



TRANSIENTS AND DREAMERS:
the Metanarratives of
Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

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At the end of *Housekeeping*, Ruth Stone admits that she has “never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming” (Robinson 215). That this confession comes toward the end of Ruth’s story is troubling, simply because it leads us to question her narrative reliability. If this narrator cannot “distinguish readily between thinking and dreaming,” then how can readers distinguish between them? While Ruth is self-conscious about labeling her dreams and memories as such, how can we trust the labels she has assigned to these creations of the mind? However, to linger on these questions would be detrimental to readers’ understanding of Ruth’s story as a whole, because the beauty of her story is indeed its imagination and transience. It is *through* the language that Ruth uses to describe these musings and dream sequences that we become privy to Ruth’s identity, an identity of which even she is not certain, a transient identity—Ruth is rooted neither in reality nor unreality, not in the past, present, or future, and ultimately, not in any specific place at all, once she joins Sylvie in a life of transience. Indeed, we learn through Ruth’s descriptions of her dreams and memories that she comes by this quality rather naturally, not simply by association with Sylvie, but by associations with her mother, grandfather, and grandmother as well, and in many ways, Ruth’s dreams and memories—however faulty they may be—

ultimately function as a larger metanarrative of the Stone family, a family of transients and dreamers.

This metanarrative begins with Ruthie's grandfather, Edmund Stone. He was a dreamer, the sort who dreamed of an escape from an ordinary life, a man who "would walk around singing to himself in a thin voice, and speak to [his wife] and his children as a very civil man would speak to strangers" (Robinson 10). For this reason, his death was "not altogether unanticipated" by his wife, for "how many times had she waked in the morning to find him gone?" (10). Even though Edmund died long before she was born, Ruth seems to feel rather attached to his memory, as he often shows up in her dreams and memories. As Rosaria Champagne puts it, "memory equals nostalgia for origins," and in some way, Ruth feels a connection with and longing for the grandfather she never met but very much resembles (Champagne 327). For instance, when Sylvie rows Ruth across the lake toward the "magical" place where Sylvie "sees" the children, Ruth comments that the boat "sidle[d] a little toward the center of the lake" where "my grandfather's last migration had settled him on the lake floor" (Robinson 149). First, this passage implies either that the "antidote" for transience is death, or that transience may cause death. "My grandfather's last migration *settled* him on the lake floor" places blame upon migration for his untimely demise (149, my emphasis). If he had not taken a job with the railroad, he likely would not have been on the train when it derailed, and probably would have lived a full life; that being said, he also likely would not have lived a life that fulfilled him as his life aboard the train did, and he may have consequently sought transience elsewhere. Second, this passage establishes Ruth's grandfather as "migratory," which is a description that can just as easily be applied to his daughter Sylvie and subsequently to his granddaughter Ruthie. Indeed, Ruth is much more accepting of her aunt's transient ways than her sister Lucille is ("Lucille hated everything that had to do with transience," 103). However, this passage, in making the connection between migration and danger, reflects Ruth's latent anxiety regarding

her aunt's habits. At multiple points throughout her story, Ruth describes how she and Lucille constantly worry that they will return home from school to find the house empty, to find that Sylvie's transient ways have finally won, and to find themselves abandoned once again (136). Moreover, because it is around this point in the narrative that Ruth begins to identify with Sylvie—describing herself as Sylvie's shadow (145) and fearing that she and Sylvie are the same (106)—this passage reveals Ruth's anxiety and discomfort concerning the transient qualities that Sylvie exhibits and that she has begun to identify within herself.

For Ruthie, transience and death are synonymous, an association likely borne out of the event of her grandfather's death and her mother's suicide. In Ruth's memories, her mother Helen is almost always distant, which is also reflected in Ruth's inclination to refer to her more readily as "Helen" than as "mother." While Helen does not adopt the same transient lifestyle as her father or sister Sylvie, she nonetheless did seem to exhibit her father's absentmindedness; to Ruthie, Helen always seemed to be physically, but not mentally, present. One of Ruth's memories, for instance, describes Helen staring intently out of a window, and when the children alert her of their presence, she appears "startled by the sudden awareness of our watching" (Robinson 52). In many ways, Sylvie, most content when she is itinerant, mirrors Helen's dreamy absentmindedness. Ruth describes Helen and Sylvie as being so similar "that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it" (53). This would not even be possible if Helen did not possess some of the same qualities as her sister; thus, Helen shares Sylvie's transient nature, but she is unable to drift as Sylvie does because she has two daughters who depend on her. This is why, after years of trying to conform to a static identity that does not suit her, Helen seeks the ultimate form of transience—death. She unloads the burden of her children onto her mother and calmly proceeds to sail her car off a cliff. Whereas Edmund succumbs accidentally to

transience, Helen does so deliberately, sinking her car in the same lake where her father's train derailed and sank.

Just as Ruth's grandfather and mother are transient, so are Ruth's memories always changing. Thus Robinson emphasizes how human memory changes the more time that passes after one has experienced the actual event, and how the mind replays this event, leading to an increasing sense of uncertainty about the accuracy of the memory. This idea is mirrored time and again in Ruth's recollections about her mother. When Ruth is narrating five years after her mother has died, she and Lucille cannot remember whether the car their mother drove off a cliff was blue or green, nor can they remember whether their mother's hair was brown or red (Robinson 43). The most vivid memory Ruth has of her mother comes toward the end of her narrative. It is the memory of the day her mother killed herself, the events prior to her mother leaving Ruth and Lucille on their grandmother's porch. Ruth describes the "waves at the crown of her hair, the square shoulders of her good gray dress, her long hands at the top of the steering wheel, the nails a deep gleaming red" (196). This is the most detailed description we get of Helen's appearance, though this description comes at the heels of numerous confessions from Ruth that her mother and Sylvie have started to blur together.

A large part of this memory consists of the songs Ruth's mother would sing; in this way, another connection can be made between Helen and Edmund. Ruth describes Edmund as a man who "would walk around singing in a thin voice" (Robinson 10) and, prior to describing how her mother looks on the day she dies, Ruth lists songs that her mother would sometimes sing to them, such as "What'll I do when you are far away" or "Irene" (196). Ruth poignantly records a universal human loss: "She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense" (160). Like Edmund, Helen too was very much detached from her static life. Proof of this lies in this passage from Ruth's memory: "We asked to stop at an ice-cream stand by the road in the woods and she stopped and bought us hot fudge sundaes, and the lady there

said we were nice and our mother smiled absently and said, ‘Sometimes they are’” (160). The “absent” mother’s smile underscores Helen’s her children and her life.

Ruth’s memories of her mother often focus on her stillness and remoteness, but one memory of her mother’s composure—“I was struck by her calm, by the elegant competence of her slightest gesture. I had never seen her drive before, and we were very much impressed” (196)—reveals that movement itself is calming to Helen. In this she resembles Edmund, who felt more comfortable on a train than on static land. Helen’s mode of suicide also reiterates her longing for transience, as she chooses to end her life by means of an automobile (literally, self-mover)¹. For Helen, Edmund symbolizes the transience she longs for, and by joining her father in the lake, she joins him symbolically in transience as well.

Unlike Ruth’s grandfather and mother, Ruth’s grandmother does not ever seem to long for a life of transience; quite the contrary, she is a lifelong resident of Fingerbone and seems quite content living out her existence there. Despite this, Ruth’s grandmother does share some qualities with her husband and daughter. For instance, the language Ruth uses to describe her grandmother’s relationship with her daughters following the death of Edmund is reminiscent of Helen’s distant relationship with Ruth and Lucille. Her grandmother “was quiet and aloof and watchful,” and she executed her housekeeping tasks with efficiency, but neither of these things indicate physical comfort that her children needed in a time of tragedy. Further, Ruth describes her grandmother as caring for herself and Lucille “like someone reliving a long day in a dream” (Robinson 24). This description aligns Mrs. Foster with Edmund and Helen, giving her the same absent, dreamy quality that they possessed. Ruth’s grandmother may have “whited shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back bedclothes,” but she performs these tasks almost me-

¹ “Auto” is derived from the Greek word for “self”; “mobile” is from the French word for moveable, moving.

chanically. She may be there physically, but her mind is “abstracted” (24–25). Although Ruth’s grandmother never longed for a life of constant movement, she was still absent, which is shown in Ruth’s choice not to say that her grandmother *loved* her and Lucille very well, but rather that she *cared* for them very well (24). Consequently, Ruth and Lucille move from one absent caretaker to another, setting them up for a life in which something (or someone) is always absent.

This is not to say that Mrs. Foster does not recognize this lack within herself. Two dream sequences that she relays to Ruth (and Ruth subsequently relays to us) illustrate that Mrs. Foster does indeed recognize this lack, if only at a subconscious level: “She dreamed that she had seen a baby fall from an airplane and had tried to catch it in her apron, and once that she had tried to fish a baby out of a well with a tea strainer” (Robinson 25). Allyson Booth sees these dreams as representing the “absurdities” and failures of housekeeping. In this dream, Ruth’s grandmother uses implements of housekeeping, an apron and a tea strainer, in her attempts to save babies; ultimately, the dreams also suggest that these implements fail, as the word “tried” implies that she failed to save the babies; indeed, the apron would be too flimsy and the tea strainer would be too small: both implements are inadequate. Ruth’s grandmother attempts to use housekeeping to unify her family and restore it to a semblance of normalcy after Edmund’s death; however, housekeeping fails to keep her family together. Her eldest daughter Molly becomes a missionary and moves away to China; her middle daughter Helen leaves once she marries, has two kids we can assume Mrs. Foster never met until the day they were left on her porch, and finally commits suicide; and her youngest daughter Sylvie is, as aunts Lily and Nona describe her, “too dreaming and self-absorbed to be ordinarily considerate,” a lost, drifting girl who has no established home. Once her daughters leave, they have no desire to come back and visit her; as Ruth puts it, “She had never taught them to be kind to her” (19). These failed relationships between mother and daughter are mirrored in the failure of the housekeeping

implements to save the babies in her grandmother's dream. The dreams suggest that Mrs. Foster feels she has failed her daughters in some way, and that she can repent for her mistakes by taking care of Lucille and Ruth: "Indeed, it must have seemed to her that she had returned to relive this day because it was here that something had been lost or forgotten" (24). However, in taking care of Lucille and Ruth in her absent way, she merely relives the same distanced experience twice, with two different sets of daughters.

Despite this emotional distance, Ruth seems to remember her grandmother with a certain fondness, recalling her grandmother's "comforting" deep-dish apple pie and the "orangey-brown stockings" that drooped around her ankles (Robinson 26–27). In fact, once her "abstracted" grandmother is replaced with aunts Lily and Nona and then Sylvie, all of whom only seem to care about Ruth and Lucille's whereabouts because they feel they ought to, Ruth seems to miss her grandmother all the more. The town of Fingerbone, however, glosses over her grandmother's death. The town newspaper prints her grandmother's obituary, but instead of focusing on Mrs. Foster, the obituary recounts her grandfather's tragic death via train derailment. There is no picture of her grandmother in her own obituary, but rather a picture of the train taken on the day of the tragedy. There is no mention of her granddaughters or daughters at all ("They wouldn't want to mention Helen," Lily speculated *sotto voce*," 40). This leaves quite an impression on Ruthie, who states that "[d]espite the omission of even essential information about my grandmother . . . it was considered an impressive tribute to her and was expected to be a source of pride for us. I was simply alarmed. It suggested to me that the earth had opened" (40–41). It is not a tribute to her grandmother, but rather one to her grandfather, whose memory overshadows his widow's; Edmund's untimely death has made him extraordinary, while Mrs. Foster's timely death has made her ordinary, and Ruth is perceptive enough to note that something is wrong with this. In fact, these feelings that Ruth has while awake are mirrored in her dreams:

I dreamed that I was walking across the ice on the lake, which was breaking up as it does in the spring, softening and shifting and pulling itself apart. But in the dream the surface that I walked on proved to be knit up of hands and arms and upturned faces that shifted and quickened as I stepped, sinking only for a moment into lower relief under my weight. The dream and [my grandmother's] obituary together created in my mind the conviction that my grandmother had entered into some other element upon which our lives floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections in water. So she was borne to depths, my grandmother, into the undifferentiated past . . . (41)

As with many of Ruth's dreams, this one involves the lake where her grandfather and mother perished, and in her dream, the ice is "breaking up as it does in the spring, softening and shifting and pulling itself apart" (41). That the ice is "breaking up" as Ruth walks across it is indicative of the very instability of the foundation of her life, as she is passed around to different caregivers, all of whom abandon her at some point, and none of whom provide Ruth and her sister with stability for any length of time. As Ruth walks across the broken ice, she imagines the limbs and faces of those whose lives the lake has claimed rising up to the surface, but in this dream, none of these faces belong to anyone she knows. For Ruth, the lake is a symbol of death; it has claimed not only the lives of Edmund and Helen, but numerous others as well. While this dream initially only involves the faces of strangers, the more transient Ruth becomes, the more she seems to imagine those who abandoned her—father, mother and grandmother—as residing in the lake. After Ruth describes the dream, she makes the connection between it and the obituary, which leads Ruth to believe that her grandmother has joined her grandfather in the lake for eternity. Words like "intangible" give the lake an ethereal, heavenly quality, while words like "immiscible" indicate that while that may be their "final resting place,"

those who perished in the lake will never become one with the lake, for they have not really perished at all—they are still very much alive in the memories of those they have left behind. Further, the depths of the lake correspond to the “undifferentiated past.” *Undifferentiated* means unchanging, but as the *past* is made up of ever-changing memories, the past is never “undifferentiated.”

For Ruth, “memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it” (Robinson 194). Memories capture those lost moments, but as time passes, the memories become just as “lost” as the moments that they captured. Memories are fleeting and impure, always influenced by the person who remembers them. Ruth’s memories have certainly been altered and some elements of them have disappeared, if the memory has not disappeared completely, by the time she retrospectively tells us her story. To compensate for this loss, Ruth creates new “memories.” In one such “memory,” Ruth imagines a “resurrection” of her grandfather, grandmother, and mother. In this “memory,” Ruth imagines the train being pulled out of the lake, “as if in a movie run backward,” and the passengers returned to their lives (96). In this “memory,” Ruth imagines “that Helen lifted our hair from our napes with her cold hands and gave us strawberries from her purse” (96). This “memory” Ruth has created is simultaneously warm and macabre. On the one hand, it shows Helen being motherly by “lift[ing] our hair from our napes” and “giv[ing] us strawberries from her purse,” two things that she does not do in any of the “actual” memories Ruth relays to us. Although these gestures may be small, they are gestures that indicate a level of affection for her daughters that Helen did not seem to possess in life. Simultaneously, Ruth’s macabre description of Helen’s hands as “cold” draws attention to her reserve and the fact that she is dead. Also, the wild strawberries in Helen’s purse carry great significance: right before Helen commits suicide, “some boys who had been fishing” in the lake come across Helen “sitting cross-legged on the roof of her car . . . gazing at the lake and eating wild strawberries” (23). The significance

of wild strawberries is further mirrored in this statement: "Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smoothes our hair, and brings us wild strawberries" (153). Here, Helen and longing are synonymous for Ruth, who longs for her mother, not necessarily as she was in life, but rather for an affectionate mother who "smoothes our hair, and brings us wild strawberries."

In this memory, Ruth also imagines her "grandmother pecked our brows with her whiskery lips, and then all of them went down the road to our house, my grandfather youngish and high-pocketed, just outside their conversation, like a difficult memory, or a ghost" (Robinson 96). Earlier in the narrative, Ruth describes "the coarse white hairs [that] sprouted on her [grandmother's] lip and chin" (26), but there is no "real" moment where those whiskery lips kiss Lucille and Ruth's brows; this is a figment of Ruth's imagination, representing affection she longed for, from her grandmother and mother alike. Additionally, in this "memory," whereas her grandmother is as old as the day she died, Ruth imagines her grandfather "youngish and high-pocketed," as he must have looked the day he died; because he never had the opportunity to age, he is always young in Ruth's mind. That is the power of memory, to make those who were not affectionate in life affectionate, to keep dead men forever young.

Finally, the lake plays a significant role in many of Ruth's dreams and memories, a significance noted by Joanna Hall: "The lake is a family grave, a deep dark decaying well of memories and history constantly threatening, and succeeding, to rise to the surface of Ruth's consciousness" (47). Ruth observes about the lake and its water:

One cannot cup one's hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it . . . I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather's, and that the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother's limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her

sight. There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken. (Robinson 193–194)

In Ruth's mind, although her grandfather and mother perished in the lake, the very existence of the lake makes them very much alive, including her grandmother, who is tied to the lake through her connection to Edmund. All are alive to Ruth through the power of memory. Abandoned by her father, mother, grandmother, and eventually her sister Lucille, Ruth uses these dreams and memories (whether real or imagined) to cope with these great losses. Thus Ruth asserts, at the end of *Housekeeping*, "For families will not be broken" (194). Although Ruth eventually joins Sylvie in a life of transience, she still imagines Lucille living in their house, Lucille "stalemating the forces of ruin," Lucille with her two pretty daughters perched upon her lap, sitting in a restaurant in Boston and completing the half-ring of condensation left by her water glass (218–219). In her dreams and memories, those who have abandoned her are alive, and her family is whole again. That is the power of Ruth Stone's dreams and memories.

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