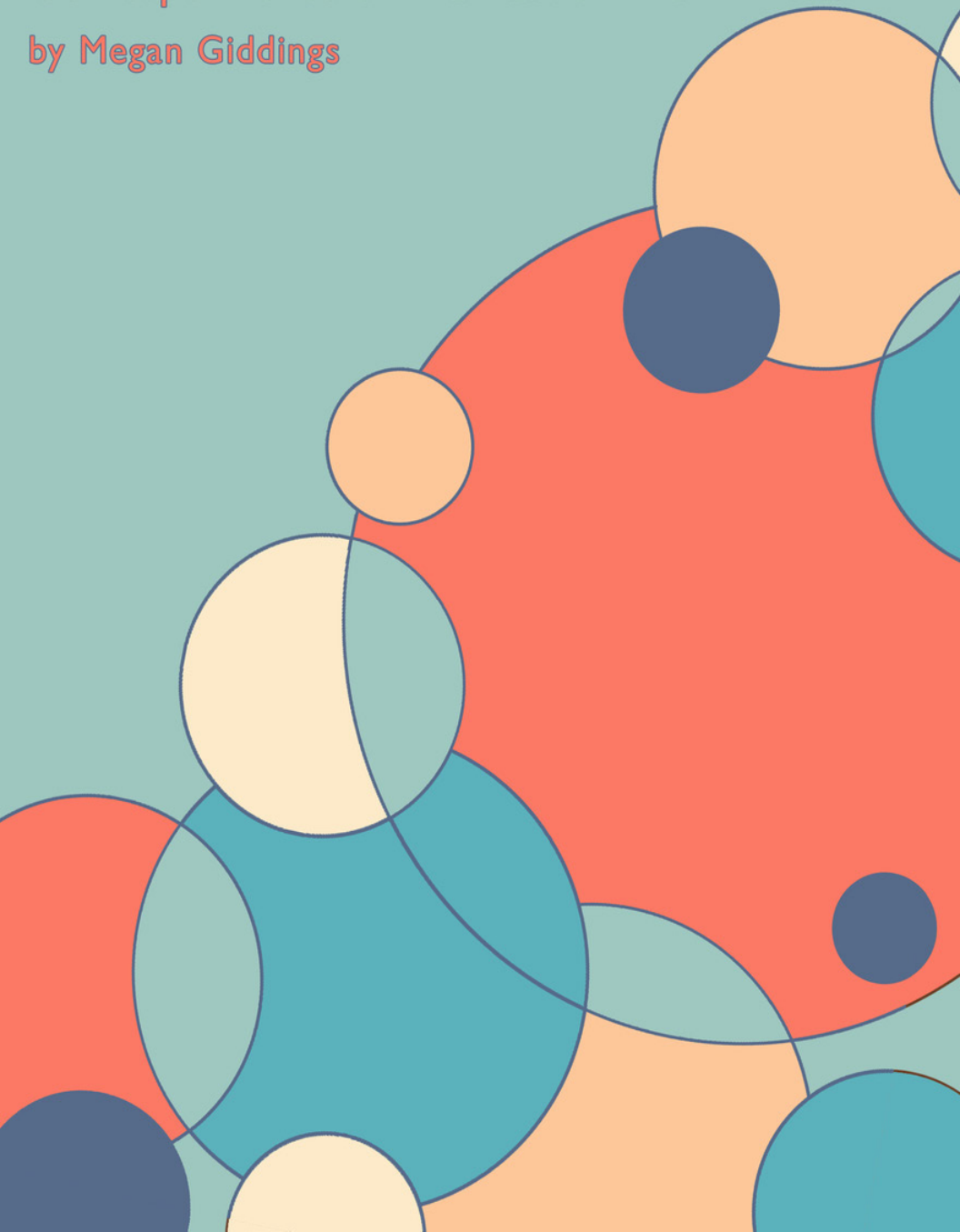
CRAFT CHAPS

A Delicious Letter: Correspondence on Narrative Time in Fiction

by Megan Giddings



A DELICIOUS LETTER: CORRESPONDENCE ON NARRATIVE TIME IN FICTION

MEGAN GIDDINGS

Dear Reader,

I wrote the craft chapbook that follows during the fall of 2020 and then revised it in early 2021. Like many people during those months, I was preoccupied with time and the ways I was now perceiving it. Without the clear delineation that comes with traveling and movement from space to space, I was beginning to forget which day of the week it was or the month when things happened despite having regular appointments and class meetings during this time.

Sometimes, this led me toward feeling more unmoored. I have frequent insomnia and the moments where I pick up my phone, blink at the fact that it is four AM and still sleep refuses me, are the most agonizing parts of the night. When I'm pessimistically thinking about insomnia, my brain narrows in on the way the phone feels in my hands, how my eyes by that point are so dry, and the restlessness that I feel from my brain to my muscles that keeps me awake. My blanket is soft and puddled at the base of the bed, it somehow seems prone and resting. Everyone in my home from person to cat seems to be cutely snoring, not in a way that keeps me awake, but in a way that makes me feel further exiled. The frustration I feel in those moments that my body refuses to do a big thing I need to function permeates those moments. I jump past when I finally do get a few hours of rest to how I feel the next day: exhausted, jittery on just one cup of coffee, having to focus extra hard when I'm teaching to make sure that I understand the exact line of my student's thoughts.

Now, Reader, go back to the paragraph you read. Look at how I slowed down that experience, tried to put you there with me. I excised the six hours before 4 AM where I was applying lavender oil to my wrists, where I drank warm milk, where I read to myself, where I got up and paced, where I lay on the couch with a cat on my chest, where I journaled, where I lifted an arm weight, where I put away dishes from the dishwasher. If I had wanted you to feel the build up to that 4 AM moment, I might've started there with that long sentence that showed all the things happening in quick concrete snippets. Instead, I gave you the moment that stays with me instead. All of those nights blur together, but each moment looking at the clock still feels distinct to me. It's those distinct moments that I'm guiding you toward in this craft chapbook.

There are many wonderful reasons why indistinct time and moments as well as confusion can be a necessary choice for you to make in fiction. And in fact, if I had the mental bandwidth, I might've written about that instead. Imagine a nice little book with big forceful letters: AGAINST CLARITY. But this is focused on how compressing and expanding moments in time are a necessary skill for all kinds of fiction.

In flash, these expansion moments you could potentially generate from this text might be your entire story, especially if you're a micro writer. Often when I'm editing flash (think stories of 1,000 words or less), I think that writers are too focused on making sure the transitions and stitching of their texts work more than considering how their readers will read their work. The more time and space something takes up on the page, the more readers tend to assume that thing is important. If you write a story that is less than a thousand words long and 600 words are characters looking at objects, conversation and moments that hopefully build a world, and then the last paragraph moves toward a big beautifully written moment that is rooted in a character feeling something, the average reader might assume that the emphasis of the story, because of an unconscious measuring of time spent reading that work, was on everything but the ending. When writers start thinking about that idea of how they perceive things while reading, it can make them more confident when editing their very short stories to be more ruthless about cutting.

For longer short stories and novel writing, there are similar circumstances to what I listed above. Sometimes, you realize you spend pages and pages on a moment to realize it's not necessary. A long dip into an unhappy week that involves phone calls and work and looking at screens can go from ten pages to a line: a week passed during a revision.

There is also the opposite though, where as a writer you may have to remind yourself to slow down, to stop compressing away the parts of your story where life starts to take hold, in the reactions. It can be easy to linger in the moments that feel big: positive interactions, extraordinary revelations, the depressing, the beautiful, or the horrifying (emotionally, actions wise, or intellectually). The struggle can be learning the patience to not force an instinctive glancing away, of

cultivating the ability to ask questions and sit in the tangled burrow of narrative complications.

I didn't expect when I started writing, that the question I would ask myself over and over was *And how did that feel?* But when I found the question, when I learned the ability to ask myself that while writing and editing, it was what led me toward two important things. Having the confidence to tell my stories in my way and having that exciting feeling for my own work of I-can't-wait-to-find-out-what-happens-next. This question might not be the exact right one for you as a writer, you might realize over time that you're a And-what-does-this-mean? Or a How-does-this-change-her? writer. There are so many questions out there, Dear Reader. Hopefully, this little book about time helps you on your path toward finding the right one.

ANIME TIME: THINKING ABOUT EXPANDING AND COMPRESSING NARRATIVE TIME

In the show, *My Hero Academia*, a young boy, Izuku Midoriya, is in a world where most of the population has some sort of power. Low-grade telekinesis, the ability to breathe fire, to float in the air, to be able to summon a wild beast made out of shadows that it takes effort to control, especially at night. Midoriya is a rarity in the fact that he is born quirkless (as powers are called in the manga and anime) and only receives his abilities from hard work and eventually having a power passed onto him by the hero he idolizes. Some of the episodes of this show have story arcs that can span weeks or even months while a string of episodes can be spent detailing what happens during one long school sports festival.

As a writer, beyond the pleasure of the emotions, the friendships, the new world, what captures my imagination the most is this expansion and contraction of time. Time slows and is shown in more vivid details when big momentous occasions are happening. Not just monumental fights against villains, but when a character is moved by another's tenacity, examining potential romantic feelings, or fretting over whether they got into school.

I'm old enough now to feel deeply wary of speaking toward a generalized idea of being alive, how it feels. One person's definition of living, of heartfelt, is potentially another's stagnancy. But to me, that sudden contraction is part of what I mean when I talk about how fiction can feel alive, can capture what it feels like to be alive even throughout its contrivances.

A memory I consider often is from over a decade ago now. I had just started seeing someone and we ran into each other unexpectedly on the street. It was early October and windy. Warm. Leaves were falling orange and red from the trees. I was walking slowly and paying more attention to the leaves, the way the air had a bonfire smell even though I was in a city, it was daylight, and there was no smoke in the air. And suddenly, he was there. I was overwhelmed by delight. We'd had breakfast together only three hours before, but there he was, also happy at the serendipity of the two of us running into each other on

a mostly deserted street. It was a moment where I also realized, oh, I love him.

It's something so small, but it looms large in my memory because the setting was beautiful, my emotions felt warm and overwhelming, and I was ready and willing to know something about myself that, before then, I hadn't entirely articulated.

What *My Hero Academia* has in common with this moment, what it has in common with many great literary novels is, I think that expansion and contraction of time speaks toward consciousness. Even in the third person point of view, especially in the third person past tense close which actively is following one specific character, it's those moments of sudden narrative contraction that make me fall in love with a novel or a short story. It can be hard sometimes, especially as a newer writer to find a way to add those expansions into your own work.

The ability to cultivate patience, to find in herself the willingness to linger is what a writer who wants to write about life, who wants to capture how being alive is a paradox of large and small things happening simultaneously, has to figure out how to do.

The other pleasure of this expansion and contraction of time is that it pushes back against conventional narrative structure. When I say conventional narrative structure, I'm thinking of Freytag's Pyramid. You begin, action rises and rises, it comes to a climax, and then there's some falling action. It's a narrative structure that, at least if you're someone who regularly consumes American-created television and movies, you might already intuitively understand because the majority of things you've consumed from childhood tend to follow that arc.

I always think it's a good place to start with learning narrative time and structure because it does do its primary job—helps a reader stay focused and be entertained—and because of the intuitive understanding someone might have of being culturally steeped in entertainment that does follow that mode of storytelling. But I also think this understanding, especially when it is permeated by the big blockbuster movie kind of telling—the White House must explode, the hero's

wife must be kidnapped, the protagonist and antagonist must have a showdown while skydiving—can also inhibit a writer from thinking deeply about the expansions and contractions that lead to richer plots, big characters, or capturing an essence of living.

Looking at a story with the idea that tension has to be consistently building, it means that quieter moments, humorous moments, moments where time slows and allows room for thought, might feel like they need to be cut. I think regularly of Alice Munro's "Oranges and Apples." Murray, the point of view character, is a small, clear pond and his wife, Barbara is the flat stone dropped into it. In the present, Barbara is waiting to find out if she has cancer. In the past, Barbara begins at least a flirtation, probably an affair with Murray's friend, Victor. Either of these plots sound like they're heading toward somewhere inevitable: death, divorce. Instead, Munro focuses on Murray's reactions toward the anticipation of the presupposed inevitable endings of his marriage. Munro doesn't build toward him making a decision; each time, Barbara takes control. She gets him to agree to never speak again of whatever was happening between her and Victor. She announces she has a benign growth. There's room in the end to wonder again if Barbara is concealing something from Murray, but it's left to the reader to decide—putting them directly in Murray's shoes: how to interpret Barbara's final words.

If a story promises large conflicts, when it builds and builds tension, a reader may expect either a resolution of some kind or to have a cliffhanger that promises if not now, later, you will understand everything. But when a writer's gaze lingers on details like a cheap, shiny, white blouse and a too-tight swimsuit like in Munro's story or when episodes of a show can move from a potential mentor's sudden brutal death to writing a song, learning how to dance, how to collaborate with friends, there's less of an expectation for answers, more room to think about the complexity of being a person.

CULTIVATING PATIENCE EXERCISE

Ingredients: a window with light, seeds (your choice either mysterious and shining like wet ink or you know, basic b parsley and basil and thyme), soil, water, a container, preferably a plastic pot because even though terra cotta looks nice, it is harder sometimes to grow things in them (especially in places where there are a lot of changes in temperature throughout the day)

Plant the seeds, look at them every day. You may choose, depending on the relationship you would like to have with them, to talk to these plants. You may also choose to document their growth. It's better though to limit your time with these potential plants.

Some of them will never sprout. Some might take forever and then suddenly: a spindly little plant. Some might grow delicious things. Pay attention more to how you experience the waiting, the growing, the points between a bunch of soil and sudden green.

If you do not like plants or gardening, other potential cultivating patience exercises: running; making plans with your always late friend and telling them when they get here, they get here, it's fine; taking up an instrument and practicing every day; baking croissants; reading *War and Peace*; getting really into opera; driving the speed limit; encouraging a neighborhood crow to like you by giving it some bread every day; bird watching; or playing *Yume Nikki* by Kikiyami.

WRITING EXERCISE

In *My Hero Academia*, like I mentioned earlier, there are multiple episodes that might take place over what is technically a ½ hr in the narrative's time but take in our time maybe 3 to 3 ½ hours to watch. Time is slowed down, multiple events are shown, people have interactions that are all important.[1]

Write a short story that is a year in the life of one character, January to January. You will alternate between two paragraph types.

Paragraph Type A will be only big moments throughout the year. You should build a whole world in this story. So, think about things from yes, the character's life that might quantify as big. A new job, a new friend, a new pet, a new love, an ending, an illness, a trip, a greater understanding, but also think about the bigger world out there. Put in elements of things that might be happening: politics that could impact your character's life, weather, global warming, a discovery, violence. Put in elements of pop culture too: a long beloved show comes to an end, an actress is incredible on the screen, a controversial painting is exhibited, a confusing movie that people pretend to like to seem smart feels omnipresent. Weave these kinds of things throughout these types of paragraphs.

Paragraph Type B will be moments zoomed in on the character's life. Only allow one to two other characters to appear in these paragraphs. Focus on the small moments. A cup of coffee. A walk. An important conversation. Cooking a meal. Dancing. A drink between friends.

You might even want to write the initial draft of this potential story on notecards because the meaning will be shaped by what elements you place against each other.

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1 I know this is also a feature of a lot of anime and manga: you zoom in (usually) on battles and then compress away the time the characters heal or process to start preparing for the next big event. That allows most of the narrative time to focus on action. One of the pleasures of this is I think most literary short stories is the opposite where the big events that put everything in motion are given much less page time and the emotional and intellectual impacts of those events are often given the space instead.

When you have finished an initial draft of this story, write also to yourself about why you chose the placement you did. What does having the "large" next to the "small" do for your character? What does it tell you about what you might be thematically saying in this story? Is there anything you better understand about time or narrative time after writing this story?

LETTER TIME: CONSIDERATIONS OF THE FIRST PERSON PAST-PAST AND THE FIRST PERSON PAST-RETROSPECTIVE

I think there's a crucial decision an aspiring letter writer has to make: are they going to be someone who appears to be killing time on the page but wants to make it clear that they just want the feeling in some way of being with the intended recipient or do they want to be in conversation with the intended recipient? Do they want to lend them the feeling of being in a bubble bath of their thoughts for better and for worse or do they want to show that this relationship is a part of their routine?

Sometimes, the preference is based on personality. I have a hard time reading letters and responding to the ones that don't have that bubble bath feel. I feel like if someone is going to write to me, it needs to feel like they urgently wanted to talk to me, to tell me something about themself. There is something charming about the former: if I have to keep going through the drudgery of living, at least knowing you've read about dinner and the weather and work makes me feel like you're alongside me.

But these two styles of letter writing—and yes, there are others, but let me talk just about these two right now—make me think a lot about how the first person past tense works. My current biggest interest in writing is the first-person past tense, where it's clear that it's in the retrospective. The speaker of the story is trying to sort all the pieces of their life into a meaningful shape, to best understand, and to convey what's happened to them. When done well, it feels akin to a delicious letter to me.

The first time I read Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, I was simultaneously horrified and delighted. Here is this woman showing how oblivious she is. She marries a mysterious, brooding, withholding man who um, maybe is still in love with his dead wife after knowing him for a very short amount of time. This simp lets herself be regularly manipulated by a woman who bears her obvious ill will. She's young and arrogant and out of place class-wise in ways she doesn't even attempt to understand, and a little immature, maybe too

easily flattered. All of the flaws of her personality are so easy to see in her telling (she is also caring and in love and young and observant and strange). There's a sense for me when reading *Rebecca* that beyond the plot idea of Rebecca always overshadowing the second Mrs. DeWinter, it's also because this narrator is so embarrassed of how fully she's letting herself be seen on the page that we never get her full name. The complexity of herself is only available to us because she assumes that if people hear the name Mrs. DeWinter, they'll still assume it's the titular Rebecca.

I think sometimes that maybe the deepest level of intimacy with someone a person could have is if essentially, you were randomly assigned a pen pal, each of you were given a post office box, and neither of you were allowed to leave any easily identifiable information on the page, especially names. What would you admit to someone if they could never find you? Especially about the emotions and ideas you're processing and attempting to understand?

I think of the details-of-a-day letter writing as more akin to a first person past tense story, with no retrospection allowed. Everything is still fresh. It might not have the immediacy or urgency that a well-written first person present tense story will have but is instead potentially more about the processing. This point of view puts a reader in the liminal space of everyday time. Things are happening and like any day, most of the time is taken up by events, by conversations, and a small part of it is the deep thinking needed for processing. The arrangement of events, the container for the story, becomes even more important when writing this kind of narrative time, especially when a writer is mostly concerned with character or ordinary time.

When I say container of a story, I mean applying a time span to the work that is different than the narrative time I described earlier. Narrative time is where a writer governs the expansion and contractions of their gaze. Zooming in on seconds: a character watching the moon and shivering in the cold November air. Compressing away months with the phrase: and then it was February. The container of a story time is where a writer makes gestures toward time that people regularly use as ways to shape their day.

Short stories that take place at a party like James Joyce's "The Dead"

or Jamel Brinkley's "The Let-Out" or Alice Sola Kim's "Successor, Usurper, Replacement" are prime examples of this. Narrative dips into back story itself, is carried along by a reader's understanding that the story ends when the event ends for the main character. Other containers: a relationship's length (Charles Yu's "Standard Loneliness Package"); a vacation (Margaret Atwood's "Stone Mattress"); the apocalypse (Kelli Jo Ford's "What Good is an Ark to a Fish?"); or a visit home that goes deeply awry (Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild").

Letters that describe a day, a week, a vacation are already a gesture toward writing with a container in mind.

CULTIVATING LETTERS EXERCISE

Choose a month—I feel like a winter month is best for this because it feels often like when people need people most—that you designate as letter month. Read *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* or Chekov's letters or *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker* throughout the month. Write a letter to someone who you can't stop thinking about and put it in a drawer. Write a letter or email to a friend that only details a day in your life. Write a complaint letter to the world in general, burn it. Write a letter that shows you thinking through something complex, don't sign it, send it to someone at random. If you have distinctive handwriting, make sure to type this one. Write a letter to a thing you love. Write a letter to yourself in the future like you're a high schooler with a nice English teacher. Hide it in a book to find years later. Write a letter to someone you love. Write a letter to someone whose work you admire.

CONTAINER OF A STORY EXERCISE

Make a list of events that feel like natural containers of a story for you. Make sure to add both specific units of time—this story will be 24 hours of time and I will call it *24* in honor of Kiefer Sutherland—to events that communicate a set ending time.

CONTAINERS DON'T CONTAIN ME EXERCISE

Think about stories or ideas where you might naturally subvert the idea of a container. Seek out Tia Clark's "Nutcracker." In their story, Clark makes it seem like a typical coming-of-age story. Coworkers have a party, a girl wants to feel attractive, sexy, but instead, the police pull them over in the end. Clark reminds readers that race will always be a factor for these characters.

If you can't find "Nutcracker," you might read any of George Saunders' stories about work. Consider how work-time feels immutable on the page in his stories.

Make a list of ideas or feelings or events that might feel more resonant without following the idea that a story needs a container. You might jot down notes to yourself after writing this list about why these particular ideas or feelings might feel like they need to be "containerless."

TWO OR THREE OR FOUR STORIES EXERCISE

Write a story based on one of your ideas from the Container of a Story Exercise. Write another story based on the Containers Don't Contain Me Exercise. Make sure both of these stories feature the same character and are written in the same point of view. When you've finished drafts of both of these stories, take your favorite paragraphs from each and create a flash story (1,000 words or less). Think about how flash with a rigid ending point of 1,000 words is a different type of container for a story. Consider what you know now about both previous stories by mixing them together.

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