

After almost a half century of political ascendancy, what exactly did American conservatism conserve?

The Ghost of Conservatism Past

Patrick J. Deneen

Since early in my graduate studies, I have been a regular participant and eventually professor-mentor in various organizations of the conservative movement, most often weeklong summer seminars exploring and inculcating conservative principles among the most promising students mainly from elite colleges and universities. Programs like these have existed for decades, each seeking to promote various strands of the conservatism that was developed in the 1950s in the thought of Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, Milton Friedman, Frank Meyer, and others. This intellectual groundwork seemed initially to stall with the drubbing of Barry Goldwater in the presidential election of 1964 but achieved redemption with the two electoral victories of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984.

In the decades thereafter, this American conservatism seemed to be a dominant public philosophy with the successive presidential victories of George H. W. Bush for one term and George W. Bush for two terms. Even the

interregnum of William J. Clinton's presidency reflected conservatism's dominance: he was a Southern centrist who stiff-armed the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, ending "welfare as we know it," chiding Sister

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Souljah during his first campaign, and supporting bills such as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the strategy of “triangulation.” Even with the ideologically leftist presidency of Barak Obama, the conservative project continues unabated and is drawing a steady supply of enthusiastic students ready to join the movement.

As Donald Trump rampaged through the Republican primaries, dispatching one mainstream conservative hope after another, I often pondered whether the organizers and funders of these numerous programs, institutes, and intellectual boot camps would consider the money and effort spent over those many decades to have been a failed investment. The well-funded and well-organized half-century project of creating a distinctively American form of conservatism, especially through the training of college-educated elites, had been rejected by an uprising of the voters lacking a college education but whose support had been complacently presupposed by the conservative brain trust. First with bemusement, then growing disquiet, and finally outright horror, over a year the American conservatives watched Trump’s demolition of their basic working tenets.

Democrats will spend at least four years considering how best to recapture the White House mainly as a strategic matter but will not likely engage in a wholesale reconsideration of the very basis of progressive liberal political philosophy. The same cannot be said of a movement that is less than elated with electoral victory. Somewhat lost amid the postelection diagnoses, speculation about how Trump will govern, and lamentation, denial, and some glee (depending on whom one asks) over the sunset of the Clinton machine is the indisputable fact that the election of 2016 spelled the end of American conservatism as it was planned, cultivated, and promoted at considerable expense and exertion for more than fifty years.

The death of unconservative conservatism

The conservatism that was demolished was, as many have related, a fusion of various strands of the American political tradition. Those strands have been described as the “three-legged stool” of conservatism: economic libertarianism, Cold War anticommunism (and a vigorous and interventionist foreign policy aimed at American dominance in the world), and social conservatism, particularly arising from a new coalition among various traditionalist strands of Christianity, especially evangelical Protestantism and conservative Roman Catholicism. The natural internal tensions between some of these strands—for instance, libertarians and social conservatives—were submerged by agreement that the greatest threats come from Soviet communism outside the U.S. and socialistic progressivism within its borders.

This amalgam of American conservatism was a creation of several masterminds, particularly William F. Buckley and Frank Meyer. It was created in order to form a powerful voting bloc and plausible governing coalition, with social conservatives offering the greatest assistance in the voting booth (especially creating a stronghold in the South) but generally aimed at appealing to the moderate conservatism of most Americans. The governing coalition offered something for each “leg”: social conservatives were offered control of various levers of social policy (particularly education) and personnel choices in the judiciary; libertarians were handed control of economic and tax policy; and anticommunist internationalists became the leaders in foreign policy. There was a consensus that it could remain a winning formula for the foreseeable future.

This midcentury American conservatism was self-consciously created to appeal to the mainstream of American philosophical liberalism. Its main touchpoint was the Constitution, which was ceaselessly

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What's left of the "three-legged stool"

invoked as a foundational philosophy commending limited government and a judicial philosophy that comported with federalism on contentious social issues, strong protections of individual rights including religious liberty and political donations as forms of free speech, and limited government intervention. Yet the Constitution was also interpreted to allow energetic national action in foreign policy, as well as to accept aspects of the welfare state that were quietly regarded as softening the hard edges of free markets, and hence serving capitalism without sliding into socialism.

The fundamental liberalism of this conservatism was perhaps best understood by what it was *not*, in addition to what it *was*. This aspect was revealed especially by the strands of the American political tradition that were excluded in the formation of this American conservatism. The first, famously, was the expulsion by William F. Buckley of far-right elements from the conservative coalition that, among its positions, opposed the civil rights movement, particularly the John Birch Society and its allies. By extension and association, the tradition of Southern conservatism was largely excluded,

particularly the agrarian tradition originally articulated by Jefferson's commendation of "yeoman farmers," developed especially in the early twentieth century by the "Twelve Southerners" in *I'll Take My Stand* and articulated most recently by Wendell Berry. Ronald Reagan had initially tapped Mel Bradford, a prominent "paleoconservative" figure with strong intellectual grounding in Southern agrarianism and an outspoken critic of Abraham Lincoln, to head the NEH, but his eventual choice of neoconservative William Bennett strongly signaled the official expulsion of this nonliberal strand from the American conservative tradition.

Further, while social conservatives were necessarily brought into the fold, it was a more "Americanist" than traditionalist, Tory-esque, and Burkean kind of conservatism. While Catholics formed a core element of acceptable conservatism, it was a Catholicism that drew on the accommodation of liberalism and Catholicism forged especially by John Courtney Murray. William F. Buckley thus not only expelled Southern conservatism from American conservatism, but Catholic traditionalism as well, captured most clearly by the break with

his brother-in-law L. Brent Bozell Jr., the Catholic traditionalist and antiliberal. This accommodation was especially open to the more individualist and utilitarian nature of the modern capitalist economy—a position developed especially by figures like Michael Novak—a stance that was encouraged in the face of the specter of Soviet communism. American conservatism accommodated and encouraged social conservatives who were largely content to focus on “hot-button” issues like abortion, school choice, and, for a time, gay marriage, framing those issues within the more individualistic civil rights interpretation of constitutional liberalism and thus eschewing a more explicit challenge to foundational liberal norms, much less support for the alternative of a more organic, communal, and traditionalist society.

As David Brooks was to write of Ronald Reagan’s distinctive kind of conservatism at the time of Reagan’s death in 2004 in a column entitled “Reagan’s Promised Land,” Reagan cast off the traditionalism of the likes of Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Whittaker Chambers in favor of a vision of conservatism that could be wed with progress and optimism. Brooks wrote that “Reagan agreed with these old conservatives about communism and other things. But he transformed their movement from a past- and loss-oriented movement to a future- and possibility-oriented one, based on a certain idea about America.” Reagan called attention not to Burke but rather to that least likely hero of conservatism Thomas Paine, whose apothegm “we have it in our power to make the world over again” he was fond of quoting. Brooks praised Reagan for his “bold and challenging optimism” and for commending America “as a permanent revolutionary force.”

While Donald Trump is an unreliable and often inconsistent messenger, the positions he declared in his populist rallies and candidate debates point to outright repu-

diation of the main commitments of the first two “legs” of the American conservative stool—namely, economic libertarianism and vigorous internationalism. And only as an afterthought and often quite problematically does he articulate support for the third, socially conservative leg of the newly crafted stool. In place of economic libertarianism, Trump repudiated the globally integrated and borderless ideal of most libertarian economists in calls for protectionism and national tariffs as well as policies that would discourage American-based companies from outsourcing jobs to lower-wage markets. At the same time, he stated uncategorical support for various middle-class entitlement programs like Social Security and a number of aspects of Obamacare, along with calls for extensive public expenditures on infrastructure, suggesting no significant reductions of federal spending in a Trump administration, long a main desideratum of American conservatism.

Trump also attacked the invasion of Iraq that had been orchestrated by the last Republican administration, that of George W. Bush, disrupting the united conservative front in support of the invasion following the attacks of 9/11. Further, Trump consistently called for greater focus on defending American interests and a reduction of U.S. military presence abroad, instead demanding that American strategic partners—particularly NATO—assume more of the financial burden in maintaining the alliance. Lastly, while Trump abandoned his previous pro-choice position, he nevertheless on a number of occasions expressed support for the *bête noir* of the pro-life movement, Planned Parenthood, and consistently appealed to LGBTQ supporters, including a postelection statement in which he declared that the *Obergefell* decision of 2015 was, in his view, “settled law.”

Trump at the same time signaled positions that each “leg” of the American conservative stool might do better under him than

what could be expected under a Democratic administration with a calculated shrewdness that allowed him to keep much of the mainstream American conservative coalition in his fold. To libertarians, he promised significant reduction of government business regulation, promising that in his administration, each new proposed regulation would be considered only if accompanied by the rescinding of two existing regulations. To internationalists, he promised a vigorous prosecution of a battle against ISIS and radical Islam, with constant taunts leveled at Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama for their unwillingness to explicitly name the scourge of Islamic radicalism. And at various moments of the campaign he promised to defend religious liberty as well as appoint Supreme Court judges that would overturn the apparently unsettled forty-three-year-old decision *Roe v. Wade*, while pointing out with commendable constitutional literacy that the issue of abortion would simply revert to deliberation and various resolutions by the states.

All in all, while Trump offered to the long-standing amalgam of American conservatism some consolation, his demolition of the daunting field of Republican candidates and then wholly unexpected victory in the presidential election signaled above all that the project of American conservatism was effectively—or at least electorally—dead.

*The elitist origins of
American conservatism*

In retrospect, it's remarkable that it was not more evident to more people that this recently deceased American conservatism was actually profoundly unconservative, starting with its almost Frankenstein-esque creation in a political laboratory. While American conservatism drew on and wove together several existing political strands, it was extensively a creation of intellectuals and

political operatives, born out of institutions that would become regular whipping boys of these same conservatives, such as Ivy League schools (for example, Buckley's Yale) and elite circles in Washington, D.C., and continually sustained by a corporate donor class, D.C. think tanks, and party apparatchiks. If conservatism was originally born of the rejection of central planning and the belief that "bottom-up" and organic developments were to be preferred over elite and enlightened rule, then American conservatism as it actually developed was arguably a rejection of organic conservatism.

The elitist origins of American conservatism was shrouded for nearly half a century by its electoral appeal to "lunch-pail" conservatives, originally "Reagan Democrats," who abandoned the Democratic Party as it became dominated by a progressivism that had a deep growing affinity to post-sixties lifestyle liberalism, the sexual revolution, and race-based identity politics, as well as increasing hostility to religion and patriotic American exceptionalism. The apogee of this support came during the Reagan presidency. In recent years, much of this populist energy was channeled through the Tea Party movement, which was extensively directed at least as much against the established Republican Party as it was against progressive liberalism. Widespread perception of a chasm between party elites, whose interests increasingly coincided with those of their purported liberal foes—namely, continuation of the project of economic liberalization and concentration of political power in Washington—and the working classes led to a rebellion from below, often rejecting mainstream Republican candidates in favor of Tea Party candidates, who became intractable opponents not so much of Democrats as of the leadership of their own party.

Not only was the origin of American conservatism profoundly unconservative, so was its fundamental nature. Two of its "legs"—

economic libertarianism and vigorous internationalism—are philosophically constitutive features of liberalism and in orientation profoundly opposite to the original Burkean, traditionalist, communitarian form of conservatism. Two heroes of this libertarian wing of American conservatism—Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman—both saw it necessary to write explicit statements repudiating conservatism, particularly its emphasis on tradition, its irrationalism (particularly the affinity between religion and conservatism), and its emphases upon boundaries and limits. Meanwhile, main proponents of vigorous anticommunism and internationalism, such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, had originally identified with the left. Their belief in a role for a liberal hegemon was philosophically informed by universalist liberal commitments that had more in common with the liberal imperialism of a John Stuart Mill or even the liberal world government of H. G. Wells than the multicultural anti-imperialism of a Burke or a G. K. Chesterton. The social conservative “leg” of American conservatism was, on the one hand, liberalized by forestalling any significant presence of opponents to the liberal commitments of the other “legs,” while also rendered politically irrelevant by encouraging its focus upon the Supreme Court, a strategy leading to its constant frustration as court appointments proved to be unpredictable. For its half century of support of American conservatism, social conservatives saw a consistent upholding of *Roe v. Wade* and ultimately the national legal imposition of gay marriage, both mainly owing to the “swing vote” of Anthony Kennedy—a Ronald Reagan appointee.

In the roughly half century of political ascendancy of American conservatism, little was recognizably conserved. The economic landscape of America was remade not only by a series of free trade agreements that accelerated globalization and economic integration

but also by internal policies, both federal and local, that favored large corporations over small business. The rise of big-box stores was coincident with the postwar creation of suburbia and settlement patterns that found Americans increasingly living often at vast distances from work, school, church, and commerce. Findings by social scientists, most prominently Robert Putnam, demonstrated a consistent and substantial decline in the associational life of Americans and the rise of forms of what Tocqueville predicted would be the dominant democratic ethic of individualism. Every religious tradition, with the notable exception of Mormonism, saw extensive losses in adherents, especially pronounced among the millennial generation whose commitments to “none” began approaching the 50 percent mark. Schooling increasingly emphasized both sensitivity and utilitarian skills, rejecting traditional efforts to steward history and perpetuate a culture. Universities, in turn, became dominated by left-wing identitarians and a bloated corporate administrative class that together eviscerated distinctive cultural and religious institutional traditions in a deracinated commitment to vague social justice and job preparation. The media became saturated with explicit sexuality, incessant sarcasm, and default mockery of traditionalist beliefs. Pornography went mainstream. Demonstrations of bathetic patriotism became obligatory at every public event even though a tiny minority of Americans would ever be directly affected by the inconveniences of military service. In nearly every aspect of American life, little worth conserving was conserved.

American conservatism was ultimately a failure because it advanced a liberalism that has now been visibly revealed to be fundamentally destructive of the fabric of lives of a wide swath of countrymen, particularly those who are in many respects by design the “losers” in the liberal order. The rejection of American conservatism was most funda-

mentally a rejection of American liberalism, and Trump was the carrier of anxieties not over the course of the Republican and Democratic parties but the American order itself. Yet, far from ensuring the rise of a new and more credible conservatism, the rise of Trump may signal that no conservatism arising from the morass of contemporary American anticulture is viable.

Trumpism

Many of the basic impulses that led to the repudiation of elites in both parties and an embrace of an insurgent populist campaign are recognizably conservative. The main support from Trump came from the outsiders to American political and economic power who clearly declared independence from the directives that had been issued about business as usual. Rather than acquiescing to candidates who were vetted and approved by various political consultants, media outlets, well-heeled donors, and party operatives, those living outside the corridors of political and economic power instead enthusiastically supported a New York City billionaire who promised the opposite of long-standing and well-crafted messages developed in the D.C. conservative world—“Build the Wall,” “Drain the Swamp,” and “Political Incorrectness” were most prominent among the main messages. If a Burkean conservatism is best understood as a worldview that accords with the lived daily experience of people, percolating from the “bottom up” rather than designed from the “top down,” then Trump’s support from the diurnal experience of ordinary Americans and the rejection of the elite-crafted messaging of typical national campaigns seemed to be an outburst of rebellious heartland conservatism.

Yet it was not a restorative and hopeful expression of confident conservatism—certainly not the sort Brooks invokes to

describe the successful candidacy of Ronald Reagan nearly forty years ago—but instead a fearful, defensive, and even desperate last-ditch effort to salvage something decent from the American nightmare. In spite of the campaign motto, “Make America Great Again,” the overarching message of the campaign was that America was in decline, and outsized rhetoric declaring that fact was preferable to any workable plan beyond exploding business as usual in Washington. While the campaign promised to restore greatness, its commendations were driven by resentment and anger, not a vision of restoration, envisioning not a return to national glory on the world stage but mainly sticking it to the winners of global capitalism (the chant “Lock her up!” was perhaps the primary example of this expression of resentful rage against those who played a rigged system to their advantage). The victorious campaign was largely defensive, proposing retreat into national boundaries, exiting international entanglements, withdrawing from a world that was hostile and dangerous. American conservatism had long been about the prospect of restoration being near at hand: a “Moral Majority” would restore national decency; one or two appointments to the Supreme Court would restore constitutionalism; a hero from California would usher in a dawning of Morning in America. By contrast, the Trump campaign signaled that things had so decayed that only a scorched-earth policy would allow new growth. The seminal text of the election season was an essay by an anonymous author published in the conservative *Claremont Review of Books*, which described the race as the “Flight 93 Election”: “2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or die. You may die anyway.” It was no longer Morning in America but Russian roulette in Flyover Country at dusk.

Only some twenty years earlier, a number of notable commentators looked to the heartland as the repository of conservative virtue,

the opposite of revolutionary temperament of the coastal elites. In a 1995 essay entitled “The Revolt of the Elites,” historian and social critic Christopher Lasch saw Middle America as a conservative remnant in a nation that was increasingly governed by progressives. As a Marxian leftist disgusted by the left’s increasing identification with upper-class social liberalism, Lasch scorned their “enlightenment” as a self-serving defense of their class status, their “cosmopolitanism” as liberation from the fates of countrymen, and their support for socially liberal causes like feminism as an aid to “their prosperous, glamorous, gaudy and sometimes indecently lavish way of life.” Lasch contrasted the “betrayal of the elites” with “Middle America,” whose instincts, he noted, were “demonstrably more conservative than their self-appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators.”

It is the working and lower middle classes, after all, that favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with “alternative lifestyles,” and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large-scale social engineering. More...they have a more highly developed sense of limits than their betters. They understand, as their betters do not, that there are inherent limits on human control over the course of social development, over nature and the body, over the tragic elements in human life and history.

Only twenty years ago, Lasch could, with considerable justification, point to the lived experience of limits as the conservative core of America, in contrast to the fundamentally similar lifestyle shared by the coastal elites of both parties. Middle America might lack a conservative political philosophy, but it had the advantage of lived Burkean tradition and Tocquevillian local virtue.

In 2012 Charles Murray painted a very different picture in *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*. Based upon extensive data over forty years, Murray concluded that Lasch’s analysis was now the opposite of correct. Working- and lower-class Americans were now living in a blighted landscape of broken families, educational disarray, abandonment of religious institutions, declining social capital, and dismal economic prospects. The scourge of opioid addiction that was only coming into view at the time of Murray’s writing subsequently became recognized as a raging epidemic in these former Laschian bastions of lived virtue. Meanwhile, family stability, educational and economic success, and relative resistance to various criminal and social disorders were increasingly the province of the wealthy, with luxury goods available only to the upper class once denounced by Lasch. More fascinating still, Murray discovered that there was a gaping divide between the liberationist *beliefs* of wealthy coastal elites and their relatively traditional family-centered lives. In a reversal of Tocqueville’s observation, liberal elites increasingly appeared “to do more honor to themselves than to their philosophy.”

Rather than looking at the lower middle classes as a healthy alternative to liberal elitism, mainstream conservative commentators became vociferous critics of the class once lauded by Lasch, particularly as its support for Trump became evident. In a much-discussed article in *National Review*, mainstream conservative Kevin Williamson heaped withering scorn upon the same class that Lasch once praised, aiming to deconstruct lingering admiration for their lived Burkeanism evinced in their rootedness and loyalty to people and place.

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hasn't. The white middle class may like the idea of Trump as a giant pulsing humanoid middle finger held up in the face of the Cathedral, they may sing hymns to Trump the destroyer and whisper darkly about "globalists" and—odious, stupid term—"the Establishment," but nobody did this to them. They failed themselves perpetuates a lie: that the white working class that finds itself attracted to Trump has been victimized by outside forces. It hasn't. The white middle class may like the idea of Trump as a giant pulsing humanoid middle finger held up in the face of the Cathedral, they may sing hymns to Trump the destroyer and whisper darkly about "globalists" and—odious, stupid term—"the Establishment," but nobody did this to them. They failed themselves.

The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs... If he has a problem with that, forget Ed Burke, too. The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump's speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn't analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul.

In this view, all that remained of American conservatism was a commitment to creative destruction of the liberal market and tax and trade policy that promote capital, labor, and economic mobility. Those most likely to experience a complete breakdown in "family

values," temperance, and law-abidingness are the least mobile, the least willing to uproot and join the borderless, rootless, deracinated modern economy. Those most likely to live out "family values," by contrast, are often the beneficiaries of a globalist economic order as well as the most enthusiastic proponents of liberal social policy, including abortion on demand, sexual autonomy (as long as it's "safe"), and open borders. They are the employees and directors of the corporations that embrace gay and transgender rights, even if those outcomes come at the expense of the religious liberty of Christians.

Conservatism as a practical matter seems dead in America, as far as the eye can see.

Conservative prospects?

What then are the prospects of a conservatism once described by Lasch as an instinctive recognition of "inherent limits on human control over the course of social development, over nature and the body, over the tragic elements in human life and history"? Where is such belief or experience lodged in modern American society, if neither in the heartland nor the coasts, nor in universities nor the media, neither in the corporate boardroom nor the one-room hillbilly cabin? This form of a lived conservatism was never a part of official American conservatism, and now it's not even a lived reality of those outside the liberal enclaves where family values are now a luxury amenity. The presidency of Donald Trump may surprise us once again and foster a resurgence and even restoration to health of the lived conservatism of the heartland, but those prospects appear dim at best.

If basic expectations of a decent and stable life for working-class Americans have collapsed in some twenty years, with good reason we might identify as a prime suspect the growing income as well as geographic divide between winners and losers in an increasingly

unforgiving economy. Observing the divided landscape of modern America, we need especially to entertain the possibility that “conservative” family values can be nurtured in one of two ways: either through healthy ecosystems in which social institutions and practices are sustained through the shared efforts of people blessed with economic success and those less fortunate, or through the ability to afford practical replacements for such a social ecosystem in their absence. Remarkably, it seems reasonable to conclude that conservative values today support liberal policy and belief because they are the greatest advantage for economic winners and social liberals over the remnant of society that might once have presented an alternative to such views and policy. Those most willing to rent U-Hauls took not only the furniture but also the social ecology in which economic losers might sustain family values.

If nothing else, the exceedingly narrow

victory of Donald Trump may be understood as the last gasp of a dying conservatism that has been destroyed by American liberalism. That “instinctive understanding of inherent limits” may be the animating attraction to a vision of Trump’s promises for a nation with a border and a common culture; a foreign policy largely defensive instead of a *de facto* empire; a capital drained of cronies and riggers; and the liberty to call things as they really are, including men, women, and children. Yet protection of this instinct was given to a man with no apparent conservative values or vision, less a sign of hope than desperation. Conservatism may have a future in America, but it will arise most likely from families and intentional communities that live as a counterculture to self-immolating American liberalism, and not as something that will be created in a political laboratory by the educated or from the wreckage of a Flight 93 administration in Washington, D.C. †

At the Lake House

James Matthew Wilson

They pulled me from my sleep in the low bunk,
 My mother and grandmother, in one’s arms
 While the other draped me with a garbage bag.
 We moved as one through the dark
 house, which shook
 Beneath the brunt of wind and the hard tack
 Of rain on glass, down through
 the pried-back shingles.

Toted like that, I saw recede behind us
 The barrel trunk of a black walnut, fallen
 From where its fellows towered among the air
 With leaves turned wild and
 raving gorgons’ heads.
 It lay there, settled, slumbering,
 its neck propped
 Upon the roof’s slick, lacerated back.

They carried me into the neighbors’ house,
 Where, days before, in much
 more measured winds,
 I’d brought a snapping turtle as a gift,
 Its young neck straining from
 the shell. And there,
 I found it, in a fish bowl, starving, food
 It wouldn’t touch adrift about its head.

For all of nature’s fierce and darksome visage,
 I’d caught her spawn within
 my grasp and held it,
 Plucked from the angled
 boatlift where it sunned
 Above still water. Staring on it now,
 I asked and was allowed to carry it out
 Into the beating storm to set it free.