

2. After you've finished reading a work, do a quick review of your marginal notes. Use your daybook to continue the "conversation" with the author or to summarize your own arguments.

3. If you own an e-book reader, experiment with the notes mode to create the equivalent of marginalia.

4. Next time you are in a bookstore that sells used books, search to find some golden oldies in which an owner of a book (or more than one!) talks back to the author in the margins.

5. Search on the Internet for "marginalia" and write briefly on what you discover.

Embrace the lyric.

There may be no more efficient form of short writing than the song lyric. The words do not stand alone, of course. They have plenty of company. A melody and repetition of sounds make the words memorable. The lyrics often tell a story. That story can be rendered in a music video or through a dramatic stage performance. The song may be used to help score a movie. Written for an opera, for example, the lyrics become part of a multimedia extravaganza, the effect—as in Verdi—of which is to capture and express an entire national artistic culture. Cue the elephants.

Many great lyrics are taken for granted and not appreciated as poetry in their own right. A few lyrics deserve the close reading we might apply to higher forms of art, such as a poem by Ezra Pound. To test this theory, I will interpret the lyrics of a Tom Petty song, "Free Falling" (sometimes

rendered "Free Fallin'"). I've played its three chords on guitar and piano and have tried to sing its lyrics of 150 words, although I can't hit Petty's high notes. I find these lyrics haunting, profound through and beneath the surface of sound. Most important for our purposes, this piece of short writing is efficient beyond measure, so economical, in fact, that it leads us to the edge of a great abyss.

She's a good girl, loves her mama
Loves Jesus and America too
She's a good girl, crazy 'bout Elvis
Loves horses and her boyfriend too

Stories have few essential requirements, but one of them involves the identification and evolution of a human character, formed on the page by a quilt of what Tom Wolfe called "status details," or, more commonly, character traits. Petty doesn't offer us much in his first stanza in the way of particularity. He asks us to settle for a litany of common, almost clichéd characteristics. God, mother, horses, form a kind of baseline, drawn, as we will learn, by a greatly flawed narrator, another staple of modern fiction.

The half line that gets me every time—so much so that I appear to hear it above the rest—is "crazy 'bout Elvis." She could love the Beatles or the Byrds but chooses Elvis to love, a bad boy in his own right, whose addictions will lead to an early grave. Think of the phrase "crazy 'bout Elvis" as a kind of grace note—that is, a small, almost exquisite ornament in music, most surprising when it turns out to be the only decoration.

HOW TO WRITE SHORT

It's a long day livin' in Reseda
There's a freeway runnin' through the yard
And I'm a bad boy, 'cause I don't even miss her
I'm a bad boy for breakin' her heart

A story needs a setting, and this one serves in both literal and symbolic ways. Poets know that place-names are powerful, and Reseda, a working-class suburb of Los Angeles, has the sound of "receding" in it, a kind of annihilation by subtraction. That freeway runs a little too close for comfort. Usually, the poorest folks in town live closest to the highway or the airport or the railroad tracks, a kind of lifeline to freedom that remains inaccessible. Just below the surface here is the joke that California is so cluttered with people and traffic that the freeway is not free at all but a clotted artery of the body politic, a society all revved up but going nowhere. That last line reverberates with some kind of dark humor and self-effacement, as Petty leads a great band known as the Heartbreakers.

And I'm free, I'm free fallin', fallin'

In this simple chorus, Petty puts into play some very sophisticated moves, both poetically and musically. I experience it as a form of binary energy, an on/off switch, a double helix of language in which the words alliterate, form connections, but then break away at the level of semantics and narrative. A free fall is a common expression of physical weightlessness, a state in physics and art where an object or person seems to defy gravity even while plummeting to the ground. Petty, quite dramatically, puts his vocal range to good use, hitting his highest note on the

elongated vowel of "free." But each time he repeats "fallin'," the notes go down in pitch.

All the vampires walkin' through the valley
Move west down Ventura Blvd.
And all the bad boys are standing in the shadows
All the good girls are home with broken hearts

This is my favorite stanza, linked and separated by alliteration. The first quartet includes "vampires," "valley," "Ventura," and even "Blvd.," where those *v*'s pile up like crashed cars in a smoky fog. There is even time and space here for what the critics call intertextuality, the evocation of one text by another. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," reads the Twenty-Third Psalm, but here the allusion packs some irony. Instead of comforting and consoling, the world of the narrator is gloomy and tragic, haunted by the walking dead of the San Fernando Valley.

And I'm free, I'm free fallin'

I wanna glide down over Mulholland
I wanna write her name in the sky
I wanna free fall out into nothin'
Gonna leave this world for a while

In this final stanza the voice of the narrator tells a story of despair, of drug use or suicide perhaps, of escape from responsibility and the requirements of love. And yet the diction is a language of light, those liquid *l* sounds in "glide" and "Mul-

HOW TO WRITE SHORT

holland," the creativity and romance signified by skywriting, but then comes the nihilism of "free fall out into nothin'" and the painful euphemism of leaving the world "for a while." We can make the interpretation of this text even more granular in the tension between the names of those iconic California streets, Ventura and Mulholland. If that initial capital *V* looks like a valley, with all its symbolic connotations of depression and despair, that *M* is its counterpart, two mountain peaks with a valley in the middle, a launching place in the hills above Hollywood, a land of dreams and of lost boys and girls.

And I'm free, I'm free fallin'...

GRACE NOTES

Consider the lessons we can draw from such an analysis of song lyrics. What practices and language moves can we apply to our own writing?

- Use simple words to build dramatic ideas.
- Depend on characters, conflict, scenes, setting, and narrators, no matter how short the story form.
- In music and writing, use repetition to hold narrative and thematic elements together, as in a chain, and make them memorable.
- Use a short text to remind readers of other short texts, enriching the experience of narrative.
- Remember that literal language benefits from its coexistence with figurative words, from metaphors to literary allusions to sound imagery to symbolism and more.