CHAPTER ONE

One Great Way to Write a Short Story

When I was a graduate student at Kansas State my stories tended to run sideways: a series of scenes upon scenes with turns and twists and lots of reveals, but something about the whole process felt like I was in search of a structure, or hoping everything would just work out. I knew stories were about change and I just kept adding scene upon scene hoping somewhere along the way the change would just happen. There was a random episodic quality to my stories and all of them ran 30 or so pages. As a writer I was just trying to survive the story, inventing more and more stuff to keep going.

Needless to say, none of these stories "worked."

During the beginning of my second year at Kansas State I had the opportunity to work with Professor Ben Nyberg (then the Fiction Editor of *Kansas Quarterly)*, sitting in and helping to teach his Beginning Fiction class, and it was there I discovered a scaffolding to hang my stories on. His approach was rooted in the modernist era, the works of Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Mansfield, and John Steinbeck.

Instead of approaching stories from a theatrical vantage point: the Freytag triangle with its rising action (a series of battles), climax, denouement (falling action and resolution), Nyberg threw out this upside-down V-shaped architecture for a three act structure: exposition, crisis (with a deflection), and resolution.

Realist stories are about ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances. It's about a day where a pattern is broken. Every morning a husband awakes late, kisses his wife on the cheek as she rushes off to her academic job, and then hurriedly drinks orange juice and gobbles down cold eggs. He then goes to his job at WKBW Buffalo as a television newscaster. He starts at point A and goes to point B. But in Nyberg's model, he never gets to point B. On this one particular morning the newscaster's wife appears distracted, making little eye contact, and then says things aren't working between them, 'I feel like there's less and less of me here, and let's try a trial separation." Instead of B the newscaster is headed to a new dimension C (the story's crisis phase). Instead of going to work he heads to Niagara Falls and visits a series of wax museums and meets a woman who has got a sure scheme to win at the casino. She invites him to join her. Now the stakes are much higher and we are in on a different day, a day full of drama, a day worth exploring.

Stories are about life and death stakes (real or imagined) and how characters react while under duress. Hollywood of the neoclassical period (1930-1960) believed in the following storytelling

premise: "a noble character overcoming a series of obstacles to achieve a worthy goal." In writing realistic fiction characters don't have to be noble. They just have to be interesting. Act One begins the process of creating an interesting lead character.

This is the expository phase of a short story (the first act) where something creates a destabilizing condition, a shift from the every day that throws the lead character into chaos. A person you haven't seen in years arrives at your doorstep. Your boss tells you to close the door, we need to talk. Your doctor says we need to do further tests. Rational order and calm break down. The narrative escalates, and some empathy is created for our lead character who is in some way beset upon.

During the crisis phase (act two) the protagonist is in conflict with another person who wants something different from the protagonist and this push/pull creates not only tension but moments of genuine connect and disconnect between them. At some point, during this emotional struggle, a deflection happens. A character makes a choice, acts on it, and the scene spins in a new direction. This deflection can include saying something that has never been said before; seeing something in the other person that the protagonist has never noticed before; taking an action that is new and pushes the lead character out of her comfort zone; etc. The possibilities are endless. The spin should direct the protagonist toward a resolution.

For Nyberg, that resolution (act three) often leads to an epiphany (the lead character coming to some sort of insight about herself or the situation or the other person or the human condition), but an epiphanic ending isn't necessary. The protagonist can realize something has shifted between her and the other person (notice I didn't say antagonist: not all stories are a fight between good and evil) without fully realizing what that shift is. Or the protagonist is taking baby steps at the end. The story can even end at a precipice where the protagonist has undergone change but still faces further changes to come. For example, two people sit in a car while the motor's running, and the man realizes something about the woman he had never realized before (he has an epiphany). He wants to build on this moment, to apologize for his boorish behavior and some inappropriate comment he made about her at a party earlier that evening. He struggles to find the words, where to begin, and the story ends as she waits, the motor choogling, and the light in the parking lot intermittently flickering.

Some nuts and bolts: these stories are very often scene driven, involve three to four characters, and take place over a short period of time (a few hours in a day or events over two days). The crisis scene often takes place in twenty minutes or less and the resolution, following on the heels of the crisis, is even shorter. In terms of length, the exposition and crisis phase are usually of similar length and the resolution about half to a third as long. Stories in this format usually run from anywhere from 12–15 pages.

Crime and romance novels and classic films have an "M" shape to their narratives. They too have a three-act structure but *two* major deflections, plot moments that spin the protagonist off in a new

direction. William P. McGivern's *The Big Heat* is a prime example. The novel begins with a suicide and Sgt. Dave Bannion investigating. But he's disengaged, distant, not completely focused. A third of the way through the novel his wife is killed by a car bomb meant for him. Suddenly, the stakes are higher and Bannion spins off into pure vengeance mode. He wants to punish and target those who killed his wife. He no longer feels connected to humanity. Two thirds of the way through the novel Bannion uncovers the root of evil, but he's powerless to do anything. He tells Debby Ward, the novel's good-bad girl, of his dangerous desires and she kills the person that Bannion, because he's a cop, can't. She even uses his gun. This is the novel's second deflection. Her actions cause the "big heat to fall" (names of the guilty are released to the press and police) and Bannion, now healed, is reintegrated into society.

I usually find the hardest component of the three act story is getting the exposition right. Once I have the deflection, the resolution writes itself, but in the expository phase I have no idea where the story is headed so I often have to go back and set up things to earn my ending. The main thing to remember is that the character in the end must be different from the character at the beginning but the change must be slight. We must believe that the character in the expository phase is possible of the change revealed in the resolution stage. Moreover, the ending should be inevitable but not predictable. That's a lot for a writer to handle, but always strive for what Aristotle called the consistent inconsistencies of character.

As you can probably see, from my above comments, when it comes to writing literary fiction I'm a pantser (a seat of your pants writer) not a plotter (I don't pre-arrange things). However, the Nyberg model does give me a structure to fall back on: I know that at some point in the storytelling process a deflection will occur and this will create the energy or engine for the story's dynamism and conflict. So in a way, I guess, I'm a bit of a plantser (a mix of seat of your pants writing and plotting).

One final caveat: all right, I know this all sounds pretty formulaic. And in a way it is. But if you're struggling like I was when I first started sifting through scenes in search of a story worth telling, this structure will help you to write a story that "works." Within four years of learning this structure I was landing stories in literary magazines. And yes, after a while, I got tired of writing the three-act story and branched out to differing story shapes. But for ten years this was a great way to hone my craft.

Case Study #1: "The Raid."

In 1934, John Steinbeck published "The Raid" in the pages of the *North American Review.* It tells the story of two communist labor organizers, one older (Dick) and the other underaged (Root), who arrive at a small town in order to spread their communist pamphlets. The destabilizing condition: Root has never done this before and he knows that they could very well get beat down by a raiding

party who isn't too particular about their brand of politics. He's afraid he might fold under the pressure. Dick has done this many times before and keeps telling Root to "take hold."

In Act Two (the crisis) they enter "a low square building" where they plan to hold their meeting and discover that they only have oil in one of their two lamps. Things are moving sideways. A stranger enters and tells them to "scram . . . The others were just going to leave you take it." No one from the communist party will be there to support them and the raiding party is bigger than expected. This leads into the story's deflection. The men, at this point, could run, but they decide to stay. Dick says, "Thanks for telling us. You run along. We'll be alright." They got their orders.

Root goes along with Dick but he's afraid, afraid of being scared, of getting hurt. Dick repeatedly tells him to take hold, and during the confrontation with the raiding party Root begins a transformation, the story's deflection has spun him to a new place of understanding. He's the first to speak, calling the men brothers. They hit him with a two by four and he gets back on his feet, suddenly filled with purpose: "His breath burst passionately. His hands were steady now, his voice sure and strong. His eyes were hot with ecstasy."

The two men are beaten into unconsciousness.

Later, they awake in a prison hospital. Dick has a busted arm and some cracked ribs. Root's muffled with "dull pain" and reaches a mini-epiphany. This is Act three, the story's resolution. He connects his experience to the Bible and how he wanted to forgive because "they don't know what they're doing." Dick chastises the kid, telling him to lay off that religious stuff, but Root gets the last word: "It was just—I felt like saying that. It was just kind of the way I felt." A reversal has taken place: the pupil has learned something; by contrast, the teacher remains stuck within a system of thinking that doesn't allow for connections with anything outside communist dogma. Root is pushing back against Dick, and in a way, he is moving forward.

Case Study #2: "A Twister on Stage Fourteen"

Here, Frannie Dove revisits classic storytelling structure. Set in 1939, Dove's story, like Steinbeck's, centers around an older character, Mr. Ross, a WWI veteran, and a younger character, Dane Gray. This time, however, our empathy is with the teacher rather than the pupil. The story revolves around the armor men wear to protect themselves and the need to connect, and as in the case of Sgt. Dave Bannion of *The Big Heat* to re-integrate to humanity.

The two work in the props department (negotiating air hoses and dirt and a muslin tornado) on Soundstage fourteen for *The Wizard of Oz.* Dane knows that Mr. Ross was wounded in the leg during the Great War and that he cried while hearing Judy Garland's rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Ross is taken aback by this and doesn't really want to explore these aspects of his life.

But, he does connect with Dane, covering for the kid while he has a coughing fit up in the rafters. If Dane's spotted coughing, he'll be sent home.

In the story's second act, the deflection occurs: "The hose hissed, and then a thunder shook the stage. Something sparked and exploded, rattling the walls of the set, like a cannon, like a grenade. There were screams from the crew. I dropped to the ground for cover, taking the kid with me, but he wasn't the kid anymore. He was Frank, in the flesh, eighteen years old, pale as a ghost and terrified. A thousand bullets whistled over us, and I covered our heads for protection." Suddenly Ross has returned to the war, and his PTSD flashback has him slipping between two moments of time. It's a private moment: all internalized.

It's discovered that a compressor had inadvertently exploded. After work, Ross drives Dane to his aunt and uncle's home. The kid is covered in dirt and somewhat disillusioned: "You stand in the dirt all day. Nobody thanks you for what you do. Don't days like this seem ridiculous? It's a long piece of stocking and a three-foot-tall house. Will people really believe it's a twister?"

This is the story's central theme, illusion versus reality and what does Ross ultimately believe? In the third act, the story's resolution, Dane doesn't show up to work the next day. Ross expected to never see the kid again—after all Dane can lean into his privilege—but Ross needs the job, and in the story's final moments resigns himself to the magic of the dream factory, hoping briefly to find peace and wholeness: "They wouldn't see a group of stagehands shooting dirt from an air compressor. They'd see damage and danger, nature and destruction. For a couple hours in the theater, they would be transported. And perhaps for some, when they saw the right picture at the right time, it would be all they needed to feel alive again." The final epiphany has an outside-looking-in quality. What if Ross isn't one of the "for some," what if he can't be "transported." Then, he may never feel alive again. The ending is wonderfully strange: sad, enigmatic, and ambiguous.

Exercise:

Write a Nyberg story. Begin with a destabilizing condition; something that places an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances. This moment will throw your world out of stasis and into conflict. Deepen the conflict in your exposition phase (act one) by involving another person. They both want something but they want *different* things. In act two deepen the conflict to a boiling point where a narrative turn happens (this will be the deflection). From the turn, your protagonist will be sent spinning in a direction that they've never experienced before. Remember: in your crisis scene characters should be saying or doing things they've never said or done before. Following the deflection we reach the resolution. Your lead character should come to some kind of knowledge, epiphany, or be taking baby steps in that direction (they might not fully get it yet, but they will, maybe, some day). Of course, you can also write the false epiphany story, where instead of being "derided by vanity" in what they learn (as in James Joyce's "Araby") they conclude, falsely, that they'll

never die (as in Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp"). The journey has been so traumatizing, your lead character comes out the other side of it embracing a falsehood.

CHAPTER TWO

Plotting

In the previous chapter I mentioned how the Nyberg model can provide us with a scaffolding (exposition/crisis with a deflection/and a resolution) to hang our story on.

Scenes also have scaffolding. Good scene work answers a question while also asking a new question for our protagonist to lean into. We string together enough scenes and we have a causal narrative chain of events that makes sense. We don't necessarily know what's going to happen in the scenes we're composing but we know the answer/question pattern has to be in play to survive the hard work of writing the story and sustaining its narrative arc.

Similarly there are classic plot shapes that announce themselves to us as the story unfolds. They're ingrained into our western storytelling DNA. Jerome Stern explored several of these plot archetypes in his fine book, *Making Shapely Fiction*. Here are my takes, slight re-workings, of seven of them.

The Quest

This is perhaps the oldest of storytelling shapes. Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture* connected it to a master Biblical narrative: the garden/the desert/the garden; Paradise; Paradise Lost; Paradise Regained. Characters begin in a kind of Eden; something disrupts their world, and they are sent into the wilderness on a quest. They complete the quest and return home, fundamentally changed. This is the plot shape to John Ford's *The Searchers.* A massacre takes place. Ethan and Marty (Jeffrey Hunter) go on a seven-year exile in search of Debbie (Ethan's niece) who is now held in captivity by the Comanche. Ethan, a racist, wants to kill as many Indians as possible; Marty wants to find and protect Debbie from Ethan. They all return. Marty's perspective on whiteness has changed. He's aware of his outsider status while also having a greater sense of belonging and kinship that isn't tied into blood lines. Ethan returns, but doesn't really belong in the new, more inclusive society, and thus in the film's final image the door shuts on him, and he's left adrift, to wander the earth. Debbie, married briefly to Chief Scar, literally crosses the threshold into the homestead, left to wonder how she'll be accepted by her white neighbors.

In crime stories of the American hard-boiled tradition, the detective's journey is often pyrrhic. What he uncovers on his quest is dark, disturbing, and the results of discovery cause him to die a little (figuratively) in solving the mystery.

Overall these stories are goal-oriented and lend themselves to action and volatile, often violent encounters. What these characters want is relatively clear. What are they willing to do to get it?

The Epiphany

James Joyce is most known for this form, the insight narrative. These are character-driven stories, firmly rooted in quotidian naturalism, that end with the protagonist suddenly realizing something. The plot can be somewhat episodic, a series of apparently discordant events, or it can be a well-orchestrated narrative that leads to a single resonating effect. The radiance felt at the end can be bright and resounding or a dim glow. The character can be significantly changed or taking baby steps in a new direction.

I had a creative writing teacher who once said all narratives are about coming to knowledge. That may be over simplifying things, but the epiphany narrative often focuses on lifting the veil off innocence, and revealing the corruption below the surface. There's a sense of the powerless gaining power through hard-fought life experiences.

The Peripheral Narrator

This is one of my favorite plot lines: a peripheral narrator tells the story of a much more flashy character. It's as if the flashy "specimen" character is being observed under a microscope. The peripheral narrator watches, empathizes, and comments on the actions of the "main" character. Many of us writers are observers in life, and this narrative lends itself to a position many of us are comfortable with, this outside-looking-in perspective. The point of view can be loving, critical, endearing, admiring, or a combination of any of these.

The point-of-view gives the story an element of restraint. We can create a wild character, but the peripheral narrator keeps things in check. William Wordsworth once said about poetry that form and meter controls the emotion, giving poetry that necessary quality of being reflected in tranquility. I see a peripheral narrator functioning in a similar way.

However, Rust Hills, a long-time Fiction Editor at *Esquire*, had what he referred to as Hills's Law: a story with a peripheral narrator is about two characters, two people are changed by the events in the story, the flashy character and the peripheral voice telling the story. Hills's model: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The story is as much about the very private and quiet Nick Carraway as it is about the flashy playboy who associates with gangsters, Jay Gatsby. Gatsby is murdered by the end of the story, and Nick needs to get away from it all and the people of the leisure class.

Collage

I'll talk more about the iceberg story in the fourth chapter that focuses on the inner/outer components to narrative showing and telling, but this technique relies on photographic realism. We stay on the surface of things and rely on our readers drawing inferences from what they see in a scene and across scenes.

The art of subtext is doubled: inside scenes and across scenes.

Very much in the spirit of Soviet Cinema of the 1920s, a juxtaposition of images creates a series of meanings. The Kuleshov effect: a man looks to his left; cut to a bowl of soup; back to the man. We connect the images: oh, he must be hungry.

In this plot line, from the collision of short photographic scenes, emerges a narrative thread. Scenes should be evocative, attention grabbing, a series of haunting tableaux.

What to be wary of: make sure the story doesn't become over-determined. Good scenes in a narrative chain should close off a prior question while opening up a new one to be explored. The danger with a collage narrative is that the scenes can get stuck in a replicating sameness: a father with his son at a restaurant makes fun of a waitress's lisp, and imitates her voice in a falsetto Elmer Fudd pitch; later, on the subway ride home he comments on a stranger's body odor, saying something sure is gamey in here; once he's back at his apartment he tells his wife about the "bad rug" his boss wore at work and "honey don't you think it's time you started your diet? You could be in the Macy's Day Parade—on a string." In each scene he makes offensive shaming comments and the boy witnesses it all, feeling more and more distant from his dad. Yes, the insults escalate, but the story appears to be announcing itself too soon. Dad or the boy needs a counter-movement, something to re-route the story's trajectory.

Slice of Life

Stories are about change, but slice of life stories really lean into the fictional world's dirty realism setting: a night shift at a diner in which the wait staff is slammed because of an all-city band concert; a few hours for a weekly poker game; a thirty-minute guitar lesson. The strength of this story is in the details. That customer at the diner who complains that the pancakes are undercooked; the manager who checks the garbage for unused jellies; the waitress who flirts with the male customers and pays little attention to their wives or partners. In slice of life plots, the writer focuses on both routine and non-routine incidents. What makes the telling of this particular day different from any other day? What makes the ordinary experience suddenly extraordinary? How is the protagonist, placed under duress, changed? Readers will feel like they're understanding things from the inside,

what it means to be a waiter, a cab driver, a contract worker installing new windows, a teacher who works with the deaf.

The Visit and A Gathering of Strangers

Raymond Chandler once wrote that whenever you're stuck and don't know what to do next in a crime story, have two characters carrying guns crash through the door. He's being a little bit facetious but the tenant still holds: a collision with another character creates all kinds of possibilities for a writer to survive the act of writing the story.

Both of these plot shapes revolve around what happens when a person or persons are placed in the same space with differing frames of reference.

The Visit often involves some sense of returning as a protagonist is confronted with the past or seeks to escape into an irretrievable past. Your protagonist is a former criminal who has moved to an upstate New York town. He now works as an auto mechanic when an unexpected car pulls up at the station. A figure smiles menacingly behind the windshield. "Hi, Tom. Or what name are you going by now?" The stranger's hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Boss Gettys says hi. You remember Gettys?" Our protagonist is about to be forced back into a world of crime.

Family dynamics often make for good drama in stories of this type: the always popular sister in high school, now in her early thirties, shows up at your door one morning and asks you to drive her and her daughter to Canada to escape her abusive husband.

In A Gathering of Strangers a group of disparate people are forced together through abject circumstances: a bus breaks down in a snowstorm. People who don't know each other are sheltered in a local church basement. The situation draws people together and through counterpointed characterization tensions can arise, stories told.

Of course all of these plot shapes can be mixed and matched, pulled out of our big pot of storytelling gumbo.

Scaffolding

Guitarists borrow licks from other guitarists; filmmakers pay homage to films they admire (when Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* looks into a glass of fizzing alka-seltzer director Martin Scorsese is doing a shout out to a meditative moment in Jean-Luc Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her)*.

And writers, if you ask them, and they're totally truthful, will give several instances of where the work of others has inspired creative choices they've made.

These creative choices can involve plotting.

Let's say you're writing a realistic slightly cruelly absurdist story that features a couch and two couples (one older; one younger) and it's an after party party in which the couples are arguing departmental politics (the wives are English professors; the husbands are underemployed: one's an adjunct instructor; the other a part-time librarian). Hmm. Where have I seen this before? Here the narrative is playing with and inverting some of the structures of Edward Albee's classic *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

I borrow and mix the scaffolding from other plots all the time.

And the example above I borrowed from "A Man in the Water," an essay Robert Boswell wrote for our *Feed the Lake* collection of craft essays (NAR Press, 2016).

Full confession: I love film noir. When I was a graduate student I purchased Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *The Film Noir Encyclopedia* and during the six years I pursued my PhD I tracked down and watched over 80% of the films listed in their hefty tome. So is it any wonder that some of this scaffolding found its way into my literary fiction?

In my short story "Essentials" I borrowed from the classic noir *Laura* and Bernard Malamud's coming-of-age story "A Summer's Reading." In *Laura*, detective Mark McPherson investigates a murder and falls in love with the alleged decedent (he's read her diaries) and fetishizes her through a painting of her he admires in the living room. The film explores obsession. One night, McPherson after falling asleep in front of the painting is awakened by the smell of perfume and the presence of Laura. She isn't dead. Diane Redfern, decimated by a shotgun blast to the face, was the victim, not Laura Hunt.

I've always loved this moment. It's pure cinematic magic.

My story centers around an estranged father who died of a heart attack and a young son who goes to his father's apartment in search of some lost connection. One night while looking through his father's things, he falls asleep and is awakened by the smell of perfume. A young woman, Melanie, a University of Toronto English major, is in the apartment, her hair wet with rain. The protagonist discovers not only were she and his father lovers but she was also tutoring him, teaching him some of the classics of literature. The father, an immigrant, had always wanted to appreciate some of the "essentials."

This latter plot wrinkle was inspired by Bernard Malamud. In "A Summer's Reading," George Stoyonovich, unemployed and feeling disrespected, tells the neighborhood that he's going to read 100 books over the summer. This gives him dignity and the respect of his community, but soon it's discovered by his sister and his neighbor Mr. Cattanzara that George has been doing nothing toward this goal. Shamed and seeking redemption the story ends with George heading to the library: "There were books all over the place, wherever he looked, and though he was struggling to control an inward trembling, he easily counted off a hundred, then sat down at a table to read."

In my story, Stan seeks a father's legacy, what is he passing down to the son, if anything? He finds it. An overdue library book, one of the essentials, his father was reading with his tutor. Melanie had a key to the apartment and was there to find the book and return it to the library. Stan promises to do so, but he wants to read it first. In a clear echo of Malamud, "Essentials" ends: "She smiled and walked to the upholstered chair. When he looked up she was gone. He started reading."
The father's legacy is secure: the son will inherit a father's love for literature.

Scaffolding gives writers ways to enhance a story's trajectory, to shape where a plot might go. It's a dialogic practice that enhances an appreciation for the past work and your own.

Exercises:

1) Visits: write a two-person scene. Character A sits in a park and is confronted by/meets a stranger, Character B. See what emerges. Rewrite the scene, only this time make Character B somebody Character A knows (a brother, a sister, a former lover, a grade school bully)
2) Peripheral narration: write a scene where Character A observes something wild and eccentric that Character B is doing. Have Character A begrudgingly admire what they see. Re-write the scene and have Character A annoyed by what they see. Write the scene a third time and have the peripheral narrator emerge from the shadows and insert their will in the scene. What emerges? Note all the differing choices you made and the resulting outcomes.
3) Scaffolding: take a scene or a moment from an antecedent text. Invert some of its paradigms (gender roles, narrative outcomes) and see what you can create dialogically. Have fun and experiment. Take risks.
4) Family dynamics: a set of car keys sits on a kitchen table. Character A wants to talk to her sister and doesn't want her to get the keys and leave. Character B wants to grab the keys (they're hers afterall) and get out of the room as quickly as possible. The characters are at odds and have competing objectives. Write the scene, see what emerges.
5) Slice of life: take an actual experience you've had (working at a big box retail or grocery store, a coffee shop, time spent in the military) and lean into the dirty realism of it. If none of these resonate for you then recall a Holiday event (Thanksgiving, a Fourth of July bash) or a rite of passage (learning to drive a car, going to prom, graduating from high school) and

tell the scene slant. Pick a moment outside the ordinary, where things went slightly awry. Let us feel the immediacy of it. Place us in the moment with all its blemishes.

6) The epiphany. Write through it. In other words, start your scene with the revelation and then go on to explore how the radiant moment was a false insight. Or, write a scene with an ironic epiphany. A character comes to a false knowledge (we readers recognize it as false but Character A, because of the trauma they've undergone, does not). Write this narrative in first person ("I" point-of-view), and then rewrite it in limited third.
7) Write a quest narrative (300 words or less) like a fable or fairytale. Use a telling voice and little dialogue. Rely on summary. Now rewrite that quest narrative focusing only on a single scene. Expand a specific moment by leaning into the action-film elements: light, time, dialogue, staging (where characters are in relation to each other and the props that are in play) and setting (to create mood and psychological subtext). Rely on the art of inference. What's implied, what are we not seeing/hearing?

CHAPTER THREE

Counterpointed Plotting

A lot of fictional stories *are* battlegrounds.

Indebted to the melodramatic imagination, literary stories often involve dynamics of power: who has control over whom; who abuses it; who uses it wisely. Stories of victimization grip us. We know that abuse from those in authority (teachers over children; a coach over players; a mother over a son) does all too often happen. When I was twelve years old the story "The Test" by Angelica Gibbs had a profound impact on me. A twenty-seven year-old African American woman needs to get her driver's license for the job she has with a privileged white family. During the road test, the examiner "tests" her, making a series of derogatory remarks such as, "Old enough to have quite a flock of pickaninnies, eh?" The commentary escalates, until Marian, no longer able to take the degradation, pushes back with a "damn you," and the examiner fails her, "[making] four very black crosses at random in the squares on Marian's application blank."

This story was originally published in the pages of *The New Yorker* in 1940 and I don't think a month goes by where I don't think about that story. It was a game changer for me. The extent of that kind of meanness, that kind of abuse of power, and racial targeting I was not aware existed until Gibbs showed the way.

Years later Sandra Cisneros does her own variation on this theme in the powerfully poignant "Eleven" where a white teacher, Mrs. Price, singles out a Latina girl, Rachel, on her birthday, making her claim ownership of a red sweater, "all raggedy and old" that clearly isn't hers and has a "sleeve that smells like cottage cheese." The teacher's assumptions are based on class: this sweater "all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope" must belong to one of her not-so-well-off kids. She embarrasses Rachel, and when the truth is revealed that it's not Rachel's sweater, Mrs Price fails to apologize.

That narrative loose string still haunts me everytime I re-read "Eleven," the failure of an authority figure to acknowledge and empathize with one of the students in the classroom.

Perhaps American writers, because we are a relatively young country, often tell stories of lost idealism, the veil of innocence being lifted to reveal what's underneath: corruption, decay, unkindness.

But battleground stories *aren't the only* stories to tell.

Charles Baxter, inspired by the work of the American stage, champions, in *Burning Down the House,* narratives of counterpointed characterization. Here the focus isn't on some kind of end game: who's

going to triumph, who's going to lose? Who's the protagonist, who's the antagonist? But instead these narratives spin around the connections and disconnects between two people, and ultimately we're asked what's emerging here? What's leaking free from the armor almost all characters wear?

In theater, acting is often seen as structured improvisation. Actors have a script, but how they say what they say changes moment-to-moment depending on what their scene partner is giving them. Similarly in counterpointed character stories, the writer needs to follow the impulses of what each character puts forward, and that will form the basis of the story's narrative arc. The end game isn't so much to win, but to be understood. Life isn't always a contest.

I love these kinds of stories.

In Norman Jewison's In *The Heat of the Night* (1967) the narrative has its fill of high-octane melodrama: a businessman, promising to bring a much-needed factory to Sparta, Mississippi, is murdered; a group of rednecks with a Confederate symbol on their car track and plan to possibly murder Virgil Tibbs; a white man Endicott (a plantation owner and resident bigot) slaps Tibbs in the face and Tibbs slaps him back; and a final arrest and shooting occurs on the pre-dawn streets. But underneath these pyrotechnics is a character-driven story as two men (one Black, one white; one big city Northerner, one rural country southerner; one college educated and nuanced with forensics, the other two-fisted and full of street smarts) tangle with each other, argue, but find connections among all their moments of disconnect, discovering a common humanity.

Sheriff Gillespie begrudgingly learns to lean on Virgil's talent to help save the town and the promise of a new factory; and Virgil, in his pursuit of the bigoted Endicott, becomes painfully aware of his own prejudices and biases. In the end the men admire one another, and in a wonderful flipping of the Pullman conductor archetype, the white sheriff (played by Rod Steiger) carries the bags of the Black detective (played by Sidney Poitier) to the train.

A perfect ending to what the true journey of the characters within the larger plot is all about.

Endings

Speaking of endings, whether it be a battleground story or one driven by counterpointed characterization, they should grow organically out of the journeys our central characters take. Moreover, they should illustrate subtle change, change that's believable within the range of possibilities for the protagonist in the given circumstances of the story.

Over the years, as an editor and reader of fiction, I've come across many satisfied endings to stories. Here's a list of "moves" I've seen again and again, resolutions that grow from the crisis and turmoil a lead character is placed in and subjected to:

- The precipice, freeze-frame ending (a personal fave of mine). A character ends in the midst of things. Stories often begin in the midst of things so why not end in them? A character picks up a rock, ready to throw it, end (Raymond Carver's "Viewfinder"); an ex-school teacher holds a pen over a blank page of a Yearbook, thinking of what to say to a woman whose life, in some ways, he tried to destroy (Tom Perrotta in *Election*);
- Image/Resonance (the lyrical poetry move: a story concludes with a powerful image that resonates back to the emotional shores of the story);
- Dialogue (perhaps double-voiced): a move that creates poignancy or a kind of haunting call back. In my story "Ossining 1919" adolescent James Cagney ends things by saying "Ready." As the catcher, he's telling the umpire after a fracas at home plate and adjusting his mask that he's ready for the game to continue, but he's also telling readers he's ready for a vision he's just had about being an artist and moving ahead without his father;
- Situational irony. In Susan Jackson Rodgers's collection *The Ex-Boyfriend in Aisle 6,* a woman, alone, is aware of a dark presence outside, an ex bent on hurting her, and she arranges in neat rows the spices in her spice rack, seeking order in the chaos;
- Revelation/Epiphany: the classic Joycean move in which a character has an intense, religious-like feeling or insight, and comes to knowledge (often an unveiling, discomforting discoveries for youth);
- A False Insight: a kind of anti-epiphany story in which the lesson to be learned goes haywire and the character learns a lie (Hemingway's "Indian Camp" in which the boy *knows* he'll never die is a thwarted coming-of-age story);
- The Inflation/Deflation Ending (hope vs despair: here's what I wish for vs. here's what I know is true). Many chapters in Anthony Doerr's *All Light We Cannot See* end on this melody line. Julie Orringer in "Notes to Sixth-Grade Self" inverts or at least plays with this paradigm:

  > He looks down into his lap and you understand that the boy is him. When he raises his eyes, his expression tells you that despite the dress, despite the hybrid peas, things are not going to change at school or Miss Maggie's. He will not take walks with you at recess or sit next to you at McDonald's. You can see that he is apologizing for this, and you can choose to accept it or not.
  >
  > Get to your feet and pull yourself up straight; raise your chin as your mother has shown you to do. Adjust the straps of your sandals, and make sure your halter is tied tight. Then ride bikes with Eric Cassio until dark.
- Narrative Telling. Not quite an epiphany, but a moment where the writer tells us something significant instead of showing us;
- A musical coda or rhyme back to something (an image/sound/action) used earlier. In Joyce's "The Dead" the snow tapping at the window echoes back to the action of Michael Furey throwing rocks at Gretta Conroy's window;
- The non-ending ending or the here we go again ending, as the quarrel or conflict continues (see Dorothy Parker's biting "Here We Are").

Case Study #3: [“Garbage Night at the Opera”]

Valerie Fioravanti’s “Garbage Night at the Opera” is a beautifully crafted tale of counterpointed characterization. It’s a rite of passage story. Massimo, an immigrant from Italy and a single parent, wants to educate his daughter Franca on an aspect of his cultural heritage: they’re going to see a production of *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan.

The narration informs us of Massimo’s other attempts to keep his past alive: To recapture the beauty of Ventozza, the town he hails from, Massimo ran “a creeping vine along his fire escape to introduce some green,” but “[T]he firemen brought ladders and chopped it away with their axes. They said it was a safety violation, wrote him a ticket, and warned him not to do it again.”

Sadly, further attempts to acculturate his daughter to Italy are also thwarted. When they arrive at the Met they discover the show’s sold out and can’t purchase a ticket.

Fioravanti then flips the traditional dynamics between a father and a daughter. Franca protects *him* from having “security” called in. Massimo isn’t happy about it: “He doesn’t like it when she has to speak for him, but strangers often misunderstand him.”

So where’s the story going to go next, what else is going to emerge? What might it pull out from the shadows, the hiding places between these two characters?

After witnessing a so-so puppet performance in Central Park, Massimo gets lost on his way home. The “outing” for his daughter appears to be going all awry. But then two treasures are found: a discarded mahogany dresser and a thrown away bicycle with a busted rim. Franca wants the bike and Dad fights an obstreperous neighbor for her right to keep it. In a final, double-voiced moment Fioravanti writes, “They have both chosen well.”

How so? Dad plans to fix the bicycle for his daughter so that she will be able to more fully participate in childhood and become Americanized. By contrast, Franca, in carrying the bike herself, allows Dad to keep the dresser so that he can fix it, sell it, and perhaps pre-order tickets for the opera, and thus pass down some of his cultural heritage.

Case Study #4: [“The Capsule”]

Joseph Helmreich’s “The Capsule” is a tight little story that deals with a different kind of counterpoint, the shadow shelf. Our protagonist is suddenly pushed back into, what we later will

learn to be, an irretrievable past. A time capsule has been retrieved from the Downsville Dam's spillway.

It's Quinn's capsule and years ago she died in a fire that killed her and eleven other classmates. The media wants to open the capsule and our protagonist is asked to do the honors. The dramatics of the situation places him in two spaces at once: "I feel guilty talking about this to Sheila. I know that's ridiculous; it's twelve-year-old me and a twelve-year-old-girl. Yet sometimes I wonder if that fact itself isn't why I try not to think about Quinn. It feels inappropriate. I was so powerfully drawn to her and when I remember her, that power returns and, as a married father of two, it feels shameful. I remind myself that I'm not perceiving her through my adult eyes, but through the eyes of myself as a child and that the feelings, too, are just being borrowed from him. But it does little to ease the discomfort. Maybe what I'm really hiding from is something more inscrutable: that I'm in love with a ghost."

He exists in a state of doubleness. And the counterpoints are doubled: the protagonist vis-a-vis himself and vis-a-vis his memories of Quinn.

Prior to the opening of the capsule he has several retrospective backstories, remembering Quinn scraping a chalk outline with a small rock of a dead deer. She's an enigma, eyes "radiant with mischief"; he's trying to understand her and his attraction to her; but this isn't going to be a simple story of coming to terms. Instead of understanding the present through the past, Helmreich, in a stunning reversal, leaves us with more questions than answers.

"The Capsule" is a powerful thwarted quest story. Sometimes the most interesting characters we can write are those that can't find what they most want.

Exercises:

1) One of the dangers of writing a counterpointed characterization story is slipping into stereotypes (the liberal versus the conservative; the feminist versus the traditionalist; the intellectual versus the UAW member). To avoid this pitfall choose two types to throw into a situation, and before you start writing make a list for each character that complicates who they are. Perhaps the feminist enjoys Hallmark Christmas movies; the liberal enjoys his Friday afternoons at the gun range. Seek out the contradictions; the consistent inconsistencies we are all made of. And then write. Do not reduce your character to a single truth.
2) Character A meets Character B at a park. B has a story to tell. A decides to listen.
3) Character A and Character B get into a fender bender. Rather than sit in their separate vehicles and wait for the police to arrive they talk. What emerges?

4) Character A hasn't seen her father in over five years. She tracks him down to a small-town high school where he works as a janitor. She confronts him. What might they say to each other?
5) Character A returns to high school for her ten-year reunion. She has a job that makes her happy, is married, and seeks out a teacher (Character B) who underestimated her, said she'd never amount to much. When A meets up with B, B says she's so proud of A's success. "I always knew you'd make it," B says. A doesn't know what to say to this or do. What does she do?
6) A meets B at a coffee shop. A likes B but wants B to know that she wants B to be in the friend Zone. B feels differently. Write the scene.
7) A family member (B) arrives at A's doorstep. They haven't seen each other in five years. B has in tow a young child (C) and wants to take up residence for a few weeks. A is about to have their girlfriend (D) move in with them. Write the scene.
8) A new boss (B) calls you into their office.
9) Your best friend (B) decides to start dating your ex (C). How does that work out? What emerges?
10) You sit at the breakfast table wondering where Dad is. It's a Saturday morning. Mom says he needed to get away for a while. Write the scene.
11) Junior High: A is bullying B. C (you) decides to stop it.
12) Junior High: A is bullying B. C (you) decides not to intervene.
13) Nine years old, soccer. Your best friend (A) doesn't pick you for her team.
14) A has to tell B some sort of emotionally charged news.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Art of Showing

When I was twenty-four years old I was a graduate student, studying creative writing at Kansas State and I was thrown into the classroom as a teacher for the first time in my life. I was scared. We had mentors who prepped us each week for our classes and the theory behind our composition teaching, or "personal essay writing," was to move the students from "sight to insight." Underpinning this school of thought was the principle of "show don't tell." Don't generalize a feeling with a summary sentence or two, put us in the immediacy of the moment, and rely on scenic detail to ground us in the real. Earn your moments.

Thus, the first day of teaching I discussed the five elements of a scene. Obviously, those principles cross over to fiction writing, but they aren't the only way to write a story. Here are the essential five:

1) Setting. Whether it's a rain-slicked city street, a sun-drenched day at the beach, or the bright-lit alleys and clatter of pins at a bowling alley, a sense of place can provide mood and atmosphere, giving a story nuance and the necessary building blocks for world building. How is a story set in a city going to differ from a story set in a small town? How might events unfold differently between two people having a heated conversation in a coffee shop versus in a hospital waiting room? Setting matters. It sets the stage. Two people sitting on a living room couch creates a different vibe from two people sitting on a bench in a museum taking in an Edward Hopper painting. The point is that setting will affect writerly and character choices. Our environments can help define us. Snow for James Joyce in *The Dead* represents death and a mood of resignation and a sense of loss. I use snow settings in many of my stories and for me it signifies what it did for Joyce but it also signifies nostalgia, idealism and hope. David Lynch, in his films, often plays with setting in contrapuntal ways: a bright sun lit day sets up an idyllic expectation but then Lynch undercuts it with his next shot selection: birds chirping for food in a nest. On closer inspection, the birds aren't real, but clearly mechanical representations. Lynch's point: the peaceful contentment of our suburban life is fraught with fraud.
2) Props, costumes and staging. What we see on our fictional stage can define character, and the world we're building (including the genre we're in). Phasers, rolling tumbleweed, a fedora places us within the realms of differing genres. Moreover if a character drives a Mercedes as opposed to a rusty Yaris that tells us something about that person's privilege and status. If another character eats a hamburger with his gloves on we might wonder why he doesn't want to leave fingerprints anywhere. A woman, while talking to a man, intermittently pulls her cardigan sweater more tightly in on herself, perhaps because she is aware of the tyranny of his gaze and being ogled. She's uncomfortable. Props and costuming lead to the readers making inferences about the world of your story, and this is a strong component of the contract between you and your audience in the art of showing. Of course you can play with

these expectations and thwart them. Peter Falk, as Columbo, works the humility topos card, with his rumpled raincoat, scuffed up shoes, messy hair, and hunched walk. He wants the killer to underestimate him while building his case and then catching the killer flat-footed. Staging allows the reader to understand where the characters are vis-a-vis each other (one is in the kitchen, saying she wants a trial separation, while the other one stands in the living room watching the TV with the sound off) and this provides emotional impact. Car scene, staging A: a husband drives, complaining about their sex life, and the wife looks away, leaning as much as possible into the locked passenger door, head against the glass. Car scene, staging B: a wife drives, the husband shares how much fun it was showering together this morning, "we need to do that more often," and she smiles when suddenly the sun rises over the curve of the hill. He reaches in the glove box for her sunglasses and places them gently on her face.

3) Dialogue and the Art of Subtext. How a character speaks and what they speak about defines them in your narrative arc. What do they want? How do they go after it? What are their objectives in the scene? What adjustments to these objectives do they make as the scene unfolds? Objectives can be anything from Character A trying to persuade Character B that they're right or they need to be understood or forgiven. Scenes between characters often involve tensions, moving between moments of connect and disconnect. Characters in a show-don't-tell narrative don't directly reveal what they want. Scene work often relies on inference and the Hemingway iceberg, his belief in revealing only an eighth of what's at stake and leaving the other seven-eighths submerged for readers to tease out of the story's dialogue, conflict, and symbols. His "Hills Like White Elephants" is a classic example: Jig and her lover have a heated conversation at a train depot—he wants her to let some "air" in; she wants him to "please please please please please please please stop talking." The repetition of "please" lets us in on her emotional space (exhausted by and gaining distance from him) and the story's title and mix of fecund versus dry imagery leads us to underscore what they might be talking about: an abortion. Hemingway never uses that word, but we piece the clues together. After all, just what does the metaphor of a white elephant represent?

4) Characters. The most fun part of world building is the people you place on your stage. What is their relationship (lovers; father/son; mother/daughter; sisters; teacher/student)? How would you describe the dynamics of power between them (equals; abusive; patronizing; controlling)? Within the given circumstances of your story what do these characters want? Are they "I" characters or "me" characters? Do they act on the world or are they acted upon? Do they have agency or are they victims? Most characters shift about within this continuum, and are not placed strongly on one defining pole. However, in the world of melodrama we do have strong characters, antagonists, irrational villains who do evil/mean/cruel things. But as I mentioned in chapter three, in many literary stories the old-fashioned antagonist has disappeared for a different kind of story, one of counterpoints or foils. What do these two characters pull out of each other? What's discovered in the hiding spots of identity? What's emerging here? And of course, for the writer, there's all kinds of

additional micro-detailing of character at your disposal: class, age, belief systems; race; gender; orientation; identity. These components will help define the characters navigating the spaces of your fictional world. One final thought: you may want to jot down a list of three adjectives to define your character before writing a scene: tenacious; passive aggressive; pouty; generous; knit-picky; etc. And don't forget, we all contain multitudes and are bundles of contradictions: a punk rock guitarist could enjoy polka music or Tchaikovsky. Just saying.

5) Time and Light. Because showing stories rely so much on immediacy and are grounded in what a character is experiencing they usually take place over a very short period: twenty minutes to an hour. And because this kind of fictional world is highly visible it relies on the spaces between light and dark. Is it night time with a few office lights glowing and steam rising off manhole covers or is it daylight with the sounds of children playing on the structures in a park as two people sit on a bench throwing bits of bread to the pigeons?

The problem with the iceberg theory of writing is that sometimes what's underneath the surface isn't a hulking seven-eighths of subtextual richness, a heavy psychological iceberg, but a lack of weight and substance. In other words our iceberg is nothing but thinning ice cubes. What the hell? We readers have to put in *this* amount of investigative inference to learn that Character A is envious of Character B? Three pages of hints for something I figured out in half-a-page? Is the effort worth the outcome?

Years ago, in a workshop, a fellow student held up a few pages from a story of mine. He had put large X's on my yarn, and like a detective studying a lie detector printout said I can tell all of this in one paragraph. "Read Cheever."

I was pissed. Needless to say, I went to the library, found the red paperback of Cheever's stories and was enthralled by his command of voice and his ability to *tell* a story.

The Art of Telling

Steven Schwartz, a writer I greatly admire, once told me that every story has an inner and outer story and you as a writer have to figure out what kind of story you're telling and what kind of writer you are. The inner journey is one of reflection/introspection/backstory and the outer often involves a more present timeline. When I started writing literary stories I'd say I was 80-20 (show versus tell); now, I'm more 60–40). Early in Philip Roth's career he was much more of a "show" writer (look at *Goodbye, Columbus* and his short story "The Conversion of the Jews"); by the end of his career he was much more of a discursive writer (compare the short novels *Indignation* and *Nemesis*). Your niche will evolve over time and you will find it in the spaces between these two poles.

In my early writing life I relied a lot on the Hemingway model. Frankly it was easier. Raised on films and television, I was used to showing a story, screenplays as fiction, drawing things out from the

doubleness inside of dialogue and the power of inference. Moreover, the world was extremely confusing to me and the art of showing didn't force me to explore in depth how people feel or navigate their thoughts about the world and its complexities. My characters could be in the dark as much as me, the writer, and what they understood could be gleamed in glimpses or dim glimmerings.

But as I grew older and read fiction by legendary authors like Cheever, Bernard Malamud and Alice Munro, I found myself wanting to tell a story as much as show one. One of the advantages of a telling voice is world building. It gives you a much bigger canvas to tell a story; you are no longer in the world of immediacy, three or four scenes, and a timeline that takes place in twenty minutes to an hour. Nobel Prize–winning author Alice Munro writes long, expansive stories. How does she build her worlds? Munro's telling voice juggles generations, different timelines, invokes other discourses like a poem from another era; newspaper writings; diary entries, etc. Her narratives rely more on half-scenes or summary scenes and can cover years. Many of her texts are polyvocal, following more than one perspective or "central intelligence." Finally, most of her stories center around relationships of power: parent/child; boss/employee; teacher/student; husband/wife; Canadian/new immigrant; etc.

Steven Schwartz in his brilliant collection *Little Raw Souls* balances the bigger canvas of telling with showing us anywhere from 3 to 11 scenes per story.

Expository Directness

Bernard Malamud's story, "A Choice of Profession," about a professor's failings to feel and truly listen, showcases direct exposition at the front of the story's four section starts. Repeatedly, Malamud gives us a sense of what the character's thinking and feeling, in particular his aching longing and loneliness, his obsessions and weaknesses. The story is essentially three or four core scenes surrounded by narrative compression. This compression allows Malamud to travel in time and gives the story a repetition with variation model (the student—Mary Lou Miller—confesses something to the professor; he can't handle it—three times, he fails her.). The story begins: "Cronin after discovering that his wife, Marge, had been two-timing him with a friend, suffered months of crisis. He had loved Marge and jealousy lingered unbearably. He lived through an anguish of degrading emotions, and a few months after his divorce, left a well paying job in Chicago to take up teaching." No repressed exposition here.

Instead, like Anton Chekhov, Malamud quickly establishes a context for the story, the given circumstances for its lead character. Loneliness pervades. The second section has yet another "summary bridge": "It took Cronin a surprisingly long time to get over having been let down by Mary Lou. He had built her up in his mind as a woman he might want to spend some time with, and the surprise of her revelation, and his disillusionment, lingered so long he felt unsettled." The psychological subtext is laid bare for us—it's not distilled through the subtextual icebergs of action

and inference. And having exposition at the front end of each section, moves the story quickly along, compressing the need for a lot of scene work. Recall my discussion of Cheever and the suggestion a student gave me to cut a three-page scene into a paragraph or long sentence.

The Habitual Tense

A language tool in a long story writer's tool box is the habitual tense, creating a sense of the ongoing, a ritualized routine that gets broken to allow the extraordinary to take place. Here's another example, from a "Choice of Profession" by my favorite writer, Malamud:

> He continued to be interested in her and she occasionally would wait at his desk after class and walk with him in the direction of his office. He often thought she had something personal to say to him, but when she spoke it was usually to say that one or another poem had moved her; her taste, he thought, was a little too inclusive. Mary Lou rarely recited in class. He found her a bit boring when they talked for more than five minutes, but that secretly pleased him because the attraction to her was quite strong and this was a form of insurance. One morning, during a free hour, he went to the registrar's office on some pretext or other, and looked up her records. Cronin was surprised to discover she was twenty-four and only a first-year student. Because they were so close in age, as well as for other reasons, he decided to ask her out. That same afternoon Mary Lou knocked on his office door and came in to see him about a quiz he had just returned. She had got a low C and it worried her. Cronin lit her cigarette and noticed that she watched him intently, his eyes, mustache, hands, as he explained what she might have written on her paper. They were sitting within a foot of one another, and when she raised both arms to fix her bun, the imprint of her large nipples on her dress caught his attention. It was during this talk in the office that he suggested they go for a drive one evening at the end of the week. Mary Lou agreed, saying maybe they could stop off somewhere for a drink, and Cronin, momentarily hesitating, said he thought they might. All the while they had been talking she was looking at him with some inner place in herself, and he had the feeling he had been appraising her superficially.

This paragraph, about a relationship of power, is amazing. It does so many things well. Up until the move of "one morning," it is in the "habitual tense," the actions are ongoing. Note words such as "continued" and "occasionally" in the first sentence; and "often" and "usually" in the second sentence. These are ongoing conversations over a span of time. The transition to "one morning" focuses on a specific day without opting for a scene. Instead, Malamud places us in a summary scene, as he quickly in sequential order informs us of what happened (and here he allows himself to be vague: "some pretext or other" and "as well as for other reasons"); next, the sequential summary moves from "one morning" to "that same afternoon," and here Malamud, for purposes of economy, eschews direct dialogue for summary dialogue (note how much time is saved by not being specific about what he told her "she might have written on her paper"); like a solid scene however, there is a turning point or deflection ("the imprint of her large nipples on her dress caught his attention") that

affects choices made; and the sequence ends with a wonderfully strange insight that's told to us: "he had the feeling he had been appraising her superficially." This is narrative telling at its finest.

Case Study #5: the Art of Juggling the Inner (Telling) and Outer (Showing) in "The Horse Burier"

Steven Schwartz's "The Horse Burier" does a brilliant job of time juggling, moving constantly between the present time story and a series of past remembrances or retrospective expository flourishes. The story focuses on an estranged father/son relationship and their helping two elderly women bury a beloved horse.

The story begins with a destabilizing condition and expository directness:

> The sisters wanted to bury Lulu on their farm, so they called Henry's son, Landon, to do the job. Landon owned and operated a front-end loader with a backhoe. He mostly worked construction but took side jobs too, including horse burial. He worked nights and weekends to support his ex-wife and two kids. Several years ago he'd gotten into trouble gambling beyond his means—way beyond them—and Henry hoped that after a divorce, bankruptcy, and visits from mirthless men with snake-eyed determination his son's problems were now behind him.

So much is laid out for us here. This opening doesn't rely on inference. Instead, an inner story is quickly pushed to the center of our narrative and we suspect hard feelings and disappointments bubbling between father and son.

As the story's arc plays out, Schwartz constantly moves from present time actions (conversations, and the burying the horse) to narrative backstories (Landon hitting a water main and his insurance premiums skyrocketing; the death of Henry's wife Meg and her vague final request, "Promise me!"; Henry's loneliness following her death, walking about an empty house talking to himself; Landon's wife asking for full custody of her kids; and Landon's inability to pay for his kids' soccer registrations).

These inner and outer stories continue to weave together until we reach a brilliant precipice ending. But just prior to that ending, Schwartz's timeline dynamics jump to a daring flashforward: "Was it wonder, Henry would ask himself when the ground turned hard with the first frost and the sisters died within months of each other and their land was sold off after a contentious probate hearing involving dubious relations who claimed to know them, was it any wonder that he would look up and see the bucket above him ready to deposit its payload."

Wow. Just between us, this is one of my all-time favorite stories I've had the pleasure and privilege of publishing.

Exercises:

A) Showing:

1) Write a scene set in an automobile where a couple is breaking up. Neither one of them says it's over directly, but through inference and silences and stillness you convey the idea to the reader.
2) Contrast dialogue with inner monologue as a checker at HyVee deals with a disgruntled customer. The checker says one thing, but their monologue says something else.
3) A character walks out to an old barn that's weather worn and falling apart. Through what the character observes we discover that they are grieving over a loved one.
4) Use a rain-soaked setting to suggest sadness. Rewrite the scene and suggest the opposite. Never once tell us the character is happy or sad.
5) Write a moment of immediacy (playing the trumpet; running a race; driving a car) and expand time by adding details and lengthening your sentences.

B) Telling:

1) Explore the ongoing in the following teaser: "Every Tuesday a group of actors meet at the local coffee shop. . . ." Suggest a series of ongoing behaviors, and then transition to "on this one particular Tuesday Susan announces . . ." Now, tunnel down to the mic drop moment and see what emerges.
2) Boldly write a paragraph or two telling us directly what's troubling a character. Summarize. Don't leave anything to inference.
3) Find a rich scene written by a genre writer you admire and rewrite it, scaling it back, sliding it into half-scene mode. Pair it down to a work of narrative telling. Use compression and convert most of the dialogue to summary.

CHAPTER FIVE

Characterization and Method Writing

What is it I want?

What am I willing to do to get it?

These are the central questions an actor asks herself while doing scene work. It involves action, verbs, seeking your goals, and these tactics shift during a scene, adjustments are made to respond to and perhaps challenge what your scene partner is giving you.

Writers can adapt this technique to their prose to give scenes levels, to increase tensions between characters, to move more freely and dramatically between moments of connect and disconnect.

In almost every chapter of Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House*, he encourages artists to avoid the over-determined. His chapter on narrative dysfunction seeks to give characters agency; his emphasis on defamiliarization is on finding the "moderately strange" within the ordinary; he dislikes the preponderance of epiphanic endings because they become too formulaic, an easy narrative solution for tired writers; and counterpointed characters should never represent ideas but exist as fully realized people, bumping up against each other and eliciting honest responses.

Actors live in subtexts. They want to make the "hot" choice, the unexpected within the expected. The best performances are never over-scripted but full of complex, shifting tonalities.

Sean Penn lives truthfully in imaginary circumstances. A proponent of the Method, Penn said on *Inside the Actor's Studio* in 1999, that his acting approach seeks the "uncommon thought in the common matter." Penn called up a poem by Charles Bukowski in which a young seven-year old boy is looking from a train window, watching the Pacific Ocean rush by. The boy utters to a traveling companion, "It's not beautiful." The man, taken aback, realizes for the first time that he too doesn't find it beautiful. We're conditioned to believe that oceans are beautiful. But actors break through our conditioning to transcend the all-too typical and find the new response, the unpredictable that is also somehow inevitable. That's living truthfully, not following the all too familiar. Penn, indirectly, is reinforcing Baxter's notions of defamiliarization.

So, how does a writer take an acting approach to his scene work and let his characters follow impulses and freely breathe? Ron Carlson has brilliantly argued that dialogue isn't just exposition, a means of moving a story forward. Dialogue is the very stuff of individualism, allowing each character to have his/her moment free of the controlling voice of the narrator/author. Carlson believes that characters speak from their own place and this can take a story in unprecedented directions. Invest in that freedom.

I have written so many stories in which characters surprised me by saying something through dialogue that took the plot or the moment in a fresh, new direction. Be open to those surprises. Stay in uncertainties and listen to the choices your characters will help you make. Explore and enjoy the shifting tones that dynamic scene work inhabits.

Writing the Back Story

The following is a list of help you discover the internal life of your character. Much of what you write down under these steps won't find its way into your story, but these explorations will give you a better sense of who your character is.

1) Purpose: What does your character want? To find love? To be accepted?
2) What are your character's hopes, dreams, and fears?
3) Stat sheet: age, sex, race, height, weight. Shoe size? What physical attribute in himself is your character most proud of? What physical attribute in himself is your character least proud of? Favorite foods?
4) Belief systems: list 4-5 of your character's values. Include political leanings.
5) Sexual history: list. Married? Sexual orientation?
6) Medical history: list.
7) Me vs I? Is your character passive or active, a victim or full of agency? Where on this continuum are they?
8) Relationships: Mom, Dad, spouse, siblings (if any). Explore. Relationships with friends, then and now.
9) Name a book your character read recently and liked? Why? Other hobbies. Avocations? Favorite movies, bands. Describe.
10) Where does your character live? City, country? Describe the dwelling (a basement apartment, a small ranch house). Where has your character lived before (locations and dwellings)?
11) Occupation: describe. What does your character like about her job? What does she not like about it?
12) List 5 vivid visual memories your character has right now. Images. Snapshots.
13) List 3 turning point experiences (epiphanies) your character has gone through.
14) In terms of personality, what does your character like most about herself? What does she dislike most about herself? What is she doing about what she dislikes?
15) What would your character like for Christmas (or a differing religious holiday)?
16) When was the last time your character cried? Why?
17) Does your character have any pleasures that make him feel guilty?Cigarettes and/or alcohol? Enjoyment of pornography and/or reality TV programs?

18) Name or breakdown for us an inconsistency within the consistency of your character's back story.
19) Why do you (the writer) empathize with this character?
20) Write a quick bio (25 words or less) to introduce your character before a formal gathering.

A caveat: use this checklist to get to know your character; don't use it to over-determine plot choices; don't write towards the back stories you've created; use them to underscore present scenes you're writing. For example, maybe when your character was four years old he had an abusive father who held him over the balcony seven floors up by his ankles. This is an incredibly dramatic backstory, but perhaps it doesn't fit directly into the story you're writing. Don't share it with us; keep it as a secret between you and your character, but use the emotional impact of that secret to provide subtext for a dramatic moment you *are sharing* with us in your story: your lead character gets into a heated argument with an abusive father who is yelling at his own daughter for dropping a fly ball during a softball game.

The Art of Subtext and the Three S's

Staging

This according to Charles Baxter involves "putting characters in specific strategic positions in the scene so that some unvoiced nuance is revealed."

Imagine that you, the writer, are a director of a play, and you are using blocking for two reasons: to reveal the inner life of your characters and to keep your audience engaged. Does one character move toward the other on a given line or action? Does the other move away or cross to an object in the room? Does one character try to touch the other character, to help land a line? Or does that character touch the other while stating the opposite of what she means? Again, Baxter on staging: "It shows us how the characters are behaving, and it shows us what they cannot say through the manner in which they say what they *can say."*

Stakes

Characters want things: respect, love, to be understood, happiness. Literary stories are often about desire. This is what creates urgency. Acting Coach Sanford Meisner defined acting as "living truthfully in imaginary circumstances." Living truthfully involves being present and following authentic impulses. For the writer, give your characters the space to live and freely breathe.

Moreover, the space they inhabit is fraught with "life and death stakes," either real or figuratively. Losing a job; getting a medical diagnosis; discovering your spouse loves someone else.

Sometimes characters want the wrong things. George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* wants to be a great man, to make his mark on the world, and fails, initially, to realize the more quiet gifts his hard work and generosity have bestowed upon the inhabitants of Bedford Falls.

Sounds

In Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* James Tyrone and his wife Mary seem to have long parallel monologues in which they aren't really listening to one another; similarly Jamie and Edmund have moments where the younger brother listens but Jamie is off somewhere else, investing in wallowing regrets and self-hatred. Their dialogue is full of "unheard melodies."

These disparate melodies can be a powerful tool for writers, what Baxter calls "non-listening, selective listening, and parallel monologues." Self-absorption can also be present. Richard Belzer as Detective Munch on *Homicide: Life on the Street* was a character who enjoyed the sounds of his own words, as if everything is pithy and brilliant and deserving of our attention. When he speaks he wants strangers to eavesdrop and revel in his cleverness.

Beats, Objectives, Tactics and *On the Waterfront* (1954)

Beats is a Method acting term for breaking down the units of action in a scene. Beats can shift word to word. "Yeah, yeah" can have a beat change in the midst of the utterance if the first word's intentions differ from the second (say surprise versus resignation). A single word, such as "fantastic" can contain a beat if the melody of the word changes in the midst of its utterance (say from celebration to irony between the syllables). Most often when an actor marks the beats on a script, she's indicating shifts in emphasis, new tactics and objectives to be explored. She's building emotional levels that continue to probe the key questions, "what is it I want and what am I willing to do to get it?"

Many stories fail because they lack genuine honesty or surprise. Instead of characters playing tactics and a writer discovering all of the shifting tonalities, beats in the dialogue, limpid stories are full of flat scenes where nothing new or surprising is emerging.

Great actors never flat-line, they find varied levels, moments of syncopation playing up against a standard 4/4 beat. Nobody followed an impulse better than Marlon Brando. He was brilliant at choosing the right expression, gesture, and response for the right moment. In a tender scene from *On the Waterfront,* Terry Malloy (Brando) walks with Edie (Eva Marie Saint) out front of a church on the mean streets of Hoboken, New Jersey. He's somewhat shy and retreating, unsure of what to say. And then, in the midst of the conversation, Edie accidentally drops her glove and Brando picks it up, sits on a swing, removes bits of lint from the glove's fingers, and places it on his hand.

A “rehearsed accident” (Saint dropping the glove) turns into a magical impulse (a man wearing a woman’s glove). Brando slides his hand *inside* her glove, leaving a personal trace within an object of clothing that isn’t his. It’s as if he’s holding hands without holding hands. This is an inspired choice that shows Terry’s tenderness, vulnerability, and repressed desire to hold her. And from there the dialogue becomes gentler between them, more poignant.

Let us slow down and look at the scene more closely now, at several beats, and how the actors’ choices and Budd Schulberg’s dialogue serve up dynamic complexities, shifts in objectives and emotional levels, that point a way for writers to write better scenes.

Terry and Edie's scene in On the Waterfront

The given circumstances: Malloy has been asked by the mob to keep an eye on Father Barry’s protest movement with the waterfront workers. Malloy finds himself attracted to Edie (Eva Marie Saint), but feels tremendous guilt in being complicit in her brother’s death. His objective is to find out just what she and the Father are organizing and to keep her distracted, directed away from the truth. Edie, a sheltered woman, desires to avenge her brother’s death and to take her fight, with the help of the priest, to the streets. She wants answers from Terry and often has to press the issue, pushing away his various moments of subtle deflection (“Well, they play pretty rough around here,” he says). However, she too finds herself, almost against her will, attracted to the ex-prizefighter and his child-like innocence. And what we have is a love scene.

Edie pushes past Terry’s armor, his apparent mask of nonchalance, directly asking him, “which side are you with?” Terry smiles with an abashed joker grin and says, “Me, I’m with me.” He once again makes light of the violence that surrounds them, but this time his efforts fail because of the intrusion of a local “juice head” who mumbles on and hints about Terry’s involvement in Joey’s death. “You remember,” the rummy cryptically intones. Beat. This is the scene’s emotional lynchpin. Even the loose change Terry tosses the rummy’s way doesn’t stop him from withering Terry with the cutting, “You don’t buy me. You’re still a bum.”

Terry’s response to this comment creates a major beat change. His emotional levels shift from nonchalance to hurt and a need to seek Edie’s affirmation: “Who’s calling me a bum.” What’s emerging here is his desire to be respected and a fear that maybe the “juice head” speaks the truth. Terry wants Edie’s acceptance and love and that will be his objective throughout the remainder of the scene.

Edie slides her tactics back into interrogation mode with “What did that man mean just now,” and Terry deflects with his “Don’t pay no attention” repetitions, and then once again shifts tactics by telling her not to be afraid of him, “I won’t bite ya,” and expressing interest in her ambitions. It’s at this moment that he picks up her scattered glove and places it on his hand while finding out about her sheltered past; her training with the nuns; and her desire to be a teacher. He praises her

ambitions trying to soothe and win her trust: "A teacher. That's very good. Personally, I admire brains. My brother Charlie was a very brainy guy. Had a couple of years of college."

His compliment, however, is turned back against him, as Edie issues a challenge, indirectly chastising his allegiances to the waterfront mob. "It isn't just brains. It's how you use them."
In good scene work, onstage or on the page, the moments vary between connect and disconnect, moments of understanding, communion versus moments of challenge and hurt.

Terry acquiesces, giving in slightly to her challenge. "Yeah, I get your thought," he replies, eyes somewhat faraway. Failing to win her trust through compliments about teachers, he changes tactics, creating different beats, returning to their shared past, and teases her, describing how her hair "looked like a hunk of rope" and how she had wires on her teeth and everything. "You were really a mess." She responds to his gentle put-downs with action, removing the glove from his hand, re-indicating a desire to leave, and he issues a halting apology: "I just mean to tell you that you grew up very nice."

After taking back the glove, Edie once again looks offscreen right, and exits the frame. Terry, uncertain, wonders if perhaps she too sees him as a bum.

This is the scene and the film's super-objective: self-respect.

How will she respond? Will she connect with him or push him away with words or silent action?

Desperately, he calls her, trying to halt her movement, his voice climbing an emotional register as he pleads, "You don't remember me do you?" Beat.

Finally, he's broken through to her.

Admissions by actors are almost always powerful moments. They make us all vulnerable: performers, viewers, readers. They strip us actors of our armor and disarm our fellow actors too. Terry's vulnerability here is on full display here. He drops his arm and reveals a fear of being invisible. This brings about an equally vulnerable admission from Edie: "I remember you the first moment I saw you." The tension is broken, he jokes about his nose, and the two connect as he crosses over to her and she offers up her philosophy about the need for teachers to treat troubled youngsters with more "patience" and "kindness." He needles her for her innocence and indirectly asks for a date. "What for?" she questions. With an inarticulate shrug he responds, "I don't know."

The beginning of their love is established in this "getting to know you" scene. Terry and Edie are vulnerable and open, letting genuine feelings in. For Terry the scene moves from denials; deflections; his need for approval (am I a bum?); his desire to win her by praising, teasing, holding onto the glove, and reminiscing about the past; an apology; his making himself vulnerable and

partially known; and finally, rather clumsily, asking her on a date. For Edie the scene moves from a desire to leave; interrogate; chastise and challenge; accept his apology; leave; admit a certain fondness for him; and question the "date" while leaving the possibility still open. She doesn't say no.

Exercises:

1) Write a scene of admit. A character reveals something that makes them vulnerable. Don't state what that something is directly but use the art of subtext.
2) Write a scene where characters A and B are talking in parallel monologues but not fully listening to each other.
3) A wants something from B. B isn't giving A what she wants. A shifts tactics three times. On the fourth try she wins or gives up (it's up to you). Write the scene. Make sure that in the dialogue A and B are playing objectives, under the surface of their words are strong verbs that are acting upon the other person. Use staging to bring the characters closer together or farther apart.
4) Write a scene where A tries to diminish B. Now rewrite the same scene where A is praising, almost toasting B.
5) Write a scene where the actions and words don't mesh. Someone is saying one thing but doing something else. Use staging to really bring home this disconnect.
6) Write a scene that escalates and ends with a reveal. Perhaps Character A takes a risk and Character B reciprocates with an equally daring risk. Or, two characters have a heated exchange. Stay in the room with them. Don't allow one to exit or cry to end the moment. Let the uncomfortableness of the moment truly take you somewhere surprising.

CHAPTER SIX

Character and Dialogue

I've found that most of you know how to write strong dialogue. We all watch a lot of serialized narratives on TV and devour all kinds of films from noirs to classic Hollywood to art cinema. We know the rhythm of our times and the beats with which people speak.

Dialogue can make a story pop, bringing characters fully to life. Direct dialogue grants them, as I've argued (taking my lead from Ron Carlson's *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*) in previous chapters, their own agency, their own spaces to speak from, giving us writers all kinds of narrative threads and impulses to follow. But we have to be listening.

The Five Modes of Fiction

Dialogue is probably the most important subset of the five modes.:

1) *Dialogue*. Conversations should involve conflict or something at stake, possibly a reveal. Not every scene is a battle. Often characters just want to be understood. Vulnerability plays a role here. Moreover, dialogue scenes should be full of uncertainty. Characters in a scene are often breaking from "fixed" roles of behavior, traveling somewhere they haven't gone before. Most moments of dialogue involve some kind of subtext (the unsaid) and waver between moments of connect and disconnect.

2) *State of Mind*.. This is where, depending on the point of view, we enter into a character's consciousness and get some of their direct interiors. A goalie awaits a penalty shot and tries to guess the shooter's tendencies, what move will be tried; a woman wonders what the hell she's doing at a laundromat at 2 a.m. still dressed as Gena Rowlands from *Minnie & Moskowitz*. State of Mind also touches on what we explored earlier: the outer versus the inner story, the overarching plot versus the discoveries of character. What's happening at the plot level, how does the dialogue or the scene further the plot (close off an action; open up another)? What's happening at the level of character, how does the dialogue and scene further the emotional impact the event has on the character (look at where she starts the scene and where she ends it: what journey did she take?). If a scene doesn't have this kind of arc, you probably didn't need to write it.

3) *Action*. Physical movement of some sort: fleeing from an adversary; a fight on a front lawn; looking through backyards for a stolen bicycle.

4) *Description*. A kind of pause in the narrative where we get a description of a structure, a place, a character. These descriptions are often linked to character psychology and the setting's mood. Moreover, short descriptions in a scene often function as beats, pauses, while a character figures out how to change tactics, how to get what he wants.

5) *Exposition*. A form of narrative telling, exposition can establish a quick backstory or compress time so that we can leap forward or back in a narrative. As I argued in a previous chapter, Bernard Malamud uses exposition as section-start bridges.

Trigger words in Dialogue:

In acting, we talk about not speaking until you have to. What are you responding to, what is your scene partner giving you or not giving you that makes you speak? In fiction, just as in acting, there are words that encourage a response and braid a scene together. Moreover, staging, brief physical details work as beats, punctuating a scene, pauses, building tension, suspense, raising questions as to what might be coming next.

Here's a brief part of a scene from Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novel *King's Ransom*. Note all the trigger words.

The given circumstances: Diane King wants her husband to pay the ransom demands for Jeff, their chauffeur's son. King doesn't want to pay; it will break him financially and end his attempted desire to seize ownership in the battle for his company. Besides, the boy is not his son. But, Jeffrey Reynolds was kidnapped because the kidnappers mistook him for Bobby King. You have a moral obligation to save him, Diane argues.

She paused. "You can't be serious."
"I am serious, Diane."
"I don't believe you."
"I'm not paying. Start believing it, Diane. I'm not paying."
"You have to pay."
"I don't have to do anything."
"They asked you for the money."
"Yes, a bunch of crooks asked. Why should they make the rules? Why should I play according to their rules?"
"Rules? Game? There's a little boy involved here."
"There's a whole lot more than a little boy involved," King said.
"There's nothing more than a little boy involved," Diane answered. "If you don't pay them, they'll kill him."
"He may be dead already."
"You can't even consider the possibility."

"Why can't I? I can consider every damn aspect of this thing, I've been asked to pay five hundred thousand dollars for a boy who means absolutely nothing to me. I've got every right to weigh the possibilities. And one possibility is that he's already dead."

"They told you he was still alive. You know they did. You can't excuse yourself by—"

"And another possibility is that they'll kill him even if I do pay. Ask the police. Go ahead. See what they—"

"And if you don't pay, they'll most *certainly* kill him."

"Not necessarily."

King rose from his chair. He left the fire reluctantly, walking to the bar until at the other end of the room. "Would you like a brandy?" he asked.

"No, I would not like a brandy." She watched him as he poured. His hand was steady on the neck of the bottle. The amber fluid filled the brandy snifter. He recapped the bottle, walked back to the easy chair, and gently rolled the glass in his big hands. She continued watching him, and finally she said, "Doug, you have no right to gamble with Jeff's life."

"No? Who has a better right? Who'd they ask for the money? What is Reynolds doing to get his son back? He's sitting on his behind, the way he's sat all his life. Why should I pay for *his* son?"

"Doug. I'm trying very hard to keep from screaming. I'm trying with all my might to keep from screaming."

Take time and mentally circle all the trigger words and you'll see how McBain threads this scene's conflict, escalating the tension: "serious/serious"; "believe/believing"; "paying/paying/pay"; "asked/asked"; "rules/rules/rules"; "little boy involved" (spoken three times); "kill him/kill him/most certainly kill him". McBain even includes a strong visual beat change, King attempting to change tactics: "King rose from his chair. He left the fire reluctantly, walking to the bar until at the other end of the room. 'Would you like a brandy?' he asked." It doesn't work. Dianne rebuffs him: "No, I would not like a brandy." This scene sounds and feels natural because of the clever use of repetition and doubling of the story's life and death's stakes (the boy's and King and Dianne's relationship).

Let's briefly return to my previous chapter's analysis of *On the Waterfront* and study all the trigger words abounding in the "getting to know you" scene, forwarding the narrative's causal chain and tonal shifts. Among the highlights: when the "juice head" tells Terry "he's still a bum" it forces the ex-pugilist to acknowledge his deepest fears: "Who's calling me a bum"; later Edie's trigger word "teacher" (her desire to become one) allows Terry to slide into praising her smarts and his brother Charlie for being a "very brainy guy." Edie responds to Terry's trigger word "brainy" with the challenge, "It isn't just brains, it's how you use them"; and finally his plea to be seen, "You don't remember me, do you?" sets forward her half-rhyme of conciliatory love: "I remember you the first moment I saw you."

Dialogue as a Verb: What are you willing to do to the other person to get what *you* want?

Sidney Lumet once said that acting is "doing. Acting is a verb." If you look back on my analysis of *On the Waterfront* you'll see many subtextual beats listed as verbs: *deflect, challenge, chastise, admit.*

Don't pre-plan or over-determine scenes: let the scene grow organically, surprise you. But once you revise, step back, and think more like an actor. *What verb is being played here? And here? And there?* Every time you have a new line of dialogue, wonder what verb/objective is under it. If the dialogue, in a certain line is cajoling, and you don't feel it quite works, make what she says a reprimand. Change the verb, the action, and the subtext will adjust accordingly. And as the subtext adjusts, so will your choices and thus the revision of a scene you're struggling with will suddenly take you to surprising new ends.

Julie Orringer plays with *verbs* brilliantly in her scene work to "Isabel Fish." The story centers around a victim, Maddy, who was a passenger in a car that crashed into a lake, killing Isabel, the driver and girlfriend of Maddy's older brother Sage. Angry, Sage is now estranged from his sister and treats her cruelly. Maddy tells us in the story's opening line: "I am the canker of my brother Sage's life." Their parents encourage Maddy to take SCUBA lessons at a local YMCA. Central to Orringer's story is a therapeutic theme: confront the fear of nearly drowning in water by going back in and learning how to breathe underwater.

And Maddy does. In the last two scenes Orringer's choice in "actions" intensifies. On her way to SCUBA lessons at the Y, Maddy verbally spars with her brother. He's stuffing food in his mouth, avoiding her. He feels guilty for having killed her "fish" out of spite. To smooth over the fish killing, Sage offers Maddy a cigarette, but she rejects him with a curt, "Yeah, right." He tries to placate her: "I know you steal them sometimes." But she won't allow for any playful connection, calling him a "dickhead." Thwarted, he offers to buy her new fish and she rebuffs him: "Do you know how ridiculous that is?"

Their jazzy musicality isn't leading to any kind of reconciliation, so Sage opts for resignation: "okay, okay," and then surprisingly confesses, "I'm an asshole." This is a moment of complete honesty and vulnerability, and it quietly rhymes with an earlier scene: at a "hot-tub party" Sage told a story in front of his high school peers about five-year-old Maddy peeing in a pool, embarrassing her. Isabel defends the younger Maddy, challenging Sage with the hard-edged "Why do you have to be such an asshole?" and then abandoning him at the party. She and Maddy drive off together in their fateful journey.

Maddy, however, isn't ready to fully embrace Sage's openness, his admissions of guilt. Instead, Maddy tops Sage's confession with the heart-felt tonalities of the wounded, "You make me wish I died instead of her." Beat.

This is a staggering and dramatic punch line. An overhand toss that leaves us on the canvas, long passed the referee counting to ten. Sage is so shaken that it forces him to reassess his relationship with his sister and admit, "I can't believe I turned into such a shitty person. . . . I wasn't even nice to her." Orringer cleverly places the epiphany in the hands of a supporting character, not the lead.

But it is *Maddy's* story, not Sage's, and Orringer writes through the epiphany. Maddy, moved by her brother's confession, soothes him: "You weren't a terrible boyfriend. . . . Isabel loved you." Her actions in the scene move from challenging to rebuffing to staggering to soothing. The verbs he plays follow a trajectory of offering, placating, abjectly confessing, and indirectly apologizing. Orringer plays levels as both characters adopt strategies to get what he or she wants (largely understanding, compassion, and love).

In the final scene, Maddy with Sage by her side conquers her fears. "Quit thinking about the last time," he says, assuring her she won't have another panic attack like she did the previous time in the pool. They tumble in the water and Maddy has the stage's final spotlight:

> We tread water, watching each other through our masks. I cannot see his eyes through the glass, but I can see, reflected small and blue, a girl wearing swim fins and a metal tank, self-contained and breathing underwater.

They're together, committed to one another, but the moment is hers. And she's *visible*.

Earlier, Maddy admired the translucent blue pair of fins and matching mask that her mother purchased for her, observing, "They seem like they'd be almost invisible underwater." It was as if she had wanted to disappear.

Now, however, she isn't hiding. She's finding herself. She can't see his eyes but her own, and like the SCUBA tank she wears, the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus, she, in a moment of double-voiced wonder, is made whole again, no longer fractured but self-contained.

Writing Three-person Scenes and Ricochet Dialogue

Raymond Chandler once joked that he struggled with three person scenes, that's why *The Big Sleep* opens with three couplets (Marlowe and Carmen Sternwood; Marlowe and General Sternwood; and Marlowe and Vivian Regan).

The advantage of an ABC scene over an AB scene is tremendous. In Frank Hauser and Russell Reich's *Notes on Directing*, they suggest staging scenes in diagonal lines and triangles. Two actors on stage are in a single relationship, but add a third and suddenly audiences are in the midst of seven

relationships (one for each pairing; one for each pairing up against a third character; and one for the entire ensemble).

But what if a crime writer creates a destabilized triangle and then repeatedly opens one of the triangle's sides, a character exiting the setting, but that character is never really gone, their absence is a structured presence, an ongoing mood of destabilization? This is what Ed McBain accomplishes in *King's Ransom* in some of his scenes involving the kidnappers.

In chapter five, after luring Jeff to the Sand Spits tar paper farmhouse, Sy takes the eight-year-old to a back room to show him a "real gun." While they're offstage, Kathy talks sense to Eddie. Eddie refers to the kidnapping as "to borrow a kid," but she doesn't let him rest easily, with his half-hearted rationalizations. Instead, she warns, they could all get the electric chair. While attempting to change her husband's course of action, Kathy is painfully aware of Sy's menacing present-absence, glancing periodically at the door Sy and the kid are shut in behind. "What's Sy doing to him in there?" McBain has amped up the story's urgency: this is life or death stakes.

In chapter eight, Sy once again is o!stage, shaving, the bathroom door closed. Kathy returns to work on Eddie's conscience. Eddie insists that they ought to trust Sy, he knows what he's doing, and Kathy, twice, snaps back, "He wants to kill that boy." Eddie, dreaming of a better life in Mexico, refuses to budge. Point blank, she asks, where do you stand, "I have to know," and Eddie refuses to answer, heading outside for a fresh pack of smokes.

The tension of the scene is doubled: will she finally win Eddie over to her position, and what if Sy, behind that closed door, is listening in, aware of her attempted coup? As Eddie continues rummaging the car for smokes, McBain shifts to another triangle, Kathy and Jeff versus her offstage husband and Kathy and Jeff versus the presence behind the door, Sy. She turns to the sofa bed, once again looking off at the closed bathroom door, and promises Jeff, "I'm taking you out of here." As the boy delays, retrieving his unloaded but treasured "real gun," Kathy continues looking at the closed door, wary of the sudden violence lurking.

Eventually, the open side of this particular McBain triangle is closed off as Sy re-appears and catches them making a break. "Where do you think you're going?" McBain now shifts our attention to the absence of Eddie: what might he do if he were to discover Sy roughing up his wife?

Eddie returns and Sy and Kathy keep their showdown (his threats; the attempted escape) a secret, and McBain slides into the menace of double-voiced dialogue. Sy: "'There ain't nothing going to foul up this job.' His eye caught Kathy's. 'Nothing,' he repeated

Three person scenes can also provide wonderful moments of menace. With three or more people you can also enhance your trigger words with ricochet dialogue. Ricochet dialogue, as explored by James Naremore in his monograph on *Sweet Smell of Success,* occurs when one character is talking to

another character for the benefit of a third. When the "juice head" attacksTerry in *On the Waterfront* for, his words in part, are spoken for the edification of Edie. Clifford Odets loved such scenes because they unveiled a pernicious undercurrent to his characters and moved us outside the realm of the usual two-character scene.

Early on in *Sweet Smell of Success* slimy press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) meets one of his "clients" Weldon outside of the 21 Club in New York. Weldon, a woman on his right arm, says to Falco, "Get your hands out of my pocket, thief!" The woman tries to restrain Weldon and as she does Falco barks back that his client is just "showing off for the girl. They supposed to hear you in Korea?" She becomes the beneficiary of two ricochets: Weldon's barbs bouncing off Falco, and his return salvos bouncing off Weldon.

But it's inside the club we get to see Odets (with the help of Ernest Lehman) at the full powers of his craft. Here's a clip. Enjoy the arsenic in the words. Analysis, inspired by Naremore's monograph, will follow:

Sweet Smell of Success (1957)- "This one is toting that one... for you" 1 min Film School

Once inside the 21 Club, Falco, uninvited, joins J. J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster) around his table. Present are Senator Walker, press agent Manny Davis, and ingénue Linda Adams. Here Odets's ricochets fire in several directions in this six-minute scene. All of them suggest veiled threats behind terse words. Upon Falco's arrival, Hunsecker doesn't look at him directly and for the benefit of the others gathered says, "Mac, I don't want this man at my table." Falco, however, remains undaunted. He has some vital information on J. J's sister and forces his way in. Seconds later, J. J. attacks the press agent Davis for possibly having extra-marital affairs: "Everyone knows Manny Davis, except Mrs. Davis." Following an obscure phone call between Hunsecker and another failing press agent, Falco asks the senator. "Do you believe in capital punishment?" The senator is perplexed and Falco explains, "A man has just been sentenced to death." Falco's now talking directly to Senator Walker, but he's letting Hunsecker, via the ricochet, know not to try that stuff with me. Finally, when Linda Adams, in response to Hunsecker's prying questioning, says she's studying singing, "of course," J. J. purrs with a smile full of arsenic, "Why, 'of course'? You might for instance be studying politics." He may be talking to Linda, but his ricochets are landing on Senator Walker, warning him of what this might look like, or as the gossip columnist, seconds later, bluntly states: "Where any hep person knows that this one (camera pans to Manny) is toting that one (swish pan to Linda) around for you" (swish to medium-close up of Walker).

Ernest Hemingway, a literary antecedent to Odets, was an expert at ricochet dialogue. In "The Killers" the two hit men speak for the benefit of everyone else in the diner. They talk to intimidate. They make fun of the menu, of Summit, and the recreation it provides. When one asks, "What do they do here nights?" the other answers, "They eat the dinner. . . . They all come here and eat the big dinner." All of these "soliloquies" are ricocheting off Nick and George, the spectators to this

performance. The killers use trigger words such as "bright boy" and the repetition of "think's" and "thinker" to build tension, until they tie them all up and admit their purpose: they're here to kill a Swede.

Three Modes of Dialogue:

1) *Dialogue Summary*. In the opening moments of dialogue it might be effective to simply tell. An entire fictional hour of conversation can be compressed into a line or two. "They sat and drank their coffee slowly, wondering if the weather would let up and they'd be able to catch the ball game tonight."

2) *Indirect dialogue*. It imitates speech using narrative voice—not the actual voice of the characters. It compresses conversations while giving the illusion of characters speaking. What I love about this mode is that it creates degrees of uncertainty. What's being said is filtered by a narrator so what we get isn't completely accurate. The characters don't have complete autonomy and aren't coming fully from who they are but some kind of blend of their perspectives and the narrator's voice. And for mystery writers this adds a wonderful air of doubt to what's being remembered or shared. "They sat and drank their coffee slowly, wondering if the weather would let up and they'd be able to catch the ball game tonight. Third base side, nothing like seeing a game from four rows up along third base, Ted said. Last time he sat there his all-time favorite player bungled two easy grounders, And the guy's a goddamn gold glover." These latter comments are all indirect. They're spoken from Ted's perspective, but they aren't precisely what he said.

3) *Direct dialogue*. Characters come from where they are. They are totally autonomous and free. This is a powerful device that allows writers to listen to what's being said and let each character follow his/her impulse. Quote marks and, when necessary, dialogue tags are employed.

An example of all three modes from my novel *Cheap Amusements*:

She smiled and handed me some pills. Painkillers. She had her wisdom teeth pulled two years ago, and these were the remainders. [summary] She had also set up an appointment for me with a dentist for Monday. [summary] I'd have to see Abramowitz too. [indirect]

"What day is today?" [direct]

"Saturday." [direct]

I tumbled to the side of the bed and slid into my pants. The room was too bright and I asked her to close the curtains. [summary]

"They are closed," she said. [direct]

“Can you close them tighter—” [direct] I was dizzy and leaned forward, hands on thighs to anchor me. “How did I get here?” [direct] I rubbed my mouth, smelled my hand. Geez, my breath was awful.

“Babe Migano.” [direct] I was rather incoherent last night, and then passed out upright in the doorway standing between Leighton and Fortunado. [indirect]

Exercises:

1) Write an AB scene of dialogue. Try to use as few tags as possible. Instead of populating your shot/reverse-shot scene with “saids” use alternating paragraphs and brief descriptions to punctuate and allow us to know who is speaking. Invest in beats.
2) Write an ABC scene of ricochet dialogue. Have character A talking to character B but landing what they’re saying on Character C.
3) Write a scene experimenting with mixing all three modes of dialogue: summary, indirect and direct.
4) Experiment with trigger words. Braid a scene together with words that build between two characters, moment to moment and escalate the tension. Have the characters listening, keeping the links in the argument chain alive through aggressive repetitions.
5) Find a moment of dialogue in a scene you’ve already written. What does each character want, what are they willing to do to get it? Change the verb, the subtext under the words, and rewrite the dialogue accordingly. For example maybe in the original scene Character A wants B to understand them, wants B to appreciate them, and thus *insists* and *pleads* through words and actions. They’re earnest. What if you change the intentions: A still wants to be understood by B but opts for a different tactic: *teasing, cajoling*, playfully *flirting*. Rewrite the scene.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Setting, Stillness, and Voice

A quick story on Voice

When I was twenty-four, twenty-five, a professor I was studying fiction with said I lacked "vision." I had no idea what that meant. I wondered if the guy was a holy roller or something. Vision? WTF.

It took me years to figure it out.

Vision.

I studied other writers like a detective cracking a code of cipher. I observed, made notes: the hurt and armor of cynicism in Holden Caulfield; the narrative distance and protective wisecracks in the first-person judgments of Philip Marlowe; the grief and suffering in the works of Bernard Malamud.

Sherwood Anderson also resonated with me. He uses a telling voice and summary scenes to guide us through *Winesburg, Ohio*. His voice is a generous one—his characters are broken and he loves them, presenting them to us raw with all their faults and repressed feelings. His voice seeks connections: not so much as to carnal love, but to emotional love, communion, and understanding.

Just what is your attitude toward your characters and your fictional universe? Do you have a voice, a vision? I'm not talking about themes here, although literary critics will look to your voice to explain to your readership the themes of your prose (and that's okay, that's what they do). But as you compose and make word-to-word choices you are putting forth an attitude and breathing life into your work.

Personally I believe in affairs of the heart (that's why in part I like a telling voice). Moreover, in the tradition of Sherwood Anderson, I love my characters and respect them. I want them to surprise me, not to be defined around one concept but to reflect the ambiguities and complexities of what it means to be human. I seek out prose that honestly explores, in an almost philosophical level of inquiry, what it means to be a human being.

Don't worry about defining your voice yet, but as you write more and more stories try to understand your value system and just what it is that you as an artist stand for.

A second story

Years ago I had a gifted student, man could this cat write. He approached me after class. We had just workshopped a fine story he had put forward about fathers/sons and love and loss. Tears pushed at the corner of his eyes. He pointed to a paragraph that a student had made line edits on. "I think about rhythm all the time," he said. "I deliberately mixed long and short sentences here for effect." The original paragraph was four sentences long. The student critic had edited the prose to make the paragraph six declarative sentences. I told the student, I agree with you, I like your original impulses, choices. "Hey, you're the final arbiter of your work. Keep it the way you want it."

This little anecdote affected me greatly as a teacher. I won't mess with your voice. I want you to find it. That's what I believe. Just as I found my own, with hard work, you'll find yours. Kurt Vonnegut once said that the goal of any creative writing professor should be to not get in a student's way.

My voice

I'm stating this to let you know I can define it. I'm not stating this to tell you what yours should be, but you should, in time, be able to define the emotional and technical properties of your voice. My voice is rooted in the Ernest Hemingway school of parataxis. I like declarative sentences (subject/verb/object constructions). I rarely start a sentence with a subordinate clause. I prefer Anglo-saxon words to Latinate words. I like hard consonant sounds. I use short descriptors to add beats, moments of tension between bits of dialogue. In terms of dialogue I prefer, in two-person scenes, to eschew tags if possible. For me, "said" is not an invisible word. Moreover, I'm not a big fan of "ing" sentence starts. I also like to use free indirect discourse as a way to create uncertainty in a narrative. But that's me. I can define my likes. Can you?

Setting as an On Ramp to Voice

I believe that setting and the props featured in a scene should do two important things: convey nuances of mood or attitudes and reveal psychology of character. If you consistently use setting in these ways you will be well on your way to developing your voice.

Voice in Raymond Chandler's "The Big Sleep"

As I stated earlier, Chandler once joked that he wasn't good at writing three–person scenes so his debut novel begins with three two-person scenes. But despite that shortcoming, Chandler establishes character/voice/attitude out of the gate (written when he was in his early fifties):

> It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

This opening establishes Marlowe's wry attitude, his self-deprecating humor (the display handkerchief cracks me up), and a subtle reveal (he has a drinking problem, his way of escape from the pyrrhic, the cost of every quest he undertakes). Moreover, the threat of a "hard" rain underscores the violence, the "mean streets" down which this man must go. Finally, his quip about "four million dollars" establishes, via contrast, Marlowe as a hard-working, honest man, navigating his spaces in a world of privilege, entitlement, and excess.

Later, in chapter three, when Marlowe meets Vivian Regan, Chandler further explores this theme of excess and his lead character's distance from such a world:

> This room was too big, the ceiling was too high, the doors were too tall, and the white carpet that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Lake Arrowhead. There were full-length mirrors and crystal doodads all over the place. The ivory furniture had chromium on it, and the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows. The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out. The windows stared towards the darkening foothills. It was going to rain soon. There was pressure in the air already.

Wow. My favorite moment here: "the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows." Talk about too much-ness. This detail shows that Vivian lacks preciseness and control. No wonder there's pressure in the air. And the judgment behind "dirty" and "bled out" is all you need to know about Marlowe's protective armor, his distancing himself from the world he travels in. This is setting as voice. There's an attitude here.

Writing Crime

Of course, crime fiction relies on attitude. We readers accept a certain kind of fictional contract: we're always on our guard; we can't trust the world we see unveiling before us; everyone is a suspect; everyone has something to hide and is prone to half-truths and lying to protect themselves or others. What clue will reveal the hidden truth?

In Georges Simenon's *Maigret Sets a Trap* (translated by Daphne Woodward) he establishes the possibility of Marcel Moncin's guilt with a detail that appears, possibly, just tossed away: "She had opened the glass-paneled door of a drawing room done up in a modern style which was unexpected in this old house, but which had nothing aggressive about it; Maigret told himself he wouldn't mind

living in a setting like this. Only the paintings on the walls displeased him, he couldn't make head or tail of them." The last sentence is the punch line, the clue. The paintings are a mess because they mirror the disordered mind of a serial killer. Moreover, unlike the distance in Marlowe's voice, Simenon humanizes Maigret as a man who connects with the world and its simple comforts: "Maigret told himself he wouldn't mind living in a setting like this." He's secure, moving about the arrondissements of Paris. The world is not threatening. Throughout the Maigret novels Simenon presents his Chief Inspector as enjoying the quotidian: drinking a beer, standing by a warm fire, going to the cinema, Saturday nights, with his wife, and walking with his wife in the evenings and sticking out his tongue to catch falling snowflakes. Again, this is voice. A vision.

Setting and the Triggering Neighborhood

In *The Triggering Town* Richard Hugo argues that you should avoid writing about your hometown but find a new town that inspires memory. The problem with your hometown is that the details are fixed and stable. You'll have a hard time making a corn silo black if in your memory it is yellow. Or if I were to write about a high school custodian, Rusty, who was a drunkard, it might be hard for me to imagine him in a different light, a guy who in his downtime replayed classic chess games in his small cinder block office.

Okay, full disclosure. I don't quite buy Hugo's argument.

I'm more with the Bernard Malamud, John Steinbeck and Alice Munro school. Write toward what you know. Establish firmly a place as your own, but also recapture the spaces you have inhabited. These writers brought to life where they lived: New York City; Salinas Valley; rural Ontario.

Years ago I wrote a story, "'Come on, You're Dead'" that appeared in the pages of the *Green Hills Literary Lantern* and wound up being nominated for a Pushcart Prize. The story's beginnings grew out of a setting exercise I shared with my students. When they write in class, I do too.

Anyway, here's the assignment: re-imagine the neighborhood you grew up in (a city block; a trailer court; an apartment complex, a farm). Draw a map of the neighborhood, and label the various dwellings. I recalled a crescent I lived on in Toronto's North York. The house at the end of the block featured a doctor with five children and a wife with an alcohol problem (I figured this part out later). She liked margarine, and thought it was better for you than butter. Next door was an Italian family, their father worked construction, and Mrs. Capitelli used to make homemade ravioli (the noodles from scratch—I stayed at her place sometimes after school when my parents weren't yet home from work). Some of the lawns of the houses in our neighborhood weren't sodded yet; other homes hadn't had the drywall installed. There were four different patterns to the houses: a kind of suburban Levittown with spindly trees and fenced-in backyards. And I, with my Thompson submachine gun from the Marx Toy Company, played war games all the time.

From this mapping and calling up of past memories grew an anti-war story (it didn't start out that way) about me and the doctor's son playing war and messing with stuff we shouldn't have been messing with. A composite of my kid brother and younger kids in the neighborhood makes a memorable guest spot in the piece too. He wanted to hang with me and my pals and fit in, and that desire gets all of us in trouble. The story explored unsupervised children's time and the dangers inherent in that. That wasn't my initial intention in writing the story but no doubt that "vision" grew from the mix of my memories of then with my having been a relatively young parent at the time I composed the story. My daughters in 2004 were ages 17; 13; and 7. Ultimately, the story resonates a sad resignation and questions masculinity. Again, I didn't start with an agenda or a theme, but that's the undercurrent to what emerged through my triggering neighborhood memory. Try it. See what emerges for you.

Let me pump the brakes a second. I don't want to be too dismissive of Hugo. I have used his advice for poets in *The Triggering Town.* I often go to Webster City, Iowa an hour down Highway 20 from where I live in Cedar Falls. I don't know what draws me to it, but I find myself attracted to the town and I've used it to recall memories of various small towns and small cities I've lived in in Ontario: Norwood, Cobourg, and Peterborough. These places, combined with Webster City's armory, local Rexall drugstore, diner with its open hot beef sandwiches and Willson Avenue spelled with two L's have all figured in my creation of "Winsome" an imaginary town in upstate New York that features my two-fisted cab driver and drifter Eddie Sands. My Winsome has an armory, a small college on a hill, a community ice arena, a strange street named Polis, and a local drugstore/diner, Regehr's, where you can still get an orange egg cream and a hot open beef sandwich.

Setting, Stillness and Voice

I'm a city boy. In *On the Waterfront*, Marlon Brando said, "I don't like the country. The crickets make me nervous." I'm with him. I don't like the quiet of open spaces. If I'm on a farm house under a black sky and no neighbors around I worry that any moment *In Cold Blood* will unfold. When I visit my sister-in-law in Emporia, KS, I'm uneasy at night.

I love white noise, sound. I write and listen to music (hard bop jazz; 1950s rockabilly; punk), or play an old Leafs game in the background. I've never been one to meditate. The closest I come to relaxing and being in a quiet "zone" or flow is when I write or play my guitar (a Martin D-28).

But, if you want to possibly find, maybe, a hidden aspect of your voice—if you're an enthusiastic, idealistic person—then try to lean into a moment of stillness. Pause the narrative storyline, stay in a specific feeling, and explore that feeling, see what associations it leads to. Allow that pause to take you somewhere lyrical.

The end game here is to seek and find some kind of wonder.

Don't listen to Mr. Brando. Listen to the crickets. Invest in that sound. Where does that sound take you?

Ever just lulled about in the shower, feeling the water run over you, as your mind drifts to relaxing far off places? Ever just floated idyllically in a swimming pool feeling the sun on your face, but the brightness of the sky still present behind closed eyes? Or walked in the woods on a harvest moonlit night and felt a connection to something beyond yourself? Go somewhere quiet, and keep yourself open to whatever enters in. What awe or wonder stirs within you?

Many stories about youth contain such moments of intense feeling and connection. Here's an example of intense stillness from Sue Monk Kidd's powerhouse novel *The Secret Life of Bees:*

> When I looked up through the web of trees, the night fell over me, and for a moment I lost my boundaries, feeling like the sky was my own skin and the moon was my heart beating up there in the dark. Lightning came, not jagged but in soft, golden licks across the sky. I undid the buttons on my shirt and opened it wide, just wanting the night to settle on my skin, and that's how I fell asleep, lying there with my mother's things, with the air making moisture on my chest and the sky puckering with light.

Setting, the Ekphrastic, and Edward Hopper

I love Hopper's work. I'm a fan of Film Noir and the first time I saw a print of Hopper's "Nighthawks" I resonated with the the painting's noir vibe of alienation, loneliness, and destitution that glowed with a sense that here were real, hardscrabble people taking a brief respite from the city's mean streets.

About four years ago I was visiting the Cincinnati Art Museum and found myself face-to-face with another Hopper painting, this time an original, hanging in their walls: "Sun on Prospect Street." Painted in 1934. Here's a facsimile:

https://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/art/explore-the-collection?id=11297054

I was mesmerized, staring at it from all distant angles, different distances, for close to half an hour. Suddenly the setting of the painting inspired a future story for me to write about two hit men sitting in a V-8 Ford, looking at that house, readying to kill a custodian.

Upon returning to my oldest daughter's home in Deer Park I quickly wrote a first draft in a white heat. Here's the first seven paragraphs of "Bend of the Sun." Note how Hopper's imagery inspires

my choice of imagery, a feeling of stillness, and a voice dipped in the sensibilities of Noir's lost-world losers (and I use the term affectionately):

> The window was open just enough to let in the cool night air. But it was no longer night time. It was day, and everything was yellow, and the window was still open.
>
> "Place is deserted. The whole goddamn street." Donnie was nineteen or twenty with hands the size of cinder blocks and a face full of licorice fuzz. A dotted black line withered across his upper lip. He had been in Gloucester for a week, studying patterns of their target. "Slavini always opens it at night. Closes it in the morning. Must still be asleep." He leaned against the passenger door, a porkpie hat nonchalantly tipped against his kinky hair.
>
> "It's Sunday. Everyone's at church, and he sleeps." Wingels, unlike Donnie, had small hands. He often wore women's-sized gloves because he liked tight-fitting clothes. They made him feel secure.
>
> "Not that church." Donnie pointed up Prospect Street to the two curved cornices rising above rooftops and trees. "Greek church." He tapped heavy fingers along the dash. "They got them Greek lines."
>
> "You Greek? The Othello of Greeks?"
>
> Donnie laughed, low gravelly. "I'm from Waterloo, Iowa."
>
> "I don't want to know where you're from—" Best to keep their backstories their own.

The genre of ekphrastic poetry comments on the art piece that has inspired the poet's vision or aesthetic response, as in Keats's magnificent "Ode to a Grecian Urn." But in "Bend of the Sun," Hopper's painting was a trigger, a tool that took me into another world without the meta commentary. I don't acknowledge Hopper directly, but his art is in the story's DNA, providing a noir vibe and scaffolding of mis-aligned details: daylight and a church Sunday, and not night, to commit a murder; an empty street with the bend of the sun and no witnesses; a Catholic community with a Greek church; two hit men, one Black, one white, one young, one older, one wearing a porkpie, the other women's gloves.

From there things for these two just get darker, more defamiliarized, as the story leans into themes of abuse.

Case Study #6: "Ghost Town"

I absolutely love Sarah Cypher's story. It is a master class in the use of setting for conveying nuance and vision.

Queer couples live in constant danger. Unwarranted threats and undercurrents of dismissal can occur at any time. And this story, set in Oakland, on the fringe line between gentrification and the run-down parts of town, captures that threat. On their block drift Cheetos bags and Swisher Sweets

and Jolly Rancher wrappers. Around their neighborhood lurks violence: "The week before we closed escrow, a twenty-one-year old woman was found stabbed to death on the next corner, by the liquor store."

Moreover, neighbors try to fit our narrator and her wife Andrea into a heteronormative box: "'What? What? Where are the men?' he cried helpless. 'Your husbands?'" He can't grasp or refuses to grasp that these women aren't sisters but wives.

Cyphers then layers the images of death and decay inherent in the setting to hang like black crepe above the characters' narrative arc. The setting begins to represent or mirror the "rough patch" in the relationship between the two women. It enriches the darkening mood as the women argue over the possibility of having a child and settling in or moving away from the neighborhood.

And in the story's final turn Cyphers even takes stillness to a dark place. As opposed to my earlier focus on awe and wonder, here stillness represents loss and resignation: not eating a final meal of mac and cheese, baking loaves of bread. The Ghost Town now inhabits the relationship between the two women. Andrea leaves to return to Texas. Will she come back? By story's end she's a haunting specter, a fading memory.

The story's final paragraph, the rebuilding of the neighborhood school, is a haunting call back to the childless couple theme and a kind of presence/absence, children breaking through the womb-like glass:

> The dog seems up for it. So we head to the next block and take in the new yellow fence, the white corrugated walls, the fresh concrete, the play structure in a perfectly deserted courtyard. The tufts of pampas grass are so fresh the dirt is still black around their base. All the classrooms overlook the playground; all their windows are brand new. Their glass still bears the factory stickers and adhesive warnings, waiting to be peeled away by so many little fingernails.

Exercises:

1) Write a scene in a setting in which you use the weather to convey a mood or attitude.
2) Write a scene in which you use the neighborhood to convey a mood or attitude.
3) Write a scene inspired by the dynamics of a painting or photograph. As you create a scene, allow the mood and nuances of the original art to affect your voice. Channel the original texts intentions and aesthetics.
4) Write an AB scene in which you lay out some clues that reveal the inner psychology of character. Write the scene in both limited third person (as in the case of Simenon's presentation of Maigret) and first person (as in the case of Chandler's presentation of Marlowe).

5) Find a moment of stillness in a location one might not expect to find it (i.e. the bowling alley; a lecture hall full of people).
6) Write a scene of stillness that leans not into awe and wonder but sadness and resignation. Don't give us a direct epiphany but rely on a resonant image.
7) The triggering neighborhood: after mapping an area from your past, take one of the dwellings and imagine what's going on in their "home." Make yourself a peripheral narrator to their story.
8) Take a narrative you've already written and find space within it to write a new scene or expand an existing scene into a moment of stillness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Point of View

Point-of-view is the most important decision you'll make in writing a story. It guides everything: perspective, voice, vision. In terms of perspective, your choice in point of view will shape how much knowledge the narrator will share or repress with an audience. In terms of voice it will invite us anywhere on the spectrum between a confessional telling mode or a reserved minimalist mode. In terms of vision the question of "from what distance?" (close to the lead character or farther removed and watching upon high like from the balcony) will add layers to the values the story puts forward.

Because of the importance of this decision, I'm not a big fan of telling students to change their point of view. As a matter of fact in my classes that's bad form. I trust in initial impulses. I guess I'm an unrepentant Beat Generation guy; I believe that first choices are made for a reason and we should trust in those choices and find ways to make them work.

For the purposes of this primer I'm only going to recommend three points of view for the beginning student. These are the most prevalent, the ones I see again and again as an editor at the *North American Review.* Master at least one of these three classic points-of-view, and then, perhaps, try your hand at something a little more non-traditional. (like a second person POV).

First Person

Popular among YA writers and readers and great for telling stories of youth coming to terms with some of life's harsh realities, this is a good way to develop your voice. First person narratives can have energy, sass, a sense of sharing from the heart—a real confessional vibe.

What kind of speaker are you presenting to your audience? Do they like to ramble? Do they wander off in long digressions? Do they judge the world? Do they find beauty in little, offbeat things, like the way a child wades into a pond, going farther and farther out, daring to discover how close they can get before flooding their rubber boots with pond water. Do they join a series of thoughts by "and" to keep the monologue going? Do they slide into apologetic transitions with a self-deprecating "anyways"? Do they comment on someone having too big of an upper lip or someone else having an uneven face like a Picasso painting as a way to distance themselves from those they encounter? All of these choices reveal character and vision. Holden Caulfield hates phonies and he is always on the lookout for them. Cynicism is his armor.

Moreover, "I" speakers let you into their limited range of understanding of the world, and this is really great for young writers. When I was in my twenties and thirties, the world was a strange, alien place, and what I knew was limited to my rather limited experience. So a first person voice was appealing because I didn't have to know a wide range of things, or do a lot of research about provenance and antiques like Donna Tartt did for *Goldfinch* or dissect radio technology and Hitler youth programming the way Anthony Doerr did for *All the Light We Cannot See*. We can stay in our comfort zones of knowing as little as our central character does.

First person "I" stories are also great for writing private eye yarns. It restricts us to knowing only as much as the detective and places the reader in the detective's shoes, trying to out-guess him or her, knowing as little as the PI does. It also helps the writer create a series of surprises. We discover the two guys behind his frosted glass door with clamped guns in their hands at the same moment the detective does.

The dangers of first person, of course, is overdoing it, leaning too much into the playful voice you've created, letting it take on Promethean proportions and burning away from you. Prometheus breathes fire and too much fire will burn down the world building of your story. What you might find a regular riot, everyone else is getting a little tired of. So be careful.

The other danger is you have to allow your first person narrator to be who they are. You might want them to make a better choice, a more moral choice, but you have to stick to the imagined probabilities of the voice you've created and have your "I" character act accordingly. We love Huck Finn, we love how he stands up for Jim out in the wilderness and how Huck feels he's going to be damned for a decision he makes half-way through the novel. But we're also frustrated with him for not standing up to Tom Sawyer later in the book, and letting Tom do all his nasty shenanigans vis-a-vis Jim. Huck can't stand up to Tom because he represents "civilization." We want Huck to push back against Tom, but Twain has to be true to the Huck he's created. And you have to be true to your first person voice. Stay consistent.

A different kind of "I" story

Years ago a student of mine, Darek Benesh, introduced me to a short story form that borrows from the works of William Faulkner (see *As I Lay Dying)* and Tom Perotta (see *Election*). A core incident (a child climbing inside a tree, getting stuck, and dying) is reflected upon by several "differing" first-person perspectives. Each brief section (2-3 pages) is titled by the name of the character who is speaking to us (Susan; Clifford; Denise; Mr. Switchback). Each character speaks in their own voice and this creates a wonderfully prismatic narrative, in the traditions of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), which leaves us questioning what's the real meaning of the story and filling us with a series of uncertainties. Over the course of a twenty to thirty page story, each character can speak to us on 3-4

different occasions. The core incident (why or how the child died) ultimately remains somewhat of a mystery. The narrative isn't all tied up; the writer leaves us readers with a handful of loose strings.

Case Study #7: "Before the N-Word" (pdf not on JSTOR yet)

C. E. Poverman's striking story is about memory and accountability.

The protagonist attends a prep-school reunion and meets up with classmates he hasn't seen in ten years. Percy, one of only three Black students from back then, is now dying of cancer and requests a chance to speak to his classmates addressing wrongs of the past.

Poverman, from the opening paragraph, freely moves from narrative showing to narrative telling, setting up his theme:

> Starting up the stairs to the second-floor dining room—I'm still pressing my name tag to my lapel—I thought I recognized Joe Clark on the landing above me. As if looking into a distance, he said, "That you, Tim Moore?" He waited for me. Easily ten years since we'd seen each other, but he was much as I remembered him. There seemed to be guys who looked more or less the way we were when we were undergraduates—well almost—and then guys who turned a corner and became unrecognizable. I read that at some time in our lives we internalize a fixed image of ourselves and after that can never really know how we appear to others.

Memory, recognition, knowability.

Percy, "without reproach," shares with his audience how difficult it was and is to be Black in America, and he relives his memories of a tricentennial event at Brewster in 1960. To commemorate the event, Mr Stubbs, the headmaster wanted to "bring to life the original Elijah Brewster endowment to the school, which had been: one negro manservant and 440 British pounds. Mr. S had asked Percy if he would stand beside him during his morning talk and be the negro manservant."

Percy agree, except during the ceremony "instead of referring to Percy as the 'one negro manservant," Mr. S said, 'one nigger slave.'"

Percy explores the denigration and pain this event caused him and how it led to his own rising Black consciousness. Our protagonist, however, has no memory of the story playing out that way: "None whatsoever. Had I been absent that day?"

No. “I’m sure that I was there. And yet, the episode was an absence.” Why? Because he wasn’t listening. The Black experience wasn’t on his radar, what they were facing wasn’t *recognizable*.

I admire how Poverman leans into the emotional complications of characters and storytelling. Rather than present a character we *want* to see (inclusive and present) we have a shadow self that was tone deaf and absent. Moreover, Moore’s white guilt shifts the story’s final emphasis, showcasing a stunning reversal:

> I, too, started working my way forward. As I did so, I felt an uneasiness, which had been coming and going in me, rise and spread. It was a fear that I couldn’t name and then I realized that it was that Percy would not recognize me. On one level, I think I knew this was completely irrational, but on another, it had been a long time, all of us had changed, and then when I thought about it, I had to ask myself, why would he remember me, really?

I love the story’s confessional voice. Usually when writers tell stories that have an autobiographical slant, they often present themselves as the hero or the person wronged. But here, we have a real honest exploration of neglect, and a writer who’s not afraid to present humanity with all its blemishes.

Third Person Limited

When I first started writing and sending out literary stories this was my favorite mode of expression. Henry James called it “central intelligence.” We walk alongside our protagonist and decide when to enter into their inner monologues or when to share some necessary backstory. A writer can decide how much, within this point-of-view, to balance inner and outer stories. And here’s where the difference between limited third and first-person perspectives are most pronounced. In first person, the backstory is spoken to us and closely aligned to the lead character’s perspective (unless you’re striking an unreliable, ironic voice); in limited third person you can play with the distance of your backstories, telling us what a character understands of the past or telling us more than your lead character understands. The possibilities for differing ranges of knowledge are greater in limited third.

I also felt as a young writer that a limited third point-of-view gave me more control. William Wordsworth believed that the formal properties of poetry (meter and rhyme scheme) controlled the emotional intensity of the work, keeping it in a sweet spot of intense feelings reflected in tranquility rather than swinging too violently into over writing. And I guess that’s how I saw third-person limited. Putting a limit on my melodramatic flourishes (and I do have them. I remember in one of my earliest workshop stories I OD’ed on adjectives, writing such gems as “unholy sink” and “Cro-Magnon face”). My voice, through limited third, became more tempered, restrained, less adjectival, and not lost in the quirky perspectives of my first-person protagonist.

The dangers of a limited third point-of-view are two-fold: how to avoid a flat voice and veering dangerously close to boring prose, and slipping perhaps into too much showing and not enough telling. I'll lay my cards on the table: as an editor, I am really tired of camera objective point-of-view and clean as glass prose. I don't particularly enjoy stories that read like they were adapted from screenplays.

What we have in our toolbox is the ability to *tell* a reader things. It's harder to do in film and on the stage (you usually have to rely on self-reflexive dialogue). Prose, unlike a camera, can collapse time, can expand time. We can move outside the limits of the moment-to-moment now.

Your voice will develop with time (be patient—you'll find your value systems in terms of style and themes) and that voice will help shape and hone your third-person perspectives.

One final thought: a trick that I see so many writers perform is to begin a third-person narrative with a scene, placing us in the immediacy and the midst of things, and then pulling back and giving us backstory. This accordion style of storytelling, stretching and contracting repeatedly between outer versus inner, gives the piece depth and nuance.

Case Study #8: "The Treasure Map"

Jaqueline Eis's "The Treasure Map" relies on a triangle: a widow (Elizabeth), her deceased husband (Edwin), and a wayward brother-in-law (Tommy) to tell a strong but restrained story of frisson, family loyalty, and awkwardness.

The story's opening paragraph begins with a doubling, a knocking sound that reminds Elizabeth of the final days of caring for her husband and his labored breathing and Tommy hammering, replacing shingles on the roof. "She knew she should feel grateful, but she didn't." This sentence establishes everything: the awkward distance between the two. But note the restraint that limited third gives Eis. The control as opposed to writing something in first like: "Goddamn it, what's he still doing on the roof?" The last line of the story's first paragraph establishes the triangle's dynamics: "She would rather be haunted by Edwin's ghost than to have his brother constantly shadowing her." Again, note the control. In first person, Eis might have written, "Is this guy ever going to leave?"

The story and its triangle takes a turn when Elizabeth discovers and old photograph and notices something she was blind to:

> A small photo album in the same drawer held a picture that made her pause. She remembered taking it herself on a ferry boat ride during a trip to Oregon in 1935. Tommy was along that time, at Edwin's invitation. The picture had always been painful to her because Edwin glared at the camera, at her, angry that she'd let the boys get away with some mischief. They cowered next

> to Tommy, but she had never looked at his expression until now. Her cheeks flushed. His look, directly at the camera, smiling openly and unmistakably—though she shuddered at the thought—with something more than affection. Had Tommy once had feelings for her? How could she not have noticed?

A writer in limited third can decide from what distance and Eis's voice isn't in the balcony looking down nor is it walking tightly alongside her character. Instead she opts for a middle ground; the last two sentences of this paragraph are an interior moment but it's tempered with some tranquility.

In the story's final moments, Tommy's departure, he tells "Lizzy" that she's a good woman, and Eis writes, "She wished it was true, wished she'd made him some sandwiches for the road." Midwestern reserve is still present (the story *is set* in Nebraska, 1957), but then the story moves into a space somewhere between quiet restraint and emotional intensity:

> Her hand grasped the window so hard it wobbled in the door frame. "Oh, Tommy," she said, but no other acceptable words would come. She wished she could point out to him that this too was a kind of love, his own, their own, peculiar and long-suffering way of showing it, but he wouldn't know what to do with that either.

The window "wobbled"; she exclaimed his name, but then no other words poured forth. Eis stays true to her characters, what's possible for them within this narrative. Just as in the case of Huck Finn being unable to speak up for Jim against Tom's cruel pranks, Elizabeth and Tommy fall back into the story's reserved tone and spaces. Poignant.

The story brilliantly ends with a return to the triangle and the presence/absence of Edwin as Elizabeth imagines her husband laughing over Tommy's final exit and saying, "Isn't that just like him?" Words that can't be spoken directly are left in the landscape of the mind.

Big Third or the Omniscient Point-of-View

This was frowned upon in the 1980s. At least in the workshops I was taking at Kansas State University. "You think you're writing *War and Peace?"* Save that for the novelists. And I can't tell you how many times in the margins of my stories I saw scribbled "point-of-view?" and "head hopping." The omniscient or what some folks like to call the God point of view was supposed to be the domain of sprawling novels, Mr. Tolstoy.

Central intelligence (limited third) and first person were the only perspectives sponsored by all workshoppers. But I recall seeing examples, in modernist short stories, of head hopping all the time. Morley Callaghan, Canada's first great fiction writer, head hops in his oft-anthologized "All the Years of Her Life." The story, largely in limited third, is from adolescent Alfred's perspective. He's caught

shoplifting from Mr. Carr's store. But before Alfred's mother arrives to bail him out of trouble, Callaghan hops into Mr. Carr's mental landscape ever so briefly: "Mr. Carr was surprised at the way she came in. She was very calm, quiet and friendly. 'Is Alfred in trouble?' Mrs. Higgins asked."

I don't see a problem. And this story was published in *The New Yorker!*

The rule of not doing this was just an arbitrary one enforced by workshops all across the country. Fitzgerald head hops. Hemingway head hops. Give me a break. Ever have a teacher correct you for using "which" instead of "that" or "that" instead of "which"? Who cares? I mean really. It was just a rule set up by grammarians and the rap against head hopping was just a similar rule set up by workshop professors.

If head hopping was seen as a crime, big third omniscience for a *short story* was seen as an even bigger offense. However, around 2008, when speculative fiction took off at university writing programs, storytellers more fully embraced narrative telling and painting their words on a broader canvas with shifting perspectives, prismatic insights, and jumps in time.

The challenge of an omniscient point-of-view is that the writer has to understand and know *a lot more* than just the limited experiences of your third-person or "I" protagonist. This will require research, wisdom, and, I believe (although this isn't alway necessary), a generosity for the human condition and an ability to empathize with a variety of people (men; women; he/him; she/her; they/them; he/they; she/they), people from differing nationalities, races, faith-based systems, etc.

Why I don't like labeling this the "God" perspective is that I think a writer should never play God, should never be an Old Testament prophet of righteous judgment or an all-knowing seer, but someone who is always open, humble, channeling whatever impulses the universe is gifting us with. Listen to those impulses, follow them.

Okay, that's a little hey wow and out there, but that's how I roll. Humility, living in uncertainty, and being present are, I believe, three of the central tenants of being a writer.

Case Study #9: "Three Days Discovered" (pdf not on JSTOR yet)

Marc Dickinson's story is a tour-de-force of a bigger point-of-view and repressed exposition. The story centers around a strong core incident: the mysterious death of a high school student, Samantha. As the story unfolds, like a literary episode inspired by *Twin Peaks* we are faced with more questions instead of answers. The story's repressed narration (the and how and exactly what happened) is opened but never fully.

Dickinson's narration constantly shifts perspectives. The opening sentences suggest a town full of gossip: "Samantha Harris has been found. Three days missing and after all the search parties, all the theories—abduction? Runaway?—she's discovered at a park two miles from her house." This is followed by an even bigger telling voice filling us in on the setting: "It used to be a landfill, so sometimes with enough rain the soccer fields release a smell like rotten eggs." The girl's father is observed from the narrator's balcony: "The father is too angry to cry. In three days his daughter has gone from Homecoming Court to Jane Doe." By contrast, the mother's perspective is much closer, veering into free indirect discourse: "Finally, the mom steps in, says to leave their daughter alone. Some lab rat with a scalpel won't be going near her child." Then the narrative stretches out like an accordion once again taking up an almost group mindset: "Today the school is full of stories. A friend of a friend, someone on the force, says once the court mandated an autopsy, traces of opioid turned up in the bloodwork." Similarly, "The church had already prepared a candlelight vigil. Sunday night, they picked the best photo for the flyer—Samantha, almost angelic in a white dress—and then selected a theme: A Night of Hope." And later, with high school lover Meg, the narrative voice closes in: "For years, Sam took Meg under her wing. And now she's gone, leaving Meg open to attack."

In Dickinson's final turn the amalgam of these voices (the mix of individuals and group mindset) coalesce into a brilliantly non-resolved ending: "What's a town without its martyrs? Still, tonight they continue to toss and turn, sick with hope the morning headlines will make more sense. That maybe Samantha can somehow be there for them one more time, telling them all the things they need to hear."

Exercises:

1) This exercise has three components. Begin with a core incident shared by two people. One, write the scene, in limited third, from character A's perspective. Two, rewrite the scene, in limited third, from character B's perspective. Three, rewrite the scene shifting from both characters' perspectives.
2) This exercise has two components. Write a visitation scene (someone from the past, a brother-in-law perhaps, arrives on Character A's doorstep). In version one, use limited third, and keep the narrative distance somewhat tranquil (walking alongside but with some midwestern reserve). In version two, use limited third but move the narrative distance closer, using free indirect discourse to give us some of Character A's inner monologues.
3) Write a paragraph or two from a group mindset, sharing some kind of gossip.
4) Write a scene in first person leaning into the comic side of voice. Change the emotional timbre by rewriting the scene leaning into sad resignation or snarky cynicism.
5) Choose a core incident. Reflect on that incident from four different first person perspectives.
6) Write a sports scene. Let's say hockey. Scoring a goal in overtime. In version one write it in either first or third person from the forward who scores; in version two write it in first or

third person from a fan's perspective; in version three write it in first or third person from the vantage point of a player sitting on the bench or his teammate, the goalie at the other end of the ice.

CHAPTER NINE

Learning the Unwritten Rules

In the late 1980s, after a three-year hiatus from the workshop, I started sending out stories for publication. I got a piece rejected (what else was new?) and the editor (at least I think it was the editor and not an assistant or intern) scrawled across the top of the first page, "learn the unwritten rules."

Say what?

I had no idea what I did wrong. I still don't.

What are the unwritten rules? What rules did I apparently break?

Did I explain the story in my cover letter? No. I knew that was a no-no. Did I say too much about being an unpublished author? I thought editors might like to know that. Did I go on and on about being a cab driver for a year? No. Well maybe a little. I figured that kind of bio info might be intriguing. My PhD mentor Robert L. Carringer said he once put a prospective professor on an interview short list because he flew helicopters in Vietnam. Anyway, did I paper clip the goddamn manuscript instead of stapling it? What the fuck did I do? Was there something about the story that broke rules? Shallow characters? Plot inconsistencies? Tonal shifts that made the prose uneven? Hmm.

You've heard of the Riddle of the Sphinx. Well this was the riddle of Gordon Lish.

He was the editor of the journal I received the scrawl from.

So out of this Riddle of the Lish mishegoss I'm hoping to provide some answers. For you. My suggestions on writing fiction are my attempts to lift the veil on some of the mysteries of storytelling. Consider what I say as my *written rules* that will lead to your success as an author. I certainly hope so.

Workshop Etiquette

During an MLB broadcast Steve Stone once said, "I probably shook off more catchers than any other pitchers of my era." He figured the W (win) or L (loss) goes next to his name in the record books not the catcher's. So he took ownership of calling a game, the choice of pitches thrown in varying given circumstances.

I think writers should treat their work the way Steve Stone approached pitching.

It's your work. You call the shots. *Take ownership. Shake off some of the suggestions of the workshop.*

Perhaps what I'm saying sounds like an anti-workshop position, but it isn't. I think the writer is the final arbiter of what's said about the work and should go with their gut. Take the advice that works but don't try to please everyone. Be true to *your* vision. The job of the teacher is to not get in your way: encourage; point out what needs work; but never hijack the story. I don't want you to write a Grant Tracey story; I want you to write *your* story.

An idea I got from Ron Carlson. Look for variables. A story puts so many things in motion, juggles so many balls, and often, for revision a story can be made stronger by finding a ball that needs to be juggled longer. In other words seek out elements that are already in your story that can be further leaned into. What maybe got dropped that needs to be back in the story's air?

Okay, that's a little abstract. But, let's just put it plainly: I like writers who are a little stubborn.

As a teacher, I don't see myself as a collaborator. The work is yours. My job is to help you realize what's in the work and find ways for *you* to make it the best it can be. My name doesn't go on the work when it appears in print. Yours does. I'm Steve Stone's catcher that now and again needs to be shaken off.

A buddy of mine says he always tries to find a third way. There's what he wrote; then there's an editor's suggestion, sometimes a line edit with a strongly worded revision recommendation; and then there's the third way: take into account what the editor said, but make it your own. Write *toward* what the editor suggested without copping their voice. Make it your publishing W (as in win). Not yours *and* the editor's.

For the writer

Remain quiet while your work is being discussed. Take notes and listen. When the discussion is finished, I let the student writer ask some questions that weren't addressed during the workshop. I also, ahead of time, allow the student to ask up to three craft questions that they can list at the end of their manuscript. Few take me up on this offer, but if they do it allows them to take some agency with regard to what we focus on in class.

I begin with what's working, focusing on cookies. Nomnomnom. Then I move to the questions (if there are any at the end of the manuscript), and then conclude with what's not working. I then ask the writer if they have any additional questions for us.

For the workshoppers

Read the story three times. Yes. Three times. The first time just get a feel for it. What's its intentions? What kind of story is it? Place it in a tradition. How well does it play by the rules it sets up for itself? I believe in textual intentions, not necessarily writer's intentions. The text is always bigger than us. We writers don't always know what we're doing. There are so many happy accidents, and if we're really channeling the world it will surprise us.

On a second read, activate the text, commenting on what's working and not working. Be specific. Don't just write "good." What makes a particular turn of phrase or character choice interesting or good?

On the third read make sure to conclude with a long end comment that summarizes your findings for the work. Sign your comments. We stand by our words.

Recently, I asked my students what they thought their responsibilities for worship were and their answers were striking. "Say something in class. Your voice is important and we want to hear your opinions." "If I'm commenting in class on your work, I expect the same in return." "Please write substantive comments on the manuscript—don't just say this is good or this doesn't work; but articulate why." "Prioritize the class and invest the time; read the stories up for discussion carefully."

One of my students strongly suggested that the work should be "finished"—not "half-baked."

I get that. I had a friend, back in the 80s, who always put up stories that weren't complete. "I'm going to get reamed anyway, so—" This struck me as a negative attitude and a kind of self-defense armor—I don't want to get "hurt" so I don't want to put up my best. Put up your best. You owe it to yourself to take your work and yourself seriously as an artist.

I don't believe a story is ever finished, but at some point we're willing to let it go into the world. A workshop story should be something that you're proud of, that you think is almost ready to send out but you need some help with to get it ready for prime time.

Oh, and I allow students to submit excerpts from novels in progress. Of course, this is kind of tricky. One, the chapter might not be self-contained and that makes it hard to critique; and two, I don't want to be suggesting to the writer where the novel needs to go next. So a light touch is required.

My Workshop Etiquette

I don't believe a story should ever be half-baked. That, for me, leads to too much collaboration and a bunch of catchers getting a W or L next to their names. The writer is the pitcher. The rest of us are catchers. Know your roles.

In terms of making the workshop a safe place, we comment on the work, not the personality of the writer. Characters in a story don't have to be moral; they just have to be interesting.

In the 1980s a female student once said about one of my stories, "You know nothing about women." It really hurt. Okay, at the time, she was kind of right, but it wasn't something to say aloud or embarrass me about in front of my fellow writers. It was a personal attack. Well, I just want to make the writing better, she later said to me at one of those parties where us grad students got to take home all the leftover bread and cheese. Maybe her heart was in the right place, but the comment still stings, even now when I recall it some forty years later.

Another workshop colleague once called my prose style "prosaic." I didn't know what that word meant, but I recognized the disdain with which the comment was made. I looked up the word once the workshop was done and I was turbo pissed. Simple? Okay, at the time I was heavily influenced by Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, but the comment implied not just simple but "simple minded." I don't ever want to see this nonsense in a class I teach.

Respect your fellow writers. It takes guts to put your work out on Front Street. That's why, in my classes, we always applaud the writer and their work at the end of each workshop discussion. Moreover, the work is in me and I'm the work. What we write is personal and makes us very vulnerable. Keep that in mind when responding.

Kindness. I believe if you put positive energy into the universe you'll get it in return.

Maybe that's a little hey wow, but my Mom was into crystals, alternative medicines, Daoism. Deal.

Finally, I believe, a teacher should never be a gatekeeper. It's not my job to say who has it and who doesn't. Sure there are some people who have a greater facility with words and language, but I truly believe if you put in the time and effort and work on your craft you too can become a published author. I grade you against yourself, not against others in class. We're all on the road of storytelling. We're a community.

On Revision

For me, my stories fall under three revision categories: first draft ready; changing, restructuring, revising major sections; blowing the goddamn thing up.

First Draft Ready

About a quarter of my published stories were pretty close to first draft ready. By this I mean what I wrote in a white heat I stuck with. My impulses were good ones and I was in a state of flow. Any changes I made were cosmetic, adding a few details to enhance mood or nuances of dialogue, but the plot shape and narrative arc didn't change at all. Alice Munro, when interviewed by the Nobel Prize Committee, said she hardly revises her more recent stories. She's honed her craft, knows what she's doing, and trusts her instincts. The more you write, the closer you'll get to this kind of confidence, this feeling of being comfortable with uncertainty, knowing you'll *make* the story work.

I'm a bit of an unrepentant Beat Generation guy. Or, I should say, the myth of the Beats. First draft ready. Trust your instincts, go with your impulses. First thought, best thought.

Blow the Damn Thing Up

Sometimes my impulses suck. Bad choices. First thought, bad thought.

I'd say that one fourth of my published stories were ones I completely hit the reboot button on. I opened a new file and didn't even look at the older version. This approach came to me purely by accident. Literally. Some time in the 1980s my computer (a Leading Edge; yes, I'm dating myself) crashed and I lost the story I was hammering away on. I was bummed. But I didn't leave the room. I started over. From scratch. My next draft was so much better. Key scenes from the first draft re-emerged, but I wasn't stuck or beholden to my previous sentences, and choices. I made new discoveries.

And often this rebooted story, written in a white heat, is *new draft ready* (or close enough to send out). I can't explain it, but usually when I do the *blow the damn thing up* approach the subsequent drafts of the reboot don't take a lot of heavy lifting revising or mind bending rethinking ahead of their futures.

Needless to say, I turned this computer crashing experience into a productive ongoing revision strategy. My Master's thesis at Kansas State featured three stories and a critical apparatus. I eventually published all three of those stories in literary magazines. Of those three one was first draft ready and the other two were blown up. "Truth or Dare" was pretty much the same story I wrote in 1985 (it appeared in *Aethlon: the Journal of Sport Literature* in 1992). "Strike" was a revision of "Fair or Foul" and I switched the emotional register from twelve year olds to twenty-something graduate students. None of the details were the same. None of the sentences of the original were echoed in the revision, but the main seed of the story—girls quitting a baseball team because of the boys' sexism stayed at the heart of the new version "The Poem, 1969" became "Hockey Canada" and once again none of the sentences are echoed at all in the published version, but what remains consistent, the throughline between the drafts, is the theme, the central conflict: a grandson rooting

for Canada and what it means to be Canadian taking on his grandfather (who because of his Slavic ancestry is rooting for the Russians) and holding on to his Old Country ways.

Re-structuring, Revising, Rethinking

Half of my published stories go through this process. It's arduous and frustrating and difficult as I fiddle finding a lost impulse or a hidden inner story I've yet to discover. I believe (taking my lead from Ron Carlson) writers juggle variables and often in this revision process I have to eliminate a variable and possibly add some new ones. Sometimes a three scene story will evolve into a five or six scene story with more summary and interiority. Sometimes a theme or object in the background needs to be moved to the foreground. Sometimes what's in the foreground needs to be displaced, removed. Sometimes a minor character needs to become a major player.

Steven Schwartz once said that this kind of revision is accordion like. If you stretch a scene in the final phase of the story, you may need to adjust something at the front end of the story to now make the clubhouse turn work. Changing one aspect affects many other choices. It's not like you just fix one little thing here. No, this kind of revision often involves restructuring.

I find solving the riddles of these stories the most satisfying. Getting them right. Wow.

Process

I write my first draft fast and loose, like Eddie Felson playing pool (if you don't get that reference watch *The Hustler* with Paul Newman and read Walter Tevis's fine novel). I just want to get the yarn on the page without judgment. I shut off my censor and enter a zone that's full of excitement and surprise. In this stage of euphoria I tend to walk around the room saying, "I'm a genius."

Then, I put the draft aside for a few days. Let it cool off and begin the process of honestly accessing what's working and what's not working and thus begins the revising process. This is where I realize "I'm not all that and a bag of chips. Genius? Forget about it. Not even close." Sometimes, I even need to let the story sit for a year. Because, damn it, I can't fix it. At least not yet.

I've got a folder on my desktop called "No." It's full of over thirty failed stories that I've either abandoned or cobbled parts from for other stories that worked.

So what to do when I'm stuck? Or lost my way? Reading other fiction often helps me. I see how a writer solved a problem I'm having and I can borrow that craft choice and return to the work.

Moreover, devouring all kinds of narratives (I'm a junkie for the stuff from comic books to TV shows ["One Adam–12, roger"] to movies to crime novels to literary fiction to American drama) creates a filing system that's in the back of my head that I can unconsciously tap into while composing and placing my events in a causal chain.

I don't write every day. I wish I could, but I can't.

I have to feel it, you know? And if I'm not feeling it, I'm not feeling it.

You'll figure out your rhythms. Trust them. Don't do what others say you should do; do what works for you. For me, I'll write furiously for forty days or so and then take a breather and read, read, read, feeding the lake of ideas, readying for the next forty days of writing, revising, and writing.

Writing Communities

"The goal of the workshop is to get beyond the workshop," my mentor Ben Nyberg once said to me, and I embrace this. Writing is a solitary activity and the introvert in me digs it. It makes me happy. It's the most freeing feeling I ever experience in life just following impulses and enjoying the flow of the story's energetic engine.

But that's not to say I don't seek out help when I'm stuck. But, for me, you need to find readers you trust, who have earned the right to see your vulnerability. They're in the arena with you. They get you. It's hard to find these kinds of people. I have three whom I trust: Marc Dickinson, a former student of mine, a helluva writer, and the best reader, ever, someone who reads all stories diligently, carefully; Jeremy Schraffenberger, fellow editor and friend who empathizes with what I'm trying to achieve and enters into the spirit of my work; and my daughter Elizabeth Tracey, who's twice the writer I'll ever be. She points out my inconsistencies. And she's my sensitivity reader for my representations of queer characters.

When I was at Kansas State, the late Paul McCarthy, a soft-spoken professor of mine, said that in the 1950s, he was in the Iowa Writers Workshop. And every time a story of Flannery O'Connor's was up for discussion, she left the room in tears. "They just didn't get her." Who needs that shit? I don't want to be in a community of folks that don't get me.

I prefer being on my own. Well, that is until I'm truly stuck (which isn't that often). Thanks to Marc, Jeremy, and Elizabeth, Hall of Fame catchers all.

Literary Citizenship

It’s important to put yourself in the arena. Go to readings. Support local writers. Buy their books. Get involved in a literary magazine, if you can, and read, read, read.

Visit local bookstores.

Also, invest in all of the arts. See plays. Go to art galleries. Don’t stay locked in a box. Play guitar. Find things that you enjoy that free up your mind to create.

A few semesters ago, a talented YA writer, Jo Knowles, came to UNI, gave a great reading and several small talks on writing. Many tidbits of advice she gave I’ve taken up in my classes. Knowles said that for literary writers our world building centers around issues of power (who has it? who abuses it?). I love this advice, this way of thinking. The crime stories I write are invested in the melodramatic imagination, a world full of the powerful and the powerless.

The day Knowles came to visit my class, two of my most talented students didn’t attend. I don’t know. I never heard from them as to why they were missing. If they didn’t attend because they thought a YA writer had nothing to offer them in terms of the craft, well then, that’s very short-sighted. You can always learn something from leaning into other genres.

One of the most valuable workshops I ever took was a poetry workshop with Jonathan Holden. It helped me with my fiction, it taught me to pay greater attention to moment-by-moment language choices.

And I can’t tell you how much acting has helped me with my writing, making me more present (listening for the choices my characters make) and creating more subtexts to my dialogue and forcing my attention on what do my characters want and what are they willing to do to get it?

So cross genre boundaries. Embrace hybridity. You’ll be glad you did.

Politics and Writing

I’m all for it. As long as it’s integrated into storytelling and not proselytizing. Stories are meant to entertain.

I have two sets of crime stories I’m currently writing and publishing: one involves former Toronto Maple Leaf turned private eye, Hayden Fuller, and the other features an upstate New York cab driver and Korean War–veteran, Eddie Sands. Both series are set in the mid-1960s.

This creates a doubleness.

I'm aware of the times I live in and the times I'm writing about. I can't be anachronistic. I can't have Hayden make a crack like telling a female client, "I apologize for my gender," but I can be aware of gender inequality and make sure my plots don't fall into pernicious stereotypes or promote what once was "acceptable" (William Campbell Gault in his 1960s novels often disparages the queer community; John D MacDonald, in his 1950s novels, at times, leans into domestic violence as a way to keep a wife in line).

With Eddie Sands I lean into issues of PTSD. He's a loner, a cab driver, and because of the horrors of war that he's directly experienced he wants to protect the traumatized from further trauma.

I care about social justice and so does my PI (in this way he's me). So my Fuller stories tackle abuse; of the young; of indigenous peoples (a knock at the door and aboriginal children of single mothers being marshaled off to residential schools); of unwed teen mothers. (under the Duplessis regime in Quebec single mothers and their children were cloistered away in asylums). I promote representations of women in positions of power (a superstar newspaper reporter; the head of the RCMP's counter-intelligence branch).

I also like to flip traditional gender binaries. Stana Younger, Hayden's former lover, begins the series as a lost love, slips into femme fatale mode, and then escapes this classification, becoming his lover again, and wife. I enjoyed playing with the dangerous female archetype and then thwarting expectations. No one can be defined around one truth. And I ultimately didn't want to embrace an all-too common trope of noir films and pulp fiction.

So, that's my spin as a writer placing myself in a somewhat irretrievable past. As a writer I want to move in the direction of being restorative.

On Publishing

What follows are some small pointers on publishing. My thoughts here are random and in a state of flow.

Cover letters

Three paragraphs. Intro: greetings; "please consider [title of your story] for publication in [title of journal], and maybe mention why you're submitting to the journal. Perhaps mention a story you read and liked that was recently published. Paragraph two: a bit about yourself; previous publications; interesting work you've done (perhaps involving community engagement); if you haven't been previously published perhaps mention that. Paragraph three: a call-to-action. "I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks."

Keep it short. Don't bloviate or brag. And never summarize or explain the story.

Near Misses

You got a near miss. An editor actually took time to say something nice about your work. Be encouraged. We don't do this often and when we do we really *do* want to see more of your work. But don't rush something off. Make sure it's your best. Wow us.

Requests from Agents

This happened to me once in my life. I got a story, "Addition," published in *South Dakota Review* and the Nat Sobel Agency wrote me a nice letter saying they admired my style, my craft, and wanted to see a novel, if I was working on one. Well, I was, and I rushed it off. Needless to say, it didn't make it past the first reader, who didn't read past the first chapter. I could tell because the novel was told from alternating third-person perspectives and there was no commentary of perspective two. Anyway, I never heard from the Nat Sobel Agency again.

Major bummer. My point? Don't rush the work. Make sure it's ready for prime time.

Where to send

I use DuoTrope as a search engine to find magazines to send to. Colleagues also suggest places that I should send my work.

I find I have to knock at the door a few times before an editor takes my work. So I like working with university publications and independents where the editorial staff is consistently the same. Some MFA–run magazines rotate editors every two–three years. I don't like sending to those kinds of journals because it often takes me two-three years just to convince an editor that my work kicks ass. And if they're gone in two–three years, I have to start the "ass-kicking" process all over again.

Submissions and All That

Most journals accept simultaneous submissions. I like to send out three copies of the same story. Three different magazines. As soon as one magazine rejects me I send to another one. Always have three copies of any story out in the world at a time. At least theoretically I try to do this.

Make sure you keep a log to track all your submissions. And once you get a story accepted, withdraw it from the other places it's in process. This is just good practice and good etiquette.

If a journal says no simultaneous submissions respect their policy. If you mess up and they find out you multiply submitted you could get blacklisted. You don't want to be that guy.

And if you enter a contest, make sure they say simultaneous submissions are okay. If not, either don't submit or only submit to the contest.

My Story's been Rejected Again and Again

Don't despair. This is part of the process. Most literary journals only take up to 1% of all submissions sent their way. That means a lot of stories I read are publishable but I can only take so many. So, if you believe in your story, keep sending it out to new places.

However, if you start having doubts about your story do the ten-percent rule. Edit down the story by ten percent. Tighten the prose. Send it back out.

And, in time, if that doesn't work and your doubts grow, linger, fester, honestly go back over the story and revise more radically. Ask a friend, a writer you trust, for advice. Seek their counsel (in the literary sense, not legal), and re-tool, re-think.

But if you're truly confident in the work. Ride out those rejections. Remember, it only takes one editor to dig you. You'll find that editor.