Designing Suspense

I. Worst-Case Scenarios

I'm always talking about mapmaking, blueprinting, planning out a story before beginning it. People seem to find this either upsetting—"You take the fun out of writing!"—or perplexing—"How do you graph a story? What is a beat sheet? When do certain actions or emotional gateways need to occur?"

Yes, they're right: nothing *needs* to happen, but some things commonly do. There are no rules, but there are "rules," certain foundational truths you should understand and master before experimenting beyond them or flouting them altogether. Know these "rules" before you break them. Literary writers will often dismiss anything that even vaguely resembles a prescription, which strikes me as both cavalier and negligent.

Consider this: Picasso trained in realism before he shattered our way of seeing. Patricia Smith can rock a sonnet or villanelle as well as experiment with free verse. Seth MacFarlane is an accomplished classical pianist who can also write crass, wandering comedic ballads. Can you say the same? Can you write something that is scene-driven and as tightly fitted as a LEGO castle and then turn around and write something masterfully nonlinear that artfully employs summary? Or are you exclusively "artful" because it's easier to excuse your sloppiness as purposeful? "Oh, the fact that nothing happened in my story? That's because I was trying to

capture the nothingness of the modern condition." Uh-huh. Sure. Good luck. Beckett's already got that covered.

Me, I'm a fan of the woodworker who can carve a badass eagle out of driftwood *and* build a solid-ass rocking chair.

Books and movies share many characteristics, but because film structure is usually tidier, the screen is sometimes easier to study when it comes to tracking and comprehending the standard beats of a narrative. Humans all have the same basic design—femur here, liver there—and yet we're all such a bunch of different goonies. Despite a shared anatomical composition, people are as different from each other as Cher and Muhammad Ali. In the same way, screenplays—which are far more rigid in their structure than novels—share the same design, and yet the results are as varied as *The Princess Bride* and *The Terminator, Caddyshack,* and *Gone with the Wind.*

Characters need a higher-order goal. This determines the course of the narrative. Find the treasure; win the big game; stop the zombie virus from spreading. Most writers seem to get this, but when I ask them to figure out their ending before they begin, they waffle or panic. This is the target your arrow will hasten toward. Every paragraph, every chapter will be written in pursuit of it. And even if you do know your ending, that leaves a lot of intimidating white space to fill up.

Here is another, less common juncture to consider: the worst-case scenario. If you know your higher-order goal, and if you know your characters' weaknesses, the calculus isn't complicated.

What does Indiana Jones want in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? The ark, of course. That's what the men in the suits charge him with finding. His central goal is its acquisition. Now, what is Indiana Jones afraid of, besides losing the ark to Belloq and the Nazis? Snakes. We know this from the beginning, when he climbs into the single-engine hydroplane and discovers a python curled up beneath his seat.

What, then, is his worst-case scenario? The ark's secret location is a chamber swarming with thousands of asps. Jones and Sallah

enter through the ceiling, throwing down a rope, descending into the dark. With a torch Jones waves away the spitting snakes. He is sweating, whimpering, wide-eyed with fear. The ark gives off a golden glow when they lift it from a sarcophagus and then hoist it through the hole in the ceiling. It is then, when the ark vanishes from sight, that the Nazis appear, smiling down on Jones and sealing him inside.

He has lost the ark—and he might lose his life to the thing he fears more than a firing squad: "Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?" Worst-case scenario: check.

Angela Carter does something similar in her short story "The Bloody Chamber," a lush, disturbing revisionist fairy tale. On the very first page, we discover what our character fears—not a snake, but an empty purse. She has married a Marquis, the "richest man in France," abandoning her single mother and banishing "the spectre of poverty from its habitual place at our meagre table." Her mother presses her, worries over her, asks her if this is really what she wants. Her daughter assures her it is, even as she worries about the face of her husband: "And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask."

His engagement ring is a "bad luck" opal. Everywhere she goes in the castle, there are "funereal lilies." He makes her wear a "choker" made of rubies "bright as arterial blood," and kisses it before he kisses her lips the first time he beds her (they do not "make love"; that's for certain). Oh yeah, and I forgot to mention: he was married three times previously, to women who presumably died but whose bodies were never discovered. Despite all this, early on she hopes that he might love her and care—to join his "beautiful gallery of women"—despite her being a "poor widow's child with

my mouse-coloured hair that still bore the kinks of the plaits from which it had so recently been freed, my bony hips, my nervous, pianist's fingers."

Her greed—her desire for a pampered life—has led her to this doomed marriage. The worst-case scenario is no surprise: she discovers a room, down a cobwebbed hallway in the castle, full of instruments of torture, including an iron maiden in which resides the fresh corpse of his previous wife.

Our narrator has ignored her mother's warnings—and she has ignored her heart—and though the Marquis's attention at first makes her feel special, beautiful, she comes to realize it is her innocence and vulnerability he finds so appealing. That is why he calls her "baby." That is why he laughs with relish when she startles at opening a slim volume full of sexual illustrations. That is why he delights when he strips her naked before a dozen mirrors and she trembles in response.

At first she believes he has saved her life, when in fact the marriage has doomed her. She recognizes this as the juncture of the second and third acts, after he discovers she has entered his bloody chamber—and before she and the blind piano tuner will attempt to escape the husband's wrath. Ultimately it is her mother who saves her. Astride a horse, wielding her late husband's revolver, firing it into the Marquis's forehead with the same accuracy she used to dispose of a tiger long ago (all of this set up on the first page).

With lovely symmetry, the very person our narrator hoped to escape in the beginning saves her in the end. The opening anticipates the ending. And the worst-case scenario is not only the hinge between them—it's also the very thing that gives the story resonance. As in life, it's difficult to appreciate success without first experiencing failure.

Here's an exercise for you. Start with reality. Come up with a moment when you really, really wanted something. Could be you wanted to land a job or could be you wanted to quit a job. Could be you wanted a divorce or a proposal. Could be you wanted a cancer-free future after a nasty diagnosis. Recall that moment. Then inject it with a healthy dose of imagination. What is the worst-case scenario for this character? (Not you, not anymore, since now we're dealing with somebody in a story.)

So let's say a couple really wants a kid. They try for two years. Tirelessly hurling themselves into bed, studying their diet, giving up alcohol, paying attention to ovulation cycles—but it never happens. Then they throw down a big wad of cash for in vitro fertilization—and still, sadly, nothing. They make the decision to adopt.

Worst-case scenario? The kid is a nightmare. Maybe they adopt a nine-year-old from Russia who is malnourished and abused, so he has physical and emotional issues. He trashes the house, bites anyone who gets near him, pisses his way through five mattresses. All they wanted was a child. They thought it would consummate their love, make their marriage complete. Now that they have a child, their relationship is on the skids. They decide to give the kid up.

If you're a short-story writer, maybe you leave us soon after this, closing with some ambiguous darkness. Don't do this—it's too Hallmarky—but imagine our story ending with the boy looking pathetically pale and small in the rear window of a car as it pulls away. You'd write some better version of that because people who read short stories love endings that make them want to gargle with Drano or nosedive off a skyscraper.

But if you're writing a novel or a memoir or a screenplay, your audience will usually hope for a gladder, luckier closure. Indiana Jones will escape the chamber of snakes and retrieve the ark. Bilbo Baggins will overcome Smaug the terrible and return the Lonely Mountain to the dwarves and hike home to the Shire. The Bad News Bears or the Mighty Ducks will overcome their star player's injury and will rack up (barely) enough points to win, because even though they suck, they have heart!

And maybe this couple will end up keeping the child after all

(after some scenario, heart-bruised with sentiment, that cements the possibility of their happy hand-holding togetherness).

This moment almost always comes, in long-form narratives, at the juncture of the second and third acts. Call it the rock-bottom moment, the dark night of the soul, whatever. Your character will be ready to give up—before they rally and enter the final act, swinging. If you know the worst-case scenario, then you know its placement, so you know one of the brighter stars in the narrative constellation.

From here, if you're outlining, it's simply a matter of reverse engineering.

You've heard before that a story is about a series of battles, with the biggest battle of all waiting for us at the end. But here's another way to think about it: as a series of failures leading toward the biggest failure of all (from which redemption is possible and success appreciated).

The shark starts killing people in *Jaws*. Chief Brody wants to keep the island safe. What's the first failure? He tries to shut the beaches down. The mayor opposes him. It's tourist season, after all. So Brody climbs the lifeguard tower and glasses the water with his binoculars, hoping to watch over everyone, warn them out of the waves if he spots a threat. He does. And everyone crashes onto the beach in open-mouthed panic. But he was wrong—it isn't the shark—it's bluefish, just a school of bluefish. Now he looks like a fool. So he pulls back from his nannying of the beachgoers. What happens then? A kid gets killed. What happens then? Boats take to the ocean, hoping to kill the monster, and yes, they catch a shark, but no, the bite marks don't match up. One thing leads to the next thing, everything a failure, until Brody is compelled to charter a vessel (despite his fear of the water) and hunt down the fish himself (and even then he fails and fails and fails better).

In screenwriting, a *beat* refers to an action and a reaction. I've just listed off a chain of beats linked by failure. Check out a more microscopic version of this in Lydia Davis's "The Outing":

> An outburst of anger near the road, a refusal to speak on the path, a silence in the pine woods, a silence across the old railroad bridge, an attempt to be friendly in the water, a refusal to end the argument on the flat stones, a cry of anger on the steep bank of dirt, a weeping among the bushes.

I don't know whether to call this a short story or a poem, but it reads to me like a beat sheet, a narrative stripped down to its essentials. And because it is short (and literary), it ends with sad ambiguity, the equivalent of our Russian orphan's pale face in the car window.

Whether we're talking about Steven Spielberg or Lydia Davis, the same narrative rhythm applies: action, reaction, action, reaction, action, reaction, many of these scenarios erupting from the character's botched response to an incident (and the botched responses to all trouble that erupts thereafter). In this way we are hurried toward the final showdown. This is the power of *negative thinking*, an alternate way to regulate the ripple effect of a casual narrative.

Samurai are said to have spent hours every day imagining all the things that might go wrong in battle. A feint, a duck, a broken sword, a severed limb, someone tripping, someone screaming, someone attacking from behind. Then they would try to imagine a way out of the situation. This helped them stay cool when they fought. They knew how to respond to muddy terrain, a gouged eye, a five-on-one fight, because they had already experienced such obstacles a thousand times over. Know your worst-case scenario and you know the way of the samurai—a clear-eyed method of negotiating the gauntlet of storytelling trouble.

II. The Dance of the Flaming Chain Saws

Every now and then a book catches fire. Everyone is reading it, talking about it: *The Da Vinci Code, The Kite Runner, Life of Pi, Fifty Shades of Grey, Wild.* For a good few years, Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the*

Dragon Tattoo was that book. I'd wander through an airport and spot hundreds of copies on every concourse, the fluorescent-yellow cover glowing in everyone's hands.

I wanted to understand its popularity—and I wanted to figure out how a book 672 pages long could seem so compulsively readable. So I read it in a flash, and then I read it again, this time with a pen and a yellow legal tablet, outlining the structure. I paid particular attention to trouble. Emotional, physical, financial, familial, and professional trouble. Mikael Blomkvist's reputation has been slandered—he's experiencing legal and financial issues—he's sleeping with a married woman—he's on the rocks with his daughter—he's battling isolation and the elements on a cold northern island—he's chasing down a labyrinthine mystery—his life is in danger—and on and on. His point of view is balanced out by Lisbeth Salander's. She is weighed down by troubles of her own and eventually their story lines thread together when they become lovers, partners.

I began to color-code the major problems the characters faced—in blue, black, red, green, yellow, pink, purple—and to track page numbers. Larsson would introduce a blue problem on page 25, return to it on 78, 169, 240, 381, and so on, each time ratcheting up the tension and complicating things further. Interspersed with the blue problems were red problems, pink problems, a kaleidoscope of trouble, ever-changing.

I have come to call these flaming chain saws. Your success as a storyteller has to do with your ability to juggle them. Every time the flaming chain saws pass through your hands, they gain speed, become more perilous, until at last they are extinguished.

The more characters you have, the bigger the book, the more flaming chain saws. Let's say the average novel has seven. One might be romantic (somebody chasing somebody for a date, a kiss, a relationship), another might be financial or professional (somebody getting fired or hunting for a promotion or hoping to keep their bakery afloat), another familial (a divorce is imminent; a child is getting into trouble at school), another physical (somebody can't stop eating or blows out a knee or gets diagnosed with cancer).

I wrote four failed novels before I finally figured out the long form. I cannot list off all the reasons these manuscripts turned to dust in my hands, but one of my major errors was this: I treated chapters like short stories, introducing and resolving trouble in fifteen pages. I guess my arms got tired. I guess I wasn't much of a juggler. I guess my flaming chain saws ran out of gas too quickly.

The containment, the stand-aloneness of my chapters, gave my books a stop-start quality that destroyed any sense of momentum. Take a look at any novel—how about *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H. G. Wells—and you can see how the chapters build toward a point of tension and then cut away. Chapter one ends with our sick, starved narrator floating in a dingy after eight days at sea! Chapter two ends with the mystery of what waits on the deck of the schooner that rescues him! Chapter three ends with an argument between the doctor and the captain! Chapter four ends with the appearance of the doctor's hideously deformed assistant (who gives our narrator nightmares)! Chapter five ends with the captain throwing our narrator off the ship! If you think about it, isn't there always an exclamation mark hidden in the white space? It's the equivalent of the commercial break.

I'm not the first to say that this is the golden era of television. HBO, Showtime, AMC, and FX are all airing episodes that don't stand alone, but build a narrative throughout the season, cumulative stories that track like novels. Study their scripts and you'll shortcut your way to an outline, the equivalent of my legal-tablet study of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.* Oftentimes, after watching an episode of *The Sopranos, The Wire, Game of Thrones, Mad Men, Breaking Bad,* or *Orange Is the New Black,* I'll read the script and slash through it with highlighters, feather it with sticky notes, paying particular attention to the way the showrunners manage trouble—through each act—through each episode—through each season.

When sketching out your early plans for a book or when revising the draft of a manuscript, do the same. Identify the flaming chain saws and make sure your hands and pages are busy with the constant rotating threat of them.

III. Mapmaking

Sometimes I follow my own advice. Let me tour you through an architectural study of one of my novels. In *The Dead Lands,* my post-apocalyptic reimagining of the Lewis and Clark saga, a super flu and a nuclear Armageddon have made a husk of the world. The Sanctuary—the fortified remains of downtown St. Louis—believes itself the last outpost of America, the flag carrying a single star. Fearmongering leaders keep the citizens cowed and safe, but a rebellion is stirring. Then one day a rider (my Sacagawea character) appears out of the wastelands, sharing news of water, civilization, the promise of the West. And so a band of rebels, led by Lewis Meriwether and Mina Clark, head off with the hope of expanding their infant nation.

I've always been interested in fishbowl scenarios. Stephen King plays with them often—in *Under the Dome, The Mist, The Langoliers, Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption, The Green Mile.* An invisible dome appears over a town, a mist full of monsters oozes across the world, a caged door rattles shut and a key turns. The characters are trapped, the pressure is on, and certain traits end up magnified by the stress of the situation. Lust, love, courage, murderous rage, loyalty, religious fanaticism—they all heighten and come crashing together in one wild social experiment.

This is how I was thinking of the Sanctuary. As a prison like Shawshank. One the characters are born into and must escape if they're ever really going to transcend the limitations of their existence, to grow up as individuals and as a country.

I also love quest stories. *The Road, The Hobbit, Heart of Darkness, True Grit.* But they're extremely difficult to write well. Because the

straight line—get the character from here to there, with various obstacles to overcome—often results in an episodic quality that feels redundant and doesn't contribute to momentum.

In *The Dead Lands,* I was trying to compound two narrative designs I admire, to create something complicated and hopefully new. Some of my characters are on a quest, moving from point A to point B. But by flashing back and forth between the Sanctuary and the journey west, I'm able to enhance suspense (by leaving the reader hanging with every chapter break) and to contrast the terrors and hopes of two very different worlds. The more time we spend in the Sanctuary, the more we understand why the perilous escape from it is so necessary.

Because I have two stories threaded together, I have two higher-order goals, which means I also have two worst-case scenarios. The Lewis and Clark expedition wants to make it to the Pacific (a concrete destination) and in doing so reunite the states (an abstract hope). When they arrive in Oregon, they discover a rising darkness. The very place they hoped would save the world may in fact ruin what little remains of it. Not only that, but the expedition has fallen apart due to betrayals among its members. Unity, on two different levels, has splintered. All is lost.

Then there is the Sanctuary, where unrest stirs and the administration punishes any who question its imperialistic politics. The wells are breaking down. The water is running out. And two young lovers (their relationship a secret) are doing their best to overthrow the mayor and bring about change. I'm afraid I had to kill one of them (and crush the rebellion). I had to make it seem as though the mayor had won—worst-case scenario—in order for him to ultimately lose.

The flaming chain saws are legion. The danger of radiation cycles in and out of the novel (not just its poisoning effects, but its mutating influence). So does heat (specifically as it relates to the lack of water, which affects the people of the Sanctuary and Lewis and Clark on their quest). Love is found and love is lost. Some struggle

with depression and others with rage. Familial loyalties are tested. Friends are deceived. My Sacagawea character has a terrible secret—which I reveal in parcels—that clues us in to the horror that awaits them out west. The expedition is pursued by an enemy from the Sanctuary whose loyalties supposedly shift, but there remains the question of whether they can trust him. Lewis struggles with addiction. Clark struggles with the terrible knowledge that she killed Lewis's ailing mother in order to get him to agree to leave (a secret that, of course, will eventually be exposed). I could go on. Every one of these elements I keep in a rotation, alternating the tension, making you wonder about one while I jerk your attention toward another.

There's something horribly manipulative about all of this. Here I am—talking analytically about worst-case scenarios and juggling trouble, mapping out the embattled terrain of novels and comics and screenplays—but when you get right down to it, I'm suggesting that the best way to mess with the head of your reader is to strategize the delivery of bad news.

Modulation
The Art of the Reversal

I feel about novels as I feel about tattoos: you need to think about them for a good long time before you commit to the ink. Otherwise, in your drunken rush, you might end up with the equivalent of Yosemite Sam on your ass. I typically brainstorm for an entire year before I touch the keyboard. The previous owner of my house was a hobby photographer and he used my office closet as a darkroom. It's fitting, I suppose, given my disposition, that I use the darkroom as a playground for ideas, my nightmare factory. At any given moment I might be toying with five different story concepts, and I assign each a different section of the darkroom. I tack up articles torn from newspapers and magazines, interviews I've conducted, photos, paintings, anything that might inform the story. Every morning, before I sit down to hammer, I spend a little time under the red light, drinking my coffee and scribbling down a few more thoughts.

I rip a long sheet of paper off my kids' Melissa & Doug art easel, and I tape it up and begin sketching out characters. I mean this literally. I often draw them. Eyes that squint even with no sun. A nose as sharp as a quill. A mossy beard that tumbles down a chest. Then I'll begin to construct a kind of Wikipedia entry, figuring out their histories. Things get really interesting when I figure out what my characters want. Because when I know what they *want*, I can set obstacles in the way of that desire, and these are the first stirrings of plot.

A thread reaches across the sheet of paper—a story thread—and then another and then another, one for each character, often a tangle of them since I tend toward ensemble narratives. All of this is written in pencil, of course, because so many things will change. And then, on top of it all, I begin to map out what looks like a cardiogram or the lines made by a seismograph, what I call a suspense-o-meter.

This registers the peaks and valleys of the narrative, the high-volume action sequences and the low-volume moments of repose, both necessary. By blueprinting this, I can step back and study the story as a whole. I'll see that I have a meditative scene (maybe a walk in the woods) followed by a scene in which the characters hash something out (maybe over dinner), and I'll recognize the narrative lag. Or I'll see four action sequences set one right behind the other—exploding helicopter, exploding car, exploding train, exploding elephant—and I'll recognize that my reader will grow numb to the pyrotechnics unless I spread them out. So I move scenes around, strategizing their placement as part of the larger orchestration of emotion.

A cardiograph, a seismograph, a suspense-o-meter, a soundboard. However you want to think about balance, modulation, expansion and contraction, the variation of style and content so that you might best manipulate your reader into feeling.

I'm bad about favorites. I have so many of them. If you ask me for a favorite food, I might say steak or pizza or pancakes or chicken tikka masala or Culver's Deluxe Butterburger or the #57 at the Thai restaurant down the road. If you ask me for a favorite movie, depending on my mood I might say *The Godfather* or I might say *The Empire Strikes Back;* I might say *Rocky* or I might say *Rocky IV.* I will probably say *Jaws* (a rare example of a film adaptation that's superior to the novel). I could teach *any* craft lesson, *everything* about the art of storytelling, by picking apart *Jaws.* I'll spare you that rant, but I will gush about my favorite scene from the film.

After a long day on the water, the men—Quint (Robert Shaw), Brody (Roy Scheider), Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss)—have retired to the belly of the boat. In the dim light, they're drinking whiskey and trading scar stories. One came from a moray eel. Another came from a thresher shark. Another came from an arm-wrestling contest in a San Francisco bar. Hooper points to his chest and makes a crack about how Mary Ellen Moffat broke his heart. They're laughing, pounding the table, pouring and toasting more whiskey—until Brody asks, "What about that one?"

He's talking about the scar on Quint's forearm, once a tattoo. Quint puts a hand over it, as if to muffle the question. "I got that removed," he says.

But the men press him—and he unleashes one of the great monologues in film history, revealing that he was onboard the USS *Indianapolis:*

> Japanese submarine slammed two torpedoes into our side, Chief. It was coming back from the island of Tinian to Leyte, just delivered the bomb. The Hiroshima bomb. Eleven hundred men went into the water. Vessel went down in twelve minutes. Didn't see the first shark for about a half an hour. Tiger. Thirteen-footer. You know how you know that when you're in the water, Chief? You tell by looking from the dorsal to the tail. What we didn't know . . . was our bomb mission had been so secret, no distress signal had been sent. They didn't even list us overdue for a week. Very first light, Chief. The sharks come cruising. So we formed ourselves into tight groups. You know it's . . . kind of like old squares in battle, like you see on a calendar, like the Battle of Waterloo. And the idea was, the shark comes to the nearest man, and that man, he'd start pounding and hollering and screaming, and sometimes the shark would go away. Sometimes he wouldn't go away. Sometimes that shark, he looks right into you. Right

> into your eyes. You know the thing about a shark, he's got . . . lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eyes. When he comes at you, doesn't seem to be living. Until he bites you, and those black eyes roll over white. And then—ah, then you hear that terrible high-pitch screaming, and the ocean turns red, and in spite of all the pounding and the hollering, they all come in and . . . rip you to pieces.

The monologue continues—as he details the days passing, the hundreds of men lost, the thousands of sharks converging, a body bitten in half and bobbing like a top, their eventual rescue. Call up the speech on YouTube, or, better yet, make a bowl of popcorn and screen the film for the full effect. It's more than Robert Shaw's slurred, deep-throated delivery; it's more than the brute power of the story; it's more than the lap of the water and the creak of the ship giving way to sinister violins that makes this scene work. It's the timing; it's the placement alongside a moment of laughter and face-splitting grins. We're vulnerable to the terror because we don't see it coming. Steven Spielberg understands the art of the reversal. He gives his audience a tickle and then slugs them in the stomach.

That's why every sex scene in a horror film gives way to a pitchfork to the abdomen, a head lopped off by a machete—because our arousal makes us more vulnerable, the scare more unexpected. And that's why this line works so well: "My mother believed that if you go out of your way to be friendly to people, they will take a liking to you, but this philosophy did not work for me, because I was a leper." This is the first sentence of "Buddy the Leper," a short story by Garrison Keillor. He lulls you with the opening platitude, and then surprises you with *leper,* a word that is the equivalent of a trapdoor into a ball pit.

I recently attended a performance of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Normally I research plays beforehand, but I had been on the road, so I walked in blind,

knowing absolutely nothing apart from the title. I soon learned that it takes place in Dublin during the Irish Civil War of the 1920s. A family of four is crammed into a tenement apartment with crumbling, water-stained walls and furniture held together with wire. Though they are desperately poor, not knowing how they'll afford their next meal, the father—known as "Captain" Jack because of his history as a merchant sailor—boozes away what little money they have at the corner pub. I laughed my way through so much of the first act, as Jack bickers with his wife and jokes with his pal and complains about "the pain in me legs, the pain in me legs" when presented with a possible job offer that would take him away from his boozing and loafing. He is a lovable loser, a ne'er-do-well who hoots and dances when a solicitor informs him of a windfall inheritance that will seemingly save his family.

It doesn't. His wild spending habits—and a problem with his will—leave the family horribly in debt, ruined. The furniture they bought on credit is repossessed. The solicitor gets Jack's daughter pregnant and then leaves the country. His son is killed by the IRA. His wife abandons him. And we are left, at the end of the play, with a wonderfully haunting image: Jack, drunk, alone, passed out on the floor of his empty apartment. At the Guthrie, the dim spotlight lingered for what felt like a long minute of total silence. A silence that felt cavernous given how loudly we had laughed over the past three hours. At intermission, I could never have guessed how carved out the play would leave me.

This matches my experience at the AWP conference a few years ago, when I heard Eula Biss read from "Time and Distance Overcome." I was unfamiliar with the author and the essay—and I think this is one of the reasons it destroyed me so fully. I wasn't ready for what was coming, caught off-balance. She read in a monotone voice, lulling the audience: "The idea on which the telephone depended—the idea that every home in the country could be connected by a vast network of wires suspended from poles set an average of one

hundred feet apart—seemed far more unlikely than the idea that the human voice could be transmitted through a wire." It was a history lesson, it seemed, about the advent of the telephone and the infrastructure it demanded and the resistance it faced. I tuned in with the same mild interest I might give to a special about narwhals on the Discovery Channel.

Ten minutes later, she paused. It was a long pause. And in the essay, on the page, you can put a finger on that pause, a visual break that serves as a fulcrum point. Everything tips; the essay darkens. "In 1898, in Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, a black man was hanged from a telephone pole. And in Weir City, Kansas. And in Brookhaven, Mississippi. And in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the hanged man was riddled with bullets. In Danville, Illinois, a black man's throat was slit, and his dead body was strung up on a telephone pole. Two black men were hanged from a telephone pole in Lewisburg, Virginia. And two in Hempstead, Texas, where one man was dragged out of the courtroom by a mob, and another was dragged out of jail." The list of atrocities continues, flatly stated. An ordinary object, the telephone pole, is unexpectedly redefined, invested with extraordinary power.

By the end of her reading, the audience was flattened. I looked around, stunned and amazed, and saw so many people shaking their heads, roughing away tears. I can't imagine Biss having the same effect on her audience if the essay dove directly into darkness.

Ursula K. Le Guin uses the same strategy in her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." It opens with a lengthy description of an idyllic community. Omelas is "bright-towered" by the sea. Music plays in the streets—"a shimmering of gong and tambourine"—and people dance to it. In a "great water-meadow" naked boys and girls run alongside horses with "their manes . . . braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green." Everyone is happy. There are flowers, booze, orgies. The descriptions stack up until halfway through the story, a question is posed: "Do you believe?"

The answer is no. You don't believe. Not in the festival, the city,

the nauseating joy. Not until Le Guin tells us one more thing about this seeming utopia:

> In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come.

It is covered with sores because it sits in its own excrement. It used to scream at night, but now it only whines and mewls. Its ribs show and its belly protrudes from starvation. It cannot remember sunlight or its mother's face.

Now we believe. We believe in light because of shadow; we believe in good because of evil, the balance that is the balance of life. Your stories and scenes require something similar: constant reversals, a modulation of tone and content, sometimes gently and sometimes jarringly negotiated, so that we will believe and so that we will feel moved to laugh or gasp or sob.