OF ROUTES AND ROOTS:

ESSAYS ON PLACE AND COMMUNITY

BY

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Preface: The Solace of Trees

> [T]here is an old willow tree that presides over an interior garden […] a battered tree, long-suffering and much-climbed, held together by strands of wire but beloved of those who know it. In a way it symbolizes the city: life under difficulties, growth against odds, sap-rise in the midst of concrete, and the steady reaching for the sun.
>
> -E.B. White, "Here Is New York"

Their scattered trunks not yet cleared away, the trees are lying in great pieces on the ground. In the still Kansas night, I press my feet hard into the bark of one of the toppled giants to gain my balance, marveling at the sight of this strange sideways world. Just a few short weeks ago, this clearing would have looked like an ordinary, right-side-up park. I imagine how this place must have looked before the attack of the men and their tree-cutting tools—a place at peace with itself before the blades began their dirty work—and I try not to let the destruction bother me. After all, writers need paper for their craft, just as carpenters need wood for their projects. Perhaps, I tell myself, living with fewer trees is the price we pay to be part of a more creative world.

Feeling unsettled, I offer a silent blessing to the fallen limbs and practice a bit of yoga, perching on one leg atop the rounded surface of one of the larger trunks. Any world in which one can rest one's feet on the top of a tree without much effort at all seems to me a strange one. In my mind, treetops are grandiose, magnificent,

untouchable places—they are not meant to be explored with human feet and hands. It seems the natural order of things, somehow, for a tree to keep its ancient secrets.

Of course, there are some who might disagree—an adventurous crew of naturalists, for one. In *The Wild Trees*, Richard Preston locates a richly developed world at the pinnacle of the redwood forest, interviewing a handful of intrepid explorers who have ascended the great redwoods to reach the ecologically diverse canopies at the top. Botanist Marie Antoine confesses: "When I'm climbing in the redwoods, I have a feeling of being one-on-one with the tree. The trees are something we can experience without any burden" (240).

The aspiring yogi learns early on the unnatural twisting of limbs known as "Tree Pose." To complete the move successfully, he must stand completely still, hands poised at the heart or above the head in silent prayer or gratitude. One leg remains straight, while the other bends outwards to the side, forming itself into a triangle shape, the foot poised against the muscle of the standing leg.

The pose doesn't require any unusual strength, but it does ask of us a keen sense of balance—and, failing that, the willingness to risk looking slightly ridiculous while balancing on one shaky leg in an ungainly fashion, like some kind of injured pelican. Once the move has been mastered, however—if one can only find the right tension between bent knee and upper thigh—there is a kind of grace and poise in the execution that onlookers cannot help but admire.

In yoga, there is a sense of balance that does not come as easily in other pursuits. Retraining the body to be able to achieve complete flexibility, as with

anything one hopes to do well—whether learning a new pose, or getting accustomed to an unfamiliar sunset—is a slow process. Perhaps each stretch of land, each stretch of the limbs and trunk has its own distinct wisdom to offer, its own peculiar value to recommend it.

There is something comforting in the repetition and familiarity of a task—a yogi's sun salutation, a few loads of laundry, a sink filled with dishes. It's the measured pace of the assembly line, the tap-tap-tapping of an insistent SOS, or the wash, rinse, repeat on the shampoo bottle. We oblige until the fingers know the way by heart, just as they know to reach for a tender spot on the neck, the discomfort of a blister on the toe, or the warmth of a lover's body on a cold night.

A few years ago, when I first arrived in Kansas in 2001, it would not have occurred to me to do yoga at all, let alone to practice its poses while balanced atop a fallen tree. I was too busy "balancing" a graduate course load and a new teaching job by staying up late and hardly sleeping, all the while struggling to acclimate to the ins and outs of a new town. In those days, I rarely slowed my pace enough even to take notice of the natural world—especially the trees here in Kansas, a place where we traditionally speak more often about flat land and prairies. Perhaps it was my New York roots taking hold, or perhaps it was some restless quality all my own, but whatever the reason, I fought the moderate pace of my new surroundings. Instead, I fit into a day all that I could, often at the expense of my physical and emotional well-being.

In “What Do Our Hearts Treasure,” E.B. White, too, struggles to adjust to the rhythms of an unfamiliar place. The comfort he takes in purchasing a small bright poinsettia is spoiled as he leaves the nursery by the sight of “a great forest of poinsettias blooming naturally in somebody’s front yard.” Such disconcerting and unexpected discoveries leave him feeling out of sync with his new world and, he confides woefully, “make a monkey out of a husband carrying home a small red potted plant” (191). As he and his wife observe the Florida sunset, he admits: “I knew that my wife and I were, unconsciously, watching it descend its more familiar rim behind the birches, the black spruces, the firs, the hackmatacks across the road from our house in Maine” (190). They find themselves plagued by the memory of trees.

I had not felt any particularly strong kinship with New York while growing up there, and yet once I arrived in Kansas, I often felt like dressing and speaking the part of the “New Yorker.” I was questioned about my peculiarities on a regular basis—everything from my “urban look” (a comment prompted by my silver rain jacket, purchased the month before at a Long Island shop) to the way I pronounced the word *forest* (*fah*-rest, with an emphasis on the *fah* instead of the more typical Midwestern *four*-est). Sometimes, while I was under such intense scrutiny, it felt as though I needed to defend and preserve the integrity of my former home to this new mass of unfamiliar faces. It was a strange sensation—as though it took being in the Midwest to reveal fully my New York-ness.

During that year—the year when I began writing essays—"home" was a different place from the one it has since become. An African-American had not yet been elected president in the U.S. The reality of the current economic crisis was a distant early warning, a notch in the memory banks of a long-ago era. A natural disaster had not yet destroyed a good deal of New Orleans, the city I called home for three years before moving here, to Kansas.

Strangely, at just about the time that I was forced to reconsider what it meant to be a New Yorker, the rest of the world was being asked to do the same. Barely a month after I had relocated to the Midwest, the World Trade Center was attacked by terrorists. Our sense of home, and with it our place in the world—including the intricate workings of our international relations with many other countries—changed overnight.

Lately, I have been considering the prospect of driving west across the vast Kansas landscape toward Colorado, bound for a summer job in a forest. As I let friends and family know my plans, I have noticed two camps of thinking emerge in response to my upcoming journey. Those who have driven this route for convenience's sake—aiming their cars and bodies westward for the promised land via the shortest available route—warn me with a shudder and a sigh that a most uneventful drive lies ahead. But there are those, too, who look at me with a mischievous twinkling in the eyes and say something like this: "Have you ever seen the prairie on fire? Amazing stuff. Make sure you catch it at least once in your life."

I have always loved the ability that some people have to see the spark of potential in some landscape or situation that we might otherwise dismiss too easily. And so, hearing this response from a few adventurous souls, I consider the prairie on fire—a sight I have not yet seen, though I have been living in Kansas for nearly eight years. I wonder what it feels like to watch the wild prairie grasses during this renewal of the land—to witness the cleansing process, to watch the land renew itself slowly, to see the debris that has been holding it back from growth go up in smoke.

The burning of the prairies, which happens each spring around Easter time, is also called "controlled burning." It is an intentional act that clears the land for new growth to begin taking root, and yet a sense of ritual surrounds the act of setting the prairie aflame, one that recalls darker days and uncertain times. In Native American culture, for instance, there is a tradition of using sage to "smudge" a new house or other physical space where difficult or disturbing events have taken place. One sets alight the bundle of sage as one might have lit a torch in some long ago cave, and proceeds throughout the place, leaving a smoky trail behind her.

Scott Russell Sanders writes that: "Wisdom comes, if it comes at all, not only by the accumulation of experience, but also by the letting go, by the paring away of dross until only essentials remain" (1). Sometimes I think: *If only*. If only the simple cleansing properties of fire, air, and earth could be applied to a worldly scale, maybe we could smoke out the solutions to the problems from which we cannot yet see our great escape.

During my first year in Kansas, one of my favorite discoveries was Senegalese tea—typically prepared by tipping the contents of one small cup into a second small cup and then back again, until the top of the hot drink grows a layer of foamy bubbles across the top. Finally, there is the wait for the contents to cool just enough to touch the scalding liquid to the tip of the drinker's tongue without burning her taste buds off. The preparation is time-consuming, but the delicious result is well worth the wait—especially considering that the finishing touch (if one knows the right people) is a sprig of green spearmint hand-picked from the tea-maker's front yard.

I spent many evenings patiently awaiting my tea in this way at a Senegalese friend's house, but I discovered patience in other ways, too, during that first year. Many of my new friends, international acquaintances who lived in my dormitory, were working on their English skills; subsequently, I found my speech slowing of its own accord so that I might be understood with no awkward pauses or quizzical eyebrow-raising. The syllables that left my lips also began enunciating themselves with a peculiar clarity, and this feature soon bled into my everyday speech—in the classroom with my students, on the telephone with my family, in the grocery store checkout line. The only time this new speech didn't show up seemed to be those moments when I was incensed about something, such as the thirty-plus dormitory fire alarms that woke us from our slumber over the course of the year. (For some reason, the obnoxious buzz of the fire alarm at 2 am seems to awaken my inner New Yorker.)

My speech, consequently, began to sound like something not quite Kansas, not quite New York, not quite anywhere else either. It was a dialect all my own.

It was with these international friends—who hailed from Senegal, Spain, Japan, and Nepal—that I stopped being "the girl from somewhere else." After all, they had all traveled on much longer journeys than I had to be here. I would find myself asking them the kinds of questions about their hometowns that everyone else seemed to be asking me. I was intrigued by the notion of sake, the Japanese alphabet, prayer flags—all of those mysteriously enticing details that I had heard so much about.

After my first year in Kansas, I continued to seek a balance in my life—I took a break from teaching and school, began working full-time to support myself, and came to know the rhythms of a new place. I stopped watching television, and found time instead to become a better writer and reader. I helped my sister through the spiritual and emotional issues that attended her difficult pregnancy, took up yoga, and sought out an apartment with a sunny room and a hardwood floor against which I could brace my back in times of distress. I embraced vegetables and grains instead of Spaghetti-Os.

Not all Kansans live this way. I suspect that most do not—they, too, are products of a time fraught with movement and confusion. They live day-to-day lives, as most of us do, that are filled with work, responsibilities, and distractions. I do not have any statistics, either, about other travelers to Kansas finding the ability to "slow down." I have only my own fires to call upon.

The rest of the world, meanwhile, seemed to speed up. Athletes such as Michael Phelps set new records for speed and accuracy at the Olympic Games. The iPod appeared on the scene, each new model smaller and faster than its predecessors. Text messaging and social networking sites exploded in popularity, making communication—if only the bite-sized, bullet-point kind—quicker and easier than ever before. My own purchases were the hallmarks of a more deliberate style of living—the cardinal-red tea kettle, the old-school turntable and accompanying jazz records (acquired at a local thrift sale), the yoga mat. In time, I hardly recognized my own life—I had traded in the last vestiges of my hurried "urban" mindset for peace of mind instead.

Gradually, my friends found themselves bound for far-off outposts, disappearing to Spain, Holland, Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, California. Everyone around me was on the go, anxious to shore up their affairs and begin living "the good life" promised to us along with those wedding certificates, graduate diplomas, or first sonograms. They accepted such tokens, as we all tend to do, with relief and gratitude—proof of a new beginning and permission to move on.

Sanders writes of achieving his own long-held goal of living in a cabin: "By acquiring a camp in the woods I fulfilled one childhood dream, even while I was relinquishing others—the dream of becoming a physicist or a musician, of mastering several languages, of living between the mountains and the sea, of running a greenhouse, of saving my soul" (1). I think of the felled trees in the park at night, no longer rooted in the earth as trees should be. I consider, too, the neat stacks of paper

lining the writer's desk, and of the things we give up when we put one dream ahead of another. Maybe the price of getting what we want is acceptance—it is the choice we make to let go of other dreams, and the sense of letting go that comes with moving on.

While living in the Midwest, I have discovered anew my own need for roots. Sometimes, we cannot know our own need of such things until we have given up old patterns and started creating life anew. Excepting a brief respite to Australia, a summer sojourn in Chicago, and a few odd days here and there, I remain at "the center of everything," as Kansas author Laura Moriarty has called this place. I have given up some things and gained others in doing so, but I consider it to be a fair trade, for the time being.

One hopes, I suppose, to achieve a balance between being *en route* and being rooted—that perfect companionship between exploration and growth on the one hand and satisfaction and comfort on the other. As I alternately travel and make roots, I become ever more convinced that the strongest hearts need both to thrive. As Sanders writes: "That is the rhythm of my days—a scattering, a gathering, scattering and gathering. The writing of essays allows me to gather what is essential in my life, and by pondering these things perhaps to discover something essential to the lives of others" (3).

Writing, too, can be a kind of meditation. As I find my own words and commit them to the page where others might find them, my mind seems to clear, and a space opens up for something that has not yet shown itself in the light.

These recent years have led us into a new kind of existence—in many ways, a more frightening and uncertain one than we can recall. These are days fraught with movement and confusion—yet in times of uncertainty, if we can manage to retain a sense of clarity instead of panicking, we may feel more keenly than ever a sense of possibility, the first stirrings of the winds of change. The gift of such times, if we choose to make use of it, is the opportunity to break the old bonds that no longer help us, but hold us back. There is a sense of power in starting fresh, in making changes that will improve our lives and our worlds.

Marie Antoine once said of the redwood forest: "It occurs to me that I have a fairly cynical outlook on so many things in the world today—this insane world. But as long as we still have these trees, there's hope for us" (Preston 240). It seems that some of us are built for climbing trees, and others, for writing about them. Still others of us feel called to carve something beautiful from their branches. There are many ways to feel the connection—the hardwood floor beneath an aching back, the cabin in the woods that supports the writer's craft—these things, too, offer the solace of trees.

Kansas, for me, is the sort of place where one comes to think, to slow down, and to reflect on the state of things great and small. A man might notice the trail of a snail digging its shell through the soil of his yard, or consider the crossroads that lie before him, or ponder his place in the vastness of country and cosmos. There is time

here—if he will allow for it—to think such thoughts, and to discover that, indeed, they are worth the thinking.

The evenings grow long as summer approaches. I have begun to feel that old restlessness worming its way through bones and tendons, into the muscles of the heart. This time, though, it is tempered with something new, some small measure of calm amidst the chaos. I have befriended a valley of trees on campus—in the stillness I am impressed sometimes by the hardened cries of the red-winged blackbirds, sometimes by the smooth songs of the cardinals. I have revisited, too, my familiar tradition of strolling through my neighborhood on dusky evenings. The uneven bricks below the foot require a careful attention paid to every step—but even this necessary slowing can bring to the walker's life a measure of rhythm and peace, if only she will let it.

Dreaming Edinburgh: Places in Mind

[T]he past makes its presence known no matter where we travel.

-Alice Steinbeck, Without Reservations

Emerging before me are the confident ebony spires of the Scott Monument, the stately ramparts of Edinburgh Castle, and the verdant slopes of that miniature mountain, Arthur's Seat. As the airplane lurches into the night sky with a jolt, the misty shroud of memory giving way to the precise clarity of the present, the images recede from my mind as quickly as the mythical Brigadoon fades from those who leave its boundaries. I have forgotten, for just a moment, that it is not Scotland to which I am en route from Kansas City Airport, but New York.

Summoned back to the present moment by the pilot's garbled announcements over the intercom, I recall my more immediate responsibilities. Casting an eye toward the window on my left, I suddenly wish that the seat next to me were vacant. Instead, it cushions the considerable bulk of my mortal foe—a stack of forty student papers, still unmarked and awaiting their impending Judgment Day.

I guiltily avert my eyes from my nemesis, wondering how I have managed to allow the mid-term grading deadline to fall during this visit to see my parents in New York. Although I often enjoy reading my English students' textual interpretations, the prospect of grading during a supposedly relaxing weekend away is a sobering thought. Could it be that the strain of these conflicting responsibilities is an unavoidable aftershock, the price of living with one foot firmly planted in Kansas,

alongside the promise of my own future, and the other—beside my family and oldest collection of friends—just as firmly in New York?

I ask the flight attendant for my usual, a tomato juice, and settle in for the rest of the flight, a paperback copy of Joe Simpson's latest climbing adventure lying open but unread in my lap. I have requested a window seat—another customary preference—and as the plane climbs higher above Kansas City, I train my eyes upon the gradually diminishing homes, covered swimming pools, and parking lots until the clouds finally overtake them.

For a brief time, suspended 30,000 feet above the world, one can no longer be defined in relation to place. One of the most fascinating aspects of air travel is that it places one squarely between two worlds, feet not touching ground in either. If the passenger is the thoughtful sort—rather than the kind of person who sleeps the hours away on a long flight—moments in flight can become opportunities to consider the question of where her loyalties lie, geographically speaking. As the airplane reaches its peak height, I ask myself whether I am leaving my midwestern home for a weekend visit, or instead returning home to the east coast from a long sojourn in Kansas, in search of a decent meal and some quality time with relatives. Or is it some combination of the two?

The answer seems to me a matter of perspective, the ambiguity of the question calling to mind those optical illusions featuring dual images with the accompanying captions, "Do you see an old woman or a little girl? A goblet or two faces?" The trouble is, once you commit to either the young girl or the elderly woman, she

becomes reinforced at every glance, until you can no longer go back to the way you saw things before.

The late monologist Spalding Gray once claimed that his well-publicized anxiety stemmed from his being physically present in one place while thinking about another. Wherever he went, he admitted—no matter how much he had looked forward to arriving—he found it difficult to be happy there, to stop thinking of some other place he would rather be.

Sometimes, as I prepare to board yet another flight, I wonder which geographical place, if any, I might call "home." During these moments, I easily recall that old cliché, "Home is where the heart is," but also I wonder about those moments when one's life seems to be divided perfectly in half. On such a map, where exactly does the heart lie? While one half of my consciousness, by necessity, remains rooted in a world of student papers, paychecks, and books, the other half might be in New York, or even leisurely wandering the domain of some entirely different city, the site of some past or future adventure.

At this moment, in fact, my imagination is far from either of my two present homes. It lingers instead, like smoke curling around the edges of a burning photograph, with a place that became home to me more than two years ago. I have invited my mother to accompany me to the National Tartan Day Parade in New York City during my visit to the east coast; the city is a short train ride away from the suburban home where I grew up and where my parents still reside. The event

coincides with the alumni reunion for former students of the University of Edinburgh's study abroad program, which we will attend beforehand.

While a glimpse of Sean Connery, who will be leading the parade, would make my mother's day complete, I am more intrigued by the prospect of confronting both of my favorite cities at once. I want to know how Edinburgh will be received by the locals who line the streets, as the pipes and colorful costumes of that far-off city join forces with the street corners and vibrant colors of New York to become—if only for a day—a city within a city.

Gertrude Stein once said that writers must have contact with at least two countries at any given moment in order to live the richest possible life: "the one where they belong and the one in which they live really" (2). Although the physical body may inhabit only one place at a time, there is nothing to stop us from dreaming—no barrier to keep the mind from inhabiting a second, third, or fourth place in our thoughts. In fact, balancing several cities in the mind at once is beneficial for the process of thinking by contrast: We need one place, Stein insists, to help us understand and appreciate the other.

Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes, who gathered places in the form of local maps and historical drawings, might have agreed. Working with historians to compile a "pictorial record of American history," Stokes created a list of 160 U.S. cities—such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston—that he hoped to gather in the form of

geographical landscape maps, as well as forty more located in other countries.[1] For this collector of urban images, enjoying the history and geography of cities from all over the world became a passion. "Few have realized that the individuality of towns and cities is just as pronounced and interesting as that of persons," Stokes tells us. The development of cities over time, the collector affirms, is a subject "quite as revealing and fascinating as the portraits and biographies of distinguished citizens."[2]

Ultimately, the collector donated these images of cities around the world to the New York Public Library in 1930, and as recently as 2004, the library displayed a portion of the collection in an exhibit titled "Cities in the Americas." Included were several bird's eye views of rapidly developing cities, a perspective that experienced a resurgence in popularity in North America during the mid-nineteenth century.[3] While strolling the hallways of the public library and witnessing a handful of cities swell into the image of their present selves, the visitors who crowded around the bird's eye images gained a clearer sense of the evolution of the modern city. Such views of the city as seen from above offer a unique perspective that cannot be gained simply from walking the streets at ground level.

As I contemplate my own bird's eye view from the height of the airplane, I consider the essays of Alberto Manguel, a writer who reflects on place from a more subjective vantage point than Stokes's historical perspective allows. Stumbling

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[1] **Title plate for Part II of New York Public Library's exhibit, titled "Settlement, Expansion, and the Business of City Views."**
[2] **Title plate for the image titled "In View of the City of Philadelphia."**
[3] **Title plate for the image titled "View of Boston."**

across concrete reminders of his past at the turn of a page, Manguel is often transported to "a certain café, a distant hotel room, a faraway summer" still lingering in his memory. Most often caught unaware by long-forgotten "traces of the reader [he] once was," he discovers scattered throughout the pages of his books "scribbles, bus tickets, scraps of paper with mysterious names and numbers, the occasional date and place on the book's flyleaf" (237). Such makeshift bookmarks—bits and pieces of daily life and mementos from a great many places—conceal themselves within the pages of his personal library, constant reminders of his traveling life.

Sometimes, such distractions can be welcome ones, even comforting. One might be whisked away to a Venetian bridge, to the kitchen of a former apartment, or to a favorite writing space tucked away in Edinburgh's Old Town. Even if the city we have left is no longer its former self—perhaps the apartment has since been condemned or the café sold and converted into mall space along with its neighboring shopfronts—yet there it lives in the mind, just as we last left it. The memory of the bridge, the café, or the kitchen now seems almost as real as the experience of the place itself.

At other times, it may feel as though these former cities are intruding on the present moment, on one's current surroundings. The sensation is akin to the presence of an unwelcome guest, who arrives unexpectedly at a late hour while one is in the middle of a good book and insists on discussing unpleasant subjects for the remainder of the evening. We are forced, for the sake of social convention, to shift our focus

and make polite conversation, when all we really want is to know how the book will end.

I have now collected in my memory enough cities to work on Gertrude Stein's challenge of experiencing one place through the lens of another. Though no place seems to return to mind with Edinburgh's unique pull, my thoughts have remained connected with many of the cities I have seen, sometimes years after I have left them: Chicago, Sydney, New Orleans. The more one tries to put them out of mind, the more they seem to appear unexpectedly, as if imploring the traveler not to forget them.

The bizarre psychological aftermath of memory is the price we pay for inhabiting a city with body and mind both; even after we have left a place never to return to its geographical landscape in person, it remains difficult to unlearn our knowledge of its contours in the mind. One moment, we might be at work, home, or school, going about everyday business, when suddenly the mind shifts unexpectedly, and we feel as though we are thousands of miles away from our current surroundings.

The modern metropolis is no less persistent in commanding the armchair traveler's attention than the rarest Mickey Mantle might be to a baseball enthusiast, or the signed first edition to a rare book collector; yet, of all the things that one might choose to gather in earnest, a collection of cities harbored in the mind's eye is perhaps one of the more unusual. Undoubtedly, cities are a less concrete hobby than baseball cards or books; my father's passion as a collector, for instance, is a sturdier hobby by nature. His assortment of fishing paraphernalia comprises rods of all colors and sizes,

reels of all shapes and weights. It would be out of character for him simply to "have" a hobby, as so many fathers seem to do; instead, he finds it necessary to own nearly every piece of equipment on the market. When I was a child, he owned at least twenty-five or thirty fishing rods, though he was doing well to go on more than three or four fishing trips in any given year. He also collected fishing reels and spools of colorful wire, as well as fake plastic bait that he would take out of its little brown carrying case and display with great zeal.

My sister and I could never much tell one rod or piece of bait from another. I did, however, enjoy squishing any available specimens of bait between my fingers and squealing with disgust as he talked on into the evening about the pros and cons of using live bait, as well as his many favorite reasons for preferring the fake plastic kind. I could not list those reasons now, all these years later, yet I do recall the hypercolor purple of the bait I liked best, its texture gummy in my palm as I tried to pull its ends apart. Live bait, I told myself, could never be this fun, and probably smelled a great deal worse.

Though my father himself rarely made practical use of his fishing equipment, its psychological power was far greater than one may have suspected upon first glance. I suspect that these items were emotional shortcuts, bringing with them memories of reclining on a fishing boat and reaching into a cooler for a cold Pepsi and a sandwich—maybe turkey on pumpernickel, a favorite of his—wrapped carefully in foil by my mother's loving hands. An inventory of the fishing gear resurrected for him the sensation of spending a lazy day on the water, and the taste of

freedom that followed was so powerful that whether or not he was actually on the boat became an irrelevant detail.

Although I am a landlubber, and my father is the consummate fisherman, we are in agreement that a sandwich—even an imaginary one, as the case may be—tastes better on a summer afternoon with a sea breeze drifting lazily overhead. In fact, as the years unfold before me, and my time spent in New York grows shorter as I begin to build a home elsewhere, I, too, can hear those faraway summers that call to Manguel. My own thoughts, drifting toward the memory of a tart plum and a Virginia ham sandwich, are likely to transport me to one of the many lazy days I spent at Long Island's ocean beaches with my grandmother during childhood. Thin slices of ham, always coated with just a bit of sand, remind me even now to enjoy the freedom of a breezy afternoon whenever I can. New Yorkers may be stressed beyond belief the rest of the year, and operating at a speed seemingly faster than the rest of the world, but those of us hailing from the island have always known how to slow down enough to enjoy a summer day.

Just before the plane lands, jolting me from my reflections, and my thoughts turn to luggage and taxis and the other practical concerns of travel, I consider once more the optical illusion of the two women. I wonder if perhaps the young girl looking ahead, imagining her future, and the old woman, looking back on her past, are two shades of the same solitary woman. It suddenly seems that just at the spot on the page where the comforting white spaces embrace the confident black ink strokes, so too do the past, present, and future reside together, companions of the most

intimate sort. And as we hold the sketch to the light—turning it this way and that, willing ourselves to see the other half of the picture—we locate ourselves not in one character or the other, but somewhere in-between, nestled in the dusky curve between wisdom and innocence.

Tomorrow, a small piece of a proud Scottish city—a city every bit as proud as New York—will find itself magically transported across an ocean. At journey's end, it will be swept into a sea breeze that carries it over an island shaped like a fish—the same island where I shared sandwiches with my grandmother in the sand and dreamed in that childlike way of all the faraway places with strange names I would someday see for myself. The strains of new music will follow the breeze, settling at last many miles from their origins.

We cannot stay, Edinburgh and I, and so most would call us mere visitors in this place. Yet as long as we keep our company with an endless stream of rainbow kilts and age-old harmonies, neither of us can help but find ourselves strangely at home.

Ruminations with a View

> To awaken quite alone in a strange town is one of the pleasant sensations in the world. […] You have no idea of what is in store for you, but you will, if you are wise and know the art of travel, let yourself go on the stream of the unknown and accept whatever comes in the spirit in which the gods may offer it.
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> -Freya Stark, The Journey's Echo

Directly overlooking the water and the bustling beachside suburb of Coogee Bay, the apartment was, at first glance, a dream come true. When we first saw the view to which we would awaken each day for the next four months, my roommates and I could not believe our luck. The building, shared among a group of Study Abroad students like ourselves as well as some older locals, was the tallest on the block of the Sydney suburb. Our apartment graced the top floor, the sliding glass balcony doors in its dining room immediately impressing onlookers with a sweeping vista of the beach and its environs. The whole of Coogee Bay spread out before us, as though offering itself up for our eyes only, the cafes, shops, and restaurants curving themselves in a grand horseshoe around the perimeter of the sandy shore below.

One might assume that such a pleasant view would inspire a would-be writer, but the process of teasing the stubborn thoughts from a writer's mind is a tricky proposition indeed. The apartment, where I planned to do much of my writing, had

proven itself to be both a gift and a curse. Waking to the sound of the rhythmic surf each day tended to put me in a reflective frame of mind well-suited to the writer's solitary craft, but the spectacular view, as well as the lively goings-on down at the beach, had made the task of finding a writer's discipline more impossible than I had imagined.

On summer weekends in the streets of Coogee Bay, a series of carefree conversations merged into one rollicking cadence over the splash of the waves a few hundred yards away. The din of clinking plates and silverware, the referee's whistle and announcer's play-by-play of the morning rugby games on the green below, and the delighted shrieks of children whose kites had just been carried along by a strong gust—the Saturday soundtrack of Coogee Beach easily caught the breeze, coursing up to my eighth-floor window and pleading with me to abandon my responsibilities for just a moment or two. *Come on down*, it seemed to whisper teasingly into my ear, *join in the fun*.

Virginia Woolf asserts that what a woman needs most in order to be successful as both a woman and a writer is the proper space in which to cultivate her life and writing. Yet, even with the blessing of a room of our own to keep us on task, distraction looms as a temptation for all but the most disciplined of writers. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard describes her own brand of writer's block, which descends upon her while she is composing a new book and is most often triggered by the distractions of the world outside her window. Whenever her writing space—an isolated library cubicle—offers her a view of something intriguing through its solitary

window, she finds herself suddenly joining the neighborhood softball game in the park below, examining the sparrows' feet on the window ledge, and leaving the building to search the creek outside for snapping turtles (28). Easily sidetracked, she does everything but write, the task at hand neatly forgotten with the promise of each new adventure.

During the several months I had lived in the Australian suburb of Coogee Bay, the promise of new adventures had been abundant. Living in as lively a place as Sydney, I was beginning to understand that even as the world outside one's window is often the source of a writer's inspiration, it also contains the power to distract a would-be essayist from her task. While looking down on the enticing beachfront outside my eighth-floor window, I was often reminded of Dillard's advice to fellow writers: "Appealing workplaces are to be avoided," she writes. "One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark" (26**)**. Yet, if inspiration does not come from a choice view or an impressive vista, how exactly does it happen that imagination and memory befriend one another?

The Lady of Shallott, immortalized in Alfred Tennyson's poem, had trouble focusing on her own creative task—the colorful weaving on the loom before her—due to the hubbub outside her solitary window. Working in silence within her tower far above Camelot, she often observed the lively scene below. From time to time, she caught a glimpse of the lords and ladies meandering down the path toward the scenic Camelot, which rose eye-level with her own isolated tower. At last, she spied

Lancelot himself, whose unrequited love was such an unbearable distraction that her longing eventually drove her to suicide.

My own distractions here in Coogee Beach were nothing so dramatic as unrequited love for an unattainable suitor who stood marking his measured pace below my window. On the contrary, the subtle events that invited laziness and procrastination into my own writing practice were as commonplace as could be. Large dark birds, for one, gathered on the balcony and in the trees outside my bedroom window, waking me in the mornings with their distinctive cries before I was ready to rise. Their soulful keening so closely approximated the wail of a hungry infant the first time I heard it that I found myself scanning the lobby and elevator for any young couple that might be neglecting their child. Black feathers ruffled against the wind, the offenders offered this sound in lieu of the alarm clock's buzz: Wah-Wah-WAAAH. Prolonged in the otherwise silent morning, the third syllable of their ritual call sounded distinctly human.

The distractions of Coogee Beach, then, did not simply keep one from writing; they disrupted the very cycle of waking and sleeping. Charles Dickens, in a bout of insomnia, once wandered the streets of London by moonlight and found the place to be equally as restless as its occupants. He found "[t]he restlessness of a great city" perfectly tailored to his own, admiring "the way it tumbles and tosses before it can get to sleep" (147). Coogee Bay, it seemed, had its own restlessness, the waves never ceasing and the wind off the beach slipping beneath our balcony doors on late winter nights, bringing with it an unassailable chill as it snaked its way toward my bedroom.

Despite my fatigue, I could not help but catch its nervous energy, as one might contract a summer cold or an unexpected bout of the flu.

A former professor of mine once told our class that if any of us were ever afflicted with insomnia, we might easily get to sleep by recalling the streets of Cleveland, and by picturing oneself wandering there, instead of counting sheep. Although his tongue-in-cheek remark was meant to disparage a city he considered uninspiring, his comment brings to mind the personal nature of our connections with the places from our lives. It seems only natural that a comfortable sleep should follow when one is surrounded—if only in memory—by the soothing details of a place known so well by heart that its streets and landmarks can be easily called to mind when needed. Italo Calvino's Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities* calls upon the familiar city of Zora when he is in need of rest, as he informs his patron Kublai Khan:

> The man who knows by heart how Zora is made, if he is unable to sleep at night, can imagine he is walking along the streets and he remembers the order by which the copper clock follows the barber's striped awning, then the fountain with the nine jets, the astronaut's glass tower, the melon vendor's kiosk, the statue of the hermit and the lion, the Turkish bath […]. (15)

Perhaps, if this place-oriented cure—this creative recollection of a familiar setting—is a balm for the restless insomniac, it may also apply to the agitation of the restless writer. Annie Dillard's solution to the creative block she experiences when composing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is to deprive her senses of the small pleasures, all of the benefits of the room with a view, so as to fire up her own imagination. Closing the blinds, she composes an elaborate drawing of each detail normally visible from her window, complete with roaming cows, a nearby parking lot, and even the window

frame itself. Posting this drawing over the blinds in place of the view that once showed itself there, she finds herself able to write again. The actual view would have been mere distraction, yet her own artistic memory of the scene outside becomes her inspiration to return to her task (27-29).

Some days, while contemplating the rolling waves below my eighth-floor window—which always reminded me of a childhood spent on Long Island, and of afternoons at Jones Beach, Fire Island, and Robert Moses—I wondered whether it was possible for a place seen in the mind's eye to engage its beholder more powerfully than one that appears before the physical eye. It was, after all, necessary for Annie Dillard to look away from her own window view, recalling it from the richness of her memory, so that she might see it from a new perspective. When she was not looking at this scene directly, but instead conjured it from the depths of her memory, the place became deeper and richer in her mind.

Essayists who write about place often suggest that the windows offered to us by books and photographic images have the power to inspire in us a sense of connection with a place, even when the place is otherwise unfamiliar. Without ever having seen firsthand the *Alhambra* shown in Charles Gifford's 1854 photograph, Roland Barthes admits that he is deeply touched by the likeness. Upon seeing "[an] old house, a shadowy porch, tiles, a crumbling Arab decoration, a man sitting against the wall, a deserted street, [and] a Mediterranean tree," he writes with conviction, "[It] is quite simply there that I should like to live. This desire affects me at a depth and according to roots which I do not know" (38).

In such a vision, Barthes does not see only the visual details of the scene; he discovers in the photograph a deeper sense of this faraway place. The house, the porch, the tree—each of these objects alone is not enough to give us a vision of the place. When taken together, however, these details offer us a scene of Alhambra, a sketch of the shadows and light of a small Mediterranean town.

My own fascination with Australia, much like Barthes with his Alhambra, had begun long before I ever saw the place in person. As a small child, I had wanted to attend the college across the street from my parents' house, so as to remain close to them; I had not wanted to stray from home. When I was in middle school, however, a brochure for an Australian exchange program arrived in the mail. The name of the country in print sparked in me some strange enthusiasm I could not explain to anyone I knew—a certainty that I would see this place for myself. After this mysterious sense of wanderlust struck, places began to call to me with every chance acquaintance, from the pages of every book I read. I heard of a friend's mother who had studied in Australia during her high school days and became immediately consumed with envy. I immersed myself in adventure tales set in Peru and survival stories whose protagonists became trapped atop Mount Everest. Born in a flash of insight with the brochure in hand, the desire to see more of the world than my small corner of Long Island never again left me.

British mountaineer Joe Simpson similarly recalls being swayed to such an extent at age fourteen by the photographs he spotted in Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider* that he later took up the sport himself and eventually pursued a career in

mountain climbing. In his own book, *The Beckoning Silence*, he describes the excitement he feels during his first attempt on the Eiger as he recognizes, one by one, each of the obstacles he faces on the mountain from the books he read as a youth. The literary and photographic representations he had pored over as a teenager come to life before his eyes. He confesses: "[T]he only reason I was here was because of reading; it was the reason I began to climb" (221).

Wendy Lesser, too, discovered a way to feel connected to the outside world from a remote location—the mind. "I had not been to England when I first read *I Capture the Castle,"* she writes of her impressions of both a favorite place and her favorite childhood book, which she recently reread as an adult. "But now I see that Dodie Smith's novel was in part responsible for the way I felt about England when I did eventually get there" (37). The power of the novel ultimately influenced the way she experienced her world beyond the page; upon visiting the English countryside years after setting Smith's book aside, she found that her connection with the place—not unlike Barthes's strange familiarity with Alhambra or Simpson's sudden recognition of the sights on the Eiger—had been deepened by an inspiration forged from memory and imagination.

While the mysterious Australian continent had stayed out of my own reach for many years, the inexplicable attraction I had felt for its deep red deserts and robin's egg blue skies had remained in my memory. Yet, even while looking out of a window from the very place I read about long ago—sitting halfway across the world from that brochure, which remained buried in a box somewhere in my parents'

house—Australia still seemed out of reach. Despite the bustling of the city elsewhere, there was a sense of isolation on the fringes of this beach, which resided at the outer edge of Sydney proper. The city, in turn, settled itself in the remote southeastern corner of Australia's map. On an even grander scale, there was the utter isolation of Australia itself, poised at such a great distance from the goings-on of the larger world.

At first glance, one might not think of such a dynamic city as Sydney—with its bustling café culture and notoriously sunny weather—as a place of danger or melancholy; yet in Australia, the dangers lie side by side with the Sunday morning pleasures. If one looks closely at the rough waves in Coogee Bay, the place will reveal itself to be as rugged as it is seemingly good-natured. Powerful riptides are especially dangerous in the waters off the Australian coast; and while the waters farther north on the Great Barrier Reef are often thought to be ideal for swimming, diving, and snorkeling, they also bear large numbers of the toxic box jellyfish during the early summer months. In addition, the nation has racked up quite a tally of shark attacks in recent years, and offers many species of especially poisonous spiders and snakes to terrify visitors.

There are many reasons, when one considers the surrounding terrors here in Australia, to lose sleep, but in truth, Aussie locals have a natural enthusiasm and fearlessness about their environment. The popular Australian folk song "Waltzing Mathilda," written by Aussie poet Banjo Patterson, is the story of a sheep-stealer pursued by the authorities as he boils tea at a campsite. We are meant to sympathize

with the fellow rather than his pursuers; his refusal to go quietly, choosing to drown himself in a billabong rather than surrender his freedom, is often seen as an act of strength.

When asking around about the Aussie sense of national spirit, one often hears the locals speak with pride about the "larrikin," whose independent, rule-breaking spirit has been captured by Australian characters such as outlaw Ned Kelley and Paul Hogan's rugged individualist, Crocodile Dundee. According to *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*, the lively figure of the larrikin is known across the continent as "a person who acts with apparent disregard for social or political conventions" and is considered a significant part of "the Australian quest for identity." Unafraid to shake things up, the larrikin possesses an adventurous spirit that is often put to good use.

Having grown up in the suburbs of Long Island—where outdoor time was mainly spent playing under the sprinklers in the front yard and building sand castles with my grandmother on the beach—I was consequently lacking in good sense about the practicalities of camping, diving, mountain-climbing, and other outdoor pursuits**.** As a result, I had found myself to be the odd man out more than once during my recent travels.

I had opted, for instance, for a long trek around Uluru—a famous natural site also known as Ayers Rock—instead of venturing to climb its steep slope in the intense desert heat. In the deserts of central Australia, the dirt is a striking shade of red. A photographer's dream, Uluru is the largest monolith in the world and a sight to behold. Temperatures in the desert, however, can reach dangerously high in the

summer months, putting hikers at risk of heat stroke. In addition, the winds at the top of Uluru are strong and severe; climbers are lost each year, due to heart attacks and careless accidents that result in their losing their footing and falling off the edge.

The Aboriginal people discourage anyone from climbing Uluru, due to the sacred nature of the site and the monolith's role in their ancestors' rituals. I had lucked out; I could pretend, while walking among my fearless band of travelers—who abstained from the climb for purely moral reasons of cultural respect—that this was why I refused to climb. Unlike those infamous and admirable larrikins who are so much a part of Aussie culture and history, I preferred to play things safe. That was the nice way of phrasing it. My conscience, however, knew the plainer truth: I was the biggest chicken this side of the Blue Mountains.

The discomfort that accompanies such risky ventures is a reminder that, even when we choose our own surroundings, the world can seem a daunting place where we might forever feel out of our element. The world outside the window offers us a paradox: As often as it provides inspiration for our writing lives, it keeps us from our task by drawing our eyes and ears toward other sources of laughter, solace, and comfort—a community softball game, perhaps, or our ideal partner wandering about the river. Sometimes, it is the kind of place that makes us want to stay in our tower with the weaving loom. Yet, so much of the writer's life lies within the mind; it is precisely because the craft requires such deep periods of isolation that the world outside the window comes to matter a great deal. The best writers know not only how to write, but how to live.

A few months after my trip to Central Australia—during a "great Tasmanian adventure," as the company's marketing brochure called it—a few members of my tour group lost a bet. As punishment, we found ourselves facing a strange sort of punishment: to compose a poem about our adventures during the trip, set it to the tune of "Waltzing Mathilda," and perform it at dinner on the group's last night together. It seemed a cruel assignment for four tourists, none of whom knew either the words or the melody to Australia's unofficial national anthem. Nervously, we looked around the room at judge and jury and confessed as much, hoping to be excused.

We had been naïve to think we could welch on a bet so easily. To our mortification and the curious glances of the waiters, the entire section of the pizza parlor where we had been assigned the challenge launched immediately into the first verse and then the chorus:

> Oh there was once a swagman camped in the billabongs,
> Under the shade of a Coolibah tree;
> And he sang as he looked at the old billy boiling,
> 'Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.'
>
> Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda, my darling,
> Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.
> Waltzing Matilda and leading a water-bag,
> Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.

As they sang, I marveled at the way a kind of solidarity overtook the room. It was not unlike those early days following 9-11, when the crowd rising before a Kansas basketball game gave forth the National Anthem. Fear and pride had joined in the vast fieldhouse, rising up in a single etherial voice both chastened and resolute. These voices before me now were just as earnest and solemn as those in my

midwestern memory, unwavering throughout the final verse. There was something proud and fierce among them, even in the steady intonations of those who were mere travelers in this place, whose fealty to the larrikin culture was as of yet untested.

Following the impressive and impromptu performance of our fellow travelers, there was nothing left to do but nobly accept our challenge. I consoled myself bitterly: at least we didn't have to wear our underwear on our heads from appetizers through dessert, as had been first threatened. Throughout our dinnertime performance in a local restaurant the next evening, I managed to ignore the amused glances we drew from several surprised diners—who, I felt certain, were hoping to enjoy a nice meal without a group of rowdy, musically challenged tourists disturbing their salad course. All the while, however, I was eyeing my delicious, unfinished slice of toffee cake as the waiter made his last rounds. A distressed squeak emerged from my lips mid-song as he lifted it swiftly from my place setting.

The female writer and artist, once denied certain access to education in light of expectations of childrearing and family obligations, has faced a very different set of challenges from those of her male counterpart, confronting her own brand of isolation in recent years. I am thinking once again of the Lady of Shalott with her weaving loom, for whom the world ultimately mattered, despite—nay, because of—her aloneness. As she ultimately peered down upon Lancelot, she decided she could no longer accept her isolation from the world, and yet, having left her loom at last and facing Lancelot's rejection, she was unable to find her place in society.

Yet times have changed. The modern writer faces daily the challenge of striking a balance between the life she creates for herself (and for her family, if she has one) and the creative pursuits that keep her spirit alive and well. If the Lady at the loom were around today to tell her tale, she might very well be making her way toward Camelot after all—texting snide quips about Lancelot to her friends via her cellular phone and brandishing a copy of "He's Just Not That Into You"—instead of joining the swagman at the bottom of the river, that unfortunate meeting place where rebellious larrikins and thoughtful outcasts join forces in a common watery grave.

We can mark gratefully the progress made by comparing Virginia Woolf, wandering an Oxford-like campus—yet denied access to the library due to her status as a woman—with Annie Dillard, successful in obtaining a room of her own (in a college library, no less) in which to write her books. Peering out of her cubicle window at the world below, she completes her own book in solitude decades after Woolf composed *A Room of One's Own*. One can almost imagine Woolf looking out on this scene gladly, perhaps even giving Dillard a conspiratorial wink as the latter struggles with a bout of writer's block. *But you're here,* she might say. *You're writing!*

Inevitably, there will be moments when the two lives of a writer—the writing life and the life off-the page—come calling at the same time. Perhaps that is why authors are forever thanking their spouses in their acknowledgments for putting up with them while creating the work you hold in your hands at the local Barnes and Noble. These words of gratitude may seem a small, perhaps insignificant kindness.

Yet, unlike the comforting ease that comes with a familiar place brought to mind on a sleepless night, the writer's bargain with both the pen and the reader has never been simply achieved. Upon accepting the title of "Writer," she assumes the twin tasks of first forging a writing life that supports home, community, and family, despite the solitude required of her, and then creating a world outside her window that remains inspiring enough to keep her creativity piqued.

When I think of Tasmania now, from the comfort of my small Kansas apartment, what I recall best is not the admiration our writer's group won from our challengers, although our new celebrity status left us wondering how on earth writers at a book-signing put up with it all, as we frantically transcribed our lyrics to a busload of friends' memory albums at a picnic table during a rest stop. What I call to mind instead is the writing session itself. I see the four of us, huddled together in a nearby café for a few hours to write, joking and laughing with one another even as we wrapped our minds around the task before us. Once we became immersed in our activity, I did not give a second thought to our fellow travelers, who were riding motorbikes across the rugged terrain of the dunes nearby. Yesterday, I may have gone diving on the reef or camped for the night in the cold desert air, gazing at the satellites making their slow trail across the five a.m. sky. Today, though, with a group of collaborators and an honorable task before me, I preferred this other kind of adventure—the scholarly quiet time with a pen in hand—to the deafening vibrations of the ATVs careening along the sandy shore. Sometimes—no matter how far across the world a writer drags her jet-lagged frame, or how many risks she drags herself

toward for the sake of both artful living and the most alive kind of art—there is simply the writing to contend with.

The quality of the spaces and places around us matters a great deal in the kind of life we live, if we put any stock in the accounts of place that essayists have contributed over the centuries. Perhaps it is a consequence of their rich inner worlds that writers, and essayists in particular, have always felt a precise kinship with place: G.K. Chesterton's day in the country with "A Piece of Chalk" lends him a new and unexpected sense of faith. Annie Dillard's thoughtful prose about the spaces where she chooses to live and write—in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *The Writing Life*, especially—reveals to us through geography and a keen sense of space not only the perceptive observational life of a writer but also the reflective world within. Joe Simpson's climbing adventures are more than just the subject of the books he writes—they are the very core of his life, a testament to the way that many writers choose to live fully not just on the page but also in the world beyond it. The writing informs the life, and the life informs the writing.

To live a life worth reading about, and to enjoy that life fully, remains, perhaps, the most distinguishing quality of a great essayist. There will, of course, be moments when we must decide whether to keep to our solitary towers or to go live the lives that our writing supports—lives which, in turn, make our words richer and more nuanced when next we sit down to commit ourselves to paper. In such times of indecision, all we can do is consult our windows, summoning all the resolve we can find before we once again pick up—or put down—the pen.

On The Naming of Children and Hurricanes

> All the names we use for the fire at the heart of matter are risky—God, Yahweh, Creator, Allah, Manitou, among countless others—for each comes freighted with a long, compromising history. From all the possible names I favor *spirit*, because the word seems to catch the lightness, radiance, and windlike subtlety of the power that I seek.
>
> -Scott Russell Sanders, The Force of Spirit

Just over a year ago, my sister Beth named her second-born child after a full-scale weather event. I suppose one couldn't call the infant a namesake, in the traditional sense of the word—the selection of the name was not made out of survivor's guilt, as my sister had not experienced the effects of the storm herself, nor was the weather phenomenon a particularly recent event. Furthermore, she did not in the least mean the gesture as a tribute to those who had survived the catastrophe. No, the connection between girl and hurricane was meant from the start to be one of little consequence, and the mother's reasons for selecting the name were simple enough: She just happened to love the name Katrina.

In his essay "The Eye of Edna," E. B. White comments on the phenomenon of naming children after hurricanes, having experienced one himself while living in Maine:

> At the height of the last storm, one of the most dispiriting crumbs of news that came to me as the trees thrashed about and the house

> trembled with the force of the wind was that a baby girl had been born somewhere in the vicinity of Boston and had been named Edna. She is probably a nice little thing, but I took an instant dislike to her, and I would assume that thousands of other radio listeners did, too. (30)

While one may surmise that White would have disapproved of my niece's new moniker, it is more difficult to say what he might have made of the hurricane that preceded her birth. The eye of Edna was small potatoes compared with the might of Katrina; nor was New Orleans, with its location below sea level, as protected as its northern neighbors from the catastrophic effects of the resulting floods.

Public opinion aside, the chosen name seems to me a good one. A few months into the pregnancy, Katie (as we now call her) was diagnosed with Spina Bifida, a debilitating condition that puts the spine in harm's way—a portion of the spinal cord is left unprotected, with paralysis a likely result. Our little namesake also found herself up against a Chiari II malformation, the resulting buildup of cerebrospinal fluid in her brain in turn causing a third condition called hydrocephalus. This "water on the brain," a swelling in the ventricles that creates pressure against brain tissue, often results in brain damage.

The question was put to my sister whether or not to proceed to term, and once she had decided to fight for the child's life no matter the consequences, a new set of challenges arose. The recommended prenatal surgery was a complicated affair that often requires the uterus to be removed and the amniotic fluid drained before surgeons can tinker with the tiny spinal cord, complete a skin graft, and return all parts belonging to both fetus and mother to their rightful place. Also uprooted from

their comfortable surroundings during this crucial time were several family members—including our mother and Katie's brother—who relocated from Long Island to Philadelphia, as the experimental procedure was set to take place at the premier children's hospital in the nation.

The surgery and birth proceeded without complications; however, Katie faced vocal cord paralysis less than two months after the birth. The little body was once again admitted into emergency surgery; first, a shunt—a small device that regulates the flow of fluid in the brain—was implanted in the head, and then a tracheostomy performed, the tube inserted into her throat saving her from respiratory failure. Shortly after—during a procedure that, by some strange coincidence, shared Katie's surname—they corrected a malrotation of the intestine, removing the appendix and reconstructing the stomach.

After every procedure, our own little hurricane bounced back remarkably. She surprised doctors left and right with her progress and her post-operation smiles, defying their predictions from the get-go. Doctor after doctor told us that she would not walk, that she would not speak, that she would not live. Meanwhile Katrina, as stubborn as her mother and the rest of the women in our clan, had her own plans. She survived.

It was beginning to seem that Katrina was the perfect name for this little being: a whirlwind of a child, bringing into our lives the kind of chaos and mayhem that accompanies a storm of the most demanding nature**.** Yet she had also brought to the surface of our lives a sea change, a sense of purpose I had not felt among our

ranks before. There was new fight in us that, for all of our previous bickering in the many years we had been a family, we had not known before.

Not too long ago, New Orleans was a place where people could forget the past without much fuss. In the time before the storm swept through—before most out-of-towners who showed up in Louisiana had humanitarian motives in mind, and before the mantra "rebuild" rose from the streets in whispered, hopeful voices—New Orleans' visitors were undeniably in town for pleasure, not business. They seemed always ready to lose themselves, arriving from great distances around the world so that they might leave their cares at the rear door of the streetcar. They never stuck around quite long enough for the clean-up to begin, but then again, nor did anyone expect them to.

When I reflect upon the three years I spent in The Big Easy from the distant comfort of my Kansas apartment, cramped bookstores filled with dusty treasures come to mind. I imagine the outdoor jazz bands playing to a packed square on sunny weekday afternoons, and the muffled steps of lazy Sunday morning foot traffic on Royal Street sound in my ears. I recall the surprisingly bland taste of king cake, a surreal-looking confection that startles the eye in all its purple, yellow, and green glory (hooray for food coloring) every Fat Tuesday.

Other icons have become familiar over the years to those of us who have spent time within the city limits of New Orleans: The "second line" following along behind the traditional jazz funeral. The ghost tours forming a queue in Jackson Square—

their guides dressed in black robes and gothic makeup, herding their crews from one historical site to the next—and tarot card readers lining the edges of the Pedestrian Mall, granting hope to passersby with a spread of their colorful cards. And let's not forget the lattice balconies, their striking ebony silhouettes set against a violet sunset, best observed in a backwards glance from Jackson Square down the long narrow streets that seem to stretch for miles.

The lively jazz bands playing nearby have always reminded us of how the down-on-their-luck can still forget their troubles and give way to the moment, dancing and swaying to that old-time rhythm. Preservation Hall with its ancient wood floors and benches, no-alcohol policy, and out-the-door crowds, is one of the only places in the city dedicated solely "For the Preservation of Jazz," as the sign in front of one local establishment cautions us.

In the old days, N'awlins (as locals often call it) seemed to embody a unique brand of chaos alongside its laid-back Southern attitude. In the former incarnation of this place, the twin traditions of Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest brought thousands of new visitors to town each year. "The Hurricane" was not a terrible addition to the city's recent history but a favorite cocktail among tourists wandering Bourbon Street on the weekends. People wandered the streets with "go-cups" full of beer. The streets were shut down just before Lent to make room for dozens of parade floats; as the awaited hour drew near, a buzz of excitement floated up and down the parade routes, a palpable anticipation in the air that felt like Christmas morning in February.

Perhaps more than with most other cities, people have always wanted to leave with something by which to remember The City That Care Forgot, even if it was only a story of an unlikely adventure or two. The visitors' pleasures varied widely—for some it was the mellow, careless jazz that floated out of the nightclubs, for others it was the wild parties that roared all night on Bourbon Street. The solemn beauty of the Garden District windows, lit from within—especially when observed from the open window of a slowly gliding streetcar on a summer evening—might be enough to ease even the most frenetic visitor into a slower pace of living, if only for a day or two.

As with a prism that catches a bit of sunlight, the mix of colors revealed to the onlooker in this place depended entirely upon one's perspective, a special gift meant for him alone. For her part, New Orleans accommodated her visitors with a sense of easy grace, with a carefree demeanor admired by the outside world and a sense of insulation from everyday pressures. The city's booming tourist culture was built around the locals' unusual knack for making everything seem as simple and enjoyable as a late-night *café au lait* in Jackson Square. And as any good hostess might do, the Crescent City bid *adieu* to her revelers with strands of colorful beads and an even more colorful collection of stories to bring home to envious friends and family.

Watching a place you have once loved self-destruct before your eyes as you sit comfortably in your easy chair—eyeing the news channels thousands of miles away from the center of the storm—is a strange sensation. I imagine the process is

akin to receiving news that a former lover has passed on or is very ill—despite the moving-on that may have taken place over the years, there is a moment of panic when one realizes there will never now be a mending of fences or a teary reconciliation.

Perhaps this fear comes upon us because we know how notoriously unreliable memory is, how it tends to release without our permission the sound of a mother's laugh, a best friend's voice, our own youthful dreams and perceptions. We might recall the scent of his cologne, or the wisp of hair that always fell across her right eye, with a kind of wonder and fondness difficult to detect while there are yet so many infinite moments to repair things.

When one is recalling a city—rather than a person—in such a light, the rules are not so different. One recalls nooks and crannies that she has not considered in a very long time. Neural pathways that had nearly shut themselves down suddenly jerk to life with nervous abandon at the thought that one may never return to those favorite places. From now on, memory is all we have to go by—but the memories already lodged in the brain are the only ones you're going to get, and even those tend to come without a warranty.

A Louisiana native, Ernest Gaines writes, "New Orleans, New Orleans, New Orleans, you will come back. But will you be my New Orleans, or the little boy's New Orleans […] Or the Joseph sisters' New Orleans? […] Katrina and the politicians have made you a different New Orleans forever" (57).

When Gaines thinks of New Orleans, it is moments of compassion and connection—some real, some imagined—he recalls vividly. His piece "Where Have

You Gone New Orleans?"—which showed up in *National Geographic* a year after the storm—reveals an intimate knowledge of the city: a man at a Mardi Gras parade before the storm, turning over a red plastic horn he has caught to the mother of a little boy who has been unlucky at catching prizes; the toy horn the man finds a few years later in the storm-damaged streets—without a loving child in tow—that makes him wonder; two elderly sisters walking together to church for the last time**.** Gaines's is a recollection not of politics or of bureaucratic procedures, but of the vibrancy of the citizens, the neighborhoods, and the interactions that have always colored southern living.

When my grandmother endured the great east coast hurricane of 1938—a storm whose floods descended with little warning upon the shoreline—she did so with no television, no ambitious news reporters giving round-the-clock reports, no ticker at the bottom of the screen. It is hard to think of it now; I cannot even imagine this kind of silent world.

On September 11th, 1954—forty-seven years to the day before New Yorkers faced a disaster of another kind and magnitude—as Edna descended upon Maine, E.B. White had his radio; today, we have our CNN. White writes: "The idea, of course, is that the radio shall perform a public service by warning people of a storm that might prove fatal; and this the radio certainly does. But another effect of the radio is to work people up to an incredible state of alarm" (31). It used to be that only those in the midst of the storm would have reason to panic. But now, as we worry for

long-distance loved ones and observe the chaos from far-flung corners of the map, we can all join in, panicking together.

I watch the crowds huddled in the Superdome and wonder if this can possibly be the same building where I attended my graduation ceremony. Where hundreds of blue and green balloons dropped from the ceiling, where we sat in black gowns and tasseled caps, singing along to the mournful tune sung long ago by Louis Armstrong:

> Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans
> And miss it each night and day
> I know I'm not wrong, this feeling's getting stronger
> The longer I stay away
>
> Miss them moss-covered vines, the tall sugar pines
> Where mockingbirds used to sing
> And I'd like to see that lazy Mississippi
> Hurrying into spring
>
> The moonlight on the bayou
> A Creole tune that fills the air
> I dream about magnolias in bloom
> And I'm wishin' I was there

What a disconcerting sensation it is, being far from a place one has loved—as a child might love a treasured teddy bear, carrying it with him everywhere he roams, until the right eye pops off and the stitching begins to come undone, exposing the too-white, surprisingly inanimate innards beneath. And how strange a feeling to be observing from afar the city's struggle to endure. The nostalgia we felt as new graduates preparing to leave a familiar place now seems garish and overly sentimental, in light of the reminder that the place itself could disappear from the face of the earth at any moment.

In truth, I am relieved to be sitting on my couch, remote in hand, considering the deep red of the "off" button that I have never before noticed. Something in the panic and grief of these news anchors, many of whom have never spent much time in the city before now, is too much, smothering. The unapologetic emotionality on my TV screen embarrasses and angers me, despite their good intentions and desire to help. I wonder where one finds the line between reporting and exploitation of a community's grief. If we take from the locals the privacy of their mourning and the images of their dead, where will they find solace?

I watch. And watch. And then I turn the television off.

When consulted on the definition of "namesake," the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* refers us to the antiquated seventeenth century phrase "for the name's sake." That is to say, when we accomplish a task "for the sake of something" other than ourselves—for the sake of a name, in this case—we are working on its behalf, to "achieve or preserve" its character.

Yet if we eliminate just a few short words from these old phrases, we alter the meaning greatly: To *forsake* someone is to do him a great disservice, to abandon him, to leave him behind to fend for himself. To watch from afar, or perhaps not to watch at all, as he struggles alone with his burden.

Do you happen to know this man? Does he take up arms on your street corner, begging for a smile and some pocket change? Is he the child fighting for life inside a sister's womb? The stranger on your television screen, falling from a tower,

buried beneath debris, beseiged by the waters that sustained him only yesterday? As always, we can choose to turn our faces away and let him fall.

There are moments when I feel unentitled to my own grief, having witnessed from my far-off perch such large-scale, devastating events of 9-11 and Hurricane Katrina. Having grown up in New York and lived in New Orleans before these large-scale tragedies occurred, and yet having been so far from the chaos as it was happening, is like returning to a tense and silent room after a terrible argument has taken place in your absence. You stepped out for a moment, and missed something that changed everyone's lives while you were gone.

Just before the hurricane, a college friend I haven't spoken with in years contacted me through our former university, mere days before the campus was evacuated and those who were willing and able fled to higher ground. The two of us now try our best to reconnect by phone in the midst of crisis, but it is hard to talk about the city. We skirt the subject and find other things to say.

My alma mater calls and survivor's guilt prompts me to make a donation. But I remain unsettled, strangely unresolved afterwards, perhaps even worse than I did before the phone rang. What have I done, after all? I have done nothing, can do nothing.

This human culture of ours has long held respect for a well-established name. In fact, the namesake has become one of our favorite ways to preserve our own legacy: we regularly give our children titles such as "Junior," assign a Roman

numeral after their name, or christen them in the memory of our favorite saints and ancestors. Yet it seems unlikely that it is simply the name itself that we are trying to preserve. We aim instead for something elusive that resides just beyond the letters and numbers themselves—a concrete sense of our own history, a legacy we cannot access without a sign, a title, or a name to remind us of its power.

The problem with being named for a person, a character from a novel, or—in the case of a world-class hurricane, a traumatic event—is the sense of history that is conjured each time someone speaks your name. The word preserves a history that is not your own, one that never pertained to your own story. It was merely called upon to stand in at the time of your birth, a better one having refused to show up at the appointed time. Your new designation calls up images of a fonder time, or a more difficult one, none of which has much to do with the small wailing creature in your parents' arms.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist Gogol is named for the author of the short story "The Overcoat." He faces much embarrassment among his school friends, as it seems a strange thing that a boy of Indian background bears a Russian moniker. Once he reaches university, he changes his name to Nikhil—a more traditional Indian name—and revels in the freedom of casting off what was never his to begin with.

During one of the last conversations he has with his father Ashoke, however, Gogol learns the true story behind his name. Ashoke, having survived a deadly train crash as a young man, had been reading "The Overcoat" at the moment of impact.

Injured and unable to call out for help as the search party arrived, his only recourse was to wave the pages of the book in his hand—in doing so, he was discovered and rescued from the debris of the wreck. Gogol was named not for a work of no consequence, but for the very book that saved his father's life.

I sometimes wonder what Katrina will one day take from the weight of her own name. Will she see herself as a survivor? Will her physical struggles make her seem to herself a stronger girl, or a weaker one? Will her many surgeries come to define her, or will she refuse them and make her own path? Will she consider herself to be the namesake of the storm that changed so many lives, or will she discount her name, as Gogol did for so long, as a mere coincidence or even as a burden?

When we say that we do something "for old time's sake"—for the sake of old times—we understand, as the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, that we are acknowledging "a shared past" with someone or something. True, one need not recognize such a connection when the only thing held in common is a name. Yet, I think again of Preservation Hall, of wooden floors and jazz, wrought-iron balconies and windows softly lit from within. To share a past with a place that has been through turmoil as defining and chaotic as your own—albeit in its own sprawling, large-scale way—seems no small achievement.

We may survive and yet lack a survivor's testimony, the survivor's determination. We may feel beaten and low, hopeless, even after coming through it all to safety. We may fear for our lives, even when the waters are calm once more.

The written word, silent as it may be to the listening ear, holds a special power during such uncertain times. Writing like Gaines's creates the start of a dialogue that helps us to examine and finally, to accept what happened in New Orleans, so that we may begin, piece by piece, to bring it back. We feel encouraged to participate in the conversation, exploring the places of our lives in a rich and thoughtful way. At moments like these, when so much hangs in the balance, we can't afford to lose our hope for long. There is too much work to do.

Once things have returned to business as usual in Jackson Square—and perhaps they have, already—then warm Saturday evenings will once again bring a crowd of hungry tourists to New Orleans' Café du Monde. I can see them in my mind's eye. Underneath the dark green awnings they sit, comparing their guidebooks and souvenirs with one another, enjoying the café's specialty—a cup of steaming chicory coffee or milky hot chocolate with a plate of beignets, a doughy confection topped with heaps of powdered sugar.

Looking out toward the square, we find the fortune-tellers gathering in a row along the sidewalks, motioning to passersby to stop and offer their palms. Their small tables feature regal-looking tablecloths and hand-made signs: "Donations accepted." These seers deal in hope, that rarest of commodities that has always drawn people to this place. There exist many chances for redemption in The City That Care Forgot—the easy strains emerging from the jazz bar, the colorful beads

thrown from the Mardi Gras floats, the gentle palm of a turbaned stranger in the square—each a delicious secret between seeker and city.

If one ventures a little farther from the crowd, edging into the alleyways behind the square, the figure of an angel is revealed to be keeping watch over the back alleys adjoining the stately cathedral. To anyone approaching the French Quarter from Louis Armstrong Park late at night—though one would be ill-advised to try this deserted route at such an hour—this solemn figure can be seen all the way from the far end of Saint Ann Street. The sight of her shadow catapulted larger than life upon the rear wall of St. Louis Cathedral is an arresting image; magnified by the hazy sheen of street lamps and moonglow—and perhaps a few nightcaps—she seems from a distance to be all wings and no body, a ghostly figure. Her wide stone eyes offer protection to this strangely quiet street, only a stone's throw from Decatur and Bourbon Streets, where the parties, after a brief but uncertain respite, once again stretch far into the night.

The Secret Lives of Storytellers

> We must learn to feel addressed by a book, by the human being behind it, as if a person spoke directly to us. A good book or essay or poem is not primarily an object to be put to use, or an object of experience: it is the voice of You speaking to me, requiring a response.
>
> -Martin Buber, I and Thou

In a silent coastal town in Oregon, a solitary light burns in a first-floor window, casting the faintest glimmer toward the shoreline below. Late into the night, as I keep quiet company with a collection of E.B. White's essays, I scan the beach outside my guest room window, where a small campfire has drawn my eye—kindled perhaps by a few restless souls telling midnight tales. The only other source of light, a lighthouse keeping its watch across the beach, flashes twice in quick succession before taking its rest.

Viewed from the shore below, the hotel cuts a grand silhouette against the night sky, though not an imposing one. Looking up toward the lights of the guest room windows makes one want to get out of the damp Newport chill immediately and settle into a cozy chair with a warm mug and a favorite book. Luckily for the hotel's well-read guests, the staff prepares a nightly offering of mulled wine—and of course, the obligatory collection of classics—in the upstairs library.

The old beachside manor was once a public bathhouse named the Hotel Gilmore. Renovated in the late 1980s, it was renamed for an influential Beach—not for the shore it overlooks, Newport's Nye Beach, but rather for Sylvia Beach, the founder and proprietor of Paris, France's prominent *Shakespeare and Company* bookstore. In 1922, Beach donned the hat of publisher as well, taking it upon herself to distribute James Joyce's *Ulysses* while the book remained banned in England and America.[4]

Sylvia Beach was the consummate book-lover, an enthusiastic collector of letters and volumes and a bookworm of the most social kind. During the 1920's and 30's, her bookstore and lending library was known as a "port of call" where French scholars, international visitors, expatriates, and writers from numerous countries mingled and contemplated the books of English and American origins in which the shop specialized. Her doors opened to the likes of James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot, among other literary lights.

As a result of her salon-style get-togethers, Beach earned herself a reputation as a weaver of connections between literati and a uniting force for international thinkers and writers. Her friend, novelist Andre Chamson, writes of Sylvia's influence on the literary world: "Sylvia carried pollen like a bee. She cross-fertilized these writers. She did more to link England, the United States, Ireland, and France than four great ambassadors combined."

[4] Source: Princeton Library website. For further information, consult Works Cited.

As befitting a literary and social career as illustrious as Sylvia Beach's, the guest rooms at the Oregon hotel named for her are each devoted to a different literary figure, some merely famous and some bordering on the infamous. Oscar Wilde, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, and Virgina Woolf, among others, join the visiting guests in spirit.

As the hotel honors authors of differing eras and writing styles—from Shakespeare to Dr. Seuss—the décor of the rooms varies widely. One quickly grows accustomed to seeing guests wandering the halls, peeking cautiously into one another's reading spaces. One popular guest room, named for the prolific mystery writer Agatha Christie, features a set of carefully placed "clues" throughout the room, including a tiny nameplate embossed with the author's name in miniscule print with an accompanying magnifying glass on the outside of the door. Alternatively, the Lincoln Steffens room offers a different experience entirely from its mystery-themed neighbor; the space honors its namesake, a journalist, with the inclusion of an authentic typewriter in one corner of the room.

Naturally, small talk in the communal dining room at the Sylvia Beach Hotel often begins with the query, "What room are you in?" All ears in the vicinity immediately perk up at a chance to gain some firsthand knowledge of the other bedrooms. The reasoning behind this intense scrutiny is hardly a simple case of good manners toward one's new friends nor a polite interest in how well they are enjoying their stay. Frequently, visitors burning with curiosity will make a new acquaintance at dinner with the sole thought of obtaining an invitation to check out the likes of Jane

Austen or Emily Dickinson after dinner, so as to better decide which room to reserve for their next visit. Bibliophiles, as it turns out, are nothing if not meticulous in their research habits.

As the Easter weekend was busy at the hotel, I booked a different room for each night of my stay. During my second night at the hotel I would reside in the Willa Cather room, while my first night would be spent in the company of E.B. White, the well-known author of *Charlotte's Web*. Although White was both an essayist and a journalist, the hotel seemed most suited to an essayist's wandering, restless frame of mind than it was compatible with the journalist's pragmatic pen. A first glance at the roomy old house and the stormy coastline seemed to invite exploration and a sense of adventure, if only for a weekend.

Upon my arrival, a group of lodgers had assembled in the lobby, admiring an enormous portrait of twenty men and women gathered in a sitting room. The piece, painted by a former guest, was a gift in honor of the hotel's twentieth anniversary, and the subjects of the work were none other than the twenty or so authors for whom the rooms were each named and decorated. Some of the guests were busy identifying various authors such as Ernest Hemingway and Robert Louis Stevenson, or pointing out those for whom their rooms were dedicated. Eager as I had been to settle in after my long shuttle drive, I stole little more than a hasty glance at the painting as I checked myself in, put in a dinner reservation with the front desk, and made my way toward the hallway with my suitcase.

Along the way, I discovered several cats wandering about, roaming in and out of the guest rooms as they pleased. They were the sort of obligatory felines that have always formed fast friendships with readers and their cozy, bookish spaces. The sight of them reminded me of the used book shop back in Kansas where I encountered Alice, the resident feline, on a regular basis.

The unofficial mascot of *The Dusty Bookshelf* and as much a staple of her surroundings as the merchandise itself, Alice wandered the aisles with the most casual air, swinging her prominent belly from side to side as she paraded down the aisles. She had a tendency toward moodiness, often shying away from a visitor's touch, proclaiming with her territorial gait and proudly raised tail that I was a mere a guest in her space. Yet, one might also find her lounging in an armchair, her wide eyes trained on the customers who frequented the nearby self-help section. Her longtime admirers and new friends alike could hardly pass by without offering her at least a scratch about the neck.

There was no dispute that Alice was as big of a draw for business as the books themselves. Her image adorned T-shirts, book sacks, and postcards near the register, and she received a regular round of visitors from the local population. No doubt this extra attention was due in large part to her prime location in a book-lover's haven, the reading community being for some unknown reason notoriously fond of felines. It seemed that these days, a handful of cats was as indispensable to a used bookshop as the books themselves were.

It soon became apparent that the cats prowling the floors of the "book hotel" (as I had taken to calling it in the weeks leading up to my trip) were as much a fixture here as Alice was among her midwestern bookshelves. While lingering in the lobby for a few moments, I overheard one of the staff agreeing with an inquiring guest that the only thing missing from the painting were the hotel's furry mascots—nearly an unpardonable omission in so literary a setting as the Sylvia Beach. "I'm going to ask the artist to add them in the next time he stops by," she chided.

Upon reaching my room, I discovered that the body of E.B. White's work claimed its place there almost as boldly as the man himself might have, had he been roaming the halls of the hotel during my visit. A neat row of framed covers of *The New Yorker*—to which the E.B. White contributed essays and "Talk of the Town" commentaries for many years—commanded my attention from the doorway. Dotting the room were kitschy flourishes that recalled his works, such as a fake spiderweb dangling from the ceiling and the tiny figurine of a pig perched on one corner of the old-fashioned desk, in homage to *Charlotte's Web*.

Adjacent to the neat twin beds was a nightstand, complete with a reading lamp and an impressive collection of White's work. Framed on the wall above the rolltop desk was one of his poems, accompanied by these words of introduction from the hotel's owner: "[H]is advice on writing, 'clarity, clarity, clarity,' is intended to be reflected in the décor of this room." I tried to conjure the author, sitting unusually

upright—even primly—at the modest antique desk, composing these words of wisdom, but instead discovered a folder of clippings about his life and work.

Although known for his composed and elegant style of writing, White's work reveals much about the passionate and detail-oriented reader he became over the years. His fondness for Thoreau became clear as I flipped through several collections of his essays and letters. For a time, White even did his writing in a boathouse of roughly the same dimensions as Thoreau's cabin in the woods. In a moment of literary reverence, White tells us conspiratorially, "Here in this compact house […] I can feel the companionship of the occupant of the pond-side cabin in Walden woods" ("Slight" 286).

Robert Louis Stevenson, too, once forged a connection with the ghost of a distant writer—fellow Scotsman Robert Fergusson. Fully convinced of his connection with the spirit of Fergusson, he declares, "You will never know […] how deep this feeling is: I believe Fergusson lives in me" (Lownie 32). In explaining his unusual kinship with his predecessor, he suggests that Edinburgh—where both men spent a significant amount of time—is a conduit between the two men. The Scottish city, he insists, has bound the fates of the two writers, holding within its memory the mark of a man that paced the streets exactly one hundred years before Stevenson himself:

> Ah! what bonds we have—born in the same city… both seeing the stars and the dawn, and wearing shoe-leather on the same ancient stones, under the same pends, down the same closes. (32)

Such instances remind us that writers are always readers as well**;** one practice never remains entirely distinct from the other. Within even the most satiric writer

there is a reader underneath the surface who has found something of value in the written word before taking up the pen. Writers, too, turn to books when seeking solace and inspiration, just as any other reader might. E.B. White once commented on *Walden*: "Every man, I think, reads one book in his life, and this one is mine. It is not the best book I ever encountered, perhaps, but it is for me the handiest, and I keep it about me in much the same way one carries a handkerchief—for relief in moments of defluxion or despair" ("Visitors" 45).

Perhaps there is something to be learned from the loyalty of a reader who defends the work of his favorite writer as he might the reputation of a true-blue friend. Quick to defend Thoreau against character attacks—such as the charge that he had become "a sort of Nature Boy"—White protested that to reject the much-maligned *Walden* due only to "the immaturity of the author and the bugs in the logic is to throw away a bottle of good wine because it contains bits of the cork" ("Slight" 284, 286). There is something there worth examining, he insists, despite the book's more obvious flaws—but it takes a reader both perceptive and willing to look beyond surface matters to recognize its value.

As dinnertime drew near, I headed downstairs to the Tables of Content, the in-house restaurant, for the unique dinner experience provided by the Sylvia Beach Hotel. Shared among new acquaintances are family-style portions of food, the usual well-informed chatter of bookworms, and the sordid pasts of the bookish diners themselves.

Dinner guests are expected to partake in a pre-appetizer activity called "Two Truths and a Lie," a parlor game in which participants offer two intriguing facts about themselves, as well as one often colorful untruth. Following the telling of tales, the dinner companions question one another, waiting for an awkward pause or a stumble over some minor detail to guide them quickly to the lie. The fun of the game lies in the process of weaving the most elaborate stories possible for the rest of the table. Other perks include observing the way each liar carries off the ruse, as well as guessing when everyone else is bluffing. In this, the game is not unlike poker.

I chose as my own lie a minor deviation from the truth, a straightforward detail that would be easy to remember and wouldn't trip me up under questioning. I had just watched the middle aged gentleman sitting next to me give himself away—he had hesitated a few moments too long while attempting to spell the name of a foreign town in which he claimed to have resided—and I was not eager to repeat his error.

Something strange happened when it came time to relay my true adventures. I had always been an excitable storyteller, especially when a good travel story and a rapt audience were available to me, but on this occasion I got a bit carried away. I quickly fell into an energetic voice and rhythm, bouncing quickly from detail to detail. I described the vibrant colors of the fish I saw diving on the Great Barrier Reef and the sound of the trains in Circular Quay late at night; I recounted the fib I had told about my asthma to convince the scuba diving instructor to let me come on an introductory dive in the Great Barrier Reef.

The enthusiasm and vivid detail I relied upon while relaying these true encounters made them seem, somehow, like fiction. Certainly, most of my acquaintances believed these flourishes to be an elaborate ruse, used to fool them into guessing incorrectly. How strange it seemed that the more sensory details I used in telling the truth—and consequently, the more believable my world became for the listener—the more people thought I was bluffing. Even after we had all made our confessions, I received many compliments on my ability to "lie."

After dinner, we lingered at the table, talking books and travel. The gentleman sitting next to me, a neighbor of a famous children's author, satisfied my curiosity about her hometown, a place I had always been curious about. I, in turn, addressed his curiosity about what books an English Master's student reads in her spare time (Thomas Fox Averill's *Secrets of the Tsil Café).*

One of our fellow diners, an expatriate from Ireland, confided in us her anxious journey from Ireland as a young woman, under the harshest of steerage conditions on a transatlantic passage. Her exotic travels as an adult—including an extended train ride through Siberia—revealed a kind of longing for the extravagances missed as an impoverished child growing up in Ireland.

Shortly after dinner, a group of us proudly showed off our rooms to one another. Edgar Allan Poe's room was all show: dark dramatic curtains, an axe hanging above the bed, a closet door that opened into a brick wall, and the warning someone penned in the room's guest journal ("Whatever you do, do not look under the bed," it teased) all would have made me uneasy had I spent the night there. I

could not see how anyone could spend a relaxing weekend away in such a room without peering through the peephole regularly or pacing the floor every hour or so in agitation.

How little Edgar Allen Poe and E.B. White had in common—at least, from the perspective of an interior decorator. Yet the Poe room somehow suited its occupant—my Irish dinner acquaintance, with her dark, dramatic features and lids creased with black eyeliner. Although I had not read Poe in many years, I recalled that the same thread of longing and dissatisfaction I had sensed in her story appeared throughout much of Poe's poetry. The match between guest and room seemed just right.

My own room, too, seemed just right for its occupant. Of the two nights I spent at the hotel, I much preferred E.B. White's simplicity to the delicate, graceful ornamentation of the Willa Cather room. Her space was certainly pleasing to the eye, with its attractive antique bureau and the curl of a long green plant twisting around the corners of the high ceiling. However, it was E.B. White's antique desk, along with the seascape pastels of the striped twin bedspreads, the calming ocean view through the long windows, and the old-fashioned mirror above the sink that appealed most to my reader's sensibilities.

The understated elegance of E.B. White's prose seemed well-matched to the simplicity of his room: a kind of artful candor that is rare, even among the best essayists—although, one might convincingly argue, it is the very thing that makes a perfect essay, and perhaps, a perfect guest room. Best of all, the small but well-lit

collection of his essays and novels arranged next to the reading lamp on the bedside table held great appeal for the kind of reader who prefers to end the evening with a book in hand.

White once wrote of Thoreau's Walden Pond, "[H]is house in the Concord woods is a haven" ("Slight" 289). However far the Sylvia Beach Hotel might fall geographically from Thoreau's original cabin, it is comforting to think that a man who so well appreciated a haven has earned just such a space in his own name at this coastal guest house. But even if White might approve heartily of the Sylvia Beach, it seems doubtful—judging from what one of his fans called his "wry modesty" in a letter to the hotel's owners—that he would take his own inclusion in the interior design of the place too much to heart.

Although I spent my second night at the Sylvia Beach in the Willa Cather room, I didn't read a word of her writing during my stay. Instead, that night, I crept into the now-vacant E.B. White room. Removing the volume of essays I had begun the night before, I stole up the stairs to the library with the forbidden volume and a glass of mulled wine—that beloved 10 p.m. tradition at the Sylvia Beach—to give myself a little more time with the object of my affections.

I was beginning to wonder whether one could learn something significant about a person merely by knowing a bit about the authors that she most identifies with. My own obsession with E.B. White's writing, after all, had revealed me as trespasser, not to mention a great "liar," if only for an evening. Maybe, if one looked

closely at our reading lives, scrutinizing our habits for clues as one might the entranceway to the Agatha Christie room, it was possible to discover more about our secret worlds and our interior lives than we cared to admit.

This evening was not the first time I had acted questionably in the name of a good book. I once discovered in the library stacks a signed copy of my favorite book at the time. I mentioned it in jest to a friend, a fellow book enthusiast, who joked that I should declare it lost, pay the lost book fee and subsequently add the volume to my own collection. At the time, I had laughed at his brazen suggestion, but a week later, my desire for the book got the better of me, and the volume found its permanent home on my shelf.

If my reading life was notable for having a bit of the criminal about it, I wondered, what kind of reader did that make me? Dedicated and passionate? Determined and adventurous? Or deceitful and selfish? And if ever I returned to the Sylvia Beach Hotel, say after a decade or more had passed, what kind of reader might I be then? Would I have changed enough with the passing years to find that a different room—the elegant Colette, or the dramatic Herman Melville, perhaps—would call my name? Or had I already chosen, sight unseen—by fate or some happy coincidence—the best possible room of all to suit my temperament throughout the ages?

Upstairs in the library, my only companions—the warm wine glass in my palm, the reading journals left by past guests, and a few of White's essays—proved themselves good company. The fire in the fireplace was dying, a mass of slowly

blackening embers, as I made my way downstairs to my room at last. Dutifully, I returned the volume—which bore the legend "From the E.B. White room" on its inside cover—to its proper home, before turning in.

On the way to my room, I passed through the lobby, and finally got close enough to admire the mural in the lobby for myself. Within its contours I discovered an unlikely gathering: J.R.R. Tolkien, Alice Walker, Tennessee Williams, Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein, along with fifteen others, "posing" together in the hotel's library, despite having hailed from conflicting eras and geographical realms. This strange assortment (was there ever any other kind, where writers are concerned?) seemed to be mere acquaintances, newly introduced to one another, rather than long-held friends. Some of them appeared slightly stiff and uncomfortable, perhaps unaccustomed to such frivolity, but nevertheless trying to make a worthwhile go of the social atmosphere.

Were they, then, really so much unlike a table full of the Sylvia Beach's boarders, a group of diamonds in the rough themselves? I wondered what this eclectic but talented group of writers might have said to one other over a few rounds of "Two Truths and a Lie." What truths might have emerged, and what fictions might they have created for the benefit of their dinner companions? Would they have ended the night chuckling with one another and checking out the décor in each other's rooms?

Maybe not. The literary lights in the portrait before me appeared preoccupied, intent; though whether they were lost in thought or merely trying to look like serious writers, no one can say for certain. I decided, for my own amusement, that each was

busy conjuring the seed of a story worthy of the rapt listeners surrounding them—though whether this seed was to be a truth or a lie, we can only guess. Any one of these "seeds" could, perhaps, have been that of a great story, article, or essay—now never to be written—finding its roots here in the deep, strong Oregon soil, where the rains' nourishment is green year round. What might they have composed—something true to life or, perhaps, something a little less real and a little more "realish," as David Sedaris calls the blurred line between actual fact and fiction that has a ring of truth about it? Writers such as E.B. White and Alice Walker could easily have composed either truth or fiction; but when it comes down to it, don't all writers—and for that matter, all of the rest of us, too—have a bit of both the truth-teller and the liar in them?

I scrutinized the faces before me one last time, recalling that each of these men and women were readers, before earning their titles as "serious writers." I'd like to think that at the Sylvia Beach, this most literary of settings, they would have been just like the rest of us, sneaking a few more minutes with a favorite writer in the upstairs library.

Several of the Newport locals have reminded me proudly of the way the local lighthouses flash their beams in a distinctive pattern, allowing sailors to recognize their location at a glance and find their way in the dark. I turn my attention back to the book in my lap, wondering whether the owners of the Sylvia Beach Hotel, too,

consider this space to be a beacon, as its visitors seem to do—a haven to which readers from all across the map find themselves drawn, time and again.

Just as northern lighthouses are the beacons that have guided ships home for centuries, books have always been the lamps by which readers guide themselves safely ashore in the dark. In our most difficult moments, surely it is a reader's greatest blessing to find a haven to revisit time and again. Such a refuge might be a physical place—a small cabin in the woods, a creaky old hotel on the seashore—or, more simply, the comfortably familiar setting encountered in the well-worn pages of a favorite book.

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