

Bumping Up Language

In your essay, find a place to get as sassy and outrageous with your language as Patricia Smith does in this poem about Gwendolyn Brooks and Chicago. Read over the poem, mark it up, take notes from this master poet: What do you love? How does Smith make you see, hear and taste Chicago? Think about content and style. Sometimes borrowing a few words or phrases can help you ignite your prose.

“You need to know Chicago if you're going to learn to miss her.” Patricia Smith

So why is Gwendolyn Brooks still dead?

To understand the question, you need to know Chicago.

You need to feel the slivers of ice in its breath, ride its wide watery hips, you need to inhale a kielbasa smothered in slippery gold onions while standing on a corner in a neighborhood where no face mirrors your own. You need to know how flap-jowled Mayor Daley walled us in, forced us to build our own language and our own castles crafted carefully of dirty dollar bills and free cheese. Every colored girl on those streets had to be a poet, or die. We all scanned the world with Gwen's huge and hungry eyes.

You need to know Chicago if you're going to learn to miss her. You need to know about The Alex, the only movie theater on the West Side, where rats as big as toddlers poked slow noses into your popcorn. We strutted pass sawdust storefronts with brown meat crowding the windows, where you could buy the head of a hog with no questions asked....You need to come with me to the corner store where you could buy 45s and vanilla-iced long johns and school supplies and fat sour pickles that floated in a jar in the corner. And when you asked for one Miss Caroline would plunge her hammy forearm into the brine and pull out the exact pickle you pointed to, plop it into a single-ply paper bag and if you were truly West Side you'd shove a peppermint stick down the middle of that pickle and slurp until the battle between salt and sugar dizzied you.

Your turn: Take your essay up a notch by turning into Patricia Smith. Find some language from her poem to slide into hers, use alliteration, use lists, take a page from her poem and explore outrageous specific details to make your place or people come to life.

My First Draft: The Vista Del Mar was a bar and restaurant located on Humboldt Bay that my parents co-owned with Jack Wells for most of my life. Because of the Vista's location on the bay, most of our customers worked in the ice house next door, picked crab or shrimp, fished for salmon, halibut, crab and rockfish; some worked in Samoa across the bay, pulling green chain; some railroad workers loaded cars. These men and women worked with their hands and their muscles, who instead of reading novels, read the ocean to find fish, who read the curve of a log, or a the hum of a railroad tie.

My Third Draft: To understand the Vista Del Mar, slung against the watery hips of Humboldt Bay, you'd need to inhale the fish, fresh from the Pacific, scales shining iridescent rainbows in the fog, lighting the dock workers' hands, their skin cracking with ice and cold until my mother's coffee warmed them up; you'd need to know the men who found warmth and camaraderie on the tall red stools of my father's bar at the end of their shifts. You'd need to learn how women, hair wrapped in bandanas, moved in small bands of laughter after boiling and cracking Dungeness crab all day. You'd need to hear the clang of railroad cars coupling and uncoupling, brakes chasing metal as they pressed against the ties, and smell the steel when the rail workers sat at freshly wiped tables and ordered fried oysters or my mom's famous clam chowder.