

A Way to Write
My Influences, Interests, Style, and Process

by

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ABSTRACT

I've chosen a selection of books that both reflect my interests as a writer, books that I've loved and have informed me in the past which continue to inform and inspire on each re-read (*Battleborn* by Claire Vaye Watkins, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, for example) and also books I hadn't read and needed to in order to challenge myself with writing I haven't been exposed to yet so I can continue to grow (I hadn't, for instance, read *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson or *Reasons to Live* by Amy Hempel before preparation for this essay.) The fiction I've chosen to discuss strikes a balance between favorites that have formed me up to this point and new work to "fill in the gaps" of books I needed to read. Additionally, I've chosen a selection of books on craft to provide a lens for thinking about writing. Finally, I've also included work in other genres that inform my fiction (Ryan van Meter's creative nonfiction essays, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now* and Andrew Haigh's film, *Weekend*.)

I've intentionally chosen work that is diverse in both form and content. I have more linear fiction represented (William Trevor, for example) matched with work that's fragmentary and language focused (Christine Schutt's *Nightwork* among others) since I'm interested in how linear form and fragmentation can intersect, and I've been experimenting with both during my time in the program. And in terms of content, the majority of the work speaks to my interest in how region, specifically the South, impresses itself on sexuality and gender, specifically queer or decentered sexuality and gender. So I have books with a heavy focus on region (*Daddy's* by Lindsay Hunter and *Girl Trouble* by Holly Goddard Jones) and work that explores the complexities of sexuality and identity (Michael Cunningham, Edmund White, Alexander Chee, and I'll

mention Haigh's film *Weekend* again because it's always worth mentioning again.) These works will help synthesize and bring together my interests in style, language, structure, and form, and in content.

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CHAPTER 1

TRADITIONAL OR EXPERIMENTAL OR WHAT? STYLE AND THE IN BETWEEN SPACE

When I was nineteen and naïve about writing – I only knew I liked mystery, horror, and crime and suspense and mimicked those tropes in a good deal of my young failed writing attempts – I took a workshop with my first serious creative writing teacher. “Start with the trouble,” he said, smoking out the window. “No one dies,” he said. “Time frame no more than 24 hours,” he said. “No more than two or three settings,” he said. I didn’t realize at the time he was forcing us to write in Aristotelian structure. I was a little miffed about it – so rigid, it seemed – but at the same time, I was terrified of him. He tore everyone in workshop apart, literally everyone, he played no favorites, everyone’s work he tore down. “If I don’t know what’s going on then you shouldn’t be writing,” he said. While the reading he assigned – staunch 80’s kitchen sink realism, lots of Raymond Carver and Tobias Woolf and Stuart Dybek, mixed in with some Annie Proulx and Alice Munro – helped me understand what “literary fiction” was, overall, what I got from his workshops was the need for fiction to be psychologically meaningful. But at the same time, he stifled me a lot. He repressed me as writer, and in the past three years of my MFA I’ve intentionally written work reacting against these rigid confines, but for so long, because he was “traditional,” and I had always written this way, I felt like my aesthetic was “traditional,” not “experimental.”

I want to break down what we mean when we say a work is “traditional” or “experimental,” two dichotomies that don’t accurately reflect the fluidity of writing techniques available. I’m putting each in quotation marks for a reason. “Traditional,” at

least the way I think of it, actually isn't traditional, but it's linear with time markers, clear characters, and a narrative structure that's oriented in linear time and space, and has a sense of forward movement, a sense of John Gardner's profluence, that we're moving forward because the characters are moving forward in time. That which is "experimental," isn't actually "experimental," it's fragmentary, non-linear, fluidity of unfixed character, defies a narrative structure rooted in linear time and can be cut up, and also may prioritize that which is language driven. As a writer, like most writers, I borrow from all of these elements.

For instance, I appreciate a piece of fiction that roots us in time. *Girl Trouble* by Holly Goddard Jones is a book I love and admire, and admittedly, as she was a former very good mentor, I admire Holly's writing. I want to discuss the way she structures a key story, "Girl Trouble," the opening story of the collection. Each one of her sections starts with a time marker around the central event of the story. They are: "A year before Jacob's son, Tommy, was arrested for raping a fifteen-year-old girl, the police chief came to his shop about the dog," "Three months before Jacob's son was arrested for raping the Winterson girl, Jacob saw Helen for the first time," "Tommy was gone the night before the arraignment," "Perry Whitebridge called Jacob on the evening following the arraignment," "Katie. That was her name, Tommy had told him," "A week after Tommy's arrest, Jacob drove out past Auburn," "A little over two months after Jacob's son raped Katie Winterson, Jacob and Tommy ate dinner together at Ponderosa." We are oriented here in specific time. Jones maps out the timeline of the story, but she's also doing it around, not just the central event, the rape of a young teenage girl in rural Kentucky, but also around small events in their lives. Instead of weighing us down with a

timeline, she also gives us the smaller event the section explores. The use of naming here is especially powerful. First, Katie's name isn't given. She's nameless in the opening. Then she's "the Winterson girl," the way Jacob thinks of her, the way someone like the judge might think of her, then we get her name dropped on us, confronting it the same way Jacob confronts it, and then we finally get her full name at the beginning of the end. I appreciate the way Jones grounds us in time here, the characters are in relation to a specific time. It gives a sense of structure to the story and establishes the amount of time the piece will cover. Even though the rigidity of that first workshop teacher I had is stifling and terrible to inflict on a new writer exploring different uses of language and narrative choices, I still appreciate a narrator who grounds us in specific time. I still ask myself whenever I'm reading a piece, or when I'm writing a piece, "where are we? – in time, in setting, in character?" Even if it's not answered in the piece, it's still beneficial for me to know. The approach divulges everything we need to know upfront, creates expectations to be fulfilled, guides us – we know the worst, Katie's rape, from the very beginning – and creates forward movement.

I want to switch gears and show the other side of the spectrum, and that's my main point: that "traditional" (re: linear, structural, narrative with fixed character) and "experimental" (re: non-linear, fragmented form and narrative propelled by language and unfixed, fluid character) is a broken and inaccurate dichotomy to classify the complexity of style. But, I want to talk about Christine Schutt as an example of writer who uses fragmentary, non-linear form, and unfixed character with so much language heavy momentum to her advantage. Let's take a look at the stunning opening of "You Drive," the first story in *Nightwork*: "She brought him what she had promised, and they did it in

his car, on the top floor of the car park, looking down onto the black flat roofs of buildings, and she said, or she thought she said, ‘I like your skin,’ when what she really liked was the color of her father’s skin, the mottled white of his arms and the clay color at the roots of the hairs along his arms.” Gorgeous. We don’t know who the “he” is – though we understand it’s someone the narrator calls her “father,” maybe her real father, maybe not, probably not, but there’s still this unsettling undertone of incest. We don’t know what she’s bringing him – herself? Is she a prostitute? Maybe. Maybe not. Probably not. So much of her character is unfixed. He is so unfixed – is he friend, is he pimp, is he her father, what does it mean that he’s her father, in the literal or metaphorical sense? There are so many ways we’re not grounded in character.

Yet we are grounded in her very specific, sensual experience, and it’s made sensual because of Schutt’s language. This opening unfurls with clause after clause, and she uses “and” as a conjunction to bring us to the next surprising place: we find out they’re having sex, “did it,” the colloquial tone. “Top floor” sets off the rounded “o” consonant sounds Schutt uses to draw us forward and then smooths them out. “Down” comes next, then she introduces a repeating “a” consonant sound, “black flat,” and then rounds it again with “roofs,” and then repeats the “b” sound of “buildings” in a subtle repetition. We have the re-cursive, “she said, or she thought she said,” the prose questioning itself and questioning the character because the character is questioning herself. Then we get her speaking for the first time: “I like your skin,” so surprising and unexpected. Then the next line is recursive again, what she says and what she means, two different meanings. We get “mottled white” and “clay color.” When Schutt repeats a consonant or uses alliteration, she tends to do it in pairs so the repetition isn’t so heavy it

overloads us. Same with words. She puts two surprising words side by side that are strange together, but they work somehow. A character has a “criminal haircut,” such a strange description, but I know what she means by it. We get the repetition of skin, once in dialogue, and then in the next clause, later. My main point here is that Schutt uses language to move us forward. There may not be a sense of profluence in the original way Gardner intended in terms of the narrative – it’s lots of fragmented scenes, oscillating back and forth between the protagonist’s father in the car and with a character named T, again, unfixed, elusive, and there are lots of one line scenes or dialogue exchanges. We don’t know if these scenes are occurring at one time or if these are different times with T or with her father, or if all this occurs in one night. We don’t know. Does it matter that we don’t know? To me, it doesn’t. Schutt creates a sense of movement, of profluence, in her language and its energy and repetition. There’s something liberating about forgetting about the temporality of the story and letting the fragments and language take over and move us from one scene to the other, from one character to the other, from one sentence to the other, from one word to the other, from one sound to the other.

Most writers fall somewhere in between: fragmented versus temporal, linear versus non-linear. Denis Johnson is an excellent example. In his story, “Car Crash While Driving,” he opens with a series of fragments: “A salesman who shared his liquor and steered while sleeping... A Cherokee filled with bourbon... A VW no more than a bubble of hashish fumes, captained by a college student...” The story goes on to extrapolate the meaning of the fragments, to draw all of them together. We understand they are fragments in the mind of the protagonist. Johnson goes on to ground is in the specific incident of the car crash, and these fragments meld together. He handles time effortlessly.

In “Two Men,” the opening grounds us in specific place. He met this man while going home from a dance at the Veterans Foreign Wars Hall. His friends are there. He propels us in time in the middle, letting us know later one of them got hurt during a burglary, the central event of the story, but we’ll get there, so he returns to that evening, that first evening. We always know where we are in time, but we’re also unsettled, and he uses language to simultaneously pull us forward. “Emergency” relies on images, but then he replaces one image for another: a grave, a cemetery, but then the cemetery becomes the drive-in movie theater. He shifts images around like tectonic plates. He is a writer who has it both ways, fragmented but grounded, temporally sound but also unfixed.

I tend to want both, to be grounded but also to unsettle, to be tied to time, to know where we are, but to defy it at the same time, to give a solid sense of character but also show how they can change and aren’t so easily defined, how real people are. In the end, there are ways, for instance, Jones’ story “Good Girl,” even though it defines a set timeline, will fragment time. She diverts from the central time of the story to give lush descriptions of Jacob’s backstory and memory of his wife, Nora – that aren’t in the set timeline. Even though it’s expansive, it’s still a fragment of Jacob’s life. There are ways we’re grounded in Schutt’s “You Drive.” We know the scene is in this car, and she grounds us in a car park, the top floor she specifies. We are still grounded. I want to use both, and I think all writers bend what’s linear and non-linear, what’s fragmented and what’s not, to one degree or another. I’ve come a long way from the strict Aristotelian structure first imposed on me. That first teacher I had also said, “And break my heart.” He prioritized emotional honesty the most, how stories can give us access to the most

intimate of emotional experiences, and that's what's the most important to me, whether it's traditional or experimental or linear or non-linear or not, or somewhere in between.

CHAPTER 2

MY DEEP DOWN SOUTH: HOW REGION AFFECTS FICTION

I write about the South. If someone wants to call me a Southern writer, I'll let them – I'm from the South, from Kentucky, and write about it. I don't think so much about it when I'm in process though. It ends up coming out no matter how much I try to control it. I'm never thinking, oh, this piece is going to be so southern, more southern than the last. I don't read it in my head with a deep down southern twang – though I've noticed it comes out in my voice if I read my work out loud, that accent I've dropped but that comes out with family and friends in Kentucky, when I'm there, when I'm back to my roots. And maybe that's what happens when I write: I settle into my background and roots, into Kentucky in a subconscious way. I suppose if someone wants to say I have “a thing” I write about, it's Kentucky, rural Kentucky specifically, even though I never tried to write toward having “a thing.” It's interesting how there's an impulse to label someone a Southern writer if we write about the South, but we don't label someone a Kansas writer, for instance. I know somewhere along the way, in the course of literature over the last hundred or so years, the South became a tradition to write in. Am I continuing the Southern tradition? Am I writing in that vein? I don't know. Writing those sentences is the first time I asked myself those questions. Part of me resists those questions. They're big questions, too lofty. When I think of Southern writers, I think of Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner, both epic writers in the literary canon I've loved and admire and who have influenced me, to the point I almost included them in my list of works to discuss here, though I didn't. There's no way I can put something I've written against their writing and call it Southern, call it the same tradition, or that I'm writing in the same

vein. That feels so false to me. What I know is this: I'm fascinated with how region affects a piece of fiction, how the region of a piece can embed itself so completely in the language, in the structure, and in the characters, and the region-heavy writers I've chosen to discuss exemplify how region impresses on all three fictional elements.

Lindsay Hunter is a writer I fell in love with the first time I read her collection of flash fiction, *Daddy's*. The voice in the story drips with the South. She writes in a deep vernacular, elevating the southern voice as lyrical, yet ugly and grotesque, yet beautiful in the ugliness, in the strangeness: southern, indeed. Like Christine Schutt, her work is voice heavy, language driven – the deep regional southern dialect guides us and creates the movement. And she plays with the grotesque, a defining characteristic of *some* southern writing. The opening of “My Brother,” the first story, draws us into the voice immediately with slang and brand names: “My brother tells me monsters set up shop in his closet among his Reeboks and hidden *Playboys*.” I love the use of brand names in fiction, especially in the south. It indicates this hyper-awareness of class, and also this intense specificity of a character's life. The brands become a part of the language because they're part of the character's life, disenfranchised, in a way that subverts the corporate association they have in elevating the brand to the language, converging the two. Let's take the opening of “Love Song”: “It was my birthday and Daddy picked me up and he was drunk and we drove to the mall and I waited at a Ruby Tuesday's and ate me a pot of French Onion soup while Daddy did the rounds at various jewelry stores trying to sell jewelry from God knows where.” The dialect and slang becomes gorgeous, become something beautiful, and Hunter never exploits the language. It's accurate to the speech of the region, and she takes it and twists it into energetic language and tone. She'll often

strip a series of clause after clause of their commas, creating this sprawling effect. We don't have the sprawling landscape, we have the sprawling of language and the character's life given to us all at once in an endless stream of dialectical word play that defines them.

I also want to address the way she uses the grotesque. It's never at the expense of character. It comes to reveal character, even the emptiness of the character, yet underneath that emptiness is this sense of richness. "Scales" is the best example. The narrator, a young girl, tells us she's "so heavy that if I move slightly I can feel the concrete deck under my ass," and she obsesses over her thin friend, Yessenia's body. Yessenia wants them to weigh each other on digital scales. The protagonist's hyper-attention to their bodies comes out in a grotesque way, in exaggerated gestures. "Her towel is so tight it makes her eyes turn up." Here, she's using physicality and voice together. "Whatever, she says, walking away, her bottoms creeping into her asscrack." A little later, the narrator eats Doritos and lets Yessenia lick her fingers, the processed dust coating them. This brand, Doritos, becomes part of their physical selves, in this weirdly sexual scene.

While Hunter lets the southern regionalism become her language, Claire Vaye Watkins, lets it become her structure. I'm in love with *Battleborn*, her debut collection. While it's not about the south, it's heavily regional, focusing on the Southwest, the desert, Nevada specifically. I read it at a time when I was enduring a summer cloistered in my apartment to avoid the summer sun of this relentlessly hot desert town. Her collection speaks to this isolation, this hardened and empty landscape, reflecting hardened and empty characters with desperate but beautiful lives. She's garnered

comparisons to Annie Proulx, but I tend to disagree. She uses some stoicism and restraint, but all of the stories in *Battleborn* are generous with deeply affecting emotional cores.

In “Ghosts, Cowboys,” she draws from Nevada history and melds it together with her own family history, her father, Paul Watkins, a former member of the Manson family. She opens with, “At the end, I can’t stop thinking about beginnings,” and then begins with the founding of Nevada as a state. Each section that follows is an alternate beginning. “Or begin the story here,” she says in the next section, and goes on to describe Himmel Green, an architect in early Nevadan history. The next, she says, “Or here. Here is as good a place as any,” and she tell us about George Spahn, who owned a ranch, whose wife suffered from cancer, and whose ranch was where producers and directors shot old Hollywood westerns, and it eventually became a commune of the Manson family. Then in the middle of the story, after these alternate beginnings, we shift to the protagonist, Claire, a fictional version of Claire Vaye Watkins, who grapples with her mother’s suicide, her father’s involvement with Charles Manson as she her long lost half-sister comes into her life. She pulls all of these threads together. She is the lineage of Nevada, the lineage of the Manson family, the lineage of the myth of the region. She’s blending the myth of history of the region, the myth of the Manson family, the myth of her family history. And she delivers all of it, here, drawing all threads together:

“And there’s still so much I’ll never know, no matter how much history I weigh upon myself. I can tell you the shape of the stain left by H.T.P Comstock’s brain matter on the wooden walls of his cabin, but not whether he tasted the sour of the curse in his mouth just before he pulled

the trigger. I can tell you the backward slant of Himmel Green's left-handed cursive, but not whether Leo loved him back. I can tell you the silver gleam of Helen Spahn's tumors, but not whether she felt them growing inside her. I can tell you of the view from George's front porch... but not what he saw after he went blind. I can tell you the things my father said to lure the Manson girls back to Spahn's Ranch, but I can't say whether he believed them. I can tell you the length and width and number of the cuts on my mother's wrists... but I couldn't say whether she would do it again, or when. Everything I can say about what it means to lose, what it means to do without, the inadequate weight of the past, you already know."

I cry every time I get to this section. The character's past is so linked to Nevadan history, and there's only so much of that past she can't know. This structure, pulling from fragmented history as myth, and then personal history as myth is informed by Nevada, the region surrounding and encompassing the character.

To return to the South, I'll return to Holly Goddard Jones' work. Her debut collection, *Girl Trouble* is specifically about sexual violence enacted upon women in the rural south. Women in the rural south are the most vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence, statistics will tell you, but Jones doesn't become didactic or preachy about rape culture in the south, and instead she lets the characters' lives in rural Kentucky, in a fictional town she made up, speak to that experience and reality. Her fiction is characterized by expansiveness and generosity of Southern characters. She uses intensely specific character details to develop them and their psychology.

In “Good Girl,” Jacob starts a new relationship with Helen, the first in years since his wife, Nora died. Helen, a real estate agent, shows him a new house, and “As he walked the grounds, looking for Helen, he was reminded of a trip he and Nora had taken to the Biltmore estate in North Carolina... “ Helen asks, “So what do you think?” and Jacob responds, “Not too bad,” and then we are so inside his head when he sees Helen, “her gray hair was tucked behind her ear on one side, and he kissed the silky bit of skin just south of her earlobe, breathing in where she’d dotted her perfume – White Shoulders, he knew now, an old bottle she’d made last. There was something about the smell that made his heart ache irrationally, as though Helen were gone like Nora instead of pressed against him, nuzzling her smooth face into his neck. He clung to her more tightly.” This exchange is so deft to me. She’s linking Jacob’s physicality with Nora and Helen together, this present igniting his past. Jones reveals character by drawing this physical and emotional linkage all at once. This is a southern man who eventually makes a plea deal to get his son off of rape charges, sacrificing his moral code for his love of his son as a connection to his dead wife. It’s a terrible decision he makes, abhorrent even, yet Jones draws his character so completely and so complexly that I understand his decision, the gray area.

To me, region is inextricably linked to fiction. There’s no way it can’t be, whether it’s the lyricism of the language or structure or character. To one degree or another, all writers are regional writers. A character’s atmosphere affects their decisions and place in their world, and the region they inhabit shapes them. So, if I’m writing in a particular tradition of letting the region I’m writing about bleed into my language and characters and structure, then sure, maybe I am writing in that tradition, the same way all of us are.

CHAPTER 3

A QUEER VOICE, DESIRE: THE UNIVERSAL IN THE SPECIFIC

I'm a queer writer, a label I don't resist. I know some gay writers do, and I understand the impulse. What constitutes queer writing? Is it the content? Is it the self label? Is it the identity of the writer? Is a gay writer who doesn't write specifically about queer experience still a queer writer, a gay writer, a writer who happens to be gay? Can a hetero writer be considered a queer writer if their work is queer in its nature, that is, challenging basic hetero conventions? All of these questions about identity and labels are complicated, and they're questions without easy answers. Maybe it comes down to the writer's preference. I embrace the label. I think it's necessary to embrace it. I also know it's just that, a label. I'm not conscious of it in process the same way I'm not conscious of my southern background in process. Again, it comes out without any control over it. I'm never thinking, oh, this piece is going to be so queer, more queer than the last one. I understand writers who want to resist the label, but I think it's feeding into a dominant literary hetero tradition. Don't be too gay and you'll get your work published in non-gay publications. You want a broader audience. Be safe for hetero readers. "I'm a writer who happens to be gay. My work is not gay, it's for everyone." I get it. But, it's an erasure that's dangerous – tantamount to the "I'm not a feminist, I'm a humanist," or "It's not Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter." In resisting the label, in stripping the name, it's catering to a dominant patriarchal culture, a racist culture, and in this case, a heteronormative culture.

So, here I am, embracing the title. When Manuel Munoz came to ASU to read two years ago, he described his struggles as a gay writer. He got a rejection from a popular,

well regarded lit mag he kept nameless, and it read, “Sorry, we don’t publish gay fiction.” He was rightfully pissed. This was in 1999. Some has changed since then, but not much. If I pick up a lit mag, I know it will be predominantly hetero. Queer writing is still found in a niche. Some view it as too political, and no, we don’t want to be too political, do we? My queer writing isn’t political; it’s experiential, and you can call it political because it’s experiential, but I focus on experience more than anything. I’ve heard some claim gay fiction is dead. I believe the opposite; it can head into a new renaissance given where we are now. It used to be that gay writing was representative of the entire gay experience, a collective *the* experience, the mono-queer narrative. And once those writers wrote it, it was over. I resist that notion. The LGBT community has played a lot of assimilationist politics, “we’re-just-like-you” politics, necessary to gain equal rights, and it’s spilled into gay writing. Gay writing is the same. Gay relationships are the same. But that’s not the case. The community itself is in a transitional period of taking queer culture back, of embracing what makes queerness specific and particular, not the same, recovering from those assimilationist ideals. My queer experience is not the same as your queer experience, and yours isn’t the same as someone else’s. And therein lies the open space: if there are so many diverse kinds of queer experiences and perspectives and voices, stories, can’t all of them find a place in contemporary fiction? All of the queer writers I will discuss hone in on what I explore, on what makes my queer writing uniquely queer: relationship to the father, masculinity struggles, co-mingled desire and shame, *The Queer Body*, and contemporary daily gay living.

“I want to talk about my father’s beauty,” Michael Cunningham’s Johnathan narrates in *A Home at the End of the World*. He goes on, “I know it’s not a usual subject

for a man... But I want to talk about my father's frank, unadulterated beauty: the potent symmetry of his arms, blond and lithely muscled as if they'd been carved of raw ash; the easy, measured grace of his stride." We're getting the early fascination of the male body, the male form as beautiful. He admits it's not a conventionally masculine topic for a man to explore, but for him, it is. The male form, thought of as crude or embarrassing, here is stripped of those beliefs and is examined through an early childhood, distinctly queer gaze in which the male body is beautified in the prose. It's a mix of idealization and desire. Edmund White explores it similarly in *A Boy's Own Story*. He ruminates, "I feel sorry for a man who never wanted to go to bed with his father," and "Once, I'd wanted my father to love me and take me away. I had sat night after night outside his bedroom door in the dark, crazy with fantasies of seducing him, eloping with him, covering him with kisses as we shot through space against a night field flowered with stars." The father here is the first love, but also the first rejection. The nameless narrator says, "But, I was in a struggle against him. Did I want to hurt him because he didn't love me?" And later, "But, now I hated him and felt he was what I must run away from." All at once, in his queer experience, the father is a first love, a first notice of male beauty, a first rejection, a first fear, a first hatred, a first shame. It's a complicated, nuanced relationship that goes on to inform a romantic relationship between two men.

A tenant of queer theoretical principles is masculinity as social construction reinforced by traditional mores and used to oppress, and Edmund White makes this principle experiential in his nameless narrator. He says, "A popular quiz for masculinity in those days asked three questions, all of which I flunked: 1) Look at your nails (a girl extends her fingers, a boy cups his in his upturned palm); 2) Look up (a girl lifts just her

eyes, a boy throws back his whole head); 3) Light a match (a girl strikes away from her body, a boy toward – or perhaps the reverse, I can't recall)." All of these are arbitrary, performative, superficial signifiers. We police each other based on gender expectations. It's still true. It's performative, the performativity of gender and masculinity, in particular gay men's relationship to it. And it's complicated and fluid. He says, "My father was just a bit of a sissy. He crossed his legs the wrong way. He was too fussy about his nails (he had an elaborate manicuring kit)... But otherwise, he passed muster." And it's this idea of passing that fascinates me, enforced so early in childhood.

Ryan van Meter's collection of creative nonfiction essays, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now* also exemplifies these kinds of gender and sexual expectations. In the opening essay, "First," Van Meter narrates his first shame. He is in the backseat – told in first person present, a shame that's become trauma that's still always present – of his parents' car with a friend about five. He grabbed his friend's hand and mimicking soap operas he's seen, he asks his friend, Ben – that might be the name, he thinks – to marry him. His mother hears. It's a stop-dead-in-your-track silent pin-drop moment. "You shouldn't have said that," she says. "Boys don't marry other boys..." Van Meter details, "She can't see our hands but Ben pulls his away... 'Okay,' she asks." Van Meter replies, "Yes." His mother makes him say it again, yes, complying with gender and sexual expectations, this first shame instilled at five.

And shame is interlinked with desire is interlinked with *The Queer Body*. From a young age, especially growing up in the South, from the start in childhood, gay men, I, was taught my desire was something wrong, something to be ashamed of. I appreciate and value writers who write about queer Desire unashamedly. I write about it

unashamedly to take it back, to reclaim Gay Male Desire. Alexander Chee does it beautifully, and with gorgeous language to match Desire. The child narrator, Fee is in love with his friend, Peter as a child, unapologetically. “He walks, and I feel the air come off him toward me, wherever we are. His sounds reach me wherever I am... My mother calls him a towhead blond, the word, apparently, for that kind of hair, so pale, so bright, it seems to be what sunshine reminds you of.” He languishes in Peter. He is trying to reconcile his desire at this young age. “What do you want of him, I ask myself. I tell myself, to walk inside him and never leave. For him to be the house of me.” So, there is a complicated kind of Desire here. A desire for Peter and also to occupy him at the same time. Wanting him and also wanting to be him. Edmund White also unashamedly narrates his narrator’s sex with Kevin, a younger boy. He lets it play out in real time, again languishing in it.

There’s also the nuances of contemporary daily gay living I try to find ways of capturing, too rarely explored in contemporary writing. It’s been in film. The HBO show *Looking* focused on gay living now. Andrew Haigh produced it. Before there was *Looking* though, there was Andrew Haigh’s *Weekend*, a beautifully rendered hyper-real, cinema verite, indie British film about two men who hook up, a one night stand, but then it becomes something more, as the two explore themselves through each other. Russell is an unassuming, mild mannered gay man, and Glen a radical, outspoken queer. Critics and early reviews were adamant about the film’s universal appeal, feeling the anxiety of pigeonholing. But Haigh never strips it of its queerness, and ends up exploring it with so much accuracy. It’s all in his filmic choices. An early shot follows Russell’s point of view in a steady cam. We shakily walk with him, as he’s coming to his straight friend and

wife's house party. The tension in that shaky walk, the anxiety of being queer about to enter a predominantly hetero space Haigh so quietly executes.

Haigh cuts away from the club scene where Russell first meets Glen, and we are in bed with them the next morning. We've skipped their sex, and for a reason. Glen is an artist, and he puts on a recorder, interviewing Russell for an art project about gay sex. Russell, speaking into the recorder, recounts their night together. We hear it instead of see it. Hearing it makes us confront it, imagining it more powerful than seeing it. The film is very much about the public self versus the private self. In the public scenes, the shots are pulled back, voyeuristic, we are watching these two as spectators in a public space, Russell's anxiety of being queer in public space, something that's very much a reality, still. In one shot, he's riding the train, coming from his straight friend's house, heading to the gay club, and we see the image of him as he's in that in between space, him and the mirrored image of him in the window. He is split in to: the role he plays with straight friends, his gay side he keeps to himself, public, private, this image, powerful.

Haigh uses Glen and Russell as mouthpieces for contemporary queer struggle as they debate the roles they inhabit in their lives. Glen is hyper-aware of heteronormativity steeped in our culture. "Straight people like us as long as we conform, we behave by their little rules. Imagine your friends, if you suddenly started getting all political about being a fag, or you got suddenly camp and swishy or talked about rimming all the time." Russell resists Glen's criticisms. "That's not who I am." Glen continues, "Well trust me. They like it as long as we don't shove it down their throats." Russell asks, "Why should I shove it down their throats?" And Glen responds, "Because they shove it down our throats all the time. Being straight. Straight story lines on television, everywhere – in books, on

billboards, magazines, everywhere. But the gays – We mustn't upset the straights. Shh. Watch out. Straights are coming. Let's not upset them. Let's hide in our little ghettos. Let's not hold hands. Let's not kiss in the street, no." He is attuned to every day heteronormative bias and prejudice. He criticizes marriage as a capitulation to hetero domestic mores, all concerns and minutia of every day gay living nowhere else in current media or art. At the same time, the film is intimate. The sex scenes are unabashed, Russell penetrated for the first time, metaphorically opening up for the first time. Russell is an orphan, and Glen pretends to be Russell's dad as Russell pretends to come out to him, a rite of passage in gay experience he's never gone through. I ball at that scene every time as Glen tells him, "I love you just the way you are." There's legitimate tenderness between the two men. There's a heartfelt, emotional goodbye scene at a train as Glen leaves, the film embracing the tropes of those same hetero romantic comedies Glen criticized. He even says, "So, is this our *Notting Hill* moment?" It's a deeply resonant love story at its core.

The film is self-reflexive. Glen says of his art project, "The problem is no one's gonna come see it because it's about gay sex. So the gays will only come because they want a glimpse of cock, and they'll be disappointed. The straights won't come because it's got nothing to do with their world. They'll go see pictures of refugees or murder or rape. But gay sex? Fuck off." Haigh's apprehension coming out. The same could be said about the film itself. And I further extend it to say, the same can be said about contemporary queer fiction. There are ways I want to capture the daily gay living the way Haigh does, these questions and concerns living in the world as a gay person, in all of its nuances. We are more than coming out stories. Haigh says in an interview in the DVD

extras, “When I was writing the script, people were questioning, is anybody who isn’t gay going to want to watch this? Because you are talking a lot about being gay and gay issues and struggles and sex. But in some way, the more precise you become about an experience, the more universal, weirdly, it becomes. They’re trying to connect. They’re looking for intimacy and working out what they want from the world... I’m not reflecting everybody’s gay experience. I’m just reflecting these two people’s gay experience.” I echo everything he says but about my fiction. I want my work to be specifically queer, exclusive to my characters, but in that specificity is – I hope – universality.

CHAPTER 4

FINDING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: POINT OF VIEW, DELAY, FORM AND CONTENT

I've learned different narrative structures and approaches through my influences. I've always been comfortable in a third person limited oscillating between distance, commenting on what the narrator doesn't know, to a voice intimate enough to speak in the character's voice like a first person. It speaks to John Gardner's levels of psychic distance, and lets me have it both ways. William Trevor does it so well, especially in his story, "An Afternoon," which switches perspectives between a young girl and the pedophile who pursues her. The opening of her section begins, "Jasmin knew he was going to be different, no way he couldn't be; no way he'd be wearing a baseball cap backwards over a No. 1 cut." Trevor establishes her character in Gardner's third register of distance to intimacy, but then the next clause goes deeper where the language is affected by Jasmin. In the next paragraph, Jasmin's life is revealed further to us as she talks in monologue to herself, "All your life you'd be carrying teas to the lorrymen in the diner, wiping down the tables and clearing the plastic plates, doing yourself an injury." It's this intimate inner monologue, but it's in the third person. Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* utilizes these different psychic registers. In "Found Objects," Sasha, the protagonist, we start removed from: "It started the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel." Then each new line filters down deeper into her psyche, getting closer, and the last line of the paragraph is, Just "*take* the fucking thing." We're in a first person inner monologue in third. I love doing this. It lets me be objective and removed

from character when I need to be and speak in the character's language and voice when I need to.

But then, I've come to develop a love of first person, especially from Susan Steinberg's "Cowboys." The narrator here is using first person as performance, yes, but is also writing without answers, and doubling back on herself because she's trying to figure out her father's death and her guilt in it. A first person narrator who isn't authoritative, who is writing to figure out questions with no answers is a first person so endearing to me. When I do use first, this tends to be the kind of first person narrator I use, one who isn't reliable, who isn't authoritative, who is grappling with memory and association and struggles and questions, and the reader can be taken along for the ride with the narrator as he or she is trying to make sense of their world.

"Start with the trouble" was an adage I got in early creative writing classes, and I've spent the rest of my time writing against that advice. What if we're not ready to start with the trouble? Andre Dubus' "A Father's Story" delays the central conflict beautifully. Luke eventually covers up a crime his daughter commits, becoming complicit in the crime itself. But starting with that would be a mistake. We're not ready to view Luke that way. Dubus lets us spend time with him, detailing the loneliness of his everyday life, a religious man. He eventually sacrifices his religion to protect his daughter, out of desperation, out of love, out of loneliness. We wouldn't fully understand what he's sacrificing if Dubus were to start with his crime. Dubus makes us empathetic, making the crime he commits more complicated. I love this concept of Delay, to not want to name the central conflict. Amy Hempel does it beautifully in "In the Cemetery Where Al Johnson is Buried." The narrator talks about everything but her dying friend. "Make it

useless stuff or skip it.” It creates this aching and longing in every line. And then in “Beg, SI, Tog, Inc, Cont, Rep,” the narrator describes knitting to not discuss the guilt she feels over losing her child. But the language of knitting becomes this double meaning to the point that she is discussing it. She’s using knitting to deliver the emotional core of the story. Avoidance and delay makes us confront what’s difficult to confront.

I also think about form as it matches to content. One of my favorite books over the last five years has been *The Invisibles* by Hugh Sheehy. He subtly blends incisive characterization and precise language with crime and suspense elements. There are murderers, serial killers, detectives, but then there are also characters isolated and alone and desperate, invisible. In “Meat and Mouth,” reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor’s Misfit, two creepy men, murderers, invade a school where Maddy, the protagonist, a teacher spiking her coffee with vodka, is sitting with a student waiting for his late father. Before these men invade, the word choices create an atmosphere set on edge. The kitchen has a “torture chamber feel.” Maddy and Luke, a child of an alcoholic, working class father, are given to us with such empathy in their characterization. But then, there are elements of legitimate horror and suspense. In the title story, “The Invisibles,” the narrator, Cynthia, is seventeen, and her mother disappeared when she was a child. Then, in the present, her two best friends are abducted by a serial killer in her hometown. She was the last to see them. She wonders if it was a serial killer who abducted her mom. What’s so heartbreaking and complicated is that she would rather believe her mom was a victim of a serial killer than what most likely happened. Her mother most likely abandoned her and her father, walked out on them. It’s tragic. She wants to believe so badly her mother was murdered by a serial killer, because that is, in such a twisted yet

understandable way, more comforting than the reality of her mother abandoning her, leaving her by choice. These genre elements bleed into character in such an emotional way.

Another telling example of form matching content that's affected me is Kate Zambreno's *Green Girl*. Zambreno's prose in the novel is fragmentary. What affects the protagonist, Ruth, so much is material culture. She is performing woman for those around her. She is fragmented the same way the prose is fragmented. Zambreno incorporates film influences into the novel, and the fragments feel like imagistic shots in film. As Ruth goes throughout her day, she is inundated with material culture, with material objects, but the way she encounters them is fragmentary, and she also confronts the same material objects over and over, which is why Zambreno utilizes repetition so heavily and effectively. It's this exchange and constant fragmented interactions Ruth engages in, reflected in Zambreno's fragmented style.

CHAPTER 5

WRITING AS PROCESS, AS PRACTICE, AS LIGHT

There's a quote that's been stuck in my head for about two years now. I forget where I heard it. It's one of those quotes that stick with you, but you've forgotten who to attribute it to. I've rumbled through a bunch of old papers and notes, thinking I wrote it down somewhere, only to come to the set of notes where I thought I wrote it down, and it's not there. I've Google searched it, and the quote doesn't come up. It was simple. "Art is pain turned to light." I wish I could attribute the writer or speaker. My process of writing used to be so meticulous. I used to write a sentence or even a clause or even a word, stop, and think on it painstakingly. Once I got a paragraph down, I would go back and re-read it and make changes. I edited as I went along. I wanted everything to be perfect the first time.

I can't imagine doing that now – it was so laborious and tedious. Revision can be laborious and tedious, but I think I was depriving myself the thrill of the first draft. I didn't really know any other way. Writing to me, while I enjoyed it to an extent, was work. It's still work. But my take on how to work has changed. Pain and art, the two mingled together, I didn't get. I was being clinical about writing. Pain. I wasn't tapping into that side of myself. I certainly had, have, my fair share, like we all do. Pain not transformed is dangerous, emotionally, psychologically, physically. In my background is a lot of self-hatred, a lot of years of not loving myself, of defensiveness to cope. There's been a lot of trauma. Being told and instilled at such a young age that the way you naturally are, your natural sexual feelings, are wrong, that there is something inherently wrong with you, fucks you up. There are so many people in the LGBT community who

don't make it. I started experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder from trauma in my past, and it all started coming out at once – anxiety, insomnia, suicidal depression. You think you're broken. I'm better now, as better as one may be. Better might not be the right word. Better implies you were broken to begin with, which isn't true. In healing fits better. Healing is a lived, every day process, ongoing. I've healed through treatment – the right medication, EMDR therapy, that is, post-trauma therapy, and it's also how I came to yoga.

Since practicing yoga, I've seen this link between the practice of yoga and the practice of writing. And that was the first time I started to think of writing as that, a practice. It's not perfection. My yoga instructor guides me into this mentality: when you step onto the mat, to let go of your pre-conceived notions about what you can and can't do, let go of the negative self-talk, and if you see it coming up, see it for what it is, release it, and let it go. And be in your own experience on the mat, a new experience in your body and mind each time you practice. I've taken those principles and applied them to writing. Forget about the negative self-talk: I don't know what I'm doing with this piece, I sound so stilted, I can't do this or this or this in my writing, I'm not that kind of writer. Though it can take a sense of mindfulness, I've learned to let those thoughts go. And each time I sit down to practice, I let myself be in whatever writing experience comes up for me. I don't try to control so much, at least for a first draft. Revision allows freedom. If I know I'm going to revise and revise again, and again anyway, why not let myself and my mind go, and be in the experience. This is our practice. Sitting down to a blank document and being in a new experience each time, forget about the last time, about what we think we can or can't do. While in a posture, my yoga instructor says,

forget about what you think the posture is supposed to look like, forget about what you've seen in *Yoga Journal*, and be in your experience. And through doing that, finding what feels good for you, the posture eventually comes. I can't help but think of writing this way too. Forget what you think a technique is supposed to look like, how another writer did it, and just do it in whatever way feels right for you. And eventually, practice after practice, that writing technique or move will come.

Yoga has been pain turned to light for me. And so has writing, my whole relationship with it up until this point, has been healing, a way of taking pain and changing it into something new, into something artful. "Art is pain turned to light." By viewing writing as a practice, a new experience each time, by letting go of preconceived notions about what I can or can't do, that negativity we indulge in, letting it go, it's allowed me to tap into myself in my writing in an emotional way, getting to the emotional core. Yoga and this idea of light have been linked to self-love for me, what I hadn't done for myself for so long. Light is self-love to me. Pain transformed. So writing, in its process, in its practice, is light.