## Traveling with Virginia Woolf



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**cover image**detail of a photo from *Lytton Strachey, His Mind and Art* (1957) by Charles Richard Sanders. photographer unknown

The secretary led me to an immaculately scrubbed flight of stairs, which had been strung with wreaths and tiny brass bells. All the while, she made a great display of heaving under the weight of my relatively small suitcase, mumbling to herself about the drive home on the icy roads of Mount Saint Francis. As I looked out the window, the landscape seemed just as inhospitable, overrun with barren trees and withered foliage.

Before long, the secretary dropped my suitcase at the bottom of the stairs and said, "Remember to lock up if you go out tonight. We had a couple of breakins recently, and, not to scare you, but, you know..." And her voice trailed off. She handed me an envelope stuffed with various maps of southern Indiana and was off to the parking lot, waving as she climbed into an old Volvo. After that, the building seemed disconcertingly quiet. I could hear the kitchen door rattle open and closed as the wind picked up again, whistling insistently into the rafters.

So I had arrived at the Mary Anderson Center for the Arts, an artist residency program and studio space near Evansville. As I stumbled up the stairs with my laptop bag and suitcase, light leaked out from under the door to the first room, but otherwise, there were no signs of life. In applying to come for a week and work on an article, I had determined the least desirable set of dates for such a stay—arriving the day after Christmas and departing a couple of days after New Year's—and listed them on my application in the blank marked "Scheduling—First Choice." I figured that such strategic maneuvering would ensure my application's success. Walking down the hall, I realized that such foresight had landed me alone for the holidays, with nothing but my thoughts, an antiquated laptop, and a stash of poetry books that had been "randomly inspected" at the Standiford Field Airport.

As I crawled into bed that night, I shivered in my sweats and wool socks, counting the knocks as an old tree branch brushed against my window. I found myself continually thinking of the burglar from a few weeks before, wondering what else resided in the endless trees and foliage of the center's grounds. And the silence. My own thoughts seemed to echo in the dark, empty rooms, blending with building's creaks and moans as I drifted off to sleep.

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When my alarm went off, a weak sun shone grey through yellow curtains. I dressed and headed downstairs to cook some breakfast, grabbing my copy of John Fosse's *Melancholy* and some diet coke. The staff was still off for the holidays, and I planned to make full use of the giant communal pantry on the first floor.

Passing through the hallway in the daylight, I began looking at some paintings that hung in a row above an oak bench. All of them depicted a flat but

lush Indiana landscape in the summer months, conveyed in round, swirling brushstrokes on square canvases. As the series of works moved from left to right, the presence of color became more pronounced, eventually overtaking the shades of green on the first canvas. A small blue tag next to each read: Abby Beaufort, M.A.C.A. Resident Coordinator.

For the first time since I'd arrived in Mount Saint Francis, I started to think about the stories that this drafty, rattling grey building and its barren landscapes had held for the people who came here before me. Passing through a second corridor, a row of glass frames glittered in the pale morning sun, and I set about examining each of them in more detail than the night before. Each framed artifact seemed to contain its own worlds, and as I passed slowly from one to the next, I wondered how this modest brick building was able to house all of them.

The first held a portrait of Mary Anderson, a noted nineteenth century stage-actress who donated the land needed to build the facility. Rendered in pen and ink, her eyes seemed to glitter from beneath a ruffled bonnet. From what I gathered, the four hundred acre tract of forest that she gave the Center had been utterly transformed. Threaded with an intricate web of hiking trails, the unruly woods were now relatively domesticated, replete with wrought iron benches, bubbling stone fountains, and a small, ivy-covered chapel. At the time, I wondered if her presence, both in memory and in her portrait, complete with lace petticoats and embroidered stockings, had shaped the landscapes and structures that I now wandered in my sweats and ratty jeans.

I kept walking, eventually shedding the sense of loneliness that I had felt the day before. In the second frame, a coffee-stained letter was mounted on a beige paper background. At the time, it immediately conjured the graded essays I received back in my history class, which were often smeared with tea and grape jelly. Squinting, I read: "Dear Mr. Baxter... Thank you for your invitation to visit the Mary Anderson Center for the Arts. I think it's a Hoosier idea, in the very best sense of the word. Other than a glass of scotch and some old-fashioned Indiana hospitality, I won't even charge you my usual fees." And it was signed, in meandering, looped letters: Kurt Vonnegut. I'll admit that I was immediately intimidated by its presence.

After overcoming my initial shock and awe at seeing something the author of *Slaughterhouse Five* had actually hand-written, I thought of people like Abby Beaufort, the M.A.C.A. coordinator, whose office was just down the hall. To be surrounded by such artifacts and histories, I reasoned, would bear down on one's ability to create. I started wondering how she was able to negotiate the stories that surrounded her with the blank canvases that stared back at her every day. This was a particularly salient question, since I had yet to start my article on women editors and web based publishing.

As I found myself thinking about the preponderance of voices resonating within the halls of the Mary Anderson Center, the overwhelming silence I had been engulfed in the night before seemed almost impossible, if not significant. Walking back down the hall, I wondered if the quietness of the building had prepared me to listen as a history of sorts began to make itself known.

Regardless, as I walked into the kitchen, I started to smile. Even though my plane had landed last night, I felt that this morning, I had really arrived here.

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More and more, I found myself alone with various works of literary and visual art, most of which had been inspired by the silent, cavernous place I now inhabited. The dining room walls were lined with various types of glassware made at the Mary Anderson Center, and these ranged from marbled bowls to vases that looped and curved into the frigid winter air. And in a small room at the end of the hallway, a mahogany bookcase held works written by previous visiting artists, ranging from small, hand-bound chapbooks to hardcover novels and poetry collections. Every shelf held someone else's story, and, in the midst of them, I started to work on my own.

I retreated to the lodgings I had been assigned at the Mary Anderson Center, a relatively small room distinguished only by the grayness of its walls and carpet. After reflecting for a moment on the lack of artistic license taken in decorating room number three, I spent the rest of my first day sorting through interviews and scholarly articles, ending with a draft of a nonfiction piece, which I called "A URL of One's Own." The essay began with a quote from Virginia Woolf about the necessity of both workspace and publishing resources in making women's artistic voices heard. She stated in a 1928 lecture at the Arts Society at Newnham that "... a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and true nature of fiction unsolved." For women today, though, things had begun to change, and this was the crux of my essay. The women whom I interviewed for the project had found that new technologies allowed themselves to become writers, editors, publishers, and distributors, allowing a variety of literary contributions to become available to readers, many of which had been slighted by traditional publishers.

While I worked, researched, and typed, I started to think about the literary landscape I had inherited, and how different it seemed from that of nearly a hundred years ago. Not only were new technologies allowing marginalized voices to reach appreciative readers, but the solitude and workspace I had experienced was becoming increasingly available to women. Residential arts facilities like the

Mary Anderson Center had been experiencing a renaissance of sorts throughout the United States and Europe, and, since the MacDowell colony was founded in 1907, artist colonies had been established in nearly every one of the fifty states. Many of them were specifically for women writers, musicians, and arts professionals.

As I reflected less and worked more, I found the heritage that surrounded me inspiring as opposed to repressive. After considering the history and cultural changes that made such quiet and creatively oriented places possible, the relative drabness of my surroundings seemed more colorful, albeit only metaphorically. I began to think of myself and my stay here as being a very small part of a literary history, although one that was changing rapidly.

As I completed more of my essay, I no longer felt like a bystander watching the history of the arts center unfold, but more like a participant in its tradition of work and reflection. I remained conscious of the fact that I was definitely (and I stress the word definitely) what the website had called "an emerging artist" as opposed to one further along in her career, but finding small remnants of the poets and writers who had inhabited the room before still felt inspiring. A stack of books, all written at the Mary Anderson Center and inscribed by the authors, rested against the pale blue lamp on my nightstand, and this miniature library at times felt like a microcosm of both the center's rich history and many of the changes in literary culture that I was writing about. While many of the works were published by commercial publishers and written by college-educated and arguably very privileged men, other small press volumes by women and minority writers often diverged from this trend. I'll never forget finding the slim yet substantial volume of poetry that won a contest judged by noted feminist writer and poet Barbara Cully, and as part of the award was published about ten years ago by the University of Illinois Press. An inscription thanked both Cully and the Mary Anderson Center for nurturing her writing early on. As I worked on my essay, having these tangible vestiges of the literary history Woolf and others had written about remained both intimidating and exciting. Although, in some ways, the specter of Kurt Vonnegut's letter loomed above my desk as I wrote, the silence of the center and its rich history of work and reflection no longer seemed as paralyzing as before. As the sun set over the small lake outside of my window, I began to welcome it.

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The next morning was even colder than the one before, and, as I fired up my vintage laptop, I shivered in my bathrobe. From my window, the tiny lake looked almost completely frozen over, and the work I had done the day before seemed just as inaccessible as I tried to caffeinate myself. At times it seemed as though the

Indiana landscape, like the room I temporarily inhabited, was distinguished by the many shades of grey that could be found within it. At times, its lack of color felt uninviting, if not impenetrable. I decided to make myself presentable and walk down to the kitchen, where I hoped I'd be able to find some granola bars or junk food cereal. For the first time since my arrival, I could sense the presence of another person in the building. The hallway smelled like pancakes, and the floors creaked and groaned more than usual.

As I opened the kitchen door, a blonde woman, perhaps in her late-twenties, looked up from her work. "Hello," she said, "You must be Kristina. Have you been enjoying your stay at the Center?" As she asked, she took the pans off the burner, looking fairly pleased with her concoction.

I smiled, still in shock at hearing another person's voice. "Yes, definitely," I replied, adding, "It's so quiet here, you really get a lot of work done."

"I'm glad to hear it." She thought for a moment and said, "I'm not sure if Alice gave you much of a tour of the grounds when you arrived. You've found everything okay, right?" As she reached for a plate and silverware, it was clear that she took great joy in cooking. I remember being puzzled by this. She looked like she didn't really eat.

"Oh, yes, definitely," I answered, "The artwork on display is really amazing. Are those your paintings in hall?"

She smiled. "Yes, they're mine. And they're supposed to show what the landscape here looks like in the summer months." She paused for a second. "In case you can't already tell, I love painting and holistic cooking. I'm going to school for both at the same time, as strange as it may seem."

As I thought of my initial response to the history of the Mary Anderson Center, I was astonished. It seemed that, for Abby Beaufort, working and creating here was second nature. "That's impressive," I said. "Do you find the history of the place and all of the artwork here inspiring? The art center has such a rich history."

She grinned and plopped a pancake down on her plate. "Oh, gosh, definitely," she answered. "But that's why I think that the cooking's a good thing. It's great to be a part of the Mary Anderson Center, but the ghost of Mr. Vonnegut and all the artists who have been here can overwhelm you. Even here, balance is important."

Immediately, I was puzzled. "What do you mean?" I asked. I had always thought that when in a place like this, an artist should seize the opportunity to work.

"We tell artists here to step back and pace themselves," she answered, "And it's important to go out and see Mount Saint Francis. You might never make it back, if you come from a long distance." She smiled and offered me a muffin.

The more I thought about it, the more this made sense. "Thanks for the suggestion." I looked across the hall at some of the blown glass in the room next door, and, as I admired them, wondered if this distancing oneself might help one's own voice seem more accessible.

"Well, I think I'm going to head out for a hike," I said, "It was nice meeting you."

"You too."

As I stepped out into the cold winter air, I realized I had never seen the outside of the Mary Anderson Center in the daylight. The grounds were covered in frost and dead leaves, but the gray sky and barren trees seemed oddly beautiful. Even the harsh December wind seemed to be milder.

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When I returned to my project, I thought about the wisdom that Abby Beaufort, between flipping pancakes, had imparted to me earlier that day. The idea of balance, even in a place like this, made perfect sense. Many artists, particularly those who travel in order to create, have struggled with the histories and significances attached to their surroundings, finding themselves at times inspired and paralyzed by them. Although, as Virignia Woolf argues, workspace and solitude remain necessary in order to write, another set of experiences and questions face those who travel in order to find them. I think that one must bear in mind that, as author Jan Morris argues, that "no one was ever less of a travel writer" than Virginia Woolf. In fact, Woolf was never outside of England longer than seven weeks at a time. Those who did journey in order to create specific works frequently identified additional challenges inherent in the process. In fact, American travel writing has a long history of such struggles, which elicited varying strategies and responses from those depicting such culturally fraught landscapes.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who journeyed in order to depict the legendary Niagara Falls, surely faced a similar struggle with the artistic significance attached to this locale. For most Americans, Niagara represented what many travelers envisioned as holy ground, not only because the landscape had no equal in America or Europe, but because, for many visitors, viewing the falls inspired a transcendent spiritual response. In fact, many travelers referred to themselves as "pilgrims." In depicting his journey in the wake of innumerable artists, poets, and writers, Hawthorne struggled to respond with the spiritual revelation expected of him, and depicting it in a novel fashion must have seemed nearly impossible. When attempting to do so, he often resorts to parody, stating that "My enthusiasm was in a deathlike slumber" after describing his "perfect decency and composure" at viewing the falls. Although he does, in the end, find some "rapturous"

enjoyment in the landscape, his narrative frequently reflects a desire to subvert the expectations imposed upon travelers to Niagara. In a way, this sense of not being able to sustain the literary and artistic traditions attached to a given place proved similar to what I experienced early on at the center, particularly as Kurt Vonnegut's ghost, along with a host of artistic insecurities and fears, loomed above my cluttered writing desk.

In many ways, this struggle with the traditions and artistic voices attached to a locale often proves different for women writers than their male contemporaries. Although the Mary Anderson Center was established fairly recently in 1989, female artists and writers most likely respond differently to the opportunity to be part of its tradition. I think that this uncertainty as to how to negotiate a literary history of male writers' voices with one's own aesthetic has been an integral part of American women's travel writing, particularly that of Margaret Fuller. In journeying to depict Illinois in her 1843 sketchbook *Summer on the Lakes*, she refuses to write in a masculine literary form—in other words, a linear narrative—but rather uses the predominantly female template of the sketchbook to depict both literal and intellectual journeying throughout the terrain. This desire to subvert the cultural expectations of the travel writer is similar to some of Hawthorne's strategies, but, in many ways, Fuller's narrative represents some of the unique challenges facing women writers who journey in order to create new literature.

Additionally, the experience of residing at an artist colony is relatively new to American literary culture, and even many travelers aren't really sure what to make of it. Every time I've traveled to a residential arts facility, my friends have been terrified that no one would be there to pick me up at the airport because, after all, the "free-spirited hippie" resident coordinator just might forget. And every time I come home from one, people ask me if I enjoyed my vacation. But, in many ways, the artists who come to places like the Mary Anderson Center face similar challenges as those who traveled to Niagara or, in Margaret Fuller's case, the scenic plains of Illinois. Although given, quite literally, "a room of one's own," the rich literary histories of such places can often be difficult to negotiate with the task of creating one's own authentic piece of art or writing.

When switched on my laptop, gathering notes from interviews with women writers and publishers, I thought about Margaret Fuller traversing the Illinois territory. Since her sketchbook was initially published and introduced to readers, some of the changes facing writers and artists had changed dramatically, but working in new terrain continued to be both inspiring and challenging. Even the church bells ringing that afternoon seemed burdened with history.

The rest of my visit seemed to pass quickly as I put the finishing touches on the last draft of my article and sent it out to a few small feminist periodicals. When I had completed most of the work I had brought with me, I began reading some of the books I had brought along, namely Theresa Boyar's *Kitchen Witch*, Nicole Cartwright Denison's *Recovering the Body*, and Leslie Jamison's *The Wintering Barn*. Although I enjoyed this part of my trip, my initial arrival and taking in the history of the Mary Anderson Center made the deepest impression on me.

I remembered my initial perception of Indiana, the building, and the quietness of the place. It had seemed misleadingly unwelcoming as I climbed the stairs to my room. As I closed the front door for the last time, I thought only of my first impression of this "inhospitable" terrain, wondering if, upon return, the small grey building and the flat landscape surrounding it would grow barren again.