


Spring 2024

Settings

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Bard College

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Settings

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
Sam Crocker

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2024

SETTINGS

Walden's phenomenological description of finding the self ... is one of trailing and recovery. This is the writer's injunction of the imperative to know thyself. His descriptions emphasize that this is a continuous *activity*, not something we may think of as an intellectual preoccupation. It is *placing* ourselves in the world.

—*Stanley Cavell*

It is necessary to study the words you have written—for the words have a longer history than you have and say more than you know.

—*George Oppen*

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1. HAPTIC

*How a name is an action unlike : How a swallow
is like a swallow : How a touch is a danger
without : How a tisket touches a casket : How
boughs an elm : How light weaves : How birds
are capacities : How bones are alike : How slides
a razor : How pink the mark*

MY FATHER IN HIS YOUTH

was told by his mother whom
I never met

to *be a have*. Later of course
he learned she was telling him to *behave*

but not before what must have been
years of pulling his elbows from the dining table

crying out that he was in fact
being a have to avoid a fork being

jabbed chidingly into his pale arm.
I imagine him as a boy: face soft

as a roll of bread and small enough
to cup in one palm: wary,

eyeing the silver
in my grandmother's hand: his mouth

searching for the shape of a word
unmastered.

SHIRTS

A little boy blows his nose
on a blue cotton shirt.
A woman had stitched

the shirt inside a factory
using a large machine
a year prior. It was

her last shirt of the day.
As she stood from her work
the woman's sleeve had

caught on an arm
of the machine and
torn slightly.

The boy and his mother
stand beside a busy street.
She spits on a rag and

wipes his face. People
wait for the cars to stop
to cross over. Some of them

hold up cardboard signs
and shake them
at the stopped drivers

who look away
toward the sun
grazing the shop roofs

or glance at this boy
and this woman who
have stopped

on the sidewalk. *His mother*
they think. They do not
think of the woman

whose sleeve had
caught on the machine.
She did not notice

the tear. The sun was low
and glancing the walls
of the factory exactly the way

it now catches
on the boy's blue sleeve
in the eyes of the drivers.

HAPTIC

We live amid surfaces...

Residue
of morning's light, blue

as the ocean's
broad heft
glowers even

as the night comes down
with its stygian-self.

'A comfort
to live amid anything.'

Rain cumulates
like thought
upon the pavement.

Sparrows
trance powerlines
down a state route.

*

'O beloved transfer
of resources...'

Trucks hauling barley,
corn, amber (its own freight
through time) leave

delicate floral patterns
in their wake
& across the city

antediluvian water
comes down on us, douses

the lit black streetlamps,
the street.

*

Having no word
for blue
the ancients

possessed no way
for blue

to occur, possessing
no word. City

shimmers
with dusk. Gestures

form & scatter &
again they form & fall
upon

the winedark sea,
night sky
streaming with nouns.

'A CLICK LIKE A CLOSING BOX'

—*Yeats*

Girl, eleven,
holds up a trout.

To whom?

Scales
flake her hands.

Stick man, thirty-five,

bent over
old computer and ashtray,

can't shake the smell

from his hair
his clothes

his apartment.

Lift him, Girl.
Trout scales

weigh nothing.

If he does not eat,
if a key is good

for opening—

Stick man
opens the box,

swallows.

Girl weighs his heart
on big trout scales.

Inside him:

inconsolate
sounds. The noise

of starting over.

A MURMUR IN THE TREES

I go to the grave in Amherst. There is nothing special about the light or the air. Someone has tied a threadbare rainbow bracelet to the iron gate which keeps me six inches from the slab. Not dead, it tells me. *Called Back*. Someone has placed stones on Lavinia's grave as well. Here, there is no confusion. She was born. She died. When I try to tell you, my phone refuses the word *grave*. *Grace?* it suggests.

*

I buy a peck of apples. They're priced down, the last of the season. *Picked late*, I read, *only \$3.00*. The sack tosses in the passenger seat. White colonials fly past the window. Their slate roofs sag in the center like a drawn bow. Soon they'll cast invisible arrows into their own shallow basements.

*

You tell me that our neighbor has been widowed, but I learned this two weeks ago. He'd written a short post for his wife, noting the date and time of her death. His next post is a photograph of an orchard, the ruddy branches picked bare.

*

I dream of starlings. A black murmuration settles in a stubbled field beside a road. The field speaks in a thousand voices.

SETTINGS

There is not a name
for this. Setting of Provincetown,
off season boardinghouse—
one winter before college
he stayed there, wrote

for a local paper. There was
an old dining room;
writers would stay
a week or so, make
idle conversation at breakfast.

Time slowed for him. There were
dunes and the dark
Atlantic. He rolled back his clock, bought
thicker socks and a yellow slicker. He wrote.
When spring came, he left.

*

Setting of signs. One reads
root hog or die. It ought to read
root, hog, or die. An imperative.
A threat.

*

The pull
 of listless nights
 without sleep. Despite the set
 pieces, the mind keeps on naming,
 naming, naming, till it begins to rest

with a pen glued to its palm,
 wearing a sash that reads *MAKING!* so there can be
 no mistake. This is not a place, he's told, for
 quote-unquote
 real life.

*

Setting of slim chairs and card tables. An indeterminate
 consistency. Jackets slouch
 over their firm backs
 like tarpaulin.

Slim chairs and card tables
 pushed against the wall. Covert music slips from a window,
 wets the sidewalk with noise. *A glance is a tool*
so long as both want it.

*

Space contorts in memory, such that
 it's possible to imagine
 a glance
 or a subtle shift of light
 sending this whole place belly-up.

The setting is simply
 what's there
 to work with, to mold
 like or unlike
 ourselves.

*

Setting of bus. Which routes
 are allowed? Which are,
really? Route from New Orleans to Jackson
 Mississippi or Anniston
 Alabama where a bus

got exploded. Or got
 swarmed by cops on the highway. Or arrived
 to cops. Buses calling for a geography
 of buses, multiplied

across the whole
 lapsed terrain of the country.
 Is it true,
 is there no name
 for this?

*

*That a man is fed not so that he may be fed
 but that he may work.* That one man is not
 one. A preoccupation with the dead,
 certainly. But

what else is there
 to tell about,
 to love, to resent?
 Better put:

*you can't leave 'cause your heart
 is there. He finds himself
 listening for the tune
 more than the lyric.*

Beat-up
 clipped-to-shit bass
 and guitar squawk. A man's voice
 skirting the edge of speech
 the way a thief

brushes
 the back of a mark:
 gently,
 with their life
 in his hands.

*

Wondering which way to go,
 he picks north. This is one route.
 Setting of a train pulling
 from a station
 pulling him from that place the way time pulled

once, the two of them
 apart. *The sun,*
 he thinks, *the sun is too low.*
 It blinds him,

sinking in a crook in the mountains
almost hurried, like
that river which
rushes in the foreground

of his vision: the Hudson
hurtling toward its Atlantic
fate. He is borne against it
now.

Nights
begin to stretch out, taut
against the corners of the day. How
to make a setting
of movement?

2. FARM

*How many weaves to warp : How it is, but : How it
could be unlike : How a bank burns : How marks a
river : How you dream a common tongue : How a
parlance becomes a commons : How salvation must
be unlike : How a longing lists*

FRAGMENT

In a broken hayloft bodies become other—

they pile up too quickly, too easily.

A farmhouse runs slick with rain

like a kettle calling apart your body.

Somewhere a window creaks, a wind

runs like a frightened kid.

FARM

1

Because we wanted to provoke a loop structure, further entangling ourselves in fate or apparent logic. Itself a mode of emergency. Because of nature's invisible economy, the constancy of desire for finding a way out. Insofar as tragedy is to be avoided. The history of western civilization appears as retreat. *What the white whale was to Ahab has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid.* Then lists. Marbles. Japonicas. Pearls. Elephants. Horses. Innocence.

2

Testing a
'pure' knot
had to put it

to use:
an open line

Slant flux so
a length of
garment

a hand
in motion

3

Economy makes a whirring sound. The noise of fungibility, from Latin, 'fungor.' *To busy one's self with or be engaged in something; to perform, execute, administer, discharge, observe, do.* Because we had wanted to provoke. Or we were yet unpossessed of ourself. Meaning: to enclose: the act of selecting what means. So that 'to perform' unhinges: to be exchangeable.

4

Sparrow
swept breeze

A weft medium
looking through
which

we thought
should feed us
its senses

floats objects
in or brims with
words

5

By work. True work which the man says ought to be against pleasure. To be radically against. Related to a root. A base form, from Latin, 'radix.' Again, as in a root. 'Racinate,' or its cousin: 'eradicate.'

6

More through
evening

Passing
one small white
house & another

false return
acting as
resonance

This malleable
'being there'—

7

This, the noise of our culture: *to wound*. From German, 'wund.' With a light touch. *Settle down in fixed dwellings surrounded by fields, define and repel weeds and pests, maximise the juiciness of your corn kernels at the expense of their flowers...* This is a noise. A loop of retreat. Because we had wanted. Because we had possessed ourselves into subjects. Which is only one way of finding an out.

SONG

A band is starting up somewhere

but this tug-boat

has pulled us from it.

The offboard

lets out a groan.

You can't stop telling me

how back then,

stars swung so low

you'd see doubles in the water.

All the people would sing

John Brown's body lies

a'mouldering

(what a word)

in the grave.

Even if I believe you,

that was then. Look

how the night gathers

at our feet

in heaps. We have

no stars to speak of.

All we can do

is get together

on Saturdays, lose our wits

and slip into that warm stupor

we love so tenderly.

The boat

(remember the tug-boat?)

lolls back

and forth

between two islands.

Love me tender,

sing the worms in their bait bucket,

love me true. Elsewhere

a hand splays lightly

across a guitar's neck.

The lightness

is a kind of trust.

BOB DYLAN UNLEASHES A TEN FOOT AMERICAN FLAG ON AN UNSUSPECTING FRENCH AUDIENCE (1966)

‘Come on now,’ he caws, ‘this is American music!’ stressing *Now & American*
& he is right there is no denying it

*

In *The Last Waltz* (dir. Martin Scorsese 1978)
Richard Manuel of The Band describes shoving stolen bologna
into his winter coat pockets on an early tour

he says, ‘we started out with The Crackers—we tried to call ourselves
The Honkies—everybody backed off from that so we decided
to call ourselves The Band’

The camera zooms out & Manuel is sitting in front of a large Confederate flag

‘It's a goddamn impossible way of living,’ says Robbie Robertson
also of The Band also sitting in the room

*

Robertson’s mother was born in 1922, Cayuga & Mohawk
& raised Robertson in Toronto, near the Six Nations Reserve
the largest First Nations reserve in Canada

where Robertson learned to play guitar
where in 1956 he meets Ronnie Hawkins & where
in 1959 he leaves
on a tour of the U.S. in Hawkins’ band

*

Robertson clangs
 more like pounds out lead lines on ‘Baby, Let Me Follow You Down’
 & ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ for the Paris crowd

Dylan is angry,
 his 25th birthday

He screams more than sings his lyrics

Internet commentators note that if one listens carefully to bootlegged
 recordings of the 1966 concert they will hear calls of

‘U.S. GO HOME!’
 rise from the audience

*

Standing to Dylan’s left Robertson plays the changes
 he is not American
 not part of the assemblage emblazoned behind him

tho interested in America—credited with numbers like
 ‘The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down’ from The Band’s 1969
 self titled
 which Levon Helm (b. 1940 in ‘Turkey Scratch’ Arkansas)
 sings live & on record while swinging
 easy rhythm that slopes
 & crests in practiced step with Allen Toussaint’s horn arrangement

*

Toussaint is caught by the camera in a 1971 recording
 watching The Band’s horn section (tho hardly ‘their’ section

with players like Snooky Young & Howard Johnson
 alumni of Count Basie & Ray Charles)

they play Toussaint's charts & he watches from the wing
 of the stage

sits cross legged & leans forward & back
 to the weird syncopation of 'King Harvest (Has Surely Come)'
 a song by Robertson, sung by Manuel, about farmers' unions

To close the set Dylan joins The Band
 his old backline
 reprising 'Like a Rolling Stone' five years
 after the incident on his 25th birthday & forgets
 an entire verse so

he improvises

*

The Last Waltz was shot in San Francisco on Thanksgiving day 1976 all
 5,000 people in attendance were fed turkey dinners

STRIP

Popeye's Pre-Owned Salvation
 Army Automotion Please
 No Loitering Littering
 Leaving Donation
 Violators Will Be Made Mobil
 Army Head In Quarters So
 Chinese Buffet Recruits
 Just Past This Light Humming & Big
 Outlets On The Hill
 A Vacant Hum Says Stop
 Over For A Bite To Eat Or
 Some Heavy Machinery
 We've Got Sardines Stilettos
 Staves You Name It We Got
 Instant Filigree For Manufactured
 Louisiana Kitchen Made
 Anticline Mobil Homes For
 Ol' McDonald's
 Colonial Technology Yes
 He Prays With Us Kids
 One Mild Leg & Beans
 & Hot Apple Pie For Dessert
 Some Sanitary Napkin A First
 & Wall Street Next
 Offers More Ways To Shop Waft & Wail
 Ask Not What You Can Do For Your Country
 But What Your Country
 Can Do To You

INTERPELLATION

In the early morning hours a Subject stumbled into a wall. It could sense Dread creeping up. Trying to push it away was no use. The Subject knew it had been found out.

*

Though no longer invisible, the Subject remained unknown. This was unbearable. Only a vision like a pinhole in a paper cup offered any respite. Still, it felt insufficient. Even as the cup suffused with light, it was not enough. At this point the Subject's limbs began to hew from it. To think, all this time they had belonged to an abstraction.

*

The Subject felt awful. It rose from bed with a nasty hangover. Stumbling into the kitchen, it encountered Dread, still drunk and insisting upon showing off its various ligaments and constitutions—as if either could mean anything without a body. At last the Subject decided to hell with it and kicked Dread out the door, where it stayed a while, shivering in the cold light.

HARLAN

The TV runs all day. *Americans think. Acute attacks. A medley of skilletts.* Try remembering something more beautiful. Instruments. Plasticine angels. *Harlan was laid out by Lewis and Julia Ann who were husband and wife.*

Harlan, you
must mull

your options. Precaution opens your windows. In comes a smooth wave. In it goes: through your alarm clock.

Harlan, you
have risks

to consider. Like, your head hurts. Or bigger love. *Hide your valuables.* The television wakes you. *Acetaminophen. Pseudoephedrine. Rebound. Zero counter intelligence tells us that chemical substitutes may lie.* I am running to you

Harlan I bear
these risks

with you. If we are liable

Harlan we
are liable

together. The angels cling to our backs. Crude hunks of oil and affect. If the bearing is too much, think only of Lewis and Julia Ann. Their risks were grave as ours: to lay your borders, to dig your plots. They felt danger. They did not inaugurate it. Ours is a cheap, unspecial fear: to be alone.

Harlan. No one
was ever alone.

3. GIRLHOOD

*How common a field : How a field could common
us : How it gathers me to you : How you are me :
How you aren't a grove of elms : How sense alone
will not save us : How salvation moves the tongue :
How it moves : How night becomes you : How we
become our parents' houses : How ruin is our
watchword : How moments skip across a body*

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Was born. Lived
in a house for a time and
another beside

a floodplain. Walked
among tall trees
that fell

around me, at times
shone
with the light

of darkness. Fields
marked me.
When I asked

would they
spin for me
walls of stone

and clay,
they did. Again
and again

midnight
scaled the span of my back
like moss

up a tree's base.
Moths
with whom

I flickered
beneath a lantern,
sized

me up,
triangulated my body,
often. The body,

whoever's, was
inevitably
someone else,

so much
like me,
who mouthed

'round corners,
stood
on black stoned

islands, who knew
this bright perch
of even

redolence—
knew even then,
my fate.

WALDEN

1

Then
keeping a practice of not
stopping

start with your hands
& begin to catalog

having calluses
or feeling

privacy
& warmth

Whether
to stay or go
leaving
some of yourself

2

Materials
are used to construct
products

endowed
with their own
life & force
products
today

which
are coming back
into use

3

Then mark this
upon the great
chain
of being useful

The fact of your walking

the day
stopless
& cool

4

Summer
never burned
anyone nor
burnished nor wished on
anything except

an intent
for sinister or
perfect
wildness

Neither ritual nor
pipeline

Marrow

TRAWL

Night sobs alarm in the heart of a matter. Cups your hands. Sings usury. Paths constitute themselves and fall to pieces again. Again, night. Sits far on a limn. Nocturnal hymn for-itself; how vocative invokes

the heart. Scrape of knuckle, claw. A pillory. *Nox advenit*, sings the matter as it falls out of being. Falling works on you like a machine till your heart

twinges toward a vision of itself. The paths reconvene for a moment, this time as the low road—they get to Scotland first. A slivered blight, silver as a moon

waves the grass toward a feeling of arrangement, a quiet song in this whaling century. The paths cannot sing, however much we wish it. This glamor around us still

keeps us alive. In the sense of *glitz*, *pizzazz*, *enchantment*, or how we'd all be dead without sleep.

Night's heart is caught in a speech-trawl. How I say *rum*, not *room*, when speaking of the stanza. *Brum*, not *broom*, when it's time to sweep the floor.

THE DEER

A man saw a deer in the road
after work. He was so tired,

he almost struck it with his car. At last
the man swerved away, narrowly avoiding

a collision. As he wrenched the steering wheel
with all his might, he caught sight of

the animal's black stare. *Oh God,*
they thought together, *its eyes*

STILL PASTORAL

after George Oppen

In this field where
nothing

newly breathes nor
stands

I walk
the grasses

glisten
not

in this light nor
mat

where nothing slept
I see

no glow
alight on this field

where nothing's
breath

stirs
the early

GIRLHOOD

1

Locate me by cataloged perimeter.
By dusk.

Some makeshift breaths plop back against the tongue.

A welcome request was adjusted to forget
that the chemical Northeast
allowed shapes. Was July,
from night—our muscular night—should kiss & delicate
was you, somewhere,
girlhood.

Thanks for the speak.

‘To minutes’ maybe struck ‘to-become.’

After all, what had changed him most was toil. Clean past
put back by accident, set down without trouble, a blur.

2

This strange guilt:
how I always wished for cataclysm. Rain without end.
What we get instead is mostly stop & go or else
it’s really fatal—

as in 4-years-old
pointing to a costume in a Halloween catalog but
‘the warehouse is still underwater.’ Still.

3

Difficult in the beginning.
The start is overstated about little interest &

what if I hear something!?? The keys come clattering. I don't wish
 'importance' on anyone, certainly not my-

self, tho 'wish'
 or 'lack-of' is not the same as desire. So where put it? Quick
 by your standards if any 'where' is used. 'Thedral some places
 as in 'finest available anywhere
 because we're the guys

who make it.
 Start with lots & end with just a little.' A little
 allowance, as though travesty wasn't in the kitchen
 with the mayflies. As though
 travesty wasn't.

4

A soporif as in
 a kind of iced drink should be enjoyed, startled
 then you put it down.

5

Such a simple divination as could be found anywhere.
 Plums. Ears. Crickets. Such that chirp
 away in the warm night.

6

& slighted, as April's showers are, eventually, by June's ashes. As
 aft was our marker & we never sold a thing. I remember lighting a match, then
 fast dark. Something

more beautiful—your strong nose.
 Your eyebrows.

7

My mother bought this table in 1995. In my memory
 she paints it blue & strips it to wood
 three times.

8

By evening find a morning's line. A slant joy—'to whom
 no sound is dissonant which tells of
 Life.' To this end

I wake
 early or late depending on nothing.

Her patient evil. What madness could patience
 not unravel? What house
 could love not blast

with calamity?
 A furlonged evening. A farmer's winter. And you,
 so credulous & prone.

AMOR FATI

That a policy is a form of contract, a way of binding another person to one's fate. That
to be alone

is to be left unlanguage
like an animal.

This is what I had believed. Outside the window a young woman
goes for a jog

in the snow. The past passes. Not much happens. I give in to a haze of doctors
and bandages, spot

a cardinal on a branch. I lay grout between floorboards and smooth,
readying the wood

for paint. The room will be white. I am always thinking
of the light,

the steam that rose from your skin, stepping from the shower. On the horizon a field
is appearing

from behind a thick veil of snow. The horizon itself is mangled. First
by light, then

by its own refraction. A dog barks outside, beyond the veil. From within the house
comes another bark

in answer. The truth, as far as I can tell, is what's there. Not a lake
of emptiness,

not evidence. Tell me there are words between us still. A contract laid
beneath our feet.

NOTES

P. 6: The line, “We live amid surfaces...” in “Haptic,” comes from Emerson’s essay, “Experience.”

P. 8: “A Click like a Closing Box” is titled after a remark by Yeats in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, which I first encountered in Mary Ruefle’s *Madness Rack and Honey*, then in *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*. Yeats’s full remark is, “the correction of prose, because it has no fixed laws, is endless, a poem comes right with a click like a closing box.”

P. 10: “A Murmur in the Trees” is titled after the first line of a poem by Emily Dickinson (F433).

P. 13-14: “Settings” quotes directly from Emerson’s *Nature*, and “A Family Affair,” by Sly and the Family Stone.

P. 19-21: “Farm” quotes directly from *Moby Dick*, Timothy Morton’s *Humankind*, the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, and the *Online Latin to English Dictionary*.

P. 27: The poem “Strip” was constructed from language collected while driving past the many strip malls along Route 9W in Kingston, NY.

P. 35: In “Walden,” the line “stopless / & cool” is borrowed from Dickinson’s “It was not Death, for I Stood Up” (F355).

P. 39-41: “Girlhood” incorporates language from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Collected Letters*, and the journals of Dorothy Wordsworth. Harryette Mullen’s syntax in *Recyclopedia* was also a direct influence at the time of writing.

