

Your story begins with the line: “I was ten years old when the neighbors called the police to extinguish the Holy Sock Fire my mother had started in the parking lot of our building.”

How did you come up with the first sentence for this piece?

The origin of this line comes, in part, from the fact that holey socks are evil. They bring you down in subtle, yet undeniable ways. Toe pops through a hole and suddenly you’re uncomfortable, exposed, deflated. *Not as good*. A hole in the ankle of your sock and you get stung: first by the unexpected breeze, then by the self-consciousness of the damaged article you’re wearing. Project that onto yourself and you too become damaged. Once again, not as good. Couple the holey-sock-effect with the fact that I have far too many of them and the image of immolation is not too far behind.

I had also been reading some of Donald Barthelme’s stories at the time I wrote “Symptoms,” and I have no doubt that the quirky power of his stories, and the way he begins so many of them (“The first thing the baby did wrong” or “So I bought a little city”) encouraged me to try and thrust a reader into my own unique and exact world.

What do you think a good first sentence accomplishes?

At the very least, they set a mood and establish a voice. For a first person narrative especially, the opening line is often the first taste of the central character. The first taste of the voice who most directly influences the reading experience. The voice can be even more important than the circumstances of plot. Aimee Bender’s story “Off” is a great example of this. It opens “At the party I make a goal and it is to kiss three men: one with black hair, one with red hair, the third blond.” This story is not about *what* happens—kissing three men with different colored hair—but it is about the mind of someone who would conceive of such a thing.

I’d like to talk about your use of fragments. They add to the voice of the story and make me linger on certain ideas. How do you decide when to use fragments and why?

The fragments are really the product of the voice and my feel for the rhythm and tone of that voice. I like your suggestion that fragments can make a reader “linger on certain ideas.” I imagine that lingering mirrors the thinking-through that the narrator is experiencing. In some ways, the reader and the narrator are lingering together.

As far as deciding when to use fragments, initially it’s more of a feel thing for me. But you’re right, some conscious decisions are made too. When a sentence runs on too long, and the narrative needs to slow down a bit, then a fragment can accomplish that.

This story is short but dense. This compression helped make the piece engaging and complex. It resonated. What was the overall effect you wanted this story to have on the reader, and how did you manipulate voice and plot to achieve it?

With this story, I wanted to explore something about superstition. Superstitions are fascinating to

me, because they are fundamentally irrational, yet they can hold such power over our beliefs and behaviors. Especially when life is not going so well. In trying times, when things really seem to be spiraling, many of us would rather not take the chance when it comes to the cracks in the sidewalk or the prayers we might not usually say or the spider we might otherwise crush, but are suddenly compelled to liberate, more out of fear of cosmic or karmic retribution than compassion (not to suggest that there aren't those who are truly compassionate).

I see the narrator of this story as grappling with and yearning for a sense of control in a chaotic and complicated world. It's his voice that captures that struggle, I think, and his mind that's piecing together the fragments of plot, connecting the most important pieces as he contends with his new position as head of his home.

There are surreal elements here. Sock fires and pillow sacrifices. However, it is essentially a story about family, two brothers losing their mother. How do you balance these elements?

The balance is really rooted in the narrator who finds himself in a surreal situation, you might say. At eighteen, he's now responsible for more than most eighteen year olds can handle. In his effort to come to terms with very real responsibilities, it provides a strange sense of comfort and stability to imagine that his circumstances were determined in some way. That his mom had a vision—as warped as it may have been—and that it's his duty now to carry it on. To protect his family and maybe even protect the world from the forces that have put him in this unfortunate and possibly even impoverished situation. So, the story becomes about the narrator's effort to work-through, to balance, the surreal and real circumstances of his life.

Often I find voice-driven stories set in a heightened reality run the risk of coming off as hollow, lacking story at the expense of self-indulgent weirdness. Your work avoids this. Have you ever struggled to reign in a wild premise that threatens to overshadow the emotional core of a story?

I imagine a sort of Wild West image here: lasso around the writhing neck of a wild premise, pulling it back mid-pounce, emotional core cowering in the shadow of its underbelly, etc. That was fun. Thanks for that. But to respond: the short answer is yes. With the type of voice-driven stories you mention, at least those that I've tried to write, the voice often triggers the writing in the first place. The sound of the opening line, something you asked about earlier, is sometimes so compelling (to the writer, at least) that it pushes the telling forward, and the unique reality or strangeness of the opening line is sometimes followed by even more strangeness and before long, the aim is to see just how much strangeness you can pack into the piece, rather than determining what the story is really about. It's not uncommon for me (and for others, or so I've heard) to fall in love with the sound of a sentence or a series of sentences. This is why I have CUT documents that are hundreds of pages long. As much as I'd like to tap into something resonant and get rid of all the rest, I can't bear to delete language altogether. But as Kurt Vonnegut and others have said, the language must be in the service of the story; we all must "have the guts to cut."

The reality you create is viewed through the lens of the narrator who claims his mother is acting rationally and with the family's best interest at heart. Initially, I assumed him reliable and therefore projected the world as different from our own, but as I got to the end I figured the opposite was probably true. Like this kid is trying to talk himself into a certain narrative about his mom, or that she had convinced her sons her madness was real. Did you blur these lines on purpose? Am I reading too far into it? Have you ever been asked a paragraph-long question before?

As someone who asks himself paragraph long questions, I'm right with you here. I see this story as set in a contemporary reality, where harsh circumstances have simultaneously exacerbated the mother's madness and made her more credible to her sons at the same time. She provides for them, rails against the forces that have made it difficult for them, and includes them in her schemes. She can be harsh, but when you have little and the world appears to be against you (in some way a product of the mother's doing, but a vivid appearance nonetheless) the hard sacrifices provide some sense of control. And the mother's meant to have a great deal of confidence in the measures she's taking. She knows what needs to be done and how it should be done. In the end, her impressionable and desperate children are inclined to believe her. The alternative—our mother is crazy; we're alone; the world is unbearably cold and cruel—would be impossible to take. Better to believe.

So I think the lines are blurry, as so many lines are blurry. For the narrator and his brother, things are especially blurry. They trust their mother, but wonder why they have to go without socks and why they have to lose their pillows and why people keep threatening to take them or their mother away. To say nothing of Maggie Thompson's hair. But even that final act of violence and craziness reinforces the idea that the mom knows what she's doing—why else would she have timed it to coincide with her son's graduation and age? From the straight narrative standpoint, the skewed and potentially comic reality established in the opening line might have helped to blur the lines. But the goal was always to rationalize the behavior and cast the opposite as dangerous and naïve and blinded by "safe" conventions.

Why did you decide to only name Maggie?

I see the narrator as searching for a sense of identity. A voice in the void, almost. Skeptical of the world around him, including conventional and practical modes of identification. Maggie, on the other hand, is someone from the other side. Someone real—with a name and parents to prove it! I also believe that by giving her a name, the mother's violence and craziness becomes a bit more personalized. Impossible for parents and authorities to ignore.

How did you come up with the story's title?

The title is the question stamped on the blurry line you mentioned earlier. It's a question that can be posed from either side. If a skewed reality, how do you mind the symptoms? If a conventional reality, how do you mind the symptoms? So the title really came out of the narrative and the narrator's experiences.

What function do you think a good title serves?

I've always felt that titles are important. They can help to establish a mood or a tone or give readers more to think about and something to return to. Whether it's Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics" or Lorrie Moore's "How to Be an Other Woman," there's always something to analyze. With the Moore example, which seems much more straightforward than the Carver example, there's still room for analysis and thought. Consider the article she uses. Why not "the" instead of "an" for her title? At first glance, it might not seem to matter. Read it more closely, and it becomes clear that the second-person narrative is not telling a story about how to be *the* other woman. In fact, the narrator discovers that her lover is separated from his wife, living with another woman and cheating on his mistress with the narrator. In this case, the narrator becomes the *other*, other woman. A good title can encourage closer reading. What more could we ask for?