Hunter S. Young

ENGL 377

Non-Fiction Essay #2—Place

Everything Under

Behind one of the many houses I lived in as a child, there was a forest. In that forest, there was a small marsh.

The marsh was mundane to me the first time I saw it. I was with Dad. We had taken our dog on a walk. Dad had said that the forest was “meant for exploring.” We didn’t know that there would even be a marsh until the earth beneath our feet began to slosh and the water soaked through our boots into the socks we wore.

The marsh was a perfect circle; a clearing in the green foliage. Even in summer, though, the grass that lined the marsh was a chapped yellow, dry to the touch. In the water, different kinds of tall grasses I didn’t know the names of sprouted everywhere. They rose from the water and stood on little patches of land. The tallest pieces of grass seemed to be reaching up into the sky, trying to escape from their small islands. Some of the white birch trees grew into the space of the marsh, loosing their straight structure, twisting. Everything existed in harmony. Wind was mostly stopped by the trees surrounding the marsh, so even on the windiest of days, the grass would barely shake.

Dad didn’t seem impressed and moved us along.

I would return to the marsh and spend a lot of the following summer there. I would bring books, that summer was full of *Harry Potter*, I was reading and a small tarp Dad had in the garage. I would place the tarp down in a spot that was driest and sit reading for hours.

I began to imagine worlds in the marsh. I imagined little creatures that would sprout from the little patches of land. They would begin to place flowers amongst the grass, adding shades of blue, purple, yellow, and pink. But then I would imagine creatures that lived under the murky waters who would come up and grab the flowers, pulling the colors to the unseen depths—leaving the land as colorless as it was before.

One day, I was alone, reading, when a large moose appeared from the other side of the marsh. His large paddle-lick antlers knocked against the trees as he slowly made his way into the water, shaking the trees creating a wash of noise. He was a giant thing, rough brown hair stretched against the massive muscles and bone. He stood taller than anything I had ever seen in person. I had not known how deep the water was until he made his way to the center. The water was deep enough to go up to his neck.

I had stayed quiet, but soon enough his ears flicked towards me. He was cooling down in the summer heat, drinking the water and eating the grass that shot out of the water. He looked me in the eye and I looked him in the eye. We saw each other and knew that we each needed to be there. We were unbothered. I opened my book and began to read. I left for dinner, leaving him in the water. He was gone when I came back.

✺ ✺ ✺

One day, I thought my twin brother, Logan, would like to come with me to the marsh. I told him in the morning that there was a “super cool” place we should hang out.

I grabbed the tarp and books I normally did and told Logan to follow me. We ventured past our backyard and into the woods. The morning sun was golden through the thick collection of leaves above us. There seemed to be golden orbs of light suspended in the air.

We made it to the marsh, the earth getting squishy like usual beneath our feet. I laid down the tarp and sat down, setting my back against the tree. I opened a book and began to read. Logan stood off of the tarp, just looking into the marsh. I looked up at him and patted the tarp next to me.

“This is boring,” he said. And he walked back to our house.

✺ ✺ ✺

That summer was the first time my family—the only world I had known—began to crack.

The cracks began in the walls. Yelling became hard to avoid, even with the doors closed. My room was closest to the yelling. I found myself at nights, without anyone knowing, walking down to the marsh with a flashlight. I would sit in the dimly lit place for hours until I could feel the exhaustion aching in my chest and I would have to make my way home.

When winter came, the water froze. The temperature had gotten so low that, what had become, my daily trips to the marsh had stopped. One day the yelling had become so loud and burned holes in all the walls that I had to go outside. I pulled on all my snow-gear and made my way into the forest.

I had never been in a forest in the winter before. The snow that was on the ground was not a pristine white like the paintings I had seen before. The snow was littered with tiny specks of dirt and remnants of the branches above. The snow crunched beneath my feet and I made it to the marsh. I looked out and saw only a plush blanket of snow. The grass was tall enough to stab its way through the snow; hardened by the air, brittle.

I didn’t wonder if the ice would break. I had trusted the marsh for so long to make me feel comfortable that I knew the ice wouldn’t crack. So I walked into the marsh for the first time.

I made it to the center of the marsh. I looked around to the trees surrounding me. They were so thick that I would not have known if someone was standing there watching me. I wondered if the marsh even knew I was there most days in the summer, reading right on its border. The grass around me looked like a golden shoot of hair against the snow. I had not noticed how warm the color was. Even now, with streaks of burnt brown deadened within the yellow, it felt alive.

I laid down in the snow. I wanted to see what the grass was reaching for. The sky was a plain white, the way the winter always paints it. I could feel the cold biting at the tops of my cheeks and nose. But I felt numb.

✺ ✺ ✺

When we moved the next spring, I did not have the chance to say goodbye to the marsh. I wish I could have left something behind. I thought of writing my name on a rock with a permanent marker and setting it down in the center where I had laid that one day. How long would the marker last on the rock? Would someone twenty years from now pick it up and wonder who I am?

Over the next seven years the cracks in my family would become canyons. Everyone stood on their own side of the canyon. We were unable to hear each other, to see each other’s pain, to communicate. I watched the rift between Mom and Dad grow larger and larger. When Mom hurt her back, my parents tried to fill the canyons up with water and let that water freeze. The ice would allow them to cross sides to each other. Sometimes I would see Mom go to Dad, but more times I would see Dad go to Mom. She began to push him away. She began to push all of us away. She began to find solace in the space that only pain medication could take her. She wouldn’t have to think in the state of mind she wanted to live in. Eventually, we all fell through the ice.

✺ ✺ ✺

Mom would later go to rehab. I wanted nothing more than to go to the marsh. It would allow me to sit still and be alone. I wouldn’t have to hear anything but the rustling of the leaves and the soft whirring of the wind.

In Mom’s combined sixty-seven days of rehab, I had only visited her once. At the time, she was still in a shorter program in a hospital in Fairbanks. It was primarily against my will. Dad tricked me into going, saying the whole family would be there—my two brothers, himself and I. That would mean I could keep my distance from her if I needed to. I had not spoken to Mom for at least two months at this point. I had been the one to stop her from hurting herself the last time, and she had shown no signs of wanting to reconcile with me—so why would I want to with her?

When we showed up, it was only the three of us—my brothers had stayed home. I couldn’t blame Dad for trying to force us to talk to each other, he was only trying to fill the cracks in his own life, but I still felt a deep sense of betrayal.

The room they had put her in was a variety of shades: pastel blues and purples. All of the furniture had rounded edges and was made of heavy and dense. The trashcan was a weird hard cardboard and the mirror was a foggy, reflective plastic. “It’s so we can’t hurt ourselves,” Mom said, laughing at the joke. Dad laughed as well. Ice spread in my stomach.

The room was a child’s room. That’s what it was. And it felt wrong for me to have let Dad put her in a place like this. Did they think that child-proofing Mom’s life and flashing these colors of youth would fix what was wrong inside her? If I was put somewhere like that, would that also fix me?

I didn’t go back after that day. I had nothing to say. I had tried and said everything I could over the years to possibly make it better. It was someone else’s turn to try. Maybe they could be a better son than I could be. Maybe they would be able to finally give her some relief, to let her being truly happy again.

I cried on the way home. I thought of the marsh.

✺ ✺ ✺

Sometimes I wish I could go back to the marsh. But I’m afraid to see if it has changed as much as I have. I haven’t been there in ten years.

I wonder if I will find joy in setting down the tarp and opening a book, staring into the delicate but complex map of water and earth. Would I still find the place magical? Would all the creatures I created still live there? I try to imagine them now: the water creatures covered in moss and twisted like sunken wood; the creatures spreading the flowers and pastel colors to the earth are little sprites.

Sometimes I wonder if I should drive to the house and walk through the forest and sit at the edge of the water. As I write this, the marsh will be frozen. I wonder, if I were to walk on the ice now, would it still hold me?