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Critical Insights: Raymond Carver

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The Carver Triangle: Lost in an Edward Hopper World

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“Ray and I were aware from *What We Talk About on . . .* of the similarities between Hopper’s tonal elements, his use of couples, the stripped down interiors and run-out-of-chances feel to some paintings—and Ray’s stories.”¹ *Tess Gallagher*

Like the Bermuda Triangle where ships and planes purportedly disappear, the often triangular structure of Raymond Carver’s fiction creates a restricted area—both temporally and spatially—where characters become or stay lost. Furthermore, the sense of helplessness and deflation that the point-of-view characters feel is heightened by Carver’s frequent manipulation of another triangle—Freytag’s pyramid, which German theorist Gustav Freytag used to explain the structure of drama. At the base of this illustrative pyramid lies background exposition with a rising action that builds via a series of crises to an apex or climax, followed by a falling action and a leveling off, or denouement.² As Carver explained to an interviewer, “Most of my stories start pretty near the end of the arc of the dramatic conflict” (Gentry and Stull 229). As such, Carver’s fiction can best be described as fiction of aftermath, since the main complications and rising action—even the climax of many stories—have already occurred before the narrative begins. His narrators are at a loss for words because they can’t explain what recently happened to them or fight a malaise they’re experiencing—an inescapable feeling of being trapped or down for the count. In that respect, they are the fictional equivalent of the subjects in works of American realist painter Edward Hopper (1882–1967). Many of people in Hopper’s paintings seem terminally isolated—even (or perhaps *especially*) when others are present. Given the body language of Hopper’s characters and their relationship to other objects and people in the paintings, it’s

easy to infer that, like Carver's characters, they too have stories that are implied but not revealed to viewers and that they too feel powerless to change their lots.

Tess Gallagher, who began a serious relationship with Carver in 1978 and married him on June 17, 1988, wrote that they attended an exhibit titled "Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist" at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art sometime in October or November of 1980. At the show she purchased a Gail Levin book of Hopper paintings that she and Carver looked at together and noticed not only a shared blue-collar element, but also a common technique. Gallagher said that she pointed out how in "Errand" Carver's "making up a side-line character central to the perspective is similar to what Hopper does in *NY Movie*, with the usherette," in which the real "show" where a film is playing to a sparse audience is the female usher who leans dejectedly against the wall on the other side of the action, looking down and lost in thought (Levin, *Art and Artist* 242). Carver agreed with her.³

A number of critics also saw affinities. Cathleen Medwick wrote in *Vogue*, "Like Edward Hopper, whose landscape his characters inhabit, Carver depicts a frozen world, blue-shadowed, where time is the betrayer of lives" (94). In a review published in the *New York Times Book Review*, Irving Howe compared Carver to Hopper but insisted that Carver works "on a smaller emotional scale," with characters that are "plebian loners struggling for speech" (1). Years later, Gordon Burn noted that Carver's stories, "like Edward Hopper paintings, portray disappointed and 'applauseless' lives" (42), while Graham Clarke tried to articulate "why Carver's settings have been so compared to the paintings of Edward Hopper" and concluded that "Hopper's images of solitary figures and couples cast amidst an array of empty rooms and environments seem to speak directly to the world Carver's characters inhabit," one which "evinces a particular kind of American loneliness which borders on pathos" (117).

Hopper, whose paintings of everyday life in the first half of the twentieth century made him one of America's most celebrated artists, was

labeled a “realist”—though his architectonic paintings of people and places are meticulously structured and highly stylized. Typically his canvases depict static tableaux, usually with three people or less, and a number of them with a single human as still as the objects in the paintings. As Levin observed, “the central figure is often psychologically remote, existing in a private space” (Levin, *Art and Artist* 145). Often there are shadows and sharp angles to suggest tension, and characters are often downcast. But even characters who appear upbeat are nonetheless weighted down by an implied narrative. In the painting *Summertime* (1943), for example, a well-dressed woman in a stylish hat stands on the stone steps of an apartment building, bathed in sunlight and staring, chin up, across the street. Yet, her aloneness is emphasized by tall stone pillars that frame her against a solid stacked-stone building. Tellingly, the window to her left—open and with a breeze blowing the curtain *inward*—invites viewers to speculate upon what she might be leaving behind—or why she paused on the stairs (151). A metaphorical prison, perhaps? Or a life of solidity that now yields to one of uncertainty and instability?

Hopper uses more than one method to create the feeling of limbo-like stasis and isolation that afflicts the people in his paintings and to convey what Levin termed “their anxiety or dismay” (256). In *Sunday* it’s the combination of solitude and body language. This 1926 oil painting shows a man in a vest with a long shirt and armbands sitting on the wooden plank sidewalk in front of a store with large windows. The street is empty, save for him. The name of the store can’t be read, and it’s not clear whether this man, slumped forward with his arms folded across his chest and resting on his legs, is a shopkeeper who’s relieved that it’s Sunday or is depressed for lack of customers and human interaction (147). In *Hotel Window* (1955) it’s a well-dressed, sophisticated woman in a brightly lit room sitting alone on a couch and looking out into the dark night, waiting . . . for what? That’s what Hopper’s isolated characters and minimalist interiors invite viewers to guess (220). Viewers are made to feel like voyeurs intruding on private moments,

outsiders who nonetheless can't help but speculate what each person's story or inner thoughts might be. In *Eleven A.M.* (1926), though the room is cramped with furnishings to emphasize the tiny apartment and the woman sitting in a chair and leaning forward to look out of a high-rise window is nude but for shoes, the same invitation is extended for viewers to wonder: Why is she looking out the window? Is she thinking of someone, or is she just staring out at the city? Why is she nude? Is there someone else in this shabby apartment that we're unable to see? If so, what is their relationship? Again, body language is a tip-off. She is not in a position of rest, or ease, or satisfaction. She's anxious about something, leaning forward, wringing her hands (274). And in *Room in Brooklyn* (1932), we see the back of a modestly dressed woman sitting in a bay window in a still rocking chair, while across from her at the far end of the window rest flowers in a vase on a plant stand. Their careful placement and the fabric on the plant stand draped to match the woman's dress suggest, of course, that the woman's life is as "still" as the floral arrangement (149).

It's impossible to attain the same degree of static isolation in a fictional narrative, because narration typically involves sequence and chronology. But Carver comes close. In his fictional world, the real time of a story is often limited, and so is the location---often to a single room. Many times a story begins with a Hopperesque scene, as in "The Idea," where the narrator had "been at the kitchen table with the light out for the last hour" watching a neighbor's house (14), or "I Could See the Smallest Things," which begins, "I was in bed when I heard the gate. . . . I tried to wake Cliff but he was passed out. So I got up and went to the window. A big moon was laid over the mountains that went around the city" (240).

In story after story, Carver's narrators recount their tales of woe with painful immediacy. Though time obviously has passed, the depressing or perplexing events are still fresh in their minds, and one can easily picture the narrator sitting, as Hopper's shopkeeper or women in windows, in dejection somewhere and feeling isolated, even when they're

with other people. Just as Hopper painted figures sitting on porches in such works as *Sunlight on Brownstones* (1956) or *Seawatchers* (1952), Carver's "Where I'm Calling From" positions the narrator and another character on the front porch at "Frank Martin's drying out facility" for most of the story, and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" offers two couples "sitting around" a "kitchen table drinking gin." In the beginning, "Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink" and "was like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity" (310, 314). But just as the conversation grows darker as the story progresses, so does the space, with the light "draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light" (320). The characters are fixed, and, for a work of fiction, are so static that they remain at the table even after the conversation and light have exhausted themselves and the narrator says he "could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (322). Often, Carver's stories end so abruptly that one suspects it may even be too painful for the teller to continue the narrative or that he or she has simply grown tired of recounting the details.

In *The Barbershop* (1931), Hopper's focus is a manicurist who sits at her table reading a magazine, while a barber stands at the far right corner of the picture frame, his back to the viewer, working on a customer who's visible only by part of his head and a leg draped under a striped hair-cutting cloth. The manicurist's inactivity is amplified by the barber's action, and the fact that most of the action is off-canvas implies that it's not part of her immediate world. She's marginalized, though depicted at the center of the room. Hopper explored that sense of awkward aloneness in the presence of others in many more paintings, among them *Room in New York* (1932), in which a man in shirt, tie, and vest sits at a parlor table, engrossed in his newspaper, while in the same room, not five feet away, a woman sits sideways at the piano, her face in shadow and turned away from him, looking down, one arm

draped on the keyboard and plunking a key with a single finger. Body language reveals her boredom, her sense of isolation from the man in her life, despite such close proximity. Hopper explores this idea of estranged-yet-attached couples in more sensual detail in paintings like *Summer in the City* (1949), where a sparsely furnished apartment is cut into geometric shapes by large blocks of shadow and light. On the lone piece of furniture in the room a man lies face down in a pillow while a woman in a loose-fitting nightgown sits in the middle of the bed, arms folded, head tilted slightly downward. She blocks our view of the man's midsection, but because his back and legs are bare, we assume him to be naked or at least partially so. Naked or clothed, it really doesn't matter—not to the woman lost in thought, as if contemplating what she could possibly do to improve her situation (258).

Carver's short story "Menudo" begins in similar fashion with an insomniac narrator whose wife is in the same room, asleep. He goes to the window and looks out at a light at the neighbor's house and concludes that Amanda, a woman with whom he's had an affair, also could not sleep (569). Almost the entire story is told while the man physically looks out the window. At one point he goes downstairs to heat some milk to help him sleep while his wife is "still sleeping on her side" (571). Later in the narrative we learn that his wife has had an affair, too, but his response, in true Hopperesque fashion, was to stay in bed rather than confront her. "I didn't get up for days, a week maybe—I don't know" (572).

The mood of Hopper's paintings is certainly reflected in all of Carver's fiction. They are kindred spirits, as well. Hopper told one interviewer, "I have a very simple method of painting. It's to paint directly on the canvas without any funny business, as it were" (Levin, *Intimate Biography* 533). For his part, Carver said he'd like to put above his writing desk a three-by-five-inch card that reads "No Cheap Tricks" (Gentry and Stull 58). Like Hopper's paintings, Carver told an interviewer that his stories "have a surface simplicity about them" and cited his teacher, John Gardner—"Don't use twenty-five words to say what

you can say in fifteen”—as an influence (209, 181–82). Hopper was similarly inclined. Late in his career he became so fascinated by what Levin termed a “strategy of reduction” (*Art and Artist* 561) that he painted sunlight in an empty room, which “seems to reduce reality to its barest outlines, affirming the ability to see sunlight that he associated with life itself” (561). Hopper said he used minimalism “to make one conscious of the elements beyond the limits of the scene itself” (Goodrich 104) and told one art historian that each of his paintings was “an instant in time, arrested—and acutely realized with the utmost intensity” (O’Doherty 82). Carver, who was reluctantly schooled in minimalism by his editor, Gordon Lish, nonetheless has the same impulse. As Carver told one interviewer, “You’re trying to capture and hold a moment” (Gentry and Stull 187).

Philosophically, the two men share the view that great art is tied to an artist’s vision. In fact, Carver’s pronouncement in “On Writing”—which was first published in the February 15, 1981, *New Yorker* shortly after Carver and Gallagher saw the Hopper exhibition together—echoes Hopper’s published statement that “Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world” (Levin *Intimate Biography* 9):

Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications. . . . It is the writer’s particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes. It is his world and no other. (87)

There are superficial similarities between Hopper and Carver as well. Fame came late in life to both men. Both were modest about their achievements, both had slightly pessimistic views of life, both had excellent teachers who helped but also exerted a powerful influence, both admitted that the work process itself does not come easily, both felt that teaching was more draining than rewarding, and both strove to make their work more complex in later years.

But the greatest point of intersection is, as Gallagher noted, their use of couples and offstage elements that triangulate an implied narrative. Hopper's method of working is clear, given studies we have for some of his best-known paintings. The most provocative example for Carver studies is *Hotel Lobby*, a 1943 oil-on-canvas that depicts an attractive young woman with shapely legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles, her calves sharply defined. She is reading a magazine or book, while in the far left background an older, matronly woman sits looking up at an older gentleman who is most likely her husband. He stands facing not her but the phone booth or elevator that is only partially visible at the far left corner of the painting. His head is tilted so that he could very easily be eying the young blonde out of the periphery of his vision. The implied narrative is obvious, but such was not the case in Hopper's original drawing for the painting, which had the older man in the background looking down at his apparent wife and leaning toward her as if to indicate his undivided attention. Meanwhile, the figure in the foreground is a man about the same age who stares straight ahead, legs tucked neatly against his chair. Missing in the drawing is a tone that is so common to Hopper—a mood that, according to Levin, became possible because “Hopper gradually removed figures from his urban scenes” and “these scenes became empty evocative settings into which he could project a mood” (*Art and Artist* 41). Missing as well from the *Hotel Lobby* study is an implied drama—even if, as in the case of the final painting, it's only the *potential* for drama. In the finished painting, Hopper emphasizes a subtle sexual tension. That is, *Hotel Lobby* derives its interest from Hopper's suggestion that the husband *may* have a wandering eye, while the study offers not even the possibility of a narrative triangle. In Carver's short story “Gazebo,” the narrator has already strayed, already had an affair with the maid at the motel he and his “older” wife were managing. In “Gazebo” the maid is kept offstage, and readers find out about this third party only through the narrator's interior monologue and brief exchanges of dialogue. But the effect is the same.

Hopper, likewise, often incorporates offstage elements in his paintings. In *Four Lane Road* (1956), a man sits at the side of his remote gas station next to an empty four-lane highway that's layered in between horizontal strips of asphalt, grass, tree lines, and a wispy cloud-segmented sky. It would be a still life with an entirely different implied narrative had Hopper not inserted one other element: a woman with a harsh hair bun leaning out the window behind the man, her face in a scowl, and her mouth open. It's clear that she's giving him an earful, and the man's heavy shadow behind him on the building while he looks out off-canvas suggests that he'd like to be on that highway *now*. Maybe there's another woman, or maybe the implied third element off-stage is another job . . . another life, perhaps like a traveler who gassed up earlier that day whose destination seems exotic. Yet, like Carver's characters, he remains.

Hopper's deliberate manipulation of figures to suggest triangles (and triangulated ambiguity) is evident as well in his most famous painting, *Nighthawks* (1942). This painting, on display at the Art Institute of Chicago, shows an empty street at night and a panoramic look inside an all-night diner through the diner's long and large plate-glass windows. A customer wearing a fedora sits with his back toward viewers and at the front left of a triangle-shaped counter, in the center of which a counter man works wearing a white uniform and hat. On a row of stools along the other side sits a man and a woman. They're dressed up, and we can infer that either the man has found female companionship for the evening, or else the couple was out on a late date and became hungry. The woman holds up her hand, as if studying her nails, while the man leans forward, his arms folded on the countertop, looking at the counter man, who crooks his neck to return the look. However, in a study for the painting, Hopper originally painted this triangle of characters—the isolated man, the couple, and the counter man—in their own worlds, no one looking at or acknowledging the others. The man turns to his woman as if to say something, the counter man keeps his head down, and the isolated man is hidden completely from view,

rather than having a portion of his face visible, as in the final painting. It's clear, then, that Hopper was "tweaking" the figures so that they could provide more narrative interest (Levin, *Art and Artist* 270) and invite the reader to speculate on the relationship of the three triangular elements.

Hopper does the same sort of thing but with a third element implied off-canvas in *Office at Night* (1940), which depicts a man—presumably hard-working, since it's dark outside and long past normal work hours—sitting at a desk and looking at a stack of papers. Behind him to the left, by a file cabinet, is his secretary, her tight dress accentuating the shape of her buttocks. She pauses over an open file drawer and looks in the man's direction, but also slightly downward as if something had just occurred to her. To the right of the man's desk is an open window, which suggests something (or someone) out there—a wife, perhaps? Have they already had an affair, and now he's ignoring her at work? Is she hoping to have an affair with him? More ambiguity drives *Excursion into Philosophy* (1959). In it, Hopper paints a small room into which a rectangular frame of light falls on the floor, like a reverse shadow. A fully clothed man sits on the edge of a small bed near an open window. Head tipped slightly downward, he is clearly in thought—perhaps about the open book next to him? Or the woman sprawled sleeping behind him, her back to him and clothed only from the waist up in a silky top with her bare lower half bathed in another rectangle of light? Or maybe, once again, it's something outside that window: another woman or a situation that's somehow better than the one in which he finds himself (Levin, *Art and Artist* 261). In this case, the book suggests an off-canvas element that acts as a wedge between the couple.

Carver also creates triangles that are visually strong, slightly off-center, sometimes ambiguous, and often off-canvas. As a reviewer for the *New York Times* noted of Carver's early stories, "The drama is almost always offstage, beyond the characters" (Broyard), leaving

readers to fill in the gaps by speculating on the action left out. Carver's oeuvre is full of examples:

In "Gazebo" it's the maid—the one that the narrator had a fling with—who's offstage as the couple drinking gin in a motel suite ignores customers and tries to shut out the world in order to talk about their problems.

In "Fat," a female waitress tells a friend about a grotesquely fat customer whom she can't get out of her mind—and who, though offstage except for her memory, inspires her to tune out her self-centered and controlling husband when he "begins" (intercourse, that is), remarking, "I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (7).

In "Viewfinder," a man with no hands going door to door and offering to take a photograph of the resident's house bonds with a man who, like him, was left by his wife and children. Collectively, those wives and children offstage suggest what momentarily enables the two men to connect, however tenuously.

In "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" the offstage element is an incident that happened at a party four years ago when the narrator's wife was unfaithful, though the narrator isn't sure exactly to what degree.

In "Neighbors" it's the couple whose apartment Bill and Arlene watch in their absence—physically removed but still present in their belongings, which, to Bill and Arlene, feels like a "greener pastures" mockery of their own lackluster lives.

In "They're Not Your Husband" it's two men at a diner who collectively come between Earl Ober and his wife, Doreen, insomuch as their poor assessment of her as a woman to be desired causes Earl to see her differently. Even after they're long gone, the damage they've done remains.

In "A Serious Talk," a man returns the day after he'd behaved badly in order to celebrate Christmas with his wife and children—but her "friend," offstage, keeps them from having a normal holiday.

In “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” the opening scene presents a triangle with one character slightly offstage as the narrator goes to visit his mother: “But just as I got to the top of the stairs, I looked and she was on the sofa kissing a man.” That opening view stops the narrator in his tracks and marginalizes him, just as he’s marginalized in the main body of the story as he recalls his wife “was putting out too” those days. But as one of the more generous of Carver’s victimized narrators marvels, her old fling Ross “did okay for a little guy who wore a button-up sweater” (231–32).

Sometimes the third element isn’t human at all. “After the Denim” begins with a standard displacement as a nameless young couple wearing jeans take elderly Edith and James Packer’s parking space and customary seats for bingo night at the community center. James becomes so infuriated that the young couple, in effect, comes between him and his wife. But something larger looms offstage: Edith’s cancer.

In Carver’s most complex short stories, the triangles tend to shift during the course of the narrative, and, like Hopper’s paintings, suggest diverse interpretations. After his wife leaves him, the man in “Why Don’t You Dance?” arranges all of his furniture on his front lawn, just the way it was inside—even to the point of plugging everything in. Then a young couple arrives, thinking it a garage sale. While readers first notice that a triangle is formed between the man, his offstage wife, and the young couple, a funny thing happens. The man, who had been drinking, gets the young couple to join him, and after some bargaining—for they do, after all, want to buy some of his things—he plays some records for them and suggests, “Why don’t you dance?” When the boy claims he’s drunk, the girl wastes no time in asking the man to dance, and “she came to him with her arms wide open.” Later, he “felt her breath on his neck” and the girl “pulled the man closer.” At that point, the man’s wife is long forgotten, for it’s the boy who’s now marginalized as his girl close-dances with a man presumably old enough to be her father. Later, in a curious postscript, the girl tries to downplay the event for friends. “The guy was about middle-aged. All

his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh" (227). Ultimately, it's the boy who's offstage, and even in her retelling the story, readers suspect that because of her impulses and behavior, the young couple might be staring at the same situation as the man and his estranged wife, years from now.

Shifting triangles occur even more deftly in "Cathedral," one of Carver's most anthologized stories. The opening sentence sets the stage: "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night" (514). As the narrator continues, readers realize that while he's not as overtly jealous as the bulk of Carver's males, he's still feeling a twinge of it, especially since his wife was moved enough by her encounter with the blind man to write a poem in which "she recalled his fingers and the way they had moved around over her face" and "what she had felt at the time, about what went through her mind when the blind man touched her nose and lips" (514–15). Though the narrator tries to downplay his reaction, it's obvious enough for his wife to insist, "If you love me . . . you can do this for me. If you don't love me, okay. But if you had a friend, any friend, and the friend came to visit, I'd make him feel comfortable" (516).

"Cathedral" is about comfort and discomfort, for the narrator's journey is from being uncomfortable around a blind man to becoming at ease with him. But it's also very much about that shifting relationship triangle. For the first part of the story, the narrator is marginalized as his wife and Robert figuratively stroll down memory lane together. The narrator tries to make jokes to relieve his discomfort—as when he announces at dinner, "Now let us pray" and his wife looked at him, "her mouth agape" (520). "They talked of things that had happened to them—to them!—these past ten years," the narrator complains. "I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife's sweet lips," but only heard more talk with Robert, who would turn from time to time and ask the narrator a polite question that seemed shallower than small talk. Though the narrator is right there in the same room, like some

of Hopper's characters he feels so marginalized that he's feeling off-stage. However, the fulcrum of the story comes when the wife goes upstairs to "change into something else" and the narrator asks Robert if he would like to smoke marijuana with him. By the time the wife returns in her "pink robe and her pink slippers" she gives her husband a look but then softens and joins them when Robert cheerfully says, "There's a first time for everything" (522). After the narrator's wife falls asleep, the narrator notices her robe "had slipped away from her legs, exposing a juicy thigh," and "reached to draw her robe back over her, and it was then that I glanced at the blind man. What the hell!" he says, and flips the robe open again. Already he's more comfortable. For the rest of the story it's the narrator, dubbed "Bub" (short for "Bubba," an informal, affectionate variation of "brother") by the blind man, and Robert who bond and talk while the wife, as oblivious in her sleep as some of Hopper's characters, has no idea that her husband will, by story's end, share the same intimacy with the blind man as she once did.

In Carver's "Feathers," three distinct images predominate, all of them associated with Bud, a man the narrator barely knows from work, and Bud's wife, Olla. The triangulation of objects that forms the narrative structure is the couple's peacock, a plaster cast of Olla's hideously misshapen teeth before she got them "fixed," and the ugliest baby the narrator had ever seen.

Carver's narrator is typical in that he's dissatisfied with his lot, as evidenced by what he says when they drive closer to Bud and Olla's place some twenty miles from town: "I wish we had us a place out of here," he says, then quickly adds, "It was just an idle thought, another wish that wouldn't amount to anything." But when he sees their house, greener pastures syndrome returns. "I thought it was a pretty picture, and I said so to Fran" (361). Although momentarily startled by "something as big as a vulture," once the narrator and Fran see it's a peacock and the bird spreads its tail feathers for them and "there was every color in the rainbow shining from that tail," they're awestruck. "'My God,' Fran said quietly," while the narrator adds, "'Goddamn'

and concludes, “There was nothing else to say.” The shared sight was enough to make Fran place her hand on her husband’s knee (362).

Once inside, the couple can’t help but notice “an old plaster-of-Paris cast of the most crooked, jaggedy teeth in the world” sitting in plain view atop the television set that Olla keeps around to remind her how much she owed her husband, who insisted on paying for her to get new, “pretty” teeth (366, 368). And then, farther into the evening, Olla brings out their baby and the narrator “drew a breath” because, “Bar none, it was the ugliest baby I’d ever seen. It was so ugly I couldn’t say anything” (372). “Fran stared at it too,” the narrator says, guessing “she didn’t know what to say either” (373). That changes, however, once Bud and Olla ask permission to bring the peacock into the house, because apparently the bird and the baby enjoy each other’s company. The bird’s entry—that is, the entry of something beautiful into the room—has an immediate effect, and Fran asks if she can hold the baby. She plays “patty-cake with it” and, after the bird stops just a few feet from the couple, brings the baby “up to her neck and whispered something” into his ear. Then, the peacock and baby play on the floor, with the peacock “pushing against the baby, as if it were a game they were playing” (374–75). On the way home, the narrator concludes, “That evening at Bud and Olla’s was special,” and Fran feels the magical effect of that peacock and how, as it played with the baby, somehow some of its beauty rubbed off on the child . . . or beauty and ugliness blurred together. That evening, the triangulation of those three objects—two of them ugly, and one beautiful enough to overpower the others—changes the couple’s life forever as Fran asks the narrator to “fill me up with your seed” as they make love. The important offstage element in the new triangle that forms with the narrator, Fran, and the baby boy that the two of them create that evening, is the boy himself, whom the narrator says “has a conniving streak in him” and adds that he doesn’t talk about it. “Not even with his mother. Especially her. She and I talk less and less,” he says. The outcome of that evening—when three distinct images created an odd triangulation of forces in

their lives and a change so profound that it has driven him and his wife apart—is their son, who remains offstage.

Finally, in “Errand,” a story that Carver and Gallagher agreed was similar to what Hopper had done with “New York Movie,” what’s offstage becomes the focal point. Hopper artfully arranged light and strong lines to draw the viewer’s eye to a female usher standing alone in the hall, while the main event—a movie playing in an opulent theater to an audience of which she cannot be a part—is marginalized. Carver indeed does something similar in “Errand” by decentralizing the death of one of his idols, Anton Chekhov, and focusing on a room service waiter and the cork that he intuitively saves from the bottle he opens—Chekhov’s last. Carver intended “Errand” as “an homage to Chekhov” (Gentry and Stull 213), but, like so many other stories from his writing life, it’s also an homage to Edward Hopper . . . or a kindred spirit at work.

Notes

1. Letter to the author. 6 May 1989.
2. Freytag’s pyramid is widely taught and available online. A helpful summary can be found at www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/DramaStructure02.htm#
3. Tess Gallagher, letters to the author dated 6 May 1989 and 10 July 1991. This and subsequent references to Hopper paintings are from Gail Levin’s *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York: Norton, 1980).

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