ANN PATCHETT'S PANDEMIC NOVEL

In "Tom Lake," Patchett returns to a familiar subject: the ambivalent interpersonal dynamics of closed groups.

By Katy Waldman

July 31, 2023

Patchett is interested in how people, in families and elsewhere, press beauty from constraint. Illustration by Chloe Cushman

hen the author Ann Patchett was five years old, her family broke apart. Her ı

Most of Patchett's work is directly or indirectly about the experience of being stuck in a difficult family. She is a connoisseur of ambivalent interpersonal dynamics within closed groups. "Bel Canto" (2001), her breakout novel, traces the bonds that develop among terrorists and their prisoners. "State of Wonder" (2011) follows a scientist searching for her colleagues in the Amazon rain forest. In the Pulitzer finalist "The Dutch House" (2019), two grown siblings return compulsively to their unhappy childhood: "Like swallows, like salmon, we were the helpless captives of our migratory patterns."

Patchett is interested in how people, in families and elsewhere, come to terms with painful circumstances; how they press beauty from constraint, assuming artificial or arbitrary roles that then become naturalized, like features of the landscape. In "Commonwealth" (2016), her most autobiographical novel, six children flung together by their parents' affair form a fraught alliance, in which the older kids routinely drug their baby brother with Benadryl. The father leaves his gun within easy reach of the kids, and the mother grabs glassy-eyed time-outs in the car. One son becomes obsessed with the art of setting fires, almost burning down his school.

…n her twenties, Franny, the protagonist, appears to transcend her upbringing by recounting it to a famous novelist, who turns it into a best-selling work of fiction. It's a thrillingly illicit inversion, or seems to be: Franny was trapped in her family, but now she has trapped them in a book; she has transformed the sinkhole of her past into a resource. But as her relatives bear up under "the inestimable burden of their lives"—the kids marrying and procreating, the parents retiring and sickening—their family narratives evolve. A mute sibling is rebranded "the smart one." When Franny reconnects with Albie, the brother so monstrous his siblings fed him Benadryl, she notes with surprise that "there wasn't anything so awful about him. It was only that he was a little kid." Franny's family *is* a resource, she

realizes, but she has mistaken its nature—it is not an heirloom to be handed off to a stranger but a commons, an inexhaustible font of ever-changing roles and stories. As the novel draws to a close, Patchett celebrates this reserve, accelerating through scenes of connection: a beach trip, a party, a talk on the porch. The gatherings suggest that talismanic word, abundance. They portray a kind of land wealth—a richness of common ground.

In "Tom Lake," Patchett's ninth and newest novel (Harper), members of a summer theatre troupe in rural Michigan in the nineteen-eighties coalesce into something like an incestuous family. They share housing, meals, and beds; their community is rife with intense, fleeting intimacies. As the group is putting on a production of "Our Town," by Thornton Wilder, the actress cast as Emily, the play's ingénue, drops out. A young performer named Lara arrives to pinch-hit. Lara didn't formally study theatre, but she has an uncanny ability to inhabit the role. "He understood what he was looking at," she says of one director. "A pretty girl who wasn't so much playing a part as she was right for the part she was playing."

At Tom Lake, the town where the troupe is based, Lara is greeted by the cast as star, savior, and potential love interest. She has eyes only for twenty-eight-year-old Peter Duke, who plays Emily's father. Within days, she and Duke are spending all their time together, rehearsing, having sex, or swimming in the lake. The summer becomes a blur of overlapping absorptions—in Wilder's language, in the water, in one another. "We wore our swimsuits under our clothes and ran to the lake in lieu of eating lunch," Lara recalls. "We could get from the stage to being nearly naked and fully submerged in four minutes flat."

Tom Lake is a fairy tale, a conjunction of person, time, and place, and it is as transient as any idyll, slipping through Lara's fingers even as half a day seems to last "a solid six months." "No one gets to go on playing Emily forever," she thinks, preëmptively grieving. The curtain falls sooner than she expects. On

the tennis court, Lara ruptures her Achilles tendon; her understudy, a magnetic Black dancer named Pallace, steps into the Emily part. Watching her friend take the stage, Lara later remembers, "I cried because she was that good. I cried because I would never play Emily again. I cried because I had loved that world so much." When the summer ends, Duke goes on to a wildly successful career in Hollywood. Lara quits acting, marries a cherry farmer, and becomes a mother.

In the spring of 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, Lara, now fifty-seven, is sheltering in place on the family farm with her husband, Joe Nelson, and their three twentysomething daughters, Emily, Maisie, and Nell. With harvesters scarce, the Nelsons have to pick and process their own fruit; to make the time go by faster, Lara tells the girls about her brief career as an actor.

The early pandemic, with its claustrophobic intimacy, seems almost tailor-made for Patchett's interests. "Tom Lake" is about being caught in an intractable family situation. It is about being constrained by one's role—in this case, motherhood—and it is about the transformations wrought by the passage of time and the search for confinement's upsides. The seasonal beauty of the fruit trees evokes the ephemeral loveliness of youth, romance, and fame; the novel, which is haunted by classics of theatre, repeatedly invokes Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," as if Lara, like that play's central character, were lost in a reverie about herself in her prime.

But Patchett airs the suggestion that Lara is stranded in the past only to gently put it to rest. Despite Duke's "ubiquitous presence in the world," Lara notices, scrubbing a lasagna pan to the strains of one of his movies, "I thought of him remarkably little." Chekhov, with his warnings about the hazards of nostalgia, turns out to be a red herring; a bigger portion of the book's soul resides in "Our Town," Wilder's play about daily life which ends in a cemetery, where the dead are "weaned away from the earth." Lara uses

the text as a touchstone, channelling its mood of elegiac acceptance as she carefully detaches herself from her old wounds and triumphs:

> There is no explaining this simple truth about life: you will forget much of it. The painful things you were certain you'd never be able to let go? Now you're not entirely sure when they happened, while the thrilling parts, the heart-stopping joys, splintered and scattered and became something else. Memories are then replaced by different joys and larger sorrows, and unbelievably, those things get knocked aside as well.

Lara's thinking here feels infused with sensitivity to the personal—to the vividness of life as it pierces a single subject—but the immediacy of pain and joy has mellowed, over time, into something richer and stranger. "Had every sight or sound of him sent me off on a pilgrimage of nostalgia or excoriation I would have lost my mind years before," Lara says of Duke. Later: "The rage dissipates along with the love, and all we're left with is a story."

A story is artificial, which means it can be fun. Lara isn't so much recalling the summer of 1988 as she is performing it—playing both her younger self and her current one, selectively concocting a PG-rated soap opera for her wide-eyed Zoomers. She finesses, elides. "I'm not telling them the good parts," she says, meaning the incredible sex with Duke. The girls, participating in the game, cast themselves as a socially progressive Greek chorus. "You can't say 'crazy,' " one interrupts. When Lara describes Pallace's "preposterous" legs, they protest that she is objectifying her.

In these scenes, the source of Lara's contentment is sweetly obvious. When Nell laments the celebrity Lara could perhaps have been, she exclaims, "Look at this! Look at the three of you! You think my life would have been better spent making commercials for lobster rolls?" The pandemic portions of the book conjure an adult world of trade-offs and compromise, in which family offers abundant recompense for lacklustre Google search results. The girls themselves are delicious creations. Emily is fiery; Maisie, a veterinarian-in-training, is sensible; Nell is intuitive, the most in tune with her mother.

She shares Lara's fanciful streak and sometimes wears lipstick to go cherry picking. Musing about whether to pursue an argument with one of her daughters, Lara thinks, "I will always be afraid of waking up the part of Emily that has long been dormant. I will always be afraid of accidentally breaking something in Nell that is fragile and pure. But Maisie is up for it; no one will ever worry about Maisie."

In other words, the ingredients have been assembled for a wistful meditation on mothers and daughters learning to handle the seasons of their lives. "Tom Lake" guides Lara to equanimity and closure, mostly by awakening her to the value of the people around her. Here, as in much of Patchett's work, togetherness compensates for loss; being with others, even if they're not exactly the others you wanted and you're not with them in exactly the right way, is a genuine form of flourishing.

But the novel's alchemical transformation of pain into peace feels, at times, overstated. In "Bel Canto," gunfire interrupted the harmony Patchett painstakingly built between terrorists and captives. "Tom Lake" softens such dissonance. Lara doesn't just acquiesce to her second act; she discovers that the convergence of motherhood, lockdown, and fruit harvesting has created "the happiest time of my life." The interlude, she thinks, is "joy itself." (Nell's opinion: "I want to get the hell out of this orchard.") For Lara, the farm is not an earthly place; its red-and-white fields ripple with magic. Amid a "pointillist's dream" of fruit trees, she can play all her roles at once, reënacting her glory days at Tom Lake, parenting her grown children, and indulging the maternal prerogative of steering the family narrative. Lara sees the selves she's shed throughout her life jumbled and reallocated among her daughters. Nell shares her "naturalness" onstage, "an ability to be so transparent it's impossible to turn your eyes away." Emily, her most difficult child, she construes as a fugitive piece of her own soul: "No matter how many years ago I'd stopped playing Emily, she is still here." The farm holds, or has held, or will hold, all the people Lara loves. It even encompasses a graveyard—with tangled daisies, a "pretty iron fence," and "benevolent shade"—where

generations of Joe's family are buried. The Nelsons "resting beneath the mossy slabs . . . had never wanted to be anywhere else," Lara thinks, projecting her bliss upon the dead.

"Tom Lake" collects enchanted places, sites of congregation like the lake and the stage, or like Chekhov's cherry orchard and the town in "Our Town." Patchett suggests that in these timeless locales, with their renewable springs of ghostly personae, characters can safely warehouse past versions of themselves and others. Or at least that's the idea. Rather than fear the cemetery, Lara and her kids love it and its promise of "everlasting inclusion." As a girl, Emily "liked to run her fingers along the tombstones, the letters worn nearly to nothing, the stones speckled with lichen." Lara herself "would lie in the grass between the graves, so pregnant with Maisie I wondered if I'd be able to get up again, and Emily would weave back and forth between the granite slabs, hiding then leaping out to make me laugh."

As "Tom Lake" goes on, the determined positivity begins to feel slightly menacing, or at least constrictive. Is Lara really that happy? Or is she hiding inside the myth of her happiness to avoid confronting her daughters' unhappiness and her own shortcomings as a parent? I was tempted into a paranoid reading of the three Nelson girls, scanning for covert signs of distress. Nell, like her mother, dreams of the stage, but she is stuck wearing sad quarantine lipstick, thumbing through plays in her bedroom at night, and practicing lines with her friends over Zoom. Dependable Maisie is always off to deliver a litter of puppies or tend to a calf with diarrhea. Was she forced to grow up too soon? Meanwhile, Emily declares her intention not to procreate. Her decision is a poignant nod to climate change, but it could also be glossed as a salvo against a controlling parent.

Ultimately, though, the novel endorses Lara's rosy perspective. The girls gratefully receive the tale of Tom Lake—"I'm not sorry to know," Maisie assures her mom—and the family draws closer. With cherries harvested and blessings scattered, the cast convenes joyfully in the cemetery. Lara thinks,

“There is room up here for all of us.” The scene seems oddly unreal, like plastic flowers on a grave. Yet there’s something subversively wise and self-aware about the book’s investment in its own fantasy. “Tom Lake,” the fiction, seems conscious of its status as a magical place, a locus of gentle make-believe. Even as Patchett validates Lara’s performance of contentment, she appears to know that behind the artifice lies a more complicated truth. The same might be said of the graveyard itself, with its friendly daisies and eternally fulfilled ancestors. Strip away the props: there, perhaps, is Forest Lawn cemetery, in Los Angeles, where Patchett and her father were briefly resurrected into one another’s lives. ♦

Published in the print edition of the August 7, 2023, issue, with the headline “Taste of Cherry.”