Read Like a Writer

from Katie Wood Ray's *Wondrous Words, 1999.*

Notice something about the craft of the text.

Noticing *writerly* things means noticing things that are close to the words, close to the text. Examples: repetition, word choice, structure of the text. This is different than responding to *readerly* things such as "It flows" or "It has great description."

Talk about it and *make a theory* about why a writer might use this craft.

Discussing WHY a writer might choose to write something in a certain way helps students to understand the writing technique. This will, in turn, help them to "untie" the technique from the text studied and try it in their own writing. It's fine if the theory doesn't match the particular author's intentions. The point is to examine the possibilities as to why a writer *might* craft a piece in a particular way. This gives a strong sense of "I might write my piece like this, or I could write it like this, or I could try this other thing in my writing."

Give the craft a *name*.

The purpose of naming a technique is to give students a common language with which they can discuss the craft of writing. If we have a name for something, we're more likely to remember it and to use it with our own work. If students notice a craft that has a name - such as alliteration, metaphor, etc. – use that. If not, then the class can invent a name. The class will know what it means and can add it to the class pot of "things we can try."

Think of *other texts* you know. Have you seen this craft before?

The same wonderful ways to craft writing can be found in many books. As students are on the "lookout" for crafting techniques, they will notice this. Such ways of writing are not owned by particular authors, but are the domain of all writers. This helps students to understand that it's not "copying" to use writing strategies, that writers learn from each other. To seek out books that are crafted like books they already know helps students to make connections between authors and to read for voice and style as well as story.

Envision this crafting in your own writing.

The most important step. Students with their own drafts, about their own topics, think about, imagine, how this particular crafting strategy might work in their own draft. They "try them on" for size, talking out how a crafting technique might work with their draft. We can help them by making statements such as, "So if I'm writing and I want to ________, then I can use this technique." This helps students to make sense of WHY writers might choose certain techniques, why certain techniques make sense for certain types of writing. With envisioning, it makes sense to help students by "writing in the air" / "writing out loud" for them, so that they can hear the sound of the crafting technique in their own draft. This step will ideally give students the feeling of so many possibilities for their draft.

On Becoming an American Writer

By Alexander Chee
April 19, 2018

My generation of writers—and yours, if you are reading this—lives in the shadow of Auden's famous attack on the relevance of writing to life, when he wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen." I had heard the remark repeated so often and for so long I finally went looking for its source, to try to understand what it was he really meant by it. Because I knew it was time for me to really argue with it. If not for myself, for my students.

*

In the winter before the Iraq War, I lost two friends, one old, one new.

The first friend died of cancer in December 2002. She was just thirty-six. She had been misdiagnosed by her doctor. First, she was told she had a rash and then that she was imagining the severity of it. She was told to take antidepressants. After further tests, she learned she had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. A lifelong hypochondriac who always looked to be in the bloom of health, she had finally fallen seriously ill and was not believed. And when she eventually was believed, when the truth of her disease was incontrovertible, there was not time enough to undo the damage, and she succumbed. She had once been my boss at a magazine launched in the early nineties. I had met her in San Francisco, when she was the girlfriend of my boyfriend's roommate. When I moved to New York to be closer to my boyfriend, she and I sometimes spent whole days together. She herself dreamed of writing a novel one day and in the meantime wrote poems more or less in secret, showing them rarely. When I was an editor of an experimental literary journal called *XXX Fruit,* we asked her for poems and published some of them. I remember looking at the typeset page and thinking of it as a picture of her secret self.

By then, she had moved on to a job at a national weekly newsmagazine, which she loved, though the responsibilities often crushed what energy she might have had to write. Or at least this was what she said. Most writers I know say they don't have enough time to write. It's usually a feint.

Her lover, a poet and novelist, spoke at the memorial service of how, during the eight months she was hospitalized, my friend would tell her stories in the dark, lights out, late into the night, about their life. The stories about them were set in the future but told in the present tense. In that imagined life, it went without saying, she had been healed of her cancer, and they had pets, a house in Woodstock, friends coming over for weekends. She had thought through every detail, down to the burial of their cats at the property's edge.

"What would you read to someone who was dying?" Annie Dillard had asked our class. She wanted this to be the standard for our work. There, at the memorial service for my friend, I thought of another: Dying, what stories would you tell?

*

The second friend I lost that year was a new friend, who died suddenly at the end of February 2003. Tom was his name. He was slightly older than me at forty and healthy for a man as devoted as he was to good drink and good food, gay and HIV positive. He managed a café on Seventh Avenue in Brooklyn, and for the two and a half years I knew him, I saw him almost exclusively after sunset, him making coffee, me ordering it. He had met me in the season when my first novel had appeared. He had read it and would praise it loudly to anyone standing next to me in line. Soon, most of his regulars knew that I had published a novel, so I spent most of our friendship blushing. When he died, I was returning from a short second tour for the paperback.

In our last full conversation, he told me about the novel he'd plotted and begun writing. When I arrived back from my book tour and returned to the café, expecting to see him, I found a young South African man with a mohawk pouring coffee in his place. I began to

quietly panic. I knew Tom was HIV positive and would be absent only if something was very wrong.

Indeed, the South African told me that Tom was in the hospital. I decided I would wait two days for the cough I had to go away, not wanting to risk infecting him. He died on the day in between.

So many of my friends had been living with AIDS, I'd forgotten it could still kill them.

Tom died on a Thursday night. A wake was planned for Sunday. I was asked to read something. I spent the next few days in a cloud of apologetic prayer that eventually pointed me to the idea of writing an elegy. I found myself in the odd position of doing what I often did, which is making a poem for a friend, but in this case one he would never read. All the other times I'd written poems, for a birthday or a wedding, I'd written them with the idea that the poem would be heard by the person it was written for.

I was able to write it only when I imagined him reading it. When I imagined giving it to him. I gave it instead to the owner of the café and his coworkers. They set it in the window, next to a picture of Tom in his sun hat in Spain, where it stayed for a year.

The writing of elegies is something uncanny, and I use that word with the sense that I've never used it before. You can't help but imagine the poem being observed by the deceased. You are even addressing it to them, asking the dead in, not to speak but to listen. And you let nothing go from your desk that wouldn't meet their standard.

In the days that followed, whenever I got my coffee, I saw the picture of Tom next to my poem, and I thought each time about how you could wait too long to write. I was faltering with my second novel, but this stiffened my resolve. Tom had always had a knack for telling me the one thing I needed to hear, and in this way, he told me this last part, again and again, almost daily, until the poem came down.

*

There's another Alexander Chee in my mind, the one who I would be if I'd only had access to regular dental care throughout my career, down to the number of teeth in my mouth. I started inventing him on a visit to Canada in 2005 when I became unnerved by how healthy everyone looked there compared to the United States, and my sense of him grows every time I leave the country. I know I'll have a shorter career for being American in this current age, and a shorter life also. And that is by my country's design. It is the intention.

I have been to convenience stores where I see people working with untreated injuries, and when I leave, I get panhandled in the parking lot by someone in a chain-store uniform who is unable to afford the gas to get home on the last day before payday—someone with two jobs, three jobs. Until recently, I struggled to get by, and yet I am in the top twenty percent of earners in my country. I am currently saving up for dental implants—money I could as easily use for a down payment on a house. But I'm not entirely sure I'll see the end of a mortgage or that any of us will.

*

Only in America do we ask our writers to believe they don't matter as a condition of writing. It is time to end this. Much of my time as a student was spent doubting the importance of my work, doubting the power it had to reach anyone or to do anything of significance. I was already tired of hearing about how the pen was mightier than the sword by the time I was studying writing. Swords, it seemed to me, won all the time. By the time I found that Auden quote—"poetry makes nothing happen"—I was more than ready to believe what I thought he was saying. But books were still to me as they had been when I found them: the only magic.

To write is to sell a ticket to escape, not from the truth but into it. My job is to make something happen in a space barely larger than the span of your hand, behind your eyes, distilled out of all that I have carried, from friends, teachers, people met on planes, people I have seen only in my mind, all my mother and father ever did, every favorite book,

until it meets and distills from you, the reader, something out of the everything it finds in you. All of this meets along the edge of a sentence like this one, as if the sentence is a fence, with you on one side and me on the other.

If you don't know what I mean, what I mean is this: When I speak of walking through a snowstorm, you remember a night from your childhood full of snow or from last winter, say, driving home at night, surprised by a storm. When I speak of my dead friends and poetry, you may remember your own dead friends, or if none of your friends are dead, you may imagine how it might feel to have them die. You may think of your poems or poems you've seen or heard. You may remember you don't like poetry.

Something new is made from my memories and yours as you read this. It is not my memory, not yours, and it is born and walks the bridges and roads of your mind, as long as it can.

All my life I've been told this isn't important, that it doesn't matter, that it could never matter. And yet I think it does.

*

I began this essay as an email I wrote to my students during that first weekend of the Iraq War. I had felt a sudden, intense protectiveness of them. I didn't want my students to go into the draft, rumored then to be a possibility. I wrote to them that weekend and told them that art endures past governments, countries, and emperors, and their would-be replacements. That art—even, or perhaps especially, art that is dedicated somehow to tenderness—is not weak. It is strength. I asked them to disregard the cultural war against the arts that has lasted most of their lives, the movement to discredit the arts and culture in American public life as being decorative interruptions of more serious affairs, unworthy of funding or even of teachers. I told them that I can't recall the emperors of China as well as I can Mencius, who counseled them, and whose stories of them, shared in his poetry of these rulers and their problems, describe them for me almost entirely.

And the paradox of how a novel, should it survive, protects what a missile can't.

I have new lessons in not stopping, after the election. If you are reading this, and you're a writer, and you, like me, are gripped with despair, when you think you might stop: Speak to your dead. Write for your dead. Tell them a story. What are you doing with this life? Let them hold you accountable. Let them make you bolder or more modest or louder or more loving, whatever it is, but ask them in, listen, and then write. And when war comes—and make no mistake, it is already here—be sure you write for the living too. The ones you love and the ones who are coming for your life. What will you give them when they get there?

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Excerpted from the essay "On Becoming an American Writer," as part of the book of essays How To Write an Autobiographical Novel *by Alexander Chee. Copyright © 2018 by Alexander Chee. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.*

Rhythm Ride: A Road Trip Through the Motown Sound
by Andrea Davis Pinkney

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p. 25-6
"Dreaming Big for Eight Hundred Dollars"

Berry and his family hung a sign out front that immediately caught the attention of anyone who passed by. Neighbors looked at that sign and wondered what would come out of that house.

When young mothers wheeled their babies by in strollers, the toddlers who saw those bold blue letters did a double take.

Even dogs out for a walk and stray cats trying to find their way home took notice of Berry's sign.

It was a sign of the times.

It was Berry's make-no-mistake intention.

It said:

HITSVILLE U.S.A.

This was the name of the building that would house Berry's company. Berry's plan was to make only hits—songs that would drive straight to the top of the record charts.

No flops.

No middle-of-the-road music.

No fair-to-middling tunes.

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p. 47-8 "The C Circuit"

Up north, things were better, but in some ways still degrading. The Motortown Revue was very well received at mostly black clubs on what folks called "the chitlin circuit."

Kid, have you ever sniffed chitlins bubbling in a pot on the stove? Have you ever slurped down some chitlins?

When people want to talk proper, they call 'em by their correct name—*chitterlings*. That makes them sound so dainty. Like some kind of puff-pastry dusted in sugar. If you say *chitterlings* slowly, with a stuffy accent and a turned-up nose, you could pass them off as a treat at a tea party.

But baby, the truth is, *chitterlings*—or chitlins when you're in familiar company—are hog intestines that were sometimes referred to in association with African Americans.

I'll tell you this. There are some good things about chitlins. If you like to chew a lot, they're very rubbery. Also, some would argue that chitlins are high in protein, and can be part of a balanced diet. But no matter how you slice 'em, slurp 'em, or say their name, chitlins are slimy swine innards that have a stinky smell.

So while the Motown performers were pleased to travel to a series of African American theatres that welcomed them, some found the term "chitlin circuit" demeaning.

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p. 57-58 "Cholly's Moves"

One of Cholly's greatest strengths was creating choreography that, like the lyrics to many Motown songs, told a story. This involved acting.

Child, how many times have you stood in front of your mirror singing a love song with both hands over your heart?

And when you're crooning about love gone wrong, I know you can't help but pretend to be wiping the tears from your eyes. Or, when the lyrics turn to the part of the song about a happy sunrise, it's darn near impossible not to spread your arms wide, wiggle your fingers, and make believe you are Mother Sun coming up over a far horizon.

We have Cholly Atkins to thank for that. He defined the art of singing pantomime.

What? You never did anything like that?

Well, here are the steps to make it happen, Cholly-style:

1. Glide up to a full-length mirror.
2. Wave at yourself (after all, you *do* look good).
3. Pay yourself a compliment. Say, "Hey, you *fine* thing."
4. Sing these words and follow the moves:

    I love my baby, yes I do (Place hands on heart.)
    But my baby's found someone new (Look surprised.)
    To tell the truth, it makes me blue (Make like you're crying and wiping your eyes.)
    When my baby's new love did my baby wrong (Fold your arms, turn your back to the mirror.)
    Come cryin' to me, singing a whole new song (Pretend you're pleading.)
    Took my baby back on one condition (Wag a finger at your baby.)
    Our love would now have a new rendition (Hand on hip.)
    Yes, our love would now have a new rendition (Both hands on hips. Nod once, like you really mean it.)

How did that feel?

Good, right?

Yeah, I *know.*

When Cholly taught these kinds of steps to Smokey, Marvin, Mary, the Contours, and other Motown singers, they were also enthused to move. We can applaud Cholly Atkins for bringing the smooth to Motown's performers—and to you.

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p. 73-77 excerpts from "Ugly Sightseeing"

Now kid, we come to a part of the Rhythm Ride that's not all harmonicas and bongos.

Every trip you make will take you to places that aren't so scenic. Every road has potholes.

But we have to stay the course, child. The only way forward is *through.* So tighten your seat belt, 'cause I need to show you this part of the highway. I have to.

You see that exit sign ahead?
It's the one that says "Road Under Construction—Beware of Danger."
Well, we're turning off here for a moment, so I can show you why Motown is so important, and how it changed the road as we know it.

*****

In many respects, Motown's Rhythm Ride was going along very smoothly. Hitsville, U.S.A. was redefining music.
But as Motown's triumphs were picking up speed, America was entering one of the most turbulent times in its history.
Look, child.
Check out the scene as we drive back in time.
Do you see it?
There it is. In the rearview mirror.
It's easy to fall asleep on long rides, especially as we enter a dark part of this trip.
But please pay close attention. Especially now, as I explain what you're looking at.
I'm gonna slow our roll just a bit so you don't miss anything.
I need to warn you. This is scary. You are about to witness things that have made grown people cry.
See those African Americans? Those proud, beautiful men and women?
They had grown weary of the discrimination endured under the Jim Crow segregation laws, which prevented them from having the same privileges as white citizens.
Most African Americans still earned less money than white people, and they were kept from gaining equal pay or opportunities for job advancement.
Although laws had been passed that prevented segregation in public schools, in many states, black students and white students still attended separate schools. Black students still had shabby books, broken pencils and rickety desks.
If Little Stevie Wonder had entered sixth grade at Miller Middle School in Detroit, he would have had to put up with inferior materials and conditions.
Look at all those children trying to make sense of their tattered books. See that little boy crying? He wants to learn about planets and mountains and clouds. But how can he learn when his textbooks are missing so many pages?
His parents want to make a change, but back then African Americans were still prevented from fair voting in elections.
In parts of the South, if you were African American and wanted a burger and a Coke at a lunch counter, you would not be served at a "Whites Only" restaurant. And, chances are, if you were African American, some prejudiced person would try to get rid of you by spitting in your face or pouring hot coffee over your head.
Spit on your lip or in your french fries doesn't taste good. And it hurts to get scalded with coffee when all you want to do is have a good meal.
There are worse things, too. Black people were the victims of hate crimes such as lynchings and bomb raids. Kids your same age suffered ugly violence.
On March 2, 1955, a teenager named Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, to a white woman after the driver demanded it. Claudette was dragged off the bus backward while being kicked by police and handcuffed on her way to the police station.

Just a few months later in Money, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955, a fourteen-year-old boy name Emmett Till was beaten and shot to death because he supposedly whistled at a white woman in a grocery store. His dead, bloated body was found days later by two boys fishing in the Tallahatchie River.

On September 15, 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama, four friends—Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins—went to church, ready to pray.

They were killed by a man with a bomb, who had tucked his hatred under the steps of that church and run away before the bomb's blast took the lives of those little girls.

It's unthinkable.

But it's all true.

Sweetheart, I know this part of the journey is painful.

Lord knows, I let the tears flow every time I pass this way. Even the Groove gets the blues.

These tragic events made Berry very sad, too. He wanted to help change the evil that was prejudice against African American people. He looked for ways to make things better.

Author's note:

I chose to render Motown's story as a road trip, told from the point of view of "the Groove," an elderly entity whose voice is that of someone who's traveled the journey to Motown's development.

The voice of the Groove is modeled after that of James K. Snowden, Jr., my second cousin, who everybody in our family calls "Scoopy."

Scoopy started his career as a small-town teen deejay, then worked his way to becoming a radio professional in major markets such as Detroit, New York, New Orleans, and Houston. Scoopy was one of the notable African Americans working in the field of radio who served up music on platters so hot they could sizzle a steak.

As his career progressed, he became a sought-after voice-ove3r actor and music industry executive. Scoopy's notoriety is legendary at Davis family reunions. Some families brag about the doctors, lawyers, teachers, or ministers in their family trees. For the Davises, Scoopy's accomplishments rank right up there with the most prestigious medical and law degrees, and with hard-earned PhDs in education and theology.

Pride excerpts from the novel written by Ibi Zoboi to build our understanding of craft

the skillful use of dialogue to develop characters:

We eat our ice-cream cones and walk and have more small talk about the program he went to, how he learned to skim through boring books and still ace the tests, the rich white kids he knows, wrestling scholarships, and the connections he's already made at Eaton. I don't talk. I listen.

And this thing we're doing, in this place at the edge of a river with buildings and row houses on one side, and the cityscape on the other, is just chillin'. It's that warm spot on the couch when my favorite show is on TV. It's a plate of Mama's food left out for me on the table and covered with a paper towel for when I get home from school. It's our front stoop on a Saturday afternoon.

With this boy named Warren, home has extended out to this part of Brooklyn too—no matter how many fancy buildings with doormen, expensive slices of gourmet pizza, and older white people looking at us with puppy-dog eyes there are. Still, we're just two homies from the hood getting to know each other.

"The Benitez sisters have a reputation, but not that kinda reputation," Warren says, bringing me back to the moment as we head back home. We walk up Jefferson Avenue from the L train. "Word on the streets is that Papi Benitez carries around a machete just to keep guys away from his daughters."

"My father does not carry around a machete." I laugh. "He doesn't have to. Me and my sisters don't get down like that." I accidently bump into him. I remember that this is what Janae and Ainsley were doing at the park—purposely bumping arms.

We reach the corner of my block, and I have to decide if he crosses that line between my block and my front door. My block is my block and any- and everybody can come chill on our stoop. But bringing a boy to my door is a whole other level. I remember how Darius brought my laptop over, and I didn't think twice about it then because he was nothing and it was nothing.

But this is something. Warren is something.

We're already on our stoop, and I take the first step. I don't looik up to see if any of my sisters are looking out the window, or if Madrina is at her window, but I somehow know that she sees me, even if she's deep in her basement with a client or going over her songs and prayers.

I stop on the second step and I turn to him, a few inches taller. "Well, thank you for walking me to my door."

He laughs. "You need to raise the bar, Zuri. Of course I'll walk you to your door. And I suggest you don't trust any guy who doesn't."

"Oh, you're schooling me on other guys now?"

"I'm just sayin'. But I plan to be around for a while, so get used to this."

I don't say anything to that. I don't protest. I'm soft now, like Mama's sweet, warm pound cake. And he's close enough to kiss me, so my heart starts to beat faster like conga drums, and I hope that no one is looking out the window; I hope that I'll know exactly what to do when his lips touch mine; I hope he steals a kiss quickly, while I'm standing here, waiting, breathing, with my heart pounding.

"So I'll text you tomorrow, a'ight?" He steps back with his hands in his pockets.

I frown, confused.

He keeps stepping back until he's completely out of our front gate. "Later, ZZ."

He holds two fingers up, then puts his hand back into his pocket and turns around. Just like that, he walks away, and I feel like the biggest idiot in all of Bushwick. I want to drag him back to his stoop and have a complete do-over. *I'm* supposed to be the one to turn away while *he's* waiting for a kiss. Not him! (88-90)

Use of a colon to introduce a list:

"What's wrong, Z?"
I tell her. I let Janae know all my fears. I lay them out on the table one by one: change, quiet, money, college, job, space, family, home. (138)

Describe a setting with what it is NOT:

The big houses here in Chevy Chase, Maryland, are pushed back away from the street, if you can even call it a street. It's more like a perfectly paved path to any- and everywhere. There are no potholes, no bumps, no double-parked cars—hardly any cars. Just wide-open smooth, curving road. And Darius drives as if he owns that path; as if this whole ride is his life and things are just as easy for him as this road. (167)

This novel is multi-genre. Some of Z's thoughts are expressed in poems, like below. How does this form deepen the complexity of her character?

Haikus

I am that tall glass
of lemonade where sugar
sits at the bottom,

Never rising to
the top. Sweet and sour don't
mix to quench this thirst

Wrapping around my
throat where a bittersweet song is
lodged. You serenade

Me while I sip this
honey lemonade potion,
you are a love brew.

Damn boy, you got me
thirsty over you. Mouth dry
lips chapped, I'm dreaming

Of quenching waters
and all I wannna do is
swim deep in this thing

Called lemonade where
bittersweet elixirs sooth
the soul like moist lips

Touching, bodies merged
in this dance while sugar stirs
to the top, whirling

Like Ochin in her
yellow dress swirling to the
drums, making all this

Sharp-tongued bitterness
submit to the queen bee called
my heart. You got me.

~Thirsty

(189-191)

The Colors of His Addiction

Source: Lauren Mauldin/Los Angeles Times/February 24, 2019

The first time I saved my husband's life, his face was the color of saturated denim. I found him curled on the floor, body fighting itself. Limbs constricted, shoulders twitching, he snorted desperately as his lungs gasped for oxygen.

I yelled his name, shook his arm, slapped his face. The sputtering sound came less often, and he was so, so blue.

"Has your husband ingested or administered any opioids?" the paramedic asked after they pushed me aside.

I shook my head no, feeling my teeth chatter. It felt like a random question. I knew what drug users looked like — disheveled on street corners, rummaging through cabinets for pills. My husband was vice president of a tech company. Earlier that night, we had been planning our upcoming Finland vacation. He was no addict. I told them he was on Klonopin for anxiety and Adderall for ADD, but other than that we were an ibuprofen family. I barely knew what an opioid was, and my husband wouldn't even take Sudafed for a cold.

My husband was the smartest person I've ever known, and an addict.

Despite my answer, the paramedics gave him naloxone, which counteracts opioid overdose. It revived him in a way that seemed impossible. Propped up in the stretcher wearing his usual T-shirt and gym shorts, he looked like he was ready to binge watch "Battlestar Galactica," not like someone headed to the hospital for an overdose. Driving as close behind the ambulance as I dared, I couldn't stop looking at his pink cheeks through the back windows. An instant fix. As if the blue had never happened.

Opioids, I later learned, cause blood to rush to the skin where the body's temperature receptors lie. They feed the brain an overwhelming dose of information, so the user feels nothing. Too high a dose drops blood pressure, and decreases respiration to fatal levels. That's why my husband was blue — the drug had told his lungs to stop working. Naloxone binds to opioid receptors in the brain, blocking them and stopping the flood of dopamine. Medically speaking, the drug is simple, and emergency responders have employed it with increasing frequency. The Nashville Fire Department recently reported a 93% increase to 1,777 doses last year.

My husband later explained that he bought the drug he had taken online from a laboratory in China that sells synthetics. Since 2013, these "designer" synthetic opioids have caused more overdoses than heroin, oxycodone or hydrocodone. In a recent study, the CDC reported synthetic opioid deaths increased almost 47% to 28,400 deaths in 2017, and increased border control or drug raids aren't the solution. The drugs come through the mail to anyone who can do a Google search.

I didn't know any of this the night I watched him in the back of the ambulance. I didn't know that opioid users are the most likely drug abusers to relapse. All I knew that night was how relieved I was when the color returned to his skin and that I would do anything to help him, because I couldn't stop picturing the blue. It had felt like he was underwater, waiting for me to pull him back up to the surface.

Later that night, he tried to explain. "You know when someone has chronic back pain? A massage isn't going to fix the problem, but it makes it feel so much better for a short time. You know it's going to hurt again, but relief feels so good. That's what using is when I'm depressed. For a few minutes, everything is OK."

He told me how he had found entire messages boards devoted to sharing tips for the perfect high. He found online labs selling synthetic versions of everything — ecstasy, amphetamines, a buffet of opioids. The drug that had nearly killed him was butyrfentanyl, which he boiled with a spoon and poured into a syringe before injecting. It is an analog of fentanyl, the drug that killed Prince and Tom Petty. Fentanyl is 80 to 100 times more potent than heroin. In late 2018, the CDC named it the deadliest drug in America.

In the days following his overdose, I started unpacking the odd behaviors that hadn't made sense in recent months. His falling asleep mid-dinner, spoon in hand; the two car accidents in a month; his sudden disdain for our dogs that he normally doted on. How, living alongside this man who was my best friend and favorite person, had I missed his addiction?

My husband was never disheveled on a street corner. He had enough musical instruments for a one-man-band, ran 5ks, made this amazing pie-stuffed cake every year for my birthday. He had a master's in engineering from the University of Texas and wanted to start a nonprofit to help ex-cons integrate into the corporate workplace. He invented a device that alerted his blind Boston terrier when she was about to walk into objects. He was the smartest person I've ever known, and an addict.

He promised me he would never relapse, but refused to go to inpatient rehab for fear his coworkers would learn his secret. The near-death experience had scared him too, he said, and he'd get it under control. He started therapy and antidepressants. I started monitoring him constantly, and assumed that would be enough. I didn't understand then how his brain constantly begged for the drug. I didn't know how much help we needed. When my husband told me I would never find him sputtering and unconscious again, he meant it, and I believed him.

Two weeks later, he picked up a small package from China at the post office. A few hours after his appointment with an addiction specialist, he injected the butyrfentanyl. He wasn't blue when I found him. His skin had a tinge of yellow, except for the patch of burgundy on his forearm where he had pushed the needle. He was cold, and he was 36 years old.

Cruel as It Is, We Somehow Go On

Sometimes, the earth is cruel.

That is ultimately the fundamental lesson here, as children wail, families sleep out of doors, and the dead lie unclaimed in the rubble that once was Port-au-Prince.

Sometimes the rains fall and will not stop. Sometimes the skies turn barren and will not rain. Sometimes the seas rise and smack the shoreline like a fist. Sometimes the wind bullies the land. And sometimes, the land rattles and heaves and splits itself in two.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel.

And always, when it is, we do the same thing. We dig ourselves out. We weep and mourn, we recover and memorialize the dead, we rebuild our homes. And we go on. This is the price of being human. And also, arguably, the noblest expression.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel, and you have no choice but to accept that as part of the bargain called life. And when it is your turn to deal with it, you do.

But what if it's *always* your turn?

Surely some homeless, dust-streaked Haitian can be forgiven for thinking it is always Haiti's turn this morning, two days after the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere saw its capital city smashed by the strongest earthquake it has ever known, a 7.0-magnitude monster. Surely, the rest of us watching from afar, experiencing tragedy and devastation from the comfort of desk chairs and living room couches, are tempted to believe the same thing.

Bad enough, Haiti is wretchedly poor. Bad enough it has a history of political instability and colonialism, of being ignored by the major powers when it is not being exploited by them. Bad enough, all that, yet at the end of the day, those are disasters authored by human hands, by human greed, human corruption, human economic predation.

Sometimes, though, you have to wonder if the planet itself is not conspiring against this humble little nation.

After 1994, when Tropical Storm Gordon killed several hundred people, after 1998, when Hurricane Georges swept away over 500 lives, after 2004, when the rains of Tropical Storm Jeanne claimed over 2,000 souls, after 2005, when Hurricane Dennis took 25 lives in July and Tropical Storm Alpha snatched 17 in October, followed by Hurricane Wilma which stole 11 more, after the double whammy of Hurricanes Fay and Gustav in 2008 killed over 130 people and destroyed over 3,100 homes, after all that, comes this latest insult -- and a death toll officials cannot begin to even imagine. Perhaps as many as *100,000*, they were saying on Wednesday.

Sometimes, the earth is cruel. To crawl the planet's skin, scanning for tornadoes in Oklahoma, charting storm tracks in Florida, running from wildfires in California, is to understand this in a primal, personal way. It is to breathe a prayer that begins, ``There, but for the grace of God . . . '' It is to write relief checks, donate blood, volunteer material and time and to fear, even in the doing, that these gestures are small against the need, inconsequential against the ache of a people whose turn seems never to end.

But what else are you going to do? As the playwright put it, your arms too short to box with God. Even less have we the ability to answer the question that burns the moment: Why are the most vulnerable repeatedly assessed the highest price?

We are hamstrung by our own limitations, so we can only do what we always do, only send prayers and help. And watch, staggered by the courage it takes, as Haitians do what human beings always do, the thing at which they have become so terribly practiced.

Dig out. Weep and mourn. Memorialize the dead. Rebuild. Go on. And show the world once again a stubborn insistence on living, despite all the cruelties of the earth.

By LEONARD PITTS JR. lpitts@MiamiHerald.com

Student Craft Analysis of “Souls and Beings” by Maria

Considering the Story based on Writing Qualities: We think this is great… BECAUSE (evidence)

Literary elements to consider:
personification
alliteration
consonance
foreshadowing
imagery: setting and other details
use of dialogue
transitions
word choice
development of plot: ending

Students worked in groups and created this list:

p.1 “He spins around…” when speaking about spinning around and then the dialogue creates imagery.
p.2 “What astonishes the hiker…” imagery of the heart in the chest
p. 3 comparison “holding onto finger like a child…” gave the sense of tall/big being holding onto a small child
p.1 “s” sounds in description... the repetition of sound: alliteration and consonance
p. 3 “There will be a way out…” clear image of dog’s eyes
p. 3 ending: leaving the dog made you FEEL…
p. 2-3 “Too big ocean blue eyes” then eyes repeat on p. 3 repeating images makes readers feel that the piece hangs together
p. 2 “dragon fire breath…” he’s trying to become warm, shows how cold it is by his breath
p. 1 transition from one narrator to another (the two tree men)—with dialogue “Do you think he’s lost?” you think: who are these people? made me read more…
p. 1 “like a child who’s broken a rule in kindergarten class…” shows age instead of tells
p. 2 “Pudge standing like a soldier at attention…” pictured soldiers: personification
p. 3 ending: changed the mood, competed the story
p. 1 paint the image the character (show not tell)
p. 3 ending: leaves us with questions (wanted foreshadowing) because nothing in the story tells you exactly what has happened—foreshadowing: “It can’t be real; I must have hit my head.”
p. 2 “long fingers grow around the hiker” image that created a scene in your head
p. 1 “he removes the baseball hat…” every kid takes their hat off and runs their hand through their hair—the smallest detail makes you connect, gives the author credibility
p. 2 use nature to describe the human “eyebrows of moss, hair of twigs” qualities of the trees
p. 3 ending: the tree men wanted the dog to be spared watching his master die--