

Shadow Play

by David Cotrone

“Or imagine Lucille in Boston, at a table in a restaurant, waiting for a friend... no one watching [her] smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger, or slip cellophane packets of oyster crackers into her handbag for sea gulls, could know her thoughts...or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me...”

- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

I read it all wrong. In writing her novel, I thought Marilynne Robinson was writing about twins — writing, in some way, about me. Instead, these characters, Lucille and Ruthie, were standard sisters, one older than the other. In fact, Robinson explains this quite clearly in the first line of *Housekeeping*, “My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille....” I only realized my mistake after rereading the book several years later. Until that time, I always had it stuck in my head: I am Ruth, my brother Lucille. Robinson *knows* me. She knows us.

Wrong.

So why was this idea in my head? Perhaps it is the way in which Ruth and Lucille start so close, mirroring my childhood memories: my brother and I constructing a fort in the snow, making a shower out of the water sprinkler, together suffering through family portraits. But then they drift and wane, fade away from each other, a color photo turned monochrome. I am no stranger to this process; in fact, it seems natural, doesn't it? It's as if there is a way in which things separate. Author Frank Conroy gives witness in his memoir, *Stop-Time*, writing, “Flossie and Penny went simultaneously insane... They turned, saw the open gate, and made a dash for it... One moment they were there, and the next they were gone, swallowed by the blackness under the trees.” Here, there are two levels of loss. Not only are Conroy's dogs running away from him — *escaping* — but they are losing their own identities, or changing

them, as they disconnect from former relationships. They have shed their affiliation with Frank, and in this moment, after reading this page, I could not help but wonder: how long until Flossie and Penny, these sibling dogs, lose each other in the forest? How long until they lose themselves? How long, how long?

In time, Flossie and Penny return. This verb — “return” — is one I have yet to experience. My brother and I are still drifting, and I am unable to say if either of us is actually *lost*, as I am unsure of the word's meaning. Perhaps this is why I read — to decode the term's significance, its implications, its gravity.

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In his nonfiction collection, *Broken Vessels*, Andre Dubus writes about losing his leg in a car accident, the process of having a limb amputated. He is called to write because of such loss; his life informs his writing, and in turn, writing informs him of his life. He enters into his work knowing that writing is a process of discovery. Though he is tormented by grief and anger, Dubus, through writing, finds grace in his personal loss; he finds himself anew. He finds, for example, that his life is literally slowed, and thus he is led to savor his time with his children. Tobias Wolff writes about losing a father, Dave Eggers about simultaneously losing both his parents, Rick Moody about confronting alcohol addiction, about wanting to *lose* such a malign habit, David Foster Wallace about what it would mean to lose his own life. I am drawn to all of these authors, to their work, to their collective search for meaning in oblivion.

There are more. In *The Virgin Suicides*, Jeffrey Eugenides writes of the unraveling of a family, as three sisters take their own lives in succession, in a way that is methodical. Jonathan Franzen talks about what it's like lose grasp of your own mind in his novel, *The Corrections*. And in his debut work, *Tinkers*, Paul Harding explores the life of a man with epilepsy, how his essence totally changes when he is struck by an epileptic fit, how a jolt — a ringing in his head — is the signal that brings him back to consciousness. I must ask, then, as a reader: What is it that will bring *me* to consciousness? Once there, what will I find? How will I come to understand myself?

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In my junior year of high school I wrote about an old swing set that once stood in my backyard. As toddlers, my brother and I would play on this swing set for hours every day. Through writing about the arc and curve of the slide, the coarse rungs of the ladder, and the dip of the seat of the swing, I realized the set itself was meaningless. It was not until I wrote about how my parents could not wrest us from the slide (even during rainstorms), or how not even splinters could deter us from the ladder, that I understood my brother gave the set its significance, its mental weight, how without him I would not have had a companion, how he was born five-and-a-half minutes after me and how it takes him the same amount of time to fall asleep, how he emboldened me to swing higher, higher, still higher.

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Now here we are, my brother and I, at different points in our lives, interested in dissimilar activities, unlike even in our sense of humor, our taste in music, our notion of belonging. As my brother socializes profusely, and as he seems to live life not with intimacy and nuance but with grandiosity and a drive for splendor, I sit. I wait. It is as if my life is open water, unfounded yet pushing forward, pulling me ahead yet yearning for yesterday, and somewhere in the middle of this onward march and this wistful withdrawal, I write.

And now here I am, writing this after a paragraph starting with "Now here *we are...*" having just asked myself a question: *What is it that will bring me to consciousness? Conscious*, from the Latin, "to be privy to," and *privy*, a word whose archaic meaning is *hidden, a secret place*. For me, the two words are melded, and this merging is the answer to my question. It is the act of becoming conscious of my own hidden and secret self that makes me feel, in the most profound way, alive.

Another name for this act, of course, is writing. So this is why I give voice to the feeling of pressing forward and drifting backwards, to a swing set, to a list of authors, to a mistake I made while first

reading Marilynne Robinson's debut novel. In some fervid and evocative way, I have to.

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Being a twin does not skew an identity. The water, nevertheless, is muddied. It is not a matter of living up to standards, as those with older brothers or sisters may complain of living in their sibling's shadow. Rather, twinship requires cooperation — sharing a shadow. Perhaps this is why I am lonely, and sometimes sad: I am unaccustomed to being an individual in the strictest sense, unused to being on my own, wrestling now with my shadow, no longer shared, and yet somehow not mine.

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It is worthy to note that out of my list of influential writers (Eggers, Moody, Foster Wallace, Franzen, etc.), no author has actually entered that holy space of *finding*, no one is truly found. Eggers' memoir ends in midair; it is a rumination, a study of pain and momentum. Moody's personal account concludes with disappointment. Two years ago, Foster Wallace hung himself. He never obtained answers — or, if he did, they were not worth living for.

I do not expect, then, to write myself into resolution. But this is good news, in a sense, as I will be writing for a lifetime. I want writing to carry me through existence; I do not want to enter into graduate school, into teaching, into writing, for the sake of earning a living, of meeting some level of artistic achievement. Yes, I want to publish. Yes, I want my work to sit on bookshelves. But not out of vanity — not quite. Instead, I want to continue the tradition of words and meaning. I want readers to use my work as placeholders for their own lives, to insert their own histories into my script. While a future reader may not be a twin who confuses characters in relation to each other, perhaps he will mix up location, maybe she will misinterpret motivation. Who knows, really? I cannot say.

