

Chairs

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Abstract

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What drives prose if it isn't the story? Or rather, what is a story? Anton Chekhov's famous rule of storytelling suggests that a gun should not be included in the first act if it is not going to be fired in the second, but life is full of guns and most of them don't go off. Seemingly-important encounters go nowhere. This piece examines and attempts an opposite approach - one of loose ends, insignificance and absence. Using vignette form, small moments are celebrated and the space between suggests movement. The fiction portion, like life, is a series of emergencies of varying degree - there is only room for what is most pressing, and then we go on. The fiction portion is followed by an examination both of works that reach in similar directions and works that push back against.

Chairs

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Walking down Yale Avenue North at 7:30 pm and a Juggalo is pissing at birds. He spins around, waves.

“How are you?” He asks. He is smiling.

“I just really want you to put your pants on,” I say.

He does. I continue forward.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight?” The man is shuffling with his belt buckle.

“I have plans,” I say, adjusting the gallon of grapefruit juice under my arm.

“You should come to the show with us!” he says, and points to a tattoo parlor on the other side of an empty parking lot. I say nothing.

The man walks to a nearby car, where he tells his friend in the passenger seat that he thinks I should go to the show with them.

“Hey,” shouts the friend, his head out the window. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” I say.

“Wait, do you like hip hop?” he asks.

“I do like hip hop,” I say and keep walking.

I prop myself up on the belt of my treadmill and look over at Lucas. He hands me the whiskey and I drink it straight from the bottle.

The apartment gym is the only air-conditioned place in this building and my apartment is hot and sticky in the mid-September heat, even at three in the morning. We're eight episodes into the second season of Scrubs and we'll have the place to ourselves for another two, maybe three hours before we'll have to close the laptop, pick up the pillows and go back upstairs while a woman in compression leggings watches with her mouth open.

Lucas pauses the show to stand up and adjust the incline on his treadmill.

"My mother asked about you today," I say.

"About me?" Lucas says.

"Well, I told her we spent all of yesterday watching 14 episodes of Scrubs, and she asked if you were a coworker or perhaps an old college friend. She obviously just wants to know if we're dating, but since she wouldn't ask then I decided not to answer."

"You just didn't answer?"

"I told her we go to Synagogue together."

Lucas sits back down and takes the bottle from me.

"Does she know that's a bar?"

"Of course not."

Google Maps has provided me with the following directions to get to my parents' house via public transportation:

Step one: take the 542 from the University District to downtown Redmond.

Step two: take the 224 from Downtown Redmond to Redmond Ridge East.

Step three: acquire a car and drive the remaining ten miles.

Instead, Greg has loaned me his car so I can drive the entire way, which is how I wound up at this Taco Bell. Cars provide access to such luxuries as Crunchwrap Supremes.

“I’m sorry,” the man taking orders says, “but the Crunchwrap Supreme has been temporarily discontinued at this location.” I decline to order anything else. But many other people have borrowed cars to come to the suburbs for their Crunchwrap Supremes, so now I’m sandwiched into the drive-through line.

There are conversations you and I aren’t having.

For example: the framed poster of the ugly aluminum ship you hung just inside your front door. At the bottom of the image are the words “The ship that launched a thousand electric shavers,” a claim that is a mystery even to Google. You said you found the poster propped against a bus stop bench and I said I hated it. I don’t hate it, though - I wish I’d found it. I would have hung it in the middle of my biggest wall.

For example: the hole in the elbow of your blue button-down shirt, which occurred sometime after you were kicked out of the Mariners game but before you somehow wound up outside Lindsey’s house where she and I were shotgunning pumpkin beer in the back yard. It is fairly noticeable, and you probably shouldn’t still be wearing it to work.

For example: our relationship, while sober.

I walk in the front door of my parents' house and immediately learn that nobody expected me to come to the baby shower despite the RSVP text I sent my mother. Sandy, my brother's wife and the guest of honor, hugs me. "I can't believe you came!" I set my gift on the table. Also in the room are my two grandmothers, Sandy's other two children, her mother, her grandmother, the wives of her two brothers, their four children, her best friend and her best friend's baby. I am late, and the games are about to begin. I go to the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee, hesitating only briefly before selecting the "I'm a mom!" mug from the cupboard. I take my coffee and sit down.

Charlotte, the best friend, holds up a tray full of pink items.

"What you need to do," she tells us, "is try to memorize all of the items on this tray. You have 30 seconds to do so. Next, write as many items as you can remember on the sheet of paper in front of you."

We all gather around the tray, and the women pick up various items and declare them to be *something I wish could've found in Omaha and a lifesaver when I had Braden*. I pick a couple of things up and put them down, nodding my head and trying to appear as though I know what they are used for.

When the 30 seconds are up, I use my piece of paper to draw pictures of chairs.

Later that night, a photo of me drinking coffee will be posted to Facebook and everyone I know will think I'm pregnant.

After a catering event we had crates and crates of unused dinner rolls. They sat overnight in the back hallway, but the next day we were all asked to take some home. Late last night each of us grabbed several bags and headed out the door just to put them all back down on the sidewalk to smoke before heading down to Synagogue. While we stood, Lucas opened up one of the bags and began playing hacky sack with a dinner roll. A circle formed. He kicked the dinner roll to Sean, who kicked the dinner roll to Jason, who drilled Shannon in the neck with the dinner roll. She transferred her cigarette to her other hand, picked the dinner roll up and threw it into the street.

“That was our hacky sack!” said Lucas.

“Luckily,” Shannon said, “we have many bags of hacky sacks.”

The bags were all torn into. We ran down sidewalks, hid around corners, crossed streets, throwing dinner rolls at each other the whole way.

This morning, these streets, a dinner roll massacre.

Your apartment is in the basement of a building that houses a pawn shop and a fish tank supply store. Along one wall is a refrigerator, an oven, a sink and a small strip of counter space. On the opposite wall is an underground window - a tunnel through the dirt to allow light in during the day and a possible escape in the event of a fire. Behind the head of the bed - a surprisingly comfortable queen-sized air mattress - is a wall heater, always on, and you have placed a stone gargoyle you stole from someone's yard between the mattress and the heater for safety. On the opposite wall, next to the front door, is a dog kennel. The kennel, which is not

used for an actual dog, supports a large flat-screen television. There are sparse piles of cigarette ash on the metal tray inside the kennel.

One time I woke up, found my pillow trapped against the heater and screamed “are you trying to burn this place down?!”

“It’s okay,” you’d told me, even though it wasn’t. “I have a safety gargoyle.”

But you know all this. What you don’t know yet is that I’m here. You have yet to remember any of the nights you’ve invited me back here.

Katrina answers the door in her high school prom dress, which is how Greg and I know she’s already drunk.

“We need to drink,” he says to me.

“Immediately,” I say.

Greg grabs four cups and fills two of them with beer from his growler. I fill the other two with ice and pour Jameson on top and we carry our drinks to the couch. Shannon is standing by the speaker drinking white wine from a water bottle. Laura, Sean and Dana are at the table arguing about *Independence Day 2*. Natalie is watching *Dora the Explorer* on her phone with Amy’s kid, and Amy is on the phone with her boyfriend, a glass of red wine on the floor beside her chair.

Katrina re-enters the room, this time carrying her mother.

“Have you all met my mom?” she says.

Silence.

She removes the lid from the urn and peers inside. “Mom, where are you? Where did you go?” She looks distraught, but we’ve seen this before.

“Just kidding, guys - she’s still in here,” she says as she puts the lid back on the urn and puts it on the coffee table.

I walk past Katrina’s mother and into the kitchen to get the bottle of Jameson. Jason walks in the door carrying an empty six-pack and one open beer bottle.

“I see you’ve brought some cardboard,” Greg says to him. I sit back down on the couch.

“I got off the bus too early,” he says, taking the last drink from his bottle. He takes the whiskey from my hand and, on his way to the other side of the room, kicks over the glass of wine. Cries of “my wine!” and “my carpet!” follow.

There are reasons this apartment isn’t ideal for parties, although I have Candyland and a deck of cards and so I do try. One is the four of everything: glasses, forks, spoons, hooks on the coat rack, as if I’ve prepared this space for the acquisition of three additional humans. And before there were the four armchairs collected from various yard sales and thrift stores, we all sat on the floor and threw bottle caps at the bucket of sunglasses and bottle caps.

But now there are these four armchairs, and a dining chair next to the door that holds an old brass lamp and my keys or sometimes a person if the situation calls for it - the chair in the closet serves a similar purpose - and these developments have changed where we sit but little else. Even now, as Greg and Sean and Shannon and I sit with our legs over the arms, the favorite party game is still several toy soldiers on a Roomba.

Sean spends most of his time in his yard smoking cigarettes and sawing pieces of wood into smaller pieces of wood, but it wasn't always the case. Ten years ago he spent his days installing cable wire under houses. He lived with his parents and older sister in Eugene, quietly completing one class at a time at a community college.

His dad was a minister and his mom volunteered at a homeless shelter. His sister was a lesbian before she killed herself.

The way Sean tells the story, there were two ducks, Fred and Arlene. They lived by the mailbox, and every day when he got home from work he gave them scraps from his lunch. One day, he got home to find Fred shredded in the road. The next day, he joined the Army.

The way Sean tells the story, Eugene doesn't prepare a person for ducks.

"There's a crazy woman on this bus," I say to Shannon. "She has just declared it a war zone."

"What are you doing on a bus?" Shannon responds instantly.

"I'm going to the dentist," I say. "The woman has now announced that she is at war with Nordstrom, which won't buy back her filthy sweatpants."

"Why are you going to the dentist?"

"I broke a tooth on regret pizza."

"What the fuck is regret pizza?"

I tell her that regret pizza is pizza ordered after 2am, usually drunk and after work, the rest of which is eaten the next morning, without bothering to reheat it, shamefaced and with the lights off and the curtains closed so no one can see.

“I love regret pizza!” Shannon says.

“Tell me you did not break your tooth on regret pizza,” Greg responds later.

“I did,” I say. “And then I promptly deleted the Eat24 app.”

“Then what are we going to eat?”

“I bought frozen tater tots,” I say, “and I suggest you do the same.”

There’s a single-cup coffee machine and a basket full of coffee in the apartment lobby and that’s how I get my rent’s worth. Approximately three cups during the day while I’m at home, and a travel mug when I head out the door. It saves me hundreds on beans and cafes.

This morning, it seems you had the same idea I did. I woke up and was upset to see that you’d left during the night. Finally, after stumbling around looking for my phone, which was dead, I put on clothes and went downstairs for coffee.

And here you are, sitting on the floor outside the elevators, two cups of cold coffee by your feet, without the code to get back up to my floor.

“I can’t walk up that hill,” Greg says.

He only lives six blocks away, but it's six blocks up a steep hill and evidence suggests we drank an entire box of wine last night.

He slowly wraps his scarf around his neck, but doesn't get up. I pick up the remote and put Aziz Ansari on Netflix.

An hour later Greg has managed to tie his shoes, but has still not left his chair.

"Okay," I say, going to the kitchen to find my purse. "I know."

Forty-five minutes later Greg is back in the chair after using my bus pass to bus the six blocks, retrieve his car and drive my bus pass back to me.

Outside my kitchen window is the Great Shoe Graveyard. It began last March as one worn athletic shoe near a bush at the edge of the night club parking lot, and then became one worn athletic shoe and a black felt clog, and in the months since has grown into a small mound of discarded shoes. I toured the pile not long ago and found about a dozen sneakers, a few men's dress shoes, several single Converse All-Stars and one black felt clog. I was disappointed in the lack of women's footwear, so when my black Steve Madden ankle boots with the ruched vamp finally wore through on a walk from Fremont to the University District in the rain, I added them to the pile. The shoes have become a source of pride in this neighborhood - I watch the gathering of families and the taking of selfies while washing my dishes.

I saw you there once, aware that I was watching you over the pot of white bean chili we ate later that night. You'd found one of my boots, held it up toward me.

I began sleeping in my walk-in closet when I realized the space was large enough to fit the futon mattress I bought at Ikea for 90 dollars. There is a small walkway between the mattress and the hanging clothes, and next to the head of the bed is a lamp on top of a dining chair. One morning last spring, before Sean had ever seen where I slept, he said “I just woke up in a coat closet.”

“So did I,” I replied, and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

“So you grew up on a fishing boat,” Lucas’ sister says to me through drinks. “What was it like?”

“It was alright,” I tell her. “It wasn’t that interesting.”

“Of course it’s interesting,” she insists. “I mean, we just grew up in Marysville.”

I finally see Lucas walking away from the bar, holding a tray of beers and shot glasses. Sarah picks up her phone, laughs at a picture of two cats in a lunchbox. She shows it to me, and I laugh at a picture of two cats in a lunchbox. Then she sets the phone back down and looks at me intently. “Well? What was it like?”

Lucas sets the tray on the table, puts a shot glass in front of each of us, and sits down.

“It was like...” I say, smiling at Sarah. “Imagine sleeping next to your parents as they have sex, while you yourself are covered in fish guts.”

I pick up my shot glass.

“To family,” I say.

I wake up and realize I'm on a couch. Greg's couch. My credit cards are scattered on the floor, my purse is upside down and I've been sleeping on my phone. It's 7am, and I have to be at work at 10.

After putting my credit cards back in my wallet and righting my purse, I look around for my shoes so I can walk home. They are nowhere to be found. I get up and walk through the kitchen, down the hallway and into the bathroom. Still no shoes.

Greg's bedroom door is closed, and it's the only place left where my shoes could be, but the shoes I have found in the hallway appear to be Mitch's so I am not going to open the bedroom door.

It briefly crosses my mind that I could walk the six blocks home with no shoes, but I dismiss that thought immediately because I have standards. Instead, I get an Uber and am driven home shoeless.

It's Sonja's birthday, and I have decided that a "happy birthday" text is far too pedestrian. Instead, I have decided to bake a layer cake and write "happy birthday, Sonja" in chocolate ganache and post a photo of it on Facebook. Since she lives in Santa Barbara, I will just bring the cake to work for my coworkers to eat.

The first thing that goes wrong is that I don't have any milk, so I use water, which the internet says will be fine as long as I add some vinegar to the batter to keep it from drying out.

The second thing that goes wrong is that I've poured more batter into one pan than the other, which means one layer is overcooked and one is undercooked.

The third thing that goes wrong is that I somehow don't have any powdered sugar even though I swear to God I had some, so instead of frosting I add blue food coloring to a paste of cornstarch and water because at this point I just want to write the message, take the picture and then put the entire thing in the parking lot.

After writing the letters "hap," the chocolate ganache hardens in the pastry bag and not another drop comes out.

The video of the cake being destroyed by crows is Sonja's favorite birthday present, she says.

Natalie wanted an easy way to sneak liquor into a football game, and so I gave her my burrito trick. Just fill an eight-ounce water bottle with liquor, wrap the bottle in a flour tortilla and wrap that whole thing in plastic wrap. I have yet to see ballpark security search a burrito.

"And I do what," said Natalie. "Drink out of a burrito? Nobody will find that odd?"

Your apartment was dark the first time I woke up there, and I didn't realize I wasn't in my own. What woke me up was an alarm, and I fumbled with my own phone trying to shut it off before realizing the alarm was not mine. I slowly sat up - another person was in my apartment.

My eyes adjusted to the dark. I was sitting on an air mattress. Next to me, under a threadbare Atlanta Falcons blanket, was you. Somewhere was your phone, the alarm still going off. I rubbed your shoulder until you woke up.

You got up to use the restroom and came back with a growler of beer. It was 6am.

You took a long sip from the growler and offered it to me. I took it. I can do this, I remember thinking. I can sit here in the dark, drinking morning beer on a pool toy.

Sitting in a camping chair outside the downtown Macy's, a large woman with a head scarf holds up a sign that says "Support our mothers and sisters." On the sidewalk by her feet is a coffee can holding change and a few bills. In the chair's cup holder is a Big Gulp with a heavily-lipsticked straw. "Care to donate?" I hear her ask people as they walk past. She has no obvious affiliation with any organization, and I imagine her handing those same bills to an am/pm clerk later in exchange for a King-size Reeses and a handful of scratch tickets.

I want to avoid her, but I don't have time to wait for the "don't walk" sign to change, so I continue in her direction.

"Can you spare anything to help battered women?" she says as I walk past.

I give a dollar. I know better than to laugh about breadding.

"I lost my keys last night," Jason says, rubbing his temples, "so I knocked on my brother's bedroom window until he let me in. I slept on his couch. Woke up in the morning to a

cramp in both calves, yelled and fell off the couch. Scared the shit out of Caleb, playing on the floor. Legos everywhere.”

My mother and Grandma Lois have come to the city to drive me to Ikea so I can purchase a dining table without having to pay a hundred dollars for shipping. The bucket of sunglasses needs a platform for proper displaying, and the table will bring order and a sense of purpose to the armchairs.

“Well,” says my mother when I get into the back seat, “where should we go for lunch?”

“Taco Bell,” I answer immediately.

“But we can go anywhere,” she says.

“I know,” I say.

As we eat, Grandma Lois asks me about the weekend I said I might spend in Santa Barbara sometime soon.

“Where are you going to stay?” she asks.

“With my friend Sonja,” I tell her.

“Look out for her,” she advises as she brushes a crumb from her pant leg. “She sounds Russian.”

“Sonja isn’t Russian,” I tell her.

“Well thank goodness,” Grandma Lois says, visibly relaxing. My mother is smirking behind her Diet Coke.

“She’s Egyptian,” I say.

“Oh dear,” says Grandma Lois.

My apartment building has a gym, a hot tub, and a rooftop patio that overlooks Elliot Bay and also several cranes that will eliminate that view someday.

My specific apartment has a washer and dryer, a dishwasher, a deep bathtub and the aforementioned walk-in closet that is large enough to house my bed. It also has concrete flooring, which I like but which made the move-in inspection form difficult to fill out, because I don't know whether or not the cracks are supposed to be there. It's been my favorite apartment I've ever lived in, so re-signing my lease for another year was an easy decision.

And now, a week after re-signing the lease, everything has gone wrong and suddenly the mice and I are taking cold showers in the dark.

It has come to my attention that you and I were making out last night at Synagogue. This is not unusual, but it has come to my attention because we were doing this right in front of Liz.

“Rough morning?” she said as we stood outside of work, waiting for one of the cooks to let us in.

“The last thing I remember,” I told her, “was that round of Buffalo Trace. And here I am.”

“Ah. Then I suppose you don't remember your makeout sesh,” she said.

“Oh no,” I said.

“I turned around to ask you something, and the two of you were making out against a Laser GORILLAZ poster.”

Liz says she was the only one still around to see it, but I was nervous she’d say something to you about it when you got to work. Since, as you’re aware, we’ve still never discussed whatever it is we’re doing.

Except you didn’t ever show up to work. And now you’ve been fired.

As of this afternoon, the following items can be found inside my freezer: 12 one-cup containers of cooked brown rice, two gallon-sized bags of spicy peanut sauce that I froze in ice trays, eight two-cup containers of chili, two loaves of pumpkin bread and three dozen blueberry pancakes, along with the usual bags of frozen vegetables, bags of frozen fruit and ice trays full of actual ice.

In the process of doing all this, I also Swiffer dry-and-wet-mopped my floor, I hung up my clothes and I arranged the books by color. I also gave all the green army men a bath in the colander and I checked the expiration dates on all the condiments in the refrigerator. This last task led to the removal of a bottle of teriyaki sauce and a bottle of Grade B pure maple syrup.

My cell phone was silent the entire time.

Grandma Rae is semi-comatose, or as Sandy says, “in transition.” She opens her eyes and moves a bit, but is otherwise unresponsive to those around her. Still, Sandy insists she can hear us and understand us and that it’s good for her when we visit.

This is, of course, the same Sandy who has been discussing Grandma Rae’s future cremation all evening while in the same room with her.

Since her kidneys have stopped functioning, Sandy - who, as a nurse, has been staying with her the past few weeks - said she would survive another two days, three days max. That was six days ago.

Lucas has lent me his car so I could come say goodbye, which I’ve done now, but I wasn’t expecting so many other people to be in the room - aunts, cousins, people I don’t even recognize - and I wish I could say more to her. My mother seems to sense this.

“Your hair looks nice,” she says to me loudly. “Did you have it done?”

I look from her to Grandma Rae and back to her.

“I did have it done,” I say.

“Did you see the same stylist you’ve been seeing?” she asks, looking at Grandma Rae.

“I’ve never seen the same stylist,” I say, also looking at Grandma Rae. “But I did like this one. Maybe I’ll see her again.”

I am sitting cross-legged on the cold concrete floor of the King County Pet Adoption Center because of Reggie. Liz met him yesterday when her sister adopted Stella the cat, and now she’s in love.

Reggie is a French Bulldog, black, 12 years old, who has gone unadopted for quite a while because, they tell us, of his age. He is turning white around the nose, and his eyes are like a pair of cloudy blue marbles in his head.

Liz showed me a series of photos at work today that she'd taken of Reggie.

"Tell me you did not adopt that dog," I'd said. Knowing her hangover schedule, she likely wouldn't get up to walk a dog until at least two in the afternoon. This means her boyfriend would be left walking any dog she impulsively adopted.

"No, I didn't adopt him," she said. "But I'm going back today to see him."

"Why?"

"Because he's homeless and it's sad."

I think it is sad to be homeless, and now here I am on the floor.

One thing I'm trying to figure out is how to get these contacts out of my eyes.

Seeing is going better, but the fear that I'll never be able to remove the lenses has done more harm to my evening than my eyesight could have.

They're better than the glasses, though, which I never felt good about, and I think Lucas agrees because earlier this evening, after drinking his sixth Manhattan at the company party, he kicked me in the shin and said "sorry, just wanted to kick something beautiful." He was immediately escorted from the premises.

And now, checking the internet for tips on getting these out, I have found "click here for the message boards. Please no more fetish posts."

I have taken a series of twenty photos of a young woman - homeless, I assume - sifting through the dumpster in the parking lot outside my window. The whole affair has been going on for hours now. I've sent all the photos to Shannon, who has deemed it "better than Netflix." It sounds sad, but it's actually a happy story - she narrowly avoids arrest and has found several outfits and possibly a boyfriend!

The outfit I liked best was the second one she tried on - a red and black damask sheet that she tied around her waist like a sarong, which she paired with a navy blue sleeveless top with black vinyl shoulders. I didn't care for the black yoga pants and striped black and white sweater combo, although it was probably the ensemble that allowed for the most physical flexibility. The pink dress was nice, but it was too large so she gathered it at the back with a hair tie. It does seem significant, though, that she was wearing the pink dress when the young man arrived, wearing all black and holding a backpack. He didn't stay long, but judging by their body language - he helped steady her as she climbed back out of the dumpster when the cops arrived - they'll be reconnecting later.

But unfortunately for myself and Shannon, I think the event is almost over. She has begun to clean up, which the police told her to do, and is currently throwing plastic hangers into the yard waste.

Now all three of us are at the adoption center, and Reggie is darting excitedly between us - to me, to Liz, to Greg, back to me.

I have pulled him into my lap and am absently stroking his head, and Greg is signing things to him, I think in an attempt to lure him from me.

“I think you like him,” says Liz.

At this Reggie sneezes violently, which startles him, and he starts to bark. He looks around frantically, trying to identify the source of the sound, and continues barking.

“Christ,” says Greg, “no wonder nobody wants him.”

I just had a dream in which you’d moved into the unit across the hall. Your apartment was furnished with a 72-inch flat screen television, a Playstation 4 and a cinema-style reclining leather sofa with cup-holders between each seat. Every time I stood outside my door, balancing my coffee in my elbow while searching for my keys, I could hear you yelling “fuck!” at the Braves.

You invited me over for dinner every night. One night you made boxed macaroni and cheese - my favorite - and pot cookies for dessert, which I declined because I tried that once and everything turned red. After dinner we had sex three times and watched two episodes of Cheaters - a lovely evening - before I went back to my own apartment to orgasm and sleep.

When I woke up I was sad to be alone. I still am.

When Shannon has guests over, she likes to show them the things she's brought back from her travels - a Yerba Mate gourd from Argentina, a phone booth salt shaker and Big Ben pepper shaker from London.

But my favorite thing in her apartment is the small two-level shopping cart in the corner of her bedroom closet, which she was too embarrassed to return to QFC after she and Lindsey went on a drunk shopping trip and decided they needed the cart to get the grocery bags home. She now uses the cart as a clothes hamper - lights in the top basket, darks in the bottom.

Claire has arrived with the pumpkin pie, and just in time - I was beginning to suspect our entire party had managed to overlook dessert for Thanksgiving.

We've all been sitting around the coffee table playing Cards Against Humanity since having dinner an hour ago. Lucas, who invited me to spend Thanksgiving with him and a collection of people I don't know, is drunk and asleep, his legs over the arm of the couch and his head resting against my side. He's making it difficult for me to play my card each round, but he did just cook dinner for the whole group so I let it slide.

"Dessert is ready," Jamie calls from the kitchen.

After the pie has been distributed, Jamie, whose house we're at, introduces herself to Claire. "I don't think we met," she says. "Who here do you know?"

Claire hesitates.

"No one," she says after a little while. "I just had a pie."

And now I have deleted your phone number.

I'm tired of waiting for the ringtone I set specifically for you. And I'm tired of setting your ringtone back to the original, because at least that way there's a chance it could be you when I hear the ring. I'm tired of saying "How have you been?" and having you respond "I've been busy" a week later, after I've also said "I miss you," "I hope we can get a drink sometime soon," "what are you doing this weekend," and "just what in the fuck is your problem?"

In the process of removing your phone number from my phone - first deleting the contact, then deleting the text chain and finally scanning the call history and deleting each occurrence of (425) 749-2820 - I have unintentionally memorized your phone number.

"When's the last time you heard from him?" Greg asks when I tell him about this dilemma.

"Today," I say. "Last week I asked him how he's been. Today he said 'busy.'"

"Don't worry," Greg says. "You'll find another guy who keeps his cigarette ash in a dog bed."

"We should have sex," Sean says one night after Lucas and Bryce have left his place.

I look at him over the table. "Excuse me?"

"I think we should have sex," he says, taking a drink from his beer bottle.

"Why would we do that?"

“Well,” he says, “we like each other, and neither one of us is having sex with anybody else. I mean - are you having sex with anybody?”

“You know I’m not having sex with anybody,” I say.

“Not even Lucas?” Sean asks.

“Wait - you like me?” I say.

“Well,” Sean says, “you’re female-shaped, I don’t hate being around you and I’m assuming you have a vagina.”

Later that night Sean runs his finger from my ankle to my thigh and I reach for his balls in the dark. He puts his mouth on mine and pushes my breasts against my chest. I climb onto his lap and remain there for a few minutes before saying I have to go.

I’m sitting in the blue armchair with my feet on the table, watching The IT Crowd on my cell phone when the screen is interrupted by a phone call. It’s Greg.

“Look outside your window,” he tells me.

I look outside. He’s standing in the parking lot with Liz. In Liz’ arms is Reggie.

“Oh fuck,” I say, and hang up. I get my coat and head out to the parking lot.

“Somebody wanted to adopt him,” Liz says when I get outside.

“But that’s what we wanted!”

“If somebody adopted him,” she says, putting Reggie on the ground and kneeling next to him, “then I couldn’t go see him anymore.”

“So now you have a dog,” I say.

“Well,” she says, looking at Greg and back to me, “now we have a dog. Now we all have a dog.”

What I want you to do is this: I want you to come to my apartment. I want you to come to my apartment because you need to see me and because my not texting you back, which I haven't yet managed because you haven't been texting me, is driving you insane. I want you to wait outside my apartment, in the rain, even if it's hours. I want you to, I don't know, squeeze ketchup at my window if the blinds are open.

Or maybe what I want is for you to find my name in the call box, alphabetically by last name, which would put you through to my cell phone. You'd tell me that you're waiting outside, that you'll wait there all night if you have to, but that you have to see me, that you can't sleep anymore because the only face you've woken up to in weeks is that goddamn gargoyle.

Maybe what I want is for you to know my last name.

And now another woman is ass-up in the dumpster, flinging garments over herself and into the parking lot. Sean and I once found a crate of organic bananas on top of the dumpster behind the Lake City Fred Meyer, but these women are pulling designer clothes out of the trash.

I am a frequenter of Good Will, but I have a strict rule - if I don't love it, I don't buy it. Not even if I really like it. It's not a perfect system, though - I recently bypassed a purple cardigan covered in pink cats because I wasn't sure I loved it. I thought about it all night, and

went back the next day only to find it gone. It wasn't until then that I'd known I really had loved it.

"You never sleep here anymore," I say to Lucas.

"I sometimes sleep here," he says.

"You haven't slept here in a long time."

"I don't live here."

"You didn't live here before."

"Doesn't Jason usually sleep here?"

"Jason hasn't been here in weeks," I say.

"Do you want me to sleep here?"

"I don't care."

We are each wearing several pairs of sunglasses, and we're leaning back in our chairs with our feet on the table.

He examines his empty shot glass carefully before responding.

"I don't like sleeping in there," he says.

"In my room?"

"In your closet. I feel like I'm sleeping in a Ziploc bag. I don't like it."

"Oh," I say.

Later that night he wakes me up after I've fallen asleep in the chair.

"Let's go to bed," he says.

I open my eyes and see that he's dragged the mattress, the pillows, the blankets into the living room.

You pissed your jeans on the kitchen floor. We were sitting on the tile, facing each other. I don't know why we were on the floor. We'd both fallen asleep against the cabinets, and then you had woken up. Your waking startled me awake. You stood up, looked horrified, and your jeans were wet.

"Don't worry about it," I'd said. I'd heard the stories about Jeremy peeing into a VCR, about Liz peeing herself outside her door while trying to get her key to turn in her lock. It just didn't seem like that big of a deal.

You took off your clothes in the bathroom and put on my bathrobe, which gaped open at the chest and hit halfway down your thigh. You put your clothes in the washing machine and sat in the green armchair. I got up and sat across from you.

When I think about that night now, so many weeks ago, I think about what it would have been like if I hadn't woken up when you did. If I'd woken up an hour later, propped against the kitchen cabinet, with you sitting in the green armchair wearing my bathrobe.

But who am I kidding - if I hadn't woken up, you would have quietly closed the door behind you and walked home in your pissed jeans and I would have woken up alone on the kitchen floor.

These are the great lengths I go to to conceal Reggie's presence from my landlord, which keeps me from having to pay the \$400 pet deposit:

The landlord is on-site Monday through Friday from 9am until 6pm. During this time, when I have Reggie, I take him out the back door into the parking lot to walk him rather than out the front door, which is near the office.

If maintenance has to come in for smoke alarm testing or anything like that, I make sure one of the others has Reggie that day and I put the food and water dishes and the toys under the sink. And just in case the apartment has begun to smell like Reggie, I keep lavender Febreze on the chair next to the front door.

By opting to not pay the \$400 pet deposit, I feel like I made \$400. And so I have purchased a television.

Walking home from Greg's apartment at 3:00 in the morning, I have found a duffel bag on the wrong side of the Denny Overpass, where I shouldn't be walking. There are no people or cars, too late even for the Denny Way Whistler to be out whistling at ladies. The duffel bag is against the curb, and from it red liquid is streaming slowly downhill.

"Are you going to remain with the bag until the police arrive?" the 911 operator asks me.

Am I going to stand alone near a bleeding duffel bag at 3:00 in the morning? No. No, I am not.

Because everyone is coming over and everyone knows I bought it, I have finally assembled the bed frame. The boxes had been standing upright in the closet for two weeks, and the new mattress had been on the floor in the living room. But now the bed frame is against the wall under the window, I have laid the rows of slats across the beams, the new mattress has been placed on top and the futon mattress has been slid under the bed frame like a trundle drawer. I've even made the bed with the new sheets and comforter before collapsing backwards to test the whole thing out.

I only get up to let Sean in, the first guest. He sets a six-pack of beer on the counter, turns toward the bed and says "well would you look at that."

"Try it out," I urge him, grabbing a beer. "Is it better than the futon? Maybe it's no better than the futon."

"Let's see," he says, and gets a running start.

He runs toward the bed, dives, and half a dozen of the slats snap beneath the mattress when he lands.

Greg says "I'm grading 22 papers on *A Separate Peace* today. Which one of us is going to have more fun?"

"I'm wandering around Seattle with a year's supply of unnecessary birth control in my bag," I tell him. I made the appointment a month ago, back when it seemed like a thing I should do.

"We need to have a serious discussion about the meaning of the word 'fun,'" Greg says.

Reggie has been seen from the window, and now I have to pay the deposit.

Greg has paid a deposit at his apartment, and Liz has paid one at hers also. This dog living in three apartments has cost us a lot of money.

My apartment is now set up like this: near the door is the table, surrounded by the armchairs. There is a few feet of open space in the middle, and on the other wall is the bed, still new, still with all those broken slats. In the corner near the foot of the bed, angled so it faces the entire room, is the trunk which now supports Reggie's television. I think he likes the food shows best, which is convenient because so do I. The two of us have been known to spend a whole Saturday watching episode after episode of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*.

Under the bed are the green army men, which the Roomba deposited there last week.

What I want to know is how there is all this dog hair all over the bathroom floor when Reggie has, to my knowledge, never been in this room.

The bigger problem, though, is that my own hair has been falling out. My doctor told me this is usually caused by extreme stress, but that she would test anyway for thyroid function and for iron levels.

This morning she left a message while I was working.

“Your thyroid function is normal,” she said, “but your iron stores are shockingly low. A normal number is 30, or even 50, and you’re below 10. There is almost no iron in your body. I’m quite shocked.”

“Well that would be the drinking,” says Greg when I tell him.

And so I spend most of 15 minutes petting Reggie with a lint roller, throwing away strip after strip of spent adhesive.

Last night I drank two bottles of pinot noir and Tinder has reappeared on my phone. I have several new matches and a few messages.

Among those messages, this one from Peter:

“Hi, I’m Peter,” said Peter, thus establishing the only thing I already knew about Peter.

It seems that I have also texted you.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” I said.

“Maybe we should just be friends,” I said.

“We’re moving too fast,” I said.

“I need space,” I said.

I did not respond to your reply, which was “you’re drunk.” I did, however, erase the daffodil you drew on the white board on my refrigerator.

Around the block is an apartment that always has its blinds open. Inside the apartment is a grey velvet couch, a couple of green high-backed armchairs, a desk with an antique globe and a round dining table with four chairs. The table is kept set with dinner plates and wine glasses, clean linens underneath. There is no visible TV, but instead a large painting of a rusty bicycle.

On a short bookcase across from the couch there is hardly anything - a few books, a small white candle and a ceramic owl. On the coffee table there is no stack of magazines, no ash tray - nothing.

For months I've wanted to encounter the person who lives in that apartment, to befriend him or her, to drink wine at that table with other friends of ours. Today I saw the apartment manager showing that apartment to a prospective renter.

“Here is a model of our one-bedroom unit,” she was saying.

I've made this list of errands to run with Greg's car today, since I'll have it after driving him to the airport: return the cable box I changed my mind about, buy groceries, drive to Lake City to re-purchase the three wine glasses that disappeared a few weeks back when Sean and Liz were over after work. The glasses, we assume, must have been introduced to the outdoors - road wine while we walked Reggie, perhaps, in glasses that we all set down somewhere and forgot about.

That list was revised just as soon as I turned in the cable box, a process that took over an hour. One errand, I have decided, is enough for the day. A better idea is to show up unannounced at my parents' house.

And just as I'd hoped, my parents looked very surprised to see me walk in. Also surprised to see me was Grandma Lois, who I didn't expect to be here.

But they've seen me, I have to do something. I walk past them into the kitchen and begin making myself scrambled eggs.

What I remember from last night's party is getting far too close to I don't know who. A kiss? I think so. Somebody's boyfriend? Maybe. Walking home on the wrong side of the road, that too. It's possible that all of this was a dream, but I am definitely at home with nothing but guesses.

And there is this text from Lucas, "you should go home," which I did, and the many texts I sent Sean about being mad at Lucas, which I wish I had explained better.

Here is a short list of things I can put stuff on: table, shelf, mind.

I've poured coffee and have watched it turn from hot to warm to cool because I am, of course, hungover. I have to clock in in 20 minutes, but these 20 minutes are mine and I choose to sit and watch my coffee.

There is a tiny sneeze and I look up. Mike, keys in mouth, is trying to pull his two-year-old daughter out of her coat.

"I need to move my car," he says to me. "Can you watch her for a few minutes?"

I open and close my mouth.

“I’m going to Starbucks, if you want anything,” he says, glancing at my mug.

“No thanks,” I say to everything.

“I owe you,” he says and hurries off.

I look at the child, her face rosy and moist, wearing pink and white striped leggings and a red Mario t-shirt. Dressed by her father.

“Hi,” I say to her.

She says nothing.

“Do you like fish?”

She nods.

“Let’s look at the fish,” I say and, taking her hand, lead her to the fish tank at the front of the restaurant. Once there, I pick her up and stand her up on the front desk.

She turns to me. “Why?”

I pull a sucker from the front drawer, unwrap it, and hand it to her. We stare silently into the bright blue water.

A man on a skateboard has decided he’s had enough of the sidewalk and wants to see what the street is all about, and now we’ve all fallen to the floor of the bus. The man on the skateboard, for the record, seemed to know we’d be fine. He glanced back over his shoulder but continued on down the road. The bus driver, however, flipped on the hazards, jumped out of her seat and rushed to our aid.

And it's fine, we're all fine. I'm on my knees, my chest against a now-empty seat. My coffee is upright and in my hand, which should be a relief to all the people whose bodies it passed over in my descent. And the man who was standing behind me, one arm casually draped around the pole as he read from a book in the other hand, has landed directly behind me, his book somewhere, his arms on either side of me, clutching the same seat I am.

He is all apologies. I don't tell him I don't want us to get up yet.

Reggie's hind legs are giving him some trouble, and they have been for a few days now, but he still needs to be taken outside. I put his leash on and pull gently, and he doesn't budge. I pull harder, and he still doesn't move. Finally I pick him up, carry him outside and put him down in the grass.

Once we're back inside I decide it's best for Reggie if I just get in bed and watch *West Wing* for the rest of the night - that way he can rest.

Except he can't even get onto the bed. He just sits on the floor and stares at me.

I could pick him up and put him on the bed, but he'd need to get down for water at some point and I worry he'll hurt himself further. So I go to the closet and get the yoga mat and the sleeping bag, and make a bed for myself on the floor.

It's the closest I've been to camping or yoga in a long time.

There is an attractive neighbor. His first name, he told me, is Dean. His last name, a package outside his door told me, is Hollister.

Armed with that information, I found him on Facebook and determined that he is 27 years old and works as a fitness and nutrition coach for a company whose employees wear turquoise t-shirts. I have also gleaned that he has played soccer at least once, that he sometimes holds bottles of Corona while standing amongst large groups of people, and that he enjoys a palm tree.

In the middle of last night I left a case of Skittles outside his door.

Today he moved out.

But only to a different floor, with a roommate. I'd already known about this.

I would be more inclined to use the apartment gym if it weren't for the disturbingly thin blonde woman who spends hours on the treadmill each day with the television volume up as loud as it will go. Even now, walking past the closed door to check my mail, I can hear the sound as loud as I would ever want to. I gave it a try a few weeks ago, and even with my headphones in and my volume maxed out, all I could hear was paternity test results. I returned to my apartment having worked up a slight sweat and a medium-large headache.

Also, and to a lesser extent, I'm bothered by being watched by her toddler, whom the woman brings along and stuffs into a bouncing device.

And so I have taken to the outdoors every day this week, and have tried my best to run. It hasn't been easy, but I am now up to running for three minutes at a time.

Around the corner are the coffee shop's dumpsters. Above the dumpsters is a large tree being taken over some sort of berry bush. I assume these are the berries Sean was talking about when he locked himself out of my building during an early-morning smoke break, still drunk, while Lucas, Shannon and I were all still asleep inside. He called my cell phone from the call box and left a voicemail.

"You better let me in," the message said. "I have rocks, I have sharp sticks, I have many poisonous berries."

Late at night the only sound that can be heard on my street is that tree, rustling and shrieking, full of rats.

Greg has worked very hard on what he believes my Tinder bio should say. His final draft is this:

"Hello, potential future spouse. I'm 28, I have a Bachelor's Degree in sociology that I have no aspirations of ever using, and I can carry three pint glasses in my left hand. I share custody of an elderly dog, the only thing in my refrigerator is mustard, and the tattoo of a ship's wheel on my shoulder demonstrates that I once didn't know what to do with \$110. I live in an apartment where I take photos of people outside my window and where I leave boxes of candy outside the doors of people I've just met. Grab a drink with me, and I'll have to ask you in the morning what we did and how it went."

At the thrift store I've found exactly what I need.

"Look at this," I say to Shannon, holding up the teal ceramic fox with the removable head. "He's perfect."

"Perfect for what?" she asks.

"Perfect for money," I say. "This is Reggie the money fox."

When I get home I fill Reggie with the money I've been keeping in a candle since my last trip to the ATM.

He is a low-maintenance pet, unlike the real Reggie - all I have to do is feed him money while he sits on my shelf. But during slower times at work, I'll have to feed him cookies - his natural diet - because I'd hate for him to go hungry.

And also, this version of Reggie does not piss on the floor if I stay out too late.

Jason's boxers have gone forgotten on the shelf in my closet all this time, but I came across them today while reorganizing so Greg and I have moved them to inside of the rooftop grill. The sky is grey and we're huddled under an umbrella. It's a beautiful day to drink wine and burn underwear on a roof.

Books, headphones, a sweatshirt - had he left anything like that here, I would probably have put it in a box and left it outside the front door of his apartment.

The things he has of mine: Neosporin and a bottle opener.

The new neighbor is David. I know this because he came to my door this afternoon to apologize for the scene he made at 3:00 this morning. He knocked quietly on my door, and I watched through the peephole as his eyes darted from side to side. Finally I cracked the door, repeatedly shoveling Reggie back inside with my foot.

“I’m very embarrassed,” he told me. “It won’t happen again.”

His boyfriend is Tyler. I know this from “Tyler, I’m going to keep kicking the shit out of this door until you let me in!” and “Tyler, if you don’t knock this shit off I’ll get us kicked out of this place real goddamn fast!”

We’re all sitting at the picnic table outside Lucas’ apartment, on the in-ground pool that’s been filled in with dirt. Me, Sean, Liz, Shannon, Greg, Dana and Mike. I’m the only one who brought Lucas a birthday present, but it’s just a book.

“It’s just a book,” I say to him before he opens it.

But it is my favorite book, and I knew he would like it too so I ordered another copy to give to him. Somewhere toward the middle I realized it would be better to give him the copy I had actually read. Something added there, I think.

And now I think that was a silly thought, too silly to ever tell him about.

Shannon was kicked off the Duck once, on the day of her bachelorette party. We'd gone to brunch at a place with bottomless mimosas, and while walking to our next destination we passed the ticket booth. Let's ride the Duck, she'd said. It'll be fun, she'd said.

And it might have been, had she not vomited over the edge and gotten us all kicked off in Fremont.

She doesn't remember any of this. All she remembers is waking up the next day in her own bed, wearing one shoe, covered in dirt and with a duck whistle around her neck.

I go through cycles with household things, which I enthusiastically bring into my home during fall and winter and then come late February I feel panicked and get rid of it all. All these books. From now on, the library. And this money fox! I need to get rid of the internet or the credit card as I cannot be trusted with both. And apologies, credit card, but I survived with just my debit card until two years ago.

It was then that I got a phone call from Capital One, in regards to an application for a credit card that I had not requested.

"We'll cancel the application process right away," Capital One had said after learning that it had been fraudulent.

"Not so fast," I'd said. "What you're saying is that I'd be approved?"

Right now I am eyeing the armchairs suspiciously. "You weren't here last year," I'm telling them.

My brother has many things people want. He owns a home, he has a well-paying job, he has a reliable car, a pretty wife who cooks him dinner and keeps his house clean, two healthy children, another baby due any day, and a girlfriend.

Upon discovering this information, Sandy dunked the Xbox in the master bathroom sink. She also phoned the girlfriend, wanting to let her know that the man she's been sleeping with has two children and a pregnant wife.

"I know," said the woman calmly. "I'm Lauren. Maybe you could name the baby after me."

Down the street past the rat tree is the cathedral, on a bench outside of which an old man can be found begging for money every Sunday morning. When I walk to work I cross the street before reaching the old man, so as to avoid being spoken to.

Except now I know he does not ask for money. This morning I left a few minutes later than normal, and was walking past the church as its bells rang. As they rang, the old man stood and clapped his hands.

Greg, Liz and I have all gathered at my place with Reggie before going to the shelter. We've neglected the chairs and are all sitting on the floor. I've picked Reggie up and have put him down on his bed in the middle of us. He sits still, but turns his head back and forth between

the three of us, his mouth open and his tongue curled upward. We pet him silently for a few minutes before we stand up and collect our things.

“Does anyone know?” Liz asks.

“I haven’t told anyone,” Greg says.

“Neither have I,” I say.

“I’m going to put it on Facebook,” Liz says. “The others will want to know.”

“Yeah,” I say. “check us in. Maybe with a pre-euthanization selfie.”

Greg picks Reggie up to carry him. I pick the dog bed up so I can throw it away on our way out.

Resisting Narrative and the Vignette Form: A Poetics

Denise Coville

The American Reader, a print literary journal “committed to inspiring literary and critical conversation among a new generation of readers, and restoring literature to its proper place in American cultural discourse” reviewed Renata Adler’s *Speedboat* after its 2013 reprint. The review takes issue with the book’s lack of a “sequential spine,” of discernible meaning, of emotion.

The one comment on the review, from a reader called Fern, says “Strange to miss, or to not care, that the prose of *Speedboat* is riveting.”

While no further discussion ensues on the review itself, the juxtaposition of the reviewer’s thoughts and the one commenter’s contribution gets at a larger conversation regarding literature: what drives prose if it isn’t the story? Or rather, what is a story?

Award-winning author Flannery O’Connor wrote novels too, but she is perhaps most famous for her short stories. And as far as the “story” of these stories go, they are very formulaic. Most of the stories in her collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find* begin with the articulation of a fear and conclude with that fear being realized. In the title story, the grandmother reads a newspaper article about a murderer called The Misfit and fears the possibility of encountering him. At the end of the story, she and her entire family are murdered by The Misfit. In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” a woman makes several claims that she doesn’t know what she

would do without her mentally disabled daughter. The story ends with the daughter being abandoned far from home, with no way to return. In “A Stroke Of Good Fortune,” a woman laments the way she perceived motherhood to have ruined her mother’s life and is relieved to have avoided it. She winds up pregnant at the end of the story. In “A Late Encounter With The Enemy,” a woman is afraid her extremely old father will die before he sees her graduate from college. He, of course, dies during her graduation ceremony.

These stories are undeniably predictable, especially when read as a collection. When the reader gets to “A Circle of Fire,” one of the later stories in the book, he or she reads that the mother in the story had always feared losing her house to a fire and can likely guess that the story will conclude with the house catching fire, which it does. As these stories are well-regarded in the world of literature, they must be popular for reasons other than suspense, other than a drive to find out how they end, because that suspense is entirely absent. It seems that O’Connor may have been playing with ideas of suspense and conclusion by giving the ending away at the beginning, making readers wonder how and when they would get to where they already knew they were going.

O’Connor’s stories and this perceived pattern bring to mind Anton Chekhov’s famous rule of storytelling: “If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.” In his article on short story form in *The Guardian*, Chris Power makes this connection when he says “O’Connor is so sedulous an observer of Chekhov’s gun rule that if a family discusses a newspaper story about a killer on the loose, there is no doubt that he’ll massacre them; if a bull is roaming the fields, its horn will soon be buried in someone’s gut; if a

grandfather has bred his own obstinacy into a beloved granddaughter, he will beat her to death when she is obstinate towards him.”

Perhaps it is more useful to examine this commonality in O'Connor's stories from the opposite side - by considering the lack of fears that aren't realized, of threads that aren't neatly tied together. My experience with life and with the lives of others is that humans are frequently afraid of things, and most of the time those things never happen. Life is full of rifles, and they hardly ever go off. That's why it's so devastating to us when they do.

Perhaps fear is a mechanism that allows us to feel we've escaped something when nothing actually goes wrong. If it occurs to me to worry that I'll miss my flight, I'll be relieved when I don't miss my flight, and relief feels good. If I never feared missing my flight to begin with, I won't think to be relieved.

While there's merit in the concept that a writer should not include anything in the story that doesn't need to be there, I may have a different idea of what makes something necessary to the story - or perhaps not unnecessary - than Chekhov's rule suggests. A storyline doesn't need to conclude in the traditional sense in order to have a conclusion. Something seemingly important may never come back, and the significance in including that thing at all may be its absence going forward, the fact that it never does return.

Jean-Francois Lyotard discusses this resistance of narrative in his essay "Acinema." His concerns are geared toward cinematography, but they are useful to the discussion of literature as well. He describes cinematography as an inscription of movement:

*...the inscription of movement, a writing with movements - all kinds of movements:
for example, in the film shot, those of the actors and other moving objects, those*

of lights, colors, frame and lens; in the film sequence, all of these again plus the cuts and splices of editing; for the film as a whole, those of the final script and the spatio-temporal synthesis of the narrative (decoupage). And over or through all these movements are those of the sound and words coming together with them.

While descriptions of these movements may be given more explicitly in cinematography (dim the lights as character moves across stage,” for example, or “sound of rain as scene fades) than in most literature, literature approaches these movements as well. And as such, Lyotard’s description of a skilled filmmaker as “knowing how to eliminate a large number of these possible movements” applies just as well to the position of the author. It is the author’s responsibility, while creating a text, to decide what to include, and in revision to decide what should be removed. In cinematography, Lyotard says, common practice is to remove anything that doesn’t come back again later in an easily-identifiable way, which is, any scene that is not valuable: “A scene from elsewhere,” he says, “representing nothing identifiable, has been added, a scene not related to the logic of your shot, an undecidable scene, worthless even as an insertion because it will not be repeated or taken up again later. So you cut it out.”

Yet something that seems to go nowhere in a story can be just as significant as the gun that will be fired in a later act. An example from my own life would be my friend Sarah, who spent a lot of money to sign up for boot camp fitness classes and crew lessons in an attempt to lose 20 pounds and to get in shape. I heard about nothing else from Sarah for two weeks - waking up early to go to crew practice before work, going to boot camp classes after work, etc. And after two weeks, I never heard another word about it. She didn’t have to tell me she’d quit going in order for me to understand that’s what had happened, and reaching that conclusion

because of her silence holds more significance to me - it indicates an embarrassment and a resignation that wouldn't have been there if she'd simply said "hey, so I quit doing all those things." Similarly, my brother was desperately trying to sell his house before losing it back in 2008 at the height of the economic crisis. And suddenly, he and his family had moved into an apartment and the house was never discussed again. I assumed I would have heard if he'd sold the house. I've never asked.

These loose ends don't have to be indicative of something big having happened, as was the case in the two examples above. The inclusion of characters who show up in one or two places and then disappear could be interesting, because that's how relationships sometimes go. Sometimes we meet somebody - they may even seem like they'll be important people in our lives - and we never hear from them again. Or sometimes they never hear from us again. It doesn't matter where these people go, but it matters that people come and go. The main character may mention the sink needs to be fixed - it may cause her great stress that the sink is running and costing her money and making noise that keeps her from concentrating on anything else - but it may never occur to the character to mention that the sink has been fixed - a leaky sink is notable and a properly-functioning sink is not. She may have a great idea one day and have completely forgotten about it the next day and is never the worse for it.

What is accomplished by this line of thinking is that the reader must consider his or her expectations, and perhaps think about why he or she expects those things. Repeated mentions of missed birth control pills would probably make a reader suspect a pregnancy is going to happen, but why? Wouldn't the person who is aware of not having properly used her birth control be the person who would think to take other precautions to prevent a pregnancy? Shouldn't it be the

person who didn't notice having missed birth control pills be the one who gets pregnant? To answer could be "yes" or "no" to either of those, and perhaps it's not the answer that matters so much as the consideration of the question.

Any of these examples of things that seem to "go nowhere" may force the reader to think "wait, why is that here if it doesn't come back?" and to examine what is gained by that item's inclusion. Anything included in a text can, in the hands of a reader, be fit into a narrative. But perhaps more can be gained sometimes by seeking pleasure rather than meaning. Lyotard uses a match as an example:

A match once struck is consumed. if you use the match to light the gas that heats the water for the coffee which keeps you alert on your way to work, the consumption is not sterile, for it is a movement belonging to the circuit of capital: merchandise-match --> merchandise-labor power --> money-wages --> merchandise-match. But when a child strikes the match-head to see what happens - just for the fun of it - he enjoys the movement itself, the changing colors, the light flashing at the height of the blaze, the death of the tiny piece of wood, the hissing of the tiny flame. He enjoys these sterile differences, leading nowhere, these uncompensated losses; what the physicist calls the dissipation of energy.

The child who burns the match revels in the act which produces nothing but pleasant sensation. This act is sterile - it leads absolutely nowhere, nothing is produced from its execution - but rather the act itself is a worthwhile experience just because of that moment of sheer pleasure.

Renata Adler's writing is full of these moments of "insignificant" brilliance. Toward the beginning of her novel *Speedboat*, which is a collection of vignettes, is this short piece:

I was lying on a Mediterranean boat deck, on a windless day. It was odd that I should be there, but no more odd than my work, or the slums, or the places where people do find themselves as their luck shifts. A girl of eighteen was taking the sun with great seriousness. The rest of our party were swimming, or playing cards below, or drinking hard. The girl was blond, shy and laconic. After two hours of silence, in that sun, she spoke. "When you have a tan," she said, "what have you got?"

This vignette seems to have no significance in the story's narrative. Perhaps its importance lies in the fact that the narrator's being in the Mediterranean, on a boat large enough to have a below-deck space where several people can play cards, suggests her position in a certain class. Perhaps it's meant to establish that this narrator is the sort of spontaneous or dazed person who just finds herself in the Mediterranean. Or perhaps what's important is the end quote, which the rest of the vignette is meant to set up. The girl does not reappear, and neither does the boat. For whatever reason, Adler has included that vignette and placed it where she did, and so there is significance to be found. But maybe the search for significance, especially when presented with so many small pieces that make up a whole as we are in Adler's work, takes away from the experience of reading that single vignette.

Adler's *Speedboat*, aside from being comprised of hundreds of short vignettes, is also broken into sections which can be read as separate short stories, and yet they have been put together and called a novel. One of these sections, "Brownstone," actually won first prize as a

short story in the O. Henry Awards. This further muddies the narrative of *Speedboat*, since it is comprised of many stand-alone vignettes arranged into a few apparently stand-alone stories and then called a novel.

Much of Adler's fiction was compiled from pieces of fiction she wrote for *The New Yorker*. Her process, she has said, was to constantly add to and cut from and rearrange these pieces. She didn't start with a narrative in mind, and claims she wasn't initially trying to write a novel or even a story. In fact, looking through Adler's archives in *The New Yorker* demonstrates this approach: the short story "Quiet," which was published in the 24 April 1971 issue, has as its first two paragraphs the first two paragraphs of *Speedboat*. Paragraphs three through six of *Speedboat* are the same as paragraphs two through five of "Castling," which appeared in the 30 December, 1972 issue. The first paragraph of "Castling" becomes the second paragraph of the second short story or chapter contained in *Speedboat*, and the sixth paragraph of "Castling" is the previously-mentioned segment about the girl lying on the boat deck, which can be found on the novel's 12th page. In the middle of a short story called "Downers and Seances" published in the 13 February, 1971 issue of *The New Yorker* is a paragraph that can be found on page 31 of *Speedboat* - this time the "he" in the story becomes "I" in the novel, and a few minor changes have been made to a description of a girl's feet. This patchwork approach shows that the novel did not emerge from Adler having a plotted story she wanted to tell.

Melinda Harvey of *The Sydney Review of Books* likens the pieces of *Speedboat* to social media - ironic, because the novel was written long before Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The sequencing and separation read more like scrolling through somebody's twitter history - short pieces that, at the time written, were the most pressing thing in that person's life. There are no

transitions between posts, because that isn't how a person experiences life. Events that prove to be unimportant are not revisited. There is little concern with connections. Harvey envisions each of *Speedboat's* vignettes concluding with a summative hashtag.

Speedboat has been both heralded and criticized for its lack of a "sequential spine," as described by the *American Reader* reviewer mentioned at the beginning of this essay. "It is a hard business to create a sense of chaos yet make things cohere and also get the reader to feel things," says Harvey. This is something she doesn't believe *Speedboat* gets quite right.

A novel similar in style but with a slightly more identifiable sequence is Mary Robison's novel *Why Did I Ever*. Also a collection of vignettes, it was created using a similar method. The novel began as notes in notebooks, written while she was dealing with personal difficulties. She noted things she heard, things she thought, things that were funny or scary or weird. "None of the material was organized at all," she said in an interview with Maureen Murray of BOMB Magazine, "except around my urgent need to distract myself." After a few months, Robison says she looked back through the notes and realized she had the components of a story. She typed the notes onto hundreds of index cards and used the cards to arrange them. "That meant, to me, a reappraisal, and taking a more fictive approach to the narrative, and then, pretty literally, assembling it," Robison said.

The narrative in Robison's *Why Did I Ever* is more pronounced than in Adler's *Speedboat*. In *Speedboat*, a couple of the characters - Aldo, Will - are mentioned in a couple of vignettes, but there are very few instances where a person or problem or other "plot point" is returned to. The work is largely external, a constant taking-in of surroundings by a woman in the journalism industry in 1970s New York. It focuses more on place than person. Robison's *Why*

Did I Ever, on the other hand, has a clear, although very fragmented, storyline. The troubled narrator abuses prescription medication and alcohol to distract herself from her failing career, her daughter's drug addiction and her son's rape. Her children along with a few friends and neighbors are returned to many times throughout the novel. While the pieces at first seem more personal and emotional than the vignettes of *Speedboat*, what's actually happening is a sort of insistent intimacy - the narrator, it seems, insistently hammers the readers with her thoughts, but these thoughts are really what the narrator is using as a means of distraction. The thoughts given act to hide the worries the narrator is consumed by, and this forces a kind of distance. Like Adler's book, many of Robison's vignettes don't contribute anything seemingly "necessary" to the book but they stand alone as brilliant moments and they layer together with the others to create something larger. "Still," says Robison, "I never did give it a hat or shoes, and if you read the pages in reverse order, they work about the same."

The effect rearranging has on narrative is something that's been addressed by many, but the poet Robert Grenier does so very effectively by putting his work "Sentences" on a website that randomly displays one of the hundreds of sentences in the piece each time the reader hits the "next" button.

We assume, as we read a piece of literature, that the things we're reading are being presented to us in the order in which we're meant to read and understand them. Grenier's *Sentences* pushes back on that assumption, because the reader suddenly becomes aware that regardless of the order he or she reads the pieces in, he or she is in complete control of any sort of narrative perceived because it was not the one intended by the author.

When asked in an interview by Charles Bernstein what the relationship was between the sentences in his work, Grenier replied “none, but you can make a relation.” Grenier goes on to explain that a story can be deciphered no matter what order the sentences are read in, because as readers, when we’re handed a piece of writing, we’re used to thinking “this is something somebody wrote, somebody had an idea, there is sense to be made here.” But what is accomplished in *Sentences* is that the reader has to recognize that it is he or she who imagines any perceived story.

Whereas Grenier’s sentences force the reader to recognize a lack of meaning by presenting a random sequence, Edouard Leve’s *Autoportrait* accomplishes a similar effect with an opposite approach. *Autoportrait* is comprised of hundreds of seemingly-unrelated sentences that have been presented as one 117-page paragraph. There are a few instances where the sentences connect one to the next in terms of subject matter, such as the following excerpt from pages 60-61, although I’ve included the sentences before and after to give an idea of the unrelatedness of most of the piece:

I do not remember whether I cried when I came back from a class ski trip and my parents announced to me that Pirouette, my hamster, had died while I was away. My father gave me a .22 rifle when I turned thirteen, which scared the rest of the family. I loved the smell of the cartridges for my rifle. I loved the shape of my rifle, but I was sorry it could only shoot one at a time, and I imagined that if our house was attacked I would have to think up a way to make the assailants think it was an automatic. Actually, my rifle only fired lead shot, not cartridges, which made it less injurious to human beings, including potential assassins. Although I

don't hunt, my father gave me my grandfather's shotgun, I have sometimes considered using it to kill myself. I do more things when I haven't got much time than when I have lots.

By presenting all of the sentences as one paragraph, Leve is telling us that all of those sentences do, in fact, go together even if it seems they don't. They cannot be separated into paragraphs, perhaps because, as an "autoportrait," they all combine equally and without organization to create his person at that time. However, while the lack of paragraphs forces the content to resist separation, the punctuation does the separating and also the relating. At the sentence level, commas connect thoughts while periods separate thoughts. In the example above, the comma between "I loved the shape of my rifle" and "but I was sorry it could only shoot one at a time" means that he loved the shape of his rifle despite its shape hindering its firing potential. In the sentence "although I don't hunt, my father gave me my grandfather's shotgun, I have sometimes considered using it to kill myself," the last clause seems like it should be its own sentence. However, the comma very deliberately connects it to the first two, giving all three equal weight in the thought. The fact that he has sometimes considered using the gun to kill himself has as much to do with the fact that he doesn't hunt as it does with the fact that his father gave him the gun, and also the fact that his father gave him the gun despite the fact that he does not hunt. The next sentence, "I do more things when I haven't got much time than when I have lots," is separated from the previous thought by a period. This has the effect of saying that his time management habits don't necessarily have to do with the suicidal thoughts revealed in the previous sentence.

The composition of *Autoportrait* as one paragraph seems to achieve the effect of something happening now - all that can be done is process what is immediately on the mind. The luxury of re-evaluating into paragraphs - always a product of hindsight or momentary silence - is absent, and all that can be done is to decide whether the current thought is related to or separate from the previous one. This is similar to what is achieved in *Sentences* - we read one thought and then another and then another, but in *Sentences* we can't see things as a whole that has been organized. Instead we simply try to make connections one sentence at a time.

Leve's *Autoportrait* and Grenier's *Sentences*, in different ways, seem to approach a complete abandonment of narrative. This is not what is attempted by Adler's *Speedboat* or Robison's *Why Did I Ever*, which use the vignette form add to the narrative by confusing it.

At what point does the question of the importance of narrative become a question of poetry versus prose? In general, more slack is given to poetry in terms the level of clarity expected. A poem that doesn't seem to make literal sense, or a collection of poems that don't seem to combine to tell a clear story, is not simply excused because those aren't things we require of poetry - rather, they are often celebrated for those traits. The meaning is expected to be disguised. Poems are digested one at a time, and are appreciated for the small linguistic choices made by the author. Prose, however, like *Speedboat* in the review mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is largely expected to "make sense," to tell a story, to privilege plot over all else. If these are the dividing lines between poetry and prose, then are we taking vignettes and requiring them to be prose when they aren't?

Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* appears on-page very similarly to many vignette collections. The book is divided into three sections, and in each section short pieces surrounded

by a substantial amount of white space. The content of each poem is famously not easy to read and comprehend, and it could be argued that the point is not to comprehend at all but to consider. The experimental work has generated much frustration in readers trying to “understand” the text, but the crucial difference is that this work is regarded as poetry - not prose. And as such, it seems much less likely that a serious reviewer would chastise the work for a lack of a clear narrative.

On the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of clarity of content is Richard Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar*, which again appears on page to be identical in form to the examples of vignette discussed above. The book is made of dozens of short pieces of prose, each with a title. Some span a few pages, and some span a fraction of a page. There is an excess of white space throughout the book, after each section, which is typical of vignette form. But where the pieces of Adler’s and Robeson’s work don’t always connect linearly, *In Watermelon Sugar* is completely linear, aside from the middle third of the book which is a flashback. But even that flashback is composed of many segments that go from one to the next in typical linear fashion.

At the end of a section of *In Watermelon Sugar* called “Margaret Again” are the following lines:

“The heart is something else. Nobody knows what’s going to happen,” I said.

“You’re right,” Pauline said.

She stopped and kissed me. Then we crossed over the bridge to her shack.

The section that follows immediately after, called “Pauline’s Shack,” begins with the two having arrived at Pauline’s Shack. The first section ends mid-scene, and the next section picks up immediately after.

White space on a page requires a pause. It provides breathing room, and a place for the reader to consider what he or she has just read before moving to the next section. A forced pause in the middle of a scene has the effect of slowing the pacing down. In the example of *In Watermelon Sugar*, this is perhaps done to slow the “feel” of the book down to the very slow pace of life in the town the book takes place in. It does not accomplish what is accomplished by the white space in the other vignette examples, though, as it does not create a distance between pieces of a story that don’t necessarily “go” together. This suggests that the visual appearance of vignette on the page does not necessarily signify that a piece is utilizing the vignette form. *In Watermelon Sugar*, upon reading the text, is not a collection of vignettes but a clear-cut example of a work of linear prose. Likewise, the appearance of *Tender Buttons* does not make it a collection of vignettes. This suggests a middle space, a place between poetry and prose, that vignette occupies.

The real magic of the vignette form is not simply the recognizable appearance on the page, in the separation between the pieces. A collection of vignettes should have the feel of a collage - several pieces that don’t necessarily go together but that are being put together to create something else. As a collection, they should reach for something larger than the sum of the pieces. However, those pieces, ideally, should also stand alone as tiny sparks worth reading on their own. And when read together, trying to locate a “sequence,” a discernible “story,” is just not the point and will take away from the beauty of the piece and of the depiction of the confusion of the world. This sentiment seems to be stated both directly and through example in this vignette from pages 55-56 of *Speedboat*:

What is the point. That is what must be borne in mind. Sometimes the point is really who wants what. Sometimes the point is what is right or kind. Sometimes the point is a momentum, a fact, a quality, a voice, an intimation, a thing said or unsaid. Sometimes it's who's at fault, or what will happen if you do not move at once. The point changes and goes out. You cannot be forever watching for the point, or you lose the simplest thing: being a major character in your own life. But if you are, for any length of time, custodian of the point - in art, in court, in politics, in lives, in rooms - it turns out there are rear-guard actions everywhere. To see a thing clearly, and when your vision of it dims, or when it goes to someone else, if you have a gentle nature, keep your silence, that is lovely. Otherwise, now and then, a small foray is worthwhile. Just so that being always, complacently, thoroughly wrong does not become the safest position of them all. The point has never quite been entrusted to me.

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