

Fine Lines

A single sentence can change one's world. These lines aren't restricted to the imaginative space of the novel, but issue from criticism, poems, reviews or TV: here, eleven writers tell us about the lines that left them different.

It is not true that we must make sense, that we must or will 'act in character'. Even if a number of opinions and habits have attached themselves like moles to the skin of our image – image, 'a reproduction of appearances' – even then one is not obliged to keep faith either with the details or with the gross accumulation of what he has asserted himself to be.

"Sense of the Present", Elizabeth Hardwicke, New York Review of Books, 1976

Of all the critical responses that we pass between in a lifetime, what will we remember? Not those that chime most with our already established positions, nor the ones that most emphatically deviate from them. What will stay with us are the essays that say something about the work, the author, and – at their very best – the world and ourselves, too, that was previously unexpressed, or even inexpressible, before this particular critic came along. The sentences above are from Elizabeth Hardwick's review of *Speedboat* by Renata Adler. They speak to the form of self that emerges in Adler's novel: transitory, in flux, re-established and then fought for from one paragraph to the next. I admire the certainty of Hardwick's entry point into each new thought, how such certainty opens up into something elusive, stylish and unfixed. "Moles to the skin of our image" is a strange enough phrase, and carries a pleasant subtle internal rhyme, but is then itself destabilised – the image just "a reproduction of appearances", the "gross accumulation" of which we are given permission to wipe away, shake ourselves free from with each new rupture in our lives, which would, on a page, be marked out by the welcome ritual of white space.

Lamorna Ash is a freelance writer. Her first book, *Dark, Salt, Clear: Life in a Cornish Fishing Town* was published by Bloomsbury in 2020.

In the introduction to Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*, the author describes a feeling that her understanding of the world has fallen out of step with the real thing. She writes:

we've ended up living in one world, with our minds stuck in another [...] We can't catch up with reality.

Chernobyl Prayer, Svetlana Alexievich, 1997

It's a peculiar introduction, in which the author "inter-views herself" about the 1986 disaster at Chernobyl and what it means to history, the planet and people. My partner first showed me this chapter a few years ago. It's only ten pages long, but I've found I keep returning to it. Alexievich thinks about "the world of Chernobyl": how the terms of human life on earth are changing now, in an era of large-scale and unintended catastrophes. These days, horror happens almost by accident. Some of the effects of Chernobyl were brutally obvious, while others remain invisible because they happen across giant or minuscule lengths of time and space. I appreciate the essay as a whole because it is humane and serious, and when I read it I feel that Alexievich is trying earnestly to find meaning. The lines about catching up with reality have returned to me because they feel true.

Daisy Hildyard is a writer. Her most recent book was the novel *Emergency* (Fitzcarraldo, 2022).

The speaker of Kyra Wilder's unpunctuated 43-line free-verse lyric "John Wick is So Tired" wants a number of things: to tell the poem's addressee to look at the feet of the titular action hero, played by Keanu Reeves; to do push-ups; to be sad; to drink espresso; that the poem's addressee should wait, be here, look at her and at the way Wick stabs a baddie; to know what the addressee thinks about the film's lighting choices. The poem belongs to a time-honoured lyric genre – a lament on the lover's absence – but what makes it cutting edge is not so much the action-film franchise that occasions it, but the locution "I want" that separates the declaration of desire from its fulfilment just as surely as John Wick's thrown hatchet separates the two hemispheres of a villain's brain.

I want to tell you to/look at his feet when he runs

"John Wick is So Tired", Kyra Wilder, 2023

writes Wilder. Nothing could be simpler: the existence of a streaming action film presumes the existence of an iPhone, with text, chat, email, voice-note and calling functions. Even within the confines of lyrical performance, there is, of course, the imperative – "look at his feet when he runs" – and in any case to record the wish to tell someone something and then to publish that wish is, in point of fact, to tell them it. (Compare the last line of the Frank O'Hara poem that is the clear model for Wilder's: "it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous/experience/which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it".) For the "I want" to be anything other than a pleonasm or a performative contradiction, it must be assumed that the only person who will be excluded from reading the poem is the very person to whom it is ostensibly addressed – a contradiction of another order entirely. Unless it is assumed that the addressee is not simply a fiction, à la John Wick, as the addressees of all lyrics ultimately are, but rather the speaker's fantasy, that is, a fiction at two-degrees-remove. I want to tell you to look at John Wick's feet when he runs, but am prevented from doing so from the fact that you do not exist. Readers of "John Wick is So Tired" who do exist are not told what the expression on the speaker's face is as she watches Reeves wearily perform acts of phallic violence on various stunt men and women. Perhaps the lineaments of gratifrustrated desire.

Ryan Ruby is a writer and critic. His book-length poem, *Context Collapse*, was published in 2020.

I think we are well-advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Joan Didion, 1968

It's all too easy to be consumed with feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment over who we once were, and likewise over the distance between ourselves now and who we want to be. This sentence is an antidote to all of that. It regularly returns to my mind as the machinations of guilt play out at the societal level, and it is obvious that Didion's statement applies to the collective "people" as much as it does to the individual. We cannot break with the past as we are formed by it. It will rear its head in some other form and point in time, as the rusty wheel of history turns. We can avoid repeating the past, not by using force, language or destruction, but as Didion says, by accepting that who we were allows us to be who we are.

Vanessa Onwuemezi is a novelist and poet. Her first book, *Dark Neighbourhood*, was published by Fitzcarraldo in 2021.

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

On the Concept of History, Walter Benjamin, 1942

I came across, in my late teens, this sentence in a book of essays by Walter Benjamin; I remember to this day the strange vertigo it induced. I was living then in India, which, like most Asian and African nations dealt a bad hand by modern history, had embraced the idea of linear progress more fervently than any nation in the continent – Europe – where it had emerged. But here was Benjamin, a great Marxist thinker no less, casting doubt on our ideal of material redemption, and hinting at the barbarisms awaiting us in the path to modern civilisation. Decades later, as the winners and losers of modern history alike struggle for a modicum of stability and dignity, the sentence's bleak truth shines even more brightly.

Pankaj Mishra's latest book is *Run and Hide* (Penguin, 2022).

In middle school, I used to scribble the second sentence of Shakespeare’s 116th sonnet on notepads, folders, even the cover pages of textbooks:

Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds,/Or bends with the remover to remove.

“Sonnet 116”, Shakespeare, 1609

This was the lie that coloured my matriculation into adolescence. Maturation came with the dawning recognition of that sentence’s intolerance. An adult knows that a healthy love does alter when it alteration finds, that it bends and grows as its object does, that only a puritanical love, only the love of a naive idealist, freezes itself.

Celeste Marcus is managing editor of *Liberties: a Journal of Culture and Politics* based in Washington D.C.

The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs.

Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag, 2003

Watching Jordan Peele’s *Nope* recently, with its thesis that the only way to save ourselves is to avert our eyes, I was reminded of Susan Sontag’s short 2003 book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Another meditation on the price we pay for looking and watching, it is, as so much Sontag, filled with sentences that jump off the page not for their pyrotechnics, but rather their stylistic simplicity. Sontag is sometimes dismissed for that very clarity, as if erudition can only be expressed in blobs of Gallic complication, but her writing about what images mean – such as the essays collected in *On Photography* – remains as relevant and intellectually lucid as when it was written in a world without Instagram and cell-phone cameras. Like Geoff Dyer in another register, she writes with a clear-eyed limpidity that actually improves with rereading. *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a book I have returned to on numerous occasions, each time thrilled to find new complexity hiding out in its precise and deceptively straightforward prose.

Tom Ridgway is associate editor at TANK.

Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.

In Praise of Shadows, Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, 1933

I think about this line a lot. Tanizaki was writing about the arrival of electricity in Japan, and what was lost through illumination, but the sentiment can be applied today. We live in a culture that is obsessed with dragging everything into the light and cleaning it up for public consumption; a culture that is, on a fundamental level, scared of its own shadow. But what of secrecy, ambiguity, dirtiness, transgression? Without an appreciation of the murkier aspects of what it means to be human, beauty becomes tedious and flat.

Rosanna McLaughlin’s latest novel is *Sinkhole*.

If your friend is already dead, and being eaten by vultures, I think it’s OK to feed some bits of your friend to one of the vultures, to teach him to do some tricks. But ONLY if you’re serious about adopting the vulture.

Jack Handey, between 1991–1998

I don’t know much about Jack Handey. This is one of his weird little philosophical things that were read out over extremely soothing ambient music and pastoral Bob Ross imagery on Saturday Night Live between 1991 and 1998 before commercial breaks, sometimes by the voice of Lionel Hutz from *The Simpsons*. Um, the vulture sentence is kind of everything I believe in: simultaneously sane and “normal” and from a totally warped alternate dimension of deranged make-believe, like Chris Morris or *Alice in Wonderland*. Who is this person and why is their brain melting? Like Syd Barrett said, “And what exactly is a dream? And what exactly is a joke?”

Charlie Fox is a writer and artist. His first book, *This Young Monster*, was published by Fitzcarraldo in 2017.

History used to pay its respects to mortality: the enduring honoured the value of what was brief. Graves were a mark of such respect. Moments which defied time in the individual life were like glimpses through a window...

Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography, John Berger, 1982

John Berger is ever terse, ever resonant. His brilliance lies in his uncanny ability to jump from idea to experience and bring in the most casual of metaphors.

Lisa Appignanesi has written 26 books. The most recent, *Everyday Madness*, was published by HarperCollins in 2018.

«*Méthode pour comprendre les images, les symboles, etc. Non pas essayer de les interpréter, mais les regarder jusqu’à ce que la lumière jaillisse.*»

A way of understanding images, symbols, etc. Don’t try to interpret them, but instead simply look, until the light breaks forth.

La Pesanteur et la grâce, Simone Weil, 1948

Published posthumously, *Gravity and Grace* represents a culling from the private notebooks of the passionate and ascetic French philosopher-mystic Simone Weil, who died at 34, in 1943 – the victim of a heart (and mind) that could not remain in an unjust world of savage brutality. Composed by her friend and confidant, Gustave Thibon, the book has become a touchstone for ethereal seekers, and possesses some of the oxymoronic energy of that very idea. A touchstone? For angels? But they leave no streak! Silver and gold can be assessed with a quick stroke on black rock; the immateriality of the soul, by contrast, proves hard to test down here, where the pencil scrapes against the page.

Hence, Weil’s luminous proposal for a hermeneutics of pure radiance, captured here in a moment of private musing. Thibon placed this excerpt in a chapter he entitled “Attention and Will,” and I think the sentence is best read as a highly compressed theory of the relationship between durational attention and understanding. In a move that presages the Sontag of *Against Interpretation*, Weil here proposes an attentional erotics of what obtains. Contemplation is the technology of presence: our own, and that of the world. What breaks forth, when we stay with texts, objects, beings, persons, is the pure light – of which everything is made, and by which everything may be encountered. ☺

D. Graham Burnett is a writer, editor and professor. He is associated with the Friends of Attention collective, and he collaborated on their *Twelve Theses on Attention* (Princeton University Press, 2022).