

Open Book

Open Book:
Essays from the Vermont College Postgraduate
Writers Conference

Edited by

Kate Fetherston and Roger Weingarten



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Open Book: Essays from the Vermont College Postgraduate Writers Conference, edited by Kate Fetherston and Roger Weingarten

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DEDICATED WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE TO

BEN JAMIN CLARK FETHERSTON

JUDITH HAHN FETHERSTON

SHIRLEY FLEISHMAN

VICTOR GROSS

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INTRODUCTION

“The texts we write are not visible until they are written. Like a creature coaxed from out a deep wood, the text reveals itself little by little. The maze evokes a multiplicity of approaches, the many tricks we employ to tempt the text hither,” writes Rikki Ducornet in her essay, “The Deep Zoo.” This book of essays is a convocation at the edge of that mystery, a meeting of minds passionate about words whose intent is to tempt language from the realms of imagination and experience onto the page.

Our collection—navigating the confluences between novelist and poet, between short story and creative non fiction writer—aims to encourage the technical and linguistic leaps that keep writers writing. To this end, we didn’t divide this collection into genres. By ordering alphabetically, we mean to allow readers to move through the slightly familiar into the unfamiliar. We’ve selected pieces that will be useful to writers at different levels of experience as well as to teachers of writing.

These essays emerged from a wealth of discussion, craft talks, and conversation among writers at the Vermont College Postgraduate Writers’ Conference. The only writers’ conference focused on continuing education for alumni of graduate writing programs, as well as other experienced writers, this conference grew out of Vermont College MFA Program’s longstanding commitment to its alumni.

The essays you’ll find here range widely in tone and theme but cross-currents are everywhere. You let your curiosity take you from advice on reading (J. Allyn Rosser’s “Caveat Lector”) to a history of approaches to translation in western literature and its effect on how we relate to and are influenced by writers in other languages (Richard Jackson’s “Translation, Adaptation, Transformation.”). You can wander from Christopher Noel writing on “the uncanny, strange, and fantastic” in his “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s To Be Said,” to the uses of omission in Victoria Redel’s “How We Mean What We Do Not Say.” Or, explore from the depths of Clare Rossini’s essay, “Nekyia: Journey to the Underworld as Theme and Strategy” to the heights of Betsy Sholl’s “Introduction to Ecstasy.”

In this collection, writers step out of the narrow idea that genre defines a writer's influences or appetite for learning. Writers of fiction write about poetry: novelist Ben Pastor writes on "Creativity, Darkness, and Lorca's Duende," inciting us to experience the raw and sometimes unbeautiful power Lorca found in flamenco music and in the folklore of southern Spain. Poet Jack Myers' essay, "Cinematic Techniques," with its detailed look at structural moves borrowed from film, is just as applicable to prose as to poetry.

And writers within diverse genres share interest in common themes. Take, for example the use of metaphor in fiction writer Ellen Lesser's "Paradoxical Shimmering" and contrast it with Sue William Silverman's essay, "Mock Moons, Metaphor and Memory" and then add Mary Ruefle's fascination with the moon as metaphor informing poetry in "Poetry and the Moon." The interplay between image, meaning, memory, and associative thinking that emerges as metaphor is enriched by this discussion.

Or, take the issue of "writing the truth, writing the lie": prose writers and poets alike write on the uneasy rub all writers confront between "fact" and "truth." Non fiction writer Robin Hemley, in his essay, "Reality Cropped" writes of photographs as "much talisman as evidence" in relation to how memory evolves and changes. And poet Bruce Weigl in "How I Lied a Twice Made Poem into Being" addresses, as he writes a "history" of one of his poems, the writer's need for creative license as imperative to the making of a true story, no matter what "really happened."

Essays on craft invite us to wrestle with language—in considering broad structure and minute detail. Fiction writer Michael Martone takes on the big picture in his essay, "How to Hide a Tank: Camouflage, Realism, and Believing Our Eyes,":

Framing is essential. It separates acts of creation (which are labeled deviant acts) from such phenomena as camouflage, errors, dreaming, pornography, and madness that are unframed deviant acts.

Writing a story or hiding a tank assumes a reader with perceptual equipment that can discriminate one thing from another.

In her essay "Noisy Poetry" poet Nancy Eimers homes in on the tiniest considerations:

The word "noise" connotes something that irritates. A grain of sand in the eye, a headache droning at the temples. But there are pleasurable noises I hear in the early morning—one is birdsong, when the bird isn't visible. Visually, red-eyed

vireos keep themselves secret at the tops of the trees, but they are a common presence as noise. HERE I AM, they say, then pause; WHERE ARE YOU? That pause—a comma, or maybe a semicolon, in the grammar of sound, is how you tell them from robins, whose warble has a similar liquidity but a different rhythm.

Poet Robin Behn’s essay “Notes on Notes” takes us into the world of punctuation and sentence diagramming as she maps the form and rhythm of language. Fiction writer Brett Lott, in his essay, “Before We Begin” states, “The word means everything” then goes on to convey how understanding differences between one word and another, down to the elemental articles *a* and *the* and *this*, is a writer’s essential tool.

With this sampling in mind, we invite you to use this text as a round table for inspired thought, writing, and discussion. We offer this collection to inspire your imagination and tune your craft as you make that leap from “What if?” to the page.

Kate Fetherston and Roger Weingarten

SHOWING AND TELLING

LAURIE ALBERTS

For years I, like many of my colleagues, have exhorted students to write more scenes, dramatize, cut exposition, cut summary. Recently, a student responded that she liked books in which the author had a strong storytelling voice that commented on and explained the action. Wasn't summary where voice came through?, she wondered. Her question was a good one. I began to ponder the uses of summary.

I'd just completed a creative non fiction manuscript and throughout the writing I worried that I hadn't written enough scenes, and that my use of summary was flattening my story. I looked to non fiction writers whose work I admired and considered fully dramatized. I was surprised to see how many of them use a great deal of summary. Tobias Wolff is a good example. I had read *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army* some time ago, and I remembered both books as vivid, scene-based works. Both books, it turns out, rely more on summary than on scene. Sue Silverman's book, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* struck me the same way. I thought of it as all scene. And certainly, in the early sections, when you are seeing the world through the eyes of a very young child lacking the perspective of time and the ability to interpret events, most is written in scene. But as the book goes on and Silverman enters her teen years, summary comes more and more into play.

How do these authors make their summary as alive as scenes? When is summary a distancing shortcut, and when is it an opportunity to deepen theme, reveal character, and express an author's distinctive voice? Where do scene and summary work best? How do good writers slide between these elements smoothly?

First, some definitions. I think of scene as the illusion of "real time" (all scenes require a time and a place) and summary as the connective tissue that holds those scenes together by providing background, exposition, or interpretation.

Janet Burroway, in *Writing Fiction*, says that

Summary and scene are methods of treating time in fiction. A summary covers a relatively long period of time in a relatively short compass; a scene deals at length with a relatively short period of time. Summary gives information, fills in

background, lets us understand a motive, alter pace, create a transition, leap moments or years. (181-182)

Jerome Stern, quoted by Burroway, says, like a child in a tantrum, when you want everybody's full attention, you "make a scene, using the writer's full complement of dialogue, physical reactions, gestures, smells, sounds, and thoughts" (183). According to Burroway, summary creates distance, scene creates closeness.

Robie Macauley, quoted in *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*, says:

The traditional rule is that episodes meant to show important behavior in the characters, to make events dramatic as in theater, or to bring news that changes the situation should be dealt with in the scenic or eyewitness, manner. Stretches of time or occurrences that are secondary to the story's development are handled by what is called a "narrative bridge." (162)

Burroway distinguishes between two kinds of summary, sequential and circumstantial. She says that these two summary forms represent two methods of memory, which also condenses. In sequential summary, a writer tells you what has happened in between the scenes or before the book has started, for instance, in compressed form. In circumstantial summary, the writer describes how things were or are, how they generally happen or happened, what was done repeatedly.

But, Burroway says, continuing with the memory model, for important things your mind provides a scene. Scene is always necessary to fiction—scene is the crucial means of allowing the reader to experience the story with the characters. Confrontation, turning point, or crisis cannot be summarized, Burroway believes. "If the author explains to us or interprets for us, we suspect that he or she doesn't think us bright enough to do it for ourselves. Writers should use significant details to convey ideas or judgments or both."

In an essay entitled "Show and Tell: There's a Reason It's Called Storytelling," Carol-Lynn Marrazzo disagrees:

The wise writer is not afraid to tell...writers blend telling and showing...when the writer depends solely on showing and neglects the narrative that artfully shapes, characterizes, qualifies, or in some other way informs the character's actions, the reader is abandoned to extrapolate meaning based upon what is observed—for example, a character's sweating palms or nervous twitch—and the reader then, rather than the writer, creates the story. (*What If?* 164-165)

In an example of the use of summary within scenes, Marrazzo demonstrates with Flannery O'Connor's story "Good Country People" what you would miss if you only looked at the showing. At a crucial moment in the story,

O'Connor's interpretation of a character's interior life shows that this moment is transforming, while the actions would tell us little (the italics are Marrazzo's).

She sat staring at him. *There was nothing about her face or her round freezing blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her; but she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her.* When after a minute she said in a hoarse high voice, "all right," *it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.* Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up. (164)

If you were to read only the scene minus the summary, Marrazzo shows us, this is what you'd get: 'She sat staring at him. When after a minute she said in a hoarse high voice, "all right"...very gently he began to roll the slack leg up.'

It's obvious that what is lost is all connection to the character's inner world. We see that she has agreed to his request but we don't know what it means to her. Of course, there is distance between the character's thoughts and the author's—O'Connor is being very ironic, since the Bible salesman then goes on to steal the woman's wooden leg.

Marrazzo, in contrast to Burroway, says that telling not only heightens the moment but reveals the transformation within the character. The interplay between both telling and showing is often crucial at transforming moments.

The good news is that we don't need to enter this argument. Good writing, whether fiction or creative non fiction, puts both of these important elements to use to varying degrees, depending on the demands of the text and the temperament of the writer.

Here are a few examples from Wolff's *This Boy's Life*:

Our car boiled over again just after my mother and I crossed the Continental Divide. While we were waiting for it to cool we heard, from somewhere above us, the bawling of an airhorn. The sound got louder and then a big truck came around the corner and shot past us into the next curve, its trailer shimmying wildly. We stared after it. "Oh, Toby," my mother said, "he's lost his brakes."

The sound of the horn grew distant, then faded in the wind that sighed in the trees all around us.

By the time we got there, quite a few people were standing along the cliff where the truck went over. It had smashed through the guardrails and fallen hundreds of feet through empty space to the river below, where it lay on its back among the boulders. It looked pitifully small. A stream of thick black smoke rose from the cab, feathering out in the wind. My mother asked whether anyone had gone

to report the accident. Someone had. We stood with the others at the cliff's edge. Nobody spoke. My mother put her arm around my shoulder.

For the rest of the day she kept looking over at me, touching me, brushing back my hair. I saw that the time was right to make a play for souvenirs. I knew she had no money for them, and I had tried not to ask, but now that her guard was down I couldn't help myself. When we pulled out of Grand Junction I owned a beaded Indian belt, beaded moccasins, and a bronze horse with a removable, tooled leather saddle. (3-4)

The book begins with scene—although to be picky I might say that the first sentence is actually summary leading into the scene, and scene shifts in and out of summary in the last paragraph. The crash is vividly rendered, although the souvenirs that young Toby cadges are even more thoroughly described. What do we know from this scene? We've got the boy's character down cold—and his character (as well as his circumstances) is always central to this work. He's on the road with his mother, the car has failed *again*, a very important word here. We see the mother's softness and her concern for her boy—which Wolff never questions in the book although we might question it, since she provides little stability and later puts him in harm's way.

The scene of the terrible crash sets up the mood of danger and precariousness that will be borne out throughout the memoir. Even more striking, though, is our response to young Toby. What an operator! This kid will try to use any situation to his advantage, and the adult Tobias Wolff is on to him. Wolff wants us to be on to him too, right from the start.

This short scene (with its brief flickers of summary) is followed by a very long summary, both sequential and circumstantial, that fills in background information:

It was 1955 and we were driving from Florida to Utah, to get away from a man my mother was afraid of and to get rich on uranium. We were going to change our luck.

We'd left Sarasota in the dead of summer, right after my tenth birthday, and headed West under low flickering skies that turned black and exploded and cleared just long enough to leave the air gauzy with steam. We drove through Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, stopping to cool the engine in towns where people moved with arthritic slowness and spoke in thick, strangled tongues. Idlers with rotten teeth surrounded the car to press peanuts on the pretty Yankee lady and her little boy, arguing among themselves about shortcuts. Women looked up from their flower beds as we drove past, or watched us from their porches, sometimes impassively, sometimes giving us a nod and a flutter of their fans.

Every couple of hours the Nash Rambler boiled over. My mother kept digging into her little grubstake but no mechanic could fix it. All we could do was wait for it to cool, then drive on until it boiled over again. (My mother came to hate this machine so much that not long after we got to Utah she gave it away to a woman she met in a cafeteria.) At night we slept in boggy rooms where headlight beams crawled up and down the walls and mosquitoes sang in our ears, incessant as the tires whining on the highway outside. But none of this bothered me. I was caught up in my mother's freedom, her delight in her freedom, her dream of transformation.

Everything was going to change when we got out West... (4-5)

Notice that the summary contains sensory details as vivid as those found in any scene. People in the Southern towns where the car has broken down walk with "arthritic slowness" and "idlers with rotten teeth surrounded the car." At night, they slept in "boggy rooms where headlight beams crawled up and down the walls and mosquitoes sang in our ears, incessant as the tires whining on the highway outside."

No wonder my memory mistook summary for scene. Yet unlike a single scene, we realize, from this summary, that these idlers, these slow walkers, these crummy motel rooms are a repeated experience, a general condition of Toby and his mother's cross-country flight.

Wolff vacillates between various forms of narrative distance in his summaries. He uses the child's simple language in the assertion that "We were going to change our luck." Of course the adult Tobias Wolf knows (as does the reader) that their luck won't change for the better. Later he uses an adult language, asserting temporal distance, the wisdom of the adult self, when he says, "I was caught up in my mother's freedom, her delight in her freedom, her dream of transformation."

So we get, in this summary, the vividness of scene created by sensory detail, and we get the opportunity to view the world through the eyes of the ten-year-old boy that Wolff was, with all his hope and naiveté. We also see the world through the eyes of the adult Wolff who will frequently comment on the action, interpret for us, and even jump forward in time to compare something happening to young Toby with something that happened later to the adult Wolff (Vietnam, for instance). Scene alone would not offer up such layered information. What else do we get from this chunk of summary that occurs very early in the book?

They don't have the money for a decent car, obviously. She has a "little grubstake." *Grubstake* is an interesting word—they are going to be uranium miners and there's the air of the gold rush, or pioneer about this term. We learn that she's impulsive enough to give a car away to a stranger, even if it is a lousy car. As the summary continues beyond the excerpt just quoted, we

learn some of the mother's background—her life in California as the daughter of a millionaire before The Crash, her dream of a past in which she and her mother played at being sisters. Wolff doesn't comment further, but we learn that his mother won't be much of a mother, either. She had early days of glory and they were going to retrieve them. The child believes in her dreams and loves her entirely.

The major issue, when deciding on scene or summary, is to determine what it accomplishes. How does it further the movement of the piece, or help to carry the themes? When do you need to "get attention," as Stern said, or to fill in, set up? If Wolff had started off with all that background about traveling the west with his mother, I would not have been half as interested as I was after that quick glimpse, that shocking event in the scene that opens the book. I'm—to use a commercial word—hooked, and now I can step back to get the context. On the other hand, without the context provided by the summary, with just the scenes, I wouldn't have as great a sense of these characters, their hopes and expectations, their poverty, and the doubtfulness that their hopes will be fulfilled.

Before we leave Wolff, I want to read another example of his effective use of summary:

Dwight made a study of me. He thought about me during the day while he grunted over the engines of trucks and generators, and in the evening while he watched me eat, and late at night while he sat heavy-lidded at the kitchen table with a pint of Old Crow and package of Camels to support him in his deliberations. He shared his findings as they came to him. The trouble with me was, I thought I was going to get through life without doing any work. The trouble with me was, I thought I was smarter than everyone else. The trouble with me was, I thought other people couldn't tell what I was thinking. The trouble with me was, I didn't think. (95)

Again we have the vividness of scene: Dwight's grunting over engines, heavy-lidded at the table with a pint of Old Crow and a package of Camels to support him in his *deliberations*. (Here Wolff uses adult language to heighten the irony.) And we have repeated time, which we couldn't have in one scene. Through Dwight's "findings"—again, the adult wording heightens the irony that this dull-witted, mean man could ever *find* anything—and through the summarized dialogue, "The Trouble with me" litany, we also get the contradictions in Dwight's observations that reveal his character. The repetitious summarized dialogue makes Dwight's complaints seem like a broken record. In scene alone we'd have to hear a character say (or think), "You always say that!" Wolff uses summary to give us, efficiently and subtly, the repeated action and his adult judgment of Dwight.

Tim O'Brien's brilliant story "The Things They Carried" is unusual in the extent to which it employs summary. In fact, the story depends on summary; its intention is to load you down with the weight of what these soldiers had to carry, both literally and figuratively. It is about a particular platoon, but it strives for a universality of soldierly experience—or, rather, the experiences of American soldiers in Vietnam—that exceeds the experiences of these individual men.

The movement within the story is the movement within Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, who, after the death of one of his men, Ted Lavender, blames himself. Cross hardens himself against his illusions about Martha, the girl "back in the world" who doesn't love him, as well as his illusions about being part of normal life. The movement of the story is also the movement within the reader as the summarized descriptions of what these men must carry accumulate and weigh us down as well.

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near necessities were P38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wrist watches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together these items weighted between fifteen and twenty pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-size bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April. By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighted five pounds including the liner and camouflage cover. They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear. On their feet they carried jungle boots—2.1 pounds— and Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of Dr. Scholl's foot powder as a precaution against trench foot. Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City Oklahoma. As a hedge against bad times, however. (Houghton Mifflin Anthology of Short Fiction, 1051)

What's also unusual and striking in this story is that the platoon members are characterized via objects, and they are characterized almost wholly through summary rather than through action, gesture, or dialogue in scene. Yet they are individualized and humanized. We are told, outright, that what they carry is determined by necessity. The story alternates between summaries about

the men and what they carried, moving from the exceedingly concrete—the 26 lb. radio, and the 2.9 lb., .45 caliber pistol—to the deeply abstract—the weight of the war, the weight of their fear, and Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’ hopeless infatuation with Martha.

As with Wolff, there is nothing vague about O’Brien’s summary sections. They are detailed, even more detailed than the scenes. In a picture Jimmy Cross carries, we see the tautness of Martha’s tongue while she’s playing volleyball. We know she “respects Chaucer and has great affection for Virginia Woolf.” We know the color of the pebble Martha sends Jimmy: oval, milky white with flecks of orange and violet, we know where she found the pebble and just what Jimmy wonders—who was with her that day at the shore. These summaries are not shortcuts. They are, like the objects the men carry, necessities.

Throughout the story we’re reminded of Ted Lavender’s death and it is this event that removes us from the abstraction of general time, repeated events, the lulling boredom and exhaustion and purposelessness of the relentless “humping” up and down mountains, through jungles.

Lavender’s death is central but it’s interesting that we never get to know Lavender beyond mention of his fear, his dope, his need for tranquilizers. Yet his death—when it comes in full, dramatized scene—shocks us with the reality of the threat these men live with. Every scene in this story is related to Lavender’s death, including the following scene in which the soldiers draw numbers to determine who will investigate a tunnel.

On April 16, when Lee Strunk drew the number seventeen, he laughed and muttered something and went down quickly. The morning was hot and very still. Not good, Kiowa said. He looked at the tunnel opening, then out across a dry paddy toward the village of Than Khe. Nothing moved. No clouds or birds or people. As they waited, the men smoked and drank Kool-Aid, not talking much, feeling sympathy for Lee Strunk but also feeling the luck of the draw. You win some, you lose some, said Mitchell Sanders, and sometimes you settle for a rain check. It was a tired line and no one laughed.

Henry Dobbins ate a tropical chocolate bar. Ted Lavender popped a tranquilizer and went off to pee.

After five minutes, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross moved to the tunnel, leaned down, and examined the darkness. Trouble, he thought—a cave-in, maybe. And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. The stresses and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight.... (1055)

In this scene, time slows down. We get the specifics of the tunnel, the atmosphere. Then we slide away with Jimmy Cross into his imagination about

Martha. The ruminations and fantasies about Martha that follow this excerpt take up more space than the actual death. But we are still in the scene, in the moment, there and not there, as Cross was. What does this scene accomplish? It's the "real" center around which the general life of these soldiers, their day-to-day existence, spins. It crystallizes all the vagueness. It is the underlying source of all terror. It is the cruel joke, the happenstance—killed while peeing. It is the primal scene, in essence, of the story, the one that must be returned to. It is the moment that determines Jimmy Cross' transformation.

Maddeningly, fittingly, O'Brien breaks away soon after to return to his litany of the things they carried. Yes, Ted's death is terrible, real, but just one of many they'll witness, those who live long enough. It's all part of business as usual, on some level. Back to the hump, back to the weight.

The most abstract "things" the men carried are mentioned after the detailed scene of Lavender's death. "They carried the weight of memory.... They carried the land itself...they carried gravity...they carried their own lives...the great American war chest." How does O'Brien get away with loading his men and his story with these big summarized abstractions? Through the specificity of the concrete details we've come to trust O'Brien. The particularized summary and the focused scene have set us up for the more abstract picture of these soldiers, and all the soldiers like them, who carried the burdens of the war.

Maxine Hong Kingston is another author who expertly alternates scene and summary. In a chapter from *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston focuses on her own silence, the silence of Chinese kids in American schools. She gives a long summary of her experiences in both American and Chinese schools and then uses summary to set up for the crucial scene to follow, in which she attacks and torments another Chinese girl who is even more silent than she in an effort to "help" her talk. This attack would be much harder to understand without the context that the summary provides. We learn, via summary, about her embarrassment when her mother insists she ask for "reparation" candy from a pharmacist whose delivery boy mistakenly brought medicine to their house and so, her mother believed, cursed them with ill health. We learn that as a child Kingston believed that Americans find the Chinese language "Ching-Chong ugly." Through all this summary, we also find out that the Chinese kids who are so silent in their public schools are loud and rowdy in afternoon Chinese school. It isn't the fact of being Chinese, but the fact of being Chinese in the world of ghosts, that makes them so silent, and makes the scene of the attack so painful and powerful.

I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China

doll haircut. I hated her at music time for the wheeze that came out of her plastic flute...

One afternoon in the sixth grade (that year I was arrogant with talk, not knowing there were going to be high school dances and college seminars to set me back), I and my little sister and the quiet girl and her big sister stayed late after school for some reason. The cement was cooling and the tetherball poles made shadows across the gravel. The hooks at the rope ends were clinking against the poles. (201-202)

When the scene begins with that tag, “One afternoon in sixth grade,” time slows down. Kingston takes enormous care setting up the scene, the mood. She even uses summary within the scene to tell you the cost of staying late—the last time her mother called the police to say she’d been kidnapped. We hear about the sounds of the toilet pipes when they are flushed during school hours—the summarizing within scene here increases the tension.

When the attack begins, it is shocking:

“You’re going to talk,” I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. “I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl.”

I thought I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. I could poke dimples into her cheeks. I could work her face around like dough...I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek, not dough, but meat, between my thumb and finger... (204-205)

It’s one thing to know that she hates this little girl because she hates the silence in herself. This girl has become representative of everything that makes Kingston feel unlike the other non-Chinese children—silence, weakness, inability to play sports, being well-behaved. We get the point as she tells us all this. But we only understand the depth of her fury, her self-hatred and anger at the world, when we see how she attacks this little girl. It goes on and on and on until they are both crying.

Our response to this extended scene is visceral. We experience Kingston’s emotions even as we have our own reactions to the events she dramatizes. The summarized parts that precede it evoke a more cerebral response. I admire how nicely Kingston sums up cultural differences when she says (a few pages before the excerpts here),

Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often and the teacher would think I’d gone quiet again. I could not understand “I.” The Chinese “I” has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American “I,” assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only

three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; “I” is a capital and “you” is lower-case. (193)

This is wonderful summary—we understand both the child’s confusion and her intelligent attempt to sort out language differences, while we note the ways two cultures treat the idea of self through the word *I*. But if Kingston had only summarized, had she written merely that “In sixth grade I trapped a very quiet girl in the bathroom and demanded she speak,” we would feel none of the depth of her emotion and how far it could drive her.

It’s interesting to note that in the scene, when Kingston finally takes definitive action by attacking the quiet girl, she uses declarative subject-verb sentences in which “I” is followed by action: “I reached up...I shouted...I squeezed...I squeezed again...I pulled...I yanked...I screamed...” (Here Kingston’s voice is really heard.) In the summary sections, the verbs and the constructions in general are often more passive in relation to Kingston: “Once a year the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy.”

The interplay, the balance and complementary effects, of scene and summary enhance the power of Wolff, O’Brien, and Kingston’s writing. There are other writers, however, whose work is carried by voice to such a degree that it doesn’t always matter if a particular passage is scene or summary. Sally Savic, in her novel *Elysian Fields*, demonstrates the graceful elision between these two elements:

Lucy Nell slapped me when I said so. “You ain’t the right girl,” she said in her Arkansas twang. Her voice sounds like a guitar string when it busts, and sometimes it still zings through the room long after she’s gone. (2)

I had never thought of him dead. I always tried to imagine other things...Marshall catching trains and slow boats to sad, forgotten places, pinpointing destinations on maps no longer current, bumping through the darkness of a world that no longer goes by the same names. Siam. Atlantis. Babylon. (3)

Savic’s scenes are just as language-laden as her summaries:

It’s quiet tonight. From inside, through an open window, I can hear a radio talk show on the transistor in the kitchen. Mrs. Adele Corners from Happy Jack, Louisiana, is asking how to get a pork chop bone out of the porcelain canal of her toilet.

“How did the pork chop bone get there, Mrs. Corners?” the talk show host wants to know. His voice is round and smooth and full of insinuation.

“Somebody threw it down there,” Mrs. Corners says breathlessly. (4)

I love the oddity of the specifics: it’s not just a plugged toilet but a toilet with a bone in it, and it’s not just any bone, but a pork chop bone. It echoes a reference to the narrator being “bone tired” of being lied to earlier on the same page. The talk show host’s voice isn’t just oily, it’s smooth and round and insinuating. There’s a hint of blame (echoing Marshall’s mother Lucy Nell’s earlier accusation that the narrator is to blame for Marshall’s disappearance), and of secrets; the woman with the plugged toilet is somehow guilty and breathless—all echoes of the narrator’s fears about herself.

This is scene, but there are no great revelations or transformations. It’s a scenic mood piece, a set-up for the background summary that follows in which the protagonist explains how she came to be in Louisiana, in that house, waiting for Marshall’s return. It could just as well be done via summary, but in this novel, summary and scene blend so smoothly that you often don’t notice the movement between them. This seems particularly fitting because the novel is about a passive situation—an abandoned woman waiting, wondering, searching ineffectually.

John Cheever often employed the sort of narration that my student was talking about when she said she liked a narrator who takes over the tale and is willing to interpret it for the reader. Cheever’s third-person narrators have total authority. In his story “Artemis the Honest Well Digger,” the narrator not only tells us what Artemis thinks and feels, but he is free to comment on related or even seemingly unrelated aspects of life. Yet he is never general. Look at the details:

Artemis loved the healing sound of rain—the sound of all running water—brooks, gutters, spouts, falls, and taps. In the spring he would drive one hundred miles to hear the cataract at the Wakusha Reservoir. This was not so surprising because he was a well driller and water was his profession, his livelihood, as well as his passion. Water, he thought, was at the root of civilizations...

To get the facts out of the way: Artemis drilled with an old Smith & Mathewson chain-concussion rig that struck the planet sixty blows a minute...Artemis rather liked the noise. He lived with his widowed mother at the edge of town in one of those little conclaves of white houses that are distinguished by their displays of the American flag...This patriotic zeal cannot be traced back to the fact that these people have received an abundance of their country’s riches. They haven’t. These are hard-working people who lead frugal lives and worry about money. People who have profited splendidly from our economy seem to have no such passion for the Stars and Stripes. Artemis’ mother, for example – a hard-working woman – had a flagpole, five little flags stuck into a window box, and a seventh flag hanging from the porch. (768-769)

Artemis' fascination with water is made explicit, as is his education, his house, etc. Whatever Cheever tells us works toward deepening themes or revealing character. For example, the narrator seemingly veers off on a tangent all his own about the displaying of flags on private property, who does it and who doesn't and why. He makes a judgment based on socio-economics. But the fact that Artemis' mother displays flags isn't just some quirky detail to characterize Artemis' background or his home. The question of patriotism mentioned here is later echoed when Artemis becomes involved with a Russian woman while on vacation in Russia and is called in to report to the State Department. Each detail, even when summarized, contributes to the whole story.

Herein lies the distinction: we don't resent a bossy, judgmental narrator who is original in his/her observations and who draws us into the tale through vivid, significant detail. We do resent a summarizing narrator who either over-generalizes or takes away the mystery, the act of discovery for us. Compare Cheever to this pedestrian summary: *Artemis was a man in his thirties who wasn't married, owned his own well-digging business, and loved water.* Yes, we're informed, but we aren't engaged. The language is flat and the summary deadens the story.

Few of us can manage that sort of authority—few of us can walk that tricky line between knowing all and being a know-it-all, few of us can manage to enthrall readers by virtue of what we have to tell instead of what we have to show. And contemporary readers are less willing to turn over authority to a narrator who will tell us, via summary, what is what—the Dickensian patriarchal narrator who announces “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times,” has mostly gone out of favor. We have become suspicious of authorities. Yet when this form of authoritarian summary is successful—and Cheever succeeds perhaps because he possesses quirky charm, just as Lorrie Moore's quirky narrators succeed because of her humor—the story, essay, memoir or novel is enriched. We feel that we are in good hands, and we relax into the joy of listening to a master storyteller.

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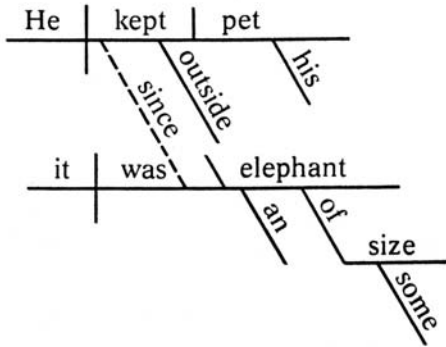
NOTES ON NOTES, / : PUNCTUATION AND POETRY

ROBIN BEHN

For some time, I've been obsessed by punctuation. Like many formal things I love, I came to this late, and had to forget the first way I learned. When I was ten I learned to play the flute from a saxophone player, then learned it all over from a real flutist who taught me not where to put my mouth and how to blow, but, rather, why it was worth doing, what effects—from forlorn bottle with prairie wind blowing across it, to viscous arguing bass—it could achieve. Likewise, I spent ten or so years of childhood summers being tossed into a freezing town pool at precisely 8 a.m. with other children of my precise age while over us hovered the lifeguards, hulking or vivacious high school kids with dreamy tan lines and ardently fluorescent suits, drilling us in the Red Cross method of swimming. By the time I was in college, I was lucky if I could get across the pool once. It wasn't until—what possessed me to sign up, I will never know—I enrolled in Life Saving, that a great teacher taught me how to move my legs and what to do with flailing arms, mine or the drowning other's, so I would be able to reach them, and, with a kind of feigned drowning myself, secure them and carry the lot of us, arms paired like some kind of elaborately drawn treble clef in the key of G, back to shore. The forms now had a purpose. But it was the forms I secretly loved, and the best days of the swimming class were the ones when we were videotaped through a window four feet down the pool's side, and watched, afterward, ourselves from underneath, the feeling of the form of swimming suddenly, startlingly, visible. The arm drawn down the length of the torso during the crawl, which, if done right, conveyed a feeling of massive, powerful propulsion, suddenly showed itself for what it was: a centered, flipped, question mark of a gesture.

The first time I learned question marks, commas, periods and other such devices, I cannot remember. I seem to remember enjoying them—like having a bottomless pocketful of bright or dull, shattered or perfectly round marbles to set out on the white ground at will. The game had rules, of course. And sometime after first shakily acquiring these rules by osmosis, I came across Mr. Rex, the seventh grade grammar teacher. English wasn't books anymore, not Whodunit, not How shall the children make their way back from the woods at the end of chapter three?, not even Pick the main idea from four possible

choices. English, suddenly, was rules. Sentences were tacked up like laboratory insects to the blackboard with chalk marks like pins, and we all looked on, budding naturalists.



It is the first time my mind wandered Big Time (I know that shouldn't be capitalized Mr. Rex, but I *wanted* to, it sounded like big letters!). By then we were all carrying around notebooks, and I took to analyzing the handwriting of the girls nearby. Suzi made the dot of her *i* into a globe. It occurred to me that one could be approved of—or not—for one's writing. One did it not to write something down but to show something off. I looked back up at the board: where, in that scheme, the capturing of thought and the proffering up of the sentence as an object for our edification and further study, did language fit in? The sentence—but I must have needed glasses by then, and it must have been that no one had noticed, not even me, for all I can see when I look now is the spider's broken legs, the chalky lines and angles like a web drawn with an etch-a-sketch, the shape of the sentence—*diagrammed*. And, here and there, among the glistening lines and the illegible names that named the parts language had become, was the empty ache where the marks of punctuation no longer were. The beautiful, stately, gravity-defying architecture of the sentence existed without them. I penciled them into my notebook: dots, one or two, little lines, straight or curved, angled this way or that, to decorate the spider. Or was the spider making them, and, if so, did the marks record the spinning of what it wanted to show (I'd read about Charlotte's SOME PIG) or something internal, not meant to be seen or scene... like twists of spinal fluid as it thought, if spiders thought, if they had spines...

I emerged with the sense of language as a map, the map-making riddled with rules that might or might not coincide with what my ear wanted to hear, what the pen wanted to speak.