Falling in place | An examination of Raymond Carver's short fiction

Daniel C. Peters

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Falling in Place:
An Examination of Raymond Carver's Short Fiction

by

Daniel C. Peters

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[Signatures]

Professor William Bevis, Chair

Dean, Graduate School

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Date
This thesis discusses the problematic and constricted sense of place found in Carver's short fiction, and its subsequent impact on his characters. Carver's use of place is both an expression of and a contributing factor to the isolation endured by his "submerged population." Finally, this study points to Carver's place as a generative factor in the "one single moment of revelation" experienced by his characters.

These essays show that Carver's biography reveals a dialogue between his life and his fictional sense of place. By splitting the experience of place into two interrelated sets (locked out and locked in) this study reveals patterns of environmental and emotional isolation in the lives of the characters. The characters who are locked out travel on the perimeters of social intercourse, believing in the superiority of "greener pastures" elsewhere. This study shows that such characters have unintentionally disabled their capacity for local attachment. These essays also show that the characters who are locked in, either by the perception of exterior "menace" or by the forces of the "tyranny of the family," truncate their ties to place in a vain attempt to seek cover from the vague "outside" world. This examination alludes to the "regionalists'" expansive definitions of place to show that Carver's constricted sense of place builds within the characters until their isolation is revealed in a segmented epiphany. These essays show that the first segment is connected to a "regionalist" trope: the characters' understanding of place as a relative location, defined exclusively by the individual.

This study concludes that the second stage of this epiphany, namely adaptation to the new understanding, is interpreted by the characters in one of two distinct manners. One set of characters adapts by severing all connections to community, including family. Contrastingly, other characters react to the epiphany with a heightened degree of empathy. Finally, this examination shows that Carver's fiction favors the latter reaction by granting such characters improved prospects of survival and in rare instances, success.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

-James Wright
"A Blessing"

I live at 1501 Summitview, apartment #208, Yakima, Washington. Raymond Carver's mother, Ella, lived in these apartments some time ago. I discovered this coincidence after months of living here and writing about Carver's life and works. I grew up in Selah, fifteen minutes from where I now call home. Every day, for over a year, first in Missoula, and now here, I wake up and think about Carver. I have even had dreams about meeting him.

Last spring in Missoula, I met Ray Carver for the first time in one of these dreams. I was hiking near Quartz Lake in Glacier National Park with my father. As we approached the edge of the lake, Ray came walking in the opposite direction. We stopped and admired the lake together. Carver told us to follow him to a spot he said we had to see to believe. We walked back up the bank in a line, Ray leading, me following, my dad behind me. As we climbed, I strained to catch what Carver was saying about the lake and the surrounding territory. He seemed to know a lot about the area, pointing at a particular tree here, a segment of ridge line there, and I wanted to learn everything he had to tell me. I remember thinking that if I didn't know better, he could have passed for a park ranger. Something about the
casual, unguarded way he was speaking to us convinced me that he did not suspect I knew him as a writer. He was completely at ease in the woods, talking to me as we were friends. Not wanting to ruin the tour with a string of questions about his stories, I kept my knowledge of his actual occupation a secret.

Carver soon led us off the trail. I had to push aside fir boughs and small trees to keep pace with Ray, who seemed to move effortlessly through the dense cover. I turned occasionally to make sure my dad was still following our path. He kept coming, but was now out of earshot of Ray's running commentary.

As we neared the viewpoint, I began losing Carver in the thick vegetation. I followed the sound of his movement. I pushed harder and caught up to the activity in the bushes ahead, hoping to continue my conversation with Ray. I brushed away a knot a branches, expecting to see Carver cutting through the wooded incline only to discover that Carver had disappeared. Instead, sitting in the clearing where I expected to find Ray, I saw a large brown bear, preoccupied for the moment with foraging. I froze. The bear looked directly into my eyes for a count, and then continued feeding on the undergrowth. I recall hearing the heavy sounds of my dad's footsteps coming from behind me. I turned and told him, in the loudest whisper I could chance, to stop.

When the bear moved away from me, I followed it- as earlier I had followed Ray. I remained a short distance
behind while the animal traveled slowly down the slope we had been climbing, pausing here and there to inspect a bush, rub against a tree or sniff the air. My dad, having stopped in the trail, was now completely out of site.

In the dream, I was certain that the bear was Ray and because of this, I had no fear.

We moved through the trees like this, with the bear leading me deeper and deeper into the forest until we were the only animals left in the woods.

This has not been an easy paper to write. I have been living, some times figuratively, some times literally, too close to the subject. Like many of the characters, I often thought that if I could take one step back, perhaps even out of my skin, I could gain the perspective and control needed to finish the paper. That proved to be a difficult, but not impossible test. As in the dream, I found myself residing dangerously near the grim heart of Carver's stories. The fascination I have for Carver's fiction and its inexplicable nature drew me in for a closer look. For reasons that are still not clear, I stayed too long. I stayed until I was alone with the bear. I am still finding my way back.

I want to thank several people for helping me write this thesis. Moreover, I want to thank them for helping me pick up the trail that leads back home. First, I would like to thank my parents for their continued support, guidance and love. I
also want to thank my teacher, Barry Grimes, for lending me his copy of *Fires* in 1986 and introducing me to Carver and reading and poetry and my imagination. Thanks also to Janeen Grimes for asking (and asking again) how the thesis was coming. Thanks to William Bevis, my thesis director, whose patient advice calmed me at critical junctures.

Finally, thanks to Amy Bouillion- for everything.
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Introduction

Untying the Knot of Connection
Inventing a Country of His Own

Raymond Carver's former home has no address— at least no address is visible from the street. Over Christmas I searched my hometown, Yakima, Washington, for several of Carver's boyhood homes. As I turned onto the street where Carver's first home should have been I slowed and carefully read the numbers: "1511, 1513, 1517," and the street came to an end. Had I missed 1515 South 15th Street, Carver's former address? I doubled back, slowing again to look at mailboxes and front porches. I stopped in front of the lot that, according to the addresses on the other houses, must have been Carver's former residence. Situated between two slightly dilapidated houses, a numberless and surprisingly new residence stands. In a letter to photographer Bob Adelman, Carver says of this location:

First address I clearly remember in Yakima is down by the fairgrounds, and is now a slum area; and the actual house I lived in has burned down— or at least there was nothing left but an old shell of a house a couple of years ago.... As I recall, the road in front of the house that leads to the "main" road is not even paved; the people who live there in the neighborhood now look like people out of the Virginia backwoods.  

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Apparently destroyed, Carver's former home has been replaced. The new dwelling is a recently constructed mobile home. In addition to the missing address, there is an odd ginger-bread quality to the exterior of the home. Aside from a plywood vestibule and a scattering of lawn tools in the yard, the home is featureless when viewed from the exterior; it looks less like a home and more like a template. Its windows, entry-ways and off-center appearance on the lot indicate that the home was not designed with this site in mind. Constructed without regard for its eventual location, it seems isolated from the yard, the older houses in the neighborhood and the nearby Yakima River. Nearly identical homes undoubtedly exist in "the Virginia backwoods" and in every state in the nation.

Like the mobile home, many of Carver's stories resist the importance of a specific location. When asked whether his stories could "take place in almost any town in the United States," Carver replied, "those kinds of landmarks and guides aren't terribly necessary in my stories".² However, place and the characters' connections to it is not so much ignored as it is intentionally distorted through diminishment. In Carver's work, we confront place on an unusually constricted scale. Many stories take place indoors. Several stories begin and end without leaving the

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room. This tightening of range affects the characters in a somewhat surprising manner.

The result of defining the scale of place so narrowly is predictably a great dilemma for his characters. Carver's writing forcefully demonstrates the perils and confusion brought about by the limited environments. The contraction of place affects the characters in two distinct, yet related manners. The residents feel themselves to be either locked out or locked in by the compression of place. In both instances, the characters experience a sense of isolation and exclusion from the greater society. In the midst of this painfully shrunken place, the characters respond in various manners, ranging from itinerant escapism to etherized indolence.

Carver's work and the residence found at 1515 South 15th Street have in common yet another abiding factor: the perception of impermanence. Unlike the homes around it that seem to be sinking into their lawns, the new house is tentatively perched on its foundation. Presumably, what has arrived on wheels may be removed on wheels. Lacking only provocation and a trailer hitch, the house appears ready to move at a moment's notice. Not only does the house stand out as being much newer than rest of the neighborhood, it is also exposed to the expectation of its next location. Carver's characters exhibit a similar lack of stability, often expressed in their uncertain living conditions. The characters refuse to call their cramped quarters home by
decamping so frequently that they nearly disable their ability to put down roots in any location. Set in a series of confining apartments, trailer parks and rented homes, the stories unfold in an habitually unsettled world.

What may not be so predictable are the consequences the characters experience as a result of these living conditions. In nearly every story, something mysterious occurs. In the course of living in the solitary environments, the characters' seem to reach a point of critical mass that creates both a puzzling measure of enlightenment and a compelling, almost existential emptiness. As Carver explains:

Almost all of the characters in my stories come to the point where they realize that compromise, giving in, plays a major role in their lives. Then one single moment of revelation disrupts the pattern of their daily lives. It's a fleeting moment during which they don't want to compromise anymore. And afterwards they realize that nothing ever really changes. (Conversations 80)

In story after story, the characters arrive at this crucial juncture at exactly the same moment they come to understand their relationship to place. The association between the epiphanies and the characters' connection to their location forcefully suggests that the difference between survival and failure hinges on the characters' ability to adapt or "compromise" their perception of place in order to fit their location.
As Carver's quote indicates, this capitulation often involves no less than the abandonment of the very dreams on which they have based their lives. When the characters are unable to wed their desires with their location, they respond to the crushing disillusionment of their hopes by migrating as haphazardly as if they were changing the channel on their television. Those characters who are able to balance their expectations with their locations often do so by adjusting their ideals to the point of fatalism. Place, in the world of Carver's fiction, is a blind arbiter whose judgments are irrevocable. From the point of comprehension when, "afterwards they realize that nothing ever really changes" the characters who find harmony in Carver's sense of place do so by adopting a graceful resignation (Conversations 80).

The resignation to this latter stage of awareness develops within the characters an understanding that "compromise" is crucial to their survival. In addition to its apparent fatalism, it is also the soul of compassion and empathy in Carver's fiction. The characters that achieve some degree of peace in the stories, do so by realizing that their act of concession is shared by everyone. Oddly, in accepting their disconnection from the condensed places, they open the door to a common truth.

Remarkably, in the midst of the incongruity between their vision and the verity, the characters achieve what, to Carver, is a lasting dignity: they survive. As Carver states, "Ideas and ideals and people's goals and visions-
they perish. But sometimes, oftentimes, the people
themselves don't perish. They have to pull up their socks
and go on" (Conversations 161). The understanding of place,
and the characters' subsequent perseverance in the face of
the new knowledge, is central to understanding Carver's
powerful style.

By tracking down the implications of Carver's unusual
perception of narrative space we gain insight into the
mystifying gravity found in his stories. In exploring his
compressed environments and vagabond population we come to
understand the obstacles such places represent and the manner
in which his characters weather the subsequent confinement
and isolation.

Because the stories' sense of place is so unorthodox and
at times perplexing, it is helpful to begin by looking
outside the texts in hopes of discovering how Carver came to
formulate his unique approach to place. In examining his
interviews and biographical background, we can begin to see
the groundwork of his fictional world take shape.

Carver's personal experience seems to have had a large
impact on his understanding of place. As mentioned above,
Carver spent much of his childhood and teenage years in my
hometown, Yakima, Washington, living for 17 years, or as one
elitist critic proclaimed, "in sum, at the end of the earth"
(Conversations 193). The son of a sawmill filer and a
waitress, his early experiences in Yakima were often chaotic.
He describes this chaos in a letter to photographer Bob Adelman, saying:

The last place I lived in with my parents in Yakima, and this was just before I graduated and just before my dad moved to California to take another job, got sick and their lives blew apart...was the best house they ever lived in and ever were to live in. It was downhill all the way after that; trailers, apartments, shacks, cabins, and with other people.... Home was a little two-bedroom house. We moved a lot when I was a kid, but it was always into another little two-bedroom house. The first house I can remember living in...had an outdoor toilet....I was eight or ten years old then. (Carver Country 29, 32)

Carver married classmate Maryann Burk shortly after graduating from Yakima High School (now Davis High) and moved with his wife and newly arrived baby girl to Paradise, California. Over the next 15 years, the Carvers continued to experience uncertain living conditions, moving 12 times including such places as: Chico, Eureka, Arcata, Sacramento, Tel Aviv, Israel, Hollywood, San Jose, Sunnyvale, Santa Cruz, Cupertino, Iowa City, Iowa, and Santa Barbara. Of this time, Carver recalls, "The world was very fractured, and the world I was living in didn't want to stay in one place....by dint of our moving around and hoping for a better job...we moved too much. We were dislocated, dispossessed" (Conversations 124). During this period of dispossession, Carver wrote sporadically, finding time between odd jobs and family life to work on his stories and poems. One frequently recounted story tells of Carver retreating to the privacy of his car parked in the driveway in a desperate attempt to compose his
stories and poems. It seems that Carver, like many of the characters we will meet later in this paper, sought a degree of sedentary relief in the incongruous promise of motion.

The transience Carver experienced in those early years found its expression in his fiction. He admits this disjointed lifestyle directly influenced his style, saying:

Once, it was important to see myself as a writer from a particular place. It was important for me to be a writer from the West. But that's not true any longer, for better or worse. I think I've moved around too much, lived in too many places, felt dislocated and displaced, to now have any firmly rooted sense of "place". (Conversations 50-1)

As Carver indicates, ("for better or worse") his inability to establish roots may not have been entirely without worth. In many ways, this itinerant lifestyle may have contributed to the development of his powerful style. As Michael Wood accurately notes on the front page of The New York Times Book Review, "He (Carver) has done what many of the most gifted writers fail to do. He has invented a country of his own, like no other except that very world, as Wordsworth said, which is the world of us all" (Conversations 88). His "invented" country seems to have touched upon certain universals; his works have been translated into some twenty-three languages (Carver Country 9). This number suggests that "Carver Country" as it has come to be known, finds its corresponding territory located in "the world of us all."
Perhaps, as Carver's "for better or worse" statement indicates, the constant relocations trained Carver's eyes and ears. The "dislocation" and "displacement" Carver felt from his surroundings may have allowed him to unearth common elements unavailable to writers who associate themselves with a particular region. In the course of his wanderings, Carver seems to have gained the ability to comprehend not simply a place, but the properties of all places. As Carver states:

...you could say that men and women behave pretty much the same whether in Port Angeles, or Bellevue, or Houston, or Chicago....And I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing in regard to my stories; there's no way to judge. I was rootless for so many years and didn't have any real place or location, some of the things that are so nurturing for a writer. I seem to have lost them in some great cyclone back in the '60's" (Conversations 134-35)

It may be successfully argued that writers who claim a particular location as their home, for convenience sake we will call them "regionalists," gain a similar knowledge by examining one place so deeply that they unlock elements common to all places. In fact, Carver's examination of place yields results similar to those commonly found in the work of authors who have been the benefactors of "some of the things that are so nurturing for a writer": a feeling of peace and a sense of heightened perception that verges on epiphany.

The primary differences between Carver's place and those generally found in regionalist writing are a dramatically darker tone and a tragically rapid shift of focus from the
"enlightened" state to what comes immediately after this awakening. As Carver states, "Most of my stories start pretty much near the end of the arc of the dramatic conflict....I start it fairly near the end of the swing of action" (Conversation 229). The feeling of connection to place, often the centerpiece or climax of regionalist works, is painfully short lived in Carver Country. Instead, the stories detail the supplemental, downward "swing" of the epiphany. Carver's work examines the spiraling denouement, literally the process of untying the knot of connection.

The result of this emphasis is a world seldom seen in regionalist writing. Members of Carver's population awake from their moment of catharthis only to discover a world made crueler by their new knowledge. Carver explains, "The world is a very menacing place for many of the people in my stories...I think many, if not most, people feel the world is a menacing place" (Conversations 134-35). If anything, the clarification of their true relationship to place and the subsequent disillusionment of their hopes reveal an environment more "menacing" and less accessible than any previously considered. Confronted with this information, the characters must choose between flight or docile appeasement.

Carver was personally familiar with both of these options. Without question, Carver's early experiences forced him to develop an ability to write and feel tolerably comfortable anywhere. As a matter of survival, his rootlessness seems to have honed his ability to adapt to any
location. During a 1983 interview conducted in the home he shared with poet Tess Gallagher in Syracuse, New York, Carver was asked whether his other residence in Port Angeles, Washington, felt more like home to him. He answered, "No, wherever I am is fine. This is fine" (Conversation 32).

The supposition that Carver's early itinerantness led in some way to the development of his artistic skills is a precarious one. The problems that arise in the pursuit of this line of reasoning are several, not the least of which is the potential disservice to the emotional and physical cost exacted from the author and his family. His relocations roughly coincide with the onset of his most serious battles with alcoholism, severe economic difficulties and finally the dissolution of his marriage to Maryann in 1978. If Carver's writing ability is related to this aspect of his lifestyle, he paid a horrible price.

However, Carver's biography is compelling material and should not be ignored as a means of bringing light to his famously enigmatic fictional world. His stories are often set in towns he lived in and are involved in such tragedies as the ones that frequented his early years. Linking biographical and fictional worlds is risky; however, Carver himself suggests the importance of his personal experience in understanding his writing, stating:

The fiction I'm most interested in has a line of reference to the real world....Everything we write is, in some way, autobiographical...I do know something about the life of the underclass and what it feels like, by virtue of having lived it myself.
This is not to suggest that his stories be read as biographical transcriptions or journalistic reporting. Indeed, the stories are finely crafted to avoid just this type of reading. Carver took pains to emphasize the limits of biographical digging that should be read into his work, often citing variations on Flaubert's statement that, "The artist in his work must be like God in his creation—invisible and all powerful; he must be everywhere felt but nowhere seen" (Conversations 109).

In many ways, Flaubert's statement may be accurately applied to Carver's understanding of place. The power of place in his stories is everywhere felt but seldom seen. It is found not in its abundance, but in its absence from the lives of the characters. Either by moving indiscriminately (as Carver himself seemed to) or remaining trapped inside their homes, the characters fail to connect to their environment. In so doing, they bear many of the same tragedies of dislocation and dispossession that their author suffered beneath for too long.

Carver's response to his own itinerancy ("for better or worse" "I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing in regard to my stories; there's no way to judge") indicates a somewhat neutral, if not ambivalent, attitude toward his rootlessness. This rootlessness remained in
Carver's fiction and to some degree in his life until finally losing his battle with cancer in 1988.

Even after years of abstaining from alcohol, and meeting his future wife, the poet Tess Gallagher, in 1978, Carver seemed to hold on to his restless beginnings somewhat superstitiously. His comments alternate uneasily between expressions of connection and dislocation. In an interview conducted in 1986 in Gallagher's hometown, Port Angeles, Washington, Carver amends his previous assertion that it didn't matter where he was living as far as his writing was concerned, saying:

I'd certainly retract that statement nowadays. Having this place here in Port Angeles has been very important for me....without question my poetry came back to me because of this relocation...I know it had something to do with this landscape here and the water....The older I get the more I feel that I am part of something, that I am...a conduit, yes, or an instrument (Conversations 104).

However, Carver's deep affection for Port Angeles was apparently short-lived. In an interview conducted in May of 1988, shortly after finally purchasing a house Port Angeles, Carver returned to his characteristically tentative stance toward local attachment, claiming that, "if I didn't have the writing, I couldn't live here. I'm just not hung up on a pretty place to live, the mountains and the water. I'd be gone in a flash if I didn't have any writing" (Conversations 242). Perhaps his responses indicate a shifting between former "defense mechanisms" carried over from his early experience and a gradual acceptance of his self-described
"new life." And perhaps they suggest something more complex.

Many of Carver's characters, before and after he attained sobriety and a more stable lifestyle, express uncertainty with regard to their homes. In 1986, 7 years after beginning his "new life," Carver described his continued examination of the themes of isolation and placelessness in his writing, maintaining that:

The vision now, today, is, I suppose, more hopeful than it once was. But for the most part, things still don't work out for the characters in the stories... loneliness and isolation and physical exhaustion are true of my people, or many of them anyway. (Conversations 161, 163)

Carver compassionately hints that his characters closely resemble his personal life saying, "You are not your characters, but your characters are you" (Conversations 8). Carver's dedication to the working poor, or "submerged population" as he occasionally called his subjects, stems from his formative wanderings and is carried over into his "new" life (Conversations 112, 130). Perhaps, like his narratives, Carver never completely lost the vagrant impulses he came to know first-hand. The longed for connection may have eluded him even at the end. Although the tenor of his stories' regard for place changes slightly during his recovery from alcoholism, his characters and to some degree Carver himself continue to express the lack of grounding that he felt for nearly his entire career.
II

Everywhere Felt But Nowhere Seen: The World of Us All

Few have argued as eloquently and as convincingly for the power of place as the poet, activist and essayist Gary Snyder. In his essay "The Place, the Region and the Commons," Snyder details what he considers to be the influence of place. His description assists our efforts to understand the unique sense of positioning found in Carver's stories. Snyder states, "We experience slums, prairies, and wetlands all equally as 'places.' Like a mirror, a place can hold anything, on any scale....One's sense of scale of a place expands as one learns the region". 3 We might also add the corollary that place, as is the case with Carver, contracts as one fails to learn the territory. According to Snyder's poetic aesthetic, environmental leanings and his Buddhist beliefs, place is a relative term, encompassing redwood forests as well as city streets. For Snyder, place, like the current model of the universe, expands and contracts along a sliding beam. As we will see, Carver adopts a similar definition of place and turns it slightly, as one turns over a stone embedded in the earth, to reveal a darker world, crawling with suspicion and alive with menace. This "underside" of place lies at the heart of Carver Country, influencing the characters' actions, speech and thoughts.

Carver's stories, occur on a scale we might reasonably view as distorted and condensed. Nonetheless, his insular characters are informed by their surroundings. In his stories, this information comes not from the watershed, the bioregion, the community or the neighborhood that Snyder investigates. Instead, it comes from unexpected enclaves many neglect to view as place: mobile homes, tract-houses and apartment complexes. Carver explains that such settings are vital to create the compressed, stale atmosphere found in his stories: "It's healthy out-of-doors...there are always some vapors hanging around indoors- fetid air" (Conversations 134-35). Prohibited from connection by parenthood, alcohol, poverty or apathy, the characters either emigrate repeatedly or pace a narrow path in their carpets. In both instances, they wear a seemingly insurmountable groove. They fail to attain a sense of the larger "region" and instead consult the limited information found in what is immediately at hand.

Much of the action and dialogue in the stories take place within the claustrophobic boundaries of the characters' living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms. In many ways, this cramped environment represents a more "realistic" depiction of place as we have come to understand the term. Snyder explains, "For most Americans, to reflect on 'home place' would be an unfamiliar exercise. Few today can announce themselves as someone from somewhere" (Practice 25). Rather than experiencing an expansion of scale, many characters live as virtual shut-ins. They are lured by the twin siren calls
of a deceptively seductive fantasy life, frequently augmented through television, and the false perception of security from the menace at their doorsteps.

Carver builds much of his stories around the examination of these seemingly banal environments. In the process, he constructs for the reader a world that is in many regards very familiar. In his collection of essays titled, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture, poet and essayist Wendell Berry argues:

The modern home is...an everyplace and a noplace. Modern houses, like airports, are extensions of each other....A person standing in a modern room anywhere might imagine himself anywhere else- much as he could if he shut his eyes....The industrial conquistador, seated in his living room...in front of his TV set...can easily forget where he is and what he has done. He is everywhere or nowhere....The history of our time has been to a considerable extent the movement of the center of consciousness away from home.4

The fact that his characters do not appear to be entirely resigned to this definition of "modern" location (as Berry seems to suggest the general public is) testifies to Carver's compassionate understanding of "his people." However, for many of Carver's resolute characters, such homes remain a familiar malformation.

Those who do venture forth on limited explorations sense only the initial, frequently hostile, nonacceptance that often greets "newcomers." In turn, they either retreat to

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the safety of stupification or move hurriedly on in search of the next Rock Candy Mountain, never staying long enough in one place to establish the longed for roots. Whether they are locked out or locked in, the protagonists suffer within an ever contracting and insufficient perception of their "home place." Both physically and psychologically, Carver's characters appear unable to find composure in any surroundings.

Critics have been quick to point out that Carver's "minimalist" style owes much to Hemingway's iceberg metaphor, with seven-eighths of the story's power and meaning submerged. Carver himself often credits Hemingway as an early influence. Citing early influences, he states, "This goes back to Hemingway of course- it's all right to leave things out as long as you know what you're leaving out" (Conversations 126). It is possible to begin to understand the importance of the "unnatural" scale in his stories by exploring Carver's relationship to the iceberg metaphor. Among the elements left out of his famously terse prose, an extended knowledge of place plays, paradoxically, a central role in defining the landscape of Carver Country.
Chapter 1

Locked Out of Place

Well we know where we're going, but we don't know where we've been. And we know what we're knowing, but we can't say what we've seen. And we're not little children, and we know what we want. And the future is certain. Give us time to work it out. We're on the road to nowhere.

-The Road to Nowhere
Talking Heads
Taking a Geographic: The Search For Greener Grass

If you leave the site of Carver's boyhood home and drive west on I-82 toward Selah and Ellensburg, you will pass a large billboard that has become a sort of landmark for the citizens of Yakima. Right next to "Trailwagons," a company that specializes in customizing vans with everything from shag carpet to satellite dishes, a sign proudly proclaims, "Welcome to Yakima: The Palm Springs of Washington!"

Undoubtedly the work of an overly enthusiastic visitor's bureau wishing to tout the valley's hot summers, the sign has become a source of ironic pride for the community.

No one who has lived in Yakima believes that it will ever be mistaken for a luxurious retreat for the rich and famous. Whenever citizens refer to the sign, their tone is mocking and self-deprecating. We often quote it as a sarcastic welcome to visiting relatives or in correspondences that begin, "Greetings from Yakima, the Palm Springs of Washington." We know, we seem to be telling our friends and relatives before they tell us. We know this is not Southern California. We know the sign is hoaky. We get the joke. We think it's funny too. Stop reminding us already. We know.

It is uncertain whether Carver ever saw the sign. He returned to Yakima for the last time in August of 1986 for a
Yakima High School thirtieth-year class reunion. The billboard was erected about that time and would have been visible to the Carvers as they came east from their home in Port Angeles. If he did see the sign, it certainly would have appealed to his sense of humor and in many ways to his unique understanding of place.

Like the sign, Carver's stories define their location through indirection. The settings are frequently determined in reference to where they are not. There is an unceasing deference on the part of the characters to some other town, to the next stop down the line. For Carver's population, the grass in invariably greener on the other side. As the stories demonstrate, the perception of the inferiority of their current location takes a toll on the characters. As a result of their perpetual motion, the characters find that they are essentially locked out of participation in any location. When Jack and Helen learn of their friends' planned relocation to Fairbanks in "What's In Alaska?," the division caused by the subordination to "otherness" is made clear:

"We might go to Alaska," Carl said. "Alaska?" Jack said. "What's in Alaska? What would you do up there?" "I wish we could go someplace," Helen said. "What's wrong with here?" Jack said.6

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While Helen's longing is characteristic of many of Carver's characters, Jack asks the unanswered question that haunts the stories: "What's wrong with here?" It is a question that citizens of Yakima sometimes privately ask themselves when they see the offending billboard. By plotting escape routes, the citizens of Carver Country ignore their current locations. As a result, they experience a failure to connect to the place where they currently reside. Life, to paraphrase John Lennon, is what happens to them while they're busy making other plans. Unknowingly, the characters' incessant fascination with the superiority of the "next place" severs their ability to relate to any place. In lamenting the fact that they are not living in Palm Springs, they simultaneously fail to live in Yakima or Arcata or Sacramento.

If the characters share anything, it is the impulse to move. If they are not in the act of moving, they are busy designing their next destination. The mother in the story "Boxes," modeled after Carver's own mother, is a chilling archetype of the manic propulsion found at the heart of many Carver stories. The mother, we learn from her son:

started moving years ago, after my dad lost his job....they...went to where they thought things would be better. But things weren't any better there, either....They were like migrating animals in this regard, except there was no pattern to their movement...sometimes even leaving the state for what they thought would be greener pastures...."Moving around keeps her alive," Jill
Crazy doesn't stop her from planning and getting on with her next move.7

The lack of a fixed residence for the mother in "Boxes" can be identified as an important symptom of and even a contributing factor to the dis-ease so many of Carver's characters exhibit. Restless to a fault, Carver's characters are never able to establish the security necessary to feel at home. Like the mobile home found at 1515 South 15th Street, little separates the characters from yet another relocation. Faced with either difficult decisions or looming consequences, they seek their release on the highways. Carver's widow, Tess Gallagher, sums up the social implications of this tendency, saying:

There is, for instance, the mother in "Boxes" who moves every few months, and who exemplifies the itinerant or gypsy nature of many of the characters in Ray's stories. Indeed she represents a facet of American life in the way its people use up "place" and depend upon the idea and the possibility of a "next" or a "new" place a remedy and comfort. In AA shorthand, when an alcoholic does this it's called "taking a geographic," a sign that the drinker is trying to shake his or her troubles instead of dealing with them. But it is entirely possible that moving itself is now inscribed on the national psyche as something "normal" in situations of stress, loss, and despair. (Carver Country 14)

As we will discover later in this discussion, those characters who manage to stay in one place often become so transfixed by the quest for cover from the "menacing" outside

world that they create an environment from which escape is no longer an option. As a result, the characters migrate inward, seeking the insular dislocation of the mind from its surrounding predicaments. They become exiles in their hometowns.

The continual de-centering inherent in "taking a geographic" wears at the foundation of even the best intentions. Fearing that their next move is perhaps only a day away, the characters turn inward, hedging their emotions and expressions against the painful, yet familiar act of pulling up stakes. This defensive tactic often results in an unexpected backlash. Trained to shelter their emotions against insecure environments, they simultaneously create an atmosphere of dislocation that makes nomadic repositioning all but inevitable. Unable to establish roots for fear of transplantation, they exist as perpetual fugitives.

A brief survey of the stories reveals a nomadic thread running throughout Carver's fiction. The pattern of escapism, or "taking a geographic," that connects the stories ranges from explicit comments to subtle gestures. By sampling from the more emphatic statements, we begin to hear a dejected echo repeated in the mouths of the characters. In each instance, Jack's question, "What's wrong with here?" is central to piecing together their rationales for leaving. Often, as the following quotes demonstrate, the characters indicate that they have a definite escape route mapped out:
I want to get out of here. Go someplace else....I just want to leave....maybe go on up to Oregon. That's good country. (Will You 181)

Then we got to talking about how we'd be better off if we moved to Arizona, someplace like that.... Arizona wasn't a bad idea. (Cathedral 96)

I'd tell them I was planning a move to Australia. And the thing was, I was serious when I'd say that about Australia. I didn't know the first thing about Australia. I just knew it was on the other side of the world, and that's where I wanted to be.8

I'm moving to Nevada. Either there or kill myself.9

Maybe I could go to Portland...There must be something in Portland.... Portland's as good a place as any. It's all the same. (Cathedral 108)

While these citizens of Carver Country have a specific location in mind, there are many who share the apparent torment of the woman in the second to last quote or the fatalism of the man in the final selection. For these characters, the destination is less important than the act of escape itself.

The desire to leap over the wall to "greener pastures," and the dispossession that ensues, persists throughout Carver's work. In the "Student's Wife," the narrator, who is also the title character, lists "flying in an airplane," among her favorite things. She explains, "There's a moment as you leave the ground you feel whatever happens is all


right" (Will You 125). As the wife's monologue continues, her list shifts from what she likes to what she would like to happen. We soon learn the reason for her escapist fantasy, as later in the same conversation she tells her husband, "I'd like us to have a place of our own. I'd like to stop moving around every year, or every other year" (Will You 126). At first, these comments appear antithetical. Upon closer inspection, we see that the statements join to form a clear picture. When coupled with the desire for a stable home, the joy found in the moment of lift-off becomes a longing not so much for flight, but for release from her dissatisfaction with their current residence.

Her statements are also a symptom of the discordant restlessness many of Carver's characters exhibit. Having "used up" a place, they pin their hopes on the mistaken belief that they will shake their troubles by fleeing the scene. While Gallagher claims that this inclination "is now inscribed on the national psyche as something 'normal'," it is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, as Berry argues and as the history of westward expansion has amply documented, the roots of our current dislocation may be said to stretch back for generations. A dark uncertainty distinguishes the movement of Carver's characters from their pioneering ancestors. They embark on their travels knowing too well that all of the territory has already been mapped. The vague and desperate plans they speak of are thins veils. Their intentions do little to mask their hopelessness:
...for a long time he had wanted to move to the country...he just knew he wanted to leave the city to try to start over again. (Will You 185)

He thought fleetingly that he would be someplace else tonight doing something else, that it would be silent somewhere... (Will You 234)

I could head right on out into the sunset. (What We 153)

She wished she were that woman and somebody, anybody, was driving her away from here to somewhere else... (Cathedral 70)

I don't have any idea where they're going....I think they're going someplace else to try their luck. (Cathedral 206)

I'm going, that's all I can say...Anyplace. Away from this nut house....That's the main thing. (What We 159)

Although the characters occasionally claim to harbor hope of a new beginning, many have lost their senses of purpose and discovery. Now, their quests are not for a return to some Eden of optimism, but for the sake of movement alone.

We meet one such character on the verge of leaving the site of his troubles in the solitary, unnamed narrator of "Collectors" who is "out of work. But any day I expect to hear from up north" (Will You 100). As he awaits the unspecified news from "up north," a pushy vacuum cleaner salesman appears at the door offering a free demonstration for "Mrs. Slater" (Will You 101). Although the narrator informs him that "Mrs. Slater doesn't live here," the salesman, Aubrey Bell, persists and finally is invited into the home (Will You 101). Once inside, we discover that his promotional speech is more than the narrator bargains for.
"I am here even to do your mattress," Bell informs the narrator:

You'll be surprised to see what can collect in a mattress over the months, over the years. Every day, every night of our lives, we're leaving little bits of ourselves, flakes of this and that, behind. Where do they go, these bits and pieces of ourselves? Right through the sheets and into the mattress, that's where! (Will You 103)

Clearly, for the narrator this is no ordinary hustle. Bell's rehearsed speech comes across as more than typical salesman banter. Although the narrator's relationship to Mrs. Slater is never fully disclosed, we learn later that he is not her husband and that whatever relationship he had with her has apparently ended badly. For the narrator, who is anticipating a move "up north," and presumably freedom from whatever ghosts have accumulated in the house, Aubrey Bell's sales pitch is an unwelcomed admonition of what he will be leaving behind.

The narrator's connection to the home is as unclear as his tie to the departed Mrs. Slater. When the two move to the bedroom to clean the bed, the narrator cryptically remarks, "It's not my mattress" (Will You 105). His confession calls into question the ownership of the "bits and pieces" that are left behind in the mattress. Whatever his relationship to the home, the mix of memories and emotions that are stirred by these words act as a painful recrimination for the narrator.
The salesman's spiel takes on even greater symbolic weight as he describes how the vacuum can clean the carpets and seats of a car. "You would be surprised," Bell tells the narrator, "how much of us gets lost, how much of us gathers, in those fine seats over the years. Mr. Bell, I said, I think you better pack up your things and go" (Will You 103-4). Although the salesman's pitch is obviously practiced, it is loaded with a new, self-conscious meaning for the narrator. Undeterred by the awkwardness his speech induces, Bell completes his demonstration, presumably removing deposits of what has gathered and what has been lost as he goes. After passing the vacuum wand-like over the mattress three times and cleaning the carpets, the salesman asks if the narrator would like to buy the vacuum: "No, I said, I guess not. I'm going to be leaving here soon. It would just be in the way" (Will You 108).

The narrator, like so many of Carver's characters, wishes to make a clean break. He does not want to be reminded of what he is leaving behind. However, as Bell ominously suggests, fresh starts come at a price. With every move, the characters forego any chance of recovering what has been lost and what has gathered in each place. The process of "taking a geographic", Carver seems to indicate, leaves "little bits of ourselves," including memories, plans and even dreams, literally and figuratively scattered and forgotten in pillows, mattresses and seat cushions. The cumulative effect of such relocations are characters that
have not only lost "flakes of this and that" but also diffused their ability to connect to place.

As if to emphasize the downside of transience, Carver provides an example of what may await the narrator of "Collectors," should he follow through with his relocation "up north". In, "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" the story immediately following "Collectors" in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? a postman narrates the activity surrounding a family who moves from San Francisco to a rental home in Arcata, California. It is as if "the call from up north" the protagonist of the previous story was waiting for had instead come to the father, Mr. Marston, and he had answered it by loading his entire family and their possessions into a U-Haul trailer. According to the mailman, who claims to have "lived in the West all (his) life," whatever their hopes for the move, the family never fully settles into the house (Will You 109). After several days of occupancy, he notices:

...the U-Haul still there in the front yard...about a quarter of the stuff had made its way to the front porch....Another quarter must have gotten inside the house, and the rest of the stuff was still in the trailer....he never did change the name on the box. (Will You 113)

The family, we are told, is attempting to get away from whatever misfortunes had befallen them in San Francisco. The narrator speculates, "the way it looked to me was that they had their fair share of trouble down there in San Francisco, whatever was the nature of their trouble, and they decided to get clear away from it" (Will You 115). In addition to the
disheveled appearance of the home, the family fails to become integrated with their new neighborhood. As the mailman explains, "I won't say the people hereabouts got used to them- they weren't the sort you'd ever really get used to" (Will You 116). The renewal the family seemed to be seeking never materializes. As it turns out, whatever problems they had in San Francisco have followed them to Arcata. The mailman arrives one day to find that the husband and wife had "disappeared. In two different directions...she'd taken off the week before with somebody- a man- and...after a few days he'd taken the kids to his mother's over to Redding" (Will You 116). The father returns alone a few days later to pack what remains of their belongings. As the mailman speaks with Marston for what will be the final time, he notices that "He was staring past me, over me, you might say, over the rooftops and the trees, south....The next day he was gone. He didn't leave any forwarding" (Will You 119). Like "Collectors," the concluding lines of "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" end with yet another character choosing to "take a geographic" when faced with hard times and painful memories. There is little to indicate success for Marston's move southward. Through the eyes of the narrator, we see Marston's identity disintegrate as he loses his wife, gives up his children and leaves yet another town behind.

After Mr. Marston moves from Arcata, the story reaches an abrupt closure. According to the mailman, the memory of the Marston family fades quickly. As he explains, "Sometimes
mail of some kind or other shows up....we hold it a day, then send it back to where it came from. There isn't much. And I don't mind. It's all work, one way or the other, and I'm always glad to have it" (Will You 119). The final lines, ("There isn't much") underscore how completely the family has been removed from the scene. Their memory has become little more than a bureaucratic formality. Having failed to establish any lasting roots, their disappearance causes almost no disturbance in the fabric of the neighborhood. For the mailman and the residents of Arcata, they effectively cease to exist.

The progressive descent of the Marston family suggests that the adversity that began in San Francisco is not so easily averted. As we discover, the tribulations appear to have followed closely on the heels of the Marston's migration. The flight southward of Mr. Marston and the absconding of his wife assures them only of anonymous citizenship in Carver's "submerged population."

The Marstons' abandonment of Arcata indicates that they have not learned from their experiences. While it doesn't take long for their trouble to catch up with them, true recognition of the source of their dilemma eludes them. If there is an enlightenment in "What Do You Do in San Francisco?," the reader is not witness to it. While we aren't allowed to follow Mr. Marston southward, we are able to track down what may be in store for him in the story "How About This?". Just as "What Do You Do in San Francisco?"
answers questions first posed in "Collectors," so too does this tale of a young couple taking to the woods continue to investigate the cost of "taking a geographic." It is hard not to remember the final, absent gaze of Marston when we read in the opening lines of "How About This?" that:

All the optimism that had colored his flight from the city was gone now, had vanished through the dark stands of redwood. Now, the rolling pasture land, the cows, the isolated farmhouses of western Washington seemed to hold out nothing for him, nothing he really wanted. He had expected something different. He drove on and on with a rising sense of hopelessness and outrage. (Will You 183)

The romantic ideal that seemed to beckon the Marstons onward is quickly evaporating for the protagonists, Harry and Emily. Like the Marston's, Harry and Emily decide to move from the city in hopes of finding a place to call home. As we learn of their background, it is obvious that they have built up an unrealistic pastoral image of "roughing it" in their new home (Will You 185). Signs that their move is based on nostalgic reverie abound. We learn that, "Harry had always lived in cities....But for a long time he had wanted to move to the country....A simpler life was what he had in mind, just the essentials, he said" (Will You 185). Perhaps envisioning his own rustic "Walden," Harry's vanishing optimism is paralleled by his movement toward the reality of life in the woods of western Washington.

When the couple arrive at the site of their new residence and discover it lacks electricity, a fireplace and
indoor toilets, their fantasy is dealt a final blow. Harry's desire for a stable "home place" is evident as he gamely tries to persuade himself and his wife that things will still work in this primitive environment. As they survey the home, Harry, "rapped on the walls near the front door. 'Solid. A solid foundation. If you have a solid foundation, that's the main thing'" (Will You 186). Trying hard to "hide his disappointment," Harry rationalizes that "It was peaceful, more or less appealing country, and he thought it pleasant to feel something permanent, really permanent, might belong to him" (Will You 186, 188). Unfortunately for the young couple, their longing for stability is quickly overcome by the reality of the neglected, isolated home.

Sensing that his wife is no longer a party to the illusion of rural bliss, Harry walks away from the house in the direction of the nearby orchard. As he looks around the farm, his course of action becomes clear:

He felt very calm really, all things considered. He wasn't going to stay here, he knew that, but it didn't upset him to know that now. He was pleased he knew himself so well. He would be all right, he decided. He was only thirty-two. Not so old. He was, for the moment, in a spot. He could admit that. After all, he considered, that was life, wasn't it? (Will You 191)

In the face of the breakdown of his hopes and dreams, Harry accomplishes a breakthrough. He seems to have experienced one of the bewildering epiphanies that occur sporadically in Carver's fiction. The enlightenment comes to him so rapidly,
it is necessary to slow down his statements to understand the role place plays in his insight.

The failure of his plans causes Harry to take stock. The awakening turns on the crucial acknowledgment that, "He was, of the moment, in a spot. He could admit that. After all, he considered, that was life, wasn't it?" (Will You 191). Harry's composure seems to stem from this simple admission. Even though the disillusionment of his bucolic fantasy means that he will have to start from scratch, he seems to have come to grips with his relationship to place. By allowing that regardless of where he moves, he will always be "in a spot," he seems ready to accept his isolation as natural, or as he puts it, "that was life". Bolstered by this "solid foundation," Harry is freed to attend to the things he can influence.

As the story concludes, he returns to the front of the house where his wife is waiting for him. With the full weight of his realization finally sinking in, Harry reaches for "his last match when his hands began to tremble...he stood there holding the empty matchbook and the cigaret, staring at the vast expanse of trees and at the end of the bright meadow" (Will You 192). Sensing that Harry has reached a decision and that it means starting over, Emily states, '"Harry, we have to love each other,' she said. 'We'll just have to love each other,' she said" (Will You 191). The pleading repetition in the last lines, coupled with his shaking hands and the description of the "end of the
bright meadow" suggests that in addition to leaving the home, Harry will also leave his wife. The language used to describe his awakening, always in the singular and never in the plural, strengthens the reading that his plans for a new life do not include Emily. Two people, Harry seems to feel, cannot be in the same spot. The epiphany that moments ago brought Harry relief, now causes him to convulse with his new found knowledge.
The vagabond itch that impels the characters mentioned previously to stumble from town to town afflicts other residents of Carver Country in a slightly less obvious, though no less penetrating manner. The absence of connection to place occurs on several levels. First, it is important to note that while Carver excludes the typical "landmarks and guides," associated with particular cities or regions, there is a continual and insistent hum regarding place in his stories. Within this conversation, the insufficient connection to place is found not in the absence of a specific environment; while the stories may take place in "almost any city in the United States," they are not without reference to location. Nearly every story occurs in a distinct site. Rather, we find that the scene is located so precisely that it precludes belonging to all but the most precarious delineation of tenancy. Among the characteristics that mark the narratives' are the various methods Carver utilizes in order to narrow the definition of place, leaving all but the actual dwellers in a given location locked out of the sense of place they wish to assume.

One of the most frequently applied restrictive techniques is Carver's practice of associating the location of the story directly with the individual who owns the residence. By limiting the definition of place so strictly,
Carver lays the foundation for locations that are, by the weight of their singular names, exclusive entities. In this manner, Carver effectively reduces the commons into a possession. Characters wishing to share in these settings are frequently barred from participation. This restrictive transformation limits participation in place to a legal, rather than spiritual, definition of propriety. As the characters struggle in vain to gain a foothold of belonging on the unfriendly territory, the ensuing isolation and disconnection that occurs is profound.

Indications of this contraction may be traced throughout Carver's career. In his first commercially published collection of short stories, Will You Please Be Quiet Please?, evidence of the dilemma facing Carver's "submerged population" is presented within the first line of the first story. The unnamed narrator of the story, "Fat," introduces the reader to the volume and in so doing, significantly truncates the location of the narrative, saying, "I am sitting over coffee and cigarets (sic) at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it. Here is what I tell her" (Will You 1). The abbreviated setting of "Rita's" immediately places the action in a distinct, if limited, environment. Much of Carver's fiction operates in this fashion, working to downplay the location's connection to a larger community by identifying it through the short-handed naming we find in "Fat." This method functions to classify
the locations as unincorporated entities, with little or no reference to their connection to the general population.

In "Fat" the narrator's tone of familiarity is offset at once by the lack of information provided to the reader. As the curtain rises on the first story of Carver's first collection, the reader is presented with a stage identified only as "Rita's." Thus, upon entering the world of the book, we find the characters and ourselves in unfamiliar and sharply segregated surroundings. The scenic proportions implied by the first line establish a setting that will come to reflect the feelings of dispossession and isolation within the narrator.

The dialogue in "Fat" is characteristically tentative. The action consists of the narrator, a coffee shop waitress, recounting for her friend Rita and the reader a puzzling encounter with an obese customer. The subtle pun on "Rita" and reader suggests yet another potential dimension within the narrative. We, like Rita, are the audience for the story about to be told. Carver's wordplay suggests that, like the exclusively named territory of her friend's residence, our act of reading creates an unique mental landscape that captures the narrator's story-telling and frames it according to our assumptions. In interviews and essays, Carver frequently rails against such self-conscious moments. However, the stories themselves contain sufficient evidence to suggest that this type of awareness is at least present, if not prominent, in his creative process.
In the course of her story-telling, the narrator reveals that the gentleman customer is, "the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough" (Will You 1). After serving the customer several helpings of bread, she asks where he is from: "Denver, he says. I don't say anything more on the subject, though I am curious" (Will You 3). This curiosity develops into an unexplained empathy between the waitress and the customer. Aside from the customer's size, his peculiar use of the royal "we," and his hometown, there is little to indicate why this feeling arises. Her interest in the customer, perhaps stimulated by his status as an alien to the unnamed town the restaurant is located in, comes to resemble a longing within the narrator herself. Having had her insularity punctured by the oddly provocative stranger, the waitress realizes something about her own situation.

If this diagnosis is valid, it is not immediately apparent to the story-teller. At times, the narrator seems to be working out the reason for her sympathetic response as she recounts their interaction to Rita. She seems unable to locate exactly what her emotional response and subsequent realization means. At various points in her storytelling, the narrator pauses to remark: "Now that's part of it. I think that is really part of it." "I know I was after something. But I don't know what." "Waiting for what? I'd like to know" (Will You 2, 4, 6). As the story-telling continues, the customer's feelings of isolation and unease
are revealed at the same time the waitress apprehensively recounts the conversation to Rita. It is as if only by explaining it to her friend in the foreign, unsympathetic environment does the customer's behavior and her response become clear to the narrator.

The narrator's empathetic response and feelings of isolation continue after she returns home from her shift with her boyfriend, also the chef, Rudy. She tells Rita, "I get into bed and move clear over to the edge...as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins" (*Will You* 6). During intercourse, her epiphany is made apparent as she explains, "I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will" and imagines herself to be so obese "that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all" (*Will You* 6).

Like the reader, Rita is left puzzled as to the meaning of this account. The waitress perceives her confusion and a failure of understanding when her friend responds, "That's a funny story, Rita says, but I can see she doesn't know what to make of it. I feel depressed. But I won't go into that with her. I've already told her too much" (*Will You* 6). In the final lines of the story, the narrator cryptically concludes, "It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it" (*Will You* 6).

Like the location of the story, this epiphany is elusively stated. There is a prediction of transformation, although the nature of this change is never fully revealed. The waitress seems to have reached a compassionate paradox,
but we are unable to divine its exact meaning. Earlier in the story, the customer explains his large appetite, and suggests even more, when he remarks to the narrator, "If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice" (Will You 5). The visitor's resignation reverberates in the waitress's response to Rudy's nonconsensual sex-act ("though it is against my will") and to Rita's lack of understanding ("I won't go into that with her"). Her fantasy of becoming massive indicates that she recognizes her empathy for the customer in relation to his obese singularity and his standing as an outsider. The waitress's hallucination points to a longing for significance. Her paradox seems to be enmeshed in the desire for recognition and the realization that true identification also requires her to become grotesquely isolated.

The encounter with the fat man represents only a segment of the realization expressed at the end of the story. The act of recounting the story at Rita's completes her understanding. The customer's use of the inclusive we, like the narrator's frustrated attempts to explain her feelings to Rita, finally is not enough to overcome the isolation both characters are made to endure. The waitress's encounter with the stranger, her towering fantasy and her attempt to explain its significance in a non-receptive environment all combine to create a conclusion that is as powerful as it is inexpressible.
The mysterious anticipation of transformation indicated but never fully clarified by the narrator is a feature many Carver stories share. There is an intentional refusal to provide tidy resolutions, often leaving the reader and the characters in a state of limbo. In "Fat," as we witnessed in "How About This?", there is a tentativeness at the very moment change appears inevitable. It is as if the reader, as well as the character have been locked out of the one room that would answer their dilemma. As Carver explains:

> It would be inappropriate, and to a degree impossible, to resolve things neatly for these people and situations I'm writing about.... The writer's job...is not to provide conclusions or answers. If the story answers itself, its problems and conflicts, and meets its own requirements, then that's enough. (Conversations 111)

The inability of the characters to enunciate their emotions makes neat "conclusions or answers" unlikely. In Carver's stories, inarticulation is not meant to deceive the reader into searching for more complex rationales. Instead, it serves to "represent" and even answer the extreme isolation endured by the characters. The desire to explain the significance of events, along with the impulse to understand the telling of the story, is met with the paradoxical realization that such sharing is impossible. Thus, attempts to express isolation work to increase feelings of separateness for both the narrator and the listener or reader. The dilemma found in Carver's stories, as illustrated by the compassionate paradox discovered by the
narrator of "Fat," and the isolated Harry in "How About This?," is that they can never fully share their dilemma with another individual. Often, as is the case with "Rita's" as well as the secluded farm house, the location of the stories accentuates the dislocation felt by the storyteller.

Within the individual stories, the personalized naming of the locations often appear as innocuous colloquialisms. However, when one begins to compile instances of these abridged names, a pattern forms that is difficult to dismiss. As is the case with "Rita's," the Balkanized sites of Carver's stories are often foreign to the primary characters, placing them in uncertain and detached terrain. In each case, the locations are narrowed to objective possessions of someone other than the main actors. Repeatedly, Carver's characters are depicted as sojourners trespassing on claustrophobic and unfamiliar turf. A sampling of central locations in several stories suggests that, in accordance with the iceberg metaphor, Carver knows precisely what he is leaving out.

House-sitting in "the Stone's apartment" serves as the principle setting for the Millers in "Neighbors," the second story in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (Will You 7). The Millers are caught in no-man's-land as they keep watch over their neighbors' vacant apartment while they are away on holiday. The reductive location and subsequent exposure found indirectly in the first story, "Fat," is made explicit
in the second, as the once "happy couple" tend to the duties of apartment sitting (Will You 7).

The dilemma of place and the related inability to make sense of their environment affects the Millers in various ways. Tellingly, Carver provides scant details concerning the Millers' residence, with the bulk of the descriptive elements focusing on their perception of the alluring world of the neighbor's apartment. Like the curious waitress in "Fat," the Millers seek identification vicariously, preferring a fantasy of "otherness" as a means of escaping the mundane pace of their own lives. Unlike the narrator in "Fat," the Millers initially view this transposition positively. As the story progresses, they are increasingly lured into this peculiar act of appropriation, believing, as many Carver characters do, that the grass must be greener on the other side. The Millers are depicted as being particularly vulnerable, suspecting that "they alone among their circle of friends had been passed by somehow" (Will You 7).

The Millers' parasitism begins innocently enough. As the Stones wave and drive away, Bill Miller comments to his wife, "Well, I wish it was us" (Will You 8). Upon entering the neighbors' apartment for the first time, Bill takes a deep breath, noting that the air is "vaguely sweet," and later "cooler than his apartment, and darker too" (Will You 8, 11). On this and subsequent visits, Bill becomes actively involved in his fantasy of switching places with his
neighbors. He steals a bottle of prescription medication and cigarettes. He fixes Chivas Regal cocktails while rummaging through their closets and drawers. Eventually, his desire for excitement and change leads him to try on Jim and Harriet's clothes, symbolically vacationing from his own identity:

He opened the closet and selected a Hawaiian shirt. He looked until he found Bermudas, neatly pressed....He shed his own clothes and slipped into the shorts and shirt....He put on a black and white checkered skirt and tried to zip it up. He put on a burgundy blouse that buttoned up the front. He considered her shoes, but understood they would not fit. (*Will You 12*)

Carver outfits so many of his characters in Bermuda shorts that it becomes a sort of internal, running joke. The apparel adds a hint of black humor to the character's presentation. Like couch bound TV viewers wearing expensive running shoes, they seem ready for any action, yet perform none. More seriously, they are shown to be literally ill-suited to deal with the reality of their daily lives.

Having "shed" his identity in the foreign environment, Bill returns home to Arlene with an unusually acute sexual appetite (*Will You 9*). During her visits across the hall, Arlene also becomes stimulated by the potential for freedom found in the neighbors' apartment. Transfixed by the possibility of substituting their place for the station they feel they have been denied, the couple finally share their mutual feelings. "It's funny," Arlene says, "You know- to go
in someone's place like that." Bill replies, "It is funny" (Will You 13).

As we have seen, the Millers attribute a certain magical quality to the neighbors' apartment. Unfortunately for the Millers, it is merely a mirage of possibilities, playacting and fantasies. The extent to which they are enamored by the image of the apartment, rather than the reality of their temporary duties, is highlighted by Arlene's excited confession and Bill's enthusiastic response to her discovery of some provocative photographs:

'I guess I should tell you. I found some pictures.' He stopped in the middle of the hall. 'What kind of pictures?' 'You can see for yourself,' she said, and she watched him. 'No kidding.' He grinned. 'Where?' 'In a drawer,' she said. 'No kidding,' he said. (Will You 13)

The degree to which their image of the apartment has ascended beyond any grounding in their own physical reality is expressed by both Bill and Arlene's speculation that the Stones will somehow not return from their vacation. In their increasingly active fantasy, Arlene contemplates that "'Maybe they won't come back,' and was at once astonished by her words. 'It could happen,' he said. 'Anything could happen.' 'Or maybe they'll come back and...' but she did not finish" (Will You 13-14). Arlene's aborted sentence betrays the true nature of her thoughts. She clearly hopes for a complete reversal of standing, vainly wishing that when the Stone's return, they will accept the peripeteia and occupy the position the Millers had previously held.
When they accidentally lock themselves out of the Stone's apartment, their fantasy and the story arrives at an abrupt end. Barred from the seductive distraction of forgetting themselves, avoidance of the true nature of their surrogate place becomes impossible. In the final lines of the story, the Millers stand in the hallway separating the two apartments, caught in a state of limbo between their actual lives and the lives they desired:

He opened his arms and she moved into them. "Don't worry," he said into her ear. "For God's sake, don't worry." They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves. (Will You 14)

Many of Carver's stories contain similar "threshold" scenes, with important interactions occurring on landings, balconies, front-doorsteps and particularly porches. Such settings add to the atmosphere of brinkmanship, of events on the edge of the narrative horizon. Like modern versions of Tantalus, whose torment was an eternal thirst with water just out reach of his lips, the characters come so close, many times up to the front door of their perceived salvation, only to have it slammed in their face. Such threshold scenes help to create a sense of verging domestic pressure both outward and, more often, threateningly inward.

The conclusion of "Neighbors," like the conclusion of "Fat," is uncertain. Change appears imminent, but the exact nature of the change remains murky. Bill and Arlene, like the narrator in "Fat," find themselves exiled from their
surroundings. Unlike the waitress of the first story who discovers a sense of resolution in her isolation, the Millers seek an imaginative rebirth in a new environment, only to find that they have surrendered any firm sense of place they might have previously obtained. The perils of vicarious experience, hinted at in the preceding story, are made clear in "Neighbors." The snakelike act of shedding identity and allegiance to place in favor of some perceived superiority of "otherness" implodes on the Millers, leaving them in a dislocated, homeless purgatory. Having peeled away their original, unsatisfactory identities, the Millers find themselves barred from the promise of the neighbors' apartment and now turn to discover the abandoned husk of their former life collapsing. The sanctuary of the Stones' apartment proves to be only temporary refuge for the couple. By locking themselves out of the neighbors' apartment, they have physically sealed off their imaginative appropriation of what had never been theirs from the beginning. They see clearly that it was, and is, the Stone's apartment.

The conclusion, although uncertain, may not be entirely without hope. With the seductive image of the neighbors' apartment disrupted, the couple cleave to the only thing that remains, each other. We have seen how the neighbors' apartment provokes a renewed sexual interest for the couple which in turn provided them with a secret to share, albeit a forbidden one. In sharp contrast to the distance between the couple at the conclusion of "How About This?," their final
embrace may signal a note of hope for the Millers. It may be an indication of change not unlike that found at the conclusion of "Fat." Just as the waitress discovers herself and is in some sense given new life, in their attempted escape, the couple may in fact have resuscitated their relationship.

In Carver's second collection of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the thread of personalized locations continues as he again makes use of this deceptively unceremonious naming. In "I Could See the Smallest Things" the anxious, insomniac narrator investigates "a noise at the fences that separated our place from Sam Lawton's place" (*What We* 32). In the same collection, the story "Tell the Women We're Going" occurs in large part at the seemingly ideal home of the narrator's friend, where:

If the weather was good they be over at Jerry's to barbeque....Jerry had a nice house. It was up on a hill overlooking the Naches. There were other houses around but not too close....Jerry was doing all right....It was Sunday at Jerry's place the time it happened. (*What We* 59)

Continuing the theme of image-driven scenes conflicting with their harsh reality, the story soon shifts from the cookout at "Jerry's" to nearby "Picture Rock." It is here that one of the most gruesome turns in all of Carver's fiction occurs. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the narrator's philandering friend, Jerry, picks up a stone and bludgeons to death two teenage girls he and the narrator have
met on the highway. Carver sets the scene for this bizarre and sudden turn of events by juxtaposing the ancient and the modern images inscribed on the hillside. "Picture Rock," the narrator informs us, is:

...a high sloping, black mound of rock, part of a low range of hills, honeycombed with footpaths and small caves, Indian sign-painting here and there on the cave walls. The cliff side of the rock faced the highway and all over it there were things like this: NACHES 67-GLEED WILDCATS-JESUS SAVES-BEAT YAKIMA-REPENT NOW. (What We 64)

The odd combination of sacred and profane writings, modern and ancient hieroglyphs, is not directly linked with the carnage Jerry perpetrates. The only connection that seems reasonable is that the wall mirrors the schizophrenic action it conceals from the view of the highway. The images of the place found here in the petroglyphs and the graffiti, like the action taken by Jerry, are at internal odds with the previous scenes and actions. Like the Millers' glowing description of the Stones' apartment and their discovery of "some pictures," the mysterious image of "Picture Rock" is disrupted and distorted by the actual events. For the readers and participants in the stories, the image must change dramatically in order to accomodate the new information. In Carver Country, failure of the perception to keep pace with the reality is a dangerous yet nearly unavoidable result of attempting to live in a place.

In Carver's third collection of stories, Cathedral, the pattern once again asserts itself on the first page of the
first story, "Feathers," with much of the action centering around the narrator's visit to "Bud's house" (Cathedral 3). As the narrator and his wife, Fran, drive the country roads to the home of his coworker, Bud and his wife Olla, he remarks, "We'd lived in that town for three years, but, damn it, Fran and I hadn't so much as taken a spin in the country" (Cathedral 6). Perhaps prompted by this feeling of ignorance to his surroundings and desiring to expand his understanding of place, he speculates aloud, "'I wish we had us a place out here.' It was just an idle thought, another wish that wouldn't amount to anything" (Cathedral 6). To the narrator and his wife who bicker throughout the first two pages of the story, Bud and Olla are the very image of folksy connection to the land. Between Bud's tomato patch and Olla's homemade bread, life in the country is portrayed by the narrator as a pastiche of wholesome delights. Although Bud cautions the guests that, "A place like this is not all it's cracked up to be," as seen through the eyes of the visitors, the home is one part farm house, one part Rockwellian fantasy.

The image is again complicated in "Feathers" by the odd and decidedly out of place appearance of "Joey," Olla's pet peacock. During the course of the dinner, Joey makes repeated and violent attempts to enter the house and force his way into the scene by pushing at the front door and climbing noisily on the roof. When Fran asks how they came to acquire the odd pet, Olla explains, "I always dreamed of having me a peacock. Since I was a little girl and found a
picture of one in a magazine. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I ever saw" (Cathedral 18). Eventually, Olla lets the ironically named "bird of paradise" into the home (Cathedral 19). Like Bud's admonition regarding country living, the bird is "not all its cracked up to be." At various times in the narrative Joey is described by both Bud and the narrator as, "a vulture," "mean-looking," "dirty," and "not even worth killing...not worth a nickel" (Cathedral 7, 9, 18). Finally, Bud complains, "That peacock is crazy, that's what...Damn bird doesn't know its a bird, that its major trouble" (Cathedral 24). Nothing in this story, it seems, knows its proper place.

The appearance of the bird is a puzzling moment in the story. It hovers awkwardly near Bud and Olla's homely infant son, Harold, creating an uneasy atmosphere that spins the reverie of the evening into a state of near hallucination. Once the peacock is allowed inside, the narrator watches it, "hanging back in the living room, turning its head this way and that, like you'd turn a hand mirror" (Cathedral 22). This odd simile is more accurate than it first appears. The bird, like the visitors, is obviously out of place. Mysteriously, its inappropriate presence, like the obese customer in "Fat," invokes a realization within the guests that they too are not at home. The head of the peacock becomes a synecdoche, functioning like "a hand mirror" reflecting the inept sense of place and the disquiet of the narrator and his wife.
The lure of appropriation, similar to the tension found in the story "Neighbors," proves too great and finally overcomes the visitors. After they return home that same night, Fran makes passionate, almost humorous, use of a metaphor more appropriate for either a biblical passage or a course on animal-husbandry. Even after the disruptive force of the bird has shattered their image of country living, the surreptitious desire apparently sweeps Fran up in the allure of Bud's place. She contradicts the narrator's earlier assertion that "one thing we didn't wish for was kids" and begs her husband to, "fill me up with your seed" (Cathedral 5, 25). This odd cliché, a misplaced and overblown image of conception, reveals how deeply the couple has been drawn into the false hope of appropriation.

At the conclusion of the story, the couple's pastoral longings, like the daydreams that ignite the Millers' appetite, deteriorates:

Later, after things had changed for us...Fran would look back on that evening at Bud's place as the beginning of the change. But she's wrong. The change came later....But I remember that night...my friend and his wife saying goodnight to us on the porch...In the car, Fran sat close to me as we drove away. She kept her hand on my leg. We drove home like that from my friend's house (Cathedral 25-26)

The cryptic change, once again involving the porch as threshold, is characteristically ill-defined. The cause of the change, like the evidence found in "Fat," is sketchy at best. We learn that the narrator and his wife perceive
themselves to be ignorant to their surroundings, but there is
division between the characters themselves as to the base of
their plight.

As we have seen, their unfamiliarity with the outlying
regions of their hometown at first troubles the narrator.
Once outside the city, the narrator ascribes an unrealistic
beauty to countryside. Both Fran and her husband seem
jealous of Bud and Olla's agrarian connection to the land.
Like the peacock, they covet incorporation into this idyllic
setting. However, just as Olla's treasured picture of the
"bird of paradise" proves untenable in light of the actual,
physical presence of the animal, the couple's vision of
rustic bliss is punctured by its threatening reality. The
house and the evening spent in it are truly not all they have
built them up to be. The narrator, we learn: hated the
dessert, rhubarb pie, "since I was thirteen years old and had
got sick on it;" their baby "was just ugly...even calling it
ugly does it credit;" and there is that "smelly bird"
(Cathedral 17, 20, 25). As many Carver characters are prey
to, their expectations color their perceptions so strongly
that they fail the not-so-simple task of seeing thing as they
are, rather than as they expect them to be, until much too
late.

Bud's crude diagnosis of the bird is appropriate for his
friends as well: like the peacock, they don't know where they
belong. They are divided between the symmetrical, mental
picture of a farm house, including its ideal inhabitants, and
the jagged experiences they have as guests at Bud's house. As a result, they are never able to fully fit themselves into the fallacious image they have of life in the country. Perhaps disturbed by the failure of Bud's house to conform to their expectations, they drive home to an existence that becomes, like the unsuitably named bird, much dirtier than they imagined.

For Fran, the cause of the collapse of their dreams is clear: "'Goddamn those people and their ugly baby,' Fran will say, for no apparent reason while we're watching TV late at night. 'And that smelly bird,' she'll say. 'Christ, who needs it!'" (Cathedral 25-26). The mirror of place that Snyder speaks of has been held before the couple. As it turns to meet their gaze, it informs them that their preconceptions are dangerously limited. Their mirror of place is shown to be warped by their expectations of and ignorance to life in the country. Although at first they see dimly in their poor glass, the constriction of place eventually educates the couple of its power while informing them of its continual presence.

The title of the second story in Cathedral, "Chef's House," invokes a sense of precarious tenancy similar to that found in the title of "Neighbors." The story further illustrates the stark conditions that arise when the identification of place is restricted to the individual owner of the residence. The story is narrated by the unnamed wife of Wes, a recovering alcoholic, as they spend a summer
attempting a reconciliation in a friend's beach house. When their benefactor, Chef, suddenly appears to reclaim his house near the end of the story, the dangers the couple hazard by associating with their surrogate surroundings are painfully rendered.

As the summer progresses, the narrator's trust in her environment and in her husband's sobriety increases. Like the Millers' fantasy of permanence, the narrator slowly lets her guard down and begins to express unrealistic hopes. "I found myself wishing the summer wouldn't end" she states, "I knew better, but after a month of being with Wes in Chef's house, I put my wedding ring back on" (Cathedral 28). Her security disintegrates suddenly when, later in the summer, she, "looked and saw Chef's big car pull in. I could see his car, the access road and the freeway, and, behind the freeway, the dunes and the ocean. Clouds hung over the water" (Cathedral 29). As we will see later in "Sixty Acres," Carver makes repeated use of a ceiling of clouds that lowers on the characters, both mentally and meteorologically, to symbolize the closing in of place. The characters' attitudes shift with the weather, foreshadowing the revelation of the narrow definition of place found so often in his stories.

Chef, we discover, has come to tell his friend, "I'm sorry, Wes, but you'll have to look for another house" (Cathedral 30). By isolating the visitor's name between commas, Carver highlights the characters' vulnerable position
as guests in Chef's house, setting up the painful realizations that follow. The previously harmonious accord found by the couple in "Chef's House" takes on ominous undercurrents. The narrator explains:

Wes came inside the house. He dropped his hat and gloves on the carpet and sat down in the big chair. Chef's chair, it occurred to me. Chef's carpet even...I sat down on Chef's sofa....We'll get another house, I said. Not like this one, Wes said. It wouldn't be the same anyway...It's Chef's house, I said. He has to do what he has to do. I know that, Wes said. But I don't have to like it....I looked at Wes and then I looked around Chef's living room at Chef's things, and I thought, We have to do something now and do it quick. (Cathedral 31)

The happiness enjoyed by the couple vanishes at the prospect of being uprooted. Their comfort is supplanted by a new understanding of place. The condensation of the home into a condition of material ownership prohibits the incorporation the couple had sought. Desperate to reverse their fate, the narrator appeals to Wes, saying, "We'll get another house, I said. Not like this one, Wes said. It wouldn't be the same, anyway. This house has been a good house for us. This house has good memories to it" (Cathedral 30). As is the case in the stories mentioned above, the loss of the appropriated sense of place relished by the visitors ignites an epiphany.

Apparently losing faith in their reunion, the home itself becomes a symbol of luck gone bad yet again. Having been barred from their connection to the home, their
attempted reconciliation collapses. After briefly discussing their alternatives, the reunion and the story abruptly conclude: "Wes got up and pulled the drapes and the ocean was gone just like that....There wasn't much else. We'll clean up tonight, I thought, and that will be the end of it" (Cathedral 33). Wes operates the drapes much like he is turning off a television. The image disappears immediately and, unlike a TV, irrevocably.

The couple is doomed in part by Wes's inability to properly understand place. He fails to recognize that the shape or configuration of place is relative, that it is in fact a mirror. Like the Miller in "Neighbors," and the visitors to Bud's house in "Feathers," the couple focus their desire so directly outside themselves that they are unable to see that the true path to connection is personal. There are no shortcuts, Carver seems to be saying, for achieving connection to a place. In attempting to appropriate Chef's place, they lock themselves out of their individual definitions of place. Unlike his wife, Wes is unable to see how another house might still be a proper place for their marriage to continue. They have knotted their sense of place to a location identified by name as belonging to someone else. Like the occurrence of the obese customer in "Fat," the locked apartment in "Neighbors," and the obtrusive bird in "Feathers," the appearance of Chef severs the erroneous, sylvan connection to place the protagonists had surreptitiously appropriated. However, unlike the
protagonists in "Neighbors" and "Fat," the couple shares the exclusive understanding of place found in "Feathers," and in Harry's resignation at the conclusion of "How About This?". They cannot see beyond the restrictive definition of place that has been set before them. Once lacerated, the characters' perceptions of place are beyond repair. By failing to "compromise," or assimilate their image of place to meet the new information, they cut themselves off not only from connection to place, but also from the people closest to them.
Chapter 2

Locked in Place

If dreams were lightning and thunder was desire, this old house would have burned down a long time ago. Make me an angel that flies from Montgomery. Make me a poster of an old rodeo. Just give me one thing that I can hold on to, to believe in this living is just a hard way to go.

-Angel From Montgomery
John Prine
I

Houses of Detention

The walls of ownership that exclude certain characters from participation in place are often so impregnable that they seal off the inhabitants who reside within their "protective" confines from the rest of society. As Bud prophetically cautions in "Feathers," the very places that the excluded characters covet are often "not all (they're) cracked up to be."

Bud's provocatively incomplete statement constitutes a second, parallel movement in Carver's sense of place. The boundaries of ownership that the curious may not cross also imprison the characters that live within these walls. The citizens of Carver Country that manage to hold onto a fixed residence often find themselves trapped within laagers of aluminum siding. Like their voyeuristic counterparts, the residents of these compressed places react against the claustrophobic isolation at the heart of "modern" homes. In many stories, the distinction between those who take to the highway and those who remain in a cloistered residential holding pattern is only a matter of timing. As we will see, the characters are best understood as two sides of the same fraying fabric.

Whether they are locked out or locked in, the classification is based on where we meet the characters in the spectrum of dissatisfaction. Just as the characters who
bounce unhappily from apartment to trailer to rental unit
envy those living in a stable home, the characters who remain
in one place idealize life outside the walls as sweet release
from their shackled existence. In both instances, the
strictly localized environments testify to an inability on
the part of the characters to participate in the greater
community or to imagine an expanded sense of place. Their
limited perspective consequentially assures a tragic, cycle;
neither the nomad nor the interned see the picture completely
and consequently are doomed to restless disaffection from the
larger society. Although the point of view has shifted for
those characters who are locked in from the exterior to the
interior, their responses are comparably close to fatalistic.

Several blocks away from 1515 South 15th Street, the
site of Carver's former residence, a new Wal-Mart is rapidly
being erected. As is the case with many Wal-Mart projects,
there is controversy over the impact the "superstore" will
have on the community. Coincidentally, one of the
altercations highlights the feeling of isolation endured by
many of Carver's characters. The headline of a recent front
page story in the *Yakima Herald Republic* reads, "A southeast
Yakima family awakes one day to suddenly find they can't get
out of their house because Wal-Mart construction leads to
a...ROADBLOCK". According to the article:

Progress long ago left Mitzi and James Lee of
Yakima the only family living on South 15th Street
in the shadow of Interstate 82. Abandoned cars
rusting on their property contrast with rows of new
cars and trucks parked at Bob Hall's Sunfair
Chevrolet across the street. Heavy trucks rumble by on...and traffic zooms down the interstate.... But none of these signs of progress prepared the Lees for what happened last month when the Wal-Mart general contractor...closed the only city street providing access to their home....Mitzi Lee was born in the modest house there on South 15th Street 66 years ago. Grew up there. Raised her 13 children there. "This is a landmark for me," she said....The Lees know with the advent of Wal-Mart, their lives will change. Their main access on East Chestnut also will be a main thoroughfare for the discount giant. "It's going to be bad," Mitzi Lee said. "We'll hardly be able to get out of here"...."No one takes into consideration that we're living in here," (James) said. "We're not in here to fight anybody. We just want to live out our last days." 10(italics mine)

While it is probably true that no one on the city planning commission has taken into consideration Mitzi and James' emotional attachment to their home, Carver has.

Like the Lees, many of Carver's characters awake to similarly confining dilemmas. Unwittingly, both the Lees and certain members of Carver's "submerged population" find themselves locked in. When they confront the outside world, Carver's characters face a comparable sea of indifference and misunderstanding. Both the Lees and their fictional counterparts come to the conclusion that "No one takes into consideration that (they're) living in here". It is at this juncture that certain characters reach a pivotal moment in which they are forced to confront the fact that they are incarcerated. They find that their stability has stagnated and they are now in a rut so profound that their "landmarks"

have become prisons. Mitzi's protestation that "We'll hardly be able to get out of here" could be spoken with similar profundity by almost any member of Carver's population. Like the Lees, these characters live in the "shadow" of modern society. Somehow passed over and isolated from connection to the larger community, they struggle to find a passage out, a route through which they may escape their domestic imprisonment and participate in the greater society.

Unlike the Lees, Carver's characters lack a clear opponent. Rather than the melodramatic struggle against an intrusive corporate Goliath, Carver's population wages a more complex battle. Unintentionally, the citizens of Carver Country that land in a fixed place commit themselves to a life of self-imposed exile. Without an obvious antagonist, the characters look inward for a target, clashing with their families, neighbors and finally themselves. The indignation that the Lee's justly express has nowhere to focus in Carver's stories. As a result, the clamor for liberation is reduced to a muffled, misdirected lament. In a turn that owes more to Kafka than Hemingway, the characters discover that they have locked themselves in a prison without discernible dimensions. By defensively shielding themselves from a multitude of external threats, they have become architects of their own detention. Longing for protection from the intimidating "outside" world, the characters are essentially expatriated without leaving their hometowns.
The glaring and painful subtraction, the part of the Hemingwayesque iceberg that rests beneath the surface of the stories, are the incomplete connections between the characters and their surroundings. Whether the characters are hemmed-in or locked out, there is little evidence of vicinity in Carver's stories. The cover sought by the envious characters previously discussed turns on the owners of place, obscuring the outside world from their view. When they do see the outside world, it is as if they are looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. Despite repeated attempts to take part in an extended community, to reach beyond the walls of the homes, they are often met with so little success that they are driven inward.

In screening themselves from the outside world, the characters are caught in a tragic double-bind. By drawing the walls of their homes are so tightly around themselves for the sake of protection, the characters exclude the possibility of integration. Their efforts to retreat to safety also precipitates an unexpected consequence: an implosion of place mirroring the mysterious, indescribable epiphanies that visit the itinerant. The knowledge and comfort provided by an expanded perspective are exchanged for a strange cage and an awareness they cannot enunciate. The enlightenment of place forces the hemmed in characters to either accept a resignation to their fate and build from there or follow the lead of their wandering counterparts and head for the hills.
II

The Tyranny of the Family

What causes the characters to feel locked in? First among several factors is a disproportionate obligation to family. As Gallagher states, "What one might call the tyranny of family would have to be a main element in any characterization of Carver Country. It figured prominently in Ray's fiction" (Carver Country 13). In the story, "Elephant," from his last collection of stories, Where I'm Calling From, we meet a narrator who is pressed to the point of bankruptcy by his destitute relatives' demands for aid and is seemingly at the mercy of the tyranny of the family.

After granting his brother's request for a loan that is never returned, the narrator tells us that he is beginning to feel the pressure closing in on him, "I was sore, yes. Who wouldn't be?...My own back was to the wall now....I kept my nose to the grindstone....When I came home I plopped into the big chair and just sat there...Then I just went on sitting there. I was too tired to even get up and turn on the TV" (Where I'm 476). Eventually, his list of borrowers grows to include, "My mother and my daughter and my former wife. That's three people on the payroll right there, not counting my brother. But my son needed money, too" (Where I'm 478). In order to pay for this assistance, the narrator, "started cutting back. I had to quit eating out, for instance....The car was falling apart. I needed new shoes, but forget it"
With each new person on the dole, the narrator forfeits a piece of his freedom, of his ability to get out of the house. Finally, he becomes so frustrated that he writes to his relatives, threatening:

to change my name and telling them I was going to quit my job. I'd tell them I was planning a move to Australia. And the thing was, I was serious when I'd say that about Australia, even though I didn't know first thing about Australia. I just knew it was on the other side of the world, and that's where I wanted to be. (Where I'm 480)

The narrator's warning illustrates how little separates the locked in from the locked out. Although he intimates that his statement are made in earnest, as it turns out, his threat is idle. After awaking from a dream where he recalls sitting on his father's shoulders, and becoming "aware of the strong grip of his hands around my ankles...I turned loose and held my arms out on either side of me" he sits in his kitchen drinking coffee (Where I'm 486). This time, when thoughts of escape come to him yet again, his fantasies seem to undergo one of Carver's cryptic transformations. He asks:

What was it I planned to do in Australia, anyway? The truth was, I wouldn't be going there any more than I'd be going to Timbuktu, the moon, or the North Pole. Hell, I didn't want to go to Australia. But once I understood this, once I understood I wouldn't be going there— or anywhere else, for that matter— I began to feel better. (Where I'm 487)

The narrator's acceptance of his condition gives him the peace he had been seeking in his daydreams of "down under."
His outlook continues to improve as he walks to work. He seems to be enjoying a freedom from his worries, and an awakening to the world around his home where "Birds were calling and some cars passed me on the highway" (Where I'm 488). He stops walking and "raised my arms- raised them up to the level of my shoulders" (Where I'm 489). Like the dream of the previous night, the narrator finds security in this act of trusting abandonment. His resignation provokes a rebirth and a child-like ability to revel in the moment. His euphoria is prolonged when he is picked up by a coworker on his way to the job. As the car gains speed, the narrator's friend, George, tells him, "he wanted me to see something.... I fastened my seatbelt and held on. 'Go,' I said. 'What are you waiting for, George?' And that's when we really flew.... We streaked down that road in his big unpaid-for car" (Where I'm 490). No longer plotting his escape to the other side of the world, the narrator embraces his situation. Like Harry in "How About This?," his admission that he "wasn't going anywhere" allows him to attend to the enjoyment of his life. Unlike Harry, the narrator does not indicate a complete abandonment of his responsibility to family. Instead, he has resigned himself to his duty, as perhaps his father's strong hands had before him.

The obligation to family is a theme that stretches back to Carver's earliest stories. Significantly, the hopeful resolution found in "Elephant," is not present in these initial works. In Carver's first volume, Will You Please Be
Quiet, Please?, Lee Waite, the Native American protagonist of the story "Sixty Acres," expresses the dilemma of constriction as he contemplates his fate as the head of a crowded household and sole inheritor of the family allotment on the Yakama Reservation.

The title of the story, "Sixty Acres," solidifies the boundaries of the narrative immediately, a practice Carver would return to in "Chef's House." Carver opens the narrative one hour after Waite receives a call informing him that, "Two men were shooting on Lee Waite's part of Toppenish Creek, down below the bridge on Cowiche Road" (Will You 60). The unusually generous domain and details granted in the story are deceptive. Despite the title, the tone of the story is that of progressive enclosure. By providing an unusual amount of what could be called scenic information ("down below the bridge on Cowiche Road") Carver narrows the already specific "Sixty Acres" to a more precise location. As if to reinforce the sense of constriction, Carver limits the natural setting by providing a ceiling: the underside of the bridge. As the story shifts locations, we see this confined scene repeated indoors as the narrator contemplates the limiting of the outdoors.

The story "Sixty Acres" contains unusual elements for a Carver narrative: detailed natural settings, open spaces, family history on the land. Of all of Carver's characters, Lee Waite seems the most likely candidate to maintain a connection to place. His property is larger than any other
mentioned in Carver's works. He has lived on the land his entire life. As the only Native American protagonist in Carver's writing, we might stereotypically expect Waite to have a reverence and connection to the land inhabited by his ancestors.

Carver skillfully anticipates these expectations and in the course of the story, carefully unworks each one. We have been set up for this reversal. Through the title and the location on the reservation, Carver at once suggests and then confuses the stereotypical representation of Native American reverence for the land. Uncharacteristically, Carver utilizes our readerly prejudices against us, playing off them in order to increase the tension between the protagonist and his responsibility to the land. This surprising hint of irony may have led Carver to exclude it from his selected stories, Where I'm Calling From. A firm opponent of writerly coyness, Carver briefly veers from his famous "No cheap tricks" axiom in order to create a heightened sense of pressure. By playing so directly against the Native American maxim that "The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth," the narrative seems forced in places. However, precisely because of this weakness, Carver exposes his own disposition regarding place in an unusually direct manner.

Throughout the story, Waite is haunted by his senses. He seems alert to the most minute details concerning his surroundings, particularly the sounds that emanate from his "Sixty Acres." At times he seems confused, even plagued by
his acute awareness. As he leaves to investigate the report of hunters on his land, Waite pauses to notice that there is "Not a sound anywhere, just the low ceiling of heavy clouds pressing down on everything. He'd thought there was a wind, but it was still" (Will You 63). As is the case in "Chef's House," the threatening clouds (here coupled with the introductory implication of the bridge as ceiling) foreshadow the feelings of burdensome obligation and duty.

Waite's hearing seems to represent a vestigial connection to the land. Through his recognition of various sounds, the land is given a voice in the story. This animation of place further amplifies Waite's dilemma. Throughout the story, it signals a telltale connection he is attempting to deny. As he nears the site of the trespass Waite hears, "Down the road, the grader scraping toward him, the blade shrieking fiercely every time the metal his the frozen gravel" (Will You 63). Later, as the two hunters approach Waite, he hears them "thrashing through the brush, two of them. Then, jiggling and squeaking the fence, they climbed over into the field and crunched their way through the snow" (Will You 65). When Waite confronts the hunters he notices that "His voice sounded strange to him, light and insubstantial. He could hear the ducks settling on the creek, chattering to other ducks in the air" (Will You 67). As he decides what action to take in order to force the trespassers off his property, Waite hears "From down on the creek the strident quacking of a drake carried up to him"
In each instance, there is a sense that some fading segment of his psyche remains in touch with the land he has inherited from his father. As Waite approaches the hunters, he recollects how as boy he felt connected to the property. After arriving at the site of the trespass, Waite recalls that:

He had not been down there to do anything in four or five years....He could not understand where all the time had gone. He remembered when he was little, wanting to grow up. He used to come down here often then and trap this part of the creek for muskrat and set night-lines for German brown. Waite looked around, moved his feet inside his shoes. All that was a long time ago. Growing up, he had heard his father say he intended this land for all three boys. But both brothers had been killed. Lee Waite was the one it came down to, all of it. (Will You 65)

The accentuation of responsibility felt by Waite ("all of it") portends a struggle within the protagonist that drives the narrative. Waite is caught between his waning allegiance to the land and ancestry and his desire to escape "the tyranny of family" that functions as the living embodiment and continuation of his heritage.

Waite attempts to shrug off his fond childhood memories by declaring that, "All that was a long time ago." However, the pull of the land is not so easily evaded. It is apparent that the meaning of the land is changing for Waite. He seems to desire escape from the pain of his memories by loosening his connection to the land. His unwanted inheritance, we learn, is a haunting reminder of his lost siblings. In addition to the early memories of trapping and fishing,
Waite's land and home are haunted by his brothers' absence. Waite's recollection of his brothers, like his connection to the sixty acres, is evaporating:

He remembers: deaths. Jimmy first. He remembered waking to the tremendous pounding on the door....His father throws open the door, and...the deputy sheriff- fills the doorway....Later, when he was twelve, another one came...and only said they'd better come along. (Will You 66)

The tragic manner in which the land is passed to Waite helps explain his reluctance to assume the responsibilities of stewardship both of the land and his small house. For Waite, the land contains the dual burden of being the repository of painful memories and present responsibility.

After he chases the hunters off his land with a warning, Waite watches "their taillights disappear toward Toppenish. He had put them off the land. That was all that mattered. Yet he could not understand why he felt something crucial had happened, a failure. But nothing had happened" (Will You 69-70). Again, we see another instance of the truncated epiphany at the center of Carver's narratives.

Waite seems to have reached Carver's critical junctures where, "one single moment of revelation disrupts the pattern of their daily lives. It's a fleeting moment during which they don't want to compromise anymore. And afterwards they realize that nothing ever really changes (Conversations 80). Waite senses "something crucial had happened, a failure. But nothing had happened" (Will You 70). Furthermore, his realization seems to be tied to the land and his
responsibility to defend it against encroachment. His moment of clarity, following closely the exclusive definition of place, resembles the epiphanies found in the stories discussed earlier in this essay. In defending the sovereignty of his acreage, Waite unknowingly seals off the outside world.

When he returns to his house he sees "only a faint light burning out on the porch that Waite did not remember seeing that afternoon" (Will You 70). Again, the scene of the porch plays an important role in the narrative. The enlightenment Waite gained in the defense of his land changes his perception of the entry to his home. By noticing the light on the porch, Waite signals an increased awareness of the details of his house that will prove bothersome as he strains against his conflicting responsibilities.

Awaiting his return are his wife, Nina, his mother, his children, Benny, Jack, and an unnamed infant. The atmosphere inside the house is intensely pressurized. It is as if it is sixty fathoms, not acres, pressing in on the walls of the living room. After adjusting to the light inside his home, Waite "walked over to the doorway and leaned against the jamb" (Will You 70). Carver's subtle play on the double meaning of jamb is made clear as Waite explains, "It was a small house. There was no place to go. In the back, in one room, all of the children slept, and in the room off this, Waite and Nina and his mother slept, though sometimes, in the summer, Waite and Nina slept outside. There was never a
place to go" (Will You 70-71). Literally and figuratively, Waite is framed by the door leading to his living room, much like a subject is trapped within the boundaries of a canvas.

Everywhere Waite turns, he is reminded of his obligations to his family's traditions. In addition to the physical constraint imposed by his small house, he feels his mother's "tiny eyes wide open, watching him" as an ever present, silent castigation (Will You 71). As he looks around the front room he encounters another icon of his fading connection to the tribal land "sticking out from a self, the brown mesh of a gill net wrapped around the prongs of a salmon spear. But what was it? He squinted at it" (Will You 71). His inability to fully comprehend the fishing tools used by his ancestors adds to the portrait of disconnection from the past as well as place. It is clear from his confusion that Waite no longer depends on the spear and the net for sustenance. The great runs of Columbia River salmon, once an integral part of the Yakama tribe's diet and religion are now reduced to a trickling of fish by hydroelectric dams. They have become a memory too faint for Waite to recall. His connection to his ancestors, like Celilo Falls buried under a hundred feet of water, is lost beneath the deceptively smooth surface of modern life on the reservation.

Denied connection to the sixty acres by the dark mysteries swirling about his brothers' early deaths, Waite's sense of place is reduced to the ramshackle space surrounding
his small home. Cramped by the living occupants and haunted by the memories of the departed, the house offers Waite little breathing room.

Nearly suffocating within the close quarters, Waite begins to search for a way to escape his responsibilities. The obligations that the land entails, now more mental than physical, have become so difficult to bear that he confides to Nina, "'I was thinking maybe I'll lease out that land down there to the hunting clubs. No good to us down there like that. Is it? Our house was down there or it was our land right out here in front would be something different, right?' In the silence he could hear only the wood snapping in the stove" (Will You 72). Perhaps foolishly, Waite is attempting to simplify his sense of place by limiting his responsibility to the property immediately surrounding his house. Once again, Waite's sense of hearing acts as a telltale, indicating the land's complex hold on his conscience. In this case, Waite notices the smoldering wood, ominously suggesting the destruction of resources.

As he details his plan to lease the land, Waite is plagued by guilt and doubt. His attempt to escape his responsibility to the land and the memories connected to it is complicated by the ever present reminders of his obligations, most notably his mother and the fishing equipment, that fill the home. Because of his obvious guilt, his attempts to rationalize the lease seem less like a compromise and more like a betrayal.
His mother continues to watch him as he moves across the room. Perhaps contemplating the unthinkable, Waite, "reached up, worked the spear and the mass of netting off the splintery shelf, and turned around behind her chair. He looked at the tiny dark head....He turned the spear in his hands and began to unwrap the netting" (Will You 73). Whatever deed he had been considering, Waite's thoughts are interrupted and become uncertain when Nina asks him how much money the lease might be worth: "He knew he didn't know. It even confused him a little. He plucked at the netting, then placed the spear back on the shelf. Outside, a branch scraped roughly against the house" (Will You 73). The nettling branch, like the multitude of sounds described earlier, enters the scene and pesters Waite's conscience. Nina persists in her questioning as well: "If you lease it to them, that means it's still your land? (Will You 73). Vexed by his senses, Waite becomes irritated by Nina's questioning and replies defensively, "Don't you know the difference, Nina? They can't buy land on the reservation" (Will You 73). Waite's overwrought explosion indicates an escalation of an exasperation that leads finally to his contorted surrender.

Like the waitress in "Fat," Waite seems to be explaining it as much to himself as he is to his wife. When Nina asks, "What will Mama say? Will it be all right?" she calls into question Waite's ownership of the land. As they turn to confront his mother with this question, they see that "her eyes were closed and she seemed to be sleeping" (Will You
With the judgment of his mother's stare, and the implied conscience of the tribe, absent for the time being, Waite's senses become unmoored.

Trembling at the possibility of his plan, Waite replies, this time half to himself, "It's just a lease" (Will You 74). Finally, Waite is backed into a corner of the living room by his doubts. Seeking relief from his predicament:

He stared at the floor. It seemed to slant in his direction; it seemed to move. He shut his eyes and brought his hands against his ears to steady himself. And then he thought to cup his palms, so that there would come that roaring, like the wind howling up from a seashell. (Will You 74).

Waite seeks solace in the echoes of the sea. He attempts to sever his connection to the sixty acres in the final obliteration of his senses. In the pressurized environment of the reservation, a limiting word in itself, a word of fences where there had been open land, a word of dams where there had been falls, a word that came to Native Americans shortly after the concept of "acres," Waite moves in the only direction available, inward. With his surroundings filled by the pain of his family's past and its bleak present, he finds himself unable to either live in it or part with it.

Retreating not only from his five physical senses but also his sense of place, the obligation of sensory reality is seemingly removed: the floor becomes the listing deck of a ship and the still air becomes a "howling" sea breeze. The stupification that occurs when his bearings are blotted out supplants Waite's connection to place. As is the case with
the centrifugal effect of personalized naming of places described in the previous section, the inward turn experienced by Waite is fraught with snares.

In shutting his eyes and ears to his surroundings, Waite also disconnects himself not only from the land but also from his wife, children and mother. Waite's denial of his senses causes his stability to implode into a whorl of white noise. He is isolated by the intensification of place in much the same manner the characters discuss previously are isolated by their inability to participate in place.

The overbearing confinement of Carver's spaces stimulates within the characters a variety of impulses. Rather than resolve their predicaments, these impulses often compound the "jamb" they endeavor to escape. In the case of "Sixty Acres," the drawing inward of Waite's physical senses, barring for a moment the possibility of permanent insanity, is a temporary solution at best. He cannot so easily escape his predicament. Eventually, he will have to respond in some way. While both Waite and the unnamed narrator of "Elephant" find solace in surrender, this resignation can take on a variety of forms: from the uplifting acceptance at the conclusion of "Elephants," to Waite's fetal recoil in "Sixty Acres".

We encounter another attempted solution to entrapment later in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? in the story "Jerry and Molly and Sam." As was the case with those characters who have been locked out of place, instances of
scheming lock-ins abound. The two groups are so frequently represented in his stories that they form the core residents of Carver Country. In some ways, "Jerry and Molly and Sam" is a continuation of the questioning of place Lee Waite struggles with in "Sixty Acres." Trapped by the "tyranny of family," Waite is left in a queerly disjointed house with his perspective in tumultuous disarray. In "Jerry and Molly and Sam," we witness a similarly constrained protagonist attempt to right the listing vessel of place.

We enter the story as Al, an aerospace worker on the verge of being laid off, takes "the first step toward setting his house in order" (Will You 154). Al is obsessed with the desire to put "order" back into his uncertain world. With his employer "cutting back...a little more every day" and an expensive lease on a house made smaller by the addition of a new pet, life has begun to close in on the protagonist (Will You 151). On top of his tenuous employment and expensive home, he has begun to have an affair with a coworker named Jill.

Al's attempts to restore order amount to projecting his financial and moral complications in the tradition of the scape-goat. He symbolically lumps all of his frustration onto two related icons: the "two-hundred-a-month place. Lease, with an option to buy. Shit!" and "the goddamn dog" Al's sister in law gave to his children without his consent (Will You 152, 153). He is impotent against the true causes of his predicament: pending unemployment and an infidelity he
cannot retract. We learn that his employer fires workers indiscriminately. Although "He got along with the right people, all right,...seniority or friendship didn't mean a damn these days. If your number was up, that was that- and there was nothing anybody could do" (Will You 151). Unable to fight the faceless corporate climate of "downsizing" in the aerospace industry, Al finds himself equally ineffective at managing the household. He finds himself locked in a lease on his house and locked in an extramarital liaison he does not want to end.

Searching for an escape from his responsibilities and deceptions, Al directs all of his frustration toward the house and the innocent dog. Trapped by the "tyranny of family," Al begins to set his "house in order" by moving against the symbol of his unwanted obligations. Like the Lees' who at sixty-six "just want to live out (their) last years" Al, at thirty-one, seems to be aging more rapidly than normal, experiencing a premature mid-life crisis. His symptoms are classic to the point of cliche:

Recently, too, he had caught himself thinking about old age after he'd been constipated a few days- an affliction he had always associated with the elderly. Then there was the matter of the tiny bald spot and of his having begun to wonder how he would comb his hair a different way. What was he going to do with his life? he wanted to know. (Will You 152)

Al's sense of enclosure is so complete that even his intestinal problems seem a sign. He is bound both externally and internally.
Picking up on the conclusion of "Sixty Acres," Carver again calls on images of the sea to explain Al's dilemma. Emotionally torn by his affair, Al feels that:

He did not want it to go on, and he did not want to break it off: you did not throw everything overboard in a storm. Al was drifting, and he knew he was drifting, and where it was all going to end he could not guess at. But he was beginning to feel he was losing control over everything. Everything. (Will You 152)

Whatever compass Al had been guided by in the past is now helplessly broken. As we will see in the course of his "drifting," Al gravitates towards the only stable sense of place he has ever had: his boyhood home.

The financial needs of his wife, his children, his sister in law and the dog overwhelm Al in much the same manner they overwhelm the protagonist of "Elephant". We learn that, "three months ago, just before the layoffs began, he'd let Betty talk him into moving into" his "cushy" new home (Will You 151-2). In the odd confusion his anger provokes, Al loses his control.

Displaying his scape-goating tactics, Al significantly crosses names and pronouns in an outburst of emotion. He states that "He wished he'd never seen that dog. Or Sandy, either, for that matter. That bitch! She was always turning up with some shit or other that wound up costing him money" (Will You 153). At this point, it is unclear who Al is deriding: the dog or Sandy. Their identities seem to cross in Al's mind, blurring the focus of his scorn. Continuing
his tirade, Al complains about having to pay eighty-five dollars for "her car payment, for God's sake, when he didn't even know if he was going to have a roof over his head- made him want to kill the goddamn dog" (Will You 153). In the quagmire that is Al's mind, the anger over Sandy's financial demands is transferred to a symbol of his unwanted responsibility, the dog.

So that he might regain some control, Al begins to plot against the dog. In his uncertain world, Al feels he must "start someplace- setting things in order, sorting all this out. It was time to do something, time for some straight thinking for a change" (Will You 153). He attempts to escape his predicament in much the same manner employed by Lee Waite in "Sixty Acres." Waite, we remember, linked his financial problems of providing a place to live for his family with the guilt and obligation he felt toward the land he had been given by default. In order to evade his guilt over his brothers' deaths and his family's meager existence, Waite transfers all of his frustration onto the land before finally tucking himself into an isolated, disoriented fetal knot.

Like Waite, Al's ship is listing. His home, made unstable by his precarious employment, his infidelity and his premature entry into mid-life, has become a virtual prison. Everything reminds him of his failed attempts to provide for his family. Life has become dizzyingly complex while Al watches helplessly. The web of lies he has told his wife causes Al to feel that "His life had become a maze, one lie
overlaid upon another until he was not sure he could untangle them if he had to. 'That goddamn dog,' he said out loud. 'She doesn't have good sense!' was how Al put it" (Will You 154).

Like Waite's solution to lease the land for a thousand dollars, Al's anger toward the dog is in fact an attempt to simplify the maze-like situation by heaping the blame for his dilemma on the most innocent and least argumentative object: the pet. Following in the tradition of the scapegoat, once the blame and sin Al is responsible for has been assigned to the sacrificial animal, it must be driven into the wilderness, taking with it the shame and leaving in its place, or so Al hopes, a clear conscience and a clean slate. However, as we learned in "Collectors," fresh starts often have hidden costs.

While waiting for the proper moment to act, Al begins "muttering to himself, saying, 'Order, order,' when the dog came up to the garage" (Will You 156). Al seizes the opportunity by coaxing the dog into his car in order to drive her to a remote location and abandon her. After searching "nearly an hour" for an appropriate place to leave the dog, "he thought of the place. The neighborhood where they used to live... that would be the right place" (Will You 156, 157). When he arrives at his former neighborhood, Al see "porch lights on and at three or four houses he saw men and women sitting on the front porch steps as he drove by" (Will You 157). In his description of the neighborhood Carver
again focuses on the porch as a symbol of domesticity. Such scenes suggest that both Al and the reader are only seeing the exterior of the home, the surface of the place. Carver's front porches are friendly images at first. Upon closer inspection, they seem to gently mock the characters with their deceptively warm invitations.

Arriving at his former home, Al "stared at the front door, the porch, the lighted windows" (Will You 158). Confounded by this familiar image, Al "felt even more insubstantial, looking at the house. He had lived there- how long? A year, sixteen months? Before that, Chico, Red Bluff, Tacoma, Portland- where he'd met Betty-Yakima...Toppenish, where he was born and went to high school" (Will You 158). As he lists the places he has lived, Al seems to be regressing incrementally from his present imprisonment. It is as if he were trying to tunnel out of his present life by clawing his way backward to a time when he felt secure in his sense of place. Completing his retro-journey, he recalls that:

Not since he was a kid, it seemed to him, had he know what it was like to be free from worry and worse....He wished he could keep driving and driving tonight until he was driving onto the old bricked main street of Toppenish, turning left at the first light, then left again, stopping when he came to where his mother lived, and never, never, for any reason ever, ever leave again. (Will You 158)

Like Lee Waite and the unnamed narrator in "Elephant," Al seeks to reduce the complexity of his present life by retreating into a state of childish fantasy. After dropping
off the dog, Al heads to "Dupee's, the first bar he came to on the way back to Sacramento" (Will You 158). Several beers later, he decides to visit his mistress, Jill.

Once inside her apartment, Al's regression continues. Jill assumes the role of surrogate mother willingly while she attempts to comfort her distraught lover. Almost immediately, Al's sugary image of his mother's protective home crumbles like gingerbread. It begins innocently, as Jill "stroked his hair with one hand and leaned over him, gazing into his eyes. 'Poor baby, what would you like?' she said" (Will You 161). Still unable to establish his longed for order, Al's speech becomes stunted. He reverts to near baby-talk: "'Just want you hold me,' he said. 'Here. Sit down. No lipstick,' he said, pulling her onto his lap. 'Hold. I'm falling'" (Will You 161). Responding in her role as mother, Jill replies in a similarly abbreviated manner: "You come on over to the bed, baby, I give you what you like...Don't think about anything, baby. Just relax" (Will You 161). When he moves over to her, the tenderness of the scene takes an ugly turn. Taking a hold of Al's head, Jill commands:

'No, don't move, Al,' the fingers of both hands suddenly slipping around the back of his neck and gripping his face at the same time. His eyes wobbled around the room for an instant, then tried to focus on what she was doing. She held his head in place with her strong fingers. With her thumbnails she was squeezing out a blackhead to the side of his nose. (Will You 161)
Al's image of the sheltered environment of his childhood home is punctured by the cloying hands of his lover. Like the mother in "Sixty Acres" the protection becomes so complete it smothers the inhabitants.

In Jill's apartment, Al is at least temporarily free from the burden of worries associated with his home. However, in seeking this escape, he finds himself once again caught in the reality of the protection he had desired. In this case, the effect is so acute that Al's very head is squeezed in his girlfriend's vise-like grip, causing him to experience a disorientation not unlike Waite's surreal plunge at the conclusion of "Sixty Acres." His sense of place has become so enclosed, he is briefly overcome by vertigo as his "eyes wobbled around the room an instant" (Will You 161). Nowhere, not even in his memory it seems, is Al free from complicated attachments.

Unlike Waite, who is left suspended in his whirling environment, Al's desire to "set things in order" forces him to react differently. He bolts from his lover's apartment and returns to his home where, in the wake of his actions against the dog, it is "all tears, confusion" (Will You 162). In the continuation of his efforts to restore order, Al confronts his disjointed home. The similarities to "Sixty Acres" ends at this point as Carver extrapolates on the suggestion of turmoil to come in "Sixty Acres" by returning the protagonist to the place he had sought to escape.
Upon his return, Al is immediately stuck by the weight
of his actions. He think to himself, "My God.... What have I
done?" (Will You 162). Hungover and ashamed, he retreats
again, this time to the bathroom. As he shaves, Al looks in
the mirror and sees for the first time the true nature of his
actions:

...his face doughy, characterless-immoral, that was
the word. He laid the razor down. I believe I
have made the gravest mistake this time. I believe
I have made the gravest mistake of all. He brought
the razor up to his throat and finished. (Will You
163-164)

The repetition of the word "gravest" coupled with the
presence of the razor suggests that Al is indeed
contemplating suicide. Like the matricide briefly
deliberated by Waite in "Sixty Acres," the portrait of
escapism is so intense, it temporarily blocks the
protagonists' ability to think rationally.

For Al, however, this moment proves to be a source of
insight. The image of himself in the mirror, although a
somewhat obvious narratological device, has a profound impact
on the protagonist. In confronting his image, Al is able to
rise above the "maze" of his life and see the destruction his
flight from responsibility has caused. In so doing, the
futility of his attempted escape is finally made clear.
Although not fully explained until the conclusion of the
story, Al recognizes the root of his discordant bearings in
after-shock of the revelation he finds in the bathroom. No
amount of rationalizing and scape-goating will allow Al to escape the pitiable image he see in the mirror.

Believing he has one last chance to salvage stability for his home and family, Al acts on the realization of his mistake. Without pausing to shower or change clothes, Al leaves the house once again, this time armed with the epiphany of his failings. As he retraces his route, Al sees "his whole life a ruin from here on in. If he lived another fifty years- hardly likely- he felt he was finished if he didn't find the dog" (Will You 165).

The dog, Suzy, once a symbol of all that was wrong with his home, now becomes his lone hope for redemption. As he drives to the site where he abandoned the pet:

He knew the situation was all out of proportion now, but he couldn't help it. He knew he must somehow retrieve the dog, as the night before he had known he must lose it. 'I'm the one going crazy' he said and then nodded his head in agreement. (Will You 165)

The odd, schizophrenic agreement coincides with Al's new vision of himself. It is as if he has divided, becoming both trapped and liberated by the impossibility of his escape. Al now knows that the situation is "all out of proportion" even if he can do nothing to bring it back into a manageable scope. As is in the classical definition of tragedy, the protagonist realizes his error too late. As his hopes diminish with the fading daylight, Al "swore at what a weathervane he was, changing this way and that, one moment this, the next moment that" (Will You 167).
Even with this epiphany, and perhaps because of it, his situation has not dramatically improved. Like Harry in "How About This?," the Millers' in "Neighbors," and Lee Waite in "Sixty Acres," the enlightenment is tempered with bleak repercussions. The scale of place is so narrowly defined in each instance that the characters find that they are unable to avoid isolation in their relationship to place.

The realization is completed for Al when he finds Suzy nosing around a yard in the idyllic neighborhood. Having surrendered the dog in a desperate act of scape-goating and avoidance, Al's recognition of his failed escape now verges on the fatalism examined in earlier stories. Having spotted the dog, he gets out of the car and calls to Suzy. At first she wags her tail "in greeting" then, "She got up. She went around the fence and out of sight" (Will You 165). Al's epiphany is complete. Rather than chasing the dog around the fence, "He sat there. He thought he didn't feel so bad all things considered" (Will You 165). His acceptance sounds almost identical to the unnamed narrator of "Elephant." Both characters are able to "set things in order" only by accepting their fate with calm dignity. Al's victory comes in the cessation of his struggle to escape his entrapment. There is a detached serenity that enters him as he concludes, "The world was full of dogs. There were dogs and there were dogs. Some dogs you just couldn't do anything with" (Will You 165).
As we have seen in the stories previously discussed, Al reaches an unassailable paradox. In each story, place acts as the enigmatic fulcrum around which realization pivots. It seems that Carver's "one single moment of revelation (that) disrupts the pattern of their daily lives" centers in some way around the characters' relationship to place (Conversations 80). The critical intersection comes at the precise moment that they sense themselves to be either fenced in or locked out of the narrowly defined place.

Paradoxically, their inability to either escape or enter place creates within certain characters a second movement in their awakening: the acceptance that "afterwards...that nothing ever really changes" (Conversations 80). The acceptance of this succeeding level of the epiphany determines the character's prospects for contentment. The "compromise" may be viewed as a form of surrender. It is also the saving virtue for many of the citizens of Carver Country. By failing to attain a sense of connection to place, the characters gain entrance into a much larger community. Although they cannot express it, they develop an empathy that extends beyond the set boundaries of a specific location. In so doing, they are finally able to participate in a truth that both incorporates and transcends the isolation of place.
Conclusion

As the stories previously examined indicate, Carver's characters rarely achieve a transcendent acceptance of their condition. More commonly, they resign themselves without struggle. Characters such as Marston in "What Do You Do in San Francisco?," Waite in "Sixty Acres," Harry in "How About This?" and Wes in "Chef's House," constitute the alarming norm in Carver Country. However, there is an unmistakable hope for salvation in several of his stories. There is a feeling that, as Carver states in his poem, "The Author of Her Misfortune," "There isn't enough of anything/ as long as we live. But at intervals/ a sweetness appears and, given a chance,/ prevails". What allows this "sweetness" to "prevail" is a mystery central to understanding the failings and victories had by his characters.

We get some indication of what constitutes redemption in "Cathedral," the amazingly rich story of transcendent grace. As the story opens, the first-person narrator appears to be another in the series of doomed protagonists. He worries about the approaching visit of a friend of his wife, a blind man named Robert who was once the wife's employer. He faces the visit anxiously. His account of his wife's friendship with Robert is derisive and blunt:

She'd worked with this blind man all summer. She read stuff to him, case studies, reports, that sort of thing....They'd become good friends, my wife and the blind man. How do I know these things? She told me. And she told me something else. On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he ran his fingers over every part of her face, her nose- even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it. She was always writing a poem. She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important happened to her. (Cathedral 210)

The narrator is clearly jealous, emphasizing the sensualism of the blind man's touch. But she was leaving the blind man's office to marry her childhood sweetheart, an officer in the Air Force whom the narrator refers to as "this man who'd first enjoyed her favors" (Cathedral 210). Like Al, in "Jerry and Molly and Sam," the narrator's jealously of his wife's first husband is projected onto the innocent blind man Robert.

Although the narrator is a heavy drinker, callous and selfishly demeaning toward his wife's feelings, he is eventually released from the figurative blindness by Robert. It is the blind man who restores his sight that he is not even aware he lacks.

In the course of the story, the narrator inadvertently befriends Robert. At the end of the evening, after a large meal and several rounds of whiskey and pot, he is left in the living room with the blind man. They sit in front of the television, the narrator watching, Robert listening. After the news ends, they turn to a documentary about cathedrals. The narrator attempts to describe to Robert what a cathedral
looks like. Stoned and drunk, he continues on, ineptly conveying the grandeur of the images on television. When Robert asks what a fresco is, the narrator is unable to answer him. The blind man suggests a solution to their dilemma. On a shopping bag cut to lay flat, the narrator traces a cathedral while Robert's hand rests on his. He begins by drawing a box and a pointed roof, the typical, elementary picture of a home that "Could have been the house I lived in" (Cathedral 227). He adds spires, windows, doors and buttresses. Robert "sees" the cathedral by running his hands over the indentations made in the heavy paper. In turn, he helps the narrator "see" the cathedral by telling him to close his eyes while he draws. Robert tells him to "Put some people in there now. What's a cathedral without people?" (Cathedral 227). When he is told to open his eyes, the narrator decides to keep them shut:

I thought I'd keep them that way a little longer. I thought it was something I ought not to forget. "Well?" he said. "Are you looking?" My eyes were still closed. I was in my house and I knew that. But I didn't feel inside anything. "It's really something," I said. (Cathedral 228)

For the narrator, seeing the cathedral depends on his having to perceive it as Robert sees it. He has learned to feel empathy. In this sharing of spiritual space, one without the strict limitations of physical space found in so many of Carver's stories, the narrator's sense of enclosure vanishes as if by an act of grace.
Like the epiphanies that visit the stories discussed earlier, the awakening comes unexpectedly and is mysteriously explained. When it comes to the narrator of "Cathedral," it reveals the empathetic response that allows the characters peace.

As mentioned earlier, citizens of Carver Country are in effect mirror images of the regional writer's response to place. In Carver's stories, the absence of locative grounding, like the firmly rooted sense of place he admired in writers such as Welch, Stegner, Eastlake and Kittredge, serves as the gateway to a more thorough understanding and an increased need for empathy (Conversations 51). The prevailing regionalist definition of place, one "western" writers and critics have influenced greatly, is that it is a construct; place, finally, is not a spot on the map, but is in the individual's conception of it. In her recent memoir, Stepping Westward, author Sallie Tisdale elegantly encapsulates this definition saying:

As much as we live in a place, we live in place; we inhabit a condition of the soul. The geographer Yi-fu Tuan calls place "a special kind of object," something too big and broad made close and dear.... We live where we have made definitions, and in the process of making definitions we create a place in which to live.... In a way I live here alone, because I live within my interpretations as much as my environment...12

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Carver's work adds compelling gravity to this assumption. In his writing, the subjective nature of this definition of place is at once a damnation and a liberation. While Carver's sense of place is a shift primarily in emphasis, rather than content, it does contextualize the message significantly. Like the naturalists and regionalists who gain insight by rooting themselves as deeply in the land as possible, Carver's characters reach the same conclusions by loosening their connection to place and descending into themselves.

The recognition of their own "interpretations," devised in the imaginations of the characters, as well as the reader, turns on itself and distinguishes its insecure origins. The initial realization caves inward, developing into the startling possibility that all understanding is based on such biased assumptions and that as a result, "nothing really changes" (Conversation 80). The possibility of connection to a larger society is removed as Carver's characters realize that any connections to place, or lack thereof, require them to live alone.

This exclusive meaning is the fragment of understanding that leaves an imprint on certain characters who grasp the empathy it requires. In a poem he wrote for Gallagher titled, "The Gift," Carver sums up this need, writing:

We're extraordinarily calm and tender with each other/ as if sensing the other's rickety state of mind./ As if we knew what the other was feeling. We don't,/ of course. We never do. No matter./
It's the tenderness I care about" \textit{(Ultramarine 140)}.

We find a similar sentiment expressed in "Cathedral" as well as every other story that ends on a hopeful note. The painful dislocation faced by all of his characters, and indeed by Carver himself, makes compassion a rare and lasting gift.

Carver repeats the call for tenderness in his last-written work of prose, titled, "Meditation on a Line from Saint Teresa" posthumously collected in \textit{No Heroics, Please}. In it, Carver expounds on Saint Teresa's line that, "Words lead to deeds....They prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness".\textsuperscript{13} Like many of his stories, the essay ends abruptly. Carver concludes his "meditation," as I will conclude this essay, by suggesting the importance two "little-used" words play in guiding the attempts of his characters and perhaps his readers to map individual, yet compassionate centers we can all call home:

Remember too, that little-used word that has just about dropped out of public and private usage: tenderness. It can't hurt. And that other word: soul- call it spirit if you want, if it makes it any easier to claim the territory. Don't forget that either. Pay attention to the spirit of your words, your deeds. That's preparation enough. No more words. (No Heroics 225)


