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Marking a life

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The problem that motivates both this and other creative projects of mine concerns the purpose of stories. The normal use of stories in the academy is to present them as evidence. Here the meaning of a story is tethered to a particular framework that has been decided before the story is written. Thus, we know what the story will tell us before it is actually told. By attempting to bring the world and our words about the world into a relation of correspondence, the value of a story is measured by its mimetic qualities. This is very far from the traditional work of stories. While all stories work to capture something real, historically that reality is measured through their capacity to affect, move or incite rather than transparently represent. Indeed, as Blanchot (1993) suggests, stories work by an act of estrangement: “I recognise very well” he states “that there is speech only because what ‘is’ has disappeared in what names it” (36). Stories make the world real by effacing the reality that they purport to reflect.

But if stories are not empirics then of what use are they to the academy? My work approaches stories as agents of thought. Stories are catalysts. They present situations, events and circumstance that solicit our attention and our consideration. While much of my work is ethnographic, the following story is auto-biographical. But similar to my other work, this story is used to situate a problem for thought. It is precisely the story’s impenetrability – its reluctance to reveal – that demands a thoughtful response. This is the role of stories in my work – not the evidence of our ideas but their progenitor.¹

In August 2005, I went to Beth Abraham cemetery in Ferndale, Michigan with my partner and grandmother to put stones on my father’s grave. I looked around the grass and found a rock, something noticeable, and set it on the left-hand side of the tomb. I am here. I came. And here is a mark of my presence. My partner and grandmother did the same. This is the way of landscape. A stone, marking a tomb, marking a life, the thread of posts leading to other posts. The scene reminds me of Poussin’s painting *The Bergers of Arcadia*, where shepherds, enjoying a timeless bucolic existence, contemplate a stark unadorned tomb. Death here is marked by the tomb itself, jutting into the middle of a tranquil pastoral scene, as well as by the shadow of the shepherd’s

¹ I have written more fully about this approach to stories in Rose (2014)

hand, light coming over the fingers and arm in the shape of a scythe, framing the words on the tomb, ‘even in Arcadia there is death’. Here Poussin tells us that death cannot be seen or properly brought to light, but rather, must be grasped through the shadows it casts. Even as light demarcates the visible by illuminating the surface of a tomb, it simultaneously reveals the invisible as an absence of surface, a projected darkness without texture or quality. The same relation can be seen in Heidegger’s (1971) concept of the clearing; that portion of the world illuminated by a specific subject’s way of being-in-the-world, like a cosy fire illuminating a forest floor. While the warmth and light of the clearing makes the site inhabitable, it simultaneously demarcates the opacity of the surrounding woods. Here is a darkness revealed not as something not-yet-present but as something secret and mysterious. An inscrutability appearing as an inscrutability, too dark for comprehension or engagement, and yet sensed in its oppressive encirclement. While the sunshine off the granite face of my father’s grave sparkled, it did not light a path. It simply glistened, reflecting sunlight over a lightless depth.

<Image 2: The Bergers of Arcadia>

When the phone rang 18 months previous it was 6am on Boxing Day in Swansea (where I was staying with my partner’s family) and I am in Miami where my family spend their winter holiday:

- ‘Grandpa?’ I asked my brother
- ‘No, its Harvey’

A car accident, I presumed. My dad lost his license a year ago. He had black-outs and had already been in a crash but I knew he was still driving. ‘No’ my brother said, ‘its bad’. When people talk about shock, they talk about a world closing in on them or the disappearance of an outside. For me this was not so. I heard my sister-in-law crying, I felt my partner’s arm, a cup of tea mysteriously entered my hands. But they took place in a light where depths and textures became effaced and smoothed. There was light, but I was not seeing. What I sensed was a voice, a speaker that was resolutely me, and yet, other and distant. A fold of interiority, a creasing of consciousness, dividing and speaking from afar. I heard an arising from the problem; the demand, posed at that moment by my brother, my father and the legacy that this event presupposed; a questioning whose questions precipitated fractals of interior space, interrogators and pushy problems forcing themselves into a facing, a sounding, a beating, whose comportment worked to

initiate a range of determinations – I, him, us, ours, then, today, I am, I can't, how did....? I took a sip of tea. For some reason it was sweet.

In 5th grade my father entered the classroom in the middle of the afternoon to take me out of school. I had not seen him since the divorce. He had been living in California for the last four years and that wild place had insinuated itself in his cropped salted brown beard, his Rayban glasses and the small leather purse he walked with. It was Detroit and he was driving a foreign car. Everyone in the classroom looked at him, his rough non-dad-like presence entralling their imagination. While we hadn't seen each other, we talked on the phone most Sunday evenings.

- 'Come during Christmas' he told me

- 'What about mom?'

- 'She can take you to the plane and I will pick you up'

The idea of going on a plane by ourselves was fantastical and yet tossed over his shoulder like shells from a nut. California had roller coasters drilled into mountains. It was the landscape of dead trees and strangely named dogs and where he, in his mystery, lived. About a month before we were supposed to leave my father's girlfriend called to tell me that he was in hospital.

Downstairs my mom sat drinking a cup of coffee. 'Is he sick?', I asked. 'I think so', she said.

<Image 3: Fishing>

I saw the sunrise for the first time when I was 16 and I was resolutely underwhelmed. The sky moved from an inky blue to a light coral feathering above the muddy grey water. The day was overcast and the sea was choppy. I was not happy about getting on a boat. My brother and I had fished for blue gills and bass on crude poles from dry land but we were not hardy sons. Using bread instead of worms, the pleasure of catching fish was matched by our displeasure with having to grab them and throw them back. Dad was indulging us in grown-up fishing. Four poles lined up at the back of a small trawler, lurching unsteadily in the windy wake. After two hours of nausea and boredom one of the poles sprung. My dad jumped up and handed it to me. I watched the line shoot out from the reel and my dad reached over my shoulders and gave the pole tension. 'Pull back slowly' he said. I was caught off-guard by the pull and weight in my arms. 'Swizzle your feet back' he said, 'and shift your hips'. By the end of the day we had a King Salmon, and

two Cohos. We took them to the station, got them cleaned and filleted, and then to a local park where my dad coated them in butter, wrapped them in foil and put them on coals. By the time we started home it was 9pm. I slept in the car, the sky a milky rooibos orange and just beginning to darken.

A year after my grandfather's funeral, the family met at the cemetery where my dad was supposed to read prayers. He would have done it well, his calming doctor-patient voice was meditative and comforting. We waited for him. But my grandmother said we should begin. Afterwards at the house my sister and I sat in the kitchen eating coffee cake when my dad and his third wife arrived. Sitting down with a cup of coffee his eyes were blank and distant, the lids drooping. 'I am on a morphine patch' he told us matter of factly, 'the doctor prescribed them for migraines'. The next day his wife called to see if I wanted to meet them for dinner. 'I can't see him. Not now. He's not good'. I heard my dad mumble something in the background. 'Your father says he understands'.

While walking along the Gower cliffs at Easter, my chest began beating and for no apparent reason I became anxious and breathless. I called out to my wife walking ahead: 'have we walked here since December?' After I first received the news about my dad we had done this exact walk; seen this same scene; stared out blankly through the same cold mixture of rock, sea and mist. Walking back my wife suggested I had been repressing. 'I haven't been repressing' I said, 'I just don't think about it because it makes me feel bad'. She looked at me as if I gave her the clinical definition of repression – but I still disagree. Repression suggests displacement, as if I had taken all my thoughts and feelings and put them somewhere else, hidden from consciousness or contemplation. But it is possible that my response did not precede the scene. Like Poussin's tomb, the landscape marked an impenetrable surface – a darkness that could only be recognised as a darkness by illuminating the space around me. In this sense, the view was not a symbol resonating with an already interiorised space. Rather, it was a surface whose appearance demanded, like ancient sorcery, an interior space to arise. The landscape was a solicitation. Its presence a dark invitation to feel, to hear the beating of one's heart, to sense the quivering of one's lip. In its alchemy of earth, light, shadow, fear and dread, the landscape summoned consciousness and sensation.

The following December I drove out to the Oakland County Coroner's office to talk to Dr. Dragovitch about the autopsy. The story my grandmother wrote in the obituary was that my dad died after a long struggle with Parkinson's. He suffered from shakes, black-outs, loss of balance and other maladies but I doubted my grandma's story: 'your dad's death is a shanda', my mom said, 'the funeral will be a white-wash'. 'In order to properly test for Parkinson's disease', Dr. Dragovitch told me, 'one would have to sample particular tissues. We did not go into those details under the circumstances since its obvious that for a self-inflicted gun shot wound, no such assessment was in order. On the basis of a gross examination of the tissues, I didn't see anything that would qualify as a departure from normal to pursue anything along those lines or even document it'. I moved onto the toxicology report: 'was he high when he died?' 'No' Dr. Drogovitch said, 'he wasn't high. There is a whole account at the scene and that includes various boxes and professional samples: Zolof, boxes of duragesic, professional samples of Phander, a bottle of Trazodone, vials of Depakote, painkillers, anti-depressants and mood enhancers, but these things clear the system very quickly'. As I walked out of the clinic I called his wife and told her I was going to be late for lunch. I had a message from my dad's second wife confirming an appointment tomorrow morning and I had a return call from an attorney to discuss how to attain my dad's files from Maple-Grove Hospital, an addiction clinic nearby. It was one in the afternoon and the sky was a grey milky tea colour and letting go of a weak and listless snow.

<Image 4: Placing a stone>

For Levinas (1987), the singularity of each individual being is guaranteed by a secret, that aspect of another person that eludes all knowing, all understanding; that which withstands all attempts to discipline, colonise or oppress; that which withdraws from the finitude of death, the expansiveness of love and the exactitude of science. Subjectivity, here, evades immediate presence. But it can be viewed from a distance. Marked by a name, stories, photos and stones, our being appears to us and others in surface and light: faces that solicit but do not reveal. In this sense, the stories and vignettes I have been telling about my dad can be understood as further incarnations of the rock I set on his tomb. I could keep listing stories – each branch and tangent

supplementing his character into further directions and folds, each periscopic angle illuminating a single surface of an infinite geodesic form – but they would provide no clear way, nothing that Heidegger would call *a path* (1998). Or if it is a path it is one of integers; a horizon that stretches out infinitely, ready to be filled by more lists of stuttering, half spoken words – questions, problems, forms of guilt and bewilderment. Unless we understand the dark imperatives that give rise to such compulsions, we will not understand how the obscure surfaces that litter our lives silently call and compel us to think. And why, when we answer it is only occasionally with narrative and text, and more often with stones, marking a way without architecture, meaning or promise.

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