The Rainy River, on the border of Canada and the U.S.

I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations—one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it—you will regret both. - Søren Kierkegaard

Traveling Through Dark – William Stafford

Traveling through the dark I found a deer dead on the edge of the Wilson River road. It is usually best to roll them into the canyon: that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing; she had stiffened already, almost cold. I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, alive, still, never to be born. Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; under the hood purred the steady engine. I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red; around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, then pushed her over the edge into the river.
The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The Assignment

Write a well-developed short essay (3 pages or so) that draws on, but needn’t refer directly to, the reading and discussion we’ve engaged in thus far. Tell the story of a time in your life in which you found yourself up against the edges of your own margins of experience. Like Tim in “On the Rainy River” this situation required you to make a choice: run or return, retreat or move forward, speak or stay silent, remain loyal to one’s “national border” or transgress it. Pace the essay in such a way that the reader is unsure as to your decision until the conclusion. Find a way to convey to the reader your own evaluation of the choice you made. Was it a moment of cowardice in your life, or courage? Could it have been both?

Find a way to include a metaphor in the essay, like O’Brien’s slaughterhouse, one to which you return somehow in your conclusion.

- Find a way to hook the reader in the opening paragraph
- Think of the reader as a journeyer and yourself as the guide. Bring the reader into the world of the essay as deeply, urgently and concretely as you can.

Try a period of prewriting before sitting down to create the first draft. Try free writing, listing or clustering. This will generate raw memories, details and feelings. Then move into the first draft, bring “left brain” organizing principles to the table.

Feel free to bring your opening paragraph in during my office hours and we can conference it if you’re feeling iffy.