

Through The Hardship of Short Fiction Narration: Challenges of Finding The Voice

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## Abstract

The main aim of this project is to investigate the concept of the author's voice. The methodic includes the research of the theoretical framework of the construction of the voice and the actual creation of the short stories used as the tool for finding the writer's voice. The voice in literature represents the rhetorical mixture of different literary devices such as tone, point of view and the word choice; however, it also operates on the author's features of the identity. As part of the project the detailed analysis and close reading of the strong voices in short fiction narrative such as Nabokov's in "Sign and Symbols" and Baldwin's in "Sonny's Blues" were provided. The voices in those stories represent the psychological reflections of the authors on their experiences. Thus, the voice also derives through the interconnectedness of the author and their attitude towards the story. Further, I tried to implement this experience of understanding Nabokov's use of the voice as the tool to deliver the truth of the author and Baldwin's distinct voice representing the connection of the past and present. Through creating the short stories "明 (aka) meaning 'bright'" and "...and earth kept singing" I came to the conclusion that the voice is rather a summation of reflections of author's identity and a tool to speak the truth of own. Although the literary devices are essential to define the way the story is *written*, the important ingredient to the way the story *sounds* is an author's choice of way on how to express this voice. The difficult experiences and identities that create the inner truth of the author and lead them to the process of telling that particular story are the main components that create the unique voice for a particular narrative that should sound in a voice the writer has intended.

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明 (aka) meaning "bright"

I was fidgeting with the lighter in my hands and couldn't stop it, sitting on the pharmacy bench in the waiting area and counting the seconds underneath my breath, staring at the clock. It was hanging on the white-yellow wall to which the smell of chalk got stuck forever. Time was ticking towards midnight. Twenty four hours from now, Earth will revolve around the Sun for twenty-fourth time with me. They said, no nicotine patches were left. They said they were sorry. I didn't think they should be, but I said nothing. Hunger was eating me whole. I opened the messages window on my phone and remembered about the cherry pie left in the flat. As I moved closer to the window, I could see tiny white snowflakes swirling down and melting on the porch that was lighted with a green "Exit" sign. If this snow wanted to stay there, it had to choose another time. April usually didn't tend to be that cold, but still, not the best spring I had. I rummaged through my pockets not searching for a particular thing but found some coins, a missing button and almost faded note with a handwritten address. I deleted an unsent message and went out, the wind was getting through the sleeves of the coat. I was trying to catch the snow, but it kept disappearing on my palms, until I found my hands trembling, and started freezing.

My flat was two blocks away and but it seemed to be extremely far, and all those steps I needed to take to get here were already exhausting. I dreamed about the days when the teleportation system would be a regular part of this world and I could easily get wherever places I wanted to, without even moving. Maybe then, I could get home sooner. With the ruthless wind messing up my hair, the headache found its way through the burning cold outside. Something felt to be squeezing my brain, and the uproar on the street became like a hammer, that kept beating my ears, both from the inside and the outside. I couldn't figure out

what was that mixture of screaming voices, and if it was real or imaginary coming from the pain in my temples. A huge crowd showed up from around the corner, all running and yelling something illegible. It was a massive merged noise and a rumble of human shouts, seemed like inhumane, that was invading the street, invading the whole city. I took some distance away from that huddle of people, as I didn't want anybody to touch me. But a guy with a black mask covering half of his face ran into me and stared at me with his eyes wide open, heavily breathing. I was looking at the mask drawing out of his mouth and getting back again, as if he was a fire-breathing dragon. He pulled it off and almost whispered, "Run, man" and rushed away. I stood still, freezing and watching the crowd vigorously marching somewhere until I noticed men in uniform among them. I didn't want the cops to see me, they always manage to break into the personal space. I hid in the smoking area enclosed with wooden walls and leaned against a cold column of its corner with my forehead. As I looked down covering my ears, all I could see was the melting snowflakes and the cigarette butt laying on the ground that had a Richmond label on it. Akari used to smoke these.

I remembered one warm winter night when I was too anxious to sleep, and as I was walking on the riverside, I met Akari. She stood under the bridge smoking chocolate-flavored Richmonds. She leaned forward to hug me and, surprisingly for me, I hugged her back. Usually, I don't like these "touching" things people do, but with her, it was so natural, it felt right. She was rushing through her hectic thoughts, trying to convince me that cigarettes could sometimes help to end a panic attack. As I asked her, how she started smoking, she told me about camping in the woods with her dad. Back then, her father set a piece of wood log on fire to show her the way lungs can burn up because of smoking. Basically, she didn't answer the question, but I understood. She was very good at avoiding things she didn't want to talk about. The only thing Akari was never successful at - was her little fingers trying to press the roller of the lighter to light a cigarette. I'd help her each time, holding the lighter

away from her bare hands, afraid to get them burnt. Her black down jacket didn't cover her knees, and when I was about to ask if she was freezing, she said she needed to fly away to Paris. She got an email with a job offer when she was in the mall, buying juice, standing in line at the checkout. It's funny how some important things happen in very ordinary places. When Akari said that, she passed her last cigarette to me, but I refused it. She asked why and I told her I had a smoking habit since I was seven and I needed to stop at some point. She said she understood and she liked to talk to me. I did too. She said we should have coffee sometime, but she would love to drink just milk. She said no people usually go just for that and they want more. I said I understood her. But we never met again. Maybe I should've apologized we didn't meet once more, maybe I shouldn't have rejected that last cigarette, maybe I should've given her my woolen gloves, I still wonder if she was cold back then.

A scream pulled me out of my memories when I heard a woman yelling from the depth of her lungs, "Let me go to my daughters!" I stepped outside to see what was going on. "Please, let me out," she was bawling, her cracking voice was barely coming through the tears, and two police officers were dragging her from the crowd, grabbing her arms. She held something shiny in her right hand, probably the keys, and a bottle of white liquid in another. Her jeans tore at the knees, as they kept bumping up on the paving stones. I stepped closer to see her eyes, but it was hard to tell if she even looked like a human being, with the blood running from the top of her head and the tears messing up her mascara. "I need to get back home, my daughters alone" was the broken sentence she was trying to build as she kept making an effort to push the cops away. A man rushed over and pulled her back, yelling, "Let her go!" For that moment, she was free and brushing off her disheveled hair from her mouth she was just about to run, but they grabbed her again. Another cop hit that man's head with a rubber bat, and he fell with all his weight into a puddle, splashing water everywhere around. As I stood there, observing if he could breathe, I noticed a few more men laying like that,

here and there, like the stones in the stream of a river. A flow of people kept jumping over them, running and shouting.

It was the right cold as the snow was already settling down on the roads, and as I sat down to take some of it, I saw a bottle of milk rolling down to my boot. I brought some snow to my forehead and temples, and sipped a little from the bottle. Burning headache didn't go along with my freezing body. I wish I had my gloves with me. They were waiting for me at home with the cherry pie. I put the bottle in my backpack and when I was searching for something to cover my hands with, a cop approached me. His eyes were empty and wild, pupils were so huge as if the light could almost get through them. He tightly squeezed his bat and asked, "Have any problems here?"

I shook my head meaning "No" and showed him with hands a gesture of lighting a cigarette, meaning I was searching for one, but I lied. I didn't know why I lied, maybe I shouldn't have lied. After all, I wasn't doing anything illegal. He looked at me from head to toe, raising his left eyebrow, shrugged and turned away. When I was just about to go, he grabbed my elbows and twisted them behind my back without saying anything. My shoulders hurt, as I kept trying to get away from his grasp, but all I could do was to bend. I felt my neck stretching, as I tried to lean back with my head to see his eyes behind me, but I couldn't. There was a lump in my throat, my voice left me, and I couldn't yell or even whisper. He kept squeezing my arms and pushing my bent body into the mob. I felt every inch of the surface of my body where I was touched, by the tons of other people that were bumping into me as if my skin was an unwrapped carpet thrown under the feet of the marching crowd. My bare hands were tight on my back and thousands of other hands kept hitting my torso, occasionally slapping my eyes and swinging my head from side to side, as if I was a rubber ball thrown onto the playground. I tried to reach for the cop's bat, hoping to myself I'd be beaten up but left alone. Seeing this he heavily hit my head and I fell immediately. The

ground was cold and wet, but it felt right. I could feel the ground was cold and wet, but it felt better like this, it felt okay. I lay watching a group of raging people attack the cop that hit me, and when a running man without noticing me kicked my head on his way, everything went dark.

I am six again, and I am in the closet with my older brother. It is dark and a door slit lightens only his sparkling eyes. He keeps saying it's hide-and-seek and we need to stay there for a while. I think it's stupid and too obvious to hide in the closet. He says it's a special game, a more interesting one. He holds my hands and then he touches my shoulders. I don't like that game. I don't understand it. I don't remember who we are hiding from. He keeps touching my body, going through my fingers and hair. It doesn't feel right. It feels wrong. I want to get out, I want to quit, but I can't say a thing. My voice left me. I close my eyes, I can't see anything.

“Man, man, wake up” a deep low voice kept repeating. I looked up and saw a man with a picture of the national flag on his cheek, shaking my shoulder. I looked at his hand still tapping my shoulder and he pulled it away. I was laying on the bus station bench, so I figured someone took me there. He said I was bleeding, I got up and I realized the snow under me was red. I couldn't stop trembling as the outside cold got even more severe while I was unconscious.

“Snow in April, huh?” he said. “Everything in this spring is so unusual, don't you think?” he asked, breaking into pieces the wooden bench, from which I have just got up.

I nodded and stepped aside so as not to disrupt him.

“You should've screamed, otherwise our people can't see you and can't help,” he said pulling out the nails and dislodging the wooden planks.

I shrugged, covering my ears, as the noise of the cracking wood was too loud. Streets were still full of sounds of blaring sirens, yelling, and mumbling, but I got used to it. My stomach walls were already sticking to each other because of hunger, I should get to that cherry pie already.

“You think they care?” he asked and stopped for a moment to look at me, raising his black hairy eyebrows.

I shrugged and shook my head no. He nodded.

“You got any fire?”

I fidgeted the lighter in my hand inside of my coat’s pocket for a moment, then took it out and showed him.

“I’m Ken,” he paused and waited for something. He reached his hand to shake it, looking into my eyes, but I didn’t move, standing as I was, watching his enormous shoulders shrug afterwards.

“Okay then, nameless boy,” he exhaled, and added, “Come on, will show ya something.” Ken moved, taking a huge wooden plank under his armpit. I was about to leave but then I saw him going towards the massive pyramid made of wooden boxes and other stuff, mostly trash. People kept throwing things into it on their way, and some of them kept circling around it, pouring, as it seemed to be, some gasoline. As we were going to that pile of trash, two men, bare-top, climbed up on a police car and started crushing the windows with fists wrapped in their shirts. The group of cops that came almost immediately, made them fall silent twisting their hands and putting them inside of that car, which didn’t stop signaling. I wondered if they had a pack, if there was a shop open that could sell me a pack. Maybe there were some cigarettes left in the flat, somewhere in the closet. Maybe there’s something else

besides the cherry pie. Maybe if I could smoke, I could feel the hunger less and would be warmer, after all.

Ken hurled out the baulk into the trash and turned to me, saying, “We can’t stand silent anymore.” I moved closer to the construction and rolled the cigarette lighter a couple of times in my palm. The snow was melting under my boots and the pile of flyers that said “You Can’t Run Away From the Truth.” It was just black text written by hand on white pieces of paper, and that’s it, nothing more. I looked at Ken and lit the lighter. He nodded silently. Through the small flame of blue and yellow flows of fire, I seemed to see the outlines of Akari’s celestial blue eyes. When I first met her, clean eyes, I thought. Clean eyes. I threw her lighter above the pyramid of human-made wares that replaced the firewood, looked up and saw the snow has stopped. Her lighter kept rolling in the air leaving almost unnoticeable mark of its path until it landed on a piece of a wooden plank. It set everything on fire. People stopped to watch the gigantic pillars of smoke grinding its way through the sky. Finally, we could see each other’s eyes, as everything was lit up, and the darkness of the street was gone along with the noise. The bonfire almost touching the sky was forming into a shape of the colossal heart that was pumping the flows of human silent breathing. Everybody just stood staring at it, no movement, only the illuminated gazes. I reached my trembling hands to the fire and saw some people doing the same, and others raising their hands in the air. Hundreds of hands around the heat, and hundreds of arms trying to reach to the sky. People started singing the national anthem. I listened to the self-proclaimed authentic choir of desperate truth-seeking voices that seemed to be lasting for eternity. But the singing didn’t reach even a minute, it was replaced by shouts and cries, again. The cops got in the way of people. The messy spiral of screams, the scarlet blood, and police caps kept circling in a dance with the snow, the moonlight and my hunger, to the swirling of the leftovers of an anthem yelled by the handful of protesters. Somewhere behind and somewhere ahead the glass kept crushing,

the things kept falling, the fire kept cracking. I heard shots. I saw bodies crashing onto the pavements, and some falling down, like snowflakes. Bullets were whistling by, adding final notes to the orchestrated chaos of sounds. I ran as fast as I could with the squeaking blast pressing my ears. My forehead was about to explode.

I got to the apartment door and dropped the keys trying to open it. Fingers were trembling, the key didn't want to get into the lock and it took some time, until I finally entered my hallway. I rushed to the cherry pie and opened the box. It took me minutes of starring at the cover until I noticed that it expired. The fridge was empty, but the lights inside were hurting my eyes. I took my phone out and saw the mail notifications. Next to the Skyscanner's promotion for discounts on flights to Europe, there was Akari's reposted news about killed men during the riots. She commented saying it's time for action. I should've unsubscribed from her a long time ago, but I didn't. I turned my phone off since the screen was too bright.

I got into the shower and observed the scarlet curly water paths swirling down my body. My shower gloves were too rough and the bruises only hurt under them, so I took them off. I could feel the lump on the back of my head with my fingers and some open wounds around the temples. I barely touched them but figured it wasn't that serious. I wondered if Akari was able to heal that stuff. I couldn't stop freezing, so I closed my eyes and stood for a while under the warm water stream thinking about the pharmacy with no nicotine patches, only apologies. People always say they are sorry, but the entire construction of the sentences was so unclear to me. Akari used to say an awkward and absolutely wrong "Me sorry" phrase that made no sense at all. I could never distinguish when one should be sorry or should apologize, and what was the difference between those things. Nobody ever apologized to me, and I was always sorry for myself. The water flows kept gently hugging my closed eyes.

I'm in the closet, again. I look at my six-year-old self. He cries. I try to hug him, but I can't. My hands twisted behind my back. He opens his mouth but doesn't make a sound. He keeps crying. I promise him to get out. I tell him I'm sorry. I try to hug him, but he steps away and gets dissolved in the air. My hands are free. Now I'm six years old again. The closet is so dark and is so high, I can't see its end. I try to open it, but I can't. I try to shout, but I make no sound. I push the doors, I push the walls, I push the floor. Nothing moves. I'm stuck. I close my eyes with my hands and squat. I feel the cold from all the sides. I can't even hug myself. I can't move. I'm stuck, forever. But then a light comes in. I can see her eyes through my fingers. Akari opens the doors. Akari takes my hand and pulls me out. Akari leads me away and says, there is no need to hide anymore.

I got out of the shower with my eyes closed, too scared I could lose the image of her face if I'd opened them. I stood like that for a while, in the middle of the cold room, unable to understand if it was water running down my face or tears. I opened my eyes but she was still there, with me. It felt right. The streets were finally silent, everything was covered in white snow, it was almost dawn. I could only hear the birds singing. For a moment, I wanted to wrap myself up in a blanket and go to sleep, but I didn't. Instead, I changed clothes and searched for cigarettes, but the closet was empty. I put the laptop, Albert Camus' "L'Étranger" softcover, the gloves and milk in my backpack and checked if I had my passport and other documents.

END

...and earth kept singing

“How many floors in that building, what do you think, April?” was the first thing I heard when I picked up my phone at midnight. The phone was ringing for quite a long producing the only source of sound and light in the darkness of my bedroom.

“It’s great to hear you too, Tobias. Tobi, I mean, Tobi,” I scratched my forehead. “How’s your days in China? Are you working, what’s with such a late call? And a question? Oh, yeah, the question, ehm, I don’t know. Do you mean like your home? Which building? Can I guess and say twelve? Twelve, maybe?” I asked, making the bed.

“It’s fourteen, fourteen floors,” Tobi replied. “And I’m standing on the roof,” he paused. “Hoping to fall,” he exhaled. “You know, there’s this very thin iron wire, like a little fencing thing. It keeps me from falling,” his voice cracked.

“Then I am glad it’s there, Tob,” I said quietly and dropped my pillows.

I never thought of him as one of the people who would call me. The kilometers between separated us in many ways, last time we talked was about five years ago, and it was about female legacy in the world of music. Nothing special, nothing even to remember, but I did. Tob was one of a kind, the smartest kid at school, my older brother, my role model. Since he immigrated, we never got to talk about actual things. *The* things. I knew Tob was so special that he might get lost someday, he thought too much, more than anybody else did. I always thought it wouldn’t bring him up anywhere, but pain. I sat with my knees up on the ice-cold stone tile floor in the corner of my bedroom opposite the window, I covered my bruises with the pajama’s sleeve, in the cold they got red. I started counting down the stars, so we don’t get to end this talk, so we would be infinite. Looking at the sky brought me a strange feeling of us all being so small that in the end, we were all together inevitably. I held

the phone to my ear so tight that it hurt. I couldn't miss a word, I swallowed the emptiness inside my throat and talked to him,

“I am listening.”

“I'm done, April. I'm done with everything, you know,” he said almost whispering by the end of the sentence, but I could still hear that deep bass voice almost drown in despair.

“I understand,” I answered. “Do you *really* want to do that?”

“I do,” he said and I waited here sitting and listening to his breath. I didn't want to interrupt him. “It's not like this wire can hold me, you know. I can easily pull it and get over. And it's not my first roof, April. There are many and always those wires. Each of these buildings, that I have been on, has them. It's just that...” he paused and exhaled, “I am so pathetic.”

“I understand. You are not,” I caught myself on the thought that I really meant it. It's been years since I really meant what I was saying. Usually the things I say are just things that should be said.

“And I mean it, I really do,” I added.

“No, I am pathetic. I am. Look at me, I don't even know why I would call you.”

“Does it actually matter?”

“You're right, it doesn't. Nothing matters. That's why I am looking at that goddamn wire and thinking that it's not worth it, you know. It really has no fucking meaning in it, if I am here or not. It won't matter.”

“No, it will. That would be pretty intense to hear the death itself talking to me over the phone,” I paused. “But, Tobi, maybe there are some things that are important and...and...and worth trying, but you just haven't found out that yet? Haven't seen them? Isn't it better to give it a shot and try to look more?”

“I did. So what? I just don't understand why.”

“Why what?”

“Why everything?” he almost screamed. “Why is everything the way it is?!”

“I think I do.” I was nodding by the phone as if he could see it.

“You understand? You actually understand this madness all around? Life? Death?”

“I understand you. Not the part about everything, I don’t understand everything too,” I shrugged. “I don’t think we can actually get to know that. It’s a part of life, of us, as human beings. Yes, we are doomed to float desperately like the rocks in open space with no exact destination or even slight allusions to understand what we are supposed to be. But we are already here, alright? So why not to enjoy the ride. You can always cross the wire and you know what’s at the end of it, but what about the other end? When you don’t cross it, what do you get here, on this side? On Earth.”

“I still don’t understand. I get to have pain here, I get to have despair and betrayal, and all the dark places are here. And I don’t want to be in them. I don’t want to soak in the darkness of these thoughts, but I don’t know any better. All I know is that I am pushing and pulling the wire back and forth. Hoping that I can fall accidentally while I’m doing it. One moment I am on the roof and the other, I am in the empty block of air between the earth and me. Back and forth, back and forth. Roof and sky, roof and space, roof...and nothing,” he yelled the last word.

“Does doing so make you happy?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think there are things left that make me happy. There are only questions.”

“Questions? Like what?”

“Why? Why do we need to keep moving? Why do we need to build families, go to work, watch sunsets, think about the future, do all the stuff that we do, you know?” he could barely bring the sounds out, as if speaking hurt him.

“I don’t think there’s a meaning out there. I figured, we just need to keep fighting. That’s it.”

“Why?”

“To live,” I shrugged again.

“But do you actually want to live?”

“I don’t know,” I paused and got goosebumps all over my body. I was afraid to ask myself such questions. “No, maybe yes. I do. I mean, why not?”

“Why yes?” he just kept attacking me with those unreachable why-s. I started to suffocate, I couldn’t figure out which stars I already counted and which ones might come across again. The clouds were speeding up and covering the unconnected parts of the skyline, creating pictures, the volumetric bunches of the white seemed to be soft bubbles.

“I don’t know what to say. Maybe life is a way, a journey to understand ‘why yes’ or there is no ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in particular. It’s just the way it is.” I squeezed the phone against my head with my shoulder and got up. I reached for the curtains to open up the entire view outside and I could see the old scars on my left forearm getting all red. I could fall into the clouds and cover myself with a curtain. Life in the end never had meaning, we all knew that.

“I’m just too tired to move against the flow, April,” Tobi exhaled heavily. “I really am tired.”

“But nobody asks you to swim against the flow, that’s the beauty of it, don’t you think? You can swim with the flow, Tob. You can swim wherever you want.”

“I’m not worth it. I don’t think I’m worth anything,” he screamed and stopped. “You know there are days when I got drunk so bad that I forget my name. And the other days I say my name out loud and it doesn’t make sense to me. And I think that’s what I deserve. I can’t even get myself, you know. I don’t know a thing, April. I hope I knew things about life. I hope I knew.”

I couldn't move, my cheeks and my tongue got paralyzed, I thought I lost him. We both stayed silent, all I could hear was the echo of his voice, his steps on the metal roof and the wire trembling against the wind. His breath got heavier.

“Look, I know you will do what you want to do. But you definitely don't deserve to be found dead at the age of twenty-five with such a history behind and beyond that you even haven't discovered yet. I know it's tough,” I paused to scratch my forehead and saw some blood on the left forearm from the fresh scars. “I just can't even imagine what you're about to do, because you don't deserve that. Are all the struggles worthless and lead to that, Tobi? Are we suffering for nothing? Please, tell me. Are we doomed to be eaten up by the sorrow and despair? I don't think you deserve to find the end of it like this, not that way, no.”

And there was a silence. Just wind. I sat there waiting and teasing my itchy spots. For a moment, I thought I would never hear him again and would be stuck with that sibilant wind whispering me secrets I couldn't uncover, I never got to understand what songs the earth was singing above my ears, beyond my eyes. The room suddenly got wide and empty, the floor got colder, I almost couldn't feel my feet. The clouds covered the leftovers of the sky as if I entered the body of the cloud and become it. The stars disappeared leaving me in a room overwhelmed by darkness.

“I don't know, Ape,” he whispered. “But maybe there could be another end for real.”

I saw one tiny star shining in the far above.

“Maybe we decide if we are doomed or not. Maybe I can. Maybe I can,” he said.

The clouds were opening up some of the starry parts of the skyline.

“Hold on until I get down, okay?” he finally asked.

I could hear him opening a door, the wind stopped being noisy and his voice became more clear.

“I’ll be there,” I said and sat quietly listening to his steps on the ladder and then the melody in the elevator; I couldn’t hear what it was singing.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that I am...you know, well...I am...” he finally replied.

“You don’t have to tell anything, Tobi.”

“You know, another thing. I am in the city last three weeks. So, maybe we could meet. I want to have some good dumplings. You know the place.”

It was about 4AM in the morning and I already lost my night, so I drove to our spot. We ate in silence, Tobi was crying sometimes and trying to push down the lump in his throat with sips of coke. It was both funny and sad at the same time. All I did was offer him napkins, over and over again. We climbed up by the river and reached the top of the hill. Little fish were swimming in circles as we sat underneath the apricot tree. For a moment, the street light blinked and disconnected. I looked at Tobi who couldn’t stop crying and I couldn’t see him under the shadows of the apricot leaves. It was so dark as if he almost wasn’t there anymore, but a little sobbing reminded me it was all real. My brother just tried to commit suicide.

Looking at the city asleep with almost no lights in houses and buildings, I wondered if Tobi would remember the day we got stuck at home alone with no lights, fifteen years ago. Our parents left to the family gathering to which we couldn’t come, it was way too serious they said. I think I was about nine and he just turned eleven. The entire city was out of electricity. It was a blackout because of the huge hurricane. The sky was drowning in black as if none of the other colors ever existed in its palette, the clouds were almost inseparable from each other. A massive earth-sized cloud covered everything we could see from one side of the horizon to the other and beyond to infinity. The darkness swallowed the city and I imagined us in the whale’s mouth crossing through the deepest parts of the ocean where none of the human beings ever was or even could have been. We sat home alone without any light and I

started searching for the candles. All I could find was a small piece of a candle, less than a half and nothing more. The wind outside was so strong that it didn't just tear apart the branches of the trees or raise up the street trash, it was ruining the entire landscape. I pushed the little stool to the window and looked outside. I saw the roof of the five-floor flat building torn up so easily and fly over for a couple of meters and fall on the road, smashing all the cars around. I heard a lot of signaling but was too focused on how an entire roof just came off the building as if it was a leaf on the bush. There was a mess on the road, the mini labyrinth of the cars and parts of the roof. I got scared and hid under the window when Tobi heavily exhaled and said,

“We gotta go to the market. There's no use from that piece of candle.”

“But do you have any money?” I asked and started searching the house for a pair of coins.

We spent sometime trying to figure out if there was a chance to borrow some money, but I knew nobody in the neighborhood, we just moved in. Tobi found fifty cents but none of us even knew how much the candles cost, if it was enough to keep us safe, to give us light. He squeezed a coin in his fist and told me to come. We locked up every door and went out into the storm. The nearest shop was about two miles away and we couldn't see the road, it was disappearing in the flows of the wind and autumn leaves, lifting up the dirt and dust in a series of small hurricanes overcrowding the horizon. I felt blind and lost. Tobi held my hand tightly and covered his eyes with the other one. The dust and little pieces of stones and trash was swirling around in the dark and it was almost impossible to get through them I was hiding behind my brother's back. We stopped to rest under tree and looked behind. The shop didn't seem to work, the city didn't seem to be alive.

“You think, it's worth it?”

“I don’t know,” he said and tried to look at me, but wind did not allow opening his eyes. “It’s worth a shot.”

“Let’s go home, I’m scared,” I said and pulled his sleeve.

“We need lights, April,” he pulled his arm back and I could feel him trying to hold back his trembling.

“No, I am heading home. We don’t even have any money, I can’t go to this nowhere,” I said pointing out the dust labyrinth in front of us. “It’s too scary.”

“Okay, listen, you’ll stay with those men, you know them, right? They are good.” He showed me taxi drivers that took me to school every morning.

“You really wanna go?”

“We need lights, April.”

Tobi talked to the man waiting for his clients and then called for me. He left me near the cab and I was watching Tob getting farther away from me and turning into undistinguishable dot. I counted seconds before I could see him. At one moment, I could not see him with the wind blocking my vision and the trees falling down on the road. I got so scared that roof fell on him or a car didn’t see him on its way, that I lost my brother forever, that this whale of darkness swallowed him in the night, that he disappeared as a piece of dust. I thought about staying here for the rest of my life and my parents never finding out where I was. We all got stuck on the island of wind as broken and forgotten toys with no way for us to come back to the lives we lived, but only surviving the storm that never ends. I thought I’d never see the lights ever again in my life, but will remember this car dim flashing around my legs. I started counting the leaves flying around, all of the colors mixed in those little

tornados of leaves. Boring yellow, dark green, scary red and the saddest hue of the brown. As I stood there losing my hope, Tob finally was seen on the horizon and sooner approached us.

“Let’s go home,” he said and I ran to him and held his hand so tightly that I would never allow him to disappear ever again.

“You were right. Our money was not enough,” he said opening the door.

“No, you were right. We need lights.”

We lit the last candle, in minutes it almost melted, with about only four centimeters of it left. Everything was melting down to the bowl that we put underneath the candle. It had glorious reflection of the light in the little puddles of wax as if it was a crystal yellow lake.

“Tobi. Wax,” I said pointing out to the melted pieces in the bowl. “We make a candle out of it. I will find some threads for the core and we could put wax around it!”

He started laughing and then smiled gently. “We can **create light**, you say? Let’s try.”

Tobi took out the melted wax from the bowl moving it from palm to palm because it was too hot. He tried to blow some air on his hands but they were burning and hurting him a lot. I could see how Tob’s hands got all red and the new bruises were forming. But we didn’t have time, it was the last minutes with the light, Tobi kept trying to sculpt a candle like a cylinder out of wax. I was forming the combination of thick threads and couldn’t look away from Tobi’s burns. When the wax finally took the form, putting the threads in the center we closed this little handmade construction of the **source of light** supposed to be a candle. We tried to lit it several times but it refused to work. I thought any minute the light goes off we would disappear. When the last light of the former candle was almost gone, the made up one, our candle, finally started burning.

“Yes!” I said and took the candle running away to the kitchen. Tob followed still blowing on his hands. I took some ice from the fridge and put it around his hands. As I looked up I saw Tobi looking at our candle and the reflection of the light in his eyes reminded me of the Sun. A little tear fell down his cheek and he gently smiled. Back then I thought Tobi was hurt by the burns, but now I think he was just happy to see his light, he was just happy to be. We came back to the bedroom and kept repeating the process of reconstruction the candle. Every time the candle was about to pass, Tobi was burning his hands to keep us safe. We kept making dozens and dozens of those candles until we started falling asleep in the deep-deep night. Around 3AM, the weather became still, I could hear the wind singing quietly on the far lands, and we fell asleep with the last light fading away. I wasn’t ever afraid of darkness anymore.

Fifteen years later, I still could see the scars all around his palms and fingers. Tobi sat covering his face with his hands and I took his huge palm in my arms and could see those burns still hurting him.

“You can now open your eyes, Tob. I know it harmed you a lot. This darkness inside. I feel it too. But look, it’s only us, see?” I pulled his second arm from his head and showed him the meadow ahead. I knew he was with me. The moment was so peaceful that I cherished my entire existence, every memory I had and every feeling I felt. “I don’t know what you’ve seen in that darkness, Tobi. But it’s gonna be alright, it’s gonna be alright, okay?”

“How do you know?” he asked breathing the freshness of the morning grass.

“Because you always find a way to keep the light going. You always do.”

END

## What is the voice?

The craft of any art ultimately assets the goal to have an influence on the audience and in order to achieve that artists of any kind should have the distinct strong voice that carries the message of their art. For the writing community this voice operates as a mixture of literary devices and the truth **spoken** by the writer in the specific story. On the journey of writing the short fiction narrative, one might stumble upon the question of finding the voice. The writer writes the story but when the readers read it, they hear someone telling them that story, narrating it with a specific voice. The art of fiction allows the audience “to see, hear and feel hidden sensations, first intimations of doubt or of desires, before these become conscious or can be spoken about directly,”<sup>1</sup> and “imagine the narrator speaking to us, giving shape, focus, and voice to a particular history.”<sup>2</sup> According to the president of creative writing classes at Gotham Writers Workshop, Alexander Steele, this voice that acts as the “sound of the story” comes through and with narration, so it can be “heard”<sup>3</sup> in readers’ minds or can be referred as the words spoken out loud, in other words, representing the “verbal quality of the narration.”<sup>4</sup> The audience tends to trust this voice, lets it enter the minds and lead them through the path of the story. The point of view is a major driving engine for this complex structural mechanism of the voice, as it gives the information on how to immerse into the story, with whom to empathize and most importantly, whose voice would remain as an echo after the completion of reading. As difficult as it gets, the narration is a colossal part of the voice and in order to create the unique voice, there is a need to investigate the ways the narration works.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Mills, *The Routledge Creative Writing Coursebook*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Booth, and Kelly J. Mays, eds. *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 10th ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Steele, ed. *Gotham Writers Workshop: Writing Fiction*, (New York: A & C Black, 2003), 171.

<sup>4</sup> Booth, and Mays, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 96.

In literature, voice functions as the sum of the literary devices used in specific narration that fully depends on the choice of the tone and the point of view. The point of view that the writer decides to use in a particular story depends on what distance there should be between readers and the story, the story and the writer, and the writer and the reader. In words of Janet Burroway, the American author and nominee for Pulitzer Prize, it is extremely important to know “Who speaks? To whom? In what form? At what distance from the action? With what limitations?”<sup>5</sup> The main function of the point of view is to answer the above-mentioned questions, to help to distinguish from whose point of view the readers are looking and to show “the unseen things” through the details and advantages of using the specific point of view.<sup>6</sup>

The investigation of the first person narration encapsulates the idea of writer’s, narrator’s and character’s voice sounding in the same voice breaking down the distance and opening up the extremes of vulnerability of the story. The first person narration tries to achieve such an effect and goal that would “eliminate almost all distance between the reader and the story by placing the reader into the narrator's skin,”<sup>7</sup> in other words – to remain as intimate as possible. The narrator in the story writes from the perspective of the character, who can be put into the framework of “*I* telling *my* story, in which case that character is a *central narrator*.”<sup>8</sup> For the starting point of many aspiring writers, the first person narration suits ideally as means to discover their voices further in the process of writing.

The voices of the writer and the narrator should not be the same and it is even better to have different voices for each of them. Since the narrator may change from story to story, the

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<sup>5</sup> Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide To Narrative Craft*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Steele, *Gotham Writers Workshop: Writing Fiction*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide To Narrative Craft*, 210.

writer's voice needs to be strong and consistent, so that no matter what the story is, readers could hear who the writer is just by the voice. It is still significant to be able to differentiate the character, the writer and the narrator, where the last one is "neither the real nor the implied author," but the narrator's words should be rather considered as "effects shaped by an implied author."<sup>9</sup> The true master while writing from the first person point of view is capable for "writing in the voice—the words and tone—of the character."<sup>10</sup> But the demands of the contemporary landscape of short fiction require "writing in all its creative forms no longer limits itself to the voice of one dominant authority, or to a form of address by a single speaker."<sup>11</sup> The richer the voices in the stories, the more interesting it gets which means more of the truth can be uncovered for the readers through the writer's voice. The hardest part of such a skill in the creative writing lies within the ability to fluctuate between the different voices of the characters, the author's and the narrator's one.

One narration is able to include different voices that can interact with each other, merge while still being apart, get closer or do not intervene at all. The major tool to learn for an aspiring writer while establishing or searching for one's voice is to understand that creative fiction "incorporates what people say and how they speak – to themselves, to each other – and builds up a rich supply of spoken rhythms."<sup>12</sup> Even though it takes a long journey of hours and hours of writing, the practice becomes the first companion of crafting the art and discovering the voice through which that art can be delivered. The great writers such as Nabokov and Baldwin perfected this skill in their short stories. The uniqueness of their voices and techniques used come through the analysis of "Symbols and Signs" and "Sonny's Blues" that uncover the multidimensionality of the concept of the voice.

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<sup>9</sup> Booth, and Mays, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Steele, *Gotham Writers Workshop: Writing Fiction*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Mills, *The Routledge Creative Writing Coursebook*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

*Nabokov's Voice in the "Symbols and Signs"*

The investigation of Nabokov's use of the omniscient narrator in "Symbols and Signs" reveals how the voices of the characters clash and merge and yet remain unique and distinguishable. The story is about a couple whose son has a mental disorder of an uncertain nature that develops suicidal intentions in the little boy. While the boy remains in the hospital where doctors unsuccessfully attempt to treat him, there happens an accident of the boy trying to commit suicide. Nabokov uses the distance between the characters and between the reader and the text itself, uncovering the essence of the narrative fiction genre "in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed."<sup>13</sup>

In order to state the relationships of one character to another Nabokov's narration sets a specific distance through the use of specific words corresponding to each of the characters. The story opens with the description of the boy's disease described by the narrator:

Man-made objects were to him either hives of evil, vibrant with a malignant activity that he alone could perceive, or gross comforts for which no use could be found in his abstract world.<sup>14</sup>

The phrase "man-made objects" comes explicitly from the narrator and its his choice of presenting the boy's disease, while for the boy those objects are more like "hives of evil," as for the narrator boy remains a stranger to whom he has no relation at all, and for him the boy's world appears as an "abstract world." This example defines the relationship of the narrator and the boy and remains in the same distance further in the story.

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<sup>13</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 7

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "Symbols and Signs," (The New Yorker: 1948), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1948/05/15/symbols-and-signs>

Nabokov's narration in the story freely fluctuates between different and distinct voices of the characters while still managing to carry the writer's voice. Nabokov masterfully uses his omniscient narrator's ability to "interpret character's appearance, speech, actions, and thoughts, even if the character cannot do so,"<sup>15</sup> for the means of presenting the story's complex voice structure. The excerpt below shows the moment when another suicidal attempt of the boy is presented through the lens of the narrator, the doctor and the boy altogether in one sentence:

The last time the boy had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded had not an envious fellow-patient thought he was learning to fly and stopped him just in time. What he had really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape.<sup>16</sup>

The narration starts with showing a character as the "boy" almost being that boy, and his attempt to commit a suicide was "trying to do *it*," but narrator in next part of the sentence present it as "the method" using literally the doctor's voice, the way a doctor would have called it. For the doctor the suicide is a "masterpiece of inventiveness", and there the boy is no longer a "boy," but he transforms to a "fellow-patient." As for the boy this "method" is rather a "learning to fly" and an expression of his wish to "escape," and by showing this narrator again comes back to being inside of the boy's mind itself and uses his words, going away from being a narrator or doctor.

When the narrator comes to explaining the disease he mostly refers to the voice of the doctor, using the words that are mostly objective and do not require any involvement, but cold emotionless observation. For example, to describe the hard burden of the psychological disease that might lead to the death itself, he uses general terms such as "the system of delusions", the ones that would come from doctor's language. The narrator stops calling the

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<sup>15</sup> Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide To Narrative Craft*, 205

<sup>16</sup> Nabokov, "Symbols and Signs"

character of the boy a “boy” or a “son” from the perspective of his parents, but he refers to him as “patient,” there, the narrator’s voice does not simply merge or transform, but almost disappears, allowing readers to be in total control of the voice of another character, the doctor’s one.

The relations between the doctor and the narrator uncovers the idea of how “narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking.”<sup>17</sup> The doctor was fascinated by the method used, in his words, it was “a masterpiece of inventiveness,” and, later on, the narrator carries on the same tone of the passion expressed by the point of view of the doctor. In the following sentence “If only the interest he provokes were limited to his immediate surroundings, but, alas, it is not!”<sup>18</sup> the narrator uses the literal words of excitement and supported by exclamation marks, as comes to describing the struggles of the boy, the inability to react with the real world, which is for the doctor occurs to be “alas, it is not!” not a pity or any other compassionate feeling, but still the passion that comes with the professional interest. It also creates the tone of the authority, which is present in doctor’s voice and sets a specific dominating atmosphere, so the narration is not flexible only in its voice differentiations but also in the tone.

Nabokov’s ability to fluctuate smoothly between the characters is also can be seen on the example of the female character of the mother, which reveals narrator’s ability to get closer and focus on a single voice. During the moment of mother’s dressing up and getting ready for a diner, narrator describes her “shaking head in deprecation of her silliness.” However, in reality she occurred to be silly for herself only, not for the narrator, so he inherits

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<sup>17</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 7

<sup>18</sup> Nabokov, “Symbols and Signs”

her perception of her own self and shows it through her actions, presenting the clear example of narration's method "inward from action to the mind"<sup>19</sup> in use. Nabokov again comes back to developing the narration in which the possibility "to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to "own" the words" is vividly realized.<sup>20</sup> As it comes to the relationships of the narrator and the wife, he writes being closer to her, presenting the light with her words "she presented a naked white countenance to the fault finding light of spring," while for the husband light had no other characteristics besides being "the light of spring" and "fault finding"<sup>21</sup> one. For the narrator the spring would not mean as much as making it to search for fault, but mostly it is the perception of the mother. Whose fault is this is never mentioned, it is purely her expression, the way he sees this spring and this light, while the narrator tries to stay as distant as possible, without intervening into her world, but rather inheriting it.

While Nabokov uses the characters as the main driven force for distinguishing his voice, Baldwin concentrates more on how the flashbacks might change the perception of the character's inner state through the use of first person narration. In his story "Sonny's Blues" the main character is the narrator that constantly revisits his memories in order to understand the issues in relationships with his brother, Sonny, who used to be a drug addict. The way the story is told resonates with Baldwin's strong voice that encapsulates his own difficult journey as an African-American writer. Therefore, the voice in his story is rather a reflection of his own truths and beliefs, which is also the major outcome found on the question of what is the voice. Another great American author Anne Lamott emphasized that "We are supposed to tell the truth in our own voice. The truth of your experience can only come through in your

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<sup>19</sup> Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, 205

<sup>20</sup> Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 9

<sup>21</sup> Nabokov, "Symbols and Signs"

own voice emphasized it”<sup>22</sup> and it makes the voice a more complex structured phenomena that does not carry only the literary value, but also a psychological one. The best way to explore this notion is show through the analysis of “Sonny’s Blues.” Baldwin entirely follows this principle and remains consistent in his voice throughout the story.

*Baldwin’s Voice in the “Sonny’s Blues”*

Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” portrays a story of the brothers’ relationship through interactions between them, while Sonny’s having a harsh time of adaptation period after getting treatment for the heroin addiction. After the rehab Sonny comes back to living his normal life in the suburbs while his brother gets back into his memories trying to understand the way childhood traumas might have affected his brother. Narrator remains suspicious that Sonny is still using the drugs and but deep inside the reasons for this attitude are rather the worries and care. However, by the end of the story Sonny’s brother finally sees the light in the darkness, which is the astonishing talent of Sonny’s ability to play on piano that he witnesses in one of the bars. The uniqueness of such narration is that it is given through narrator’s view only, even though the main focus is on his brother, Sonny. The understanding of his brother’s addiction and decline in life comes to the narrator through complex manifestation of his own feelings and relations to the past. He refuses to accept the dark side of his brother, which is the drug addiction and to some extent the freedom of his mind.

The story is full of narrator’s doubts towards his own feelings because of the great distance between the narrator and the way he recalls them. It starts from the very first line, when narrator sees the news about arrest of his brother for the possession and selling of the drugs, he tells “I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again.”<sup>23</sup> This denial of own feelings comes

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” in *The Jazz Fiction Anthology*, ed. Feinstein, Sascha, and David Rife, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2009), 17.

through the emphasis on the need to reread the message, as if he could not comprehend it, as if after the second reading the news could change. The inability to accept the reality is shown further when the narrator is unsure of what came after the news. He mentions “then perhaps I just stared at it [newspaper],” and the doubt is shown through the use of the word “perhaps,” that he keeps repeating throughout the story. It displays how his voice is so distant from understanding his own feelings that the narrator is forced to be doubtful almost all the time of the things he is surrounded by.

There are still moments where things got clearer for the narrator’s understanding and this understanding has a deep and tight connection with his constant flashbacks. Only by the moment the narrator understands that “he is scared,” he also says that his brother “became real to [him] again.” This “again” talks about narrator’s habit to put his brother out of reality and out of his own feelings too on a regular basis. Since “being scared” is revealed along with the memories about his brother, these two things become connected to each other on the level that only with feelings narrator is able to make things real. Narrator follows it by saying “I had kept it outside for a long time. I hadn’t wanted to know,”<sup>24</sup> which illustrates that this choice of keeping his brother “outside” was conscious.

Sonny’s brother has this inability to count himself as part of this reality and all of his observations came from being outside of the events. For example, in a classroom he is the algebra teacher who observes his students and compares them to his childhood mates whom he’s been observing almost the same way, with no interactions but only wonders. He wasn’t playing with any of them, he’s been thinking about the darkness that in the future these children might get into and the same happens even after the tens of years when these children came as reflections of his childhood friends:

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<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” 17.

all they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more that they at any other time.<sup>25</sup>

On the street he also does not include himself in the society and people he meets, he stays only as an observer and describes events, people and setting around him. All the other feelings and beliefs he pushes away claiming that there is no “room inside of me” for that. So far, the Sonny’s brother does not just tell the story, he rather plays the role of the narrator to an extent that he actually becomes one, without even having the name or possibility to interact with the story and the events in them. He is so unsure of his own presence in all that narration that he constantly doubts it, “their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time,” “perhaps I was listening to them.” (18) The story itself is not called “My brother’s blues,” but it puts narrator outside of the picture and makes Sonny central figure even in the title itself.

The actual cross-section of the lives of Sonny and narrator appears only when narrator says “I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself,” still separating himself from his brother even on the level of structuring the sentences. The narrator always talks about himself separately and the two brothers are separated just as the way two sentences separated by the period, not comma. The reason might be the clear disconnection of the narrator from his own feelings, he constantly repeats he is not aware of why and what he feels, “all this was carrying me some place I didn’t want to go. I certainly didn’t want to know why.”<sup>26</sup> Later the narrator admits he was escaping from this connection to both his brother and his feelings, “I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life Sonny lived inside.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

Even though the interconnectedness between narrator's feelings and his past act as the major source for uncovering the voice of the writer, there is a still correlation to the present and the way it is perceived by the character. He easily fluctuates from the present to the past smoothly transitioning his thoughts. For example, as they drive through the streets he notices "these streets hadn't changed," "houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been..." and other memories just slip into the present, almost incorporating with it. Another great transition is presented through the use of one single word:

"I was trying to find out something about my brother. I was dying to hear him tell me he was safe.

"Safe!" my father grunted, whenever Mama...He always went on like this..."<sup>28</sup>

By using the last word from the present he connects to the memory when this word was said in the past and introduces his father to the audience. A narrator keeps using his voice to fluctuate between the time differences and the memories that combined together complete the story itself. The voice is captured within these little stories and reminiscences that keeps happening inside narrator's head. It's not what character tells about his past but the way it is presented through the author's voice that creates these transitions, doubts and undefined feelings inaccessible to the character but intervened in the tone he speaks. The way the narrator talks is not as important as the way he tells the stories. Underneath of all those sentences there lies this nostalgic voice that tries to understand Sonny and connect the two separated brothers while none of them can hear each other. The voice that shows that distance and the narrator's obsession with his past through the numerous interventions of the flashbacks to the present is this worry and care for Sonny's well-being and life in general, that was implemented in the narration. James Baldwin creates the voice of the deepest

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 26.

nostalgia and longing for the understanding of the damaged soul and the ways it can be healed.

*Exploring the voice in “(aka) meaning bright”*

While constructing the narration of the “aka meaning bright,” a short story written for this project, the delivery of the inner world of the character was the main focus. The narrative component was built with the use of the first person point of view that affects the perception of the entire story. Due to the narration the reader is almost captivated inside of the main character’s mind looking outside only with his eyes and no ability to go beyond or further his head. The world is limited to his view and yet it gives an ability to fully merge with the character.

These limitations are also constructed with the use of the actual physical environment in the story. For example, from the moment he enters that “smoking area enclosed with the wooden walls,” the outer world almost shuts up and the reader has this sense of being present with the character, as if the audience also enters there, also becomes enclosed in the character's mind, diving into his thoughts and memories, while everything else from the outside remains unavailable. Up until the shout of a woman intervenes his thoughts, and the character is forced to “stepped outside to see what was going on,” the self-centered narration does not allow it to happen.

The perception of the events is extremely personal, the image of the screaming woman is perceived explicitly and only through the narrative of the main character. The way he appears in the story is the exact same way the character has got to see Akari: at first it’s only her voice is heard, and only then the entire image occurs. It is with the character’s eyes we have the chance to see her arms grabbed first, then the items she holds in those hands, he goes further observing her, his look goes on her “jeans tor[n] around the knees.” The image

occurs no other way than that the character perceives it; it was for him “hard to tell if she even looked like a human being,” as we see him observing her face “with the blood running from her crown and the tears messing her mascara.” He watches only her and her taking away from her mouth the “disheveled hair” and calls it a moment of her freedom. We do not have any other opportunity to know if it could be the other way, if she was looking like a human, if her hair was not that messed up, as we are stuck with the main character’s narration that basically defines all the perception we get, define the world outside him.

However, the first person point of view limitations do not allow seeing beyond the character. In the story, as he stood observing the screaming woman, he could not notice that behind her back the police officers were already approaching for the second catch. The character says she was free, when in reality it was not like this. In another part, he is unable to see the cop’s eyes, “all I did was bend and felt the neck stretching, as I tried to lean back with my head to see his eyes behind me.” It was significant for the character to see his eyes, but both the character and the readers do not have this opportunity to see it, while the agony of wanting to see it remains. That perception is extremely important since we get to see the world the way the character does it creates an indestructible bond and the foundation for the trust, we allow him to carry on his voice and set it up inside of our heads. There, the narration completely occupies the voice of the entire story and resonates in the audience’s absorption of it.

The story portrays the perfect case of being “limited by the intelligence and vocabulary of the first-person narrator.”<sup>29</sup> The limitations are kept consistent throughout the story in further events too. For example, when the character loses his consciousness, “everything went dark” for him, and the readers got blind too. There is no evidence to what

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<sup>29</sup> Steele, *Gotham Writers Workshop: Writing Fiction*, 81

happens after he faints, but as he falls almost the view falls with him, leaving us to see the kick from his side that comes as suddenly as he sees it. After that moment, a complete immersion into his memories follows, creating that atmosphere of being inside of his dreams while the rest of the world is left unknown. As he gets little in his memories, the narration changes, it goes in the present tense showing that even though events have already passed, it stays with him in the present and is perceived as something real, happening in that exact moment. Along with the time tense, the voice of the narrator changes: the sentences get short and clear in the mood of a child, trying to express the way a little kid would think and say things. Before that reminiscence, the narrator uses long and ornate sentences with the vivid descriptions of the things he sees, but while memory is having a place, he thinks abruptly, using the limited vocabulary to tell the story that is happening to him.

Besides the writer's voice being consistent, it also should gain an ability to fluctuate between the tones and perception of time changes that require the story. Like Nabokov who has presented a smooth transition of the narrator's voice adaptation to the different ages, genders and states of the character, I have tried to incorporate this fluidity in this short story. I also attempted to include Baldwin's approach to weave the past into memory and then into the present and show the character struggling with time continuity. Particularly, the narrator's voice changes becoming similar to the one of the six years old boy. The tense changes from the past to the present demonstrating how memories can haunt and stay present with us in the form of traumas and fears. The view side also changes, as the closet, in which the memory happens, occurs to the narrator taller than him, the entire space relationship changes making him small in accordance to the environment he is in, during the memory. This use of the narration allows to be fully present inside of the character's mind as well as to follow his actions and thoughts almost entirely captured within his voice, allowing this voice to be perceived by the audience. Only with the use of the first point of view, the voice of the

character could be revealed as the intimate disclosure of his inner world, his thoughts, the memories that almost entirely show the reasons to why the character is the way he is in the presented story.

*Exploring the voice in “...and earth kept singing”*

The second story in the collection presents the relationship between a brother, Tobi, and a sister, April, that is revealed through the phone dialogue in the late night. It starts with the Tobi's suicidal attempt and April trying to call him out by presenting her worldview, although she herself has problems with self-harming that can be traced through the images of her body full of scars. The story ends up by two meeting each other and April's reminiscences of the dark times in childhood where she tries to understand the turning point of her brother's behavior, just as in Baldwin's discoveries of the truth in the past of the Sonny. Both of the centuries portray difficulties in life through the single object of relationships but different methods of comprehending the understanding of humanity.

The story's uniqueness comes through the choice of the first person narration as the inability to be present omnisciently around both of the characters creates close distance between the story and the reader strengthening the empathy. A first sentence sets up the entire environment around the character: it reveals the name of the narrator, the time when events happen and what she was doing. Such a start builds up the interest of the reader about what can happen next, but the most important thing is that the voices of the both characters are heard in the very beginning. The first half of the story is built on the dialogue that shares important aspects of each of the characters' attitude towards the theme of death and life purposes creating the explicit and distinguish voices to each. The first point of view works almost as a third character narrowing down to the experience of only one person. This position helps to understand the hopelessness of the moment, as during the phone call there is

no chances to reach out for a person physically, only by speaking and listening. The point of view strengthens the tone by showing how hopeless situation might be with no ability to be actually present around the person on the other end of the phone. Through narrating this action, “I held the phone to my ear so tight that it hurt,” it is illustrated how this inability to show an empathy by being close to the other character can be expressed only within the one point of view. There is no way to know in what conditions Tobi is going through his moment of mental breakdown; and the audience gets to know only the other side, April’s, “I sat with my knees up on the ice-cold stone tile floor in the corner of my bedroom opposite the window.”

The use of omniscient narrator would reveal more about Tobi’s reaction to what is happening but, at the same time, there could have been a damage to the delivery of the message on how empathy turns out to cause a pain when there is nothing can be done. April’s worries are expressed to its extreme: she presses the phone so hard because the only thing she can do is to listen. The narration keeps describing those voice and tone changes that audience can get “his voice cracked,” “he exhaled,” “he said almost whispering.” The moments of silence are the heaviest to get by for April because she could not see Tobi, all she has is “the echo of my voice, the sounds of his steps on the metal roof and the wire trembling against the wind.” She distracts herself from the thoughts of not being able to get closer by counting the stars and observing the skyline, as she says “”Looking at the sky brought me a strange feeling of us all being so small that we were together at the end inevitably.” In other words, with the help of the first person point of view there is an opportunity for a reader to feel that helplessness of getting to the other side of conversation. There is the voice raising the empathy of April, telling about the complexity of feelings restricted by the time and space and nothing else can be done, except as April says “I am listening.”

Besides the point of view, another component of the giant construction of the voice is the tone set by the author, and in this story the tones differ for each of the characters. When it comes to April, she tries to stay neutral and observant towards her brother, she doesn't specifically use her emotions in the conversation, she rather "answers," "pauses" and "replies." Tobi gets to talk more as he "yells" and "whispers" the words, "his voice cracks" showing his anger, confusion and loss he feels inside. April responds listening carefully as she "could still hear that deep bass voice almost drown in despair." However, the word choice between two are similar, even though April is more concentrated on the bigger concepts of the feelings "I swallowed the emptiness inside my throat," "Yes, we are doomed to desperately floating over like the stones in the open space with no exact destination or even slight allusions to understand what we are supposed to be." For Tobi, these dark themes hurt as he says:

"I get to have despair and betrayal, and all the dark places are here. And I don't want to be in them. I don't want to soak in the darkness of these thoughts, but I don't know any better,"

the feelings are rather real and material to him, there is the concept of the "darkness in his thoughts" specifically. April considers that darkness more abstract she calls it the "whale" that can swallow an entire city in her memories to which readers also have an access only through her eyes. The both characters know these dark feelings but for April it comes from outwards, while Tobias considers it coming out from the inside.

Tobi and April also differ in the perceptions on the things, while April maintains her childish almost innocent toned views on the subject of darkness and light, death and life, Tobi stays more realistic having his feet on the ground. April remains poetic in her thoughts and memories, whenever she is alone the storm gets to be a whale, the wax turns into the light; however, Tobi is consistent in his concentrations on real things: there is a wire that keeps him from falling, not the thought about the infinity of the stars. They both are connected through that intimate moment of understanding that Tobi has suicidal intentions, but responses differ

since April gets to count the stars and Tobias actually makes the steps on the roofs, he climbs each of them, he pushes the wires, he is present in his actions, while April is rather present in her feelings. The ultimate connection and the emphasis on their understanding is shown through the last lines of the dialogue:

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that I am...you know, well...I am...” he finally replied.

“You don’t have to tell anything, Tobi.”

Another thing that distinguishes Tobias is his constant asking “you know,” that comes from the deepest will to share this darkness with somebody, to explain it and know that there is someone out there who knows it too. It can be read as the slang expression but for a suicidal person it is rather a cry for help, as if there is nobody who knows that darkness. However, through the memories it can be understood that April was the one who was worried about him since the very beginning she “held his hand so tightly that I [she] would never allow him to disappear ever again.”

The flashback in the story enters from the perspective of an older April. She describes event happened in the childhood and even shows the fear and worries of the child but in her voice remains an adult version of herself. The memory rather shows how the way of her thinking and speaking was established in the roots since she was a kid. The crushed roof and the cars are shown from how a little child sees it “a mini labyrinth on the road” and the blackout is like an adventure from the Baron Munchausen stories “I imagined us in the whale’s mouth crossing through the deepest parts of the ocean.” However, April is still quite distant from herself in the memory, she uses words the kid wouldn’t “was too focused on how an entire roof just came off the building as if it was a leaf on the bush,” while still maintaining to see what kid saw. Here is the moment when author’s voice can be heard explicitly: both versions of April, whether adult or a kid are fighting against the darkness. The voice of the author is the narration of adult April sharing the memory of her child version. There is the tone of fear of darkness and fear of losing a brother mixed together with a confusion of what one should do next, whether it comes to finding

the way to lit the lights or finding the right answer to keep a person alive on the other end of the phone call. The voice of April in both cases remains both calm and scared at the same time for she is able to understand the feelings and rationalize them in comparison with Tobias, whose voice remains almost the same as he cannot distinguish his own feelings.

The author's voice leaks out in the moments when April is not in charge of the narration, it talks not about her brother or her trying to save him, but explicitly about her ways of coping with darkness. April as a character is presented as someone who had the same struggles with questions on purpose of life as she quickly answers brother's "why-s." Besides there are moments when April tries to hide away from the audience she has problems herself that's when the author's voice sneaks out and tells her left forearm has got the scars and bruises. The memory uncovers the traumatic experience of both of the characters that each of them still carries with them but in different way. This trauma has its own voice that pushes both of the characters to the edge of "crossing wires" or "enjoying the ride." In the end, Tob and April are two reflections of their shared experience of the trauma, the memory, the storm they both trying to escape from almost an entire life, at least the large part of it.

Is it possible to find one's voice?

When I first started to write I have faced troubles with understanding the requirements needed to build the strong narrative. The research of the creative writing guidelines showed that any worth reading short fiction narrative must carry the voice and in order to write such stories author should find this transcendental voice. As a literature major student for the investigation of this phenomenon, I dived into the history of the short fiction and the novel and tried to understand how voice can sound beneath all that narration. The narrator's voice and author's voice often appear to the audience as interchangeable ones. However, the author's responsibility is to maintain the distinguishable voices for the characters, the narrator and still to carry the voice that tells the story with its own tone, pace and, again, the narrative.

Nabokov as the great author achieved the perfection in that skill and “Symbols and Signs” shows the simplicity and beauty of such art. His characters’ voices remain distinct and rich, while the narration delivers an outstanding and unique voice of the author himself. However, when I heard Baldwin’s voice in “Sonny’s Blues” I discovered that the ability to fluctuate between narrations is rather the means to get to the essence of his voice. Baldwin shows that there is a deep connection between the way the certain short story or entire novel sounds in author’s head and how they came to that sounding, between the voice of the author and their experience, the traumas in particular. While the main goal that the narration tries to achieve is to “not only to reduce the separation between writing and voice, but thrive on their proximity,”<sup>30</sup> this proximity is achieved through the interconnectedness of what writer is and what do they want to express through the voice in their stories, the truth they want to tell. Truth is revealed through experiencing and investigating those traumas, As Lamott states,

“You can’t get to any of these truths by...avoiding your anger and damage and grief. Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while... – then we we’ll be able to speak in our own voice.”<sup>31</sup>

The voice is the summation of experiences and roads taken before, the sum of identities of the author, it is the representation of what author is, the way this particular exact story wants and needs to be expressed. The voice is the complicated structured phenomena that can be found only by attentive listening to own voice that says “Write this story, write it this way, and until this voice can be heard through the hardship of attempts and discovering of oneself as an author there is no way to hear how it should sound like. The voice of the story is in the heart of the one who writes it.

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<sup>30</sup> Mills, *The Routledge Creative Writing Coursebook*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020).

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This project represents my own original work in accordance with Nazarbayev University's  
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