From the title story in *The World to Come* by Jim Shepard (pp. 99–100, 133)

Sunday 1 January

Fair and very cold. Ice in our bedroom this morning for the first time all winter, and in the kitchen, the water froze on the potatoes as soon as they were washed. Landscapes of frost on the windowpanes.

With little pride and less hope and only occasional and uncertain intervals of happiness, we begin the new year. Let me at least learn to be uncomplaining and unselfish. Let me feel gratitude for what I have: some strength, some sense of purpose, some capacity for progress. Some esteem, some respect, and some affection. Yet I cannot say I am improved in any manner, unless it is preferable to be wider in sensation and experience.

My husband has since our acquisition of this farm kept a diary to help him see the year whole and plan and space his work. In his memorandum book he numbers each field and charges to each the manure, labor, seed &c and then credits each with the value of each crop. This way he knows what each crop and field pays from year to year. As of last spring once we lost our Nellie he asked me to keep in addition a notebook list of matters that might otherwise go over looked, from tools lent out to bills outstanding. But there is no record in these dull and simple pages of the most passionate circumstances of our season past, no record of our emotions or fears, our greatest joys or most piercing sorrows.

When I think of our old farm I think of rocks. My father hauled rocks for our driveway and rocks for our dooryard and rocks for the base on which our chimney
was set. There were rock piles in every fence corner, miles of stonewalls separating our fields, and stone bridges so we might cross dry-shod over our numerous little water courses. Piles of rocks were always appearing and growing, and every time we plowed we would have a new supply. My first tasks as a toddler were picking rocks out of new-plowed ground and filling the wood box. My father before his day began would say to me, “While I’m gone you can pick up the rocks on this piece, and after you get that done you can play.” And when he returned at sundown I’d still be in the field at which he’d pointed, on my hands and knees, in tears, the job always less than half done.

My sister’s features were so fine that our mother liked to sketch them by lamplight, and her spirit was equally engaging, but when it came to the affections of others, circumstances doomed me to striving and anxiety. I grew like a pot-bound root all curled in upon itself.

I resolve to recover some of my former patience. And to remember that it was got at by practice. What most of us truly require is to make habitual what we already know. . . .

Sunday 24 June [from the conclusion of the story]

After dark I walked across our upper fields over the hills for the wide, wide view. I stood there with my child’s face and selfish love. I imagined my Tallie living in a home that existed only in our thoughts. I imagined myself ungoverned by the fear that holds the wretch in place. I imagined my response to her crying, “What do I
know about you in this moment? Nothing!” I imagined cherishing a life touched by such alchemy. I imagined the story of a girl made human. I imagined Tallie’s grave, forsaken and remote. I imagined banishing forever those sentiments that she chastened and refined. I imagined everyone I knew sick to the point of death. I imagined a creature even more slow-hearted than myself. I imagined continuing to write in this ledger, as if this were life, as though life were not elsewhere.

Even though Jim Shepard is inclined to follow his insatiably curious mind to far and different worlds when crafting his stories—from the ancient Minoan civilization in “Cretan Love Song” to a British World War II submarine in “Telemachus” to a nineteenth-century farm in New York State in “The World to Come”—at heart, all his stories are about the unfolding of the protagonist’s private drama within the constructed world of the story. The use of catastrophe as a back drop helps Shepard better illustrate the human plight, how we fall short, how surprised we can be when we fall short, or, as Shepard put it, “the gap between whom we imagine ourselves to be and who we turn out to be.”

Many of Shepard’s stories feature first-person narrators because, he said, “The lens is determining almost everything.” The way a first-person narrator perceives the world of the story reveals the narrator. And not only how the narrator sees herself, but also the unconscious bias through which the narrator sees the world. Such subjectivity preserves blind spots and personal fictions that help maintain a not-necessarily-accurate sense of self. Since it’s the author’s job to reveal the WHOLE character to the reader, much of the revelation of the character’s unconscious is conveyed through what Shepard
refers to as “subliminal coordinates.” (He credits Nabokov with the term.) A writer doesn’t start a story knowing what these thematic and emotional patterns will be. Suggestions of these patterns begin to appear organically in the drafting of a story. To learn how to spot these subliminal coordinates, Shepard suggested a four-step process.

1. Read through a story once as a civilian.

2. Next, read it again, marking anything that stands out for you.

3. Next, read the end again and then go back to the beginning, reading it with the ending in mind. Mark as you read what drives toward the end.

4. Ask yourself: Is the story continually enlarging the reader’s understanding of the character? What is the amount you are learning at any given moment?

(This reading process works as well with poems as with stories!)

Let’s try this reading process with the opening and conclusion of “The World to Come.” Read the opening paragraphs (excerpted above) and ask yourself what is revealed in each sentence—not just what the words say, but the undercurrent of what the words suggest. For example: “Fair and very cold. Ice in our bedroom this morning for the first time all winter, and in the kitchen, the water froze on the potatoes as soon as they were washed. Landscapes of frost on the windowpanes.” In this first paragraph, we have a narrator who doesn’t see through the windowpane to the vista beyond it. The narrator’s vision is foreshortened. She sees just the frost on the glass.

At the end of the story, after the narrator has for a short time found love and then lost it, we have this passage: “After dark I walked across our upper fields over the hills for the wide, wide view.” The author, by making available to the observant
reader these coordinates (the foreshortened view at the beginning vs. the “wide, wide view” at the end), reveals that the narrator has changed.

Let’s do it again. In the opening paragraphs, note how modest the narrator’s prayers are: “Let me at least learn to be uncomplaining and unselfish.” Later, she says, “I grew like a pot-bound root all curled in upon itself.” Of her journal she writes, “There is no record in these dull and simple pages of the most passionate circumstances of our seasons past, no record of our emotions or fears, our greatest joys or most piercing sorrows.”

Now return to the last paragraph. The passion, the wide imagination that this narrator reveals shows how she has been changed, opened to the world, despite her grievous loss.

**Assignment:** Imagine a first-person narrator who keeps a journal or writes a daily blog—or microblog, like a Twitter feed. Craft an opening and a closing, and by using “subliminal coordinates,” communicate to the reader without having the narrator directly say—or even know—that something deep within has changed.