Since our arrival at my house had not been signaled by the noise of the truck we were able to go around to the side and crush up against the wall, kissing and loving. I had always thought that our eventual union would have some sort of special pause before it, a ceremonial beginning, like a curtain going up on the last act of a play. But there was nothing of the kind. By the time I realized he was really going ahead with it I wanted to lie down on the ground, I wanted to get rid of my panties which were around my feet, I wanted to take off the belt of my dress because he was pressing the buckle painfully into my stomach. However there was no time. I pushed my legs as far apart as I could with those pants tangling my feet and heaved myself up against the house wall trying to keep my balance. Unlike our previous intimacies, this required effort and attention. It also hurt me, though his fingers had stretched me before this time. With everything else, I had to hold his pants up, afraid that the white gleam of his buttocks might give us away, to anybody passing on the street. I developed an unbearable pain in the arches of my feet. Just when I thought I would have to ask him to stop, wait, at least till I put my heels to the ground for a second, he groaned and pushed violently and collapsed against me, his heart pounding. I was not balanced to receive his weight and we both crashed down, coming unstuck somehow, into the peony border. I put my hand to my wet leg and it came away dark. Blood. When I saw the blood the glory of the whole episode became clear to me.

—Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women*

Only after years of trying and failing to come anywhere near the level of Munro’s prose did I realize how much skill goes into it. It looks easy. It *reads* easy. It seems to be transparent to the story while actually delivering the story in all its riches.

Start with syntax. When I first encountered Munro’s fiction I was a tenured professor of linguistics, so I always dove headfirst into the grammar of any text.
But you don’t need to know a gerund from a geranium to hear the music in this passage. The satisfying orchestral texture: here a sentence that begins with the speaker, there one whose opening clause resonates with the preceding action. The crescendo of desire in the repetition of “I wanted,” its baroqueness immediately balanced by the starkness of “However there was no time.” The continuing counterpoint of a sentence that climbs, then one that stops; climb, stop; climb, stop. And the high point? Not the boy’s climax, nor the couple toppling into the peony bushes, but a single word that forms an entire sentence, like the clash of cymbals. “Blood.”

You can take virtually any passage from any of Munro’s work and see/hear (there should be a word for the silent sound a reader continuously takes in!) the same care and beauty in its design. But woven through the music of Munro’s sentences is another, more immediately perceptible pleasure. The sense detail in this passage opens the narrator’s experience and pulls us inside. Truck, wall, peonies, pants (hers and his), dress, belt, buckle, stomach, buttocks, arches, heels, heart, hand, leg, blood. Pushing, tangling, heaving, hurting, groaning, pounding, crashing. Pain, weight, wetness. The white gleam of buttocks; the darkness of blood. And everything—everything—in motion. Yet there are no heroics here; no mindless lyricism. The passage achieves its extraordinary concreteness through the accumulation of ordinary things.

This marriage of music and sensation would have sufficed to make me Munro’s lifelong fan. But Lives of Girls and Women did more than that. It made me a writer. Munro’s honesty—the teen-aged narrator of Lives, reflecting afterward on the events in this passage, says “I had a radiant sense of importance”—made me suspect a conjunction of pleasure and wisdom I hadn’t previously seen. Her humor—like the near-slapstick moments in the sexual encounter here—did not rule out heat. Her realism left room for life’s lyrical flights—for glory. But most of all, Munro’s novel made me see that the lives of girls and women—the lives I’d lived, the lives I knew—were interesting enough to write about.

So I left the respectable world of scholarship and started writing fiction—which made my life more interesting still.

But that’s another story.