

THE WRITER'S UNMENTIONABLES:
A Study of Recurring Images and Themes

Rebekah Robinson

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Say what?

The Introduction

It all started with E.B. White—for me, that is. It was his essay “Death of a Pig” that struck something in me, a memory from my own childhood about a story of a pig. Here I was, all grown up, reading about the real Wilbur, I was sure of it. It occurred to me that this experience White had with his pig (once meant for slaughter and then given pet-like status after suffering an illness) could have been the makings of *Charlotte's Web*. Had White intended these stories to seem similar, or was he just drawing from what he knew to be just another day on the farm? As writers, the work we produce includes similarities in language and theme, even down to the way we punctuate each sentence. This repetition must come from somewhere. We repeat language we like, but why this language? Why this pig? The more I studied writers' work, the more answers came pouring in, a burst pipe leading me to new theories. Human experience shapes our writing and makes it our own. The similarities in language, form, and theme are often subconscious.

In my search, I came across an article in the May 2010 issue of AWP's *The Writer's Chronicle*, in which Eileen Pollack wrote about theme, what it means to us as writers, and where it comes from. She writes:

A story's *aboutness* is the center about which its other elements revolve.

That center might be a point—an opinion, a belief, a thesis. More often it's

broader and fuzzier than a point. A story's *aboutness* is the larger, more

abstract question that plagues the writer about his material, the reason this particular story drew this particular writer's attention. (28)

Pollack uses the term "aboutness" to describe the writer's subconscious attraction to particular things, the place the writer goes in his or her own head to drag out all the components of story, essay, poem, etc. As a writer, I have felt this dragging. Each piece of language, form, content piled inside a burlap sack in my brain, hauled out and dumped onto a page in seemingly no particular fashion. It makes sense that sometimes items get thrown back, jumbled up, and pulled back out again. It is the persistence of the larger ideas to continually reappear that creates the aboutness.

Pollack goes on to say later in this article that young writers should write what they are best at and find their aboutness later on. She is speaking specifically to fiction writers, but the message is the same for any genre: what shapes writing is a combination of all the unique experiences of the writer, not the story itself. The aboutness will appear through the natural course of doing the work.

At the 2009 residency of the Rainier Writing Workshop, Jim Heynen gave a compelling lecture about recognizing repetitions in his own work. He explained that he had a peculiar preoccupation with teeth as props and metaphors throughout his writing. They appear throughout his work in various forms: dentures, pearly whites, decayed. It became clear to Heynen through the progression of his writing that this teeth imagery was linked to his experience growing up with parents who had distinctively poor dental health. He described the embarrassment he felt about his parents' teeth, and this old childhood sentiment kept coming back subconsciously into his work over and over.

Sometimes in small ways, but significant nonetheless. It was only after Heynen had produced a substantial amount of writing that, looking back, he could recognize this pattern.

Stanley Kunitz, with his many decades of writing, knew this phenomenon well. He called it the writer's "constellation of images." Kunitz was interviewed by Elizabeth Farnsworth in 2000, shortly after becoming Poet Laureate of the United States at the age of 95. Kunitz speaks of his own work:

I think a poem lies submerged in the depths of one's being. It's an amalgamation of images, often the key images out of a life. I think there are certain episodes in the life that really form a constellation, and that's the germinal point of the poems. The poems, when they come with an incident from the immediate present, latch on to those images that are deep in one's whole sensibility, and when that happens, everything starts firing at once.

Kunitz's advanced age and prolific catalogue of work give him a wise perspective on this idea of recurring images and themes. His theory is similar to Pollack's idea of aboutness, but it is this constellation of images that creates the aboutness in a writer's work. The writer must work, create what seems the most true to form and personal style, and the constellation will appear because it is central to our humanity.

I like to consider this idea as being more of a web than a constellation, each independent variable linked and expanded out from the center, making independent lines and layers from the same impervious thread. What makes a truly beautiful web is the

ability of the spider to know where he has been, and then explore where he goes next.

Some of the most beautiful webs I have seen start from gutter edges and extend down to trees and flowers below, but each segment still connects.

In order to understand and clarify why or how a writer can repeat herself gracefully, I read multiple works by one author in tandem, and then compared these works. In all of these cases I compared pieces of nonfiction with poems or pieces of fiction. I focused on several specific authors who crossed genre with their work: Mark Doty, author of several memoirs, essays, and poetry; Peggy Shumaker, a poet and memoirist who works also in collaboration with visual art; Rebecca McClanahan, a writer crossing into every imaginable genre, but I focus mainly on her essays and poems; Li-Young Lee, a Chinese American poet who also wrote a startling memoir of immigrating to America as a small boy; and, for balance, novelist and memoirist Kim Barnes, writing about her life in rural Idaho.

I devoured memoirs, held them up to the light, side by side with stanzas of poetry by the same author, looking for secret messages to appear through the page, straining to understand why I felt I had read something before, or why I understood the works better when read together. I found passages in authors' works that were the same. Almost verbatim. I began to see patterns and style choices repeating. Images were being drawn the same way from one page to the other. Characters were recurring with only subtle differences. Adjectives were becoming habitual. Metaphors were lingering across binding. It was more than just the stylistic choice each individual makes, it was the question of why. Where did this preoccupation with certain verbiage, metaphor,

simile—syntax—come from? It was clear that each author had a moment in time when something branded their words. A specific incident, place, or character that affected his or her subsequent writing. The center of their web; their constellation of images.

In the next sections of this paper I will explore what I found in my search for meaning in repetition. I will address some of the specific language choices made by these authors and give my assessment as to where these repetitions came from in the authors' lives. These conclusions are mostly based on the authors' works and clues I found in pieces of their nonfiction, but in some instances they come from conversations with writers themselves. Lastly, I look at how each author can transform the same idea into different work.

Have I Seen That Somewhere Before?

Recognizing Repetition

The cover of Peggy Shumaker's memoir *Just Breathe Normally* is the first illumination on the recurring themes in her work. A woman submerged in a deep aqua of ocean, arms spread out, giving an odd sense of stillness and movement at the same time. There is no land in the picture, but there are lines of washed sand underneath the water that let us imagine the movement of waves and tides. Upon opening Shumaker's poetry book *Blaze*, I found that, in any given poem, liquid appears in various forms. From the language of droplets and melting, to the harshness of frost and ice. The imagery of liquid in all its mysterious configurations—not just water, but also blood and tears—presents over and over. When I spoke with Shumaker in person, she noted that growing up in Arizona it was often the absence of water that gave her this strong liquid imagery.

The differences between Shumaker's book of poems and her essay collection are demonstrated in the physical shaping of the words on the page. Her poems are set out in stanzas, appearing symmetrical: clean lines, words flowing and butting against one another in specific ways. Shumaker's essays have many of these same poetic, flowing qualities; however, they are set in sequences next to each other and complement subject matter, moving the reader along through a narrative arc with each essay. Sequences are written in short concise paragraphs with titles that speak clearly to what is to come, the way a poem's title often does. Shumaker's titles give reverence to water as a life source. Titles like "Before Leaves Fall, Snow," "Too Soon After Rain," "After Long Drought,"

or “Absence of Ocean.” All these titles implicate the importance of water, or the power that comes from its absence. I use this poem from *Blaze* to illustrate:

“Braided River”

Under the ice, burbot glide

as if giving birth

to silence.

Someone who held the auger straight

drilled clean through

to moving water,

set gear, then hurried home,

chilled blood pulling back

from the surface, circling deeper

toward the center, the sacred.

As all winter the heartwood

holds the gathered birch sap

still. Ours is only one bend

of a wild, braided river. (1-14)

Shumaker proves her gift as a writer by taking a powerful universal symbol like water, with all of its various connotations, and weaving it into her piece. In this poem there is ice, moving water, chilled blood, birch sap, and, of course, the river itself. Each representing the movement of life in some way. The way ice holds the movement in, the blood becomes chilled, the sap remains still, yet the river never stops. The river flows beneath the ice the way the blood flows beneath the skin.

It seems that the metaphors for life and for womanhood are what really transcend through these liquid passages. But Shumaker's personal connection with this is deeper than just metaphor. In *Just Breathe Normally* Shumaker describes a moment where she was on the edge of death:

I'm under a door covered with sandbags. Muddy water's rising. My hips sink deeper into muck. I can't open my eyes until I know what's in this water. The weight crushing my chest grows heavier. Am I wearing armor? My lungs fill with wet concrete. (7)

This author's connection with water is far beyond traditional symbolism, although symbolism works to her advantage by giving her work multiple layers of meaning. When a person describes her own dying sensations as a drowning there must be more there than the reader can possibly know. Water appears again when Shumaker describes the flash floods that washed over the desert neighborhoods of her childhood in her short essay "Moving Water, Tucson." We see it in different ways as she writes of her life in Anchorage, Alaska. At some point in Shumaker's life the way that she was affected by water has shaped the language she uses to express herself.

Some of the themes in Rebecca McClanahan's work are similar to Shumaker's. The strong female identity is always present, but McClanahan's language seems to have been shaped by the intricate dichotomy of dependency and independence of growing up, and the struggle to find a balance. McClanahan's descriptive tendencies and thematic choices seem also to be heavily influenced by the loss of an infant sister shortly before she was born. McClanahan identifies herself equally in both the dependent and independent, and has a great strength in the honesty and value she places on family relationships. Again and again there are images of children, mothers, sisters, and wives, even if these are not expressly autobiographical. We can see the connections of McClanahan's web as each poem and essay unfold beside each other.

From her book of poems *Deep Light*:

“Somewhere In Iowa, a Woman”
 leans over steaming pots,
 over the soft flesh of plums,
 skins slipping off in her hands.
 Her hair clings damp, curling
 on her cheek, a woman giving
 birth all over again. Her breath
 fogs the window. She calls their names.
 Her daughters, years gone. (1-8)

This first stanza of McClanahan's poem is a perfect example of themes she continues in her work. Not only of mother, daughter, sister, but in the last line of this stanza there is even slight allusion to the loss of a child; be it metaphorical or literal, the

theme is there. McClanahan also uses the imagery of food. In this stanza the “soft flesh of plums” may even represent the sustenance a mother gives to her children, or the fruit could be the children themselves. Again and again in her work we see a woman or girl, dependent or care giving.

McClanahan’s poem “Second Skin” is an exquisite metaphor for the unique lost and found experience she had as a baby born so closely to the loss of an infant older sister:

Yes I know whose pelt I wore
 Those first few hours,
 Whose woolly death covered me,
 A sheep in sheep’s clothing— (1-4)

She uses the actual, physical fact of a lamb wearing another lamb’s skin—a practice called “grafting” that shepherds use to trick the mother of a dead lamb into suckling an orphaned lamb—and connects that to her personal web of imagery. It is a brief moment, but from this we have a slight understanding that the speaker of the poem is “wearing” the death of someone else, she is wearing the pelt of another sheep. Although the subject of this poem is perhaps not a mystery, the tone and feeling seem mysterious, as if she is describing the indescribable, and perhaps that is exactly what she is doing.

In Kim Barnes’s memoir, *Into the Wilderness*, the author recounts her childhood growing up in the logging camps of rural Idaho and living with strict religious parents. The story itself is exciting and Barnes brandishes all the ways of poetry to illustrate her

setting and convey the utter dismay and frustration with her situation without coming across as overly angry or sentimental. These themes are all directly translated into the prose of her novel *A Country Called Home*, where we not only have the character of a young girl overcoming religion, but even at the base level of words themselves we have the repeated naming of trees and the sights and scents of the land that carry over from the author's life in Idaho.

Having read Barnes's memoir first I had some personal knowledge of the author, enabling free assumptions about correlations to her fiction. I found that characters overlapped. The pharmacist who played a minute part in her memoir became a main character in her novel. The young girl who was the main character of her novel seemed very reminiscent of the way Barnes describes herself in her memoir.

Writing from memoir to novel is an example of transformation across genre. The autobiographical novel is another way for the writer to come to terms with recurring themes. Although Barnes writes the water and the trees similarly between each book, one could argue that this transformation across genre was a way to relive the past differently. The themes are the same, a young girl overcoming adversity in the midst of the wilderness, but some of the finer points of the story have been changed. For example, in her memoir she writes of a fleeting moment she has sitting at a piano with a love interest. Nothing happens between the two of them, but the tension is obvious. In her novel, the main character, Elise, has a very similar moment at a piano, but in this fictional story the couple's actions go beyond what happens in her memoir scene. Without speaking to Barnes personally, I would guess just from the comparison of the text that this was an intentional transformation of the memory.

The style of her work in the novel is more poetic than the style of her memoir.

Compare the first lines of each book.

From *Into the Wilderness*:

Past the Clearwater Timber Protection Association and the “Fire Danger” board, across the creek and before the dump, the small house squatted in a pocket of red fir and pine, not visible from the road. The locals called the hollow Dogpatch. (3)

From *A Country Called Home*:

First the river. Mountain wash of snowmelt through granite, past fir, larch, red cedar, and pine. The Canyon where the water widens, runs deeper, eddies in against rimrock, gulleys the bank’s soft pallet. (3)

Each of these first lines introduces a rural Idaho setting that is situated near water. The novel presents the river as a character with a force and a quiet but important presence that will ultimately drive the story. The memoir mentions the creek in passing, while noting the various unsightly features of the land that make up a place she calls home. What Barnes has transformed across genre is the way the character of the girl perceives the same setting. The memoir is stark, giving the necessary details, while the novel describes in detail the way the water moves and feels. The characters in each book are both well versed in the language of the area; in both passages Barnes mentions red fir and pine. The novel goes even further to suggest larch and red cedar. Her recurring themes as a writer are the trees and the rivers she grew up around. We know from her memoir that her father was a sawyer, that the forest provided for her and her family, and that she was taught the delicate differences of each tree. She transforms the way she sees the trees

across genre from a harsh wild place to escape into a lush green land worth returning to, but with a certain reverence that comes with the wisdom of age.

In his book-length essay *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, Mark Doty uses the painting of the same title, by Jan Davidsz de Heem, to connect images to memories, a testament to the way visual art has influenced his work. Doty's relationship with art comes from a significant experience from his childhood. He mentions a brief passage in one of his memoirs, *Heaven's Coast*, almost in passing: "I came, after a while, to seek the images of comfort and challenge and transformation in art. My mother, with her love of painting and music and beauty, had helped me to look there. . ." (17). Art is one of Doty's greatest influences. Not just the physical art itself, but the ideas that art can create or symbolize. The intellectual and/or emotional intimacy can be more intense than paint on canvas or print on page. The writing and the painting are a complement.

From *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*:

To think through things, that is the still life painter's work—and the poet's. Both sorts of artists require a tangible vocabulary, a worldly lexicon. A language of ideas is, in itself, a phantom language, lacking in the substance of worldly things, those containers of feeling and experience, memory and time. We are instructed by objects that come to speak with us, those material presences. Why should we have been born knowing how to love the world? We require, again and again, these demonstrations. (10)

This is the gift of the essay form: the writer can speak plainly of what he knows to be his great influences, and he can acknowledge recurring moments as important to the shape of his art. In Doty's case, he is discussing the influence that visual art has had on his work as a writer.

In further passages Doty goes on to elaborate on a special relationship with his grandmother, who died while he was still very young. He uses the yellow of the lemons in this painting to draw the reader into the "thin flowered dress" of a memory, this leading into a scene and a whole section of memoir:

Mamaw wears a thin flowered dress of rayon or some other slippery stuff, and a white crocheted cardigan sweater, also thin, that keeps riding up her skinny, intricately mottled wrists; the sleeves of her sweaters are never long enough, and somehow this underlines the fact that everything about her is thin, both delicate and peculiarly sturdy at once. (10)

Visual description is the starting point to a much deeper layered process for the reader to understand Doty's recurring themes. His grandmother appears also in the beginning of his memoir *Heaven's Coast*, where he describes the moment she died and the effect it had on his childhood. Maybe this is why Doty writes so pristinely about death and moving beyond the body when he is faced with it again, more prominently, with the death of his long time partner, Wally, who is present as memory in much of Doty's work. All these pieces in his history return to Doty's writing, setting the tone for a greater theme that deals with the space between those left living and those who are dead.

Visual art comes through in Doty's poetry most prominently in his language choices. He uses the precise naming of colors to describe the scenes around him. Doty often uses the image of the painter's palette to emphasize the distinct, unique color choice. In his poem, "Four Cut Sunflowers, One Upside Down," he describes a scene reminiscent of van Gogh, using the paints to punctuate vivid imagery. But this particular poem encompasses more than just this repetition of color detail; it also holds some of the repeating themes in Doty's work. Just in glimpses and pinpricks of words, but they are powerful. I include the poem, from Doty's collection *Atlantis*, in its entirety not only for its rich descriptive beauty, but to give full effect of how he uses this color language:

"Four Sunflowers, One Upside Down"

Turbulent stasis on a blue ground.

What is any art but static flame?

Fire spun gold, grain.

This brilliant flickering's

Arrested by named (Naples,

Chrome, cadmium) and nameless

yellow, tawny golds. Look

at the ochre sprawl—*how*

they sprawl, these odalisques,

withering coronas

around the seedheads' intricate precision.

Even drying, the petals curling

into licks of fire,

they're haloed in the pure rush of light

yellow is. One theory of color,

before Newton broke the world

through the prism's planes.

And nailed the primaries to the wheel

posited that everything's made yellow

and blue—coastal colors

which engender, in their coupling,

every other hue, so that the world's

an elaborated dialogue

between citron and Prussian blue.

They are a whole summer to themselves.

They are a nocturne

in argent and gold, and they burn

with the ferocity

of dying (which is to say, the luminosity

of what's living *hardest*). Is it a human soul

the painter's poured

into them—thin, beleaguered old word,

but what else to call it?

Evening is overtaking them.

In this last light they are voracious. (1-35)

Between the fifteenth and sixteenth stanzas, the space between the living and the dead is so eloquently placed in the line, “. . . they burn // with the ferocity / of dying (which is to say, the luminosity // of what's living *hardest*) . . .” Doty uses the gold and burning colors to emphasize what he sees as the visual of this space. In the fourth stanza when he writes, “. . . arrested by named (Naples, / chrome, cadmium) and nameless . . .” he gives the palette a form and uses the specific names, extending later with ochre, and

focusing on the traditional word, yellow. This technique is something that he uses in *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* when he is describing the intensity of the yellow lemon, but in essay form he describes the science of this color making:

The lemons are built, in layers, out of lead tin yellow, which the Italians called *giallo di Fiandria*, a warm canary made by heating lead and tin oxides together, which was also the preferred pigment for the petals of daffodils, and out of *luteolum Neapolitanum*, or Naples yellow, and of a glowing but unstable pigment called orpiment. (8)

Doty's proper usages of color names give the prose piece a depth and a beauty of language that is his style. It is their consonance that creates a really powerful impact to the recitation of his poetry or prose. Words like "tin oxides," "preferred pigment," and "orpiment," with their push and pull of consonants and the impact of the *ox* and *in*, all make this passage something more than just informative. His poetry and prose read like brush strokes.

Going further into Doty's poem, he writes in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas, ". . . posited that everything's made of yellow and blue—coastal colors . . ." This line draws in another of Doty's recurring themes of coastal images—not the water itself, but the shore and all its inhabitants. The shore is a place that is imprinted on his life and subsequently appears throughout his work. He titles this book of poetry *Atlantis*, and his memoir from the same time period *Heaven's Coast*. He writes of the life and death he sees going on around him through the colors of nature. He writes of boats, crabs, sea

grasses and plants. Reading Doty's work, there are moments when you can almost feel the sea air rustling the pages.

Li-Young Lee's poems continually use the images of things fresh, ripe, and in bloom. Lee's father is almost always present either as a character or as a characteristic he sees in himself. This relationship is beautifully illustrated in his poem "Persimmons"—from his collection *Rose*—where he relays the images of his father's paintings after his father has gone blind.

From "Persimmons":

Under some blankets, I find a box.

Inside the box I find three scrolls.

I sit beside him and untie

three paintings by my father:

Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.

Two cats preening.

Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,

asks, *Which is this?*

This is persimmons, Father. (70-79)

The fruit is the central image, the image he takes care to describe as “full” and wanting to “drop from the cloth.” We know from this that the fruit and the father are connected. The fruit is both setting and character, and in some ways the fruit seems to convey emotion.

Lee’s poem, “Always A Rose,” is divided into ten sections dealing with the intense internal war between his love and hatred for his father. In each section he uses the analogy of blossom and fruit to represent different moments he has with his family. In section one, Lee speaks of a rose left on his father’s grave: “. . . a rose / left for dead, heaped with the hopeless dead, / its petals still supple.” (37). He continues with the theme of the rose, but in section six he writes, “Not for the golden pears, rotten on the ground—their sweetness their secret—not for the scent of their dying did I go back to my father’s house.” (42). It is evident in Lee’s language that whenever his father appears the fruit and flora are ripe and beautiful; when he is lost the flowers wither. In his poem “The Weight of Sweetness,” he writes about gathering peaches with his father:

The good boy hugs a bag of peaches
 his father has entrusted
 to him.
 Now he follows
 his father, who carries a bagful in each arm.
 See the look on the boy’s face
 as his father moves
 faster and farther ahead, while his own steps
 flag, and his arms grow weak, as he labors

under the weight
of peaches. (19-29)

In this stanza the fruit represents the strength of Lee's father. One may infer that the author's struggle to live up to his father's ideals for him as a son is represented by the heavy weight of the peaches. The fruit may also be a critical part of Lee's family's survival story as they overcome the poverty of immigration from China. Lee's images are almost always based on pulling the peach from the tree; the fruit and the flower in purest form. Each fruit, ripened, meant strength for survival. The metaphor is very powerful and Lee indulges in it because the fruits seem to be so much a subconscious part of his life story.

As we look into Li-Young Lee's memoir *The Winged Seed*, the fruit and the blossom are still present, as is obvious from the very title: a seed, adrift, ready to produce a tree or flower. In a pivotal moment in the story, after his father has died and the family is sorting and discarding his belongings, Lee writes: "Everything else we fed to a roaring fire we'd made in the backyard between two apple trees." (34). Another writer may not have included apple trees in this scene, but for Li-Young the apple tree, or the metaphor of the fruit tree, was a significant part of his relationship with his father. The reader senses that Lee's relationship to the virility of ever changing nature stems from lessons he learned in his childhood. Similar to some of Mark Doty's work, Lee's work seems to explore the space between the living and the dead.

Say It Again, but Say It Different

Transformation across Genre

If repetitions are what give a writer's work deeper resonance, how does the repetition of these images and themes transform when they are shifted across genre? The writer cannot escape herself. But what about writers who move whole sentences—paragraphs even? What of these recycled passages? Is it cheating to work around something that you have already written? Is a writer “getting away with something” by reusing her own intellectual property? The answer is subjective. It lies entirely on the reader's ability to accept the repetition. What I have discovered in my own personal experience is that when a writer describes something using her own constellation of images, the sentence or paragraph often comes out exactly the same across genre, especially if this is a description of actual experience. These segments are replicated lengths in the web, holding it together equally from different sides. There are obvious exceptions to this rule when editors become involved, taking lengths of work published in different places and adding them to new collections, but, as readers, what we see is the repetition of words, and the repetition can only emphasize the importance of these repetitions to the author and the meaning of the work.

Peggy Shumaker opens *Just Breathe Normally* with “Just This Once,” a brief, vivid account of sneaking into the wilderness, alone, at night. In her book, *Blaze*, poems accompany the brilliant paintings of Kesler E. Woodward, and we find these same lines reshaped in a poem of the same name.

From *Just Breathe Normally*:

Just this once, I told myself. Everyone else snored. Black nets billowed, let in a few mosquitoes. I snuck out, careful to prop shut the cabin door so porcupines wouldn't be tempted, pulled on hip waders folded knee-high, headed up the path not singing, not calling out, not jangling bells to warn the one who left tracks bigger than ours at the edge of the water and her spring cub who dawdled behind, clawing up storm clouds of silt. (3)

From *Blaze*:

Everyone else snores.

Black nets billow, let in

a few mosquitoes.

I sneak out,

careful to prop shut

the cabin door so porcupines

won't be tempted, pull on

hip waders folded knee-high,

head up the path

not singing,

not calling out, not

jangling bells

to warn the one who left

tracks bigger than ours

at the edge of the water

and her spring cub

who dawdled behind, clawing up

storm clouds of silt— (*I-18*)

An important note to the piece from *Blaze* is the juxtaposed painting. We see what looks like the white and dark peelings of a birch trunk, with the suggestion of a face peeling through in subtle shades of cream and grey. *Blaze* has no introduction to describe the author or painter's processes. It is possible that the poem came before the painting, but without clarification from the author or artist this is something the audience is meant to let go of. So what we ask as readers is, what about this painting reminds her of this specific moment in her life? The repetition of such a specific experience is a flag to both

reader and writer that this story must have a particular significance to the author and may require a closer reading.

Shumaker has copied the verbiage of one piece and shifted tense to make the poem more present and immediate to the accompanying painting. However, the meaning seems to surpass shape, and her poem and short essay share the same form as the telling of a story. The characters of the girl and the bear are present in both, as is the water, implied by the hip waders the character pulls on. This is a place where the reader grasps a recurring theme in the author's work. What moments are important between these two pieces? The escape to water; the independent girl. The moment the author steals out into the world on her own, wearing hip waders and ignoring the danger of the bear, has shaped her life. A crucial moment in Shumaker's collection of memories makes that story important to repeat. The idea that she is reusing the words almost exactly only adds to the importance the author places on this one message.

In the preface of her book of essays, *The Riddle Songs and Other Rememberings*, Rebecca McClanahan tells us directly, “. . . its primary focus is not the *events* of a life but rather the questions arising from those events” (ix). From her subsequent work we have seen what memories and events have been most valuable and how they have shaped her writing. These memories often come out as repetitions of story; the Quonset hut is one marker of this repetition.

In her poem “Marine Base,” from *Deep Light*, McClanahan describes a scene of a daughter watching her mother set up house. She describes a girl who doesn't understand

just yet what it all means. Again, we are taken in by McClanahan's recurring themes of womanhood and motherhood, dependence and independence. This sentiment is repeated at the beginning of an essay called "Dependent." I will compare sections from both poem and essay.

From "Marine Base":

Balancing barefoot
on unpacked crates,
she remembers his promise:
the best thing about a Quonset hut is
the artillery rain on metal roof. But here the sky
coughs its brown throat. Dust.
Dry heaves.
And Mother hangs
a picture of waves
on curved tin walls. She tacks
each corner to keep the waves
from spilling off the canvas,
drowning her youngest
sleeping on the foldout couch. (1-14)

From “Dependent”:

In one of my earliest memories, my mother is standing on an unpacked crate beneath the ceiling of a Quonset hut. Barefoot, she balances like a circus performer, testing her weight gingerly as she leans toward the curved wall, trying to hang a picture of waves. (64)

The first stanza of “Marine Base” suggests a kind of childlike interpretation of a very grown up conflict: moving—or restarting. In the opening line of “Dependent,” McClanahan reveals that this is one of her earliest memories. It is distinctly something that is factual and McClanahan is giving us access to the details. In both places the image she presents of her mother is telling the same story. McClanahan acknowledges directly in the text, “This is the only image in my head that hints at any desperation my mother might have felt in her long career as a military wife.” A desperation that is implied through the cut language of the poem. The specific words “Quonset hut” come up in several different poems and essays, an image that is powerful and obviously significant to the structure of her web. The story is the same between the poem and the essay, the dependency of a child and the idea that she may have taken this dependence for granted most of her life. McClanahan has taken the same story across genre, and while we notice it as a reader, the repetition only emphasizes the importance of the moment in the author’s life.

McClanahan’s poetry feels bold, sometimes brash and witty. It is as if she extracted the most important bits, the parts that stand out most vividly, and compressed them into a tight bundle of poem. The tension in McClanahan’s line breaks gives a sense

of urgency to the words, ending lines with “barefoot,” “promise,” “dust,” “heaves,” “hangs.” They punch, whereas in the prose form the fluidity of the words makes the emotional impact softer. In both places the moment and the story are important, but in the poetry she is extracting the exactness of the emotion. In essay form McClanahan is using the conflict and action to bring out emotion. Her transformation across genre facilitates subtle differences in tone and meaning.

Mark Doty’s work seems similar to McClanahan’s in the tendency to finesse the emotion in his prose. In his transformation across genre the language in his poetry and prose flourish and imprint images, but at the most crucial moments—describing death, love, loss—he rescinds the poetic language and makes his point startlingly clear. In Doty’s poems of objects and scenes his feelings are hidden behind a beautiful coat of paint and if you look very closely you can see the writer underneath. Doty’s prose has a palpable sheen of tears the reader must wipe away. Even within his poems, when he speaks of interactions with real people, his language shifts. He no longer uses the palette of colors to describe with whom he is most intimately connected. In Doty’s poem “Atlantis,” he speaks of his lover Wally’s illness as a thing, describing it using this same color and coastal language:

I didn’t understand what’s to come
 was always just a glimmer

 up ahead, veiled like the marsh
 gone under its tidal sheet

of mildly rippling aluminum.

What these salt distances were

Is also where they're going:

From blankly silvered span (3-10)

When the illness becomes a thing rather than a characteristic of a person, the illness is suddenly deceptive and whimsical. He uses language like “glimmer,” “veiled,” and “rippling aluminum” to give the intangible an artful presence. However, the moment that Wally himself comes into the poem the language becomes philosophical and set with questions. In the poem “New Dog,” Doty writes:

. . .How many men
want another attachment,
just as they're
leaving the world?

Wally sits up nights
and says, *I'd like*
some lizards, a talking bird,
some fish. . . (24-31)

Doty inserts Wally's own words as part of the poem, perhaps as a tribute, but also as a testament to the importance of writing Wally the way he was. This may be one of the reasons Doty's tone and colors seem to shift across this sensitive subject matter.

Additional to Doty's transformation of tone across genre and subject, some of the beginning essays of *Heaven's Coast* include lines in the text that copy exactly some lines from poems in the beginning of *Atlantis*. "Green Crab's Shell," a favorite poem in the collection, includes lines that are also repeated in his essay "Cold Dark Deep and Absolutely Clear." For context I will give a longer quote from both poem and essay to compare.

From "A Green Crab's Shell":

Though it smells
of seaweed and ruin,

this little traveling case
comes with such lavish lining!

Imagine breathing

surrounded by
the brilliant rinse
of summer's firmament.

What color is
the underside of skin?
Not so bad, to die,

if we could be opened
 into this—
 if the smallest chambers

of ourselves,
 similarly,
 revealed some sky. (23-31)

From “Cold Dark Deep and Absolutely Clear”:

What color is the underside of our skin? . . . It smells of seaweed and ruin.
 I will not open this shell; I am less squeamish now about the tumbled mess
 of the flesh, but I’m no scientist. Yet there is something I love about
 placing this body next to the fragment of shell whose dry lavender interior
 reminds me of what was there: even in the smallest chamber, a sky. (35)

Doty gives us the intimate description of the inside of this dead crab, using the picture as a metaphor to describe his feelings about death and loss. He then questions what is next. Where Doty writes “Not so bad, to die, if we could be opened into this . . . ,” it seems he is saying that life and death may not be so bad if we could be surrounded by this natural beauty. An artist’s philosophy, and a point that must have taken some time to reach through the sadness of loss. From the introduction to Doty’s memoir we know he is writing his intimate feelings about the death of his lover. In some small way, through

both pieces Doty shows the reader that death can be something of beauty and that, perhaps, through beauty we need not be afraid.

In both pieces Doty is trying to replicate the epiphany he had while walking along the beach at a requisite point in his life. It is not that he is plagiarizing, but that he was moved in a particular way by the crab's shell and it repeats because of its importance. It has woven itself into his web. Doty's description in prose gives a more direct approach to what he was feeling. He says, "I am less squeamish now about the tumbled mess of the flesh, but I am no scientist." The addition of this small point makes the prose seem a personal profundity, where the poem is placing emphasis on visual beauty. Arguably, these points of personal plagiarism are signifiers that this moment has in some way shaped the writer's recurring theme. This repetition can be seen again in the poem "New Dog," from *Atlantis*, where Doty writes:

And though we already
 have a dog, Wally
 wants to adopt,
 wants something small
 and golden to sleep
 next to him and
 lick his face. (10-18)

This exact moment he writes again in his essay "Sweet Chariot: 1994," from *Heaven's Coast*:

We already had a dog, Arden, a calm, black retriever with a meditative, scholarly disposition, but Wally had his heart set on a new dog who'd sleep next to him and lick his face. (19)

The moment that repeats so distinctly here is the idea that Wally needs a new dog to sleep next to him and lick his face. It is a beautiful memory, and one that seems more powerful in its repetition. It is also a truth that has not been altered by the glamour of grandiloquence, as writers tend to do when striving to capture a moment. This one happened, and we may be assured that this is the way that it happened.

Let Me Repeat Myself

The Conclusion

So what have I found? Can it all be tied up in a package with a bow and labeled “art imitates life?” That may be one way to look at it, but what we choose to be our art is more complex than our subconscious simply willing ideas to be born. The beauty of the web we weave as writers is in finding the appropriate space for these images, a space that helps them to enhance what we have chosen to work on. Stanley Kunitz says later in that same interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, “I think it's important for one's survival to keep the richness of the life always there to be tapped. One doesn't live in the moment, one lives in the whole history of your being, from the moment you became conscious.” Writing what comes naturally creates the most interesting and profound work. *One doesn't live in the moment; one lives in the whole history of your being . . .*

Can I tell you if that pig from E.B. White's “Death of a Pig” essay is the same pig that eventually became Wilbur? No, of course not. But I can say with some degree of certainty that both pieces of work are linked together in the same web of ideas and images that influenced White. These aren't the only books or essays that he wrote about his time living on a farm. Can I answer for Mark Doty when I say that his experience at a museum with his mother was the defining moment that filled his writing with color imagery? No, but perhaps we can say that a combination of experiences over time caused a ripple of imagery and idea, helping to shape his writing.

The difficult task of analysis, as a reader or a writer, is that a subconscious repetition can never be defined absolutely. The way a line between the stars in a

constellation can only be imagined. We can make connections in a web, but in the end only the spider knows why each piece connects the way that it does. One could argue that in order to become that spider, one must have a mostly finished web; an extensive body of work that shows the repetitions in their true, subconscious form.

Searching through all these pages I have seen webs, constellations, trees, fruit, rivers, mothers, paints—but what exactly does it mean for my own writing? What has brought me to recognize these repetitions in other authors' work? Perhaps it is the search to slide along the threads of my own personal web of images. As Eileen Pollack wrote, it requires a writer to write, and the aboutness will present itself. Discovering aboutness requires work, but also an honesty as a writer to write what is natural, and not contrived out of the necessity to assimilate. My art will undoubtedly imitate my life, because I do the work. I must do the work without the intention of repetition, but with intention of meaning and truth. The language will follow and make up the web that holds everything together.

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