

Come on. in:

A Chapbook of Lectures
on the Craft
of Creative Writing

from West Virginia Wesleyan's Low-Residency MFA

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This chapbook, curated by Jessie van Eerden, is a collaboration of West Virginia Wesleyan College's MFA in Creative Writing and Welcome Table Press, an independent, nonprofit publisher devoted to publishing and celebrating the essay, in all its forms.

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With many thanks to Eugenia Kim

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Preface

West Virginia Wesleyan's low-residency MFA program was founded in 2011 by the late Dr. Irene McKinney. The mornings of the program's summer and winter residencies are devoted to craft seminars. All students, regardless of genre track (fiction, poetry, or nonfiction), participate in all seminars. The interdisciplinary nature of the morning reflects the reality that writing is always interdisciplinary and genre categories are fluid: prose and poetry don't happen without one another. The compressed musicality of a poem sharpens the paragraph, and the well-wrought narrative reverberates with the poetic line. Thus, the interdisciplinary seminars are not a default of a small program, but rather an intentional curricular design: all-cohort sessions build and maintain a foundation for the rich and ongoing residency-wide discussion. Seminars emerge out of deep questions of craft that faculty members ask themselves, and their students; faculty present a seminar not so much as the definitive word on a topic as much as a carefully thought-out contribution to the conversation. Some seminars are discussion-based, some address nuts-and-bolts issues of craft, some cover theoretical concerns. The five craft lectures included here have been adapted from seminars delivered at campus residencies by core and guest faculty; they have been selected for this chapbook to offer a sampling of the writerly concerns vital to members of WV Wesleyan's MFA community.

—Jessie van Eerden, Director
WV Wesleyan Low-Residency MFA Program

Pay No Attention to That Man Behind the Curtain: Notes on Narrator, Persona, Voice

Kim Dana Kupperman
2015 Winter Residency

In my early twenties, I became obsessed with making masks of clay. Then, as now, I understood the transformative power of the mask that medicine men use to summon spirits deep within themselves but that are, if you don't look closely enough, invisible on their faces. It wasn't until much later, however, that I came to understand the underlying reason for my preoccupation with masks, when I read these words from James Baldwin: "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

Baldwin's idea became the leitmotif for an essay I wrote in the mid 1990s, which was about crossing boundaries and the frustration and danger in not being able to remove the multiple masks that disguised not only me but others I encountered. The boundaries in question involved geopolitical borders (between Europe and northern Africa) and cultural practices that demarcate western and Muslim mores; the masks were not the powerful disguises of shamans but were instead the lies we tell about ourselves and others to negotiate uncertainty. The essay uses a painful event—a sexual assault that took place at the Algerian border crossing—as a catalyst for understanding colonialism and anger, fundamentalism and oppression. I was the person sexually assaulted, but I did not want to make an essay about me as a victim. I discovered through the process of writing the essay that I wanted to understand how historical forces had converged to make the crime both possible and permissible.

When I wrote the essay, I was ignorant of the elements of craft used by non-fiction writers to create narrators or personae, thinking instead—as many beginning writers think—that the voice on the page was *mine*, the teller of the story *me*. I could

go even further and say that I thought the experience was mine, even though it's true, as Annie Dillard says, that after writing about any experience:

memories—those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling—are gone; they've been replaced by the work. The work is a sort of changeling on the doorstep—not your baby but someone else's baby rather like it, different in some ways that you can't pinpoint, and yours has vanished.

Several years later, when an editor called the essay “dense and complex,” it occurred to me that without knowing how, I had created a narrator, who in turn wielded a persona to further conceal the real me, the author. This narrator/persona contained me in it but was not, ultimately, the me I reveal to family, friends, or, even, to myself. Put another way, the voice on the page was not the voice I use when speaking. But before thinking about voice, I'd like to try to answer another question: what do we mean when we talk about persona?

Consider the Narrator

In order to understand persona, we have to first consider the narrator, who is, essentially, a character *constructed* by the writer (I like to think of the phrase from *The Wizard of Oz*, “that man behind the curtain,” in which the man is the persona and the curtain is the narrator. Like a curtain, the narrator functions a little like a nonfictive veil—thinner or heavier according to the writer's need—and permits the writer to create distance, which is critical for making meaning out of experience and achieving discovery. This distancing veil also protects the writer—we cannot reveal our entire life because such exposure is untenable, and for many reasons. Put another way, the narrator is a kind of filter, who chooses the scenes that are recalled and describes setting, characters, and events.

Questions that might help us limn—bring forth from the darkness—the character of the narrator who tells a story include: How will the narrator tell the story? How does she or he *sound*? What will readers remember about this narrator? What matters to the narrator when s/he looks around during the experience being described? How does s/he react to complications and/or interact with other characters in the story? What is s/he *thinking*? Often, we write what we're feeling, which is a kind of note to self that may not resonate in the same way with a stranger who is reading your work (in other words, you may know what it means to you to feel disappointed or sad, but a reader who does not know you may not be able to comprehend this). One way to ground emotion is to go further inside the body, by describing where and how pain, fear, sadness, heartbreak, joy, or sorrow manifest (and knowing what is cliché and avoiding it at all costs).

The construction of a first-person narrator is described in a schema developed by author Richard Hoffman, who identifies six variations—refractions, I like to think of them—of the first-person narrator.¹ These strategies are: the Engaged I, the Reminiscent I, the Reconstructed I, the Self-Regarding I, the Documentary I, and the Imagining I. A word of caution: this is not a prescriptive template. Rather, it is a tool that provides us with an excellent way to talk about autobiographical narrative and to evaluate what elements of the first-person singular may be over or underdone in such narratives. I've found that most effective works of first-person prose (both nonfiction and fiction)—that is to say, works we might call vivid, concerned, and fulfilled²—combine all of these strategies, in larger or smaller measure depending on the kind of nonfiction in question.

Here, then, are some abbreviated descriptions, excerpted directly from Hoffman's schema (I urge everyone to read his essay, which contains some superb examples):

The Engaged I³

- Makes overt editorial or political statements on behalf of a world view, belief system, or social/political agenda.
- We see what the author is engaging in the work: injustice, ignorance, heresy, misunderstanding, life-threatening illness.
- Offers a bold statement of the reason for the work and helps orient the reader to the author's intention.
- Another kind of engagement is that of the writer with the material, with the labor to translate a vision to the page.
- Gives voice to [the narrator's] skepticism.
- Sometimes struggles with memory itself.

1 Richard Hoffman, “The Ninth Letter of the Alphabet: First-Person Strategies in Nonfiction,” in *The Call to Write*, ed. by John Trimbur (Cengage Learning, 2013).

2 Vivid writing lingers in the reader's mind, usually because of indelible images/scenes, precise language, and an illuminated lucidity that distills the consciousness on the page to something we can grasp and internalize. Nabokov said, “Caress the divine detail,” which speaks to another quality of vividness, namely that it originates in the small things, and that, along with metaphor, arises organically and from the ground up. Concerned writing speaks to an engagement with the material, the rendering of the ordinary as extraordinary and the extraordinary as ordinary. Concern also expresses itself in the way a narrative is presented, the care with which a writer sets down each sentence (word by word) and uses language. Writing that is fulfilled delivers on the promise set up by a narrative (and often, this promise is revealed in the intent of the narrator to tell a particular story at a particular time). This particular criterion often refers to how a reader is affected. When a narrative is fulfilled, readers come away feeling as if their minds have been challenged, expanded, changed, even if the work elicits more questions and delivers fewer answers.

3 When I mentioned earlier “concerned” as one criteria we might use to evaluate effectiveness in nonfiction, part of what *concerned* means to me involves the Engaged I. Specifically, if this variation of the first-person narrator is correctly timed and judiciously apportioned, concern is made manifest. And in memoir, I think the engagement with memory constitutes one of the primary concerns. Which means that to be fulfilled, memoir should deliver on the promise to depict how human memory functions. This is different than the promise of an essay, which I like to call the “biography of a thought.”

- Appears most often early in the story.
- Often didactic; a little of its use goes a long way (think polemical pieces).

The Reminiscent I

- Often heralded by “I remember...” or “I recall...”
- Invites us to accompany the narrator in her remembering.
- The narrator views the past at least mostly from the vantage of the present. The most usual, probably because it is the most natural form of the first person that memoirists use.

The Reconstructed I

- Often introduced by the reminiscent I as a way of establishing the time, place, and particulars we need in order to enter into the reconstructed consciousness of the narrator in an earlier time.
- Think of this common transition as the old movie technique of a screen-shimmering flashback.
- Gives the writer the opportunity to play a scene from the past against some knowledge of what has happened since then, thus involving readers by engaging their own historical experiences. Take, for example, [certain] Holocaust memoirs, which derive at least some of their power from the fact that both the Reminiscent I and the reader know full well the horrors to come that the Reconstructed I—a younger first-person narrator, speaking from an earlier timeframe—cannot know.

The Self-Regarding I

- Interrogates and explores itself within a specific timeframe.
- Self-conscious, hesitant, unsure.

The Documentary I

- An eye, really, and not much else.
- May be the eye, view, or vantage of a reconstructed I, but it is different in the intensity of its connection to what is going on.
- Narrator [...] is at one remove from the scene, watching, and not filtering what’s seen through any feelings or interpretations.
- The Documentary I derives power from the complete lack of commentary and from a tight focus and careful selection of what’s being shown to us.

The Imagining I⁴

- Fairly straightforward in announcing itself; usually it’s heralded by [...] “I imagine” or “I imagined,” although sometimes, for effect, the writer may prefer to let this realization sneak up on the reader.
- A simple and useful tool for filling in gaps in the story.

⁴ Both the Documentary and Imagining I are present in greater measure, I think, when work is especially vivid.

- The proper use of fiction in a memoir because it is the very way we use fiction, or call it the imagination, in our lives.

In an embellishment of Hoffman’s schema, I’d add what I call the Here-and-Now narrator, who is closest, perhaps, to the writer’s real self. The Here-and-Now narrator is possessed of intent to tell a *particular* story at a *particular* time. And while the writer does not have to state this intent, the more I think about it, the more I feel certain that the writer must infuse the narrator with knowledge of intent, to the point that the reader trusts that the narrator does, indeed, *know*, even if the narrator does not *say*, what that intent is. This relates a bit to what Hemingway called the iceberg theory—namely, that only a small part of an iceberg is ever visible. What lies beneath the surface of the water—in the case of narrative, what is *omitted* or *not shown/not chosen*—lends gravitas to the story. In turn, the narrator gains the distance, which lends authority to the story. The Here-and-Now narrator can also be summoned to step in—usually as an Engaged, Self-Regarding, or Imagining *I*—to make meaning out of the near or distant past of the experience contained in the narrative.

A Mask Is a Mask Is a Mask

Sometimes, of course, a narrator is not enough to separate the writer from the experience, or the narrator from the narrative. Sometimes the engagement itself requires more distance.

Enter the persona. Persona originally referred to the physical mask that Greek actors wore. For our purposes, a persona is the disguise that a narrator adopts to tell a story. As E. B. White put it: “The essayist arises in the morning and, if [there’s] work to do, selects... from an unusually extensive wardrobe [pulling] on any sort of shirt, [to] be any sort of person, according to [...] mood or subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, pundit, devil’s advocate, enthusiast.”

According to mood or subject matter: this is important, of course.

Compared to the narrator, persona is a trickier element to pin down because it requires the writer to inhabit another, different voice to shape the disguise. Following White’s prompt, I try to use nouns to describe personae and adjectives to describe narrators. Thus you might have, for example, a cranky environmentalist (think Al Gore), a cautious pioneer (think Barack Obama), a rogue tea partier (think Sarah Palin). Now, think of how these three people actually talk: What colloquialisms do they use? How do they inflect their words and sentences? Do they have a regional accent (or have they worked hard to hide it or have they adopted another kind of accent)? What syntax and vocabulary do they use? How do they deploy pause? Asides? Humor? What do they look like and how do they sound when they affect seriousness, sadness, happiness? Then, think of the noun at hand and the adjective modifying it: How do each of these people talk about what preoccupies them? Then, imagine each

of them narrating a story that is not how we typically hear them: How would Al Gore tell a bedtime story (and what story might he choose)? How would the story differ if he tells it as a first-time father to his child or as a grandfather to a grandchild? How would Sarah Palin deliver advice to her best friend (and what would the problem/advice be)? Where might this conversation take place? How would Barack Obama talk with Michelle about visiting an ex-girlfriend? When might he choose to tell her this news—before or after?

Whenever I talk about persona, I am often asked if authors set out to create a persona prior to the act of writing. I can't answer for other writers, but I can answer for myself, and the answer is: "It depends." There have been times I have consciously used language to forge a particular persona. Most often, however, both narrator and persona emerge organically from what I write. Sometimes I think of them as the *me's* who live inside me, personalities I am able to conjure in the same way actors pull from their inner beings selves both unrecognizable and completely familiar.

Here are some other ideas about personae—the masks we adopt to disguise our true selves when telling a story:

- Sometimes the persona functions to distance the author from the subject being written about. Think about the very unreliable (yet eager-to-tell-her-tale and genuine-sounding) first-person narrator in Lauren Slater's memoir *Lying*, who may or may not have epilepsy but who uses the condition as a metaphor to describe a painful coming of age. Or, consider E. B. White, that master of camouflage, who was able to assume, from one essay to the next, the personae whose shirts he spoke of so eloquently.
- Sometimes the inverse is true, and the persona functions to involve the author more deeply with the material being written about. Many confessional narratives, for example, feature witness personae, who recount all the grisly details while the person to whom things happened may be someone who prefers more privacy in day-to-day encounters. This sort of persona allows the author to remain intact while crossing boundaries defined by denial and/or silence. I'm thinking here of Richard Hoffman's memoir *Half the House*, which tells the story of a boy molested by his baseball coach.
- Sometimes both are true at once—Mark Doty, in the memoir *Heaven's Coast*, gives us a contemplative mourner—a man who is involved his lover's dying and at a remove from this painful event. Joan Didion is both eye witness and participant in many of her essays.
- Sometimes the persona is a device that allows the author to cross the boundary of not knowing where the writing itself will lead. For example, Dustin Beall Smith's narrator, in his essay "Starting at the Bottom Again," is a know-it-all skeptic whose know-it-all skepticism permits him to accidentally discover redemption.

In all these examples, the persona is a means to an end, a vehicle that the author uses

to negotiate boundaries. Often the boundaries are not physical entities but the choice between telling or not telling a story; sometimes the boundaries are simply a personal tolerance level and the persona a way of helping the author cross a threshold of pain that was previously uncrossable.

By way of a practical exercise, think about the narrator of a piece of prose you may be writing or want to write. Let's suppose this narrator was, instead of a young person at a university, a former punk rocker at midlife living in suburbia. How would s/he talk or act differently? As an exercise, it may be instructive to have your narrator adopt a mask, just to see what s/he says and how s/he says it.

Voice Is in the Body of the Beholder

Which leads us to the topic of voice. The word *voice*, like the word *style*, is used, sometimes indiscriminately, to describe certain qualities of writing that are somewhat elusive. Peter Elbow, well known in the world of composition and rhetoric, has made some astute observations about voice. "Voice is produced by the body," he writes. Here are some other ideas that he offers:

- Cicero says the voice is a picture of the mind.
- "Almost always, people learn to speak before they learn to write."
- "We identify and recognize people by their voices."
- "People have demonstrably unique voices: 'voice prints' are [...] as certain as fingerprints for identification."
- "We can distinguish two dimensions to someone's voice: the sound of their voice and the manner or style with which they speak. The first is the quality of noise they make based as it were on the physical 'instrument' they are 'playing'; and the second is the kind of 'tunes, rhythms, and styles' they play on their instrument."
- "Despite the unique and recognizable quality of an individual's voice, we all usually display enormous variation in how we speak from occasion to occasion. Sometimes we speak in monotone, sometimes with lots of intonation. And we use different 'tones' of voice at different times, e.g., excited, scared, angry, sad."
- "Audience has a big effect on voice. [...] Partly, it's a matter of responding to those around us. That is, our voice tends to change as we speak to different people—often without awareness."
- "Though voice is produced by the body, it is produced out of air or breath: something that is not the body and which is shared or common to us all—but which issues from inside us and is a sign of life."
- "Voice involves sound, hearing and time; writing or text involves sight and space."
- "Speech contains more channels for carrying meaning.[...] For example, there is volume, pitch, speed, accent, intensity.[...] Writing has to achieve its subtleties with fewer resources."

The writer N. Scott Momaday reminds us that: “In the beginning was the word, and it was spoken” (*Way to Rainy Day Mountain*, ix). Momaday argues that oral storytelling is one of the most powerful narrative forms; he asks us to consider which sounds are stilled and resound against silence, and which, as Adrienne Rich puts it, are weighted with “the heft of our living.” Thus, Momaday advises us to read aloud (to give sound to) the three voices he uses in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* so that they “remain, as they have always remained, alive at the level of the human voice. At that level their being is whole and essential” (*Way to Rainy Mountain*, ix).

Reading aloud—our writing and that of others—and listening to work being read (including our own) is one of the most concrete and effective ways to develop both the physical voice and the ear that hears it (reading aloud is also one of the best ways I know to catch errors in punctuation, syntax, and usage). Paying attention to what the body does when we read aloud provides valuable clues to what the words evoke: Do we sit or stand, slouch or maintain perfect posture? Do we hold our heads in a particular way? How is our weight distributed? Where does tension surface? Do we feel warm or cold? Are we blushing? Are the words clear? Do we want to sleep or go for a brisk walk? How are we breathing?

We may also deepen our understanding of voice if we attempt to describe why particular writing resonates with us. Resonance, says Peter Elbow, occurs when writers are able to “use metaphors and tell stories and exploit the sounds and rhythms of language” (*Landmark Essays*, 19). Resonance may be the chief force behind style, another elusive and difficult-to-define quality in writing, though Virginia Woolf described it as “a very simple matter, it is all rhythm” (*Letters*, 247). As E. B. White says, “Style is an increment in writing. When we speak of Fitzgerald’s style, we don’t mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean *the sound his words make on paper*” (*Elements*, 66; emphasis mine).

Resonance, then, suggests that an auditory quality emerges from a visual context (i.e., words on a page) to evoke a response (a positive response in the case of “resonant” writing). Resonance assumes a vibration, which can be felt even if sound is not perceived by the ear. The prefix re- indicates a sounding that occurs again, which implies there was a previous sounding, assumed in a narrative to have originated with the writer. When we read, there are implicit, shared conventions between author and audience about how particular words are pronounced, and how the deployment of punctuation directs accentuation, pauses, emphases, etcetera. The mediator in this activity is our sense of vision, which transmits these printed characters (symbols) to the brain, which in turn decodes their meaning.

When *resonant* describes writing in its smaller units (i.e., sentences, phrases, words), one has the sense that, if spoken aloud, the words on the page would vibrate or echo, that a reader will hear or feel them again. Resonance may also be located in those details that provide dimensionality to narrative—ideas, objects, metaphors—

details that, when a writer returns to them, unify a piece of writing. The repetition of a motif creates coherence because it echoes. Often, writers repeat (re-sound/re-sonate) a particular word or phrase. Joan Didion, for example, repeats the word *inchoate* often in her great body of nonfiction work; Loren Eiseley uses, respectively, the verb *marvel* six times and the noun *miracles* five times in his essay “The Judgment of the Birds.” Often these repeated words or phrases hint at a writer’s deeper concerns or preoccupations.

When we say that particular narratives “resonate with us,” we are also—and often—saying that we agree with the instruction, solace, advice, opinion, and so forth that the writers of these texts provide us around a given issue, a specific event, or a series of observations.

Put another way, writing that resonates does so, perhaps, because if we had thought as a particular writer had thought about the issue or event or observation at hand, we might have said what that writer had articulated, in exactly the same way. We might have echoed the writer’s thoughts. In other words, along with the physical voice, a style of thinking resonates. As E. B. White observes, “Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition” (*Elements*, 84).

And those “attitudes of mind,” those styles of thinking, animate and organize language, point of view, and characters, all of which are elements in what Kathleen Blake Yancey calls “the landscape of voice” (*Landmark Essays*, xix). Like an attitude, a style of thinking is neither static nor singular from writer to writer, nor from one writer’s work to another work, but fluid and multifaceted. To consider styles of thinking may help us to understand how writers shape ideas and thoughts, and how they use facts, memories, and metaphor to structure and propel their narratives. To reflect on strategies used in first-person narration, the functions of persona, and styles of thinking in conjunction with resonance will, I hope, provide a way to talk about the specifics of the writing that moves us.

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Part of this lecture was published by Michael Steinberg in his blog, *The Fourth Genre: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*.

Why a Memoir?

Karen Salyer McElmurray

2012 Summer Residency

“There was a time,” says Neil Genzlinger in a January 2011 *New York Times* op-ed, “when you had to earn the right to draft a memoir (“The Problem with Memoirs”). An average Google search, as Genzlinger tells us, will produce some 160,000 hits. “Memoirs,” he writes, “have been disgorged by virtually everyone who has ever had cancer, been anorexic, battled depression, lost weight... owned a dog... run a marathon. Found religion. Held a job. ... this flood just has to stop. We don’t have that many trees left.” As Christopher Lasch describes in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, ours is an age of “massive social invasion of the self” (5).

What, in a world of Facebook, Twitter, reality shows and blogging, constitutes an authentic self, no less a good memoir? “A memoir reaches deep within the personality as it seeks its narrative form,” says Patricia Hampl, in her essay, “Memory and Imagination” (273). “Memoir,” she says, “is written in an attempt to find not only a self, but a world” (273). The writing of a good memoir involves not only a manipulation of craft elements (crisis, conflict, resolution) but also the uncovering, in draft after draft, of the true heart of a piece at hand.

Over thirty years ago, Pearlie Lee, my mother, went to live in a house off State Road 1498 in Lancer, Kentucky, where she clipped my granny’s nails, braided her long hair, bathed her. She seldom left the house at all unless her brother drove her five miles up the road, to the small town of Prestonsburg. Once her parents died, my mother was alone and soon adrift in the early stages of dementia. For years she decorated my dead grandmother’s walker with plastic flowers. She sat alone at night, brushed her teeth for precisely half an hour, did forty minutes of laps through the immaculate rooms past an enlarged photo of Ruby, her dead sister.

That sister lived her last years in an apartment building for the handicapped,

though her greatest handicap, as I recall it, was simply being afraid. In an eight-floor concrete apartment building with a guard rail along the halls and a persistent smell of something medicinal and sanitary, Ruby woke from dreams of a Holy Ghost with her own face. The third sister, Ruth, the youngest, lives up Mining Hollow, outside of Prestonsburg. She spends her days tending house and the grave of her son, which she can see from the trailer's kitchen window. Like Ruby and my mother, Ruth also leaves home less and less, since her son's suicide, a self-inflicted gunshot in the back room of the trailer. When I went to visit there one August, Ruth's husband was leaving to go squirrel hunting. Just joking, he waved his rifle in the air, pointed it at us. I heard a voice from the couch, Ruth saying, *I can't stand it when you do that*. She didn't get up.

Who am I in this inheritance of women's lives when it comes to my writing life? In my journal, I once wrote down a dream about eating supper with my mother and Ruby and Ruth while around us was a chaos of unwashed dishes and clothes. In the dream I was told that we were all moving to a house made of glass. My own writing self is sometimes as fragile as glass with its inheritance of fear. From that same writing journal a few years ago: Want to write; can't, can't. *Give my writing back to me*.

My first novel, *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven*, is partly about a woman named Ruth Blue, her childhood abandonment by her mother and her difficult coming to womanhood. Part of the novel's plot is Ruth's son Andrew's love for another boy named Henry. Ruth is convinced that if she can save Andrew from this love, she will be able to offer him her vision of God instead. Madness is vision. Vision is God. Dreaming of a bombing in France during World War I, Ruth dreams of fire. By the end of the novel, Ruth Blue is held fast to the only earth she's ever known—Eastern Kentucky, Mining Hollow, the house of her father, the house of God. Ruth Blue's voice is powerful only when she envisions the world cleansed by fire, made new again with her own son's death.

For awhile after I finished *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven*, I was Ruth Blue. I was in the throes of darkness. As Natalia Ginzburg says in her essay "My Vocation," this space with regard to writing can be one "filled with echoes and trembling and shadows, [one] to which [we are] bound by a devout and passionate pity" (116). My dreams rocked me awake with faces I didn't know. I dreamed my mother's hands. I dreamed of my maternal grandmother, the way she sat in the green horsehair chair in her living room all day and drew patterns on the chair arm with her forefinger. After one dream about a young man and a cellar with a door I couldn't open I woke and found myself drenched with sweat. When I stood in the bathroom, scooping up cool water from the sink, I touched my own face and felt that I'd dreamed someone uncomfortably familiar.

My writing life was reduced to grocery lists. Lists of papers to grade for my new teaching job at the local college. Lists of tasks. Lawns to mow and rent to pay and

committee meetings to attend. Occasionally, I'd dip into some popular self-help book suggesting list-making as a way to enter the subconscious and emerge again, scathed but healed. Make a list, the book would suggest, of the ten most important events to shape your experiences until now. I wrote down how I saw the ocean for the first time when I was eighteen and the time I hiked forty-four miles across the Grand Canyon, there and back. I listed events one through five, but after that all the other blank lines in my empty notebook left me shaking. Words themselves left me empty and frightened.

I agree with Natalia Ginzburg when she says that "you cannot hope to console yourself for your grief by writing" (116). But it was writing that began to save me. At first, post-novel, I wrote almost nothing. I kept my dream journal. I worked at the revision of some short stories. Then I began to take a hard look, again, at early drafts of *Strange Birds*. Accompanying a first draft from graduate school was an essay similar to the critical essays that students write at West Virginia Wesleyan. I was writing about that mysterious phenomenon called voice.

Part of what I'd written about was a story called "Circumstance," by early American writer Harriet Spofford. The story concerns a frontier woman who stays alive by singing when she is held captive all night by a panther. I'd written about women's voices that "sing" in a variety of ways, from the lyric prose of Virginia Woolf to the minimalist, fragmented prose of Renata Adler. I'd also written about my mother's fear of coal dust on the living room walls when I was a child, her later fear of any world outside the four walls of her Floyd County house. And somewhere, in the middle of those pages about all those other women, I found a few sentences I'd written about my own life. I'd described a dream I'd had once, when I was traveling in Crete and sleeping out on a beach at night. I'd described how, in the middle of the night as I slept, a blond-haired boy came up out of the sea and walked toward me, touched the top of my head. *It's all right*, he said. *I forgive you*.

And so I began to write again, first via sketches. I wrote about my mother and father and what I knew about their first married year in an apartment in Topeka, Kansas, right after she gave birth to me. I wrote about photographs—my mother in bobby socks and pedal pushers before their wedding, then her pinched, tense face after I was born. I wrote about our lives in Harlan County, where my dad was once a high school math teacher. I began to fill pages with stories I remembered and with hard questions. What, I wanted to know, had caused my mother's descent into fear? Why had she gone back to her parent's house in Eastern Kentucky and never left?

As I wrote more during two summers at an artist's retreat in North Georgia, I began to realize that the real story still wasn't being told. I looked again at the essay, and that blond-haired boy who walked up out of the ocean began to appear again in my dreams. The doors of memory began to open as, for the next three years, I worked on what later became my memoir, *Surrendered Child*, which is the story of my relinquishment of a child to a state-supported adoption in Kentucky. I wrote a

dream I'd had about the apocalypse during the forty-eight hours of my labor with my son's birth. I wrote the taste of sweet yellow milk from my own breasts, and how my breasts dried and ached and emptied after I'd given him up. I wrote my son's birth, his surrender, and not quite miraculously, as I wrote, my depression shifted, curled itself up inside me, a smaller creature I could begin to live with. My writing was becoming, as a friend has described it, "beautiful pain." I began to think of it as the translation of darkness, and it was a language I was beginning to understand.

Writing memoir takes courage, but it is a courageous journey via craft. To craft my memoir, I had to reach deep into the bag of tools of craft that we all must use for good prose. I had to consider vantage point—when to begin the telling of a story that took over thirty years to live. I had to make decisions about parts of the book that insisted on being told in second person. I had to make choices about what is said, when, and how much of what is said can or can't be recorded literal truth-telling via dialogue or sensory details. What I found is that excellent memoir means an exploration of structure and shape, careful choice of point of view, good characterization, specificity of language. After all, as Rosellen Brown says, non-fiction "must use some, if not all, of the techniques of fiction: plot, characterization, physical atmosphere, thematic complexity, stylistic appropriateness, psychological open-endedness" (XXVII).

Neil Genzlinger, in writing the *New York Times* piece with which we began this essay, did a close reading of four new memoirs and afterwards arrived at five major areas of criticism. Here are his major discoveries and some observations about each that I've found invaluable:

1. "The prose isn't particularly surprising, and, more to the point, neither is the selection of anecdotes: cheerleader tryouts, crummy teenage jobs and, that favorite of oversharers everywhere, the loss of virginity." (Genzlinger)

As a writer of a memoir that in part explores my adolescent loss of virginity, I will, in some ways, agree with this assessment about what could be the limits of truth-telling. I could have written the story of my teen self, my pregnancy, and a child's relinquishment, and ended right there. Instead, as Michael Steinberg describes in "Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays," I chose to ask myself some hard questions about my experiences. How, as Steinberg asks, did my experiences shape me? How was I transformed by being a child-mother? What were the costs to who I was, and who I became? Who and what was at stake? What, as Steinberg's essay asks, was compelling me to write a story about relinquishment? What was relinquished besides a child? "Finding the inner story," as Steinberg says, is "thinking vertically" (334). Just as good poems must have a tenor that rises off the page as well as the

vehicle of an excellent line, so a really good memoir must have the power of story told and story deeply understood—again, as Steinberg says, a voice that "comments, digresses, analyzes, and speculates about the story's events" (335).

2. "That's what happens when immature writers write memoirs: they don't realize that an ordeal, served up without perspective or perceptiveness, is merely an ordeal." (Genzlinger)

Norman Sims, in *The Literary Journalists*, says that good nonfiction "demands immersion in complex, difficult subjects. The voice of the writer surfaces to show readers that an author is at work. Authority shows through [via] dramatic details. Voice brings the author into our world." No less can be said of the translation of powerful experiences of loss or joy or love, of surrender or discovery or departure in the pages of the memoirist. I did not write my girl-story, then, when I was sixteen. Nor did I write that story at twenty, thirty, even forty years old. I wrote it when I was ready to enter that former experience, walk around in it, open it, a box full of difficult memories I had to be willing to examine and, over time, understand and somehow forgive.

3. "If you still must write a memoir, consider making yourself the least important character in it." (Genzlinger)

Consider the memoir *Opa Nobody* by Sonya Huber. Huber tells her own story of her years as a political and environmental activist and as a young mother, but she weaves this story into the story of her German grandfather's life as a member of the Independent Social Democratic Party, of his service in World War II as a "noncombatant" and his postwar anticommunist efforts. Sue William Silverman has just finished a book about faith and disavowal of faith, layered with the story of meeting pop music icon Pat Boone. The key word for me here with stories like these is "layered." A good visual artist layers foreground and distance, colors and textures. My own layers were many—the Holy Mother; Mammoth Cave; street kids in Missouri. Good memoirists can make their most intimate stories part of the larger fabric of telling—can even make their personal stories metaphors for that larger experience.

4. "There can't be just one book by a bulimic or former war correspondent or spouse of an Alzheimer's sufferer; there has to be a pile. But they are lost in a sea of people you've never heard of, writing uninterestingly about the unexceptional." (Genzlinger)

In response to this rule for the memoir writer, I refer to Charles Baxter's essay, "On Defamiliarization." "You may not remember your violent abusive uncle very well," Baxter writes, "but his blue glass ashtray or his decoy duck stays in your memory as if riveted there. The burden of the feeling is taken on by the objects" (41). The burden of summoning memory via living sense details is the hard work of the

memoirist. My own hard work as I summoned the story of my teenage self was to reenter that body, that time. I had to pull her forward, that lost girl, and relive not just a pregnancy, but a living experience. How did it look, feel, taste, even, to be me as I sat in a lukewarm bath and squeezed milk from my girl's breasts? If I can taste that time, be that girl, you, the reader, male or female, should be able to enter her body as vividly and, hopefully, as meaningfully as you enter your own.

5. "No, the sole purpose of this memoir, like many, many others concerning some personal trial, is to generate sympathy for its author." (Genzlinger)

William Zinsser, in his essay "How to Write a Memoir: Be Yourself, Speak Freely, and Think Small," says this:

"Don't use your memoir to air old grievances and to settle old scores; get rid of that anger somewhere else. The memoirs that we do remember from the 1990s are the ones that were written with love and forgiveness, like Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, and Pete Hamill's *A Drinking Life*. Although the childhoods they describe were painful, the writers are as hard on their younger selves as they are on their elders. We are not victims, they want us to know. We come from a tribe of fallible people and we have survived without resentment to get on with our lives. For them, writing a memoir became an act of healing."

Because I wrote a memoir, I have moved slowly toward healing. I found the son I relinquished for adoption when I was sixteen. Andrew's fiancé found me online, Andrew read the book I'd written, we met, and we sometimes touch base, feeling our way gingerly toward that healing Zinsser describes in his essay. Most days as a writer I trust as well as I can that writing a memoir means I've found the courage to look hard at where my writing comes from and where it's headed and, as a teacher of writing, I've found the skill to describe how to get there. As writer Dorothy Allison said once in a lecture I was fortunate to hear, "until we ask the hard questions of our prose and of our own lives, our work won't be worth a damn." Difficult, impossible even, but this is the heart with which I try to write, teach, and live.

We must, I tell students these days, reach for what I call "heartwood." By "heart" I do not necessarily mean the emotions evoked by the piece or experienced by the characters or the writer, but I mean something closer to the word essence, core, quintessence—or, as a poet friend said—heartwood. Heartwood is the center of the wood, its hardest part. Charles Baxter, in his essay "Digging the Subterranean," calls

my heartwood "the source of the wound" (39), and he also variously uses other terms to describe that center: mind-haunting; hidden-story possibilities; real story; derailment of ordinary life; impulse and dream; wellsprings; source of power (*The Art of Subtext*).

Most days, as I come to the blank page, I tell myself I have found at least one source I trust. By writing a memoir I have discovered, as Patricia Hampl says, "a permanent home for feeling and image, a habitation where they can live together" (269). More than that, as I turn again to the pages of fiction, after having written a memoir, I experience a pervasive sense of the possibility of creating language, in fiction and nonfiction, that drinks deeply from the twin rivers of joy and of sorrow. That's at least one truth I'm still discovering.

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Ultra-Talk: Poetry in the Fast Lane

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In the poetry world (and I use that phrase advisedly, since it is mostly self-contained), in this self-reflexive world, from time to time, a new wave of language use appears. In the past several decades, we have seen the Deep Image School, the New York School, the New Narrative Movement, the Language Poets, and other lesser known mini-movements. Currently, Ultra-Talk poets—also dubbed the Kitchen Sink poets—have jammed the air-waves, to some extent. When I have tried to define Ultra-Talk in conversation, invariably someone says, “Oh, you mean stream-of-consciousness.” But no, it is much more consciousness than stream. Most of what we term stream-of-conscious is dream-like, filled with Jim Morrison-type shadowy connections, with a central self concerned with its own pain and strained lyricism.

Some poem titles from the Ultra-Talk school of poetry might be more informative than trying to describe what it is not: “Poem that Wears Your Scarf” and “Little Poem that Tries” (Cate Marvin, *Fragment of the Head of a Queen*), “Ode to Diagramming Sentences in Eighth-Grade English Class with Moonlight, Drugs, and Stars” and “Ode on Cake, Catcalls, Eggs with a Minor Scary Reference to the End of the World” (Barbara Hamby, *All-Night Lingo Tango*). These titles teach us a lot about how the poet wants to be taken: these poets are vitally interested in nearly everything that enters the mind, but they are also interested in providing a framework for this plethora of material. Barbara has a series of odes that gives a rough sense of form and continuity. In David Kirby’s poems, the unifying element is often place. He and his wife Barbara Hamby travel extensively in Italy, and material in both of their poetry draws heavily on place names and experiences while traveling. One of the best Ultra titles comes from David Kirby’s book of essays, *Johnny Cash, The Mafia, Shakespeare, Drum Music, St. Teresa of Avila, and 17 Other Colossal Topics of Conversation*.

Another notable practitioner of Ultra-Talk, Albert Goldbarth, titles a book of essays *Great Topics of the World*. You'll notice a kind of circus barker's tone here. "Come one, come all! See the giant pig from Sumatra, see the poet having an Italian dinner while discoursing about public fountains!" The experience you're about to undergo is communal, and it's going to be entertaining, the title tells us. The word "conversation" is especially telling: many of these poems follow social forms: parties, dinners with friends and strangers, taking leisurely walks while talking. The ease of conversation creates a relaxed sense that we have permission to talk about whatever we want, and so does the poet. Think of the structure of a typical dinner conversation among six or eight people. People reminisce about books they read as children, which leads to anecdotes from childhood, which leads to issues around having children, which leads to current culture and its depravity. And then for no known reason, someone starts talking about the arrangement of seats in theaters.

The only anthology, at last count, dealing exclusively with Ultra-Talk poetry is edited by the two main practitioners of the form, the husband and wife team, David Kirby and Barbara Hamby. Maybe it's unfair to characterize them that way: Kirby is older than his wife, and has been writing for much longer and has had the leading role in popularizing this form of poetry. One would suspect that she has learned a great deal from following his example. An earlier anthology that includes this work under a different label, or labels, is Charles Harper Webb's *Stand Up Poetry*; a new edition of that came out in 2002. That title also tells us how to take the feeling of the poems: they're jokes, they're joking, they don't ask you to get all serious, they just want to entertain you, and not enlighten you, for the most part. "Stand up" can refer to stand-up comedians, or to being just a regular stand-up guy, an ordinary person, not an elevated poet at a podium.

Let me list here some qualities of Ultra-Talk that most commentators agree upon:

1. The poem features the voice of a speaker but other voices may come and go.
2. The poem focuses on the present moment, but often looks outward toward a larger world, even the universe, the cosmos. Albert Goldbarth, a well-known practitioner of the form, does this most consistently. This is usually done in a half-mocking, comic tone.
3. A poem that deals in comedy will also acknowledge tragedy.
4. A poem that could work on stage also works well on the page. There is a strong element of performance, a direct acknowledgement of an audience. But the performance doesn't depend on the poem actually being spoken on stage, although these poems do read well aloud. Instead, the sound of the voice is the performance.
5. These poems often mix levels of diction and rhetoric: very serious diction followed by sheer goofiness, say.

6. The poems can be spoofs of other rhetorical forms, perhaps a business letter or a packing slip.
7. The poems include specialized information in a casual way, saying, in effect, "Listen to this part if you want, but it doesn't matter."
8. The poems show their connections clearly, unlike stream-of-consciousness or surrealism.

In this kind of poetry, we sense a resistance to censoring any object or experience, no matter how undistinguished. Playful, headlong, a pile-driver of energy, the subject often seems trivial, just driving around, looking at this and that. The grandfather of all this looseness and ease and fresh air is Kenneth Koch. Beginning in the early sixties, his poems were a direct challenge to the academic poets who dominated the poetry scene at the time. After Koch and the other New York poets—Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara—nothing was ever the same. And Ultra-Talk might well be viewed as the expected outcome of what began back then.

With its tone of casualness and insouciance, with its inclusiveness, this "I-do-this-I-do-that" school of poetry reminds us that much of human existence and thinking is caught up with mundane detail. Rather than excluding these details to get to what we usually think of as more important matters, the Ultra-Talk poet welcomes them with open arms, in a truly democratic spirit: "Come on in, you forks and knives and ways of setting the table. Come in, you Tampax and your older sister Modess. Welcome, foam mattress pads and songs from the seventies. And welcome, insignificant memories of childhood. You all belong here."

A Thousand Years as One Day: Layered Time in Noy Holland's *Bird*

Jessie van Eerden

2016 Summer Residency

I have noticed three time-related problems in the early drafts of narratives: they remain one-dimensional with stick-figure characters acting out ahistorical scenes on a flattened plane of existence; they plod through time with a *this then this then this* sequence without any modulation to accord weight to particular events; or they include a chunk of a character's past which, instead of adding depth to the narrative, simply serves as a stab at reductive psychology, or as what Joan Silber calls in *The Art of Time in Fiction* an "explanatory vehicle," explaining away the intricate network of causality.

In this lecture, I hope to explore strategies for rendering on the page the fullness and density of time—time within time as we experience it in lived life—through a study of Noy Holland's novel *Bird*, a novel that replicates a lifetime's fullness while covering in its narrative present only a single day. Ultimately, we'll look at how the lyric impulse can thicken time in a novel without clotting the prose, can infuse the narrative with richness without derailing its urgency.

All narratives need not be as dense as Holland's, but I feel that our most effective stories do give a sense of depth, of being carved from time, of belonging to a larger story beyond this story. The conveyance of richly textured experience seems to require representing the pressing-in of memory and the multitude of selves that one character contains.

Holland's novel covers one day in the life of Bird, a suburban wife and mother of two who indulges memories of her wild past life with her lover Mickey. The book opens with an erotic scene in past tense: the naked main character, Bird, is tied down, gently, by Mickey who then leaves the house. This opening scene is a tableau of their life together, showing Bird's vulnerability and Mickey's tenderness mixed with threat

and volatility and desertion. Then we get the line: “A day a day: it passes. Gone: and not: and so again” (2). A sentence syntactically strange with three colons, and what comes after each colon almost contradicts what comes before it. This contradictory and cyclical movement continues throughout the book; the language here in this line is raised up to present tense, to the present Bird dreaming, remembering, and coming into her day in suburbia; then we go back to past tense, back to Mickey finally coming home.

How long is a day, a moment? During the present-tense day of this novel, the narrative is uneventful: Bird wakes, talks to her old friend Suzie on the phone, readies her son for school, waits for the school bus, sends her husband off to work, nurses the baby, walks with baby, takes a bath and drinks rum and remembers. But the day has, as one reviewer says, an apocalyptic feel: “She smells smoke, or a hurricane coming. Smells the baby’s milky head”: calamity infuses sleepy domesticity (Holland, *Bird*, 15).

Of course the forward-moving narrative in the novel, or the compelling one that comes at us circularly, is that of her younger life with Mickey in Brooklyn shortly after her mother has died, the Drive-Away they undertake (getting paid to drive someone’s car out West) after Bird’s miscarriage, then their return and Mickey’s abandoning her for good.

The novel’s premise of a stay-at-home mom missing the wild days of her youth could be cliché, but the premise is not that clear-cut. The layered-in memories do not simply reveal her domestic present as pale in comparison to the erotic, electric, self-destructive past; indeed, throwing “normal life” into relief with a feral past merely to point out dissatisfaction with motherhood, traditionalism, and safety would adhere to a too-familiar cultural script. There are hints toward this script from Suzie—the still-wild friend on the phone who sleeps with whomever she wishes and snorts whatever she wishes and resists being in “the mother club”—but we get the sense that Suzie also knows it’s more complicated than that. The last lines of the novel, when Bird’s son comes home on the bus and the baby “flutters her milky arms” read: “God above. Unholy love. Bird is burning up and collapsing. She is ash and dazzled, rapt—gone to her knees in pieces in the wind of a passing world.” The incendiary love is both present and past; she experiences a kind of dissolution before the heat of her multifaceted life. Thus, the memory of Mickey and of Bird’s former selves is more a *withness*, a presence, that has come alongside her to experience with her the unbearable glow of the present and her fierce love for her children. I feel this withness at the end because Holland threads it throughout the book, in lines like this one: “They kissed [she and Mickey], and the air everywhere went sparky. *Sparky* is her boy’s word” (16). The book is about more than the predictable doldrums of “settling down.” There are tensions between loose living and domestic life, sure, but the narrative’s mixed temporal layers seem to ultimately suggest that we move on, but never move on; we live our lives in simultaneous moments in time, inhabiting multiple selves—and desires—at once.

The first time-layering strategy I want to examine is **staying close to the body**, a strategy that best accesses “involuntary memory” which ambushes a narrator (Sven Birkerts, in *The Art of Time in Memoir*, distinguishes involuntary memory from voluntary memory which is a “mechanical retrieval” of the past, an effort to remember an occasion sequentially instead of having one’s memories naturally triggered). In some ways, focusing on the physical is easy in this novel since the primary physical experiences are central here: birth, sex, death. Memories of the past are erotically charged and also charged by the overlapping losses of Bird’s mother and a baby through miscarriage. Also, Bird in the present is a lactating mom recently wounded from birthing her daughter and aware of that cracked bone each time she climbs steps; the present-tense context is the insular world of a mother-of-small-children in which everything orbits around her body giving itself out.

In these physical intensities, boundaries blur. There’s the slippery nature of time experienced by an exhausted mother who receives “a phone call in the dark” from Suzie, from the past; dark and light, day and night go undifferentiated. “The line grows very slight for Bird and Mickey between wanting to die or live,” writes Holland in an article about writing sex, which in this novel is both “sacred and narcotic,” another blurred line (Holland, *Bird*, 27). The line is thin, too, between loving and grieving, between the mother and lover identities, between being born and giving birth (or almost giving birth). It all overlaps in various intimacies, when Bird says she wants her boy (her son) to be like Mickey, for instance, and also to not ever be like Mickey, and for her baby girl to never love a boy like Mickey, but also to have a chance to love him hard and be done with it.

In “On Sex in Fiction,” Holland writes: “All good fiction has an erotic charge. You don’t have to write like Henry Miller to be sexy. There are certain writers and passages of writing it feels like going to church to read and I mean the church of rocks and trees and dripping breasts and bloody crucifixes, all. The place of the sacred. The work feels sacred. It proceeds in a condition of tremulous restraint, barely contained, unhelpable ... I’m not thinking of cheap innuendo here but of the mutable shapes rapture takes ...” Sometimes the sexual act in *Bird* is detailed; sometimes it’s given a few lines; sometimes it’s only suggested in between the lines; and sometimes the focus is off-camera, on the beetle crossing Bird’s foot in the boulder field during sex. But at all times there’s an erotic drippingness to the prose, and the resultant blurring of the roles of mother, daughter, lover, griever, survivor creates a feeling of layered time, especially as Bird further and further indulges memory as her day in the present wears on: “Bird sinks into it, a bloom of heat, so to feel it: the door swung to, the shrinking stars. A leaf falling. The way her mother spun her ruby on her finger, think of that. The way Mickey hooked his finger in her ear. Berries in the bathtub. Sweetened ferns. The sound of the chain on the asphalt road that the school bus drags behind it. Shall” (59).

The second strategy to study for layering time is Holland's **use of implication**, suggesting in shadow the experience of time lived. Much is left out of this narrative. "Immediacy in scenes," writes Silber in *The Art of Time in Fiction*, "is sometimes taken to mean a slavish step-by-step presentation of moments," but "the beauty of selective concreteness—dialogue, gesture, sensory detail—is that it allows us to believe we have experienced the time completely" (17-18). Look at the implication used in reference to Suzie, the friend who calls Bird in the middle of night from the midst of her wild life: "Not for her: the leaky tit, the pilly slipper. The dread of the phone that rings in the dark" (7). In that spare line, we get a sketch of Bird's domestic situation by means of Suzie's rejection of it. "[T]he old looseness," Suzie says, "'you must miss it'" (8). And in that line, we understand that Bird's life, too, was untamed and unhinged. Their phone dialog throughout the novel is wonderful and tangential and full of effective omissions; it never feels utilitarian; it gestures toward the years shared between them. The first words Bird says to Suzie over the phone are: "I wish you'd stop," implying a constant needling from Suzie and a tension between Bird's different selves (6).

Holland's use of implication at the sentence level mirrors what happens at the scenic level that Silber is describing. Holland is understated with causal connections. Events are more often parallel, concomitant, than they are causally related. Regarding poetry, Richard Hugo in *The Triggering Town* writes: "Beware certain words that seem necessitated by grammar to make things clear but dilute the drama of the statement. These are words of temporality, causality, and opposition, and often indicate a momentary lack of faith in the imagination" (40-42). Hugo's warning applies to taut prose as well. Words of causality (*so* [as a result], *because, thus, causing*) plague our narratives often because we're nervous about being unclear, but they can be cut in lines like this one: "I turned the corner too fast, causing me to trip over the flowerpot."

An example from *Bird*: "The cows are eating windfall apples—beyond the window, beyond the sandbox and its rusting toys. Bird hung a swing in the tree—a rope with knots her boy jumped from and broke his arm on the first day of school. The rope bends in the wind, moves toward her. Swallows bicker in the eaves.

"Hello, love, she thinks.

"Hello, Mickey" (22-23).

We see no phrasing like "causing her to think of," though the rope swing does cause Bird to think of the ways she fails as a mother and is a misfit in this present calm life; the connections between these sentences are wonderfully ambiguous—what makes her think of love? And love for whom? For her husband from whose cheek she has just blown away a tiny descending spider? For the boy on the swing, or for the Mickey in her head? The ambiguity allows it to be love for everyone at once.

Holland is also masterful in her use of **triggers and flashback**. Continuing with this idea of trimming away over-explained causality, Sarah Gerard notes in her review of *Bird*, "The story of Mickey expands and foregrounds Bird's present while also inflecting it," more so than explaining, or footnoting, Bird's emotional state. Again, the multiple time frames add depth. Here is a flashback that deepens the novel's present tense:

"They [Mickey and Bird] knocked the bike out of true and the wheel made a shh, a mother-sound, dependable as a heartbeat, all the way, all the way home.//*Go home*, her boy wails when the snowman takes the child's hand and flies north. *Go home, go home, go home*. He is talking in his sleep down the hall..." (20-21)

In the diction (mother, home, boy), the past and present overlap and embed into one another associatively, fluidly. And even more so a page later: "Mama, stay awake with me, Mama. I'm afraid to close my eyes"—a floating line set apart as its own paragraph, as if floating in Bird's consciousness, followed by a section from the past beginning with Mickey's line: "I can't sleep, Bird, I'm sorry to wake you" (23). Again, the overlap is her boy and her other boy.

Regarding triggers in fiction, the question is often: when are they believable and when are they contrived? How do we avoid triggers that feel manipulative, or like devices that merely move the narrative along or provide information? One method is to avoid obvious triggers. For instance, in real life, sometimes looking at your wedding dress summons zippo emotionally about the marriage that has died, yet seeing a certain pattern of plaid on a frat boy's shirt makes all hell break loose in a memory of your ex-husband. Harkening back to Birkerts' differentiation between voluntary and involuntary memory: we want to give the sense of involuntary memory here; triggers are "unhelpable," as Holland might put it; the character is ambushed. In *Bird*, triggers act as portals in time through which consciousness spills back and forth. Again, there is the feeling of concomitance. Let's look at this long passage about fifty pages into the novel:

The dog is licking at the baby's sleeper, the sack Bird puts her in. A good dog. If only she didn't shit, Bird thinks. If only she fed herself.

The dog turns to feasting on the mealy foam that leaks out of her bed. Her tail flares up against the woodstove.

Better build a fence around that woodstove, Bird thinks, and that awful rhyme about the ladybird comes around again.

Doll Doll comes around again, too. Doll Doll with her beautiful baby teeth, neat and straight and small. Milk teeth, deciduous

teeth. Not your keepers. Passing through. She had skin like melted plastic glommed onto her neck and arms.

‘What’s that smell?’ her husband calls down. ‘What are you burning?’

‘Don’t worry. It’s only the dog.’

‘Stupid dog.’

I never wanted her.

I never did want that dog.

‘I killed my fucking dog,’ Mickey said.

‘But you didn’t,’ Bird said.

‘But you didn’t,’ Mickey mocked her. He took a swing at the wall.

‘I was out getting drunk with you,’ he said. ‘Why was I with you?’

‘Mickey, stop,’ Bird said.

‘I don’t mean it.’ He picked a chair up and poked her in the stomach. ‘We don’t mean it. We don’t mean anything. Keep away from me, Bird. I’m not well.’

‘You’re not well,’ Bird said, and moved toward him.

Make yourself large, her mother had taught her, should you meet a sneak cat in the wood.

Sneak cat, cougar, puma.

Hold your hat in the air and sing to it until it turns to go (52-53).

Bird’s psyche is defenseless against the onslaught of triggers here, and the prose is recursive between present and memory, between the trigger and the triggered material, the dog, the mother, the self-protection, the other dog (Maggie who was killed by Mickey and Bird’s landlord), Doll Doll—a character from the past to whom we haven’t even been introduced in the novel yet, but, of course, she’ll recur, she’ll be shaded in.

Indeed, **recurrence in imagery and refrain** is maybe the most powerful strategy Holland uses to layer time in *Bird*; repetition is central to the lyric impulse that enriches prose. As we work to layer time in our narratives, we might establish a set of words and images that are primal, set out a plane of imagery from which everything grows. We must take care, though, that lyricism does not derail the forward motion of the narrative, and Holland may not always keep this balance in check, though the subject of her novel is partly the *lack* of forward motion in time, so the densely wrought lyricism contributes to that theme.

Sometimes the images in *Bird* are first mentioned as objects unrooted, uncontextualized by narrative, such as a bracelet of grass or a bloody tissue that floats in the ether of Bird’s consciousness, and the reader must be patient for the context that will be offered later as the narration builds to it (as with the first mention of Doll Doll in the long passage above). Often, in repeated images, Holland goes to the shadow place of simple words: *bird, boy, see, die, baby, mother, whale, moon*—primal, elemental words. Even when she evokes *boy* in Bird’s memory of a boy on a swing in Kansas, glimpsed when “[s]he and Mickey drove a Drive Away out, setting out from Brooklyn, dark,” I can’t help but think of Bird’s young son who fell off the rope swing she made him in her present life and broke his arm—the boys overlap and mirror each other (9).

An example of a refrain is the hovering voice of Bird’s dead mother: “Who will die when I die?” is the question she asks Bird, and Mickey asks Bird the same question later (3). Refrains suggest an obsessive recycling of phrases and memories in the character’s head over time, the past always pressing in. Another refrain is “I want to see” which is a literal request from Bird since Mickey has blindfolded her in that opening scene and she wants the blindfold off (5); it’s repeated later, *I want to see*, with a deepening resonance: “But they couldn’t really—see. The world had shrunk by then to become them” (34). They have no vision, no perspective; they cannot see their way.

The repeated images and refrains offer the felt sense of a person in thrall to memory. We see this especially with Bird’s grief over her mother and her miscarried baby. She and Mickey called the unborn baby “Little Caroline” (Caroline was Bird’s mother’s name), so identities are fluid:

[After Bird’s miscarriage] “They had scraped the mother in Bird out. Her mother was tiny, Thumbelina, set out on a rind of lemon across a bloody stew” (71).

[Echoed in language italicized in a letter to her dead mother] “I wanted you, Bird wrote to her mother.

I’d be you.

I would wear your dresses and carry you around and in this you would be a mother again and a baby and I wouldn’t be a dead baby’s mother and not a girl with a dying mother, over and over again. I’d be nothing at all. I’d be you” (92).

A final time-layering strategy to note is Holland’s use of the **flash-forward**. Often her verb tenses are mixed as she moves into a future time and back again, using *would*: “It would be years before Bird dreamed of her [mother] living, the months Bird carried her first child” (18). Sometimes Holland embeds the future in a past scene; in this scene, Bird and Mickey are hitchhiking in the Ryder

truck with Tuk and Doll Doll, and Bird refuses to apologize to Doll Doll: “Bird was saving *sorry* up for children, a husband, a demoted family dog. For the months to come, the hand through the wall, Mickey’s tender wrists he opened” (107). Holland’s frequent blurring of time periods and references to both past and future remind us this is a novel about consciousness and multipronged, contradictory desire, about the selves we inhabit and even the possible selves we might never become, or at least those we have not yet become: “Bird misses everything at once. One thing makes her want all the others—lived or not, still she misses them. She misses lives she has never lived—days issued out of the future, hours that will never be” (58).

Exercises for layering time:

1. Write a story, essay, poem that covers no more than a single day. How much of the past or future can you infuse untediously? An example in poetry is “Beauty” by B.H. Fairchild in *The Art of the Lathe*, which uses the frame of a museum visit in order to excavate memory.
2. Try to create—or remember—a place of liminality (or threshold) that is mutable, fluid, and also grounding for associations from various time periods in a character’s life—try a swimming pool, a deciduous woods, the crown vetch patch in the median on the interstate, a bed with the sheets frothed up, a playground. An example of such a place in a work of nonfiction is the ice of the frozen river in Ann Pancake’s essay “Our Own Kind.” An example in fiction comes from Per Petterson’s novel *Out Stealing Horses* in which a sixty-seven-year-old man moves into the cabin where he lived at age sixteen when he last saw his father alive; Petterson’s chapters alternate between these two time periods in the character’s life, so the cabin is both an adolescent space revisited and a present home of haunted solitude.
3. (From Poet Diane Gilliam) Begin an essay, chapter, story, or poem with the word “Instead,” as in: “Instead, I hung the *Cow Skull with Roses* that came in the mail from the print shop.” Such a piece opens with implication.
4. Studying Suzie and Bird’s phone dialog in Holland’s *Bird*, write a piece composed almost entirely of phone dialog, with the narrative frame being one speaker’s present life.

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Against Sentimentality

Eric Waggoner

2012 Summer and 2016 Winter Residencies

Sentimental images of children and of animals, sappy representations of love—they are fueled, in truth, by their opposites, by a terrible human rage that nothing stays. The greeting card verse, the airbrushed rainbow, the sweet puppy face on the fleecy pink sweatshirt—these images do not honor the world as it is, in its complexity and individuality, but distort things in apparent service of a warm embrace. They feel empty because they will not acknowledge the inherent anger that things are not as shown; the world, in their terms, is not a universe of individuals but a series of interchangeable instances of charm. It is necessary to assert the insignificance of individuality to make mortality bearable. In this way, the sentimental represents a rage against individuality, the singular, the irreplaceable.

—Mark Doty, *Dog Years*

“**T**he world as it is”—this is the phrase I want us to keep in mind during this brief talk. Because no matter how expressionistic our writing may be, the observable, material world is the final source and wellspring of all literary writing, even as one moves along the increasingly non-referential spectrum from stark realism to total abstraction. I want to talk today about sentimentality, about the misrepresentation of emotion. Not about emotion itself: not, per se, about happiness, love, loss, or pain, but rather about the flattening effect that manifests in our writing when we deploy false or received language in an attempt to describe intense states of emotion.

Learning to spot the tendency to sentimentality in our writing is a difficult challenge because, like no other aesthetic mode, writing tends to the sentimental precisely

at the moments when we likely feel most invested in the honest, effective expression of an interior truth; and when, therefore, we feel ourselves to be working in a state of elevated self-awareness. Egregious examples of sentimentality are, we believe, easy to spot. The airbrushed rainbows and puppy faces Doty references are the stuff of store-bought tchotchkes, trinkets, and greeting cards. No writer who takes issues of craft seriously, we agree, would attempt overtly to replicate these sorts of empty images in language. Yet when we write about matters very important to us, we sometimes slip unconsciously into what feels in the moment, and what looks to us on the page, like expressive intensity. In fact, what we're sometimes applying is a kind of simple increase in expressive volume: an increase that works, paradoxically, to blunt the emotional force of our writing, in the same way a too-loud amplifier will not only artificially distort the sound of natural human speech, but render it painful to listen to.

We're accustomed to thinking of "sentimentality" as an overabundance of emotion, a surplus of feeling usually connected to intense joy, or to deep sorrow or melancholy. Popularly, we equate sentimentality with cloying sweetness, with nostalgia, with a rose-colored worldview. This is certainly a useful notion, but I want to suggest that we try to understand sentimentality in broader terms, as an effect and not a feeling. Considered as an effect of language, **sentimentality is the aesthetically deadening result of a writer's attempt to render complex emotional states as simple ones.** Sentimentality is thus the unintended result of an honorable writerly impulse, executed poorly; that impulse is the desire to foster emotional engagement in the reader, by depicting a state of intense emotion through "intense" language. When we attempt to elicit that engagement without honoring the complexity of the world, sentimentality is the result.

When we are in the process of representing loss, frustration, anger, sorrow, or gladness—indeed, any intense emotional state—we run the risk of mistaking narrowness of depiction for clarity of focus. Grappling with the question of how to depict extreme conditions of feeling and being (which are, after all, subjective), we sometimes shift into a kind of referential or impressionistic shorthand that in fact allows us to avoid the close examination, and clear articulation, of complex states of awareness. And that shift is particularly difficult to spot because sentimentality tends to "hide" from the writer by disguising itself as intensity.

We speak often, in this sort of work, about the distinction between "writerly" concerns and "readerly" concerns. Though the desire to depict an interior truth accurately is a writerly concern, it's frequently much easier for a reader to spot sentimentality than a writer—even a very self-aware writer, and even within a draft that's been worked over. This phenomenon is, I think, less a matter of experience than a matter of our proximity to deeply affecting material. I often tell my writing students, particularly in the context of the "personal essay," that when they're writing for an audience

that doesn't know them (for a public audience, in other words), it doesn't matter at all whether a thing they're writing about is true. I'll hand a draft back and tell them, "I don't believe this story yet." But it's a true story, they protest; it happened to me. "I don't know you," I'll say; "I have no connection to this story beyond what I'm given by the words on the page. Whether it's actually true, in this context, doesn't matter at all. What matters is whether you can make me believe that it's true." For the writer who attempts to articulate not merely the facts of an event, but his/her impression of those facts, believability is the primary textual quality—the one without which the others cannot be sustained.

This is a tricky line to walk. Because, considered within a very obvious context, my students are raising a sensible, thoroughly valid objection when they challenge my criticism. If engaged properly, and with sensitivity to an unpracticed writer's investment in the content of a piece, the ensuing discussion can reveal the limitations of writing rooted in an attempt to articulate any emotional truth. This is a real event they're writing about, an actual story of loss and suffering, of stoic endurance, of triumph or failure. These are deep issues—mortality, love, fear, courage, risk—and they're trying to turn these intense experiences into art, or at least into something more complex and interesting than straightforward factual summary. My students sometimes get understandably frustrated with me, even angry. I'm wading into their deep emotional waters, and telling them that what they've written doesn't sound like truth—that the phrasing they've used not only doesn't effectively describe the impact of the experience they're writing about, but actively mutes and obscures it.

Well, no one wishes to be the specter at the banquet. I don't derive any joy from telling a student that their writing in a given piece doesn't move me, that it sounds false. But let's think about this aspect of writing from the standpoints of investment and articulation. And let's begin with an observation that's not necessarily aesthetic, but mechanical: The only forms of writing that can be said to be reliably free from the dangers of sentiment are directional or instructional writing, and basic denotative or descriptive writing. A set of instructions on how to assemble an entertainment center is not sentimental, and cannot be made so without doing great violence to its basic utility, its entire reason for being. Denotative writing, simple descriptive writing—these, too, resist the urge to sentimentality. However, the moment we modulate from description to impression, from denotative language to figurative, we open the door to sentiment.

All aesthetically complex forms and genres—persuasive arguments, poems, autobiographical essays, sermons, private letters, comedy, tragedy, etc.—are at risk of engaging in sentimentality. These forms of writing risk a flattening of complex emotion into simple emotion, paradoxically enough, not because we're not invested in the story we're telling, but precisely because we are invested, both

emotionally (personally) and aesthetically (as writers). Moreover, that deep investment usually feels very keen. As a result, we recognize that a simple recounting of facts, events, or observations alone won't carry the weight of full disclosure, and so we turn to intense language, figurative language, modifiers, comparatives, metaphors, and a host of other techniques, in order to go deeper than a superficial, denotative record of experience.

In itself, this investment isn't a liability. It is, in fact, one of the primary motivators for any writer. But language that is intense without being revelatory or personalized blunts our ability to articulate that investment, which is one of the reasons sentimentality not only constitutes bad art, it's anti-art. Before we discuss articulation, though, let's consider more fully the nature of deep writerly emotional investment, which is precisely that mode of consciousness that triggers sentiment.

The impulse to craft stories, essays, or poetry is in part an impulse to investigate the human costs of emotional risk. Much as we remind ourselves, frequently and rightly, of the necessity of getting the world right on the page, this investigative act requires a deeper kind of attention than simply an attunement to concrete details. It requires cultivating a critical optic on our private reactions, and those of the characters we're creating, when we experience intense or extreme circumstances. This is one of the reasons (despite the frequently treasured but finally self-aggrandizing belief that to be an artist is to exist always on a fundamentally different level of awareness than other people), that before one can be an artist of any sort, one often needs to disinvest one's work from one's raw emotional experience in order to cultivate trust in an audience.

I'm talking about the reader's detection of "truth" I mentioned earlier, but I'm also talking about something much more humble and basic, which is the honest engagement with one's own experiences and reactions to the world, an engagement that's essential to successfully emotionally moving writing. This sort of honesty is a prerequisite for any piece of writing that purports to deliver a believable account of actual, individual experience. To take a very brief example, recall Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes: The fox wants the grapes, but can't reach them where they hang on the vine high above him, and so convinces himself the grapes are sour. It's a simple story, but at the heart of that story is an honest representation of the divided self—the self that wants but cannot have, and in a spasm of ego-protection disparages the object of desire. It's a simple story, but not a simplistic one; it tells a fundamental truth about the messiness of the human condition in a way that's figurative without muting the frustrated desire that serves as its dramatic core. Quite by contrast, in fact, the story foregrounds frustrated desire, the essential frustration of desire, in a way that allows us to perceive the seductiveness of the comforting lie the fox tells himself—and to consider the comforting lies we might tell ourselves, in comparable circumstances.

We're a contradictory species; we often want and do things that we know, on

some level, are bad for us. We often avoid making changes that might bring us greater happiness, because the private dangers associated with that process scare us to the point of inaction. The basic paradoxes within us, between our desire and our fear, between our pleasure and our anger, is the crucible out of which honest engagement with self and the world arises. To tell a true story doesn't require a great deal of filigree or detail. A complex story can be simple; but a simplistic story cannot be complex, and sentimentality privileges the simplistic at the expense of complexity, and therefore at the expense of honesty.

When we recognize and honor the complexity of human experience in our art, we are already beginning to correct for the basic error at the core of the sentimental impulse. To say you love something, or someone, is not in itself complex. To say you love something that you know puts your sense of stability at risk, is. To say you hate something is not complex; to say you hate something because you see some of its own characteristics in yourself, is. This is the difference between sentimental and genuine expressions of emotional truth: Sentimental language mutes complex emotional undertones, the layers of paint beneath the surface that deepen, thicken, and complicate the top layer, the one that's most immediately visible.

This is certainly not to suggest that there is no place for the articulation of extreme emotional states in writing. But an articulation of extreme emotion, absent even an implicit awareness that this is only one of an array of more or less interconnected and perhaps simultaneous emotional states or experiences, can only be of interest to the writer; because it articulates only an immediate reactive response. Sentimentality is the result of a closed cognitive loop wherein a series of private images or words may satisfactorily get you where you want to be, emotionally speaking, but doesn't do anything for the reader attuned to complexity. The act of expressing complex emotional states brings with it the necessity of risk, of authorial vulnerability. As Oscar Wilde observed, "A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it." And when we write about very intense or extreme experiences, we veer into sentimentality whenever we ask the reader simply to recognize that our emotions are extreme, without inviting the reader to understand why.

These seem hard words for a mode of expression that initially seems direct, because it favors the immediate articulation of high emotion, but it's that articulation that I want to turn to now, as we reconsider the Mark Doty quote that opened this discussion. I find Doty's idea—that sentimentality represents the attempt to mask a disappointed rage at the heart of the human experience—to be largely convincing. But as I have tried to suggest, relentless nihilism is, to my mind, equally as sentimental as unrelieved wistfulness. If sentimentality is an attempt to mask anger, or (to use my preferred phrasing) an attempt to render complex, multifaceted emotions as simplistic

or single ones, I'm not at all sure that this dynamic doesn't flow the other way as well—that sentimental art doesn't itself mute an attunement to complexity in our sensibilities as writers and as readers. Considered in this light, sentimentality functions not only, as Doty suggests, as an anodyne to intense pain, but as an anesthetic. The more we depend on it, the less we allow ourselves to feel. And that way lies artistic death.

The depiction of utter loss and suffering as no more than a totalizing event, an event that can only ever be devastating and shattering, now and forever, also rings false. Our experience of the world, being infinitely complex, is filled to the top with rage, sorrow, joy, and ecstasy, much of which can unfold along parallel temporal moments. It's possible, when facing chemotherapy treatment, to crack jokes about unconvincing wigs. It's possible, when eating ice cream on the hottest day of summer, to cut your gums on a flawed waffle cone. The capacity to express that complexity is what any genuine articulation of human experience acknowledges.

Our reactions to the world, if we're any kind of attentive or reflective people at all, are complex. As writers and artists, we avoid presenting the complexity of the world, or any part of it, at the final peril of the quality of our art. If we want our writing to function beyond the walls of our skulls, it has to be honest. If we want it to sound true to a reader, it has to be honest. If we want it to reflect accurately the messy state of confusion and paradox in which we all must live, it has to be honest. And if we want it to be honest, it has to be earned. Readers have a right to demand that we risk something, that we move beyond the simplistic statement of any gut-level reaction to writing that honors the deeper nuances of actual human experience. Simplistic descriptions of experience are a useful initial way into asking questions about why we react as we do. But if the writing does not progress beyond that stage, we're attempting to buy the reader's engagement with counterfeit money.

Let us recognize too that the cynical extreme one might be driven to when consciously avoiding what we popularly identify as "sentimentality"—the complete avoidance of depicting intense happiness or joy—is just as egregious a mistake. If we understand sentimentality, as I've defined it here, as the transformation of chaotic, conflicting emotions into a single emotion, then the tendency to characterize the world as dark, doomed, ruled only by failure and disappointment, is just as false.

In his essay "In Defense of Sentimentality" (*New York Times*, "Books" section, November 25, 1979), John Irving considers Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," which contemporary readers can find a little too treacly to engage as serious art. In his discussion of the innate hopefulness of Dickens' story, Irving hits upon a point that's especially relevant for us in this context when he identifies the centrality of craft to the treatment of any subject matter:

... to the modern reader, too often when a writer risks being sentimental, the writer is already guilty. But as a writer it is cowardly to

so fear sentimentality that one avoids it altogether. It is typical—and forgivable—among student writers to avoid being mush-minded by simply refusing to write about people, or by refusing to subject characters to emotional extremes. A short story about a four-course meal from the point of view of a fork will never be sentimental; it may never matter very much to us, either. A fear of contamination by soap opera haunts the educated writer—and reader—though we both forget that in the hands of a clod, "Madame Bovary" would have been perfect material for daytime television...

Practically, then, the work of attuning ourselves to lapses into sentimentality in our writing should encourage us to focus on questions of execution, not content. No subject matter is off-limits for a writer who wants to honor the world—though certain subjects more than others may certainly make our own writing more prone to simplistic depiction, and knowing which private associations can lead us in that direction is a useful awareness for any writer to cultivate.

So what do we train ourselves to look for? On the practical level, as always, figurative language is one element to watch carefully. The deployment of simile, metaphor, and modifiers offers one foxhole in which we might hide from genuine engagement. It's the most seductive thing in the world to describe our emotional responses not in terms of how they actually felt in the body, but what they're "like." But when we use figurative language, we're already at one remove from what we might call the body-truth of emotional experience. How does it *actually feel*, in the body, to be terrified, to be elated, to recognize an overwhelming loss, and how do we put that across to the reader in such a way that the reader not only understands that we feel these things, but *how* and *why*?

Here the ground falls away. Because like no other sort of truth, emotional truth is dependent not only on an individual writer's voice, but on choice of subject, the tone, the depth of feeling the writer's attempting to achieve, and the dramatic focus of any given piece.

We return, then, to questions of articulation, to issues of craft. The dangers of sentimentality lie not in content, but in the treatment of content. The fundamental verities—love, loss, survival, risk—will continue to drive our art as long as we seek to transmute experience into art. But before I can understand your story about loss or pain, I need to know what was at risk for you. Before I can understand your deep emotional response to loss, I need to know what made you vulnerable to that loss. Before I can engage with your story in a way that convinces me, I need to understand, with utter clarity, the series of events, decisions, and private reactions that led up to this moment. I cannot know that, if what I'm being given is the reduction of complexity to simplicity.

Contributor Biographies

It's our obligation to construct stories—any stories, lyrical or narrative, poetic or prosodic—in ways that reach out, and there can be no reaching out without breaking the boundary of our own private feelings and associations. By way of balance, it's a reader's obligation to remain open to grappling with an understanding of experiences outside his or her own, so that a well-articulated expression of intensity can break past the barriers we all construct to keep ourselves protected from risk.

Because that risk, that openness and the potential for empathy that it triggers, is what matters. Not the event being described, not the raw emotional response, but the representation of it in language. All we have, in this context, are the words on the page. Any word that works against self-awareness and lucid expression of intensity, and instead tries to reduce individualized expression to a series of encoded or stock images, is a word that works against the genuine connection between ourselves and the world-as-it-is that art provides us, a connection that no other human pursuit can effect in quite the same direct way.

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