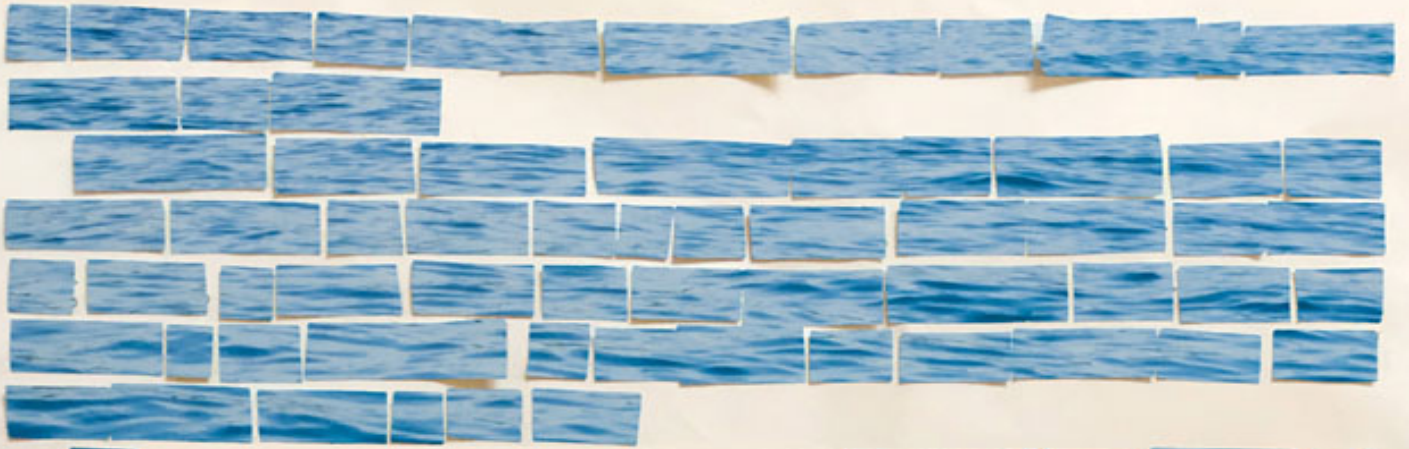
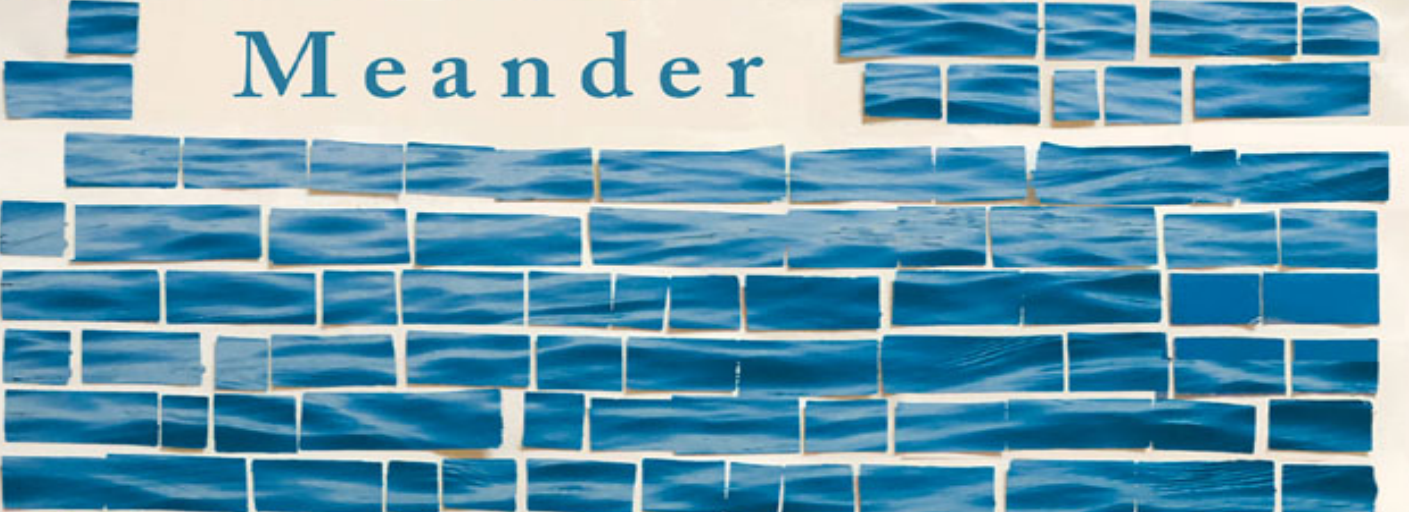


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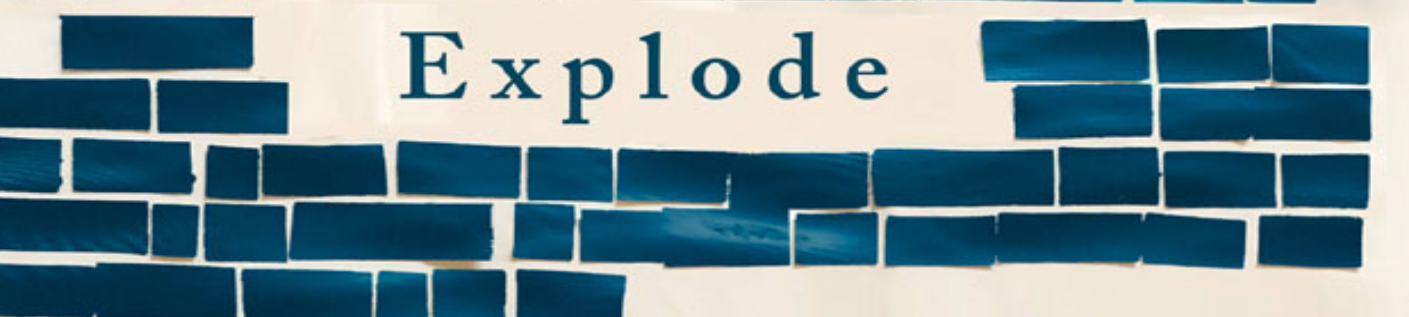
Meander



Spiral



Explode



Design and Pattern in Narrative

Meander, Spiral, Explode

MEANDER,
SPIRAL,
EXPLODE

Design and Pattern in Narrative

JANE ALISON

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POINT, LINE, TEXTURE

Before flying overhead to view spirals, meanders, or branching patterns in stories, I want to look at text close-up: how it feels to travel word-by-word as the narrative unfurls around you. This is the first way we move through a story: one-way motion, word after word until the end. Narratologists call it movement on the *discourse* or textual level. (*Discourse* comes from *discurro*, to run back and forth: think of your eyes reading lines on this page.) Other movement takes place inside the content of the story: what happens, whether things happen chronologically or are tangled and must be unraveled, whether you move less through events than through ideas, and so on. These storyworld movements can be more complex than the word-after-word transit and form the large patterns we'll look at soon. First, that one-way trip.*

A physical way to envision the trip: think of swimming along a river. Stroking, kicking, floating, you'd feel or see the water's chills and warm plumes, its siltiness or clarity, when it burbles over pebbles or grows still, when it's tangled with greenery, when it sparkles or flows through shade. Moving word-by-word through a story is analogous: we "see," "hear," "feel" what we read as we flow forward, line after line.

Fine for a metaphor, but how do writers create those primary sensations of speed or sluggishness, transparency or murk, that a reader meets in our medium? What actually are the elements of our medium? Most craft books say that the "elements of fiction" are

character, plot, place, etc. But I want to go down to true elements, the tiniest particles a reader encounters: letters, phonemes. These gather to form words, which line up as sentences, which clump in paragraphs or *crots* (prose stanzas, *stanza* being Italian for “room”), everything flowing over white space. With all of this we create the medium, or texture, through which a reader moves.

Text and *texture* are joined at the feet, for both come from *texere*.

Although we first absorb printed letters or words as pictures, we also “hear” them: neural activity registering sound is about the same whether a word is read silently or aloud; a part of the brain called Broca’s area generates the “sound” of a word internally. So, reading, we see a picture and “hear” a sound, and in both cases we experience the word in time. (The sense of a word, its clarity or cascade of connotations, naturally also affects how long a word feels to us.) In English, the sounds of letters and syllables are so varied that their length isn’t as measurable as scored notes of music, but we still sense differences among them. The letter *t* is quicker than *m*; *bit* is quicker than *bite*. We see and hear the difference in length between *tot* and *tomb*, between *tot* and *tomatillo*. We might also see and hear commas, semicolons, question marks, periods—the tribe of punctuation—and the spaces between marks. All of these take portions of time. So, types of letters, lengths of words, friction or fluidity among them, repetition, pauses or liltings within our inner ear signaled by commas or question marks: these are our elementary particles, the visual, auditory, and temporal units with which we first design.

On to the sentence. Even a one-word sentence fragment can take surprising time and open up space in our minds, if that word is long or has long sounds, as of course does a very long sentence. Something fascinating about sentences is that when I’m in the thrall of one, I’m held in its temporal and spatial orbit; it begins and ends when it must, holding and directing me until ready to let me go. I move slowly through tricky syntax; luxurious language makes me linger; or I warily await a final word that will snap the whole into sense.

For more on sound and syntax, see Ellen Bryant Voigt’s beautiful *Art of Syntax*. Now, though, some examples. Look at this two-part

paragraph in David Foster Wallace's "Forever Overhead." The story's about a boy sensing new things in himself on his thirteenth birthday—and learning alarming facts about time:

And dreams. For months past, there have been dreams like nothing before: moist and busy and distant, full of yielding curves, frantic pistons, soft warmths and great fallings; and you have awakened through fluttering lids to a rush and a gush and a toe-curling scalp-snapping jolt of feeling from an inside deeper than you knew you had, spasms of a deep sweet hurt, the streetlights through your window blinds cracking into sharp stars against the black bedroom ceiling, and on you a dense white jam that lisps between trembling legs, trickles and sticks, cools on you, hardens and clears until there is nothing but gnarled knots of pale solid animal hair in the morning shower, and in the wet tangle a clean sweet smell you can't believe comes from anything you made inside you.

The first two words form not a sentence but a fragment ("there have been" is understood), yet the single word *dreams* lingers long in my mouth and skull. Then that 132-word sentence is fabulous as it meanders, flows, rushes, explodes, and finally stills in a pool of reflection. These two are different animals, ant and giant squid, each with its own motion and life span. So, a fundamental way to design narrative is to work with a range within our smallest units, from syllable to word to phrase, clause, and sentence, much as you'd plant a garden with different leaves: pixelated baby's breath, spike of aloe, palm.

Another way to design on this level is to play with sentence *patterns*. You see and hear the boredom of a row of sentences starting with "the"; ditto when all sentences follow the same syntax: subject-verb, single clause. Here, by subtle contrast, is the opening of Raymond Carver's "Why Don't You Dance":

In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the chiffonier. Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom—nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side.

His side, her side.

He considered this as he sipped the whiskey.

The first sentence is grammatically simple, with a single subject even if it takes two verbs: he poured . . . and looked. It also begins with a prepositional phrase rather than the subject. With two independent clauses, the second sentence is compound, a step more elaborate: the mattress was stripped, and the sheets lay beside two pillows. The third sentence, like the first, begins with a phrase but steps farther up the scale in being complex, with main and dependent clauses: things looked much the way they had. Next comes no sentence at all but a fragment repeating two phrases from the sentence above—his side, her side: the structure mirrors the split bed. Then we start back down the scale of single-compound-complex-fragment with another complex sentence: he considered this as he sipped. This is a crisp way to create texture via sentence variety, even in Carver's spare prose. Just break down each of these sentences to be syntactically simple (and complete), in subject-verb formation, to feel the dulling effect:

He poured another drink in the kitchen. He looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped. The candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the chiffonier. They'd looked much like this in the bedroom. A nightstand and reading lamp had been on his side of the bed. A nightstand and reading lamp had been on her side.

There had been his side. There had been her side.

He considered this. He sipped the whiskey.

You lose a lot if you run from complex sentences with their depths, the way they pull one time zone or idea into the light and let another sink. *Things looked much the way they had in the bedroom.* That bedroom, that marriage, that love: all gone. What's here *now* are relics on the lawn and this man at a window, looking.

A complex sentence can not only take longer to wade through but can almost be a mini-story. Here's one from Nicholson Baker's *Mezzanine*:

From the men's room came the roar of a flushed urinal, followed immediately by "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" whistled with infectious cheerfulness and lots of rococo tricks—most notably the difficult yodel-trill technique, used here on the "ee" of "dandy," in which the whistler gets his lips to flip the sound binarily between the base tone and a higher pitch that is I think somewhere between a major third and a perfect fourth above it (why it is not a true harmonic but rather perceptibly out of tune has puzzled me often—something to do with the physics of pursed lips?): a display of virtuosity forgivable only in the men's room, and not, as some of the salesmen seemed to think, in the relative silence of working areas, where people froze, hate exuding from suspended Razor Points, as the whistler passed.

This is its own cosmos! Truly designed—and look at that menu of punctuation. (Try writing a page-long sentence using every kind. And why not every letter?) Even though the main action's over in the first line—*from the men's room came the roar*—you'd be missing an amusement park of a sentence if you didn't read on. A different effect comes in a sentence that also gives its main action at the start but then rolls on and on with a series of paratactic ("and") phrases tumbling forward. Here's one from Jamaica Kincaid's *Mr. Potter*:

And the dew was vanishing quickly from the presence of the early morning sun, and the dew rose up, forming

a picture of thin, worn-out old curtains, shielding a landscape filled up with sea and sky and ships with masts and boats for rowing and canoes and men who will fall overboard, never to be heard from again, and women with trays of fruit on their heads on their way to market, and children who are completely absorbed in the child's world that is made up of powerlessness and pain and the margins of joy, and wet clothes hung on a clothesline, and goats bleating and cows crying as they are milked or just before they are slaughtered, and policemen marching to their station at the governor's house, and the governor just getting out of bed, and the hen laying an egg and the egg being scrambled and then being eaten between two slices of bread and the bread was made by the baker Mr. Daniel, and Mr. Daniel was descended from men and women brought from Africa many years ago and made slaves, and Mr. Daniel, in blissful ignorance, had become a Seventh-Day Adventist.

And here's the opening sentence from Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Water*, based on the Chappaquiddick horror:

The rented Toyota, driven with such impatient exuberance by The Senator, was speeding along the unpaved unnamed road, taking the turns in giddy skidding slides, and then, with no warning, somehow the car had gone off the road and had overturned in black rushing water, listing to its passenger's side, rapidly sinking.

Am I going to die?—like this?

Oates's syntax—her speedy paratactic clauses, modifying phrases that add neat packets of information, and a veto on commas between adjectives—races as fast as the Senator's car.

How about sentences that try to reflect human thought, with its fumblings, pauses, corrections? Look at this from B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, in which the narrator returns to the town where his friend Tony lived; as he walks through town, his thoughts wander:

Perhaps they had a doctor to me on Saturday morning, the next day, yes, I remember they did, I was counting my pulse rate, knew what it was normally, then, do not know, now, no. . . . June was out for Saturday, perhaps all day, certainly for lunch, for lunch Tony came in and said he was cooking fish fingers, he said they tasted okay if they were fried, a curious thing to remember, all memories are curious, for that matter, the mind as a think of an image . . .

Then there is the space around text (or, in this passage, interrupting it to make bubbles of wordlessness). A pool of white surrounding a raft of words rests the eye and creates the time-space for a reader to draw connections or ponder. Marguerite Duras uses white space in an especially designed way in *The Lover*, which I'll talk about later; Dinty Moore has a fine essay on the uses and misuses of white space called "Positively Negative"; Nigel Krauth and Simon Barton also have much to say on the kinetic and semantic properties of space.

Super-short paragraphs and line breaks can aerate prose, throwing light into density, giving the reader space to think. They also create dynamism, letting the eye swing to the left more often, each swing shifting the thought. Here's the opening of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, about a woman who might be the last person on earth:

In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.

Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say. Or in the National Gallery.

Naturally they could only say that when I was in Paris or in London. Somebody is living in the Metropolitan Museum, being what they would say when I was still in New York.

Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages.

To tell the truth, perhaps I left only three or four messages altogether.

I have no idea how long ago it was when I was doing that. If I were forced to guess, I believe I would guess ten years.

Possibly it was several years longer ago than that, however.

And of course I was quite out of my mind for a certain period too, back then.

These mini-paragraphs, some a single line, are being typed by Markson's narrator as she struggles to assemble what she knows of the world, to draw a thread between it and herself with language. She's having a solo dialogue, a desperate thinking-through. But with no way to check the "truth" of anything she thinks, she helplessly begins to weave a new net of "knowledge" from ever flimsier fiber. She's a lone, last Penelope, weaving and unraveling meaning as she types—a process we feel at the start of each line, each fragile warp or weft.

In her novella *Days*, Dorthe Nors also imagines a female narrator writing a personal account of solitude; she keeps a cryptic diary of daily lists as spare as bone. Yet they gradually reveal her inner and outer worlds, through both what they give and what they leave out, an unnerving emptiness around each line. Here's the first day:

1. *So much for that winter,*
2. I thought, looking at the last crocuses of spring;
3. they lay down on the ground
4. and I was in doubt.

5. Chewed out an entire school because a single sentence bugged me
6. and drank my hot chocolate, *sweet/bitter*.
7. Worked,
8. considered traveling somewhere I never imagined I'd find myself
9. yet stayed where I was
10. and banged on my neighbor's wall,
11. was in doubt, but sure,
12. was insecure,
13. stood still by the window,
14. let my gaze move from running shoes to wool socks
15. and lay down on the bed.

Compare those spare, lonely passages with the quicksand of Sebald or Knausgaard, where there's no breath of white space for days. Akin to this literal textual density—what we see on the page, how much relief we get—is the degree of resolution in what is actually being said: the density of detail or association. On one end of the spectrum could be Tao Lin's *Shoplifting from American Apparel*; here is its opening:

Sam woke around 3:30 p.m. and saw no emails from Sheila. He made a smoothie. He lay on his bed and stared at his computer screen. He showered and put on clothes and opened the Microsoft Word file of his poetry. He looked at his email. About an hour later it was dark outside. Sam ate cereal with soymilk.

Not only are the sentences short, simple, and mostly subject-verb, but the vision is low-resolution. With no grit or detail beyond a brand name, this writing (deliberately) has the texture of a cartoon or emoji. It's as flat as the screen Sam stares at.

Now consider another passage from Baker's *Mezzanine*. Here the narrator describes a tie, as everyday a subject as Lin's:

it was made of a silk that verged on crepe, and its pattern was composed of very small oval shapes, each containing a fascinating blob motif that seemed inspired by the hungry, pulsating amoebas that absorb excess stomach acid in Roloids' great dripping-faucet commercial, and when you looked closely you noticed that the perimeter of each oval was made of surprisingly garishly colored rectangles, like suburban tract houses; an order so small in scale, however, that those instances of brightness only contributed a secret depth and luminosity to the overall somber, old-masters coloration of the design.

This single sentence winds far longer and more intricately than Lin's seven short ones, offering elaborate phrases and clauses that give it different depths (this is in fact the second part of a longer, colon-split sentence). Several of Baker's words have four or five syllables, while no word of Lin's has more than three. Baker makes more texture with his detail and range of vision, from a microscopic look at amoebas to an overhead view of the suburbs; from lowbrow Roloids to Old Master painting. These two references themselves carry different cargoes of imagery and tone, and that Baker pairs them gives his sentence even more texture, like moving from a hard plastic surface to velvet. Both Lin's and Baker's passages treat minor content. Yet their different kinds of words, syntax, and associations—style and sensibility, you can say—create strikingly different textures. Further, Lin's passage narrates, making the storyworld advance in time, while Baker's describes: a portrait. And this takes me to the subject of movement in time.

* I won't address the use of explicit visual devices such as varied typography, or photographs and other graphic images embedded in the text, even though all of these can add to or trouble how we absorb or make sense of the language. See works cited by Simon Barton, Glyn White, and Nigel Krauth. Some thoughts on the uses of space and gaps will appear, but mostly I'm interested in patterning on the contentual level of text, not the graphic.

MOVEMENT AND FLOW

A few years ago my mother had a phase in which every three or four months something would short in her heart or brain, and she'd slump to the floor. Whatever did this left no trace; we guessed some kind of seizure. By the time I'd find her in the emergency room with her skinny arms taped and wired, she'd be back to herself, toss her head, and say, Oh, never mind. I'm *fine*. The last time this happened, as she again lay wired in a hospital bed, we played an alphabet game to kill the dull time as tests were run (names of flowers from *a* to *z*; names of birds; names of cities or cocktails). She began to fall silent for longer spells between words, forgetting which letter we'd reached or fumbling the topic, and her hand in mine grew still. I thought she was exhausted, drifting to sleep—when suddenly her machines flashed and buzzed, her face went hollow, and just as I cried out the medics ran in. They pushed me away, circled her, pounded, defibbed, injected, until her thin body arched from the bed—alive.

When the cardiologist came back later, he looked pleased: they'd captured what kept going wrong and had an easy solution. Pacemaker.

Since then, twice a year I take her to the “device clinic” so a technician can test the tiny box of technology bulging the thin skin at her collarbone. We sit in a small room with illegible screens, my mother in her wheelchair, me on a stool. The technician types up codes, makes connections, then turns to her. I'm just going to speed you up a few seconds, he says. My mother raises her brows at me,

but when he touches a key to make her heart race, her face goes still. Yet I see her eyes change, her gaze turn inward. After a moment he rolls back from his screen. How'd that feel? he asks. Well, she says, exciting. And I marvel at the power in his hand.

Ben Marcus calls the best stories “stun guns,” says they hold you “paralyzed on the outside but very nearly spasming within.” Yes. Think of what we can do. Our hands (as I type I realize that once I'd have said *hand*, but now most writing takes two hands: curious) can hold a reader fixed, making her feel not her own time but the time we devise. A story covering millennia can flit by in six minutes. A storyworld of just a minute can burn four hours in your life. It's magic, but a magic that can be mapped, which I suppose makes it technology. For there are different speeds in narrative, and shifting among them—sedating a reader, making him race—is in our hands, to be done with skill, with care.

SPEEDS

Call them speeds or flows or even *narrative hydraulics*. Henry James knew how important scenes are, “scene” being one of narrative's steals from drama, letting a writer portray an incident so that a reader almost sees it. After each scene, James said, a curtain can drop, and summary can let a writer hurry over moments that don't deserve the stage. Scene summary; walk, run: a smart way to get through a novel.

Since James, narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman have studied the differences between story time (how long an event in the storyworld takes) and text time (how long the telling on the page takes) and have named speeds according to the ratio between the two. There have been more refinements since (see Brian Richardson's *Narrative Dynamics* for many essays on this, or Anežka Kuzmičová). But here's a basic menu drawn from Genette and Chatman:

gap	fastest	no text/much story time
summary	fast	little text/much story time
scene	“real time”	text time = story time
dilation	slow	much text/ little story time
pause	slowest	much text/ no story time

Starting at the middle: if an event in the story and its telling on the page take about the same time, we’re in “real time.” A scene usually comes closest to this, with dialogue, choreography, and slivers of description holding our attention as we “watch” the incident play out. The purest form of real time would actually be the transcription of a character’s diary entry or letter or some other page of print: then words on the story’s page would equal what’s “happening” in the story (printed words on a page), so text time = story time.

If a story’s events would take much longer than a reader spends reading them, the narrative speed is fast: *summary*. Here is the Australian writer Murray Bail moving quickly over several years in his novel *Eucalyptus*:

Early on [Holland] had packed his daughter off to the nuns in Sydney, until—for no apparent reason—abruptly bringing her back. At least in Sydney she learned to sew and swim and to wear gloves. In the dormitory she developed the eager way of talking, between girlfriends, and the uses of silence; on weekends at distant relations’ Ellen while scraping vegetables liked to overhear the stories told by men, and she could watch as lipstick was carefully applied. On the property she roamed about wild. He seemed to allow it. Then she became quiet: in her teens.

Seven or eight years here? Summary can be deadly dull, but Bail splices sensory glimmers into his to draw the reader in: gloves, scraping vegetables, lipstick.

I'll take Bail's "uses of silence" to move now to *gap*. This is the fastest, when the text goes mute and we can leap over eons of story time. White space! Overused often, but so useful. All sorts of things can "happen" in white space: a few minutes, a month, centuries—leaving a place for a reader to ponder or guess. On the other side of the gap, back in the stream of words, you might need to figure out what you missed. In Salarrué's short-short "We Bad," a sliver of space between the story's halves equals several hours one night—but in this space, a man and his son are murdered. This we learn obliquely a few paragraphs after the gap: "In the nearby gully, Goyo and his youngster fled bit by bit in the beaks of vultures." Salarrué doesn't have to picture the murder. He makes us do it, makes us complicit.

So: scene = real time; summary = fast; ellipsis or gap = fastest. Now, back down the scale from real time. If the printed words showing a story event take more time to read than the event would: *dilation*. Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," about a book critic named Anders who gets caught in a bank robbery, is the best showcase I know of all speeds, especially dilation. (Try reading the story line by line, noting the speed of each.) Here is one of two specimens of dilation in "Bullet." We're mid-story, once the robber has grown annoyed with Anders; in the below lines we'll start with real-time/scenic treatment (dialogue, narration) before making a deft switch. Anders has caught the robber's attention and been told to look away:

Anders fixed his gaze on the man's shiny wing-tip shoes.

"Not down there. Up there." He stuck the pistol under Anders' chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank. . . . The domed ceiling had been decorated

with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. . . . The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders' eye was Zeus and Europa—portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there'd been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, "Hubba hubba."

"What's so funny, bright boy?"

Story time passes as we gaze with Anders at the ludicrous ceiling: we know this because the robber responds to Anders's evident snickering: "What's so funny, bright boy?" I've deleted several lines from the passage, yet it still takes a bit longer to read about the ceiling than for Anders to study it. Dilation: text time is greater than story time. Wolff dilates extravagantly a few lines later, when the robber (spoiler alert) shoots Anders in the head:

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of ion transports and neurotransmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these traced a peculiar pattern, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to memory.

What follows is a brilliantly counterintuitive *pause*. All action in the story has stopped, and we are told instead what is *not* happening: what Anders doesn't remember. Not his first lover and "the cordial way she had with his unit," not his wife, not his daughter, not the sweet moments when he saw that he loved literature. The account of what Anders did not remember goes on for a page, and while we read, the story has frozen. Lots of text, but no event: the slowest narrative speed, a pause. But given what we are waiting for—to see what Anders does remember, and for the bullet to "do its work and leave the troubled skull behind"—I'm happy to sit suspended.

When the pause is over, we learn at last what Anders recalls, in a return to scenic treatment. But it's the sort of scene that exists in memory, occupying an enchanted space in Anders's altered brain-time: "This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects . . ." Do you hear that word *heat*? A single word, small as can be. But it takes up time: the long diphthong; the reconfiguration of my inner mouth to move from *remembered* to the opening *H*; another reconfiguration to move from that final *t* and onward. *Heat*. This single word slows me, creates a lull between the act of remembering and what's remembered. This word clears a glade in the mind for the potent, lingering scene that will be Anders's final memory and the end of his story.

Why have a menu of speeds? For illusion, economy, variety, of course. Also for magic and power. See the reader, paralyzed by a white page marked with tiny pictures. Only her eyes move, from cluster to cluster of letters, a dot or two, a curl, but in her brain: synaptic lightning, a whirring glade, *heat*.

PATTERNING WITH SPEEDS OR FLOW

Choosing different types or lengths of words, sentences, and speeds lets you design a narrative as variegated as a garden. But you can also create *patterns* with speeds, manipulating the story so that repetitions and rhythms emerge just below the surface. You can switch among narrated action, a reflective pause, speedy summary,

more action, a curious gap, a pause for comment, and so on: you can make a pattern of flow and still-spots. Chandra's story "Shakti" is a fine specimen of this.

VIKRAM CHANDRA'S "SHAKTI"

This long story from *Love and Longing in Bombay* is about Sheila Bijlani and her cheery ambition to rise socially, which means battling the old-world socialite Dolly Boatwalla. It's a mini-mock epic told by gossiping men:

What you must understand about Sheila Bijlani is that she was always glamorous. Even nowadays, when in the corners of parties you hear the kind of jealous bitching that goes on and they say there was a day when she was nothing but the daughter of a common chemist-type shopkeeper growing up amongst potions and medicines, you must never forget that the shop was just below Kemp's Corner. . . . [S]he saw the glittering women who went in and out of the shop, sometimes for aspirin, sometimes for lipstick, and Sheila watched and learnt a thing or two.

Two pages of chatty summary follow Sheila as she becomes a hostess for Air France, marries unlikely, sweaty Bijlani, who manufactures "mixies" (blenders), and lands in a huge apartment on Malabar Hill. "So now Sheila was on the hill, not quite on the top but not quite at the bottom, either, and from this base camp she began her steady ascent. . . . [T]he top of the hill was the Boatwalla mansion, which stood on a ridge surrounded by crumbling walls."

Clear lines. Sheila belongs to a world of mixies and airplanes: newness, fluidity, ascent. Dolly, atop the hill, belongs to crumbling walls and old freighters (she is a "kind of stately ship"). A battle will rage between women and social classes, and it will last years, from a snubbing to a blackballing, to the founding of an exclusive club, to a

marriage proposal to a buyout effort, and at last to a marriage-merger. Chandra could sum up all incidents in a few sentences, or give each incident full scenic treatment. Neither would be smart. Instead, he gives each element its due time on the page. He shows scenes that are truly dramatic, where something happens that we must see, and intersperses them with summary, gaps, and so on. Good pacing. But the variations in speed over forty pages also reveal two patterning systems that help give the story motion and form.

I see the first system in the *content* of the scenes. Each (insulting) act meets a counteract: attack A, counterattack A', attack B, counterattack B'. This system of retribution has a larger parallel in the social rectification going on throughout the story: the Sheilas of India will rise, and what helps Sheila do this is her ability also to "descend": unlike Dolly, she is empathetic to the woman who works for her, Ganga, who's on a far lower stratum but will repay a favor of Sheila's with an even greater one. Like the airplane that would be her attribute were she painted as a goddess or saint, Sheila can fly up and down. Dolly can only glide on a level. This first pattern, then, is a system of balances.

But when I look through content and instead chart the shifts among speeds, I find another kind of patterning. At the story's key moments, after a dramatic scene comes a nearly still spot. Dolly snubs Sheila in a vivid scene, and then Sheila "sat in her office among the books and tried to think about what she had felt at that moment. It hadn't been anger, more a kind of recognition," which she parses for a paragraph. We watch her think—time passes—but it is slowed, making this a dilation, and one the narrative's health needs. An incident happens and then is pondered, its deeper sense revealed. A comparable still-spot comes pages later, once Sheila has delivered a crafty snub to Dolly, again in real time. After this friction, narrative and reader need a chance to recover, and we get this in a relaxed description from a safe distance. This pairing of drama with stillness soon happens again, and here the story's flow is not reflective so much as compressed, an inward rage that would look motionless from outside. Sheila wants to crush the Boatwallas. She's thinking about money, but the image is apt: "she saw how it could be

like a stream, unpredictable and underground, and she was going to turn it into a torrent that would flow up the hill instead of down, crumbling the bloody Boatwalla gate like paper. It was going to burst out of the hillside under the mansion like a fountain from the interior rock.” Later, sleepless,

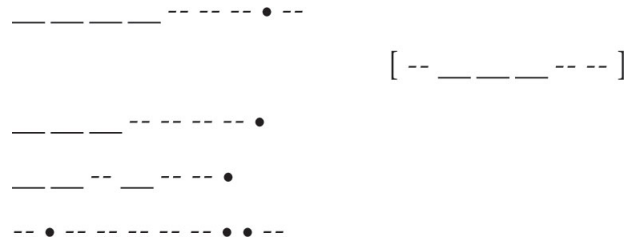
[s]he could see the shapes of the companies they owned, how they fit together, and she moved the segments against one another like the pieces on a chessboard, looking for the nuance that would give them the edge. . . . Again she tried to sleep, but now it was only the zeros that spun before her, symmetrical and unchanging. *Shunya shunya shunya*, the words came to her in her father’s high voice teaching her some forgotten childhood lesson: *shunya* is zero and zero is *shunya*. She felt very tired.

The final and most important still-spot comes at the end of the story. Sheila behaves nastily toward Ganga; she acts just like Dolly. But she apologizes, and Ganga both forgives her and tells her a secret that will let her destroy the Boatwallas. After this Sheila sits on her rooftop until dawn, pondering a powerful memory of her father and his awful losses during Partition. This is the turning moment, when not action but reflection brings change, a move from fighting and toward reconciliation: a petty battle gains humanity and depth.

Chandra controls the energies of the narrative in a way that feels riverine: a stream rushes over rapids, stills in a pool of reflection, flows slowly in a deeper channel until rushing again, and so on. You could draw this as a sequence of lines and dots. Here’s a version page by page, in which—

__ = summary / -- = scene / • = still - spot

The passage between brackets, below, is a side-plot about Ganga, which I’m putting aside because it works with different dynamics; boldface passages are the key moments of change:



It feels like a river—yet looks like a design.

COLOR

Twice I've had the luck of collaborating with the composer Thomas Sleeper, who's set texts of mine to music: a ten-minute opera, a song cycle. Each time we worked together (i.e., I handed him sheets of paper with words, he disappeared into his world for weeks, then emerged with his own sheets covered in marks illegible to me but soon lit up as sound), along the way, he used the word *coloration* to describe passages where words and sound would meet in glory. Coloration, *coloratura*. Words, sounds, a streak of color: synesthesia! My understanding of *coloratura* is low, but still I'll take the word and turn it to narrative, like another Italian art term, *chiaroscuro*. Bright-dark. Even the throat drops from aerial to shadowland in saying the word, from hopeful half-smile to guttural growl. There are so many ways to hold sunlight and dusk side by side for effect: a sentence can switch at a *yet* or *although* from love to savagery; scenes can flicker between day and night, between sweetness and bitter ruin.

Some people say that they don't dream in color, which makes me wonder if we all have inner colorscapes (or grayscapes?). My envisioning mind tends toward Bellini hues, their clarity and transparency, or Mannerist confluences of rose and lime green, or rich Rothko hoverings, one deep blue upon a deeper one. Not the muddy smudges of Tintoretto or Rembrandt. The colors I hold in mind naturally appear in what I see when I write, so my private palette sifts onto the page. But I'd like to be more deliberate and start to design with colors. They can do more in narrative than just render a world

plausibly: they can signal mood, change, or contrast; create an overall tone like a painting's undercoat or wash; direct the eye. I first felt my attention being conducted by color—and its lack—in *The Barracks Thief*.

TOBIAS WOLFF'S *THE BARRACKS THIEF*

On first read, I felt overwhelming bleakness in this novella, except for rare sparks of red. On a more obsessive second read, I found this wasn't quite right: other colors do appear, but barely, and most of the color *is* red. Was Wolff using color as a device? He seems to deploy other visual elements in this bent-realistic novella: it starts with a remote third-person p.o.v. that covers a dozen years; switches to first person for a close view of some weeks; shifts to a close but unilluminated third person tracking a different character for a few days; then returns to the first person and finishes with a span of years. In time, then, it's like moving a loupe over a line of text and watching the words swell and distort. In its shifty point of view, *The Barracks Thief* reminds me of a Cubist painting, where impossible 3-D views are forced upon a single plane. In tone, though, the violent grotesquerie is more like a Francis Bacon—except for the spareness of color.

The story: Philip and his family are abandoned by his father; Philip grows up angry, joins the army, and struggles between inarticulate rage against people and an equally wordless longing to join them. The story's center is in Fort Bragg, where Philip lives in tense quarters with barracks-mates, in particular, his fellow newbies Hubbard and Lewis. Pensive Hubbard misses his family and friends, while Lewis is brutish, swollen with anger and insecurity—the two representing the poles between which Philip agitates. The focal moment is July Fourth, when the three guard an ammunitions dump and, through a mix of rage, closing ranks, and recklessness, come close to being blown up. At this moment the three seem comrades, but soon the connection dissolves: Philip closes ranks upon Lewis, with violent consequences that form the novella's central drama.

At the heart of *The Barracks Thief* is this question: what sort of man turns his back on his own kind? For this is what Philip's father has done: in the opening passage, the father gazes at his young sons as they sleep, imagining the evil that might one day strike them. Within a page, he looses that evil himself by leaving them, turning his back on his own kind. And this is what Philip does to Lewis, and what Lewis does to his comrades, above all, his "friend" Hubbard.

Later, I'll look at overall patterning in *The Barracks Thief*; right now, its use of color. Color-words appear just forty-seven times in ninety pages: one color-word every other page. That I'd be tempted to count (chronic counter that I am) suggests how colorless this world is. And when color-words do appear, they're flat: *red, yellow, blue, purple, green, brown*. Red is first and last. There are twenty instances of red (including three pinks); two of the similar purple. So, more red tones than almost all others combined: white (eleven), black (six), gray and yellow (three), green and blue (two), and brown (one). Wolff could have described any physical entity in the book with color, but didn't. Actually, colors could just as well not appear; when they do (as a student pointed out), they're what you'd expect: red lips, red spark; blue sky. So, why?

Red in *The Barracks Thief* describes toenails, faces, hands, eyes, a scar, hair, blotches, a nose, and lips; a bandana, a building, a shirt; a blinker, the earth, burning cigarette tips, a burning sky. The reds almost never signal anything good, and they do seem to signal (an important exception is pink calamine lotion). The first time we see red, on Philip's mother's toenails, he's an angry teenager being asked to do something he doesn't want to do. "Her toenails were painted red. She caught Philip staring at them and looked down at her drink. 'My life isn't going anywhere,' Philip said." And at this moment he surprises her, the reader, and himself by announcing that he's going to enlist. Later, faces are red with heat or rage; scars and swollen hands practically pulse red; a girl's shockingly bright lips, like Philip's mother's toes, whisper sex and spur violence; burning cigarette tips in the dark are the last thing we see before someone says "Let's go," and the gang attacks Lewis.

I made a chart of the color-words used in this text (not counting *black* and *white*), and found that reds cluster in certain chapters: the first and fourth, where it's the only color; the third, when Philip, Hubbard, and Lewis guard the ammo dump; the fifth, when Lewis hunts a woman and starts stealing; and the sixth, when Lewis is outed as the thief. These are the most tense and dramatic sections, where the narrative burns hottest.

And the spark that by chance never drifted toward the ammo dump but has burned through the souls of these men ever since, finally, in Philip's imagination, flies on the last page:

Three men with rifles. I think of a spark drifting up from that fire, glowing as the breeze pushes it toward the warehouses and the tall dry weeds, and the three crazy paratroopers inside the fence. They'd have heard the blast clear to Fort Bragg. They'd have seen the sky turn yellow and red and felt the earth shake. It would have been something.

It's probably foolish to read a single hue in a symbolic way. So think instead of a pop-culture icon in which only a few flashes of red appear in an otherwise black-and-white world: the little girl's coat in the film *Schindler's List*. The red hinted what, life? Little Red Riding Hood? Or did it just mean to draw our eyes? Red can conjure blood, violence, fire, rage, passion: in *The Barracks Thief*, it could be all of these. But it works, too, on a purely visual level: spotlighting a moment, throwing the rest into relief, controlling a reader's focus—like the red lights on a city's tallest buildings, creating a roofscape topography for pilots at night.

W. G. SEBALD'S *THE EMIGRANTS*

When I've asked people (many) what "color" this quartet of narratives is, everyone has said gray, sepia, or brown. Rare for a writer to strike a single after-effect in a book so complex. Here it's not so much the

use of color-words like *gray* or *sepia* but an overall tone Sebald creates, as if he's poured muddy river-water over the whole, or let it settle in ashes. The blurred gray photographs embedded in the text deepen the sense of silt, ash, or dust. And a portrayal of Max Ferber in the fourth narrative, an artist whose way of painting and drawing mirrors the narrator's account of his own way of writing, furthers this sense:

Ferber has set his easel in the gray light falling in through the high north window coated with a century's dust. Because he lays the paint on thickly and, as he works, scratches it away again from the canvas, the floor is covered—an inch deep in the middle, thinner toward the edges, the mass mixed with coal dust and already hardened and crusted so that in places it looks like a lava-flow, and Ferber says that it represents the true product of all his labors and the clearest proof of his failure. He once remarked that it was of the greatest importance to him that nothing should change in his workplace, that everything should stay as it was, as he's arranged it, as it is now, and that nothing should be added but the filth that accrued as pictures were finished and the dust that steadily fell and that, as he gradually learned, was the dearest thing to him in the world. He said that he was closer to dust than to light, air, or water. Nothing was more intolerable to him than a well-dusted house, and nowhere did he feel better than where things were let to lie undisturbed, muffled in the residues that form when substance, breath upon breath, dissolves into nothing . . .

Dust. Even in this passage, you sense the gray? When Sebald names colors—as he does a few lines earlier—the brief flares of carmine or blue soon die beneath the dust. The same cindery, silty, dusty feel in each of the four narratives is one way he joins them, one

of their alchemical meldings. More on *The Emigrants* later. But as a text with a single palette created by tone, it seems to me remarkable.

I would love to see more close studies of color as a patterning element in narrative—not as symbol, like Fitzgerald’s green or Melville’s white, and not as the narrative’s focus, like Maggie Nelson’s blue—but as a unifying wash, a secret code, or a stealthy constellation: I hope someone makes this study.

PATTERNS

I often dig to the roots of words, as though down there I'll learn both origin and truth. Comfort seeps in when I find a word's ancient seed, and then see how far it's grown or scattered. Now, thinking of patterns, I open the *Oxford English Dictionary*, look up *pattern*, and am surprised to see that it was a doublet of *patron* and thus born of *pater*: father. It seems odd that *pattern*, with its whiff of wallpaper and McCall's, is kin to *patronize*. But a word's history and an *OED* entry can be long. And looking an inch below *patron*, I reach *matrix*, an archaic sense of pattern. From *mater*: mother. This note in the entry follows a cross, which is the grave marker of obsolete definitions, but I like knowing that *pattern* evolved through both female and male.

The textile scholar Charlotte Jirousek tells me what pattern is now: "an underlying structure that organizes surfaces or structures in a consistent, regular manner. Pattern can be described as a repeating unit of shape or form, but it can also be thought of as the 'skeleton' that organizes the parts of a composition" (*Art, Design, and Visual Thinking*). Now I want to look at patterns underlying narrative, especially those "darlings of nature," as Peter Stevens calls them in *Patterns of Nature*, to see how they can structure novels and stories.