

A Carrot for Dennis

*A writer's walk of
reclamation*

Colin Fleming

I was a collector of outside places with inside meaning. “Place”

as a concept is funny. Those that we like say much about us. How we respond to them at different points in our lives conveys much meaning, too. And place, to my thinking, has its most meaning when it is internalized, existing at once outside of us as a place we venture to, cherish, love, and existing inside of us as a spot we visit for purposes other than leisure.

One of the great things about Boston and New England is that the attractions of the Northeast are sufficiently tightly bunched that you can have day trips galore. And at the same time, those attractions can be worlds apart from each other. A car ride of forty-five minutes can take you from the Public Garden, in the center of Boston, to a town on a rocky coast where there are pine forests ideal for hiking, birding, with ponds for fishing in summer, skating in winter, such that within five seconds of your arrival it becomes almost inconceivable that skyscrapers featured in your year at all, let alone the earlier portion of your day. I loved the trips I used to take when I had means of a car, before I was besieged with what I'll call life stuff. Sometimes, with my wife at the time, we could go to the same spot, given that there was so much to luxuriate in, four, five weekends in a row.

When my marriage ended, I felt emotionally gored. The concept of place changed so much for me. Even in Boston where I had lived long before I met my wife, my spots had become *our* spots. Maybe it's better, if you're the type of person who remembers everything—down to what foot your weight was on when someone made some random remark to you about their favorite salad—to get gored in, say, Houston, where everything is more spread out. Maybe the reminders of what was are less frequent. But walk an hour in Boston, and you can go from the North End, where I live (half a football field from Paul Revere's house) to the Museum of Fine Arts, which is past the South End. In other words, you've covered the bulk of what a lot of people—and all tourists—think of as the city proper: Faneuil

Hall, Government Center, Freedom Trail, Common, Public Garden, Newbury Street, Fenway. Every tree I used to see, in that earlier context, became a tree I now saw a new way. The willows in the Public Garden, by the Swan Boats, became green-fingered banshees with ropey hands having at me.

It was as if place, as a prior concept, had been a series of vibrant Singer Sargent watercolors, and now all those paintings had been blackened, coated with something that made them filmy, oppressive, eye-jarring. But there was nothing else to look at, no alternative to the eyesore that was also a reminder of what the image used to be.

There is this dude in Dante's *Inferno*—I forget his name—who creeps out Dante with his defiance, even in his suffering. Dante says that God himself could come down and put his will against this guy, show him that there was no way a given something could work out, and could then get all the angels of heaven and every learned being who ever existed to back him, and this guy would still try to overcome his situation. Now, you might think that guy is an idiot. Maybe he was, I don't care. I respected him as someone for whom place as a concept, his internal version of a place, couldn't be altered by anyone. It was his.

Mine was mine too, and I needed a way to at least try and get it back. Without a car, that effort was going to come by walking.

In my mind, I made a list of places I would try to get back.

There was Concord, where I had previously walked around Walden Pond, and also visited the Old Manse, the home on the Concord River where Hawthorne had lived. The famed battle of the Revolutionary War was fought about thirty yards away, and the spot has remained virtually unchanged. Most of my spots, though, were on the North Shore—like a farm in Ipswich called Russell Orchards. Animals wander around, you can go apple-picking, and the cider donuts are local legends of deliciousness.

I took the commuter train to the Ipswich station, believing, in truth, that I would not be able to get to Russell Orchards on foot. Driving there, the changes in the terrain makes you cognizant of the

road's length. First there were rows of houses, with chicken coops and lobster traps in the yards, then the expanse of a farm, followed by protected forest land, a marsh then meadows, forest again, and, finally, Russell Orchards. Past Russell Orchards, and probably twice as far as that first bit of road, was Crane Beach where a mansion straight out of *Downton Abby* stood on a hill overlooking the rolling dunes.

A form of salt-encrusted peat was on both sides of the road, with tidal sinkholes waiting to claim your foot and the bottom half of your calf. Almost everything, even roadside traffic signs, was skirted with a layer of barnacles. Razor clams jutted out of the mud, hermit crabs scampered for cover under marsh grass, the occasional fiddler crab—a species that never used to frequent the area—made a dash for it across a clay bank as a circling gull pondered his next meal. You wouldn't think this road, which began with suburban homes, was the same one now that it had become the stuff of a nature documentary.

I figured if the fiddler crabs, tempted by global warming, could get to the end of this road—albeit by working their way up the shoreline—I would at least give it a try.

The last time I'd been at Russell Orchards, my wife had gone into this 200-year old converted barn that now served as a store, all drafty and smelling of pine and oak, such that you're reticent to use a word like "store" in describing it. "Shoppe," maybe. A place where you expect to hear a blacksmith's hammer ringing out in the back.

It was past Halloween then, and the farm would be closing for the season. Even if everything in our joint lives went on as usual, hunky dory, that was our final visit for the year. While she got the donuts and scones, I visited with two little pigs in a pen jutting off the barn set back deeper on the grounds.

These pigs were not long for the world. I knelt down beside them. The sun was very low in the sky. I could see my breath, their breath. One of them munched a carrot. He was charcoal-colored, the other pinkish. My wife had named them, despite my warnings not to get attached to these guys. A warning she ignored every year, suggesting later, when we returned in the spring and the pigs were gone, that

maybe they had been adopted. Yes, I thought but didn't say, adopted by Stop and Shop. I'd just smile and make my best "well, maybe" face.

Dennis was the carrot-chomper. He eyed me peacefully as he crunched away at his treat. "Enjoy it, my friend," I said, scratching the top of his head, thinking, "ah, you're lucky you don't know what's coming for you."

It was some months later, after Dennis had been dispatched presumably, when it occurred to me that he could have conveyed much the same sentiment to me and been even more in the right.

After you get past those first few homes, there are no sidewalks on Arugula Road in Ipswich. I decided to walk with the cars at my back. That's the way you're supposed to, legally, I think, but I also wasn't against getting dispatched myself, especially if I didn't see it coming, like Dennis. The cars whip past you, a whirl of sound that makes your shirt billow with every vehicle. I made it to the marsh and was decently pleased with myself because I didn't expect to see this beautiful eye-ful of nature again. A moral victory.

Fitz Henry Lane, the wonderful nineteenth-century seascape master, my favorite painter, would have set up his easel here and, I imagined, do for these reeds and rushes and winding saltwater rivulets what Monet had done for water lilies and pond water, but with more possibilities. There was simply more to see here. The horizon running to impossible distances seemed to bolster that fact and made it into something else, the symbiotic scope of water underfoot and clouds sloping away, past the field of vision, turning mere fact into endless truth.

One of the speeding cars pulled up beside me, and I was asked if I needed a ride because no one walked here. The first of what would be a fairly regular occurrence during my reclamation efforts. Women stopped more than men. Three to one ratio, easily. I'd think about all the film noirs I'd seen that started this way, but film noirs never happen in the sun-spangled setting of a coastal spring, though I worried that I was some anti-hero with an unavoidable bad end awaiting, regardless of my intentions.

Each time I would thank the person who had shown me some

concern, adding that I was good, and really, thanks again. And on I walked.

Garter snakes rustled in the vegetation on the road's right hand side, but it was the brown snakes slithering onto the pavement for warmth that took their chances. I'd seen a number of them squashed by cars on the first mile or so, so when I encountered any still living, I'd pick it up and carry it twenty yards into the forest, leaving it on a rock in a spot where the sun broke through the density of the oak canopy.

This felt good, even as I started dreading Russell Orchards, now that it seemed like a possibility I'd see it again. The past would rear up like a horse you couldn't break, kicking at anyone who sought to gain some command over it. I worried I might vomit. True, a farm was probably a decent spot to do so if you had to pick one. Dennis, surely, wouldn't be there, but I had another Dennis on my mind.

I'd read about a St. Dennis, or St. Denis, this guy in third-century France who'd had his head chopped off. Now, getting your head lopped off wasn't that uncommon, once upon a time. Suffer this form of slicing, and you might become known as a cephalophore, which basically means, "dude without a head who gets painted holding said head." Entire sub-genre of painting. Gist was you were shown with your head to indicate that particular form of death, often as a martyrdom.

I liked the display of resiliency as some sort of symbolic gesture about keeping your head. But the legend of St. Dennis went several steps further. Quite literally. Having been dispossessed, bodily, of his head, he picked it up, and like that guy in Dante, refused to accept his fate. Carrying his head, he was said to have walked six miles. That's commitment to what he wanted and believed in. They buried him at the place he reached and built the wonderful church of St. Denis on that spot.

I thought of Dennis the saint and Dennis the pig, and how the latter chomped at his carrot, me dangling a carrot of sorts in front of my head, my still attached head, even if it felt like my heart, and parts of my mind, had flown the barn.

I was pretty sure that being back at Russell Orchards was going to be awful, but I knew I had to go back, then go back again, and again. Because each time it would be a little less awful, and, if I ever had a life again, a place like this, because of all of this, would mean more than a place, in its mere place-ness, so to speak, otherwise could. Because the place wouldn't just be this awesome farm in this spot I loved so much.

No. It would be an extension of who I was, a patch of me from which I could reflect, learn, grow.

When you walk on the sides of roads most people do not walk on, to get to a place you must get to—because of who you are, what you have been through, what you are fighting for and to be—you learn what place really means, better than any master vacationer, visitor, or even lifelong resident, ever could. The place isn't really a place when it matters most, when it has its highest quotient of place-ness.

Nope.

The place is you.

When I saw the sign for Russell Orchards, I felt proud that you could, if you wanted it enough, walk there. I also felt queasy. My first return visit was a quick one. I bought some unpasteurized cider from the Shoppe and guzzled it down out back after confirming that Dennis had, indeed, vacated the premises.

But life teemed. There were goats, and geese, and rabbits, a 1,200 pound pig who wasn't going to be eaten by anyone, two outdoor cats—one of whom had a portion of a bird's feather in his whiskers—mallards, and this strange make of fowl, standing off on his own, who kind of kept pace with me wherever I walked and stared at me. Everyone else there was with someone else. I was the only person on my own. This strange creature was on his own, too. I found him interesting.

I didn't turn back left, towards town, when I came out of the parking lot, but went right. I was going to try and make Crane Beach. Again the forms of nature shifted. Leafy woods with huge boulders

and houses more like shacks and cabins were on either side of me now, and the occasional gully and ravine.

I encountered hills with steep inclines, the last of which, a long time later, sloped down to the sea. I heard a crunch underfoot—tiny periwinkles blown from the nearby marshes. I fretted if I'd be able to get back to the commuter rail in time to catch a train back into Boston, not being familiar with the schedule, but now that I was here, I was going to that *Downton Abbey* mansion, Crane Estate.

There is an attendant at the gate to take your money for the entrance fee. No other way into the place. So I walked up and got right into line with the cars.

When it was my turn, I asked the man how much it was to go in. He had one of those “what the fuck is this?” looks on his face, but the kind, amused version.

“How'd you get here?”

“I walked from town.”

“Then it's free. You earned it.”

The mansion is one thing, but what is behind it is another: a series of massive lawns, cleared entirely of trees down the center, that flow down the back of this enormous hill, ending in the sea three hundred yards below. I had never seen anything like this. I never went here when I was married. To Crane Beach, yes, but not the estate. Here was newness, new experience, and I was having it.

You have to pay to get into Crane Beach, too, but at the end of the lawn, with the sea crashing about, I detected the vague outline of what may have once been a path through the trees on the right. I pushed through some brambles, saw the sand dispersed by the wind from the beach flecking clumps of moss. Soon there were dunes, just past the reach of a last triumvirate of cedars standing like friendly sentinels. I flew past them, having decided to run. No idea why. But my momentum took me in the direction of the tallest dune, and I kept chugging up it, tripping at the highest point before I could get my bearings, then rolling down the other side like I was the coastal version of Charlie Brown or Oliver Hardy.

When I had stopped and brushed the sand from my eyes, I saw

that I was among beachgoers, having arrived at Crane Beach. Thirty seconds later, my shoes were off, and I was knee deep in the cold water, thinking, yes, how many people would have done that?

I was also thinking it would be a long, long-ass walk back into town.

At least, that's what I used to think of as a long walk. My definitions, though, would be rapidly evolving in such matters.

As would I.

A carrot for a pig, a carrot for Dennis, a carrot for Colin, I thought, as I bit into the clam roll I had acquired.

After walking to Russell Orchards and Crane Beach, Concord was, as they say, a piece of piss.

I took the commuter rail again, then started walking in the direction of Walden Pond. Thoreau had done it, and I knew that the common idea of Thoreau way out in the woods was mostly bullshit, and that he walked back into town for groceries.

People love Walden Pond, but it's always been too hippy-dippy for me. Groups smoking pot on the banks with a guitar, a naked swimmer or two becoming one with nature. I wanted to see snakes and snapping turtles and watch harriers do harrier things. Find a plant I'd never seen before. Encounter a salamander. Use my Swiss Army knife to tap open a crumbling geode, catch the glint of mica in the sun. I never associated those interests with Walden Pond, maybe because it was too communal. But I wanted to get back there, and I did.

Later, after I had what I thought were problems with my heart, indicative of my endless stress rather than physical debilitations—after all, I was walking everywhere—I returned to Concord, thinking maybe the meditative space of the pond would do me good.

I encountered a woman whose car had broken down on one of those roads where nobody walks. No one was stopping to help, either, as they whizzed by. She didn't seem at all surprised to see me, oddly, and asked if I'd help her push the car the thirty or so yards to a hollow, where her daughter was going to pick her up.

She wanted both of us to push, which wouldn't have worked, so

I told her to steer and brake, and I pushed that sucker, which made me feel all zesty. I wanted to bound and explore, to go to new places, screw the pond and the pot and the “All You Need is Love” atmosphere. She thanked me and I took a hard left into the woods, woods I’d never been in, in this place I was reclaiming but also now first-claiming—new spots, new places, new memories.

I sat on the forest floor, deep in those woods, my back against some marker that, for all I knew, Thoreau himself had placed there, and I literally watched the leaves fall. Some got stuck in my hair, and I left them there, and others I tried to catch, unsuccessfully, as a woodpecker paused in his pecking to eye me, and I eyed him.

Next up was Gloucester, further north than Ipswich. There is an allegedly haunted forest there, called Dogtown. For this one, I’d have to book it, as we used to say as kids, across a highway. My best friend John, who lives in D.C. but spent many a day exploring these bucolic parts, had some advice.

“They get on you fast. Just be aware.”

“What gets on you fast?”

“Cars. You think they’re way off, and then they’re right on top of you.”

“And you’re such an expert on this because?”

“Remember that farmer’s daughter I was dating in Ohio back when I was rambling? Her father chased me down the road with a shotgun when he caught me with her.”

“Ah. Don’t worry—I’ll run hard until I’m across.”

Dogtown is a strange place. It was settled centuries ago, a village far enough back from the sea that the pirates wouldn’t get it, pirates probably a way worse problem than Subarus. When the men died at sea, some of the women turned to witchery, but most left, leaving behind the dogs that had served as their protection. The dogs became feral, their wolf-like cries echoing through the nights, a real *Hound of the Baskervilles* kind of thing right there in Olde New England.

The settlement was consumed by the forest, but the foundation holes remain, so you can be walking along and trip on what had once been the bottom portion of a house. Eldritch rock formations are

everywhere, with boulders from the glacier that striated this most rocky of coasts looming twelve feet over your head.

The blueberries here are excellent, and it is said the ghost-spotting is, too. As I wandered the great expanse of the Dogtown woods, notching trees with my knife so that I would not get more lost than I knew I inevitably would, I looked around bends for ghosts, and saw but ravens instead, those brilliant birds who, in that particular environment, always seem to know more than you do. There were places where the photos I took on my camera would not come out. Always a blur of vapors, like the ghosts were telling me they'd only communicate through modern technology.

In Concord I liked to sit behind the Old Manse, which is in the opposite direction from Walden Pond, reading Hawthorne and being amazed that on that spot, where the Battle of Concord had been fought, skulls had been exploded by musket balls. And yet it was so peaceful, as if the ghosts were reading alongside you. You never feel alone there, you feel *them*, but you feel at ease.

Dogtown now felt the same way to me as that spot behind the Old Manse. Maybe because Concord had been a battle for freedom, and now I was involved in a battle for my own freedom, in a way. A freedom from my past.

My love for Boston's North Shore—specifically, the Cape Ann area—began many years ago when that friend who learned lessons about traffic while running from a famer's gun took me to a spot called Manchester-by-the-Sea. It's all woods, coves, cliffs, a village green, small churches tucked into glens, beaver dams, cider stands. You know what your version of heaven looks like, right? You have some idea of what you'd like to see? This is pretty close to what I'd want.

My wife and I would drive around town, park, explore, drive again, stop at this makeshift parking lot at the edge of this huge forest, wander into the woods for a couple hours, see foxes, hope to see the ever-elusive beaver, whose handiwork—this guy was a master of the teardown, in terms of forest real estate—was visible everywhere

in the form of fallen birches and happily gnawed stumps, his engineer-in-absentia calling cards.

After that we would drive for quite a while before coming to a town called Essex, where the salt marsh began, with clam shacks and antique stores perched at the edge of it. A bend followed, and you went past a church with a bell that had been cast by Paul Revere, across the street from an eighteenth-century graveyard, complete with a “Hearse House” for that cheery wagon of yore. Then the trees retreated back from the roadside and huge meadows opened up, with horses and cows and barns the size of hockey rinks. This went on for miles. Green trees had given over to yellowy patches of grass, with the occasional ice cream stand tempting you to stop.

After a few more miles, where the green came back in full, we’d turn off the road and park. A footpath wound up a hill and we’d ascend, and that’s what I did the first time I attempted this walk of reclamation, knowing that once I had gotten to a certain point, I’d be all in. Out there in the middle of nowhere, no train stop, no cabs passing by, no buses. Me in the deep sticks with no way home save I got all the way to the end of my journey, where I could find transport.

Here the hawks circled over the fields, looking for mice or a pheasant who had become careless. I’d watch for those explosions of feathers when a hawk collided in mid-air with some quail who hadn’t quite mastered how these avian matters worked, impressed that about half the time it managed to get away. The hawks never seemed to care, returning to their perches in the trees to scan the fields anew. This was simply how it all went down. You never get to bat 1.000, be you a bird, be you a human.

Walk on the sides of roads no one walks on, you will come to pull for both the hawk and the quail, because if you have occasion to walk on those roads, you’ve probably been the quail often enough, and you are fighting to become a hawk. A hawk unto yourself, maybe. I don’t mean you want to eviscerate other living things. I mean that you want to be able to return to your perch, after you didn’t get what you want, and know that, hey, your time is coming, but only if you hang in.

As I went all in on what was to be a walk across the whole of three towns, Gloucester to Rockport to Manchester-by-the-sea, I got to that point, past where the hawks and the quails were, where the path beckons upward. I made a detour on my epic walk and mounted that hill. In the distance—and I mean far in the distance—were dunes, shimmering, the open ocean seeming to come up to them ever so gently, a coloristic kiss of light brown and deep blue.

I wasn't sure I could get to where I wanted to get. But then I recognized a particular ice cream stand, and I knew to turn right. I'd been walking for over twenty miles. I figured I had five or six left to go.

When I finally arrived back in Ipswich, at Russell Orchards, having come this roundabout way, not the simple, much shorter way I had on that first trip back, when I set out to make sure I would not lose the places I loved, should I ever have a life again and get to return to them in a standard fashion—which wouldn't involve nearly crippling myself—I didn't feel like throwing up this time.

I obliterated a jug of unpasteurized cider and had a frozen strawberry pop before walking back towards the barn, where that odd duck was.

He was alone again. I approached him and he just stood there, until I started walking again, which prompted him to walk, stopping when I stopped, resuming when I resumed. He does it every time I go now. Sometimes I film it because people can be incredulous when you tell them that this duck walks around with you. For a while I had a couple clips up on YouTube.

Inside that converted storage barn, where the cider donuts are sold, you can get magnets with photos of the barnyard animals of Russell Orchards on them, with their names. That's right, they have names. There is Galley the cat, for example—the one who likes to eat the birds—and the 1200 pound pig is Big Daryl.

Have a guess what the weird duck's name is. Yep. He's Dennis the duck. I don't feed him carrots, of course. I feed him jellybeans, which you're really not supposed to do, but he loves them, and then he walks with even more celerity.

