since what matters is not complexity or decoration but rather intelligibility, grace, and the fact that the sentence should strike us as the perfect vehicle for expressing what it aims to express; the sentence should seem ideally suited to whatever story or novel or essay it happens to appear in.

Before we leave the subject of sentences, we should say something more about the subject of rhythm. Rhythm is nearly as important in prose as it is in poetry. I have heard a number of writers say that they would rather choose the slightly wrong word that made their sentence more musical than the precisely right one that made it more awkward and clunky.

Read your work aloud, if you can, if you aren't too embarrassed by the sound of your own voice ringing out when you are alone in a room. Chances are that the sentence you can hardly pronounce without stumbling is a sentence that needs to be reworked to make it smoother and more fluent. A poet once told me that he was reading a draft of a new poem aloud to himself when a thief broke into his Manhattan loft. Instantly surmising that he had entered the dwelling of a madman, the thief turned and ran without taking anything, and without harming the poet. So it may be that reading your work aloud will not only improve its quality but save your life in the process.

* Some of the most celebrated passages in literature are those whose cadences move us in ways that reinforce and finally transcend their content. The sentences affect us much as music does, in ways that cannot be explained. Rhythm gives words a power that cannot be reduced to, or described by, mere words.

The haunting, dirgelike force of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is created by the repetition of the words *necessity*, *carried*, and *each man*, and by the rhythm established by the obsessive listing, first of objects, then of proper names, then of a quality of each man, followed by more objects, and by the succession of phrases beginning with *because*. Notice how many

characters are created in a relatively brief space by the exact and telling choice of what each soldier carried; observe the way that equipment functions as a sort of mini-biography, and the way that, by the end of the passage, *necessity* and *carried* will have taken on a newer, darker meaning. And note how each character is introduced, fleshed out, and humanized by the objects to which he is attached, regardless of how cumbersome they are to carry: canned peaches in heavy syrup, hotel-sized bars of soap. With this recitation of paraphernalia and detritus, O'Brien manages to encapsulate the experience of an army and of a particular war, of a mined and booby-trapped landscape, of cold nights and hot days, of soaking monsoons and rice paddies, and of the possibility of being shot, like Ted Lavender, suddenly and out of nowhere: not only in the middle of a sentence but in the midst of a subordinate clause.

> *The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tabs. . . . Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Ke in mid-April. By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds including the lining and camouflage cover. . . . Necessity dictated. Because the land was mined and booby-trapped, it was SOP for each man to carry a steel-centered, nylon-covered flak jacket, which weighed 6.7 pounds, but which on hot days seemed much heavier. Because you could die so quickly,*

each man carried at least one large compress bandage, usually in the helmet band for easy access. Because the nights were cold, and because the monsoons were wet, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or makeshift tent. With its quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost two pounds, but it was worth every ounce. In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away.

Among the most well known cadenced sentences are those that end James Joyce's "The Dead." Read them aloud, and there's little that I need to add to what you yourself will discover from the experience of saying them, and hearing them, one word after another:

> *The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.*

Many of the devices of poetry: meter, alliteration, assonance—swooned slowly, faintly falling—are employed here, as well as the repetitions of the words *falling, falling faintly*, and *faintly falling*, in a series of sentences that at once tie together the

themes of the story and lift the narrative to a higher level.

A similarly powerful use of rhythm, in this case to achieve an effect that's a cross between an incantation, a lamentation, and the sort of sermon that might have been delivered by the narrator's Puritan ancestors appears at the end of John Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother." The family tensions that have simmered throughout this story about a terrible family reunion have, by now, boiled over and more or less evaporated. The unpleasant, difficult brother who functions as the scapegoat for the family's private grievances, and who permits all the buried truths and unspoken dissatisfactions to remain deflected and repressed, has left home yet again. And the narrator, by no means an entirely attractive character himself, rises above that cramped and untrustworthy self to deliver these final lines:

> *Oh, what can you do with a man like that? What can you do? How can you dissuade his eye in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirm hand: how can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless? The sea that morning was iridescent and dark. My wife and my sister were swimming—Diana and Helen—and I saw their uncovered heads, black and gold in the dark water. I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea.*

We're struck by the energy, the grace, and the variety of the sentences, to say nothing of the high oratorical mode in which the passage begins, with the series of questions asking (Who? The reader? The deity?) what is to be done with "a man like that." They are, of course, rhetorical questions. Nothing can be done,