

NICK BROWN

Resting Place On The 5, 2012
Oil on Panel, 60 x36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

THOMAS FARBER

Writing from a Distance

A Bostonian Who Went West

Now age seventy, and after many books of fiction and nonfiction, writing autobiographically I again think of myself not as Tom but as “the writer.” This character, the writer in me, thinks that perhaps there are two kinds of people: those who say there are two kinds of people and those who do not. As, for this moment, one of the former, the writer ventures that there are those who stay home and those who leave.

Of those who stay, his mother was one. She lived in Boston nearly all of her seventy-four years. Though remaining within several miles from her childhood home, she made a radical break with her past. Never saw her mother again after marrying at eighteen, never corresponded with her again in any way. And, for good measure, cut off all contact with her mother’s extended family, most of them living nearby.

The writer’s older sister, firstborn dealing with their formidable mother in an era of rapid social change, made the normal difficult decisions about how to live and love right there in Boston. Often in the very face of parental disapproval. A strong woman, his sister, able to molt where there was so much pressure to be the person others expected—demanded—you be.

The writer left Boston for freedom from it, to be able to look back from the vantage of worlds yet unknown to him as the person he’d become. Himself but anew. Various selves, actually: reinvented, disowned, reaffirmed, repudiated. Jus’ plain left behind. As that who he’d become, he’d send letters home. Books, it turned out, written in the vernacular he’d been born into. But of course, in the leaving, one loses things. Like, perhaps, something as simple as the vector and music of a place name. The brain and tree of the suburban town of Braintree, or what was mystic in the unremarked-on, much-crossed Mystic River Bridge.

Think of the phrase “twice removed,” as in cousins of different generations. Boston, California, Hawaii, New York City, Paris among the homes, frequent destinations, places the writer stayed, departed from, returned to. So many times twice, thrice, self-removed.

The writer could make the case there was something in Boston driving him away, something that was its fault. He has a friend who left, has never looked back. Had no question that Boston was a place you had to get out of. Shitty weather, high taxes, the cost of housing and heat-

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ing fuel, endless status discriminations, the schadenfreude. *Claustral*—of or relating to a religious house or cloister, hence enveloping, confining. From the Latin *claustrum*, locked or enclosed place. To the writer, there seemed something stunted about the available identities: sexuality tamed, credentialing too layered, overvalued. So much school, social control, infantilizing! Suffocation, but you didn't asphyxiate. *New England Life*: an insurance company. But there also could have been a book, *New England Death Trip*...

And yet, the claustral was deeply familiar. Safe, predictable; everything confirmed the rules of the game. Maybe too safe, giving the writer the feeling he'd never really grow up there. Not its responsibility, but what would come of him if he stayed? Still, the place was in his blood. Would he ever know any other as well? Leaving left him ambivalent: recurrent departures, self-exiles, for decades something he continued to reconsider, reelect.

Thoreau wrote:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest

terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

The writer could not have used such rhetoric, but did hunger for what, no doubt simplistically, he imagined as authentic: writing, but not in some careerist way; ranches; oceans, surfable waves; wandering. And at seventy he's perhaps entitled to say he was willing to pay to find out. If it entailed ongoing improvisation with a sense of being imperiled, so it would have to be.

Japanese poet Basho wrote, "Those who remain behind watch the shadow of a traveler's back disappear." Desperate not to remain behind, wanting to see the world and then seeing it, who was the writer in it? Far from where he grew up, estranged from Boston, he was separated, if not divorced. In the company of strangers. Part of being gone from Boston was that people couldn't be aware of what had shaped you. Ignorance that bestowed a kind of liberation.

The last time the writer almost returned to live in Boston was as he was turning forty. Months of helping to care for his dying mother, flying back and forth from and to California, or was it to and from Boston, his cottage life ever more attenuated, the Boston he knew so well revived, ever more real.

But then his mother died, there was a memorial celebration of her life and art, he and his siblings emptied her apartment, and one day it was one more cab to Logan Airport. The flight cross-country, long descent in over the hills of the East Bay. He'd again opted to be free of Boston, but had no plan in mind. Free to define himself. Once again, however, failing to wonder how long he'd be gone.

In *A Blue Hand*, Deborah Baker writes that Thoreau argued "that to be truly free in this world...one must be free from every kind of claim...such a life required setting out on a long journey to a distant country. Only when surrounded by unfamiliar landscapes and strangers, [Thoreau] wrote, was it possible to live a truly free life. Relieved of all claims, you are not merely traveling. You are in search of a setting that will reveal your truest self."

The writer remembers that Thoreau's outpost at Walden Pond was close to friends and family. What would

Thoreau have made of the anonymous Sanskrit poet centuries ago, who wrote, in Andrew Schelling's translation, "The traveler/stung with tears/sings of a faraway girl./Oh traveling/is a kind of death,/the village people hear it,/lower their heads/and suddenly quit their/proud tales/of adventure." Or Sanskrit poet Yogesvara: "And a solitary traveler?/Can he get/through the nights?" Thoreau went as far as Walden Pond, Maine, Cape Cod, Canada, Michigan, and New York City, but, avid reader of travel literature, living "at home like a traveler," as he put it, he may not have felt he'd found his truest self.

Again in California after his mother's death, the writer asked himself just how free he needed to be. Released from how many kinds of claims. In physics, objects have six degrees of freedom. On shipboard, for instance, this includes moving up and down (heaving), moving left and right (swaying), moving forward and backward (surging), tilting forward and back (pitching), swiveling left and right (yawing), and pivoting side to side (rolling). Which is to say, such a range of freedom could make one sick of the sea. Make you yearn to get back to where you came from.

About leaving home, there's Italo Calvino's astonishing *Invisible Cities*. Calvino imagines traveler Marco Polo in China, long gone from Venice, perhaps thinking, or perhaps saying to Kublai Khan, "The foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, un-possessioned places." Also, "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."

So: the Boston the writer left behind, memory of which he has not stopped invoking, responding to. Could have given up responding to in this way, perhaps, had he stayed. Recently, belatedly, he tuned in to the well-known Massachusetts group Dropkick Murphys, Celtic punk band from Quincy [pronounced "Kwinzee"]. Stage hooligans with art and heart. (Hooligan, variant of the Irish name Hoolihan.) Hybrid music, rowdy fusion of hard rock and traditional Celtic (Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Breton) instruments—uilleann pipes, accordion, bagpipes.

Dropkick Murphys, among other things, talk tribal Boston English—"Kiss me, I'm shitfaced;" "brown in the trousers." The writer's especially drawn to their frenzied version of "The Wild Rover," a sixteenth-century Irish tune:

Relieved of all claims,
you are not merely
traveling. You are in
search of a setting
that will reveal
your truest self.

I've been a wild rover for many's the year
And I've spent all me money on whiskey and beer,
And now I'm returning with gold in great store
And I never will play the wild rover no more.

And it's no, nay, never,
No nay never no more,
Will I play the wild rover
No never no more...

I'll go home to my parents, confess what I've done
And I'll ask them to pardon their prodigal son.
And when they caress me as oft-times before
I never will play the wild rover no more.

Famous old song, Dropkick Murphys tearin' it up as if they birthed it. (Their "never": pronounced "nevah.")

But about the self as prodigal son. At seventy, will the writer go home? Confess what he's done to parents who are...long dead, lo these many decades?

Going home. Perhaps there are two kinds of people: people who try to go home and people who don't. The writer used to make trips back—consulting work for foundations; those countless stays during his mother's long dying—but now it's been years. At this point, though it's still too soon to tell, he'd guess there's no more returning. Turning: reversing, reverting. Being transformed, converted, changed into. Brought into rounded form.

Is it the plane flight from California or Hawaii: five or ten hours? Or too much to undergo, imagining all he'd see, recall. *Relive! Rethink. Refeel.* Not to mention confronting all that *might* have been. Leaving him waiting to discover what price he'd have to pay to avoid, as Bob Dylan put it, "going through all these things twice."

The writer once wrote, "There came a point he realized he'd be changed not by traveling but by coming home." Which might be one too many changes. Self as writer still curious, litmus paper perennially ready for tests, recording. But self as human? Not so much. If a trip's unlikely, however, a good part of the writer will miss not making it.

About going home. Only yesterday, the writer was thinking of The Western Front. When he was nineteen, it was a bar on Western Avenue in Cambridge, then the far edge of the known college world. Something wild in the air in its liquor, dope, rock'n'roll; he hungered for more. He'd like to see it again, see what he'd make of it now. And just this morning the writer summoned up the rows of enormous beech trees of a park a few blocks from where he grew up. Some of them a century old when he was born. The beech trees just popped into his mind.

And...this afternoon, the writer's brother e-mailed him a link to a video of Boston Red Sox center fielder Brock Holt making a phenomenal diving catch at Fenway Park. The hyper-green of the playing field, known to the writer from childhood; the white uniforms, the Red Sox Nation a fan religion. But of course you don't have to be there to tune in, keep the faith.

So the writer is...not there. Both here and gone. In David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, exiled poet Ovid finally realizes he will not return to Rome, even if allowed. In this foreign place he's found his true fate. Now a whole hidden life has come back to the poet. Childhood, "Not as I had previously remembered it, but in some clearer form, as it really was; which is why my past, as I recall it now, continually astonishes me. It is as if it happened to someone else, and I were being handed a new past, that leads, as I follow it out, to a present in which I appear out of my old body as a new and other self."

Does the writer expect such metamorphosis? Has it already happened? Falling off to sleep, his thought is: If you spend your whole life trying to be something you're

not, that's who you are. But then, who were you supposed to be? Or, who was that person you never could have been, but thought you were going to be?

The Beatles sang, "Once there was a way to get back homeward/Once there was a way to get back home..." But how to return to the point of departure, if that's the hunger, the time of one's life irreversible. Irreparable?

So, for the moment, and moments are running out...

As far as returning to Boston...

Never say never, but, nonetheless...

For the writer, most likely, "it's just no, nay, never, no nay never no more."

Thomas Farber has been awarded Guggenheim and, three times, National Endowment fellowships for fiction and creative nonfiction, Thomas Farber has been a Fulbright Scholar, recipient of the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize, and Rockefeller Foundation scholar at Bellagio. His recent books include *The End of My Wits*, *Brief Nudity*, and *The Beholder*. Former Visiting Distinguished Writer at the University of Hawai'i, he teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, and is Publisher/Editor-in-Chief of El León Literary Arts.

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