



Patrick Madden

Once More to “His Last Game”

Here is a thing that happened recently, though its initial happening happened seven years ago, and its primary happener died two years ago, and, look, here it will happen again, in a moment, as you read, which is a thing the primary happener would have said, indeed often did say, in general though not of this particular happening, in long sinuous sentences such as the one I am writing here, under his influence and in his honor, and in order to revive my friend the primary happener, whom I miss dearly and whose presence I long for and so sometimes revisit in memory and in reading, which is a kind of memory, too, often someone else’s. The thing that happened was this: I was in a classroom with a group of eager writers, all taking turns reading E. B. White’s essay “Once More to the Lake,” at the behest of my friend and fellow teacher Robert Vivian, who’d chosen the essay for its rhapsodic lyrical moments, especially the interruptive paean to summer (“Summertime, oh summertime, pattern of life indelible, the fade proof lake, the woods unshatterable, the pasture with the sweet fern and the juniper forever and ever, summer without end...”) somewhere in the middle. Jane was reading, I think, the fifth paragraph, and I was following along with my eyes and my ears, reading the essay as much in the classroom as in memory, enjoying its music and its images, progressing both line by line and atmospherically as I recalled the general themes of the piece, when she voiced the wry line “When we got back for a swim before lunch, the lake was exactly where we had left it...”

The words hit with such force that I felt tears welling in my eyes. Jane kept reading, but I lost her voice, and my mind left the present completely. I *knew* this phrase, “exactly where we had left it,” and, unusual for me, I knew where I knew it from. It was a line from Brian Doyle’s “His Last Game,” about

Brian's last visit with his brother Kevin, who was then dying of cancer. [And here we have finally arrived at not only the happening (this epiphanic moment of connection between White and Doyle), but the happenner.] They drove a while aimlessly around the college campus where Kevin had taught. Eventually they found a pickup basketball game, which they watched in admiration. It is one of my favorite essays by one of my favorite writers, who happens to be one of my favorite people, who happened to have died not long before, as I've mentioned. I felt that the phrase was an Easter egg, a message, now from the great beyond, connecting two essays with similar themes and similar emotional resonance. I felt as if Brian were winking and whispering, revealing his intention via this quotation. I understood: just as White's exploration of mortality broaches ontological questions of selfhood by conflating father and self and son, Doyle's exploration of mortality melds his brother with himself, via memories and stories. I have preached on this feature elsewhere. It is a powerful idea, one that Brian explored frequently, but in this particular essay, he did it with poignant artistry and crescendoing subtlety that are unmatched in his other works, or in others' works, as far as I'm concerned.

To wit (the essay's third paragraph, which is one long sentence):

We drove deeper into the city and I asked him why we were driving this direction, and he said I am looking for something that when I see it you will know what I am looking for, which made me grin, because he knew and I knew that I would indeed know, because we have been brothers for 50 years, and brothers have many languages, some of which are physical, like broken noses and fingers and teeth and punching each other when you want to say I love you but don't know how to say that right, and some of them are laughter, and some of them are roaring and spitting, and some of them are weeping in the bathroom, and some of them we don't have words for yet.

I would note, as I've noted before, how this sentence generates a transition or transformation, how Kevin's diction suggests or even creates a unification between the brothers: "I am looking for something that when I see it you will know what I am looking for." Note the pronouns, how "I" *becomes* "you." While this essay

is narratively about a poignant evening shared by brothers in the shadow of pending death, it is thematically or metaphysically about the impossible struggle to really *know* another person, which we can sometimes do, or approximate, via writing, essay writing particularly.

So the E. B. White quote was yet one more point of entry into the essay, another thing to mean, especially as Brian was an E. B. White fan, as all essayists are, but perhaps especially Brian, who had elsewhere signaled his respect by titling an essay “Twice More to the Lake,” which I had recently reread as I wrote a summary of the many emails he had sent me with subject lines of three or more “heh”s. Brian had sent it to me and probably others in one of his frequent surprise essay emails. I believe “Twice More to the Lake” has never been published before now, here at *Assay*, and I thank Brian’s wife, Mary, for granting us permission to share it with you. While I was trying to ascertain its publishing status, my online search for its title turned up only two others who’ve thought to name their essays sequentially after White’s: Brett S, who writes of taking his 15-year-old daughter to Nepal, and an anonymous student on a paper-sharing site who writes of vacationing with family at Walloon Lake in Michigan. Why someone would want to plagiarize another student’s reminiscences is beyond me, and in this particular case, I warn sternly against it, given sentences like “The breeze coming from the placid body of water was so welcoming jumping there could not be resisted.”

Speaking of sentences, here’s the first one from Doyle’s “Twice More to the Lake,” another entire paragraph with only one period (as was his wont):

Once a summer, when I was a boy in New York, my family would cram snarling into the Rambler station wagon and sail north into the teeming wilderness of Connecticut or Vermont for a week on a lake, during which we would be punctured by vast insects, catch fish the size of subway tokens, and inhabit sagging moist cottages and cabins so dense with that unmistakable dusty weary woody moldy summer-cabin scent that it entered our skin and bones and innermost cellular souls, so that when I smell it here and there even now I am instantly again twelve years old, gingerly

entering an icy pool covered with rotting leaves and spawning frogs, or staring up from the bottom bunk at the epic equatorial sag of the ancient mattress above me, or ducking an insect the size of a pterodactyl at dusk, and feeling its fangs graze my bristling crewcut, and realizing that at some point we were going to have to offer up one of our younger brothers as bait, if we were going to get through the week with most of our blood intact.

Lovely, right?

Back to that moment we began in. Jane has finished paragraph five and Mackenzie is reading paragraph six, but I barely register this fact because I am still caught up in a reverie, believing that I have discovered a secret message, feeling once more all the emotions (loss and hope and deep brotherly or fatherly love and) available in both essays, but I am also afraid. To check, to confirm the quotation I am sure I've felt, because I felt it so strongly, as if confirmed by the Spirit, so what would it mean if I am wrong, even slightly?

Fast forward several days: It turns out I *was* slightly wrong. Here is the phrasing Brian uses in "His Last Game":

We drove through the arboretum checking on the groves of ash and oak and willow trees, which were still where they were last time we looked...

What to do with this, then? On the one hand, it would have been utterly cool if Brian had borrowed from White verbatim, said "the groves of ash and oak and willow trees were exactly where we had left them." It would suggest quite strongly that Brian was intentionally quoting in order to infuse his essay with White's spirit and create a firm link between the two. On the other hand, the fact that the phrasing differs can mean any number of things. It's impossible to be certain. Maybe Brian liked White's idea and appropriated it intentionally without using his exact words. Or maybe humorously suggesting that landscapes *might* move but haven't is a "thing" common to writers. Maybe Brian wasn't thinking of "Once More to the Lake" at all when he wrote "His Last Game," despite the thematic resonances between the two. Or maybe, having

read White's piece often, Brian had absorbed its spirit so fully that it had become a part of him, ready to spring forth or seep out when needed. And maybe the connection I felt exists only in my mind, which stored not the phrases but the sentiment inherent in the two sentences.

And look here: E. B. White doesn't really *own* "exactly where we had left it" anyway. A simple Internet search returns 114,000 results (surely many repeated), with "Once More to the Lake" appearing only once on page one, in the second position, linking to a "Quizlet" that's no longer available. The rest of the top results seem to use the phrase in earnest, which is not the sense employed by White (or Doyle). A bit of filtering reveals that the phrase was in common usage before White employed it in 1941, and some writers seem to have winked through it just as White does. To wit: "With God's blessing we at last reached the shore, exactly where we had left it five hours ago!" from John G. Patton's account of his missionary work in Vanuatu. (Nobody seems to have used the "exactly" phrase before Patton in 1890, so perhaps White was quoting *him*.) Or "The hotel as a matter of fact stood exactly where we had left it earlier in the morning" from a 1938 issue of *Punch*. If you substitute "right" for "exactly" or remove "had," you can find thousands more results, with many employing the humorously ironic sense of not losing a thing that couldn't possibly be lost.

Meanwhile, "where they were last time we looked," appears only in Doyle's essay. *And* in a 2012 report on minor-league pitcher Justin Haley's strike rates, which had dipped. Since then, Haley has moved around a lot, playing a few major league games for the Minnesota Twins, and eventually landing in Korea, where he plays for the Samsung Lions.

Which information is a bit far afield, even for me, so let's round up our ideas now and reach a conclusion, or at least an ending. I've listed a number of maybes above, possible reasons for the resonance between White and Doyle, and I've made some claims about their overlapping themes. Themes are always, or nearly always, readerly interpretations, even when we can confirm a writer's intentions, which in this case we cannot. But in essays, writers often declare their intentions, or at least allude to them, so I can feel

confident in claiming to *get* some of what Doyle and White are doing in these essays. In “Once More to the Lake,” White says that he “began to sustain the illusion that [my son] was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father.” And though he casts this spell in his own past, his way of writing the experience creates the effect for readers. He returns often to moments and situations when he felt the “creepy sensation” “that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and that there had been no years,” and even his choice of simple words like *same* and *again* and *constant* contributes to the effect. In other words, though White posits this identity-melding as an event that happened in his recent past, he presents it as an effect generated by his writing. Similarly, in “His Last Game,” Brian Doyle is about his brother’s business, writing artfully-strategically into the impossible inevitability that he can never fully know his brother (“We are utterly open with no one in the end—not mother and father, not wife or husband, not lover, not child, not friend. We open windows to each but we live alone in the house of the heart. Perhaps we must,” he wrote in “Joyas Voladoras,” yet he does, or he must get as close as possible.) In the last paragraph of the essay, after they’ve witnessed the pickup basketball game that Kevin had unknowingly been looking for, Kevin pleads with his younger brother, “What happens to what I remember? You remember it for me, okay?” and Brian obliges, has been obliging all along right there on the page, by the very act of writing this essay we are reading, so that not only has Brian become Kevin, we have become them, too.

In each essay, experience and writing dissolve the boundaries of self, allowing souls to unite. The primary merging happens between characters—narrator and other become one—but a secondary merging happens between writer and reader, so that we, too, become White’s father and son, become Kevin Doyle; we, too, experience that strange connected sensation, outside the confines of time and self; we, too, live, in our own way, what the authors and their family members have lived, again, in 2019, or whenever, years, decades after their initial happenings or their written happenings; which is why, despite discovering that the wording in their wry phrases is different, I still believe in that deep spiritual rumbling I felt when I

recognized White in Doyle, and I can believe many or all of those maybes simultaneously and without contradiction.

If there's one thing I've retained from my undergraduate studies in quantum mechanics, it's the metaphorical possibilities of "both/and," the simultaneity of unresolvable states and a fundamental uncertainty built into the universe, so that although you *can* find things again, nothing is ever exactly where you left it anyway, which used to be an uncomfortable position for me, but is now a well-worn and welcoming home.