

## REMINDERS: My Life through Virginia Woolf's Words

### PREFACE

*To The Lighthouse* was one of those books that I didn't think much of when I read it; in fact, I was incredibly frustrated with its pacing and its seeming lack of plot. However, after I finished it and had time to think on it, I realized that the reason it frustrated me so much was because I didn't like that I felt reflected in it somehow. After a while of sitting on the book, I started to wonder why I couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was that moved me so much about the novel, especially when the only character that resonated with me was a painter like myself. So I did what I always do when I need to sort a feeling out: I wrote about it.

### TO PAINT

I read *To The Lighthouse* with my eyes closed until Lily Briscoe hit the page. Then they opened. She held a paintbrush, like I do, and held it like a mirror to my face. We painters—sentimentalists to our core—are all trying to achieve the same thing: meaning, poured onto a canvas like words on a page. The first reflection of myself that Lily gave me appeared in her musings about light and darkness, and her explanation to Mr. William Bankes about the blurred figures of Mrs. Ramsay and James that she had airily brushed into her work. Mr. Bankes asked why she had not painted them in perfect clarity, to reflect reality as it is, and Lily responded with the following:

“But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there” (Woolf 52-53).

And I thought, quite suddenly, that this was it. In painting, there's something distinctly unsatisfying about capturing something exactly the way that it is in real life. Maybe some satisfaction stems from the act of creating and mastery over a skill like realism, but once that skill has been acquired, it no longer sparks...anything. A realism piece feels less like a snapshot of a moment and more like a duplicate one tier down from reality, separated only by the splaying of the brush, that inevitable inaccuracy. While it is a celebration of skill, it says nothing. And, at least for me, my goal as an artist is always to speak.

So what do I say? If not accuracy, what do I have left? And here, I think, is why I gravitate towards the art style that I have. My paintings are full of blurry marks, full of splotches and shadows. I had a classmate in a painting class tell me that my style is “painterly.” I showed her, she said, that painting doesn't always have to be about capturing every detail with a brush the size of a dust speck. I love to use the side of my brush to create a close approximation, but never an exact replica, of what I'm painting. Duplicating, to me, seems like the easy way out.

Blurriness leaves room for thought, for interpretation, for a viewer to insert themselves into a painting. I don't know if I do it for the viewer, though. I do it for me, because the distance that my inaccuracy puts between me and my object makes me feel more connected to it, like I'm putting something into the world that pays homage and doesn't just imitate for the sake of imitating. And this, maybe, is the reverence that Lily mentions when she dabs Mrs. Ramsay and James onto her canvas as an indistinct splotch of color: an impression of feeling, of simple presence, of nodding to an existence as if it was the only thing that mattered.

## **BACK HOME**

And this nod to existence brings me to the next reminder that Virginia Woolf gave me, not in the form of artist Lily Briscoe, who first caught my attention, but in the form of a house, now that she already had it. An empty house. And being the painter that I am—sentimentalist to my core—I was immediately brought home, but not to the house that I grew up in. I thought of the house I lost when I lost my own Mrs. Ramsay, my death in brackets.

When Woolf describes the house of Mrs. Ramsay after it is deprived of her, she writes in a long string of semi-colons, connecting all of the pieces together like rooms in a house tied with hallways:

“So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled round, those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in the bedroom or drawing room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. What people had shed and left—a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes—those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again” (128-129).

In prose almost like poetry, Woolf puts into words the ghostly emptiness of removing humanity from a home: the transformation of home to house. We didn't roll mattresses, but I did help my dad lift the bed that he had once slept in, and that I too had slept in years later, out of my grandfather's house. I don't remember where it went—whether we sold it or offered it to a friend, one of my many cousins. It doesn't matter. What I remember is feeling like we were carting my childhood out of that room, that it didn't matter how I'd slept in that room for years and counted the Hires bottle stickers my dad had pasted along the wooden side of the bed—or was it the headboard? All I knew was that the house as I remembered it was slipping through my fingers, and I couldn't control it any more than I could convince the frogs in our yard to come back after they had stopped coming to spawn because we had filled their concrete planters back up with earth, as they should have been from the very beginning. It didn't matter that I loved the

neglected, algae-filled, mosquito-larvae-infested pools of growing tadpoles that they had always been; my grandfather was gone and with him went the magic of his home.

That home only lives in my memory now. I don't have any photos of it the way it was in my childhood, and at any rate, no simple photos could have ever encompassed the way I imagined it. As a child, I loved that damn house. I saw it as my personal Narnia, seven hours away from my home in LA, where I could jump out of the car and forget all of my responsibilities in exchange for treasure hunts in the geode-filled fireplace, cartwheels across the obnoxious yellow-green carpet, and make-believe games in the robin-egg-filled woods above the house. I loved the weird yellow gourd that hung from the ceiling above the old TV, the faded maroon couch with age-worn embroidery that sunk so far down when we sat on it that our bottoms practically touched the ground. I loved sitting on the floor with crayons and computer paper, coloring imprints of the jagged cracks in the black and white kitchen floor. I loved the peeling owl stickers that my father and uncle had pasted up on the clear, rolling glass of the wall-to-wall, sliding back door because an owl had once smacked into it and passed away from the concussion. I loved, in the living room, the long blinds, terribly curled and stained from age, that I could send into a swinging, clacking frenzy if I ran my fingers along them and then came back around the other way.

I loved my grandfather in his creaky, faded maroon chair that matched the couch, his arm slung over his favorite armrest with its characteristic towel. I loved the notes that I found in one of his drawers once, filled with English sentences lovingly penned because, my dad said, he was trying so hard to learn English to talk to my brother and me. I loved the hard bed that I couldn't lie on without hurting my back, that my grandfather had slept in for as long as I could remember. I loved the traces of him, all over his house even after we moved him out of it, imprinted in my mind like ghosts that haunted me when I fed him with a shaking spoon in his nursery home a year before he died. I loved the picture of him in the hallway outside of my room in LA, where he holds me as a tiny, disgruntled baby on the beach. He smiles like I'm all that matters. I loved and love the thought of him, because that was all I could love.

I don't have any memories of my grandfather before Alzheimer's. He was diagnosed when my brother was born; I was three. What I know of the brave man he was before I knew him comes from my father, whose stories of my grandfather catching fish with his bare hands and running away from home to join the military made me admire him even though the man I knew seemed nothing like him.

### **TO DEATH (AGAIN)**

James, in *To The Lighthouse*, speaks of two Lighthouses. He claims that both are real. One is the one that he finally sees when he's sixteen: "the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred and black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry" (186). The other is the one in his memories, that was "a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening" (186).

I don't have two, but three versions of my grandfather. All of them are real. The first is the legend, I suppose: the daring father of my dad who decided that he would rather be with the military than with his family, and who settled in Taiwan simply because the army stopped there and he found it beautiful. The second is another legend, but closer to home: the grandfather of my distant memory, who held me on the shore of that cold Carmel beach, bought me stuffed animals from the aquarium, and fed me expired sesame candies that my mother had to confiscate behind his back. The last is the grandfather I do remember: his shell, who urinated listlessly into the pot of my grandmother's money tree, and who wandered down the highway sometime early in the morning and who would probably have died out there if my father had not dragged himself out of bed, gone out, and brought him back. He's not the one who taught me how to draw and love art; he's the one that made my mom cry because my dad was spending too much time caring for him and the one whose illness kept us from going on a long-awaited trip to Hawaii.

I like to think that my Narnia house didn't belong to him. The shell of my grandfather couldn't remember his son's name, much less mine or that old maroon chair that he loved or the dozen or so bonsai trees that he kept in a row above the pond of koi fish I used to feed. Never mind the English he used to try to learn; it wasn't long before he couldn't speak Chinese or even speak at all. He just lay there in his nursing-home bed and blinked occasionally, breathing shallowly. It took my father, my brother, and me to clean him, to lather him down with lotion. I massaged his feet and imagined that they were leather; I couldn't feel the heartbeat under his skin. Putting on his socks was like trying to dress a large stiff doll. Sometimes I imagined that he was turning to stone. In some ways, he already had.

When Virginia Woolf removes Mrs. Ramsay from her novel in three lines, bracketed, I found a way to express what I felt of my grandfather's death. How could I say that I loved his house more than I ever loved him? How could I say that the smell of his house IS him to me—that I see that green carpet and long glass door more as the home of his soul than I ever did his physical body? When we visited the body after it breathed its last, I stood there and felt nothing. But when we visited the house after it had been emptied of all of my grandfather's paintings, all of our beds, the gourd, the dining table, the old stereo in the living room, the barely functional blinds...I felt vacated, as if my grandfather had really and truly left me then. I could finally bracket what I remembered of him in the soul of the house that I could never reach again; seven hours would never be enough to return me there. The magic was gone.

I've tried to draw my grandfather's house so many times, to try to capture it as it exists in my memory, but I've come to realize that I can't because it doesn't really exist in my memory at all. I can't remember the exact shade of the carpet, the color of my grandmother's rosary that hung on my bed, the exact arrangement of rocks in the fireplace...but I have the feeling of it. I have Lily Briscoe's shadow, her blurry reverence. And I'd like to think that that's enough.

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *To The Lighthouse*. Harcourt Inc., 1927.