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FEELING THE GRAIN
EXPERIENCES IN BOAT RESTORATION AND WRITING

by

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Master of Arts


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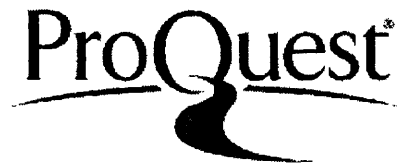


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Experiences of Boat Restoration and Writing (68 pages)

Committee Chair: Randy Bolton 

Writing and wood boat restoration were pursued from the summer of 2003 through the spring of 2005, as a creative focus centered around both reflections on teaching and the prioritization of an artistic dimension outside the classroom. Six prose compositions and five poems comprise the main written body of material selected to represent the creative journey involved. Their creation was guided by interest in essay style, as was the video production included also for documentation of boat experiences in boat restoration.

The creative process during the first few months focused on stream of consciousness journal writing and experimentation with essay forms. Distinct writing aims came to be clarified in this process, leading to a reconsideration of project direction. This reflective juncture coincided with involvement in a video-editing workshop through an educational program called "Bridges." The program's focus on bridging cultures through a digital storytelling exchange between students began to connect conceptually with project aspirations of linking writing interests and reaching new outlook in the process. The development of these bridging ideas through participation in the Bridges program influenced a reorientation of the project writing focus to a boat restoration venture.

Involvement with boat restoration provided both creative and symbolic focus, i.e., as a vessel to the contemplative space sought. Through the confrontation of values staged by the boat restoration in a community context, the process supported an inward critique of perspective that governs busy patterns of life and teaching that conflicted with dictates of thinking and feeling space entailed by creative experience of the project. The creative project provided an expressive outlet to similarly conflicted feelings experienced in teaching that have pronounced themselves through non-specific feelings of angst.

In helping clarify the nature of this angst the creative project reinforced an outlook about the self reflective capacity offered in the artistic act of essentially projecting attitudes and convictions through an audience. Part of this discovery involved a reconnection with ideological thinking that helped guide the author's path in to teaching.

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Video Production

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Chapter 1

Getting a Bearing (Restatement of Intent)

In defining a direction for my final creative project I was pulled by a couple core urges. One was to engage in a reflective experience toward distilling my perspective about teaching; what it is, what I need to get from it, how to bridge worlds where necessary. The other urge was to develop more of an intentional incorporation of the arts in my classroom practices, which I saw as integrally tied to my own experience of artistic discovery and growth. Somewhere between, or all encompassing of these urges, I intuited that I could find a way of accommodating each through writing. Considerations about literary form or genre seemed to matter less than the contemplative opportunity offered through writing toward articulating and doing something about what I felt generally as a yearning that pronounced itself particularly through my teaching experience. My intent was to develop an expressive capacity in this yearning, addressing both a focus specific to my teaching experience and more open-ended exploration of writing process and styles. This aim was guided less by ideas of specific outcomes than by intrigue about the search for a product through which a joining of my different interests, or yearnings might be achieved.

The beginning stage of my process oriented at developing a daily regimen of writing and achieving a free flow of ideas mainly through the stream of consciousness journal exercises emphasized in the Creative Pulse poetry workshops. From the churn of material that transpired in this exercise, I began to work ideas into other compositions, generally narrations of life experiences that serve also as experimentation with story telling approach and perspective. The following section, Setting Out, focuses on samples writing concentration in the mid part of my school and project year to involvement with a

teaching program that engages students around the world in digital story-telling exchange. The program is appropriately named “Bridges.”

The Bridges experience helped me redefine my project direction toward a focus on interactions in a coastal fishing community and a boat restoration project. The impetus of this reorientation and its connection to the central writing focus are subjects that will be addressed in chapter three--Navigating the Ebb and Flow. They are further explored in chapter four and five's respective focuses on the significance and affect of the project, particularly with regard to the prioritization of contemplative and expressive space against the grain of competing expectations in teaching.

Chapter 2

Course Setting

One of the more rigorous aspects of the Creative Pulse experience for me has been the first week experience of the summer sessions with the transition involved between professional and student roles. On the teaching side, this transition involved a several week narrative report writing process that overlapped with the start of graduate school. Unfinished pieces of this process accompanied me to Missoula, to complete with the mix of activities in the starting agenda of the summer program. The ordeal serves well in drawing to light various motivations that influenced the writing direction I took for my final creative project. One has to do with the rejuvenation of writing spirit the summer sessions of the Creative Pulse achieved for me, from a somewhat aversive mindset tempered through an intensive task-oriented preoccupation with writing activities over the course of the teaching year. While it wasn't the aspect of the summer program that I anticipated most, by the end of the six-week sessions I'd found renewed connection through the writing focus as a path of self-discovery and expression.

In part the transformation of writing outlook developed through experiences in forms I'd previously had limited practice with by comparison particularly with academic styles such as essay and research compositions that comprised the main focus of my undergraduate background. This slant of literary exposure pronounced itself in my role as a Language Arts teacher as I tried to draw perspective from my academic past in developing a rounded curriculum that included what I heard widely referred to as a "creative writing" component. While I liked the term creative writing, a consistent definition of it evaded me. The poetry writing workshops through the Creative Pulse approximated the kind of experience the label conjured for me. With regard to the sense

of new possibility aroused about my teaching approach, in terms of the experience of personal connection through writing that was revitalized, and on the basis of the need I feel to practice what I teach, these considerations all motivated me toward a writing pathway for my final creative project.

“Confluence” is a piece that I wrote as one of the poetry workshop exercises (Appendix B-1, p. 33) that reflects for me intrigue with an inward-outward connection I was finding through a descriptive writing focus. I was deliberate in selecting an ordinary spot as its setting, dragging my chair onto the parking space in front of my motel room. I recall being utterly transported by the feat of characterizing the rush of sensory experiences that swept me from the moment I sat down to write, beginning with the eruption of sound from a passing motorcycle and lasting fully an hour until I forced myself finally into the solitude of my room. The poem is a vivid snap shot for me of a place, as much of a receptive frame of mind as it was of particular circumstances or physical attributes of the setting. In this regard the poem captures also a sense of an awakening I felt in that transitional time between the end of my teaching year and involvement in the Creative Pulse program. In its reflection of inner reconnection that accompanied the lifting of preoccupations from the school year, it further portrays for me the excitement I was finding through *writing* as a focal experience in this process.

The general theme of awakening emerges in a number of compositions I developed through writing exercises during summer sessions of the Creative Pulse. “Dawning Encounter,” “View By a River,” and “Nature” share also a similar focus toward landscape description as a mirror to inward feelings (Appendix B-2, B-3 & B-4, pp. 22 - 27). The concept of an awakening is more specifically the subject of another poem, “Personification of a River,” developed largely from an interest in stream of

consciousness journal writing exercises and the interaction they involved with the subconscious as I imagined it, or the experience of reaching to the edge of consciousness (Appendix B-5, p 38). Beyond the evocative capacity I was discovering through these exercises, in terms of generating for instance a wealth of association and recollection from childhood about growing up on a farm, they helped establish direction to the yearning I felt toward accommodating a contemplative dimension in my focus as an educator and otherwise. I began to clarify a distinction between the value of writing as a mode of articulation and expression, and the lure I was otherwise finding in it purely in terms of the contemplative space it provided.

Guided by discoveries through the Creative Pulse exercises, my beginning steps of the final creative project aimed at achieving a free flow of ideas through a daily regimen of writing involving mainly a stream of consciousness approach to journal entries (the focus of in this exercise generally being to maintain a continuous flow of ideas by not allowing my pen to stop its motion across the page). Content-wise, my focus centered often on feelings of angst related to my teaching experience, a direction that entwined with recollections of my father and a similar professional pathway he followed. Seeking further direction to a growing body of notes in these subject areas, I drew from them in exploring an essay style of writing. "Farm Reflections" is one result of this exploration that focuses in particular on imagery from my earliest recollections of childhood, tying with it speculation about my father's outlook in parenting and farming (Appendix B-6, pp. 39 - 43). Another piece, "Reverie," centers on a nail wounding experience as its subject (Appendix B-7, pp. 44 - 49). The essay aims to relate the emotional-intellectual processes that accompanied the event with a tension I have encountered along my path as an educator, one that I have characterized loosely in terms of a feeling of angst.

Through my experience and interactions with others in teaching I have come to regard this tension as one that is widely shared in the field, attributing it in no small part to the world of expectation the profession is about and the limitations of any individual or institution to address them. It involves the struggle as a teacher to sort out personal needs *against*, or in the context of vocational demands. In developing ideas about the nature of this tension, my focus in “Reverie” is also toward drawing connection with my father’s struggle against repression, or the marginalizing of an inner, particularly emotional connection that was exacerbated by demands in teaching.

Writing “Reverie” was the start of a turning point in my project direction. In part this shift occurred through the affirmation I found in probing my feeling of angst in teaching and clarifying through this process the hopes I held about my graduate school experience toward addressing the roots of it; ultimately doing something about it. This affirmation at the same time led me to a divided sense of priority in my writing direction. In one respect I needed it to serve as a reflective complement to my professional teaching experience following an intensive preparatory step through certification experience. Graduate school represented an essential next step along my teaching pathway, toward integration of ideological and practically minded perspectives that I perceive the profession to be essentially about. In this reflective focus, though, I sought also an expressive outlet different from academic forms that had heavily preoccupied my teaching background, both collegiate and professional.

In this process of introspection regarding my project direction and while trying to identify a writing pathway that could allow a fusion of interests, my focus turned primarily to journal entries. I struggled to find approaches to packaging material from this inward focused stage in essay form. “Ride Pool” (Appendix B-8, pp. 50 - 55) is one

result of this effort. It explores interactions from a work experience previous to teaching and draws from material through my undergraduate background relating to communities and the institution of “individualism.” In general the focus of “Ride Pool” is as an effort to revitalize an ideological bearing that helped lead me into teaching. While I found this path fruitful, the product of my writing focus tapered off at this stage against a wavering sense of conviction in my direction and a growing competition with other writing projects in my teaching obligations. Rather than acting on intentions toward addressing angst related to my teaching experience, my writing efforts seemed more to result in an opposite effect by adding another layer to a demanding school schedule.

It was at this juncture during my final project year that I became involved with “Bridges,” a program developed by world-renowned photographer, Phil Borges, and an educational software designer, Susan Hirasawa. Its intent is to promote cross-cultural interaction through a digital story telling exchange between students in developed and undeveloped regions around the world. The storytelling focus aims at student representation of something characteristic or distinct about his or her culture and regionally influenced perspective of the world. Our school was selected as one among three in the country to pilot the program and I was offered the opportunity to set up and teach the class. In taking on this challenge I was drawn particularly by the connection I saw in it to my graduate work--partly in terms of the video editing background I’d acquired through the Creative Pulse summer workshop with Rick Hughes. I also began to latch on to the Bridges’ concept of place representation, which resonated for me with the creative struggle I was encountering through my writing process of sorting out purpose and direction. This exploration in my graduate project centered on a place experience of its own nature, in terms of needs and desires that I was gaining a better

sense of through my writing as well as a more specific sense of destination toward addressing them. I was lured to the Bridges program as a temporary surrogate experience to my writing process that I felt could help sustain the hunt for creative direction.

“Best Market” (Appendix C-1, track 1) is a video piece I produced during a training and mentorship workshop for the Bridges program. As in the project I accomplished during the Creative Pulse video editing class, it involved digital manipulation and sequencing of pictures and audio segments. The production process for Bridges focused extensively also on photography, both in terms of operating a digital camera and through fieldwork experience gathering photographic subject material.

Like the poetry I wrote that focuses on landscape description as an introspective mirror (Appendix B-2, B-3, B-4 & B-5, pp. 35 - 38), Best Market aims also at inward reflection in its depiction of setting. New perspective developed for me in light of the process of producing it regarding the direction of my creative project, which I began to visualize as a story crafting exercise similar to the Bridges experience. Rather than photographic material that I was assembling for my production, however, my collection consisted of a mixed bag of pieces that together comprised my expectations, desires, fantasies and idealisms about life with particular focus toward teaching. I had come some distance through my graduate school experience in gathering these pieces on the layout table, by this conceptualization, and confronted a next step in my production process of connecting them as a cohesive whole.

Chapter 3

Navigating the Ebb and Flow

In light of my experience through Bridges with regard to story telling and place representation, I began to think about settings that might accommodate the various interests I was trying to develop as focal aspects of my project. Besides my aim toward reconnecting with subject material from my undergraduate background (Appendix B-8, pp. 49 - 55), I began to entertain the idea of adventure as a focal aspect of my creative process. This latter interest became more pronounced as the direction of my writing turned inward and the demands in teaching crowded the space I was able to prioritize toward finding new directions.

The setting these project interests began to point me to is a small coastal fishing community a couple hours outside Seattle. My connection with the town had developed during visits there during the previous year that led to the discovery and purchase of an undeveloped lot in the marina area. One aspect of the town I was particularly interested in concerns a transformation it is undergoing from a past rooted primarily in a fishing economy, to a future being shaped by tourism and a landscape of condominiums. I began to focus this interest through explorations of the community and writing about my reactions and interactions within it.

My sights in this exploration came to a couple abandoned fishing vessels (see Appendix A-1, p. 20) lying in a boatyard at the outskirts of the marina (boats that had been repossessed by the port operations department for non-payment of moorage fees). I was drawn by these nautical presences, the mystery of their neglected plight and the untold wealth of connections their histories held in the community story. What did they reflect about the outlook of the residents here, no doubt humbled by the forces and

rhythms of a natural world on which their primary livelihoods so closely depended? In my musings about the vessels I saw reflections about my romantic ideals of this place by the sea where I sought an order regulated more out of a communion with a natural environment, and less so by the more artificial dictates of commercial, materialistically centered enterprise. All was not what I wanted it to be in this coastal promised land, or by reflection, within myself. I began to dwell on these musings as a theme focus of my project, with the actual boats as my central subject.

Two tensions factored increasingly for me in taking ownership of the boat projects through a public auction, one involving a compulsion to commit myself with abandon to needed restoration efforts; to at least accomplish weather proofing steps, which I found led increasingly to structural rebuilding measures.

The other tension involved a developing sense of trepidation about the commitment and risks involved. The scale of my angst in this respect amplified itself through the public eye as I imagined it. No longer was I a sideler in my interactions with the community, but now more center stage. In large part this was because of the location of my property where I worked on the boat, lying in a very central and public part of the marina district, immediately next door to a marine supply business that serves also as one of the area's foremost social spots of local fishermen (Appendix A-2, p. 23).

Immediately across the street are the marina's operations offices, and on a third side is the town's most popular working-person's dining spot. In short, if I wanted a place to draw more attention to my boat projects and myself, I can't think of one. All of this seemed very in keeping with project criteria of risk and irrevocability. Cost and rigor quickly became central to the experience as I began to dig more into the vessels, acquiring better sense about the nature of the challenge I had chosen.

These tensions were equal and opposite in proportion—between the desire to involve myself with abandon in the restoration process and the developing trepidation through doing so and assessing the *costs* involved. The emotional experience aroused through these competing perspectives acquired greater weight as I progressed with the project, one that led me increasingly to turn inward for justification and articulation of my direction and purpose. This need was served in my writing focus mainly through journal writing and also to some degree in narrative composition that I submitted for review to my faculty advisors (Appendix B-9 & B-10, pp. 55 - 59). One of the main motivational considerations for pressing on with the boat restorations came to center on the self-confrontational aspect, particularly with regard to reflection it spurred about my experiences and outlooks in teaching.

Generally speaking the connection I found in the boat project to teaching related to the experience of working against the grain of societal expectation. There were various facets of this experience I perceived through my involvement with the boats, one pronounced explicitly through the words of a seasoned fishing boat operator who while leaning on the fence of my property while I was engaged on my boat some 40 feet away, yelled to me, “The only good use of a wood boat is firewood!” He then proceeded into a litany of reasons why he regarded the restoration effort in wood boats a fool-hearty venture.

In the view of the fishing community for which he asserted himself as spokesperson in that occasion, fiberglass and steel were the only materials in boat construction worth anyone’s attention. While trying to negotiate the incendiary or chiding tact of this fishing salt I briefly debated raising the point about the rather enormous investment of natural resource and production energy wood boat construction involved and how other utility

might be found for such end products of such a short-lived consumptive cycle that's valuation process based itself entirely on profit margins and convenience. I opted not to pursue this path of discourse with the fishing boat captain, though, deciding that the more effective approach of *staging* my convictions in the community was through on-going actions to demonstrate an alternative to the apparent mainstream view.

My perceptions of reaction in the fishing community to the boat venture began to clarify for me a similar tension I encountered in other areas of my life, having to do with the impulse always to want more, do more, do it faster, outdo the other person with the bigger basket of economic goods. Identifying the nature and impetus of this societal bent has been an ongoing area of inquiry for me through the Creative Pulse, related to a broad interest in issues of community as discussed previously. The lure in teaching of being able to affect social consciousness in this area of concern and interest also becomes a root of frustration against an agenda—reflective of the wider societal pattern--where contemplative space commonly takes a back seat to the relentless push to squeeze more in. My inclination has been to channel such frustration as a me-against-the-institution reaction; to achieve an object toward which to attribute a source of angst I felt but could not articulate clearly. Through the boat restoration project I began to identify the core of this reaction more within myself, as a non-specific tension stemming from my ineffectiveness in connecting desire—toward prioritizing a personal, contemplative space in my life—with words, and action.

In preoccupying myself increasingly with the boats as a focal direction in my project I turned increasingly also to use of the camera as a supplement to journal writing in recording my experience (Appendix A-3, A-4 & A-5, pp. 25 – 29). My experience through the Bridges workshop proved very valuable in this interest and spurred me

eventually also to apply video editing techniques to the production of a pictorial overview of the boat projects. “Westport Mongo” (Appendix C-2, track 2; B-11, pp. 65 – 67) is one result of this experimentation, incorporating photography and narration as a visually oriented essay about the restoration experience and my interactions in the marina community.

Chapter 4

Project Significance

The work of the boat restoration goes on. A considerable amount of attention needs yet to be given to the ribs and outer planking before prospects of an actual launch can be seriously entertained. The significance of my final creative project, however, measures for me far less in terms of sea destinations than the path it has provided both in clarifying a core of angst in teaching and developing an expressive outlet toward addressing this disposition. These outcomes developed particularly through the boat restoration and the stage in a sense it provided to the experience of rubbing a bit against the grain of the community where I accomplished the work.

Working on the boats reconnected me to the experience of the personal stage performances of the Creative Pulse, of standing before an audience to communicate a message of vital importance. On the stage of the boats, in the amphitheatre of the marina community as it were, I tried to reach a core of conviction about my direction in the restoration work. Ideas about resource conservation and the preservation of local heritage pieced in to the justifications I developed at first. These values assumed a weight of more secondary importance over time, however, to an inward critique it led me to of perspective that governed the busy patterns of my life and conflicted with the unwieldy dictates of thinking and feeling space entailed by my final project experience in general.

Not to diminish the importance of my writing focus, it has been the core of the contemplative experience provided through my project and the process of making meaning of it. However it wasn't always the language or words of my writing that served this aspect of the project. Rather in fact it was what I perceived at the mid-year point that

I wasn't saying in my writing that helped shape the feeling of need and redirection to the boat restoration.

Addressing the need of the boats in their neglected state developed as a metaphor to an inward search that eluded efforts to characterize it through writing. At the same time, in committing to the time demands of the restorative work I discovered contemplative space I looked for also through writing. In this space I began to find energy of renewal similar to that noted earlier about poetry writing experiences during summer coursework. It was aroused through the experience of breaking stride with agendas and expectations that can negate other worlds of experience from notice, worlds such as a four-foot square of lawn that served as the week long focus of one poetry exercise. In the interaction with the people, natural rhythms, maritime and myriad other elements in the marina community that drew to focus in the process involved, the boat restorations served as an access-way of discovery at the same time that that it drew attention to the nature of the barrier this portal helped penetrate.

Chapter 5

Affect and Applications to Teaching

In its state of ongoing repair the boat restoration reflects an inward feeling of flux. This outlook is shaped in one regard by a deepened understanding of need that has developed through the project, and in another view by an evolving perspective about the kind of energy and commitment that is involved in going forward with the restoration work. The experience of navigating this line of outlook through the process of my final creative project carries to my perspectives toward teaching, helping to shape my understanding of a similar struggle I perceive at the heart of my experience in the profession. As discussed, the focus on a theme of angst in my process has served toward clarifying this understanding, largely in terms of the personal challenge involved of prioritizing contemplative space in the crowded life of teaching. One of the affects of my creative process has been the affirmation I have found in reacting to this angst; in projecting it outward, as I came to think increasingly about it through the somewhat oppositional experience of the boat restoration. While I did not at first see my interaction with the boats as a reactive gesture or aim, it developed weight in this capacity as I began to think of the restoration work more in terms of a metaphor of personal need.

The affect of the boat restoration at the same time spurred another kind of reaction, pertaining to a desire to break stride from a conventional thinking that I associated in some part with consumerism but more generally in terms of a kind of conformist societal attitude that subordinates creative and critical thinking abilities to the relentless race of keeping pace with the latest materialistic trends. I do not perceive myself as any less of a casualty of societal orientations this way than the children and parents I interact with in

my teaching role. Through the contemplative experience of my final creative project I've begun to re-access an ideological root that led me into teaching and reminds me of the importance of reacting to the load of tasks and routines that is some large part the business of educational institutions but can end up forming the walls of a boxed outlook that supports wider societal trends of conformist thinking. Readings from Paulo Freire have been particularly insightful for me in developing sensitivity to the critical role of schools in affecting a social-political consciousness along these lines. His language for example about an "intentionality of consciousness" reverberated with the challenge I confronted through my writing of fleshing out a root of my angst in teaching, and the empowerment I found in translating feelings and intuitions into words.

My final creative project provides an affirmation about the importance of exercising an ideological bearing in my purview as an educator. It reminds me about the imperative I see in teaching to look beyond institutionally bound perspectives to entertain a bigger view of ourselves and potentials as a civilization. This need in my idealized vision of schools involves a support group of colleagues engaged in a conversation whereby diverse perspective and divergent thinking are embraced as an integral aspect of a process of knowing and defining ourselves. The reality I discover in the demands of teaching, however, is more of an isolated experience where considerations of expediency in managing an overly full plate of responsibilities crowd out what interest there may be in more ideological exploration. While I see this disposition as reflective certainly of wider societal orientations, I reach a point in education where it seems that if I don't in some manner react to this root of conformist outlook than I am complicit in it. But how do I break stride with the busy dictates of my life to focus on or develop such a reaction?

In part, the answer to this concern I find through my final creative project is that it is important to act on my convictions in some way, even as a token gesture, and that the personal impact of doing so measures on a different scale than what achievement may be seen in an outward sense. The inward affect for me of the boat restoration involves a reinforced perspective about the kind of meditation that is needed to sort out my convictions and align them with a course of action and a language of intent. In this regard I don't see the specific form of my project activity as mattering so much as the occasion structured through it to find contemplative space. By itself this focus through my final project amounted to a kind of personal performance staged on a daily basis, directed largely as a reaction against the grain of teaching in all its preoccupation with tasks and agendas that in net effect can be more about structuring and controlling learning than accommodating it.

Among the affects of my final creative project is the conviction it has promoted about the importance of exercising a counter-institutional perspective toward the function of schools. The aim is not to undermine their role but rather to call attention to the essential struggle in the mix of bureaucratic process and creative enterprise they try to navigate. Only through a concerted focus on the nature of this struggle, it would seem, can institutions transcend themselves in a sense; to reach beyond the bureaucratic and task oriented aspect of its business to more fully embrace the underlying spirit or essence. Joseph Campbell describes transcendence as “[dying] to the vehicle and [identifying] in your consciousness with that of which the vehicle is the carrier.”

Like the boat restoration, I navigate a line of flux between a developing understanding about the challenge teaching involves and the nature of the work involved in addressing

this challenge. Where general feelings of angst pronounced themselves at this crosscurrent in the early stage of my final creative project, my process has yielded a better feel for the water I navigate in teaching. It has occasioned also a development of perspective about the contemplative and expressive potential through an artistic focus toward contending in this sea.

Appendix A

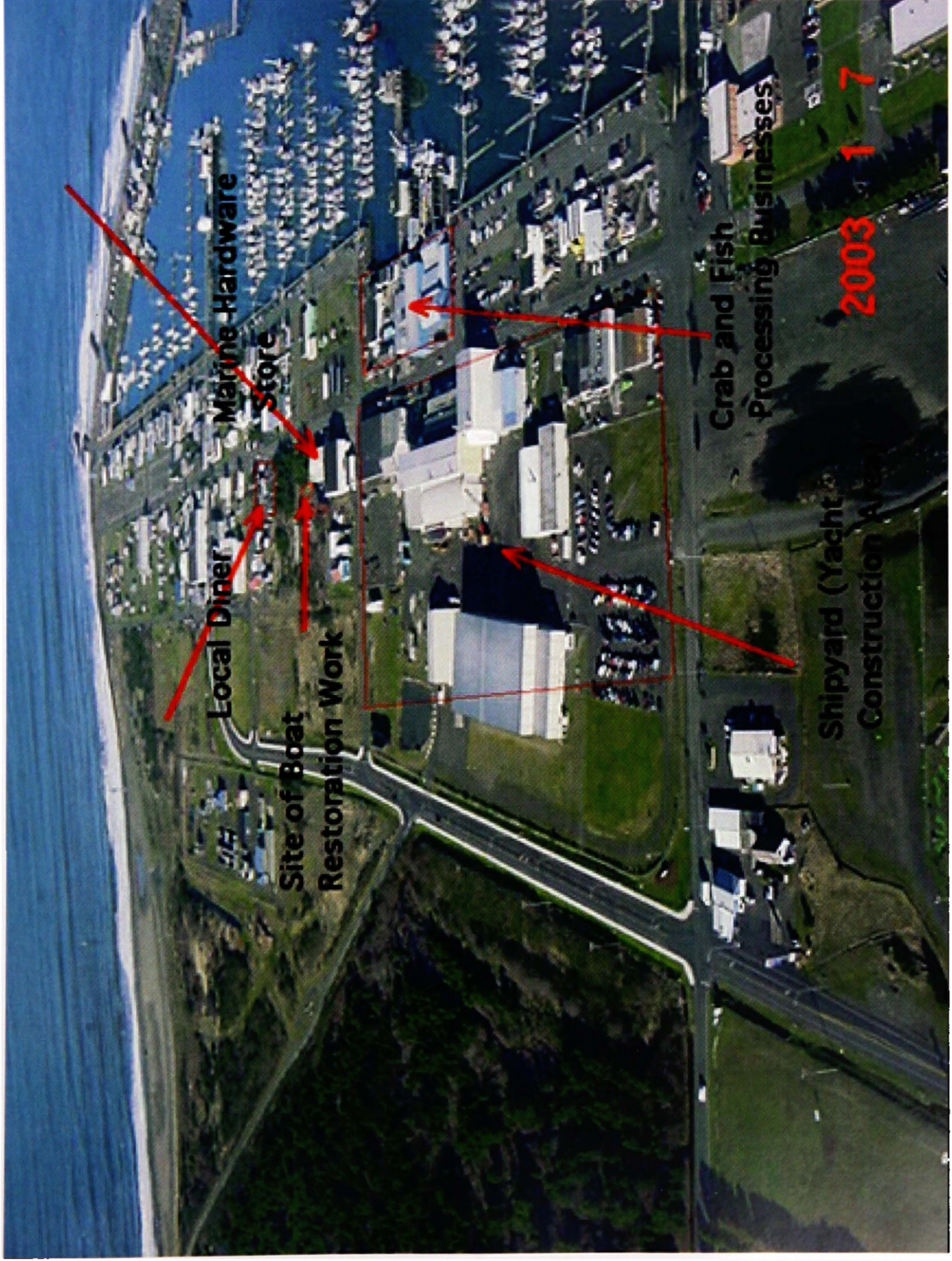
Plate A.1

Boats Possessed by Port Operations at the Marina Boyard



Plate A.2

**Aerial View of Marina Area, Boat Restor:
Neighboring Businesses**



Marine Hardware Store

Local Diner

Site of Boat Restoration Work

Crab and Fish Processing Businesses

Shipyard (Yacht Construction Area)

2003 1 7

Plate A.3

Site of Boat Restoration with View of Marina
and Grays Harbor

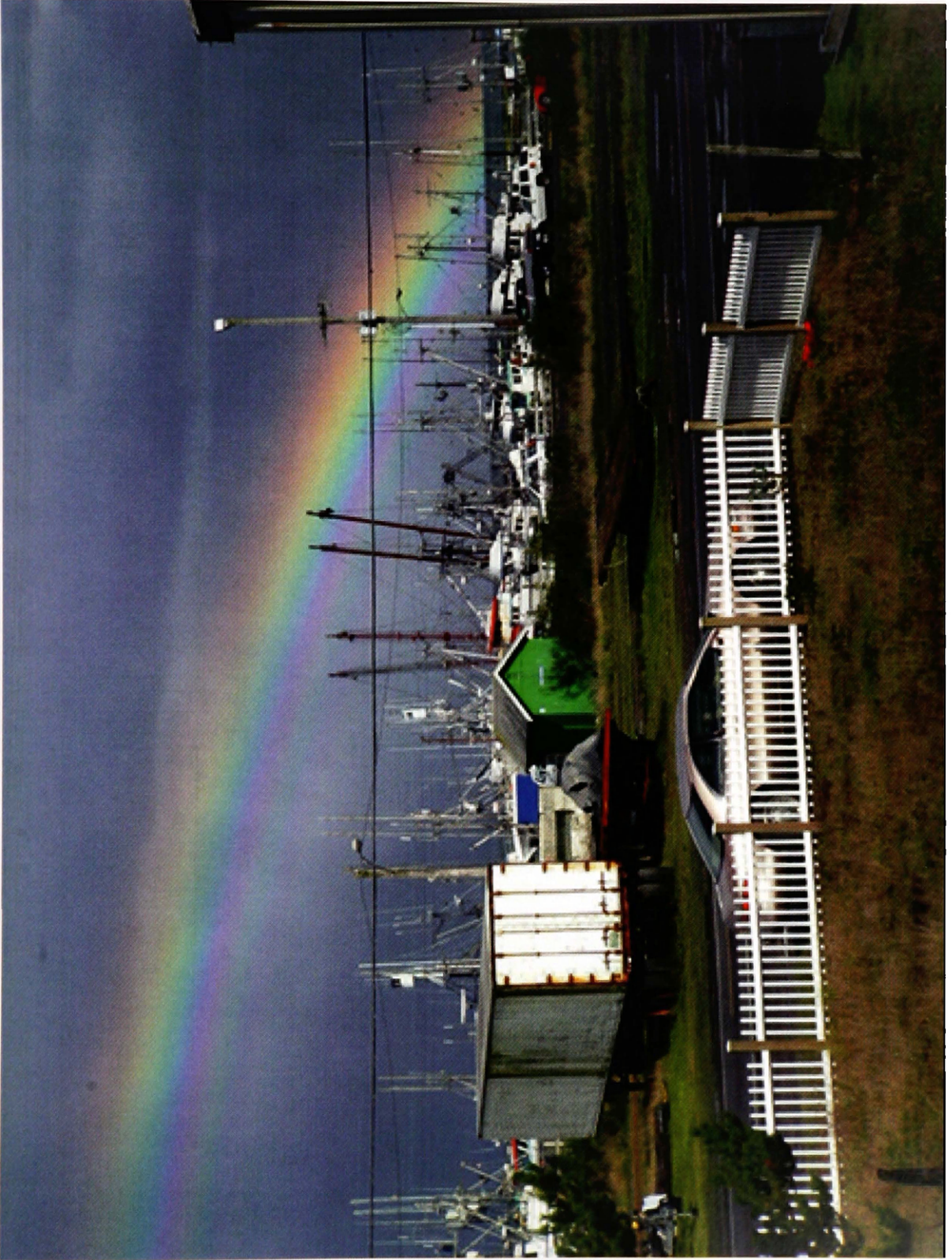


Plate A.4

The *Qualifier*, a 43 Foot Wood Hulled Boat
in Pre-Restorative State



Plate A.5

The *Qualifier*, in Stages of Hull and Cabin
Restoration Work

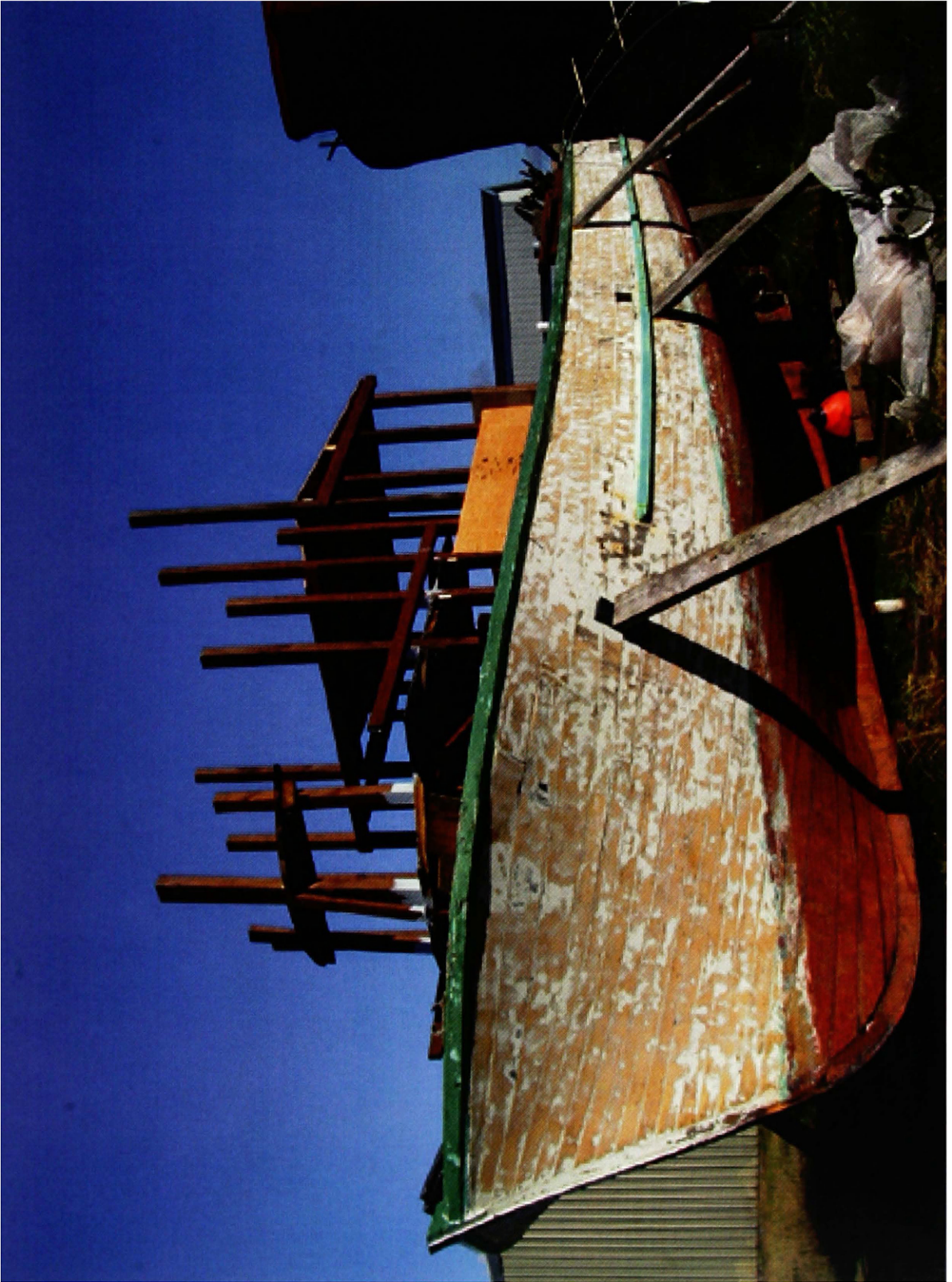
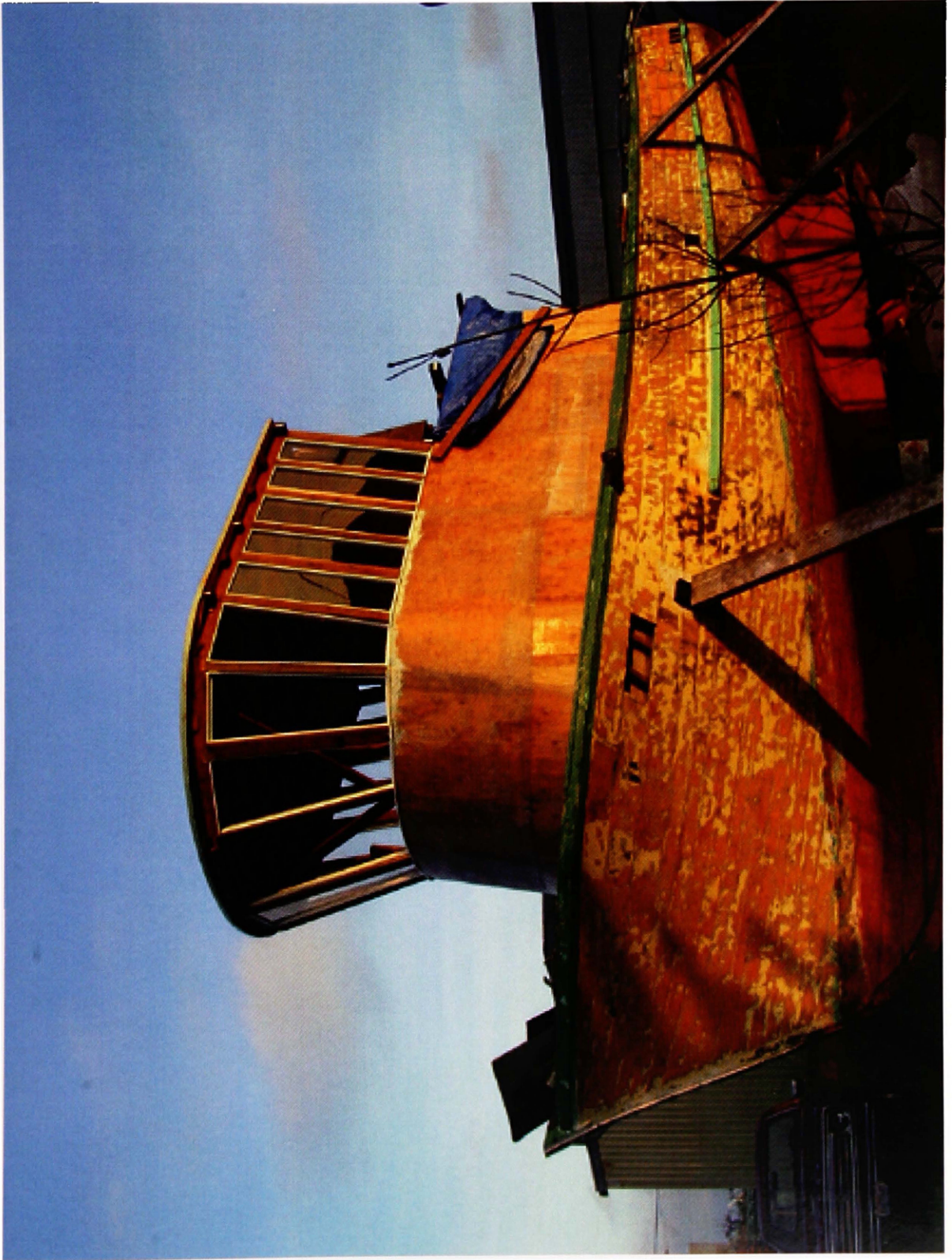


Plate A.6

The *Qualifier*, with Closed-In Cabin and Ongoing
Hull Work



Appendix B

Writing

Confluence

Outstretched limbs of the maple
lift dense green curtains,
staging view to swath of world beyond.

A show quickly begins,
ushered in by high pitched whine of crotch rocket streaking by
a near blur of red in foreground,
stage left to right.

Briefly disturbed by opening event,
I check expectations about a serene experience.
Still bristling from the intrusion, thoughts divert
with abrupt gust of wind
stirring stage canopy into a frenzy of leaf commotion.

Barely a moment to marvel about this near seamless transition,
so well sequenced to set up contrast between natural and unnatural sounds
rivaling each other in impact
on serene setting I hope to be restored.

Who would have expected these occurrences to serve as but lead-in
or set-up to explosion immediately afterward,
seizing world in state of shock and confusion?

Independence Day connection filters from fall-out,
with recollections about the war.
Sights turn outward,
chasing hope of more tranquil perspective in staged landscape.
Furtive scanning is easily lured
by throaty sound of a truck's combustion

cutting across field, center stage.

Cargo of logs spurs speculation about source
and the circumstances of their harvest.

Spectacle of resource consumption filters further to mind
through recognition now of incessant automobile stream
tracing truck's path
and stage front activity of worker
wielding hoses between truck and behemoth gas tanks.

Exposition of extravagant consumption accentuates
in the calamity of massive rolling boxes,
some carrying camouflaged artillery tanks.
A moving social commentary in visual form.

And a pair of sparrows frolic
on the asphalt near my feet.

Dawning Encounter

Slumber clings around my eye sockets
As I encounter the world outside my room
at this break of dawn.
Consciousness washes over this landscape in soft tones,
blurring in spots of mistiness.
The world on edge,
as heralded by a hidden flock of birds jumpstarting themselves into full song,
anticipating the sun.
It must not be far away
as the fluorescent bulb-white of the sky
in its pre-ignited state
begins to draw out details along the distant hillside.
My focus is nearer to me though,
with the fuzzy feeling of cognizance,
the chill of the air,
and an attenuating fragrance of skunk.
Another day readies to consume me.

View by a River

There is much here I do not comprehend
When I open my mind
How desperate an act
The newborn's sense-making encounter
Outside the womb
Horizons defined first by limits of reach
Rapidly give way to others.
Needs for security and peace
Fall into tension
Against anxieties about the unknown.
These poles of consciousness
Propel us along paths
To places of no less desperate circumstance
Than those of the baby's crib.
Satisfactions are temporary,
Achieved only by fixating
On certain details of the palette;
The baby's rattle,
The tones of the cardinal
In the upper willow branches
Along the river.

Nature

How well those pines along the ridge endure their solitude,
exposed and vulnerable
embracing nature's energy through their vigorous contortions
while I in my sheltered vantage feel barely a stir.

But I don't want to write about the weather,
or trees
or landscape.

These are but preoccupations
that deflect from an inward focus,
and the here and now of being me.

I feel the warmth of late afternoon sun on my shoulders.
I am further lulled by the rhythmic sound of crickets,
that remind me of walks in fields of the farm
when competition among three brothers and two sisters
drove us out of the house
in search of solitude
in nature.

Personification of a River

Here the river has achieved a regular gait; a tranquil flow
Unagitated, unreddened
It reaches outward, touching all contours along the shore,
Departing the main course where it can find wayward paths,
The forward seeking force of the river is sapped
In Backwater eddies and marshes
While a new force pronounces itself in still pools
Hung heavy with algae where tadpoles writhe
And cattails creep.
Once the engine of forward transformation,
Gravity now immobilizes these waters by its grip.
Turned inward,
Centered upon itself,
Memories of more turbulent roots
Here locked in murky depths.
This watery communion with earth
Like consciousness
Clutching for shores and resting pools,
Seeking boundaries;
Grasping for an outer edge
In a moment undefined by current
Or purpose.

Farm Reflections

The story of my father's entry into teaching began as a failure. Professional aspirations in farming that he had pursued previously for ten years with every ounce of his being eventually crumbled under the relentless pressure against debt and the enormous physical toll involved. Auctioning of the herd happened not long after a bout of rheumatic fever forced him to a several month confinement in bed, a timeframe that is well etched in my memory of being eight through associations of the regular stream of neighborhood visitors volunteering help and food donations, and the extra chores I assumed with my five siblings. I became the resident dishwasher and I remember tending to my task for hours at a time while standing on an overturned crate at the kitchen sink. As much of any other single aspect of farming in those days, my recollection about it centers on the experience of hard work. One of my earliest memories in life is of being about two and the ache in my arms from the 100 or so yard task of carrying the five gallon milk bucket from the barn to the house. It was this essential connection of work in farming that in some large measure drew me to the opportunity of dismantling the old dairy barn years later in my late 20s.

Returning to the vicinity of my upbringing with my wife at this transitional stage of our lives, we lived briefly on the farm with my widowed mother, and then visited it regularly over the next couple years of our stay in the area. During this revisiting of my roots I became particularly drawn by the dairy barn, saddened by its deteriorating condition with gaping holes in the roof exposing massive structural members that had framed so many of my early impression of the world. Vivid associations attached themselves to tactile experiences like climbing the ladder to the haymow, my fingers

anticipating the texture and way of negotiating each separate rung. Varying grades of smoothness in the concrete floor mapped a topography of recollections about the chore of wielding a coarse bristled broom across it. One gravelly section of the manger I recall particularly requiring concerted effort to move across it finer sediments and water from cow drinking cups that would regularly accumulate there, a condition made more exasperating by the ornery disposition of the cow that occupied the stanchion in that particular area. Olfactory associations contributed a richly faceted other layer of connections about my history with the barn, from the residual smell of bleach and other disinfectants in the milk house to the musty smell of old manure in the calf pens.

The intricacy of this world of associations pertained not only to the known and familiar aspects of this place but to the many murkier connections with it as well. Functional understandings of objects and design features comprised one area of this gray zone, with only marginally complete ideas about how a gutter sweeper works or how it connected with the mechanisms in a sheet metal housing outside the barn, and how large ventilation ports to the hay loft provided essential air movement from the warming effect of thirty and more ton-sized animals confined to close quarters. Another large aspect of the murkier realm of understandings surrounding my early years of upbringing and the barn centered in a psycho-social domain, involving relationships among both family members and cows. Regarding the latter, I did not share the distinction between animal and human mentalities my father possessed nor his grasp of herd behavior that guided what I sometimes regarded as his overly aggressive treatment of individual cow beings. The use of pitch fork jabbings and even wailings across the hind quarters with a board to correct the actions of an unruly animal convinced me of the existence of a darker side to

my father's personality, an impression that does not mesh with later life realization about the exceptional investment he put toward each individual cow's well-being and how this approach put him at odds with and even led to his departure from an industry movement increasingly toward large scale dairy operations and open feed stall systems. This view of my father in my early observations with him nevertheless factored into my fathoming about a strict side of his interactions with my siblings and me and later his students and my middle and high-school peers.

While I was somewhat surprised and amused by this public reaction to the strictness of my father's child rearing attitude that I accepted as normal and in any case didn't seem to measure up to peer descriptions of classroom conduct that I interpreted as clearly exaggerated, a side of me also found precedent and some degree of understanding about his aggressive outlook in the treatment I observed of cows. Like the bigger part of the herd I quickly learned to avoid provoking this side of his behavior, acquiring tact in this respect largely through observation of the turbulence aroused by line pushers such as cows that resisted going to their assigned stalls, and my older brother whose attitude toward farm chores seemed regularly to fall out of step with parental expectation.

Lured by the rich tapestry of associations that began to weave itself for me within the crumbling walls of the barn, I sought pretense to further involve myself in the reverie and quickly latched onto the opportunity when it was offered to dismantle the barn for its timbers. In some sense I yearned for the sweat and toil of the exercise whereby further connection with my early farming experience could be achieved and my flow of association in this manner leveraged. And there was something else about the prospect I couldn't fully grasp, in being an agent of the barn's destruction rather than a passive

observer of it. This other aspect of attraction heightened as a focus as the veneer of my initial romanticism with the undertaking soon eroded through the regular commitment of weekends to the laborious process and the dirtiness of the job. Beyond the century's accumulation of dust and dung released with every board pried free, there was an unsettling aspect in the destructive act that defied justifications I made to myself about merely accelerating the course of natural decay. There was a kind of irreverence I felt in undoing what generations of others had sought to achieve in the way of subsistence from the land, and a defilement of a landscape wrought through the enormous investment and sacrifice of others.

The angst aroused through such speculation became for me a point of focus in its own respect as I began to think more of the experience of my father's sacrifice, as his dreams of subsistence from the land gave way to a realization about the shortcomings of his own physical strength and will toward achieving such independence. Not only did this failure I imagine constitute a falling out with a Jeffersonian idealism about the core place of healthy agricultural communities in well functioning democracies but at some level also a sobering affront to his faith. The very name he and my mom gave to the farm, Lordsland, alluded to the deep connection they ascribed between their economic aspirations and religious views. The puritanical work ethic trumpeted in this relationship, to verses of *Onward Christian Soldier* on the drive to church services that counted as a regular among infrequent departures from the work life of the farm.

Work represented the path to both economic and spiritual well being, along which one marched to the agricultural cadence of planting and harvest seasons and the relentless daily routine of dairy operations. The arduous ritual of Sunday morning service in its

program of sitting, standing and kneeling reflected the work ethic of farm life. In those early church encounters verbal understandings of the liturgy mattered far less than the physical experience in this form of prostration and exercise of faith. In a similar sense I imagine that that the glue that sustained my parents' conviction to their idealism about farm life derived from sweat and toil as an exercise of faith, more so than a language of reason.

The road of reason for them I'm sure must often have veered quickly into a terrain of doubt as they navigated the numerous potholes along a route mapped largely on the basis of hopes hinged upon an American dream. Broken mechanical parts, severe weather conditions, ailing cows, rising costs and declining prices regularly counted as topics of conversation in our farm community. "Face forward and avoid distraction," my mother admonished my five siblings and me across the front pew of our small church we occupied each Sunday. It strikes me now how deep a connotation there was in these words as an expression of my parents' religious view and approach to life. How trying on the one hand it must have been for my father to face the sinking ship of his ambition that's direction charted itself in terms of an ethic of hard work. Work perhaps in that context served also as a panacea, the anchor that served as a point of reference at the same time it pulled the ship under. The harder my father worked, the heavier the toll it began to take on his life.

Reverie

I've heard it said that the mind remembers pleasant experiences far more readily than painful ones. I nevertheless have little trouble recalling the painful impact of the large rusty nail in my hip when I slipped on the ice in that dismembered barn 15 years ago. I remember trying to rationalize myself through the wooziness I felt as I climbed to my feet with the foot and a half piece of board effectively nailed to my side, contemplating the prospect of pulling this attachment free of myself. Securing a grip on the board ends as I readied myself for the painful yank, I thought about the irony of this injury occurring at the end stage of the several month demolition process during which I had fairly well avoided serious mishap. After all the risky steps I had been involved with before this moment in the project, my misstep on ice happened during a nonchalant tour of the remnants, anticipating the burn I'd scheduled with the fire department the following week. Not that this amounted to so serious an injury, I thought, the worst part of it being the risk of tetanus that I'd already been inoculated against a few months prior. One pull is all it would take, and that was the last thought I remember before the sickening realization struck that I had slipped again, headed unavoidably for the same point of impact as the time previous.

Credit it I suppose to the bone mass in that hip region that resisted much deeper penetration than I dreaded might have occurred in the horror of that moment. Upon raising myself the second time to a standing position, however, this time away from the ice, I found that the board and nail extraction still appeared to require only a firm outward shove. An inspection of the wound revealed a purplish entry point with little blood. The lack of blood actually contributed to my unsettled feeling as I fleetingly envisioned the

trail of rust and microbial element now lodged within myself, beyond reach of any removal process I could think of except eventual oozing infection.

In my concerted effort to maintain an upper hand on my emotions through the ordeal, I seized on whatever rationalizations filtered to mind as footholds against a rapid slide I feared I might begin toward unconsciousness. I had lost out on one such struggle not long before, following a blood donation. Somehow the experience was too disquieting a one for whatever cognitive control center circuit that over-rides intellectual processing of a steel needle penetrating my vein. I could feel myself succumbing to this override function as one part of my brain tried to hold at bay the fast flood of imagery conjured through this voluntary mutilation, of hemorrhaging tissue surrounding punctured vein wall and cold steel siphoning life fluid.

In my menagerie of associations about blood-giving experience there are fuzzy areas that obscure more unsettling connections, such as the story I once heard about a needle breaking off in a vein of a donor, and being carried along by the vascular currents to become lodged in the heart. Other images in turn connect with this one, for example about the finely synchronized actions of valves in the muscular fiber of the heart, and another regarding surgery that once had to be performed on my sister-in-law's puppy that had swallowed a needle.

It is an imaginative capacity no doubt closely linked to our survival as a species, the ability to anticipate undesirable outcomes of our actions through the pairings of such potentially disturbing associations. It is at the same time our cognitive capacity to regulate such associations, for example by restricting them to the more distant reaches of consciousness, that underlies the emotional quality of our survivor experience. Mental

pairings with all the horrific possible mishaps that could occur in a car do not overwhelm my experience of driving, though my chances of being involved in an automobile accident are far greater than having a needle snap off in my vein. For some reason my mind has not yet devised an approach to distancing blood donation from gruesome possible outcomes I have associated with it.

The theory I was working on about this association process while contending with the board nailed to my hip is that the distancing of uncomfortable ideas to avoid the over-ride intellect shut-down function is mainly a matter of will. The trick of it amounts essentially to diversionary tactic, for example in picturing myself as the subject of my own study about avoiding going under. What if I had been alone under the conditions, and passing out could have exposed me to conditions of extreme cold for dangerous, perhaps a life threatening length of time? My situation could be seen as no less than a test of my survival fitness as a species, where imaginary capacities of the subconscious could be subordinated to the dictates of consciousness. In other words, the overwhelming dictate of the moment was that I engage the conscious side of imagination to disallow the subconscious side from luring me again to the intellectual-disconnect point.

Whether any of this cogitating made any sense, as I said, mattered far less than it's purpose in diverting attention from the enormous hurt in my side as I grasped the board firmly on both sides and abruptly applied the requisite outward force. No amount of rationalization, however, could steer imagination away from the grotesqueness of this act. Yelling at full lung capacity revealed to be the catharsis needed in that moment, the outward projection of an impulse bottled all too long within. I abandoned myself to the full force of this release, using the trajectory of my voice in this wintry landscape to

catapult attentions to a place far enough away to detach myself from the place in the here and now that defined my experience of pain and revulsion. I imagined my voice reaching the flock of geese air-borne now several fields away, registering my pain as a distant outsider might. From this remote place I then allowed my attention to follow the sound of my voice back to its source, in the body connected also to the wound. In finding myself again at this place I found that the physical pain wasn't actually so bad, really no more than a throbbing ache. Sickening associations hovered on the edge of consciousness, of splintered bone and broken needles but my capacities of keeping them at bay seemed in tact for time.

For reassurance sake I unleashed the force of my voice again, going for even longer reach to the "V" of geese barely visible now in the distance. Fixing steadily toward them, though, my field of vision begins to fill with patterns of markings that I recognize as the wavy scrawl of a student's report on Mayan religion. One report in a stack of 20 that I am not even half way through evaluating. I refocus but am soon distracted again, this time by the recollection of my father regularly consumed in this arduous assessment process. How difficult was it for him to maintain his fix on the relentless demands of the teaching profession, willing disquieting thoughts about other life possibilities to the outer reaches of consciousness. There are no mistakes, I think to myself as I contemplate again the irony of timing in my mishap(s) with the nail and think about his admonishment once to me against following his path into the profession.

I'm not a superstitions person, and I didn't think that I was operating on any other kind of agenda in my barn demolishing efforts than to salvage the century old hardwood timber frame rapidly suffering the ravages of weather through its deteriorating exterior.

Still, there was something that drew me to the project that was more than the intrigue of salvage and demolition. I felt a connection with these old beams that had framed so many of the episodes of my youth, from tunneling through hay forts to the myriad strenuous tasks that characterized the barn life. The hard work involved in demolition reestablished this association so vital to my connection with this landscape. The farm was about hard work, and eking an existence from the soil. It was about subsistence, and sweat and toil capable of sustaining a model of free enterprise whereby the lives of six children and their parents could be nurtured. Even the mechanical slaves enlisted in the load were taxed to the point of breakdown. I remember the barn cleaner regularly breaking down, and the tractor needing repairs.

My God, there were frightening machines, one that lived in a silo and could be activated with the throw of a switch to devour silage and spew it down a chute in a waiting cart that needed then to be manually maneuvered along the barn-length manger troughs. And there was the corn-grinder that would arrive periodically to digest dried corn on the cob into a granule that blasted through a pipe aimed into a grain bin in the barn's hayloft.

I don't know what there was about the barn, except that I was drawn to it. I was mining it for its beams, at face value. But it represented for me a fix; a way of leveling my gaze on a landscape I had lost perhaps an essential connection to through a dis-involvement with any serious form of work. I was mining my past for this connection, perhaps, recalling the sweat, toil, anguish of managing a farm through the layers of material of which it was built; recalling the tactile associations and allowing them to bring a world to life again for me. Laying this hulk of another world to life, mining it for

its essence.

This was an execution of sorts, and also a study of a world and relationship that had departed all too abruptly. I wasn't ready to lay this one to rest, and it felt vitalizing in some respect to be performing this systematic disposal of the monument from my past the barn represented. With its frame broken in several spots and the merciless effects of decay taking hold like a cancer. I was doing the merciful thing, laying this carcass in its grave with a dignified, deliberate approach. This was unfinished business. This was a wretched act, a defiling of the landscape that I had no greater right to tamper with, and no less, than those who had erected it. However I might account for it I recognized that a core aspect of the endeavor was about contending with a pain. Pain is what brings it all in to focus, providing context and meaning.

The Ride Pool

It was a short stride across my front yard but an enormous transition from the sanctity of my home to the back seat of idling yellow Valiant. This was day two of my ride pool commute, an arrangement that I had joined in to the week earlier upon casual invitation by a work peer, Cal. Casual in the way that he also stepped out of the car to give me access to the middle seat position, beside an Asian man unknown to me through my shop associations and who was introduced to me as Nip. My glances around the car gauged no reaction to what I perceived as an obvious racial innuendo behind this name pairing; no reaction except an open smile from Nip that reflected a very limited grasp of English soon pronounced also in my attempts at conversation with him.

Scant time was spent on introductions with the only other member of our five-person carpool unknown to me, Warren, who was also our driver and anxious clearly to be on our way. With barely a moment's pause after Cal pulled his door shut we were rolling, working out the cramped back seat logistics of seat-belt fastening and lunch box positioning as in-route business. Meanwhile Warren launched into rather high-strung oration he had evidently been in the middle of airing prior to my pick-up, focusing on a critique of business practice of some variety in this country. I eyed the other members of the carpool to gauge their take on Warren as his diatribe assumed a ranting tone.

“It’s another example about how the *god damn* government,” he snarled with an elongated emphasis on the expletives, “tries to regulate the actions of the business owner without having any *god damn* idea what they’re doing.

I was relieved to see that Thamir in the passenger seat seemed fully at ease in his audience role, laughing quietly as Warren approached his crescendo. Having by now

jockeyed positions well enough to straddle my lunch cooler between my legs, I quickly negotiated my strapped in position to retrieve a paperback stashed in my inside jacket pocket. Such diversion I could see would be an imperative with this bunch with Warren's ranting temperament quickly pronouncing itself. I felt little connection with any of the other riders except perhaps Cal who was still a bit of an unknown to me. Thamir I'd had enough interaction with to develop a bit of a standoffish feeling toward that I recognized as being similar to the edge I felt about his position in the relative spatial comfort of the passenger's seat.

Not that my cramped middle of the seat position particularly bothered me but I couldn't help but muse about a hierarchy of spatial privilege had established itself in the car by virtue of pick up order. I tried at first to distance myself from this feeling, but then relented to sorting its persistent force with the thought that if it was truly trivial than I should be able to root out its unfounded root and be done with it. I tried to approach this query from an academic light; to objectify that matter. I was quick to concede to feelings of discomfort at some level to his distinctive mannerisms as a first generation Iraqi immigrant. There was a certain sort of contentiousness I perceived in his manner that I guessed stemmed from a defensiveness rooting in his experience as "outsider." His form of defensiveness seemed in my perception to carry with it a kind of *aloofness* that bordered on arrogance. I actually respected that about Thamir, his close identification with a culture tracing back so far as to color American experience as juvenile by comparison. This strong identification and nationalistic pride, however, combined with his defensiveness in the form of pedantic tones in conversation and heated views about issues that seemed to aim more at shutting out other points of view than opening up to

others.

There was a non-egalitarianism in Thamir's mannerism it seemed that pronounced itself in another irking way, being an apparent kiss ass approach with higher ups around the company. He was all charm around anyone with equal pay status to his own, like Warren in the front seat, and aloof to *underlings* such as those of us in the back seat. The particularly peevish side of this behavior is that his higher paying job as ink-mixer required no greater skill than possessed by anyone else around the shop and was acquired mainly by virtue of seniority status. The fine line I found that I need to sort around in contending with Thamir's attitude is that even though I could understand it rooting in defensiveness and insecurity, it also indulged in a sense of deserved privilege. I could see this in the way that he carried himself around the shop, hob-nobbing with middle managers and exuding an air of arrogance with the rest through a condescending sort of humor that his undeveloped English skills could not effectively pull off, or reverting to a drawl of indignant tones in his argumentative, hot-headed style.

So there it was, the side of Thamir that I found particularly irksome when I allowed myself to sort through my reasoning. I wasn't about to change him but I at least needed to find a place of understanding and potentially even acceptance so that I could clear my mind adequately to focus thoughts elsewhere, like my book. Making my peace with coworkers in this way was a coping strategy developed through penny-ante squabbling around the shop that derived in my view from a nagging sense in everyone's mind that we were as easily replaceable as the cogs of the machines we operated. Such was the nature of the industry that's organization of labor was not a large step removed in design from the Taylor model. With nothing else in terms of professional credential to differentiate us our innate urge to distinguish ourselves led to mundane areas of

comparison, such as whether your job centered around a sitting sort of position or standing; whether it involved more inspection or construction of parts; whether we worked as partners or more individually. The bottom line is that very little distinguished one job from the next. One either bought into this perception, or an alternative one about one's relative "station" around the floor.

This was a losing prospect in my mind, founded in a distaste for the line of work I had to admit. Somehow I couldn't find it within myself to care much about whether my occupation centered more on middle management position or lower tier activity. The horizons of opportunity for me measured far beyond the corrugated steel factory walls and professionally defined cells that characterized existence within. To allow myself to care led to a far more daunting question about what I might be doing alternatively with my life. For the time being I could rest contentedly with the relatively unsullied working environment that was relatively sheltered from corporate cut-throat attitude. Sure there was squabbling, but in more accepting moments I looked upon this tension in a familial sense. I regarded it also as a kind of defensiveness that insulated us from the uppity-ups who impinged upon our world in one capacity or another.

So what was Thamir's bag, and why did it rub against me at times? Because he was a bit careless about how he bought into it, at times romanticizing about his place as though it had been achieved through any other strength or merit of character than that he had sacrificed more years of life doing something as unimaginative as his line of work and achieving seniority as a result. How uncaring of me I thought at times to disallow him whatever scrap of self-exalted feeling he was able to extract from that, no doubt wallowing in an immigrant dream of having "made it" in America. His satisfaction

revealed my own lack of romantic notion through its contrast. I didn't envy him for his attitude so much as I felt defined in my reaction to him. He forced to the surface frustrations and a sense of desperation I felt in this industrial place where one's worth measured as a function of physical output, taking me to the brink even of recognition about caring; caring about not caring; caring about not being able to fix on a vital sense of my self worth through this workplace.

It is not resentment I feel toward Thamir so much as a reaction to his defensiveness. I actually empathize with his defensiveness. I just don't know how to get around it. I feel stuck in the same rut, I think. What bothers me most about him is his victimhood, serving as pretense for this ass-kissing game he plays. Clearly I have an attitude problem, stemming from a lack of reverence for a hierarchy based predominantly on a seniority system that rewards sacrifice of life in pursuit of some utterly mundane task. Yes, I would love to buy into this and be able to feel some genuine fulfillment through having mixed up buckets of ink for most of my adult life. But where is the significance and higher meaning? To support the raising of kids who will one day face the guilt of having incurred such sacrifice from their parents, for what purpose? To become part of the rank and file? Where is at least the passing interest in higher meaning of sense of purpose? Purpose in this self-sacrificial place would appear to derive from a comparison with what he has on others around him. I can just feel him needing to derive that satisfaction through comparison with the *underlings* around him, "flaunting it" as it were in this shameless ass-kissing spectacle with other long-timers. They become their own in-group, out of a desperate need to belong somehow. There is indeed a cutting off place it occurred to me in this moment, between those of us groveling in the lower ranks and

finding ourselves unable to find that identification and respect for the lifers. Those who had passed that hurdle respected that line; dignified each other with an acceptance of place. They became the audience to each other's illusion.

Sea Story (Berth of an Idea)

The origin of this story roots in two long held intrigues of mine, one woodworking and the other the sea. The former interest has a distinct association for me with my father who acquainted me with basic tools and techniques of the craft in a basement workshop he seemed to spend as much time toward developing than actual production. The arsenal of machines and devices he amassed in that subterranean hold was a spectacle, convincing me that there was a greater agenda at play than fashioning pieces of wood together. I eventually attributed that agenda to a survivalist attitude that underpinned also his road into farming. Later I saw this agenda as reflecting also his deep anxieties about aging and reaching retirement. This was the entrenchment from which he planned to hold out against life's unvanquishable rival, leveraged in the struggle through the power of machines and the soulful exercise of his craft. In experiencing this relationship between my father and wood, I found a connection in boats as another expression of human struggle through craft to contend with an indomitable force. An appreciation of the sea in this sense goes in hand with an interest in boats, which goes some distance in accounting for the other intrigue related to this story beginning. More basically, though, I have imagined the sea to hold a universal fascination, like outer space, seating perhaps primarily in core angst and luring about our origins. For me, this intrigue led even to an enlistment in the navy, at a time when other life moorings lost purchase for me.

This background is only to provide a broader context for an undertaking I assumed under fairly straightforward circumstances. It emerged from an interest my wife and I developed in a fishing village where we liked to make weekend escapes from our urban life, one that led even to the purchase of an undeveloped plot of land there for no greater

reasons than that it was affordable and within sight of the marina as the main focus of attraction for us. Never mind that the parcel situated within the industrial side of town, overtaken with rusting cars and all forms of debris. It provided the escape we sought just to think of possibilities while indulging in a noncommittal attitude to any of our ideas. Our favorite destination in town was an inexpensive motel room that overlooked the marina where we could observe the traffic of fishing vessels and crabbers along the docks. The idea occurred to us from this vantage that it might be a more fulfilling experience to spend our visits as boat dwellers instead of sideliners, and then we discovered that the opportunity for doing so lay in our very midst, in the port boatyard where three fishing vessels had been impounded for non-payment of moorage fees. Inquiries were made and within months we were the excited, nervous owners of two dilapidated and very needy fishing vessels.

The first need to be addressed was that of relocating our possessions to our property a half mile across town. A couple quick points about this moving feat that needed to be accomplished within a month of the purchases: a) these were larger size craft, one a 43 foot delta hull, and the other a 38 foot "deep V"; b) we were pretty much clueless about how one proceeds with such transport. We'd contracted with a trucking agency to accomplish the job, which we supposed would get the craft from point a to point b without much difficulty, but then there's all the business of propping the things up and providing the adequate keel support. That was our activity on the day before the move, gathering planks for a scaffold from a port scrap-yard and doing our best to emerge from the cloud of speculation and fantasy from which we'd pretty much plotted our course until this point. Oh, and dismantling some of the top-riggings on the boats to be able to

clear power wires as an imperative that occurred to us as a last minute realization.

Despite the blue-skied, sparkling coastal condition we enjoyed during our preparations the day before, the weather went seriously south on us the day of our move. It started soggy and turned fairly drenching by mid morning. While we were buoyed in our thoughts with the rush of anticipation, the overcast condition was already taking a serious toll on the outlook of the truck driver by the time we met him about 8:30 that morning. His mood wasn't helped by his attire that unbelievably didn't include anything in the way of rain gear. In our brief exchange of greetings and plans, there was little to disguise his sour attitude that cloaked itself in an uncomfortable outer layer of wet flannel. This factor became a more serious variable in our moving equation a short while later after the driver had navigated his truck into the boatyard and backed up to the larger of our two craft. "No way it could be done," he pronounced after his quick survey of the situation. The boat was too heavy, the keel too low down, the stabilization arms (on truck) weren't meant to lift boats, and nobody at his home office ever listened to his pronouncements about the hauling limitations of his rig. I thought at one point that the guy's whine would give way to tear. There was a dark moment of quiet there as we grasped the serious nature of both the physical and psychological barriers before us. I think the rain picked up in intensity at that point. I was at a total loss for suggestions, trying to let go of a mindset that this part of the transport process would happen without having to coerce the process. After all, that's why we paid the big bucks to enlist the technology and know-how of this specialty organization, I thought. This was the beginning of our experience along a very steep learning curve that day.

Going for a deflection, we informed the driver we'd work on that boat challenge. My

friend Tony had access to a 100,000 pound jack, and the port had a large size forklift that we might be able to use for stabilization. Together we thought we might be able to work it to get the needed keel clearance from the ground. In the meantime we could get our other boat moved, surely the driver could handle that without much of difficulty—or attitude. Wrong assumption, his main concern being about negotiating the 55-gallon barrel supports out of the way while getting his rig in position to get his stabilization arms in position. And of course there was question about the structural integrity of the hull. This was going to be a long morning. We in any case were able to allay his worries sufficiently to have him give it a try. Everything proceeded well, and this vessel was propped up on our property within the space of an hour.

This first hurdle surmounted, the truck driver then left to work with the port crew on a couple transports they'd arranged. This gave us some time to work out a solution to the other boat transport. I'd put a call through to an independent construction outfit to see what equipment they might have to assist our effort and luckily they were able to get back within the half hour. So while Tony continued to secure the first boat on our property, I zipped off to discuss possibilities and numbers with the equipment guy. As it turns out, the equipment guy—Harvey—had a “boom” truck (basically a crane) that he thought might do the trick but he was nervous about the weight of the boat. After eyeballing the situation, gauging the position of the engine and ensuring that the bilge wasn't carrying a large accumulation of water, he agreed to give it a go. But he had to make an hour run to get a needed “spreader bar.” It was at least a plan and it was about at that time that the guys from the port phoned me (this story would have been far different without cell phone communication) to indicate that they were too nervous about involving their

fork-lift in an attempted jacking operation. He also informed me that the truck driver wasn't able to accomplish one of the boat jobs they had in mind—no surprise there—and that he'd be ready to get on our other job in about a half hour. So I relayed to him the plan about using the boom truck, that he in turn communicated to the driver. This prompted a near hysterical reaction from him that I could overhear clearly. "No way! There's absolutely no way they're going to be able to lift that boat..." Etc... Needless to say this didn't boost my confidence in the hasty plan I'd contrived with Harvey that was based on a grasp of equipment tolerances way beyond my experience. But we needed a plan, and I needed to get back to Tony and the other boat. Yes, the rain was definitely coming down harder at this point.

Sea Story (The Continuing Saga)

After parting paths with Harvey who was on his way to get the needed spreader bar, and having only a vague notion of how this apparatus was needed for the operation or even really what one looked like, my immediate objective was on getting back to our property to set up keel support blocks with hopes of a successful resolution to the boat lifting challenge. I'd expected to have a comfortable interval of time to make this preparation step out of belief that the port crew would be long involved with their boat transport needs. Barely had I begun setting up the blocks, however, than our truck driver friend pulled along-side our property with his rig to re-inform me that he was sitting idle, needing to charge me for his time even if he wasn't actively involved with a job. He added that he wanted me to understand that because he just didn't want me wasting my money, given that he thought there was no way that the plan with the boom truck would work.

Tony and I were in the meantime busily involved with chainsaw and planks, stabilizing the one boat while trying to complete groundwork for the other. My growing annoyance with the driver was at least partially appeased out of amusement in seeing him grow wetter in the rain by the minute. I provided what assurance I was able by explaining that I was following by Harvey's expertise and he seemed pretty confident in the capacity of his equipment to do what needed to be done. I think he meant it as a conciliatory gesture when the driver proposed at that point that he would go get some lunch so that he could take himself off the clock for the duration while awaiting the next step. Glad to have the guy out of our hair, Tony and I scrambled for the next half hour securing operations there and then raced out to the boatyard to anticipate the fateful next step.

The truck driver was already there when we arrived, along with the two personnel from the port. These guys were along for the entertainment, reminding me of some of the laid back characters I used to work with at in a university maintenance department a few years back. The day before when some big equipment had been brought in to maneuver another boat out of the way of ours, they appeared with their forklift. Not to miss an opportunity to make productive use of their time, they occupied themselves for a full half hour trying to lasso a bow-rope over one of the tines of the lift's fork, that they'd determined had to be raised the full 8 or ten feet of lift in order to achieve a needed "hooking angle." More detailed explanation wouldn't any better establish the soundness of their plan, that in any case didn't work but provided diversion while waiting for the bigger show to begin. Here again today they provided diversion in passing the half hour or so while waiting for Harvey to arrive, relating stories about the operation of the port and their line of work. In part I was glad for the pretense this interaction provided to avoid conversation with the truck driver, whose quiet expression indicated that his regard of the plan hadn't been helped by either the lunch break or the continuing rainfall.

There was a brief interval when Harvey did finally arrive, with his white rig silhouetted against the dark gray sky as it rig ambled along the winding dirt road to the boatyard, that I was able to assume a kind detached perspective to the unfolding drama—like watching a movie. As Harvey muscled his truck into position beside the boat I tried to find reassurance about the prospects of success in the venture, through comparison of the masses of the behemoths staged before us. In fact they looked pretty evenly paired, though I was able to allot some added weight to the truck side of my mental equation—because of its huge rumblings as the stabilization arms were hydraulically positioned to

the ground and the boom was angled into position. Harvey stood in a heroic pose high on the side of his rig, maneuvering hydraulic controls with a confident air and conferring calmly with a young assistant he'd enlisted for the job. Much stood to be gained or lost in the moments ahead, for Harvey in terms of his credibility and the safety of his machine, for the truck driver in terms his emotional investment in a doomsayer attitude, for the boat in terms of its very fate. I tried to hold at bay visions of our possession imploding under the enormous pressure of applied forces, a long history of who knows what kind of nautical glory brought to this sad ending.

Loud revs of the boom truck announced that the final moment of reckoning had been reached. I watched the boat straps tension as the flared upper sides of the hull began to flex under the load. The boom truck and the boat began to lean toward one another and I glanced toward Harvey for signs of concern. His calm visage to me was like a ship captain's at the helm in a turbulent sea. Deft motions of his hands were accompanied by more loud rumblings and then suddenly the keel was off the ground. A long several moments passed with heavy anticipation that something might start to give but all seemed to be holding steadily--high enough it seemed for the truck trailer to back underneath(?). Nope, the truck driver wasn't satisfied yet. Diesel smoke fumed from the Harvey's truck as the gears were pushed to even greater degrees of stress but the boat hoisted smoothly to a keel height of at least a foot off the ground. I was sure there was a bit of a smug quality to Harvey's voice when he yelled over to the truck driver, "High enough?"

Clearly it was as the driver scrambled toward his cab, beginning the loading process that resulted in the successful landing of the boat on our property in the space of less than an hour. Harvey's clear elation about events pronounced itself after the trailer loading

step had been completed as he loudly chided the port personnel about not believing the job could be done. This was after I overheard one of the port personnel ribbing the truck driver about “never underestimating can-do attitude.” More than the triumph of machine and will power in this occasion, there was something larger I sensed in this interaction between Westport locals and the truck-driving-outsider with no greater interest in the job than the maximum wage he could extract from it. It was larger also than the plight of an individual boat, long neglected and saved from ruin only by a somewhat desperate and hastily contrived plan. There was something deeper involved I felt for certain, something steeped in the long sea-going history of this town in which our boat had participated, and perhaps slighted by the spectacle of neglect here at the marina’s edge.

Script: Westport Mongo

Mongo (definition): “Any discarded object that is retrieved.”¹

How to comprehend the voice of the subconscious that led me here to this fringe society by the sea? Essentially I think I was compelled by a feeling of emptiness, rooting in a culture of distraction from which I come. The agents of this distraction abound, leveraged particularly by mass media and a growing sophistication of technology with its expanding access into every reach of cognitive space.

Perhaps it was angst of this nature that most lured me to this fishing community, leading me to romanticize about the lives of sea-goers here in their routine of departures to vast expanses of open ocean space. The other catch “out there” I imagined as the experience of isolation and escape from the oppressive forces of consumerism that even in this remote region pronounced itself dramatically through a changing landscape of condominium development.

However I might account for the lure of it, writing stories about the community provided a structure to support my exploration of the connection I felt there; a bridging process perhaps beyond a mindset that shaped my perspectives as an outsider’s.

It was through this fog of angst and inquiry in my story writing process that my sights began to fix on a camp of outliers along a remote stretch of the marina’s edge. The attraction of these hulking, neglected presences for me was immediate and powerful. Their weathered condition attested to long histories among turbulent forces—social, economic, nautical—that molded the lives and outlook of residents there. I found it disturbing that the richness of this group’s background in the community’s heritage counted for so little in their present plight. In the spectacle of their neglect I perceived a

reflection of inner emptiness luring me to this place, one that rooted in a materialistic world that transformed all aspects of life into objects of consumption and disposal.

Words evaded my attempts to account for the full force of my magnetism with this group as I became more involved with them. I tried to maintain a cautious approach in my interaction, but eventually resolved myself to a view that there is no way to conduct comprehensive cost-benefit analysis as an a-priori step to relationship. Like the open ocean expanses I romanticized about while watching the traffic of fishing vessels from the marina, relationship is its own sea. And risk is in some part what draws us to it, along with the inherent aspect of vulnerability that gets to the core of feelings, such as trust, that lie at the heart.

Or so I resolved in committing to the intensifying needs of our relationship. The wounds of neglect I discovered were deep, and the prospects for full restoration often bleak. Structural issues related to core integrity extensively preoccupied early stages of our interaction. The more invested I became in this enterprise the stronger also became voices of a skeptical element in the community that closely scrutinized developments. Daily, and nightly I contended with these nay-saying voices, most of them in my own head. Through this on-going confrontation, though, I began to achieve clarity of conviction about the importance of moving forward in the relationship; about the understanding it was helping to clarify about my inward needs and how they factored into the emptiness that brought me to that place.

Over time these inward processes began to support outward expression; a reaching out. The perspective I held of myself as an outsider in this community underwent a transformation with the headway achieved toward resolving inner angst. Increasingly I

was able to find reflection of myself in community discourse, particularly to the skeptical element that mirrored for me my own tribulation in the non-conformist pathway of the restoration effort. This inward-outward bridging encounter coincided with a growing receptivity to the natural environment as well, and connection with something-much-larger-than-myself within it. With my hands I endeavored to craft a transformation with wood but in a larger scheme I began to appreciate that the greater mechanism of change operated itself on me, wielded through the rhythms and forms of a landscape, around which the community had adapted itself. The vessels had not yet achieved a return to their natural element, though they were indeed transporting me to a new place.

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