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ALL FEATHERS AND ATTITUDE

By

Virginia A. MacDonald

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

April 2015

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: ALL FEATHERS AND ATTITUDE

This thesis by Virginia A. MacDonald is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Faculty Chair in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### ALL FEATHERS AND ATTITUDE

By

Virginia A. MacDonald

This collection of essays and prose poems seeks to examine the elements of an identity: how memories, culture, work, place, family, and brain chemistry simultaneously create and undermine a sense of self. How the sense of self is not contiguous, or smooth. How hope and regret wrestle.

While deeply personal, *All Feathers and Attitude* is not a memoir, but rather an assemblage of interpretations based on actual events. The individual pieces are gathered into sections that correlate somewhat to the themes mentioned above, but the sections are not labeled as such. The readers may draw whatever conclusions they wish regarding the sections. Things overlap.

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Virginia A. MacDonald

2015

For Dave, who stayed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the general big-hearted generosity of the Northern Michigan University MFA program, without which I would have floundered. Thanks to my readers, Jon Billman and Dan Gocella (who knows about grouse.) Also Jen Howard, who introduced me to nonfiction and convinced me I could do it, and to Matt Frank, who didn't let me get away with painting happy little clouds.

I would also like to acknowledge the patience and understanding of my coworkers in the Financial Aid Office at NMU.

And my children, who taught me to be brave.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English. Some of the names have been changed; some of those on purpose.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chipper .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>On Entitlement .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Grandma .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Rescue.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>On Default.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Go, Jim Dandy .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>The VW Beetle .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Looking on Facebook .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Afghans .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Hallelujah Dinner .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>The Sun and The Fence.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>On Motherhood .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>December 20 .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>On Disappointment.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Carrying On.....</b>	<b>65</b>



<b>Staff Meeting .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>The Dictionary Entry .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Voiceover .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Good Job .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Adventure Pants .....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Worse Things .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Wool Socks and Coffee .....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Geography .....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Scorpio, Born in the Year of the Cock .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Truth .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>On Impotence .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Leaving.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>A Populated Place .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>On Wishing .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Walking In Place .....</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>The Untaken Vacation .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>January .....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>The UP Predator Challenge.....</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>Spring.....</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>What We Lay Our Hands On .....</b>	<b>143</b>

<b>On Watching the News .....</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Gwen's Birdfeeder .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Gravedigger.....</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>The Owl .....</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>The Fall.....</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>T-Shirt .....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>On Having Removed All the Junk Food from the House to Be Supportive of My Husband's Efforts to Lower His Blood Pressure and Cholesterol after the Sobering Doctor's Appointment, and Ticks .....</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>Kestrel .....</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>An Outline for the End of the World As We Know It .....</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>185</b>

## Introduction

Ginny MacDonald has a bad memory. She is afraid she will be held to task for that. She is easily swayed by the assertions of others regarding the actual details of true-life events. There are events that others swear are actual for which Ginny MacDonald has no personal recollection whatsoever, even though those others say she was present at those events. She does not remember, for example, that she and her sister were in the same high school French class when Ginny was a senior and her sister was a sophomore. Ginny has no reason to believe her sister would make that up. Ginny spends a lot of time wondering why she doesn't remember. She has spent time trying to recreate that memory. The results are negative. She does remember, from her senior year, ditching last hour Study Hall and driving to South Bend in Kathy's white Karmann Ghia – The Turtle Whore – to drag race Notre Dame boys at stoplights. Ginny dislikes Notre Dame boys even now, even though Kathy and the Turtle Whore usually won.

Then there are other events, which Ginny MacDonald thinks are actual, that probably didn't happen. She remembers sitting in the backseat of a convertible at the age of three or four. The top down, her father driving, her mother in the passenger seat. Her mother turned to smile at Ginny, cat-eye sunglasses shining.

Ginny's mother wore a kelly green silk scarf tied around her hairdo, and the ends of the scarf fluttered in the breeze. This is one of Ginny's best and earliest childhood memories. Years later, learning what year her parents bought the Studebaker Golden Hawk, and when they sold it, she is fairly certain she never rode in a convertible with her parents on a sunny day. Still, she remembers the warmth of the pale upholstery, how her father's arm lay across the back of the front seat.

She believes there may be other memories equally suspect, but she does not know how to look for them. Sitting at the top of the basement stairs, listening to her mother sing while she ironed down in the laundry room; walking late to school in first grade, afraid to go inside when all of the other children were already at their desks; the classroom turtle pond in kindergarten; playing marbles with Lynn in fourth grade; puking under the bleachers at a high school football game – it all seems as if it happened, and to her.

There are those snapshots, though. The Polaroids of her standing in the sunshine, or a family room, or a backyard, wearing clothes she doesn't remember on occasions she can't recall.

Ginny MacDonald does not swear to the veracity of anything. She only estimates, guesses, supposes. She can, as mentioned previously, be swayed. She

would be a terrible witness at a criminal trial. She imagines the crushing moment when, pressed by the opposing attorney, she is asked the question she can only answer in the negative: “Are you positive?” No, she is not. Not only is she unable to tell you what she was doing at, say, eight o’clock on the evening of January 14<sup>th</sup>, she thinks anyone who can confidently answer a question like that is making stuff up. Nonetheless, Ginny MacDonald has a story. Maybe she made it up. It seems actual to her, though, no matter how she came by it. It seems true enough. It is as true as anyone else’s.

Ginny MacDonald sees things that aren’t there. Let it be clear that Ginny is quite able to tell the difference between those things whose presence everyone would agree upon, and those things which are visible only to her. “Visible” may perhaps be the wrong word.

The things Ginny sees that are not there are actually things that are there – in the agreed-upon sense of “there” – it is just that Ginny interprets those things in what might be considered an unorthodox or unilateral manner. In other words, the woodsmoke rising from a neighbor’s chimney in the moonlight is not, in fact, a giant in a silver satin shirt standing between the house and the edge of the woods. But for a few happy seconds, as Ginny walks her dog in the twilight, there is the vision of an enormous dark-haired man in a very fancy shirt, the kind

he would wear if he were about to take the ice for his figure-skating routine.

Ginny is always a little bit sad when the items in her line of sight rearrange themselves into the ordinary, when the giant's face wisps away in a bit of breeze and the puffy sleeves sheen off into the night.

This afternoon, on the drive from the office to the grocery store, Ginny was entertained by the sight of an all-black baby giraffe standing carefully on the side of the highway, watching the traffic. She knows, of course, that the frame for a piece of highway construction signage had tipped awkwardly onto its side, but she is not enchanted by that. The baby giraffe kept her smiling all the way into Econofoods. She is happy to have seen it. She wonders what Dali saw, what Van Gogh observed. She imagines Van Gogh painting in the interlude between what he thought he saw and what he could catch with his brush, pulling vision from the moving air. She's not so sure about Dali. Certain artistic representations do not alarm or perplex her.

But Ginny MacDonald worries. She wonders about the day when the family of sea turtles under the boardwalk refuses to shift back into ordinary rocks, when the boy in the serape leading a burro does not obligingly reform into a plywood-reinforced mailbox. She is concerned these visions may one day sport dangerously with her. To date, she has never had the urge to slam on the brakes

and exclaim to the person riding next to her, “Good lord! Did you see the line of narwhals standing guard across that field?” She might remark, “That’s an odd-looking fence,” but that is all. Normally, she makes no comment whatever, keeping the ephemeral odd-ball sights as private little gifts, gifts that would lose all meaning in the sharing.

It is true she does not always try to make sense of what she’s seen. What appears to be a large array of half-blown pink balloons when glimpsed from the corner of her eye, and which would be entirely out of place snagged in the trees a half-mile off the nearest hiking trail, might stay forever in her imagination as those balloons. Sometimes, she doesn’t look again. She does not wish to confirm that it’s only oak leaves not yet fallen, is not so sure that the logical explanation is the only one worth considering.

Ginny MacDonald suspects the imaginations of childhood have something to do with the work of interpreting the incoming stimuli. “Hush,” we reassure the toddler with night terrors, “See? That’s a shadow, not a monster.” And we teach the toddler to see what we see, to think as we do, to take the balloons out of the tree and replace them with leaves. Ginny is not passing judgment on this practice. She is wondering how many things do not get sorted. How many of

the things we see are unique to us, how many memories belong to no one else, because the interpretations are ours alone.

Ginny MacDonald wonders, too, about the dreams that stick. The dreams that don't let go in the morning and strobe into the workaday with flashes of the bizarre and terrifying landscapes of the night. Ginny has dreams that cloud entire days with the emotional mist conjured up during sleep. She knows she is not the only one. She wonders if dreams tamper with our memories in a significant way, if they intrude, reinterpret, erase, or invent. If they forgive, explain, diminish, or indict. She knows they fuck with her. She doesn't know how much. Nobody knows how much.

In 2002, scientists studied the dreams of burn victims to see if pain crosses over. They found that those who suffer in waking life can have dreams in which pain manifests itself in such a real way that the dreamer gets no relief during sleep. This is rare, but it happens. The barrier is porous going the other way, too. Fear, anger, emotional pain, joy, horniness...all can sift through from dreams to daylight. In the sentence: "That was only a dream," the word "only" is incorrect. Dreams are not to be dismissed.

There's a trick your brain does in its sleep, called off-line memory processing, in which it takes the things you've done during the day and reinforces the



memories. Your dreams help you learn. Ginny MacDonald wonders about the combination of these phenomena – the emotions and the learning, the pain and the memories, the way her brain, your brain, the brain, concocts the stew of who we think we are.

Ginny MacDonald likes to read articles about brain science and memory. She is happy to find out the brain scientists are quantifying what has been commonly known all along: memories are unreliable. When we remember something, the memory undergoes a process called reconsolidation; the memory is brought forward from its storage space, reassembled, and made use of. What the researchers are finding is that every time we recall something, there is the opportunity for that memory to be altered by what we have learned since, by what is going on at the moment the memory is reconsolidated, and who knows what else. This altering of memory to accommodate new experience is how we learn to adapt. It is how we learn anything.

The malleability of memory, it seems, is the most necessary survival tool. It is what makes us human, in that humans are learners. Learning is not forcing facts to stay in one place; it is the rearranging of those facts to fit the situation of the present.

Memories are all housed in the hippocampus area of the brain, or so everyone thought. Now it might be the cerebral cortex, at least for some types of memories. Exactly where those memories hide in their neighborhood of the brain is still fuzzy. Maybe in the synapses. Maybe in the neurons. Science doesn't know, yet, exactly how the bits of whatever it is that comprise a memory are stashed. But they use words like "stored." Words like "reconsolidated." Words like "encoded." Words like "synaptic plasticity."

Scientists can put the brain cells of snails in a petri dish and count the synapses. Shock them with electricity and douse them with serotonin and count the synapses again. They figure the brain stuff out like that, by building and interrupting the formation of memories, by enhancing and destroying the connections. Ginny MacDonald thinks about the interruption created by puking Jack Daniels and blood into a plastic bucket.

She wonders how many brain cells must be gathered in one spot for that mind to be aware of itself. She wonders if the snails know that they're being messed with. She wonders if humans know: how much we remember, how much we don't.

There might be a way to restore lost memories, as long as the neurons are alive.

There might be a way to prod or douse or bully the synapses into latching on to

those neurons and digging out the memory that would remind Ginny of the color of her Keds on the hot asphalt driveway as she squinted into the camera for the black and white snapshot taken of her posed between her paternal grandparents. Ginny can smell her grandmother's Estee Lauder *Eau de Parfum* spray. She wonders in which neuron that particular whiff is stored. Why isn't it next to the Keds, stored right together?

Given a handful of pertinent or personal details, skilled interrogators can convince innocent people that those people were, in fact, present at the scene of crime, that those innocent people may have actually participated in or abetted the commission of a crime. The interrogators use our own brain's capacity for filling in the blanks to create bogus memories. And those memories, no matter how false, conjure up the emotional responses associated with the misremembered behavior. Innocent people feel guilt for crimes they did not commit. Ginny supposes that people could therefore feel joy or contentment for accomplishments or occasions that are equally as unreal. She would like to participate in that research.

Ginny MacDonald is thinking about the memory-wiping device of the *Men in Black* movie, and the spell Hermione used in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* to make her parents forget they ever had a daughter. Ginny is thinking of *The*

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Fifty First Dates*. And she is wondering about the tree falling in the forest, and the sound waves that wash over the receptors of ferns and snails and thrushes, who must do something like hear it. Do they remember it? Does that sound count?

If our human memories are the markers for whether or not something happened, and if you don't remember an event, does that event cease to exist? Did it ever happen? Even if it left a scar? Ginny has scars for which there are no memories. She is picking her scabs.

The way we remember something is the truth of it, no matter what happened.

Upwind someone is burning orchard wood.

Grey smoke, grey road, grey sky

and one red apple, yet to fall.

## Chipper

I decided to rent the wood chipper. I need mulch for the strawberry and asparagus beds. I need something to spread in thick layers between the rows of bi-color sweet corn and jewel-toned chards, around the fruit trees and under the hydrangea. I will rent a chipper and clear brush: stringy maple saplings, scrubby dogwoods, bushes I can't name, and the tops of trees felled for firewood. I will hack away at the verge of the woods that every spring creeps closer to the house and feed it all into the hopper.

I looked at the chipper rental choices online while the smarter of my two dogs rested her murderous muzzle on the edge of the keyboard. Stubby is a Bassett mix mongrel, twice as long as she is high. There was the time last summer, on a routine hike in the woods, when Stubby jumped into the brush and emerged with a full-grown grouse in her jaws. Stubby carried the flaccid body with her head high, not letting the drab feathers drag like a dishrag through the dirt. The bird was still warm and unmarked when we got back to the house, and dead. Quite dead: like the voles, the baby robins, the rabbits, the fawn. Stubby is a vermin hound.

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Grandma is driving the pickup back to the farm from the grain elevator – “the mill,” she called it. My sister and I are riding in the back, buried past our waists in shelled corn. It is a hot day. We are wearing cotton shorts and short-sleeved blouses: our play clothes. The corn is cool on our legs, we don’t notice the dust blowing back from the load. We giggle. Later that day we will find corn in our ankle socks, our panties, the little cuffs on the legs of our shorts. The shelled corn is exactly the color of the Crayola called Maize, which is neither yellow nor gold, but something deeper, something that looks nourishing. The corn smells like popcorn in the sun. It is for the pigs who live in the near field. (This is back before the advent of the hog factory. Today we would say they were free-range pigs, although not organic. Grandpa and Grandma believed in agricultural advancements, like vaccinations.) The pickup cruises down the blacktop; I dig my hands deep into the corn, wriggling myself further under. The truck swerves a bit; we bounce with the thump-thump and jolt of something being run over. I look behind at the possum squashed on the road. Grandma is good at making sure she gets them.

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A six-inch chipper should do it. Entire saplings chewed and spit. I’ll wear ear protection against the growl of the thirty-five horse power engine and the clamor

of the cutting blades and feeder drum. The feeder opening is six inches by six inches. That's a pretty big opening. I won't be chipping anything bigger than that, although I could rent a unit powerful enough to destroy smallish trees. No, I won't need that. I can't shred anything I can't lift.

A one-day rental should be enough time. The sweet, tangy, sappy smell of maple and hemlock and cedar and oak. Nearly delicious and oozing. A pile of beautiful, damp, resinous chips, the green confetti of leaves and needles intermixed with the blonde of the freshly regurgitated trees. I imagine buying my own chipper, but that's silly. I'll never need to grind so many things.

Stubby shifted in her sleep, sighing a satisfied dog sigh. Our other dog, a hulking, somnolent, sulfur-colored Lab, an ice cream cone of a dog, with no lives or deaths on her ledger, dreams active dreams, yipping and whining in her sleep, paws twitching and sides heaving as she plays out whatever it is dogs do in their subconscious. Is she chasing or being chased? Someone usually says, when watching a dog dream like that, "Must be chasing rabbits!" It's easy to guess that; we think we know what dogs dream. We don't.

Stubby doesn't dream. Not so you'd notice. She's a calm sleeper.

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Later that summer, or another summer, I don't know. Grandma keeps a long pole in the tractor barn, which is a new pole building that houses the farm equipment. They are tidy farmers. The equipment is clean and well-maintained. The yards are mowed all the way to the fence line. There is no junk. Every building is square to the road and painted. There is no dust in the house, no streaks on the windows. Grandma and I walk down to the pole barn together before lunch. She keeps that long pole, which has a nail sticking out at a right angle from the very end, leaning in a corner of the barn. She reaches up with the pole and pulls down the nests of barn swallows in the rafters. After she yanks the nests down, I bang them with a shovel to make sure any baby birds are dead and the eggs are broken, then scoop them up and toss the mangled mess outside behind the barn, on the side away from the road. By morning the little bodies will be gone; the mower will shred the nests. The mother birds wheel and swoop but we pay no attention. Swallows shit all over the equipment. Grandma doesn't care if they nest in the old barn, but not here. Later we will take a thermos of cold iced tea out to the field where Grandpa is working.

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The trashy neighbors across the road have some rabbits they don't keep in a pen. They are stupid, domesticated rabbits: big, long-eared, slow, many-colored. In

the moonlight of early morning they all look grey, like blurred, enlarged negative images of the careful hares that live here naturally and change color with the seasons. I hate the neighbor's damn free-range bunnies. They do not belong in my yard, this close to my garden. They do not belong under my front porch, uninvited. They should not be here, begging to get chased back across the road, putting my dogs at risk of getting hit on the pavement. The damn rabbit wouldn't get hit; it is always the second critter, the chaser, which ends up under the tires of a barreling pickup truck. But there isn't much traffic. Once the guy who drives the Trudell Plumbing truck leaves for work there's nothing till the school bus comes. I don't try very hard to keep Stubby from clearing those rabbits.

I plant a big garden. I'll need a lot of mulch. I never have enough. It takes three inches of mulch or more to keep the weeds down. The garden is a wild patch of ground, not many years under cultivation, and the weeds are greedy and opportunistic. Even with heavy mulch, the grass comes up anywhere. It travels. Witch grass, Johnson grass, crab grass. Carefully tended spring beds become battlefields by July. The grass keeps winning. I need more mulch. I want that chipper.

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This happened when I was grown, after my uncle had moved back to the farm to help Grandpa and Grandma, when I had children of my own. We are visiting the farm, my kids are spending time with their great-grandparents. The house is the same. It is always the same. The grey tile of the kitchen floor gleams, a tiny dog yaps as people come in and out, the linen closet smells of liniment.

Grandma is putting lunch on the table. Cold cuts, white bread, sliced tomatoes and onions, Campbell's vegetable soup. She keeps Pepsi in the refrigerator and ice cream in the deep freeze in the basement. One of the kids is sent downstairs to bring up a carton of Neapolitan to soften.

My uncle comes in for the meal, blowing the dust out of his nose into a white handkerchief, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a rumpled blue bandana stowed in a back pocket of this jeans. He tells Grandma, while piling together a sandwich, that he found a nest of baby raccoons in the bottom of the gravity wagon in the pole barn. "Get the pitchfork," Grandma says. My uncle says, "I know, I know," not liking to be nagged about something so obvious. The kids shoot alarmed looks my way across the plastic tablecloth and the Corelle dinnerware. I shrug, and put more mayo on my tomato slices.

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Last spring, after the ground was bare but the snowbanks remained, I let the dogs out one morning before sunrise. Stubby dove under the front porch, intent and weasel-like. She did not bark. There was no noise; the bunny didn't scream. Stubby brought it up from under and left the offering lying on a snowbank, like a misplaced shadow. She shakes them. It's a bloodless death. If I were hungry, if the weeds won, Stubby could feed me. I took that fat, stupid, dead bunny by the back feet and flung it across the road to rot in the trashy neighbor's yard.

The six-inch chipper can be towed behind any vehicle with a hitch and a two-inch ball. I will occupy a weekend or two assembling my brush pile, then spend a day grinding it down. The machine can deconstruct about anything grindable, including me. A couple of hundred people are hurt in wood chipper accidents every year in the U.S. Some of them die. I'll need to be careful. Having a branch get snagged on your clothing is a common hazard. I should wear short sleeves that day, like the guy in the how-to video, and tie back my hair. I'll wear sturdy gloves and solid shoes. I'll make sure I have enough gasoline and oil, and lay a tarp on the ground where the mulch pile will be. I will start the engine and live in the bubble of noise and destruction, tearing those branches down to pieces I can use.

## On Entitlement

Taffy was a Welshman (this is the house that Jack built), Taffy was a thief. *One little two little three little Indians.* Taffy came to my house (eenie, meenie, minie, moe) and stole a leg of beef, Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack. I went to Taffy's house (if he hollers let him go) all dressed in black black black, Taffy was in bed. *Four little five little six little Indians.* I took the marrow bone, the farmer takes a wife, and broke Taffy's head! Rain, rain go away (you are not it), sitting in a tree, the farmer takes a wife with silver buttons buttons buttons, k-i-s-s-i-n-g, all down her back back back. And Bingo was his name-o. This is the house that Jack built. (My mother told me to pick the very best one.) All around the mulberry bush (you are not it) *seven little eight little nine little Indians,* the monkey chased the weasel. My gal's a corker, she's a New Yorker, the monkey thought it all was fun, too many monkeys jumping on the bed, POP goes the weasel! Baa, baa, black sheep, a penny for a needle, this is the house that Jack built. Have you any wool? Yes sir, yassah, three bags full. Georgie Porgie pudding and pie, one for my master, kissed the girls and made them cry, one for my dame, made them cry, and one for the little girl who lives down the lane. Came tumbling after. Made them cry. Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater – this is the house that Jack built –

had a wife, *ten little Indian boys*, and couldn't keep her. She'll be comin' round  
the mountain; put her in a pumpkin shell when she comes. When she comes.  
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah (catch a ~~nigger~~ tiger by the toe); there he  
kept her very well. Mama's little baby loves shortin' shortin,' strumming on the  
old banjo. This is the house that Jack built and someone's in the kitchen. I know.

## Grandma

Charles Lindbergh had flown to Paris, the last of the Model T Fords were rolling off the line, and it was already a hot day on the planted fields outside of Mishawaka, Indiana. There was a good fire heating the wood cookstove in the busy kitchen of a crowded house. A skinny girl with bowl-cut hair stood at the table, grimy apron knotted over her wan cotton dress, bread dough in her hands. She was not wearing shoes. Small puffs of flour floated in the air around her elbows as she rocked forward and back, shoving the dough in upon itself, folding and pushing. The hard muscles in her scrawny arms bunched and relaxed; sweat curled her hair. Her undershirt stuck to her back. An older sister carried a kettle of boiling water to the back porch to scrub the pee sheets and granny rags to hang in the sun. A younger brother brought in an armload of splits for the cookstove, and tossed them banging into the box. Yet another sister returned from their mother's room with breakfast dishes. "She's no better," the sister remarked. Nobody answered. Their father had gone looking for work. None of them went to school that day, although they did, most of the time.

※ ※ ※

I asked Grandma: *What was the Great Depression like for you? Did it change your lives?*

I expected a Midwestern Faulkner or Steinbeck, a cross between *The Waltons* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. She sat in her rocker-recliner, her tiny dog on her lap, looking out of the big picture window in her living room.

She said: *Oh, we was always poor, so we didn't know the difference. We made do.*

※ ※ ※

Grandma taught me how to can tomatoes and make peanut brittle. We sat at the kitchen table covered by the plastic tablecloth patterned with roosters, and formed flower petals from the mashed middles of cheap white bread mixed with glycerine, arranged the petals into pansies and roses, and painted them with a tiny brush. She sold arrangements of these bread dough flowers at the church bazaar. She had the cleanest house. She could drive the combine.

Sometimes, on summer evenings, she and Grandpa sat in the shade of the open garage door in folding lawn chairs and watched the cars go by on Pine Lake Street. A wren nested near the clothesline; Grandma called the bird Jenny and loved to hear her sing. The tarry smell of the asphalt driveway faded as the blacktop cooled, fireflies blinked over the lawn and the eighty acres across the



road. When it got dark enough, the automatic light mounted on the pole near the gas tank buzzed and eased itself on.

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I asked: *What's the most amazing modern scientific thing you've seen? What meant the most to you?*

I expected something like television, or a man on the moon, or computers. We were setting the picnic table in the side yard, keeping the flies off the potato salad and Texas sheet cake while the burgers cooked on the grill and the men listened to the Indianapolis 500 on the portable radio.

Her answer: *When electricity came to the country. I could look out across the fields and see the lights of the other houses. Oh, it was a wonderful thing.*

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Grandma said her family was "Pennsylvania Dutch." That would have been on her mother's side. Grandma never said much of anything about her father. She didn't tell heartwarming tales about her childhood; we've had to fill in the blanks as best we could.

There were eleven kids: Bertie (my grandmother), Gertrude, Ida (the oldest), Dougie, Orpha Jane, Little Eileen, Adrian, Roscoe, Joe, Helen, Katherine. The

family moved around a lot. Her father held one job or another, farmed sometimes. Bertie's mother had birthed her eleventh child by the age of forty, had her first stroke at forty-five. By the time she was ten or eleven years old, Grandma was in charge of making the bread for the family. Thirteen people. Every day. She managed to finish eighth grade.

Grandma married Grandpa when she was sixteen and he was twenty-one. My uncle was born seven months later.

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I asked: *How do you keep your houseplants so beautiful?*

My expectation, after having read all of the *Foxfire* books and *Mother Earth News*, was some old-timey, forgotten-by-the-modern world, plant-growing secret. She pulled three pairs of Grandpa's striped overalls out of the washer, to hang on the line near the wren.

Her answer: *If they don't grow, I pitch 'em.*

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My father spends a lot of time tracing the genealogy of our family. The guest bedroom in their condo is his office, with his binders of family history, his own memoirs, his memorabilia shelved alongside the professional-sized monitor of

his Apple computer. He has an account on *Ancestry.com* and corresponds with other amateur genealogists investigating our family lines, who may or may not be distant cousins. Grandma's branch of the tree does not go back very far. We know the names of her parents, and her many brothers and sisters, but beyond that, not much. None of that matters.

What's important is this: in the drear fading days of a southern Michigan winter, as 1931 slogged its way into 1932 and national unemployment topped twenty percent, as Bertie's mother never got better and her older sisters and brothers moved out of the house, Grandma worked at a tiny four-corners filling station somewhere in the farm country near Vandalia. A good-looking, bespectacled farm boy from a respectable family, a young man who had finished high school, travelled the flat, straight road through the wheat and corn fields at the same time every day. And on one of those days, Bertie carefully folded the tops of her socks, brushed her skirt smooth, stepped nearer the road, and waved as he drove by.

## Rescue

The teacher had organized a “slave auction.” None of the parents objected.

After lunch, after the apples and peanut butter sandwiches on white bread pulled from limp brown paper bags, after the tiny cartons of chocolate milk, after the children had been let outside and called back in, after they had kicked off their snow boots and hung their damp cloth coats on hooks in the back of the room, after the teacher counted heads, the girls would be made to line up in a row across the front of the classroom and the boys would bid their little bits of pocket money on each girl. The winner of the bidding would have the services of the girl for one day: to carry his books, maybe. That part was a little vague. She was eleven, the youngest in her sixth grade class. It was 1968.

The girl, with the help of her mother, had dressed carefully for the event. She wore black shoes, white tights, and a white blouse with long sleeves and a Peter-Pan collar. Over this was a red, wide wale corduroy jumper with three heart-shaped buttons sewn in a vertical row at the yoke. She wore galoshes on her way to school, careful not to splash mud on her tights, even when she had to scurry across busy Front Street. She had nightmares about Front Street, about a

car coming after her, crossing sidewalks and lawns, chasing her down blocks she didn't know until she was lost. It was hard to not run, even in the daylight.

The teacher lined the girls up. The row began at the teacher's desk. It was alphabetical, so the black girls were mixed in with the white girls, and the town girls were mixed in with the country girls. The teacher began the bidding. Boys who liked certain girls were bidding ten, fifteen cents, as much as a quarter.

Kathy G. started a bidding war and went for thirty-five cents. Kathy had long straight hair, and she wore it down. She wore culottes and knee socks. She rode the bus to school but her parents didn't farm. Her older sister was a hippie. She wore shoe-boots rather than galoshes. The girl in the red jumper envied Kathy those shoe-boots most of all.

She shuffled sideways, towards the lectern the teacher was using as an auction block. The soles of her shiny good shoes scraped along the gritty tile floor.

Outside the windows the winter slush lay exhausted on the curbs. This small public elementary school building had once been the Catholic School. In the hallway outside the sixth grade classroom stood a large statue of the Virgin Mary. The girl never looked straight at the statue when she walked by. It didn't seem polite, or safe. She didn't know anything about the Virgin Mary, and the word "virgin" made her uncomfortable. The girl lived across the street from an

old green house where the nuns who no longer had teaching duties lived. She was frightened of the nuns, of the windows with no curtains.

It was her turn. She sidled to the specified spot and looked out over the desks. Some of the girls were sitting down already, smiling and whispering. The boys slumped backward in their chairs: Haskell, as big as a man, squeezed into his desk; Mike, in a sweater vest, smart and shy; big-footed, big-shouldered Lenny swatted Dan G. on the arm and they both laughed about something; little Dan S. never stopped reading, flipping the pages and ignoring everything. None of them were sizing her up. No one made eye contact. The teacher called for bids. Silence. The girl had expected this. The red jumper was not enough. She dropped her gaze back down to the toes of her shoes, which were not like Kathy's shoes at all. One of the others had dropped a blue barrette. She moved the toe of her shoe over the barrette and leaned her weight over it, felt it break. Someone in the back of the classroom whispered. The teacher called for bids again. Another pause.

"Two cents!" It was John W., who smelled like he kept his clothes in a garage. Exhaust, and frying oil, and old blankets. "Anyone else?" The girl could hear relief in the teacher's voice. There was no one else.

After school, with a desperate, confused gratitude, she tried to carry John's books. "Nah, nah, you don't have to do that." Those were the only words they had ever spoken to each other. They would not speak again until the summer before ninth grade. John sometimes walked past her house in the evening, ambling through a neighborhood far from his own. She sat on the sill of her open bedroom window above the green lawn she cut with the self-propelled LawnBoy, like the lawns in front of all the white houses of all her white neighbors. John would stand below and try to talk her into jumping down, "I'll catch you!"

Years later, she heard John was in Jackson State Prison. She didn't know why he was supposed to be in there; she wasn't sure she believed it. She remembered July evenings, the asphalt shingles of her front porch roof warm against the backs of her thighs. She could see the nunnery from there, and the abandoned basketball court. She remembered John smiling up at her, late sun laying gold planes across his brown cheeks and haloing his afro. He stood steady, holding his arms out, ready to break her fall.

## On Default

Scientists are finding that there is no “nature vs nurture” duality. Nurture is, in fact, nature, and the opposite is also true. Rats born of nurturing mothers express certain behavioral genes differently than those born of less than perfect mothers – and those gene expressions can, and do, get passed along to future generations. Genes switch on and off all the time, based on experience, environment, who knows what. Your kids will be changed by what happened to you, or to your grandparents. Maybe we already knew this, as a group. Maybe science is confirming what we had observed previously: some families (in general) are adventurers, some are hot-headed, some warm and big-hearted, some are mean.

I am not a geneticist and have an imperfect understanding of the process, but I read that a certain sheath of chemicals around our DNA has everything to do with this activation and deactivation of genes. The activators are called histones. Our genetic predispositions are not set in stone. There’s talk of drugs. Drugs to alter the action of the histones. Drugs to reset our DNA back to its default. We could be rebooted.



Imagine, after a particularly horrific experience that threatens to echo down a person's life, imagine if a pill could make the genetic scars of that experience disappear. Not only might the victim be relieved of pain, the children of the traumatized would not be stamped with the behavioral genetics of that trauma. That would be a good thing. Right?

The trouble is we don't – we really, really don't – know how these things work together. The gene that makes a person easily angered may also help prevent certain types of cancers. Maybe: we don't know. Scientists have recently discovered that a category of DNA – what was once referred to as junk DNA – is responsible for an essential range of genetic activity. Discoveries about the layers of genetic function and the complexity of the interactions changes our understanding of who we are, and how we are, every single day.

Vicky, a girl in my eighth grade class, tossed the choir teacher over the upright piano, telling him, "I've been taking care of myself for long enough. You can't talk to me like that." Then she walked out. I don't know if she finished school. I imagine the rest of her life was a series of adversarial encounters in varying degrees of violence, sometimes involving law enforcement. I know I'm drawing uncharitable conclusions. But although I was afraid to use the school bathroom if I knew Vicky was in there, I admired her willingness to fight.

I didn't like the choir teacher, either, but I was physically meek. My retaliations were smart-mouthed and snarky. I was incapable of open confrontation. If suddenly the classroom were overrun with zombies or terrorists, I imagine my eighth-grade self cowering behind the music stands in the alto section and wetting my pants. Vicky would have taken somebody out. Under this imagined threat I see her swinging one of those plastic choir-room chairs by its metal leg, "You don't treat ME like that," and sending the attackers retreating back into the hallway. I wonder what, in her genetic makeup, made her so quick to prickle, so ready to defend the abstract concept of her intrinsic worth with direct physical action? She could fight. She would fight. She did.

Say now this Vicky, a person that I have now reduced to a type, say she was counseled after the choir teacher episode. Perhaps she met with a therapist who had a mighty range of pharmaceuticals at his disposal. And say the disruptive gene that allowed for physical retaliation to perceived slights was chemically switched back on (or off). What if Vicky were rebooted? Would she still be Vicky? What is the default setting?

We share fifty percent of our DNA with our parents and siblings, and it gets watered down pretty quick beyond that. But we all have a concept of what a human being is, *who* a human being is, and we recognize one of our own species,

no matter how different that other person may appear. So there is, at bottom, a default: a bare-bones, essential framework of humanness. But how basic is that framework?

When we set our computer back to the default setting, we often lose big chunks of stuff. The computer behaves differently, we can't always find files we're sure we've saved, the photos display in ways we're not used to; some things won't work anymore at all. If we accept the premise that evolution and experience over the long haul have altered the primates we were into the people we are, how far back is the human default? How much would be lost if we pushed the reset button?

The assumption is that erasing the effects of trauma or experience from our behavioral genetics would reset us to a pre-trauma state. The assumption is that would be better. We assume that trauma and its effects can be erased from the human experience. It can't. There is no default point that does not carry the genetic markers of the trauma endured by our parents, grandparents, the population as a whole, the entire conglomeration of the messy human gene pool. We can't reset that far back.

I can't say, of all the people in my eighth grade choir class, that Vicky was the one most in need of a reset, if a reset were needed at all. Perhaps it was me. On

the flight-or-fight scale, Vicky at least had the fight. I didn't even have the sense to flee. I sat in that choir class, day after day, enduring the apathetic teaching of a sarcastic, tired, uninspiring teacher. It was not, by any means, traumatic, and I do not want to suggest that it was. But whatever selection of genes that expressed itself in my behaviors prepared me nicely for sitting through it without revolt. When pressed I might occasionally snap back, like a cornered possum, but that's not real fight.

This default setting: would it make me more or less like Vicky, move me further away or closer to myself? Who would I be, if not afraid? Who would I be if I could fight?

Vicky shoved Mr. G over that upright piano and stalked out of the room. She wrenched the door open and would have slammed it if the automatic closing device hadn't prevented it. Everyone was still. The sound of Mr. G landing on the keys lingered in the corners. He steadied himself with a hand on the blonde piano bench before standing. I remembered to breathe and wondered where Vicky was going.

## Go, Jim Dandy

Sandy carried a vial of patchouli oil wherever she went. We walked everywhere in our Converse high-tops. She was almost always restless; I was almost always bored.

In October we hitchhiked 175 miles to find a stringy college boy I had a crush on. A carload of guys picked us up and asked if we liked to party. I didn't understand the question. "We'll get out right here," Sandy said. They left us standing on the shoulder in the dark between exits. Our next ride was an off-duty cop who made us call our parents. He watched. We waited.

We were adrift in our skins. All hipbones and hair; the long sweep of spine from low-slung leather belt to beaded macramé necklace. To hide the scars, Sandy kept her soft flannel shirts tucked in.

We stashed a carton of Kools in our locker. "When I'm thirty," Sandy said, "I'm going to find a tall building and jump off the roof."

Lunchtime in the school parking lot. Chug a bottle of Annie Green Springs, pass a joint, drop a hit of something we called mescaline but was just a dirty kind of speed. Black Oak Arkansas on the eight-track. Sandy braided Trevor's hair; I

drew flowers on the rubber toes of my Converse with a Bic. Everything happened in vans.

I wore costumes. A 1940's era coat with rhinestone buttons, a top hat with a long yellow scarf fluttering down the back. I wanted to be seamstress for the band, somebody's Suzanne. I wished I owned a pair of red velvet pants.

For my fifteenth birthday Sandy gave me Steve. Drive-in movie: *The Legend of Billy Jack*. Sandy and her boyfriend Mike sat in the front of his van. Steve and I screwed in the back on itchy army blankets. Slow motion violence pulsed through the windshield; the bong gurgled in the dim.

Mike was twenty-eight. I pretended to know the things that Sandy did. All I knew were the alto parts, the square roots, the French verbs.

Sandy gave me a second hit of PCP when I thought I wasn't getting off on the first one. I spent the last hour of school with my head down on my desk in Government, trying to remember if I had a mother. Twenty-four hours later I woke up, forearms tracked with bite marks. I had, I recall, been trying to make myself feel something.

There came a boy who didn't know any better so he got me home on time. He taught me to drive a stick and play pinochle. Some other things, too, things that didn't include Sandy.

She was with some guys I didn't know. When the car hit whatever it hit, Sandy was set free from the wreckage. I imagine her cartwheeling, airborne, grinning. She blew past the ditch, pot and patchouli spraying from her pockets, snagged on a fence post. Bled out before the ambulance got there.

It was open casket and I sang.

## The VW Beetle

Hands on the steering wheel of his VW Beetle, he says, "What are you going to do about it?"

I say, "Don't worry." I say, "It'll be all right."

One day off work and no one's any wiser. There's a poster on the ceiling that reads, "Hang in There, Baby." I've got fists full of the table's paper cover, even though they used enough anesthesia to smooth things over, keep me calm.

Breath goes in, breath goes out, it'll be all right. Stainless steel pinches and scrapes and does its work. There's a doctor down there somewhere, busy, whistling behind his mask. "You're doing fine, honey," says the nurse. Heels up, knees apart, the position that got me here in the first place. I paid the cashier first.

Tubes suck and gurgle and remnants swirl down the drain to nowhere. It'll be all right, it'll be all right, it'll be all right. Hang in there, baby. I've got that poster on the ceiling. No gods listen to the coward's prayer. Breathe in, breathe out. I wish I'd kept my socks on. The table's paper cover is no longer crackling; I hold myself still.



They send me home with a list of things to do, an amber bottle of pills, the admonishment to call my doctor if I get a fever, signs of infection, excessive bleeding. Anything unusual. I don't know what's usual but I go home. I sit in the waiting room for a half hour and eat a cookie and juice first. Like donating blood.

I read the instructions. Number five says I can resume normal activities in twenty-four hours. Number one says not to put anything in my vagina for two weeks.

I can't get warm. I can't sleep enough. I run through the bottle of pills they give me and find other ways to keep myself numb for six months. Pitchers of sangria, pills you don't get from the doctor. I go to work and I don't talk about it and I don't ride in the Beetle anymore. It'll be all right.

From here, nothing but corn stubble fields all the way to Pokagon Highway. My hands, flat in the hollow between my hipbones.

## Looking on Facebook

We had shoeboxes full of marbles. My favorites were the bumble-bees and the puries. I didn't care about the cat-eyes, which seemed like failed puries. I wanted to be able to see all the way through the clear ones. The bumble-bees were my signature marbles. I liked the way the yellow and black stripes showed up bold in the dust. Lynn and I split the marbles between us when my family got ready to move, and he let me have all of the bumble-bees, even the boulders. We were going to be pen-pals, but you know how that goes. The friendship forged as fourth-grade marble champs didn't hold up over distance. I don't have that box of marbles anymore. I don't know where they went. I remember, though, the smooth, cool surfaces of the marbles rattling in the little cloth bags we carried them to school in. I remember the gravel of the playground, the click of the tosses, winning the pot, and Lynn coming over after school, drinking grape juice, sharing. We shared, like good kids are supposed to do, sitting on the floor under the shelf of World Book Encyclopedia volumes.

Facebook search results: Not found.

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Mike and I were supposed to be friends because our parents were. The six of us children were shooed down into the basement and expected to play. One summer our families vacationed together to Mackinac Island. I got an asthma attack and didn't have the breath to walk. Mike stayed in the motel room with me for a long time. There was nothing to watch on the black and white TV so he read to me in the knotty-pine paneled room while I pushed the air in and out of my lungs and looked at the sky between the algae-green fiberglass drapes. It occurs to me now to wonder why he stayed, why he didn't go outside and look at the old forts and horses and things with the rest. Weeks later we kids were playing house down in the basement and Mike and I were the parents. We laid down in his bed together. We just laid there. The next day at school I told some girls he tried to put his hand up my shirt. He found out and said, "I resent that." He wasn't my friend after.

Facebook search results: Found six men that might be him. I looked at the photos of the accountant for a long time, his yellow polo shirt, trying to imagine him as a boy. No luck.

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Robin would pinch the back of my arms to see if I'd yell. It left bruises. She lived on a lake and my dad was impressed by that. She and the red-headed girl

who lived next door were outdoorsy and athletic. Robin's house had a long rope tied to a tall tree. You could swing on the rope from her deck out over the grass. Not clear to the water, but a long way. Her room was unnaturally tidy and her father was very tan. I quit going there when I got tired of the bruises. I didn't tell my parents she hurt me. I never swung on that rope.

Results: Found. Did not send Friend request. I wonder if she's still mean. She doesn't look mean. She's wearing one of those fitness bracelets and she's tan.

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Jenny's Polish-speaking grandmother lived with them. The tiny old woman existed all in shades of grey, kept to the edges of a room, except the kitchen, where she moved back and forth from table, to stove, to counter. The house smelled of root vegetables. Jenny became a cheerleader. I did not.

Results: Not found. There's probably a married name I don't know. If I hadn't deleted all the perky class reunion invitations off Facebook from people I couldn't stand, I might be able to find her.

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In eighth grade, Carrie had hickies on her stomach from her boyfriend. They ran in a line from the bottom of her bra and disappeared beneath the waistband of

her jeans. She told stories about things I had no notion of. I was scared of the big, silent man who watched TV all day on her couch and wasn't her father. He never looked at us. I never met her boyfriend.

Results: Not found. Didn't look too hard.

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Jody's mother was divorced, and thin, and pretty. She smoked a lot and had hemorrhoid surgery. Jody had to tell me what hemorrhoids were. We went to visit her mother in the hospital. She was lying on her stomach reading a *Life* magazine with the Jackson 5 on the cover.

Results: Not found. Not actually looked for; I can't remember Jody's last name. I typed in her first name and the name of our high school, but got bored searching through the results. I think she moved to Kalamazoo, or Waukegan.

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Lonnie and her mother lived out of town a ways. The house was dim, unfinished somehow, stuffy. We would walk down her road to smoke cigarettes. I smoked my first joint with Lonnie. Once, we drove a couple of hours to pick up Lonnie's mother's boyfriend at a train station or truck stop or somewhere. Lonnie and I sat in the back seat and fell asleep on the way home,

highway lights sliding across her pale skin and the heavy brown hair that tangled itself into the shoulders of her bulky blue sweater. It was late when we got back. Lonnie's mother and her boyfriend got drunk and yelled all night. Later, I would know all about drunken yelling at night, but at the time I'd never heard such a thing. "They're having an altercation," Lonnie said, from the dark on her side of the bed. I didn't sleep much at Lonnie's house. I stayed over, but I didn't sleep.

Results: Found. She looks vibrant on Facebook, with her dappled grey hair and the loose, colorful wardrobe of those women who work for museums or other non-profit enterprises. I did not send the friend request. Who knows if she remembers me?

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Sharon had stunning, thick, long red hair, and she didn't have the invisible eyelashes some redheads have. She lived with her aunt and uncle. After Sharon's mother killed herself, people thought it would be a scandal for teen-aged Sharon to go on living with her young stepfather. There were some relatives in someplace like Oklahoma. I don't know why she didn't live there. We wafted around together, visiting her stepfather, avoiding her cousin. She got

pregnant in high school and was married the first of any of us. It didn't stick. I didn't like her second husband, either. Neither, after a while, did she.

Results: Not found. Found a bunch of redheaded people who might be children or other relatives. They all look happy.

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Cathy M. had the messiest house I'd ever seen. You had to go sideways up the stairs. Her parents taught at the college. We walked to her house at lunchtime and made Jell-O, drinking it warm from mugs that we left in the sink. Cathy was valedictorian.

Results: Found, I think. What is there to say now? Hi – Remember me?

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Kathy S. was an only child. For a while, she and Sharon and I were our own smart and awkward clique. We invented an older brother for Kathy named Steve. She drew sketches of him, which looked quite a bit like Dan Fogelberg on the *Homefree* album cover. Steve was supposed to be away at college. Kathy left town right after high school; she went away to college and didn't come back. None of us had brothers.

Results: Not found. Never found. She didn't do the Facebook RSVP back when the class reunionites flooded my newsfeed. I search for her every now and again, not sure what I'd do if I found her profile on line somewhere. I'm so different, now.

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Gina and I washed dishes together at the county old folks' home. We were nearly fired for having a food fight in the dish room. It was the day they served fish and prune whip. We took showers and finished our shift.

Results: Found. She lives in Florida, dyes her hair blonde and owns a motorcycle. Sounds about right. Hope you're having fun, Gina. If I hadn't started having babies and such... well, you know. Friend request not sent.

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There's a blonde woman on Facebook with Sandy's last name and that same southern set to her jaw, but it's not my Sandy. My Sandy might have married, but she would never have had her wedding photos taken in front of a fake tropical sunset. My Sandy could not have sit still long enough to program computers like Facebook Sandy. She might have raised dogs, but not golden retrievers. Pit bulls, maybe, or salukis. And this Facebook Sandy was born in August. My Sandy's birthday was opening day of deer season, two days before



mine. She was a Scorpio, like me. This Facebook Sandy couldn't be my Sandy, even if I hadn't been to her funeral. Even if they did bury her in that frilly white dress.

Twenty acres off the chainsaw growl cuts out.

Two dogs pause, lift their heads;

Hemlocks, still.

## Afghans

We've always called them afghans in our family, the crocheted blankets draped over the backs of sofas, over the arm of the rocking chair, bunched at the bottom of a toddler's bed. My grandmother made me my first afghan when I was fourteen years old: red-gold-black zig-zag stripes. I was into the dramatic color schemes then. That afghan snuggled me through monthly menstrual cramps and the occasional bout of flu. I took it with me when I moved out of my parents' house. It was a fixture then of my own house, and eventually bundled all four of my kids through colds, through chicken pox, during winter Friday movie nights with popcorn and hot cocoa, snow days and Saturday morning cartoons. You could spill lemonade on this afghan, wipe the pizza grease from your fingers into it before taking your turn in Monopoly, fart under it and vomit onto it. It was washed untold times, always throwing the washer out of balance. I'd mutter and make my way to the laundry room (which was sometimes a garage, sometimes a back porch, sometimes a basement), pull the heavy, wet mess out of the drum, flopping like a dead seal, and rearrange the load. Shut the lid and wait, wait for the spin to start again, gauge if the rock of the cycle would smooth itself out or send the washer into more frenzied banging until I had balanced the weight.

I have other afghans my grandmother and my mother made over the years. Tiny baby blankets in mint bright pastels, soft as fluff, (carefully, carefully...those fragile infant fingers sometimes find their way through the double crochet as if to clutch the blanket tighter to themselves, and it takes a gentle touch to unwind those small but fervent fists.) Robust twin-sized afghans for rambunctious kids to drag from bed to TV, to build forts from, tell secrets under, kick off in the middle of the night. Yarns in the blue-and-silver of the Detroit Lions, fairy princess pinks and purples, the high school orange-and-black. For the older recipients, the pretty afghans, destined to stay folded over the back of an uncomfortable corner chair, or arranged across the foot of the guest bedroom bed. Mauve, sage, taupe, rose: grown-up colors. I have a gorgeous, cream-colored afghan, in a tasteful, close pattern, perfectly stitched – obviously my mother's work: precise and geometric. I never use it. It lies folded at the bottom of a trunk in a spare bedroom nobody sleeps in. I would hate to ruin it. When I spill hibiscus tea on it, the stain will never come out.

I imagine my mother and my grandmother, busy fingers jabbing the crochet hook in and out of the stitches. Quiet in the rocker in the evening, the three-way lamp turned to its highest setting (the dark yarns can be so hard to see!), counting stitches, counting rows, checking the gauge, the yarns creeping up the

side of the chair into the trap of the fingers and the hook, bound into patterns, loops, knots. Put to use.

I tried my hand at afghans. I could not control them. Zig-zags wandered into waves, into stripes, into lost diagonals. I could not conceal a single knot. The blankets were too long, or narrow, too heavy, too ugly. And besides, we did not need more afghan makers in the family. Already there was one on every bed, in every chair, tucked close around us as I read aloud to the kids at bedtime. We were warm enough.

And warm I am still. The red-gold-black afghan, small holes and ragged edges notwithstanding, keeps doing its work. These days I own a fancy washing machine that self-balances its load, so after I've spilled my coffee, and sat with a dog on my lap, and wiped a smear of grape jelly from my thumb to the afghan, I can toss the yarny behemoth in the washer and let the technology do the rest. I can hear it, though, the washer, attempting to spin, beginning to bang, slowing, reversing, trying again, the slow thump, the fast thump, the smooth hum, as it finds its equilibrium and freshens the afghan, again. For the thousandth time.

## Hallelujah Dinner

This was my grandmother's china with the platinum stripe and the rose. The tableware matches if the chairs do not, and all the faces shine. The girl who believes in heaven says grace as we hold silent hands to either side, and I think about the gravy. I believe in meals. Bless this food to our bodies, the vessels of hugs and kisses, of sticky pie fingers and giggle bellies. Sanctify the turkey to the daddy, the cranberries to the sister, and the mashed potatoes to the baby with two new teeth. Give us, oh lord, the communion of real butter and green bean casserole, the sacrament of story: the time that she... remember when we... he said... we went. We'll all have seconds (amen), please pass the stuffing (amen). I've been at the altar all day.

## The Sun and The Fence

A framed needlepoint representation of the sun hangs on the wall above my desk. It is a bright, smiling sun, the execution of which leans more towards craft than art. I designed the sun when I was in high school and worked all the stitches, from the basket stitch to the French knots, while listening to James Taylor and Elton John albums on the portable stereo in my bedroom. I think I built the frame, too, out in the garage. I gave the sun to my parents as a gift, but although they thanked me, they could never quite decide where to hang it in their home. It didn't go with their signed and numbered limited edition prints, so the sun languished out of the way somewhere, on a basement or spare bedroom wall.

Several years ago, when my folks were downsizing, they gave the sun back to me. And even though I understand, it still pricks: this thing I made is not something they value enough to keep. But what the hell; it all goes eventually. We joke – *one less thing for the estate sale!* We joke about these things.

I sit back in my chair and study the sun from time to time, examining the choices I made in color and design, the places where I should have put a red stitch instead of a yellow, the uneven spacing of the triangles that ring the circle of the

sun's mustachioed face. Whatever imperfections I might find in the needlepoint, I like that sun.

I spoke with my parents on the phone today and my father, at eighty-three, is worried his cane makes him look old. That is still his primary concern: how things appear. He and Mom sit in their condo, surrounded by their nice things and his framed photography, the bird and fish prints, some good paintings, all hung in the painstaking geometric precision that soothes my mom and dad.

We have forgiven each other for I hardly know what – for not understanding each other, for a parade of gifts that missed the mark. I can't say why we didn't enjoy each other's company when I was a child, and I can't say how we got past resenting each other for that.

When Mom and Dad married and left the farms they grew up on, they left the people they were behind, and spent the rest of their lives attempting to be people they only had a notion of. They didn't know themselves any better than they knew me. I cannot explain to them why I love that sun; they couldn't begin to articulate why they don't.

Hanging beside the sun is the auction notice for the dissolution of my grandparents' farm.



Tuesday, October 1, 2002  
Hahn Auction Service to sell The Former Property of  
Russell Leach, *Deceased* – Alberta Leach, *Owner*  
1:00pm (IN time) – 2:00pm (MI time)  
Tractors & equipment – 5:00pm

Everything sold: the 1967 International Harvester Farmall tractor my sister drove like a champ, the antique wooden wheelchair we played with in the basement, the baler, the gateleg dining room table with leaves we sat around only at Christmas, the new Remington Model 870 Wingmaster pump 12-gauge shotgun, never fired, that Grandpa was carrying the day he got hung up on the fence. The day he decided to take the gun with him back to the pond, climbed the barbed wire and couldn't get untangled, the cold day when he was found hours after leaving the house, delirious and feverish, the day that changed everything (although it had been changing for a while), the day he'd never come home from.

I kept the auction notice in a drawer for a long time. It is something worth hanging on to, like a snapshot or a lock of hair. Recently I moved it to its current spot on the wall. I was happy visiting Grandpa and Grandma on the farm, happier than anywhere else in my childhood. I remember riding on the wagon behind the tractor, driving the lane next to the plowed fields, watching the way the tires flattened the weeds, and how those weeds popped right up again after

our passing. I remember the redwing blackbirds on the fenceposts, the smell of diesel fuel and hogs.

Years. There came a day when Grandpa looked out over the fields he was too tired to plant and something broke inside. After the fence, he spent what was left of his life sedated and strapped in a wheelchair, parked in the hallway of a facility where the fluorescents buzzed and bounced light off the waxed grey tile.

I call my parents every Sunday.

We don't know the secrets our ancestors kept. I can set the Christmas table with Grandma's china and make her pineapple tapioca pudding. I can see my grandfather's profile in my oldest daughter's nose.

After Grandpa's funeral we all went fishing in his pond. I think he would have liked that, but I can't say for certain. All I know is there's a fence waiting for me, too. And I don't want to climb it with a gun in my hand.

## On Motherhood

1. There are baby blankets in the bottom drawer and I don't remember which baby they were for.
2. Definition 2a: "refusal to admit the truth or reality."
3. They never went to bed hungry.
4. I should have taken him to the doctor after he fell off the monkey bars.
5. There are certain lies I chose to believe. When told to me. When said by me.
6. She was in charge of too much, too early.
7. One broke year we poked sequined pins into Styrofoam to make ornaments for gifts. They called it the sweat-shop Christmas.
8. Definition 1: "The fact of having committed breach of conduct."
9. His arm might have been broken.
10. We should get a good night's sleep and start again tomorrow.

11. Her first word was “button.” His first word was, “get down.” Her first word was, “don’t!” The baby called her oldest sister, “Mama.”
12. My motives are unclear.
13. Definition 2c: “to judge, regard, or treat as righteous and worthy of salvation.”
14. I left them with that terrible babysitter.
15. I didn’t know it was that bad.
16. There was music. There were books.
17. She shut them in a room with a TV and a ball. They could not have found me.
18. His arm probably was broken, a little.
19. Definition 1: “sorrow aroused by conditions beyond one’s power to repair.”
20. The children of the good parents go to therapy, too.
21. They are all fine now. We’re fine.

December 20

I put gifts in the mail. The tracking numbers report that these gifts have reached their destinations. The tracking numbers do not let me know what happens next. Will the little boys shake the boxes? Will the downstate uncle eat all of the cashews in one sitting while watching the Alaska gold miner shows on TV? Will the fourteen year old girl shrug the shirt to the side and go back to texting? Will the baby notice that I sent nothing specifically for her, since she's a baby and everything is equally delightful? Can the recipients tell, no matter how carefully or indifferently I've shopped, I always feel as if I'm doing it wrong? I should have known she's outgrown purple, he's quit drinking, they've become vegan.

(I stare at my hairline in the mirror. I can see how each individual hair rises from my scalp, see which are grey, which are not. There are fewer, of all colors. I can see the ivory skin between the hairs; the tough sleeve stretched around the rock of my skull. I pull the skin of my face back, easing the wrinkles, widening my eyes. Let it go.)

It's the commercials. A diamond will suspend and sustain love at twenty-eight and moonlight, forever. The glowing, cuddly, Disney-stamped toy will erase all toddler troubles, will cancel Daddy's absence, will make the children smile

enough for everyone, even Mommy. Grandma can send a talking storybook, a suitable substitute when Grandma can't afford airfare. So much rides on that gift. The perfect one.

Blame the commercials: All the grown children pull up to Grandma and Grandpa's house, disgorging golden retrievers and healthy offspring from late-model SUV's. It is always snowing at Grandma and Grandpa's, and the children are always returning to the house they grew up in, to sleep in rooms whose stains and divots are so familiar they have become invisible. The television-approved grandparents have not moved to a one-bedroom condo in The Villages, Florida. They have not sold the maple dresser with the burn marks that never rubbed out. Grandma has not decided she's never cooking another goddamn turkey for as long as she lives.

(It has been five years since my last period. I engage in the regular exercise necessary to keep bladder leakage at bay. I lie on my back, knees raised, and count through the reps, concentrating on the right muscle groups. The physical therapist suggested that there are weights one can use if it becomes necessary. I did not ask to try them; it is not yet necessary. The biblical Sarah gave birth to a son when she was ninety. Did she still have her periods? Did her bladder ever recover? Were she and Abraham still having sex, without Viagra, as he neared

one hundred years old? In my bathroom closet there is a box of maxipads. In case I bleed. In case I pee.)

None of the grown children in the mythical TV holidays have to tend bar on Christmas Day, or work the evening shift at the hospital on Christmas Eve, emptying bed pans and watching monitors while robust carolers invade the dayroom. None of the grown children have obligations to other families, to in-laws or ex's. None have opted to ski in Colorado over break instead of going home. The snow is always softly falling, the nights are silent, a toddler does not fuss with a fever and backed up eustachian tubes.

I blame the Nielsen Rating system.

Long ago, I told my children not to feel guilt or pressure to come home for the holidays. I wanted them to be able to make the plans that suited them. I did not know that I should have given myself that advice, that I should be taking it now. I should not be checking last-minute flight schedules and devising strategies.

(On Sunday mornings, before I call my sister, my parents, my children in Seattle and Tennessee and Arkansas and Louisiana, before I make a grocery list, I open the rattling pill bottles and fill the days-of-the-week dispenser that keeps the medicines organized: gout, thyroid, GERD, allergies. The pharmacy has my credit card number on file for my convenience. They deliver to my office. Then,

on the small piece of paper magnetted to the refrigerator door I write: skim milk, lima beans, lemons, whole wheat flour.)

Every year I tell myself that I will not ask the kids if they liked their gifts. Every year I ask anyway, saying, "Did the box get there?" Saying, "Is it the right size?" Saying, "I left the receipt in the box so you can take it back." Every year I hear those words coming out of my mouth and cannot pull them back in time to save myself. This year I will not ask, will not wedge the question in the midst of other telephone chatter. They will not love me more if they like the gift; will not love me less if they don't. It is not the thought that counts, it is the receipt. I have the tracking numbers to prove it.

Here at our house, which is not the house the kids grew up in but where it is, actually, snowing, the two of us will put up the tree on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day my husband – their father – and I will prepare Beef Wellington, which is both time consuming and appropriately festive. We will congratulate our kitchen success and pretend it is enough. We will try to find a football game on TV and walk the dogs and Skype with the kids who are not here and, who are, I hope, guilt-free.

(As if the stretch marks don't remember every time a fetus fluttered toward life. As if the widening breasts don't recall the mouths of babies and lovers. As if the



stiff and knotty fingers have forgotten how to braid a little girl's hair, pull a roofing nail from a bare foot, rub a shaking back until the sobbing subsides. As if this body weren't once a destination in itself.)

## On Disappointment

And I was cruel, and I said through her tears, "So just how is it supposed to be?"

And she flung her hot heart against the cold thing in my chest and I remained unmoved. And the phone was sweat in my hand, and my ear burned full, and I wanted to sleep. I wanted to hit "end." On a lot of things. But the cold thing took it and I adjusted my posture accordingly. I could see my reflection in the window pressed against the night, listening, could see the Chihuly globe hanging unbroken on its string. It was not sundown yet where she lived.

## Carrying On

I have carried four children, put them down.

My last obstetrician told me, “After you’ve been doing this as long as I have, you tend to gain a sense of perspective.” The first doctor who tinkered around down there said nothing to me at all.

I carried diapers, bottles, extra socks, allergy meds, groceries, addresses, hair ties, schedules, secrets.

If I were a bobcat I would have raised them up, taught them to hunt, and chased them off, never expecting a thing from those kittens ever again. Once the kittens have left the den, do they ever smell the same? Seen from afar, in a context unfamiliar, mid-hunt, would we stop and acknowledge the relationship? All I ask for now is the nice nursing home, someday, please.

My children are out in the world now. They are there, and I am here, and the burden of their existence is no longer mine. I created that burden, gave it to them at my breast, taught them to walk and brushed the cut grass off the scraped knees, taught them to love and there-there’d the broken hearts, taught them to

try. They never asked me, *try for what?* They were good children. Now, I expect them to carry the burden of trying without my help.

I should have taught them to hunt. I have gained a sense of perspective. I stand at the kitchen window with a mug of licorice tea and watch the sun set behind the trees across the road, as the spot I inhabit rolls away from the light.

## Staff Meeting

In the staff meeting she thought about enemas. She thought about locking herself in the Ladies Room, where the lights dim automatically after eleven minutes if she sits very still. She wanted also to vomit, but if she vomited she would pee her pants. Maybe she wanted to do that, too. She imagined a clean, warm bathroom, with white tile, many towels, and a thick cake of eucalyptus soap: a safe place to lie naked in her own effluvia.

She drew a row of tiny x's across the top of her notepad. She drew tinier o's in the diamond shapes between the x's. She wondered why she needed to fill those spaces.

Procedures for administering enemas are recorded in the very earliest civilizations. The ancient Egyptians had enema how-to papyri.

She wanted to burn her house down and lose everything. Her books, and her frying pans, and her bed. The bag of yarn and buttons. Even her good Iverson snowshoes, the ones she varnished every summer and whose bindings had made permanent grooves in her winter hiking boots. She wanted to stand over the steaming, acrid hole of her basement and kick chunks into the smolder. It would

smell terrible: burned plastic, hot metal, a Pandora's box of toxic vapors  
simmering unto heaven. She wanted know there was nothing left to save.

King Louis XIII of France had more than two hundred enemas in one year. Back  
then, it was called a clyster.

She reached across the conference table and picked up a donut with pink frosting  
and sprinkles. She shook it once over the white bakery box to allow the loose  
sprinkles to tumble in with the other crumbs. She placed the donut on a small  
square paper napkin next to her coffee mug. She wished her coffee was still hot.

She wanted to shave her head and lay on a flat orange rock in Utah until her skin  
blistered and peeled, until strips of muscle curled away from her bones. She  
didn't want it to hurt too much.

Saint Lawrence is said to have been barbecued alive for the crime of keeping  
lists. He is the patron saint of cooks. Legend quotes him as saying, "Turn me  
over, I'm done on this side."

Her ass was sweating in the vinyl chair. When she shifted her weight the chair  
made an obscene noise. She knew her pants would stick to the backs of her  
thighs when, finally, she stood up. In twenty minutes they would all stand,  
shaking their clothes away from their bodies, buttoning jackets, adjusting the

waistbands of skirts, not making eye contact until appropriately resettled into themselves.

Marilyn Monroe was an enema enthusiast, and ate raw eggs and milk for breakfast. Dr. Kellogg advocated colon hydrotherapy. He also invented corn flakes.

She licked the tip of her right index finger and pressed it on a blue sprinkle that had escaped to the blonde surface of the conference table. She put the sprinkle in her mouth and chewed it between her front teeth. One tiny bite, and gone.

Colovexus delivers powerful cleansing results or you get your money back.

She ate her donut. She drank her coffee, now, before it got any colder. She realized, after thinking about it, that there was no lock on the Ladies Room door. The bathroom of her dreams was not in this building.

She was in love with the shredder. Through the conference room wall she could hear the powerful growl of the Fellowes 485i cross-cut with self-oiling blades and the capacity to disincorporate paper for ten hours straight. She envied the intern whose job it was to feed ancient books of green-bar reports into the machine's patient slot, to watch the pages unfold and disappear. She did her own shredding. Phone messages, meeting notes, badly-formatted reports, obsolete

files, page by doomed page grinding away, the motor smelling of warm electricity and the dust of lists. She wondered what it would feel like to be the shredder. Constantly fed and emptied, fed and emptied, accruing nothing. The bin beneath the blades was large. She could squeeze inside, let the confetti of all those words fill her ears and eyes.

Some of the colonic hydrotherapy clinics put photos of the shit they'll clear out of you on their websites. Some of the clinics cater to pets. The kings of France were known to clyster a dog if it seemed unwell.



## The Dictionary Entry

Jeff was the news director. He was in his mid-forties and had worked at the radio station for about a year when his hip started bothering him. He went to the doctor when the pain got in the way of his golf game. The doctors found calcium deposits, which were the result of a malfunctioning kidney. The kidney was cancerous, and the cancer had gone pretty far. There wasn't much the doctors could do, although they tried.

It wasn't long before Jeff no longer came to work. His chair was empty; his duties were covered by others. Within a few months we all went to his funeral.

I was given his vacant office. I boxed up my stuff and carted it down the hall to settle in. All of Jeff's personal items had been cleared out previously; there were a few general office supplies rattling around in the drawers and on the shelves.

It felt a little creepy to be moving in, a bit haunted, maybe, but since my old office was a converted storage closet adjacent to the restroom, this was a definite step up. It was all men except for me, and I had heard enough of the aggressive pissing, the shit sighing, and the poor guy who vomited before every newscast.

A week or two after moving in to Jeff's old office I no longer felt like I was

intruding. There were phone calls, playlists, schedules, reports, copy writing, meetings...it never stopped.

I was working on a press release and grabbed the dictionary. It was one of the things left over from Jeff's occupation of the space. I riffled through the pages to find what I was looking for and stopped, flipped back a few pages. Someone had highlighted something in yellow. There it was: *die*. Jeff had highlighted the word and underlined part of the definition, lightly, in pencil, "to cease to exist."

That was it, the only mark in the whole dictionary. I flipped through all the pages, then turned back. A few moments ticked by while I let the haunted feeling creep up my back. I jumped when the phone rang, picked up the receiver with relief, closed the dictionary and kept on moving. The press release was finished well before the deadline. I always made my deadlines.

If I ever told anyone else about the dictionary, I don't remember. At first it seemed as if finding that highlight was a violation of Jeff's privacy, as though I had intruded on an intimate contemplation of eternity. After a while it slipped my mind. But maybe I should have made a big deal out of it, spread his quiet gesture around to those who knew him. Maybe Jeff wanted to leave a little clue, a tiny mark someone would come across later to let that someone know he had been there, before he ceased to exist.

Everything in the night sky is shining at us from the past. Those stars are far, far away, and moving farther. Even sunlight is eight minutes old before it hits the greenery and sparks photosynthesis. What we see when we look into the night sky is the history of the galaxy playing out in our present. Alnitak, the left-hand star in Orion's belt, is eight hundred light years away; the light we see is eight hundred years old. The light from Sirius, the brightest star, is about eight and a half years old. But yet, we see them both, at the same time, any clear night.

I don't know if I believe in heaven. Or hell. Or an afterlife. But we linger, like starlight. Shining on, at least for a while. The exploding stars of the infant universe left their light in the sky and their atoms in our DNA, even mine, even Jeff's, even in the cells that turn to cancer.

There is a biological study of the economy of scale, in which scientists try to figure out why, ounce for ounce, it takes so much more energy to power a mouse than an elephant. I don't understand the calculations about arteries and the surface area of lungs and the cube roots and logarithms, but simply put, big animals coast; the little ones sprint. No matter what the fables say, in real life the hare reaches the finish line first, using up all his frantic heartbeats on the way. The tortoise lives much, much longer.

Generally speaking, the slower the heartbeat, the longer the life. There are always exceptions, of course. Sometimes someone or something will suddenly cease to exist, and nobody knows why. And certain creatures are granted fewer total heartbeats, no matter how fast they use them up.

People have, on average, 2.2 billion heartbeats in a lifetime. If the 14-billion-year-old universe were middle-aged, and had a metabolism similar to ours, its heart would beat once every twelve years. If, that is, the universe is keeping time like we are. Busy, busy, busy. Answering phones and writing press releases, filling up every one of those two billion or so seconds. We are the scurrying counterpoint to the languid universe. Do humans seem serene and slow-moving to a hummingbird, whose heart can beat a thousand times a minute? Do we seem blessed with immeasurable lifespans counted down by our steady, slow and efficient heartbeats?

The physicists claim Einstein's Theory of Relativity quashed the idea of absolute time. Time does not go back forever or stretch infinitely in front of us.

According to those calculations time started with the Big Bang and is a property of this particular universe, which could either be flying apart or doomed to collapse in upon itself. But most importantly, the Theory of Relativity states each

observer experiences time differently. Clocks run faster or slower, depending on where they are. Depending upon the position of the observer.

I'm sure Jeff's clock was running pretty fast there towards the end. His heartbeats were numbered early. But I hope, Jeff, you didn't believe you were going to cease to exist. I hope you know I found your mark. Your wife, your kids: I'm sure they all remember you, but I don't know for sure. I do know you sent something into the future, and I noticed, and there must be more. There must be.

## Voiceover

I kiss a microphone in a room with one window that looks into a room with one window that looks back. Usually the blinds are closed.

With the headphone gain way up I hear every breath, every tongue click, every lip pop. *Funeral home, flower shop, family diner.* Murmur the right way and men shift in their seat belts. That's what I do.

I take the good decongestants. Enough for the sweet electric crawl that's not white cross but close enough. Ephedrine was wonderful, over the counter anywhere. May cause nervousness, thank god. Approximately coffee, times ten. Midnight shift or morning, either one.

Nothing but the script and me in the headphones. Exhale hard, deliver the Oldsmobile spot in a perfect melodious twenty-eight seconds flat to fit the donut. Go have a smoke. Back in the day we smoked right in the studio, ashes on the vinyl records and the reel to reels. Two turntables and a microphone. Things change. Now, I suppose, the sales manager feels up the copy editor in the server room rather than the tape library.

The tire shop bought thirty seconds of airtime that I will read into. *Now through the end of the month, buy three all-season radials and get the fourth one free*, they pay me to say. Take off the wind sock and rest my lips right on the tangy metal grill, speak into the sweet spot, breathe in electrons and magnets and current. I'd lick it except fat O'Boyle who looks at pantie porn on the overnight shift touches this mic too.

One take. I never stumble over *orthopedic surgery* or *bureau of land management* or *Friday prix fixe seafood special*. The syllables press back on my ears like practiced fingers. Alone, I know what I'm doing.

People don't know it's me but I shower anyway. It's like talking to myself with everybody listening, talking to everyone with nobody making eye contact.

I speak into a microphone and read the script about irrigation equipment. I don't know if it will save a crop, but four hundred miles and six months later, a man in Eastern Washington believes it will, and writes a check.

## Good Job

Adam's first job was to tend the garden. His second job was to name every living creature. And also to have dominion, although I'm not sure if domination is a job so much as an attitude. An attitude bestowed, in this case, by a higher dominator. God set Adam's place in a hierarchy that we must presume God had previously worked out, maybe on graph paper, with a flow chart. Adam was warned: he could lose his job at any time. There were rules. He'd have to do a good job.

Dominion is an offshoot of domain, and I wonder if the two can be separated. Once outside of one's domain, can one retain dominion? Did Adam get to be the boss of anything other than that garden, and when he was kicked out, did that dominion end?

I think it might have, although Adam hung onto the idea that he was still in charge and told it to all his sons. Kings, Founding Fathers, Priests, Popes, Sheiks, Supreme Dragons: everything that has ever happened demonstrates that you were not, ever, in charge. The hierarchy is in charge. Not you. Have a son, appoint a successor, pass a law, start a pogrom. If you don't set up a system, or work within that system, you can do anything you want and still be dead at the



end. Women will have more babies, then, to fill up the space you left behind.

Spackle the scars with offspring.

But back to the names, and Adam in the garden in the days before the serpent.

Adam weeded and watered, walked with God, and named everything. He was responsible for this certain range of assigned functions and does not seem to have offended God until the apple incident. So he must have been doing a good job, till then.

I wonder about Adam and Eve, strolling through the garden in the hot afternoons, looking out for living things that had yet to be named. (I don't know if the non-living things already had names, or were not deemed to be in need of names. Did God say, "That's a rock, by the way." Or did he say, "That? Don't worry about it. Doesn't live, doesn't need a name." Did God provide Adam with a checklist; was there a quota? Did Adam ever stop before a little brown rodent and ask himself, "Wait. Didn't I already name this thing?" Who was keeping track?) So Adam and Eve are strolling. Or perhaps they are not strolling. This idea of strolling through the Garden of Eden is a culturally accepted notion: non-purposeful action is the norm in paradise. If paradise is "a place or state of bliss, felicity, or delight," then what is so blissful about having nothing to do? The first thing God did was give Adam a job, so there was likely

very little strolling going on at all. "Eve!" Adam called, "Where did we see that yellow bird last? I haven't named it yet and it's been flying all over the orchard all day!" Paradise includes a job; perhaps paradise cannot exist without one.

Eve, the minion without a task, the helpmeet to the dominator, says, "I like the name 'goldfinch.' How about that?" and she says, "Relax, I'm sure he doesn't expect you to name everything in one week!" and "I could help; I could name a few. Why don't you let me work on this bunch of bushes over here?" Adam, though, Adam has dominion. He believes he should name it all. He says, "Maybe." He says, "I wouldn't be too sure about that!" He says, "No." He is in paradise. He has a job to do.

I talk to my husband about his job; I talk to my sister, my children, my friends about theirs. I have a hard time finding things to talk about with my parents: they don't have jobs anymore. My sister-in-law has never had a job. I look at her and have no idea how she orders her time. It is a failure of understanding on my part, I know. Perhaps envy. But I know myself well enough to know that if I did not have a job to do, I, like Eve, would find time to talk to serpents and wonder about too much. Perhaps God should have endowed Eve with less imagination. She was never going to be happy with the just the title of Helpmeet: "one who is a companion and helper; esp: WIFE." She needed a real job.

I am a low-level functionary in the financial aid office of a smallish university. I care – very much – about doing a *good job*. Unlike Adam, I have no dominion. But I have a place. Still, I know enough about the good and evil from Eve's terrible tree to know that having a place in bureaucracy may not, necessarily, be good. I know that all of us who want to do a good job, and who diligently do those jobs within the framework of a larger structure, serve to prop up that structure. That might be Foucault. While a structure may not be evil, it also may not be good. I can feel, as I file paperwork, and check the procedures necessary to comply with regulations, and interpret regulations that are unclearly defined (purposely, purposely vague!), I can feel the cynical indifference of the structure, the machine. But I do not rage against it. I do a good job.

How far of a walk is the officious and meticulous "according to regulations," to the terrifying, "I was only following orders?" No one dies from any action I do or do not take in the conscientious completion of my range of duties. But I know that somewhere, murkily somewhere in the CIA or NSA or on the grey streets of a brown neighborhood in an American city, somewhere somebody is losing a life at the hands of a government functionary. Someone is losing their home in a stretch of tundra not formerly delineated as government property. Someone is losing a child – suited up and trotted off to occupy a strategic position. Is there anything, anything at all, about me doing my job, and doing it well, that makes

that other scary stuff possible? In what situation would I ever say, "I was just following orders?"

And I think I could say that. I think I could find having my place so essential as to not ask too many questions. I think I am a coward, really, who requires validation. (I do not know how to measure the right amount of bravery and insight necessary to see how sorting through a person's Pell grants is linked to conflict commodities in the Congo.) I want to be a good helpmeet.

Cicero, who never filled out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), said that anyone who enjoys the benefits of government is duty-bound to that government. Looking at it that way, I am living up to the citizen contract. I fulfill a function of my government, from which I have benefitted. (I have streets to drive on, I have electricity all day long, I can call 911 (although not everyone under this government can say the same)). Cicero also wrote, "There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it."

I used to believe that nobody ever thought, "I want to be a low level bureaucratic functionary when I grow up," although Cicero might have approved of that.

Then I met a guy whose ambition it was to work for the Veterans

Administration, so I guess I was wrong. But he was already grown up. I don't

know what he wanted to be when he was in kindergarten. We can't all be firemen; there would have to be a lot more fires.

When asked what we do for a living, no one in my office says, "I'm a low-level bureaucratic functionary," not even the Director, who has at least a little dominion. I wanted to be a veterinarian when I was five, then a bronc buster. I wanted to be a songwriter, a homesteader, a radio DJ. My path to the financial aid office of a small public university is convoluted. It mostly involves a desire for regular paychecks and paid vacation days.

Sometimes, in the course of my day, I tell someone they've got more financial aid money coming. Sometimes I tell them they have none. In the first case, the student usually thanks me, sometimes cries for joy. I smile and demur; it's not my decision. I deserve no thanks. In the second case, the student may curse at me, may cry from frustration or despair, may ask me to reconsider. Again, I am kind but firm, this is not my decision, it is all based on regulations. I am only following orders.

Look at me, God. Just like you set it up, there is a system, and jobs to do within it. Some of us have dominion and most of us do not. I know where I stand. I am a helpmeet. I know about the tree, though. I can't take paradise at face value. I wonder, too, why you didn't want us to know. Did you think that, if we knew

about good and evil, we wouldn't *obey*? Did you think we would run amok and willy-nilly, not doing our jobs? Did you think that? Did you not know, after you tossed us out of the house, that we would set up the entire world using our expired dominion, that we would always be waiting for you to tell us we were doing a good job? Didn't you know, even after there was no more reason for it, after our old room was no longer ours and we could never come back, that we would still try?

A scarlet maple spills a puddle of shadow.  
Leaves beat red as longing, red as leaping,  
red as a tiger's heart, caged and pacing.

## Adventure Pants

I will pull on my adventure pants. I will rummage a hair tie from the blue and white Limoges canister next to the bathroom sink. I will lace up my shoes, which are still in the basement, and still wet, and call up the dogs and go.

The wild strawberries will be ripe. Skippers will bounce up from the wildflowers in orange surprise, confetti tossed up and settling. The ravens will reconnoiter, like they always do. The ticks will be questing. The ticks are questing now.

The scent of a spruce in the sun is waiting, a glory just to breathe the air, right there, with the new green needles, pliant, oozing. There will be buttery sun, and a yet-cool westerly breeze, and red mud on the thick black soles of my shoes. Something resembling awe will bump up against the cold cast of my heart.

Out on the highway – you can hear it from here – trucks hum. It is an Upper Peninsula highway: two lanes only, no median, deer and coyote carcasses tossed broken on the shoulders. The crows will be at work on the pink innards of a doe, her deceptively dainty hooves curled as if in repose. I met a boy in the veterinarian's office who had lost his boon companion, a golden retriever, "Deer



kicked him in the head and he died.” Deer can kick the life out of a coyote, too, but more often it’s a semi that does the deed, shrugging the coyote off the road to flop like a dirty sweater on the gravel verge. Porcupines, too, and raccoons. Those critters who venture too far from this field, the surrounding swampy lowland and the logged-over, second growth woods.

I will walk with my head down, looking for the strawberries. Tiny, sweet things, as big as tip of my finger only, or smaller even. Nestled, warm and bright in the tangle. They won’t keep, they’re fragile and difficult to transport. Best to eat them right where I find them, a few here and there. Back up at the house I have a big patch of cultivated strawberries, fat and abundant, for jams and such. The bland, easy versions of these wild-grown berries.

I will scrub my hands on my pants to wipe away the *Deep Woods Off* before picking the wild strawberries. The chemicals that keep the mosquitoes at bay taste like a mouthful of highway. It’s poison, probably, but I am soft and will take the trade-off to not get bitten. My adventure pants are thick; they absorb it all. There are matches in my pockets, a knife, a length of leash.

I don’t know the names of all the things I see. Once in a while I’ll look something up and add it to my vocabulary, but I am content to go on not knowing the name of those flowers whose petals curve in upon themselves and glisten like yellow

raincoats on the ends of thin, light green stems. The pale, tiny, lavender butterfly. The bird with the falling, repeating call. The brown toads that were everywhere this spring. They exist, whether I name them or not.

I have never seen a hermit thrush, but I hear them. For a long time I called it the Sweet Evening Bird, because evening is when I first heard its song. The online Cornell Ornithology lab calls it an unassuming little brown bird. But that song, which sticks like sap. Not the bright, nagging trill of its cousin, the robin, nor the chipper tweets and whistles of the chickadee. The song of the hermit thrush is melancholy honey; my heart catches a little, every time.

I did not know the thrush's name at first, but I was determined to see the bird that made the sound of fairy flutes. So I quieted my step, waited for the call, and followed. The bird seemed to be moving from tree to tree, and I looked up as I walked, listening towards it through the hemlocks and yellow birch. This, I think, is how the old stories were made, the stories about getting enchanted, led astray, captured by elves. It is possible to lose yourself in the pursuit of something like that, to never come back from the magic music of a chubby little brown bird. Stay on the path, we are warned, or... Or you can find yourself, twig-whipped and bug-bit, in a stretch of mucky cedars you do not recognize. I had let myself go too far. The thrush called again, from a tree a little further

away. I did not follow. I turned in a circle, trying to mark the way I had come, seeing nothing that looked like a path. The dog watched me, now, wondering where we were going next. She panted and wagged, happy to cover new ground. I asked, "Which way is home?" She sat. No help there. The bird dropped the call again, further south, in darker trees, and I waved my hand towards it, dismissing the spell. I needed to get back; there were other things in this woods besides birds. There were coyotes, and bears, and deer that can kick you dead.

Later, after I oriented myself with the angle of the sun and navigated my way home, winding up just a half mile south of our place staring over a fence at the neighbor's horse, who stared back – much later, after I had showered off the bug spray and sweat, I realized I might have let myself feel something like magic for a while. And I had pulled myself away, for safety. I had not wandered very far at all.

I eventually identified the hermit thrush on Google, but the internet recordings are, and are not, what the Sweet Evening Bird sounds like. Not when you're wearing adventure pants out there with a wild strawberry melting on your tongue, and the Sweet Evening Bird sends out a call that bounces from silver maple to poplar, containing its own echo, and you imagine the sound Galadriel

would make whistling up her dogs, and you face the sun, which always moves from east to west, and you think there might be a god, or mystery at least, but you don't know any of the right prayers, or if the spells would work, on you. But you will come again, to see.

## Worse Things

*"May I never experience all that it is possible to get used to." – Julia Alvarez*

There are always worse things.

It could be like little Amy, born early born with a broken heart, patched and IV's and NICU'd into a tenuous and needy existence. Some other baby had to die for Amy's new heart to be installed. Diabetes, diarrhea, acne, kidney damage: just the drug side effects. Diapers, still. Life expectancy of twenty years or so. You hope something new comes along by then, something to make it all worth it.

You wonder if it is: worth it, that is. You can't stop now.

Your problems are not like fragile Amy. Yours are only the late blue TV flicker, the Lean Cuisine, the cherry vanilla straight out of the carton and the big, cold spoon.

Yours is not: The screaming from your daughter's bedroom while the second man with a knife holds you down, too, heaves his breath and his cock into you, too, while she loses the last of her innocence and you lose the last of your faith, and the knives take all the things they can carry with them when they leave, and you huddle with her – she smells of his aftershave – while help comes long after

it is too late. There was no prevention. There is no cure. The men are never caught, at least for this crime. You do not go back to that house, where your daughter had the sense to hide her cellphone in her shoe.

Yours is not on a scale with that. Yours is only: finally stop checking for omens, entrails, wrecks.

This is no burning barn, with horses. Sparks fall and singe your hair, burrow into the flannel, melt the glasses on your face as you run towards incinerating flesh and dreams. They won't let you in. And the wind of the fire, and the way the roof caves, and it is loud, even after. Always after, and none of the horses survive, and your hands, once so sure with the foaling, flop stupid.

No. Yours is only the growing accustomed. And you do not know if accustomed is growth. It feels like a kind of retreat, and you do not know how far to fall back. You can stand with your breath icing into the air and the pale sun pushing a vague warmth on your face and know that the things that drag at you also helped to get you here: here on the edge of the clean world. You think that might be a load of shit.

There are worse things. Yours is only the effort to breathe and the need to look away. The disgust and the wallow, the petty and the broke. You take the cold

into your chest like armor and move towards the tree line, over the snow. There are bobcat tracks all over. You never see it watching.

## Wool Socks and Coffee

It is winter here in Michigan's Upper Peninsula where whatever you've heard about it is probably true. It's like Canada only harder to get to. Even the summers aren't very nice, although we lie to ourselves that they are. There is no spring to speak of; today is Earth Day and the ground is still covered with a foot or more of snow, with more in the forecast. The robins and sandhill cranes are back, so summer can't be far behind. We tell ourselves these things. As the stores fill up with flip-flops and patio furniture, I am not miserable. I am proud; a little smug. I lace up my boots and measure the woodpile. I will win this round.

I lived in the Willamette Valley of Oregon for a time, and winter there means rain. From October to April the sky is grey, the ground is brown, and the everlasting green of the Douglas firs hovers between the two. I never had such a sad winter as my first winter in the Northwest. There is nothing to push against. You can't shovel rain, you can't heap it against the side of your house for insulation, you can't keep it from trickling in. It drips and dribbles, mists, drizzles, pelts, pours, and sprinkles. Some days the drops don't fall; the air is so saturated the moisture gathers on your surfaces as you move through it. Your hair is dripping, your sweater is soggy; it will be this way for months.



In Oregon I pulled a cookbook from a pantry shelf to find the pages ringed with mold. A black, pestilential fuzz of mildew coated the walls behind dressers, the cupboards under the sink, the space between the curtains and the wall. I spread bleach water everywhere, ignoring the recommended bleach-to-water ratio.

Sometimes I poured the bleach straight from the bottle. The crawl space flooded, and when the furnace kicked on the hot air came gurgling through the ducts.

During January my kids didn't build a snowman, they turned a tricycle upside-down in a mud puddle, spun the big wheel and pretended they were running a chocolate milk factory. An unsavory mountain of damp laundry festered between trips to the Laundromat. That got bleached, too.

It came as no surprise to learn later – reading the journals of pioneer women – that suicide was not an uncommon cause of death for the settlers who made it to the end of the Oregon Trail. Suicide, or madness, or a slow wasting away. I doubt I could have withstood that first winter under pioneer conditions: never warm, never dry, no way to stay clean, no way to *get* clean; watching the nails rust, the flour mold, the canvas rot; mildew crawling up the sides of the tent and every precious possession which had been hauled across a continent gathering damp in the murky confines of trunks and crates. *Mr. Wallace took an axe to his wife and infant son then hanged himself from the big tree next to his tent. We all think it a terrible shame.*

I wonder if Mrs. Wallace went down fighting, or welcomed the axe as she sat, head bowed, her skirts wet to the knees, a fretting baby tugging at her breast, nails dirty, the sulky fire casting more smoke than warmth. She shivered most of the day, washing the baby's diapers in tepid, dingy water and hanging them about the tent to dry as much as they might before being called into use again. The baby did not thrive. Her husband dwindled. Every morning in December she made the same prayer, "Let it be over, please God." The axe. Mr. Wallace was strong enough for that.

If you can make it through the first long, wet winter in the Northwest, the growing season rewards you in the spring. You can plant peas and greens in February. My yard in Eugene had blueberry bushes that bore fruit for weeks. I would walk out the back door on a warm morning, leaving footprints across the grass that was always too long, and toss blueberries straight into my cereal bowl. The camellia bushes were as high as the eaves, and climbing roses pulled down fences. Blackberries run wild there; gardening is as much about fighting against the profusion of everything as coaxing anything to grow. If you can't grow things in Eugene, Oregon, you might as well become a sailor. That vanguard of pioneers who survived their first winter must have lived on dreams of the spring. As they ducked between the lines of drying diapers, swept mud out the doorway, waited for a break in the rain to dump the chamber pot, the strong

ones kept the dream steaming and bubbling on the back of the stove: bumper crops, fat livestock, healthy children.

I learned to survive the Northwest winters with coffee – pots and pots from the Mr. Coffee, augmented by a daily Caffè Americano with an extra shot of espresso. I believe if Mr. Wallace had access to a coffee shop, he and his family would have lived a lot longer. Not only for the coffee, which, I contend, has unequalled restorative powers, but also for the process of going out to get a good cup of coffee. If only the Wallaces could have pulled on their sweaters and trudged through the drizzle to the shop down the street, to sit in the frothy, aromatic caffeine cloud and wrap their starveling fingers around a mocha too hot to drink. The steam condenses on the windows, slides down into the fine ridge of mildew on the bottom of the pane, the man at the next table offers you the newspaper: December 15, 1866: *“Lake Oswego Plans First Iron Ore Furnace on West Coast.”* All is not hopeless.

In the rain I learned to appreciate wool, even more than Gore-Tex or other fancy waterproof gear. Waterproof gear is designed to keep water out, and that is impossible. You will not stay dry. As you pile groceries in the car, you will be wet. Running in the park, pumping gas, walking the dog, you will be wet. As you dress for a job interview you must consider the water – don’t forget the

umbrella, wear pants that won't wrinkle when damp, find a parking space with no puddle.

Then I learned about wool. Wool socks and sweaters are warm even when they get wet, so it's okay to get a little soggy. Wet wool smells, but that is a small concession. The wool and the happy caffeine buzz build a bubble of resilience against the perpetual damp. Since it's rarely below freezing in the Willamette Valley, a person can get through the winter with a couple of good sweaters, a few warm socks, and their coffee. There is no way to tell, in the Willamette Valley in December, where the sky starts. It squats close to the ground, resting on the earth, enveloping the creatures that move through it. You put on a sweater and wait.

This Upper Peninsula is a different kind of land. The winters don't insinuate themselves into the landscape; they steamroller it. While the winters of the Willamette Valley are relentlessly passive/aggressive, a kind of water torture; the winters of the UP are a strong-arm bully. Is there enough wood to last the winter? Is there, huh? Your pipes are going to freeze and there's nothing you can do about it. The road is drifted over up past the curve, that's if the car starts. *C'mon! Winter taunts, Let's see what you got!*

After the first snowfall we prop a ladder in a corner of the roofline. It angles orange and stiff from behind the big blue barrel I upend over the rhododendron bush to keep it from getting crushed by the weight of the snow. We leave the ladder there all winter, and when the snow piles too deep on the roof we climb up and shovel it off. By February the big blue barrel is buried.

Ole Halverson was the first homesteader in our corner of the Upper Peninsula, which was settled by white people later than even Oregon. He walked in to his homestead after travelling from Sweden and spent his first winter in a big hollow log. I don't know what he did all day. Did he venture out to cut trees to build a cabin in the spring? Did he hunt? Did he have a dog? When he crawled in his hollow log at night and pulled the makeshift door of hides and sticks behind him, what did he dream as the fire burned down? I remind myself what he lived without. No hot running water, no toilet paper, no satellite TV, lip balm, companionship, coffee. But he survived it, built a house, started a farm, got married, raised a family.

I believe Ole Halverson survived that first winter in the hollow log *because* he was alone. By himself, Ole Halverson could suffer the requisite sacrifices. He could go crazy in his solitude, and make strength from it. There was no moment of recrimination delivered with the pitch of a sigh. He could stay wrapped in his

furs all day during the blizzards, shoot a doe and eat her liver raw and hot, shit in the sunshine and enjoy the smell of it, howl at the moon on the coldest nights when the air froze the insides of his nostrils and the stars pulsed towards him between the hemlocks and white pine of swooning girth. I imagine him standing on top of his hollow log in the February night, wearing a bearskin coat, his hair long and matted, his stench familiar. The northern lights play the sky and there is not a sound. He does not hear the distant hum of traffic on a highway yet to be imagined. He does not hear a jet; no light in the night was put there by men. The coyotes are quiet, not running down a hare; the bare maples do not rub their branches together; the fire does not hiss or crackle. For a few moments all he can hear is his own blood singing in his capillaries, which is all he needs to know. Ole did the hard time solo and waited out the winter. In the spring he would make his world, when the snow melted and the water seeped back underground. The poor Wallaces. All the months, the sweat, the pain, dragging mama's quilts and his carpenter's tools across the bare bones of the continent only to watch them molder and rust along with their spirits. I pour a cup of coffee into the tall ceramic mug that equals a venti. My husband and I have retained some of our Northwest coffee snobbery; grinding oily, dark roast beans fresh before every pot. That may be my favorite sound in the world: the growl of the coffee grinder

in the kitchen. It's still snowing. I am wearing my wool socks, which are dry,  
thank god. They're dry.

## Geography

She thought about levees, and volcanoes. About how everything is under pressure, being confined, held in. Until it's not. How the letting loose breaks something, every time. How we all like to watch.

She thought about the way rain erodes the tops of mountains and carries the silt down to the sea. She thought about the ways lakes die: how, when there is no outflow, the salts and minerals build up until the water becomes dangerous to life. All of the crap carried by the water builds up, and builds up. The good water evaporates, leaving the caustic bits behind. The dead water lake can kill things, or at the very least, prevent growth. It takes a long time.

Sometimes she could feel it sloshing around in her stomach, taste it in her burps: the dead water that never ran off. There was no outlet, no faucet, no tap or creek or seep to ease it. She was an endorheic basin, a curiosity of nature, a page in a textbook about the delicate balance of the cycle of water.

Was it always this way? Was there a point a few months ago, or before the children left home, or before she became a mother, or got married – a point when she was fine? She couldn't remember.



She saw a conversion van in a parking lot and wanted it, that life, not settled into any one spot, carrying everything she owned with her. There would be a Rand-McNally curled up in the door pocket within easy reach – a paper map, a book of states, something she could spread before her in the evenings, at a table that folded away. She made a mental list of all she would take with her: jeans, flannel shirts, socks, two plates, two mugs – no: one plate, one mug. Her laptop, a Kindle. She'd strap a bicycle on the back of the rig. Maybe she'd get a little dog, one that could ride in the passenger seat while she drove and curl up next to her in the fold-out bed at night. A terrier. She'd teach it tricks and name it Lucky.

She could cash in her 401k and drive west, through the hills of Wisconsin into the prairies of western Minnesota until the sky opened up over the Dakotas and the weight of the horizon changed. She'd keep heading towards the coast, over the Rockies through Lookout Pass into eastern Washington, then south down to catch the Columbia River Gorge all the way to the Pacific, where she'd turn left. She wanted to see the redwoods, Hoover Dam, the Great Salt Lake. How long would her money hold out? Not long enough. Plenty long.

She hoped, when she got to Yachats, it would be raining. She hoped the Pacific would be its grey north color, and the wind would be howling straight off the Kamchatka Peninsula, sharpening its teeth on the way across the water. She

wanted to stand there on the black rocks at the edge of the world and let it blow  
a hole right through her. She would see what was left, then, after the break.

## Scorpio, Born in the Year of the Cock

If I were a Virgo I would wear white pants. Like the ladies on QVC and tampon commercials, I would be immaculate. I would have creases in my slacks even though nobody irons anymore, and I would get my hair cut professionally. It would swing. My nails would gleam, and whatever might be under them – dog shit, potting soil, blood – could be easily scraped out. There would be no scars on my hands from the oven burns, the knife slices, the bathroom-sink wart removals.

A Virgo can look back on her day and see the purposeful actions roll by like so many boxcars. She knows what each contains, its position in the train, the speed of the engine. She owns a healthy 401k. She does not wish the train would turn around, is not afraid of the destination, wouldn't throw herself on the tracks rather than watch it all proceed. She does not lie to her mother. Her hand is not terrified on the switch.

Virgos do not have umbrellas that do not open, dogs that might bite, dishpans full of grouse feathers. Every article of clothing they buy, fits. They own Roombas for their taupe Berber and salad spinners for the mesclun and mizuna. They remember their first time fondly; it was sweet and expected, with a boy

named Jerry or Mark, who had waited, and brought flowers. Not different boys, various events, things done alone in a room. A maidenhood not so much given as worn away.

If I were a Virgo I would buy appropriate little gifts to commemorate others' promotions and anniversaries. I would have scented soaps for Mary, an alma mater tie for Lawrence. I would be described as "thoughtful." A Virgo knows what day it is, unsurprised by the calendar. Two days before her child's birthday she is not scrambling through Amazon, paying extra for one-day shipping.

What does she do, this Virgo, when the reflection in the mirror is not improved by careful plucking and the application of a tasteful amount of eyeliner? Does she run the side of her hand across the shower steam on the glass, pushing hard, hoping it will break? There's gin in that orange juice, Virgo, and I'm having breakfast. Comb your hair, bitch, and get on with your day. Get on with it.

If I were a Virgo I would. But it is way past September. I am not a Virgo, and the eighth house nears where I, menses-stained and pungent, dry my hands on my jeans and wait to be born anew.

## Truth

There wasn't any reason for this to be true. She listened anyway, between the lines. She thought about the guy with the vial of Mount St. Helen's ash in his glove box. She thought about the guy who had asked her to go to the Ice Capades in ninth grade. She hadn't slept with either one of them.

There were both probably nicer than this dick. There was some weird bicycle-riding music and a couch too small for both of them. Hot sauce on KFC. Some other woman's boots in the corner. He never did her any favors, except take her to the hospital once, when she was too sick to drive. "Don't put me down as your emergency contact," he said.

He was talking about volleyball. He was talking about California. He was talking about his friend the gynecologist. She lay there and felt everything drain back out of her. She didn't believe he had a gynecologist friend. She wanted to get up and get dressed. She wanted to sleep in her own bed, alone. This was not what she wanted and she didn't know why she didn't do anything about it.

Why did men always want to feed her fried chicken? She like fried chicken, sure, but she liked steak and lobster, too. She was not, she began to realize, a steak-and-lobster girl. She could be had for chicken.

He had a nice voice. That always got her. She listened some more. He talked about Denver. "I gotta go," she said, finally. The vertical blinds rattled in the forced air. "No," he said. He pulled her closer, nudged his half-hard cock towards her crotch. She knew this was going to be over soon. She knew she was sorry. She began to think being wanted was worse than not being wanted. His sweat did not smell as good as her husband's.

"I gotta go." She sat up, started pulling on her jeans. "I've gotta get my kids." He sighed and rolled away, pouting. She stood up and looked at him sprawled on the apartment beige Berber, forearm over his eyes. "Come back tomorrow?" he asked without moving his shield arm.

"Sure," she said. She didn't know whether or not that was true when she said it. It was getting more difficult, lately, for her to know the difference.

Turns out it was. It was all true.

## On Impotence

He is yelling *Fuck You* over and over again. He puts the accent on different syllables.

## Leaving

“Go,” she said then, “now.” He did not go, then or later. Even when he left, and was gone, he was there. She was the one who left, though she did not go. Not then, not later. They arranged themselves around the absences, and he learned to be gone and to stay simultaneously. They began to notice the misconceptions around stay and go. They did not go, now or later, and the not leaving became staying. She does not say, “Go,” now. She does not leave. He is not gone. She does not know when this began, the staying and the not leaving, though she knows she is not leaving now, not ever. (Then, she thought she might go at any time. She might have gone, then.) Now, though. Now. She has learned to notice the staying, not the absence. They have arranged themselves, staying around, one and one, against *the* leaving. That one. Later from now, when she is the only one and there is no staying for him, she will notice the absence, the milk not drunk. She does not know, after all of the staying and the leaving, after all of the saying, if he will notice the same. If he stays, that is, and she is gone.



## **A Populated Place**

*Populated Place: Place or area with clustered or scattered buildings and a permanent human population. – U.S. Geological Survey*

Tavis was hosting a hayride. A few days before the event he loped across the road from his place to ours. As usual, he wore the mechanic's uniform he wears to work at the auto repair shop out on the highway. Tavis almost always wears those greys. His baseball cap covered a receding hairline and his short-buzzed hair. Tavis leans forward a little when he walks. Mostly he is driving something. His grey pickup, his four-wheeler, his one-ton, the front end loader, a dump truck, or tractor, or semi. My husband Dave and I enjoy watching Tavis' equipment parade. We have fun guessing where he's going and what he's working on. The eight-to-five at the shop isn't enough for Tavis. He works almost all the time.

"Hello, neighbor," Tavis said. He always calls me "neighbor."

"Hey, Tavis, how's it going?"

"I'm having a hayride this Saturday. Just a bunch of Carlshend people. You're welcome if you'd like to come. Meet some neighbors."

Dave and I were newcomers to Carlshend, and to the Upper Peninsula. We'd fallen in love with the U.P. over the years, visiting and vacationing, long weekends in funky Marquette bars, camping in May and getting snowed on, camping in June and getting driven out by mosquitoes, coming back anyway, watching sunsets on Superior, planning winter driving routes based on the lake effect snow bands, talking to people in grocery stores, gas stations, parking lots, we kept visiting, kept finding new things to love about the remoteness and the people. So after our youngest child went away to school we sold our house in a trendy Lake Michigan resort town and moved. It was, looking back, a pretty gutsy (foolhardy) thing to do, with no job prospects and not enough in the bank to live on indefinitely. It was our midlife adventure. When we told our friends what we were doing we got one of two reactions. Either a head-tilted, "Are you serious?" or the dreamy "Wow. Lucky." We bought our place on Carlshend Road after a one-day whirlwind tour with a realtor. We felt lucky.

Tavis introduced himself shortly after we moved in. Over the two or three years between our move and the hayride we had met only a handful of our neighbors. Early on, the pastor of the Community Covenant Church, which is just a half mile away, stopped by to welcome us and drop off a gift basket. Dave became acquainted with a few of the Carlshenders at the local Habitat for Humanity ReStore. (There is no logical explanation for why the ReStore was located way

out here. There are plenty of reasons why it has since moved to town.) And we'd developed a cordial but distant relationship with the neighbors to either side, Dan to the south, who came from one of the Carlshend founding families, and to the north, Dick the retired state cop. That's about as far as it had gone.

Dave and I might seem standoffish. Never mind; I know we are. It's not that we don't like people. We like to stay home more. Dave almost always refuses an opportunity to eat at a restaurant. Neither one of us is excited by a cocktail party, open house, or wedding reception. The Lion's Club pancake breakfast? Not likely. When we park the cars in the driveway after work, they normally stay right there until it's time to leave for work again. Because of this inertia of contentment, we do not tend to meet many people, neighbors or not.

Carlshend is just fifty-four houses strung out along five and a half miles of an oxbow road that loops off a two-lane highway, smack dab in the middle of the Upper Peninsula. County Road 456 comes into Carlshend from the west, but it is not a busy intersection. Except on Sunday mornings, when folks are going to the Covenant Church, there is never much traffic. The road itself was paved in the early 1960's and hasn't been noticeably improved since. It is winding and potholed, buckled in spots. The edges of the pavement are not well-defined; they peter out incrementally as the asphalt crumbles into the gravel shoulder.

The road is smoother in the winter when there's a good layer of snow over the irregularities. Every spring the county road crew drives down Carlshend Road with the hot patch truck while a couple of guys languidly toss shovelful of new blacktop in the worst spots. In the summer, weeds grow in the cracks that stretch across the asphalt from one side of the road to the other. Because Carlshend road is a county road in a rural location, the posted speed limit is fifty-five miles per hour. That seems rather optimistic to me, although some people seem to manage it.

"We'll be leaving my place around four," Tavis said. "We'll take the grade over to the Full Throttle in Little Lake, have something to eat, and then come back here for a bonfire."

"Can I bring anything?"

"No, just yourselves."

"I'm pretty sure Dave has to work, but I'll be there!" I was looking forward to an outing with new people. It must have been Tavis' air of calm geniality that did it. A hayride sounded wonderful.

October in the Upper Peninsula can mean anything from snow to T-shirt weather. This particular Saturday was about what you'd expect from autumn: it drizzled all day with the temperature stalled out in the low to mid-forties. I

studied the weather from the window, giving myself every opportunity to weasel out of the invitation, but when the time came I pulled on wool socks and boots, layered a turtleneck and wool sweater under a waterproof jacket, and headed across the road at four just as a cavalcade of pickups and SUVs began crunching up Tavis' gravel drive.

Tavis is somewhere in his thirties and lives just a mile from his parents and the house he grew up in. He bought his acreage fresh out of high school, put a house trailer on it, and seems to be settled in his spot. Directly across from our kitchen window is his fenced field with one big tree right in the middle. Along the road he planted a row of spruce trees a few years ago. Well, it's a row of spruces and one white pine. I imagine there must have been a stray in the seedlings. I don't like those trees; they block my view of the field, of Tavis' cows grazing and the sandhill cranes that come there to dance in the spring. Every year the trees get taller.

People were congregating outside of Tavis' trailer house, pulling on parkas and loading coolers from their trucks onto the hayride, which was a thirty foot low-boy equipment trailer with bales of hay lined down the middle. The low-boy was hitched up to what looked to be a Viet Nam-era U.S. military surplus troop transport vehicle. The truck had big round fenders, a cab you have to climb up

into, and a covered cargo area outfitted with benches. It was shades of green – the colors our military vehicles used to be, when our country was fighting wars in jungles rather than deserts. I don't know what I expected in the way of vehicular transport for our outing, but it wasn't this.

I made some remark to Tavis about the truck, and he beamed as he launched into an explanation of the fuel ratio necessary to keep it running. I smiled and nodded. I had no idea what he was talking about. I was introduced to a lot of people, whose names and relationships didn't stick with me, and we all climbed on to the trailer. Tavis' father drove. He roared that troop carrier into life and off we went to hit the old railroad grade. I'm not sure if this arrangement was precisely legal. I don't know if Tavis needed permission to drive that rig down the grade, and I don't remember adequate lighting or a slow-moving vehicle sign. Nobody gave it a second thought.

There must have been about thirty of us, ranging in age from the late twenties on up. I wound up sitting between Tavis and one of the true Carlshend power couples: John and Gloria. John and Gloria are in their mid-seventies. Dave was acquainted with them, but this was the first I had met them. Since then I've had the pleasure of listening to John tell his stories over a cup of peppermint tea in

their immaculate little kitchen, while Gloria pushed a plate of pumpkin rolls at me.

We had to shout to be heard over the transport engine. "Here!" Tavis tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a Bud Light Lime. "You like these, don't you?"

"It's my favorite," I said. At that moment, it was.

It was still raining. A couple of people were up inside the cover of the transport truck, but the rest of us were out in the open. The better to see the country.

"See that trail there? You follow that up and you come to MacGregor Lake," Tavis told me.

"Where does that trail lead?" I asked Tavis a minute later, pointing to a parting in the underbrush.

"I don't know. Jimmer!" Tavis got the attention of a young man swaying on the bumper of the transport, hanging on with one hand and drinking beer with other. "Jimmer – where does that trail go?" Jimmer told us, but I don't remember what he said.

Tavis leaned in. "Jimmer's got the best job in the world. He gets to take his dog with him everywhere."

"What's he do?"

"Works for a survey company. He knows the area."

The flasks came out. Someone would take a swig, tap his neighbor on the shoulder and say, "Phone's for you," before passing the flask along. It came down our side of the trailer and John was tapped on the shoulder. "John, phone's for you!" John turned to me and winked as he took the flask, "Must be an important call," he said, tipping it up. I nursed my Bud Light Lime and let the flask pass. I took my cues from Gloria.

John and Gloria live a mile down the road from us, on the farm that his father bought in 1941. Before that, John lived two houses down from where Tavis lives now. John has lived in the same mile and a half stretch of Carlshend his entire life. Gloria likes to say she's a newcomer: she's only lived here fifty years. At seventy-six, John still works in his sawmill and still heats the house with wood he cuts himself. He and Gloria fish all year 'round, and his fishing prowess has been featured on the local outdoorsmen TV shows. Gloria works alongside John keeping up the farm, and she is elbow-deep in township politics and affairs. They're active in their church. They can be difficult people to catch up with. I don't know, anymore, what stories John and Gloria told me themselves, and which ones are told about them.

The railroad, whose grade we were grinding along, used to be the only reliable transportation between Marquette and all of the little outlying settlements like



Carlshend. John's mother was widowed young. Her first husband was a railroad worker and died of pneumonia. In those days the railroad workers rode up and down the tracks to their worksites in the little open cars, summer and winter. This is the U.P. There is more winter than summer. After a day of physical labor, those workers' shirts would be sweated through, their boots soaked. They sat in that open car all the way back home, with their muscles stiffening and their temperatures dropping. Maybe walk another mile back to the house, where they would have chores to do before they could strip out of their wet woolens next to the wood stove, drink some coffee. John's mother's first husband didn't survive it.

Her second husband, John's father, was a lumberjack who drifted to Carlshend and stayed. He is the man who bought the farm that John and Gloria still live on. They have the original deed to the place, signed by President Benjamin Harrison, giving the homesteader Anders Peterson claim to 160 acres in 1884. Nine homesteaders started Carlshend in that year. Anders Peterson walked in from the nearest town to settle on his land, before the railroads had come that far.

Eventually, four passenger trains passed through Carlshend every day.

Shipments of goods and equipment came in, carloads of hay went out. The train stopped in Dukes, Selma, New Dalton, Yalmer – little places that, like Carlshend,

are no longer much more than a crossroads and a handful of neighbors. Most of the railroad tracks are gone now, but the grade is still there, still well-traveled by four-wheelers, snowmobilers, hayrides.

Gloria told me, "We've been down this grade on our snow machines many a time."

John pointed, "The furthest I ever tracked a buck was from that ridge there down through that swamp out to the lake."

"Did you get him?" somebody asked.

"Nah, we lost that one."

"John, phone's for you."

"I think I better take this one."

Where I was raised, three hundred acres would be the beginnings of a respectably-sized farm. It would be fenced and planted, full of corn or soybeans or hogs. Carlshend doesn't support anything like the working farms I grew up around. I don't know how those early homesteaders made it. Most of them didn't; not on farming, anyway. It's impossible to get a good crop of anything besides hay, and there's no demand for that anymore. A few folks still keep some livestock, many of us garden, and there are some very small orchards.

That's about it. John remembers when all of Carlshend was open fields. "Just

think,” he said, “those homesteaders cleared all that virgin timber with an ax.

It’s terrible to see all these here fields grown into trees.”

In 1900 Carlshend was populated almost entirely by Scandinavian immigrants.

They were tough people, and their descendants are still infinitely resourceful.

John never finished ninth grade. “When I was fifteen years old Dad bought the tractor and said, ‘You might as well quit school and work with the tractor.’ And that was the best thing.” John and Gloria raised their family in a comfortable home and are respected in the community. In this neighborhood, education is not nearly as important and knowing how to work.

After the hayride arrived in Little Lake, and the entire noisy group of us had eaten and drunk in the back room of the Full Throttle Bar and Grill, Tavis’ father urged the truck into black-belching action, scattering a flock of scrawny twelve year old Little Lake boys who had been circling the rig on their tiny bicycles, pointy knees stretching the fabric of their Wal-Mart jeans with every pump of the pedals. We followed the grade back to Carlshend in the dark, bumping down the back ways that the locals use, the way those boys would take to smoke their cigarettes, drink their beer, put their hand down girl’s pants for the first time. Jimmer and a couple of well-oiled guys stood in the back of the troop carrier and shot firecrackers over our heads into the soggy underbrush. We had all gotten

louder. The hayride stopped for homemade hot fudge sundaes at the home of our neighbors to the south and I walked home from there, leaving the younger and more practiced partiers to finish the evening around Tavis' bonfire.

When I got home I peeled off my clammy clothes, opened the damper on the woodstove, and waited for Dave to get home from work. I couldn't wait to tell him about the hayride, about Jimmer and John and Gloria. I wanted to affirm that we'd made the right choice when we ditched our downstate jobs and moved to this place in the middle of nowhere. We were at home.

If you happen to drive down Carlshend Road, notice, just at the intersection with County Road 456, on the east side near the sharp bend, a tidy wooden sign that says, simply, "Carlshend." That's all there is. Just that sign, and a permanent human population.

## On Wishing

I wish that on this white bone fullmoon night my good dog will forget her manners and run off with the coyotes, join the canine circus. I want her to wake up with the sex and scruff of the leader of the pack smeared on her hindquarters, hunt hares in the dew for breakfast. I wish her up on the swaying highwire of survival where it all hangs on a breath, a quiver, a catch.

If there's someone around here who keeps chickens, I hope she steals one. Snatches it from its dozy domestic nest, hightails it across the back forty under this effusive moon, nose to sky, howl bursting. And the man protecting his flock, I hope he's a good shot. Scopes her dead to rights so the slug rips clean through her lungs in midstride, feathers in her teeth, blood on her tongue.

That's my wish I may, wish I might: end it different. Different than the tumor that has knocked her nose off kilter, bullied her teeth aside, called in the randy carnies of metastasis to set up a sideshow in her liver, belly, brain. Decisions will have to be made. I shiver in the moonwashed yard, whisper, "Go on, girl." She wags, and stays.

## Walking In Place

There was a languid morning in New Orleans, sitting on the levee eating hot beignets from a paper sack, watching the Algiers ferry make its run back and forth across the Mississippi. She would rather have had straight black coffee; the café au lait too sweet for her Midwestern tongue. Not enough bite. She licked powdered sugar off of her fingertips, brushed it from her pants, still felt sticky. A tattooed boy bummed a cigarette, "It's a long walk to the store, ma'am." She gave him a Marlboro Light even though the store was just across the train tracks. He nodded his thanks and left without lighting it. She was not afraid of him.

As the heat built she walked the shady side of the streets of the French Quarter and the Marigny, imagining life in a pastel shotgun house where you walked straight from one room to another with no hallways or transitions. To get to the bathroom from the front door you must walk right through the living room, kitchen, and the bedrooms, one by one. Room opened into room and there you were. Like life, which rarely afforded a hallway in which to pause, arrange your hair, decide if you wished to turn the knob.

She dodged caged air conditioners hanging forehead-level over the sidewalk and aggressive tropical, bushy-shrubby plants that grabbed at her clothes. A dread-

locked, dreamy white girl pedaled a bicycle across the cobblestones. From a red milk crate bolted to the back of the bicycle, a curly-haired toddler jiggled happily, sweaty curls bouncing around its shining face. She couldn't tell if the child were a boy or a girl. She couldn't tell if it mattered. Someone was practicing a marching cadence on a snare drum from one of the shotgun houses nearby.

On a brick corner in the Marigny a restaurant that was sinking into the sidewalk squatted with its door wide open, letting the flies in and a cloud of deep fryer grease and curry out into the damp air.

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Last night brought three more inches of snow but the sky is clear this morning. Titmice and cardinals flutter around the bushes beyond the clothesline pole. When she opens the door to let the dogs in, she takes a deep lungful of the astringent air and looks out over the treeline to the sun, so low in the southern sky that it seems the bare branches have snagged it there, like a lost kite. It is a perfect day for a walk.

She wipes the toast crumbs and coffee splotches from the kitchen counter and turns off the coffee pot. She pulls on her bibs, ties up her boots, grabs her gloves and hat. The dogs whine and pace around her, toenails clicking on the kitchen

tile, while she straps on her snowshoes at the back door. "Let's go!" she calls, and the three of them head out. She decides to break a trail to the north, head up the ridge where the snow is smooth, down through the middle of the swamp, then circle back up to the ridge and follow the packed trail home after she and the dogs are good and tired.

It's slow going off the trail. There's a good two feet of snow on the flat and snowshoes or not, she wades through some deep drifts. On the south side of the field she is obliged to pause between every step, using her snowshoes to pack the snow into makeshift stairs in order to climb up over the drift. The dogs wait, panting, their own progress through the snow just as difficult. They're content right now to let her break the trail. There are fresh coyote tracks in the field next to the swamp, and fresh snowshoe hare tracks, too. She is not afraid of the coyotes.

Inside the trees the snow is smooth and even. No drifts, but each stride is like high-stepping in the marching band. She lifts her knees to bring the snowshoe up and over the top of the snow before taking the next step. She unzips the front of her bibs and takes off her gloves. The back of her turtleneck is wet with sweat. She's breathing hard and it feels good. She takes a step and feels the snow give too much under her weight. When she pulls her foot up, the top of the snowshoe



is covered with a layer of slush. The water under the snow isn't frozen, then. She alters her course a little to avoid getting too far into the swamp, hugging close to the edge and heading more directly towards the ridge. The dogs range in circles, sniffing under logs and burrowing for voles. When she gets thirsty, she scoops up a handful of snow.

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In the evenings, towards sundown, she walked through the Marigny and the Bywater again. She bought a snowball and sucked on it there in a city that did not know what real snow meant, could not imagine the accumulating layers over a winter that lasted half the year. Snowballs are shaved ice in a paper cup with flavored syrup, known as snow cones anywhere else she had ever been. But like everything in New Orleans, there was something special, something augmented, about it. The snowball stand in the Bywater was also an iron works yard, with wrought iron patio furniture, porch railings, and gates displayed along with the lists of snowball flavors and sizes. The man who made the snowballs took his time, shoving the shaved ice tightly down into the cup, pausing to add an extra dollop of syrup in the middle, and carefully packing the ice into a funnel that he inverted over the top of the cup so the snowball was perfectly mounded, like an icy little breast. After nine pm, he played jazz guitar on Frenchman Street.

While she waited for the careful construction of the snowball, she wandered through the ironwork and petted a ginger colored cat with a blue collar and a bell. She had eaten snow cones all of her life, at dusty county fairs and shabby school carnivals. The key lime snowball she took from the hand of a musician in New Orleans was not the same thing. Not unless you could call blue the same thing as indigo, or a bell on a cat the same thing as Sunday morning church bells in Jackson Square. She savored the snowball. There was no need to rush. Later she would read, drinking unsweetened iced tea.

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She lets the handful of snow melt on her tongue while she catches her breath and studies the set of tracks. They're not canine; not a dog, or a wolf, or a coyote. It's a bobcat. It has to be. There's nothing else out here that would make that kind of a track. And this cat was here not too long ago. The edges of the prints are still fairly sharp; the sun hasn't softened them yet. The breeze is from the northwest, and the tracks are headed south. She calls up the dogs. Her voice hits the trees and falls flat, with no echo or bounce. Loud enough, though; the dogs won't have ranged that far out and she wants them near her right now. A bobcat won't bother the dogs unless they bother it first, but she can't be sure they won't.

She keeps walking; the dogs will find her soon enough. The sun is casting blue-black shadows from the trees to the snow, and the world glitters. The edges of everything seem sharp; each ripple and dip of snow is defined in deepening divisions of grey. The sky is the blue of Gershwin. She pushes through the snow, contending with it, feeling her heart beat and her lungs expand in the clean of the cold and the white. She notices that she has begun to count her steps, and she lets the counting take over. Somewhere in the high hundreds or low thousands she'll lose track, and then the clarity comes. The time of no-thinking.

This is her stomping ground. She knows the land. Off to her right the cedar swamp gets thick. It's full of whitetails and rabbits, and coyotes. There are supposed to be wolves around, but she's never seen any sign of them. The cougars are moving back in for sure, even the DNR is admitting it now. She knows she's seen one at least once, and she wonders if it was just passing through or is living somewhere around here. The counting in her head submerges for a minute – where are the dogs? She calls them up again. This time she stops and listens for the jingle of collars or the crackle of brush.

"Come!" Her call settles into the silence. A raven squawks to the north, another answers. And then barking starts. Crazy barking. She takes off in the direction

of the commotion as fast as she can manage through the snow. It's not far, back into the swamp a bit, near the way they'd come.

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Her son lives in New Orleans and she has only visited. When she sends letters and birthday cards it's as if they are being addressed to another country; she wants to add extra postage. There, a continent away, he is scouring nurseries for a yucca tree to plant in his yard. He is collaborating with jazz musicians. His daughters do not own mittens.

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She finds the dogs with a cat up a tree. Just an ordinary housecat, no way of knowing why it was clear out here. She calls them off and tells them to quit being stupid while her breathing slows and her concern subsides, "Jesus, you'd think you two had never treed a cat before." It's a ginger-colored cat, and she thinks of the snowball stand. She wonders what a native New Orleanian would make of all this weather. She had spoken with a bartender who had never been outside of his city, "New Orleans is the kind of place that if you don't travel, it don't matter, 'cause the world comes to you." But not everything can come to you. She knows that to be true. She looks at the sun straggling through the hemlocks and heads for home. This walk has lasted long enough.

She's almost out of the swamp and can just see where the trees end and the big field begins. Her left foot goes down into the snow and as she shifts her weight it breaks through into water, sliding forward under two feet of slush and snow. As she falls, her right snowshoe buries its nose in the snow. She falls to her left, away from her bent right knee, and goes down. Her left leg is straight out in front of her, her right leg is bent under her, and both are locked in place under the snow.

She pushes into the snow, trying to sit up, but there's nothing to get a grip on, her arms sink down to her elbows. Changing her position puts more torque on her trapped leg, something shifts, and she lays back to think. The dogs circle nervously; Stubby tries to lick her face. She pushes the dog away.

She is soaked with sweat but has not yet begun to shiver. She knows that soon she will have to try to free her right foot, so she can sit up straight and dig out her left. Maybe she'll just rest a bit first. She looks up through the bare tree branches, wrought iron grillwork against the sky. She pants, and gathers her strength. Tiny flakes of snow dust down from the branches, sifting like powdered sugar on her face.

## The Untaken Vacation

A cabana on creamy sand with warm lulling waves pushing at the shore, the patient waves of an ocean full of fish guts and whale jism. I would drowse beneath yellow-striped canvas shifting in the breeze, on a reclining lawn chair, with a thick beach towel, red paint on my toenails, cocoa butter on my thighs, and a boy named Raoul to fetch my gin and tonics. There would be no dogs to shed on my slick skin, to chew my dramatic sunglasses. No diapers in my beach tote. Along about seven I would rise and step carefully to the bleached boardwalk, make my way to my shower, my closet. I would be ready for dinner by nine, where I would order octopus salad with mango, and emperor fish. I would eat all the fish that come in that sea and at night I would sleep with the windows open to the gauzy breeze. There might be someone with me, although I can't imagine who.

## January

There's a lot of night this time of year. A bit of day is all, quick to the window and mostly clouds. Mice track tiny trails on top of the snow, bigger than their own feet and brave as noontime. Spring is down south now, painting her nails, biding her time, waiting the turn. Now, snow falls just like snow: smooth and neat as Sunday sheets. We dream, drugged as quilts, snug as belts, dark wrapped around our shoulders. We don't count the hours. Now, we could dream a mammoth into being. Wooly, tusks down in the drifts, digging through the frost to chew on orange tree roots, peat, and clay. The mammoth breathes onto the window glass to fog it over; he doesn't want me to look. Spring is afraid of the mammoth. He has abused her before now. I am afraid of the mice. They know when to come up into the sun.

## The UP Predator Challenge

Every January the West Branch Sportsman's Club outside of Marquette, Michigan, hosts a contest to see which hunter can kill the most animals of certain predator species – coyote, bobcat, and fox – in a weekend. These types of hunts are held all over the country. In some places they're called varmint hunts. It is thought that reducing the number of natural predators will decrease survival pressure on game species like deer, rabbit, and grouse, and make for more successful hunting in those seasons.

*She's up in her den, a hollow log on the ridge above the swampy section. Its afternoon, and the low sun fingers through the leafless maples and yellow birch. She licks her paws, purrs, a fresh vole warm in her belly. Come evening on this short day, she'll hunt again.*

There's a bobcat lives near my place. I've never seen her, but I've seen her tracks. She's likely the only full-time female bobcat around here. Bobcats never share their space; the females have a territory of about five square miles. The male bobcat territory can easily cover twenty square miles, and overlap with other males and females. She'll be coming into heat about the time the hunt begins.

*The boys are coming to see her soon, and she'll let them. The first one or two. She won't lift her tail for the stragglers, and rake their lazy faces if they linger. This is her stand.*



No road kills will be accepted at the Predator Hunt. This makes sense, especially for the coyotes, which are a common sight on the roadsides around here, carcasses tossed on the snowbanks for the crows and ravens. Bobcats, though, you don't see smashed on the asphalt. Although they're the most common wild cat in North America, most people will never see one at all. If you do find a bobcat in your yard, it is recommended you scare it away with loud noises. Or spray it with the hose. If you're a farmer or a rancher, you might shoot it. There's no hunting season on varmints. Participants in the Predator Hunt must have current State of Michigan appropriate hunting licenses and abide by all game laws. Unlike wolves, bobcats are not considered endangered.

*There's the human with the dogs trails through here some days, but mostly she's left alone. The air smells of diesel from the men with the tree machines to the south. It is warm again today. There will be rabbits in the sunshine in the morning.*

Most bobcats are harvested with traps, but for the Predator Hunt you'll have to shoot one. Any dead predator with trap or snare marks will be disqualified. It's easier to set up a trap or snare for a bobcat, since she'll get curious and come looking for food. But she's smart, and cautious. A bobcat hunter will have to wait a long time for a cat to get close enough to shoot.

*Sometimes she follows the tracks of the human woman all the way to the edge of the clearing where the house is, too near the big machine track. There is a hut that once held chickens – so easy, so fat – but is empty now. Some nights her memory sends her that way, to see.*

One of the methods of hunting bobcats recommends driving around the back roads after a fresh snow looking for bobcat tracks. Once you've found the tracks, find a clearing across which you'll have a good line of sight and a clear shot. Stand very still next to a tree, where your presence will be more difficult to detect, and call the bobcat in using a call that makes the sound of an injured bird. (Hunters know how to do this.) Stand still a lot. When the cat gets close enough, try your shot. You won't get more than one.

*The dogs know how to find her den, but they give it space. Some days she sits on the top of her log and watches the woman and the dogs walk the deer trail below. The woman never looks back, does not lift her head to sniff.*

When a bobcat hunts, she stalks. Then leaps. A bobcat, which is about twice the size of a domestic housecat, can leap ten feet or more from a dead crouch. If she knows you're there, you'll never see her. The bunnies don't know she's there until it's too late.

I imagine the trap set for me. What would call me in? A Zydeco band, cinnamon rolls? I would not be cautious. I would barrel through the brush to see what was going on, a big, unaware target, intent on my pursuit, oblivious to danger. I would think, "What's going on here?" I would think, "Let's go see!" I would holler, "Hey! Who's there?" I would not hear the soft breath of the hunter, intent as I was on the accordion and washboard, would not smell the gun oil and sweat through the burnt sugar stench, would not know till I heard the click, and then, even then, I would turn towards the danger instead of away.

*She does not walk the bottom of the ridge, where there are wires and other, too many man things. She can watch from the edge of the thicket until the owls come out and softfoot it through the new snow.*

Bobcats will fight a coyote for a meal. And each other, for being there, so they tend to avoid contact. They're described as secretive. Another word might be circumspect.

Bobcats can swim. Bobcats can climb. Bobcats only come out at night. They are not pets, although some people try. There's an outfit in Montana will rent you a bobcat for photographic purposes. They have the best scenic spots mapped out. Do these quasi-tame bobcats know that they have become atmosphere, backdrop, scene? As they walk the fallen tree trunk across the western river that they have

been trained to walk, as they wait for the piece of fish that is their reward, as they refrain from using their claws on the soft hands of their handlers, do they think their fur is pretty?

*She has never been touched by other than the seasonal males and her own kittens, who she will chase off after a few months. After they've learned to wait and watch, to kill and eat. Who those kittens touch after that is none of her concern. She would not counsel them, even if she cared.*

There are varying schools of thought on whether or not the practice of predator hunts succeeds in increasing the number of game animals for hunters to shoot at later on. Grown bobcats are prey to only wolves and cougars, and people. Rabbits are prey to so many things.

The bobcats, the ones the hunters shoot with a gun, not a camera, the ones not trapped or hit on the road, the ones shot during the three days of the official predator hunt, are worth thirty points each in the competition. Coyotes and foxes are worth less because they're so much easier to hunt. Ron Edgerly is a successful Upper Peninsula bobcat hunter. "If you ever see a man coming out of the woods with a bobcat over his shoulder," he says, "you should stop and shake his hand, because that man has really done something."

## Spring

She was having the murder dream. In this version, an excavator she had hired to dig a basement uncovered the man's corpse wrapped in black plastic. It came up in the bucket. The excavator swiveled to dump the load onto the rocks and topsoil next to the hole; the body flopped and slid down the pile. She knew what it was without looking. A clammy mist beaded on her jacket. It was night. The operator worked by the lights of his machine. He did not cut the engine, just kept digging.

She had dreams like this, even after days like this, when spring was ratcheting up her entrance and the gutters gurgled with the snowmelt off the roof. The yard squelched; four eager crocus had pushed up on the south side of the house. The snowbanks receded. She stood outside the garden fence and waited for the moment she could see the dirt.

In the woods the pileated woodpecker screamed its primeval cry as it moved between trees, gouging holes like empty eyes in the living bark, littering the last snow with sawdust. She stopped and watched it hammering. There were no leaves yet, she could see it clearly in the branches. It did not seem to care if she watched.

It was always a man who was dead, and she always knew how he came to be buried in a place that couldn't keep its secret. She knew who he was. She didn't need to see the face, the eyes, the broken jaw. In the dream last night there was a house half-finished, one part old and lived in, one part being renovated. Pale plywood in the lights of the excavator. The plastic covering the window opening snapped in the breeze, as if the house were breathing against the barrier, pushing the plastic in and out in sudden, irregular gasps.

She spent the morning splashing through the yard, shoveling up the piles of dog shit exposed by the withdrawing snow. She picked up sticks, a deflated football, it was too wet to rake. Everywhere were the bones she bought at the grocery store for the dogs to chew on. When the dogs were bored with a particular bone, she opened the door and flung it out into the snow. In the spring, on a day like today, she would flip the discards into the edge of the woods. There were lots of them – hundreds – in the verge of trees circling the yard. Soon the trout lilies and ferns would hide them, the fall leaves cover them over.

In the dream: no panic. She does not wake screaming. The dead man is exhumed and she watches, every time. She sees the body rise out of the dirt. A hand, or a booted foot, escapes the wrapping. She does not run towards the

excavator shouting, “No, no, no, not there!” She does not exclaim, “Oh my god, what is that?” She stands, she sees, she does not run away.

In the woods, under the two-track, the runoff is chuckling through the hollow log culvert and foaming away towards the cedar swamp. The seasonal creeks are in season. She wears her swampers. The bottom has fallen out of the winter trails, every step gives way. She can’t see the rabbit tracks or the snow fleas on the bare forest floor. Things have begun to burgeon. This has nothing to do with her.

The first time she had the murder dream, it was the UPS man. Last night it was no one in particular, but someone. She doesn’t know why the man has been murdered. She doesn’t know if she did it. None of that matters. The body rises and rolls away, revealed. The yard lights – or maybe the moon – shine on the bundle. She is complicit. It’s the knowing that does it. As always, it’s not the doing.

Waking, she shuffles to the bathroom, holds her face in her hands while she pees, sits on the toilet until she can feel the cold tile on her bare feet, until she can arrange her past. She remembers, and wonders about metaphors, and how long it will take to cure.

Miles of bumpy roads rattle dirty pennies in the cupholder.

Years collide under the front seat; empty pop cans in a no-return state.

Dust on the dash.



## What We Lay Our Hands On

*A bird in the hand is a certainty. But a bird in the bush may sing. – Bret Harte*

### A Basket of Snakes

When I peer into the basket of snakes I can see the tails and the heads, hear the hisses and the farts. They glint like dry oil, firm liquid, aimless purpose. There is one that, once I catch it, will unravel the knot of *everything*. I watch the snakes as one watches the hands of a magician, looking for the tell, the flick, something I can trace. I believe I have found the right snake, have zenned myself into sync with the reptiles, and reach – slowly, so as not to startle – for the spot on my snake just behind the head, where it is safe (if such things ever are) to grasp. They shift. The knot I thought I knew is gone; there is a tail where I reached for a head. A tongue flutters, an eye shines. I am aware that by reaching for any of them, I am in danger from all of them. But I have to. I know how Eve felt when promised a secret, a way to know. I do not believe there will be no repercussions from knowing. I do not believe there will be no repercussions from not knowing. If I kick the basket on its side, step back and let the snake slither to freedom, I will never again have the opportunity to see them in their relation to one another, and to discern the patterns of their interaction. I must, if I want to know

anything, thrust my hand inside. If I want to know when I'm tasting stardust,  
how the whales decide when to breach, the theory of relativity as it pertains to  
those who don't own clocks. If I want to know anything.

### A Sack of Cats

The sack contains three cats. One cat is truth. One cat is lies. One cat is the way  
of the world. The cat of lies will speak without capture. The cat of truth will not  
speak unless shaken by the scruff of its neck. The cat of the way of the world will  
jump from the sack towards any daylight, climb to one's shoulder, and whisper  
twenty-four-hour news headlines and recipes.

I must reach into the sack, careful not to let the cat of the way of the world  
escape. I must listen to the sack and attempt to nab the cat that is not speaking,  
the cat of truth. I grope, and am bitten, by which cat I don't know. There is  
blood hot on my fingers and still I thrust in among the warm fur, the frantic  
paws. My sleeve is shredded, by whose claws I can't tell. A paw, an ear, a  
scruff. I listen, and pull my prize, sight unseen from the sack, licking my blood  
from its Egyptian lips.

If I have chosen wrong, I must live with this cat anyway, meowing at my feet. I have only the one chance. This is my capture to make, my release to grant; it took a very long time to find this sack with the cats still alive.

### A Bird in the Bush

And then I knew. Or I thought I knew. And the knowing gave me a certain power, a sense of urgency, and a mandate to tell. I sprayed like graffiti under the bridge, like balloons let go while a blue-eyed toddler screamed into the July sky, like a .410 over-and-under on a skeet range, or like the clay pigeon. I believed it was, after all I had gone through to capture the snake and the cat, important.

There is more than one bird in the bushes. I look at the snake in my hand and wonder if it is the one I intended to grasp, then let it hiss into the grass. The cat of the way of the world is purring on my shoulder, where it churns its headline hairballs in peace. It is safe to open the window, the better to hear the birds; this cat is too well fed to catch them. Holding a thing explains nothing.

## On Watching the News<sup>1</sup>

She wonders<sup>2</sup> if<sup>3</sup> it is time<sup>4</sup> to give up<sup>5</sup> on the “all<sup>6</sup> men<sup>7</sup> are created<sup>8</sup> equal<sup>9</sup>” thing<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Knowing that she does not know the half of it.

<sup>2</sup> A wondering woman is a solitary thing. Women scholars are less likely than their male counterparts to publish, so whatever they wonder, whatever they discover, whatever they conclude, is less likely to ever reach an audience. She can wonder all damn day.

<sup>3</sup> Not finding as many avenues for intellectual notoriety also affords a perverse sort of freedom. She can postulate any number of ideas, and since no one is listening, she'll not have to prove any of them. An unproven “if” is a lover who does not require a commitment, who does not return messages or stay for breakfast.

<sup>4</sup> She paid attention in history class. It's been a long time: millennia. Real thousands of years, and it's always a question of who gets to be equal now, and here, and for how long.

<sup>5</sup> It would be a jolt, for sure. Loss of one's illusions always is. A shower helps, and a long walk for coffee, but the fact remains you've been sleeping with a liar for a long time. But he is so pretty, and talks so nice, and he has all the money.

<sup>6</sup> “All” is a lot. All is: every single one. No exceptions for stupid men, murderous men, rich men, power-hungry men, meek men, poor men, brown men, mean men, crude men, illiterate men, tall men, salesmen, chairmen, anchormen, policemen, deliverymen, congressmen, churchmen. She knows all women are not created equal. She does not have to wonder about that.

<sup>7</sup> It doesn't say “people,” it says “men.” It can be spun out any way she chooses, but the Founding Fathers and their penises had a very clear idea of precisely who they were referring to. They didn't define their terms. They assumed much. They assumed white, too.

<sup>8</sup> Stipulating a creator. Stipulating a boss. Stipulating a grand decider, a hierarchy, a tacit man. As if we know what god thinks. As if even a man – a white, rich, well-educated one at that – could assume to know the mind of this creator person. As if there were a creator person.

<sup>9</sup> As if there was a way to be equal. If all men (okay – she would consider it a step forward if at least that much were true), just the men, even, if all of them were *created* equal, then everything that happens after is either that man's fault or that man's triumph. If every semen squirt up into that damp box canyon were anonymous, if every dividing egg were autonomous, if every slick and bloody entrance into the world were completely divorced from the panting dam and the pacing sire, if all that were true, equal might be a word we could use. Or same. But we know. We know that's not true. The smallest child knows it is not true.

<sup>10</sup> The next line in that Declaration is all about inalienable rights. Oh, right. Those.

## Gwen's Birdfeeder

No matter how often she fills it, it is always empty. She fills it sometimes daily. She stands at the kitchen sink, peeling pineapples and scrubbing carrots for the juicer, and looks at the feeder out the window. There are no birds. She knows they come. She knows they eat, probably while she is at work. She can see the seed casings dotting the snow below. She tries to connect those dots, like identifying constellations, or reading tea leaves. She could run an ad, be a prophetess or seer, travel to peoples' homes and discern the future from birdseed patterns.

She has seen, once or twice, the mourning doves. One dove will fly up to the feeder and knock some feed to the ground, where the others can peck in comfort. That is all. No jays, no cardinals, none of the little brown sparrows and chickadees she cannot tell apart. Nothing but the big, fat doves, and they don't show up every day.

She thinks she must be doing it wrong.

She talks, when she fills the feeder, hoping the birds can hear, "I don't put this out here just for your convenience, you know. I expect a little cooperation.

Could you maybe come and do some perching while I'm home? Is that too much to ask?" The thistle seed, the millet, the sunflower seeds tumble from the scoop into the bin. She wonders about expectations. Could she train the birds to come at a certain time, like dogs waiting by their food dishes at 6:30 sharp? Would the birds think that too much autonomy to relinquish for a mouthful of seeds? She has heard of people who have trained hummingbirds to eat from their hands, hovering over the sugar water cupped in a palm. The patience required! The trust. Why would anyone stand still so long, waiting for a moment of connection that means nothing? Or very little. She does not wish to be a bird whisperer. She does not ask so much of the birds.

In the winter, the sun slants differently through the windows. She can see the dust she does not notice at other times. On the floor under the kitchen table, where she and her son do not eat, dust lies undisturbed by feet; on the bookshelves the framed photos of grandparents and other ancestors sit in their own dust niches; the decorative plates hung on the wall – Niagara Falls, Yellowstone National Park, The Corn Palace – hide miniature strings of cobwebs behind their china faces. Only this time of year, with the solar angle just so, does she notice.

She will dust, and mop the kitchen floor. She will cook chicken and noodles for her son. She will watch the television shows about appraising antiques and buying homes in far-away countries. Tomorrow is Monday. The birds, she thinks, know that, too.

On the day she at last sees a cardinal, red against the snow, she posts a picture of it on Facebook.

## Gravedigger

My heart is a bucket of mud with you curled at the bottom and all over the peninsula birds cry. April will happen anyway. Maples unfurl to rush the blue, light fills both ends of the sky, and creeks run drunk to summer.

There was no moon or circus today, or tomorrow. I sleep now right in the middle. Though I bail with all my might the runoff seeps in: full of spring, full of brown, full of underground. I will plant lingonberries over it, small as they are, and hardy.



## The Owl

I would like to be a Barred Owl. The Barred Owl is not an exotic owl; they're common throughout the eastern half of North America: rural, nondescript, no undue flash about them. A rare and resplendent bird has something to live up to; a Barred Owl is what she is.

The Barred Owl makes a characteristic four or five syllable call that sounds like "who cooks for you?" or "who cooks for you-all?" I hear the owls in our woods and I'm of the mind the call is four, not five syllables. That could be a regional thing, though. In Tennessee, maybe the owls do say "you-all." Or more likely, that's what the Tennesseans hear. In any event, the owls who live around our place do not ever use the phrase "you-all." I have Upper Peninsula ears. I, too, would be a four-syllable owl.

Unlike their energetic cousins, the hawks and kestrels, Barred Owls don't move around a whole lot. They sit on tree branches and wait for their prey to pass by below, then swoop down and snatch it up. You won't see a Barred Owl circling all day over an open field. She bides. Nothing hunts a Barred Owl except the Great Horned Owl, which is not so common in our area. I could live with those

odds. The Barred Owl's life span is about twenty-four years. In the people-to-owl years conversion, I'd be a seventeen-year-old owl.

When an owl catches something small, like a mouse, she swallows it whole. Her stomach digests whatever it can, then the owl regurgitates a compacted pellet of fur and bones. There is no preparation involved; it's catch and swallow and let your belly do the rest. It is doubtful a Barred Owl has ever paused over the kitchen sink wondering if, for ecological reasons, she should wash and save the empty yogurt container or whether she can, with a clear conscience, throw the damn thing away. I want to be able to spit out my pellets and leave them.

The Barred Owl doesn't build a nest, either. She finds a suitable cavity in a tree and lays her eggs there. Other than for childrearing purposes, the Barred Owl doesn't need a nest at all. She is sufficient unto herself. She's never been faced with hanging a shower curtain or setting up a gaming system. She has never spent a single moment washing windows, squeaking the rag on the inside, then the outside, ammonia and vinegar dripping down her arms, removing all of the dust and the streaks, the fine grease from the fish fry mixed with sloughed skin cells and wood smoke, smearing, clearing, coming clean from the pane separating her from the open air.

I hear the Barred Owls in our woods at night, and every now and then I catch a glimpse of one whisking across a gap in the canopy. You won't hear an owl fly; she's pure grace and talons on a deceptively proportioned body. Her wings span forty inches, but she weighs only a couple of pounds. It's all feathers and attitude. I want to know how that feels, to be only bones and feathers (which are just a fancy kind of bone): to be hollow and light and silent.

I want to sit on a tree branch in the fading light and note the rustle of a vole in the underbrush. I want to turn my head all the way around so I can see what's behind me without thinking about my past. To gaze from my vantage at the edge of the woods up across the slope of a mowed lawn, past the fenced garden and the fruit trees, across the firepit and the deck, look into the lit windows of a warm house at a fat woman in a laden kitchen and call loud enough for her to hear, "Who cooks for you?"

I want me to hear that, and I want to, finally, listen.

## The Fall

Here is an autumn leaf, sent shifting down from the top of one of the tall silver maples surrounding our yard. These are not the tame neighborhood maples of my childhood, standing alone and spreading benevolent shade across summer lawns, thick-trunked and satisfied like good hearted bankers with full bellies and fat pockets. Such a civilized maple used to hide me at ten years old as I climbed, book in hand, to lie propped in the curve of one giant branch and shelter myself in the leaves and pages. This leaf did not fall from such a tree.

This scrap of summer-gone fell sixty feet or more from one of these wild maples, crowded and second growth, branchless and straight for thirty feet, mingling tops as they reach towards sunlight, twining twigs for squirrel roads, swaying together in the wind. When you are in among them, you can track the shifts in the breeze from the changes in the leaf whisper. When one of these maples falls, it does not fall alone. It crashes through its neighbors, clearing out the weak branches and spindly undergrowth in its trajectory before bouncing on the springy forest floor, squashing ferns and the stringy stubborn saplings that struggle to be tall enough. For Dave and me then its chainsaw time, tops to trunk, four foot lengths hoisted on our shoulders and threaded through the

underbrush to be stacked against December. We don't cut healthy trees, but the fallen and the dead and the diseased keep us warm, sheltered against the two-fisted winters of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

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Neighbors. Scotty asks, "Got your wood in?" Tavis asks, "Where you getting your wood this year?" John asks, "I see you got yourself an outdoor boiler. How you like that?" Winter is the defining season. As the trees strip down we fill up the wood shed. There are a lot more trees than jobs, and a few weeks of work with a chainsaw can keep the propane truck out of your yard all winter long.

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A grizzled couple in a rusty Suburban struck up a conversation with Dave while he and our dog waited for me in a grocery store parking lot. The stranger fished in his wallet for a photo. "Let me show you a picture of our dogs," he said. "There, see that beagle-poodle mix right there?" Dave nodded, squinting at the animals in the worn snapshot. "Well, that one there we got when she was already grown. First night she wakes me up barking. I get up thinking she needs to go out, so I open the door but she stand there looking at me. Won't go out. So I go back to bed. Few minutes later, she barks again. What the heck, I think, she's not used to the place, so I go to open the door for her again. Nope,

she don't want to go outside. She looks at me, then she looks at the woodstove. Looks at me, looks at the dang stove. I checked the fire, and sure enough it was getting low. I stoked 'er up and went back to bed and the dog she settled right down. I don't know how she knows, but she barks every time that fire gets low!"

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This particular leaf landed on the deck outside my bedroom along with dozens of it compatriots. I will not sweep them off. I let the leaves and the breeze do the dance that they do, piling rows along the fences and the sheds, swirling eddies on the slope beneath the clothesline, spreading in a thick layer across the top of the pond. None of these leaves will be bagged and hauled away or burned to no purpose. They will die where they lie.

I have read that autumn leaves do not fall from a tree; they are pushed. As the season draws to a close, the tree builds up a barrier layer of cells between the twig and the leaf stem, slowly detaching the leaf from its base. The layer gets thicker, shoving the stem away until the leaf has no choice but to let go. Early in the spring the maples need those leaves; they unfurl them as fast as they can to get the photosynthesis process started towards the urgent work of launching millions of seed helicopters out into the world. But in autumn that task is done, and the sun settles lower to the south every day.

The winter burden is too great for the tree to sustain its foliage. Through the winter the tree cannot feed all of those leaves, cannot protect them from freezing, cannot support itself under the tons of snow those leaves would collect. So the leaves swirl away in a Mardi Gras spectacle as the tree sheds the excess. It's no wonder life appears anew every spring. It should, with how thoroughly it prepares for winter, how carefully it is crafted to continue.

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I will go out of my way to shuffle through a windrow of fallen leaves, to feel my feet drag through the heavy, wet leaves at the bottom of the pile and scatter the light, bright one at the top. There is that smell, as particular and evocative as lilacs, or new cars, or cinnamon, but not like any of those, at all. The smell of fallen leaves: the surplus of a successful summer, pretty and temporary, joyous and moldering. It is the smell of renewal. The tree pulls what it needs from deep under the surface, then spreads another golden red layer on top.

It is difficult to find a perfect autumn leaf. This example in my hand is a mottled, luminous yellow and orange, but there are a couple of black dots, a tiny hole, and a chewed spot on one edge. For all its flash, it is not perfect. Tossed together with all of its comrades, though, it's glorious.

At this moment the marvelous maples are fluttering against a blue lit sky, the late afternoon sun is illuminating dark tree trunks against the glowing foliage, and a fat blue jay is sitting on the picnic table waiting for a sign. I cannot believe all of this is random. The jay has been joined by a friend, hopping; through the carpet of leaves, lifting my soul for reasons I can define no better than this: I find it overwhelmingly beautiful. Of course, I tell myself, this is not for me. The jay would be here whether I watched or not. But I can't know that, either. Perhaps the jay was summoned by my attention. There are mysteries.

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When the kids were younger we took them to Northern California to see the redwoods. After the long drive we all piled out of the car, the kids running beneath the trees, hollering to one another. I kept shushing them. "Why? Geez, Mom, it's not like we're in church!" But that's how it felt to me. Those huge, ancient trees seem holy. There is a tangible silence beneath those redwoods, a silence our voices did not so much interrupt as get swallowed by. I could have stayed there for days, not saying a word, breathing the oxygen those trees exhale, and whatever else they have to tell.

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Three winters ago a big hemlock exploded on the west side of the trail that leads up to Maki's deer blind. One day it was fine, the next day something had happened. From about ground level to twenty feet up, half the trunk was gone. It had blown apart from the inside; huge splinters of the tawny wood speared the snow at violent shrapnel angles. It probably burst from cold – the water inside froze beyond the capacity of the trunk to contain it. There it still stands, half its diameter spread around it, balancing on the remaining truck.

After every high wind or heavy snowfall I go check on it, always expecting to see it down, always happy when I see it standing. This summer it had no foliage. The blasted hemlock is dying, or dead. It may well stand for many more years, or it could come down today. When it comes down, it will come down big. Whether or not I am there to hear it, that fall will make a sound.

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Dave said, "I've decided how we're going to die." I lowered the real estate section of the Sunday paper and looked at him standing by the sliders out to the deck. "Oh yeah?" I asked. He said, "When we're both in our nineties, we're going to be standing right out there," he pointed to a spot in the back yard, midway between the clothesline and the apple trees, "We'll be out there with a

really old dog, and one of those big maples is going to fall and take all three of us out at the same time. We won't know what hit us."

I hope he's right. I hope it's in the autumn, and I hope I know what hits me. I want to look up and see those golden leaves come for me, I want to reach out and grab Dave's hand and not run away. I want the leaves to wrap me in their eternal whisper and in one breathless rush gather me up with my imperfect companions, and dazzle with my very last breath.

On the day the air crystallizes,  
I will return,  
Following my tracks.

## T-Shirt

I am wearing a T-shirt that was once a rag. Finding it in the rag box, I pulled it out and judged that the stains were not *so* bad, and it would fit, so I claimed it as apparel, which is not to say that I will not use it as a rag if the need arises: to scrub dog barf from the area rug beneath my desk, which was a gift from my husband and patterned with leaves, or to wipe shower steam from the bathroom mirror after the Saturday night shower, which is my favorite shower of the week – clean sheets, clean pajamas, clean me – and the only shower I take at home, the rest taken at the gym after my morning workout where I do not wear this particular T-shirt, although I could, because it is stained but not holey, and would cover me properly and coordinate with the black sweatpants covered in dog hair I always wear, but I have more pride than the amount that would allow me to wear a T-shirt that had once been in the rag box to a public place, but only slightly more, as I do wear the T-shirt around the house (and once to Jack's IGA to buy beer), tossing it in the washer on Saturday evenings after my favorite shower, washing it with the other things I can bleach, and whose stains do not come out either, folding it from the dryer, and deciding, right then, with the laundry basket at my feet full of underwear and washcloths and unmatched bath

towels, wearing my clean pajamas warm and sweet, determining at that moment whether this T-shirt will go back in my drawer, or back in the rag box. Whether it will cover me, or clean.

**On Having Removed All the Junk Food from the House to Be Supportive of  
My Husband's Efforts to Lower His Blood Pressure and Cholesterol after the  
Sobering Doctor's Appointment, and Ticks**

Some nights, when I am sick to death of salad and can't even find a cracker to snack on, and I'm not all that worried about my blood pressure because my body was brewed with some unearned and accidental genetic recipe that allows me to be fat without any of the potentially debilitating diagnoses that can go along with it, sometimes on those nights after I have opened every cupboard door, even the one above the stove that contains nothing but vinegars, molasses, oils, and salt, sometimes on those nights I resort to making low-fat tortilla chips.

I spray a whole-grain, low-fat sandwich wrap tortilla with non-stick cooking spray and try not to think about why so many of the foods I eat are hyphenated, or not-something. I sprinkle the sprayed tortilla-like wraps with salt and garlic powder (since I no longer keep garlic *salt* in the house) or better yet, use up the forgotten envelope of ranch dressing mix powder I found in the cupboard while searching for garlic salt.

Out in the tall grass and trees, the wood ticks are questing. The little arachnids burst onto the wilderness scene every spring, insatiably

parasitic. The ticks are after one food only: the blood of birds or mammals. They are born hungry, they remain hungry, their instinct is to feed until satisfied and then drop away from the host.

I cut the tortilla in triangular wedges with a pizza cutter (which has languished, unused, for weeks). Arrange the wedges on a baking sheet in the light of the fluorescent tube mounted over the stove. Try to make the baking sheet look full. (Who am I kidding, like eight chips will do the job?) The dogs have roused themselves to watch; maybe I'll drop a crumb, a part of a tortilla, a side of beef that they can clean from the floor. I prepare a couple more tortillas and fill that baking sheet up. Bake at 450 degrees until crispy. I watch through the dark glass of the oven door; keep an eye on the snacks so they don't burn.

When the tick hatches in its larval stage, it must have a blood meal before it can metamorphose into a nymph, then another blood meal to morph into an adult, and yet another blood meal before laying eggs. That means the tick needs at least three different hosts in its lifetime. If there is good hunting, the lifecycle can take a couple of months. If not, the tick can

stretch it out over two years. The tick is patient. There is no evidence that  
absent the presence of blood the tick will settle for honey, or horse piss, or  
owl pellets. It wants what it needs, and will  
wait for it.

The tortilla-ish chips are not that good, so I eat them with a lot of salsa. I can eat  
all the salsa I want; it's a non-fat, cholesterol-free food. After everything's gone, I  
stand at the kitchen window and clean out the salsa jar with my finger. Watch  
the cows pastured across the road, black and white and placid, chewing all day.  
I wonder if my neighbor sprays his cows with something to keep the ticks at bay,  
like the medicine we squirt on our dogs, parting the thick fur on the ridge of  
their backbones, finding a spot of pink skin, squeezing the tube so the clear  
liquid spreads out between the follicles. I run my finger around the inside rim of  
the jar to catch the last red chunk of tomato. Lick my finger clean.

Today I pulled two ticks off of myself after my hike. One was attached to  
my thigh, the other had yet to sink in; she was tucked up into my hairline.

I have heard that of all their options, ticks would rather not feed on  
human blood. They'd prefer to latch onto a dog, or a mouse, or almost



any other warm-blooded opportunity. I don't know if that's true, but if it  
is, I'd like to believe it's because our blood smells like  
non-something.

Sometimes I want some friggin' dessert already. And I feel like I can get away  
with it because my cholesterol isn't high; my doctor didn't want to put me on  
five different medications, so I slice up an apple in a microwave safe bowl.  
Granny Smith are best, Jonathans and Honey Crisp are also good, but I don't  
want to use the soft, wild apples I pick from the trees in the woods. They mush  
up. (I save them for canning unsweetened, organic applesauce, cooking them up  
worms and all. I stopped trying to find the worms; they are apple-flesh colored,  
and small. Their trails through the apple are brown, but may not lead to the  
worm itself. So I chunk up the apple, throw it in the pot, and when the sauce is  
finished it's as if the worms never existed.) I put a tablespoon (or two) of brown  
sugar on top of the sliced apple, along with a tablespoon (or two) of Earth  
Balance vegan buttery spread. Microwave for one minute and pour some low-fat  
granola on top. Adding a dollop of non-fat Greek yogurt gives the faint  
impression of ice cream, especially if I add more sugar. The yogurt settles into  
the bowl, accommodating itself to the shape of the warm apples, and the brown  
sugar I sprinkle on top loses its edges, merges into.

An adult wood tick has a big body and a tiny head. She is bigger than the head of a pin and smaller than a sequin – the color of a scab. When she finds a warm-blooded animal to hitch herself to, she sinks her mouthparts under the skin and drinks until engorged. An adult female can expand up to five times her normal size when full of blood, a slick and shiny grey ampule of a body.

After I eat the faux apple crisp, I drink the melted buttery spread-sugar-apple juice liquid in the bottom of the bowl that has started to thicken and tastes like caramel. I remember caramel apples, and cinnamon sugar donuts, and the hayrides and bonfires of somebody else's childhood. I tilt the bowl on the way to the dishwasher so more of the liquid can collect. I stand at the open dishwasher door and wait for the slow drops to find each other; drink the last little slurp before I put the bowl out of sight, in the bottom rack.

What it is like for the tick to want for one thing *only*, to be satisfied with only that metallic, warm, salty, essential blood feed? What is it like to search for that requirement exclusively, to know no other thought, no

other desire, and then, and then...to quench it, fill up, overflow with  
satiating umami mouthfuls of all it was ever born to want? I wonder if I  
have ever wanted anything that much. I wonder if I would know it  
if I found it.

Sometimes I eat when no one is looking. Sometimes I do not allow myself  
enough time in the morning to prepare an egg-substitute omelet. Sometimes I go  
to Cal's Party Store on the way to work and buy their homemade chocolate chip  
cookie that is big as a dinner plate and contains shredded sweetened coconut as  
well as chocolate chips. If I get there between 7:00 and 7:30 in the morning, the  
cookie may be warm from the oven and the chocolate chips will still be melty.  
It's two dollars. The man who works the register in the mornings – who might  
be Cal, or his son – will break off his conversation with the two or three other  
men who stand near the door in their zippered jackets and incongruously dressy  
shoes scratching lottery tickets and reading a paper. He will be polite as he rings  
up the sale, but seem relieved I'm not hanging around.

The larval tick hatches from its egg and waits for its first meal to pass by,  
usually supplied by a mouse. No one knows how ticks find a host, how

they know where to wait. Perhaps they smell the trails of mammals,  
perhaps drawn to the emissions of carbon dioxide in our breath. I like to  
think they can hear our warm hearts beating, the blood sloshing in our  
veins, their pulsing feed trough sending signals through the grass. When  
it finds its host, the larval tick mounts the mouse like a mahout on an  
elephant, sinking its mouthparts into the sweet, soft skin for that first  
rush. The urgency of the baby at the breast, the chicks in the nest, the  
instinctive greed, the basic, living search for  
nourishment.

I take the Cal's Party Store cookie out to the car. Peel back the plastic wrap and  
eat the first bite before I start the engine. Lean back against the headrest, close  
my eyes, and hold that bite on my tongue for a moment. I save half the cookie  
for after work. I'll be hungry after work. I will have had to sit through a meeting  
at which my presence is required, but not necessary. The non-fat Greek yogurt  
and home-dried plums with honey I brought for lunch will not be enough.  
Bringing home a pizza and a box of wine is no longer the thing to do. We are a  
healthy eating household. I take our new menu like medicine.

At night before bed I strip naked, raise my arms, and examine my skin in the bathroom mirror. I turn this way and that, touch every mole and freckle and scab to see if that spot is a tick, or a part of me. When I find a tick I pull her from my body and examine her, slide my glasses down the bridge of my nose and hold the tick inches from my eyes. I watch her legs wave, can see the tiny shred of skin still pinched in her mouthparts.

You're supposed to make sure you get the head out. It takes a couple of days for a tick to engorge, and I catch them before that stage. It's not good to let a tick stay in too long: there are diseases. So after I pull her from me, after I take a good, long look, I rip off her head and throw her dismembered body in the trash. I'd like to let one go, though. I'd like to let her feed till she drops off. I imagine flicking at her bulging body as she balloons, hosting her on purpose, a benevolent mammal, my blood full of non-foods filling her sack. It may not be the meal she was questing for, but it's what she would get.

## Kestrel

On the north edge of the field, under the big white pine where the blackberries are thick, feathers smatter the path. Dusty blue-grey wing feathers. Salmon pink tail feathers, a black bar near the end and the translucent white tips. An American kestrel, the smallest of the falcons. No blood, no body, but it seems like too many lost feathers to be anything but fatal. I imagine the kestrel diving for a mouse and the hawk diving for the kestrel, lifting the body away and leaving nothing but this litter in the grass of the overgrown two-track. The dogs sniff and moved on.

I've become aware of the raptors. One spring, several families of robins were nesting in the gnarled apple tree outside our back door. The adults sailed in and out of the leaves, delivering twigs, taking turns, scolding us when we walked beneath the tree on our way to the garden. The eggs hatched; the chicks cheeped. Just before those chicks fledged, the Cooper's hawks made their move. I don't know if they had been waiting for the chicks to fatten, like veal, or if the hawks attacked the moment they became aware of the nests. Once they started, though, the hawks were thorough.

We watched from the deck as the hawks – a pair of them – sped among the apple branches to snatch a chick from its nest and zoom away again. Some of the baby robins panicked and jumped flightless from their nests to fall to the ground. We kept the dogs inside. The fallen babies peeped, hopping with nowhere to go, fanning out over the mowed grass that offered no cover. They were taken, too, even with their parents circling, calling, swooping on the hawks in an effort to break the hunters' concentration. The Cooper's hawks were not distracted from their hunger. In a series of raids over the course of a weekend, not one of the robin chicks from the apple tree nests survived.

When I tell this story to friends they always ask, "What did you do?" and I confess it didn't occur to me to do anything but watch. And what could I have done? Shoot the hawks? Run around the apple tree with a broom, swatting at the birds? More to the point, those robins were not mine to safeguard. The hawks had nests, too, full of urgent mouths. I don't get to choose which baby dies.

Except for the quiet, afterward, nothing marked the massacre. The robins moved on, built nests in the eaves of the garden shed, the pole barn, anywhere else.

The predatory birds don't leave many clues behind, but I see one now and then.

On a winter day I snowshoed across the middle of the field, following the trail of

a mouse, or maybe a vole, something tiny and brave that had popped up out of its burrow to scamper freeway-straight across the top of the snowpack and leave a string of miniscule footprints in the snowdust on the surface. Why would a mouse break cover, I wondered, and where was it going? I chugged along, breath and sweat steaming into the single-digit air, squinting against the glitter. There was nothing on the surface of the snow but snow, no reason I could see for the mouse to be up here. In deep winter the rodents build Habitrail-like tunnels in the margin between earth and snow. There they have access to seeds and bark if the store they've laid up for the winter runs low. They're protected from the cold – or the worst of it – enfolded in iceblue twilight under the drifts.

I followed the tracks, hoping to see where the mouse dipped back under. A few yards along the mouse trail stopped, but not at any tunnel. Pressed into the surface of the snow where the tracks ended was the perfect imprint of wings, each feather outlined where it had dented the snow at the nadir of the dive. The wing-span was perhaps two feet across, and in the sun the outline of the featherprints was blue and grey against the white, sparkling in the hard light of January. I stopped, caught my breath, pulled off my hat and looked up, as if the bird would be flying away in that moment's sky.



I kneel to the feathers. Maybe a hawk killed the kestrel. Or an owl. Or an eagle. There are coyotes, too, and bobcats, but it's difficult for me to imagine a kestrel falling prey to a four-footed hunter. You won't find a kestrel pecking under the bushes for lunch. They are predators; they eat the brains of voles, strips of sparrow flesh, grasshopper legs. An American kestrel is smaller than a Cooper's hawk, which is smaller than a red-tailed hawk. The raptors kill all up and down the food chain, from dragonflies, to rabbits, to each other.

Even though the kestrel is only about as big as a robin, it in no way resembles any feeder-hopping seed eater. A kestrel has that look about it, that flat cast of eye, that potential for sudden action, that dearth of mercy that all the raptors have in common.

I once held a stare-down with an owl: looked it right in the face till one of us flinched. It was not a raptor-rescue crippled and tame owl, trotted out for middle school field trips and morning TV shows, this was a wild Barred Owl. It sat on my hiking trail one late autumn day, right in the middle of the path only I used. My dog sniffed at the owl and the owl did not budge. The dog lost interest and moved on; the owl swiveled its head to watch the dog go. Then the owl, without hurry, turned to face me. I squatted, keeping my distance. I did not reach out. We looked into each other's eyes.

One thing I can tell you for sure about that owl: behind that beak and the concave face, deep in those black hole eyes, glims the distillation of don't care. If the universe is both infinitely large and infinitely small, the distance between is how much an owl doesn't give a shit. Look in the eye of any raptor and it's the same thing. They do what they were born to do and if that means strafing an apple-tree robin colony for Sunday dinner, then let the feathers fly.

We stared, the owl and I, and I flinched first. The owl showed me what it had to show me, so I continued my hike. When I came back that way later, the owl was on its back, wings spread open to the sky, eyes closed. I watched as the life left, until the talons ceased clasping at the air.

So my kestrel, this kestrel hinted at by feather remnants. I think it's dead. I don't know how, for sure, but I have a pretty good guess. I don't say, "Aw, poor bird." My pity would be superfluous, or misplaced, just as it would have been during the great robin massacre. I gather up the pretty feathers, smooth them between my fingers, carry them home. I will press them between glass and hand-made paper and frame them for my wall, to hang next to diplomas and auction notices and the tamarack bough that is losing all of its needles. The kestrel feathers will hold their color for a long time.

## **An Outline for the End of the World As We Know It**

### **1) The Cold War**

- a) Norad still maintains a massive fallout shelter, and a bunch of bombs, but the smaller fallout shelters built after World War II under schools and courthouses across America now store trial records, lacrosse sticks, dented copper kettle drums. The air circulation and water/waste systems may no longer function.
- i) If you were in grade school in the 1960's you watched nuclear bomb filmstrips and practiced bomb drills. Bare knees on the tile floor, your plaid skirt flared around your legs as you sat on your feet, in line with the other children, the top of your head against a locker and a social studies book clutched over the back of your head. They couldn't get us all into the shelter.
- b) There are nuclear weapons in or adjacent to every country north of the equator. Canada doesn't have any, but she's got Russia on one side and the U.S. on the other.
- i) If I were Canada, I wouldn't tell anyone if I had a nuclear bomb.
- c) The theory of Mutual Assured Destruction applies, so we're cool. We're cool.

## 2) The Earth

- a) There's a super volcano under Yellowstone National Park. If it blows, it could wipe out North America.

- (1) Last time it blew, it covered the entire continent with ash.

- (a) It would obliterate everything that sustains life for thousands of miles. Nobody would be left to tend the missiles.

- (b) There is no information on whether the super volcano has any agreements with Russian volcanoes.

## 3) The Energy Crisis

- a) In 1973, you could dig the change out of the couch cushions and buy enough gas to last the weekend. It was 39 cents a gallon.

- i) By 1978 it had gone up to 65 cents. There were lines at gas stations.

- (1) There weren't as many lines at gas stations in small towns, where the guys you went to high school with came out to pump your gas, with their dark, oily hair, and the muscles in their forearms shifted as they handled the nozzle, and the swoony smell of leaded gas all over their grey shirts.

- (2) You could sometimes go to someone's farm and buy gas from their tanks.

(a) Or steal it. The locking gas cap became popular during this time.

b) People built communes, grew gardens, moved off the grid and practiced survival techniques.

i) We read Mother Earth News and dug outhouses and learned to kill chickens.

(1) Most of us moved back to town at some point. That much freedom is a lot of work, and you still need money for snow tires and doctors.

c) The national 55-mile-per hour speed limit is a direct result of the Arab Oil Embargoes of the 1970's.

i) In 1975, the Ford Mustang got about 20 miles per gallon. These days, it gets about the same.

(1) Even though the price of a gallon of gas has gone up 550%.

#### 4) The Sky

a) A meteorite big enough to make a crater hits the earth every few thousand years.

- b) NASA says the chance of something hitting earth that's big enough to threaten civilization in the near future is less than one tenth of one percent.
- i) They keep watching the sky for asteroids, though, because the chance of something hitting earth with enough force to disrupt everything, sooner or later, is just shy of 100%.

## 5) Terrible Diseases

- a) The World Health Organization estimates about 36 million people have died from AIDS.
  - i) Most of them are in Sub-Saharan Africa.
    - (1) The National Institutes for Health spends about three billion dollars a year on HIV/AIDS research.
      - (a) Americans spend about ten billion a year on cosmetic surgery.
    - (2) Six million people live with HIV/AIDS in South Africa right now.
      - (a) Most of them are not white.
- b) A child dies every minute from malaria. Estimates on malarial deaths range from one to two million people per year. For always.
  - i) In 1850, malaria was one of the leading causes of death in the United States, behind only dysentery, tuberculosis, and cholera.

(1) Without window screens and mosquito eradication efforts, malaria could rebound in the U.S. quick enough to kill our kids, too.

c) SARS killed about a thousand people. More people than that die of gunshots in the United States every two weeks.

i) There are more firearm suicides than homicides.

d) Most private survival shelters contain weapons and lots of ammo, but few or no vaccines.

i) There's nothing to prevent dying from diseases we've lived with for millennia, let alone those we haven't met yet.

(1) It was only a century ago the Spanish Influenza pandemic killed up to one hundred million people in just a couple of years.

(a) The bubonic plague is still out there.

a) You might want to save some ammunition for personal use.

6) Y2K

a) While the techno-computer crisis envisioned for the rollover of the millennium from the 1900's to the 2000's turned out to be a non-event, it did raise the question of how reliant the developed world had become on computers and the programs that run them.

i) People built survival shelters. We stocked up on powdered milk and withdrew cash from the ATM.

(1) We looked at our phones and the television at midnight to see if anything happened.

ii) In 2014, there were about 7.3 *billion* live cell phones in the world.

That's one for every living person, with a few to spare.

## 7) The Sun

a) In 1989 a solar flare erupted with such intensity it blacked out portions of Canada and melted electrical transformers in New Jersey.

b) It knocked out satellite communications, too.

i) Y2K didn't end civilization, but a solar flare might.

(1) The Northern Lights, though, will be spectacular.

(a) You won't be able to text anybody about it.

## 8) The end of the Mayan calendar

a) Shut up.

b) People built survival shelters, anyway.

i) We had an end of the world party during which we ate a lot of deep-fried foods.



(1) I still have the deep-fryer.

9) Climate Change

a) The jury is not out. The science is real.

b) A rise in the carbon dioxide levels twenty thousand years ago ended the last ice age and began the Long Summer, which allowed humans to thrive on the planet Earth.

i) The woolly mammoth and sabre tooth tiger didn't fare as well.

c) Something is happening again. We don't know exactly what.

i) New studies are finding that past, dramatic global weather shifts took place not over thousands of years like we had originally hypothesized, but in centuries, decades, perhaps a mere handful of years.

(1) By handful, I mean less time than it takes to get from kindergarten to high school.

d) This is nothing new. Build a shelter if you want.

i) I have powdered milk. I have guns and ammo. I have a deep fryer.

(1) I am sure I will be unprepared for whatever catastrophe befalls.

(a) I am not sure one will.

(2) I will not build a shelter.

(a) I will make snow angels in the falling ash.

- (b) I will take pot shots at meteorites.
- (c) I will watch the Aurora Borealis and smoke.
- (d) If the deep fryer still works, I'll make chicken.

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