

Occasionally, while I was teaching a reading course and simultaneously working on a novel, and when I had reached an impasse in my own work, I began to notice that whatever story I taught that week somehow helped me get past the obstacle that had been in my way. Once, for example, I was struggling with a party scene and happened to be teaching James Joyce's "The Dead," which taught me something about how to orchestrate the voices of the party guests into a chorus from which the principal players step forward, in turn, to take their solos.

On another occasion, I was writing a story that I knew was going to end in an eruption of horrific violence, and I was having trouble getting it to sound natural and inevitable rather than forced and melodramatic. Fortunately, I was teaching the stories of Isaac Babel, whose work so often explores the nature, the causes, and the aftermath of violence. What I noticed, close-reading along with my students, was that frequently in Babel's fiction, a moment of violence is directly preceded by a passage of intense lyricism. It's characteristic of Babel to offer the reader a lovely glimpse of the crescent moon just before all hell breaks loose. I tried it—first the poetry, then the horror—and suddenly everything came together, the pacing seemed right, and the incident I had been struggling with appeared, at least to me, to be plausible and convincing.

Close reading helped me figure out, as I hoped it did for my students, a way to approach a difficult aspect of writing, which is nearly always difficult. Readers of this book will notice that there are writers to whom I keep returning: Chekhov, Joyce, Austen, George Eliot, Kafka, Tolstoy, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Mansfield, Nabokov, Heinrich von Kleist, Raymond Carver, Jane Bowles, James Baldwin, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant—the list goes on and on. They are the teachers to whom I go, the authorities I consult, the models that still help to inspire me with the energy and courage it takes to sit down at a desk each day and resume the process of learning, anew, to write.

TWO

Words

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I HAD A PIANO TEACHER WHO tried to encourage her uninspired students with a system of rewards. A memorized Clementini sonatina or a completed theory workbook earned us a certain number of stars that added up to the grand prize: a small, unpainted plaster bust of a famous composer: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart.

The idea, I suppose, was that we were meant to line up the statues on the piano as sort of an altar to which we would offer up our finger exercises in the faint hope of winning these dead men's approval. I was fascinated by their powdered wigs and their stern—or in the case of Chopin, dreamy—expressions. They were like chalky, bodiless dolls I couldn't imagine dressing up.

Unfortunately for my piano teacher and me, I didn't much care about winning the dead composers' good opinions, perhaps because I already knew that I never would.

I had my own private pantheon made up not of composers but of writers: P. L. Travers, Astrid Lindgren, E. Nesbit, the idols of my childhood. Theirs was the approval I longed for, the com-

pany I longed to join as they floated above me, giving me something to think about during those dreary practice sessions. Over the intervening years, the membership of my literary pantheon has changed. But I have never lost the idea of Tolstoy or George Eliot nodding or frowning over my work, turning thumbs up or down.

I have heard other writers talk about the sensation of writing for an audience made up partly of the dead. In her memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam describes how her husband, Osip, and his friend and fellow poet, Anna Akhmatova participated in a sort of otherworldly communion with their predecessors:

Both M. and Akhmatova had the astonishing ability of somehow bridging time and space when they read the work of dead poets. By its very nature, such reading is usually anachronistic, but with them it meant entering into personal relations with the poet in question: it was a kind of conversation with someone long since departed. From the way in which he greeted his fellow poets of antiquity in the Inferno, M. suspected that Dante also had this ability. In his article, "On the Nature of Words" he mentions Bergson's search for links between things of the same kind that are separated only by time—in the same way, he thought, one can look for friends and allies across the barriers of both time and space. This would probably have been understood by Keats, who wanted to meet all his friends, living and dead, in a tavern.

Akhmatova, in resurrecting figures from the past, was always interested in the way they lived and their relations with others. I remember how she made Shelley come alive for me—this was, as it were, her first experiment of this kind. Next began her period of communion with Pushkin. With the thoroughness of a detective or a jealous woman, she ferreted

out everything about the people around him, probing their psychological motives and turning every woman he had ever so much as smiled at inside out like a glove.

So who are the writers with whom we might want to have this out-of-time communion? The Brontës, Dickens, Turgenev, Woolf—the list is long enough to support a lifetime of solid reading. You can assume that if a writer's work has survived for centuries, there are reasons why this is so, explanations that have nothing to do with a conspiracy of academics plotting to resuscitate a zombie army of dead white males. Of course, there is the matter of individual taste. Not all great writers may seem great to us, regardless of how often and how hard we try to see their virtues. I know, for example, that Trollope is considered to have been a brilliant novelist, but I've never quite understood what makes his fans so fervent. Still, our tastes change as we ourselves change and grow older, and perhaps in a few months or so Trollope will have become my new favorite writer.

Part of a reader's job is to find out why certain writers endure. This may require some rewiring, unhooking the connection that makes you think you have to have an *opinion* about the book and reconnecting that wire to whatever terminal lets you see reading as something that might move or delight you. You will do yourself a disservice if you confine your reading to the rising star whose six-figure, two-book contract might seem to indicate where your own work should be heading. I'm not saying you shouldn't read such writers, some of whom are excellent and deserving of celebrity. I'm only pointing out that they represent the dot at the end of the long, glorious, complex sentence in which literature has been written.

With so much reading ahead of you, the temptation might be to speed up. But in fact it's essential to slow down and read every word. Because one important thing that can be learned

by reading slowly is the seemingly obvious but oddly underappreciated fact that language is the medium we use in much the same way a composer uses notes, the way a painter uses paint. I realize it may seem obvious, but it's surprising how easily we lose sight of the fact that words are the raw material out of which literature is crafted.

Every page was once a blank page, just as every word that appears on it now was not always there, but instead reflects the final result of countless large and small deliberations. All the elements of good writing depend on the writer's skill in choosing one word instead of another. And what grabs and keeps our interest has everything to do with those choices.

One way to compel yourself to slow down and stop at every word is to ask yourself what sort of information each word—each word choice—is conveying. Reading with that question in mind, let's consider the wealth of information provided by the first paragraph of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find":

The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the Journal. "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

The first simple declarative sentence could hardly be more plain: subject, verb, infinitive, preposition. There is not one adjective or adverb to distract us from the central fact. But how much is contained in these eight little words!

Here, as in the openings of many stories and novels, we are confronted by one important choice that a writer of fiction needs to make: the question of what to call her characters. Joe, Joe Smith, Mr. Smith? Not, in this case, Grandma or Grandma Smith (no one in this story has a last name) or, let's say, Ethel or Ethel Smith or Mrs. Smith, or any of the myriad terms of address that might have established different degrees of psychic distance and sympathy between the reader and the old woman.

Calling her "the grandmother" at once reduces her to her role in the family, as does the fact that her daughter-in-law is never called anything but "the children's mother." At the same time, the title gives her (like The Misfit) an archetypal, mythic role that elevates her and keeps us from getting too chummy with this woman whose name we never learn, even as the writer is preparing our hearts to break at the critical moment to which the grandmother's whole life and the events of the story have led her.

The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. The first sentence is a refusal, which, in its very simplicity, emphasizes the force with which the old woman is digging in her heels. It's a concentrated act of negative will, which we will come to understand in all its tragic folly—that is, the foolishness of attempting to exert one's will when fate or destiny (or as O'Connor would argue, God) has other plans for us. And finally, the no-nonsense austerity of the sentence's construction gives it a kind of authority that—like Moby Dick's first sentence, "Call me Ishmael"—makes us feel that the author is in control, an authority that draws us farther into the story.

The first part of the second sentence—"She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee"—locates us in geography, that is, in the South. And that one word, *connections* (as opposed to *relatives* or *family or people*), reveals the grandmother's sense of her own faded gentility, of having come down in the world, a semi-deluded self-image that, like the illusions of many other O'Connor characters, will contribute to the character's downfall.

The sentence's second half—"she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind"—seizes our own attention more strongly than it would have had O'Connor written, say, "taking every chance." The verb quietly but succinctly telegraphs both the grandmother's fierceness and the passivity of Bailey, "the son she lived with, her only boy," two phrases that convey their domestic situation as well as the infantilizing dominance and the simultaneous tenderness that the grandmother feels toward her son. That word *boy* will take on tragic resonance later. "Bailey Boy!" the old woman will cry after her son is killed by The Misfit, who is already about to make his appearance in the newspaper that the grandmother is "rattling" at her boy's bald head. Meanwhile, the paradox of a bald, presumably middle-aged boy leads us to make certain accurate conclusions about the family constellation.

The Misfit is "aloose"—here we find one of those words by which O'Connor conveys the rhythm and flavor of a local dialect without subjecting us to the annoying apostrophes, dropped g's, the shootin' and talkin' and cussin', and the bad grammar with which other authors attempt to transcribe regional speech. The final sentences of the paragraph—"I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did"—encapsulate the hilarious and maddening quality of the grandmother's manipulativeness. She'll use anything, even an imagined encounter with an escaped criminal, to divert the family vacation from Florida to east

Tennessee. And her apparently unlikely fantasy of encountering The Misfit may cause us to reflect on the peculiar egocentrism and narcissism of those people who are constantly convinced that, however minuscule the odds, the stray bullet will somehow find them. Meanwhile, again because of word choice, the final sentence is already alluding to those questions of conscience, morality, the spirit and soul that will reveal themselves as being at the heart of O'Connor's story.

Given the size of the country, we think, they can't possibly run into the criminal about whom the grandmother has warned them. And yet we may recall Chekhov's remark that the gun we see onstage in an early scene should probably go off by the play's end. So what is going to happen? This short passage has already ushered us into a world that is realistic but at the same time beyond the reach of ordinary logic, and into a narrative that we will follow from this introduction as inexorably as the grandmother is destined to meet a fate that (we do suspect) will involve The Misfit. Pared and edited down, highly concentrated, a model of compression from which it would be hard to excise one word, this single passage achieves all this, or more, since there will be additional subtleties and complexities obvious only to each individual reader.

Skimming just won't suffice if we hope to extract one fraction, such as the fraction above, of what a writer's words can teach us about how to use the language. And reading quickly—for plot, for ideas, even for the psychological truths that a story reveals—can be a hindrance when the crucial revelations are in the spaces between words, in what has been left out. Such is the case with the opening of Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel":

The week after was one of the busiest weeks of their lives. Even when they went to bed, it was only their bodies that lay down and rested; their minds went on, thinking things out,

talking things over, wondering, deciding, trying to remember where . . .

Again, the story begins with a simple declarative sentence that establishes a sense of competence and control: a story is about to be told by someone who knows what she's doing. But if you read it quickly, you might skip right past the fact that there is no object for that temporal preposition *after*. The week after . . . what? Our heroines—two sisters, whom we have not yet met, who have not been named for us (*Josephine and Constantia*) or referred to in any way except as *they*—cannot supply the necessary words, *after their father's funeral*, because they have not yet been able to convince themselves that this momentous and terrifying event has really occurred. They simply cannot get their minds around the fact that their feared, tyrannical father, the late colonel, could be gone and is no longer dictating exactly what they will do and feel and think every moment of every day.

By leaving out the object of *after* in the very first sentence, Katherine Mansfield establishes the rules or the lack of rules that allow the story to adopt a distanced third-person point of view along with a fluidity that lets it penetrate the dusty, peculiar recesses of the two sisters' psyches. The second and final sentence of that paragraph is all participles—thinking, wondering, deciding, trying to remember—that describe thought rather than action, until the sentence exhausts itself and peters out in an ellipsis that prefigures the dead end that the sisters' attempts to think things through will ultimately reach.

These two low-key sentences have already ushered us into the paradoxically rich and claustrophobic realm (both outside and inside the sisters') in which the story occurs. They enable us to see their world from a perspective at once so objective and so closely identified with these child-women that everything about their actions (giggling, squirming in their beds, worrying about

the little mouse scurrying about their room) makes us think they might be children until, almost five pages into the story, the maid, Kate, comes into the dining room, and—in just two words—the story dazzles us with a flash of harsh sunlight that reveals the age of the “old tabbies”:

And proud young Kate, the enchanted princess, came in to see what the old tabbies wanted now. She snatched away their plates of mock something or other and slapped down a white, terrified blancmange.

(Note, too, how ingeniously and economically that “terrified blancmange” reflects the mental state of the “old tabbies” in the trembling of the gelatinous pudding.)

Mansfield is one of those stylists whose work you can open anywhere to discover some inspired word choice. Here, the sisters hear a barrel organ playing outside in the street and for the first time realize that they don't have to pay the organ-grinder to go away so his music won't annoy Father. “A perfect fountain of bubbling notes shook from the barrel-organ, round bright notes, carelessly scattered.” And how precise and inventive are the words in which the women respond to Father's live-in nurse, who has stayed on after his death. Nurse Andrews's table manners alarm and enrage the sisters, who suddenly have no idea how, economically, they are supposed to survive without their father:

Nurse Andrews was simply fearful about butter. Really they couldn't help feeling that about butter, at least, she took advantage of their kindness. And she had that maddening habit of asking for just an inch more bread to finish what she had on her plate, and then, at the last mouthful, absent-mindedly—of course it wasn't absent-mindedly—taking an-

other helping. Josephine got very red when this happened, and she fastened her small, bead-like eyes on the tablecloth, as if she saw a minute strange insect creeping through the web of it.

Again, it's a matter of the word by word—this time, of adjectives and adverbs. Though we remain in the third person, the simply fearful and maddening are the sister's words. We can hardly miss the rage and despair being generated by that "just an inch more bread," that "absent-mindedly—of course it wasn't absent-minded." And we can see with absolute clarity the look of horror, concentration, and suppressed disgust on Josephine's face as she "fastens her small bead-like eyes" on the "minute strange insect" she imagines crawling through the web of the tablecloth.

Along the way, web informs us that the cloth is made of lace. "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" rewards rereading at different points in our lives. For years, I assumed I understood it. I believed that the sisters' inability to supply an object for that after, to comprehend their father's mysterious departure, had to do with their eccentric natures, with their childlike inability (or refusal) to face the complexities of adult life. And then I happened to reread it not long after a death in my own family, and for the first time I understood that the sisters' perplexity is not so unlike the astonishment and bewilderment that all of us (regardless of how "grown-up" or sophisticated we imagine ourselves to be) feel in the face of the shocking finality, the absence, the mystery of death.

THOUGH their subject matter, their characters, and their approaches to fiction could hardly seem more different, both Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Mansfield share a certain pyrotechnical aspect, deploying metaphors, similes, and sharp turns of phrase that are the literary equivalent of a fireworks

display. But there are also writers whose vocabulary and whose approach to language is plain, spare, even Spartan.

Alice Munro writes with the simplicity and beauty of a Shaker box. Everything about her style is meant to attract no notice, to make you not pay attention. But if you read her work closely, every word challenges you to think of a more direct, less fussy or tarted-up way to say what she is saying.

Hers is such a seemingly effortless style that it presents another sort of challenge: the challenge of imagining the drafts and revisions, the calculations required to end up with something so apparently uncalculated. This is not spontaneous, automatic writing but, again, the end product of numerous decisions, of words tried on, tried out, eliminated, replaced with better words—until, as in the opening of "Dulse," we have a compressed, complete, and painfully honest rendering of the complexities of a woman's entire life, her professional and romantic circumstances, her psychological state, as well as the point at which she stands along the continuum from the beginning of life to the end:

At the end of the summer Lydia took a boat to an island off the southern coast of New Brunswick, where she was going to stay overnight. She had just a few days left until she had to be back in Ontario. She worked as an editor, for a publisher in Toronto. She was also a poet, but she did not refer to that unless it was something people knew already. For the past eighteen months she had been living with a man in Kingston. As far as she could see, that was over.

She had noticed something about herself on this trip to the Maritimes. It was that people were no longer so interested in getting to know her. It wasn't that she had created such a stir before, but something had been there that she could rely on. She was forty-five, and had been divorced for nine years. Her two children had started on their own lives, though there were still

retreats and confusions. She hadn't gotten fatter or thinner; her looks had not deteriorated in any alarming way, but nevertheless she had stopped being one sort of woman and had become another, and she had noticed it on this trip.

Observe the relative intimacy that results from the writer's choosing to call our heroine by her first name, the rapid deft strokes—in language almost as plain as that of the newspaper—with which the essential questions (who, what, when, where, if not why) are addressed. Lydia has the resources to take a boat somewhere just to stay overnight, but not enough leisure or freedom to extend her vacation past the few days she has left. We hear not only about her work as an editor but also about her vocation, and the fact that there might be people around her who might know, or not know, that she is also a poet. In one sentence, we are informed about her romantic life and the undramatic resignation ("As far as she could see, that was over.") with which our heroine looks back on eighteen months spent living with a lover whom she chooses to think about not by name but only as "a man in Kingston."

We discover her age, her marital status; she has two children. How much verbiage could have been squandered in summarizing the periodic "retreats and confusions" that have stalled Lydia's grown children in their progress toward adulthood. And how much less convincing and moving the last part of the passage would be if Munro had chosen to couch her heroine's assessment of her mysteriously altered effect on others ("people were no longer interested in getting to know her") in words that were more emotional, more highly charged, more heavily freighted with self-pity, grief, or regret.

Finally, the passage contradicts a form of bad advice often given young writers—namely, that the job of the author is to show, not tell. Needless to say, many great novelists combine

"dramatic" showing with long sections of the flat-out authorial narration that is, I guess, what is meant by telling. And the warning against telling leads to a confusion that causes novice writers to think that everything should be acted out—don't tell us a character is happy, show us how she screams "yay" and jumps up and down for joy—when in fact the responsibility of showing should be assumed by the energetic and specific use of language. There are many occasions in literature in which telling is far more effective than showing. A lot of time would have been wasted had Alice Munro believed that she could not begin her story until she had shown us Lydia working as an editor, writing poetry, breaking up with her lover, dealing with her children, getting divorced, growing older, and taking all the steps that led up to the moment at which the story rightly begins.

Richard Yates was equally direct, as devastating, and similarly adept at making everything turn and balance on the apt word choice. Here, in the opening paragraph of *Revolutionary Road*, he warns us that the amateur theatrical performance in the novel's first chapter may not be quite the triumph for which the Laurel Players are hoping:

The final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium. They hardly dared to breathe as the short, solemn figure of their director emerged from the naked seats to join them on stage, as he pulled a stepladder raspingly from the wings and climbed halfway up its rungs to turn and tell them, with several clearings of his throat, that they were a damned talented group of people and a wonderful group of people to work with.

When we ask ourselves how we know as much as we know—that is, that the performance is likely to be something of

an embarrassment—we notice that individual words have given us all the information we need. *The final dying sounds . . . silent and helpless . . . blinking . . . hardly dared to breathe . . . naked seats . . . raspingly*. Even the name of the group—the Laurel Players—seems banal. Is that laurel as in the tree, or as in the laurel wreath with which the Greeks honored victory, or an unthinking conflation of the two in some arty theatrical terminology? Then come the director's throat clearings and, in indirect dialogue, the equivalent of the group's first bad review. The fake enthusiasm and bravado of that “damned talented” (as opposed to merely “talented”), the immediate retreat into the noncommittal “wonderful,” and the repetition of “group of people” tells us, sadly, all we need to know about these actors’ gifts and the likelihood that their dreams will come true. Meanwhile, we’re very aware of what the director’s not saying, which is that their performance was brilliant, or even passably good.

Some writers can write both meticulously and carelessly, sometimes on the same page. At lazy moments, F. Scott Fitzgerald could resort to strings of clichés, but in the next paragraph he could give a familiar word the sort of new slant that totally reinvents the language. That reinvention occurs, beginning with his use of the word *deferential*, in the description of the rose-colored grand hotel that opens *Tender Is the Night*:

Deferential palms cool its flushed façade, and before it stretches a short dazzling beach. . . . Now, many bungalows cluster near it, but when this story begins only the cupolas of a dozen old villas rotted like water lilies among the massed pines between Gausse Hôtel des Étrangers and Cannes, five miles away.

Each adjective (*flushed, dazzling*) strikes us as apt. And the simile “rotted like water lilies” will come to seem increasingly

applicable to much of what happens in a novel that is partly about the dissolution and decay of romance and beauty. Students instructed to ransack *The Great Gatsby* for its narrator’s unreliability, for a historical portrait of a bygone era, and for a discussion of social class and the power of lost love might miss the wordy-word gorgeousness of the first time Nick Carraway sees Daisy and her friend Jordan. Every word helps to render a particular moment in, or out of, time, and to capture the convergence of beauty, youth, confidence, money, and privilege. Fitzgerald not only describes but makes us experience what it looks and feels like to be in a beautiful room by the sea:

The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.

You could almost get a sense of the passage by sorting the words according to what part of speech they represent, the par-

ticiples and verbs (*gleaming, rippling, ballooned*), the adjectives and adjectival phrases (the white windows and skirts, the fresh grass, the pale flags of the curtains, the frosted wedding cake of a ceiling), the nouns (the *whip* and *snap* of the curtains, the *groan* of the picture, the *caught wind*, the *boom* of the shut window). But you can imagine the same words grouped in far less felicitous combinations. There are at least two places in which words are, as with the deferential palms, used in ways that seem surprising, even incorrect, but absolutely right. It's not exactly a *shadow* that the wind casts over the sea, or the *breeze* over the rug, but we know what the writer means; there's no better way to describe it. Nor is there a more vivid way to create the image than the seeming improbability of the two women slowly ballooning back to earth without ever having left their couch.

That daring deployment of the incorrect word also occurs in the first sentence of Joyce's "The Dead," in which we are told that Lily, the caretaker's daughter, is literally run off her feet. We know it isn't *literally*. The mistake is one that *Lily herself* might make, which puts us momentarily in her point of view and prepares us for the ways in which the story will play with viewpoint, with notions of truth and untruth, and with the ways that class background and education affect how we use the language. Such "wrong" words are neither mistakes nor the product of the lazy writer's assumption that one word is as good as another. Nor are they the consequence of a bullying attempt to will the square peg of a wrong word into a round hole of the sentence. Rather, they are the results of conscious, careful deliberations of writers who thought a thousand times before they purposely misused a word, or gave another word a new meaning.

Some writers simply cannot be understood without close reading, not only those like Faulkner, who requires that we parse those wonderfully convoluted sentences, or like Joyce, whom Picasso called "the incomprehensible that everyone can under-

stand," or like Thomas Pynchon, who requires us to put up with long stretches of narrative in which we may have absolutely no idea what is going on, even on the plainest narrative level. I'm talking about more deceptively straightforward stylists who also happen to be masters of *subtext*, of that place between the lines where so much of the action occurs.

One such writer is Paul Bowles, whose stories you might easily misread if you read them for plot, of which they have plenty, or for psychological truth, which is mostly of the sort that you would rather not think about for too long, if at all. I always feel a little guilty asking students to read Bowles's "A Distant Episode," the literary equivalent of a kick in the head. I justify it to myself by saying that the story is about language as one way to predict when the kick in the head is coming, language as the essence of the self that registers the fact that one's head is getting kicked.

The tale concerns a linguist known only as "the Professor," who travels into the North African desert in search of exotic languages and armed with the arsenal of the timid tourist. The contents of the Professor's "two small overnight bags full of maps, sun lotions, and medicines" provide a tiny mini-course in the importance of close reading. The protagonist's anxiety and cautiousness, his whole psychological makeup, has been communicated in five words ("maps, sun lotions, and medicines") and without the need to use one descriptive adjective or phrase. (He was an anxious man, who worried about getting lost or sunburned or sick, and so forth.) What very different conclusions we might form about a man who carries a bag filled with dice, syringes, and a hand gun.

By the end of the story, the Professor will have been captured and mutilated by the Reguibat, a tribe of bandits who turn him into a mute clown and sell him to a group of men who are, or have some connection with, fundamentalist revolutionaries. A casual perusal of the story suggests that the Professor's misfor-

tune is the accidental result of his being in the wrong place at the wrong time, of having left “civilization.” There are some places where you just shouldn’t go, or go at your own peril. Bad things happen there: the normal rules no longer apply. But a closer reading reveals that the Professor is not entirely blameless, though the harshness of his punishment hardly fits his crime.

From the start, the Professor is coolly observed making an escalating series of simultaneously innocent and arrogant cultural mistakes. He takes the darker and more dismal of the two rooms he is offered at the hotel because it is a few pennies cheaper, and because he has “gone native” and does not want to be taken for the tourist he is—and possibly cheated. He insults the waiter at a café by suggesting that the man might be willing to do business with the bandits and help the Professor buy some of the camel-udder boxes he knows are sold in the region. And he insists on this even after the waiter has made it very clear that to consort with the outcast tribe would be so far beneath his dignity as to constitute a personal degradation. There is also a moment at which the Professor fails to offer a cigarette to his guide: a serious breach of decorum. The Professor’s miscalculations result in, or contribute to, his being delivered directly into the hands of those same outlaws. None (or few) of these serious social mistakes would be apparent unless you stopped at every word and asked yourself what was being communicated, understood, misunderstood, said, and not being said.

Reading this way requires a certain amount of stamina, concentration, and patience. But it also has its great rewards, among them the excitement of approaching, as nearly as you can hope to come, the hand and mind of the artist. It’s something like the way you experience a master painting, a Rembrandt or a Velasquez, by viewing it from not only far away but also up close, in order to see the brushstrokes.

I’VE heard the way a writer reads described as “reading voraciously.” What I’ve always assumed that this means is not, as the expression might seem to imply, reading for what can be ingested, stolen, or borrowed, but rather for what can be admired, absorbed, and learned. It involves reading for sheer pleasure but also with an eye and a memory for which author happens to do which thing particularly well. Let’s say you are facing the challenges of populating a room with a large cast of characters all talking at once. Having read the ballroom scene in *Anna Karenina*, or the wild party that winds through so many pages of William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, you have sources to which you can go not just for inspiration but for technical assistance.

Or let’s imagine that you want to write a scene in which someone is telling a lie, and turns out to be an excellent liar, foreseeing his listeners’ doubts and covering himself in case anyone might want to challenge his story. The difficulty of getting this sort of moment onto the page might direct you to Tatyana Tolstaya’s “Heavenly Flame.” The story is set in a summer dacha outside Moscow, in the post-glasnost years. A sculptor named Dmitry Ilich, who has spent two years in a Soviet prison camp, labels a hapless invalid named Korobeinikov, a man whom Dmitry feels he is competing with for the attention and affections of the other guests at the dacha:

They were in school together, as it happens. In different classes. Korobeinikov, of course, has forgotten Dmitry Ilich—well, it's been forty years now, that's only natural. But Dmitry Ilich hasn't forgotten, no sir, because at one time this Korobeinikov pulled a really dirty trick on him! You see, in his youth Dmitry Ilich used to write poetry, a sin he still commits even now. They were bad poems, he knows that—nothing that would've made a name for him, just little exercises in the fair

art of letters, you know, for the soul. That's not the point. But, as it happened, when Dmitry Ilich had his little legal mishap and went camping for two years, the manuscripts of these immature poems of his ended up in this Korobeinikov's hands. And the fellow published them under his own name. So, that's the story. Fate, of course, sorted everything out: Dmitry Ilich was actually glad that these poems had appeared under someone else's name; nowadays he'd be ashamed to show such rubish to a dog; he doesn't need that kind of fame. And it didn't bring Korobeinikov any happiness: he got neither praise nor abuse for his reward; nothing came of it. Korobeinikov never did make it as an artist, either: he changed professions, and now he does some kind of technical work, it seems. That's the way the cookie crumbles.

Until this point in the story, the reader may have been entertained some doubts about the somewhat sketchy sculptor. But this passage, written in a third-person voice that is actually a sort of indirect dialogue, convinces us, just as it is meant to convince Dmitry's listeners, that he is telling the truth.

The chatty, conversational, deceptively casual colloquialisms ("Well," "you see," "no sir," "that's natural") and the concluding cliché ("That's the way the cookie crumbles") give Dmitry's lie a sort of folksy authenticity. A story told this spontaneously and simply, so apparently straight from the heart, must, we feel, be authentic. The self-deprecating references to his poems as "rubish" and a "sin," "little exercises in the fair art of letters," suggest that Dmitry, who has no serious stake in his writing, could not possibly be harboring a serious grudge against Korobeinikov for having plagiarized something so unimportant. Indeed, Dmitry is (as he himself would be the first to tell us) too large, too forgiving, too generous a soul for any emotion so small as bitterness or resentment.

Unlike Korobeinikov, he is an artist and thus, he suggests, superior to the putative plagiarist, who does "some kind of technical work"—he is in fact an engineer. But what's most noteworthy about the passage—what indeed is the fulcrum on which the entire story turns—is the (also deceptively) lighthearted and euphemistic reference to the sculptor's "little legal mishap" after which he "went camping for two years," which, of course, is a reference to his term in the Soviet labor camp: a grim reality of their recent history that the pleasure-loving, almost hysterically hedonistic dacha crowd cannot bear to mention more directly. Eventually, when Dmitry's story is revealed to be a lie, the reader is shocked, but in a different way than are the characters, who (again because of their history) are so used to concealment, to being lied to, and to being forced to lie that they treat the incident as yet another joke, though the joke has tragic consequences for poor Korobeinikov.

BEFORE I move on from the subject of words to that of sentences and paragraphs, let me say a few more words about those portrait busts of the musicians that presided over my grade-school piano practice. When I told my husband that I was writing this essay, he informed me that we actually had one of those same little composer statues in our house. It turns out that it had gone underground, survived any number of dislocations and losses, and emerged in an upstairs bedroom, where it remains to this day. It's part of a setup, almost like an altar, in the childhood room of our younger son, who has grown up to be a musician and a composer.