

Spring 2017

# The American Pastoral Tradition and The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake

Christopher Blackburn

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THE AMERICAN PASTORAL TRADITION AND THE STORIES OF BREECE D'J  
PANCAKE

by

CHRISTOPHER BLACKBURN

(Under the Direction of Olivia Edenfield)

ABSTRACT

In the late twentieth century, Breece Pancake carried on the American pastoral tradition by both featuring and modifying characteristics of early American pastoral literature. Breece Pancake does not directly imitate his predecessors, but instead brings the spirit of the nearly 200-year-old tradition in which he participates to a twentieth-century audience. Part of the enduring relevance of the literature in the American pastoral tradition, including *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, is that at the heart of these stories is a theme that has defined and continues to shape the American experience: the struggle with living in liminal spaces.

INDEX WORDS: Breece D'J Pancake, Chris Blackburn, American pastoral, Liminal space

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PANCAKE

by

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2015

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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Electronic Version Approved:  
May 2017

## DEDICATION

For Kara.

You continue to make me a better person.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot thank Olivia Edenfield enough for her participation in this process. Her level of enthusiasm kept me motivated and her dedication to this project rivaled my own. The entire Literature and Philosophy Department has continuously encouraged me for years, and I cannot express how much of an impact that encouragement has had on me. Thank you all.

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## CHAPTER 1

The American Pastoral Tradition and *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*

Breece D’J Pancake’s short story collection, *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*, was published posthumously in 1983. *The Stories*, written during the 1970s, often depict the landscape of West Virginia as dying, barren, and unwelcoming. The characters who populate his stories are often impoverished, trapped in place, or failures in one way or another. Pancake’s work is notable for, among many other things, participating in the pastoral tradition of American literature that has its roots as early as the eighteenth century. In the late twentieth century, Breece Pancake carried on the American pastoral tradition by both featuring and modifying characteristics of early American pastoral literature. Of all the similarities shared by the literature of the American pastoral tradition and *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*, perhaps none is more important to consider than liminality.

French sociologist Arnold van Gennep coined the term *liminality* in 1909. Originally it was used to designate a middle period during a ritualistic rite of passage. The classical example of liminality is found in initiation rituals of a boy becoming a man or a girl becoming a woman. The liminal space is found during “the middle phase of such a process [where] the individuals involved are understood to be ‘no longer’ and simultaneously ‘not yet’” (Wels, et al, 1). Victor Turner later expanded on the term to explain that people existing in a liminal space are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremon[y]” (Turner 95). The term has been expanded to cover a wider range of phenomenon, including geographic liminal spaces and cultural liminality, and has gained some conceptual legroom, allowing its use in discussing literature and theology, as well as gender and

race issues. As a result, the term can easily be used to explain one of the major problems inherent in the American pastoral tradition.

The pastoral tradition in America has always been defined in some way by liminal space. The desire to preserve the American landscape in order to create the Arcadia found in pastoral literature was shared by many. Leo Marx argues, “Beginning in [Thomas] Jefferson’s time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size” (141). While the idea of viewing America as a garden came from Captain Arthur Barlowe’s impression of the Virginia shore in 1584, it became a symbol of the abundant American landscape that could be found throughout works of art and literature (Marx 36-7). Annette Kolodny explains that one of the fundamental differences between the European and American pastoral traditions was that “the ideally beautiful and bountiful terrain [was] lifted forever out of the canon of pastoral convention and invested with the reality of daily experience” (5-6). In other words, the Arcadian paradise imagined in art and literature was supposed to exist on American land. With American independence came the need to develop manufacturing and industry in America that would be at odds with the desire to preserve the natural landscape. The conflict between the Arcadian myth and the goals of a modernizing America is at the heart of the liminality that is a defining trait of the American pastoral tradition.

One of the most prevalent debates in early American literature concerned the direction of America, a conflict which often boiled down to a pastoral ideal versus the realities that faced the new nation. The pastoral ideal, for many, was a natural American landscape populated by farmers who privileged a rural lifestyle and were often opposed to technological advances and the establishment of manufacturing in America. Leo Marx explains how the pastoral ideal of America was envisioned as “an immense garden of ‘incredible abundance’” (37). That garden

was dependent upon Americans who would work the land independently, resist the destruction of the natural landscape or the formation of cities, and reject the rise of manufacturing in America. Opponents of this ideal, however, argued the necessity for progress in the form of technological advances, manufacturing, and new industries. The natural paradise would need to be cultivated into more than farmland if the new nation were to thrive. The conflict between maintaining an Arcadia-like natural paradise and ushering in mechanical progress is a defining characteristic of the pastoral tradition in America.

The problem was that the largely philosophical pastoral ideal found in literature and the more materialistic needs of the nation were always in conflict with one another. The materialistic needs of America involved the destruction of the natural environment, which negated any attempt to bring to life the Arcadian ideal depicted in pastoral literature. The pastoral ideal, however, “enabled the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power. It remained for our serious writers to discover the meaning inherent in the contradiction” (Marx 226). Breece Pancake is among those “serious writers” who sought to explore the liminal spaces that exist within the contradictions with which humans continue to struggle. Marx asserts, “For more than a century our most gifted writers have dwelt upon the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact” (354). *The Stories* presents the modern continuation of exploring the liminality that has been present in the American pastoral tradition since its inception.

American pastoralism is liminal by its very nature. Marx asserts that there are two types of pastoralism: sentimental and complex. Sentimental pastoralism is “an expression less of thought than of feeling” that is “widely diffused in our culture, insinuating itself into many kinds of behavior.” While Marx admits it is difficult to define, sentimental pastoralism is easier to

understand in its manifestations. For example, the “longing for a more ‘natural’ environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life.” Marx also asserts that “wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities this obscure sentiment is likely to be at work” (5). Sentimental pastoralism is demonstrated by many of the characters in *The Stories*. Those characters often view the past as a better, simpler time, admiring and wishing to emulate it in the face of modern progress. Sentimental pastoralism is, according to Marx, generated by a desire to “withdraw from civilization’s growing power and complexity. What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural” (9). While the bliss and peace of rural life may appear in the memories or imaginations of the characters in *The Stories*, activities indicative of sentimental pastoralism, such as hunting or camping, are often violent and corrupt. Despite the depravity that surrounds characters and their rural lifestyles, many of them still exhibit a sentimental view of pastoralism that often confines them to liminal spaces.

The second type of pastoralism defined by Marx is complex pastoralism, which involves a contrast between a pastoral ideal and a materialist reality, or more broadly “a contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication” in which “the ideal is inseparably yoked to its opposite” (19, 318). The result is a pastoralism that necessarily exists between two opposing forces. Complex pastoralism cannot exist without the liminal space in which the tension between the ideal and the reality exists. Whereas sentimental pastoralism is demonstrated in *The Stories* most often as nostalgia, complex pastoralism and its inherent liminality can be found in many of the situations surrounding Pancake’s characters. Considering Marx’s notion of complex pastoralism, the early stages of the pastoral literary tradition in America were clearly shaped by liminality as well. The constant

push and pull between the desire to preserve an Arcadian lifestyle, or, in the case of *The Stories*, at least a rural lifestyle and the inevitable progress of modernity – this tension pervades *The Stories* and dates back to French-American writer Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, American President Thomas Jefferson, and the “Poet of the American Revolution,” Phillip Freneau.

Crevecoeur migrated from France during the mid 1700s and lived in New York where he kept a farm and wrote his version of the American experience. In his 1782 work, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur exposes the conflict inherent in complex pastoralism. He asserts, “if ever man was permitted to receive and enjoy some blessings that might alleviate the many sorrows to which he is exposed, it is certainly in the country, when he attentively considers those ravishing scenes with which he is everywhere surrounded” (95). Yet, in the next letter he acknowledges that the European visitor “wonders at the elegance of our towns, those miracles of industry and freedom” (135). Ironically, Crevecoeur, who lived out the pastoral ideal during the late eighteenth century, would embrace the very same conflict present in Marx’s notion of complex pastoralism – the idealization of the natural landscape and the need for human industry. Marx writes, “By 1785, when Jefferson issued *Notes on Virginia*, the pastoral ideal had been ‘removed’ from the literary mode to which it traditionally had belonged and applied to reality” (73). Eighteenth-century America was being shaped by a sentimental pastoral ideal found in the imagination and the literature it produced. The ideal bled over into reality, which allowed people like Crevecoeur to attempt to live out a literary ideal, bringing it from the pages of books into the real world.

Thomas Jefferson addressed the conflict between sentimental pastoralism and complex pastoralism in his 1785 work, *Notes of the State of Virginia*. Jefferson devotes Query 19 to the subject of manufacturing in America. He writes, “... we have an immensity of land courting the

industry of the husbandman. Is it best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that one half should be called off from that to exercise manufactures and handicraft arts for the other? Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (342). Jefferson’s position is made quite clear. He highlights the ills associated with manufacturing, such as the rise of cities and the corruption it breeds within man. His vision was to keep Americans close to the land, working as farmers instead of in factories. He argues, “while we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench” (343-44). With the vast amount of farmable land in America, it does not make sense to Jefferson that half of the population should devote its time to manufacturing. Instead, Americans should participate in what Jefferson believes God’s “chosen people,” who have been gifted with genuine virtue, could only choose: agriculture. Manufacturing is just one way in which the American experiment could fail. Ultimately, each way that Jefferson articulates results in the same destruction of the ideal America.

Eighteenth century poet Philip Freneau criticized the idea of destroying the natural paradise of America through the machinations of the arts thirteen years prior to Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Part of the debate in *The Rising Glory of America* (1772), written by both Philip Freneau and Hugh Brackenridge, focuses on the contention between a sentimental pastoral ideal and the need for progress in the form of commerce, science, and the arts. The poem is written in a similar style to the argumentative poems of Virgil or Milton and contains three characters engaged in a conversation on the subject of progress. Eugenio privileges sentimental pastoralism when he asserts,

... more noble riches flow

From agriculture, and the industrious swain  
 Who tills the fertile vale, or mountain's brow  
 Content to lead a safe, a humble life,  
 Among his native hills ... (234-41)

Not only does the learned Eugenio assert that agriculture is more noble, safe, and humble, but it is also the jealousy of the gods who leave their domains to envy the mortals in their rich, natural environment. Leander seconds Eugenio's argument and calls back to the writers who privileged a pastoral ideal. Freneau's poem does not just consider the agrarian ideal. After Eugenio and Leander make their case for a more pastoral lifestyle, Acasto reminds them of the realities facing America. He argues that "No nation e'er grew social and refined / 'Till Commerce first had wing'd the adventurous prow" (288-89). Acasto reminds Eugenio and Leander that America is not a land that can remain in the rural past, but a budding nation that needs direction.

Freneau's poem exemplifies the conflict between the desire to preserve America as a natural paradise and the desire to grow and prosper through the arts and commerce. Breece D'J Pancake's *Stories*, with a twentieth-century aesthetic, deals directly with this tension between paradise and progress. Many of the characters have a desire to live out their own version of a pastoral ideal that is largely based on their memories of previous generations. Those characters often cling to the past in ways that are characteristic of sentimental pastoral impulses. The characters who are stuck in the liminal space between past and present often struggle to remain rural in the face of a rapidly modernizing world, a struggle that has been present in American pastoral literature since its earliest stages. Depictions of the landscape and the domestic conditions in which the characters exist are also reminiscent of early American pastoral literature. In each case, Breece D'J Pancake does not directly imitate his predecessors, but

instead brings the spirit of the nearly 200-year-old tradition in which he participates to a twentieth-century audience. Part of the enduring relevance of the literature in the American pastoral tradition, including *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, is that at the heart of these stories is a theme that has defined and continues to shape the American experience: the struggle with living in liminal spaces.



## CHAPTER 2

Between Paradise and Progress: Sentimental and Complex Pastoralism and the Problem of  
Encroaching Modernity

While the notion of preserving the natural paradise in America is long-gone by the twentieth century, the sentiment remains. Many of the characters in *The Stories* still struggle with the liminality that accompanies the tension between sentimental and complex pastoralism. Pancake's characters often quietly reflect on the past. Their reflections tend to suggest the dangers of dwelling on the past or privileging sentimental pastoralism. The desire to retain the ways of the past often conflicts with the modern world that continuously encroaches upon them. In addition, the characters are often geographically bound to liminal spaces. Their marginalized geography and the resulting struggle with a modernizing society often leads to social isolation and poverty. Rob Shields explains how the concept of liminal space can be applied to geographic locations:

Marginal places, those towns and regions which have been "left behind" in the modern race for progress, evoke both nostalgia and fascination. Their marginal status may come from out-of-the-way geographic locations, being the site of illicit or disdained social activities, or being the Other pole to a great cultural centre. In all cases the type of geographic marginality ... is a mark of being a social periphery. ... They all carry the image, and stigma, of their marginality which becomes indistinguishable from any basic empirical identity they might once have had. (3)

It is clear that the West Virginia of *The Stories* is a region that has been, at least temporarily, left behind by modernity. The hollows and small towns that the characters inhabit are sometimes literally in the middle of nowhere. Those hollows and towns also support activities such as strip

mining and participate in what could be considered “disdained social activities.” Thomas Douglass asserts that “critics have ... inadvertently perpetuated the idea of Appalachia and especially West Virginia as the ‘cultural other’” by “equating artistic vision with sociological reality,” much in the same way the early American pastoral ideal was believed to be an actual reality (“Problem” 62). B.R. Seybert comes to an excellent conclusion about the problem of liminality and the characters in *The Stories*. He explains that the characters’ “place in the world is disappearing” and that “without the weight of the past, these characters would be free to embrace the modern world that is quickly engulfing them” (48). Sadly, many of the characters are simply unable to let go. Instead, they remain trapped in a shrinking landscape.

Colly, in “Trilobites,” dwells on the memory of his father. The most significant instance is when he recalls how his father died. As he is arriving home, Colly looks “again at the spot of ground where Pop fell. He had lain spread-eagled in the thick grass after a sliver of metal from his old wound passed to his brain” (24). Colly’s father, in a literal sense, was killed by a part of the past of which he could not let go. While the shrapnel from the war was a material object that caused a medical problem, the idea that refusing to let go of the past is both painful and harmful is repeated in many ways throughout the collection.

In “Hollow,” for instance, Buddy is found doing what many of the characters in *The Stories* do often – daydreaming. Like Colly, Buddy daydreams about the past and “his father lowering him into the cistern: many summers ago he touched the cool tile walls, felt the moist air from the water below, heard the pulley squeak in the circle of blue above” (39). These daydreams often contain sensory material that becomes almost real to the characters. When Buddy remembers crying during this scene with his father in the past, his father responds,

“That’s the way we do it” before carrying Buddy to the house (39). This paragraph in the story describes the daydream, but the next paragraph explains why it is described at all.

Clinging to the past often has negative consequences for the characters in *The Stories*. Douglass argues in “Breece Pancake and the Problem with Place” that “Buddy cannot get beyond the physical and immediate obstacles in his life: not enough money, not enough love, not enough sense of the past” (65). However, Buddy himself acknowledges that the way mining was for his father “came before everything: before they moved from the ridge, before the big mine closed, before welfare,” and has since changed (39). While the memory of his father may be somewhat pleasing, Buddy realizes it gets him nowhere in the present. Both mining and the mines themselves have changed, and he seems to realize that looking to the past for answers is not terribly helpful. Instead, Buddy argues for strip mining, a more immediate solution to an infertile mine. This sentiment is expressed again in the conversation between Buddy and Andy, Estep’s son.

Buddy’s sense of the past is strong enough to alert him to the dangers of sentimentality. When Buddy sees his friend Estep’s son looking around in a pile of shale, he stops to ask the boy what he is doing. Andy says the rocks have “pitchers on ‘em” and Buddy says, “Fossils. Ol’ dead stuff.” When Andy reveals that he is collecting the shale pieces, Buddy asks, “What ya wanna save ol’ dead stuff for” (44). Why, indeed, save the old dead relics from the past when they seemingly have no bearing on the present? For Buddy, clinging to the past is a waste of time and a dumb way to waste it at that. Later, after Buddy wakes up on the floor of his trailer after a night of heavy drinking, he mutters “ol’ dead stuff” to himself in the mirror. At this point in the story, his utterance gets no further explanation. What it does, however, is call back to the conversation he had with Andy about the dangers of clinging to the past. This day, in addition to a hangover,

Buddy wakes up with a pregnant dog and a girlfriend who has run off with another man. The “old dead stuff” that he resents in the mirror is himself. Buddy is, as Douglass suggests, “without vision, which inevitably leads him to commit a list of transgressions that elucidate the meaning of the title of the story” (“Problem” 65). He has yet to find a way, like many of Pancake’s characters, to move forward. Buddy himself resents that he has, in a sense, become an old fossil. That resentment and the sense of the past it requires explains why he “chastises a young boy for collecting old fossils” that are “emblematic of the mythic past” (Douglass, “Problem” 65). For Buddy, the past is little more than a mythic recollection of days gone by that have no substantial bearing on the present.

“The Mark” is another story that features characters who cling dangerously to the past. In the opening paragraph, Reva is walking through the “tunneling light of the hallway, past her brother’s neatly framed arrowheads, past the charcoal portrait of her grandfather, beyond the cool darkness, onto the porch” (89). The details paint a picture of Reva traveling through a liminal space that resembles a birth canal. It is no coincidence that the majority of this story focuses on Reva’s pregnancy and that her brother, Clinton, is implicated as the father. Clinton, like Andy in “Hollow,” likes to collect tokens from the past – in this case, arrowheads. As Reva traverses the hallway in the beginning of the story, she passes emblems of both her brother and her grandfather, making it clear that family is at the core of this story. She worries for Clinton who is “working the same river that had killed their parents only eight years ago” (89). Like other characters in *The Stories*, Clinton carries on the traditions of past generations, even at his own potential peril, demonstrating the dangers of clinging to the past.

Another dangerous implication from this scene is the notion that incestual relationships have been occurring in this family for generations. Often in *The Stories*, different characters,

situations, or items are placed in close proximity to one another. For example, animal behavior and human behavior are discussed often in consecutive paragraphs. Sometimes seemingly unrelated images are placed next to each other – in the case of “The Mark” it is the collection of arrowheads and the portrait of Reva’s grandfather. The juxtaposition of these images invites analysis of their relationship. Clinton has already been positioned as a character who clings to the past, and the grandfather plays a role in this as well.

Reva’s sexual attraction to her brother is clear and indisputable. While the facts are never explicitly revealed, the child she is carrying certainly belongs to her brother. When Reva thinks about the pregnancy, she decides “they would find no confessions in the rabbit ovaries” (90). Immediately in the next paragraph, she remembers “her brother Clinton holding a litter of baby rabbits close to his naked chest while the mowing machine droned behind him in a dead hum” and wonders, “was that the summer she began to want him?” (90). Pancake has clearly established a sexual attraction between Reva and Clinton that causes Reva to squint in disgust at the idea of “a whore holding her brother’s strong body, smelling the smoky scent of their grandfather” (90). Finally, the grandfather brings us full circle to the relationship between the images in the beginning and illuminates the dangers of living in the past.

The implication of the proximity of these images is that there have been generations of incestual relationships within this family. While Clinton works a dangerous job by the river as his parents did, Reva also places herself in danger by perpetuating the cycle of incest by sleeping with her brother. While Reva’s husband, Tyler, is aware that Reva cares deeply for Clinton, he does not seem to understand the extent to which she cares for him. He tells his brother, “I figured I’d give her a baby to keep her mind offa Clint. Boy, she was ripe the day he left. Now she just misses that sassy talk of his” (92). Bill, Tyler’s brother, tells him not to worry about it.

While Tyler may suspect an odd relationship between his wife and her brother, he has no idea that the baby she carries does not belong to him. Reva carries this worry with her as well, thinking, “Clinton might never come back after the baby was born” (94). The confession she mentions early in the story, and almost gives at the end, is the cross she bears throughout the story.

The title, “The Mark,” comes from the idea that an unborn baby can be “marked” by something that happens to the mother while pregnant. In the story Reva’s friend Carlene tells her, a mother once marked her baby by becoming fascinated with mating monkeys. The story, of course, comes from the three monkeys that they see in a cage, two of which “bucked in their breeding” while “another lay on a shelf near the roof, stroking himself, awaiting his turn” (97). The proximity of Reva’s fantasy concerning her brother, a cigar, and the lockhouse in relation to these three monkeys makes it clear that one represents the other. Reva, like the female monkey with two mates, is pregnant with a baby that could have come from either Tyler or Clinton. Reva clearly wishes it to be Clinton’s baby, as she does not care much for Tyler or his drunkenness and, immediately after witnessing the mating monkeys, “wanted to go to the lockhouse, wanted to feel the chilly floor against her buttocks and shoulders” (97). Reva’s incestual desire permeates the story and has its roots in the past. However, like the marked baby in Carlene’s story, Reva’s child dies as a result of miscarriage.

The glimmer of hope for Reva is found at the end of the story. Instead of staying trapped in this cycle of her incestual past, Reva “felt her belly for the child that had never been, and almost wanted the deed undone, even forgotten,” so she decides to set fire to the lockhouse where she and Clinton had their sexual relationship (99). When her husband rounds the corner, she confesses to him saying, “I done it ... I done a awful thing, T” (99). Her confession does not

get explained any farther. Douglass discusses Pancake's treatment of domesticity. He writes, "In retrospect, Pancake used the classic horror device of having the most unseemly violence occur amid the very common domestic longings for home and family, for something to look forward to in life. The never of calm and peace, Thanksgiving and Christmas turkey, [is] edged out by reoccurring fear of the bad past, bad hope, bad love under the surface" ("Re-reading" 74).

Pancake's treatment of domesticity highlights the social ills that plague both the men and women of his West Virginia. Tyler likely understands her confession to mean that she burned down the building. For Reva, her confession concerns a long history of incestual relationships in which she can no longer participate. Reva has experienced, firsthand, the dangers of living in the past and seems to have a desire to end it.

Animals and people are again compared in "The Scrapper." Skeevey, the title character who "quit boxin' five years ago" because of a promise he made to his mother, ends up fighting a vicious battle at the end of the story (108). Again Pancake illuminates the dangers of living in the past. Skeevey's nostalgia for his fighting days prevents him from moving forward with his life, despite having exited his prime. While Trudy worries about Skeevey's upcoming fight and the hospital bills that may ensue, Skeevey looks at a "snapshot of a younger self looking mean over eight-ounce gloves" (112). Trudy asks about the money being used for a wedding but Skeevey dismisses the conversation in favor of telling Trudy a story she has heard several times before. As a result of Skeevey's nostalgia, he ends up with a broken jaw and a missing tip of his tongue. The money he would make on this fight will now certainly need to go toward hospital bills, keeping both Skeevey and Trudy stuck in the same situation that they have been in, only with a few new scars.

One of the best examples of living in the past is found in “The Honored Dead.” The title alone is highly indicative of how the story will unfold. The narrator shifts tenses throughout the story, often confusing the present and the past as he remembers his friend Eddie. The narrator is walking down the street during the early hours of the morning, alone and dwelling on the possibility that his daughter actually belongs to his best friend. Eddie had written a letter before his death, revealing intimate details about Ellen, and the narrator thinks, repeatedly, “sometimes I want to ask Ellen if she saw Eddie on his last leave” (124). Ultimately, he realizes he “cannot go away, and [he] cannot make Eddie go away,” so he goes home (125). Eddie’s ghost, and what Eddie possibly left behind, haunts the narrator throughout the story.

Pancake presents a narrative that jumps around temporally in “The Honored Dead.” In doing so, the past and the present become conflated, and it can at times be difficult to distinguish what is happening in the “now” of the story and what is being recollected. The narrator experiences this also when he recalls the story of the last strike his grandfather participated in at the mines. The grandfather would “quit his Injun act when he told it, like it was real again, all before him, and pretty soon I started thinking it was *me* the Baldwin bulls were after. *I* ran through the woods till my lungs bled” (123).<sup>1</sup> Stories like the one the narrator cannot stop imagining about Eddie and Ellen and the labor strike story his grandfather tells become real to the narrator and as a result cause him to tell his own story in such a way that makes past from present difficult to distinguish. Indeed, he is one of the best examples of a character who lives in the past.

While clinging to the past and privileging sentimental pastoralism is dangerous for most of the characters in *The Stories*, many of them are resentful of the modern world. Often, Pancake’s characters reflect on the unaccommodating encroachment of modernity. Douglass



mentions that the tension between the past and the modern world have grown “since 1952, the year [Pancake] was born,” as his “America has become more mobile, more transient, and more fluid than ever before and because of this also more conflicted in its connections to the rural American past” (“Problem” 66). In several cases, the characters are not actually clinging to the past, but rather holding on to myths such as embellished stories of wartime travels or vague impressions of how things used to be. Seybert also touches on the problem created by the encroachment of modernity onto Pancake’s characters. He explains how “folklore serves ... to represent the past and the old ways of life that are slowly dying out both within [Pancake’s] characters and the world that surrounds them. His characters are constantly caught up in the struggle between keeping tradition alive and embracing modernity” (46). The constant push and pull between the past and the present creates a liminal space from which his characters often cannot escape. As a result, many of them remain stuck in place, only able to daydream about a future.

For example, Colly in “Trilobites” imagines scenes from the past as he is driving down the highway that is ironically built on top of an old riverbed. He looks off the side of the road and sees “fields and cattle where buildings stand” (24). Colly sees the nondescript buildings, or rather sees through the buildings, and envisions the past that existed before them. Where cattle might have brought prosperity before, buildings stand now that themselves are apparently not important enough to be described by the narrator.

While the modern world has left the West Virginia of Pancake’s fiction behind, it has also returned – just not in many ways that are beneficial for the characters who live there. In “Trilobites,” Colly recounts to Ginny, his ex-girlfriend, his attempt to run away from home. He says, “I was walking through this meadow on the other side of the Hill, and this shadow passed

over me. I honest to god thought it was a pterodactyl. It was a damned airplane. I was so damn mad, I came home.” (35) The contrast between the imagined dinosaur and the airplane makes for a telling juxtaposition of old and modern. What flavors the image is Colly’s reaction to it. He is so angered at the airplane that he decides to give up on running away and instead return home. It is never made explicit why he returns, but the airplane certainly served as a reminder that the world beyond the hollows of West Virginia has been modernized to the point that if he were to run away he would be faced with a world so foreign to him that he might be susceptible to confusing an airplane with a prehistoric bird.

Colly often thinks about the landscape and how it used to be in the past versus how it appears in the present. In doing so, occasionally entire generations of time are expressed. For example, Colly says, “I look down the valley where bison used to graze before the first rails were put down. Now those rails are covered with a highway, and cars rush back and forth in the wind” (29). In this reflection, Colly moves from the railroad carving a path through the natural world to the railroad being replaced by a highway that allows cars to behave the same way. In both examples, the natural world has been dominated, either then or now, by the progress of the modern world.

One of the clearest images of the modern world’s progress encroaching upon the characters in *The Stories* is found in Mr. Trent of “Trilobites.” Colly’s family farm is failing in the face of blight and the absence of his father. Mr. Trent has made offers to Colly’s mother to buy the farm in order to build a housing project. While Colly is eavesdropping on the conversation between Trent and his mother, he thinks of how “his voice sounds like a damn TV” (29). Even in his conversation, Trent resembles an example of the modern world that has come to change the status quo.

The stark contrast between Colly and Mr. Trent during Trent's first appearance in "Trilobites" is significant. Colly is wading through a stagnant pond trying to catch a turtle to eat when Trent walks up to make his offer again. Colly notices that "the sun is turning his glasses black" and admits that he "crave[s] [turtles] now and again" (26). The contrast here is between Trent wearing photochromatic lenses, which were a fairly recent invention of the 1960s, and Colly hunting for food with a gaff, which is simply a stick with a hook on the end, and a knife. Trent's self-tinting sunglasses connect him to the modern world while also serving as a metaphorical indictment of it. The glasses dehumanize Trent by preventing any eye contact or empathetic connection that might jeopardize his ability to commodify Colly's heritage. In comparison to Trent, Colly ironically looks like a savage wading through a murky pond for food while Trent is everything that his suit and sunglasses represent: the poster-boy for the commodified and pitiless modern world.

In addition to feelings of resentment at the modern world's progress, Colly often depicts the encroachment of modernity as something that could very well erase the past. Colly, while sitting on his tractor, reflects:

Yesterday Trent said the bottoms would be filled with dirt. That will put the houses above flood, but it'll raise the flood line. Under all those houses, my turkles will turn to stone. Our Herefords make rusty patches on the hill. I see Pop's grave, and wonder if the new high waters will get over it. (27)

Trent, already an image of the destructive modern world, brings the news that the natural landscape will be augmented. As a result, the turtles that he interacts with now will likely suffer a similar fate as the railroad that has been replaced with the highway, or the trilobites that used to live in the Teays River. Also, his father's grave will be literally overcome by water. While the

images surrounding Trent are striking enough, if they are combined with Trent's admission that he wants to buy and then destroy "the last real farm left around here," what they reveal in combination is how progress, in the form of Trent and his housing project in this case, often does very little for the characters who populate Breece Pancake's West Virginia (26). Instead, the modern world is often depicted as a force that will destroy their way of life and force them either further onto the margins or into a world that they cannot, or will not, be able to navigate. The past, in each of these examples, will be buried by the encroaching modern world. The inevitability of this is made apparent in the red-coated Hereford cattle. Though alive and well, the Herefords appear as a patch of rust on the hillside.

While Breece Pancake's short story collection chronicles the lives of people in the twentieth century, he frequently calls back to the past. One way in which he does this is by invoking the image of the train as much of the pastoral literature of America did before. Much of early American pastoral, according to Marx, used "the trope of the interrupted idyll. The locomotive, associated with fire, smoke, speed, iron, and noise, is the leading symbol of the new industrial power. It appears in the woods, suddenly shattering the harmony of the green hollow, like a presentiment of history bearing down on the American asylum" (27). In *The Stories*, the green hollow does not often contain any harmony. It, in and of itself, is an alienating force as well as the planes that fly overhead like pterodactyls. The asylum-like paradise has become "flanking hills" and imprisoning company towns full of impoverished people, many of whom desire nothing more than escape (25). As far as the trope of the train crashing through the idyllic pastoral is concerned, Pancake takes that trope and makes it relevant to the twentieth century.

Humans are in a constant liminal space between where we were and where we want to go. The train and the railroad both symbolized progress, for better or for worse, in the pastoral

tradition of the nineteenth century. Pancake uses decommissioned, abandoned, or rusted trains to demonstrate the inevitability of human progress. In one case, the train is viewed in terms of a vehicle that will carry a character toward a new fate, but that fate is never realized. Fights occur in abandoned dining cars, and old tankers are rusted and immobile. Marx explains, “In the 1830’s [sic] the locomotive, an iron horse or fire-Titan, is becoming a kind of national obsession. It is the embodiment of the age, an instrument of power, speed, noise, fire, iron, smoke – at once a testament to the will of man rising over natural obstacles, and, yet, confined by its iron rails to a pre-determined path, it suggests a new sort of fate” (191). In Pancake, however, trains often represent the death of old-world progress and its inevitable replacement by the next technological innovation.

Another way in which they differ from the more pastoral usage is in how Pancake’s train images do not represent the strong will of man to conquer the natural world or the modern world’s encroaching progress. Instead, images of past progress are dying out and being replaced by something more modern. For example, in “Trilobites” Colly looks over some railroad tracks to a field on the other side. When he thinks about the tracks, he notices “they run on till they’re a dot in the brown haze. They give off clicks from the switches. Some tankers wait on the spur. Their wheels are rusting to the tracks. I wonder what to hell I ever wanted with trilobites” (33). The tankers are still operational, but the image of their wheels beginning to rust in place speaks to two of the major themes of *The Stories*. First, it works to suggest being stuck in place, or being unable to escape from a liminal space as is the situation for many of Pancake’s characters. Secondly, it also demonstrates the past dying off to be replaced by the progress of the modern world. The last line of this paragraph, however, illuminates Colly’s own personal struggle with

liminality in that he does not want to let go of the past, yet does not know how to navigate the modern world.

At the end of the story, Pancake uses one last train image to tie together each theme he has been weaving throughout the story. Colly and Ginny are ending their time together at the depot when Colly hears a train in the distance. Colly thinks, "I feel old as hell. When I look up, her taillights are a reddish blur in the fog" (36). Ginny will leave Colly to go back to her new life in Florida. Colly remains behind thinking about how he has yet to make any sort of move forward in his own life. As Colly stands outside the depot reflecting on the past, he again hears the train approaching. This time, he can tell "she is highballing all right," and she is "just too fast to jump" (36). In this instance, the train resembles Ginny herself, as Colly previously tried unsuccessfully to persuade Ginny to take him with her back to Florida to rekindle their old relationship. Not only is the actual train moving too fast for him "to jump," but Ginny is also like the train that moves too fast for him. Her life has direction and momentum, the two things Colly cannot seem to find.

Another use of train imagery appears in "The Scrapper." This particular train car is highly indicative of a past that has ended but not yet been abandoned by the characters. Across from the church just outside of town is "The Car, a wheelless dining car left behind after the timber played out" (102). In this case, the characters repurpose the train car for holding fights. As a result, Pancake places characters within this image of a bygone past that are, sometimes quite literally, attempting to kill each other. While the train image in early pastoral work brought either hope for a future or disdain for a lost past, for Pancake it reminds us that the characters are stuck holding onto the past that cannot sustain them and might even eventually kill them.

The narrator of “The Salvation of Me” thinks also of escaping his hometown via the train. While most of the train images in *The Stories* are of decommissioned trains, the train still runs in this story while simultaneously calling back to the past. The narrator thinks, “I would maybe take the train – since that was the only way I knew to get out, from my father’s Depression stories” (135). The train in this story is still an icon of a bygone era and, for the narrator, a last-ditch effort to escape the liminal space he inhabits. His other option is the car that he dreams of building to take him to Chicago. However, he knows the more viable option is to rely on the past that he can touch instead of the modern world with which he struggles and which he fails to repair. As is the case with many of the characters in *The Stories*, neither the icons of the past nor the modern innovations of the present serve as feasible vehicles for escaping the liminal space they inhabit.

## CHAPTER 3

Virginal, Motherly, and Hostile: Landscape and Domesticity in *The Stories*

The landscape in *The Stories* is often depicted using hostile and barren imagery effectively connected to a number of Pancake's female characters. Pancake's treatment of both landscape and women may appear harsh on the surface, but in fact it demonstrates the unsustainability of viewing the landscape as a virginal, mothering figure. Cynthia Kadohata describes West Virginia in terms that support Pancake's perspective. She writes, "Tucked into the middle of five different states, neither part of the North nor a part of the South, West Virginia derives much of its identity from the splendid Appalachian Mountains. It's a beautiful state – sometimes made less beautiful by strip-mining—of rhododendrons and honeysuckles and of ridges cut by exuberant rivers. It's also a poor, largely rural state with a low mobility rate" (2). The landscape, the low mobility rate, and the poverty all work together to create the liminal space that Pancake explores. When pastoral literature began to emerge in America, Annette Kolodny asserts that it "hailed the essential femininity of the terrain in a way European pastoral never had, explored the historical consequences of its central metaphor in a way European pastoral had never dared, and, from the first, took its metaphors as literal truths." She asserts that America's "single dominating metaphor" is "regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape" (6). In *The Stories*, however, neither the landscape nor the women can provide much warmth or escape from the unforgiving realities of adult life.

Of course, the problem with holding on to an idea of a landscape that is simultaneously motherly and virginal is apparent in the contradiction in terms. The virginal landscape must be altered from its natural state in order for agriculture to thrive. In doing so, the motherly landscape



can provide sustenance and nurturing. However, any such alteration destroys the ideal, natural landscape and immediately nullifies any notion that it remains untouched or virginal. Kolodny explains how “the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else – a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation” (7). The pastoral ideal, Kolodny suggests, was splintered from the outset and “confused with the myth of progress. ... It is therefore imperative that we recognize at least some part of our urge to progress, and our historical commitment to conquer, master, and alter the continent as another side of the pastoral impulse” (67-68). *The Stories* depict male characters who often seek to possess and master the female characters of the stories since, more often than not, their mastery over the landscape is impossible. The men master neither the landscape nor the women because the landscape is no longer the virginal, nurturing mother figure; and, for the most part, the women in *The Stories* cannot be dominated, for they are often the ones who have achieved at least some level of success or who have managed to escape.

Landscape plays a significant role in *The Stories*. One way in which it is used is to suggest a liminal space. The way in which the landscape is presented, however, is often in terms of aggression and barrenness. Brian Finnegan observes how Pancake’s characters “may feel the urge to run ... but they also live in an impoverished mountain landscape whose very topography places constraints on those desires” (96). Indeed, the topography of the land is described often as aggressive, constrictive, and imprisoning. The first encounter with an aggressive landscape is in “Trilobites” when Colly thinks, “I lean back, try to forget these fields and flanking hills” (25). The fields are barren due to blight, and the hills are flanking Colly as an army would an enemy. The characters who are stuck in the hollows and impoverished towns with failing farms, despite

having some connection to the landscape that they appreciate, often acknowledge how the landscape itself traps them in place.

Many of the female characters in *The Stories* resemble the feminized landscape of early American pastoral literature in that they are supposed to be simultaneously accommodating and dominated. For example, Ginny in “Trilobites” has a highly aggressive sexual encounter with Colly. He describes the scene in very aggressive terms, noting, “I slide her to the floor. Her scent rises to me, and I shove crates aside to make room. I don’t wait. She isn’t making love, she’s getting laid. All right, I think, all right. Get laid. I pull her pants around her ankles, rut her.” (35) Colly has clearly positioned himself as a dominating force during this encounter. His choice of the word “rut” is particularly telling in that it can mean “to have sexual intercourse; to behave promiscuously or lecherously” or “to cut or make a furrow through (turf) with a spade or other implement” (OED). The dual meaning of “rut” as both sexual intercourse and the tilling of the landscape positions Ginny as both. After their tryst, Colly says to Ginny, “let me go with you” (35). Even after attempting to dominate her, Colly still relies on Ginny to provide for him. Sadly, Colly needs an avenue of escape from the life he is unable to leave behind. Ginny, however, has no way of helping Colly escape in the liminal space between the past and the present in which he remains.

Kolodny explains the continuation of America’s pastoral impulses and points out how initially, according to Crevecoeur, the dominant impulse was a return to nature. She says Crevecoeur provided “a definition that had at its base the literal acceptance of a return to primal harmony within the bosom of a maternal landscape and, as a consequence of that return, a rebirth. Moreover, because the Mother was reputed to be so generous in America, the old European vulgar, striving, acquisitional self could die, to be replaced by the yeoman farmer,

loyal at once to the soil that had made this new reality possible and to the republic that promised to codify the new order of things” (26). The allure of this idea made it desirable to take an old European pastoral ideal and transform it into a functional way of life in America. After writers like Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, and Freneau worked to find a way to make the American pastoral ideal a reality, what was left and considered feasible and profitable was agriculture. The idea of the yeoman farmer, Kolodny asserts, “became a kind of emblematic self-image for the new nation as a whole. The only possible flaw in the image was the inevitable tensions it suggested between the initial urge to return to, and join passively with, a maternal landscape and the consequent impulse to master and act upon that same femininity” (27). The biggest problem then becomes the pastoral impulse splintering into a range of possible outcomes, which Kolodny explains “could extend from a healthy sense of intimacy and reciprocity to the most unbridled and seemingly gratuitous destruction” as even farmers who rely on a reciprocal relationship with the land could instead farm it into infertility (27). Throughout Pancake’s narratives are examples of characters out of harmony with the land. Colly, in “Trilobites” for example, is unable to maintain the family farm in the face of a blight that has destroyed it, and the strip mining featured in “The Scrapper” and “Hollow” serves as the ultimate metaphor for the ravaging of the land that leaves it infertile and useless. In each case, Pancake demonstrates the anxieties present in American pastoral literature.

Among those anxieties is the inherent paradox of the landscape existing symbolically as both mother and virgin. Kolodny observes how Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* “hints at, but steadfastly refuses to make explicit, the essence of the pastoral paradox: man might, indeed, win mastery over the landscape, but only at the cost of emotional and psychological separation from it” (28). She continues, “for Jefferson, then, the eroticism of the landscape was

as compatible with its maternal image, as the wild forests were with the cultivated tracts, and nowhere does he acknowledge the possibility that the response to one may finally destroy the possibility of experiencing the other” (28). In one case, however, Jefferson did make the threat of the pastoral paradox explicit: in the case of mining in Virginia. Kolodny explains, “Jefferson did fear, and in some sense foretell, the destruction of the land that promised so much bounty; significantly, however, he detailed the threat only once, and not in relation to agricultural pursuits, but in relation to the mining of Virginia’s mineral deposits” (29). *The Stories* contain several settings in which Jefferson’s fear has become a reality. While Jefferson was seemingly able to separate the agricultural, mothering landscape from the wild, virginal landscape, it is clear in *The Stories* that whenever the mothering landscape ceases to nurture and provide, the virginal landscape can be conquered and tamed in order to replace it. The proximity of Jefferson’s farm to his wild woods makes this inevitable.

One way to uncover the themes that Pancake explores in *The Stories* is, again, to consider the differing elements of the narrative that appear in proximity to one another. For example, in “Hollow” the male characters are standing around the entrance to the mine when Fuller asks Buddy, “Is Sal goin’ back to whorin’?” (41). The proximity of the reference to Sally’s sexuality and the coalmine invite a comparison that becomes clear later when Buddy and Estep are arguing the pros and cons of strip mining. Estep says, “Won’t work, Buddy. Operation like that’d put ever’body outa work. ‘Sides, land ain’t good fer nothin’ after ya strip.” Buddy replies, “That land ain’t good noway” (48). The scene just before this conversation is the last time Buddy and Sally are together. In that scene, Sally and Buddy have sex one last time before she leaves him. Sally, stripped of everything that Buddy can get, has no more to offer him just as the land will not be useful after strip mining it. On the other hand, Buddy is also stripped of everything that he can

offer Sally and is also like a barren landscape. Buddy's alcoholism and inert station in life clash with Sally's drug habits and crass materialism in such a way that leaves each of them with nothing left to offer the other except empty promises and a barren relationship.

The third leg of proximity is Sally and the dogs. Before Buddy enters the room where Sally sits up, "letting the sheets slide away from her breasts," Buddy has been outside fighting off a pack of male dogs that smell the heat of his dog. When she sits up, she asks, "The dogs," to which Buddy responds, "Oh yeah" (46). Sally gets sexualized during this scene in close proximity to the dogs that want to mate with Lindy, Buddy's dog. In each case, the female involved is supposed to serve the males in the situation insofar as they can bear the sexual or material needs of the males. In other words, the males involved with the mine, Buddy, and the dogs outside Buddy's trailer all want to penetrate in one way or another in order to reap a benefit.

In each case, the females, including the impregnable hole in the ground, will suffer if the men are allowed their way. Buddy would likely have Sally stay in an impoverished relationship that is stuck in a liminal space and going nowhere. After Lindy makes it out of the house and gets caught by the males waiting for her outside, Buddy, "patting her wet side" says, "Poor old girl ... Yer in fer the works now" and immediately after tells Lindy that "Sal's gone, yes, she is" (50). Again, Sally and the dog are placed in close proximity to one another. This time, one is pregnant and the other is gone: both will experience change. Buddy, on the other hand, only talks about change. Most telling, perhaps, is that strip mining the hill is the way in which Buddy imagines his change will come. At the end of the story, Buddy kills a doe while hunting that he cleans on the spot. In the process, "a squirming lump fell at his feet" and Buddy kicks it aside as he consumes the raw liver of the doe (52). Albert Wilhelm argues, "Buddy not only ends an

individual life, but also destroys the potential for future life. Such a cruel and wasteful attitude toward wild animals parallels Buddy's attitude toward the land in general." Furthermore, "in cutting off the potential for future life, he is probably signaling his own sterility and emptiness" (40, 41). The fawn that falls from the doe is of no more concern to Buddy than the new birth that could arise from the landscape he wants also to destroy. What is important to Buddy, however, is what the doe, the mine, and Sally all have to offer for his consumption.

"The Scrapper" features several ways in which femininity and landscape are interwoven. From the beginning, the narrator makes it clear that Skeevy feels "empty talking to [Trudy, his girlfriend] and did not want to be there when she woke up" (101). While Skeevy does love Trudy, his nostalgia for the past outweighs his affection for her. As he leaves her sleeping in the morning, he looks back "to the hollow, where he knew Trudy was still sleeping" (101). Trudy is physically in the hollow – the flanking, unprofitable, and unforgiving landscape. Furthermore, the comparison between women and the landscape comes again due to proximity when in the next paragraph Skeevy looks "at the strip mine" where the houses in the company town have flowers planted by the wives of the miners that "were all dead or dying from the constant shower of coal dust" (102). Not only do the women fail to grow anything of beauty from the land, but it is due in no small part to the men who are ravaging the land at the strip mine. As the miners destroy the mountain, it begins to resemble a chewed "apple core" that simultaneously destroys the works of the women in the town (102). In each case, the women and the landscape both suffer and are rendered infertile in one way or another.

Whereas *The Stories* may seem to fail to depict women in a positive light, what they actually do is highlight men who often fail to provide anything. Defeated, the men are foils to the women who escape, own businesses, and get educated. Not only do many of the men fail to

escape, to provide, to grow, or to progress, but they also largely fail the women close to them. Finnegan posits that, “while Pancake may depict mostly negative or weak female characters – domineering mothers and untrustworthy girlfriends – and bring women in ‘as the enemy’ from which to flee, he hardly valorizes the men who would flee” (95). True, Pancake does not make heroes of underserving men. In addition, the judgment of women most often presented from a male perspective is suspect. Judith Fetterly, in *The Resisting Reader*, recalls “Rip Van Winkle” and how Rip is “the first in a long line of American heroes as ‘nice guys’” who resists his wife only because “she represents what he ought to do” instead of what he wants to do (3,4). Indeed, many of the male characters in *The Stories* are irresponsible failures. Many of them fail to provide, yet simultaneously express a desire to dominate the women for whom they cannot provide. Seybert writes, “[Pancake’s] fiction, however, does show a sadness and empathy for his women characters, which in a few stories adds to the male protagonist’s sense of futility” (74). The domestic sphere of *The Stories*, therefore, is often a bleak space for both parties. However, if we consider the men who exhibit reprehensible behavior toward women, *The Stories* reveal that they are simply highlighting the egalitarian nature of failure that runs throughout Pancake’s narratives.

Take for instance “Trilobites” in which Colly is trapped on a failing farm and exhibits no clear idea for how to save it or escape it. Ginny, on the other hand, has gone to college in Florida and begun to make a life for herself. During her visit with Colly, his own weakness is made apparent when he attempts to dominate her sexually immediately before begging her to take him away with her. Toward the end of the story, she is literally compared to a vehicle of escape that is “too fast to jump” (36). Clearly, Ginny is the character in the story who has taken on the more stereotypically masculine role of carving out a path for success. Colly, on the other hand, waits

on a failing farm, pining for the past. Ellesa Clay High concludes, “by the story’s end, Colly recognizes that only he can forge his own independence, his future, and these cannot be reached by romanticizing a place, the past, or other people” (37). This is the lesson that Ginny has already learned. Colly, on the other hand, must learn this lesson from her.

Bo, in “Fox Hunters,” is a teenage boy who embodies more masculine traits than nearly all of his male counterparts. His answer to why he does not act like a man is often that he is not being treated like one. Bo’s response begs the question: what is a man? Certainly the answer is not found among a group of rapists on a hunting trip. Finnegan argues, “there is a misguidedness in Bo, who wants to leave his mother behind and go off with a prostitute, that takes the romance out of his road fantasy. Pancake makes clear that Bo’s flight is not noble but rather weak” (95). However, the story offers no evidence to suggest that Lucy is a prostitute, or that Bo is weak or misguided. While the grown men of the story use the word *whore* to describe Lucy, the female character who owns her own business and is deemed a whore for that very fact, their treatment of her only serves to underscore their own failures. Again we see a strong female character being disparaged by men who are clearly compensating for personal insecurities. Bo, on the other hand, demonstrates his maturity and intellect in a number of ways – not least of all in his respectful treatment of Lucy.

Skeevy from “The Scrapper” does not mistreat Trudy, his girlfriend. In fact, he is clear about his love for her. His problem, however, is that he, much like Rip, does not want to do what he should, but rather what he wants. When he decides to fight for money, Trudy asks, “You reckon that money would do for a weddin’?” (112). Skeevy quickly changes the subject. While theirs is one of the better relationships in the story, it still highlights the liminality from which the characters, both male and female, suffer. In each case, the men who mistreat women are not



presented as American heroes or nice guys, but rather failures who take out their own issues on those around them. Finnegan writes, “Pancake certainly follows the Van Winkle paradigm with his tendency toward nagging mothers and shallow girlfriends, but the male does not emerge virtuous, exalting, or excused” (96). The combined effect highlights how the narrative of the landscape as woman promotes the idea that women should be accommodating, even at their own expense. Like the once bountiful West Virginia landscape that has been destroyed by consumption, blight, and neglect, the women in *The Stories* often have very little left to offer the men. Likewise, some of the women in *The Stories* realize the material realities of their situations and understand that they may have only two choices if they are to survive: resort to desperate measures or escape. In both cases, Pancake demonstrates how the narrative of the feminine landscape is both antiquated and dangerous.

## CHAPTER 4

“In the Silence between Darkness and Light”: Liminal Space in *The Stories*

From the opening story of the collection, Pancake uses images and language that suggests liminality and each individual tale that follows is connected by the theme of liminal space. Images of windows and ghosts are repeated throughout the collection. The landscape itself is often described using liminal language. Characters often daydream or reflect on the past. Douglass praises the structure of Pancake’s collection saying, “hats off to the vision of Peter Davison of Little Brown who . . . arranged the stories in a progression of closing spaces, of turns and switchbacks that send us into the valley of the last story ‘First Day of Winter’ . . . as the final confinement” (“Re-reading” 76). Pancake’s characters exhibit the problems that can arise from living in a liminal space: that space shrinks continuously and confines them the longer they stay or the more they return.

Many of the reflections found in the stories take place in liminal spaces. In the first sentence of “Trilobites,” for example, Colly opens the door to his truck and steps onto the street. After passing over this threshold and into the space between the truck and the cafe, he pauses to reflect on Company Hill, the air around him, his birth, and his father’s death before he heads toward his destination. Company Hill and the air that surrounds him ground him physically in the present while his birth and his father’s death carry him mentally into the past. His reflections that reveal the liminal space between his past and the present in which he exists immediately follow Colly’s movement over a threshold. His continuous search for trilobites, as David Stevens suggests, also “points to his need for a specific piece of the past that will inform his present, somehow justifying his sense of historical determinism, but his failure to find even one causes him to perceive history as a kind of generality to which, finally, he can articulate no rational

connection” (266). Colly’s inability to realize that the past, especially the ancient past when glaciers carved the landscape and trilobites roamed the Teays River, cannot inform his present is the failure keeping him trapped in a liminal space.

On the way to the cafe he notices a Florida-shaped patch in the street and again pauses to reflect, this time on his old girlfriend, Ginny, and what he wrote to her in her yearbook. Ginny has left their hometown to attend college. Colly’s meditation on Ginny foreshadows what she will come to mean for him: a future that he cannot obtain because of his inability to escape the liminal space between his past and the present. Finally, after what appears to be enough insight into his character to drive the rest of the story forward, he enters the café.

The next example of liminal imagery in “Trilobites” is found when Jim, an old family friend, approaches the café and Colly sees him “through the window ... crossing the street” (22). Windows are an effective image suggesting liminality. A window is a threshold that allows perception to exist in a liminal state. For example, a person looking through a window can be physically present indoors while being mentally present outdoors, or vice versa. Windows are often used in *The Stories* to highlight a character’s struggle with living in a liminal space. Colly, for instance, listens as Mr. Trent tries to convince his mother to sell the farm. At first, Colly “can hear Mom and Trent talking on the front porch, and [he] leave[s] the window up” (28). Almost a gesture of inviting change and an escape from life in a liminal space, Colly leaves the window open to hear the conversation he is sure will lead to his mother selling the farm. After a few minutes, Colly hears Trent begin to talk about him. When his mother mentions that Colly “don’t go out none since Ginny took off to that college” and Trent replies with “there’s a college in Akron,” Colly shuts the window (29). He does not want to remain stuck in place, but he also resents the idea that he should follow in the footsteps of the girl he feels left him behind. Instead,

he chooses to look “through the door to the living room” where he looks at the “rock case Pop built” for him (29). He is physically in one room but his focus and attention is in another. The rock case he focuses on, suggesting the permanence of the past, and the liminal space in which Colly stands combine to explain Colly’s struggle. Colly leaves the window, a threshold that contains talk of the future, for another threshold that takes him back into his past.

The next time Colly is presented in relation to windows is during his time with Ginny. After she comes back to visit, the two go off to an abandoned depot “for old times’ sake” (32). Colly says to Ginny, “you never talk about your momma,” to which she replies, “I don’t want to” and “goes running to an open window in the depot” (34). Ginny, instead of dwelling on the past, runs toward an image of liminality and wants to pass through it into the depot. When Colly finally relents, he drags “a rotten bench under the broken window and climb[s] in” (34). For Ginny, who has escaped her liminal state, the window that she runs toward is described as “open.” For Colly, the character who fears change, the same window is described as “broken” (34). Open windows make crossing the threshold easier, while broken ones make it dangerous. Moreover, when Ginny enters the window that Colly has helped her reach, she cuts her arm on a piece of glass. Returning becomes dangerous for Ginny, who has escaped from the life in which Colly is stuck. Even the mud dauber consumes her flesh off of the broken glass. Ginny’s return to a life that she has left behind, one Colly cannot escape, is literally eating her alive.

“The Scrapper” presents an image of a window that is particularly telling. Skeeve is inside a church when he sees “only a shadow of light seeping through the painted window” (103). The way in which the light and the window work together to illuminate the corruption of the deacon who “was sweeping bottles from between the pews” after a cockfight took place there the night before is quick and straightforward (103). Light usually symbolizes, among other

things, truth, divinity, and intelligence. There is very little light that makes its way into this church where a deacon can acknowledge that it “ain’t right, drinkin’ in a church” and that the “Lord’s abotherin’ me for marvelin’ at the devil’s work” (103, 104). The window itself is painted and thus prevents the light from entering the church. The liminal space through which the light can travel instead blocks its entrance. Somewhere between good and evil is where this deacon, and indeed the church itself, resides.

Skeevy interacts with another window in “The Scrapper” that is a particularly significant scene. He is gearing up for a fight in which he has no business participating when he “saw his ghost in the window against the outside’s grayness and felt his gut rumble with the flux. Lightly, he touched the scar above his eye, watching as his reflection did the same” (112). In this window, Skeevy’s reflection reminds him of how he is stuck in a cycle of fighting that brings little prosperity. Instead, it only brings scars which should remind him of why he promised his mother he would quit fighting five years ago. Unfortunately, this window and his ghostly reflection only serve to show how stuck in a liminal space he remains.

The first line, from which the title of this section is taken, is one of the most pointed examples of language used to suggest liminality. Critics have noted the “in-betweenness” in several spots throughout *The Stories*. Surprisingly, the connection between those suggestive elements and liminal space has as of yet to be explored. Wilhelm points out that “the very first words of ‘The Scrapper’ suggest that Kelly exists in a kind of limbo. The story begins ... as Kelly awakens from a nightmare. In a symbolic sense, however, this new day brings neither enlightenment nor new life. For Kelly, the new day offers nothing more than continued bondage to the past” (42). The first line clearly suggests liminal space. Kelly’s nightmare also serves this end in that dreams are a liminal state between consciousness and unconsciousness. It is

Wilhelm's last observation, however, that really drives the point home. Kelly awakens to a new day that looks just like any other. He is still stuck, like many of Pancake's characters, in the liminal space between the past and the present.

The window Alena looks through in "The Way it Has to Be" foreshadows the inevitable conclusion of the story. As "she stood by the slotted window, peering through the dirty glass to empty freezers and sills speckled with the crisp skeletons of flies," she thought about how she could not call home to her mother. She has escaped from her hometown with Harvey, a gun-toting madman freshly released from jail and running from a murder he committed. Even though Alena has escaped, she is still very much trapped by the piece of home that is with her. When she begins to reveal that she does not want to be with Harvey any longer, and that she has called her mother and told her about their location, Harvey takes her to the upstairs of the hotel to talk with his gun in tow. The story ends here, never revealing whether or not Harvey kills Alena. However, the skeletons of flies and the dirty window at the beginning, the title of the story, and Harvey's attitude all suggest that she will not survive.

Another liminal image repeated throughout *The Stories* is the ghost. Ghosts, liminal *memento mori* figures in that they are neither wholly dead nor wholly alive but stuck somewhere in between, are used again and again in *The Stories*. In "Trilobites," the landscape is described using ghost imagery. Colly says, "the hillsides are baked here and have heat ghosts" (25). The image of the ghost serves two purposes – first, to describe the effect of extreme heat, such as can be seen in roadways, and second to suggest a liminal space. Shortly after noticing the heat ghosts in the hills, Colly notices the boundary post his father set "when the hobo and soldier days were over." He thinks, "It is a locust-tree post and will be there a long time" (25). Here, immediately following the use of the ghost image, Colly thinks about his dead father while observing a

physical landmark left by him. In this scene, Colly's father seems to be somehow neither wholly dead nor wholly alive.

The landscape is described in terms of ghostly imagery again in "Trilobites." In addition to using the image of a ghost to express liminality, the motion of the environment works to this end as well. In this description of the landscape, "the rain trickles, and as it seeps in to cool the ground, a fog rises. The fog curls little ghosts into the branches and gullies. The sun tries to sift through the mist, but is only a tarnished brown splotch in the pinkish sky. Wherever the fog is, the light is a burnished orange." (31) As the rain falls to the ground, the fog rises from it. In the middle, among the branches and gullies, are the ghosts. While all the liminal imagery is clear, the next part reveals the point. The sun is unable to cut through this liminal site where the ghostly fog sits. Moreover, the sunlight is tainted by it. The sun, and the obvious baggage attached to it, cannot penetrate the liminal space Colly inhabits. It seems as if darkness has dominion over the light.

Ghosts are also used to describe the landscape in "Fox Hunters." As Bo is walking down the street and Bill's truck is approaching, Bo steps "onto the pavement feeling tired and moved a few paces until headlights flooded his path, showing up the highway steam and making the road give birth to little ghosts beneath his feet" (63). This image comes after Bo had been walking alone in the early hours. Afterward, he gets into the truck and his interactions with others throughout the rest of the story reveal his struggle with liminality. The ghosts being born from the road announces the theme that follows.

"In the Dry" presents another sort of *memento mori* in the form of a liminal image. Ottie, the main character, is driving down the road when "he sees the bridge coming, sees the hurt in it" (147). The bridge is another revealing liminal image in that it connects two separate places but

itself is located neither fully in one or the other. This particular bridge, however, is where Buster and Ottie had the car accident that came to define their lives. For Ottie, the accident is a ghost that haunts him “now and again, [when] his nerves bang one another until he sees a fist, a fist gripping and twisting at once; then hot water runs down the back of his throat, he heaves. After comes the long wait – not a day or night, but both folding on each other until it is all just a time, a wait” (147). The memory of the accident with Buster, like the other ghost imagery used to suggest liminality, keeps Ottie in a perpetual state of guilt.

In the case of “In the Dry,” the ghost that exists in the story is not simply an image used to describe something, but a character. Buster, as a result of the wreck, is severely disabled. When Ottie returns to visit Buster’s family, Buster’s mother wastes no time in telling Ottie that “Buster’s awful bad off. He’s in a wheelchair with two of them bags in him to catch his business” (149). Like a ghost of what was once a man, Buster has become a burden on his family and a constant reminder of the accident that haunts Ottie. This becomes explicit when at the dinner table Buster’s father presses Ottie again for the details of the wreck. When tension escalates quickly, Shelia, Buster’s sister, tells their father to leave Ottie alone. He reaches back to hit her when Ottie yells, “Hit *me*.” The old man responds, “No, you have got your suffering – just like her,” and continues to eat his dinner (158). Ottie, Buster, and the entire family are stuck in place.

Ottie walks through the fields before he leaves to go back to the road and truck-driving, which ironically still does not allow him to escape from his past, and he imagines an alternate life. Even in Ottie’s imagination, Ottie and Buster are still stuck in a liminal space. “Ottie knows Bus owns this farm and has sealed it off in time where he can live it every day. And Ottie sees them together a last time: ... two useless children, forever ghosts, they can neither scream nor



play; even dead, they fight over bones” (161). Neither Ottie nor Buster has ever been able to leave the wreckage of the night on the bridge. They are forever trapped in the bardo, like ghosts in limbo between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Windows and ghosts both open the short story “First Day of Winter” as “Hollis sat by his window all night, staring at his ghost in the glass, looking for some way out of the tomb Jake had built for him” (163). Hollis’s brother, Jake, has moved a short distance away to work in a church. As their parents’ health is failing, Hollis is left to take care of them and the worn out farm alone. Jake recommends putting them into a care-home, but Hollis refuses. The tomb Jake refers to is the liminal space in which he lives – stuck between his farm and his parents with only a broken car to keep hope alive.<sup>2</sup>

Thematically, much is made of birth and death in “Trilobites.” Pancake explores this in the image of the cups that hang in the café and “give [Colly] the creeps,” not because one of them belongs to his dead father, but because “the cleanest one is Jim’s. It’s clean because he still uses it, but it hangs there with the rest” (22). The juxtaposition of life and death bothers Colly enough to remind him of his own mortality. He is able somewhat to shake off this troublesome thought by reminding himself that “Jim is old” and his crossing is much closer to its end than Colly’s own. To help drive this point home, Colly looks back toward the window through which he had watched Jim crossing the street through and notices the windowsill “speckled with the crisp skeletons of flies” (23). Finally, the threshold that gave Colly the ability to contemplate his own mortality is itself littered with death.

As Colly is leaving the café, Pancake uses the last verbal exchange between Colly and Jim to close this scene and present a final juxtaposition of birth and death. Colly thinks of his father before turning to Jim, saying, “you stink so bad the undertaker’s following you.” To which

Jim replies, “you were the ugliest baby ever born, you know that?” (24). Pancake presents life as a liminal space between birth and death from the outset of the collection. The interest, however, is found in how his characters traverse that liminal space. Pancake’s presentation of characters who are often stuck in a middle ground between nothing and nowhere is what makes his particular view of the liminal state of living worth examination.

As Colly reflects on the past, specifically the river that flowed there long ago, his reflection becomes almost real as he feels “the cold waters and the tickling the trilobites make when they crawl” (25). His fascination with, and later contempt with, finding a fossilized trilobite is indicative of his desire to hold on to the past. Geoffrey Galt Harpham observes how Colly’s mind “wanders continually from the blank and forbidding present, defined only by his failures and losses, to a prehistory still present but only ambivalently meaningful,” in which “trilobites become a synecdoche for a pastness, which, if he could apprehend, would make the present possible” (266). Sadly, however, Colly also reflects on his relationship to his father and his ex-girlfriend, two characters with whom Colly speaks even when they are not physically present. He muses, “my father is a khaki cloud in the canebrakes, and Ginny is no more to me than the bitter smell in the blackberry briars up on the ridge” (25). His father, his past, is only real in his memory and his imagination; and Ginny, who could have been his future, only represents an imagined future that never came to pass. For Colly, however, the relationship he has with his father and Ginny, even in their absence, allows him to remain willfully liminal.

While Colly does not want to stay stuck in the past, he does not know how to move forward. He often expresses his inability to run the family farm like his father before him. In spite of this, when his mother gets an offer to sell the farm, Colly resents it. Eventually, he gives in to the fact that she will certainly sell and move to Ohio. When Colly finally admits this out

loud, he thinks, “I feel better in a way I’ve never known. . . . It can go now; the stale seed, the drought, the blight – it can go when she signs the papers” (27). Wilhelm argues, “Colly’s major goal is not to open his eyes for enlightenment, but rather to close them to the pain of the past” (43-44). Indeed, Colly cannot move forward until he reconciles his liminal relationship to the past. Although the potential for moving his life forward and leaving the past behind him would be cathartic, he is still unsure about how to accomplish the task.

At the end of the story, Colly seems to resolve to make a move toward the future. He thinks, “I’ll spend tonight at home. I’ve got eyes to shut in Michigan – maybe even Germany or China, I don’t know yet” (37). While he seems to know that he wants to move forward, he does not know how to do it. Stevens also cites the passage above and argues that it is “an assertion of identity finally independent from the history that has constrained him all along” (267). However, even in his resolution to leave the past behind, Colly’s only idea for moving forward is to imitate the movements of his father, despite having tried and failed to do just that with the family farm. Stevens eventually acknowledges this imitation: “though he ends his story with a decision to discover the external world, . . . the places Colly vows to go – Michigan, Germany, China – are the same places to which his father had gone in World War II” (270). Nevertheless, Colly appears self-assured: “I walk, but I’m not scared. I feel my fear moving away in rings through time for a million years” (37). Despite his apparent fearlessness, however, he does not seem poised to make any sort of exit from his liminal space.

Earlier in the story, when Colly is in a pond gaffing for a turtle, he describes the scene using language that is echoed in the quote above. Colly knows where to hunt the turtle when he sees “rings spread where [the] turtle ducked under” (25). The turtle is startled, and its fear is left behind in rings, signaling to Colly his whereabouts. Just as Colly feels his fear “moving away in

rings,” he is, like the turtle, also “a sucker for the roots that hold him” (37, 27). The rings in the water are not caused by the turtle escaping the pond, but instead appear when the turtle dives deeper into its depths in a vain attempt to flee. The comparison between Colly and the turtle makes it clear that Colly, despite his newfound desire to leave, is still stuck floating in a pond full of stagnant, brown water. In other words, Colly remains trapped within the liminal space that is illuminated time and again throughout “Trilobites.”

Some of the same liminal imagery found in “Trilobites” is also present in “A Room Forever.” This story follows an unnamed second mate of a ship as he waits in town for the tug to dock. It opens with the main character looking out through a window, thinking about how “the waiting eats at [him] again” (53). He has only managed to escape one life of liminality for another. The title of the story also suggests the physical liminal space that he inhabits: a one-night hotel room the he may end up keeping forever. The hotel room is a place of possibility for the second mate. It could serve as a tomb if he chooses to kill himself, or it could serve as a home in which he could build a new family. Either choice confines him liminally. The makeshift home in which the story begins and the second mate’s reaction to it immediately suggests liminality.

“A Room Forever” also takes place during a liminal time – New Year’s Eve. The main character remarks on this liminal period of time: “I figure that is my bitch with New Year’s – it’s a start all right – only I think back on parties we had in the Navy, and how we pulled out the stops the year we got to be short-timers, and it leaves me feeling lousy to sit here thinking about parties and work and the baby year and the old worn-out year” (54). For him, the night is about looking both forward and backward. The past, with its parties and companionship, looks much

better than the future in which he will be alone. To remedy his loneliness, he purchases the company of a teenaged prostitute.

The second mate in “A Room Forever” also exemplifies a departure from the typical struggle with liminality present in the other stories. Unlike other characters who are typically stuck in the places in which they were born or grew up, the main character of “A Room Forever” has escaped the rootlessness of his childhood spent with various foster parents. High describes him as “living an ugly, tug-boat existence, he has no family, no friends, no connections in a port of indifferent alleyways and mechanical relationships” (39). Despite having left this past behind, the second mate is still struggling with being stuck in place. For him, the struggle is the isolation he feels in lacking a family unit. Having gone from being a foster child to belonging to a military family to being alone in a cheap hotel on New Year’s Eve, the second mate lacks the permanence most of the characters in *The Stories* cannot find.

Several of the other characters in “A Room Forever” serve to remind the second mate of his own failures. The drag queen who wishes the second mate a happy new year angers him – not because of his sexuality, but more because he hears him “in there laughing at [him], laughing because [he is] alone” (54). The drag queen points out the second mate’s failures by, whether deliberately or not, pointing out that he is alone. Later, when the second mate cures his loneliness by picking up a teenage prostitute, he is again disgusted with another person for providing him a metaphorical mirror in which he can see his own failures. As the second mate and the prostitute have sex, he says, “when I take her, I know what I’ve got – a little girl’s body that won’t move from wear or pleasure, a kid playing whore, and I feel ugly with her, because of her” (58). He blames the ugly feeling he has on her, but he knows it is not her fault. Instead, he realizes that he is forcing himself on her “like the rest” (58). The prostitute’s presence is a direct result of the

loneliness he feels while stuck in place, waiting for the Delmar to dock, and it does not serve to fill his need for companionship.

After his encounter with the prostitute, the second mate leans back in the bed and thinks about “Prince Albert,” a man who “sits at the counter talking to himself” because “he cauterized his brain with a forty-volt system aboard the Cramer” (55). Prince Albert represents the fear the second mate has of having some sort of accident on board the Delmar that would render him handicapped in a way similar to Prince Albert. The second mate compares Prince Albert to the stumblebums he notices “between the buildings” that are “sleeping in the trash they have piled up.” The second mate thinks about how “the stumblebums are like Prince Albert, they ran out of luck, hit the skids” (59). The caliber of people who populate this town – homeless, drunks, prostitutes, pimps, the disabled – all remind the second mate of how he could end up if he does not find a way to escape the cycle in which he has found himself.

The fear of a career-ending accident, however, is not the only fear that Prince Albert represents. He is representative of a much larger problem – escaping the liminal horror of the town itself. The second mate reflects, “I think how there must be ten of his kind in every town down to the delta, and how the odds on ending up that way must be pretty low. Something goes screwy and they grab the wrong wire, make a stupid move on the locks. But if nothing goes wrong, then they are on for a month, off for a month, and if they are lucky they can live that way the rest of their days” (58). He makes the day-in, day-out life of a boatman sound as if it is something one would be lucky to have.

Indeed, having a job is a luxury in the world that Breece Pancake creates. However, at the end of the story the second mate reflects, “I stop in front of the bus station, look in on the waiting people, and think about all the places they are going. But I know they can’t run away from it or

drink their way out of it or die to get rid of it. It's always there, you just look at somebody and they give you a look like the Wrath of God." (60) The "it" is made clear in the list of non-solutions – it is the liminal nature of living a life such as that of the prostitute. She, like the second mate, has run away from home. When she is confronted with the realities of her chosen profession during their sexual encounter, she leaves the second mate's room in anger and goes to the bar to get drunk. Later, the second mate finds her out back of the bar with her wrists slit. The prostitute and the second mate share the same problem – they have escaped from home only to find a similar problem – being stuck in place.

Liminal imagery surrounds both the second mate and the prostitute. The prostitute is a teenager, which, in and of itself, is a liminal state between childhood and adulthood. She is "just a girl – fourteen, fifteen" (55). Additionally, the two are often connected by liminal imagery. Sitting in the doughnut shop, the second mate spots the girl looking at him through a window as if "she knows exactly when [he is] going to fall between two barges in a lurch" (55-56). This connection between the two characters gives the second mate "the creeps" and he decides to "follow her until she gets into another doorway" (56). After a series of liminal images that connect the two, in addition to the seemingly psychic connection they share, he purchases her services for the evening. The second mate has apparently solicited prostitutes before this girl. He refuses to follow her to a liquor store for fear of being set up and attacked by her pimp. Instead, they go down the street to a store of his choosing. On the way, he reflects on the girl. He concludes that "if she is working alone [without a pimp] she won't last two days between the cops and the pimps" (56). The girl's job is described as a perfect example of a liminal state. For the girl, working without a pimp places her somewhere in between legal and criminal activity. In other words, she faces problems from both sides of the spectrum by not being fully in one world

or the other. Like the second mate, her job is liminal in nature in that it is never fully one way or another. Like her, he understands the dangers and hardships one must endure when facing a world like this alone.

As their encounter progresses toward sexual activity, the second mate and the prostitute share a moment together. The second mate notices their reflection, but describes it with more liminal images, remarking to himself, “in the window I see our ghosts against the black gloss of glass” (57). Here, two different liminal images are used to draw a connection between the second mate and the girl. First, the window serves, as in many of the stories, as a threshold between where a character actually is and where he can mentally project himself. The ghost image carries the bulk of the weight of this part of the scene. Here, the ghost implies character and foreshadows future events. Both the second mate and the girl are trapped in a liminal state, like ghosts. Furthermore, the girl will actually end up attempting to kill herself later on. The obvious connection between the two begs speculation as to the fate of the second mate if he remains in this town and in this job.

The connection between the second mate and the other characters who serve as foils to highlight his own fears concerning the liminality of his life is emphasized in the scene in the bar toward the end of the story. As he walks down First Avenue, the second mate says, “[I] look in the windows at all the lucky people getting partied up for New Year’s. Then I see her sitting at a table near the back door.” The two highly connected characters are on either side of a threshold when the second mate walks in and “see[s] her reflection in the mirror behind the bar” (59). It is significant that while in the bar, he sees the girl reflected in a mirror. The second mate looks around the room and returns his gaze to “look for her in the mirror but she is gone” (59). He gets up to investigate and finds her out back of the bar with her wrists cut. When he comes in to tell



the bartender about the incident, he denies knowing the girl at all. However, he clearly knows her on a very intimate level – not as a result of their sexual encounter, but rather because they are essentially suffering from the same problems that form a connection between the two that the second mate may not actually be able or willing to comprehend. Instead, the second mate later concludes, “I think about that girl sitting in the alley, sitting in her own slough, and I shake my head. I have not gotten that low” (60). Perhaps he has not yet gotten that low, but it seems plausible that suicide has been on his mind, as suggested by the title of the story. The only thing that keeps the second mate from seeing the connection he shares with the stumblebums, Prince Albert, or the teenaged prostitute is that he is convinced he has not sunk to their level just yet.

The short story, “Hollow,” also begins with a liminal image in the title. The word *hollow*, in the first sense, describes the landscape in which the characters live or work. The valleys between the mountains are the hollows where the towns are and where some of the mining takes place. The landscape in this case is highly indicative of liminal space in that it is literally a space that is betwixt and between. The word *hollow* can also refer to the ghosts which appear many times throughout *The Stories*.

Twice in “Hollow” the liminal imagery is presented in terms of old versus new. In each case, corrosion is present to imply age and neglect. Buddy, at one point, looks at his trailer and notices the “rust from bolts already streaking the white paint of last summer” (44). In this case, the old is corroding the new in terms of the rust streaking the new paint. Later, after Buddy fires at a group of dogs waiting for access to Buddy’s dog in heat, his girlfriend, Sally, is startled from her sleep before she settles back into bed “watching the blue TV light play against the rusty flowers of ceiling leaks” (46). In both cases, the rust is an image of corrosion that not only suggests the actual rusting of the trailer, but also the corroding of their home, their relationship,

and the present – all of which suffer because of the past. Whether it is Buddy still working at the job he knows and not moving forward, or simply rust streaking paint or causing leaks, the past bears negatively on the present.

In the same scene, Sally thinks about how she is prettier than other girls and lots more fun. Sally is contemplating prostitution in light of the poverty in which she and Buddy live. Buddy, on the other hand, has been contemplating a strike at the coal mine in order to make the case that strip mining the hill is the best way to make real money. Both characters are aching for change – an escape from the liminal space in which they are trapped. After Sally contemplates prostitution while watching television, she presents the first instance of repetition that ties her and Buddy together in their desire for change: “‘Lotsss,’ she whispered, over and over” (46). The next instance of repetition is from Buddy: ‘Strike,’ he muttered over and over” (52). Sally intends to escape her liminal prison by prostituting herself. Buddy intends to call a strike and force the mine to produce more money for him to use to escape his. Ironically, poverty is the same liminal space that drives them away from each other.

Liminality, in the anthropological sense describing rites of passage, is also featured in *The Stories*, specifically in “Fox Hunters.” This short story features a sixteen-year-old fatherless boy who is taken on a fox hunting trip by Enoch, a man who fancies himself a role model for young Bo. However, this hunting trip is an inverted version of a rite of passage in that it depicts a boy who is a man surrounded by men who are boys. Seybert discusses the presence and function of folklore in *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*. Specifically, he discusses the rites of passage present in stories like “Fox Hunters.” In that story, according to Seybert, “the hunting trip is set up to act as Bo’s initiation into the community fraternity” and includes “several moments of transition for Bo” (44). Bo, a highly intelligent teenager, rises early in the morning as he feels it

is “the royal time of his day – these sparse, solitary moments when the rest of the world was either going to bed or not up yet.” During this liminal time of day, Bo reflects on how “he was alone, knew the power in singularity, yet was afraid of it” (61). This fear is what leads him to agree to the hunting trip with people who he does not like or respect. It is also the same fear that plagues many of the characters in *The Stories*.

The first character whom Bo encounters is Bill. Bo demonstrates his maturity during a conversation with Bill when we are told “questions and complex sentences, Bo had learned, were the great shield of liars” (64). Bo is a social outcast largely due to his intellect, which separates him from the rest of the males surrounding him. His only real confidant, Lucy, is a woman with the reputation of being a whore who blackmailed her way to success. Bo often talks with her as she serves him coffee. On the occasion described in the story, Bo reveals that he has become bored in his short sixteen years of life. Lucy laughs at this disclosure, and “Bo watched her face contort, wondered if she was laughing with him or at him, decided that was why the other men called her a whore, and smiled” (67). Not only does this statement reveal the insecurities of the men who disparage Lucy for her strength of character, but it also reveals Bo’s maturity in how he handles her. Instead of being influenced by the men who surround him, Bo has enough strength of character, even at such a young age, to make up his own mind about Lucy. Bo’s strength of character becomes necessary as his friendship with Lucy instigates ridicule from the men.

As they connect over coffee, Lucy tells Bo to brighten up and “quit cryin’ in yer coffee” when he reveals, “nobody wants to talk to [him]” (67). She is not simply diminishing what Bo is experiencing, however, because she displays empathetic behavior when she “remembered growing up” and says, “Yer okay. Just growin’ pains” (67). At the end of their conversation, Buddy leaves Lucy a tip because “nobody tipped Lucy, which compelled Bo to do it” (68). The

amount of empathy shared between the two characters is not found in any of the rest of the characters. In fact, the rest of the cast of this story lack empathy to the degree that they fondly recollect memories of aggravated assault, rape, and murder. Several times throughout the story, much is made of the fact that Bo “ain’t acting like a man” (77). Bo is quick to explain, however, that he is not being treated like one. David Wilson offers an explanation for the distressed domesticity of *The Stories*. He writes, “Patriarchal rule in [the male character’s] families has eroded and provides no legacy of sustenance or authority for these men. Reactions to their dilemmas range from mild enmity to murder, expressed through embodiments of virility and violence” (58). He continues, “Together females and sexually anomalous or feminized males serve as targets to bear the brunt of anger, frustration and violence vented by Pancake’s leading men” (60). What makes a man is certainly a clear theme in this story, and sadly, it is the boy who exhibits the most mature qualities. It is in this way that Pancake uses these characters and their misdirected anger to highlight their failures.

None of the other characters surrounding Bo realize this fact. Instead, they converse about how they each had sex with two girls who died in a car accident, talking about them with absolutely no respect. The conversation only serves to make Cuffy and the others “horny again” while they recollect that one of the girls “coulda hung [them] all if’n somebody didn’t marry her,” the implication being that she was pregnant (81). These are the men who are supposed to be presiding over Bo’s rite of passage into manhood, since “nobody never teached ‘im no better” (81). Clearly, Bo has no need for the education these men can provide. Regardless, Bo is stuck in a liminal clearing in the woods with only these men and the hope that one day he will be able to get his car running so he can escape.

“Time and Again,” one of the lesser-studied stories, also depicts a character struggling with liminality. This character’s struggle is psychological. The main character works on a snow plow each winter to make the money he needs to sustain himself for the year. He does not seem to care much for the people he encounters while driving the snowplow and carries with him a general air of misanthropy, which is in keeping with the fact that he is a serial killer. In a conversation with a hitchhiker, which is how he finds his victims, he reveals that he was a paratrooper in France and is likely suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder from his experience in the war. This is made apparent when he thinks, “All the way up the mountain, I count the men in France, and I have to stop and count again. I never get any farther than that night it snowed. Mr. Weeks passes me and honks, but I don’t honk. Time and again, I try to count and can’t” (88). He complains about the people who drive in the snow, saying, “They never sit still and wait for the salt to work” (84). However, salt can also corrode, and this is exactly what has gone wrong with the old man. He is perpetually stuck in the winter in France in his mind, and is waiting for when he can allow himself to die and be eaten by the same hogs to which he feeds his victims – just as he did in France during the war.

Liminality not only permeates the American pastoral tradition, but it is clearly a defining feature of *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*. Many of the stories depict characters who are stuck in liminal spaces – be it physically in terms of landscape, mentally in terms of dwelling on the past, or emotionally in terms of daydreaming about a tomorrow that promises a better life. Characters like Colly dream of travelling to other countries, Alena dreams of Texas and cowboys, and the narrator of “The Salvation of Me” dreams of Chicago. In each of these and other cases, the dream is to escape the liminality of their lives.

## CHAPTER 5

## Always Coming, Never Comes: Conclusion

Many critics tend to paint Pancake as a regional writer.<sup>1</sup> True though this may be, Douglass points out that describing Pancake as a regional writer “does not mean his region is bounded by lines on the map ... nor does it mean that regional facts overshadow emotional truth” (“Problem” 67). The major themes that Pancake explores can be easily identified in many rural areas in the south, and surely other regions as well. The narrator of “The Salvation of Me” sums up this idea best when he says,

Chester was smarter than any shithouse mouse because Chester got out before the shit began to fall. But Chester had two problems: number one, he became a success, and number two, he came back. These are not your average American problems like drinking, doping, fucking, or being fucked, because Rock Camp, West Virginia, is not your average American problem maker, nor is it your average hillbilly town. You have never broken a mirror or walked under ladders or celebrated Saint Paddy’s day if you have never heard of Rock Camp, but you might have lost a wheel, fallen off a biplane wing, or crossed yourself left-handedly if you have. The three latter methods are the best ways to get into Rock Camp, and any viable escape is unknown to anybody but Chester, and he is unavailable for comment. (133)

To find someone in a small, rural town who feels the way described above, all one would need to do is throw a rock. Douglass asserts that Pancake’s characters “can be found in any town in America or in the world.” For Douglass, Pancake was “a regional writer ... who rooted his personal vision of the world in his own experience of place, both uniquely individual and widely shared” (“Problem” 65, 66). As anyone who has lived, or especially grown up, in a small rural

town can attest, the common cliché used to describe those places is the “black hole that always sucks you back in.” The drug use, the misogyny, the fighting – all are typical of the depravity often found in these small rural towns where people grow up with very little to do. Vice can become the only motivation to get up in the morning – right up until it no longer is. When that day comes, people tend to check out or try to escape.

The latter is much more difficult. In addition to geographic and economic constraints, many of the characters, as well as Pancake himself, share a profound connection to the land. Often, the emotions associated with that connection are ambivalent at best. Finnegan talks about the regional determinism in *The Stories* and explains how “Pancake’s characters, and ultimately the man himself, seem paralyzed by their landscape, by its topography as much as its economy” (97). Residents of rural West Virginia, even thirty years after *The Stories* was published, still demonstrate the same tense connection to the land in interviews and documentaries. Marsha Timpson, a resident of McDowell County in West Virginia, explains to interviewers what the land means to her in the 2013 documentary “Hollow.” Her words could have been lifted directly from the pages of *The Stories*: “These roots get embedded in our souls, and we’re very connected to these mountains.” Many of the children and teenagers interviewed in the documentary express the same sentiment found in Ann Pancake’s “Brush Breaker,” that is, understanding the necessity of leaving home in order to pursue a future. Ann writes, “if by some miracle I were to become [a published writer], I believed it would be contingent on my leaving West Virginia and transforming into someone from someplace else.” While the people in these areas often acknowledge the “love and hate, longing and grief, beauty and repulsion, that shrouds the West Virginian heart when it contemplates its place,” many of them seem as conflicted as Pancake

himself in terms of how they navigate those liminal spaces (79). In a frequently quoted letter to his parents, Pancake writes:

I sort of like working with the [students], especially the home sick cases – I know just how they feel. I must be getting old; today I decided my hobo days were gone forever – I have no desire to live in Europe anymore, I don't even want to go back out west for a while. I'm going to come back to W.Va. when this is over. There's something ancient and deeply rooted in my soul. I like to think that I've left my ghost up one of those hollows, and I'll never be able to leave for good until I find it – and I don't want to look for it because I might find it and have to leave. (qtd. in Douglass, *A Room*, 161)

Breece Pancake was a writer who understood, in many ways, what it means to live in the middle of nowhere. His work demonstrates the depth of that understanding with a tone that echoes the honest, uncensored narration of a man inside of his own head and a sparse style resembling remains that have been picked clean and reshaped on the page. He understood the toll that poverty, despair, and overwhelming isolation can take on individuals trapped in areas like those described in *The Stories*: individuals left wondering about the familiar open jar to which they have grown accustomed, watching as hordes of tiny moths circle them in swarms, waiting without expectation. The characters who populate *The Stories*, and indeed all of the one-stoplight rural towns rarely visited or even passed through, are very much worth knowing. If for no other reason, they provide a picture of the hard-laboring people who helped shape this country – even if it ultimately deserted them. *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* skillfully explores the liminal spaces where the American dream lived, died, and left behind generations of orphans either too old or not yet old enough to drive away.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Douglass also talks about the regionalism of Pancake in his article, “Re-reading *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*.” He says, “A place steeps your blood a certain way, and there are certain things about the imagination of there and from there that remain mysterious without the feeling of place and the influence of its history” (72). He explains that Pancake’s regionalism was unique in that it represents characters who must escape their homes in order to live. Some of them do escape from the confines of their environment, but often make the mistake of coming back. He says that “many of Pancake’s stories are variations of this conflict, concentric rings, like stones thrown in deep water” (73). This theme, Douglass asserts, is central to Appalachian regionalism – it is the “heartbreak of the Appalachian diaspora” (73). Douglass says, “the emotional autobiographical tone of the stories has always presented a problem to the critic, but not to the reader, who readily accepts the stories as the author himself speaking of his own life” (73). I have omitted any biographical reading of *The Stories* as a cursory reading of the biographical material will reveal that Pancake is deeply imbedded in his stories.

Seybert also discusses Pancake’s regionalism. He says, “Pancake creates characters that are natural extensions of their setting” by ascribing a knowledge of folklore to the characters since “the first main function of folklore in [“Trilobites”] and other works is to connect the characters with their region and culture” (45). Additionally, Pancake makes use of local color in the dialect of his characters. Seybert points out the scene in “Trilobites” where Colly and his mother remember Pop referring to cornflakes and chicken as pone-rakes and sick-un respectively (45). Of course, this is just one of many examples.

<sup>2</sup> Broken-down cars are another image that appears frequently in *The Stories*. This paper has excluded a discussion of them largely because Brian Finnegan covers this image well in “Road Stories that Stay Home: Car and Driver in Appalachia and *The Stories of Breece D’J Pancake*.” In the article he discusses how in several of the stories, “the protagonist’s dream of escape rests with his ability to restore a junked car” (94). Furthermore, “those who hope to stay pin their hopes of a better life on a good car” (95). Any exploration of the significance of cars in this work would be largely reiterating Finnegan’s essay.

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