SEEING IS BELIEVING

Showing and Telling

- Significant Detail
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Literature offers us feelings for which we do not have to pay. It allows us to love, condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any of the risks those feelings ordinarily involve, for even good feelings—intimacy, power, speed, drunkenness, passion—have consequences, and powerful feelings may risk powerful consequences. Fiction also must contain ideas, which give significance to characters and events. If the ideas are shallow or untrue, the fiction will be correspondingly shallow or untrue. But the ideas must be experienced through or with the characters; they must be felt or the fiction will fail also.

Much nonfiction writing, from editorials to advertising, also tries to persuade us to feel one way rather than another, but nonfiction works largely by means of logic and reasoning. Fiction tries to reproduce the emotional impact of experience. And this is a more difficult task, because unlike the images of film and drama, which directly strike the eye and ear, words are transmitted first to the mind, where they must be translated into images.
In order to move your reader, the standard advice runs, “Show, don’t tell.” This dictum can be confusing, considering that words are all a writer has to work with. What it means is that your job as a fiction writer is to focus attention not on the words, which are inert, nor on the thoughts these words produce, but through these to felt experience, where the vitality of understanding lies. There are techniques for accomplishing this—for making narrative vivid, moving, and resonant—which can be partly learned and always strengthened.

**Significant Detail**

In *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk, Jr., writes:

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite and concrete. The greatest writers ... are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter.

Specific, definite, concrete, particular details—these are the life of fiction. Details (as every good liar knows) are the stuff of persuasiveness. Mary is sure that Ed forgot to go pay the gas bill last Tuesday, but Ed says, “I know I went, because this old guy in a knit vest was in front of me in the line, and went on and on about his twin granddaughters”—and it is hard to refute a knit vest and twins even if the furnace doesn’t work. John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* speaks of details as “proofs,” rather like those in a geometric theorem or a statistical argument. The novelist, he says, “gives us such details about the streets, stores, weather, politics, and concerns of Cleveland (or wherever the setting is) and such details about the looks, gestures, and experiences of his characters that we cannot help believing that the story he tells us is true.”

A detail is “definite” and “concrete” when it appeals to the senses. It should be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. The most superficial survey of any bookshelf of published fiction will turn up dozens of examples of this principle. Here is a fairly obvious one.

It was a narrow room, with a rather high ceiling, and crowded from floor to ceiling with goodies. There were rows and rows of hams and sausages of all shapes and colors—white, yellow, red and black; fat and lean and round and long—rows of canned preserves, cocoa and tea, bright translucent glass bottles of honey, marmalade and jam.

I stood enchanted, straining my ears and breathing in the delightful atmosphere and the mixed fragrance of chocolate and smoked fish and earthy truffles. I spoke into the silence, saying: “Good day” in quite a loud voice; I can still remember how my strained, unnatural tones died away in the stillness. No one answered. And my mouth literally began to water like a spring. One quick, noiseless step and I was beside one of the laden tables. I made one rapturous grab into the nearest glass urn, filled as it chanced with chocolate creams, slipped a fistful into my coat pocket, then reached the door, and in the next second was safely round the corner.

Thomas Mann, *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*

The shape of this passage is a tour through the five senses. Mann lets us see: narrow room, high ceiling, hams, sausages, preserves, cocoa, tea, glass bottles, honey, marmalade, jam. He lets us smell: fragrance of chocolate, smoked fish, earthy truffles. He lets us hear: “Good day,” unnatural tones, stillness. He lets us taste: mouth, water like a spring. He lets us touch: grab, chocolate creams, slipped, fistful into my coat pocket. The writing is alive because we do in fact live through our sense perceptions, and Mann takes us past words and through thought to let us perceive the scene in this way.

In this process, a number of ideas not stated reverberate off the sense images, so that we are also aware of a number of generalizations the author might have made but does not need to make; we will make them ourselves. Mann could have had his character “tell” us: I was quite poor, and I was not used to seeing such a profusion of food, so that although I was very afraid there might be someone in the room and that I might be caught stealing, I couldn’t resist taking the risk.

Such a version would be very flat, and none of that telling is necessary as all these points are “shown.” The character’s relative poverty is inherent in the tangle of images of sight and smell; if he were used to such displays, his eyes and nose would not dart about as they do. His fear is inherent in the “strained, unnatural tones” and their dying away in the stillness. His desire is in his watering mouth, his fear in the furtive speed of “quick” and “grab” and “slipped.”

The points to be made here are two, and they are both important. The first is that the writer must deal in sense detail. The second is that these must be details “that matter.” As a writer of fiction you are at constant pains not simply to say what you mean, but to mean more than you say. Much of what you mean will be an abstraction or a judgment—love requires trust, children can be cruel. But if you write in abstractions or judgments, you are writing an essay, whereas if you let us use our senses and form our own interpretations, we will be involved as participants in a real way. Much of the pleasure of reading comes from the egotistical sense that we are clever enough to understand. When the author explains to us or interprets for us, we suspect that he or she doesn’t think us bright enough to do it for ourselves.

A detail can also matter because it suggests plot development. Chekhov famously said that if a pistol is placed on the mantle in the first act, it must go off in the third. Similarly, when a story offers a new kind of detail or level of specificity it may suggest a change in character or a development of the plot. As you read Teodinda Gersão’s “The Red Fox Fur Coat” at the end of this chapter, the narrator will alert you to a brightening of the main character’s senses as she goes jogging in the wood, but what does it mean when that
character notices “a lizard scurrying through the leaves, an invisible mouse making a twig crack, an acorn falling, [and] a bird landing on a bush”?

A detail is concrete if it appeals to one of the five senses; it is significant if it also conveys an idea or a judgment or both. The windowsill was green is concrete, because we can see it. The windowsill was shedding flakes of fungus-green paint is concrete and also significant because it conveys the idea that the paint is old and suggests the judgment that the color is ugly. The second version can also be seen more vividly. (For further discussion of selecting detail, "How Fictional Elements Contribute to Theme," page 347, in Chapter 9.)

Here is a passage from a young writer that fails through lack of appeal to the senses.

Debbie was a very stubborn and completely independent person and was always doing things her way despite her parents’ efforts to get her to conform. Her father was an executive in a dress manufacturing company and was able to afford his family all the luxuries and comforts of life. But Debbie was completely indifferent to her family’s affluence.

This passage contains a number of judgments we might or might not share with the author, and she has not convinced us that we do. What constitutes stubbornness? Independence? Indifference? Affluence? Further, since the judgments are supported by generalizations, we have no sense of the individuality of the characters, which alone would bring them to life on the page. What things was she always doing? What efforts did her parents make to get her to conform? What level of executive? What dress manufacturing company? What luxuries and comforts?

Debbie would wear a tank top to a tea party if she pleased, with fluorescent earrings and ankle-strap sandals.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mrs. Chiddister would stand in the doorway wringing her hands. “It’s not nice.”

“No who?” Debbie would say, and add a fringed belt.

Mr. Chiddister was Artistic Director of the Boston branch of Cardin and had a high respect for what he called “elegant textures,” which ranged from handwoven tweed to gold filigree, and which he willingly offered his daughter. Debbie preferred her laminated wrist bangles.

We have not passed a final judgment on the merits of these characters, but we know a good deal more about them, and we have drawn certain interim conclusions that are our own and not forced on us by the author. Debbie is independent of her parents’ values, rather careless of their feelings, energetic, and possibly a tart. Mrs. Chiddister is quite ineffectual. Mr. Chiddister is a snob, though perhaps Debbie’s taste is so bad we’ll end up on his side.

But maybe that isn’t at all what the author had in mind. Perhaps it was more like this version:

One day Debbie brought home a copy of Ulysses. Mrs. Strum called it “filth” and threw it across the sunporch. Debbie knelt on the parquet and retrieved her bookmark, which she replaced. “No, it’s not,” she said.

“You’re not so old I can’t take a strap to you!” Mr. Strum reminded her.

Mr. Strum was controlling stockholder of Readywear Conglomerates and was proud of treating his family, not only on his salary, but also on his expense account. The summer before, he had justified his company on a trip to Belgium, where they toured the American Cemetery and the torture chambers of Ghent Castle. Entirely ungrateful, Debbie had spent the rest of the trip curled up in the hotel with a shabby copy of some poet.

Now we have a much clearer understanding of stubbornness, independence, indifference, and affluence, both their natures and the value we are to place on them. This time our judgment is heavily weighed in Debbie’s favor—partly because people who read books have a sentimental sympathy with people who read books—but also because we hear hysteria in “filth” and “take a strap to you,” whereas Debbie’s resistance is quiet and strong. Mr. Strum’s attitude toward his expense account suggests that he’s corrupt, and his choice of “luxuries” is morbid. The passage does contain two overt judgments, the first being that Debbie was “entirely ungrateful.” Notice that by the time we get to this, we’re aware that the judgment is Mr. Strum’s and that Debbie has little enough to be grateful for. We understand not only what the author says but also that she means the opposite of what she says, and we feel doubly clever to get it; that is the pleasure of irony. Likewise, the judgment that the poet’s book is “shabby” shows Mr. Strum’s crass materialism toward what we know to be the finer things. At the very end of the passage, we are denied a detail that we might very well be given: What poet did Debbie curl up with? Again, by this time we understand that we are being given Mr. Strum’s view of the situation and that it’s Mr. Strum (not Debbie, not the author, and certainly not us) who wouldn’t notice the difference between John Keats and Stanley Kunitz.

One may object that both rewrites of the passage are longer than the original. Doesn’t “adding” so much detail make for long writing? The answer is yes and no. No, because in the rewrites we know so much more about the values, activities, lifestyles, attitudes, and personalities of the characters that it would take many times the length of the original to “tell” it all in generalizations. Yes, in the sense that detail requires words, and if you are to realize your characters through detail, then you must be careful to select the details that convey the characteristics essential to our understanding. You can’t convey a whole person, or a whole action, or everything there is to be conveyed about a single moment of a single day. You must select the significant.

In fact, the greater significance of realistic details may emerge only as you continue to develop and revise your story, for, as Flannery O’Connor says, “the longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it.” Certain details “tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself”
The following is a passage with very little action, nevertheless made vital by the use of active verbs:

At Mixt she neither drinks nor eats. Each of the sisters furtively stares at her as she tranquilly sits in post-Communion meditation with her hands immersed in her habit. Lectio has been halted for the morning, so there is only the Great Silence and the tink of cutlery, but handsigns are being traced as the sisters lard their hunks of bread or fold and ring their dinner napkins. When the prioress stands, all rise up with her for the blessing, and then Sister Aimee gives Mariette the handsigns. You, infirmary.

Ron Hansen, Mariette in Ecstasy

Here, though the convent meal is silent and action is minimal, a number of the verbs suggest suppressed power: stares, sits, lard, fold, ring, stands, rise, gives.

Compare the first passage about Debbie on page 24 with the second of the rewrites on page 25. In the generalized original we have was stubborn, was doing things, was executive, was able, was indifferent. Apart from the compound verb was doing, all these are linking verbs. In the rewrite the characters brought, called, threw, knelt, retrieved, replaced, said, reminded, justified, toured, spent, and curled up. What energetic people! The rewrite contains two linking verbs: Mr. Strum was stockholder and was proud; these properly represent static states, a position and an attitude.

One beneficial side effect of active verbs is that they tend to call forth significant details. If you say “she was shocked,” you are telling us; but if you are to show us that she was shocked through an action, you are likely to have to search for an image as well. “She clenched the arm of the chair so hard that her knuckles whitened.” Clenched and whitened actively suggest shock, and at the same time we see her knuckles on the arm of the chair.

To be is the most common of the linking verbs and also the most overused, but all the linking verbs invite generalization and distance. To feel, to seem, to look, to appear, to experience, to express, to show, to demonstrate, to convey—to display—all these suggest fiction that the character is being acted upon or observed by someone rather than doing something. She felt happy/sad/amused/mortified does not convince us. We want to see her and infer her emotion for ourselves. He very clearly conveyed his displeasure. It isn’t clear to us. How did he convey it? To whom?

Linking verbs, like the passive voice, can appropriately convey a sense of passivity or helplessness when that is the desired effect. Notice that in the passage by Mann quoted earlier in this chapter, where Felix Krull is momentarily stunned by the sight of the food before him, linking verbs are used: It was a narrow room, there were rows and rows, while all the colors and shapes buffet his senses. Only as he gradually recovers can he stand, breathe, speak, and eventually grab.

I don’t mean to suggest that as an author you should analyze your grammar as you go along. Most word choice is instinctive, and instinct is often the best guide. However, I do mean to suggest that you should be aware of the vigor and variety of available verbs, and that if a passage lacks energy, it may be because your instinct has let you down. How often are subjects portrayed in some condition or are they acted upon, when they could more forcefully do?

A note of caution about active verbs: Make sparing use of what John Ruskin called the “pathetic fallacy”—the attributing of human emotions to natural and man-made objects. Even a description of a static scene can be invigorated if the houses stand, the streets wander, and the trees bend. But if the houses frown, the streets stagger drunkenly, and the trees weep, we will feel more strain than energy in the writing.

Prose Rhythm

Novelists and short-story writers are not under the same obligation as poets to reinforce sense with sound. In prose, on the whole, the rhythm is all right if it isn’t clearly wrong. But it can be wrong if, for example, the cadence contradicts the meaning; on the other hand, rhythm can greatly enhance the meaning if it is sensitively used.


In this extreme example, the short, clipped sentences and their parallel structures—subject, verb, modifier—work against the sense of slow, flowing movement. The rhythm could be effective if the character whose eyes we’re using is not appreciating or sharing the calm; otherwise it needs recasting.

The surface lay flat on the sluggish, slow-moving river, and the birds circled lazily overhead as Jon’s boat slipped forward.
the store opened again for business. They might seek other employment; if there was any other employment and the police did not get them.

Well, this doesn’t work. We may be willing to see the likeness between stock lost in a department store fire and men and cars lost in a military retreat; but “they” don’t shoot floorwalkers as the Italian military shot defeated line officers. And although a foreign accent might be a disadvantage in a foreign war, it’s hard to see how a floorwalker could be killed because of one, although it might make it hard for him to get hired in the first place, if... The mind twists trying to find any illuminating or essential logic in the comparison of a soldier to a floorwalker, and fails, so that the protagonist’s situation is trivialized in the attempt.

Mixed metaphors are so called because they ask us to compare the original image with things from two or more different areas of reference: As you walk the path of life, don’t founder on the reefs of ignorance. Life can be a path or a sea, but it cannot be both at the same time. The point of the metaphor is to fuse two images in a single tension. The mind is adamantly unwilling to fuse three.

Separate metaphors or similes too close together, especially if they come from areas of reference very different in value or tone, disturb in the same way the mixed metaphor does. The mind doesn’t leap; it stutters.

They fought like rats in a Brooklyn sewer. Nevertheless her presence was the axiom of his heart’s geometry, and when she was away you would see him walking up and down the street dragging his cane along the picket fence like an idle boy’s stick.

Any of these metaphors or similes might be acceptable by itself, but rats, axioms, and boy’s sticks connot a three different areas and tones, and two sentences cannot contain them all. Pointed in too many directions, a reader’s attention follows none.

Obscure and overdone metaphors falter because the author has misjudged the difficulty of the comparison. The result is either confusion or an insult to the reader’s intelligence. In the case of obscurity, a similarity in the author’s mind isn’t getting onto the page. One student described the spines on a prickly pear cactus as being “slender as a fat man’s fingers.” I was completely confused by this. Was it ironic, that the spines weren’t slender at all? Ah no, he said, hadn’t I noticed how startling it was when someone with a fleshy body had bony fingers and toes? The trouble here was that the author knew what he meant but had left out the essential abstraction in the comparison, the startling quality of the contrast: “the spines of the fleshy prickly pear, like slender fingers on a fat man.”

In this case, the simile was underexplained. It’s probably a more common impulse—we’re so anxious to make sure the reader gets it—to explain the obvious. In the novel Raw Silk, I had the narrator describe quarrels with her husband, “which I used to face with my dukes up in high confidence that we’d soon clear the air. The air can’t be cleared now. We live in marital Los Angeles. This is the air—polluted, poisoned.” A critic friend pointed out to me that

anybody who didn’t know about L.A. smog wouldn’t get it anyway, and that all the last two words did was ram the comparison down the reader’s throat. He was right. “The air can’t be cleared now. We live in marital Los Angeles. This is the air.” The rewrite is much stronger because it neither explains nor exaggerates; and the reader enjoys supplying the metaphorical link.

Metaphors using topical references, including brand names, esoteric objects, or celebrity names, can work as long as a sense of the connection is given; don’t rely for effect on knowledge that the reader may not have. To write, “The sisters looked like the Dixie Chicks” is to make the trio do your job; and if the reader happens to be a Beethoven buff, or Hungarian, or reading your story twenty years from now, there may be no way of knowing what the reference refers to. “They had the blindingly blond, in-your-face exuberance of the Dixie Chicks” will convey the sense even for someone who doesn’t watch country music cable. Likewise, “She was as beautiful as Theda Bara” may not mean much to you, whereas if I say, “She had the saucer eyes and satin hair of Theda Bara,” the comparison will “show,” and you’ll get it, close enough.

The Active Voice

If your prose is to be vigorous as well as vivid, if your characters are “come to life,” you must use the active voice. The active voice occurs when the subject of a sentence performs the action described by the verb of that sentence: She spilled the milk. When the passive voice is used, the object of the active verb becomes the subject of the passive verb: The milk was spilled by her.

The subject is acted upon rather than acting, and the effect is to weaken the prose and to distance the reader from the action.

The passive voice does have an important place in fiction, precisely because it expresses a sense that the character is being acted upon. If a prison guard is kicking the hero, then I was slammed into the wall; I was struck blindingly from behind and forced to the floor appropriately carries the sense of his helplessness.

In general, however, you should seek to use the active voice in all prose and to use the passive only when the actor is unknown or insignificant or when you want to achieve special stylistic effects like the one above.

But there is one other common grammatical construction that is in effect passive and can distance the reader from a sense of immediate experience. The verbs that we learn in school to call linking verbs are effectively passive because verbs with auxiliaries suggest an indefinite time and are never as sharply focused as active verbs. (Further editing his example cited earlier, Gardner contrasts the phrase “two snakes were fighting” with the improved “two snakes fought,” which pinpoints a specific moment; he further suggests substitution of active verbs, as in “two snakes whipped and lashed, striking at each other.”)

Linking verbs also invite complements that tend to be generalized or judgmental: Her hair looked beautiful. He was very happy. The room seemed inexplicably finished. They became famous. Let her hair bounce, tumble, cascade, or swing—we’ll see better. Let him laugh, leap, cry or howl a tree; we’ll experience his tow.
abstract idea of material (metal cans or memories) that once loomed large being crushed and all but crowded out by the volume of daily experience.

**METAPHORIC FAULTS TO AVOID**

Comparison is not a frivolity. It is, on the contrary, the primary business of the brain. Some eighteenth-century philosophers spoke of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which sense impressions were recorded, compared, and grouped. Now we're more likely to speak of the mind as a "computer" "storing" and "processing" "data." What both metaphors acknowledge is that comparison is the basis of all learning and all reasoning. When a child burns his hand on the stove and hears his mother say, "It's hot," and then goes toward the radiator and again hears her say, "It's hot," the child learns not to burn his fingers. The implicit real-life comparison is meant to convey a fact, and it teaches a mode of behavior. By contrast, the goal of literary comparison is to convey not a fact but a perception, and thereby to enlarge our scope of understanding. When we speak of "the flames of torment," our impulse is comprehension and compassion.

Nevertheless, metaphor is a dirty word in some critical circles, because of the strain of the pursuit. Clichés, mixed metaphors, and similes that are inept, unapt, obscure, or done to death may good prose and tax the patience of the most willing reader. If a metaphor is too familiar it operates as an abstraction rather than a particularizing detail. If it is too far-fetched it calls attention to the writer rather than to the meaning and produces a sort of hiccup in the reader's involvement.

There are more don'ts than dos to list for the writing of metaphor and simile, because every good comparison is its own justification by virtue of being apt and original.

To study good metaphor, read. In the meantime, avoid the following:

**Cliché metaphors** are metaphors so familiar that they have lost the force of their original meaning. They are inevitably apt comparisons; if they were not, they wouldn't have been repeated often enough to become clichés. But such images fail to surprise, and we blame the writer for this expenditure of energy without a payoff.

Or, to put it a worse way:

Clichés are the last word in bad writing, and it's a crying shame to see all you bright young things spoiling your deathless prose with phrases as old as the hills. You must keep your nose to the grindstone, because the sweet smell of success only comes to those who march to the beat of a different drummer.

It's a sad fact that at this stage of literary history, you may not say that eyes are like pools or stars, and you should be very wary of saying that they flood with tears. These have been so often repeated that they've become shorthand for emotions (attractions in the first and second instances, grief in the third) without the felt force of those emotions. Anytime you as writer record an emotion without convincing us to feel that emotion, you introduce a fatal distance between author and reader. Therefore, neither may your characters be hawk-eyed nor eagle-eyed; nor may they have ruby lips or pearly teeth or peaches-and-cream complexes or necks like swans or thighs like hams. Let them not shed single tears or freeze like deer caught in headlights. If you sense—and you may—that the moment calls for the special intensity of metaphor, you may have to sift through a whole stock of clichés that come readily to mind. Or it may be time for freewriting and giving the mind room to play. Sometimes your internal critic may reject as fantastic the comparison that, on second look, proves fresh and apt.

In any case, pools and stars have become clichés for eyes because they capture and manifest something essential about the nature of eyes. As long as eyes continue to contain liquid and light, there will be a new way of saying so.

Cliché can be useful as a device, however, for establishing authorial distance from a character or narrator. If the author tells us that Rome wasn't built in a day, we're likely to think the author has little to contribute to human insight; but if a character says so, in speech or thought, the judgment attaches to the character rather than to the author.

The door closed and he turned to find the dumpy figure, surmounted by the atrocious hat, coming toward him. "Well," she said, "you only live once and paying a little more for it, I at least won't meet myself coming and going."

"Some day I'll start making money...

"I think you're doing fine," she said, drawing on her gloves. "You've only been out of school a year. Rome wasn't built in a day."

Flannery O'Connor, "Everything That Rises Must Converge"

*italics added*

Far-fetched metaphors are the opposite of clichés: They surprise but are not apt. As the dead metaphor far-fetched suggests, the mind must travel too far to carry back the likeness, and too much is lost on the way. When such a comparison does work, we speak laudatorily of a "leap of the imagination." But when it does not, what we face is in effect a failed conceit: The explanation of what is alike about these two things does not convince. Very good writers in the search for originality sometimes fetch too far. Ernest Hemingway's talent was not for metaphor, and on the rare occasions that he used a metaphor, he was likely to strain. In this passage from *A Farewell to Arms*, the protagonist has escaped a firing squad and is fleeing the war.

You had lost your cars and your men as a floorwalker loses the stock of his department in a fire. There was, however, no insurance. You were out of it now. You had no more obligation. If they shot floorwalkers after a fire in the department store because they spoke with an accent they had always had, then certainly the floorwalkers would not be expected to return when
Sometimes the aptness of a comparison is achieved by taking it from an area of reference relevant to the thing compared. In Dombey and Son, Charles Dickens describes the ships’ instrument maker, Solomon Gillis, as having “eyes as red as if they had been small suns looking at you through a fog.” The simile suggests a seascape, whereas in One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Ken Kesey’s Rucky, rendered inert by shock therapy, has eyes “all smoked up and gray and deserted inside like blown fuses.” But the metaphor may range further from its original, in which case the abstraction conveyed must strike us as strongly and essentially appropriate. William Faulkner’s Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily” has “haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temple and about the eyesockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper’s face ought to look.” Miss Emily has no connection with the sea, but the metaphor reminds us not only of her sternness and self-sufficiency, but also that she has isolated herself in a locked house. The same character as an old woman has eyes that “looked like two pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough,” and the image domesticates her, robs her of her light.

Both metaphors and similes can be extended, meaning that the writer continues to present aspects of likeness in the things compared.

There was a white fog... standing all around you like something solid.
At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of sun hanging over it—all perfectly still—and then the shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves.

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

Notice that Conrad moves from a generalized image of “something solid” to the specific simile “as a shutter lifts”; reasserts the simile as a metaphor, “then the shutter came down again”; and becomes still more specific in the extension “as if sliding in greased grooves.”

Also note that Conrad emphasizes the dumb solidity of the fog by comparing the larger natural image with the smaller manufactured object. This is a technique that contemporary writers have used to effects both comic and profound, as when Frederick Barthelme in The Brothers describes a young woman “with a life stretching out in front of her like so many rent videos” or a man’s head “bobbing like an enormous Q-Tip against the little black sky.”

In a more usual metaphorical technique, the smaller or more ordinary image is compared with one more significant or intense, as in this example from Louise Erdrich’s “Machimanito,” where the narrator invokes the names of Anishinabe Indians dead of tuberculosis:

Their names grew within us, swelled to the brink of our lips, forced our eyes open in the middle of the night. We were filled with the water of the drowned, cold and black—unless water that lapped against the seal of our tongues or leaked slowly from the corners of our eyes. Within us, like ice shards, their names bobbed and shifted.

A conceit, which can be either metaphor or simile, is a comparison of two things radically and startlingly unlike—in Samuel Johnson’s words, “yoked by violence together.” A conceit is as far removed as possible from the purely sensory comparison of “the eyes of the potato.” It compares two things that have very little or no immediately apprehensible similarity; and so it is the nature of the conceit to be long. The author must explain to us, sometimes at great length, why these things can be said to be alike. When John Donne compares a flea to the Holy Trinity, the two images have no areas of reference in common, and we don’t understand. He must explain to us that the flea, having bitten both the poet and his lover, now has the blood of three souls in its body.

The conceit is more common to poetry than to prose because of the density of its imagery, but it can be used to good effect in fiction. In In The Day of the Locust, Nathanael West uses a conceit in an insistent devaluation of love. The screenwriter Claude Estee says:

Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press home the lever. There’s some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat, take a firm grip on your umbrella and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened.

"Love is like a vending machine" is a conceit; if the writer didn’t explain to us in what way love is like a vending machine, we’d founder trying to figure it out. So he goes on to develop the vending machine in images that suggest not "love" but seamy sex. The last image—"trying to look as though nothing had happened"—has nothing to do with the vending machine; we accept it because by this time we’ve fused the two ideas in our minds.

Deborah Galyn employs conceit in “The Incredible Appearing Man,” in a playfully self-conscious description of the overpowering effect of a new baby’s presence:

A baby transforms you, body and soul. The moment you give birth, your mind is instantaneously filled with Styrofoam peanuts. Your past is trash-compacted to make room for all the peanuts. As the baby grows, you add more peanuts, and the little tin can of your past gets more compressed. But it is still there, underneath all the peanuts. The smashed cans of your past never entirely disappear.

The comparison of a mind and a trash compactor is a conceit because physical or sensuous similarity is not the point. Rather, the similarity is in the
and back. And there was that funny time, she recalled, when Henry had to change the flat tire on Alligator Alley, and she’d thought the alligators would come up out of the swamp.

Just as the present scene will be more present to the reader without a filter, so we will be taken more thoroughly back to the time of the memory without a filter:

She and Henry had owned an ivory car once, though it had been a Chevy, with a hood shaped like a sugar scoop and chrome bumpers that stuck out a foot front and back. And there was that funny time Henry had to change the flat tire on Alligator Alley, and she’d thought the alligators would come up out of the swamp.

Observe that the pace of the reading is improved by the removal of the filters—at least partly, literally, because one or two lines of type have been removed.

**Comparison**

Every reader reading is a self-deceiver: We simultaneously “believe” a story and know that it is a fiction, a fabrication. Our belief in the reality of the story may be so strong that it produces physical reactions—tears, trembling, sighs, gasps, a headache. At the same time, as long as the fiction is working for us, we know that our submission is voluntary: that we have, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge pointed out, suspended disbelief. “It’s just a movie,” says the exasperated father as he takes his shrieking six-year-old out to the lobby. For the father the fiction is working; for the child it is not.

Simultaneous belief and awareness of illusion are present in both the content and the craft of literature, and what is properly called artistic pleasure derives from the tension of this is and is not. The content of a plot, for instance, tells us that something happens that does not happen, that people who do not exist behave in such a way, and that the events of life—which we know to be random, unrelated, and unfinished—are necessary, patterned, and come to closure. Pleasure in artistry comes precisely when the illusion rings true without destroying the knowledge that it is an illusion.

In the same way, the techniques of every art offer us the tension of things that are and are not alike. This is true of poetry, in which rhyme is interesting because tend sounds like mend but not exactly like; it is also true of music, whose interest lies in variations on a theme. And it is the fundamental nature of metaphor, from which literature derives.

Metaphor is the literary device by which we are told that something is, or is like, something that it clearly is not, or is not exactly, like. It is a way of showing, because it particularizes the essential nature of one thing by comparing it to another. What a good metaphor does is surprise us with the unlikeness of the two things compared while at the same time convincing us of the truth of the likeness. In the process it may also illuminate the meaning of the story and its theme. A bad metaphor fails to surprise or convince or both—and so fails to illuminate.

**TYPES OF METAPHOR AND SIMILE**

The simplest distinction between kinds of comparison, and usually the first one grasped by beginning students of literature, is between metaphor and simile. A simile makes a comparison with the use of like or as, a metaphor without. Though this distinction is technical, it is not entirely trivial, for a metaphor demands a more literal acceptance. If you say, “A woman is a rose,” you ask for an extreme suspension of disbelief, whereas “A woman is like a rose” acknowledges the artifice in the statement.

In both metaphor and simile, the resonance of comparison is in the essential or abstract quality that the two objects share. When a writer speaks of “the eyes of the houses” or “the windows of the soul,” the comparison of eyes to windows contains the idea of transmitting vision between the inner and the outer. When we speak of “the king of beasts,” we don’t mean that a lion wears a crown or sits on a throne (although in children’s stories the lion often does precisely that, in order to suggest a primitive physical likeness); we mean that king and lion share abstract qualities of power, position, pride, and bearing.

In both metaphor and simile a physical similarity can yield up a characterizing abstraction. So if “a woman” is either “a rose” or “like a rose,” the significance lies not in the physical similarity but in the essential qualities that such similarity implies: slenderness, suppleness, fragrance, beauty, color—and perhaps the hidden threat of thorns.

Every metaphor and simile I have used so far is either a cliché or a dead metaphor (a metaphor so familiar that it has lost its original meaning). Each of them may at one time have surprised by their aptness, but by now each has been used so often that the surprise is gone. I wished to use familiar examples in order to clarify that resonance of comparison depends on the abstractions conveyed in the likeness of the things compared. A good metaphor reverberates with the essential; this is the writer’s principle of choice.

So Flannery O’Connor, in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” describes the mother as having “a face as broad and innocent as a cabbage.” A soccer ball is roughly the same size and shape as a cabbage; so is a schoolroom globe; so is a street lump. But if the mother’s face had been as broad and innocent as any of these things, she would be a different woman altogether. A cabbage is also mild, heavy, dense, and cheap, and so it conveys a whole complex of abstractions about the woman’s class and mentality. There is, on the other hand, no innocence in the face of Shrike, in Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts, who “buried his triangular face like a hatchet in her neck.”
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE RIGHT WORD and the almost right word...is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

MARK TWAIN

Mechanics

Significant detail, the active voice, and prose rhythm are techniques for achieving the sensuous in fiction, means of helping the reader "sink into the dream" of the story, in John Gardner's phrase. Yet no technique is of much use if the reader's eye is wrenched back to the surface by misspellings or grammatical errors, for once the reader has been startled out of the story's "vivid and continuous dream," that reader may not return.

Spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and punctuation are a kind of magic; their purpose is to be invisible. If the sleight of hand works, we will not notice a comma or a quotation mark but will translate each instantly into a pause or an awareness of voice; we will not focus on the individual letters of a word but extract its sense whole. When the mechanics are incorrectly used, the trick is revealed and the magic fails; the reader's focus is shifted from the story to its surface. The reader is irritated at the author, and of all the emotions the reader is willing to experience, irritation at the author is not one.

There is no intrinsic virtue in standardized mechanics, and you can depart from them whenever you produce a result that adequately compensates for a distracting effect. But only then. Poor mechanics signal amateurism to an editor and suggest that the story itself may be flawed. Unlike the techniques of narrative, the rules of spelling, grammar, and punctuation can be coldly learned anywhere in the English-speaking world—and they should be learned by anyone who aspires to write.

We Didn't

STUART DYBEEK

We did it in front of the mirror
And in the light. We did it in darkness,
In water, and in the high grass.

Yehuda Amichai, "We Did It"

We didn't in the light; we didn't in darkness. We didn't in the fresh-cut summer grass or in the mounds of autumn leaves or on the snow where moonlight threw down our shadows. We didn't in your room on the canopy bed you slept in, the bed you'd slept in as a child, or in the backseat of my father's rusted Rambler, which smelled of the smoked chubs and kielbasa he delivered on weekends from my uncle Vincent's meat market. We didn't in your mother's Buick Eight, where a rosary twined the rearview mirror like a beaded, black snake with silver, cruciform fangs.

At the dead end of our lovers' lane—a side street of abandoned factories—where I perfected the pinch that springs open a bra; behind the lilac bushes in Marquette Park, where you first touched me through my jeans and your nipples, swollen against transparent cotton, seemed the shade of lilacs; in the balcony of the now defunct Clark Theater, where I wiped popcorn salt from my palms and slid them up your thighs and you whispered, "I feel like Doris Day is watching us," we didn't.

How adept we were at fumbling, how perfectly mistimed our timing, how utterly we confused energy with ecstasy.

Remember that night becalmed by heat, and the two of us, fused by sweat, trembling as if a wind from outer space that only we could feel was gusting across Oak Street Beach? Entwined in your faded Navajo blanket, we lay soul-kissing until you went with wanting.

We'd been kissing all day—all summer—kisses tasting of different shades of lip gloss and too many Cokes. The lake had turned hot pink, rose rapture, pearl amethyst with dusk, then washed in night black with a ruff of silver foam. Beyond a momentary horizon, silent bolts of heat lightning throbbed, perhaps setting barns on fire somewhere in Indiana. The beach that had been so crowded was deserted as if there was a curfew. Only the bodies of lovers remained, visible in lightning flashes, scattered like the fallen on a battlefield, a few of them moaning, waiting for the gulls to pick them clean.

On my fingers your slick scent mixed with the coconut musk of the suntan lotion we'd repeatedly smeared over each other's bodies. When your bikini top fell away, my hands caught your breasts, memorizing their delicate weight, my palms cupped as if bringing water to parched lips.

Along the Gold Coast, high-rises began to glow, window added to window, against the dark. In every lighted bedroom, couples home from work were stripping off their business suits, falling to the bed, and doing it. They did it before mirrors and pressed against the glass in streaming shower stalls; they did it against walls and the furniture in ways that required previously unimagined gymnastics, which they invented on the spot. They did it in honor of man and woman, in honor of beast, in honor of God. They did it because they'd been released, because they were home free, alive, and private, because they couldn't wait any longer, couldn't wait for the appointed hour, for the right time or temperature, couldn't wait for the future, for Messiahs, for peace on earth and justice for all. They did it because of the Bomb, because of pollution, because of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, because extinction might be just a blink away. They did it because it was Friday.
There is nothing very striking about the rhythm of this version, but at least it moves forward without obstructing the flow of the river.

The first impression I had as I stopped in the doorway of the immense City Room was of extreme rush and bustle, with the reporters moving rapidly back and forth in the long aisles in order to shove their copy at each other or making frantic gestures as they shouted into their many telephones.

This long and leisurely sentence cannot possibly provide a sense of rush and bustle. The phrases need to move as fast as the reporters; the verb must be pared down because it slows them down.

I stopped in the doorway. The City Room was immense, reporters rushing down the aisles, shoving copy at each other, bustling back again, flinging gestures, shouting into telephones.

The poet Rolfe Humphries remarked that “very is the least very word in the language.” It is frequently true that adverbs expressing emphasis or suddenness—extremely, rapidly, suddenly, phenomenally, quickly, immediately, insistently, definitely, terribly, awfully—slow the sentence down so as to dilute the force of the intended meaning. “It’s a very nice day,” said Humphries, is not as nice a day as “It is a day!” Likewise, “They stopped very abruptly” is not as abrupt as “They stopped.”

Just as action and character can find an echo in prose rhythm, so it is possible to help us experience a character’s emotions and attitudes through control of the starts and stops of prose tempo. In the following passage from Persuasion, Jane Austen combines generalization, passive verbs, and a staccato speech pattern to produce a kind of breathless blindness in the heroine.

...[A] thousand feelings rushed on Anne, of which this was the most consoling, that it would soon be over. And it was soon over. In two minutes after Charles’s preparation, the others appeared; they were in the drawing room. Her eye half Captain Wentworth’s, a bow, a courtesy passed; she heard his voice; he talked to Mary, said all that was right, said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing; the room seemed full, full of persons and voices, but a few minutes ended it.

The opening paragraph of the Stuart Dybek story “We Didn’t” (included at the end of this chapter) consists of several sentences, all of which open with the phrase “we didn’t” followed by a prepositional phrase identifying a place where the young couple did not consummate their relationship. The repetition reveals the narrator’s frustrations and introduces the complexities of the relationship described.

Often an abrupt change in the prose rhythm will signal a discovery or change in mood; such a shift can also reinforce a contrast in characters, actions, and attitudes. In this passage from Frederick Busch’s short story “Company,” a woman whose movements are relatively confined watches her husband move, stop, and move again.

Every day did not start with Vince awake that early, dressing in the dark, moving with whispery sounds down the stairs and through the kitchen, out into the autumn morning while ground fog lay on the milkweed burst open and on the stumps of harvested corn. But enough of them did.

I went to the bedroom window to watch him hunt in a business suit.

He moved with his feet in the slowly stirring fog, moving slowly himself with the rifle held across his body and his shoulders stiff. Then he stopped in a frozen watch for woodchucks. His stillness made the fog look faster as it blew across our field behind the barn. Vince stood. He waited for something to shoot. I went back to bed and lay between our covers again. I heard the bolt click. I heard the unemphatic shot, and then the second one, and after a while his feet on the porch, and soon the rush of water, the rattle of the pots on top of the stove, and later his feet again, and the car starting up as he left for work an hour before he had to.

The long opening sentence is arranged in a series of short phrases to move Vince forward. By contrast, “But enough of them did” comes abruptly, its abruptness as well as the sense of the words suggesting the woman’s alienation. When Vince starts off again more slowly, the repetition of “moved, slowly stirring, moving slowly,” slows down the sentence to match his strides. “Vince stood” again stills him, but the author also needs to convey that Vince stands for a long time, waiting, so we have the repetitions “he stopped, his stillness, Vince stood, he waited.” As his activity speeds up again, the tempo of the prose speeds up with another series of short phrases, of which only the last is drawn out with a declarative clause, “as he left for work an hour before he had to,” so that we feel the retreat of the car in the distance. Notice that Busch chooses the phrase “the rush of water,” not the flow or splash of water, and how the word “rush” also points to Vince’s actions. Here, meaning reinforces a tempo that, in turn, reinforces meaning. (An added bonus is that variety in sentence lengths and rhythms helps to hold readers’ attention.)

“Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien demonstrates a range of rhythms with a rich variation of effects. Here is one:

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wrist watches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between 15 and 20 pounds....

In this passage the piling of items one on the other has the effect of loading the men down and at the same time increasingly suggests the rhythm of their marching as they “hump” their stuff. Similar lists through the story create a rhythmic thread, while variations and stoppages underscore shifts of emotion and sudden crises.
becoming “symbolic in the way they work,” O’Connor notes. “While having their essential place in the literal level of the story, [details] operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction.”

No amount of concrete detail will move us, therefore, unless it also implicitly suggests meaning and value. Following is a passage that fails, not because it lacks detail, but because those details lack significance.

Terry Landon, a handsome young man of twenty-two, was six foot four and broad-shouldered. He had medium-length thick blond hair and a natural tan, which set off the blue of his intense and friendly long-lashed eyes.

Here we have a good deal of generic sensory information, but we still know very little about Terry. There are so many broad-shouldered twenty-two-year-olds in the world, so many blonds, and so on. This sort of cataloging of characteristics suggests an all-points bulletin: Male Caucasian, medium height, light hair, last seen wearing gray raincoat. Such a description may help the police locate a suspect in a crowd, but the assumption is that the identity of the person is not known. As an author you want us to know the character individually and immediately.

The fact is that all our ideas and judgments are formed through our sense perceptions, and daily, moment by moment, we receive information that is not merely sensuous in this way. Four people at a cocktail party may do nothing but stand and nibble canapés and may talk nothing but politics and the latest films. But you feel perfectly certain that X is furious at Y, who is flirting with Z, who is wounding Q, who is trying to comfort X. You have only your senses to observe with. How do you reach these conclusions? By what gestures, glances, tones, touches, choices of words?

It may be that this constant emphasis on judgment makes the author, and the reader, seem opinionated or self-righteous. “I want to present my characters objectively/neutrally. I’m not making any value judgments. I want the reader to make up his or her own mind.” Yet human beings are constantly judging: How was the film? He seemed friendly. What a boring class! Do you like it here? She’s very thin. That’s fascinating. I’m so clumsy. You’re gorgeous tonight. Life is crazy, isn’t it?

The fact is that when we are not passing such judgments, it’s because we are indifferent. Although you may not want to sanctify or damn your characters, you do want us to care about them, and if you refuse to direct our judgment, you may be inviting our indifference. Usually, when you “don’t want us to judge,” you mean that you want our feelings to be mixed, paradoxical, complex. She’s horribly irritating, but it’s not her fault. He’s sexy, but there’s something cold about it underneath. If this is what you mean, then you must direct our judgment in both or several directions, not in no direction.

Even a character who doesn’t exist except as a type or function will come to life if presented through significant detail, as in this portrait of an aunt in Dorothy Allison’s story “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know.” Like many of the female relatives the adult narrator mentions, the aunt embodies a powerful, nurturing force that nonetheless failed to protect the narrator from childhood abuse.

My family runs to heavy women, gravy-fed working women, the kind usually seen in pictures taken at mining disasters. Big women, all of my aunts move under their own power and stalk around telling everybody else what to do. But Aunt Alma was the prototype, the one I had loved most, starting back when she had given us free meals in the roadhouse she’d run for awhile…. Once there, we’d be fed on chicken gravy and biscuits, and Mama would be fed from the well of her sister’s love and outrage.

For a character who is a “prototype,” we have a remarkably clear image of this woman. Notice how Allison moves us from generalization toward sharpness of image, gradually bringing the character into focus. First she has only a size and gender, then a certain abstract “power” and an appeal to our visual memory of the grieving, tough women seen in documentary photographs; then a distinct role as the one who “had given us free meals” when the family hit hard times. Once in focus as manager of a particular roadhouse, Alma’s qualities again become generalized to the adult women of the family.

The power in them, the strength and the heat! … How could my daddy, my uncle, ever stand up to them, dare to raise hand or voice to them? They were a power on the earth.

Finally, the focus narrows to the individual again, whose body has been formed by the starch that poverty made a necessity and that at last kept hunger temporarily at bay: “My aunt always made biscuits. What else stretched so well? Now those starch meals shadowed her loose shoulders and dimpled her fat white elbows.”

The point is not that an author must never express an idea, general quality, or judgment. But, in order to carry the felt weight of fiction, these abstractions must be realized through the senses—“I smelled chicken gravy and hot grease, the close thick scent of love and understanding.” Through details these abstract qualities live.

**Good writers may “tell” about almost anything in fiction except the characters’ feelings. One may tell the reader that the character went to a private school—or one may tell the reader that the character hates spaghetti—but with rare exceptions the characters’ feelings must be demonstrated: fear, love, excitement, doubt, embarrassment, despair become real only when they take the form of events—action (or gesture), dialogue, or physical reaction to setting. Detail is the lifeblood of fiction.**

**JOHN GARDNER**
**WRITING ABOUT EMOTION**

Fiction offers feelings for which the reader doesn’t pay—and yet to evoke those feelings, it is often necessary to portray sensory details that the reader may have experienced. Simply labeling a character’s emotion as love or hatred will have little effect, for such abstraction operates solely on a vague, intellectual level; rather, emotion is the body’s physical reaction to information the senses receive. The great Russian director Stanislavski, originator of realistic “Method” acting, urged his students to abandon the clichéd emotive postures of the nineteenth-century stage in favor of emotions evoked by the actor’s recollection of sensory details connected with a personal past trauma. By recalling such details as the tingling of fingertips, the smell of singed hair, and the tensing of calf muscles, an emotion such as anger might naturally be induced within the actor’s body.

**THE PAST IS BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE ONE never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don’t have complete emotions about the present, only about the past.... That is why we dwell on the past, I think.**

_VIRGINIA WOOLF_

Similarly, in written fiction, if the writer depicts the precise physical sensations experienced by the character, a particular emotion may be triggered by the reader’s own sense memory. In his story “The Easy Way,” author Tom Perrotta describes the moment in which a lottery winner learns of a jealous friend’s death: “I stood perfectly still and let the news expand inside of me, like a bubble in my chest that wouldn’t rise or pop. I waited for anger or grief to fill the space it opened, but all I felt just then was an unsteadiness in my legs, a faulty connection with the ground.” By tracing the physical reaction and staying true to the shock of the moment, Perrotta conveys the initial impact of this loss.

“Get control of emotion by avoiding the mention of the emotion,” urges John L’Heureux. “To avoid melodrama, aim for a restrained tone rather than an exaggerated one. A scene with hysteria needs more, not less control in the writing: keep the language deflated and rooted in action and sensory detail.”

There are further reasons to avoid labeling emotion: emotion is seldom pure. Conflicting feelings often run together; we rarely stop to analyze our passions as we’re caught up in them; and the reader may cease to participate when a label is simply given.

**FILTERING**

John Gardner, in _The Art of Fiction_, points out that in addition to the faults of insufficient detail and excessive use of abstraction, there’s a third failure:

...the needless filtering of the image through some observing consciousness. The amateur writes: “Turning, she noticed two snakes fighting in among the rocks.” Compare: “She turned. In among the rocks, two snakes were fighting…” Generally speaking—though no laws are absolute in fiction—vividness urges that almost every occurrence of such phrases as “she noticed” and “she saw” be suppressed in favor of direct presentation of the thing seen.

The filter is a common fault and often difficult to recognize—although once the principle is grasped, cutting away filters is an easy means to more vivid writing. As a fiction writer you will often be working through “some observing consciousness.” Yet when you step back and ask readers to observe the observer—to look at rather than through the character—you start to tell—not-show and rip us briefly out of the scene. Here, for example, is a student passage quite competent except for the filtering:

 Mrs. Blair made her way to the chair by the window and sank gratefully into it. _She looked out the window and there, across the street, she saw_ the ivory BMW parked in front of the fire plug once more. _It seemed to her, though, that something was wrong with it. She noticed that it was listing almost the back and side, and then saw that the back rim was resting almost on the asphalt._

Remove the filters from this paragraph and we are allowed to stay in Mrs. Blair’s consciousness, watching with her eyes, sharing understanding as it unfolds for her:

 Mrs. Blair made her way to the chair by the window and sank gratefully into it. Across the street the ivory BMW was parked in front of the fire plug again. Something was wrong with it, though. It was listing toward the back and side, the back rim resting almost on the asphalt.

A similar filtering occurs when the writer chooses to begin a flashback and mistakenly supposes that the reader is not clever enough to follow this technique without a guiding transition:

 Mrs. Blair _thought back to the time that she and Henry had owned an ivory car, though it had been a Chevy. She remembered clearly that it had a hood shaped like a sugar scoop, and chrome bumpers that stuck out a foot front_