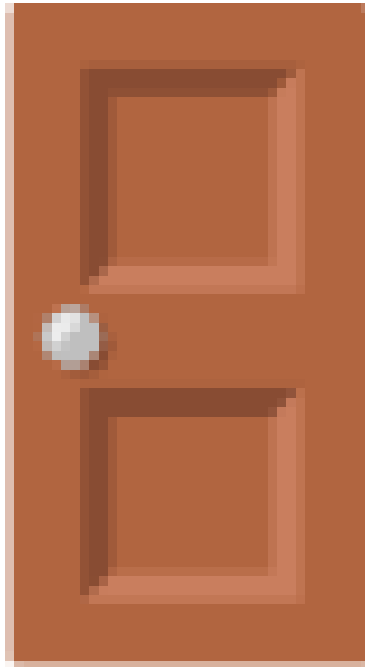


A Brief Guide to Reading



Part I The Tommyknocker

an essay
by Charles Wolfgang Keane Tuomi

“become like little children”
jesus

#

“Late last night and the night before, tommyknockers, tommyknockers knocking
on my door. I wanna go out, don't know if I can 'cuz I'm so afraid of the
tommyknocker man.”
Stephen King
The Tommyknockers

There was a time in your life when you were in the early stages of learning language. You were encountering new words all the time. Even new letters. Learning the sequence in which they appear in the alphabet. How letters and words are pronounced.

You no doubt encountered many different forms of polymorphism during this period.

Words often have multiple possible meanings, leaving it up to you, the reader or listener, to decipher which is correct, which is sometimes not a trivial thing to do. You were often confronted with words that could be used as different parts of speech, depending on context. You encountered homonyms during conversations, words that sound exactly the same when spoken but have different meanings. You found different words that meant the same thing, or nearly the same, and a bit later you learned about connotations, which are subtle, emotional messages that some words can convey.

All this was probably confusing and difficult. There are rules within rules inside of rules, a vast puzzle of hard-to-remember and sometimes seemingly illogical rules for constructing phrases and sentences. There was likely a time in your life when all of this was very much top of mind, as you attended school and tried to absorb it all. You practiced printing and perhaps writing letters. At some point you got used to using a keyboard, maybe, as well. Memorizing, integrating, synthesizing, growing your understanding and vocabulary literally day by day.

That time in your life happens to be right now. And also tomorrow. And the next day. And the one after that, too. Because the child you were when you were doing these things, the *children* you once were, all of them, are all still there, in a very real sense, in your own personal cabin in the woods. Our past selves, including these many sponge-like children, progressing from pre-school to kindergarten to elementary school to middle school, are *points of view* from which we remember our lives. In this sense our *youngest* selves are our *oldest* selves: they have been around the longest, and witnessed the most.

When we read, or write, or read what we write, or listen, we hear not with two ears but with many of them, so many different listeners, like the world's largest cinema audience, each one operating with slightly different information, slightly different context, and therefore sometimes hearing things differently.

When most people read, even silently, we still hear or at least consider the pronunciation of the words we are reading in our minds. And our mind exercises something like a word sense disambiguation algorithm. When we read the word “love,” we decipher whether it is being used as a noun or a verb, and make an effort to ascertain what “kind” of love it is referring to (romantic love, sex as in making love, brotherly love, simple appreciation as in “love that shirt!”, the beginning score of some sports involving rackets, a term of endearment, the middle name of the actress Jennifer Love Hewitt, etc.).

When someone speaks to us the phrase, “I knew it!” we must disambiguate: the sound “noo” could also mean “new,” but we make a guess because we would not understand what someone would mean if they said, “I new it!” But in doing so, someone in our head, some little homunculus, is passed the possibility “I new it!” to consider, and so we “hear” that sense of the phrase within us. It makes a ping.

Writers exploit all of this when writing, both consciously through deliberate repetition techniques like alliteration and subconsciously through involuntary forms of repetition or emphasis.

I call one such form of emphasis a Toomyknocker. Sorry, I mean Tommyknocker! Me and my typos. It’s a bit like a poker tell.

The Tommyknockers is the title of a novel written by Stephen King, in which Boobi Anderson (oops, Bobbi), an author of Wild West fiction, trips over something while out walking in the Maine woods, which turns out to be just the teensiest tip of a big old iceberg of a problem.

(“Coincidentally,” “Captain Trips” was the nickname of the virus that nearly exterminates all of humanity in King’s opus, *The Stand*. This virus was released by a man named [Charlie Champion](#), who fled with his family from the government facility in which the virus was being housed immediately after an outbreak began, thereby becoming Patient Zero in the outbreak that ultimately tears down society and leads to a standoff between empathes and narcissists. This virus also appears in one of the first stories King ever wrote, entitled “Night Surf,” in which it it contrasted with the “asian flu” or “Hong Kong flu”)



Here are some folks in the film *Knock at the Cabin* taking a trip.

Anyway, what I mean by a Tommyknocker in writing is a conspicuous detail or phrasing, which is deliberately used by the author (which may or not mean the author's *conscious* self) to call attention to something by sort of tripping them up. Repetition in particular of such a thing makes a careful reader go, "hmm, what's up with this?"

"All I'm saying is that a man's misspellings - or a woman's - are his literary fingerprints. Ask any copy editor who has done the same writer a few times...the subconscious leaves its fingerprints, but there's a stranger down there, too. A hell of a weird guy who knows a hell of a lot."

from "The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet"
by Stephen King

One example I can give is King's own conspicuous use of the word "luxuriant." In his non-fiction book *On Writing*, while describing the real-life inspirations for the character Carrie White in his first novel, *Carrie*, King is in the middle of depicting a high school classmate of his who he calls "Dodie Franklin" as an mousy, unattractive victim of bullying when he mentions that, after shaving her legs for perhaps the first time and coming to school in new leg-revealing clothes, the "luxuriant mat of black hair" on Dodie's legs that had previously been there was gone.

“Luxuriant,” Mr. King? Really. This unattractive girl had thickish black hair on her legs. Which you, an indisputable wordsmith, describe as “luxuriant.” Implying that you had, apparently, regarded it carefully enough in some way so as to be able to label it as such.

As “Luxuriant.”

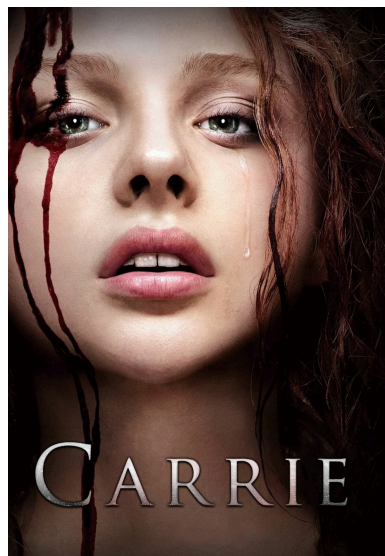
Mr. King, that is...quite a word for a woman’s unshaved legs.

I freaking love it.

King also writes in *On Writing* that Dodie was dead by the time he wrote *Carrie*.

“Coincidentally,” this curious word “luxuriant” occurs at a couple of key moments in King’s novel *Pet Sematary*, a book that begins with a man named Louis Creed arriving at a new home with his wife Rachel, their two children, and their cat, Church, and concludes with a “new” Rachel arriving back at that same house, having been killed and then resurrected and in the process transformed into something entirely different, a darker Rachel reborn.

“I want to be
Theodore Dreiser
when I grow up.”
Stephen King
Danse Macabre



“Carrie laughed
luxuriantly.”
Theodore Dreiser
Sister Carrie

King chooses, in a possible wife-swapping fantasy called *Pet Sematary*, which he admits to having tucked in a drawer for a long while because he thought it went too far in some way and was not sure he wanted it to be published, to describe the

lawn of the new Creed home near the start of the novel, like the beginning of one's life as a lover, as a "luxuriant sprawl of lawn, lushly green."

And when he portrays Rachel in the novel, getting onto an airplane and leaving him at home, he says this:

"She was clutching her three pink boarding cards in one hand. She was wearing her *fur coat*, some fake stuff that was a *luxuriant brown*...probably it was supposed to look like muskrat, Louis thought. Whatever it was supposed to look like, it made *her* look *absolutely lovely*."

(All italics except for the italicization of the word, "her" above are mine, not King's)

A reader might also note the fact that the "fake stuff," the fake name he gave in *On Writing* to his former classmate who had died, is "Dodie," which means "well loved."

To which a reader might respond: Ah, I see, Mr King.

"Luxuriant."

Meaning: "Lush. Rich in growth and provoking sensual pleasure. Also sexually attractive."¹ And doubling up on it. Luxuriant *and* lushly green, young and lush.

Sort of a...tactile way of describing something. Like depicting how it might feel to slide one's hands over the surface of a pool table.

"*God save the past*, Louis thought...*God save the past*."

Pet Sematary
by Stephen King
(King's italics)

The burning, as one named Luis told me the other day...*keep it up*.

"you then asia"
by Charles Tuomi
(Tuomi's italics)

"Bringing the dead back to life...that's about as close to playing God as you can get, ain't it?"

Jud Crandall, *Pet Sematary*

¹ definitions provided by Oxford Languages via Google search

“I sit alone, but a lunatic frenzy of voices shares the chilly air around me with the smoke and embers. Harsh whispers of lips inches from my ear, threats and lusty vows, deferential gratitude and mirth, mad cackling laughters running like brook water through the trees behind me. Glee hope venom and freedom. A thousand other sensations, but freedom above all.”
“you then asia”



"Luis² glanced at this watch. “The rock and roll animal has got to put on his boogie shoes and go,” he said.”
Pet Sematary



² wink wink - sorry for another typo

Whether Rachel in *Pet Sematary* represents a high school classmate or a younger Tabitha King, whom Stephen King met during college, or far more likely both and then some other people, is a topic for another essay. King does note in *On Writing* his fondness for Tabitha's legs upon meeting her. There is a clear *anti-domestication* vibe in the novel, though.



“SMUCKY THE CAT, one crate-board marker proclaimed.
The hand was childish but careful.
HE WAS OBEDIANT.”

Pet Sematary

I picked up on this vibe, sympathize with it, to say the least, and explore it in pretty much all of my own work, including the short story “you then asia.”

“The police came late that afternoon. They asked questions but voiced no suspicions. The ashes were still hot; they had not yet been raked. Louis answered their questions. They seemed satisfied. They spoke outside and he wore a hat.”

from the Epilogue of *Pet Sematary*

Louis

Luis

Creed

One who Walks a Way

The police came late that afternoon.

Sirens, distant but rapidly drawing nearer. Fire engines and police cars. They are too late, of course. As am I. As are we all.

They asked questions

The adults among the voices have needs unaddressed as well, questions unanswered, fears unquelled. Some articulate them.

but voiced no suspicions.

The government knows nothing about why this is happening. Or claims it knows nothing.

The ashes were still hot; they had not yet been raked.

burning like a sacrifice to long-vanished gods, a massive funeral pyre.

Louis answered their questions.

Tens of thousands placed into cold sterile buildings to, what? Rot? They won't even do that.

They seemed satisfied.

Harsh whispers of lips inches from my ear, threats and lusty vows, deferential gratitude and mirth, mad cackling laughters running like brook water through the trees behind me.

They spoke outside

The woods around me.

and he wore a hat.

The thought of my dear sweet child stuck forever in such a place

He played solitaire that night until long after midnight.
He was just dealing a fresh hand when he heard the back door open.

What you buy is what you own, and sooner or later what you own will come back to you, Louis Creed thought.

He did not turn around but only looked at his cards as the slow, gritting footsteps approached. He saw the queen of spades. He put his hand on it.

The steps ended directly behind him.

Silence.

A cold hand fell on Louis's shoulder. Rachel's voice was grating, full of dirt.

"Darling," it said.

The closing lines of *Pet Sematary*

I sat alone in my cramped kitchen sipping lukewarm tea.

The thought of my dear sweet child stuck forever in such a place drives me to the brink of madness, and past it, and so it begins.

After I burn the first building down, with Maria and dozens like her in it, the voices start.

as one named Luis told me the other day,

...a harsh disembodied male whisper in my mind speaking in English with a street Latino accent, while I sat alone in my cramped kitchen...

the burning, the bodiless whisper in my ear.

Keep it up.

Excerpts from "you then asia"

From *Knock at the Cabin*:

Wen played solitaire that mourning for a long time.



She was just breathing in fresh air...



...Wen she heard the back door open.



She turned around as the slow, gritting footsteps approached.



The steps ended directly in front of her.
What you buy is what you own, and sooner or later what you own will come back to you, Wen thought.



She saw the King of Hearts.





Leonard saw the Queen of Spades.
He put his hand on it.

In “you then asia,” the deck of cards with which Louis Creed is playing solitaire is depicted as a forest of dead trees, covered in plastic crap, which Louis shuffles in a dimly lighted room, making the face cards dance as if an old-style cartoon.

“The woods around me are imbued with an orange, flickering glow, provoking animated shadow dances among the trees.”

Sort of calling a spade a spade.



Rachel's voice was grating, *full of dirt*.
(as if she was a mother made of Earth)



"Darling," it said.



His name is Charlie.

“I, RACHEL”

“*Dodie*,” it said.

“Charlie...*Firestarter*,” it said.

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

Matthew 2:18



The King of Hearts in the ‘Paris pattern’ of playing cards
is named Charles.

Rachel is the name of the Queen of Diamonds.

“Ben stood up. ‘We ought to go back.’

He flicked³ the smoldering cigarette into a pile of dead brush and old brittle leaves. The white ribbon of smoke rose thinly against the green background of junipers⁴ for two or three feet, and then was pulled apart by the wind. Twenty feet away, downwind, was a large, jumbled deadfall.

They watched the smoke, transfixed, fascinated⁵.

It thickened. A tongue of flame⁶ appeared. A small popping issued from the pile of dead brush⁷ as twigs caught.

‘Tonight they won’t be running sheep or visiting farms,’ Ben said softly. ‘Tonight they’ll be on the run. And tomorrow - ‘

‘You and me,’ Mark⁸ said, and closed his fist. His face was no longer pale; bright color glowed there. His eyes flashed.

They went back to the road and drove away.⁹

In the small clearing overlooking the power lines, the fire in the brush began to burn more strongly, urged by the autumn wind that blew from the west.¹⁰”

The final lines of Stephen King’s novel, *Salem’s Lot*.

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Begun October 1972

Completed June 1975

³ you then asia: orange, flickering glow

⁴ you then asia: woods, trees

⁵ you then asia: smoke and embers

⁶ you then asia: engulfed in flames, flaming sword flashing back and forth. Gen 3:24, Pentecost

⁷ you then asia: funeral pyre

⁸ you then asia: Maria

⁹ you then asia: fire engines and police cars

¹⁰ you then asia: “urged by the autumn wind - *The burning...keep it up.*”



It's really happening.

“Mad Genius Behind Immortality Epidemic Identified”

