

RELAXING INTO TENSE

Skye | Write-o-Rama | Hugo House | May 15, 2022

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Offerings at Hugo: Cultivating Apocalyptic Sensibilities: Climate Fiction (in session)

Writing about Past Travels (coming fall 2022)

Raise tension, and the narrative stakes, through choices about tense. Present perfect, present time, imperative. Attention to tenses gives you control—over stories, essays, and memoirs. Bring words in progress or a blank page. We'll speak in the present about times past and to come, typing out memories of tomorrow.

Flow

- Intro to Tense (10)
- Reporting the future with Charlotte McConaghy (15)
- Reflecting the past with Ayşegül Savaş's *Walking on the Ceiling* (2019) (15)
- Sharing (10)

Intro to Tense

"When I was a child, I used to be filled with envy when adults recalled events of twelve or fifteen years before. I would think it must be marvellous, to issue those proclamations of experience – 'it was at least ten years ago', or, 'I hadn't seen him for twenty years'. But chronological prestige is tenacious: once attained, it can't be shed; it increases moment by moment, day by day, pressing its honours on you until you are lavishly, overly endowed with them. Until you literally sink under them.

"A centerarian has told me that memory protects one from this burden of experience. Whole segments of time dropped, she said: 'Of five or six years, say, around the time the turn of the century, all I can remember is the dress that someone wore, or the colour of a curtain.' And I would be pleased, rather than otherwise, at the prospect of remembering Naples in similar terms – a lilac dress Gioconda wore one morning driving to Caserta, or the Siena-coloured curtains of the apartment in San Biagio dei Librai. But memory, at an interval of only fifteen years, is less economical and less poetic, still clouded with effects and what seem to be their causes. The search is still underway in unlikely places – too assiduous, too attenuated; too far from home."

- Shirley Hazzard, *The Bay of Noon*, 1970, p. 2

(1) Reporting in the present with Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020)

Imagining what is to come – the task of speculation – when the outlook is bleak, and the world has begun to disappear, is terrifying. McConaghy gives body to the this terror by leveraging the dreamlike quality of the present simple – which she gives gravitas to with splices, interludes of present perfect. This novel is hopeful, yet, by conveying the sense of wonder we can have when we are reading/living in the surrealness of moment as they unfold.

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"The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here." (1)

[...]

"The fear is worse than death. It is worse than anything.

And it has found me once more, way out in the Atlantic, inside this rocking cabin.

Tonight is the first night I haven't been able to sleep.

"Primary coverts," I whisper through chattering teeth, "greater coverts, median coverts, scapular, mantle, nape, crown—shit. I lurch upright because even the mantra isn't helping me tonight, it's not calming or centering me, there's no distraction from the queasy terror of this skyless room.

I click on my travel torch and wedge it on top of my pack so it beam lights my notebook.

Niall, I scribble. I have to forestall a full-blown panic attack. *Where are your lungs when I need them? Where are your senses, your perpetual calm?*

It's been over a week and we've escaped the ice. We're headed for the Labrador Current, which Samuel says is dangerous. He says this whole ocean is dangerous. I'm not sure you'd like it. I think you enjoy having your feet on solid ground too much, but the sea is like the sky and I can't get enough of it either. When I die don't bury me in the ground. Scatter me to the wind.

I stop because tears have blurred my eyes. This won't be one of the letters I send. It would frighten him to hear me speak of dying.

"Turn that fucking light off," Lea snaps at me from her bed.

I riffle through my pack until I find the sleeping pills. I'm not meant to take them with alcohol but at this point I don't give a shit. I swallow one and then squeeze my eyes shut. *Primary coverts, greater coverts, median coverts, scapular, mantle, nape, crown—*

I wake hanging two inches above the sea. It roars black and bottomless, its spray icy against my face. For a moment it must be the most perfect dream and then the moment passes and I realize I'm awake and my body lurches with such shock that I nearly fall.

I'm clinging to the rope ladder I saw Ennis use. Swaying precariously against the ship's hull. My knuckles are white and frozen in their grip, and I am not wearing enough layers, not even close.

I have sleepwalked here." (p. 37-38)

Offering: Divide a sheet into two columns. On the left, write the event or a scenario that you will describe in a play-by-play scene. On the right, write the scene using the present simple to relay real-time feelings without exposition or much interpretation. (e.g. I say, she says, it goes, we walk, I see). You might occasionally include present perfect for context, but do not reveal the event, keep it a secret.

Scenario (left column suggestions):

- * A first day in a new job at a museum in a different city, after your spouse has died of unknown causes.
- * A walk with a friend who trips badly over a rock in an arboretum, they have bad news that they refuse to tell you.
- * Person 1 sits next to Person 2 in a ski resort in the summer, to begin training to be wilderness guides. Person 1 has been contemplating their unhappy marriage but is unable to name their unhappiness. Person 2 is flirtatious.

(2) Reflection with Ayşegül Savaş's *Walking on the Ceiling* (2019) (15)

We live so intimately with our memories; the past grafts itself to our day-to-day. Savaş's book poignantly and beautifully dilates how memory is unreliable, and yet we rely on it to make sense of events that have come to pass. We return to memories over and over, turning them over in our minds, in our day to day lives. Savaş uses the present perfect and present continuous and past conditional to tell a story of longing and remembering.

"At the time, I didn't know what sort of damage could be caused with words. I didn't know, either, what would be lost" (40).

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"When my mother and I moved from Moda to the new apartment, we started playing the silence game. We started it right after I came back from my grandparents' in Aldere.

I had imagined that when I was back and the two of us were finally alone, my mother would explain what had happened to us. I continued to wait for her explanation for years, even as I established the rules of our shared silence.

I would come home from school and slide the key into the lock, turning it with care. Inside, I unstrapped my shoes, slowly, like pulling at cloth stuck to a scar. I followed the trail of rugs to my room and changed out of my school clothes. I would either sit down to do my homework, or lie on my bed reading a book, listening to my mother's sounds in the apartment.

My mother would be at her desk or in the kitchen making dinner. After I went to my room, I heard the sound of water from the shower, and I gave myself several points in the game. When there was no danger of my mother hearing me, I would take things out of my schoolbag, or go to the kitchen for a snack. There would always be something for me on the table—a plate of fruits, peeled and sliced, or a glass of milk and walnut cookies.” (44)

Offering:

Imagine, or remember, or name, a lesson that was learned. Write it down. The lesson. It also might be called a realization. Or a change, a shift. Then write a scene of *the before*, to explain how it it was learned or attained, *using the past conditional* (e.g. “I would do this, I would do that”) to bring to life what was once done in a situation. Consider how you might use the present tense to return to *the after*, and what you might say.

And offering to take home:

Reread your own words from times past. Aim for enough time to have passed that the words are ordered in ways that appear strange. Become a stranger to your own writing. Then, as the stranger, note the tenses used, when, and the effects. Consider rewriting in a different tense to explore the effects on meaning for you, the stranger to your own words.

Lines for flight:

“arrange us with meaning, / the words plead. Find the thread / through the dark.”
- Farnaz Fatemi (by way of Maya C. Popa)

“Each piece of writing is a new port of call, full of surprises and disappointments, pleasures and intrigue.” – Colleen J. McElroy (by way of The Writers magazine, date unnoted).