

Rachael WEBER

# Looking Forward to the Past

“Immanent and transcendent experience are nevertheless connected in a remarkable way: by a change in attitude, we can pass from the one to the other.”  
Edmund HUSSERL

*A boy pulls on his mothers' hand; he holds up a clear glass Coke bottle for her to inspect. She continues looking ahead, not breaking her line of vision with the traffic light, her hand pressed into his back, urging him forward. His head keeps moving; he stretches, waving the bottle high for her attention. He puts the bottle mouth to his eye, turning his head this way and that. He looks up, through the bottle at the electric lines above. He bends down, inspecting the crack in the sidewalk through the glass. “Look, Mom,” he calls. Her hand still presses him forward; the walk light is green ahead. Looking to the side, examining a patch of grass with his bottle, he trips. She grabs his shirt in her fist, but he falls, throwing the glass bottle to the side. I wait for a cry, but instead he picks up the unbroken bottle, looks to his mother, and announces, “You can’t walk and look through a Coke bottle telescope at the same time.”*

*Yet, we walk, run, stumble, and run again with faded lenses, not able to see or understand (often pretending we do). A picture cannot capture a moment of change; one mind cannot fully penetrate another. Our senses experience, yet their memories limit observation.*

*Words and sound—to hear words aloud changes their interpretation (to listen through different ears does also). Another outside voice, other than the one within our minds, changes the sound, purpose, meaning, giving a variant interpretation and another filter, another life to the text. I first presented a piece similar to this for an oral reading, combining poetry and prose, not liking the idea of my voice influencing the minds of the listeners, but desiring to play with this ancient tradition. An oral text, an oral poem, details felt yet written on the page—not necessarily meant to be read aloud. The puzzle is for the eyes (sight’s interpretation), and we are all listeners.*

Snapshots of comparison,  
articles of memory,  
reminders of hidden  
touches of lore.

Rustles of inspiration,  
crimson sashes, mustaches,  
slim waists, clickity bustle,  
hints of eternal aspiration.

Scrutinizing, self-despising.  
singing in, singing out,  
an unquieting din,  
aloud or silent.  
Now and then,  
again the mute voices rise.

Reversed in the search  
for what, him, when, how,  
not found now, but almost,  
not so lost as before,  
but getting closer.

The rhymes are not worth  
the time to give them birth,  
but the eternal cycle tickles,  
dreaming of childhood past.

Grassy feathers waving up,  
tree peaks pointing heavenward,  
holes of mud and rock  
to bury disillusion and  
false conclusions.

The steady churning of the fan is silent background music, only the cars rush by, un-rhythmically. Yet in their failure to follow a uniform beat, the siren shrieks, the horn honks, the passing winds, all fulfill their own unordered rhythm—also blending into the silence of repetition. Nothing awakens John's slumber but the wind—the wind blowing through the window, speeding the spinning wings of the fan, breaking the arrhythmic rhythm of his dreams. His eyes flutter, and his head jerks up. He searches for the clock; had he slept through his alarm? Four o'clock, three more hours yet. The spinning old fan heightens the resonance of the wind gusts, magnifying the sound as if rushing through his room at hurricane speed. The air is thick over-salted ice cream, and the whirling mixer is wearing out. But even the winds define their own patterns in the arrhythms of his room, and his head falls back to the embroidered pillow case.

John adjusts his pillow ten minutes before the blaring red numbers morph to 7:00. The time to lapse back to sleep is too short and his mind fades to snowy whiteness.

The blaring beeps out-scream every rhythm of his flat. 7:30. Cold air swathes him as he lifts blanketed layers, awakening his skin with thousands of pin pricks as he climbs out of bed. He parts the slats in the blinds with his fingers, breaking their horizontal uniformity. The light forces his eyes shut and he only wants to fall back on the bed. But his shirt is ironed; his bike waits at the door. A bit of rushing, and a stack of papers at the office air will greet him at eight.



The metal poles from the construction take over more of the already narrow sidewalk. If John's hands were not on the handlebars, he would plug his ears to block the drill and their yelling. Horrible desk, papers, computer—but at least he did not have to work construction, miserable working, the same thing, the same pounding. But his bike works well, weaving in and out, around the girl skipping ahead of her mother, who's yelling for her to slow down. Around the man with a bag in one hand and a cane in another. Between the pile of dirt and the pole and around the hole. When will the drilling, the dust end? Past a girl walking with a bounce to the beat of her headphones, the sidewalk is empty. Open. The front wheel twists on the corner of the pole. His weak ankle is crunched beneath the spokes.

One drill stops: "Ok?"

"Yeah," he sneezes and looks up to bottom of the wooden planks above. No neatly pressed shirt today.

The hand that held the drill reaches out, lifting him up. His hand is dry; John can feel the grains of sawdust pressed against his skin and floating in the air. But his eyes bounce, reflecting sun; they are not bored from hammering, not tired, not squinting in the morning light.

### **... in the beginning again ...**

"I am running away," John says, shaking beside his bike, angry to be grounded from TV again, but older now because his father had taken the training wheels off his bike yesterday.

"I am taking a nap," his father says, staring at John's brown curls and on, to the neighbor's long green field beyond.

“I am *running* away. For *good*.” John stomps his feet, grounding his tennis shoes into the gravel.

“Well, dinner is at 6:30,” his dad says as he turns to walk back into the house, pulling a low-hanging apple from one of the trees.

John runs to the shed, hopping over the extending tree roots and jerks open the door, breaking the wooden peg holding the latch. Thrusting his body back, he jerks on the seat of his bright blue bike and scrapes his calf on the pedal of his father’s much larger bike. He pulls up and out, untangling his bike from the spokes of his father’s.

Breathing heavily from his tug-of-war, he swings onto the bike, pedaling hard across the grass. He stops, looking up at the apple tree; food for the trip. No apples within reach again. The gravel bounces under his wheels and he focuses ahead, to the maple tree at the end of the driveway.

Reaching the towering tree John slows down; he is not going back ever. He has pedaled all the way over the hill and he is not allowed to go past the end of the driveway. Dropping his bike down in the sprinkling of grass at the gravel’s edge, he squats to the ground, curling against the base of the maple tree. He is never going back. He notices a half-cherry-half-maroon trail meandering down his calf and his eyes begin to tear. But he is not going back for a band aid. His breathing evens out, sucking breaths not coming so often, and John wishes he would have brought his football with him. He rises, brushing the clinging leaves from the back of his pants, and begins to gather the golden and burnt red leaves into a pile, a bed because he is not going back. As he bends over again and again, his stomach begins to rumble; it must be almost dinner time and Dad was going to grill. He abandons his leaf pile and lumbers over to his bike. He climbs on and begins to pedal back up the hill, back over the gravel toward home, because never does not always mean forever.

### ... in the beginning again ...

“Good morning,” the radio announcer sings, her cheery voice cutting through the stale office air.

“Please open a window, Sarah—stuffy in here.” John says, looking to the stack of papers to the right. One by one he must go through them. By lunch, he would be halfway, but in the afternoon—finished. Hopefully.

“Good morning to you too,” Sarah calls; the screeching of the window latch hurts his ears. “Have a good evening?”

“It was okay,” he says, dreading the sound, which will fill the office when he turns the computer on.

“Same here,” she slides into the next desk. “Hear back about that job application yet?”

“No,” he reaches for the first paper.

“Will you stay if you do not get it?” Sam asks from the next desk.

“That is hypothetical,” John sets the paper down and stands. He cannot begin yet. He pours coffee into the filter; the smell wakes him more than the taste.

“But you turned it in this time?” Sam asks again, turning his computer on. John knocks his elbow against the counter at the sound.

“Hhhmmmm,” John mumbles; the deadline was not till tomorrow. The lines, “What is your long term vision?” scroll across his vision. The blank white space below the question is on the application, lying to the right of his computer. How could they ask him that? But he will not look; maybe it will be answered with rolling script, miraculously. Morning light from the window illuminates the power button on his own computer; he must push it. Another day, again.

### ... in the beginning again ...

He pulls his step ladder to the tree side, the bottom rung bangs against his knees as it catches on clumps of grass. Balancing as he climbs, he reaches up, stretching, holding the apple’s stem, while trying to untangle the tape. John pulls and the tape sticks together; he pulls and falls to the ground, a jagged root cutting into his skin. He bites his bottom lip. One apple, Dad said, one apple without worms and he would not cut down the trees. Wiping away the blood, he stands, back up the ladder. The noise of the tape peeling off the roll echoes in the cricketing night, and he holds his arm steady. There will be an apple in the morning. He tapes round and round the branch and over the stem from the apple from the basket in the kitchen. Mom had never bought apples in the summer before.

The sun wakens him. He looks to the window. One apple hanging on the tree. But his foot ladder—left outside. Dad will know, he might see, he will know it was not natural.

### ... in the beginning again ...

“Oooww...” John yells.

“What happened?” Sarah calls from down the hall; the echoes of her fingernails clicking on the keyboard follow her voice.

“Nothing,” he murmurs, his finger in his mouth, the taste of blood on his tongue. He braces the packet of paper towels between his stomach and the counter; the plastic is sealed, wrapped tightly. Of

course there would be no more tissues, when the knife slipped from the carrot. His finger bounces off the plastic as he tries again to pierce through. Damned plastic. But the knife is right where he dropped it; he slits the plastic open and presses his finger against the fresh blue floral printed roll.

“Coming again tomorrow night? It will be better this time, I promise.” Sam asks.

“Better be,” John says, sliding back to his desk. The paper towel slides from his hand, blood smears on a paper.

“Ahhhhh, got blood on the work.”

“At least you will not have to prepare the food for yourself for dinner,” Sam says.

His finger in his mouth; he picks up the paper. It is not full of numbers, but a red smear through the blank lines, and covering the end of *vision*?

### ... in the beginning again ...

John sits up. “Do you hear that?” Grant passed a note in geometry that it was not safe at Henry’s; John needed to watch when he fell asleep.

“What?” Henry turns to his side.

“That sawing sound.”

“That is just Dad. He is finishing up on a project.” Henry closes his eyes. John tries to close his eyes, but the sound rises, louder and louder.

“What is he making?” John cannot sleep.

“Hmmmmm..., a table I think; or cutting up the one he made before.”

“Why cutting?” John imagines the wood falling to pieces, bouncing off the ground.

“So he can use the wood again. Of course.”

The sawing rises and falls, fading into the silence; but then there is a ticking against the wall.

“Henry ... what is tapping?”

“Mom, putting cups out for breakfast.”

Something is making his nose itch: the smell. Grant warned him about it at lunch.

“What is that smell?” John asks again.

Henry breathes in, “I don’t smell anything.”

John breathes in again; he does not smell anything either.

### ... in the beginning again ...

The white screen, the scrolling numbers, his mind is blank yet filled with unconscious calculations. "Almost finished?" Sarah calls from around the corner, her voice high, cheery. "Yes," John shuts his eyes, the moisture of the lids soothing them from the artificial brightness.

Forcing his eyes wide against the glaring white screen, he focuses again on the scrolling numbers. His finger hurts to bend, to stretch to the keys. How many does he push each minute? How many each hour? But he will not calculate that, just ask.

Must double-check the numbers: their numbing blackness against the white, against the grey-blocked spreadsheet. The dates are right, the amounts. Check again. Command S. Command P., and he will be free.

But the music of the printer stops, jarring. P-a-p-e-r j-a-m scrolls across the screen and he cannot go home yet.

His fist hits the wood, shaking the desk, knocking the papers to the floor.

"Okay, John?" Sarah calls, leaning over to help him gather papers.

"Printer ..." The desk is now littered, where papers were neatly piled once before. One shove and all this.

"John ... what is this?" She holds the application; the red spot mocks him. "I thought you turned it in."

"I can tomorrow."

"But John ... you want this right? You have talked about applying for a year?"

"Yeah ... but ..." He takes it from her, folds it in half, and tucks it under the keyboard.

### ... in the beginning again ...

A motor runs outside: a constant sound in the silent night until it stops. The new quiet hurts his ears and he awakens, lifting to the window. Why the change? A tree lies on its side; white blossoms reflecting the street light above. The dim figure of his father looks down to the ground. The leaves of the neighbor's tree blow in the wind over the stone wall. The moonlight shimmers on its green leaves, spilling over the fence, and onto the neighbor's lone fruit. His father's arm hangs limp; the motor silent.

His father's arm pulls back, looking towards the next tree. John pushes his face to the glass, closer, yet he plugs his ears and squeezes his eyes. The motor silent; his father walks back to the house; the second tree still standing.

### ... in the beginning again ...

John carries his bike down the steps of the underpass. His weaker ankle aches with each step from the morning fall. The red of the spray paint was still visible in the dimming light, the orange of the sky against the black-grey-brown of the metro steps.

“So we will go after work tomorrow?” Sam asks. A man sits, his arms tattooed and upraised, his chest moving, a hymn flowing out “He was pierced ...” His voice echoes off the curses graffitied on the opposite concrete wall and almost rattles the cup face-up before his knees. John nods. The man’s eyes are shut, his face upraised, his lips moving and calling.

“Maybe we can leave early because today ...” Sam raises his voice.

John looks to his friend’s moving lips and keeps walking. He sidesteps the water stream running down the concrete steps on the other side. “We are healed ...” the voice echoes into the outside air.

### ... in the beginning again ...

Her fingernails dig into his shoulder, pushing him to the left. John’s mom always made him cut his fingernails. But according to the rules, he cannot talk. His foot catches on a root. “Do not drag your feet,” she says. The moisture, humidity of the handkerchief covering his face, makes him feel as though he was suffocating. He steps down, the leafy ground gives and his ankle cracks. “I *told* you to step over the hole,” she yells. He feels her hand on his shoulder: “Do not touch me.” This game was supposed to be fun. Building trust; but why was he stuck with her? Everyone knew she always lied because of the way her eye twitched. But with the blindfold, he could not watch her eye.

“John, Lydia, be *careful!*” Ms. Samuels yells. “John, you have to listen to her!”

### ... in the beginning again ...

Squinting and unsquinting, the shadows moving as John bikes past building after building. Two hours till he is watching the movie in bed. Seven and a half more till he wakes up to ride back again. Then dinner with Sam and friends. Why waste the time in between, the going back and forth, back and forth. Why not stay at work? What is the purpose of the in between?

The grocery store is still open. Light shines to the dimmer streets.



The green post sticks out of the curb. Why? So cars do not run up on the sidewalk. A ball of hair sits against the pole. What is it? A body lays, spread out beyond. Is the boy okay? It is not a boy, it is older. Its leg is wrinkled and outstretched. A blue vein from far away. A foot twitches. A hand clenches and unclenches, sticking up in the air. She is mumbling. Is she drunk? Did she have a stroke? He leans over, extending an arm, at least to pull her from edge of the curb. Her hand flies up, striking his face; he inhales her alcoholic breath and jerks his arm away, rushing past. She might not want the help and he wants to go home, only ten hours till work begins again.

### ... in the beginning again ...

"If you could be anything, what would you be when you grow up?" Liz asks him, her fifth grade braids making her look like Heidi on the movie cover.

He turns from his seat on the ground, on the other side of the apple tree. "Singer," John says, knowing she knows, "and a songwriter."

"If not a singer?" she asks, clapping her hands for no reason.

"I will be a singer," he nods his head, standing as he looks up to the green branches above.

"Wonder if you cannot ... wonder if you lose your voice and cannot even speak?"

"Liz, that is a hypothetical question."

"What is a hypothetical question?" she asks. He swings, hooking his feet over the lower branches. She cannot get up this high.

"Look," she says. She has an apple core in her palm. "I am planting it." She walks to the stump nearby and pulls at the grass. "Promise you will water it."

"It will not grow there." He is hanging upside down.

"Promise?"

"But it will not." He swallows, feeling the blood pooling in his head.

"But I want my own apple tree."

Another voice yells from inside. "Your mom is calling." He looks down at her.

"Promise," she asks from below.

"Go." He swings down, the bark digging into his hands.

"We can pick apples next year ... then this tree will be small and I will reach the branches too," she calls, running into the house.

### ... in the beginning again ...

His finger is pinched between his heel and the fake leather sole of his sandal. Just a little farther and the rock will be out. John licks his finger, blood from his heel mixed with the dust of the road; Sam is motioning him from ahead. The flavor of the cut lingers on his tongue and his mind clears.

"That is it," John yells.

"Hmmm? Hurry up. We will miss the next bus ahead," Sam says, turning around in front of him.

"That's it ..." John gets up, jogging forward, the pebble bouncing down the street.

"What?" Sam asks, walking faster, the bus is rounding the corner.

"That guy talking ... the violence of love ..." John calls, reaching to secure his sandal strap again.

"Hurry ... You're thinking about the metro guy?" Sam jogs to the street edge. "The bus is almost here."

"But don't you see ..." A car blocks his speech.

"Nonsense. But he will be there again tomorrow if you want to talk to him," Sam calls, jogging to the other side of the road.

"Just wait ... let me explain ..." John follows.

A brush of wind; his hands digging into the gravel. Stones in his head. "*John*," a voice yells. "*John*."

Feet stop.

"Are you okay?"

Hands pull. He slides. There is a weight in his head. "I am fine."

"But ... walking in the road ... one second earlier and ..."

Papers, never-ending, piled on his desk. He cannot go back and stare at the computer or find the almost finished application underneath the keyboard. Something else, somewhere. His car is packed full; borders of boxes and bags impinge on the view in his rearview window. John rolls down the window, letting the wind buffet his hair, penetrating through the bandage around the gash on his head and blowing back to the bags behind him. The alignment on this car is much better than that on his old one. He could take his hands off the wheel and this car would fly along, staying straight between the yellow lines and the roads edge. He does not constantly have to adjust the wheel, but straight means straight, not even a slight ten degree variance in the steering. What would happen, if he stayed straight, never placing his hand on the wheel to turn? Where would he end up, if he kept going straight, straight, regardless of roads and

fences and houses and rivers? Wonder if he could just keep going and going and going? Gliding over and over and over? Was that a hypothetical question?

... **in the beginning again** ...

The lions silent, the lambs cry not (in the beginning again)  
when the air smelled of green and the sky glint as citrus  
when two interplayed in the singing of crickets and cleanliness  
of soil

when understanding was a clear cold pool and listening was  
eternal

before plot and mishap, murder and consequence  
before trees had rings and lights extended the day  
before jealousy and fruit, envy and sacrifice

before the power of one took the lives of others  
before the only way to discern right was to win war over the  
wrong

when the day was light and the night was dark without  
interruption

when one tongue was intelligible to another ear  
before the story is known and the end has been written

In the beginning again  
death unreal with the cry of an infant  
a simple phrase, but the inability of expression.

How to start over?  
When is the beginning again?

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