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No Cheap Realizations: On Kathryn Rhett's "Confinements"

As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six,
we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of
that vast republican army of anonymous trampers...
—Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting"

As both a meditative activity and as a narrative frame, writers have turned, timelessly, to *walking*. Some call it the *ambulatory* essay. Others, the *peregrination* essay. Or the *flâneur* essay. Saunterer. Stroller. Rover. Drifter. Whatever. There is Thoreau's "Walking," Kazin's "Walker in the City," Garnette Cadogan's "Walking While Black," Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts' walks in "Harlem is Nowhere..." (the title from Ralph Ellison's 1948 essay). Rebecca Solnit's sweeping *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Writing from a wheelchair in "Meditations from a Moveable Chair," Andre Dubus mourns his memories of walking in New England. One could go on. While I've taught, in various iterations, all of these pieces in my creative nonfiction courses, the one I continually turn to is the short—clocking in at just under five pages—lesser known "Confinements," from Kathryn Rhett's 2014 collection, *Souvenir*.

Rhett's premise is, on the surface, simple: it's "the first nice evening of spring," the speaker has had "a headache for three days," and her home has "begun to feel confining." From the first sentence to the last, the essay circles and interrogates that word, "confinement," as a physical, psychological, and societal concept. The opening line, iambic and direct, establishes a casual, relaxed tone: "I saw the places of confinement." With that she takes us on a seemingly leisurely walk through her small

neighborhood in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I've taught the essay in countless creative writing courses because of its brilliant control of syntax, concision, description, and Rhett's rejection of easy epiphany. I've also taught it because of the way in which Rhett takes a seemingly mundane evening stroll and transforms it into an existential exploration of, among other things, complacency, class, suburbia, mortality, along with other literal and metaphorical *confinements*.

From a craft perspective, Rhett's scenes are a crash course on anaphora, description, and syntax. The speaker's rhythmic, almost hypnotizing voice moves from object to object with anaphoric cadence.

After the sidewalk ended, after the neighbors' houses and then the strangers' houses, the black road shoulder wasn't safe enough at dusk, and I saw how the grass of the nursing home lawn would be safer, and so I walked on that. I saw the large white nursing home mailbox with green stick-on letters spelling out GREEN ACRES. I saw the Adams County Jail beyond the nursing home...I saw...(9)

Here, and throughout the essay, the deliberate and measured use of anaphora ("After..." and "I saw..."), the subtle attention to sound ("black road shoulder wasn't safe enough at dusk..."), and the ways Rhett controls the pacing and momentum of the essay through syntactical shifts—serve to speed us along or slow us down. Rhett teaches us how good prose, like poetry, involves creating a pattern and knowing, precisely, when to deviate from that pattern. With this succinct accumulation of imagery, there's an anxious suspense that we might want to leave but can't. The physical move to the lawn as "safer" quietly suggests so much else that is unsafe, but also the anxious, frenetic mind of the speaker. Also, here, Rhett subtly confronts the privilege of living in a space where walking on the grass versus the pavement is an option. This is one of the essay's major themes: safety, security. The details help to both reveal the landscape but also, as we learn more later, the speaker's internal, and inescapable, "confinement."

While the speaker continues the walk, observations toggle between the external and the internal, the present and past. Rhett also, with concision and wit, adds a refreshing, sometimes humorous, tonal diversity to the page:

I had thought of walking past the jail and across the battlefield to the pre-Civil War cemetery (to see the erasure of names, the tilted stones) and then down the rippling one-lane road that let out at Vicky's Country Kitchen, the tacky place with the HELP WANTED and the ALL U CAN EAT SPAGHETTI signs out (and I must admit a bias against the very name Vicky, a former girlfriend of my uncle Garry's who used to get drunk with him between his third and fourth marriages and come searching for him at our place, waving her straw cowboy hat and whooping at 2:00 a.m. in the driveway)...(9)

Without these quick asides, which are memorable because of their concrete specificity and unapologetic honesty, the essay might fall into a one-dimensional, monotonal trudge. Moments like these accomplish at least three goals: formally, they continue to build the cadence Rhett has established; thematically, they widen and complicate what the speaker sees; and, most importantly, they build up the speaker's personality and character through family history and personal memory. Rhett also, I stress, places these asides here with efficiency and precision. Even when we "leave" the walk for these impressions and memories, Rhett is brief and to the point. We still see Vicky "waving her straw cowboy hat" even as Rhett moves back into the more earnest meditation.

As the speaker moves further from the home, the attention to particulars—and here we might consider Williams' "No ideas but in things," though that's too *confining* for what Rhett does—may seem, at first, tedious; however, as the the walk continues, Rhett confronts some of the more explicitly *confining* material: "I saw the chainlink fence around the back of the jail...I saw that the jail had a lovely two stories high rectangular panel of glass bricks...I saw...that the nursing home had a view, a vista of battlefield hills..." (10). While this recognition of individuals incarcerated, disabled—these other

confinements—might be, for a lesser writer, subjects provoking empathy or self-congratulatory awareness, for Rhett they are not. Rhett confronts the reality that, for a walker with a bad headache, one might find beauty, even pleasure, in jail architecture. That adverb, “lovely,” I think, speaks to this self-aware irony: for the walker, this jail is, somewhat, eye candy. Turning her gaze to the nursing home, she describes, with attention to color, texture, how “A few lamps shone behind the windows, dimmed by screens or sheer curtains or venetian blinds, and it did not seem that anyone looked out at the scarves of dusk laying down the rules of disappearance.” In each image, Rhett works hard to construct descriptions through firm particulars with attention to the sonic qualities of a sentence. The soft “s” consonant—“shone,” “windows,” “screens,” “sheer,” “scarves of dusk,” and so on—weaves through the sentence, helping the image rise with the music. Her attention to detail, especially sound, makes the appearance of these dim windows ghostly—they are Williams’ “things” that rise with so many “ideas”—interior vs. exterior, seeing vs. being seen, windows as liberating or confining.

In what I consider to be the climax of “action” in the essay, Rhett pushes deeply to confront that elephant on the walk: what does it mean to casually gaze at the jail, the nursing home, and then walk away? She faces this directly with the line: “I saw how I wanted a realization and how I might get it, cheaply, imagining a woman stuck in her room observing how lucky I was to stride across a landscape.” It’s worth observing how a well-placed word, an adverb here, might shift the entire tonal range of a piece—that *cheaply* explodes on the page. The desire for, and rejection of, mindful self-awareness not only ingratiates us to this speaker, but it also keeps the essay from falling into bromides or platitudes: the speaker is not trying to convince us she’s a “moral” or empathic person, but instead, her observations acknowledge how one’s mind—for instance, imagination, perspective—can be the most confining thing of all. Rhett resists easy epiphany. Her observations acknowledge what’s often hard to admit: many of us worry, mostly, about ourselves, our headaches, how our houses might feel “confining.” Rhett then mentions the other facts of the scene but refuses to exert any false sympathy or

epiphany: “I thought of the ones in jail who couldn’t even look out, except from the small exercise yard on the far side of the building with a view of a car dealership, of their real and true confinement, and of the other confinements that had led them to be in jail.” Those “other confinements,” of course, might involve racism or structural oppression or income equality yet Rhett doesn’t pontificate on these truths because she knows they already haunt the scene, the page. If anything, Rhett’s careful and precise descriptions rightfully suggest how those “other confinements” are always there woven, mostly unnoticed, into the landscape’s fabric one passively saunters through.

As the essay progresses we encounter various other social and historical layers, all while Rhett pulls along with her careful rhythmic pace. Working to push beyond simply “seeing,” Rhett’s roving eye aims to focus, cinematically through close-up to extreme close-up to long shot, on both building the texture of the space while also interrogating her own analyses about that space:

I saw a mint green bus in the nursing home parking lot, on which dark green letters against the mint spelled out GREEN ACRES; underneath, in script, was painted *The Adams County Home*. If that didn’t sound pathetic enough to break your heart. *The* home, as if there were only one place in the county for all the old folks to go, as if it were a natural progression for everyone to end up here with the green color scheme and the view of fields where fifty thousand had died, been wounded or gone missing in the previous century (the most blood-soaked piece of ground in America), as if the place was a lovingly homemade and handcrafted depository full of hand crocheted afghans, and that was okay. Maybe it was, maybe it was. Maybe the wheelchairs were lifted tenderly onto the anachronistic bus, which had no contemporary disability access features. (3)

Syntactically, again, Rhett masterfully dictates the pace and momentum of this passage through anaphora, sentence length, and lucidity of thought. Taking that close-up shot of “*Adams County Home*,” Rhett relies on that conjunction repetition (“as if” for three beats) to simultaneously create momentum

and emphasize the imagined, terrifyingly *confining*, implication of that phrase. After that one lengthy, accelerating sentence, she suspends judgment and slows the pace: “Maybe it was, maybe it was. Maybe...” Even during these seemingly minor fluctuations in thought, Rhett never loses her attention to both the sonic and rhythmic aspects of diction and syntax. Thematically, it seems appropriate that the very specific history beneath the speaker’s feet, essentially surrounding her, is offered as a parenthetical. This casual aside aligns, I think, with the larger argument of the essay: Rhett’s inability—like many of us—to feel much emotion for this brute statistical fact that’s both completely involved in the walk while not being involved in it at all. Even while strolling on “blood-soaked” ground, Rhett can’t escape her own headache, her own problems. In many ways, her walk is about trying to feel something, trying to connect, trying to leave the self-absorbed, cacophonous mind, yet failing, again and again; however, within this experience of “failing,” we do learn something, though not pedantically.

Throughout the essay, Rhett alludes to her desire for some kind of escape, whether psychological or physical. For instance, she fantasizes about the ways in which cities, unlike her small town, allow for individuals to maintain more anonymity. “In this small town there was even less point in venturing out, because I couldn’t be anonymous as in the preceding cities and foreign countries and nomadic stops—I was accustomed, in other words, to being invisible.” Rhett later writes, “I preferred *seeing* to being seen.” Craving a place where she can be “invisible,” Rhett gradually, as her evening journey comes to a close, faces a reality: whether it’s a headache, depression, wanderlust, turmoil within the home, Rhett knows that she cannot flee from her home, or the town, or most significantly, her mind. Her head, along with its endless processing of thought, is the most “confining” thing of all. Rhett’s essay suggests, while looking at the various “confinements”—nursing homes, jails, large suburban houses, fenced-in yards, the neighborhood, the sidewalk—the largest confinement of all is, inevitably, the ceaselessly wandering headachy mind that will not stop. One might think of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” As

Rhett records her observations, she wants some form of solace, some comfort, some cure to her headache and her petty—only on the surface—concerns and complaints about the town where she’s stuck but where she lives. While she tries to enter the lives of those in the jail, the nursing home, she wants some perspective, some wisdom, a dose of awareness for her comfortable life in that town. It doesn’t happen.

But what do we take from this walk, this process that ends in, mostly, a failure to wear off that headache, a failure to have a “realization”? Most of all, suggested through Rhett’s experience, I’m reminded of how complacency will seep into our lives, no matter how hard we may fight it. Whether it’s the privilege to walk around the block or live in the safe, spacious home or have the secure job, all of it, ultimately, can feel confining. No matter how hard one works to develop “empathy” for those prisoners or the elderly in the nursing home, there will be headaches, there will be walks and homes and safe neighborhoods taken for granted. Even a walk, this act to go outside and clear the mind, can be confining. All things become, the essay seems to argue, confining, but most of all, it’s us, our limited perspectives, our worries, our own shit. Among many ideas, Rhett’s essay, I think, suggests these concepts in a way that’s free from didacticism or cliché.

Finally, as it’s getting late, Rhett comes closer to home while she passes the elementary school soccer fields. She sees that the “neighbors were kicking a ball at the nearly invisible goal, the night almost dark except to those who were out in it.” By this point, she has touched on many other subjects—both in the neighborhood and inside her head—beyond the jail, the nursing home: there’s an ominous man in a pickup, the “new agricultural center,” the “sad and colonial” local bank, a reference to “the flood of 1993,” and a lengthy section on “rest cures forced on hysterical women in former eras.” Before taking us to her home, before crossing that last street, Rhett has a brief conversation with one of the mothers on that field, the only human interaction in the essay.

Have you been out running?” the mother called. “Walking,” I called back. “Taking a loop?”

“Yes, a loop,” I said, “it’s such a nice evening.”

Circling from her home, through town, and back again, Rhett’s innocuous stroll becomes a cogent exploration of a safe domestic life in a quiet American town, which, as noted, was not too long ago a killing field. As a prompt, I challenge students to brainstorm words—concepts, phrases, ideas—that they’re obsessed with, a la *confinement*, as a focal point for an essay. Thematically and formally, Rhett’s brief essay inspires and teaches students how ostensibly “familiar” material—an evening walk in a quiet American suburb—can be transformed into an acute examination of place and the self. Like many walks, metaphorically, the journey is Odysseus-like—though this time it’s the woman who leaves—in that the speaker journeys from home, has various “encounters,” and then returns to find, at the least, some trouble with homecoming. Rhett’s essay shows us, subtly, this inescapability of the self, along with the varying levels of confinement individuals face, whether internal or external, personal or structural. After the interaction with the neighbors, Rhett describes the final steps of her walk while alluding, quietly, to those larger themes associated with *confinement*.

I crossed the last street to my home. I sat on the breezeway for awhile. It was spring, and I was a free person, and not ready yet to go in.