

COMPLIMENTARY TOILET PAPER:  
SOME THOUGHTS ON  
CHARACTER AND LANGUAGE

Not long ago, Sarabande, one of our so-called *small* independent presses—an adjective that clearly must refer to size rather than to heroism, mission, and conviction—asked me to judge a fiction contest. The winning book would be published.

I agreed, as I have to several similar requests, and, as always, when I put down the phone or send off the e-mail, I had to lie down for half an hour, sick with regret, self-loathing, and dread. The obvious anxieties—that I might have to read manuscripts I might not enjoy or that I might make the wrong decision—were compounded by the deeper terror that there would be no right decision to make.

I've heard about several writers, people I admire, who have refused to award a prize in a literary contest they were judging because, they believed, no entry deserved a prize. While I respect their integrity, I simply don't have it in me. I say, if someone wants to give a prize, they should give a prize. I say, if someone wants to publish a book, they should publish a book. Besides, I say, there's no predicting what such an award might do, no telling when recognition, even modest recognition, will reveal, to a merely competent writer, some previously hidden but dazzling vein of talent. I have, I'll admit, picked winners whose main distinction was that they were the best of a merely competent lot. It felt a little strange, a little inauthentic, I'll admit, but I soon forgot about it, and some writer somewhere got the good news and was happy.

Fortunately, the package from Sarabande contained several

strong contenders. But my decision was made when I read a line in Michael Jeffrey Lee's story collection, *Something in My Eye*. I recognized at once—correctly, as it turned out—a sentence that would prove hard to beat, because of the way in which it used language to give first life and then dimension to a fictional character.

The narrator of Lee's story "If Ever We Should Meet" has been working (duties unspecified) in a building "so tall that people used to jump from the roof when they became so sad that they wanted to end it all." One day, our hero feels a shadow cross his face, and when he's told that someone has jumped from his side of the building, he lies and says he's seen it. Overcome by guilt at having told a lie and worried that "the dead person was angry with me for making a memory of him that wasn't true," our narrator spends his days in bed until his employer calls and fires him. Already, we have an intimation of something slightly . . . unusual, slightly, one might say, *off*, a sense that is entirely a result of Lee's slightly unusual, slightly *off* syntax and word choice.

The story goes on. We learn that our hero's older brother has been killed in an (again unspecified) war after spending his military leave leading the family in the evenings, before dinner, in the choral singing of a song he wrote entitled, "If Ever We Should Meet." This "became a little controversial within the family because the lyrics were vague and kind of ominous, and nobody could ever understand why he was singing about a meeting with strangers when there were, all of us around the table, a family and not strangers at all."

After losing his job, the narrator travels to a new town. Getting off the bus, he makes a vow to himself, "that I would try to view each new sentence as independent of previous ones, and make no snap judgments, because although I had visited once before, I was unfamiliar with the people and the customs." The narrator tries to keep this vow, though his resolve is challenged when he drops a cracker and, retrieving it, sees a bloodstain under the bed. Determined to find work, he reads the classifieds like "sacred scriptures," conducts practice interviews with himself, and finds a room in a motel under a freeway and across from a veterans' hospital. Every morning he showers and shaves and frequently cuts himself shaving.

"The motel had complimentary toilet paper, so I was able to

staunch any of my cuts with little folded scraps before I left my room. One day though, I was in such a hurry that I cut myself under my nose, bad enough that I had to ask the manager nicely for a Band-Aid. People gave me nasty looks on the bus that morning, and I only figured out why, when, after I had filled out an application at the coffee shop and was using the bathroom in the back, I noticed that I had a pretty sizeable amount of blood in my teeth, which I wasn't able to taste because of the cinnamon gum I was chewing. My brother's song went something like: *If we should ever meet, I will kindly take your hand. If we should ever meet, I will cudgel every lamb. If we should ever meet, I will wear my cleanest gown. If we should ever meet, I will set fire to this town. If we should ever meet, I will deny those close to me. If we should ever meet, I will feign to disagree.*"

Doubtless many of you are still trying to decipher what the author could have been attempting to communicate with the sheer incantatory weirdness of the dead brother's song. Kindly take your hand? Cudgel every lamb? But I would like to direct your attention back to the first sentence I quoted. That is, the line that won the prize.

*The motel had complimentary toilet paper.* What does that even mean? Are there motels that have uncomplimentary toilet paper, for which they charge you extra? Or no toilet paper at all? We know the protagonist has taken a vow to see everything in a new way. But complimentary toilet paper? Has he come not just from another town but from another planet?

On a planet where, it will be noted, they speak a slightly different language. English, but not English. Or English that has been picked up very carefully like a heavy serving platter and moved slightly to one side and set down someplace else—a place created and occupied solely by the character of the narrator. That linguistic transition can make the reader vaguely seasick, and whether or not you enjoy that sensation may affect your response to the story. I like not knowing where a sentence, or a story, is going to wind up, and if the route twists, as it does here, the momentum that propels us forward is the combustive force of language producing a human being. A human who, I should say, may not be to everyone's liking; not every reader may want to spend time in his company, on the page, any more than they would in life.

(Myself, I'm delighted to meet him in a book but not in the flesh, if I can help it.)

I was shocked when a prepublication review of this book, a work I'd admired and chosen, described its atmosphere as "calculated to be noxious to human health—moral, spiritual, and psychological." But that shock may have been partly inspired by oversensitivity to the uses of language, which in turn may have been temporarily intensified by the fact that I had just been reading about the word and imagery choices of the Nazi propaganda machine. My reading had left me with a troubling sense that, historically speaking, it is usually bad news when metaphors of poison and disease are applied to cultural products.

Recently, at a question-and-answer period that followed a reading, I heard the writer George Saunders say that what interests him most about fiction—that is, about writing fiction—are the interior monologues of his characters: specifically, the language of the chatter inside a character's head. He had just read his story, "Victory Lap," a story entirely composed of the interior monologue of three separate people who have the misfortune of finding themselves in the same place at the same time: a teenage girl, a boy who lives next door to her, and a stranger who drives up in a van with plans to abduct and murder the girl. Saunders did the three voices expertly, but had we been reading the story silently, to ourselves, the language employed by each voice—vocabulary and rhythm, to choose just two elements of the whole—would have let us know instantly which of three was speaking, or actually, thinking. We begin in the voice of fifteen-year-old Alison, who, with her bigger than all outdoors hair bow, her stone age picture of herself as a little cutie, and her baby deer reverie could not be anyone else—that is, we would be hard pressed to imagine that five-year-old boy or sixty-year-old man whose inner monologue would sound anything like this:

On a happy whim, do front roll, hop to your feet, kiss the picture of Mom and Dad taken at Penney's back in the Stone Ages, when you were that little cutie right there {kiss} with a hair bow bigger than all outdoors.

Sometimes, feeling happy like this, she imagined a baby deer trembling in the woods.

Where's your mama, little guy?

I don't know, the deer said in the voice of Heather's little sister Becca.

Are you afraid? she asked it. Are you hungry? Do you want me to hold you?

O.K., the baby deer said.

A few pages further into the story we find ourselves in the mind of Kyle, the teenage neighbor, whose interior conversation (of the sort we all have) involves a running imagined conversation with his disapproving father:

Gar, Dad, do you honestly feel it fair that I should have to slave in the yard until dark, after a rigorous cross-country practice that included sixteen 440s, eight 880s, a mile-for-time, a kajillion Drake sprints, and a five-mile Indian relay?

Shoes off, mister.

Yoinks, too late. He was already at the TV. And had left an incriminating trail of micro-clods. Way verboten. Could the micro-clods be hand-plucked? Although, problem: if he went back to hand-pluck the micro-clods, he'd leave an incriminating new trail of micro-clods.

And now the story takes us on a dark excursion into the brain of a man with a knife—the stranger whose game plan for Alison fills his mind with a highly concentrated mantra of preparedness and readiness for any obstacle in the way of the smooth execution of his psychotically efficient agenda.

The following bullet points remained in the decision matrix: take to side van door, shove in, follow in, tape wrists/mouth, hook to chain, make speech. He had the speech down cold. Had practiced it both in his head and on the recorder: *Calm your heart, darling, I know you're scared because you don't know me yet and didn't expect this today but give me a chance and you will see we will fly high. See I am putting the knife right over here and I don't expect I'll have to use it, right?*

If she wouldn't get in the van, punch hard in gut. Then pick up, carry to side van door, throw in, tape wrists/mouth, hook to chain, make speech, etc., etc.

What should by now be obvious is that we are never in any doubt about whose voice we are hearing, and that this certainty in the mind of the reader is achieved by the language Saunders uses to portray the ways in which each character is thinking at each given moment. Part of the pleasure of listening to the story comes from wondering what is going to happen next and at the same time being aware that the outcome—whether the would-be kidnapper will get away with his crime—was not what was keeping the writer writing. I intuited this, and yet when Saunders explained that what had engaged him had been his characters' interior chatter, I was surprised, because it is something I often hear myself say in similar situations.

Actually, I've heard many writers say more or less the same thing: that narrative and event are merely the armature on which to hang the layerings of consciousness, the inner chatter imagined and reproduced through precision of diction and word choice. And I suppose it's what writers mean when they talk about inhabiting a character, about the psychic ventriloquism of understanding a character on a level so deep and intimate that, when you think about that character, you seem to hear the language in which that character thinks. Quite possibly it's what Chekov meant when he wrote, "to depict horse thieves in 700 lines I must all the time speak and think in their tone and feel in their spirit."

And while it makes perfect sense to me, it does seem somehow counterintuitive that writers should want to augment and amplify and record that interior monologue, when entire religions, meditation techniques, and schools of psychotherapy have been based on the understandable human longing to mute or silence that chatter, if only for a few moments of blessed peace. Perhaps it's this, as much as anything—that desire to eavesdrop on the language of what is never said out loud and perhaps cannot be said—that distinguishes the writer from those who have sensibly chosen other professions.

Even after all this time, I am still slightly surprised when reviewers or readers talk about the plots of my novels when what I thought I was doing was charting how a character's consciousness changes with each bit of interior or exterior information, and recording the language that accompanies and comments on these changes in a person's mental state. Who

could have imagined that I'd been engaged by such topics as sexual harassment or academic politics or any of the subjects that readers and critics have seized upon in talking about my novel *Blue Angel* when the reason I wrote it was to watch my hero's mind founder and go under and painfully haul itself back to the surface, only to plummet into the hell fires lit and stoked by his misguided passion for a talented student.

The oddity of this intention, or compulsion, to burrow inside the human mind—rather like the brain worms that were the terrifying mainstay of the science fiction I read as a child—is one reason why I never know if people have any idea what I mean when I talk about language as the key that turns the lock of character. Or maybe the problem is that I have been using an unhelpful or confusing illustration whenever I have tried to explain what I mean.

The example from my own experience that most readily comes to mind concerns my desperate efforts to get inside the mind and heart of a character who could hardly be less like myself—a young neo-Nazi named Vincent Nolan, who claims, at the start of my novel *A Changed Man*, to have had a radically transformative experience and who, by the end of the book, has actually had one, though the genuine transformation is much more gradual and complex than the pretend one. In the opening scene, Vincent has just driven in from the country in a stolen truck and is walking through Times Square during an especially crowded lunch hour, on an unseasonably hot day. I could all too easily empathize with Vincent's discomfort, alienation, irritation, with his sense of being threatened and nearly overwhelmed by the crush of unfamiliar humanity and the reek of auto exhaust. But still it seemed improbable that I would ever understand who this person was. Until (and the really impossible part is trying to fathom where these things come from: obviously from within ourselves but also, it often seems, from some mysterious "other" place) I found myself writing the following sentence—one of the many thoughts that goes through Vincent Nolan's mind as he struggles to process, and respond to, and defend himself against, the sensory assault of midtown Manhattan at lunch: "While he's been off in the boondocks with his friends and their Aryan Homeland wet dream, an alien life form has

evolved in the nation's cities, a hybrid species bred to survive on dog piss and carbon monoxide."

Almost a decade after writing it, I can almost look at the sentence as if it were someone else's, and at the same time recall why I found it so encouraging as I labored to see the world from the point of view of a young man whose world view is in fact more about hustle than about hate. I'm again reminded of Chekhov's brief disquisition on the challenge of writing about horse thieves. "Let the jury judge them; it's my job simply to show what sort of people they are. I write: you are dealing with horse thieves, so let me tell you that they are not beggars but well fed people, that they are people of a special cult, and that horse stealing is not simply theft but passion."

So, in writing, I felt that I had cracked a code, that my hero (or by that point, I should say, my protagonist) was poised between two worlds, still speaking the language of his immediate past ("Aryan Homeland") but not yet that of the future into which he was hurtling, dismissive of what he'd left behind (the "wet dream" in the "boondocks") but so intimidated and dissociated from the people around him that they might as well have been visitors from another planet, with wholly different dietary and respiratory needs. As it was turning out, my character was not stupid but rather intelligent, not self-serious but rather gifted with an edgy sense of humor, and most importantly, from my own point of view, capable of the kind of sustained metaphorical thinking that could hold my—and I hoped the reader's—attention for the next several hundred pages. Of course, one reason why I've had trouble explaining why that sentence made me think it was possible to write the remainder of a novel may be that I am the only person in the world who thinks that the phrase "an alien species bred to survive on dog piss and carbon monoxide" is an indicator of a gift for metaphor, intelligence, and humor.

In any case it's always easier to see (or at least to attempt to explain) how other writers use language as a magic charm that makes a character come to life and rise, like a golem or Frankenstein, off the printed page. Not long ago, I met a young woman who had, tattooed down the length of her arm, a sentence from a story by Denis Johnson—a writer with a particular gift for creating characters who inhabit what I

suppose could be called the margins of society yet whose consciousness thrums with a electrically charged, hallucinatory lyricism that would, or should, be the envy of any established poet.

The sentence that the young woman had running down her arm—"And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you"—appears at the conclusion of Johnson's "Car Crash while Hitchhiking"—the first story in his collection, *Jesus' Son*.

In the course of the book, its more or less unnamed narrator takes a wide range of recreational and prescription drugs (without troubling much about possible side effects or contraindications) and gets into (and barely out of) a great deal of trouble. One might think, and the surface of the narrative might lead us to suppose, that the narrator is an essentially simple guy—down on his luck, out on a limb, alarmingly vulnerable, open to experience, his consciousness laid bare by vagrancy and desperation and consequently transparent to the reader. But a closer reading reveals a character that's somewhat more complex: high or straight, he's acutely observant, judgmental, imaginative, and tells us exactly as much about himself as he wants us to know.

The opening story begins with a series of ellipses that not only use language but also punctuation to give us some indication of its narrator's fragmented state of mind. "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 . . . And a family from Marshalltown who head-onned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri . . ."

By the time we've reached the end of the paragraph, we've already gotten some idea that we're hearing from someone whose perceptions are a bit . . . well, out of the ordinary. Beyond the question of content (the alcohol and hashish) is the little matter of *head-on* employed as a verb as well as the haunting redundancy of *killed forever*. And as we focus in on our hero—sopping wet, waiting in the faint hopes of getting a ride (who would pick this guy up unless they weren't too drunk or stoned to think better of it?) by the entrance ramp to the freeway—Johnson's use of language gives us the first real indications that our hero isn't your ordinary hitchhiker.

"The traveling salesman has fed me pills that made the linings of my veins feel scraped out. My jaw ached. I knew every raindrop by its name. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm." I'd suggest that the conviction of feeling one's veins scraped raw and even of receiving direct and unwelcome communications from the immediate future is somewhat more common (if one were to survey the segment of the population that Johnson's narrator represents) than that of knowing every raindrop by its name. And what would those names be? It's this sentence, I'd also suggest, that puts us on the alert: the interior monologue on which we're being permitted to eavesdrop is a highly unusual one, demanding and deserving of our attention. Like the phrase "complementary toilet paper," those few words—a single sentence—radically alters and sharpens the quality of attention that we are prepared to pay to what we are being told, and to the person who is telling us.

As daunting as it is to inhabit a character such as the narrators in Denis Johnson's and Michael Jeffrey Lee's stories, or the psycho kidnapper in the George Saunders piece, or my own recovering neo-Nazi, there is also a kind of freedom and exhilaration involved in finding the language that so clearly sets a character outside the parameters of normal or ordinary—or what we've agreed to call normal and ordinary—interior chatter. (I suspect that if we were honest about the thoughts that ran through our minds on a minute by minute basis, recognizing and allowing in the ideas and perceptions we've learned to screen out before they can take hold, they might be closer to those of our brothers so appreciative of the complementary toilet paper or on a first-name basis with each rain drop.) But it's a different sort of challenge to find the language of the interior life of a character who is even better trained than we are to closely monitor and rigidly control the fragments of self that break loose and rise to the surface.

One of my favorite characters in literature, if such a thing could be said about a smug, painfully clueless husband and father of four, willfully or unknowingly blinded to the truth about his life and those of his mother and siblings, is the narrator of "Goodbye My Brother," John Cheever's harrowing account of a New England family reunion from hell. Or perhaps

it would be more correct to say that the story is one of my favorites to teach, since in the opening paragraphs, Cheever so masterfully layers the language of class, race, region, gender, and unintentional self-revelation beneath the natter of self-description and mannerly introduction. And because the first-person story is, formally speaking, an interior monologue with dialogue and action, we read this opening with the sense that the narrator is not introducing himself to us, but rather crystallizing, for himself, who he is and what he's about, but as if he were giving a talk to an audience, listening.

We are a family that has always been very close in spirit. Our father was drowned in a sailing accident when we were young, and our mother has always stressed the fact that our familial relationships have a kind of permanence that we will never meet with again. I don't think about the family much, but when I remember its members and the coast where they lived and the sea salt that I think is in our blood, I am happy to recall that I am a Pommeroy—that I have the nose, the coloring, and the promise of longevity—and that while we are not a distinguished family, we enjoy the illusion, when we are together, that the Pommeroyes are unique. I don't say any of this because I'm interested in family history or because this sort of uniqueness is deep or important to me but in order to advance the point that we are loyal to one another in spite of our differences. . . .

We are four children: there is my sister Diana and the three men—Chaddy, Lawrence, and myself. . . . I teach in a secondary school, and I am past the age where I expect to be made headmaster—or principal, as we say—but I respect the work. Chaddy, who has done better than the rest of us, lives in Manhattan, with Odette and their children. Mother lives in Philadelphia, and Diana, since her divorce, has been living in France, but she comes back to the States in the summer to spend a month at Laud's Head. Laud's Head is a summer place on the shore of one of the Massachusetts islands. . . . It stands on a cliff above the sea and, excepting St. Tropez and some of the Apennine villages, it is my favorite place in the world.

Really, you could start anywhere. The regretful acceptance of *principal*, "as we say," the public-school job title (the narrator teaches on Long Island) in place of the anglophile prep

school *headmaster*. A job, by the way, that he will never get; he just lets *that* pop out. The simple fact of calling one's mother Mother instead of Mom, Mommy, or Mami. The locutions—"in order to advance the point"—that seem left over from writing (or teaching) the high school essay or debating on the team. The genteel understatement of the entitled (the way monumental seaside mansions have been referred to by their residents as *cottages*) and the coded language of "one of the Massachusetts islands"—places that outsiders might be more likely to think of as Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard. The family, the coast, the sea salt in their blood. The fact that what the narrator considers the distinguishing characteristics of the Pommeroys (nose, coloring, longevity) are all physical traits of the sort that might be noted by the eugenicist, rather than deeper qualities: kindness, say, or humor. The telling description of the grown siblings as four children, and the way that judgment and competition (Diana's divorce, Chaddy having done the best) crop up the instant the siblings are mentioned. And those are the surface. We have to think a minute more to get the implications of a high school teacher (later we will learn that one of his duties is firing the gun when there are races at the school) telling us about Saint Tropez and hill towns in the Appenines.

We have to read a good deal further and come back and reread these lines to realize how much of what the narrator says are lies, or at least distortions, but ones that he believes himself, which makes it all more complicated. Yes, the family is close in spirit in the sense that they cannot get free of each other; they might as well be still children of their recklessly self-involved, alcoholic mother, and if the narrator doesn't think of the family much, it's hard to say what else he does think of. Even the names are freighted with meaning: Diana, like several other women in the story, has the name of a Greek goddess, an association that will become important in the final paragraph; Chaddy is precisely the sort of prep school nickname that one associates with families like the Pommeroys, and as for Laud's Head—one of my students told me that William Laud was the conservative and punitive archbishop of Canterbury, beheaded by order of the court of King Charles in 1645.

As the story progresses we learn that the despised third

brother, Lawrence, has returned to visit the family, and that everything of which Lawrence is accused by the narrator—pessimism, selfishness, a joyless and judgmental Puritanism, disapproval of the family's decadence and excessive drinking—are in fact the narrator's own thoughts, so inadmissible that he can only allow himself to think them by projecting them onto Lawrence. The cumulative effect of Cheever's virtuoso use of language is that every phrase, every sentence comes to function as a direct pipeline to the narrator's unconscious, so that the mounting pressure, the explosion of violence, and the final moment of grace are experienced by readers as if we were watching the narrator from the outside and at the same time seeing the world through his cramped world view, constricted by a lifetime—by generations—of privilege and damage.

The story is a model of the way in which words and sentences are used to construct a character, a family, a history, a plot, a sermon, a story that takes its place in a particular line that connects the Bible, Greek myth, and the fading aristocracy of New England. I could dissect it line by line, but you can do it yourself for a lesson in how many dazzling objects language can juggle at once.

I could go on for much longer, but I'll end with a coda that has added another layer to my thinking about the complementary toilet paper. One afternoon I was bored and tired of writing, and, I'll admit, I googled myself for the reasons one does: ennui, vanity, curiosity, a desire for low-level entertainment. One thing led to another and soon I was reading the story of how the author of the book I'd chosen for *Sarabande* had cancelled a reading he was supposed to give from his new book in his hometown, New Orleans. He claimed that he had looked over his book, which he had forgotten, and was so horrified that he was unable to give the public reading because he'd realized what a "sick fuck" he'd been when he wrote it.

To tell the truth, I was a little surprised to learn I'd picked a book by a sick fuck. Had *Publishers Weekly* been right about the psychic dangers it posed? If so, what was wrong with me? But as I looked at the story again, I thought, I don't really care how sick the fucks we write about are. We are not their psychiatrists, their judges, their parents, or their lovers. The only thing that matters to me as a reader and a writer is the

language in which these characters think, the words the author gives them with which to reveal themselves *to* themselves and to us as we delve into the mystery of what it means to be a human being—like us and totally *not* like us—alive at this moment, on this planet.