

I see the mark he left on the desk from time to time. It's generally covered by stacks of ungraded papers, but when I'm in a mood to organize my surroundings, I see it. A sizable chunk, hacked out by an Elizabethan era sword. I run my fingers along it and remember his theatrics, his valiant reenactments of Shakespearean duels and impassioned soliloquies. He often said: "Shakespeare's poetry has more literary force when it's read with action. It was made to be read with action!"

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:36 PM

**Comment:** What else might he say here? Something more memorable, punchier?

Mr. Williams smuggled the Elizabethan sword to class in a guitar case. He selected a few girls from our ranks, giving them their parts, and energetically went about dramatizing Hamlet's duel. Nearing the end of the scene, his personality faded and he took on Hamlet's, almost forgetting he stood in front of a classroom full of fifteen year old girls. The girls he selected as actors fled to their seats so they could enjoy the show. With his white button-up shirt stained with sweat and his tie dangling undone from his neck, he lunged and stabbed at his imaginary foe while the purest poetry arrayed in his British accent poured from his lips. At the crucial moment, when he'd been stabbed with the poisoned blade, he fell upon his murderer with rage and delivered his *coup de grâce*. The stroke landed with a loud thud on the mahogany desk. A piece of wood the size of a quarter sailed through the air and landed at the feet of a girl in the first row. She snatched it up without taking her eyes off of Mr. Williams. We all sat in silence. His pose was frozen in the perfect posture of a fencer: his right hand extended in a thrust, his left knee touched the floor, and his fisted left hand rested on his hip. When his trance had broken, he gaped at us with wide eyes. We stood to our feet and applauded wildly, and he responded with a broad smile and a quick succession of three bows.

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:37 PM

**Comment:** How might you show this transformation rather than announcing it?

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:39 PM

**Comment:** This could be clearer: if the girls were actors, how could they go to their seats mid-scene? Specify that this is a scene that ends with a big soliloquy, so the girls' job is over.

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 9:27 PM

**Comment:** Be precise: "loose," maybe, rather than "undone." "Undone" could mean the knot is completely untied and the two ends are dangling.

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:41 PM

**Comment:** Is he putting on a British accent? Or is he British?

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:49 PM

**Comment:** If you portray this moment well (see next note), you don't have to announce that this is a crucial moment.

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:48 PM

**Comment:** You're making the reader work just a little too hard here. I can figure out that he's pretending to be stabbed by an invisible/imaginary opponent, but my first reaction was "Wait, I thought everybody else had gone to sit down..." Play this up. Mention again that he's alone "on stage" before you mention his lunging at imaginary foes, then show him pretending to be stabbed (in other words, go beyond the passive-voice "when he'd been stabbed")

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:49 PM

**Comment:** Nice detail!

And how could I forget the first day we walked into his classroom? We came in as humble as sheep, burdened by the expectations laid upon us by the headmistress's convocation speech. Mr. Williams sat at his desk with a copy of *Henry V* in his hands. As we took our seats he didn't say a word but sat engrossed in what he read. The bell rang, and we waited for something to happen. Suddenly, without any warning, he dropped the book on his desk and rummaged through his leather satchel. He pulled out a paper crown from Burger King, assembled it, grabbed a wooden pointer, and held it at his side as if it were a sword. He placed his crown upon his head, and leapt on top his desk. We all gave out a high pitched scream, thinking we entered the realm of a madman. None of this fazed him. He looked at us with a slight smile and said: "In your books, please turn to page 342." Some of us obeyed, others sat bewildered. His face transformed from congenial to intense as he assumed character, and then he began. His voice was soft at first, as if talking to one or two people, but grew in volume as if pleading for us to join him in a great fight. In fact, that's exactly what he was doing, addressing a group of timid girls who found themselves enrolled in the most prestigious Catholic girls boarding school in the Midwest, and encouraging them take up arms with him, to take the challenge head-on for the sake of honor. He didn't have a book in his hand, but recited King Harry's rousing St. Crispin's Day Speech from memory. And although he spoke to simple, frightened girls who had left their nest for the first time, his rhetoric filled with more force and his smile stretched from ear to ear: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he to-day that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother." After saying this he paused and gazed at us with hope-filled eyes. It had its effect. At that moment, all of us saw he cared. And that's all we needed to know.

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:54 PM

**Comment:** Did everybody give out one scream? Granted, it would also seem strange to say "screams." You can handle this by making "scream" a verb. "We all screamed..." If the high pitch is an important detail, you can change to a verb that implies the high pitch: "We all shrieked..."

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:55 PM

**Comment:** This information would have been much more helpful at the beginning of the piece.

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:56 PM

**Comment:** Which challenge?

Jonathan Rogers 9/17/19 8:56 PM

**Deleted:** as he said

Dylan—

Especially for a “flash fiction” contest, I think you’re going to need to make this happen in one scene rather than two. Which of these two scenes (Hamlet or Henry V) gets closer to the heart of what you want to do in this story? Pick one or the other, and go all in with that one. In one sense the St. Crispin’s Day speech seems like the low-hanging fruit here, but that’s also a reason not to pick that scene. It’s pretty on-the-nose. (I’ve always thought Dead Poets’ Society was too on-the-nose; something that feels this close to a DPS scene—the rousing speech, the students who go from bewilderment to utter devotion—is really pushing your luck.

The Hamlet swordfight gives the reader a lot more to look at and gives you a lot more to work with. I think I would double down on that scene. And while you’re at it, maybe move that scene to the first day of school, so you get some of the narrative advantages you have in the Crispin’s Day scene—the wide-eyed girls wondering what they’ve gotten themselves into, their realization that they’re going to love this teacher after all.

I want you to do some thinking on what I, the reader, would experience if I were present in that room. One of the first things I would notice is that, except for Mr. Williams, I was in a room full of girls in Catholic school uniforms. As it is, we’re 4/5 of the way through the story before you mention that this is an all-girls Catholic school. The reader might have noticed that you’ve only mentioned female students, but that’s very different from giving me what I need to be able to inhabit that scene. Similarly, I want to have more to look at when those girls are up front with Mr. Williams playing their supporting roles, and then when they trickled back to their seats. Were they embarrassed? Were they emboldened by his antics? Were they rolling their eyes? How did they know it was ok to go back to their seats and watch? I feel like you’ve got some great visual possibilities there, but you’re not taking advantage of them. And as I mentioned in a marginal note, I’d like to see you get more goodie out of that moment when Mr. Williams lunges at imaginary enemies after he gets imaginary stabbed by them. (Also, notice how the use

of the passive voice—"when he'd been stabbed"—keeps you from having to actually show the reader what's going on.)

Finally, I want to talk about that narrator. I guess she's a former student of Mr. Williams, now teaching in Mr. Williams's old classroom? At the very least, she's teaching in a classroom containing Mr. Williams's old desk. I thought that was going to prove significant, but nothing much came of it. That feels like a missed opportunity. (Actually, I was hoping that the narrator would turn out to have been the girl on the front row who picked the chip of wood off the floor...would that have been cheesy?)