

LEAVING

By

MARC ANGELO SCHUMANN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
Department of English

AUGUST 2009

To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Marc Angelo Schumann find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

---

Debbie Lee, Ph.D., Chair

---

Peter Chilson, MFA

---

Jon Hegglund, Ph.D

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Debbie Lee for her extraordinary patience, support, enthusiasm and wisdom in chairing this project. I feel very fortunate to have had her as my chairperson. Thank you also to Peter Chilson and Jon Heggund for their encouragement of my work at Washington State and their involvement in this thesis.

Thank you to Rebecca for your love and support.

# LEAVING

## Abstract

by Marc Angelo Schumann  
Washington State University  
August 2009

Chair: Debbie Lee

When I was twenty, I dropped out of college and spent nine months backpacking in Eastern Canada—the stark and beautiful landscape stretching from New Brunswick to Prince Edward Island known as the Maritimes region. For my Masters Thesis I seek to explore this year from a creative-critical perspective that draws principally on the literature of the English Romantic and American Transcendentalist writers. More specifically, I am interested in representations of two distinct modes of engagement with nature: perception and movement. The three main texts I will use are William Gilpin’s “Observations and Lake District”, particularly his description of the Picturesque in nature, Henry Thoreau’s long essay “Walking,” and Anke Gleber’s recent book on urban movement, “The Art of Taking a Walk”. In pursuing this discussion, I seek a natural confluence between story and commentary, idea and image, each deepening a coherent inquiry.

The guiding motivation of this project is a human interest. I want to better understand both my own journey that year—one in which questions about my own place in the world and the kind of life most worthy of living weighed on my mind—and also that of several of the people I met along the way. I remember being struck, particularly during the first months of traveling, by how many people I met who had chosen this same transient, itinerant lifestyle— like me, they were staying in hostels or campgrounds, working a few months here or there, picking up and moving when the mood struck. I was fascinated by this kind of subculture I hadn't known existed. They weren't really tourists, nor were they vagrants, hippies, drop-outs (my dad's word), or any other convenient label. They were just people, and had different reasons for the life choices they had made. I would like to tell their stories (at least a few of them), as well as my own. I am interested in exploring the community that developed among us. I've never written about this time before, and I want to better understand the impulses that moved me towards this nine-month experience.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE WILD.....	19
3. CHILDHOOD.....	29
4. PAIN.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	70

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“Leaving” is a creative thesis that explores the need for intimacy with nature in the context of human pain and suffering. In my creative pieces I have focused on three time periods in my life: a) the year 1999, which I spent traveling in Alaska and Eastern Canada, b) my childhood growing up in Vancouver, Canada, and c) 2006, which deals with my own physical pain in the months leading up to my wedding, as well as my relationship to my father’s life. This project started with my interest in Thoreau’s concept of The Wild, and an attempt to track representations of this image in both Romantic and contemporary literature. The main writers I have studied are Henry Thoreau and John Keats, as well as the contemporary American environmental poets Thomas James and Anne Carson.

The main idea guiding this work has been that of the Wild as representing the human desire to exist outside the constraints of death, loss, and pain. Reading Keats and Thoreau in the fall of 2008, I was struck by how, for these writers, going “into the Wild” suggested an ambiguous double action—a movement both towards a deep intimacy with nature, and, as importantly, away from society, and indeed corporeal existence itself. The image of “disappearance” cuts throughout Keats’ and Thoreau’s engagements with nature. In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats wishes to “leave the world unseen” and “fade away into the forest dim” (19-21), while in “Walking,” Thoreau writes of leaving the human world behind in his quest for “absolute freedom” and true intimacy with nature. “Lose yourself,” Thoreau urges his readers: “If you are ready to leave father and mother,

and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends...and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (Thoreau, Walking).

This idea of cutting oneself off from the world and going deep into nature resonated with me. When I was twenty I left college and spent the year traveling in Alaska and Eastern Canada, and I began my writing for this thesis by relating some of my experiences that year to the work of Keats (particularly the poem “Ode to the Nightingale”), and Thoreau’s long essay “Walking.” What interested me most about Keats and Thoreau’s descriptions of leaving society was, first, the idea of disappearance—of identity itself being a burdensome illusion, that once left behind could give way to true freedom—and second, the emphasis on spiritual pain and death in these works. The severity of the break with society that Keats and Thoreau imagine can be understood, perhaps, by acknowledging that which they seek to leave behind. In “Ode to the Nightingale,” Keats expresses his wish to “forget” the pain of temporal existence, where death is ever-present. His earth is a place “where men sit and hear each other groan/ Where palsy shakes a few, sad last grey hairs...Where but to think is to be full of sorrow/ And leaden-eyed despairs” (24-28), while in “Walking,” Thoreau evokes a kind of living-death in his description of people working behind office desks day after day, cut off from their bodies and their natural connection to the earth: “When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them—as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk—I think they deserve some credit for not having committed suicide long ago.”



A basic idea of Thoreau that stayed with me throughout the year, and informed much of my own writing was the idea of intimacy with nature as a sensual experience. He writes of walking in nature, “It sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village... I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses.” Thoreau contrasts this experience of vitality with the “dullness” and “moral insensibility” that comes from being detached from nature. For Thoreau, this represents a spiritual loss. Later, he imagines a “general explosion”—that is, unquantifiable, emerging perhaps from a physis, human source—sounding throughout the downtown at the end of each day, “curing” the “evil” contained within the shops. For Thoreau, movement towards wilderness is as much about leaving behind a false existence, a false identity, as it is claiming the rightful intimacy with nature that people have lost. His evocation of “living-death”—the debilitating effect (or potential) in work, in living “outside” of one’s body—informs my representation of my father throughout this thesis.

As I began writing about my experience traveling in 1999 I was interested in the specific description of leaving society that Keats and Thoreau explored. The first poem I wrote, “Darling Lake,” concerned my two-month stay at a remote rural town in Nova Scotia—grassy hills sloping down towards the Atlantic—at the beginning of my travels, and introduces the major themes that unite this collection of work: the fluidity of identity and the desire to “disappear” from society, and the yearning for intimacy with nature embodied in spatial metaphor, that is, movement from a limited man-made space towards vastness, solitude, freedom. These concerns are evident in the first stanza of “Darling Lake,” which I will quote in full because I feel it encapsulates much of my thematic interests in “Leaving.” In this poem I imagined my movement towards Darling Lake as

beginning with an experience of painful constraint, and the leaving behind of “true” identity for greater freedom. I wanted, also, to evoke a sense of birth, moving from a womb-like adolescence into young adulthood:

*Darling Lake*

To be between these cracking brick walls  
that catch every wail and child's moan  
With cinder dust trapped in the dawn light  
and outside my cramped room, a woman,  
her skin chalky and creased with anger  
at me and who else  
banging her tiny fist and shouting my full name  
"Marc Angelo", that I haven't heard since I was six.  
I had an idea of a quiet place  
far removed.

This act of self-transformation, of “disappearance,” is elaborated in “Peggy’s Cove,” which begins on a fall morning in Halifax as I am set to leave the city on a weekend trip to the picturesque fishing village of Peggy’s Cove. In this piece I tried to capture the exhilarating moment of departure, so familiar to me that year. In the first scene outside the steps of the Halifax hostel where I stayed for several months, I linked the excitement of moving to a new setting with the act of self-reinvention:

*Peggy’s Cove*

We meet at one in the afternoon to drive to Peggy's Cove,  
a tiny fishing village on the northeastern edge of Nova Scotia.  
The day is bright and crisp, early in fall.  
The blue sky pounds through my temples.  
Dry cherry and mustard-brown leaves scatter the steps  
outside the Heritage House Hostel, in downtown Halifax,  
our home this week and maybe next.  
As we make small talk, getting to know our weekend companions,  
our breath punctures the air.  
"Hi, my name is Marc." I can be anyone, and you  
too. Anxious smiles and cold hands.

Today, a new country to discover.

This process of self-creation continues throughout the poem. I wanted to depict how this freedom of identity was shared among the people outside the hostel that day—among the many people I met that year who had chosen this itinerant lifestyle—and later in the poem I describe the experience of recognizing a woman from a previous excursion. My wish to preserve my anonymity, to create myself anew that day, is mutual:

Avert eyes from the woman from last week. Spanish with  
black braids. I think I told her I fed  
tigers for the national circus, was on a mission  
always a mission  
to find my father, a fall-down drunk and failed poet.  
She knows too much.  
But she's on the same game, pretends not to see me.

The idea of intimacy with nature involving a kind of disappearance, of identity itself being false, a performance required by society, was something I was aware of while traveling in the Maritime provinces. It had been on my mind since I began thinking about my trip during my first year of college. I think that partly this perception came from moving so frequently as a child, and having to reinvent myself almost constantly to fit the given situation. When I was eight my family moved from San Mateo, California to Vancouver, Canada. In the winter we would return to San Mateo, and I would reunite with family and old friends. There was a fair amount of antipathy—sometimes playful, sometimes not—between the countries, and back in the U.S, my friends would tease me about being a Canadian. In Vancouver, I would receive similar treatment for being an American. The remarks themselves were rarely hurtful, but the absurdity of the situation was something I felt acutely growing up.

At times it could be painful. I remember coming home early from California one winter to see the Canadians play the U.S in the Rugby World Cup (rugby was the main sport among me and my friends then). I was probably 13 or 14 at the time. We were all enjoying the game until the word spread in the bleachers that I was “an American.” At that point dozens—or what seemed like it—of drunken fans began taunting me and waving a huge Canadian flag over my head, into my face, every time Canada did something good. At first the flag was swung towards me whenever Canada scored a try (the equivalent of a touchdown); but by the end of the game there was no occasion too small: a near-try, a great tackle, even simply a caught pass were all good enough. Canada was losing the game badly and that didn’t help my situation. The flag was so big that I would feel momentarily smothered and would have to fight it away with my arms. My friends joined in on the taunts, and although I spent most of the game laughing off the treatment—there wasn’t really any other choice—by the end of the afternoon I felt completely alone and was holding back tears.

In high-school I excelled at rugby and baseball. I enjoyed playing, and it was a way to fit in. But eventually, that became limiting. I went away to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois with the idea of forging a strong new identity, but once there found myself in many of the same situations. I was asked to arrive on campus a week early to take part in “International Orientation,” but once there was told that I wouldn’t be able to participate. On the lawn outside the International House, the lanky African-American woman in charge that week approached me with an amused, quizzical expression. “Canada isn’t very international!” she exclaimed, laughing, while handing me my dorm-

room key. She shook her head, pointing me towards a drab brick building in the distance. “Come on, now. It’s not even another continent.”

I joined the school soccer team along with my roommate, and pledged Sigma Nu together. But at the parties I would leave after only a handful of minutes, and go for hours-long walks in the city. I remember the sense of lightness, the sudden relief that would come over me when on the back lawn of the fraternity house I would step just slightly back, out of the light, invisible for that moment. In the shadows, I felt that I could not be seen. I would watch the movement going on around me for several minutes, before slipping away, unseen. Walking in the night, often on the broad train tracks that cut through the city, I felt free in a way I hadn’t experienced before. Then I would return to the party hours later and tell my roommate I was heading home. This happened for most of the year, and neither he nor anyone else ever caught on, ever asked where I had been.

It was an exhilarating feeling, out in the dark open air on my own, but there was another side to that feeling. As the year went on I experienced a growing sense of anxiety. At first, I couldn’t be at the fraternity parties, then I couldn’t be in the dorm (there were always people coming in and out of the suite, banging on my room door), and at last it was difficult to be around people altogether. Those walks were freeing, but I also felt a little bit like a fugitive, that I *had* to keep walking.

When I decided to leave school I remember telling my dad that I wanted to feel “un-self-conscious.” It was an awkward locution, not even a word, and my dad, uncharacteristically speechless for a long moment finally replied, “You mean, like *dead*?” He was smiling a little, seemingly baffled. At the time I didn’t make very much of this comment—except to realize that my father, who worked every day of his adult life in

an office cubicle, could not comprehend this idea of lightness, or simply thought it a fantasy. I will always remember, one time when I came to visit him on “Bring Your Child to Work Day,” how he had to endure a long lecture about misfiling papers from his boss while I stood outside the head-high plastic walls listening in horror. From where I stood, I could see the bald head of his longtime boss, Bill, gleaming under fluorescent light.

I didn't make much of my father's comment at the time (probably, in my self-seriousness of that time, brushed him off with a dismissive shake of the head), but now I think he was on to something. In literature about the Wild, the desire for closeness with nature—it is in the wish to blend in completely with the natural world that one assumes a spiritual form, loses his physical self—is paired with a pre-occupation with death. The deep intimacy with nature that the Wild represents is itself likened to a kind of death. In “Ode to the Nightingale,” Keats uses a coffin-like image—“embalmed in darkness”—to describe his experience listening to the nightingale outside his home, and writes that in this moment, death seems desirable: “Now more than ever seems it rich to die,/ To cease upon the midnight with no pain” (55-56). Listening to the “immortal” song of the bird, he imagines passing out of his human form and joining with completely with nature.

Ultimately, however, this is not possible. Although Keats imagines himself lifted up to soar with the nightingale, carried on the “viewless wings of Poesy,” it is his own language, the working of his own all-too-human mind, that brings him back down to earth (42). As Keats writes the word “forlorn,” he is reminded of the inescapable human situation, and the spell created by the nightingale is broken: “Forlorn! The very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self” (72-73).

Ultimately, Keats expresses the idea of constraint in this poem. The desired intimacy with nature is ultimately limited, and Keats returns to the human predicament. In the three pieces that make up the first section of this thesis, “The Wild,” the act of “leaving” is undercut by a similar return, and the sense of intimacy and peace felt at Darling Lake is short-lived. In exploring the desire for intimacy with nature—for “absolute freedom,” to use Thoreau’s phrase—I have sought to open up, to understand, the lives of several of the people I met during this year. Following off of my reading of Keats and Thoreau, I have emphasized the fact of human pain. In “Peggy’s Cove,” the playful role-playing of the opening scenes gives way to the image of a woman having a nervous breakdown during a group trip into the woods: “Now she was up there perched on a slick rock/ like an injured bird, shouting nonsense.” By the time we end up in Peggy’s Cove a terrible storm is waiting for us, and the poem ends with me and another man, a stranger to me, watching a group of small boats bouncing precariously out at sea. The image holds two of us in place, and in that moment we are reminded of our bond, our shared experience.

Reflecting on this section, I can see that I have expressed the idea of intimacy with nature in terms of yearning, something experienced in glimpses, but mostly out of reach. In “Naknek,” set in Alaska, I write about my roommate Ron who was completely silent and seemed to be suffering privately until one night he poured out his life story to me, recounting the losses he had experienced, and his own sense of displacement. The most vivid moment, I think, in this brief story, takes place when Ron recounts a moment of true harmony in nature, on the afternoons in high-school when he would go down to a nearby lake with his first love, Katherine:

“Last night he told me about his first love, Katherine-Anne Walcott, how they'd cut Mr. Shepard's sixth-period music class ("What am I going to need to sing for?"), take a 6-pack of Bud down to Watson Lake. Our windowless room was so dark I couldn't see my hand in front of my eyes. Outside, the night was quiet apart from the near-constant chorus of snapping dragonflies and crickets droning in the tall grass. I could hear Ron breathing, deep and even, while he lay in bed. He would talk a little then go quiet, like he was waiting for the next memory to jar his mind.

Some days in the spring, when no one was around, he and Katie would strip to their underwear and splash in the water, swim until their arms grew too heavy. After, they would stretch out under thick-limbed cottonwoods, patches of sunlight and shadow moving on the lightly inclined slope. Ron with a book, something about flying or war (he had wanted desperately to join his friends in Vietnam but had failed his physical with bad eyes and a "stump leg" that forced him to walk with a limp), Katie not doing anything, staring out at the water. Her blonde hair almost white in the sun, wet against her back.”

Although this memory is fleeting, and the piece as a whole is shrouded by the threat of violence, it is these moments of direct contact with nature—sacred moments, I want to say—that I believe animate the various stories in this section, and balance the recognition of loss and pain depicted elsewhere.

The second section of the thesis reflects on my childhood, and is meant to serve as a kind of preface to the obsessions with movement, my father's life, the yearning for intimacy with nature, and the fluidity of identity that run throughout the rest of the



manuscript. Each piece in this section is set at a different location, and elements of plot become clear as the pieces develop—our family moving from house to house, struggling with financial problems, baseball as a source of bonding between my father and me, but also an area of anxiety. In this section, I wanted to reveal an impression of my childhood through linked fragments. This is what the process of memory feels like to me—vivid moments, recurring details and points of emphasis, but not necessarily a complete or coherent whole. The main influence for this section was James Joyce, particularly his description of his childhood in “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.” Joyce uses this mosaic-like structure to capture Stephen’s early years, as impressions pass in and out of view, vivid but fleeting, at times seemingly random, form representing the experience of childhood itself. In the first scene of the book, a children’s story about “baby tuckoo” turns into a reflection about wetting the bed, and then into a family gathering where important characters such as Uncle Charles and Dante are introduced. Gradually, poverty and isolation, Stephen’s intense engagement with the meaning of his father’s life, emerge as distinct themes out of the panorama of sense perception. Everything grows out of Stephen’s perspective, and the representation of his maturing sensual awareness.

In writing about my childhood, I studied Joyce’s narrative technique and tried to make use of it where I could. Sense detail is extremely important in “Portrait,” and certain lines—“cold slime of the ditch,” “long dark waves rising and falling,” “his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face”—quicken my imagination and fascinate me with their ability to evoke a child’s perspective. Joyce’s style resonated with me; it seemed true to my own experience. The simple, but specific, almost tactile quality of the imagery, the fluidity of perception, gave me a sense of how I wanted to

convey my own experience of childhood. I remember that when I wrote the first image of “Lincoln Home, 1987”—“Cold yellow sun/ firing through the clouds/ as bright as fresh cement”—I was excited, and felt that I had found a voice that could work for the childhood pieces.

The narrative in this poem is dictated by the shifting perception of the young speaker, mirroring Joyce’s technique used in *Portrait of the Artist*. In this poem, and throughout this section in particular, I was attentive to using sense detail in a specific way, bringing out the sensitive awareness of childhood. When writing about nature it is easy, I find, to lapse into sentimentality, which tends to occur when human emotions are projected onto nature in a general way. When this happens, the image that is being observed has no real life of its own, and the emotion feels unearned. I have tried to resist this temptation by writing as specifically about nature as possible. The idea of respect for nature being shown through specific observation was a main theme that I took from the course on Romantic Ecology in the fall of this year, and one I have worked to keep in mind. I was particularly moved by Terry Tempest Williams’ belief in *Refuge* that intimacy with nature comes out of attention to detail in the natural world, knowing the names of birds and plants as though are living members of a community.

In an interview, Williams has stated: “If we don't know the names of things, if don't know pronghorn antelope, if we don't know blacktail jackrabbit, if we don't know sage, pinyon, juniper, then I think we are living a life without specificity, and then our lives become abstractions. Then we enter a place of true desolation” (Williams, Scott London interview). Rather than projecting human emotion onto nature, I have aimed to give a concrete reality to the natural images I have used; frequently it is the characters in

my poems and stories who experience an emotional response to nature, and this can only happen when the detail I am observing is concrete and specific.

I found that writing specific images was key to allowing the kind of leaps in narrative focus that I wanted for this poem—if a line could evoke the specific emotion I wanted to convey, then that could guide the reader to the next, unexpected detail. I think a successful example of this in “Lincoln Home” comes when the image of “ants squirming in the dark moss” (echoing the discomfort and constraint of my father inside the small room) leads into a painful memory of being lectured in class that day. This technique is used throughout the poem. An awareness of beauty in nature in the first—mystery suggested in the image of sunlight penetrating clouds—leads to a desire to “know everything that is going on now/ in my father’s basement study.” The loud music heard through the wall brings an awareness of emotion that is then translated into a heightened awareness of the natural world—the yard “carved into blocks of muted amber light,” the music changing the moss on the oak tree a darker green.

The image of sunlight penetrating clouds was the first image I wrote for this section, and without my thinking about it too much, it developed into a key image throughout the thesis. Frequently the image of light appears in moments of human conflict. This is meant to reflect the idea of natural beauty being a solace, and so seemingly most present during times of pain or anxiety. Throughout this collection of creative pieces, the image of sunlight often appears at key moments. It is, as stated in “Night,” a poem in the third section of this manuscript, a “presence” that seems to contain its own identity, its own movement.

In “Night” a dreamlike narrative of my father disappearing in the middle of the night, then returning in the morning full of barely concealed anxiety, is broken with the observation of sunlight, moving through the yard, resting on my mother’s hair.

The sky a haze of radiant cloud,  
sun pushing through the glass.  
It fills the yard, liquid,  
a presence.  
It clings to the ends of her pepper-grey hair.

The image of light through clouds seemed to capture for me the awareness, or intuition, of mystery in the world that I felt strongly as a child. In these poems, it seems at times to have no clear source, and this reflects my childhood experience of uncertainty about human matters as well. As a child, the beauty that I perceived was larger than I could comprehend. The feeling was overwhelming, but also comforting. In leaving college years later, I was unconsciously moving towards this experience of mystery.

When I talk about mystery, I don’t mean that the experience triggers the need for an explanation, religious or otherwise. There is no need for answers—in these moments a sense of my own “smallness” to use the environmental writer Edward Abbey’s word, overtakes me. Abbey wrote of his need to experience the desert, writing in his book *Desert Solitaire*, “The desert says nothing. It lies there like the bare skeleton of being... a realm beyond the human” (Abbey, 270).

When I left college in 1999, sick with anxiety and depression, it was this sense of smallness that I was groping towards. This is what I found at Darling Lake. I had been anxious to leave the small rural town after a night’s sleep, but the next morning I found there was no bus leaving out of town for ten days. The poem I wrote about my time at

Darling Lake—I ended up staying two months in a six-dollar-a-night cabin above the Atlantic—ends on a note of tranquility, but there was another side to the experience. There was virtually no one in the town, and I would spend my days walking the cliffs above the water that battered the rocks below. Wind whistled through the grass around me. From the cliffs, the vastness of the ocean at first provoked a feeling of the sublime—terror, uncertainty, disorientation—but after several days this gave way to something else, something like, I think, the sensation Abbey had when confronted with vast stretches of sand all around him, a feeling of peace that came from the recognition of something far larger than whatever problems I was facing, larger, even, than the life that was ahead of me. This sense of mystery is something that I felt keenly as a child, that I had lost and had to find again.

The final section of this thesis is titled “Pain” and is set in 2006, in the months leading up to my wedding. This is clearly the area of the manuscript that is least polished and developed, but I feel that there is enough of value here to include it. I feel that this section builds strongly on the main themes of the manuscript: the fluidity of identity and negative potential in work, emotional and physical pain, the yearning for space and greater intimacy with nature. I began “Leaving,” by emphasizing the double aspect of the movement towards the Wild that Keats and Thoreau wrote about—towards intimacy with nature, but as importantly, away from spiritual loss and death—and in this section I want to develop this focus. Although my own story in this thesis has largely been separate from my father’s, this section begins to indicate areas of overlap and correspondence that I plan to develop further. This connection is particularly apparent in the theme of work in

this section, and the difficulty I faced in finding and holding a job in 2006 while dealing with at times intense chronic pain. This experience is depicted in the pieces “Work,” “Audition,” and “Pain.”

As I have been working on this thesis, I have been conscious of echoes building between the various “parts.” At times this has been unintentional, but in this section, I was conscious of developing the connection between romantic love and work that was suggested earlier in “Naknek,” in the relationship between Ron and Katherine. I thought that the scene of the two of them alone at the lake presented a nice contrast with the negative description of work, and its link to Ron’s suffering, expressed in the piece. This scene connects an experience of intimacy with nature with romantic love, and this was something I wanted to build on in the Pain section. The poem “Work,” likely the most experimental piece in this manuscript, uses a violent romantic-sexual metaphor to depict the experience of work during this time—something close to a rape, in fact, in the faux-seduction that masks a gross power imbalance, in the lack of control over one’s own body—while the short prose piece “Pain” suggests the possibility of physical love as a balance against pain.

“Leaving” ends with the longest piece in the collection, “The Ordinary Man,” which developed out of a creative interpretation of my father’s life. I used to feel a kind of horror—mixed with amazement and admiration—watching him leave every morning to a series of jobs he hated with increasing conviction. I couldn’t understand how he did it. He rarely complained, but at the end of the day would collapse in my mother’s arms for a few seconds, before putting the groceries down and starting to make dinner. In the poem “Ballgame,” the last piece in the Childhood section, I think I got closest to

expressing the combination of fear, pity, and admiration that I felt towards my father growing up. The poem begins with one of his semi-frequent outbursts—roars of rage—breaking the serenity of a spring afternoon baseball game. When I was writing “Ballgame,” I initially ended the poem by dwelling on the shock of his anger, but in revision I changed the final stanza to express the love I have for him, and the respect I feel for how hard he worked for our family:

I remember the days when my father would come home  
from work, groceries for dinner, the day’s newspaper  
in hand for us to read.  
If we needed something from the store  
he would go back out and get it for us.

The lines are simple but they felt honest in a way I hadn’t expected. I had expected to dwell in the discomfort of the moment, but this element of warmth gave the piece a new dimension. When I wrote those lines, I surprised myself, and I started crying. It was going to be a nasty poem, but it turned out differently.

“The Ordinary Man” takes its most direct influence from Thoreau—who I was reading intensely at the time I wrote the poem. I wanted the story to depict not simply depression and the painful toll of work that I perceived in my father’s life, but also something lighter and more hopeful that is expressed in Thoreau’s call to break free from one’s attachments and lead a more authentic life. Frank begins this process at the beginning of the story, as he quits his job, and continues it later when—confronted by his friends and wife and psychiatrist in an “intervention” style scene—he announces to them all: “I’m sorry, everyone. Thank you for coming... but I have to leave now.” This sense of movement that Thoreau called for was the same motivation that led me to leave

college in 1999, and in this piece—and the “Pain” section as a whole—I am interested in bringing together my father’s story and my own.

This story also cycles back to the theme of identity engaged in the first section of the thesis, of its fluid and even illusory qualities, with a series of puns and quips about Frank’s “real” identity. When he comes into the doctor’s office for his visit with the psychiatrist, Dr. Bright greets him by reading him his horoscope which says that “Someone new is about to enter into your life.” Although the issue of Frank’s identity, and future health, is left unsettled—in the final scene, Frank walks into the empty house of another man and casually takes a seat—I believe that the uncertainty of the ending is balanced by a sense of promise. Frank has made a change in his life, and begun to look for conditions where he can live more authentically.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE WILD

#### *I. Darling Lake*

To be between these cracking brick walls  
that catch every wail and child's moan  
With cinder dust trapped in the dawn light  
and outside my cramped room, a woman,  
her skin chalky and creased with anger  
at me and who else  
banging her tiny fist and shouting my full name  
"Marc Angelo", that I haven't heard since I was six.  
I had an idea of a quiet place  
far removed  
where I could read Anna Karenna, finally, or if not,  
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, again.  
And all the things I had read about or seen on TV,  
white pebbled sand, trees, an ocean greater than I could imagine.  
At Darling Lake, town of 65, in Nova Scotia, Canada,  
I lay down on a styrofoam bed for days  
and didn't move, didn't make a sound.  
Trickling river, smells of beech and pine.

#### *II. Peggy's Cove*

We meet at one in the afternoon to drive to Peggy's Cove,  
a tiny fishing village on the northeastern edge of Nova Scotia.  
The day is bright and crisp, early in fall.  
The blue sky pounds through my temples.  
Dry cherry and mustard-brown leaves scatter the steps  
outside the Heritage House Hostel, in downtown Halifax,  
our home this week and maybe next.  
As we make small talk, getting to know our weekend companions,  
our breath draws cloud-rings in the air.  
"Hi, my name is Marc." I can be anyone, and you  
too. Anxious smiles and cold hands.  
Today, a new country to discover.  
Louis and Lynda, proprietors, organize road-trips  
Bi-weekly excursions.  
Sometimes just to a park on the other side of the city.  
Always a rush to the clipboard,  
but I know

the time it appears, outside the kitchen door, Sunday evenings.  
I wait silently.  
We can't resist.  
Fools for a new piece of land.  
I've been here two months now. Each day people coming  
in and out.  
On the T.V, the Leafs are losing to Montreal.  
Louis says there is a storm warning but chuckles  
touching his round belly. "You'll never make it  
to Peggy's if you wait for calm weather." Lynda stares  
absently at the screen. Two dozen people around the long couches  
with beer and popcorn. Domi scores and a cheer erupts,  
mingled with a few lonely boos. A man with a shaggy blonde beard  
waves a Leafs flag.  
"Bring an extra pair of socks,"  
Lynda says finally, a thin smile, her eyes not moving from the game.  
Haven't been to P.E.I yet. Meaning to go.  
Louis says maybe November. Hoping this trip  
better than last.  
Labrador wasn't so good. 6 days might have been  
overly ambitious, looking back.  
Louis can admit as much  
now. We spent the morning climbing in the damp woods of  
Grand Hermine Park.  
Mid-afternoon, a middle-aged woman  
had a nervous breakdown while climbing a rocky waterfall.  
She was wearing a shirt that said "Life's a beach and then you die."  
Earlier that day, I had talked to her.  
Jill, I think  
her name was. She'd said she'd left her family,  
husband and two kids a year before.  
Travelling ever since.  
"Why did you do it?" I asked. She said her husband  
was a first-class jerk and her boys were college-age  
(my oldest looks just like you, she said, touching my chin lightly)  
She said she had forgotten who she was.  
The kids would be there when she got back.  
Now she was up there perched on a slick rock  
like an injured bird, shouting nonsense.  
Bizarre family tangents.  
A young man, Jeremy, unofficial leader of our group,  
went up to rescue her but he slipped and fell badly,  
caught between two sharp slabs. "Oww, fuck," he cried.  
Jill was still going off.  
A group went up to help Jeremy. I stayed below.

I looked high up, past the noise and pain. The view  
was breathtaking.  
Light through the leaves. Glinting off the  
tumbling water.  
Outside the hostel, tapping my feet  
no one left to talk to.  
Avert eyes from the woman from last week. Spanish with  
black braids. I think I told her I fed  
tigers for the national circus, was on a mission  
always a mission  
to find my father, a fall-down drunk and failed poet.  
She knows too much.  
But she's on the same game, pretends not to see me.  
A fat pigeon struts around her feet.  
Our van goes clumping up a bumpy road while the sun  
lowers behind us, spreading hues of pink and gold.  
I'll spend my time getting to know a girl from Germany  
she smiles while we talk.  
Starting to feel Jack Keuroac. Talk some shit about the banalities  
of college, the couped-up life. On the road to Peggy's Cove.  
Consider quoting Neil Young, Hey Hey My My  
but decide against it.  
And when we settle on a hill against the Atlantic pummeling,  
I can see the whole of Halifax, the bay splashed with moonlight.  
I can hold the small, decent homes in two hands.  
The sky is dark, roiling.  
Below, the ocean is righteous, tossing two white ships,  
a mile from shore, around like toys. "Come in, come in,"  
I start to say, but they only twirl and bounce.  
Mattias, our driver, a lanky Italian kid not much older than myself,  
calls us back into the van.  
A light rain, warm on the skin, begins to fall.  
Gusts of sea-salted wind gather strength.  
Everyone has turned to leave but I wander out  
to the cliff's edge, where a man with frosted white hair  
and black-frame glasses looks down at the water.  
He is from our group. I look back at the blue van.  
Heads sticking out windows, unknown faces.  
"They're going to start honking," I say.  
He nods. "We can't do anything for them," I say.  
"I know," he says.  
The sky, a tangle of black-blue clouds, is lowering, like  
a closing lid. I look back at Mattias, who is making frantic  
arm gestures at us.  
He calls out, but the wind swallows his words.

I can hear the engine kick, wheels grinding on the gravel path,  
but I don't move. The man beside me looks up.  
"It's going to storm," he says,  
touching my shoulder.  
"We should find shelter."

### III. Naknek

*--Alaska, June 1999*

Just after dawn. "Time to go, Marco--". A hand, as large and hairy as a water rat, shakes my bare shoulder. Half-asleep, I grab the long butcher's knife cold against my side, spin onto my chest flashing the blade. Ron jumps back. "Jesus, kid! It's me." He looks at me a moment and shakes his head, a tall, thick-chested man in his mid-forties, whose pinkish, clean-shaven face I am seeing today for the first time. He kicks open the door of our trailer lodging, the bronze numbers spelling '86' clinking, the grey-blue wood peeling in wide strips. This morning the northern Alaska sky is black and dull-orange, like a crackling fire about to go out. Thin fog floats around the woods that rise, gradually, beyond the factory, until they merge entirely with the clouds. The air tastes sweet, wet grass mingling with the just-arrived tubs of fresh salmon. I can faintly hear T.D and the boys driving the loading trucks up from the river, T.D shouting something, pounding a basketball on the gravel driveway, scattered, mocking laughter.

"I'm sorry, Ron," I say. I suck in sharp breathes of cold air, trying to calm my nerves. The smell of woods heavy in the air, bending around me, an invitation. Ron leans down and picks the knife, still extended, from my lightly trembling hands. He appraises me, his coal-black eyes small and empty. "What did you think you were going do anyway?" He

crosses the room and slips the blade between the metal coils of his cot. His back to me, he mutters, "Damn college kids."

"Angel," I say under my breath, ashamed of the heat in my cheeks, that my heart hasn't slowed its anxious rhythm. Ron spits low, mirthless laughter. "Grab your stuff," he says. "We gotta be going." His voice is swift and coarse, not at all like the previous night, lying in the dark room, when he had opened up to me, about his runaway daughter, his three marriages, the time last year when he got too drunk and drove his truck through his neighbor Ted Kingsley's brand-new two-car garage. Ted had burst into the dusty space in a silk robe aiming a shotgun. "Well, hello Ted!" Ron had bellowed, his windshield cracked, splintered pine sliding down the glass, onto the hood. His breath was hot with whisky. "I'm just looking for a place to park myself," he said to Ted.

Me and Ron had been roommates for one week in Naknek, both of us working the day shift in the freezer plant of the Fish King salmon cannery, but until that night Ron hadn't said a word, hadn't even said his own name. We worked from nine in the morning until midnight, but I never saw Ron when I got back to the trailer. I don't know where he went. One morning I woke early to find him sitting on the edge of the bed in nothing but his tall rubber work boots and red-checked boxer shorts. He was staring at the wall in an odd way, eyes squinting, his ear nudging forward as though trying to receive a message in the wood paneling. "Hey, you all right, friend?" I said. Ron looked at me with a small smile and what seemed a fleeting recognition, but then his face went blank again and he turned back to the wall.

Last night he told me about his first love, Katherine-Anne Walcott, how they'd cut Mr. Shepard's sixth-period music class ("What am I going to need to sing for?"), take a 6-

pack of Bud down to Watson Lake. Our windowless room was so dark I couldn't see my hand in front of my eyes. Outside, the night was quiet apart from the near-constant chorus of snapping dragonflies and crickets droning in the tall grass. I could hear Ron breathing, deep and even, while he lay in bed. He would talk a little then go quiet, like he was waiting for the next memory to jar his mind.

Some days in the spring, when no one was around, he and Katie would strip to their underwear and splash in the water, swim until their arms grew too heavy. After, they would stretch out under thick-limbed cottonwoods, patches of sunlight and shadow moving on the lightly inclined slope. Ron with a book, something about flying or war (he had wanted desperately to join his friends in Vietnam but had failed his physical with bad eyes and a "stump leg" that forced him to walk with a limp), Katie not doing anything, staring out at the water. Her blonde hair almost white in the sun, wet against her back. She looked at him and smiled. "Whatta you wanna go die for?" All his friends were in the jungle. It wasn't right that he was home, the only one from the group left behind. It wasn't right. In the sunlight she squinted and turned her face. He moved next to her in the grass and stroked her arm. The softest skin. They married just out of high school, in the small Montana town where they'd grown up.

I stand from the bed and scoop underwear and damp socks into my canvas backpack. "What's going on, Ron?" I ask. At the doorway Ron begins to turn to me, but stops, his sharp-boned face dim in profile. "That friend of yours," he says. "Angel." He turns again outside. He lights a cigarette, puffs, leaves it burning low at his side.

Angel Ramirez was a young, geeky-looking *varon* from Mexico City, all spindly limbs, square-frame black glasses, and tight-lipped seriousness. He dressed funny. He

wore these faded golf shirts--odd colors, yellows and pinks and watery-blues-- buttoned to the top and tucked into jeans that hugged his thin, strong legs and failed to reach his bony ankles. In the first, lazy weeks in Naknek before the fish came, when there was nothing to do but explore in the woods and wait out the long cool nights playing basketball on the gravel courts behind the plant, I had reached out to him. Whenever I saw Angel, almost always alone or, when around others, utterly silent, I couldn't help but feel a twitch of sympathy. He seemed so badly out of place. While we played full-court off to the side, watching, or so it seemed. It was hard to tell. He gave no reaction to the hurtling contest in front of him, but wore a look of intense focus, as though working out some sustained problem in his head.

I remember one night (the sun didn't fall completely until three in the morning, and we could play off the dying orange light until nearly that time) the ball dribbling into the tall grass where Angel stood. A pleasant aching in my legs, jogging over, smiling with outstretched hands. Angel holding the ball just a moment too long, so that I asked, a little confused, if he wanted to play. "Hey," I called out, unsure, suddenly, if he spoke English, motioning with my open hands. "Here." Past midnight and Angel looking away, at the woods packed tight below us, the moon glowing in the clear dark sky. No response, then at last a grim smile and a quick underhand toss, like he had forgotten the thing was in his hand, like it was hot on his skin. The ball limping towards me through the grass, Angel turning and walking away. As he left he glanced over his shoulder, back towards the court, and our eyes connected. For the first time I saw his face soften, his mouth fall open in a way that seemed to ask a question, to wonder, even, if I would follow behind him. The moonlight radiant on his copper skin.

After that, he stopped watching the games, and besides, we hardly played anymore. But I still saw him often, eating alone in the cafeteria with watchful eyes or sitting out on the cracked wood steps of his trailer, and I approached him a second time one hot afternoon, when the absence of work had started to infect us all. You could feel the change in the air—a thickening silence—in the way irritable boredom had replaced the easy joking and time-filling games of the first week. Something had changed in the last week. Now the men smoked hungrily all day in groups of two or three, watching each other closely, some new suspicion on their faces, and paced the factory grounds in aimless circles, like ants trapped in a glass jar.

There was nothing going on. Each morning before dawn the boys drove in their clumping white trucks up the dirt road to tell T.D the river was still quiet. There were three of them packed tight into the front bench, two skinny boys around a bigger one, wider than the other two together. The big one smiled a lot and liked to pop his gum and pull on the face of the one next to him. Then though they would tussle, while the third—an odd looking boy whose sagging white face looked bleached somehow, too bright—would lean out the window and talk with T.D. T.D would dig circles with his heel in the gravel, kicking up puffs of dust.

I ventured out into the woods one day behind the factory to think twice before going far into the forest. That was where the Grizzley's were thought to roam. A wide gravel path led upwards for miles, drecepit homes made of corrugated plastic appearing now and then in the grass on each side. About halfway up, Angel appeared over the crest of the hill, shirtless and wearing only tight black track pants. He moved quickly with a slouched, loping stride, the sun hot on his skin. He barely looked at me as he approached,



and I called out to him “Hey,” but couldn’t think of anything to say after that. He stopped and stared blankly at me, that same look of distraction as the night at the basketball court, like he’d been pulled abruptly from his own interior world.

“Anyplace to eat up ahead.” I felt foolish looking at the grass blowing soundlessly all around us, clusters of sumac, the black woods further up ahead. He shook his head with an earnestness that surprised me and said “No.” I nodded and continued walking, while Angel went the other way. I turned to watch him as he moved down the hill with the sun on his back. The paved road broke into weeds and gravel, bare and flat for a distance. The ground became softer and darker while the woods closed around me. I stayed in the woods for hours that day. Sun shone through the pine leaves. At one point while I saw Angel below bathing under a crashing waterfall. He was naked and let the water tumble over his skin, his arms spread wide, welcoming. I rubbed my eyes, disbelieving, having seen Angel leaving the woods in the opposite direction.

Ron glances back at me. The air is wet with drifting fog. “Let’s get moving,” he says quietly. He brings the smoke to his lips, holds it there while he pulls a flannel shirt over his broad back. When he lifts his arms I see for the first time a pink and grey scar the size of a fist, bright and smooth, along his waist. Ron glances back and meets my eyes, holds my gaze coldly a moment, then he steps onto the small trailer deck and ashes his cigarette over the railing. “You about ready?” he calls stiffly.

“Yeah.” His back to me, I move, silently, quickly, across the room and take the knife from under the thin mattress. When Ron turns I am placing it into my bag. His uncomprehending eyes seem shrunken, grey. He stares at me with his head with head cocked, resting almost on his shoulder. He releases a quivering line of smoke.

“I’m taking it with me, Ron,” I say. I meet his gaze for a long moment, then look down, fitting the blade between sweaty undershirts and worn paperbacks.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHILDHOOD

#### *I. Lincoln Home, 1987*

Cold yellow sun  
firing through the clouds, as bright as fresh cement.  
White-brick home on Lincoln,  
squat and dripping with vines,  
our family's fourth rental  
this long year  
in Vancouver.  
The back steps brushed  
with crumbling red leaves.  
I want to know  
everything that is going on now  
in my father's basement study. Beethoven battering  
the feeble walls  
again, blinding flashes of light and  
gale-force winds,  
uncontained.  
I know this song, the same  
as last night when  
Mom sent me downstairs to fetch  
my father for dinner.  
I didn't want to go.  
"Frank! Frank!" She had cried,  
as sudden as a hammer's blow. "That damn music."  
Mom's long apron covered with flour  
and pink-grey dots of chicken blood.  
Hunting down the silent, unfamiliar stairs  
(missing the easy give and ancient wood-creak of the Victorian  
on Bentham) Beethoven filling out  
in waves  
the deep blue space, all dark but for a single  
frosted pane in the corner,  
a head without a face. Notes swelling,  
skittering strings  
then silence. When I look in on the room  
my father's bright tormented face  
is still in motion, bowed slightly  
and turning side to side, his eyes

pinned shut. His body rocking gently  
side to side  
on the blue wicker chair.  
Today the yard is carved into blocks  
of muted amber light.  
Below, the music  
clears a threshold. It soaks the tufted moss  
crawling at the foot of the house,  
turns it a darker green.  
I set my knapsack  
on the leaf-brushed stairs.  
Hundreds of ants squirming in the dark moss.  
Mr. Brown, stern mustached face,  
called me out today  
in front of the fifth-grade class.  
Caught during lunch-hour food fight,  
hot-dog in hand, cocked to throw.  
He made me stand at my seat.  
I was near tears  
and Stuart Morris whispered  
“Holy Shit”  
his wide soft mouth open in astonishment  
Never a bad word from Mr. Brown before.  
When the bell rang for recess  
he held me back and  
put his hand on my shoulder.  
“You’re a real leader in this class,  
Marc, don’t let us down again.”  
At the end of the day, talking to Kate Stanley  
in the dim cubby-room, close enough  
to touch her hand,  
while the others put on their winter coats  
and began to leave.  
Music scraping through the white brick wall,  
cracked and scuffed.  
Beethoven stamping towards the close  
with a kind of wild joy.  
The sound eases.  
All is quiet.  
Sun dips behind the clouds  
leaving fissures of light on the lawn.

## II. *Grass*

The home on Collingwood was a large, unpainted clapboard structure, alone on a hill above a sparse forest of pine and cedar that, regardless of the season, appeared sickly and foreboding. At least this is how I remember those woods. It seems improbable that, as my mind recalls, the bare branches twisted upwards like lonely arms year-round, or else, curling down, stuck in the muddy earth like the bars of cages. It may not have been this way, but then, memory has its own life. It returns to us as a dream, transfigured, the essence of a moment preserved in image or bodily sensation, shined to a brilliant clarity, the unwanted details discarded. I remember the woods descending slowly, so that I would sometimes forget completely I was going downhill, until I turned and stared up with astonishment at the steep path I had traced. Eventually, the woods leveled and a clearing of tall yellowish grass appeared. Light fell on the wide field and turned the grass as pale as wheat. The grass, up to my knees, went on for what seemed like miles, until the granite church appeared. It was oddly placed in the middle of the grass, like a traveler left behind some hundred years earlier, a good distance from the nearby road. Sunday afternoons I would go out to the field with a couple of tennis balls and the smooth, reddish-brown baseball bat my dad had made from a fallen hickory branch in the woods. I would spend all morning and afternoon out in the field. The grass was fine and slid like ribbon through my fingers. I would knock the fuzzy green balls around the field, watch the families move silently through the grass in their best clothes.

## III. *Our Shared Dream*

I remember that bat well. It was comically large—34 inches, as long as the bats the pros used, and much thicker than my thirteen-year-old arms. It took all my strength to swing. Baseball was all I really cared about for a few years, around the time we moved from San Mateo to Vancouver. Baseball was a way to fit in, and it was something I was good at. Our family had a new home every year from the time I was nine until I was 15—the result of my dad’s often frantic job search and frequent unemployment—and it was hard to keep friends with all the travel. My dad justified the size of the bat by saying that I would eventually grow into it, and also that if I was going to make it to the major leagues (our shared dream at the time) I would need to start building my strength now. It wasn’t just him saying this. This was the consensus of Mr. Gilchrist, Mr. Stevens, and Mr. Rollins, coaches of the Western B.C All-Stars. The three of them were scouts for the Seattle Mariners. When they had showed up in a long Mercedes convertible the first evening practice in May, each wearing crisp blue Mariner uniforms with their names etched on the back, a hush had fallen over all of us. Their shiny cleats clattered on the pavement as they crossed towards the field. That summer I had started at third-base, the youngest player on the team, and we had come within one run of winning the national championship. My dad had been out of work for half a year, and couldn’t afford a ticket, but the parents of the other kids on the team chipped in and bought him round-trip airfare to Montreal. They surprised him with the ticket at the team-party we held after winning the provincial title. He was so moved, barely holding back tears, and I hugged him while everyone at the party cheered.

The final game was played in Valleyfield, Quebec, a rural town north of Montreal, in front of 5,000 people. People sat bunched together on a steep hill behind the

outfield wall, stretched out on blankets, so close you could hardly see the grass. At home plate, their legs appeared milk-white, reflecting the sun, their faces small and black, like little portals to a new world, unsettling but also full of mystery, full of possibility. My name was announced over the P.A. It seemed to echo back in an extended groan among the black faces on the hill. It passed like a secret handshake from one blurred dark face—no mouth, no lips—to the next. And then my dad’s voice, plaintive, mild, cutting through the others, silencing everything. “*Come on, Marc!*”

It was the final inning. I was the lead-off hitter. The pitcher grinned with the sun on his face, pink gums like dripping paint in the light. The first pitch sailed near my chin and I stumbled back, almost falling. “Whoa, there, fella! Hang on tight!” the umpire, a heavy-set man with a puffy brown-red beard pushing against his mask. Murmurous laughter spread across the hill. I looked out at the small black faces. My teammates stood in the dugout shouting their voices raw, pounding the chain-link fence. The next pitch came in near the dirt, but I swung instinctively and knocked the ball into the gap between left and center field. It shot through the grass towards the wall, and as I approached second-based I could see the third-base coach, Mr. Stevens, clapping and waving me around. Everything was silent, and as I rounded towards third I was already thinking about making it home. But in an instant, Mr. Stevens’ puffy red face grew tense with fear, his eyes huge, and he signaled desperately for me to get down. It was too late for that, though. I was already thinking about home-plate, and when the ball landed in the third baseman’s mitt well ahead of my arrival I didn’t even think about sliding. I lowered my shoulder and threw all my weight into the kid with the ball, shoving him hard as he fell to the ground. I stood over him and for a moment everything was still silent. He held onto

the ball, and the noise of the stadium came rushing in from all sides—more garbled laughter from the hill, wild-eyed threats from the opposing dugout—as I was dragged off the field by the third-base umpire.

#### *IV. Father Britton*

It was early in spring and I had come in too late from the field. Mom and Dad were at the dining room table hunched over strewn papers, receipts. Mom held up a crumpled blue page up to the light and read out numbers, while Dad jotted on a legal pad, entered the numbers on a calculator. Wind picked up swiftly outside, snapping the screen door shut behind me. I had run the last part up the hill, wanting to make dinner. A plate of meatloaf, smeared in ketchup, sat uneaten by the sink. I stood inside the doorway, my body humming, shoulders throbbing an agreeable ache. My parents continued, absorbed in their task. Behind the kitchen windows, catalpa turned lightly, leaves grown huge this week. Beanpods hung down like tassles and knocked against each other. Dad held the calculator close to his eyes, staring hard like the result that appeared had to be a mistake, and muttered, “Goddamn.” I began walking towards the food at the sink, but put down her pen and turned to me. “Eat later,” she said. “Father Britton’s coming over. You need to get cleaned up.” I stood staring blankly. We rented from the church, and every six months Father Britton would come by the house to renew our lease. We had lived in the large, remote home on Collingwood for over a year, our longest stay in one place since we had moved to Vancouver from San Mateo, California when I was nine.



I didn't want to leave. I could feel a cold pressure on the back of my neck, like a large hand pressing softly, firmly, into the skin. Dad again brought the small screen to his eyes, and shook his head. "You heard your mother," he said absently. "Go on now."

*V. Ballgame*

It's happened again. Another outburst,  
my father's soft lined face  
red-purple,  
like pomegranate.

You don't expect this at a Little League baseball game.  
The dull repeated thump of the ball against leather,  
hard glare of sunlight  
on the white rubber pitcher's mound.  
Summer near.  
In the on-deck circle  
I watch a single-engine plane,  
white with a broad red strip across its body,  
cross the blue sky  
and disappear into cirrus  
spread like handprints.

The stunned, pale face of Angie Sengara,  
coach's wife.  
Soft sheen of light on the mound.  
Again, the pounding of the ball on leather.  
She had said I should have caught  
the ball and tagged out  
the runner  
sliding into third.  
I will learn this later.

I remember the days when my father would come home  
from work, groceries for diner, the day's newspaper  
in hand for us to read.  
If we needed something from the store  
he would go back out and get it for us.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### PAIN

#### I. *Walking*

In her long narrative poem, “The Glass Essay,” Anne Carson narrates a failed love affair in the context of her close reading of Emily Brontë’s life and work. The piece develops through nine distinct sections that illuminate the complex relationship between the speaker, the speaker’s mother, and Brontë. Each section begins with a one-word title that relates, sometimes indirectly, even mysteriously, to the action that follows. “The Glass Essay” is largely about finding connections—between the speaker and Brontë, between humans and the natural world—and this glancing, mosaic-like structure reinforces this idea. The image of “glass” is central to this poem, suggesting both a connective possibility, but also division and isolation. In the second stanza of the poem, “Three,” which begins with the speaker’s arrival at her mother’s remote country home, and introduces the relationship between the speaker, her mother and Brontë, Carson writes, “It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass. Now and then a remark trails through the glass” (2). This sense of spiritual isolation—and enclosure—pervades the poem, and yet in this early scene the possibility of transcendence is hinted at. Beyond the “dark and small” kitchen window in which this scene takes place, “there is the moor...It extends as far as the eye can see” (2). Over the course of the poem, Carson develops the moor—and the natural world more generally—as an image of freedom that is crucial to the spiritual balance of the speaker and Brontë. It is this relationship to

environment that links the two women, and which allows the speaker to see her own grief in a new, more positive light.

Carson begins “The Glass Essay” by grounding the reader in a specific narrative moment. In the introduction to the book, writer Guy Davenport commends Carson’s “Tolstoyan skill” in developing character, and this is evident in the first lines of the piece, which instantly evoke a mood of unrest. “I can hear little clicks inside my dream,” Carson writes, “Night drips its silver tap/down the back” (1). We learn the cause of her discomfort—a dream of her former partner, Law, “the man who/ left in September,”—and her plan of action. We know that tomorrow she will leave to visit her mother. But it is the details of this first scene that linger, and that locate us emotionally in the action. In the bathroom mirror sees “white streaks” down her face, and comments, “I rinse *the* face and return to bed,” (1- italics mine). Carson’s description of this action is significant. By using the word “the” instead of the expected “my”, she indicates the speaker’s detachment from her own body, evoking a sense of disassociation. Finally, we learn that is the speaker’s fear of “turning into” Emily Bronte that is her “main fear,” one which she plans to “confront” during the weekend at her mother’s home. One of three silent women “around the kitchen table” in the first scene at the mother’s home, Bronte is an insistent, often troubled presence in the poem, and the speaker’s “confrontation” with the meaning of her life drives the narrative.

In developing the connection between the speaker, her mother, and Emily Bronte, Carson emphasizes the relationship between each woman and her surrounding environment. The first image linking the two comes at the end of this second section, as the speaker elaborates on her fear of turning into Bronte, imagining “my lonely life

around me like a moor,/ my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of/  
transformation/ that dies when I come into the kitchen door/ What meant is it, *Emily*, we  
need” (2- italics mine). This image of walking the moor appears later as Carson reveals  
Bronte’s preoccupation with walking the muddy lands around her own home: “She spent/  
most of the hours of her life brushing the carpet/walking the moor” (6). A solitary figure,  
Bronte was most fully alive on these walks. Carson writes of a neighbor who “recall[ed]  
her/ coming in from a walk on the moors/ with her face ‘lit up by divine light’” and  
suggests that Bronte discovered the imagery and inspiration for *Wuthering Heights*  
through these long, daily excursions (10).

The idea of moving freely through space, seizing liberty through a direct  
engagement with one’s environment and a return to the physical, sensual self, is shown to  
be a critical theme in both the speaker and Emily’s lives. For each woman, walking is a  
critical expression of agency, and indeed an act of resistance. The dominant metaphor in  
this poem is one of space. Throughout the piece, Carson contrasts the openness of  
walking the moor with images of constraint. It is clear that for each woman, walking the  
moor suggests the possibility of transcendence, a kind of escape—from domesticity, from  
societal judgment, from loneliness and pain, whether physical or emotional.

Reflecting on Bronte’s writing, the speaker in “The Glass Essay” observes “her  
poetry from beginning to end is concerned with prisons/ vaults, cages, bars, curbs, bits,  
bolts, fetters/ locked windows, narrow frames, aching walls” (6). Part of the speaker’s  
engagement with Bronte in this poem involves an attempt to understand this obsession  
with liberty. Moving fluidly between the voices of critic and poet, Carson recalls an early  
critic of Bronte’s work who asked, “Why all the fuss?/ She wanted liberty. Well didn’t

she have it?/ Why all this beating of wings?/ What was this cage, invisible to us/ which she felt herself to be confined in?" before responding in the ensuing lines, "Well there are many ways of being held prisoner,/ I am thinking as I stride over the moor" (6-7). This line, "there are many ways of being held prisoner" is repeated later in the poem and emphasizes the spiritual link between the speaker and Bronte and the critical importance of images of space in this poem.

For the speaker, "being held prisoner" refers both to emotional suffering—and what is described as the brutal "necessity" of love—and also, it is suggested, physical enclosure. Here, Carson contrasts the image of the kitchen with the openness of the moor. In the final moment of "She", the speaker's look "transformation" on the moor dies upon entering her mother's kitchen. The next section, "Three" (referring to the speaker, her mother, and the silent presence of Emily Bronte) begins with the women "silent" around the kitchen table (2-3). The kitchen, Carson tells us, "is dark and small but out the window/ there is the moor, paralyzed with ice" (3). Although the moor is "paralyzed," reflecting the speaker's own condition of grief, it nonetheless represents openness and possibility. By using the word "but" to transition from the description of the kitchen and the moor, Carson suggests an important contrast between the two spaces, indeed a sense of relief. Moreover, by ending the line at "window", Carson a feeling of movement, not only emphasizing a distinction between the two spaces on each side of the glass, but creating the experience of moving importantly from one space to the next.

Carson further associates the kitchen with emotional estrangement when she writes that the afternoon light reminds her of childhood: "it is the light of the stalled time after lunch/ when clocks tick/ and hearts shut/ and fathers leave to go back to work/ and

mothers stand at the kitchen sink pondering/ something they never tell” (7). Intriguingly, this image of spiritual isolation—of closed hearts and women “holding onto” too much—is followed by the speaker’s mother chiding her, in lieu of her grief over Law, “You remember too much... Why hold onto all that?” (7). At first, the mother’s statement may appear insensitive, with its suggestion of simply forgetting—or suppressing—the speaker’s grief. Yet the speaker’s immediate response, “Where can I put it down?” indicates there is also an important truth in what she says. The question of where to “put” emotional pain is one animates the speaker’s inquiry into Bronte’s life. After posing this central question, Carson moves directly to the image of walking the moor, as the speaker states, “As a rule after lunch mother has a nap/ and I go out for a walk... crops of ice are changing to mud all around me” (7).

Carson identifies the shared act of walking the moor as vital to the liberty of both the speaker. The speaker’s relationship to Bronte, however, is complicated. Although she fears “turning into” Bronte, it is clear that she also draws strength from the writer’s example. Where critics have lamented Bronte’s “sad stunted life.../Uninteresting, unremarkable, wracked by disappointment/ and despair,” the speaker expresses admiration for “The little raw soul caught by no one,” seeing in Bronte someone who withstood the pain of loneliness and isolation and forged a powerful artistic identity. While praising Bronte’s “inexorable spirit,” Carson is also aware of the suffering she experienced, a result of both the illness that brought her life to an end at the age of 31 (“pain no words can render”) and also the demands of society—to marry, to engage in the social customs of her time—that she could not meet. Despite taking strength from Bronte, the speaker recognizes that in some ways she *was* trapped, and could not attain the liberty

she desired. Carson both emphasizes the importance of walking in Bronte's life, and indicates the gendered basis of her confinement—a failure to live up to a model of expected female behavior—in the line “She could have been a great navigator if she'd been male” (5).

For both women, liberty is importantly linked to the act of walking, and the direct contact with the natural world. In the section of the poem titled “Liberty,” the speaker says that “as soon as the morning light hits my eyes I want to be out in it--/ moving along the moor/into the first blue currents and cold navigation of everything awake...Out on the moor all is brilliant and hard after a night of frost” (16). While she finds relief on the moor, her senses awakened again after the break-up with Law, the land also has the power to stir emotional pain. It is important to remember, however, that in terms of the necessary contact between a person and the natural world, this desired transcendence does not come easily. It is, to use Carson's important description from earlier in the poem, a “confrontation.”

On her first walk the speaker reflects, “the bare blue trees and bleached wooden sky of April/ carve into me with knives of light” (7). Later, walking in the cold morning light, the sound of “frozen mud crunch[ing] underfoot...startles me back into the dream I was having... sweet dreams of lying in Law's/ arms like a needle in water” (16). The memory provokes a vivid, and frightening, experience of loss—running into the wind, away from the memory, the speaker imagines herself trailed by “Goblins, devils and death” (16)—and yet Carson shows the surrounding moor to be integral to the speaker's emotional recovery.



After her terrifying vision, the speaker recalls that “In the days after Law left/ I felt as if the sky was torn off my life,” and over the course of the poem, healing is found through a reintegration with the natural world. While the speaker’s mother encourages her to move past, or simply suppress, her feelings of grief, asking “What does it accomplish/ all that raking up the past?” the speaker finds solace in the cyclical changes of the environment around her (4). Carson illustrates the speaker’s gradual healing through careful description of the moor. At the beginning of the poem, the moor, “paralyzed with ice” and scarred with “dead leaves” and “pine filth,” suggests death. Yet Carson indicates the change in season and mood that is to come: “At the middle of the moor/ where the ground goes down into a depression,/ the ice has begun to unclench./ Black open water comes/ curdling up like anger” (3). For the speaker, walking the moor is a sensual experience that allows for the claiming of her own emotions, the changing environment comforting in that it suggests the temporality of her grief.

## II. *Confrontation*

I am struck by the idea in Carson’s poem of “confrontation” with nature. For Carson, engagement with nature involves the recognition of loss, but also the painful awareness, and ultimate acceptance of mortality. The idea that all things die is discovered to be freeing, beautiful even. In the “Glass Essay,” the speaker must experience grief before it can pass, and her movement in nature is ultimately a movement towards pain. Out on the moor, the speaker can no longer hide from emotion, can no longer, as her mother wishes, pull the blinds over the uncomfortable parts of life. After earlier in the poem chastising her daughter for dwelling too much on the past, the mother later states, “You know you

can pull the drapes in that room” (21). The speaker refers to this as “one of our oldest arguments,” and tells us that in contrast to her mother, “who always closes her bedroom drapes tight before going to/ bed at night,” at least by the end of this trip, she opens hers “as wide as possible” (21).

“What’s there to see?” she asks rhetorically, “Moon. Air. Sunrise./ All that light on your face in the morning. Wakes you up/ I like to wake up” (22). This image of light, coming as it does at the end of the poem, after the “pine filth” and cold of the earlier sections, suggests the beginning of the speaker’s emotional healing. After experiencing the pain of losing Law, the speaker is now open to receiving the simple and affirming beauty of sunlight, air, the moon. To be “awake” in nature, as the speaker is by the end of “The Glass Essay,” is to realize that beauty and pain are inseparable, fundamentally linked.

This has been a big lesson for me in the last few years, as I have struggled with chronic pain and depression. The toughest years were 2006-07 in Eugene, Oregon. I was seeing a therapist named Sabin, and he used to talk about “being with” the pain I was experiencing. “Feel it here, in your legs, in your arms,” he would say. “Don’t try to run away from the pain. It will always find you.” The human body is so much stronger than we acknowledge, he used to tell me. People forget that. People get into trouble when we try to “think away”, our pain. “That’s when things get tricky. That’s when people find themselves in real trouble.”

He was a stocky white-haired man in his sixties, a former offensive guard in Canadian Football League. This was helpful because we could talk about rugby. My neck and facial pain had started with a bad rugby injury when I was 18. There were differing

opinions from doctors—some thought it was related to an irregular curvature in my vertebrae, but others minimized the importance of that detail—and the uncertainty, the mystery, was the most difficult part. Nobody could really explain it. A lot of the time, it was painful to talk, and I had begun to avoid interactions with everyone but my closest friends and family. It became difficult to make it through the work day, to hold even a low-paying job, as I bounced from position to position.

### III. *Work*

-- *Eugene, April 2006*

A proposition, a lover's heavy, whispered promise  
before sleep,  
a knife-point demand  
delivered calmly, lovingly  
even, on a crowded downtown  
street. Mid-afternoon.  
No concern for who is watching.  
This is what you will do.  
This is what will happen.  
You promised. I have it here  
in writing.  
You signed the contract  
in your stinking, babbling mouth  
the day you were born. Oh  
did you forget? Touch my leg  
like that. Thank you.  
Rub your hand lightly  
over my chest.  
This is how it will work.  
Give us your body  
and then—only then—  
you can have it back.  
That's it. Look lovingly  
into the floating whites of my eyes,  
which are pure,  
which will always be pure.  
At night, dream of all that waits  
in the not-too-distant  
future. Try to smile

every now and then.  
It is, I should say—  
all things considered,  
all other options  
considered—  
a beautiful arrangement.  
A natural arrangement.  
*Give us your body  
and then you can have it back.*  
This is how it will work.  
Now come here and kiss  
me on the lips.

#### IV. Audition

I had been job-hunting for about 3 months. Rebecca had started her Masters degree in Spanish Literature at the University of Oregon. We needed me to bring home some money. She was worried about my worsening pain and days of depression. We were broke. I applied for everything. I was even willing to be Elmo in a Christmas season parade through downtown Eugene. I really wanted that job, but when I got to the audition there were literally hundreds of men, some as old as 80 and bone-thin, trying on the furry red suits. I waited for hours until I was called into a carpeted room with five other would-be Elmos. No pleasantries were exchanged on our way in. We were competitors.

An attractive middle-aged woman, black dress, kinked red hair, high leather boots, greeted us with smiles as we entered. “Okay guys, you’re all looking very snazzy! Very sharp. I think we have an Elmo in here somewhere. Now you only have one chance here, so when I say ‘Go’ I want you to all approach another Elmo in the room and pretend that the person you are approaching is a *small child*. Are you with me? Good. Now here’s where it gets interesting...” she smiled coyly, saying nothing for a moment. I wondered if she went through this same routine with every new batch of candidates. It

seemed utterly spontaneous, but her words were clearly chosen for maximum effect. Like a mask had been drawn over her, the woman became serious. She put her finger up to her lips and said in a confidential tone, like she were whispering into the ear of each one of us individually, “no talking.” She beamed and her eyes lit up like the lights of a pinball machine. “None! No talking, go!”

The Elmos looked at each other with what I could only imagine was bafflement, as we were behind heavy costumes, and could only see each other’s eyes. It didn’t make sense. No had been assigned to be the children. Any one of us could have done the noble thing and taken on that role first, a leader of sorts, but that was a risky move. She had told us all to be Elmos and that’s what we did.

Inside the costume my breath sounded cavernous. I remembered I had to attend a seminar on selling vacuum cleaners later that day. The woman stepped forward. “Go!” she shouted. There was a short bald man in a black and white striped suit sitting behind the desk. I hadn’t noticed him there in the middle of the room. Until then the woman had been standing directly in front of him. When she moved out of the way, I saw that he was taking careful notes on a red legal pad. He looked up at me for a long moment while he continued writing. Like confused animals, we bounded around the small, square space that was bordered with wall-to-wall mirrors. We greeted each other, rubbing shoulders, miming ebullient gestures. Suddenly the thought came to me. I would take a risk.

I lay down on the floor and began to act like a small child. I looked up with innocent, adoring eyes as one after another grateful and eager Elmo approached me. Just then the man behind the desk said “that’s it,” and the woman came and raised my arm. “You’ve done it,” she declared seriously. “Congratulations.” I was pleased, thinking I had

been given the job, but she quickly added that I had only advanced to the next round of auditions, to be held the following month.

*V. Pain*

*--Vancouver, June 2006*

I am home for a few days with Rebecca before we drive to Arizona to see her parents, and begin planning our wedding. At night in my old bedroom that seems strangely small, like a miniature version of the room I remember, we look through wedding guide-books. Seven shades of blue tuxedo jackets. I can hear my father moving heavily upstairs across the oak hallway. It annoys the hell out of me, always has, but Rebecca often reminds me that I myself walk with heavy steps. "Elephant feet," she will say simply, when I am moving too quickly around the apartment. When she says this I try to smile, but secretly feel uneasy. When she says this I fear that I am turning into my father.

She smiles. "What do you think?" she asks, stretched out on the bed with her head propped in her hands. Blonde curls slip across her forehead. When we first started dating, her beauty was too much to take in. After we made love, I would stare at her face for long periods of time while she dozed next to me. Then she would lift an eye wearily, smiling a little, and mumble, "Don't stare. I can't sleep when you're staring."

I look at the thick hard-bound book that seems as comprehensive as an encyclopedia. "I'll take... blue," I say morosely. The smell of old paper, piles of Sports Illustrated and college essays in the corner, vaguely unpleasant, acidic.

Rebecca closes the heavy book. "You're no fun."

“I know.” I lie on the bed next to her, and begin to kiss her bare chest above her breasts. After a moment of hesitation she swings her hips close to mine. “It’s all going to be fine, you know,” she says quietly, touching my shoulder as I continue kissing. I feel that if I can just continue kissing, keep touching the cool soft skin of her arms and breasts, than the future can be avoided. All that will ever happen is this moment.

I fold my body into hers. “It’s going to be great,” she says.

\*\*\*\*

In the morning I find my father out back on the worn velvet armchair, staring dull-eyed at the high laurel hedge across the brightly lit lawn, like one of the elderly men in Edward Hopper’s *People in the Sun*. Light shines on the glossy dark leaves, shading the newer, lighter leaves at the top of the hedge near-white. I often find him this way, lately, since he has retired, either out in the yard or evenings in the high-ceilinged living room. He will sit like this for hours, perfectly still, alone with thoughts. This has become, it seems, his favorite activity. When he is sitting like this, I don’t bother him.

In that picture of Hopper’s, half-a-dozen people sit in out on a broad concrete patio next to what appears to be a house. This, like much in the painting, is unclear. We see only a sliver of a bare cement structure, two tall windows shielded by heavy drapes. The reason for this gathering is likewise unexplained. Are the people waiting for something? Are they there to enjoy the natural scene in front of them? This seems unlikely. They are dressed in work clothes and regard the view— a wide field of pallid yellowish grass extending to low blue hills—with melancholy detachment, or, in the case of the younger man seated behind the first row of watchers, complete indifference. Absorbed in a book, his head lowered, he clarifies a sense of in the picture of separation

between Nature and Civilization. The hills seem to meet at eye-level the gaze of the onlookers, creating the impression, as poet and art critic Mark Strand has stated, of “Nature and Civilization...staring each other down” (Strand, 31).

## VI. *Night*

Sometimes, in the middle of the night,  
3:00 a.m. or closer to dawn, the first glow  
of light low in the city,  
I can hear the front door closing quietly,  
my father slipping outside  
under the electric blue sky.  
Engine of the old maroon Datsun hiccupping,  
tires wrestling dirt and gravel  
in the driveway,  
skidding away.  
This happens in a flicker of time,  
and when I wake the next morning I am  
unsure if I have imagined it,  
if it was only  
a recurring moment in a dream.  
In the morning, everything is normal,  
as though nothing had happened.  
Dad at the breakfast table, fresh-shaved,  
smelling heavily of Old Spice. He rises  
like a prizefighter out of his chair,  
bouncing a little  
on his heels. He smacks the folded newspaper  
against his palm.  
“Today is going to be the day,  
I can feel it. Laura, I missed some hairs didn’t I?”  
Five months out of work. The week cluttered  
with interviews and impatient  
follow-up phone calls.  
Today he runs a hand roughly over the back of his neck,  
pulling at the long black hairs,  
his soft face twisted  
into a knotty grimace. “No. That won’t do.”  
Mom at the sink in her silk robe, washing dishes.  
“You look great,” she says absently. “Don’t worry.”  
While foam rises, glistening, she gazes



out the bay windows over the sink.  
The sky a haze of radiant cloud,  
sun pushing through the glass.  
It fills the yard, liquid,  
a presence.  
It clings to the ends of her pepper-grey hair.  
“No!” Dad shouts.  
He digs his fingers into the back of his neck,  
rubs hard at the stubbly skin.  
From the drawer next to the sink, he grabs  
a butter-knife, presses it  
to the hairs standing  
on his flesh.  
I want to yell something,  
to stop what is going on,  
but like in a dream I have limited agency.  
I bang my cereal bowl on the table.  
When Mom cries “Frank!” and pulls the knife  
away, wrapping her arms around his shoulders  
while he weeps silently, the light from the  
windows seems to expand in the room.  
The tiny bubbles that fill the sink  
glitter and disappear.

## VII. *The Ordinary Man*

Frank stands behind his desk in the far right corner of the London Bank. His arms are held limp at his sides as he stares out the clear glass wall that looks out on downtown Vancouver. His boss, Bill, asks, "What is it, Frank?" and he glances over his shoulder then turns back to his view. It is early afternoon, and the streets are nearly empty. The sky is pale and grey. Fog hangs low and is advancing on the rooftops of the shops and diners. It is early October and brown-red leaves are all over the sidewalks and clinging to the sides of cars. Frank thinks about the coming snowfall and how the school children that pass in front of the bank every day will soon be invisible under big jackets and stocking caps, tossing snowballs at the window front and then racing off.

He hears Bill breathing heavily behind him and turns. Bill's narrow face is flushed. His jaw is clenched and Frank can see pale blue veins above his eyes jutting out. It looks like he might burst. "There's a young woman here to see you," Bill says quickly. Then he smiles, but his face is still the color of an unripe plum. Looking at him, Frank begins to feel nauseous; a knot forms and twists around in his stomach. "For the interview Frank, are you with us?"

Frank says, "Yes, that's right," and returns his gaze to the window and the settling fog. The young woman is just out of college, he guesses. She is wearing a long maroon dress and her dark hair is combed neatly in waves down to her shoulders. When they shake hands, Frank says, "You look like my niece," and she looks at him strangely. The young woman is friendly, confident, and mature; Frank says he is looking for someone, "hard-working, trustworthy, and (above all) punctual." He explains company policy and the type of questions she will be asking loan applicants. It is the same speech he has given for twenty-two years (or has it been twenty-four?) but now the words are difficult to find. He speaks haltingly. He has the distinct impression that his words make no sense at all. Instead of saying, "Of course I will be in contact with your previous employers," he says, "Of course I will be in contact with your friends and associates." The woman feels uneasy with Frank; it is as though he is not looking at her at all, but rather at something directly behind her.

When the interview ends, Frank apologizes and extends his hand. The young woman smiles faintly and leaves. Frank stares at his computer and after a few minutes his eyes begin to feel heavy, and he is slumped in his chair, dozing.

He dreams that he is standing alone in a vast open space, surrounded by a brilliant white light. It is difficult to see; he is squinting and shielding his eyes and looking around but he can't tell where he is. Then the light begins to dim and he realizes that he is standing in a gigantic supermarket. He looks upwards and for a moment loses himself in the eternal bank of florescent lights, in the towering aisles and the infinite rows of soda and after school snacks. He stumbles, then gathers himself. He begins to move through the aisles. He feels that he can't stop his legs from moving, as though some invisible force is carrying him along. He watches a crazy smile spread on his face and wakes up.

And things had been going so well for Frank. He was very content with his life, he rarely complained about anything, and when he did, it didn't last long. He prided himself on being an "optimist." He received a promotion last year—he is now the personnel director at the bank. With his promotion came a generous raise, which he used to buy a red Four-Runner he had been eyeing for years. He has aged nicely, although he is getting a little heavy around the front. His cholesterol is "under control." He enjoyed football on Monday nights at the tavern, and, more than anything else, playing doubles tennis with his friends, Mike, Doug, and Trevor. He has been getting on well with his wife of ten years, Susan. They live in a nice home, in one of the more pleasant districts of town. They renovated their bathroom last month; there's a new tub in there now.

He takes leave from the bank, tells Bill he has to deal with a "personal situation." When Bill asks if it is serious, he replies, "I'll drop you an email." In the next days, Frank stays at home mostly. He doesn't do much of anything in fact, digs a hole in the yard. He takes a long drive in his "red girl." He tries to find himself in the reflection of his bathroom mirror, but all he observes is that hair has started to grow on his ears. He

watches a little television, but all they are playing is commercials. Susan asks him if perhaps he has bumped his head. He says, "No, but thanks for asking."

He tries to locate the precise moment when he began to feel this way. He is convinced that if he can only answer this simple problem then things will be normal again. But he really can't remember anything specific. It isn't that he is sure that he felt fine during the previous months, although he doesn't recall feeling badly either; it is more that he can't remember feeling anything at all on those particular days.

At the dinner table Susan says she knows of a doctor named Bright. She is very enthusiastic about Bright, he has been highly recommended by Emily, Laura and Jennifer. "I really think we should stomp this bug out, Frank," she tells him. And what can he say to that?

Frank thinks about the first time he saw Susan, nearly twenty years ago. She was working as a secretary at the bank, it must have been her first or second day on the job, and she was wearing a soft yellow blouse. He remembers that they stood next to each other by the water cooler during break, and that they didn't say a word to each other. It always stuck in Frank's mind how little of an impression she made on him. He walked past her desk every day on his way to his office, and yet he doesn't remember them saying, even once, "hello, good morning," or "goodbye," at the end of the day. All that time and they never cared to have a simple conversation. She might as well have been a piece of furniture, or one of the plastic palm-trees around the bank.

So when they saw each other one day in a hardware store, several years after Susan had quit the bank, it was surprising for both of them that they began talking to each other. He felt comfortable around her, strangely at ease. They talked about the bank, and

her vacation in Greece, and had lunch together the next day. Frank remembers how funny he thought the whole thing was; it was as though he had met a complete stranger, like he had never seen her at all. The thing they loved to do most together was go to the movies on Tuesday afternoons.

Susan has finished her dinner and is clearing off the table. She is carrying her dish to the kitchen when she stops suddenly and puts her plate down on the window ledge. She gazes out on children playing ball in the streets, standing very still, like a statue. Her eyes slowly close and she brings her right hand over mouth. Frank is still working on his meatloaf. As he sits, looking up at his frozen wife, he realizes that her hair is dark brown, not black as he had always imagined. Susan lowers her hand from her mouth and says, "Laura nearly lost her mind. It was the saddest thing." She leans down to pick up Frank's plate and says to him, "You remember Laura, don't you?"

Frank goes to see Bright. On a television screen in the waiting area there is a commercial running too loud. Frank looks over at the female receptionists but they don't seem to notice. On the screen, a young man is drinking a soda against a white backdrop. As he drinks his stomach expands, pushing outwards like an inflating balloon; larger and larger and then suddenly explodes and he's left standing there with the bottle in his hand, looking down at a hole in his body. The screen goes white and a voice shouts, with almost maniacal glee, "Rush, it'll fill you up!"

"Frank?" He turns his head from the picture and there is an elderly lady standing beside his ear. "Frank?" she asks again.

"Yes?"

"Come this way." She leads him down a narrow hallway, and then points to a room on Frank's left. "Good day, sir," she says. When Frank enters, Bright is already in the room, turning slowly on a black swivel chair behind his desk and reading aloud a magazine horoscope. He turns to Frank and asks, with a quick smile, "What's your sign?"

"Um, Sagittarius."

Bright's eyes move with his index finger down the page and then he exclaims, "Ah! It says that 'Someone special is going to enter into your life.'"

"Fabulous," Frank says.

Bright nods in agreement and asks Frank to sit upright on the examination bed. "I can't go a day without the, uh...horoscope," he says, as Frank takes off his jacket.

Bright is English. He is tall and slender and has a massive, nearly unprofessional, mop of light brown hair. He appears to be around Frank's age except that he is in a much better mood. After he moves his hands up and down Frank's back, sticks a piece of wood down his throat, and twists and cracks his neck like he is opening a jar of pickles, they are ready to get down to the business at hand.

Frank seats himself, and his eyes catch on a framed picture of Bright and a woman on the doctor's desk. They are standing hand in hand on a pier and behind them the water is sparkling under the sun. The woman is wearing a long blue dress.

"Your wife is beautiful," Frank says.

Bright looks at the picture, momentarily confused and then says, "That's my sister actually."

"I'm sorry."

Bright smiles. "Did you smash your head, Frank?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Smash your head? Did you take a fall of any kind?"

"No."

Bright leans in on his chair, pursing his lips together. "So you haven't experienced any memory loss, then?"

"No," Frank says. He scratches above his eyebrow with his thumb and looks around the room. On the right is an oil painting of a dove; the left wall is covered with awards and certificates. Frank squints to read the words of one certificate encased in a copper frame but all he can make out is, "For Exemplary Psychosis."

"Tell me, Frank," Bright begins, knitting his thin blonde brows together. "Does your head feel cloudy, like everything is covered in a thick haze?"

"No, not particularly." For some reason, Frank isn't sure why, he spreads his hands and stares down at the lines on his palms.

"Your thoughts are...difficult to access?" Bright's mouth is slightly open and the corners are raised; Frank isn't sure if he is smiling.

"Sometimes," Frank says.

"And what about the past. Are you forgetting things?"

"No, it's the opposite actually. Everything is very clear in my mind. Unusually so, in fact, very clear, very distinct." Frank clears his throat. "I remember everything about my life, certain events, important things I suppose you could say, wedding day, like that. I even remember how I felt during specific moments, and details also."

Bright lowers his head and scribbles on a small notepad. Frank curls his fingers around the arm of his chair. "The thing is that it's not mine anymore, you see? It's as though it's all moved outside my body... it's like a projection of an image, not the thing itself. I can see it all very clearly, but I don't feel any of it."

Bright looks up from his notes. "Do you feel angry?" he says, punching his fist down on the air.

"No."

"Spontaneous outbursts?"

Frank laughs softly; he likes the way that one sounds. He wants to say yes, but shakes his head.

"Was that funny?" Bright leans back in his chair and chuckles heartily; he does have a nice laugh, Frank admits to himself, very natural sounding. Bright asks: "Do you feel out of control, Frank?"

Frank remembers roaming through the supermarket, and the strange light. "I'm not sure."

"And what about your job? Before your, um...difficulty...did you enjoy working at the bank?"

Frank thinks. He can't remember a time when he wasn't at the bank; and before him it was his father, whose own father...and so on, each life merging into one history.

"Yes."

"What did you like about it?" Frank looks over at the painting of the dove; he feels suddenly restless.

"The plants," he says.



"What's that?"

"There were really nice plants in the bank."

"Married for...?"

"Ten years."

"You seem to be a rather ordinary fellow."

"Thanks."

Frank looks at the doctor's table. Beside his laptop is a small porcelain figure of Mary. Bright catches Frank's glance and asks him, holding his voice low so as to be respectful, "Are you a religious man, Frank?" Frank looks up at Bright, and says, "No, not particularly."

"No then?"

"No."

"Never?" Frank laughs a dry, hoarse laugh, more of a cough than a laugh.

"Never. And yourself?" Bright smiles and says, "No, I just keep it in here for appearances. It was a gift." Frank rises and starts walking towards the door with Bright trailing behind him. A few steps into the hallway, Frank turns and says, "Thank you, Doctor." Bright grips his hand tightly, "I'm not sure what to tell you Frank," he says. "Of course, I will need to see you again. There are many possibilities to consider...perhaps hypnosis is an option." He bites down gently on his lip. His hand begins to run through his thick mass of hair, but only makes it half way. Frank turns to leave. As he's walking he hears Bright say, "It could be a case of...delayed traumatic response syndrome, or a common bout of depression, perhaps too long under the sun..."

Frank decides to take a walk. He leaves his car in Bright's lot and climbs several blocks until the pavement levels off and merges into a large city park. The grass is tall; it's up to his knees and blowing lightly in the wind. The park is mostly empty and quiet. The ground is dry and hardened from too long without rain. A baseball game is in progress and Frank winds around the outfield fence and down a brief slope, pursuing the laughter and shouts of children below. His legs gather speed as he falls; when he reaches a small playground he is nearly running. He sits down on a bench beside a large square of dust and a rusting brown swing set and collects his breath. There are a dozen or so children altogether and their mothers are lounging with books and small talk next to a dry swimming pool on the right. Looking on a group of girls laughing and daring each other to begin down a twisting orange slide, Frank unbuttons the collar of his white shirt and lets a smile settle on his face.

He looks around the park. Across the way, near the boulevard and a cluster of giant oak trees, an officer drifts between the trees, his royal blue uniform disappearing then showing again. On a path to Frank's left, a middle-aged woman jogs slowly, her face placid and content, listening to music on her headphones. In the middle of the swimming pool, a boy sits alone on the cracked pavement, playing with a toy racing-car.

Frank looks out on the open field. He remembers himself as a child, playing baseball with his cousin Adam. In the summer, they would meet at Frank's house after dinner almost every night and walk with Frank's father to the park. While they played, his father would sit on a bench to the side and watch them through heavy, tinted sunglasses—his "shades," he called them. He used to tell Frank that they gave him special powers, like one of the characters from Frank's comic books. His father's eyes

were sensitive to light and he wore them whenever he was outside, regardless of the climate, and whenever Frank sees him now, he is wearing them still.

He is startled by the sound of a lady speaking loudly, and turns from the field. She is standing in front of the monkey bars with the officer Frank saw earlier. Her hand is resting on her cheekbone and shielding Frank from her face. He can't make out what she is saying. As she speaks, the officer fiddles with his moustache, and nods patiently. When she finishes, he puts his arm on her shoulder and looks over at Frank. He begins walking towards the bench with his head down, and doesn't look up until he is standing several feet from Frank's side.

"How's it going, sir?" he says.

"I'm fine, thanks." Frank looks up at the officer. His eyes are dull and moving lazily around the park. His brown hair is thinning, and a little grey on the sides. Stroking his moustache he asks Frank, "What's your name?"

"Frank King."

The officer smiles. "Like the folk singer, Frank King?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I love Frank King."

"I've only heard a little."

The officer raises his eyes and says, "What are you doing here, Frank?"

"Here?"

"Enjoying the view?" Frank smiles and leans back on the bench. He clasps his hands together behind his head like he saw in a movie one time. "That's right," he says, "just enjoying the view."

The officer laughs quietly and turns from Frank. He looks over at the boy in the pool and then up at the grey sky. "Did the Lions win today?" Frank asks.

"No, they lost it in the fourth quarter," the officer replies, still looking upwards. To Frank's surprise, he sits down on the bench. He looks over at the monkey bars; the lady he spoke with is glaring at him. The officer exhales loudly. "You're making the mothers nervous, Frank," he says. He nudges Frank in the arm and motions his head towards the woman. Frank looks across and smiles. He turns to the officer and they break into laughter. When they are quiet, Frank asks, "Are you married?"

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Curiosity, I guess."

"Yes, I am."

"How many years?" The officer pauses to think for a moment, and scratches the bridge of his nose.

"Um, it's been twenty-eight, I believe."

"Twenty-eight huh?"

"Yeah, around there."

"Good for you," Frank says.

The officer digs a hand into his pocket, as though he's looking for cigarettes.

"Lady says you've been sitting here for one hour now."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, it's right." He winces and runs his thumb along the deep wrinkles of his forehead. He slides an open palm along the wood and rises to his feet. "You seem like an

ordinary enough guy, Frank," he says. "I'm not going to hassle you. But I think it's a good idea for you to leave."

Frank agrees. The officer looks at Frank and says, "Have a good day," and walks away. He walks to the monkey bars and assures the lady that everything is "under control," and then across the field to the boulevard where his car is parked. He gets in his car and drives away, and doesn't look back to see if Frank has left.

Frank stays sitting on the bench. Children are playing tag in the field area to his left. Frank watches a girl wearing a red t-shirt. She screams as she tries to avoid a boy chasing after her. Her blonde hair is down to her waist, and swinging as she twists her body. Her green eyes are huge, alive with terror and delight.

When the game ends she is walking with the others back to the playground and a man sneaks up from behind and sweeps her into his arms. He swings her in circles over his head and tickles her under the arms, while she giggles madly and cries, "Daddy!"

Frank looks at them for a moment and then rises from the bench and begins to walk back to his car.

When he is home he goes straightaway to his bedroom upstairs. He steps inside the closet, and searches with his hands in the darkness for an old photo-album. He reaches up, on his toes, and swipes his hands along a dusty wooden shelf and then pulls the heavy album into his arms. He sits down with it on his bed. He leans across his bed and pulls on the light cord, takes out his reading glasses and places them above his ears.

He flips quickly through the pages of his childhood: baseball teams, a birthday party; outfitted in a blue king's crown, swinging blindfolded for a donkey shaped piñata,

his mother and friends cheering him by his side. He stops when he is a young man. He is nineteen years old, in San Antonio, training to be a combat pilot in the Air Force. His body is lean and strong. He is standing in front of a small twin-engine plane, leaning up against its side. He had asked someone walking by to take his picture. The runway is wide and empty, the tar dark and menacing, burning up under the swollen sun.

The idea to join the navy came to him during the last few weeks of high school. It was like a dream that took hold of him. It went into his head that he ought to be up in the sky, making something out of his life, some adventure of his own. Who would have thought it, anyway? Him, Frank King. It was so unlike him, but that was what made it exciting. Suddenly Vietnam was all he could think about. He loved the wonderment on the faces of his family and friends when he told them of his decision.

Frank looks closely at the picture. It was the closest he ever got to a real fighter plane. He flunked out of the Reserves, nine months in. "Academic disqualification," which refers to his failing a written exam that was necessary before they let you off the ground. He hung around Texas for awhile after his dismissal. On his way back to his motel he stepped in front of a car and broke his leg in three places; when he returned home he told everyone that his injury was the reason for his early return. To this day Frank's friends and family will tell you that it was because of his "mangled leg" that he was unable to fight in the war.

On the next page Frank is several years older and smiling broadly. His arm is wrapped tightly around the waist of his girlfriend, Liz. They are standing on the front lawn of Frank's childhood home, beside a yellow soccer ball and sprinkler set. Liz's black hair is up high in a bun; she is laughing and her mouth is formed in an oval towards

Frank as though she is about to say something. She is wearing a white top and jeans cut raggedly at her thighs.

Frank takes the picture out of the album and holds it up to the light. He starts laughing quietly. It's his big, goofy grin; he remembers the moment vividly. That summer they went together to Boston; Liz was visiting a music school she was hoping to start at in the fall. Frank recalls that she was a talented pianist; she won a local competition several years after high school.

Frank hears a group of cars pulling up in front of the house. Doors slamming shut and Michael's familiar whine, "they should have kicked the field goal when they had the chance!" Footsteps bound up the porch and Susan calls, "Frank!"

He walks to the top of the staircase and looks down. Susan is standing at the bottom. Her hand is resting on the mahogany banister post. She lifts her arm and motions to the left, as though she is a hostess leading a guest to his seat. "Come this way Frank, some people are here to see you."

Frank follows behind Susan into the kitchen, and sees Trevor, Michael and Doctor Bright standing in a half circle around the centre counter. Frank looks blankly at each person, confused; for a moment he expects them to yell, "Happy Birthday!" but remembers it's not his birthday. "Hi everyone," he says. Michael stands in the middle of the group and brushes his hand through his wavy blonde hair. "Susan told us about what's going on, Frank," he says. "We wanted to be here."

Frank looks at Susan, who is standing near his left. A small smile plays on the corner of his mouth. "What's that?" he asks. "What's going on?"

Susan says, "How are you feeling today?"

"I was looking at photos."

Trevor has grown a beard since the last time Frank saw him. His tongue rolls over his dark moustache and he says, "Whatever we can do...if there's anything, that is."

Frank replies, "That's nice of you to say."

Bright is drifting at the back of the space, his eyes moving alternately between Frank and a large cluster of bananas in a fruit bowl on the counter.

Michael asks, "Is it your memory Frank? Have you forgotten things about your past?"

Bright quietly says, "No," and everyone turns to him. He is looking down over the fruit bowl, inspecting the health of each banana. His long hair is covering the side of his face. Almost to himself, he adds, "His memory is very much in place."

Trevor scrunches up his face. "I've heard about this kind of thing...it's well known, with men and the middle ages and that."

Frank smiles. "Is that right?"

"Aha!" Bright exclaims. He has picked out his banana and is holding it victoriously over his head. Smiling buoyantly, he peels the skin and begins chewing aggressively, his mouth opening wide with each bite. Frank can see deep inside his mouth, to the black wall at the back.

Susan says, "Doug's running a little late, he should be here soon. Basketball game."

Frank thinks about Liz. Her long flowing hair, and her laugh that would start quiet and then erupt with joy. He remembers Doug pointing to her house while they were driving years ago. "You remember Liz, don't you?" he had said. The house was several



miles from Frank's neighborhood. It was cream, green around the windows, memorable in that it was perfectly square, like a large box.

Michael leans in and slides his hand along the marble counter. "Is it your job, Frank?" he asks. "Has Bill been giving you a hard time?"

Frank scratches the side of his body. "I won't be working at the bank anymore," he says.

Susan shakes her head. "But, you love your job, Frank." Through a mouthful of banana, his voice garbled somewhat, Bright says, "Not anymore."

Trevor takes a step towards Frank, and says, in a perfectly even tone, "Susan's right, Frank, you're always saying that."

Everyone is now looking intently at Frank. Michael's arms are folded across his chest. Bright puts his banana down on the counter and faces Frank. Frank says, "I have to leave now." He turns from the group and tilts his head so that he can see down the hallway to the front door. He is still for a moment and then says, "I'm sorry, thank you all for coming...to see me, but I have to leave."

Susan says, "Where to, Frank?" but he doesn't answer. He moves quickly for the door and leaves the house.

Liz's house is as he remembers it. Frank steps out of his car and looks around the neighborhood. The streets are empty; he can hear the hum of a television set on the other side of the boulevard. The sky is darkening; it's like a calm purple sea. The interior of Liz's house is lighted. Through a rectangular window, Frank can see clearly a bare white wall. The lawn is strikingly green and trimmed smartly. A brown picket fence surrounds the front yard; Frank reaches over the fence and enters the gate easily. He follows a

narrow walkway that leads directly to the front door, then knocks firmly. He waits for nearly a minute with no answer and then puts his hand on the door handle—to his surprise it is unlocked. He opens the door slowly and peers inside. "Elizabeth?" he calls. There is no response; Frank enters the house and closes the door behind him. The house has two levels. The oak floor is dark brown and shining.

"Elizabeth?" An iron chandelier hangs from the high, flat ceiling. The air is cold; a stiff shiver moves through Frank's body.

He walks up a staircase leading to the second level. "Elizabeth?" Again there is no answer. He moves carefully through the second-floor hallway, knocking on, and then opening, each door. He finds two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a study, but there are no people.

He returns down the stairs. He pulls open a sliding wooden door and walks into an empty living area. "Elizabeth?" he calls, louder this time; his voice echoes off the walls. The room is large and mostly unfurnished. Against the left wall is an olive-colored leather sofa and a black marble coffee table. To Frank's right is a large-screen television. The walls are completely bare.

Frank looks around the space. In the corner there is a small oak table with a white lace cloth draped over it. On top of the cloth rests a single framed photograph. Frank approaches the table. In the picture, a small elderly man is standing between two men in their middle years. Frank picks up the frame and holds it close to his eyes. The old man's face is deeply wrinkled and his lips are thin and pale. He is smiling warmly. There is some kind of satisfaction, or relief, in his look. Tears are in his green eyes, behind his

black wire-rimmed glasses. Frank assumes that the men standing on each side of him are his sons. Their arms are wrapped around the shoulders of the old man.

Frank looks at the picture for a moment and then places it down on the table. He walks out of the living area through an open space leading into the kitchen. He heads for the refrigerator and opens the heavy white door. There is a pitcher half filled with iced tea, and Frank takes it out. He looks through the cabinets and grabs a glass. He pours himself a drink and returns to the living area. He feels tired in his legs and lowers his body slowly onto the couch. He places his glass onto a coaster on the coffee table and reclines back against the soft leather. A leg rest releases and he stretches out. He reaches across his body for the remote control and turns on the television. The picture is fuzzy for a moment and then becomes clear. A soft blue glow projects into the room. Frank exhales. He takes a long drink from his tea and enjoys the show.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books Consulted For This Thesis:

- Abbey, Edward. Desert Solitaire. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. Selected Poems. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- Carson, Anne. Glass, Irony and God. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- Carson, Rachel. Silent Spring. New York: Mariner Books, 2002.
- Gleber, Anke. The Art of Taking a Walk. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Joyce, James. Ulysses. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Joyce, James. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. London, England: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Joyce, James. Dubliners. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.
- Keats, John. "Ode to a Nightingale." Romanticism. An Anthology, Third Edition. Ed. Wu, Duncan. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006. 1395-96.
- O'Connor, Flannery. The Complete Stories. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971.
- O'Grady, John. Pilgrims to the Wild. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993
- Plante, David. The Woods. New York: Atheneum, 1982.
- Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Sebald, W.G. Vertigo. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Seconds. Dir. John Frankenheimer. Paramount Pictures, 1966.
- Solnit, Rebecca. A Field Guide to Getting Lost. London, UK: Penguin, 2006.
- Spielgelman, Art. Maus. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Strand, Mark. Hopper. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

Thoreau, Henry D., and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nature/Walking. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992

Time Out. Dir. Laurence Cantet. Canal, 2001

Williams, Terry Tempest. Refuge. New York: Random House, 1991.

Williams, Terry Tempest. Interview. Insight and Outlook Radio Series. 2006.  
<http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/williams.html>