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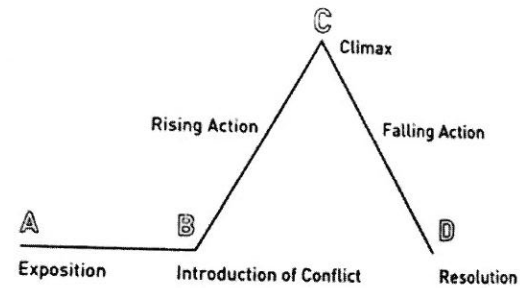
THE PERFECT GERBIL

READING BARTHELME'S "THE SCHOOL"



RISE, BABY, RISE!

Sometimes, at moments of desperation in a creative writing class, I find it useful to introduce Freitag's Triangle:



It's especially useful because I get to point to the portion labeled "Rising Action" and explain that this—*this*—is the hardest thing in storytelling: getting one's action to rise.

Sometimes at this point there are snickers in the classroom.

Whatever.

If you wanted a perfect, Platonic example of Action (Rising), you'd be hard-pressed to find a better one than Donald Barthelme's story "The School." That's essentially all it is: boldly rising action. He sets up a pattern (things associated with our school die), then escalates it. Some orange trees die, some snakes pass away, an herb garden kicks the bucket, some gerbils/mice/salamander, having been acquired by the school, cease to exist.

And we're only at paragraph three.

"The School" belongs roughly in a lineage of "pattern stories," which might be said to include, for example, Chekhov's "The Darling" (woman with no real personality of her own takes on the personalities of a series of men with whom she gets involved); Gogol's "Dead Souls" (guy goes around to a series of people, trying to buy the deeds to their dead serfs); "A Christmas Carol" (stingy man is visited by series of ghosts who try to convert him); and the stateroom scene in "Night at the Opera" (tiny room gets filled with series of people). In each of these we know, fairly early, what to expect: we grasp the pattern.

So: part of the fun of "The School" is going to be the gradual unveiling of a series of Things That Die.

But then immediately—writing short stories is very hard work—Barthelme is in trouble. The reader is already, here at the beginning of paragraph four, subtly ready to be bored. The reader knows The Pattern—and is suddenly wary that The Pattern may turn out to be all there is.

If I say: "I ate a small candy, then a bigger candy, then a candy the size of a room, then a candy the size of Montana . . .," you get the idea. You know where I'm headed. There's a certain pleasure in this: you're in on

the joke, your mind knows the general shape of the fun to be expected. But if I just keep going ("I ate a candy the size of the United States! The size of North America! The size of—" even typing this is getting tiresome, although I would have liked to get at least as far as "I ate a piece of candy the size of Uranus!"), you are going to start to dislike me. Why? Because I'm condescending. I'm assuming that this simple, linear pattern is enough to interest you. I'm treating you like a dumb beast, endlessly fascinated by a swinging weight on a cord.

A STORY IS MADE OF THINGS THAT FLING OUR LITTLE CAR FORWARD

When I was a kid I had one of these Hot Wheels devices designed to look like a little gas station. Inside the gas station were two spinning rubber wheels. One's little car would weakly approach the gas station, then be sent forth by the spinning rubber wheels to take another lap around the track or, more often, fly out and hit one's sister in the face.

A story can be thought of as a series of these little gas stations. The main point is to get the reader around the track; that is, to the end of the story. Any other pleasures a story may offer (theme, character, moral uplift) are dependent upon this.

In this case, once we've discerned the pattern, Barthelme is going to fling us forward via a series of surprises; each new pattern-element is going to be introduced in a way we don't expect, or with an embellishment that delights us. For example: when it is time for the tropical fish to be introduced, i.e., to die, Barthelme capitalizes on our knowledge (born of many carnival-won

fish) that killing a tropical fish is basically a fait accompli once you've acquired one ("Those numbers, you look at them crooked and they're belly-up on the surface."). This constitutes a gas station because, in the process of advancing the pattern, he has given us a little something extra: a laugh, yes, but more important, an acknowledgment that the writer is right there with us—he knows where we are, and who we are, and is involved in an intimate and respectful game with us. I think of this as the motorcycle-sidecar model of reading: writer and reader right next to one another, leaning as they corner, the pleasure coming from the mutuality and simultaneity of the experience.

Likewise, there is a little gas station at the beginning of paragraph seven, when suddenly, from Dead Puppy, we leap to Dead Korean Orphan. This gas station has to do with the boldness of the escalation: Barthelme's refusal to flinch at the logic of his own pattern. Some part of art, certainly of Barthelme's art, involves the simple pleasure of watching someone be audacious. Another little audacity-related gas station—actually a series of gas stations, seeded throughout the story—is the pleasure we get from the narrator's stuttering, fragmented syntax, a pleasure which comes in part from our awareness that this syntax is not exactly *necessary*; it is, yes, character-indicating, but mostly it's funny, and also impressive: we take pleasure in how well it's done. Another hidden pleasure of the story is the way that the pattern is not—if I could say it this way—*load-bearing*. A lesser writer, who believes writing is about knowing, control, and mastery, told to create a pattern in which things die, might (mis)understand his job to be: designing and executing an extremely meaningful pattern. He would spend a lot of time trying to decide, in advance,

the answers to questions like, "In what order should I have the things die?" and "What will I have cause the deaths?" and "How is the main character to be implicated in, and changed by, these events?"

Mr. Lesser Writer, in other words, realizing with joy that he has a pattern to work with, sits down to do some Thinking. Barthelme proceeds in a more spontaneous, vaudevillian manner. He knows that the pattern is just an excuse for the real work of the story, which is to give the reader a series of pleasure-bursts. The story, then, can be seen as a series of repetitions of one event: the reader leaves a little gas station at high speed, looking forward to the next one.

ENDING IS STOPPING WITHOUT SUCKING

So: if the writer can put together enough gas stations, of sufficient power, distributed at just the right places around the track, he wins: the reader works his way through the full execution of the pattern, and is ready to receive the ending of the story.

Because all along, a question has been rising: OK, we've been feeling, this is funny, this is enjoyable, but how and when is it going to start being literature? How's he going to take this Marx Brothers-quality romp and convert it at the last minute into a Post-Modernist Masterpiece?

How, in other words, is this story going to *mean*?

The land of the short story is a brutal land, a land very similar, in its strictness, to the land of the joke. When I tell a joke, everyone hearing knows that the joke is going to culminate in a punch line, and the intention

of the punch line is to make them laugh. If it doesn't, the joke is dumb, and I'm a dork. Likewise, when a person presumes to tell a literary short story, everyone reading knows that it is going to culminate in an ending, and that the intention of the ending is to . . .

Well, hold on—what is the intention of the ending?

Or—the million-dollar question for any of us who has ever tried to complete a short story: When constitutes a *sufficient* ending? In other words, what does Barthelme have to do here, as he goes forth from the end of paragraph nine (which I consider the end of the Rising Action), so that we will continue to love him?

His first responsibility is to not do something that will make us groan. What will make us groan? Something that too neatly “answers to” his Pattern.

Say he ended it:

*Then I came in one day, and all the kids were dead.
And all of a sudden I wasn't feeling so good myself!
That was one bad semester!
THE END!*

This is not a story ending, but the ending of a lousy after-dinner speech: it knows its own pattern too well, and has stuck with it mindlessly, to the bitter end. It has done (merely) what it set out to do—and we require more of our endings than this.

Einstein once said something along the lines of: “No worthy problem is ever solved within the plane of its original conception.” Touching on the same idea, a famous poet once said: “If you set out to write a poem about two dogs fucking, and you write a poem about two dogs fucking, then you've written a poem about two dogs fucking.”

What we want our ending to do is to do more than we could have dreamed it would do.

Sheesh.

No wonder there's such a thing as writer's block.

But Barthelme understands that what he has to do in this last page is keep doing what has worked so far in the story: he has to escalate. The story has, so far, been captivating us via its nervy continual progress along the axis labeled: Deaths, Increasing. By paragraph nine (parents have died, fellow students have died) Barthelme's gone about as far along that axis as he can, and now understands that, to continue escalating, he has to leap to another axis. He seems to intuit that the next order of escalation has to be *escalating* escalation.

“One day,” he tells us, “we had a discussion in class. They asked me, where did they go? The trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar, the poppas and mommas, Matthew and Tony, where did they go? And I said, I don't know, I don't know. And they said, who knows? and I said, nobody knows.”

So there's a possible ending, right? He's turned to look back at his pattern, he's addressed it—he's wryly yet earnestly commented on it, saying a true thing: nobody knows why death happens. It's not bad. But it's not great. One can almost feel Barthelme squirming under the not-greatness of it, then pushing discontentedly onward, feeling around with his most substantial tool: the devastating adroitness of his language. Our narrator continues: “And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life?” (We notice this weird, illogical elevation of diction—three lines ago these kids were still saying “poppas and mommas.”) “And I said, no, life is that which gives meaning to life.” (We like that the narrator doesn't balk at his students' sudden new articulateness—he doesn't

even acknowledge it—maybe, it occurs to us, they talk like this all the time?) “Then they said, but isn’t death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted—”

Whoa, we think, slow down, they’re now talking in an even *more* elevated—

“. . . mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—”

What’s happening here, I think, is that Barthelme’s mind has gotten tired of being polite. Without worrying about whether it’s allowed, or will be understood, or is logical within the world of the story (or whether the workshop will tolerate it), he races off in the direction his logic is taking him, appropriate diction be damned, trying to get the story to answer the questions the thing’s been asking all along: What are we to make of death? How are we to live in a world where death is king?

We follow because we find his courage thrilling.

Does he then use this new allowance we’ve granted him—this expanded diction—to glibly wrap the story up on some cool philosophical basis? (“Then little Sally Adams posited that, what manifested to them as mundanity could also be understood as simply as an example of Brugenheiser’s ‘vantage conundrum,’ at which time the bell rang, and they bolted from their desks, well-satisfied with Sally’s explanation, and our day was done, as all our days, eventually, will be done, for all of us, for good.”)

No, thank God, he does not.

He escalates again. The students (still in professorial diction) request that he make love with Helen. Where does this come from? Until just now, there was no Helen. Sorry, Don’s in a hurry, and can’t/won’t explain it to us, except to let us know, parenthetically, that Helen is “our

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teaching assistant.” “Come on, come on!” he seems to be saying. “It surprised me too! Just keep up!”

Will they do it? Will the narrator and Helen make love? The reader honestly doesn’t know, but does care. The narrator demurs: “I said I would be fired and that it was never, or almost never, done as a demonstration.” (The “or almost never” is a fine little gas station.)

And then the reader (this reader, anyway) falls, once and for all, forever, in love with this story, at the line: “Helen looked out of the window.” Why? Well, for one thing, Helen *wants* to do it, and *will* do it, in front of the class, gladly, if only The Narrator will ask. She has loved him all along. A few lines ago we didn’t even know Helen existed, but we do now, and so does The Narrator, and the small voice in our mind that has all along been registering that The Narrator has no personal life in this story, that there are no real human emotions in the story, that this alleged story is just a pattern, is assuaged: this is now, writ small, a love story. It’s a love story! We see Helen plainly, her sensible shoes, the red-ink stains on her young hands, which she wrings every evening in her tiny, under-furnished, teacher’s assistant apartment, dreaming of a life with The Narrator. But Helen is shy! She doesn’t want to demand anything! She’s not a pushy girl, our Helen—

But also—there is no Helen. Or, there’s barely a Helen. Helen has only existed for four short paragraphs, and already she represents quiet, faithful, unrequited love. Our pleasure in Helen is, partly, also pleasure in Barthelme’s incredible economy.

Little four-paragraph Helen sits, drumming her ink-stained fingers, gazing out the window, waiting, hoping . . .

The children press their case, and we see that making love with Helen would be a real win/win/win; not

only would Helen like it, The Narrator seems kind of lonely, and it would also be good, you know, for the kids ("We require an assertion of value," they plead, "we are frightened.").

Weirdly, we are really curious, or at least I always am, to see if some lovemaking will in fact break out on this desk somewhere in the desolate, death-besieged Midwest, or what.

We have one long paragraph left.

And look what's happened: suddenly, Barthelme can end this thing any way he pleases. The essential work has been done. If the narrator begins making love to Helen, that's good. If he declines, also good. The air is charged with meaning. It is everywhere we look. It seems he's going to pass—he kisses Helen on the brow—but we sense that he and Helen may very soon be demonstrating some lovemaking, if only to one another, possibly in Helen's sparse apartment. Everything has changed between them. Suddenly there is death in the room, but also life, and love.

The reader is satisfied: so much has happened, in so short a time and in such an unexpected way. It could end with a simple line: "I looked at Helen, and she looked at me."

But Barthelme, being great, abides long enough to produce from his sleeve one last escalation which, Barthelme being Barthelme, arrives in the person (?) of a gerbil.

Where does the gerbil come from? How did it find the classroom? And why is it a gerbil and not (if we are seeking circularity) an orange tree, or at least a snake? How did it knock on the door? Doesn't it know this is exactly the wrong class, that soon it will die? Or—who can say?—maybe Helen's just-revealed love for The

Narrator's love has changed everything, and the gerbil will live, and prosper, and get fat enough to overflow its cage!

It is ambiguous, and it is funny, and somehow perfect: this little expectant rodent, politely waiting for its knock to be answered, all set to die, or to live.

We, like the children, "cheer wildly."