

Walker

written by Guest Contributor | July 23, 2018



The summer I turned fourteen, my best friend Katie was in love with the chiseled lifeguard who presided over her community pool from his chair high up in the heavens. He twirled his lanyard in showy circles. His hips tapered into shimmering equilateral muscle, a Bermuda triangle we nervously giggled over. We called him “The Greek God.” His name was Greg.

Katie had kissed a guy before; I was years away from leaning into any face. I knew a girl on my neighborhood swim team who liked to pass hard candy back and forth with her boyfriend while making out. “I can tell an orange Skittle,” she had bragged to me, “without even *looking* at it.” That summer, instead of kissing, I practiced identifying the colors of Skittles with my eyes closed. Sometimes, I practiced on the long walks Katie insisted we take to Greg’s front lawn.

On any given weekend, my mother would drop me off at Katie’s house (ironically, driving right past Greg’s house), where Katie would greet me like a kind but exacting coach:

“Good! You’re wearing comfortable shoes this time.”

To better get us into the spirit of pilgrimage, Katie and I would listen to the cassette single of “Against All Odds” on her portable stereo, a song that opens with the lyric, “*How can I just let you walk away?*” It didn’t seem to me that Greg was doing any of the walking. But Katie’s eyes would well up from want, and as her best friend, I’d produce a near identical response, the blisters on my heels still raw from the week before.

Katie always came prepared: water bottle, Sun-In, Fun-Dip. She navigated the sidewalk with steely determination, but not without sincere gratitude for my company and the occasional thrown bone: “youth group Brian likes you,” she would say, knowing full well that this wasn’t true. We would ascend her suburban hill, following identical yards bordered by hot pink azaleas, until we passed the swim club where Greg lifeguarded. If he wasn’t there, we would keep going for another fifteen minutes or so, finally cutting across a dry creek bed to emerge into the parking lot of the arcane shopping center with its shuttered fur and piano stores. Before us lay the two-line highway. I never told my mother we walked this far. “I worry you’ll get hit,” she used

to say. "Or taken." It was time to turn around, to track in reverse.

We would repeat this exact course until Katie had amassed enough courage to scout the side street to Greg's cul-de-sac.

I didn't resent Katie for asking me to walk miles for an unrequited crush. Something larger, something vaguer, agitated me. I was starting to realize how each step was inseparable from the one before. I had begun to grasp that eventually, even if you don't head back, the furthest you can go is still connected to your point of origin.

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"Whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct?" asks Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*.

My students bring me what at first I think of as small tokens of appreciation: postcards from Cape Cod, a paper mache whale, a scrub brush with flat flukes for a handle. "That handle is 100% accurate," I can now say, having learned that a sperm whale's tail isn't vertical, but horizontal. This semester, I'm teaching a special topics course on *Moby-Dick*. When one student carts in her grandfather's heirloom whale tooth, because, as she puts it, "I thought you'd like to touch it," I realize these gifts aren't testament to any excellence in teaching, but rather, sad proof that I've withdrawn into singular focus. They seem like attempts at rescue, reminders of the physical world.

I've made a Tumblr for the class called "You've Got Ishmael," which I sometimes update hourly. I'm a walking compendium. I recognize the book in nearly everything. Knowing I'm not alone in my obsession provides some comfort – *Moby-Dick* has a history of engendering devotion, often via masochistic creative projects. I'm thinking of artist Matt Kish, who for a year and a half retreated daily into a 3X6 blue closet until he had illustrated all 552 pages of the Signet Classics paperback edition. Melville himself evinced the same profound commitment to *Moby-Dick*. He uprooted his family from New York to the mountainous Berkshires, where, stowed away in solitude, he could rise early and work on the book uninterrupted, only bodily hunger forcing him to stop.

In December 1850, facing Mt. Greylock from his desk at Arrowhead, Melville wrote the following to the editor of *The New York Literary Journal*: "I look out my window in the morning when I rise as I would out a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic." When I consider what compels me to return to *Moby-Dick*, it's Melville's emphatic need to write it. Even his home conformed to the shape of his thoughts. When faced with an inability to secure the mainstay of his brain, he found a way to spin obsession into art.

I tell my students about the word *calenture*: the term for a delirium fever that caused sailors in the tropics, mistaking ocean for meadow, to jump overboard. I want a term for the opposite: expecting to break water, to dive deep, and instead, finding only hard surface. If I'm unable to quit an idea, if I can't reach clarity, it feels like I'm battering my brain against dry land.

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After the birth of my son Miles, I experienced heightened anxiety accompanied by a surge in creativity. I wrote more, but not the Great American Novel. I made lists on my phone of all the ways that Miles could die. "Why don't you go for a walk?" more than one friend suggested, not realizing that my biggest fear once Miles became mobile was that he would tumble down stairs. What would happen once he was old enough to toddle into traffic? How could walking provide any relief? Walking was the problem.

Literary scholars talk about the theory of two *Moby-Dicks*: there's the version that existed before Melville took walks with Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the version after. On August 5th, 1850, the two men met for the first time as part of a group trek up Monument Mountain for a champagne picnic. Their conversations, both on Monument Mountain and on subsequent walks, initiated a shift in Melville, transforming *Moby-Dick* from clear-cut whaling adventure into metaphysical treatise, an interrogation of both God's distant indifference and deliberate vengeance. You can feel him writing chunks of the book in manic transport. You recognize that the same single-mindedness that drives Ahab to hunt the whale, that drives Ishmael to build a lexicon, is also driving Melville to create.

While anxiety had always marked me, early motherhood wracked me. I suffered violent, intrusive thoughts. In wanting so badly to keep my child out of harm's way, I sometimes found myself imagining, in graphic detail, and against my will, how I might inflict that harm. Carrying him down the stairs, tucked securely into my chest, I might hear the thud of his delicate, unformed cranium on the hardwood floor. In the kitchen, his weight strapped to my body, I might see flashes of my exacting hand with a knife, scrimshawing his sweet-smelling skin. I read that these thoughts aren't uncommon to new mothers. If we can control the moment of crisis, determine its exact coordinates, then we can spare ourselves unfathomable pain.

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I was a late walker: 18 months. My mother loves to tell the story of how in a panic, she took me to the pediatrician. "She shows no interest in even standing," my mother confessed, her arms like a seatbelt buckling me into her lap. "I must be doing something wrong."

The doctor asked her a series of questions, culminating in, "Do you ever put her down?", to which my mother, after giving this some thought, answered honestly: "No. I'm afraid she'll get hurt."

This is the part in telling the story at which my mother laughs. "We stopped carrying you. You walked about a week later."

My anxiety leads me back to my mother. My mother, whose maiden name is Walker.

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Miles was a terrible sleeper. For the first year of his life, he slept no more than three consecutive hours. The most effective way I could get him down was to pace. I would strap him in the Ergo carrier, cover his head with the attached hood, and walk the length of our living room, one whole wall of which was windows, with a view of Cayuga Lake. Like Ahab, I slept upright. Like Ahab, I traversed the quarterdeck with steadfast intent.

That first winter was one of the bitterest on record for upstate NY. My husband Dan and I had left Georgia when I was 37 weeks pregnant, after he was offered a tenure-track teaching job. Between giving birth and learning how to care for an infant, I hardly had time to make friends. I was both a natural and a nervous mother, a combination I never anticipated, an only child with no experience with babies. I spent most afternoons trapped indoors watching snowfall accumulate. I must have walked hundreds of miles with Miles, but the same stretch of floor – I can remember collapsing with exhaustion, a cold bunless hotdog in one hand and a spit-up rag in another, laughing at his name, saying it out loud, Miles, Miles, a prophesy I was fulfilling step-by-step.

When I finally did brave the weather and my fear of driving in snow, I took Miles to the movies. I count among my greatest pleasures seeing movies alone. This particular theater offers Crybaby Cinema, a special weekday showing of current films for parents with small children. They dim the lights and turn the volume lower. The idea is that it doesn't matter how disruptive anyone is; chaos is expected.

The movie playing was *Wild*. *Wild* tells the story of Cheryl Strayed's decision to hike the Pacific Crest Trail as a way of reclaiming her life from dissolution. Miles woke up 30 minutes in. I changed his diaper in the aisle to the soft glow of track lighting, but when he started crying, I strapped him in and walked. I walked our row, and then, for a change of scenery, I walked the next. And the next. On the giant screen before us, Reese Witherspoon was also walking, trying to escape self-destruction and the blunt fact of loss. Our footsteps were moving in tandem, so that I was better able to recognize my own inner bustle mirrored in art. This larger-than-life reproduction relayed a familiar but unworkable message about worry: you can walk as much as you want, but at some point, it's healthier to stay put.

The dominant rhetoric for anxiety is spinning. We believe that the anxious are stuck in a circular rut. We insist that they merry-go-round the same thoughts. But I've never experienced repetition this way. My obsessive thoughts make me walk a line. They deny me the closure of a hoop snake or the wholeness of a planet.

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There is a moment in *Moby-Dick*, the last of the great anatomical digressions, in which Ishmael recounts the time he walked through a sperm whale's skeleton (and reveals to us that tattooed on his right arm are this skeleton's exact dimensions). The whale, transported to a verdant wood by island natives after they found it washed up dead against a cocoa-nut tree, is encountered by Ishmael years after its death, trellised with overgrowth, the skull kept lit

in constant tribute with mystical flame. Our narrator enters through the ribs; he imagines, like Theseus in the labyrinth, moving through the vaulted leviathan with a ball of twine; that as he moves, his unspooling is both a way back as marker and a way forward as measurement. "But soon my line was out," Ishmael tells us. "And following it back, I emerged from the opening where I entered."

I envy Melville his certainty after his walks with Hawthorne, how his novel parted like the Red Sea. I envy him his emergence.

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Miles caught a cold when he was 14 months old. In a matter of minutes, his temperature spiked from 101 to 106. He was so vacant he was almost luminous, a shaking dwarf star. I cradled his burning body in bed. I tried to absorb his fever, but in doing so, could feel my own palm transferring heat back to his forehead as I stroked it. His slack mouth against my left breast – the only certain comfort I could offer – was white-hot.

"Call an ambulance," I whispered to Dan, when I had always imagined that I would scream.

Some minutes later – I was both outside of time and walled in by it – the paramedics appeared in our room. I apologized to them for co-sleeping on a mattress on the floor. "We're getting a bedframe," I promised, as they checked my son's vitals. I wasn't wearing any clothes. They entreated me to dress quickly as Dan carried Miles outside, limp and sweaty, to be strapped onto a gurney. It was a mild September night. I remember seeing the comical name of the ambulance company printed on the side of the vehicle – Bangs – and thinking: *So. This is the way my world ends. Not with a whimper but a bangs.*

When confronted with your worst fears realized, your anxiety made flesh, there is maybe an initial adrenaline rush of gratitude. Exigency replaces obsession. No longer do you tread the floorboards of *what if*. You take solace in standing dead center. You find a kind of stillness in action.

What follows that blip of relief is terror.

Soon, I wanted nothing more than to return to the familiar overwrought state of *before*: of picturing him wind-milling through a sewer grate, or choking on sweet potato, or sinking like a fat stone in the middle of a lake.

Anticipation of loss isn't worse than loss itself. I now knew I would do anything to avoid the moment of crisis.

We spent the night in the ER, where we took turns making Miles smile by pretending to ride an invisible elevator down into the basement. "Oh no, I forgot the bananas!" one of us would joke, hamstrings on fire from lowering and raising ourselves so slowly. My parents were staying in a nearby hotel at the tail-end of a visit from North Carolina. We called them that morning to tell them the news: that Miles had been diagnosed with pneumonia; that his fever had broken; that there would be no permanent damage. We had chosen not

to wake them in the middle of the night. I had, after all, inherited my mother's anxiety, and I knew that her horrible imagined scenarios were *my* horrible imagined scenarios.

You think you have all the time in the world. You think that time stretches before you like a brightly-colored lane divider in a never-ending pool, that time is a comforting, undulating marker.

The following afternoon, my mother phoned me from an ER in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She sounded eerily calm against the background of busy staff and beeping machines. "Your father," she explained, "went into septic shock on the ride home. I think he'll be fine. There's no need to come. I'm still carrying my purse."

I left immediately, drove the two and a half hours to yet another hospital, sleep-deprived from attending to Miles. I wanted to register my grief as gently layered, as if fresh trauma stacked upon the newly old could provide some semblance of cushion. Instead, the dark stretch of highway, meeting my even darker thoughts, edged me into sharp corners.

My 78-year-old southern mother was indeed still carrying her purse. She kept both hands on the clasp, as if poised to reach inside to pay for groceries. Her short hair was matted on one side and her linen jacket rumpled. She seemed surprised to see me.

"He's in there," she said, pointing to a room with a closed curtain. "Awake but weak. They're giving him a 50 percent chance. Can you believe it?"

Hooked up to a cat's cradle of tubes, my father appeared small and pale, but he could wink. A nurse informed me that he had collapsed from walking pneumonia. "He didn't know he had it. That's how it happens. One minute you're walking around fine, the next you're not."

My mother insisted that I check into a hotel for a few hours and try to sleep: I would need to be the one to call family. I spent most of the night throwing up into a toilet. I had no idea that shock could produce such a violent, physical reaction. My breasts were swollen because I hadn't nursed. Each time I bent over the bowl, they swung heavy against my shirt, sore pendulums. I thought about how my father had most likely gotten pneumonia from my son and how this felt like a form of retrograde inheritance.

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Melville and Hawthorne took a final seaside walk together in Southport, England in 1856, when Melville was passing through on his way to Jerusalem. Hawthorne was always more reticent, more reluctant to show any enthusiasm for their time together, but he was willing to let his friend talk. They hadn't seen each other in years. We know from Hawthorne's journals that Melville liked to obsess over ideas, although Hawthorne rather graciously labels this obsessiveness as "persistence:"

It is strange how he persists – and had persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before – in wandering to and fro over these

deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting.

I think back to my childhood walks with Katie. After traipsing her subdivision for over an hour, we'd stop and stare for five minutes, gazing up at what we imagined to be Greg's bedroom window. We'd break open the Fun Dip, and Katie would silently bring a mound of sugar to her lips, still staring, only half-hoping to be seen. "That's his *house*," she'd say. Then I would raise or lower the flag on his mailbox: our cue to head back.

It consumes you, the inability to stand still.

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My father lived. In the two years since his hospitalization, he's gone into septic shock on two more occasions, surviving both. Polycythemia vera, a blood cancer in which your bone marrow makes an excess of red blood cells, has stripped him of any immunity. Once a month, usually on the same day, he receives an infusion of white blood cells and a phlebotomy of red. "You would think these treatments would just cancel each other out," he likes to joke.

My parents are too infirm to visit, so we rely on phone calls and Skype. Sometimes, I Google map Raleigh to Ithaca, reducing distance to two connected dots. It takes ten and a half hours to drive or seven days to walk. I'm always on heightened alert for the call that will tell me he is sick again, that there are new odds to beat.

I tell them about Miles' predilection for running away from me in public. "He hid under a stall in the women's bathroom," I say. My parents laugh, reminding me of the time when I was three and bolted from them at the State Fair. "We found you in the horse stables. You were missing for hours!" my mother says, barely able to contain her glee. I can't understand her revisionist spin on anxiety. I know that at the time she must have cried terror-stricken tears. I know she must have had visions of a stranger's gloved hands, of a white, windowless van and masking tape over my mouth.

I tell them that after Miles ran into the street, I bought a leash. "It's attached to a cute striped backpack," I say, as if stripes can negate the creepiness of putting a child in a restraint. When the backpack arrived, I realized it was way too small, practically doll size. I made Miles put it on in the living room. The harness rode high on his shoulders. "Go on, run away from me," I said. He stood there, confused by my request. "This backpack will be fun!" I tried. "Go for it." He took about ten deliberate steps. Then he pulled the line taut like a whale straining against the boat of me, pulled until there was no more line to give.



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