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On Patient Writing

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Steven Millhauser's story "A Visit" begins with a destination. In the opening sentence, the narrator, lonely and dissatisfied with the conventional drift of his life, reports that he received in the mail an invitation to visit his peculiar college friend Albert, whom he hadn't seen in nine years. The letter includes a scribbled map to Albert's "remote upstate town," as well as the mysterious news that Albert has "taken a wife." The narrator—curious, envious, nervous—cancels his weekend plans and heads north to Albert's house. By the end of the first paragraph, we have a dramatic vector, a narrative shape. It's pretty clear: there's a story at Albert's house. We're headed there with a crude map and an uneasy feeling.

The second paragraph then executes what one writer friend calls "the page two move." Having established shape and movement, it now backs up to fill in some critical backstory and to bring into focus the

ground state of the story, which has been *perturbed*, to use John Barth's term, by Albert's letter. The emotional valence of an event is never self-evident. Going to see an old friend could mean ten different things to ten different characters, so readers need to know *to whom* this is happening. The narrator briefly relates the history of his friendship with Albert, and he admits that he has thought frequently of Albert in the last nine years. That he still considers Albert his best friend is sad and strange, and it perhaps reveals more than the narrator imagines or intends. Though we learn some key facts and a basic timeline in this passage, the crucial information here is the narrator's attitude toward Albert. That attitude is a complex alloy of respect and disdain. Albert might be an iconoclast, and he also just might be a flake, but at any rate he troubles and attracts his old friend. Ambivalence in fiction can be a source of drama.

In the third paragraph we're on the road, following Albert's imprecise map, seeking the destination established in the first few lines of the story—"a little white square marked MY HOUSE." The story, not just the narrator, is following the map. Readers at this point understand well that whatever terrible and wonderful events will happen in this story will happen at Albert's house. "Time draws the shapes of stories," Joan Silber writes, and even inexperienced readers know implicitly that the visit with Albert *is* the story. They are overlapping categories. When the visit is over, the story will be over—this information is coded into the opening paragraph. The story needs to get to Albert's house—there is a strong dramatic current pushing writer and reader there. It's perhaps useful to pause here in the third paragraph to consider that many writers would be at Albert's house already, knocking on the door, shaking hands, observing the changes wrought by time, trying to get a glimpse

of Albert's wife. In "Serious Noticing," an essay on detail and observation, James Wood writes, "Often with great writers, it is instructive to stop at the point in a sentence, or in a metaphor, or in a perception, where the *ordinary* writer might come to a halt." Analogously, I would say that it is instructive to note the destinations at which ordinary writers might arrive too quickly. Wood's point is about imaginative extension; my point is about imaginative deferral. Both points have to do with patience and the lingering eye. Here is what Millhauser, not an ordinary writer in the least, does in the third paragraph:

> The town was even worse than I had imagined. Slowly I passed its crumbling brick paper mill with boarded-up windows, its rows of faded and flaking two-family houses with sagging front porches where guys in black T-shirts sat drinking beer, its tattoo

parlor and its sluggish stream. County Road 39 wound between fields of Queen Anne's lace and yellow ragweed, with now and then a melancholy house or a patch of sun-scorched corn. Once I passed a rotting barn with a caved-in roof. At 3.2 miles on the odometer [Albert's map says "3½ MILES, MORE OR LESS"] I came to a weathered house near the edge of the road. A bicycle lay in the high grass of the front yard and an open garage was entirely filled with old furniture. Uncertainly I turned onto the unpaved drive, parked with the motor running, and walked up to the front door. There was no bell. I knocked on the wooden screen door, which banged loudly against the frame, and a tall, barefoot, and very pale woman with sleepy eyes came to the door, wearing a long rumpled black skirt and a lumberjack

shirt over a T-shirt. When I asked for Albert she looked at me suspiciously, shook her head quickly twice, and slammed the inner door. As I walked back to the car I saw her pale face looking out at me past a pushed-aside pink curtain. It occurred to me that perhaps Albert had married this woman and that she was insane. It further occurred to me, as I backed out of the drive, that I really ought to turn back now, right now, away from this misguided adventure in the wilderness. After all, I hadn't seen him for nine long years, things were bound to be different. At 4.1 miles on the odometer I rounded a bend of rising road and saw a shadowy house set back in a cluster of dusty-looking trees. I turned into the unknown dirt drive, deep-rutted and sprouting weeds, and as I stepped on the

> brake with a sharp sense of desolation and betrayal, for here I was, in the godforsaken middle of nauseating nowhere, prowling around like a fool and a criminal, the front door opened and Albert came out, one hand in his pocket and one hand waving.

If plot can be conceptualized as a chain of causally linked events, the protagonist's stop at the wrong house is not quite connected to plot. It is not properly a link in a chain of causation. *Because* he received an invitation, he drove to his estranged friend's house—that's plot. The turn into the wrong driveway may have been *caused by* Albert's inexact map, yes, but it does not then cause some further action. Nothing is eventuated; the narrator was going to Albert's house before his wrong stop, and he continues there afterward. You might say that this wrong stop caused him to be disturbed, but he was already disturbed, and in fact

there is a sense that his uneasiness is as much a cause as an effect of turning into the stranger's driveway. The story too is in a strange driveway, off its main road.

In terms of plot, then, this moment is superfluous. It is not a load-bearing event; the story does not require it. And yet I would argue that this moody half-scene is vital precisely to the extent that it is unnecessary. It constitutes what Wood calls the "life-surplus" of story, "the riot of things beyond order and form." Primarily it is persuasive and alive, and it creates a powerful sense of dread. Here we are made to feel—through the story's pacing as much as through explicit commentary—the extent of the protagonist's ambivalence. He wants to visit Albert, and he very much does not want to visit Albert. Because the passage does not merely serve the narrative, it serves the narrative exceptionally well. Millhauser has every reason to rush on to Albert's house, the site of the extraordinary

events to come, and yet he doesn't. Notice how the prose seems almost equipped with a governor here—"*Slowly* I passed its crumbling brick paper mill . . . and its *sluggish* stream." Millhauser regulates the pace by placing his driver on County Road 39, not the interstate. County roads—Chekhov must have written this in some letter to his brother—are well-suited for fiction. They wind around. They have low speed limits. Then the narrator parks the car "with the motor running," which is precisely what the author has done with his story. If Millhauser slows his narrator down, then he too can slow down, see what there is to see. This is what I most want to say: we might imagine that writers slow down when they have stuff to notice, but precisely the inverse is true. Pacing is the cause, not the effect, of observation. A commitment to patience generates perception, detail. Millhauser doesn't slow down because he sees a bike in the grass; it is only when he slows down that the bike appears.

The story would still work without this interlude, but it would be ever so slightly less authentic, ever so slightly more fictional. What is exciting and apparent to me in this passage is the certainty that Millhauser, not just his protagonist, was surprised by this house, this yard. It did not exist when Millhauser began writing the paragraph. The bicycle in the high grass, the barefoot woman in the lumberjack shirt, the pink curtains—these excessive details are charged and glowing. They are, as Wood writes of details, "bits of life sticking out of the frieze of form." They make me believe in this made-up story. Fiction, after all, is a risk. As Rachel Cusk said in a recent interview, "the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous." It's true that fiction can be "fake and embarrassing"—unless both author and reader have conviction that it's real. In Millhauser's imagination, there is a world beyond story. There are

other houses on the way to Albert's house. There is an *on the way to* Albert's house. A person, not a character, lives in this house, which is not, to her, the wrong house. She doesn't know or care about the interesting premise or backstory. She has her own strange thing going on, her own mysterious life. She appears to have hung pink curtains in the window. Those curtains, so useless to the plot of the story, make it clear that Millhauser believes in his world, or believes in his story's ability to point beyond itself to the world. Because they don't do any work, they do the most important work there is.

2

I'm interested in the quality of patience in fiction, not as an abstract spiritual aspiration but as a specific and

discernible element of craft, analogous to setting or dialogue or voice. We might think of an adjective like patience as a quality of the writer, but we often talk about fiction in terms generally reserved for its creators. We say that books are smart or courageous or tender or perceptive, and we are not necessarily referring in a direct way to the writer. To call a novel smart is not quite the equivalent of saying that the writer is smart, though this may be implied. I would say, rather, that when we talk like this we are making an unintentionally sophisticated claim that the fiction itself is intelligent—that intelligence is a quality of the writing, that it resides somehow on the page. (Most writers know the sensation of writing pages of fiction that are smarter—and, alas, dumber—than they themselves are.) Patience in writing is a consequence of the patience in the writer, yes, but ultimately it becomes a feature of the writing. The writer, working patiently, imbues the work with patience. We can

distinguish it, as we can distinguish metaphor or point of view. We can see what patience produces in fiction.

My interest in patient writing grows out of my experiences as a writer —trying to surprise myself, trying to discover material in a scene that is richer than what I knew when I entered the scene; as a reader—finding delight in a vivid, expanded moment and in the necessity of the unnecessary; and most of all as a teacher of writing—noticing that apprentice writers typically move too quickly through scene and story. For eighteen years I've been scrawling in the margins of student work. Of all my injunctions and bromides and plaudits and illegible symbols, my most frequent comment by far is *slow down*. In those years of teaching I cannot recall ever writing *speed up*. Although I have suggested that a lack of conflict or urgency or emotional stakes may be sapping the energy from the prose, I cannot recall wishing a student would move through a scene more rapidly. In

my experience, problems with tension rarely have to do with slow pacing, and in fact swift pacing can often diminish tension. In fiction, speed does not equal energy, but there are numerous forces that impel the writer. Many of these forces are external—deadlines, for example, or dance music—but one powerful force of propulsion is intrinsic to narrative. Once begun, a story seeks its end. The form and movement of a story work to maintain order and curtail possibility and excess. A story doesn't want to imitate life; a story wants to be a story, and writers must learn to resist the powerful currents of form.

But why? Why is it beneficial or artful to slow down? What is achieved by patient writing? First, patient writing is dramatic and dynamic. It creates meaning and feeling by the very virtue of its pace, *regardless of content*. As Joan Silber writes, "Pacing points to meaning." When Millhauser lingers on the drive to Albert's house, readers understand that something important is

happening; they can feel it, even though the events themselves are not necessarily crucial to the story. Slowing down, creating variability in pace, regulates and directs the reader's emotional experience. Pacing can do as much or more than event or exposition to create, manage, and sustain drama. Often, slow writing creates a charged, anticipatory narrative zone in which small details crackle and hum. Second, patient writing is connected to conviction, persuasion—the heft and texture of verisimilitude. When we write too quickly, we lose conviction in the fictional, and readers will too. Fiction is least persuasive —"embarrassing," as Cusk says—when it seems like a Potemkin Village or a movie set or a model apartment (in which we sense that there are actually no pipes beneath that kitchen sink). And third, patient writing generates material of the best sort. To be impatient is to engage the known, the map, the path, the plan. "A fully known

world," writes Robert Boswell, "is devoid of mystery." To move slowly is to contend, word by word, with the unknown, the wrong turn, the dark, the previously unseen, the vivid and surprising. When we move slowly we generate material. We teach ourselves and our readers about our invented world. Paradoxically, that world becomes both more precisely drawn and more mysterious. And some of this material may prove useful. Out on County Road 39, Millhauser's narrator notes the Queen Anne's lace. Here you can sense the fiction writer just looking around; invention is a kind of seeing. Once invented, once noticed, it's part of the story, there for the author to use. Sure enough, that Queen Anne's lace returns in the story's final line.

If patience is a quality of writing, a discernible element of craft, how do we see it and how do we evaluate its benefits? How do we point it out to students and persuade them that it's a valuable quality? The investigation of

pacing is complicated by the fact that each writer and each piece of fiction has its own baseline pace, and so patience in one sample may not resemble patience in another sample. One basic way to isolate patient writing, though, is to look carefully at very specific moments in a piece of fiction, specifically the moment when the writer's next move is evident, established by causal logic. What happens when this move, a Point B, is signaled but then deferred? I would suggest that patience in writing becomes visible when the writer creates a destination but does not go there immediately. Plot a move but don't make it. It's a kind of corollary to the old jazz adage: think of a note and don't play it.

3

The opening chapter of Dorothy Baker's novel *Cassandra at the Wedding* is a master class on the art of not being there yet. Cassandra, completing a graduate degree in English at Berkeley, has a twin sister, Judith, who is getting married to a man Cassandra has never met. Cassandra and Judith are, even by the standards of identical twins, inordinately close. Cassandra certainly has the idea that she and Judith are two halves of a single being; she has regarded their current separation as temporary and fully expects that she will spend her adult life with Judith—two sisters against the world. Cassandra, then, is hurt and miserable about the forthcoming wedding. She is a messy and difficult human being—smart, sardonic, self-destructive, unstable, impulsive. When the academic term ends in late June, she decides to head home to the family ranch a day earlier than planned. Her trip is ostensibly to meet Judith's fiancé and to

celebrate the nuptials with family, but it's more accurate to say that she's going home with the intention to wreck everything. She's a ticking bomb.

As in Millhauser's story, we have here a simple and familiar shape, a clear destination. As in Millhauser's story, we have in the opening pages info-rich exposition and narrative attitude; we have a troubled ground state roiled by inciting event. We have a narrator who is not entirely self-aware and we have a powerful sense of unease. The story, we know, will take place at the family ranch, and we await Cassandra's early arrival with dread and voyeuristic thrill. Baker has deftly managed her premise, balanced drama and exposition, and instilled forward movement. The drive from Berkeley to the ranch is five hours "if you move, if you push a little," Cassandra tells us. Five hours in a fast car can be managed in a sentence or two, can even be elided with a space break. "*Time passes*, as the novelist says," says the novelist Richard Powers. A solo

drive through agricultural regions is not exactly electric drama. Let's get to the ranch—it's going to be awful and amazing there.

The novelist here has good reason to play the *Time Passes* card and to jump her protagonist swiftly across the game board, over the fields of alfalfa and cotton, over the vineyards and directly to the front door of the family manse. Baker, however, slows down, engages her character's radical ambivalence. Cassandra wants to go home, and she very much does not want to go home. It's a five-hour drive "if you push a little," but Baker does not push. First, Cassandra stops at a bar that she and Judith have visited in the past. When she looks in the mirror behind the bar, she sees her sister's face. This detour has both delayed and initiated an encounter with Judith. Cassandra returns to her convertible and drives again along the hot and dusty road:

I was fifty miles from home and I slowed down, all alone now, and let the Riley drift between fields of alfalfa, dark blue-green, like lakes, exchanging swampy breezes over my head and pulling me together. If now there would be a place to stop and have a drink, I'd stop drifting and go in. I'd find a place to comb my hair and put on some lipstick and see to my forehead and my nose and then I'd go out to the common room and take care of my thirst. I'd heed the demands, speak to a stranger and confide in him or even her that I was going to a wedding. But I knew this road like the place it was leading to and there were no common rooms on it, no taverns, no inns. The alfalfa fields would yield after a few miles and become cotton fields, and on beyond there would be vineyards with leafy vines delicately espaliered

> to the basic training. I knew this road. The only buildings on it are pumphouses, unless you count as a building the emergency telephone booth at the crossroads near the power line. The one where we stopped and telephoned from the time Judith forgot her vaccination certificate on the way back to college our second year. We made the call and waited on the corner throwing rocks at targets until [our mother] came charging up with the certificate and quite a few other things we'd forgotten. Driving this car, too; wearing shorts, I remember, and a blue polo shirt of papa's with the tail out almost as long as the shorts.

There is strong feeling in this scene that is achieved as much by pacing as by event or content. Why is she narrating this desolate stretch of road fifty miles

from her home? The answer has less to do with setting and action than with Cassandra's state of mind, her reluctance to arrive. Again, pacing points to meaning. Notice that Cassandra (and by extension, Baker) first "slowed down," then began to take note of her surroundings. Clearly she does not slow down because the late-June alfalfa is spectacular. Her change in speed is a cause, not an effect, of observation and reflection. We're outside the operations of plot. Baker is teaching us (and herself) about Cassandra. When Baker and Cassandra apply the brakes, they can both consider this familiar road. There isn't much here, just some pumphouses and an old emergency telephone booth. The declining speed allows Baker to conjure the booth, and the booth can then be useful, though it must not seem merely useful. For now, it is the catalyst for a memory of Judith and the deceased mother (and suddenly we have the

convincing detail of papa's blue shirt with a long tail).

For two paragraphs Cassandra obsesses and seethes over the upcoming wedding. Her speed increases, and her bitter introspection culminates in an unspecified malediction, uttered out loud:

> I don't know when I stopped drifting. Probably at the same time the word came out, but I was moving again, kicking up dust along the edges of the vineyards and slamming along between them, past the power line and past something green and shining. I was a good way beyond it when the green-and-shining got through to me for what it was—the old emergency booth, the one to use when in trouble. I stopped as soon as I knew it, left rubber on the road, and twisted around and looked back, and I was right. Our

booth, there by the power line. I put an arm over the back of the seat and backed up the whole way and pulled in on plowed ground beside it and cut the motor. It was twilight now, or almost; vespers after a roaring day, and I let it come in on me—my homeland, after all. It was still hot, but the edge was off, and I sat quiet for a minute while the dust settled. I stripped off my gloves, pulled the belt apart, found coins for the phone, and kept hearing a sound I thought I knew and then knew it—the moan of a pump, not far away, quite close.

It wasn't far to seek, just across the road, a plank pumphouse with a pipe sticking out of it spilling a clear head of water in a high cement weir, and I got out of the car and went straight to it and looked up at it—water, without which nothing

for us farmers, and also for us vagrants. There was a sun-beat ladder leaning against the weir, and I went up four or five rungs, very gingerly on the one that was split around the nail, until I was high enough to touch the flow with a finger, and then with a whole hand. There was a weight behind it, and enough force to push the hand away, so I took it away and grabbed the sides of the ladder and went on up and leaned far in. My mouth went to pieces with such a push against it but I made it hold while I drank. I made it hold again and again, and then without even deciding to I stuck my head in and let the water tear through to the roots of my hair and sluice one ear. I didn't stay long and on the way down I forgot all about the rung that was split. It was very dusty where I landed, and I'm not sure but I think I cried a little.

What the narrative needs is for Cassandra to get home, but somehow here she is, in the middle of the opening chapter, sitting by a broken ladder in a dusty field. Call it her ground state. Imagine a writer imagining this scene. Imagine the satisfying surprise of a writing day that includes the split rung, the sluiced ear. Think about what has happened here. Driving home, Cassandra (Baker too!) is waylaid by a phone booth, "the one to use when in trouble." She stops her journey. Then, on the way to the phone booth, she is waylaid by the pumphouse. Thus the distractible protagonist is distracted from a distraction. When she slowed down, she conjured the booth and the pumphouse, both of which prove useful. For Baker, the expanse of land between Berkeley and the ranch is real and not merely a narrative gameboard. Willing to slow down, willing to stop the car and even to put it in reverse, she is alive to the possibilities and opportunities that exist beyond the

strictures of plot. It's not easy to write one-person drama, but here Baker discovers wonderfully revelatory action in an interstitial narrative zone. The episode at the pumphouse perfectly characterizes Cassandra as reckless, impetuous, self-destructive. We see her lack of control and her flirtation with oblivion. It is an inconsequential moment of tremendous consequence.

After she picks herself up from ground, Cassandra does make that call home from the emergency phone booth. In this way she once again both hastens and postpones her reunion with her sister. This is a novel that begins with a sort of map: "I told them I could be free by the twenty-first, and that I'd come home on the twenty-second." Baker plotted her move but did not make it. Pacing is the technical means by which she so convincingly depicts the troubled and dangerously ambivalent Cassandra.

4

In my examples thus far, narrative destination has been distinct, significant. Like a first responder, a character gets into a car and drives toward the trouble. These plotted termini—Albert's house, the family ranch—are the primary sites of drama in the fiction. If patient writing is most visible when writers plot a move but don't make it, these passages of patient writing are relatively visible because they are imbued with anticipation and suspense. Since the destination is vital, the deferral of arrival, the suspension of a journey, creates a heightened energy. Patient writing, however, can exist in much more mundane circumstances. The concept of destination or authorial move—in the shadows of which patient writing thrives—need not involve a momentous journey or dense node of

plot. Sometimes the next move is just a trip to the kitchen, the garage.

Elizabeth McKenzie's first book, *Stop That Girl*, is a coming-of-age collection of linked stories about a character named Ann Ransom. The story "Life on Comet" features Ann in turbulent preadolescence. She longs to go shopping for stylish clothes, but she is forced to wear ill-fitting homemade clothes constituted from strange fabrics and buttons. She has sleep problems, anger issues, comically violent dreams and fantasies, and troubles at school, all stemming from a home life rendered radically unstable by her mother. Ann's mother is depressive and inconstant, prone to disappearing into her dark bedroom. Ann, her younger sister, and her stepfather all exist warily in the presence of the mother's emotional volatility.

"Life on Comet" begins at a neighborhood barbecue. This is the first time, Ann tells us in the opening sentence, that her family has attended—

or even been invited to—such an event. One gets the idea that the family is attempting to be normal, to socialize with neighbors in a wholesome way. Immediately Ann gets into an argument, then a shoving match, with a classmate neighbor named Leslie about whether Comet is a planet (Ann is correct on this point, though not gracious). The adults break up the fight, and Ann's mother says that it's time to go home. Ann, her sister, and her stepfather, Roy, all want to stay. But the mother announces that she doesn't feel well and they're all going home. She bolts, and the others follow truculently. Once inside their house, they all yell at each other about the incident, and then the mother vanishes into her dark room.

Ann spends a few desultory hours in the yard and house, smashing a tetherball, pacing the fence, lying in bed, and playing a violent volcano game with her sister. During this time, we learn about her nightmares, her therapist, and her visits to the

principal's office. Then the story turns, lurches forward on the power of Ann's agency, ingenuity, and desire: "Later, no sign of Mom, Kathy settled down in front of our black-and-white Zenith with a plum, and I have an idea. I take a pack of matches outside with some Oscar Mayer weiners." Ann's idea—originating from hope, not spite—is to recreate the neighborhood barbecue without the neighborhood. The family failed to integrate into the world, but perhaps they can at least bond together on a small scale at home. Ann, though, is unable to light the old charcoal in the barbecue. She holds lit matches to the coals until they burn her fingers. Ray sees her from the porch and half-heartedly tells her that she shouldn't play with matches.

> He crosses the yard now and inspects my work. "Not a bad idea," he says. "What do you say we bring out some fresh charcoal and lighter fluid?"

"Sure."

"We've got ketchup and mustard, relish, the rest?"

"Yeah, I checked," I tell him.

"What should we make for a side course?"

"We have potato chips," I say.

"Okay, we're set," he says. "Come on."

Come on. The dialogue is brisk and there is implied haste in Roy's summons. Roy, Ann, the family barbecue, the family equilibrium, McKenzie's plot and story—each at this point requires just two items, some fresh charcoal and lighter fluid. That's all. These are not exotic items; they can be retrieved in a sentence, perhaps even an introductory clause or phrase of a sentence that gets us right back to the scene at hand. *We're set*, as Roy says. Let's get the items, quickly. Once we have them, we can make a fire, cook the

hot dogs, coax the mother out of her room, achieve domestic tranquility via barbecue, achieve poignant realism via linked and escalating scenes. Destination: garage. A small detour. There is every reason, for character and author, to hurry along. Ordinary writers, finding themselves in need of these common items, would gather them rapidly from a shelf and return to the wide path marked *Climactic Action Ahead*.

McKenzie, though, resists the strong tailwinds and slows down the minute Ann and Roy enter the cluttered garage. The cluttered garage—this must also be in one of Chekhov's letters to his brother—is ideal for fiction. You can't move quickly through a cluttered garage. You have to step carefully. You have to look where you're going. Ann follows Roy, watches him as he lifts a lawn mower, knocks over a bag of steer manure, hangs a rake on a nail, squeezes between two dressers "full of fossils and rocks." Here is Wood's surplus—the

stuff in this garage shimmers with "lifeness," precisely to the extent that it exceeds story. The stuff in this garage was not a part of some plan. It is not merely functional. It does not exist to help Ann (or McKenzie) make her way through the story, though in a sense that's exactly what it does. McKenzie created this junk as she typed, as she looked around, but paradoxically we understand that it has been here all along, unobserved and ignored until Roy and Ann walked in to get charcoal and lighter fluid.

> Mom has a little area in the corner for projects. She has a pink Formica table, our kitchen table from the old days, and on it is a wooden box filled with different kinds of scissors. For some reason she really loves scissors. You can't even touch her scissors, she thinks they're so great. On the wall is a bulletin board rustling with articles about

> newly discovered perils in the world, such as pesticide levels in farmed salmon and botulism in dimpled cans. Today there's something there I've never noticed before. It's a hard little suitcase, and I lift the latches. Inside, fitting perfectly, is a small blue typewriter, so compact it looks like a toy. Smith Corona. I take a piece of paper and roll it in crookedly. I start trying to type.

You can see, in this scene, what patience gets the writer. You can see how a commitment to pacing generates material. The pink Formica table, the scissors, the rustling articles about botulism, the blue typewriter—these convincing and revelatory details are the fruit of pace.

Roy then holds up a piece of melted glass that Ann's mother once found at the scene of a fire. Ann says that her mother might make something

of that "if she ever comes out of her cave." Roy then testily defends his wife and urges Ann toward forbearance. "Okay. Good girl," he concludes. "Now, let's find that charcoal." But really, why not linger in this hot garage with that Smith Corona?

> I've been nervously poking at the typewriter. The keys have been overlapping and striking one on top of the other, smudging or missing. Now they're stuck together in a wad, and I reach in and try to pull them apart. My fingers are mottled with ink.
>
> "Can you come here a second?" He's rummaging still. "Roy?"
>
> He says, "I'm busy! What is it now?"
>
> "I just need you," I say.
>
> He stops and regards me, and he's hot and sweaty, but he makes his way over, straddling and shoving as he comes. "What

now?" he asks, and when I point at the tangle in the typewriter, he takes the chair and digs in and quickly restores the machine to a usable state. Then he leans forward and straightens the piece of paper and types this:

NOW IS THE TIME FOR ALL GOOD MEN TO COME TO THE AID OF THEIR PARTY.

"What's that mean?"

"Just habit," Roy says. "Some kind of political slogan from the turn of the century."

He's just warming up. He types some other things then. Part of the Gettysburg Address, then some verse like *Double double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble*, then *I am the captain of the Pinafore, and a right good captain too, I'm very very good, and be it understood*—He's making the little typewriter come alive, every finger flying

and the carriage riding out to the side, ringing the bell, and then getting slapped back into place, all in one motion so he doesn't ever have to stop. "What should I type now?" he asks me. "Anything!"

"How about the names of all the teachers at my school?"

"Okay, call 'em out," he says, and I do, and into the typewriter they go by way of his madly octopoidal fingers. Then I start shouting out really goofy things I make up right then, and he types those too. Things like *We are the cows, we are the best, we're getting numerous, we will infest!* By the time he stops, he's almost filled the whole piece of paper, single space. The paper is punctured and bumpy.

"My top speed was one hundred thirty words a minute," Roy says. "I was in the army, but I was stuck in an office."

> "Oh," I say, and nod eagerly. My pigtails flop against my shoulders like paintbrushes.
>
> "I've got a lot to learn," Roy says to me. "You know that. I'm not perfect. Not even close!"
>
> I smile and nod some more.
>
> "Well, better find the charcoal and get it going," he says. "This will cheer up your sister. Maybe even your mother."
>
> "And me too," I say.
>
> "And you too," says Roy. "Go in and talk to her, will you? See what you can do?"

This is a delightful and utterly surprising scene, tender but unsentimental. It illuminates three main characters (including one who is absent), and it deepens the story without altering its dramatic trajectory at all. I think it is exceedingly unlikely that McKenzie saw this coming or planned for it. She discovered it—it became possible—when she refused to

rush Ann's trip to the garage. The clutter, like a county road, helps the author regulate the pace, but then the typewriter in its splendid hinged case, once invented and engaged, becomes a kind of scenic lighter fluid. What is interesting here is that the scene, once Roy begins typing, is especially brisk and zany, not at all deliberate or patient in its own right. Strangely, I now find myself arguing that patient writing need not be patient. Here is a case where patience cannot be reduced to pacing. One of the things I'm suggesting about patience in fiction is that it exists within the context of the entire story and its sequence of scenes. This passage, while it tumbles forward quickly and comically, is in a kind of dramatic cul-de-sac. The family barbecue awaits out on the narrative thoroughfare. For all of its wild energy, this scene exemplifies patient writing, and scenes like this one lend support to my plea for students to slow down. *This* is what it gets you to fall off the map a bit. This is the kind of

unnecessary and invaluable stuff you can find when you watch your character trudge into a hot garage. A box of scissors, for instance.

5

A final (and favorite) example of patient writing is a very brief passage—just two short paragraphs—near the end of Raymond Carver's story "Cathedral." The shape of this story is not a journey but a visitation. The narrator's wife has invited her old friend Robert to stay with them for a night after the death of his wife. Robert is blind. The narrator, unhappy at work and at home, is dismissive and defensive about Robert's visit. "A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to" serves as something of his thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph. He is

jealous about his wife's relationship with Robert, he is callous about Robert's blindness, and he seems determined to be a boorish host. The story enacts a gradual reversal, however, and by the third act, after a lot of food and a lot of scotch and some pot, the narrator and Robert are on relatively equal footing. Late at night the narrator's wife falls asleep on the couch. Good writing requires credible and elegant contrivance, and Carver contrives to get these two men alone, sitting in front of an educational television program about cathedrals. Robert asks the narrator to describe cathedrals, and the narrator is unable to do it. He tries several times and fails badly. While failing at this basic but difficult task he is forced to admit that cathedrals—all of religion, really—mean nothing to him. He has, it turns out, no spiritual resources. Robert encourages the narrator, comforts him like a lover. The narrator, though, grows despondent. You can track his downward movement throughout this

scene, and then you can see him hit bottom. “The truth is,” he says to Robert, “cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They’re something to look at on late-night TV. That’s all they are.”

Here the narrator is naked, vulnerable. He began the evening with caustic asides about Robert—his blindness, his beard, his smoking—but hours later he is emotionally splayed. His defenses have evaporated, and he sits helpless before the blind man he so ardently did not want in his house. And that’s when Robert, like Ann Ransom, has an *idea*. It’s actually Carver’s idea, and it’s an idea that will lead directly to the lovely and tender ending of the story. “Hey, listen to me,” Robert says, turning the story toward its conclusion. “Will you do me a favor? I got an idea. Why don’t you find us some heavy paper? And a pen. We’ll do something. We’ll draw one together. Get us a pen and some heavy paper. Go on, bub, get the stuff.”

Let's pause here to consider that Carver, composing or even revising this story, is at this point right on the verge of an astonishingly intimate final scene, one of the most iconic endings in the American short story. All that is required is a pen and some heavy paper! That's it. Go get it, bub! Get the stuff! These two men are going to draw a cathedral together, the narrator with his eyes closed, Robert with his hand closed around the narrator's. And this scene is not difficult to get to. Here, I'll try it: "So I went and got the stuff he wanted." That's a passable imitation of Carver and it certainly gets the job done. It also reinforces the narrator's pliability and lack of skepticism, the extent of this reversal. He's now taking orders. My sentence is not fancy but neither is Carver. If you used my sentence, this would still be a terrific story.

But here's Carver:

> So I went upstairs. My legs felt like they didn't have any strength

> in them. They felt like they did after I'd done some running. In my wife's room, I looked around. I found some ballpoints in a little basket on her table. And then I tried to think where to look for the kind of paper he was talking about.
>
> Downstairs, in the kitchen, I found a shopping bag with onion skins in the bottom of the bag. I emptied the bag and shook it. I brought it into the living room and sat down with it near his legs. I moved some things, smoothed the wrinkles from the bag, spread it out on the coffee table.

Perhaps I am an idiosyncratic reader, but to me this is a glorious passage. Once a character (or the writer) has an *idea*, it can be difficult for the writer not to move directly toward it. Robert's voice is the voice of plot—hurry, we'll do event now—but Carver

somehow heads upstairs. (The narrator, we see clearly, has given himself over to Robert's will.) After looking at Millhauser's county roads and McKenzie's cluttered garage, it's fun to notice here that Carver's narrator begins by saying his legs aren't working right. They're weak, they're slowing him down just a bit. The ballpoint pens in the little basket are quite good, but the paper shopping bag is evidence of imaginative genius. Those onion skins! The bag is not empty—it's not a prop and this kitchen is not a set. Carver's world is not fully *understood*—indeed, he is a bard of bewilderment—but his world is fully *imagined*. In this moment he has imagined not only the bag but its dark interior. The real world—the world that fiction attempts to represent—is capacious, and patient writing helps to fill it in. Inside the story is a house; inside the house is a downstairs; inside the downstairs is a kitchen; inside the kitchen is a bag; and inside the bag, look now, are *onion skins*. Lest you think

that the author lacks conviction in his made-up story, he has discovered brittle, fragrant, evocative, wispy, unnecessary onion skins in the bottom of that bag, which is itself not even strictly necessary. The paper bag is not merely useful; the author has not stashed it here in the kitchen as a long-distance runner might stash fuel along the route. If you turn the bag over, the skins fall out. The bag exists in time. It has a past. The inside of the bag is real, which helps me believe in all that is outside of the bag. Again, all Carver needed to finish this story was some paper and pens, bub.

The vitality of the onion skins is not connected to theme or subject. We're not in the realm of interpretation. Perhaps you could write an essay about the skins as metaphor, or about how the story operates to make the invisible visible, or about Carver and the domestic, but the thrill of the onion skins has nothing to do with meaning and everything to do with vivid veracity,

achieved by a writer who refuses to hurry. It is sometimes the case in my classes that *onion skins* becomes a repeated phrase or invocation, a marginal comment, a workshop shorthand for the luminous details that spill over the banks of story. But most young writers have a sense that details are important in fiction, and this is not ultimately a lesson about details, not really. It's a lesson about the habits of pace and progression that allow for the spontaneous generation of detail. By not getting there quite yet, the writer has a moment to invent a world that was already there.