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Interrogating Patterns: Meandering, Spiraling, and Exploding through *The Two Kinds of Decay*

"How can I stop thinking about the disease long enough to write about anything else?
How can I stop thinking about everything else long enough that I can write about the disease?"
– Sarah Manguso, *The Two Kinds of Decay*

Introduction

In Jane Alison's introduction to *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, she proposes her overarching concept, namely, that patterns found in nature can inform both fiction and nonfiction writing. She notes, "my writer self thinks two things: first, being aware of visual elements such as texture, color, or symmetry can open windows and let us design as much as write. Text comes from texere, after all: to weave. Next, we can beconscious, deliberate, innovative, in the paths we carve through our words" (5). Her luscious language oozes onto the page, enticing the reader to devour the text.

Meander, Spiral, Explode consists of two primary sections. The first section features what Alison calls *primary elements*, including chapters on: 1) point, line, texture, 2), movement and flow, and 3) color. The second section focuses on *patterns*, including: 4) waves, 5) wavelets, 6) meanders, 7) spirals, 8) radials or explosions, 9) networks and cells, 10) fractals, and 11) tsunamis.

Sarah Manguso's work demonstrates that an author can write brief snippets of text, moments rather than scenes, make a point in a few hundred words rather than belabor it for several thousand. *The Two Kinds of Decay* includes roughly 31,000 words spread over 81 chapters. The shortest chapter is 55 words long; the longest chapter is 938 words long; the average chapter is 383 words long. Most paragraphs include only one or two sentences. Each chapter has a descriptive title. Short paragraphs and

brief chapters provide ample white space. The appearance of the text on the page, in addition to its length and spaces, serves as a reminder that Manguso is a poet. She also focuses on the concept of spacetime, defined elsewhere as any mathematical model in physics which fuses the three dimensions of space and the one dimension of time into a single four-dimensional manifold. Although this approach takes precision, skill, and restraint, it can also free a writer from feeling constrained by having to recreate not just one scene, but multiple scenes, one after another, cohesively linked. Instead, an author can dip in and out, share a thought, a feeling, anidea, a snapshot, and then step away and let the reader breathe, interpret, reflect, assimilate. Manguso's approach may prove especially valuable in situations where the author may feel trapped or burdened by the lacunae that can plague memory. She opens by setting the stage for what follows with that premise,

> The disease has been in remission seven years. Now I can try to remember what happened. Notunderstand. Just remember… I waited seven years to forget just enough—so that when I tried to remember, I could do it thoroughly. There are only a few things to remember now, and the lost things are absolutely, comfortingly gone. (3)

This essay focuses on how Sarah Manguso applies three of Alison's eleven areas: I) movement andflow, II) color, and III) wavelets in *Two Kinds of Decay*. It also briefly addresses IV) networks and cells as they relate to Manguso's body of creative nonfiction work.

I. Movement and Flow

> *"There are different speeds in narrative, and shifting among them—sedating a reader, making him race—is in our hands, to be done with skill, with care."*
> – *Jane Alison,* Meander, Spiral, Explode *(45)*

To describe the notion of movement and flow, Alison uses two related concepts: *text time* and *story time*. By text time, she refers to the number of printed words on the page. She contrasts this concept with story time,

which involves the amount of calendar time (measured anywhere from seconds or minutes to yearsor millennia) that the events discussed in the narrative would take to transpire.

An adaptation of Alison's concept of movement and flow appears in **Figure 1**.

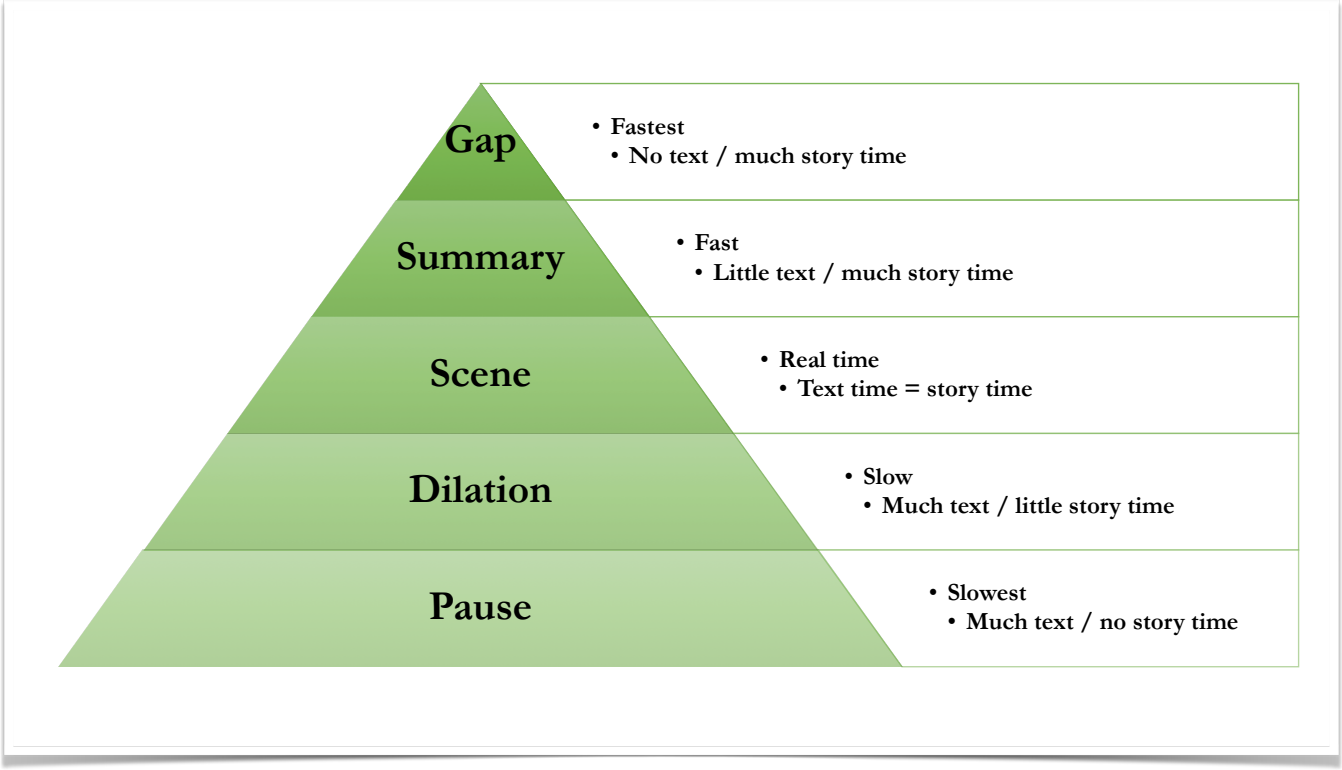

Figure 1. Movement and Flow in Jane Alison, **Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative**. *Catapult, 2019 (p. 46).*

At the top of the pyramid, calendar or story time exceeds text time, so time passes quickly compared to the number of words used to describe the events. A *gap* uses few words to skip over time; the text could jump over several years or decades. A *summary* uses more words than a gap to explain events, but the reader does not experience the events along with the narrator.

Scene appears in the middle of the spectrum, where text and story time are in sync. The reader feels part of the action in the moment. At the bottom of the pyramid, story time slows down, moving more slowly than a ticking clock. The reader may experience this concept, *dilation*, as a sense of slow motion

based on a relatively large number of words used to envision something that could happen, like a flying bullet, in the blink of an eye.

Finally, the author can make time stop entirely yet still continue the text. A *pause* can lift a reader out of action and turn attention toward other ideas or concepts unrelated to time or action. A pause in time may be particularly useful for describing scientific concepts, for example. The following table includes three examples of each of Alison's five types of movements and flows: gap, summary, scene, dilation, pause. The different shades of green represent each type of movement, organized according to their appearance to illustrate that each type appears sprinkled throughout the text. (**Table 1**) Although the table includes one example per chapter from sections throughout the book, different movements and flows also take place within a single chapter.

Table 1. Movement and Flow in *The Two Kinds of Decay*

Chapter (#)	Movement	Example (pp)
The Beginning (1)	Summary	"For seven years I tried not to remember much because there was too much to remember, and I didn't want to fall any further behind with the events of my life." (3)
Metaphors (5)	Pause	"My blood plasma had filled with poison made by my immune system. My immune system was trying to destroy my nervous system. It was a misperception that caused me a lot of trouble. All autoimmune diseases invoke the metaphor of suicide. The body destroys itself from the inside. I secreted poison into my blood. The poison was removed and replaced with other people's blood and with chemicals. With my own blood in me, I couldn't feel, and I couldn't move, but with other people's blood in me, and with chemicals in me, I could do those things. The new blood became mine as soon as it entered me. Or maybe it took a moment to mix with what was there. Or maybe it took an hour, or a day. My blood came out dirty and went in clean. It came out hot and went in cold. It came out old and went in new. And the new, cold, clean blood was better than the
Names (7)	Pause	"In 1916, two more French doctors, Georges Guillain and Jean Alexandre Barré, studied several people with ascending paralysis and observed the key diagnostic abnormality of increased spinal fluid protein but normal cell count. And so the second proper name of my disease was Guillain-Barré syndrome. The pathology is now understood as the immune system's generation of antibodies targeting the peripheral nerves' myelin, their protective and conductive protein sheath." (18-19)

Causation (9)	**Summary**	**"Sometimes I think that in the real universe, I am born already in possession of my CIDP, my depression, my whole life and death, and the text of this book. That I'm incapable of making the events of my life happen—either because they've already happened, or because they're always happening, at every possible point in spacetime." (21-22)**
The Internship (10)	**Scene**	**"One day a doctor and I visited a patient who was deeply asleep. She was an old woman, and her name was Anna. I held Anna in my arms as the doctor listened for her breaths through a stethoscope held to her back. She wasn't cold or waxy or lying in a pile of excrescence, so we spent a long time trying to find a pulse. She looked no older or frailer or sleepier than many of the other elderly patients. (23-24)**
Strength (14)	**Gap**	**"I did eventually run three miles, but it took nine years." (32)**
Rehabilitation (30)	**Summary**	**"My third hospitalization was fourteen days instead of the usual ten because the covering neurologist didn't schedule my five plasma exchanges right away. I had to wait a day or two before each one, and during those days the antibodies ate away at my nerve cells." (67)**
The Chair (36)	**Scene**	**"On June 9, 1995, my mother helped me onto my father's antique wooden desk chair and pushed me to the bathroom. I was a dead weight in the heavy chair. My mother, bigger and taller than I am, pushed as hard as she could. The chair's casters caught in our beige wall-to-wall carpet. Push, back up a few inches, rest. Push, back up, rest. When it was time to get up and onto the toilet, my mother held my upper arms very tightly, then lowered me down." (80)**
A Gift (44)	**Dilation**	**"Very late one night, in the fall of my eleventh-grade year, five years before the diagnosis, I unlocked the front door of my parents' house and went inside and closed the door quietly and locked it behind me, and turned on the hall light and tiptoed up the thirteen steps, and turned off the hall light, and felt my way along the railing that surrounded the stairs, and walked through the dark doorway of my room, and felt in the dark above my shoulder, to the right of the doorway, for the antique light fixture that had been installed in the 1920s when the house was built, and turned the small switch that felt like the head of a small smooth screw." (97)**
Attention (47)	**Pause**	**"I say "the time would be filled," but the time was not so much filled as overfilled. The time was already full before I put the new thing in. I overfilled my time, I think, to hide what was already there. Some things are so horrible they need to be hidden right after they become visible. They are too horrible to be seen except very slowly, or in very small amounts. Or they are too beautiful. (107-108)**
The Signet (52)	**Dilation**	**"I wore a lavender gown and a twenty-inch tube that never clogged as long as blood thinner was shot into it every two days. From one direction it went into my right breast, under the collarbone and straight up, just under the skin, then into my jugular, so that halfway up my neck you couldn't see the shape of it anymore, and then it went into my subclavian vein and reached toward my heart. On the outside it hung like two white drinking straws, six inches long, with one red clamp and one blue one, like a piece of jewelry, and it was nothing like the expensive pendants the other Signet girls wore." (119-120)**
More Medicine (53)	**Gap**	**"A little less than seven years after I was cured of my disease through the mystical power of intercourse, Victor had an aneurysm and died." (124)**

The Dump (55)	**Dilation**	**"After my third gamma infusion, my mother and I drove to the town dump on a weekday. Our town dump was not so much a dump as a futuristic recycling station with three kinds of glass, six kinds of plastic, two kinds of paper, compost and mulch and firewood, a book swap, and a section labeled Recycle, which was where you could get a pretty good pair of skis and where my parents got most of the furniture on the first floor of our house, including an antique Shaker chair." (127)**
1996 (56)	**Gap**	**"At some point after the year 2000, I read my journal from beginning to end and saw I had recorded nothing of consequence in 1996 and threw away that year in disgust." (129)**
Just Visiting (77)	**Scene**	**"My friend Isabel is sitting in a blue plastic-upholstered easy chair with a twenty-two-gauge needle in her left arm. Her arm veins are good. She's receiving saline, steroids, and a designer immunosuppressant. We're making off-color jokes. About sex, not death. There are some sick people on the other side of the curtain." (172)**

Next, a single chapter illustrates each movement and flow. The selected chapter (73 of 81) is not entirely indicative of others, as it does not involve other people, it includes some of Manguso's journal entries, and it is the only chapter with a section break mid-chapter. It appears next along with an interpretation of each movement and flow noted in bold font at the end of each paragraph.

The Point and the Ray

I grew used to being sick and looking forward to recovering. **[Summary]**

Then I grew used to being well again for a short while, knowing I'd be sick again sooner or later. **[Summary]**

Then I grew used to having no prognosis at all, because with a mysterious disease, all things are possible. **[Summary]**

My existence shrank from an arrow of light pointing into the future forever to a speck of light that was the present moment. I got better at living in that point of light, making the world into that point. I paid close attention to it. I loved it very much. **[Dilation]**

And then one day, my life was a ray again, and the point was gone. **[Dilation]**

I tried to find that point after the latest, longest remission began. **[Gap]**

I thought of the point as a moment in spacetime where I could be free of all memory and all desire-a point that existed apart from everything before and after it. **[Dilation]**

Sometimes I can feel myself getting close to finding the thing in spacetime I lost by getting well. **[Dilation]**

* * *

I didn't start writing this until my body made another decision. **[Pause]**

> The day before the decision I wrote, *Cant catch my breath all morning because of a wildness in my body that is like birds flying me toward his body.* **[Scene]**
>
> The next day I wrote, *I resisted as long as I could. A narrator must keep a safe distance from the story, but a lyric speaker must occupy the lyric moment as its happening. Or so it seems to me at this moment.* **[Scene]**
>
> A crow stands outside my window all day, reminding me of the best thing about my life-that it ends. **[Scene]**
>
> I think my body's decision shone a light on the memory that once my body steered me. Or that it steers me. **[Dilation]** (165-166)

Studying Manguso's variation in movement and flow within and across chapters illustrates the richness of her work, beauty of language, and how she turns her horrendous experience into art. She accomplishes this feat in part by varying her pacing and focus. Examining Manguso's use of movement and flow at the chapter and paragraph level elucidates her skill and grace. By varying movement and flow at the chapter, paragraph, and sentence level, Manguso allows the reader to move back and forth between the tight focus on a single experience and back out into a vast expanse, as if both training the lens of a microscope to shifting and using a telescope. Both serve to ground the reader in the space and time continuum at a microand at a macro level.

In addition to lending a level of complexity to the writing, this approach also illustrates the potentially disorienting experience of severe and lasting illness. Unlike a brief and straightforward episode of acute illness, Manguso underwent a long and arduous journey of an unfamiliar disease that ebbed and flowed, requiring both ongoing and episodic hospitalizations and treatments, with improvements and setbacks. Thus the movement and flow on the page also simulates the back and forth nature of illness andwellness, crystalized memories and blurs of misery and pain.

Other writers might apply the use of movement and flow at the macro level (by chapter), the micro level (by paragraph or sentence) or some combination. Some ways to use each technique follow.

Gap: A writer might use gaps when incorporating material that intentionally skips over time, such as between a mother experiencing postpartum depression and the daughter subsequently experiencing her own version of that illness decades later.

Summary: A writer can employ summary to bring a reader up to speed on information thatprovides relevant backstory but does not represent the main focus of the story, such as events in the months or year leading up to a particular incident of interest.

Scene: Writers typically receive the advice to "show, don't tell," yet for creative nonfiction, others recognize this guidance as potentially ruinous and not helpful, (Lopate, 2013; Huber, 2019) recommending both showing and telling. Scenes allow the reader to experience action in real time and engage with the protagonist viscerally.

Dilation: The use of dilation can provide an opportunity for a writer to muse on a subject or experience, to slow down time or action, such as using many words to portray a bullet firing from a gun that in calendar time would occur in mere seconds. One could use dilation to reflect on the experience of illness or loss or meaning.

Pause: Stopping the movement through time on the page entirely can allow the writer to include factual information, data, or other information or narration that remain timeless, or devoid of a specific time. It can also provide an opportunity in the case of an illness text to illustrate that the writer has recovered from the illness, or reflected upon it or researched information about it, providing a view of wellness before returning to scenes displaying incompetence.

Authors may employ these techniques during early drafts without realizing movement back and forth between time and focus, and yet either incorporating them with intention from the beginning, or revising to include variation provides a richer experience for the reader and a more complex and nuanced manner of creative nonfiction writing.

II. Color

"I would love to see more close studies of color as a patterning element in narrative—not as symbol, like Fitzgerald's green or Melville's white, and not as the narrative's focus, like Maggie Nelson's blue—but as a unifying wash, a secret code, or a stealthy constellation: I hope someone makes this study."
– Jane Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode (66-67)

A question arises regarding how to incorporate the natural world in writing, including seasons, senses, and colors while avoiding overused analogies, such as depression and illness as winter and health and rebirth as part of spring and summer. Using color-related words and concepts could represent a wonderful way of mitigating these challenges. As Alison discusses:

> There are so many ways to hold sunlight and dusk side by side for effect: a sentence can switch ata yet or although from love to savagery; scenes can flicker between day and night, between sweetness and bitter ruin... The colors I hold in mind naturally appear in what I see when I write, so my private palette sifts onto the page. But I'd like to be more deliberate and start to design withcolors. They can do more in narrative than just render a world plausibly: they can signal mood, change, or contrast; create an overall tone like a painting's undercoat or wash; direct the eye. (59-60)

A visual representation of the use of words associated with colors appears in **Figure 2**.

Alison discusses her own experiences exploring the use of color in fiction, such as noticing that reds almost never signal anything good. Or that color words may cluster only in some chapters, often where thenarrative burns hottest. She contrasts uses of reds with sepia or grey, which give a feeling of muddy water, ashes, or blurry old photographs. Perhaps they signal despair or foreboding. As she observes, color uses palette to create tone.

Manguso uses a spectrum comprised of hues related to her illness, and how shades influence her interpretation of experiences looking back from several years later. She includes a chapter titled "Color,"

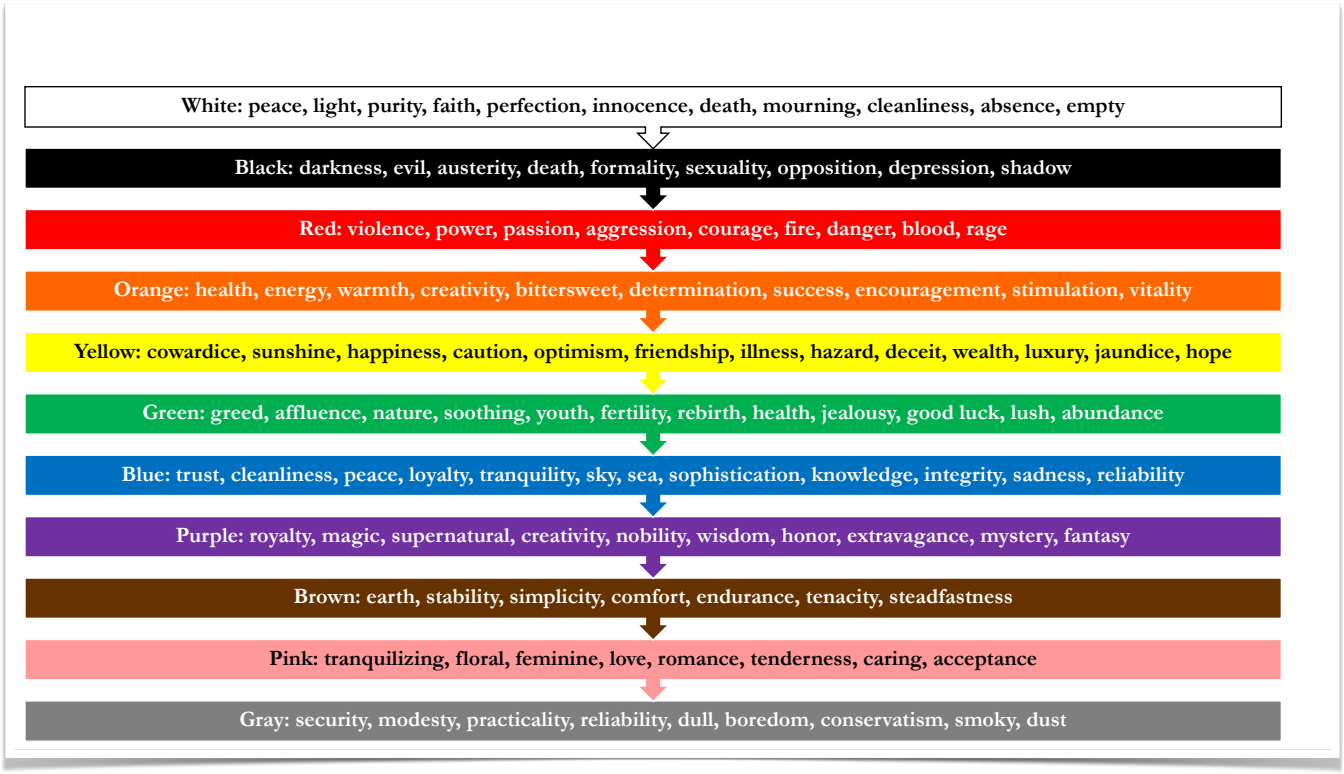

Figure 2: Uses of colors in writing to convey senses, feelings, experiences, and ideas

that is nearly devoid of color. It focuses on how her healthcare providers remark that her skin tone is pale.Manguso's uses color in two ways: 1) in a chapter titled, "Color," and 2) in instances of each of the colors from **Figure 2**.

The chapter "Color" appears midway through the book (chapter 35 of 81). In the following portion of the text of that chapter, Manguso uses the word **color** six times and the word **pale** four timesin 223 words ("color" and "pale" bolded for emphasis).

Color

One of the categories in the summary was **Color**. For a while I didn't look at the copy of the form the nurse left in the white loose-leaf binder that had been provided by the home nursing organization. But then I did and saw that for the first two weeks I'd been home, the nurse had written the word pale on the line next to the word **Color**.

The next time she came, I protested when I saw her write the word **pale**. But she wouldn't change it.

The next time she came—she didn't come again. It was a new nurse, Fran. I told her, as she began to fill out the form, that the other nurse had written that I was **pale**, but that I'd always been **pale**, and that I wasn't anemic, and I was already taking so

> much iron I was almost completely unable to have bowel movements, even when I chased the iron pills with a double dose of stool softener.
>
> Fran listened to me and wrote patient is naturally **pale** on the line next to **Color** and filed a copy of the form behind the ones the other nurse had left, and every time after that, she just put a check mark in the **Color** box to denote that my **color** was fine.
>
> Fran was my favorite. (79)

Manguso uses 81 color words throughout the text, as shown in **Figure 3**. The word white appears mostoften (24 times), followed by red (16 times), blue (14 times), and black (11 times). Given that *The Two Kinds of Decay* focuses on illness, including physical illness and mental illness, it is perhaps unsurprising that thesecolors appear most frequently because they are typically associated with illness (white for hospitals, red for blood, blue for depression, black for death). The words represent not only illness (cells, blood, coffin, tissue, but furniture (chairs) and clothing (hood, jacket, dress, uniform). She also uses generic color words (e.g., she does not use turquoise, auburn, or magenta). Some color words appear in the same sentence (e.g., yellow and purple candies).

The aesthetic that the use of color words creates is more important than the frequency of their appearance in the text. In *The Two Kinds of Decay*, color words draw the reader's attention to specific details about Manguso's surroundings and the people she interacts with during the course of her illness. They create variety and texture, and even comic relief, such as a mascot or cheerleader costume. They convey setting and mood, as a white plastic chair conveys a different feeling than a navy blue scalloped recliner.

Manguso's use of color also highlights that she remembers individual concrete details, even though large swaths of her experiences with her illness remain lost in the recesses of her mind:

"The trauma guys, those Norse gods, strapped me into a fire rescue chair, carried me down the thirteen steps to the first floor, lay me on a gurney, and rolled me into the back of the ambulance.

It was so **green** outside! Massachusetts was a **green** jungle. I could smell the trees." (81)

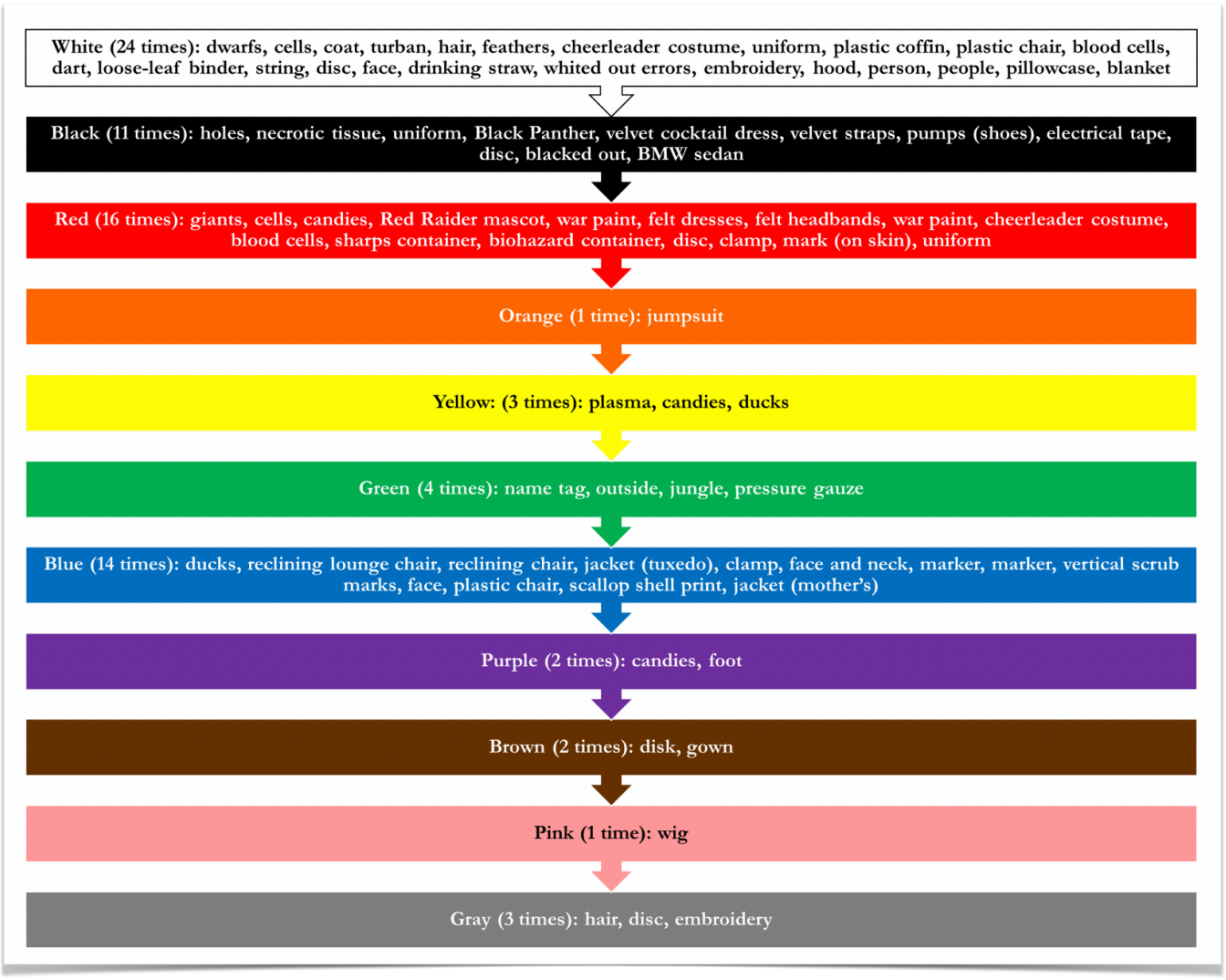

Figure 3. Color words used in **The Two Kinds of Decay**

She also uses color words and phrases to convey mood through showing rather than telling: "At one point I thought I felt a jet of blood spurt into my chest cavity, and that's when I lost my composure.

Months later, after his hair had gone from steel **gray** to **white**, my father told me it had looked like a horror movie." (38)

"I was part of a Monet painting and had to wear a **pink** gown with a plunging neckline. The tube showed. I pulled the bodice up. The top of the bandage still showed. A square of gauze and a

frightening bump. I let it show. One girl saw it backstage and turned **white** and said my name as if she felt she had to."(115)

She even uses colors to address her larger theme of connecting to time, space, and the universe: "There are names for things in spacetime that are nothing, for things that are less than nothing.

White dwarfs, **red** giants, **black** holes, singularities." (4)

Manguso's use of colors add a richness, a vibrancy, a level of depth that might not have shown through without these words and images. When a reader encounters a color-related word on the page, it can generate a spark or jolt, especially in the context of illness, that often intentionally conveys colorless, lifeless, pale imagery. Manguso clearly made conscious choices of when and how to use color-related words and knew how they would affect the reader, as evidenced by using color as a chapter title.

Manguso's work illustrates for a writer how intentional use of color can generate imagery and tone in ways that may feel more authentic and less obvious than using season or even weather itself as a way to generatea particular experience on the page. For example, the use of words and phrases related to a cold, dark winter compared to a bright spring rebirth may appear more heavy handed than the use of the whiteout of a snowstorm or tulips bursting with magenta hues.

Conversely, a writer could also use the lack of color not only to represent illness but to illustrate a lack of nuance or flatness of character by using shades of gray rather than distinctive hues. Color could allow some characters to appear vibrant and multidimensional whereas characters devoid of hue could fade and appear two dimensional. Writers can also use color to quickly portray sensory detail, as evidenced by the different experiences evoked when picturing a white plastic chair compared to a fluffy royal blue couch, even though both may serve similar purposes (e.g., a place to sit). Writers might consider including color-related terms during first drafts, or splashing them into the text during revisions to provider a richer experience for the reader, and referring to Figure 2 above or a color wheel might assist the writer in this approach.

III. Wavelets

> *"The narrator exists, maintains, and renders in words a field of tensions that pulse around her, almost a sense of malign* plotting *outside her, as she tries to retain integrity—of place, body, self."*
> – Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode (114)*

Alison presents eight different patterns in nature that form alternatives to a traditional narrative arc, summarized in **Table 2.** Citing several other authors, Alison notes that pattern is, "an underlying structure that organizes surfaces or structures in a consistent, regular manner. Pattern can be described as a repeating unit of shape or form, but it can also be thought of as the 'skeleton' that organizes the parts of a composition. Now I want to look at patterns underlying narrative, especially those 'darlings of nature,' to see how they can structure novels and stories" (69-70). These patterns could represent options for a book structure. To apply this concept, an author would choose one approach, which would have implications for the book's organization. Wavelets represent the pattern that most closely resembles the structure of The *Two Kinds of Decay,* whereas Manguso's subsequent work moves in the direction of networks and cells.

Although the table provides definitions of all eight concepts, two stand out. Wavelets represent an alternative to a singular large wave leading up to and down from a key climax. Instead, not only does a wavelet imply a series of smaller ups and downs, but it implies alternating or undulating movement back and forth, where the push and pull guides the reader's experience forward. It conveys a system of pulses, tensions, breaths, rather than a singular event or focus. Conversely, a network exists separate from time, from chronology. The reader makes connections between events, experiences, feelings, ideas involving a thematic approach that illustrates transformation.

Table 2. Patterns underlying narrative in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*

Pattern	Definition (pp)

Waves	**The dramatic arc, a wave: disturbance rolls through a medium (seawater, characters), pushing everything to a wobbling peak until it all collapses, and calm returns. In a story, the peak usually feels like some sort of climax (impossibly loaded word), but anyone who's ever been chest-deep at the shore knows there's more fun to a wave than the peak: the swell, the rise, the rush of foamy water on shining sand, the tug back toward the deep. (73)**
Wavelets	**Dispersed patterning, a sense of ripple or oscillation, little ups and downs, might be more true to human experience than a single crashing wave: I'm more likely to feel some tension, a small discovery, a tiny change, a relapse. (95-96)**
Meanders	**Meander begins at one point and moves toward a final one, but with digressive loops. (117)**
Spirals	**A spiral begins at a point and moves onward, not extravagant or lackadaisical like a meander, but smooth and steady, spinning around and around that central point or a single axis. (143)**
Radials or explosions	**Radial or explosive patterns are born of a nucleus, kernel, black hole, whether they spoke outward or circle…Unlike in a spiral, the story itself—the incidents we see dramatized—barely moves forward in time. Instead, a reader might have a sense of being drawn again and again to a hot core—or, conversely, of trying to pull away from that core. You might already know the end at the start and get many fractured views of the same moment, or many fractured views of things avoiding that moment. You might feel a sense of violent scatteration from a central point. Radials can be centrifugal or centripetal, but linear they are not. (165-166)**
Networks and cells	**You can call the pattern cellular if you focus on the shapes (bubbles, chips of bark); or you can focus on the lines defining those shapes and call the pattern nodular, a network. Either way, the look's about the same: polygons in a plain. The pattern is a field, not a shape made by a single line, like a meander or spiral…Texts like these, which don't care much about causal or temporal relations but grow through linked ideas, images, or phrases, are called "spatial." (187-188)**
Fractals	**But fractals forming the shape of a whole narrative are what interest me: texts that start with a "seed" or blueprint that spawns several more. To be clear: where in cellular narratives… the segments are equal, in fractal narratives an initial segment is more likely to be compacted like a seed and generate the rest. (223)**
Tsunami?	**A wave so huge it would hurt your neck to lean back and see its peak before the whole thing toppled and crashed. (237)**

Of the patterns Alison identifies, the wavelet pattern dominates *The Two Kinds of Decay*. Each wave appearsbelow in a circle moving linearly through the chapters (**Figure 4**). Each wavelet represents a different number of chapters and amounts of time, with some almost suspended in time (timeless). But the

pattern appears to ebb and flow, moving forward, not scattershot like fractals, nor in spirals. One could

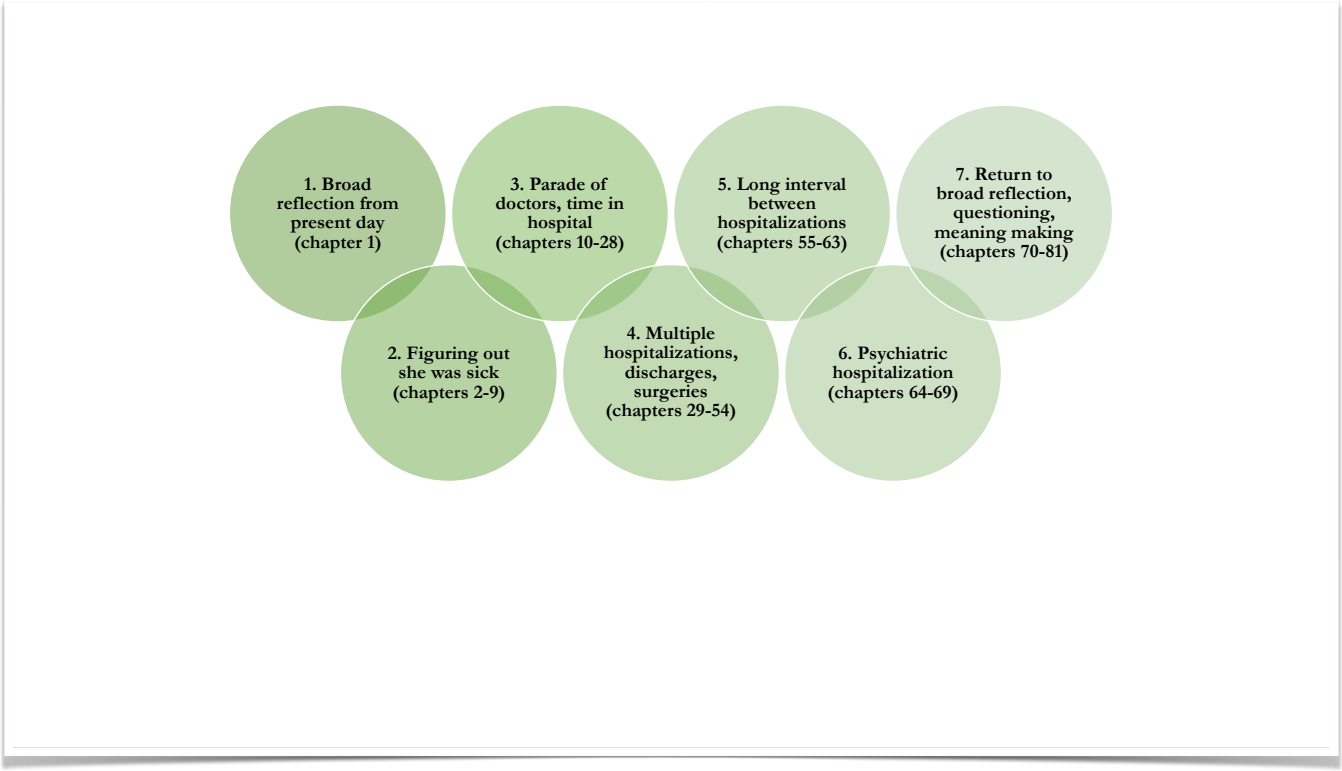

Figure 4. *Wavelets in* **The Two Kinds of Decay**

argue that there might be small digressions, but the book does not meander.

The text appears intentional, and any elements that reflect reaching back into the more distant past are resolved within a single chapter (e.g., a recollection of an experience during high school comes full circle when she sees the same person she knew in high school as a nurse during one of her hospitalizations). The wavelets could embody the undulating nature of moving in and out of the hospital, between various caregivers, school and home, relative illness and wellness, rather than one single pathway forward that might include only a single wave.

Although the concept of wavelets may not include overlapping patterns to the extent the imperfect figure conveys, the overlapping and consistent influence of spacetime, reflection, and hospitalization remain as threads throughout, over which the narrative expands and recedes, like tides. For

this reader, the structure of *Two Kinds of Decay* felt initially like an hourglass, starting broad in time and space, zeroing in on small moments, scenes, and snippets, and then expanding back out into the universe of spacetime. However, onecould also imagine tipping the hourglass onto its side and gently sloshing the grains of sand back and forth, generating ripples or wavelets as described here and envisioning Manguso's protagonist moving between health and wellness, progressing forward toward recovery, and experiencing setbacks or additionalcomplications to her illness. The text does not invoke one single crescendo, a single large wave, but rather a series that drift inward and outward, that ultimately recede after many years. Manguso's approach reminds the reader that even though time may proceed in one direction, that health-related time may not follow a straightforward path, a traditional arc, and may not have a single beginning or end.

Wavelets may have multiple uses in creative nonfiction, but appear particularly useful for health or illness related memoirs and linked essays. They may more truly illustrate the illness experience and perhaps can free writers from the notion that the narrative must proceed on a singular pathway. One might also envision the use of an oscillating pattern in the case of a journey that spans a larger amount of time, perhaps cutting across multiple generations, including birth and development and setbacks and deaths, from child to middle age to late life.

In both cases, an illness and recovery narrative, or multigenerational odyssey, a writer can present multiple waves, or ripples, back and forth, in and out like the tides. A reader cannot sustain a high level of action or engagement, so if a writer includes peak moments of tension or drama, that approach may engage readers both at the micro level, and to keep them wondering how the author will steer the sled through multiple peaks and valleys.

IV. Networks and Cells

"Not just temporal jigsaw puzzles, though; spatiality also describes how a reader can find vectors of association that cut across a narrative, like shafts of light in a stairwell, or find exciting relations among passages that have zero to do with chronological sequencing…I think the idea of spatiality becomes most clear in cellular texts made of discrete parts that gain power through patterns of images or ideas rather than sequential incidents."
– Jane Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode (190)

A reader often proceeds through a text from start to finish, learning, growing, and gaining understanding along the way. Alison notes that in narratives comprised of networks or cells, the story does not create the narrative arc; the reader's brain serves that function. She explains that "the questions a spatial narrative asks are not "what happens next?" but "why did this happen?" and, more complexly, "what grows in my mind as I read?" (202) Although an author cannot dictate what the reader interprets from a text, the author can nudge the reader toward ideas and feelings that accrue based on reading an amassed set of "crots" or "prose stanzas, stanza being Italian for 'room'" (28). Alison discusses a novel comprised of 56 crots as "more a catalogue of like moments than a drama. A reader dwells in one moment, then hops overwhite space to the next, with no sequentiality. Other than stepping from one catalogue item to the next,what moves you forward? And, moving forward, how do you find meaning? At the end, there is a sense of change. How? (192) These are the essential questions that an author using this form must grapple with andanswer.

Although *The Two Kinds of Decay* follows a wavelet structure, brief chapters, large portions of white space, short paragraphs all lend themselves to a network or cell-like quality. This could unfold chronologically or randomly, like a kaleidoscope, or using a hermit crab structure, such as a glossary. *The Two Kinds of Decay* does not use networks and cells as an organizing principle. However, Manguso could easily rearrange the short chapters in that format. The reader might still be able to grasp the connections through the linked ideas, images, and phrases. She travels back and forth through time using memories andmaking connections between people in her past and how they reappear either during her illness or thereafter. Manguso's evolution as a writer includes a body of work that increasingly employs brief

segments that avoid appearing constrained by chronology or a singular narrative. She moves further in the direction of networks and cells with each of her subsequent books.

In *The Guardians: An Elegy* (2013), the narrative does not adhere to a strict form and uses brief seemingly random brief paragraphs separated by asterisks without chapters or titles or explanation.

In *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2015), Manguso uses even shorter chapters that are mostly removed from calendar time. Part way through the book, she introduces that she has become a mother.But she writes an entire book about her near obsessive compulsion to write daily in a diary while excluding excerpts from the diary itself.

In *300 Arguments* (2017), Manguso uses aphorisms that could likely appear in any order without a noticeable impact on the overall tone or movement within and through the text.

Therefore, perhaps the notion that *The Two Kinds of Decay* could employ a network approach maybe influenced by Manguso's later artistic movement in that direction.

Networks and cells can prove a useful strategy for seemingly unrelated pieces of writing, or those loosely connected in mosaic form. As both essay collections and flash nonfiction have increased in popularity, readers may have become more comfortable with book length projects that include brief snippets that can both stand alone, or that a writer can artfully and intentionally arrange to generate an overarching experience for the reader. In such texts, a writer might consider, and a reader might ask oneself, if I rearranged the order of these pieces, how would my experience of this text change? How would the meaning of the protagonist's experiences differ? Why did the writer arrange these segments in this particular order? Or one might even ask, why did the author choose this approach, rather than a more straightforward or linear narrative?

This approach might prove useful when the writer has memory gaps or lapses and chooses to use amore fractured format, not only to overcome the limitations of these holes, but to illustrate for the reader the impact of these gaps on the protagonist. As with the other structural approaches Alison presents,

options for networks and cells appear endless, both constraining and freeing the writer to abandon a particular shape or process or order and yet still generate an artistic body of work that evokes a visceral experience for a reader. If done effectively, this approach could gently nudge the reader toward asking whyand identifying what grows as a result of engaging the whole. The final product becomes more than thesum of its individual parts.

Conclusion

Applying Alison's framework in pyramid form in which the writer can delve swiftly across space and time or deeper into an experience transcending or pausing chronological time lends artistry and depth in a satisfying way. Incorporating shades and hues provides a rich way to incorporate senses, moods, and seasons, and provide a vibrancy in stark contrast to despair and whitewashed illness.

Thinking of memoir or essay collections as constructed using patterns from nature soothes provides a much more interesting set of choices than deciding between a cinematic approach or a random collection of tidbits. It also provides an opportunity for reflection on how multiple options might workand that the decision about approach has obvious implications for the work, but with shorter chapters andblank space and non-narrative arc, several different patterns may be effective for roughly similar material.

Alison uses nature as an organizing principle for understanding primary elements and patterns, and Manguso uses the notion of spacetime to understand illness, health, and life. Both books can serve as beacons in the messy, complicated, intoxicating process of creative nonfiction. They can serve as guides for those seeking to push the boundaries between poetry and prose, traditional and essayistic memoir, and creative narrative patterns, structures, and forms.

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