

APOLOGIA

‘With me it’s quite different. While I am digging for the truth, so much happens to it that instead of discovering the truth I dig up a heap of, pardon... I’d better not name it.’

- **Andrey Tarkovsky, *Stalker***

SHE IS AT home, in the little room at the top of the house reserved for writing. She is thinking about how to begin; or, at least, how to prepare to begin, how to lay the ground for what follows.

Books are piled all around her – in little towers on the fringes of her desk, in scattered groupings tessellating out across the carpet. They haphazardly combine reading for pleasure, for her teaching work and for her research. One pile contains, from the bottom up: Philip Gourevitch’s book on Rwanda; J. M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello, for a seminar she is leading on the public and the private; a novel, *Quilt*, by the theorist Nicholas Royle, is followed by a collection of stories, edited by the novelist Nicholas Royle (that’s the creative critical nexus, right there, she thinks); Theodore Zeldin’s book on conversation, which Danielle had given her, a gift pregnant with symbolism if ever there was one.

There are others: T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death*, a volume of stories by Denis Johnson, some poems by Rilke, Donald Barthelme's *Not-Knowing*, Jane Rabb's anthology on the short story and photography and, of course, Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice*, the turquoise Melville House edition. At the top, the book with which the whole thing started, on Saturday 16th March 2002, at twenty five minutes past two in the afternoon, when her then boyfriend stopped in at Blackwell's on Charing Cross Road to buy her a present: *Assorted Fire Events*, by the American short story writer David Means.

What is it that Coetzee says, at the beginning of *Elizabeth Costello*? 'It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge.' The metaphor of construction makes it all seem so straightforward: the building of a means to take us from one world to another, a transfer between ontological zones. With a few planks and some nails we can have something knocked together in no time. It's such a manly idea, emblematic of mankind's belief that for every problem there is an answer, for every gap, a crossing.

It is simple for Coetzee, perhaps for others. For her part, in her room at the top of the house, it is always a struggle. She goes through agonies, having to give birth to each word, bracing herself against the table, pushing as hard as she can. Rather than a bridge builder, she feels as if she is a climber who, having shinned up one cliff face, finds herself inexplicably at the bottom of another. She looks up and wonders how she is in this position again. Will she ever learn? Will it ever get any easier to say – to write – what she thinks? To speak her mind? To fully account for and realise her intentions? That goal, like the top of the imaginary cliff, appears an illusion. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps this is just the condition of things; perhaps it is just the condition of her; the condition of

being, as she feels, back to front, the wrong way around. Each time she starts out on an act of writing, she feels obliged to turn around, go back further and start out again. Because really, when it comes down to it, how does she know where the beginning begins? It is a question of choice as much as anything else and choice, she feels, is at once highly arbitrary and utterly determined.

Part of the problem is that her intentions change with each thing she reads, sometimes without her even noticing it. Each reading changes her, knocks in a dent here, or sharpens an edge there. Each dent and sharpened edge subsequently requires a pause, a moment of reflection to take account of the new shape of things. Each pause brings with it its own dents and sharpenings. As a consequence, the process repeats itself, only differently. This condition of uncertainty with regard to origin – with regard to how to make a beginning – dogs her. She knows what the problem is, she knows it as clear as anything, but she can't do anything about: it simply is what it is. The truth is, it's not a question of not knowing how to begin at all. There is no beginning – she knows that, obviously. Beginning is simply what comes after the thing that went before it. And the thing that went before it is the past. And the past doesn't matter, really. She accepts it for what it is, takes its existence as read. In truth, it is the things to come that trouble her. More than anything her problem with beginning is that all she really wants to know is how it will end, what the outcome will be. And in a fairly obvious way you can't get to the end without going through the beginning, so what is she to do?

It is the next day. She didn't sleep very well and her shoulders ache, a real deep-in-the-muscle kind of tension. A massage would be useful, but there isn't time. Russell Banks, talking of the short story and introducing Frank O'Connor, says:

‘For those of us who write them, when we sit down to write another, all too often feel that we are at the very beginning of the history of the genre and therefore do not know what to do’. She knows well this feeling of not-knowing: is there a tradition and, if there is, where is it? Does she align herself with Chekhov or Barthelme? Joyce or Kafka? On different days she thinks different things, convinces herself of a different attitude to the tradition, but finding a way to capture this flow of thoughts; or, better, to settle peaceably and quiescently on a single standpoint vis-à-vis the tradition seems beyond her.

O’Connor is no greater help. ‘For the short-story writer there is no such thing as essential form. Because his frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each selection he makes contains the possibility of a new form as well as the possibility of a complete fiasco’. Well, there you have it: no such thing as essential form and the possibility of a complete fiasco.

To make matters worse, she is not, at the present moment, even trying to write a story. (Writing, she thinks, real writing. What bliss!) Instead, the task ahead is to perform an inversion: to write ‘critically’ about stories, to commit to paper her thoughts on a form about which, as she freely acknowledges, she has a shifting and frankly incomplete understanding. That she will have to do this under the guise of a thesis – ‘A proposition laid down or stated, esp. as a theme to be discussed and proved, or to be maintained against attack’ (OED) – is enough to bring on the jitters.

If there is to be a bridge, she thinks, between what is creative and what is critical, it will be one with mirrors at each end, so that, as you approach each bank, you are reminded of what you have left behind, what you have come from, at the same moment as you see what lies ahead.

What lies ahead. She cannot prevent her mind jumping forward to her panel, to her interlocutors, trying, in her imagination, to discern what they will have made of what she hasn't yet written, whether they intend to spare her or throw her to the wolves.

She takes a break. She goes down to the kitchen. They are out of coffee. They cannot be out of coffee. There isn't time to be out of coffee. She jumps into the car. Because of some works at the end of the road, she is forced to go a little way around the ring road before a route opens up into the city centre. There is a coffee shop near the river. When she lived in a different apartment she used to go there a lot, but now she goes less frequently.

She knows the owner of the coffee shop a little.

'How're things?'

'I'm working on my thesis,' she says.

'Ah,' she says, and smiles, before wordlessly putting her hand on her arm, a touch more usually associated with condolence.

Although it is cold, she takes the coffee outside and drinks it sitting at a table on the pavement. It's good coffee, really good coffee – dark and sweet. She has her notebook with her, to capture any thoughts she might have. Being out of the house is good. Sometimes, she finds, a different environment is all she needs to get herself going. She is just thinking this, imagining her mind clearing, when a friend comes along. Before long they are talking about the thesis.

'I don't know how to begin,' she says.

'Describe it in one sentence,' the friend says.

She slurps her coffee, hesitates. 'It's too complicated.'

'Try.'

‘No.’

‘Go on.’

‘I don’t want to. I don’t know how to put it into words.’

‘What are you so afraid of?’

She looks up, exasperated. ‘All right. Are you ready?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK. It’s an attempt to track the experience of looking at some short stories by one particular short story writer and from them come to some understanding of my own interest in the form.’

‘It’s not that complicated.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘But why looking? As opposed to reading, I mean. It makes you sound like, I don’t know, a mechanic, or something, rather than a...’

‘Rather than a what?’

‘I don’t know. What would you call yourself?’

‘Well, there’s a question.’ She looks at her friend, smiles. This is fun, suddenly. ‘In any case, I say looking because it allows me to introduce the metaphor of sight – you know, all that Flannery O’Connor stuff about fiction’s proving ground being the eye.’

‘And you go along with that?’

‘I do. And I don’t. William O’Rourke says that a story ‘is always held in view,’ like a piece of sculpture, an art object. I kind of think yes, but I kind of think no, too.’

‘Why do you think no?’

‘I suppose I think no because one of the things I like about stories is the way they actually stop you from seeing, either by literally not showing you

something, or by otherwise going out of their way to get in the way of the complete... picture.'

'Say more.' Her friend is smiling now, too.

'Well, here's an example. There's a wonderful story by Clare Wigfall. It's called "Free". A woman's hitchhiking, maybe in Spain. She gets dropped off in a town. It's siesta time and only one café in the little square is open. She goes in. There's nobody there but a barman. Are you with me so far?'

'Yup. Hitchhiker. Woman. Spain. Barman.'

'Good. She orders a drink, sits down. There's a fly buzzing around. After a while she gets talking to the barman. There are some pictures on the wall behind him. One of them's of his mother. Out of nowhere, she says to the barman: "What's the worst thing she ever did to you?"'

'That's a bit direct isn't it?'

'It is, but that's not the thing. The thing is, the barman answers, but the story doesn't tell us what he says. It just jumps over it, leaving a gap. Then she says: "Why was that the worst thing?" And he says: "I don't know. I don't know why I even said it. I've never told anyone about it before."'

Her friend is about to speak, but she holds up her hand:

'Wait. Don't say anything yet. And then she says: "Did she look happy?" And he says: "She looked." And he pauses. "She looked free." And that's it, more or less, the end of the story.'

'Oh but that's really annoying. You never find out what it was, what he did?'

'No.'

'But that's infuriating. No. Don't like.'

‘It is infuriating, but it’s also brilliant. I love it. I basically think it’s the best thing that’s ever been done in a story.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘I don’t know, really. That is the infuriating thing. But I first read that story, what, five, six years ago. And I’m still thinking about it now. I can’t get it out of my head. I literally think about it every day. I want to know what it was, what he said. So I keep going back to it.’

‘But you’ll never know.’

‘I know I’ll never know, but that doesn’t stop me wanting to, wanting to go back and see if there’s some clue I’ve missed, or some interpretation that fits incontrovertibly with the facts.’

‘Well,’ her friend says. ‘You’re a better woman than I am. I’d have just thrown the book out of the window.’

She leans forwards, takes her tobacco from her pocket and begins to roll a cigarette. Her movements are fluent, fluid. She lights the cigarette and inhales. When she exhales, she begins talking again. ‘That’s up to you. But I love it, in part because it kind of leaves me in this state of radical uncertainty that I find thrilling. It leaves you completely on your own. There’s no one to turn to. There’s another story by William Sansom – it’s called ‘The Vertical Ladder’ – it does something similar. It’s like it takes you right to the edge of a cliff and leaves you there looking down at the bottom, but the bottom is so far away you can’t see it. The story says “OK, buster, over to you: are you going to stay here, or are you going to jump?” There’s a great quote about Chekhov, by this guy Shestov. He said that Chekhov’s work “murmurs a quiet ‘I don’t know’ to every problem.” Do you get it?’

‘I’m not sure I do.’

‘Well, the unspoken part of that statement is: “What do you think?”

‘And?’

‘And what?’

‘What *do* you think?’

‘I don’t know. I think a lot of things.’

When she gets home, she goes back to her desk. The problem remains the same, although its metaphorical possibilities have multiplied: the laying out of ground, the scaling of a cliff, the construction of a bridge, the selection of an approach, a path to the centre. It had been so easy to talk about it in the café with her friend, but now, with the blank screen reflecting her tangled nest of hair – she cannot remember the last time she did her hair properly – she feels the overwhelming sense of her own inadequacy. She has nothing to say, nothing to write; or she knows that what she does have to say can only ever be hesitant, partial, knocked off. There was a great essay that Danielle loaned her, before the great falling out. It was by Denise Riley. She wrote a bit of it down and stuck it on the noticeboard. Now where was it? She has to get up in order to find out, but find it she does: ‘an acknowledgement that you are at best going to manage a cut-and-paste is the minimum you require to proceed at all’. Right, she tells herself. Come on. Proceed. You don’t need much. Even so, it is infuriating, that the thing she thinks of as her special gift – the ability to express herself in words – should desert her at precisely this moment.

None of this would matter, perhaps, if she could only nail the principle behind the thing, the way in which she sees it operating – is that even possible, desirable?

At some point in the last three years – she cannot remember precisely when, although she thinks it might have been summer – she was reading a book in the library. Unforgivably, she cannot remember what it was called. In its introduction, the author announced that what followed should not be thought of as a complete history, but rather as Notes towards a complete history. She remembers thinking that perhaps her thesis could take its place in a similar undertaking on the short story, an endlessly extendable project, never reaching the end, and so, never available for complete appraisal, endlessly deferred. In this way, she thinks, any gaps or omissions in her own argument can be excused by their projected presence in an as-yet-unwritten future volume.

It is the following day again. She is making coffee in the kitchen. On the subject of looking, one thing keeps coming back, returning and returning, haunting her thoughts. She feels that if she can grasp it – and extract from its ghost-like presence in her imagination something writeable – it might give her a frame, something around which to hang her thoughts, to give them shape, some sense of purpose.

It goes broadly like this:

In the autumn of 1907, a thirty-one year old Rilke was in Paris. During his stay, he made several visits to the Salon d'Automne, which, that year, was hosting a Cézanne retrospective. Rilke recorded his experience of looking at Cézanne's paintings in a series of letters to his wife, Clara. One quotation stands out. It is not so much on Cézanne, but on the experience – the phenomenon – of looking. 'Looking is a marvellous thing,' Rilke writes, 'of which we know but little. Through it we are turned absolutely to the outside, but when we are most of all so, things happen in us that have waited longingly to be observed; and

while they reach completion in us... their significance grows up in the object outside.’

The principle – that by turning to the outside in contemplation of something other we reach some understanding, and some fulfillment, of ourselves – is the hoped-for effect of her entire project. It is her fervent wish that by focusing on – by looking intently at – some stories by somebody else she will, by way of some kind of alchemy, come to an understanding of (a) what she even means when she says the word ‘story’, and (b) of her own decision to write stories – and to write stories instead of novels, which, no matter what you dressed it up in, was beginning to look like an odd decision, at best, contrary to the prevailing commercial wind. The idea, then, is to attempt to track in some way the experience of looking, all the while watching and waiting as the yields of that looking grow up somehow in the stories she creates. How is it even possible to talk about such an experience, to grasp it?

It worked for Rilke, or seemed to. Years after his experience of looking at Cézanne’s paintings, on the eve of the First World War, he wrote what, otherwise untitled, is sometimes known as ‘the Weltinnenraum poem’. The name derives from Rilke’s creation of the term in the fourth quatrain. He uses it in an attempt to capture the exchange between the object observed outside and the response within: ‘inner-world-space’. She reads the quatrain aloud:

One space spreads through all creatures equally –
inner-world-space. Birds quietly flying go
flying through us. O, I that want to grow,
the tree I look outside at grows in me!

This is how she conceives of the thesis – this is its engine, as her friend might say. She wants a conversation to take place between the critical object and the creative subject, which is, so to speak, herself. ‘Conversation is a meeting of

minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards.' That's what Theodore Zeldin thought, in any case – another scrap of paper on the noticeboard, another reminder of Danielle. Now, here, this evening, in her room, the windows black with night, she is not of a mind to disagree. Tomorrow she will think about it some more, and the next day, and the next. In the end, she will get there – she has to, she tells herself; there is too much at stake; too many bridges have been burnt to go back. She picks up her pen and holds it above the page. As she does so, she wonders whether, in the future, when it is all over, she will look back on the period she is now living through with nostalgia or horror.

MEANS OF DISCOMFORT

NARRATIVE AND ITS DYSFUNCTIONS IN THE SHORT FICTION OF DAVID MEANS

PART ONE: Notes Towards an Idea of Narrative Dysfunctionality

I

As Gabriel Josipovici has written, when writing on a single writer ‘one focuses on the object and everything has to be directed towards the one aim of bringing out into the open what one thinks makes that author or work important and meaningful’.¹ This, then, is the project at hand: to focus on David Means, to look closely at his stories and to draw out those elements that strike me as being of significant interest. In making readings of those stories, I will dwell on certain aspects when they arise and follow them when they seem significant.² This is an approach that the complex and recursive stories of Means seem to demand. In bringing theoretical perspectives to bear, I follow the line of Margaret Atwood, who describes their inclusion as coming ‘by the usual writerly methods, which resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests’.³ The intention in so doing is to produce a creative reading, whose form as well as content is inspired by the material under examination: stories which jump around, circle back and repeat themselves, in language that possesses ‘a grand hypotactic inclusiveness, a kind of linguistic generosity that comprehends all sorts of things in passing’.⁴ In this way, I hope to make a case for David Means, to bring out into the open the ways in which he is meaningful and of value, and to show what lessons he might have for us as readers – and writers – of short fiction.

¹ Gabriel Josipovici, *Whatever Happened to Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), xi.

² Alice Munro describes how, when reading, she doesn’t ‘take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while’. See Alice Munro, ‘What is Real?’ in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Fifth Edition, ed. R.V. Cassill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994) 940.

³ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (London: Virago, 2003), xviii.

⁴ Daniel Soar, ‘It had better be big,’ review of *Notable American Women* by Ben Marcus and *Assorted Fire Events* by David Means, *London Review of Books* Vol. 24 No. 15 (2002): 19.

II

David Means. When I say the name aloud I feel bound to pronounce at least part of it as if it were in italics: David *Means*. There it is, that inescapable word, right there on the cover, acting as a kind of extra-textual indicator or injunction. Peter Brooks suggests that when we read, we seek ‘in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the promise of progress towards meaning’.⁵ Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, refers to a similar tendency, writing of ‘a powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for...a signified,’ which results in a ‘transcendent reading’ which goes ‘in the direction of the meaning or referent’.⁶ Likewise, Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending*, writes that ‘right down at root, they [fictions] must correspond to a basic human need, they must make sense, give comfort’.⁷ Implied in these claims is the existence of a common, if problematic, desire that meaning should deliver the satisfaction of intelligibility: a disclosure, or revelation, an act of opening or uncovering that purports to make the world more intelligible.

For Means, however, as for the three theorists above, meaning seems less an object to be pursued, than a process to be gone through. It is to be found in the taking of something seriously, to do it the service of paying close attention. Means has said: ‘Writing comes out of silence and isolation and complete attention, a form of heavy duty staring. I take the world seriously. The world is a serious place’.⁸ Means’s fictions are certainly serious, both in subject and structure, product and process. As Charles May has it, his work represents ‘a serious literary exploration

⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), xiii.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 49, 160.

⁷ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 44.

⁸ Peter Wild, ‘Bookmunch Interview with David Means,’ *Bookmunch*, November 4, 2010, accessed July 13 2013, <http://bookmunch.wordpress.com/2010/11/04/why-don't-you-ask-bob-dylan-or-bruce-springsteen-when-they-re-going-to-write-a-symphony-interview-with-david-means-author-of-the-spot>.

both of the human need for meaning and transcendence and the human despair of finding a means for fulfilling those needs'.⁹ It is this aspect of his fiction that I wish to explore: its resistance to our sense-making instincts, our desire to make meaning.

As Roy Schafer suggests, by way of Freud, when it comes to resistance, 'nothing is more important than to ferret it out and analyze it'.¹⁰ One way in which this can be accomplished, Schafer goes on, is by 'retelling' the resistance and, in that retelling, coming to a better way of telling. 'Retelling' is a useful term in relation to any attempt to talk or write about the stories of David Means, which often themselves seem to be at once tellings and retellings. Schafer's theory also alludes to a positive drive towards an ultimate point at which the stories we tell about ourselves will make sense. Means is alert to this aspect of his work, describing the stories in his most recent collection, *The Spot*, as being 'concerned with the way we tell stories and the way we use stories to survive'.¹¹

III

In attempting to find away to write about Means's stories, I have drawn the term dysfunctional narratives from C. K. Williams, who, reflecting on differences between the novel and the poem, writes of the way in which we have become accustomed to identifying ourselves by the stories we choose to tell: 'We *are* our stories, or so we believe.' However, when we are unable properly to give an account of ourselves – unable to retell the story of our existence – we become 'narratively dysfunctional' and in need 'of the attention of specialists trained in narration...who teach us to tell our

⁹ Charles M. May, 'David Means' "El Morro" – The Literary Quest for the Sacred,' *Reading the Short Story*, October 12, 2011, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/david-means-el-morro-literary-quest-for.html>.

¹⁰ Roy Schafer, 'Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue,' in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 40.

¹¹ John Paul O'Malley, 'The Q & A: David Means, author,' *More Intelligent Life*, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://moreintelligentlife.co.uk/blog/david-means>.

stories more accurately, or gratifyingly, while at the same time also teaching us one of the key lessons of our time, which is to detach ourselves from any disturbing eschatological implications'.¹²

As Williams implies, this urge to narrativize – to plot our lives into a comprehensible unity – underpins psychoanalytic dialogues such as Gestalt therapy, which assume that psychological illnesses arise when an individual is out of touch with their whole self. In these circumstances, the dialogue aims to help such people to become well again by integrating their fragmented parts into a coherent whole.¹³ For Williams, such approaches – evident in literary theory in Iser's notion of the 'consistency-building habit,' or Ingarden's notion of 'concretization' – point to a 'possibly disabling immersion in novelistic ways of experiencing and understanding ourselves'.¹⁴ We have become conditioned, Williams suggests, to thinking of ourselves as both the authors and readers of our own narratives, lulled into the expectation that those narratives will, in the end, make sense. There are two things worth noticing here. In the first instance, attendant on this idea of satisfactory self-narration is the negative implication that, if we cannot tell our stories properly, there must be something wrong with us. Secondly, against this norm of novelistic ways of thinking about life, it is possible to see the short story as a dysfunctional form. As Michael Trussler has it, 'short fiction intimates how thoroughly our apprehension of historicity has been conditioned by sequential narrative forms such as the novel'.¹⁵

¹² C. K. Williams, 'Admiration of Form: Reflections on Poetry and the Novel,' in *Poetry and Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 111.

¹³ For a full explanation of Gestalt principles, see Muriel James and D. Jongeward, *Born to Win: Transactional Analysis with Gestalt experiments* (New York: Signet, 1978) 6-10.

¹⁴ Williams, 'Admiration of Form,' 109. For Iser's notion of consistency-building, see: Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 129. For Ingarden on concretization see: Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature, with an Appendix on the Functions of Language in the Theater*, trans. George C. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 332-55.

¹⁵ Michael Trussler, 'Suspended Narratives: The Short Story and Temporality,' *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996): 558. Means is alert to this dysfunctionality of form: 'In many ways, it seems to me, the novel has become part of the corporate landscape; whereas the story, of much less monetary value, remains forever

An ideal of unity is buried deep not only in the foundations of Western culture and social life, but in the culture of the short story itself. It goes as deep as Poe, who, in 1842, wrote of the requirement for a ‘certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out’.¹⁶ Likewise, Brander Matthews, who suggested, in 1901, that, ‘a true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression’.¹⁷ The desire for coherence persists. Charles Baxter, adopting Williams’s term in his essay ‘Dysfunctional Narratives,’ aligns fictional narratives with public ones and writes of the consequences of a failure to be clear in the stories we tell: it ‘creates a climate in which social narratives are designed to be deliberately incoherent and misleading’.¹⁸ At the heart of this incoherence is the concept of deniability, which entails a reluctance to take responsibility, a refusal to tell stories accurately. For Baxter, it then becomes impossible to ‘reconstruct a story’; impossible ‘to even know what the story is. The past under these circumstances becomes an unreadable mess’.¹⁹ Baxter claims the Kennedy assassination as ‘*the* narratively dysfunctional event of our era. No one really knows who’s responsible for it’.²⁰ There is little doubt that for Baxter this dysfunctionality counts as a negative: ‘Instead of achieving closure, the story spreads over the landscape like a stain as we struggle to find a source of responsibility’.²¹

One of the objects of this essay is to reclaim the term ‘dysfunctional narratives’ from these negative associations. I read Means as a writer who has dysfunctionality

outside the flow’. See David Means, ‘The Voyeuristic Impulse: Why I’m a Short Story Writer,’ (speech given at ‘Short Stories: le choix des histoires courtes,’ Insitution Des Chartreux, Lyon, France, November 28, 2006).

¹⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘Poe on Short Fiction,’ in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) 61.

¹⁷ Brander Matthews, ‘The Philosophy of the Short-story,’ in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) 73.

¹⁸ Charles Baxter, ‘Dysfunctional Narratives, or: “Mistakes Were Made,”’ in *Burning Down the House* (Saint Paul, Graywolf Press, 2008) 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

encoded into his very way of being. While my focus is on dysfunctionality at the discourse level, Means is interested in dysfunctionality at the level of subject too. James Lasdun draws attention to the way Means's stories deal with 'an assortment of misfits in a series of archetypal American wastelands'.²² Similarly, Means has referred to the fact that none of his characters 'are really pointed in the kind of direction you might expect in a society that values making money, or having a career'.²³ This brings Means close to Frank O'Connor's famous declaration that 'always in the short story there is the sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society'.²⁴

The dysfunctionality of his characters provides a useful analogue to thoughts about the dysfunctionality of his stories, which are dysfunctional in the sense that they are reluctant wholly to account for themselves, reluctant to reach a point of closure. I want to suggest that this reluctance – although it might be the cause of the form's often lamented marginality, to the extent that a short story writer like Means might be said to conspire in his own marginality – is in fact a reason for the form's appeal, allowing it to extend its significance beyond the confines of its own brevity.²⁵ When Baxter writes that 'one of the signs of a dysfunctional narrative is that we cannot leave it behind, and we cannot put it to rest, because it does not, finally, give us the explanation we need to enclose it,' I find that, rather than shaking my head in baleful recognition of this 'narrative failing', I raise my arms at what I see as a

²² James Lasdun, 'Darkness on the edge of town,' review of *The Spot* by David Means, *The Guardian*, November 27, 2010, accessed July 13, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/nov/27/spot-stories-david-means-review>.

²³ Dave Weich, 'David Means Makes It Work,' interview, *powells.com*, October 10, 2006, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/david-means-makes-it-work-by-dave/>.

²⁴ Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2004) 18.

²⁵ For more on the form's marginality, see Charles E. May, 'Why Short Stories are Essential and Why They are Seldom Read,' in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, Hans H. Skei (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 14-26. One of May's central claims is that the paradox inherent in all narrative – the juxtaposition of temporality of narrative with atemporality of theme – is all the more manifest in short fiction, its very shortness of sequence coming hard up against a desire for long significance.

narrative triumph.²⁶ ‘Precisely,’ I think. ‘This is precisely what I want a story to do. I want it to stay with me.’

In part, Means achieves his stories’ endurance through the manufacture of uncertainty that denies or impedes our ability to transform his narratives into closed systems. In what follows, having provided a three-part contextualisation of Means’s writing and my engagement with it, I will look at three ways in which dysfunctionality operates. In Part Four, I will outline the way in which his stories contrive to interrupt our ability to ‘see’ them whole, by making us blind, whether by masking important information or by the oscillation of narrative point of view. From this idea of sight and sightlessness, Part Five will move on to consider the ways in which narrative circumlocutions – temporal jumps, disavowals of cause and effect – make full assimilation difficult. Part Six will look at the presence in his stories of figures and structures of rotation, symbols that contrive to disorientate. An afterword will consider the consequence of these dysfunctions: the afterlife of his stories, their capacity to live on in the imagination of the reader.

IV

That such dysfunctionality might lead to readerly discomfort can be thought about in a number of ways. Frank Kermode proposes the *tick tock* of a clock as a model for thinking about plot: ‘an organisation that humanizes time by giving it form’.²⁷ In this scheme, the *tock* is the end-note that both closes and confers meaning on the duration in between. In Kermode’s view, this closural rhythm is a necessary feature of the fictions we tell ourselves, because ‘we humanly do not want it to be an

²⁶ Baxter, ‘Dysfunctional Narratives,’ 4.

²⁷ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 45.

indeterminate interval between the *tick* of birth and the *tock* of death'.²⁸ We need our stories to end, in other words, because ending brings with it the certainty of cognitive closure and so gives meaning to that which precedes it. Without it, we experience the agony of uncertainty.

'The Knocking,' the opening story in *The Spot*, Means's most recent collection, captures this agony in microcosm. A man lives in an apartment block on Fifth Avenue. He is tormented by the insistent knocking of his upstairs neighbour – the sound of a tapping heel, a hammer, a brush – which seems to taunt him for reasons that never fully become clear. Every now and then, a pause opens up in the knocking, but the pause comes more as torment than relief: 'Maybe a five-minute reprieve, more or less, because it is impossible to guess how long these silent moments might be when they open up overhead, knowing, as I wait, that the knocking will begin again.'²⁹ We can think of the knocking here as representative of the character's time sense, the metronome of life that prescribes its limits. Its presence endows life with sense, with order; without it, there is uncertainty, discomfort. What interests me here is the period between the knocking, where the narrator is caught in an agony of attendance. He doesn't want the next knock, as such, but, thinking of it Kermudian terms, he would rather have it than have the interval between knocks extended or deferred.

The stories of Means revel in uncertainty, revel in our discomfort, often leaving us without the satisfaction of *tock*. In this way, they leave the reader, like this

²⁸ Ibid., 58.

²⁹ David Means, 'The Knocking,' in *The Spot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010) 3. As an aside, the story, like a number of Mean's stories (see 'Reading Chekhov,' for example) seems to respond to Chekhov, in this case a particular passage from 'Gooseberries': 'There ought to be behind the door of every happy, contented man some one standing with a hammer continually reminding him with a tap that there are unhappy people; that however happy he may be, life will show him her laws sooner or later, trouble will come for him.' Anton Chekhov, 'Gooseberries,' in *The Essential Tales of Chekhov* ed. Richard Ford (London: Granta, 1999) 293. Chekhov's intimation seems to be that it is only a matter of time before the ordered narrative of contentment is disrupted by chaos, some form of traumatic event. One can see the same theme played out in many of Means's stories.

narrator, adrift in a disorganized middle, a position that makes awkward the human instinct towards a cumulative mode of understanding and leaves us, as Kermode explicitly suggests we do not want to be, in an 'indeterminate interval'. Means's dysfunctions place his stories in a state of narrative latency, not fully discharged, even at their end. As Michael Trussler suggests, such an effect 'either implicitly or specifically projects a hypothetical continuation of the narrative world created by the text, a postnarrational existence'.³⁰ Even when his stories are over, they are not finished. There is more to come: an unstructured afterlife, in which the reader becomes responsible for the story's continuation. Means is alert to this idea of a postnarrational existence for his stories. In one of his few public statements on the short story, he has this to say:

I don't think there really are ending points, at least not in the stories that work, but rather a kind of forward movement radiating out from the terminus of the story. That's what stories do best. They leave you with this sensation of having gone through something and then in the end, carrying it with you.³¹

³⁰ Michael Trussler, 'Suspended Narratives: The Short Story and Temporality,' 571.

³¹ David Means, 'The Voyeuristic Impulse'.

PART TWO: A Word on Methodology and Contexts

I

In approaching Means's stories, I borrow a tenet from T. J. Clark's processual experiment in art writing, *The Sight of Death*, which consists of looking again and again, over a period of six months, at two Poussins, *Landscape with a Snake* and *Landscape with a Calm*. What most appeals about Clark's method is his exploration of what it means to come back and look at a painting over and over again, day after day, rather than assume that we can take it all in at one glance.³² Such an approach entails concentration, a focus on detail, a willingness to become attuned to the 'intensity of the very small'.³³

Clark writes:

certain pictures demand such looking and repay it. Coming to terms with them is slow work. But astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallises, fragments again, persists like an after image.³⁴

Which is as much as to say, the more we look, the more we see, but at the same time, what we see is not what we saw. Note the suggestion of an afterlife for the image, something which persists long after the moment of initial contemplation, like a trace image left on the retina after looking too long at the sun. I make a similar claim for David Means: his stories both demand such looking and repay it, responding to the attention by revealing greater rewards.

Of course, there is a significant difference between looking at art works and looking at stories – looking at text. At the very least, an extra layer of response is

³² T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

required to convert text into image in the mind's eye. Nonetheless, at a certain point it seems to me that reading – after the first narrative desire is satisfied – becomes looking. Derek Attridge divides the reading process into two main parts: 'At the same time as it tries to decode the textual string with the necessary objectivity and accuracy, however, reading... can be an attempt to respond to the otherness, inventiveness and singularity'.³⁵ The looking I am attempting here – even if, perhaps, a metaphorical looking, a fictional looking – can be characterised as an attempt to respond to otherness.

In being a record of looking and looking again, this is also a record of reading and rereading and, in some senses, getting stuck, of neither wanting to let go nor being allowed to let go – a record of being caught in a loop, in a Derridean *delireium*. Derrida writes of this in relation to Maurice Blanchot in 'Living On', the portmanteau word suggesting a point at which reading becomes a kind of madness or hallucination. He writes:

Forever unable to saturate a context, what reading will ever master the "on" of living on? For we have not exhausted its ambiguity: each of the meanings we have listed above can be divided further (e.g., living on can mean a reprieve or an afterlife, 'life after life' or life after death, more life or more than life, and better; the state of suspension in which it's over – *and over again*, and you'll never have done with that suspension itself) and the triumph *of* life can also triumph *over* life and reverse the procession of the genitive.³⁶

In this context, going back, again and again, to read what has already been read, is itself dysfunctional. The process of reading fiction is, after all, goal-orientated, acquisitive: we strike for the ticket at the end. Barthes notes the dysfunctionality of such a practice, describing rereading as 'an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us "throw away" the story once it

³⁵ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) 79.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Living On,' trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Continuum, 2004) 63-64.

has been consumed (“devoured”).³⁷ To then go back to the beginning and read again what has already been read seems both counterintuitive and indulgent: ‘tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors)’.³⁸ Barthes is being playful, but part of my claim is that, rather than being a province for the marginal, rereading, when it comes to stories like Means’s, is a necessary act.

II

As this critical enquiry is closely linked to my creative practice, the angle of my approach – in the tradition of the practitioner criticism of Frank O’Connor, Elizabeth Bowen, Nadine Gordimer et al – is that of a writer-reader and so is inextricably connected both to what and how short stories mean and what it means to be a short story writer. Such an approach is necessarily personal, a clarification worth making when about to write on the subject of the short story. Charles May makes the point that academic criticism of the short story has failed to provide the necessary ‘unified theory of the genre’. While I would argue with the necessity of a unified theory, May set the failure of academic criticism against the ‘more helpful suggestions’ of writers themselves, who ‘have a less sure but a much more passionate view of the form’.³⁹ Writing more recently, Per Winther, referring to the ongoing critical quest for an essentialist definition, wonders why there is such a ‘passionate interest in felling an animal who refuses to play dead’.⁴⁰

What I mean to say is that I am not presently interested in definitions – in the sense that a short story is this, but not that. Rather, I want to examine a set of

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 15.

³⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, 16.

³⁹ Charles E. May, ‘A Survey of Short Story Criticism in America,’ in *Short Story Theories* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1976) 10.

⁴⁰ Per Winther et al, introduction to *Narrative* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2012): 136.

behavioural tendencies in Means's fiction, and come to some understanding of how they act upon the reader. Consequently, the central theoretical context underpinning this essay is reader-response, stemming from Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*. Iser's work is useful as a point of origin, not least because much of his work responds to the role of indeterminacy as the foundation for acts of interpretation. More broadly, reader-response theories are valuable because, in the first instance, my writing practice is informed by my readings. Also, while it cannot be disputed that all texts place interpretative demands on the reader, it is my claim that Means's stories are especially demanding. I do not intend to adhere to a single version of reader-response, rather to borrow and adapt from a range of response theories, using them to underpin a staging of myself – with all my prejudices – in the reader role.

As Andrew Bennett makes plain, there are a number of figurations of the reader already in play, from Michael Riffaterre's hypothetical reader, possessed of all possible knowledge, to Judith Fetterley's resistance reader: a marginalised person, whose responses are conditioned by one or another form of distance.⁴¹ Perhaps most useful, however, is Wai-Chee Dimock's suggestion, invoking Iser, that, 'in the absence of any competent reader inside the text, it is the outside reader – or, I should say, the implied reader – who is called upon to occupy the position of interpretive authority, functioning both as the text's ideal recipient and its necessary coordinate'.⁴² For Dimock, the reader should be understood as a figure 'who is traversed by time and disposed in time, making its staggered appearance in a variety of stages, in its residual, established, and emergent forms, and through its inflections by class, gender, race'.⁴³ While Dimock is writing from a feminist perspective, I

⁴¹ Andrew Bennett, ed., *Readers and Reading* (London: Longman, 1995) 2.

⁴² Wai-Chee Dimock, 'Feminism, New Historicism and the Reader,' *American Literature* Vol. 63, No. 4 (1991): 606.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 611.

might add to that list of inflections any number of individual traits and competencies. Following this I can, at a basic level, establish myself as a reader – over and above idealized or hypothetically constructed readers – at the centre of this project, changing as I go through the process, being alert at different stages to different things – different priorities, thoughts and structures. This is important, entailing a necessary recognition of my difference as an individual reader and the difference of the specific reading event. In this case, the specific reading event takes place in the context of a critical enquiry into the nature of a certain short story writer. The event of reading is undertaken by an individual, me, who is active and open, but also selfish. I mean this in the sense that I am reading alert for clues – clues that I might well myself read into the text – that might help me to think about my own writing. What I am proposing, then, is to explore through Means questions of practice that interest me, that arouse my enthusiasms; without them, after all, this would not be happening; they are the frame for this entire enquiry.

III

The frame stretches back to my early reading encounters with the form. The frequent bafflement I felt – and still feel – on coming to the end of certain stories contains within it the germ of both my creative and critical interest. Virginia Woolf marked the bafflement long ago, describing the effect of Chekhov's short fiction, which:

produces at first a queer feeling that the solid ground upon which we expected to make a safe landing has been twitched from under us and there we hang asking questions in mid air. It is giddy, uncomfortable, inconclusive.⁴⁴

The discomfort that Woolf alludes to – and that I still sometimes feel as a reader – is a crucial effect of the kind of story that I wish both to examine and produce.

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Tchehov's Questions,' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume Two, 1912-18*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990) 248.

To give a brief example, take the story 'Two Men' by Denis Johnson. As it nears its end the narrator, out driving with two friends, sees a man, Thatcher, who had previously, outside the frame of the story, stiffed him in a drug deal. A chase ensues. Thatcher appears to run into an apartment house. A light goes on and is then turned off. The narrator bangs on a door and a woman answers. She tells him there is nobody there apart from her and her children. The narrator's companions search the apartment and find that the woman is telling the truth. Nonetheless, the narrator takes out a gun and puts it to the woman's head: 'I don't care,' he says. 'You're going to be sorry'.⁴⁵

And there the story ends, leaving us, as Woolf suggests, suspended in mid-air, asking questions: was the man there at all? Who is the woman? What will the narrator do?

Straightforwardly enough, our readerly discomfort here functions around gaps in the text, information to which we do not have access: what Wolfgang Iser would call 'blanks'. As Iser suggests, all texts contain blanks, gaps and negations, and their predominant function is connection: 'They indicate that the different segments of the text *are* to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so.'⁴⁶ This is similar to what John Dufresne has called the 'synaptic theory of composition', referring to the synaptic gap that exists between neurons in the brain, by which the reader of a text is made active by strategies of omission that require completion: 'In order for a message to travel from one neuron to another (one scene to another) there needs to be a gap between them.'⁴⁷ Although Iser goes on to argue a greater complexity, Dufresne's theory relies on the possibility of completion – what Woolf might call the existence of solid ground onto which we might make that safe landing. One of the

⁴⁵ Denis Johnson, 'Two Men,' in *Jesus' Son* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992) 31.

⁴⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 182.

⁴⁷ John Dufresne, *The Lie That Tells A Truth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004) 34.

things that interests me about Means's work is the way it encourages an exploration not just of the blank itself, but of the concomitant absence of that solid ground, when the synaptic gap stretches on and on in search of a landing point; when the connection, in other words, cannot be made, because, as Denis Johnson puts it in another story: 'certain important connections have been burned through'.⁴⁸

Salvatore Scibona, talking about Johnson's 'Two Men', describes the effect of the ending as follows:

It's curious. I don't immediately wonder what will happen next. I immediately wonder what I'm going to do with the terrifying, nightmarish, violent capacity that I've just discovered in myself.⁴⁹

What Scibona picks up on – a transference of power and responsibility, through which the reader becomes co-respondent for the claims the story has made – is evident in many of Means's stories. Again, in Scibona's reading there is the implication of a post-narrational extension of the story world, brought into being by strategies of omission, narrative disruption, occlusion and distortion, all of which might be described as resistances to closure. These strategies subvert our readerly expectations, taking us to neurotic edges and leaving us there, to figure it out for ourselves. Scibona suggests that such a practice 'turns the story into a kind of earworm... willing to leave you with things that will maybe not satisfy you in the most conventional way'.⁵⁰ Note the resistance to conventional satisfaction and its consequence. Scibona goes on:

the cure for an earworm, if you get a song into your head, is to sing it out loud to yourself all the way through to the end. If you get to that last note it will conclude for you. It's because you can't conclude it that it stays with you.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Denis Johnson, 'Dundun' in *Jesus' Son*, 51.

⁴⁹ Salvatore Scibona, 'Salvatore Scibona reads Denis Johnson' – *New Yorker Fiction Podcast*, July 13 2010, accessed July 13, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/online/2010/07/19/100719on_audio_scibona.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Again, the signal thing to carry forward is the way in which a resistance to a standard
closural move invites story's perdurance.

PART THREE: On First Encountering David Means

I

J. M. Coetzee suggests that ‘all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it’.⁵² Very well.

It is Saturday 16th March, 2002. I am twenty six years old. In the afternoon, I return from Blackwell’s on Charing Cross Road to the flat I share with two friends in Red Lion Square. It is a fine spring day and I have the place to myself. I crave such moments of silence and isolation. With the window open to the breeze, I settle myself on the sofa, cigarettes near at hand, and take up the book I have just bought. It is a hardback and it makes a satisfying crack as I open it. I begin to read:

The declivity where he sat to rest was part of a railroad bed blasted out of the hard shale and lime deposits cut by the Hudson River, which was just down the hill, out of sight, hidden by forestation, backyards, homes. The wind eased through the weeds, pressing on both sides of the track, died, and then came up again hinting of seaweed – the sea miles away opening up into the great harbor of New York, the sea urged by the moon’s gravity up the Hudson, that deep yielding estuary, and arriving as a hint of salt in the air, against his face, vised between his knees; he was tasting his own salt on his lips, for he’d been walking miles and it was a hot evening.⁵³

Immediately, I feel that I am on familiar ground. A man is sitting by a railroad. He is in upstate New York, near the Hudson, mythic river of the suburban American imagination. I am thinking already of Updike, of Cheever and the golden age of the *New Yorker* story, grounded, as Kasia Boddy suggests, ‘in recognisable aspects of contemporary life,’ and ‘the low-key repetitiveness of suburban sadness’.⁵⁴ I am summoning the view, the trees, the gardens, the decking. There is a wind; with it comes the smell of the sea. The man is tired. In the writing, there is a precise attention to the everyday world of phenomena, sensations and logical relations. I

⁵² J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: J. M. Coetzee, Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 17.

⁵³ David Means, ‘Railroad Incident, August 1995’ in *Assorted Fire Events* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) 1.

⁵⁴ Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story Since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 39, 45.

know where I am and what it feels like. I am, in other words, in the territory of a comfortable, familiar sort of realism, the province of the knowable. Or I would be, if it weren't for the fact that the character is, and remains, un-named. Then, with that unusual verb 'vised', I get a hint of more: this man is trapped, head down, caught in a bind. A darkness creeps in. It functions as a call to attention. I read on, perhaps lulled by the apparent clarity of these opening sentences, in the expectation that I will find an answer to the questions they pose: Who is this man? Why is he there? Why has he been walking for miles, without water, on a hot evening?

I put the book down. If I were pressed at this moment I might say that Means has his roots in the muscular tradition of a certain type of hard-won American realism, with sentences blasted out of rock. I might, further, begin to trace a route for his antecedents through the likes of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane, through Anderson, Hemingway and Raymond Carver.

And yet, the more I read, the more Means's stories seem to resist my attempts to place him in that lineage. For all the stories – like 'Railroad Incident', like 'A River in Egypt' – that seem to be located in the realist tradition, there is another – like 'A Visit from Jesus' or 'Dustman Appearances to Date' – that forces me out of that mode of understanding and nudges me towards something more inchoate, something ineffable, oftentimes something surreal. To some degree, this is a function of form. As Charles May has suggested, the 'tradition of short fiction militates against the central conventions of realism'.⁵⁵ It points, nonetheless, to a certain difficulty in accounting for and contextualising Means. James Wood suggests that what characterises a Means story is 'a generous flexibility with the formulas of realism,'

⁵⁵ Charles May, 'The Short Story's Way of Meaning: Alice Munro's "Passion,"' *Narrative*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2012): 176.

before going on to suggest that ‘he never seems to have met a convention he likes’.⁵⁶ The signal thing at work here, once again, is resistance – an opposition to the norm, to convention. In my own encounter with Means I feel that resistance in the way that he ‘looks’ like one thing, but then confounds my readerly expectation by behaving like another thing altogether: a slice of suburban life, with its petty jealousies, guilt and drink (‘The Reaction’) gives way to a startlingly vivid, hyper-real account of a drifter hanging on to the back of a moving freight train, seeing visions in the night sky (‘The Grip’). What I mean to say by this is that his work contains within it the capacity to surprise, by appearing at one moment to be simply another version of a kind of writing – the American Realist Short Story – with which I am already broadly familiar, only to veer off into difference and alterity.

Already, then, in this my first encounter with his work, I am struck by something in Means’s stories that suggest – long before I give any thought to writing about them – that they might have something to offer me, both as a writer and as a reader. The easiest way to say it is that they make me uncomfortable. At the level of subject, they are shot through with violence, criminality and cruelty, with few signs of the common consolation of redemption. This man I encounter on the railroad track will, before the story’s end, be set upon and savagely beaten, his near lifeless body left on the tracks to be smashed up by a train.⁵⁷ As I am instinctively drawn to Kermode’s formulation that fictions should give comfort, it is perhaps not surprising that they trouble me: these stories are cold, hard and seemingly without comfort. I am unsettled not just by their subjects, but by their structures, too. As much as these stories reveal violence in their actions, they perform an equal violence in their

⁵⁶ James Wood, ‘Overloaded with Wasps’ in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2005): 39.

⁵⁷ Other stories in the collection tell of a man being killed in a canoe accident (‘Coitus’), another buried alive in a landslide (‘Sleeping Bear Lament’), a little girl killed as a consequence of industrial malpractice (‘What They Did’), and a hobo turfed out of a wedding reception and left to die on the street (‘The Interruption’). There are further examples, but you get the picture.

structural manipulations. They are difficult to follow: they loop back on themselves, they jump around, they switch perspectives, they dissemble. All of which is rendered in sentences that are highly articulated, dense and intense, constantly undermined or reconditioned by qualifications and caveats. James Wood suggests that in this way Means succumbs to ‘the general failing of contemporary American sentences – DeLillo, Lethem – which often seem to find it difficult to know when to stop’.⁵⁸ I absolutely see what Wood means, but, again, that resistance to stopping seems integral to Means’s storytelling strategy.

I read on, and the more I read in the days and years that follow, the more I come to think that Means’s brand of realism is so hard, so tightly packed, so meticulously detailed in long, circuitous sentences, as to become a distraction from itself. In other words, it is fiction so real, so vividly described, as to become unreal, the particularity of detail troubled by excess. As Cavanaugh, an assistant art director and the focal character in ‘A River in Egypt,’ is told when being relieved of his job: “‘You’ve got fine, visionary abilities. You see things others miss. But maybe you see too much. The problem with your design was – and I don’t know how to put this – it was too real, too clear.’”⁵⁹

What I mean to say is that this meticulousness imbeds a distraction in the writing, making it not more plain, but less so. As Austin Wright suggests, writing of an effect evident in poetry and short fiction, this intensity of detail ‘implies recalcitrance in the act of attention, the arresting of notice at every significant part’.⁶⁰ It operates as an information overload; so dense is the detail that it becomes difficult

⁵⁸ James Wood, ‘Overloaded with Wasps,’ 39.

⁵⁹ David Means, ‘A River in Egypt’ in *The Spot* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc, 2010) 22.

⁶⁰ Austin M. Wright, ‘Recalcitrance in the Short Story,’ in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 120.

to 'see' what is being described; the language becomes a distraction, forcing us to pause, to go over it again, to delay us in our quest for the end.

II

My own difficulty in accounting for Means is mirrored somewhat in critical attempts to pin him down. While critical work on Means's writing is in short supply, a brief survey is useful.

The central pieces of work are two reviews from the *London Review of Books*: one, on *Assorted Fire Events*, by Daniel Soar; and one, by James Wood, on *The Secret Goldfish*. Alongside this, Charles May, although he hasn't written formally on Means, has devoted a number of entries on his extremely useful blog, 'Reading the Short Story'. In addition to this, Means, although relatively reticent in public, has given a handful of highly revealing interviews and a short, but nonetheless significant, speech on the attraction of the short story form.

One common thread of the critical response is the presence of uncomfortable subjects. Daniel Soar describes his stories as 'phenomenally violent,' Emma Hagestadt as 'seething with nihilistic misery and biblical rage,' while Michel Faber sees them as 'hooked on the worst possible outcome'.⁶¹ The absence of redemption is noted, too. James Wood, using Flannery O'Connor as a point of comparison, suggests that 'where O'Connor had her Catholicism to account for depravity, Means can seem belatedly bereft of explanation'.⁶² For Faber, this is problematic: 'Means's pessimism

⁶¹ Daniel Soar, 'It had better be big,' review of *Notable American Women* by Ben Marcus and *Assorted Fire Events* by David Means, *London Review of Books*, August 8, 2002, 19-20; Emma Hagestadt, review of *The Spot* by David Means, *The Independent*, November 3, 2010. Accessed July 13, 2013.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-spot-by-david-means-2123449.html>;
Michel Faber, 'The World is a Mucky Mess,' Review of *The Secret Goldfish* by David Means, *The Guardian*, February 19, 2005. Accessed July 13, 2013.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/feb/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview16>.

⁶² Wood, 'Overloaded with wasps,' 39.

may indeed have brought him to the point where storytelling becomes impossible'.⁶³ The impossibility of storytelling is an idea worth hanging onto. This impossibility is echoed in Means's response to questions about his troubling subjects, which often entails a closing down of its own, a refusal to tell: 'I can't say much more than that about why I might be interested in lost, angry characters, without getting into personal stuff... Let's just say I've had some first-hand experience with those on the edge'.⁶⁴

Attempts to place Means in a lineage of short story writers are likewise fraught with difficulty. Familiar names – Hemingway, Carver, Tobias Wolff, Flannery O'Connor, Cheever, Updike, Rick Moody – come up against the more avant-garde – Guy Davenport, Edward Dorn and Beckett. Indeed, as Jess Row suggests, 'it would be easy to mistake Means, on a sentence-by-sentence level, for a traditional writer of realist fiction'.⁶⁵ For James Wood, even though he 'utterly resists the formal tidiness of most contemporary short fiction,' he is 'not an American surrealist, nor even a postmodernist'.⁶⁶ Of course, it is not a question of either/or, but the critical hesitancy seems to point to a fundamental quality of his work, its resistant to closure, neat explanation and categorisation.

It is worth noting in this regard that when the Italian publishers Marco Cassini and Martina Testa were assembling an anthology of the best young writers from America in 2003, they couldn't find a place for David Means.⁶⁷ Plenty of his contemporaries are there: George Saunders, David Foster Wallace and A. M. Homes among them. While the anthologised stories vary in stylistic terms, certain

⁶³ Faber, 'The World is a Mucky Mess.'

⁶⁴ Jay Ponteri, 'David Means and the Secret Mystery,' *Loggernaut Reading Series*, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://www.loggernaut.org/interviews/davidmeans/>.

⁶⁵ Jess Row, 'Turning Points,' review of *The Spot* by David Means, *New York Times*, June 10, 2010, accessed July 13, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/books/review/Row-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

⁶⁶ Wood, 'Overloaded with wasps,' 39.

⁶⁷ Marco Cassini and Martina Testa, ed., *The Burned Children of America* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

preoccupations emerge. Evident in a number of the stories is a playful, often heavily ironised, surface, giving way to a vivid sense of shock. Zadie Smith, introducing the collection and naming David Foster Wallace as its presiding spirit, identified a shared experience of sadness at the heart of the stories. The sadness she identifies is resolutely contemporary, drawn from a feeling that at this point in human development our lives should be better than they are. For Smith, the sadness stems from a fear of death and advertising: the one, unavoidable, the other, an emblem of postmodernity.⁶⁸ It is perhaps in this light that Means's exclusion can be understood.

As James Lasdun has suggested, despite their evident self-consciousness, Means's stories 'don't aim for the wit or irony or satirical bite that seems a prerequisite for the post-modern game of pop-culture manipulation, as played by a Burroughs or a Tarantino'.⁶⁹ Nor do they appear to have any interest in the contemporary: there is precious little technology to be found in a Means story. Even when situated in the notional present, the events portrayed – the heists, the bank robberies, the adulterous affairs – have a mythic lustre, as if they exist in a world of story alone. As Means has said, 'a good story is kind of outside of contemporary culture'.⁷⁰ What I mean to say by this is that, in a similar way, Mean's stories seem to stand outside easy contemporary categorisation or formal definition. As Brian Beglin suggests: 'Means was put on earth to frustrate creative writing teachers and John Gardner evangelists'.⁷¹ Not only that, but he appears to aim for something other than the new, or the now. In Means's stories, it seems to me, our lives are not filled with sadness or grief or pain because we are alive now, at this moment, but because we are

⁶⁸ Zadie Smith, introduction to *The Burned Children of America*, ed. Marco Cassini and Martina Testa (London: Penguin Books, 2003) xv.

⁶⁹ Lasdun, 'Darkness on the edge of town'.

⁷⁰ O'Malley, 'The Q & A: David Means, author'.

⁷¹ Brian Beglin, 'The Duke of Discomfort,' *The Rumpus*, May 27, 2010. Accessed July 13, 2013.

<http://therumpus.net/2010/05/the-duke-of-discomfort/>.

alive at all: it is the predicament of being human. To return to James Wood: ‘all his tales are tied to human beings... the oddity of the stories emanates from human oddity, not from authorial freakishness or ludic obstructionism’.⁷²

III

Means has written four collections: *A Quick Kiss of Redemption & Other Stories* (1991), *Assorted Fire Events* (2000), *The Secret Goldfish* (2005), and *The Spot* (2010). The first collection is out of print, has been suppressed by Means himself.⁷³

As he describes it, his writing underwent a transformation:

There was a point in my life as a writer, actually a day, when I threw up my hands and began to write differently. I just went into my own isolation. I embraced something in myself. My inclination for years was to avoid writing the way I really wanted to write and to shape stories into that horizontal mode. I’d also been trying to write chronologically, to avoid my own style and the fact that I did not think in an orderly fashion.⁷⁴

The intimation of a move from the sequential to the disorderly clearly has its uses to the project at hand. One of the first stories he published after the transformation directly references the way in which he wrestled the demons of his own style.⁷⁵ ‘The Stories I Used to Write’ appeared in *The Paris Review* in late 1995. It begins with a general lament:

I used to write stories that had lakes, that had deep blue waters shelled by the sky; water mucky and full of disease; I wrote stories where people used to break down and cry unbidden, unprovoked, just because of the way a stone looked when it was wet, or the way the wind ruffled the grass; the people in those

⁷² Wood, ‘Overloaded with Wasps,’ 39.

⁷³ ‘Well, I’ve kept that book out of print for various reasons. Some day, if anyone wants to read it, I’ll put it on Kindle, or the iPad. But my writing life started one day—after years of learning—with a genuine epiphany one afternoon, a day after I visited a Hopper exhibit in New York—when I suddenly went into a different zone and began to write exactly the way I wanted to write. I wrote two stories, and they both sold to *The Paris Review* (I never put them in a collection) and then I wrote two more, and those sold to Harper’s, and I kept going. I didn’t want to look back at *A Quick Kiss of Redemption*. Those were apprenticeship stories that took me from being a poet to being a fiction writer.’ See Peter Wild, ‘Bookmunch Interview with David Means’. Given what is about to come, it is interesting that Means refers to his moment of transformation as an epiphany.

⁷⁴ Jay Ponteri, ‘David Means and the Secret Mystery’.

⁷⁵ A second *Paris Review* story from the same period, ‘Disclaimer,’ appears to do the same. It begins: ‘Disclaimer: Nothing in this story is true. All of the characters in this story are the products of the writer’s imagination’. See David Means, ‘Disclaimer,’ *The Paris Review* 143 (1997): 170.

stories might jump to violence unprovoked; they wore teal windbreakers and rolled packs of cigarettes into their T-shirts.⁷⁶

The lament is against purposeless detail – ‘deep blue waters shelled by the sky’, ‘teal windbreakers’, packets of cigarettes rolled into T-shirts – and whimsical emotiveness. The former – examples of a Barthesian ‘Reality Effect’ – litter *A Quick Kiss of Redemption*, which is resolutely located in the ‘real’ world.⁷⁷ Social issue stories abound, appropriate to the collection’s point of origin: ‘McGregor’s Day On’ deals with race; ‘The Library of Desire’ and ‘Close Your Eyes’ with sexuality; ‘Salvation’ with class; ‘The Myth of Devotion’ and ‘At Point Lookout’ with adultery, the collapse of marriage. This positions Means’s early stories neatly on the arc of the American short story outlined by Kasia Boddy, in which the experimentalism of the 1960s and 70s precipitated both a return to moral fiction and a revitalisation of the realist mode.⁷⁸

‘Stories I Used to Write’ continues:

And I never wondered where a story was going because it was always going to the same place, that little plot of land on the lake, lifting high with yellow weeds, and the smell of lighter fluid starting a barbecue next door where things were better and people partied with the kind of gusto that stunned, destroyed, obliterated; boats crashed on the lake in the dark, folks lost arms and limbs, yet in the morning light rising over the flat dead water there was always some solace; a flank of geese wedging south, the end of summer, some russet colors to the leaves, the seasons making headway; for in my stories there was always that much, at least to go on.⁷⁹

Yet in the morning light rising over the flat dead water there was always some solace. The narrator of the story seems to be reacting against the easy move to epiphanic close, some moment of revelation or insight that will tell us, more or less, that the end has arrived and we can get on with our business. The story is broadly contemporaneous with two pieces of critical writing on the predominance of the

⁷⁶ David Means, ‘Stories I Used to Write,’ *Paris Review*, 137 (1995): 169.

⁷⁷ Roland Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect,’ in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 141-148.

⁷⁸ Boddy, *The American Short Story Since 1950*, 84.

⁷⁹ Means, ‘Stories I Used to Write,’ 169-170.

epiphany in American writing, especially the short story: Miriam Marty Clark's 'After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age' (1993) and Charles Baxter's 'Against Epiphanies' (1997).

Baxter's polemic is fierce, seeing in the 'mass-marketing of literary epiphanies and climactic insights' both an unnecessary insistence on closure and a highly dubious bringing forth of 'the sensation if not the content of meaning'.⁸⁰ The problem for Baxter is both one of surfeit and of increasing ease. For Clark, the rejection of epiphany is directly linked to postmodern culture, which 'disfigures teleology, displaces universal truths and eternal verities, and eventually the epiphany itself, that point of contact with meaning or wholeness, which has stood so long at the center of our understanding of the genre'.⁸¹

Taken together, Clark's and Baxter's critiques suggest that in the late eighties and early nineties the American short story was sagging into disrepute, contenting itself with a norm that settled for the illusion of a movement towards unifying insight, the illusion of a significant, meaningful end. What is thus significant about the rejection of epiphany in Means's story is what it implies about Means's rejection not only of a norm, but of a drive towards meaning and wholeness. The story goes on from its general lament to a particular example of change: 'Only once did it all fail me and the control I had lost hold and this poor girl named Sandy found herself alone without anything'.⁸² The writerly implications of the loss of control here should not be missed, nor should its implication of a break in the pattern – something, a certain way of doing things, is coming apart.

⁸⁰ Charles Baxter, 'Against Epiphanies,' in *Burning Down the House*, 49, 42.

⁸¹ Miriam Marty Clark, 'Against Epiphany: American stories in the postmodern age,' *Style*, Vol. 27 No. 3, (1993): 387.

⁸² Means, 'Stories I Used to Write,' 170.

Alone in this way, Sandy, an experienced swimmer, strikes out into the lake until she is struck by cramp, at which point

she forgets she's in one of my stories; she's taken off on me; she's more concerned about living than about being alive; she's panicked past the point of remembering – because that's what she's supposed to do, remember some point in her past vividly, wag her arms, make it to the dock and pull herself heavily out of the water; lie back gasping for breath, crying at the shrill beauty of the sky.⁸³

Again, the implication of loss of control in the face of resistance: Sandy's resistance to her status as character, to doing 'what she's supposed to do'. There is also a rejection of the idea that a recursion into memory can somehow fuse with the story's present moment, unifying it and redeeming or rescuing it in some meaningful way. In the case of this story, redemption does not occur – 'this is sadder than all those stories I used to write'.⁸⁴ Sandy drowns. Tony, her boyfriend, arrives, sees her body and is 'unable to decide how to act'.⁸⁵ In a movie, we are told, he'd race down and drag her from the water, but in fact he walks slowly to the cottage and dials 911, frozen by grief. In the stories the narrator used to write, Tony would have done something, anything, to allow us 'to know that it was over and that it was up to us to make sense of it, to go back over it all and to find the meaning in the event'.⁸⁶ But in the end it isn't like that: 'You won't see a girl named Sandy there anymore; or a guy named Tony. If you see anything, you'll see words out of place; events that don't fit. Things that just don't make sense no matter how hard you look, and how long, too'.⁸⁷

At the end, we are left with absence, a void: things we won't see. The language is forceful, determined. 'Try and make me out', it seems to be saying, 'try and build a sequence out of this. I dare you'. The challenge, make no mistake, is directed at the reader's sense-making instincts. Asked about his ideal reader, Means replied:

⁸³ Ibid., 174.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

I hope for a good reader, somebody who will hold it, go back take a look at it again and really think about what I'm trying to convey, not just somebody who will simply read the story. The great thing about the short story is that you can really go back and reread it with a sense of knowing what's going on. So the reader I have in mind is someone who is willing to read poetically, someone who will tell the story emotionally and connect with it.⁸⁸

In the end, perhaps it is true to say that we reread because, as Thomas Leitch has said, we assume that 'the most puzzling stories... will eventually make sense; if they do not, we feel let down'.⁸⁹ Of course, Means is not the only writer to risk letting the reader down in this fashion, but there is something particularly interesting about the direct way he lays his argument out in his fiction – the way, often, he inhabits a realist mode, before bending his storytelling away to feed at its own roots.

What then, might we draw from the emphatic, challenging end to 'Stories I Used to Write'? Elsewhere, Means has spoken of feeling 'a duty to tap the power of a genre that can... shake the reader awake from a deep state of amnesia'.⁹⁰ Perhaps it is enough for now to say that with his emphasis on violence, the near constant presence of death, Means's challenge to our sense-making instincts alerts us to the fact that things are not all right, that things do not make sense. This is less banal than it seems, implying that the security of sequential thinking, of narrative thinking, is no security at all.

⁸⁸ O'Malley, 'The Q & A: David Means, author'.

⁸⁹ Thomas Leitch, 'The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story,' in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 132.

⁹⁰ David Means, 'The Voyeuristic Impulse'.

PART FOUR: Seeing Things: Problems of Sight in ‘It Counts As Seeing’ and ‘The Gesture Hunter’.

I

For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it. It involves judgment. Judgment is something that begins in the act of vision, and when it does not, or when it becomes separated from vision then a confusion exists in the mind which transfers itself to the story.⁹¹

Flannery O’Connor’s dictum is one of several examples of metaphors of sight being brought to bear on the production, consumption and interpretation of short fiction. In this case, clear sight stands as a vital precursor to clear judgement. William O’Rourke, writing of a distinction between the novel and the short story, similarly emphasises sight: ‘The greater the space, the more time it takes to comprehend, to see. To see all parts of the novel requires great distance, therefore more time, but not so the short story: the reader is always close enough to see a short story whole’.⁹² In these remarks, O’Connor and O’Rourke speak to a valuing of availability, of clarity, of the visible surface; they speak, too, to the idea of wholeness, unity and containment as positive critical values. Introducing a collection of essays titled ‘The Blind Short Story,’ Timothy Clark suggests ‘the force of such metaphors lies in relation to the idea of total understanding. “Seeing” expresses the idea of seeing-as-a-whole in a way that is simultaneously detailed and comprehensive’.⁹³ These metaphors draw on the way in which vision ‘seems to be privileged as the sense that is most comprehensively and most immediately knowing, akin in its action to a kind of possessing, even of

⁹¹ Flannery O’Connor, ‘Writing Short Stories,’ in *Mystery and Manners* (London, 1972) 91.

⁹² William O’Rourke, ‘Morphological Metaphors for the Short Story: Matters of Production, Reproduction and Consumption,’ in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 193-205, 195.

⁹³ Timothy Clark, ‘Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading,’ *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 26 (2004): 10.

consuming'.⁹⁴ In Clark's view, translating such reasoning into short fiction theory leads to a fallacy, in which brevity has come to be equated with ease of consumption, in turn encouraging a culture that wants the short story to be a quick fix, something that can be contained easily in the rare gaps in our accelerated lives. In place of sight as a visual metaphor, Clark asks 'how far would "not being able to see" be a better model for a phenomenology of reading a short story than "seeing" is?'⁹⁵ It is a question to which Means is alert, remarking, in 'The Voyeuristic Impulse,' that 'there is nothing more horrifying to me than feeling I'm being forced to see the complete picture'.⁹⁶

Not being able to see things calls to mind, in a straightforward way, Hemingway's Iceberg analogy.⁹⁷ As John Gerlach suggests, if we take the analogy literally it implies something hidden from view because it is beneath, extending vertically downwards.⁹⁸ This form of internal blindness – suggesting significance residing within a deeper, invisible, substratum of story – will be the focus of what follows. It should not be allowed to obscure, however, a form of blindness in relation to the short story that exists not only below or above story, but all the way around it: what Clark calls a 'lack of the *trompe l'oeil* effects of a lengthy context'.⁹⁹ We can think about this through Chekhov's famous remark to Ivan Bunin: 'It seems to me that when you write a short story, you have to cut off both the beginning and the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁶ Means, 'The Voyeuristic Impulse'.

⁹⁷ 'If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.' Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner's, 1932) 192.

⁹⁸ John Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985) 119.

⁹⁹ Clark, 'Not Seeing the Short Story,' 8.

end'.¹⁰⁰ It seems reasonable to suggest that Chekhov's dictum arises from a reluctance to see a story either (a) too clearly set up at the outset, or (b) explained at the end. For Clark, the effect of this lack of context is to interfere with our ability to concretize. We are made blind to history, disconnected from the sense-making pattern of cause and effect and so limited in our ability to either interpret or explain.

In what follows, I intend to track the way in which Means stages various forms of blindness within story. The effect is to complicate our own ability to see clearly. In doing so, it calls into existence further 'blind' regions in the universe around story. In other words, at the same time as encouraging movements inwards, predicated on the desire to see clearly, these occlusions produce projections outwards: the reader's wrestling with an absence of clarity in the story's aftermath. In the place of clear sight, there are visions, both for characters and readers – themselves an indicator of some form of dysfunction or abnormality: 'You're seeing things,' we say, when we don't trust somebody's sight.

II

Means's stories are littered with accidents of vision, tricks of the light, perspectival oscillations leading to things overlooked and things mis-seen. In this way, they often create the confusion that Flannery O'Connor cites as a negative value. For Means, it often appears, confusion is at the heart of it.

'The Grip' concerns a drifter: a typically anachronistic and dysfunctional Meansian archetype, drawn from the well of American myth, from Hemingway, from Steinbeck, the Beats. The drifter jumps a Santa Fe-bound freight train at Albuquerque. He becomes stuck as the engineer opens the throttle and tears down a

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Peter Sekerin, ed., *Memories of Chekhov: Accounts of the Writer from his Family, Friends and Contemporaries* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2011) 81.

strip of track running alongside the Rio Grande. He somehow manages to hang on through the day and into the night. He doesn't see 'the passing of the stars; the spiralled celestial movement' because his gaze is turned inwards, towards a memory:

He'd been at the house, in Galva, in the backyard, playing beneath large double sheets on the line as they bloomed and folded with wind like spinnakers, starched by the sun while his mother – making that soft little hum sound she made when she was occupied by herself – put more pins into more cloth, or just stood there with her back to him scrutinizing the horizon, as if in the view his father would appear as an aberration of light.¹⁰¹

In this turning back to the past, the story makes plain the imaginative gaps that storytelling seizes upon and fills: the element of wish fulfilment – *as if* or *if only it were so*. The aberration of light stands as an emblem, evidence of absence, narrating in the present the presence of the past, which is both unseen and unseeable. The drifter's mother cannot *see* the father – he is not there – nor can the drifter *see* inside his mother's imagination. There is a double blindness at work, then, a movement inwards leading to a projections outwards. The apparition of the father is an act of interpretation – *as if* – projected onto a blank canvas, an immaterial materialisation of the invisible. In this case, the inward gaze proves more profitable to story than the outward observation.

In 'The Project,' the inward gaze is lacking, with heartbreaking consequence. The narrator – a father, as it happens – announces his intention 'to stake out and occupy' each province of his household, 'to spend enough time in them to know them completely'.¹⁰² This project of complete knowing is conducted primarily through the eyes. He examines first the yellow shag carpet, then the intake vent for a furnace, then 'the point where the duct made a right angle into a rectangle of pure

¹⁰¹ David Means, 'The Grip,' in *Assorted Fire Events* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) 72.

¹⁰² David Means, 'The Project,' in *The Secret Goldfish* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005) 107.

darkness'.¹⁰³ Already we are met with an obstruction – that rectangle of pure darkness, that blind spot. It serves as a reminder that, for everything we can see, there is something – on the other side perhaps – that we cannot. Inevitably, despite the obsessive completeness of the quest – ‘the project depends on the closest of scrutiny and an accounting of everything’ – it yields him little in the way of knowing.¹⁰⁴ At the close of the story, his children – outside the house, out of sight – call to him: ‘I’m here, I call back, still counting, not willing to take my eyes from the pill bugs and millipedes, the dry husks of their forms, shelled and sucked empty of life. I’m here, I’m here’.¹⁰⁵ What we, as readers, are left with at the story’s conclusion is an awareness not of discovery, but of loss. It is as an example of the things missed, not because they are not there, but because they are so close to us we cannot see them. Sight is limited, after all. We are not all-seeing. We choose where to look and, inevitably, the choices we make are not always the most gainful. In story, our sight is directed by the author who, again, will not always allow us the clearest view. Means plays with the writer’s position at the camera’s helm, in a way that makes his readers aware of sight’s limitations and the artificiality and process of selection involved, not only in a writer’s selection of point of view, but our own.

III

The metaphorical and testamentary aspects of sight are explicitly thematized in ‘It Counts As Seeing’. The story so overwhelms us with sight that we see too much and suffer, as a consequence, sensory overload – a form of apathetic madness so associated with urban modernity, when an excess of stimuli limits our capacity to

¹⁰³ Ibid., 109.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 111.

understand our experience of the world.¹⁰⁶ Means's story is baffling, bewildering, resolutely unclear – demanding reading after reading after reading. Even then, we might be left asking a question in response to the story's title: *what* counts as seeing?

The story is structured as a series of witness accounts to the event of a blind man falling down some steps outside a bank. In employing multiple narrative perspectives, the story – like Akutagawa's 'In a Grove' or Coover's 'The Babysitter' – undermines our confidence in visual testimony, blurring the boundary between objectivity and subjectivity, between truth and fiction, between what we know and what we imagine.¹⁰⁷

The first narrator claims that he sees the blind man on his approach to the steps and goes to his aid. The blind man rejects the offer of help. In doing so, he loses his balance and falls down the steps. Despite the inherent drama of the situation, there is no need to panic: not a bone is broken, nor a ligament torn, the narrator tells us, 'in this version of events'.¹⁰⁸ This line, when we come to read again, will become imbued with all the characteristics of foreshadowing: the story is all about versions of events. The narrator is approached by a man who begins shouting at him. We are encouraged to believe that this relates to the fall, that the man is making some threat or accusation against him. Again, there is no need to panic: 'I realised that he didn't witness the fall and was yelling at me about something else, had me pegged for someone else'.¹⁰⁹

A second narrator appears, hard to distinguish from the first: the changeover happens in the same paragraph, there is no line or paragraph break to alert us to the

¹⁰⁶ See George Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life,' in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leech (London: Routledge, 1997) 69-79.

¹⁰⁷ Ryunosuke Akutagawa, 'In a Grove,' in *Rashomon and Other Stories*, trans. Takashi Kojima (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1952) 17-31; Robert Coover, 'The Babysitter,' in *Pricksongs & Descants* (London: Penguin Books, 2011) 182-213.

¹⁰⁸ David Means, 'It Counts as Seeing,' in *The Secret Goldfish* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005) 34.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* It will be noticed here that the narrator is a victim of mistaken identity, an accident of sight.

switch. This narrator claims: 'I didn't see the blind guy at all before he hit that first step, until he was already falling'.¹¹⁰ The second narrator goes on to say that he was in the bank, had glimpsed the blind man through the window, 'out of the edge of my eye, not the corner'.¹¹¹ He only sees him again when he is falling. As the blind man falls, this narrator loses sight of him: 'he was out of my vision'.¹¹² We can see this in two ways: on the one hand, the figure of the blind man is beyond sight, but he is also out of the vision, that is: out of the story. As he falls, the second narrator recalls that he knows the blind man, knows his name, Harrington, and how he came to be blind – a freak flash fire. As the second narrator watches the aftermath of the fall, a girl in the gathering crowd points to him and says: 'He pushed him. I saw that fucker push the guy'.¹¹³ The second narrator is set upon and arrested.

A third narrator – again hard to distinguish from his predecessors – claims to have seen the blind man when they were both still inside the bank and resolved to help him. He is bound to offer assistance not out of 'a sense of right and wrong' but on account of 'a small hint that if I do not help... then in some way I will be indicted as *one who did not come to the aid of a fellow human*'.¹¹⁴ In other words, he is moved to help not out of some present instinct, but in anticipation of a notional future moment at which he will be called upon to account for his actions. In doing so, he adds to the blindness at the story's heart a further form of metaphorical sightlessness, albeit a relatively common one: that of anticipation, acting in accordance with an expected or wished-for future event that has not yet taken place;

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Obviously, the switching of narrators, is another way in which the story obstructs our vision: it is hard to see who is speaking.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 35. Note the relationship to Pritchett's delineation of the short story as 'something glimpsed from the corner of the eye, in passing'. Quoted in Raymond Carver, 'On Writing,' in *Fires* (London: Vintage Books, 2009) 26-27. Means himself has said 'in the end a great story takes a small, voyeuristic glimpse and transforms it into something eternal and complete'. See Means, 'A Voyeuristic Glimpse'. A glimpse, of course, implies something not fully seen, a momentary and imperfect view.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 36.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

something that can be envisioned, perhaps, but cannot be seen.¹¹⁵ A fourth narrator claims that he did not emerge from the bank until the blind man was being hoisted into an ambulance. Even so, despite not having seen what transpired, he joins the mob chanting at the presumed perpetrator of the push.

You can see the game being played. In the case of this story, the consequence of witness – the judicial act that, perhaps more than anything else, has, as O'Connor would put it, 'its testing point in the eye' – is to make things not more manifest but less so, to the extent that everything – including the question of who, really, is blind – becomes contingent upon acts of interpretation:

I pushed him./ I was angry and insisted that I help him./ I didn't help him./ I didn't come near him./ I was still in the bank counting my money when he fell./ I gave him a good hard kick in the ass./ He staged the whole event in order to sue me./ He was suicidal and found the most intricate manner to kill himself – so intricate he could not have planned it in such detail./ He pushed me./ I pushed him back./ We pushed each other and fell simultaneously./ He wasn't blind./ He was a fraud./ I was the one who was blind – legally, though I could see colorless masses across my field of vision./ I wasn't near the bank. I was in the Grand Union.¹¹⁶

This passage performs the action of the story in miniature. In its rapid oscillations between points and objects of view it puts before us a series of still images, each a different version or a contradictory continuation of the one before. In the frantic juxtaposition our sight becomes blurred. The forward slashes – emblems at once of a separation and a running on – drive us through the text, their common usage – to signify the word 'or' – suggesting a mutually-exclusive choice: either/or. The repetition of 'pushed' pushes at us, pushing us to decide. Yet decision is not possible: it is not either/or, but all, or versions of each. There is contradiction even within a single statement: *He was suicidal and found the most intricate manner to kill*

¹¹⁵ Timothy Clark speaks of all reading as a form of voluntary blindness, in which the ability to anticipate is lost: 'Unlike the wall or person that one can see simply by looking up from the page, in the text itself the wall or the person that will be described as being at the other end of the street cannot be known in advance of its being stated to be there'. Clark, 'Not Seeing the Short Story,' 12.

¹¹⁶ Means, 'It Counts as Seeing,' 38.

himself – so intricate he could not have planned it in such detail. Again and again, the language reminds us of its unreliability, its artifice – *staged, planned, blind, fraud* – particularly when it is engaged in the description of what we see. The words cannot express quickly enough the act of witness. As soon as they are formed, an interpretation has taken place.

In behaving in this way the story makes manifest the slipperiness of communication and language, the ambiguities of perception and the impossibility of seeing the whole story. It is impossible to ascertain the full truth of the situation – or even determine whether there is such a thing as truth, beyond a particular perceiver who sees what he or she would term truth. With a cacophony of voices claiming different versions of what was seen, we are reminded that we are the ones who are blind, having voluntarily surrendered our sight in the act of reading. The masks of language, coupled with the staging of blindness, deny us clear sight of the thing we want to know: the solution to the riddle, the missing clue, the right answer.

A fifth narrator is called upon to bear witness. It is the blind man. He describes his own mode of seeing – ‘translating the taps, vibrations up the cane to my hand and in turn into my brain, where the sensation is translated to the dimensions of space’.¹¹⁷ That word ‘translated’ calls to mind the sense of transfer, of decoding from one ‘language’ into another, one sense into another. We might think of reading in the same way: the signs of the text translated into images in the mind’s eye. He describes the fall, an explosion of sparks behind his eyes as his head hits concrete, the journey to hospital. Lying with severe haemorrhaging he exits his body:

I’m angelic. I’m lifted through the joints and beams of the hospital and am flying out over the town. I’m fully vested with sight. The Hudson is fantastically blue. It hooks over to the west near Indian point, the domes of the power plant spewing steam. To the south through the milky haze of a summer day is the thin gray conjoined monolith of the World Trade Center on the horizon; and to the left of it,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

the needle point of the Empire State Building injecting the sky. Holy. Holy. Holy.
I'm vested with visions. I see it all.¹¹⁸

This, he tells us, this vision, is what he counts 'as actually seeing'.¹¹⁹ There is a transition from sight to insight, from literal seeing to metaphoric vision: pointed towards something that lies within, that cannot be seen, the beatific, a sight of the glories of heaven, first granted to a disembodied spirit.

In this case, the glories of heaven are represented by the New York skyline, its majesty of commerce. At its centre, something – 'the thin gray conjoined monolith' – that is no longer there. The needle point of the Empire State Building calls to mind Barthes' *Punctum*. 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.¹²⁰ 'However lightning-like it may be,' Barthes continues, 'the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion'.¹²¹ In other words, it has an explosive quality, it radiates outwards, assuming a resonance incommensurate with its size. We can see this played out in figurative terms in the image of the Empire State Building: the needle point fills the sky. One might say the same about the short story, about its capacity to expand outwards from a gestural moment of ignition: 'linked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph'.¹²² But the *punctum* is deceptive. It cannot be intended; it must arise. It is, to use the language of Barthes and photography, 'undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze)'.¹²³ This undevelopable quality becomes, in language, a problem of telling, or of what cannot be properly told. What does this vision signify? Is it possible to say? We are in the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010) 27.

¹²¹ Ibid., 45.

¹²² Ibid., 49.

¹²³ Ibid.

regions, again, of Hemingway's Iceberg, signs of absence, removal, or avoidance, which imply conjurings of our own, as we wrestle to come to terms with the story in its aftermath.

This is no epiphanic ending, however. The story recalls us from the visionary moment back to the everyday. At the story's end, a sixth narrator is brought into play. He really does see it all, or claims to. He knows the man who falls by reputation, knows how he became blind. He crouches down at the man's side as he lies there at the foot of the steps:

You're gonna be all right pal. It's going to be all right buddy. You ain't slipping away from us yet. Hang in there. Hang on. Help is on the way. It'll be here soon. Don't move at all. Just stay right there and breathe easy. Take nice easy breaths. Don't go. Don't go at all. Just a few minutes and you'll be on your way.¹²⁴

It is as if he is talking to us, consoling us on the loss of our vision and telling us that it will soon be restored to us, that we will soon be out of story. Yet there is – in that push/pull action: *Don't go... you'll be on your way* – both a letting go and a holding close that seems emblematic of story's desire to both end and endure, to take its leave and yet remain with us.

It is, then, perhaps ironic that, at the heart of the story, Means gives us an image of 'that Walker Evans photo: a man in the moth-holed cap presumably just out of the coal mine, clutching his shovel handle, staring half-blankly into the lens...a face void of insight. A blank face holding all the blank portents of mankind'.¹²⁵ It is ironic because, on the one hand, the Farm Security Administration project that Evans's photograph forms a part of, had as its intention to reveal to America a hidden truth about itself.¹²⁶ On the other hand, as Sontag, among others, has told us, 'photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven

¹²⁴ Means, 'It Counts as Seeing,' 45.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹²⁶ Gilles Mora and Beverley W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006) 9.

when we're shown a photograph'.¹²⁷ The image, however, is enigmatic, called up from a photograph, of a man looking at an audience he cannot see, whose existence today projects far beyond his own and counts among the many things numbered unforeseeable. The repetition of blank, with its origins in the French for white, *blanc*, a sign both of the dissolution of text – the page becoming white again – and the dissolution of everything: the nothing that awaits us all.

IV

Means's strategy of occlusion – and its effect of provoking in the reader's mind an extension of the story world – can be read through Austin Wright's recalcitrance theory. For Wright, every work of fiction displays recalcitrance, framed as a battle between 'the force of shaping form and the resistance of the shaped materials'. If we, as Wright does, define form as 'a work's unique principle of wholeness,' then recalcitrance can be seen as an obstruction placed by the writer to delay a perception of that wholeness; an obstruction that causes the reader to work towards the idea of a possible synthesis, leading, Wright implies, to a more satisfying reading experience.¹²⁸

Wright's theory starts off with the proposition of a general recalcitrance common to all short works:

In general, the shorter the work, the more prominent the details. Words and images, as well as character and events, stand out more vividly than they would in a larger context. This attention to the parts, found in all short fiction and poetry, implies recalcitrance in the act of attention, the arresting of notice at every significant point. In effect, shortness intensifies recalcitrance at the ground level of language, even as it loses recalcitrance at the overall level of formal unification.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 2008) 5.

¹²⁸ A. M. Wright, 'Recalcitrance in the Short Story,' 116.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

The idea that prominence and intensity of detail increases recalcitrance or resistance – seems counter-intuitive: surely prominence of detail leads to greater clarity. But, as Wright suggests, this form of recalcitrance comes in the act of attention, the act of looking, each prominent detail delaying the reader by requiring some gesture of incorporation or assimilation in the attempt to map a path to total synthesis. A reading of ‘It Counts as Seeing’ demonstrates this delay in action; the way in which it calls us back, to look again, to see who is speaking, to see what it is they are saying, and whether it squares with what has been said before.

This effect tests our readerly patience, our willingness to delay in reading and to look closely. In testing our patience, Means asks for our commitment, that we remain open to the possibility of being changed in reading, to the possibility that our beliefs – what we think – might be altered. It keeps us, as readers, poised on the cusp of multiple possible outcomes.

Mary Rohrberger, writing of her first encounters with the formal study of the short story, recalls that ‘one of the resemblances that came to me clearly was that all of the really good stories that we read and discussed were never, upon consideration, what they first appeared to be’.¹³⁰ The relationship between this statement and T. J. Clark’s delineation of the effect of repeatedly looking at the Poussins is clear – ‘aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface’. One of the writers Rohrberger encountered in her early studies was Nathaniel Hawthorne and it is Hawthorne, she contends, (rather than Poe, Gogol, Irving, Chekhov, Maupassant et al.), who is the originator of the prototypical short story. Her reasoning, in brief, runs as follows:

As a literary theorist, Hawthorne declared that the art form is a closer approximation to reality, as he understood it, than is the extensional world.

¹³⁰ Mary Rohrberger, ‘Origins, Development, Substance and Design of the Short Story,’ in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis* ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, Hans H. Skei (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 2.

Simply stated, he believed, as many people do, that there is more to the world than that which is apprehended through the senses.¹³¹

What Rohrberger puts in place here is the distinction between the profane world of the everyday (the province of realism) and a more sacred sense of life (which needn't be religious) that exceeds the observable. Thus the short story, deriving, as Éjxenbaum suggests, from romance, myth and legend, pushes the extensional world out of mind and deals instead with an underworld, 'a mystical world of paradox and ambiguity, of shadows and shifting perspectives governed not by rational order but by intuition and dream logic'.¹³² It is something beyond language, beyond text: something we cannot see.

V

Failures of sight, of course, are not restricted to the blind. The narrator in 'The Gesture Hunter' is someone who prides himself on his observational skills. He spends his days trawling the streets of the town in which he lives, on the look out for glimpses of life, of the everyday, the apparently small scale:

I'm interested in how people go about their daily lives. You know, how they bide their time, what they fill all that time up with. Not the big motions but the little ones, I suppose: someone hanging clothes on an old-fashioned line, breaking with the convention of the gas dryer, the fluid motion of her arms lifting the sheets, a wooden pin between her teeth, the sway of the line, laden with windblown sheets, in relation to how she bends up to it in greeting; a guy at the gas station helping the full-service customers, his foot on the black slab of rubber bumper, leg jittering hard as he pumps, the car rising and falling gently while his oblivious eyes stay cocked to some lost point on the horizon and he plucks at the stains under the arms of his green sweatshirt.¹³³

In the character of the Gesture Hunter there is a figure for the writer. Richard Ford describes himself in the following terms. 'I'm a noticer and a prolific taker of notes. If

¹³¹ Ibid., 4.

¹³² Boris Éjxenbaum, 'O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story,' trans. I. R. Titunik, in *New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles. E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) 81.

¹³³ David Means, 'The Gesture Hunter,' in *Assorted Fire Event* (London: Fourth Estate) 139.

I see something, I try to write it down because I know I'll forget it otherwise'.¹³⁴ Likewise, the Gesture Hunter. Note how he takes things in, attending to their surfaces, to detail, as if, by mastering their appearance in language, he might ensure their survival in memory: *the old-fashioned line... the fluid motion of her arms... a wooden pin... the black slab of bumper... leg jittering hard... his green sweatshirt*. It seems important to him that he should see things clearly, be able to describe them precisely. In one sense, this will guarantee their veracity, but in an important sense this accumulation of detail is also done with a narrative intention. As with Ford, things are noticed and noted in anticipation of the fact that they will later be used to form story, to give an account, to explain.

We might be able to infer from this realistic opening some sense of what is to come in the gas station attendant's 'oblivious eyes...cocked to some lost point on the horizon,' the horizon representing the line between what can be seen and what is beyond sight, but at this point in the story, we rest upon the visual, on what is described, on what is seen.

The story takes place on a typical day, in a typical town on the Hudson River. As the narrator drives around town, he pursues his gestures. He catches sight of something, but what he sees in this case – 'just the back end of the man: his Wrangler jeans, his hip, and the edge of whatever he was carrying, dark oak maybe, and the buffed metal frame of the door' – contains 'nothing worth noting'. It is 'a gesture, certainly, but not the kind I wanted'. In looking for gestures, it emerges, the narrator is looking for something in particular, an ideal: something 'united and graceful and, most of all, full of revelation, stark, wonderful revelation'.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Quoted in Andrew Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction* (London: Pearson Education, 2011) 19.

¹³⁵ Means, 'The Gesture Hunter,' 141.

The use of the words ‘graceful’ and ‘revelation’ – with their allusions to a religious, spiritual sense, something beyond the everyday – might encourage us to believe that we are being shown, not a hunt for gesture, but a hunt for epiphany, for some uniting insight, something that might make sense of the whole, that figure, as we have seen, so associated with the modern short story, both for good and ill.

As he drives around town, the narrator recalls gestures from the past, such as those of a Mr Bursell, owner of a dry goods store, who, each morning, would open his shop: ‘His cranking would lead the awning, tart green and white stripes, to open gracefully – his work taking shape and form over his head’.¹³⁶ Into these words we might read a lament for a time gone past, a more spiritual age:

That’s how it used to be in a town that wasn’t betrayed yet by the onslaught that would eventually take so many of the finer gestures out of our hands; stolen from us, taken into the innards of so many machines.¹³⁷

The narrator’s claim appears to be that our capacity for gesture is being taken away from us, gobbled up by machines, by programmes: we live in an age of manufactured gestures, a factory line of fakes. We are besieged by a modernity that takes away our power to act. That being the case, we can neither trust the things that we see, nor, as a consequence, take charge of the form and shape of our lives.

As we progress, the story reveals itself more and more. It becomes apparent that it is indeed a lament. The narrator has twice ‘been consecrated by pure gestures’.¹³⁸ The first came when out fishing with his now-dead son, when the narrator, in the process of casting his line, snagged the hook into his son’s wrist. The boy yelped in pain, but the cry is soon followed by ‘the gesture pure and sweet, of his face, a large face, so much my face, smiling at the pain and flicking my fly back,

¹³⁶ Ibid., 142

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 144.

swiping the blood from his wrist'.¹³⁹ The gesture is one of erasure: the boy's action wipes away the pain. When the son is killed in Vietnam, the father vows 'just once more, on the surface of this earth peopled by human souls going about their lives, to find a gesture that equalled that of my son in the stream a year and a half before he died'.¹⁴⁰ The narrative has a purpose, then, a direction: it is a hunt for a repetition, an equal feeling. As the hunt goes on, the narrator, circling and circling the block, witnesses and rejects a host of gestures until, on the steps of a funeral parlour, he finds what he has been looking for:

A man and a woman embraced by grief. Embracing...She bent and shifted with the great forces against her the way someone on the deck of a boat must adjust himself to a changing horizon – it was right there before me, the gyroscope of their pain holding the gesture, making it as pure as carved stone, petrified forever, the brass rails holding up the canopy overhead, green-and-white striped. Suddenly a blinding purplish brilliance lit the front of the parlor afire. I was past. It was behind me. That beloved, graven gesture – near perfect – was gone, faded off into some infinite point along the lines of my life, dissolved by time and by the human movement.¹⁴¹

The image is powerful, no doubt: the gyroscope of pain providing anchor and orientation. Knowing what we know about the narrator's own experience of grief we might read into this the suggestion that he is witnessing some version of himself. There is a hint of possible back story: a past life, buried from view, consoling a wife. 'Ah, the mutual sadness of loss, the dead and gone'.¹⁴² Mutuality implies connectedness, a shared feeling, a unity. For the gesture hunter the scene becomes statuary and then – in a flash – it is gone. Grief struck and against his better judgement – he has already acknowledged that gestures cannot be pursued: 'To hunt gestures you have to let them find you' – he circles round the block, hoping to see the

¹³⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 148-149.

¹⁴² Ibid., 149.

gesture again, to see if it would repeat itself.¹⁴³ This time, however, looking more keenly, scrutinising the scene, he finds that it has changed.

This time I saw the klieg lights set up on the side of the street opposite Olsen's establishment, and the snaking electrical cables draped over the curbing, and the bored and lonely extras with their unreal eyes, chewing catered bagels from fold-up tables near the library... It was an impingement on my town's soul, a final affront. The town had given itself over to the unreal. The unreal was stopping traffic, attracting gawkers.¹⁴⁴

The revelation – that what was thought to have been seen and verified as real is in fact unreal – relies on a form of blindness. The story denies us sight of the Klieg lights first time around. In one way, it is a trick, a piece of subterfuge – a writerly trick of the light. How can he have missed it? we might justifiably ask. However, as Timothy Clark suggests, writing of a similar effect in Kate Chopin's 'The Blind Man,' the story becomes memorable precisely as a result of the 'manipulation at a critical point of the reader's moving field of concretization'.¹⁴⁵ Both narrator and reader are made blind – teller and audience – at the same critical point.

The gesture hunter is furious at the act of imitation, and his own failure to see it for what it was – 'was it not a crime to grieve, falsely grieve, and in that false bereavement to create what is essentially a perfect human gesture?'¹⁴⁶ He drives his car into the heart of the melee and, 'with a death, I made hallow the setting in which the perfect gesture took place'.¹⁴⁷

In finally revealing what was not seen, the story makes manifest its reliance on something that is not hidden, in the sense of concealed, but rather something that has been mis-seen, the narrator passing that confusion onto the reader. As a rejection both of epiphany, as a moment of uniting insight, and of the privileging of sight, it is as ringing as we might like to imagine. It provides a suggestion that, with

¹⁴³ Ibid., 147.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹⁴⁵ Clark, 'The Blind Short Story,' 12.

¹⁴⁶ Means, 'The Gesture Hunter,' 149.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 150.

Means, we might need to look beyond the ordinary, the expected – to mine deeper, to not accept the common consolations of story.

PART FIVE:
**‘One Might Wish That It Were Otherwise’: Narrative Lines in
‘The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,’ ‘The Gulch,’ and ‘Railroad
Incident, August 1995’.**

I

‘It Counts as Seeing’ and ‘The Gesture Hunter’ reveal ways in which the reader’s move towards synthesis can be complicated by interference with the visual sense. These interferences can be thought of as blockages in the way of narrative line, in cinematic terms, missing or damaged frames from the reel.

We can see how this works by way of Peter Brooks’s examination of a scene from Michaelangelo Antonioni’s film, *Blow-Up*.¹⁴⁸ The scene, Brooks suggests, is emblematic of those ‘moments where we seize the active work of structuring revealed or dramatized in the text’.¹⁴⁹ In his analysis, Brooks outlines a shift from lines of sight to lines of narrative. The scene in question shows a photographer looking at a picture he took earlier that day. The photograph – and the memory of the event photographed – troubles him; there is something he cannot work out, something he cannot quite see. He makes enlargements. In looking at the enlargements he seeks to reconstruct from the frozen moment some sense of movement, of animation – some narrative direction that will allow him to enclose the scene with meaning:

What starts him on the reconstruction is the gaze of the girl in the photographs, the direction in which her eyes look: the gaze appears to seek an object, and by following its direction – and its intention – he discovers, shaded and barely visible, a face in the shrubbery and the glinting barrel of a pistol. Then by following the direction of the pistol barrel – its aim or intention – he locates the zone of shadow under a tree which may represent a corpse, that of a man whom the girl was leading toward the shrubbery, perhaps toward a trap.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ *Blow-up*, DVD, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1966; Los Angeles: Warner Home Video, 2004). The film is derived from, but by no means the same as, the Julio Cortázar story, in which a photographer seeks to construct, from a still image, the sense of a narrative line. See: Julio Cortázar, ‘Blow-up,’ trans. Paul Blackburn, in *Bestiary: Selected Stories* (London: The Harvill Press, 1998) 78-89.

¹⁴⁹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 35.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Brooks describes the interplay of lines of sight, which allows the ‘reader’ of the scene to discover not just an intentional direction but also the object of that intention and so infer a potential plot. The photographer looks at the photograph. In the photograph there is a girl. The girl is looking towards something. The photographer follows her line of sight. He sees another face, a pistol. He follows the sight line of the pistol and comes, at last, upon the ultimate object of the scene, the corpse, that allows him to make his own sense of the whole. As Brooks continues, ‘finding, or inventing, the plot... could alone give meaning to the events, which... remain unavailable to interpretation so long as they are not plotted’.¹⁵¹

Had Brooks focused his analysis on Cortázar’s story, rather than Antonioni’s film, he would have found this argument harder to advance: what the film makes more-or-less explicit (gun, corpse), the story leaves hazy (no gun, no corpse, only shadows), and so the very idea of deriving meaning – in Brooks’ thesis, both the consequence and the object of plotting – is thrown into crisis. The difference is relatively simple: it is not necessary to be a detective to cross the synaptic gap from gun to corpse, and so infer likely cause for effect, to find out what has happened. In story, when such things are left imprecise, uncertain or occluded, the role of the reader in actively structuring the text, inferring a line of narrative - and so finding out what has happened and why – is made much more active and more complex.

II

‘Fictions,’ Kermode tells us, ‘are for finding things out’.¹⁵² In fulfilling that function, they help us to overcome disorder by imposing a structure that contains a beginning,

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 39

middle and an end.¹⁵³ This, as Barthes suggests in *S/Z*, is the hermeneutic function of literature, the articulation, in narrative form, of question and answer, the code of enigma and puzzle.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps no form of fiction is more nakedly hermeneutic than the detective story. For Tvetzvan Todorov, detective fiction must ultimately be conditioned by clarity, both at the level of style ('style, in this type of literature, must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible; the only requirement it obeys is to be simple, clear, direct') and of plot, (the form tending 'towards a purely geometric architecture').¹⁵⁵ In Todorov's analysis, readerly engagement is predicated on two different forms of interest:

The first can be called *curiosity*; it proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive). The second form is *suspense*, and here the movement is from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes, the initial *données* (gangsters preparing a heist), and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights).¹⁵⁶

This proposes two different categories of question, one forward looking – *what will this cause?* – and one backward – *what caused this?* Such impulses, and the interplay between them, are present, to one degree or another, in all fictional discourse and in all acts of reading.

By adhering to a movement from crime to solution – from chaos, to order, to comfort – the detective story stands as a serviceable ideation of a functional narrative, against which any dysfunctionality might be measured. It also, in the figure of the detective, provides a figure of reading as a pursuit towards unity and

¹⁵³ Joseph Frank, in his appreciation of Kermode, writes of a shift in his theoretical sensibility that heralded *The Sense of an Ending*. 'Kermode's focus was on what he now saw as an existential need to give shape and pattern to the unendurable meaninglessness of pure temporal duration. Where there is a beginning, we want an end – a human pattern and not simply repetition'. The function of the end, in this scheme, is to save us from repetition. See Joseph Frank, 'His Sense of an Ending' in *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2011): 427-432, 429.

¹⁵⁴ Barthes, *S/Z*, 17. 'All those units whose function is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.'

¹⁵⁵ Tvetzvan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction,' trans. Richard Howard, in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Third Edition, ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood (London: Pearson Education, 2008) 228.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

knowledge. As S. E. Sweeney suggests, by using the detective in this way, detective fiction ‘reproduces in a narrative *mise en abyme* the same physical conundrum that it describes: a movement from mystery to solution’.¹⁵⁷ In what follows, I will look at three stories by Means and from them draw an analysis of the way in which Means uses plot – that narrative line towards meaning – to undermine itself. Whereas self-reflexivity in the detective story falls on revelation, ending and closure – ‘the answer to a riddle, the unmasking of a criminal, and, most important, the full explanation of everything that happened in the preceding narrative’ – in Means’s work it falls, as we will see, on the other side of the line: no revelation, no end, no closure.¹⁵⁸

III

‘The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,’ is, ostensibly, about two detectives trying to find things out, seeking, as Kermode suggests, some sense of the ‘concord between past, present and future,’ to lend ‘significance to mere chronicity’.¹⁵⁹ Charles May describes it as one of those stories that make him ‘despair of trying to get others to like it,’ because, ‘like all good stories, it requires paying close attention to structure and style, not just what it seems to be about’.¹⁶⁰ What a story seems to be about, we might describe as the consequence of its plot, the accumulation and ordering of its events: ‘that concordance of beginning, middle and end, which is the essence of our explanatory fictions’.¹⁶¹ In the story, however, Means problematizes the logic of

¹⁵⁷ S. E. Sweeney, ‘Locked Rooms: Detective Fiction, Narrative Theory, and Self-Reflexivity,’ in *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1990) 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 56.

¹⁶⁰ Charles May, ‘David Means, “The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,”’ *Reading the Short Story*, November 1, 2010, accessed July 13, 2013. <http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/david-means-tree-line-kansas-1934.html>.

¹⁶¹ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 35.

explanation, embedding within a story that is ostensibly about finding things out an enquiry into the very idea of plot, the mechanism of the search for meaning.

To give a brief outline, the story concerns two FBI agents, one young (Barnes) and one old (Lee). They are on a stakeout, waiting to see if Carson, a Dillinger-esque gangster, might return to his uncle's farm to recover some loot. As the two agents wait in the woods they exchange talk and attempt to read the situation before them.

There are differences in their methodologies, however, 'a flaw in the dynamic between the two partners'.¹⁶² Lee, the story's predominant consciousness, listens as Barnes 'recites verbatim' from the file:

Carson has a propensity to fire warning shots; it has been speculated that Carson's limited vision in his left eye, causes his shots to carry to the right of his intended target; impulse control somewhat limited. Five days of listening to Barnes recount the pattern of heists that began down the Texas Panhandle and proceeded north all the way up to Wisconsin, then back down to Kansas, until the trail tangled up in the fumbling ineptitude of the Bureau. For five days, Barnes talked while Lee, older, hard bitten, nodded and let the boy play out his theories.¹⁶³

Barnes, fresh out of college, goes by the book, examining the past for suggestions of what will happen in the future. He looks for patterns, seeking to project from them a line of concordance, some plot that will conduct him to an end that makes sense. As the younger man talks, Lee focuses his attention 'away from the house and onto the road, which came in straight from the horizon'. The horizon, he understands, is a foe. The horizon alters the odds. 'The horizon – always mesmerizing if stared at too long – might take over the stakeout'.¹⁶⁴ Again, as in 'The Gesture Hunter,' in drawing our attention to the horizon, Means draws our attention to the line that marks a point of division between the visible and the invisible, between what can be anticipated and what comes out of nowhere.

¹⁶² David Means, 'The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,' *New Yorker*, October 25, 2010, 76.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Periodically, the two men take it in turns to have breaks, to give their eyes a rest from staring. On one such, Lee ‘stretches out the stiffness in his legs, lights a cigarette, and feels the tingle deep in his gut as it goes to work, zeroing in – as only a gut can zero’.¹⁶⁵ Here, the difference between their ways of knowing becomes evident. The younger man narrativizes – attempts to concretize from known elements that which is unknown. He attempts to discern a logic that might explain things and allow them to know what will happen next. In this way, Barnes operates as a figure for the reader of detective stories, conditioned by signs, who, on encountering puzzling things, attempts to resolve them into coherence according to patterns of expectation based on previous experience. He is guilty, in other words, of the entirely human instinct to read for the plot in pursuit of closure.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Lee relies on instinct, the ineffable: on the way in which ‘a gut feeling finally becomes a hunch’.¹⁶⁷ In his way, he provides a useful model for the reader of the Meansian Story: open to surprise, the unexpected, something beyond reason. The story thus plays out the distinction between the sacred and the profane; between an attendance to the ‘facts’ of the formulated, everyday world, and an acceptance of the validity of the unformulated world of the mind, that aspect of our consciousness that lies beyond rational explanation, beyond plot.

Of course, there is a consequence to this. Barnes’s attempts to ‘read’ the actions of Carson lead him to a conclusion: ‘it’s highly unlikely, Lee, regarding the

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Brooks tells us that ‘we live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed’. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 3. Later in the story, Barnes continues: ‘This guy knows we’re looking for patterns, and he’s even considered, I’d venture to say, the idea that we’d expect him not to come back here, and in expecting him to expect us to expect him not to come back, he’d expect that we’d take that expectation into consideration – the potential pattern – and stake out his old uncle’s farm’. Means, ‘The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,’ 78. We might, then, describe Barnes as one who, in C. K. Williams’ phrase, has a novelistic sense of life, a belief in a readable sequence leading to an outcome, whereas Lee, prepared to be patient, to be unsure, to rely on chance and the guiding properties of a gust of wind, represents a more lyric attitude to being and knowing.

¹⁶⁷ Means, ‘The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,’ 77

patterns set forth by his previous movements, that he would alas venture, as I've said a few times before, to risk arriving at a location known to fit with his past movements'.¹⁶⁸ The language here is formulaic, procedural, even as the use of the conditional alerts us to its provisionality. Nonetheless, Barnes, having assessed the pattern, has decided that Carson will not come. Lee, however, remains still, reading the landscape for signs of his own:

as if the world, unfurling itself with stunning elegance, were preparing for the imminent arrival of God, or gun, his gut told him, in those exact words. Something big was coming, the wind had said. It was a sure give away. Any experienced lawman knew that the wind rising like that had to mean something.¹⁶⁹

This is instinct at work, rather than the logic of plotting. Lee is ready and willing to believe in sacred power, something beyond human management and understanding.

The consequence is this: Barnes – having analysed past and present and so inferred a future – relaxes. He goes back to smoke a cigarette in the woods. Believing he knows what is going to happen, his guard is down and he

steps forward into a single, ferocious moment. He steps forward into a fury of gunfire while his mind – young and foolish but beautiful nonetheless – remains partly back in the woods, taking in the solitude, pondering the way the future feels when a man is rooted to one place, waiting for an unlikely outcome, one that, rest assured, would never, ever arrive.¹⁷⁰

In this passage, Barnes steps out of narrative – out of life, of pattern, of time – and into a singular moment. There is a separation of the physical from the spiritual – his body in one place, his mind in another – that is emblematic of a shift between the lived life and the after life, that which is to come. For Barnes, the life narrative is over. Means presents a simple plot in microcosm in terms of cause and effect (cause: Barnes doesn't believe that Carson will come; effect: Barnes is shot). At the same time, there is an awareness of the danger inherent in reading for the plot. Barnes

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 75.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 77.

infers an effect from prior causes, but the effect is incorrectly anticipated. Plot cannot be read *for*, it can only be understood retrospectively, when everything is done, when the endnote has been supplied.

And yet, 'The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934' ends on a note of emphatic unending – 'waiting for an unlikely outcome, one that, rest assured, would never, ever arrive'. It is a future troubled because it has no line of demarcation, no point of retrospection. It is over – for Barnes, for the story – without being finished. The end comes too quickly and cannot be assimilated into the comfort of plot, of meaning. Barnes's narrative is incomplete to himself because he cannot get beyond it in order to make sense of it.

This, of course, is always true of death qua ending in life, but it is a truth that literature often has to betray. As Brooks has it, 'all narrative may in essence be obituary in that...the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death'.¹⁷¹ We might say, then, that the plot of the story functions according to the classical unities, but Barnes's attempt to read the situation for the plot, to infer the spurious comfort of knowing, is shown to be problematic. It reminds us that what we seek – both from narrative and from life – is an impossible comfort: to know that it will all be all right.

As if to bear witness, Lee survives. He gets beyond the end, or seems to. Earlier in the story, we are told that he will live to tell the tale:

years later, retired, sitting on his porch, looking out at the lake while his wife clanked pots in the kitchen, whistling softly to herself, he'd know, or think he knew, that even at that moment in Kansas, turning to speak to Barnes, he'd had a sense that one day he'd be retired and reflecting on that particular point in time... When you retired, you turned back into yourself and tried to settle into not thinking about the way others thought. You rested your feet and sat around

¹⁷¹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 95.

tweezing apart past scenarios that had ended up with you alive and others dead.¹⁷²

This proleptic leap into an imagined future is signalled by the use of the future conditional aspect. It is a projection beyond story and its conditionality embeds, within the very act of bringing it into being, the possibility that this – the future moment of retrospection – *might not happen*. Thus, its possible existence, taking into account its already fictive nature, is made unstable in an interpretative sense: what are we to make of it? Did it happen, or didn't it?

Although Lee appears to get beyond the end of this story, he still cannot make sense of it, because he cannot let it go. Like Baxter's definition of the dysfunctional narrative, its obscurity insists upon its continuation. All those years later, at his summer cottage in Wisconsin, Lee is still reflecting on the event in Kansas, 'holding it out for examination' and wondering if he might have acted differently:

Shut your yap, he might have said. Clam up, kid. You can talk until you're out of words, but, no matter what you might say or think, the fact that there is a chance Carson might show is the only thing that matters.¹⁷³

Even with the benefit of hindsight – of being in a position to know the end and so construct the logic of what went before – Lee cannot get closure. He can only make a plea for intuition, for a kind of anti-logic that defies plot: the reliance on chance. This is troubling, confronting the desire for teleological sense-making with a construct that is beyond explanation, presenting a challenge to the novelistic sense of both life and reading.

¹⁷² Means, 'The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,' 75.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 76.

IV

There is a break. We jump to another Meansian take on the detective story. In ‘The Gulch,’ a Detective Collard attempts to figure out the facts surrounding a gruesome murder: the crucifixion of Sammy by three schoolfriends (Ron Bycroft, Rudy Highsmith and Stanton). Early on, Means alerts us to the fact that this will be a story dealing with extrapolations outwards: acts of interpretation. The story begins with a line – a washing line, belonging to the Highsmith family and used in the crime. As Collard looks at it in the evidence room he finds that

he could easily imagine Rudy’s ragged jeans, holes shredded white, pale blue and growing lighter under the warmth of the sun, picking up the breeze on some late-summer afternoon, while a dog barked rhapsodically along the edge of the woods.¹⁷⁴

As with the photographer in Antonioni’s film, there is a movement from static image towards animate narrative, from the washing line to the life narrative it implies. Later in the story, listening as the physical details of the crime are divulged in the courtroom, Collard ‘bites his nails to the quick just to find some small amount of pain from which he might extrapolate the rest’.¹⁷⁵

The problem, in this story, is not with the details of the crime, nor even with the identity of the perpetrators, but with the precise apportioning of blame: ‘Bycroft blamed Stanton, who in turn blamed Highsmith, who went around himself to point the finger at Bycroft in what most detectives traditionally call the golden hoop of blame’.¹⁷⁶ It is a precise illustration of Charles Baxter’s dysfunctional narrative: the hoop of blame – a cycle of deniability – turns the narrative line into a circle, a ceaseless revisiting, that serves to obscure rather than clarify meaning. In other

¹⁷⁴ David Means, ‘The Gulch,’ in *The Spot* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010) 127.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

words, the story becomes a vortex of indeterminacy; the crime, in Baxter's phrase, 'an unreadable mess'.¹⁷⁷

The consequences of unreadability are, for Baxter, 'sorrow, mixed with depression or rage, the condition of the abject... the psychic landscape of trauma and paralysis'.¹⁷⁸ This is a condition that Means's story seems designed to engender, challenging our readerly desire for known outcomes. As Means knows only too well, when confronted with the bewildering, the scarcely believable, we still hunger for some sense of explanation, some sense of meaning to rescue life from senselessness:

Into the gap these facts formed, folks inserted wedges of philosophical thought and tried to avoid the possibility that the reenactment of a two-thousand-year-old-event was pure senselessness on the part of teenagers who in no way meant to crack the universal fabric and urge a messianic event.¹⁷⁹

Drawing attention to the reenactment, the story suggests a reflection on the sense-making power of the original crucifixion, its role in the ideologies of western civilisation: that, in some way, the meaning of everything derives from what took place on the cross. The gaps – the blind spots in the collective knowledge of the crime and its context – are filled by possible causes for the effect. We yearn to know the answer to the question: 'why?'

Means foregrounds this desire for explanation through the presence of several contemporary agents of interpretation: a media commentator argues that the boys 'were trying to find a way to grace'; a professor makes 'a connection between the trench shovel, the poetry of Wilfred Owen, and the Great War'; another professor draws 'a parallel between the mock event, the young ruffians... putting their friend up on the cross, and Benjamin's concept of a "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past"'.¹⁸⁰ Meanwhile, a high school English teacher tells her students: 'We

¹⁷⁷ Baxter, 'Dysfunctional Narratives,' 3.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷⁹ Means, 'The Gulch,' 133.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

all have these strange ideas and sometimes we're with our friends and we feel pressured to do them, but we do not because we are free, she said, looking for a segue into *The Stranger* by Albert Camus'.¹⁸¹ The language here – 'connection,' 'grace,' 'parallel,' 'segue' – draws further attention to the privileging of unity and connectedness: the idea that, in an ideal world, everything will join up in the end, will make sense, or, if that fails, be made to make sense.

This staging of a social quest for understanding, nods us towards the function of the explanatory fictions we tell ourselves: to help us feel safe at night. Through the logic of understanding and explanation, a thing can be mastered, overcome and so left behind. The same desires are evident in reading, in the hope that a text will tell us something intelligible about the world, about ourselves. Means alerts us to the speciousness of these ways of knowing, providing reminders that they are neither truths, nor certainties. Nonetheless, Collard goes on circling around the event in a series of attempts to read into it some sense of explanatory logic, looking not just for the facts, but for their significance. For the boys, however, it is all quite straightforward:

We just felt like doing it, was Bycroff's statement during his confession. We was just trying it out, you know, like maybe he'd rise again and maybe not, but it was worth a shot, because he was such a lightweight in this life.¹⁸²

'We just felt like it' is a kernel of occlusion around which a dysfunctional narrative can form. 'We just felt like it' does not give us the explanation needed to enclose the event, to give it sense and so an ending. It provides neither the narrative nor legal logic necessary to bring the case to a close.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 135. In its performance of the search for meaning, the story is linked with another in the same collection, 'Facts Towards Understanding the Spontaneous Human Combustion of Errol McGee,' in which a series of theories are called forth in the attempt to explain the titular conflagration. See David Means, 'Facts Towards Understanding the Spontaneous Human Combustion of Errol McGee,' in *The Spot* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010) 89-101.

¹⁸² Means, 'The Gulch,' 136.

Indeed, for Collard, the story doesn't end. In a precise structural repetition of 'The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,' his consciousness takes a proleptic leap into an imagined future:

He left Bycroff back in the interrogation room, behind the one-way glass... He stood in the doorway and thought about it. He'd be a retired cop living up north, enjoying the solitude and silence. He'd be fishing... and then he'd think of the gulch case, and it would all come back to him, and he'd remember storming out of the interrogation room into this bright, clear, beautiful light of a fall day in Bay City. He'd cast again into a riffle, thinking about the fish, while at the same time, trying to tweeze apart the facts of the case, remembering the voids, the gaping space between the statements and his failure to get the story straight.¹⁸³

In other words, he thinks forwards to the moment in the future when he will think back to the moment in the past when he was thinking forward to the moment in the future. The detective imagines the act of future retrospection as one in which he will 'tweeze' apart the facts of the past, still looking for truth and meaning, still attempting to enclose the hitherto unexplainable in some comforting explanation, some straight story. In these oscillations between temporal moments, Means creates a structural vortex, an unending spiral, which is, finally, as unreadable as the story itself.

Mark Currie's analysis of prolepsis in *About Time* focuses on the 'future of a narrative as a future which is already in place, one which has a spatial existence in writing,' and, thus, 'by making an excursion into a future which is already in place, fiction can therefore instruct us in the kinds of significance acquired by an event when it is looked back upon in a mode of teleological retrospect'.¹⁸⁴ It is the already-in-placeness that is problematic. In both 'The Gulch' and 'The Tree Line, Kansas, 1934,' the prolepses are predicated, through the use of the future conditional aspect, on a contingent version of the future: these are things way off, far beyond the temporal limit of the narratives in which they occur. They are things that *might* yet

¹⁸³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁸⁴ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 33.

happen – that the narrative asks us to believe might yet happen – but which are certainly not already ‘in place’. They are, then, perhaps a more proper version of our actual experience of future temporality, involving a lifelike projection forward to an entirely imagined, but still essentially possible, future.

As the story nears its close, Collard – still standing outside the interrogation room, still thinking forward to his future moment of retrospection – continues to reflect on the dysfunctionality of the gulch narrative, anticipating how ‘he would remember it clearly, not so much the facts around it...but mainly the place itself, silent and gritty, with condoms curled like snakeskins in the weeds’.¹⁸⁵ Even so, Collard cannot construe significance. He cannot make sense of it, cannot answer the question: ‘Why?’ The story is cracked, broken in some way, and his mind is compelled to return to it in the attempt to tell it again, to himself if no one else, to give it an end and so fill it with significance. The truth is, as Collard knows, ‘he would still have questions about the case that would linger for the rest of his life. There was no end to it’.¹⁸⁶

V

Broken stories are hard to tell, but they are also hard to read: we need some assistance. ‘Most viable works of literature tell us something about how they are to be read, guide us towards the conditions of their interpretation.’ Peter Brooks advances this claim in relation to ‘the novels of the great tradition’ and the way in which they use the line of plot as a ‘model of understanding’.¹⁸⁷ David Means embeds one way of thinking about his own stories into ‘Railroad Incident, August, 1995’.

¹⁸⁵ Means, ‘The Gulch,’ 138.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁸⁷ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, xii.

We've touched on the story before. An unnamed protagonist is walking a railway line, not far from New York City, near the Hudson River. At a certain point, he steps on a shard of glass:

it went into his heel cleanly, cutting firmly into the hard pad, opening a wound that sent him falling sideways. It was one of those cuts that open up slowly into the possibilities of their pain, widening from a small point into a cone; this was the kind of cut that gave the fearful sense of being unlimited in the kind of pain it would eventually produce.¹⁸⁸

This passage provides a neat, microcosmic exegesis of Means's approach to story: a movement from a point of trauma (the cut) to the boundlessly spatial (the widening cone of pain it will produce), from point of event to limitless interpretative possibilities. Means has described it as the way a story 'radiates out into an infinite space of the reader's eternal imagination'.¹⁸⁹ The cut is emblematic of the trauma or wound: the senseless moment that inaugurates all stories. From this, as S. E. Sweeney suggests, 'plot consists of subsequent attempts to restore order; and when this resolution occurs, the story is over'.¹⁹⁰ If plot is about the placing of limits – of drawing a concordance between beginning, middle and end – Means's figure of pain suggests, by contrast, the unlimited, the unending: a narrative space that echoes outwards until it is incommensurate with its initial size.

The story begins on a linear premise – a man walks a railway line. Very rapidly, however, it proposes a series of alternative narrative lines. By implication they open up spaces both in the text and in the reader's imagination. We are forced in some way to consider them and to wonder where they might lead. What is especially interesting about the prolepses in 'Railroad Incident, August, 1995' is that they propose alternative futures subsequently – yet still within the same narrative – revealed to be false. The effect is to defamiliarize our sense of the way in which

¹⁸⁸ Means, 'Railroad Incident, August, 1995,' 3.

¹⁸⁹ Means, 'The Voyeuristic Impulse'.

¹⁹⁰ Sweeney, 'Locked Rooms,' 4.

narrative functions, frustrating our epistemophilic urge and leaving us with a puzzle rather than a solution.

The story deserves close attention. A man walks a railway line. We infer that he might be in some kind of trouble, but he is apparently devoid of motive, save, it seems, from a desire to cover his tracks, to misrepresent himself. Five miles back, he abandoned his car. He left the engine running, despite knowing that he had no intention of returning, because ‘he was the kind of man who would leave his car running for the sake of appearances, to help lull an imaginary stranger into an illusionary sense of stability: all was right with the world, she would think, passing, going about her business’.¹⁹¹ The complexity of this passage is worth picking apart a little. The man imagines a stranger passing by his abandoned car. In imagining the stranger, he calls them into being for us, too; like him, we are forced to imagine them. Inevitably, we imagine how we might feel on encountering a car parked at the side of the road with its engine running. In sending out this false trail, the character in the story wants to protect that stranger from knowledge of the truth. In some way, this is a generous, human act; he wants to save the stranger from becoming implicated in the narrative. It is, nonetheless, an act of narrative misdirection – a lie. It creates – in the mind both of the imaginary stranger and the reader – the sense of an alternative temporality in which a different decision has been taken; in which narrative and life line are functioning normally; in which his car is ‘one of many such cars,’ holding ‘people up from the city for the summer night... before going home to the embrace of concrete’.¹⁹²

This man is not going home, however: all is not right with the world. In a declivity, he sits and removes his shoes, ‘fine, handmade Italians,’ divesting himself

¹⁹¹ Means, ‘Railroad Incident, August, 1995,’ 2.

¹⁹² Ibid.

of the trappings of civilisation and their markers of status. He is not here to look at the sunset: 'He has come to betray himself, to rid himself of such things'.¹⁹³ This is a man in crisis. He is coming loose from the plot of his life, which has, it seems to him, 'become a series of such episodes, long searching silences as he tried to recall some image lost to him'.¹⁹⁴ The search for an image to which he no longer has access is significant. He is thinking about a blank space, a blind spot: a narrative secret that creates a gap in the sequence of memory. Somewhere along the line, connections have been broken and, as his vague memories circle through his consciousness, his life appears as an accumulation of events, disassociated from causality. The precise nature of the links between them are burned through in some way. Kermode suggests that 'history... is a fictive substitute for authority and tradition, a maker of concords between past, present and future, a provider of significance to mere chronicity'.¹⁹⁵ This man, however, has lost his grip on his own history: he cannot place the hazy images of memory into an order that resembles the truth, that lends his corporeal presence significance.

Why is he there, other than to betray himself? 'He wishes for a single clear-cut reason,' but in fact there are myriad: the death of his wife, the loss of his job, his wife's affair, with an old friend.¹⁹⁶ However, none of these explanations is 'reason enough for his actions. He is certain of that'.¹⁹⁷ He has lost his sense of concord, and the authority that such a structure provides. Instead, he is marooned in an effect without an identifiable cause, unexplainable, even to himself. For this character – and for this story – the central question of motivation cannot be answered by recourse to novelistic or psychological verisimilitude.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹⁵ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 56.

¹⁹⁶ Means, 'Railroad Incident, August, 1995,' 4.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

The story shifts into the collective consciousness of four youths, to whom he appears ‘out of the hazy air like a wounded animal, nothing but a shadow down the tracks moving with a strange hobble that didn’t seem human’.¹⁹⁸ The language is attentive to place, to the spatial dimension where things happen:

The spot where they hung out, just before the tracks carved a hole in the overflowing cliffside, was strewn with old railroad debris, rails and tie plates and gobs of black tar and broken bottles; it was an outback hovel secluded and safe from everything, as purely wasted and unneeded as they felt themselves to be and, because of that were; a bunch of rubbish and torn away flesh, the self-made tattoos brandished on their own young flesh.¹⁹⁹

The isolation of this spot – filled with rubbish, things no longer needed, no longer useful – signals a move from society to its margins, from a place in the world and in story, to a place outside both.

As the youths circle the man, the narrative again leaps forward: ‘It was later, in the dreamlike reproductions of those moments’. The temporal locution is odd, the pastness of ‘was’ colliding with the future orientation of ‘later’ to create a temporal anomaly: a moment of suspension that is outside time. In that moment, the man reflects on the youths’ behaviour:

Muscles limber from stunts, flesh marred and bruised and burned with hard little bull’s-eyes from the butts of Dad-held cigarettes; the you’s of bodies being twisted into lockholds and half nelsons, pinned with knees in backs and sternums; bucked tendons and double-jointed bone breaks that sucked the air from their fourteen-year-old mouths in the recessed trailer back stuck down in the shithole wastelands near the town’s toxic dump.²⁰⁰

He attempts to imagine the history of other lives, each a fictional extrapolation from known facts of appearance and expected narratives of deprivation and abuse. In other words, he attempts to tell a story, something that fits with the facts and can provide a logic for what is happening and what is about to happen. At the reader’s

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 7.

level, all of these proposed narrative lines are acts of delay, diversions that confound the linear impulse of reading, opening wounds in the surface of the text that impede the cleansing motion of complete assimilation.

The man is beaten, savagely. Means's exquisite prose seems to luxuriate in the brutality of the moment, facing it down with an equal force:

The kick landed in his stomach. He fell. Slowly and with grace the two boys to the side came to him and gently helped him up, feeling his lack of resistance immediately, making note of it by bending back his arms behind him far enough to produce a rainbow of pain over his shoulder blades. Their job was to fill the beating with as much dignity as possible, to uphold the ballet of the scene, to make it worth their fucking while.²⁰¹

The writing is stylistically complex, brave in the pronounced contradiction between the elegance of the prose and the brutality of that which it describes. The effect is visceral, the call that it should be 'worth their fucking while,' once again signalling the human instinct to fill the dilatory spaces of life, between beginning and end, with significance, something that is meaningful. As they drag the man into a railroad tunnel, one thinks again of Kermode, of that readerly desire for comfort, a plot that will allow me to make sense of all this brutality.

Sure enough, the narrative plays along with this desire, teasing us with the possibility of redemption. 'One might wish that it were otherwise, wish that these boys in their joy had decided to release him to the elements, toss him into the ragweed, the leaning stalks of wild bamboo, to rot or crawl his way back to safety'.²⁰² There is, it emerges 'a scheme in place overall'. And perhaps now we might discover logic, a reason. But the scheme that is in place is spiritual, sacred, beyond everyday understanding: 'the stars were aligned in certain ways and all was going as planned'.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Ibid., 8.

²⁰² Ibid., 9.

²⁰³ Ibid., 10.

The story continues to challenge the desire for assimilation, backtracking, before veering off into a further alternative narrative. The term ‘veering’ is appropriate to the way in which Means’s texts change course and direction unexpectedly. It also, as Nicholas Royle suggests, has a psychological context:

of someone veering away from some goal or aspiration, for example, or veering between one thing and another. Veering can be deliberate or unintentional. Either way, there is a suggestion of something sudden, unexpected or unpredictable. Moreover, veering as a movement does not necessarily depend on any logic of origin or destination: it is an uncertainly perverse, unfinished movement *in the present*. Veering, then, entails an experience or event of difference, of untapped, unpredictable energy. Veering back, round, down, up, towards, about, over, away, off: it might go anywhere.²⁰⁴

It might go anywhere, is the signal phrase here. Instead of abandoning his car, the man might have, as he usually did, driven into the city, to the Lincoln Centre, where tonight, as all of this motiveless violence is taking place, a concert is underway:

Brahms’ Symphony No. 3 with its mysterious second theme, the Andante that fails to reappear in its expected place in the recapitulation; and the third movement, of which he was particularly fond, Poco Allegretto, so rounded and soft at the beginning it would, if he had gone, remind him of the shoulders of his wife, of a moment twenty years ago, making love in a small room on Nantucket.²⁰⁵

The movement of the music seems to map the movement of the story. Like the Andante, things are not where they should be. The attempt to recapitulate the pattern of events, to retell the story, is complex: a man has been beaten, almost certainly to the point of death, but the narrative asks us to follow a line that suggests, in the event he does survive, he will think of how different things might have been had he done what he usually did – gone into the city to a concert – during which, he would have thought of his dead wife, when she was still alive, the first time they made love. Even if that had happened:

of course, listening from his seat in the third tier to the right with his eyes closed he would, had he gone into the city, have idealized and sentimentalized that first

²⁰⁴ Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) 4.

²⁰⁵ Means, ‘Railroad Incident, August, 1995,’ 10.

night of lovemaking with the woman who was two years later to take his hand as his beloved wife.²⁰⁶

The effect is dizzying, disorientating, complicating and impeding the narrative's forward-looking intention, its drive for the end: 'He did not hear the Brahms and therefore he didn't go through that particular memory. (And perhaps stepping from his car, locking and closing the door behind him, the firm crunch of his leather soles on the breakdown lane, he knew that he was avoiding this memory; perhaps, or perhaps not)'.²⁰⁷

In order to be clear, it is worth repeating the pattern of the movement: he doesn't go to the concert and therefore doesn't have the memory he might have had had he gone; a memory that, in any case, had he had it, he would have recognised as embellished, fictionalised; and the reason he didn't go to the concert, and instead walks the railway line, is possibly because he had earlier anticipated having the memory, had he gone, and wanted to avoid it having it, so didn't go. In this interplay of the lines of life, memory, imagination and desire the story comes close to that which Brooks – by way of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – settles on as the functioning principle of plot

As a kind of arabesque, or squiggle, towards the end...that suggests the arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative, its deviance from the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end – which would be the collapse of one into the other, of life into immediate death.²⁰⁸

For Brooks, this deviance performs the living fear of reaching our end too quickly, 'of achieving the improper death'.²⁰⁹ In other words, we don't just want to die, we want to die on our own terms, in a way that is satisfying, that makes sense.

In the story, there is a line break, a significant indication that the text is going to change direction. Then the arabesque continues: 'He would re-enter the so-called

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁰⁸ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 103.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 104.

world in a half hunch, with his knees bleeding and the sky overhead showing the first hints of morning.’²¹⁰ Again, we are forced to recalibrate. The man we thought dead is alive, or at least back from the dead. He stumbles down an embankment, to be met, eventually, by an old man out driving. It’s not just any old man, either: ‘he’s the Reverend Simpson of the Alabaster Salvation Church of Haverstraw’.²¹¹ We might, on rereading, take a cue from the use of the word ‘Alabaster,’ cold and unfeeling, and infer that this will be a parody of that old narrative of comfort: that at our end God will save us. We *might* do that, but we can by no means be certain.

A link can be made here to Ambrose Bierce’s ‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,’ another narrative in which we are not only allowed, but encouraged to dream of what might have been, to wish that it were otherwise.²¹² In Bierce’s story, when Farquhar, the confederate sympathiser sentenced to death by hanging, experiences his vision of redemption it takes place in the instants between falling from the bridge and the noose snapping his neck. Rather than the noose snapping, he falls into the water and swims off into a dreamscape, complete with visions of homecoming, images of his wife and children. For a moment, the reader is also allowed to live in that dream, is encouraged to believe in it, before the story snaps back and leaves us with the image of Farquhar’s corpse swinging gently beneath the bridge. Borrowing from a psychologist’s vocabulary, Cathy Davidson suggests that Bierce’s method fosters reader ‘rationalization’; that is, a tendency towards completion of the incomplete, in which fragments of certainty and vast unknowns are brought together into a structure that *seems* sure, consistent and reasonable.²¹³ Rationalization, in these terms, is not so far away from Ingarden’s concept of ‘concretization’, in which

²¹⁰ Means, ‘Railroad Incident, August, 1995,’ 11.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²¹² Cathy N. Davidson, *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 45.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

he identifies the task of the reader being to concretize the text effectively on the basis of given clues.²¹⁴ Each of these narrative switches requires a process of re-concretization – ah, so it's like this now.

Presenting false future moments is one of the ways in which Means challenges the reader's ability to concretize effectively. As with Bierce's story, the effect of the recalibrations – the man dies, lives, dies again – is to force the reader to pause, to re-examine, as if the text itself were beginning again, having to be reread in a new light. This fosters an inability to let go, as if the end of the story were beyond us – it is self-evident that if we keep re-starting we will never get to the end. This, coupled with the powerful desire to finish the unfinishable and know the unknowable, creates a strange loop effect, a going over again, but at a different point in time.²¹⁵

Of course, the dream of what might have been proves to be just that. The story returns us to the tunnel, describes the final kick, and how

as a finishing touch they'd gone back and laid the body over the tracks—an afterthought, a coda, a grand finish that would stand out as one of their great moves so far because it was certain to come, that one rattling beast of a train that always chewed up the last bits of silence the night had to offer, waking birds up and down the line, birds that would hawk and chirp stupidly in their sudden intense hunger; that train, an old New York Central engine repainted with Conrail colors, would haul a chain of some fifty or so beleaguered cars; they'd be down in the shithole diner tasting the weak coffee and eating eggs when the train rounded that bend in the river; they'd have their elbows fixed to the formica tabletop and the slick-headed one would be saying Fucking A, it's a fucking trip, man. I mean fuckin' A, do you hear what I'm hearing man? while the others nod and allow themselves a few minutes of silence—not even a nervous Fuck muttered—a brooding contemplation deep and spiritual, full of weight, or weightless of morals, of God or no God, as their stars aligned or unaligned, depending on how you see it.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, 332.

²¹⁵ Drawing on Hofstadter's study of Gödel, Escher and Bach, Mary Rohrberger uses the figure of the strange loop to describe curious tangles – for example, hands drawing hands drawing hands – that occur in the hierarchical system of narrative when we unexpectedly find ourselves back where we started. See Mary Rohrberger, 'Strange Loops: Time in the Short Story,' in *La Nouvelle de Langue Anglaise* 6 (1991): 71-81.

²¹⁶ Means, 'Railroad Incident, August, 1995,' 14.

The passage is worth quoting in full, because it shows again the idea of narrative sense in action: the awareness of a proper end and an anticipation of how that end might come about. The youths use their knowledge of the trains and how one will, after their role in the drama has ended, come along and finish the job. There is also a nod to the idea of grander schemes, grander systems of order: God, or no God? And then, in that final phrase, the key to it all: the question of perspective, the way in which we see things.

Still, the story is not done. There is another line break. Means shifts us into the perspective of a railway engineer, who finds himself bearing down on the spot where the man had been left by his tormentors. The engineer:

Saw it first in the disk of his headlight and began the emergency procedure for stopping a thousand tons of stock, air breaks and friction breaks both applied, turning away so he wouldn't have to see the impact – actually he'd never see it anyway, hidden by the front of his locomotive, but turning away anyway out of respect for the about-to-die. The body lodged up under the coupling, or parts of it at least: divided cleanly, the legs stayed back in the tunnel.²¹⁷

Means draws the engineer and the focal character into a synchronous line of connection – ‘When he died, shortly after that final kick, going deep into the shock that precedes systems shutting down, the train was still in New Jersey, heaving and bucking along the backside of Newark Airport’ – before again performing another proleptic leap, this time in the consciousness of the engineer, who looks to narrativise his experience, give it some plot, some meaning:

Later, perhaps in some recollection of that night... he would also remember the sight of that plane taking off; not that he *made* a connection between the two events that night, but he *felt* somehow that there was one between the plane and the death of the man.²¹⁸

Again, that retrospective desire for finding and feeling patterns of sense, even in the seemingly random, the inchoate:

²¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

He had an ability to take the ever-increasing frequency of bodies lying across the tracks and turn it into a philosophical precept of sorts: the world was failing, spinning into something bad and evil, away from what once was firm and hard and, of course, united with steel and wood and broken stone – clean, white right-of-ways, timetables seldom broken.²¹⁹

There is a banality to this nostalgia, a simplicity to the parable drawn, that seems to stand against all that has gone before, that signally fails in the attempt to explain it.

The story ends on a further banality, an epiphany, of sorts, of domestic normality:

Down the street kids rode their bikes around in circles. It was a good job even if things weren't going the way they should in the world. It was a good, good job.²²⁰

The image of kids riding their bikes in circles around the streets is eerie. On the one hand, it implies a timeless normality, things being as they should be, but there is also a hint of meaningless spiralling. Norman Cameron, writing of the way in which we organise our perceptions, suggests that 'the hallmark of rationalization is the inventing and accepting of interpretations that satisfy personal need but are not substantiated by impartial analysis.'²²¹ The banality of the engineer's rationalization, his forcing of events into his own interpretative arc, being insufficient, turns the story over to the reader, to look again; because, as Barthes tells us, rereading alone 'saves a text from repetition,' allowing us to see not only 'what happens' in the text but how our reading makes the text happen.²²² Thus the story as a whole exemplifies the temporal problematics of the form itself: the disassociation from context, the refusal of easy interpretation, of linearity and the destabilisation of our way of knowing. The reader ends the story as isolated as its characters: surrendered to contemplate ultimacies, 'last thoughts,' which, as the narrative avers, 'don't come easily'.²²³ And when they do come, they extend the 'meaning' of the narrative outwards into the

²¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

²²⁰ Ibid., 17-18.

²²¹ Norman Cameron, 'Perceptual Organisation and Behaviour Pathology,' in *Perception: An Approach to Personality* ed. R. R. Blake and G. V. Ramsay (New York: Ronald Press, 1951) 283-306, 295.

²²² Barthes, *S/Z*, 16.

²²³ Means, 'Railroad Incident, August, 1995,' 13.

reader's life, and, finally, on to assault the silence beyond the text. At its close, the story enacts what the passage about the cut states. The pain of the cut – the trauma of the story – is not mastered by the story's close. The end we are given is not sufficient to the task. It tells us nothing more than some people die and other people live. Leaving us wanting more, it instructs us to go back in, to take another look.

PART SIX:

Spinning Yarns: Symbols and Storytelling in ‘Two Hearts Times Two,’ ‘Nebraska,’ and ‘The Junction’.

I

One of the pleasures of going back in – of rereading – is the pleasure of recognition, of encountering again what one has encountered before. As Derek Attridge suggests, ‘the knowledge of what is to come in a work one has read before and the memory of the experience of earlier readings transforms the reader’s experience’.²²⁴ A further subset of this pleasure is that of recognising not the same thing experienced again in a different moment of reading, but the identification of similarities and patterns – groupings of images, symbols, repeated themes, or characterisations – that arise across a body of work: in the case of David Means, across four collections and a scattering of individually published stories.

In noticing these groupings the work of the reader shifts from the syntagmatic – a reading predicated on an accumulative horizontal plane – towards the paradigmatic: a form of sense-making that emerges vertically, drawn from a coalition of similar things that arise in likeness rather than sequence. Responding to an interview question about stillness in writing, Means has this to say:

I think the stillness you mention comes out of what Andre Dubus called vertical writing, rather than horizontal; going down deep, and deeper, into the situation instead of moving to some end point.²²⁵

This kind of reading illuminates ways in which stories and collections by a single author appear to be in dialogue with one another outside the linear sequence of their publication. Michael Trussler draws attention to the way in which Alice Munro has ‘created an oeuvre that grows increasingly subtle in the way it refracts (and

²²⁴ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, 88.

²²⁵ Ponteri, ‘David Means and the Secret Mystery’.

comments upon) itself'. Looking specifically at the collection *Runaway*, Trussler highlights how certain images, sentences, scenes and even single words shadow one another, connecting each story to others in the text and to prior collections. 'The effect is Proustian in that *Runaway* appears to remember, and then seemingly forget, and then recast various components (thematic and stylistic) of itself throughout the eight stories.'²²⁶ The word 'recast' is important here, signalling a compulsion to remake – to retell and, one might imagine, tell better.²²⁷

This pursuit of symbols speaks, once again, to the belief that, in the end, it should all make sense – that it should all come together somehow. James Wood, writing about Means's third collection, *The Secret Goldfish*, observes that a common function of symbols in contemporary short fiction is, much like the epiphanic close, precisely representative of this move towards unity: 'a controlling symbol or organising detail or image can be sensed fizzing away like a lozenge of meaning in most contemporary short stories'.²²⁸ Such stories are the products of a delicate art, the 'subtle work of implication and connection,' which the writer uses 'without pressing too hard' until the end point is reached and the story 'can now expire in figurative ellipsis'.²²⁹ The suggestion that, once its figurative meaning has been determined, the story can, effectively, die, seems disappointing: is this really the object of storytelling? To be left behind? Means, according to Wood, 'will have none

²²⁶ Michael Trussler, 'Pockets of Nothingness: "Metaphysical Solitude" in Alice Munro's "Passion," *Narrative*, Vol 20, No. 2 (2012): 183.

²²⁷ Means is alert to the possibilities of such a dialogue and the potential for revelation within it. 'I think the way one story plays off another, the way a collection adds up to a single vision is a deeply complex thing, one that hasn't been addressed enough in criticism'. See: Tom Barbash, 'The Rumpus Interview with David Means.' *The Rumpus*, July 16, 2010. Accessed July 13, 2013. <http://therumpus.net/2010/07/the-rumpus-interview-with-david-means/>. Despite Means's claim, there is some criticism that seeks to address this aspect of connectivity within a collection. See: John Gerlach, 'Narrative, Lyric, and Plot in Chris Offutt's *Out of the Woods*' in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis* ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans Skei (Columbia: University of Columbia Press, 2004) 44-57; J. Scott Farrin, 'Eloquence and Plot in Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*: The Merging of Premodern and Modernist Narrative' in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues* ed. Farhat Iftekharruddin, Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger, and Jale Claudet (New York: Praeger Publishers, 2003) 130-144.

²²⁸ Wood, 'Overloaded with Wasps,' 39.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

of this'.²³⁰ He works differently, eschewing delicate symbolism 'to accentuate the pattern, to dash it in the reader's face,' overloading a story's controlling symbol, 'so that we can see the story's strategy for what it is'.²³¹

In what follows, I intend to apply just such a reading to Means's work, drawing attention, in the first instance, to the regular re-occurrence of a particular family of images or symbols, before seeing if this helps us, following Wood, to 'see the story's strategy for what it is'. The symbols in question are various manifestations of spirals, circles, loops, and rings: rotational devices, in other words, things that spin. An example can be found in the whirligigs strewn across Augusta's grandfather's farmyard in 'Oklahoma':

An old farmhouse with a streetlamp attached to the back to ward off prowlers (like us), a huge orb of light casting itself into a mud-rutted backyard filled with whirligigs of all types attached to poles, heaving and rattling in the wind, creating a terrible shudder.²³²

That orb of light appears as a kind of aura for story itself, an emanating glow, both emerging from and surrounded by darkness; while those heaving and rattling whirligigs give rise to the terrible shudder story can produce in the reader's imagination.

As the *OED* tells us, 'whirligig' is a term:

applied to various mechanical contrivances having a whirling or rotatory movement...*(a)* Something that is continually whirling, or in constant movement or activity of any kind; *(b)* a fantastic notion, a crotchet (*obs.*); *(c)* circling course, revolution (of time or events); *(d)* a lively or irregular proceeding, an antic; *(e)* a circling movement, or condition figured as such, a whirl.²³³

Implied in this definition is a sense both of order and disorder, of control and chaos.

A whirligig, then, is a figure that is both in possession of its own movement yet has

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² David Means, 'Oklahoma,' in *The Spot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010) 116.

²³³ "whirligig, n," *OED Online*, June 2013, Oxford University Press, accessed July 13 2013 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228470?rskey=J2Q2kz&result=1>.

the potential to disorientate – to confuse, to spin us out into chaos.²³⁴ It serves, for the narrator of ‘Oklahoma’, as a figure for her own life, as she stands for a minute in the dark and feels the wild ratcheting of the whirligigs in a burst of wind from the west. Reading herself as a symbol, she knows how they feel, ‘stuck spinning in eternal toil’.²³⁵ It serves, too, as a useful figure for Means’s way of story, which seems at once highly patterned and irredeemably chaotic, performing structural loops or spirals, circling back in a seemingly ceaseless effort to return to some lost point of ignition.

In some senses, this is what art is about – order and chaos – the chaos of subject and the order of shaping form. As Ali Smith has said:

If you look at what any art is about, it’s about addressing, with the thinking mind, what looks chaotic and what looks meaningful – both. And seeing what the relationship is between an unfolding chaos and an unfolding meaning. Allowing something to un-neaten itself to find out what it’s made of.²³⁶

Nonetheless, the effect of Means’s spirallings is to destabilize our position as readers, confusing us, impeding that sense-making impulse, to the extent that when, finally, we are flung out of story, we remain nonetheless in its orbit. There is, then, a double circling at work: while we circle story, story circles within us.

II

To gather and draw a reading from such dispersed points of reference is to give attention to the spatial dynamic of reading. Joseph Frank’s essay, ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature,’ sought to challenge the prevalent view that language must be based primarily on some form of narrative sequence, composed of a series of words proceeding through time. While not disputing that time represents, along with space, one of the defining limits of literature in relation to sensuous perception, Frank

²³⁴ So it proves, to give one example, for John’s daughter in ‘Carnie,’ when a ride on a ferris wheel serves to spin her life off its axis, leading to a sexual assault at the hands of Ned, the ferris wheel operator. David Means, ‘Carnie,’ in *The Secret Goldfish* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005) 157-171.

²³⁵ Means, ‘Oklahoma,’ 117.

²³⁶ Ali Smith, ‘All There Is: An Interview About the Short Story,’ *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2010): 70.

observed an intention in certain modernist writers, of both poetry and prose, that the reader ‘apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence’.²³⁷

The idea of spatiality in poetry is easier to come to terms with than the idea of spatiality in prose. Frank traces its emergence in modernist poetic discourse through the example of Eliot, whose early work still holds within it the skeleton of an implied narrative structure: ‘Let us go then, you and I,/ When the evening...’.²³⁸ While ‘Prufrock’ progresses to a series of isolated fragments presenting aspects of emotional dilemma, there remains ‘a perceptible framework around which the seemingly disconnected passages of the poem can be organised’.²³⁹ As Eliot’s aesthetic developed towards *The Waste Land* it is possible, in Frank’s view, to observe how radical his structural transformations have become: ‘syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word groups’.²⁴⁰ The effect is that

instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word groups to the objects or events they symbolize and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity.²⁴¹

The spatiality of prose is more difficult to determine, not least because the reader of prose is ‘led to expect narrative sequence by the deceptive normality of

²³⁷ Joseph Frank, ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature,’ in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1963) 9. Frank’s theory, first published in 1945, anticipated and fed into the development of structuralism, with its gathering together of oppositional signs. While not seeking to deny the link, the structuralist desire to overlook the temporality of reading leads me to focus my analysis through Frank’s theory. Not only that, but being a writer – and emphatically not a structuralist – I am interested in structures not for their own sake, but the ways in which they might be used to enhance and carry meaning.

²³⁸ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936) 13.

²³⁹ Frank, ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature,’ 11.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 12

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

language sequence within the unit of meaning'.²⁴² Nonetheless, Frank sees evidence of spatiality of prose form in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where 'a vast number of references... relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative. These references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole before the book fits together in any meaningful pattern'.²⁴³

For Frank, the modernist move towards spatiality over linearity was a means of representing 'the insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life'.²⁴⁴ By naming his collection of essays *The Widening Gyre*, Frank chooses an image to represent the emotional and intellectual complexes of his spatiality theory. He is also nodding to W. B. Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming', which begins:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.²⁴⁵

The image of the gyre is reminiscent of Means's figure for pain discussed above: 'one of those cuts that open up slowly into the possibilities of their pain, widening from a small point into a cone; this was the kind of cut that gave the fearful sense of being unlimited in the kind of pain it would eventually produce'. That image – and the apparent sentiment of Yeats's poem – receives its spatial echo at the end of the story, in the thoughts of the engineer, for whom 'the world was failing, spinning into something bad and evil, away from what once was firm and hard'.²⁴⁶

Straightaway we have an example of spatiality. The two spiralling figures connect to present a possible reading that exists independently of the narrative's

²⁴² Ibid., 16.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁴⁵ W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming' in *The Major Works* ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 91.

²⁴⁶ David Means, 'Railroad Incident, August 1995,' 16.

time sequence. One interpretation might be that the future is unstable, fractured, radiating ever outward from the solid and painful point of now. In the case of Yeats's poem, we glimpse the central point – the cause of its radiating waves of disruption – in the apocalypse of World War One. In the case of Means's story, the central point, although difficult precisely to identify, is a personal pain.

It is indicative of the way in which trauma – be it psychic, emotional or physical – lies at the heart of Means' fictional universe, the centre around which the rest rotates. When the doctor, in 'The Reaction', driving home with his wife, muses on the chaos of life, the points at which it suddenly breaks apart, he holds 'on to the idea of pain itself as the center of the world, the location of its gravitas'.²⁴⁷ The word 'gravitas' holds much within it: a sense of seriousness, of solemnity, yes, but also the trace of the word 'gravity', that force which draws us in, without which we should surely break apart, keeping us in its orbit, in its possession. Again, there is a double movement – inwards against outwards, forward motion against gravity, pull against push, holding close against letting go.

III

As Cathy Caruth suggests, 'to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event'.²⁴⁸ In Freud's early writing on trauma, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', the traumatic event is often a lost event, something that has been forgotten or not entirely remembered, to which the trauma sufferer returns, gripped by 'the compulsion to repeat' as 'his way of remembering'.²⁴⁹ The idea of return and repetition again implies a circling movement, a restless going back and going over,

²⁴⁷ David Means, 'The Reaction,' in *Assorted Fire Events* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002) 67.

²⁴⁸ Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience,' in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. in Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 4.

²⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through,' in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Philips (London: Penguin Books, 2006) 395.

with the object of integrating the lost event into a series of associative memories. In this way, according to Freud, the traumatic event can be remembered, mastered and so forgotten, left behind.

A story from Means's first collection, 'Two Hearts Times Two,' opens with the following image, a signalled dip back into memory:

He remembers the dark clouds, the way the twister pulled down from the sky, poking, hopping, like a natural appendage, making a direct course through town, as if thinking, "I'll just strike her in the heart, run a full course right down the center of Main Street." A tornado is not a funny thing. He remembers that once he had believed all of that mythic fluff about twisters, the Wizard of Oz journeys and lucky stiffes who stared directly up into that winding swirl that was like the very center of hell itself, and lived to tell about it, to brag about it. The real thing brought no such joy. It came out of nowhere, swinging like an iron pipe, and clubbed the town over the head.²⁵⁰

There are many bones here to pick over, familiar presences on Means's fictional landscape. For one, there is the spiralling image of the tornado itself, spinning out of darkness – out of nowhere – a place beyond recognition, and visiting violence and pain, changing the course of lives. There is also the idea of a traumatic centre – a location of gravity, in both senses of the word.

The focal character, Claude Jacobsen, is a widower, whose wife was killed when the department store in which she worked was blown apart by a tornado. The story deals with the aftermath. The havoc caused by the tornado is mirrored by mental disintegration, as Claude's mind circles back and back again to the traumatic events of the preceding spring: 'Jacobsen thought all about it again, for what certainly was the thousandth time'.²⁵¹ Nonetheless, in all the going back, he can make no sense of it. Because he cannot fully remember it, he cannot satisfactorily fit it into the narrative that leads him to his present. The implication drawn from Freud – that if one cannot remember one cannot forget – and its impact on this story, on

²⁵⁰ David Means, 'Two Hearts Times Two,' in *A Quick Kiss of Redemption* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991) 127.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

Jacobsen, is once again emblematic of a pull-push effect: the dynamic tension between chaos and order, that both keeps things together and ensures their radiation outwards.

In the story, Jacobsen is paired with another widower, Paul Samuels. It is Christmas Day and the two men are wandering alone through the landscape – which still bears the physical signs of its traumatic event – looking for some form of solace while ‘all the good people in the town were safe in their houses’.²⁵² Again, it is worth noticing how the two men stand as representatives of those outside society, marginal figures rendered socially dysfunctional by the separate tragedies that have taken over their lives. A tension exists between them as they orbit one another in a desultory news agency, looking for company and a way to pass the time. Later, out on the street, in kinship, Jacobsen gives Samuels money to buy a coat and, in a gesture that seems like an act of reparation, takes off his scarf and ‘spins the muffler around Samuels’ neck’.²⁵³ A spin to repair what has been unspun, we might think, and yet the imagery of chaos remains:

Both men recalled the funnel that had arrived inland from Lake Michigan and exploded barns all the way, following the two-lane highway – mindfully – and then the flat blueberry farms, rickety fruit stands, and finally, into the town itself. The department store was peeled open like a can from top to bottom. Shirts, blouses, slips, bras, briefs, socks, scattered across the countryside, hanging from maples, washing down the creek, in schoolyards and baseball diamonds.²⁵⁴

The action of the funnel is worth dwelling on, moving from a wide to a narrow opening, its function being to suck up and then cast out, bring together then spin apart, leaving in its chaotic wake the detritus of numberless lives. At the story’s close, however, despite all the circlings of memory – the attempts to repeat and so remember – a gap remains, a structural vortex that cannot be filled: Jacobsen, for all his trying, cannot ‘remember what had killed Samuels’s wife before the tornado had

²⁵² Ibid., 133.

²⁵³ Ibid., 135.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

killed his own wife on that hot humid day'.²⁵⁵ If we cannot remember, we cannot let go. The story, by ending in this way, implies that it will go on for Jacobsen, this circling, spinning further and further outwards, yet still held by the gravity of the trauma he can neither fully remember nor fully forget.

IV

Where else to begin but beneath the dining room table, where she's hiding, dazed and alone, tormented by fear and loneliness, lost to time (it seems), most certainly to be forgotten?²⁵⁶

So begins 'Nebraska'. It could just as well begin: 'Where else to begin but at the end?' Which might equally well – and accurately – be rendered: 'Where else to end but at the beginning?' In fact, the story ends like this:

She would find herself in the basement amid the dusty light from the window wells and the smell of heating oil and the earthen floor, compacted into the corner there, under the old table... she'd feel an urge to spend the rest of eternity there in the dark and the cool... she knew that one way or another she would get back to the hideout and fulfil the vision she had of how this whole thing would come to an end.²⁵⁷

There is a nod towards eternity, a dark space, the idea of visions and their fulfilment. The story has shifted into the conditional register – she *would* find herself in the basement – which implies she is not there yet, that the prescribed end with which the story began, has not yet occurred, that the end lies beyond story, just out of reach. This circling quality has been observed by a number of critics as a feature of storyness. Mary Rohrberger suggests that in the short story an end does more than complete a pattern and effect closure. 'The thing about the short story is that beginning and end make a strange loop: beginning is end and end is also beginning. Epiphany expressed through analogy fuses past, present and future in a moment of

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 136.

²⁵⁶ David Means, 'Nebraska,' in *The Spot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010) 37.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 55-56.

continuous flux.²⁵⁸ In Means, those strange loops are found – yes, at the beginning and the end – but also *within* the story, the way in which his stories often describe a restless revisiting, a desire to return to some aspect of the past in order to understand it or bring it more fully into the present. The effect is destabilising, obfuscatory. Our situation as readers mirrors those of the characters; we are not quite sure where we stand in relation to what has already transpired and what is still to come.

The story, ‘Nebraska,’ in brief, concerns a group of underground terrorists, led by the violent and self-avowedly poetic Byron, preparing for a heist. They are seeking: ‘Monies to finance the bomb-making! Monies to demolish the status quo!’²⁵⁹ The story has four central time units: the days the gang spend in Nebraska, plotting their attack; the drive from Nebraska down to New York State, where the attack will take place; the drive back from the heist; the moment under the table, with which the narrative begins and ends. At the centre of it all there is the point around which the story rotates, a moment in the parking lot of a shopping mall, when Brinks’ staff carry bags of money from the mall to the truck: ‘That space between point and point, through which the bags had to travel; that in itself, of course, was the weak spot, open to human error’.²⁶⁰ Amid the chaos, then, there is order, a plan, almost geometrically laid out, identifying a weak spot and calling for ‘the swiftness of exacting precision’.²⁶¹

Having begun at the end, the story circles back to the actual beginning – the days in Nebraska – when the heist was planned, the act of anticipation thereafter creating a structural oscillation to and from that central moment in the shopping

²⁵⁸ Mary Rohrberger, ‘Origins, Development, Substance and Design of the Short Story,’ 11.

²⁵⁹ Means, ‘Nebraska,’ 41.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

mall. In its final section, the story switches to the future conditional, with the unnamed female protagonist – whose role was to drive the getaway car – having abandoned the heist at its midpoint, driving alone back to the safe house: ‘She would begin to look for the house; she would track it down intuitively’.²⁶² The effect of this is to make the ending contingent, unstable. She is not at the safe house yet; the story is imagining what it would be like if she made it there. It is not an ending, then, so much as an anticipated ending, something that has not yet happened, that is beyond the story’s frame. Nonetheless, it does send us circling back to the beginning, and, looking at it again, we might begin to think that the beginning, which looked like an ending, was in fact a prophecy, an imaginative prolepsis: ‘the vision she had of how this whole thing would come to an end’.²⁶³ It is, to borrow from Rohrberger, a strange loop, indeed.

‘Nebraska’ is punctuated with the circlings back of memory. Under the table, at the end, after the end, at the beginning, and, indeed, in the middle, she feels a breeze, ‘and with the breeze comes a smell from the Hudson that reminds her of summers at Lake George’.²⁶⁴ The memory coalesces into a reverie of her brother, Hank, alive then, but dead now, ‘in a grave, at Arlington, not far from the eternal flame over J.F.K.’²⁶⁵ Later in the story – but earlier in the time scheme – as she flees the parking lot as the heist gets underway, she returns again to childhood, ‘trying to picture Hank in her mind, his boyish face in his uniform, the collar tight up against his neck, and his smile, bright and hopeful, as he tells her not to worry, that he’ll be back in the summer and they’ll go to Lake George together just like the war never

²⁶² Ibid., 55.

²⁶³ Ibid., 56.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

happened'.²⁶⁶ Again, there is pain at the centre, that traumatic nub, the given to which his fiction returns and around which it spins.

V

The connection between spinning and storytelling can be read in the following passage from *Heart of Darkness*:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.²⁶⁷

As Valentine Cunningham emphasises, Conrad here marks a distinction between typical storytelling – ‘for the traditional ends of revelation, of disclosure, the broaching of truths, the opening of secrets and the dispelling of mystery’ – and an atypical modernist aesthetic in which ‘narrative threads will be followable, perhaps, but only with difficulty. The narrative webs, texts, tissues woven here will be otherwise than of old – obscurer, less revealing, more secretive’.²⁶⁸ This is a problem for the reader; the problem for Marlow, the storyteller, is that the story he wants to tell cannot be told: ‘Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation’.²⁶⁹

As we have seen, Means, like Conrad, is a writer unusually interested in storytelling, at the level of both subject and metaphor. I mean this in the sense that his stories often embed or exemplify the problems inherent in accounting for oneself, of telling one’s own story straight. The father in ‘Carnie’, struggling to come to terms

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁶⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007) 4.

²⁶⁸ Valentine Cunningham, ‘Yarn,’ in *Glossalalia: An Alphabet of Critical Keywords* ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 353.

²⁶⁹ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 23.

with his daughter's abduction, reflects: 'You see, to tell the story or even a series of actions would be to make sense of it and to lend it some kind of ordering function in the world'.²⁷⁰ In grappling with this in Means's fiction, there are the obvious and performative examples of 'What I Hope For' and 'The Stories I Used to Write,' stories which directly and playfully approach the troubles inherent in writing fictional narratives. Alongside these, however, there are stories which dramatize the problematics of storytelling within a fictional frame: the difficulty of spinning yarns from so many disparate threads.

'The Junction,' the final story in *The Spot*, fuses together some of the aspects of Means's art already discussed: the sense of circularity, disruptions to linearity, fragmentation – storytelling and its discontents, storytelling and its dysfunctions.

There is first of all the title: 'The Junction'. The junction in this instance is a particular railway junction – the railway, with its lines, its possibility of connection, being another favoured Meansian figure. It is a cross-track 'where the line came down out of Michigan and linked up with the Chicago track'.²⁷¹ This has a metaphorical weight, referencing the way in which Means's stories change track, from point of view to point of view, from narrative line to narrative line, from now to then and back again; from present, to memory, to future.

The story centres on a group of vagrants, who meet at this junction year after year. Between these meetings, the men cross and recross the country – Chicago, Pittsburgh, California – looking for piecemeal work, scavenging for food. When they meet, they sit and talk, swapping stories of their experiences, telling tales. They are aficionados of the storytelling art. At the centre of this group, Lockjaw – so-called on

²⁷⁰ Means, 'Carnie,' 166.

²⁷¹ David Means, 'The Junction' in *The Spot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010) 163.

account of ‘that mind-numbing case of lockjaw he claims he had in Pittsburgh’.²⁷² The word ‘claims,’ here, is significant, alerting us to a questioning both of Lockjaw’s story and of story itself. Likewise, the figurative resonance of Lockjaw’s name, its association with the inability to speak, guides us to consider a blockage or suppression of the narrative sense, the character’s ability to define himself through his story. As we will see, Lockjaw is a man who is indeed denied the opportunity to tell his own story, although not because of lockjaw.²⁷³ With a narratological twist that places us at a further remove from the centre of the story, Means narrates the story not through Lockjaw, but through one of the other men, a member of his audience.

The story opens with a double return, a circling back within a circling back. Not only have the men returned to the junction, but Lockjaw is re-returning, after a satellite scavenging trip, to their camp in the woods, ‘through the weeds with a plate in his hands and a smear of jelly on his lips,’ the remnants, we come to discover, of a cherry pie he found on a window sill.²⁷⁴ Already, at the outset, Lockjaw, despite his name, is talking. He is talking about how he came upon the pie, ‘waiting for him as he expected’; how the man of the house was there, visible through the window, a shotgun at his side. ‘Same son of a bitch who chased me out of there a while back, he explains’.²⁷⁵ Anticipation and retrospection collide – he expects to encounter again what he has encountered in the past – giving the moment of coming upon the pie a curious temporal status. It has a foot both in a notional future and a remembered

²⁷² Ibid., 150.

²⁷³ Charles May has written about the way in which the process of telling one’s own story is frustrated in the short fiction of Raymond Carver. May defends Carver against the common criticism that ‘his characters are inarticulate and insufficiently realised because they seem unable to explain why they do what they do’. In this inadequate inarticulacy, May sees not a flaw but a strength: ‘Writers who know the form well and practise it faithfully are constantly aware of an inherent tension between the desire to tell the story and the frustration that telling will never quite evoke or make the reader ‘see’ what the narrator desires him or her to see’. See Charles E. May, “‘Do you see what I’m saying?’ The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in Raymond Carver,’ *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 31 (2001): 39, 49.

²⁷⁴ Means, ‘The Junction,’ 149.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

past. At this point in his storytelling, Lockjaw pauses, and in the pause the story reveals its levels of orality, of telling and having retold.²⁷⁶ The narrator, speaking for the group, for Lockjaw's audience, describes the scene:

Then he pauses for a minute and we fear – I feel this in the way the other fellows hunch lower, bringing their heels up to the fire – he'll circle all the way back to the beginning of his story again, starting with how he had left this camp – a couple of years back – and hiked several miles to a street.²⁷⁷

This is a story they have been told before, and the idea of circling back, of hearing it again, fills them with dread. It suggests, too, in Lockjaw, a compulsion to repeat, as if the event of this story, provokes in him a kind of neurological saccade, his mind flicking back to something he can neither master nor accurately relate. The teller – in this case, Lockjaw – clearly feels the need to tell his story again, but to tell it better, more accurately. Perhaps, the narrative suggests, this is because he cannot get his own story straight. When he left the camp, a couple of years back, the street 'had seemed very much like the one he'd grown up on, although he wasn't sure because years of drifting on the road had worn the details from his memory'.²⁷⁸ In the dysfunctionality of his life, we see the dysfunctionality of his narrative: absence of clarity shrouds his story in uncertainty regarding its origins. This uncertainty requires, even demands, a repetition and a working through, as Freud would have it, in the attempt to tell the story again: to work out, in Lockjaw's case, the truth of where he is from. The suggestion, then, is that this is a story about a longing both for a place of origin and a return to that place.

On his first visit – two years back – Lockjaw was so overwhelmed by this apparent sense of returning home

a sense so powerful it held him fast and – in his words – made him fearful that he'd find it too much to his liking if he went up to beg a meal. So he went back

²⁷⁶ 'Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn'. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller,' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) 84.

²⁷⁷ Means, 'The Junction,' 149.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

down to the camp with an empty belly and decided to leave well enough alone until, months later, coming through these parts again after a stint of work in Chicago... he decided to hike the six miles into town to take another look, not sure what he was searching for because by that time the initial visit...had become only a vague memory, burned away by drink and travel; aforesaid confession itself attesting to a hole in his story about having worked in Chicago and giving away the fact that he had, more likely, hung on and headed all the way out to the coast for the winter, whiling his time in the warmth, plucking the proverbial fruit directly from the trees and so on and so forth.²⁷⁹

Again, the language is of memory, of forgetting, and the desire to return to a point of origin, lending some sense of fixity, and so value, to the life narrative. As the narrator of the story retells Lockjaw's earlier version of the same story, he picks at it, exposing the flaws in its logic.

It is apparent that there are multiple time schemes at work and these, as the story progresses, become interwoven, overlaid. There is the now of the telling – the first person narrator describing Lockjaw returning through the weeds with his plate. There is the time – two years back – of Lockjaw's first visit to the street that reminds him of home. There is then his second visit to that place (his return), which takes place months after the first visit. It is the second visit – and the events that transpired during it – that motivates Lockjaw to tell the story that his audience is now fearful of hearing again. From this we can assume that at some point, after the second visit and before the now of the telling of this story, there is an additional temporal point – undetermined – at which Lockjaw tells his story for the first time.

This is what Robert Frank describes as the way in which spatial texts 'maintain a continual juxtaposition between aspects of the past and the present so that both are fused in one comprehensive view... distinctions between past and present are wiped out'.²⁸⁰ I'm not so sure that the distinctions are wiped out but the lines, certainly, are blurred: 'You smelled the brook the first time you went up poking

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 150-1.

²⁸⁰ Frank, 'Spatial Form and Modern Literature,' 59.

around, you dumb moron, Lefty said'.²⁸¹ Consequently – as the story goes on to make manifest – there can be no true certainty in the attempt to place things in a narrative line, nor any certainty regarding what is memory and what invention. There is a hint here, too, towards what makes Means distinctive, in Benjaminian terms, as a storyteller. In 'The Storyteller,' Benjamin posits a significant distinction between the 'short story' and storytelling. Spinning off Valéry's claim that 'modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated,' Benjamin goes on to lament:

In point of fact, he has succeeded in abbreviating even storytelling. We have witnessed the evolution of the 'short story', which has removed itself from the oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.²⁸²

In Means's performance of storytelling – the unnamed narrator retelling Lockjaw's telling, while at the same time parsing the story for errors and weak points – we are held at a double distance from the story's centre. Nicholas Royle describes Means's style as not so much telling stories 'as performing them, on the page. They're routines, full of tricks and tricksiness. They're very clever, slick,' before going on to describe them as 'exhausting'.²⁸³ I don't think Royle is wrong – they are exhausting, demanding – but in its performative quality, a story like 'The Junction' returns us to the orality of storytelling – what Benjamin describes as experience 'passed on from mouth to mouth' – hedged around by the contusions of telling, the doubts, the missteps, the things that can't be properly remembered or truthfully narrated.²⁸⁴

VI

²⁸¹ Means, 'The Junction,' 151.

²⁸² Benjamin, 'The Storyteller,' 92.

²⁸³ Nicholas Royle, 'The Spot by David Means' in *Warwick Review*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2010): 120.

²⁸⁴ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller,' 84.

Despite the narrator's wish to interrupt, and so suppress, Lockjaw's retelling of his own story, the narrator retells it himself, only in his own words.

This is the situation: Lockjaw, on his second trip to a house that reminds him of home, needs to tell a good story in order to secure some food from the lady of the house. It is worth dwelling on the levels: the narrator is telling us a story of how Lockjaw told them a story about how he had told the lady of the house a story:

He stood outside the house again... preparing a story for the lady who would appear... I had a whopper ready, he said, and then he paused to let us ponder our own boilerplate beg-tales of woe.²⁸⁵

A boilerplate, in these terms, is a pre-formed template designed to achieve an effect, a story told with a preconceived goal in mind. Lockjaw's boilerplate is a story of hunger and need, of lockjaw and how this had got in the way of his willingness to work. In order for a story to convince – as Lockjaw knows and the narrator reminds us – it is necessary that it provide specific detail, particulars: evidence. In the case of Lockjaw's story, there are two audiences in need of convincing: the woman of the house and his fellows in the clearing:

Then he drove home the particulars – he assured us – going into not only Pittsburgh itself (all that heavy industry), but also saying he had worked at Homestead, pouring hot steel, and then even deeper (maybe this was later, at the table with the entire family, he added quickly, sensing our disbelief) to explain that once a blast furnace was cooked up, it ran for months and you couldn't stop to think because the work was so hard and relentless, pouring ladles and so on and so forth.²⁸⁶

And so on and so forth, indeed. Lockjaw produces tears for the lady of the house, perhaps sensing her disbelief in turn, as she offers him a cup of tea, and still, as he tells his fellows, the house reminds him of something:

I knew the place, you see. The kitchen had a familiar feel, what with the same rooster clock over the stove that I remembered as a boy, you see. Then he tapered off again into silence and we knew he was digging for details. Any case, no matter, he said. At that point I was busy laying out my story, pleading my

²⁸⁵ Means, 'The Junction,' 151.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 152.

case. (We understood that if he had let up talking he might have opened up a place for speculation on the part of the homeowner).²⁸⁷

Evidently, here, we are in the region of Sheherazade, and the need to keep telling stories as a matter of life and death. Lockjaw is telling his story to sympathetic ears; his fellows know how it is, know how

you had to spin out a yarn and keep spinning until the food was in your belly and you were out the door. The story had to be just right and had to begin at your point of origin, building honestly out of a few facts of your life, maybe not the place of birth exactly but somewhere you knew so well you could draw details in a persuasive natural way... an amalgamation of other tales you'd heard... Then you had to weave your needs into your story carefully, placing them in the proper perspective to the bad luck so that it would seem frank & honest & clean hearted.²⁸⁸

The image of yarn here begins to seem like Ariadne's thread that you spin out as you go along in order that you might later find your way back. Herein lies Lockjaw's problem: as the story attests, he doesn't know his point of origin – he can't remember it – so how can he spin his life story out in a way that satisfies? He is the predicament of his own dysfunctional narrative. As Freud suggests, 'in the case of the many forms of obsessional neurosis, forgetting is limited in the main to losing track of connections, misremembering the sequence of events, recalling memories in isolation'.²⁸⁹ The answer – the way back into remembering – in Freud's thesis is through repetition, repetition and working through. It is this that Lockjaw is attempting: through repeating his story he is trying to find a way back home.

And so we come full circle again, to the need in storytelling to spin out a yarn – and in spinning out a yarn the circular motion leads to a line, a piece of yarn, a linearity, telling a straight story, because a story, to convince, has to make some kind of sense. It has to follow well in order, and has to have detail, particularity, the force of truth. Again and again, the narrative returns to this notion of spinning a tale,

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 153.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 154.

²⁸⁹ Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through,' 393.

turning a story out of the specificity of a singular detail, ‘naming a particular junction, the way an interlocking mechanism worked... before swinging back wide to the general natural of your suffering’.²⁹⁰ We are again among gyres, swinging wide, from a central point, a locus of verifiable meaning.

The story shifts to the second person, implicating us as another audience in this method of storytelling, and tells us that ‘you use that location to spin the boilerplate story about the sick old coot’.²⁹¹ And then, ‘you shake your head and mention God’s will, fate, Providence, luck, as the idea settles across the table – hopefully, if you’ve spun the yarn correctly – that hobos do indeed serve a function in God’s universe’.²⁹² Again, the suggestion is that being able to tell your own story correctly allows you to establish a place and a function in the world. If the story fails to convince, ‘if the point isn’t taken, you back track again’.²⁹³ You circle back, again and again, going over the same ground, until the story is accepted and your place in the world is secure.

Lockjaw’s audience is able to acknowledge his accomplishments: ‘When Lockjaw told this part of the story, the men by the fire nodded with appreciation because he was spinning it all out nicely’.²⁹⁴ Indeed he is, and the men ‘leaned intently and listened to him because the story had taken a turn we hadn’t expected’.²⁹⁵

Just as Lockjaw’s story seems to be convincing the lady of the house, the man of the house becomes doubtful. He goes upstairs to get a gun, to chase Lockjaw off the property. As he does so, the lady begins to cut Lockjaw a piece of pie.

²⁹⁰ Means, ‘The Junction,’ 155.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid., 156.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 158.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 161.

Right then I felt it and knew it and was sure of it, he said. I was sure that she was my mother and had somehow forgotten me, or lost whatever she had of her ability to recognize me... I would've asked her to confirm my premonition if the old man hadn't come down and chased me clean out of there before I could even have a bite.²⁹⁶

In this move, Lockjaw is denied confirmation of his origins. He cannot gain access to the truth of his own life narrative, whether it is his mother or not, whether he knows where he comes from, or not. At this point in his original telling, Lockjaw breaks down and begins to weep. He can say no more. For his audience, however, this is not a moment for sympathy or understanding: 'He was faking it, Hank said later. He was pulling out his usual trump card. He had me up until that point. Then his story fell apart'.²⁹⁷ *Then his story fell apart.* The story doesn't make sense; it doesn't work; it is not believed. At the end, where are we? Back at the beginning:

Like I said before, he had the pie on his face and a plate in his hand and he's already talking, speaking through the crumbs and directly to our hunger, starting in on it again, and when he comes to the smell of the brook, we interrupt only to make sure he doesn't go back over the story from the beginning again.²⁹⁸

The story performs its strange loop, bringing us back to where we started. In doing so it renders the heart of the story a structural void, suspending time: nothing has happened, or it has all happened in a blink, not of the eye, but in the imagination of someone else. Lockjaw still hasn't told his story and we still haven't heard it and so, like him, we cannot make sense of it. Bergson's delineation of 'clock time' has been suspended and into the void enters 'real time,' the flux of the mind's structuring activity, of anticipation and retrospection.²⁹⁹ This, at the end of the story, is both our

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 162.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 163-5.

²⁹⁹ Mary Rohrberger writes of Bergson's distinction between modes of time as a model for the distinction between the novel and the short story, suggesting that clock, or mechanical time, is more suited to the novel, whereas real time, or *durée* 'seems perfectly fitted to the short story. Synchronicity defines the short story's base. Analogy not only objectifies the moment in space by stopping the clock between ticks but also connects past and future by encompassing successive states, each of which follows and contains that which precedes it'. See: Rohrberger, 'Origins, Development, Substance, and Design of the Short Story,' 8.

task and our fate, to go on structuring the story, to keep retelling it, to ourselves, in the afterlife of contemplation.

AFTERWORD: Into the Postnarrational

I

We are at the end. Although, in fact, we are also beyond the end, looking back on what has gone before. Throughout the essay to this point, I have made repeated mention of the way in which Means's stories bring into play an afterlife, a postnarrational existence. On each occasion I have used Trussler's term, I have asked myself why I think this quality is important, why it matters – because I do think it is important, it does matter. I'm not sure that I know the answer. Then again, perhaps it's actually very simple. I have a favourite quotation on the short story. It comes from William Maxwell, the legendary figure who presided over the *New Yorker* fiction desk from 1936-75. Not only was he a wonderful editor, but he was a wonderful writer. In the preface to an edition of his collected stories, he has this to say:

I think it is generally agreed that stories read better one at a time. They need air around them. And they need thinking about, since they tend to have both an explicit and an un-spelled-out meaning.³⁰⁰

Really, it is that simple. 'They need air around them'. Perhaps, speaking selfishly, this is the single most valuable lesson to be drawn from this process, the signal thing that has worked its way into my own fiction. Short stories need air around them. Repeat. Short stories need air around them. David Means's stories – for all their internal density, their hyper-reality, that 'grand hypotactic inclusiveness' that Daniel Soar refers to – most certainly have air around them. The air, of course, is the postnarrational. It is difficult to talk about, to write about, because, in a fundamental way, it has no existence. The postnarrational, as Timothy Clark implies, is a blind

³⁰⁰ William Maxwell, preface to *All the Days and Nights: The Collected Stories* (London: Harvill Press, 1997) x.

space: the dark reaches of an outer universe. Nothing is written down in the postnarrational: it is beyond text, made only of air.

II

In ‘The Storyteller’, Walter Benjamin writes of the limit of the ending for the novelist, a point ‘at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing "Finis"’. By contrast, he observes that ‘there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate.’³⁰¹ In this afterword, I want to suggest that narrative dysfunctionality, manifested as various types of resistance to coherence, implies an act of interpretative generosity on the part of the author. To put it another way, a narrative is an accretion of moments concretized in words, sentences and paragraphs. In what I term its functional state it imposes a retrospective fixity on those moments, a place in a sequential hierarchy that leads to revelation and denies them their original openness. The novel, by dint of its length, does this more than the story, achieving its power through a cumulative orchestration of control, which leads to that Benjaminian sense of ‘finis’. Means’s work achieves its power – despite critical claims and desires for formal unity – by surrendering control, projecting its often fragmentary details into a hermeneutically open postnarrational future, leaving us caught, as Means puts it in ‘Reading Chekhov’, ‘in the quaint paradoxical dynamic of knowing and not knowing’.³⁰²

In this way, Means’s dysfunctions play knowingly with ideas of closure, our yearning for it, and the way in which a frustration of it can bring about a crisis of sense-making that is – insofar as we are sense-making beings – a bringer of discomfort. Means’s stories work hard to draw you in, the language directing you to

³⁰¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999) 99.

³⁰² David Means, ‘Reading Chekhov,’ in *The Spot* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010) 78.

focus tightly on a spot – the blind spot, the narrative occlusion, the centre of pain, the misremembered trauma – which then vanishes, zipping away, conducting you after it and leaving you alone to contemplate it in the blackness at the end of the text. Means's stories draw you in and then they fling you out.

In some measure, then, they are approaches to the end and, by extension, approaches towards death. Garrett Stewart writes: 'In the life outside of novels, death often invites and defies imagination at once, terrifies and refutes our sense of identity and of the mortal language we would use to phrase its finish'.³⁰³ Death, in these terms, is the ultimate blind spot, the blackness in the face of which language and stories can only fail. And yet, it seems to me that one of the signal effects of Means's narrative dysfunctions – their discontinuities of narrative line, their gyres, rotations and circlings back – is that they bring the afterlife into play and their legacy, as T. J. Clark suggests, persists like an after image. In this way, Means's stories, at their ends, ask us to imagine their continuation.

This resistance to closure might suggest that meaning, for Means, plays a secondary role to the act of tale-telling; or that tale-telling, no matter how inchoate, rudimentary or indeed unspeakable, is what we have as consolation in meaning's absence. Gabriel Josipovici suggests that:

principles of fragmentation and discontinuity, of repetition and spiralling... do not reveal anything so banal as the final disintegration of the Western Imagination. What they perhaps reveal is the disintegration of a notion of Truth, and of the power of the intellect alone to discover that truth and embody it in works of art, which men had come to take for granted in the centuries following the Renaissance. The fragmented or spiralling work denies us the comfort of finding a centre, a single meaning, a speakable truth, either in works of art or in the world. In its stead it gives us back a sense of the potential of each moment, each word, each gesture and each event, and acknowledges the centrality of the processes of creation and expression in all our lives.³⁰⁴

³⁰³ Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 3.

³⁰⁴ Josipovici, 'Linearity and Fragmentation,' in *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1987) 138.

Means's dysfunctions – his resistances at the level of both structure and subject – argue powerfully with our sense-making instincts, our desire for a speakable truth. In doing so what they deliver is not a single, intelligible meaning to be carried away – a kernel of truth, easily packaged – but an experience of the thoughtfulness that goes into all acts of storytelling, whether they come together or not. Stories like Means's disturb the critical orthodoxy that surrounds formal study of the short story, which suggests that, in ending, the form must in some way satisfy the 'human impetus for closure'.³⁰⁵ While not disputing the orthodoxy entirely – every text, however open or inconclusive, must have an ending, which, by dint of its being there, at the end, takes on a certain significance – I do believe there is a particular value in Means's resistance to that impetus.

III

In some way, this attitude cleaves with much of the theoretical work associated with deconstruction. Let's concede a general point about a deconstructive reading: the goal of closure, the single interpretation, is impossible; instead, we should accept either indeterminacy or undecidability. Like much of the work that followed in its wake, Derrida's opening salvo, 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences,' manifests a resistance to the 'transcendental signified,' the great fallacy of Western metaphysics that idealises unity. In its place, he emphasises both the play of language and the play of life: 'the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active

³⁰⁵ Susan Lohafer, *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press) 98.

interpretation'.³⁰⁶ Often, the emphasis of play falls on language systems, but there is also the play of imagination: when story ends, what are we going to do with what is left? The paradox inherent in this form of play is beautifully captured by Maurice Blanchot, who writes in *The Infinite Conversation* of 'the illusion that there is still questioning to be done when there is nothing left to be said'. Nonetheless, Blanchot goes on to maintain that such questioning is 'the most profound, because it can only be formulated or thought when everything else – the whole – has been thought.'³⁰⁷ When the story has nothing else to say, its trace remains and continues to speak. The afterlives of Means's stories teem with imaginative life: possible narrative continuations veer off in all directions, textual conundrums hang there, waiting for resolution that will never come: What did happen to the blind man? Whose idea was it to crucify Sammy? Was it Lockjaw's mother?

Do the answers matter? Almost certainly not, but it is in the play of possibilities that we are given access to the experience of thoughtfulness, of thinking things through, for no end other than enjoyment.

IV

Chekhov's 'Lady with a Dog' famously 'ends' with the following realisation, for both characters and readers:

And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long road before them, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences,' in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood (London: Pearson Education, 2008) 223.

³⁰⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 16-17.

³⁰⁸ Anton Chekhov, 'The Lady with the Dog,' in *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Granta Publications, 1999) 362.

Means pulls off a similar ending in ‘The River in Egypt’, which centres on the father of a sick son. As they drive away from the hospital, the son in the backseat, the narrative tells us: ‘But for now, as he entered the town on a beautiful day, the diagnosis was somewhere off in the remote future... “Are we home? Are we home now, Dad?”³⁰⁹

The proposition of a question takes us back both to Woolf on Chekhov and to Kermode. If, as Kermode suggests, the endings of plots – and the concordance they show with the events that precede them – constitute a fundamental aspect of human nature, a way of making sense of the world, what are we to make of contemporary fictions like Means’s which resist our drive for the end? The hermeneutical implications of Means’s resistance to such comfort might indeed be found as the cause of the common complaint that the short story is a neglected literary form. On the one hand, this is because it denies the very thing that readers want. However, I suggest that this holding back, rather than being ludic obstructionism, implies an act of interpretative generosity on the part of the author. Means’s work projects into a hermeneutically open post-narrational future, leaving us poised, as we often are in our encounters with the real, between knowing and not knowing. While it is not a place that we, as readers, like to be, nonetheless, the imaginative gift is in our hands. As Shestov is reputed to have said of Chekhov: ‘His work murmurs a quiet “I don’t know” to every problem.’³¹⁰ The unspoken corollary of which statement is: “What do you think?”



³⁰⁹ David Means, ‘A River in Egypt,’ in *The Spot* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc, 2010) 36.

³¹⁰ Quoted in James Wood, ‘What Chekhov Meant by Life,’ in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999) 86.

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