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BEYOND PLOT

*Charles Baxter*

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## Inflection and the Breath of Life

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"It isn't what you say; it's *how* you say it." Emphasis on the "how." This pronouncement from my high school speech class is worth considering whenever a surface conversation seems to be blandly innocent while the depths roil with demons. *How* you say something is more likely to get you in trouble than *what* you say. When, following the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan, the then Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, held a press conference and said he was in charge, his trembling voice inadvertently let the American people know that he wasn't even in charge of himself.

Suggestions about the inner life, and the soul's secret preoccupations, arrive by means of overtones. Pandemonium can be struck with one clear if barely audible note.

Before Steven Spielberg, and before *Jurassic Park*, and before *The Lost World* was found and filmed and sold to millions, before all this, there was, and still is, along Highway 12 in southern Michigan close to the Ohio border, a humble tourist trap, Dinosaur World. A little roadside attraction in Michigan's so-called Irish Hills, it shares the neighborhood with a Mystery Spot,

where the laws of gravity are violated and where, the billboards claim, scientists are baffled; a fireworks outlet called The Boom Box; the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential railroad car next to a stand selling chocolate fudge; Chilly Willy's putt-putt golf course; and other odds and ends of local tourist interest, including a water slide and a go-cart track. Most of the businesses could use a few coats of paint. The place has seen better times.

When our son was seven years old, my wife and I decided to make a day of it and take him to Dinosaur World. We figured he was ready for the terrors of prehistoric killer raptors and reptiles. He thought so, too.

Outside Dinosaur World, a fountain of sorts spouts water tinted dark blue, thanks to heavy doses of dye. You pay the entry fee and are loaded onto a train of what seem to be about eight rusting golf carts, Cushman Cars, linked together. There are no rails. These carts are on kid-sized rubber wheels. While you wait for the guide, you watch the Triceratops, the one dinosaur available for free viewing, constructed out of chicken wire and some sort of painted plaster. His mouth opens and shuts every five seconds, like an elf in a department-store Christmas-window display. The sound of reptilian indigestion emerges from a hidden loudspeaker.

At last our guide arrived. He was a high school

kid. This was his summer job. August: you could tell from the expression on his face that he was exasperated and bored. He looked at us, his customers and fellow adventurers, with ferociously undisguised teen-aged indifference. "Welcome to Dinosaur World," he said in a flat monotone. "We are about to go into a land that existed before time began." He had spoken the line so often that it had turned into one word. "Weareabouttogo into a land that existed before time began." He plunked himself down into the driver's seat of the head golf cart and began speaking into a microphone, aided by feedback. "Fasten your seat belts," he said, unnecessarily. "Lemme know if there are any questions."

The hapless train, moving backwards in time in several respects, followed the asphalt road around the displays of chicken wire and painted plaster. The multinational technology of Disney World was far away. Every so often the guide would stop to explain a prehistoric wonder, reciting his script with ill-concealed indifference. At the climax of the tour, close by an eight-foot-high killer dinosaur, he mumbled, "This is the fearsome Tyrannosaurus Rex." Then he yawned, and the three of us, my wife and son and I, burst out laughing. The guide looked slightly taken aback. "What's a matter?" he asked. "You're not scared?"

I shrugged. I thought of Leo Tolstoy's remark after reading a play by the writer Leonid Andreyev. Tolstoy

had not been impressed. "He puts on a sheet and says, 'Boo!'" Tolstoy said, "but I am not afraid."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is an unstable category. What makes it curious is not the "suspension" but the "willing." None of us at Dinosaur World expected to believe what we were seeing. We expected to be invited to a little party where the host acted as if *he* believed in his own flimflam and was inviting us into that *as if*. The tour guide had an actor's job to perform a role. His responsibility was to encourage us to suspend our disbelief. That was his task, his summer job. To pretend within certain limits that he was inside a moment of time and that we could join him there, he had to hypnotize us a little by means of his act. This projection of belief is the technical problem of narratives concerning fantasy materials. Pretending to be interested, he had to convince. When you cry, "Wolf!" you have to sound as if you mean it. Otherwise, no wolf. As Orson Welles once said, there are no magicians, there are only actors who are playing magicians. A great magician is a great actor. And great actors perform hypnosis on a small scale and cause us to fall asleep into another world.

Any reader becomes involved in a story when an attachment forms to a set of narrated events, or when the tone of the narrative has so many signs of emphasis

that it rouses itself to life, and disbelief is suspended. The story starts to enact itself, often by means of inflection. When someone cries "Wolf!" believably, that conviction spreads outward. A broken, twisted face appears before you, speaking: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say. I says you're lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you." (William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*) You can't hear these lines properly without hearing the malice dripping off of words.

Inflection, which I am defining here as the tone with which the wording is conveyed, particularly when applied to extreme events or circumstances, can elevate fiction into sudden shocking life. It signals belief and urgency. The urgency wakes us up. At such moments, emotion is not recollected in tranquillity but is re-enacted before our eyes. The story is singing or groaning itself awake. And yet another world is awakening, too, the one I have been referring to as being "beyond plot." Inflection is the sign of spoken intensity, conscious and unconscious: an inflection offers a glimpse of what is usually unseen. If you say something the wrong way, your subterranean realm is suddenly revealed. Tonality takes you from what has literally been said down there, to the realm of shadowy implications.

Writers of fiction not only stage events, but often suggest how those events and statements are to be inflected; that is, how they are to be acted, pitched, and

voiced. Fiction writers thus serve as both the creators and the directors of their own work. My dictionary defines "inflection" as an alteration in tone or pitch of the voice. This might seem to be a small matter, but an alteration in tone or pitch can be the difference between being inside a moment and being out of it, or between fighting words and a statement of love, using the identical phrase, such as "You're really something," a completely meaningless statement without a tone or context to support it.

A monotone equals monotony. In the Land of Dullness, everybody speaks like a robot and goes about their mechanical business with their heads down. They eat their words, sentence by sentence. By contrast, inflection gives us both an indication of life-in-the-moment and a sense of how a phrase is to be understood. It constitutes the difference between a tonal deadness and a sense of urgency conveyed through shifts in tone. Shifts in tone alter the meaning, from sincerity to irony or exasperation to incredulity. Given sufficient urgency, our disbelief is suspended. When someone grabs you by the lapels, you tend to listen to what he says.

Every page is silent until the reader's imagination revives it, adding tonal shifts, exclamation points, underlinings, over- and undertones. Without salt, the rice is tasteless.

In critical confrontations statements are inflected when the words alone won't carry the required emotional meanings. Teenagers are capable of transforming themselves from bored affectless speakers to drama queens in seconds. "So, they're *sitting* there, and I'm, like, doing *the tour*?" It's like saying: I'm overinvested in what I'm telling you! I can't help it, listen to me, this is a fucking emergency! For the inarticulate, sheer feeling substitutes for eloquence. In the perpetual crisis of adolescence, who cares about poor or approximate word choices? Every sentence is an emergency, and emergency sentences acquire their voltage through high-pressure emphasis.

Of course, this state of affairs has, in literary work, its mirror-vice: overinflection, the particular deadening rat-a-tat-tat of prose that has gone purple from hyper-emphasis. There is an odd kind of monotony to writing and speaking of this kind. The effect has some resemblance to an incessant television commercial. When inflection is applied everywhere, without limit, we are back in a kind of robotized verbal-delivery system. The novels of James Ellroy sometimes strike me this way, as hyperinflected tonal artifacts in which the first quality to be misplaced is a feeling for what should be emphasized, and where, and how. His landscapes lack all perspective and proportion. Everyone is crying "Wolf!" all the time. Perhaps that is the point.



All the varieties of inflection are particularly necessary to those who don't have access to official language and official eloquence—to teenagers, the dispossessed, minority groups, and the baffled and broken, the hopeless and downcast, the obsessed and the fantasists, the inarticulate, outsiders of every kind and stripe, and those who are feeling two contradictory emotions at the same time, particularly if one emotion is unofficial. The official emotion goes into the statement; the unofficial one (which exists at the subtextual level) goes into the inflection. Incidental stress is the tonal outpost of fugitive feelings and of layered or compounded emotion. As the eloquent music of idiomatic language, it is the homing device of effective liars, magicians, outcasts, losers, and poets.

Is some fiction underacted? Is such a critical category even imaginable? Stories can be told without being brought entirely to life, and one of the signs of this semi-lifelessness, this zombie condition, this Dinosaur-World narration, is that the whole story seems under-voiced, as if we had gone into a bad dream of the 1950s, and the writer had not quite believed his own story, or was an agnostic about it, or didn't want to get involved in it, or was bored, or wanted to keep a safe distance from it or from the audience. The story stays calm. And everyone is allowed to fall asleep.

It is our business to wake everyone up. By force, if necessary.

I am on an Amtrak train in Oregon. Behind me a little girl is commenting on the trip, town by town, mile by mile. When we cross a river, and the bridge under the tracks is not visible underneath us, the girl says to her mother, "I'm frightened! We'll all fall into the river. We will be *destiny*." But the little girl is being ironic. I immediately write down the sentence and am simultaneously plunged into despair about how to convey on a page the way the girl sang out the word "destiny."

Months later, the girl's misuse of the word "destiny" doesn't interest me so much as the joy that the little girl conveyed in role-playing a little girl who is frightened. She had mastered her own emotions by acting them out theatrically, for her mother. Her lack of fright—the subtext being her joy—projected itself distinctly through her happy inflection.

Given sufficient urgency, an electrical charge can be applied tonally anywhere, to any words. The art of acting applied to the art of writing provides a tonality for a line, so that we know how a totally meaningless statement like "You're really something" is to be understood, as a caress or an insult. For operatively vague statements, inflection fills in what the vagueness leaves

out. Good acting often gives us an unexpected coloration to a phrase, a reversal of what's expected, that makes a scene with dialogue heat up without warning.

Much of what gets said in the course of a day comes out strangely. We accompany our seemingly bland statements with a large inventory of pauses, facial gestures, body movements that can intensify or contradict the apparent meaning of what we're saying. "Pass the rivets" is one thing, but "I love you" is another and requires a tone to support it. A person can say, "I love you," while at the same time using body language to disprove it. Conversations can go on entirely by means of body language, as in dancing or lovemaking.

The plot of Francis Ford Coppola's remarkable film *The Conversation* hinges entirely on how a single line of dialogue spoken by two young people is inflected, and how the movie's protagonist, Harry Caul, hears it or mishears it. The line is "He'd kill us if he had the chance." If the inflection, the emphasis, is on "kill," then the two people who are overheard in the conversation are frightened for their own safety ("He'd *kill* us if he had the chance"). If the emphasis is on "us," then they are plotting a murder themselves ("He'd kill *us*, if he had the chance," i.e., we have to get to him first). In the second reading, by the way, it helps to have a pause, a comma, after "us." In that particular reading of the

line, the single emphasis flips the statement's apparent meaning onto its back.

Stage actors sometimes describe a "flip" as an unexpected reading of a line that wakes you up, shocks you into awareness. The actor reverses the emotion in a line reading so that the expected tone gives way to an unanticipated tonal shading buried contextually, and an urgency—an immediacy—results. Suddenly a subtext appears, arising from an emotional emergency. Christopher Walken has described seeing Laurence Olivier playing Dr. Astrov in Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and being taken aback when Olivier reversed the usual tone of Astrov's first long speech. Near the beginning of Act One, Dr. Astrov comes on the stage and describes losing a patient, a railroad worker, who has died on the operating table under chloroform. Most actors deliver this declaration in a tone of slightly depressive unhappiness, reflecting Dr. Astrov's despair over his inability to do much good for his patients.

But that was not the inflection that Olivier used, according to Walken. Olivier *laughed* during this speech, despairing alcoholic laughter. Exhausted and giddy, Olivier's Astrov suffered from a spiritual fatigue so intense that only broken laughter projected it. Watching Olivier laugh like that onstage was mesmerizing,

Walken reported: the "wrong" tone produced, not incongruity, but a kind of hysterical sincerity.

One of the filmed versions of Vanya, *Vanya on 42nd Street*, has several moments of this sort, examples of a sudden drop into an emotional chasm by means of unexpected tone shifts. In the middle of Act Two, for example, when Sonya, among other inquiries, asks her stepmother, Yelena, if she's happy, and Yelena simply says, "No," both Julianne Moore and Brooke Smith play the scene with barely suppressed expectancy and giggles, as if they had finally been able to get to the questions they had always wanted to ask each other and were pleased with themselves for having done it. Unsolemn about these solemn questions, they feel girlish (the effort to get to be direct has worn them out), trading secrets back and forth while the men are out of the room. They can't quite shed the feeling of being co-conspirators, and they are shy, finding themselves—at last—emotionally naked.

Similarly, Wallace Shawn, playing Vanya, does so as if Vanya himself were doubled: Vanya feels despair about his own life, but in addition, he finds his own despair comic. Vanya is a desperate comedian, handling his despair through clowning. Shawn delivers the comedy lines with a woebegone mournfulness and the lines of resignation with a strange, heady exhilaration, as if

he were a brave heroic explorer, a sort of Scott-of-the-Antarctic, in the poorly mapped continent of patient despondency.

In Katherine Anne Porter's story "The Leaning Tower," set in Berlin in 1931, Charles, an American, has been staying at a hotel and then finds an apartment house where he would rather reside. His German isn't as good as he would like it to be, so, like most foreigners, he has to study facial expressions and body language to make sure that he has understood what he thinks he has heard.

In signing a lease for the apartment, Charles accidentally knocks over a little plaster Leaning Tower of Pisa in the landlady's parlor. The landlady tells him, "It cannot be replaced," and then the author adds that the line has been said with "a severe, stricken dignity." Notice the compounded emotion, a sign that Charles is paying attention to her intonation. It is also an indication of how she is reinforcing her distress by theatricalizing it. We can see her physically stiffening, accompanied by a touch of phoniness. A few moments later, the landlady adds, "It is not your fault, but mine. . . . I should never have left it here for—" She doesn't finish the sentence. The text tells us, "She stopped short, and walked away carrying the paper in



her two cupped hands. For barbarians, for outlandish crude persons who have no respect for precious things, her face and voice said all too clearly."

The landlady is playing to the gallery. Katherine Anne Porter signals here that conversations are far from over when people stop speaking, but continue in the burnt electrical silences that follow, often by means of facial expressions and body language. The most emphatic point in the sentence may arrive not with the last word but with a refusal to say a word, allowing the accusatory silence to hang there.

In the following scene, Charles goes back to his Berlin hotel to move his belongings and to check out. Here he must deal with the "sallow wornout looking hotel proprietess" and her "middle-aged, podgy partner." Charles had previously agreed to stay in the hotel for a month, but now, after eight days, he is leaving. What follows is a masterful scene of telegraphed malevolence and dramatized malice, indicated by both words and physical indicators. The characters are playing themselves but are also, enthusiastically, overplaying for their own pleasure.

"But our charges here are most reasonable," the proprietess says, "her dry mouth working over her long teeth." This is an odd detail. In my first reading of the story, it stopped me cold. Excellent result: it is there,

perhaps, to slow down the scene, and to convey the woman's anxiety and suppressed rage. But we also have those "long teeth" over which the mouth is working. She is chewing over something. She is wolfish.

"You will find you cannot change your mind for nothing," she continues, in what we are told is a "severe, lecturing tone." We might figure out this tone for ourselves, but the statement of it intensifies the feeling and adds an aura of danger, a sense of the woman's inflexibility. She has a pedantic vehemence, like a violence-prone professor. Now the narrator illustrates the woman's facial change. "She glanced up and over his shoulder, and Charles saw her face change again to a hard boldness, she raised her voice sharply and said with insolence, 'You will pay your bill as I present it or I shall call the police.'"

Enter the proprietess's podgy partner, who, hands in pockets, smiles "with a peculiarly malignant smile on his wide lipless mouth." The author here is not only writing the words of the scene, she is directing them for us. We have faces and inflections. Charles pays the proprietess all the money she has demanded, to the last pfennig, and then the podgy man, whose "pale little eyes behind their puffy lids were piggish with malice," asks to see Charles's identification papers. This is an extreme situation, Weimar Germany, and Charles

is on his guard, watchful for the signs of malice aimed in his direction. He means to survive in this poisonous locale.

Insisting on seeing the papers, the podgy man is then described through micro-details. "He seemed struggling with some hidden excitement. His neck swelled and flushed, he closed his mouth until it was a mere slit across his face, and rocked slightly on his toes." After Charles has shown him the papers, the man says, "'You may go now,' with the insulting condescension of a petty official dismissing a subordinate." In the next sentence, we learn, "They continued to look at him in a hateful silence, with their faces almost comically distorted in an effort to convey the full depths of their malice." Notice how the silence is being drawn out, and how this silence is not peaceful, but hateful. The silence vibrates with its own negative energy. Finally, after Charles has left the hotel under their "fixed stare," he hears, "as the door closed behind him" the two of them laughing "together like a pair of hyenas, with deliberate loudness, to make certain he should hear them."

The malice is marked by all its small details of gesture, speech, and hoaxing gratuitous meanness. But cruelty, as Henry James and Katherine Anne Porter knew, is increased and intensified by shades of detail. Cruelty lives off small signs and hints, closed rather than open doors. Subtle cruelty creates a web meant to

catch the unwary, who are punished by small but incremental wounds.

Another tactic for combatting the zombie effect appears in Eudora Welty's "A Visit of Charity." The ground situation in this story is quite straightforward: Marian, a junior high Campfire Girl, has been assigned to take a flower to a retirement home for old ladies and to sit there and chat for a while. This visit of charity is part of the procedure for Marian's earning of a Merit Badge.

This ground situation is not particularly promising. The elderly have become commonplace pathos-targets, especially when they are afflicted with illnesses. Retirement homes and assisted-care facilities provide ready-made settings for literary opportunists.

But what Eudora Welty does in this story is to upset the expected tone of the story so that pathos is a minor element. Instead, there is a kind of scorched wit at work, not pitiless but in the service of genuine but very dark compassion and understanding, and this dry comedy moves the proceedings in the direction of what I will call for the sake of brevity the abyss. Suddenly, the mystery of existence opens up in front of Marian and the reader. Welty does all this by carefully inflecting every moment of the scene. After a few pages, Marian's old ladies stop being pitiful creatures, old Southern ladies down on their luck, and seem more like Beckett's

tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, in *Waiting for Godot*, struggling with time and the absurd.

The reader is given, moment by moment, careful close direction detailing the scene. This *is* a scene and is not summarized; it has to happen in front of you. Marian has walked into the room with her gift of a potted plant. Two old ladies inhabit the room, one lying down and one standing up. The standing one has a "terrible, square smile . . . stamped on her bony face." I like that: a *terrible*, square smile. We're not told what makes it terrible. Nor are we told exactly how to visualize it. It seems contradictory. Her hand, "quick as a bird claw" grabs at Marian's cap. The room is dark and dank, and Marian starts to think of the old ladies as robbers and the room as the robbers' cave.

"Did you come to be our little girl for a while?" the first robber asked." The plant is snatched out of Marian's hand. "Flowers!" screamed the old woman. She stood holding the pot in an undecided way. 'Pretty flowers,' she added."

*Did you come to be our little girl for a while?* This is comedy, but the furies are writing it.

"Then the old woman in bed cleared her throat and spoke. 'They are not pretty,' she said, still without looking around, but very distinctly." After the first old woman repeats that the flowers are pretty, the old woman who is lying down says in return, batting the

ball back in this peculiar verbal tennis game, that the flowers are "stinkweeds." Somewhat disarmingly, the old woman in bed is described as having a "bunchy white forehead and red eyes like a sheep." When she asks Marian, "Who are you?" the line is interrupted by dashes to indicate slowness of speech, and the author tells us that the words rise like fog in her throat and that the words are "bleated."

We learn that the woman in bed is named "Addie." Addie and her unnamed old companion then argue about a previous visitor and whether they had enjoyed that visit. Triangulated by the two ladies, Marian, the Campfire Girl, a frightened intelligent child, begins, very mildly, to hallucinate, to go off into the hallucinations of ordinary life created by the scene before her. At this point, Addie and the other old lady have a surrealistic discussion about who is sick and who is not and who did what as a child. The standing woman speaks in an "intimate, menacing voice," another unusual combination. This is interrupted by Addie's first long speech directed toward both her roommate and, I think, obliquely to Marian. The author gets out of the way here and lets the speech speak for itself.

"Hush!" said the sick woman. "You never went to school. You never came and you never went. You never were anywhere—only here. You never were



born! You don't know anything. Your head is empty, your heart and hands and your old black purse are all empty, even that little old box that you brought with you you brought empty—you showed it to me. And yet you talk, talk, talk, talk, talk all the time until I think I'm losing my mind! Who are you? You're a stranger—a perfect stranger! Don't you know you're a stranger? Is it possible that they have actually done a thing like this to anyone—sent them in a stranger to talk, and rock, and tell away her whole long rigmarole? Do they seriously suppose that I'll be able to keep it up, day in, day out, night in, night out, living in the same room with a terrible old woman—forever?"

At the end of this speech, the author notes that Addie turns her eyes toward Marian, eyes that have gone bright. "This old woman," the author notes, "was looking at her with despair and calculation in her face." We then get an image of her false teeth and tan gums.

"Come here, I want to tell you something," she whispered. "Come here!"

Marian is frightened, we're told, and her heart nearly stops beating for a moment. Then Addie's companion says, "Now, now, Addie. . . . That's not polite."

This scene, packed with seemingly contradictory emotions, throws into a blender Marian's fascination

and terror, Addie's despair and calculation, her companion's fake sentimentality and cynicism—the scene is a mixture of despairing comedy, pathos, terror, and metaphysical giddiness. These elements are built into Addie's speech through the repetitive use of words like "empty," "talk," and "stranger," and the use of carefully deployed dashes and pauses. And they are then cemented by the brilliant tag following the speech, noting that Addie is now turning toward Marian with despair *and* calculation on her face. Addie is not feeling one thing. She is feeling several emotions at once. One of them makes her pitiable, the other makes her dangerous. We then learn that today happens to be Addie's birthday.

As if this weren't enough, when Marian leaves, the nameless woman (the other half of this terrible octogenarian tragicomic vaudeville team) who has been playing the straight woman to Addie's riffs of calculation and despair, this nameless woman then goes into a riff of her own. "In an affected, high-pitched whine she cried, 'Oh, little girl, have you a penny to spare for a poor old woman that's not got anything of her own? We don't have a thing in the world—not a penny for candy—not a thing! Little girl, just a nickel—a penny—'"

The "affected, high-pitched whine" notation tells us that this woman may have fallen into a moment of



senile dementia. Or, more likely, she may be playing a role for her own amusement to scare and disconcert Marian, or maybe to get some money out of her. Like the woman in Katherine Anne Porter's scene, Welty's old woman is theatricalizing her own situation and speech. But no reader, I suspect, can be sure exactly what the tone is, and our uncertainty parallels the uncertainty that Marian must feel. You can see clearly and distinctly what you see, but you simply can't be sure of what you're looking at.

The scene presents these women, as Samuel Beckett does his tramps, with all the complicity of art, of realism flying off into the metaphysical and then flying back. The scene's feeling-tone can't be described in one word. What's going on is too overdetermined for that.

Much can be said for the uses to which the opposite—an uninflected voice—may be employed. Zombie voicings in literature may well echo our current conditions, particularly the bureaucratic ones, better than the hot-to-the-touch effects of inflection. There is something about uninflectedness that suits trauma, and data fatigue, and anonymity, very well.

What can be bothersome about uninflectedness from the last two decades generally, however, is that it can seem like a decadent form of hipsterism, a retro form of cool, of being removed, which can harden into

a posture. Against middle-class fake sincerity, fake patriotism, and fake fervor of every sort, uninflectedness and ironic withdrawal, at least since the 1980s, have been deployed massively and effectively in every form of postmodern art. It is now completely mainstream and has been put to some interesting uses. George Saunders, for one, is a master of the zombie tone.

At Sea Oak there's no sea and no oak, just a hundred subsidized apartments and a rear view of FedEx. Min and Jade are feeding their babies while watching *How My Child Died Violently*. Min's my sister. Jade's our cousin. *How My Child Died Violently* is hosted by Matt Merton, a six-foot-five blond who's always giving parents shoulder rubs and telling them they've been sainted by pain. Today's show features a ten-year-old who killed a five-year-old for refusing to join his gang. The ten-year-old strangled the five-year-old with a jump rope, filled his mouth with baseball cards, then locked himself in the bathroom and wouldn't come out until his parents agreed to take him to FunTimeZone, where he confessed, then dove screaming into a mesh cage full of plastic balls. ("Sea Oak").

Well, the people of the village *do* understand by now. The miracle of Saunders's fiction is that the

zombie-dazedness of the beaten-down acquires, somehow (this is the miracle) a crazy eloquence, a back-from-the-dead intensity.

The guide at Dinosaur World was at pains to demonstrate that he was above what he was saying, detached from it, *better* than it. And so he was. But as triumphs go, this is a very minor one, and in its way is as much a miscalculation as overacting would be.

In his recent memoir, *Crabcakes*, James Alan McPherson describes a moment during which he listens to two African Americans flirting with each other. Then he remarks:

The kindly flirtation between the two of them reminds me of something familiar that I have almost forgotten. It seems to be something shadowy, about language being secondary to the way it is used. The forgotten thing is about the nuances of sounds that only employ words as ballast for the flight of pitch and intonation. It is the pitch, and the intonation, that carries *meaning*. I had forgotten this.

Everyone forgets it. Nabokov once said that the price of being a writer was sleepless nights. But, Nabokov added slyly, if the writer doesn't have sleepless nights, how can he hope to cause sleepless nights in anyone

else? If the writer doesn't indicate interest in the story through inflection, how can she expect the reader to be interested and willingly suspend disbelief? To close the book or finish the poem and to say, "You're really *something*"? And the something turns out to be *something*, after all.