The Sequential “Thematic Core” of Raymond Carver’s Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976)

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ABSTRACT

The first of American author Raymond Carver’s major short story collections, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976), may not, upon initial examination, appear to be a short story sequence or even to bear any of the typical sequential characteristics. The volume’s range of both style and subject is explicitly recognized by many critics of the volume. However, important links between its stories are almost as immediately noted. A close reading of the volume yields a great deal more than simply the inevitable “narrative homologies” and “commonalities of style or sensibility” which sequence theorist J. Gerald Kennedy would attribute to any single-author collection of stories. There is, rather, compelling evidence that much of the collection revolves around a “thematic core” (or, as Kennedy would label it, a “radical content”). This core—which gives Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? at least something of the character of a sequence—consists of two tightly-intertwined themes, or “obsessions,” as Carver preferred to label his overriding concerns. The most prominent of these is what Carver critic Kirk Nesset calls “love and its absence”—the ways in which ordinary people are “alternately bewildered, enraged, diminished, suffocated, isolated, and entrapped by love.” The volume’s second “obsession” is the failure of individuals to communicate with those who surround them, especially their spouses or partners. This paper will argue that Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?—while not nearly as unified a sequence as Carver’s later, landmark volume Cathedral (1983)—nevertheless possesses significant sequential characteristics revolving around these twin obsessions.

Key Words: Raymond Carver, short story sequence, short story cycle, sequence theory, communication, alienation, ambiguity, generic signals
The first of Raymond Carver’s major short story collections, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), may not, upon initial examination, appear to be at all sequential in nature. Carver critic Kirk Nesset writes: “One of the more striking things about Carver’s first volume of stories is that as a collection it is hardly uniform in subject or voice” (9). Indeed, we are keenly aware of a writer in the process of experimentation as we read the twenty-two stories which make up the volume. There are occasions when Carver’s style varies to such an extent that it belies the fact that the stores are even written by a single author. Nesset notes that “Carver ranges from the Kafkaesque expressionism of ‘The Father’ to the anecdotal simplicity of ‘Nobody Said Anything’ to the heavier, mildly Faulknerian prose of ‘Sixty Acres’…and he ranges with similar freedom from subject to subject” (9) There are moments of humor in the collection, and some of tragic desperation. Its world is populated by factory workers, waitresses, and the unemployed, as well as writers, artists and university students. Those stories that mention geographical location all take place on the Pacific Coast of the United States, but the volume is hardly unified by common setting: “Sixty Acres, “ for example, is set on the rustic Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington State, while “Jerry and Molly and Sam” takes place in Sacramento, California.

This diversity is explicitly recognized by many critics of the volume. Important links between the stories, however, are almost as immediately noted. Ewing Campbell detects an overarching presence of “motifs of alienation and encountering the other, often in the guise of the grotesque” (30). In the chapter of his 1992 book *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* devoted to *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, Campbell discusses each of the volume’s stories separately. Other critics deal with the collection in a single essay, therefore implicitly recognizing some degree of unity. Arthur M. Saltzman is one of these. In *Understanding Raymond Carver* (1988), he prefaces his essay on the volume with this generalization: “Carver’s characters are victims of anguishes they can neither brave nor name, only suffer. William Carlos Williams's diagnosis in *Paterson* targets them exactly: ‘The language is missing them / they die also / incommunicado’” (21-22). Kirk Nesset, in his essay entitled “‘This Word Love’: Sexual Politics and Silence in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, “sees the collection as being principally about “the issue of love – or, more precisely, the issue of love and its absence, and the bearing of love’s absence on marriage and individual identity” (9) These and other critics clearly view *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* as a collection of related stories, as opposed to a random miscellany, but none attempts to bring the volume into the ongoing discussion of the modern short story sequence.
Short story sequence theorist Robert Luscher sees sequences as occupying an “expansive middle territory” between the miscellany of short stories and the traditional novel. An initial examination of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* readily leads us to the conclusion that the volume is not located side-by-side with, say, *Dubliners* or *Winesburg, Ohio* on such a continuum. It does not have the recurring characters and places, or the “generic signals,” “that we expect from the “traditional” short story sequence. Yet, a close reading of the volume yields more than simply the inevitable “narrative homologies” and “commonalities of style or sensibility” which J. Gerald Kennedy attributes to any single-author collection of stories (*Modern Sequences* ix). There is compelling evidence that much of the collection revolves around a “thematic core” (Ingram 21), or, as Kennedy calls it, a “radical content.” This core – which gives *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* at least something of the character of a sequence – consists of two tightly-intertwined themes, or “obsessions,” as Carver preferred to label his overriding concerns.

The most prominent of these two obsessions is love, or, more specifically, the ways in which ordinary people are “alternately bewildered, enraged, diminished, suffocated, isolated, and entrapped by love “ (Nesset 10). Failing marriages and relationships abound in this volume. Nesset indicates that Carver’s preoccupation with “love and its absence” in his first collection can be placed in a larger context:

For Carver’s lovers, the politics of sex ultimately reflect a kind of larger politics, more tenuous and more ominous still: the politics of fortune and fate which, forever unseen and unheard, dictate the bleak circumstances of their lives, provoking the bafflement and dismay that is for them a daily fact of existence. Evoked by the politics of Carver’s uniquely hardscrabble domesticity, the marriages of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are scaled-down models representing larger, more terrifying politics, or antipolitics-models reflecting, in human form, the arbitrariness and caprice and chaos of the world in which those marriages are rooted. (11)

Arbitrariness, caprice and chaos are the keynotes of Carver’s world in larger part because many of its occupants are profoundly affected by poverty and the insecurity which is its natural consequence. For the characters of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, poverty and insecurity lead to feelings of overwhelming frustration, alienation, and isolation. These, in turn, help to undermine the possibility of satisfactory relationships, especially between the sexes. Feelings of alienation and isolation disrupt and damage human relationships by making communication impossible, or at best difficult.
The volume’s second obsession is the failure of individuals to communicate with those who surround them, especially their spouses or partners. Lack of communication can only perpetuate the despair which too often pervades Carver’s world and the relationships between its characters, and, indeed, it does so in many of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* The volume’s relationships are typically marked by a deafening silence, often broken only by “a variety of misguided outbursts, neuroses, and perversions” (Saltzman 22).

Susan Garland Mann identifies the most commonly-found organizing elements of short story sequences as being recurring characters; themes, particularly of isolation, fragmentation, or indeterminacy; statements, particularly about art; and finally place, either historical or mythical. This paper will present a model of interpretation for *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* which focuses on the volume’s twin obsessions of “love and its absence” on the one hand, and the failure of communication principally between spouses and partners, on the other. The relationship between this “thematic core” and the themes which Mann points out are obvious. I will look at fifteen of the volume’s twenty-two stories, leaving out these seven: “Sixty Acres,” “Night school,” “Collectors,” “What Do You Do in San Francisco?,” “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” “Why, Honey?” and “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes.”

Of the fifteen stories, six will be shown to possess a special structural relationship: “The Idea,” “What’s in Alaska?,” “The Student’s Wife,” “The Ducks,” “What is it?” and “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” Of these, the first five are strikingly similar not only in their treatment of the volume’s “thematic core,” but also in their patterns and conclusions. The sixth – the volume’s concluding story – reverses the pattern established by the others, with significant effects on our reading of the entire collection. In his “Poetics” essay, J. Gerald Kennedy suggests that “every collection, especially those by a single author, may be expected to reveal elemental narrative structures, resembling grammatical chains, which generate the individual stories and account for similarities and differences among them” (23). The above six stories reveal a “narrative deep structure” at the heart of the collection, a feature which Kennedy indicates as one of the most significant aspects of the modern short story sequence (22).

Before proceeding to this “narrative deep structure,” however, I will first examine nine stories which, despite being fairly dissimilar from one another in their individual narrative patterns, nevertheless prominently display their author’s two main obsessions, the “thematic core” of the volume. These are “Fat,” “Neighbors,” “They’re Not Your Husband, “Are You A Doctor?,” “The Father,” “Nobody Said Anything,” “Jerry and Molly and Sam,” “Signals,” and “How About This?".
Particular attention will be paid to “The Father,” a two-page fragment which, when read in the context of the volume as a whole, serves to compact and crystallize the volume’s main obsessions.

The collection’s opening story, “Fat,” solidly establishes both of the authorial obsessions which dominate Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? In it, the waitress – narrator recounts, to both her friend Rita and us, her curious identification with an obese customer seated at her table one evening. Although the exact nature and cause of this identification ultimately remain mysterious to us, we can at least speculate that the fat man’s gentlemanly politeness, “festive” personality (Campbell 13), and exotic quality – demonstrated particularly in his comic use of the royal “we” – represent for the narrator an escape from the dreariness of life she is used to. His behavior certainly contrasts with the party of four businessmen seated at another table, twice mentioned as being “very demanding” (Please 3, 5).

After the encounter, the narrator’s boyfriend Rudy only refers to the man as “some fatty” (Please 7). Indeed, the identification of the narrator with the fat man throws into sharp relief the inadequacy of the former’s relationship with Rudy. We recognize this initial manifestation of the theme of love’s absence most explicitly when the couple are in bed together:

I get into bed and move clear over to the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some, through it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all. (8)

The narrator cannot, or will not, communicate to Rudy her identification with the fat man – this failure is merely the first of the volume’s many depictions of its authors’ second obsession. When Rudy recounts his own childhood experience with two fat boys, the narrator “can’t think of anything to say” (Please 8). Although she tries to relate her experience to Rita, she ultimately stops short, further isolating herself:

That’s a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn’t know what to make of it.
I feel depressed. But I won’t go into it with her. I’ve already told her too much. (8)

Some critics, for instance Ewing Campbell, see the narrator’s connection with the fat man as a renewing event (13). In fact, the narrator’s inability or unwillingness to communicate fully the interaction and its implications suggests something else: “Her inarticulateness stakes out the limits of her growth of consciousness” (Saltzman 24). The final lines of the story (“It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it.”),
while superficially positive, have a false ring to them, especially in light of the narrator’s “depression.” admitted to only a few lines earlier. The passivity of the sentence “My life is going to change” (as opposed to, say, “I am going to change my life”), which echoes the narrator’s passivity during sex earlier in the story, is seen by Saltzman to be another negative sign. (24) Finally, August seems hardly the month for positive transformation, prefacing as it does the decline associated with autumn. As “Fat” concludes, we are left with little faith that the narrator’s life will improve, despite the potential for growth and revitalization that her identification with another holds out.

“Fat” is followed by “Neighbors,” “a tale of marriage in the process of diminishing” (Nesset 11-12). Although Bill and Arlene Miller are described in the story’s opening sentences as “a happy couple,” it becomes clear that the opposite is true as we observe them taking sexual pleasure, separately, in the empty apartment of their more affluent neighbors, which they have agreed to look after. Like the narrator in “Fat,” Bill and Arlene “look outward, imagining themselves as others, seeking alternate, more attractive selves” (Nesset 12). They never tell each other what they are experiencing in the neighboring apartment, and when they find themselves locked out of it as the story concludes, can only hold each other in silence “[bracing] themselves” (Please 16) before the inevitable collapse. “Neighbors” clearly shares a “thematic core” with the preceding story. Like the empty relationship between Rudy and the narrator in “Fat,” Bill and Arlene’s marriage is depicted by Carver as being drained, at some point previous to the story’s action, of whatever initial mutual passion and understanding it might have possessed. Paralleling the opening story’s communicative paralysis is “Neighbors”’ combination of marital failure with a striking inability or unwillingness by its protagonists to communicate meaningfully. The reader recognizes that Bill and Arlene’s silence can only serve to hasten a complete marital disintegration.

The collection’s fourth story brings us back to a nondescript coffee shop like that in which most of the action in “Fat” takes place. “They’re Not Your Husband” centers on Earl Ober, who is “between jobs as a salesman” (Please 22). One night, after he has been drinking, he goes to the restaurant where his wife Doreen works, and overhears two customers commenting on her weight. The next day he “sells” her on the idea of a diet. Unemployed, drinking heavily, and reliant on Doreen’s income, Ober is clearly no longer in control of his own life. His reaction to his predicament comes in the form of a callous attempt to control Doreen’s weight – she has “suddenly [become] a problem to be corrected” (Saltzman 28). The attempt eventually backfires on him when he becomes the object of strangers’ derision as the story concludes.

In his “Poetics” essay, J. Gerald Kennedy notes that the juxtaposition of stories
may be used to highlight differences as well as similarities (17). We note some interesting results if we juxtapose “They’re Not Your Husband” and “Fat.” Carver uses the same tools in both stories: the main characters are reacting to an encounter with strangers in a restaurant. Images of weight are central to each – thinness in the former and fatness in the latter. The stories are, most importantly, connected by a common “thematic core”: both depict love’s absence, specifically revealed in this pair of stories as a description of women caught in relationships in which their male partner has no interest in their well-being. In both instances, meaningful communication has ceased – if it ever existed to begin with. The two stories are not completely parallel, however. In fact, it is how they contrast that makes the relationship between “Fat” and “They’re Not Your Husband” most interesting. “Fat” suggests at least the possibility that an interaction with “the other” can have beneficial consequences, representing as it does a potential escape from communicative paralysis (although, as we have seen, the narrator’s potential for positive transformation is, arguably, far from realized). The analogous interaction with “the other” in “They’re Not Your Husband” has overwhelmingly negative consequences, leading as it does to a steady erosion of Earl Ober’s marriage as his wife becomes more and more physically emaciated. In short, when the two stories are examined side-by-side in light of both their unities and disunities, we are presented with a somewhat ambiguous, but ultimately gloomy, vision of the interaction with “the other”: if the former story holds out perhaps some hope, the latter overwhelms and crushes it.

“Are You a Doctor?” again presents the possibility of a connection between its main character and a stranger – the connection is not ultimately forged, however. This failure to escape isolation through meaningful communication is once again set against a backdrop of marital erosion. The story opens with the solitary presence of Arnold Breit, who is forced to spend many nights at home waiting for his wife to phone: “she phoned – late … after a few drinks – each night when she was out of town” (Please 31) When the phone rings, however, Breit finds himself talking not to his wife, but to a female stranger. After another phone conversation the next night, Breit makes the decision to visit the stranger after she begs him to do so.

As he approaches the strange woman’s apartment, Arnold is “stalked by fear” (Nesset 17). He is afraid of the possibility that he may commit an act of infidelity. He thinks of his honeymoon, very likely the only emblem of this marriage he has left to hold on to, and almost balks: “He remembered the hotel in Luxembourg, the five flights he and his wife had climbed so many years ago. He felt a sudden pain in his side …”(Please 35). Breit’s other, contrary, fear is that he may not get the chance to meet the stranger: when he leaves the telephone for a moment earlier in the story, to
light a cigar, he returns “half afraid she might be off the line” (33).

The result of Breit’s indecision is the story’s anticlimax. Breit does meet the stranger, Clara Holt, but their conversation, typical of many which indicate the volume’s “thematic core,” is profoundly frustrating to the reader in its emptiness, despite the obvious potential it holds:

“Then there’s nothing?” he said.
“No. I mean yes.” She shook her head. “What you said, I mean. Nothing”.

When Breit returns home and his wife calls, it becomes clear that the meeting with Clara has only served to distance Breit further from his wife: “Are you there, Arnold?” she said. “You don’t sound like yourself.” Saltzman notes that “Carver leaves [the couple] on the verge of inevitable distance from one another” (32). The failure of Arnold and Clara to connect fully, despite the obvious potential in their meeting, leaves the former more alone than ever. Indeed, he seems profoundly alienated, even from himself, as the story concludes.

“Are You a Doctor?” is followed by what is perhaps the strangest story in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? “The Father” is barely two pages long and reads essentially like a fragment from some dark fairy tale. It presents a snapshot – like image of the female members of a family looking at their newborn baby and trying to determine whom he most resembles. They conclude that he looks like his father, who sits alone in another room. That realization leads to this exchange between two of the daughters:

“But who does Daddy look like?” Phyllis asked.

“Who does Daddy look like?” Alice repeated, and they all at once looked through to the kitchen where the father was sitting at the table with his back to them.

“Why, nobody!” Phyllis said and began to cry a little. (Please 42)

The story ends a few lines later with this chilling image: “[The father] had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression” (42).

The stories so far examined all essentially revolve around a “thematic core” comprised of the issue of “love and its absence,” and a related “motif of alienation.” “The Father” compresses these two obsessions of Carver’s into the single, horrible image of the father, seated alone and figuratively distant from his family. As the women in the story become aware, and make him aware, that he looks like “nobody,” the father finds himself, like Arnold Breit, utterly displaced from both his family and himself. The fear inherent to such a state is, in varying degrees, manifest in each of the stories which precede “The Father,” as well as other stories later in the volume, but is never as grotesquely realized.
The above reading is grounded in “The Father”’s presence within what Kennedy calls the “textual structure” of the collection (“Poetics” 15). Other readings are obviously possible, especially since this story, more so than any other in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, is characterized by what it does not say. Regardless of how we ultimately interpret “The Father,” our attempt to fill in its ‘gaps’ will almost certainly be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by whether or not we come to the story on its own, or as part of a larger whole. In Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century, Forrest Ingram writes: “A short story cycle [is] a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (19). The reader of “The Father” is given so little information to go on that he is very likely to call on the overall patterns at least seemingly present in the rest of the collection to aid in the interpreting of the story. It is through “The Father,” therefore, that Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? appears in one of its most sequential lights. As we shall see, “The Father” takes on another layer of complexity when we arrive at the collection’s final story.

“Nobody Said Anything,” like “The Father,” comes at the theme of “love and it’s absence” from the child’s point of view. It is, however, considerably longer and more detailed than “The Father,” or indeed any story we have examined thus far. It opens with the child-narrator overhearing his parents argue. After they both go to work, he explores various adolescent escapes from reality – television, a science fiction novel, and masturbation. He then goes fishing at a creek nearby his house. Through an act of teamwork with another boy that contrasts with his parents’ earlier bickering, he catches and brings home a bloated, grotesque fish, or rather the half of it which belongs to him after it is divided with the other boy. He clearly hopes to impress his parents with the trophy, and perhaps distract them from the argument which they have resumed, but instead its bizarre appearance only further enrages them – they order him to throw it in the garbage. The final lines of the story leave the adolescent alone with his catch, but imbue both with a poignant nobility that seems to signify the hope for reconciliation they had represented:

I went back outside. I looked into the creel. What was there looked silver under the porch light. What was there filled the creel.

I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half of him. (Please 61)

Part of the moment’s poignancy derives from our understanding that despite his best efforts, the boy cannot possibly restore equilibrium to his parents’ relationship. Only they can do that through constructive dialogue. It is once again a lack of such dialogue which exacerbates the story’s despairing vision of love’s absence.
“Jerry and Molly and Sam” is one of a pair stories, within the group of nine “thematic core” stories, which somewhat jarringly treat the two obsessions of the “thematic core” with black humor. It centers on Al, who, beset by potential crises on all sides – the possibility he may get laid off, rent and car payments, and, not at least of all, the fact that he is having an affair – decides, in what he sees as a moment of great clarity, to take control of things by getting rid of the family dog. In keeping with the volume’s previous visions of a failure of marital dialogue, we sense Al’s real problem is his complete isolation from his wife and family, and even his secret lover – it is noted that “his life had become a maze, one lie overlaid upon another until he was not sure he could untangle them if he had to” (Please 156). For all this the blame is put on Suzy the dog.

After covertly dropping the pet off in a faraway neighborhood, he goes to the apartment of the woman with whom he is having an affair. He does make an attempt to communicate his anxiety to her, but by this time, having stopped at two bars and a liquor store on the way, he is too drunk to succeed in the endeavor. She is more concerned with squeezing his blackheads than with consoling him. He then goes home to his family, who are naturally distressed by the fact that the dog is missing. From then on Al is convinced that everything depends on retrieving the dog. The sense of impending disaster that we experience at the end of so many of the volume’s stories in fact propels “Jerry and Molly and Sam” from start to finish, and is its chief comic device. There is an underlying note of tragedy to the story, however, as we detect that Al’s life and marriage are merely two more failures in the series we have been tracking. The failure of Al’s marriage, combined with his inability or unwillingness to attempt to repair it through truthful communication, represent another revelation of the two obsessions with constitute the “thematic core” of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?

“Signals,” like “Jerry and Molly and Sam,” employs dark humor in its depiction of a couple on the brink of disaster. Wayne and Caroline’s attempt to repair their relationship by having dinner at an expensive French restaurant backfires when Wayne discovers how out of his depth he is amid the elegance of Aldo’s, and how far he is from reconciliation with Caroline. Their inability to communicate with the new French waiter is echoed by their failure to replay their fears to each other. As they leave the restaurant, Wayne is determined to salvage something of his dignity: he expresses doubt that Aldo, who has been flirting with Caroline, ever knew Lana Turner, as Caroline had earlier claimed.

“How About This?” begins with a couple setting out on a new road: unusually, for this volume, they are actively trying to change their lives (Saltzman 60). Harry, a writer, and Emily, an artist, have made a seemingly clean break from their lives in San
Francisco, and are destined for an isolated house in northwestern Washington. Their vaguely expressed hope is to “make a more honest life somewhere in the country” (Please 187). Disappointment sets in when they arrive to find the house dilapidated. Nervous and tentative, they debate whether or not they should stay. Their examination of the house becomes, in effect, an examination of their relationship (Saltzman 61): “He rapped on the walls near the front door. ‘Solid. A solid foundation. If you have a solid foundation, that’s the main thing!’” (188). The problem with this examination is, once again, a “ritualistic avoidance” of genuine communication (Saltzman 41). The couple do talk, but in a dangerously guarded and tentative way. After commenting on the foundation, Harry avoids eye contact, for “[Emily] was shrewd and might have read something from his eyes” (188). Later he says “‘Let’s …let’s not let any of it get us down, okay?,’” to which Emily replies: “‘I wish you’d just be quiet’” (189).

In the story’s second equation of the sexual and the material, Harry eventually discovers, despite his initial assessment of the “foundation,” that he has no confidence in either his relationship with Emily or the sturdiness of the homestead: “He suddenly recalled the mattress in the kitchen. He understood that it made him afraid. He tried to imagine Emily walking under the big rafter in the barn. But that made him afraid too” (Please 193). He decides he can never live in the new house, and it is clear the couple will soon be withdrawing to the world they have, with great hope, left only days earlier. The house will remain dilapidated. As the story ends, the couple, like Bill and Arlene Miller at the end of “Neighbors,” fearfully brace themselves: “‘Harry, we have to love each other,’ [Emily] said. ‘We’ll just have to love each other, ‘ she said” (194).

The above nine stories yield a clear “thematic core” based upon two obsessions: the breakdown of relationships, combined with and reinforced by the failure of characters to initiate reparative communication. Such a “thematic core” is strong indication – as Ingram and Kennedy argue – of a short story volume’s sequential design. In addition to these nine stories, there are, embedded at intervals within the volume, six stories which collectively represent its “narrative deep structure”; these six stories resemble one another not only in their thematic concerns, but also in their narrative patterns and conclusions. The “thematic core” of these stories is the same as that of each of the above nine stories: the sexual relationships they reveal are all on the verge of breakdown, and meaningful communication between partners has essentially ceased. Carver goes a step further in these stories, however, depicting the terror felt by characters involved in an almost completely disintegrated relationship. The crisis between partners in each of these stories ends with one falling asleep, leaving the other totally and finally isolated as he or she faces a single, horrible image or state. Fear and loneliness, sometimes only hinted at in the above nine stories, are
keenly realized in the narrative pattern of the dark “inner core” stories of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? The collection’s final story also displays the same “narrative deep structure,” yet “upsets” the pattern established by the other five. This discontinuity adds another layer of complexity to the whole volume.

The first of these six stories, “The Idea,” is virtually a parallel to “Neighbors,” which immediately precedes it. It depicts a couple who, like the Millers, experience sexual titillation as a result of an outside source. The narrator and her partner, Vern, secretly observe their neighbor as he stands at his wife’s window watching her undress. While the neighbors presumably get sexual satisfaction through their voyeurism, this is not the case for Vern and the narrator. Instead, the act of watching makes them “jumpy, “and they channel their sexual appetites into other, solitary, acts: eating and watching television. Indeed, their sexual, and more general, isolation from each other echoes the situation in “Neighbors”: they are unable or unwilling to communicate why they repeatedly watch the couple next door. The result is the narrator’s terrifying encounter with an infestation of ants after Vern has gone to bed. Naturally, the narrator is unable or unwilling to tell Vern about the ants, although she clearly wants to: “I’d wanted to tell Vern about the ants” (Please 21).

“What’s In Alaska?” centers on the “ritualistic avoidance” of communication between spouses Carl and Mary after the latter announces she may be getting a new job in Fairbanks, Alaska. They are clearly anxious about this new development in their lives, but avoid discussion of it, instead venting their fears in a number of “misguided outbursts, neuroses and perversions” when they visit, and smoke marijuana with, their friends Jack and Helen. Shortly after they arrive at Jack and Helen’s, Mary accuses Carl of being “on a little bummer” (Please 80). Carl takes particular notice of interactions between Mary and Jack, and becomes increasingly agitated by them. Eventually his anxiety shifts to a new pair of shoes he’s just bought, after he spills soda on them. Carl and Mary are careful to avoid the subject which truly bothers them. Carl does mention it once, but only vaguely articulates his fear: “Mary, what am I going to do up there?” (84). Mary does not reply.

After leaving their friends’ house, Carl’s shoe continues to bother him obsessively: “He could feel the dampness in that shoe” (Please 91). Meanwhile, Mary yearns for further distraction: “‘When we get home, Carl, I want to be fucked, talked to, diverted. Divert me, Carl. I need to be diverted tonight’ ” (91). In fact, she quickly falls asleep after they get home. Carl then notices something “vaguely predatory” in the darkness:

He kept staring and thought he saw it again, a pair of small eyes. His heart turned. He blinked and kept staring. He leaned over to look for something to throw. He picked up one of his shoes. He sat straight up and held the shoe
with both hands. He heard her snoring and set his teeth. He waited. He waited for it to move once more, to make the slightest move. (93)

This concluding scene is clearly reminiscent of the final moments of “The Idea,” after the narrator in that story discovers the ants: one spouse sleeps, leaving the other alone to bear a vaguely-realized horror. This narrative pattern is more fully explored, and more terrifyingly achieved, in “The Student’s Wife” than in either of the above stories.

“The Student’s Wife” directly explores the problem which Kirk Nesset outlines at the beginning of his “Sexual Politics and Silence” essay. The story portrays a couple who can recall the romance of the early stages of their relationship, a romance crushed by “the arbitrariness, caprice and chaos” of their subsequent, poverty-ridden lives. It opens with its protagonists, Mike and Nan, in bed together – Mike is reading the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke to his wife, but gets sleepy. Nan, her mind filled with escapist thoughts of “caravans just setting out from walled cities and bearded men in robes” (Please 122), is restless, and wants Mike to stay awake. Among the tactics she employs is an attempt to get Mike to list the things he likes and dislikes. First she gives her list:

“I like staying up late at night and then staying in bed the next morning. I wish we could do that all the time, not just once in a while … I’d like to go dancing at least once a week. I’d like to be able to buy the kids nice clothes every time they need it …. I’d like to stop moving around every year, or every other year. Most of all … I’d like us both just to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and things like that”. (128)

Her attempt to elicit similar admissions from Mike is tersely cut off when he says: “I wish you’d leave me alone, Nan” (128).

Mike falls asleep shortly thereafter, but Nan, kept awake by the rhythmic monotony of her partner’s breathing, gets up and restlessly seeks distraction. She stays awake, anxious and crying all night, only to realize fully the horror of her insomnia when the sun rises:

The sky grew whiter, the light expanding rapidly up from behind the hills. Except for the times she had been up with one or another of the children (which she did not count because she had never looked outside, only hurried back to bed or to the kitchen), she had seen few sunrises in her life and those when she was little. She knew that none of them had been like this. Not in pictures nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise was so terrible as this. (Please 131)

The story concludes with Nan bearing the image of a “terrible sunrise” in solitude,
desperately yearning for some sort of communication:

She wet her lips with a sticking sound and got down on her knees. She put her hands out on the bed.

“God, “she said. “God, will you help us God?” she said. (131)

Arthur Saltzman notes that one of Rilke’s poems, “The Archaic Torso of Apollo,” ends with the line: “You have to change your life.” Will Nan’s life change? With a husband to whom she cannot communicate her fears, the possibility for positive renewal seems as unlikely as that presented at the end of “Fat,” which, we recall, ends with a hollow-sounding variation on, or perhaps reply to, the line from Rilke (“My life is going to change.”).

“The Ducks” is the next in the “narrative deep structure” of stories, whose structural pattern sees, in each case, one member of a dysfunctional couple completely isolated to bear a terrible anxiety while the other sleeps. Its crisis is the death of the male partner’s boss during a work shift one evening. The event prompts his unnamed wife, suddenly reminded of life’s transience, to initiate sex. The husband is unreceptive, however:

He tried to think how much he loved her or if he loved her. He could hear her breathing but he could also hear the rain. They lay there like this.

She said, “If you don’t want to, it’s all right.”

“It’s not that, “he said, not knowing what he meant. (Please 183).

After his wife falls asleep, the husband tries to focus on an upcoming holiday in Reno which the couple has planned. His mind becomes flooded with images of gambling:

He tried to think of the slots and the way the dice clicked and how they looked turning over under the lights. He tried to hear the sound the roulette ball made as it skimmed around the gleaming wheel. He tried to concentrate on the wheel. He looked and looked and listened and listened and heard the saws and the machinery slowing down, coming to a stop. (Please 183)

The sudden and seemingly arbitrary death of a co-worker is surely part of the explanation for these thoughts of chance and fate. We sense as well, however, that the death has prompted the husband to reevaluate his marriage and his own happiness – in other words, his standing in life’s game of chance. As we noted above, Kirk Nesset links the volume’s “politics of sex” to a larger “politics of fortune and fate.” While he does not deal directly with the story in his essay, it should be noted that “The Ducks” in fact makes the link in a more explicit way than any other piece in the volume.

Thoughts of Reno finally give way to a fear which we have now seen, in various guises, several times. The husband thinks he hears something outside, but his
wife is asleep and unaware of what her partner hears: “‘Hon, wake up,’ he whispered. But she only shuddered and moved farther to her own side. She kept on sleeping. ‘Wake up,’ he whispered. ‘I hear something outside’ (Please 184). Like the narrator of ‘The Idea,” Carl in “What’s In Alaska?,” and Nan in “The Student’s Wife”, the husband is left to bear, in isolation, a vague, unnamed fear.

The couple at the centre of “What Is It?,” Leo and Toni, are on the brink of financial disaster: their bankruptcy hearing is just two days away. The couple’s monetary insolvency parallels a breakdown in their marriage, and indeed, the two failures reinforce one another, as Nesset observes: “conjugal proximity teams up with bad fortune to destroy what is left” (20). As the story begins, Toni is leaving for the evening to sell the couple’s convertible. When we learn that she has committed adultery with the dealer who buys the car, we come to understand that Toni has in fact “sold” all that is left of the couple, material and spiritual.

While she is gone, Leo drinks heavily, and even considers suicide. He is unable to understand how he has reached this point. Like Nan in “The Student’s Wife,” he finds himself desperate for the spiritual communion his relationship lacks as he cries out for help: “A news program begins – it’s ten o’clock – and he says, ‘God, What in God’s name has gone wrong?’ and goes to the kitchen to return with more Scotch” (Please 213). Leo’s horrible solitude is finally interrupted by Toni’s telephone call to announce the sale of the car. We sense that meaningful conversation between the two at this point – before adultery has been committed – may be vital. The telephone dialogue however, is as stilted and unsatisfying as that in “Are You a Doctor?” When the telephone rings again, there is “only a dial tone” (216). Leo’s isolation is now complete.

When Toni is dropped off the next morning by the car dealer, Leo makes a faint attempt to confront the man, but instead finds himself confronted with questions he cannot answer: “What is it you want?’ the man says .... ‘What is it?’ ” (Please 217). Leo is silent. Later he gets into bed with Toni, who is sleeping. The story ends with a grotesque metaphor of the baffling, and randomly drawn, roads of life: “He runs his fingers over her hip and feels the stretch marks there. They are like roads, and he traces them in her flesh .... They run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them” (218). Leo and Toni’s road appears to have come to an end. The final image of the story transports us to an earlier moment when, with infinite promise, the road had begun: “He remembers waking up the morning after they bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, in the sun, gleaming” (218).

The last of the six stories which constitute the volume’s “narrative deep structure,” “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?,” is also the collections’ final story. The situation it presents – a couple in crisis – is familiar. How it principally differs
from all the stories thus far examined is in the degree to which the reader is made aware of the background to the story’s events. We are introduced to Ralph Wyman, the central character, and read of his progression through young adulthood as a university student and, after graduation, a school teacher. Two moments during this period seem particularly significant. One is Ralph’s feeling, after taking courses in philosophy and literature, that he is “on the brink of some kind of huge discovery about himself” (Please 227). But, we are told, it never comes. He does find inspiration under the tutelage of a literature professor, Dr. Maxwell, and then meets the woman he eventually marries, Marian Ross. The second moment comes the night before the couple’s wedding, when both he and Marian “[pledge] to preserve forever the excitement and the mystery of marriage” (229).

In keeping with the volume’s “thematic core,” marital bliss does not last. The story differs, however, in that we are witness to the moment at which a critical gulf between the couple opens. One afternoon during their honeymoon in Mexico, Ralph observes, from a distance, Marian learning over a balustrade, sexually alluring and almost exotic. He experiences “an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not” (Please 239). Marian’s intense sexuality scares and isolates Ralph, and, furthermore, “suggests the rupture to come” (Saltzman 69).

Ralph’s insecurities about his position within the sexual world of his wife are confirmed on the fateful evening which is the story’s focus. During a quiet moment after their children are put to bed, Marian confesses to a sexual liaison with a male friend, an event which, to some degree, Ralph has always known about and feared. He becomes enraged: “‘Christ!’ The word leaped out of him. ‘But you’ve always been that way, Marian!’ ” (Please 235). As Saltzman puts it: “before him once again is that strange, disconcerting woman whom he had watched on the balcony” (70). Ralph’s perceived isolation seems complete to him as he connects this moment with the earlier one in Mexico.

The night of drunken excess which follows resurrects a way of life which was usual for Ralph during the period in which he felt “on the brink of some kind of discovery about himself” (Saltzman 70). After it is over, he returns home, seemingly farther away than ever to such a revelation. Seated alone at the kitchen table, we are brought back to the unrecognizable man in “The Father.” Indeed, the connections between that most fragmentary of the volume’s stories and the final story speak for themselves:

[Ralph] heard the children stirring. He sat up and tried to smile as they came into the kitchen.

“Daddy, Daddy,” they said, running to him with their little bodies.

“Tell us a story, Daddy, “his son said, getting into his lap.
“He can’t tell us a story, “his daughter said. “It’s too early for a story. Isn’t it, Daddy?”
“What’s on your face, Daddy?” his son said, pointing.
“Let me see!” his daughter said. “Let me see, Daddy.”
“Poor Daddy, “his son said.
“What did you do to your face, Daddy?” his daughter said.
“It’s nothing” Ralph said. “It’s all right, sweetheart. Now you get down now, Robert, I hear your mother” (Please 249)
Ralph’s face has been bruised after an attack by a hoodlum, but his child’s question (“What did you do to your face, Daddy?”), invoking a similar question in “The Father” (Who does Daddy look like?”), suggests the degree to which he has been displaced from his former self by the night’s events.

Juxtaposing the story’s conclusion against those of the five stories discussed above reveals a significant variation – indeed an inversion – of the recurring end-pattern present in the above five “inner core” stories. Ralph gets into bed with Marian, only she is not asleep. They make love, and in so doing seem to bridge the gap that the previous night has torn open. The effect of this re-connection on Ralph concludes the volume: “… he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him” (Please 251). Commenting on this last sentence, Nesset notes that

Through verbal repetition – especially of the gerund – Carver suggests the kinds of possibility residing in the “impossible,” emphasizing that the road to recovery is part of the journey, too. He also suggests, ironically, that the remedy for such dis-ease lies in its cause. For Ralph and Marian, sex will now restore, at least in part, what sex has earlier undertaken to destroy. (25) Ralph does not know where his “turning” will take him. As his daughter points out, it is, for the moment, “too early for a story.” We clearly sense, however, that he, and Marian, are not at the end of the road, but at a new beginning.

The majority of the stories we have looked at end with couples more alienated from each other than ever, and sometimes clearly on the brink of disaster. Sexual politics, often working in tandem with a larger politics of fate, and combined with an inability or unwillingness to communicate, lead to displacement from the partner and family, as well as displacement from the former self. The man at the end of “The Father,” isolated from and unrecognizable to his family, is the volume’s single-most compact and intense recognition of these displacements. Yet, the volume ends ambiguously, but intriguingly, by suggesting that the final story’s displacement (and, by implication, displacements that have come before) may in face be a positive
transformation. “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” ends on a note that suggests a terrible storm has been weathered, and that life, although difficult and confusing in its newness, can now continue. The final story’s seemingly positive ending cannot possibly negate all that has come before in the volume, however, but it does make it more difficult to pin down the collections’ overall world-view.

As has been noted, seven of the stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? do not chiefly concern themselves with the “thematic core” evident in the above fifteen. The alienation which Lee Waites, an American Indian, suffers in “Sixty Acres” does not stem from marital disintegration, but rather originates in the story’s backdrop of racial dispossession” (Saltzman 37). The action in each of “Night School” and “Collectors” takes place after the narrator’s marriage has ended, contrary to the main current of stories in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? which occur before marital collapses. In “What Do You Do in San Francisco?,” we witness an apparent marital disintegration through the eyes of the postman Henry Robinson, but the story is actually more concerned with Robinson’s use of his observations to validate his bourgeois philosophies. “Put Yourself in My Shoes” is a story of how an experience with “the other,” in this case manifest in “a couple of brusque philistines” (Saltzman 52), enables a writer to discover his next story and overcome artistic inertia. “Why, Honey?,” which comes in the form of a confessional letter, reveals the disintegration of a mother and son’s relationship resulting from the latter’s deception. Finally, “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes” is a tender and optimistic story about a profound moment of connection between a father and son.

With seven stories in which the volume’s overriding obsessions of relationship disintegration and non-communication are not particularly evident, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? cannot be considered a traditional short story sequence. In the remaining fifteen stories, however, these obsessions are pervasive, and in one of these fifteen, “The Father,” are terrifyingly distilled. There exists an inner core of six stories within the fifteen in which the volume’s obsessions manifest themselves in very similar narratorial patterns, giving way as they do to final, fearful images of isolation. The last story in this “narrative deep structure” – and the final one of the volume – adds a layer of complexity and ambiguity to the collection’s vision: despite a special connection with “The Father” – the most unyielding of the volume’s linked stories – the final story reverses the pattern established by the conclusions to the other five. It is clear that Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, while not a traditional sequence, is no random miscellany.
References


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