

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY THE SHORT-STORY WRITER GARY LUTZ TO THE STUDENTS OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S WRITING PROGRAM IN NEW YORK ON SEPTEMBER 25, 2008

I came to language only late and only peculiarly. I grew up in a household where the only books were the telephone book and some coloring books. Magazines, though, were called books, but only one magazine ever came into the house, a now-long-gone photographic general-interest weekly commandingly named *Look*. Words in this household were not often brought into play. There were no discussions that I can remember, no occasions when language was called for at length or in bulk. Words seemed to be intruders, blown into the rooms from elsewhere through the speakers of the television set or the radio, and were easily, tinnily, ignorable as something alien, something not germane to the forlornities of life within the house, and readily shut off or shut out. Under our roof, there was more divulgence and expressiveness to be made out in the closing or opening of doors, in footfalls, in coughs and stomach growlings and other bodily ballyhoo, than in statements exchanged in occasional conversation. Words seemed to be a last resort: you had recourse to speech only if everything else failed. From early on, it seemed to me that the forming and the release of words were the least significant of the mouth's activities—and more by-products of those activities than the reason for them. When words did come hazarding out of a mouth, they did not lastingly change anything about the mouth they were coming out of or the face that hosted the mouth. They often seemed to have been put in there by some force exterior to the person speaking, and they died out in the air. They were not something I could possess or store up. Words certainly weren't inside me.

A word that I remember coming out of my parents' mouths a lot was *imagine*—as in “I imagine we're going to have rain.” I soon succumbed to the notion that to imagine was to claim to know in advance an entirely forgettable outcome. A calendar was hung in the kitchen as if to say: Expect more of the same.

I thus spent about the first thirteen or fourteen years of my life not having much of anything to do with language. I am told that once in a while I spoke up. I am told that I had a friend at some point, and this friend often corrected my pronunciations, which tended to be overliteral, and deviant in their distribution of stresses. Any word I spoke, often as not, sounded like two words of similar length that had crashed into each other. Word after word emerged from my mouth as a mumbled mongrel. I was often asked to repeat things, and the repeated version came forth as a skeptical variant of the first one and was usually offered at a much lower volume. When a preposition was called for in a statement, I often chose an unfitting one. If a classmate asked me, “When is band practice?” I would be likely to answer, “At fifth period.” I did not have many listeners, and I did not listen to myself. Things I spoke came out sounding instantly disowned.

Childhood in my generation, an unpivotal generation, wasn’t necessarily a witnessed phenomenon. Large portions of my day went unobserved by anyone else, even in classrooms. Anybody glimpsing me for an instant might have described me as a kid with his nose stuck in a book, but nobody would have noticed that I wasn’t reading. I had started to gravitate toward books only because a book was a kind of steadying accessory, a prop, something to grip, a simple occupation for my hands. (Much later, I was relieved to learn that librarians refer to the books and other printed matter in their collections as “holdings.”) And at some point I started to enjoy having a book open before me and beholding the comfortingly justified lineups and amassments of words. I liked seeing words on parade on the pages, but I never got in step with them, I never entered into the processions. I doubt that it often even occurred to me to read the books, although I know I knew how. Instead, I liked how anything small (a pretzel crumb, perhaps) that fell into the gutter of the book—that troughlike place where facing pages meet—stayed in there and was preserved. A book was, for me, an acquisitive thing, absorbing, accepting, taking into itself whatever was dropped into it. An opened book even seemed to me an invitation to practice hygiene over it—to peel off the rim of a fingernail, say, and let the thing find its way down onto a page. The book became a repository of the body’s off-trickles, extrusions, biological rubbish and remains; it became a reliquary of sorts. I was

thuswise now archiving chance fragments, sometimes choice fragments, of my life. I was putting things into the books instead of withdrawing their offered contents. As usual, I had things backward.

Worse, the reading we were doing in school was almost always reading done sleepily aloud, our lessons consisting of listening to the chapters of a textbook, my classmates and I taking our compulsory turns at droning through a double-columned page or two; and I, for one, never paid much mind to what was being read. The words on the page seemed to have little utility other than as mere prompts or often misleading cues for the sluggard sounds we were expected to produce. The words on the page did not seem to have solid enough a presence to exist independently of the sounds. I had no sense that a book read in silence and in private could offer me something. I can't remember reading anything with much comprehension until eighth grade, when, studying for a science test for once, I decided to try making my way quietly through the chapter from start to finish—it was a chapter about magnets—and found myself forced to form the sounds of the words in my head as I read. Many of the words were unfamiliar to me, but the words fizzed and popped and tinkled and bonged. I was reading so slowly that in many a word I heard the scrunch and flump of the consonants and the peal of the vowels. Granted, I wasn't retaining much of anything, but almost every word now struck me as a provocative hullabaloo. This was my first real lesson about language—this inkling that a word is a solid, something firm and palpable. It was news to me that a word is matter, that it exists in tactual materiality, that it has a cubic bulk. Only on the page is it flat and undensified. In the mouth and in the mind it is three-dimensional, and there are parts that shoot out from it or sink into its syntactic surround. But this discovery was of no help to me in English class, because when we had to write, I could never call up any of the brassy and racketing words I had read, and fell back on the thin, flat, default vocabulary of my life at home, words spoken because no others were known or available. Even when I started reading vocabulary-improvement books, I never seemed capable of importing into my sentences any of the vivid specimens from the lists I had now begun to memorize. My writing was dividered from the arrayed opulences in the vocabulary

books. Language remained beyond me. My distance from language continued even through college, even through graduate school. The words I loved were in a different part of me, not accessible to the part of me that was required to make statements on paper.

It took me almost another decade after graduate school to figure out what writing really is, or at least what it could be for me; and what prompted this second lesson in language was my discovery of certain remaindered books—mostly of fiction, most notably by Barry Hannah, and all of them, I later learned, edited by Gordon Lish—in which virtually every sentence had the force and feel of a climax, in which almost every sentence was a vivid extremity of language, an abruption, a definitive inquietude. These were books written by writers who recognized the sentence as the one true theater of endeavor, as the place where writing comes to a point and attains its ultimacy. As a reader, I finally knew what I wanted to read, and as someone now yearning to become a writer, I knew exactly what I wanted to try to write: narratives of steep verbal topography, narratives in which the sentence is a complete, portable solitude, a minute immediacy of consummated language—the sort of sentence that, even when liberated from its receiving context, impresses itself upon the eye and the ear as a totality, an omnitude, unto itself. I once later tried to define this kind of sentence as “an outcry combining the acoustical elegance of the aphorism with the force and utility of the load-bearing, tractional sentence of more or less conventional narrative.” The writers of such sentences became the writers I read and reread. I favored books that you could open to any page and find in every paragraph sentences that had been worked and reworked until their forms and contours and their organizations of sound had about them an air of having been foreordained—as if this combination of words could not be improved upon and had finished readying itself for infinity.

And as I encountered any such sentence, the question I would ask myself in marvelment was: how did this thing come to be what it now is? This was when I started gazing into sentence after sentence and began to discover that there was nothing arbitrary or unwitting or fluky about the shape any sentence had taken and the sound it was

releasing into the world.

I'll try to explain what it is that such sentences all seem to have in common and how in fact they might well have been written.

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The sentence, with its narrow typographical confines, is a lonely place, the loneliest place for a writer, and the temptation for the writer to get out of one sentence as soon as possible and get going on the next sentence is entirely understandable. In fact, the conditions in just about any sentence soon enough become (shall we admit it?) claustrophobic, inhospitable, even hellish. But too often our habitual and hasty breaking away from one sentence to another results in sentences that remain undeveloped parcels of literary real estate, sentences that do not feel fully inhabited and settled in by language. So many of the sentences we confront in books and magazines look unfinished and provisional, and start to go to pieces as soon as we gawk at and stare into them. They don't hold up. Their diction is often not just spare and stark but bare and miserly.

There is another way to look at this:

The sentence is the site of your enterprise with words, the locale where language either comes to a head or does not. The sentence is a situation of words in the most literal sense: words must be situated in relation to others to produce an enduring effect on a reader. As you situate the words, you are of course intent on obeying the ordinances of syntax and grammar, unless any willful violation is your purpose—and you are intent as well on achieving in the arrangements of words as much fidelity as is possible to whatever you believe you have wanted to say or describe. A lot of writers—many of them—unfortunately seem to stop there. They seem content if the resultant sentence is free from obvious faults and is faithful to the lineaments of the thought or feeling or whatnot that was awaiting deathless expression. But some other writers seem to know that it takes more than that for a sentence to cohere and flourish as a work of art. They seem to know that the words inside the sentence must behave as if they were destined to belong

together—as if their separation from each other would deprive the parent story or novel, as well as the readerly world, of something life-bearing and essential. These writers recognize that there needs to be an intimacy between the words, a togetherness that has nothing to do with grammar or syntax but instead has to do with the very shapes and sounds, the forms and contours, of the gathered words. This intimacy is what we mean when we say of a piece of writing that it has a felicity—a fitness, an aptness, a rightness about the phrasing. The words in the sentence must bear some physical and sonic resemblance to each other—the way people and their dogs are said to come to resemble each other, the way children take after their parents, the way pairs and groups of friends evolve their own manner of dress and gesture and speech. A pausing, enraptured reader should be able to look deeply into the sentence and discern among the words all of the traits and characteristics they share. The impression to be given is that the words in the sentence have lived with each other for quite some time, *decisive* time, and have deepened and grown and matured in each other's company—and that they cannot live without each other.

Here is what I believe seems to happen in such a sentence:

Once the words begin to settle into their circumstance in a sentence and decide to make the most of their predicament, they look around and take notice of their neighbors. They seek out affinities, they adapt to each other, they begin to make adjustments in their appearance to try to blend in with each other better and enhance any resemblance. Pretty soon in the writer's eyes the words in the sentence are all vibrating and destabilizing themselves: no longer solid and immutable, they start to flutter this way and that in playful receptivity, taking into themselves parts of neighboring words, or shedding parts of themselves into the gutter of the page or screen; and in this process of intimate mutation and transformation, the words swap alphabetary vitals and viscera, tiny bits and dabs of their languagey inner and outer natures; the words intermingle and blend and smear and recompose themselves. They begin to take on a similar typographical physique. The phrasing now feels literally all of a piece. The lonely space of the sentence feels colonized. There's a sumptuousness, a roundedness, a

dimensionality to what has emerged. The sentence feels filled in from end to end; there are no vacant segments along its length, no pockets of unperforming or underperforming verbal matter. The words of the sentence have in fact formed a united community.

Or, rather, if the words don't manage to do this all by themselves—because maybe they mostly won't—you will have to nudge them along in the process. You might come to realize that a single vowel already present in the sentence should be released to run through the consonantal frameworks of certain other prominent words in the sentence, or you might realize that the consonantal infrastructure of one word should be duplicated in another word, but with a different vowel impounded in each structure. You might wonder what would become of a word at one end of a sentence if an affix were thrust upon it from a word at the other end, or what might happen if the syntactical function of a word were shifted from its present part of speech to some other. And as the words reconstitute themselves and metamorphose, your sentence may begin to make a series of departures from what you may have intended to express; the language may start taking on, as they say, a life of its own, a life that contests or trumps the life you had sponsored to live on the page. But it was you who incited these words to shimmer and mutate and reconfigure even further—and what they now are saying may well be much more acute and more crucial than what you had thought you wanted to say.

I think this is the only way to explain what happens to my own sentences during those very rare occasions when I am writing the way I want to write, and it seems to account for how sentences by writers I admire have arisen from the alphabet. The aim of the literary artist, I believe, is to initiate the process by which the words in a sentence no longer remain strangers to each other but begin to acknowledge one another's existence and do more than tolerate each other's presence in the phrasing: the words have to lean on each other, rub elbows, rub off on each other, feel each other up. Among contemporary writers of fiction, there are few who have regularly achieved what I am calling an intra-sentence intimacy with more exquisiteness and grace than Christine Schutt, especially in her first novel, *Florida*, and in her second collection of short stories,

A Day, a Night, Another Day, Summer.

Let's first look inside only a four-word phrase of hers.

In her story “The Blood Jet,” Schutt ends a sentence about “life after a certain age” by describing it capsularly as “acutely felt, clearly flat”—two pairs of words in which an adverb precedes an adjective. The adjectives (*felt* and *flat*) are both monosyllabic, they are both four letters in length, and they both share the same consonantal casing: they begin with a tentative-sounding, deflating *f* and end with the abrupt *t*. In between the two ends of each adjective, Schutt retains the *l*, though it slides one space backward in the second adjective; and for the interior vowel, she moves downward from a short *e* to a short *a*. The predecessive adverbs *acutely* and *clearly* share the *k*-sounding *c*, and both words are constituted of virtually the same letters, except that *clearly* doesn't retain the *t* of *acutely*. The four-word phrase has a resigned and final sound to it; there is more than a little agony in how, with just two little adjustments, *felt* has been diminished and transmogrified into *flat*, in how the richness of receptivity summed up in *felt* has been leveled into the thudding spiritlessness of *flat*. All of this emotion has been delivered by the most ordinary of words—nothing dredged up from a thesaurus. But what is perhaps most striking about the four-word phrase is the family resemblances between the two pairs of words. There is nothing in the letter-by-letter makeup of the phrase “clearly flat” that wasn't already physically present in “acutely felt”; the second of the two phrases contains the alphabetic DNA of the first phrase. There isn't, of course, an exact, anagrammatic correspondence between the two pairs of words; the *u* of the first pair, after all, hasn't been carried over into the second pair. (Schutt isn't stooping to recreational word games here.) But the page-hugging, rather than page-turning, reader—the very reader whom a writer such as Schutt entralls—cannot help noticing that the second phrase is a selective rearrangement, a selective redistribution, of the first one—a declension, really, as if, within the verbal environment of the story, there were no other direction for the letters in the first pair of words to go. There is nothing random about what has happened here. Schutt's phrase has achieved the condition that Susan Sontag, in her essay about the prose of poets, called “lexical inevitability.”

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Before we turn our eyes and ears to the entirety of a two-clause structure by Christine Schutt, maybe we can agree that almost every word in a sentence can be categorized as either a content word or a functional word. The content words comprise the nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and most verbs: they are carriers of information and suppliers of sensory evidence. The functional words are the prepositions, the conjunctions, the articles, the *to* of an infinitive, and such—the kinds of words necessary to hold the content words in place on the page, to absorb them into the syntax. The functional words in fact tend to recede into the sentence structure; their visibility and audibility are limited. It's the content words that impress themselves upon the eye and the ear, so the writer's attention to sound and shape has to be lavished on the exposed words. They stand out in relief. (Pronouns, of course, do not quite fit tidily into this binary system; pronouns tend to be prominent when they are functioning as subjects or objects and tend to be shrinking when they are in a possessive capacity. And some common verbs—especially those formed from the infinitives *to be* and *to have*—tend toward the unnoticeability of operational words.)

In Christine Schutt's two-clause formation “her lips stuck when she licked them to talk,” the second half of a sentence from the short story “Young,” the conspicuous content words are *lips*, *stuck*, *licked*, and *talk*. These four words are not all that varied consonantically. The reappearing consonants are *l* and *k*. Three of the four words have an *l*: two have the *l* at the very start of the word (*lips* and *licked*), and in the final word (*talk*), the *l* has slid into the interior. Three of the four words have a *k* in common—we go from a terminal *k* (*stuck*) to a *k* that has worked its way backward into the very core (*licked*) and then again to a terminal *k* (*talk*). In the first three words, the *l* and the *k* keep their distance from each other: in the first two words, they don't appear together; inside the third word, *licked*, they are now within kiss-blowing range of each other over the low-rising *i* and *c* that stand between them. In the final word, *talk*, the *l* and the *k* are side-by-side at last—coupled just before the period brings the curtain down. A romance between two letters has been enacted in the sentence: there has been an amorous

progression toward union.

This kind of flirtation between two letters and their eventual matrimony brighten Christine Schutt’s work not only in the individual sentence but in the paragraph as well. In the four-sentence opening paragraph of the story “The Summer after Barbara Claffey,” in Schutt’s first short-story collection, *Nightwork*, the characters *k* and *w* spend the first three sentences dancing around each other and sometimes tentatively touching, but their intimacy never gets more serious than the conventional embrace they entertain in the familiar participle *walking*:

I once saw a man hook a walking stick around a woman’s neck. This was at night, from my mother’s window. The man dropped the crooked end behind the woman’s neck and yanked just hard enough to get the woman walking to the car.

Letters, of course, are also known as characters, and it’s a courtship of characters that is giving an excitement to these sentences. The *w* seems warily feminine; the *k* seems brashly masculine. In the fourth and final sentence of the paragraph, the two characters mate and marry in the unexpected but beautifully apposite participle *winking*, a union resulting in what is in many ways the most stylistically noteworthy word in the paragraph. Then the *w* and the *k* disappear completely and completely from what is left of the sentence as it plays itself out in a fade-out sequence of prepositional phrases:

I saw this and saw rain winking in the yard in the light around our house.

Writing is rich to the extent that the drama of the subject matter is supplemented or deepened by the drama of the letters within the words as they inch their way closer to each other or push significantly off.

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Gordon Lish—the enormously influential editor, writer, and teacher whom I mentioned earlier—instructed his students in a poetics of the sentence that emphasized what he called consecution: a recursive procedure by which one word pursues itself into its

successor by discharging something from deep within itself into what follows. The discharge can take many forms and often produces startling outcomes, such as when Christine Schutt, in “The Summer after Barbara Claffey,” is seeking the inevitable adjective to insert into the final slot in the sentence “Here is the house at night, lit up tall and _____.” What she winds up doing is literally dragging forward the previous adjective, *tall*, and using it as the base on which further letters can be erected. The result is the astounding, perfect *tallowy*—the sort of adjective she never could have arrived at if she had turned a synonymicon upside down in search of words that capture the quality of light.

Gordon Lish’s poetics forever changed the way I look at sentences, and so many of the sentences that thrill me are sentences in which consecution and recursion have determined the sound and the shape of the community of words. Take the aphoristic sentence that closes Diane Williams’s story “Scratching the Head,” in her second collection, *Some Sexual Success Stories Plus Other Stories in Which God Might Choose to Appear*: “An accident isn’t necessarily ever over.” There is so much to remark upon in this six-word, fifteen-syllable declaration. A sibilance hisses throughout *accident, isn’t*, and *necessarily*; and in those three words there are further acoustical continuities—the *ih* sound moving forward from *accident* and into *isn’t*, the *en* sound moving forward from *accident* and into *isn’t* and into *necessarily*. In the five-syllable adverb *necessarily*, the vowel-and-consonant pair *ar* of the third syllable receives the primary stress, and the *ne* of the first syllable receives the secondary stress; and the *e* and the *r* of those two syllables get filliped forward into *ever*, and then the dying fall of that adverb is echoed dyingly by *over*. *Ever* has morphed into *over*, of course, with nothing more than the substitution of an *o* for an *e*. These tumbly final words tumble out into a long vowel, the only long vowel of the sentence: the woe-laden, bemoaning long *o*. The final syllable of the sentence is unstressed, and this unaccentedness deprives the sentence of a hard, clear-cut termination, much as the import of the sentence insists that an accident lacks definitive finality.

A sentence that I have spent an almost pathological amount of time gaping at since the

turn of the century, a sentence that always leaves me agog, is the opening sentence in Sam Lipsyte's story "I'm Slaving," in *Venus Drive*: "Everybody wanted everything to be gleaming again, or maybe they just wanted their evening back." The paraphrasal content of the statement informs us that high hopes for a return to a previous wealth of life or feeling are inevitably going to have to be scaled back and revised immediately and unconsolingly downward. If you tweak the verb tense from the past to the present, the sentence is even more self-containedly epigrammatic in its encompassing of our shared predicament of disappointments. It's a richly *summational* sentence, not the sort of sentence you might expect to find at the very outset of a story—but there are writers whose mission is sometimes to deliver us from conclusion to conclusion instead of necessarily bogging us down in the facts, the data, the sorry particulars leading to each conclusion.

Lipsyte's sentence is composed of words that, in ordinary hands, are among the most humdrum and pedestrian in our language: in the first half of the sentence alone, the words filling the subject slots in the independent clause and in the infinitive clause are the bland, heavily used indefinite pronouns *everybody* and *everything*. And the entire sentence is in fact completely lacking in specificity and so-called literary or elevated language: there is no load of detail, no verbal knickknackery whatsoever—there are no big-ticket words. The only standout word, the participle *gleaming*, most likely was called up into the sentence out of bits and pieces of the words preceding it—the ruling vowel of the entire utterance (the long *e*) and the *-ing* of *everything*. Yet this opening flourish of the story not only has both sweep and circumference in its stated meaning, but it has a swing and a lilt to it as well. The first half of the sentence is buoyant, upfloating. The entire sentence has the chiming, soaring, C-chord long *e*'s in *everybody* and *be* and *gleaming* and *maybe* and *evening*; it has the alliterative ballast of the *b*'s in *everybody* and *be* and *maybe* and *back*, and of the *g*'s in *gleaming* and *again*; and the only really *closed* word in the mix is the final word, the adverb *back*, which is shut off with harsh consonants at either end, especially the cruelly abrupt, terminal *k*, which finishes off the sentence and pushes it rudely down to earth. The last vowel in the sentence is the minor-

key short *a* in *back*—the only appearance in the sentence of the disappointed, dejected *ahhh* of *crap* and *alas*.

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Some of the most obvious ways to ensure that the words in a sentence together create a community of sound and shape are too rarely discussed explicitly outside of, say, high-school creative-writing classes. Yet many great writers constantly avail themselves of these little tactics to give their phrasing both dash and finish. The result is often a sentence that looks and sounds fulfilled, *permanent*. These phrasal maneuvers are concertedly evident in the examples I cited earlier, but they are worth considering individually, because even though we are all well acquainted with every one of them, we too easily forget just how much they can do for us.

For starters, make sure that the stressed syllables in a sentence outnumber the unstressed syllables. The fewer unstressed syllables there are, the more sonic impact the sentence will have, as in Don DeLillo's sentence "He did not direct a remark that was hard and sharp." You can take this stratagem to breathtaking extremes, as Christine Schutt does in her sentence "None of what kept time once works." Schutt's sentence should remind us as well that we need not shy away from composing an occasional sentence entirely of monosyllabic words, as Barry Hannah also does in "I roam in the past for my best mind" and "He's been long on my list of shits in the world," and as Ben Marcus does in "They were hot there, and cold there, and some had been born there, and most had died."

Those sentences illustrate another point: unless you have good reason not to do so, end your sentence with the wham and bang of a stressed syllable, as in Dawn Raffel's sentence "She lived to marry late" and in John Ashbery's "There was I: a stinking adult." Such sentences stop on a dime instead of wavering forward for a wishy-washy further syllable or two.

At the opposite extreme, give force to your sentences by stationing the subject at the very

beginning instead of delaying the subject until an introductory phrase or a dependent clause has first had its dribbling say. This precept of course violates almost every English-composition teacher's insistence that students vary the openings of their sentences, but you will find the best writers disobeying it as well. Readers have often attempted to account for the extraordinary cumulative power in the work of Joseph Mitchell, who wrote literary journalism for the *New Yorker* in a deceptively plain and simple style that often achieved incantatory cadences. You can make your way through pages and pages of Mitchell's work and almost never find him starting a sentence without laying down his subject at the outset. Many fiction writers also skip the preambles, as Dawn Raffel does in her sentence "She was born in December in Baraboo or thereabouts—small, still, blue, a girl, and, by some trick of oxygen, alive."

That Dawn Raffel sentence, with its recurring *b*'s and *l*'s, illustrates another form of play available to any writer. Avail yourself of alliteration—as long as it remains ungimmicky, unobtrusive, even subliminal. Such repetition can be soothing and stabilizing, especially in a sentence whose content and emotional gusts are anything but. You can let a single consonant dominate all or most of a sentence—the way Don DeLillo does with *h*'s in "He was here in the howl of the world," and as Christine Schutt does with *k* sounds in "He knew the kind of Kleenex crud a crying girl left behind." And the reiterated consonants do not have to appear at the beginnings of words: they can also show up at the very ends, as the *t*'s do in Barry Hannah's sentence "Ah, well, what you cannot correct you can at least insult," or they can be confined to the interiors of words, as the *l*'s are in Elizabeth Hardwick's sentence "Another day she arrived as wild and florid and thickly brilliant as a bird."

Take advantage of assonance as well. Keeping a single vowel in circulation through most of the conspicuous words will give a sentence another kind of sonic consummation, as Don DeLillo achieves with the five short *a*'s in "He mastered the steepest matters in half an afternoon," and as Sam Lipsyte does with three short *u*'s in "You could touch for a couple of bucks." (A lesser writer would of course have been satisfied with "For merely two dollars, you could cop a feel.") Or reserve the assonance for the words in a sentence

deserving the greatest stress, as Ben Marcus does in “The ones that never got born were poured into the river.” You can even divide a sentence into two or more acoustical zones and let a single vowel prevail in each zone. Here is a three-zone sentence by Don DeLillo: “There were evening streaks in the white of the eye, a sense of blood sun.”

You can make the most of both assonance and alliteration in a single sentence or multi-sentence sequence. In the following two-sentence run, Sam Lipsyte assonates with the long *oo* sound and alliterates with *p*'s and *k* sounds: “Dinner that night was some lewd stew I’d watched Parish concoct, undercooked carrots and pulled pork in ooze. I believe he threw some kiwi in there, too.” Some writers take merged assonance and alliteration beyond slant rhymes or half rhymes (such as *lewd*, *stew*, and *ooze* in Lipsyte’s first sentence) and even as far as a careful, unsingsongy kind of internal perfect rhyming, in which the rhyming words end with an identical vowel-and-consonant structure, as Fiona Maazel does in this sentence, which is acoustically unified further by the repeated *k* sounds: “I could tell she had been crying from the swell of her pores and the spackle crusted at the levees of each eye.” And here are three samplings from the saddeningly neglected writer Elizabeth Smart, all from her short-fiction collection, *The Assumption of the Rogues & Rascals*: “This cliff, I thought, this office block, would certainly suit a suicide”; “The long fall is appalling”; and the aphoristically molded, five-word formulation “God likes a good frolic.” In the last of these three sentences, there are all sorts of family resemblances among the words: the identical consonantic shells of *God* and *good* (as well as of *like* and the second syllable in *frolic*) and the shared vowel of *God* and *frolic*. And the way the words have been arrayed gives the sentence its aphoristic permanence. The article *a*, at the center of the statement, separates two phrases very similar in shape, with the words in the second phrase, *good frolic*, appearing as enlargements of, and elaborations on, the words in the first pair: *God likes*.

There are still further opportunities for you to put some play into your phrasing. Press one part of speech into service as another, as Don DeLillo does in “She was always maybeing” (an adverb has been recruited for duty as a verb) and as Barry Hannah does in “Westy is colding off like the planet” (an adjective has been enlisted for verbified

purpose as well). A variation is to take an intransitive verb (the sort of verb that can't abide a direct object) and put it in motion as a transitive verb (whose very nature it is to enclasp a direct object). That is what Fiona Maazel is up to with the verb *collide*, which abandoned all transitive use ages ago, in her sentence "Often, at the close of a recovery meeting, as we make a circle and join hands, I'll note the odds of these people finding each other in this group; our sundry pasts and principles; the entropy that collides addicts like so many molecules." Or take some standard, overworked idiomatic phrasing—such as "It turned my stomach"—and transfigure it, as Barry Hannah does in "I saw the hospital in Hawaii. It turned my heart." Or rescue an ordinary, overtaken verb from its usual drab business and find a fresh, bright, and startling context for it, as Don DeLillo manages with *speaks* in "You will hit traffic that speaks in quarter inches" and as Barry Hannah does with the almost always lackluster verb *occurred* in "... a single white wild blossom occurred under the forever stunted fig tree..." You can also choose to prefer the unexpectable noun, as Diane Williams does with *history* in "We can come in out from our history to lie down" and as Sam Lipsyte does with *squeaks* in "Home, we drank a little wine, put on some of that sticky saxophone music we used to keep around to drown out the bitter squeaks in our hearts." Or you can choose a variant of a common word, a variant that exists officially in unabridged dictionaries but has fallen out of usage—if, that is, you have reason enough for doing so. In Fiona Maazel's sentence "This was not how I had meant to act, all tough and abradant," not only does the unfamiliar adjective *abradant*, with its harsh *d* and *t*, sound more abrasive than the milder, everyday *abrasive*, but its terminal *t* has been bookended with the initial *t* of *tough*, lending symmetry to the adjectives coupled at the sentence's end. And you can take the frumpiest, the ugliest of the so-called vocabulary words—the Latinate monstrosities that students are compelled to memorize in SAT- and GRE-preparation classes—and urge them into a casual setting, where they finally shine anew. Fiona Maazel pulls this off in her sentence "The floor tiles appeared cubed and motile." The choice of the unusual sentence-ending adjective, which in other contexts might risk coming across as thesaurusy and pretentious, most likely resulted from the writer's unwavering alertness to the alphabets of the noun in the subject slot of her sentence. The upshot of this

morphological correspondence between *tiles* and *motile* is that the subject's embrace of its second adjectival complement is much stronger than that which would be achieved by the two words' merely syntactic functions alone. Finally, you can fool around even with prepositions. Prepositions often attach themselves adverbially to verbs and thus form what are known as phrasal verbs, such as *check out* and *open up* and *see through*, but you are not legally bound to use the orthodox preposition with a verb. Don DeLillo breaks from established usage in the sentences "She was always thinking into tomorrow" and "She moved about the town's sloping streets unnoticed... playing through these thoughts...."

Granted, there can be a downside to the kinds of isolative attentions to the sentence I have been advocating. Such a fixation on the individual sentence might threaten the enclosive forces of the larger structure in which the sentences reside. Psychiatrists use the term *weak central coherence* to pinpoint the difficulty of certain autistic persons to get the big picture, to see the forest instead of the trees. A piece of writing consisting ultimately of an aggregation of loner sentences might well strike a reader as stupefyingly discontinuous, too dense to enchant. But the practices I have been trying to discuss can also result in richly elliptical prose whose individual statements converge excitingly in the participating reader's mind. These practices account in part for the bold poetry in some of today's most artistically provocative fiction.