

# Still Waters Run Deep: Searching for Stillness in Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home"

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*We often think of silence as being a blank, a null set, or of all silences being similar, expressing the same thing, the same nothing.*

—Charles Baxter, *Burning Down the House*

There is an ultimate sort of stillness in Raymond Carver's story, "So Much Water So Close to Home," when Claire, the narrator asks her hairdresser if she ever wished to be somebody else, or nothing, or to be nothing at all. The hairdresser says no and then grabs Claire's fingers and holds them for a good minute. She wants to answer this question and grabs Claire's other hand (Carver 228). In his book of essays on writing, Baxter approaches the concept of "stillness" in fiction. He describes it as "expressive air pockets of dead silence" (Baxter 176). He sees it as an intensifier in that it "strengthens whatever stands on either side of it." He goes on to say that American culture sees daydreaming with contempt, that being unable

to sit still and be fed image after image is considered a disorder, and that violence is not viewed with contempt but instead with fear (Baxter 176-8). Baxter's interest in silence is in his search for a "benign stillness," and he admits that it "is simply one of the hardest psychic conditions to get on paper" because of "the narrative necessities of fiction" (Baxter 183). In his short story, "So Much Water So Close to Home," Carver fails to deliver on Baxter's ideals of a fictional or literary "stillness," but we can see how Carver peppers his prose with silence throughout his story, in his characters, with stillness not quite benign.

Baxter describes silence in a fictional work of art by first locating "wonder," where "wonder" is "at the bottom level, the ground floor, of stillness" (Baxter 195). In Carver's story, the reader does not get anywhere near "wonder," except in the passage at the hairdresser's mentioned earlier. This could be by design. Or it could be because of the editor. It could also be due to the limitations of the short story. We, the reader, do get an awareness of things for the narrator, Claire. For much of the story she is like a person living underwater. Much of what she sees and feels is muffled, filtered, "drowned" out. The narrator starts a transformation and she's able to relay a scene between her son, Dean, and her husband, Stuart, after the son asks him about the dead girl's body he found floating in the river. Claire is silent, obviously, during this exchange, and her awareness finally gives us a clear voice and image of Dean and Stuart. What is interesting is when her husband's attention is focused on her, and she jumps. "I should be able to touch you," the narrator relays her husband telling her, "without you jumping out of your skin" (Carver 225). Whose skin is she suddenly jumping out of? Has she metamorphized? It is still unclear. But we know through the details she relays to us that she is now "aware." She tells us that this is the first thing she remembered from that night (the night before she leaves for the

dead girl's funeral). She goes on to list two others. One, the murdered girl will be identified on the news, leading to Claire and her husband staring at each other in silence. Claire goes on to say, "I can see he is obscurely hurt" (Carver 226). This is the first objective bit of information we get about the husband besides the dialogue. We know that she has found some kind of inner awareness or, I suppose you could say that this is a distorted version of Baxter's "wonder." Meanwhile, the third thing is that Claire has made a bed to sleep on by herself. Her husband just stares at her while she arranges the makeshift bed on the sofa. Her silence kills, and it is this sort of "stillness" that we find in Carver's prose, rather than the benign stillness that Baxter wants the clever reader to seek out. More on this "silent violence" to be discussed later, but first ...

I'm having a heart attack. Rather, my heart is about to jump out of my chest. Sorry for the cliché. But it's true. I time travel and I'm at the end of Paul Harding's novel, *Tinkers*, when we, that clever reader, realize that the father who walked out on the boy when he was 12 is at his front door now, decades later, and has just knocked on it. But wait, before we get the father into the house and onto his (now) grown son's sofa, let's look more closely at what Baxter says about silence (and this "benign stillness"): "Stillness in fiction arises when the dramatic action pauses, and when the forward movement of thought appears to cease as well" (Baxter 181). Baxter goes on to mention this "stillness" in the reader's mind is achieved by first distracting the mind away from the story line by "fine details" that consume the inner workings of the mind while our thoughts cease with regards to that "forward movement" we were surely headed toward. Details bring us in on a "thought train," but before we go through that "tunnel of knowledge" we are forced to feel our way through the darkness, wondering when we will come out of the other side. So in Harding's *Tinkers*, the son is actually on his deathbed and this last moment of his life, this

very last thought of his life, happens when his father knocks on his door and invites himself in, sits on the sofa, and refuses food and drink because he must leave soon. But before we can get to this scene, or resolution, if you could stretch and say it was some sort of epiphanic moment of insight or whatever, we, the said clever reader, are forced to read two and one-half pages of dictionary-like elegiac prose written by the grandfather or great-grandfather who was mad (obviously). But it's not out of place. Remember, Harding's book is a layered masterpiece and we take in this moment of literary stillness of densely layered verbiage while our heart sinks in our chest or explodes out of it—however you choose to look at it. In Carver's story, we get nothing like this "benign stillness"—which feels something more like rapacious stillness rather than benign stillness, but having our heart torn out in fiction is why we read, and should be why we write, as well. As great as "So Much Water So Close to Home" is, it lacks that stillness that Baxter so elegantly describes and Harding so remarkably exhibits. Perhaps this is because of the "narrative necessities" that a longer work like Harding's can accomplish.

In Carver's work, we do get what Baxter has described as a truly American phenomenon of "stillness framed by violence" (Baxter 181), and on nearly every page. The story opens with Claire picking up the phone and listening, in silence, to her mother. After she hangs up, her husband slams his napkin down (they are at the dinner table) and he says, "Goddamn it, why can't people mind their own business?" (Carver 213). The violence framing the silence continues to the end. Later, we also see what Baxter says of the awareness of how much "Americans have distrusted silence and its parent condition, stillness" (Baxter 176): After a moment of violence (this time by Claire), Claire describes how her husband "doesn't move" and how she hates "him for that, for not moving" (214). Americans are obsessed with action, and as writers we are told to

use active language. Cinematic works like this story of Carver's are familiar, but they lack the type of stillness that Baxter describes. Baxter does not mention Carver in his chapter on "Stillness," but he does mention another American master, Fitzgerald, and how his *Gatsby* has "stillness—a rapt gaze—[that] alternates with violence, very much in the American style" (Baxter 186). Baxter heaps praise, deservedly so, on Fitzgerald, for his moments of stillness, but notices he can't escape framing it with violence.

Baxter gives two other examples of writers who capture stillness in their fiction. Marilynne Robinson, interestingly the mentor of Paul Harding, has an ability to capture something primordial in grieving, with a "curious calm and alertness, an animal sensitivity, to this condition" (Baxter 188). Anyone who has undergone a traumatic experience can relate to the level of detail we seem to absorb, and how calm and alert our senses become. In Carver's story, we get moments of Claire's alertness and calm, as when the driver tries to get her out of her car, to get her window rolled down, and all we have is Claire sitting quietly, the voice of the man muffled through the glass, seemingly from another world and sensitivity that predates humanity.

Baxter's last example is of Wright Morris, who plays with time in much of his work. Morris takes pages to describe seemingly pointless moments and shuffles through years as quickly as one would turn pages of a comic book. What is left is emptiness, moments left alone and as distant as shrubs in a desert. The effect is a depiction of "a specific kind of American emptiness" (189). This isolation of a specific feeling tied to an event—we do not see many examples of this in Carver's work, but in Harding's longer work, *Tinkers*, we do. The main character, George, is in fact a clockmaker, and time (mind) travels in his hospital bed, with time

but one layer of many on the story's canvas. During most of the book we, the clever reader, are wondering where we have allowed ourselves to be transported to, that is if we first allow ourselves to become disenchanted with Harding's bewitching prose. His moments are painted events, strokes of brilliance. We can't see that, though, until the beautiful and silent (and still) end.

Baxter outlines a very interesting approach to understanding stillness in fiction for writers and the clever reader. He informs us of what Gertrude Stein has said about the topic as she noticed fiction changing at the beginning of the 20th century. She says that "action" has been turned into a kind of "narcotic" (179). Where readers are getting so much action, much like a drug addict gets too into too many drugs, we become immune to the effects. Long gone are the days of writers like Chekhov devoting more time to describing stillness—his readers turning pages with rapt attention—than action. Those days are gone and Gertrude Stein could see. Hemingway picked up on an absurd form of silent description by removing much of the noise from the fiction. Iceberg. Refining the image. However you want to describe it. Carver also inherited this. Stein might say that movies may have done the novels in. Action has displaced stillness in our lives. Baxter might say that the amount of information we receive because of technology might make fictional narratives of the past obsolete. But with writers like Carver giving us cinematic literary masterpieces, however they are framed with subdued violence and lack the stillness that longer works can deliver, are still elegant and sweet. It seems that fiction has become like we have always viewed photographs: we find the details appealing, and we are transfixed by a stillness that keeps the fixed images moving, achieving a transcendence of time

and place. We shuffle through them—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. The past is kept vivid and alive.

## Works Cited

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