

Not Just Any

When we write for a stranger, we are asking her to cross a border, out of her experience into our own. In a moment we will return to border crossings that are not only fraught with drama, but, in addition, are likely to create strong responses—whether of support, curiosity, standoffishness, moral judgment or disdain—depending on the reader’s preconceived feeling about each of the situations described.

However, for right now, let us imagine more simple universals, such as:

1. A grandmother’s Page One Moment with her grandchild or grandchildren, or else the reverse—a grandmother scene told from the grandchild’s point of view.

- ▶ Be careful when you work with the exercises around this one to remember that unless you find a situation that particularizes this scene, it will become just anyone’s family photo.

2. The death of a parent.

- ▶ Again, be careful to think of what will particularize this situation which, sooner or later, befalls us all.

As people begin to work with us, they often confuse our focus on figuring out each story’s drama with what they interpret as a wish for trauma. Before we look into an interaction between a transgendered woman at the moment of her sex-change operation and an Islamic woman looking for a metaphor to express her need to climb the walls and remove the veils that handicapped generations of women before her, let us turn to a story that seemed almost too simple and sweet when it first was presented.

Chris Giordano was an overprotected 22-year-old who joined our workshop “because [her] mother felt that the experience might be good for [her].” With just one exception, the women in the group were her mother’s age or older, and had lived through a great deal of trauma. In her effort to fit in, Chris had silently looked for a small bit of trauma. “But the only thing I was able to come up with was the burden of bearing the torch for a long line of virgins dating from 1492 in the middle of the sexual revolution,” Chris told us many years later. How could this compare to the stories of poverty and family and political violence she heard every week?

The only thing that convinced Chris that she might belong, she confessed, was the feeling that “in the face of so much pain, a story of

Fast-forward into caring

As we move back and forth from very startling and unusual examples to those that are so universal we wonder if they are worthy of being told to a stranger, we will be learning very gradually to distinguish between “still pictures” that can only speak to those who already know us and scenes that fast-forward a reader into a caring that realistically she cannot have on page one.

At the end of this chapter, I will be asking you to choose examples of your own, but for now, read through my examples in that relaxed meandering way that allows you to pick up whatever strikes you.

Drama vs. trauma

Within any group, you will find those who are worried that if they tell it fully, the degree of pain they have undergone will be off-putting.

Their concerns are counter-balanced by the worries of those who feel un-entitled to relay their stories because they “haven’t suffered enough.”

“Isn’t hardship what creates drama?” comes a shy tentative voice from one side of the room.

“But how can I write *How Green Was My Valley*, if my valley wasn’t green?” I remember asking myself as a beginning writer trying to reconcile the romantic literature I loved with the darkness of my memories.

In becoming each writer’s idealized Stranger/Reader, we must remember that it is that very yearning to be touched by stories in tonal ranges radically different from our own that opens us up to the full range of narrative possibility.

As opposite palettes meet and mingle, awareness of the interplay of light and shadow sharpens.

Those whose life-telling requires dark turbulent brushstrokes can learn such a great

deal from those working in pinks and in yellows, on a canvas that often appears small at first glance. Each stimulates the other to take on a wider range.

Thoughts on beginning students, Shakespeare and Beethoven

As teachers of writing, we have been taught to avoid the sentimental, and yet there is often only a very fine line between what is sentimental and what is profound. (We have only to think about the works of Shakespeare to know this is true.)

As teachers we have too often been taught to make separate rules for the already established/great writers and our new beginners.

How might I help Chris to translate her own tremulousness onto the page, enabling her to hear her own music without fear, yet to write it so that others would also be able to hear it, without turning away from her romanticism?

Hearing the music inside us

As we struggle to bring out each student's special music, I like to imagine that we are all a little bit like Beethoven at the end, deaf to our own deepest resonances.

Yet when another can relay our notes back to us, we are capable of hearing long-ago echoes from the time when our insides were audible.

I believe that we all once heard ourselves in whatever powers we were granted; but that at some point, either gradually or suddenly, our range of self-hearing was suppressed.

hope, maybe even a book about miracles, might be needed." As a child, she had felt it was her role to cheer up the adults whenever they were sad. She believed she had been given magical powers.

Might she produce her "miracle" by conveying "the way she experienced joy at those moments when she needed most badly to be brave?" she quite seriously asked, as she went on to tell us in a voice so soft it was almost impossible to hear it, that she believed she "had been sent [to us] in order to provide the cheer that might balance the sadness" (which seemed to her young mind perhaps even greater than it was).

"However, I'm afraid no one will want to read about that girl who would ask God for a golden penny to fall," she said somewhere in the middle of it all.

As I listened, I wanted to protect her, not only from her own vulnerability, but from both the jaded and overly sentimental reactions coming from the other workshop members. While I feared those who would squelch her spirit by mocking the sugary coatings behind which she was still hiding, I equally feared those such as Dorothy, whose identification with the child wishing for a miracle threatened to take Chris out of the running for the critical feedback that would transform her oversimplified romanticism into a tale that would truly speak to others.

Could we force the same narrative requirements on Chris' miracle that we had forced on Dorothy and Hazel?



At first the other women in the group were somewhat shocked when we talked Chris through various possible Page One Moments with the same seriousness we had brought to helping them find their own. But their judgment quickly vanished as Chris play-acted a Page One Moment in which she would be "noticing Nature, with dew and the wind, experiencing that spirit that I contact when I need to be brave."

Pages about the joy of jumping on beds when everyone else was out of the house, intermingled with upset over the fact that her brother, the boy, seemed to be better treated than she was, led her to spend the next couple of months writing a novella about "a duck miracle." While it contained many lovely passages and meditations, as Chris found ever more subtle ways to become that magical child on the page, in the end, the depth and brightness of the writing went far beyond what the rather limited story could hold. I often wonder what would have happened if we hadn't decided to meet her in that land of miracles,

even while insisting on as large a structure as possible for something so simple as her ducks.

Chris was still on the track of trying to heal the older women through “using [her] magical powers to make happiness” when she suggested a second book about the summer she had spent teaching her grandmother to love her. “You see, my grandmother hated me just because I looked exactly like a cousin who had been very cruel to her when she first came to America. The summer I was eight, she kept calling me Elizabeth, the hated cousin’s name, but this changed when I saved her life down in the pump house when she was trying to fix the pump and the ladder broke. Could I write a book about teaching my grandmother that I was no one but myself?”

Now that we had come to know her, we could see that Chris would turn everything she touched into a book about miracles. But how, without falling into self-congratulation, does one write about one’s own magic?



In the way that she first told her story, Chris had revealed the specialness of her current-day relationship with her grandmother. Could she start with that place and then circle backward? Would that give the whole thing a more intriguing structural dimension, if the shift from hatred to love was announced right away?



It was in our giving Chris permission to meander and muse her way into the story that we helped her to validate the drama even in very small moments, but it was also in our insistence that every moment have a shape. The small moment I will reproduce here became anything but small when Chris accepted our dare to make sure that each section took the Stranger/Reader to a place at the end very different from where she had come in.

CHINK IN A DAM
by Christine Giordano

Back at the bungalow, Grandma was snoring from her big feathered in her room. She had thoughtfully left the door unlocked for me; something she was always afraid of doing while she slept. I creaked the screen door open, careful not to upset the beetles too

On making the small moment large

As you read through this piece, think carefully of what it might take to give someone permission to pause so fully in seemingly small moments.

Think also about how one creates the fullness of being back in childhood without taking on simplified vocabulary or ways of describing perceptions.

Moving details and those that stand still

I want you also to muse on the difference between the sort of thematically and dramatically moving details that abound in this piece, and the kind of details that often come out of the command to “show the reader more” when it is given without talking through the deeper direction of the piece at hand.

Notice as you move from one paragraph to another how there isn’t a detail that isn’t critical to the larger story?

It is not that Chris deliberately planned her details to function this way. Her job as the writer was merely to be there in the moment as fully as she could.

Our job was to hold her in those moments when her rudder was most fully pointed toward her goal.

Chris’ writing process

People asked us how long it took Chris to write this piece. It is important, as we share it with you, to note that it was written over a period of a month or more, and that its most daring sections were often rewrites of places where Chris “stuck her Toe in the Water Half-way,” as we often like to put it.

Again, we were careful never to ask Chris either to “show us more” or to let us know more about how she was feeling.

Rather, we had her talk us through the deeper direction each time a transformation seemed to be skipped over too fast.

much, slipped inside, and locked it with the secure hook Grandpa had made sure would never come loose . . .

And when I crawled into bed and the sheets were cold, they reminded me that none of my comforts from my bed at home were in this house. I had no stuffed animals to bring up onto my bed, no covers that weren’t damp from the night air, and no dreamland bed that I would close my eyes and imagine into a big sailboat that would sail with me and all my stuffed animals into the magical land of unexplored dreams where anything was possible. But worse yet, I was slowly realizing, and it started as just a feeling of disappointment, that I was lonely. Incurably lonely.

The only cure to this mood in the past had been to crawl into bed beside my mother, cuddle my head into her and talk to her while she hummed me to sleep. She had an atonal way of crooning that she reserved only for when she knew I was tired and needed to sleep. It always worked. That and the way she would warm my hands and feet in that snug space between her calves or under her arms or the nestle of her neck when I was cold at night or in the mornings. I would always be welcome to crawl under her covers and be treated like the “little bean” I was.

But now I was alone. In this cold place in the bungalow where Mom wasn’t and wouldn’t be because Mom was far away in Europe, I was alone. I felt like it was time for me to grow up now. Like I shouldn’t need my mother now. Like if I could just be a grown-up I wouldn’t need her. Like if I was a big girl, I wouldn’t even long for her. But I felt so lonely, so stranded in this cold, musty room.

I looked around me and saw the creatures on the wall that Grandpa had trapped and killed and stuffed to hang as testimonials to his power and vigor. Weasels and hawks arched in life-like coldness; hard and stiff to the touch—cold-eyed and bitter to my gaze. They hung around me in the position they had died in; animal shrines to soft and strong animals who once were but could never be again. I shivered. Oh, how I longed for the happy faces of my stuffed animals that I would never, ever hurt! MY stuffed animals that I loved and cuddled and who tended to wrap their arms around me when I slept.

In the future, when Grandma is speaking of this night, she will tell of hearing soft whimperings from the porch. Whimperings that first sounded like a small animal, but as she listened, became recognizable as the soft, hushed low cries of a child without her

mother. A child very much alone whom she had to help, whom she had to love.

But I don't remember whimpering. I don't remember seeming lonely to anyone but me. I just remember burying myself into the cold, damp, moldy-smelling covers of my bed out on the bungalow's porch and shuddering because a damp coldness had seeped into me, and my happy reserves were somehow again drained. My wood burning stove of compassion held nothing but cold ashes now.

I missed my mother. This I knew. But I also knew that my feet were cold from the clammy floor and I was being watched by the beady eyes of the dead animals that surrounded my bed. I don't remember whimpering. But I do remember how I felt when I heard what I heard.

"Beanily?"

It was Grandma's voice calling from the dull darkness. It was high and inquisitive and full of the rounded tones of the strength I no longer had.

Why now? I felt naked and exposed; like someone had torn off the shower curtain while I showered in a public bathroom. I couldn't answer.

Why was she awake? I didn't want to see her.

"Beanily?" she called again.

I needed to be alone. "It's late!" I wanted to say, "Leave me ALONE!" And I remember the knot that formed in my stomach.

She knew I was awake. She was getting more insistent. I hated her. I hated that because she wanted to see me, I'd have to see her. She was the authority. She was my elder that I had to respect. Even if I was in no condition to see anyone, I had to see her. Maybe I could still pretend I was sleeping. Why did she think I was awake, anyway?

"Beanily?" she called again. She knew I was awake for sure.

Now my body was a violin string of fear, anxiety and anger and it wanted to sing a shrill, long, high note. I had to go to her and I knew it.

Slowly, I crawled out of bed and shuffled over to her, careful in the darkness not to bump into anything, but also careful not to put on a light. I needed the veil.

Soon I was standing on the clammy cold wood floor in her doorway and looking at her. Her hands were bunched like a chipmunk's front paws over her chest so she could flatten and squish her dome-like feather comforter down to see me better.

I was able to find the "holes," usually by locating those moments when a change occurred and the rhythm didn't break, which is a process I liken to listening to music.

Chris was able to respond by dreaming herself into the content of each hole I found, first aloud in class, and then later quietly writing by herself with the memory of play-acting each unrealized section to us. It was that play-acting that helped to give her courage to go deeper and deeper.

Avoiding "Show, don't tell . . ."

► Do note also how much would have been missed if we had badgered Chris with that command, all too popular in writing classes. For it is in the beauty of her intermingling what she sees, feels and smells with telling her deepest feeling that her power and originality lies.

► Note how it is almost always in the telling of what is secret and hidden that she causes us in turn to quicken.

This is of course what all great writers have known, over the centuries, regardless of whether they were working in Victorian forms or in 20th-century stream-of-consciousness, so that I am always a bit mystified as to how "Show, don't tell" found its way into the rubric for teaching writing.

I didn't want to be looked at. Didn't want to be inspected. I just wanted to go back and hide.

"Come here, Beanily," she called from the pale darkness in her room.

And then she did something horrific. Something that was unfair. She pulled the feather dome away from her, making a crawl-way under her covers to invite me into it.

I was caught off guard. I wanted to scream, "NO, no, please leave me alone!" I was gripped with fear. The closer I got to her, the more she'd see in my face and the more she'd think I needed her. And the more she'd offer me her false, trap-bottomed comfort. I didn't need her—no matter how lonely I felt. I didn't want her. Couldn't be soft around her. It would be the ultimate betrayal to myself if I let myself be comforted by my attacker—the woman who called me by her despised enemy's name. I needed nothing from Grandma.

"No, no, that's OK Meema." I said.

"Beanily, come here," Grandra's voice, gentle with sleep, insisted. I could feel myself caving in. I had no out. I had to, even if I was tight and cringing inside, I had to lie beside her. Or else I'd hurt her by rejecting her love.

Slowly I walked to the edge of her bed. Every fiber of my being screamed at me not to do what I was about to do, but I forced myself to anyway. Standing where I was outside of the covers seemed like a place in the warm sun. The crawlspace seemed like going underground to a cold, hostile place, far away from any comfort I could offer myself.

As I crept closer to Grandma, teetering on the edge of freedom and entrapment, I resigned myself to be strong. I could feel out my emotions about this later, but I dared not show them now.

I soon lay stiff by her side, her scent of plump, sweaty flesh washing over me. I knew I had to make believe I was genuinely happy to be here, that since she was being nice to me I was somehow feeling better. Because I knew if I "felt better" I could go back to my own bed. But I was afraid I would break down and start to cry.

She was so not my mother. And so not what I needed. She even *smelled* offensive. I didn't know what I would do if she began touching me.

And soon, she did. With her small hand, she began to stroke my

shoulders, crooning “It’s alright, Beanily. Mom will come home soon . . .” And I wanted to run again. Run and run away. It was either that or I feared I’d lash out at her with the feelings that were really on my mind. I hated her for trying to comfort me. She had no right. NO RIGHT. And here she was trying to pretend to know what I was feeling. “Mom will come home soon.” How dare she! She didn’t know me. “Mom will come home soon.” Had no idea what I was going through. How could she even presume to know what I was feeling?

But a tiny voice inside me wondered, *How did she know I missed my mother?* and a tiny part of me soaked up all the warmth from her small, wrinkled hand on my shoulder. And a tiny part of me wanted someone, anyone to snuggle into. And soon, I began to feel these tiny parts of me all calling out to my strong self that lay stiff and stoic by her side.

The tiny parts, on the inside, felt like chinks in a huge, strong dam; the kind of dam that no one thinks will ever leak. Well, I started to leak. The tiny parts of me forced themselves out as slow tears in my eyes. But as soon as the tears hit my cheek, the tiny parts of me all got together and formed a sneak attack and soon I was shuddering and sobbing, and Grandma’s hand was now an arm and next, I was cradled in her arms, sobbing once again, like the child I was suddenly allowed to be.

At very first, everything in me detested myself when I turned towards her, but once I did, everything in me needed to cry. To cry against her. And when I did, the huge dam broke down inside me, leaving only a river between us; a river I let pour out and all over her. And while I did, she held me and embraced me in all of her soft warmth. All of her big body became a pillow to nestle myself into. And her arms held me tight—so tight, I didn’t care if I breathed because I was finally being held by someone, wanted by someone and secure. And her words, “Don’t worry Beanily, Mom will be home soon” became words of pure intent. I knew by them, even if she held me and embraced me, that she knew that the only thing that would take my ache away would be to see my mother again. And I felt bad, because I was taking what I needed from her anyway, intent on missing my mother, and giving nothing in return. I felt bad, but I needed to. And I loved her, at that moment, I loved her for understanding and offering herself to me.

Sly secrets when they are shared

Over a decade has gone by since Chris wrote this piece, and she is no longer that innocent 22-year-old. Or is she? For, this is part of the wonder of touching our deepest voices where we evoke past selves.

By now Chris has read this segment in a large variety of venues, yet whether she reads it in a small safe workshop setting or before a large audience, her work “does something” to all who hear it.

The last time I heard her read, not only was everyone in tears. Women who were struggling with adult love relationships suddenly were telling her that really her piece was about all love. Women who felt bad about their fears about being touched were saying that she gave them permission to feel the way they did that they had been seeking all of their lives. Women in the role of the grandmother were rethinking their desires to touch without waiting for an invitation.

► But note how these deep universals are only let in through the utter specificity of this story’s thrust.

► Note also that if we hadn’t kept daring Chris to keep going in a dramatic direction the whole piece would have fallen apart.

Applying principles of empathy equally across moments of pain and joy

I have reproduced this piece in full because it is critical when we think of facilitating memoir-writing in a group setting not to favor stories with seemingly more dramatic content, nor to decide that a somber tone will yield deeper results than a joyous one.

What makes the Herstory approach work in the end is the fact that we gauge what creates reader empathy moving rapidly back and forth between workshop members in terms of style and content and voice, so that we can see what principles of movement and structure universally apply.