

The image features a white background with two decorative, wavy, zigzag lines on the left and right sides. These lines are composed of two parallel paths, one in a light teal color and one in a darker teal color, creating a layered effect. The central text is positioned between these decorative elements.

The Art of Tension

with Kelly Grace Thomas

Welcome to Sweat, Tears, or the Sea

Hi! I'm Kelly. Feral writer. Deep feeler. Relentless Momma. I'm an ocean-obsessed Aries from Jersey living in California, writing hard to become a deeper, more inspired thinker and feeler. I'm a former high school English teacher who has published four books. I landed a book deal with my dream publisher before taking a formal workshop. Everything I learned, I learned by reading and writing closely, by letting my creativity lead, and I can teach you to do the same.

I want to get you closer to who you want to be and what you need to say—through deep feeling, thinking, and writing.



Substack Update

- We have a new name: Sweat, Tears, or the Sea!
- We will be going down to one workshop a month to focus on more writing.
- This means more essays, poems and prompts coming your way!
- If you haven't subscribe I'm putting a sign up link in the chat.



SWEAT, TEARS, OR THE SEA



WITH KELLY GRACE THOMAS

New Upcoming Workshops!

Sunday, December 8
10-12 pm PT



Writing the Big Thing Small

Paid Subscribers.
Register for Zoom Link in Post.

Sunday, November 3
10-12 pm PT



Prompted by Pop Culture

Paid Subscribers. Register for Zoom Link in Post.

Sunday, October 6
10-12 pm PT



**The Magic &
Mining of
Metaphor**

Paid Subscribers.
Register for Zoom Link in Post.

Important Things To Know Before We Start


1. There is no right or wrong.
2. You are a writer (whether you practice a lot or not).
3. Writing can be about anything and everything.
4. Sometimes it takes awhile to get to the ketchup.
5. The most important thing you need to do is have fun.





**It takes a lot of energy
and beautiful risk to
try something new.**

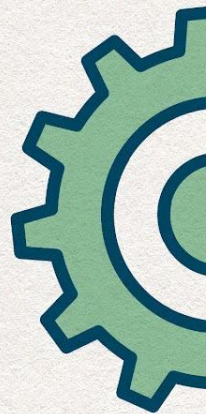
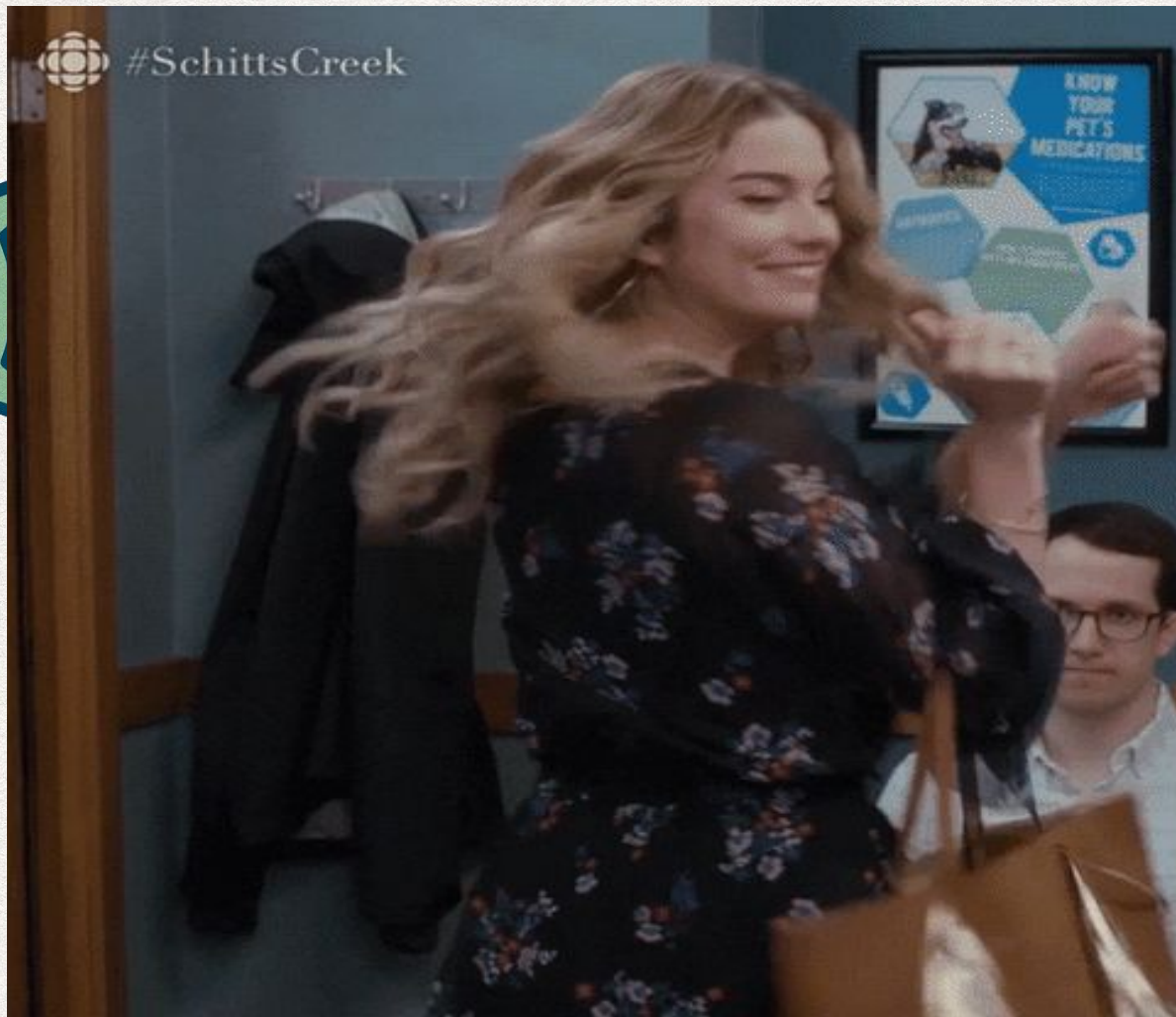
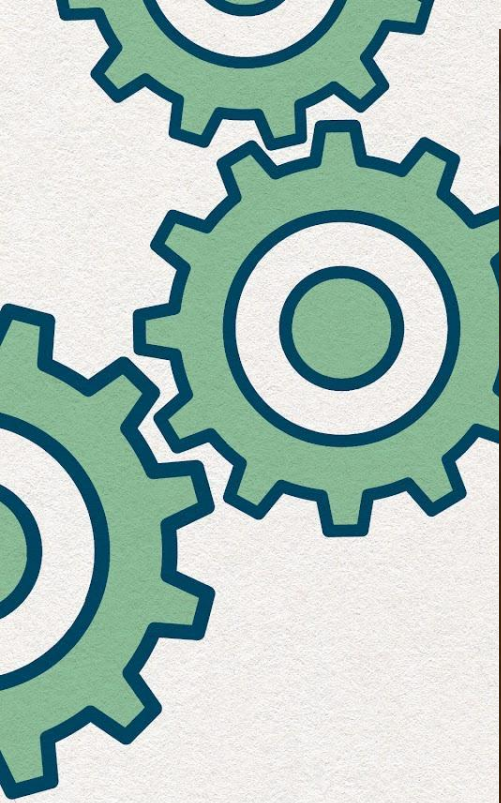
**Be gentle with
yourself when trying
new techniques.**





Quick Poll





What is Tension and Why It's Important

Tension, in short, is anticipation. It is about wanting—needing—to know what happens. It is the thing that keeps you reading. The uncertainty and anticipation of resolution.

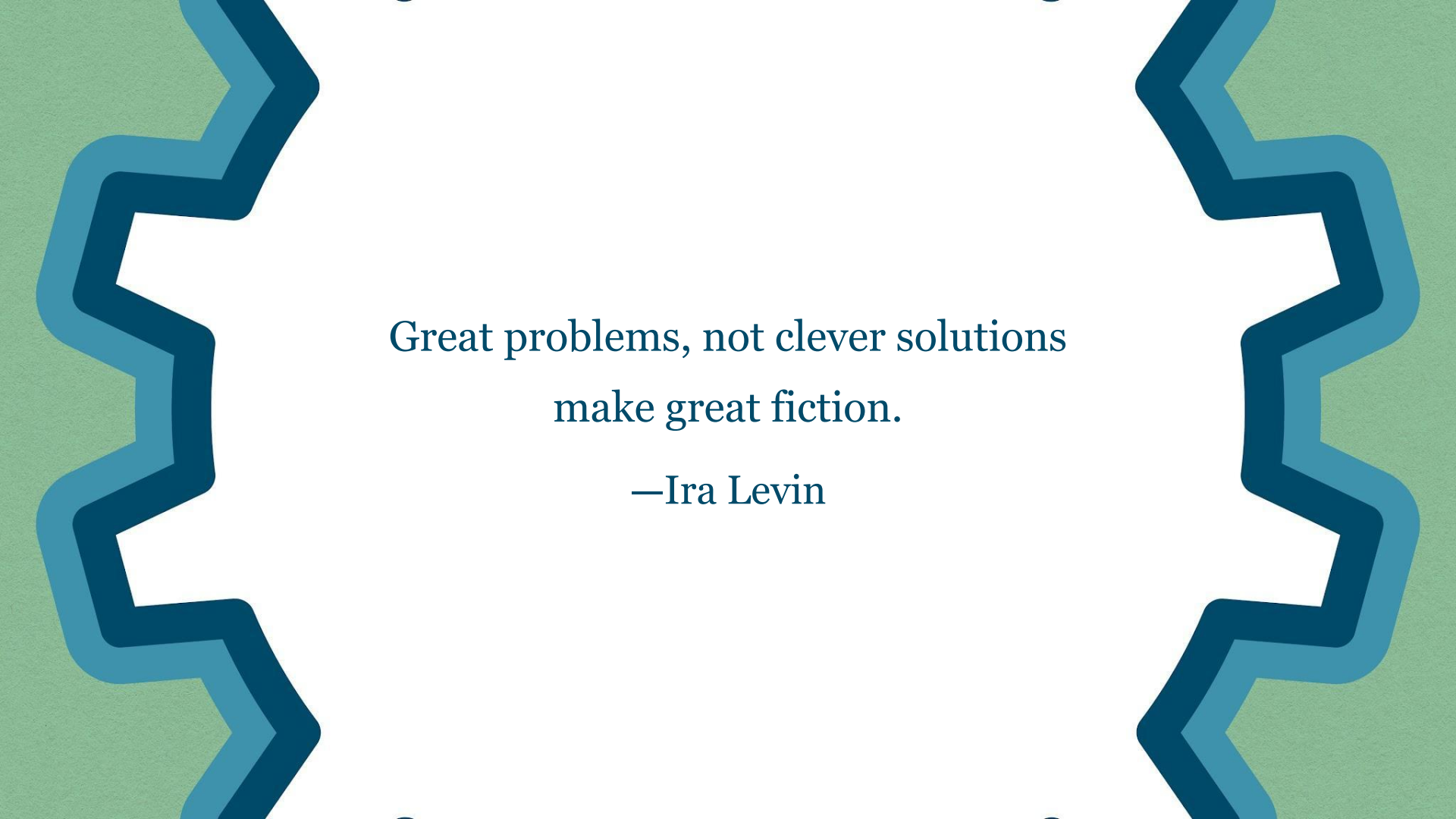
Without tension, a story falls flat. Robert McKee says that during a sex scene tension is release, during this time in a movie most people tune out because the tension is no longer there. Your job as a writer is to hold your readers captive.



A decorative border consisting of two parallel, wavy lines in shades of teal and light green, framing the central text.

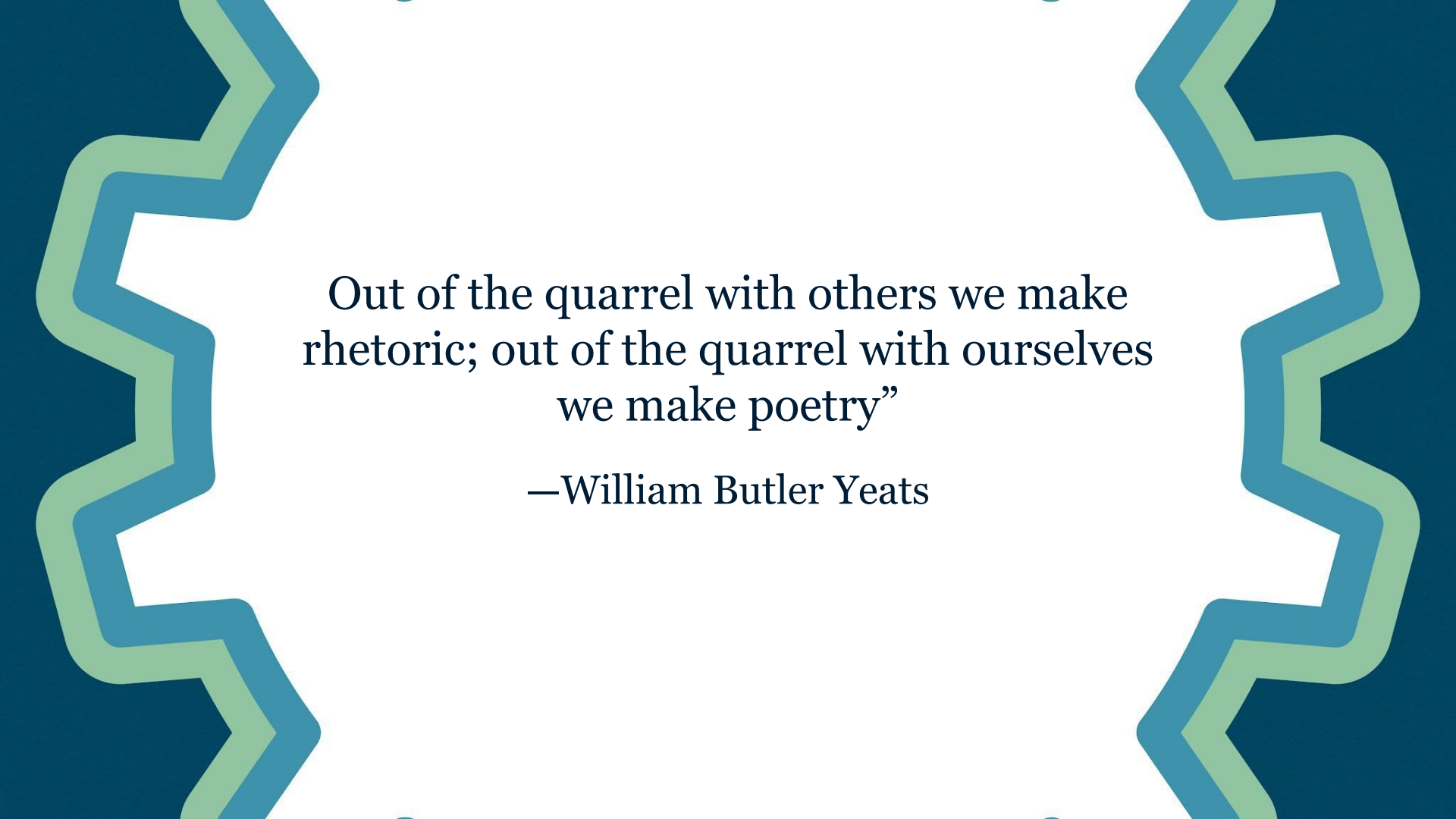
Tension is anticipation and uncertainty.
Every art has to have it.

—Rex Brandt



Great problems, not clever solutions
make great fiction.

—Ira Levin



Out of the quarrel with others we make
rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves
we make poetry”

—William Butler Yeats

So How Do You Do That?

Today we will talk about three distinct ways to create tension with unique strategies for each approach.

This workshop's focus is making sure a poem has enough tension for the reader to invest in the poem. It is tension that keeps us reading. Everything create tension—a problem that causes more problems or even the verbs you use.



How to Create Tension

1. Present a problem
2. Start in the middle of conflict
3. Make sure there is external and internal change
4. Create a “clock” or “gun”
5. Let the reader do the work



Remember: TENSION IS...



How to Kill Tension

1. Giving a thesis statement
2. Cliche language or content
3. Writing the expected thing
4. Being too abstract or vague
5. Keep bringing something up with no new information



Three Techniques of Tensions

1. Subvert Expectations
2. Juxtaposition & Voltas
3. Strategic Surprise

We will go over each and they will be broken down into actionable steps.





Warm Up #1



A: Make a list of things you waited for/anticipated in your life. For example, a partner to move out, a baby to come, to finally have it out with someone you loved, to share how you really feel, to be able to afford X, to love yourself.

B: Pick one thing on your list and write about it in detail. What thoughts were you thinking at the time? What were you nervous about? What did you not know how to say?



#1 Subvert Expectations

“After Years” by Ted Kooser

Today, from a distance, I saw you
walking away, and without a sound
the glittering face of a glacier
slid into the sea. An ancient oak
fell in the Cumberlands, holding only
a handful of leaves, and an old woman
scattering corn to her chickens looked up
for an instant. At the other side
of the galaxy, a star thirty-five times
the size of our own sun exploded
and vanished, leaving a small green spot
on the astronomer's retina
as he stood on the great open dome
of my heart with no one to tell.

“In Dispraise of Poetry” by Jack Gilbert

When the King of Siam disliked a courtier,
He gave him a beautiful white elephant.
The miracle beast deserved such ritual
That to care for him properly meant ruin
Yet to care for him improperly was worse.
It appears the gift could not be refused.

“Friend Text Thread” by Kate Baer

did anyone hear the / link to the story that / have
an opinion on / dress for the weekend / meal to
make quickly / where is the place we / pictures
from Tuesday / ache in my left breast / calling
tomorrow / baby is coming / crying all night and /
remember the guy who / cannot stop laughing /
sick of the fighting / not sure if we'll work out /
results in the morning / nightmare unfolding/ we
are right here and / tell us the hard part / tell us
you'll try

“An Interview” Questions by Brendan Constantine / Answers by Gail Gauldin Moore

Why is the sky blue?

Because darling, I can't dance.

Why does the wind blow?

Because everything is a close call.

Why do birds fly?

Because no one is greater or more noble when they fill out their resume.

Why do trees wait?

Because I am all the birds in the world.

Why does the earth sleep?

Because I don't have my own dreams

“The Vulture And The Body” by Ada Limón

On my way to the fertility clinic,
I pass five dead animals.

First a raccoon with all four paws to the sky
like he’s going to catch whatever bullshit load falls on him next.

Then, a grown coyote, his furred golden body soft against the white
cement lip of the traffic barrier. Trickster no longer, an eye closed to what’s coming.

Close to the water tower that says, “Florence, Y’all,” which means I’m near Cincinnati,
but still in the bluegrass state, and close to my exit, I see

three dead deer, all staggered but together, and I realize as I speed past in my
death machine that they are a family. I say something

to myself that’s in between a prayer and curse—how dare we live
on this Earth.

I want to tell my doctor about how we all hold a duality
in our minds: futures entirely different. Footloose or forged.

“The Vulture And The Body” by Ada Limón

I want to tell him how lately, it's enough to be reminded that my body
is not just my body, but that I'm made of old stars and so's he, and that last Tuesday,

I sat alone in the car by the post office and just was for a whole hour, no one
knowing how to find me, until I got out, the sound of the car door shutting like a gun,
and mailed letters, all of them saying, Thank you.

But in the clinic, the sonogram wand showing my follicles, he asks if I have any questions,
and says, Things are getting exciting.

I want to say, But what about all the dead animals? The Earth? Our trapped bodies?
But he goes quicksilver, and I'm left to pull my panties up like a big girl.

Somedays there is a violent sister inside of me, and a red ladder
that wants to go elsewhere.

“The Vulture And The Body” by Ada Limón

I drive home on the other side of the road, going south now. The white coat has said
I'm ready, and I watch as a vulture crosses over me, heading toward

the carcasses I haven't properly mourned or even forgiven. What if, instead of carrying

a child, I am supposed to carry grief? The great black scavenger flies parallel now,
each of us speeding, intently and driven, toward what we've been taught to do with death.

“Getting Ready To Say I Love You To My Dad, It Rains” by José Olivarez

i love you, i say to the cat.
i love you, i say to the sky.
i love you dad, i say to the mirror.

its rains & my mom's plants
open their mouths. my dad stays
on the couch, maybe the couch opened

its mouth & started eating my dad.
i love you dad, i say to the couch,
its tongue working my dad like a puppet.

i hear the rain fall & think the city is drinking.
or making itself clean. i am here
with my dad & the tv & the tv drones

“Getting Ready To Say I Love You To My Dad, It Rains” by José Olivarez

on & on, so i'm not sure i hear it-
my dad grunting & a nod. i love* you dad,
i say to my dad. we sit together

and watch tv. outside it rains. my dad
turns the volume up. the city is drunk.
the city is singing badly in the shower.

i killed a plant once because i gave
it too much water. lord, i worry
that love is violence. my dad is silent

& our relationship is not new or clean.
i killed a plant once because i didn't give
it enough water. my dad and i watch tv

on a rainy day. we rinse our mouths
with this water.

* America loves me most when i strum my Spanish song. mi boc guitarron. when i say me estoy muriendo, they say that's my jam.

Technique #1: Subvert Expectations

1. Avoid a topic or leave it unresolved
2. Ask a question and don't answer it (or answer in an unexpected way)
3. Do the opposite of what is expected
4. Add something primal: fear, sex, hunger
5. Recycle an image or word but have it change meaning



Avoid a Topic or Leave it Unresolved

It is very powerful when a poet sets something up and then avoids it, or when they present a problem and instead of resolving it, they make it worse or offer no solutions. This makes the reader active and invested.



For Example:

In “After Years,” we expect Kossler to explain how he felt seeing this lover after years; instead, he responds with the huge ways in which the world responded. He changes the physical surroundings to illustrate tension.

In “In Dispraise of Poetry,” the first poem in Gilbert’s collection, he doesn’t mention poetry at all. Danez Smith’s first poem in their new book *Bluff* is called “AntiPoetica.”



Hold Back the Answers

One of the reasons readers become invested in art is because they don't have the answers or a summary of what will happen. To create tension, give an answer to a question never asked. Or ask a question and never answer it (or answer in a way that doesn't show an expected connection, like in "Interview" by Brendan Constantine and Gail Gauldin Moore).



Do the Opposite of What is Expected

Keep tension strong by subvert expectations and extending anticipation. Tension is created when you don't know what will happen or when the opposite *has* happened, which leaves you asking *why*.

In “Getting Ready to Say I Love You To My Dad, It Rains,” we wait the whole poem for a moment that is supposed to change everything and changed nothing.



Add Something Primal

Tension is also created when we bring undeniable need or feeling into the poem. The internal danger should be as high as the external danger. To create both inward and outward tension, add something primal: fear, sex, hunger. Think monkey brain emotions.

“The Vulture & The Body” does a great job of showing death through the attempt of life.



Change the Meaning

It creates tension when you have an image or word that means something and then in another stanzas means something else. This keeps the reader wondering, making sure not to take things at face value, like the plants in “Getting Ready to Say I Love You To My Dad, It Rains.”



Prompt #1

Write about your anticipation and then reaction to an event or interaction. It can be a big event in the world or in your life. It could also be something extremely small, a moment that gave you clarity, calm, or maybe invited more chaos. Somewhere in the poem, add the element of fear.

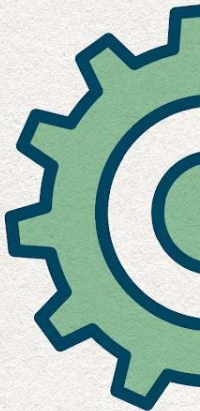
When writing, use one or some of the following techniques:

- Avoid a topic or leave it unresolved
- Ask a question and don't answer it (or answer in an unexpected way)
- Do the opposite of what is expected
- Add something primal: fear, sex, hunger
- Recycle an image or word but have it change meaning





#2: Juxtaposition and Voltas



Technique #2: Juxtaposition and Voltas

Create contrast and change to keep tension strong.

1. Two opposing forces
2. Create turns
3. Break patterns



Warm Up #2 (Bonus for Later)



A: Make a list of moments in your life and/or others' lives that were full of feeling. For example: a wedding, breakup, bringing a friend to the ER, a holiday gone wrong, winning the thing you wanted, the death of someone you have complicated feelings about.

B: Pick one moment and write about it in detail.

C: Pick 10 words from the description above. Write them down and then write their opposite. The “opposite” words are completely up to interpretation.

For Example:

Word	Opposite
Dancing	Death
Bouquet	Screwdriver
Gown	Rags
Invitation	Silent Treatment
Midnight	Dawnbreak

“Letter to Bruce Wayne” by Matthew Olzmann

A good place to hide a drop of water is a stream.
A good place to hide a stream is beneath an ocean.

A good place to hide a man is among thousands
of men. Watch how they rush
through the city like water through a ravine.

I've searched many famous cities for you.
There are three listings for "Bruce Wayne"
in Houston, two in Pittsburgh, one in Miami, and one in LA.

In Tampa, Bruce Wayne is a retired chemistry teacher.
In Flagstaff, he drives a taxi and hopes
to procure a diamond for his soon-to-be fiancée.

A good place to hide a star is a galaxy.
A good place to hide a galaxy is a universe.
Look at the night sky. Justice

“Letter to Bruce Wayne” by Matthew Olzmann

used to be a cowl and cape, the flicker
of wings under an etiolated moon. And you,
like a gargoyle, crouched atop some stone edifice.

To conceal a universe, place it in a multiverse—that hypothetical
klatch of alternate realities. The dilemma of the word
alternate is how it implies a norm, a progenitor stream
from which the alternate diverges. Which is the alternate?
Which is right here, right now? There is no such thing

as Gotham City, but here is Gotham City and I've been
so naïve: believing the truth of the old mythologies.
How they promised a recognizable villain,
a clown with a ruby-slashed mouth, a lunatic's laugh.

“Letter to Bruce Wayne” by Matthew Olzmann

In the universe where I exist, supervillains
look like everyone else. Give them an old flannel
to wear and a square jawline to smile at the world.

They're hanging a noose in a middle school bathroom.
They're shouting, Get out of my country,
from the window of a passing car.
They're pulling a pistol in a crowded barroom,
or bus stop, or the middle of the street.
They could be anyone. They could be everywhere.

A good place to hide a sociopath is a full-length mirror.
A good place to hide that mirror is the heart of America.

“Letter to Bruce Wayne” by Matthew Olzmann

In the battle of Good versus Evil, I was so sure
Good would win. Now I just hope something Good will survive,
get a job cutting hair or selling cars, make it home for dinner.

I suspect there's a parallel dimension where you, Vigilante,
long for this as well. To have a normal life is victory enough.
To remain anonymous and not be spat upon on the subway.

In Boston, Bruce Wayne owns a pawn shop.
In Milwaukee, he plays pinochle and feeds stray cats.
In New Hampshire, he goes fly-fishing on the Sugar River,
reels in one brook trout after another.

When he removes the hook from a mouth,
he might place the fish in a cooler.
Or, he might set it back into a stream—

the alternate or the original—no longer certain
in which he stands.

“To the Woman Crying Uncontrollably in the Next Stall” by Kim Addonizio

If you ever woke in your dress at 4am ever
closed your legs to someone you loved opened
them for someone you didn't moved against
a pillow in the dark stood miserably on a beach
seaweed clinging to your ankles paid
good money for a bad haircut backed away
from a mirror that wanted to kill you bled
into the back seat for lack of a tampon
if you swam across a river under rain sang
using a dildo for a microphone stayed up
to watch the moon eat the sun entire
ripped out the stitches in your heart
because why not if you think nothing &
no one can / listen I love you joy is coming

“The Committee Weighs In” by Andrea Cohen

I tell my mother
I’ve won the Nobel Prize.

Again? she says. Which
discipline this time?

It’s a little game
we play: I pretend

I’m somebody, she
pretends she isn’t dead.

Two Opposing Forces

Use juxtaposition to place contrast in close proximity. The closer and more opposing the forces, the stronger the impact.

For example, in “Letter to Bruce Wayne,” the juxtaposition of good and evil, ordinary and superhero, kind and psychopath, raise the stakes.



Create Turns (Voltas)

Think about the trajectory of a poem, what is expected? How can you change the flight path? Use a volta to offer a different perspective, expectation, etc.

For example, both “To the Woman Crying Uncontrollably in the Next Stall” and “The Committee Weighs In” take a complete turn in the end, which adds tension and complexity.



Break Patterns

Break patterns in your poems to make sure nothing becomes expected. You can break patterns in tone, syntax, imagery.

For example, add a funny line in a serious poem, or a serious line in a funny poem. Think about the role of a volta in a poem, a line, etc. For example, in “The Committee Weighs In,” expectations are broken throughout the poem.

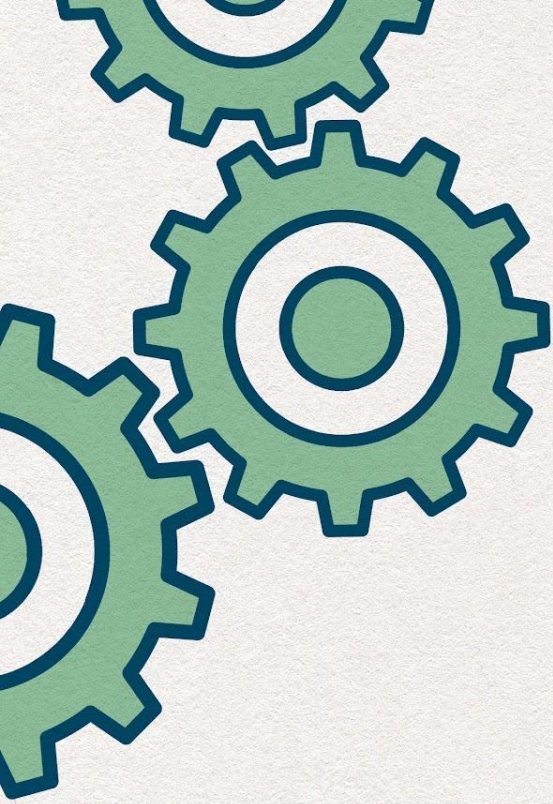


Prompt #2 (Bonus for Later)

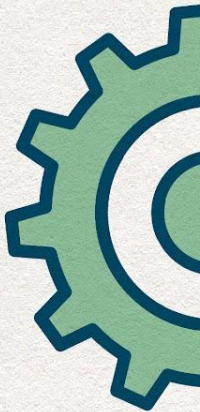
Write about a moment or relationship in your life that is full of emotion. Use tension to explore that feeling. What opposing forces were present? What changed? How can you still feel the ripples today?

When writing, use one or some of the following techniques:

- Two opposing forces
- Create turns
- Break patterns, varying syntax, tone, form (i.e. add humor in a serious poem, add seriousness in a funny poem)



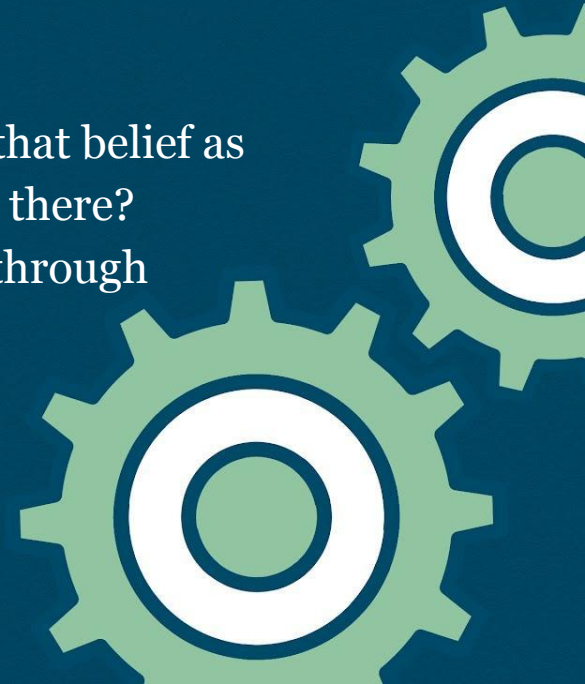
#3 Strategic Surprise



Warm Up #3

A: Make a list of assumptions or beliefs you have about yourself and the world. For example, when someone dies, they're gone; everyone deserves love; life isn't fair, the saltwater heals all.

B: Pick one thing on the list and write as many details about that belief as possible. What moments taught you to believe this? Who was there? What happened? How has this belief affected how you move through your life?



“Lament for the Living” by Sarah Matthes

We feel them walking over us in their intolerable shoes,
knocking down our stone doors. And what
would they have us do—come outside?

We will not afternoon among the pigeons,
who loiter like blanched old men in a sauna,
moaning "arrgargahhh" but meaning to say
"shut the door" but meaning "let this day
end me." Their dicks lolling across their thighs,
gummy and white as gefilte fish.

Overwrought? Yes.

But this is just one tunnel through the story,
and it is not the one that leads to some outside
that is sweet and green. What if we had known

“Lament for the Living” by Sarah Matthes

we were in the last five years of our lives?
What a relief! To look around and say
how fine it is, to awaken in the cracked sun,
to knock back a berry into our mouths
like a large and living pill! To have two
and a half years to eat before our time is reset
into a new measure of halfness. And it goes.
For decades we split ourselves across the longing
of an asymptote, until one day we reach down to wipe
and we're putting our hand

through a ghost.

And then it becomes intolerable. Like fruit salad —
a grape disguised in the juices of a cantaloupe.
We leave behind a dotted line, and all these people!
They follow it like a map to heaven,
when all we meant was "cut here."

“Daveen” by Shira Erlichman

Blonde, chipper, & with a name like a cleaning solution
the young nurse catches my drool in a mini paper cup
as I spit out the meds, again. This is her third try. She sighs.
Only a few years older, Daveen grabs me under-the-armpits,
transports me to the chair, then wheels me to the room
at the hospital’s end. Someone/a stranger/everyone
is disappointed in me. Ten days later I’m *released*—is what
they call it. She breaks strict code to walk me through
the heavy doors to my car in the lot, lightly punches my shoulder
like a stepsister. I’m not just outside, I keep thinking, I’m Out.
With nothing to gain, Daveen pulls me in close. She’s hugging me
so tight, spots choke my vision. With all this concrete fog
in my head it’s hard to hold on to a sentence but she says
“I hope,” she says “I never,” says “see you,” says “again.”

“Urban Girl Writes another Poem About Her Dead Father” by Siaara Freeman

My father is dead.
I notice it most
During things that haven't happened
yet.

My Father is dead
at my wedding.
He is a slow dance of bullets
an autopsy trying
to make polite conversation with the guests.
My flower girl is me at every age
he did not see me turn.
I am throwing things I haven't seen in years
(My virginity, pig-tails, my diploma, joy and names of old lovers).

“Urban Girl Writes another Poem About Her Dead Father” by Siaara Freeman

My father is dead
at the birth of my first child
The doctor asks *where is the father*
I say *murdered* out of habit.
The doctor does not specify so neither do I
Instead we both stare
at my child who is named after the chill in the room.

My father is dead
at my death bed. We play
Blackjack until the light comes.

When it does, he lifts me onto his shoulders
I get the piggy back ride promised to a child
who time had been waiting on.

“The War On Drugs” by Brendan Constantine

The war called at midnight, called again
at two, third time it left a message. Made
no sense; something about wagons, a palm
tree weeping, (I played it over), weeping.
Said something else about money, a ride
to the airport. The airport was closed,
was falling, the airport was crawling
with cops. Come get me, it asked,
Can you come get me? But it never said
where. It called at sunrise, then again
at noon. Left a message, half rage, half
song—You’re all a bunch of cowards.
You don’t care if I die (eye, eye). To hell
with all y’all.

“The War On Drugs” by Brendan Constantine

It must've called someone else after that,
someone who answered; a month passed.
I heard it went north. I heard Mexico.
A friend (of a friend) saw it raging in Rome.
Now it's here, in this room, with the shades
drawn and the lamps on. It won't show me
its eyes, its red, red eyes, rubbed out
like the price of a gift. It's wearing
a hospital gown over jeans, a house dress,
over nothing, wearing a helmet, a rifle.
It's barefoot, sandaled, got huge black boots
with no laces, and it's sorry.

“The War On Drugs” by Brendan Constantine

It's so sorry about things: the disappearing,
the curses and songs. No really, it wants
to surrender. Can it stay? Some of it?
Can some of it stay the night? I should
keep away from the windows, it says,
I should kill the lights. If I say no,
it will go off, it will cry or break things,
accuse me of loving it all wrong. I love it
all wrong, as a cup loves coins, a bed loves
fire, a tree loves whoever comes to eat
its last heart. When the phone rings again,
the war watches me hesitate, then grabs
the receiver. It doesn't know its own voice
on the other end. Christ, it's so loaded,
it can't tell it's lying. OK, it says, I'll ask,

“The War On Drugs” by Brendan Constantine

but seriously, just for one night.
And if I let it stay, it won't stay. That is,
it'll find something of mine to steal,
then find a reason to leave, before
more of it comes—in helicopters,
rubber rafts, in busses, paper bags—
comes to take the city, mother by mother,
and pawn it. What will it get for us.

#3 Strategic Surprise

To create tension you must always be strategic about surprise.

1. Say something new or offer a new perspective
2. Use a different kind of conjunction
3. Change the rules (mess with the undeniable)
4. Use a new take

Say Something New

Or offer a new perspective. When you say something in a way that hasn't been said before, people are surprised—and that surprise keeps the tension.

For example, “Lament for the Living” uses the idea that the dead are over the living mourning them and want to cut ties.



Use a Different Kind of Conjunction

In “Consider This,” Chuck Palahniuk offers different conjunctions as a way to create tension. For example, using “and then” “and next” “and now” instead of just “and,” or using the word “dad” to string together sentences in the voice of a little kid.

For example, Erlichman uses the word “says” as a conjunction in her poem “Daveen.”



Change the Rules

Change the rules or what the reader believes to be true. Examples of this are messing with time, gravity, physics, love, etc. Once you create a new set of rules, your reader wants to know this new world, real or imagined.

For example, in “Urban Girl Writes another Poem About Her Dead Father,” Sierra Freeman reverses time.



Use a New Take

Take something that is tired and make it new. A saying, a cliché, a trope. Use what we know—with a twist!

For example, Brendan Constantine’s “War on Drugs” he uses the tension we already know to build new tension.



Prompt #3

Write a poem about an experience in which one of the beliefs did the driving. What did it prove? How did it create tension? How has it surprised you? How does it help you see the world with a new take?

When writing, use one or some of the following techniques:

When writing, use one or some of the following techniques:

- Two opposing forces
- Create turns
- Break patterns, varying syntax, tone, form (i.e. add humor in a serious poem, add seriousness in a funny poem)
- Say something new or offer a new perspective
- Use a different kind of conjunction
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- Use a new take



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New Upcoming Workshops!

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Writing the Big Thing Small

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**Thanks, hope to write
with you again soon!**

@kellygracethomas