

**Translating “How to Become a Writer”:
a Change of Time and Place**

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on how one can resituate a work of fiction to a different place and time while conserving its humorous tone. It consists of a translation of Lorrie Moore's short story "How to Become a Writer" and a theoretical text that examines in detail specific problems found during the translation process.

In "How to Become a Writer," Moore employs a combination of the imperative language used in self-help books and sarcastic wit. The fine balance between the two is what gives the story its charm, what makes it a gripping read, but also what makes the text interesting to translate. The translator has to retain both the meaning and the humour in the target text, while one of the two may easily become lost in the process. Often, translating the literal meaning of a sentence is important to keep the plot intact, but a joke or pun may lose its impact, or clever wording and imagery may suffer. Furthermore, the text is filled with a large number of culture-specific elements that each require special strategies of translation, which makes the process more challenging.

The story takes place in the United States of the early '70s, which is not a time or place the average Dutch reader can easily relate to. To make a translation of the text appealing, then, I have chosen to modernise the text and place it within a Dutch cultural framework. My mock commission is to translate the text for Dutch university students interested in creative writing, mainly those studying Dutch language and culture.

The theoretical text includes, in order, an analysis of source and target texts; an analysis of culture-specific items in the source text; an analysis of problems specific to English-Dutch translation; discussion of stylistic elements particular to the text; and theories on translating humour and puns.

Theoretical text

Analysis of source and target texts

Before beginning a translation, it is important to examine the source and target texts and their effects. In addition to the Lasswell formula of “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect”, Cristiane Nord offers additional questions, the most relevant being “where,” “when” and “how” (145). Of these questions, “in which channel” is unimportant here, as it is mainly used for analysis of non-fiction; a short story will not be translated differently if it is published digitally as opposed to on paper, for example.

The “where” and “when” are the first two factors to consider, as the mock commission requires changing them in the target text. Neither is explicitly stated, but hints are scattered throughout the text. The reader learns the main character goes to high school and college, and has a brother in Vietnam. This, along with culture-specific terms such as “doughnut”, and “Kleenex” used as a genericised trademark, make it clear that the story takes place in the United States. The fact that the main character's brother is drafted for the war in Vietnam places the story around 1970. In order to relocate the text to the Netherlands in 2013, then, all these references to time and place will need to be altered as they are translated.

The questions of “what” and “how” are particularly important to address here, as the text pretends to be serious but is heavy with irony. The story is presented as a step-by-step guide and conforms to many of the genre's conventions with the imperative mood and second person narrative. Each paragraph describes a new step in the process of becoming a writer and the whole is presented in chronological order. At first glance, the story truly does seem to be a self-help guide. However, irony is omnipresent because “much of the putative advice dispensed by [Moore's] narrators is highly subversive” (Kelly 20): most of the steps tell the reader to attempt something new, then fail almost instantly. At one point, aspiring writers are told to accidentally end up at Creative Writing classes instead of at Bird-Watching 101. In

other words, the structure and language both conform to self-help genre conventions, but the contents are tongue-in-cheek and reflect “Moore's serious artistic purposes: mocking the frequently glib precepts in 'real' self-help manuals and revealing human vulnerability to, and tendency to cause, the opposite of help—harm” (Kelly 21). This effectively answers any relevant aspects of “who” as well. To create the desired balance between self-help and irony in the target text, Dutch self-help genre conventions need to be analysed. *Handboek voor Schrijvers* by Molhuysen and Stiller is perfect for this purpose, as it offers steps not for how to write, but for how to advance one's writing career (8) – in other words, it is about how to become a writer. The language used in the book is highly informal and colloquial, addressing the reader with a mixture of *je* and *jij* and referring to the authors as *we* and *wij* throughout. Pragmatic particles appear in many places, much more so than in the source text. As in the source text, steps are written in the imperative mood. These conventions will need to be considered when translating the text. Pragmatic particles may need to be inserted, and may even be used to preserve the ironic tone of the source text. Additionally, phrasing and wording in the target text should be kept simple wherever possible, as long as the source text allows it.

Next, analysing the target audience is necessary to answer “to whom.” Luckily, as this is a Bachelor's Thesis, the target audience is not difficult to relate to. The translation is meant for students interested in literature, and as such can be translated as closely to the original as possible. Of course, the target audience would influence word choice, but as the source text is written in fairly simple, everyday language and the target text conventions as discussed above dictate the use of simple language, no alterations need to be made to help the reader understand the text.

Finally, “with what effect” must be considered. Apart from the more covert irony, the story is filled with jokes and puns. These silly instances of wordplay are all the creations of the protagonist, and underline her failed attempts at writing. As such, they serve as comic

relief rather than serious attempts at humour, and the joke becomes funny exactly because it is clumsy. Jokes, then, will need to retain their (lack of) impact in the target text to achieve the desired effect.

Culture-specific items

In order to successfully place the text within its new target culture, any culture-specific items will need to be translated properly. Javier Franco Aixelá discerns two main methods of translating culture-specific items (CSIs): conservation and substitution (200). Conservation means keeping the original CSI in the target text, whereas substitution means changing the CSI so that it fits within the target culture. Conservation here is not an option, as the goal is not to maintain the source culture nor to make unnecessary reference to it. Solutions will need to be found for words such as “Vietnam” and “doughnut,” as mentioned in the text analysis. Substitution, then, is the answer. Franco Aixelá lists five methods of substitution: synonymy, where the CSI is replaced with synonyms or references so that the CSI need not be named; limited universalisation, where the CSI is replaced with a reference that is still embedded in the source culture but is more understandable to the target audience; absolute universalisation, where the CSI is neutralised and any foreign connotations are removed; naturalisation, where the CSI is transformed into a specific item within the target culture; and deletion, where the CSI is omitted (201). Each of these options need to be considered when translating each CSI, as there is no universal solution. Some elements will require only slight adaptations, others will require more drastic changes.

A particularly complex CSI in *How to Become a Writer* is Vietnam. It occurs twice within the text: “Show it to your mom. She is tough and practical. She has a son in Vietnam” and “your brother came home from a forest 10 miles from the Cambodian border with only half a thigh.” Although “10 miles from the Cambodian border” is not strictly the same as

“Vietnam,” both are references to the Vietnam War and can therefore be treated as related. Here, a gap between the source and target texts becomes apparent: the Vietnam war was current in the '70s while it is long over in 2013 and, more importantly, the Netherlands were not involved in the war. Because the protagonist's brother is sent to Vietnam in the source text, then, it is not possible to conserve the CSI in any way. Synonymy or universalisation are equally impossible, as replacing *Vietnam* with *een land in Azië* or anything of the sorts does not change the fact that the Netherlands were uninvolved. As such, naturalisation or deletion are the only options. Deletion is undesirable, because then there would be no explanation for the brother losing half a thigh, nor would there be an explanation for the mental stress the mother is under while the brother is away; other alternatives involving terrorism, kidnapping or hostage situations are far too unlikely to be accepted by the reader. Naturalisation, then, means finding a different war or war-like situation that the Dutch did participate in and has occurred recently. The only candidates are the Srebrenica massacre, where the Dutch served as part of the UN safekeeping force, and the war in Afghanistan. Neither approaches the scale and severity of the Vietnam War and choosing either will result in a significant loss of impact, but, sadly, other options are unavailable. As there were no Dutch casualties in the UN safekeeping mission, the Afghanistan war, with 24 dead and 140 wounded in 2010 (BBC), is the most fitting option for translation. “A forest 10 miles from the Cambodian border,” then, can become *Uruzgan*, as this is where Dutch soldiers were sent.

Another instance where naturalisation is required is wherever the protagonist refers to school-related CSIs. Dutch equivalents will need to be found for high school, college, law school and other similar words, but also for the names of courses such as “Bird-Watching 101.” In these cases, similar terms and constructions can be found in Dutch parallel texts, most notably on the websites of Dutch schools and universities.

Finally, the names of characters required a translation. While sometimes it is possible

to find the nearest Dutch counterpart, some names were particular to the time in which the story takes place. For example, Gordon, the name of the protagonist's uncle, peaked in popularity in the United States around 1930 (US SSA), meaning that it was a common name for uncle-aged men in the '70s. While this could be a coincidence, other names show similar patterns. When translating, then, every name must be checked for popularity at the Social Security Administration. If the popularity is relevant to the translation and not, for example, stable throughout the years, a contemporary Dutch alternative must be found. For Gordon, this could be *Gideon*, which peaks in the '70s (Meertens Instituut).

Language-specific elements

A few problems arise when translating specifically between English and Dutch due to differences in sentence structure, syntax and grammar. One problem can be found in the difference between Dutch and English treatment of certain transitive verbs. After verbs such as “explain” and “say,” the conjunction “that” is optional in English, while the Dutch *dat* cannot be left out. This leads to problems, especially when using the imperative mood: Moore uses the constructions “Explain, yes, she did,” and “Say, yes, you understand,” which are a clever mix between the paraphrased form “say you understand” and the direct dialogue form “say: 'yes, I understand'.” In Dutch, these two forms cannot be combined: the direct dialogue form is still “zeg: 'ja, ik begrijp het',” but the paraphrased form is “zeg dat je het begrijpt.” As such, the two cannot be combined as smoothly as in English. After all, “zeg dat ja, je het begrijpt” and any similar sentence structures are unusable. The solution is to move the “ja” to the end, so that the sentence becomes “zeg dat je het begrijpt, ja.” This way, the sense of spoken dialogue can be retained, while the sentence remains grammatically correct and easily readable.

Another problem that appears many times when translating Moore's story is her use of

the future tense. Rather than simply describing actions that take place in the future, it is used to stress the inevitability of what will happen. For example, in “Your mother will come visit you. She will look at the circles under your eyes and hand you a brown book with a brown briefcase on the cover,” the future tense is used to explain that at one point in time, the protagonist's mother will come visit and the ensuing awkward situation will be inevitable. While some instances of the English future tense can be simply translated to the future tense in Dutch, some sentences will come out mangled or strange. For example, “You will want to die” cannot reasonably be translated to “Je gaat dood willen gaan.” In such instances, a different solution is required. Andrew Chesterman discusses translation strategies, two of which are of particular use here: clause structure change and level shift (157). Clause structure change includes, for example, changing word order and verb tenses to better fit the target language. Level shift means altering textual elements to change the emphasis and tone of a sentence. In this case, clause structure change involves changing the English future tense to the Dutch present tense. Then, an option is to add the adverb *dan*, to still suggest that the flow of time is progressing. With the second strategy, level shift, the emphasis in the English sentences can added to the translated sentences in a different way: instead of stressing inevitability by using “will,” the use of pragmatic particles such as *wel* can attract the reader's attention. For example, “You will want to die” becomes “Je kunt wel door de grond zakken.” The added benefit of this second strategy is that the use of pragmatic particles is common in Dutch how-to texts, as discussed above.

Stylistic elements

The text displays a few unique stylistic properties that require separate attention. First, there is the element of repetition, which is used to draw parallels between the different stages of the protagonist's life. For example, Moore uses the simile “blank as a [x]” four times throughout

the story, describing the reaction of other characters to the protagonist's texts. Similarly, the protagonist writes five stories about accidental deaths, and each description has the structure “a story about [y] who accidentally [z].” To preserve the effect of these passages, it is important to translate each recurring instance in the same way as the previous.

Another stylistic element is that of quasi-poetic language used by the protagonist. It is first seen when she tries to write a haiku: “It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain.” The humour here lies in the protagonist's use of clichéd imagery and ungrammatical phrasing resembling that of a non-native speaker of English. This poetic use of language returns when the protagonist lists a few of her writing fragments, including “*An eyelid darkening sideways*” and “*World as conspiracy*.” Again, the obscurity and strangeness of these images contribute to the humorous tone of the story, and the same effect should be reached in the translated version.

Translating jokes and puns

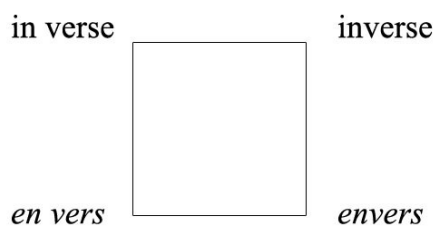
Because humour plays such a central role in the story and is difficult to translate, it deserves a separate section. While Moore's use of irony has been discussed above, the biggest problems arise when translating her jokes, which often rely on wordplay for their effect. Before these jokes can be translated, their context and impact need to be assessed to determine the proper course of action. An article by Peter Alan Low lists four questions to analyse a joke:

- (1) What is the work's genre/context/tone/situation/purpose?
- (2) Is the humour obscure/clumsy/complex/hilarious/offensive?
- (3) Is the humour language-specific or not?
- (4) Is the humour culture-specific or not?
- (60)

The first two questions prove the most helpful when analysing Moore's jokes. The jokes flow

from context, as they are always connected to information of a few sentences back. The level of complexity and clumsiness is also important to how a joke should be translated, as its tone will need to be carried over to the target text. Instances of wordplay are often culture-specific and nearly always language-specific.

Next, three of Moore's puns will be analysed in detail. Low proposes that puns can be analysed as shapes, where each step in the translation process corresponds with a vertex (63). The two punning words in the source language are directly connected, and the goal is to find two directly connected words in the target language that approach the same meaning, or at least achieve the same effect. A direct, simple translation of a pun is square-shaped and the most complex translation is circle-shaped. Low's example of a direct, square-shaped translation is the English-French pun "in verse/inverse → *en vers/enverse*" (63):

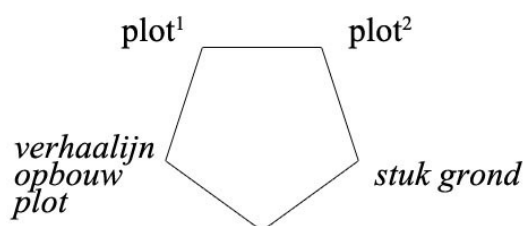


This model proved extremely helpful when translating the puns in Moore's story.

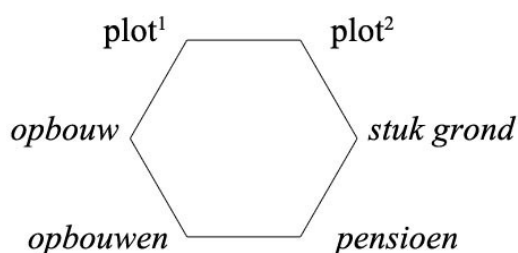
The first pun is "Plots are for dead people," found in the passage:

When you get it back, he has written on it: "Some of your images are quite nice, but you have no sense of plot." When you are home, in the privacy of your own room, faintly scrawl in pencil beneath his black-inked comments: "Plots are for dead people, pore-face."

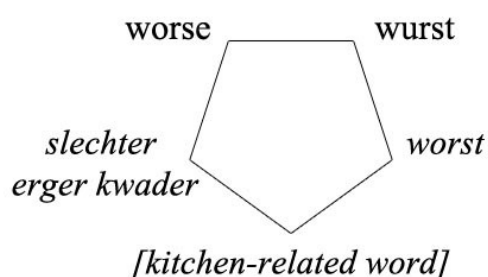
This combines the senses 'storyline of a novel' and 'piece of ground' of the word plot. The result is simultaneously silly and slightly menacing and the translated pun should have a similar impact. Constructing pun in Dutch using Low's model yields the following first step, with plot¹ meaning story and plot² meaning piece of ground:



Translating plot (story) yields three distinct words, so this is the preferred starting point. To make the pun work, a word must be found that has two suitable meanings. The Dutch *plot* also means graph, but this sense of the word is too far removed from being menacing and therefore unusable. *Verhaallijn* only has one sense. *Opbouw* also does not have a menacing second meaning, but *opbouwen* could, as it can be used in *je pensioen opbouwen*, meaning building up your pension. If the main character were to say “*opbouwen doe je met je pensioen, poriegezicht*” in defence of her story, it would also sound like a threat to her teacher. Of course, then, the punning word pair would not be exactly the same, but *opbouw* – *opbouwen* are close enough to still work. The final model, then, is as follows:



Sometimes, the model will be affected by a number of constraints. For example, here is the analysis for “For Better or for Liverwurst”:



The context of the pun is that it is the title of a story that takes place in a kitchen. The word between *erger* and *worst*, then, needs to be kitchen-related to fit the joke. Normally, because there is no kitchen-related homophone counterpart of *erger* as there is with *worse/wurst*, the translator would look for a word that is semantically close to *erger* but does have a homophone. The model is constrained further, however, because one step is already set: *worse* → *kwaad*, as the pun also refers to “for better of or worse,” part of the wedding vows used in Anglican churches. The direct Dutch equivalent is “in goede en kwade dagen,” so that *kwaad* has to be part of the pun. The humour, then, is complex, as it combines pun and reference. Maintaining this complexity while staying close to the context will yield a satisfactory translation. Food-related words that are nearly homophones of *kwaad* include *kwark* and *kaas*, but *kaas* fits the role slightly better because it shares the stressed vowel rather than the initial consonants. Because the adjective *kazig* has an undesired positive meaning in regional Dutch dialect, some freedom is allowed and “in goede en kaasloze dagen” becomes the final translation. Of course, *kaaslooze* and *kwade* are not close homophones like *worse* and *wurst*, so that the pun is less clever in the translated version. Considering the tone and purpose of this pun, however, which is to make the main character seem strange and silly, a less clever solution does still fit within the context as long as the reference to marriage is preserved.

The passage that was the toughest to tackle joke-wise was that of the “transformation of Melville to contemporary life.” Here, a series of related jokes all lead up to a complex pun (numbers in brackets added for structure):

. . . a transformation of Melville [1] to contemporary life. It will be about monomania and the fish-eat-fish [2] world of life insurance in Rochester, N.Y. The first line will be "Call me Fishmeal," [3] and it will feature a menopausal suburban husband named Richard [4], who because he is so depressed all the time is called “Mopey [5] Dick”[6]

The first string of wordplay involves the author of a novel [1]; wordplay on dog-eat-dog,

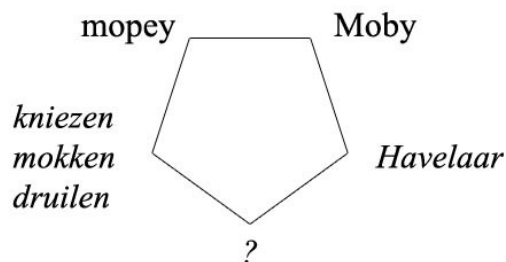
related to the subject matter of the novel [2]; and wordplay on the first line of the novel, referring to element 2 [3]. The second string involves a name [4] and a word for depression [5], which is combined with a shortened form of the name to form a pun on the title of the novel [6]. While the two strings are related, the only connection between the two is the novel, and analysing the wordplay will be easier when treating the two as separate. The humour in the passage is clearly highly complex, but also meant to be clumsy and silly to underline the strange character of the protagonist. After all, the roommate does not seem amused. However, the humour is also fairly culture-specific, as Dutch readers will not know *Moby Dick* well – at least not well enough to know the first line. This makes an adaptation necessary, which in effect means that the element at the root of both strings, the novel, needs to be changed to one the Dutch audience will know well enough. As such, elements 2 and 3 will need to be altered as well to fit the new novel and its subject matter. Finally, a new name needs to be chosen for 4 that can be used in a new pun on the title.

First, then, a new author and novel need to be chosen. The opening line of *Moby Dick* was chosen by the American Book Review as the best and most-known first line in literary history (Harris). To make the jokes accessible, a similar Dutch novel would be ideal. The Dutch literary canon lists Multatuli as most important Dutch novelist and his work *Max Havelaar* as most important Dutch novel, while Novels and authors lower on the list have substantially fewer votes (DBNL). Furthermore, nearly all Dutch students will know the work as it is extensively taught in literature classes in Dutch secondary education. For example, in the school book *Literatuur: geschiedenis en leesdossier* five pages are devoted to Multatuli, while most other authors are discussed in one or two (Dautzenberg 135). *Max Havelaar*, then, will serve as the Dutch counterpart of *Moby Dick* for these jokes.

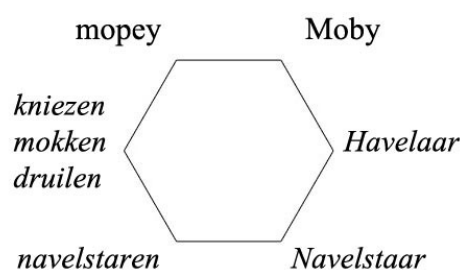
The next step will be to complete the first string of wordplay. The subject matter of *Max Havelaar* is of little help, as it ranges from colonialism and corruption to the narrow-

mindfulness of the Dutch elite, as opposed to the straightforward subject matter of *Moby Dick* which is the whale itself. The first line, however, provides a starting point: “Ik ben makelaar in koffi, en woon op de Lauriergracht, N° 37” (Dautzenberg 136). Instead of working from the subject matter of the novel, it may be simpler to work backwards from the opening line, choosing *koffie* as the subject of the first string. Next, a Dutch equivalent of dog-eat-dog will need to be found. In its adjective form, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “ruthlessly competitive.” While it is difficult to find a similar Dutch saying that can also be used as an adjective, one suitable equivalent would be *pompen of verzuipen*. While the meaning differs slightly, the saying is reasonably well-known and not too long to transform into an adjective. Adding *koffie*, then, would make it *koffiedrinken of verzuipen*. In fact, this adds an additional layer to the saying, as drinking large amounts of coffee is associated with stress. A new version of the opening line could then be “Ik ben zetter van koffie, en woon aan de Lauriergracht.” This preserves the link between elements 2 and 3. Of course, a strong, single word like “Fishmeal” will not be possible with the lengthier opening line of *Max Havelaar*, but the complexity and silliness of the wordplay have been carried over in the translation.

Now that the title of the novel has been chosen, the second string can be translated. A name pair like Richard – Dick will not be possible with Max, as the only related names are Maximiliaan or Maxim. Maximiliaan is far too uncommon to use and while Maxim may not be nearly as common as Richard, Maxim is a fairly modern name, first gaining popularity in the '60s and experiencing a sharp rise in the '90s (Meertens Instituut). This means that using Maxim gives the translation a sense of modernity, which was one of the original goals. Finally, then, a pun on the title must be made. Low's model for this pun would be:



Constructing a true pun on *Havelaar* is impossible, as the word is too long to have a homophone. Instead, using the suffix *-aar*, meaning “someone who . . .” could be used, but this also leads to unsatisfactory results as for example *haperaar* seems too fabricated and obvious. The goal is to replicate the “cognitive flash of humour” (Low 62), as this pun is the climax the whole passage has been building up to. A more satisfactory outcome may be reached by changing the emotional state of Maxim: if he is self-centred, he becomes *Max Navelstaar*. Of course, this involves changing the meaning of the text. In this case, however, the purpose is to be witty rather than convey information and if the humorous effect cannot be truly achieved in the target text by preserving the original meaning, changing the meaning is the best option. The final pun has the following model:



Conclusion

In conclusion, there are four steps to resituating a text to a new place and time while conserving its humorous tone: first, both source and target texts need to be analysed, so that

differences and similarities can be handled appropriately in the translation process; in the second step, culture-specific items found in the source text must be analysed in terms of their place within the source culture and subsequently translated to a satisfying equivalent in the target culture; in the third step the translator must consider problems that are specific to the translation between source and target languages and take care to keep translated sentences as similar as possible despite these problems; finally, the impact of text-specific stylistic elements, most notably that of imagery and humorous devices, must be analysed and these must then be translated carefully to retain the writer's style. Theories such as Low's pun analysis model can help the translator in this final step. Each of these steps ensures that both the tone and the content are carried over as accurately as possible, even when the translated text is placed within a different culture.

Translation

Hoe word ik een schrijver

Eerst probeer je iets anders te worden, maakt niet uit wat. Filmster/astronaut.

Filmster/missionaris. Filmster/kleuterjuf. President¹ van de Wereld. Het mislukt compleet. Het is handig als het je al op jonge leeftijd niet lukt – zeg maar op je 14^e. Je moet al vroeg teleurgesteld raken², zodat je als je 15 bent ellenlange reeksen haiku's kunt schrijven over onvervulde verlangens. Het is een vijver, een kersenbloesem, de wind strelend over mussenvleugel wiekend naar berg³. Tel de lettergrepen. Laat het aan je moeder zien. Ze is taai en nuchter. Ze heeft een zoon in Afghanistan en een man die misschien vreemdgaat. Ze is een voorstander van bruine kleren omdat die vlekken camoufleren⁴. Ze kijkt even naar je tekst en dan weer naar jou met een gezicht zo nietszeggend als een boterham. Ze zegt: “Kun je niet even⁵ de vaatwasser uitruimen?” Kijk weg. Stop de vorken in de bestekbak. Breek per ongeluk een van de weggeefglazen van het tankstation. Dat is de noodzakelijke pijn, het noodzakelijke lijden.⁶ Dat is pas het begin.

Kijk bij Nederlands op de middelbare school naar het gezicht van meneer Gideon. Beslis dat gezichten belangrijk zijn. Schrijf een rondeel over poriën. Loop vast. Schrijf een sonnet. Tel de lettergrepen: 9, 10, 11, 13. Besluit je aan fictie te wagen. Dan hoef je geen lettergrepen te tellen. Schrijf een kort verhaal over een bejaard echtpaar dat elkaar per ongeluk

¹ While the Netherlands have a prime minister, not a president, the title *President van de Wereld* sounds more international and worldly than *Premier van de Wereld*.

² Translating the original “Early, critical disillusionment is necessary,” word-by-word would make the target text far too wordy and complex and would not fit within the genre conventions of self-help literature.

³ As the source text haiku does not contain the appropriate number of syllables, the number of syllables in the target text does not matter, as long as it is the wrong amount.

⁴ In the source text, the continuous verb is used as a noun. Dutch lacks this grammatical option, so I added *kleren* to give the sentence a noun.

⁵ This pragmatic particle was added to make the dialogue more natural and retain the hint of annoyance in the mother's speech.

⁶ As *pijn* and *lijden* require different determiners in Dutch, this sentence had to be split to make it grammatically correct.

door het hoofd schiet als gevolg van een onverklaarbaar defect in een geweer dat op een avond op geheimzinnige wijze in hun woonkamer verschijnt.⁷ Geef het als praktische opdracht⁸ aan meneer Gideon. Als je het terugkrijgt heeft hij er bij geschreven: “Sommige beelden die je gebruikt zijn best geslaagd, maar je hebt geen gevoel voor opbouw.” Krabbel, als je thuis bent, in de beslotenheid van je slaapkamer, in potlood onder de zwarte inkt van zijn commentaar⁹: “Opbouwen doe je met je pensioen, poriegezicht.”

Neem zo veel oppasbaantjes aan als je kunt. Je bent goed met kinderen. Ze vinden je geweldig. Je vertelt ze verhalen over oude mensen die op een idiote manier doodgaan. Je zingt liedjes voor ze, zoals hun lievelingsliedje “Aan d' oever van een snellen vliet¹⁰.” En als ze hun pyjama's aan hebben en eindelijk zijn opgehouden elkaar te knijpen, als ze diep in slaap zijn, lees je elk sekshandboek in huis en vraag je je af hoe iemand in godsnaam ooit zulke dingen kan doen met iemand van wie hij echt houdt. Val in een stoel in slaap terwijl je meneer Ottens *Playboy* leest. Wanneer de Ottens thuis komen, gaan ze je zachtjes op je schouder tikken, naar het tijdschrift op je schoot kijken en grijnzen. Je kunt wel door de grond zakken. Ze vragen je dan of Anouk zonder problemen haar medicijnen heeft genomen. Leg uit dat ze dat deed, ja, dat je haar een verhaal had beloofd als ze als een grote meid haar medicijnen nam en dat dat prima leek te werken. “Oh, fantastisch,” roepen ze dan.

Probeer trots te glimlachen.

Schrijf je in voor een bachelor pedagogiek.

⁷ This sentence is lengthier than its English counterpart because “mysteriously” had to be translated as *op geheimzinnige wijze*. This does, however, help to convey the absurd effect the sentence already had in the source text.

⁸ A *praktische opdracht* is the Dutch version of a final project, as it counts toward the final examination grade.

⁹ Because Dutch lacks an adjective counterpart of “black-inked,” this construction is necessary to convey the meaning.

¹⁰ It is strange to sing Bluebells of Scotland to children as it is about a highland love who has gone to war. I chose the Dutch song because it shares the feeling of sadness.

Tijdens je opleiding heb je keuzeruimte. Je hield altijd al van vogels. Schrijf je in voor iets dat “Een ornithologische wereldreis¹¹” heet. De colleges zijn op dinsdagen en donderdagen om 2 uur. Als je op de eerste dag van het blok bij lokaal 134 komt, zit iedereen rond een tafel over metaforen te praten. Daar heb je wel eens van gehoord. Steek na een korte, ondraaglijke tijd je hand op en vraag verlegen, “Sorry, maar is dit niet Inleiding vogelkunde?” De groep stopt met praten en kijkt je aan. Ze lijken allemaal één gezicht te hebben, enorm en nietszeggend als een klok zonder wijzers. Iemand met een baard buldert, “Nee, dit is Creatief schrijven.” Zeg: “Oh – oh ja,” alsof je dat eigenlijk de hele tijd al wist. Kijk¹² op je rooster. Vraag je af hoe je hier in godsnaam beland bent. De computer heeft kennelijk een fout gemaakt. Je begint op te staan maar doet dat dan toch niet. De rijen bij de inschrijfbalie zijn deze week eindeloos. Misschien moet je bij deze fout blijven. Misschien is je geschrijf¹³ zo slecht nog niet. Misschien is dit je lot. Misschien is dit wat je vader bedoelde toen hij zei, “Het is het computertijdperk, Francine, het is het computertijdperk.”

Beslis dat je het studentenleven leuk vindt¹⁴. In je studentenhuis ontmoet je veel aardige mensen. Sommigen zijn slimmer dan jij. En anderen¹⁵, merk je, zijn dommer dan jij. Helaas zul je de wereld de rest van je leven precies volgens die indeling blijven zien.

De opdracht voor creatief schrijven deze week is om een gewelddadig moment te beschrijven¹⁶. Lever een verhaal in over autorijden met je oom Gerrit en nog eentje over twee

¹¹ Constructions with *excursie* were too ambiguous, as it was never clear whether it was a course or a field trip.

¹² “Look down” is difficult to translate to Dutch, as *neerkijken op* is almost exclusively used in daily speech as “to look down on someone.” Simply translating it as *kijk* eliminates the problem and no significant information is lost.

¹³ I left out *creatief* because it would make the sentence strange.

¹⁴ While “dat het studentenleven je bevalt” would arguably be a more pleasing translation, this is not a construction that sees much use in the daily speech of students and would therefore violate the rules set by the target text.

¹⁵ Repeating *sommigen*, as with “some” in the source text, would seem strange, so lexical variation is introduced.

¹⁶ While “narrate” directly translates to *verhalen* or *vertellen*, neither fit naturally within this sentence: *verhalen* is outdated, and *vertellen* is used for speech, not writing.

oudjes die per ongeluk geëlektrocuteerd worden als ze een bureaulamp met slechte bedrading aan willen doen. De docent geeft het dan aan je terug met als commentaar: “Je teksten zijn doorgaans vloeiend en energiek. Je hebt alleen een belachelijk gevoel voor opbouw.¹⁷” Schrijf nog een verhaal over een man en een vrouw wiens onderlichamen, in de allereerste paragraaf, per ongeluk weggeblazen worden door dynamiet. In de tweede paragraaf beginnen ze van het verzekeringsgeld samen een yoghurtijssalon. Er volgen nog zes paragrafen. Je leest het hele ding voor tijdens de werkgroep. Niemand vindt het leuk. Ze zeggen dat je gevoel voor opbouw vreselijk en incompetent is. Na de les vraagt iemand je of je gek bent.

Besluit dat je het misschien maar bij komedies moet houden. Krijg verkering¹⁸ met iemand die grappig is, iemand die dat heeft wat je op de middelbare een “echt goed gevoel voor humor” noemde, en wat nu bij je groep van creatief schrijven “zelfverachting als oorzaak van komische manieren¹⁹” heet. Schrijf al zijn grappen op, maar vertel hem niet dat je dit doet. Vorm anagrammen van de naam van zijn ex en vernoem je sociaal gehandicapte personages hiernaar. Zeg hem dat zijn ex in al je verhalen zit en kijk dan hoe grappig hij kan zijn, let op wat voor echt goed gevoel voor humor hij dan kan hebben.

Je tutor²⁰ van pedagogiek zegt dat je de vakken van je major verwaarloost. Je zou het meeste tijd moeten steken in dat waar je op af wilt studeren. Zeg dat je dat begrijpt, ja.

Tijdens de colleges van creatief schrijven van de komende twee jaren blijft iedereen sigaretten roken en dezelfde dingen vragen: “Maar werkt het?” “Waarom zouden we iets

¹⁷ While “plot” could be translated as *plot*, I use *opbouw* because the earlier pun uses the same word.

¹⁸ “Date someone” has no straightforward translation. Because this character remains the boyfriend of the protagonist for some time, *verkering* fits best.

¹⁹ Here, simplification would be undesired. The strange and pompous construction is used to comedic effect, and should remain strange in the target text.

²⁰ A *tutor* at Dutch universities fulfils the same role as an adviser.

geven om dit personage?” “Heb jij dit cliché verdiend?” Dit lijken belangrijke vragen te zijn.

Op de dagen dat het jouw beurt is kijk je hoopvol de klas rond terwijl ze je kopietjes uitkammen naar een plot²¹. Ze kijken van het blaadje naar jou²², nemen een diepe trek en glimlachen dan liefjes.

Je verdoet te veel tijd met hangerig en ontmoedigd zijn. Je vriend raadt fietsen aan. Je huisgenote raadt een nieuwe vriend aan. Mensen zeggen dat je aan automutilatie doet en afvalt, maar je gaat door met schrijven. Je enige gevoel van geluk komt als je iets nieuws schrijft, in het midden van de nacht, oksels vochtig, hart kloppend, iets dat nog nooit iemand gezien heeft. Je hebt alleen die korte, breekbare, onbeproefde momenten van vreugde wanneer je het weet:²³ je bent een genie. Zie in wat je moet doen. Wissel van studie. De kinderen bij het kinderdagverblijf gaan teleurgesteld zijn, maar je hebt een roeping, een drang, een waan, een ongelukkige gewoonte. Je hebt je, zoals je moeder zou zeggen, bij de verkeerde mensen aangesloten.

Waarom schrijven? Waar komt schrijven vandaan? Dit zijn vragen die je jezelf moet stellen. Ze lijken op: Waar komt stof vandaan? Of: Waarom is er oorlog? Of: Als er een God is, waarom is mijn broer dan nu invalide²⁴?

Dit zijn vragen die je in je portemonnee bewaart, alsof het visitekaartjes zijn. Dit zijn vragen, zegt je docent creatief schrijven, die je goed in je dagboeken kunt onderzoeken maar liever niet²⁵ in je romans.

De schrijfdocent die je deze herfst hebt legt de nadruk op de Kracht van de

²¹ Here, I use plot because *uitkammen naar een opbouw* is strange.

²² As with “look down,” “look up” is better translated as *kijk*. To retain the motion of looking up, I added *van het blaadje*.

²³ While this construction is strange in Dutch, using it increases the ironic tone.

²⁴ Some meaning is lost here, but choosing nouns such as *een manke* would come off as far too derogatory and *kreupel* is not necessarily used to describe as severe injuries as “crippled” is.

²⁵ *Zelden* could be used but is uncommon in daily speech.

Verbeelding. Dit betekent dat hij geen lange beschrijvende verhalen wil over je kampeertocht van afgelopen Juli. Hij wil dat je begint in een realistische context maar deze dan verandert. Zoals recombinant DNA. Hij wil dat je je fantasie de vrije loop laat, haar laat zwellen in de wind. Dit is een citaat uit Shakespeare²⁶.

Vertel je huisgenote je geweldige idee, je geweldige uitoefening van verbeeldingskracht: Multatuli omgezet naar de hedendaagse tijd. Het zal²⁷ gaan over monomanie en het koffiedrinken-of-verzuipen-wereldje van levensverzekering in Amsterdam. De eerste zin gaat “Ik ben zetter van koffie, en woon aan de Lauriergracht” zijn, en de hoofdpersoon is een stadse²⁸ getrouwde man in de menopauze genaamd Maxim, die omdat hij de hele tijd zo zelfingenomen is “Max Navelstaar” genoemd wordt door zijn gevatte vrouw Yvonne. Zeg tegen je huisgenote: “Max Navelstaar, snap je hem?” Je huisgenote kijkt je aan, haar gezicht zo nietszeggend als een grote zakdoek. Ze komt naar je toe, als een maat, en legt haar arm om je bezwaarde schouders. “Luister, Francine,” zegt ze, zo langzaam als een logopediste²⁹. “We gaan fijn uit en halen een groot glas bier, goed?”³⁰

De werkgroep vindt deze ook niet leuk. Je verdenkt ze ervan dat ze medelijden met je krijgen. Ze zeggen: “Je moet nadenken over wat er gebeurt. Waar zit hier het verhaal?”

Het volgende blok is de schrijfdocent bezeten door schrijven vanuit persoonlijke ervaring. Je moet schrijven vanuit wat je kent, vanuit wat er jou overkomen is. Hij wil

²⁶ The original quote is “When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind” (Shakespeare 379), and was translated by L. A. J. Burgersdijk as “En lachten, als de speelse wind de schoot / Der zeilen zwanger maakte en zwellen deed” (105).

²⁷ While this translation of the future tense is very formal, it matches the passage's tone of grandeur.

²⁸ As the Lauriergracht is near the city centre, *voorstedelijk* would be out of place. Furthermore, *stads*, like “suburban,” can also be used pejoratively.

²⁹ This alteration was necessary because *langzaam als logopedie* would not be understandable.

³⁰ The added *fijn* and *goed* were necessary to give the sentence its tone. *Laten we* does not carry the connotations that “let's” does in this sentence.

sterfgevallen, hij wil kampeertochten. Bedenk wat er jou overkomen is. In drie jaar zijn er drie dingen gebeurd: je bent ontmaagd; je ouders zijn gescheiden; en je broer is thuisgekomen uit Uruzgan met alleen een half dijbeen en³¹ een permanente grijns in zijn ene mondhoek geplakt.

Over het eerste schrijf je: “Er ontstond een nieuwe ruimte, die pijn deed en riep in een stem die niet van mij was, 'Ik ben niet meer dezelfde, maar het komt wel goed'.”

Over het tweede schrijf je een uitgebreid verhaal over een oud echtpaar dat toevallig in de keuken op een vreemde landmijn stuit en zichzelf opblaast. Je noemt het: “In goede en kaasloze dagen.”

Over het laatste schrijf je niets. Er zijn hier geen woorden voor. Je computer³² zoemt zachtjes. Je kunt geen woorden vinden.

Bij cocktailfeesten van studenten zeggen mensen, “Oh, je schrijft? Wat schrijf je zoal?” Je huisgenote, die te veel wijn, te weinig kaas en helemaal geen crackers heeft gehad, flapt eruit: “Oh, Jezus, ze schrijft altijd over haar suffe vriendje.”

Later in je leven zul je leren dat schrijvers alleen maar open, hulpeloze teksten zijn zonder een duidelijk begrip van wat ze hebben geschreven en daarom alles wat over hen gezegd wordt maar half moeten geloven. Jij hebt dit punt van literaire kritiek alleen nog niet bereikt. Je verstijft en zegt, “echt niet,”³³ op dezelfde manier als wanneer iemand in groep 6 je ervan beschuldigde hoboles echt leuk te vinden en dat je ouders je eigenlijk niet alleen dwongen om het te nemen.

Houd vol dat je helemaal niet per se in één onderwerp geïnteresseerd bent, dat je geïnteresseerd bent in de muzikaliteit van taal, dat je geïnteresseerd bent in – in – lettergrepen,

³¹ It was necessary to add *en* because *een permanente grijns in zijn ene mondhoek geplakt* is strange when used as an independent phrase as in the source text.

³² No student would use a typewriter nowadays.

³³ *Echt niet* is more fourth-grade-like than *dat doe ik niet*.

omdat ze de atomen van poëzie zijn, de cellen van de geest, de adem van de ziel. Je raakt aangeschoten. Staar je plastic wijnbekertje in.

“Lettergrepen?” hoor je dan iemand vragen, terwijl zijn stem wegsterft als hij langzaam wegsliipt naar het geruststellende wit van de dipsaus.

Begin je af te vragen waar je wél over schrijft. Of of je wel iets te zeggen hebt. Of of er eigenlijk zoiets bestaat als iets te zeggen hebben. Beperk zulke gedachten tot maximaal 10 minuten per dag; net als sit-ups kunnen ze je vermageren.

Je leest ooit ergens dat schrijven iets te maken heeft met je geslachtsdelen. Blijf hier niet te lang bij stilstaan. Het maakt je nerveus.

Je moeder gaat bij je op bezoek komen. Ze gaat naar de wallen onder je ogen kijken en je een bruin boek geven met een bruine koffer op de omslag. Het heet: “Hoe word ik een leidinggevende.” Ze heeft ook de encyclopedie met babynamen³⁴ waar je om vroeg meegenomen; een van je personages, de clownsschoolleraar³⁵ op leeftijd, heeft een nieuwe naam nodig. Je moeder gaat haar hoofd schudden en zeggen: “Francine, Francine, weet je nog toen je logopedie studeerde?³⁶”

Zeg, “Mam, ik houd van schrijven.”

Zij zal zeggen: “Tuurlijk houd je van schrijven. Allicht. Tuurlijk houd je van schrijven.”

Schrijf een verhaal over een verwarde muziekstudent en noem het “Schubert was die

³⁴ There is no well-known book for this in Dutch and adding a title would probably cause confusion and distract from the story.

³⁵ The source text is slightly ambiguous here, as it is unclear whether Moore means a clown and schoolteacher or someone who teaches at a clown school. However, in the first paragraph of the story, Moore uses a slash to separate the two jobs of one person, as in “movie star / astronaut.” Therefore, it can be safely assumed that the desired meaning is someone who teaches at a clown school.

³⁶ This is a more common way and less wordy way of saying *weet je nog toen je van plan was af te studeren op je hoofdvak psychologie?*

ene met de bril, toch?” Het is geen groot succes, al houdt je huisgenote van het deel waar de twee violisten zichzelf per ongeluk opblazen in een concertzaal³⁷. “Ik had ooit iets met een violist,” zegt ze, terwijl ze een kauwgombel blaast.

Godzijdank volg je andere vakken. Je vindt je redding in 19^e-eeuwse ontologische dilemma's en de paringsrituelen van ongewervelden. Sommige bolvormige weekdieren hebben iets dat “Seks per arm” heet. De mannelijke octopus, bijvoorbeeld, verliest het uiteinde van een arm wanneer hij hem in het lichaam van het vrouwtje plaatst tijdens de copulatie. Mariene biologen noemen het “de zeven-hemel.”³⁸ Wees blij dat je zulke dingen weet. Wees blij dat je niet alleen een schrijver bent. Schrijf je in voor een opleiding rechten.

Vanaf dit moment kunnen veel dingen gebeuren. Maar het belangrijkste is dit: je besluit toch geen rechten te studeren en in plaats daarvan breng je een flink deel van je volwassen jaren door met mensen vertellen hoe je besloot toch geen rechten te studeren. Op de een of andere manier pak je het schrijven weer op. Misschien doe je wel een master. Misschien klus je wat bij en volg je 's avonds schrijverscursussen. Misschien heb je een baan en schrijf je alle gevatte opmerkingen en intieme persoonlijke geheimen die je overdag hoort op. Misschien verlies je langzaam³⁹ je vrienden, je kennissen, je evenwicht.

Je hebt het uitgemaakt met je vriend. Je gaat nu uit⁴⁰ met mannen die, in plaats van “ik houd van je” te fluisteren, “geef het aan me, schatje” roepen. Dit is goed schrijfmateriaal⁴¹.

Vroeg of laat heb je een manuscript klaar, min of meer. Mensen kijken er lichtelijk

³⁷ There is no direct equivalent of “recital hall” in Dutch, so I used *concertzaal* because it is concise. The exact meaning here is less important than the effect.

³⁸ I could find no references to either the term “Seven Heaven” or any Dutch counterparts in texts on marine biology, so I chose to translate it directly.

³⁹ I added *langzaam* to maintain the feeling of a process, as with the continuous “losing”.

⁴⁰ Here, I used *uitgaan* instead of *verkering* because the relationships are short.

⁴¹ Making a noun out of *schrijven* is uncommon in Dutch, so this construction is the more natural one.

bezorgd naar en zeggen, “Ik durf te wedden dat je altijd al fantaseerde om een schrijver te worden, of niet?”⁴² Je lippen drogen op tot zout.⁴³ Zeg dat van alle mogelijke fantasieën in de wereld je je niet voor kunt stellen dat je als schrijver ook maar de top 20 zou halen. Vertel ze dat je eigenlijk pedagogiek ging studeren. “Volgens mij,” zuchten ze altijd, “zou je geweldig met kinderen op kunnen schieten.” Kijk ze giftig aan. Zeg dat je een wandelend wapen bent.

Stop met colleges. Stop met je werk. Schraap het laatste geld van je spaarrekening⁴⁴. Nu heb je tijd als wratten op je handen. Neem langzaam de adressen van je vrienden over in een nieuw adresboek.

Stofzuig. Kauw hoestdropjes. Bewaar een folder vol fragmenten.

Een ooglid dat zijwaarts verdonkert.

Wereld als samenzwering.

Mogelijke verhaallijn? Een vrouw stapt op de bus.

Stel dat je een liefdesrelatie organiseerde en niemand kwam opdagen.

Thuis drink je veel koffie⁴⁵. Bij Van der Valk⁴⁶ bestel je de koolsla. Bedenk hoe het er uit ziet als de kleffe confetti van een kaart: waar je bent geweest, waar je naartoe gaat – “U bevindt zich hier,” zegt de rode ster op de achterkant van het menu.

Af en toe vraagt een date met een gezicht zo nietszeggend als een leeg blaadje je of schrijvers vaak ontmoedigd raken. Zeg dat dat soms het geval is en soms het geval is. Zeg dat het veel weg heeft van aan polio lijden.

“Interessant,” glimlacht je date, en dan kijkt hij omlaag naar zijn armharen en begint

⁴² While I translate “I bet” as *volgens mij* further down, it is used here with strong sarcastic connotations, so *ik durf te wedden* fits the tone better here.

⁴³ While this sentence is strange in Dutch, “your lips dry to salt” is no less strange in English. The reader will understand what is meant, just as in the source text.

⁴⁴ There is no Dutch equivalent of savings bonds. Still, I did not want to remove this sentence altogether because it forms a three-part climax with the preceding two sentences. Withdrawing money from savings accounts is similar to cashing in savings bonds in that it frees up 'old' money.

⁴⁵ I removed the imperative here to place *thuis* at the beginning of the sentence, so the parallel between *this* and *bij Van der Valk* is as clear as it is in the source text.

⁴⁶ *Van der Valk* is a well-known hotel/restaurant similar to Howard Johnson's.

hij ze, allemaal, altijd, één kant op glad te strijken.

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Source text

How to Become a Writer

First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/ missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age - say, 14. Early, critical disillusionment is necessary so that at 15 you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom. She is tough and practical. She has a son in Vietnam and a husband who may be having an affair. She believes in wearing brown because it hides spots. She'll look briefly at your writing then back up at you with a face blank as a doughnut. She'll say: "How about emptying the dishwasher?" Look away. Shove the forks in the fork drawer. Accidentally break one of the freebie gas station glasses. This is the required pain and suffering. This is only for starters.

In your high school English class look at Mr. Killian's face. Decide faces are important. Write a villanelle about pores. Struggle. Write a sonnet. Count the syllables: 9, 10, 11, 13. Decide to experiment with fiction. Here you don't have to count syllables. Write a short story about an elderly man and woman who accidentally shoot each other in the head, the result of an inexplicable malfunction of a shotgun which appears mysteriously in their living room one night. Give it to Mr. Killian as your final project. When you get it back, he has written on it: "Some of your images are quite nice, but you have no sense of plot." When you are home, in the privacy of your own room, faintly scrawl in pencil beneath his black-inked comments: "Plots are for dead people, pore- face."

Take all the baby-sitting jobs you can get. You are great with kids. They love you. You tell them stories about old people who die idiot deaths. You sing them songs like "Blue Bells of Scotland," which is their favorite. And when they are in their pajamas and have finally stopped pinching each other, when they are fast asleep, you read every sex manual in the house, and wonder how on earth anyone could ever do those things with someone they truly loved. Fall asleep in a chair reading Mr. McMurphy's Playboy. When the McMurphys come home, they will tap you on the shoulder, look at the magazine in your lap and grin. You will want to die. They will ask you if Tracey took her medicine all right. Explain, yes, she did, that you promised her a story if she would take it like a big girl and that seemed to work out just

fine. "Oh, marvelous," they will exclaim.

Try to smile proudly.

Apply to college as a child psychology major.

As a child psychology major, you have some electives. You've always liked birds. Sign up for something called "The Ornithological Field Trip." It meets Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2. When you arrive at Room 134 on the first day of class, everyone is sitting around a seminar table talking about metaphors. You've heard of these. After a short, excruciating while, raise your hand and say diffidently, "Excuse me, isn't this Bird-Watching 101?" The class stops and turns to look at you. They seem to all have one face - giant and blank as a vandalized clock. Someone with a beard booms out, "No, this is Creative Writing." Say: "Oh - right," as if perhaps you knew all along. Look down at your schedule. Wonder how the hell you ended up here. The computer, apparently, has made an error. You start to get up to leave and then don't. The lines at the registrar this week are huge. Perhaps you should stick with this mistake. Perhaps your creative writing isn't all that bad. Perhaps it is fate. Perhaps this is what your dad meant when he said, "It's the age of computers, Francie, it's the age of computers."

Decide that you like college life. In your dorm you meet many nice people. Some are smarter than you. And some, you notice, are dumber than you. You will continue, unfortunately, to view the world in exactly these terms for the rest of your life.

The assignment this week in creative writing is to narrate a violent happening. Turn in a story about driving with your Uncle Gordon and another one about two old people who are accidentally electrocuted when they go to turn on a badly wired desk lamp. The teacher will hand them back to you with comments: "Much of your writing is smooth and energetic. You have, however, a ludicrous notion of plot." Write another story about a man and a woman who, in the very first paragraph, have their lower torsos accidentally blitzed away by dynamite. In the second paragraph, with the insurance money, they buy a frozen yogurt stand together. There are six more paragraphs. You read the whole thing out loud in class. No one likes it. They say your sense of plot is outrageous and incompetent. After class someone asks you if you are crazy.

Decide that perhaps you should stick to comedies. Start dating someone who is funny, someone who has what in high school you called a "really great sense of humor" and what now your creative writing class calls "self-contempt giving rise to comic form." Write down all of his jokes, but don't tell him you are doing this. Make up anagrams of his old girlfriend's name and name all of your socially handicapped characters with them. Tell him his old girlfriend is in all of your stories and then watch how funny he can be, see what a really great sense of humor he can have.

Your child psychology adviser tells you you are neglecting courses in your major. What you spend the most time on should be what you're majoring in. Say yes, you understand.

In creative writing seminars over the next two years, everyone continues to smoke cigarettes and ask the same things: "But does it work?" "Why should we care about this character?" "Have you earned this cliché?" These seem like important questions.

On days when it is your turn, you look at the class hopefully as they scour your mimeographs for a plot. They look back up at you, drag deeply and then smile in a sweet sort of way.

You spend too much time slouched and demoralized. Your boyfriend suggests bicycling. Your roommate suggests a new boyfriend. You are said to be self-mutilating and losing weight, but you continue writing. The only happiness you have is writing something new, in the middle of the night, armpits damp, heart pounding, something no one has yet seen. You have only those brief, fragile, untested moments of exhilaration when you know: you are a genius. Understand what you must do. Switch majors. The kids in your nursery project will be disappointed, but you have a calling, an urge, a delusion, an unfortunate habit. You have, as your mother would say, fallen in with a bad crowd.

Why write? Where does writing come from? These are questions to ask yourself. They are like: Where does dust come from? Or: Why is there war? Or: If there's a God, then why is

my brother now a cripple?

These are questions that you keep in your wallet, like calling cards. These are questions, your creative writing teacher says, that are good to address in your journals but rarely in your fiction.

The writing professor this fall is stressing the Power of the Imagination. Which means he doesn't want long descriptive stories about your camping trip last July. He wants you to start in a realistic context but then to alter it. Like recombinant DNA. He wants you to let your imagination sail, to let it grow big-bellied in the wind. This is a quote from Shakespeare.

Tell your roommate your great idea, your great exercise of imaginative power: a transformation of Melville to contemporary life. It will be about monomania and the fish-eat-fish world of life insurance in Rochester, N.Y. The first line will be "Call me Fishmeal," and it will feature a menopausal suburban husband named Richard, who because he is so depressed all the time is called "Mopey Dick" by his witty wife Elaine. Say to your roommate: "Mopey Dick, get it?" Your roommate looks at you, her face blank as a large Kleenex. She comes up to you, like a buddy, and puts an arm around your burdened shoulders. "Listen, Francie," she says, slow as speech therapy. "Let's go out and get a big beer."

The seminar doesn't like this one either. You suspect they are beginning to feel sorry for you. They say: "You have to think about what is happening. Where is the story here?"

The next semester the writing professor is obsessed with writing from personal experience. You must write from what you know, from what has happened to you. He wants deaths, he wants camping trips. Think about what has happened to you. In three years there have been three things: you lost your virginity; your parents got divorced; and your brother came home from a forest 10 miles from the Cambodian border with only half a thigh, a permanent smirk nestled into one corner of his mouth.

About the first you write: "It created a new space, which hurt and cried in a voice that wasn't mine, 'I'm not the same anymore, but I'll be O.K.' "

About the second you write an elaborate story of an old married couple who stumble upon an unknown land mine in their kitchen and accidentally blow themselves up. You call it:

"For Better or for Liverwurst."

About the last you write nothing. There are no words for this. Your typewriter hums. You can find no words.

At undergraduate cocktail parties, people say, "Oh, you write? What do you write about?" Your roommate, who has consumed too much wine, too little cheese and no crackers at all, blurts: "Oh, my god, she always writes about her dumb boyfriend."

Later on in life you will learn that writers are merely open, helpless texts with no real understanding of what they have written and therefore must half-believe anything and everything that is said of them. You, however, have not yet reached this stage of literary criticism. You stiffen and say, "I do not," the same way you said it when someone in the fourth grade accused you of really liking oboe lessons and your parents really weren't just making you take them.

Insist you are not very interested in any one subject at all, that you are interested in the music of language, that you are interested in - in - syllables, because they are the atoms of poetry, the cells of the mind, the breath of the soul. Begin to feel woozy. Stare into your plastic wine cup.

"Syllables?" you will hear someone ask, voice trailing off, as they glide slowly toward the reassuring white of the dip.

Begin to wonder what you do write about. Or if you have anything to say. Or if there even is such a thing as a thing to say. Limit these thoughts to no more than 10 minutes a day, like sit-ups, they can make you thin.

You will read somewhere that all writing has to do with one's genitals. Don't dwell on this. It will make you nervous.

Your mother will come visit you. She will look at the circles under your eyes and hand you a brown book with a brown briefcase on the cover. It is entitled: "How to Become a Business Executive." She has also brought the "Names for Baby" encyclopedia you asked for; one of your characters, the aging clown-schoolteacher, needs a new name. Your mother will

shake her head and say: "Francie, Francie, remember when you were going to be a child psychology major?"

Say: "Mom, I like to write."

She'll say: "Sure you like to write. Of course. Sure you like to write."

Write a story about a confused music student and title it: "Schubert Was the One with the Glasses, Right?" It's not a big hit, although your roommate likes the part where the two violinists accidentally blow themselves up in a recital room. "I went out with a violinist once," she says, snapping her gum.

Thank god you are taking other courses. You can find sanctuary in 19th-century ontological snags and invertebrate courting rituals. Certain globular mollusks have what is called "Sex by the Arm." The male octopus, for instance, loses the end of one arm when placing it inside the female body during intercourse. Marine biologists call it "Seven Heaven." Be glad you know these things. Be glad you are not just a writer. Apply to law school.

From here on in, many things can happen. But the main one will be this: You decide not to go to law school after all, and, instead, you spend a good, big chunk of your adult life telling people how you decided not to go to law school after all. Somehow you end up writing again. Perhaps you go to graduate school. Perhaps you work odd jobs and take writing courses at night. Perhaps you are working and writing down all the clever remarks and intimate personal confessions you hear during the day. Perhaps you are losing your pals, your acquaintances, your balance.

You have broken up with your boyfriend. You now go out with men who, instead of whispering "I love you," shout: "Do it to me, baby." This is good for your writing.

Sooner or later you have a finished manuscript more or less. People look at it in a vaguely troubled sort of way and say, "I'll bet becoming a writer was always a fantasy of yours, wasn't it?" Your lips dry to salt. Say that of all the fantasies possible in the world, you can't imagine being a writer even making the top 20. Tell them you were going to be a child

psychology major. "I bet," they always sigh, "you'd be great with kids." Scowl fiercely. Tell them you're a walking blade.

Quit classes. Quit jobs. Cash in old savings bonds. Now you have time like warts on your hands. Slowly copy all of your friends' addresses into a new address book.

Vacuum. Chew cough drops. Keep a folder full of fragments.

An eyelid darkening sideways.

World as conspiracy.

Possible plot? A woman gets on a bus.

Suppose you threw a love affair and nobody came.

At home drink a lot of coffee. At Howard Johnson's order the cole slaw. Consider how it looks like the soggy confetti of a map: where you've been, where you're going - "You Are Here," says the red star on the back of the menu.

Occasionally a date with a face blank as a sheet of paper asks you whether writers often become discouraged. Say that sometimes they do and sometimes they do. Say it's a lot like having polio.

"Interesting," smiles your date, and then he looks down at his arm hairs and starts to smooth them, all, always, in the same direction.