Chapter 1

GOOD WRITING

REVERSE-ENGINEERING GOOD PROSE AS THE KEY TO DEVELOPING A WRITERLY EAR

Education is an admirable thing," wrote Oscar Wilde, "but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught."[1] In dark moments while writing this book, I sometimes feared that Wilde might be right. When I polled some accomplished writers about which style manuals they had consulted during their apprenticeships, the most common answer I got was "none." Writing, they said, just came naturally to them.

I'd be the last to doubt that good writers are blessed with an innate dose of fluency with syntax and memory for words. But no one is born with skills in English composition per se. Those skills may not have come from stylebooks, but they must have come from somewhere.

That somewhere is the writing of other writers. Good writers are avid readers. They have absorbed a vast inventory of words, idioms, constructions, tropes, and rhetorical tricks, and with them a sensitivity to how they mesh and how they clash. This is the elusive "ear" of a skilled writer—the tacit sense of style which every honest stylebook, echoing Wilde, confesses cannot be explicitly taught. Biographers of great authors always try to track down the books their subjects read when they were young, because they know these sources hold the key to their development as writers.

I would not have written this book if I did not believe, contra Wilde, that many principles of style really can be taught. But the starting point for becoming a good writer is to be a good reader. Writers acquire their technique by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples of good prose. The goal of this chapter is to provide a glimpse of how that is done. I have picked four passages of twenty-first-century prose, diverse in style and content, and will think aloud as I try to understand what makes them work. My intent is not to honor these passages as if I were bestowing a prize, nor to hold them up as models for you to emulate. It's to illustrate, via a peek into my stream of consciousness, the habit of lingering over good writing wherever you find it and reflecting on what makes it good.

Savoring good prose is not just a more effective way to develop a writerly ear than obeying a set of commandments; it's a more inviting one. Much advice on style is stern and censorious. A recent bestseller advocated "zero tolerance" for errors and brandished the words *horror, satanic, ghastly,* and *plummeting standards* on its first page. The classic manuals, written by starchy Englishmen and rock-ribbed Yankees, try to take all the fun out of writing, grimly adjuring the writer to avoid offbeat words, figures of speech, and playful alliteration. A famous piece of advice from this school crosses the line from the grim to the infanticidal: "Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—wholeheartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. *Murder your darlings.*"[2]

An aspiring writer could be forgiven for thinking that learning to write is like negotiating an obstacle course in boot camp, with a sergeant barking at you for every errant footfall. Why not think of it instead as a form of pleasurable mastery, like cooking or photography? Perfecting the craft is a lifelong calling, and mistakes are part of the game. Though the quest for improvement may be informed by lessons and honed by practice, it must first be kindled by a delight in the best work of the masters and a desire to approach their excellence.

> We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

In the opening lines of Richard Dawkins's *Unweaving the Rainbow,* the uncompromising atheist and tireless advocate of science explains why his worldview does not, as the romantic and the religious fear, extinguish a sense of wonder or an appreciation of life.[3]

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Good writing starts strong. Not with a cliché ("Since the dawn of time"), not with a banality ("Recently, scholars have been increasingly concerned with the question of . . ."), but with a contentful observation that provokes curiosity. The reader of *Unweaving the Rainbow* opens the book and is walloped with a reminder of the most dreadful fact we know, and on its heels a paradoxical elaboration. We're lucky because we'll die? Who wouldn't want to find out how this mystery will be solved? The starkness of the paradox is reinforced by the diction and meter: short, simple words, a stressed monosyllable followed by six iambic feet.*

Most people are never going to die. The resolution to the paradox—that a bad thing, dying, implies a good thing, having lived—is explained with parallel constructions: *never going to die . . . never going to be born.* The next sentence restates the contrast, also in parallel language, but avoids

* Technical terms are defined in the Glossary.

the tedium of repeating words yet again by juxtaposing familiar idioms that have the same rhythm: *been here in my place . . . see the light of day.*

the sand grains of Arabia. A touch of the poetic, better suited to the grandeur that Dawkins seeks to invoke than a colorless adjective like *massive* or *enormous.* The expression is snatched from the brink of cliché by its variant wording (*sand grains* rather than *sands*) and by its vaguely exotic feel. The phrase *sands of Arabia*, though common in the early nineteenth century, has plunged in popularity ever since, and there is no longer even a place that is commonly called Arabia; we refer to it as Saudi Arabia or the Arabian Peninsula.[4]

unborn ghosts. A vivid image to convey the abstract notion of a mathematically possible combination of genes, and a wily repurposing of a supernatural concept to advance a naturalistic argument.

greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. Parallel wording is a powerful trope, but after dying and being born, being here in my place and seeing the light of day, enough is enough. To avoid monotony Dawkins inverts the structure of one of the lines in this couplet. The phrase subtly alludes to another meditation on unrealized genius, "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest," from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

In the teeth of these stupefying odds. The idiom brings to mind the menacing gape of a predator, reinforcing our gratitude for being alive: to come into existence we narrowly escaped a mortal threat, namely the high odds against it. How high? Every writer faces the challenge of finding a superlative in the English word-hoard that has not been inflated by hyperbole and overuse. *In the teeth of these incredible odds? In the teeth of these awesome odds?* Meh. Dawkins has found a superlative—to render into a stupor, to make stupid—that still has the power to impress.

Good writing can flip the way the world is perceived, like the silhouette in psychology textbooks which oscillates between a goblet and two faces. In six sentences Dawkins has flipped the way we think of death, and has stated a rationalist's case for an appreciation of life in words so stirring that many humanists I know have asked that it be read at their funerals.

What is it that makes a person the very person that she is, herself alone and not another, an integrity of identity that persists over time, undergoing changes and yet still continuing to be—until she does not continue any longer, at least not unproblematically?

I stare at the picture of a small child at a summer's picnic, clutching her big sister's hand with one tiny hand while in the other she has a precarious hold on a big slice of watermelon that she appears to be struggling to have intersect with the small *o* of her mouth. That child is me. But why is she me? I have no memory at all of that summer's day, no privileged knowledge of whether that child succeeded in getting the watermelon into her mouth. It's true that a smooth series of contiguous physical events can be traced from her body to mine, so that we would want to say that her body *is* mine; and perhaps bodily identity is all that our personal identity consists in. But bodily persistence over time, too, presents philosophical dilemmas. The series of contiguous physical events has rendered the child's body so different from the one I glance down on at this moment; the very atoms that composed her body no longer compose mine. And if our bodies are dissimilar, our points of view are even more so. Mine would be as inaccessible to her—just let *her* try to figure out [Spinoza's] *Ethics*—as hers is now to me. Her thought processes, prelinguistic, would largely elude me.

Yet she is me, that tiny determined thing in the frilly white pinafore. She has continued to exist, survived her childhood illnesses, the near-drowning in a rip current on Rockaway Beach at the age of twelve, other dramas. There are presumably adventures that she—that is that I—can't undergo and still continue to be herself. Would I then be someone else or would I just no longer be? Were I to lose all sense of myself—were schizophrenia or demonic possession, a coma or progressive dementia to remove me from myself—would it be I who would be undergoing those trials, or would I have quit the premises? Would there then be someone else, or would there be no one?

> Is death one of those adventures from which I can't emerge as myself? The sister whose hand I am clutching in the picture is dead. I wonder every day whether she still exists. A person whom one has loved seems altogether too significant a thing to simply vanish altogether from the world. A person whom one loves *is* a world, just as one knows oneself to be a world. How can worlds like these simply cease altogether? But if my sister does exist, then *what* is she, and what makes that thing that she now is identical with the beautiful girl laughing at her little sister on that forgotten day?

In this passage from *Betraying Spinoza,* the philosopher and novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein (to whom I am married) explains the philosophical puzzle of personal identity, one of the problems that engaged the Dutch-Jewish thinker who is the subject of her book.[5] Like her fellow humanist Dawkins, Goldstein analyzes the vertiginous enigma of existence and death, but their styles could not be more different—a reminder of the diverse ways that the resources of language can be deployed to illuminate a topic. Dawkins's could fairly be called masculine, with its confrontational opening, its cold abstractions, its aggressive imagery, its glorification of alpha males. Goldstein's is personal, evocative, reflective, yet intellectually just as rigorous.

at least not unproblematically. The categories of grammar reflect the building blocks of thought—time, space, causality, matter—and a philosophical wordsmith can play with them to awaken her readers to metaphysical conundrums. Here we have an adverb, *unproblematically,* modifying the verb *continue,* an ellipsis for *continue to be.* Ordinarily *to be* is not the kind of verb that can be modified by an adverb. To be or not to be—it's hard to see shades of gray there. The unexpected adverb puts an array of metaphysical, theological, and personal questions on the table before us.

a big slice of watermelon that she appears to be struggling to have intersect with the small o *of her mouth.* Good writing is understood with the mind's eye.[6] The unusual description of the familiar act of eating in terms of its geometry—a piece of fruit intersecting with an *o*—

forces the reader to pause and conjure a mental image of the act rather than skating over a verbal summary. We find the little girl in the photograph endearing not because the author has stooped to telling us so with words like *cute* or *adorable* but because we can see her childlike mannerisms for ourselves—as the author herself is doing when pondering the little alien who somehow is her. We see the clumsiness of a small hand manipulating an adult-sized object; the determination to master a challenge we take for granted; the out-of-sync mouth anticipating the sweet, juicy reward. The geometric language also prepares us for the prelinguistic thinking that Goldstein introduces in the next paragraph: we regress to an age at which "to eat" and even "to put in your mouth" are abstractions, several levels removed from the physical challenge of making an object intersect with a body part.

That child is me. But why is she me? . . . [My point of view] would be as inaccessible to her . . . as hers is now to me. . . . There are presumably adventures that she—that is that I—can't undergo and still continue to be herself. Would I then be someone else? Goldstein repeatedly juxtaposes nouns and pronouns in the first and third person: *that child . . . me; she . . . I . . . herself; I . . . someone else.* The syntactic confusion about which grammatical person belongs in which phrase reflects our intellectual confusion about the very meaning of the concept "person." She also plays with *to be,* the quintessentially existential verb, to engage our existential puzzlement: *Would I then be someone else or would I just no longer be? . . . Would there then be someone else, or would there be no one?*

frilly white pinafore. The use of an old-fashioned word for an old-fashioned garment helps date the snapshot for us, without the cliché *faded photograph.*

The sister whose hand I am clutching in the picture is dead. After eighteen sentences that mix wistful nostalgia with abstract philosophizing, the reverie is punctured by a stark revelation. However painful it must have been to predicate the harsh word *dead* of a beloved sister, no euphemism—*has passed away, is no longer with us*—could have ended that sentence. The topic of the discussion is how we struggle to reconcile the indubitable fact of death with our incomprehension of the possibility

that a person can no longer exist. Our linguistic ancestors parlayed that incomprehension into euphemisms like *passed on* in which death consists of a journey to a remote location. Had Goldstein settled for these weasel words, she would have undermined her analysis before it began.

I wonder every day whether she still exists. A person whom one has loved seems altogether too significant a thing to simply vanish altogether from the world. A person whom one loves is *a world, just as one knows oneself to be a world. How can worlds like these simply cease altogether?* This passage fills my eyes every time I read it, and not just because it is about a sister-in-law I will never meet. With a spare restatement of what philosophers call the hard problem of consciousness (*A person . . .* is *a world, just as one knows oneself to be a world*), Goldstein creates an effect that is richly emotional. The puzzlement in having to make sense of this abstract philosophical conundrum mingles with the poignancy of having to come to terms with the loss of someone we love. It is not just the selfish realization that we have been robbed of their third-person company, but the unselfish realization that they have been robbed of their first-person experience.

The passage also reminds us of the overlap in techniques for writing fiction and nonfiction. The interweaving of the personal and the philosophical in this excerpt is being used as an expository device, to help us understand the issues that Spinoza wrote about. But it is also a theme that runs through Goldstein's fiction, namely that the obsessions of academic philosophy—personal identity, consciousness, truth, will, meaning, morality—are of a piece with the obsessions of human beings as they try to make sense of their lives.

Maurice Sendak, Author of Splendid Nightmares, Dies at 83

Maurice Sendak, widely considered the most important children's book artist of the 20th century, who wrenched the picture book out of the safe, sanitized world of the nursery and plunged it into

the dark, terrifying, and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human psyche, died on Tuesday in Danbury, Conn. . . .

Roundly praised, intermittently censored, and occasionally eaten, Mr. Sendak's books were essential ingredients of childhood for the generation born after 1960 or thereabouts, and in turn for their children.

Pauline Phillips, Flinty Adviser to Millions as Dear Abby, Dies at 94

Dear Abby: My wife sleeps in the raw. Then she showers, brushes her teeth and fixes our breakfast—still in the buff. We're newlyweds and there are just the two of us, so I suppose there's really nothing wrong with it. What do you think?—Ed
Dear Ed: It's O.K. with me. But tell her to put on an apron when she's frying bacon.

Pauline Phillips, a California housewife who nearly 60 years ago, seeking something more meaningful than mah-jongg, transformed herself into the syndicated columnist Dear Abby—and in so doing became a trusted, tart-tongued adviser to tens of millions—died on Wednesday in Minneapolis. . . .

With her comic and flinty yet fundamentally sympathetic voice, Mrs. Phillips helped wrestle the advice column from its weepy Victorian past into a hard-nosed 20th-century present. . . .

Dear Abby: Our son married a girl when he was in the service. They were married in February and she had an 8 1/2-pound baby girl in August. She said the baby was premature. Can an 8 1/2-pound baby be this premature?—Wanting to Know
Dear Wanting: The baby was on time. The wedding was late. Forget it.

Mrs. Phillips began her life as the columnist Abigail Van Buren in 1956. She quickly became known for her astringent, often genteelly

risqué, replies to queries that included the marital, the medical, and sometimes both at once.

Helen Gurley Brown, Who Gave "Single Girl" a Life in Full, Dies at 90

Helen Gurley Brown, who as the author of *Sex and the Single Girl* shocked early-1960s America with the news that unmarried women not only had sex but thoroughly enjoyed it—and who as the editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine spent the next three decades telling those women precisely how to enjoy it even more—died on Monday in Manhattan. She was 90, though parts of her were considerably younger. . . .

As *Cosmopolitan*'s editor from 1965 until 1997, Ms. Brown was widely credited with being the first to introduce frank discussions of sex into magazines for women. The look of women's magazines today—a sea of voluptuous models and titillating cover lines—is due in no small part to her influence.

My third selection, also related to death, showcases yet another tone and style, and stands as further proof that good writing does not fit into a single formula. With deadpan wit, an affection for eccentricity, and a deft use of the English lexicon, the linguist and journalist Margalit Fox has perfected the art of the obituary.[7]

plunged [the picture book] into the dark, terrifying, and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human psyche; a trusted, tart-tongued adviser to tens of millions; a sea of voluptuous models and titillating cover lines. When you have to capture a life in just eight hundred words, you have to choose those words carefully. Fox has found some mots justes and packed them into readable phrases which put the lie to the lazy excuse that you can't sum up a complex subject—in this case a life's accomplishments—in just a few words.

Roundly praised, intermittently censored, and occasionally eaten. This is a zeugma: the intentional juxtaposition of different senses of a

single word. In this list, the word *books* is being used in the sense of both their narrative content (which can be *praised* or *censored*) and their physical form (which can be *eaten*). Along with putting a smile on the reader's face, the zeugma subtly teases the bluenoses who objected to the nudity in Sendak's drawings by juxtaposing their censorship with the innocence of the books' readership.

and in turn for their children. A simple phrase that tells a story—a generation of children grew up with such fond memories of Sendak's books that they read them to their own children—and that serves as an understated tribute to the great artist.

Dear Abby: My wife sleeps in the raw. Beginning the obit with a bang, this sample column instantly brings a pang of nostalgia to the millions of readers who grew up reading Dear Abby, and graphically introduces her life's work to those who did not. We see for ourselves, rather than having to be told about, the offbeat problems, the waggish replies, the (for her time) liberal sensibility.

Dear Abby: Our son married a girl when he was in the service. The deliberate use of surprising transitions—colons, dashes, block quotations—is one of the hallmarks of lively prose.[8] A lesser writer might have introduced this with the plodding "Here is another example of a column by Mrs. Phillips," but Fox interrupts her narration without warning to redirect our gaze to Phillips in her prime. A writer, like a cinematographer, manipulates the viewer's perspective on an ongoing story, with the verbal equivalent of camera angles and quick cuts.

the marital, the medical, and sometimes both at once. Killjoy style manuals tell writers to avoid alliteration, but good prose is enlivened with moments of poetry, like this line with its pleasing meter and its impish pairing of *marital* and *medical.*

She was 90, though parts of her were considerably younger. A sly twist on the formulaic reporting and ponderous tone of conventional obituaries. We soon learn that Brown was a champion of women's sexual self-definition, so we understand the innuendo about cosmetic surgery as good-natured rather than catty—as a joke that Brown herself would have enjoyed.

hauntingly, flinty, tart-tongued, weepy, hard-nosed, astringent, genteelly, risqué, voluptuous, titillating. In selecting these uncommon adjectives and adverbs, Fox defies two of the commonest advisories in the stylebooks: Write with nouns and verbs, not adjectives and adverbs, and Never use an uncommon, fancy word when a common, plain one will do.

But the rules are badly stated. It's certainly true that a lot of turgid prose is stuffed with polysyllabic Latinisms (*cessation* for *end, eventuate in* for *cause*) and flabby adjectives (*is contributive to* instead of *contributes to, is determinative of* instead of *determines*). And showing off with fancy words you barely understand can make you look pompous and occasionally ridiculous. But a skilled writer can enliven and sometimes electrify her prose with the judicious insertion of a surprising word. According to studies of writing quality, a varied vocabulary and the use of unusual words are two of the features that distinguish sprightly prose from mush.[9]

The best words not only pinpoint an idea better than any alternative but echo it in their sound and articulation, a phenomenon called phonesthetics, the feeling of sound.[10] It's no coincidence that *haunting* means "haunting" and *tart* means "tart," rather than the other way around; just listen to your voice and sense your muscles as you articulate them. *Voluptuous* has a voluptuous give-and-take between the lips and the tongue, and *titillating* also gives the tongue a workout while titillating the ear with a coincidental but unignorable overlap with a naughty word. These associations make *a sea of voluptuous models and titillating cover lines* more lively than *a sea of sexy models and provocative cover lines.* And *a sea of pulchritudinous models* would have served as a lesson on how not to choose words: the ugly *pulchritude* sounds like the opposite of what it means, and it is one of those words that no one ever uses unless they are trying to show off.

But sometimes even show-off words can work. In her obituary of the journalist Mike McGrady, who masterminded a 1979 literary hoax in which a deliberately awful bodice ripper became an international bestseller, Fox wrote, "*Naked Came the Stranger* was written by 25

Newsday journalists in an era when newsrooms were arguably more relaxed and inarguably more bibulous."[11] The playful *bibulous*, "tending to drink too much," is related to *beverage* and *imbibe* and calls to mind babbling, bobbling, bubbling, and burbling. Readers who want to become writers should read with a dictionary at hand (several are available as smartphone apps), and writers should not hesitate to send their readers there *if* the word is dead-on in meaning, evocative in sound, and not so obscure that the reader will never see it again. (You can probably do without *maieutic, propaedeutic,* and *subdoxastic.*) I write with a thesaurus, mindful of the advice I once read in a bicycle repair manual on how to squeeze a dent out of a rim with Vise-Grip pliers: "Do *not* get carried away with the destructive potential of this tool."

From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which meant nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make. There were sharecroppers losing at settlement. Typists wanting to work in an office. Yard boys scared that a single gesture near the planter's wife could leave them hanging from an oak tree. They were all stuck in a caste system as hard and unyielding as the red Georgia clay, and they each had a decision before them. In this, they were not unlike anyone who ever longed to cross the Atlantic or the Rio Grande.

It was during the First World War that a silent pilgrimage took its first steps within the borders of this country. The fever rose without warning or notice or much in the way of understanding by those outside its reach. It would not end until the 1970s and would set into motion changes in the North and South that no one, not even the people doing the leaving, could have imagined at the start of it or dreamed would take a lifetime to play out.

Historians would come to call it the Great Migration. It would become perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century. . . .

The actions of the people in this book were both universal and distinctly American. Their migration was a response to an economic and social structure not of their making. They did what humans have done for centuries when life became untenable—what the pilgrims did under the tyranny of British rule, what the Scotch-Irish did in Oklahoma when the land turned to dust, what the Irish did when there was nothing to eat, what the European Jews did during the spread of Nazism, what the landless in Russia, Italy, China, and elsewhere did when something better across the ocean called to them. What binds these stories together was the back-against-the-wall, reluctant yet hopeful search for something better, any place but where they were. They did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done.

They left.

In *The Warmth of Other Suns,* the journalist Isabel Wilkerson ensured that the story of the Great Migration would be underreported no longer.[12] Calling it "great" is no exaggeration. The movement of millions of African Americans from the Deep South to Northern cities set off the civil rights movement, redrew the urban landscape, rewrote the agenda of American politics and education, and transformed American culture and, with it, world culture.

Wilkerson not only rectifies the world's ignorance about the Great Migration, but with twelve hundred interviews and crystalline prose she makes us understand it in its full human reality. We live in an era of social science, and have become accustomed to understanding the social world in terms of "forces," "pressures," "processes," and "developments." It is easy to forget that those "forces" are statistical summaries of the deeds of millions of men and women who act on their beliefs in pursuit of their desires. The habit of submerging the individual into abstractions can lead not only to bad science (it's not as if the "social forces" obeyed Newton's laws) but to dehumanization. We are apt to think, "I (and my kind) choose to do things for reasons; he (and his kind) are part of a social process." This was a moral of Orwell's essay

"Politics and the English Language," which warned against dehumanizing abstraction: "Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*." With an allergy to abstraction and a phobia of cliché, Wilkerson trains a magnifying glass on the historical blob called "the Great Migration" and reveals the humanity of the people who compose it.

From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age. Not even the chronology is described in conventional language: the century is an aging person, a contemporary of the story's protagonists.

Typists wanting to work in an office. Not "denial of economic opportunities." By invoking a moderately skilled occupation from an earlier era, Wilkerson invites us to imagine the desperation of a woman who has acquired a proficiency that could lift her from the cotton fields to a professional office but who is denied the chance because of the color of her skin.

Yard boys scared that a single gesture near the planter's wife could leave them hanging from an oak tree. Not "oppression," not "the threat of violence," not even "lynching," but a horrific physical image. We even see what kind of tree it is.

as hard and unyielding as the red Georgia clay. Once again prose is brought to life with a snatch of poetry, as in this simile with its sensual image, its whiff of allusion (I think of Martin Luther King's "red hills of Georgia"), and its lyrical anapest meter.

anyone who ever longed to cross the Atlantic or the Rio Grande. Not "immigrants from Europe or Mexico." Once again the people are not sociological categories. The author forces us to visualize bodies in motion and to remember the motives that pulled them along.

what the pilgrims did . . . what the Scotch-Irish did . . . what the European Jews did . . . what the landless in Russia, Italy, China, and elsewhere did. Wilkerson begins the paragraph by stating that the actions of her protagonists are universal, but she does not rest with that generalization. She nominates the Great Migration for inclusion in a list of

storied emigrations (expressed in pleasingly parallel syntax), whose descendants doubtless include many of her readers. Those readers are implicitly invited to apply their respect for their ancestors' courage and sacrifice to the forgotten pilgrims of the Great Migration.

when the land turned to dust, not "the Dust Bowl"; *when there was nothing to eat,* not "the Potato Famine"; *the landless,* not "the peasants." Wilkerson will not allow us to snooze through a recitation of familiar verbiage. Fresh wording and concrete images force us to keep updating the virtual reality display in our minds.

They left. Among the many dumb rules of paragraphing foisted on students in composition courses is the one that says that a paragraph may not consist of a single sentence. Wilkerson ends a richly descriptive introductory chapter with a paragraph composed of exactly two syllables. The abrupt ending and the expanse of blankness at the bottom of the page mirror the finality of the decision to move and the uncertainty of the life that lay ahead. Good writing finishes strong.

The authors of the four passages share a number of practices: an insistence on fresh wording and concrete imagery over familiar verbiage and abstract summary; an attention to the readers' vantage point and the target of their gaze; the judicious placement of an uncommon word or idiom against a backdrop of simple nouns and verbs; the use of parallel syntax; the occasional planned surprise; the presentation of a telling detail that obviates an explicit pronouncement; the use of meter and sound that resonate with the meaning and mood.

The authors also share an attitude: they do not hide the passion and relish that drive them to tell us about their subjects. They write as if they have something important to say. But no, that doesn't capture it. They write as if they have something important to *show.* And that, we shall see, is a key ingredient in the sense of style.