

# THE SINGLE-SCENE STORY

*“[Short essays] require an alertness to detail, a quickening of the senses, a focusing of the literary lens...until one has magnified some small aspect of what it means to be human.”*

—Bernard Cooper

*“If you really become friends with your doubt, you can go ahead and take risks, knowing you will be questioning yourself at every turn, no matter what. It is part of living, a healthy evolutionary adaptation, I would imagine.”*

—Phillip Lopate

For this exercise, inspired by an assortment of flash single-scene essays—including Dylan Nice’s “Teeth,” Ryan Van Meter’s “First,” and T Kira Madden’s “The Lizard”—each of you are charged with writing a single-scene story by selecting a place, an object, and a realization you have had, however small, and combining them in an artful and urgent piece of writing. You’re also welcome, I should note, to take on the voice and experience of another, so long as you have a means of setting forth a thorough narrative and employing authentic sensory detail. Regardless of which you choose, do your best to begin, as Lopate prescribes above, with a moment or thought that targets doubt, curiosity, or questioning. What do you still not understand? What do you doubt about your life?

Furthermore, remember Vivian Gornick’s words that the most powerful works of literature are those that “take the reader on a journey, make the piece arrive, and bring us into a clearing where the sense of things is greater than it was before.” What does this mean, exactly? It means that your single-scene story moves by way of plot, character development, dialogue, and action and, by its end, has expanded beyond the situation itself (in the case of Dylan Nice’s essay, the stepfather preparing to kill the cat outside, or in the case of Ryan Van Meter, feeling that initial sting of shame, or in the case of T Kira Madden, the violence enacted against a lizard) to say something far greater about the world or the narrator’s particular world or lived experience.

To get you started, I’d like you to brainstorm three moments in your life—consider them scenes, if you will—where you came to a moment of epiphany or realization. This doesn’t have to be earth-shattering; you might have simply realized you had outgrown your hometown, or a relationship was no longer working, or the stream where you once caught turtles was about to be turned into yet another Kroger. For each of these moments of realization, please note the place where it occurred, and then within that space, note an object or several that might serve as metaphors/symbols for that scene, experience, or way of thinking.

## Scene 1:

Place:  
Epiphany:  
Object:

## Scene 2:

Place:  
Epiphany:  
Object:

## Scene 3:

Place:  
Epiphany:  
Object:

Now, select the scene that feels the quietest, the most subtle, the one for whom you’ll have to rely on creativity and artistry as opposed to outright emotion and narrative drama. Begin writing this single-scene essay and do not allow yourself to use any more than 750 words. Try to remain in this scene throughout the duration of the piece, save for an occasional brushstroke where you look outward, work to contextualize (briefly! succinctly!) the present, or foreshadow out: hours, days, months, years. Employ narrative action, landscape description, dialogue, rhetorical questions, interior monologue, and interaction/movement wherever possible. Try, too, to invoke your objects/scene elements as metaphor, as Nice does with

both the teeth of the chainsaw and the tree as it falls, Van Meter does with the radio and baseball equipment, and Madden does with her understanding of power, of violence. Try, too, to end on an image that *subtly* hints at symbolism. If you're feeling particularly adventurous, you might even consider drafting this single-scene essay in the present tense.