

COPING AND CONNECTION: THE EVER- PRESENT STRUGGLE

a review by
Dennis R. Turner, Jr.

Robert Wallace. *As Breaks the Wave Upon the Sea*. Main Street Rag Publishing Company / Mint Hill Books, 2021.

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Family, friendship, and romantic love are thought to be great comforts in life, and you are supposedly able to rely on them to help you through your problems. But what happens when they cannot? What do you, as a family member, friend, or lover, do when you see a loved one slipping away and their pain, trauma, or inner turmoil is a mystery to you? What do you do when the things you carry set you off from those who love and care about you and you find more kinship amongst strangers and casual acquaintances? Though characters and circumstances change from story to story, the inhabitants of Robert Wallace's new short story collection, *As Breaks the Wave Upon the Sea*, all struggle with feelings of emotional isolation and estrangement, of being set adrift. They yearn to reach out, and Wallace relates their struggles and inner turmoil with empathy and sensitivity.

The characters in Wallace's story collection all struggle emotionally and psychologically in some way. In "The Science of Air," a young girl has a very close relationship with her orchard farmer father but wrestles with the enigma that is her depressed mother, whose long-ago pain and loss has rendered her almost unknowable to her daughter.¹ At one point, the daughter enters her mother's room, where she is reading to a visiting cousin, and the meeting is described thusly: "My mother doesn't respond to me. Her face

is blank, her lips sealed in secret like the Mona Lisa. . . . I lift my mother's arm and begin stroking her palm. She turns her head to look at me, but the expression on her face doesn't change. She is almost as unmoving as drying cement" (5). Later, she recalls an incident that symbolizes the gulf between them, despite their blood relation: "When my mother gave the photograph to me, she had a smirk on her face. I remember it as a smirk because her face was twisted to one side; it seemed to be telling me *this is the real me*. When I reached for the photo, she held it for an instant, and, failing to release it, we stood there separate yet tethered" (12). Wallace shows that even blood relatives can be hard to fathom, for we do not always know the back pages to their personal stories.

Likewise, in the book's title story, a young wife feels like an outsider looking in as she watches her Iraq War veteran husband become increasingly closed off and struggle with civilian life while keeping his war-time traumas bottled up inside.² She explains, "I hold his hand steady. All the while it trembles and pulls, grief stricken with something" (15). Meanwhile, Wallace also shows what the husband's inner life is like now that he is stateside: "Some days I fritter away the hours by doodling page after page of musings about nothing at all. I sit in my chair holding pen and paper like an author on some kind of drug. This is something



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I often write: *How often do I think of my buddy? I never stop thinking of him*. He moves in my mind like a permanent thought" (18). As the story progresses, this chasm between them grows and he acts out in more perplexing, frustrating ways.

Elsewhere, in "Taking Bright Home," Ava, an older woman on a seemingly mundane trip with her husband Wally from Michigan to Chapel Hill, NC, to see family, tries to come to grips with her husband's encroaching mental decline and is confused by his bond with a teenage hitchhiker they have picked up along the way. Toward the beginning of the story, she explains her befuddlement with her husband's behavior: "The change I have been noticing in my husband mostly seemed to be in the area of judgment. One incident by itself could be put off as a momentary lapse, but the tractor mishap, the full

price paid for the Explorer, and now picking up a hitchhiker . . . added up to much more than a coincidence. But what it added up to I couldn't say" (23). Her frustration and alarm grow as a quick stop to drop the boy off at a trailer park in West Virginia turns into an afternoon with the boy's mother while the boy and her husband frolic about together. In one passage she remembers, "Last night Wally and I had walked in the fields as if it would be for the last time. I'd felt a pulling in my chest as I held his hand" (33). She feels increasingly cut off from him.

The theme of emotional estrangement from those who are closest to us continues throughout. In a pandemic- and civil war-torn dystopian America of "We Who Were Living Are Now Dying," a young man's relationship with his girlfriend unravels when she comes home from the war with another soldier girl

in tow. The story is told from his girlfriend Jennifer's perspective, who explains her boyfriend's reaction when she first arrives home with her friend Ariel: "We began smoking cigarettes, and Ray looked at me like he didn't know me any longer, like I came back from the war a different person" (83–84). Later, she tells Ray that she and Ariel want to take a little road trip, to which Ray replies, "I don't understand. . . . Are you gay?" (86). Three is ultimately a crowd and Ray fails to understand why he is the odd man out. His anxiety over the growing gulf between himself and Jennifer manifests itself in suspicion and homophobia.

In "Big Daddy's," a young woman in a couple recently transferred from Michigan to Roxboro, NC, watches her boyfriend lose interest in the relationship just as they are building a life together, even as she has given up a lot to follow his wishes. Early on, Anna ponders misgivings about the move south that she's kept to herself: "She was beginning to wonder about the whole adventure. She knew that's how Sam approached it. He was impulsive. The move down south, the renting of the house, all were his ideas" (43–44). While things appear good between them, her unexpressed second thoughts put a strain on the relationship. Wallace writes, "God she loved him, but she wondered if living in the boondocks was good for them" (51–52). Sam's friendship with neighbor Clarence does not help

¹ Both "The Science of Air" and "As Breaks the Wave Upon the Sea," discussed next, received the Doris Betts Fiction Prize and appeared in *NCLR* (2018 and 2011, respectively).

² Brian Glover discusses this story in his essay, "Hitting Home with the New Story Project: Teaching with the *North Carolina Literary Review* in North Carolina," published in *NCLR Online* 2016.

bridge the gap between them either, as Wallace explains, "From that first visit they had become friends, and it seemed to Anna that Sam was spending most of his free time, when he wasn't working on the house, with Clarence" (52). Sam and Clarence often go to local watering hole Big Daddy's without her. After one particular night out with Clarence, during which Anna knows Sam did something he should not have but is not saying what, her frustration and dissatisfaction reach a breaking point: "They turned down Julian Cross Road, a gravel road, with fine-toothed ridges in the middle that made the truck shake violently. Anna thought about putting the truck in neutral, and with one good kick the door would open wide, spilling Sam" (55). Their ensuing argument ultimately shreds the relationship, all due to unspoken resentments and diverging interests.

In "There's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," this idea of being connected and separated simultaneously continues. In the early days of the COVID pandemic, two elderly sisters, Clara and Kate, isolate together in a New York City high-rise apartment and find themselves both bound to and separated from each other in mutual grief and guilt over a past family tragedy, the death of their little brother when they were children. They are thrown together by aging and the state of the world, with strong feelings of guilt and resentment left unacknowledged between them. For instance, Clara recalls

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a time decades ago when she tried to confront their pain, only to be shut down: "Her sister had looked at her with such hatred, as if she alone was to blame, though they were equally at fault. She tried not to take Kate's words personally, but the sharpness of her sister's tone made her feel that it was a mistake to have come home. . . . It was at that moment that she felt like she didn't know her sister" (124). Now, in the midst of pandemic isolation, these old issues between them slowly bubble to the surface.

Through these stories, Wallace illustrates people's struggles to stay moored to those they care about, even as the gulf continues to widen. However, not everything is struggle, despair, and loss in Wallace's collection, and he does offer possibilities of hope, healing, and being understood, even if these opportunities do not always come in expected ways and forms. For instance, in "The

Science of Air," the young girl does eventually break through to her mother after the mother goes missing during a depressive episode. As she makes childish airplane noises while searching for her mother in a barn, the mother says, "I want to play," and the daughter describes her feelings as such: "I stand in the light, my arms outstretched, making the airplane sound. All I feel is air. It lifts me" (14). One gets the sense that healing can begin.

In the previously mentioned "Taking Bright Home," though she initially puts up walls due to class differences, Ava ultimately finds comfort in the obese, palm-reading mother of the teenage hitchhiker she and her husband bring home during their road trip. At first, Ava is full of judgment of the woman's appearance, home, and life: "I glanced at Angelica's undulating stomachs, and then looked around the trailer. An odor of wetness permeated the air. A

sour stench, like mildew, filled my nostrils. Although I couldn't see all the way into the kitchen, the trailer was small enough for me to view a leaking faucet" (28–29). Later, her judgment gradually melts away as Angelica reads her husband's palm and gives him a message meant both to prepare him for what is ahead and to show Ava she understands the situation: "This is a different kind of trip. This is a trip of the spirit. A most different kind of experience altogether. You will meet others, some will travel with you. . . . And I see a lot of confusion. Or what I mean is, I don't know" (38). Ava sees she has underestimated the perceptiveness of her hostess.

In "The River While Swelling," a retirement-age coach for a traveling women's baseball team is saddled with a player's secret that she cannot tell her husband and, while struggling with this burden, is hit with the surprise of his own imploding marriage, eventually finding comfort and understanding through a chance encounter with another woman. Early on, during a trip to the hospital over an injury, Coach wonders why his pitcher needs him there: "Coach wanted to ask Grace why she didn't want Flynn here. Or, for that matter, why she wanted him as opposed to one of the players. He felt a little uncomfortable being here with a woman, though he of course knew Grace well" (61). Later, upon finding out her secret, wrestling with it, and being dealt his own personal setback, he meets a forty-something, free-spirited college teacher who

calls herself Pandora. Pandora becomes an emotional lifeline for him: "He felt that Pandora knew things, what things he couldn't say, but he knew emptiness had suddenly overwhelmed him, seeping into his body like some kind of murky vapor. He waited for Pandora to say something, maybe give him some advice, or tell him it wasn't his fault that his wife was leaving him, but she didn't say anything. She handed him another energy bar" (79). They bond over baseball history, and after this night he is better able to carry on.

In the aforementioned "We Who Were Living Are Now Dying," during a road trip to see pandemic monuments, Jennifer's jealous, dejected boyfriend ultimately accepts that their relationship is ending after realizing that the bond between Jennifer and Ariel is not born out of romantic attraction but shared trauma and loss on the frontlines. Jennifer explains, "I looked at him then, and I saw something there that told me he understood. Not everything maybe. But he understood that everything was changed now between him and me. . . . He was saddened by it, but he understood that whatever we had together was now over, that compared to what Ariel and I now have, ours had never really amounted to much" (101). Sometimes experience forges a stronger bond than love, making strangers of those who once thought they knew you.

In "A Kayaker's Guide to the Pungo River," Winsome Pinnock,

a widower from the Triangle area who has recently moved to Belhaven, NC, and started channeling his grief over his wife's cancer death into lonely kayak trips down the Pungo, has a series of encounters with Tia Ruiz, a young, quirky Latina woman with a fixation on stealing a seemingly abandoned boat. Winsome feels the need to save her from making such a bad decision, which ultimately helps him move beyond his grief. After the story reaches its climax, he has an epiphany: "And as he drove past town, he realized that he had been close to giving up, that his wife's death had nearly suffocated the life out of him. He hadn't realized how close he had been to giving up until he had given the kayak to Tia" (119). Even unlikely connections can be lifesavers. In these stories, Wallace illustrates how, if we allow ourselves to do so, there is great comfort in reaching out and being reached out to.

Throughout the eight short stories that comprise *As Breaks the Wave Upon the Sea*, Robert Wallace shows that, however desired and necessary they may be, human connections can become frayed, especially for those who withdraw inward in the face of trouble and pain; however, internalizing feelings or withdrawing is not the best way to handle those feelings. Even if you do not always feel like your loved ones can recognize your pain, Wallace's stories show it is not the worst thing in the world to let them try or to find someone who can. ■