

Robert Smallwood Jr.

Professor Ann Pallazo

ENGL 2268- Writing Creative Non-Fiction

New Construction

As I sat, at once idly contemplating the assignment but also ruminating on the topic I knew I was going to write about, I had my vast library of music streaming on in the background. Two songs in particular, I focused on a bit more. They seemed to capture the sentiment and mood that I was thinking of, as I began going through the motions, and ideas of my paper I was to begin.

These two tracks were by the artist Nick Drake: “Place To Be” and “Road.” I alternated thoughts of my history in a certain place I knew was to be the setting of my assignment, and also of Nick’s history and his ill-fated end. Perhaps, as he wrote and edited and constructed these songs, he was thinking, as I was, of themes spinning round his head: of home and of place, and their emotional, mental, and physical meanings and space we give them, or that they give us. It seemed to me he was meditating on his time and place, as I’ve often found myself doing. You come to think, as these days pass, that at the core, changes come. Some, in small flurries, others in tremendous tidal waves that shift the narrative of your days and of the space you inhabit. And then, there are changes to be made that are down to you, only you, often after that which we can’t control.

I found myself in a place a few years ago, and the subsequent days after, not sure of where my feet stood. For sure, the foundation upon where I had laid my purpose and future times ahead, crumbled. My marriage ended. My family splintered. And then the flood of memories rushed at me and I tried to keep pace. Your mind runs off reel after reel of places tied to

particular events; the most minuscule minor detail along the wall of the stairwell where you can picture your daughter sitting down, patiently learning to tie her shoelaces, to the moments we all tend to mark as definitive in our lives, as when my stepdaughter crossed a line into further independence, as she began to maintain balance of her bike by herself for the first time.

We try to hold onto these memories, trying to get them to stand still, though they hang in the balance. Meanwhile, the background is dropping and moving along, forever steady, as we struggle to compromise the vacuum of our life and times in it with this ever-surging tide.

I recently took a trip back to a place where I once was a part of a family; myself, my wife, my daughter, and my step-daughter. As I came upon the turn into the road that led directly to our townhome, I could feel the sense of place envelop me. It's as if it's a ghost, a spirit all its own. It clings there, draping upon the tall, swaying trees, its presence felt just above the surface of the grass. There was a heavy silence as I meandered across the fields and meadows behind where we once lived. I had a keen eye of any detail that seemed to show change, that was different than before. I had a camera with me to capture what I was seeing, and also feeling, within and around me. That's important to recognize; I'm not sure if you'd feel the same way in a similar situation, but there is a sense of being outside of yourself. It's as if you were once alive a certain way, in a certain time, a different person altogether. Years turn into something almost intangible.

There were murmurs and the soft echoes of my girls giggling, weaving through the brush and woods, lingering in the air and in my heart. I saw landmarks; the old trees with brittle bark, the rough edged rocks and formations in the ground, the old marsh behind a building in the back of where we were once. A flash would come, and I'd see my girls crouched down, collecting sparkly stones and pebbles and investigating a spider web or roly-poly. A wonderful view of

their presence almost speaking to me. It wrapped me in a warm glow, only to evaporate and leave a somewhat hollow mood within a concave chasm of only whispers, subtle laughter and giggles, and ambient sounds fading in and out.

I looked upon Central College Presbyterian Church, the roots of which began as far back as 1842, where my daughter began her first forays into schooling in their preschool. I parked my car, got out under the robust sun, and stood there. I kept thinking - “This was once home. This is where Madeline’s footsteps began. This is where I, and we, spent years.” And now, as I went about the campus where I walked my daughter each and every weekday to the door of her classroom, my steps felt weak. It’s as if you enter an entirely different realm. Every step seemed to touch the ground as if entering water; a shimmer, a ripple, both entering a physical space and liquid form. I meandered about throughout the area, noticing everything, senses heightened; where my stepdaughter caught the bus, where I’d stand to watch her walking back from afternoon drop-off, where I’d race with my daughter along the small hillside slopes that were off to the side of the church and school, as we waited for her sister to arrive back home. I drove into the property of Columbus Colony, next door to where we resided, an organization that cares for the deaf and blind. The girls and I would wander around the sidewalks there and lots, often without a specific direction or cause, going from here to there searching for something along our little adventure paths. Would we capture a new ladybug? Would we uncover a shiny new rock? Would we spot a new bird to learn about and try mimicking their call? We’d lovingly stroll down the sidewalks built upon the land there. At the far end of their property, we would encounter the marsh in the back, oftentimes spotting several female white tailed deer, perhaps a fawn or two, especially in autumn. My wife and I would warmly and naturally hold hands as we witnessed the frolicking of our children. We all look for retreats, and this was one of ours, the somewhat

quieter space not even more than a mile or so from busy Sunbury Road. Then, I drove to where there used to be a walking and bike path leading directly to Inniswood Metro Park, only to find that the trail had been widened, trees had been uprooted and removed, and a huge development of new apartments were in the place of the old, abandoned, and dilapidated outcrop buildings that were once there and havens of mysterious strolls for my girls and I. I sat in my car, said nothing and felt as if I wasn't breathing. I just dead stared at everything laid out, painfully trying to cull concrete details from what was before me, as it once was.

On and on, I would sit in my car a bit each time I drove to a new spot. I sat and gazed longingly. I could feel all of the old times and voices and sights rain down on me. I'd look around from time to time, almost embarrassed of what I was feeling inside or how I looked, juggling my feelings of sentimentality. I could still see these things, my children's bikes and stroller, their small legs of youthful energy walking and running and bounding, their glorious curiosity both benefitting from the excitement I tried imbuing within them of the world around, even their own backyard, but also providing me such great lift of spirit as their father. I felt such great heights then, and miss it like nothing else.

I left for my car once more before lunch. I sat there, looking out at all of it and then back down to my steering wheel, seemingly over and over again. I was hesitant. I was procrastinating. I was delaying the inevitable. That the family I was once a part of, lived here, together, long ago. That we no longer lived here, nor were a family anymore. And that I must go. I didn't want to leave. Not only physically leaving this place that I know well, but mentally and emotionally. I didn't and don't want to leave this place altogether. I hadn't been back in four years and thought "When will I come back? When will I return again?", knowing both the warmth and melancholy of venturing here. I broke a bit, quietly drew a tear or two, and tried to center myself enough to

be able to drive off. "I love you," I gently uttered towards the direction of the old townhome and landscape of memories I once knew with my ex-wife and children, and pressed the accelerator slowly to forward momentum.

That was then. A place still present, but far faded into an old horizon line. My ex-wife and I no longer speak and she doesn't allow me to see my stepdaughter any longer. My time with my daughter is compromised, as is the norm with these kinds of things when two people and a way of living change, courts get involved, and a separate roof becomes your next home. My memories of this place and area in Westerville, and all the small, intricate, and intimate places held within there are full and elastic, expanding then retreating back as if to whisper in my ear..."It's nice of you to return. We know you left a piece of yourself here and so it shall be."