**University of Colorado Boulder | Department of Writing and Rhetoric**

**Speaking With the Leaves**

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**Chapter 1: Waves**

12:16 at night; the only thing keeping me company were the occasional flashes of white LED light from the electric bicycles the university provided. Across Kittredge Pond, the cold metal bridge across Smith and Andrew Hall was starting to show its age, with rusted split ends and papules of trapped porosity that peppered the black steel. Despite the weathered state of the bridge, the parapet was somewhat comforting to hold on to, as on restless nights such as these, I like to look at the leaves floating on the water below and whisper, “Tell me, are you traveling through this world, or are you no more a drifter than I?”

Below me is the separation of the Smith and Arnett Ponds. A little black grate with equally small slits allowing only the thinnest of water through. Shoddy in design; the minute amount of water that could slither through the slits not enveloped by the unfortunate leaves would sink into the Arnett Pond below–a disgusting, calcium carbonate pond ridden with so much algae it looks like a sentient soccer field at night. Sadly, some leaves would fall through the slits and drift out to wherever the center of the mucky pond was, lost until the coming winter or torn apart by the current; I never bothered to wait and see.

Back in the clean pond, if I prop myself up and look over the parapet, I can see my transient azure reflection. The geese that lay under the naked tree that weep on the petit coastal range cause a muck and stir small waves that are always brisking about themselves.

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The identity of water is curious. Like the endless combinations of the human genome, no wave is the same; no wave will ever be the same. However, the Navier-Stokes Equations can partially explain the elusive nature of water—a set of matrices describing the motion of waves over time. This set of matrices explains the infinite number of motional combinations are dictated by external forces (such as gravity, friction, and chemical bonding) along with internal characteristics (such as viscosity, mass, and curl), and therefore every wave will always be mathematically unique.

Yet, the mathematical stalking of water is intrinsically limited because the Navier-Stokes Equations are yet to be fully solved. See, the application of matrices in large-scale bodies of water becomes muddied: messy, to the point where there may be more luck trying to blood a stone. While the equations are designed to identify surface waves in a pond, they cannot identify the crashing waves in the ocean, or the roar of a river.

If the Navier-Stokes Equations are unsolved, why then, are they relevant to the pond below me? Well, if we consider the identity of water, something that hundreds, if not thousands of cultures and peoples around the world have found value in without trying to glean, the unsolved nature of the Navier-Stokes Equations poses an even greater question: should we try to define the identity of chaos with science and mathematics? This question ends up opening a can of worms in the ethics of Chaos Theory, but at this moment, I’m sure the leaves are glad the Navier-Stokes Equations remain unsolved, as then their every moment would be mapped out, and strangely, the beauty in not knowing every future memory is robbed of them; robbed of us.

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If I come back to this bridge tomorrow, under the same conditions with the same wind and same leaves, I still would not be able to view the same crests and troughs I see now; so, these are my moment waves. Yet, my ownership of the moment waves is strange, because though I can control the moment, I cannot control the waves. If I tapped into my avarice, scooping some water in a cup, it would not be a wave anymore: it would not be authentic anymore. It would be the equivalent of taking a small rock from the Grand Canyon and presenting it to an absolute stranger with no context. To the layman, of course it looks just like every other rock! To the expert, they may be able to deduct the composition of the rock (ingenuous, sedimentary, metamorphic), or the timeliness (eon, era, epoch); the power of its origin would still highly likely be allusive! Does my ownership of the moment waves mean nothing if I cannot control them, or am I just hung up on what French poet, Voltaire calls the Illusion of Control?

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These waves are not sublime, profound, divine, or whatever adjective makes me more comfortable in the salvation of my own consciousness by stating it to be an advancement of my understanding of the world. It is as English philosopher Alan Watts says in his speech, *The Way of Life,* when addressing the characteristics of putting a sermon to a pebble.

Watts says, “Enjoy the pebble. If you can do that, you will be able to become a loving, helpful human being. If you cannot do that; if you can only do things because you can get something out of it, you are a vulture.” The pebble is but a pebble; these waves are but waves. Just as that pebble will always be a pebble until it eventually erodes down to nothingness, these waves will just be waves until they blend into the water again. Here, purposelessness becomes the catalyst for argument. In Western Culture, the description of something being ‘purposeless’ is met with negative connotations, so when something comes around that is genuinely purposeless, many of us become like a vulture, trying to glean whatever meaning we can, but by doing this, we miss the forest for the trees! Watts argues that viewing the world with a little less expectation yields a more grateful life, and with more gratefulness, comes a more holistic gaze. A pebble knows nothing of its purposeless nature, so who are we to give it a purpose beyond itself by giving a sermon? A wave knows less than nothing of its purposeless nature, so scooping it in a cup and trying to make it magical is no madder than drinking from that same cup if it had a hole in the bottom. Afterall, the rain only misses the clouds if we say it does.

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Standing and staring at the waves flattening out, some leaves drifting around began to curiously flow upstream; away from the little grate that perpetually draws them in and away from the mucky pond below. It is here I notice something, or rather, lack of something. It is very quiet; silent, even. So silent, I can hear the somewhat discomforting tone of everything around me, like noticing the second hand of a clock march forward, with or without you: a cruel general, but the fairest we have come to know.

Yet, as discomforting as the tone of silence may be, there is something enticing about it, much like how memories of the past go unappreciated until what we remember has either changed or changed us beyond recognition, and all we can do is grow gentle and melancholic. It is now I am truly alone, where even my reflection cannot talk back. I wonder then, why is it silence has a tone but not a pitch?

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Philosophy professor David Cooper at Durham University may have answers. In his scholarly article, *Silence, Water, and the Dao*, Cooper introduces the reader to the philosophy of Taoism through the connected metaphors of a clear mind and an undisturbed pond. Cooper writes, “The most suggestive metaphors invoke water that is still. Just as water must be undisturbed in order clearly to reflect clouds or trees, so the sage’s mind must be still if it is to register the truth of things” (Cooper, 2). In this case, the motif of something being motionless is directly connected to the motif of silence, and the idea of clarity. There is a deconstructed binary of water and the sage via a metaphor of the sage’s mind reflecting the motionless state of the water, which is to say that the physical state of the water is like the sage’s mind and vice versa.

But if a motionless pond is a metaphor for a clear mind, then what of water rings, and what of directionless waves? Well, if we consider how Cooper writes of the stillness of the water to be a physical property of the water, then applying the same logic to water rings and waves alike is fair. For water rings, they sprawl outward in satisfying geometric rings, and all hail from one point where there was a disturbance. For the waves, they stir around aimlessly and crash into each other, where the pond becomes the zero hour of a feast or famine, and there is no clear beginning and end. Thoughts can be the same way, with Engineering Professor, Barabara at Oakland University, arguing that thinking comes in two modes, the Focused and Diffuse Mode, where the former is like the water rings (symmetrical, constructive with a clear beginning) and the latter is like the waves (chaotic, deconstructive with no clear beginning or end), which is to all say that the physical state of water is what Cooper argues to be clearly connected to the human mind in more ways than one. As students, we often find ourselves lost in the center of thousands of circular crests; flat circles that were once organized are now chaotic and disturbed.

With the “undisturbed” stillness of the water comes silence, a characteristic of Taoism that Cooper also writes about. He states, “Still water typically makes little or no sound, so it is a metaphor too for the silence of the sage, for a wise refusal to speak of what cannot be spoken of,” (Cooper, 2). This interpretation of Taoism is something that Alan Watts would agree with, though he would put his own spin on the term “silence” by utilizing Western Philosophical thought. In his speech, *Individual and the World,* Watts introduces the idea of silence through his characterization of an unspeakable world. Watts speaks of a world beyond basic recognition; a world where one simply cannot point out characteristics of physical nature because they exist in a different space than what we can comprehend. Watts says, “Just as you have to stop talking to hear what others have to say, you have to stop thinking to find out what life is about. The moment you stop thinking, is the moment you come into contact with what Korzybski called, so delightfully, the Unspeakable World,” (Watts, 2:28:32)*.* Watts argues silence to be the stopping of talking to listen, but more importantly the stopping of thinking to start living in a more nuanced manner. Much like Watts, Cooper writes of silence to be the clearing of the mind, and like water, the settling of ripples. Both philosophers agree silence is a crucial aspect of understanding the natural world, and silence comes from the lack of motion, where the traveler can become motionless and view the world from a different angle. Silence may not have a pitch, but next time you find yourself moving too fast, take a moment to walk into your unspeakable world where there are no waves. You may find silence certainly has a tone; at least that is what the leaves tell me.

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*Scrrrwueak!* The piercing shriek of an electric bicycle brake had the privilege of waking everyone up in a five-hundred-foot radius, dragging me out of my head. I looked down at my watch, *Oh man…*

It is 2:25 in the morning, and I hate it when late nights get the best of me. I look like an idiot standing here staring at the waves, so next time I want to talk to the leaves, I will just seek the source of the stream and see where it takes me; maybe there, they will give me more answers. For tonight, the leaves are not talking back much, so to all the drifters in the world,

Goodnight.

**Chapter Two: Seeking the Source of the Stream**

12:12 at night, and I found myself along the bridge that overlooks Boulder Creek. After snooping around on the internet, I discovered the water that flows in the Kitteridge Pond comes from this creek, which comes all the way from the mountains, which will eventually flow into the Colorado River, and find itself lost at sea. Of course, trailing down the stream will only lead me back to the Kitteridge (and Arnett) pond, so instead, I will make my way down the bridge and walk up the sidewalk next to the water, seeking the source of the stream.

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In Colorado, one of the most popular game fishes is the Kokone salmon, a hearty red salmon closely resembling its sister, the sockeye salmon. With a large plateaued dorsal fin and a dull green color that blends into a herculean red near its lateral line, fishers seldom miss identifying this fish and its spawn (known as redds) in late October and September.

According to the Seattle Aquarium, adult salmon (including the Kokone salmon) learn to swim upstream later in life, “As adults returning to freshwater, when they encounter that familiar smell, it stimulates them to swim upstream. So, there may be some “testing of the waters” as salmon migrate home. If they swim up the wrong river, that memorized scent of their birth stream will fade, decreasing their drive to swim upstream” (Seattle Aquarium). This ‘homecoming’ of the salmon is an evolutionary drive; one that is prompted during the earlier instances of mating seasons. The adult males (hook noses in many species) swim upstream to mate with the adult females (hen in many species), where the hen may lay up to 15,000 eggs! Only ~1% of these eggs survive, and the males end up dying soon after the journey from exhaustion and lack of will to survive (they completed their goal to reproduce). If I can talk to the leaves, surely, I can talk to the salmon too, right? I wonder then, what would they say if I asked them the same question I asked the leaves?

Unlike the leaves, which aimlessly drift around on top the Kitteridge Pond, the salmon have a clear purpose, and with this purpose, a clear direction. The salmon would tell me that they are not only traveling, but on a life-long journey, where the destination is the homecoming. The best visualization of the difference between traveling and drifting would be the leaves and the salmon then, and I think that everyone could learn to be a bit of both sometimes. I do not want to permanently travel yet, but I can certainly see myself swimming against the stream once I find my life purpose, but until then, I will just flow downstream with the other leaves.

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I am about halfway down the upstream, and my bones are starting to grow a bit brittle, maybe from all the walking, or maybe the incoming cold. *Am I even on campus anymore?* Who knows? I certainly do not recognize anything around me, though I can feel the familiar sense of falling in and out of time again and again. Maybe now, I am finally ready to understand and explore what travel author Linda Lapin calls “Hypertime”.

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Travel author Linda Lapin first wrote of the concept of “Hypertime” in her work, *Mapping the Soul of Place*, an interactive analysis of travel theories and collection of didactic exercises to spark motivation in young travel writers.

“Hypertime”, according to Lapin is deeply connected to another travel anomaly, called “Deep Travel”, where the traveler has, “an experience of discontinuity or expansion in our perception of time, which may be triggered by the act of traveling and visiting new, unfamiliar places” (Lapin 57). Essentially, getting lost in time, much like how a massive project or hobby seems to “consume” all the time away, but instead of work, the non-linear flowing of time comes from traveling to unfamiliar places.

Strangely, I experience “hypertime” the most when I find myself equally drifting and traveling, so who knows? Standing on that bridge, running up that hill, falling down that stream, it all feels the same to me, so maybe the two terms aren’t so indistinguishable after all? I could easily get as lost chasing butterflies as I could staring at the water, so perhaps the hypertime of everyday is something I have to consider? Perhaps what I need is not the changing of a setting, but the changing of a gaze?

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2:34 in the morning, and I cannot see beyond the wicked crown that is formed by the lined grove of the bare Peach Leaf Willows along the bank of the stream. They curl up and consume the stars, but I know they are still there, because if I cannot look at the sky and find the stars, I can look at the white streaks in more still of the rushing water. Despite the blackness of the trees, with their twists and turns on the horizon, I can certainly see what lies at the end of the stream, and I will go no further in trying to pursue it; at least not tonight.

To all the travelers in the world, unlike the salmon who lays down his life to seek the source of the stream, I am not ready to permanently travel. As long as the water flows downward, the source of the stream is only the final destination, and no one can fight forever. We all either drift out to a strange sea, where sometimes the best course of action is setting new direction and raising our sails anew or fall stagnant into a pond where the algae bloom, becoming nothing more than biotic matter for the feeding of another.

Goodnight.

**Chapter Three: All the Pretty Little Lights**

11:37 at night; I stepped away from a small get-together with my friends in Smith Hall to go for a nightly stroll. It was nice out, a bit of a frigid wind whistled through the now dolled willow, gently lifting her arms, and parting her bangs. The overhead streetlights shone; not too bright in the bleak midwinter, but just enough to see some glistening of the tiny snowflakes dancing around me.

I paced along the sidewalk ornamenting the Kitteridge Pond, eventually finding myself at the aged bridge again. Strangely, the papules of porosity and rusted split ends did not seem as withered, or perhaps nowadays, I just did not bother to notice the imperfections as much.

Halting halfway, I leaned over the guard rail, and took a deep breath, feeling the frigid winter air inside my nose. Closing my eyes, I allowed the silent tone of the night to invite itself into my mansion and pull up a little wooden chair to the rich mahogany table that serves as a centerpiece. After a while, I opened my eyes and instead of looking down at the water, I raised my head skyward, to gaze upon the stars above.

Normally, I would have thoughts—subvocal conversations popping around in my head, but now, just like the night, everything was silent. And everything, for the first time in an extraordinarily long time, was gentle.

“Hey Sebas, can we come?” yelled Tate, suddenly pulling me out of my toneless world. He is a good friend of mine from the group I had left behind and was standing at the door with some of my other friends; all dressed up for a nightly excursion.

“Y-Yeah, just give me a sec and I’ll meet y’all over.” I responded, patting my pockets to make sure I had my keys, wallet, and phone.

I took one step, and stopped, turning around one last time to the water. There were no waves; no leaves, only the reflection of all the pretty little lights.

Goodnight.

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