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A PATH TO STORY(S) TABLE

*Kate Nace Day**

This is an essay about writing. It is also an itinerary—in writings and reflections—of the journey I have made from writing about law to writing stories. I have taken only three steps. I think of them in writing as Resistance, Fiction Theory, and Story(s) Table. I also think of them as women’s names—Joy, Ruthann, Eudora—the names of the women who illuminated each step. Joy Williams was the beginning. Eudora Welty saved me from an ending. Professor Ruthann Robson illuminated the path between the two. I write this essay in praise of her.

JOY / RESISTANCE

Our search leads us back to where it all began . . .
bell hooks

Resistance is movement. It is lift. It is sighting a clearing where there is light to see things that aren’t there. It may have no borders or margins, no limits. It lives in childhood games and women loving, in stories told to children and stories told to law, and in Key West in January. I have a little house there bought years ago, and one day I noticed a flier in the local book store: “January Writing Workshop - Essays and Short Fiction with Joy Williams.” So, there I was on the second floor of the Old City Hall looking at the white walls and high white ceilings, and the tall windows that opened to the street noises. There was a ceiling fan. I want to imagine the thick scent of jasmine in the air, but probably not. There was a table. There is always a table.

At the table sat twelve writers and Joy. It was warm. Joy told us she had recently contributed an essay to a collection about why writers write. The essay was about her mother’s illness and death and her own suffering as she watched her mother become too weak for even the simplest tasks—tasks her mother had loved. Joy had written that she would have given every word she had ever written if for one moment she could be a broom in her mother’s hands. That morning, Joy asked us to say why we wrote.

“Resistance,” she said, after I answered.

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I remember her pink high top sneakers and the way she looked out through the hair falling across her face. I remember she looked bored. I took frantic notes on every writer she mentioned—Jean Rhys, Flannery O'Connor, DeLillo—on every thought I understood or hoped to understand.

“Leave a talisman in the room,” she told one writer in aid of a story about a woman’s murder.

“Life is not art,” she told another who argued that a story was good because it was true.

I had submitted an essay entitled *Outlaw(s)* about people/identities that live in the shadow of law. I wanted to celebrate them. I thought I had been very brave, but when Joy picked up the pages of the essay she rattled them.

“Dead,” she said. “This language is dead.”

I wrote down one word, “Dead.” I didn’t know what she meant, but I knew it was true and I knew I wanted to resist dead language. Language would come alive. There would be no footnotes. There would be no violins. Later the next day, I met with Joy alone in her writer’s studio in Bahama Village. Her studio house had a chain link fence and rusted iron gate, a 1950’s turquoise metal chair on the porch and very little furniture inside. In the front room, there was an old wooden desk with a manual typewriter and one lamp. All three windows were closed and shuttered. That’s where she writes, I thought, that’s what she sees.

“Oblique,” she told me. “If you’re going to write about real people, the work is better if you approach them obliquely.”

Dead. Oblique.

I had promised to present my essay on *Outlaw(s)* at The Law and Culture Society meeting in the spring. Weeks before the meeting, I began *Outlaw(s)* again but this time I hoped it would be a story, a story about the idea of resistance to dead language. There were three characters—a little girl child, a legal writing instructor, and a poet who might also have been a thief—each of the three in her own scene.

The first was Blue.

It was one of those spring afternoons, when the City looked more real than remembering. The sky was a simple, big blue. Sunlight dipped and rolled and genuflected. It fell upon the streets, upon the shiny and irregular mica specks in the pavement. And the light passed obliquely, as through a prism.

At the corner of West 35th Street and Fifth Avenue, a young woman in a soft lavender dress bent down to pick up a toddler, who had sat

herself down to play on the warm sidewalk. The little girl squirmed, dirty fingers pushing against the tight grasp. But, the young woman lifted the toddler, whispered, "No," and with a swing of the hip, turned both their faces to the sun. The young woman pointed to the sky.

"Blue," she instructed. "The sky is blue.

The little girl strained and cried. All she wanted was the colors stirring in the pavement light, now out of her reach.

* * *

A detour.

I wrote for hours in the middle of the night. It is now morning and the clock radio has gone off in the other room. I awake to Mozart. I am so privileged, spoiled to have this voiceless space, to have a writing table a few inches from my bed. The books for this project are there—Joy, Ruthann, Eudora—books of essays, collections of stories, novels, and letters from Joy—ordered in time. Itineraries, perhaps, the published path of story.

"Too early for analysis," the waking mind objects.

I look around my writing table at the books. Each has a photo. There is the same photo of Joy on all her books. There are photos of Ruthann on a windswept beach and against a garden wall. Photos of Eudora—old and young. All the photos are black and white and only the very young Eudora looks away from the camera.

"Story writing and critical analysis," Eudora wrote, "are indeed separate gifts, like spelling and playing the flute [A]nalysis has to travel backward, the path it goes is an ever-narrowing one, whose goal is the vanishing point But the writer of the story, bound in the opposite direction, works into the open."

This morning I think I can go forward—not into story—but something else. I want to take Blue's little girl into the open. I reach for two early stories, Eudora's *A Memory* and Ruthann's *Learning To See*. Eudora's girl is old enough to take painting lessons and be in love for the first time. Ruthann's character is a young woman and a professional photographer. Both characters frame the world—one with her hands, the other with a camera. They both encounter an unwelcome realism. Eudora's girl wishes it dead. Ruthann's young woman made social realities the trademark of her photography, a devotion. Neither story, however, is an observer's story.

Katherine Anne Porter once described the gesture of bringing "the observed thing into a frame" as "the gesture of one born to select, to arrange, to bring apparently disparate elements into har-

mony within deliberately fixed boundaries.” Eudora sheds a better light on it. In *One Writer’s Beginnings* she wrote: “The frame only raises the question of the vision”

The frame through which I viewed the world changed too, with time. Greater than scene, I came to see, is situation. Greater than situation is implication. Greater than all of these is a single, entire human being who will never be confined in any frame.

Central to Eudora and Ruthann’s work are human beings who will never be confined in the frame.

Learning to See is the first story in Ruthann’s first collection of stories, *Eye of a Hurricane*. It is a story about a photographer and three of her photographs. The story begins with the first photograph:

The photograph is of a shoeless Mexican boy, about eight or nine, standing on a vacant, flat South Florida road. He and his surroundings are in gray tones. The single color in the photograph is the large, round orange the boy holds in front of him, as if offering it to the viewer. Orange. The fruit looks as if it is about to ripen and burst from the heat, as if it is about to send bright boiled juices down the boy’s gray arm, down his gray ragged shorts to coagulate into a radiant puddle on the gray rocks of sand.

The photographer thinks about the boy when she sells the photograph. She wonders whether the stylish couple who bought the photograph sees him as she did. She thinks of him when she uses the darkroom equipment his image bought.

The second photograph is the “perfect” photograph. While driving across central Florida, Ruthann’s character sees a Black teenager standing on the porch of a small frame house. To the left of the building is an old black hearse with smashed windows. To the right, there is a brilliant fuchsia azalea in bloom. Ruthann’s character doubles back and parks, but when she stops to take the photograph, the boy resists: he changes expression, looks back at her, and starts to come toward her. The photographer then sees the very thing she has trained herself not to see: “that her subject is more than a subject; . . . that he might feel.”

The Mexican boy and the Black teenager are now the living texture of the story. They live on in her memory. When she learns that she has a tumor pressing against her optic nerve, she thinks of the Mexican boy.

“Photography as an art form reeks of death,” she once said in an art class. Faced with blindness, however, she wants to feel.

The third photograph ends the story. It is a self-portrait.

The photograph is of a barefoot white woman, youngish, standing in front of a vacant white wall. There is such a high contrast between the whites and black of her dress that there appears to be no gray. The only other color is the red of a large, sparkling pin. It is stuck in the curve of her breast, as if she is hiding it from the viewer, as if it is real. Ruby real. The gaudy piece of costume jewelry looks as if it is about to summon up crimson fluid down the woman's black dress, down her white legs, to curdle in an erratic scarlet pool on the bleached sheepskin of the rug.

She will never sell this photograph.

At story's end, the artist is both the subject and object. They are one.

This early story suggests Ruthann's later works and stories where lesbian artist and lesbian subject are one. In thinking about all that is involved in making the artist and subject one, I read Katherine Anne Porter's praise of Eudora's early work:

external act and the internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end.

For Ruthann, the human imagination has voice, the dream has waking, and the lesbian existence is admitted and confirmed.

Katherine Anne Porter insisted on not blurring the line between "daylight reason" and "the crazy logic of the dream." I felt sadness at this, sadness for the rebellious young girl of eleven who snuck out of her Catholic convent school to go to horse races, the girl with "a penchant for long odds and black horses with poetic names, no matter what their past records indicated." At sixteen, Porter ran away from another School for Girls, this time to marry a twenty-year old ranch hand. By her own proclamation, "I was frigid as a cucumber, and never really did get over it altogether." It was said that the marriage was never consummated and she was divorced three years later.

We often know too little about the place between waking and dreaming where writers live. Eudora wrote of her childhood, her beginnings as a writer, and about the origins of her stories, but she never spoke or wrote about her adult private life. There's a sadness I feel in that silence. Eudora was a photographer, though, and her first full-time job was writing news stories and taking pictures for the Works Progress Administration, one of Roosevelt's national

measures. In *One Writer's Beginnings*, she wrote that photography taught her about capturing transience, making transient human beings live on in language. To paraphrase Eudora, this is the thing a story writer needs to know.

There was so much I needed to know when I began writing stories. Dead. Oblique. Resistance. The summer after that first writing workshop with Joy, I watched the spongers out in the waters west of Key West standing in the bow of their flat-bottomed skiffs with long poles. I researched sponging—the two methods, types of sponges, quality and uses, and the blights and the accounts of the few spongers left. I wrote what I hoped would be a better story—about an old man named Pinder Verdura, the last sponger in Key West. Pinder is special to me. When Joy read Pinder, she noted all the poetic language—the little moments, when he tucks his feet into the cool of his own shadow, when he turns away in shame from the spoiled surface of the water—and I knew this language was not dead.

“All that language,” she added after a pause, “longing for something to do.”

RUTHANN / FICTION THEORY

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury.

Audre Lorde

Another summer came. Now I had a question: “What was my language longing to do?” There is a little bookstore in Key West, a cluttered stacked room of new books and remainders, poetry, gay studies, first editions, and lots of South Florida’s own unique contribution to summer trash. One day, one of the books I gathered up was Ruthann Robson’s *Sappho Goes to Law School*. I read the chapter entitled *Embodiment(s)* and I found the words “fiction theory.”

“Fiction theory,” Ruthann wrote, “is echoed in legal theory.”

“Mine,” I almost shouted. “I want to occupy that space as mine.”

Over the summer, I read *Embodiment(s)* and footnote 7 many times. I read out from there, in circles of a sort that placed the words in context. But, I began with just words and phrases.

“Seductive texts,” I read.

French lesbian feminists. Quebecois lesbian feminists. Nicole Brossard. Monique Wittig. Gail Scott. Drucilla Cornell.

“The reality of Woman cannot be separated from the fiction in life and in theory.”

“Feminist theory cannot be separately maintained from fiction.”

Texts that invent. Invention as theme. Invention as practice. Texts that “inhabit a new genre, a post-modernist feminist genre, that of fiction theory.”

I turned the pages back and forward between the text and footnote 7.

Footnote 7: “. . . [F]iction theory is ‘a reflexive doubling-back over the texture of the text’ in which nothing, ‘not even theory escapes the Poetry’ . . . fiction-theory, while it may be a method of exploring a space, a gap (never pretending to close it) between two or more ways of thinking, is the antithesis of a bridge.”

The text: “‘But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.’”

Footnote 7: “. . . a method of exploring a space . . .”

The text: “. . . a new genre . . .”

Footnote 7: “. . . a method . . .”

I had language now for what I intended. I had no understanding of any distinction between genre and method, or even whether I was taking any intended meaning from the words, but I didn’t care. I had found a new practice, a conscious feminist method of approaching story and the only way I knew to occupy that space was to write.

So, I wrote. I doubled-back. I remembered. I found the poetry. I ran my hands over texts—the text of my own life, the unwritten and unspoken; texts of the law review articles, and later narratives, mine and others; texts I had read while writing; and new texts. For each character, I drew upon different texts but my practice was much the same. I don’t want to engage in analysis here. That is for someone else. But, each story was a beginning with its own problems, resistance, and longings. The origins of each story matter.

The first story was about two sisters living in Washington D.C in the early 1970’s. The origin of the story was news of the death of a Black woman I had known and loved. Miss Evelyn Jones, the matriarch of a little community on Tennessee Avenue on Capitol Hill, owned her own house. She had never married, had no children of her own, but her house seemed always filled with women and their children. Her reclusive sister and her two children lived with Miss Evelyn and other women and their children seemed welcome. I

never saw a man there. Miss Evelyn worked six days a week at the Government Printing Office. In the evenings, she sat on the front stoop with a cold beer and watched the street.

I wrote my story to honor her. In my story, Miss Evelyn's sister is Miss Josephine.

Evelyn sat barefoot and wide, smiling. Her face was round, dark as wood, slick with heat. The purples, blues, and black of night flowed over her face and into her eyes and sometimes spilled down her neck, like water over a worn riverbed, light and sweat catching on the thin gold chain at her neck . . . In Miss Josephine's eyes, Evelyn was everything that had never been.

For the character of Josephine, I doubled-back over the deep memories of my childhood to the Black woman who had cared for me when my mother had almost died in childbirth. I had written about her several years earlier, of my indebtedness and shame at the child's complicity in not knowing the difference between hands that held me as work and hands that held me as love. I don't remember any word she ever said, but I remember her touch. I imagine her there whenever I write.

Doubling-back. The texture of texts. Nothing escapes the poetry.

Writing Josephine, I touched the texture of many texts. I followed the steps in my own work from memory to reflection and into writings on race and shame, on children and the color line. I felt the texture of Virginia Woolf's *Angel in the House* and Tillie Olsen's lowly, almost invisible essential angel. Back I went to Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's *Living In, Living Out* and Dorothy Roberts's writings on Black Mothers as the victims at the intersection of white women's work and family. There was the poetry of Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark*, Alice Walker *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and others. A few books found their place at my side, tucked between my left hip and my wicker chair. All summer, these books kept me company. There was Jean Toomer's poetic novel *Cane* and Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* and her autobiography *Smile, Please*. These texts gave a cadence to the story's texture, touch, and well-spring of memory.

I gave the character Josephine a garden and an artist-man, Bonaparte, who lived next door. Bonaparte loved her.

I gave her patience and impatience.

I gave her work. Josephine was a domestic—a day worker—and she rode the bus each morning to the white part of town.

On the bus, there were more fragments of overheard talk. Josephine

sat straight and still. Through half-closed eyes she watched the sun rise. The gray shadow of the Capitol rolled by and miles of big blocked buildings, downtown offices and government buildings and museums, all washed white with heat. People got off at every stop, descending into the sunlight, walking slowly down side streets and into back entrances. Just clean ordinary people. Nobody too color struck, no whites. Just ordinary people across from Anacostia and out Prince George's County. People known by working.

I gave Josephine a white woman's house to clean and I got her home safely. Sitting on the stoop, she tells Bonaparte that everything in the white world was "Just a whole lot of nothing."

What I was unable to give Josephine was the lift of a fully developed story. The story collapses too often and leaves too little room for the reader. There is no eye of the story. Part of that was my inexperience; but part of it, I think, was the origin of the story. Eudora wrote that stories "wait upon—indeed hang upon—a sort of double thunderclap at the author's ears: the break of the living world upon what is already stirring inside the mind, and the answering impulse that in a moment of high consciousness fuses impact and image and fires them off together." I am sure she was right. There was something inadequate in the origins of my story about Josephine—not in the women I loved, not in the practice of fiction theory—but, in me. I had not waited for the gesture from the living world and had tried to move off solely from the subjective country of love and loss. The story suffered for that.

That fall, I began another story. This one was about a working class white boy named Snap. My writing practice remained much the same, just the memories and texts differed. For Snap, there were memories of my sweet brother who had died young and his friends, commercial fishermen and gas jockeys, race car drivers and engine wipers. There were our own friends in Key West, fishing guides and carpenters and the island's most legendary bartenders, beloved Shirley and Miss Vicki. There were texts of all sorts. By the end of story-writing, there were just three texts tucked into my writing chair and they were all poetry—Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poems*, Tess Gallagher's *Portable Kisses*, and a book of poems by Raymond Carver, *A New Path to the Waterfall*. I named my forgotten white boy Christian Carver Smith. I gave him a childhood girlfriend, Tess, who would give him his nickname:

"Snap," she announced. "That's your new name."

Tess said it would sound good when he was older and walking into a bar. With a name like that, she said, he was meant for the road. She could see him in Texas maybe or someplace in the New Mexico desert,

tumbling in off the road, into some boozy dark place. Just slap that name right down. With a name like that, she added, you can escape. Anything.

When Tess left town, I gave Snap a college girl with Elizabeth Bishop's method of observation and description.

Carver's poetry was important. These poems were written in the time after he was diagnosed with lung cancer and the book includes excerpts from Chekov. In Tess Gallagher's words, Chekov was "a companion-soul" for Carver and bound Carver's poetry to his fiction. His last collection of stories ended with his tribute to Chekov, *The Errand*. I liked Carver's method, his "more spacious form," his way of dealing with dying. There was maleness that I tried to give to the young white boy in my story who would never escape.

It was a better story. The difference was not in its language or writing practice, but rather in its origins. The story began with a gesture from the living world and that had left open the mystery of the story. I learned that for me, not knowing was better. Now, when I lose my way in the writing, I can go back to the story's origins—in both the living world and my subjective country—and find the clues. I didn't know that then. I just did my best.

Sometimes, though, neither the living world nor the best practice can save a writer. Three years ago, I had one of those times when life requires something else and the living connection seems dead. I mistakenly tried to write through it and failed miserably. Worse, I had written a story that was worse than dead—it was abstract. The story was about a young woman whose two splendidly-named babies had died. I exiled her to a haunted house in a dying town with only her grief, a camera, and her poet husband flush with the success of his book, *The Dead Baby Poems*. Ugh!

That failure hurt. I gave up writing. I waited upon the gesture, held ready the method. Other projects presented themselves. I helped my colleague Marie Ashe write the Amicus Brief for Seventy-Four Law Professors challenging the constitutionality of the war in Iraq. Writing again, I imagined a return to writing about law. Something more about the constitutionality of undeclared wars, I thought, and the First Circuit's reasoning that, No, it was not a political question, but Yes, the question was still non-justiciable because the question was not ripe! I shook that project off. Maybe, something in Law and Literature.

I was lost. Then I sent some of my work to Ruthann and into that wide and empty place where I was living without writing, came

Ruthann. She sent a note and then months later her writings—creative non-fiction, stories, poetry, and her scholarship. Once again, without her even knowing me, she made space for me. Then, Eudora came marching in. Eudora’s stories and her essays on writing taught me the importance of a story’s origin. In her essay on the origins of one of her early stories, *A Worn Path*, she wrote:

One day I saw a solitary old woman She was walking; I saw her, at middle distance, in a winter country landscape, and watched her slowly make her way across my line of vision. That sight of her made me write the story. I invented an errand for her, but that only seemed a living part of the figure she was herself: what errand other than for someone else could be making her go? And her going was the first thing, her persisting in the landscape was the real thing, and the first and the real were what I wanted and worked to keep.

There is such extraordinary love in Welty’s writing. There is such strength in Ruthann’s work. These two women made it possible for me to go back to that sadly abstracted story of the young woman and her babies. The young woman and her babies were the first thing and her leaving was the real thing, and the first and the real were what I wanted and worked to keep. Eudora had taught me about movement and sense of place, so I placed the story’s beginning on an imaginary island and I gave the young woman a ferry for her leaving. There were animals—lots of animals, as Joy noted—and when I lost my way, I held my story up to Eudora’s worn path for clues.

It was the beginning of writing in aid of life. I sat at my writing table as straight as Jackson Mississippi, imagining my young woman through Eudora’s eyes. It was weird and amazing and along the way I caught my first glimpse of what I now call Story(s) Table—that strange plateau where the writer is I, ineffably and ineffaceably alone.

OH EUDORA! / STORY(S) TABLE

. . . as in cliff’s edge, water’s shore, night’s stars.

Sylvia Peck

Years ago, I stopped going to faculty meetings. Last winter, I questioned whether I could go back. Is it possible, I asked, for a woman—for me—to sit at Patriarchy’s Table and not starve?

“A new metaphor,” Marie suggested as we had dinner together at the little Italian café near the Law School.

“The makings of a prose poem,” my artist son offered in a phone conversation from Amsterdam.

I did a Lexis search: Federal court cases—“woman w/10 table.” I found sex-based mortality tables. I found a Black woman in the South removed from a dining table for violating the “practice” of segregation. There were men sitting at tables with wives and concubines. I found crumbs that fell from tables, waitresses and pregnant women not allowed to wait on tables. There were men turning the table. There were pool tables, abortion tables, a beaten woman bent over a table, a beaten woman in a remote area known as Table Mesa. They read like movie trailers in our pop culture of death. They read like sound bites from the evening news. There were even women sitting at kitchen tables, but never were there women like the women in Ruthann’s writings and stories, women at a table being nourished.

I went about rescuing tables. I restored an old kitchen table from the barn at my mother’s house and rescued a writing table that had been my son’s, and I thought about Story(s) Table. Writers are often asked about their work, their thoughts on writing, on inspiration and process, and in their answers, they often quote other writers:

“A true method . . . tells its own story, makes it own feet, creates its own form. It is its own apology.” — Emerson

Annie Dillard

. . . the best sentence, the one that echoed in my head long after I had put Monsieur Teste down: “One must go into himself armed to the teeth.”

Doris Grumbach

I resolved to ask her [Anna Akmatova, the persecuted Russian poet]: now, after so many years of work, when she writes something new, does she have a sense of being armed, of having experience, of a path already trodden? Or is it a step into the unknown, a risk, every time?

Naked, on a naked soil. Every time.

Lydia Chukovskaya

The very best image of a writer at work is in Ruthann’s second collection of stories, *Cecile*, about the narrator, her lover Cecile, and their son, Colby. *Desert Scars* is the story of their cross-country journey. “We’re almost there,” Cecile announces as the story begins:

The land has been turning pinker and my softest jeans have been getting tighter all day.

There she is - my writer at Story(s) table - a woman in tight jeans, her softest jeans. When I imagine what the writer brings to a story, what she needs to know for a story, I am sure that it is the knowledge inscribed in her body and whatever else she can tuck into the back pocket of her jeans.

Desert Scars is a beautiful story. Its edges move forward into the desert and back to childhood and adolescence. Here's just one excerpt:

"So that's why you like pink," Colby says, as if in explanation.

"Yes," I agree. What I don't add is that pink seemed the only color magical enough to transform the gray world I lived in, that I carefully shaded the pinks and thought of them as scars produced by centuries of survival. And what I especially don't add, but what Cecile must remember from the first time I told her this story—Colby safely asleep while we looked at maps on our kitchen table—was how I tried to create that pink world of mesas for myself.

I like the bodies in jeans writing stories, making pink worlds. I like the cover photo on Ruthann's most recent collection, *The Struggle for Happiness*—the photo of a woman's belly in her button-fly blue jeans.

What shall be tucked into those soft jeans? I know each writer is unique. I am not an angel, a poet, or a revolutionary. I am not a lesbian. I am not even young. My body holds memories of my son and my beloved, memories of a shooting star over New Orleans where my brother died. My body holds most particularly my own mortality. For me, it is time to sit alone—windblown, small and mortal—to follow whatever waits upon the gestures from the living world. I am still just beginning.

Ruthann knows all the lessons of story writing and takes them for a ride. At Story(s) Table, Ruthann invites you in, welcomes you, and opens spaces for you to be in touch with the heart of her stories. She wields aesthetic principles as directions to follow, resist, or invent. Her narrators' voices are in a present tense so immediate that I came to think of the merge of voice and tense as her own "present voice." Point of view shifts and weaves and pours like "the hot-pink funnel" of a hibiscus flower. The beginning is the end. Time is a character with edges cutting forward and back. Advance, regression—time takes the story with her.

Ruthann is so generous with her characters. She gives them gifts and the many languages of outlaws and resistance, law and theories, and poetry, always poetry. Her languages materialize the

characters, but even before there are words there are lyric images, then, words fill the pictures.

There is her deep pink/deep blue sense of place. There are questions she answers and questions she leaves unanswered—the story’s mystery left moving into the open. There is a question left unanswered, I think, in her most recent collection—*The Struggle for Happiness*—that feels central to all her work. The final story, *Close to Utopia*, is a longer story in three parts.

Part One begins: “The kitchen floor is my sky.” An amazing first line, as good as a title, and we are in. The character’s voice offers poetry and mystery, both of which will hold us to the end. Her situation is real and symbolic: she is a teenager chained to a radiator pipe by her mother because she loves women. Her name is Joy. Her mother leaves the television on and she watches the news of a she-wolf being kept as a pet near where she now lives just off Utopia Parkway in Queens. Such a simple clear beginning, yet it swirls outward as it moves forward, making more and more room for Women.

There are many Women in Part Two. The first two Women are Kia, a lawyer who wanted to be a photographer, and her lover Summer, who is a photographer and an animal rights activist. Kia becomes Joy’s lawyer and Summer becomes the voice of the wolf. These women move in time through the crisply drawn and remembered world of the homeplace in many of Ruthann’s stories, Florida, and a possible new one in Quebec, “where summer is a deep breath, as long and as necessary.” Kia and Summer escape to Quebec with the wolf and Joy. At the wolf sanctuary, there are other women waiting. Josephine and Madame, Blanch Saint-Clair and women named Eden and Collie. Each woman is characterized and given her own full story.

Part Three begins:

“The sky is my mother.”

Joy must decide whether to stay with the Women in Quebec or go back to Queens.

I would like to ask the woman called Madame what she thinks. I would like to ask the woman named Eden. I would like to ask the woman Collie who owns this place but doesn’t live here. I would like to ask each of them what she thinks about this place and about love.

Whether love is a place.

But instead I have to ask the sky.

Several of the characters in *Close to Utopia* shed light on the

question whether love is a place. Josephine, a beautiful woman from Martinique the island of beautiful women, tells Joy that every soul has a place. Some are born in places that match their souls, others must search “for the place where our souls match the soul of the land.”

Eden explains that “her life has the logic of a map, dotted with inevitable continents.”

Madame is “weary of words” and no longer believes that language is the ground of being. She says that where she lives is the important part of living of her life.

Summer tells Joy about a photograph of a silvery round rock that “looked like a globe almost.” Summer called the photograph Join the Struggle for Happiness because Kia suggested that name, even though she wanted to name it Utopia. Summer tells Joy that Kia is her Utopia.

The best stories leave the question unanswered. I am left thinking about whether love is a place. I hold the question up to what Eudora wrote about place:

Place is one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction, perhaps the one that gazes benignly enough from off to one side, while others . . . are doing a good deal of wing-beating about her chair, and feeling, who in my eyes carries the crown, soars highest of them all and rightly relegates place into the shade . . . Yet, as soon as we step down from the general view to the close and particular, . . . place can be seen, in her own way, to have a great deal to do with that goodness, if not to be responsible for it.

I think love is a place in Ruthann’s writing hands. I think love is a place in her body or tucked into her jeans. Love is the raw material of her writing and the goodness in the writing itself. She creates the place that holds love, an undying space between her and the reader where the story comes alive. I wonder if there are places that hold the texture of beloved bodies, where the memory of those bodies will live because of words.

* * *

It is after 3 AM. I have been dreaming and I awake wanting to read Pinder, my old story of the last sponger in Key West. I move quietly to the light on the writing table and his blue folder is there. Back into bed, I am relieved. This is my only copy. It bears the reading marks and comments of a young writer friend, one of Joy’s small group of writers, MaryAnn Suehle. Her handwriting was

clear so I know which descriptions and lines she loved. As I read her notes again, I know she understood that I couldn't let him go and become a story. MaryAnn died last summer. Just weeks before she died, she wrote to me and asked me to think of her. She said that she imagined me in Key West, somewhere on the blue waters watching the waves.

I tuck Pinder and MaryAnn's notes in beside me and fall back sleep. Later that morning, I will write a poem about Pinder and his beloved blue waters—a poem that belongs here, I think, in this celebration of living and writing.

* * *

AFTERWORDS

“There would be no footnotes. There would be no violins.”

These are words in this essay. They are also promises I had made myself as part of resistance to dead language. I know they are true words, good promises, even if I remain unsure of their meaning. I have reflected on the question of their meaning. I have researched them: “footnote” w/25 of (legal writing) and “violin” w/25 words of (legal writing). I found few violins—which pleased me mightily—leaving me free to wonder about sentimentality and tropes in legal writing. On the other hand, I found over one hundred law review articles, written with and without footnotes—an almost seventy-year old debate about “the footnote.” Not surprisingly, none of these articles concerned violins or worried about dead language.

Publication of this essay presents the question of meaning again. The essay was written without footnotes. It was written with the intention that it would be published without footnotes. This had nothing to do with any debate about “the footnote.” In fact, I sometimes find the architecture of legal writing very lovely, its use of footnotes as augers deep into the bedrock and marl of the past or as vanes high into the shifting winds of theories that might some day blow the whole house down. This essay, however, is not about architecture or structure. It is about resistance and I cannot help but think of resistance as movement.

Thus, I am very grateful to the Editorial Board of the New York City Law Review for respecting my intention to publish the essay without footnotes. For the reader, however, the question of meaning might be aided by knowing some of the sources that footnotes might otherwise provide. I present them here not as authority but as company, my own selected company of women and

writings. Some of the women are valued friends. Others I have never met. Some are long dead. I am deeply indebted to them all.

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