

1. **Love & Children:** From Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*

When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children. I said that once, in another book, and I find I am still thinking about it. I said that children are hostages to fortune. I find I am still thinking about that too.

2. **Self & Personal Development:** From James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago. I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read. The story of my childhood is the usual bleak fantasy, and we can dismiss it with the restrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again. In those days my mother was given to the exasperating and mysterious habit of having babies. As they were born, I took them over with one hand and held a book with the other. The children probably suffered, though they have since been kind enough to deny it, and in this way I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Tale of Two Cities* over and over and over again; in this way, in fact, I read just about everything I could get my hands on—except the Bible, probably because it was the only book I was encouraged to read.

Death & Meaning: From Annie Dillard's *The Death of a Moth*

There is something marvelous about the way a flame burns a moth's wings. It is not cruelty, but clarity. The moth dies, yes, but it dies in light.

Identity & Belonging: From Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*

I wanted to lie. I wanted to lie about my weight, my family, my fears. But I also wanted to write something that felt like truth, even if it hurt.

Faith & Transcendence: From Brian Doyle's *Let It Go*

I'll tell you a story. Four years ago I sat at the end of my bed at 3 in the morning, in tears, furious, frightened, exhausted, as drained and hopeless as I have ever been in this bruised and blessed world, at the very end of the end of my rope, and She spoke to me. I know it was Her. I have no words with which to tell you how sure I am that it was the Mother. Trust me.

Let it go, She said.

The words were clear, unambiguous, crisp, unadorned. They appeared whole and gentle and adamant in my mind, more clearly than if they had somehow been spoken in the dark salt of the room. I have never had words delivered to me so clearly and powerfully and yet so gently and patiently, never.

Let it go.

Prompts:

- Write about a moment when you felt love and fear at the same time. What did that reveal about your understanding of connection?
- Begin by following Didion: When we talk about x (abstract concept) we are talking about y (something concrete and specific. Keep going and see where this move takes you.
- Follow Laymon: Begin by stating something you'd prefer to do, to make life easier on yourself. Then state what you are doing instead.
- Write a paragraph that describes your growing up, as Baldwin does, and name three things you did and one thing you were supposed to do that you did not.
- Describe a time you confronted loss—of a person, a place, or a version of yourself. What did it teach you about permanence?
- Reflect on an episode that changed your sense of time. Did it speed things up, slow things down, or make you feel suspended?
- Find something “marvelous” in an experience or incident that seems anything but.
- Begin with a question you cannot answer. Let the essay be your attempt to live inside the uncertainty.

“Tricks” to try:

- try using a collective voice, “we” instead of “I.” Or address the reader as “you.”
- write a long sentence that feels almost out of control, followed by a very short one.
- try one-sentence paragraphs. Drop conjunctions, add conjunctions. Address the reader directly.
- be aware of meaningful repetition.
- open up your thought process to the reader.
- find a way to elide difficult material, as Baldwin does. Tell the reader you're not going to tell them something.
- take two sentences (or more!) and revise them just for sound. Use vowel rhyme and alliteration.