From The 3AM Epiphany by Brian Kitely

BEGINNINGS. Write a story with one of the following as your opening sentence (or choose a sentence from a favorite writer). You should not let anything but this sentence influence you, however you wish to be influenced (I won't say, for instance, that the style of the sentence should be continued, or that the information contained in the sentence should act as a key to your prose piece). Then again, you might also want to combine this or the next two exercises with other exercises in the book. 400 words

A. He saw her from the bottom of the stairs before she saw him.

B. What I am saying now is a lie.
C. One hot evening in Padua they carried him up onto the roof and he could look out over the top of the town. (Ernest Hemingway)

D. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.

E. There was a man she loved with a violent love, and she spent much of her time thinking about his wife. (Joyce Carol Oates)

F. Like all men of —, I have been a leader; like all, I have been a slave. (Jorge Luis Borges)

G. Truth, like morality, is a relative affair: There are no facts, only interpretations.

I. Every morning there's a halo hanging on the corner of my girlfriend's four-post bed. (Sugar Ray)

J. She said, I know what it's like to be dead. (John Lennon and Paul McCartney)

K. They shoot the white girl first. (Toni Morrison)

This is one of the most commonly used exercises in this book. Why is it so appealing? Perhaps the first sentence acts as a shove in the back of the writer. Get going—it's all downhill from the first sentence. Writing teachers and handbooks discuss great opening sentences, and I know from my own experience as a young writer that this was depressing. I wanted to be able to create a great opening sentence, but I couldn't, and it didn't seem worth it to go on. This exercise gives you the great opening sentence and then everything else you do is your own stuff, which is surprisingly liberating.

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ENDS. Write a story that ends with one of the following sentences. Aim at an idea, a style, or a solution to your piece of narrative. You should always be thinking about the words that will conclude the piece, letting them subtly alter the sentences you write in advance of the concluding sentence. 600 words

SOME LAST SENTENCES to land on (although you should go out and find your own personal favorites, too):

A. Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger. (James Joyce)

B. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (James Joyce)

C. The bodies of the two men lay together, side by side, in the mortuary, the one white and slender, but laid rigidly at rest, the other looking as if every moment it must rouse into life again, so young and unused, from a slumber. (Robert Graves)

D. Sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand. (Cool Hand Luke)

E. I felt it was a poor, sad, lonely thing being nothing but a genius. (James Joyce)

F. The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates)

G. Mother, I want to call out, Mother, I am dying, but she is falling once again into the arms of a man she loves. (Beth Nugent)

H. While C— sat there in a thoughtless, vegetative stupor, completely surrendered to circulation, respiration, and the deep pulsation of his natural juices, there formed inside his perspiring body an unknown, unformulated future, like a terrible growth, pushing forth in an unforeseeable direction. (Bruno Schulz)

I. Spring will be a little late this year. (Sarah Vaughan)

Why is this useful? You just might end up with a slightly different style than you started out with—the ideal of any of the experiments these exercises cause you to undergo. It may seem that the experience of this exercise should be the opposite of Beginnings (Exercise 137), and in some ways it will. But something of the same spirit will prevail. You'll be sailing along in a story whose conclusion (to an extent) you already know. As you get closer and closer to it, you'll begin to wrap up, tabulate your sales, and pull down the shutters. Enjoy the freedom and remember that you're doing most of the work, even if it seems like the last sentence is doing the heavy lifting.

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CANNED FILM. Write a very short synopsis of an imaginary film, as if writing for one of those video anthologies—perhaps 10,000 Films in a Nutshell. Concentrate on images as much as you can in this summary of a plot or an interesting combination of images and time. 300 words

REMEMBER THE DISTINCTION between film, fiction, and drama: Film is story told by way of images, fiction by way of thought, and drama by way of conversation. Of course, each of these art forms uses other methods of advancing the story, but these are the preeminent methods. Study some of the better books in this genre—VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever (an annual) or David Thomson's The New Biographical Dictionary of Film.Imitate the style of these anonymous or well-known writers. This exercise might be most useful as a way of constructing the outlines—or the bare bones—of a story.

Let me give, as a malicious example, something from David Thomson's method of summarizing careers, in this case the great director Howard Hawks:

> Men and women skirmish in Hawks's films on the understanding that an embrace is only a prelude to withdrawal and disillusion. The dazzling battles of word, innuendo, glance, and gesture—between [Cary] Grant and Hepburn, Grant and Jean Arthur, Grant and Rosalind Russell, John Barrymore and Carole Lombard, Bogart and Bacall, [John] Wayne and Angie Dickinson … are Utopian procrastinations to avert the paraphernalia of released love that can only expend itself. In other words, Hawks is at his best in moments when nothing happens beyond people arguing about what might happen or has happened. Bogart and Bacall in The Big Sleep are not only characters tangled in a tortuous thriller but a constant audience to the film, commenting on its passage.

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NAMES. Take the full name (including middle name) of someone you love. Write down as many words from this name as you can. You can repeat letters from the name as many times as you wish. Treat the letters of this name as the only letters in a new alphabet. You cannot use any words containing letters that do not exist in this name. Because this is so difficult, you'll probably be able to come up with only about 200 words for this exercise—that's okay. When you have built a sufficient list of words (maybe breaking the list down into nouns, verbs, adverbs, etc.), write a fragment of fiction that has to do with a fictionalized situation this person, or someone like this person, would be involved in. 300 words

AS AN EXAMPLE, for Geoffrey James Kiteley (my brother, who died of AIDS on Christmas Eve, 1993), you could come up with the following list of words: frog, klieg, a, fray, make, mar, leek, jag, fog, kilter, legal, illegal, glee, flag, fey, gay, fray, jail, fillet, oyster, aioli, fritters, fry, gel, jelly, oft, soft, satay, etc. You may notice, as you're creating this list, a pattern develops that relates to characteristics of this person you're making words out of: In my brother's case, frog and leek relate to both his career as a cook and his love of things French. Because he was gay, you can see other relationships to the words.

If you have built up a strong relationship with a fictional character in your long story, you may simply use that character's full name in place of someone you love. But it would be better to use someone you love, because this exercise can otherwise be a little bland without the added spice of affection for the words themselves. This exercise often yields unexpected results if you are patient. I discovered this once myself. I worked very hard at the exercise over a few weeks and then gave up, happy for the difficulty and the experience but convinced I'd failed at a proper piece of fiction. I put the very brief story in a file and it stayed unmolested in my computer for several years. I rediscovered it one day and printed it out to look at it. To my surprise, it was much easier to revise a couple of years after its original composition (whereas when I first wrote it, the writing felt unnatural and impossible to mold into anything like narrative). Be patient with this exercise. Let it gestate in a quiet file or drawer. You might find a voice in Which you never thought you were capable of speaking.

This is a variation on an Oulipo exercise by Harry Mathews, author of Cigarettes and The Conversions. Oulipo stands for Ouvroir pour litterature potentielle (workshop for potential literature), a group of writers and mathematicians who have been meeting for over forty years in Paris to dream up demanding and sometimes impossible restraints for writing.

Members who have gained fame include Harry Mathews, Italo Calvino, Georges Perec, and one of the founders, Raymond Queneau, who described Oulipians as rats who build the maze from which they plan to escape.

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CHAOS FOLLOWS. Write a set of short scenes in which confusion or chaos follows a character, as if in his wake. The character does not cause this, knowingly or unknowingly, but disorder nearly always happens after he has left a room, an intersection, or an elevator. This should not be magic. Imagine an exotic wake, but try to make these effects and aftereffects grow naturally out of the character you're describing. 400 words

THE CONCEIT OF THE FILM The Cooler is that a man is able to sit down at a blackjack table and, because of his infectious bad luck, make other people at the table lose, too. Why would this be useful? We all leave emotional, unseen wakes behind us, in ways most of us never realize (the idea behind It's a Wonderful Life and all of the movies that have ripped off its conceit). Study these little explosions of reaction, the way someone's stray remark remains in the mind of a near stranger. Think about who populates your memory and how they do. What acts or spoken phrases remain. Why? We all remember things we've said—usually stupid or embarrassing remarks—but if you think hard about what other people have said that your memory latches onto and won't let go, you may have some idea of how to proceed in this exercise.

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PHONE TAG. Write a fairly long, complicated phone conversation overheard by someone in the room. All three people—the listener in the room, the caller, and the person on the other end of the line—are involved with each other (not necessarily romantically). Let us hear the other end of the conversation, without actually hearing it. This means you will be giving us only one side of a conversation, so you will have to work to make the side we're hearing intriguing and capable of carrying a story. The listener in the room can guess what the person on the other end of the line is saying, but try to keep this guessing to a minimum, and make sure this guesswork is done with integrity— well after the unheard speaker has spoken. 600 words

THIS EXERCISE MAKES you pay attention to what's going on behind your back, in a sense, in your own fiction. Another thing you may learn from this exercise is how to let your characters interact with each other's words—implicitly summarizing or paraphrasing. You want your reader to be able to figure out what's being said on the other end of the line that we can't hear.

Conversation often does this, a little maddeningly. Dialogue is interesting repetition.

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ASSOCIATIVE LOGIC. Use associative logic in a narration a child tells to an adult. The child can be any age between five and ten. The story itself is a dramatic monologue. Don't let us hear the adult's questions or complaints about the anarchic nature of the story—although they can be implied by answers or responses from the child and shifts in the momentum of the story.

In this story, the child is trying to tell the adult something important, relating a life-or-death (and very time-sensitive) problem about someone else. The child nevertheless gets lost in the associations—although not to the extent of being unable to tell the story. 700 words

THIS EXERCISE CAN BE particularly applied to childhood, but it also works well with adulthood. Children don't think often in logical ways. They compare every new thing they see to something else they already know. We all do this, and some writers have discovered this as a method of narrative progression that works much more intuitively than the traditional linear approach, which suggests that there is a line, a series of causes and effects, a result to the world's chaotic arrangement.John Hersey, in his book Hiroshima, quotes Toshio Nakamura, ten at the time of the Hiroshima bombing, who wrote this one year later:

> The day before the bomb, I went for a swim. In the morning, I was eating peanuts. I saw a light. I was knocked to little sister's sleeping place. When we were saved, I could only see as far as the tram. My mother and I started to pack our things. The neighbors were walking around burned and bleeding. Hataya-san told me to run away with her. I said I wanted to wait for my mother. We went to the park. A whirlwind came. At night a gas tank burned and I saw the reflection in the river. We stayed in the park one night. Next day I went to Taiko Bridge and met my girl friends Kikuki and Muzakami. They were looking for their mothers. But Kikuki's mother was wounded and Murakami's mother, alas, was dead.

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UNIVERSAL FREEDOM. Pit two characters against one another in an enclosed situation. One character is unable to grasp universals. In other words, this person can think only in very concrete terms; he can't generalize or make abstractions from specific reality. The opposing character is unable to act freely. This person feels constrained to follow orders, and when no orders are obvious she balks or comes to a temporary halt. Don't tell us at any point what these two characters are incapable of doing. By "pit against one another," I don't mean you should make these characters fight either physically or verbally. Simply let these two styles of operating in the world interact with each other. 600 words

THESE TWO CONCEPTS come from Richard Rorty's "Nine Qualities of the Mental," quoted in the introduction to Thought and Emotion. You may certainly choose two other qualities from these nine to pit against each other, embodied in two characters—or you may want to make up your own two essential personality types. This exercise radically simplifies the process of thinking and moral behavior in these two oppositions, but students who try this exercise have found surprisingly complex characters despite the restrictions. You may find yourself reminded of familiar types from your own experience, so you create a complex character out of an abstraction instead of building character out of experience and memory. It is sometimes better to work this way, against the grain of the normal process of discovery.

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FACT AND FANCY. Write a brief autobiographical story or fragment in which you use alternating objective and personal sentences. One sentence should set down relatively objective, factual details, focused and clearheaded, without bias or interpretation. The next sentence should be personal opinion; it should reveal feeling—deep or shallow; it should respond to the factual sentence but need not respond directly. Alternate like this. Write a total of thirty sentences—fifteen objective, fifteen personal. 500 words

THIS IS A STUDY in sentence rhythm. Don't worry too much about the spaces, the offstage activity, between sentences. It will be tempting to write reactions between the personal sentences and the objective sentences— thesis and antithesis. I was born in a gutter. The geometry and engineering of urban sewer systems has always fascinated me. The best fiction that has been triggered by these instructions has used jagged and irregular relationships between the two paired sentences, tangential or associative, rather than cause and effect or point and counterpoint, connections.

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THE GAP. Write a short scene—200 to 300 words. Leave a gap and skip ahead to another short scene with the same characters you were studying before the gap. Make this gap a mystery or an emptiness—you yourself should not necessarily know what has happened. What is the effect of this gap? Do fiction writers ever indulge in this sort of thing? Why? Poetry is full of empty spaces, and you may not think that fiction uses gaps and elisions the way poetry does, but it does. Use to your advantage the reader's strong sense that something must have happened. Most writers who attempt this exercise will know what has happened in the space between the two sections, but sometimes you can fool yourself into not knowing. Or simply pretend you don't know what has happened. 500 words

WRITERS OFTEN EXPEND most of their energy getting to the heart of the story. For a variety of reasons, stories either end quickly or glide over the most important parts. Many otherwise good writers bury their most important scenes, leaving yawning gaps in the essential moral structure of the story. Look for what you're leaving out of your stories after the first draft (which is a good tip for critiquing any of your fiction). This exercise should show writers how to leave out crucial information (without harming the story) and what the effect of such leaving out is—it can be both good and bad.

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PANTOUM. Write a very short story on the model of a pantoum, which is a type of poem, like a sonnet. In a pantoum, the second and fourth lines of each quatrain become the first and third lines of the next quatrain. In the last stanza the first line of the poem reappears as the last line of the poem. The structure of a pantoum (where A, B, C, etc., are lines rather than end rhymes) is ABCD BEDF EGFH, etc. A quatrain is a four-line stanza in a poem, but in this story, you can break up your paragraphs however you wish. Because many of my students ignore this command, I remind you that this exercise and the next one should be done in prose and not as poetry. This exercise should be thirty-two sentences (eight “stanzas”). 400 words

YOU MAY ALSO FIND it useful not to repeat the words exactly but figure out the rough patterns of the sentence. A pantoum most effectively describes obsession. A man is in a relationship with a woman and they’re on the slow downward spiral toward dissolution. He is about to fall asleep, every night, and he revisits the same argument with this woman, in the dark, the red numerals on the alarm clock his only light. Obsession and mania are hard to convey in narrative—the effect is easier for actors to express, voice and body jerking a bit, with nervous twitches. But repetition of words and phrases like this is a nifty way of approximating the air of near madness or even the gentle insanity of someone who’s recently fallen madly in love.

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OUTRUNNING THE CRITIC. Write one hundred short sentences about a character in a piece of your fiction. Don't lift your pen from paper (or fingers from keyboard) for all one hundred sentences (then go back exactly twenty-four hours later and revise). The sentences should not connect, nor need they follow one another logically. This exercise forces you to outrun your own thoughts, intelligence, and critical mind. Be careful not to use the name of your character or a pronoun to start each sentence; the key to this exercise is to relax and let your mind find new material and detail. A better exercise would be to write two hundred or five hundred sentences about this character, but one hundred sentences are enough of a stretch to make this useful. You could substitute a central concept or a key room or space for a character. 800 words

IN MY CLASSES, this has been the most fruitful exercise of the whole book. It seems to work in part because students take to heart the idea of writing without censorship, without the editorial voice interfering with the process. It also breaks writers out of their narrative habits better than any other exercise I give them. It is unnerving to have to write so many sentences in a row, and after a certain point the pressure of creating character details overcomes the pressure to tell a story. My students have generally applauded the dramatic change in style this exercise produces in their classmates.