

CHARACTER

The human head, we are horrified to discover, is a riotously unstable object—it lists and puckers with every passing moment, cells dying off with murderous precision, bone matter regenerating, blooming beneath the rapidly buckling bolts of skin. If we had any memory at all—if we could truly store all that our eyes picked up—we would be unable to recognize, from day to day, even the people we keep closest to us. Their features would have changed so drastically from moment to moment that we would be forced to re-familiarize ourselves with them each time we met. Each day, we would navigate a world of horrifying, unidentifiable monsters. We are saved by our brain's shabby remembrance. We know people because we hold so little of their presence in our long-term memory.

Character, then, can be defined as the hastily assembled clutch of gestures, speech fragments, and bodily tics we keep on file after the head has been ruined. When we accept that, in describing a person's appearance, we are only able to tease out some primitive (and often misleading) aspect of a person's life ('her eyes are narrow'; 'he has a hunchback'), we begin to understand the significance of our brain's willful destruction of sensual information—we see that without the narrative tool of characterization the person we aim to describe is nothing more than a complex accretion of cells, wholly indistinguishable from her peers, from one day to the next. Once we begin to describe a person's characteristics—her behaviors, her memories, the objects she drags behind her, we recognize the crucial art of individuation. As she rises from her chair, we begin to understand her as an operator in the physical world. We can illustrate the precise manner in which she lunges forward, throwing all of her weight into the effort to stand; we can focus on the way she favors her right side, how the left half of her face sags a bit; we can move our attention to the chair, noting that it is the chair her mother died in, that it is made of red leather, that she's removed the brass buttons along the right arm, one by one, over the years, leaving a frayed, matted wound; we may move on to the room, describing the photos this woman has chosen to hang on the walls, or, just as

tellingly, the photos she's hidden away. Suddenly, we are no longer in the presence of a grotesque, unidentifiable human body but of a character moving through time and space, saddled with an elaborate, conflicted history, brimming, in equal parts, with sorrow and joy. We have identified the individuating properties of this particular cellular vessel, filled her with passion, contempt, and exhaustion. Characterization, we understand, is the outward embodiment of our faulty, shorthand memory.

MATTHEW DERBY

SEE
ANAMORPHOSIS

CHARM

Charm revelation is in the legacy of the symbolic, the superstition at once time-bound and time-freed, the way a boat can make landfall during a hurricane, the charm offensive truly playing defense, the power of the iconic to outfox the power of loss. Charm plays in the minds of writers who believe they can substitute sentiment for nonsense, or in the minds of characters senselessly adhering to coherence. What flies in the face of charming is the deity of excretion, the other half of infinity, the missing focal point of the parabola. Charm's best outfit is never a naked old woman before a mirror, but a disguise degenerate and folded in massive fabric; even the token found on the day of deliverance becomes a costume, all in the private channel of style and service to a forcefield of broadcast trickery. But lies and deceit are survival games, adhered to when we believe the truth will kill. Charm cannot win the war, but charms can delay the loss until the moment when soft tissue tears from bone, or parts scatter dismembered in the viscera of a passing thought. Charms themselves don't pass with thoughts, we hold them tighter than that, and build the shrines and paint the bus and call up our political enemies as satan or his symbols, a charm himself, we invent, dividing a world which by itself may not need such long divisions.

THALIA FIELD