

SIMPLY STORIES – Stubble Wind

Craft Area in Focus: POV & Narrative Voice Working Together

Read the story below to see this craft element in action

POV and Narrative Voice Working Together

Point of view is the technical decision: who is inside the story, how close, and what they can know. Narrative voice is something harder to name — the accumulated pressure of a particular consciousness pressing against every sentence. When they work together, the reader does not notice either one. They simply find themselves inside a mind, moving through events that feel inevitable because this particular person could not have seen or told them any other way. When they work at full strength together, separating them becomes impossible. The voice is the POV. The POV is the voice. Stubble Wind is that kind of story.

Story Details

Genre	Historical Literary Western
Subgenre	Post-Civil War Frontier Fiction
Narrative Tone	Elegiac, laconic, reflective
POV	First person
Story Length	Approximately 3,500 words
Why This Piece	Noah’s voice and his point of view are inseparable — the way he sees the world is the story’s entire architecture.

Stubble Wind

*Killing a man is easy. It's the
shudder after that takes its toll.*

Noah Birkman

The epigraph above is attributed to the narrator himself. Noah Birkman quotes his own philosophy before the story begins. This is POV and voice arriving simultaneously — before a single scene has opened, the reader is already inside a particular mind that has killed men and thought carefully about what that costs. The attribution does not introduce Noah. It installs him. Everything that follows is the story of a man who already knows this truth from experience and is living inside it in real time.

Not a breath of relieving breeze stirred in these high rocks as I watched for even a feather of movement below. Jeremiah nudged my side and whispered raspy, “Horses need water soon.” In his mind haze, he forgot I shot his mount, leaving us only my horse, Buster.

“No point being quiet,” I said. “Those Comancheros know we’re up here, and they need same as us.” I stroked the barrel of my Winchester for a measure of personal reassurance. There’s a passable chance to escape this castle of rock and sage at a midnight gallop, but I’m staying with Jeremiah.

“Why are they so far north?” he asked.

I gave him my best conjecture. “Army musta chased their kind out down south.”

Three mornings ago, we saw the bandits a mile off, being sure they were such, riding toward us with purpose through the chaparral. That distance allowed us time to skedaddle horses and

pack mules below this escarpment that guards our rear and flanks. On the climb to a higher perch, Jeremiah's mare stumbled severe and rolled, splinter breaking a leg on horse and rider. Jeremiah got better treatment than his horse, me doing my best, pulling his leg to get bones back under skin and bound up straight.

Jeremiah's face is gone flush and sweating fierce. Claims he can still draw a bead, but his glassy stare wouldn't do well for targets over ten feet away. His cheek is healed from a saloon cowboy's fist he took for being who he was and where he stood. After knocking Jeremiah down, that ranch hand wanted to boot stomp my partner, but the barrel of my 44, pressed against his skull, sobered him up sufficient to reconsider his dislike for Jeremiah's kind.

Today is too hot, too dry to be still. "Got any rollys?" Jeremiah asked. It took much from him to get that request made.

"Have to twist our own. Wanna Sip?"

He ran his tongue over dry lips, taking long to think. "I would."

I scooted close, uncorked the bottle from my duster, and handed it over. "Not too much now," I advised as he tipped it up. Turning my eyes and thoughts to the bushwhackers spread out behind rocks in the draw below, I gathered pouch and papers. Lighting the smoke, I touched the cigarette to a fuse then tossed the fizzling stick over, aiming for the mouth of the gulley. Jeremiah reached, and I passed him the cigarette. The explosion reminded the bandits to keep to their wits and gave them more desire for our goods. Why the wagon captain we were meeting needed dynamite was a mystery to me. The other boxes held mostly ammunition, whiskey, tools, and salt blocks.

On the first night, two men below got stupid brave in the light of a mostly full moon. Five remain to claim what the mules carry and to scavenge our corpses.

Late morning ate the shade, and shifting Jeremiah out of the sun was hard on his splinted leg. The dark red oozing flesh smells of putrid rot, and this morning's bandages came away green when I changed them for fresh. Figure a day more for him, maybe two on a stretch. When he passes, I'll take his saddle, guns, and bags with me and see his personals get returned to whatever family he has.

POV is doing social work here that only this narrator could do. The saloon scene — Jeremiah's cheek healed from a fist he took "for being who he was and where he stood" — is delivered without editorial comment. Noah does not explain or condemn. He simply records the fact and then records his own response: the barrel of his .44 against the ranch hand's skull. The voice's restraint is the statement. A different narrator would have named what happened, explained the injustice, or performed outrage. Noah's POV registers it the way a man registers weather — something real that required a practical response. The reader understands everything Noah does not say.

Getting into a crouch, I said, "Gonna see if I can nick some of those boys down there."

Jeremiah has his smoke and bottle, so won't need me for a while. Every few hours, I take our rifles and box of shells to a guarded crevice in the rocks, shooting down into the gulch, hoping for a lucky ricochet. I want them to fire back in wild aimed desperation and anger, wasting ammunition. Our supply could last a week of constant shooting. After chipping away at the rocks below, I returned to my place by his side.

"More whiskey," he said, then, "Tell me about your family."

Me and him met seven days ago, charged to bring top-off supplies to a wagon stop along the trail. He didn't know my family

was such a thin one, and I knew little of his except for how he presented. Both of us understood his request, his needing diversion of thought. So, I began.

Pa told me I came into this world along the Ohio, and I took it as truth. Was six before I learned the Ohio was a river.

First I can true remember we were on a sod house homestead in John Brown's bloody, blown to bits, Kansas. That was before the Union suffered the full war. The pain of that mighty conflict reflected in the eyes of men Pa's age, who could recognize each other without exchanging a word or a nod, no matter what side they took. Mostly, they were quiet men. Others, those ill of mind from the ravages, never got off their knees, Pa said. Didn't know what he meant back then. Do now.

I suppose every Pa tells their sons about that time, fearful it might get forgotten. When speaking of the war, he always looked to the horizon, wind to his back, puffing his smoking piece. Never talked of what he done personal. Instead, related about the places and battles and how it was a time every man became a killer. Those streams of considered words always finished in lament of what could never be after such great loss.

In those rambles, he pressed on me that men in large numbers often chose bad, and it was good policy to ride clear of those circumstances. Best to figure out the proper of things, long and hard, before stepping out. He never said it, but I figured it's why we moved to Kansas. You can see a man coming from a long way off on those flat grasslands.

Pa had a gentle countenance with those of his but wasn't slack in advising correction when needed, cuffing the back of my head to get my attention. On occasions of riders crossing into our land, he was a straight iron bar, never bending to a slick word or sly intention. Kept his Henry repeater and revolver ready, and the easy manner he carried them seemed warning enough to those who might seek what was not of their earning. I saw men look to his face, then to his gun hand, then turn their eyes to other things. He taught me to shoot on that Kansas prairie. Got so I could pop the head off a prairie chicken at fifty yards. Hitting them in the bulk leaves nothing but bloody feathers, bones, and guts.

The four of us, Ma, Pa, me, and Emma, settled on that lush land, growing corn for the feedlots in Kansas City. There had been one before me, a brother, and a younger sister. Neither climbed past a year in age. Ma never spoke of those. Pa told me it was the cause of her melancholy days and to let her pass through them. He never spoke their names. I never asked.

The embedded narrative — Noah telling Jeremiah his family's story — is a structural test of voice consistency. The POV has now moved from the siege in the rocks to a Kansas homestead decades earlier, from a dying man's side to a boy watching his father watch the horizon. The voice does not change. The same compression, the same preference for action over abstraction, the same habit of delivering weight in short declarative sentences: "He never spoke their names. I never asked." This is the mark of a genuine narrative voice — it holds its character across time and circumstance because it belongs to a person, not a mode. The reader does not feel a gear shift. They feel depth opening.

When Pa got the cough and died on the trail after we left Kansas, I felt need to share that knowledge with Young Emma, thinking

being part of something bigger would bring her a comfort. I'd grown hearing Ma call her Young Emma, so I took to doing the same. Pa always just said Emma, like his Ma's name. Never knew that woman, but Ma told of her kindness and strong spirit.

Locusts swarmed bad when the winds blew dry across our part of Kansas for a season, then drier for those following, making the loam turn toward dust and crumble. It came as understood the land would no longer sustain, so our family joined some hundreds, leaving that once heaven for the promises of the Oregon Territories.

I was two months shy of fifteen and Emma ten when we hitched the ox pair. I imagined them holding conversations in their own tongue to pass the miles and hours, telling of good forage, soft ground, cool water, and hills of manageable slopes. Ma did most of the rein work, though I could manage that as well as Pa had.

In the early trail months, he and I took turns riding Charlie, his gelding buckskin, to keep him accountable of having a saddle and rider. Up high, standing tall in those stirrups, I felt as the master of a land that stretched forever. It made me thirst for a gallop with a fist full of mane in one hand and leather in the other.

Every day, Emma walked till her little legs gave out in late morning. Then she would squeal as Pa swung her up into the back of the wagon to perch on our night quilts piled on crates and trunks, sitting up there like a prairie princess braiding her dark hair. After Pa passed, I took up that care.

Weren't officially on the Oregon Trail until we left Leavenworth, our wagon joined in company of a guided train longer than a mile with drovers pushing cattle behind.

We provisioned there for the long stretch of empty sameness that lasts to the Rockies. That town was such a bustle and curiosity

to my boy eyes. Never saw so many people in one place. It took Ma's frequent and stern warnings to keep me from wandering off in search of a day's adventure, striding through the dusty choke of waggoners, buyers and sellers, and men and ladies of higher note than us. Buffalo soldiers and gaggles of Indians filled the streets as if on parade. Plenty of drunks slept in the low places and fancy women beckoned from high balconies colored up in face and dress.

Those were different days for me. The boy days. Before telling the lie of being sixteen, the lie of being a man on the day I laid Ma in her grave along the Platte River, the day I shot that drover dead when I caught him in our wagon, searching for our stake money minutes after the last shovel of dirt joined the mound above my mother. He called me boy. Waved a rusty Bowie blade in my face and threatened to send my soul upward. His whiskey breath heated my cheeks and seared my eyes. To my mind, men like that were hardly what I considered human.

I believe God gives big brothers a high calling, so wasn't fear for myself. What horror came to me was leaving Emma alone, unable to fend for herself, thieves taking all that was hers and then taking her. No Pa, no Ma, and no big brother. That pumped my blood hot. I felt under the wagon seat for the cloth that wrapped Pa's Colt revolver and swung it up as Pa taught. When using a pistol, he said, find the target, find the center, the being of what a thing is, then squeeze the trigger, not expecting the sound, the flash, or the recoil. It was as if Pa steadied my grip and trued my aim.

I punched a hole in that man's chest. With a single shot, I turned a man into dead meat without a second thought, without an eye twitch, wondering if it had been like that for Pa in the war. I gave no resistance when a hand came out and took the pistol from mine. Seemed an eternity between the gun blast and feeling that hand.

"It's alright, Noah," said the hand's voice, a man's voice, gravelly yet kind in tone.

A press of folks closed in on our wagon, fencing in the small patch of ground my family claimed temporary. Their presence held back the open sky I needed to make time roll regular again. It was Tom Anderson stood beside me. Had been his hand, his voice, the Tom Anderson who left our county with us and five other families. He helped dig Ma's grave that morning.

Emma's crying brought me to steadiness more than anything else could. She fit snug, gathered hidden in the skirts and arms of Tom's wife, Elizabeth. Been with her since we woke to find Ma passed on from the fever.

No mistaking the sound of horses at a gallop or their hoof scuttle and complaining huffs when drawn up short. The wagon master and one of his scouts slid off saddles before their mounts came to a proper halt.

"What goes on here?" Captain Harrison demanded. "Who fired that shot?"

"There's a dead man," someone said.

"Drover Jenkins," said another.

"Who killed him?" the captain asked.

Fingers pointed to me, and my knees sought the ground.

"Why so?" came the question.

Another of our small band who made the trip to Leavenworth, Frank Willis, and his woman saw Jenkins crawl into our wagon, heard the commotion, and bellowed threats. But for their testament to the bald facts, the circumstances might not have turned my way.

"Who belongs to this boy?" came the captain next.

I tried to stand, but Mr. Anderson kept me down with a gentle hand on my shoulder while men's voices issued their knowledge.

"Pa is gone."

"Ma died this morning."

"His wagon."

"Got a sister."

"Too young."

Defiance rose in me. I stood. "Sixteen. A man, not a boy." I said.

Mr. Willis and his wife knew it to be a lie, short almost a year, but kept council to themselves.

The captain eyed me. "That so? You look younger."

Drawing my chin up as to offer a target, I gave my answer. "Got charge of me, my sister, and this wagon. Been so since Pa died, and Ma got the sickness last week."

My words brought satisfaction enough to the captain. That and seeing Frank Willis stand in such a way to say he would look on after us.

The captain pulled his brim down, ending all conversation. "Get that body buried," he said before mounting up and riding back to the head of the train to get its long tail moving for the day.

Tom Anderson handed over Pa's revolver. "Best strap this on and keep it handy." Eyes looking west, he said, "Dangerous country."

Men hauled Jenkins out of our wagon while I took stock, finding purposeful things needed doing. Hitch the ox, hammer the wheel wedges, and water Charlie. The men who carted off Jenkins returned too soon to have made a grave. His bones were left to join those of

horses, mules, and cattle we'd seen on each side of the trail along the way. Seemed every mile had a cross or plank with names and dates marking a pile of rocks or mound in the grass, some dug up by wolves. The largest bones were from burnt wagons or those with broke axles, their hoops arched like the bare ribs of some great beast.

After harnessing the ox, I asked Mrs. Willis, "Can you see fit to keep Young Emma for a day? Got some cleaning and fixing up in the wagon to do later." I didn't think it proper to tell a woman about the blood.

When we started for the morning, she put Emma on their wagon seat, arm around her shoulders. They pulled in behind my wagon so she could see me through the canvas opening.

My wagon. First time I considered it in such term. Was a lonely thought. Salt tears came. Missed Ma's tender touch and voice, teaching Emma to read and write from the same Primer I learned from. Pa would load his pipe and smoke on those evenings of lessons, face relaxed, content after a hot supper and hard day tending what needed. He bought Ma one of those traveling libraries. Six books and a bible, all of the same bindings and size, held in a purpose made oak box with brass hinges and latch. She read to us from those. After such readings, Emma would whisper to me in the dark, wanting to know more about those stories and if they were true.

The Last of the Mohicans was my favorite. Read that one to myself since Ma thought it too man hardy for Emma's ears. I took to continue reading to her from those story books after Ma was no longer able. Even then, Emma gave night questions to my ear when she'd had time to consider.

Two weeks on and the purple of high mountains, their jagged sawtooth clipped the horizon's straight line. Emma and I found our

way by then, taking the chores each could manage. The washing was hard on Emma. It had always been done in Ma's company, her learning and listening to what it meant to be a woman. I cleaned the skillet, Dutch oven, and big pot as it fell beyond her small hands and strength to do the scrubbing. Her biscuits turned softer in those weeks, and I came to turn the bacon proper, not burn it. Pa's gun belt no longer rested strange on my hip.

Since I laid claim to being a man and in charge of a wagon, it was my place to take occasional night turn to protect the herd and keep them from wandering off in search of better graze. The hands driving the cattle needed sleep as to be ready for another hard day in their saddles.

On big moon nights, the duty came easy, and I liked the feeling of a true man doing true man things. Being young, I idled with thoughts of shooting wolves and coyotes or running off Indians and bandit rustlers and partaking in other derring-do. When out of sight of the other men, I practiced drawing and aiming at imagined intruders. We saw wolves and coyotes aplenty but never shot them at night. Chase them off, we were told. Gunshots would rouse the train and cause commotion and fear of a raid or such.

The boy on night watch — imagining running off Indians and bandit rustlers — is the same man now pinned in the rocks above a Comanchero camp, staying beside a dying Kiowa man he has known seven days. The voice carries both moments without comment on the distance traveled. This is POV as structural irony: the reader holds the boy's fantasy and the man's reality simultaneously, and only the accumulated voice makes that gap visible and meaningful. Noah does not reflect on how much he has changed. He does not need to. The story has laid the evidence without argument, and the reader assembles the verdict alone.

My throat ran dry in my telling, so I took a mouthful from the canteen then lit a twisty, intending to pass the first to Jeremiah. He'd slipped into slumber from the whiskey and fever. As full dark overcame us, I took a long pull of whiskey courage and stepped into a pair of moccasins before embarking on my plan.

On foot, I swung wide of the bandit camp, following a dry bed. Two fireside voices murmured, and three blanket lumps told of those sleeping. Finding my place, I held a match in one hand and a fused stick in the other. Two more lay in the dirt by my knees, tied together with twine, twisted, ready to light. It was a sure thing the two awake would hear the match scratch, perhaps see the flash of it even sheltered by rocks between us. I considered this long and hard as Pa counseled me. Once struck, there was no course but forward.

The first stick was well thrown, landing close at hand to their fire. Without looking, I grabbed the next and sparked the short-fused pair, then gave a more careless toss, being sure the men knew my location.

Explosions, yelling, and chaos covered my movement to a shadowed, low place where my rifle waited. I stood, exposing shoulders and head. Three shots took two of the crowd, backlit by their fire, wounding, if not killing. The others found cover and darkness, so I slipped back to Jeremiah.

When dawn lit the underside of the eastern clouds yellow, the sight of three men and seven horses making away from us came as pure relief to my sleep starved eyes.

Sally's doing good after these days of little water, but Sam looks mostly give out, head low, nose almost touching dirt. Loaded down, that mule will never make trail to the next drink, and I doubt he'll even try. After stacking the salt blocks and crates of explosives under

the rock shelf, I took the remainder from Sam's pack and found room on Sally's.

I saddled Buster and gave the rocks piled over Jeremiah a last look. No man should die alone, and I think he had a good drift off, full of whiskey and my story.

Rummaging through Jeremiah's saddle bags, I'd found a bible and a double locket. That good book gave me wish for better words to say over him, and the two pictures, one an old woman and the other younger, brought remembrance to me of Ma and thoughts of Emma. Holding that locket, it came to me that the source of loneliness in a man's heart often springs from far away concerns for the women of his life. Some say Indians aren't like white men, but that locket, those pictures spoke different.

Down on the flats, I mustered Buster and the mules a piece away from the butte. He nuzzled me, so I reached up to knuckle rub under his chin right where he likes, then slipped him a molasses candy. He's been steady in his service to me, and I sometimes wonder who's the master and who the servant.

Winchester to shoulder and cheek to stock, I laid sights on my target, drew breath, held it half exhaled, then squeezed.

I'd judged wrong on how far back to stand. As intended, it brought down a sizable chunk of the ledge, giving Jeremiah a tomb no man or animal would ever uncover. The explosion hurled rocks high in the air, surprising me with dull thuds and thumps made on reaching ground around us for many seconds after the detonation. Given the noise and hard rock rain, I waited some minutes for Buster to regain his sanity before I took to the saddle.

Laying over the reins, we headed north to the wagon stop and my employment. North to the river. This land holds death's promise

for pilgrims seeking an imagined Eden, not understanding the sorrowful forfeit that comes due.

When the wind flows gentle on the stubble grass plain, I hear Young Emma's small voice whisper from seven years in the grave.
Noah, tell me a story.

The final line collapses the story's entire structure into a single image. Young Emma, dead seven years, whispers from the grave — and what she asks for is a story. POV and voice arrive at their destination here. Noah has spent this story telling Jeremiah a story so a dying man would not die alone in silence. He has spent his life being the kind of man who stays, who covers the dead with stones, who does not think it proper to tell a woman about the blood. The voice we have inhabited for the length of this story is the voice that answers Emma. It always was. The wind on the stubble grass plain is the same wind that blew dry across Kansas and turned the loam to dust. Nothing is explained. Everything is paid.