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# In the Middle: North of 45

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IN THE MIDDLE: NORTH OF 45

By

Susan A. Morgan

THESIS

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2012

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

IN THE MIDDLE: NORTH OF 45

This thesis by Susan A. Morgan is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

IN THE MIDDLE: NORTH OF 45

By

Susan A. Morgan

The personal essays in this collection follow a loosened helix of experience, questioning, and reflections experienced during the author's middle years. Three main themes emerge: the yearning to belong to a specific place – both geographical and spiritual; the tension between expectations imposed by the chaotic secular world and the writer's emerging sense of spiritual identity – her resistance to labels; and, a celebration of the natural world which inspires in the author both a child-like sense of wonder and an awareness of the close presence of the One.

It is a celebration, a love story: of place, of family, and of the power of language to lift us up toward joy.

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Susan A. Morgan

2012

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the children of my middle years, Kendra, Alex, and Ben,  
and to their father, who carried me to this place. I am profoundly grateful.

The thesis is also dedicated to my husband, Jim, who keeps me here  
in wonder and in joy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a (mostly) retired perfectionist, I am convinced I would never have taken up pen and paper were it not for the encouragement and support of the community of writers I encountered at Northern Michigan University: Dr. Ron Johnson, who first invited me in; Dr. Beverly Matherne and Allison Hedge-Coke; the visiting writers, Dr. Patricia Foster and Dr. Sheryl St. Germain; Laura Soldner, the most recent in a long chain of memorable teachers. Laura, you inspire all of us to offer our best selves.

To my thesis readers, Matthew Gavin-Frank and Dr. Rob Whalen. Thank you.

With deep respect and gratitude, I thank my thesis director, Dr. Paul Lehmborg who held my hand to the fire, expecting always just a little push more than I thought I had to give... who gently prodded me one night following an orchestra concert at the middle school: “Just get back on the horse and ride. It’ll come back to you.”

And it did.

Thank you, also, to my many workshop companions along the way, especially Mary Kay, Emily, and Sarah who first pronounced– “of course you’re a real writer!”

To Ginny – who read tenderly - and to all the rest of my church family at First United Methodist Church: thank you.

To my sisters in sobriety (and a couple of fairly cool men – Bob S. and Brad V.): you were there to lead me out of the chaos. You’re still there as we laugh ourselves sore over coffee, toast, and – often – chocolate.

Third from last – thank you to my children, who were mostly patient while I finished just one last sentence, “in the zone,” lost for hours in my words.



Second to last – my husband, Jim. I hope my affection and respect shine through at least some of these lines. I am often distracted. You have been patient.

Finally – I recall and bless my parents, George and Ann Martin, who summer after summer piled three girls into the back of a Mercury station wagon and headed west and north, over prairies and mountains, then home – pulling a red Apache camper behind... with me, sitting in the middle, dreaming my dreams and thinking my long, slow thoughts. It was a gift, a time, I can never repay.

I was one lucky little girl.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Conversation with the Author .....	1
PART I – <i>Lake</i> .....	19
Burying a Finn .....	20
Speaking Finn .....	21
Empty .....	44
PART II – <i>Forest</i> .....	68
Qui Quoligentes Folia: The Collector.....	69
Chiasmus.....	88
Beautiful.....	89
Drought .....	115
Leaving Forest .....	116
Max .....	143
PART III – <i>Sky</i> .....	152
Taxidermy.....	153
Strange Lights .....	155
Learning to Pray.....	165
Zona Pelucida.....	186
The Fishing One.....	187
Camped on the Greenwood Reservoir after a Poor Day of Fishing .....	207
Works Cited .....	208

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

One late February afternoon, I caught up with myself – the emerging memoirist, Susan Morgan – as I put the finishing touches on my first collection of essays: *In the Middle*. I was pleasantly surprised at the discovery; I'd been mostly missing for some time, dodging home, family, and friends – hoarding hours spent huddled over a small round table tucked into the corner of the George Shiras Room of the Peter White Library, in downtown Marquette, Michigan.

I was not surprised to note my dishevelment. I often emerge after hours of feverish writing with my hair twisted in knots from running exasperated hands through its swinging bob; its color, “golden brown,” so proclaimed my dad when I was three. I now call it “retro-enhanced,” with threads of silver at the roots. I was not at *all* surprised to note my dress: loose black yoga pants furred in a fine layer of cat hair: take your pick from white, gray, or brown – our cats generously share the color spectrum. My roomy fleece pullover almost covered the accumulated effects of croissants, hot chocolate and other necessary winter habits. I can no longer be called anything like “svelte.”

The room where I write is lined with solid oak bookshelves and dusty tomes sporting titles such as *American Game Bird Shooting* and *Hunting Camps in Wood and Wilderness*. Shiras' night-time flash photo prints of whitetail deer peer down at us, their eyes startled white marbles, white tails flashing indignantly as they leap away toward the sheltering margin of forest and swamp. Tall windows give the impression of an eagle's nest surrounded by water and trees, paired images that inform much of this first collection of essays.

**Why here? I wondered. What was it about this public space that opened me up to writing? Wouldn't real north woods writers tuck themselves away in some cabin, camp or cottage they'd borrowed from friends near a shore or out in the woods? Places with names like "UP Here" and "Bide-a-While?"**

"Ironic isn't it?" I had to admit, with a shrug and a grimace. "I'm a person who writes extensively about the importance of place and yet I have nothing of my own to claim as writing space. Shades of Virginia Woolf! The university office, where I spend most of my working life, is filled with other people, other tugs on my attention and time. It's a place to earn a living. And then – well, it's winter. It's too damned cold to go moon about at the shoreline."

"Besides," I continued, "I like to imagine that I'm hiding here, creating small illusions of intimacy that force me to focus on the task at hand." I hazarded a glance at the small black eye of a camera mounted to the ceiling in the corner. "I think I'm just inside the cone of that thing. Just as important: my kids don't look for me here. And, at the Peter White I'm surrounded by thousands and thousands of books. It's proof that some poor soul pulled off this impossible task – actually finishing a manuscript worth publication."

My eyes drifted toward the view from the windows. "And then, there's that long stretch of beach, that amazing horizon. If this writing thing doesn't work out, I can always indulge in my persistent fantasy of disappearing into the wilds of Canada."

**The self-interview was proving quite fun, almost naughty, as a stand-in for the requisite – and almost certainly stuffy – critical essay introducing this collection.**

**I decided to continue in the role of interlocutor, in an almost sardonic and certainly literary vein....**

**It's a fairly wide arc you trace in these essays. Are they memoir? Could we call them nature writing? Personal essay, perhaps? Where would you find this book on the library shelves? It's no do-it-yourself manual on marriage or parenting, that's for sure!**

I do kind of wander, don't I? The whole thing is this crazy helix – a loosened arc, almost like time travel. I skip from one marriage to another, one mixed-up child to the next. One minute I'm standing in a snowdrift sucking in gulps of Scotch, the next I'm out at the Reservoir, hauling in a prize bluegill. There's a lot of star gazing, a number of cliffs, a whole section where I'm wandering alone out on the prairies, exposed to the elements and to the buzzards circling my formerly tidy life. But even though it skips around, it's all writing from the middle – ripples of prose spreading out from the big stone of a life I hauled up here and tossed into the Big Lake, some twenty-seven years ago.

I didn't start out with the idea of a memoir. I mean, who really wants to read about my ordinary scrap of a life? Nope, I wanted to write about the beauty I discovered here in nature, like my heroine Annie Dillard. Her essays had just come into my life when I moved here with Stewart (husband number one) in 1985. My favorite quotable line of prose – ever – is from one of her essays in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: “A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks?” (11). What a great line. What wonderful alliteration! It comes in just ahead of another Dillard classic, this time from her memoir *An American*

*Childhood*: “Terwilliger bunts one!” Such wonderful stuff! She is dead-on with the rhythm of her prose.

Anyhow, I suppose I wanted to explore what that weasel might be thinking if he ended up *here*, in *this* specific place. I wanted to write about what I saw and heard – what I loved – in this sheltering forest, this lucent air, this water all around me. To be snatched up into that sky like Dillard’s weasel, to grasp my ‘one necessity’ and refuse to let it go. To ‘dangle from it limp’ wherever it takes me (*Teaching a Stone* 16).

However, when it came time to actually get down to the difficult business of writing this collection, I realized that while the personal essays I love to read gave me a vision to aim for, I did not yet have the craft to adequately shape pure imagery and metaphor. I needed the discipline of a timeline, the devices of a recognizable format like memoir. It requires a strong sense of narrative to *be* the eagle, to actually keep a limp carcass of ideas aloft.

So, I guess I could fairly characterize this collection as half memoir, half nature writing, half complaint, half praise.”

### **That’s a lot of halves!**

Well, I never claimed to be very good at math. I guess I’d better stick with the writing.

**Let’s talk about how you came up with *In the Middle* as the title for this first memoir. Don’t most writers start at the beginning? In *Liar’s Club* Mary Karr is a six-year-old renegade. Wolfe has his “boy’s life....”**

These stories are – literally - taken from the middle of my life; they’re all set at least ten years ago. They deal with the tension generated by many years spent crouched in an appeaser’s stance, mitigating the extremes at either end of marriage and parenthood. (Such a good little co-dependent I was all those years ago!) I’ve had a chance to reflect on the incidents I describe, time to cultivate the perspective that’s necessary for any memoirist. Write too close to the bone, and you get raw meat.

Still, there’s a fair amount of reflection on my childhood years. That’s where the resilient metaphors hide, right? The stuff that feeds a future writer.

The most persistent image that informs the collection comes from endless summers I spent riding in the middle of my family’s most recent model of Mercury station wagon, the seating dictated by birth order: me, the second sister, sitting in the middle (over the hump of the driveshaft, within reach of my father’s flailing arm-of-exasperation; that’s lot of little girl bickering to haul over the prairies!). We spent hours – days – driving through those flat fields of wheat and corn, inside looking out. Moving through without belonging... staring through the dusty glass of the rear window with lots of time for long, slow thought.

**‘Interesting that you link those relatively happy memories of camping with your family to the strong sense of displacement running through the first half of your memoir...the years you spent longing to be comfortable in your own skin. All that time invested in earning the coveted title “True Yooper.” (As if a “troll” born downstate ever *could* be, right?)**

It goes deeper than that, I think. There's this stereotype of the folks who came here in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – Swedes, the Finns, the Italians, *real* Yoopers – with their thick accents and cloddish, plodding ways. Even the best jokes don't get at their strong sense of having earned this place. It's a sense shaped by harsh weather, strenuous labor – lumber, iron ore, farming rock and potato – and *Sisu*, that Finnish sense of stubborn fortitude

For later immigrants, expatriates like me, there's a real allure in belonging to such a place. It's demanding. There's an implied imperative of getting it right. Of toughing it out until one truly belongs. And I'm not just talking about physical survival. You have to face long stretches of dark, deep nights, spend your first 180-day stretch without sunlight, another 180 with measurable snowfall.

I have this strong recollection of the first time I wandered down the Hewitt Street hill from our second-story flat on High Street down to the beach at McCarty's Cove. It was June, maybe three weeks after we'd moved here.

I walked right to the water's edge, sat down and stared out over the Lake Superior twilight, straight east - only water and a seemingly endless horizon stretching all the way to Canada, the Arctic, and the winter I knew would come.

I sat on the beach for perhaps a half-hour, feeling my unborn daughter shift and squirm, then settle; my hands resting warm on my belly, the sand cooling beneath my legs, and I found myself breathing. *Really* breathing. Each inhalation welled up and out from some place so deep I no longer recognized it. With each exhale, muscles loosened. I was completely relaxed.

Breathing in. Breathing out.



As the tension fell away, I felt like I was recovering from some disease I never knew I carried.

As expatriates, I think many of us come to the U.P. dragging some fairly significant dis-ease, some holes that are just waiting to be filled up that way – with deep breathing.

**Holes? That’s an interesting concept. What holes do you imagine you brought when you moved here?**

Well, that’s the backstory, isn’t it? Before the middle.

The first big hole: my dysmorphic sense of self. I did not grow up feeling particularly “carnate.” I spent a good deal of time up in my head. I was a reader, in almost a pathological sense of the term. Life inside a book seemed expansive in ways my own life could not. I preferred to lose myself to some larger reality where I could shout, or cry or indulge myself in the pure tragedy of it all. I was pretty melodramatic! Just take a look at some of the journals I kept during those long camping trips, sitting in the middle of that station wagon: “*Alas, another day of travel. Alas! We are lost!*” Sheesh.

I think I learned to doubt the value of any present reality I discovered when I poked my heads out from the pages. But there I was, with this busy, busy brain, filled with lovely, lovely words, and for a lot of my life I felt some shame in that. By the time I hit high school, I was ready to slip away into silence. I felt stymied by the norms I’d learned at home: You *feel* too much. You’d be so much better if you could just take it easy. You’re so *hard* on yourself!

And I was. Hard on myself. I did a serious round with anorexia in high school. The anxiety that fed my disorder came from a sense of never quite measuring up. I went all the way through college with high honors, feeling like a fraud, convinced I'd be exposed at any moment. I wasn't that smart – I just had a good memory for things I read! I wasn't that gifted. I just spent more time on my papers than my classmates did. And always, there was my father and his constant regard – his absolute faith that I could not fall. It was a pretty heavy weight for one young woman. It set me up with a debilitating fear of failure.

By the time we moved here to Marquette, I'd added the shame of a shiny master's degree that I wasn't using. I was pregnant and joked to the people back home that I didn't know nothing about birthing no babies...and I didn't. My infant daughter terrified me the entire first year of her life. She did! For months, I put her to bed in a carriage pulled up next to our bed, my hand on her chest – hyper alert to the rise and fall of her breathing.

And then came The Lost Years: I'd had one miscarriage just before we moved here. Then came Kendra. And then I lost five more. I couldn't even pull off the one thing that any real woman can do: I couldn't stay pregnant. There's a desperation in that.

I watched my husband, disappear down the rabbit hole of his own loss, his depression over his father's death. We could not comfort one another. Like a lot of women – I blamed myself for the holes. The poetry I've included in this collection hints at that.

**In *Burying a Finn*, you imagined yourself as a laboring immigrant, a Finn who gave birth to your first mother-in-law, Mae. (That’s a weird twist!) I feel like this is where you really begin to address those holes mentioned in the back story.**

Please understand: Mae makes a great character; she still looms larger than life, and I truly detested her for most of those middle years. She shielded my husband from responsibility for his own actions, actually moved in with us for a time when her drinking was at its worst. But the real issue was this: she had something I wanted; she belonged here in ways I did not. I believe she was convinced to the end that I had no place in her son’s life. No place here. I hadn’t earned it, somehow.

And maybe I hadn’t. When I wrote *Burying a Finn* I was forced to confront the many ways I truly did not measure up to the demands of life in this place. To keep the perspective and the judgments turned towards me and the many ways I’d abdicated responsibility in the marriage. As I wrote this piece, I kept chanting the same three phrases over and over in the back of my mind, almost like a mantra: *Is this true? Is this right? Is this fair?* By writing from Mae’s perspective, I was forced toward empathy.

**You write about your own struggles with alcoholism in *Empty* and make an interesting shift to the second person. Can you tell me why? (Are you just showing off? Come on, be honest.)**

Well – I’ve always enjoyed pushing nonfiction to the edges by experimenting with fictional tools. I got the idea of trying a second-person voice when I first read Mary Karr’s second memoir, *Cherry*, in which she writes about her emerging sexuality as a young woman. It’s difficult subject matter, very private and personal. My years as an

active alcoholic were private and hidden, too. In fact, most of my friends had no idea I drank until I told them I was going to admit myself to the rehab unit at the local hospital.

When I first read Cherry, that second-person voice irritated the heck out of me; it almost forces this sense of shared experience between author and audience. But it's also strangely alluring, so when I started writing *Empty*, I really only wanted to see if I could sustain the voice for an entire essay. As an experiment I think it worked in some surprising ways. It offered me some emotional distance to assess that part of my life without self-pity. Almost as an outside observer.

In *Empty* I'm writing of a person, a young woman, who seems almost foreign to me now. That person who never felt particularly incarnate. She'd float on the water and fantasize she could dissipate – the skin of her hand as warm as the air; in the absence of any breeze, she could fancy her cells had expanded and she'd dissolved like ash into the lake itself – evaporated into sky. It had its appeal, the notion of vanishing into an ideal world. When I brought these ideas up to real people, they'd just stare. "Susan," one friend used to tell me. "That's weird. *You're* really weird."

I guess that's the notion that feeds a lot of memoir – this persistent notion that somehow we are different and because of that difference – there is shame.

**You shift into new subjects in your second section, *Forest*. In *The Collector* there is a consistent sense of push-back – a resistance to being fixed by names and labels. You *do* realize that you spilled your deep, dark secret, right? Now we *all* know you've never felt comfortable in your various roles as wife, mother, and writer.**

Actually, *The Collector* started out as a bit of a lark. A way to poke some gentle fun at my husband, Jim, and his compulsion for naming things and being right (*all* the time). Underneath the humor there's my impatience with this very Western way of thinking, this Enlightenment sensibility that truly irks me: the idea that if we just try hard enough we can fix things in place with our human knowledge, with the power of linear logic. Or with the precision of language.

I don't necessarily need prose to carry me in a straight line forward, to offer firm conclusions. I lean more towards an Asian mysticism. There's this great essay by the Japanese novelist, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*. He argues that in place of the "shallow brilliance" of rational explication, we need the "pensive luster" of shadow (121). Or, there's the poetry of Li-Young Lee, another Asian writing to a western audience. In *Praise Them*, Lee points out that a tree, exposed in December, is not entirely seen until two crows land on its branches, highlighting its essential bareness. Making it more visible by creating the contrast of shadow. It's an Asian sensibility of negotiated meaning.

In writing about nature, I'm also content to let meaning float out there in some hazy recollection of owl call and the luster of June moonlight. I'll let images swirl around like fog and then settle on some low-lying hemlocks or cedar, where I can discover metaphor quite by accident. I'm aiming less toward explication and more toward *zattori* - the ah-hah moments of discovery where one finds a deeply personal connection between text and memory.

**I detect a different kind of push-back in the middle chapters, *Beautiful and Leaving Forest*. Here you're writing through some fairly difficult years of raising your kids – the ones that were “raised by wolves!”**

As I said, I've never been very comfortable with labels and pre-packaged roles. They lead to judgments of never good enough, and I'm already plenty prone to beating up on myself. The culture of contemporary parenthood demands it. For god's sake – it's become its own verb tense. We are no longer Mommies or Daddies. Instead we *parent* as an active, and exhausting, verb form. Look at this section of library we're in today: here's a book on “The School-Savvy Parent,” another on “How to Cook Nutritious Meals for Your Autistic Child” – lots of room for guilt in that. My kids struggled in the public schools. *If only I had cooked better when they were young!* “Forty Ways to Live a More Spiritual Life....” What? Ten isn't enough anymore?

There's a fairly consistent message in these titles: Buck up. You're not trying hard enough. *You* are not enough. There're those holes again.

So yes – in *Beautiful*, I'm braiding together some fairly complicated strands from a time of great disruption when I lost my job and was fighting back the shame of *unfair*. I was a good girl. I was a good employee. I went to college, paid my taxes and still found myself without work – without a way to support my kids.

I ended up back in graduate school with a bunch of much younger TAs and loving this writer-ly life far more than my responsibilities at home – the many dysfunctions of my blended family. There was an actual moose calf living in the Park Cemetery that summer, just down the street from our house. I got the idea to braid the calf's story into

mine when I discovered that a mother moose turns her back on her calf when it's still fairly young.

In these middle chapters, I'm working out my feelings of somehow failing at all this juggling in the middle years. I'm a lax mother. I'm a recovering drunk. I'm unemployed and deep in debt. And I poke fun at my wonderful husband for his certainties precisely because I am plagued by self-doubt.

**Did you find it challenging to write in your children's voices? Is it even fair to voice their thoughts for them? (Are you sure you got it *right*?! You're not exactly impartial.)**

Actually, those were some of the easiest sections to write. I'm not likely to forget memorable epithets such as "smell-badder!" Like I said, I like to push the edges of nonfiction by employing fictional techniques – dialogue and interior first-person voice. Maybe trying on my children's voices serves as a means of paying it forward, preempting the many apologies my kids will eventually demand!

**You also included an almost entirely fictional chapter – more of a prose poem, *Taxidermy*.**

That was sheer play. It's exhausting dredging up all my insecurities day after day, anchoring them to my many failures. By the time I got to *Taxidermy*, I just needed a little time-out for myth, for fantasy. In my own mind, I am a goddess, you know: Artemis – the virgin – purely her own creature.

But what happens to a goddess once she's grounded? *Taxidermy* is also a vehicle for working out feelings of being chained to family, work, running to the grocery store, getting those wolf-children out the door and in school for at least three days in a row – to address the very incarnate body that failed at its most basic task. To deal with this underlying conviction that I've somehow betrayed the person – the goddess – I was meant to be.

**In the last section – *Sky* – you turn more toward the larger abstracts: prayer, the physics of deep space, the Aurora. Are you nuts? These are challenging subjects! What prompted you to take them on?**

When I read Plato as an undergraduate, I began to imagine the notion of God as all these ideals escaping in a huge explosion – like the flares from the sun. (This is actually fairly close to the physics of Big Bang theory.) I imagined huge TRUTHS as floating out in the air like giant balloons, bobbing in space, and I started to think of my human experience, my eventual death, as a yearning back toward that original wholeness. A writer, I think, is doing the same when she tackles a big abstract like prayer or the Aurora. She is following some imperative – some essential desire – to order what has become broken or elusive, the big ideas, the principles that shape a common human experience of longing. In the end – we fail. (That's a nod to another favorite essayist, E.B. White, and his essay *Ring of Time*.)

Nature lends me the specificity I need to make the abstract concrete. I can't just get lost in pretty words and imagery; I have to be keen in my observations of how nature works things out and then make those patterns accessible and useful to others.



Mary Oliver does this wonderfully in her poetry. I keep a copy of *Wild Geese* on my desk to remind me that nature does not require perfection, only that I learn to love “the soft animal” of my body, to let it “love what it loves.” If we offer up praise – resist despair – the wild geese call back, announcing our place in “the family of things” (*New and Selected Poems* 110). Oliver’s words encourage me to trust in the natural cycles I observe all around, to take a chance on reaching out to other people with my writing.

**Don’t you think you should show just a bit more of your husband, Jim? One of your early (and possibly only) reviews for this work criticizes you for leaving him so formless. We don’t really finish this book with a clear vision of Jim as a physical entity on the page.**

In a lot of ways Jim is also a fictional device in my essays; he’s a foil to the metaphors I lay out in this work. He is both my way into the place and my means of relating to it physically. Somebody had to teach me to fish. Someone should still hold my hands and keep me from streaming up into the aurora, chasing those Platonic bubbles. I don’t stay outside under the stars all night, lost in wonder, even if I want to. I’m content to leave Jim in the margins, serving that role, but since you insist, here’s what I can tell you: He’s a retired electrical line man who has worked and played outside for most of his 59 years. His skin is dark enough that people ask – or assume – he must have Native American ancestry. (He doesn’t, as far as we know. We figure it’s the Welsh ancestry.) His hair was dark when we met but has turned almost silver in the last twelve years. My wolfings took their toll on a guy whose sentences often begin with “When I was your age....” He’s slightly stooped from a hunting accident he had about five years ago. (He

did *not* fall out of his tree stand. It broke. That's an important distinction to a guy who grew up with a re-curve bow in his hands and then spent a career as a professional line man, always tethered by appropriate safety gear.)

Look at his hands if you want to know Jim: they've planted at least a hundred gardens, harnessed snaking thousands of miles of line in heavy winds and snow, and snelled more hooks to more reels of four-test fishing line than anyone else I know (except for his brother, David – my fish caddy). He's the oldest of nine kids and has the booming bass voice of authority that goes with that. Almost anything from Jim's mouth sounds like a pronouncement. He's capable. He works hard. He bakes fantastic pies. And he takes good care of me. That's pretty attractive to a moony solipsist like me.

**A solipsist – it's interesting you characterize yourself that way, because there is a sense of accountability throughout your collection that argues with that label.**

Accountability, hmmm. First, I hope, to the many excellent nonfiction writers who instilled both a love for this genre as well as a persistent sense of despair – the conviction that I will never get it right. Actually, I haven't read much nonfiction for the last couple of years for that very reason! Two years ago, when I finished Mary Karr's most recent memoir, *Lit*, I turned the last page, slammed the cover shut and ...*Shit!* She got it right the first time and before me. *Why try?* Later, as I re-wrote my own chapter on becoming a drunk, I realized Karr had given me permission to write about the private issues, to skirt the confessional and keep the focus on my own role, my own responsibilities, my own singular experience.

I am also, as I said, awed at the craft of Annie Dillard. She sets the bar fairly high for any essayist who draws inspiration from nature. I tackled my *Strange Lights* chapter with a nod toward her essay *Total Eclipse*; the imagery of madness, of myth, gave me permission to explore similar themes. And she is so eloquent at expressing the hopelessness of this essay business. Who but Dillard would think to pair the terror of writing really big ideas to that of an inchworm, waving its tiny, grasping legs out over the abyss of a small patch of lawn?

E.B. White is another strong favorite – with his clear, conversational style. White invites me to regard my scribbles as part of an extended discourse with generations of essayists. There is accountability in working your thoughts out through essay; there is a sense of the offertory, the humility of displaying *all* your triumphs, *all* your questions, your many, many doubts – and then asking for whatever it is that drives you forward into community: forgiveness, understanding, a place in the general human experience....a glimpse of God.

And of course, Scott Russell Sanders lifts up the value of writing from the land you know, intimately and up close – of lifting up its value for others in the community, giving back to “the places that feed them a more abundant life” (161). It’s not enough to just go on and on about how much you love this particular place – this wild Upper Peninsula. You have to lift it up to others. And you ought to protect it. (I have to confess I’m not quite there yet, but I feel a healthy shove toward joining in local efforts to curb nickel-sulfide mining. And I did just sign an on-line petition against state Senate Bill 778 which seeks to limit public access to Michigan’s waterways. I even wrote comments!)

Essayists are, in the end, accountable to a circle of close-up regard, to this crazy, looping, non-linear thread – to the conversation itself.

**Well enough of all this conversation, then. It's definitely time to wrap this chit-chat up. So, let's talk about the last piece – *The Fishing One* - a rather bland title and yet you tell me you always wanted to write the definitive *woman's* fish-story. The title suggests you believe you pulled it off in more ways than one. The text implies that you've emerged from the struggles of the middle years to claim a more confident voice. You are writing from an interiority that is at once calm and yet open to further wonder.**

Yes. This period in my life feels better shaped to my mental contours, my thinking life. I feel I've given up a good deal of the struggle of those middle years; I'm almost floating in a mental space in which wonder has a home. Where mystery can enter, and I can let God speak.

I'm put off by all the quick-writing I see out there today: flash fiction, even flash nonfiction, the blogs and electronic journalism that push us along on a flood of verbiage before we've even had a chance to marvel at what is offered... to reflect. For me, the opportunity comes - when I let it – out on the water at the instant of the first quick tug on the line. Just before I reel it in to see what waits on the other end. In that moment – there is amazement. What more could I ask?

I am finally *enough* at the end of a good day of fishing. Not too many holes.

Right-sized and enough.

PART I:

*LAKE*

## BURYING A FINN

On that day you sat bone stiff like Rudyard limestone, south of Sault –  
back stacked rock on rock, your mouth the thin curved line of ore  
humped black for winding miles. Staring straight  
blue as Pastor's words dropped down, bounced up  
like rain on fields once robbed of stone.

That shiny suit. Those stiff black shoes. You leaned hard,  
left a space between us because – I thought – I cried.  
I still think so. I had not learned the language of this place.

Later, in a drunken outburst,  
your mother's tongue split open: "A good man. He was a good man!" Her words  
were sharp, they rattled loose somehow,  
rushing out away from her the way this lake will quest  
and spin until it finds a level. They startled me.

As if someone had argued.

(For Evert Hakola, 1914 -1988)

## SPEAKING FINN

*She presses her back against rough boards, binds her fists again in thick strips of burlap cut from an empty Co-op feedbag. Baby number seven. Her belly has swelled, her ankles are thick. Heavy knit socks are rolled low under petticoats layered double against the draft. She prays this one will come soon even as a low grunt escapes with the effort of a rolling contraction. Just last week, the doctor hinted at twins, urged her to plan the lying in at the new hospital, up the road in Houghton. The hospital! It's an extravagance for other women. Softer women. Women with coins to spare. Her belly points high to the ceiling.*

*Cardamom and yeast. She can smell the morning's baking over the steam of the sauna's cedar planks. In the distance comes the rhythmic thunk of steel on oak. She's sent Emil out back for wood to build the kitchen fire higher. Already, a cradle sits empty by the woodstove.*

*Early this morning, as she made her way out to the privy, the moon had stood silent, a distant observer high in the January sky. From so far away, long beams seemed to pull forth the first slow stirrings of her imminent labor, a tidal pull, an ache down low, so deep. Even now, in a small crack in the sauna's ceiling – she can see the last of the morning stars, winking down from a sky that has just now lightened from coal-gray to the dusky lavender of early dawn.*

*Another deep swell and the cool hands of the neighbor against her forehead, sweeping back strands of hair escaping like pale straw from the braid she bound before*

*bedtime. She sets her feet hard against the cedar boards of the sauna's wall, arches her back, then sets her chin tight against her chest. Ajaa, painaa – push – the neighbor urges. And at last comes a thin, reedy cry - complaint against the sudden quiet. A son, her fourth. And then, before the neighbor can swaddle the infant for his first feeding, again, the urge to push – the second baby's head descending like an orange she once pulled from her Christmas stocking long ago in Ullua. The bright fruit as foreign and other as this child who fights her way out into chilled air. A girl. Her second.*

*She will name this one Mae – a practical name well suited to the practical demands of this new place with its hard-iron rails, deep-piled snow, and dark-pitted mines. A short name, suited to a life that begs in clipped syllables and favors hard work.*

*But then– in a flash of whimsy – she breathes a second name, stolen from a traveling singer she once saw on the brightly lit stage up in Calumet... Irene. It's impractical, frivolous even, this name chosen for some other child, somewhere else – some soft creature of factory-spun cottons and silks. Mamie Irene. She breathes the name to her neighbor. A bright and lively talisman to stand against deep seams of ore dust ground into the cracked and heavy palms of the child's father.*

*It is 1919 in South Range, tiny town, a gap in the trees really. Set just south of the copper-seamed hills of Michigan's Keweenaw County, a fingerling strip of rock and shore shaking its fist out from forest into the darkened waters of Lake Superior.*

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We're driving the back roads of Highway 28, any place west of Koski's Corners. Here, wide hills roll past hardwood breaks and the occasional white pine guarding rock-



stubbled fields. Potatoes, mostly. White-washed houses sit neatly tucked at the end of dirt drives, propane tanks set discretely at the back of each lot. Hay ricks scatter the fields, rolled and bound with twine. Single-spired churches dot the highway's edge, their lots standing empty save for Sundays at 10:00.

Life here seems like scenes imagined from artifacts in a country museum. Mailboxes bear names spun from music: *Kesti, Maki, Heikkinen, or Vuorenmaa*. Rough-board barns pose with cross-cut saws, standing up on end. A rake or a broom, metal staves cast off from water-soaked barrels, pitchforks, and plows – tools once used to harvest, mold or master the land.

On spare shelves set over every cast-iron stove stand single serving bowls, hollow mirrors to the frost-breath blue of open skies. Blue like the waters from a half-remembered homeland. Blue streaming down from the hills – even in summer as cool as winter mint.

Imagine in each home the countless jolly gatherings. Kitchen walls stretch and swell to accommodate each fresh arrival, friends and neighbors stuffing the farmhouse until – in a reversal of the old circus clown routine, they burst forth from every door, spilling into the yard in a seemingly endless stream, bearing plates piled high with good things to eat: *nisu, juustoleipä, Piimäkakku*.

They've come from the mines – the Quincy and Jackson. They've come from the camps in Munising and Mohawk. They've labored on ore docks and settled on farms more rock than potato. They've come from Finn halls and co-ops, from communities knit tight to stand fast against assimilation – the loss of their language, their stories and custom.

I know these people, these Finns. Their lives have been told in tales passed down from my first husband, his cousins – all second-generation Finns crafting legend and ethos from stories their parents told them. Men and women who left their homes in the early 1930s, desperate years that emptied the Upper Peninsula of its first native-born generation, sending them down to feed the post-war factories of Detroit.

I know these people: painstaking, no frills. They are tightlipped. Tough as stone. Some, you might imagine: emotionless.

They are borne of *Sisu-Soumilainen*. It's a tough inner fortitude that will stand any challenge: blizzard winds, the company boss, shoddy homes built on scrip and promise. *Sisu-Soumilainen* – a whistle in the face of their dark descent into tunnels of copper and iron, the failed crops, the letters from home reporting regular cycles of birth and loss. Letters that highlight the true price of this brave adventure to a new land of promised riches.

*Sisu-Soumilainen*.... It's the stuff it took for outlander immigrants, set down in these Upper Peninsula woods, to withstand the resentment of those who came before. It's a newer, tougher ethos, built from sandstone and iron. Devoid of any wasted emotion or complaint. Any doubt. Any tears.

*Sisu-Soumilainen* – a quality, I sense, I will need for my adopted life here in this place.

I am an immigrant, too.

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*She stands by the kitchen window, hands in the suds, idly noting a drift of clouds over the hardwoods at the edge of the field. The snow is gone. The first green shoots of the garden are warming in the weak June sun and a mosquito whines endlessly somewhere at the edge of consciousness. She turns to the pump handle mounted to the cast-iron sink. Water bubbles up only to quiet itself with a final glugging bulp. Over the sound of the sudden quiet, she listens as the insect whine separates itself into shrieks. Distinct. Edged with panic. She takes a swift step to the side door. There, by the shed, five-year-old Andrew stands with mouth gaping open like some half-witted calf. In front of him, her husband stands, work-roughened hands dangling something down and over, into the cool damp of the well. It's a sock edged in red yarn she knitted just this winter. He gives the sock a rough shake, dips it lower then pulls it up again, high enough to make out its edge. And now, she can see, the sock is attached to a slim ankle, no bigger than the tender bone just above a calf's front hoof. "Useless! You're nott'ink. Chust a dumb girl." Another shake and Mae is drawn up and over, back into the senseless light of the yard. He turns from her in disgust. Takes one step back toward the shed, leans a sudden left before catching himself up straight, stumbles right in an awkward dance, then left again in a sudden bow before disappearing through the open door where a bottle stands half-emptied.*

*She waits a full minute before swinging the kitchen door silently open. What has the child done this time? Likely nothing more than freezing still at his approach, like the rabbits that feed some evenings in the yard. Leaping right and up then left, they freeze in a sudden spill of light from the open door. It's as if Mae's habitual caution draws out*

*some madness, some long-buried fury that drives his drink. As if her wide-set eyes judge his failure.*

*Years of labor, the arrival of each new child, have given a creeping and bitter edge to his sweet whispers of a better life, here in America. Whispers grown hoarse now, with disappointment and whiskey.*

*Mae will leave this peninsula. In the wake of the Great Depression, she will travel south toward steel and autos. She will type and file, wear nylons with seams, and meet her girlfriends for drinks on some Friday nights. She'll meet a handsome soldier with eyes the same pale blue of the skies above her remembered home – a man whose name and gentle ways of speaking echo the familiar lilt of her childhood playmates.*

*She will meet and marry her Finnish-American husband and bear two sons. Sons to educate. Sons to pamper. Sons to placate and feed on family vacations spent in the far-off U.P., taking sauna and picking thimbleberries with cousins as fair and sun-bleached blonde as themselves. Sons to carry north in the summers, sons to fill with dreams she thought she'd left behind.*

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My mother-in-law – the first one – loved her sons both equal and fierce. It was her way, the legacy of a childhood spent in the rough mining communities of her native Copper Country.

Mamie Irene Kesti, twin sister to Andrew, smart and dream-filled, the youngest girl in a family that prized boys, born in a cedar sauna at a time when hospitals were reserved for the rich. Her father worked for the railroad and maintained a small home

farm in South Range, just enough land to supply the family from the kitchen garden, a few hens and a cow for milk. He'd emigrated from Finland with his wife to settle in one of the dozens of immigrant Finnish communities that fed the local mines and timber camps.

Of course I knew nothing of this on the day I met her son Stewart, the latest college English major hired by the publishing company where I worked in downtown Detroit's Book Tower, just west of Hudson's Department Store. I saw an intelligent guy, a soft-spoken reader like me, with grey-blue eyes and a shy habit of ducking his head when he spoke.

Stewart soon demonstrated the hottest bat on our company softball team and the ability to deliver a stinging one-liner with flawless timing. His eyes followed me at the parties we both attended, where I wore a short skirt and my new white jacket for the first time. We celebrated birthdays at Joe's Bar across the street and skipped out to laze in the bleachers at Tiger Stadium, where beer was a cool 50-cents. We learned how to open a round of poker with one-eyed jacks, and on a handful of wild nights joined our friends hopping bars in the gritty no-man's land sandwiched between the darkened factories trailing along Jefferson Avenue and the affluent Pointes to the east.

At the time, I was living rootless in a flat on Detroit's east side, raised Wonderbread white without a hint of the ethnic '60s and '70s that had encroached slowly north from riot-torn Detroit to my placid hometown some thirty miles north. Stewart, with his rough-edged friends, his blue collar, downriver upbringing and his Finnish roots, seemed truly exotic to me. It was an impression that gained strength as we began to spend time with his extended family at the Finnish American Center in nearby Farmington. Women

with first names like Toine and Impi, last names like Mayry and Kesti – lilting names that seemed to hold the music of a half-remembered homeland. Names far removed from the prosaic Marys, Susies and Anns I'd known in grade school.

In the kitchens of his cousins, we feasted on foreign foods – nissua, squeaky cheese and pasties, heavy with lard. Drove down Ecorse and Mack to bridal showers set against the background music of two to three accordions, folding chairs set out in garages with concrete floors that held the faint outline of leaking oil pans. Tables were set with hand-sewn placemats in the cream and blue of the Finnish flag. Gifts with the distinctive crinkle-cut of Iittala glass, imported straight from Helsinki. Old ladies sat with pin-curled hair and spoke of thimbleberries, sauna, and drifts of January snow so deep they had to use the upstairs landing for their front door.

We danced on New Year's Eve at the Finn center in Farmington, rollicking polkas where I was passed from arm to arm in endless beer-fueled fun. Stewart's dad, Evert, winked slowly under a shining silver hat, held in place by a thin string of elastic stretched beneath his chin. The shared secret: he was sweet on me, the new girlfriend.

I was different then, somehow. Loosened and reckless enough to fall in love – as much with the boy as with a sense of claiming something rich and big, something with roots running deep, true and silent as the snowy hills that bred them.

I had fallen in love with stories, really – with the fantasies Stewart spun of a place, a people, a landscape I had also visited as a child. A place that romanced me still with its visions of pristine forest and rough, cool water – of rock piled on rock, steady against all storms. A landscape settled by stalwart sorts, people honed on snow or ice and

long nights dozing by the fire. A place settled by many, but adopted as home by the Finns.

And I wanted to belong there with him, as fiercely as any émigré ever longed for a half-remembered dream of lost home.

And so, in 1985, newly married and pregnant with our first child, I paid a fare, crossed the Mackinac Bridge, and followed the U-Haul west toward my new home in the U.P. And became an immigrant myself.

For my young husband, our move to Marquette was a homecoming of sorts, a return to his boyish dream of life in the home of his ancestors. For me, it was half adventure, half haven, a safe place to raise the baby I carried with me. A place I'd visited with family ages before, where agates winked on beaches that stretched for miles and I ran with my sisters, lone voyageurs with gulls and the sound of water our only company. I remembered clean air that stretched our lungs too deep for comfort. Water so clear and cold it startled us into silence.

May turned to June and then July that first summer. I sat on the beach dreaming my dreams, my belly stretched tight.

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It took remarkably little time for the first inevitable clash between fantasy and life in this adopted peninsula. It may have been something as simple as the second, or third polite hello directed my way in a Finnish bakery we'd found on Third Street, its air

redolent with warm yeast and cardamom. The slight reserve of the owners' welcome followed always by a cheery "Hei, hei!" "Päivää, Moikka!" as a local entered behind me.

Or maybe it was too many hours left alone in my new role as young mother-to-be. I knew no one and had not bothered to look for work. My graduate studies had been abandoned far south in Ann Arbor. It was easy to let thesis work slip by in those lazy summer months in our new home. Stewart spent long hours at the job that had brought us north, and longer nights studying for the bar exams looming at the end of the summer. I was content to drift in a drowse of pregnancy and clean air.

Our first real fight – ridiculously – came over my habit of locking car doors behind me. Stewart would walk ahead, arms filled with groceries, and turn at the click of the car door. "You don't have to do that!" His frowning eyes convicted me of some nameless crime. "It's safe here. We're in the U.P. No one's going to take things."

We traveled in August to join his family at their camp in the Keweenaw, on the long channel separating Houghton from Superior's long roll toward Duluth. Mae sat on the banks of the channel, her feet bare in their slippers, her face reddened by the sauna's steam, a towel draped over the curls springing up on her head. Stewart and his brother drank beer on the banks, watching ore freighters slip by just yards from the shore where his father sat on the sauna's front porch, sipping beer from a jelly glass. My sister-in-law stayed one night too long in the sauna. Had to be carried out, faint from the heat and restored by deep draughts of water from the well.

I sat on the docks at water's edge, dabbling my toes in water so cold it might shock the baby growing inside, the sauna so hot my doctors had warned me away. I



wasn't even to eat the perch and whitefish carried up from Superior's deep bays for sale at the local grocer's.

I felt out of place. Off my rhythm.

I fought the first few months of deep snow. Listened with my breath caught mid-chest as the wind howled a record-breaking snowfall against our north-facing windows. When we ran out of milk, I stepped from the front porch into snow that spilled over the tops of my boots, struggled through drifts piled higher than my head, just to buy a gallon of milk from the store at the corner. A woman in our childbirth class had lost her baby to SIDS. I slept with the baby's stroller next to our bed, my hand against her chest, feeling its steady rise and fall. Alert for any disturbance in the rhythm of her sleep. In phone calls home to my family, I lied: "It's not so bad. I've met a few people at church. Really, six inches of snow... It's nothing up here."

"We're *fine*."

In the flat blue of my television screen on a sunny day, white snow dazzling the eyes from the apartment window, I watched the high trajectory of the Challenger's flight and its sudden disintegration – falling apart in a clear and sunny sky.

By mid-winter, I had discerned a hard truth. Hauled up against the careful reserve of my Finnish-American neighbors, I'd finally discovered the dimensions of a divide that gaped between their polite smiles and my attempts at friendship. The gap between Yooper and troll, the immigrant survivor and this upstart city girl.

I'd grown afraid. I was not sure I'd make it here. The endless winter had rattled me in ways too deep to contemplate.

I wasn't sure I could ever belong.

That spring, when the snows had cleared, and my in-laws traveled north to visit, I resorted to lessons in Finn-stuff. I learned to make pasties from dough heavy with lard – a careful, even dice of ground meat, potato and rutabaga, margins sealed tight against leaks that leave them burnt and bitter at the edge. I claimed with confidence a preference for ketchup over gravy. It didn't matter which, really, only that I could claim one over the other.

I laughed at Mae's claims that our infant daughter was 51% Finnish, her blonde, downy fuzz transparent against the rounded dome of her head. Caught up helpless against this Finn-centric boast, I eventually came up with my own jaunty response: "Yes, but the other 49% came over on the Mayflower."

I learned to laugh at Finn jokes.

At parties with his work buddies, I'd often find Stewart in the middle of the room, deflecting with humor the legacy of his immigrant heritage. Like the famous Finnish gene for stubborn.

"Hey, Dave," he'd call out. "Yeah?" the hapless party-goer might respond.

"You know, you can always tell a Finn..." Stewart drew out his response with classic comic timing. "But you can't tell him much!"

Laughter always followed, and the jokes piled one on the other until a circle had gathered around my husband – a circle of admiring faces and mostly good-humored fun.

I usually remained at the outside edge of that circle, mindful of some unseen barrier, ephemeral, sensed at the margins of the outward humor. Could these jokes, aimed at the first-generation Finns in America, reflect some residual insecurity and fear that perhaps he didn't deserve the success he had earned? Who was Stewart, after all – this university-educated lawyer – to come north and do better than all his relatives and the ancestors whose lives he so admired?

We all do this – each in our own way – pushing back the darkness with jokes aimed at our own soft-bellied fears. Maybe that's why one joke in particular resonated deeply for me... this one aimed at the stereotypical stoic and emotionless reserve I had already found so frustrating:

*Toivo comes in from the barn, knocking snow from his heavy boots. He's greeted at the door by his wife, Hildy. "Toivo," she begins, a plaintive note in her voice. "We've been together now t'irty years. How come you don't tell me you love me no more?" Toivo is silent, considering his response. He sits on the stairs and bends to pull his boots off, one by one. Straightens and clears his throat: "I told you once when we were married, eh?" Hildy nods. "Well, if anyt'ing changes, I'll let'cha know."*

And then, one Sunday as we sat in the kitchen, we tuned into a *Sixty Minutes* piece featuring the latest Finnish craze. A scant fifteen seconds into the segment – an interview with Miss Finland – we telephoned Stew's parents to key them in. They were already jolly with laughter. They'd seen the show and agreed with every word, although they had a hard time explaining the why of it. Here, on the television screen, was a room filled with rock-faced Finns, pressed as close as propriety dictated, dancing...the Tango.

Yes! The world's most passionate dance form, with its sinuous steps and hip-to-hip, thigh-to-thigh innuendo, had become the newest national pastime. There on the screen we saw older women, young ones, too, dressed in flowing gowns, held by men in tight shirts and neckties, hands positioned just so, a careful distance from the waist, circling in total silence. Each dancer gazing at a distant point, just off their partner's shoulder, circling and circling. Endlessly circling without a single smile.

When Safer quizzed the smiling Miss Finland Universe about the strange humor inherent in the scene, she could only shrug and laugh as she attempted to explain the inexplicable. "I know, I know... It's funny, so funny!" she exclaimed.

"They do not speak. They don't really look at one another. But it's us. It's Finns. It is just us Finns."

And we laughed, too, long after we'd hung up the phone.

Laughed so hard we cried. But we couldn't really tell each other why.

I became convinced it was a matter of language.

I had always equated words with pleasure. I loved the cadence, the rhythm, the half-sung music of language. Words were my way out, my escape from an inward-turning mind.

In newly-married naivety, I was convinced that words – my words – carefully chosen, could tend this marriage. If I could explain myself with reason rather than venom, avoid the passion that seemed to disturb my husband's cool reserve... If I could summon logical arguments, beautifully crafted, each word a plea, a sigh – a rounded orb,

ripe with good intent – all would certainly be well. We’d have no need to argue, to retreat into the stony silences that haunted our home. I wouldn’t even have a need to be right. Words, carefully chosen, would establish an uneasy middling ground, bridge the vast silence that cooled the core of our marriage.

But here, I encountered a language that was spare. I wondered, had those early Finnish immigrants also failed to learn the language of power in this new land: “I need, I want, I demand?”

Had the rigors of life in this place defeated their dreams of a new start? Perhaps the original Finnish settlers had lost early a language of encouragement and hope. Here, in America, words had become an extravagance they could ill afford, the energy expended in conversation better stored up against the unrelenting cold – each breath better saved for short, clipped speech: *fire, heat, wood, cold.*

It’s as if a new language grew up beneath the Finnish they’d brought with them – a tongue distilled from cold forests and hard fields peppered with granite and lime. A language meant for speaking the unspoken. A language that waits in silence, or awe, and weeps only when the distant lights of the aurora flare and fire in a circle of endless night.

This language – this silence - left me ever begging for admission to the place, these people. The trouble is I kept on wanting. I was left aching with the wanting.

I should, perhaps, have shouted.

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We were ill prepared for the lost years ahead.

First the loss of our babies. Miscarriage after miscarriage, followed by the stillbirth of our infant son, Noah.

The death one cold December of Stewart's father, Evert.

Months of dark, depression. The slow seep of alcohol. A retreat into our two lonely corners.

I fell helpless before this newer silence. Picked one-handed battles that left me spent, emptied of every screamed emotion, every plea for a reaction.

Instead: the perfect rigidity of Stewart's silent back retreating from the room, dressed in his father's faded tan cardigan, feet shuffling with the same slow, uncertain steps.

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I was the only who cried at the funeral.

Stewart was dressed in his one good suit, in a church he hadn't entered since his confirmation some 18 years earlier. Mae sat in front, eyes ahead, packed into a blue brocade suit and sturdy heels. The relatives – the same who had played polkas at every rehearsal dinner, every birthday or commencement I had attended as part of this extended family of Finns – were seated behind us in rows.

Stewart had spent the night before putting together a photographic display of his father's life. Here was Evert, all handsome, marching off to a war he never spoke of. Here he was, beer in hand – a happy grin on his face - captured in a pensive moment on

the porch of that sauna on the Portage Canal, watching iron freighters ply their slow trade.

And how ridiculous! The only pastor available stood at the front of the room – a man who had not known my father-in-law, knew nothing of his past, nothing of his character – resorting in the end to a vague, yet impassioned, sermon about sin and retribution, pre-destination and a concern for the deceased’s immortality that seemed, frankly, doubtful.

“Sin?” I wondered? “This gentle man? What sins could possibly have earned him *this* end?”

I was angry. I was inexpressibly sad. How could such a quiet life, such a good and tidy life, be reduced to this mean, impersonal sermon?

I sneaked a glance at my husband, edging a sympathetic hand nearer him – transferring a soggy tissue to my other.

Nothing. A blue-eyed stare straight ahead.

I looked further down the aisle to where my brother-in-law and his wife sat. Steve’s hand was on ‘Shell’s arm; his eyes were on the pastor. I can’t imagine what he was thinking. My mother-in-law sat straight and stoic from the start. Her pale blue eyes resolute.

I was the only one who cried.

All day.

I cried so hard that attempts to stifle the sound shook the arms of those seated on folding chairs to either side. Cried enough to fill the empty winter weeks and months ahead, day upon day of silence as Stewart slowly disappeared – folded into the endless

winter and into his full-fathomed despair. A grief that would prove unrelenting for almost three years, until Alex, our second child, was born.

If Stewart shed tears that day, they were private and brief.

If his mother cried, I was not privy.

My immediate reaction was shame. Shame at my unseemly display. It seemed – frankly – sloppy.

After the funeral, we held a wake featuring beer and whiskey, songs and maudlin speeches. I sat apart with my family. My sisters had driven down from their homes in the suburbs, bringing Kendra and her small suitcase to us. I spoke with them softly, my eyes following Stewart from table to bar, from bar to small clusters of Mayrys and Hakolas, Kestis and Lahtis. The drinks and the laughter flowed as story after story attested to a life lived well, with decency. Evert's life.

Later, we gathered, immediate family and a few of Stewart's high school friends, crowded into the small bungalow on Winona Street. Here, my mother-in-law finished what she'd not quite dared to begin at the wake.

Mae called for a short glass and a full bottle and determinedly drank her way toward her first night as a widow in this suddenly quiet house. We provided the drink and offered other comforts. Her slippers? A sandwich? She was tired, but not hungry. Her feet hurt.

Stewart settled her into a chair near the plastic divider between the kitchen and the tiny living room. I remember thinking how strange it seemed – to find her sitting while guests were in the home. Like most Finnish women I had met, Mae rarely sat while



guests were in her home. She always stood by the stove or sink, hovered near the table where coffee, cakes or sandwich materials were spread. “Eat!” she’d urge. “Have more.”

Yet here she was this night, slim ankles stretched before her, holding court from her armchair with an almost defiant air.

“I don’t care,” she announced abruptly. “I don’t care. I’m just going to drink and drink. Nobody can tell me no. I’m going to get drunk.”

No one argued. We just continued our quiet conversations – the small catch-up talk that takes place when old friends meet up for the first time in years. Brian “The Ghoul” and his girlfriend Julie – who fascinated me with her literate air. Others, too – neighbors, perhaps – or neighborhood pals. Frank, the same Frank who had frightened us so on his visit to the U.P. the year before when he strolled out one night in sub-zero weather for a smoke and a look at the lake, and didn’t return until evening of the next day .

“Mae!” Frank exclaimed. “There’s no reason you shouldn’t drink. In fact, you deserve it. Here...” as he leaned over her glass, whiskey pouring forth from the bottle he’d snatched from the sideboard.

“Frank – you are a most loyal subject,” Mae intoned. “I’m the queen. And you – all of you! (she spread her arms wide)... You may attend my court for the rest of the evening.”

Something in her demeanor – the way she held her upper body, the slight lift of her chin – suggested a slight resemblance to Britain’s Queen Victoria. Mae’s face displayed that same confidence, the assurance her courtiers were nearby, poised to serve.

“Pour me a drink, good squire,” she sang out, and I began to suspect the delicacy of her grip on sobriety. But I wasn’t going to begrudge Mae this first real opportunity to grieve. It was, after all, the only real display of emotion I’d witnessed in days.

To be honest, I was fascinated. I’d always been wary of my mother-in-law’s occasional drinking bouts. ‘Learned to recognize a certain level of intoxication – and danger – from the way her voice escalated in both pace and pitch. This was, after all, years before I faced my own dependency. I was aware that Mae’s relationship with alcohol was not quite right. Stewart had once shared, in a moment of uncharacteristic self-revelation, stories of the times he’d cowered in the dusty basement with his father, hidden beneath boxes of ornaments and strings of stored Christmas lights, as his mother raged throughout the house. I could guess how frightened the young boy had been, could picture in my mind the hunched figure of my father-in-law, his own look of shame hidden from the boy he sheltered.

Mae was often a mean drunk with a sharp tongue. I didn’t know what to expect.

At some point around midnight, Michelle and Steve retreated to the back bedroom, while Stewart, Frank and the Ghoul reminisced together on the couch. I gathered a few empty plates and left the room to check on Kendra, who slept on one of the twin beds upstairs. When I came back down, Mae sat silent, staring ahead.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked. “Are you hungry? Would you like an afghan to cover your feet?”

No, she signaled with a shake of her head.

I sat down again, next to Stewart and fell into a half-doze. It was late. We had a long drive ahead of us the next day.

Suddenly: “He was a good man! A *good* man!” Mae burst out.

She had a fierce look on her face, and she stared first at Frank, then at Stewart and Brian, before a brief glance at Julie and the rest. Her words were harsh – odd – as if someone had argued. She picked up her glass and again fell silent. One by one, we went to our beds, leaving Mae and Stewart alone in the living room.

I’m not sure when he came upstairs to sleep. I’m not sure his mother slept at all that night, or any of the lonely nights that followed.

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Months later, when spring came again, we cleared the snows and traveled downstate once to visit for a weekend. I had gone into the kitchen to find a drink of water for Kendra, and there – posted on the cabinet, just above the weathered plastic dish-drainer and the checkered towel that draped the clean dishes – was a list written in my mother-in-law’s careful hand. A list with times and dosages for all of Evert’s medicines; the telephone number of his hospice nurse; a card for the medical equipment outfit that had provided his oxygen tank and the paraphernalia necessary to sustain his last breaths.

In emphatic capitals at the bottom of the page was a stern command: “Do NOT call the ambulance in the event of an emergency. Dial the hospice service.”

These instructions, I recalled, had flown out the window on the night Evert died. In a panic, Mae had dialed the police, who in turn sent an ambulance. Her pleas to “just stop!” went unnoticed as the paramedics labored over his body and strapped his wasted

form onto a gurney. They lifted him into the ambulance parked on the lawn, its emergency lights mutely circling the suburban night and sped away toward the hospital.

And there was Mae, dressed in her housecoat with curlers tightly wound. Or maybe braids, wound loose on this loosened night. Mae standing small and alone on this tiny patch of lawn, watching the racing tail lights vanish at the corner where the tidy blocks of Winona Street meet the urgent rush of Ecorse Avenue, busy even at this early hour, just before daylight.

Had she not called she might have said goodbye in her own way. On terms spoken best under the silent, star-stitched nights of the Upper Peninsula that bore them both.

When Mae entered the kitchen and found me looking at her note, she offered only a single comment: “I just can’t seem to take it down. Not yet.”

I nodded. Words seemed, at last, unnecessary.

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Years have passed, and I’ve gained some perspective.

It’s not so much about the language. Instead, it’s a matter of *sisu*, that fierce U.P. pride that translates best as Finn-hard guts. Stamina. Determination. A failure to yield to anything and anyone. The strength it takes to persist in the face of thousands of failures, large and small.

*Sisu.* Something reserved for real Yoopers. For the fighters. The original immigrants.

The Finns.

“But,” I protest, “I’ve been forged in fires just as fierce and blue. My ancestors settled this state. They signed the Declaration, governed a colony, and battled the British. We were peacemakers, too. One ancestress, a Quaker, was tried and hanged for her pacifist beliefs. Can’t I borrow from her and find a similar strain of fortitude? Or has too much distance grown between the original experience and my much softer life, a childhood spent in the relative suburban peace of the 60s and 70s?”

In my voice, I detect the petulant strains – the whining – of a child left out of some longed-for playground game. It is the lost voice of one who stands, still, outside the circle. One who still yearns to belong to an experience that has shaped something fierce and absolute.

*Sisu.* I whisper to the sky. To the shore and to the trees.

The answer, when it comes, is wordless.

## EMPTY

Once, some years ago, I was flying home from a site visit somewhere – Germany? Spain? Argentina? I work in a study abroad office at our local university. I'd left a jumbo jet to catch my much smaller connecting flight home out of the distance runner's favorite airport: Minneapolis. I'd made my connection – just – having sprinted from the noisy bustle of immigration control to the small terminal and smaller planes that glide and bump us from all corners of the world home to the Upper Peninsula.

I plunked myself into my seat – single by the window, so no one would talk to me – and we took off on a sharp angle, banking hard right, lights from the Twin Cities disappearing into the sun setting behind us. “At last,” I took a deep breath. “Peace and quiet.”

Wrong. I had just settled into whatever book I was reading, when a young girl's voice piped up from the seat behind me. “Oh, great,” I thought. Or maybe it was something less kind. I'm not an airplane-talker, and I kind of despise people who are. The twin prop planes that fly us up here usually provide perfect cover – loud with a persistent drone that has nervous flyers subconsciously holding their breath with each change in pitch (or worse – the abrupt absence of sound when cruising level is reached). But something about this girl's tone had caught my attention. She was, perhaps 14. Her voice was high, a little nervous and punctuated by giggles, but mostly it was cocky, and it was this note of bravado that stole my attention and kept it captive for the rest of the journey. It seemed so out of place in this quiet plane, full of business travelers and a handful of stoic Yoopers – Finns, Swedes, and the like.

“Yeah, I’m on my way to Gwinn,” I overheard. “To stay with my Grandma and Grandpa. Is it pretty there?” A murmured response came from the very kind, elderly woman seated across the aisle who was patiently answering each question and comment in a measured and reassuring tone.

“Yep. I’ve never been there. They always come to see us. I’m from San Diego, you know. Kind of a big city. I’ve been, well...I kinda got into a little trouble there, or I was about to, and my mom and dad were worried and all, like, ‘That’s it, Amanda! You’re going to go live with your Gram an’ Gramps in the Upper Peninsula,’ and so here I am!”

The girl seemed in it for the long haul. Grateful that I was not her target, I sat back, closed my eyes and tried to create a private pocket of silence. No dice. The girl just couldn’t stay quiet – hardly stopped for breath for the first half of the hour-long flight.

“They say there’re lots of lakes, and a high school, of course, and I know all about the snow and everything. Maybe I’ll go ice fishing, Gramps says, or learn to ski or something. None of my friends back home has ever even seen snow! That would be cool. Cool... hah? Do you get it? *Cool?* Hey, do you like the snow?”

*Oh, yes, it’s quite lovely, and sometimes...*

“Or maybe I’ll see a moose, or a bear or something!” the girl broke in. “There’s wild animals, aren’t there? Did you ever see a bear? Are they really everywhere?” I mentally scoffed at the impressions the girl carried with her, flashing back to a time just before my own move north from the suburbs of Detroit, a time when my questions about life up here had been answered with defensive wit such as the classic, “Yeah, and we even paved the roads last year!” Now, the approach into Marquette from the west looks

like anywhere-else-in-America: strip malls selling cell phones and quik-loans, a Kohl's department store, McDonalds, and even a Buffalo Wild Wings.

The older lady patiently addressed each new outburst with calm reassurance. She really was a patient soul. Of course, I chided myself, the girl is just nervous, flying into the night and into a new life, so far – so different from the one she's just left. It really is kind of the woman to engage her in conversation.

By now, the lights of the cities had faded, and I looked out my window into a view familiar to those who frequently fly through the night skies over Wisconsin and on in toward Houghton and Marquette: Nothing. Just wind and dark, punctuated by only the most lonely of lights from the forest floor below. Or, occasionally, a small shimmering chain shining up from an ore freighter out on the big lake.

“... Yeah, I'm a little nervous about starting out in a school where I don't know anybody, and maybe they'll think I'm a little strange, coming from California and all, but Mom says I just have to be myself and ....”

The plane's engines suddenly powered up a notch as the flight attendant's voice broke in, “*Ladies and gentleman, as we begin our descent into the Houghton area, please make sure your seat back is straight and your tray stowed in the upright position. If you've brought personal items on board, please ....*”

And with that interruption, the girl finally stopped her chatter, turned back toward her own window, and fell completely silent. Her companion followed up with a question to keep the conversation going, but the girl had no response. Nothing. Not a single sound for something like five minutes until....

“M'aam?” came a quavering voice from behind me.



*Yes, dear?* the woman responded.

“M’aaam... it’s just that. Well, it’s just... there aren’t any lights. There *is* a town down there... *Isn’t* there?”

And with that, my heart went completely out to the silly chatterbox, on her way alone through the night with bears, and snow, and woods and toads and every imagined terror to fill an endless void of forest, water, and air. A vacuum of time and space I’d come to know well, beginning some twenty years earlier when I’d first moved here from downstate Michigan. The tiny airplane windows, I knew, reflected back a darkness that this girl – or any other – could very well fill with her own brand of mischief.

She got off in Houghton, and I stayed seated for the quick twenty-minute run to Marquette.

I wish she’d stayed, too. *Listen!* I could have told her. *Forget your snow angels and the forest critters. There’s a few things you really need to know for your new life up here.*

For starters, I could have told her, the Upper Peninsula makes up one-third of Michigan’s entire land mass, 16,542 acres – most of it covered by forest. Marquette County, where I live, is Michigan’s largest, with 3425.17 acres of back roads, 4-wheeler dust tracts, unbroken jack pine and hardwood.

Too pedantic? Too much like a tired-out history book? Perhaps.

Well then, I might have continued, consider this: There are men and women here who – unread of in these times – have never ventured beyond the vaguely fish-like

outline of our geographic boundaries: Ontario to the right, Wisconsin to the left, and mile after rolling mile of water stretching north to Canada.

It's a peninsula, I'd tell her, surrounded by sea – a vast and hungry wilderness that sucks in tourists, retirees, and second-chancers just like you. Some were pushed north from the empty-eyed factories of Detroit, Pontiac or Flint – women, but mostly men (illiterate perhaps), who couldn't envision the grand articulation of disappearing into the much greater north: Hudson Bay, Alaska, the Yukon. Some are young like you – pushed out by guns, bad schools, and rumors of drugs. It's quiet here and safe. Deceptively so.

You come – we all come – seeking something to fill a life run to empty. *But listen!* You've got to come tough. Better not be toting up your doubts, your worries, the fragile damage of your previous life. Don't let these open spaces scent your fears. Don't let your guard down.

*Listen!* I'd finish ... If you come to a vacuum toting a hole of any size, the place will swallow you up.

Unless – of course – you fill it first with something else.

And many folks do. *Listen...*

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Each summer, from the edge of the yard – just at the edge of the evening, comes a time when the sky winds in its half-moon arc from east to west, blue to apricot on its way toward full night. In this stolen moment a siren screams, a helicopter chops its way east out over the lake, an ambulance wails. Your breath clutches – heart stumbles – you can't

help it: a mental checklist reels down the back of your brain in a tickertape litany, placing your children one by one in an appropriate setting – school, library, sleepover, camp. *Not my child. Not mine. Not now. Not this.* You see it so clearly: the nose-to-tail bounce of bumper to dashboard in the jeep’s free fall over the cliff’s edge. Teenaged bodies, lean and graceful, flung out into the evening air, slowed in a ballet set to silent music. Beer bottles tinkle a soundless melody of glass and error.

Or it’s two in the morning. An hour for dread. Telephone rings, waking you into half-sleep you’ll remember over coffee the next morning, hours later, after you’ve already fit your warm body close once again to your husband’s night-chilled skin, welcoming him home from the emergency electrical call-out. You’d imagined in your half-sleep a line scissored through by beaver, or a tree limb slapping wires together in the wind – a crazy quilt of spark and sizzle before the power abruptly died, plunging cabin after cabin into sudden darkness.

Except that’s not the story this time. You read the truth the next morning over coffee, see it in the droop of his reddened eyes – the half-stared memory they hold. *That kid must have hit the tree at over a hundred miles an hour. The engine block was shoved clear back into the trunk, the chassis separated from the roof....*

You shudder, picturing the scene clearly, want to shut out his voice, the unrelenting story. Perhaps you imagine the phone that has already rung in some kitchen up the highway in Negaunee, or Westwood. But you can’t not listen. The tale drones on.... *the passenger seat was at least 50 feet away from the wreck....seat belts... couldn’t handle that bend by the Forestville road.*

“Did you see it?” you break in suddenly. “Did you see the body?” You prepare to offer sympathy but something in his eyes stops you. *No... no, the ambulance was just pulling away when we got there.* At this, you both fall silent. You’re there too, in this imagined moment – standing at the edge of the scene, watching them ease away slowly, sirens silenced. No hurry.

Later, at work, you’ll hear the rest: how the driver – a kid really, only 18, just graduated from Ishpeming High – had been staying at a friend’s house, kicked out of his own home two days earlier by an angry parent. A parent tired from the trying. Just tired. Just a kid speeding down the highway in the night, blood alcohol level .2 or more – suicide on a last rollicking roll. The tree always wins. The county eats its own.

You see it now, so clearly. This county – this peninsula – it’s not all jolly Finns and red-cheeked card games at your uncle’s deer camp. It’s not just the sullen stares of laid-off miners, the smoke thick over breakfast at Buck’s café. Or the Indians in their large-barn casinos scratched from broken treaties, rising up from backdoor garages. It’s not even the expected, sideways glance of rowdy undergrad drinking games in the dorms up at Northern. All of these have their own specific brand of desperation.

Yours has its own as well. You know this now – what you couldn’t know before the rift, in your life lived miles and eons ago.

Your story has no particular drama. No sirens. No wailing. Just a few lives disrupted, hearts broken, nothing you couldn’t fix later. Never a single cry for help. Just a slow, remorseful elegy, brewing for years in some dark cauldron you carried here from below. A hole. A space. A beckoning that built, year after year as loss accumulated slowly, patient, cunning. Baffling, so they say.

Your story has no fiery ending. No crash, no drama. No reason.

Your story is simply this: You came here empty and drank to fill the hole.

Drank slowly, drank fast – sipped your way to bravery on your way to parties filled with strangers. Drank to celebrate. Drank to relax or to forget your earlier life with its fancy education and high-flung dreams of travel or power. Drank to ease the tightened scalp of a migraine gathering force on the shore of the next hazy morning. Drank privately having left the party early with a mumbled excuse to a husband who only half-heard. Drank to not notice. Drank from a glass shoved under the skirted ottoman at the sound of his step on the porch. Drank because the need was there... or not. It didn't matter.

You drank because it's all you knew to do. Drank until you went numb to stop your ceaseless caring, and the uncaring, you discovered, was exactly what you'd wanted all along.

Drank alone, in the end, until you no longer recognized hurt or failure or grief or joy. Drank and drank and drank because – in remarkably short order– your best friend became the drink itself. Scotch, straight-up, no ice, in a short glass cup purchased years before from a gift shop at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago – penguins marching in circles at its rim. A glass stored carefully second shelf up, 36-degree angle of reach on tiptoe against the edge of the kitchen sink. Thick amber, with oil-slicked swirls, sipped on the summer screened porch with Garrison Keillor the mellow background, couples passing on the sidewalk and toasted silently with a slight lift of the glass. In the winter, you gulped it down in ice-fired draughts of false-promised warmth as you shoveled the driveway for the eighty-first time one storied winter, cup perched incongruously atop a seven-foot snowdrift.

The cup had a name, you're embarrassed to recall, and once – when the light slanted in through the window at just the right angle one late afternoon in autumn – you placed it carefully in a spill of sunlight on the fireplace mantel and ran – you are embarrassed to report – for the camera, to capture its mellow glow.

And you *don't* report unless begged at twelve-step meetings where everyone, predictably, will laugh at just the right moment. Rueful and wry. They've been there too, your story theirs and, it turns out, just a simple tune after all: You drank from 1978 to 1997, nineteen years, until one day you quit. Just before the county swallowed you, as well.

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*You come up from some deep swell, dreaming, threads hanging down from the edge of a hole where it played on the back of a silver-dusted screen, dust motes dancing in the high beam of your daddy's old projector. Same old story told in grainy grey slides...*

*Rub-a-dub-dub, three girls in a tub of a boat, one is squinting, one is grinning, and one is looking away toward the shore where Mommy waits with knees modestly pressed inward to the deep red vee of her swimsuit. Is that your Sinclair Gasoline dinosaur bobbing at the shore of Lake Gogebic?*

*1965. It floated away on the waves, the dinosaur, your sister now scowling from the old Mercury wagon – white, or was it yellow? – with veneer paneled sides, hauling the white-capped Apache trailer on Highway 41 west from Bergland, then a wide swinging turn left at Wakefield up into mountains near Jackson Hole.... WHAT??*

*We're in Wyoming now? Dreams are wrong that way.*

*A bear jumps out, and the trailer swings wide out over the canyon. We're going faster, then faster! Gaining speed with each switchback. Daddy, are you nuts? We're-trapped-you're-driving-way-too-fast, the trailer's wheels are hanging out over the canyon. We're gonna go right over the edge and – like magic now – we'll be flying, tumbling upward in some snapped-cable spin to the moon. Mommy stares straight hard-eyes smoke drifting back and....*

*Full awake... must be. You can hear your husband's whistling snore on the couch in the hall where he crashed inches short from the bed.*

*You haven't slept well in months.*

*You throw the covers from legs grown numb in a single-celled sleep of dead wood, left foot flopping against the wooden frame of the bed. It takes both hands to raise then place it on the cool pine boards of the bedroom floor. Your head droops, heavier than its snapdragon neck stem will hold. When you stumble to the bathroom, pee spills out in a rush that is somehow better than the last best sex you can remember. But you don't remember.*

*The mirror does not flatter. Two eyes stare back vacant, mud dull, brown, pinprick pupils squinting against the light. You never did like the overheads, judging and harsh, staring back. They remind you of the late-night flick of a switch – your dad's wrist a sudden snake rounding the doorframe. Your sister – you – blinking back, two pink-eyed rabbits caught in his glare. "Someone. Had. Better. Settle. DOWN! NOW!"*

*Game's over. Nighty night.*

*Oh shit!!, you recall. The baby. Where's Ben?*

*Real time now. There's a hole there, too, shredded at its edges like your nightmare. Is this what they call a blackout? There's nothing in this hole. Not even the remnant of recall.*

*Oh God, let him be in his crib. You try to flash a memory from the night before, like striking the flint in a Bic lighter: one spark, a wisp of trailing butane, click...click... flame. Oh yeah! You came up the back steps from the kitchen last night. The stairs in this aging ghoul of a house are shallow, built for dwarfish Chinese cooks and Finnish servant girls fresh from the farms. There's a dumbwaiter in the dining room. You use it as a backlight for a collection of grinning Santas. But that's only at Christmas. STOP! Focus... Was Ben in your arms when you climbed the stairs last night?*

*Click. Click. Nothing.*

*Screw this. Just go look.*

*You inch open the bedroom door. Brother Alex has left the room, his toddler bed empty, covers thrown back. Thomas the Tank Engine and Percy grin a cheery "G'day, gov'nur!" and there he is: Ben. Humping up and down on the rails of the crib. So happy to see you, Mommy! Tumbled gold curls. Chubby cheeks split in a one-toothed grin.*

*You wait for a minute before scooping him in an updraft whoosh from stale pajamas, half urine half sour milk. Your heart slows from its racing gallop. Sphincters tighten, stomach rising slowly from its elevator rush to the floor.*

*Of course Ben's there. You knew it all along. You wouldn't actually forget to put the baby to bed.*



*Together, you follow a cereal trail to the living room where Alex is parked before a television re-run of Care Bears. The evil weather machine, you are informed, has been defeated. It's going to be sunshiney all day long.*

*Clock is ticking, almost time for work. You trot to the kitchen, open the pie-hutch and lift the bottle from your cache behind the soup pans. A practiced slosh to calculate the remainder. It's simple math: divide contents by 1.25. (You suspect your husband's been checking too, perhaps taking a swig himself. You never speak of this. It's like the old card game – War, was it? – that you played with your sister on endless road trips, back deck spread flat and rolling thump-dunk, thump dunk, over the ridges baked into the prairie blacktop. A game played out in silent drama. One card flipped face up – Eight. Opposite deck deals a six. Small hands snatching tiny victories. Nah, nah, na-naaah-nah. My stack's bigger than yours!)*

*Time for work, but first: a quick stop at the daycare center. Hand the baby over, peel sticky hands from your nylons, crouch down, promising comfort hours – toddler years – from now. Turn in the parking lot back toward a tear-stained window. Desperate measures: you make your patented mosquito face, splayed hand in a peace sign over your nose, fingers pulling down the red-shot eyelids, opposite forefinger shooting out underneath, from the middle, like the insect's pointy proboscis. A watery grin rewards the effort.*

*Clickety click. Data data. Work. Work. Meeting. Meeting. Yack Yack on the telephone yack. Yacksomemore.*

*“And aren't kids funny,” you ask at coffee time. “Want to see Kendra's Mother's Day card...?”*

*You bring it forth to read out loud:*

*Q: What's your mom's favorite food? A: Pizza. (Uhh, Wrong. That's Kendra's favorite food.) Your co-workers politely giggle).*

*Q: What does your mom do all day? A: She goes to work and she talks on the phone and types. (Sort of).*

*Q: What does she like to do? A: Dress up in a pretty dress and go to a party with Daddy. (Where did she get that idea?)*

*But the card is sweet, really. And she's colored you with 80s big-hair bangs and a big yellow smile. There are tulips on the front. You suspect the Parkview PTA ladies are all better moms than you. But you got the card. (Nah-nah).*

*Lunchtime! Errands. You can pay the minimum on the credit card this month – there's sixty bucks left until pay day, just enough for a fifth of Old Grouse, cheaper than the single-malts, but the buzz is just as sweet: slow and thick, building up over the course of an evening.*

*You are now alternating stores and gas stations: Whites, Cal's, then The Spot, Admiral Gas or the IGA. Keep 'em all guessing.*

*At afternoon break, you recall that it's Wednesday - church night – so maybe some wine, just a glass before choir. A glass is okay. And besides, you're walking just a short half-block down the hill toward town. You won't be driving.*

*Late at night, you lie in bed and listen as the college kids weave their way back up the same hill when the Shamrock bouncers spill their sorry drunk butts back on the streets. Their voices are loud: "I LOVE you man! You ROCK!" Girls with high-pitched giggles ten steps back. Sometimes, on a warm night, they stop to sit on the curb just*

*outside the black-iron gate that marks the edge of your yard. Sometimes they argue. But most times it's pretty quiet, just a short break to smoke a cigarette, or something. And then it's on toward campus, their voices trailing back.... "Did you see...? 'Fuckin' AWESOME when she.... SHIT dude, where'd 'ja put my...."*

*Yeah...you guess you can pretty much walk to the church.*

*Five pm: morning in reverse. You drive to the daycare then on to Shopko for diapers, milk, and poster board for Kendra's school play. You promised you'd bake cupcakes.*

*Car seat: click. Seatbelt: snugged tight around the soft-belly overalls of four-year-old Alex – riding next to his brother. Jibber, jabber. "I'm so dumb. I'm so dumb. Dumb, dumb Ben. Ben's a dum-dum." Pinching his brother's cheeks, jiggling them in rhythm with his chant. The baby's eyes are opened wide, alarmed.*

*"Knock it off!" you sharpen your voice.*

*The daycare director in the building behind was so sweet-voiced minutes before, as she pulled you aside and into her tiny office. "I'm a little concerned about Alex," she began. "Possibly socio-something.... No remorse... Always says he's sorry, but...."*

*You can read her fake warm eyes just fine: "Do something quick or your kid's on borrowed time. You're skating on fairly thin ice, you lush." Wait. She didn't really say that last part. Your imagination is toying with you.*

*"We love Alex," she goes on, Really, he's so smart! So gifted. But, we have to think of the other children, the parents...." The real ones, you silently complete the thought in your head. The parents who know what they're doing.*

*“Who wants McDonald’s?” you shout,. “It’s choir night!”*

*“Hooray!” Alex interrupts his chanting long enough to signal a quick thumbs up in the rearview mirror. McDinner it is, again. What the heck. There’s years ahead for vegetables and other lessons in nutrition. Screw those real parents.*

*The van rolls into the driveway, nosing the fence open. You greet the dogs with their black noses pressed to the screen and flash a quick glance back to the curb. Stewart’s car is parked at the curb. Up the porch steps, Ben balanced against one hip, Alex racing ahead, arms swinging.... “Daddeee! Dadeee. Dadeee....! Where ahhhhhr you?”*

*Before you can stop, you shoot a reflex glance up at the stairwell and its open 12-foot drop “No!” you silently chide. It’s been months since you had that thought, and it was winter then, weeks into the long dark. The shadows in the entryway mask the upstairs railing where you’d imagined his limp body hanging, face canted sideways, congested and dark.*

*It wasn’t really that bad, you’ve convinced yourself now in the lighter June air. You’re almost sure of it.*

*You park both boys by the TV in the front room for Tiny Toon Adventures and shout up the stairs, “Kendra have you started your homework I brought your poster board there’s French fries and nuggets on the table.”*

*It’s quiet. You remember: she’s at Emily’s, down the street. Again. Having supper with Emily’s real parents. “Maybe they’ll feed her real food...” your mind spins out its shaming refrain. “Shut up, shut up, shut UP!” you answer, tired of the tune.*

*There's a light spilling up from the basement into the laundry room off the kitchen. He's down the rabbit hole again. The radio drones... "and it's a swing and a miss. The Tigers retire the side and we're back for the top of the eighth, after this from Belle Tires."*

*"We're home," you call down the stairs. A chair squeaks, feet thump to the floor. Radio's off, abrupt. You can smell the smoke, heavy, sweet. Your heart thumps hard, once. Twice. "Okay" he finally calls back.*

*He's been in the basement for months, punctuated some days by work, ever since December and the anniversary of his dad's death. Colon cancer. It was hard. Sad and awfully, awfully hard. You excuse him mostly, know he's depressed. Has been for years, but this was the worst winter ever. "Please..." you've asked him, over and over, begged, really. "Please, I don't understand. There are good drugs now. You don't have to feel this way."*

*But he doesn't want to feel all numb and drugged. He thinks he won't feel like himself.*

*"Like yourself?" you ask. But you don't speak it out loud. "Is this the self you want to feel? And, what about us?" you continue silently. You've asked him before. And you wonder, just who the 'us' is that you mean. The kids? The dogs? The marriage?*

*You hear the radio start up again as you turn toward the cupboard, bend down and snake your hand back to check the bottle in its hidey hole, place its newer twin carefully by its side. "Later," you mouth to yourself.*

*You open the fridge and review its contents: lettuce, leftover Spaghettios and a gallon of milk. You pour one careful glass of clear white Zinfandel. You can eat later, after you get home from church. If you eat now, it'll spoil that first buzz.*

*Buzz...buzzz. Buzzzzz. You hate that word. It sounds so 1960s, so hipster, so practiced and polished, so very not the person you used to think you were. Such a good girl, you were. Straight A's. Straight teeth. In your high school yearbook they wrote: "Sue...you're nice, stay that way."*

*An imperative... really? You were ordered to stay nice? No wonder you're so fucked up.*

*7:00. It's choir night. And after that, handbells. The kids will be in bed by the time you get home. But you won't eat, not then. You'll walk back home and head for the kitchen. Check the basement lights. Listen for the radio – but, no, it's the CD player now. The Roches? The Cranberries? A little Van, Into the Mystic?*

*Let the dogs out. Let the dogs in. Check on the kids and head back to the kitchen. Roll the dishwasher to the sink, hook up the hose, turn to the cupboard and take down your cup – the glass one with the handle. Chink in just one cube of ice. Back to the cupboard, squat down to the shelf. Put your hand behind the pots, and pull out the bottle. Pour one inch, two, three and check the level again before you hide it away. A different shelf this time. Might as well keep the game going.*

*You pull a chair up to the counter and decide to leave the TV off for a while, preferring the dishwasher's hum in the dark.*

*You almost remember back to when it was good – this quiet, mizzy watch in the middle of a sleepy household. How enough you felt once the liquor began its creep into your blood. The holes it filled in a soul that leaked from its losses – one miscarriage, two. A stillbirth. Your husband’s affection.*

*Baby number four, and then five.*

*The drink filled holes. Made you whole, more complete. Less like a raggedy toy left too long on the shelf.*

*He wrote songs for you, you abruptly recall. Your husband did. Songs about you... the you he saw with fresh eyes back then. Saw that you loved to belt out show tunes with the radio turned up high and knew all the words to every song. Knew that you loved to beat his law school friends at Trivial Pursuit with your freakish memory for small things. Remembered how you loved to go camping and snug up to his warm back at night, listening as thunderstorms crept closer from their birth out over the lake.*

*He was your best friend first, before the booze. Was, then, before you both began to lose.... babies, parents, jobs. The game.*

*It started out slow. At first, you went to the parties with him, sipped pop from a can ‘til the party really got moving, but then ... more often than not, you’d head home early, drawing from your lexicon of really-pretty-good excuses: “Our sitter’s still young, I have to let her get home before 10.” “Big day at work tomorrow, I need to get some sleep.”*

*You headed home after just one drink, to finish the job properly.*

*Later you just stayed home, let him go ahead. Spent your nights sipping and stitching on the screened porch, cup filled, amber and smoky in the slanting late sun.*

*You took a picture of that cup once – you remember. Stumbled for the camera, tripped and laughed right there, on the floor, on your ass. Laughed your ass off, grabbed the camera, took the shot – click! – still giggling.*

*Your glass. Your cuppy. So funny there in the sunlight.*

*And then it wasn't. Fun, you mean, now – years later, in the quiet hum of the kitchen.*

*Wasn't fun. Wasn't funny. Not anymore. And you think... you're starting to wonder. No.... you're pretty sure: you might have a problem. The weekends, when you used to quit, are getting shorter. First, you tried drinking only Friday to Sunday, extending it sometimes to Monday, just to get through the shock of greeting the work week with a hangover, dry mouth, head crashing in tempo with your heartbeat. Then Thursday to Tuesday... Eventually, the weekends met in the middle, Wednesdays rotating through in a seamless, ever-widening circle, spiraling down to a place that does not – cannot – recognize hope. Or joy.*

*11:15. The basement is quiet, the lights are still on. "G'night," you call down the stairs.*

*You check the stove, fill the dog's dish with clean water, put your purse by the front door and head up the stairs to the bedroom. You can hear Kendra breathing from here... see her head lolling back on the pillow, mouth open wide. Her snores are big – gaping – cartoonish. You won't hear his footsteps when he finally comes up to bed. If he makes it up to bed. Lately, it's been the couch in the hallway. You suspect he's been waiting until you're asleep. And you are almost asleep...the old house creaking and*



*ticking, settling around you. Your book falls shut and you startle up from a doze to check the switch on the alarm clock. Pull the chain on the lamp. Dark hallway. Moon from the window plucking at your shuttered eyelids.*

*Shit!!!*

*Did you put the baby in his crib?*

*And there is no memory – none – of how you mapped your way to this strange place. This time that has its own longitude, its own precise geography. It is not – you are very, very sure as you drift off to sleep – the destination you had charted in the promising heat of the drive north and over the Bridge to this new life, here in this county, mid-peninsula, mid pole and equator – poised at its own edge of then and now.*

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I wonder, more often than you'd think, whatever happened to the girl on the plane, traveling solo, bravely on, carrying her raggedy edges to a new life on this peninsula.

I have so much more to tell her now, from this place on the other side of drunk. *Stick with the fishing and the critters!* I'd begin. There's wonder in these woods and streams. *Find one great thing about winter, and then do that thing as if your life depends on it.* Perhaps it does. *Be careful about how you choose your brand of lonely.* More careful yet about what you use to plug the empty spots it leaves on the inside, where no one sees.

I'd finish up telling her about a collection of short stories I read once, all set in the Upper Peninsula. One of the stories was about a couple of teen-aged girls from L'Anse hitch-hiking west along US 41 from Marquette. More than a couple involved some heavy drinking.

I read these stories maybe in the year just before we moved north, but more likely the year or two after when I eagerly consumed book after book set in the U.P. Back then, I pored over road and place names that had just begun to feel familiar: L'Anse with its coiled bun cinnamon rolls warm from the ovens at Hilltop. County Road 550, Little Presque, Ewen/Trout Creek, the Keweenaw – names from a TV-6 weather map shaped by prevailing northwest winds. I collected each esoteric location and learned its name with careful enunciation to claim a longed-for sense of belonging.

*The Long White.* That was the title of the collection. By Sharon Dilworth. The story I'm thinking of featured a man, retired after years scanning the big lake's horizon from the deck of a laker, its iron-clad belly weighted down with iron. Years out in the void, a tiny speck on open sea.

In this story, or my memory of it, the man is newly restless in his abruptly land-locked retirement. He spends his days downing bottle after bottle, whisky and beer, staring straight from inside to outside, morning to dark, at kitchen walls hushed after nights bearing witness to ceaseless bickering and sudden silence. He misses the water. On land, he finds no swell to break the line from day to night and back to day.

The man walks out his back door one snowy night and vanishes into the blank stare of the cloud-covered night sky, the sky – this dark – more complex than any you'd

ever imagined. The darkness made light by the clarity of its frigid air. *Cold* – the word breathed out as half-prayer. The kind of cold that kills.

The next day, perhaps it is two – the family notes his absence. They make phone calls, look in all the usual places. But they know. They know. And they make their way, eventually, out to the lake's frozen shoreline.

There, at the edge: the faint trace of a boot print stamped into ice that has crashed onto shore in peaks of frozen meringue.

Step after step, the man has walked steadily out onto the frozen lake until the surface turns from ice to slush and can no longer hold the imprint.

At the time I first read this tale, a slight shiver of foreshadowed knowing may have crept its way up the back of my arms. What, I wondered, would propel a man outward from a warm kitchen – a safe and tidy life – even one filled with malcontent bickering, the stale air of failed argument?

What called out to him from that empty dark?

I could not imagine then the allure that lives at the edge of a vacuum. Madness beckons there with a crooked pale finger – your feet suspended mid-step, halted at the edge of ice just before open water. Wind howls in this void. What was for the last mile or more a distant boom is now a needle-nosed spray forming icicles that hang at the edge of your frizzled woolen cap. There is a moment of clarity – a pause to consider in the final few yards of ice and climbing. And then comes a wide-stretched grin of madness.

But hesitation, too. I am sure of this.

*Listen!* Years later, the story's lesson falls into place with a soft click, its tumblers sliding smoothly into place. With only a slight tug, the lock springs open, and I'm driving in my own night, speeding on the highway somewhere between McMillan and Newberry.

In memory I am alone – either by choice or caught in the middle somewhere between hope and resignation. My marriage – my life – this experiment on a wild peninsula – has all been a single instant, an eyeblink only. The rift between then and now as familiar in its geography as the road names that spin out ahead in the dark: Commencement Creek, Star Siding, Creighton's Ditch. I am driving, headlights forward, eyes moving in an easy side-to-side sweep, scanning the highway's edge for telltale flash of reddened eye, flash of hoof, or tail. I glance into the rearview mirror and all there is to see is utter black. No headlights behind, none ahead. No faint outline of tree or moon or shadow. Black. Night complete. As blank as any ending before or since.

In memory, my eyes keep wandering back, mile after mile. Dark after dark.

But what really happened is this: Eventually, I swung them resolutely forward to the road ahead. I drove on and on toward the brief society of Seney, then Munising, Christmas, Deerton and finally, the familiar sweep of beach, lights and water from the beaches at Shot Point drawing me in with a broad and welcoming hug. Then, a right-hand turn from M-28 in Harvey, up the Shiras hill and down, Front Street and my own front door.

*Listen!* There is madness in this dark – plenty. But, there is choice as well. Ultimately, I chose too, almost casually, one mad March morning. Picked up a telephone

and placed a call to the addiction rehab unit at the nearby hospital. A final glance back in the mirror, and then only lights ahead, below – forest spreading out empty and silent.

*Listen, young girl... Listen!*

PART II:

*FOREST*

*QUI COLLIGENTES FOLIA: THE COLLECTOR*

Late-slanting light warms the carpet in a patch just large enough to cradle our lazy cat. An audience... perfect! I raise the lid of our aging upright piano and run a trill of chords to test its dissonance. In the dry air of autumn, the half-step tones have re-grouped in orderly ranks that almost resemble a diatonic scale, do, re, mi.

I riffle through the sheet music stacked on the piano's top – hymnals, old Broadway show tunes, a few *Reader's Digest* favorites, and then my hand settles on the familiar red cover: *John Thompson's Modern Course for the Piano: The Fifth-Grade Book*, a favorite from half-remembered lessons. I open the book to press it flat and there – tucked neatly between the Mazurka and a Chopin etude are three pressed leaves: yellow birch, poplar, and the open-handed welcome of a sugar maple – once red, but now a uniform dusty brown. “*Acer sacchurum...*” I whisper the dusty Latin to the air around, and the answering silence beckons me into memory.

1965: *Sorbus americana*

Orange berries hang from the mountain ash trees in miniature umbrellas, suspended against the bright blue sky I can see through my bedroom window. They smell like pee, but Mommy says the birds like them lots. She calls them cedar wax wings and I think that's funny 'cause wouldn't their wings melt if they were made from wax? “*Wouldn't they, Mommy – if they got hot? Wouldn't they just melt and fall? And why can they eat the berries, but we*

*can't? You said we can't. You said they're poison. And wouldn't the birds just drop out of the sky, dead too? And why don't we see more dead birds? Where do they go when they get dead, Mommy...?*

*... Mommy?"*

We are sent to walk in the woods – three step-ladder sisters and my daddy holding my hand, out the screen door and through our backyard, breezes crisping the Sunday air. We cross Tienken just before it turns from blacktop to gravel, this boundary of my world with its tidy streets and post-war ranch houses made from brick. Road gives way quickly to aging orchard and fields of dried grass. And I am knee-high reaching up, squatting down, my pudgy hands cupping oak and maple – splayed out in fans in all the colors of my sixty-four box of Crayolas: umber brown, ochres, and bright pumpkin, like the one back home on our porch.

In my hands, they are cool and smell of faint cinnamon and sap.

We walk and walk for miles and at least one whole hour – just enough time for my mother to finish her nap. Home again, we press our leaves in sandwich form. Mommy's iron hisses hot on waxed paper, and we have caught the leaves in their flight. In picture windows up and down our street and in the tall glass panel windows of my first-grade classroom, they are fixed bright against darkening afternoon skies – collections neatly labeled in simple print: Maple.



Oak. Ash and Elm. Bright patches in repeated patterns, heralds of the change in season.

I want to set them free. Kick them, toss them to dance away in windy gusts and skorls across the sidewalk. To rise up, then settle, blanketing the autumn-brushed lawn.

1999 *Quercus alba*

Most men I know need to be right. Very right and all the time. I married one, and he is right.

All the time correct.

Correct and precise.

We go out walking in the northern hardwood forests of Marquette County. Two steps into a tree-shaded trail and the questions begin. He holds up a leaf. “Can you tell what this is?”

Usually, it’s a maple, or maybe we ease in with an oak – there’s only one variety to play with here, white oak, *quercus alba*. It’s a gimme in the naming game, this pastime that began in the early days of our courtship.

“Ironwood,” I pipe up. A tricky one. He’s playing hardball today.

“Right,” Jim exclaims, with a note of respectful surprise in his voice. “Come on!” I tease him, from my customary position, two or three steps back: eager student trailing the master. “Got anything harder? I’m up for a challenge today.”

And we're off again, touching scruffy bark (red pine), the floppy triple lobes of the moosewood (*acer pensylvanicum*) cool as they graze my head where the trail narrows. The air is rich with the scent of sun-warmed cedar. A tickle on my cheek – Jim's plucked the whisk-broom bristles of a nearby shrub. "Easy-squeezy," I brag, "Black spruce...?" The question mark in my response belies the boast. "Wrong!" Jim frowns. "Are we in a swamp?"

*How could I be so dense?* I am starting to mutter, not a good sign at all. But in the next breath, he graciously lets me off the hook. "It's hard to tell them apart. Just remember that black spruce mostly grow in wetlands. If you're on an upland trail, you're probably talking white spruce."

*Or fir. Or cedar. Or any one of the dozens of pine species that perfume the air and send me sneezing through our abbreviated summer months.*

At the next stop, comes the expected question: "What's this one?" But this time I answer with a terse: "Tree. It's a tree." My usual signal that I'm tired of the naming game. I just wanted a nice walk in the woods, with my husband.

"Yeah – a tree. But what kind?"

"Tall," I reply, tired of the perceived one-upmanship. "Tall and pine."

"No, actually, it's a fir, not a pine. There is a difference..." And he's off again. Mink, ermine, brown bear, vole... dog bane, doll's eyes, wort and willow... invoking the ancient male skills of survival that demand I stand alert to diversity and difference: the neon oranges and large black eyes of the monarch butterfly's defense; the seductive golden spots and the creamy underbelly of *Amanita muscaria* – a mushroom poisonous in its beauty.

We stop to rest at Sunset Point, the waters of Lake Superior spread out to the horizon before us, shifting blue and silver in the sunlight.

I muse on Jim's habit of naming as we walk – a tradition as old as Adam in his Eden, the newness of creation spread out around... conversations with a God who still walked close to earth. And it was good, we are told. While the Greeks, Romans and others from the Mesopotamian cradle focused on warring gods, giants, and disturbing trends toward matricide, Genesis painted a lovely tale of original man in peaceful harmony with the land and the creatures around. In this light, I can forgive my husband a small streak of show-off-edness. (Lupine, red squirrel, ironwood, purple vetch...). He's only doing what the Lord commanded: "Adam: Name my creation."

Yet something still niggles: the Biblical story – the Judeo-Christian tradition – does it not subtly set man above and apart from his god and from all living things that share the good garden?

I am beguiled instead by an Aboriginal tale from Australia in which all forms of life slept together beneath the earth's surface, ever-present yet dormant. All together, sleeping: cockatoo's brilliant crest feathers; first woman's dark, silky lashes; the cloddish thump of kangaroo's paws and tail against the sun-baked desert.

In an instant – in Dreamtime – all things burst awake and into life. Each ancestor – sun, man, plant, flower, tree and star, flying bird, creeping insect – all sing themselves with joy into being. "I am frog!" "I am woman!" "I am Sky... Eucalyptus, Gumtree, Crocodile... all in chorus to the waiting void of a sky. Footsteps, slither, whoosh of wing – all add their music to the calling out, name by name, rivers and valleys, dunes, and mountains, wind, rain, sand: "I am! I am! I am!"

Or, there's the tale I favor from the Anishinaabe –a gift I received in the poetry of my friend, April. We were in a writers' workshop together when it came her time to share. I remember the circle of faces, comments offered to earn a grade rather than to help. We were tired, all of us; it was 9:15 and time to go home. The teacher had found April's poem clumsy because it lacked articles. She wanted her to change Bear to "the bear," "Turtle," to *the* Turtle. April's face flattened, her eyes grew slightly wider. I'd come to recognize this look as April-offended – the stillness of a rabbit pinned to the ground by the shadow of a circling hawk. Unwilling to explain to this audience what she later shared with me, and only when I gently asked....

"In our tradition," April explained, "language is verb-based – not so much by nouns. It's driven more by relationship than classification. So Chair becomes 'that on which you sit,' Canoe, 'that which you row,' 'Bear' – that which offers you his coat,' and so on."

"And Leaf," I joined in, "that which cradles song and shadow. "Or," I continued after the comfortable silence that followed, "in the woods I identify basket wood because in my mind I see its bark woven with its neighbors in a harmony of utility. The relationship is in knowing which greens, which whites, will form a watertight whole to carry water from the rivers."

By placing noun markers and pronouns against April's careful naming, we had objectified and removed a level of closeness implicit in the poet's relationship. This single degree of removal – remoteness – makes it easier to conquer. It's much easier to manipulate that which is separate from us.

Did our Christian God begin to call us ‘the people’ – or, by naming a distant God – did we remove *ourselves*? Original sin: in the separation – in the naming?

I’m just about to share these gems of thought with my now-rested spouse, when he turns to me from his perch on the next rock over. “Say,” he begins, “did I ever tell you about the time I helped Jalyn with her leaf project?”

1995: *Sassafras albidum*

Aaargh! The leaf project – that’s *it!* The source of my unrest – a metaphorical retort to the idyllic cosmology I’d begun to work out on the trail behind us.

The leaf project! Fifteen to twenty discrete samples, neatly labeled, English and Latin, phylum, class, family...order, species. Epidermis, mesophyll, arrangement of veins. Petiole, stipule, and axil. All shapes and sizes, arranged on their stalks in toothy terms like *dentate* and *crenulate*. *Ciliates*, fringed with hair, and *sinuates*, indented in waves, like the sea.

“*Thank you, Mr. Linneaus,*” I murmur with some degree of sarcasm beneath my breath. “*Thank you Mr. Enlightenment*” – a man of whom no less than Jean-Jacques Rousseau once wrote: “Tell him I know no greater man on earth.” A man! Of course! They’re almost always men – these science teachers with their darned leaf projects. Their labels. Their functions. Their need to dissect, classify – yes/no, right/wrong. This. Not that. Poplar. Not birch.

It's nothing more than a thinly disguised competition, I tell myself. *I got more than you did, nah, nah, nah na-naaaaa.* It's a throwback, really, to our westernized orientation toward Enlightenment, the audacity of thinking we can name and know each species and – by naming – set a claim: knowledge as property.

There's something in me that fights this hubris – my mind that tends to see trees gazing back when I glance into a forest – each with its own subtle shadings of green and earth. Leaves in their moments of light – their internal nights of green bleached grey into oblique shadow.

I love the way they dance in a light summer breeze, flipping first up, and then down as they seek the moisture promised by clouds mounting in the western sky. From the hammock behind our garden, in the afternoon's lazy heat, the darker green of the leaf's nether side seems a palimpsest, whispering stories hidden, secret, behind each upturned silvery surface.

Leaf collections! How is one to dissect and re-assemble an orderly whole from a mind so easily beguiled?

Or, I sigh, with keener insight, maybe it's just six children spread out over fifteen-plus years of regret: to be perfectly honest, I'm not the kind of mom that digs the leaf project.

I know, I *know*. I should expect it by now, but every year, it sneaks up on me despite some first-rate hints. For starters, there's the shopping list. I can do this simple

calculation: Late September + poster board + glue and 3"x 5" index cards = leaf project due soon. And then there's the notes home: "Remember! Latin name. English. Family. Order. Genus. Deciduous. Fir." The terms shout up from a bright orange flyer left casually on the kitchen table.

So why am I so surprised when I find myself on the living room floor, ten o'clock the night before it's due – each successive child's project more mine than theirs?

It didn't start out that way.

First came the famous Jalyn collection. Jalyn: long, lean – a sylvan slip of a girl, dark hair and deep-brown eyes, eldest daughter of an eldest son. She eagerly set off into the woods, weeks ahead of the due date, and cheered her dad on with each contribution from his daily walks at lunch break. The only girl – and dad – in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade who *would have* earned an A+ for their collaboration had the teacher not ditched the project that year. They ended up with more than seventy native species, mostly Upper Peninsula natives with a few ringers thrown in from Jim's days as a contract lineman when jobs took him down below the Bridge. Hickory – hard to find north of Bay City, Burr Oak and Sycamore. A sassafras crept its way into the collection, stumping the science teacher until Jalyn scratched the specimen of bark she'd taped beside the raspy leaf – releasing a scent like root beer barrel candies.

Collection # 2: Phillip, quick and clever, took advantage of a new hire at the middle school and re-submitted his sister's collection, having re-inked the labels in his own handwriting.

Erin, in her turn, submitted a collection notable for the artistry of its color arrangements, pleasing to the eye. Years later, Erin taught us the utility inherent in the

collection. Enrolled in a specialist's program for stringed instrument construction and repair, she signed up for Wood 101. Stripped of leaf, each tree bared to her its singular character, grains arrayed like waves, each chosen for its resilience and perfect give to adze or lathe.

Her artist's hands cupped mahogany from Brazil. The cellist's ear heard a timbre of mourning. Graceful fingers coaxed durable music from straight-grained planks. The partnership of ear, limb and spirit inherent in her choice: ebony, rosewood, gran and cherry.

This step-acquired trio completed much of their work before I arrived on the scene. Jalyn, already away to college, Phillip and Erin - strong, lithe, supple and deep-rooted, made to stand in strong wind.

Then came my three. Raised by wolves.

### *2001 Populus tremuloides*

Kendra could have skidded by on her stepsister's heels, but no – she gathered her own and laid them out, the neatness of her labels a poignant counterbalance to the chaos of her teenaged life – each leaf carefully chosen to witness its collapse in a rapid fire succession of divorce and re-marriage.

In the precision of her mounts, she seemed to define some workable order for our blended family: stepsister, step-dad, father, grandma, brothers, friends – classified,



broken down, each in its place, renamed and re-imagined, weaving a fairy-bright whole from a mish-mashed assembly, this crazy-quilt family of dissonant threads.

I had no hand in this creation. She worked alone and away, at the library, or in the classroom after everyone else had gone. Dust motes spinning in empty air, echoes of the teacher's praise: "Nice work, Kendra!"

Alex – Collector #5 – was the king of the sprint, announcing his own due date with a gracious eight-hour lead before bedtime. We tramped around the block in hard rain and still managed to assemble a respectable twenty leaves, stuck in messy globs to white poster board (an arrangement that resembled my attempts one long-ago and drunken evening to hot-glue 15 merit badges to his sister's first Girl Scout sash).

We fetched the blow dryer and ironed them flat, storing several in a music book I grabbed from the piano. I hoped they would dry by morning to complete the recommended categories. "Five conifers!" I shouted. "Check!" came his voice from behind the couch, a position chosen for its distance from the disapproving glower of his stepfather.

*Lazy. Procrastinator. Thoughtless.*

A grumbled set of labels assembled in the air above our heads.

"Doesn't that kid know you've been working all day? That you're tired?"

I took a deep breath and continued.

"Five deciduous!"

"Check!" came the response.

Five nut bearing. Five variants. Five conifers.

Check and check.

And then came Ben, the youngest, and with him – a surprising perspective.

2007: *Tilia americana*

It's a chilly November evening. The cold rain has chased us indoors to scatter upstairs and down to our respective pursuits, television, studies, dishes and such.

“*Mommmmm...?*” comes a plaintive voice from the stairs behind me. It's Ben, the last one and a young twelve, reluctant to give up his place as the baby and with it the lion's share of his mom's distracted attention.

He's standing in the dark in his underwear, halfway down, fearing the snap of his step-dad's barked command to “go back upstairs and put some clothes on, for Pete's sake!”

“What?” My response is sharp and low-pitched, attracting no attention. It barely masks my exasperation. I don't quite know where to aim it.

“What, Ben? What do you need?”

“Can we go to the store?”

“Now, Ben? *Now?* I glance at the clock. “It's 8:00 already. What do you need at the store that can't wait 'til tomorrow?”

No answer, just Ben's slightly wheezy presence hovering on the steps, but I know. How could I not? It's the leaf project, of course, and my guess is – a very strong hunch really – Ben's collection is due tomorrow. It's not as if there were no clues. For the past two weeks, in line at McDonald's, waiting for coffee on the morning drive to the middle school, I've been relentlessly quizzed on the difference between dicots and monocots. If beans are present, can trees be far behind?

We grab his damned shoes, my wallet, the keys, and dash through some drizzle, arriving at Office Max five minutes before they close. Glue and index cards.

“White or yellow, Ben?”

“I don't care.”

Scissors and paper. On the short drive home, I quiz him right back: “How many leaves do you have, Ben?”

The others would have dissembled, ducked their heads, offered a wry confession. Not Ben. He stares straight ahead and in his deep and characteristically deadpan voice answers “None.”

“Are you, freakin' *kidding* me?!?” I swallow my words mid-sentence, before the “f” can hiss its escape. What good can they do at this point?

We pull into the driveway, gravel crunching, headlights sweeping a dripping tree line at the back of our lot. Our eyes scan the treetops where only a few hearty leaves cling, survivors of last week's storms. The rest are on the ground, in the dark. Scattered from where they fell. Frostbit.

“They're brown, Ben. All dried up then rained on again. Can you even use them?”

“It doesn’t matter, Mom. They’re leaves aren’t they?”

Well, I won’t argue with the logic of a kid who just plain doesn’t care unless it’s animated and comes from Japan. We grab the flashlight and dodge Jim’s shouted question – “where are you going *now*?”

“Getting some leaves!” I yell back. “We might need your help in a few minutes, to identify them.”

I grab one handful, tucking the flashlight under my arm, aiming its narrow beam at the ground. Ben kicks at the ground as I hold them up to the light. “Are these going to work? Are there enough kinds?” He shrugs. Embarrassed or just impatient?

“Sure, Mom. Just get some. I need to have at least ten different kinds.”

“*Ten*? I’m not sure we have that many back here. Do pine needles count?”

Another shrug.

I examine the clutch in my hand and start naming those I recognize. There’s some kind of maple, sugar I think, and the familiar ribs of the yellow birch. I know there’s an ironwood back here too, and some kind of balsam.

The saw-toothed edge of a larger specimen teases my memory and I turn to question my son.

He’s gone. Retreated back to the lights I can see from his second-floor bedroom.

It’s dark where I’m standing, though. And quiet. The trees form a circle around me, and I can hear the creak and groan of one old pair, white spruce leaning where it fell once in a windstorm and was caught in the basswood’s permanent embrace. They rub together in the slightest wind and make a sound like the muttered conversation of old

men over a chessboard. I have asked my husband to never cut them back. I'd miss the cadence and the careful way they hold each other upright, heedless of their flaws.

Inside, Ben lays his samples out on the kitchen table. Flat and lifeless. Hastily assembled. His stubby crayon guesses at the confusion of their edges, veins alternating or opposing, surfaces smooth or ridged, carrying the fine-haired rasp of a cat's tongue. From the window I can hear the occasional snatch of conversation as Jim lends direction. "That one is ironwood, Ben.... *This* one's the basswood."

*Basswood!* Suddenly, the name of the saw-toothed mystery leaf returns.

I am not unhappy in this stolen moment out beneath the trees. I'm not exactly hiding, but I've already noted the rising impatience in my husband's voice. ("Come on, Ben, you've gotta' know this one! It's a maple! 'Looks like your hand.'")

*Leave him alone, already,* I beg in the dark. It's a tired plea. Almost rote. My futile, end-of-a-long-day recognition that the blending of families is just damned hard work.

We're all so different.

Our saw-toothed edges meet in sullen resentments, left mostly unspoken, trailing behind a daughter up the stairs to her rare clutch of privacy in this crowded house. Banging out the door with a jangle of car keys.

Stars are poking out now between bare branches of the hemlock by the shed. Orion is spinning away from the moon in his three-starred arc across the sky, marking the season in his march through the circling year.

It comes to me then: the root of my problem with the leaf project.

It's not the persistent notion, the acknowledgement that a good parent might have prodded her child along a little earlier. Should have noted the progression of this, her final run at the 7<sup>th</sup> grade calendar. (Heck, who knows? This imagined *real* mom might even have indulged in some vicarious triumph, helping her son out – just a little – with some harmless technology. A PowerPoint perhaps, or laser-printed lettering.)

It's not the tedious work of classification and division, not the knowing nor even the gender-linked boasting. After all, in this we're all just claiming a privilege as old as Adam, a role in creation. It's just...there's something in me still that resists a label. Something expansive that rejoices in ambiguity and the hope of real change, in diversity that lends itself to necessary adaptations.

For there's one thing a leaf won't do: it refuses to be fixed. It's a message, a harbinger, a creature of seasons.

Leaves filter summer air and spill themselves each spring in greens so fine they would have us weep. Sailing high on the wind, they swoop low to skim the waves of lake or stream, bounce in the foam at the margins. Collected, they paint our Octobers in riot, adding urgency with the deepening scarlets. Even brown has its place, providing depth and contrast as the golds have their say.

In winter – even in their death – they cling, bones etched against joyless skies, asking of us patience. And so we wait for a spring that will return.

*And we aren't finished, either* these leaves remind me, clutching them still where I stand, insisting alone in this dark on some vital margin for change, for pardon, for redemption.

As I muse on the imperfections of our life – this family I've cobbled together from disparate bits, suddenly – underneath this cold sky – something eases, and I envision us all as we catch a wind and spiral high before settling. We shift together on some imagined page, each carrying our own specific gift. Beautiful in our variety.

Summer, 2010: *Pinus strobus*

We're camped in the side yard at Jim's folks in Onaway, his hometown near Black Lake, some thirty minutes southeast of the Bridge. This used to be the pig yard, but now we're lying on a loamy carpet of earth and soft pine needles. When I lie here, on such soft nights, the waiting brings joy. What sound might it carry, what news from the woods?

The air is still – so warm – like a light sweater thrown over our bodies where we lie on top of the bedding and listen to the rhythm of one another's wakeful breathing, in and out. We're enjoying the quiet, I think. Waiting for sleep.

Occasionally, the needles rustle overhead in a welcome breeze that lifts the flap of our tent. Half-drowsing, I recall a bit from a story I read some years earlier – the Anishinaabe tradition that departed souls, our missing dead, are carried on the wind

above and around us, never completely gone. Swept away, they may return on any sudden gust, their whispered songs and tales captured by the waiting leaves above.

Just as I turn to share the fancy with Jim, a harsh call comes from the woods. Owl has begun his hunt. There's a slight shiver in the air now. *Will it sound again?* Unconsciously, I mimic the strength of its tensile wings, its hunched shoulders – talons flexing on a high-branched red pine across the fields. Its yellowed eyes stare at the meadow grass below. He's waiting, too, for a hapless vole or perhaps a rabbit. I can almost hear the indrawn breath as once again he gathers voice and....

“*Strix varia*” Jim orates. “It’s after a mouse, or a rabbit.”

“Yes.” I hope the brevity of my answer will give him a strong hint. This is no night for talking. Or labels.

But Jim continues. “It’s a Barred owl I think... or maybe a Great Horned.” He frets and works it out by the rise of each note, the pause between. In his mind’s eye, I am sure, each flexed feather, each white-tipped notch, shaft and covert is etched with devastating clarity, his vision as clear as that of the nocturnal hunter whose voice echoes from the woods.

“Nope,” he concludes. “It’s a.... “

“Shush!” I scold, suddenly tired of the game, the interruption of my mind’s own wandering.

“Shush, let’s just listen now.”

Jim falls quiet. I’ve hurt his feelings and later – perhaps in the morning – I’ll apologize, glad again for his certainty, for the order he brings to my restless mind, the chaos I carry forward from my life before.



But for now, we lie here warm and still and we wait, rewarded as the owl rasps its plaint again to the cooling hollow air above the pines and old-orchard apple – their scent, the trailing wake of his call, the leaves overhead, the soft night air vibrant in their blended mystery.

## CHIASMUS

In my lap, Noah, skin inside out

thin knit cap of white cotton, helpless shelter.

My gown, an irritation, severs

womb from flood – the impossible

craft of curling toes, waning moon of brow bone,

crow barking at night.



I will tell you a truth: all green acorns are girls.



A flicker on a grainy screen, cells meet and merge,

seethe toward center: thirst of the llamas, the tigers,

the doves on the raft, we drift – they surge,

dendrites reaching, searching, clasp then flee to the sides

and pause, sides heaving for breath.



(Andy Pixley cupped Diane's braids with halting hands, lifted them

up, *I swear*, like communion bread, and stole their scent from the moon.)

## BEAUTIFUL

### *Dreamtime*

The moose picks his way over pre-Cambrian rock, past boulders softened under time's indifferent shrug. Lichens muffle his circling steps. The stones lie still as the forest darkens. It is two billion years since they reached this angle of repose.

It is his third night alone in the forest. Squirrels shake the limbs overhead; voles and shrews skitter through dried leaves. An owl wakes to cry out its warning to the evening, and a shrike dives and dips with a fool's hollow whistle. Warm air has summoned tree frogs and their rhythmic wooden clacking.

Long lashes dip in a drawn-out blink...blink... then dip again as the night settles around; his breathing deepens, his brain beckons the peace of recall: the warmth of his mother's tight udder; how he butted his head against its rubbery side, drawing milk down his upturned throat in sweet, hot draughts. How he huddled with her in the deep green shelter of hemlock and spruce and watched a gray and lowering sky settle over the surrounding hills. In December, the mother walked ahead through mounds of snow, wet, her thick hooves breaking inch-deep crust as he followed, head dipped below the drift line, searching for tender green. They slept together in the lee of strong granite, his small head tucked under mother's broad cheek, their shaggy brown bodies curled in shared warmth. He watched thick flakes settle in his mother's spiked black lashes.

## *Waking*

The cat wakes me at 6:00, pre-empting the bedside travel clock I keep by the lamp. She's getting earlier each day, anticipating the full morning light of the coming summer solstice. I flap a weak pat in the direction of her low-pitched meow, catching only tail as she leaps over my head onto the windowsill. It sags beneath her, the wood grain weakened by a winter of ice dams leaking into the drywall. Patches of fur cling to the sill; it's a favorite perch.

*Beep, beep, beep.* I tap the snooze alarm. Again. As habits go, it's relatively new. I'm one tired gal.

I stretch a leg out from the covers, watching as light plays through new leaf on the ceiling, dancing over the pale cream of the walls. I am not ready for this day, fighting it before it is fully formed. It's summer too soon, and already I'm anticipating noon, the way the heat will climb and tempers shorten.

There is time for a quick review of my checking account balance: *When's my next payday? Can I risk one more withdrawal from the ATM? And how the hell did I end up like this, kiting checks in my head the second I'm awake?*

Jim snorts from the pillow beside me, clearing his sinuses. He's awake, I can tell. It's a married thing, the rhythm of his breathing... an almost electric charge in the air above the bed. I roll over and drape an arm around his waist. It's thicker, a legacy of the nine-month Upper Peninsula winter. Mine is, too. "I don't have a cute winter butt anymore," I told him last week. "It's not even an ass. I think we'll have to call it booty. Yep, it's official: I have a fat-ass booty."

Jim stirs and hooks his long leg over mine in a half-dream of desire. I move carefully away, his heat – welcome in winter – an intrusion now.

I send my ears out on a furtive quest around the house. Was that a floorboard creaking upstairs? Who's here this week? I run a quick mental check: *Ben?* Nope. He's at his dad's. *Kendra? Erin?* Nope, still away at school. *Alex?* Oh, yeah. Alex is here. A long sigh escapes. I didn't even know I was holding my breath.

Alex. *Shit.* Here we go again.

In the kitchen, the coffee pot gasps and bubbles. Jim swings both legs over the side of the bed and scuffs toward the bathroom, scratching at his thinning hairline. I'll get up while he's in the shower, pack his lunch and anticipate his leaving.

*Beep, beep, beep.* The cat jumps down to follow.

*Crap!* We're out of milk.

#### *Stair # 4*

*Here she comes. The fourth stair creaks if you're not careful to step over it. But I can squeeze out at least fifteen more minutes of sleep... Nope. She's got her crabby-mom voice on already: "Alex, Alex. ALEX!" Yeah, Mom, I know my name, alright?*

*"ALEX!!" She's in the doorway now.*

*"Whaaa-uuut? I heard you, okay?"*

*"Well, if you heard me why aren't you moving? Get dressed. I told you we'd have to get going early this morning. I've got a paper due before class."*

*You've got a paper due. You've got a paper due! You've always got a 'paper due' these days, Mom. Shit! And I didn't get my speech done. Ms. Dietz is gonna kill me. I hate speeches. I hate school.*

*"Alex – mind your mother!" Butt out, asshole-Jim.*

*"Aaaallllex! Get. Dressed. This. Min. utttt."*

*Good, she's gone back downstairs. I hate it when she pops her t's like that! Where's Jim? Did he leave for work yet? Bastard. He's not my dad. Where does he get off yelling at me like that? Fucker.*

*"Mom, my stomach hurts." It's worth a try.*

*"Too bad. You're going to school today. Do you hear me? You. Are. Going. To. School! Come on, get up. Here's your jeans."*

*"I don't have any socks."*

### *Castaway*

A female moose carries its calf for eight months, folded in upon itself in slick whorls of matted hair and gelatin hooves; pink-lined nostrils that will someday flare in the cool, moist air of the Upper Peninsula rainfall. In spring, rivers loosen and roar, grateful to break thick ceilings of ice; tumble swiftly toward the depths of the cradling lakes below, pushing sticks, seeds, leaves and the matted carcasses of deer and porcupine.

In the woods, the mother is edgy. Irritable. Her belly hangs low and brushes the tops of aspen seedlings. Her steps slow as she devours leaf upon leaf, stripping low branches and grinding them sideways in long-meditative circles. Last year's calf stands nearby, reaching up as he has been taught. The mother turns her back, bony rump edging

the young calf back. He pushes closer, and the dam bares her teeth, head lowered in menace. He stumbles back and trots a short distance to the forest's edge where he hovers throughout the long morning and into the cooling evening. Watches as his mother sinks to the meadow floor, her sides heaving beneath the tall grasses. Hears the birth calls as life struggles forth, tastes the hot iron scent of blood and water as the slick mass drops and steams on the forest floor. The mother's tongue licks and strokes. She raises her massive head and stares into the woods, her rejection complete as the calf steps back in silence, into the welcoming dark. He wanders a short distance and makes his bed in the woods.

When dawn breaks, he is gone.

### *Bacon, Egg and Cheese*

"Come on, Alex – get in the car. I told you five minutes ago to get your shoes on. Do you have your speech?"

*Crap!* "It's not due 'til Friday."

"Yeah, but there's no reason not to get it done before then. You always leave things for the last minute."

*Not always.* "Yeah, well it's not due, okay? Mom... I'm hungry."

"I told you I'd buy you a biscuit if you got moving, didn't I?"

"Yep. Can I get a Sprite, too?" *'Worth a try.*

"You don't need a Sprite." *No duh, Mom, I know I'm fat. Fat Alex. El large-o.*

"But I'm thirsty!" *Oh good. She's pulling into the Freedom station.*

"Here's your Sprite."

“Thanks, mom.”

“Ummmhmmm.”

“When’s Jim get home tonight?”

“Aaargh! I hate it when you kids do that: Where’s Jim? Where’s Jim? When’s Jim getting home? He gets home at 4:30 like always. For cripes sake, he *lives* there. It’s his *house*. We’re *married!*”

“Don’t yell at me!” *I can practically see the cartoon exclamation points hovering over her head.*

“I’m not yelling, Alex. Was there anything like a yell in my voice? I’m not yelling. You’ll know it when I’m yelling.... Here we are. Are you getting out?”

We creep ahead in the chain of SUVs, pick-up trucks and Hummers that line the yellow curb. Kids with braces, posters and violins pop out. A bevy of stick-thin girls and boys with pimples follow. There’s Mr. Hewitt. Good! He’s spotted Alex; no way he can give me a hassle in front of the principal. *Not this time, baby. You’re goin’ to school!*

“Bye-bye sweetie. I’ll see you after school. Are you going to my house or your dad’s?”

“Yours.”

“Okay. Well. I’ll see you then.”

I watch Alex shuffle in the door, check the side mirror one more time, then turn my eyes straight ahead. The lake is shining at the bottom of the hill and the sun’s just up over the break wall, turning the dancing whitecaps to orange. Left onto Altamont, up



past the Jacobetti Veterans Facility, and on toward Third Street. A quick drive through the Cruise n' Coffee, then left again and I'm headed for my office.

I've got a paper due.

### *Drifting*

The calf slips into the water forty miles north of town and paddles slowly out from shore, his hooves brushing sand. In the clear waves below, he watches the dull red wink of petrified ore, the greenish streaks of granite and pale reflections from smooth limestone. His head, bathed in off-shore breezes, is relieved for a while of the ache it has carried for days, for weeks. He swims in silence and allows the water to carry him in rolling swells past inland lakes and the in-rushing waters of the Little Garlic River. White pines pierce the looming hills. Empty windows gaze in somber witness as he passes the shuttered bulk of Granot Loma, the sometimes retreat of a wealthy Chicago businessman.

The calf swims on until he bumps the rocks of Little Presque, bobs past ore docks and the tall winking tower of the power plant. He hears its faint hum and feels the low thrum of a darkened freighter at port. At the Coast Guard station, his feet find purchase, and he pulls himself from the water, shaking his shaggy brown coat in the morning air. Gulls scream and wheel from a line of rocks just out from shore, and his nostrils stretch and flare, gathering in the spice of faded lilac, the unfamiliar scents of tar and traffic. He gathers long legs, stumbles once, and crosses the beach up a slight rise, through bear grass and toward the waiting line of flowering shrub.

He trots through the morning streets of this lakeside town, where a man leans into his day, sipping coffee from a thick brown mug. Knobby knees poke out from a terry-cloth robe and a small dog roots beneath the wooden lattice of the porch. The man startles and stares then slaps his mug down on the railing beside him. He runs inside, shouting as the screen door bangs. In seconds he is back with his girlfriend; they watch in wonder as a moose ambles up their tidy street and vanishes over the top of the hill.

### Sanctuary

In my office across town, I pull open the reluctant screen of my laptop computer and begin to write in fitful bursts, halfway through a day that still echoes with the faint distress of the morning's edges. One eye on the screen's blue letters, my mind retraces the neon outlines of bickering in the car. Only five weeks left in the school year and already I'm dreading the loosened air of summer, the relentless discontent of children who refuse to take up happiness. At home, last night, I told Jim "I do now know what to cook for you tonight. I'm not hungry." What I meant is this: *I want to live a larger life.*

The computer comes awake with a trill and serves up images from deserts and mountains: sunrise over a sprawling river, the early evening sweep of cooling stone and orange dust at Monument National Park. Here, someone has submitted a photo of cactus in Sedona. *BEAUTIFUL!!* they have labeled it, as if the viewer may be too distracted to notice. I think how people like pictures of sunsets and dawns, enchanted by beginnings and seduced by the promise of rest at day's end. There's little energy spared for the life between.

Well, at least I'm happy for now. Maybe too happy. It's a guilty pleasure, I'm sure, but the fact is: I love my office. It's quiet here, and life makes sense. Here, I am a real person. A smart person. A good writer.

I keep the lights off on purpose. It helps me to concentrate, and besides, I hate overhead lights, especially the fluorescent ones. They make me feel like I'm under inspection, and they trigger fierce migraines.

A fellow grad student, Maggy, pokes her head in the door. "Wanna walk to Starbucks with me?"

I keep typing. "Sure," I tell her, "but can you hold on for a minute while I finish this paragraph?"

"Not a problem." I glance up, but she's already turned to go back down the hall, a braid of auburn hair swinging behind her. Maggy's tall, really tall – we look like Mutt and Jeff when we walk to class in the morning. And she talks a lot, really a lot. Really fast. It bugs some people, but I like her, and besides I need a break.

*Brring-brring.* It's the phone.

"Hello, this is Susan."

"Yes, hello Mrs. Morgan. It's Mr. Hewitt and I've got Alex here in the office with me, and well... we've got a little problem."

*Shit. Shit. Shit!*

I hit the save button, close the computer, and grab my wallet and keys.

## *Lightning*

*Oh great, here comes Mom. I can hear her voice out in the office. She's talking to that snotty Mrs. F. I don't like HER at ALL. Her voice is sarcastic and she doesn't even look at you when you ask to use the phone.*

*If I bend forward a little, I can see Mom from here. Her lips are all tight, and she looks like she's been crying. Oh no, Mom, don't cry. I hate it when you cry. My stomach gets all knotty, and I'm afraid I'm gonna bawl or something. Not that I haven't been already. Mr. Hewitt's really mad this time, and I really don't get it. I had to stick up for myself, didn't I? Tyler shoved me, and I shoved back. Guy stuff. Just a game of Lightning. I was going in for a layup and accidentally ran into him.*

*Get off me, fat asshole! he said.*

*You're an asshole!*

*Oh yeah?*

*Yeah!!*

*Well, you're gay....*

*And then, he grabbed the fat under my chin and jiggled it. Hard.*

*So I took a swing, just one swing, and then he's standing there with his nose bleeding and Mr. Anderson is hauling on my arm, and I'm crying now, really crying, and everyone's yelling and my arm is scraped and the kids are all pulling away to the side, looking scared, and they're backing away from me and we're walking to the office and there's Mrs. Addison and I'm really in trouble this time....*

*Home of the Scots*

There's an empty parking place right in front of the school's main entrance, like it's been waiting for me all morning. I turn off the engine and sit for a minute, listening to the engine's *ping, ping, ping* as it cools. The wheezing sound my breath makes as it squeezes through tight lungs.

I look up at the building, a fortress really with its smooth beige walls, no windows on the first floor and only narrow slits on the floors above. Three steps across asphalt and I'm at the push-bar doors, under the canopy where brown letters spell out *Bothwell Middle School: Home of the Scots*. A bearded man in scarlet tartan grins down at me through thick beard and beetled eyebrows as he clutches his merry bagpipes. The sign used to say 'Home of the *Fighting Scots*,' but that got dropped sometime in the politically correct '80s.

My moment of private irony passes, and I enter the building where I'm instantly bathed in a familiar wash of odor: stale milk, toner from the copiers, sweaty gym socks. I pass the orchestra room and the display case in the hallway and a flyer: "Scotty the Scotsman recognizes Not-Your-Kid: Bothwell Student of the Month!"

Lori F., the secretary, glances up as I come through the office door and then bends her head right back to the terribly-important-stack-of-papers on the desk in front of her. Not quick enough: I caught the smirk that flashed across her face.

"They're in his office," she tells me. "Thank you," I reply. *Smug bitch*.

Mr. Hewitt is standing at the door to his office, propping it open with his arm as I duck underneath, my eyes already on Alex; his face is red and he's staring at the wall, head down on one arm. His eyes are swollen with tears. They're green when they're

wet. So green...like the beach glass we collect at my parents' cottage. My eyes are brown, and I can feel them begin to well up in sympathy. Alex looks so defeated. So lonely. I force my tears back.

Not this time. I'm not going to let them see me cry.

"Alex?" I keep my voice gentle. Like I'm trying to bridle a colt that's been running for miles. Or a bird that's been trapped in the rafters, darting from corner to corner. Beating its wings on the walls. Bumping its head against glass.

"Alex...What *happened*?"

Mr. Hewitt closes the door. "Alex is here because he got in a fight at lunchtime, right Alex?"

"I guess so," Alex mumbles.

"I'm afraid it's more serious than usual this time," Mr. Hewitt continues. He's addressing me now. His head is bald, and he always wears a tie. I nod my head. I'm listening, but my eyes stay on Alex.

"The other kid has a real shiner. I'm not saying Alex is all to blame. Some of the other students tell me the kid was actually fighting a sixth-grader and Alex felt like he needed to get involved and defend him. Even so, this is the third time this year, and I don't have much choice. District policy. One more time, and the policy states expulsion is an option. Hear me Alex? If you're expelled, nothing says we have to take you back in this district...You have to wait a full year, and nothing says we have to take you back."

The voice goes on and I stare out the window. A small group of kids is straggling out the door and heading up into the woods that anchor the building on the east side. Some of them clutch spiral notebooks and pencils. Their teacher has a pair of binoculars.

Perhaps they're looking for the snowy owl the paper's been reporting in the area these past few days. One of the girls spins, her skirt flying out in a circle as she punches the shoulder of the boy behind her. He grins and moves his lips. She stops to shift her weight on one leg, arms on her hips, girlfriends instantly forming a semi-circle behind her back. She's smiling. I watch as they disappear into the leafy cool of the hillside.

*The calf crosses deep lawns. His hooves rattle on hard asphalt. A crowd is growing; it creeps behind him as he meanders through the morning and on past noon. A television crew has arrived. Cameras spin and whirl as he strolls the streets and pauses at the iron gate of the cemetery. In the pond, just beyond the gates, water lilies spread in white-faced welcome. The calf steps in and lowers his head to drink the long, cool water.*

"... Looking at a five-day suspension but I've told Alex I'll give him full credit for tomorrow and Friday, even though they're half-days for in-service. Mrs. Morgan?"  
*Mrs. Morgan?*

Busted. I watch as Mr. Hewitt pushes the button on the intercom. "What about the other boy?" I ask. "Is he okay?"

"He's got a bloody nose and we've called his parents. He'll have to sit out some school, too."

"Lori?" he asks the intercom. "Will you bring in that disciplinary form for parents' signatures please?" Only static crackles back. He pushes up from his chair and strides out the door.

“Alex?” I say. “Are you alright? Do you want to see Mrs. Addison?”

“What’s *she* gonna do?”

“She really likes you, Alex. I know she likes talking with you. Maybe she can help.”

### *Deceptions*

It’s lie # 1. Lesley is a great counselor, a kind person, and I’ve known her for years, ever since she and her sisters helped me find my way to the sanctuary at church on my first Sunday in Marquette. The three of them lined up in the back door lobby from tallest to short, like steps on a ladder. Now Lesley’s the counselor for last names A-L. She’s been working with Alex for two years, and I thought they were making some progress. She’s the only one who’s been able to get him to open up and talk about the bullying, brainstorm some ideas, make him a partner in some kind of solution. But somewhere between fall and spring – between his perfect score on the MEAPS and a killer free-throw in the basketball game against Gwinn – Alex disappeared. Retreated into a closed-off place where I can’t reach him. Maybe no one can.

“Alex?” I try again. He sniffs, once, then wipes his nose on the Tigers jersey he wears over a tee-shirt that reads: *Looking for Groupies*. His blonde hair is shaggy, and it lies lank, almost dusty, against his flushed face. I wonder when he last took a shower.

“Alex?” I repeat. “I’m not giving up on you, you know. I never will. I’m your Mom and I love you, and you’re going to be okay. I know it even if *you* don’t. Middle school sucks, and I know you don’t like yourself much.”

His eyes flick up for a moment, but he doesn’t lift his head.



“Did you hear me? I’m not giving up on you. I’m your Mommy. I’ll never give up. It’s going to get better.”

Lies # 2 and 3. We’ve both given up for now. A battered wife can leave her husband, take the kids and run. I’m tired of the fight, but I’m still the mom and you can’t just leave your son.

And I shouldn’t give up. But I have. And he knows it.

Alex shrugs his backpack onto one shoulder, and we trudge out toward the car. “Have you got everything you need?” I ask his back. “Do you have any homework you can catch up on while you’re off from school?”

Alex doesn’t answer, just ducks down into the low seat of my rusting ’96 van and tosses his books on the backseat where they land in a papery nest of French-fry cartons and straw wrappers.

The lake at the bottom of the hill has turned grey and flat, taking on the muted shades of a cloudbank that’s crept over the ski hill to the south. I turn left, and then right, threading my way back through the Summits.

“Do you want to go back to my house, or your dad’s?” I ask. “I still have to go back to my office, you know...and I’ve got class a 6:00.”

“Your house, I guess.... Mom? I’m hungry. Can we get some pizza.”

*By mid-week, the calf has settled in the town’s quiet park lands. He picks his way through gravestones and listens as his hooves sound the wood chip paths which wind in and out. It’s pleasing music. Each night, he strolls past the waiting crowds and lines of*

*waiting cars, eager to slip again into the shallow algae of the lily pond. Once, a man ventures close to offer beer. The calf's nostrils flare at the sharp scent of hops, and he turns away.*

*At midday, children line the fences of the school across from the gates; their fingers point, and they hop up and down, rattling chain links. Sometimes, the calf thinks he can remember a different place, another forest. He drifts toward the thick trees, and his head trembles in a sudden palsy. He bends a knee in deep curtsy, then the other, and folds himself into a welcoming mound of cinquefoil and soil. Here is the grace of hemlock, broad maple and young alder. Water and space. Enough to last the summer.*

*On the path behind him, a man and woman walk by. Their voices rise and dip, then rise again as they follow the trails' small hills. They pause just ten feet from the calf's leafy shelter, stare into forest shadow and then move on, their voices quiet now. The calf settles and listens as a tight knot of pain blooms and then loosens at the center of his brain. A nighttime chorus of peepers begins.*

*Banter, or "The Smell-Badder"*

"Mom?" Alex asked me just the other day. "Would you characterize our conversations as 'banter?'" The witty exchange of two quick minds?" "Why, yes Alex," I replied. "I believe I would. Banter is exactly what I'd call it. We bant, you and I."

Alex and I argue. A lot. The second Jim hops into his truck and the taillights clear the driveway, it's as if a bell rings and we go to our corners, sharpening our verbal talons. He thrusts, I parry.

“Alex,” I’ll plead. “I’ve got a headache. I’d really rather not drive you to the Y tonight.”

“Come on, Mom” he wheedles.

“No, really. I can’t tonight.”

“Can’t or *won’t*? ‘Got plans with your precious husband? Going *fishing*?”

His voice shifts into sneer.

“That’s right, sonny-punkin’” I respond. “Jim *is* my precious husband, whether you like it or not.”

“Well, I don’t like it. Not one bit.”

“...And that’s okay, but he’s still my husband and that’s not about to change.”

*No fuckin’ kidding*, he mutters just under his breath.

“Alex! You can at least give Jim a little respect. At least he’s *trying*. It’s not like your *dad* is putting much effort into things these days.” *Shit*. I shouldn’t have said that.

‘Fuck you!’

“Don’t you *dare* talk to me that way!”

“Fuck you, fuckyou, *fuckyou!*”

By now, we’re both screaming. He’s a thirteen-year-old master manipulator, and I’m right there in teen-land with him, trading punches. Enjoying it, in a sick way. The fighting gives us quick release, a way to diffuse the tension that has hovered over our household ever since I lost my job and went back to school. Besides, we both know when to pull back, just this side of real damage.

Alex glares at me from the couch. “Oh yeah?” he sputters. “Well...you know what you are, Mom? You’re a... you’re a.... You’re a *smell-badder!*”

“A *what?*”

“A smell-badder!”

“Alex.... Really, do you always have to get the last word?” I’m laughing now, full-out, and a small grin is playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Smell-badder!” he repeats.

“Alex,” I remind him. “Some animals eat their young.”

But today, I’m cautious, caught between my strong desire to join in the fun – to smooth things over – and a nagging need to drive my point home. To be the mother.

Jim doesn’t think I’m strong. *You’ve got to put your foot down*, he lectures me. *You can’t just tell him no and then cave in and do what he wants. The second something goes wrong around here, he just grabs his darned GameCube and gets you to drive him over to his dad’s house.... And what if he decides to punch me? I’m not sure I could hold myself back. He’s a big kid now. What if I punch him? I could get arrested for assault!*

I just stare at my hands. Alex *is* a big kid. He’s got three inches and a hundred pounds on me. And he *has* kicked me. Pushed my feet right out from under me in the parking lot at Kohl’s: *Why not, Mom, huh? Why the fuck not? You bought Ben a game, why not me? Huh? You don’t have an answer, do you Mom. Huh? Kick. Kick.*

“I just bought you a game last week, Alex, and now I’m broke.” *You’re always broke. I hate your teaching. I hate your classes. I hate you.*

For a little while, I believe him.

“Your kids need limits,” Jim finishes up. “Right? I’m right, aren’t I?” He stares at me, but what can I say? I give him my stock reply: “They were raised by wolves.”

I scan the living room floor. There’s an empty coke bottle by the couch, and little bits of popcorn are ground into the carpet under the computer desk. “Alex,” I ask, “could you please pick up your stuff? It’s almost 4:30. Jim’s going to be home soon, and I’ve got to get back to school. I’ve got class tonight.”

“Mom, give me a hug.”

“Well, come here then. I’m not going to lean down to the floor.”

Alex lumbers to his feet and enfolds me in a sweaty hug. He smells like pepperoni.

“I love you my bum-bum bee.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I lean down and carefully pick up the popcorn, every piece, and head to the kitchen and a sink full of waiting dishes. Just then, Jim’s truck swings into the driveway and he comes in the back door, waving a copy of the *Mining Journal*. “Hey, did you hear about the moose?” he calls out. “They think it’s got brain worm, maybe, being in the park like this. It’s not normal moose behavior. They pick it up from slugs and snails. Deer cough the worm up and sneeze it onto plants and leaves. It’s deadly for young moose. They say this one wandered down from the Sylvania Tract, through the Huron Mountain Club.”

I dip my wrists back into the soapy water and try to imagine the calf's solitary journey. *So far!* Why would it leave the cool north woods? What's behind its sudden impulse for human company? I wipe my hands on the dishtowel and ask him: "Will we take a walk, then? I've got just enough time before I leave for class."

We cross the road then leave the sun behind, tracing the damp imprint of the calf's split hooves, skirting the pond then a ring of people who have gathered to wait on its banks. Moose-watching: it's the new town sport. We loop past the community garden and up the service road where we stare into a thick tangle of branch and bracken at the park's western corner. Jim can't imagine how this small space will support the moose past the first deep snows. *Moose need range and forage.* He sounds so certain.

On the short walk home, I listen as he names the plants, the flowers along the path – Solomon Seal and quintonia – the night sounds that wake from the creek bed below us.

I listen, mostly silent. Afraid he might tell me the limits of my life.

#### *Gravida 4*

Back in my office, after class, I pick up the threads of a different tale – let the words sweep before me, capture their cadence before I can forget.

I write about husbands and journeys and children and heat. Disappointment and loss; the skeins of honor and regret that bind my life in intricate weave.

I write about love and stop to ask each page: "Is this true? Is this true?"

The phone rings, once, and Alex's voice floats flat and distorted: *When are you coming home?* I glance at the clock and offer him a blessing, look again, and it's 10:00, then 11:00 – too late for tucking in.

I lock the office door and step into the waiting night. The sky breathes in once and exhales in a rush, spilling stars in trails and clusters that deepen in the smiling pitch of the sky, over the sleeping campus and out to the north.

But when I come in the back door, a blue light is playing on the top stair, and I know he's still up, playing video games. Jim's already in bed. "I'll be right in," I call over my shoulder, and head up the stairs to find Alex sprawled across his bed, sheets tangled on the floor. His feet are on the pillow, and his head dangles over the end of the mattress, a controller in his left hand. "Mommy!" he cries. "Hug me!" I perch on the edge of the mattress, smooth back some hair that's fallen on his forehead, and oblige him with a quick kiss before turning to go.

"Mommy...?" his voice catches me at the door. "Am I still your miracle baby?" I smile without turning. "Always," I promise, before turning again toward the stairs.

Downstairs, I brush my teeth and wash my face, check to make sure the cats have water. I'm taking my time. I think Jim's asleep, but I'm not sure. I fix a bowl of ice cream – a big one – and climb into bed, pulling a novel onto my lap. Page thirty-six of three hundred. I'm reading in two-minute increments these days, just one more casualty of my stretched-thin life.

So tired tonight. I pull the chain on my bed-lamp. It's summer-dark, and a faint lavender glow lingers by the open window. I can hear the peepers down in the park. I can

also just make out thin strains of Mario music from the bedroom overhead. *Miracle baby*, I muse, drifting toward sleep. *Para 3. Gravida 9.*

It's like a box score from the baseball games Alex loves to watch with his dad, but it's actually a medical term, fancy Latin for my personal track record as a mother. *Para 3*: three live births. *Gravida 9*: pregnant nine times. You do the math. Alex is #4, my miracle baby, born six years after his big sister, Kendra, and four years after his brother Noah, a stillbirth at 7 months' gestation.

"There's something wrong," the doctor had told me as he lifted the stethoscope from my rounded belly. Too quick. "You have excess volume of amniotic fluid, and the baby's heart rate is slowing. It's a sign of serious birth defects. Our ultra-sound machine isn't sophisticated enough to detect the problem, and I'm going to send you downstate to Ann Arbor. I'll make the arrangements. Do you have anyone at home you can call? Anyone who can come and get you?"

I stared at his concerned face. "No. No...that's okay. I'm okay, really. I'll walk."

By the time we drove to Ann Arbor, nine hours away, and checked into the clinic, the baby was dead.

"I'm so sorry," the doctors told us. "We can't find the baby's heartbeat." Can't find it? Can't *find* it? *Look harder!* I almost let a perverse giggle escape, but they just stared. They were so kind.

"We'll induce labor tomorrow, but tonight we need you to stay here and start a gel-pack to soften the cervix."



We drove downtown to State Street and parked the car, then sat in a booth at the Cottage Inn and toasted our dead baby with pizza and wine. People stared at me, the lady with the big pregnant belly and a full glass of wine. *Fuck you*, I thought.

After it was over, they cleaned me up and sat me in a rocking chair in an empty labor room. I was alone. They gave me some literature and encouraged me to name the child. Suggested an autopsy. Told me about a memorial service they hold once a year for all the unborn babies.

When they brought him to me, I was startled by the blanket. There seemed no need to keep him warm. Tiny paper fingernails. Thin arms muscled like raw, red beef, his skin sloughing off in ragged patches. “That’s from the amniotic fluid,” they told me. “The skin starts to break down.”

“Noah,” his father named him. “Like the flood.”

Minutes later – hours? – the nurse gently swung the door open. “Are you ready?” she asked. “I don’t want to rush you, you can take your time. Just let me know when you’re ready, okay?”

*Ready? Time?* How do I know when it’s time? Why can’t *you* let me know when I’ve held him enough? How can I say when it’s time to let go of love?

Back home in Marquette, I lay in the bathtub, staring at my swollen breasts. I squeezed one and watched a thin stream of grey-white milk arc toward the faucet. My belly was flaccid, and I punched it. And punched it again, harder, and harder, tears coming now in a hot, salty flood.

Four years later, in the delivery room with Alex, the doctor poked his head up over the drapes. "It's a boy!" he exclaimed. "Ten toes, ten fingers. Uh, oh.... He just peed on the nurses. Listen... can you hear him crying?" Then they took him to the nursery while the doctor sewed me up.

I stayed in the hospital for five days, and I never let him out of my sight. I tucked him up tight next to me in the hard metal bed and I did not let him go.

### *Hungry*

*Mom's asleep, I think. Good. She's tired. She's tired a lot lately, and Jim's always yelling about something. I guess I don't help.*

*Ben's at Dad's house. He doesn't like me anyway, so I don't care. I miss dad, a lot though. It pisses me off how he doesn't do anything with me anymore. He used to take me to mini-golf. That was fun. Now he just sits in his room and drinks beer with his new girlfriend. "Did you go to school today, Alex?" he asks in that sarcastic voice. "No, Dad, I had a stomachache. "Suck it up," he says. "Be a man... Christ! If I had skipped school every time someone called me a name, I never would have graduated."*

*I'm not a man. I'm a kid. A fat kid. A class-A fuck-up who yells at his mom.*

*I'm hungry. I wonder if there's any leftover pizza.*

In the park, the young moose startles from a dream. Lifts his head as a car passes on the nearby road. The memory comes now, quiet: it is close, slow breathing and warm, sweet milk.

*Release*

The next day dawns humid and heavy. Alex is back with his dad for the week, and I'm hanging clothes on the line.

By late afternoon, clouds are stacked high in threatening layers to the south. They scud and skate toward our waiting town as the wind shifts and grumbles over Wisconsin. Jim coils the garden hose and calls for me to grab the sheets. The first drops bounce like pebbles on the hard-packed earth, and we run together toward the shelter of the mud porch.

Inside, we kneel on the bed, arms propped on the windowsill. Jim's head bends toward mine, and we watch as the sky splits its swollen seams, pours down in rivers, and cascades over the tin gutters of the neighbors' garage. Lightning flashes high over treetops that whip in the wind's sudden violence. Soon, it is so dark we cannot distinguish stormy sky from the blackened outlines of maple leaves that spread their palms in wet surrender on a branch just five feet away.

The phone rings and calls Jim out for work. He pulls on rubber boots and shrugs his way into the thick yellow slicker that hangs ready by the kitchen door. I turn from the window and note the tender white at the base of his neck – there where his close-cropped hairline meets the bronze of his working day. “Jim...?” I call. He turns and waits. My hand reaches up, then falls. “Be careful out there. Come home safe.”

Five minutes later, the phone jangles, and I turn from the open window where I'm still propped, staring at the passing storm.

*“Mom...? It's Alex. Did you see that lightning? Did you see it? It was awesome! We don't have power. Maybe we won't have school tomorrow! Dad's going*

*to let us cook stuff in the fireplace and then maybe play Scrabble or read ghost stories, or something....”*

In the woods, the calf watches in wonder as tall trees thrash and lightning dances from limb to limb in sheets of fairy-fire. At the base of an aging hemlock, the earth splits in a sudden shower of dirt and roots. Flames streak up the tree’s sturdy branches, gathering speed as they race to join the darkened sky, spiraling higher and higher yet until they crackle out in an explosion of sparks and light, diffusing the tension of days and weeks of lonely grief.

When it comes, the rain pours down in steady streams of redemption.

And promise.

DROUGHT: 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1987

Our garden is dry. I coddle hollyhocks and tomatoes, sprinkle them early before  
the sun can rob the earth.

*Big-bellied women carry water, hanging before them like gourds.  
My womb gushed forth one day when it could hold no more.*

It may rain soon, they say      Saturday, perhaps. Here,  
the sky is so thin the blue bleeds  
to eggshell      the membrane of nest, robbed by crows.

*Noah, his father named him. After the flood  
when they placed him in my lap, it was sore – his skin  
frayed tender – worn away like toes too long in a tub.*

We are duped by the speech of the weathermen who spin a conundrum of hope –  
“partly cloudy” promises more sun than shade.

*His limp, starved limbs, his hands, his dimpled knee. Eyes sealed shut in mute grace.  
How could such a perfect mouth refuse to take up milk?*

The peas are falling. The pods are stopped half-full and rattle hollow music.  
*The nurse asked me “have you had enough time?”*

On our lawn, I call to the neighbor boys as they chase one another with squirt guns  
dripping – the impossible curve of their ribs – I beg them to drown me where I stand.

*We can never have enough love.*  
I carry buckets one by one to the garden gate.

## LEAVING FOREST

When we were children, my mother,  
my father, my sisters, and me,  
in the middle –  
faced forward, faced back,  
rattling like vagabonds  
on the long, loose seats of our '63 Ford

We headed west, away  
from cool waters and  
Michigan forests. The trees  
smudged a spruce-dark horizon.

On  
Dakota plains

the nodding sweep of wheat-spread arms  
stretched wide from day  
toward night, a sky so broad it cracked,  
crazed leather.

I leaned across my sister's legs and  
watched for hours, the way a hawk will  
dip and wheel and stitch desire to pulse  
and blood – lull  
the ground and ride the sweep of fierce  
air to earth.

I imagined him there with talons curved  
and gripped into the matted forbs

and grasses, the weave so dense  
it gave its bones up to the air  
and watched them scatter to bleach  
in the brittle shout of sun.

Pioneer soil.

A remnant, the ranger told us,  
brave in the face of fire and resurrection.

He told us, then, of the Pishko bird,  
Who flies and flies and dips and glides  
Over hills and plains and on to Altair,  
searching for a lost and empty nest.

And I thought how we,  
accustomed to the sanctuary of trees  
and easy cover, might learn to live  
as prairie.

Might shift a wing to echo  
the blue-bowl arc of sky,  
swell to fit its generous curves,  
our skin so smooth  
that bones would lose their limits

and teach us of the wind, the oaks,  
the flames – this thirst  
for any home.

*Prairie #1*

We make the climb – slowly – gears turning on some gigantic cog, suspended on an ascending cable – up, and up the winding hills of Duluth, the lake spilling into the distance below. Victorian houses and spacious front porches mark each switchback turn in the road, and then...the breathless pause at the top before we shoot forth onto the prairie, malls and used car lots whipping past our windows in a blur.

Instantly, sound is swallowed by the empty sky. We are gliding through endless fields of wheat and grass, the sun relentless overhead, the horizon a shimmering question. My sister's head nods on a white pillow beside me.

I turn and stare at the faint smudge of spruce green that marks the distant horizon – receding with each turn of the wheel. We have left forest. Adrift under the bare, stark light of the plains.

High-wheeling hawks are silhouetted against the bright prairie sun. Circling and circling. There is no hiding here. This place has no angles, no shadow. All is revealed, diminished. The sun is a cliché, burning, melting, pounding. The unrelenting stare of a strobe, the sweep of a prison tower beam, without comment, caring for nothing except its duty of exposure.

Traffic jams appear from nowhere, without reason. For miles we stop then go, my father's elbow propped in the open window, tanned and freckled. There is the grind of gears; we pass cattle cars, cow shit planked against the sides. Through the slats, the occasional twitch of tail or rolling eye. The cows' journey toward death has been halted by human calamity. Suitcases strewn along a stretch of highway. The ripple of a torn

hem, caught on the wire of the fence that lines the shoulder. A child's doll with blue eyes staring.... By the time we creep past the site, all that's left is a sprinkle of glass, the red of a shattered reflector. The air still packed tight with an echoing shriek of torn metal, the father's shout, the dull thump of head and elbow, end over end.

All shimmering beneath that endless bowl of sky.

*We are lost.* What sinew will knit us whole once more?

*I am lost.* Imagine myself prostrated under the hawk's wheeling cry.

Desperate to disappear against the muted browns and yellows

of wheat and grassland. *With what shall I build a self once more?*

*My bones – stripped bare, and brittle.* Once dismantled, what gluten,

what desire will leap these synapses bleached barren?

*My doll mouth opens in dismay.*

Of course – these memories are a crazy quilt, a mish-mash, mixing snippets from multiple journeys, made summer after summer. A Triple-A Trip-tik unfolds in my mother's lap. A family of pegs from the game of Life, our three pink heads line up on the back deck, mother and father up front, pulling a trailer behind our station wagon, red or white, with panels made of wood. We enter the plains from the south, through Iowa or Wisconsin, or north through Michigan's cool forests, climbing up from Ashland, Superior, and finally, Duluth.



What is clear and constant? The empty road. The thump of wheels over tar patches softened on concrete. The drowsy lull of sense and sound. The disassociation of a journey just begun.

A passage from a journal I kept: “Alas, another day of driving!”  
Alas... *alas*. It is the sorrow of the epic hero far from home. The removal of all things known or sensed. The promise of comfort, lost.

I am a child of forest.

This wilderness of open sky and grass... a formula for terror.

### *Leaving*

We drive away in the morning cool, sneaking out before the sun clears the tree line on M-28. Headed south for college orientation, eight hours away.

Kendra’s riding shotgun, feigning sleep, her eyes already closed when I stop for coffee at the edge of town. It steams in the console beside me, too hot to drink. She’s quiet, remembering, maybe, the fight yesterday with friends, a last high-school drama played out in bursts of ring-tone, text, and – finally – a drawn out conversation completed outside on the front sidewalk, where she paced, hands arguing with air. A familiar frown drew her eyes together like the green underbellies of thunderclouds. Her mouth drawn up like a purse string around a cigarette she thought she was hiding, cupped in her left hand as she hunched the phone to her shoulder.

The screen door banged when she came back inside to the piles of clothes I'd stacked on the piano bench, ready for her to pack.

"*What?*" Her eyes challenged me to comment.

"*Nothing!*" I claimed. My eyes were already widened, anticipating this assault. My shoulders rose in a silent shrug.

"*Nothing! Did I say a thing?*"

"*Hmmmm.*" Her eyes narrowed, suspicious. "*You know, I really hate that thing you do. When you repeat the same sentence, twice in a row. It's really annoying.*"

Today, my shoulders shrug upward again as I glance at Kendra, now sleeping soundly beside me. Mouth open, she coughs from time to time. It's a rattling cough, a reminder of habits she thinks are secret.

I turn the wheel south at Seney. Ninety minutes down, seven hours to go.

I'd thought of this drive as a process—an inevitable, necessary loosening of my own tight grasp. I'd imagined the play of a silent slideshow, images flashing in proud progression as I drove. That picture of us on the beach, baby Kendra half-sheltered from the wind in a blue Snugli wrapped around my waist tight and close, a hidden pleasure clasped like a nut in my paws. Next up, the pictures of Kendra with neighbor-boy Seth on their first day at Parkview, that blue pinafore with red piping. In the driveway, they'd both played up to the camera's neutral lens, Seth's fists pumping in the air overhead. In front of the school, Kendra's small hands clutched a rope, marking her place on the line of young-fives, stretching up toward the door and Mrs. Evan's long red hair. Kendra is smiling. Seth's face is white, turned toward Kendra for clues. I had sat up all night to

finish the hand-embroidered nametag pinned to the front of her dress: “Kendra Hxxxx – Bus # 4.”

Here she comes, feet pedaling like mad, blonde braids flying out to the sides – a gap-toothed Jack-o’Lantern plowing her bike through a pile of October leaves. And there’s her dad grinning off to the side, leaning on the handle of his rake. Slides, clicking through quicker, and quicker: Emily, Laura and Kendra – a trio of Brownies grinning up at the camera, all missing the same two front teeth. The first day of middle school... Graveraet! Kendra’s perched on the front porch railing, wearing my burgundy sweater, a flowered skirt, and her first pair of nylons, a carbon copy of her GrannaAnna – my mother – at age twelve. Here she’s dressed for her first Christmas dance; a gaggle of black-suited boys shuffles nervously off to the side while the girls twitter and fuss with their hair, tucking in straps and squealing as each new girl arrives in a flutter of sequins and scent. She looks impossibly grown-up.... Her new car, first job.

A new picture: Labor Day weekend, last summer, at the beach-house in Chebyogan. Kendra lying face-down on a chaise at the shoreline, soaking up some sun so she’d look nice for her senior pictures. She is exhausted. Anemic. She’d come along at the last minute, after a flurry of calls to re-arrange her work schedule.

And only two weeks before, we’d stood together in line at the high school book distribution. I parked the car after Kendra slammed her door against the simmering August heat. She trudged ahead in no particular hurry, her hair holding a dusty blond patina and smelling of smoke and late night adventures. Her splotchy face was free of make-up and she hadn’t bothered to dress. Her flip-flops poked out from the bottom of

ragged pajama bottoms and scuffed the broken gravel of the lot. I noticed tired weeds poking up from the concrete beneath the school's canopy entrance.

“Welcome to Marquette Senior High: Home of the Redmen!”

We joined a long line of chattering seniors and stood for a few minutes. Kendra stared vaguely ahead at some spot on the cinder block wall, gauging the wait. She waved to a couple of people, but hung back, beyond the range of conversation. Uncharacteristic for a girl whose progress reports typically included remarks such as *Kendra can always be counted on to contribute to a lively discussion*. Teacher code for *likes to chat*.

“*Phew*. Hot in here, isn't it?” I sent out a trial conversation balloon.

“Yeah, Mom...can we not talk, please? I just want to get out of here.”

We settled back into silence and I waited for the embarrassed half-smile of a public put-down to fade from my face before trying again: “You are remembering that you have an appointment with Georgia at 10:00, aren't you?”

“No duh, Mom! Why else would I drag my ass out of bed this early?”

It had been a long summer. My voice had lost some element of authority it once held; had grown strident with the stress of worries over my own sudden job loss and hints of an older boyfriend who slouched somewhere in the shadows of Kendra's nights.

Kendra had responded with avoidance. For most of the summer, she was missing-in-action. She spent her mornings sprawled on the couch, flipping through seemingly endless channels of gyrating bodies and young-adult versions of reality. The steady da-THUMP of MTV rap set the rhythms of her day. Around noon, she'd grudgingly slip into the shower before heading to work at Econo.

And that would be the last we'd see of Kendra for the day. She'd call around 8:00 or 9:00 each night: "Mom, I'm sleeping at Angie's, okay?" Or Amanda's, or Meghan's.

"You're not out partying, are you? You're not driving around...?"

"No, Mom! God...I hate it when you do that! *I'm not stupid!*"

"Well... just remember who you are, and where you come from."

Silence.

"Mom? I really, *really* hate it when you say that."

Not stupid. Just depressed. At least, that's what the doctor had decided following the previous winter's steady stream of recorded messages on our answering machine: *Your son or daughter has missed one or more periods in the previous school day. To excuse these absences, please call the high school office at 225-....*

Her perfect academic record had taken a few hits. We'd spent six long months juggling prescriptions, trying to get it right. I thought we had turned a corner.

Now, standing in line with my daughter, I felt a sense of guilty relief. The summer was almost over, and the familiar outlines of the school day could measure our days once again. I could lock Kendra and my worries up in a mental filing cabinet each morning before taking myself off to teach at the nearby university. I'd put her in a file folder for first hour: AP English...*Click!* Second hour, pre-calculus: *Click!* Third-hour, Government...*Click!* and so on until she was released for work-study around noon.

The line shuffled on. Kendra had disappeared at some point during my internal ramblings. Now she was back, thrusting some papers into my hands. “Here, Mom. You have to pay some lunch money or something from last year.”

I took myself off to find the kitchen office while Kendra went to stand in yet another line, returning to the lobby just in time to intercept her as she stormed past me toward the doors, her face set in rigid lines of red-faced defiance.

“Mom, *look!*” Her fingers jabbed at a pink line marked at the top of her schedule. “They say I can’t get a parking permit. ‘Too many absences last year,’ or something stupid like that. Mom! *God!!* I’ve got to have a permit. I’ve got work study. How am I supposed to get to work on time if I can’t have my car here? Besides, you excused all those absences...didn’t you? I was sick! I have doctors’ notes.”

Kendra’s voice spiraled up, and up. I just stared for a moment, trying to mask my own frustration with the indifference of this place, these people. Didn’t three years as president of student council count for something? How about a perfect 4.0 grade point and endless hours of float decoration, or how about wrapping gifts at the mall with the honor society? This kid has played your game. Where were you all when the mask started to crack?

I sighed. “Well, what can you do to get a pass?”

“I’ve got to write some note to Mr. Anthony,” Kendra mumbled, “explaining why I need it and how he should let me have it ‘cause I’m not going to miss any more school this year. Something like that.” Her voice trailed away, and I could see tears threatening the corners of her eyes. Kendra scuffed at the freshly waxed floor with the edge of her

flip-flop, refusing to make eye contact with a handful of sympathetic teachers standing behind the book table.

“Mom, can we just get out of here?”

*“Please?”*

We left the parking lot, headed toward the doctor’s office. Kendra wept, silently at first, but increasing in volume with each turn of the wheel. In between sobs, she kept wailing the same bewildered litany: *Why are they doing this to me, Mom, why? I don’t understand. I’m not a bad kid. I’m not! What’s wrong with me, Mommy? Why am I like this? I don’t even know who I am anymore.*

I had no answer for her. We came to the edge of campus and Kendra’s sobs increased, mascara from the previous day streaking her crumpled face. Now she was panting, each breath coming in deep, whooping gasps. I lifted one hand from the steering wheel and fished behind the passenger seat. *“Here!”* I’d found a discarded McDonald’s bag and handed it to Kendra. “Here,” I repeated. “Just breathe.... Kendra!” My voice sharpened, riding the crest of her mounting hysteria.

“In. Out. Now in again. And... out.” Her breathing slowed in cadence with my calm instructions. We parked in the shaded end of the parking lot and walked toward the familiar green awning of the university health center.

I headed toward the reception desk and watched Kendra walk toward a row of molded beige chairs attached to the wall. She slumped into one and waited for me. Her red-rimmed eyes held some mute plea. I signed her in and flipped through a few magazines on the table before taking the seat beside her.

Kendra leaned into my side, and her head fell against my shoulder.

“Mom?”

“Mmmm, hmmm?”

“I think I might be pregnant.”

My hand reached out in an automatic gesture, and I paused for one suspended moment before I let it fall, cupping her head and cradling her closer still. “Shhhhh,” I whispered. “You’re okay. You’re okay. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Later, I stood in line again at the receptionist’s desk, waiting to pay the bill. Kendra was already on her cell-phone, halfway out the door. Her voice trailed back: “Yeah, hi.... It’s me. Yeah... no, I’m not. Nope. Yeah. I’m relieved....”

The receptionist snicked open the sliding glass window and waited with outstretched hand. I handed her the routing slip and watched as her eyes scanned the charges. She looked up, eyes magnified by the thick lens of her glasses, and offered a terse: “We’ll charge the office visit to your insurance. There’s a fifteen dollar charge for the pregnancy test.”

Did I imagine her voice growing louder as she broadcast this last comment into the waiting room? Rage flooded through me in a wild, irrational tide. I wanted to snatch the disapproving smirk from her face. To stretch her thinned lips as far as I could before letting them fly to snap her back in her seat. How *dare* she sit in judgment on my daughter?

The anger ebbed as quickly as it came, leaving me shaking in unvoiced grief.



I followed my daughter out into the blazing full heat of the August morning, and we turned the car toward home.

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Kendra coughs again and half-rises from the pillow... “*Where are we?*”

“Just past Gaylord,” I tell her. “You’ve been sleeping forever! You missed the Bridge.”

She shrugs and settles back on her pillow, her eyes closed again. “Just tell me when we’re getting close. I want to put on some make-up before we get there.”

I nod my agreement and resume a mental rosary of fretting. Where are we going to get money for this school, this historic college, a millstone around the family neck? Couldn’t she have stayed home and attended the state university in her own backyard? We can’t afford this school! *Poke... poke.* It’s the demon on my left shoulder. *But she deserves the chance... She worked hard for this. She’s smart enough. It’s her chance to stretch her limits, to grow, to be happy....* The reasonable angel on my right shoulder flutters her wings in post-70s, good-parent, solidarity.

Right, well then... she’ll just have to find a job. Hell, *I’ve* got to find a job! A good one. *But we can’t afford this place....*the litany resumes.

Is it really the money that’s worrying me?

I’m reminded of how, on the plains – as a child – I grew to fear empty space, the miles and miles of fields, devoid of shadow under a harsh and unrelenting sun. In school, I had read brave tales of pioneer families setting forth in their wagons, small specks

heading toward a horizon that stretched toward unseen mountains. But what of the friends they'd left behind? Theirs the only house for miles on miles. Neighbors more than a day's drive through tall grass on dirt-rutted tracts. Brothers and fathers lost in sudden snow-blinding blizzards, tying ropes to kitchen doors just to reach the animals, snug in the barn. Their frozen bodies found just steps from shelter.

I imagined the women left standing, staring into hundred-mile views at movement along the horizon – Bison? People? Friends? Foes? Will we send them away with a sack of corn, a Johnny cake, a drink of water from the well?

Flat land. A place for women to unravel, driven mad by the ceaseless sound of wind blowing – howling – then falling to a mordant chuckle as it teases the corners of their log-framed homes. Looking for chinks.

In this open air, meaning has no place to find its purchase. Womens' words desperately seek a flat surface – any striation of grass or wheat, tossing and blowing – and are swept away, careless of their glancing impact. Here, there is no place for memory to find its purchase. Even their shouts are swallowed by empty space. Screams go on, and on. Nothing stops them in their careening sweep through dark, and time.

Did peace finally come, when they let go – released over time the self they'd left behind?

*Does my daughter, sleeping beside me, know enough to leave a careful trail behind her?*

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The land is beginning to flatten, the forest thinning as we drive further south past fields of hay, soybeans, and sunflowers. Trucks rumble by, headed toward the cities: Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland.

And, like a gift, at the last edge of forest that lines this stretch of highway, a doe is standing, her warm body steaming in the morning air. I can just make out the spots of a fawn she's hiding in the grass behind her. Her eyes seem to note Kendra's sleeping form as we make the final swing from north-pointing I-75 toward Caro, south on US 31. "Go!" she seems to urge. "The woods will wait."

*Well, I can be like that, I vow. I am brave. I am stoic. This is only the first small loosening, after all. It's not like she won't come back....*

Suddenly, I am angry. Fighting back tears. "For *what?*" I scold myself. "For *the first time she stayed out all night?*" For my heart that pounded, my breath held through the early morning hours as I waited to hear the soft snick of a door eased shut... her careful tread on the stairs, the bedsprings whining softly overhead?

And I remember the rest of my story.

How later that night, I sat up in bed with a book opened before me, my finger wedged in its spine to mark my place. Jim lay beside me, his steady snores blending with the outside noises of a summer night, offering a measure of peace. I sighed and then turned to switch off the small bedside lamp, letting my thoughts spin free, until I'd imagined myself high up in the midnight sky, wheeling and swooping over the sleeping earth like some fierce predatory bird. An owl, perhaps, or a kestrel, my colors blending in a streaming blur of yellow, gray, red, and blue as I race towards the earth with outstretched talons.

I want to snatch up my beautiful daughter, to fly us up and away toward some unnamed haven. To place us gently down in a nest of soft feathers I have plucked from my own warm body. Cradle us in the pitch-black embrace of a towering hemlock.

In the morning, we will soar up and out over the lake, over the trees. I will beat my might wings and fly us higher still, until she cries her fears out into the wind and finally comes to understand that I will not let her fall.

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Kendra's voice breaks in again. It's a small voice. Not pinched, just somehow smaller than it was a hundred miles back. "Mom," she begins. "If I don't like it there, can I come home and go to Northern?"

"Yes, absolutely!" is my prompt affirmation.

*But you won't.* I complete the thought silently. I've already noticed: one foot is tapping impatiently against the floorboards of the speeding vehicle.

*You are already gone.*

### *Forest # 1*

Be careful what you speak into the woods....

But everybody else gets to....

*He said I wasn't pretty! Not even cute!*

I wasn't drinking. I wasn't!

*Yesss, Mom. Yes! There's going to be parents there. I promise.*

It's only *beer*....

I can't stand it when you do that. 'Look at me like you know what's going on.

Like you know what I'm thinking. You *don't!*

*You never listen!*

I . Hate. You.

I . Hate. Everything.

*God....*

I can't *wait* to get out of here!

Take care.

On the open plains, your words are swept on the wind, and borne away.

Telegraph lines stretch for miles, filling the air with static, a low murmur, the constant buzz of our discontent.

But the forest... the forest has time for long, slow thought. Branches thrust and grab, hold thoughts close then tattle in any wind.... *There!* Hanging from a hemlock's low skirting, past regrets are arrayed like lace. Overhead, your worries, your fretting are wound tight and cling like the blackened scarring of the fragile birch. Here, a flicker has bored a hole for the ache, the discontent you bring.

Breathe your dread, your joy, your petty victories, your heart-close hope – your despair – into this waiting silence. In these woods, winds will toss them high then bat them down again to earth. Roots trap even the smallest sounds, clutch them tight in brooding shadows for long consideration.

For contemplation of your fate.

### *Prairie # 2*

I have left the U.P. for a women’s retreat, downstate at a camp where we counsel each summer. It’s a chance to greet good friends, let them soothe edges made jagged with worry. To borrow some small measure of wisdom as they circle around me, their voices the comforting twitter of songbirds, stitching the sky together.

The call comes. Kendra’s voice tinny, wailing “Mommmyyyy...?” In her cry is the final progression of a scant three weeks since she left for her junior year, a semester of studies in London. It is high-pitched, loosened, manic as she sobs out her lost and wild love of the City. The girls in the flat too loud, too many, too loud. *Sob*. A breath caught.

“Kendra, where are you?” It’s quiet outside the lodge. I’ve taken my phone outside so I won’t disturb the women gathered inside.

“I don’t know... I’m just walking around. Oh my *god*... look at that. I don’t have my shoes on. *I’m barefoot, Mom!*” A small giggle as the realization sets in. And then, a rushed tumble of words on words: “Mom I just couldn’t take it, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t – sorry, I’m so *sorry!* – haven’t been taking my meds. And I don’t even know

who I am anymore. This isn't me, Mom.... It's not *me!* And all the lights, and the *noise*, but Mom it's all so *beautiful!*"

*What? Who me? Yeah, I'm alright. Yeah, my flat's just over there... thanks, though.* Her voice has faded as she talks to some concerned stranger in the street: *.... thought I could manage. I mean, I really thought I could manage, start over or something. Find myself. I thought I'd left all that shit behind me."*

I look at the sky. Twilight here, almost 8:00 in a late-summer sun, mellowed and orange, setting to the west over Lake Charlevoix.

In London, it is 2 am.

Kendra's voice changes register once again. It's calm now, almost trance like. "It's all so...I can't tell you...it's beautiful, it's beautiful, it's beautiful."

My voice breaks in against the sudden silence – air hissing over wires sleeping under deep ocean, waves breaking a mile or more above:

"Kendra... is it time to come home?"

Her voice is tiny. No more than a sigh.

"*Yes.*"

Phone calls are made, hasty flights arranged. Bills paid. (More than two-thousand dollars in telephone charges on the brand-new credit card.) We collect her two nights later in Marquette. She's pale. When I hug her, bones shift beneath a thin fall jacket. Her eyes, over my shoulder, dart around the tiny airport, noting each face. We don't see anyone we know.

Seven weeks later, we must visit the small college campus Kendra left with confidence in May. (An internship... In *London!* She must be so *excited!*) It's quiet here. Papers are finished, finals completed. Students have all gone home for pie and football and sleep.

In a well-appointed parlor, we receive the dean's polite words, delivered with kindness and resolve: "We find it best, perhaps, if Kendra takes a semester off. Decides whether this place, this college, is truly her best fit."

A good *fit*? I flash back to Kendra's orientation in early June. I'd taken two days off to drive Kendra down to this small college town, just west of Jackson, the campus familiar to me from visits with my father, class of '52. Kendra was a legacy admission, her grades strong, her essay competitive, her grandpa's contributions, equally strong. We've already done the obligatory visit to the donor bricks and the plaque at the field house when we pull up in front of the student union, park the car just ahead of the last yellow line, and head toward the ivy-ed entrance. Other family groups pass us as we make our way up the steps. Mother's with handbags. And initials. Fathers in pullover shirts with tiny golfers on their pockets. Pastel triangles on tight-knit sweaters, plaid, trousers with the creases pressed in. The girls' hair almost uniformly sleek, perfectly flat and held in place by wide headbands.

I've seen Kendra's eyes as each group passes; the nuances of acceptable fashion have been carefully noted. I've watched as she draws her shoulders in and lowers her chin. Her jeans, I notice as she walks ahead, are too tight. They ride a shade too low under the hem of her shirt. It pulls away against the buttons where her belly pushes against the belt loops.



Inside, we gather a schedule, a folder of papers, and a key and head to the chapel for the president's welcoming comments after which I am informed that this is the last I'll see of my daughter until the next morning. She is whisked away by a cheery group of upperclassmen, dressed in gold and purple. The same group that delivered a raucous cheer as we entered the building: "*IO TRIUMPHE! IO TRIUMPHE! Haben swaben rebecca le aminor ...*"

"*Lame,*" was Kendra's only response.

I wander around for a while, attend a parent session on course selection, tour the new science building and head to the motel, where I watch TV until bedtime.

The next morning, Kendra darts in to the cafeteria where they're holding a parents' breakfast. "Mom!" she exclaims. "They're making fun of me!" But she's grinning; the light hazing is apparently a sign of healthy acceptance.

"Yeah, they keep making me say 'Houghton.'" She gives it the trademark U.P. pronunciation: hoh- and then, almost a slight hiccup that swallows the 't' sound almost completely before trailing off in a final 'uhn.' "They don't even know where Marquette is! It's like they've never met a 'Yoopers' before." Her vowels are broadening as she speaks. "Are you finished? Let's go buy my books. I've gotta be back for a team-building game or something. *Soooo lame!*" But she's still smiling.

On the drive home, I ask her "Is it still a good fit, Kendra? Are you still planning to come here this fall? It's expensive! You know... you still have time to change your mind." Careful parent-type phrases I'm borrowing untested from the orientation program at the university where I work.

“Oh yeah, Mom... I mean, I know I’ll have to be careful, study hard, make friends and all that. I mean, it’s not Marquette High School or anything! But I know how to study. I can save my money, find a job or something. Did you see all that DKY? The girls all had these Vera Bradley bags.... Guess what I want for my biiiiirrrth-daaaay, Mom” she warbles with a quick glance my way.

*Vera Bradley?* I turn the conversation toward academics, the prestigious Ford Scholars program she will enter in the fall. Inside, I’m not so sure. How are we going to pull this off?

Kendra is resolute. ‘Holds a party for friends on her dad’s front porch the night before she packs a U-haul and heads south for the fall semester.

By the time she’s home for Thanksgiving, her camouflage is in place.

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After a quick lunch at a deserted pizza joint, we drive home without stopping and cross the Bridge in darkness. Kendra is quiet in the seat beside me, then soon asleep – her mouth slack, a tiny bubble of spit at the corner. I fight the urge to wipe it away with my thumb – to smooth her hair, damp against her cheek, where it leans against the door of my Jeep.

Along this stretch of U.S. 2, cedars lean out from high banks, stretching toward Lake Michigan, silent on its shores to our left. The road is bare of snow, unusual for this first week of December.

Once, driving this same stretch of highway, I might have fancied our children as trees, imagined how they'd knit themselves to the peninsula like these cedars, strong in any wind. Learn to twist in silvery shades, weaving deep roots through banks of loose sand. Their passage away seemed a necessary searching, an epic journey or the Amish *rummsprage* – almost playful, the journeyers intent on finding a reason and the means to return. Their values, their families – a careful crumb trail, leading home.

Kendra was unraveling long before she left for London. What map had she packed for the time away? Mine? Hers?

Any?

Out of nowhere comes a snatch of memory: the Oregon Trail game. Kendra had played it endlessly on our old Compaq computer, laughing with glee when my character – she insisted on naming one for me – ran out of corn. Or gunpowder. Or nails. “Mom... you're dead, again!” I was left on the prairies while she sailed along with the moving train of wagons, ghostly as they moved away through wheat and moonlight.

Did any of us ever reach the western coast? How did we make it over the snow bound teeth of the Tetons? *Did anyone ever turn around?*

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Full dark now. I follow the taillights of the pickup ahead, my headlamps – one slightly askew – skimming the ditches, my eyes scanning the edge of this darkness.

A dull thump ahead and a deer’s flailing body is flung high into the air over the bed of the pickup. It hits the road in front of us – a scramble of hooves – legs heaving beneath bewildered eyes, black and blinded. No time to even brake, and then we are past, the road dark again before us.

Kendra wakes with a start. “What happened, Mom? Did we hit something?”

Her eyes are wild.

*“What happened?”*

### *Forest # 2*

I sit in afternoon light, in trees – their leaves, amber, crimson, fragrant in the still warm air. The light is not yet dulled by thick banks of November cloud.

I am suspended high above the forest floor, attuned to sound and motion. Jim has set a tree stand here for me, the two-man stand, but I am alone in these familiar woods while he hunts a mile or more down the road. Today, a wind is stirring things up. There’s a sway in the hemlock that anchors the ladder. I lean back and imagine its branches circling to fold me in, like a hug from a favorite uncle, his sweater brown and nubbly with rough weave, smelling of nutmeg and pipe smoke. I have brought a thermos, my binoculars, and a book to read. Time to think. Time away from phones and i-chat.

In the bowl of the forest clearing, each sound is amplified, each movement has portent. An acorn falls, a leafy scrabble behind me: *Squirrel? Mouse?* Scavenging, digging, hiding and hoarding. Ravens call in the distance, audible shape shifters, alternating between doom and vaudeville with their froggy cries. Bluejays dart back and forth from the pile of corn, cabbage and apple, their wings more black underneath than blue. They perch in a split-toe grip in the tree beside me, holding each pilfered kernel steady against the branch as they dart their heads forward on a sideways slant to crack the corn in two.

In between, it is silent. The late-slanting sun sculpts pockets of shadow at the edge of the clearing.

When I drove on the prairies with my family as a child, the silence – the light - stretched out to the horizon. The landmarks – an occasional silo or farmhouse – seemed flattened by the lack of perspective. My ears – my eyes – had nothing to anchor them.

On the prairies, I found no context. I used to wonder but *where would a bird build a nest?* And more important, *how would it find its way back to the communion of its fellows?* Under the flat sky, even the shadow clouds passing over were wiped out in the movement of wind sweeping over grass.

The joke in our car was this: everyone else saw rabbits, or mule deer – a bison standing close to the road, leaning its back into barbed wire.

“Susan did you see it?”

“What? Where?” My eyes would fly up from the page, and I would strain to see something... anything. “There!” my older sister jabbed her finger past my nose. “It was right there, by the side of the road. What were *you* looking at?”

I had no answer. So sometimes I lied, rose on my knees to peer out the back window as the road rushed away behind us. “Yes! *Yes!* I see it...!”

But I never had.

Was it like that with my daughter?

After Kendra’s first few visit home from school, I’d tried to pluck meaning in the spaces between her words. Pick out the delicate balance between truth and believable fiction stretching from the phone – to guess at her needs and her sorrows. Her loneliness, the essential anxiety feeding a fine tremor in her hands as she gripped a pencil or pen.

In that last year of high school, we’d both seen what we wanted: an ice blue prom dress, regular car payments, an award-winning model *Mayflower* for A.P. History. A girl in charge, her outline sharp against well-knit sweaters from J Crew.

I had chosen carefully what to notice, what to gloss over.

Kendra had learned to hide in plain sight.

But she had shown me, once – clearly. Just after one of the bewildering fights her crowd played out each night in unheard streaming of on-line chat via AOL. There had been a quick intake of breath, the clatter of her keyboard response. Silence. More clatter. And then – the abrupt shove away from the desk, her feet pounding on the steps upstairs to her room. The slam of a door. Muffled sounds of weeping. Ten minutes later, her voice arguing with some displaced friend on the other end of a phone line.

She came back downstairs, footsteps subdued, and stood in the kitchen just out of sight behind me.

“Mom,” she began. “I don’t even know who I am anymore. This isn’t me. It isn’t.... It *isn’t*.”

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A deer – careless in the clear air of early autumn – stands off to my left, still hidden by dense thickets of hemlock and cedar, but easier to hear. She comes in thrashing, trotting – then slowing – the dried leaves giving away her position. I freeze and hold my breath, as I’ve been taught, hoping she’ll come in. Over the slow thud of my heart, I listen, careful, for the startled whoosh of air, the declaration of hooves struck sharply – *once!* – that tell me I’ve been winded.

And I remember how I learned to see, at last, with forest eyes.

How I learned to stop straining and to simply sit, still and watchful.

In the woods, a doe’s dense body – wholly formed – is lost until I remember to soften my sight at its edges, let the light seep in to fill the empty spaces. Slowly, I let my imagination form the low-lying sway of curving back, a slim line of tan, the darkened oval of a down-bent tail. The flash of an ear, silver-white at browse level.

To form from tiny brush-stroke parts the expectation of a deer, fully formed and beautiful where she stands in the margins.

And I am blessed by her passage.

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I climb down into the cooling air and walk to the truck, where I wait for Jim to emerge from the dark that's coming on fast now. I open the door for a moment, to catch a flash from the dome-light and check the time: 7:30, October 26.

Three more weeks.

Kendra's coming home.



## MAX

*August , 1998*

The road swoops in extravagant S's, dipping then rising again, mimicking the path of a swallow in flight. I'm driving out, away from the city and the humid weight of its dog-day heat. The road invites speed. It urges me on, a wicked companion in my reckless escape.

We pass Phil's 550 Store, where one might rent a cabin, purchase coffee or leeches, pocket a stash of venison jerky, or wheedle hints of recent angling hot spots. The trees – full-leafed maples, oaks, and popple – flash by and begin to thin, offering tantalizing glimpses of the lake's blue horizon. The air is cooler here and laced with cedar. I crack the windows, and Max's wet nose immediately thrusts toward the two-inch gap. Huffs of air and a keen whine escape his throat in intermittent bursts. My throat is tightening too, anticipating the release of a long walk at Little Presque Beach, emptied by the breeze of black flies – perhaps of people. Maybe I will swim, if the water is warm.

Down the straightaway through the late slanting light of a north woods evening, out beyond Hog Back, we drive past a break in the wood's edge that marks the entrance to a beach popular with the local college students. "We're almost there, Max."

I begin to count: "One, two...third bridge from the cove. Here we are!" A small brown sign – one blink and you miss it – announces our arrival: *Little Presque Isle Nature Area, 1/2 Mile.*

I turn into a tunnel of sand and forest. Max is bounding from side to side now, rocking the car in doggy anticipation, halting short for a surprise *sloorrup* of his tongue against my cheek. The air in the car is sharp with the scent of his sweat. I have to elbow him back from my side, away from the steering wheel.

My tires bounce over potholes, up on the dip of the road's shoulder, and back, churning up clouds of dust. I scan the main parking lot ahead. *Good!* It's empty, save for one blue sedan and a shiny red pick-up parked at the far end. 'Not too much company tonight.

I turn the key and kill the engine, "Okay, boy. Here you go!" I open the door and Max is gone in a tan-and-black streak. I watch him quarter the forest, nose to the ground. Hear the ping, ping, ping of the engine as it cools. I ease myself out from behind the wheel, sucking in greedy draughts of air sweetened by the lake which waits just below the bluff.

It's warm tonight. Motes of pine dust are suspended in a lemony haze. Paths beckon to the left, and wind away to the right, toward the ridge trail through the woods. I bend down to slip the keys into the cuff of my sock and pause, rewarded by the antiphony of birdsong: the fluting call of a hermit thrush and the answering rasp of a chickadee from the tree above my head. *Zzzz, zzz, dee, dee, dee.*

I straighten again, gazing at the high pure vault of the tall red pines before me. They stand in regimented rows, separated by a path some ten feet wide. I enter the woods as supplicant, setting off toward the bluff, my footfall muffled by a thick carpet of fallen needles. I scan the path from right to left, a habit borne of my needy claims on this

place. Alone. I'm quite alone. No others on the trail tonight; no one to dilute the promise of open air ahead.

I quicken my pace. At the end of the trail is a small knoll, curtained by a sheaf of dried bracken fern and the feathery height of Indian grass. I weave my way into its center and sink to the ground, hidden from view. A long, deep breath follows, and then another. I sift sand from one hand to the other, idly noting the ripple of a breeze as it smoothes the beach grass at the edge of the bluff. A bird is wheeling out over the lake. An eagle, perhaps.

*Where's Max?* I twist around and I'm surprised to find a handful of late-season raspberries, dangling from branches before my face. I pick the berries and cup them in my hands, enjoying the contrast of ruby red against the soft pink of my palm. I pop them into my mouth one at a time, savoring the last sweet promise of the summer and recall the harsh clutch of days and months that preceded this season of healing...the year just past.

*Fall, 1997*

When I came to this place in the autumn of that year, I came alone, carrying with me the seven-thousand pieces of my finely shattered life. No gentle glide down the lazy winding road. I fled the city as if it held the stinging darts of a million Furies, pedal jammed to the floorboards. The tattered ends of a thousand recriminations jitterbugged in my brain:

*Idiot! What have you done? You're alone now... are you happy? What kind of mother just takes off and leaves her children behind? Puts down the bottle and bails on the marriage. You promised to stay and 'work things out,' but then you called the game: 'Sorry! Last inning. Everyone go home.' What kind of madness is that? They do, you know...everyone thinks you're nuts, and maybe they're right. Maybe you can't be trusted. Maybe there's no way back.*

*No! No, no, no!*

*What now, huh? What's next in your master plan?*

*Maybe you should have just stuck with the booze....*

I cut off my thoughts with a sharp twist to the steering wheel, raced past the yellow gate to the gravel lot, parked the Jeep with a scree of scattered stone and ran, my feet pounding up the path toward the ridge.

It was a grey and jagged day, the sky scowling with darkly beetled clouds that hung low with the weight of cold rain. I ran on, my breath coming in great punishing gasps, up, up and up the trail, running right out onto the slippery cool granite of the tall cliff at its side.

I stood at the edge of the edge of the sky, threw my arms open, and let the wind blow – a scourge – my hair whipping free from the hood of my jacket, teeth bared in a fierce and silent howl. Below me, the lake surged and rolled, sand riding in the white plume of its waves. A hooded merganser fought to bob in place.

In the water's muffled roar, I sensed a dangerous loosening. The eddying madness of the Sirens' song.

*Enough!* I wheeled and headed back toward the trail, my footsteps slowing—made cautious by the need to step over and through the knotted ridges of cedar roots that criss-crossed the forest floor. Here, the air was dark and green. My ragged breaths rang out against the hush of the place, slowing in response to its utter indifference. A flash of prehistoric red crest and a harsh *Ack, ack, ack* marked the flight of a Pileated woodpecker as it crossed the trail before me. It disappeared into the black of the trees ahead, startling a clutch of small, brown songbirds who rose in a twittering cloud only to settle once again in the yellow-leafed cup of a birch tree, some twenty feet ahead.

The trail dipped into the woods here, and I felt a small easing as the thick brush gathered me in. Shielded from the stray chance of another traveler on the trail, I continued at a slower pace, careful to keep my feet to the path, not trusting myself to the free-fall of the forest that stretched away and away. I felt more than the heard the lake behind me. Its sound welled up from the earth through my boots in strong bass counterpart to my mind's high-pitched keening, driving me forward.

I walked and walked until I finally sensed the deep weariness that had settled in my bones. Dropping onto a rough log bench someone had planted at the base of a thick spruce tree, I let my head drop forward on the springy curve of my neck. A beetle scuttled in and out of the fallen mat of leaves and disappeared into a small black hole at the vee of the tree's old roots. A weasel's hole, perhaps. Or a smallish vole.

I stared into the hole until it filled my gaze. What would it be like to follow that beetle, burrowing down into the loamy damp of the earth? Strands of feathery root would brush my cheeks, holding back the displaced earth. It would be dark there, other senses heightened. I could curl up in the benediction of utter stillness – wrap myself around the curve of my own soft underbelly, flesh, fur and bones melding into the earth. Listen to the rush of blood in my inner ear; let all sound dwindle down to the steady pulse of my own heart beating.

There's an allure to madness of this sort. A kind of mental cliff-daring as one senses one's mind at the brink, looking down into the center of crazy. I'd been building up to this moment – this place – for weeks, ever since the night I packed the car in silence and drove the few blocks to an apartment I'd rented in secret on the other side of my twelve-year marriage. Leaving husband, job, and children behind, newly sober and out of options other than the familiar isolation I'd woven from long months of desperation, I had turned my back on friends and family and loosened my mind like a fragile balloon bobbing at the end of a string clutched in my tight fist. The slightest nudge, and my hand might open, setting me free to drift alone and away.

A burst of feminine laughter preceded a young couple rounding the curve of path to my right. Students, I assumed. His head dipped toward hers with an answering kiss before they noticed me on my little log bench. He smiled: "Hey! 'Didn't see you there. Isn't it great out here with all this wind and the trees and everything?" The girl wore a wooly cap and a faint blush, and her hand burrowed deeper into the boy's back pocket. I

nodded and watched them for a minute or two before I stood to stretch, a new resolve forming in the wake of their passage.

I turned my face back up the path, toward my empty apartment. That weekend, I made a few phone calls, got some directions, and headed up the highway toward the animal shelter. The next time I drove out to these lonely woods, Max came with me.

### August 1998

*Whoosh!* Max explodes from the bluff in a shower of sand and water. He heads my way and then stops short, distracted for a moment by the shouts of some children on the beach below. His head whips back, darting quickly from side to side, his tongue lolling down. His eyes have grown anxious, and his nose is slightly elevated in its quest. I sit behind my high grass screen for just a moment longer before I take pity. A sharp whistle, and Max spins himself around. *There!* He bounds toward my hiding place in gleeful leaps and spills me onto the ground in a tangle of legs and helpless giggles.

*“All right, all right! Off of me, already!”* I push myself up and wipe berry-stained hands on the legs of my jeans. Max leads me down to the water’s edge, where I stop to scan the beach stretching out before me. My eyes travel in an arc that takes in the looming bulge of an island to my right, the faint smoky trail of some passing freighter, and a smattering of small family groups at the far-off end of the beach. *Progress.* Their presence doesn’t bother me now, ‘though I still cling to the relative solitude of my small strand of beach.

Max's eager brown eyes gaze up at my face. His sandy wet coat and the stick he's carrying tell me he's already visited with some of these folks. *Have you been bugging those folks, Max?* He just cocks his head, big pink tongue lolling out to the side. I shake my head and grab the end of the stick; he's a hard dog to resist. After a brief tug-of-war, I pick it up and fling the stick out over the lake, as far as I can, repeating this pattern several times before Max races off again, heading back to his new-found friends. One of them has a dog, too. I watch as Max and the other dog dance in a circle that spirals them far, far down the beach toward the mouth of a small creek that spills from the woods into the waiting lake.

In April, as a puppy, Max ran headlong into this creek, where its curves form a deep well. I raced toward him from my position twenty yards back down the beach, watching in helpless horror as his head sank once, twice, and once again, staying submerged on the final plunge. "Come on, Max, come on," I chanted. "It's too cold to jump in after you today! Don't you know that labs can swim? Besides, I *need* you. Come on boy, *come on.*"

Max's head bobbed to the surface, and he filled his lungs with a strained gasp before his webbed paws finally found a rhythm. He paddled back to the banks where I could lean forward to pull him from the water. In the chill of that early spring afternoon, I wrapped my arms tight around his matted coat, lending him my warmth.

Today, weeks of August heat have removed the chill from the Lake Superior shoreline. I stretch down to slip off my boots and notice a beer-can wedged into the sand



at my feet. I tug my shirt off over my head with an exasperated sigh, exposing the blue band of my swimsuit top. The can is a violation in the pristine purity of this place. *What kind of person needs to blur its edges with beer?*

I skinny out of my jeans and fold my clothes neatly together in a bundle to be left at water's edge. Turning back toward the open expanse of the lake, I step into the warm slipstream of water at its edge, easing myself out in a slow glide, parallel to the shore. I dip my head down and swim just beneath the water's surface, admiring the ripples of black sand crystals that glitter in the light of the setting sun.

When my head breaks the water, I am startled to find Max at my side, paddling in tandem, matching my movements in a perfect ballet of fluid grace. His eyes are steady on mine. In my chest something breaks free and wells up from its chamber, and I laugh and laugh at the joy of – the liquid music – of swimming with Max.

Part III: *Sky*

## TAXIDERMISTRY

Wakened by moonlight, Artemis is horrified to find herself sleeping beneath the fine brows of the fallen, her peers. Narrow, wall-mounted heads with glassy eyes staring straight, impervious to the seductive pull of the night. A red plaid Kromer is perched festively on one, left front. Keys depend from the next. Cobwebs droop from dull, dusty capes. The neglect is shameful; a blighted pledge to honor them forever.

She slips from her bed into the waiting yard, a night breeze lifting the hem of her shift – so cool – masking the hectic flush of over-warmed skin. In the autumn sky and just above the big-hearted hemlock set guard to the house, Orion calls and calls, pacing the skies impatient.

She's not really listening anymore but does from time to time note his little-boy petulance. *Crazy, drunken fool!* Blinded through no-one's fault but his own. *Mintaka, Alnilam and Alnitak....* He's even named the shining buckles on his belt, a play for attention if she's ever heard one.

*Arrogant, crazy drunken fool.*

How they once played. *Yes...* she remembers. The chasing games, her feet fleet on forest paths she'd carved from racing among the cedar, spruce and poplar. The hiding games! Her green tunic (*where has she put it?*), dappled brown, generous with its cover as she stopped stone-still in the path, pressing back into the bark of maple or oak, her chest heaving with the effort of suppressed mirth.

They slipped together out one spring, out and into the welcoming velvet night, leaving bow and string, arrow, belt and blade behind. Watched from the edge of the farmer's field, softening sight until shadows shifted and separated into images of deer on the field, their necks bowed to glean the recent harvest, sharp hooves sinking into the loamy earth. Watched as does melted silent into the forest, followed by the rutting stags.

And sank, themselves, into the thatched stubble of grain cut short to the ground. Sank, then shouted, and sighed....

*Damned moon!* It sets the measure of her days, her nights – calls forth the thick and ropy blood of her womb. Plies her with a silvery wink, bids her act the tart just once more.

That moon plays on her nerves with low-strung notes more felt than heard – a thrum beneath the surface of the everyday. That moon is a partridge, on its log, drumming lower than the threshold of sound, drumming hollow with longing. That moon – that harpy – that crone with her placid, fissured face, older than memory.

That old moon issues a timeless, uncompromised imperative: Be more. Remember more. Become again: the woman, the playmate, the huntress, the harlot, the girl she half-recalls.

Remember. *Become*. Remember.

Artemis ponders the notion and shrugs. *Why bother?*

The damned moon remembers it all.

## STRANGE LIGHTS

*Never whistle toward the Northern Lights, the Inuits caution. Do not stare.  
Defiance will anger the Aurora. Beams will shoot forth from the sky and snatch  
your fretful soul.*

I wasn't expecting magic when the phone rang one Sunday evening in early December. I was up to my elbows in sudsy water, making mental lists of all the tasks and troubles I could cram into the coming week. With a sigh, I wiped my hands on my jeans and reached for the receiver, anticipating another push-the-limits request from the far side of town where Ben and Alex live half-time with their father. Instead, I heard an urgent invitation: "*Mom!* You've got to go outside...It's the Northern Lights! *Hurry!* They're really bright."

The phone clicked into abrupt silence. I dropped the dishtowel and half-shrugged into my jacket, calling out to Jim, "Hurry up...the 'Lights are dancing!'" Heavy footsteps pounded from the living room to the backdoor, and the two of us spilled into the chilly dusk, craning our necks and stopping up short on the darkened lawn, where we stood still.

To the north, light flared in quick bursts of white and yellow. The trees on the southern ridge were lined in a faint smudge of rose. Silver drapes and shimmering rings twisted above our garden, and directly over the peaked roof of the house a giant starburst radiated from its brilliant center, fixing us both in a moment of time – suspended in wonder between sky and the hard chill of the earth.

We stood for a time under the arc of the wheeling sky, speaking of magnetic fields and angles of refraction – a globe spinning ever away from its axis, tilted toward a fractious sun. The words, stripped of poesy, irritated with their heavy logic. The lights seemed to call for something more – something finer, fragile.

Jim turned to go back inside, but I slipped further back into the shadows on the hill, longing for something I couldn't name. Language of gossamer to lift up lightly the mysteries of the northern sky. Something to pull me from the fretful rhythm of my days. I shivered in the chill and stared at the lights as they shifted and spun across the sky. A single ray seemed to stretch down to brush my feet, and I waited as the night held its breath. Silent.

## II. On the Roof

*Ezekiel 1:4-13: “On the fifth of the month – it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin...I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures....The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.”*

Several years earlier, my friend Dave, a physicist at the university, had tried to explain the lights to me one night. We'd been hanging out together for months, two single buddies sharing the occasional game of cribbage and joining his fellow science geeks at the Shaft for fierce games of trivia. (I provided expertise in obscure lexicology; only one of us thought we were dating. It was becoming awkward.)

On this night though, Dave had jingled a heavy set of keys and invited me to come and see the telescopes and fine-needled instruments a grant had funded to record the aurora and its displays on the small handful of winter nights that offered clear glimpses of the Upper Peninsula sky.

I followed him down the halls of old West Science with a half-high school sense of giggling mischief – the building oddly still at this late hour, the air sharp with the scent of formaldehyde. With a flourish, Dave opened a heavy door at the end of the hall and indicated a steep set of iron stairs. We climbed up to the flat asphalt roof and entered the small observatory mounted there like a turret. I sat on the stool and watched as the skylight above me opened with a whoosh. I lowered my head to the eyepiece and squinted, Dave twiddled a couple of knobs and stars fell into my lap, startling me into silence.

Dave began to map the night sky before me: Jupiter, dense and looming heavy at the edge of the field, Mars smaller and vaguely menacing with its reddish cast. Lesser lights circled like so many beggars. And in between, it was quite, quite dark.

From this stillness – this vacuum – Dave explained, the lights are born in a fiery, silent streaming, pulled forth from the sun by the magnetic tug of the earth, its tight bands of oscillating energy – closer, more powerful near the poles – spinning the continents along their plodding axis. Energized particles escape the earth's dense atmosphere to follow the bands and ignite gaseous atoms in the ionosphere – oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen – catching fire as solar winds sweep across the field.

Or so Dave said...sort of, his voice pedantic, patient. So certain.

As I listened, visions of old B movies began to play in my head: comets flashing fire, asteroids crashing to earth... the upturned faces, our Munch-ian mouths frozen slanted and open in terror. Godzilla rising.

There, on the roof, I could almost believe we'd been caught spying on something forbidden – creation spinning out its stories in timeless silence. I could well imagine being stricken down right there on the roof. Smitten in a true Biblical sense of the word. Instead, we closed the skylight, secured the chain on the observatory door, and turned back toward the steps, Dave still chattering on about web sites designed to forecast solar displays, to score their potential for brilliance, making it possible to set our watches to rise, or to turn over in our sleep, trusting the predictions of a better, brighter display two or three days hence. Some people, Dave exclaimed, even have teams of wakers in place, pledged to call one another forth to observe.

This last– to me – seemed almost right. Still, in the rational space between Dave's explanations, something seemed lost, and I could not voice it. Later, I realized the poet Coleridge had named it, wakeful one night and surprised into joy at the secret ministry of frost.

Here – in this northern parallel, frozen and fixed along undetected streams of wonder, we are startled by the lights. The aurora a ministry, undetected in our sullen dark.

### III. Green Flash

*The Fox Indians of Wisconsin regarded the Northern Lights as the outcry of enemies slain in battle. It was said their ghosts returned in flashing flame, seeking revenge for dark acts executed by dark souls.*



*Estonian peoples believed the lights were reflections of great fires set by the gods to casting brilliance upward from icebergs floating in the sea. How could this be true? What here on earth is fine enough to magnify such light? What capable of casting it back to its source in praise?*

In some places, where the air stretches out over the long flat horizon of endless water, people speak of the green flash at sunset. A rare observance, its effect made from the scattering of sun's light as it tries to enter our dense atmosphere.

It is the refraction of light that makes this possible – the bending of light in air of differing densities. Blue bends most and penetrates, while red bends least. To the observer on the ground, when the red of the setting sun has already disappeared, blue light remains after its long journey through space. As it scatters and spreads, the image appears green for an instant in time – a flash along the edge of our awareness.

It is the density of our thick atmosphere that makes this possible.

Dark acts of murder, jealousy, pride, or greed. The greater sins of love and indifference. The air above us thickens with the years.

#### IV. Long Dark

It is so dark here in this time between. Early December is not yet fully dark but stretching forward already toward dull February, March, even late April before the sun begins its cumbersome swing back, bringing the grace of light.

We drive to work and school in darkness, offices now quiet – the students have fled; projects we have saved sit in stacks on our desks. We turn toward home when the sky has deepened to indigo and join a stream of cars pointed west toward the shops at the mall. When we exit, the night has crept in.

My neighbor has hung a wreath; has she noticed my lights are not up yet? They sit in a spill of tin and coiled cord on the dining room table. A bright tree marks the corner of the apartment buildings that have encroached on our tiny neighborhood. A modest strand hangs from the neighbor's cherry tree, the same one that birds stripped bare of fruit in a single summer day – desperate for rain, or sky, or some sweet juice.

Here, in this dark time, does my neighbor – like me – sit in her house, silenced of boy and dog, Nintendo and fear, and remember the night when deer stepped lightly through grass and moonlight to feed on the cherry tree's lowest leaves?

At the middle school where I drop Ben each morning, the family on the corner has again set up a large and cheery display for the school children. Santa waves, Rudolf swoops down low; the Holy Family huddles under a wooden star. The lights, unfailingly, are on even at this early hour. We have not once beaten them to the switch.

They are unaware, I'm sure, that their faithful display serves as a welcome respite from arguments and tears... my youngest son, lost for a moment in wonder – his serious face brightened in the shifting spill of green, red and blue, his mouth tilted upward, softened, bending to the laws of an unseen order.

Later – in January – I drive with his brother along Bluff Street and notice as I always do one older home with strong ceiling lights in its spacious living room.

“I wouldn’t like that,” I comment. “The curtains wide open, light revealing every private detail. Wouldn’t you feel invaded? *Exposed* somehow?” I prod. Alex isn’t much for early morning conversation.

I mention that their Christmas tree is still up.

This evokes a response – “That’s *dumb*” – from the seat beside me. “Christmas is over.”

“Well, some people like to leave them up a little longer. The lights are cheery....”

By now we’ve reached the downtown area. Alex comments on the white lights threading the leafless trees at each storefront: “Those lights are dumb, too.”

“Alex!” I can’t let this one pass. “People leave them up all winter because it’s so damned dark out! Think of them as ‘dispel the dark forces of winter’ lights. People get really gloomy around this time of year....”

“That’s dumb, too. It shouldn’t be so dark.”

But it is.

We stamp our feet. We whistle. Shout and drink and pair off in couples.

The dark remains.

The lights we string from branch to home do not so much turn back the dark but bring the stars a moment nearer, drawing myth close as we whisper each need to the night.

#### IV: The Turning

*Ojibwa legend tells of a time of great darkness – of a vast flood sent by Manitou to caution a wayward people who strayed too far from his gentle gifts of ceremony and song. They had grown ungrateful. The People cried out to Great*

*Manitou, begging for light and new vision. Soon, he covered the north in a blanket of snow and mountains of ice so tall that they brushed the skirts of the waiting sky, gathering in the sun's rays and shattering them into brilliant shards of green and blue, fiery magenta and cool, cool silver. Color and blessing for his children.*

Sometimes, when the aurora lights are dancing, I imagine the beams slipping one by one from their sky-castle beds, like princesses from a fairy tale I loved as a child. I see them tiptoe down a darkened stairway to gather at the shore of a fathomless lake, waiting for a boat to ferry them to a night of stolen magic. I can almost hear the lilting rhythms of the waltz – see the sisters straining forward, rocking on the heels of their thin dancing shoes. Their dresses shimmer in faint greens, silvery pinks, and sprays of gold as they lean forward, eyes straining across the lake's moonless surface – tilting toward the keen edge of adventure.

*(Or, is it redemption?)*

What prompts them to turn from the dance? Is it simple fatigue that sends them home, yawning, drooping, shoes dangling by ribbons now held loosely in each graceful hand?

How do we turn from wonder?

What prompts us to turn from these lights?

*I once sat and rocked the body of my stillborn son, his ears the fragile shell-pink of a sleeping oyster. His fingers, cilia waving from a seabed floor – now stilled.*

*A nurse stood at the door. "Take your time to hold him. Take all the time you need. You can call us when it's time...."*

*When it's time? I wondered. Time for what? Time to surrender.  
Time to give him back. Time to turn away....?*

In this grown-up story, on the stone-hard ground of my backyard woods, I am left on the shore with no words big enough to call the dancers back. But perhaps it is they who called me forth and away. Away from the demands of a life grown fretful and anxious.

In the house, I've left stacks of dishes on the kitchen counter. My marriage is stretched thin by endless cycles of accommodation and compromise. My days often seem a slow, seeping ache for my children, my angry son who is frightened that no one loves him. Could love him. Not really; not God....

It's easy to lose the proper perspective, the knowledge of grace.

On this night, I am stranded below with the burden of a fearful heart. A stone-spirit who has forgotten how to stand in simple wonder. To listen for the crackle, spit and whistle of the light. The notes of a symphony, fading away – leaving room between each dying note for grace to vibrate.

As I continue to gaze at the Aurora overhead, I wonder what sparks the impulse to turn our eyes away from sky and back toward an uncaring earth. What finally will prompt me to mount the steps and shut the door against the fading remnants, shimmering still above these trees.

*Remnants of what? Of whom?*

Perhaps I've glimpsed the dance of ancient angels – spirits who call to us across a deep abyss, asking nothing more – or less – than reverence and praise. Light steps as we dance.

How then to decide we've seen enough? What can explain my sudden, fierce impulse to stay? Perhaps I should whistle and stamp my feet. Plead with the gods to snatch me away and up to the sky, even as the lights begin to fade. Maybe there, in the unseen margins between mute beams, I will find the fire to melt this lump of unsung prayer. Maybe there I'll find the words – a will, the grace.

Yet, my words – language itself – seem futile, the stories about these lights only fragments – half-guessed memories of some essential whole just beyond our ken. Tales told to explain what puny language cannot.

*Look!* I want to cry. Whatever god you seek, it is your longing that fuels these lights. Along the poles, the lines are streaming, rushing – electrons leaping, charges firing.... *See!* Our desire leaps from one to the next, our hopeful eyes sifting the darkness ahead.

We are carried, each of us, beautiful in this waning light.

## LEARNING TO PRAY

### *Prayer on the Rocks*

Once, in the months just before I got sober, I fell into the habit of taking my lunch out at Presque Isle Park, a place locals call, simply, the Island.

Here, water and rock have clashed and quarreled and then receded for more than one billion years, working in tandem to carve from the basilisk stare of black rock the fissured hide of ancient sea fish – *coelacanth* or *nothosaur*. The rocks lay worn. Humped here in a timeless wash, benign in the warmth of July or August.

People come all summer to picnic or play, to jump from the rocks' smoothed edges into the gasping chill of the lake below, rising like buckshot from their plunge, water streaming from skin shocked white then flushed with red. Clutching small shrubs to anchor their climb, they scabble to the top to jump again, and again... ascending with a shout or a gasp.

They come in parties of brightly clad girls with tuxedoed beaus, or in pairs: to catch up on important gossip, to kiss, or to watch sudden storms rise from the north and rumble in through the sunset still pinked at their backs.

Some come alone in the cooler air of autumn to walk the looping paths of the park's interior, further in from the lake where oak, basswood and maple shelter deer or rabbits, the scuttle of squirrels in dry leaf. Here, the water is only a distant murmur. With only the occasional whir of an insect's wing or the buzzing chatter of a curious

chickadee to startle them from their reverie, they circle in calm meditation – and perhaps prayer.

That fall, I came alone. I came to pray but could not.

Parking my car on the east-facing loop far from public trails, I'd grab my bag, duck my head and set off on a familiar path toward sandstone cliffs and the generous blue of Lake Superior skies. Passing the park's wooden gazebo, my eyes scanned the benches set along the wooden railing, measuring an acceptable distance between others and the solitude I planned at the base of a slow-rising hill, in the gentle vee it formed with grassy headlands. Here, a silver bleached oak cradled my back and hid my slight frame from the sight of others. Here, tired of the slow-dripping collapse of my marriage, the misery of losses too numerous to count, I could place myself with firm resolve at the outer margins of my life... seeking any place that might offer absolution.

I'd sit for my hour, usually bent over a pile of needlework in my lap. (As if I could stitch a family back together. As if the patient tug of needle through cloth might calm my angry heart.)

At times the slow drowse of the afternoon sun offered temporary relief from my troubled thoughts. I would close my eyes and imagine myself on this high scrap of earth – the prow of a massive ship sailing out on those open waters, serene and stately.

More often, a gusting wind would stir a restless response, urging me to my feet, to the cliff's edge – as close as I dared – one hand stretched out to grasp the sturdy security of the sun-warmed railing.



There I would stand, suspended in the margins of the fading season, scanning the far horizon like the wife of some lost sailor, pacing the planks of my widow's walk. On such days, I fancied I might suddenly stoop to pluck up the broken dreams that lay scattered at my feet, clench them in a hard-edged fist and fling them out over the breaking waves below. I imagined them careening away over the lake's steely surface, out toward Canada where they could shatter themselves on the craggy shores of ancient volcanoes – burn in the cool blue flame of long-dead fires.

On such days, I could not bow my head. My knees would not accommodate the grit of sand on stone. Prayer was a broken contract, an emptied bottle. Faithless, senseless babble. A ranting journey without destination.

What good was *prayer*? What had it ever done for *me*...?

### *Before I Wake*

My parents taught me to pray when I was very young, I suppose but can't remember. In those days – the early 1960s – most children prayed, each of us, every night, on our knees at the side of our beds, chanting a soothing ritual, *Now I lay me down to sleep...*

I looked like every other little girl I knew, with short pixie hair or long ringlet curls; Susie, Debbie, Mary, all of us in flannel pj's or nightgowns. On the walls of our bedrooms, just over the dresser, hung the familiar framed sepia prints of Jesus, his hair

long and wavy, eyes brown – like mine – and gazing off into some imagined future. Gentle Jesus, kind and mild. I thought he looked mostly sad.

My prayers, I imagine, were like theirs, too – grace over supper or the “God-bless” type: God bless Mommy, God bless Daddy, God bless Bootsy (my cat). God bless my sister Kathy (and protect us both from the imaginary alligator who lingers in that shadowed gap between our beds). Even God bless Sharon – my older sister - but only on the nights when I felt generous.

I would begin, *Now I lay me down to sleep*, asking God to bless them all, and close, each night, with the prayer’s familiar ending, as I’d been taught: *If I should die before I wake, I pray to God my soul to take.*

To the child I was then, these last words were a formula for unvoiced terror, gave shape to the faint anxiety that had already begun to shiver the edges of my daylight hours. *Was I to die that night?* Would God really snatch me away from my parents before dawn? Or might the witch that lived under my robe in the closet finally have her way, turning my innards to black goop?

Even later, when I was old enough to enter school and lose my baby worries, the shape of this question remained, though its character had evolved: Where *was* my soul to go...?

It was the mid-1960s at the height of the cold war, on the brink of steamy jungle war in far-off Vietnam.

We lived near Selfridge Air Force Base, close enough to hear bombers race overhead, crashing the speed barrier and loosening the air above in booming waves of

thunder. The sound arrived almost a full minute after the last jet had passed. I always had time – every time – to hit the sidewalk, the grassy lawn, my bedroom floor. It didn't matter where I was; I got as flat as I could. This was it. The end of the world had arrived.

My Uncle Gordie (not really an uncle, but a college buddy of my dad's) visited occasionally, bringing stories with him from some important job in Washington DC, tales offered low-voiced just outside my bedroom window, on the patio where the grown-ups sat with bottles of cold Stroh's. Tales filled with missiles and Communists, a bay filled with pigs. The Jose family just down the street had a bomb shelter filled with water and canned goods. In school, we practiced drills: hiding beneath our desks or marching in orderly rows to the basement library where we lined up according to grade in darkened hallways. The building was marked with a familiar sign: three yellow triangles touching at their corners in the middle of a black circle labeled "Fallout Shelter."

*If I should die before I wake....*

By the time I reached ten, and then twelve, prayer seemed a flimsy defense against the promise of apocalypse.

I wondered sometimes what my parents prayed for. Surely they had their own fears to appease. Surely their words, the shape of their phrasing, were superior to mine, more confident and correct.

Maybe they prayed for the practical things that fed our comfortable suburban life. A new car every couple of years, the health of my sisters and me, a raise or promotion, the continued confidence of the post-war years...perhaps. But theirs must have held terrors, too. Smiling Jack Kennedy and a boom economy, then smiling Jack gone and

with him the innocence that had fed those prayers, the lost days when all a guy wanted was a girl whose only wish was a pledge pin from her fraternity sweetheart. Letters exchanged from Korea. White cake, lace, vacations every summer.

I hope my parents prayed – and I believe they did – for something with shape and scope large and luminous. Flexible, accommodating. Big enough to tether us each to our earth, to whatever God my sisters and I finally chose. Some Thing, some One, to keep us safe in event of terrors that were then beyond imagination.

But... back then when I was five or six, my prayers – simple star wishing – were limned with fear. Despite what country songs of the current century suggest, Jesus never jumped off the bedroom wall to help me when I woke scared at night.

To find some peace, I had to get clever. And in the cause of honesty, I have to give the credit for my solution to a friend from school who told me she ended her prayers with a simple substitution for that dreadful last line: *May angels watch me through the night and wake me with the morning light.*

Angels seemed possible and mostly benign from what I'd learned at Sunday school.

As for the morning light, it mostly just kept coming.

### *Anciently Praying*

As a teen, I sang in the youth choir at St. Paul's Methodist, where my single voice, combined in a chorus, seemed somehow mightier than the thready warbling of

Mrs. Trimble, the almost weekly soprano soloist. We gathered in sections – alto, tenor, soprano, bass – each Wednesday night, just after youth group where we practiced exercises in Serendipity, tolerated the occasional doubter, and learned to read the Bibles we'd received back in third grade.

I loved the Psalms! Those ancient songs, fierce and tender by turns, written by compatriots of David and other long-dead kings and heroes. There was, admittedly, a lot of wailing, a whole lot of war and other trouble. Many were framed as extended laments, the tears, shouts and struggles of women and men whose struggles seemed strangely close, along with their tone – the absolute assurance of a response from the god they called – whether rescue, simple reassurance, or the future desolation of a common enemy. The Psalmists prayed a two-way path – Reb Tevye on his roof, fiddling his way toward conversation with his god – up close and wholly personal.

The Psalms held beauty – poesy and extolling; praise and joyous dancing. The bright blare of trumpets, clashing cymbals, harps, lyres and timbrel... sincere appreciation for all God's great creation: cedars and lambs, cattle and ravens.

Psalm 23 – the first we were to memorize, carried in its sonorous language the absolute promise that even in the darkest valleys, God walked with us. We could let go our fears and take up confidence.

The Psalms were promise set to song. In the 70s, I could groove on that and on the reverence written between each line – the steadiness that might carry me safely through the turbulent years I sensed ahead. My favorite then, as now, was Psalm 121: A Song of Ascents.... *I will lift up mine eyes to the hills – From whence cometh my help?*

*My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved...*”

I needed the certainty promised in those Psalms. I was fifteen and about to disappear.

Some time in early high school, the vague drift of anxiety I’d carried from my baby days caught up with me. The habits of foot-tapping and hair-twirling, taken up in grade school to tame the catch-breath of anxiety I carried to school each day, no longer worked. The boys circled my former childhood friends, hungry, watching as chests swelled and legs lengthened. College-prep English and SAT scores; a beaded strand of A’s stretching back through 8<sup>th</sup> grade; the unstinting approval of my father as he set each report card in its glassed casing along the stairwell: all framed some fairly tall orders – expectations and bargaining that might prove hard to live up to. No one knew what I did: it was all a sham. I was not even close to deserving all their praise. I would be exposed at any moment, all my bright achievements unraveling from some spool of fate outside my control.

I set some rituals in place: ten sit-ups, then fifteen, and then a hundred, after each meal. A full glass of water just before to swell an empty belly full, leaving no room for steak and potato. A scale set on the bathroom floor, calibrated to a careful zero each morning before I eased one foot, then the other, onto its sandpaper finish: 110 pounds, then 100. 96 down to 80...72.

I resurrected an old practice from my childhood days, rising early each morning (before my sister could sharply observe me at breakfast – one small rectangle of toast cut

into four careful dry patches; early, before she could jeer as I packed my lunch: 10 Wheat Thin crackers and a carrot, cut into sticks).

I would pad up the stairs kitten-quiet to stare at my mother where she sat, alone in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Sometimes she was reading in a small cone of light, or writing out a list of one kind or another. But most often she was just sitting, sipping coffee. Staring out the darkened windows to whatever vision filled her morning.

Lifting her eyes to the hills. Waiting for help.

She seemed so sure it would come.

### *Praying in Church*

By the time I was an adult, I prayed only in the empty language of an uneasy Christian – one or two steps up from true skeptic – my faith carved hollow by a penchant for shame, the constant nag of these convictions: my husband no longer loved me, preferring the hazy smoke of our basement to my company; I was stuck in this timeless cycle of booze and self-pity, hiding from friends, wasting my fine degree and talents in a nowhere job, such a disappointment....

And the kicker: my drinking had killed my babies.

The comfort of childlike blessings, the sonorous language of the Psalmists seemed by now a futile school-girl's exercise in geography – church – combined with simple algebra: lay out the variables – your pain, sorrows, joys – and then lift them up for solution.

But answers and relief never came, or if they did, I could not discern.

The bent heads that I observed from the choir loft where I sat in church each week (front row, third seat from the wall) I perceived as the devout actions of people who could summon, by better language, stronger faith and finer actions, a solution greater than the sum of my own puny efforts – could call forth a being who would actually intervene, bringing the solace or outcome that they sought. As for me, the contract had been broken, the loss of prayer my penalty. I never doubted my God, only how to find him. Only whether he could still care for me.

I'd messed up.

Still, I continued the formulas of intercessory prayer, as if I could earn my way back on the roles of redemption:

Ann's husband Jack was back on the oncology unit.

*Lord, help him!*

Bob's cousin Owen had recently divorced.

*Lord, send comfort!*

God... really? *Another* earthquake? *Another* school shooting?

*What the hell can I do?*

By the end of most services, I'd fallen into a sponginess that left me weeping for hours over some tragic situation or person I'd never even met. My rote participation in the familiar phrasing of intercessory prayer seemed self-centered, the equation in the back of my conscience: *If I pray for you, it will get better for me.*



Years later, my friend, Leigh shared *The Story of the Burning Bush*. Not the one in Exodus 3:1-15, but this version she related after a family trip home to her in-laws in Duluth. Picture it: Thanksgiving Day. All the rushing around to prepare the big feast; the smell of turkey, gravy on the stove; dogs looking for scraps. Football and ancient arguments revitalized by strong drink; cousins, uncles, with whiskers and without ... and one four-year-old girl in a green velvet dress with something very big on her mind.

Leigh relates that she sat in a corner – an in-law, no real job but to observe – as the little girl spent her day going from grown-up to grown-up, tugging at a pant leg here, a skirt there. First, wandering into the kitchen where there was way too much action, next back to the uncles in the den where they were watching football and it was far too noisy.

Finally, Miss Velvet stood right in front of the television set, hands on her hips waiting for the verbal outcry and general leaning around her small body to come to a halt... and here is what came out of her mouth:

*“Finally! What do I have to do to get someone to listen around here? Set a bush on fire?”*

Well.... it worked for Moses. He got some answers. He got *instructions*.

In my heart, I knew I was an arsonist, setting my own fires. Busy, busy, fanning the flames – rushing forward, heedless of the damage. Expecting nothing.

And nothing changed.

How could it?

I had laid out the following formula:  $x^2 + y^2 = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ .

And as any school girl can figure, you can't solve for:  $\underline{\hspace{2cm}}$ .

### *Praying Sober*

The first things I heard on the alcohol re-hab unit were framed as suggestions:

*Keep it simple, Let Go and let God, Easy does it....* I was mostly crabby in the morning before coffee and did not find it a good time for chit-chat or aphorisms, let alone prayer. Besides, what did these people know? There was *nothing* easy about my life just then. This was all just mumbo-jumbo, simple platitudes for simpler minds.

“Oh, but this will be easy for you!” my counselor exclaimed. “You already know about a Higher Power. You have a church background.” I didn't bother to correct her assumptions. I was already convinced that years of going it alone had brought me exactly...here. And here was pretty damned miserable. Why not try God – prayer – again?

One suggestion seemed simple enough, and I tried it every morning that I spent on the unit: *God, I'd begin, please help me stay sober just for today.* Sometimes I didn't remember until fairly late in the morning, but usually, by noon I'd given it a shot even if – as it did when the cravings cried loudest – the prayer had changed to something like:

*Lord, please help me not want a drink for just the next ten minutes, a half-hour if you're*

*feeling generous.* Even if by late afternoon, my polite requests translated better as imperative: *Keep me sober dear Lord because I really want to chew that fat-fuck's face off and – truly – neither one of us thinks that's a good idea, right?*

It worked.

I stayed sober, first for minutes, then by hours and days.

When I was well enough to attend my first 12-step meetings, one of the first formal prayers I learned was the Serenity Prayer. The idea was that drunks like me need to learn how very, very little of our lives are under our control. It taught me, supposedly, to seek help from a higher power – any power – as long as it wasn't me. This seemed advisable. I could see where my own best efforts had landed me.

I prayed the lines incessantly at first, chanting them like a mantra left on re-dial, with middling results until I hit on my own version of the prayer, naming specific problems, substituting names of actual people for the word “things” that appears in each line. What came out at first was often something like this:

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the marriage I cannot change; the courage to change the Stewart I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Occasionally, I'd change it up and throw in the name of one of my children, left behind at home with their dad. And, I felt better almost immediately. The variables had shifted and I was better able to sort out where my role started and where God just might have to take over. Something inside me had

subtly reconfigured when I flattened myself prostrate and powerless. I became right-sized, recognizing the need for help.

Acceptance proved the missing variable on the other side of my equation, the mental equivalent of the numeral zero – an absence of specific expectation. Acceptance was a real number, empty and waiting.

I could live with this equation. I could move forward, asking only for direction, for only the very next right action - God working through the open promise of zero.

### *Praying with Trees*

Much of prayer is voiceless, tales spun out in a space without words. Benedictine hours play out, dripping slow as honey. Pilgrims walk on in silent ranks, intentional, two steps forward, one step back, focused on the quiet....

I pray these days mostly in the woods, where noise is emptied of all but birdsong. There, a story is waiting – from a day I spent walking in the woods with Jim one spring, some six or seven years ago. By walking, I mean to say I was sitting on the edge of an old quarry, waiting for Jim to finish his rustling around a half-mile or more back in the woods where he searched for black morels.

The story winds along like the underground runner of a wild strawberry plant that lay at my feet, binding my fretted musings under the loose litter of winter-wasted

leaves. The story was looking for its beginning, its ending – its shape. I already knew its center; the shape of an aching need that drove me to the woods that day.

(Did the story know me? *You?* )

The day before there had been three separate telephone calls from the middle-school camp, forty miles to our north where I'd dropped Ben a day or two before, each call building on its intensity of want and longing.

Call # 1: "Mom, I just want to come home. *Please.*"

"No, Ben, we want you to stay. It's only Tuesday – hang in there. It'll be fun. Aren't you enjoying your classes? Isn't there *one* fun thing? Fishing? Star-gazing? Staying up late to read under the covers with your flashlight? The counselor skits?"

Call #2: This time, Ben used a different phone to place his call; an unfamiliar number lit up on my caller i.d., and I was tricked into picking it up.

"But *Mom*, will you *please* come tomorrow? If I call again tomorrow in the morning, will you come? You could come at lunch. Mr. Andersen said it was okay."

*Damn*, he's good! If only he'd put that resourcefulness to use and try to enjoy himself.

"Yes," I sighed, "You can call tomorrow, Ben." But I wasn't intending to go. I offered up my lie and ignored the *ping* of acknowledgement my conscience sent instantly to store in my mental bad-mommy file.

There was a soft snuffle, a note of resignation. "You'll just say 'maybe' again tomorrow, Mom, won't you? You're just trying to make me stay."

"Ben, your dad and I both want you to stay. We know it's hard, but you'll feel so proud of yourself if you stick it out. *We'll* be so proud. It's only two more days."

Call #3 came around 9:30, at bedtime, with tears behind it. “*Mom!*” I just want to come home.”

“Goodnight Ben. I love you.”

I hung up the phone, and this time my tears came as well.

So, on this day with Jim, I was out in the woods that I love. I was looking for the shape and scope of a prayer big enough, strong enough to bind my lost teen-aged boys, Ben and his brother, Alex. To anchor them in lives that might just push forward.

I thought of a newscast I’d seen several days before. Two men had gone fishing on Lake Gogebic, two counties west. It happened the evening of the first full day of walleye season. These two guys had pointed the bow of their boat toward shore and revved up the motor full out at 30 knots, about 35 miles an hour. An abrupt jerk and they both tumbled out in a sharply angled plunge into cold water, the anchor rope forgotten in their turning toward home. Two men went out. One made it home.

The days of my two boys in their doubt and their turmoil, in their unvoiced, endless need were like that – suspended somewhere between the rush and the fall, unanchored.

They have no faith, and I am mute before them, terrified by the depth of their dependency. Our days – our encounters – had become a plodding trail of pleas and bargains. I walked sometimes still in the hair shirt of my previous marriage, mired again in half-lies I once accepted as full currency for truth:

*It’s you that’s the problem, you know. You’re the mom - you’re the problem. It’s all your fault. You’re not strong; you don’t do enough. You’re not enough. Never enough.*

That voice played again that morning in the woods. I remember it clearly. But I was armed that morning knowing some things I hadn't in the years just before.

I knew from the forest spread before me that spring takes some seeking, some courting here at this northern latitude. That courting, takes a blind sort of courage, driven by desire, hormones, seeking. Some known but faceless god is unleashed in the renewal of light each spring.

In this light, we know some things. We know the first leaves of the wild strawberry plant are edged in silver. Later, in the deep and glossy green of full summer, their profile turns to saw-toothed rust, but today in the chilly bowl of the old quarry, their leaves are mottled with sunlight as tender as the down I spotted earlier in a twig-bowl nest of a nearby thrush.

*(Are we ready yet to call this knowledge prayer?)*

Look closer: We know that in the spring, snails cast their shells in twists of swirling coral on the cool green of limestone. We see that a young rabbit has survived its night in the shelter of the cedar brush at my feet.

Closer still: Snails are creeping, naked in new skin.

Prayer – it's a rope that knows when to hold, and when to let go.

And when we do, we are transformed.

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Later that night, I was in the living room, looking out the window at the evening's last light, the red-budded maple tree outlined against the sky.

My day in the woods had helped, but I was still feeling restless and out of sorts. I thought of a meditation I'd once read "for those enmeshed in a chaotic life."

This meditation posited there are three separate beings that make the whole you. There's your doing self, your spiritual self, and your emotional self – all rushing in every direction, avoiding one another like views snatched from a dressing room mirror.

Your job is to be still. Sit. Breathe in. Breathe out. Invite them to the center.

"Together... together...together..." That's the suggested mantra.

"Bull-shit, leftover 80s self-help drivel," I muttered. I had tried some of this before. I'd subscribed for a while to an on-line Belief Net site- deliverer of daily sayings and quizzes to test my spiritual wellbeing. Friends on Facebook invited me daily to read *What God Wants You to Know This Day*, and I did read them, but usually forgot them as soon as the words disappeared from the rapid-screen electronics of my computer.

But this night, I tried the chant. And it worked, slowly, once I got past the silliness of sitting with my eyes closed wondering who might wander into the living room while I tried it.

What I felt was a physical welcome home. I could actually feel my breathing shift, swinging wildly right, returning from way out left – seeping slowly toward my center.

Almost.

"*But this can't last,*" I protested. My body fought the settling in, insisted on the familiarity of anxiety, the daily adrenalin that kept my muscles pulled taut like catgut in an exquisite knot of coiled tension.



I knew this pain, this tension. This persistent notion that there's something I could be, should be, fixing. This coil was *mine*. It was so hard to let it go. Harder still to let God pick it up.

But something had shifted.

At last – inevitably – my will gave way like a fretful child held long past bedtime. The prayer I'd resisted all day was there before me, as it had been all along.

I left the next morning, headed up the Big Bay Road toward camp and my homesick son.

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Maybe it was the tree outside the window that revealed my prayer – its resolution. Stick with me: this is no idle whimsy. The tree knows this: you can see through its branches to what was always there – or perhaps only just now revealed.

Watching the tree in the waning late light, I noticed that each young branch had its own form, shaped by wind, water, sap and the porous cambium layer held tight beneath its bark, unseen. Some branches bent sharply downward, some hugged the frame. Others shot up wildly, unheeding. But all pushed outward, away from where they started and on the verge of change.

That night, I learned again, as I will again and yet again, that 90% of any useful prayer is getting myself out of the way. Leaning forward. Straining outward. Sitting still.

The wind was coming up through the open window, cold. But I stayed where I was, unworried, with one more thing to learn. This skeletal trunk before me – scaly and scarred – was strong enough to bear its branches because patient silence is in its design. Even the most barren limb will deck itself again with promise. Function shapes form, and when we get it right, leaves are stirred in a sudden breeze.

I laughed out loud at this notion:

*Our prayers – when we get them just right.... God claps.*

The proper response, raised in antiphony: a simple thank you.

### *Praying from Cliffs*

Ancient pilgrims once walked toward Jerusalem, two steps forward, one step back. The Celts walked labyrinth paths, weaving word and need inward toward the center and out once again, in an unvoiced ceremony of renewal. Benedictine sisters measured out their days in hours like honey, creating pockets of quiet – intentional space for reflection.

Me? I still place myself on cliffs, gazing out at the Big Lake, my toes inched up to the impossible margin between self and Other: God, Buddha, friend, spirit, Gaia, Mother.

And today, I know just one more big thing:

This lake has its rhythms, its own timeless cycles of loss and renewal. Eighty miles out and more, water moves in a long cylindrical roll some 1300 feet deep. It is waveless there. Particles spin in tight eddies that diffuse the forward motion of the lake's

vast swells. A piece of driftwood, a wandering tern, an errant dream – all will bob in place, trapped in the gentle up-and-down motion of the lake’s indifferent center.

If you want *your* dreams – your shouts or muted needs – to shift and swell, to gain new luster, you must cast them close to shore. Cup them gently and toss them lightly forth on the heaving waters beneath you. The long-distance fetch of wind across the lake’s broad surface will gather energy as it rushes again toward you; lift the water high and spin your need up and over against the slow friction of shore and your waiting soul. There, in that margin where God waits, your hope will dash against the hard wisdom of sandstone shoals... tumble in the backwash, again and again until it emerges, something new.

Something changed and fine.

Something like a prayer.

ZONA PELLUCIDA

A boy jumps onto his red bike and pedals half  
a heart, into the wind.

Fox rasps his hollow need at the fence  
by the garden.

A cicada sheds its skin and spreads her legs open to sun  
as squash gulp green from sky.

At the moment of our conception  
a zygote cleaves in synchronous motion,  
two cells without gender,  
embracing each other,  
intact – a sea surge, then  
retreat.

*How can we live with the shape of our longing?*

Thisbes whispers to Pyramus her love for  
the wall.

## THE FISHING ONE

Pick any Sunday between, say, May and September, December through March, and you're likely to find me standing at the edge of a circle of men, downstairs around 10:00 am in the Social Room of the First United Methodist Church.

I am at the edge because they are talking about fishing, and unless they know Jim or me well, they are not aware we share a passion for fishing. Anytime, anywhere we think they're biting, any (almost) weather.

George Pennell is usually there in the circle. "Say, Jim," he'll begin, "Been out to Little Shag lately?" Jim will rumble his response, and then someone – maybe Chris Hatherly – will chime in with a comment that the bite is on out at Schweitzer's Reservoir, or some other inland waterway.

Sometimes, I'll interrupt, just to get them to move over a little – to include me in their conversation. Most times I don't, content to let them maintain the conceit that well-dressed and comely women like me just don't do un-lady like things like slipping on rocks and gravel; scrabbling in the bottom of boats for a pair of jaw-spreaders; sliding wax worms onto hooks; or walking out on the cracks of early ice... just to land "the big one."

It's fun to note the surprise on a stranger's face when I throw in a comment that demonstrates my now near-perfect expertise in the language of angling.

It wasn't that way at the first.

My earliest memories of fishing are from long, long ago – so long that they may be only the false type, projected onto a mental screen of recall that comes from photos one has seen time and time again. There’s my grandpa in the old rowboat out on Round Lake, my sister in a faded orange life vest, twisted on the seat looking back at me, her tongue poked out in a clear “na-na-na-na-nah” gesture. Me left behind on the dock.

There’s my favorite picture: Grandma Wildern in the type of outfits they still sell at Gander Mountain – all mesh-lined pocket vests and bibs with suspenders and attached rubber wader boots. She has a big ol’ string of perch and sunfish spread out on a stringer held in her hands. A bigger-yet grin beams from her face. Clearly, these are fish she has caught.

But I never fished until later, just before my divorce. A time in my life when running to the woods, or the water, held the appeal of time for reflection. Time to think, an excuse to leave husband and children behind.

I didn’t know how to fish. Didn’t really have a clue. Where... *how* should I begin?

At first, I bugged a guy from work. Where should I start? (*The deck at Harlow’s Pond, the one they built to accommodate wheelchair-bound anglers.*) What type of equipment would I need? (*Steel leaders, treble hooks, some worms, some lures, and – obviously – a rod and reel.*) What about bait? (*Try potato chips – this from a friend in New York City. I think he was kidding.*)

I purchased a license at Dick’s Sporting Goods, a great old store that has since vanished, outclassed by Wal-mart, Gander Mountain and the like.

My first attempts were not successful. I cast my line, zinging out far over the pond, dragging bottom with my too-heavy sinkers, dragging up weeds, and losing more than one (expensive) Rapala lure. I did, one gorgeous morning with heavy fog just beginning to lift under diffused summer sun, hear the rasping wonk of a blue heron as she hunted on the opposite shore. As the mist drifted away, I spotted her there, first stalking then spearing her breakfast.

On subsequent attempts, I moved to the Tourist Pond dam, and here – accompanied by a flask of really good Scotch whiskey – landed my first catch: a smallmouth bass, maybe eight inches nose to tail. Startled at the first tug I'd felt against line, I'd pulled up hard to set the hook, flipping the fish up and over my head. I stared where it flopped on the grass then squatted down to ease the hook from its mouth in a squelching *soookkk*. I threw the fish in a baggie I'd brought *just in case*, grabbed up my gear and raced to my car, heading to my friend Melissa's house nearby where I knew her husband Greg would first admire and then show me how to clean the thing.

Greg greeted me at the door, took the fish – admired it properly – and then, as he prepared to filet my catch, informed me kindly that the DNR would not find my fish legal as a keeper. Even stretching it out, my first fish had no chance of meeting the fourteen-inch minimum requirement.

That was the end of my fishing for a while. Trouble in the marriage, the upheaval of moving out, getting sober, finding new employment – all interfered with my new would-be hobby.

One thing held steady, though: my church. And that is where I showed up some two years later on a Wednesday night for choir rehearsal, took my seat and heard a new and very deep male voice out in the hallway, chatting with someone about fishing.

The man entered the room, ducking his head shyly as he looked for a welcoming face. The director moved forward to assign a folder and a sheaf of anthems, and then pointed out a vacant seat in the back row with the other bass voices.

It was Jim, himself newly divorced and looking for a new church home.

Denise, tried to catch my eye. She thought any new man without a ring was destined for me. My first thoughts? Honestly, I thought something like this: “Uh uh... no rebound romance for you, never again! Concentrate on your kids, your sobriety. Leave this one to someone else. Besides, he’s obviously not ready; he looks so sad – like a kid who just watched his best friend kick his puppy.”

But over the next few weeks, Jim kept showing up, and he kind of grew on me. He had a deep, true bass, a genuine chuckle, and then there was my memory of that fishing conversation out in the hallway....

One spring night, having finished up rehearsal and put away my music, I followed Jim out and as he shrugged his way into his coat, I shyly mentioned that “I just took up fishing recently and maybe, some day, if he wasn’t too busy or anything, maybe he’d like to take me along. As a friend. Just to help me learn.”

And he did. But not before others at the church watched the early stage of our courtship. On the night he followed me in the dark to my car and invited me to a concert the next evening, I turned him down, thinking how impossible it would prove to find a babysitter on short notice. But as he turned to go, so did my mind – *Crazy fool! You*



*know he's been waiting weeks, screwing up his courage to ask you out!* So I called him back. "Jim... I'll work it out. Yeah, sure. I'd love to go to the concert."

On our second date, he took me fishing.

I drove up to his house, waved hello to Erin, his teen-aged daughter standing at the door, and walked over to where Jim stood in the driveway. "We're waiting for Doug," he explained as he loaded a sled with auger, buckets, and the truncated type of slender pole used for fishing through ice.

"Doug *who*?" I wondered. But soon enough, Doug drove up, heaving his generous body out from his own beat-up truck, Carhart bibs straining against his Humpty Dumpty belly, his blue eyes warm. He shot me a giant grin. "So, you're Susan! Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get fishin'"

We all piled in, three on the broad front seat of Doug's pick-up, drove south toward Gwinn, singing along to old Statler Brothers favorites. "Say there, Suz," Doug exclaimed. "You make a pretty good tenor. I'll sing baritone, Jim can be the bass, and we'll have a hit on our hands." And so we sang our way down the road to Big Shag Lake.

We dragged our sleds down a snowy slope and onto the frozen water. My first steps were tentative. Would the ice hold me, all 105 pounds, maybe 110 with my gear? That question was answered when Jim augured the first hole and I peered – for the first time ever – into a hole rimmed by ice twelve inches thick, reflecting up to my wondering eyes the blue of a late August moon; the mystery caught in the layers of ice created

between daytime melt and midnight freeze; shades of gray, white or silver shimmering in between.

We got down to business. Jim set me up with a chair, a line, a jig and a wiggler and showed me how to find my depth, an inch or so off the bottom of the lake. “Just wiggle it up and down every now and then,” he instructed. “You’ll feel a tug if you get a bite and then, just pull up quick and set the hook.”

“Keep your line tight, though” he continued as he walked away to auger his own set of holes. “If you let it go slack, the fish will find its way off your hook.”

I don’t remember if I caught a single fish that day. I do remember some things: Jim’s growing pile of pretty nice bluegills. The ache of my feet, freezing in boots that were just plain inappropriate for the cold of this mid-March afternoon. Jim’s pole suddenly bent under the weight of something heavier than usual, an out-of-season walleye he coaxed up through the hole and slid out on the ice. He was just about to throw it back when Doug hollered from his perch on top of the sled he’d inverted to sit on: “Are you crazy, Morgan? That’s a darned fine walleye, and you’re walking home if you throw it back down that hole! Just push it over here; I’ll take care of it.”

And he did, sliding it neatly under the sled before resuming his seat on its top side. “Don’t you worry about the DNR,” he called over to Jim. “I’ll take the hit.”

My first real fishing trip, and I was complicit in breaking the rules spelled out in the tiny black type of my nearly-new license. I was violating.

Our second or third time out, Jim took me fishing for brook trout in early May, on the west branch of the Escanaba River. We bumped along a dirt road maybe four feet

across, parked the truck, slid down a long hill and fought our way through tag alder to the stream. Partridges drummed every minute or so, calling out for springtime love – the thrum of their drumming on hollow logs felt deep in my chest for a split-second before the actual sound reached us.

“The water’s still a little high,” Jim called over his shoulder as I trailed behind. He’d showed me how to hold the pole behind me so the tip wouldn’t break and the line wouldn’t catch. But I was having trouble. I’d walk blithely on for a step or so, only to get caught up short when I heard the *whizzzz* of drag from the reel as my line got snagged on yet another branch.

This was a lot more work than I’d planned for.

We finally slid into the stream on a stretch of sand, and my breath stopped short; my heart held still for a beat, then two. Water a little high? For sure! And damned cold.

Jim then proceeded to set a pattern that holds to this day: Threading a worm onto a hook, with or without a flashing spinner. The casual expertise of his over-handed cast, ten feet or so before him; bobbing the bait lightly along the river’s graveled bottom where trout like to spawn, or just float, suspended in a warming sun.

“You stay to the right,” he called back to me over the rushing sound of the cold spring melt-off. “I’ll fish the left shore.” It hardly mattered. Within minutes, I was so far back that the fish could easily forget all about Jim, missing the fact that another angler was sneaking up from behind.

Well, not exactly sneaking. I had trouble keeping my hook from snagging on the bottom, the line floating back toward me instead of floating lightly forward, as Jim’s had. Chubs and shiners – early spring fry – nibbled away on my worms before I noticed I’d

been fishing for minutes with no bait at all. And the trees seemed to lean out purposely every time I tried to cast. I must have stopped at least ten times before I caught up to Jim, where he was fishing a deep hole just behind an old beaver dam, each time repeating the same routine: First, wade over to the side of the stream. Reach up as high as you can to catch the line, then pull the branch down toward you – gently! You don't want to break the line. Somehow unwrap the line from its several revolutions around said branch, loosen the hook, thread another worm, and start all over again.

I also fell in the water at least five times, sputtering to my feet with language strong enough to startle fish from their hiding holes. In one fall, the current swept me out beyond my depth, and I panicked until my dangling feet found bottom again.

I was cold. Really cold. Was this supposed to be fun? But I was a trouper, determined not to let Jim in on my secret: I was miserable.

We stopped fishing that day when Jim looked back and noticed that my hands were shaking so hard that when I tried to thread a worm on my tackle, I couldn't keep my hands any closer than five inches above or below each other, refusing to meet in the middle where the hook patiently waited.

Hypothermia. We hiked back to the truck, and I skinned out of every stitch of my cold, wet clothing. Jim started up the truck, hauled a blanket out from the cab, wrapped it around my shaking frame, and cranked the heat up as high as it would go. I was still shivering when we reached Marquette, a forty-minute drive home.

But quit? No way. I was in love.

First with the fishing and, soon enough, with Jim.

(The next spring, fishing downstate on the Canada Creek, near Onaway, my brother-in-law Dave walked beside me in a shallower stream, in warmer waters. All day he served as my fish caddie, teaching me – wordless – to let my line simply float and then bounce. Drift and then search. Let it float lightly and lazy; the fish will find you.)

What followed was a summer I still think of as enchanted.

First, I learned to walk the railroad tracks at Goose Lake, south on M-35, feet slipping between each tie, rolling on iron ore pellets spilled like marbles from the trains that run between mine and docks at the mouth of the Dead River, filling the freighters that wait at its mouth in Marquette's Upper Harbor.

May 15: Walleye opener in Michigan, still cold enough to see your breath when the sun goes down – young guys, workers from the mines, camped out by open fires on the banks of the lake. And soon, my first keeper. I threw him up on the tracks and watched carefully lest he might somehow find his way magically back, squirming through the pellets at the edge of the tracks, gasping his way down the bank of alder and rock, until – at last, he escaped me, and my pride in the catch. (I held my breath as the bucket cars of the train rattled the tracks we stood on. First a quick two hoots of the horn, about a half-mile up at the mine, and then, coming our way and passing – scant feet behind us – each car holding seventy tons or more of instantaneous death should the train derail.)

In June, we pushed away from the dock at the Greenwood Reservoir in Jim's old aluminum rowboat, close enough to the water's surface that my hand could skim the colors from the sun as it sank in the west – later in mid-July, just beginning to fade at

10:30; not quite fully gone even in the early hours past midnight, the sky simply dimmed like a lamp to its deepest shade of gray.

We caught fish back then. Full limits of bluegill, crappie, the occasional pike, and bass: those we nearly always threw back, their flesh too muddy, speckled with grubs in the warmed waters of summer.

At night, we pulled out boat up to the island where we'd earlier pitched a tent and built up a fire, to be lit upon our return. I'd walk from the shore up the hill, past the outcrop of rock where Jim set up a plank for cleaning the day's catch. And there, lining the trail, like lights set as a welcome, dozens of fireflies, blinking on and then off and then drifting up to the trees above.

One night, I entered the tent to find Jim waiting on the sleeping bags spread out over our air mattress. We made love under the flickering lights of the fireflies he'd scooped in his hands, cupping them gently, and setting them free to light the air above.

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When did the fishing, the dreamtime, early days of our courting take their inevitable turn toward competition, as any sport must do?

The signs were always there. First, when I learned to play cribbage with my new husband. "Jimmy doesn't like to lose at games," his mother shared, her voice a whisper as she leaned in to share this with me during a visit down to Onaway.

Or maybe it was the time we were fishing brookies at the Forestville basin falls. My line had fouled up just after I'd spotted a huge specimen in the pool in front of me.

As I struggled to untangle line from hook, Jim leaned over my shoulder and plucked the monster out of the water before I got the chance.

Later, I noticed that each time we took the boat out, he nosed it in bow-first, the less-experienced me in the back, making it harder to cast to the shallows where the biggest fishies swim. The growing exasperation in his voice when I could not remember how to snell my own line to a hook.

When we moved on to purchase a real boat, used with enthusiasm for years by the elderly couple who sold it – but ours now – with a 70-horse outboard on its back, I enjoyed sitting up front on the padded seats, trailing my hands in the waters that slapped them as we raced our way back to the landing. Enjoyed the time we took my visiting mother out to the Reservoir where she sat up front with a paperback book, finger marking her place, just watching the weeds float by, watching the waves, watching us and enjoying the watching.

And then Jim took out the seats, built up a platform, attached a swivel chair and a trolling motor, and that was that. The sport, the rivalry, had begun. At least as far as I was concerned.

I am not proud of the faces I made, the words in my head or muttered faintly behind his back when he hauled in fish after fish, me still trying to cast around him from my spot further back in the boat. Trying and often failing, or worse yet, getting caught on some log or the crack in some rock that hid underwater. When that happened, we had to circle back past the spot where I'd gotten hung up until I could tug straight up to loosen my line and continue.

I lost more bobbers and hooks than I can count.

Jim's responses to my polite pleas for help – “could you please, ‘next time you get a chance, put another hook on my line?’” – became increasingly curt. Exasperated.

But then... the day arrived: I became a DNR-certified Master Angler.

It happened in the hot afternoon haze of a breathless July day. We'd already scouted a couple of holes, turning left in the main channel to avoid the slipstream of other boats ahead. Gliding along the shore, we waved at a father and two boys who were moored in a deadfall of stumps. As slipped around the corner, Jim poled us past fallen logs into our secret cove, discovered earlier that spring, holding the promise of previous catches. I dropped our three-prong anchor and clambered past Jim's tackle box to take up my station on the port side of the Crestliner. A quick thread of a worm on my hook, and *zeeez*, plink! My bait landed just...there, underneath a shady overhang of brush.

Tip. Tip. Tip. SET! *Gotcha*. I started to reel in my fish, the heavy tension on the line hinting at bounty.

“There's your Master Angler,” Jim calmly stated from the front of the boat.

“Get the net! *Get the net!*” I shouted.

Jim was already there, dipping the water behind the point where my line broke the water. “Don't horse him,” he cautioned. “Slow and steady, just keep the line tight.” No need to tell me twice; I'd already seen the fish, flashing just below the boat, more than ten inches of gleaming blue scale –a monster 'gill. I hauled it on board and quickly flipped it to the deck before I'd even released the hook.



“Do you think he’s big enough?” My voice stretched taut and anxious. “Oh, yeah,” Jim replied. “He’s big enough.” His understated tone offered up both confirmation and redemption. “Well,” he prompted, “what are you waiting for? Put it in the cooler. You don’t want to lose him.”

I quickly complied.

We cast out again and, after a few minutes, I asked “Can we mount him?” Jim’s big catch from the previous summer was proudly displayed over the bookcase in our bedroom. I pictured mine alongside, mounted on its own piece of driftwood from the beach. A casual strand of weed to call up the glory of landing this beauty. Once mine was up there, I too would have the right to call myself a fisherman.

*“I’m a Master Angler!”* My reverie continued. I could already see the coveted DNR patch stitched casually to the side of my lucky fishing cap. *No, maybe not there – a jealous wind might catch my cap and carry it away along with evidence of this proud day.*

We continued to fish, me opening the cooler every ten minutes or so, just to make sure the fish was still there. “Don’t mess up and clean him when we get home,” I blurted; the horrid thought had just broken in as a real possibility. He twisted around in his seat, seeing through my half-joke. Mild scorn flashed across his face: “I won’t.”

The fish had stopped biting, and the flies had come out. We pulled up anchor and readied ourselves to swing back toward shore.

When we got home, Jim put my fish in a Ziplock freezer bag, carefully squeezing out every spare ounce of air. A phone call the next day, and we were out the door again,

on our way down US 41 to the taxidermist. I entered the store in triumph under the beady gaze of a dozen glass-ball eyes. “Come on in,” the owner’s wife Bonnie sang out from the back of the store.

I stepped across the threshold into the work area, heady in my new status: A Master Angler! I held my breath as the countertop scale came out. My fish looked diminished as it lay there on the small white platform. “You’re right on the line,” Bonnie observed. “Exactly one pound.”

“Oh.” My voice came out a little deflated. “Is that enough? Don’t they have to be over a pound?” Jim’s fish weighed more than that, I recalled with sudden alarm. His statistics marched in large black print across my mind.

“Oh, no,” Bonnie quickly assured me. “One pound qualifies you with a ‘gill. We’ll have to confirm it when we thaw it out, though.”

“Oh,” I repeated. My voice had dropped a half-tone lower. Bonnie could see the anxiety on my face. “I’ll call you at home,” she told me. “Oh, no – call me at my work number,” I told her, as if the status of my university job was some kind of fall-back plan. “I might not get the message at home,” I qualified my request. “Teenagers... you know.” Bonnie rolled her eyes in sympathy as Jim and I turned and made our way out the door.

Thursday morning, the call came. I was home for lunch and noticed the message light on the phone flashing red. “Susan... Hi, this is Bonnie from Outdoor Adventures. Your fish is exactly one pound, and we measured it out at eleven and a quarter inches. Congratulations! I’ll send the paperwork to your house, but you’ll have to mail the papers to the DNR yourself....”

Bonnie's voice continued, but I'd already stopped listening.

*Eleven and a quarter inches?*

I pressed the button to save the call and paused a minute as I looked up to the ceiling. I was trying to remember where I'd last seen the tape measure. I trotted to the basement and rummaged around on Jim's work bench until I found it. Back up the basement stairs and into the bedroom where Jim's fish was mounted to the wall. I paused for a moment to brush a small cobweb from the dorsal fin and then, with infinite care, I extended the curved metal edge of the tape. 'Just as I'd thought: his fish measured exactly eleven inches.

A quarter-inch smile played at the corners of my mouth.

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Things have changed a lot since then. I noticed a general turn in attitude when my friend Patty, who works with Jim, repeated something I said at some party – something not so complimentary about how he always hogged the front of the boat. Jim's face had darkened red with embarrassment, and then fell as she tattled on me. Perhaps he felt shame. (Patty still feels bad about that.)

Or, it could be just time and its passing; there are always newer, more worrisome concerns.

To be fair, I've noticed it's generally change for the better. Jim now snells my hooks and wraps them around a cylinder, places it gently in my tackle box where I can reach it, ties a swivel to the newest thing in spider-line (nearly un-snappable) on my reel,

and attaches a short and pliant leader with the hook at its end. The idea: if you snag the hook on a log or other underwater hazard, it's no big deal. You just grab an already-snelled line, complete with hook, and loop it back on through the swivel. Slip on your worm, your leech, or your (new and state-of-the-art) artificial pink worm, loaded with fish-sexy pheromones, and you're back in business. No need to bother your partner at all. I rarely lose a bobber. Or a fish.

We're also using "cheaters" these days – those flashing sonar fish-finders people take out on the ice. On screen, we can see the fish rise from the bottom, hover near our chilly bait, and be on the alert to the light-biting tap at the end of whip-thin rods. Some people use underwater cameras. I'm not sure we're quite ready for that. We still disdain the roar of the noisy snowmobiles that race back and forth, from shore to bay, fish-biting hole to fish-departed hole, faster than we can pull up our gear and relocate. I think the disdain may just mask a little envy for the trailers they haul behind them, useful for the much heavier gas augers, the tents, the propane heaters that now accompany us when we go out on the ice to fish.

I suspect it is I that has changed the most. I don't really care so much about weight or totals after my first fish are caught. As long as I don't get skunked – going home empty-handed – I'm content just to spend time outside, away from the office, away from the kids. Cell phones left behind in the truck. Jim nearby. Fish nearby, too. Or not.

After all, we both eat the fish we catch, no matter who set the hook. They look the same once they're skinned and in the frying pan. And we share them with our

neighbors, often trading our pan fish for their salmon and ‘lakers, caught in their bigger boat, out on bigger waters.

Newer memories now flash across my mind, replacing the earlier grainy scenes from the days when my Grandpa and Grandma displayed their proud stringers of perch and brook trout.

I remember the time when Jim took me out to Bass Lake on late ice. It was his birthday, March 26. The weather was warm but there was still ice enough to bear our weight. We set up close to the mouth of the spring that feeds the lake and pulled from the ice first one, then two, then many rainbow trout. I gloried in their colors, gleaming pinks and blues, their iridescent greens. As soon as they were pulled from the water, their skin began to dusk over like the bloom on a grape –subdued by the heavy air of earth.

Or the day I disappeared – floating up from my body where it languished on the cushions in the stern of the boat, and into the sky – watching a newly-fledged eagle fly high overhead. I imagined myself there with him, pinpointed against the sky in the quiet rush of air.

One night Jim sat at the shore where we’d camped, and patiently called in a beaver to shore, mimicking her plaintive call – almost a moan – as she sought her own springtime lover. She circled our bay once, heading out, then turned to paddle back towards Jim as he called. I watched from the rock where I sat after a dip in the lake.

The beaver swam within fifteen feet from him before slapping the water with her tail, indignant at the ruse.

I call this fishing.

I call this joy.

One last story.

One spring, I slipped once again into the west branch of the Escanaba River, water rushing in chilly eddies, chasing plump trout from their winter resting places. The footing was treacherous along the river's swollen banks and on its gravel beds. Jim was fishing behind and did not hear my startled cry as the current lifted my feet from the river's bottom, spinning me into a deep pool. I leaned back and relaxed, mindful that I must not let the chilly water creep above the level of my bibbed waders.

The river carried me along and spun me in an occasional violent dance of water, at odds with the overhead music of finch and warbler; the flute of hermit thrush. From nearby, I could hear the panicked fluster of a deer thrashing in the tag alder thickets that lined the stream, probably chased there by a coyote, or some other April-hungry predator. We'd seen the imprints of young bear – like human feet with claws – in the mud of beaver slicks and on the sandy shores.

I returned my concentration to my tricky suspension in the river's urgent eddies and missed the deer's entry into the stream, a dozen yards back near Jim.

When I looked up, the young doe was swimming at my side, within the span of my outstretched arm. She was one with the water, and we were swimming, and as we

drifted, matching our dancing steps, I became the fish that rises, the lift of light at the water's dark surface. I was buoyancy and the calm brown of the young deer's liquid gaze as she finally turned her head my way to see me lithe and graceful, rising from the river into the forgiveness of April air.

I was weightless in this prayer, this dance of river and doe and trout.

Perfect in this stream.

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I still grin when the last thing people guess about me is that I love to fish. But I do. And I know a few things I never did before: I know that when the wind has changed and shifted to the east, fish will bite least. I know that when a front is pushing in, the fish will bite well. Or not at all.

I know that on Little Shag, the fish bite best in the ten minutes just after the sun has lowered itself beneath the tree line. And that they will stop, without warning.

These days at church... I let the guys talk. I rarely butt in. They are the boys. I am a girl. They were born here; I have only the claim I have staked: this place is my homestead. There are some walls that should stay in place to better enjoy my steady dream of barriers dissolving before me, like clear water.

But mostly, fishing is for me, the secrecy of what may lie at the other end of my line, past the point where it breaks the tension of the water's surface.

The surface – liquid or encased by ice – is there for a reason, masking mystery. This quest is kin to an impulse that draws me out on some summer nights to stand – slight

and still – in communion with the benign and silvery moon. On such nights, the slightest breeze tugging at my hem, rubbing up against my bare legs, can bring a catch to my breath. Stir up an ache for a space that wells up from some half-remembered time of perfect wholeness. A time that is primal in its draw.

I've come to believe that for a woman, perhaps fishing *is* essentially different – primal, indeed. Creatures born from water, carrying infants suspended in our wombs, we step into streams like a homecoming, water washing our feet in celebration.

When we fish, the tug of the line at our fingertips – it's the insistent tug of an infant as it suckles.

At the water's edge, I am – finally – all I ever wanted to be a: a seeker, not a finder.

Both angler and believer.

A believer and a lover of all I cannot know.

Fish knew these secrets all along.

They tug from below and – swimming, swimming, swimming, resting – swishing large and low or suspended like tears that have not yet decided to rise or sink... We remain separate until the moment the fish lies in our boat, gasping.



CAMPED ON THE GREENWOOD RESERVOIR  
AFTER A POOR DAY OF FISHING

It is enough to end this way,  
with firefly and spruce-tossed light  
and watch the night seep up from day

of wind and warm and water sway,  
of dragon-whir and dip-dart flight.  
It is enough to end this way

as trout lie safe by cool, dank clay  
and minnows dream, quick-silvered sprites,  
and watch the night seep up from day,

as eagles rest from wind-rushed spray  
of wing and need and want and might –  
it is enough to end this way

and catch the gods at secret play;  
to cast the eyes toward star-stopped height  
and watch the night seep up from day,

then, halt our restless words' array  
and charm our feckless hearts from fight.

It is enough to end this way,  
and watch the night seep up from day.

(for Jim - who thinks it must rhyme – in love)

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