FIVE EASY PIECES

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As in the movie this title refers to, we discover things visually in fragmentary form, and what we think we know or see and what someone else knows or sees and what we communicate between those two positions is scant. This exercise attempts to tell a whole story in a quick scene. It is to be written in five sentences, and can be done in a class. There are two preparation steps. The first step is to remember a person you know well, or to invent a person. The second step is to imagine a place where you find the person. Then you are ready for the five pieces.

1. Describe the person’s hands.
2. Describe something he or she is doing with the hands.
3. Use a metaphor to say something about some exotic place.
4. Mention what you would want to ask this person in the context of 2 and 3, above.
5. The person looks up or toward you, notices you there, gives an answer that suggests he or she only gets part of what you asked.

Years ago I met a wonderful old woman on Martha’s Vineyard. She told me I had the hands of a priest, then went on to invent a life for me. Maybe it never turned out that way, but I’ve kept it as an ideal. What has always struck me is how you can invent a story from a part of a person. Here the writer is asked to focus on the hands and what they are doing, then explode the poem out to some widely different, unfamiliar context. Now the trick is to come back, but come back by trusting that your subconscious brought you to a place that has some relation to what you have been observing. The way to come back is usually through some tonal or image path related to the metaphor. Finally, the focus is broken again, this time by the subject. Often the other person ends by saying something about the exotic place that makes all the emotions come together.

The exercise is probably the most successful one I’ve used in beginning classes and is useful in showing how a poem can condense narrative and characterization, how it can quickly shift focus like a photographer going wild with a zoom lens, how images reveal stories behind them simply by knocking against other images and perspectives, how you can use dialogue in a poem—each time I use it I’ve found different uses. Sometimes I’ve made the five pieces sections rather than sentences or lines, but for a first draft, the sentence/line rule is generally best.