

Skinned

Taxidermy and Pedophilia in Alice Munro's "Vandals"

Nature hides.
—Heraclitus

Taxidermy is a narrative art. Whether the animal's body is part of a diorama containing an overabundance of figures arranged to suggest interspecies communion, or whether its glass eyes gaze directly out of a head hanging on a rumpus room wall, taxidermy tells a story about human-animal interactions. But a taxidermic diorama can also tell a different kind of story. In Alice Munro's "Vandals," a taxidermic display arranged to present a narrative about the innocence of nature in fact reveals another, more disturbing one. Because the strangely denatured taxidermic diorama in "Vandals" features idealized displays of animal life that are predicated on the slaughtering, skinning, and stuffing of their animal subjects but are nevertheless received as icons of the natural, it emphasizes our tendency to see nature as a "naïve reality" that is self-evident and not in need of explanation.¹ The *perception* of the outdoor diorama as a haven of intra- and interspecies communion works to disguise both the violence on which it is premised and the violence that takes place on its grounds; the diorama reminds us of the consequences of failing to scrutinize the "natural." Thus, the diorama, as a simulation of a natural environment, provides fertile ground in which to explore the willing self-deception at the centre of this complex, chilling story.

"Vandals" opens with a letter that Bea Doud composes to Liza, the young woman whom she remembers as one of two "pretty sunburned children" who grew up across the street from "Dismal," the property that Bea shared with her recently deceased partner, Ladner (305). Bea means to thank Liza for checking on the property while Bea cared for Ladner in the hospital, but the letter never gets sent. Instead, Bea retreats into a period of slightly

drunken musing that provides the material for much of the first part of the story. Among other things, Bea remembers the second time she visited Ladner at Dismal: “‘I expect you’d like a tour,’ Ladner said” (316), before leading her on a strenuous walk along the trails criss-crossing the property. Bea recalls that “[s]he couldn’t keep track of their direction or get any idea of the layout of the property” (317), but it soon becomes evident that the heavy foliage is not the only cause of her confusion. Bea sees live animals moving among “stuffed and lifelike” ones (317): for example, mating swans let out “bitter squawks” beside “a glass-fronted case containing a stuffed golden eagle with its wings spread, a gray owl, and a snow owl” (316), and real birds flit in and out of a group of stuffed birds that are positioned beside signs inscribed with “tight, accurate, complicated information” about their habitats, food preferences, and Latin names (317).

The stuffed animals belong to indigenous species, so Ladner’s carefully crafted taxidermic garden could be construed as a simulacrum of the Ontario countryside in which it is located. The presence of a fridge, detailed signs, and inert, reconstructed animals in a garden that also contains living ones seems to create a dialectical context for thinking about the relations between nature and culture, and between the natural and the simulated. But Ladner’s garden deflects this line of questioning that it seems to invite. In addition to the species identification signs, Ladner has posted quotations in his garden:

Nature does nothing uselessly.
—Aristotle

Nature never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves.
—Rousseau (317)

On one hand, the signs direct visitors to see nature in general and this garden in particular as a sanctuary from human pomp and pretense, a haven from deceit. On the other hand, the “stuffed and lifelike” animal bodies encourage visitors to suspend disbelief and thus deceive themselves. But Bea appears not to see this contradiction. Although she remembers the scene in front of her as “complicated,” Bea perceives the taxidermic specimens as frozen in mid-motion—“a wolf stood poised to howl, and a black bear had just managed to lift its big soft head” (317)—suggesting her willingness to partake of the fantasy established by the diorama. Given that the story is also concerned with Bea’s refusal to admit—to others and, perhaps, even to herself—that Ladner was a pedophile, his diorama functions as a symbol of the often

complex relationships between ways of knowing and of not knowing, of preserving disbelief in the face of knowledge too horrible to contemplate.

James Kincaid argues that “what passes for knowledge” about pedophilia “is really ‘knowingness’, a pact that authorizes us to treat our ignorance as wisdom and to make that ignorance the basis for action” (3). To the best of my knowledge, Munro has not explicitly addressed the particular challenges of writing about pedophilia, but her characterization of *Open Secrets* (the collection in which “Vandals” appears), suggests a shared interest in the dynamic that Kincaid calls knowingness: it is, she says, an attempt to “challenge what people want to know. Or expect to know. Or anticipate knowing” (“National Treasure” 227). In “Vandals,” Munro uses the contradictions and violence inherent in the taxidermic garden to “challenge what people want to know” about pedophilia.

In *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, Kincaid emphasizes the extent to which Victorian and, to a lesser extent, contemporary constructions of pedophiles have been used to shore up dominant ideals of the natural. If pedophiles are perverse animals who violate the order of nature, then the “rest of us” can be civilized, socialized, and controlled. Kincaid’s idea of the natural is understandably restricted to the historical dissociation of child and adult, asexuality and sexuality, innocence and experience. Munro also addresses this dissociation, but she does so by using “nature”—in the commonplace sense of the great outdoors—to make us examine the “natural” in the context of human behaviour. Put differently, Munro uses the events that take place in Ladner’s garden to demonstrate the consequences of our failure to scrutinize the “natural.” The “shame in the grass” (341) at Dismal goes undetected or at least unreported, in part because it is disguised by its setting and by the perception of its setting. When, for example, Ladner takes Bea on her first tour of Dismal, Bea, who is wearing high heels and nursing a vague plan to seduce him, thinks, “this tour, so strenuous physically and mentally, might be a joke on her, a punishment for being, after all, such a tiresome vamp and a fraud” (318). Whether or not Ladner intends the tour as a rebuke, Bea believes that the time spent in the bush is designed to be corrective. While Bea’s response to the tour draws on a longstanding discourse about nature as the source of health and purity and as a model for social relations, nature does not—as she later recognizes—work this way at Dismal. Bea notes that the physical exertion of the hike has caused her lust to evaporate. However, Munro subtly suggests that Bea’s sexual energy is not lost at all, but redirected onto the nonhuman

world: “By this time lust was lost to her altogether, though the smell of the hawthorn blossoms seemed to her an intimate one, musty or yeasty” (318). Thus at the same time that Bea figures the nonhuman world as a haven from or curative for human deceit and desire, Munro shows that we experience and represent that nonhuman world—in this case, the hawthorn blossoms—through our own human predilections.

As a taxidermist, Ladner is skilled in the art of deception. But because taxidermy is such a realistic art form it has, as Donna Haraway argues, been traditionally understood to be peculiarly “capable of embodying truth” in the bodies of its lifelike subjects (“Teddy Bear” 254). In a discussion of Carl Akeley’s contribution to the field of taxidermy, Haraway explains the relationship between taxidermy and truth-telling:

Taxidermy became the art most suited to the epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism. The power of this stance is in its magical effects: what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if one will look. Realism does not appear to be a point of view, but appears as a ‘peephole into the jungle’ where peace may be witnessed. (“Teddy Bear” 254)

Ladner’s attempt to “tell the truth of nature” (257) with his taxidermic garden is, of course, enhanced by the outdoor setting. And because the garden purports to “tell the truth of nature,” it disguises the violations that take place on its grounds: where the truth is “effortlessly, spontaneously found,” one need not look very hard.

Given Munro’s stated desire in *Open Secrets* to “challenge what people want to know” and “to record how women adapt to protect men” (“A National Treasure” 227), we can assume that “Vandals” is centrally concerned with the question or possibility of what Bea knows. The assumption that Bea does know what goes on in the garden is supported by Liza’s expectation that “Bea could spread safety, if she wanted to” (343). When, for example, Liza finds Bea sitting contentedly under a plum tree drinking wine with Ladner shortly after Liza has witnessed him contemptuously mimicking Bea, she thinks that Bea had “forgiven Ladner, after all, or made a bargain not to remember” (343). It seems that the incident for which Ladner is ostensibly forgiven is his imitation of Bea, but maybe Bea has agreed to forgive and forget a great deal more. Similarly, Bea’s characterization of herself as a “fake” whose voice is memorable for its “artificiality” (337, 336), combined with her suggestion that she has come to terms with “what [Ladner] would say and wouldn’t say” (320), intimates that she may indeed know

more than she is willing or able to say.² In “Carried Away,” another story in *Open Secrets*, Bea acknowledges her tendency to edit or selectively “forget” the truth where “it would have made the story less amusing” (29).

Bea’s “knowingness” is encoded in her references to nature (in all the many senses of the word). For example, on the topic of self-deception, Bea thinks, “such was not her nature. Even after years of good behaviour, it was not her nature” (313). In the context of a story in which the nonhuman world is denaturalized and rendered deceptive by a taxidermic diorama, Bea’s repetition of “nature,” combined with the repeated evidence that she might well be given to self-deception, suggests her inclination to use the ostensibly self-evident “natural” to justify her self-deception. In an attempt to characterize Ladner’s brusque and heavily ironic manner of treating her, Bea describes herself as “*slit top to bottom with jokes*” (315). This image aligns Bea with the animals whose skins have been slit; it also indicates Ladner’s capacity for violence. Moreover “slit,” a derogatory term for female genitalia, might also suggest that sex and violence are linked in Bea’s mind.

The connection between Bea’s apparent naivete and her invocation of the natural world is also evident in her metaphorical connection of teenagers and “savage beasts.” In the letter that Bea writes to Liza, she thanks Liza for boarding up the windows of her home, and thus protecting the house from “savage beasts,” which, as a subsequent comment makes clear, means teenagers. The house is in fact raided by people in their late teens or early twenties: Liza and her husband Warren. When Liza returns to Dismal at Bea’s bidding, she does not check the pipes as asked. Instead, she goes on a rampage, breaking furniture and glass, and throwing stuffed animal specimens to the floor. As she prepares to leave, Warren reminds her that they need to smash a hole in a window—“Big enough so a kid could get in” (344)—so that Bea will not know that the vandals were key-holders. After breaking the window, Warren nails a board over the smashed pane, saying, “Otherwise animals could get in” (344). That Bea’s allusion to teenagers as beasts so closely resembles Warren’s comment suggests that she knows what happened at the house, even though the tone and content of the letter do not reveal this. Bea’s comment that the vandalized house “looked natural” and that it “seemed almost the right way for things to be” (306) can be read as her tacit recognition of the violence that has taken place just outside its doors.

William Cronon argues that “the time has come to rethink wilderness,” to rethink our conception of wilderness as an “antidote to our human selves” and “the one place we can turn to escape from our own too-muchness”

(“Trouble” 69). Munro makes a similar argument in “Vandals.” Both authors suggest that our tendency to see the nonhuman world as “an antidote to our human selves” means that we fail to see “our own unexamined longings and desires” reflected there (Cronon, “Trouble” 70). We may also fail to see our deepest fears. Bea’s many references to “nature” seem premised on a belief that the nonhuman world is the site or repository of authenticity and truth. This view inhibits Bea from looking more closely at what went on in the garden. If she had looked more closely, she might have been able to meet Liza’s expectation that she would “spread safety” at Dismal (343).

If pedophilia is an “open secret” in “Vandals,” it is the taxidermic diorama that makes it so. Although Ladner’s garden—like so many taxidermic displays—sets out to celebrate individual communion with nature, what the mute and inert animal bodies demonstrate is the painfully reconstructed nature of the scene. The taxidermic display can be read as a story about the violation and manipulation of bodies, and about man’s domination of nature. In “Vandals,” the taxidermist’s aesthetic arrangement of bodies and his choice of ideal(ized) specimens, frozen in a state of arrested development, hints at a very particular kind of bodily violation.³ In the second half of the story, Liza remembers what happened while she was swimming in the pond at Dismal. Ladner attempted to grab her between her legs, and she escaped his clutches by clambering through the diorama: “She splashed her way out and heavily climbed the bank. She passed the owls and the eagle staring from behind the glass. The ‘Nature does nothing uselessly’ sign” (338). Liza is unable to articulate the trauma of Ladner’s assault, but her position among the animals is telling. The image of the violated girl child among the dead birds recalls the myth of Philomela, the rape victim turned tongue-tied bird. Because Liza is seen against the backdrop of the diorama but does not appear to look at any of the birds, she does not exercise the transcendence implied by the taxidermic gaze; she is not constituted as a viewer of displayed animal bodies but is implicitly compared to the birds, whose silent and violated bodies are on display.

While Ladner’s diorama tells the story of pedophilia, it is difficult to interpret because the heavily forested landscape at Dismal is, as both Bea and Liza acknowledge, confusing and difficult to read.⁴ But readerly difficulty also arises at Dismal because meaning in Ladner’s taxidermic garden is very unstable and changes according to his whim. For instance, Liza recalls the time when she first showed Bea the initials “P.D.P.” carved into a tree:

In the middle of the path was a beech tree you had to go around, and there were initials carved in the smooth bark. One "L" for Ladner, another for Liza, a "K" for Kenny. A foot or so below were the letters "P.D.P." When Liza had first shown Bea the initials, Kenny had banged his fist against P.D.P. "Pull down pants!" he shouted, hopping up and down. Ladner gave him a serious pretend-rap on the head. "Proceed down path," he said, and pointed out the arrow scratched in the bark, curving around the trunk. "Pay no attention to the dirty-minded juveniles," he said to Bea. (338)

Given that the children are sexually abused in the garden, we can assume that Kenny has been led to believe that "P.D.P." sometimes does mean, "Pull down pants." This reading is also suggested by the context in which the phrase "P.D.P." subsequently appears:

Here are the places of serious instruction where Ladner taught them how to tell a hickory tree from a butternut. . . . And places where Liza thinks there is a bruise on the ground, a tickling and shame in the grass.

P.D.P.

Squeegey-boy.

Rub-a-dub-dub. (341)

The message carved into the tree shows Ladner's ability to make meanings shift according to his desires, and his garden demonstrates his desire to control his surroundings. In an essay about Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden, Susan Stewart argues that "[I]n making a garden one composes with living things, intervening in and contextualising, and thus changing, their form. . . . The garden is thereby linked to other means of ordering life: codifying and ritualizing social time and space, creating political orders and social hierarchies" (111). Because Ladner's garden is composed, in part, of dead things, it "orders" life not by ritualizing time, but by freezing it in an image of "taxidermic timelessness" (Simpson 94).⁵ And, because Ladner is ultimately powerless to prevent the growth and eventual departure of the children, his taxidermic garden can be understood as an attempt to preserve a fantasy of intra- as well as inter-species control and communion. It should not be surprising, then, that the animals in Ladner's "remarkable sort of nature preserve" (311) are arranged in groups that tell a nostalgic story about man's God-given dominion over nature and about Edenic unity and plenitude. For example, the careful arrangement of a "dainty family of skunks" simulates a congenial community, and, in an image reminiscent of the lion lying down with the lamb, a porcupine is positioned beside a fisher, which, says Ladner, "was intrepid enough to kill porcupines" (317).

There is a long tradition of taxidermists who have attempted to recreate

a Canadian Eden. As George Colpitts demonstrates, taxidermists played an important part in producing images of Edenic natural abundance that were used to attract immigrants between 1890 and 1914. Wildlife specimens were installed in provincial and municipal natural history museums across the country, and they were also sent to international exhibitions in the USA and Europe. For example, the federal superintendent of immigration shipped crates of birds and a large buffalo to various European offices as evidence of “what could be got in Canada” (qtd. in Colpitts 106). And yet, given the fate that befell the Canadian buffalo in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the buffalo was an ironic but not inappropriate choice for a symbol of Canadian wildlife: as Colpitts points out, the taxidermic images of Canadian over-abundance belied the fact that Western Canadians had faced a meat crisis and general food shortages as recently as the mid-1870s.

Colpitts’s argument identifies antecedents for Ladner’s efforts to recreate Eden in spite of the evidence that “should have countered” the formation of that image of Canada (Colpitts 113). But it is Robert Lecker’s reading of another story in *Open Secrets* that is most useful in demonstrating the perversity of Ladner’s nostalgic garden of Dismal. Drawing extensively on Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in American*, Lecker argues that “Carried Away” documents the “postwar, postindustrial fall that is identified with the commodification of all forms of human activity” and with the perceived “loss of nature” (103). Although “Carried Away” is centrally concerned with the postwar loss of a sense of community and an unspoiled rural landscape, the dream of what Leo Marx calls an “undefiled green republic” (qtd. in Lecker 104) still exists in the character of Patrick Agnew, a gardener who spends his free time in the countryside and who fishes for his supper or dines on the fruit of wild apple trees. But some fifty years later,⁶ the over-abundance of animals, the happy juxtaposition of enemy species, and the implicit communion between man and animal in the garden of Dismal constitute a perversion of the “vanishing pastoral ideal” represented by Patrick Agnew. In the “green republic” of Dismal, neither the land nor its inhabitants are “undefiled”: children are raped; animals are perceived as commodities that bring “a good price”; and the ground itself is “bruise[d]” and “shame[d]” (341).

Ladner’s idea of Dismal as a prelapsarian and, by implication, pre-industrial landscape is also deeply ironic because the garden itself is full of thinly veiled manufactured things.

Ladner fitted the skin around a body in which nothing was real. A bird's body could be all of one piece, carved of wood, but an animal's larger body was a wonderful construction of wires and burlap and glue and mushed-up paper and clay. (334)

Drawing on Donna Haraway's argument about the enduring dualism that pervades discussions of nature and culture, it might be said that Munro represents the "stuffed and lifelike" animals as cyborgs, "beings that are simultaneously animal and machine who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" (*Simians* 149). Because a "cyborg body is not innocent" and "was not born in a garden" (*Simians* 180), its presence constitutes a reminder of the extent to which nature is imagined as the absence of and antidote to technology. Ladner employs the cyborg-animals to affirm a vision of nature and technology as separate. But Munro ensures that we see how human beings inevitably construct the nonhuman world in their own image: whether or not our construction of our natural environment involves "wires and burlap and glue and mushed-up paper and clay," it is, she suggests, a construction nevertheless.

Presented in the context of a narrative about an altogether different kind of assault on bodily integrity, and added to the image of Ladner scraping animal skulls and skins, Munro's ironically rendered image of the taxidermic specimens as "wonderful constructions" repudiates Ladner's nostalgic rendering of a thoroughly pastoral, prelapsarian Dismal.⁷ At the same time, it also repudiates an enduring tendency to see animal bodies as self-evident and utterly literal. Jane Desmond points out the particular symbolic power of animal bodies:

Animals' identities as authentic representatives of the natural are ultimately presumed to reside in their bodies, in their physical difference from humans. Their division from us articulates the Cartesian and Christian mind-body or body-spirit split. Even when these conceptual boundaries are smudged, animals are seen as fundamentally more embodied than humans, that is, as more determined by their bodily aspects. (149)

If, on the one hand, the taxidermic garden encourages this view of animal bodies by presenting animals as "aestheticized bodies" whose "stasis . . . heightens their objectness and allows for [the] leisurely contemplation of discrete bodily details" and the affirmation of bodily difference (Desmond 149-50), Munro's emphasis on scraped skins, "guts that looked like plastic tubing," and eyeballs "squished . . . to jelly" (334) demands a meditation on the processes by which that "objectness" is established and, more importantly, on the ends it serves.

In *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation*, Steve Baker argues that the animal body needs to be taken out of nature and “rendered unstable as a sign” in order that we might understand what it is that we have invested in the animal and what is occluded in our tendency to rely unthinkingly on animals as a prime symbolic site (223). Munro advances a similar view by emphasizing how Ladner has made the animals in his garden. Animal bodies are also destabilized in “Vandals” through the use of animal imagery to describe the human characters. When, for example, Bea arrives at Dismal and asks Liza and her brother, Kenny, “what kind of animals they’d like to be” (332), she reminds the reader of the extent to which they are ready to become animal victims like those whose “skinned bodies” are manipulated by Ladner (334). The connection between the children’s bodies and the animals’ bodies is reinforced in a number of other passages: Liza “cluck[s]” and makes “croaking noises” (326, 332); she is possessed by a “slithery spirit” (328); and she claims to have been “wild” as a child (329). Given the sexual abuse perpetrated in the garden, Liza’s father’s warning that she “better not cross [Ladner] or he’ll skin you alive. . . . [l]ike he does with his other stuff” (334), further aligns her with the animals. She and Kenny quickly learn “not to talk so much about all [they] knew” (335); they are silent like the animal specimens. But the equation of the violated children with the stuffed animals is complicated by Munro’s description of Ladner in animal images. When Bea first meets Ladner, she mistakenly thinks that he is accompanied by a fierce dog, but later decides that he is “his own fierce dog” (312). As an adult, Liza remembers a time when Ladner raped her and then “collapsed heavily, like the pelt of an animal flung loose from its flesh and bones” (341): as he collected himself, he “clucked his tongue faintly, and his eyes shone out of ambush, hard and round as the animals’ glass eyes” (342). Although Munro repeatedly invites the reader to compare Ladner’s treatment of childish bodies with his treatment of the animals he stuffs, the fact that Ladner is also likened to an animal ultimately prevents easy correlations. Moreover, by comparing Ladner to a taxidermic animal (“glass eyes” and a disconnected “pelt”), perhaps Munro is also pointing to the tendency to figure pedophiles as animals: if Ladner is an animal, he is one that is painstakingly constructed as such by humans.

James Kincaid argues that the steadfast reluctance to talk about childhood sexuality allows pedophilia to flourish.⁸ He goes on to suggest that the contemporary disavowal of childhood sexuality is a hangover from the Romantic era, when a wide range of poets, prose writers, and philosophers

constructed the innocent child in nature as an ideal with which to counter the grim reality of the working conditions of child labourers during the Industrial Revolution. Although William Cronon does not address the implications of longstanding ideas about the child in nature, his general discussion of discourses of nature helps to explain how an appeal to “the natural” can deflect critical discussions of childhood sexuality:

The great attraction of nature for those who wish to ground their moral vision in external reality is precisely its capacity to take disputed values and make them seem innate, essential, eternal, nonnegotiable. When we speak of “the natural way of doing things,” we implicitly suggest that there can be no other way, and that all alternatives, being unnatural, should have no claim on our sympathies. (“Introduction” 36)

The essentialism to which Cronon refers helps us understand why “Vandals” is so disturbing: Munro not only brings the pedophile out from the trees and takes nature out of the animal, she also takes the child out of nature. Put differently, Munro’s children, like her animals, are not “innocent” and are “not born in a garden” (Haraway, *Simians* 180).

Munro does not suggest that the children sexually desire Ladner, but she does represent them as sexual beings whose behaviours and motivations are as complex and conditioned as those of adults. For example, Liza gives a rhinestone earring to Bea as an acknowledgement of and apology for Ladner’s cruel imitation of her: when Bea asks if the earring belonged to Liza’s mother—who is dead—Liza lies and says yes, all the while aware that her gift “might be seen as childish and pathetic—perhaps intentionally pathetic” (342). And, in a move that further repudiates the vision of the child as innocent and natural, Munro has Liza—who lives in a house painted “glaring pink, like lipstick,” on a property on which there is “not one tree” (340)—project her own sexual urges onto the natural world. After characterizing Ladner’s abuse as a situation she “couldn’t get out of . . . , or even want to” (339, emphasis added), Liza describes the allure of Ladner’s property:

Then the pine plantation . . . with its high boughs and needled carpet, inducing whispering. And the dark rooms under downswept branches of the cedars—entirely shaded and secret rooms with a bare earth floor. . . . In some places the air is thick and private, and in other places you feel an energetic breeze. (341)

In an ironic rejoinder to the image of the Romantic child at home in nature, Munro has Liza figure the natural realm as a domicile—a place with “rooms,” a “floor,” “carpet,” and culture. Not only does Munro refuse to polarize child and adult, human and animal, nature and culture, but she also shows

us what we risk by doing so. She shows us that the tendency to posit the natural and the cultural as distinctive spheres allows for what Desmond calls “the naturalization of the cultural” (192): it allows the category of the natural to function as a “rudder,” steering us away from destabilizing questions and bringing us back, time and again, “to biology as if it were a neutral, natural, ordinary category” (192). Likewise, Munro shows us that by imagining childhood innocence in opposition to adult sexuality, and by using pedophilia to shore up our ideas of what is natural, we “find ourselves sacrificing the bodies of children” (Kincaid 6).

“**D**o you care if he croaks?” (332). In answer to the question that Warren puts to Liza while she sets about destroying Ladner and Bea’s property, Liza makes “croaking noises to stop him being thoughtful” (332). Moments earlier she makes “a funny noise—an admiring cluck of her tongue” while dumping the contents of desk drawers on the floor (326). After raping Liza, Ladner also “clucked his tongue” (342). The echoing “cluck” is important because it establishes Liza’s violent behaviour as a direct response to Ladner’s abuse of her, while also suggesting her tendency to emulate Ladner and identify with him. As Nathalie Foy argues, Liza “recuperates the good in Ladner” by recalling and taking on his role as instructor (159):

“Can you tell what the trees are by their bark?” she said.

Warren said that he couldn’t even tell from their leaves. “Well, maples,” he said. “Maples and pines.”

“Cedar,” said Liza. “You’ve got to know cedar. There’s a cedar. . . . And that one with the bark like gray skin? That’s a beech. See, it had letters carved on it, but they’ve spread out, they just look like any old blotches now.”

Warren wasn’t interested. He only wanted to get home. It wasn’t much after three o’clock, but you could feel the darkness collecting, rising among the trees, like cold smoke coming off the snow. (344)

At the end of the story, the reader also feels a “darkness collecting,” for the pedophile has been rendered more fearful for his lack of monstrosity, for the very ordinariness of his desire to teach children and his ability to elicit their trust and respect. Although I do not share Nathalie Foy’s sense that the blurred letters in the beech tree, rediscovered in the wake of Liza’s cathartic act of vandalism, indicate that she has succeeded in “dispell[ing]” the darkness that has haunted her (159), I do think that the act of reading the natural world is represented as a means of staving off that darkness. The first meeting between Ladner and the children contains a specific injunction:

The first time that Liza and Kenny had ever been on Ladner's property, they had sneaked in under a fence, as all the signs and their own father had warned them not to do. When they had got so far into the trees that Liza was not sure of the way out, they heard a sharp whistle.

Ladner called them: "You two!" He came out like a murderer on television, with a little axe, from behind a tree. "Can you two read?"

They were about six and seven at this time. Liza said, "Yes."
"So did you read my signs?" (333)

The context suggests that the signs to which Ladner refers are the "No Trespassing," "No Hunting," and "Keep Out" signs that line his property (325), but there are, as I have already indicated, numerous other signs in Dismal. Some of them contain scientific information, but others present quotations:

Nature does nothing uselessly.

—Aristotle

Nature never deceives us; it is always we who deceive ourselves.

—Rousseau

These signs—set off from the text and presented in italics—contain a direct challenge to the reader. Aristotle's dictum, "Nature does nothing uselessly," demands that we reflect critically on the uses—both material and metaphorical—to which nature is put. The Rousseau quotation, displayed in the midst of a "lifelike" simulation of the natural, challenges us to consider how we deceive ourselves by clinging to the idea that the "natural" world is a repository of truth—as indeed both Bea and Ladner do. Bea's references to nature and the natural inhibit her own critical faculties; Ladner uses the nonhuman world to stage his own Edenic dream of timelessness and communion. If, like Bea and Ladner, we fail to heed the challenges implicit in these two signs, presented in a story concerned with the abuse of both the "natural" and the human, then we, too, are mired in—and even complicit in—the darkness collecting at the story's end. But to accept this challenge, and to remember, for example, Heraclitus' dictum that "Nature hides," is to begin to shed light on the ways that we think, or refuse to think, about pedophilia. "So did you read my signs?" asks Munro.⁹

NOTES

- 1 In the "Introduction" to *UnCommon Ground*, William Cronon describes the perception of "nature as naïve reality" this way: "It is in fact one of the oldest meanings that the word 'nature' carries in the English language: the sense that when we speak of the nature

- of something, we are describing its fundamental essence, what it really and truly is. Indispensable as the usage may be, it is dangerous for what it tempts us to assume: the very thing it seeks to label is too often obscured beneath the presumption of naturalness" (34).
- 2 Natalie Foy disagrees, arguing that Bea's "ignorance" of the abuse is "complete" (151). However, Foy's otherwise very strong argument is undermined by her own acknowledgement that "[w]e know that Bea is capable of forgetting unpleasant associations" (151) and, more generally, by Munro's determination to preserve and to emphasise a degree of ambiguity. As a further argument for the possibility of Bea's "knowingness," consider the extent to which the following passage invites us to question her motivation for sending Liza to college: "It was her gave me some money,' Liza continued, as if it was something he ought to know, 'To go to college. I never asked her. She just phones up out of the blue and says she wants to'" (322). Also consider Bea's recognition of Ladner's "insanity" and of own very complicated desire for a man capable of offering her an insanity that she could "liv[e] inside" (314).
 - 3 For a discussion of the taxidermist's interest in ideal(ised) animal bodies, see "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," where Haraway discusses Carl Akeley's relentless search for "the unblemished type specimen" (254).
 - 4 See Bea's description of the property on 317, Liza's description of the property on 333, and Liza's description of the attraction that Dismal held for her as a child on 340–41.
 - 5 Simpson's "Immaculate Trophies" does a good job of exploring the contradictions and ironies of the "frozen liveness of wild nature" (92).
 - 6 The central event in "Carried Away" is the factory accident that results in the beheading of Jack Agnew in 1924. At that time Bea, who also makes an appearance in the story, is 13. When Bea sits down to write Liza a letter in the opening paragraph of "Vandals," more than 50 years have passed. No dates are given in "Vandals," but Bea's indication that Ladner was a Vietnam veteran when she first met him, and the fact that reruns of "I Dream of Jeannie" are playing on the television suggest that "Vandals" is set in the early to mid 1980s.
 - 7 See Redekop's argument that Munro frequently constructs the nostalgic as grotesque in order to repudiate it.
 - 8 Also see Levine and Steed.
 - 9 Thanks to Susan Fisher, Susie O'Brien, Pat Saunders-Evans, and Andy Wainwright, who generously read and commented on earlier versions of this paper.

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