

The Youngberg Manifest Anxiety Scale

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**Abstract**

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Creative Writing

A particular strain of short stories runs through the mountain face of twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. Written in the first-person, more akin to theatrical monologue than traditionally plotted narrative, these works are majestic in the way they stage the self against the realities of the world. The women who narrate them (and they are nearly always women) are whip-smart, almost to a fault, and depend on their wit to carry them through trying times. This essay is a look at my arsenal, those stories and voices I cannot escape as I muddle over what it is to write and read. Their mattering is inextricable from their sound and sense, but in trying to tease them apart, I hope I can show some small part of what that mattering looks like.

*To discuss subtexts at first appears to be a hopelessly contradictory mission. It's like saying "I am about to show you how to show the unseen." Or: "I wish to demonstrate how to think about the unthinkable."*

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*

I am about to show you how to show the unseen. Or: I am about to show you how deeply I need the unseen to matter.

I struggle, in my day to day life, to say what it is I need, or want, or mean; I depend almost unhealthily on subtext to do that work for me. Give me a glance, a gesture, a tone, and I will hear you. But just words? I take each sentence as split-level, two-fold.

Joan Didion asserted that, "[I]n many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind,*" (Why I Write, 18). If that is true, (and, to a large extent, I do believe it is), then its complement is also true: I read to be imposed upon.

I am a vacuum of empathy, but selfishly so. I need other peoples' puzzles and trials to work out my own. And so I read and write first-person fiction. Like a true or false anxiety questionnaire, in which participants rate the accuracy of statements such as "I admit I have felt worried beyond reason over small things," or "I sometimes feel I am about to go to pieces," first-person short fiction gives me that sense of seeing myself in the mirror.

A particular strain of short stories runs through the mountain face of twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. Written in the first-person, more akin to theatrical monologue than traditionally plotted narrative, these works are majestic in the way they stage the self against the realities of the world. The women who narrate them (and they are nearly always women) are whip-smart, almost to a fault, and depend on their wit to carry them through trying times.

Or at least I read them that way, because it's what I need to see in fiction.

Narcissus, meet Narcissus.

Reading third-person fiction, we naturally perceive the split between narrator and character—sometimes a gulf, sometimes a rivulet—just as we, too, perceive the gap separating writer from character. First-person fiction blurs these divisions ever so slightly; the narrator becomes a character, and authorial intent must bleed through the character's intent. James Woods reductively calls this “a nice hoax,” as “the narrator pretends to speak to us, while in fact the author is writing to us, and we go along with the deception happily enough” (Woods 29-30).

I much prefer Marco Caracciolo's theory of fictional minds—that the minds of first-person narrators “are the result of stylistic and narrative techniques that invite readers to attribute experiences and mental processes to nonexistent beings” (Caracciolo 30). Thus, my experience of reading an Amy Hempel story will be different from your experience, and the authorial

achievement is that Hempel creates space for subtext that various readers might interpret in various ways.

Amy Hempel admits, as I am sure all writers admit, “There are many stories I admire or keep rereading because they are technical feats in addition to the tremendous emotional power they have over me” (The Art of Fiction).

This essay is a look at my arsenal, those stories and voices I cannot escape as I muddle over what it is to write and read. Their mattering is inextricable from their sound and sense, but in trying to tease them apart, I hope I can show some small part of what that mattering looks like.

## On Wanting

*I wanted a sailboat, he said. But you didn't want anything.  
Don't be bitter, I said. It's never too late.*

Grace Paley, "Wants"

We have been fighting, the man I love and I. While the triggers are many, the threads of discontent remain the same each time: I am too busy, we are too poor, he is too busy, we are too cramped. Sometimes I wonder whether we are two especially stubborn creatures, drawn to each other's muleheadedness, or just plain humans.

There are the abnormal days, days in which I mewl and screech and weep, but for the most part he is vocal in his wants; I am silent. He thinks I am not speaking my mind, but the truth is, I am not thinking and suppressing thoughts, nor am I even thinking one thing and saying another. The thinking has stopped. The saying has stopped. It is not a matter of summoning the strength to articulate what's inside me, because I am positive it's a vacuum.

Grace Paley's "Wants" appraises and dramatizes the tension between spoken and unspoken desire with the kind of economy of language I'd kill to master. The narrator, a middle-aged woman, sets out to return two long-overdue library books, but encounters her ex-husband along the way. The subtextual anger in the sparse dialogue that the two exchange at first sets the tone for the rest of the piece.

"Hello, my life, I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.  
He said, What? What life? No life of mine.  
I said, O.K. I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them." (129)

Here, the ex-husband displays deafness as denial: The repetition of his question, plus the phonetic nearness of *life* to the unspoken but implicit *wife* adds to the weight of this rejection. Additionally, Paley's disregard for quotation marks obfuscates and almost negates the distinction between dialogue and exposition. Even though "I don't argue when there's real disagreement" is almost certainly not spoken aloud, I feel sure the ex-husband hears its hostile sentiment in the "O.K." that precedes it. The final kicker in this passage, as I see it, is the last phrase: "how much I owed them." The matter at hand is not reconciling three decades of their shared past; it's merely time to return those books. The only debts the narrator is concerned with are those she has with the library.

This stubbornness continues as the story progresses. Again and again, the narrator insists on attending to and commenting on the task at hand. "I gave the librarian a check for \$32," she says, "Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean, which is just what most other municipal and/or state bureaucracies will not do" (130). This sentence appears to be about others; yet it drips with contempt for the ex-husband who continues to dog her, nit-picking at the past.

Her next action is unexpected and briefly liberating: she checks out the just-returned Edith Wharton novels again. Why? "[B]ecause I'd read them so long ago and they are more apropos now than ever" (130).

Nowhere in the text is there an indication that the ex-husband's presence is the triggering event. Yet the positioning of the two in the scene suggests it. He stands over her shoulder at the circulation desk, fulfilling Baxter's definition of staging in fiction—that "poetry of action and setting when it evokes the otherwise unstated" (13).

Re-borrowing the returned books undoes the narrator's intent at the story's outset. It appears superficial, uncalculated, a kind of reactionary nothing. She's just wiped a dirty rag across that newly cleaned slate, negating a negation. The ex-husband's later pronouncement that she never wanted anything furthers that sense of nothingness. So she sits on the steps until he leaves her alone; this is another action that looks like inaction (he leaves her on the steps, after all), but is instead very direct—she sits there to get rid of him.

The last third of "Wants" is a defense of the narrator's wants. "I felt extremely accused. Now it's true, I'm short of requests and absolute requirements. But I do want *something*" (Paley 130). The series of wants that follows—to be a different person, to personally end the war for her children, to be married to one person—deflates any agency in her assertion. The reader knows these things could never, and have not, come true.

Here is something—and yet, it's nothing.

Professing want comes across as both expression of desire and a confession of what's missing.

To *want for*, after all, is two-sided, at once an absence and a presence.

“Wants” plays with both these ideas, at times filling the precise, sparse prose with rich metaphor—“He had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark, which, like a plumbers snake, could work its way through the ear and down the throat, halfway through my heart” (130) does incredible work through a vivid metaphor and carefully placed direct articles and pronouns. It’s *the* ear, *the* throat, but *my* heart. The effect is a broadened image that ultimately constricts, echoing the image of the plumber’s snake.

Yet this delicacy feels flattened by the story’s final paragraph, which emphatically slams the matter shut: “Well! I decided to bring those two books back to the library. Which proves that when a person or an event comes along to jolt or appraise me I *can* take some appropriate action, although I am better known for my hospitable remarks.” (131)

That exclamation mark! There’s an immediate charge in the paragraph, an energy that somehow still crackles even as the imprecision of the conjunctions in “a person or an event comes along to jolt or appraise me” attempts to diffuse it. The unexpected verb, “jolt” keeps momentum going, and as we hit that italicized “*can*” I find myself clenching my fists in anticipation of a final lightning bolt.

But once again, something dissolves into nothing. The final detour of “Although I am better known for my hospitable remarks” rewipes the slate once more.

For years I have puzzled over this story's ending, yearning for the narrator to take a damn stance. And I have been upset by my own disappointment with it. It boils down to feeling inadequate in my ability to voice my own desires.

All my life I have been saying I am not an actor. In 2003 I placated my mother by spending eight months rehearsing the songs and monologues of Lucy Van Pelt in *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown* for an ambitious church production. I learned my lines by heart but gripped the script anyway, afraid to leave the security of the couches where we practiced. The whole idea of staging felt false. Where would my limbs go? Where would my eyes look? I began having dreams about an audience full of stage lights and feeling a piano buckle under me as I sat on it. After two Charlies in a row fell through (curse, bless you, voice-changing puberty), the youth minister pulled the plug.

But would I have bailed, eventually? Even more than I am not an actor, I am not a bailer. I would rather let the clock run out under me than cry uncle.

Why? Because admitting defeat means saying you don't want what you've been trying, and failing, to get. In my mind, if you say you don't want something, you've got to know what you *do* want instead.

## On Secrets, Part 1

*We speak of secrets from the point of view of the teller or keeper, but what of the listener? What about the one who hears the secret? What happens to him? The listener is made uncomfortable. The bearer of the secret may be unburdened, but the hearer is now burdened. This is the heartbeat of all exchange. It goes by many names, and one that is not perhaps chiefest among them, but is nonetheless important to us, is reading.*

Mary Ruefle, "On Secrets"

When I first started writing stories I confused plot for plot twist—She’s not reliable! She’s really a he! I treated subtext as clues, strewn like bread crumbs. I fell into the trap of believing *If you read the story right, of course you’ll see what I see.*

But the trouble with those early stories was that the narrators knew the secret surprise well before the reader. I couldn’t separate author-knowledge from narrator-knowledge, and thus felt as though I was constantly writing interruptions and prolonged silences to keep her from spilling the beans too soon.

The poet Mary Ruefle has dedicated an entire essay to secrets in poetry. Not secrets told in poems, or secrets about poems, but the poem as secret. “Poetry is NEVER encoded—it is NEVER a covert operation whose information is ciphered and must be deciphered—and yet it does incline toward self-concealment” (91).

Similarly, playwright Sarah Ruhl begs: “If you are acting in a play of mine, and I say this full of love for you, please, don’t think one thing and then say another thing....Think of subtext as to the left of language and not underneath it. There is no deception or ulterior motive or “cover”

about the language. There are, instead, pools of silence and the unsayable to the left or to the right or even above the language” (100 Essays 66).

I discovered the pools by accident. I wrote a story with a narrator in denial about her dying mother and suddenly found myself loving my characters.

At their best, Mary Ruefle argues, words, laden with meaning and expression, “are a bridge that, paradoxically, breaks isolation and loneliness without eradicating it. It is the first experience you ever had of reading a decent poem: ‘Oh, somebody else is lonely, too!’” (95).

## Why I Do What I Do, Part 1

*Why do I write? I treat this question differently today than I would have years ago, when I started to write. Then I would have said that it was my act of seduction, that sentences were “my lipstick, my lingerie, my high heels.” I would have said, before I knew better, that I wrote to settle a score.*

Amy Hempel, “That’s What Dogs Do”

*I used to think that I wrote because there was something I wanted to say. Then I thought, “I will continue to write because I have not yet said what I wanted to say”; but I know now that I continue to write because I have not yet heard what I have been listening to.”*

Mary Reufle, “On Secrets”

I write because talking is harder. I write because it hurts when I don’t.

It feels false to declare why I write, maybe because I’m still trying to prove to myself and the world *that* I write.

I am young. I have time. But maybe part of why I write is to take time.

At some point in my undergraduate education I discovered that writing stories came easiest right after a panic attack. I assumed, for a long while, that it was because my body lacked the energy to censor itself. A few years later, training for a race while working too hard for too little money, I found that I could run faster, and further, when angry. I see now the relation between these two things. It’s not a lack of energy, but a sudden surge of it, that forces the body to overcome itself.

The temptation, then, is to jam yourself into emotionally vulnerable positions, so that you are constantly in the practice of proving your self-worth. I have almost willed myself into panicked states, just to chase after that glimpse of catharsis. I have put myself in danger just to feel how good it feels to tumble into safety.

Maybe I'm overthinking it, pressuring myself to see growth where there hasn't been room for any. I'm enchanted by the way writers like Reufle or Hempel can say *I used to think X, but now I think Y*. Already in this essay I've constructed at least two of these arguments. Already I know I will do it again.

I don't know which seduces me more: the dew of naiveté or the patina of experience. I certainly feel I'm still in Hempel's lipstick and lingerie category. There are moments when I write grit into my characters and think I'm on the cutting edge—look at these women, with their brazen and open drinking problems, their badass tattoos—and give them the power to say and think the things that I would never say. In one of my stories, a woman boasts to her therapist: “I have no fears.... Last night I ate chicken feet on a bed of watercress, and it was delicious.”

But at other moments I look and where I've tried to craft gumption I can see only a swelled head. It is at these moments I grow weary of their sass, and wonder if they're no braver than I, just better at deceit.

I first learned Eudora Welty's “Why I Live at the P.O.,” as an example of unreliable narration; relatedly, in Katherine Anne Porter's introduction to Welty's collection *A Curtain of Green* she

diagnoses the narrator, Sister, with “a terrifying case of dementia praecox,” (xvii) an outdated term for what we’d now call schizophrenia. But both diagnoses, literary and psychological alike, divert attention away from the precise and inimitable humor of Sister’s narration. To quote Porter again, “the spirit is satire and the key grim comedy” (xvii).

Published in 1941, “Why I Live at the P.O.” is a chaotic portrait of a white southern family in the early twentieth century. Sister confronts an absurd crucible when her sister, Stella-Rondo, returns home for the July Fourth holiday with a mysterious two-year old in tow, having left her husband (Mr. Whitaker, a former swain of Sister’s). Everyone in the family except Sister welcomes Stella-Rondo back with open arms. After a series of increasingly calamitous household incidents, Sister packs up her belongings and moves into the post office where she works.

Welty makes a choice in “Why I Live at the P.O.” to capture emphasis and pronunciation in punctuation and alternative spellings. As a result, the comedic timing is on point throughout. The first words we hear the toddler Shirley-T speak are portrayed thus: “the loudest Yankee voice I ever heard in my life yells out, ‘OE’m Pop-OE the Sailor-r-r-r Ma-a-an!’” (96) Interjection, indeed, is the language of this family. Sister’s indignation and perceived suffering come through in the frequent fragments and exclamation marks that spill across the pages: “So as soon as she got married and moved away from home the first thing she did was separate! From Mr. Whitaker! This photographer with the popeyes she said she trusted” (87-8).

Sister’s only ally is the reader, her co-conspirator in righteous gossip. “Stella-Rondo just calmly takes off this *hat*, I wish you could see it” (88), she confides early on, just the start of her

performance. “There I was over the hot stove, trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without one moment’s notice” (88). Hyperbole and exaggeration are among her greatest assets, and it is exactly these tools that add subtext into the story and prevent it from derailing into gab for the sake of gab.

Sister does not see that subtext; she is the least introspective narrator I may have ever read. Instead, the reader travels through the story witnessing her tone-deaf hysterics and the discrepancies between what we see and what she reports. When her uncle sets off firecrackers in her room and she exclaims, “Well I’m just terribly susceptible to noise of any kind, the doctor has always told me I was the most sensitive person he had ever seen in his whole life, and I was simply prostrated. I couldn’t eat!” (98), we as the reader see the holes in her statement; it’s true, she’s sensitive, but she’s the greatest cause of noise in the house, sending her family members into screeching fits and crying jags just to prove herself right.

The items around the house that Sister grabs as she packs her things pound home her inability to hear her own irony. “And I very politely took the sewing-machine motor I helped pay the most on to give Mama for Christmas back in 1929.... The thermometer and the Hawaiian ukulele certainly were rightfully mine, and I stood on the step-ladder and got all my watermelon-rind preserves and every fruit and vegetable I’d put up, every jar.” (100) It’s not the whole sewing machine, nor is it *her* sewing machine motor, or even a gift to her mother she paid for in full—it’s the one she “helped pay the most on.” Similarly, the double adverbs for the thermometer and ukulele—“certainly were rightfully mine” undercut each other.

Sister's words are her own worst enemy, and she remains oblivious to it, seeming to fulfill Charles Baxter's "three great pillars of the Tower of Voluntary Deafness" (67): Narcissism, egomania, and psychic vulnerability. We can read irony in the refusal to hear, but we can also look at what Charles Baxter calls "selective attention" of the narrators, the deafness that is not consciously performed but engrained in our character. "This kind of unhearing is, instead a kind of psychic impermeability, a mode where nothing gets through—an unattended switchboard," within which "the pain of others becomes bothersome, an annoyance" (68).

After moving to the P.O., she doesn't smarten up. If anything, her vitriolic martyrdom grows even stronger. "Stella-Rondo may be telling the most horrible tales in the world about Mr. Whitaker, but I haven't heard them. As I tell everybody, I draw my own conclusions," (Welty 104) may be a self-soothing statement, but the subtext of "I haven't heard them" rings loud and clear.

When I first read "Why I Live at the P.O.," as a middle schooler, I found Sister's gumption charming. I had been seduced by myths of children making homes for themselves in unexpected places—boxcars, treehouses, the Metropolitan Museum of Art—and Sister's little home, with "everything cater-cornered, the way I like it," (104) was just an extension of that dream. To live at one's work, because one cannot live at home; I found folly in it, whim. And that, truly, is the surface text of the story. The small bites of crow she takes are tough to detect, since they're quickly followed by affirmations of righteousness. But they are there: "Of course, there's not much mail. My family are naturally the main people in China Grove, and if they prefer to vanish from the face of the earth, for all the mail they get or the mail they write, why,

I'm not going to open my mouth" (104). If "deafness and denial manifest themselves when we can't stand to absorb what's being said" (Baxter 67), then one need look no further than the end of "Why I Live at the P.O." for the paragon of mule-headedness as a means of survival.

"But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy. And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen" (Welty 104).

## On Needing

*I am bad at asking for help. When you ask a human being for help, there is a chance they will say later, Remember when you asked for help? Can I have five dollars? That goes for medicine, too. I don't like asking help from pills in a bottle. I don't want to be woken up at night by a tab of aspirin asking to borrow five dollars.*

Marie Helene-Bertino, "Sometimes You Break Their Hearts, Sometimes They Break Yours"

My sister has a piece of internet advice that she keeps in her metaphorical back pocket, an article that delineates the difference between Ask Culture and Guess Culture. Someone raised to be an Asker will assess her needs and ask for what she finds lacking. Someone raised to be a Guesser might still assess her needs, but will then wait for someone else to guess what's wrong with her, or wait until she is positive the answer won't be no before requesting help.

Of course these are generalizations; someone raised to be a Guesser might shun these patterns and adopt the Asking way of life, or vice versa. It's not a question of "nature or nurture?" so much as "is nurture permanent?"

But broadly speaking, an Asker might look at a discussion of subtext and say, "Why can't you just say what you mean?" A Guesser might look at the same thing and say, "Where have you been all my life?"

There are ghosts of Ask and Guess culture in Baxter's discussion of under-articulated desire. I see flickers, too, in so many of the stories I read and write. In one of my own stories, two women settle into their pattern of watching Netflix together, rather than discussing the death of one of

their friends, because television is easier. In another, a gender-queer teenager who refuses to actually say how they feel gets hurt by their girlfriend's judgements. If we could overcome the inability to be direct, our characters might suffer less, and achieve things a whole lot faster.

But then again, if we could overcome the inability to be direct, we might not write at all. Why would I turn to writing if I didn't need to puzzle out the world I can't understand?

I can think of no greater example of such an attempt in fiction than Marie-Helene Bertino's "Sometimes You Break Their Hearts, Sometimes They Break Yours," which starts in small truths: "I am like everyone else—good at some things, bad at others" (Bertino 13) and ends with a gigantic plea for connection. "I was down on my knees. One human being cannot withstand the force of that much kindness. Do you know what I mean?" (20) Between these sign posts, Bertino's narrator grapples with an isolation so strong the only way she can make sense of it is to tell the reader she is from another planet whose untranslatable name "sounds like a cricket hopping onto a plate of rice" (14).

At first glance, it would be easy to straightjacket this narrator into the same corner of neurosis and dementia praecox as Eudora Welty's Sister, but with modern self-deprecation. Yet just as the performance seems to be spinning out of control—after a trio of anecdotes about the humorous and quaint practices of humans—the narrator reveals her own deeply human qualities. "There's a reason it's called alien-ated. Because I am an alien, I am alone. When you are alone, there is no one tell,... 'There's a spider landing on your head.' So you tell yourself. There's a spider landing on my head. I should move" (15).

Bertino's narrator must pivot between the self and self, the performance and the perceived failure. The alien and the alien-ated human. This is the kind of tone Calvino calls lightness of thoughtfulness, in contrast to the (alien) lightness of frivolity. "In fact, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy" (Calvino 10).

And so the reader begins to anticipate the cracks in the alien façade, the spaces between the practiced, universally appealing standup routine. "If you need it to be about a boy, I'll give you a boy," (Bertino 17) she seems to concede, only to once again pull away. A page later: "It would be easier if it were a boy. Then I could say to Tammy or Grace at work, *I feel lonely because of a boy*. And they could say, *Men are like trains; there's one every five minutes*" (18).

Every time I read this story I get tight in my chest. The levels of self-awareness are suffocating, and I see myself so strongly. This is the magic trick of the story, I think, the complete inversion of Welty's Sister. Sister thinks any rational person must understand her side of the story; the reader laughs at her obliviousness. Bertino's narrator believes she is the only one who feels as she does, yet for an introvert like me, the words sting bright and true. "It's not a boy or a job or a family or a house. It's the world. There are so many people in it" (19).

Finally, triggered by the sight of two people in wheelchairs, "the human pain equivalent of a royal flush" (19), the narrator returns home and staples Christmas lights to her roof that read "HELP ME." Her rationale? "I figured it was best to err on the side of honesty. I didn't learn that on Earth, dear god, but I learned it" (20). And to her surprise, people arrive.

To say that the entire point of the story is for the narrator to summon the courage to ask for help would be reductive. And because of the story's oscillating emotional registers and its wide variety of recurrent details, it can be hard to track the "narrative" or core running through it. But Bertino's narrator, self-aware even of the constructed nature of her story, drops hints. "I am bad at telling stories," she confesses at the top of the second paragraph, one of many "good at/bad at" sentences sprinkled throughout. "For example, this one is about Christmas lights and here is the first time I'm mentioning them" (13). It's in plain sight—"This is story is about Christmas lights I finally got around to putting up last night and the miracle that happened afterward" (14)—but the aliens and fax machines act as a kind of misdirection. And this misdirection sustains, for several more pages, until the narrator again circles the wagons and nearly shouts *PAY ATTENTION*—"This is the part with the Christmas lights and the miracle" (19)—but again, caught up in the confessions about loneliness, the reader might miss it.

And the miracle itself? The thing that the narrator calls a miracle—the thing that I, too, might many days call a miracle—is simply that she asks for help and the world does not end. She asks for help, and people listen: "There were cars. More cars than I could count.... People filled my street and the street next to it and the cars were still coming. I could see headlights for miles. They were still coming" (20).

## On Secrets, Part 2

*And who among us is not neurotic, and has never complained that they are not understood? Why did you come here, to this place, if not in the hope of being understood, of being in some small way comprehended by your peers, and embraced by them in a fellowship of shared secrets?*

*I don't know about you, but I just want to be held.*

Mary Reufle, "On Secrets"

I have seen how much simpler my life would be if I just asked for help, but I cannot. Because I cannot presume you shoulder both your burden and mine.

The man I love has insisted we table the word *burden* indefinitely. It is not our word, not his and mine. It is left over from a prior relationship, he argues, and I wonder if he sees webbed feet or a vestigial tail hanging from it, limply.

What I do not say is that the word *burden* has been shadowing me far longer than that. It is Atlas's globe, Marley's chains, Prometheus's regenerating liver. I was born believing in burdens.

As a young girl I slept with a stack of picture books heaped at the foot of my twin bed and I still miss the heft of them at night. I pile quilts over my feet, dense pillows, but I have lost the security of childhood. And so I look to the contents of books, instead, to soothe.

Here is a secret no one knows: after spending an excruciating night in silence this February, the angry weight of an unresolved argument tossing and turning in bed beside me, I briefly contemplated moving into my office in Padelford full time. "To live at one's work, because one

cannot live alone—I used to find folly in it, whim.” When I first wrote that sentence, I’m pretty sure I still did see caprice. Now, after the other shoe has dropped, I am overwhelmed by the brutality of feeling forced out.

I didn’t move out of my apartment, of course. The man I love and I patched things up, and now, he is busily making a life for us on the other side of the country while I tie up loose ends here. But for a moment—for several moments, across several months—I felt the impulse to grab the sewing machine motor and get the hell out of dodge.

In telling secrets, I of course return to Amy Hempel, whose story “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” was born out of confessing:

“The assignment was to write our worst secret, the thing we would never live down, the thing that, as Gordon put it, ‘dismantles your own sense of yourself.’ And everybody knew instantly what that thing, for them, was. We found out immediately that the stakes were very high, that we were expected to say something no one else had said, and to divulge much harder truths than we had ever told or ever thought to tell.” (The Art of Fiction)

Looking at “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” in an essay about narrators and subtext and grappling feels like how I imagine it might feel to look at the Mona Lisa at the Louvre—it’s the obvious thing, and maybe you wonder, for a moment, whether it’s too cliché, but ultimately, you go for it, because it’s the damn Mona Lisa, and it’s what you have to do. In an earlier draft of this essay, I tried to come at Hempel’s story through the valence of grief; to associate it with my mother’s trouble talking about her dying father.

But the grief wasn't mine. I felt it, of course. I feel grief every time I read Hempel's story, pushed and pulled and gripped by her language. The story's final sentence is a masterpiece:

“And when the baby died, the mother stood over her body, her wrinkled hands moving with animal grace, forming again and again the words: Baby, come hug, baby, come hug, fluent now in the language of grief.” (40)

The commas that buoy the reader through those last lines; the sterile adjective “animal” fused to the deeply human “grace”; the repetition of again, and the double stutter of “fluent now” before the last exhalation of grief. I sigh, and I swoon, and I feel as though I have come through something heavy.

But the thing that gets me, the gut-puncher in my reading, comes earlier on in the story, as the narrator attempts to answer the question no one is asking her.

“Two months, and how long is the drive?

“The best I can explain it is this—I have a friend who worked one summer in a mortuary. He used to tell me stories. The one that really got me was not the grisliest, but it's the one that did. A man wrecked his car on 101 going south. He did not lose consciousness. But his arm was taken down to the wet bone—and when he looked at it—it scared him to death.

“I mean, he died.

“So I hadn't dared to look any closer. But now I'm doing it—and hoping that I will live through it.” (31)

For most of the story, Hempel's narrator commands the role of storyteller: “Tell me things I won't mind forgetting,” (29) her dying friend demands at the start. But in this passage, the friend working in the mortuary flips the dynamic. The narrator is now the listener, and this is crucial—it demonstrates that she knows what it means to hear, even as she appears emotionally deaf to her

dying friend. But the narrator rushes past this, to the Yogi Berra-istic “The one that really got me was not the grisliest, but it’s the one that did.”

*The one that really got me was not the grisliest, but it’s the one that did.* I found myself writing lesser versions of this sentence as I tried to explain why I think this passage is the heart of “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried.” Why is this moment the moment that matters? I can’t tell you succinctly; it just is.

*The one that really got me was not the grisliest, but it’s the one that did.* In sixteen words, the narrator preemptively highlights and underlines the anecdote that follows; it’s a speedbump and a highway sign rolled into one. The man in the car accident doesn’t really matter, even though the phrase “taken down to the wet bone” is chillingly lovely; what matters is that he matters to the narrator. And this mattering comes through in the space around the words themselves; the paragraph breaks that surround “I mean, he died” draw the first crack in the humorous, colloquial façade of the story. Once again, we slow down at the comma and halt at the period.

The narrator’s seeming explanation—“So I hadn’t dared to look any closer. But now I’m doing it—and hoping that I will live through it” (31) is a jarring return to the present. A dual present: the present of the narrator telling the story, but also the ghost present of Hempel writing the story. The final dedication to Jessica Wolfson forces the reader to consider the external and internal truths of the story, and in this moment, one can read both the narrator summing up the courage to look at the impending death of her friend, and Hempel summing up the courage to look at her guilt.

## Why I Do What I Do, Part 2

*Writing is as close as I will ever come to achieving the kind of self-regard that was available to my brother at the age of ten, when he composed the shapely and authoritative English theme: "Why I Am My Favorite Person."*

Amy Hempel, "That's What Dogs Do"

Even on my brightest mornings, I am not my favorite person.

But perhaps writing is as close as I will come to being my truest person, even though I can only come to that honesty through indirection.

Amy Hempel, in "That's What Dogs Do," lists answer after answer to the question of why she writes; answers dependent on so many things but mainly time of day. I am gripped by the same answer again and again (Once again, Amy, *The one that really got me was not the grisliest, but it's the one that did*). She writes "[t]o combat grief. Recall looking for a lost dog, calling a ranger in Maine, and the ranger's saying 'I'll look in the place I hate to look,' meaning the printout of dogs found dead on the roads, and my thinking: That is my job, too, to look in the place I hate to look" (Hempel 43).

"Recall," naked without a pronoun, the odd phrase "the ranger's saying," the colon after "my thinking," They trip up; they force the reader to halt. It is the exact feeling of letting loose the sentence I'd prefer to keep unsaid, of pausing at a crosswalk before darting into traffic, of looking in the place I hate to look.

But I don't think I write to overcome grief. I write to see with clarity, just as I go to therapy to see with clarity. I try to spell out the mess in front of me, and then listen as my therapist sums up what I have said in single words. Not *anxiety*, not *depression*, not even *pain*. Those I can say myself. But *sorrow*. That cuts through the gloom of perceived failure, the cloud of panic attacks and headaches I cannot escape. Sorrow.

Charles Baxter asks his readers to consider his close reading approach to discussing subtext “as the reports of a private investigator, examining a few stories with a magnifying glass, looking for the secret panel, the hidden stairway, the lovingly concealed dungeon, and the ghosts moaning from beneath the floor” (5).

In the last months, as I have both written and avoided writing this essay, I have been haunted by memories of the year my parents renovated their upstairs bathroom. The easy comparison to draw here is one between Baxter and my mother, as she peeled back the brown and cream striped wallpaper to discover a whole new craziness underneath: mid-century satellite-like objects splattered across silver holographic paper. That's the surface story, the well-intentioned parents looking for beauty underneath gaudiness but finding something worse below.

But I'm struck by a smaller, more personal recollection. For the months between when my father made the decision to put in new drywall and rewire the lights, I showered in a bare-boned room illuminated by a work light that smelled like burning hair if left on too long. I remember stepping out of the tub one night, not long after I'd turned thirteen, and seeing the shadows my body cast

on the floor, the shadows my body cast on itself, and for the very first time not recognizing its shape as my own.

What I mean is, I believe often we take apart one thing and find something different in its pieces.

Or maybe I mean: bear with me. I'm not looking for ghosts under floorboards so much as I'm looking for myself.

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