Craft Essays by Chuck Palahniuk

2005 – 2007

Establishing Your Authority

It was after basketball practice, my sophomore year in high school. We were all in the locker room, opening padlocks, getting towels, when the coach asked me back out to the gym floor. To practice a few more foul shots. Or lay-ups. Something. So I left my locker open, and went.

At the time, I had two friends: Fred Rutz and Robert Krause, and they seemed like enough. None of us three were popular. Fred and I, because we were terrible at sports. Robert, because he'd just transferred to Columbia High School, and we'd all heard his parents made him take ballet. Wearing tights. Still, if any of us three could move up the ladder, it would be Robert.

Back in the locker room, everybody had already taken their shower and got dressed. I took mine. And stepping into my shorts, these are tighty-white briefs from Sears or Penney's, the white fabric inside the crotch looked a little dark. A little stained. Blotched a faint, faded yellow.

Both my bare feet stuck through the leg holes, the elastic waistband pulled up to around my pale, hairy knee caps, this is really what went through my mind:

Mom must not be using bleach.

We lived in the desert, where the well water was so "hard," so dense with dissolved minerals, that everything white you washed – your underpants or T-shirts or gym socks – would soon enough turn a rusty color.

So in that moment, as my shorts pulled up past my knees, that was my answer. Not enough bleach. My shorts on, I pulled on my pants, my shirt and socks. I tied my shoes and combed my wet hair, going fast, not aware the locker room was still full of guys, fully dressed, not going home, waiting for something. Quiet.

By now, it was dark outside. It was basketball season. Winter. The time when local dogs ran in packs to stay warm. Our dog included, a border collie. Down along the river,

you could find the bloody tugged-apart hides of mule deer or rabbits the dog packs had caught. It was dark, and I had to walk home across the sagebrush and prickly pear cactus of the desert, wading through snow and low sand dunes. There you could hear the dog packs barking and snapping in the dark. Those nights, when there was no moon, and the air was so cold it made your lungs cough big white clouds, so cold the snarling dogs sounded close by, those nights it was three-thousand-six-hundred and twelve steps from the back door of the gym to my family's kitchen porch. Give or take a step. The size of my stride. Or if I ran.

If my own dog would attack me, I didn't know. But running with that baying, rolling, biting tide of teeth and fur – my dog just might.

So I didn't notice how the whole basketball team was still standing around. Not going home. Just waiting.

Of course Fred and Robert were waiting. They were my friends. Together, we schemed to buy Spanish Fly from the ads in the back of Hustler magazine and somehow get it into the school's water supply. We talked about driving south all night, the thousand miles to and from the Mustang Ranch in Nevada. In a school where the upperclassmen stood around my locker in the hallway, every morning, waiting for me to arrive, so they could chant: *Paula-Nick Suck My Dick…* Loud as the school cheerleaders yelled during pep rallies. Well, two friends wasn't a lot, but they were enough. Two was better than none.

Then I was dressed, then just shutting my locker, snapping the padlock.

Then, my nuts were on fire. My testicles. My balls were burning hot, and the locker room was everybody laughing.

My pants tore off, inside-out… my shirt tore off so fast the buttons went flying, gone… my shoes kicked off with the socks still inside them, I jumped into the shower and started scrubbing.

The stains in my shorts, the yellow that needed more bleach, it was a joke. It was a sports analgesic cream – the hot-kind like Ben-Gay that got hotter and hotter the more you rubbed, the greasy kind that wouldn't wash off, wouldn't scrub off with soap and water, the super-strength kind the school had sitting around the locker room in white plastic tubs. While I was flubbing foul shots, someone had rubbed the crotch of my shorts full of this.

Everybody laughing, I scrubbed. Everybody dressed and zipping up their coats, pulling on knitted hats and grabbing their backpacks, I stood in the shower, naked and scrubbing by nuts. Everybody gone, and the coach shutting off the lights, I was still scrubbing. My balls still on fire.

The three thousand six hundred and twelve steps through the dark still ahead of me. My dog lost, barking in the pack out there, tearing something apart.

It was Robert Krause. He put the hot in my shorts. To curry favor with the upperclassmen. Somebody I'd trusted.

After that, he was popular. Everyone in school heard the story.

The next winter, I didn't go out for basketball. I got a job at a movie theater, tearing tickets, popping corn, splicing film, so far away that no one knew me. Every night, the drive took twenty songs on the radio or a whole eight-track tape, heard twice. The world is a bigger place than just Burbank, Washington, and after graduation I just kept going.

This year, I got a letter from Texas. From Robert Krause, who runs a garage and wrote to say hello and ask what I've been doing for the past twenty-three years. On his letterhead, it says he's a member of the Better Business Bureau. So I sent him a copy of *Fugitives and Refugees*, the travel book with the short "postcard" essays.

A friend of mine, Bob, makes soap as a hobby, homemade soap molded and wrapped to look exactly like the Paper Street soap used in the *Fight Club* movie. Bob had just delivered a box of soap, all the bars perfect and smelling like cloves and cinnamon, but he

said not to use it. The soap still needed to age. As it was, the lye was still too caustic, and it would burn the skin off of anyone who washed with it.

So, I sent it to Robert in Texas. Two bars of it. In the copy of *Fugitives and Refugees* I wrote: "To Robert, Wash your balls…"

This, the first essay in this series, is about "Establishing Authority." Once you establish your authority, you can take the reader anywhere. The reader will trust you, believe you, and you can do anything with the plot.

This authority is arguably the most important part of starting your story.

The two most effective ways – that I use – to establish authority are:

Honesty and frankness.

Or demonstrating knowledge.

Heart versus Head.

In the first method (as demonstrated in the preceding essay) you risk revealing something that makes you look bad. You allow yourself to become the fool instead of the hero. And by doing so, you allow your reader to risk becoming involved, emotionally involved, in your story. In a way, your honesty proves to the reader that the story will not be about proving your glory. You admit your failures and weakness, and doing so lets your reader admit and accept their own. You prove a story – and life – *doesn't have to be about looking good*.

The second method for establishing authority is through knowledge: Prove to your reader that you've done your research. That your narrator is the best, most-qualified person to tell this story. This method won't engage the reader emotionally, not like the Honesty method, but it can be impressive and compelling.

To illustrate, the story above is the Heart Method.

This essay that follows is more the Head Method.

Emotion versus Intellect.

In my book *Survivor*, Chapter 46 is the Heart Method. It shows how the narrator is running a fake suicide hotline in order to meet people as damaged as himself. But Chapter 44 – with its chorus of obscure household hints – is the Head Method.

Again, the Heart Method impresses the reader with honesty and vulnerability.

The Head Method impresses the reader with its knowledge.

You could argue that Stephen King uses the Heart Method mainly. The way each character is introduced, slowly and carefully, to prompt the reader into bonding and feeling sympathy. It's not often you run across dense thickets of statistics and facts, insider knowledge and data in a Stephen King novel.

Among my favorite books, *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson has moments of such brutal, unflattering honesty, that I will read it again and again. And feel shocked and touched each time.

You could also argue that Tom Clancy uses the Head Method. The way military and government procedures and technology are used to assure a reader that the protagonist is smart and trained – and therefore worth spending time with. This includes wonderful insider, jargon-y language. Another form of impressing the reader with knowledge.

Among my favorite books, *Ill Nature* by Joy Williams is filled with such a burden of horrible data about the destruction of the natural world, that reading it is addictive.

Craig Clevenger's book, *The Contortionist's Handbook*, also uses a wealth of information to establish the narrator's authority as a forger – a criminal so adept at his job that we can forgive his crimes because we're so impressed by his obsessive, methodical work habits and skill.

Still – Heart or Head – both methods establish the writer or narrator's authority. They engage the reader, and help prove the authenticity of the story.

With authority in mind, this series of essays is not the perfect way to write fiction. This is only what works for me. So, please, take or leave anything you read here. If it helps, use it. If not, thank you for considering my view.

This isn't about you, the author, looking good. Or me looking good. This is about serving the reader with your most effective storytelling. Over the next year, this series of essays will cover a few basic rules that I wish someone had taught me in my first writing workshop. A few rules that – if applied – will make your writing tighter, more immediate and more effective.

There are other possible ways to establish your authority. The most popular is being Clever. But after a few minutes, you can tell cleverness is someone hiding. Someone scared and dishonest and trying to distract you from the truth of anything that matters. We all know glib, silly people like that and it's amazing how fast their banter can become tedious and cruel. Maybe for short stretches, clever is entertaining, but it won't convince the reader to suspend their disbelief and follow you anywhere.

Another method to establish authority is to just bully the reader. To constantly tell the reader how to feel, how to react. To spoon feed the reader every thought and insight. If you provide the reader with every thought, soon they won't be able to think and might trust you completely. This is that bland, third-person, voice-of-God writing you see so much. But, God, that kind of story can get boring.

Another method is to charm, but again – even the loveliest, most lyrical language gets boring after a few paragraphs. It still becomes a hero story, because it showcases the writing and the writer. Before that point, you need to make something interesting happen. Convey concrete information.

So, for now, let's concentrate on establishing authority with either Heart or Head methods.

For homework, pull a few books down off the shelf and look for examples of the Head or Heart scenes where the author is establishing authority. They tend to be early in a book, where the authority is most needed. And where establishing it won't slow down the escalating plot.

For homework, write an anecdote that establishes your authority with honesty and vulnerability. For this, risk telling a painful, embarrassing story. The story of a scar or a humiliation. The glory of this risk is how it prompts other people to risk telling their own stories, and gives people an instant feeling of freedom and relief.

Then, write an anecdote that establishes authority using knowledge and data. You might have to do some research to establish a "body of knowledge." One good method is to meet and casually interview someone about what they know best – typically, what they do for a living. You'll notice that people always look wonderful – open and animated – when they speak with the authority of their profession.

Developing a Theme

Our first furnace was an oil stove that sat just outside the kitchen door, crowding the dinner table on one side of the living room. The stove was square, standing waist-high with slots for vents in the top. A stove pipe ran out the back, a sheet-metal tube that ran up the wall behind the stove, and disappeared into a hole near the ceiling, connecting the stove to the brick chimney behind the plaster.

The stove had a baked-on paint, a smooth enamel glaze like on old metal pans, brown and swirled to look like burled walnut, but it was really just painted metal.

The stove burned heating oil, gravity fed from a cow-sized tank that stood on tall legs outside the kitchen window, and that's how it made the house smell. Like diesel oil. Not like a cow. Like trucks idling in the gravel parking lot of Francisco's diner on the highway. Or like tailgating too close, trying to pass a slow flatbed or cement mixer on your way to the hospital in town.

No fan pushed the warm air out of the stove so on cold days you had to stand next to it in your Bugs Bunny pajamas, holding your hands over the slotted vents as the heat rose out the top.

In the basement was a cast-iron stove that burned wood. The kind of cook stove with thick iron burner lids you lifted off with a long handle. Heavy as little manhole covers. The kind of stove with a warming oven on top. The cook stove stood on nickel-plated legs with feet shaped like lions paws, but gripping round balls. Our one bathroom had a bathtub that stood on eagle claws, but gripping the same kind of balls and painted white.

If you dropped anything between the wall and the bathtub, you could just forget it. A pile of slippery soaps were dead back there. Nobody could reach into that tight space. Not Mom or Dad. Nobody.

If you rolled anything under the cook stove in the basement – even a quarter or a Kennedy half dollar – same deal. You lost it to a nest of scorpions who lived in the cracked concrete under that stove.

This story starts the day my Mom told us kids to get in the car. She said our grandma was coming, to drive us into town. My Mom was holding the edge of the kitchen counter, leaning with most of her body over the counter, gripping with both hands, and saying, "Just, please, get in the car…"

She'd close her eyes, saying, "Hurry." But saying it slow, eyes closed, taking long breaths in and out. In and out. Still holding the phone after calling our grandma to come get us. To drive us into Pasco, Washington, a drive long as twenty radio songs, two news casts, Paul Harvey, the farm report, maybe the same radio commercials fifty times for the Columbia Basin Department Store and Haas Western Wear.

With only the straight-line horizon to watch the whole trip to Our Lady of Lourdes Emergency Room where they had antidote for scorpion bites.

In the kitchen, Mom was standing on one bare foot, her other bare foot hung loose from her bent knee. Her loose foot getting fat and red, already the foot of a huge red person instead of the skinny white person the rest of her was.

In slow motion, she yelled for somebody to turn off the sprinkler in the yard.

If you left the sprinklers on to water the lawn, you'd come home to find the grass full of rattlesnakes that would crawl out of the desert sagebrush and prickly pear cactus.

Scorpions lived in the house. Rattlesnakes lived in the lawn. If it snowed, you had to remember where the cactus grew or risk sledding and bombing out, impaled in your nylon snowsuit, a pincushion landed on too many cactus spines as long as a mattress needle.

If you raked leaves, same deal, you'd have to sort through them first, leaf-by-leaf, before you jumped into the pile. There in the desert, with almost no trees and no rocks, only sand, the bats would burrow under the leaves to sleep in cold weather. Any dive into

a pile meant getting bit by those two long bat teeth. Maybe rabies. If nothing else, another trip hearing the car's AM radio all the way to Pasco.

My grandpa chewed tobacco while he drove, and the backseat window behind his was always a yellow-brown smear you had to look through.

Our little town was 600 people who lived in houses between the two-lane highway, the train tracks, and the river. This was right where the Snake River met the Columbia River in eastern Washington state, a town called Burbank after the Burbank Public Power Company which was named after the botanist Luther Burbank. These people lived where people had always lived, along the river, and every house had a little collection of Indian knives and maybe a stone grinding bowl. Arrowheads behind glass, displayed on white cotton wool in black, wood frames. Obsidian knives. Flint arrowheads and beads made of bone and shell. Found in the river's gravel bars or dug out of burial mounds.

In the sand along the river, you could find shotgun shells not exploded. And blasting caps that were still good.

This was Burbank until the Columbia River's last dam, the McNary Dam, when the federal government condemned everything upstream that might be flooded and moved all the houses up, away from the river, to a high plateau where the wind always blew. The highway was re-routed, taking it somewhere else. The rivers got fatter and fatter behind the new dam, and all the people who used to have farms went to work at the paper mill or refining uranium for atomic reactor fuel.

Where the town used to be, the river lapped close by, but never did cover. All the left-behind basements and wells became rumors, warnings, covered with wood planks the desert sun dried, brittle and rotted. Along the river, the cottonwood groves were haunted by those hidden wells that no one could remember. The Tops' family well. Or the Armstrongs' old well. Rotten wood waiting to break under one wrong step and drop a kid down into bottomless dark water. The cottonwood groves criss-crossed with left-

behind, nameless streets. Abandoned lilac bushes growing tree-high. Orphaned rose bushes that never bloomed.

One Saturday, my cousin Jason went missing, waddled off from his playpen in the yard next to their trailer, and half the town wandered all day through the woods along the river. Kneeling next to broken well covers, shouting his name down into each narrow pit. All day, until they found him curled up, asleep under their trailer.

Even in the new town, high up in the wind, some of the houses stood moved but not wanted. They stood balanced on wood blocks, brushed with tall, dead weeds, with chickens or panting dogs resting in the dusty shade underneath. Witches houses. House after house. One or two on every block. Empty houses with no paint left on the silver wood siding, the glass busted out of every window. Broken beer bottles and used rubbers and faded Hustler magazines left inside.

Streets where loose boards lay everywhere, rusted nails stuck up to step on.

Busted glass. Rusted nails. Another trip to town, for a tetanus shot.

At night, with my Dad gone at work for the railroad, my Mom ran from room to room pulling curtains. Even in daytime, if it was winter you had to pull the curtains closed before you could turn on a light. Before you could change clothes in a bedroom. The big house rule.

One day, while pulling weeds in the flower beds outside the house, Mom had found a few cigarette butts. A few outside every window. Outside my sisters' bedroom window, the ground was paved with cigarette butts. They were the brand of cigarette smoked by our neighbor down the road, a skinny, stooped man with daughters who wore dirty clothes to school and never spoke or made eye contact.

There in the flower beds, where Mom weeded, this neighbor dropped empty matchbooks. Written inside each one, all capital letters, it said: YOU BEING A WOMAN WOULD YOU LET ME EAT YOU FOR 50 DOLLARS. And his phone

number. Outside every window, the beds of iris and petunias were littered with cigarette butts and these little notes.

Every night with our Dad at the railroad, our Mom's chorus, every evening: "Close the curtains. Close the curtains." Flipping on the porchlight and saying, "Close the curtains…"

Summers, red ants boiled up in busy nests, everywhere. Fat red ants that stung as bad as bees. Scorpions and rattlesnakes. Bats and skunks with rabies. The sour smell of dead skunks, shot-gunned or run over, that sour smell was always in the air. Sometimes along the river lived porcupines, and your dog came home crying, his nose huge with quills your Dad had to pull out with pliers.

Summers, the county sent trucks up and down every road to fog for mosquitoes. Trucks driven by our high school teachers, off work like the rest of us. All us kids running along behind in the thick, white fog of insecticide, getting high on the tangy smell of the gasoline they mixed the spray with. If you left the windows open, the house filled with the fog. That tangy smell in our new, wall-to-wall shag carpet. In the furniture.

The most-popular high school teacher always hired the head cheerleader as his assistant, a different assistant each summer, and they'd spray all night, driving and screwing in their fog of white poison.

Winters, grade schoolers had to bring sack lunches for special fire drills where we pretended the nuclear reactors upriver had been bombed. The yellow school buses would drive us out, all the way until lunchtime, into the desert. There we'd sit in sand dunes, eating out of our brown bags until time to drive back.

After Dad pulled the wood cook stove out of the basement, he put in a furnace that burned oil. To replace the upstairs one made of metal painted to look like polished wood. Dad buried the oil tank so only the delivery cap stuck out of the ground. This is what separated the nice people. White trash still left their oil tanks where you could see, next

to the house and dripping, screened with a little forsythia or flowering almond bushes. The tank painted white or blue to match their house.

After that, we had a furnace in the basement that chugged to let you know the house would get warm. The furnace filled the middle of the basement, between the doors to the two bedrooms: the boys' bedroom and the girls' bedroom. It went all the way to the ceiling, boxes of sheet metal riveted and folded together at the corners, and Mom painted all of it chocolate brown and the concrete-block wall around the basement tangerine orange. She put a Kelly green lounge chair with its back to the furnace. Then a tangerine-orange sofa, and that was our Family Room with a color television and an ashtray so big it covered half the coffee table.

The chocolate-brown furnace was the size of a little factory, and the only controls were two On/Off switches down low on one side. They were the same as On/Off light switches, but painted brown, and they controlled the power to the furnace fan.

One Sunday, my cousin Bobby went missing. It was a fishing trip to the river, the summer the radio played Karen Carpenter singing *Close to You* until everyone knew every word. Bobby was on a rock next to the river. The next minute, he wasn't.

Again, half the town went looking. All day. Then, all week. Then the next week until he washed up along the dock of a marina downstream, across the stateline in Oregon.

My Dad was with them, and my grandpa. All my uncles and aunts. Us kids all stayed home.

If anyone ever turned off those two switches on the new furnace, my Dad said the furnace burner might start up and the heat would have no place to go. It would get hotter and hotter until the furnace would explode.

Those two switches down low where anybody could touch them. Mom had painted them brown so many times it would take a hammer to turn them off. But every night,

every time I woke up and went to the bathroom, I'd check those switches. Summer or winter. Some nights, two or three times. To make sure they were still turned on.

This second essay is about using a limited number of themes – perhaps the core of what I call Minimalism.

In the workshop where I started writing, Tom Spanbauer called these themes, "Horses." He used the metaphor of a wagon pulled by horses, cross country. The horses that started on the East Coast would be the same horses that ended on the West Coast. By keeping the themes, or "horses," limited you were able to build the depth of the story.

Another metaphor for Minimalism is a symphony that starts with a simple melody. Over time, that melody builds and varies, getting richer and more powerful as more instruments contribute, but at its core it's still the same basic melody until the very end.

None of this made much sense to me until – after workshop, visiting a friend – I saw a commercial on television for Skipper's Seafood restaurants. In thirty seconds, the stream of images included flashes of drink cups, food, restaurant signs, employees working the counter, and paper take-out bags. But all those images said "Skippers" in some way. To a lesser degree, they all said "good food" and "happiness" or "pleasure." With smiles and people eating in groups.

In a television commercial, no one eats alone and sad at a greasy plastic table.

The commercial was doing what a lawyer does in court. What good Minimalist writing should do. It presents a focussed case, a series of images or details that will prompt the viewer to a specific decision.

In effect: Skipper's is a good place to eat.

Or, Burbank, Washington is a spooky, spooky little town.

Only my most-distant relatives still live there, but my grandpa did make the metal street signs. The old people down the road from us, the Purcells, kept a little monkey they tied to a weeping willow tree in their yard. Summer afternoons, us kids would feed the

monkey thick, green caterpillars we'd picked off Mom's tomato plants. So, no, Burbank isn't all bad.

The point is, this is how you shape the reader's perception of your fictional world. By presenting a limited message, but that same message as many ways as possible.

In my book *Choke*, the repeated message or theme or "horse" is: Things that are NOT what they appear. The coded security announcements, the symptoms of disease, the female protagonist. That's why we must each determine our own reality.

In my book *Invisible Monsters*, the theme is: Youth and beauty are power, but not the strongest kind. That's why we must keep growing and finding new forms of power.

In *Diary*, the theme is: How can we communicate across time and stop making the same mistakes over and over?

This might sound limiting, but once you begin to develop your theme you'll find constant new ways to present it. One of my favorite methods has always been to go out to a party. There, I'll drop the theme into conversation. Crowd seeding. I'll tell a personal anecdote such as: Those scary wells from childhood. Then, I can kick back and just listen as everyone gives their own – much better – version of my story. This way, you have dozens of people fleshing out your theme. Maybe hundreds. And you'll find that theme becomes universal, expanding to touch everyone's life.

Beyond that, party people will love you because you're actually listening to them. You're paying attention and loving the value in their story. You might only say ten words all night, but people will remember you as a dazzling entertainer – when you were really just doing your job. Harvesting. Listening. Developing your themes. Running to the bathroom, occasionally, to write the best stuff on toilet paper and stick it in your sock.

Once you have a critical mass of details, you can start recognizing repeating patterns.

In the above essay, those patterns include:

1. Bad things
2. Trying to fix bad things, but creating more bad things

That's it. You could recognize sub-categories such as: Furnaces… Predators… Reckless acts… Sex… Death…. Poverty… But it's really just the two basic themes.

Once you recognize the patterns, you can arrange and re-arrange them on the page. Cutting and pasting, seeing how each is affected by the one presented next to it. Like a collage. Whole books are written this way. Those aren't my favorite books, but they can be beautiful.

As a method, the collage works well if you contrast it against concrete scenes where people interact to further the plot – those chapters where events or plot points happen. The collage chapters are best used to slow the plot or imply time passing in your fictional world.

But for scene setting or establishing a tone or mood – a collage works great. Make a list. Go to a party. Keep adding to your list. Look for patterns. Then shape your list to best effect.

For homework, read Amy Hemple's short story *The Harvest*. It's a beautiful list of details, all steering you along to heartbreak. If you can't find that story, look for her story, *In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried*.

If you're really ambitious, hunt down a copy of Tom Spanbauer's short story, *Sea Animals* in a back issue of The Quarterly magazine.

Then, write out your worst fears from childhood. Work on that list for a few days, adding details as you remember them. Flesh out those fears. Then, get together with people and share enough to get them talking about their childhood monsters. Look for patterns between yourself and other people. Add new material to your list. Then, arrange and re-arrange your expanded list to create the best effect. Like editing a movie. Cut and re-cut. If anything seems thin or under-developed go back out and talk to people.

Identify the themes or "horses" in last month's essay about authority. Identify the themes in *The Great Gatsby*. Identify the themes in *Slaughterhouse 5*.

Using "On-the-Body" Physical Sensation

To make a palm tree, you draw two curving lines that meet at a sharp point. That's the tree trunk. Then, you draw some zigzag lines between the two lines, to suggest the bark of the tree. Then, you draw long curves that branch from the point, and some zigzag lines that hang off those long curves. For the palm fronds.

My brother and sisters and I, we could draw a palm tree because our Mom had a big floppy, paper book called: *How To Draw Trees*. She had another book, big and thin, with almost nothing but those sketchy pictures – none of them colored-in, just drawings – but this other book we couldn't look at. It was called: *How to Draw Human Figures*. Her third book was *How to Draw Animals*, and she could sit down and draw you a horse as fast as your eyes could follow her pencil.

She had these books from before she had us kids. These books and a box of pastel crayon stubs and a few charcoal pencils. After we were born, the only time she drew was to make us hook-nosed witches riding broomsticks that we would cut out of black construction paper and tape to our bedroom window on Halloween. Every Halloween, we cut tombstones out of gray construction paper and twisted trees out of brown paper. Pumpkins out of orange paper. Flying bats out of black paper. And we taped all these, and the witches, to our bedroom windows.

After she had kids, our Mom took a class in sewing. A night class way, far away in town, and she kept her car doors locked and called home to let our grandma know when she'd arrived safe or was about to leave for the long drive back home.

Those nights, our grandma would stay with us. Or Aunt Ruthie would. Our Dad was… we didn't know where.

Instead of drawing trees or horses, after that our Mom sewed clothes. All year round, we'd drive to big, cold fabric stores with concrete floors. Bolts of fabric, tall as you were, stood on tables or leaning into wood racks painted white. Giant picture books

showed nothing but page after page of people wearing clothes you could make if you bought the right patterns by Butterick or Simplicity. Long, skinny fashion-model drawings.

Every visit, Mom took you to the table of fabric, the table with the "Clearance" sign standing way-high in the middle, and she'd say to choose a fabric for your shirt.

The smiling, skinny fashion drawings – they never wore clothes made from any fabric you'd find under that "Clearance" sign.

No. No matter how cool the shirt or vest or pants might look in the Simplicity Jiffi-Pattern catalogue, you'd never look that good.

But still, Mom would drag us to look at fabric. To look at patterns. My sisters, excited, saying, "Please, please, please!" whenever Mom stretched something silky or velvety between her hands, saying, "… this might be nice…"

On the clearance rack, the patterns were always some kind of pollen photographed under an electron microscope, like illustrations in a school science book. Blobs. Germs. Bacteria. Internal organs. Livers and kidneys. Paisleys. The colors muddy and dark. "So they won't show dirt…" Mom would say.

My brother and me, we prayed for hand-me-downs from our uncle John. He got striped T-shirts from the rack of clear-plastic hangers at Sears or J.C. Penney's.

For us, school shopping meant new shoes and underwear. And looking at fabric.

Our Mom's fashion year had three seasons: Christmas, Easter and Back-to-School.

Christmas and Easter were… I have to groan, here.

Inspired by brother-sister singing groups, mostly the Partridge Family and The Brady Bunch, Mom would design us kids matching outfits. My brother and me in matching red-and-blue plaid jackets with Nehru collars. Or embroidered Cossack outfits. Or bright, blousy shirts with puffy, leg-o-mutton sleeves that ballooned down to long, tight, three-button French cuffs.

My two sisters got the same colors and general theme, but in miniskirts or Nancy Drew jumpers or Bo-Peep frocks.

One Christmas or Easter, we were paraded to Mass at St. Patrick's, wearing identical vests made of fake suede, each vest with a brass buckle in front and a knee-length fringe of suede strips our Mom had stayed up, night after night for weeks, cutting with her chrome sewing scissors. Each vest, each long, thin ribbon of fringe, hours of breath-holding, careful work under a bare light bulb in her little sewing room.

These were outfits we wore once. One time. All of us lined up in front of the flowering almond bush at Easter, while our Dad took a picture. Or, lined up with the Christmas tree. After that, we wore the outfits to church. Then, by noon of whatever High Holy day, those outfits were history. Shed and forgotten. Existing only in some old photo.

Every evening, year 'round, she'd call us into the sewing room, kid-by-kid. For fitting after fitting. Her mouth full of pins, she'd pinched the fabric tight, at the waist, at the ankle, marking it with fast slashes of tailor's chalk. Through the pins, telling us: "Stand up *straight*." Then sticking in a pin. If you'd jump, she'd always say, "Sorry, *did I get you*?"

Then, with the pants or shirt still bristling with pins. Your skin stuck and bleeding a little, here and there, you'd have to get undressed in careful slow-motion.

Then, she'd say: "*Now, send in your brother…*"

The other kids, they'd all wait their turn, watching television in the basement. Not saying anything. On Tuesday nights was *Happy Days* and *Three's Company*. On Friday nights was *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*. None of these shows were ever funny, but we'd sit and watch while the television talked to itself, laughing at its own lame jokes.

No, the rules in our house were: No yelling. No cussing. Stand up straight. And *Go outside and DO something; nobody is ever going to pay you to read or write books…*

Every holiday, we'd be a different band. The Beatles. The Turtles. Paul Revere and the Raiders. Back-to-School meant big Halloween costumes. One year, Mom spent nights latch-hooking an afro wig of red yarn so my sister could be Raggedy Ann. Another year, she pieced together a full-body dog costume so my brother could be Snoopy.

This is what she did instead of drawing. Because: *Nobody would ever pay you to just draw pictures…*

About that time, the television in our basement, the picture got smaller and smaller. Not a lot smaller, but enough that we noticed. The tube was going out, our Dad said. We'd have to run a newspaper ad and sell it, fast. To people who didn't know it was doomed.

For a few days, people we didn't know came to look at the old television, but nobody was dumb enough.

While they squatted in the basement, monkeying with the color and contrast knobs, I'd sit in my Mom's sewing room, watching her little portable television as it laughed at its own stupid jokes. My legs, so short they dangled from the edge of her sewing chair, my bare feet kicking above the blue-green shag carpet.

That one night, I was alone. Mom was in the kitchen, washing dishes. Dad was in the basement, showing the old television to stupid strangers. My brother and sisters were… I can't remember.

Then, I jumped down from the sewing chair.

And there, dropped, forgotten, poking straight up from the carpet was a needle. A thick mattress needle, silver-sharp and long as your baby finger.

The needle point popped out the top of my foot. Into the sole, and all the way through the meat of my bare foot.

Looking at it… Staring at it… even before it started to bleed, I knew this wasn't my fault. It was Mom's fault. She'd dropped the needle.

This meant, for right now, I could do anything I wanted. For just this moment, I could get away with breaking a rule.

I'd never screamed inside the house.

Nobody ever screamed inside our house.

So I screamed.

As loud and long as I had breath, I screamed. I screamed until Mom stood in the sewing room doorway, her wet hands holding a dishtowel.

Pushing her face at me, her eyes popped out, round as the perfect circle-pumpkins she could draw, she said: "Those people just might buy that old TV. Do you want them to think we're a bunch of crazy people? Be *quiet*!"

And then she was gone.

She didn't even see my foot. The needle. The blood now squirting out the top and bottom of my bare foot.

So I went hopping after her, hopping on my one good foot, all the way to the kitchen, sprinkling blood with every hop. Hop. Spray. Hop. Spray. The needle, I couldn't feel. But the trickle and drip of blood off my toes felt warm as bathwater. There, standing behind her, waiting until my foot leaked a juicy, big red puddle around me on the fake-stone linoleum of the kitchen floor, I told her: "*Look*!"

Then, she looked.

Then, she's lifting me.

She's sitting me on the kitchen counter. She's got a pair of rusty pliers from the junk drawer, by the back door. From where she'd stashed her old pastels and paint brushes.

The blood still everywhere, the floor still smeared with sticky red, she's trying to yank the needle out of my foot. She's trying, but the blood makes the needle and the pliers so slippery. So slick. She can only wiggle the needle. Or twist it around and around.

Then, from the doorway to the living room…

The strangers come around the corner, carrying our old television that they've just bought. Dad helping them, their check is stuck in the back pocket of his store-bought blue jeans.

And when they see this kid bleeding, the woman weeping, these red footprints everywhere… When they smell all that blood…

When they slip in that puddle, they drop the TV. Blood and broken glass, everywhere. True story.

This third essay is to demonstrate physical sensation in a story.

This physical sensation is what the Minimalist writer Tom Spanbauer would call "going on-the-body."

In fiction writing, there's an old saying: *When you don't know what happens next, describe the inside of the narrator's mouth.*

Or the soles of their feet, or the palms of their hands. Any physical sensation that can evoke a sympathetic physical sensation from the reader.

It's one thing to engage the reader mentally, to enroll his or her mind and make them think, imagine, consider something. It's another thing to engage a reader's heart, to make him or her feel some emotion. But if you can engage the reader on a physical level as well, then you've created a reality that can eclipse their actual reality. The reader might be in a noisy airport, standing in a long line, on tired feet – but if you can engage their mind, heart and body in your story, you can replace that airport reality with something more entertaining or profound or whatever.

That's why each of my books involves some intense physical sensation. Whether it's violence in *Fight Club*. Or plastic surgery in *Invisible Monsters*. Or sex in *Choke*. Or illness and self-mutilation in *Diary*. With each of my books, the goal is to make the story occur in the reader's mind, heart and gut.

In the recent short story, "Guts," this effect goes almost too far.

Almost.

Note, this doesn't happen with abstract words that describe pain or pleasure. You can't just order a reader to feel a sensation. It happens when you create a tangible situation, detail by detail, and let the events happen in the reader's mind.

Words like "searing pain" or "sharp, stabbing pain" or "throbbing headache" or "ecstatic orgasm" don't evoke anything except some lame-ass paperback thriller book. Those are the cliches of a cheating writer. Little abstract short-cuts that don't make anything happen in the reader's gut.

No, you want the pain – or whatever physical sensation – to occur in the reader, not on the page. So un-pack the event, moment by moment, smell by smell. Make it happen, and let the sensation of pain occur only in the reader.

The same goes for sex. But with sex, it helps if you re-invent the language of sex. Most people have their own pet vocabulary for sex organs and sex acts. To make an orgasm fresh and unique – even if it's just words happening on a page – invent a way that only your narrator would talk about sex. That special nickname for their genitals. Their euphemism for intercourse.

I like to say: "When a regular person gets sick, they take an aspirin. When a writer gets sick, they take notes…"

The next time you get a headache or diarrhea or poison ivy, sit and inventory the physical details you experience. Put them down on paper for some future use. Because the toughest job you'll have as a writer is to give your character a headache. Still, you should do it so well you give your reader a headache.

Another method is to inject medical language – the almost-poetry of surgical jargon or diagnostic terms. Anatomical vocabulary. Chemical names. All of those build their authority in a "head" sense, proving you're smart. Plus, they evoke a physical discomfort or pleasure in the reader.

Plus, odd language can slow the reader and focus their attention on the moment.

Plus, medical language gives people a way to discuss topics they couldn't because they never had the language. So you're engaging the reader on a mental and physical level.

So, when you don't know what happens next: Have sex. Get sick. Get hurt. Or hit somebody.

To date, we've discussed "establishing authority" and "horses or themes" and "physical sensation."

To review the previous topics, look at this essay and find how it establishes authority and what the "horses" or themes are.

Then, create a character's headache – without using any words such as "headache, pain, migraine…" This might force you to do some research into the cause of headaches. Or into how other cultures explained headaches. Or how a headache changes your total perception. Or headache cures – true story: my old doctor used to swear by masturbation, to lower your blood pressure and cure headaches. The goal is to re-invent the tired, cliched idea of a "headache" so well that you can create one in your reader.

For another exercise, write out an event from your past that involved a strong physical sensation. Un-pack it, detail by detail, and create the sensation in the reader's gut. Again, without using abstract short-cuts that describe the sensation. Always, create the sensation.

Submerging the "I"

To do that, first I'll present the short story Guts which has now been published in the States and in Europe, by Playboy magazine and the Guardian newspaper, respectively. *Guts* is a chapter from my book for 2005, called *Haunted*, a collection of linked short horror stories. *Guts* is by no means the most upsetting story in the book, and I'm working with Playboy to publish some others early. During a recent workshop, a different story from the collection made another writer cry so hard she had to leave the table and sit in the bathroom to recover.

The *Guts* story has a three-act structure, consisting of three true (yes, very true) anecdotes. To recap our earlier writing distinctions: it establishes authority… uses a series of "horses" or themes… and involves the reader by depicting physical sensation in a way that creates a physical response in the reader.

Perhaps it does this last task too well… Forty people have fainted while I read the story in public. My apologies for that, but too much horror is better than boredom.

What the story does best – no pun intended – is "Submerge the 'I'." And I'll describe that more, after the story.

For now, here's *Guts*:

Inhale.

Take in as much air as you can.

This story should last about as long as you can hold your breath, and then just a little bit longer. So listen as fast as you can.

A friend of mine, when he was thirteen years old he heard about "pegging." This is when a guy gets banged up the butt with a dildo. Stimulate the prostate gland hard enough, and the rumor is you can have explosive hands-free orgasms. At that age, this friend's a little sex maniac. He's always jonesing for a better way to get his rocks off. He

goes out to buy a carrot and some petroleum jelly. To conduct a little private research. Then he pictures how it's going to look at the supermarket checkstand, the lonely carrot and petroleum jelly rolling down the conveyer belt toward the grocery store cashier. All the shoppers waiting in line, watching. Everyone seeing the big evening he has planned.

So, my friend, he buys milk and eggs and sugar and a carrot, all the ingredients for a carrot cake. And Vaseline.

Like he's going home to stick a carrot cake up his butt.

At home, he whittles the carrot into a blunt tool. He slathers it with grease and grinds his ass down on it. Then, nothing. No orgasm. Nothing happens except it hurts.

Then, this kid, his mom yells it's suppertime. She says to come down, right now.

He works the carrot out and stashes the slippery, filthy thing in the dirty clothes under his bed.

After dinner, he goes to find the carrot and it's gone. All his dirty clothes, while he ate dinner, his mom grabbed them all to do laundry. No way could she not find the carrot, carefully shaped with a paring knife from her kitchen, still shiny with lube and stinky.

This friend of mine, he waits months under a black cloud, waiting for his folks to confront him. And they never do. Ever. Even now he's grown up, that invisible carrot hangs over every Christmas dinner, every birthday party. Every Easter egg hunt with his kids, his parents' grandkids, that ghost carrot is hovering over all of them.

That something too awful to name.

People in France have a phrase: "Spirit of the Stairway." In French: Esprit de l'escalier. It means that moment when you find the answer, but it's too late. Say you're at a party and someone insults you. You have to say something. So under pressure, with everybody watching, you say something lame. But the moment you leave the party…

As you start down the stairway, then – magic. You come up with the perfect thing you should've said. The perfect crippling put-down.

That's the Spirit of the Stairway.

The trouble is even the French don't have a phrase for the stupid things you actually do say under pressure. Those stupid, desperate things you actually think or do.

Some deeds are too low to even get a name. Too low to even get talked about.

Looking back, kid-psych experts, school counselors now say that most of the last peak in teen suicide was kids trying to choke while they beat off. Their folks would find them, a towel twisted around the kid's neck, the towel tied to the rod in their bedroom closet, the kid dead. Dead sperm everywhere. Of course the folks cleaned up. They put some pants on their kid. They made it look… better. Intentional at least. The regular kind of sad, teen suicide.

Another friend of mine, a kid from school, his older brother in the Navy said how guys in the Middle East jack off different than we do here. This brother was stationed in some camel country where the public market sells what could be fancy letter openers. Each fancy tool is just a thin rod of polished brass or silver, maybe as long as your hand, with a big tip at one end, either a big metal ball or the kind of fancy carved handle you'd see on a sword. This Navy brother says how Arab guys get their dick hard and then insert this metal rod inside the whole length of their boner. They jack off with the rod inside, and it makes getting off so much better. More intense.

It's this big brother who travels around the world, sending back French phrases. Russian phrases. Helpful jack-off tips.

After this, the little brother, one day he doesn't show up at school. That night, he calls to ask if I'll pick up his homework for the next couple weeks. Because he's in the hospital.

He's got to share a room with old people getting their guts worked on. He says how they all have to share the same television. All he's got for privacy is a curtain. His folks don't come and visit. On the phone, he says how right now his folks could just kill his big brother in the Navy.

On the phone, the kid says how – the day before – he was just a little stoned. At home in his bedroom, he was flopped on the bed. He was lighting a candle and flipping through some old porno magazines, getting ready to beat off. This is after he's heard from his Navy brother. That helpful hint about how Arabs beat off. The kid looks around for something that might do the job. A ball-point pen's too big. A pencil's too big and rough. But dripped down the side of the candle, there's a thin, smooth ridge of wax that just might work. With just the tip of one finger, this kid snaps the long ridge of wax off the candle. He rolls it smooth between the palms of his hands. Long and smooth and thin.

Stoned and horny, he slips it down inside, deeper and deeper into the piss slit of his boner. With a good hank of the wax still poking out the top, he gets to work.

Even now, he says those Arab guys are pretty damn smart. They've totally re-invented jacking off. Flat on his back in bed, things are getting so good, this kid can't keep track of the wax. He's one good squeeze from shooting his wad when the wax isn't sticking out anymore.

The thin wax rod, it's slipped inside. All the way inside. So deep inside he can't even feel the lump of it inside his piss tube.

From downstairs, his mom shouts it's suppertime. She says to come down, right now. This wax kid and the carrot kid are different people, but we all live pretty much the same life.

It's after dinner when the kid's guts start to hurt. It's wax so he figured it would just melt inside him and he'd pee it out. Now his back hurts. His kidneys. He can't stand straight.

This kid talking on the phone from his hospital bed, in the background you can hear bells ding, people screaming. Game shows.

The X-rays show the truth, something long and thin, bent double inside his bladder. This long, thin V inside him, it's collecting all the minerals in his piss. It's getting bigger

and more rough, coated with crystals of calcium, it's bumping around, ripping up the soft lining of his bladder, blocking his piss from getting out. His kidneys are backed up. What little that leaks out his dick is red with blood.

This kid and his folks, his whole family, them looking at the black X-ray with the doctor and the nurses standing there, the big V of wax glowing white for everybody to see, he has to tell the truth. The way Arabs get off. What his big brother wrote him from the Navy.

On the phone, right now, he starts to cry.

They paid for the bladder operation with his college fund. One stupid mistake, and now he'll never be a lawyer.

Sticking stuff inside yourself. Sticking yourself inside stuff. A candle in your dick or your head in a noose, we knew it was going to be big trouble.

What got me in trouble, I called it Pearl Diving. This meant whacking off underwater, sitting on the bottom at the deep end of my parents' swimming pool. With one deep breath, I'd kick my way to the bottom and slip off my swim trucks. I'd sit down there for two, three, four minutes.

Just from jacking off, I had huge lung capacity. If I had the house to myself, I'd do this all afternoon. After I'd finally pump out my stuff, my sperm, it would hang there in big, fat, milky gobs.

After that was more diving, to catch it all. To collect it and wipe each handful in a towel. That's why it was called Pearl Diving. Even with chlorine, there was my sister to worry about. Or, Christ almighty, my Mom.

That used to be my worst fear in the world: my teenage virgin sister, thinking she's just getting fat, then giving birth to a two-headed retard baby. Both heads looking just like me. Me, the father AND the uncle.

In the end, it's never what you worry about that gets you.

The best part of Pearl Diving was the inlet port for the swimming pool filter and the circulation pump. The best part was getting naked and sitting on it.

As the French would say: Who doesn't like getting their butt sucked?

Still, one minute you're just a kid getting off, and the next minute you'll never be a lawyer.

One minute, I'm settling on the pool bottom, and the sky is wavy, light blue through eight feet of water above my head. The world is silent except for the heartbeat in my ears. My yellow-striped swim trunks are looped around my neck for safe keeping, just in case a friend, a neighbor, anybody shows up to ask why I skipped football practice. The steady suck of the pool inlet hole is lapping at me and I'm grinding my skinny white ass around on that feeling.

One minute, I've got enough air, and my dick's in my hand. My folks are gone at their work and my sister's got ballet. Nobody's supposed to be home for hours.

My hand brings me right to getting off, and I stop. I swim up to catch another big breath. I dive down and settle on the bottom.

I do this again and again.

This must be why girls want to sit on your face. The suction is like taking a dump that never ends. My dick hard and getting my butt eaten out, I do not need air. My heartbeat in my ears, I stay under until bright stars of light start worming around in my eyes. My legs straight out, the back of each knee rubbed raw against the concrete bottom. My toes are turning blue, my toes and fingers wrinkled from being so long in the water.

And then I let it happen. The big white gobs start spouting. The pearls.

It's then I need some air. But when I go to kick off against the bottom, I can't. I can't get my feet under me. My ass is stuck.

Emergency paramedics will tell you that every year about 150 people get stuck this way, sucked by a circulation pump. Get your long hair caught, or your ass, and you're going to drown. Every year, tons of people do. Most of them in Florida.

People just don't talk about it. Not even French people talk about EVERYTHING.

Getting one knee up, getting one foot tucked under me, I get to half standing when I feel the tug against my butt. Getting my other foot under me, I kick off against the bottom. I'm kicking free, not touching the concrete, but not getting to the air, either.

Still kicking water, thrashing with both arms, I'm maybe halfway to the surface but not going higher. The heartbeat inside my head getting loud and fast.

The bright sparks of light crossing and criss-crossing my eyes, I turn and look back… but it doesn't make sense. This thick rope, some kind of snake, blue-white and braided with veins has come up out of the pool drain and it's holding onto my butt. Some of the veins are leaking blood, red blood that looks black underwater and drifts away from little rips in the pale skin of the snake. The blood trails away, disappearing in the water, and inside the snake's thin, blue-white skin you can see lumps of some half-digested meal.

That's the only way this makes sense. Some horrible sea monster, a sea serpent, something that's never seen the light of day, it's been hiding in the dark bottom of the pool drain, waiting to eat me.

So… I kick at it, at the slippery, rubbery knotted skin and veins of it, and more of it seems to pull out of the pool drain. It's maybe as long as my leg now, but still holding tight around my butthole. With another kick, I'm an inch closer to getting another breath. Still feeling the snake tug at my ass, I'm an inch closer to my escape.

Knotted inside the snake, you can see corn and peanuts. You can see a long bright-orange ball. It's the kind of horse-pill vitamin my Dad makes me take, to help put on weight. To get a football scholarship. With extra iron and omega-three fatty acids.

It's seeing that vitamin pill that saves my life.

It's not a snake. It's my large intestine, my colon pulled out of me. What doctors call, prolapsed. It's my guts sucked into the drain.

Paramedics will tell you a swimming pool pump pulls 80 gallons of water every minute. That's about 400 pounds of pressure. The big problem is we're all connected

together inside. Your ass is just the far end of your mouth. If I let go, the pump keeps working – unraveling my insides – until it's got my tongue. Imagine taking a 400-pound shit, and you can see how this might turn you inside out.

What I can tell you is your guts don't feel much pain. Not the way your skin feels pain. The stuff you're digesting, doctor's call it fecal matter. Higher up is chyme, pockets of a thin runny mess studded with corn and peanuts and round green peas.

That's all this soup of blood and corn, shit and sperm and peanuts floating around me. Even with my guts unraveling out my ass, me holding onto what's left, even then my first want is to somehow get my swimsuit back on.

God forbid my folks see my dick.

My one hand holding a fist around my ass, my other hand snags my yellow-striped swim trunks and pulls them from around my neck. Still, getting into them is impossible.

You want to feel your intestines, go buy a pack of those lamb-skin condoms. Take one out and unroll it. Pack it with peanut butter. Smear it with petroleum jelly and hold it under water. Then, try to tear it. Try to pull it in half. It's too tough and rubbery. It's so slimy you can't hold on.

A lamb-skin condom, that's just plain old intestine.

You can see what I'm up against.

You let go for a second, and you're gutted.

You swim for the surface, for a breath, and you're gutted.

You don't swim, and you drown.

It's a choice between being dead right now or a minute from right now.

What my folks will find after work is a big naked fetus, curled in on itself. Floating in the cloudy water of their backyard pool. Tethered to the bottom by a thick rope of veins and twisted guts. The opposite of a kid hanging himself to death while he jacks off. This is the baby they brought home from the hospital thirteen years ago. Here's the kid they hoped would snag a football scholarship and get an MBA. Who'd care for them in

their old age. Here's all their hopes and dreams. Floating here, naked and dead. All around him, big milky pearls of wasted sperm.

Either that or my folks will find me wrapped in a bloody towel, collapsed halfway from the pool to the kitchen telephone, the ragged, torn scrap of my guts still hanging out the leg of my yellow-striped swim trunks.

What even the French won't talk about.

That big brother in the Navy, he taught us one other good phrase. A Russian phrase. The way we say: "I need that like I need a hole in my head…" Russian people say: "I need that like I need teeth in my asshole…"

Mne eto nado kak zuby v zadnitse

Those stories about how animals caught in a trap will chew off their leg, well, any coyote would tell you a couple bites beats the hell out of being dead.

Hell… even if you're Russian, some day you just might want those teeth.

Otherwise, what you have to do is – you have to twist around. You hook one elbow behind your knee and pull that leg up into your face. You bite and snap at your own ass. You run out of air, and you will chew through anything to get that next breath.

It's not something you want to tell a girl on the first date. Not if you expect a kiss good night.

If I told you how it tasted, you would never, ever again eat calamari.

It's hard to say what my parents were more disgusted by: how I'd got in trouble or how I'd saved myself. After the hospital, my Mom said, "You didn't know what you were doing, honey. You were in shock." And she learned how to cook poached eggs.

All those people grossed out or feeling sorry for me…

I need that like I need teeth in my asshole.

Nowadays, people always tell me I look too skinny. People at dinner parties get all quiet and pissed off when I don't eat the pot roast they cooked. Pot roast kills me. Baked ham. Anything that hangs around inside my guts for longer than a couple hours, it

comes out still food. Home-cooked lima beans or chunk light tuna fish, I'll stand up and find it still sitting there in the toilet.

After you have a radical bowel resectioning, you don't digest meat so great. Most people, you have five feet of large intestine. I'm lucky to have my six inches. So I never got a football scholarship. Never got an MBA. Both my friends, the wax kid and the carrot kid, they grew up, got big, but I've never weighed a pound more than I did that day when I was thirteen.

Another big problem was my folks paid a lot of good money for that swimming pool. In the end my Dad just told the pool guy it was a dog. The family dog fell in and drowned. The dead body got pulled into the pump. Even when the pool guy cracked open the filter casing and fished out a rubbery tube, a watery hank of intestine with a big orange vitamin pill still inside, even then, my Dad just said, "That dog was fucking nuts."

Even from my upstairs bedroom window, you could hear my Dad say, "We couldn't trust that dog alone for a second…"

Then my sister missed her period.

Even after they changed the pool water, after they sold the house and we moved to another state, after my sister's abortion, even then my folks never mentioned it again.

Ever.

That is our invisible carrot.

You. Now you can take a good, deep breath.

I still have not.

End

There, you've survived it. A year ago, when I first read this story in the Tuesday night workshop I attend, my fellow writers squirmed a little, they laughed a lot, but none of them fainted.

Now the topic: Submerging the "I"

First, to give credit where it's due, a writer named Peter Christopher (author of *Campfires of the Dead*) told me about "hiding the I" as he called it. The theory is, you can write in the first person, but nobody wants to hear a story told that way. We're too ready for a first-person story to be boasting and bragging. A hero story. Nobody wants to hear that crap. So the moment we see that "I" on the page, we recoil. It bumps us out of the fictional dream – the same way a self-absorbed person irritates you. It's always: I I I, me me me.

But, the problem is that a first-person story has more authority. It seems more authentic than a third-person story. In this era where we know about the "spin" that everyone puts on their version of reality – Rush Limbaugh versus the Liberal Media Conspiracy – it's getting harder to trust an omniscient, third-person narrator that tells the story as if from the viewpoint of God.

No, a story told in the third-person can seem thin, even cowardly, mostly because we don't have the added dimension of knowing who is telling it, and how their agenda effects what they choose to reveal. The best example I know is *The Great Gatsby*. Sure, you can read it as if Nick Caraway is honest – he even brags about his honesty – but by the end of the book we see him being dishonest. At that point, the whole glory of Jay Gatsby comes into question. Was he really so cool… or does Nick make him seem cool so that Nick's own youth will seem more exciting and romantic? Does Nick make Jay wonderful and then kill him so that Nick's own chickenshit retreat to his Midwest family seems justified?

See? That's the wonderful extra dimension you get by using first person. You get to play with the honesty of the narrator. What writers call the "Unreliable Narrator."

With third-person, well, you don't really wonder about God's honesty. You just assume it. End of story.

Plus, a first-person story is better grounded in the "real" world. Consider movies such as *Citizen Kane* and *The Blair Witch Project*. They rely on a non-fiction device (yes, I

know I covered this in last month's Q & A, but tough titty, it's important). *Kane* begins with a newsreel and uses the newsreel reporters as the structure for telling the story. And *Blair Witch* uses film that was shot for a student documentary. Both base their stories in the real world by using a non-fiction frame or context for telling them. In this same way, Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* panicked the nation by telling an old H.G. Wells story within the context of a non-fiction radio news broadcast.

Consider that first person is stronger because it bases the story in the non-fiction context of memoir. *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club* read as memoirs. Both are "Apostolic fiction" like the movie *Shane*, where an average-joe talks about his hero. Really, an apostle talks about his messiah – thus telling a hero story without being boring. Those stories seem to have a connection to the real world because they seem to be told by real people. Not by some hidden "God."

In contrast, third person stories can feel as if they're being told by someone too afraid to take responsibility.

Still, the problem is – we hate that "I."

The answer? Use the first person voice, but hide the I.

In *Guts*, we see only one hint of the first-person on the first page: the word "mine" in the fourth paragraph. This "mine" occurs twice more before we see the first "I," and that's not until the third page. It's not until halfway through the story, on page five, that we meet the narrator. It's only then we realize the story will be about him.

And by then, the readers are hooked. The authority has been established – by the "paramedic facts" (head authority) and by the funny/sad nature of the first two anecdotes (heart authority). So, by page five, the narrator can risk showing us that "I" and finally his face.

Another benefit comes when you perform something written in the first person. This is still an important part of Tom Spanbauer's workshop: reading your work out loud to hear where it clunks. It should read with the honesty and charm of a monologue, like

something an actor would use in an audition. First person lets you *become* the character, and you give your audience a better program.

So consider writing in the first person, but after your first draft – take out as many I's as possible. Or hide them. Change them to "mine" or "me" or "my." Or switch to the rhetorical second person or even third person. Just get rid of those I's.

My personal demon is any story that starts with "I." That instantly turns off my attention. But that's just me.

Keep that camera pointed *away* from yourself for as long as possible.

Now the homework. To review the previous topics, look at *Guts* and find where it establishes authority, then how it goes "on the body" to give the reader a sympathetic physical reaction. Then, identify all the themes or "horses." Hint: Food is a horse, from the carrot to the lima beans…

For extra credit, find a copy of *Campfires of the Dead* and check out how Peter Christopher hides his I's.

For extra, extra credit – take out an old story you wrote in the first person, and practice cutting and hiding all the I's. First, circle them all. Then get rid of them. You'll find this turns the focus of the reader's attention off of the narrator and makes a better story.

Nuts and Bolts: Hiding a Gun

This month, let's take a break from big concepts and look at an ordinary writing technique. A *very* basic nuts-and-bolts chunk of advice for you to keep in mind.

To some writers, just discussing this topic will seem sleazy – the most obvious plot device – but it happens in stories because it happens in life: The one detail or mistake or character flaw you've forgotten about… it comes back around to destroy you.

In the book/movie *Breakfast at Tiffanys*, the female lead makes money by visiting a criminal in prison, and posing as his niece to convey messages coded to sound like weather forecasts. This seems like a funny job, a lark, and it's revisited in passing references throughout the first half of the novella, but then it's dropped and we forget it. The plot moves forward. It seems everything is doomed to go down one happy path. Then Holly Golightly is arrested for carrying those earlier messages. The predictable plot is wrecked, and the main characters are thrown into crisis.

That's *hiding a gun*. Some form of device that you can introduce, then forget, then re-introduce to bring your plot to resolution.

At first, I hesitated even discussing this topic. From now on, you too will be doomed to recognizing "guns" as they're introduced in the first scenes of every movie or book. You've seen them all your life:

In every James Bond movie, Bond is introduced to all the gadgets in the lab that we can look forward to him using to resolve the plot.

In Stephen King's *The Shining*, the moment the hotel caretaker mentions the pressure relief valve on the furnace boiler – you know it will explode to resolve the plot.

In Lillian Hellmann's play, *The Little Foxes*, when the maid carries a glass bottle of heart medicine and tells everyone she's not going to break it… you know as soon as the father has his heart attack, that bottle will get broken.

The buried gun is a promise or a threat you fulfill in order to wrap up your story.

It can be a Big Question: The sled Rosebud in *Citizen Kane*, which is nicely shown only *after* the characters have abandoned their quest. Also consider the "interview" that forms the heart of *Suddenly Last Summer*. That entire play is a long tease leading to a short, dramatic story. As are so many courtroom dramas.

It can be a Physical Process: Usually a pregnancy – a nice way to limit your story to nine or ten months. Consider *Rosemary's Baby*. Or *Cabaret*. A nice, natural way to have a character's past actions catch up with them and change or destroy them. Another example is Guts, where the first lines of the story tell you: "…this story should last as long as you can hold your breath, then just a little bit longer…" before we spin off into two distracting stories that will help us forget the "gun."

It can be a Count Down: An actual amount of calendar or clock time, be it *48 Hours* or *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

In all these forms, the "gun" is a framing device that helps you limit the length of your story and bring it to crisis before it becomes too long and loses energy.

The device is usually called "hiding a gun" because of the scene in Act One of Anton Chekhov's play, *The Seagull*. There a character loads a gun and leaves it. Of course, the rest of the play the audience is waiting for the shooting.

In college, and later, in diesel service training classes, I hated sitting through classes where the teacher assumed everyone knew the same information. No one would risk looking like a fool – to ask a simple, obvious question – so we'd all sit there, bored and confused, while the teacher charged even deeper and deeper into automobile refrigerant recover systems or wiring schematics. God bless the student who would finally ask: "How does the heat-exchanger work on hot days?" Or, "What's an Open/On circuit?"

That student, who admitted being dumb and risked asking something, after class almost everyone would sneak over and thank him or her for asking what we all were too afraid to ask.

If techniques such as hiding the gun seem too simple, too obvious, please know that these are skills I didn't know when I started writing fiction. As crude as it seems, this is something none of my college courses taught.

As a result, my peers and I wrote endless stories and novels that ran on and on and on for a thousand pages and never seemed to come to a solid end.

Hiding the gun can be crude and obvious – or it can be so subtle your reader will be dazzled.

If you consider the device dated and clumsy, take a look at the short story by Mark Richard called *This Is Us, Excellent*, from his story collection *The Ice at the Bottom of the World*.

In the story, a young boy describes a "carnie" who runs a ride at the local amusement park. In particular, the boy describes the carnie's tattooed arms as the *kind of tattoo that just looks dark blue when you see it through bars in the local jail*. At the point in the story where this description comes – it's terrible, the reader is jarred by this simile that is so beyond the experience of a small boy. Reading, you shake your head and think Mark Richard botched that bit of description. But, after you've finished the story – even days after, it hits you why Richard described the tattoos in that seemingly too-sophisticated way. Here is a hidden gun that alludes to a scene that takes place *after the story is finished*. At this point, midway through the story, we're given a glimpse of the future beyond the last page. The gun is hidden. We forget it. Then, it's only by re-reading or reflecting on the story that we discover the story's true – very sweet – ending.

Sometimes, you know your gun before you start writing. You plant it and move on.

More often, you don't know your gun. After two hundred pages, you panic because no climax is happening. At that point, you re-read your earlier chapters and find a detail or character you've forgotten and discarded. With very little re-writing, you can bring that detail back and use it as your gun. To create the chaos you need – the iceberg in *Titanic*. Or to resolve the chaos you've created – the sled in *Citizen Kane*.

To anybody who thinks a hidden gun is bad, keep trying. What makes it good or bad is how well you hide your gun.

Now the homework. Find a copy of *This Is Us, Excellent* and figure out the hidden gun and what it alludes to.

Beyond that, take another look at your favorite books and movies – with an eye out for the hidden gun. One of my favorites is the grim love story *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* In the final scene, Jane Fonda pulls a gun out of her purse. The first time I saw the movie, this seemed odd. Where did she get that gun? But re-watching the movie, that gun is used constantly in the plot, to start races… It's hidden – and the way she steals (by having sex with a gross guy) it is beautifully hidden – and creates a strong intention for her character, an intention only apparent after she's dead.

After you've dissected everything, look for new ways to "hide guns." Beyond the three types I described – the question, physical process, the clock. The Road Trip or quest makes a good gun. So does disease. Try to find a gun that no one has used. Knock yourself out.

Beware the "Thesis Statement"

To start work at the Freightliner Truck plant, I had to bring a sledgehammer I'd never, ever use.

The "required tools list" called for three socket sets in metric and English sizes. It called for a lady-foot pry bar. You had to bring sets of fixed and adjustable crescent wrenches. You had to bring a ball-peen hammer. Two sets of screwdrivers in Phillips and standard-head sizes. A fifty-foot tape measure. Wire cutters. Snub-nosed pliers. Adjustable pliers. Needle-nosed pliers. And vise-grips. And safety glasses. And all of these had to be engraved with your Social Security number and fit into a tool box you could carry from your car in the parking lot, for 157 back-breaking steps to your work station.

All these tools cost a total of almost one thousand bucks – money I had to borrow.

Then, on the job, the foreman handed you a company-owned speed wrench, and you never touched those shiny new tools you'd lugged to work. Maybe you sat on your tool box during break, but you'd almost never open it.

My point is – this essay series is about giving you tools *just in case you'll need them*. Each of these essay topics will point out an aspect of weak writing and how to make it stronger. Your work might not have every weakness, but it never hurts to be aware of them all.

This month's topic kills more stories than almost any other problem. Any story that starts out, saying:

"Robert woke up, hating his life."

Or, "Lydia never could get along with her upstairs neighbors."

Or, "Harrisburg was a tough place to find work."

These are all blanket statements that reveal the purpose of the paragraph that follows. Because of that, we'll call them 'Thesis Statements.' Sometimes called, 'Thesis

Sentences.' And while this works well in a dry essay or thesis – where you must follow rules about structure and presentation. And where content is more important than entertainment. In fiction, opening with a Thesis Sentence will suck all the joy and energy and intrigue out of your work.

Boom – and all your energy is killed. Completed. Settled.

Instead – you want to raise a question in your reader's mind.

Picture a stripper walking out on stage. First, she might just tug a little at each fingertip of her black, elbow-length gloves. Or, she might reach both hands to play with the hair at the back of her head – a move that always pulls her breasts up and a position that suggests bondage. A woman without hands. Helplessness. All this in a single pose.

Now, instead of a slow, gesture-by-gesture ritual of erotic undressing… imagine the stripper just walking out on stage, dropping his or her g-string, pushing his or her tired, ordinary genitals in your face and saying, "Any questions?"

As a writer, you are the stripper.

At the opening of this essay, if I'd just said: "Freightliner required you bring a lot of tools you'd never need." It would've seemed abstract and boring. But by 'unpacking' the tools, you get the 'burnt-tongue' poetic quality of their odd names. And you, the reader, get to decide 'hey, this is a LOT of tools…'

In your own writing, instead of saying: Brian felt sick.

Begin with: 'Maybe it was the mayonnaise. The sour glop that looked a little yellow where it leaked from between the edges of the ham sandwich. Maybe it was all the shit flies, buzzing loud as traffic, big around as black jellybeans, that swarmed the meat behind the deli counter. Alfalfa sprouts, all wet and crunchy, they're a breeding ground for ecoli bacteria…'

My point is: Don't tell your audience too much, too fast. Unpack every detail of the sandwich until your audience feels sick.

Unpack every gesture or physical symptom. Especially if this is the opening of a story.

As a cheat, deep into the story, you can still use your original Thesis Sentence, but by then you probably won't need it.

Of course, with all this unpacking of details – you need to know, going into each scene, just what plot point you're going to accomplish. Too much unpacked detail is just as boring as too many vague Thesis Sentences.

Consider this another tool for you to monkey around with your fiction and make it work better. If the opening is slow and fails to grab attention – look out for a Thesis Sentence. Too much, too fast. Then get rid of it.

As homework, look at your existing work, and find examples where you started with a vague Thesis Sentence. Then, keep reading until you find the strong detail that should've been your opening. Some strong, tangible, compelling fact. This might not even be on the first page, but it's somewhere.

Most times, you can just bring that detail to the beginning of the story, and it gives the work a new, powerful life. Often, writers will start with a vague first paragraph, then a stronger, detailed second paragraph. Consider scrapping all your weak, opening paragraphs. Then, just begin with a single strong detail and keep adding details until they accumulate to let your reader know what you'd started to tell them with your original Thesis Sentence.

Besides this, look at a few of your favorite stories or novels and find examples of solid, specific details that the authors have used as the start. Compare those stories with work that opens with more general Thesis Sentences. Notice how the specific detail can have a "teasing" quality that hooks the reader. And how the Thesis Sentence has a more "make believe" storytelling or yarn-spinning quality – more like a fairy tale. In some

fiction, that quality is perfect. Find examples where the Specific Detail or the Thesis Sentence fits the style of the overall story.

Reading Out Loud – Part One

In my dream world, you wouldn't be reading this on the internet. We would be sitting around a table, only seven or eight of us, and we'd each read our week's work out loud.

Reading out loud, you hear every bad decision you've made in your work. You hear where the story digresses and loses energy. Where you've gotten too vague. Or where you've hurried or used a trite, cliched phrase. You hear the lack of laughter or loud inhales or moans from your fellow writers – all those, the truest form of workshop feedback. Even the sighs or quick, loud sniffs of someone trying to not cry.

Or, reading out loud, you do hear all that involuntary, honest feedback.

While you'd read – in my dream world – you'd hold a pen in one hand and jot marks on the lines and words that felt wrong. That didn't "work" to get the effect you wanted. By the end of your reading, you'd know almost exactly what the rest of the workshop would be ready to praise or question about the piece.

So much about writing is about timing, and the only way I know to get that right is to read your work out loud for people.

Just so you remember, here it is again – Timing. Pace. Delivering your information in a script that people can follow – linear or nonlinear. Performing your work – or listening to good storytellers at parties or bars or dinners – you learn how to build tension and break it with humor. You learn how to engage people and relax them as you build your authority: head or heart authority, with facts or personal revelations.

This year, scientists published two studies that prove a reader's brain reacts to verbs in stories – hitting or kissing or chewing – that same way the brain would react if the reader's body were actually hitting, kissing or chewing. The motor cortex of the brain lights up with electrical activity just as if the reader were living the story, performing those actions. That alone should be enough reason for you to use verbs, to create action and make something happen in every scene or story.

Reading your work out loud, you can experiment with the flow of verbs until you produce a seamless chain of actions that will light-up your listener's motor cortex. You can find the perfect balance of Big Voice observations to Little Voice physical business – the hitting and kissing and chewing stuff.

In college, I worked as an intern for the local National Public Radio affiliate (KLCC) in Eugene, Oregon, and that newsroom was never silent. Each writer working on their news copy had to read the words out loud to make sure the newscaster could read them smoothly on air. Each intern would be hunched over their sheets of paper, their lips moving, their voice almost a whisper as they read, "Today, the state Senate tabled the progress on a bill that would legalize marijuana in the treatment of cancer…"

And just like in a good workshop, each intern would mark the places where the copy read rough. Where the sentences that were too long. Or, the quotes that needed attribution. All the parts that didn't work. And after that, it was re-write time.

Even now, I read every short story out loud. Doing book tour has become a way to "beta test" stories, to experiment with getting a bigger, better effect each time I read a story. By the end of a tour, after a couple dozen cities, I've marked up the original, printed copy of each story until it's almost illegible.

But those are the changes I make on my next re-write.

I mark the places where people laugh. I mark where the story needs to stop for a moment longer, a pause in the form of a bland chorus or a fragment of flashback reference (in "Guts" it's moments like the line: "What even the French won't talk about…"), these moments where the listeners needed time to comprehend a plot point that isn't stated by the narrator. Always, always, always, the goal is to bring the listeners to any realization a paragraph before the narrator states it.

And I mark the places where the audience needs the release of a laugh, to break the tension, before the story can build to an even more-terrible crisis.

In our time, stand-up comedians are the last oral storytellers. They learn their craft by experimenting and practicing in front of people. They learn when to pause and let a laugh build. Or let dread build. And they learn how to stoke a laugh and keep it going - and how to let that big moment exhaust itself before the story can begin, again. In good oral storytelling, the listener's participation – gasps or laughs or moans or bursts of applause – those become the device that transitions to the next aspect of the story.

The only other form of storytelling that comes close is "slam poetry." This summer, I read a half dozen collections of "slam-winning" poems, and most of those work better than most of current prose fiction. The brevity of each poem, plus the pacing and the controlled delivery – all those aspects, crafted to be told out loud – those make slam poems a fantastic form of storytelling.

All this fine-tuning, it's tough unless you have a group of listeners. A test audience. So in my dream world, you wouldn't be reading this on the internet. We would be sitting around a table, only seven or eight of us, and we'd each read our weeks work out loud.

On a therapeutic level, reading even a story-fied version of your current unresolved personal crisis, it helps you exhaust the related emotions that keep you frozen – stuck – too frightened to take action and find resolution. More on this aspect, in the December essay – Part Two, of this one.

On a clarity level, you find out quickly how important attribution is in dialogue. Oh yeah, all those unattributed quotes cascading down a page of text, they look smart and tight, but out-loud they'll confuse and piss off your listeners. This is why attribution is one of my personal Have-To's. You have to use attribution, for every line of dialogue. And I'll build my case for that in an upcoming essay.

On a poetic level, reading out loud, you get to hear the joy of hard "dentil" sounds – those popping sounds you make with your tongue against your teeth, those popping P's and K's and D's and T's. And you learn to avoid using too many soft S's or F or V sounds

in your work. Reading out loud, it's the parts of a story where you notice your spit spraying out past the microphone, it's those parts that keep the listener really hooked.

This last aspect – the popping, cracking, exploding sound of letters and words – takes us into the homework assignment.

As homework, find a copy of *The Ice At the Bottom of the World* by Mark Richard. This is a collection of the most poetic but dynamic, action-filled short stories I've ever read.

In stories like "Strays" and "Her Favorite Story," Richard plays with sounds the way a musician plays a melody on a piano, repeating the same vowels and consonants to create a music of words – that also tell a compelling story.

His work is less stories you'd tell, but more… ballads you'd sing.

In front of me, this copy of his book is probably the thirtieth one I've owned. The earlier ones, I've given away. For most of a year – when I'd first started writing – I carried a paperback copy with me, every time I left the house. That way, every place I might get stuck: on the bus, at work, at the laundry, in line at the grocery – I'd always have this thin book of incredible language to study.

Beyond just the music of his hard consonants and repeating vowels, Richard invents a "burnt tongue" language that only his characters speak. Each person talks a personal slang all their own. Just like most of us talk – okay, all of us. Every story in the book is a lesson in how to write things "wrong." Richard breaks every rule of grammar, but these "errors" make his characters more real than any amount of passive, physical description or tedious "told" backstory ever could.

So for homework, read the book. Read at least "Strays" out loud. And begin reading your own work out loud. AND do everything possible to join other people, around a table, and practice your work in front of listeners.

Reading Out Loud – Part Two

Consider that you always tell stories, you create stories and share them whether or not you call yourself a "writer."

Every moment you're awake or dreaming – you have what some cultures call your "Monkey Mind" chattering and yammering, trying to make sense of and resolve every sensory detail you encounter. That little voice that has to find a "meaning" in every event. That voice that replays every moment you've just lived.

Accepting this idea, your practice to become a better storyteller: more observant, more able to shape and present your stories, better at communicating to create a specific effect in your listener – whether or not you sell your work – that quest could give you a better life.

On an interesting side note, a recent study shows that advertisers and quick-cutting video editors might be exploiting the human need to watch and evaluate new events. According to this study, when we're faced with something new, something that doesn't "fit" in a series of preceding events, human beings must fixate on this new thing and watch it long enough to make sure it's not a dangerous predator.

Imagine, some primitive human or animal suddenly seeing a tiger or space alien on the veldt where there are usually only zebras. Of course you'd snap to attention, alert and soaking up every detail so you'd know whether to fight, run or relax. In this same way, we use a zillion sensory details to evaluate each person we meet. Friendly versus hostile. Sexy versus not. Young versus old.

Knowing this, advertising can flash from one detail to the next, quickly. Or film editors can cut rapidly, image after image, knowing that viewers have to watch. That this instinct to evaluate the danger of something new, this will keep us watching a cascade of rapid-fire images for our own self protection. Even if the product is something we'd never buy, our instinctual mind is scrambling to catch up with the images and sounds that

present the SUV or fast-food burger or exercise contraption as many ways as possible in 30 seconds.

So, consider that you have no option but to be a story teller. Through music or prose or video animation. That your mind has to make up stories in order to make sense out of the world around you. And consider that accepting that, building your skill as a storyteller might be your best way to function in the world.

Consider that – as a story teller – you use the events of your life; you're aware of, and exploiting them, instead of letting those events exploit you. Consider that it's the stories we can't tell, that we haven't the skills to make funny or entertaining, those stories we can't share and exhaust, those stories are the secrets that usually kill us.

With this in mind, writing becomes something beyond just a hobby or vocation.

No matter how much you bury your real-life in fiction – you can never write anything that's not some form of diary. It's an old saying in art that "Everything is a self portrait." I heard it from Tom Spanbauer, but he heard it somewhere else. Maybe Pablo Picasso. The source doesn't matter. The sentiment does. Nothing you'll take the time to conceive and execute isn't some aspect of you. Your experience and your education, even your physical and mental abilities shape how you see the world. And therefore what you create.

You are doomed to painting self portraits and writing diaries – the same way you're doomed to that chattering "Monkey Mind," that little voice in your head, always telling you what's good or bad or fat or slow or lovely. Every novel (or picture or song) is really veiled memoir.

Perhaps the only escape from that little voice is to embrace it. Accept that you're doomed to storytelling – in effect, experiencing your life and making stories out of it – and then use that impulse instead of letting it use you. In that way, the act of creating anything – a painting, an opera, a book or movie – overwhelms that annoying little voice

by forcing it to do something productive. To build something. Something that can be explored and crafted, shared and exhausted.

To do that, the creative person has to be aware, always listening and evaluating the little "Monkey Mind" voice as it tells stories about the world. The creative person uses this increasing self awareness – how he or she reacts, why they judge, why they react emotionally – to write a report or diary or "novel" that exploits that annoying, never-ending little voice.

Again, the creative person stays self-aware and uses the "Monkey Mind" instead of being used by it.

Accept the idea that you're always depicting yourself – some story of crisis or identity or survival – and use the practice of research and writing and presenting your "work" as a way to explore and exhaust your emotions related to issues you can't resolve or tolerate.

This is another reason to read your work out loud. Actually speaking it will help you exhaust and vent – in a productive way. The speaking will help turn that personal issue into a product crafted for an audience. Speaking will remove the story from you.

Embracing your need to tell stories, start to see it as a "craft." Then, use this detachment as a route and permission to dig up your personal shit and make it into "art." Again, by holding the issue at arms length, you can have more freedom and license to explore it – to make it funny or exciting or tragic. Plus, by crafting it into something larger than strict memoir, you turn your personal issue into a story that doesn't exclude others. A bigger, fictionalized story lets other people see, explore and exhaust their own issues.

But the first step is to become self-aware. Watch yourself when you're reacting, and notice what triggers your emotions. Figure out why you're so attached to this trigger. And begin to turn all that unresolved emotion into a story you can share and exhaust.

Another important aspect of writing about personal issues, is the release, the continuing therapeutic "reward" you get just from the research and writing – that will

keep you coming back to the work. You'll be so much more invested in your writing projects. You'll discover and accept so many hidden aspects of yourself that getting your work published and getting paid money for it will be beside the point.

The writing process will be the point.

Consider that, writing this way, using your un-shareable stories and personal shit to make a crafted "product," then sharing and exhausting that product in a workshop, that will make writing fiction its own reward.

Now, for homework, ask yourself: "How do I tell time?"

Because you don't use abstracts – hours, minutes, seconds – what do you use in everyday life to tell time?

Me, I usually section my morning by cups of coffee. Three cups equal one hour. My shower and shaving equals a half hour. My morning emails, about half an hour.

Watch yourself and take note of how you tell time. By tasks accomplished – I can write two letters in an hour. By the sun – when the bedroom curtains turn pale blue, then it's time to get up. By entertainment – driving into town usually takes about three radio songs. Figure out how you tell time, then use this awareness to establish a different way for a character to tell time. Some method not your own, a method maybe unique to this character and no one else in the world.

Really, the same way you're writing a diary when you're writing a novel, when your characters describe time, what they're really describing is themselves.

So, what does a half-hour mean to your character. A whole Sunday morning?

First, be aware and dissect your own perception. Then, invent a perception unique to a character.

If you're up for a second homework assignment, please look back over the topics discussed this past year – establishing authority, hiding a gun, avoiding 'thought' verbs,

writing on-the-body, Big voice vs. Little voice, etc. – and use the mid-month Q & A to ask about aspects of those previous topics.

Nuts and Bolts: Punctuation with Gesture and Attribution

How often do you stand stock-still with another frozen, paralyzed person and hold a conversation? Maybe only during the hottest moment of the hottest argument you've ever had. Maybe never.

Probably never.

Watch yourself. Watch a movie. Look for the specific bits of physical "business" that characters perform as they speak. Look for the tasks that keep their hands busy, and create a distraction from the conversation at hand, thereby adding tension and visual interest to the scene.

Two people talking gets almost instantly boring, no matter how clever and witty their dialogue. Even stage plays, with very little room for action, use gesture and expressions to pace the dialogue and add another layer of meaning to what's being said.

Despite the fact you seldom just "talk" to someone, and despite watching a million actors peel apples or drive cars or brush their hair while they speak their lines – too many writers will depict long passages of nothing but quotes.

Yes, this can look smart on the page. Like free-verse poetry. With no physical action or sensation or attribution (those "he said/she said" markers that keep events organized in the reader's mind).

If your work seems flat, or confusing or dull – add the physical businesses or "pauses" that will create tension. The way a moment of silence during a piece of music, it makes you wait, expecting the next note, and creates a sense of relief and payoff when that note finally arrives… that's how gesture and attribution can control timing better than standard punctuation: a comma or period or semicolon.

Inserting a bit of physical action – maybe one step in a process that's completed over the course of the scene (remember, breading the pork chop during the Suicide Hotline

scene in *Survivor*?) – that lets you control the exact length and intensity of the tension before that next "musical note" or moment of communication thru dialogue.

Inserting attribution: "So? Now that you're dead," he says, "what are you going to do with your life?" Just attribution gives a bland moment of quiet in the reader's mind. Compared to the quote, the simple pronoun and verb don't occur. My bet is the reader doesn't even subvocalize them. Doesn't even read them. More likely, the reader's vision 'jumps' those two words or 'skims' them, landing even harder on the most important part of the quote.

Now the homework. I almost hate to say this, but: Watch some movies.

I'd tell you to watch some live theater, but it's pretty hard to find. As a compromise, you might look for movies based on plays: *The Glass Menagerie* or *Suddenly Last Summer* are easy to find. But whatever you watch, be aware of the action or task or gestures that the actors use to space-out or pace their dialogue. These can be as subtle as eye movements, or as obvious as arriving in a scene late, therefore panting and apologizing and sweating from their hurry. Or entering from a rain storm, giving them lots of coat shaking and hair mopping or umbrella furling.

Only television seems to do this poorly, especially soap operas. There, actors still seem to stand still and say lines back-and-forth for the camera. The equivalent of stiff, boring fiction.

Then, watch yourself and the people around you. What do you do as you speak or listen? Do you leaf through magazines. When you're on the telephone, do you speak while petting the dog? Dusting the furniture? Picking your ear and sniffing your finger?

Then, start using physical business and attribution to better control your passages of dialogue.

When You Can't Find a Writing Workshop

It never fails. When you're stuck at work, doing some mindless task or staring at a computer screen, ideas fill your head and you dream of writing. Then, when you're at home with your cup of tea, and it's quiet, and you have time and blank paper – nothing. You might have pages of notes and ideas, but there's dirty laundry to wash. The phone rings. Dust coats everything.

Why is it so easy to daydream at work or school – then, impossible to do the same at home?

Okay, I don't know why – but I accept the fact that I write more when I'm "trapped" in a very specific type of setting.

In my perfect writing trap, it's like this: Very little distraction (no television or radio); enforced seating; a space foreign to me; a lot of other people engaged in some kind of learning or testing; the minimal comforts are provided; and I can't easily leave for at least an hour.

To get writing done, I used to sign up for real estate seminars – really sales seminars where it cost nothing to attend but you'd be pitched a system you could buy. Or I'd go to retirement planning seminars – again, free meetings in hotel ballrooms where you'd be pitched something to buy. I'd sit in the Department of Motor Vehicles – which is especially crowded and slow during the last few days of each month. I'd even sit in church. In the back pews, but writing longhand in a notebook. I'd sit in during the all-day state bar exams if I could. The LSATs or the GSATs.

In all these places, the distractions are minimal. The environment is disciplined and monitored. Everything is controlled – except my imagination.

You're surrounded by people, most of them focussed on learning something.

The room is quiet and comfortable – except for a presentation of some kind you can ignore.

And it isn't easy to escape. Especially if you're sitting between people in the center of a row.

Like at work or school, you're trapped. So you day dream. If you bring a pen and notebook – you write. That's when my imagination goes nuts: when it's the only option I have to entertain myself.

Many people say the most important thing a writers workshop does is give people the "permission" to write. The workshop setting makes it okay to write. It gives you the license to write. But if you can't find a workshop, consider using the structure of any other "classroom" to settle yourself and get permission to write on a regular basis. This might be a church service. Or even a support group – I've seen people writing in AA meetings. Or any of a million sales pitch seminars. These are all focused, public settings where you can sit for structured lengths of time – writing.

Hell, wear a tie. Wear the clothes you'd wear to work or church. Make this a real ritual for you – but always take a pen and notebook. Make this little window of time your place to reflect and imagine. Hunt out the most-boring place you can find.

And the benefit goes beyond finding this "permission." Most meetings are lead by ministers or salesmen trained in public speaking. Listening, you can borrow their rhetorical devices for structuring information. You can pick out how they transition from one topic to the next. Or, how they build tension or gets laughs. How they establish head or heart authority. Their choruses.

The best sales pitches seem to be great stories. Testimonials. This might include people standing to "witness" on the behalf of the product. They tell their story: how the doohickey changed their life. How no-money-down real estate investing made them rich. Then, what they spent their new money to buy: What to them demonstrates "rich". Boats, cars, second homes. It's wonderful, revealing stuff. Real human emotions on parade. Greed or fear or joy.

That's just not going to happen around you, sitting alone at home.

Plus, sitting around you is a sea of physical detail. If you need to describe a certain color of hair. Or a hand or shoe or mouth. You have this huge inventory of detail and gesture that you don't have at home.

In short, if you can't find a workshop to keep you writing – borrow the structure from some other "classroom." Trap yourself among other people in a setting where you're forced to entertain yourself. Re-create the kind of boredom that leads you to daydream. Attend this church service or support group or seminar at least once each week, and see if you don't get more writing done.

This is going to make me sound a little piggy, maybe just insensitive, but I have to share this resource I've just discovered.

Recently, I've been shopping for rural property – the dream of creating a writers retreat center still lives – and I've noticed something about property presented for sale by the actual owners. When you look at property represented by a real estate agent, the agent describes the land and building in fairly dry, legal terms. Square feet. Zoning restrictions. Room dimensions. Well water flow in gallons-per-minute. All the boring-assed abstract terms I avoid in my story telling.

But when an owner shows their property… This weekend, at a farm near Goldendale, Washington, the owner talked about a stooped plum tree in the backyard. How some years it produced no plums, some years, tons. How when she and her husband bought the farm twenty years ago, the tree with just a stick growing beside the garage. How, they'd fenced the backyard and created a warmer, sheltered garden. Then, the tree had really branched out and flowered. Now it bore more fruit than they could eat or can.

The owner talked twice as long about that tree than about the furnace in the house. She told stories about each of the bedrooms. She told about being pregnant with each of

her three children. Every moulding and corner of the house had a story. Every plant in the yard. When an owner presents the property, they tell stories – in effect demonstrating, "Heart Authority."

When a real estate agent presents, they tell legal details – or, "Head Authority."

For homework, look for places where people tell stories. And look for the "memory cues" that trigger those stories. Consider going to yard sales and asking, "What can you tell me about this baby crib… tea pot… bloody dagger… whatever." Look for ways to coax good stories from people. Most people are dying to talk, to tell their stories and exhaust their emotions about the past.

I'm not saying to pester and abuse people – but just be open and give permission for them to talk about the history of the car or house or sofa they're selling. This is best done face-to-face. Whatever they describe, it's likely they'll be describing themselves. As Tom Spanbauer would say, "Everything you say is a self portrait."

If you're working on a first draft, get it done. Push through it until the horizontal journey is done. Find the boring setting that will "trap" you on a regular basis until you're done.

Learning from the Cliches… Then Leaving Them Behind

This week, a trainer I've hired gave me a length of white, cotton string and said to suck in my stomach and tie the string, tight, around my waist. All day, the string's under my shirt, cutting into my skin unless I stand straight and hold my abdominal and lower back muscles tight. Every night, a deep red scar runs around my middle. The string is the kind you'd tie to a helium balloon. It's like the strings that Catholic boys wear under their clothes in high school, "St. Joseph's Strings," to remind them not to masturbate. Or the string that "lay" Franciscan's wear inside their clothes, knotted three times to remind them of chastity, poverty and obedience – the vows of St. Francis. The scar it leaves is like the red mark left by the elastic top of your socks.

Someday, if I make it a habit to hold my stomach in, my back straight, there will be no scar at the end of the day. That's what the trainer says. The string is the reminder. Every time I slouch, it cuts into me. I hate this string.

Walking home from the gym, I shake. My clothes hang, heavy with sweat, and the wind blows off the river. My teeth rattle as I stand, waiting for a traffic light to change. The string cutting into the wet skin under my t-shirt, my hands twist together, the fingers thin and red with cold. When I look down, I see it: I'm "wringing my hands…"

Here was a phrase I'd read in stories my whole life, but I'd never "wrung my hands." Always, I'd just accepted the cliché and moved on, hoping my payoff would be something bigger and better – later in the story.

In the cold wind, the traffic light turned green and then, red, and I just stood there, still looking at my hands, my fingers twisted together: This was "*wringing my hands*"…

Until that moment, that phrase, the shorthand shortcut for something real and physical, it had just been a symbol I only pretended to understand. In Tom Spanbauer's workshop, I could never use the phrase. To Tom, "wringing your hands" would be called "Received Text." Like a cliché, but more subtle. The phrase might not be as bad as

"warm as a summer's day" or "pretty as a picture," but the phrase was still a short-cut, or pathway well-worn by a lot of writers and easy to feed into a story. It's easy, but it creates no sympathetic physical reaction in the reader. It doesn't re-invent the world in a way unique to your character. The action, and the entire physical moment still needs to be unpacked and inventoried, translated into a series of sensory details that will create a reaction in the reader.

If you've heard something depicted one way, it's your job to depict it a new way. Based on your character's history and education and family… what is the unique way he or she would describe "wringing your hands"?

Beyond that, my personal taboo is hyphenated phrases such as "he gave me an I-told-you-so look" or "she did a maybe-next-time shrug." Yes, true, this type of phrase is everywhere, it looks clever, but it still seems like a cheat. Not just to the reader – but to the writer, who gets to keep slouching and never builds the habit and ability to invent every moment according to a character.

Even worse are the moments and details that writers describe as "beyond description." Lazy, lazy writers.

Of course, writing your first draft, sometimes you need to slide for the moment, to put a "placeholder" adjective or phrase in place and keep going until the end of the draft. At those times, consider using the most-bland placeholder possible. I use "??????" to remind myself that I still need a beat of description or time – maybe a gesture to remind the reader that the character has hands and feet – but I'll insert that later. Rather than fill the blank at that instant with a cliché, or "received text," I'll mark the beat I still need with something that's impossible to miss during my rewrite. At some point, I'll find the perfect way to describe someone's nose, or a good physical gesture, then the question marks come out.

Now that I've ranted about not using clichés…

Now, I'll say it's okay to copy other storytellers. One of the best self-teaching methods is to "ape" or mimic the style of writers you enjoy. When I started writing as an adult, I wrote for months, imitating Dorothy Parker's short story style. Then John Steinbeck's. Then, Stephen King. It was kind-of a joke, how everyone in Tom Spanbauer's workshop sooner or later sounded like a cheap copy of Tom. All our stories had the same pace and "voice" as Tom's work. We made the same intentional "burnt tongue" mistakes and used similar choruses. We learned to write the way so many apprentice painters learn to copy masterpieces in museums. This is a fun, effective way to learn another writer's techniques from the inside, duplicating them until they come naturally in your own work. Then, you can create variations on the techniques, breaking the rules and combining them with the techniques you've learned by copying other writers. That way, by mixing and sampling and copying – not just writers but people you hear speaking, telling stories next to you at Starbucks – that's how you develop a personal, signature "voice" for your own work.

Don't worry, even if you become a parrot, echoing the voice of another writer in everything you write – you'll get past that. You'll get bored and evolve. Another voice will arrive to teach you something new. Most of us seem to create ourselves from the behavior modeled by our peers. We pick and choose speech patterns and gestures and mimic them. The ones that work, we incorporate into our daily presentation. It's the same with writing styles.

Just always be aware – keep some kind of string tied around your writing waist to remind you: Mimic to learn. But reject clichés. Always find a new way to present your character's world and make it fresh and unique for your reader.

For homework, swear off using clichés or hyphenated phrases for the next six months. This is where a workshop helps. Other writers can help you recognize phrases and shortcuts you've picked up from reading.

At the same time, read a short story by a writer you enjoy and write a different story, a new story, but in the same style. Write as if you were Hemmingway or Hunter S. Thompson. Get inside their style, and "borrow" what works for you. In a way, this allows you to think in the same patterns as the author you're aping. According to friends of mine, who work with addictions, the more you follow the same thought patterns to express or resolve something, the more those patterns or routes become "burned" in your mind. Thus, the more likely it is you'll follow that same path in the future. My addict friends call this "kindling," like the small wood that starts a larger fire. The more you drink a beer to solve your stress, the more likely you'll be to always drink a beer – or many beers – to deal with your problems.

With this in mind, "kindle" a path in your brain that follows the writing patterns of Hemmingway. Burn a Dorothy Parker route in your head. You might get stuck in a "Charles Dickens rut" but you'll get out. Someday, you'll take off your shirt and find no ugly red scar around your waist, but your stomach and back will be stronger. After that, you'll have one more method or tool or approach to use in creating your own voice.

If it helps to remind you, tie a string around your waist, under your clothes. We'll all have the same red scar. In honor of my trainer, you can call this the "Derrick rut."

Talking Shapes: The Quilt Versus the Big O

"The straight line is God-less."

I wish I'd said that, but Tom Spanbauer said it first, almost every week in his workshop. In response, I'd always say, "The linear story is dead."

Starting with this month's topic, I'll be discussing the different "shapes" you can use to present a story. As a kid, you told linear stories, where the plot started at A and moved: "and then the dog bit me, and then the sun came up, and then and then and then" until you arrived at Z. That's the straight line Tom can't stand. The linear story I love to kill.

Over the next few months, we'll look at ways to monkey with that line. My first story-telling experiment was the "circle." The big O shape of Fight Club – versus the "quilt" form I've used in *Haunted*.

Between the two, I've tried other forms, but we'll get to those in upcoming essays.

To start with the O, it's the form that Fitzgerald used to tell *The Great Gatsby*. Capote used it for *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. It's a classic shape for plots, and I used it for *Fight Club* because it's easy to set up and follow.

You start at the end or the crisis of the story. *Gatsby* begins with the narrator, bitter and old, talking about how he used to be a good guy. In school, his peers used to confess to him because he was such a good listener. He dreamed of moving to the East Coast and making his fortune. Instead, he's back in the boring Midwest he wanted to escape. Now, Nick Carraway just wants folks to shut up and leave him alone. Nick demonstrates how he's an asshole. That's how the book opens. Nick's heart has been broken beyond repair, and then he tells you how that happened…

At that point, we drop into flashback, and we spend the rest of the book trying to return to the bitter present, ending when Nick turns thirty and leaves his dreams and youth behind.

Breakfast at Tiffany's begins with the narrator hearing a rumor that his long-lost friend, Holiday Golightly, has been seen in an isolated African safari camp. The proof is a photograph of a sculpture of a woman who stopped at a village in the middle of nowhere, in the company of two sick English men on safari. It's the thinnest possible proof she's alive, but the photograph excites the narrator. Just the possibility that the exciting, daring, dazzling Holly Golightly is alive – it's too incredible. But it's enough to bait the reader into a long flashback that will depict this strange, wonderful woman – long gone, most likely dead or insane – but still so compelling that her old friends talk about her, keeping her alive with their stories. At that point, again, we drop into a long flashback to explain how we arrived at this sad, broken moment.

In *Fight Club*, it's the same shape. You start in the crisis, then drop into flashback. The advantage to a "circle" shape includes a gripping, compelling opening scene. This scene is an assurance of where the plot must go – for beginning writers, that's a huge comfort, to know where this mess must somehow end.

Beyond just a strong opening and a comfort to the author, the O shape admits right up front that what's happening on the page is a story. The narrator is established, and the storytelling context is set. The paradox of any story is the fact it's being told in the past-tense. The real events have already happened. Someone survived to tell the story. In the face of that, it would seem impossible to create dramatic tension. Still, that's the goal.

Some authors will ignore that given fact – the story is a dead thing being repeated – and just plunge into the plot. That's most standard, linear fiction. Instead of denying the "dead" past-tense nature of a story, consider that it's more effective to admit that fault up front. That's the most-powerful thing the O allows the writer to do. You create a fake person to tell a fake story, but by doing so you give that story a greater sense of reality.

Readers know the teller shapes the tale. By providing at least a glimpse of the teller, your story gains credibility.

All of that is built into the O shape of a story: A gripping first scene. Assurance of where the plot must go. And a context and teller for the story.

With *Haunted*, I've taken my first shot at a story shape I'll call the Quilt shape.

A friend of mine, Whitney Otto, wrote a book called *How to Make an American Quilt*, and since then she complains about how readers want to discuss quilt making with her. Whitney doesn't seem to give a shit about quilts. She just needed a good device for uniting a series of different stories. She found a book about quilting, and the metaphor was born. Her stories became the "squares" she could sew together, to make a larger quilt. That's what I call a "Quilt" shape: A novel that provides a context for telling many short stories.

The first novel that I recognized as quilted short stories was *Generation X*. In chapter after chapter, the characters sit around telling each other stories. Beside swimming pools. At desert picnics. In this same way, every musical play provides the matrix for song-and-dance numbers to occur. It's a kind-of variety show or vaudeville that consists of different types of acts, all combined to serve a larger narrative line.

In simplest terms, *Haunted* is a rip-off of the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line*. The context is a group of folks trapped in a theater, on stage, and performing different types of stories that they hope will save them. Some stories occur as moments of stand-up monologue. Some as songs. Some as dance. And some narratives stretch across the entire length of the narrative, revealed bit-by-bit, between the shorter, self-contained stories. This mimics the different textures of acts that made up a vaudeville show, varying from low comedy to high drama, tragedy to comedy.

A talent show is the same thing: an "envelope" drama that holds together several short performances. The central question is: Who will win? In *A Chorus Line,* who will get the jobs? This central question lets you collage together a collection of very different acts. The different plot points of your envelope allow you to transition between the shorter stories. To cull characters. Tell medium-length stories.

The short "acts" allow you to leave the immediate setting and moment of the envelope story. These tangents give you regular, frequent dramatic climaxes. And these story "asides" create a sense of time passing in the reality of the "envelope" story.

Of course, both the O-shaped story and the Quilt-shaped story have their drawbacks. The O shape is pretty common. It's become a little clichéd to open with the "gripper" scene as a "hook." And the Quilt shape can be clumsy and labored. Just watch older musicals like *Forty-Second Street*, where totally dissimilar musical numbers are lumped together in a mythical show that the players are rehearsing. Any leftover songs, they get tacked onto the finale, as the "real" show is presented on opening night. Even in the *Chorus Line* movie, the "sex" song that was added to lengthen the show, it has nothing to do with dancing or dancers.

Writing *Haunted*, I wanted each story to include a death – so the teller would have to live with the "ghost" of an unresolved relationship. And each short story would have to include some form of food. And each would take a new look at the way shame drives people into isolation. Even with these common goals in mind, some stories might seem to be pulled out of a hat. Too wildly different. But with a Quilt-shaped story, it's always a balance between the envelope serving the stories – or the stories serving the envelope. Ultimately, you decide which is the stronger: the stories or the envelope, and you let the winner win.

For homework, look around and find stories told in the O shape or the Quilt shape. *Tales of the Crypt* is a classic quilt. In a way, so is *The Joy Luck Club*, where women play mah jong while they tell each other tales. Almost any film that opens with a gripper scene, then flashes back to a long "discovery" process is a big O.

Beyond that, look at your own work, and restructure it to follow an O or Quilt form.

No storytelling form is perfect. We'll discuss a half dozen more shapes. But almost any shape beats the straight line of: and then, and then, and then…

Textures of Information

On nights in workshop, when no one brings pages, we just talk. But instead of talking about book and writing, we tend to talk about movies. This week, someone rented a copy of the documentary movie *Trekkies*, and I watched it with friends.

It's still just storytelling. Almost everything is storytelling in some form. So, why not borrow the techniques and forms from other, real-world stories, and use those forms to tell our stories?

Watching *Trekkies*, you could rattle off a dozen different "textures" of information or types of story telling. We have the main, through-line characters – including the fourteen-year-old, who acts as our guide through all things Star Trek. He appears and disappears during the show, resurfacing usually to introduce a new aspect of the story, or to physically lead the camera through a journey along a convention floor. Otherwise, he forms a broken, or interrupted, but otherwise on-going story that spans the entire film.

It's interesting, but despite how much time we spend with "the kid," his name never sticks in my mind. Please note how unimportant names can be to a good character. In the film, we'll recall the kid's passion and his language, even his hair and obsession with costumes, but seldom his name. So keep in mind, the actions and language and appearance of a character is what the audience is more likely to retain. Names are over-rated.

Another "texture" of information are the short "anecdotes" told my people who appear just once. Some are famous people, some known by their real names, like Leonard Nemoy. But more are known by their character names. Like Scotty. And still others, we know only by their strange costume or the story they present.

Still another texture is the "tour" sequences, where the audience is lead through a Star Trek convention floor, among tables of items for sale. Or we're led through a dentist's office decorated in a Star Trek theme. Or a couple's home, decorated to look like

an episode.

Still, another texture of information is a "collage" of visual images, quick shots set to music or voice over. Another texture is segments of "how-to" information, when someone demonstrates a process or skill – like the man singing "Klingon folks songs."

My point is that the documentary is a mix of storytelling forms, cut so quickly that no single form has to carry too much weight. If something bores the audience, there's always a new "act" to replace it. Every few seconds, the texture varies. In that way, the *Trekkies* documentary mimics vaudeville or variety shows.

My point is – why shouldn't books do that?

Just consider the different forms of written or oral storytelling:

Recipes. Recipes work great in stories, nothing new there. From the cooking in *Heartburn* to the explosives in *Fight Club*, that's still recipes.

Lists. From the faded guest list in *The Great Gatsby*, to the name-dropped list of celebrities in *Glamourama*. Here's a way to introduce a lot of proper nouns that form a kind-of poetry. It can imply a real-world sense of non-fiction, by using actual people. Or it can imply the sense of time passing, as Fitzgerald does, his list representing a summer of many parties that all melt together in the narrator's mind.

Definitions. Inventing words and defining them by context and usage.

Consider also epitaphs, graffiti, poetry. Jargon. Slogans. Advertising. All the non-fiction forms of dictionaries and encyclopedias. The call and response of religious ceremonies. Anecdotes. Speeches. The staging or camera directions built into screenplays. Prayers and magic spells. Those little "fabric care" labels sewn into your clothes. The legal warnings printed on a pack of cigarettes. Dance instructions. Street directions. Tour guide speeches. Greeting card messages. Fortune cookie fortunes. T-shirt sayings. Tattoos.

You might not want to write an entire novel in tattoos, but they could make a good device for transitioning from one topic or scene to the next.

Consider name tags – "Patricia Runningbear" – as very short stories. Photo captions. Headlines. Autopsy reports. School report cards. Even the stuff that people write with their finger, in the dirt on your car, that's a form of written story telling. Even the language of classified ads in the newspaper. The billboards on a freeway. Junk mail. Chain letters.

You have rules – which worked great in *Fight Club*. Pledges. Vows. Contracts. All of them, just different forms of non-fiction storytelling.

The point is to be aware of the countless textures available, and to use them to vary your work. Consider this as "sampling," the way a DJ might record real-world noises or speeches and mix them into music. Instead of just a single running "little voice" or "big voice" narrative, present your information in textures you "borrow" from other less-traditional forms of storytelling.

By using a variety of different textures to tell your story, you don't just keep the reader's interest. You also borrow the credibility of the real-world device. You establish authority by borrowing forms that have authority. And you help ground your story in a sense of the real world. Another spooky side-effect, is how you can undermine the authority of the original, real-world device. By using the coded public announcements in *Choke*, I hoped I could make people question any future announcements they'd hear in airports or hospitals. In that same book, the clocks that use fake bird calls to tell time – those clocks have undermined the credibility of the real birds.

For homework, watch some documentaries, and inventory the different forms of storytelling. I've noticed that independent documentary folks are much more creative than Hollywood feature film people, especially when it comes to depicting a story from several angles, in a non-linear way, keeping it interesting despite the "talking head" nature

of the information. There's not much action, so the storytelling forms become even more important.

For another good example of textures, take a look at Stephen King's Carrie, and how he samples and mixes non-fiction forms to document the disastrous prom.

Then, be aware of all the textures of storytelling you encounter in a day, a week, two weeks. At Starbucks, this week, they've set up these small video monitors that pay endless looping infomercials of people making coffee at home. Folks standing in line, waiting to order, they have to face these video testimonials for Starbucks coffee-brewing machines. Occasionally, the overhead music pauses, and a soothing voice says something like, "You're listening to the Starbucks music channel…" and gives directions for buying the day's ambient music.

Effective Similes

The writer Joy Williams says, "A writer must be smart but not too smart. He must be dumb enough to break himself to harness." In July, those words are especially true. In summer, most workshops fall apart. No one brings new pages. Most of writing isn't the brainstorming, exciting flashes of idea that come so fast. Most of writing is the moment-by-moment choice of details that will create your physical reality on the page.

Even now, I'm only aware of the music playing (country and western), the rushing sound of the fan, the keyboard, and the computer screen. A limited number of physical details make up every reality – one smell (on none), one texture, one sound. One gesture or nervous tic. If you can get those right – choose them and depict them well – your scene will write itself.

As an aside, ask yourself: "What is your character doing when he or she isn't doing anything?" Again, what's happening with hands, feet, tongue, breathing?

This is the plodding, hit-or-miss, try-and-fail, job of writing and re-writing.

That said, I hate similes. Those phrases that compare one thing to another. "Her hair had the softness of rabbit's fur." Or, "His cheeks were like raw meat."

Anytime you want to use a simile, a metaphor will usually work better. Stronger. Instead of: "Being married to Jim was *like* driving five years down a dirt road"… the stronger version is: "Being married to *Jim* was five years of driving down a dirt road." Or better yet, "Being married to Jim left you shaky as a five-year drive down a dirt road."

But if you're determined to use a simile, try the following:

Avoid using forms of the verb "is." As in, "Her car was green as a traffic light." Or, "His job is as boring as church." Instead, unpack the "is" verb and determine the quality you want to highlight with the comparison. For example even, "Her car *looked* (or "shined" or "streaked past") green as a traffic light." Or, "His job *felt* as boring as sitting in church." In short, unpack the verbs that link one subject with the other.

Limit your similes. Every time you compare something inside of a scene to something that's not present, you distract your reader – taking them out of the moment – and losing energy. "The preacher's hands were like pale birds," forces us to picture birds, then maybe doves, maybe some other white birds, pigeons, nesting or flying, blue sky, clouds, and we're lost. To avoid this, use only your strongest similes, and try to reuse them. Consider, "The preacher's pale hands curled together in his lap, nested still and tight as a pair of dead birds." Again, unpack the verbs – exactly *how* is one thing similar to the other. And describe the actual item before comparing it to something else.

Beyond that, consider monkeying with your similes. If you have to use a comparison, linger on it, over-do it. I loved doing this in *Lullaby*. For example, "Her blouse was the same pink as strawberry sherbet, but sherbet served on a green Haviland dessert plate on a tablecloth of Belgian lace beside a window overlooking Paris." Whether you pile up the qualifiers this way, or find another method to over-extend and re-invent your similes, they'll still be stronger than too many, simple, distracting comparisons.

Most important: Rephrase your similes to avoid using the word "like." Consider: "The woman breathed fast as a dog, panting." Dropping words is a very "voicy" human tendency. Not every "blank as blank" comparison has to include every "as." Or, "The man stood the same height as the door beside him." A comparison with no "like." Or, "How Brenda swatted the fly, without looking, she could've been swatting Russ."

Now, use similes if you must, but don't let them weaken your story.

This brings us to three types of words to still avoid:

"Like" comparisons.

"Is" and "has" verbs ("the dog had a limp" is never has strong as "the dog walked with a limp").

And, the dreaded "thought" verbs such as, "knew, realized, believed, worried, understood," that let you spoon feed your reader, instead of letting the reader think.

For homework, take a printed hard copy of your work outside. A story or a whole manuscript. Carry it around to the beach or work or the airport, and line edit, looking for the above weaknesses.

Strike out the word "like," every time you find it. Then, rephrase the sentence to make it stronger. Keep marking your hard copy until the weather turns to rain, or you get a blistering sunburn – then, you'll have the permission you need to stay indoors and revise your work. After that, print another hard copy and get back outside.

If you're serious about writing, this summer you might look for the book *Copy and Compose* by Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester. The edition I have is copyrighted 1969, so it's a tough book to track down. My thanks to Erik Hedegaard of *Rolling Stone*, who recommended it. Here's a simple guide to rhetoric and dozens of different ways you can vary sentence structure for a better effect.

Talking Shapes: The Thumbnail

A paradox of storytelling is: How does a character tell a story, with full knowledge of how it will end, but with the immediacy that keeps the reader in the present moment of the action? Stories are told after the fact. The teller has already made the journey, and been changed by the process, but the reader has not. So, again, how does the storyteller acknowledge the fact she has survived? She is wise and enlightened. And how does she revert and tell the story from the perspective of the innocent, unenlightened person who has to go back and make the journey with the reader?

Consider what I'll call the 'thumbnail' form of structuring a story. You've seen this a few times. The best example is the newsreel shown in the beginning of the film Citizen Kane. But it's also demonstrated with the nifty computer graphics model used at the beginning of the film Titanic. In "Kane," we see the entire plot, summarized and condensed into a quick 'thumbnail' view. In Titanic, we see the ship hit the iceberg, flounder, split in half and sink. All the mechanics of the plot climax are shown. There will be no big surprises. Charles Foster Kane will die. The Titanic will sink.

In all of Tom Spanbauer's novels, the first chapter is a form of 'thumbnail.' In *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon*, we see the narrator, "Shed," on a normal morning, doing chores, but salted into this action is a constant stream of references to future events. In this way, Tom demonstrates full knowledge of what is to come. And he baits the reader with the promise of interesting, exciting events.

You could also call this an 'overture' form of storytelling. In the same way an overture presents small samples of the entire score, the 'thumbnail' opening chapter offers teasing glimpses of the entire plot. It's a pleasant introduction to the material, but it also manages some difficult storytelling tasks.

First, it creates tension. Consider the opening of the film American Beauty, the long establishing shot with voiceover that announces the main character will die on this day.

In a way, this lessens tension by telling us the resolution, but it creates even more tension by assuring us that our time will not be wasted. Big stuff is going to happen here. This will be a wild ride.

Second, it uses expository storytelling in a contained way that allows for more subtle storytelling after that point. The ship WILL break in half. Kevin Spacey WILL die. Beyond that initial expository section, the characters get to unpack the story and demonstrate the events in a more relaxed, natural way. In a way, their job is to make us forget the ending we know will happen.

Third, it creates a greater sense of authority and realism by acknowledging the nature of stories. The actual events are not happening as you read. A story is always a residue, a leftover of reality. Most stories begin at the first event, never admitting they're told in retrospect, maybe because the author fears losing tension and immediacy. But imagine the Titanic story if you didn't know the ending up front. It might seem terrible and contrived. All these melodramatic events, love and power struggles, leading to a disaster that trumps everything. Consider that this is also why the film Magnolia had to start with a "thumbnail" that discussed coincidence and synchronicity – so when the frogs rained down, the audience wouldn't cry "foul."

The stories that can admit their 'leftover' nature, they introduce us to the storyteller, and they make the unreal seem real. The unbelievable become believable.

Before you launch into telling a story in the 'thumbnail' form, consider the following: you'll be writing the first chapter, last. You'll need to see where everything will go before you can hint at it with full knowledge. And, you do NOT want to overdo that hinting. Too often, students in Tom's workshop try to mimic his opening chapters, including too many references to coming events. The effect is confusing and annoying and makes no sense until the reader's finished the book and gone back to reread that opening chapter.

What seems to work best for an opening 'thumbnail' is to present it inside a limited physical scene. Put your narrator in a setting, doing a simple task, and allow the

references to occur within the structure of these simple landmarks. You reader will more likely tolerate teasing, confusing glimpses of the future if he can understand the physical setting of the storyteller. So, you can tease, but give your reader enough landmarks to hold onto. Balance the unreal moments of the up-coming future with the real details of the tangible present.

For homework, notice the stories told with an opening 'thumbnail' scene that summarizes the plot. Note, these are different than the "O" stories which begin near the climax and drop into flashback, then progress back to the climax. The 'thumbnail' will give away most – if not all – of the coming plot in a contained, expository way.

Take something long-ish you've finished and write a 'thumbnail' first scene or chapter for it. Or, take an existing book and write a 'thumbnail' new first chapter for it.

Remember, ground your telling in a tangible scene so you can tease without annoying your reader.

Again, summer can be the worst time to write, but you can still get some work done. Every time you walk through the garden, pull a few weeds. Keep a hard copy of your work at hand, and line edit. Even a few words every day will accumulate. What's most important is you'll maintain the practice of storytelling. As the weather turns bad, and your fellow writers come back to workshop, you'll be ready to present your work.

Again, no storytelling form is perfect. We'll discuss a half dozen more shapes. But almost any shape beats the straight line of: and then, and then, and then…

Talking Shapes: The Cycle

In the first few weeks of his writers workshop, Tom Spanbauer used to hold weekend work parties. Workshop members would show up on Saturday morning, wearing gloves and boots and we'd help Tom clear the littered property around his house in Southwest Portland. We pulled blackberry vines and hauled rusted metal to the dump for recycling. We raked up broken glass and bagged piles of garbage. Tom made tuna sandwiches, and we quit by the late afternoon. No one was paid, and we still had to pay our workshop dues – back then, twenty dollars per week to attend the Thursday night meeting around Tom's kitchen table, which grew into the dining room, then the living room, until the workshop broke into two separate nights to accommodate all his students.

The purpose of the Saturday work parties was, in addition to landscaping Tom's yard, to introduce writers to each other and give them a way to work together until they became friends. If we could see each other as people, instead of just other competitive, needy writers, we wouldn't be so frightened and defensive in workshop.

People, Tom said, tend to see themselves as outsiders, especially writers. And they tend to see other people are united and comfortable together. Anyone approaching a group is certain that group is bonded and sure it will exclude them. Saturday work parties were a way to introduce ourselves before the spooky, vulnerable process of submitting our work for discussion on Thursday nights.

This tendency to feel excluded, and consider the world as united against us, maybe that's why 'Cycle' stories are so popular.

To define my term – and I'm the only person who calls them 'cycle' stories – I'll just list a few. From my shelf of DVD movies and their original books, the stories include *Burnt Offerings, The Haunting of Hill House, The Hunger, The Stepford Wives, The Wicker Man, The Lottery, The Sentinel*, and *Ghost Ship*. In each story, an innocent person happens upon what looks like a bright new beginning, a fresh start, and an escape from the misery

of the world. The victim flees to this sanctuary, then discovers it's a trap and this entire new reality has been organized to destroy victims as a means of perpetuating itself.

In *Burnt Offerings*, a summer blockbuster book and a campy Karen Black movie, a harried city family finds a crumbling country mansion they can rent for cheap. Over the course of their isolated summer – and isolation plays a key role in all Gothic stories – the family members begin to fight each other, some become ill, some go crazy, but they realize that while they suffer, the house has begun to regenerate itself. They try to escape, but it's too late. In their panicked, weakened state, the house keeps them trapped and digests them. At the end of the 'cycle' we realize this is a process that must take place regularly in order to keep the house intact. Dozens of families have been eaten by this house, and dozens more will be. We only have to see one 'cycle' of this process to extrapolate the past and future.

The formula changes slightly. In *The Wicker Man*, a police detective goes to an isolated island to investigate a murder, then finds himself trapped and sacrificed. In *The Lottery*, a housewife arrives late and joking at a village gathering where she finds herself the human to be sacrificed in hope of a bumper corn crop.

Almost always, the steps in the process are the same.

First, the victim discovers a sanctuary. A happy new day. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor Lance has been caring for her ill mother for years. Now, the mother is dead and Eleanor is middle-aged and sleeping on the sofa of her smug, married sister. A doctor writes to invite Eleanor to an experiment in a 'haunted house,' and she jumps at the chance to escape her dull life. In *The Sentinel,* a fashion model wants an apartment of her own, unfortunately she finds this great apartment in a building filled with demons. A key clue is: the sanctuary is always really, really under priced.

Second, the victim rationalizes and denies the sinister events that start to happen. In *Ghost Ship* each of the victims refuses to believe the ghosts that appear to seduce or warn them. In *The Hunger*, the victim is so charmed by the vampire that she dismisses the

vampire's attention and gifts as normal. "She's just *that way*," Sara says, "she's… *European*." No, actually, she gave you the gold necklace because she's a vampire.

Third, people start dying. Yes, it's time to slaughter your secondary characters. In *The Stepford Wives*, kill the best friends and replace them with robots. In *Burnt Offerings*, kill old Aunt Elizabeth. But keep your main victim in denial.

Fourth, cripple and trap your victim. Even if they're not marooned in an isolated country manor house, the doctor can still prescribe them pills that will sedate and slow them. That's why Misty gets her un-broken leg wrapped in plaster in *Diary*, another 'cycle' story.

Fifth, let your victim gradually discover undeniable proof of the conspiracy and the ultimate doom. Let Joanna in *Stepford Wives* find proof that her neighbors weren't always perfect housewives. Of course, this is always too little knowledge, too late, but…

Sixth, let your victim just try to escape. People are dead. The victim is drugged or sick or crippled. The trap is closing. But the protagonist should always make a last-ditch effort to survive.

Seventh, show the aftermath. Ideally, show the next victim being led into the trap, thus beginning a new 'cycle' of the story. And show some lingering trace of the last victim, just to confirm her fate to the audience. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the book's opening passage is repeated, but revised to include Eleanor, now dead and absorbed into the identity of the house. In *Burnt Offerings*, the victims' photographs appear on a table, amid a sea of dozens of now-dead people. In *Ghost Ship*, we see the gold 'bait' being loaded aboard a new ship, ready to generate a new 'cycle' of the story.

Sometimes the 'cycle' ends in consumption: the house as Venus fly trap, or the vampire. Sometimes the 'cycle' is an experiment, like in my book *Haunted*, where the villain hopes to process through people until he produces a specific outcome: a ghost. Sometimes, the 'cycle' is a sacrifice or gesture intended to bring good fortune, like in *The Lottery* or *The Wicker Man*. But if done in the classic formula, it presents a single episode

in a chain of identical episodes you can imagine stretching forward and backward in time. It depicts an unending, systematic horror.

One reason why these stories resonate so well is that they portray our worst fear: The world is an organized conspiracy to kill you. Everyone at the party is united in hating YOU. They only pretend to like you, just long enough to use and discard you. You've trusted, and now you'll die for your trust and faith. You idiot.

Another reason the stories resonate is the way they depict cruelty and destruction as an automatic process. No one questions the process, they only know it works so they perform it. They stone the victim to death. The individual must be destroyed so the rest of humanity can survive. My pet theory is that Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* was an attack on the military draft system: lotteries where someone would always die violently, against their will, to further the goals of the larger society.

Likewise in Stepford, the men don't fret over killing their wives, they just want the end result of sexy, obedient robots with big boobs.

Maybe that's why we'll always see new 'cycle' stories, and we'll always enjoy them in a bittersweet way, knowing the protagonist will fail. Because… No matter how well you dress, someone will always be 'randomly selected' for further security screening at the airport gate. No matter how hard you study and perform, if your teacher grades on a 'curve,' someone will always get an F. Someone will always get stuck in the hotel room beside the noisy elevator. A few individuals will always be sacrificed for the rest of society. Life isn't fair or perfect.

Maybe the pleasure of 'cycle' stories is watching that shit happen to someone else, instead of you.

For homework, look around for examples of the 'cycle' story. And look for variations. I didn't include *The Shining* or *Christine* because their plots don't depict a repeating ritual

for attracting and destroying victims, but both books have elements of the 'cycle' story. The Overlook Hotel comes alive as its victims suffer, and Christine rebuilds herself as her driver goes nuts, but neither seem to be part of a larger, societal conspiracy. Nor does one of my favorites, *Session 9*. Again, look for other 'cycle' examples.

Also, note how the 'thumbnail' and the 'O' form of story telling don't seem to work for a 'cycle' story. The 'cycle' relies on a gradual, then sudden 'reveal' of information – "the house is renewing itself" – so you can't reveal too much at the beginning. Sure, you can plant clues to suggest the doom – the usual clue is the lingering presence of the last victim. But the beginning of a 'cycle' story is always about seducing the reader in the same way the victim is being enrolled and seduced. The brighter, the better. The first pages of the story should promise a deliverance from all misery and suffering and frustration. From that point, this will be a fairly linear story.

As a writing exercise, write a total escape fantasy for yourself. Be it the perfect lover (*The Hunger*) the perfect home (*Burnt Offerings*) or loads of money (*Ghost Ship*), develop a story opening where you discover the way to obtain your greatest desire. Or, consider a scenario about finding your dream job. With great pay, glamorous perks, and fun duties – now, what's the incredible downside? Develop the history and culture that surround that goal, and try to recognize how you're being courted and seduced in order to power some hidden, evil cause.

Okay, 'evil' is debatable. Half the time, I find myself rooting for the evil trap, and not wanting the victim to escape.

Again, no storytelling form is perfect. We'll discuss a few more shapes before the end of this year. As you read or watch stories, be aware of the 'shapes' the author uses to present the information. Notice how a specific shape presents each story to its best effect. A complicated story that spans decades will benefit from a "Citizen Kane" thumbnail on the front end. A story with a slow initial 'build' will catch more attention if the opening is a grafted moment of excitement from the end, and you present the story in a long

flashback 'O' shape. By staying aware of the possibilities, you can present your work in the 'shape' that serves it best.

Talking Shapes: The Rebel, the Follower and the Witness

Some writers say that story telling is less about inventing stuff, and more about archeology. So often, the task is not imagining new stories, it's identifying ancient myths and presenting them in unique ways that still hold true to the original plot.

The stranger the circumstances – outer space or dinosaur park or Middle Earth – the more likely the audience can accept that strangeness if the plot is a familiar classic.

Instead of wild, original maneuvers, the best storytelling depends more on an ability to combine and present 'compulsory' traditional forms – perfectly.

The most-popular example is the Star Wars series, and its basis in the teachings of Joseph Campbell. It may happen in the distant future, far, far away in space, but it's still a Quest story: the warrior is called, saves the princess and kills the dragon.

Often, when you're not sure what's missing in a story, it helps to identify the type of myth you're telling and to study the original as a blueprint. For example, in *Haunted*, the story "Ambition" is a Faust myth, where someone makes a bargain with the devil for personal gain and is destroyed by that deal. Or, maybe finds a new way to escape the doomed bargain.

This essay will explore a form of myth that seems to be prevalent in popular fiction, through most of the past century in America. If this is a "shape" or a structure, I'm not sure, but it's everywhere when you look for it. You start with three main characters – and you end with just one. You've seen this plot since you started reading, in books like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, The Great Gatsby, Valley of the Dolls*, and even *Fight Club*.

The reason this form is so popular is that it seems to mirror the politics of our times: within our families and our government.

For example, consider that *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is about the paradox of living in a modern democracy of only two political parties. *Cuckoo's Nest* tells the same story as the most-popular novels of the last century, a story we'll be telling and retelling

because that paradox is still our paradox, and we still struggle with Kesey's central conflict: How can you live within a democracy that expects you to participate, to hold an opinion and vote and thereby control and be responsible for your society – but at the same time, you must surrender and follow the will of others if even the slimmest majority disagrees with you?

To live in a democracy, you must be willing to live as a savior or a slave. To have all or nothing. And you have very little control over that choice.

Either way, you'll be lost. Destroyed. Either by yourself, out of self-hatred. Or by your society because you pose too big a threat.

Or…

Or, you can choose something different. You can learn from the destruction of others. You can create and live into a new system. You can rise above the either/or choice of being a parent versus a child. A savior versus a slave. And you can become an adult, not rebelling against or caving into your culture, but creating a vision of your own and working to make that option into something real.

That… consider *that* as the core of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

The rebel. And the follower. And the enlightened witness.

The first time I heard this story, it was the movie starring Jack Nicholson. A movie that Kesey once told me he disliked.

In 1975, my parents' marriage had been through several trial separations, little rehearsals for their eventual divorce. My siblings and I lived with our mother. Our father lived an hour's drive away, and every Sunday he'd collect us for an afternoon and evening. That's when anything was possible. He took us to see *Klute* with Jane Fonda and *Bonnie and Clyde* with Faye Dunaway, films full of sex and violence. He was so desperate to please us for those few hours, if we'd asked he would've taken us to see a snuff movie.

We had only one movie theater, five towns away from our town, and one Sunday night the only choice was *Cuckoo's Nest*.

On the surface, the story was new and different, but really – even as a child – I could see my parents in that mental hospital, battling each other for power. Here was my father, Randle Patrick McMurphy, who always looked for a quick miracle to fix his life. A trick or a new scam that would rescue him – even faking a back injury so he could retire early from the railroad – the way McMurphy faked being insane. And there was Bill Bibbit as our mother, trying to follow a path she'd been taught since childhood: being good, giving in, obeying orders, trusting that good behavior and hard work would bring love. My mother, who got straight A's in school.

And here I was, Big Chief, the witness to their battle.

Not just that, but here was a story like so many I knew. Here was the rebel girl, Holiday Golightly, from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, or Sally Bowles from *I Am A Camera* or *Cabaret*. Or the rebel Jay Gatsby, social climbing to find his lost love in *The Great Gatsby*. Or the pushy, ambitious Ethel Agnes O'Neill who remade herself as Neely O'Hara in *Valley of the Dolls*. For that matter, Randle Patrick McMurphy was the renegade Scarlet O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind*. These were all books my folks had at home, alongside Pearl S. Buck and Agatha Christie.

The story was always about someone, a man or woman, almost always renamed, who didn't seem to fit into the world and always shocked people by misbehaving.

More often than not, the rebel was missing some kind of father. Sally Bowles invents a mythic diplomat to replace the man who ignores her. Scarlet O'Hara buries her father but then becomes him, saving his farm. Even Jay Gatsby displays an old photo of the rich man, Dan Cody, who lifted young James Gatz from poverty and showed him the world.

And here, in Ken Kesey's Billy Bibbit, is the follower. The lamb for sacrifice. Here was Melanie Wilkes, so good and upbeat and meek. Billy Bibbit was Jennifer North, the beautiful *Valley of the Dolls* showgirl who primped to please men, then slept with even the most obnoxious for a fur coat. Here was Holly Golightly's offstage brother, the blonde

beanpole, Fred Barnes, stupid and obedient and stashed away in the Army for his own good. Like Bibbit stashed in the asylum.

By the way, Holly marries her father figure, Doc Golightly, escaping her starved past as Lulamae Barnes. At that, her life becomes a series of similar, older men, all of whom she serves for the money she needs to rescue her brother.

In all of these stories, there was the rebel and there was the follower. The first, trying to destroy the social order and the latter trying to please it. But both of them used by that system. Both of them reinforcing that system.

Even the social order was the same. A great looming doom: The Union Army swarming in to burn Atlanta. Or the Nazis, swallowing up Sally Bowles. Or the barbiturates swallowed by everybody in the *Valley of the Dolls*. In *Gatsby*, it's the ashes, the valley where Myrtle's death takes place, and the "ashen man" who arrives to kill Jay Gatsby.

In all these stories, the rebel exhausts herself battling the system. Resisting but perpetuating the social order.

The follower conforms.

The follower destroys herself.

And the rebel is destroyed. Or lost, left bereft as Scarlet O'Hara is, without love or husband or child or family.

But the witness… the witness lives on as a compromise, transformed, leaving the old system to begin a new story in a different social order. Enlightened.

As the witness, we have Rhett Butler, Ann Welles, Nick Carraway, and the unnamed narrator who lives above Miss Golightly's apartment.

The rebel, the follower and the witness. The two extremes and the resulting compromise.

Of course Kesey's social order is ugly. That part of the story is always simple and ugly and unjustly represented. It's the "bull dyke" police officers who ambush Holly, or

the Berlin Nazis or the cold, old-money snobs – always happy to attend Jay Gatsby's parties, but absent from his rainy funeral.

That was the pattern: Randle Patrick McMurphy will always rush in to threaten the social order. My father would always reappear on Sundays to offer us children options we'd never imagined. Holly Golightly will always shine in the First Act, brash and loud and thrilling. Sally Bowles makes such a dazzling first impression.

There will always be the meek Billy Bibbit, jumping to please everyone and living in terror of their displeasure. Daisy Fay Buchanan, drunk with frustration and sauterne, but fishing her $100,000-dollar pearls out of the trash and going downstairs to marry a man she doesn't love. Or Myrtle Wilson dashing out in front of her lover's car. Both women, sacrificing themselves for the same man.

McMurphy will always dance and sing, but Jennifer North and Fred Barnes can't follow. It's too late for them to change. They'll continue to conform, but they've seen what's possible so that new truth leaves their old lives fake, inauthentic, and the only choice they see is to destroy themselves in order to escape. So like Melanie Wilkes, choosing to have another child despite the advice of her doctor, they choose to die.

Whether it's Billy Bibbit cutting his throat or Myrtle Wilson with her breast torn off or Sally Bowles staggering after her back-alley abortion, it's usually a bloody plot point. And that crisis will prompt the social order to destroy Sally Bowles. Or Jay Gatsby. Or Randle Patrick McMurphy.

That's the pattern I'd seen so many times before. Even as a 13-year-old, on that Sunday night at the movies, I knew this story.

There were my parents, fighting, and there was me: Big Chief. Always watching, mute, trying not to attract attention, but always dreaming up ways to make my escape.

I just didn't recognize how this is everyone's story, in a two-party democracy. Even now, especially now, in America where an almost equal number of people must follow the will of their peers. No matter how democracy holds them responsible for their

government, no matter how much they protest, the minority is still the minority. Saviors or slaves.

That's the pattern. That's *always* the pattern. But we're never stuck with just two choices.

In *Fight Club* the narrator is the follower, Tyler Durden is the rebel – so the follower's martyrdom serves the double purpose of killing both characters in the same instant, leaving an enlightened survivor. The good boy and the bad boy die in order to create the adult.

When you recognize the type of myth you're telling, you have the freedom to create a variation. Your reader will recognize the basic form of the myth and that familiarity will keep the reader hooked, even if the hero is an elf or the setting is a galaxy far, far away.

For homework, take another look at the plots of your favorite books. Is there a passive character? A rebel? A witness? This form shows up in even more movies.

And now that you know the secret formula – look for variations that people have created. Notice how just a little tweaking leaves you with a bitter, sad end to a story. In final scene of the novel *Valley of the Dolls*, the witness takes her first pills so we know she's learned nothing and will be destroyed – but then, We The Readers become the witness and learn the big lesson.

Also, notice how these smart, dark endings tend to get re-written for the movie version. There, the witness will learn – and We The Audience will just watch that happy enlightened ending.

Is that another pattern? Do novels tend to teach by a doomed example – but movies teach by a successful example? If so, why? Is it because movies are rated and books are not?

Beyond that, look at your parents or your spouse. Which one of you is the rebel? Or, depending on the situation, do you trade that role?

Beyond THAT, look at your work. Are you writing a classic rebel-follower-witness story? If not, what kind of myth are you creating? If your work doesn't seem to fit any classic myth, you might be creating a variation. What myth are you closest to?

Nuts and Bolts: Using Your Objects

Let's start with a true story about Truman Capote. As a young man, after he'd gone to live in New York and started to write, his long-absent father, Archie Persons, contacted him. Persons promised to send his son a ring, a family heirloom that was supposed to be some form of legacy. Capote was thrilled, after all these years, to have this very personal tribute from his father, a man that he'd never known very well.

According to Capote's friends, the ring arrived and it was junk. Trash. It was, to quote one witness: "like something out of a box of Cracker Jack." Capote was crestfallen, but he rallied. He took the ring – his "legacy" – and immediately pawned it and spent the money on martinis and a turkey sandwich.

The ring, itself, is lost to us, but it's funny how often it keeps turning up…

In Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the older, long-abandoned husband of the heroine finds the ring in a box of Cracker Jack candy. As he's about to be rejected and abandoned, yet again, the sad, older man – he gives the ring to a young writer who's currently involved with the heroine. The young hero pockets the ring, and it's forgotten.

As they become closer friends – in the movie, lovers – the young hero and heroine find themselves in Tiffany's jewelry store. There, in a gesture, the hero remembers the junk ring and asks to have it engraved as a gift for her. He surrenders the ring to the store, and it's forgotten again.

At the crisis of the novel, as the heroine is fleeing yet another failed relationship, the hero produces the engraved ring – now, the symbol of their friendship. In the movie, the ring unites them. In the book, it's the symbol of her ultimate betrayal and doom.

Like a snowball, each time the ring appears, it carries more emotional weight. It becomes layered with more associations, prompting more memories and making the entire backstory of the novel present in one symbol. That's using an object effectively.

Pass it from character to character, allowing it to accrue meaning, and allowing the characters this "prop" with which to perform gestures.

Now, let's take a look at some of the ways objects function in stories:

Memory Cue: like choruses, an object can echo a past plot point and recreate all the emotion/wisdom of the past.

Buried Gun: kept hidden until it's needed to force a point home.

Gesture Prop: allows characters to physically express themselves instead of using only language.

Through-line Image: reoccurring just to add another element of continuity to a story.

And now some examples:

As a memory cue, think of the big blue necklace that gets the old lady yakking in the movie "Titanic." Think of the crucifix that spurs the flashback suicide scene in "The Sentinel." This is very standard stuff. The monkey music box in "Phantom of the Opera." You've seen objects serve this purpose a zillion times.

As a buried gun, think of the sled in "Citizen Kane." Enough said.

As a gesture prop, think of the scene in "Harold and Maude" when Bud Cort gives Ruth Gordon a ring (his gesture of union) and she flings the ring into the ocean (her gesture of un-attachment). In those moments, the two gestures occur with much more power than any lines of dialogue could convey. And notice how the stories you remember best occur as a good mix of gesture and dialogue.

As a through-line image: think of that green marble ashtray that appears in each segment of the Stephen King movie "Creep Show." Sometimes, the ashtray just sits there as set dressing. Sometimes it's prop. But its appearance adds an odd, hidden continuity to the disparate stories.

The point of this essay is to make you aware of the important objects in your work. If you identify the purpose of each object, you can use it to better effect. Instead of

introducing a constant stream of new objects, you'll recycle the same ones, passing them between characters as gestures, adding meaning to them, and increasing their power.

Your objects can be drugs (Invisible Monsters) or jewelry (Diary) or a plastic ID bracelet (Choke), but make each object do as much work as possible.

For homework, first look at the important objects in your life. What are they, and why are they important? Are they tools? (your computer or bong) Memory cues? (family photos) Do they symbolize bonds or contracts? (wedding rings or degree certificates) If your home were on fire, what objects would you rescue? Why those?

What are you (or your characters) never without?

Second, look at your favorite stories and films and identify the important objects. Most main characters will have one important object that represents their eventual salvation or downfall. Because actors can't state the character's thoughts (… boy, do I need a drink of scotch…) they'll always need a prop, like that bottle of scotch they keep looking at.

Third, look at your own work, and identify the important objects you've used.

Myself, I tend to morph my objects through a story. In "Fight Club," the fat of a bored society becomes soap which is sold for money, then becomes nitroglycerin for power and excitement. In "Invisible Monsters," the drugs they steal are for money, but also gender reassignment and self-destructive addiction. Each time an object occurs, it can morph into a slightly different symbol. Capote's junk ring starts as a discarded Cracker Jack prize, becomes a courtship gift, then becomes an engraved bond. A contract of sorts.

This month, look at limiting your objects and recycling them throughout a story so they gain as much power as possible each time they occur. Find ways to morph them from appearance to appearance. And create gestures with which your characters can use the object to express themselves.

If you put an object on the page – use it.

If you're not going to use the object – don't clutter the page with it.

Thirteen Writing Tips

Twenty years ago, a friend and I walked around downtown Portland at Christmas. The big department stores: Meier and Frank… Fredrick and Nelson… Nordstroms… their big display windows each held a simple, pretty scene: a mannequin wearing clothes or a perfume bottle sitting in fake snow. But the windows at the J.J. Newberry's store, damn, they were crammed with dolls and tinsel and spatulas and screwdriver sets and pillows, vacuum cleaners, plastic hangers, gerbils, silk flowers, candy – you get the point. Each of the hundreds of different objects was priced with a faded circle of red cardboard. And walking past, my friend, Laurie, took a long look and said, "Their window-dressing philosophy must be: 'If the window doesn't look quite right – put more in'."

She said the perfect comment at the perfect moment, and I remember it two decades later because it made me laugh. Those other, pretty display windows… I'm sure they were stylist and tasteful, but I have no real memory of how they looked.

For this essay, my goal is to put more in. To put together a kind-of Christmas stocking of ideas, with the hope that something will be useful. Or like packing the gift boxes for readers, putting in candy and a squirrel and a book and some toys and a necklace, I'm hoping that enough variety will guarantee that something here will occur as completely asinine, but something else might be perfect.

Number One:

Two years ago, when I wrote the first of these essays it was about my "egg timer method" of writing. You never saw that essay, but here's the method: When you don't want to write, set an egg timer for one hour (or half hour) and sit down to write until the timer rings. If you still hate writing, you're free in an hour. But usually, by the time that alarm rings, you'll be so involved in your work, enjoying it so much, you'll keep going. Instead of an egg timer, you can put a load of clothes in the washer or dryer and use them

to time your work. Alternating the thoughtful task of writing with the mindless work of laundry or dish washing will give you the breaks you need for new ideas and insights to occur. If you don't know what comes next in the story… clean your toilet. Change the bed sheets. For Christ sakes, dust the computer. A better idea will come.

Number Two:

Your audience is smarter than you imagine. Don't be afraid to experiment with story forms and time shifts. My personal theory is that younger readers distain most books – not because those readers are dumber than past readers, but because today's reader is smarter. Movies have made us very sophisticated about storytelling. And your audience is much harder to shock than you can ever imagine.

Number Three:

Before you sit down to write a scene, mull it over in your mind and know the purpose of that scene. What earlier set-ups will this scene pay off? What will it set up for later scenes? How will this scene further your plot? As you work, drive, exercise, hold only this question in your mind. Take a few notes as you have ideas. And only when you've decided on the bones of the scene – then, sit and write it. Don't go to that boring, dusty computer without something in mind. And don't make your reader slog through a scene in which little or nothing happens.

Number Four:

Surprise yourself. If you can bring the story – or let it bring you – to a place that amazes you, then you can surprise your reader. The moment you can see any well-planned surprise, chances are, so will your sophisticated reader.

Number Five:

When you get stuck, go back and read your earlier scenes, looking for dropped characters or details that you can resurrect as "buried guns." At the end of writing Fight Club, I had no idea what to do with the office building. But re-reading the first scene, I found the throw-away comment about mixing nitro with paraffin and how it was an iffy method for making plastic explosives. That silly aside (… paraffin has never worked for me…) made the perfect "buried gun" to resurrect at the end and save my storytelling ass.

Number Six:

Use writing as your excuse to throw a party each week – even if you call that party a "workshop." Any time you can spend time among other people who value and support writing, that will balance those hours you spend alone, writing. Even if someday you sell your work, no amount of money will compensate you for your time spent alone. So, take your "paycheck" up front, make writing an excuse to be around people. When you reach the end of your life – trust me, you won't look back and savor the moments you spent alone.

Number Seven:

Let yourself be with Not Knowing. This bit of advice comes through a hundred famous people, through Tom Spanbauer to me and now, you. The longer you can allow a story to take shape, the better that final shape will be. Don't rush or force the ending of a story or book. All you have to know is the next scene, or the next few scenes. You don't have to know every moment up to the end, in fact, if you do it'll be boring as hell to execute.

Number Eight:

If you need more freedom around the story, draft to draft, change the character names. Characters aren't real, and they aren't you. By arbitrarily changing their names, you

get the distance you need to really torture a character. Or worse, delete a character, if that's what the story really needs.

Number Nine:

There are three types of speech – I don't know if this is TRUE, but I heard it in a seminar and it made sense. The three types are: Descriptive, Instructive, and Expressive. Descriptive: "The sun rose high…" Instructive: "Walk, don't run…" Expressive: "Ouch!" Most fiction writers will only use one – at most, two – of these forms. So use all three. Mix them up. It's how people talk.

Number Ten:

Write the book you want to read.

Number Eleven:

Get author book jacket photos taken now, while you're young. And get the negatives and copyright on those photos.

Number Twelve:

Write about the issues that really upset you. Those are the only things worth writing about. In his course, called "Dangerous Writing," Tom Spanbauer stresses that life is too precious to spend it writing tame, conventional stories to which you have no personal attachment. There are so many things that Tom talked about but that I only half remember: the art of "manumission," which I can't spell, but I understood to mean the care you use in moving a reader through the moments of a story. And "sous conversation," which I took to mean the hidden, buried message within the obvious story. Because I'm not comfortable describing topics I only half-understand, Tom's agreed to write a book

about his workshop and the ideas he teaches. The working title is "A Hole In The Heart," and he plans to have a draft ready by June 2006, with a publishing date set in early 2007.

Number Thirteen:

Another Christmas window story. Almost every morning, I eat breakfast in the same diner, and this morning a man was painting the windows with Christmas designs. Snowmen. Snowflakes. Bells. Santa Claus. He stood outside on the sidewalk, painting in the freezing cold, his breath steaming, alternating brushes and rollers with different colors of paint. Inside the diner, the customers and servers watched as he layered red and white and blue paint on the outside of the big windows. Behind him the rain changed to snow, falling sideways in the wind.

The painter's hair was all different colors of gray, and his face was slack and wrinkled as the empty ass of his jeans. Between colors, he'd stop to drink something out of a paper cup.

Watching him from inside, eating eggs and toast, somebody said it was sad. This customer said the man was probably a failed artist. It was probably whiskey in the cup. He probably had a studio full of failed paintings and now made his living decorating cheesy restaurant and grocery store windows. Just sad, sad, sad.

This painter guy kept putting up the colors. All the white "snow," first. Then some fields of red and green. Then some black outlines that made the color shapes into Xmas stockings and trees.

A server walked around, pouring coffee for people, and said, "That's so neat. I wish I could do that…"

And whether we envied or pitied this guy in the cold, he kept painting. Adding details and layers of color. And I'm not sure when it happened, but at some moment he wasn't there. The pictures themselves were so rich, they filled the windows so well, the

colors so bright, that the painter had left. Whether he was a failure or a hero. He'd disappeared, gone off to wherever, and all we were seeing was his work.

For homework, ask your family and friends what you were like as a child. Better yet, ask them what they were like as children. Then, just listen.

Killing Time – Part One

Imagine a stripper taking the stage, loud music, colored lights, the moment she enters, the stripper drops her dress to reveal herself fully nude. In that first minute in the spotlight she's already naked, not dancing, simply standing there with a stern face and she says, "This is my vagina... any questions?"

That's why fiction – or nonfiction – needs good plotting: to reveal the secret of the story in a gradual, teasing way similar to how we learn most things in real life. It's a constant play between denial and gratification. A sort-of tantric tension. If the stripper sheds clothing too fast, we don't crave the ultimate discovery. Too slow, and we lose interest, overwhelmed by too much tension over too long a period of time. If the stripper is nude too long, the dance becomes silly, continuing beyond the release of tension. And if the dancer leaves the stage too quickly after the full reveal, we're left confused and feeling cheated.

No, the trick is to get naked in a slow, gradual series of smaller reveals. First the gloves. Then, the stockings. Whatever. But to depict each reveal in a clear enough, slow enough way so the reader appreciates that step in the process, and so the accumulating nakedness builds tension in the audience.

Welcome to 2008. The one consistent problem I see in most writing students' work is plotting or pacing. Sometimes too fast, but more often too slow. This year I'll focus on methods you might consider for keeping time and characters in motion throughout your work. In the real world, time has the nasty habit of passing. In the fictional world... time needs some help. This essay will discuss methods for implying that time has passed in a narrative.

Not many stories are told in real time – a story that depicts ten minutes told in the ten minutes it would take a reader to consume that story. A minute-for-minute trade. No, instead fiction condenses time, covering days or centuries in the short time it takes to

read. The simplest method is to blurt out the jump ahead or flashback. Consider how many movies begin or end with a single-card stating: "One Year Later..." Or, "Ten years ago..." Here are big blunt signposts to make sure we're not lost in time, and we can assemble the linear narrative despite how the plot is presented in a nonlinear way.

Sure, go ahead. Go with the tried and true phrases, "Two hours later, Stephanie still had not called..." Or, "After days of driving, they arrived at a lonely cabin..." Better yet, there's always the Space Break, but that's not as clear to a reader. An inch of white page between one paragraph and the next might imply any amount of time.

Beyond that, consider some other ways to imply time passing, or to jump your reader around in linear time. Check out your favorite films and watch for the device that collapses time – so often the musical montage where we see the young couple in fragments of romantic encounters, or fixing and furnishing a new home or struggling to survive grueling college courses.

One effective way to kill time is to run two parallel plotlines, one present and one placed in the past. As you cut back and forth between them, you enter each plot at a point after the point where you last exited it to cut to the alternate plot. For an example, watch the film "Dead Again." Each time you shift, past to present to past to present, you take a step forward in time – skipping the boring parts where a character sleeps or folds laundry. Over the course of a book, this works great, but in a single story or scene or chapter, it can take too much time.

In future essays we'll talk about other methods of killing time – going to Big Voice or going On the Body among others – but here I'd like you to consider the old tradition that writer's call the "Information Dump." This is the passage where the author lapses into the detail or history of something specific. It's an aside or tangent that lifts us from the immediate plot and teaches something about the French aristocracy, or in my book *Survivor*, about cleaning stains. All that precious research, here's where you can shovel it

right onto the page. Between each important action or plot point, you simply cut in a serving of factual fodder.

Of course, this is a balancing act. You're not writing a book about the French aristocracy. You need to keep your facts tight and contained. The moment the trivia starts to slow the plot, you've added too much. But in the right amounts, Information Dumps do so much for your story. First, they imply that time has passed. Each time you cut to nonfiction information, you can cut back to the present scene at a later point. Each time you cut back to your character he's moved to a new task, a new room, a new romance.

Second, factual information builds your authority or your narrator's. It demonstrates that you've done your research. If a reader can trust you about the French aristocracy, they can trust you about the big plot twist.

Third, an Information Dump allows you to portray the character's state of mind. You can depict a character's aspirations or concerns by the facts they summon and obsess over.

Fourth, facts occur as a different texture of narrative, to contrast with the fictional storytelling voice. This can be jargon and medical language, or second-person instructive language, i..e. "To clean up broken glass, just blot the fragments with a slice of soft white bread." And every time you change texture, you keep the reader engaged. Remember, most storytelling uses descriptive voice, "Benjamin ate the cake." Any time you can alternate with instructive voice, "Turn right at Alder Street" you can vary the tone of the narrative and keep it more dynamic, rich and compelling.

Consider also that your nonfiction factoids must never compete with your larger story. Keep your facts interesting, self-contained and easily understood. And keep them all "in character" with your narration. Don't give a character knowledge that her past wouldn't include. The biggest joy in writing "Invisible Monsters" was the simple

statement that Shannon had a billion undergraduate college credits; this allowed her to offer facts about almost everything yet still seem believable.

Also, at the moment you inject the facts into the story, don't bother to explain how the character knows this or that. Just stick in the fact – either you've already explained the character's past education, or you'll explain that education as part of the on-going discovery process. If you inject the fact, plus the source, you risk taking the reader too far out of the present plot. What you're doing in a story is mimicking real life, and we seldom perceive each thought coupled with a full awareness of how we came to first perceive that particular concept. In short, we tend to think: "The sun is bright." Not: "The sun is bright because Mrs. Francisco in third grade made us read this book called 'Our Solar System' which explained that brightness is caused by the collapse of hydrogen atoms in a gigantic furnace of nuclear fusion..."

No, just allow your facts to occur as facts. Don't undermine the reality of your character's world.

For practice, watch some of your favorite films and take note how they imply time passing. Read some fiction, and look for Information Dumps that create authority, imply state of mind, and control the pace of the plot. Science fiction is notorious for these dumps, maybe because a largely male audience seems to need the authority of factoids, and craves the kind of fine-print statistics you'll find in the Business and Sports sections of the newspaper.

Beyond that, build a list of truly interesting facts that your character could spout, or mull in his or her mind. Again, make each fact self-contained. And keep them brief and engaging.

And welcome to 2008, if you do nothing else in January – please – make a list of the goals you'll accomplish in the next 12 months. Then, share those goals with as many people as possible. Please, expect more from yourself than you think will be possible. Use this year to become someone bigger, smarter, happier than you ever imagined.

Discon nected Dialogue – Part One

Christmas twenty-five years back, I took the Greyhound bus to visit my family. The last stop was a desert town thirty miles from where my mother lived with her second husband, and the two of them would drive to collect me, arriving in a rusted pick-up truck. With my wrapped Christmas gifts in the bed of the truck we started our drive home, my new step-father swerved to intentionally hit a pothole in the highway, and all those gifts slammed into the rear of the cab.

With a little smile, my step-father looked into the rearview mirror at the jumble of smashed boxes and said, "I hope none of those pretty presents was fragile..."

Funny man. They've been divorced now for years.

In response I said, "Only yours..."

After that pothole, those two statements, none of us said another word until dinner. Bad me. Bad, bad, bad me.

A million hours of television sit-coms have trained us to be "witty," to connect every statement with the perfect reply. It's a great game wherein one person demonstrates power, and another trumps that. So, let's talk about power. Good plotting is about playing with power: A character gets power, loses it, regains it. Every time power shifts – like the ball changes teams in basketball – the story gains power, tension and momentum.

That said, consider how the perfect, clever response seems to kill the energy in a scene. I say, "How's the weather?" You say, "Raining." And the communication is complete. No frustration or unfulfilled expectation slops or builds into the next scene or moment or chapter. So instead of being clever, let's look at ways to build tension through rough, incomplete dialogue.

The first method to consider is Questions. For a great example, watch the opening scene in the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Here, the landscape is blurred with blowing sand, one character speaks Spanish, one speaks only French, a squadron of World

War II fighter planes sit in the desert perfectly preserved from the 1940's. Everything is chaos in the roar of airplane engines and wind. Finally, the man who translates the French and Spanish into English, stumbling backward amid this confusion screams, "Why are these planes here?" Screams, "How did they get here? What's going on? What's happening?" Or something similar.

The point is, he's stating the core quest of the story, the questions the audience would ask. Same deal in *Citizen Kane*, "Who is Rosebud?" Same deal with your four-year-old toddler asking question after question. Anytime you feel tension building in a film, be aware that a character might be asking a long series of questions to which no one is responding. That said – just because a character asks a question, that doesn't mean anyone has to answer it. In fact, most times it's more effective to just let the question "hang" unanswered, creating frustrated tension and unmet expectation.

One of the most common weaknesses in the work of new writers is that tendency to volley questions and answers, completing each exchange and leaving the energy flat. For example:

"Did you walk the dogs?"

"Yeah, an hour ago."

"Do they need to go out, now?"

"They should be fine."

In her screenwriting course, the writer Cynthia Whitcomb talks about the "A, B, and C choices" for dialogue. The A choice might simply complete the expectation of the question: "Did you walk the dogs?" The A choice: "Yeah, an hour ago." Energy complete and flat.

The B choice might still respond to the original question, but spins it a little for tension: "Did you walk the dogs?" B choice: "They're *your* dogs..."

But, the C choice ignores the original question and shows us the inner world of the responding character: "Did you walk the dogs?" C choice: "Stop attacking me!"

Or: "Did you walk the dogs?" C choice: "Did you fuck my friend, Gwen?"

Or: "Did you walk the dogs?" C choice: "The lab called with your test results."

So, forget being clever. Leave that to television sit-coms. If you're going to use dialogue, forget being witty – okay, you can do that occasionally, but we'll talk about "black-out lines" later.

For practice, watch that opening scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and note how many aspects of the scene are obscured or occluded. List how many devices confuse the viewer (languages, noise, dust) and how many entice (the planes, the witness statement). Also, note how characters talk "past" each other, seldom responding to questions or statements. Next, read some stories from the Raymond Carver collection, "Cathedral." Carver was an expert at dialogue between disconnected people.

Tom Spanbauer used to say, "The longer you can be with the incomplete object, the better it will become." Keep paying your tension forward, keep pushing your largest incomplete issues into the next chapter. Later, we'll discuss wrapping them up in the last act of a book or story.

Body Language – Part One

Let's start with the assignment. In March, put your television on "Mute," and watch movies. Just sit with a pad and pen and list the physical gestures that actors use. What do their hands or faces do to undermine or reinforce the words they might be saying? Doing this, build an inventory or wardrobe of physical gestures.

Researching *Rant* I found the results of a study conducted in 1967 at the University of California Los Angeles. Test subjects were engaged in conversation, then quizzed about what they'd each learned from their talking partners. It found that approximately 75% of the information was conveyed through body posture and gesture. Roughly 18% of the information came via voice volume and tone. And only about seven percent of the communication occurred with actual words.

Nevertheless, beginning writers will depict scene after scene where no one does anything except talk. Just pages of dialogue.

After a few hours of silent movies you'll notice that the cheapest, most-boring ones mostly consist of scenes where actors merely look at each other and talk. However, movies wherein people move, dogs move – even the camera moves, a nice cheat for putting movement into otherwise static dialogue scenes – those movies most full of movement are great.

Consider that movies present no scents, flavors or textures. Nothing you can smell, taste or touch. Film tells a story with only sight and sound. And – in a cheap television movie without gesture or movement – too often a movie seems more like a radio play.

It's just my private crack-pot theory, but visual movement seems to reach an audience more effectively than language. As we look around, our eyes move in jerking, jumping, short movements. This is pure "Physiology of the Senses 301," for a simpler version, watch the Susan Dey movie, *Looker*. However... when we're watching something move – a bird or car or horse – our eyes track that movement in one continuous, smooth

path. It's as if we're entranced by motion, and it hypnotizes us, lowering our mental defenses or resistance. Action seems to hold our animal attention paralyzed in the same way we can be mesmerized by hours of sports, dance, pornography, camp fires or ocean waves. The same way my dogs are captivated by the movement of a cat or squirrel.

In new forms of talk therapy, patients watch the constant, steady back-and-forth movement of a small light, and this seems to allow long-repressed memories to resurface.

Another study from Great Britain suggests television viewing might be linked to developing Alzheimer's Disease because TV watching is a passive, not-fully-conscious state.

Another study – sent to me by readers, and published in big-time medical journals – seems to demonstrate that when a reader reads a verb it stimulates the part of the reader's brain involved with that actual action. When you read "kick" it excites the portion of your brain responsible for kicking. The more physical action verbs you read – kiss, kick, run, jump – the more of your brain is engaged.

Now, consider how many ways we have to communicate with gesture: thumbs up, hitchhiking thumbs, nods, shrugs, sighs, head scratching, nail biting, hair chewing, eye rolling, finger pointing, fist shaking, finger down the throat, knuckle biting, winking, blowing a kiss. Make a list, and add to it as you recognize common gestures. Build your vocabulary of gestures and actions.

Years ago, during an interview with a well-known, very successful journalist, I asked why she kept squeezing her elbow with the fingers of her opposite hand. Her eyes sprang open, and her chin jumped up. She blinked a couple times, fast, and stopped touching her elbow, dropping her hands to her lap. As it turns out, she'd been an anorexic for years and still, unconsciously felt the spaces in her elbow joints to determine her current level of body fat. If her index finger fit into the joint, her body fat was five percent. If only her pinky fit, she'd ballooned to eight percent body fat.

Gestures. Nervous tics. People say more with their hands than they'd ever risk telling you with their mouths.

As you watch films without sound, determine the purpose of the action in each scene, and look for the following:

How do the gestures and positions and postures of the characters help tell the story?

How does action distract the viewer from clumsy expositional dialogue?

How does the action or gesture help pace the dialogue so that tensions build?

How does gesture underscore jokes and allow the audience enough time for a joke to "land" and laughter to build?

Now, here's a story from the Sundance festival.

The man who directed *Choke*, Clark Gregg, is married to Jennifer Grey. Her father, Joel Grey, plays a part in the film, and attended the premier in Park City, Utah. He's always been an ideal storytelling hero of mine, and the moment we were introduced I launched into a long, nervous theory that the movie *Cabaret* was so effective because it was directed by the former dancer, Bob Fosse. That, and the story was set in the era of silent movies when people practiced a very exaggerated, physical form of acting. All of this jabber rushed out of me like vomit – I was so nervous about meeting Joel Grey. While I blabbered about *Cabaret* being the "most kinetic movie of all time," he smiled politely.

In response, he said how, during the national tour for *Cabaret*, the theater in Portland, Oregon received a death threat. Neo Nazis telephoned to say that if Joel Grey performed, a sniper in the audience would shoot him on stage. Joel insisted on playing that night, but the word had gotten around to the rest of the cast. Throughout the Portland run, every time Joel crossed the stage, every other actor rushed to the side opposite from him. If he moved downstage, the cast moved far upstage. Every evening was this constant dance to stay away from Joel Grey and any possible sniper bullet.

What I loved about that story – and the reason I remember it – is how it pays off with a series of absurd physical actions. The fear of death keeps everyone sidestepping and shunning one person. And the humor of that final payoff doesn't happen through dialogue.

Objects

A friend of mine in Italy – Paolo, who's translated for me during my past three visits – well, last summer he told me this story.

Years back, when he was first working as a translator, Paolo had worked for Princess Grace of Monaco, Grace Kelly, and one evening she'd gone to bed in the palace, slid between the sheets, and found a surprise hidden there.

An Indian tomahawk. Or, as Paolo pronounces it, "A Tommy-hawk."

A small, crude hatchet with a blade of chipped flint, lashed to a wooden stick with thongs of dried leather. Tucked deep in her bed for Princess Grace to find. This wasn't the first time – for most of her life, Grace Kelly had been slipping into beds in luxury hotels, in palaces, in remote spas, and finding that same crude, dirty little ax.

As she told it to Paolo, the tomahawk had been a movie prop, used in a western film she had shot with David Niven. They'd made the movie during her engagement to the Prince, but Niven had romanced her, nonetheless, hoping to prevent the marriage. Despite his best efforts, Kelly became a princess. Their cowboy film was never released. And on her wedding night, the new Princess Grace drew back her bed sheets to find that prop from her last film smuggled into her honeymoon bed. Niven had bribed people, pulled strings, gotten the tomahawk hidden where she'd find it that evening.

In return, the Princess bribed people, pulled strings, and got the prop smuggled into Niven's hotel bed a year later.

And for the rest of their lives, that tomahawk appeared each year. In hotel suites. In resort beds. In castles and palaces around the world, surprising Kelly, then Niven, then Kelly. A long-running practical joke: first, a reminder of their affair. Then, a gesture of friendship. Then, a nostalgic souvenir of their lost youth and glamorous careers. A symbol that never changed, in contrast to their own aging selves. This weapon that came

to represent love. A contradiction – the savage hatchet that would trigger a sudden flood of memories and affection.

This is how a good object should do its job in fiction. In *Clown Girl* it's the rubber chicken that occurs as a joke, then occurs as lost love, then occurs as an aborted child. In the film *Cabaret*, it's the gold cigarette case that first represents a bribe for power and affection, then represents acquiescence, then becomes the symbol for betrayal. Or, the fur coat that represents success – then complete failure.

In the film *Session 9*, it's the bouquet of roses, the stash of coins, the asbestos.

For your homework, watch films, and look for the key props or objects that reoccur throughout the story, but change meaning. After you've found such an object, consider its use or reason or meaning.

Is the object a "gun" that will evolve to end the story? Forcing the plot to crisis. Think of the furnace boiler in *The Shining*.

Is the object used to stand in for an absent character? Think of the poetry volumes in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Or, the green velvet curtains in *Gone With the Wind*. Or, the filigree necklace worn by the suicide in *Rosemary's Baby,* and later given to the protagonist.

Is the object something that represents the goals and dreams of a character? Think of the sled, "Rosebud," in *Citizen Kane*.

Or, does the object represent power? Like the gold ring in *Lord of the Rings*. Or the Holy Grail.

As you learn to find the key objects in a story, please notice how the very, very best ones morph to serve several different plot points. Like a limited number of characters, having limited key objects allows you to build tension, faster. Once your objects are introduced, you won't need to lose momentum in describing new objects. Energy and focus dissipate as settings, characters and props multiply. So, notice how the best stories – like stage plays – have limited props that serve several different key functions.

Now, a story about objects at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

At every stop in Park City, the parties and interviews and screenings, someone is always pressing paper bags into your arms. Fancy shopping bags of swag buried in bright fluffy tissue paper. Luxury sunglasses, silk scarves, eyeliner, lipstick, compact disks, shoes. To run the media gauntlet, people start at one end of Main Street, stopping at one media outlet after another, going door-to-door, being photographed and interviewed for magazines, television, the web. And accepting gift bags of swag.

No one could carry that crushing burden of expensive colognes and nail polish and wristwatches. At their next media stop, everyone guts the bag from the previous stop, removing only the very best trinkets, consolidating them into a single bag, and abandoning the rest.

The scene is like some adult, movie star, luxury consumer goods Halloween. All those glamorous trick-or-treaters walking door-to-door with their loaded handle bags. At each new doorway, artists apply more make-up to each celebrity. Stylists curl or straighten their hair. Publicists pay tribute with a new bag of expensive baubles.

Everywhere, movie stars lean their heads together, giggling over the choice bits. Asking, "Who's giving <u>THAT</u>?" Trading two cashmere T-shirts for a Fendi purse. Trading three Gucci belts for a Coach pocketbook.

Then, in their celebrity trick-or-treater wake... leaving the remnants. Left behind, the stacks of boxed designer chocolates, the organic body creams. A fortune in expensive shoes that don't fit. Cast-off cigarette lighters. Top shelf liquors.

Thrown away like the caramel apples or popcorn balls that children – the little pirates or angels or witches – would jettison between houses on Halloween night.

Here's the only time you'll see a heap of brand-new hair products tossed in the snow. You'll feel a stab of pity for rejected drifts of costume jewelry. Scented candles nobody wants.

What starts out as a thrilling surprise – *Free Stuff!* – quickly becomes a dead weight you're lugging. Then, it's culled. Dropped. Maybe a publicist or make up artist takes it home. If snow falls, maybe those leather gloves or pore-reducing masks or lace camisoles won't be seen until the spring thaw. Just another winter casualty.

Even a world-famous celebrity can only hump so much booty back to the hotel.

Those are the key objects of Sundance.

Required Reading: Absurdity

Before you go any farther, you need to read an essay by Shirley Jackson. Also, an essay by E. B. White. Neither will be difficult to find, and you might want a copy of each to read and reread for the rest of your life. Both are short, no more than five pages, closer to three or four pages depending on the typeface. And both are stunning examples of fast pacing, entering a world mid-stream and leaving just as quickly.

The Jackson essay is, "My Life with R.H. Macy."

The E.B. White story is "Dusk in These Fierce Pajamas."

Then, let's look at why these pieces work so well. Their instant authority, their specific details, plus their pacing and brevity.

In the first piece, notice how the entire story is built from specific moments and tasks. Jackson's authority comes from her constant flow of new details and her lack of explanation, while her humor comes from taking mundane tasks too seriously and taking serious tasks to blithely. For example, bowing and worshipping the time clock, yet pocketing the money that a customer gives her. The senseless slang, the abbreviations and the numbers all pummel the reader into accepting each action, leaving you with the same kind of learned helplessness the narrator develops.

In terms of pacing, notice how the essay begins with "And," implying that something has gone before. "And" also suggests those endless, dry lists from the Old Testament, who begat whom, and the creation of everything important, but trivialized by the Bible's very cursory recitation of generation after generation, king after king, until it all sounds like so much blah, blah, blah. Not to slam the Bible, but Steinbeck also knew the trick of using "and" for an Old Testament effect. Check out how Jackson uses the Biblical tone for humor, and Steinbeck uses the tone – especially in "The Grapes of Wrath" – to sound serious and profound. That said, never hesitate to start sentences with "and" to create instant immediacy.

What else... notice how Jackson creates all her secondary characters as not-quite-real. They're all named "Miss Cooper." They all wear suits. Either that, or they're only their employee numbers or "a customer." No one except the narrator occurs as real, that way the reader has to accept the narrator's version of reality. *And* Jackson never has to slow the pace of her story to describe new actors: it's always a generic Miss Cooper or customer entering to make some demand or issue an order.

Consider that only your most, *most* important characters should have names. Lesser characters should get nicknames based on their role or physical characteristics. We seldom learn names, instead describing people as: "the man who runs the dry cleaners, but not the crippled man, the man with bleached hair." Or, "those people who park too close to the corner." Usually, the last thing we recall about someone is their name.

Compare all of this to Jackson's story "The Lottery," where everyone has a proper name, there's an abundance of names, and the story is set on a specific date.

In the second piece, "Dusk in These Fierce Pajamas," by E.B. White, the narrator also overwhelms the reader with specific images and details, assembled too densely and delivered too quickly to make sense. Like Jackson, White launches into absurdity but keeps the reader engaged by using very concrete, easily-imagined elements. Clothing, architecture and names combine into a parody of gushing magazine copy. Bureaucracy is Jackson's route into absurdity. Fashion and lifestyle magazines are White's.

In both pieces, the narrators are "unreliable," Jackson's because she doesn't understand the world, and White's because he's delirious with illness.

Please, overlook the creepy touch of racism, this is the man who wrote "Charlotte's Web." Again, the way to keep a secondary character comic is to depict them as an abstract – but White's black nurse/maid is outdated, especially compared to Jackson's effective parade of identical Miss Coopers. What's important is how White uses illness to gradually warp a character's perspective until we can see how things which seem so important and sublime are built simply out of nonsense and hype.

Recently, I watched a concert video of Billy Idol where he talked about the similarity between so many punk songs. Idol joked that all the songs started fast, lasted for two-and-one-half minutes, then ended abruptly. As he said that, I was shocked. At that moment, my taste in short stories made sense to me. My favorites, by other writers or myself, are stories that start instantly, go fast, and end within a few minutes. "Two screens into my presentation to Microsoft, I taste blood and have to start swallowing..." I loved punk music, and it's clear that manic esthetic has bled into the fiction I love.

As homework, write your own version of the Jackson and White pieces. Write one from within the framework of some complicated system, a job or bureaucracy. Write a second piece using delusion to accelerate something very every-day until it breaks down to absurdity. Use illness or drugs or sleep deprivation as your device, any stress that will degrade your narrator's sanity until ordinary events assume profound weight and drama.

Remember to enter the story quickly. Like a punk song. Establish your authority by keeping every detail specific. Keep your secondary characters vague – make them serve their purpose and make their exit. Build to the absurd, quickly, and get out fast.

Utility Phrases: When All Words Fail

Growing up, whenever my family got together for a picnic or a birthday, if conversation lagged to silence, someone always said, "It must be seven minutes after the hour..."

According to superstition, Abraham Lincoln died at seven minutes past the hour, and since then (folklore says) people always fall silent at that moment, in subconscious grief or honor or whatever. More important, the phrase gave my relatives something to say when no one had anything significant to say. It was something to break the tension of silence. It's a way to acknowledge a lapse in communication, a disconnect, without being stopped by the problem. A kind-of verbal silence or pause.

In a way it connects with a moment of such national grief and shock, a moment when language fails us. At other times when someone shared enormous bad news: they lost their job and developed cancer and their dog died and their kids were sentenced to prison... A traditional way to acknowledge the helpless misery of that awkward moment is to say, "So, Mrs. Lincoln, what did you think of the play?" A dark, gallows way to accept the horrors of the moment, and begin to move forward into the future.

Both phrases are something to say when you're left speechless.

What do you say when you don't know what to say?

More important, what does a character say when he/she doesn't know what to say? What's the phrase they use to fill that silent moment, to bridge it, when language is inappropriate? In *Snuff*, Mister 72 says, "I don't know." That single beat, one sentence, it undermines everything that he's said previously. One stock phrase he says without thinking.

What are the phrases you say without thinking?

Again, in *Snuff*, Sheila says, "True Fact," which does just the opposite. Instead of undermining herself, her phrase bolsters her authority. She always underlines what she's said before.

Mister 72 automatically cuts himself down. Sheila automatically builds herself up.

These phrases are just as important and constant as "hello" and "good-bye," but they're phrases you can tailor to a character. I'm not talking about phrases that indicate state-of-mind – like "I am Jack's raging bile duct" – here, I'm talking about the moments when you need a beat of time to pass. Possibly to frame a gesture. Or to allow for the reader to rest and recover after a big shock or laugh. In the story Guts, it's the line "what even the French won't talk about." A kind-of throw-away reference to something that came earlier. An echo – like the echoes referring to Lincoln's death. In time, we'll no doubt have similar dark phrases that reference the events of 911. Something like, "I'm still waiting for the second tower to fall..." Someday grandparents will say that at picnics, and their kids will have no idea what it refers to.

So, be aware: What does your character say when he/she doesn't know what to say?

For homework, you get to watch any of the cable television shopping clubs. These are wonderful, creepy streams of storytelling – a tent revival crossed with a snake oil pitch. The announcer never stops talking, approaching the item from every angle in an effort to engage the buyer. On a recent program, selling $20 rings set with tiny emeralds, rubies or sapphires, the announcer told how these exact same gem stones were "among the crown jewels of many foreign lands… these same jewels were worn by kings and queens." Emeralds, rubies and sapphires were mentioned in the Bible. The announcer asked: Didn't you have a friend, someone special, who was battling cancer? Was your marriage falling apart? Did you forget Mother's Day? Didn't you, yourself, deserve to wear a lovely ruby ring?

This pitch just drones while the inventory counter ticks toward zero. The clock runs out. The price drops. The entire television screen is filled with stressors, pushing you to buy, while the announcer ventures down one emotional avenue after another.

What was the point of working so hard if you couldn't treat yourself to a nice emerald ring?

Why not do your Christmas shopping early?

Wouldn't a dazzling $20 sapphire ring made a good investment?

Any shopping channel would make a ready set-up for an absurd story. Simply, begin with the conventional aspects – the sales spiel, the item, the clocks – then gradually have your narrator move from vague statements... to more-particular statements, until it's clear the announcer is speaking about his/her own life. That way, the shopping program segment becomes the frame for presenting a short story, and ends when the clock ends or the items are sold out.

For example, your narrator/announcer says: "... maybe your lady is spitting nails because you slipped, again. Just this once you maybe had a drink with Shelley from the Warranty department and one thing led to another, and nobody had to know except Shelley gave you crab lice you took home. And really, it wasn't anybody's fault. Wouldn't a dazzling ruby ring go a long ways toward healing your marriage, and maybe you could not have to sleep on the rec room sofa another night...." On and on, until the entire story is told.

If nothing else, listen to how the announcer fills all that empty time. What do they say when they're just filling the silence?

Names Versus Pronouns

Nothing I say here is law. These are not rules carved into stone. Consider these guidelines more like shirts hanging on a rack in a store: If you like them and they fit, try them on. If they're comfortable and make you look good, wear them.

The goal is to collect options and techniques you can use as you need them. A wardrobe or tool set or paint box that will always be ready.

So, relax.

That said... never, ever use third-person pronouns. At least for the month of July, No Third-Person Pronouns. No "he said" or "she walked" or "it flew." Instead, look at more specific ways of referring to a character. If you haven't noticed, my goal is to always create a maximum amount of tension using a minimum of elements – limited settings, characters, time. By staying with the same elements, I can focus on physical actions and avoid slowing the story with the description necessary for introducing new characters and settings.

The obvious problem with avoiding pronouns is repeating nouns until they become monotonous. For example, "Shelley Parker closed the book. Then, Shelley Parker dropped the book on the floor. Shelley Parker bent at the waist to retrieve the book."

No, using the pronouns "she" and "it" wouldn't make these sentences much better, just shorter.

So instead, consider that everything has multiple names, the least-powerful of which is the usual noun. For example, "Shelley Parker closed the book. Then, Miss Parker dropped the dusty thing on the floor. The coy minx bent at the waist to retrieve the crumpled pile of pages."

It's not perfect, but the passage is getting better. The trick is to recognize how identity shifts, then refer to people and props by their new, varied, evolving names. If nothing else, this is why I try to give each character at least three names. And it's not just

a Catholic Trinity deal. Most of us have nicknames and middle names. Full names we only hear when we're in trouble – "Charles Michael Palahniuk, this court sentences you to serve no less than thirty years in a federal maximum-security..." Many cultures or religions ask members to choose a new name at adulthood, including Catholic rituals of Confirmation where applicants must choose a saint to emulate, adding the saint's name to their own.

As a conversational opening, anytime you're around a Catholic ask him or her about their Confirmation saint. It's a shortcut to their secret childhood identity. Saint Joan or Saint Francis. Mine is St. Lawrence, who talked too much and was barbequed alive by the church officials.

My point is that nobody has only a single static name.

But before we get to proper names, let's consider other, stronger labels. At our first awareness of someone we're likely to assign them a label based on their actions and appearance. For example, "the blonde man who died in that movie" or "the tall, singing woman wearing the hat."

Beyond that, we're likely to label someone based on their relationship to us. For example, "the bastard who cut off my car on the freeway" or "the dog that licked my hand."

Usually their proper name is the last detail we recall about someone. Shelley or St. Lawrence. Even then, you can vary the name by using titles or nicknames: Miss Turner, Dr. Lewis, Sweetie-Pie Barnes. Plus any endearments – Honey, Dear, My Sweetness. "Marian winked at me, and the skinny witch said, 'Drop dead'."

Of course, you need to be careful not to lose or confuse your reader. If you're referring to one character in various ways you'll probably want to create a new paragraph each time you depict each character. Just as important, you'll want to create standard, consistent physical characteristics and nicknames or endearments for each character. And keep the following in mind:

First impression is based on appearance and physical action.

Next comes relationship – how does this affect me?

Last comes a real name, "I'd like you to meet Thomas." Also, "Thomas" is the most abstract or vague of these labels. That's why it's stronger to precede it with action and gesture. Or sensation, how someone smells, tastes, sounds.

In closing, please experiment. If you're careful and write with authority you can skate with references based on practically nothing about the character. In *Fight Club*, as the narrator rails about Big Bob, the narrator refers to him as "the big moosie" and "the big cheese bread." Neither of these are based on Bob, personally, but portray the narrator's distain. Moosie is a covert reference to the hulking, idiot character Moose in the Archie comics. And "cheese" is always kinda dismissive and derogatory, i.e. "that's too cheesy to take serious." Anything beats a pronoun.

For homework, you get to watch reality television.

As you work on a writing project, it helps to recognize the ancient myth your type of story reinvents. Is it a Faust tale, where someone bargains with the devil? Is it a Quest story, where someone must complete a mission or journey? This month take a look at the various reality competitions where groups of people compete at tasks and one-by-one get kicked off a television show. Shows like Survivor, Design Star, Project Runway and Hells Kitchen. Note how the cast consists of archetypal characters – the Asian, the Gay, the Blonde Princess, the Jock, the Black, the Old Man, etc. Then notice how all these shows isolate their casts from the real world, and push them to crisis. Doesn't this sound like every Gothic novel? Compare the shows to *Ten Little Indians* by Agatha Christie, or *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin. How about the novel/movie *Burnt Offerings*? Or the great movie *Alien*. Consider that this ancient Gothic form – isolate, stress, execute – never changes, and that the success of a story depends on reinventing this ancient storytelling model.

List all the basic character types. Identify every variation of the form; even if it happens in Alaska (*Thirty Days of Night*) or on a derelict ocean liner (*Ghost Ship*).

After that, list all your own names. Including the teacher who still knows you as "the weird kid who sat in the third row, the younger brother of that hellion Armstrong boy..." You'll be surprised by the length of that list.

Nuts and Bolts: Plot Points

This seems obvious, embarrassing even to mention, but you need to know the purpose of each scene or chapter or passage before you write it. To make each part of a story do its job well, to best effect, you need to be very clear what the job's supposed to accomplish. Is the scene a set-up (what's 'Rosebud'?) building toward an eventual pay-off? Is the scene or chapter a reveal or pay-off ('Rosebud' is a sled)?

Is the scene or passage acting as a lull in the story, slowing the pace so that subsequent pay-offs generate a stronger reaction – think of the scene where 'Lt. Ripley' prepares for bed, the moment before we find the Alien is also in the escape pod.

Also, ask yourself and be very clear about what earlier questions the current scene will answer. And what new, larger questions will this scene raise.

Yes, all of this seems obvious, but in most workshops if a story or chapter doesn't work well – it tends to drag or lose energy and interest – the failure is because the writer didn't decide the plot point. Instead, the writer just… wrote, hoping a plot point would reveal itself. Usually, forgetting all the earlier set-ups and unresolved details leading to this part of the story.

No, you don't have to know every plot point before you begin writing, but you should know the current point and focus on making it work. Again, here's the stripper analogy: The goal isn't to get naked as fast as you can. The point is to make every small gesture fulfilling. Removing the gloves. The dress. The garter belt. Don't annoy your reader by grinding away, uncertain about what garment to drop next.

Will the next chapter or scene be a flash-back? A flash-forward? How will that support the chapter which follows?

Is the scene a 'gripper scene' intended to seize the reader's attention? Will it be a 'reversal' where power shifts completely from the stronger character to the weaker?

If you're unsure, ask your ideal reader or fellow workshop writers what's missing for them in the story. Often, readers will point out a single, important aspect of your character you've been forgetting to depict. Or, readers will recall an earlier set-up you can resolve. Then, you can determine what action the characters will take to create more tension.

Once you've decided the purpose of a scene – make that happen. If you hate first drafts this will be your salvation. You can write that first terrible draft in three quick pages, completing the plot point, and feel confident that it works well enough to carry the reader to the next plot point. Beyond that you can polish and expand the chapter without pressure. Regardless of the form – novel or short story – don't waste time. Decide the next plot point, then make it happen. With each scene or paragraph, ask yourself what it's supposed to accomplish.

For homework, consider that the best stories are not the ones that stop the audience in its tracks and leave it stunned. More often the best stories excite the reader or viewer, evoking a storm of personal anecdotes with everyone talking at once, thrilled to discover a new connection between themselves and the larger world. In that way, a good story recognizes something in the world and gives people permission to explore it. Usually the story also gives the topic a shared language and supporting metaphors that allow people to discuss it. We can't acknowledge what we have no words for.

With that in mind, a huge aspect of telling good stories is listening and recognizing themes which seem unresolved for people. A writer's job is to express what other people can't.

For example, today, a friend mentioned a secret passionate resentment of vegans. After I didn't condemn his admission, he developed it aloud, telling personal anecdotes that proved his point. Quoting medical information. Saying how Hitler was a vegan. Eventually speculating about absurd situations – a carnivore entering the Vegan Olympics, secretly eating meat and kicking ass in all the events. Such a ringer entering

vegan bodybuilding and martial arts competitions. Or, spoiling the Vegan Tour de France.

The moment he stopped talking, someone else expressed the same hidden irritation. Then a third person started carping about vegans. As a storyteller, you'll recognize that this isn't about vegans as much as it's about a shared, unexpressed passion. By collecting the best ideas presented by people, this is an opportunity to make something to which a larger audience will instantly connect.

Again, a story that evokes stories is a good story.

That's another reason why I don't resist changes as my books become films. The highest form of flattery is NOT imitation, it's seeing your work become a catalyst for other people to express their ideas. With something as difficult to make as a film – to finance and shoot and distribute – unless the actors and director find their own passionate attachment to the story, they'll never complete the process.

As homework, listen for statements or jokes or observations that excite people and prompt them to talk. Listen for something unique, beyond the politics of the moment, some unresolved and generally unexpressed idea that will last over a long period of time.

Tell a Lie, Bury a Gun

Let's revisit the idea of a "buried gun" in plotting. According to Chekhov, if you put a gun in a drawer in Act One, then you must take it out and shoot someone in Act Three. For example, think of the furnace boiler in "The Shining," we're told in the first few pages of the book that the boiler will explode if you don't watch it. We revisit the furnace several times over the subsequent chapters. And when the plot needs to climax – guess what – the boiler explodes.

More recently, in the film "30 Days of Night" we're told early-on that a character has cancer so she's growing dope to help her deal with the nausea of chemotherapy. Soon enough, the cancer character gets shredded by vampires, but all that cancer fuss was just a way to provide ultraviolet "grow" lights which the hero can use to battle those vampires. In "Citizen Kane" the gun is a sled. In "It's a Wonderful Life" the gun is the rose petals that Jimmy Stewart tucks in his pocket.

In every story about the "Titanic" the gun is the iceberg.

In the film "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" the gun is... well, a gun. Again and again, we see Gig Young's character fire a pistol to start various competitions. It seems so natural that the audience never gives it a thought. A starter's pistol. Even when Jane Fonda takes that pistol out of her purse and puts the barrel to her head it seems perfectly "organic." We know that gun. We've seen it so many times that we can't help but recognize it, and this go-round its job is to end something instead of begin something.

With all of that said, let's talk about another type of gun: The Lie.

In "The Talented Mr. Ripley" Tom Ripley masquerades as a Princeton graduate, taking greater and greater measures to protect his secret. Each time he's confronted with his lie, he kills the person who's about to unmask him. In "Stir of Echoes" and "The Changeling" the lie is a crime that's been committed long before the story starts, but that corrodes the guilty killers until they're revealed and brought to justice.

In "The Graduate" it's the affair with Mrs. Robinson. In "Breakfast at Tiffanys" it's Holly Golightly's weekly visit to prison where she relays coded messages to a mafia kingpin.

If you tell a lie early, you can bury it. Remember Ruth Gordon in "Harold and Maude," saying very, very early that she plans to die on her up-coming birthday? Okay, it's not quite a lie, but it's a very-dark promise. Maude says this, and the statement is instantly buried in dialogue and music. No characters respond to the line, so the statement makes very little impact – until we need to force the plot to crisis. At the most-sweet moment, when Harold has arranged a surprise birthday party, Maude announces she's already taken an overdose of drugs.

On that same note, consider the promises in stories that first occur as lies. Usually movies about dead-beat dads where absent fathers make impossible promises to their estranged kids. By Act Three, surprise, the dad has somehow fulfilled that promise that he had no real intention of completing. Transformation happens, and everyone's happy.

Again, an insincere promise is a lie is a gun. A crime or secret is a lie is a gun.

Yes, okay. It's artificial and manipulative, but a buried lie will save you from writing 800 pages and never finding your plot climax. Life might seem to drag on and on, but fiction shouldn't.

In "Fight Club" the lie is the narrator allowing dying people to think he's also dying. In "Choke" the lie is the narrator allowing strangers to think they've saved his life. In both books, a kind-of social contract requires that their deception be revealed, and that the liars be subjected to the reaction of their victims. The lie gives the narrator power over others. The truth places the narrator at the mercy of others. What's important is how the narrator is brought back to an honest relationship with his community.

That, and you have other story ideas you want to be writing. A well-buried lie respects your reader's time, also.

So, tell a lie. Tell it early. Bury it, and unmask the teller before you get bored.

Whether it's the police arresting Holly Golightly... or Romy and Michelle inventing Post-Its... or the black girl Sarah Jane passing as white in "Imitation of Life"... or Marla Singer announcing, "You're not sick, either!" – you know this trick. We all use a form of it in our everyday lives.

Now, use it in your fiction.

For homework, find the lies that function as guns in your favorite films. In "Alien" where is the big lie revealed? In "The Fog"? Notice how so many stories place the lie or crime before the narrative begins. That way, the characters arrive innocent and unknowing, in the same way the reader is naive, and everyone enjoys the discovery process together.

How about "My Fair Lady," where the lie convinces everyone, but begins to degrade the liars as they continue to deceive. How would the story go if Eliza Doolittle were discovered and humiliated at the embassy ball?

How about "American Psycho," where it doesn't matter once the protagonist confesses to his crimes? No one cares. Satisfaction and honesty are impossible to attain.

Beyond that, look for the lies that actual people work double-hard to conceal. People who seem smart are usually trying to hide the fact they feel stupid. Beautiful people are hiding how ugly they feel. Hard-working folks are hiding their inner sense of laziness. All of them will maintain their lie until that's impossible.

That's when the fun really starts.

A Story from Scratch, Act One

Years ago, Ira Levin wrote a very polite rejection letter to me. As the author of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* and *Deathtrap*, Levin's my hero of tight, fast plotting. I'd written to thank him for endorsing my book, *Diary*, and asking if he could offer any advice based on his method of writing fiction. In response, Levin told the story about a very, very old man with a long beard. Once someone asked if the man slept with his beard inside or outside the blankets, and the old man couldn't readily say. That night, going to bed, the old man was so aware of his beard that neither tucking it under the covers nor leaving it out seemed comfortable. After that, he was so overly aware of his beard, that he just couldn't sleep. And not sleeping, he died.

At that, Levin declined to discuss the process of writing out of the fear that exploring his practices would make him too self-conscious to work. I can accept that.

Ever since I began writing these essays about process or style or technique – whatever you want to call this – people have asked me to present the rough, evolving drafts of a short story. My first drafts are always such a disaster that I've never done this, until now. The bookstore Dark Delicacies has asked me to contribute a 5000-word horror story to their next anthology so over the next three months I'll present the rough first, second and third acts of a story called Fetch. A ghost story. In each section of the story, I'll insert notes explaining my reasoning. In Tom Spanbauer's workshop, Tom would sometimes stop an author mid-story and ask him or her to justify using a certain word or image. That's always stayed in my mind, the idea of being challenged and having to argue for each detail of my work.

Be warned, this will suck the way most first drafts suck. To see the finished version, free of failed experiments and excess details, look for the story in the next Dark Delicacies anthology. I'll give the details of that in an up-coming essay. For now, here's the first act of ***Fetch***.

Note: A decade ago, as a branding device, my editor Gerry Howard asked me to give single-word titles to my books. My preference is to use verbs that can have multiple meanings, like "choke" or "snuff." Especially verbs with hard "ch" or "k" or long vowels like the 'eye' sound in Fight Club or the 'ee' sound in Pygmy.

Also, there's no rule about staging every story in three acts, but for a first draft it's the easiest way for me to imagine the plot. The first act will be approximately 2000 words, the second act 1500 words, and the final act 1500 words. Now the story...

Hank stands with one foot a step in front of his other. He crouches back on his rear leg, squatting low on that behind leg, his knee bent, his torso, shoulders and head all twisted and pulled back to the farthest point from the toe of his forward foot. At the moment he exhales, Hank's rear leg explodes straight, the hip flexing to throw his whole body forward. His torso twists to throw one shoulder forward. His shoulder throws his elbow. His elbow throws his wrist. All of that one arm swings in a curve, cracking fast as a bullwhip. His every muscle snaps that one hand forward, and at the point where Hank should fall onto his face, his hand releases the ball. A tennis ball, bright yellow, flying fast as a cannon. It shoots until almost disappearing into the blue sky, following a yellow arch as high as the sun.

Note: My preference is to always begin with a physical action. Gesture always trumps dialogue. Verbs connect with readers in a more immediate way, coming in under our radar and resonating with more basic structures of the brain. Because this is a story, I'll use present tense to create more immediacy, and less sense of distance between the reader and the on-going action.

Hank throws the tennis ball with his entire body, the way a man's supposed to throw. Jenny's Labrador retriever bounds after it, a black smear shooting toward the horizon, dodging between the tombstones, then bounding back, tail wagging, and drops the ball at my feet.

Note: This will be told in first person, "I", but I need to "submerge the I" so it's less likely to distract the reader.

How I throw the ball, I only use my fingers. Maybe my wrist. Nobody ever taught me any better so my throw bounces off the first row of tombstones, ricocheting off a mausoleum, rolling through the grass and disappearing behind a grave marker, while Hank grins at his feet and shakes his head from side to side, saying, "Good throw." From deep down in his throat, Hank hawks a wad and spits a fat oyster into the grass between my bare feet.

Note: Establish the setting through action, the moving ball has to carry our vision to the tombstones and grass to avoid just stating we're in a cemetery on a sunny day. Also, depict body language that contradicts what's actually said in dialogue. The spitting is an on-the-body moment to demonstrate distain, cut with repeating vowels, D's and B's.

Jenny's dog stands there, part black lab, part stupid, looking at Jenny. Jenny looking at Hank. Hank looking at me and saying, "What're you waiting for, boy, go fetch." Hank jerks his head at where the tennis ball has vanished, lost among the headstones.

Jenny twists a strand of her long hair between the fingers of one hand, looking behind us to where Hank's car sits in the empty parking lot. The sunlight shining through her skirt, no slip, outlining her legs all the way up, she says, "We'll wait. I swear."

Note: The first act needs to establish the rivalry between the narrator and Hank. Establish the setting and the activity and important objects.

Written on the close-up tombstones, no dates come any newer than 1880-something. Just guessing, my throw landed around the 1930's. Hank's throw went all the way back to the Pilgrims on the Mayflower.

With my first step I feel wet against the underneath of my foot, some ooze, sticky and still warm. Hank's spit smeared under my toes, I drag my foot on the grass to wipe it. Behind me, Jenny laughs while I drag that foot up the slope toward the first row of graves. Bouquets of plastic roses stick in the ground. Little American flags twitch in the

breeze. The black lab runs ahead, sniffing at the dead, brown spots in the grass, then adding its piss. The tennis ball isn't behind the row of 1870's graves. Behind the 1860's, more nothing.

Note: Measure distance in a way specific to the situation.

With my next step, the ground explodes, the mowed grass geysers with landmines of cold water, hosing my jeans and shirt. A booby trap of sheer, freezing cold. The underground lawn sprinklers drive sprays of water, blasting my eyes shut, washing my hair flat. Cold water hits from every direction. From behind me comes laughter, Hank and Jenny laughing so hard they fall into each other for support. They fall to the grass still hugging, and their laughter stops as their mouths come together.

Jenny's stupid Labrador barks and snaps at a jet of water, biting the sprinkler head next to me. Just as fast, the automatic sprinklers drop back into the ground. My t-shirt drips. Water runs down my face from the soaked mop of my hair. Sopping wet, my jeans feel stiff and heavy as concrete.

Not two graves away, the ball sits behind a tombstone. Pointing my finger, I tell the dog, "Fetch," and he runs over, sniffs the tennis ball, growls at it, then runs back without it. Walking over, I pick up the yellow fuzz wet from the sprinklers.

When I turn to throw the ball back to Jenny, the grass sloping down below me is empty. Beyond that, the parking lot spreads, empty. No Hank or Jenny. No car. All that's left is a puddle of black oil dripped out of Hank's engine pan.

In one huge throw, every skinny muscle the length of my arm whips, heaving the ball downhill to the spot where Hank's spit wet the grass. I tell the dog, "Fetch", and it only looks at me. Still dragging one foot, I start back downhill, until my toes feel warm, again. This time, dog piss. Where I stand, the grass feels coarse. Dead. When I look up, the ball sits next to me, as if it's rolled uphill. Where I can see, the cemetery looks empty.

Throwing the ball, again, down the long slope, I tell the dog, "Fetch." The dog just looks at me, but in the distance the ball rolls closer and closer. Returning to me. Rolling up the slope. Rolling uphill.

One of my feet burning, the scratches and bunions of my barefoot stinging with dog piss. My other foot, the toes webbed with Hank's foaming, gray spit. My shoes, in his car. Gone. Me dumped here to baby-sit her stupid pooch while Jenny's run off.

Walking back through the graves, I drag one foot to wipe it clean on the grass. With the next step, I drag the other foot. Dragging each foot, I leave a trail of flattened skid marks in the lawn all the way to the empty parking lot.

Note: Keep the narrator aware of the cumulative sensations of his or her body. Describe the narrator's walk in terms that will suggest a zombie or monster staggering through a dark setting. And, mention creating a "trail" to foreshadow the up-coming plot point.

This tennis ball, now the dog won't go near it. In the parking lot, I stand next to the pool of dripped crankcase oil, and I throw the ball, again, chucking it hard as I'm able. The ball rolls back, spiraling around me, forcing me to keep turning to watch it, circling me until my head's spinning, dizzy. When the ball stops at my foot, I throw it, again. Rolling back to me, this time the ball takes a detour, rolling against the grade, breaking the Law of Gravity, the ball circles in the pool of Hank's crankcase oil, soaking up the black muck. Stained black, the tennis ball rolls within kicking distance of my bare foot. Looping, jumping, doubling back on itself, the ball leaves a trail of black across the gray concrete, then it stops. A black tennis ball, round as the period at the end of a sentence. The dot at the bottom of an exclamation point.

Note: Using a simile is always less effective than stating the quality that's similar. Instead of "the tennis ball looks like the period at the..." use this moment as a chance to state the qualities of the ball – round, black – then state the similarity to a punctuation mark.

The stupid black lab shakes, too close, spraying me with dog water from its sopping fur. The stink of wet dog and spatters of mud stick everywhere on my jeans and t-shirt.

Note: Keep the dog present in the scene, but only depicting its actions. Also, cutting to the dog for a moment will create better tension before the imminent reveal.

The ball's oily, black trail forms letter, those letters spelling words across the concrete parking lot, writing the sentence: "Please help me!"

The ball returns to the puddle of engine oil, soaking its fuzz with black, then rolling, writing in big, loopy handwriting: "We need to rescue her."

As I reach to pick it up, just squatting down to grab the tennis ball, it bounces a few steps away. I take a step, and the ball bounces, again, reaching the edge of the parking lot. As I follow, it bounces, coming to a complete stop as if glued to the road, leading me out of the cemetery. The blacktop, hot and sharp under my bare feet, I follow, hopping from one foot to the other. The ball leads, bouncing a row of black dots down the road ahead of me. The black lab follows. A sheriff's patrol car cruises past, not stopping. At the stop sign, where the cemetery road meets the county road, the ball stops, waiting for me to catch up. With each bounce, the ball leaves less oil. Me, not feeling much, I'm so pulled forward by this vision of the impossible. The ball stops bouncing, stuck in one spot. A car trails us, crawling along at the same speed. The horn honks, and I turn to see Hank behind the wheel, Jenny sits beside him in the front seat. Rolling down the shotgun window, Jenny leans her head out, her long hair hanging down the outside of the car door, and she says, "Are you crazy? Are you high?" With one arm, Jenny reaches into the backseat, then reaches out the car window, holding my shoes in her hand. She says, "For crying out loud, just look at your feet..."

With each step, my raw feet leave behind a little more red, blood, my footprints stamped in blood on the pavement, marking my path all the way from the cemetery parking lot. Stopped in this one spot, I'm standing in a puddle of my own red juice, not feeling the sharp gravel and broken glass on the roadside.

One bounce ahead of me, the tennis ball waits.

Note: First plot point accomplished. The story has started from something fairly familiar – playing fetch with a tennis ball in a cemetery – and moved to something miraculous, raising lots of questions. Does the reference to rescuing "her" mean Jenny? What will the quest be? How is the tennis ball animated? At this point, the word count is roughly 1500 so there's room for more details as they might be needed in subsequent revisions. Also, there's an old method for creating a sympathetic, physical response in the reader: describe either the inside of a character's mouth or the soles of his feet. Another old saying goes: If you're going to do something in a story, do it three times. So, here I'm using the soles of the narrator's feet under three escalating conditions: contact with spit, urine, then bleeding. This gives a nice balance between the ball writing in black oil, and the narrator marking his journey with a map of red blood.

A Story from Scratch, Act Two

Note: At the moment I'm writing this, my neck hurts like all-get-out. Yesterday I was driving northbound on Interstate Five, when a driver two lanes to my right hit his brakes on wet pavement, spun 180 degrees and slid to the left, then continued southbound into north-bound traffic, and collided with me head-on. My pick up truck is trashed. Totaled. Not a great day. That's a strange comfort about writing... years later, as you read your past work, it reminds you of landmark events that you might otherwise forget. In a way it's like keeping a diary in code. So many biographical details – physical details, emotions – are translated into fiction, and it's a comfort to be reminded of the problems you've survived.

That way, it's similar to the old Dale Carnegie exercise: At any crisis point of your life, write your worse problems and fears on paper and hide them in a drawer. After a year has passed, retrieve and read the list, and you'll laugh about how many of those horrible problems eventually amounted to nothing.

In addition, writing this type of fictional diary makes you more aware of actual circumstances – I'm less likely to see this accident as an on-going danger. It happened once in the 30 years I've been driving. That's the reason I love reading biographies, because they demonstrate how most successful people have suffered countless failures, but we know them because they didn't quit and managed to score a small, regular number of successes.

Now, let's continue with Act Two of ***Fetch****. The first act established a basic reality of characters and action within a setting, then something miraculous happened to lead us on a quest with the narrator. His feet are bleeding, his clothes are wet, and he's stepped in spit and dog piss – these are physical details to keep in the reader's mind. The animated tennis ball is stained with oil.*

Sitting behind the steering wheel, Hank twists one shoulder backward, hooking his arm over the seat back and pinching the tab of the door lock between two fingers.

Pulling up the tab, he reaches down and yanks the handle to throw open the door, saying, "Get in the car." He says, "Get in the fucking car, now."

Note: Damn I hate repeating "backward" and "back" so close together, but that's fixable in the next draft. All of this action serves to reintroduce Hank to the reader and place him in the drivers seat. That way we avoid passive statements like "Hank was driving" or "Hank's at the steering wheel." Don't show the reader anything unless that thing is moving or acting in relation to other things. Yeah, like in a movie. Remember: People hate slide shows, but they love movies.

Jenny swings her hand, dropping my tennis shoes so they fly halfway to where I stand, flapping down in the roadside gravel.

Note: Again, Jenny takes action, and we use the shoes as props or objects.

Standing here, my feet dark as hooves or church shoes, so coated with dried blood and dust, all I can do is point at the dirty tennis ball. Except the ball only sits there, not moving, not leading me anywhere, stopped along the edge of the blacktop where the pigweeds begin.

Note: Describing the bloody feet is an on-the-body passage. It's followed by a gesture. Please avoid dialogue if you can use gesture, instead.

Hank punches the middle of his steering wheel, blasting me with a gigantic honk. A second honk so loud it echoes back from the nowhere over the horizon. All the flat sugar beet fields, the crops all around me and their car, filled with Hank's loud horn. Under the car hood the engine revs, the pushrods banging and cams knocking, and Jenny leans out her shotgun window, saying, "Don't make him pissed off." She says, "Just get in the car."

Note: Let's talk about 'Burnt Tongue.' You can prompt your reader to stay more focused by misstating something. Especially in dialogue: "Don't make him pissed off." We've already demonstrated the anger, with the hostile sound of horns and the engine. The dialogue merely summarizes that. To make it do more – help characterize Jenny – you can spin her slang any "wrong" way you'd like.

A flash of black jumps past my legs, and the stupid Labrador jumps in the door Hank holds open. With his twisted-around arm, Hank yanks the door shut and cranks the steering wheel hard to one side. Flipping a big U-turn, his beater car tears off. Gravel rattling inside the wheel wells. Jenny's one hand still trailing out her open window.

Note: A comic reveal: Hank and Jenny don't give a shit about the narrator. They only wanted to collect the dog. This places the narrator in a lower status than the animal, totally abandoned in his quest.

Watching them go, I bend over to pick up my shoes. It's right then when – pock – something slams into the back of my head. Rubbing my scalp with one hand I turn to look what hit me, and already the tennis ball is on the move, bouncing down the road in an opposite direction than Hank's car.

Kneeled down, knotting my shoes, I yell, "Wait." Only the ball keeps going.

Running after it, I yell, "Hold up." And the ball keeps bouncing, bouncing, big jumps right in line with the road. At the stop sign for Fisher Road, mid-jump, at the highest point in one bounce, the ball cuts to the right. Turning the corner in mid-air, and bouncing down Fisher, me still trucking along behind. Down Fisher, past the junkyard where it turns into Millers Road, then the ball turns left at Turner Road and starts going upriver, parallel to the bank of Skinners Creek. Staying out of the trees, the oil-soaked, dust-packed tennis ball really flies along, puffing up a little cloud of dust every time it smacks down in the road.

Note: Describe your world only as some object or person moves through it. In a film, the camera would be the motion, continually pushing through the static landscape, adding a sense of motion to the naturally slow movement of the sun, the wind, the plants. The added action of the camera would heighten all that and justify the viewers interest. In fiction, consider always introducing your world through the objects that move through it.

Where two old wheel ruts leave the road and run through the weeds, the ball turns right, rolling now. The ball rolls along the dried mud of one rut, swerving to go around the worst puddles and potholes. My shoelaces dangle and whip against my ankles. Me panting, shuffling along after it, losing sight of the ball in the tall grass. Catching sight of it when the ball bounces, bouncing in one place until I find it, there. Then, rolling along the rut, leading me into the cottonwood trees that grow along the creek side.

Note: Here, action implies time passing. I'd never want to say: "Fifteen minutes later..." or "All afternoon..." By linking verbs, I can suggest lapsed time.

Nobody's standing in line to give me any scholarship. Not after my three big, fat D grades Mr. Lockard handed me in Algebra, Geometry and Physics. But I'm almost sure no ball should be able to roll uphill, not forever. No tennis ball can stop perfectly still in one place, then start up bouncing off by itself. It's an impossibility, how this ball comes flying out of nowhere, socking me in the forehead to grab my attention any time I even look away.

Note: The previous paragraph is an example of cutting to "big voice" and leaving the narrative "little voice" scene for a moment. The goal is to vary the texture of the narrative and imply more time and distance passing.

One step into the trees, I need to stop and let my eyes adjust. Just that one little wait, and – pow – I have dirty tennis ball imprinted on my face. My skin greasy and smelling like motor oil. Both my hands raised up by reflex, swatting at air the way you'd fight off a hornet too fast to see. I'm waving away nothing but air, and the tennis ball is already jumping out ahead of me, the thumping, thudding sound going off through the woods.

Going all the way to the creek bank, the ball leaps out ahead, until it stops. In the mud between two roots of a cottonwood tree, the ball rolls to a standstill. As I catch up, it makes a little bounce, not knee high. It makes a second bounce, this time waist high. The ball bounces shoulder high, head high, always landing in the same exact spot, with

every landing pushing itself deeper into the mud. Bouncing more high than I could reach, up around the leaves of the tree, the ball clears away a little hole, there, between the roots.

Note: We're full-on into a fable or tall tale by now. The language can risk getting looser and more choppy or coarse, anything that will support the chaos and immediate danger of the moment.

The sound of birds, the magpies, stopped to silence. No mosquitoes or buzz of deer flies. Nothing makes any sound except this ball and my heartbeat in my chest. Both, thudding more and more fast.

Another bounce, and the ball clinks against metal. Not a sharp sound, more a clank like hitting a home run off the gutter of old Mr. Lloyd's house, or skipping a rock off the roof of a car parked at Lovers Lane. The ball hits dirt, hard as if it's pulled with a magnet, stops, and rolls to one side. And deep in the hole it's dug, a little brass shines out. The metal of something buried. The brass lid of a canning jar, printed Mason, same as your Mom would put up tomatoes inside for the winter.

Note: You describe a character by how the character describes his or her world. The more specific, the better. Not "vegetables" but "tomatoes." Not "the gutter of a house" but "the gutter of Mr. Lloyd's house." You can risk these odd extra details because, at this point, your plot is moving so well. People will read along, looking for the next verb.

No ball has to tell me. I dig, my hands clawing away the mud, my fingers slippery around the buried glass outsides of the jar. The tennis ball waiting, I kneel there and pull this dirty jar out from the sucking mud, big around as a blue-ribbon turnip. The glass so smeared with mud I can't see what's so heavy inside.

Using spit, spit and my t-shirt still wet from the graveyard sprinklers, I wipe. The lid stuck on, tight, swollen with rust and crud. I spit and wipe until something gold is looking back from inside the glass. Gold coins. Same as you'd find if you followed a leprechaun to the base of a rainbow – if you believed that crap – here's a quart jar filled

with gold coins packed so tight together they don't rattle. They don't roll. All they do is shine bright as the alloy wheels I'm going to buy to blow Hank's crap burner car off the road. Bright as the ring I'll take Jenny to buy at the Crossroad Mall. Right here in my two hands – and, pow.

Note: Ah, money... It represents the ultimate possibility. Money alone is boring, abstract shit, so make it equivalent to a character's dreams and priorities. Build a character by describing what he or she would do with a new fortune.

The bright gold, replaced with shooting stars. The smell of motor oil.

The next smell, my own nose collapsed and filling with blood. Busted.

Note: If you read your work aloud, you learn to love repeating sounds. The most-fun ones are explosive B's or P's. They act like a full-stop, and you can really "pop" them into a microphone. "... blood, busted, blasted, bouncing, back..." Like a series of good jabs in boxing.

The tennis ball, blasted off my face, bouncing angry as a hornet. The ball flies in my face while I fight it back with the heavy jar. Shielding my eyes with my arm muscles burning from the weight. Blood running down from my nose, sputtered out by my yelling. Twisting one foot in the slick mud, I launch over the creek bank. Same as Cub Scouts teaches you to do in a wasp attack, I splash into the water and wade out to over my head.

From underwater, between me and the sky, the ball floats on the surface of the creek. Waiting. The jar of gold coins, holds me tight to the rocks on the creek bed, but rolling it along, my chest full of my breath, I work my way upstream. The current takes the tennis ball downstream. Working my way into the shallows, the moment my breath gives out and the ball's nowhere to be seen, I pop my head up for a gasp. One big breath, and I duck back under. The ball's floated, bobbing, maybe a half-mile downstream, hard to tell because it looks so oily black on the water, but the ball's following the trail of my nose blood, tracking me in the direction of the current.

Note: You want a fast way to create tension? Hold a character underwater. It's worked in a million movies, from "The Poseidon Adventure" to "Aliens IV." It worked well in "Guts" and that's why I don't want to over-use it, here. But a jar of gold makes a nice symbol for attachment to material possessions and the cost of being greedy.

When my new air gives out, I stand up, half out of the water and wade to shore, making as little splash and noise as possible. Sniffing the blood back up my busted nose. One look backward, over my shoulder, and already the ball's swimming, slow as a paddling mallard, against the current coming toward me.

Another Sir Isaac Newton impossibility.

Note: Once you establish the theme or "horse" of physics, it doesn't take much to revisit it in the reader's mind, to create a beat of time and better pace your actions. Here, it acts as a fragment of "big voice."

My arms both wrapped around that jar full of gold, I scramble up the creek side, the water squishing in my shoes, and I take off running through the woods.

Note: This is the end of Act Two, in this draft. The quest has led to an ethical choice. At this point I'm at roughly 1420 words so I'll stop. The goal is 1500 words for the second act, and this gives me some wiggle room in case I need to add another paragraph.

Note: Here's another concept: "The Vertical versus the Horizontal" of a story. The Horizontal means the string of plot events from beginning to end. The Vertical means the accumulation of emotion that leads to a character's "transformation" near the end of the story. Most first drafts are limited to establishing the horizontal – the plotting, scene, characters. It's usually in reflection that a writer finds and heightens the emotional or vertical aspects of a story.

A Story from Scratch, Act Three

Note: To date, we've established the three human characters, plus the dog and tennis ball. We've established the narrator's motivation: to win Jenny's affection. We've created the obstacle of Hank, and the counter-motive of the tennis ball… which wants to retrieve some gold coins and do – something unknown with them. At this point, the narrator has stolen the gold and is fleeing with it, trying to escape the tennis ball.

*Remember to keep all the previous on-the-body details present: the narrator's bloodied nose, the fact his clothes are soaked with water, his feet are cut and scraped, and the jar of gold feels very heavy. Now, back to '**Fetch**'…*

My every running step through the wood, mud slides under me shoes. The jar swings me sideways, almost off balance, spinning me when I jerk to far the other way. My chest aches, my ribcage feeling collapsed. With every landing I just about fall on my face, grabbing the jar so tight that, if I fell, the glass would bust and stab straight into my eyes and heart. I'd bleed right to death, slipped here, face-down in a puddle of mud and gold and broken glass. From behind, the tennis ball shoots through the leaves, snapping twigs and branches, whistling the same zing noise as a bullet ripping through the Vietnam jungle next to your head in some television war movie.

Maybe one good bounce before the ball catches me, I duck low. The rotted trunk of a cottonwood has busted and fallen, and I stuff the heavy jar deep into the boggy center of the roots, the mud cave where they've pulled out from the ground on one side. Hidden. The ball probably doesn't see because it keeps after me as I run faster, jumping and crashing my way through blackberry vines and saplings, stomping up sprays of muddy water until I hit the gravel of Turner Road. My shoes chew up the gravel, my every long jump shakes the water from my clothes. The cemetery sprinkler water replaced by dog piss replaced by Skinner Creek replaced by me sweating, the legs of my jeans rub

me, the denim stiff with stuck-on dust. Me, panting so hard I'm ready to blow both lungs out my mouth, turned inside-out, my insides puked out like pink bubble-gum bubbles.

Note: Do not explain why a character takes an action: i.e. "I hid the gold under the tree so I could come back for it, later." Simply take the action. Also, by revisiting each of the fluids which have soaked our narrator, we can summarize the various segments of the story, keeping them all present in the reader's mind. The dog piss keeps the dog around as a character, too. The summary helps pace the on-going physical action and implies time and distance passing.

About language, decide what words your narrator does NOT know, and avoid them. For example, my narrator doesn't know the word "stride." Using too great a variety of words can sound "writerly" as if the story is told by a writer instead of the narrator.

Midway, between one running step and the next, the moment both my legs are stretched out, one in front and the other in back of me, in midair, something slams me in the back. Stumbling forward, I recover, but this something smacks me again, square in my backbone between my shoulder blades. Just as hard, arching my back, something hits me, a third go-round. It hits the back of my head, hard as a foul ball or a bunt in softball. Fast as a line drive fresh off the sweet spot of a Louisville Slugger, slamming you dead-on, this something hits me another time. Stars and comets swimming in my eyes, I pitch forward still on my feet, running full tilt.

Note: Since the ball is behind the narrator, let's not assume the thing hitting him is the ball. Instead, describe the effect using comparable things which will describe the narrator's life history: baseball, television, sports, etc. We know the attacker is the tennis ball so this sequence is an opportunity to describe the narrator by how he describes his immediate experience.

Winded, sucking air and blinded with sweat, my feet tangle together, the something wings me one more time, beaning the top of my skull, and I go down. The bare skin of my elbows plow the gravel. My knees and face dive into the dust of my landing. My teeth grit with the dirt in my mouth, and my eyes squeeze shut. The mystery something punches my ribs, slugs my kidneys as I squirm on the road. This something bounces,

hard, to break my arms. It keeps bouncing, pile driving its massive impact, drilling me in my gut, slugging my ears while I curl tight to protect my nuts.

Note: See how much fun verbs can be? A good action sequence feels like writing for a sports broadcas, just using one dynamic verb after another.

Past the moment I could still walk back and show the ball where the gold's hidden, almost to the total black of being knocked out, I'm pounded. Beat on. Until a gigantic honk wakes me up. A second honk so loud it echoes back from the nowhere over the horizon, all the bottomland cottonwoods and tall weeds all around me, filled with Hank's loud car horn. Hank skids to stop.

Jenny's voice says, "Don't make him pissed off." She says, "Just get in the car."

I pop open my eyes, glued with blood and dust, and the ball just sits next to me in the road. Hank's pulled up, idling his engine. Under the car hood the engine revs, the pushrods banging and cams knocking.

Note: Here's a good 'buried gun.' Anytime I need to interrupt the action, I need only bring Hank's car back around. All of my seemingly wasted years of cruising in cars with bored friends, they keep this story moving. Another aspect of using limited elements – characters, settings, repeated actions – is that you can recycle previous passages for comic effect, or simply to create an event with economy. For example, once we know what a gesture means, we no longer need it defined. The character only performs the gesture, and it's already loaded with previous meaning.

Looking up at Jenny, I spit blood. Pink drool leaks out, running down my chin, and my tongue can feel my chipped teeth. One eye almost swelled shut, I say, "Jenny?" I say, "Will you marry me?"

The filthy tennis ball, waiting. Jenny's dog, panting in the backseat of the car.

My ears glow hot and raw. My lips, split and bleeding, I say, "If I can beat Hank Richardson just one game in tennis, will you marry me?"

Note: A character with nothing left to lose can reveal his deepest desire.

Spitting blood, I say, "If I lose, I'll buy you a car. I swear." I say, "Brand-new with electric windows, power steering, a stereo, the works…"

The tennis ball sits, nested in the gravel, listening. Behind his steering wheel, Hank shakes his head side to side. "Deal," Hank says. "Hell, yeah, she'll marry you."

Sitting shotgun, her face framed in the car window, Jenny says, "It's your funeral." She says, "Now climb in."

Getting to my feet, standing, I stoop over and grab the tennis ball. Just something rubber filled with air. Not alive, in my hand, just wet with the creek water, soft with a layer of gravel dust. We drive to the tennis courts behind the high school, where nobody plays, and the white lines look faded. The chain-link fences flake red rust, they were built so long ago. Weeds grow through the cracked concrete, and the tennis net sags in the middle.

Jenny flips a quarter-dollar, and Hanks gets to serve, first.

His racquet whacks the ball, faster than I can see, into a corner where I could never reach, and Hank gets the first point. The same with his second point. The same with the whole first game.

Note: To create tension, we need to suggest that Hank might win. This will generate more sympathy for the narrator and make the obvious impending plot reversal seem like more of a victory. For a stronger effect, I need to reread the opening of this story and borrow some of that earlier wording to echo the scene where Hank was clearly superior. Just a few well-chosen words can keep that earlier scene present in the reader's mind.

When the serve comes to me, I hold the tennis ball close-by my lips and whisper my deal. My bargain. If the ball helps me win the match. To win Jenny. I'll help with the gold. But if I lose to Hank, it can pound me dead and I'll never tell where the gold is hid.

"Serve, already," Hank yells. He says, "Stop kissing the damned ball…"

My first serve drills Hank, pow, in his nuts. My second takes out his left eye. Hank returns my third serve, fast and low, but the tennis ball slows to almost stop and bounces

right in front of me. My every serve, the ball knocks another tooth out of Hank's mouth. Any returns, the ball swerves to me, slows and bounces where I can hit it back.

No surprise, but I win.

Even crippled as I look, Hank looks worse, his eyes almost swollen shut. His knuckles puffed up and scabbed over. Hank's limping from so many drives straight to his crotch. Jenny helps him lay down in the backseat of his car so she can drive him home.

I tell her, "Even if I won, you don't have to go out with me…"

And Jenny says, "Good."

I ask if it would make any difference if I was rich.

And Jenny says, "Are you?"

Sitting, alone on the cracked tennis court, the ball looks red, stained with Hank's blood.

I wait and wait, then I shake my head, No.

Note: My preference is to limit dialogue, and to confine exchanges to a few lines. The goal is to sort and separate action and speech, because they engage different parts of the reader's mind. And – please – always avoid perfect "tennis match" exchanges where characters respond exactly to what they've been asked. If you can resolve a situation with a gesture instead of dialogue – use the gesture.

After they drive away, I pick up the tennis ball and head back toward Skinner Creek. From under the roots of the downed cottonwood tree, I lift out the Mason jar heavy with gold coins. Carrying the jar, I drop the ball. As it rolls away, I follow. Rolling uphill, violating every law of gravity, the ball rolls all afternoon. Rolling through weeds and sand, the ball rolls into the twilight. All this time, I follow behind, lugging that jar of gold treasure. Down Turner Road, down ???? Road, north along the old highway, then west-bound along dirt roads with no name.

Note: We've resolved the rivalry with Hank a little too easily, but the next draft can unpack tha into a better action sequencet. For now, we need to sprint to the finish line. A laundry list of roads and landmarks will condense our journey into one paragraph.

A bump rides the horizon, the sun setting behind it. As we get closer, the bump grows into a lump. A shack. From closer up, the shack is a house sitting in a nest of paint curls peeled off its wood by the weather and fallen to make a ring around its brick foundation. The bare wood curves and warps. On the roof, the tarpaper shingles buckle and ripple. Stapled to the front door, a sheet of yellow-color paper says, "Condemned."

The tennis ball rolls up the road, up the dirt driveway. It bounces up the brick steps, hitting the front door with a hollow sound. Bouncing off the porch, the ball beats the door, again. From inside the house come footsteps echoing on bare wood. From behind the closed door, the "Condemned" sign, a voice says, "Hello?"

A witch voice, cracked and brittle as the warped wood siding. A voice faint as the faded colors of paint flaked on the ground.

I knock, saying, "I have a delivery, I think…"

The jar of gold, stretching my arm muscles into thin wire, into almost breaking.

The tennis ball bounces off the door, again, beating one drumbeat.

The witch's voice says, "Go away, please."

The ball bounces against the wood door, only now the sound is metal. A clack of metal. A clank. Across the bottom of the door stretches a slot framed in gold-color metal, written with the word, "Letters."

Crouching down, then kneeling, I unscrew the Mason jar. Twisting off the cap, I put the lip of the jar against the "Letters" slot and tip the jar, shaking it to loosen up the coins inside. Kneeling there, on the front porch, I pour the gold through the slot in the door. The coins rattle and ring, tumbling inside and rolling across the bare floor. A jackpot spilling out where I can't see. When the glass jar is empty, I leave it on the porch and start down the steps. Behind me, the doorknob pops, the snap of a lock turning, a bolt

sliding open. The hinges creak, and a crack of inside darkness appears along one edge of the frame.

From that inside darkness, the witch voice says, "My husband's coin collection…"

The tennis ball, sticky with blood, coated with dirt, the ball rolls along at my heels, following me the way Jenny's dog follows her. Tagging along, the way I used to follow Jenny.

The witch voice says, "How did you find them?"

But me, I only keep walking away.

Note: We've fulfilled the social contract. And the narrator has abandoned his childhood goals after finding they had little value. Jenny was not his salvation. Neither was money. In the next revision it would be good to develop the theme of physical versus metaphysical strength – how at the narrator's time of greatest infirmity he wins the tennis contest by trusting in something he can't explain. Like Luke Skywalker closing his blast shield, becoming blind, then trusting the 'force.' People love that shit. Once more, notice that your characters can ask questions, and these don't have to be answered by another character. Your reader knows the answer.

Also, consider a different final line. It would be nice to have the dog present in this last scene, to point up the narrator's humanity, possibly to retrieve the ball and thus demonstrate that the ball is no longer possessed, and the spirit which occupied it is now at peace. The sun is setting. The heroic narrator is battered and bloody and limping home. Perhaps the old woman will call after him, shouting a kind-of existential chorus: "Who are you? What do I owe you? God bless you…". Those are all elements to keep in mind.

So far this is the "horizontal" of the story, the chain of plot events. The vertical will come, with it the emotions and symbols.

Again, the goal is 6000 words. It was 5000, but Dark Delicacies has expanded that. If you want to see the finished story, it will be included in an upcoming anthology. Dennis will post the details about where and when that will be available.