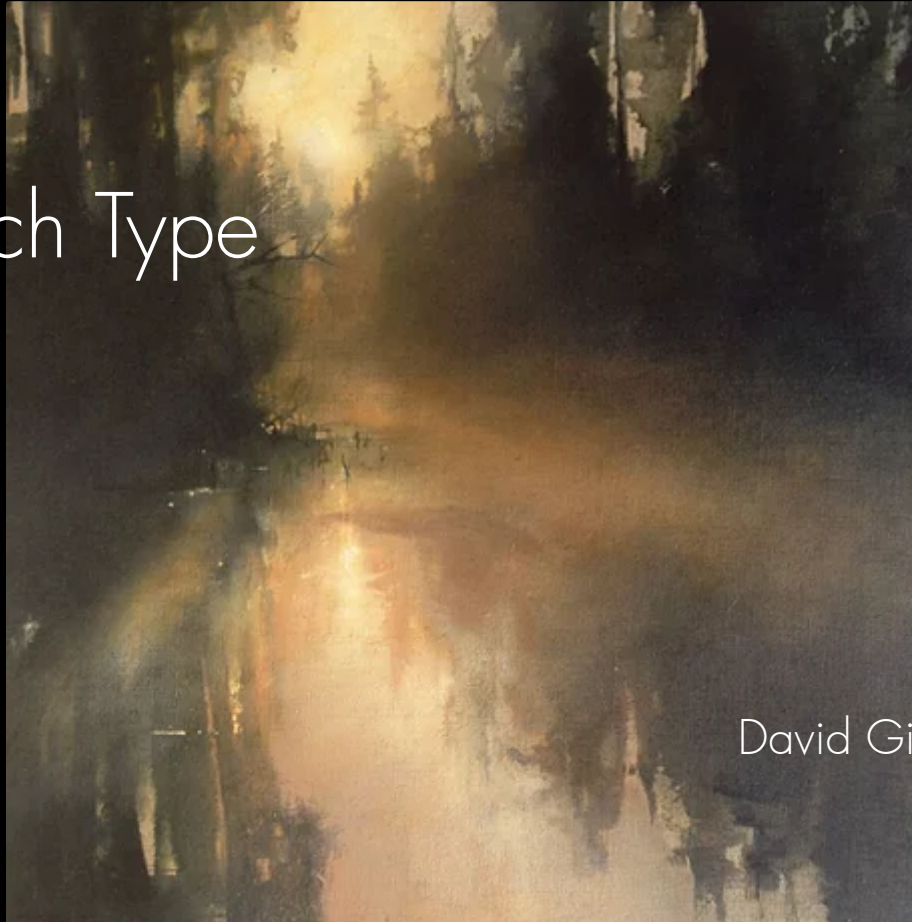


# Touch Type



David Gillette

Oil on canvas by Kathryn Turner

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by David Gillette

Donna had finally driven the typing teacher round the bend. She was the reason he stumbled out in tears, leaving his cane behind, sobbing, slamming doors down the hall, then stood in the parking lot screaming their names, cursing in a guttural, spitting rage, his face raw and red, his bum leg tipping him sideways as he staggered between the cars, leaning on hoods and side mirrors to steady himself. Principal Timmons stormed out there, tackled the man into his hay truck then drove off with their typing teacher leaning against the cab door, staring back up at them now exhausted and broken. Nearly the entire class stood at the high bank of windows watching the show, chattering with glee, brimful with power and thrill. They'd done it. He was gone. The second teacher that year.

In this tiny mining town at the dusty end of Southwestern Colorado in 1963, the rest of the world existed only in the distance, like the sketchy clouds and hazy Utah peaks that drifted at Nucla's western horizon, so far away it was hardly there. In the magazines her father brought back from his business trips to Grand Junction and Denver, Donna caught glimpses of what was happening elsewhere with police dogs and water hoses aimed at children, beautiful singers on bright stages surrounded by seas of strange costumes and long arms dancing in the air, mushroom bomb tests that blossomed around gunboats and tea-cup spaceships that spun high in the black sky, all of it tumbling from page to page, cover to cover. There was so much happening, but none of it here. There was nothing to do in Nucla, no marches or concerts or parades of any kind. No rocket launches, grand movie openings or foreign fashion shows. Just one road in and out with bars and a few stores stuck haphazardly along the sides. Her father always said someone could drive slowly end to end and still not realize they'd been in town. Everyone in Nucla knew they didn't have much but they did have this: the satisfying freedom to send someone away.

The class pressed together at the windows, relishing their accomplishment, inebriated by pride and smug satisfaction. Donna, however, had not left her back row seat. She was too rattled to move. Besides, she knew she was unwelcome. She'd have to push in among them to get to the windows, and they didn't really want her there. She hadn't done it for them anyway. She didn't need to see him in the parking lot, she heard the man like everyone else. Donna knew what he felt like. Watching wouldn't tell her more. So she stayed put, rooted, but not alone. Juliet was also still sitting in place at the center of the front row, turned to the side of her desk, facing the student mob at the windows. The beautiful Juliet was too composed to make a fuss, too reserved to gawk. She turned her head slightly in Donna's direction and asked, "How long's it gonna take to put them back together?"

Donna studied her hands pressed flat on the surface of her desk, fingers spread wide. She lifted her fingers slightly so she could admire the threads of black grease arched under her nails. "I...I don't know. Two hours? Maybe three?"

"That's amazing."

"I guess," Donna said, finally gathering the courage to look up and see, for the first time in her life, Juliet staring directly back at her.

Then again, in a whisper, Juliet said, "Really. Amazing." Donna looked back at her hands. It was too much attention, all at once. Juliet waited until Donna looked up again, then smiled, silently said "Thank you," flushed pink, snatched her books from beneath her desk, and left.

Two hours, maybe three? Putting them back together would use the rest of the day. Taking them apart, though, had been simple.

A few minutes after the midnight whistle, Donna broke in by slipping the loose latch on the back cafeteria door. She headed straight for the typing room, enjoying the echo of her work boots thudding against the tiles in the empty hallways. Once inside, she switched the light on atop her father's old mining helmet, tossing wild shadows against the walls every time she moved. The softball-sized lamp made the helmet front heavy so when she looked down the whole thing slipped over her face. Donna had to keep shoving the brim back and tugging the chin strap tighter until the helmet was pushing down, gripping her head like a giant, guiding hand. With every bump a skim of dust fell away from the brim and she could smell the diesel and hear the compressor from the mine which filled her with purpose, made her eager for work.

As she moved from desk to desk, she screwed herself into each seat by sucking in her stomach and pushing past the helmet's battery pack that was double-strapped around her waist. Once she was reasonably comfortable, she unrolled her leather tool kit, withdrew the first small screwdriver from its sleeve, and went to work. Biting her tongue and humming Patsy's "I Fall to Pieces," Donna worked from the back to front, eighteen desks in all, twenty minutes per machine with a sandwich and water break at four thirty from her father's broken lunch pail. By the time sunrise lit the windows at six twenty, she was finished. She pushed back from the instructor's desk, wiped her hands with a cloth in her breast pocket, and surveyed her work. Arranged before her rested the glistening interiors of eighteen completely disassembled Olympia SM3 manual typewriters.

Donna had piled the parts for the typewriters into their inverted green shells with the black platens, black paper conductors and black space bars poking up as legs, the chrome carriage return levers curving taillike from underneath. She had unspooled the typewriter ribbons from the center of every pile into an intestinal jumble that spilled casually over the sides. From her seat up front, with the sun rising hot and strong through the windows, the classroom became a beach filled with mechanical turtles flipped onto their backs, waiting to be picked further apart when the first students arrived at seven forty-five.

Donna had spent nearly the entire last hour disassembling the man's prize possession: his fire truck red Olympia SM7 that he had carried all the way from Montana. At the end of each day the fastidious little man made a point of cleaning and polishing his machine, then tucking it into a black velvet cover he pulled tight against the base with a bright yellow drawstring. Donna had seen him in the late afternoons sitting in there alone, staring into space, tracing lazy circles in the velvet. His typewriter she reduced to its miniature nuts, bolts and folding clips, everything unscrewed, each piece pulled permanently apart. She had no intention of reassembling this machine so Donna spread the remains across the crippled man's desk, onto his lectern, then down to the floor, scattered wide like the dinosaur bones on display at Massy's coal pit north of town. The three most important pieces—a mount for the frame, a latch for the striker panel, and the primary support for the return spring—Donna bent and flattened completely, pressing down so hard she left dents in the table top. Without those pieces intact, the typewriter would never function again.

For a moment that morning she had felt worthy of applause. But now with Juliet gone and the other students wandering the halls, Donna sat among the remains of her work, remembering when the typing teacher first came into class and saw the velvet cover at his feet. The cover had jammed beneath the door, gaping open where Donna had yanked the yellow drawstring from inside. With his first step into the room he kicked a few keys from his machine and fumbled with his cane for balance. He gazed out at the students, trying to focus on them as if they were far away, then glanced back to the floor as he knocked into another pile of

parts. Donna couldn't watch. She closed her eyes as the class whooped and cheered itself on. Everyone had picked at him since his arrival earlier that fall, with the slashed tires, the incessant hangup calls, the chopped up canes, and the dead cat at his door. They had all taken a turn. But that final personal blow, the way his entire body shook loosely inside his clothes, that was hers alone. Even if he deserved it for what he'd done to Juliet, Donna knew it was wrong. She was no better than the rest.

What had he done to Juliet, after all? Donna didn't know. Not for certain. It was how Juliet left the typing classroom weeks ago, stuttering, stepping sideways as she tucked in her blouse at the back and along the front, touching her shoulders, arms, and hips as if checking they were still there. Even from the back, Juliet was clearly confused, uncertain, so unlike herself. She paused mid-hall, her shoulders dropped and Donna knew Juliet was crying. Donna wanted to rush over, pull Juliet close and whisper something to her tender and true, to comfort her while she cried. But she knew Juliet only dropped her guard because she believed she was alone in the hallway, as she should have been halfway through second period. All the other classrooms were full. Juliet had no idea Donna was also there at the end of the locker row, un-intentionally hiding behind the stuck locker door that suddenly snapped open just as Juliet stepped into the hall. Juliet wiped her eyes with a tissue from her purse, checked herself again and headed down the hall, straightening as she walked away from Donna toward her next class. The typing teacher leaned out into the hall from the classroom door and held up his hand as if to call Juliet back, then did nothing but watch her turn the corner. That's when Donna knew she had to do something to set things right, to even the scales.

But she had only made everything worse.

Nucla knew it was gaining a reputation, driving away not just schoolteachers, but everyone not from the mines, the farms, or the nine families. It was addicting and strangely comforting every time they forced another one out. Donna had been filled with that heady rush of fraternity, the warming confirmation that this was indeed how things were supposed to be. But soon as she saw the man's face when he looked out at the class, with that childlike fright and desperation she knew all too well, the heat and excitement of the moment fled, leaving her slightly ill, cold, and sad. She pulled out her work cloth again, wiped hard to remove the grease between her knuckles, then waited for Principal Timmons to return and decide on a reasonable punishment. Donna promised herself she would be better with the next one, if there was a next one.

Six weeks later a new instructor did appear, much to everyone's surprise. He drove into town the same evening the drunken swing crew from the Silver Bucket mine decided to hang themselves a wayward hippie, using the ornate black lamppost standing in front of city hall. Nucla's sheriff was just mustering himself out his office door to head downhill and send everyone home, as he did for the bar fights and errant nonsense that spilled into Main Street every payday, but Mr. Gilson arrived first. Seeing what was about to happen, Mr. Gilson spun his dust-plastered sports car into a sharp U turn in the middle of Main then drove over the curb in front of Melburne's tavern. In one smooth motion he stepped out of his car, crossed directly through the drunken miners, guided the frightened, long haired kid behind him then turned to face the crew, chest forward, casually rolling up his right sleeve.

RJ—the biggest and ugliest of the Richardson brothers—stepped up. "Hey asshole, move over. This is not your problem." Mr. Gilson twisted slightly to the side, took aim, then swung wide but sure, slugging RJ so hard the man spun a bit before hitting the pavement. The other miners stepped back, listing uncertainly on the sidewalk, beers in one hand, the long rope in the other, not sure what to do so they took another drink and gaped at their buddy sprawled and groaning on the ground.

The sheriff strode in, pushing the men toward their trucks and back into Melburne's, and took the tow rope out of their hands which he coiled as he walked toward Mr. Gilson. "And who the hell you supposed to be?" Mr. Gilson introduced himself politely, shook hands, clapped the sheriff lightly on the shoulder, then helped the shaken hippie into his hand-painted VW van, and pointed him back to the highway.

Mr. Gilson was not what they were expecting. A few weeks before he had answered the West-End Montrose District announcement for a new business teacher, after the ad somehow found its way into a paper in New Orleans. He had sent a quick, overly formal note stating that he would be delighted to take the position, and was already making his way toward Colorado. Everyone thought they were going to get someone with a bow tie, a stammer, or another hopeless drunk. They did not expect the delivery of someone six foot five, crew cut, mostly muscle, with palms so callused it felt like gripping sandstone when you shook his hand. They all felt that hand too, the first day of class when he went row to row, requiring students to stand up and introduce themselves as businesslike as possible. "Just like the first day on the job," he told them. "First impression better be a good one so shake hands like a man, even you ladies. Give a good grip and say hello like you mean it. Come on, get up, give it a try. Won't kill you."

It was only his second day in town, and already everyone gave him wide berth, trying to not meet his eyes or cause offense. There were stories about him killing a man out East, or beating a motorcycle policeman senseless after leading a chase in his roaring red Triumph. They all knew that with a single blow he put RJ into UraVan's clinic with a broken jaw.

Mr. Gilson was brick solid, unpredictable, frightening and had a green-eyed stare that locked right into you. No one would think about breaking his windows, dumping paint on his hood, or setting a bushfire in his yard. Besides, Mr. Gilson didn't have a yard. Instead, after that first week, he drove to Norwood, bought himself a dingy pink bubble trailer, pulled it onto a dirt lot by school, and moved in. He played colored music in there at night, loudly, sitting in a lawn chair out front while he smoked, nodding at people who strolled by, working through his six pack like everyone else.

When he reached Donna's desk that first day she popped up, stuck out her hand and gave it everything. She looked right into those green eyes and didn't flinch. "My God girl! Now, that's a handshake. You're hired." He winked at her. No one had ever done that before. She just kept standing. "And you may now sit down, miss. Next?"

She liked him, this odd, wall-sized duck from Louisiana. A few days later she moved with his permission from the back row to the very front, directly beside Juliet, the lovely Juliet. Donna knew Juliet liked Mr. Gilson too, and they silently shared this affection together. They watched him all through class, sitting straighter when he stood behind their chairs, giving them comments on the placement of their hands, the angle of their wrists. When he moved away it created a slight breeze, pulling over a whiff of Juliet's perfume that made the hairs on Donna's arms lift and her toes press against the floor. Donna daydreamed Juliet posing questions about Mr. Gilson, maybe while they were alone on the lawn above the playing field, perhaps at a picnic in the hills. Where was he born? What he was like as a child? Where did he go on weekends with his sports car? Up to the mountains? Was he on a date? Who with? In those imagined conversations Juliet always moved closer to Donna, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, breathy and intense.

Donna and Juliet used every excuse to linger with Mr. Gilson, and always took a great deal of time to pack up at the end of class.

One afternoon, Donna was the last to leave since some of her smaller tools had escaped her kit and skittered across the floor. She needed time to put them back, precisely in place. Mr. Gilson was still sitting at the instructor's desk, fiddling with his machine, hitting the same two keys again and again.

"That's quite a collection you've got there," he said as she rolled the kit back together, tying extra tight to be sure it wouldn't fall open again.

"Thank you."

"Those all yours?"

"Yes."

"You're good with machines, aren't you?" He looked into his typewriter, clicking hard on one key in particular.

"I suppose."

"I hear you're good with typewriters, especially."

She didn't know what to say.

"Could you help me with this one? It's the L and the S keys. Damn thing's been sticking since I got here. Everything I do makes it worse. I'm all thumbs with these on the inside. Maybe you've got something in that kit that'll help? You mind?"

She shook her head, no. She didn't mind. He stood up, made a self-amused show of pulling the chair back for her, brushing the seat with an invisible cloth, then snapped his briefcase shut and headed for the door.

"I appreciate it. Thank you. And if you get it to work, stay a while. It's nice in here in the afternoons. Quiet. Just your thoughts and the machines. No one to bother you. There's paper in the drawer if you want to write something, for practice. Just close the door when you leave."

It only required a few minutes of adjustment with her smallest standard, and a slight bending at the tip of both strikers with the needle nose before everything was working fine. Donna sat back in Mr. Gilson's chair, looking out at the room of typewriters, each one silent, waiting for the next day. She saw Juliet sitting there before her, the scrunched V rising on her brow every time she typed something tricky, the tip of her tongue licking her top lip as she hit and slid back the return. Then she remembered Juliet looking over at her again that other morning, whispering, "Really. Amazing." Donna closed her eyes and listened to the silence of the room, took a deep breath, and caught an inspiring hint of Juliet's perfume.

Donna pulled open the side drawer, took out a fresh sheet, rolled it in, placed her hands in the right position—wrists level, fingers poised over the center keys—closed her eyes again, and began thinking of what she needed to say. The pictures from her father's magazines began flowing around her, sweeping her up and pushing her along, moving her faster and faster until it was suddenly hard to breathe. Her fingers hit the keys, Donna opened her eyes, and she typed the first few words in what would eventually become a long string of missives that would never be sent, never be received, but were important nonetheless. "Dear Juliet," she wrote, her heart thudding hard now in her ears. "My dear Juliet, I have something you need to know."

David Gillette has lived most of his life in the small towns that often serve as the basis for his fiction. He studied creative writing at the University of Iowa, then published his first poems and short stories while traveling and working odd jobs in Europe, the UK and Ireland. He lived in rural Japan for a number of years, returned to the United States for graduate study in New Mexico, then taught at universities in Florida, Japan and Australia. He now teaches interactive narrative design and directs the Liberal Arts and Engineering Studies program at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California. Some of his other short stories were published this year with *The Somerset Review* and with *cahoodaloodaling*. He is currently completing work on a novel about a small mining town in southwestern Colorado.

