
CAROL SHIELDS

ABSENCE

SHE WOKE UP EARLY, DRANK A CUP OF STRONG unsugared coffee, then sat down at her word processor. She knew more or less what she wanted to do, and that was to create a story that possessed a granddaughter, a Boston fern, a golden apple, and a small blue cradle. But after she had typed half a dozen words, she found that one of the letters of the keyboard was broken, and, to make matters worse, a vowel, the very letter that attaches to the hungry self.

Of course she had no money and no house-handy mate to prod the key free. Many a woman would have shrugged good-naturedly, conceded defeat, and left the small stones of thought unclothed, but not our woman; our woman rolled up her sleeves, to use that thready old metaphor, and began afresh. She would work *around* the faulty letter. She would force her story, however awkwardly, toward a detour. She would be resourceful, look for other ways, and make an artefact out of absence. She would, to put the matter bluntly, make do.

She started—slowly, ponderously—to tap out words. “Several thousand years ago there—”

But where her hands had once danced, they now trudged. She stopped and scratched her head, her busy, normally useful head, that had begun, suddenly, to thrum and echo; where could she go from here? she asked herself sharply. Because the flabby but dependable gerund had dropped through language’s trapdoor, gone. Whole parcels of grammar, for that matter, seemed all at once out of reach, and so were those bulky doorstep words that connect and announce and allow a sentence to pause for a moment and take on fresh loads of oxygen. Vocabulary, her well-loved garden, as broad and taken-for-granted as an acre of goldenrod, had shrunk to a square yard, and she was, as never before, forced to choose her words, much as her adored great-aunt, seated at a tea table, had selected

sugar lumps by means of a carefully executed set of tongs.

5 She was tempted, of course, to seek out synonyms, and who could blame her? But words, she knew, held formal levels of sense and shades of deference that were untransferable one to the other, though thousands of deluded souls hunch each day over crossword puzzles and try. The glue of resonance makes austere demands. Memory barks, and context, that absolute old cow, glowers and chews up what’s less than acceptable.

The woman grew, as the day wore on, more and more frustrated. Always the word she sought, the only word, teased and taunted from the top row of the broken keyboard, a word that spun around the center of a slender, one-legged vowel, erect but humble, whose dot of amazement had never before mattered.

Furthermore, to have to pause and pry an obscure phrase from the dusty pages of her old thesaurus threw her off balance and altered the melody of her prose. Between stutters and starts, the sheen was somehow lost; the small watery pleasures of accent and stress were roughed up as though translated from some coarse sub-Balkan folk tale and rammed through the nozzle of a too-clever-by-half, space-larky computer.

Her head-bone ached; her arms-bones froze; she wanted only to make, as she had done before, sentences that melted at the center and branched at the ends, that threatened to grow unruly and run away, but that clause for clause adhered to one another as though stuck down by Velcro tabs.

She suffered too over the *sounds* that evaded her and was forced to settle for those other, less seemly vowels whose open mouths and unsubtle throats yawned and groaned and showed altogether too much teeth. She preferred small slanted breakable tones that scarcely made themselves known unless you pressed an ear closely to the

curled end of the tongue or the spout of a kettle. The thump of heartbeat was what she wanted, but also the small urgent jumps lodged between the beats. (She was thankful, though, for the sly y that now and then leapt forward and pulled a sentence taut as a cord.)

10 “Several thousand years ago a woman sat down at a table and began to—”

Hours passed, but the work went badly. She thought to herself: to make a pot of bean soup would produce more pleasure. To vacuum the hall rug would be of more use.

Both sense and grace eluded her, but hardest to bear was the fact that the broken key seemed to demand of her a parallel surrender, a correspondence of economy subtracted from the alphabet of her very self. But how? A story had to come from somewhere. Some hand must move the pen along or press the keys and steer, somehow, the granddaughter toward the Boston fern or place the golden apple at the foot of the blue cradle. “A woman sat down at a table and—”

She felt her arm fall heavy on the table and she wondered, oddly, whether or not the table objected. And was the lamp, clamped there to the table’s edge, exhausted after so long a day? Were the floorboards reasonably cheerful or the door numb with lack of movement, and was the broken letter on her keyboard appeased at last by her cast-off self?

Because now her thoughts flowed through every object and every corner of the room, and a moment later she *became* the walls and also the clean roof overhead and the powerful black sky. Why, she wondered aloud, had she stayed so long enclosed by the

tough, lonely pronoun of her body when the whole world beckoned?

15 But the words she actually set down came from the dark eye of her eye, the stubborn self that refused at the last moment to let go. “A woman sat down—”

Everyone knew who the woman was. Even when she put a red hat on her head or changed her name or turned the clock back a thousand years or restored to wobbly fables about granddaughters and Boston ferns, everyone knew the woman had been there from the start, seated at a table, object and subject sternly fused. No one, not even the very young, pretends that the person who brought forth words was any other than the arabesque of the unfolded self. There was no escape and scarcely any sorrow.

“A woman sat down and wrote,” she wrote.

[2000]



Architect's rendering of the Carol Shields Memorial Labyrinth in King's Park, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where the writer lived for twenty years and wrote her major books. The labyrinth suggests a visual image of the riddling construction of her fiction.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think the author entitled this story “Absence”?
2. What is the answer to the riddle: Which key is missing? Would the absence of a different letter have the same effect as the absence of this letter? Why or why not?
3. What is the relation between the unnamed protagonist of the story, who sits down one day with a cup of strong unsugared coffee to find a key on her word processor broken, and the story’s author, who we can imagine might have done the same thing while writing this story?
4. How would you characterize the difference between the constraints the protagonist sets herself before starting (“a granddaughter, a Boston fern, a golden apple, and a small blue cradle”) and the constraint set by the failure of her keyboard to function correctly?
5. In the final analysis, do you think the story the protagonist will write will be better or worse for being written without the benefit of the missing letter? Explain your reasoning with arguments based on the language of the story.