

Introduction.

D.T. Max's article, "Carver Chronicles," published in *The New York Times Magazine* in August of 1998, incited curiosity about the early years of Raymond Carver's writing career, a period Max refers to as the "Lish period."¹ Gordon Lish edited, or made editorial suggestions to, a large amount of material for Carver beginning in the year 1969, continuously, until their professional and personal relationship ended in 1983, after Lish took control over Carver's manuscripts for their second book collaboration. Max writes about the controversy surrounding the manuscripts Lish edited, and he does not limit his discussion to the 1981 classic *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Max discusses stories from both collections Lish edited: the aforementioned and Carver's first major book collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976). The behind-the-scenes information Max gave us ranges from Lish's role in changing Carver's authorial intent to questions about the collaborative nature of author and editor when the production of a literary work was based on an editor playing more than the traditional editor's role.

But what becomes important to Carver scholars, as William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll argue in their article "Prolegomena To Any Future Carver Studies," is not the controversy over Lish's editorial control of Carver, but the focus for future Carver studies. According to Stull and Carroll, the focus is on the work and the author. "For scholars, the Carver controversy must be about *Carver*. What did Raymond Carver write, and what is the relationship of that writing to the various publications that bear his

¹ D.T. Max, "The Carver Chronicles," *The New York Times* 9 August 1998, The New York Times Company, <<http://donswaim.com/nytimes.carverchronicles.html>>.

name?”² As Max describes in his article, the Lish manuscripts in the Lilly Library at Indiana University are filled with additions and strikeouts: “Lish’s black felt-tip markings sometimes obliterate the original text... ‘Carol, story ends here,’ he would note for the benefit of the typist.”³ The manuscripts read exactly as Max says, but the importance is not getting caught up in the controversy, the importance is the work, the brown cardboard boxes filled with folders holding manuscripts, early drafts Carver sent to Lish before he was his editor, when Lish was Carver’s friend, and drafts of manuscripts with Lish’s markings for what they would eventually look like in the book collections. These manuscripts are of singular value when confronting questions about Carver’s work.

Over the years Carver scholarship has been preoccupied with the theories about the stories taking on different styles, published in various forms at various times in the author’s career. Some scholars believe Carver’s work evolved due to changes in his personal life: the troublesome early years wrought by alcoholism and financial hardship that grew into peaceful years with his second wife Tess Gallagher. Some view the change in style in terms of “minimalist” versus “maximalist” or expansiveness.

Adam Meyer, in his article “Now You See Him, Now You Don’t, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver’s Minimalism,”⁴ introduces a theory based on the shape of an hourglass. Written in 1989 just after Carver’s fourth major-press short story collection, *Where I’m Calling From* (1989)⁵ and long before Max’s article, Meyer explains his “hourglass” theory comes from reading, chronologically, the stories printed

² William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, “Prolegomena to Any Future Carver Studies” *Cahiers De La Nouvelle* 77 (2006): 16.

³ Max 3.

⁴ Adam Meyer, “Now You See Him, Now You Don’t, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver’s Minimalism” *Critique* (Summer 1989): 239-251.

⁵ Incidentally, it was published a year after the author’s death in 1988, as well.

in *Where I'm Calling From*: the stories are fuller, then they become sparse, and, finally, the last stories expand to reveal Carver's true, mature vision. In his article, Meyer examines Carver's "evolution" by drawing attention to some of the stories and their various published forms—the most prominent example taking place in the discussion of "So Much Water So Close Home," a story that had been published four different times in three different versions. Two of those publications showed dramatic changes in the text Carver was arriving at from one version to the next depending on when the story was being published. Meyer focuses on the first version, published in Carver's small-press book collection *Furious Seasons* (1977), and the second version, published in its heavily edited form in the second Lish-edited major book collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Meyer had no idea Lish had made those cuts contrary to the wishes of the author, nor would he have known about the cuts Lish had made to "A Small, Good Thing" that would eventually be published as "The Bath," after Lish had taken editorial control over Carver's 1981 book collection. Meyer's understanding of Carver was muddled by his lack of knowledge pertaining to the author's vision and how Carver's texts had been corrupted by his editor's minimalist vision.

What scholars did not know during this pre-"Carver Chronicles" period was that Carver had written those stories expansively to begin with before Lish had edited them to the minimalist bone for the first two book collections on which Lish served as editor. As we will see through letters and interviews, Carver's preference was to show characters and motivations more fully. Modern scholars now have to be careful of the claims they make about Carver's work because it is now common knowledge that Lish was responsible for these changes, that Carver, in publishing his expansive version, was

simply reinstating the material Lish had cut from his texts. The manuscripts within the folders in the Lish holdings at the Lilly Library debunk any claims pertaining to Carver texts made by scholars previous to 1998 who had no knowledge of Lish's role—knowledge that, in most cases, was unknowable before that time.⁶ Stull and Carroll write, “What accounts for the striking turnabout in Raymond Carver’s fiction between 1981 and 1983? The answer to this question resolves the Carver controversy and establishes an authoritative textual foundation for future Carver studies.”⁷ The controversy Lish created can only be resolved by archival research and examination of the work Carver did and how Lish’s changes have altered the work—whether the work has been diminished or improved. Finding the Carver text and making a critical analysis of his work will show us the breadth of Carver’s real vision.

This of course begs the question, How can Lish’s role in shaping Carver’s texts be ignored? The answer is that it cannot. As late as 2002, an article was written contesting Meyer’s “hourglass” theory and the evolutionary development of Carver’s work as a minimalist. The article does a superior job showing how both the shorter, minimalist version of Carver’s “So Much Water So Close To Home” and the expansive, fuller version of the story, both of which were published in Carver’s lifetime, demonstrate qualities of minimalist fiction. Written by Gunter Leypoldt in 2002, “Reconsidering Raymond Carver’s “Development”: The Revision of “So Much Water So Close To Home,”⁸ goes into some depth about how both versions of Carver’s stories are

⁶ Lish sold his papers to the Lilly Library in 1991, but as Max points out: “Since then very few Carver scholars have examined the Lish manuscripts thoroughly. When one tried to publish his conclusions, Carver’s widow and literary executor, the poet Tess Gallagher, effectively blocked him with copyright cautions and pressure.” Max 1-2.

⁷ Stull 14.

⁸ Gunter Leypoldt, “Rediscovering Raymond Carver’s “Development”: The Revisions of

minimalist. But the article's success is diminished and Leypoldt's thesis fails due to the fact that he does not sufficiently address Lish's role in the editing of the story's shorter version. What becomes the "revision" in the title of the essay is in truth Lish's edited textual version of Carver's original manuscript for the *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* 1981 book collection. Leypoldt identifies Lish as having a role in editing the book collection, but he does not consider the significant changes Lish makes to the text, and how those changes alter the meaning of the story. Gordon Lish's edits to any story in the first and second major press collection, regardless of topic, profoundly affect the meaning attributed to the stories discussed in Carver studies. Having not discussed the contextual changes Lish made to "So Much Water So Close To Home," Leypoldt's article cannot be read without confusion over whether or not the scholar truly understood the implications of Lish's edits. When Leypoldt discusses the "development" of Raymond Carver, he cannot then include discussions concerning changes Carver himself did not make or changes Lish made to the stories that lead to new meanings and interpretations for Carver's texts.

In the following essay, there will be a discussion of three stories: "What's in Alaska?" (or "Divert Me") and "Fat" from the book collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" ("Beginners") from the book collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). The original version of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the pre-Lish titled and edited story was titled "Beginners," the original, authorial intent of the story. By textually examining the draft-to-publication suggestions and edits made by Lish, either by the author's own volition or forced upon the story by the editor, we can sort out

"So Much Water So Close to Home" *Contemporary Literature* 44. 2 (2002): 317-341.

how Lish's changes ultimately affected the outcome of Carver's stories. To understand the stories textually is to get at the original Carver, and illuminate his true vision, separate from Lish's edits, in order to open up a new perspective and understanding of Carver's emotional depth and expansiveness. Each story has been carefully examined to help understand certain motives in Lish's editing. And we can grasp a broader understanding of Carver's decisions for improving his stories at that time in his career. All four stories are from the "Lish period:" the years 1969-1983, but the discussion will be limited to two early stories from 1969-71 and the other two from 1980, leading up to the second major press book publication, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). The years 1969-1971 provide a clear picture of the foundation for Lish's editing style and his textual vision. The stories will give us an idea as to how Lish began impressing his vision upon Carver's actual text. But, more importantly we will see that for their second book collection as professional colleagues, Lish actually diminishes Carver's style and vision.

In late 1969, Lish was an editor at *Esquire* and was making editorial suggestions to stories his friend, Raymond Carver, was sending him, stories sent at Lish's behest. That is to say, Lish was not Carver's professional editor at that time, he was merely giving his friend *suggestions* as to how to improve a story; Carver's belief in those suggestions was based on what Lish would publish in *Esquire*. The four stories have been arranged, not according to chronology of publication, but by progression of Lish's edits. The first story, for example, "What's in Alaska?" or "Divert Me" demonstrates an early Carver story where Lish was making editorial suggestions and Carver took only a few. This early version of the story serves as an example where Carver took Lish's remarks as mere advice as to how to improve the story. Lish did not overrule the final decisions

Carver made from version to version, even when he published the story in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976).

The second story discussed in this essay, “Fat,” is a story Carver sent Lish for suggestions as early as late spring 1970, and the story exemplifies Carver’s trust in Lish as a talented editor, because Carver unwaveringly accepts all of Lish’s suggestions. We will see that Carver was not exactly attached to the story and he takes all of Lish’s changes, incorporating them into the draft he was making ready for publication in national journals and magazines. The Lish suggestions were at once changes the story needed but were also changes that included theme, voice, and character development. In other words, after Carver accepted Lish’s changes to “Fat,” the story became a signature Lish-edited story. Carver revised his story to fit perfectly into Lish’s vision. The implications of Carver’s decision to accept these suggestions are far and wide, but one speculation as to why Carver did this was simply that he did not feel the story was of that much importance and he may have been anxious to get published in a major, national magazine like *Esquire* or *Harper’s Bazaar*, the magazine that would eventually take the story for publication.

The final chapter of this essay will discuss two stories that have effectively become two completely different texts, and have been published as such. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” from the book collection by the same name, is a version of the story, without hyperbole, that represents Lish’s vision. His version of the story might be considered by some to be one of Carver’s most powerful stories in their second book collection. Lish’s edits are definable and can be separated from Carver’s; and by doing just that we will discover a pattern for Lish’s minimalism. “Beginners” is

Carver's original vision for "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." This version of the story was published in the December 24 & 31, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, published without Lish's edits.⁹ The story provides the backbone for a comparison of Carver's vision versus Lish's vision, precisely because "Beginners," in its uncut form, shows the full, expansive context of Carver's characters, theme, and plot development. Though Lish's edited version, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" is considered one of Carver's greatest short stories and has remained steadfast in the Carver literary canon, the 2007 publication of "Beginners" represents the full-text version of Carver's story that shows us a powerful, expansive emotional Carver country, hitherto unseen at that time of his career in 1981. And though Carver himself never reinstated the full-text version of the story in other publications after the book collection, as he had done with other stories, Carver's attachment to and belief in the story springs from emotional depth and personal involvement with the story.¹⁰ This chapter will show us that Carver's style, by his own admission, was based on achieving "some emotional...esthetic truth" and that Carver reached this achievement by the development of his own vision as a writer.¹¹ By examining the full text of "Beginners," we begin to understand the shape Carver meant for his vision to take as a writer. This story proves that Carver's own talent as a writer could sustain him without the heavy-handed editing techniques employed by Gordon Lish. Had Lish published the story, "Beginners," without so many of his edits, the world at large would have been made

⁹ Raymond Carver, "Beginners," *The New Yorker* (24 & 31 December 2007) 100-109.

¹⁰ There is much speculation as to why Carver would not have reinstated the text as he did with "A Small, Good Thing" or "So Much Water, So Close to Home." I believe it may very well have been due to the success of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Reinstating his original authorial version could have impacted his career.

¹¹ Raymond Carver, "On Writing," (Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington) 8.

aware of Carver's expansive vision of writing long before his third major book publication, *Cathedral* (1983).

The discussion of these stories together, some varying in importance in the Carver catalogue, gets at the very heart of the controversy D.T. Max helped to incite. And when Stull advises the reexamination of Carver manuscripts to get at what exactly Carver wrote, we cannot ignore the Lish editorial additions and deletions. In order to make any new assessment of Carver's fiction, we have to separate one vision from the other. What this essay hopes to accomplish is not only the separation of visions, but to arrive at a new analytical appreciation for Carver's true text.

I. Gordon Lish and Raymond Carver Discover “What’s in Alaska?”

Raymond Carver met Gordon Lish in 1969 while they both were editing educational textbooks in Palo Alto, California. They worked across the street from one another and as Max would have it, “were drinking pals, Carver tall, handsome and deliberate, Lish short and wiry.”¹² Carver wrote many of his early stories, stories Gordon Lish would eventually help make famous, in the late sixties and early seventies. Carver recounted his time in an early, unpublished draft version of “On Writing.”¹³ He said:

I was lucky that in 1970 the textbook company I worked for decided to “reorganize” and fired me. I was able to collect severance pay, unemployment benefits, and support my family for six months without having to work out. I managed to do a great deal of writing in those six months. I was lucky to receive a small NEA grant a while later...I was lucky Gordon Lish began taking my short stories with some regularity for Esquire in the mid-seventies.¹⁴

Carver’s life in 1970 was to be one of contradictions: on the one hand he gets time and money to write, yet he is also begins drinking more and more until he quits writing completely by 1971. Carver’s life was not financially secure, nor was his private life free from stress during much of the sixties and most of the seventies. These years after 1971 are considered the “Bad Raymond” years for good reason: he was not producing new work and was drinking heavily, so much so that his health was at stake.¹⁵ But, during the years 1969-1971, Carver was developing as a writer who wanted more recognition and

¹² Max 5.

¹³ Raymond Carver, “On Writing,” (Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana). All manuscripts (letters and drafts) cited throughout this essay are taken from the Lish manuscript holdings at the Lilly Library at Indiana University and are currently unpublished, unless where noted.

¹⁴ “On Writing” 19. The piece that would eventually become “On Writing” was untitled at the time Carver sent the draft to Lish; the manuscript was not edited by Lish but did contain edits in Carver’s written hand. All quotes from this manuscript are as Carver had intended. The manuscript is undated; however, Carver first mentions the essay in a letter dated 30 January 1981. The final version would be published in *The New York Book Review*, 15 February 1981.

¹⁵ Carver would be hospitalized in 1976 for his drinking.

needed someone there for him to write to and to send stories to for suggestions and advice, a contact—someone outside the life he had been living. He needed a mainstay, someone who signified a sense of stability for his life. He spoke of the time building up to and after 1971 in an interview in 1983.

We were in a state of penury, we had one bankruptcy behind us, and years of hard work with nothing to show for it except an old car, a rented house, and new creditors on our backs. It was depressing, and I felt spiritually obliterated. Alcohol became a problem. I more or less gave up, threw in the towel, and took to fulltime drinking as a serious pursuit.¹⁶

Carver's "Bad Raymond" period was not the most prolific time of his writing career, yet Carver had a friendship with Gordon Lish. And from 1969-1971, the years leading up to his heavy drinking years (1971-78) his friend and experienced editor, made numerous suggestions to early drafts Carver was sending him. Though the exact year Carver first sent his original manuscript of "What's in Alaska?" to Lish for suggestions is unclear,¹⁷ Carver had been sending Lish early drafts of his work since at least 12 November 1969. According to Laura Heather Heath's account of these early years, "In an undated scrawl on a manuscript that Lish returned to Carver in 1969, Lish wrote a note that expressed encouragement and a sense of shared frustration: 'If I don't get this in *Esquire*, I'm going to lay right down and croak. Shit, man, these are great stories.'" ¹⁸

Heath's narrative about how Gordon Lish felt he needed to impact American literature while he was editor at *Esquire*, indicates Lish had a persuasive nature. As Heath would tell it, Lish knew Rust Hills, the famous *Esquire* editor, who at the time was

¹⁶ Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull, ed. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (Jackson, Mississippi and London, England: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) 30.

¹⁷ Lish did not date any of the manuscripts in his archives. However, Carver mentioned a story he had titled "Bummer" in a letter dated 12 December 1970.

¹⁸ Laura Heather Heath, "Carving Raymond Carver: How an *Esquire* Editor Influenced the Minimalist Movement" (diss. Indiana U, 1998) 19.

retiring. Hills told Lish to write a letter to editor, Harold Hayes, and Lish did so on 17 October 1969: “I am good...and that there is in me the will to leave a mark as an editor...I want this job, and I want it with more eagerness than is becoming of a man my age because this is the work I was meant to do, and because I have not been doing it.”¹⁹ Lish went on to say he wanted to be an editor who would make *Esquire* a magazine that would “create a public and professional opinion acknowledging that it is more profit to a writer’s critical reputation for his work to appear in *Esquire* than for it to appear in any other magazine, slick or literary.”²⁰ Lish had his own view of how things needed to happen for his own life and career—he was ambitious, he was confident, he was a man imagining himself on a threshold of great things. Gordon Lish had a vision.

In a list of writers Lish saw fit to publish, he mentioned Raymond Carver and others including Ken Kesey, James Purdy, and Eudora Welty. Perhaps one of the most telling Lish quotes, and maybe the most famous, captures the ingenuity and originality in fiction Lish had devoted himself to finding for the magazine. Lish recalled his interview with a cofounder of *Esquire*: “Arnold Gingrich...asked me what kind of fiction I was going to be publishing. I said, ‘The new fiction.’ He said, ‘What’s that?’ I said, ‘I’ll get out there and find it, Mr. Gingrich.”²¹ Evidently, as Heath tells it, Lish wrote a letter to Rust Hills on the same day he wrote his letter to Hayes, in which he said: “My ear is good, I have a certain style.”²²

¹⁹ Heath 16.

²⁰ Heath 16.

²¹ Sven Birkerts, “The School of Lish,” *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on 20th Century Literature* (New York: William Morrow, 1987) 251.

²² Heath 16.

A letter Lish received from Carver, dated November 12, 1969, indicates Lish had informed Carver about getting the job at *Esquire*. The letter shows how Carver must have been first invited by Lish to send him work.

Your letter from *Esquire* just arrived and really is the most amazing communication I've ever received. Am I dreaming?...Jesus! Congratulations...Well, as it happens, I do have a few stories on hand, and I'm sending them along within the next day or two. I hope you find something you like and that maybe other *Esquire* staffers and maybe *Esquire* readers as well might like.²³

Lish wrote Carver asking him for stories, perhaps to begin his search and publication of the sort of fiction that might make a name for himself at *Esquire*. This was just the sort of break Carver needed: his friend getting the position as an editor who could help get his stories the recognition he wanted. Lish no doubt was writing similar letters to everyone he knew (James Purdy, Ken Kesey, for instance) who was writing fiction, especially unknown writers, with the hope of making an impression on the magazine as quickly as possible. A fair assumption is that Lish did like the stories, but how much of the stories he liked as Carver had originally written them is hard to say. Carver writes about sending fiction to Lish in his essay "Fires" —

I sent one of the occasional stories to *Esquire* and in so doing hoped to be able to forget about [his then living conditions] for a while. But the story came back by return mail, along with a letter from Gordon Lish...He said he was returning the story. He was not apologizing that he was returning it, not returning it "reluctantly"; he was just returning it. But he asked to see others. So I promptly sent him everything I had, and he promptly sent everything back. But again a friendly letter accompanied the work I'd sent to him.²⁴

Carver was a relatively unknown writer—he'd been published in little magazines and had even been picked for a *Best American Fiction* anthology, but had not yet

²³ 12 November 1969.

²⁴ Raymond Carver, "Fires," *Call If You Need Me* (New York: Vintage, 2001) 104-105.

published a book. Carver was sending work to Gordon Lish in hopes of forgetting about the poor conditions in which he and his wife and family were living, but more importantly he was sending the stories to Lish because he believed in what Lish could do for him. Unfortunately, Lish's "certain style" would be felt by unknown writers, specifically Carver. From 1969-1972, when Lish and Carver's burgeoning friendship was based on sending him stories for suggestions, Lish's determination and his intensity for the job seemed almost palpable. We can almost feel the tangibility of Lish's words; we can imagine Carver felt this confidence from Lish when they first met. The significance Lish seems to place on finding a "new fiction" reverberates through his words and echoes the cacophony of tacit promises from a new fiction editor bound to get writers the recognition they deserve. Meanwhile, Lish would get the recognition he and the magazine needed. Carver believed that with Lish's help an unknown writer could succeed. And Lish did help him do just that by publishing Carver's first recognized story, "Neighbors," in *Esquire*—notifying him by late 1970.²⁵

But, based on the suggestions Lish made in pen on an early draft manuscript version of the story "What's in Alaska?" titled, "Divert Me," one gets a strong indication of how Lish preferred the story to read if ever published in *Esquire*. The first and only time Carver mentioned the story in his letters was as "Alaska" in a letter dated 04 February 1971, "What's in Alaska?" seems to have been the fourth story Carver was working to get into a publishable state in a line of stories that included "Neighbors," "Fat," and "Are You A Doctor?"—three stories, that would go on to see publication in

²⁵ "Neighbors" would not be published until May 1971, but Carver writes Lish in an undated letter from 1970: "Gordon, what can I say? Am overwhelmed. I swear. Waited to write you until today for fear I'd simply open up a little squirt in gush. Christ. I'm not careful, fear I'll do it yet so will be brief and try to reach the point: this is a milestone, a turning point."

national, well-known magazines.²⁶ In the letter, Carver apologizes to Lish for the story, “Thanks for the vote. Sorry that ‘Alaska’ didn’t make it, but glad that Levine [his agent] likes it.” Obviously, Lish had informed him that though he gave it a good effort at *Esquire*, other “staffers,” as Carver would put it, did not like the story.²⁷ We will see in the discussion of “Divert Me” that Carver only takes the suggestions Lish offers as mere light editing, changes that include grammar, syntactical flow, and other non-intrusive changes to theme, character development or plot. These observations lend credence to the idea that for this story, Carver did not see any need for implementing Lish’s vision to further the possibilities for publication. “Divert Me” becomes an early example of Carver having confidence in his own abilities and talent for storytelling. Lish in this case does not feel the urge to lean heavily on the work. We will see that both visions are completely separate, and Carver succeeds in arriving at his own version of the story, using Lish’s help sparingly.

“Divert Me” or “What’s in Alaska?” showcases their relationship in 1971, and also, in some ways, gives us hints at Lish’s editorial influence on Carver’s work. Lish’s heavy editing to Carver’s stories is a well-known fact, but here, for “Divert Me,” the edits are subtle, and less intrusive. The eventual product, “What’s in Alaska?” would eventually be published in *Fiction*, a literary journal not to be scoffed at by any means, but not as nationally known as *Esquire* or *Harper’s Bazaar*. Though it is a lesser-known work by Raymond Carver, it is by no means a lesser story. The progress of Carver’s creative development, as well as Lish’s edits, can be traced to the early manuscripts of

²⁶ “Neighbors” was taken by *Esquire* in 1970, “Fat” by *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1971, and “Are You a Doctor?” by *Fiction* in 1972. It was not till March of 1973 that “Are You a Doctor?” would finally appear.

²⁷ Though there is no date on the manuscript, we can discern from the letters that this story was one to which Lish had made suggestions, and then Carver made the changes and returned it by 04 February 1971.

“What’s in Alaska?” This specific instance from the Lish archives sheds light on their professional relationship in the years to come, the years that would eventually lead up to the controversy surrounding the publication of *What We Talks About When We Talk About Love* (1981).

Lish was generous with his suggestions to this draft.²⁸ However, the comments he made to the manuscript are relatively slight, compared to edits he would make to later stories. Each page of the manuscript contains some form of suggestion for improvement, or light editing.²⁹ Every page has mark outs and rewritten lines—on average, Lish’s suggested changes are made on three fourths of the lines on each page. By page twelve Lish is marking out full paragraphs, or heavier editing. By page thirteen, he is marking out most of the lines and full bulk paragraphs. After page thirteen he returns to marking out three fourths of the lines and making additions and writing over lines. If Carver made any changes to the story, as suggested by Lish, he did not make them before the final version was printed in *Fiction*.³⁰ The changes he did make to the “Divert Me” draft were slight—word choices mainly and to some small extent, Carver left out lines Lish may have imagined as non-essential. These changes were what would eventually appear in published version in *Fiction*, including the new title, “What’s in Alaska?”

The number of suggestions Carver takes from Lish at this point are few and far between, but the changes he does or does not take will help define Carver’s vision at this point in his career, 1971, and offer an early taste of what Lish has to offer him with

²⁸ Again, “Divert Me” is an unpublished draft version of the story “What’s in Alaska?” Lish is only Carver’s friend making suggestions in 1971, not his professional editor “taking over.”

²⁹ The strikeouts usually pertain to what Lish may have viewed as unneeded lines: he would knockout sentences to make the story leaner and more compact. As with many later manuscripts, Lish crossed out lines and wrote his own suggested lines above them.

³⁰ Based on the manuscripts used in this research, there was no evidence that would support the claim that Carver had submitted both versions of the story to *Fiction*: one version as it appeared in print, and one version with all of Lish’s edits.

regards to editorial advice. The editorial suggestions can be separated into two categories: the first category is one that includes smaller changes, including grammar and word choice. The second category is of a bigger sort, changes that affect overall theme or outcome of the story. The latter is important for discerning styles, thus impacting our understanding of their overall visions. The changes and suggestions are indicative of those Lish would make to many future Carver stories. Had Carver taken the suggestions in this first manuscript, the story would have been much shorter, but would not have remained true to the conceptual depth Carver was attempting. The story would have retained the story's involvement with characters and plot movement, but the key Lish suggestions would have changed lines pertaining to the protagonist's emotional state and scenes involving images and content, severely affecting interpretation of events and to some extent the outcome of the entire story.

The story has a relatively simple premise: A man's relationship with his girlfriend is threatened when, upon his arrival home from work after buying a pair of new shoes, she informs him that she has had a successful interview for a job in Fairbanks, Alaska. The couple, Carl and Mary, have been invited to their friends, Jack and Helen's house to spend the evening breaking in Jack's water pipe he received from Helen for his birthday. They spend much of the evening enjoying one another's company, but soon some tension arises after the discussion wanders into what Carl and Mary will eventually do in Alaska if she takes the job and they make the move. The problem with Carl and Mary begins when Mary attributes certain feelings to Carl's mood, as if she has been anticipating his response (that never comes in the story) to the possibility of her taking the job in Alaska.

One example of a Lish suggestion for improving Carver's manuscript, regards a shift toward an aesthetically pleasing ear: "~~He dunked his hands and then covered his eyes with his fingers.~~ **He dipped his hands and then raised them to his eyes.**"³¹

The linguistic change relieves the sentence of a broken rhythm and gets the sentence more to the point: Lish leaves out nonessential words and forms the thought more eloquently and economically. The action and sentence structure are made less awkward and are hemmed in to move the story along with some grace. And Carver did take this suggestion for his publishable manuscript.

Carver also decided to take Lish's suggestion to cut from the manuscript dialogue regarding character actions readers will never see. When Carver begins to set the story up, he uses a string of dialogue between Carl and Mary. Lish struck out a large amount of dialogue and detail in this scene, which Carver chose to accept as a fair deletion. An important marker in these first few pages of the draft, Carver takes Lish's suggestion to cut Carl's opinion of how the evening plans have affected his mood.

~~"We'll have an early dinner," she~~ **Mary** said. ~~"Helen and Jack asked us down over tonight." She got him a water pipe for his birthday and they're anxious to try it out. They're funny."~~ She looked at him.
"I need a bath," Carl said.
"Is it all right with you?" **Mary said.**
"Sure," he said.
 ~~"What time?"~~
 ~~"Around seven. After they put the kids to bed. What's the matter?"~~
~~"Nothing. I felt like watching something or else reading tonight. I don't know, it's all right."~~
 ~~"We don't have to go," she said.~~
 ~~"No, it's all right. I think I'll take a bath and then have a beer."~~
~~"I'll start dinner in a few minutes."~~ She looked at her shoes again and sucked her cheeks. **"Take your bath, she said."**³²

³¹ Raymond Carver, "Divert Me" (Lish ms, Lilly Lib, Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana) 2. The strikeouts indicate a Lish deletion, and the boldface indicates a Lish addition.

³² "Divert Me" 2.

Lish believes an element of suspense can be created in this first encounter with the characters—the readers no longer know why they are going to Jack and Helen’s, for they might not need a reason. The dialogue becomes short, and the impression is that they are curt with each other: they react to each other only out of habit, as they would on any day—the scene illustrates the mundane nature of their lives. The first scene of the story is of Carl getting a new pair of shoes. The very next scene is of him returning home to his everyday existence and a plan to see friends is not even enticing to him. The text Lish suggests removes any understanding of Carl’s mood, and we no longer get a glimpse into his feelings, his consciousness.

If Carl’s feelings are given voice, the story becomes something else entirely. The story becomes about how Carl is consciously aware of how he feels and what he wants, and by voicing it early in the story, readers might expect his wants and needs to be expressed often or even met—which conceivably could have been given a part in the story and still no resolution achieved. If Carl’s desires are voiced, then he becomes conscious of himself in terms of how he feels and things he wants. But, without Carver’s fuller vision of how Carl feels and the early indication of his mood, a silence is created, manifested in Carl’s inability to understand what the true impact of moving to Alaska could have on himself and his relationship. If Carl’s feelings are eliminated, the story invites readers to intuit the situation after they have been given the breath of information Carver gives throughout the story. He is keeping his feelings from his wife but the reader still “senses” some unknown truth of the situation. By his short response, we know he does not want to go. But we get an understanding from his wife that she understands he

might not want to go—later, while he is in his bath, she pampers him, and she wants him to go and have a good time.

Carver is probably taking Lish’s advice and instruction here with more faith than any other person reading his work. Carver obviously liked the suggestion or he would not have taken it—but, as we will see, Carver never intended for Lish’s idea of dulling the character’s consciousness to become his trademark. This is proved not only by his not taking all of Lish’s suggestions, but also by his reaction to future Carver edits, and his refusal to accept the title of minimalism for his work. Carver appears, for this specific manuscript, to be making deliberate choices as to what he leaves in the text and what he removes based on Lish’s advice, not how the story would best suit any one magazine’s need, such as *Esquire* or one overall literary vision. Lish was trying to establish a new trend. Carver was trying to establish his original style. This is how the scene was published in *Fiction*:

“We’ll have an early dinner,” she said. “Helen and Jack asked us over tonight. She got him a water pipe for his birthday and they’re anxious to try it out. They’re funny.” She looked at him. “Is it all right with you?”

“What time?”

“Around seven. After they put the kids to bed. Carl, we don’t have to go.”

“It’s all right, sure,” he said.

She looked at his shoes again and sucked her cheeks. “Take your bath,” she said.³³

Carver accepted the minor changes in word choice, refused the dialogue tags, and trimmed the dialogue in telling ways. But, Carver did not leave out the details of the couple’s plan for the evening, presumably because such a remark makes little difference to the story one way or the other. And Carver took Lish’s advice and cut Carl’s emotional clues in his dialogue, clues that indicate what sort of mood he would be in. Mary no

³³ “What’s in Alaska?” *Fiction* 28.

longer brings it up in conversation, either. The curtness Lish would have preferred is lightened—they become a couple who is concerned with the other’s wellbeing, yet they are no longer sure what is being left unsaid, or what is the unconscious issue they are unable to raise to the level of conversation. The hesitation is subtle—no longer does Carl express his feelings, his wants, or his desires. And Mary is unable to help meet those needs, but she is neither callous nor uncaring. She simply does not know.

The scene is an example of what appears to be Carver picking and choosing what he wants to take from what Lish is offering. Their visions are separate in this case as to how the story is to be in the end, but Carver likes what Lish sees in deleting the man’s consciousness from the page. As the story progresses, Mary joins him in the bathroom and he brings him a beer. At this point, she gives Carl the news of her having a successful interview for a job that is in Alaska. But, Carver leaves in Carl’s emotional response to hearing the news: he responds, “I always wanted to go to Alaska.” Carver includes this dialogue in the final version of his story, the version published in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976).³⁴ We see here that this example demonstrates that Carver was not completely convinced about changes to his style, a style Lish and Carver’s work would one day champion: minimalism. Carver has eliminated Carl’s feelings about not wanting to do anything that night, but leaves the idea of Carl liking the move.

Confusion occurs between Carl and Mary as the night progresses, and as the couple becomes more and more stoned. Once the couple has arrived at Jack and Helen’s,

³⁴ In some cases, Carver left his original descriptions and word choices the same for the published text in *Fiction*; however, they were deleted from the final text in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Lish presumably took over at that point as professional editor and deleted what he had originally suggested. See also, 28 September 1975: This *handwritten* letter to Lish catalogues some five pages of minor editorial changes Carver would have liked to have made to the *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* book ms. At the time of my research for this essay, no comparison between the letter and texts had been made.

they all enjoy a round or two with the water pipe, when Mary makes an assumption that Carl is “on a bummer tonight” and she tells the party as much.³⁵ Carl responds by asking Mary why she would say that; making such an assumption is enough to put him on a bummer. After the hookah session continues for a few more pages and the conversation has been changed and Mary’s remark is seemingly forgotten, Carl returns to the dialogue. He continues the conversation.

“That’s ~~stony grass~~ **real stuff**,” Carl said, **and studied his shoes.**
~~“What did you mean when you said I was on a bummer tonight?”~~ **“How come you say I’m on a bummer?”** he said to Mary.

“What?” she said.

Carl stared at her and blinked. “You said something about me being on a bummer. What made you say that?”

“I don’t remember ~~now~~, **Mary said**, “but I can tell when you are.”
~~But please don’t bring up anything negative right now, okay?”~~

“~~Okay. All I’m saying is I don’t know why you brought it up.~~ If I wasn’t on a bummer before you said it, it’s enough when you say it to put me on one.”

“If the shoe fits,” Mary said. She leaned on the arm of the sofa and laughed until tears came.³⁶

Carver indicates Carl might have been premature in his initial response to Mary taking a job in Alaska. When Mary suggests he is on a bummer, Carl begins to wonder if she has put him on bummer, or if he was on a bummer the entire night for something entirely different from her news. Or, simply, he was truly unaffected by her response to the job interview, and was fine with the possibility but Mary has now brought it to his attention that he might not want to make the move. Soon after Mary tells the group he is on a bummer, Carl introduces the idea of their moving to Alaska to their friends. The possibility of a move to Alaska, whether Carl wants to admit it, has had an effect on his

³⁵ “Divert Me” 4.

³⁶ “Divert Me” 7.

mood and thoughts. But his mood and thoughts might have been affected by the pot, too. Being stoned might be intensifying his emotional response to any conversation.

Taking a look at Lish's strikeouts, the tension between Carl and Mary depends heavily on the confusion between the two. Carl closes himself off from the group by being on a bummer, but he is unsure exactly what is causing his bummer. He cannot fix the issue at hand any more than he can identify the problem. By Lish's suggestion, nothing truly is lost by its deletion. But, to leave the dialogue in the story, the idea might be to bring the characters to a full realization. Lish adds a simple action for Carl; he merely suggests he look at the new pair of shoes he had bought in the first paragraph of the story. Now, with this comment, the character becomes quieter, more interested in finding out why Mary would say such a thing about his mood. Here is the same scene with the changes Carver made for the published manuscript in *Fiction*.

“What did you mean when you said I was on a bummer?” Carl said to Mary.

“What?” she said.

Carl stared at her and blinked. “You said something about me being on a bummer. What made you say that?”

“I don't remember now, but I can tell when you are,” she said. “But please don't bring up anything negative, okay?”

“Okay. All I'm saying is I don't know why you said that. If I wasn't on a bummer before you said it, it's enough when you say it to put me on one.”

“If the shoe fits,” Mary said. She leaned on the arm of the sofa and laughed until tears came.³⁷

Lish offers to trim Carver's dialogue a number of times throughout the story, dialogue that, in his opinion serves no purpose. The story on the whole is filled with dialogue that does not necessarily move the story along, but at the same time does do the story the service of humor. Carver chose not to take many of the suggestions Lish advised

³⁷ “What's In Alaska?” *Fiction* 31.

for this early story. The idea Lish was getting at might have been to give the story flow, to move it along without unneeded dialogue. But, at the same level, the dialogue functions in its own way—it might deepen the relationship between the reader and the story—and the experience might also become more vivid. Carver did take out the reference to the pot at the beginning of the passage, by his own accord, but did not take Lish’s suggestion of the shoes. This is a good instance where Carver did not believe Lish’s stylist changes affected him enough to make the change, even though Lish’s changes seemed for the better. What Carver is accepting as reasonable for improving his vision of the story seems to have been haphazard or inconsistent at the very least. Carver’s decisions show him to be searching out his vision, still unsure exactly what he wants his style to communicate and what needed to be communicated. Before, during the bath sequence, Carver took his suggested lines that were concise, effective, and sparse. Yet, here, he fails to see the importance of Carl looking at his shoes.

However, in this passage the effect remains clear: the couple is having a hard time communicating with each other, which is a reoccurring theme in many of Carver’s short stories. Lish has helped the story in the beginning scenes by “dumbing” down Carl’s awareness of his conscious feelings, and by this point in the story, after the couple interacts with their friends, the tension begins to build from a lack of understanding each other and their friends.

From this point forward, the reader is able to make some interpretations from Carver’s imagery to get a better understanding of Carl’s character by embarking on a close, interpretable reading of the text—incidentally, the same text Lish would have had him cut. Jack leaves the scene to get Popsicles for his guests and lets their cat in from

outside. At this point in the text, Lish suggests Carver cut entire paragraphs. Lish wants the entire scene of the cat bringing a mouse into the bathroom removed from the story—possibly for no other reason than Lish knowing Carver meant the scene to hold significance in its imagery. Lish struck out half of page twelve, a sequence of dialogue and very detailed paragraphs. By page thirteen, he has cut nearly 90% of the page.³⁸ Carver chose to keep the entire text intact. Lish’s cuts, had Carver taken them, would have severely changed Carver’s vision of the story and the outcome of certain interpretable avenues in the text.³⁹

Interpretations of the “cat and mouse” scene hinge primarily on how we identify ourselves with Carl and Mary. Carver hints at Carl and Mary’s subconscious primal nature, both in how they communicate in their daily lives and how they express themselves sexually—which she will explain by the end of the story. Carl’s unconscious feelings about the move are manifested in the known and unknown of Alaska. Words such as primal, wild, or untamed are in some cases associated with descriptions of Alaska. At the very least, the text reaffirms Alaska as an unknown and foreign place by the title Lish created for the story. Jack asks at different times in conversation, “What’s in Alaska?” When the cat brings a mouse into the bathroom and begins eating, cat eyes looking strange and wild, Jack refers to the cat and Alaska: “Cindy’s got to learn to hunt if we are going to Alaska.”⁴⁰ The idea that the female cat must learn to hunt in some ways highlights the uncertain wilderness of Alaska, while juxtaposing the feline nature of the

³⁸ Lish’s suggested cut begins with the line: “In a while he came back...” to the line “...Look at the way she looks at us”—page 12 to bottom of page 13 in “Divert Me” or what would be the middle of page 88 to the bottom of page 89 in the *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?* text. Carver, Raymond. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 88-89.

³⁹ Lish’s suggested cuts are similar to those he would make as Carver’s professional editor; they are those cuts which would further Lish’s vision for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

⁴⁰ “Divert Me” 12-13. Lish suggested the entire scene be cut.

cat with Mary's suggested ravenous sexuality—a sexuality Mary makes mention of but we never see played out by story's end.

Readers know Carl and Mary are from the city; the detail is subtle and Lish may have left it in because it was too subtle to be of any significance one way or another. Mary describes briefly the kitchen she had at some time in her life; she speaks about the people who would show up looking at the kitchen. The text reads, “‘We had a tiny kitchen when we lived in the city,’ she said.” She does not say with whom she lived or when she lived in The City.⁴¹ Carl agrees that he, too, had a tiny kitchen. The dialogue could have no meaning. Or Carver might be suggesting neither of them have ever lived in such a far off place—a place neither of the characters know much about, especially a place known for wilderness.

Carver might be implying that Carl looks at Alaska as an unknown, a place of chaos, where they both might become something else entirely. Helen speaks about Alaska as the place where “a prehistoric man in a block of ice” was found.⁴² This may have been something Carver wanted his character to mention in passing. But, interpreted as a phrase that could have affected Carl's mood by his inability to grasp the deeper implications of what a move to Alaska would entail. Carver might have meant for the “pre-historic” comment to be directed at Carl's personality, a signifier for Carl's primal, less affluent instincts. Carl's mind wanders during the conversations and his imagination for the walk home intensifies the motif that for whatever reason, Carl feels he is returning to nature, to wilderness, and to a primal state.

⁴¹ “Divert Me” 9. Lish suggested he change the case, which he did for all versions except “Divert Me”

⁴² “Divert Me” 11.

After the small party, Carl and Mary walk home arm in arm. Before they arrive, Carl hears sounds: a dog barking, traffic, the wind in trees. Lish wants these details stricken from the text. “**Beyond this he** ~~He heard the sharp and distinct a sound of a dog barking and above that a murmuring of distant traffic that sounded like wind soughing in the tall trees.~~”⁴³

Lish suggested deleting much of the detail here that then takes away from the wilderness, or simply the nature of the world around him; Carver wanted Carl to be aware of this surroundings. Fortunately, the only deletion Carver makes to the manuscript before its acceptance at *Fiction* is the deletion of the word “soughing.” Carver leaves out Lish’s suggested changes to the text and Carver leaves in the description of the dog barking. We get a fuller description of the setting, the city, the nearby highway. Carver implies the change: Carl is anticipating the move by hearing the sound of trees in the passing traffic. His imagination has taken him to the wilderness; he has become aware of the sounds of nature manifested in the concrete or industrial world.

The primal nature of both characters is illuminated at the end of the story—as Carl is hearing the dogs and the traffic, Mary...”raised her head. ‘When we get home, Carl, I want to be fucked, talked to, diverted. Divert me, Carl. I need to be diverted tonight.’ She tightened her hold on his arm.”⁴⁴

We get a glimpse into how the stress of the situation has weighed on her. She wants to be diverted. She tells him her desire and need to be diverted, but she does not say if by fucking she will be diverted. She might also mean she needs to be “talked to” in order to be convinced of staying, of not moving to Alaska. Or she might simply need Carl

⁴³ “Divert Me” 15.

⁴⁴ “Divert Me” 15.

to divert her from her true feelings on the subject, which we never truly understand. No one has clearly stated how they feel about moving to Alaska.

Carver also leaves the harsh language to amplify her sexual desires—this is not love making she is asking for, she wants to become primal with Carl—though Lish suggested both her desire to be fucked and diverted be cut from the manuscript. An interesting juxtaposition of images and raucousness goes with the idea of both characters being affected by or in some ways reverting to a primal nature, especially since the night ends without them having intercourse. The matter fades away into her sleep.

By the final scene the couple is going to bed and the text gives certain clues to the state of mind. The couple has returned home, and Carl is finding his way to the bedroom when Mary yells out to him, asking if there is anything left to smoke. They only have beer. She doesn't finish the beer; after swilling down her birth control pill, she tells him she can't keep her eyes open. The dialogue creates an entirely different portrait of Mary and Carl's relationship than at the beginning of the story. She yells to him, he is just as outwardly curt with her as she with him. The couple is finally in bed, the alarm is set, but Carl is still unaware of how he has been affected by the possibility of moving to Alaska.

The last paragraph of the story is remarkable, both for Carver's developing style as a fiction writer, and how Lish helped Carver with his suggestions. The text provides clues to understanding Carl's inability to recognize how he feels. These clues set this paragraph apart from much of humor in the rest of story. Up till this point, the story remained jovial, with ominous undertones concerning the move to Alaska. The cat eating the mouse in the bathroom marked the change from "good time" to something akin to violence or the untamed. Mary tells Carl she wants him to fuck her, as if she is untamed

and wild, she wants him to be primal, she needs him to divert her from whatever she needs diversion from. She falls asleep before Carl can step up to divert her, which might add to his frustration. And while she falls asleep, Carl notices something, a shadowy unknown in the darkness of the hallway just before he turns out the light. Again, Lish suggested some changes to the text to give the finale a certain polish, a remarkable finish. Here again, as with most of these suggestions Lish made to this early story, Carver's idea remains intact, it is the veneer Lish brings to the lines that Carver recognizes as useful. "~~In a while he~~ **He** turned her over ~~and half pushed and lifted her to the other~~ **and eased away to the far** side of the bed. ~~She groaned.~~ **In a moment she was snoring.**"⁴⁵

Carver took Lish's suggestions: the subtle rewording of the text to give it a gentler flow, succinct and to the point. Carl's dissatisfaction is revealed by his final actions—one wonders if a parallel can be met in his actions toward the unknown creature in the a hall (presumably another cat) and his own girlfriend. Does Carl wish to do violent harm to his sleeping girlfriend? Lish helped bring the undercurrents of Carl's primal nature to the surface in these final lines.

Just as he started to turn off the lamp, he thought he saw something in the hall. He kept staring and saw it again, a small pair of eyes. His heart turned. He blinked and kept staring. He leaned over to look for something to throw. ~~She sighed and moved slightly in the bed.~~ He picked one of his shoes. He sat up straight and held the shoe with both hands. ~~She sighed again,~~ **He heard her snoring** and he set his teeth. He waited while one part of his brain told him this was a real bummer. He waited for it to move once more, or make a **slightest** noise.⁴⁶

The paragraph is very true to Carver's vision, his style, his milieu—his idea of silence, his ideas of having the uncertain, an unknown very deep and at times uncontrollable in his characters that sometimes comes to the surface and other times ebbs

⁴⁵ "Divert Me" 17.

⁴⁶ "Divert Me" 17.

or dissipates entirely. What will happen in Alaska or whether they move or not, become irrelevant simply because Carver has made the evening devastating: for the woman, she needed the wild nature of sexuality and was not fulfilled through sex; for Carl, his only release from the night's frustrations, from his frustrations with Mary, is to cast a shoe into the hall. Carver gives his audience a dramatic anticlimax. The ending becomes a vague indication of something violent in Carl's nature—by “setting” his teeth to the unknown, signifies displeasure with the unknown of Alaska, and the “pair of small eyes” signifies wilderness, something feral. Carl's frustration with Mary might one day escalate to her being at the other end of the shoe.

As it stands, the end paragraph is certainly more poignant after Lish made his suggestions and after Carver made those changes to the text. This may have been the first instance where both Carver and Lish successfully worked to get at what Carver wanted, even though Lish was not officially his editor at the time, but merely a friend. Lish did not treat “What's in Alaska?” as he did later manuscripts. The story must not have been that important to Lish's over all vision for minimalism. Lish at this point may have been still tinkering with the idea of what minimalism could become; at this point, Lish might not have had a definable blueprint for how he wanted the text to appear as he envisioned it. His suggestions defined and redefined certain characteristics in the story, but he might not have been confident in what form exactly his own vision was going to take. Lish helped Carver bring unconscious elements of his storytelling to the surface, but still other elements Carver ignored.⁴⁷ So we arrive at the possibility that both men were still

⁴⁷ For *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* only a few lines were deleted, some more grammatical changes made to the published text in *Fiction*—and again minor changes occurred for the version published in *Where I'm Calling From*, most notably, the names of the characters. For *Will You Please Be quiet, Please?*

figuring out their visions and what was to be left in was certainly at this point up to Carver.

Lish might have been trying to get Carver to present less characterization and plot development, to make the minimal by nature, in this early draft of a story that already lacked a good deal of both. But a common theme in his suggestions concerned Carver's relying on non-essential details of a story which had little or nothing to with vision and more to do with creating a tighter form. A trademark Lish move was to steer away from the sentiments or feelings Carver's protagonist was expressing at the beginning of the story, which would not fit well with later actions or overall character development as Lish preferred. And perhaps Lish was focusing on the move to Alaska—Lish did after all suggest the new title.⁴⁸ What's in Alaska is never definitively answered—is it the new job, a new avenue in the couple's relationship, or is it more than a sum of both? Could it be something abstract: a primal and feral abstraction lurking in Carl's subconscious?

The changes Carver does make to the manuscript before sending it to *Fiction* relate to the smoothness and wording of the sentences, his phrasing and word choice, in particular. Carver does not accept the changes affecting the greater mood of the story, or rather the changes taking away from the mood or theme he believes the story should accomplish. The mood is one pertaining to the relationship, but again, not entirely—the idea of the unknown is just as important to the ending of the story as any concrete verbalization of the couple's wants and desires. All the characters are aware of many unknowns that come with their move, but especially a place they know little about that

Lish would, in the end, see many of the slight changes he suggested for Carver in the early draft carried over into the later published versions of the story.

⁴⁸ "Divert Me" 17. Lish suggested a poignant line for Mary: "**What's in Alaska?**" she said. Lish suggested inserting the line just before the final paragraph. Carver took the suggestion.

has a wilderness connotation. But none of them, including Carl, are aware of the volatile nature of their relationship and his desire for the unknown creature in the shadows “to make the slightest goddamn noise.”⁴⁹

Carver’s syntax and word choice seem to be areas where Lish is helping the most; Carver’s style, his choice of plot and theme, do not seem to be of much concern for “Divert Me.” The subsequent changes Carver makes to “What’s in Alaska?” showcase many of the choices he will make as a writer for future stories. It is a story where Lish tries his best to help Carver hone his preferences in style and theme, but Carver makes sure his story remains true to his vision. He did not take all the suggestions put down by Lish—at least here we see Carver is still looking to make his own literature. He did not take the suggestions because Lish suggested them. We see Carver picking and choosing what changes he would apply to a developing manuscript. He does not give in to Lish because he is Lish. A friendship and professional collaboration was seemed to have been formed at this point to discover what is best for the work itself.

On 19 January 1971, Carver wrote to Lish after Lish had informed him that “Neighbors” would be published in *Esquire*. Carver has sent the story to Lish, and Lish returned the story with suggestions, and then Carver sent the story back and it had been accepted. What Carver tells Lish could very well have been said about any of the manuscript drafts Lish was looking at during these first few years.

I think it’s a fine story. Took about all yr changes added a few things here and there... Listen, something you said a long time ago, the thing itself is what matters. Is true, in the end. I’m not bothered. I’ve always been the slowest kid in the class anyway, right down there. But, I keep trying, even at this advanced age. So lean on it, if you see things. If I don’t agree I’ll say something... pls, am not trying to push this story on you... Ray’s cup is spilling over already for your kindnesses... Stay alive. All best.

⁴⁹ “Divert Me” 17.

The letter illustrates many aspects of the relationship these men shared in the beginning of 1971: For one, their friendship, and for another, Carver's permission for, and trust in, Lish's editorial intuition and instinct. Carver wanted Lish to help him develop the story to its maximum potential. And though "What's in Alaska?" did not go on to be one of Carver's more famous, the story itself is true to Carver's nature as an artist—the story does after all make it into the selected stories, *Where I'm Calling From*. Regardless if in 1971, as we see in the letter, Carver lacks the confidence as a writer to bring about his vision through a definite style of his own.

II. Gordon Lish Measures Down “FAT.”

To definitively separate Carver’s vision from Lish’s, we need to look at a specific example of an early draft where Carver took all of Lish’s suggests—in effect, preferring Lish’s vision over his own. As we will see in the textual analysis of “Fat,” the differences in texts are great. And Lish all but hand delivers him a story that gets good critical responses, and makes Carver’s life a little easier, as he was attempting to find recognition from a bundle of early stories to which Lish was making suggestions. We will see that Carver does not hesitate to rewrite the story exactly as Lish has rewritten the story in his strikeouts and additions. By critically examining these changes Carver made to this early manuscript, we see the burgeoning pattern Lish would eventually master for reworking a Carver story. This early (1970), specific example of their working together gets at the very heart of two separate visions coming together. This story is not an example where two visions blur, making it ever more difficult to separate. “Fat” happens to be a story that Carver had no evident attachment to and chose Lish’s vision as the more prominent for inclusion.

In 1967, Carver and his first wife, Maryann Burk, moved to Palo Alto, California. He had a job as an editor at a textbook publishing firm, Science Research Associates. A year later in 1968, after a move to Tel Aviv for Maryann’s graduate studies failed, they were again living in Palo Alto where Carver met Gordon Lish.⁵⁰ In an interview with Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee in 1983, Carver spoke of this time with Lish and the luncheons they had. Carver worked across the street and he remembered Lish in 1969.

⁵⁰ Heath 7.

At least once a week he'd ask me over to his place for lunch. He wouldn't eat anything himself, he'd just cook something for me and then hover around the table watching me eat. It made me nervous, as you imagine. I'd always wind up leaving something on my plate, and he'd always wind up eating it. Said it had to do with the way he was brought up.⁵¹

In the same interview, Carver spoke of Lish taking him to lunch in present tense, in 1983, "He'll take me to lunch now and won't order anything for himself except a drink and then he'll eat up whatever I leave on my plate!"⁵² Some might consider this common encounter Carver had with Lish a metaphor for their entire professional relationship: Lish seemed to "eat up" a lot of the left over lines Carver would write in his stories. And one story in particular fits nicely into this mode for Lish's editing. "Fat" is a textual slimming down, filled with cut lines—lines suggested for deletion first by Lish in a marked up draft manuscript and then eliminated by Carver. Lish struck out a good many lines and paragraphs, and made line additions that were lean and to the point. This early story may have become a classic primarily because of Lish's influence and judgment. For this manuscript, Carver chose Lish's vision and he did not look back.

Carver's first mention of "Fat" to Gordon Lish is in a letter he wrote on 20 July 1970.⁵³ Carver had given a reading lecture at the University of California Santa Cruz and Carver tells Lish of the audience reception for the two stories he read at the lecture. The one story the audience liked he identifies as "Fat." Though he does not mention the other story by name, he mentions to Lish he liked the other story over "Fat."⁵⁴ Carver had been

⁵¹ Gentry and Stull 50.

⁵² Gentry and Stull 50.

⁵³ All references to Carver manuscripts (letters and drafts) are taken from the Lish Collection at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.

⁵⁴ By July 1970, the only other story Carver has mentioned by name in his letters to Lish is "Friendship," from a December 1969 letter. "Neighbors" is mentioned on 20 August 1970, but Carver clearly indicates it is the first time Lish has seen the story. In a string of undated letters from 1970, including a letter thanking Lish for taking "Neighbors" at *Esquire*, Carver mentions "Fat" and "Are You a Doctor?" in two separate

sending stories for Lish to read and make suggestions on since mid-November of 1969, and we can conclude, based on what titles Carver has given in his letters, that “Fat” had been one of the stories in the early bundle he had sent Lish. Carver begins his letter on 20 July 1970 speaking about “Fat.”

As I said, whatever the outcome there, thanks for the assist. They’re better than before. If they still ain’t what esq. is looking for I’ll try something else on you. I feel they’re good...I read them both Sat eve at UCSC along with a new, longer story, and the response was terrific, no shit. –Me visiting lecturer? Yep, first time too & liked it, a good gig. I believe the audience liked “Fat” better, tho I prefer the other I think. Leastways there was more animated response, more praise, more testifying, more speaking in tongues with Fat.⁵⁵

By the time Carver was out giving readings for “Fat,” he would have already made the changes Lish suggested. What the textual analysis will show us is that unlike the early draft manuscript for “What’s in Alaska?,” Carver took all of Lish’s suggestions for “Fat.” This fact alone gives a unique understanding of the praise the story receives at this early public lecture—the reception was good. Carver’s new, redone version of the story, based on Lish changes is well-received publicly. Interestingly, though the other story he reads is unknown, the story itself is longer, Carver “prefer[s] the other,” “new, longer story.” The letter informs us of Carver’s predisposed preference for his longer stories, but understands full well the implications of the public response to Lish’s contributions to a story to which Carver does not seem all that attached. Under no circumstances does Carver ever doubt Lish’s contributions to his stories, and here the work Lish suggested for revision pays off in the form of a “more animated response, more praise, more testifying, more speaking in tongues.”

letters and again in February 1971. Though this is not conclusive evidence, we can make an educated guess “Are You a Doctor?” was the story read in conjunction with “Fat.”

⁵⁵ 20 July 1970.

The “Fat” manuscript folder in the Lish holdings at Indiana University has four different texts: The primary text is an early draft with Lish’s marks and suggestions.⁵⁶ Also, the folder includes a photocopy of the published version of the text published in *Harper’s Bazaar*—a copy text for the *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) publication with only a few minor changes, mostly dialogue tags such as “he says” and a few grammatical changes.⁵⁷ The third is the actual text ripped from the September 1971 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*. The fourth is yet another photocopied version of the published text with marks that would never be referred to in the draft-to-book-publication schema. The early draft manuscript with Lish’s strikeouts and additions is the text of utmost interest—the manuscript is the draft from which Carver decidedly accepts Lish’s changes and makes his final revisions for publication.

The textual changes Lish suggests to the story are like many of those editorial changes he would later make to the manuscripts for the *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* copy text. He strips the main character of any thing resembling a self-reflective nature, he shortens dialogue, he makes the character “dumber” linguistically, and for “Fat” especially Lish cuts unnecessary details. Like “What’s in Alaska?” the bulk of the pages are marked with long penned-in strikeouts, blocking out much of the any given paragraph. He is shortening sentences with inserted periods, changing paragraph breaks, and making grammatical adjustments to ensure flow. But, for this story, Lish focuses on narrowing the focus of the story to meet one effect, an effect given to us by Carver, but accentuated by Lish: the waitress’s sexual longing and unconscious attraction to the fat man’s fingers.

⁵⁶ Though the manuscripts are undated, this document might date back to the first bundle of stories received by Lish in 1969.

⁵⁷ Raymond Carver, “Fat,” *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 3-8.

A shorter Carver story, "Fat" is told by a waitress, recounting her experiences with an overweight customer to Rita, her friend. The waitress, like so many Carver characters, is unaware of why the fat man has bothered and unnerved her, and eventually she comes to the conclusion that her life is going to change.⁵⁸ The course of the story covers only a few hours in an evening. She waits on the fat man: she gives him his dinner and desert, then goes home and has what many might classify as bad sexual relations with her lover. The waitress is telling her friend the story because she has been bothered by her experience: she knows the experience has affected her but she is unsure exactly why. Though she is unaware of any conclusions based on her retelling, she knows her life will change, and she may have to leave her lover, if she discovers her sexual frustrations start with him.

As D.T. Max pointed out in his brief analysis of "Fat," Lish "moves the story into the present tense...he eliminates the waitress' self-reflectiveness, so we seem more involved than she does in what she is feeling."⁵⁹ Max discusses Lish's suggestions as being mostly technical, but upon a closer textual analysis, we discover these technical changes have a profound effect on the meaning of the story. Max picked out Lish's most important contribution: he develops Carver's description of the fat man's "long, thick, creamy fingers" and how the fingers affect the waitress.⁶⁰ This is an example of Lish helping Carver zero in on a powerful theme, a subtext that focuses the story's main effect. The story may just be about a waitress's retelling her experience of serving a fat

⁵⁸ As we will see in the discussion of Lish's suggested changes, Lish adds most of her unawareness. Many of Carver's stories, for instance, "What's in Alaska?" or "Beginners," Carver provides much of the frustration behind his character's inability to know why the are bothered.

⁵⁹ Max 3-4.

⁶⁰ All reference to "Fat" will be to the double-spaced, nine paged manuscript draft. Raymond Carver, "Fat" (Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana)1.

man that culminates into her changing her life, but to Lish the story becomes a short telling of a woman's sexual frustration and her desire and longing to be satisfied.

The story begins with a waitress telling her audience she is having coffee and cigarettes with her friend Rita, and she conveys the experience she's had serving a fat man. The story is short, and Lish gives the story everything it needs to sustain itself in a few short pages. From the start of the story, Lish makes changes to the bulk of the page.

~~He was~~ **This fat man is** the fattest person I'd ever seen, ~~outside the movies, and I had to stop a minute to stare at him. His head was big and shaggy, though he was~~ **He is** neat appearing and well dressed. ~~But Everything about him was is big—his ears, his nose, even his lips. His fingers especially got to me. But it is his fingers I remember best.~~ When I stopped at the table near his to see to the old couple, ~~I seated there, I looked over at his fingers holding onto the menu. I first notice the fingers.~~ They looked ~~two or three~~ times the size of a normal person's fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers.⁶¹

Lish has already found many of Carver's details to be superfluous to the overall content and direction of the story. Lish easily picks out details of the fat man and deletes them so readers can absorb the theme Lish wants of the story: the man is fat, nothing more, except that he has "long, thick, creamy fingers." Lish likes Carver's idea of the waitress "first noticing the fingers" and incidentally rewords the encounter more clearly and succinct. The idea of the fingers was already in the story, but Lish magnifies the waitress's perception of the fingers, which then not only become her focus, but a concrete detail signifying a fuller sexuality for which she longs. Carver may or may not have found a similar significance for the fingers in any revision he might have done for the story, but Lish notices and develops it for Carver.

Lish suggests Carver remove the waitress's self-reflectiveness, and substitutes the line for one of his own. ~~"I began to feel sorry for him right away. I couldn't help it.~~

⁶¹ "Fat" 1. The strikeouts indicate Lish's deletions, while the boldface represents his additions.

My God, Rita, those were fingers.⁶²

Lish has cut the sympathy, the emotion from the story so as not to divert the audience's attention from the fat man's fingers. The waitress is now less aware of how she can understand what she is feeling for the fat man, because Lish has cut out all emotional response and attachment to the man. And once the waitress goes into the kitchen to give the cook, her lover, Rudy, the fat man's order, Lish suggests cutting lines that really have no bearing on the scene or the story's outcome.

~~Give me around fifteen or twenty minutes before you put it on,
Rudy.
He grunted and turned away to take something off the broiler. As I
came out of the kitchen, hurrying, Margo—You know Margo? I've
told you about her Margo. The blonde from Germany one who used to
chases after Rudy, she says to me, Who's your fat friend? He's really a
fatty.⁶³
I definitely resented her making such a remark. Now that's part of
it. I think that's really part of it.⁶⁴~~

The first line here is completely irrelevant to the story, and if Carver had left it in, the dialogue actually confuses more than clarifies the story's progress. Carver gives no indication as why she needs fifteen or twenty minutes before she can serve the fat man. Also, Lish cuts the details pertaining to a woman who only has a few lines the entire story—we do not need to know she is German. We see Lish is cutting words that do not lend to the overall outcome of the story. And more to the point, he is making the paragraph tidy by eliminating words.

Lish is getting more confident with his line additions. He is forming the tone, the voice, the cadence with which the waitress is speaking. But more importantly, Lish has stricken yet another remark the waitress makes concerning her feelings for the fat man or

⁶² "Fat" 2.

⁶³ Carver did not delete "really" from the text.

⁶⁴ "Fat" 2.

the situation of serving the fat man. Though Carver's line expresses only minimal emotional response to the situation—he does not explain whether she resented the remark being said by Margo or that she resented the remark entirely—Lish has reworded the text in such a way as to leave the waitress with no idea as to what she is feeling. Lish's line does let the audience know she has in some way been affected by the Margo calling her customer “a fatty,” but she cannot communicate what it is she has felt or why.

Carver is benefiting from Lish's changes, and he can incorporate the changes to the story, retyping the story exactly as Lish has suggested. Or, Carver could leave the story exactly as he had written it to begin with. But, here the purpose for Lish's suggestion goes a little beyond helping the story and into “taking over” the piece. By this point Lish has already brought the story into present tense, forgoing the past tense, a technical change that helps draw the reader into events as they were happening. But by eliminating the line, “I definitely resented her making such a remark” and replacing it with “Now that's part of it. I think that's really part of it”—Lish has changed the style with which Carver was writing his main character, and he has changed her character's substance. She is unaware of her conscious and unconscious feelings for the fat man, and how they affect her as a person and how they affect her life. She is now speaking as Lish “hears” her, not as Carver does. And she no longer has Carver's attributes he has given her. In other words, the waitress is now seen through Lish's vision, not Carver's.

But, the style Lish is incorporating into the text Carver has established does seem more interesting. He continues to make similar additions throughout the story. For example, the very first line of page three begins:

and laying them off to one side, all the time making his puffing noise. I
~~calculate I had three to four minutes before I had to take the coffee pot~~

~~around to my other people. Then I saw out of the corner of my eye that my older couple was finished, just sitting there looking at each other waiting for the check. Anyway, I was hurrying too much, I guess, because~~
Anyway, I'm so keyed up or something I knocked over his glass of water.⁶⁵

Lish has managed, for the better, to eliminate a good deal of clutter from the first paragraph of the page by paring down entire actions and thoughts the waitress is having while serving the fat man into one sentence, “I’m so keyed up...I knock over his glass of water.” The waitress is not even aware of why the commotion seems to be going on in her mind, but Lish has taken Carver’s words describing how she functions as a waitress and how the fat man has affected her and reduced them to a mere suggestion of commotion, which here seems to do the paragraph justice. The voice Carver has created for the waitress no longer exists—the woman no longer uses words like “calculate.” And do we not know what she thinks while she is working. We no longer see what Carver originally wanted; we do not see the things going on in the head of a waitress, the commotion of thoughts that has caused her to spill a glass of water. These thoughts, written with the same commotion of words, are not important to the progression of the story. Such “waitress thoughts” have nothing to do with the subconscious stirring she is undergoing with the fat man’s fingers. And after Lish has made his suggestions, she is unaware of why exactly she is “keyed up.” Lish has taken away the reason for her excitement, leaving the character only the awareness that she is excited, which alone can cause frustration. He has reduced the word count by funneling what the waitress is feeling into one simple phrase, and he is developing the character through her speech. Lish uses her linguistic characteristics to fill out her character on the page. Carver makes an attempt to show the waitress’s sexuality.

⁶⁵ Fat 3.

You're very kind, he ~~said~~. **says**. This bread is marvelous.
~~I smiled. I was standing right in front of him, and I could feel the
rim of the heavy table against my thighs.~~ **Thank you, I say.**⁶⁶

Carver attempts, albeit subtly, to make the encounter sexual by nature—as with his previous mention of the fingers. But, the scene's sexual undertones are so subtle they might go unnoticed by the reader, or they might give the audience an expectation from the actions, one related to developing a relationship between the big man and the waitress—something neither Carver nor Lish had the intention of doing by bringing the woman's sexual nature into the story's theme. To prolong the sexual theme and for consistency, Lish wants Carver to remain focused on the fingers alone. The story's payoff involving the waitress's sexual frustration and how she is affected by the fat man relies heavily on her being unaware of her sexual attraction to the thick fingers, thus accentuating the unknown reason for her preoccupation with them. After all it is the fingers alone Lish has made inciting. Also, Lish has cut the waitress's moment, her connection with the fat man in a kind manner entirely by removing her emotional response. He must have believed the story did not need such character development. The story was less about her sympathy and kindness toward the fat man in the end, and more about her subconscious sexual frustration with her lover, Rudy.

In its entirety, page five gives us a good look into Lish suggestions regarding some faults Carver presented in the story's scope. The stage on which the story is set, the diner and the customers therein, is relatively small; the story should hinge on principal characters and actions. Lish understood the absolute need for keeping the readers focus on what is going on in the story: the more focused the story becomes the easier the theme can be brought to the surface. For both visions, Carver's or Lish's, the theme has always

⁶⁶ "Fat" 3.

been how the waitress is affected by her encounter with the fat man. This theme alone drives the actions of the plot, and character development.

As the story progresses, the waitress is serving the fat man more bread and butter, when he realizes he is warm, and he asks the waitress if it is warm in the diner or if it is just his imagination. Page five begins,

~~I don't think so, but I'll check the thermostat.~~
No, it is warm in here, I say.
Maybe I'll take off my coat, **he says.**⁶⁷
Go right ahead, ~~feel free.~~ **I say.** A person has to be comfortable.
That's true, **he says, that's very, very true.**
But I ~~noticed when I looked at him again~~ **see** a little later he **is** was still wearing his coat.⁶⁸

The waitress's line to check the thermostat gives the relationship between the fat man and the waitress a new angle. Although she is no doubt willing to check the thermostat for any customer, after their previous interactions, the line could be misconstrued as the waitress being too nice or too involved with her attention to the fat man's needs. Also, does the audience need to be distracted by her disagreeing with the man? Carver's line suggests a generality about overweight people, they often overheat. Lish avoids any possibility for distracting readers from theme and so forth, and decides to delete the idea and, for easing the story along, Lish suggests the waitress agree with the fat man. After Lish has smoothed out the text, the diner appears to be warm, end of story, and she agrees. Though what we see here is only a minor illustration of Lish's abilities, the text reveals how the editor managed to make the encounter more illuminated, yet more to the point, entirely separate from Carver's original voice.

⁶⁷ For text version published in *Harper's Bazaar*, Carver must have later changed this line to read: "Maybe we'll take off our coat," giving the fat man the pronoun of "we" and "our."

⁶⁸ "Fat" 5.

The rest of the page:

~~Both my large parties were~~ **are** gone by now, and also the older couple. **The place is emptying out.** ~~Two women took one of the tables and began right away to stare at the fat man. I could see them look at each other and smile, and it made me despise them. A serious-looking young couple, both with long hair but well dressed, took one of the other tables, but after a glance in his direction they went back to their own conversation and never paid him any more attention. I took their order first, cheesecake and coffee, it was, then I approached the women. One of them, about forty with a mannish haircut, said, Who's that? nodding in the direction of the fat man. Have you ever seen anything like that? But I ignored her and simply took their order. By the time, A little later I served the fat man his lamb⁶⁹ chops and baked potato along with more bread and butter, he's the only one left. ¶ I dropped spoonfuls lots of sour cream onto his potato and it seemed to please him. I sprinkled bits of bacon and chive over the his sour cream. Then I brought bring him more bread and butter, and I asked if Is everything was all right? I say.⁷⁰~~

Lish suggests cutting material affecting scene and action. Carver was bringing in more characters, attempting to fill the scene, to make the story seem fuller with the ordinary occurrences of a diner. These new characters serve no purpose. These large cuts are sentences which can bog down the story. And under Carver's own structure, the story is very limited. There is no need to develop the scene any further. Lish cuts the nonessential addition of characters to limit the stage on which the story takes place. Also, Lish is limiting the time in which the story is set. Instead of making more time available to the characters, which broadens the possibility for more encounters, more actions and reactions among them, Lish pairs down commotion, letting us enjoy more time with what really matters: the fat man and the waitress.

More importantly, Lish cuts the idea of her staying till eleven. Lish must have believed that to have the other diner employees wait for the fat man to finish before they could leave, before they could go home would better congeal with the moods Carver had

⁶⁹ Carver must have deleted the word "lamb." The *Harper's Bazaar* text does not contain the word.

⁷⁰ "Fat" 5.

already established. They are curious about the situation between the waitress and the fat man because they have to be: he is the only customer left in the diner.

We're not making you late, are we? he ~~says said~~, puffing and looking concerned.

Not at all, I ~~answered~~. Of course not. ~~I'm on duty until eleven. If I wasn't waiting on customers they'd just have me doing sidework or something like that. I'd much rather be meeting and talking with the public, with people.~~ Take your time. I'll bring you more coffee while you make up your mind.⁷¹

Lish makes the situation about waiting for this big man to stop eating so she can go—Carver had it so she had no reason to hurry and cluttered the scene and the story with distracting new customers. Lish suggests adjustments so the fat man appears to be the reason everyone is waiting. Carver writes that the waitress's lover, Rudy, is not busy at the moment he speaks with the waitress, that he simply has his apron and hat off. Lish cuts the "isn't busy" idea and now the reader gets the distinct impression they are all waiting for him to finish before they can go home. This includes changes to the previous page, page five, where Lish has made the fat man the only person left in the diner. The setting and character involvement is maintained and reduced significantly. Lish has hedged the story's possibilities for digression into what exactly a waitress's life is like and again refocuses the story's theme, setting and character involvement.

Some of the most important suggestions Lish makes are presented on page seven of the draft manuscript. As the fat man and the waitress have more and more encounters as the meal progresses, the fat man volunteers information pertaining to his personal life and his character back-story grows—but, Carver's control over the direction of where the conversation goes and what he wants his audience to perceive from encounter seems to meander a bit and leaves us wondering at meaning and interpretation.

⁷¹ "Fat" 6.

Believe it or not, he ~~says, said,~~ we haven't **not** always eaten like this. ~~We weighed two hundred pounds when we came out of the Navy in 1946. Since then we've gained ten pounds a year, every year. Ten pounds a year. It doesn't sounds like much, does it?~~

Me, I eat and eat and I can't gain ~~anything.~~ I'd like to gain, I ~~said~~ **say.**

No, **he says.** If we had **our** a choice, no. There's **is** no choice. ~~any~~ **more.**

I don't think I understand. I didn't either, and I felt nervous hearing ~~him say that. The thought crossed my mind he might suddenly break a~~ **dish.**

Do you smoke?

I nodded.

~~But I'm being a nuisance, he said.~~

No, no, please, it isn't that. I just don't think I understand.

It's ~~nothing.~~ He **Then** pickeds up his spoon **and eats.**

I know you all laugh, but I felt like I wanted to pat his arm or give ~~his big bushy head a squeeze.~~⁷²

These adjustments reveal much about what exactly Lish was attempting to accomplish overall by story's end, versus what Carver seemed to be adding to the story willy-nilly, as if Carver did not have a clear idea where he wanted the encounter to go and what he wanted to sustain as plausible information moving the story forward—specifically, Carver's lacking control over character development. Lish is cutting any opportunity for back-story concerning the fat man. This is not a story whose scope can involve such digression into why the fat man is fat. Though the grotesquery in the idea of the fat man gaining ten pounds every year since he returned from the naval service in 1946 has great potential for development, this story does not have the need. Since Carver eliminates the fat man's character from the story on the very next page, this exchange serves the story no purpose. The audience does not need to be interested in his life. The details lead nowhere. The possibility of these details adding to the waitress's attraction is certainly a real one but not likely. Lish has redirected our focus, again. He has made it

⁷² "Fat" 7.

easier to stay focused on the fingers, the only reason the waitress is drawn to the man. Her attraction and desire, after Lish as made the cuts and additions, hinges on her unconscious sexual desire for the fingers and with a limited sense of sympathy for his being so overweight.

Carver gets sidetracked on what his motivation is for the fat man's dialogue. He is vague and gives the audience only a guess at what he is leaving out of the conversation and what is implied by the man's smoking. Carver even creates a confused reaction from the waitress—adding to the unreliability of what the dialogue entails. Does he have a bad heart? Does he believe he has no reason to lose weight because he is dying? Because he has no one else, etc.? Carver tries to get his readers involved with avenues of thought related to an expansive text, but does not make a clear pattern in the reader's mind; Lish closes off any incomplete pattern by eliminating the fat man's distracting dialogue.

The ending of a Carver story comes with an unsettling action, when we get the awesome realization of what exactly has been upsetting the characters, though usually the characters still remain unaware. Here the character is grappling with an unknown—the waitress is unaware that she is sexually frustrated with her lover. Unfortunately, Carver had the ending, the sort of audience realization, where the waitress's can feel her life is about to change, and she knows it will change, but she does not know how or why. But Carver's device fails to elicit any response to the waitress's true frustrations: sexuality. The "unknown" element, the substance of the theme, in this case, which drives the story to an unsettling end, was developed entirely by Lish. By the end of the story, Lish is pulling threads and ties them into a perfect, albeit open ending. Though it is Carver's idea for the waitress to relent to her lover's sexual advance unwillingly, Lish provides the

waitress's motivation for observing the fat man's fingers. Lish's vision saturates the last few pages of the text.

Soon after the waitress tells Rita the fat man's part in the story is over, Carver picks up with the waitress returning home after her shift—and Carver makes the segue, the transition between scenes seem effortless as he describes their routine. Both the waitress and her lover, Rudy, have been affected by the fat man's presence in the diner. "Some fatty, Rudy says," once they have returned home, and he immediately goes back to watching the television after making such a remark.⁷³ The scene then switches to the waitress in the shower touching her stomach and she wonders "what would happen if I had children and one of them turned out to look like that, so fat."⁷⁴ When she returns to the kitchen to pour tea for Rudy and herself, Rudy begins telling her of the experiences of his youth with fat kids. "They were tubbies, my God," and he cannot remember their real names, only Fat and Wobbly.⁷⁵

After Rudy tells her about the fat kids from his youth, they sit a moment longer before Rudy begins his "unbuttoning."⁷⁶ She gets into bed and wants nothing to do with her lover, yet he forces himself onto her. The scene Carver sets up lacks motivation, yet holds true to some facts throughout the story: the waitress is unsettled by the experience, she is unsure why, and she feels her life is about to change. What Lish adds to the end of the story, when her lover climbs on top of her is this: "But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing

⁷³ "Fat" 8.

⁷⁴ "Fat" 8.

⁷⁵ "Fat" 8. Incidentally, Carver gives Rudy the rumination, "Wish I had their pictures," at the top of page nine. Carver included a picture of himself fishing at about age nine or ten with a letter he sent Lish on 01 April 71, after the story had been taken by *Harper's Bazaar*. "Hey—here's a pic of me, Washington Fats, back in the good days."

⁷⁶ "Fat" 9.

and hardly there at all.”⁷⁷ Without the recurring imagery of the fingers, and the waitress’s preoccupation with the fingers, Carver’s vision of the last scene becomes about nothing more than the waitress’s lover’s insensitivity. But, Lish fleshes out a deeper interpretation of events and imagery within the context of the story’s main character: the waitress has a longing, an inability to fill a void, signified here through her sexuality. Her lover is inadequate, and lacks the fullness she desires. And, now, what action she is to take is left open for us to make a guess at. In the last line of the story Carver gives us a self-realized, though intuitive conclusion on the part of the waitress that her life is going to change but she does not know why or how exactly. Will she leave her lover and start again?

As with other stories Carver had written in the late 1960’s and sent to Lish for consideration, such as “Neighbors,” “Friendship,” “Are You a Doctor?” and “What’s in Alaska?”—Lish made suggestions based on an already established premise for a good story and infuses his remarks into the telling to enhance and to develop ideas Carver may have overlooked or was unable to identify at the time he was revising. His reasons for accepting these suggestions, in full for “Fat,” without considering the possibility of revision based on his own evaluation of the story, are unclear. But Carver had received some feedback for “Fat” from a time before Lish had suggested these changes, before Carver had gone back through and made his revisions based on Lish’s suggestions. Though the letter is dated after Lish had helped Carver with “Fat,” the collection of stories sent to Double Day mentioned in the following letter had been written before Lish had seen the stories, before he had made any suggestions. The observations are astute regarding the original draft manuscript. According to a letter Carver received from

⁷⁷ “Fat” 9.

Claudia Ansorge at Double Day expressing her thanks and appreciation for a proposed story collection, they declined Carver's manuscript based on these observations.

Although several of the stories are really outstanding, the collection as a whole is uneven. 'The Summer Steelhead,' and 'Neighbors' are suitable psychological dramas that have a haunting, almost terrifying effect. 'Fat' and 'The Man is Dangerous,' on the other hand, seem to be straining for effect, dealing with situations unclearly motivated or artificially created.⁷⁸

As seen in the above analysis of "Fat," the descriptors attributed to the story seem fitting. Before Lish's contributions, "Fat" did seem "straining for effect" that dealt "with situations unclearly motivated or artificially created." Whether or not Carver accepted the changes based on bad receptions of the story or good receptions of the story does not change the fact that Carver seemed completely uninterested in making changes to "Fat" based on his own ideas not those from Lish. Carver rewrote the story as Lish suggested—exactly as Lish suggested. And unlike with other stories, he made no attempt to reshape or rewrite the story with the suggestions in mind, to reconsider the story's outcome using Lish only as a guiding hand. Regardless if we decide to imagine Carver accepting the changes because he agreed with all of them, Carver did not leave some suggestions out and leave others in, or develop the story differently based on what Lish saw in the story. Carver set the story out for publication exactly as Lish suggested, implementing all the editor's cuts and additions.

Carver had to have known what he was doing when he decided to make these changes to his story. He made the choice of his own free will, but this early instance of Carver relinquishing his authorial control over his story, in some ways, proves detrimental to their future roles as professional collaborators. Lish was doing everything he had set out to do as new editor at *Esquire* and for the unknown Raymond Carver. And

⁷⁸ 10 March 1971.

Carver wrote Lish in the winter of 1971 letting him know that through strange sequence of events, "Fat" the story they had worked on together, had been taken by *Harper's Bazaar*.⁷⁹ Carver had been sending stories to Lish at *Esquire* and nothing had been taken for the magazine, including "Fat." Carver wrote in his letters that Lish tried his best to see the work published in *Esquire* and in *Cosmo* and *Mademoiselle*.⁸⁰ To have gotten Carver published in *Harper's Bazaar* had to have been rewarding to Lish as much as Carver and helped prove his vision was getting more results among the bigger national magazines.

Lish would later become confident in his editing suggestions, so much so, that even after he had gotten Carver into a wider readership, and began his preparation of Carver's book collections, Lish still wanted to make heavy contributions to the stories. By their second book collection, Lish is no longer giving suggestions, he is taking complete editorial control over the stories, stories Carver wanted to remain in tact. "Fat" becomes an early example where Carver relinquished control, artistic and authorial, over the story when he returned it with all of Lish's suggestions neatly retyped into a wholly new version of the story. Carver could very well have felt the changes were necessary and believed in the help Lish was providing, but he had no idea that Lish would later take his stories from him—deleting text Carver wanted to remain, and reshaping stories to fit a vision contrary to his own.

⁷⁹ 22 February 1971.

⁸⁰ No Date, possibly mid-Feb 1971. Carver writes: "I'm pleased and thrilled you sent FAT upstairs or down the hall, wherever. Yeah. And thanks. And I'll pray for FAT. And I got Maryann to pray for FAT—that was easy—and with everybody praying, why, who knows? Maybe something will happen." *Mademoiselle* and *Cosmo* were in Lish's building.

III. Gordon Lish Takes Over “Beginners.”

In the years following Raymond Carver’s publication of “Fat” and the subsequent success with the first book collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), he continued to have problems at home and with alcoholism. His “Bad Raymond” years would not end until his eventual sobriety in 1977. After quitting drinking, and after his separation from wife Maryann and after meeting Tess Gallagher in the late summer of 1978, his creativity returned in the form of many new stories, stories to which he would write about in his letters as having a good deal of personal connection. This new lifestyle affords Carver some semblance of permanency, and gives him a new found creative streak for new stories.⁸¹

In the spring of 1980, Raymond Carver and Gordon Lish were getting Carver’s new stories together, preparing them for their second short story book collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) to be published by Knopf. Carver and his then girlfriend, Tess Gallagher, were going to be in New York City for a reading, and they stayed at their friend’s, Jane Shore’s apartment on Madison Avenue.⁸² Carver planned a lunch with Gordon Lish about which he had this to say:

As for lunch, lord, it was the high point of my visit to NYC, nothing mindless and silly, at least not on your part...I delight in your company, simple as that...You know, I feel closer to you than I do my own brother. Have for a long time, years. We don’t see each other that often, or talk on the phone weekly, etc., but I know you’re there and it’s important to me. Besides, you’re my hero—don’t you know? Ever since you left PA and went out into the Great World and began sending me messages back from time to time what it was like out there.

⁸¹ Many believed, before Lish’s edits become public, that it was this change in lifestyle that inspired the expansiveness in some of his later stories, after *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981).

⁸² 29 April 1980. All references to Carver manuscripts (drafts and letters) are taken from the Lish manuscript holdings in the Lilly Library at Indiana University.

By the time this letter was written, on 10 May 1980, the friendship these two men shared appeared as close as ever to Carver, though he did not spend as much time as he would have liked with Lish. Carver repeatedly mentions in his letters he felt Lish was like a brother. We see Carver writing with nostalgia in this letter, referring back to when they had first met in Palo Alto, and when Lish left for New York City to work for *Esquire*. In May of 1980, Lish was both friend and professional editor to Carver, working together to create the best short story collection they could. Carver continued in his letter:

Your friendship and your concern have enriched my life. There's no question of your importance to me. You're my mainstay. Man, I love you. I don't make that declaration lightly either. I trust you too as I told you there on the street. For Christ's sweet sake, not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make them better; and if anyone can you can. I want them to be the best possible stories, and I want them to be around for awhile...I'm serious. I never figured I was going to get rich or even make a living writing stories and poems. Be enough, you know, to have Knopf do the book of mine and have you as my editor. So open the throttle. Ramming speed.⁸³

The letter not only gives us a good idea as to how Carver felt about Lish, and how much impact the man had on his life, the letter demonstrates the emotion Carver wanted to express to his friend. Carver's writing in his personal letters actually accentuates, draws attention to the feeling he preferred to express in his fiction. Carver showers Lish with gratitude, with love and trust, feelings associated with sentimentality, and had been doing so since 1969. Carver was sentimental, he was sincere, and he wanted Lish to be constantly aware of how he felt about what Lish had done for him. Carver has complete trust in his friend as an editor, and he assuages his friend's worry by remarking, "For sweet Christ's sake, not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make

⁸³ 10 May 1980.

them better; and if anyone can you can.”⁸⁴ Carver is excited about the new group of stories being “around for awhile” and he wants Lish to do everything he can to help them first to be accepted and then remain in the literary canon.

Gary Fisketjon, an editor who worked with Carver on *Where I'm Calling From* (1988),⁸⁵ when asked about Carver and Gordon Lish's relationship, said this in December 2007: “An editorial relationship is a private one, and nobody can see it fully and completely. Clearly, there was a catastrophic breakdown here that's interesting and ultimately unknowable.”⁸⁶ Lish has said on numerous occasions he has no interest in discussing his relationship with Carver or what exactly happened almost thirty years ago concerning Carver's frantic 1980 letter informing Lish he did not want to see the manuscripts for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) published as Lish had edited them for the collection. The now-famous letter Carver wrote Lish was in the morning of 08 July 1980.⁸⁷

The reasons he gives for not wanting the book read by the public are of different types. The first reason he gives is that many of his friends, including his then girlfriend, Tess Gallagher, had seen the early versions of the stories—another friend, Donald Hall, had “discussed them at length with [Carver] and offered services in reviewing the collection.”⁸⁸ But the primary reason the author gives for not wanting to go forward with the collection is one most personal and certainly more abstract: Carver shares his feelings with Lish, how the present edited, collection would assuredly cost him his sanity. But

⁸⁴ It would seem Lish had expressed a concern to Carver about his editing. According to the letter, and what we can assume from their encounter, Carver was responsible for Lish's actions, to some degree.

⁸⁵ Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988).

⁸⁶ “Rough Crossings.” Editorial. *The New Yorker* (24 & 31 December 2007) 94.

⁸⁷ 08 July 1980. The letter was published almost in its entirety in *The New Yorker* (24 & 31 December 2007) 94-96.

⁸⁸ 08 July 1980.

more importantly, he stresses to Lish how the stories themselves have contributed to his sobriety and his mental health. When Carver gives Lish examples of stories, with which he is “too close right now, that story”—he is refereeing to “Beginners,” the story Lish titles, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” Carver writes to Lish,

Now much of this has to do with my sobriety and with my new-found (and fragile, I see) mental health and well-being. I’ll tell you the truth, my very sanity is on the line here. I don’t want to sound melodramatic here, but I’ve come back from the grave here to start writing stories once more. As I think you may know, I’d given up entirely, thrown it in and was looking forward to dying, that release. But I kept thinking, I’ll wait until after the election to kill myself, or wait until after this or that happened, usually something down the road a ways, but it was never far from my mind in those dark days, not all that long ago.⁸⁹

The absolute bottom line of the letter is that Carver wants production stopped on the book due to Lish’s extreme edits. Carver does not stress the obvious: these are his stories, not Lish’s, and he prefers the stories as he has written them, not how Lish has edited them to fit the vision of minimalism. Instead, Carver focuses on why he needs the stories kept intact as he has written them. He was not proving a case against Lish’s edits—or why he believed, textually, the stories should be returned to their original form—so much as pleading with his friend to show compassion for the emotional depth out of which the stories had developed. It appears Carver was relying on Lish to “feel” for Carver’s emotional attachment to the full-text versions of stories, one specifically, “Beginners.” Again, Carver did not make an accusation against Lish for corrupting his vision as a storyteller and how Lish had encroached upon his authorial intention, though that is exactly what happened.

⁸⁹ 08 July 1980. It should be noted that unlike the stories “Fat” and “What’s In Alaska?” this was not a situation where Lish was advising Carver on early drafts. Lish took control of all Carver manuscripts for their second book collection; and though he have control over the texts of the first book collection, he did not make the changes as he did with the second.

What we have is a frantic letter written at the height of an emotional crisis regarding a book collection and all the manuscripts therein. Carver was going through the emotional meltdown in order to establish a viable reason why Lish should have understood what he felt needed to be done regarding the texts. Carver wanted more of his original vision in the stories he had written not Lish. Both men had a vision and the importance of discovering the true Carver text relies on the separation of Lish's from Carver's. To reach a conclusive text from which some critical analysis can be made is to discover that Carver was a highly emotionally charged writer and in the case of "Beginners" he is a writer who triumphs: he writes the aesthetic emotional depth of characterization and discloses the emotional and intellectual turmoil that goes with attempting to understand what love is. According to Carver, love is disarming in nature, and drags the character through endless turmoil as they attempt to get at emotional truth.

For us to get at Carver's original, and powerfully emotional style we have to discover his original vision for his story. We have to look at Lish's contributions and Carver's authorial intent separately. To discern Lish's contributions to "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" from Carver's authorial intentions for "Beginners,"⁹⁰ we must first look at Lish's edited version and Carver's original version textually, in order to discover important variants. The discussion will be of a general sense: what type of changes Lish made, how often he made them, and the severity of the changes, minor or major. Examples of both minor and major changes will lend to an analysis aimed at defining the impact of Lish's changes. The only way to generate a critical analysis of

⁹⁰ Carver does not mention "Beginners" in any of his letters to Lish until 08 July 1980. The first he mentions getting the stories together for Lish's editing is 15 February 1980. "Beginners" had not been published in any form at this time; the story was first published in *The New Yorker* (24 & 31 December 2007) 100-109.

these texts is to separate them, treating them as two separate stories—the first published, Lish’s edited version, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (1981), and the second published, Carver’s original version, “Beginners” (2007).⁹¹ “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” will be discussed in view, primarily, of the additions Lish was making to the text, but also how certain deletions transformed Carver’s vision into Lish’s. What makes one text so different from the other is how these additions and deletions are considered. “Beginners” is a completely different story from “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” because of the what the readers do not know about the characters in the first published version. So, the textual and critical analysis for “Beginners” will depend heavily on that which Lish has left out, the deletions.

After a discussion on the textual differences between the two stories, we will begin to see some important changes in Carver’s original vision, which lead to the Lish edited version of the story. Once the two stories have been separated, the textual differences in the stories will generate a discussion for “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” the end result of Lish’s edits. After a sufficient discussion of Lish’s version, a critical analysis can then be established for the deletions Lish made to Carver’s original text, “Beginners.”

In order to emphasize the importance of Carver’s original authorial intention, the critical analysis will focus on major scenes. For “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” we will discover Lish’s intention for adding lines of text that paraphrase pages he chose to leave out: the first is the old couple’s story as told by Mel (Herb) and, the second is an added paragraph, which sums up the last pages of the story. We will also

⁹¹ This is not to suggest that only “Beginners” is Carver’s “version”—the tags are used for clarity purposes only. Both versions of the story are Raymond Carver’s; one is edited by Gordon Lish, the other is not.

see how Lish changed Mel (Herb) by making additions to the text to make the cardiologist seem less educated and more everyman in his speech mannerisms.

For “Beginners” we will discover the depth of the original text by paying particular close attention to Lish’s deletions involving the old couple’s story, and Herb’s (Mel’s) suicidal tendencies. Together, the discussions will show both Carver texts as two separate stories and they will prove to be powerful in their own right. But what the stories will show us is not only that they can both be established as two classic Carver stories, but that no matter how powerful a story, one can be called Lish’s vision, the other Carver’s vision.

Lish’s edits to the pages of the original text, “Beginners,”⁹² which reshaped the story into “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” are hard to judge by simply turning the pages and looking at them. Not one page is exempt from Lish’s editing: he makes changes to every page, sometimes so severe that the page only mildly resembles that of Carver’s original text, with three fourths of the page blacked out and rewritten.⁹³ Other pages were completely deleted, and Lish summarizes the pages in only a handful of sentences.⁹⁴ Textually, the stories are very different. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” as published in the paperback, Vintage Book Edition is a lean seventeen pages.⁹⁵ The original text as Carver envisioned was thirty-three pages. The original manuscript shows Lish added lines of text in his written hand (usually just above

⁹² Though *The New Yorker* published “Beginners” in its entirety, all references to this story are taken from the manuscript entitled “Beginners,” unless where noted, found in the manuscript folder marked “Lish mss Carver What We Talk About...1st Draft ms. (f. 3 of 3)” in the Lish Manuscript Holdings in the Lilly Library, Indiana University. This edited version of the manuscript, though slightly different from the published version “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” in the paperback, contains Lish’s original edits in his own hand.

⁹³ “Beginners” pages 7-8, 10-18, 25-28.

⁹⁴ “Beginners” pages 19-24, 28-33.

⁹⁵ Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 137-154.

a deletion) to simplify description and to segue from one sentence to the next, and his insertions shortened dialogue, in many instances changing intonation and vernacular. He also added words to the text (after deleting certain words) to make the descriptions more poetic, more charming, even more imaginative.⁹⁶ He added paragraph breaks and he inserted punctuation to create new, shorter sentences out of broken, longer ones, raising the case of any given word to restart a sentence or lowering the case to extend a sentence. He added question marks, and periods, and commas to provide rhythm. And he added space-breaks to divide the story into shorter sections.

Lish is making changes to Carver's style to better fit the tone and shape he helped Carver mold for their first published book collection, *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?* (1976). The pattern with which Lish is editing can only be described by using similar attributes penned by so many critics at the time *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* was first published in 1981. Lish's edits made the text stark, spare, lean, and to the bone. Lish deleted characters' self-reflexiveness: deleted the characters' awareness of feelings, making them less conscious of the world and their understanding and place within it, effectively making most every Carver character encountered a little "dumber." Lish wanted to de-familiarize the familiar, wanted to make the characters less unique, even more ordinary than they originally appeared. Lish might have considered this an "every man" attribute, where his audience would more easily relate to what was happening in the story. Every edit Lish made was calculated and created to have some effect on the reader, however minute. In the following discussion of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," we will begin to see just how Lish was affecting the

⁹⁶ These additions and deletions will be further considered in later discussion to discover just how major or minor the changes were.

story with his edits. By using examples of how Lish edited Carver, his additions and certainly some deletions we will begin to see how these visions separate into two entirely new stories.

“What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (and for that matter, “Beginners”) is a story that revolves around two couples sitting around discussing past relationships in the home of a cardiologist named Mel McGinnis⁹⁷ and his second wife, Terri. The story is narrated by Nick, a friend to Mel and Terri, who is accompanied by his wife, Laura. The entire company is drinking large amounts of gin as they wait to go out for dinner. The plot of the story is driven by their conversations about love and past relationships, until Mel is inspired to tell a story about an old couple whom he helped recover after they had been through a near-fatal car accident.⁹⁸ The old couple’s story is meant to provide contrast to the relationships Mel and Terri have lived through. The story comes after the couple has recounted the experiences they had with Terri’s crazy ex-boyfriend, Ed, an abusive man. After she has left Ed and after he has brought fear into Mel and Terri’s lives, he ineffectually tries to commit suicide on one occasion, before succeeding on the second, but not before suffering a prolonged death from a self-inflicted bullet wound. The conversation gets around to Mel’s desire to kill his ex-wife with a hive of bees, his ex-wife being profoundly allergic. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” ends with group still sitting around the kitchen. With the Lish ending comes an impending sense of nothingness, as if the entire group is waiting for nothing to

⁹⁷ One of the changes Lish would eventually make to the manuscript before the book publication is renaming the cardiologist. His name is Herb in both the published version of “Beginners” and Lish’s edited manuscript found in the folder for the first draft of the book manuscript. For the book, his name is Mel, and for convenience purposes, Mel is used for discussing “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”

⁹⁸ The bulk of deleted material comes from this section of the story. Lish deletes six pages from Carver’s story regarding the old couple.

happen: a grand indifference. They are no longer waiting to decide what to do for dinner, they are just simply waiting.

Carver believed his story was better after Lish made his edits. Carver explains in the 08 July 1980 letter: “Gordon,” the passage begins, “the changes are brilliant and for the better in most cases—I look at “What We Talk About...”(Beginners) and I see what it is that you’ve done, what you’ve pulled out of it, and I’m awed and astonished, startled, even with your insights.”⁹⁹ Most of the edits Lish makes to the story are in the same vein as many suggestions he made to early drafts of stories Carver had sent him at the beginning of their relationship in 1969.¹⁰⁰ We will see here, though, that Lish’s edits to the story “Beginners,” eventually becomes “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” through his virtual rewrite of the text. Most of the following changes might seem like minor deletions and additions in some cases, but they end up having a major affect on the outcome of the story.

The story begins, “My friend Mel McGinnis, ~~a cardiologist,~~ was talking.” Lish added to Carver’s opening by inserting his line, “Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right.”¹⁰¹ The second sentence of the short story has now been changed considerably by Lish. He has changed our understanding of Nick: we see him now as a character who does not speak often at what Mel is saying, but does quietly judge him. Not only does the line affect the consciousness of the narrator, Lish changes what the audience knows about Mel, that he talks because he feels others should listen.

⁹⁹ 08 July 1980.

¹⁰⁰ These were no longer mere suggestions as they were in 1969-71. The strikeouts and additional lines in this case were edits Lish made to the manuscript for what would eventually become the copy-text of the book publication in 1981. Carver at this point had lost authorial control over what was going to be deleted and added to his work.

¹⁰¹ “Beginners” 1; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 137.

Lish also isolates Carver's first sentence and his own into one concise paragraph, an opening punch. For the rest of the page, the edits are consistent with Lish's brand of editing but reasonable: the strikeouts are there but he has given Carver the leeway for a more expansive text. Whether or not the details he cuts are superfluous is arguable, but the details left in become important. Lish is giving Carver a great deal of room to describe the setting and people. The strikeouts do not affect theme or tone.

In the third and fourth paragraph of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," we see how Lish's deletion of text begins to affect character development.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with Herb loved her so much he tried to kill her. ~~Herb laughed after she said this. He made a face. Terri looked at him.~~ Then **Terri** she said, "He beat me up one night, ~~the last night we lived together.~~ He dragged me around the living room by my ankles. **He kept saying,** ~~all the while saying,~~ 'I love you, don't you see? I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. **My** ~~my~~ head **kept** knocking on things." ~~Terri~~ **She** looked around the table ~~at us and then looked at her hands on her glass.~~ "What do you do with love like that?" she said. ¶ She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendent earrings. ~~She was fifteen years younger than Herb, had suffered periods of anorexia, and during the late sixties, before she'd gone to nursing school, had been a dropout, a "street person" as she put it. Herb sometimes called her, affectionately, his hippie.~~¹⁰²

Lish is taking away as much detail as possible about characters, their back-story and their movements. The deletion of character movement refers to how they are being affected by what is said. Lish has cut Mel (Herb) and Terri's reactions, thus removing details pertaining to minute actions. When Mel (Herb) laughs and makes a face, readers do not need to process the remark. Lish changes Terri's dialogue to change the vernacular with which she speaks: an "everywoman" would probably use "He kept saying" instead

¹⁰² The indented text represents the draft version of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The strikeouts indicate Lish's deletion, the boldface indicates an addition. Again, Herb is actually Mel. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" 138; "Beginners" 1-2.

of “All the while saying”—Lish “dumbed” her down, to make sure the audience would relate to a more colloquial dialogue. Lish is cleaning up the story so the reader is not bogged down by actions they do not need to “see” to understand how the characters feel from what she is saying. And Lish’s paring down back-story leaves out any chance the audience might mistake this group as unique, or less ordinary. By striking her age, her anorexia, and the time period during which she was in her early twenties, readers of all ages and eras relate to her more easily. Lish is trying to make the piece timeless.

The bulk of the “Beginners” text includes cuts and strikeouts, and trimmed detail—pages filled with Lish’s edits curtailing over-explained or drawn-out observations. Regarding most of Lish’s light editing, they seem almost reasonable, minor cuts and trimmings, especially if one considers Lish’s talents. Here is a brief listing of some of the more memorable lines from “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” that Lish wrote. When Mel is telling the group about the night Ed was brought to the hospital after he has tried killing himself a second time. This is Carver’s detailed description: “I happened to be there when they brought him in to the emergency room. I was there on another case. He was still alive, but beyond anything anyone could do for him. Still, he lived for three days.”¹⁰³ This is Lish’s line: “I happened to be there when they brought him in, alive but past recall. But, the man lived for three days.”¹⁰⁴ The simplification of Carver’s explanation is hard to miss.

Here is a particular instance where Lish has made an impression on Carver’s text by adding a bit of poetic flare to his description of the room they were sitting in. After the conversation moves from Ed’s suicide and all the crazy things he put Terri and Mel

¹⁰³ “Beginners” 6.

¹⁰⁴ “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 142.

through, and after the Nick makes a scene by kissing his wife's hand to show he was in love with her, Carver includes a description of the afternoon before Mel goes off on his tangent about "what real love is" referring to the old couple. Here is Carver's description of the afternoon as he originally wrote it, which includes Lish's edits:

Outside, in the backyard, one of the dogs began to bark. The leaves of the aspen tree that leaned past the window **ticked against the glass. flickered in the breeze.** The afternoon sunlight was like a presence in ~~the~~ **this** room, **the spacious light of** ~~There was suddenly a feeling~~ of ease and generosity. ~~around the table, of friendship and comfort.~~ We could have been anywhere, **somewhere enchanted.** We raised our glasses again and grinned at each other like children who had agreed on something **forbidden for once.**¹⁰⁵

Of course, how one gauges how aesthetic or poetic an ear is depends on taste, but Lish seems to succeed in making the description more pleasing, more "enchanting," by any means. Lish's additions to this description might very well have incited Carver to tell Lish in that 08 July 1980 letter that the changes were "brilliant...in most cases." What he adds to the description of the scene does show us where Lish was succeeding in his edits. And a smaller addition to the story that Carver could very well have appreciated, literally had something to do with word choice. Carver's line was: "She seemed anxious, that's the only word for it."¹⁰⁶ Lish rewrote the line, "She seemed anxious, or maybe that's too strong a word."¹⁰⁷

Here's a few of the more pungent lines Lish added to the text of "Beginners" to arrive at "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." These are some colloquialisms and cruder phrases Lish added to Carver lines, most are both Carver and

¹⁰⁵ "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" 143-144; "Beginners" 8. These indications of deletions and additions resemble changes Lish made to the "Beginners" manuscript that would become the book published version of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The "Beginners" manuscript included additions by Lish that did not make it to publication: "~~around the table, of friendship and a special tenderness. comfort.~~"

¹⁰⁶ "Beginners" 12.

¹⁰⁷ "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" 146.

Lish, but Lish is adding the vulgarity of the language—incidentally, the same language Carver had used in stories past, but Lish seems particularly concerned with changing Mel’s demeanor. He’s a working professional on his day off. “Just shut up for ~~a minute,~~ ~~will you?~~ **once in your life.**”¹⁰⁸ “A kid hit them and they were all **torn to shit** ~~battered up.~~”¹⁰⁹ “I’ll try ~~and make a long story to keep this~~ short. ~~The other fellows showed up,~~ **and So,** we took the ~~old couple~~ up to the ~~operating room~~ **OR** and worked **like fuck** on them most of the night.”¹¹⁰ “Let’s drink this **cheapo** gin. ~~Let’s drink it~~ **the hell** up.”¹¹¹ “Vassals, **vessels...** **What the fuck’s the difference?** ~~vassals, vessels, ventricles, vas deferens.~~”¹¹² “I’m a heart surgeon, sure, but ~~really~~ I’m just a mechanic. I ~~just~~ go in **and I fuck around** and I fix things. **Shit.**”¹¹³ And of course, “Let’s finish this **fucking** gin, **okay?**”¹¹⁴ And finally, “**We all need a pill now and then.**”¹¹⁵

The real additions that play an important role in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” are those that paraphrase entire pages worth of actions into single paragraphs. These major additions begin at the point in the story when Mel begins telling the story about the old couple’s near fatal car accident. During their conversation about Terri’s last relationship and how her ex-lover had threatened Mel and Terri’s lives, Mel is inspired by his frustration over “modern” love, about how he seems to know little to nothing about love. He explains to the others, Nick and Laura and Terri that even if he and Terri were to divorce or even if they were to perish, one or the other, the survivor

¹⁰⁸ “Beginners” 11; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 143.

¹⁰⁹ “Beginners” 12; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 146.

¹¹⁰ “Beginners” 13; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 147. Here, “like fuck” was not written on the draft “Beginners.” Lish must have added the phrase just before the final published version for the book.

¹¹¹ “Beginners” 14; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 148.

¹¹² “Beginners” 16; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 149.

¹¹³ “Beginners” 16; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 149.

¹¹⁴ “Beginners” 25; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 152.

¹¹⁵ “Beginners” 25; “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” 152.

would end up loving again—their previous failed marriages seem to prove this rule. No matter what, the human heart would love again. Mel gets so worked up over the conversations that he wants to share with them something that had happened to him regarding an old couple he helped save and especially his involvement with the old man’s convalescence.

Lish reshaped the story by making line additions in order to abbreviate the impact and relevance the old couple’s story has on Carver’s overall story. And Lish returns to the same light editing as described for earlier passages, but he adds his lines to capture the essence by way of reduction for what Carver wants from the old couple’s story. Mel (Herb) details what the old couple looks like, he describes their casts and bandages as those seen in movies, with nothing but eyeholes to see through and nothing but mouth-holes to talk and breath through. Herb says after they have been taken out of intensive care, the old man was depressed, “Even after he found out his wife was going to pull through ~~and recover~~, he was still very depressed.”¹¹⁶ Here is what Lish adds to replace a great deal of text in which Carver conveys his emphasis and significance of the old couple’s story:

“I mean, the accident was one thing, but it wasn’t everything. I’d get up to his mouth-hole, you know, and he’d say no, it wasn’t the accident exactly but it was because he couldn’t¹¹⁷ see her through the eye-holes. He said that was what was making him feel so bad.¹¹⁸ Can you imagine? I’m telling you, the man’s heart was breaking because he couldn’t turn his goddamn head and *see* his goddamn wife.”¹¹⁹

He Herb [Mel] looked around the table ~~at us~~ and shook his head at what he was going to say.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ “Beginners” 19. The strike out indicates Lish’s deletion.

¹¹⁷ “Beginners” 19. The page numbers given here within Lish’s text indicate on what page he was making his addition. Carver’s original text is deleted. Note the number of pages between each added phrase.

¹¹⁸ “Beginners” 20.

¹¹⁹ “Beginners” 21.

¹²⁰ “Beginners” 21. This line is the only Carver line that remains out of the six pages Lish condenses. It includes Lish’s addition of “Herb” and the strikeout of “at us”.

**“I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn’t *look*
at the fucking woman.”¹²¹**

We all looked at him.

“Do you see what I’m saying?” he said.¹²²

True to Lish form, the passage is brief and to the point, succinct yet holding enough information for the readers to understand the importance of what Mel is saying and the relevance the old couple. And, of course, Lish is direct and succinct in his statement of theme. No one can know exactly as to what about Lish’s additions and deletions Carver found “astonishing.” But, perhaps he was astonished by Lish’s uncanny ability to summarize Carver’s original text into a few short lines. For instance, Lish deletes some six pages (19-24) of the original manuscript filled with back story, audience involvement with details of the scene, and some powerful conclusions of theme.¹²³ Lish still maintains Carver’s theme for Mel’s complete befuddlement concerning love. Mel cannot imagine loving as these two older folks loved, but we have only one example which is more like a hint: the “old fart” was being torn apart inside because he “couldn’t *look* at the fucking woman.” This is the only clue we have into the emotional depth of their relationship. Lish believes readers can fill in the blanks, so he can get on with the starkness, the terrifying indifference of his ending. And Lish’s line for Mel, his final question to them regarding the old couple foreshadows the intellectual crisis of indifference. Mel is almost pleading with his audience. Carver could very well have been astonished by Lish’s ability to simplify a very deep relationship meant to contrast the contemporaneous romance into a failure even to verbalize the emotional response such a seemingly perfect, old fashioned relationship would have on someone. Everything has

¹²¹ “Beginners” 23.

¹²² “Beginners” 24.

¹²³ A more detailed analysis will be provided once we begin discussion of “Beginners.”

been cut, but the powerful befuddlement of not being aware of our world forces us to be hopeless to change it, and Lish knew this. Perhaps this is why Carver was “startled” by Lish’s insights.

Lish’s ending for the story is even more stark, even more terrifying. But, it certainly lacks Carver’s emotional depth. The last four pages of the “Beginners” text was deleted by Lish. Again, Lish has done something with those last four pages that Carver himself had done in previous stories.¹²⁴ But, Lish takes Carver’s own ending from him here and substitutes it for one he might have been more likely to write some five years before in their first book collection. For whatever reason, Lish did not like Carver’s development since he had quit drinking and started writing newer stories that would naturally lead to different forms and approaches to stories. For “Beginners,” Carver had employed his favorite sort of ending, Chekhovian in nature, but Lish trumps him with his own influence and turns the ending into something more out of a Beckett play. The stark indifference from the characters as they wait, as if they do not understand, and they do not have the desire nor the capabilities to fully grasp their position and involvement in any respect for the conversations they have just sat through. The ending is full of despair, but lacks human comprehension aside from disgust in “human noise” and Lish fails to allow any enlightenment or any hope for development out of these characters. Mel’s rant, as it were, for having “the right” to sit and lecture considers no new positions or new outcomes. The ending is void of any positive response from the characters and their situation.

¹²⁴ See my discussion of “What’s in Alaska?” and the “Divert Me” manuscript.

“I could eat something myself,” Laura said. I just realized I’m ~~hungry~~ **starved**. What is there **something to nibble on?** ~~to snack on?~~¹²⁵

“I’ll put out some cheese and crackers,” Terri said. ~~but~~ **But Terri** ~~she~~ just sat there. **She didn’t get up to get anything.**

Herb finished his drink. ~~Then he got slowly up from the table and said, “Excuse me. I’ll go shower.” He left the kitchen and walked slowly down the hall to the bathroom. He shut the door behind him.~~

“Gin’s gone,” Herb [Mel] said.

I could hear my heart beating. As a matter of fact, I could hear everyone’s heart. It was awful, the human noise we sat there making, not a one of us moving even when the room went totally dark.

The characters are hopeless to their own grotesque nature of living. Here Lish adds to Nick’s character a powerful sense of disgust in the human race: they make an awful noise as they sit, the beating of the human heart. This exit, this ending for a story that had dealt so heavily with the spiritualization of the love, and should be an absolute, has been diminished, reduced to a mere disgusting organ instead of an instrument for loving. Mel is a cardiologist, yet he is paralyzed by his inability to fully grasp the emotional depth of love; he is unable to understand the human heart as symbolized by human nature as a place that springs forth love. Lish succeeds by way of simplification and reduction. But what of an ending that is more expansive, one that is truer to what Carver had originally written, and one that was definitely Carver’s initial authorial intention?

Lish failed as Carver’s editor when he cut entire passages from “Beginners” that did have weight—passages that carried profound significance for the ending that Carver knew the expansive text would require. The deletions have hindered the depth Carver wanted to show his audience and Lish reduced the scale of appreciation for his work. The

¹²⁵ I have included Lish’s edits exactly as they appear on the manuscript. “What” would later be dropped from the text.

old couple's story becomes diminished, considerably, and the ending loses much of the emotional impact Carver had anticipated.

Carver's emotional depth in his writing and in his personal life, and the combination of the two, is exemplified in his 08 July 1980 letter in which he pleads with Lish to re-instate some of the material he had originally produced for the old couple's story. Referring to some of Lish's edits he would have liked to see reversed, Carver wrote Lish: "...and I'd want some of the old couple, Anna and Henry Gates in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (Beginners)."¹²⁶ The story of the old man and his wife gives the audience an example of what love conceivably was, in an "old fashion" or idyllic way, and what love became, the reality of divorce and violence.¹²⁷ Herb (Mel) was a man who needed the old man's story, and we begin to understand the depth of contrast between relationships, both the old couple's and Nick and Laura's verse Herb and Terri's. Herb is also an individual who sees the world in very light and dark terms, and he is heavily involved with the world in which he lives on an emotional level. Understanding this view of Herb as he tells the story of the old couple, after he has given us a perspective on the dark days he and Terri were forced to live through, creates a desire for Herb to manifest some form of hope from the stories they encounter.

As for Lish's contributions, Carver explains his own style of writing in the draft manuscript of his famous essay, "On Writing."

If fiction, long or short, is to be worth anything, I think there has to be some linking-up of words and images so that it's possible to get at some emotional or intellectual, call it esthetic, truth, which must in turn communicate itself to the reader through those specific words and images; and the focus for this truth most usually has to come to us as readers

¹²⁶ 08 July 1980.

¹²⁷ See also, "Gazebo."

through perceptions of one or the other of the characters in the narrative.¹²⁸

Carver, in his own words, defines what he believes writing should do. We have seen some of Lish's preference: his edits link-up images to get at only an intellectual truth, for if he had wanted an emotional truth to come to the surface of the story, he would have left much of Carver's story exactly as he had written it. With "Beginners" we feel the full breadth of an artist conveying emotional depth and exacting emotional responses from the characters.¹²⁹ Herb conveys a story of an old couple with profound attention to detail, and he is affected deeply by the idea that an idyllic romantic love had once existed, and as we will see, has no way of incorporating idyllic love into his contemporary relationship with his present wife—not after all she's gone through and everything he's gone through.

After the couples discuss Terri's past situation and the hardships Herb and Terri endured, the story shifts away from the hopelessness of Carl's (Ed's) obsessive, criminal love to a story with a different sort of tragedy. Herb wants to get at something he's been trying to understand himself. He asks the group, "What do any of us really know about love?"¹³⁰ Herb wants to prove his point by involving his audience with a story about an old couple who have been in a terrible, near-fatal car accident. As Herb tells the story, we get a distinct air of hope as the tale progresses. The story is not about whether the old couple lives or dies—they do live through the accident; the story is about how they love while they live, have lived, and how they go on living.

¹²⁸ "On Writing" 8.

¹²⁹ With this discussion of "Beginners," I have reverted to the original names of Carver's characters. Mel is now Herb, and Ed is now Carl.

¹³⁰ "Beginners" 9.

Lish has had his way with the story, but many of the aforementioned edits are minute in light of his decision to shorten the text by forty percent. Lish makes “Beginners” a very short story considering what he has left out. The editor begins to find instances in the story that hinder the content as he sees and understands it and he does so slowly—eases into his cuts, first with the set-up of the old couple’s story, then by deleting almost the entire story. Up to the point of the old couple, Lish has been editing “Beginners” in a way with which many editors might argue as perhaps heavier than usual but necessary nonetheless. Other editors might say the editing is still relatively light.

During Herb’s set-up for the old couple’s story, Lish takes Carver’s lines and rewords phrases to shorten and sharpen what Carver hopes to convey to his readers. Lish is not changing too much of Carver’s essence, but he is changing the number of words Carver takes to say what he means. After all, Herb has been talking on the page already for a good bit of the story and intends to speak about the couple for many more pages. As we have seen, Lish hints at changing Herb’s tone and the general informality of the conversation through word choice. The longwinded, detailed telling is shortened, abbreviated, but in the meantime, Lish has changed Herb’s demeanor: a subtle, if not minor enough change that can go unnoticed, compared with the deletions Lish makes to the overall composition of “Beginners”—profuse deletions from this point on in the manuscript regarding the old couple’s story and the ending.

After Herb sets up the old couple’s story for Terri, Nick and Laura, the group moves into a long digression about a new restaurant called “The Library” where people sit and dine while surrounded with books on shelves. The digression takes the reader completely out of the story. Carver uses the discussion of the new “library” restaurant to

segue into a digression about the novel *Ivanhoe*, and this digression segues into a discussion of vassals and serfs during the medieval age.¹³¹ Carver shows how real-life conversations have a tendency to evolve into different topics and return to the point, but Lish does not see the digression as relevant—that is, not the digression in the entirety, what with mention of the restaurant and the Sir Walter Scott reference. However, with all that has been said up to this point in the story about Terri’s previous relationship, about death and life and love, Herb’s wish to be something or somebody else is not only fitting and relevant, but has a profound affect on the crisis he has been going through in his life: Herb wishes he could be a knight and be protected by his armor. The intent here on Carver’s part is to establish Herb’s ego as being fragile, his vulnerability comes from and is based upon the turmoil of his first marriage and his second wife’s turmoil from her relationship with Carl (Ed). More and more throughout the text does the reader become aware of the growing fragility of his mental state.

Lish does leave in the vassal and knight digression for the weight it bears on the overall connection between Herb’s mental fragility and the redemptive quality of the old couple’s story. Lish, as editor, makes these minor cuts and additions based on the theme, the overall effect the story is to have on the readers. The length of the digressions and the expansive texts depends heavily on the outcome of the entire story.

The old couple’s near-fatal accident compliments what Herb and Terri, and Nick and Laura are all discussing before Herb tells the anecdote. The discussion of love and life and death is ongoing throughout much of “Beginners.” Herb makes the point of telling the group that “we’re just rank beginners at love. We say we love each other and

¹³¹ “Beginners” 14.

we do, I don't doubt it. We love each other and we love hard, all of us."¹³² After he discusses his love for Terri, and how he must have loved his first wife, Herb talks about how "if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one, the other partner would mourn for a while, you know, but then...go out and love again."¹³³ What inspires Herb to tell the story of the old couple is the idea of death, of loss and how most people would just go out and love again, and how most people do just that. But even Herb is unsure what the old couple's story means to him and when it is over no one tries to analyze what he has said. Mostly, Herb is inspired to tell the story because he is at a loss—he's admittedly a beginner who does not know anything about how people love but he is aware that he does love. Understanding how people can learn to love again, when he believes love to be an absolute, spiritual love has brought him into a dilemma. Love and life and death become a very important theme to Carver and these three elements commingle into what Herb believes. He gives the proper depth to his claim on spiritual love through the example of his anecdote. He describes the accident, as described by the old man. The old man tells him...

...what it looked like to him, what it felt like, when that kid's car crossed the center line onto his side of the road and kept coming. He said he knew it was all up for them, that was the last look of anything he'd have on earth. This was it. But he said nothing flew into his mind, his life didn't pass before his eyes, nothing like that. He said he felt sorry to not be able to see any more of his Anna, because they'd had this fine life together.¹³⁴

Carver has demonstrated a fictional but realistic claim to what would happen if someone was faced with death. And the author gives us an example of idyllic romantic love. But, due to Herb's past experiences with relationships, specifically his ex-wife and

¹³² "Beginners" 9. This line does not include Lish's edits.

¹³³ "Beginners" 10. This line does not include Lish's edits.

¹³⁴ "Beginners" 19. This passage is part of the text Lish deleted; it was struck out in its entirety.

his present wife's ex-lover, his hope to establish such a love is diminished considerably. What ensues is Herb's retelling of what the old man described to Herb while he was recovering about his life as he and his wife lived for the past fifty years.

The old man is depressed because he can not physically be with his wife while they recovered.¹³⁵ He tells Herb of how he and his wife lived on a ranch outside of Bend, Oregon, that they moved to Bend only a short time ago and how they had only been separate on two occasions throughout their marriage, incidentally for two deaths—one for when the old woman's mother died, and then again when her sister died. Herb speaks of how the old man "pined" for his wife as he recovered in the hospital, and how he had never even understood the meaning of the word he saw the old man so depressed. Herb recounts how the couple would entertain themselves by spending their winters during the 1920's and 1930's, before they had kids. The old man tells Herb, "We'd go to the dances every night."¹³⁶ They would play their Victrola at night and dance and that they could hear the snow falling outside. The old man assures the doctor, "It's true Doc...you can do that. Sometimes you can hear the snow falling. If you're quiet and your mind is clear and you're at peace with yourself and all things, you can lay in the dark and hear it snow. You try it sometimes."¹³⁷

Herb might be considering this old couple in light of his first marriage, which failed, and his second marriage. As he told the group, "I loved my first wife more than life itself" and they still stopped loving each other; Herb doubts the true, absoluteness of his relationship with Terri.¹³⁸ Not only is Carver using the old couple's relationship as an

¹³⁵ We discovered earlier that Lish liked this theme and drew his own vision from it.

¹³⁶ "Beginners" 22. A Lish deleted line.

¹³⁷ "Beginners" 22. A Lish deleted line.

¹³⁸ "Beginners" 9.

example of the sort of love affair Herb might long for, but the story within a story exemplifies a certain peace that rarely has existed for Herb in relationships. Herb could be looking at the old couple's relationship as the unattainable, some lofty representation of things past, never to be returned to again.

Carver does not bring too much attention to their miraculous survival; he diverts the reader's attention by bringing them into an idyllic romantic love that Nick suggests Herb has trouble believing. Nick observes, "[Herb] looked around the table at us and shook his head at what he was going to say, or just maybe the impossibility of all this."¹³⁹ Carver also has Herb echo Nick's observation. Herb says, "I didn't see how people could live like that. I don't think anyone can live like that these days. You think so? It seems impossible to me."¹⁴⁰ We can relate to Nick and Herb that the story seems impossible, and could even be too sentimental to take seriously. Carver gives his readers an opportunity to willingly be aware of his characters' doubt in how this old couple lived. We cannot conceive of a time when love was so simple, so understood between two people, any more than they can. Carver presents his storyteller with enough doubt that his almost over-sensationalized, romantic telling of the relationship becomes implausible even to him.

Through Herb's emotional retelling of the story, and his already highly emotionalized state, Carver demonstrates a powerful characteristic that Lish has left out. Carver succeeds at raising the story to a level of impossible love where anyone can see how foreign such a relationship appears in this context. This old couple is from a different era, from a time stigmatized by idealistic romantic love—it might have existed

¹³⁹ "Beginners" 21. Lish salvaged half of this line for the succinct version mentioned above: "or just maybe the impossibility of all this" was not included in the Lish version.

¹⁴⁰ "Beginners" 21-22.

but not to Herb and Nick. And unfortunately, Herb is torn between believing it may well be a romantic love that is possible and the belief that it cannot exist for him. Herb gives the story weight; he does not quickly disregard the anecdote as pure nonsense. The old couple represents idyllic love and a peace Herb certainly registers as a need in his life.¹⁴¹ Herb never admits it, though. The allusion to the snow falling and bringing absolute peace must have heightened Herb's frustration to no end, but, Herb McGinnis tells the story as if he is detached from his own feelings. He draws no conclusion and gives no indication of how he feels.¹⁴² Can one achieve the old couple's impossible love affair and peace here recounted by Herb?

Carver shrouds the reliability of the storyteller. Before telling the old couple's story, Herb has admitted he knows nothing, he believes he is a rank beginner at love. He is clearly searching for some new way to retain love for his wife or attain a higher belief in love—and to gain peace. But his reliability certainly comes into question after he tells the story. Terri says, "You didn't tell me this before, Herb... You just said a little about it when it first happened."¹⁴³ She goes on to add that he is deliberately telling this to her at that moment to make her cry. His wife doubts him, and the only indication Carver gives to dissuade our assumption about his reliability is to have Herb mention he received a card from the old man, "I guess that's one of the reasons they're on my mind right now. That, and what we were saying about love earlier."¹⁴⁴ The unreliability of Herb's character is deepened when one considers his mental state, hitherto unknown until his

¹⁴¹ Let's not forget that in both versions of the story, Lish's vision and Carver's vision, Mel and Herb both would like to kill their ex-wife.

¹⁴² This perhaps could very well be Carver mastering a trait he developed from Lish's suggestions to early stories. Carver does not draw attention to Herb's own awareness of what he has been talking about. See my discussion on "What's in Alaska?" and "Fat" pertaining to Lish cutting self-reflectiveness.

¹⁴³ "Beginners" 24.

¹⁴⁴ "Beginners" 25.

wife begins to explain her concern for her husband after he leaves the scene to shower before going to dinner.

After the story of the old man, Carver spends a lot of space fleshing out Herb's character and making him round. He mentions at the close of the old man's story that, though his experience with the old man was amazing and he would never forget the days he spent listening to him, "talking about it now has got [him] depressed."¹⁴⁵ This is the only reaction he speaks of the old man having on who he is and the life he has lived. He is depressed because he cannot reach any conclusion or resolution for his emotional state. He expresses no awareness of how the story relates to him personally and all the turmoil he has undergone to arrive at the relationship he now has with Terri. Herb, clearly, has not arrived at finding the peace in falling snow. And not only is he depressed, his wife suggests he take a pill, a "mood elevator."¹⁴⁶ Carver has given Herb a stressful job and a stressful personal life, with regards to his second wife's dangerous ex-lover. In the pages following the old couple's story, Carver broadens Herb's personal history by letting his audience in on how bad his first marriage was—a conversation stimulated by his depression. He is depressed from the thought of the old man, so he wants to call his kids, which draws his ex-wife into the conversation.

She has not remarried, and Terri parlays Herb's sentiments for her to either remarry or die. The ex-wife is allergic to bees, and Herb explains that when he is drunk he would like to dress up as a beekeeper and "release a hive of bees in the house."¹⁴⁷ Herb is a character who is depressed, takes "mood elevators" and fantasizes about killing his ex-wife. When Herb exits the story he has been carrying the conversation for the

¹⁴⁵ "Beginners" 25.

¹⁴⁶ "Beginners" 25.

¹⁴⁷ "Beginners" 27. Lish's changes are not included. Lish replaced "release" with "let loose."

entire length of the thirty-two page story, and as soon as he is gone, Terri divulges: “Herb was very suicidal after his first marriage.”¹⁴⁸ She adds he had been seeing a psychiatrist for awhile, and that Herb sometimes wonders if he should still be going, and that he talks of suicide, currently.¹⁴⁹ Herb had mentioned earlier in the story his wishes to come back after death as a knight, returns as she reveals her feelings about Herb, she says:

Lately, he’s been talking about suicide again. Especially when he’s been drinking. Sometimes I think he’s too vulnerable. He doesn’t have any defenses. He doesn’t have defenses against anything.¹⁵⁰

According to his wife, Herb is a man whose stress threshold has been maxed; he is a man who has thought about suicide, and evidently murder, on a number of occasions, mostly when drunk. Yet, Herb’s unreliability as a storyteller and what he has related to his audience is reinforced, strengthened, by the enormity of his inability to grasp what love really is to him, and how he can say love is spiritual and absolute, but still doubts it enough to be without peace. Though he desires to believe in a definition of love, when he poses these different relationships, one toward the other, he comes to no real understanding of what he lacks. The only result is that he is depressed, and still be, according to a firsthand witness, suicidal.

Carver has written a story to show his readers a prime example of a man under a tremendous amount of emotional turmoil, due in part from his personal life and his professional one. Herb speaks as if he can relate to the old man’s accident when he says, “There you are one minute, you know, everything just dandy, then blam, you’re staring into the abyss. You come back. It’s like a miracle. But it’s left its mark on you.”¹⁵¹ The

¹⁴⁸ “Beginners” 28.

¹⁴⁹ “Beginners” 28.

¹⁵⁰ “Beginners” 28-29.

¹⁵¹ “Beginners” 19.

“abyss” to which Herb refers, could just as easily mean emotional abyss, a suicidal abyss, and the abyss he sees in the death that occurs almost daily in his professional life, the hospital. Either way, Carver has instilled in Herb a profound sense of emotional depth, a depth with which Carver is familiar. Herb shows us how the expansive, emotional depth of a character can easily cloud their own understanding of a human condition and remain unaware of how to make themselves feel better about their current relationship. No one, it seems to Carver, is excused from having tremendous, if not an opaque understanding of exactly how human nature deals with unstable emotional states. Carver has made a character who demonstrates the chances of never returning from such an abyss, and that he also demonstrates realistic and terrifying possibilities of not knowing how to fix ourselves.

Why Gordon Lish would choose to shadow Carver’s achievements as a storyteller by not publishing a longer, expansive version of the story might very well boil down to the fact that Lish was simply doing his job. Lish was editing the story for how his own vision related itself to the short story collection. Carver mentioned “Beginners” a number of times in both his 08 July 1980 letter and his 10 July 1980 letter. The latter, Carver is still unnerved by the editing Lish has done to the story, but his tone is more of a business nature. He wants Lish to look through the manuscript for the short story collection because for Carver it is “a question of reinstating some of the things that were taken out in the second version.”¹⁵² And Carver seemingly mentions at random the possibility of renaming Herb, “Doug” for the story. At this point in the letter, it seems Carver has recalled some faculty of patience for his friend and professional editor. But, he still fails to argue that Lish’s version of the story, though brilliant, is not Carver’s own

¹⁵² 10 July 1980.

vision. So, his tone in the letter sounds as if he is compromising with Lish for the sake of getting on with the publication of the collection. He writes of the story,

Well, I've gone through WHAT WE TALK ABOUT, the story, and changed all the Herbs to Dougs. And, I just re-read it. It is just a beautiful story. No question it will make all the anthologies. I think it's important, and I know you agree, to try to get the story into print before too long, before the book comes out or at least right around the same time. Now, as I told you, TRIQUARTERLY wants to print the original of that (BEGINNERS) but not until Fall 1981 or Winter 1982. Even if they had this edited version they could not get it into print faster than that. So, I'd like to have WHAT WE TALK ABOUT sent somewhere else. I think ESQUIRE would take it; he nearly took BEGINNERS, as I told you, and asked if he could see it again if I made any changes.¹⁵³

Carver refers to "Beginners" as "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," but Carver looks forward to the publication of the story in magazines and journals, and he hints to the idea of it being published in its original state in "TRIQUARTERLY...but not until Fall 1981 or Winter 1982." The letter might lose a great deal of Carver's initial, albeit frantic emotional response, but the letter shows that the story is still one of his favorites, regardless of who's vision the story better fits for his writing style. Lish's vision has clearly stood the test of time—Lish in fact made the story timeless. But at what expense? Carver's true style for which he had been searching, and trying desperately to accomplish after not writing in five years was hidden until 1983 upon the publication of the more expansive stories of *Cathedral*.

Regardless of how the story can be interpreted and regardless of title, "Beginners," in its full, uncut text remains one of Carver's most involving stories. The story shows a development away from Lish's ambitious editing style and toward a style emotionally and intellectually true to himself. His authorial intentions, paramount to understanding any Carver study, have in many ways been celebrated with *The New*

¹⁵³ 10 July 1980.

Yorker's publication of the story, as it should be. The story shows how Carver understood the fictional world he was creating, and how he was expanding and becoming braver and more confident in what he was presenting to his readers as an artist.

Raymond Carver, with "Beginners," achieves personal success by articulating the emotional "link-ups" for a complex form of multilayered storytelling and multilayered characterizations. The stage is broader and the characters rounder. "Beginners" could very well become an example of a writer demonstrating a triumph, a breakthrough in writing what he saw fit to read and publish regardless of how famous "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" would become. Lish and Carver both had to have known the story would be a success. Their contributions to the story, though very much separate and different, both have effects on the reader that incite and confound, like many of the characters within. Carver achieved with "Beginners" what any writer would want to achieve. He has demonstrated a unique ability for holding up a reflection of reality that at once maintains the essence of the realistic world in which the writer exists, and also conveys the emotional truth of the characters that lived the story.

Works Cited

- Carver, Raymond. "Beginners." Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana.
----- "Beginners," *The New Yorker* 24 & 31 December 2007: 100-109.
----- *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
----- Correspondences. Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana.
----- "Divert Me." Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana.
----- "Fat." Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana.
----- "Fires." *Call If You Need Me*. New York: Vintage, 2001. 104-105.
----- "On Writing." Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana.
----- *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Vintage,
1989.
----- "What's in Alaska?" Lish mss. Lilly Lib., Indiana U, Bloomington, Indiana.
----- *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988.
----- *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Birkerts, Sven. "The School of Lish." *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on 20th Century Literature*. New York: William Morrow, 1987. 251-263.
- Gentry, Marshall Bruce and William L. Stull, ed. Conversations with Raymond Carver. Jackson, Mississippi and London, England: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.
- Heath, Laura Heather. "Carving Raymond Carver: How an Esquire Editor Influenced the Minimalist Movement." diss. Indiana U, Bloomington, 1998.
- Leyboldt, Gunter. "Rediscovering Raymond Carver's "Development": The Revisions of "So Much Water So Close to Home" *Contemporary Literature* 44. 2 (2002): 317-341.

Max, D.T. "The Carver Chronicles," *The New York Times* 9 August 1998. The New York Times Company. <<http://donswaim.com/nytimes.carverchronicles.html>>.

Meyer, Adam. "Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism" *Critique* (Summer 1989): 239-251.

"Rough Crossings." Editorial. *The New Yorker* 24 & 31 December 2007.

Stull, William L. and Maureen P. Carroll. "Prolegomena to Any Future Carver Studies" *Cahiers De La Nouvelle* 77 (2006): 16.