Opening of “Greasy Lake,” by T. Coraghessan Boyle
from Greasy Lake (widely anthologized)

It’s about a mile down on the dark side of Route 88. – Bruce Springsteen

There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was
good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste. We were dangerous
characters back then. We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks
in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine. When
we wheeled our parents’ whining station wagons out into the street we left a patch of
rubber half a block long. We drank gin and grape juice, Tango, Thunderbird, and Bali
Hai. We were nineteen. We were bad. We read Andre Gide and struck elaborate poses
to show that we didn’t give a shit about anything. At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.

Through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and
shopping malls, street lights giving way to the thin streaming illumination of the
headlights, trees crowding the asphalt in a black unbroken wall: that was the way out to
Greasy Lake. The Indians had called it Wakan, a reference to the clarity of its waters.
Now it was fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with
beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a
hundred yards from shore, so stripped of vegetation it looked as if the air force had
strafed it. We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to
snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and
plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the
incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and
crickets. This was nature.
I was there one night, late, in the company of two dangerous characters; Digby wore a gold star in his right ear and allowed his father to pay his tuition at Cornell, Jeff was thinking of quitting school to become a painter/musician/head-shop proprietor. They were both expert in the social graces, quick with a sneer, able to manage a Ford with lousy shocks over a rutted and gutted blacktop road at eighty-five while rolling a joint as compact as a Tootsie Roll Pop stick. They could lounge against a bank of booming speakers and trade “man’s” with the best of them or roll out across the dance floor as if their joints worked on bearings. They were slick and quick and they wore their mirror shades at breakfast and dinner, in the shower, in closets and caves. In short, they were bad.

I drove. Digby pounded the dashboard and shouted along with Toots & the Maytals while Jeff hung his head out the window and streaked the side of my mother’s Bel Air with vomit. It was early June, the air soft as a hand on your cheek, the third night of summer vacation. The first two nights we’d been out til dawn, looking for something we never found. On this, the third night, we’d cruised the strip sixty-seven times, been in and out of every bar and club we could think of in a twenty-mile radius, stopped twice for bucket chicken and forty-cent hamburgers, debated going to a party at the house of a girl Jeff’s sister knew, and chucked two dozen raw eggs at mailboxes and hitchhikers. It was 2:00 a.m.; the bars were closing. There was nothing to do but take a bottle of lemon-flavored gin up to Greasy Lake.
**Exercise: Key Points**

- This week, allow yourself to play and have fun. **Create a bold first-person persona narrator** (PN) who maintains a wry distance from his or her younger self. This talkative PN is **humorously self-accepting of his younger self**. It has **attitude and energy** and could even be a bit of a show-off. Remember: this is not you! If you are shy or reserved, it does not matter. The beauty of writing is that you can create a talkative, exciting PN even if you are quiet yourself.

- Start with a scene or incident from your past to embellish or completely invent one. Then, **start** to tell us about it from the adult point of view of its main character. Remember: this is an exercise: do not try to write an entire story in your two pages.

- The adult first-person persona-narrator can tap in to the language of his/her younger self (“to show we didn’t give a shit about anything”).

- Beyond that, your PN is **strictly an adult with loads of distance from and perspective on the past**. He/she is revisiting this material for the sake of the pleasure to be had in the evocation of a lost period, through **specific details**.

- Feel free to write in either prose or verse – it does not matter. What matters is the personality of your narrator.

Remember, as with every persona-narrator, **you want to get the reader’s attention**. Boyle’s strategy is one way, out of many, to do this. As you write, do your best to keep in mind that his storyteller is an invented persona-narrator, a created personality, even if the events you describe are originally derived from factual material.