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THE FLATS OF PARADISE

by

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B.S.N. Northern Arizona University, 2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2009

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ABSTRACT

The Flats of Paradise is a collection of personal essays exploring the interconnectivity between humans, land, identity, and belonging. Through the perspective of my experience as a nurse, these essays probe the friction created when borders rub up against each and the comforts gained through connections both spiritual and physical. “Avoiding the Stepladder,” for example, examines a near lightning strike on a mountain in relation to the potential pain caused by the human need for touch. “The Dust Trail,” a meditation upon various traditions for disposing of the placenta (burning vs. burying), also looks at the problem of finding home when relationships with the land are broken.

Other essays in the collection juxtapose memories of people and nature to reflect upon the artificial constructs people erect that separate them from each other and from the land. In “When Nothing Takes Notice,” for example, explores similarities between a father’s love of the sound of crickets and a child’s long wait in line to register for swimming lessons. These and other essays record the search for a sense of place, while also exploring the nature of memory, change, death, and a restless refusal to settle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius for taking on my thesis directorship with all of the graceful support, encouragement, and expertise that she provided; I will always be grateful. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Don Stap and Dr. Lisa Roney, for all of their feedback and shared knowledge. Next, I would like to thank my family—Pete, Olivia, and Lily—for their years of patience and dedication to an endeavor that was not their own. Finally, I would like to thank Matthew Bryan, Jessica Ryan, Diego Rincon, and Lydia Sanchez for Writing Group. Because of the long hours we spent discussing writing, and other gangrenous digressions, my work has expanded beyond what I alone could have imagined. More importantly, they each represent the best of what I could've hoped for in and beyond UCF's MFA program: a group of friends who are diverse, smart, challenging, funny, and kind. Thank you.

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SIXTEEN STITCHES

Joe Gage was loaded to the gills when he followed me up the road. I was screaming the whole way, yelling for my parents, stopping to scream louder when I should've just been running. That was what Joe Gage told me to do—"Run and get your parents"—but I wanted them sooner than my legs could reach home. The last thing I saw before running was the white fear in my pony's eyes as Joe held her faded halter. She reared back against him, her wounded body pulling hard, and he cracked his voice back at her and swayed.

When I entered the dirt driveway, my mother met me first. She saw the blood I had on me and screeched in panic as if I'd been the one hit by the truck—"What happened? What's wrong?"—until my father joined us from the barn. He understood through my tears and left to fetch the pony when Joe Gage, drunk though still stamping his wide man's stride, caught up, leading my wounded pony he'd crashed in the chest. I worried she'd die, even if she could still walk straighter than Joe.

Someone called the vet—a young woman with dirty blonde hair whom I believed was a pretty savior. She kept my pony, Mischief, alive by stopping the stains darkening her brown coat and by stitching closed the gaping hole and flapping skin.

No one knew where to ascribe blame: Joe driving drunk and with reflexes too dulled for a sharp swerve, the Shetland silly enough to bolt at surprise, or the child who couldn't stop the scared pony. Drunk, pony, or a nine-year-old child? I thought a driver couldn't help what ran out at him, and an animal can't help skittish nature. It was my fault; I wasn't strong enough or quick enough to pull back the reins hard and stop her from leaving the old woods road when something

in the bushes moved. She'd spooked before. I should've been ready, mindful, prepared to stop her bolt. Instead, in the collision, I flew over her neck and head while clenching the reins. On the ground, I sprawled useless under her chest where the blood drained down, collecting on me like pooled worries.

"She'll be alright," the vet said.

But I didn't know. The old truck with its bent silver fender would be alright—Joe Gage couldn't stop smiling about that, about how the bent fender made his truck look just fine—but a pony, hit by a hunk of metal coming down the road at it, ridden by a child too weak to control the gallop, might have organ damage, internal bleeding. Something unseen and broken somewhere in deep. The innermost workings could be the pony's downfall—despite the outer flesh getting sealed with sixteen stitches—and like the lost restraint of her run from the woods, the subsequent injury was my failing.

"Any lower and it would've hit her heart," the vet said. "Luckily, she was hit in a good place."

A place Joe Gage couldn't keep his hands out of. He kept reaching down and touching the opening, massaging the raw muscle with his hand. Did he think his rubbing helped her? Maybe he needed to feel what he'd done with his truck like I needed to feel she'd be alright.

"Get your hands out of there," the vet said, cleaning his prints from Mischief's hole before piercing her skin back together.

I wanted to be a vet then, too, with sure hands and usable advice. Someone who could stand among large animals and never fear the outcomes. But that didn't happen. Instead, I waited out the weeks for my pony to heal, and listened to my mother re-tell the story year after year: "All that blood and not a scratch on you."

“Something in her bit was missing,” my father tells me many years later, tells me what I never knew, tells me what I’m not ready to know now. It’d be easier to remember the crash as my mistake, or the spooked pony’s. Not a careless fitting of tack. Not a father’s fault. Not nobody’s fault.

Now there are houses on that wooded road. Three of them. And a name announced by a green street sign: Starter Lane. I don’t ride anymore. And Joe Gage, no longer drunk off his heels by noon on a Saturday, is dead. Mischief, too. And all the other horses and ponies I knew.

BONES GO SOFT

The animals my father butchered were strung up by their ankles, the straps around tendons, between hock and hoof, and hung just inside the barn's double white doors. The barn doors were rolled open for the occasion so my father had plenty of light to see his work. In that opening, between the thick hay leading to dull shade and the bright sun catching on trees, the smell of coagulating blood and freshly peeled-back hide blended with the dust from the barn and the fresh air from the open door to make some new smell—a waft of old and fresh twisting all together.

Death was all around me as a child, but I didn't see it as a morbid thing. It was too close to life. Dinner. Winter's rations. A freezer full of meat. Death wasn't meant to be packaged in crisp white sheets of butcher paper and taped shut. It was meant to be cut open near cobwebs and grain, splayed open where gristle and muscle showed all its colors from creamy white to rose petal pink, appreciated for its beauty.

I've long been enthralled with carcasses. Death was always more interesting to me after all the work of dying was done. After the body was already down. The process of dying isn't what I want to see. It's the stiff aftermath. What's left behind. That's what I like to look at. Haven't we all done this? Stopped to study a dead thing, to take it in? The stillness that death leaves is fascinating.

As a child, I found that investigating blank, lifeless bodies made death feel more natural, its potential randomness less ominous. Once, when I wanted to stop and stare but wasn't allowed, I was around eight and out horseback riding with an aunt. We were going through some

woods off my family's property, down trails too remote for me to be on alone, and we passed by the remains of a deer. I didn't recognize the animal like my aunt did. She had to point it out to me, saying, "Hunters might've left it there."

Indeed, half the body seemed to be missing, including the antlers. The remaining piece was gutted—an empty cage, decomposing as if too tired to wait for the pick up.

"Why would they leave it?" I asked.

"Maybe they just wanted the rack. Or they couldn't find where they'd left it." The woods were quiet, it being late fall or early spring, with snow melt left in deeper shade. "Or an animal could've got it. Eaten its full and moved on."

I had more questions regarding its origins, fascinated by its twist in the bushes where it was nearly hidden by leaves. The crumple of fur, bone, and flesh was so different from what I saw my father cut apart. But my aunt thought I'd seen enough of it and she moved us on. It was one of the first times I remember wanting to stare and poke at death, hang around it for awhile. But being unable to fulfill my curiosity, all I could do was sit in the want of going back, the want of seeing a dead deer carcass, to study it, peer inside of it. I learned basic anatomy and physiology on the farm, or in the woods—not in a lab dissecting frogs, cats, sheep brains and eyes.

Once, maybe twice, my father butchered a deer in front of the garage—I think just for the show of it in front of the neighbors. But the dressings didn't seem right to me, out in the open, away from the barn. There was too much space. The barn was best suited for skinning animals because that was where birth broke out of something, death curled near, and the day to day of all else—from routines to the unexpected—took place. A barn isn't just a place for sleep or shelter. It's a place for storage, shearing wool, finding stray eggs, combing out horses before saddling

them, or clipping down their hooves before putting on fresh steel shoes. The barn was where I'd jump down from the hay loft and pretend I could fly before landing in the cushion of loose, scratchy golden sticks about to get fed to the animals or spread out beneath them as a sop for urine and excrement. The barn was where my father found fourteen rotten eggs and incited the best egg fight ever with the neighborhood boys, and where he once got drunk with a calf. The barn was where I tried to teach my goat how to play hide-and-seek on rainy days, and it was the one warm spot in winter where I could pat my pony and dream of rodeos. The barn was the center of our farm and so the best place for slaughtering.

On the farm, death and life were the same to me: the place where everything meets together and changes. It was an embryo and old age merged, working together as a half formed turning towards new surprises. It was the reminder that nothing is permanent. When my mother tried to save things—she went to nests after mother fowl left them so she could warm the one egg left behind and then open the crisp shell with tweezers some baby was too weak to come out of—my father supported her. Even as he killed the animals we didn't need—he'd shoot some backyard dog in the head when we went to town for groceries—my father recognized the value of saving lives. These things—the killing and the saving, the life and the death—stood side by side. They just were.

One of my jobs on the farm was to collect eggs from the hen house. It was a job I did with little reminding because I loved spending time in the coop—attracted by the soft feathers, the low clucking sounds always on the verged threat of fussing squawks bursting out for one hurried moment steeped in a ruckus pitch before becoming low, slow again. Attracted there by the way the hens' heads cocked in both caution and curiosity, their legs that looked rough and scaly but were actually a smooth surprise, pleasant to stroke. There was one hen, a golden

orange, who became quite tame, showing little effort to escape my arms when I reached out to pull a hen in for petting. Her docile nature made me love her, favor her, give her the name Goldie.

At some point, my infatuation with the chickens turned into a fear of their momentous and erratic behaviors. They looked shifty, suspicious of me and my egg collecting, and they were armed with their pointy beaks if I got too close. My mother had to remind me each day then to go out and retrieve the eggs. If the eggs were too far inside the hen house then I would leave them until I found that if I broke one egg against the far corner of the cramped building then they'd all flock there to eat as much of the yolk and shell as they could manage amongst the others flapping in for a taste. As they busied themselves, fought in to eat the egg, I could snatch up the others and quickly leave the coop. It became a game for me. I liked watching them run for the corner or far wall, their wings up and out, their clucks turned to harried sounds of pleasure in the threat and irritation with their cellmate's competition.

I began to like the winged commotion that it caused, and I was curious about how quick and ready the hens were to eat their own makings. The unbridled chaos in their race both thrilled and frightened me. Sometimes, I'd throw a second egg just to watch it all again. There was a bantam hen who didn't join in, whose eggs were half the size and useless in comparison to all the others'. She sat on everything she laid, always tried to hatch something new. But my father said bantams were useless apart from the novelty of their slight size, and I was never supposed to let her keep something she'd laid. Still, I was torn by her dedication, felt bad for her constant trying, until I needed another egg to throw. She'd been lying on it long enough. She and I both watched the others eat her half formed chick, the bloody mess of soft shapes where feathers hadn't yet formed.

The farm was where I first learned how to kill and then feel guilt's sharpness under the rib cage, like the sinking-chest-feeling of getting caught doing something wrong. Like the lingering remorse you're never able to catch, clutch, and reverse. I stopped breaking eggs after that. Killing made me lose my fear of the hens. Or rather, the remorse did.

Away from the farm, death came up in even more of a surprise. The first time I saw the punch of life fade from human eyes, a body stop breathing and go still, it all happened with such swift speed that none of us in the nursing home saw it coming; I did little but watch. I was fifteen, working as a newly certified assistant, assigned to a woman whose legs kept giving out, who fell all the time. She was a disruption to my schedule, to all the others I took care of, because almost every night I'd need to call for help, have somebody run and get the charge nurse while I stayed with her as she sat on the floor; we were told not to move anybody after they'd gone down because if they'd broken a bone in their fall then we'd only make it worse in the shifting or pulling of their weight. The charge nurse would check the person out, ask them if they hurt anywhere, then give us the go-ahead to help the fallen back up. But this woman wouldn't stay on the floor when she fell, and she'd be half way down the hall with me walking beside her by the time the charge nurse got there to shrug her shoulders and walk off, her job done. Caring for this woman meant at least one incident report a night, maybe more, and extra charting to do for her file.

Then one night, I passed her in the hall while on my way to help someone else in bed. She paused as I passed, shaking all over from Parkinson's, her curled hair from the weekly rollers was flat in the back and needed to be re-set. The woman I was readying for bed had smooth, straight, perfect white hair cut in a blunt bob that I admired for its monochrome, and just

as I started undressing her, another aide entered the room and asked if I was taking care of the woman with Parkinson's.

"Yeah," I said.

"She's on the floor again."

"Okay. Thanks."

Before I could finish shifting day clothes to night, the aide came back in. "She's not getting back up," she said.

I left the woman with the white hair and went out into the hall to see. Already the nurse was there sending the same aide for oxygen, and another one for the blood pressure cuff. "I just saw her walking," I said. "She always gets back up."

The woman's shaking changed as the nurse and I watched, waiting for the others to return. No longer fine or rhythmic, it was arced, jerky, erratic. The nurse checked her pulse. "I thought she'd get back up," I said.

The oxygen tank came and was cracked open. I watched the oxygen mask go over the woman's face, as if I had no hands, no way to help, my arms muted stubs. As the nurse busied herself with the blood pressure cuff and stethoscope, I watched the woman's movements slow, the measured lethargy of an arm lift and drop, and then stop. The nurse looked up at us looking down at her with the dead woman on the floor and she stood up. She smiled and said, "Well ladies, that's what you call dropping dead."

Her words shocked me almost as much as the death did. I thought we'd stay silent for awhile, or discuss what had happened. The other aides, older and more experienced, laughed, and I laughed with them. The tension broke. The business of death and dying was over, so the

real work could get done; we discussed how we'd carry the body back to the dead woman's room for post mortem care before the family or the mortuary arrived.

Death seemed like a bell—not the kind that rings in an announcement, like from a church's steeple before a funeral, but a silent sweep, a dog whistle singing a sharp key so high pitched you'd never know it was coming up the hallway to buckle a body down with one long resonating note. I turned my back to it, let it strike.

As time has passed, and I've spent years off the farm, I've decided that death can't be a bell. Death can't be an unheard sound or an instrument that only gets rung in the moment lungs or hearts fail. Death is always there, rummaging around the corners of life like an opportunistic stalker hunting for anything it can destroy. If the animals aren't there, if the bodies don't fall, death will kill a way of life. A simple life. One where men don't tame down, rustic rawness doesn't fade, and the nature of things doesn't get questioned.

I long for the feelings of childhood where life was bordered by a death I never feared. Where death was something I understood as an expected fact. Although that life was harsh, its outcomes were never questioned. They never changed. Back then, my father wouldn't use the vet for useless animals we had too many of like cats and kittens, dogs and puppies. And my sister and I would watch the open mouths gape, the tiny teeth unable to bear down from the viral effects of distemper. Even then, when I saw death coming, I'd look away. I'd watch the twitching resistance—after the body was felled—fade to a stiff silence, but I never looked when death's note rang high, at its peak, before the body's toppling over.

Because I didn't care for the process of dying, I looked away when my father drowned the litters of too many pets and unfixed animals. My father would load the new litters into grain bags with a rock and then tie it shut with a tight knot. The brown weave of fabric, or the whitish

slick bag, would become a lumpy sack of movement with one stiff mass falling heavy at the bottom. With a single-minded march to the side pasture and then a good strong heave, my father would propel the bag of puppies or kittens into the center of the pond where they'd drown.

As a child, I imagined the young animals poking at the bag with tiny paws, as if trying to knead their way out of the bag instead of feeding from their mother's nipple, their mouths filling with water instead of milk. I'd picture our pond's mucky bottom littered with puppy bones. It was as if the animals changed instantly from tiny mouths crying soundlessly to bones picked white from the turbulence of fish and frog.

Later, when my father placed a small motor on a ten-foot aluminum boat, I rode donuts in the pond. Going faster than I should have, my tight circles closed in and the motor fell off the boat and slid into the pond. My father had to wade in through the muck to locate the motor and then dive for it while I wondered if he walked through the bones of all those he'd killed. It didn't occur to me then that they'd still be in their bags, sealed in from the time my father had closed them there. I wondered how many little decomposed skeletons were at the bottom of our pond, if the dogs my father shot were there, too—perhaps the pond was an easier, quicker disposal than burying in a grave. He probably didn't think he'd have to walk through those deaths someday. And he not only walked through them, he dove down into them, perhaps softening his bones when those he killed lay calcified in the mud.

I wonder, now, if killing a thing is fine as long as we don't draw too long on what we've done. Is this how my father felt? He doesn't kill many things anymore. I'm not sure how long it's been since he dropped a deer, pulled down the graceful arc of leaping buck. He buys his meat cellophane-wrapped from the grocery store. His dogs have their own special fenced run—away from cars and roads and the possibility of getting hit—and he uses the vet, protecting his pets

from the careless, random, viral meanderings of death. There are even soft chairs and cushioned beds kept in each room for the dogs in his house. Next, he'll be taking the dogs to the groomers, I fear, bringing them back home with pretty bows tied to an ear.

“I'm going soft in my old age,” he tells me, as if this would explain it all, explain his not caring beyond burying a bullet in our dogs' heads when I was a child, and then explain his caring now, while I'm an adult living too far away to be touched by his gentle turnings in old age.

Death was something I thought I knew, but it changed along with my father. I want to believe my father's change is because he moved off the farm, away from the place where death and life sleep spooned together—away from the necessity where livelihood and feeding a family keeps death and life cuddled cozy in the barn's straw. When life is rough, rough things are expected. I moved away from the farm thinking I'd left death, and a sure certainty about how death worked, behind me. I left thinking I liked death's perfect form of stillness—so quiet when it's gone, leaving behind tissues, feathers, fur, and bones—as long as I didn't see the killing.

So, when my father dumps worms on the ground, when he can't keep the squiggling wiggling things for fishing because he “felt bad for them,” I have no place to put this saving of life, this keeping of things from death. When I visit my father now, all I'm left with is memory and the wondering of what happened to the man and the world I used to know.

AVOIDING THE STEPLADDER

I.

The mountain is a dead volcano. It used to be 3,000 feet higher than it is now, but it either blew out basalt and rhyolite in a tremendous tantrum or caved into itself, collapsing like an old body that suddenly and completely gave out. When I tracked up the remaining 3,300 foot ridge, switch backed through the spruce, aspen, and fir with my friend Stella, a storm came in over the city of Flagstaff south of us. We stood on the saddle, a tundra with bristlecone pines growing out of loose-chipped gravel and stone, and watched clouds drip shadows, leaking ink across the land.

The wind was cracking at us, but we were in the sun, standing in the nape of an animal's neck. To our east, the mountain slipped straight down the neck's side and into the Inner Basin, the volcano's central cavity. The south meandered across a crooked spine weaving through bowed ribs, sloping down to lumpy hindquarters and back legs stretched out in a dozing sprawl. The other way, north, angled up to the crown—a hike that's steep but worth the achievement and view. This was the way we went: up to Humphreys Peak's summit, the highest spot in Arizona. The trail is littered with fulgurites—rocks that have melted from lightning strikes, identified by grey-to-greenish splotches of glass that slick the rocks with a polka dot sheen. Recognizing them allows hikers to see how many times lightning strikes the mountain. But I didn't pay attention to this geological marvel because I was instead looking out towards the horizon, holding on to as much distant land in one view as my eyes could gather.

At the top of the skull, Stella wrote our names in the visitor's notebook while I clicked pictures. A second storm was ambling in to the east of us as the first traveled northwest. Strands

of blue-grey water streaked down white sheets in the sky on either side of us—waterfalls spraying on the horizon with lightning sprigs occasionally flashing, the thunder loud and warning—but the sky was blue above our heads. The wind carried rain’s scent, but the storms would travel past us, not over us. Sandwiched between the two thunderstorms, raised 12,600 feet up in the sky, I pointed out the Colorado Plateau and the north rim of the Grand Canyon to Stella—she didn’t normally hike on that side of mountain. I pointed out the trails familiar to me on the slope below, then lowered my arm, and asked my friend, “What’s that sound?”

As soon as I said it, I knew. I raised my arm back into extension and held it out over the mountain like a rod. A high pitched singing sound—a tinny tune—shrilled out as my body stroked the electricity in the air—like an old radio tuning for a station, trying to find something with reception good enough to land on. Before lightning strikes, a path from the cloud to the ground needs to be made; there are many paths electricity can take and I was about to act as the outstretched streamer met with lightning’s shock. With my arm over the edge, we heard the sound again: static, and the old song of someone playing a saw.

Lightning can strike miles from the storm, and most people who have been touched by the tendriled light report being struck under blue skies. I’ve read advice that instructs hikers to crouch like cowards and stay grounded on the soles of boots when thunder rumbles louder, warns of the charges in the air. Stella and I were too stunned by the unexpected danger; we looked to each other with our mouths open in surprise, and said, “We’ve got to go.”

We took off, rushing around the rocks, each of us in a hurry not to be the highest point in Arizona. But in the silence of our departure, in the quick quiet of turning away from the currents, I slowed down to take more pictures of the storm—the rain in blue wisps, in perfect isolated

strands beside the mountain, the margins of storm and sun crisply divided—an excuse to wait and see what would happen. Would the lightning find me?

I wanted to go back and touch the invisible electric line again. Tempted by having something that I move through every day—air—snap and crackle because it was finally aware of my presence, I was desperate for the recognition again. Hearing lightning’s acknowledgement—the song my skin made with the atmosphere—was as tempting as it was dangerous. Getting stuck would affirm my desirability, my exceptional status.

For a month after my near lightning strike, I would feel the static in my arm every time it stormed. There would be a heavy, numb tingling that begged me to lift up my arm and finish the stroke. I’d tell no one about the sensation, curious to see if it would stay. I’d savor it as a private proof that I’d been touched. But it wouldn’t stay.

II.

The first skills learned in nursing school are, in this order: hand washing, bed making, and bed baths. Therefore, the first clinical rotation in a hospital exercises these skills by assigning the nursing students to care for patients who need them. The best floor for this is the neurological one where students can wash the careless men who rode motorcycles without helmets and then had their brains bashed in; students can tidy up the women who dove headfirst into water too shallow, the unexpected result causing them to lie in a vegetative state while the social worker negotiates for a bed in a convalescence home. There, nursing students can take their time to gather supplies, can practice the elaborate way they were taught to twist and drape a bath blanket so the body is covered while all parts are easily accessible. Students can start with

the patient's eyes and wipe from inner canthus to outer, dip the white terrycloth into water and then wipe again, moving down the torso until every inch has been cleaned.

When I was in nursing school, a bed bath done right could take up to an hour because it took time to follow all steps in perfect order, wash every inch of skin—my unsure hands smoothing out dry blankets, changing the sheets. And it was a relief when the person was unconscious because then I could fumble my way through the regimented steps until they'd all been completed. Little is known about how much an unconscious person can hear. With my hands in the pink basin full of soapy warm water, I'd ring the cloth and tell the body before me what I would do next: "I'm going to wash your arm."

Then I'd study the face for recognition, try to remember interesting bits from the news I could pass on; what was going on outside the building that would be relevant? I didn't want to risk too much silence at the off chance the person could understand me—how awful to be awake inside a shell, disconnected from the workings that make dendrites and axons run messages to muscles, unable to tell the person touching you that you're awake and not brain dead, not unconsciously detached.

Before I was released to practice bed baths during my first rotation, a guest from the hospital—I believe she was a social worker—spoke to my class about the importance of touch—not the clinical kind of feeling, where healthcare providers palpate with phalanges and listen through metal and plastic for the right rhythms in the sounds of life, but the kind where communication happens. She told us a story about an elderly woman who came into the hospital for a physical illness and then told the speaker how nice it was to be in the hospital, instead of at home, alone. "Sometimes," the elderly woman said, "I sit in my apartment and wish that somebody would touch me, anybody, so that I would know I am real."

I've always been a tactile person. My friends, knowing this, have dramatically pointed to the "Do not touch" signs, warning me as if I were a child to keep my hands to myself in the art museums we've visited. They know my fingers compulsively itch to know what things feel like—the texture of paint or frames hold no less desire just because they're old or famous. It's as though my axons can't transmit the complete message of what I see without my skin sensing it as well. Touching is knowing. The elderly woman's words reflect this; her acknowledgment of how physical contact is self-validating stayed with me over my years as a nurse, and I took her story as permission to touch. A brush down a shoulder's slope, the caress of a back, and the stroke of a hand are all ways I can show mindfulness for the person in front of me. They're also ways I can verify myself—wake up the dendrites that tendrils out like light, carrying nerve impulses toward the neuron's center, electrocuting the senses, illuminating life.

III.

I grew up on several acres of what my father liked to call a "hobby farm." It meant that he farmed because he loved it, though it took more money than it gave. About two acres were wrapped in lines of electric fence to keep our handful of animals in, and sometimes my cousins, with my sister and me, would dare each other to touch the fence. At times the challenge held a practical purpose: we wanted to get on the other side of it and run through the neighbor's cattle corn—knowing whether or not the fence was turned on made a difference in how we crossed it. Other times, it was just bold-faced provocation to see which one of us was brave enough to take the jolt.

On one of these dares, a cousin's friend told us about a club she was in. Initiation was simple. Everyone held hands together in a line with the president of the club hanging off one end

and the girl wanting inclusion into group at the other. Standing next to an electric fence, the one wanting to be taken in by the others would grasp the grey wire in her palm, holding on until the low voltage pulsed through each member and the gang's leader said she felt it: a communal conduit indicating acceptance.

Knowing the shocks as a localized experience, the electric burst detonating only in the area of skin, fat, and muscle contacting fence, I couldn't imagine how long the girl would have to hold on to the fence before she was let into the group. Afraid of the fence, and the zaps it gave, I preferred going out of my way by walking back to the red shingled barn to see if the light was on, indicating that the fence was live, over touching the fence like others would. But, fear of the fence left me on the day I succumbed to it. I was climbing the long silver gate near the pond, leaving the pasture after petting my Shetland pony, Mischief, and my foot slipped. Losing some balance, I startled and grabbed for the fence with my right arm as my legs fell between the electric fence and the gate. For a few seconds, tides of low heat and vibrations streamed through my legs, and the only way to pull myself out was to lean into the currents until I could get my body over the gate. It was the longest my skin had touched the circuit, and after the third pulse I realized that it wouldn't get worse—the percussion was a low drum that charged through me with surprise, but it didn't really hurt.

IV.

An argument between cardiac and neurology nurses consists of this: Does the heart function to keep the brain alive, or does the brain function to keep the heart going? Both start to damage and die after four minutes without oxygen. So, should resuscitative efforts be made to preserve brain function or to decrease damage to the heart? It's a debate I don't understand

because we need both organs in order survive, function, and feel actualized; thoughts tell us we are real, nerves send signals for the heart to contract, and the heart keeps the brain supplied with nourishments. They are too connected to be separated.

Under a microscope, heart cells can be seen in action: they couple and disconnect with the reliance of a repetitive machine. But perpetual motion is a myth. Eventually, all things must stop. Each body is its own mountain and the nerves are the inhabitants with wanderlust, couriering themselves towards untouched territories until everything has been mapped out and explored. But only the mountain's chemicals, nerve cells, and electric charges own this atlas. The rest of us, consciously, are in the dark.

I've never liked cardiology or neurology. I prefer endoscopy where I can look inside of people and see plain as daylight what is there. Surgery is too messy with its blue sterile drapes, masked-and-gowned groups crowding around a small table passing cold instruments back and forth, counting gauze patches to ensure nothing is left behind, and with everything painted red as the surgeons cut into the mechanisms of what they can see or feel. The endoscope's view is clearer, usually unobstructed by blood and other bodily fluids so that the pink walls, the long tunnels, can be magnified and projected up onto a screen. In dark rooms, I see a person's outside, touch the texture of their skin, and then look inside of them, following the channels of intestines or lungs, sampling tissues or applying therapies, all the while leaving their body whole, untouched by cuts and fragments that need to be stitched back together. I'm there without setting down seams.

V.

Lightning is a thief. It charges in through white tails running across what only those holding the atlas know, and it steals the blueprints to a previously well-working body. There is a long list of lasting symptoms that lightning-strike survivors suffer from, including cardiac arrhythmias, muscle weakness, insomnia, profound fatigue, depression, amnesia, and anxiety. It takes memory, speech, sleep, desire, and just about anything else it wants, like a jealous band of angels collecting fragments of mortals in order to piece together their own embodiment of humanity living up in the sky.

Survivors, or victims, are a fallen tree, a hollowed out log charred from the flash of a quick fire. Much fear resides in the kindled host because the old adage is false. Lightning does strike the same place twice—even prefers it for less resistance—so there is a residual worry that the weather will once again find them, acknowledging their existence by the touch of empty commitments and sensory deprivations. The current might even return to claim the rest of what it left behind.

I had wondered if a lightning strike would be like falling into the electric fence—a blast of astonishment followed by the tingling acceptance of my fate. Weather isn't supposed to notice people, but lightning does. It seeks us out, bending rods that release their pressure as they normalize—depolarize—back to a neutral state; a thundercloud is in an imbalanced state as positive charges flip with negative until a stepladder is thrown down, carving a channel for objects and forces to meet in a rush of relief. But to connect, something has to be stripped wide open or nothing will be received. In the sky, electrons are torn off the path, creating a tube for the lightning to touch through. In my body, am I willing to shed layers of myself—corporeal or emotive—in order to climb that ladder up into the sky? Do I have to split myself wide open and share what I'm afraid to show in order to be received?

In nursing school, I learned that lightning leaves an entry wound and an exit wound. It's important to find two marks on the victim's body so both are healed. I believe that people are like lightning, and we move through each other's lives like lightning strikes: each of us makes an entrance mark on those whose lives we penetrate, and if we leave, the exit mark hurts. This is what they didn't tell us in nursing school: we all have these wounds. They are as hidden to the naked eye as the singed nerve endings that cause post-strike side effects.

I need touch to know that I am real, too. As a nurse I touch a lot of people, but people don't always touch me. "Nursing is a thankless job," I've heard so many nurses say.

It's not that I haven't felt thanked—I have—or even that I want to be. What bothers me about nursing is this: the every-dayness of moving in and out of others' lives. We pass through each other like lightning but we carry none of the magic, none of the rare feeling that tells us we're unique. I see people in intimate and vulnerable ways. But seeing inside of someone's body, or seeing simple moments in their broken-down lives, isn't the same as knowing them completely. Of staying with them. And even if I get to know them some, they'll never know me, never enter my life and assure me of my singular difference.

If I climbed the electric stepladder, where would I go? As soon as the current attached itself to me, it would slip away, leaving the things that nurses and doctors can't touch singed; it would leave me and I would be alone again, a wife and a widow all on the same day. I want the security of permanent acceptance and connection—not a robber who tempts me with a filament of desire before disengaging with my life. I've been waiting for something in this land to lift like a wish, to have something from the ground emerge and claim me on the horizon. But I need to look elsewhere for this affirmation since the relief of feeling acknowledged is as elusive as catching the strike and holding it—the grip of sureness will never take hold.

A PLACE WHERE WE CAN TALK

There was a room. It was cramped and hot. Nobody liked doing procedures there, but the hospital had run out of space. When we got busy, there was no choice. We did short procedures—flexible sigmoidoscopies and upper endoscopies—on a blue reclining chair that looked like it had been pulled from a dentist’s office because a regular-sized stretcher wouldn’t fit. Despite all this, there was an allure to the closed-door quiet of the nook’s small quarters. “There’s just something about room two,” one of my co-workers would say.

A confessional quality, I’d think.

While waiting for the doctor to show up, I’d sit on a stool inches from the patient, and in the close proximity, oftentimes my patients began to tell me about themselves. One woman told me about her son who had died the year before. I don’t remember the details about him, but I remember her—brown wavy hair, flawless smooth skin, round glasses, about 200 pounds, divorced, and tears that fell into her lap as she balled tissues in her fists. We didn’t find any polyps during her colon exam, and she hugged me before she left. She thanked me for listening.

After a few more similar admissions from strangers, I started looking forward to working in the room. The patients had stories to tell and I wanted to listen. With each patient, I’d wonder how much they’d share, or how long we’d sit close together—them in a gown and nearly naked while I wore generic OR scrubs that looked like pajamas—before they’d open up and tell me about themselves.

At the end of the day, as the other nurses and I cleaned, caught up on charting, and got ready for the next day, I’d go over the patients I took care of and retell their stories to the other

nurses. It was a way of undoing the day. Remembering the funny things someone said and mixing them in with the complicated lung brushings we'd done, the subtraction errors on the narcotic count, and biting comments from a nurse on another floor—"Did you hear what that nurse up on Three South said about us not helping enough?"—made the day's events wash from my thoughts like soap sliding bacteria away from my hands. I was able to go home to my husband unburden by the day's events.

Later, when I either worked alone or on another unit and I had no one to vent my day at work to, the stories started stacking up on each other, building inside me. I began visualizing the patients I took care of as bodies of literature waiting to be read and then passed on and talked about with other people like good books. But there are laws against such speaking. Even before HIPAA (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996), I'd signed a confidentiality agreement for every healthcare facility where I'd worked. Threats often accompanied the papers I signed; if I said anything about a patient outside of work, told someone why a person was at the hospital, and that divulgence made its way back to the right person, I could be terminated, sued, or even have my nursing license revoked.

I'd even been warned about what was said inside hospitals, and sat through many videos portraying examples of how innocent chit chat gets misconstrued by everyone who overhears it: the daughter who believes it's her mother the nurses complain about in the elevator, the husband who demands a different physician for his wife because he overheard two nurses in the hall calling a doctor incompetent, or the grandmother who leaves the cafeteria horrified and then runs breathlessly into her daughter's room on the maternity unit to report, "I just heard someone say your baby has AIDS." While these staged training examples are exaggerated, people do talk. And of course, not everyone followed the rules.

In one hospital where I worked as a nurse, because of the electronic charting system, most information about patients in one area of the hospital was available to those in another unrelated one. When one of my co-workers had a friend who was in labor, she “checked in” on her friend’s progression of cervical dilation throughout our shift in surgical services; convenient since labor and delivery was on the second floor and we were on the first. Through computerized charting, she would know precisely when to go congratulate her friend with flowers. When I worked nights, some of my peers kept track of how busy the emergency department was, and discovered who was in for what. How many drunks? What was the trauma? One unit secretary I worked with preferred pediatrics over emergency medicine—she’d look up what all the kids were in for and then decided which child had the worst parents. Some nurses liked to see how many of the patients had abortions before they decided to keep a child—an informal survey with character discussions following each find. When a well-known hospital employee stroked, everyone in the hospital knew about it. Those who wanted to could find out what medications he was receiving, track his progress throughout his hospital stay.

These things were frowned upon by administrators, but patients are not pressed between ink and folders like they used to be; their medical records are no longer stored safely in one room or behind one gatekeeper. Instead, they switch through wires, spread like gossip where their privacy can be disclosed or discovered by many people who don’t need the information but want it. Before HIPPA, our computer systems didn’t have reliable ways to check on who was looking up what. Peeping was relatively easy and safe. This open-information effect of electronic documentation and file storage was what HIPAA unplugged.

After the law’s privacy rule portion deadlined in April of 2003, and all the laws affecting healthcare workers went into effect, terms like Individually Identifiable and Protected Health

Information (PHI) were introduced as a means for establishing uniform standards in the acquisition, use, and exchange of Health Information Data. No one was to know anything about anyone unless they were on a “need to know” basis, directly involved with either care or payment. Unfortunately, confusion settled in. Because the law’s burden of interpretation—nothing was directly spelled out except the criminal penalties (expensive fines and jail time) for noncompliance—fell on those providing healthcare services, administrators and advisors from risk management thumbed through pages of the law and deciphered how we’d change our practices. During that time, I walked back and forth between the telephone, my boss’ office, and patients’ rooms.

“Indian Health Services is on the phone attempting to set up home fetal monitoring services. What can I say?”

“Take down the person’s name and number and tell them we’ll call back—*if* it’s appropriate,” my boss said.

If PHI included a person’s name, could we be in violation by just acknowledging that the patient was there at the hospital? I’d obtain, and then document, the patient’s verbal permission allowing me to tell providers what they needed to know. Eventually, I started having all of my conversations with the follow-up providers in the patients’ rooms because if a provider asked for more information than what I’d gained permission for, like the biophysical profile of the fetus, I remained gagged until I got permission again. It was cumbersome, but it worked. Gone were the days of simply transferring a phone call to a patient’s room. If the caller didn’t have the right Individually Identifiable information, I ran down to the room, asked the patient if I could transfer the call, and then ran back and explained to the irritated and self-righteous person on hold why we needed to be so strict.

The Individually Identifiable included any data that could point to a specific person: demographics, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatments. The nurse working next to me wasn't supposed to know who I was taking care of for what unless the patient's care necessitated her or his knowing. My co-workers and I thought this point in particular was crazy. While the law acted as the noble patient protector, it ignored the support network nurses build with each other, the individual uplift a communal experience endures. When something unpleasant happens, nurses turn to each other for validation and the knowledge that we all have bad days. It also ignored the shared burden of telling a story. I remembered back to my days in endoscopy where I could retell my day and let all of the stories I'd heard and moments I'd worked through slide off of me before I went home. HIPPA may be good for patients, but it pulled the sink away from me and I had no place to wash my hands.

To educate us on the new law, inservices were created: "Get Hip to HIPPA." And I began to think of it as a child on my hip. One that's too unwieldy to handle and hold. I'd always understood the importance of upholding a patient's legal right to privacy—it establishes rapport and preserves trust. Even my husband, who was employed as a social worker, understood the rules. In our town of 50,000, I took care of a lot of familiar community members, which meant that he sometimes found himself in awkward positions. He'd come home and say, "I saw John and Jackie at the farmer's market."

"How are they doing?" I'd say.

"They had their baby. They acted like I already knew because you did."

"Oh. I wasn't her nurse. I never asked if I could tell you."

"I wasn't sure if I'd get you in trouble if I pretended you had told me, or if I should risk hurting their feelings by telling them you hadn't."

“What’d you say?”

“I told them I had to leave.”

One of the most awkward times for both of us was when his professor came in for a colonoscopy and I was the sedation nurse. I referred to his girlfriend as his daughter—she was many years younger than him—and my husband felt he’d been placed in an uncomfortable position when his professor complained about it to him. For me, the discomfort came when my husband and I later attended a party at their house. I acted like it was the first time I’d met the man, but he asked me about the polyps I’d helped remove from his colon, and before long everyone at the party knew I’d been his nurse. For a patient, this may mean little. Patients can say whatever they want to say about their experiences with me, but I’m not allowed to share the experiences I’ve had with them.

For me, it’s like waking up and eating breakfast with all the family members of a one night stand. It means I’ve shared something intimate with a stranger I plan to never see again, but then hear, “She was my nurse,” which always makes me feel pressured to act a certain way, as if we’re still in a setting that requires certain rules. People I knew in a public context strip from their street clothes, don the homogenized identity parceled out with ubiquitous gowns, slip into bed sheets, and trust me implicitly. I observe them in postures they hide from their closest friends, I find out facts I’d sometimes wish I hadn’t learned, and consequently know these people differently in a public context.

Sometimes this juxtaposition is reversed, though, and I’ve found grace in the moments where someone I’ve know in the community comes into the hospital under my care. Most memorable for me was when I took care of a past neighbor I’d never liked. My husband and I identified her oddities in a list. She was the woman on our block who tore all of the carpet out of

her house and lived on bare concrete, kept a dead cat in her freezer, let her dog bark incessantly day and night, returned our smiles, waves, or pleasant exchanges only when she felt like it. If she didn't feel like acknowledging us, she turned away and pretended we weren't there.

I didn't recognize her name when her previous nurse gave me report. Her hair was growing out grey, and it wasn't until I was in a conversation with her that I recognized her face. She didn't want me to assess her completely, didn't want me to see her skin—I think because I recognized her. Eventually, after we talked more, she did allow it. I felt the tapping of her pedal pulses, saw the pale and hairless belly, heard her clear breath sounds and fluttering heart, gave her the discharge instructions, and learned details that filled the gaps in between a senior dog, an ailing dad who might be dying, and a neighborhood that wished her out with the dirty carpet. I knew her more intimately in that moment than I ever had in the years I'd lived beside her and wished I'd been kinder to her when she was my neighbor.

Patients and their families share privileged moments with me: the birth of their child, test results containing good news, an unsuspected sad diagnosis, the successful recovery from a surgery. They share moments that shame them: urinating on themselves because they couldn't make it to the bathroom in time, sharp words spat out from pain that drugs can't mitigate, the inability to move without help, tears without reason. They trust me with their lives, trust that I will help get them through moments they need me for, and I'm humbled under this burden of intimacy. I've needed to talk about it. I've needed a constant space where patients could share with me and then I could pass those moments and stories on to others. Some of these moments pass but then echo in flashes, haunt my memory, fray like heat lightening in my dry mind.

Like the time some teenager said he “sat” on a wide piece of plastic and it took us an hour to get it out, a surgeon needing to come with extra tools to help, me pleading with the

doctors, “One more of versed, twenty-five more fentanyl?” The gastroenterologist and surgeon refused to knock the kid completely out in the emergency room, and I looked into the kid’s flat eyes and tight lips that betrayed his embarrassment. “I’m alright,” he kept insisting when I asked, but I wanted to push enough drugs for us to both forget that moment when his quest for pleasure twisted into a pain that we thought would need to be surgically removed. Retelling moments like this help me let them go from my mind.

The first time I remember breaching the confidentiality agreement was after helping restrain a near naked woman. I was around twenty and working in a locked adult psychiatric unit. My only qualification was enrollment as a nursing student; the unit’s director liked hiring us in the hope we’d stay on after finishing school and passing our boards. I felt power in the keys I carried—I bought a special cord for them, a yellow spiral that went around my wrist—and I was young enough to feel grandiose in my new position, convinced there was something in my interview characterizing a therapeutic nature. I was ready to imbue those in need with my care. By twisting thoughts of despair into keen perceptions, I had faith in myself that the right words would spill from my mouth, pierce holes and let in light.

One evening, there was a confrontation. I was doing hourly rounds with my clip board and grid sheet, checking that the right doors were locked, all the patients accounted for. I entered the kitchen, the patients’ domain. One woman, desperation in her motions, was eating cold hotdogs over the kitchen sink, one long link after another. Another patient was concerned, trying to talk her down, to get her to stop eating the hotdogs because it was in her care plan to eat less. She was wearing nothing but a Johnny for bed, blue angles patterned on white gown, the back barely tied because of her size. I asked her to please put down the food, the weapon she would

hurt herself with. Did she need to talk? Did she want to talk? Did she want to leave the kitchen and go someplace else? She smiled in answer to me, stuffed more meat in her mouth.

My position deflated, I left to get the tech assigned to her—that person’s problem, not mine. The tech huffed up from her spot at the nurses’ station, as I knew she would, sighed with her eyes, lunged to the kitchen. “Put the food down,” she said, “Put. It. Down.”

The tech’s tone made the woman stop, hold the bit of rubbery hotdog in her hand as they studied each other, considered the other’s position, each one deciding who would give in. An audience gathered as patients grouped together near the tables, and I shared an authoritative stance as reinforcement behind the primary tech.

“Do you want to do this to yourself?” The tech said, momentum gathering. “You’re just hurting yourself. You’re not supposed to be doing this. Put the food down. We can talk. You were making progress. You’re hurting yourself. Put the food down. Put it down.”

I want to remember that the woman had adult onset diabetes, her obesity causing insulin resistance in her cells. What else could have made us push her? To take control? It was just a few hotdogs, a care plan, a day, an evening.

She gave in, threw the bitten pink rubber into the sink. I heard it thunk against the metal, watched it bounce back out as she yelled back at the tech, something about not being understood and, “Why can’t you leave me alone? I wish I was dead!” She stomped towards her room.

The tech followed her, kept taking charge. I marveled at her command of the situation, took mental notes of her stance as I watched. “So that’s how you handle it,” I thought. You don’t give in. Don’t let go. Stand strong. Body straight. Legs slightly apart. Arms open at the side. See it through to end.

Open door seclusion is a place for the patient to regroup, calm down, think about what he or she did wrong. With the door closed, it's solitude, a place to safely lose control. The reasons for closed door seclusion are clear, both by law and facility policies—patients have to be either a danger to themselves or a danger to others. This was in the early nineties, when universal precautions enforced the use of gloves and people were afraid of AIDS. At a different facility, one tech told me, “If they spit on me, I close the door. Spit can be considered a weapon. They try to spit at me, they're trying to hurt me. I close the door.” He smelled like latex.

The woman in the gown didn't spit, but she was screaming, disrupting the therapeutic milieu, trying to hurt herself with the food, and so she couldn't be trusted. When she threatened to come out of the room, the tech closed the door; “She's out of control,” she said.

As the tech got the seclusion paperwork, I watched the woman through the door's small, square, shatterproof glass window, watched her take off her gown and tie it around her neck. “She's trying to choke herself,” I said.

Someone unlocked the door. Two pulled the gown away. Naked, her smooth breasts sagged, her dimpled thighs shook, and her screams were low pitched and echoed—a white bear without teeth and claws. The door closed again and we were on the other side of concrete and metal, thinking it was finally over.

“Oh, god, she's still trying to strangle herself,” the nurse said.

It was true. Both of her hands were up to her neck, her face was turning red. “What do we do?” I said.

“We'll have to restrain her,” someone said.

And we did. We walked her to the other room with an acquiescing calm that didn't feel right. She walked straight to the bed, laid her face down, and held still as we placed the leathers

on all her limbs. Somebody put a bath blanket over her to finally cover her exposed flesh. Tears replaced the noise, but eventually she calmed, even though she refused to make a verbal contract to stay that way. It was our fault, she said—we should have let her eat in peace.

To get out of seclusion, the patient has to “process out.” It’s very much like letting a child out of a time out. “Why are you here? What did you do wrong? What should you have done instead? What are you going to do differently next time?” She wouldn’t do it; she came out of restraints but not the room. The next day, she was still in the room, too stubborn to give in. And she wouldn’t eat. I knew the patient had been at the state hospital many times—years through the revolving doors—so when I saw a friend who worked there, I asked her if she was familiar with her case. She said she was. “How do you manage her?” I asked. “What do you do there?”

My friend talked about the patient’s stubbornness, how she wouldn’t yield to staff if she felt cornered and powerless, how her behavior would turn compulsive and irrational if she felt she wasn’t getting heard. Proud of my new-found insight, I shared the information with my co-workers my next day at work. Shortly after, my charge nurse took me aside and verbally reprimanded me for breaking confidentiality. Because there was innocence in my breach she told me she’d let it go this one time, but I was never to vent my feelings to anyone outside of our unit again.

I always wondered what would’ve happened if another tech had been assigned to the woman we restrained. Or if that tech had simply let her storm to her room. The incident was never therapy; it was a power struggle, the lines clearly drawn between us when we walked through the door with keys the patients didn’t have. Would she, the patient, have tied the gown around her neck in her room? Or would she have simply cried face down on her bed?

Who has power—the patient or the caregiver? Who needs it the most? I'd like to think I do. After all, I'm the one who needs to provide care past all barriers I'm given, including new laws and consequences. It's a burden for me when I want to leave what I've seen or done back at the hospital—to not hold it in my home, my sleep, or my extended community. However, when I think of that woman's bare breasts touching the plastic mattress, her naked wrists encircled in tan leather, and the rapid progression that got her there, I see the law differently. With the information I carry in my memory, I have a power that reaches beyond trust, to a place of power where I don't always have the right to be. HIPPA may be the place where the patients carry the keys on their wrists.

I've been hassled by HIPPA, as if I didn't have enough to do already at my job. But what really makes my job more difficult, my relationship with patients more complex, is the inherent vulnerability in a patient's role while healthcare providers have an ability, no matter how briefly, to take over the course of events in a patient's life. I wonder if it's not the privacy laws that get between us but these incomprehensible circumstances where both sides have a need that's reduced to a job getting done. There are times when both parties need more authority and the nurses feel just as powerless as their patients.

There was another woman I helped. She had a "slow leak" from a blood vessel nicked in surgery. Before anyone knew about the vessel, her nurse paged the doctor multiple times about her abdominal pain and ashy color. While the doctor was out with his family, the patient begged us nurses, "Please, help me," through pale lips drying like fish scales in the sun. By the time the abdominal leak was identified, the surgeon didn't want to open her up—the release of pressure on the defect could cause the small hole to tear open and allow her blood to leak out faster than

the hole could be identified and sewn shut. The surgeon explained all this, detailed her probable death in the OR to her, and then smiled and said, “Here’s the option that I like.”

He explained how excited he was. Her blood might create enough pressure to eventually close the hole for him; at a certain point there wouldn’t be any room in the abdominal cavity for more blood. The other nurses and I raised our eyebrows at each other. At the nurses station, we whispered our disbelief: the patient’s heart was pumping blood to the wrong place and slowly killing her, her breath was rasping, her belly rigid from the blood pressing her organs tight, and we were going to “wait and see” if she could make it, wait and see if her own blood would tamponade the slow leak and stop it.

When the surgeon’s avoidance of surgery didn’t work and her blood pressure kept dropping—80 over 50, 70 over 40, 60 over 30—almost moments after he’d told her it probably would, we ran her to the emergency department (“Faster, faster,” the surgeon yelled at us, “she’s going to die in the hall.”) where they treated her like a fresh trauma, started new lines, large bore tubes as big as would fit in her vessels, expanding her volume, the lab coming with a box of blood that was never crossed to match.

“Please don’t leave me,” she had said to those whose hands she could grasp, feeling the slip of her life an illusive and tricky thing. So I stayed with her in the trauma room until she was ready to let go of hands and place her vitality into the oncoming rush of volume, the blood from other people. I left her there, surrounded by a new group of caretakers slowing down in their emergent activities, filling her body with what could save her more than the holding of hands. She never had the surgery. She spent days in critical care and was eventually discharged from the hospital. But she never left me.

There was another woman who needed a box of blood. Her baby had died inside of her, and the doctor on call didn't want to pull them apart. He kept her waiting until morning so he could stay in bed and catch some extra sleep. By then she needed 28 units of packed red blood cells and fresh frozen plasma. At a unit per person that's 28 people who ate cookies and gave two cups; four cups in a liter, approximately six liters in a pregnant body, and it's enough donation to provide four or five people their fill.

The reason blood is thicker than water is because there are millions of suspended cells. Too thick, it clots. When clotting factors fail, blood runs too thin. The woman who lost her baby had blood like that—it was loose because of a condition known as DIC, disseminated intravascular coagulopathy. The body can take a certain amount of rapid blood loss by throwing out clotting factors to slow things down. It's like adding mesh or cheesecloth to the spout of a funneled container, or mixing particles into the liquid being poured. The more added, the slower the flow. But in a hemorrhage, too many clotting factors can be sent out. That signals a warning that the blood's getting too thick, and factors that thin the blood are sent out which causes the person to bleed faster. The balance gets lost. When water boils, if the heat isn't turned down, the water will boil itself out of the pot. That's DIC. That's what happened to the dead boy's mother in the extra time the physician took to sleep.

He was a perfect boy, full term, even if he was blue. We wrapped him in blankets and hid him in a bassinet behind the nurse's station until all those working who wanted to see—how beautiful he would have been—could see him before he was closed inside of the baby refrigerator. I think back on that moment as the boy's first funeral. The nurses came and paid their respects. We shared our anger at the physician and the experience we'd shared by expressing grief over the child.

When I left work after that shift, I arrived at home two hours later than usual, and my husband was angry at me. We had a baby of our own at that time, and he had expected me home with fresh milk. “Why didn’t you call?” he asked.

All I could say was that there had been a patient who almost died. “They needed help. I needed to stay. I’m sorry.” I said.

When I went back in to work that night, the tech who had scrubbed in for the c-section told me how the patient’s blood had never clotted. Out of the body, blood thickens, dries. Two hours after the trauma the tech finally had time; she returned to the room to clean and restock. She saw the bowl of blood never dumped, and feared how hard it would be to scour. “Two hours of sitting and I thought it was going to be oozed gel,” she said. “But it poured right out as if it had never sat there. It had never clotted.”

The things I’d read about in text books—hypofibrinogenemia, prolonged prothrombin time, disseminated intravascular coagulopathy, abruption placentae, dead fetus syndrome—become real. How can I not need to talk about them to someone? According to that burden on my hip, that law, if I discuss someone’s care with anyone who isn’t on a “need to know” basis, I’m in violation. No one should have seen the dead baby unless the viewing necessitated providing adequate care. But how do you describe need when it’s of a different kind? How do you legalize a need that will keep you from falling asleep when you go home at night, or in the morning, but you can’t process it with your husband who is lying there beside you because it’s against the law to speak?

When a new law like HIPAA is passed—one that creates boundaries to enable patients’ power over the disclosure of their information—the message to me is that I can’t be trusted with their stories, that patients need to create boundaries for their own protection from me and what I

know. But what about the borders of my protection when I'm disempowered by a physician who doesn't trust a nurse's judgment? How do I swallow the replay of my actions, the thoughts about taking the wrong patient at the wrong time, the helpless frustration at the damned doctor who wouldn't come in, and the anger at myself because if there is a lawsuit I'll probably lose since I could've called the chief of medicine sooner. This law tells me that, to the patient, I can be dangerous. But I already know this; it was drilled into me in nursing school, as was the fact that I will make mistakes.

Once again, I think back to the space I'd had back in endoscopy where the day's events were shared and then let go. That small room, where patients felt secure enough to open up, had been a storage closet before it was cleaned out and used for procedures. It makes me wonder what other spaces could be cleared for nurses and patients. Without this sharing, like the blood that didn't clot, these barriers of law and power and need will never resolve.

There's so much between a patient and a care provider. Disease. Virus. Pain. Surgery. Rooms. Gloves. Patient load, acuity status, call lights, co-workers, bosses. And so much that isn't. So little between us. White sheets, finger pads, the membrane for auscultation, a port into the blood stream. I read their bodies like a story, touching their skin, smoothing out the ripples between what I overhear and what they choose to confide in me. What I've decided is that, stitched with each suture, pinned beneath each staple, and glued shut under the liquid plastic of a collodion sealed incision reads the story that I know: each person I care for is its own body of literature waiting to be spoken. The words can remain with the patients, flaking off in dead skin cells and left behind for only the mites to mouth, or they can be given their own space where they are comfortably shared between all who are involved.

COVALENT BONDS

When the Waltons' house burnt down, it didn't matter that it was only a TV show, or that the Waltons got a new house in the end—a crisp-cornered house complete with new-bed-jumping laughter and smiles from John-Boy. All I thought was, “This can happen. Our house can burn down.”

At first I just spent time thinking about house fires in general and the random possibility of them. The unexpected waking into heat and a burning so destructive that no single possession would be left when the fire was through. I'd be left on the sidelines with my family, sifting through the remnants of rafters, piles of sunken soot. That is, if I was lucky enough to escape. I was old enough to know the stop, drop, and roll from lectures at school, and I knew enough to get down on all fours and crawl under the choking smoke, to never run through it. But the idea of a homeless future in borrowed clothes, sympathetic smiles and shoulder pats, local newspaper articles begging for charity sent our way, or the rawness of having nothing, absolutely nothing, was too much for me. The image I couldn't swing out of my mind was one where, after waking to discover orange flames blazing at the bottom of the stairs, I'd choose to jump down into the burning fire. Instead of going out the window and risking broken legs in the second story jump, I would leap into the flash at the bottom of the stairs and go down with the house.

Although this image never left me, I started getting practical about my fear. When I folded clothes for my mother, I stole small items belonging to everyone else in the house: pairs of socks and underwear, handkerchiefs for my father, something warm we could share—items I could keep without my mother's noticing. I took these articles, along with what I'd want saved

from a fire, and I kept them in a box in my room; if a fire came, I could at least throw the box out the window before jumping after it. Maybe then the loss wouldn't be so bad and I could chase after the box instead of the consuming flames.

Among the items I stored in my fire-box were tinker toys. I pushed the wooden circles onto the longer green dowels and pictured them being used for tools we would surely need when we caught our food in the woods and needed to pulp it into cookable, eatable sized portions. Forget that I had seen my father hanging deer or lamb out in the entrance to the barn—hocks of skinned muscles he used knives to cut through—I held claim to a vague notion that we could kill and process animals with a child's palm-sized round of wood because it was at least something. And if we had nothing, wouldn't I be hailed as the miracle planner who thought of everyone? I'd be the one who saved her family from starting out barren, empty, hungry, and without.

I don't know why I thought we'd live in the woods if our house burnt down, limited to a diet of rabbits, beaver, and deer instead of going to the grocery store like we always did when supplementing what our farm gave us. Perhaps the idea was my romanticism of life without a structured home, that we'd be turned to a kind of Daniel Boone or Grizzly Adams existence, living off the land and in the Maine woods until our new house was, like the Waltons' house, suddenly built and ready for move-in—every stick of furniture and stack of plate miraculously in place. I think I wanted the adventure or challenge of living so completely, so wildly off the land; I just wanted to be sure I was prepared for it, ready for it, able to govern how the circumstance came at me. Even if my equippings were incomplete, the illusion of some control calmed me.

When I did finally wake to fire flaring in my face, I was fifteen and too arrogant to do anything but lie about it. A lit candle I'd fallen asleep with burned down to a stub and the melted wax carried the wicking flare over to the blankets and sheet in front of my face. It lit my bed on

fire. Either sound or heat, maybe both, caused me to startle awake. I jumped from my bed, pulling the blankets with me. My commotional panic, the flinging of blankets over flame, fanned oxygen over the orange light and it grew around where I tried to smother it. I remembered the jug of water I kept for plants and emptied it onto the ruined mattress and pillow.

After it was out, my irresponsible behavior left the mattress with a black indentation. A crater. And the smell of fire that'd just been put out lingered heavy in my room. I flipped the mattress and opened my bedroom window to cover up what I'd allowed. But the damage was done: a smudged burn lightly scratched the left side of my face, fingers blistered at their tips, my eyelashes and eyebrows were singed, my legs spotted with charred flecks, the right calf hanging melted skin. If I could have hid the bodily damage, I would have hid the incident from my parents, tolerated the pain if I hadn't feared infection. I stayed up in the living room until morning, afraid to show my parents my legs, my bed, worried about their reaction and how much trouble I'd be in. When they woke, I told them a light bulb exploded, a faulty wire in an old house ignited by electricity and then left to smolder on cotton fuel and my sleep.

My parents suspected it was a candle but, because of my burns, their anger softened and they went along with my story. My mother took me to the emergency room where she vouched for the alleged exploding light bulb. A nurse, surprised by the extraordinary chances—"Good thing you woke up. And you put it out how? All by yourself? You didn't call for help?"—set up a whirlpool bath, then dipped my naked body in the warm, swirling water to soak off the charred skin and clean my wounds. Afterwards, she rubbed a white salve over the second degree burns, and then wrapped them all in gauze after setting down telfa pads to prevent the serous drainage from sticking. My left leg was swaddled from ankle to mid-thigh, my right just around the calf.

I still went to school that day. I was late, of course, arriving sometime just after lunch, but the school was taking pictures of the gymnastics team that day and I wanted to get in the group shot. It was the one way I was sure to make it in the yearbook. My parents had never let me join the team before—they didn't like picking me up at school after practices and meets—and I wasn't about to give up the pictures or the gymnastics team just because of a few burns caused by my own stupid mistake.

For the next month, I covered the gauze, protecting my burns with tape each day after school, and practiced my routine on the uneven bars. My goal was to do an eagle, a difficult move requiring complete upper body strength and control. From the top bar, facing the lower, I'd cast off in a straight line and then catch the lower bar with my hips, swinging myself around the low bar with nothing except my groin and hips touching. Then I'd pitch my body back and up and catch hold of the top bar from a backwards grip. I couldn't do it. I could do flyaways, and cast a perfect front hip circle, but once my body had swung around the low one, I was never strong enough to pull my torso up and back to the high bar. In all my attempts, my burns kept reminding me they were there. When I kicked my legs over the bars, they'd sometimes hit the wood, or the floor mats when I fell, and the gauze would rub against the burns. The pain was small compared to what I wanted: a moment in the middle. If I could set my body through the air, lift myself up high enough, I'd be suspended between the bars, inside their borders, instead of hanging or gripping or twirling off their ends.

The bars became my box of hidden toys and stolen clothes. They were how I re-gripped control, choosing my own place and outcome when it seemed any random life event could loosen my hold, my plans, my ideas of what stability meant or what it looked like. The way I pictured it, as a child, there was time to think when the fire swayed at the bottom of the stairwell. Held in

perfectly by the walls, the orange peaked flames dragged themselves up each step in a half-hearted climb, waiting for me to decide. The temptation to leap, fall into, or yield to the combustion was as great as the open window leading out to clear, fresh air. Even with my box, some nights, when I thought about it, I'd decide on fire over the window and my box because I knew that no amount of Grizzly Adams romanticizing would replace the real truth: we would be outside with nothing. No amount of warm clothes or extra pairs of underwear would hide the fact that we were all out in the open—a family without shelter, a nucleus exposed. When I realized my box would mean little compared to the loss, that I wouldn't get praised or be the central focus of attention, I prayed the inferno would never come.

But when fire did come, the choice of outcome wasn't mine; it started quick, went out in a hurry, and gave me no choice between surrender and survival. And it still burned me. The bars were my second chance. Gaining back the helm was up to my body: finding the middle ground, the center—where I thought most everybody else lived—was between the lip of bar and my strength. But I failed. Instead of catching the center, I banged my burned, salved, gauzed, and white-taped legs against the bars until my routine took on a stiff, sloppy quality, and I fell more than I hung on.

As an adult, I still feel like I'm swinging at the brim of inclusion. Like welcoming committees and acceptance only happens on TV or in the movies. I'd thought marriage would give me a constant, a person always there to belong to, but I still need to feel a sense of belonging outside of my home. This need clashes against the periphery I feel I'm on, reminds me of how I'm on the edge.

Once, after my husband and I moved across the country for his job, I retreated to a small room in the corner of the children's section where the library keeps a few toys. There, after story

time, I found the far wall in the rectangular fishbowl-looking room, with all of its windows, and sat leaning back in a blue plastic chair while breastfeeding my youngest and watching my oldest play. Nursing, without showing any breast, was easy because of the sling I kept my baby in; a little shifting of cloth and body and I could feed her anywhere. One mother, belonging to the girl playing with my older child, shared her mutual appreciation for a baby sling's use.

"I believe in the attachment theory of parenting," she said while picking up her son and cradling him against her chest. "If I could still put my son in one, I would."

Her son looked about two, her daughter four or five. "Yeah?" I said.

"Sometimes he needs to be that close. Especially now. We've moved a lot recently."

I couldn't believe my luck. I'd just spent the past thirty minutes attempting to strike up any conversation with any other mother who'd look at me: "That's a pretty shirt... I like that name... When are you due?... What kind of books does your daughter like?... Do you like this story time?" But all their lack of interest and shortened answers tired me with disappointment. My attempts at contact failed, but here was a woman, newly moved here like myself, and she was talking to me. "Where'd you move from?" I said.

"Louisiana."

"We moved here recently, too."

"Where from? The North?" I didn't have a southern accent like she did.

"No. From Arizona, from the West. I miss it. It's so different here in Florida. Why'd you move here?"

"My husband's parents live here. We're staying with them right now." Though she didn't smile while she spoke, I thought she was a nice person. She was petite and pretty, her dark hair

loose around her shoulders, her body posture relaxed as she leaned back in a nearby chair and held her son on her lap.

“That’s nice. We don’t have any family here.”

Our small talk went on, which I took as a hopeful sign. Her children were kind and played well with my three-year-old, sharing toys and trading toys from the bin. Then, the woman ruined it. “I’ve been watching you,” she said, as if I were a sport, the losing team in need of advice or a new plan. “You’re never going to make any friends with people here if you keep going to their front doors.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t be upfront with people or they’ll shy away,” she said. Her face got serious and she looked concerned, like she was about to tell me the most important thing I needed to know. “In the South, people don’t want you to go to their front door. It’s too forward. They need time to get to know you. They need to see who you are first before they’ll let you in.”

“I can’t try to meet people?” I said, a little confused. Most people I knew appreciated it when others talked first, opened things up, welcomed them in.

“You need to go to their back doors.”

“How do you do that?”

“Slowly. It takes a lot of time. You go to the same places again and again until you’re familiar. Then, maybe they’ll let you in. But if you walk up to people’s front door and start talking before they talk to you, they’ll never let you in.”

So, I’m not making friends because I’m trying to make friends. What if I can’t find the path to the backdoor? We discussed her theories on southern traditions until she invited me to her church.

“No thank you,” I said, and, understanding how the conversation had changed, got ready to leave.

“What do you believe?” she said.

What did I believe? Not what she did. I mentioned karma and she said, “Well, I don’t need to worry about that. I know I’ll be saved as long as I believe.”

The bleakness of my beliefs, for me at that moment, lay in what I knew would happen next: I’d leave the library and take my kids home to a hollow house where there was too much me and not enough of somebody else. That there, on the city’s outskirts, to semi-rural zoning, in a once-was-town now bankrupt and taken over by the county, I would step through a steel door, walk on glossy white ceramic tile, and I would be the only entertainment for miles, the only one there with milk in her breasts, the only one there who could reach up to where the cups were kept, the only one there who could turn on the oven and heat up food, the only one who could read, clean a bottom, rub in ointment, open the door and let the dog out, wash the socks left out in the rain, and answer the phone that never rang. What did I believe? That I was someone else’s center, but it was a center of need and not of desire. Being in the center had to feel better than this, I believed, because I pictured the center a place where all bonds and forces wanted to reside. A place where solid mass turned into a solute, where a solute was dissolved into something greater—something so important and necessary, like air or water, that it wasn’t just needed by helpless children; it was craved by all others with such yearning that they, too, would want to exist as a solute and melt into my life.

After I pulled into the driveway, my neighbor walked over and, as if in conspiracy with the woman at the library, invited me to attend his church, too. “Everyone needs to go to church,” he said.

Maybe it was my startled look of disorientation; maybe I looked like I needed to be saved. I did have boxes from the move, and many of the boxes were still packed. But they were not boxes saved for leaping or flight. The house had no second story window. No stairwells or steps. No temptation. No feelings of potential fires to prepare for, leap into, or flee from. Just brown cardboard boxes stacked in corners waiting to be opened up and emptied out.

I have been saved before. It wasn't just fire. I was also afraid of drowning when I was a child, of suffocation, of the pressure that builds in the chest and body from holding the breath for too many seconds. Underwater, when everything in the body is pushing outward to let the held air escape so the body can pull in new oxygen, I knew that the relief of fresh breath would be a watery betrayal, filling—no, flooding—the lungs until there was no room for air. My fear of going under, of the inability to breathe, got me scolded by my mother after swimming lessons. I was about five or six. “Did you go under water today?” my mother would ask.

“No.”

“How come?”

I'd shrug. My attention would fix on something else, my toes crawling through the soft white sand, lifting and burying, sifting and digging. My towel would hang a little, and I'd pull it around me tight, the goose bumps already appearing in the Maine morning, my lips preparing to shiver.

My cousins had swim lessons with me once. They told me stories of the tea parties they had—a swimming class full of children all underwater with their arms and legs crossed in style for tea, their eyes all open to look around and wave to each other at their underwater tea party before emerging through the surface for another bite of air. “If you go under, then you'll be able to come to the tea party with us,” they said.

I wasn't so sure. It sounded like fun with the eyes open and waving around, but would it be worth the risk?

When I finally gained enough courage to go under, it was after a mistake. I went under without meaning to after stepping into a drop-off too low for me to touch the sand and keep my head above the water at the same time. I was following the float. Damariscotta Lake had a buoyed-off swim line with a float people could swim out to. The float was in the shallow waters where I could reach it, and I was having a grand time jumping off it into waist-deep lake. But the adults started pushing each other off it. They decided to move it back out in the deep end so they upended the anchor and swam to where they could really have their fun.

My parents were amongst those other adults. "Stay there," my mother said.

I followed, jumping up and down into deeper and deeper waters until finally the sand was lost beneath me. Up and down I jumped, water pouring over my face in a continuous cycle because I couldn't push up high enough to where the air would touch my face. With each tap at the ground, no matter how hard I kicked, I couldn't reach air. "Help!" I tried to yell into each cycle of waterfall before submersion. I could hear the adults still playing and laughing, their sounds all muffled like a motor boat running under water with me beneath its wake. My own voice sounded the same way—trapped. There was no escape.

Big Bird saved me. Her name was Roberta, but I couldn't pronounce it so she let me call her Big Bird, even though my mother said no one wanted to be called "big." She reached down, pulled me out of the waterfall I was in, carried me back to the shore, and I always thought she saved my life. "Oh, you weren't that far out," my mother said. "You would have been alright."

"Did you hear me?" I said.

"No," my mother said, looking out towards the lake.

“Then how did you know I needed help?”

“I could see you.”

“You could?” I didn’t understand how, if I couldn’t see above the water, how she saw me inside of it. I pictured myself looking like a big water bubble going up and down, up and down. It could have been any child trapped in the bubble. How did she know it was me?

“I saw you following the float out. I saw you go out over your head.”

I still believed I’d almost drowned and that I was saved because I couldn’t push my face out from the bubble, the water fall, and Big Bird plucked me up out of it and carried me back to the sand, back to where all of our towels were laid out together. I became an expert swimmer after that. “A fish,” my mother called me because I never wanted to leave the water when it was time to eat or go home, and I dreamed of an underwater world beneath the sand where creatures looked up and watched me swim over them. Someday, I hoped, they’d invite me to join them, teach me how to breathe underwater without gills, and then I’d never have to leave the water, the place where I felt completely surrounded, held from all sides in an unrestricted binding, a circle of complete acceptance—a world where I could fall but then never land wrong or even feel like I was falling, a world I move through as lightly as if flying, a world I could upend myself from and come out of whenever I wanted, since the world would always be there waiting for me to jump back down into it again.

Life is not like water, however, and on land I don’t always step right. I had a neighbor I was afraid of as a child, mainly because he barked warnings when he saw us, told us to keep off his property—as if we were always hanging off the edge of trouble—but also because he didn’t smile. My family’s large pasture and hay field butted up against his property. An old, wide stone wall, overgrown with bushes and trees, marked a clear boundary. We’d heard he let the

raspberries on his side grow thick, though they went unpicked, and late one summer day, while picking raspberries with my sister and two cousins on our side of the wall, we talked about the man's raspberries and their supposed easier picking. Braving his side of the wall, we climbed through a sparser portion of bush and began to pull his berries into our mouths. While searching for the better patch that held the larger fruit, we heard him heading towards us. We fled back across the wide and crumbling wall, through denser brush, as fast as we could. We planned to feign innocence from our side of the stones if he spoke to us, but, crossing the wall, I stepped in a wasp's nest and crushed its gray paper with my foot.

The nest must have blown down from a branch, and at first—before I screamed—I wondered what it was doing on the ground. Then, as the wasps grew louder and circled my body, I panicked, waving my arms about as if clouded by mosquitoes. I knew I shouldn't slap at them, that they'd become angrier and sting, but I also rationalized that if I ran, it wouldn't be fast enough; they'd sting me anyway. Paralyzed by the shock of what I'd done, the fear of so many wasps, I couldn't do anything but stand there and defend myself. My cousins and sister coaxed me, screamed at me to run towards them, to leave the wall I stood on and get away from the hive. But I didn't dare. I stood there, my foot through the center of the grey and papery ruin, watching the swarming buzz around my body, and waiting for the bald-faced hornets to land. As they touched me, I slapped them. The force of my palm and fingers smacking my skin was harsh, but I was in control. If I could swat them dead, they couldn't sting me.

Lisa, my older cousin, came back through the brush and pulled me out of the nest. She carried me half way up the hill towards our farmhouse, and the wasps circled our heads nearly the whole way. Inside the safety of the house, after our chattering excitement from my stepping in a hive and then our getting chased by the wasps settled, and we found only two stings on my

body. I'd crushed their grey delicate tissue paper nest, slapped them hard like they were mosquitoes—no more than a nuisance—and, for the most part, they were forgiving in their defense.

Now I wonder if being in the middle, if feeling in the center of life, whatever that place might be, is like being in that nest—the clear and present danger buzzing all around with me and everybody else at the mercy of vengeance or forgiveness or even apathy. Inclusion seems so random. I picture the center, that elusive place I feel like I'm bordering most of the time, as being a frenzied circle filled with all the particles that make up life: protons, electrons, neutrons—atoms smashing into each other and collecting parts, stealing pieces, leaving something off, pulling something in, and all the lonely barely touched people are out at the edges watching what they long to be a part of but feel too scared to really get pulled in to because then maybe they'll get taken apart. Being on the inside might be overrated. I picture an open cylinder with the pressure turned up by increasing the heat, decreasing the volume, or both, and all of us inside it unhinging and coupling, searching out normality through numbers and equivalents, or changing our states because the forces exerted on us by others are too great, too much to take, and molecular stability means we'll avoid the leavings and smashing and seek the bonds formed by sharing instead of breaking apart.

If the nest is the center of things, then I did find my way into a core once, and what I found was a paralyzing fear that made me defend myself. Disregarding all the buzzing action around me, I placed my focus on killing anything that touched me because in all landings there's as much potential for harm as there is for safety. Do I belong on the edges of things or do I choose to be there, to not live out in the open with everyone else in this crowded world—to cling to the safety of bars and boxes and an either-or mentality where I can swing or fall or leap but

keep distanced control in a zone clearly defined by the periphery of never letting go, of never moving into the forces that hold groups together.

THE DUST TRAIL

When we moved from Arizona to Florida, I thought my dusting days were over. The air was so dry in Arizona, the dirt had nothing to tampon it—no humidity to weigh the particles down—and fine silt settled on all the surfaces. In Florida, the air would be so heavy nothing would move. There'd be no aerosolized earth clinging to the furniture. What I found instead was that the dust still settled in Florida, just differently. Instead of loose grit, fiber particles built themselves with sticky air until ceiling fans and book shelves became hairy. On window sills, visible bug fragments lay dead. If I fell behind in the dusting, the gooey surfaces looked like old forgotten bread even the birds wouldn't go near.

Although I've learned that dust is something I can't get away from, I continue to dread the idea of how it might get worse. Because my husband has long wanted to live on a dirt road, regardless of where we live, I worry about dirt roads kicking up and diffusing unsettled silt everywhere while he pictures a quiet stretching past our home—maybe a cabin under a canopy of pine—that is only seen by those who want the same kind of secluded calm. He'd even have us living down a grooved drive worn deep by erosion where the only exposed earth lies open in a dip for tire tracks; the center line of green growth paralleling the brown stripes is a forgotten runway that leads to fields of grasses curled by wind and our house hidden at the end. It sounds nice. It was a dream born in Arizona where dirt roads are plentiful, and I enjoy walking dirt roads when they're Forest Service byways eroding into rocky slopes that scrape the undercarriage of cars—this discourages vehicular travel. But when my husband talks of living off one, it's when we're driving down one, scattering dust behind us from wheels that spin rock detritus into

aerosolized fragments, clouding the air brown as we go. The faster we drive, the higher up the particles travel, and the longer it takes them to settle. When I think of dirt roads, regardless of which state I'm in, I don't think of the pastoral. I think of the dust. I imagine us living on a dry, wash-boarded road where every time a truck passes by, dust flies up in the trees, lands on the roof, clings to the windows, and finds its way in. I think of wet rags browning in my hands as they are constantly cleaning, removing the fine sediment from everything I own.

Arizona is a landscape filled with eroding sediment. Gravel, sand, silt, and clay accumulated in layers when the land was underwater. It hardened and bonded. Most of this is sandstone, fragmented grains cemented together by minerals, and brittle shale that flakes easily into a finely ground rock disintegrating into soil. Hard rock is layered on top of soft and sheets the horizon into windblown sculptures with top heavy ridges, dented grooves. Rain water fractures wall joints, folds scarps into bowls, and dips canyons towards decay. Weather-dressed mesas shear into spires. Screens accumulate under gravity. Rocks rise up out of the dust in bent march. A headless giant stands stock still, leaning on its club. Three pink women, pointed heads in scarves, tan in the sun. Fingers point to clouds. Lips purse to kiss the sky. Bridges arch, windows open, and hammers stand ready to pound. For all of its dusty roads, I still consider Arizona solid ground. And so I return there each summer, as if standing under sedimentary rocks-come-to-life prevents the erosion of my own sense of stability.

Just across the New Mexico border, on my way back to Arizona, I've stopped in a large vacant lot that sits between the highway, I-40, and a frontage road. This is where I feel the switch between east and west. It's right after I've left Texas, moved over the final time zone, and am just a day's drive from the town I lived in for seven years, from the mountainous strip of country

I lived in for eleven years, and from the summer job waiting for me—the one allowing me to not just visit but stay. Because of these summer shifts, I don't know what home is anymore, or where it is. Since I moved to Florida four years ago for my husband's job, this will be my third summer moving back to the places I miss out West. Each time I return, more questions cling to me. Is home a destination? A place I need to look for and find? And once I've found it, how do I keep it? Is it right to go out in search of it, to track it down like some animal I'm trying to catch and tame? Or do I make my home according to where I am, where I have found myself, and accept that it's where I must live?

I stopped to let the dogs out of the car so they can run a bit, pee, and get a drink. Poking along the weeds, grasses, and flowers that have somehow managed to germinate and force their way through the hard-packed, cracked desert ground, I find first one, then another, and then an endless supply of quarter-sized rocks. Each one is its own distinct shape with pointed corners or rounded angles, each one is a different texture and color than the last.

At first I palm an oval shaped, smooth, yellowish-tan one. It's so hot from the noontime sun that I need to move it, roll it around from fingers to palms until it isn't burning anymore. As I shoe through the scattered stones I find white quartz, rose quartz, granite flaked with mica, fools gold, perfect iron bird eggs, glassy terracotta, smooth skinned copper, jagged black ovals broken open, red, white, brown—the colors of people. I line them up like soldiers, put them in a row.

One of the dogs finds a young carcass decaying in the open bush. All that is left is skull, jaw bone, scapula, legs with intact hooves, and enough fur to tell me it was fawn and not calf. My dog rolls in the remnants before I can stop her, wafting dead animal gristle my way. I groan at how the car may smell and decide to spend a while in the sun to bake the stench off her.

This dry and open landscape—easy to climb and pick my way across—was something I once looked beyond. The desert was something to get through while on my way to trees. So little grows here, and what does look like stiff-haired Brillo pads, muted greens and yellows ready for scrubbing. The desert's sparse vegetation leaves the land exposed to almost all available sunlight. The extra heat pulls moisture away from the earth and all that is standing on it. I am more water than not. The sun wicks me dry before I know I'm being drained. The nicking away—deflation—of dry lands makes this place feel impermanent while the land lying open for miles of endless rugged beds makes this same land feel impossibly indomitable. Left open on the horizon, I am vulnerable and without shade but able to see for miles. I savor it. Under the doming blue sky, I feel as if I could lift up from my toes and fly. The way blue changes to white at the far end of my vision, as scattered clouds come together for the intersection of earth greeting air, tells me that I am out West: home.

At least, I am where home used to be. Now, instead of knowing for certain my place in the world, one foot is rooted in Florida—the place my husband's career change has brought me, and the other is standing stubbornly in the West—the place I haven't been able to let go of. I understand that life transitions are supposed to bring about changes. Moving across towns, and even states, is a normalized accompaniment to milestones: college, roommates, lovers, marriage, jobs, kids, career changes, school districts, and housing markets. Sometimes a simple restlessness or curiosity for what else is out there can necessitate moving to someplace new. I was looking for this: someplace new, the next big adventure, a chance at a different job market, housing market, people to meet and get to know. But planning my move, welcoming the experience and change, didn't prepare me for the fallout of loss that I have experienced. In this constant motion of looking for someplace new, or someplace better, I have lost my sense of

place, of where I fit in this world. Florida doesn't *feel* like home, so place can't be just about home—the structure of sheetrock, paint, joists, and nails—because a house doesn't contain my identity, it doesn't provide me with the sense of belonging that I need. There must be some other global position for me where my authentic location lies.

Whenever I'm a tourist, people ask me where I'm from. These days, I don't know what to say. On one excursion, in Canyon De Chelly National Monument, I hiked down the White House Trail that dips through the thin black- and brown-streaked surface coat of desert-varnished sandstone cliff. The red walls of canyon end at river bottom and a sixty-roomed Anasazi ruin. The Navajo tribe holds the legal title; they manage the park. It's on their land.

One ranger, dressed in tan and green, clipped down the trail at a pace twice my speed. As he passed he asked, "Where are you from?"

I haw-paused, slowing him down. "More recently, I've been living in Florida."

"Wow, that's far."

"But I'm spending the summer in Flagstaff. I used to live there."

After he passed, I turned the question around to ask him where he's from. He threw his answer back while pointing down to the dirt path we're on. "Right here," he said.

Why can't I know where I'm from with such clarity and assurance? I was born in Maine. I grew up there. Though all my relatives say I'm "coming home" when I visit, I don't consider it home. For traditional Navajos, the native land is protected beneath the ground: when a child is born the placenta is buried on family land so that the child will always know where home is. Strung out on symbolic cord, two arteries and a vein, if the placenta has been ceremoniously placed in the soil then the children, no matter how old, will always know where their place is. A

direct line will call away from the heart, fix on the child's positioning, and circulate them into homeward flow.

Traditional Hopi bury the placenta under a plant, a flowering bush or tree, to ensure a retained source, an imprinted memory so that the children will always know who they are, where they came from, and that they are connected to the earth, sky, planets, and galaxies. According to the Hopi, the placenta itself is a tree lobed with venous branches, grooved like bark. If such an important thing—a part of the body—were thrown away in some hospital garbage then the children might as well be discarded too, since the circle of family and home would be broken. The children would grow up never knowing who they were or where they came from. I can see what they mean: the round disk is imprinted with a network of stemmed fibers, and it breathes and filters, converting minerals and water into growth. Without it, no new life would develop.

When I was in nursing school in 1991, on my first rotation through obstetrics, I was shown the freezer full of placentas. Purple pancakes stacked one on top of the other for a cosmetic company that took them away for research.

“What are they researching?” I said.

“Oh, you know, cosmetics. Beauty care products,” the nurse who showed me said.

“How are they researching? What are they doing with them?”

“Probably figuring out ways to make people look younger.”

“Do they put the placentas into the cosmetics?”

“I don't know.” She walked off, the novelty of show and surprise worn off. I have continued to wonder about those organs. Some companies boast about processes where protein-based products—sterilized, dried, and finely ground into a powder—fight wrinkles, moisturize,

rejuvenate, and stimulate blood circulation to minimize cellulite. A newly grown organ, built for the sole purpose of perfusing a life, could turn up in pore cleaners or face masks.

At the time, it didn't occur to me to ask if the mothers ever wondered what was done with the afterbirth, but I revisited this question nine years later when I worked as an obstetric nurse in Flagstaff, Arizona. When I first started working the mother-infant unit, placentas were left sitting at room temperature on a shelf or night stand until the patient went home; for a long time no one questioned this arrangement. It seemed convenient. The patient wanted the organ, so keep the organ with the patient. Occasionally one would get tossed out after delivery—a miscommunication between the patient and the nurse where the nurse didn't know or forgot that the patient wanted to keep the organ. Often the mother would be moved to a new room before she thought to ask where it was. I imagined the nurse, gloved and gowned, sifting through the biohazard bag with other infectious waste for the discarded remains she hadn't thought to save; she probably never forgot to ask again before throwing one away.

Now most everyone who delivers at that hospital is asked if they want to keep it. I took care of a Caucasian family traveling through on their way to another state. The grandmother asked me what the placentas were used for and should she have said "yes" when the nurse asked; should they have kept theirs? I explained that some cultures take them home and bury them.

"Oh," she said.

"You thought you were missing out on something big, didn't you?" I said.

She smiled back at me. "I thought there was something about it worth keeping."

The unit also bought a special refrigerator to keep them in. A new nurse on the unit brought up the point of having body parts rotting in the rooms, coagulated blood decomposing and stinking up the air. I never noticed a smell before they were put on ice. And it became a

hassle of notes everywhere: “Placenta in fridge,” so that no one would forget and send the mom and baby home without it. The rest of the placentas at that hospital were incinerated with the rest of the red-bagged waste. With this burning, I think of ash. I think of smoky pounds of particulate matter riding on the wind, settling in the trees, on rooftops, cars, and soil hundreds or thousands of miles away.

The Navajo reservation spreads across the entire northeast corner of Arizona—its southwestern tip just outside of Flagstaff—and the Hopi reservation is landlocked inside of it. One area, Black Mesa, has been claimed as a traditional and sacred homeland by both tribes. One court ruled it to be a Joint Use Area. A later court divided the land between the two tribes and the Hopi reservation was widened. Thousands of Navajos had to be moved, relocated. Part of the Black Mesa land dispute, Navajos still living on Hopi land, isn’t just about where the Navajos will go if and when they leave—it is about what they would be leaving behind. They’ve argued in courts about how their placentas and umbilical cords are buried where they live, about how their memories are tied to the land. They’ve pointed out how the Peabody Coal Company wants to mine the coal seams as thick as 18 feet. Mining will dig it all up. Removing history from the land is a form of removing the reasons for their existence. I wonder, would they become permanently erased, their identity gone along with the unearthing?

Since a placenta’s worth is so great in some cultures, I have become haunted by the implications for my own. If who I am and where I am from has been scattered as ash on the weather then am I doomed to roam restless my whole life? I’m convinced, because of my age, that my own placenta was buried instead of burned; in 1971, before the worries of AIDS, hepatitis, and medical waste washing up on New Jersey’s shore, most medical waste was dumped instead of burned. All the same, I pretend it was incinerated, distributed in the air.

Maybe there was a westerly wind that day of the fire, blowing me out West. I return there again and again, though I've moved away, and on the side of the road in New Mexico, I gather up my small rocks and put them in the car. To reunite my present with every fragment from my past drifting across the land, I collect stones like they are pieces of myself.

I'm in the northern Arizona woods, up a rocky gulch between two hills, behind white limestone and pink rocks glistening with quartz. Blue plastic ribbons tied around younger ponderosa pines lead the way up to a turquoise Ford, shot and dead in the woods. The lights have been knocked out. Busted black and yellow clay pigeons lie with red bullet casings; I find one pigeon in pine needles, perfectly intact, with the words "White Flyer" pressed on its side, though there is no white. Bullet holes rim exposed metal. The windshield is hanging over the driver's seat, the bottom drapes over the dash like some frosted semi-opaque fragmented curtain hung for decoration. Only two seats remain—the hood is just up the hill ten yards, bits of rusted barbed wire behind it, the roof is dented, a piece of burnt wood is inside of it—it looks like someone had a good time destroying it, taking it apart.

The path takes me up through the trough of hills to more wire, crushed and empty beer cans, a pile of ash and broken glass, one of the tires from the car behind me, and more bullet casings. The remnants of a party I wasn't invited to—a tremendous fire pit built upon limestone rocks is circled by logs fashioned campfire-style from fallen ponderosa. They are the perfect height for benches in the woods. Crows call to each other. Their holler fills the air with either question or complaint.

Some come into the woods and leave things behind. I take things with me. I pick rocks up by the fistful, pocketful, baggie-full (clear plastic stretching over hard ridges), and then by the

backpack-full—so heavy it pulls on my shoulders, makes them sore. I plan my storage spots in the car, places for heavy cargo that I will take back to Florida with me. Being in the woods clears my head, makes feel less worried about who I am or where I belong. I enter the woods feeling fractured and when I leave them I am whole again. Perhaps some of the placental winds caught on the tree tops because, even though I don't always climb trees, I need to be in a forest of them.

The path splits—into the shade or into the sun. I choose the mix—sun shaded by lines of tall trees and bunches of dappled needles on the forest floor. Pine litter softens the path through more discarded remains: a half gallon milk jug, the yellow plastic lid of an aerosol can. A granola bar wrapper. A plastic peanut butter jar licked clean, the paper label fading in the sun. Later down the road, hanging on a tree branch, the empty paperboard twenty-four pack that had carried in the beer. Who are these people?

Pine litter. Human litter. Like books bought used with the trail of their previous owners left behind in underlined words and notes in the margins. The person wanted to remember something but then discarded or sold the book back into circulation for other hands to pick up, other eyes to move through. It seems so personal to read through their thoughts written on the page, like beads of sweat wiped off the brow and rubbed on somebody else's shirt. Is our litter more natural than we think? Is it wrong for me to attempt to leave nothing behind?

Dust—dirt so light in Arizona that as I walk I breathe it in. Scuff my foot once and up it flies. I understand the term eating dust because it does go into the mouth—a dry aftertaste that leaves me thirsty. But more than eating it, I'm breathing it. Each respiration brings the inhalation of fine particles of sand. "Soft sand," my four-year-old calls it. She picks it up by the fistful and

carries it along with her on our hikes. Never mind that there is more ahead, more that she is walking on now: she picks it up, grabs it in her hands and tries to take it all with her.

After the rains, the dust turns to mud. It clings to my boots, fills the tread and widens the rim of my souls so that my boots become heavier with each step I take. Mud sticks to mud until I kick it off on a debarked tree stump.

The monsoons are taking pause. In only one week the draw has dried out. The muddy arroyos and algae-bloomed puddles, greener than the trees, have cracked and gone muddy. The earth is hard packed but green. A once brown landscape is alive with grass and no longer does the dust of soft sand travel to my lungs. The ground has been so rich this season—richer than I ever noticed before this season turned up the stereo, attuning my senses to the subtleties this land has to offer. “It sure is sparkly up here,” my friend Sharon said of the ground on the day we went rock-hounding with the kids.

Yes, it is. And it’s the end of summer. I eat up my last moments here like they’re precious gems I need to swallow to keep within before they are stolen from me. I think of images from movies, clips of Jews swallowing rubies in white bread before they are taken off to be shot or enslaved. The woods. The rocks. My places of solace that I must turn away from. A mourning dove calls now, just like they call in Florida. I always think the mournful bird, who just won’t give up her song, is calling for me. Is it possible to discover something that I have already known is buried inside me? The stones are my own, my map, my dust trail that will lead me back home to the rest of my life, enlivening my sense of connection to the place where I now live.

HUSH, HUSH, VOICES CARRY

When the landlady came, you were frying an egg. The frying pan flaked Teflon into the whites and yolk as it popped and sizzled and the landlady gave us her warning: if we couldn't keep the noise down at night then we'd have to move out. Our neighbor kept complaining. "I don't know what kind of parties you're having," the landlady said, "but she has to get up mornings and work."

After the landlady left, we saw ourselves from her position and laughed at what she saw, at what she might think: the egg for lunch instead of breakfast, the dishes piled dirty in the sink and threatening to take over the short blue counter, the three tiered hanging basket filled with tapes and junk instead of fruit. We laughed at the books and laundry spread out across the floor between our only furniture: a redish-orange beanbag chair, an old coffee table, and Steve's plaid foam cot. We laughed at my paints and canvasses up against a wall, at the overturned boxes used as tables, at the garbage needing out for days, and the obvious lack of a broom. We laughed at what she thought of us and her poor abused "carriage house" that she'd rented out to two teens who were only girls—me at sixteen and you at nineteen. Surely the sight of us was worse than the complaints of noise.

Five years later, you were dead at twenty-four, and your parents made an appearance on *Hard Copy*—"infotainment" tabloid TV, that sleazy show, selling sex and violence as regular news, as if there was no other kind. "We told her not to go out there," your parents said about your move. They shared no photos from after high school when your nose was pierced and your

hair less tame. “We told her not to go,” they tsked into the camera, “but she wouldn’t listen to us.”

Like our complaining neighbor, I had to get up mornings, too, and go to school, and then work eight hours at the nursing home until eleven, but that didn’t stop us. We had friends. They stayed late, or crashed on the floor near dawn. You even drove down the coast of Maine to Portland one day and brought back Dave, who walked around shirtless and smoked up all your Camels while you gave him back massages and looked over-the-moon happy when he kissed you and slept beside you naked past noon.

We loved that apartment: a wide open living room, a cathedral ceiling with wooden beams, a glass door opening on a short deck, a black spiral staircase that went up to a loft. So thrilled we were, after signing the lease, we knocked each other down while hugging. But when Dave wanted to be deposited back in Portland, and there was rumor of his other girlfriend there, you came back all wrong: a hangover headache, guts twisting or lurching, a body going numb. I’d overslept and missed school again. When I woke, you were groaning and threatening to move out. “I think I’m a drug addict,” you said. “I can’t say ‘no.’ I think I need help.”

I was worried about managing the rent on my own, about what your changes might mean for me and my own partying, about what it might mean for our friendship. Soon after, you moved back home with your parents and fell in line marching with the twelve steps of NA like they were the only path to recovery, and I managed fine on my own. You kept your key and we found other ways to have fun. After you picked up a new boyfriend with the new life, you finished art school, traded up one boyfriend for another, and then another, until finally you moved to the other Portland—the one people know about—where you metalsmithed and then needed money for overdue bills so you danced nude for new faces, new men.

It was my mother who gave me the news. “Didn’t you used to chum around with that girl from Warren, Suzanne Hill?”

“You mean Su? Yeah. Why?”

“She was murdered. It’s in the paper.”

The papers had much to say. Before someone found your badly burned body in the Northwest Portland, Oregon trash bin, you’d been missing for over a month—last seen with “strip club habitué” Michael McNeely who, it turned out, never gave you the ride home like he promised. When I heard you’d been raped again, I remembered the other rape, the one with the carnie, and I pictured your bleached-white Aimee-Mann-from-‘Til-Tuesday hair sticking out from hairspray and struggle, your rapid nose breathing increased for the fight, and the irony of how your hair style was from the *Voices Carry* era when you got choked in a junk yard too far away for anyone to hear your strangled screams.

Years later, Aimee Mann did the soundtrack for a movie where Tom Cruise strutted through infomercials as a misogynist selling how-to programs for men—“It’s not what you hope for, it’s not what you deserve, it’s what you take”—and claimed that any girl was obtainable, was there for the having. I think you would’ve laughed at Tom Cruise saying, “Respect the cock.” You were one of my first feminist role models—even before the landlady rented the place out to us. She’d said, “I’ll have to call my husband and make sure it’s okay with him,” and you said, “What, she can’t make a decision on her own? She has to ask a man first?”

The papers, though, said you were too trusting, naïve. They said you’d fooled everyone with your “elaborate tattoos” and pierced nose, the bleached-white hair and thick black eyeliner; no one would’ve guessed the fine arts degree or that you were from Maine. What the papers didn’t know, but I did, was that you’d considered stripping in the lesser-known Portland. We’d

talked about it, and I said I thought I'd like it—easy money and all that attention, those eyes thinking you were hot—and you said you would, too, only you were afraid that a customer might get the wrong idea and see you on the street, away from the club, and think they knew you and what you're willing—even wanting—to do. Both of us decided right then that we'd probably never dance because of that risk, because of what all girls are told they should fear: forced open legs, pinned down arms, the inability to fend it off, feeling weak because of this, and vulnerable, and violated, and like a too-stupid-girl who should've know better. Always, it's the girls who should've known better; they'd been warned.

What you would've liked, though, was the protesters in your honor: female friends and strangers holding hands together at the Rimrock Café where you'd worked, standing in front of the garish paintings of naked women stuck in martini glasses with accentuated breasts and legs unable to kick, and the “Girls! Girls! Girls!” calling for men to watch and drink and pay; the protesters said they opposed objectifying women and pornography, and you would've cheered or lit another candle for the female power and solidarity.

He kept you like a fetish for a while, before going back to finally burn and dump your body. He kept you like a fetish while the police questioned him and then let him go. I've always wondered what it felt like when you died, without breath, under hands that tipped you crinkled dollar bills and felt your thighs under runway lights. Were you thinking, “Shit, how'd I get myself into this mess?” Did you remember our conversation about dancing and realize you were right?

For some reason, I always hear you breathing. It's loud, nasal, and too fast, just like when you were alive. Also, I hear you laughing—it's like the time when the landlady came, and once again you've left me alone, after the warnings, to manage the rent and late nights and

oversleeping and boys and men and my body with all of its power and danger, all on my own,
and all I can do is remember the fresh sizzle of oil and egg.

THE FLATS OF PARADISE

I'd wanted a little farm with chickens and pet goats, so the coop was a selling point when my husband said he loved this place. He was convinced it was the right home to buy, even if we didn't know the area. He fell in love with the tiled floors, arched doorways, covered porch, acres of flowers and fruit trees, and the quiet. I trusted his enthusiasm because I imagined raising my kids knowing the joys I'd grown up with on a farm in Maine: discovering perfect oval eggs in fresh straw, a rooster's throaty crow announcing dawn, and the knowledge that food doesn't magically grow on supermarket shelves. What I didn't expect was for the roosters to start competing nights just after three a.m. Most nights I can't sleep through it; one of them will announce the sunrise, but until then, their cocky entitlement keeps me awake till daylight. I regret my own rooster's part in this competition as he crows from his chicken wire cage, behind my bedroom window, and sends off another round of responses from the neighbors' yards.

The rooster and two hens, a gift from my parents, were brought down from Maine when Evelyn, a family friend, drove here to sunny Florida for a visit with her nearby relatives. My father made a chicken cage for the backseat floor of her car, my aunt Nancy rode with her, and I did a little dance about not needing spring; it was early October but we'd have young chicks to raise—fresh eggs by midwinter. I looked forward to those eggs, to cracking them open while still warm after they went from chicken to palm to pan in under an hour.

They came in the evening: Evelyn, my aunt, and the chicks. Evelyn had a mess to clean from her backseat, but my three-year-old daughter sprawled on the kitchen floor—where the cage was—in pure delight. The chicks showed up too old for yellow fluff and, wearing new

feathers, were somewhat distinguishable from each other. My daughter held all three in the kitchen and then showed them to their new quarters, too excited to let one go from her arms as my husband put out the food and water.

The next day, we named them. My husband designated the red one Gerty, my daughter called a black and white one Chee-Cha, and I named the last one, also black and white, Trudi. My daughter spent hours in the chicken coop, chasing after them, catching them, holding them, the whole time talking and singing. It was sweet. Then one of our dogs, Angelina, snatched a black and white chick with nimble speed when my daughter opened the coop's door; the chick had made a go at escape, running free in the yard, and then it felt the dog's wet mouth and firm teeth. It was a quick end—I imagine the necks of both animals snapped as one lost life and the other one gained it—and my daughter learned how death is a permanent thing that can't be reversed or changed.

My husband and I were inside when it happened. We heard my daughter screaming "Dad! Dad!" and crying like something awful was happening. When I reached her, she told me through tears that it wasn't Chee Cha, it wasn't her baby chick who died. "It was the one you named," she said, refusing to give up her naming along with one of her pets.

Out on the back acre, the wooded one, my husband dug a hole for the bird and let my daughter hold it until she was ready to drop it in. "It's deep," she kept saying about the hole, and, "I don't want to say goodbye to Trudi."

"Trudi isn't in the chicken's body anymore," my husband said

"We need to return the chicken's body back to the ground," I said.

My daughter was curious about the chicken's head and neck, the floppy way it fell into its chest or dangled in the air, and my husband showed her the chicken, explained how the body

was there but the chicken's soul had left and was gone. She cradled the young hen's body under one arm and found a way to keep its head from lolling as she stroked its chest and outer wing. Finally she let it go, but with so much crying and resistance, even as she let it drop in the hole, we had to carry her back to the house.

In the shower, my daughter's body shook and heaved as the power of loss swept through her. I sat on the tub's bottom, holding her sobbing, naked body while she repeated, "I want Trudi, I want Trudi," and the shower's water fell over us.

"You have two other chicks to look after and think about," I said.

"I don't want to go back to the chicken coop, not without Trudi there," she said.

Earlier that morning, before the chick's death, my mother told me how the mother hen was angry at my parents for taking three of her babies. "She chased after us when we got too close. She wanted us to leave her babies alone."

"I'd be pretty pissed off, too, if someone was trying to take my kids," I said.

I think of that mother hen's loss now, far away in Maine. She didn't know what would become of her robbing, of her offspring. Empathizing with her now, in the dark, and listening to her son compete against neighboring roosters she'll never know, I see how I also feel robbed. Not of life, but of place. I'd never moved anywhere for a job before this. I'd always gone where ever I wanted and found the job after I got there. Marriage changes these things, though. It took my husband six years of moving from job to unsatisfying job before he decided to go back to school and get his PhD. Now he has his dream job while I have the land I wanted in a state my friends back in Arizona and Maine make fun of: hurricanes, alligators, sharks, snow birds, retirees, and hospitals known for cutting off the wrong leg—the good leg. Here, unfastened from where I came from, from what I know about choice and rural western or northern ways, my

sense of home has bolted from security like the chick did. Grasped by this flat and strange peninsula hanging out in the Atlantic, this central bit of land, my sense of place or purpose in this world is gone.

Finally, one cock falls into first place and sings before the others through a damp cloth of fog and dull, lifting light.

This is what I'm used to: ponderosa pine forests in northern Arizona so wide open that trees scatter across the land like pawns from a half played chess game, cinder cones and volcanic mountains that dot the national forest miles and—when climbed—provide a view that melts distant land and sky into one perfect unbroken place, an endless light that turns slivers of shade into welcoming shadows, and hills that—from a distance—roll like a man's stippled and rugged face but then—up close—are covered with a reddish-brown sand that's softer than velvet. There are colors beyond the never ending greens: canyons the color of salmon flesh striped with rust, soot, clay, gold, milk and—if the light hits the walls just right—endless shades of all these items. Ponderosa pines give off a strong vanilla scent and their bark flakes off in puzzle pieces; with enough of them I feel certain I could match the bits together and form a picture of the whole world with everything wonderful in it. The picture would smell like cookie dough. Up in the mountains, aspens stripe the woods white and display carved histories that can be read in their black scars. The markings span through years of shepherders and mountaineers carving their names, dates, and messages under the aspens gentle, spaded leaves that quake and make the trees look and sound like they're shivering from a secret story they overheard—one that's so lovely it's haunting.

This is what I now have: A woods so thick with bushes and vines that a barrier—created out of spite, I'm convinced, by Florida's overgrown vegetation—keeps the unwelcoming land locked up and separate from me. The sky feels smaller, the air heavier. Palm trees sway stiff with bunched heads that scratch in the wind. The land feels soft, almost fluid with so much sand; it's a land that doesn't move right, a land that smells like mildew, like somebody's flooded basement. Everywhere I look, the horizon is the same: trees forming a jagged border with the sky separate and lonely behind them.

Also, there are bugs. I have nurse friends who've worked in emergency departments, and I've heard one too many stories about cockroaches that need medical removal from people's ears; I'm not fooled by the word choices—palmetto bugs—people here use to soften reality. Then there's Lyme disease—30% of all cases are from Florida—and the small speck of a bug that needs to be removed right with tweezers or the head will detach and burrow further into the skin. When anything green brushes against my arm, I quickly wipe the area off in case there was a tick waiting to hitch a ride. At night, I feel ticks crawling on me in my dreams and I scratch my neck to pull them off. I feel my legs to be sure they're tick-free. Then sweat gathers in beads between my breasts and I pad it dry with the shirt I wear to bed.

All the time I wait for something mean to come up out of the ground and sting me. And it does. Fire ants, a nuisance for some, represent unexpected swarms of harm to me. The first day I set out to enjoy our new yard—over three acres; we were so pleased to afford such a spread when, out west or up north, would cost at least twice what we paid—I paused to take it all in, felt something pinching at my ankle, and looked down to see the little black ants rushing over and up my lower legs. First, they pinch their jaws into skin and anchor themselves in, then they swing their butts around stinging in a circular motion. The granular poison I pour around their nests

rarely kills them. Instead, it moves their mounds over two feet, away from the poison. A friend sent me an organic gardening book that suggested I kill them with boiling water. I did, and now I have brown spots dotting my front lawn because I killed the grass while the ants, or anything else running upheaval out of the ground, are still there preventing me from making peace with this place, this land.

I'm supposed to like it here, though. This, I'm told, is paradise: tropical weather, white sandy beaches, ocean waves, and palm trees standing out like postcard-perfect get-away pictures. A thousand people move here every day. Some have waited their whole lives until retirement for kicking back in the Sunshine State and knowing they'll never again shovel snow. But I think paradise looks like Alaska, or at least the Rockies. It's someplace where I can climb to higher ground and take in a longer view.

Where we live now, there are plenty of dead things on the side of the road—cats, dogs, peacocks, vultures. There was even a pig once. From the community park, the sidewalk stretches almost two miles and then ends before our house. “We live where the sidewalk ends,” my husband and I said to each other after we bought the place, thrilled by the Shel Silverstein reference. I looked forward to the exercise, to walking the semirural road with my daughter in the jogging stroller. I imagined us enjoying the tropical flowers—creamy pink hibiscus, golden trumpets, purple allamanda, red bottlebrush trees—while we sang cheery songs about baby beluga or five little ducks, but the stink of dead animal is always too strong. Some animals are left rotting for a week before someone removes them. I'll drive to the park, but never walk.

The park has a lovely pond with ducks that beg for bread. The playground is beside the community center where the Head Start kids go. The park is simple but adequate: four swings,

two slides, monkey bars, climbing bars, and a fireman's pole. I like that there's a sand pit for digging and burying. I am at the park now, on a bench near the sand pit, watching my daughter climb up the playground's metal stairs, slip down the plastic slide, climb up the stairs, and slip down the slide. Two women, on a bench beside mine, take an interest in me. "You're not from around here, are you?" one of them says.

Not sure how to answer this, I stare blankly at her, slowly letting the words out, "I moved here." Is that what she means?

"But you don't live around *here*, right?" Her eyes motion beyond the park. She's a petite Asian woman with limp hair that looks unwashed, but she's bold—like somebody who'd point out your thinning hairline or say you'd worn the wrong thing to a party even though she'd never seen you before.

I'm a bit dazed from her conversation opener. "Well, my husband and I moved here," I say.

"You live here, in Bithlo?" The large white woman with brown hair asks.

Bithlo isn't actually a town. It used to be, before it went bankrupt and the county took it over as an unincorporated community. I've heard that Bithlo is part of the old South where crosses burned and blacks never got their streets paved. It's the stereotypical you-know-you're-a-redneck-if south. Still, I again stare at them in confusion.

"What she means," the petite Asian woman says, "is that you don't look like the typical people who live around here."

My clothes are neat; they're casual: Capri pants and sneakers. My hair is a bit askew from the humidity, but still presentable in bob fashion and tucked behind my ears. But my shirt, multicolored and embroidered, was made by a fair trade weaving cooperative in Guatemala and

is a bit of a contrast to the worn T-shirt with a faded beer company slogan that the heavy-set woman is wearing.

The heavy-set woman laughs, says, “You mean she doesn’t look like Bithlo trash,” and keeps on laughing.

“Why did you move here?” the Asian woman asks. She doesn’t miss a beat after her friend’s joke.

I place my words carefully, feeling a bit defensive of my clothes and motives. “We wanted a place that had land. We bought a place with three acres.” I don’t mention that it’s a house. In Bithlo, there are more trailers than houses. Because these women are questioning my presence in their town, I’m too self-conscious of my unlikeness and fear that owning a house might cut me out from the herd completely, that too many differences will place me out on my own, not just here, with these women, but in general—as if all of it added up together was reason for no one to like me.

“That’s what my old man wants,” the Asian woman says. “He’s always talkin’ ‘bout buying himself a couple of acres.”

A little silence passes and, for now, she’s lost interest in me. She talks to her friend about her “redneck man” and the partying they did last night. Although I know she sees me as a novelty, I’m curious about her, too. No one else has ever spoken to me this much here at the park before. Usually, I don’t even get eye contact when I say, “Hello.”

My daughter comes over complaining of thirst, and I pull out the juice box and snack I’ve packed for her in a small cooler. The children loitering about the two women drink water from the water fountain that I won’t let my daughter go near; it has ants crawling all over it and I know the water’s not filtered. The two women watch me with my daughter, and then the Asian

woman asks, “So, what do you think of Bithlo?” I know the question is a set up. What she means is, what do I think of ugly run down mobiles?—some of which look so warped and rusted or mold infested they shouldn’t be lived in. She’s asking if I’m aware that I don’t belong here with them.

Of course I know that it was a mistake. At least, for me it was. My husband is happy with our home, our land, and his new job. He’s the one who refused to rent first, who refused to look at a house with less than two acres. Also, he doesn’t embarrass easily, like me, and he doesn’t care what people might think of him for saying he lives in Bithlo, even though his boss at the university—where he teaches—has told him more than once, “You should have asked someone here in the department before you bought your house in Bithlo.”

What bothers me about where I live is the concern that people will think I too live in a trailer which, here, would mean I’m like the woman questioning me. Where I’m from, in the West, trailers dot the foothills right along side the expensive houses. There, trailers aren’t burdened with connotations of poverty and ignorance. But here, they represent being less than everyone else in every imaginable way. Here, in my Bithlo community, I feel like I have too much, and like a foreigner who will never get the accent right. Outside of my community, at other parks or organized playgroups, I’m ashamed that I don’t have enough, or—worse—that I might belong near the junkyards surrounding the area with stacked cars leaking lead, benzene, and god knows what else into the ground water. Do these women even think about ground water?

I refuse to sound daunted. “It’s not bad,” I say. “Our neighbors are nice. It’s quiet. People seem to keep to themselves.”

“That’s because people are doing things they shouldn’t be. People keep to themselves around here because they don’t want nobody knowing what they’re up to,” the limp-haired Asian woman says. “Have you heard about the 17th street whore yet?”

“Who?”

She smiles. “The 17th street whore. You’ll see her walking around out on Highway 50 trying to pick up men.”

“But, the area is growing,” I say. “There are new developments and more people moving to this area. There’s the new Publix.”

“Usually is, the more people there are, that just means it gets worse. More drugs and crime and that kind a thing.”

The heavy-set woman’s voice becomes harsh and loud, “You’ll learn not to tell people you’re from Bithlo. They’ll look at you and think ‘trash!’”

What these women don’t know is that I have experience in this area. While the “white trash” of the South is something I’d only previously encountered in Dorothy Allison books, or on TV, the North has its own version. I grew up next door to a junkyard, and I grew up with parents who elevated themselves—financially—above their lower class status while clinging to the scrimping practices of economy they’d learned when poor. They lived as if poverty lingers like possibility and always needs to be prepared for. Growing up, I knew I was middleclass, that I had luxuries my neighbors didn’t: horses, summers at the lake, boating, waterskiing, an abundance of junk food that visitors came over and shared—but the thrift my parents practiced made us appear of another class. A lower class. A class in need of hand-me-downs or hand-outs. It was my secret where the water skis came from: our initial pair was picked from the town dump by my father

who thought it good fortune he came across them; he wouldn't waste his money buying a luxury item such as water skis.

Because thrift has always embarrassed me—how it shows need or possible indigence all out in the open—what a person can't do without, can't afford—I avoid it. Even if a person can replace broken items, has enough resources to throw away busted wheels, cracked toys, rusted tools, and threadbare clothes, I avert my eyes from the redemption. An object saved and repaired is supposed to mean prudence, but it can also show a need that I don't want people to think I have. So, these women are too late. I've already learned to tell people I live on the eastern side of Orlando, east of the university, which could mean a nicer place like Lake Pickett or Chuluota. I've learned to cling to my husband's professorial status because it means more than my own status as a nurse, or as a mother, and it almost cancels the fact that I live in a town too poor to be incorporated.

Chee-Cha, it turns out, is a rooster. My husband doesn't let us eat the eggs. There's one rooster, one hen, one egg a day. "They're fertilized," he says with a tone so filled with disgust I feel like he's accusing me of wanting to eat soft yellow babies fresh from their hatchings.

I remember the fresh laid eggs of my childhood, how my father taught me to pick out the sound of a hen who'd just laid so that I could collect the egg and feel its fresh-from-the-chicken warmth. I always felt special when I held those heated shells. But my husband and I have standards. We're vegetarians raising our children off meat, and if the eggs are fertilized then they classify as poultry. Even though this seems like the abortion argument reduced to our back yard, I don't point out my view to my husband. We are living his dream now, his new career, and I stay home with the children.

There was a time, however, when I was twenty and things were different. I had a lover who drove across ten states and then through the edges of two more—keeping me company—when I moved from Maine to Montana. We camped under New England’s August crickets, the Midwest’s pitch black night and rustling corn, Dakota’s bitter winds and near freezing temperatures, and Yellowstone’s sulphury smell. Somewhere across the Midwest, near corn that stood bold while chattering every last word possible before getting cut down at harvest, he repeated what he’d told me before we’d left Maine: I was a self-assured woman moving to Montana all on my own where I knew no one and didn’t even have a job. Montana was a place where he dreamed of living, too, but he was apparently too frightened by life to move there. Because of my adventurous spirit, he couldn’t be my friend anymore after we got there. I didn’t quite take him seriously, but the day after arriving he took a plane out of the state and I never heard from him again.

“Every time I look at you, I’ll see who I can’t be,” he’d said. “I won’t be able to be your friend because you’ll represent what I’m too scared to be.”

This is who I am, who I want to embrace: someone so bold and brave, so confident in what’s right, I scare men away like they’re a flock of birds I’ve stumbled across and startled into the sky. They’re willing to fly across multiple state lines to get away from my audacious thinking and daring moves. That’s the woman I know, the one I’m familiar with. But this is who I’ve become: a woman throwing eggs away—farm fresh eggs she wants to eat, eggs like she grew up on—because she let a man guilt her into it.

It’s a romantic notion that roosters only crow to the coming dawn. For some, their internal clocks are set early, and others bicker back and forth with the neighbors, defending their

territory by warning each other to stay away; they assert their authority over the others, impress the hens, express their domain, just because they feel like it. The reasoning doesn't matter, anyway, because Gerty and Chee-Cha are gone—given away to our neighbors after rats took up residence in the hen house, grew fat on chicken feed, and refused to run scarce when my daughter entered the coop. Now it's the sound of wild peacocks that wakes me up. They scream hello, sounding like a sick cat, or something wild captured, getting its call squeezed out between invisible, crushing forces.

Before the roosters, and the peacocks, it was frogs that roused me out of sleep. On one of our first nights here, I woke up my husband and said, "Do you hear that? I think that one of our neighbors has ducks. They're really loud."

"No," he said, "I told you, we have frogs."

I grew up catching bullfrogs around my family's pond—an easy task when lifting the rocks they liked to stay shaded under when the sun was high and the bugs weren't swarming. Each time I lifted the rocks, the frogs would make a dash to the pond and, if I was fast enough, I could snatch them up before they swam away. Their loud, low pitched guttural bellows encouraged me to seek them out, catch them. I used to hold bullfrog races. And kiss them, my lips as well as my hands learning their wet texture.

"I know what a frog sounds like, and that's not frog. It's duck," I said

"Trust me. No one has ducks. We have frogs," he said.

"Frogs don't quack. I'm telling you, someone has ducks."

"I'll show you tomorrow."

Sure enough, squirrel frogs—known for their duck-like mating calls—abundantly cover our property, breeding in the ditches filled with rain water, hunting in our trees and bushes, and

harboring behind the hurricane shutters where they'd wait for night. I've been expecting things here to be as familiar in their patterns as they were where I lived in Maine, or even out West. Instead, I can't even identify a chorus of frogs coupling through the night.

Where are my feral instincts, now that I've settled down, settled for less? I need them to reclaim the control I feel has flopped away from my life like the lolling neck of Trudi rolling around from side to side with nothing strong and sure to hold it up. I want to make my own breakout, without the greeting of a dog's wet grasp.

Everywhere here, I am reminded of death. Even Evelyn, who brought the chicks down, is dead—the following spring after she delivered the young birds down to us, she was killed at night in a car crash back in Maine. She took her last breaths while staring at rescue workers before they extricated her from the wreck. And yesterday, a yellow warbler flew into one of the kitchen windows, the sound hitting like a rock pitched into glass. A pity—citrus feathers that would've been a joy to see flash in the trees. My husband buried the bird, out on our back wooded acre, next to Trudi and the cat we found stretched stiff after a hurricane. I'm sure it was an accident, a mirrored trick of glass, but I can see how a bird would seek the thin pane. I can see how a bird, who can't open a door or throw open a sash, would need an escape from the oppressive heat or world and find it. Although I have no feathers, I feel that my own beak is not strong enough to turn the knob or release the lock. I'm not letting myself out. I'm not insisting we move. Instead, I'm fluttering into the windows, the walls, and feeling out the seams of escape that I know my desperation will help me find. I refuse this fastening to a lonely longing. It's time I take charge. I refuse my sequestering on this empty farm.

I'm at the river—the Econolahatchee—braving the spiders and ants and the ticks that carry Lyme disease. I've decided it's worth it. It's a sluggish river that looks like a stilled flat sheet of absolute calm. I was told that everything done down South was done slow, and this is how the river moves, lagging without a worry, turning corners as if it'd rather loaf than see around the bend. This slow gentleness is how the river has worked its way into me, captivating my spirit with the deliberate steadiness of coffee-tinted waters that hold fish and clams, and even alligators that I never see.

The river is part of a wilderness area I either drive or bike to. Once here, I take my time on the trails that lead to this river because there's much to discover. The flowers smell so good through the forest—sweet fetterbushes in bloom. I saw a barred owl, a dark one. It swooped ahead of me and landed on a pine branch. We watched each other for a while and listened to another barred owl calling from the thicker woods to the north of us. Then it flew away without ever saying a word. When I got to the river, I could still hear owl.

Under a high sun, the river is clear and everything in it can be seen clear to the bottom. At this time of day, though, the river looks black as the sun sets on dusk, reflecting sky, trees, banks, brush, birds, the world, and still reflecting darker, along with the light greens and deep browns and fading blue light, there's me as I stand on the edge of everything. It's a place that feels simultaneously otherworldly—foreign—and familiar, like home, like I belong there. It is my favorite place in all of Florida. It's the one place I've come to know.

I feel seduced by this river, by bulbous cypress trees whose long, thin legs flair out at the ends—bellbottomed dancers wearing a rustle of needles, a bush to cover their torsos. Their knees are sometimes distorted structures, crooked and bent like gnarled knuckles clawing their way out of the ground, while other knees stand perfect and tall like erect wooden shafts searching for the

light. Knees hold the cypress steady in Florida's soft and shifting soil so that the trees hold strong though alluvial floods and eroding runoffs.

The sky has threatened to rain all afternoon. The wind is down but distant thunder rumbles behind me. The river is desperate for rain. We all are. The woods, the thickets, the scrublands: forests are burning northeast of here and my river is sinking low, so low that white striated lines I've never seen before mark the banks. These salty bands show where the water was a few weeks ago. Sunflowers have blossomed along lines of green grass. They seem brave to have rooted where water will cover and drown them as rain refills the channel. They must feel safe, though, to stand up and flower where they have.

Birds are calling from everywhere, racing through the trees, collecting food, dipping in the palmettos, and causing such a racket they could be a herd of deer about to emerge from the brush and drink where I stand. This is what the river is: a pooling range of answers that call for me to inch closer and allow its waters to rinse through my thoughts so I can learn what paradise is: not a perfect state or way but a delight so slight and fallible that it takes patient solitude and absolute initiative to find it. What I find here is what I'd find with a lover—moments that are always worth it: deep belly bliss, stolen private glances, brushed fingers, embraced openings, the back of the hand swirled through liquid skin. I want to stay here beside the cypress knees, bony and brown, and rest my chin on them as if they were my own.

Water striders leave concentric circles all over the river—the only discernable movement. The wind kicks up again and pulls through the trees. Leaves fall on me like dry rain. Soft and brushing, the leaves are smooth on one side and rough on the other. When I am here, I never want to leave. When I am away I dream of the tea tannins, of a slow and subtle current, murky dark bottoms, and a place that wants me more than time. The rain is coming. Frogs quack from

the other side of the river—they compete to be heard over the wind and rain. They're happy for the sprinkles and sing out in delight. Or possibly even thanks. The barred owl calls again to its mate with a low calm. A dog barks in the distance, throaty and terse. I want to take all my clothes off in the rain and rest here on the banks. As the river fills, uncertainty can drip off me and fall into waiting shores. Instead, I leave, gaining a solid foothold in the soft understanding of how home is carried inside where it cannot escape or get snatched away.

NO CHANCES WITH THE HEART

The jokes are always the same. I pretend they're not and say them like they're new. The patients appreciate this. They spent the past day fasting, haven't had anything solid to eat in almost two days, and the bowel prep meant to clean them out by bedtime kept them on the toilet all night, so, a little humor gets us by. We joke about the five-pound weight loss, how they really were full of it. They sign the colonoscopy consent and I witness their signature, saying, "We get you in the end."

They always laugh at that one, but they laugh more when I have to tell them how sorry I am for the wait but, "The doctor's running a little bit behind today."

I have fun with them and it puts them at ease. They don't know what we'll find up there, hidden in the dark corners of their colons, what years of not eating right or bad genes caused to grow. Plus, when I ask some men what procedure they're having done, they say, "You're going to violate me."

They don't like the idea of what's going to be done, about what's going up where and how far it's going to travel. I promise them good drugs or say how it's margarita Friday, or I repeat Dupont's old commercial and say, "We believe in better living through chemistry."

If they're having both procedures done, the upper and the lower, we joke about being able to stomach it and how we do the upper procedure first, "Otherwise it'd leave a bad taste in your mouth," I say before explaining that it isn't even the same scope.

Of course, not everyone's in the mood for joking. Some come in with stories long enough to match their faces. They're the ones who quell the jokes or change what's said. I need to listen

before I can make them smile. A middle-aged woman tells me about her breast augmentation that didn't work: "My husband hasn't slept with me for two months. I wake up at two, three, four. I get no sleep. I can't swallow, eat, drink."

Another woman comes in with her husband and he tells me what's really wrong with her: "She's just a complainer. She's always been that way. She's going to have this done for nothing," he says.

The woman looks at me, shrugging apologetically. "Well, I guess we'll see soon," I say, hoping we'll find something bad, but not too bad, just to prove him wrong.

One man talks about his daughter's drug overdose. "My wife's the one that found her. I woke up to screaming and thought someone was breaking in." He talks of CPR on his daughter's stiff body, the death-groan sound she made as he pushed on her chest. "I knew she was gone. I did it for my wife. Had to." His eyes stare out behind me as they fix on nothing. "That was a bad year."

Many—young and old—come in with a drug list two pages long; the medications aren't working, and the symptoms have no diagnosed cause. One guy takes enough morphine and valium to sedate him away from daily life—he has a flat affect and doesn't make eye contact, someone he barely knows gives him a ride home. Another patient hasn't got a ride home because her husband's on a cruise.

One woman tells me, "My son was murdered."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"It was drugs. I can say that now. He was cooking it in a lab."

"That must've been hard for you."

"It is what it is."

“You miss him?”

“I guess. How can anyone be close to a drug addict? There isn’t anything you can do but watch them self-destruct. Al-Anon taught me that. If it wasn’t for Al-Anon, I couldn’t speak of it.”

I listen and fill out their paperwork, making sure the spaces are all filled in and they understand what’s going to be done. I wrap the blue blood pressure cuff around their arms and record what it says, take all their vital signs down. They talk about car wrecks that weren’t their fault, or the ones that were. I hand them a gown and tell them the opening goes in the back, their belongings in the bin. They talk about mothers who’ve died, fathers who are still hanging on, sons they don’t speak to, daughters who don’t speak to them, brothers, aunts, and in-laws. I tie the tourniquet around their forearms, swab their skin with alcohol, and start their IVs.

Sometimes, their blood pressure is too high and I have to take it again, after the IV is in and they’re lying down in bed trying to relax. If the blood pressure’s still too high, I find the doctor who tells me to get a 12 lead EKG. The reading I print out, from all the different angles of their hearts, always looks fine on paper. Still, the doctor worries the drugs we’ll give might cause more than sleep, might cause their hearts to struggle or stall, so he enters the room and asks for more details about their history. “What’s that you said, you had some chest pain about a month ago? When’s the last time you saw a cardiologist?” he says.

If the blood pressure doesn’t come down, the procedure will be cancelled. “We could give you some medicine to lower your blood pressure,” he says, “but that won’t tell us what’s going on with your heart. Something else beside anxiety can cause your blood pressure to go up.”

The patients look horrified each time the doctor says it. They're remembering the fasting, smelling their spouse's dinner they couldn't eat, the bad tasting prep they almost didn't get down because of nausea, all the food commercials on TV, their night in the bathroom, all the times they thought they wouldn't make it to the toilet in time, and maybe even a time they didn't. They cleaned out their bowels, emptied out their heartbreaking thoughts to some nurse, laughed at the stupid jokes, and, now, they might have to go through it all over again.

"I'll sign something that says I'm not going to sue you if anything goes wrong," some say.

Or, "If I don't get this done today, I'm not coming back on another one. You won't get me back. Not here. Not for this. Not again."

When the doctor tells them, "We're going to have to cancel your procedure," they look at me as if it's another joke. They're ready for the punch line. But the doctor closes that off, saying, "We don't want to take any chances with your heart."

I marvel at his wording and think, someday. Someday I'll tell him how the chances were already taken.

BEHIND THE CONSERVATION LOT

When my husband and I—for the sake of driving less, finding a better school district for our children, and moving away from rural isolation—acquiesced to suburban sprawl, we discovered that suburbia had something we wanted: space. A buffer between us and everybody else. Having a wooded extension to our back yard, in the form of a conservation lot, meant we wouldn't be boxed in. Solitude and privacy would be ours, behind the house, where the blooming loquat tree engulfed us with its sticky sweet smell that's strong enough to give some a headache. In bloom, the tree opens milky yellow flowers centered like a star about pollen rich filaments. In February my kids climb the low branches, skinning the bark to fill bowls with the orange smooth-skinned, grape-sized fruit they share with the neighbors, spreading the gift of potassium and phosphorus to those we never see unless we want to. The rest of the year, the loquat's branches, as a citrus related evergreen, fall heavy with thick leaves that carry dark folds, shading our bay windows from the sun's southern light.

The other trees behind our house form a semicircle shield so that, when they are all in bloom, I conveniently forget that I willfully reside in a cookie-cutter stamp—a decorated variation on redundant theme—where, from the front side of our house, nature is manicured, tamed, worked into lines, and shows perfect curves that mean something, say something orderly about people who live there; home association dues are collected quarterly, and a lady with her clipboard takes notes for noncompliance on Saturdays. Behind the superficial appearances, I'm secured by live oaks that bring in coupled cardinals, banana trees, a silver maple, a pond pine a raccoon sometimes uses, pond cypress, water locust, red maple—another favorite climbing spot

for the kids—saw palmetto scrub, and an orange tree as reliable in fruit as the loquat. All are rooted by loose sand and nurtured by water from the wetland we border. Beyond the marshland swamp is an island of wood—a hammock—where we hear owl, see red shouldered hawk, and over twenty other bird species enter and leave year round, including the sandhill cranes when they are done bogging traffic in the streets. Houses lie beyond all of it, but they are seen only from their front sides and away from the context of nature’s wildlands.

After buying our house, we let the hedge grow high in the front so that when we eat our dinner all we can see is green leaves and blue sky. It’s not that we’re antisocial; our front yard has become a place where kids play while neighbors chat and take turns watching the children. Our oldest daughter has taught all of her local playmates how to climb the magnolia shading our drive. Sometimes three kids are up there at once, pretending it’s where they live, and our garage is either a yard sale or junk yard—depending on the mood—they return to for collecting items they need for living out in the woods. They pull berries off the crepe myrtle (seeds), smush magnolia hearts in the driveway (beans), collect dirt from my forthcoming garden expansions (chocolate), and pull lantana flowers from the butterfly patch (food that changes name according to color). I like that when we’re out front people can surround us, but when we want to be alone and pretend there’s nothing but woodland and marsh, we can.

When the rooftop clatter gained tempo, I first took the noise for squirrels playing chase between the loquat and our roof—a reasonable assumption since there is an over abundance of them living in our trees, running back and forth along the top rail of our fence, and jumping on our neighbors’ roofs—and was annoyed. When I noticed the skittering more at night and thought of possums, I cut branches off the loquat that bridged over to our roof. The noise still didn’t end,

and evidence started showing up in the garage: nibbled peels and old bread crusts pulled from the garbage and left in odd places.

I mentioned the gap in weather stripping on our garage door to my husband. From past experience I knew that if a mouse could fit its head through a hole then it could pull its body through; when we lived in Arizona, deer mice set up camp in our garage. My husband had bought live traps and transported the mice we caught to the woods behind our house. Almost every day we caught and released them. They kept coming. We could have been catching the same ones. At the time we lived near the four corners area—where the first outbreak of Hantavirus occurred—and we'd decided to take stronger action. We'd hired someone to ensure the garage was sealed and, since neither of us wanted to kill the mice ourselves, we hired an exterminator to do it for us.

This action brought harsh criticism from two of our neighbors back then. They wanted to know if we had tried asking the mice to leave. It was a simple matter as far as they were concerned; the reason why we still had mice was because we hadn't asked the mice to move on in tones strong enough to encourage their departure from the sanctuary of our garage. Our mice problem was an evident result of our failure to communicate with them, and there was no need to kill down the local rodent population because all we had to do was pose the question in the right way. My husband told our neighbors, "We tried," and he had. He believes in that sort of thing. I just wanted them gone, however, and felt that finding the right tone would take too long, if it worked at all.

I didn't think the droppings in our garage this time were from deer mice because of their size, but knowing we needed to call someone again, I remembered my previous neighbors' advice about their way of exterminating rodents. I considered it and then asked the rodent feces

in our garage to clean itself up. It didn't, so I tried a stronger warning. "Watch out," I said, "Or I'm going to clean you up."

The man we've hired this time, Steve, first inspects the outside of our house. He doesn't want to hear about the rodent droppings just yet because he's very concerned with the other problems around our house, a disaster open to letting things come in. "Let me show you," he says.

I follow him to see the mud wasps we knew were there, but never bothered us, and the lines of acrobat ants trailing up our house near the front door. The ants are especially concerning to him. "I've seen it to where if you pulled back the insulation away from the drywall inside, all you'd see is black. There'd be so many ants," he says.

I can tell that he thinks I'm not as impressed as I should be by this news because he takes me to another trail. There are six altogether, laying the scent that lets them all know the way into my house. Still, I dismiss this news because I've called him about the droppings in my garage and the skittering that I now fear is coming from the attic and not the roof. When he sees I'm not going to stop asking about the garage, he finally gets there, and I tell him about my neighbor's problem with squirrels getting in her attic and chewing up an expensive amount of electric wiring. I'm not sure which to hope for in his verdict—the relative ease of mouse traps or the complicated bait caging for a larger animal that would cost more to remove but sound less discomfoting. I decide on the squirrels, and Steve says, "Its roof rats."

"Roof rats?"

"Yeah, they're real common. I was just at another house this morning and they had the same problem."

Glad I'm not alone.

"Over there, they're climbing right up the brick walls."

"How are they getting in here?"

"Probably the eaves. I'll find out where. You're letting your trees and bushes grow too close to your house. That's how they're getting up onto your roof."

Rats. Mice are at least small, and possibly even cute, but there's something about having rats that doesn't settle right with me. I muse about how gross his diagnosis is.

From the attic, Steve agrees. With his respirator mask pulled down so he can talk, he says, "Yeah, you've got to take care of this. It looks like they've been up here for a while."

"We don't want to use the poison that causes them to dehydrate," I say.

He sets me straight. "It doesn't dehydrate them, it's an anticoagulant. Their blood can't clot. The bait works by thinning out their blood so much they start to bleed from all of their organs. They die of anemia."

I picture rodents with bloody tears. I picture the many patients I've seen in hospitals who had clotting problems and were on their way to bleeding out. "We don't want to do that," I say.

"Well, I wouldn't put bait up here, anyway. I'd set up snap traps. Otherwise they could die anywhere and, if it was mice they'd be small enough so that it wouldn't matter. But rats—they're too big and you'd get an odor."

"How big are they?"

"About the size of my hand." He holds his pudgy man hand like a fist.

I look at his hand, and then my own. I'm still stuck on the image of rat-death through bleeding orifices. I know I should be eager to kill the rats and be rid of my infestation, but I also know that the human heart is about the size of the human hand, only without the whip tail. This

is why I can't directly kill the rats myself—their deaths seem too much like the deaths of people, like all those patients I've seen, and I'm not convinced animals shouldn't have as much right as me to live where they please.

After he's through with the attic and discovers where the rats have pushed through the screens under the eaves, he takes me back to the acrobat ants and tells me what he wants to do with them. "I'll only use a specific poison. It's important that the ants don't notice it. Otherwise it's like taking a stick to a beehive. You'd get ants come pouring in all over the inside of your house."

I notice more of them this time, watch them soldier their way into my house. They look motivated. Single-minded. I think of them blackening my walls, think of the rats and their black droppings on the drywall above my head, their urine possibly soaking through. Then I tell him to poison them all. "I know those loquat trees are nice, but it brings the rats to your house," he says. "They smell the fruit and it draws them in." He suggests we cut it down.

At the store with my daughters, I run into some acquaintances who ask me about the house. I smile and start to say we like it but then my daughter cuts in. "Rats," she says. "We have rats."

Of course this draws looks of combined confusion and surprise. Not to worry, she clarifies: "Rats are living in our garage."

"We're taking care of that," I say.

My husband finds my embarrassment amusing. He's never cared much about appearances to the public, and he's far more upset about the poison sprayed all over our house, the bait boxes between us and the marsh that will leave anemic carcasses littered in the tall grass

and thin strip of woods. I, however, have lingered like an adolescent between caring and not, wearing the attitude that I'm too cool to care while hiding my awkward need for acceptance—I'd like verification that I'm not alone with what is happening in my life, that having rats doesn't mean something horrible about me specifically. My daughter is merely upset that the garage is now off limits for her play excursions.

When I tell my father about our problem he says, "Well I imagine you do have rats with that swamp behind you." I was supposed to have guessed it. Places with wild acreage, no matter how small, allow wild things to come in and live.

The drafty old farm house I grew up in was well over 100 years old—old enough for its original family cemetery plot, behind the pasture, to have the woods overtake it, and when I wanted to read the headstones, I had to break through the scratchy branches and leafy brush. That house had Norwegian rats in the attic and I remember my father pouring boxes of rat poison down each year. I ask my father about it. "They leave a scent trail," he says, adding that the house was too old to ever be completely sealed shut.

"When I was a boy," my father says, "my mother found me one morning whimpering, blood all over the place. A rat had come in and chewed on my hand during the night. After that, I never went to bed with candy on my hand."

My father grew up in a Federal house, built in the late 1700's, and there was a crack down one of the thin walls where it had settled—anything from snow to rats could come in. "I had marks on my fingers for years. They make good pets, though, the white ones."

Leave it to my father to be able to live so well with something I feel has tainted my house. "Funny how critters like that chase people around. They depend on human waste to

survive. Wipe out the humans and the first thing to go would be the dogs. Next would be the rats.”

We hired the handyman Steve recommended. He added a stronger soffit under the eaves that the rats wouldn't be able to push through. Now, with the rats sealed in, my anxiety softens. They have no place to go but to the traps. They will either trigger them in their starvation, deftly escaping the metal snap, or they will be broken by them, severed, and unable to move. My husband cuts back the hedge, and together we create the space Steve recommended between our house and all of the other branches, bushes, and ferns that threaten to touch the sides of our house or laze over the roof. Aside from some pruning, we leave the loquat alone.

I go for a bike ride through adjoining neighborhoods, choosing routes that have rows of houses on conservation lots, like ours, so that I can be closer to the woods where it's cooler. I've always been impressed with the number of these neighborhood lots backing up against protected woodlands in my suburban town—a progressive thought in a conservative state—because it lends credence to the notion that people need green spaces that haven't been tamed or manicured. I take notice of everyone else's landscaping—an oak limb tapping on a roof, a patch of overgrown bougainvillea falling into gutters, wax myrtle leaves leaning on glass, palms that need to be trimmed, strands of boxwood reaching for the trim, bridges of green shrubbery creating a window of opportunity for unsuspecting hosts. In my scrutiny, I decide who else has rats.

Whenever I'm in these neighborhoods, my world feels so small, like suburbia is nothing but these few acres or miles. What harm could these few houses cause? What do they matter? Moving along in front of them, especially in the older developments where the trees are mature enough to hang out moss, or where vines wall the conservation bridge between housing plots, it

all feels so benign. It's not until I drive from one end of Orlando to the other, spending an hour through triple lanes and traffic lights—while passing walled off housing suburbs dubbed with pastoral names that make no logical sense—that I begin to feel uneasy, like it's too much, like there are too many.

When I see aerial photographs of suburbs, I think of computer circuit boards with their chaotic organization of dots and lines ready to relay messages from one location to another. It strikes me as odd that those of us in suburbia have chosen a life simulating such connectedness—an ideal of communal pot lucks or happy cook outs with neighborhood block—while at the same time walling ourselves off through closed window treatments, privacy-fenced back yards, community playgrounds that only admit the locals who pay, and wearing the names of each development as if they were designer jeans: “I live in Stoneybrook.” “Oh really, I live in Picket Downs Estate.” Sometimes the name dropping is innocent—people like to know if they live near each other. Other times I feel like we haven't left high school at all and the popular kids are still dividing us out, placing us in the boxes we belong in.

My conservation lot isn't conserving much at all. But to think that the three acres I once lived on—in an area splitting the forests with even smaller land divisions and cut grass—was tremendously different from the two acres of conserved marsh where I now I live is also wrong. The density of people may be greater in the sprawl, but there is no continuous wild, just pockets of it that those lucky enough to afford can buy.

Something smells in the laundry room. Mildewed washcloths that scrubbed the sink and were left to fester forgotten for too many days. I empty the laundry basket, climb up onto the machines and look behind them. Nothing. I decide if I wash some clothes the problem will be

solved, and put the garbage into the garage for good measure. The clothes go into the dryer and still something smells. I open the pantry and look for rotting potatoes or onions that have drawn bugs in brown juices. Still nothing. I send my husband through the garage, into the attic. He comes back down with a plastic grocery bag containing the rat bloating white against the shopping sheen. I was expecting it to be grey, not the color of a pet.

Now that I know I've been inhaling decomposition, I can't escape the smell. We call Steve, the man who was supposed to take care of this for us so that we wouldn't have to, and I understand that I am implicated in the killing process after all. I've been pretending to be a bystander in the trapping of our rats just as I've been pretending that, when I'm in the back of my house, I don't really live in a grid. Staring beyond my conservation lot, into the marsh where owls hunt for rodent leftovers at night, I wait for Steve to arrive so that he can lay down more traps. And I compromise, again.

I'm starting to feel like I've become the rat in all of this, trapped by my own resolve to compromise space. We had three acres. We even had rats wandering in and out of the shed and the chicken coop. But they didn't bother us there and we left them free to explore. They never came into the house. Perhaps because they had enough space so they didn't have to, or want to.

In many suburban developments built today, the houses keep getting closer together. Throw open the windows and you can hold hands with those next door. The lot sizes are shrinking, too, so there's less to mow, landscape, or be hassled by. There's also less outdoors to sit in, play on, enjoy. I think it makes sense that houses would grow in size over time, especially since the rise of indoor diversions and entertainment. Perhaps I should remember times when a house was a single roomed shelter. One room. No wonder people spent so much of their time

outdoors; that's where all the space was. Back then, a trophy was a pair of buck antlers, the points on them as numerous as towns on a map, and not a house.

I wonder if we give our developments pastoral names because they sound like home, even if nothing in the name is where we live. Around me, the names are an endless variation on theme: ridges, springs, oaks, woods, shores, coves, rivers, bridges, and preserves—though nothing has been preserved. There are multiple bird landings, though, and birds do seem to be the one thing around, along with the rats. If my father is right, if rats are dependent upon humans and our waste to the point of dying down without us, then our presence actually encourages their livelihood; we may try to get rid of them, but they'll still be there, following us wherever we go.

All this time, I've felt like an irresponsible homeowner who put leaves and branches before order and civility, inviting disease carrying mammals to move in. Now I wonder if it was the consecutive barriers between exterior and interior that has encouraged them to move in. I remember now that we didn't hear owls on our three acres, though we had rats, and we hear at least two different species of owl here, out in the conservation area, hunting almost every night. I am comforted by this idea that nature has a way of breaking in, even when we think we've locked it out. That it will always be there, even when it seems it isn't. I'll still have Steve carry off all the rats, and be glad to be rid of them all, but I may let my hedge grow tall again, just so long as it isn't touching the house.

EATING PIECES OF THE UNIVERSE

This is how all of our phone conversations go: I'll ask my father about a Maine memory, about something we or he used to do. He'll bypass the old memories and focus instead on his new ones. He'll provide updates on laws or places, focusing on what's the same and what has changed. He'll talk about what he ate for dinner, or what he'll cook next.

This time, it's fiddleheads I'm asking about. He loves eating the young, tender ferns—especially in a sandwich with mayonnaise. “Tastes just like lobster that way,” he says.

I think it's more like eating grass, or mushroom flavored asparagus. Something earthy that should only be liked for either the idea of rare indulgence or because of peculiar taste buds.

“I call it a poor man's lobster sandwich,” he says.

I want to remember where we went, where we picked them. Instead my father tells me about the last fiddleheads he tasted. “I bet you'd like 'em now,” he says.

“I don't think so,” I say.

“When was the last time you tried 'em?”

Although a Maine delicacy—or staple—fiddleheads were one of my least favorite foods as a child. I'd push the boiled fern heads around on my plate, their circles and stems limp, wet, and bitter, and remember them standing erect near a river. I'd remember how their tight, perfectly coiled bodies stood near lichen painted rocks, how their brown husks flaked off like dead skin, and how their newly emerging frond blades would wind down the U-shaped stalks like draped lace. “I don't need to try them again to know I don't like them,” I say.

“I'll ship some down to you.”

“How are you going to mail them? Frozen?”

“Course not. I’ll send you some fresh next spring.”

It’s a deal.

Mostly, I just want to feel them again, not cook them. By handling them, maybe I can focus my short clips of memories into something longer—if I feel the shaft of fern stem and touch the scalloped edges of a tight pin wheeled coil, I’m convinced I’d also smell the forest and go back through time to trees growing light green ruffles on their tips as leaves fold out from buds. Remembering field wildflowers and grasses poking up through the winter-flattened tan stems of last year’s meadow, their perky determination an encouragement, I’d hear and then be able to name the bird chorus: warbler migration joining grackles, robins, and sparrows. In some spaces, ground laurel might even trail pink flowers fading to white, and the sturdy stem of a lady’s slipper not-yet-in-bloom could rise out of broad leaves. I’d be there, abandoning the task of collecting what I didn’t want to eat, hoping my parents wouldn’t find enough to freeze for next winter, while collecting the reminiscence of thoughts I had as a child or who my parents were when I was young.

“Not too much going on up here,” my father says finally. This is how he ends the conversation when I can’t think of anything else to ask or say.

For the past sixteen years I’ve lived between 1400 and 2700 miles from my parents. My trips to Maine have longer time lapses between them; I used to return twice a year, but now a space of two to three years separates my visits. This is what I have from my childhood: memories of Saturdays out on the Atlantic in a small fishing boat—just my dad and me—picnicking off the coastal islands where I collected the spiraled casings of abandoned periwinkle shells and—when I was lucky—rocks containing sheets of flaking mica, where I stomped down

the mudflats to watch a clam squirt up water—“Here’s one!”—which always made it look like they were peeing, the two of us trying our luck at floundering, filling five gallon buckets with mackerel kept fresh under seaweed, stopping off at all the relatives’ houses on the way home to share what we’d caught. This is what I have now: a voice that has barely aged, and the few things he chooses to share—or make up—none of which tells me anything about who I was, who he was, who either of us will be tomorrow, or how parents and children ever avoid estrangement.

Sometimes, I hit it lucky; I find the right subject to keep my father going for a while. Like the time I asked him about mackerel fishing and he talked for quite awhile about, “The only last thing you can do for free.”

Soon, like resident-only restrictions on clamming or lotteries for deer hunting, it won’t be free anymore. “Hard to believe they can out-fish an ocean,” he says, and goes on about draggers—commercial fishing boats that trawl the sea bottom with a large, conical net. “They kill everything. Good things. Bad things. If you’re not allowed to have it, they just throw it overboard dead.”

The first requirement is a registry for everyone—a phone book of who fishes for what where. All who fish, in addition to registering, are supposed to fill out forms reporting how much of what was caught where so that the state of Maine can keep track. “If there’s anything left to catch,” my father first says, and then, “I’m not going to tell ‘em what I got anyway. It’s none of their business.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I’m obstinate. I’ll fill out their form but make it all up.”

My mother is more talkative. With her, I don’t have to work that hard to keep the conversation going. Often times, she launches into all her news, strings it out like one long news

update she's got. She passes on the family happenings from her seven siblings and all their families, the lowdown on my sister who-lives-next-door-but-is-rarely-seen, and what's really going on with Dad. With Dad's health, his trips to the doctors or changes in his blood pressure medication, it's always on the sly. Sometimes the conversations are general worries, like, "Your father isn't doing too well."

"What do you mean?"

"He just looks, I don't know, sickly to me, sickly and pale. He just doesn't feel good. He used to work for hours, steady, without stopping. He tries not to worry me. He doesn't tell me anything."

"Has he been to the doctors in a while?"

"He don't talk about himself. He don't tell me nothing. You know how he is. He has a doctor's appointment sometime this month. I don't know whether he went already or not."

It's not surprising that my father doesn't tell my mother everything about his health; she doesn't always handle it well. Once, when one of her brothers-in-law—June's husband—was in the hospital for radiation treatments, June called and left a message on my mother's answering machine. In the message, June was crying, and asked my mother to call her back so she could talk. My mother called another sister and, instead of returning the call herself, had the other sister call June. "I get too nerved up," my mother said.

When my mother is a wealth of information, I'm caught by surprise. "Okay, wait a minute, Dad, was in the hospital last week?"

"They put some tube up his penis and took some skin out," Mom says.

Great. Because I'm a nurse, the images are instant for me: a visual on Dad's penis with a black fiberoptic cystoscope coming out of it, a visual of a urologist's office with Dad on the short

table, his body crinkling in a disposable gown made from coffee filter material—his six-foot-two frame looking ridiculous on the medical examination bed covered with sanitary paper that tears under every small shift—and a young doctor peering through the scope, my father just one of a thousand other bladders the doctor has seen.

“Why didn’t somebody call me?”

“He didn’t want to worry you until he knew the results.”

“But if one of you is having surgery, I’d like to know.”

She ignores the request, continues with what she has to say.

“Trisha had her appendix taken out and they took some kind of cyst off her tubes, or something like that.” Tricia is my cousin who rents the basement apartment in my parents’ house. “And then that same day your father went in the hospital and had that thing done. I didn’t even know that your father has cancer until a few weeks ago.”

“He has cancer?”

“I guess so. He came home and was all shook up, ‘They think I got cancer.’ I never knew he had cancer until a few weeks ago.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“He don’t tell you nothing. You know how that is. He doesn’t talk about himself.”

“But, Mom, you knew and you didn’t tell me.” Normally, I fold clothes while we talk, or straighten my desk out. It gives me something to do with my hands. During this conversation, I stopped all movement and sat down.

“Don’t tell him I let you know he had cancer because he didn’t even want me to know that.”

“He didn’t want you to know he might have cancer?”

“Of course not.”

The first time I saw cancer, I thought, “That’s it?” It looked so innocent—nothing more than a blood tinged overgrowth. It was in a colon. I’d been a nurse for a couple of years and, after seeing patients slowly die from cancer, the way their faces grimaced in pain and their bodies weakened, I was expecting something black and uglier, like charred flesh or gangrene plus the look of an infection. “And what kind of cancer is it?” I ask.

“Bladder, I guess. They don’t allow you to get off work unless it’s a real emergency so I had Susie go to the hospital with him.”

The day of the surgery, Mom went to her job at the nursing home where she works as a nursing assistant, and my sister, the daughter-who-lives-next-door-but-is-rarely-seen—a secretary—went to the hospital to be a driver and sign the discharge instructions as “Responsible Adult” while the daughter who is registered nurse, who knows all the right questions to ask, the right things to look for down polished-floor-hospital-corridors is told nothing. Reflecting on this, I feel my insides curl.

“But what kind of bladder cancer is it?”

“I don’t know.”

She thinks about the details of the day—going to work, my sister driving him home, the coincidence of both my father and cousin unexpectedly ending up in the OR at the same hospital on the same day—and I think of uncontrolled cell proliferation, oncogenes, and tumor grading. I think about bladder anatomy and the basket weave of smooth muscle fibers, epithelial tissue, clustering, what cancer looks like. In the bladder, in early stages, the tumor would look more like a nipple. A slight prominence or a papillae, a nub thrusting out. A tuft-like lesion attached to the bladder wall—the mucosa—by a stalk that the doctor would swing a lasso around and burn

through with cautery. Then, he'd extract the soft lump through the scope and send it to the lab for a pathologist to slice, dissect, look at under a microscope. I realized, then, that my father must've had symptoms he told no one about: dysuria, hematuria, oliguria; pain, blood, and frequency upon urination with the nagging knowledge that something is wrong. He'd go to the toilet too often and have too little urine come out for how bad he'd have to go. I wondered if he was curious or scared, or just plain irritated with the inconvenience and extra doctor visits.

When I was in nursing school, my father was building a greenhouse off the soon-to-be basement apartment. A support beam fell on him. Later, he said to me, "I came to while sitting at the kitchen table, trying to figure out what the hell day it was, what time it was, and what I was supposed to be doing." He'd lost two hours of time and refused to go to the hospital, or even the family doctor for a neurological check. Of course, I was told almost a week later, after he told Mom.

Around the same time, one of my nursing instructors told a story to give us students a perspective on kidney stone pain. A male patient she knew walked into the ER with a broken femur—the largest bone in the body—situated in the thigh—saying, "I think I broke my leg." The same man, a few months later, was doubled over, unable to move, from kidney stones—grainy particles trying to pass through a tube the diameter of uncooked spaghetti. This is what I think of now: how dramatic were my father's symptoms? How bad did he let the pain or the blood get before he saw his doctor?

"You wouldn't believe what he can't eat anymore," my mother says. "He can't have that orange fruit you take the seeds out of, what do you call it?"

"Oranges?"

"Cantaloupe."

“Oh yeah.”

“He can’t have coffee, just decaf. He can’t have no catsup. This morning he was making himself a cup of hot chocolate and I told him he couldn’t have chocolate. He said, ‘Yes I can.’ and I told him it’s on the list. He looked at the list and said, ‘I can’t have chocolate.’ No onions.”

Her stream of thought is typical. I picture her sitting at the round kitchen table she keeps covered with vinyl tablecloths, her feet propped up on another wooden chair. She must have the list memorized.

“It said no Chinese food and I love Chinese food. I love that Lipton onion soup on the top of my turkey. Pamela, I love Chinese food! He can’t have no spaghetti sauce. I love spaghetti. No tomato sauce. He can have some acid free tomatoes. He says he’ll grow some acid free tomatoes this summer.” She laughs.

I ask her if I can call him and ask about the surgery. “Yeah, that’s alright. But don’t tell him I told you anything. He’ll get mad at me.”

That night, I call him.

“How have you been?” I ask.

“Good.”

“What’ve you been up to?”

“Nothin’ much. You?”

“Not much.”

Silence. I can hear the TV on in the background, but I can’t tell what show. Normally, I’d ask him what he’s watching. “I talked to Mom earlier today,” I say.

“What’d she have to say?”

“She said Tricia had to have her appendix out recently.”

“She tell you I was in there at the same time?” I wasn’t expecting him to be so open, but I’m relieved he is. I wonder if Mom couldn’t keep it in and if she told him we’d talked about his cancer.

“What for?” I ask.

“I had a couple of tumors in my bladder. He removed the one and biopsied the other.”

“Wow. When do you get the results?” I try to play it cool, like I don’t already know this information.

“It ain’t that big of a deal. He said even if they were cancer it’s a real slow growing kind. Nothin’ to be alarmed about.”

“How come he didn’t take the second one out?” If I had been there for his surgery, I would’ve asked the doctor this. I don’t understand, if there was a question of cancer, why both tumors weren’t removed. My father might need a second surgery.

“He didn’t think it needed to come out.”

We talk more about his surgery, about his bladder, about old age, about being the third sibling in line diagnosed with cancer after his brother Stanley died of lung cancer from asbestos and his sister Carolyn survived breast cancer once only to be diagnosed with it again. He redid his will. I don’t get the land this time, he tells me; I get the house. “We figure you’ll never live up this way again. That way you can sell it.”

I can’t believe he thinks I’d readily dispose of their property, and I want to say, “But you know that I’ve always wanted the land. I don’t care about the house. It’s the land that means something to me.” My sister is the homebody. As a child, she was never outside like I was, and I can’t picture her now caring about the mosses and trees, the field we hayed and gardened in, or

the wild blackberries, raspberries, and pussy willows. I don't say anything, however, because I know it's not the time. It's my decision to make.

He talks about his good life. "I've had a good life," he says, as if he has just days to live or is down to the last few hours where he has no choice but to make peace, and there's something in his voice I can't quite catch. A calmness stretching out across the lines between us that slackens and pulls, slackens and pulls, and betrays the good face he's showing—he almost sounds like he doesn't care that he has cancer—with a tinged melancholy I take for proof of his helpless not-knowing-what-comes-next fear. The slackening and pulling of tension crossing the lines between us reminds me of the time he wanted to extend the pasture into the woods, and I followed behind him as he strung grey wire on yellow insulating spirals for the electric fence. The metal wire came loose in curled rolls and he pulled it taut between the posts, working his body wet with sweat, as I picked at pale field grass, bent it between my teeth or spun it around in my mouth, moved it from corner to corner pretending I was a real farm girl sucking on hay, and wondering if I had the look right.

At some point, when we were in the woods that day, Dad pointed out a couple of lady's slippers to me. "Those are rare, endangered," he'd said.

I bent over them, simultaneously fascinated and confused. Their pink pockets rounded out like a balloon holding air and looked delicate on their sturdy stems, but I couldn't image any kind of shoe that was so wide and short. I wanted to pick one and keep it forever but feared that, as soon as it was picked, it would deflate. The pink puffed petal, flat, wilting, and browning on the edges as its silk tore, would then be nothing special.

“They can fine you if they catch you picking one of them,” Dad said, which scared me a little. Although I didn’t know who “they” were, the power of fining seemed ominous and definite enough.

Across the phone lines, Dad repeats himself. “I’ve had a good life,” he says, his voice snapping and falling, trailing down the vibrating wire.

I remember the man who kept me over an hour at the dinner table while I chased cold fiddleheads around and around with my fork, hoping that if I spread them out right it’d look like I’d eaten more. Even if I didn’t want to eat them, I loved my time fiddleheading as a child. Late April, early May—if it’s not muddy, it’s the best time to be in the Maine woods. The black flies aren’t out, and signs of spring mix with the snow melt, showing proof that winter really is almost over. By mid-summer, the fiddleheads will be ferns up to four feet high, a thicket of brilliant green leafed blades casting shadows with gentle breezes and moving light, and a chorus of mosquitoes will whine at walkers through the woods. Early spring, though, the biting insects haven’t emerged; the woods are a place open and pleasant enough to sit and picnic.

As a child, I’d drop the paper bag I was supposed to fill with young ferns, and keep my hands open for everything else there to tap, touch, and pick. It was family time as well because it wasn’t often that we all walked into the woods together. Only when we gathered foods—fiddleheads, raspberries, blackberries—did my parents both work in the woods with my sister and me. The rest of the time, my father entered the woods alone, or with me trailing him, while my mother stayed in the house.

When I found out, as an adult, that fiddleheads share the exact same geometric spiral as many other structures in nature—spiraled sea shells like the nautilus or periwinkle, hurricanes, galaxies, the arrangement of seed pods or flower and leaf development—I liked to think that,

when I was a child, my father was giving me the opportunity to eat pieces of the universe, or collect them from the ocean and place the small bits in my bucket. If I could now, I'd gather up all those scraps, line them up in front of my parents, and ask, "Where? At what exact location did the memories from my youth and all the words and hidden meanings from your parenting and adulthood disconnect?" I want to know when and how we decided not to tell each other certain things.

My life experience, even my father's and my mother's, isn't as perfect as nature; there is no mathematical or polar equation, no Fibonacci numbers to go by, no golden ration to count on—nothing that makes it all match up because there's a severed line between the then of my youth and the now of my parents. But there is a common thread: that which goes unspoken. In pictures of spiral galaxies I've seen, there's always a bright solid light at the center held by two arms. It's difficult to tell if the arms are moving out from the center or holding the center in. This is how it feels talking to Dad: he's holding the center, and everything I want to know, protected in a tight curl. He's spiraling in towards the tight center of hidden truths while I'm trying to whirl out to where everything is open, known, and perhaps fading away into blackness, dripping out stars from an unanchored tail.

WHEN NOTHING TAKES NOTICE

It's six o'clock in the morning on a Saturday. I've pulled myself out of bed and stuffed a faded camp chair into the car—not to do something fun, like take the girls blueberry picking as I'd planned, but to sit in line for swim lesson registration. In my town you've got to get up early for this, I've heard, and when I get to the community center I find the rumors are correct. At six, the line is already wrapping the brick corner and I need to set up my spot down the building's long side, among the competition, and hope that no one before me fills up the classes I want for my kids.

A nurse I work with, Danny, told me these are the hunters of our society—the soccer moms looking forward to the chase, trailing down time slots or a spot on the swim team like it's meat to live off of for the next week. Danny told me I'd better get here by five, and, after I'd spent the morning gathering up the anesthesia paperwork he dropped down in a careless-of-where-it-would-land way, after I kept shuffling all his sheets into neat piles, he said, “See, that's why you don't get it. You're not a hunter. You're a gatherer.”

I consider these terms while waiting, hunter vs. gatherer, and muse over how modern society has both changed us and not as I survey the women around me who look chillingly alike in their sporty shorts, their hair pulled back under colorful baseball caps that, I think—in the dim rising light—match their shirts. I wonder now, in our increasingly divided society, are the hunters beginning to band together as the gatherers form their own clutch? Since I've heard the informative news reports warning of a nation polarizing in views, I wonder how much of our social differences turn back to an evolutionary past we aren't consciously aware we're living out,

if—in our competition to stand out—we have disbanded the tribal ways of hunters and gatherers working in concert so that one group can take over and get ahead.

At 6:30, the sun is high enough to allow for easy reading without the artificial light I've brought, and a woman two chairs down from me pulls out a book: *The Organized Student*. The woman immediately to my right, the one filling the air with wafts of caramel-flavored coffee she pours out from a thermos, shrieks excitement: "I'm reading that book, too," and she pulls it out from her bag.

"No wonder there was such a wait for it at the library," the first one says.

"Yeah, the library is mad at me because it's overdue and someone else wants it," the one with the coffee says.

I notice, as the two of them delve into the mutual harassment of their disorganized sons ("Now my daughter will line up all of her ponies in neat rows, but not my son—he keeps his legos all over the place"), that her copy is marked with small yellow post-it notes. She has organized her book about organization. Their conversation contradicts my previous thoughts, and my theory breaks down. Learning tricks and tips on "how to organize your child" doesn't seem like a hunting ritual. Unless the hunt is tied to marshalling out a plan, their arranging and indexing strikes me as a type of gathering. I think about my own children's scattered toys, how I often find myself rummaging through their chaos to capture what they ask me to track down; for this, I'm the hunter.

My neighbor has a different survival technique. She has enough money to pay someone to come out to her house for private swim lessons in her private pool. But what kind of a survival skill-set is that? Surely a new one. I'd like to think they'd be the ones unable to hunt or gather food after the apocalypse, or the end of oil. Still, my neighbor does recognize, and stops mid-

sentence to catch, the sound of a woodpecker banging on nearby pine, and she politely follows my gaze to the white cups of open gardenias dotting the tall trees' crowns. These natural observations hardly count as an act of survival, but it is at least listening and looking, the start of paying attention to one's surroundings.

The other parents I'm waiting in line with seem to notice little around them. The father to my left keeps busy on his BlackBerry and has yet to acknowledge my presence, though I've chatted with his sister who held his place in line when he went home to bring back a lounge. I myself have stayed mostly buried in the book I've brought—one that's not about parenting or organizing—and I wonder how many others here see through this queue we've all woken up early for; the parents who gets their children in the right swim lessons will succeed in a level of good-parentness that surpasses the parenting skills of the others. After all, in order for one person to stand out, many others need to be less than the rest; they need to be ordinary. But for those whose efforts expended are successful, they'll be rewarded—the children will be happy, the spouses will be happy, and they will feel special.

Part of why these other mothers feel foreign to me is because I don't see myself as ever being interested in what I imagine them to enjoy: strip malls with a good sale, trinkets that can be shown on a shelf, home-managing strategies pointed out as advice, a comparison of spousal achievements and childhood intelligence, manicured bodies to go in their manicured homes. I'm sure these same women, or hybrids of the species, were around when I was growing up, but my mother kept to her own sisters and our farm life. Now, pinned in line with them, I compare myself to them, and see how our vast differences create an indifference to each other's lives. It's obvious we'd have little to nothing to talk about, even if we tried.

I took swim lessons at a lake when I was a child, not in a chemically balanced, heated pool. Signing up was easy—there was plenty of room. The lake was wide open, the white beach long. No lines or crowds. No competition.

As a child, I spent most of my time outdoors; often shooed out by my mother, I wasn't allowed inside on hot, sticky days when the weather was "too good to be indoors." Under my protest of the summer's sun, my mother simply said, "Then sit under a shade tree."

So I did, and I watched things. The way leaves twisted in the light when the wind lifted them up before dropping them down again. The way caterpillars touched the finger I laid in their path as if tasting it before stepping down and finding the way around my skin. Ants, inch worms, and tree frogs all got noticed by me. My world was small then, focused on a single place instead of a broad domain. Then, I saw just two places in this world: the city and the country. The nostalgia passing through me now—for the time when signing up for swim lessons was as simple as going down to the lake—is for the loss of rural ways vs. city commotion while we move instead to something in between. The suburbs have expanded out of and into these once disparate worlds, shrinking the memory of who we once were—rough around the edges, unrefined in our survival techniques, but genuine. Following this trend, I moved with everyone else into the suburbs, though I feel apart from those I live near.

The two women I'm sitting next to pull out food. One has a sandwich and the other a brown bagel. Only the smart ones have brought chairs. The rest are on the ground, against the cold concrete. At 7:30 a city worker moves down the line to check everyone's drivers license, ensuring we're all city residents and not county because that's a different line, and the woman to the right of me pulls out a plastic folio filled with cards—her systemization starts with her, before she finds a way to involve her kids. Maybe this is a different survival skill, too. Maybe

we've adapted our hunting and gathering skills for whatever the occasion calls for, pulling out each mode at once, multitasking our purposes and goals. Or maybe these are just parents who simply crave the golden days of camping out for concert tickets, the gone by freedoms of sleeping in without kids. Either way I smile to myself, realize that I've beaten them both. In all their organization and planning, I've worked ahead of their hunting plans—I'm in line before them.

When I was a child, my father used to catch field crickets and let them loose inside our house summer nights. "I love the way they sound," he said. "I could listen to them all night."

It wasn't enough that he could easily hear them through the screens since, in Maine, our windows were always open through summers—he had to hear them inside the house, in the walls. I'd watch him cup their black bodies in his wide hands and then scuttle them through the cracks in the baseboards of our old house until they were out of sight. It was a wonderment to me how they could disappear so easily. And it worried me. What would they eat? I pictured them dead for the lack of green food, empty exoskeletons littering the floor between our walls.

"They might survive there all winter," my father would say, convinced he'd hear crickets singing when the insects outside were gone. Still concerned with what they'd eat, I wondered: if they ate the pulp of plants outside, would they nibble on our boards inside?

They were easy to catch because our farm had so many. Even during the day I could lift a piece of un-split fire wood left over from winter, or a flat rock near the pond, and see them scatter for cover. They had antenna long enough for a cockroach to appreciate and alien-shaped bodies that took mini hops in the dirt while contemplating direction. Every once in a while I'd hear muffled crickets through the walls inside and think they sounded trapped, their song dim

and helpless compared to the racket they raised nights outdoors, competing with their friends for mates. My father's gathering meant he'd have the chirping closer to his ears, his sleep, as if the song sung was his own personal serenade. Outside, the chorus of crickets would be for mating, just for the insects themselves. But inside, the song would be for him.

As an adult, I understand my father's actions. I've also wished, in similar ways, for something in nature to notice me. I've walked meadow openings, been circled by woods harboring no human sound save myself, and felt that all the tall grasses brushing my legs, the sway of branches and leaves, and the fallen logs collecting mosses were somehow there for me—that nature turned its attention in my direction inviting me to stay awhile. Although I know the swallowtails and buttercups could care less about me for their own business they carry on, I still like to think I'm an important part of it all.

In this way, I'm like the mothers around me, here in line. The only difference, as far as I can tell, is that they're trying to get noticed by their good-momness while I go out into the woods and try to get noticed by plants. They survive off the attention of their kids, spouses, and the clusters of others like themselves—with whom they are often competing against in order to gain their desired recognition—and I survive off other satisfactions, like how my daughter taught all the neighborhood kids how to climb trees, or how I subvert the home association by expanding my flower gardens into the required-but-completely-unsustainable St. Augustine grass with a gradual, right-under-their-noses take over.

As we're all trying to get noticed, I see how we're alike. This super-mom-go-around is merely a replacement for the nature they've lost in their lives. At least, I think it is because I need nature, even as I know that little to nothing in nature cares for me, specifically, in such a grandiose way as I'd like to think it does. And perhaps because I care and nature doesn't

reciprocate, I sometimes mimic these other suburban moms. Stealing glances at them, from the corner of my eyes, I measure myself against them, contrast their manners against mine, and see where I fit in, above, or behind their groupings, and I pretend that I fall out ahead. Or, if I don't fit, I'm nonchalant, pretending I don't care. Also, my nature-loving-facade isn't perfect since I pay men to squeeze gel inside my electrical boxes and under the sink to bait and kill the stray palmetto bugs, and they spray chemicals over the outside of my home to keep the bugs off and away instead of letting them in like my father used to.

He doesn't anymore. "I found out they eat up your clothes and cause all kinds of damage like that. I do like the sound of them, though," he said.

Within this same conversation, my father also tapped out his daily life for me—his settled routines in recent retirement. One of his new things is going to the gym, and I find this unsettling. He was a man who walked the woods for exercise, who always had a chore to correspond to movement. The gym was a place for other people, for these people I'm in line with. An unnecessary luxury for those with too much time on their hands, who didn't have a better place to go.

The first time I remember my father bringing crickets into the house was, I think, the first time he did it, and I wonder if it was one of those summer nights when the lawn, pasture, hay field, and everything else was lit by the passing of fireflies. My parents have rented a seasonal summer-long spot in a private campground since I was around seven. It's on Damariscotta Lake, close to their house—just two paved miles and then a dirt one. Since my parents didn't like the bed in our small camper, we spent warm days by the lake, ate meals cooked over a fire, then drove home to sleep. My favorite summer nights were when we left the campground after dark, my sister and I spent from a day of swimming with our camp friends. Riding home in the back of

the pickup truck, past our bedtimes, it would be dark in a way that only rural nights can be—I hadn't heard of light pollution then. The moment we emerged from the dense, mosquito laden woods, the dirt road opened into a grassy field and then passed a pond before meeting up with the pavement. There, as soon as the opening showed itself, fireflies flickered all about us, cascading twinkles in their flight. It was like falling through the nighttime sky, stars passing us at different speeds. Some would glow past our heads, even land in the bed of the truck, and I would reach out my hands, grab at them until we were on the paved road and moving too fast for me to stand a chance at capturing any of them. I imagine that the first night my father decided to bring the crickets inside must have been a similar night for him where he was outside, lost in the pitching wing clap of a thousand crickets—so engulfed in the beauty of their business, he must have been, deciding he needed to have some of it for himself.

Then, my father shook up nature, disorganizing a night song by bringing scattered crickets together under one roof, between two old plastered walls, as if insects—nature—could be lined up for an amphitheater that would raise the calling hymn beyond what it was meant to be. Though walls are usually meant to keep nature out, my father forced it in, further disorganizing the structure of our home.

Now he, too, has found his way towards domestication.

The father to the left of me, the one who has yet to acknowledge my presence, scolds his sister when she returns from the morning run they were meant to go on together. “You didn't go far enough,” he says to her. “You were supposed to go past that street and take the loop down the next one. You didn't go far enough.” He looks through her and she looks down at the interesting ground.

The crickets were indifferent to my father, inside the house or out, and I want to feel indifferent to these people I wait in line with, too, these people whom I'm competing against for a swim lesson time slot as well as the recognition that I made it here in time, suffered out the ridiculous wait. But I can't. In all of this competition every single species on this planet is attempting to get noticed—including me.

Some of us, like my father once did, make their own ways of being heeded. Some of us need to bring the nature in and pretend it's not without our regard, that it's instead serenading us into existence like an Aboriginal song trail, a creation story that marks the importance of our lives. Others among us, when not regarded with enough attention or observation, may move to controlling things instead, organizing nature, children, toys, schedules, swim lessons, and schoolwork. Perhaps, in this way, indifference becomes mastered, moved past. It needs to be. Worse than being outweighed, worse than not feeling special, is not being noticed at all.

THE BLUEBERRY FIELD BULLETIN BOARD

Any kid who rakes blueberries for Dale Scott can get his messages written in the black Sharpie she keeps in her fanny pack. Sometimes she'll hear something funny that makes her smile and, pausing from the work of transferring heavy heaped buckets into purple crates the canning company needs filled, she'll write it down. Recording the words on the inside bottom of "clam shells"—green paperboard quart containers situated in wooden crates—means anyone who rakes into those crates for fresh pack sales can read the messages. Most of the time she's recording an exchange of advice and personalities, an echo of field worker talk.

It's hot today. It's always hot. The field's always open and unshaded so that facial sweat salts your hair, your skin, drips into your eyes, onto the ground, and into your bucket. Come noon, lunch isn't long enough, and cool breezes never outlast the steady burn of the beating sun. Best drink plenty of water and avoid heat exhaustion—a nauseating, disorienting experience that interferes with your ability to make money. The sun is at least good for daylight-warmed berries, though, naturally heated, enhancing the sweet, wild blueberry flavor. So, eat what your sweat falls onto; bodily fluids aren't allowed in the food services industry, including agriculture.

Have a good day at work, Jacqueline. Don't worry, she will. She's getting moved down to the pick-over table where she'll be standing at a conveyor belt, factory-style, and in the shade. She won't be bent under the high noon heat; she can tan at the beach, or on her lawn, and not while raking blueberries where the farmer's tan browns your skin unevenly.

If you don't want to rake, go home. An older kid wrote that. It's always the youngest who want to play. If they're not sitting on the overturned bucket they're meant to fill, they're throw

berries at each other. Or, maybe it was someone who's jealous because better than blueberry fights is stuffing them down the front of a cute girl's shirt to watch her pick them out. Or, stuffing them down some cute boy's shirt and watching him take his shirt off.

Don't eat the caterpillars. The best advice there is.

My teeth are blue. It's very hard to touch berries all day and not taste them, but those with pride on their face, who filled the most buckets that day, have no stains on their teeth. Some will say, "Quit eating and get raking," or, "Did you eat more than you raked?" but being proud of your blue stains means the better rakers didn't get you down.

I want to ride on the red truck. Don't we all? That's Larry's truck, the other boss—Dale's husband. No one gets to ride who isn't Larry or Dale. Maybe some day he'll make an exception, though, like on a Saturday when a few came in extra and pretended they didn't mind, or when the season was generous and almost over, and a few workers stuck with it 'till the field was emptied, the blue carpets all cleaned.

Given the chance, there'd be more than one message that'd be good to post. To start with, *Don't shit in your bucket.* A kid once did this, figuring it'd weigh his bucket down or, who knows what else, but they know who the buckets come in from. They'll figure it out. You don't want your shit back.

Buy some gloves. Nothing else will help prevent poison ivy.

Pray for rain. Nothing else will save you from five days a week of six a.m. mornings, stinky port-o-potties (or leaves for toilet paper if you prefer the woods), peanut butter, hard labor, and nothing to drink all day but water.

Don't pray for rain. You'll need to make it up on a Saturday.

Don't eat the berries 'till the end of the day. Once you start, you can't stop. Time gets wasted picking out the BB-sized berries from leaves and twigs, and when you return home with teeth, tongue, lips, and everything else stained blue, your parents will think you didn't try hard enough, work hard enough, and the effort of stained clothes and gas money to get you there wasn't worth the fun they think you had.

The second card is king. Everyone knows this, but the reminder is good. For each five gallon bucket that's filled, the card gets a hole-punch. The second card means twenty-five buckets are behind you—over 400 pounds of blueberries and sixty more dollars on Friday—and you're envied by all rakers still on their first.

The Maine Wild Blueberry Queen didn't rake blueberries. It isn't fair, but knowing this will fuel you, make you feel like the better person.

The work is worth it. It may not seem like it now, but these experiences really do come in handy some day, like when you're old and feeling like the world is fading and the right things aren't valued anymore. You can say to your kids, "When I was your age," and then tell them your toils. They'll still roll their eyes, and they won't care, just like you didn't when you heard it, but, still, at least you'll get to say it.

They'll always remember you. It's true. Stop by their wild blueberry information booth at the Union fair and Dale will pull out your name like she met you yesterday. If the fair doesn't suit you, then ten, twenty years later, stop by their fields in August. They'll reminisce, even tease you about who you once were—"What was that haircut called?"—and, always, they'll let you hold a rake and fill some buckets.

SCHEDULED BURNS AND OTHER TREATMENTS

The trail we like to hike on weekends, once lined with tall tangles of jungle-lush plants, shaded by scrub oaks, is now open and peeled back bare. Instead of green borders and leafy walls, the sandy path we wind down has little definition between trail and all that was cut down. “Forest Restoration,” the sign tells us; “Mechanical Treatment.” The county is digging up the underbrush to rejuvenate the pine flats.

“I feel like it’s ruined,” you say.

“There’s only like five or six trees left,” our daughter says.

“There’s a lot more than six trees left,” I say. There are many pines. They’ve left almost all of the pines.

“Not much,” you say, and because this moment risks another reason for you to dislike Florida—the place you refer to as, “This angry little peninsula,” and, “This cold and simpleminded state”—I take a deep breath to keep sharpness and irritability out of my voice.

I understand why the county is digging up the land, the undergrowth. Years of fire suppression has promoted tinder-ready underbrush and invasive vegetation. You should know this, too; remember last time? The undergrowth was lit for the pruning. The woods were black with nutrients then, the horizontal stumps of the saw palmettos looked like gigantic alien worms digging their way under the fresh soot. I loved that smell, like a campfire, and a year later the palmettos grew back thick and lush. They were better for the fire. Most species are. It’s just, they took so much this time—and by scraping instead of burning.

“We knew they were doing this here,” I say, defending the harrowing and disking as if I approved of both the act and the methods.

“It’s not the same place,” you say. “It’s too open.” Our refuge is gone.

When we moved here together from the West, from the thirsty winters leading us into leaping crown fires, from the summer charred mountain trails and hazy smoke-filled sunsets, we laughed together at Florida’s “fire season.”

“They don’t know what dry is,” I’d said. “What danger?”

We’d moved to the subtropics but the risk, invisible to our eyes but still here, loomed large for us: we didn’t know that pine flats are an ecosystem dependant upon lightning strikes and random but regular burns. We didn’t know that, without fire, the herbaceous species normally suppressed end up overgrowing past what’s healthy or natural. The forest can’t take care of itself. Since then, I’ve learned that if the blazes are fierce and natural, then the fuel potential—for out of control fires—is contained. The fire suppression policies, meant to avoid such raging heat, leave fires to be prescribed like a drug curing depression; when a woodland looks despairing with all of its overgrowth—the unwanted weight gain and unkempt appearance—then it’s allowed a weak burn. I’ve learned that forests recovered through this type of prescription are artificial artifacts of what was wild and nurtured through intensity because, when a low intensity fire—the easiest to control—is set, the removal of randomness, potency, and timing favors some species at the expense of others. Controlling the fire controls what grows.

As we weave through the newly opened-up trail—scraped back like a lobotomy instead of burned—you’re still complaining about the loss, about how many acres might be involved, and finally I acquiesce. “They’ve taken so much,” I say.

“Too much,” you say.

“Why’d they have to take all the oaks?” I say. I can understand everything else: the saw palmettos, wax-myrtles, marlberries, asters, even the fetterbushes blooming their pale-pink urns and smelling like honey. But the oaks? I miss their shade and the unusual way they angled overhead, the unexpected shapes they made.

“If it rains, we’re going to get soaked,” our daughter says.

“We would,” I say, noting that the clouds are white and the sky’s a Microsoft blue. You hate that phrase, Microsoft blue: nature and a corporation combined. I see the quick image, the brilliant color both a sky and computer can cast, and you see the “imperialistic infiltration” of two things you think shouldn’t be put together. Two things like us? You’d think the two things that don’t go together are us and Florida, but I’m not so sure. I’ve been wondering if, regardless of place, it’s the two of us who shouldn’t be coupled.

How can you not love this land? Don’t you know? Over 190 species of either rare or endangered plants live in a longleaf pine forest, and some longleafs have aged over 500 years. Their wood, strong enough to dull a serrated edge, produces resins which gum up saw blades and safeguards against fire. The trees endeavor to self-protect, even fend off humans, but still the trees are on their way out. Most longleaf pines are harvested for use before they reach a hundred years, or have already been eliminated and replaced by the faster growing, more economical slash or loblolly pines. I think what we’re walking through is mostly slash, but there are some longleafs here, too.

The tree’s heartwood, named for its deep amber color, is a weakness because over time a fungus infects and softens the dark orange wood. Red heart disease, it’s called. It decays the pine’s cellulose and increases flammability. Regardless of this weakness, it’s also a strength; by hollowing out the tree’s center, the fungus opens up a new place of refuge for animals, birds.

I know you've considered me your place of refuge. In the past, we clung to each other as if we'd never be apart, need nothing outside of the other. Cravings change. People change. Forests change. You know I'm not your mooring anymore, right? You must.

The longleaf pine trees might fail at protecting themselves from the long run, from being overrun, but they also succeed in protecting so much more beyond their singular selves. So, is it a failure or an opening up of the heart to a more diverse community of species? That's what I need now. Something more, different. The tree is first its own home, and then, as it changes and ages over time, it expands past its own singular, thick, isolated body and becomes more than it could accomplish alone. This is what we thought, isn't it? That we'd become more together? What about the plans, the alternative paths we both gave up; was the result enough?

"It's just not right," you say. "It doesn't feel as good to be here."

I say nothing in response. What's left to say? I'm noticing something new as we walk. It's the smell, like fresh cut field grass drying into hay. It's a smell from my childhood, of the fields I hayed in Maine—yellow blades rippling under the high noon sun, narrow straw music dancing to itself in the wind. I don't tell you how I think the smell might be a good sign. Something new was opened up with this pine flat forest, and you're not going to like the result.

Do you remember the time we were at the river, standing on its steep bank at the first bend, and the two of us saw the birds you thought were red-cockadedads? They flew from one bank to the other, their red caps flashing—hot embers tipped on coal—playing chase with one another and sounding like a pet's squeaker toy released in the woodlands. "Those are endangered," you said, smiling at our witness of a rare and special moment. I believed you. You were so sure.

Later, when I looked up the birds, I learned you were wrong. What we saw were the common kind, the pileated. Red-cockadededs are territorial and need at least 200 acres of one-hundred-year-old trees to nest in; their presence epitomizes old-growth longleaf pine forests. They prefer the pines suffering from red heart disease. Each day the birds spend time maintaining the resin wells that line the walls of their home. If the sap stops flowing, they abandon the cavity they've made so that others—chickadees, bluebirds, screech owls, wood ducks, flying squirrels, bees, reptiles, amphibians, and other woodpeckers—can move in. Like the longleaf pines, the red-cockadededs have less room to live. Since the birds are stubbornly territorial, they won't move on just because their trees are down. Like a homeless body standing before the smoldering remains of a house fire, streaked from creosote, the bird refuses to go elsewhere. Once the pine stand they lived in is cut down, it doesn't move on to colonize a new forest or to make a new cavity in a different tree near where its home once stood. They're very set in their ways.

Are you this stubborn? Would you stay where your former home was gone like a bird staring at a bit of stump and empty sky? You're not seeing how I've let go, how I'm ready to move on when you're not. Red-cockadededs live in islands now, isolated hold-outs—the last one percent of old growth—set apart as if desire can't die when it's contained. Federally listed as endangered since 1970, if fragmentation of their longleaf forests continues, the red-cockadededs will never recover and they'll slowly die out—they're willing to die before they'd move or change or adapt or evolve. Fragmentation of anything will never mean recovery; our bodies can be fragmented, my own heart can lose pieces and go on thumping, but I will still be in danger of a short life. Mechanics understand how, if something is taken apart, all of the pieces must be kept to reassemble the object whole. Most of the pieces to fragmented lands have been lost. What

consoles us when we lose our familiar landscapes, when our surroundings change, when we change?

“It feels...raw. That’s the word. It feels raw,” you say.

“I miss the shade,” I say.

“Where are you going to pee, now?” our daughter says.

She’s right. There are no places to squat or hide.

Trees used to lightning have evolved to withstand it, and the self-protection against fires many trees developed comes in many forms: bark, spacing, grasses; there are seed pods that won’t even open unless first burned. For the longleaf pines, it’s the wiregrass community that keeps them safe. Together, they adapted to seasonal fires and then thrived as a result of them. The relationship encouraged the milky yellow clumps of grass to grow beneath the pines so when a fire spread through it would run fast over the ground and leave the tender tips of needled trees unsinged. The bunch grass rarely establishes itself from seed, spreading instead through a sluggish reproduction too slow to be seen. Eventually, wiregrass creates a dense ground cover that grows thicker after fire sweeps it bald. This community, these species, grow stronger after fire touches them.

Under the longleafs, the wiregrass is also an indicator species revealing the relative quality of the overstory it lives under, the soil it stands up from. But like the birds, it is sensitive to disturbance. Instead of fire, forest management practices—aimed at keeping the undergrowth from taking over the pines—adopted mechanical means of control. As we’re observing now, scrub is chopped, disked, and bedded with a plow into rows. This harrowing changes shrub species composition and abundance. Weeds come into the wood. Bluestems, panic grasses, and grass-like plants move over the soil and take it over. Because of this, in some places, wiregrass

can't be found. It won't grow back. Wiregrass, it turns out, is a plant that thinks like a certain bird.

Our shade is gone and the acres we walk through are so open I've lost my bearings on the trail. I knew every turn before this, every bend or clump of plants. Now that it's all gone—all except for the pines that stick out like too proud last-men-standing, that don't see how in their winning other people lost—I walk into the cross path disoriented. Wasn't that too soon? Here already? When we get to the bridge, where the blackberries grow and the wild grapes tangle over them, we find that it's still too flooded to cross.

“Do you want to try that way?” you say, and point past the old burn site to a trail we've never tried before. It winds towards more pine flats.

Aside from this trail, from right here and right now, I worried that I can't follow you anymore. I know I should, for the stick-to-it commitment of things, for the love that's circled between us for so many years, for the you-knew-me-when, and the I-know-you-now. But I've seen the way species work on each other over time, the way organisms change each other, take away from each other. When I think of us going on together in our relationship, I think about the birds and fires, the pines and oaks, creamy bunch grasses, mechanical treatments and prescriptions, and a whole forest peeled back—sheared open so that the soil is loose and branch rubble is scattered everywhere. The soil has been given a fresh chance to grow something new even if it is raw.

“Sure,” I say. Maybe I can try. I'll hang on a little longer.

Sometimes, creatures evolve nicely together. They'll ride each others backs, take turns as both the carrier and the carried, thriving in both conditions. Other times this arrangement goes against what all parties want or need. I'm done changing what you asked me to alter. I can't

shape myself for the saddle or give up another piece of my identity. If I take back what I left behind for you, years ago, will you still want me this way?

“Let’s just go home,” our daughter says.

We can make this work, I think. We have before when either of us has doubted our ability to stay together.

“Let’s go down here first,” I say. “Dad wants to.”

I lead the way to where you pointed. This time, I will not be your forest. I need my own. I’ve been tainted by the alternatives and know how only a scheduled burn—a planned event—can have tight constricting boundaries, and how a flame that leaps the crowns of treetops knows a freedom so boundless that even the fire itself doesn’t know where it will go.

A CARPENTER'S HAMMER

The hard labor of raking wild blueberries was once a Maine rite of passage—like corn detasseling for Iowans—but fewer kids pass through it each year. I was fourteen the last season I raked. The following summer I had a “real job” working in a nursing home and didn’t have to make my money while bent under the hot sun. My mother used to rake at least one day every season, “Just for the fun of it,” she’d say. It’s a point of Maine pride for me, the fact that my mother did this hard thing for fun, even though I haven’t lived in the state now for over fourteen years. Like me, my mother doesn’t rake anymore. She stopped a few years ago, in her late fifties, saying that the local crews were getting smaller and that migrant workers were coming in to fill the gap. “You should see how fast they go,” she said. “No one can keep up with them.”

I’ve also heard there’s an effort to refine a mechanical raker so that people won’t be needed for the task of hand raking. All of this is unsettling for me. I spent five seasons in blueberry fields, turning from child to adolescent in them, and I consider them an integral part of my growing-up experience. Those fields were the place where I glimpsed the lives of others outside of my family, saw how they interacted, what they valued. I learned how to flirt in those fields, learned that older boys thought I was pretty. I developed friendships with kids who didn’t go to my school, and swapped music with the ones who did. Once, I got heat exhaustion when I was eleven and sat dazed on my overturned bucket until someone—I forget who—noticed I looked bad and got me into the shade until it was time to go home. All of these memories swirl around with images of small farms that are getting bought up by corporate ones, and I worry that,

just as blueberries have been discovered as the antioxidant powerhouse of foods, something special from my childhood is slipping away.

My mother worked for the Medomak Canning factory in Winslow Mills, Maine, for many years. When I was ten, she signed me up to rake—along with my older sister and cousins—the blueberries she canned. My parents thought it was good for me to work at an early age, and they didn't make me spend all the money I earned on school clothes like other kids had to do. I started out making eight cents a pound. The bus picked us up early mornings at the canning factory and we, a mishmash crew of all ages attempting to make some extra tax-free cash while it lasted, rode to the different locations. Mornings were often quiet on the bus, and moist stepping off it. The August fog—fishing weather—allowed the dew to drip onto my legs. It soaked through my sneakers, wetting my socks. We got metal rakes and white five-gallon buckets, the smell of vinegar in every one.

When the sun burned off the moisture, rakers exposed their personalities as if previously hidden in the fog. People got to know each other in hours spent side by side; friendships formed and lovers would sometimes try to escape into the woods. Some raked hard, making the best of it, and others gradually pulled the strings of their berths in so that the width they had to rake narrowed. They were the workers who liked to spout off clichéd lines to each other—“You working hard or hardly working?”—and no day went by without someone singing the only line of the Fats Domino song we knew: “I found my thrill on blueberry hill.” Though it was over-sung, few complained about the tiresome tune because of our rich paradox—all of us were spending a month of summer on a blueberry hill while feeling far from thrilled about the hard physical labor that brought us there.

Wild blueberries grow naturally in hilly barrens—areas considered useless for farming because of the poor, acidic soil that’s either sandy or gravelly—along the coast of Maine and northward through Canada. On the bush, the leaves grow half the size of a pinky and are deeply creased down their center. The berries are smaller than what’s carried fresh in grocery stores—the cultivated, highbush kind—and range in color from a dusky pale blue to a purple so deep it’s almost black. Not all landowners want to be bothered by the farming work that’s involved with rotating fields and hiring a harvesting crew, so many wild blueberry fields are managed by a canning company. It’s an arrangement that makes sense since only one percent sells fresh while most are canned as pie filling.

The company I raked for through four seasons spent more time managing its workers than the fields themselves. Most of the fields I raked were a miserable mess of weeds and older bush growth that didn’t produce blueberries and clogged the rake with uprooted plants. I’d spend half the season with poison ivy, and the tines of my rake would often twang against all the rocks. Sometimes, to avoid the rocks or weeds, I’d accidentally send the rake into my shoe.

Before I raked, I heard my cousins complain about their backs hurting from the job, and I pictured a yard rake that pulls scattered leaves together—not a steel toothed scooper. Blueberry rakes are shaped like a wide, deep dustpan with the handle flipped forward, above the pan’s dish, instead of behind it. Long skinny tines, with dull pointed ends, take the place of the dustpan’s bottom, extending out from a flat back. Wild blueberries grow ankle deep in open fields. They’re like endless low hedges hugging the ground. To rake the berries off the bushes, I raked bent in bad-back posture, or sometimes on my knees—staining my pants while flicking my wrist up and down, combing the dustpan-rake forward.

Every afternoon I'd come home stained blue. "Did you eat more than you raked?" my parent and aunts would ask.

I couldn't help myself. As soon as I'd start I couldn't stop. And that meant I would spend ungracious amounts of time picking out clean berries to eat instead of dropping them into my bucket. "You know you're eating maggots," some of the boys would say.

They'd watch me crunch more down as I ignored their information and then, when they weren't looking, I'd open up the berries and search for proof of what they'd said, scrutinizing seeds and pulp for something white. I used to think the taunts about blueberry maggots were a myth to get the younger kids to stop eating and start raking, but the myth was pulled from truth concerning the history of the blueberry fruit fly. Just shy of growing the size of a house fly, the females lay a single egg in up to one-hundred berries. The maggots grow to half an inch, which would be noticeable if you found one in your pie. In 1922, someone in Maine not only found one but had it identified as well. Word spread and everyone began looking for, and finding, the white worms in their canned berries; it was a particularly active year for the fruit fly. Sales from canned berries tanked. Fresh berries were stopped at state lines. Farmers and canners stuck with the unmovable berries pleaded their losses to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Canners association, respectively, and asked for help. The result was a set standard for "an acceptable number of maggots" per samples of berries submitted for sales—a number which growers accused the factories of changing according to production need.

Today there's a zero tolerance for maggots in food, and a single maggot discovered upon inspection may lead to the entire shipment being turned away. Infested berries may be used for preserves, however, because maggots rise to the top for skimming and easier removal. As I got older, I learned to restrain myself and not allow the berries to cross my lips until the end of the

day. Then, I could allow the younger rakers to get taunted as I moved past them, knowing I'd make a lot more money if I didn't allow myself to stop and eat.

When I was fourteen, the factory I raked for stopped canning blueberries and my mother was laid-off that harvest season. Together, we raked blueberries for an independent grower, Gordon Scott, in Waldoboro, Maine. I remember Gordon as a stern man, stout with a grooved face he kept semi-shaded by a baseball cap. He carried himself in a way that insinuated the admonishments he gave out: "Get back to work," "Rake your line clean," and, "Good berries back there."

"Back there" always meant in the weeds, or under the string that marked out a raker's row. I wasn't sure if I could meet his standards; he took his fields and his blueberries seriously. There was no fooling around or lolling on overturned empty buckets. Still, I thought I had it made. People talked round the fields about how much better his berries were, and receiving two dollars a bucket, regardless of weight, was better pay than the then ten cents a pound I'd made the previous summer. I hadn't seen blueberries carpeted so thick. One day, I raked 56 five-gallon buckets and became competition for the "most buckets raked in a day" title.

Gordon Scott managed to stay moored on his hundred-acre barrens until he was 81. He handed the whole business over to his son, Larry, and daughter-in-law, Dale, so he could take care of his wife who suffers from Alzheimer's. Larry and Dale had always helped manage the barrens, and when I called them and asked if I could spend time with them in their fields, unimaginably, twenty-two years later, they knew me. "Of course we remember you," Larry said. "You beat Albert Bragg. Your mother used to do headstands in the field. Please tell us you're going to rake for us."

The mention of Albert Bragg is in reference to the 56 buckets story. Albert was several years older than me, but he was my competition. In a wild blueberry field full of seasonal rakers, the two most commonly asked questions are: “What time is it?” and, “How many buckets you got?”

The first question was often answered with almost anything but the time, and especially with, “Time for you to get a new watch.”

The second question was often answered with truth, but in a competition, such as the one Albert and I had, it was often answered with lies. “Tell him I’ve got twenty-two buckets,” I’d say, when really I had thirty-four.

On the day of our fiercest race, the raking was some of the best: thick berries, minimal weeds and rocks, and—as the tension of our opposition heightened—I received help. My mother and Larry carried my buckets, punched my card, and dropped more empty buckets beside me so I wouldn’t waste time carrying. Instead, I could go on raking. At the end of the day, I filled fifty-six buckets, and a group of boys were pissed. They thought it impossible that a girl could have raked more. For the rest of the season, I either heard excuses—“I would’ve been able to make fifty-six buckets if I’d had the day off before, too,”—or about my fluke success—“Let’s see you try to do that again.”

At the Scott’s pickup site where parents dropped their kids off for the day, I reintroduced myself and Larry’s wife, Dale, immediately bragged to the crew about my speed-raking while they collected in the back of a large flatbed truck carting them up the hill to the day’s raking spot. “This here is Pam Baker,” she announced, and told them the story.

Instantly I felt put on the spot. I knew I couldn't rake with the pace I used to, so Dale and Larry's hope that I would "show these kids how it's done" made me nervous. I smiled, though. The kids in the truck looked bored and didn't respond, so Dale added, "And she was little then."

The kids still stared, unimpressed, and Dale turned to me and said Albert had raked for them for years. But when he got beat out by a young girl, "He turned in his card and never came back." She laughed.

Her light laughter at Albert's action surprised me; I'd think losing such a reliable raker would be a mourned loss, but she smiled as if that could never be a worry. Dale is like that—always looking for something to make her laugh. Even her hair, braided low on each side and then pulled back with the loose hair in a ponytail, reveals the easy spirit she carries.

"I had help, though," I said. "People carried my buckets for me."

"He had help, too," Dale said.

I'd never known that. I always thought the only reason I'd beaten him was because of the help I'd received.

After Larry took the crew up to the fields, I followed Dale over to the garage where she showed me the "pick over" tables used for cleaning and packaging "fresh pack" berries. Later in the day, when the dew has dried, one person will gently dump blueberries through a tilt table while others stand above conveyor belts picking out all the bits of twigs and imperfect berries. The cleaned berries are sold in flats to local vegetable stands, private buyers filling their freezers for winter, and to Moody's Diner—a landmark place for both locals and Route 1 tourists. Dale organized herself, checking her fanny pack for what she might need, and drove us up to where Larry and the rakers were, chatting as if there hadn't been years between us. "A lot has changed," she said. "You'll see."

Back when I raked, it was all tax-free income not reported to the government, like babysitting. Now there are W2 forms and a mandatory booklet on pesticide disclosures Dale's required to read to all workers stepping into fields for the first time. The most remarkable change was the size of their crew. "It's small," I said.

Twenty years ago, around eighty people—mostly kids like me—would leave their names with Gordon and then about forty would get to work for him. Most of those around my age and younger worked to pay for school clothes, but some were older and worked for extra income, or even their only income.

"Oh, this is a good crew today," Dale said. The largest one yet this year, counting in at twenty. She's happy to have this many. In one season she may have to go through forty names to keep twenty people in the fields.

All of them are young—most in middle school or starting high school, raking for their first year—except for one adult, Ryan McNelly, a tall man who teaches freshman biology at the local high school. He kept his punch card tucked up under his cap and rakes with one of the newer, extra wide, double handled rakes. When we arrived, he'd already filled twelve buckets; he'd put me to shame in a competition. The Scotts know and trust Ryan enough to let him enter their fields and start early, alone, since he needs to cut out early. The rest of the crew meets at 7:30. "This is early," one boy said while wiping his forehead and rubbing his eyes.

"It is?" I said, smiling. "It'll get you used to getting up for school mornings."

"It's still early. Well, for summer."

"What time do you usually get up in summer?" Dale said.

"Nine," the boy said, getting his card punched for the bucket he'd brought in.

I helped Dale transfer the five-gallon buckets of wild blueberries into purple trays for the canning company they sell to, smoothing out the berries' humps into a level flat before stacking on the next tray—I've always loved the feeling of hundreds of berries rolling under my fingertips and palm, the firm but delicate plump of the berries piled together. Being there with her was like getting a back-stage pass. When I raked, there was something mysterious and magical about those who got to work at the scales and punch cards instead of rake. No one got to sit around and chat there, either; there was work needing to get done, so it felt special being allowed to just hang out and take in the view.

It's a beautiful piece of property they have—what any rural home buyer craves: rolling hills in one direction, trimmed by tree lines that stitch fields and foothills together, while distant and southward on a clear day there's the Atlantic Ocean. I didn't notice this when I was fourteen, when my work was lined by the white string marking lanes to rake, my sights set on the silver blush of blueberries, the task of making good money. Then, I was looking down all the time, focusing intently on the blue carpet I was to collect, and not out on the view. As an adult visiting them, I could see why developers would want to buy their land and build houses over their blueberries.

Of the hundred acres Larry and Dale Scott have, they keep only seventy in rotation, a thirty-five acre crop each August season. Wild blueberries grow on a two year cycle. The harvested bushes are pruned by fire and then managed to encourage new growth while the other bushes are prepared for the next season's harvest with pesticides, herbicides, and bee pollination. From thirty-five acres, the Scotts may haul out about 200,000 pounds of blueberries, but growing seasons and prices are unpredictable. Both have other jobs. Larry works for UPS—that's where they get their health insurance—and Dale makes wreaths for Christmas that are so popular Larry

likes to joke about how someone needs to die before there's room on her list for someone new to get a wreath.

They don't seem to mind the long days, and they aren't interested in selling their land, though they've had offers. In one offer, Dale told me a man tried convincing them to sell just one acre to build his house on. They kindly told him no, but he kept persisting. "It's just one acre," he said. "It'd make a great house lot."

Finally, the man asked, "Why not?" Surely, they must understand they'd still have all that other land.

Larry said, "If I was a carpenter, would I sell my hammer? I'm a farmer. Why would I sell my land?"

Larry is a fourth-generation blueberry farmer on his hundred-acre barrens. He has a slighter build than his father, wears brighter colors—a greenish-blue tee shirt tucked neatly into his jeans—has a mustache that could never hide his wide smile, and though his mannerisms are mild, there's a kinetic energy about him where he seems to be everywhere in the fields at once, always on the move. He's less intimidating than his father because he prefers to joke with the rakers instead of admonishing them back to work. If a kid steps in the berries, he'll tell the kid that when he or she goes up to Moody's Diner and orders a pie, if there's a big footprint in the middle of it, it's that kid's. Or, if Larry wants them to go back and rake up some berries they missed, he might tell them that when they go up to Moody's Diner and order some blueberry pancakes and there's a big empty spot in the middle of the stack, they'll have no one to blame but themselves because they left those berries back in the field.

One of the boys raking brought up a broken plastic owl, handed it to Larry, and said, "I found this at the end of my row."

“I wonder what happened to that,” Larry said.

The owl looked as if, in better times, it would have sung a song when somebody clapped their hands in front of it, but more recently it was used as one of the multiple and creative bird deterrents scattered on posts throughout the fields. Larry held the broken owl up towards the young teen who brought it to him, pointed to its round glass-like eyes, and said, “There are cameras in both of those eyes. I put this at the end of your row, see, because that way I’ll know if you’re raking.”

He moved his body towards the boy’s so that they were both positioned in front of the owl-camera, and he waved at the owl with his free hand. “Say ‘Hi,’” he said.

He was so deadpan that the boy, for a flashing instant, looked as if he wasn’t sure, but maybe he should wave at the owl, too.

I asked Dale about migrant labor. “We were one of the last ones to use the migrants,” she said.

Their canning company, Allen’s, makes it easy for them. When the kids are done raking, they call Allen’s and say they’re ready for the migrants to come in and finish off the fields. Allen’s drops the workers off, who don’t even string lines—they just rake fast in an open berth, skipping the buckets and raking directly into the trays. It’s all about speed for the migrants, so Dale says they couldn’t use them for the fresh pack. Also, Dale said, she and Larry “like to keep things local.”

I saw this sentiment again reflected when an inspector from Hannaford Supermarkets, the local grocery chain, came to decide if they’d sell the Scotts’ blueberries in their stores this year. Though the Scotts were asked if they want to sell in the larger Damariscotta store, they said no,

just to the one in Waldoboro, a grocery about the size of a Walgreens. The inspector—an attractive young woman with long blonde hair, who showed up in crisp white pants Dale said she couldn't promise would stay clean—joked about the small size of the store. “I thought, *that's a Hannaford?*” she said.

I knew what she meant. I've been spoiled by city supermarkets, and I'd probably drive to the larger store in the next town over.

“It's the best one they've got,” Larry said.

“Everyone knows everyone at that store,” Dale said, and I remembered browsing through the magazines as a young teen while my mother shopped, how every stocker went to my high school and all the cashiers had graduated from there.

“That's the way we like it,” Larry said, and Dale agreed.

While the Hannaford inspector was there, another older raker visited. At twenty, he had “a real job” as a meat cutter at the Hannaford in Waldoboro and was “just checking things out,” seeing how the berries were this year; he'd raked since he was twelve and liked to rake at least one day each season. He knew Ryan, the high school teacher, and the two of them together picked out which kids in the field were related to which other people they knew. When the Hannaford inspector left, Larry teased him about not getting her number and not asking her out. One of the younger rakers came up, turned over a bucket, sat on it, and tried to join in on the conversation. Dale let him. She doesn't push the kids too hard into getting back to work because she found that if she does, “They won't come back.”

It's a delicate balance they need to manage where they keep things moving so the berries get raked but they also don't move the help right out of their fields; they have to be far more flexible than Gordon ever was. Already, by lunch time, some of the kids—their lips, teeth, and

fingers stained blue—were using Dale’s cell phone, calling a parent to come and take them home. Dale recounted how, in Gordon’s time, if a kid wanted to take a week off and go to basketball camp, Gordon wouldn’t hire the kid. “That was play,” she said. “From Gordon’s perspective, either you’re going to work, or you’re not. We can’t do that. If we did, we wouldn’t have any kids to rake.”

The former Maine Commissioner of Agriculture, Bob Spear, was one of my neighbors growing up; I got yelled at by my father a few times for playing in his feed corn, though I did have free range to ride my pony around the edges of his fields. Back then, the Spears were known locally for their delicious corn—the human variety, not that fed to the cattle—and today they have several vegetable stands and sell their produce at Hannaford Supermarkets. I saw him at North Nobleboro Days and asked him if he had any thoughts about changes in blueberry farming. He invited me to his house, after the auction, and we sat in the room I remembered seeing year after year while trick-or-treating. He said that the biggest challenge blueberry growers face isn’t about harvesting help or corporate farms taking over; it’s related to the clash between encroaching development and pesticide use. “People think building a house on the edge of a blueberry field would be nice. Then they say, ‘No, I don’t want you to spray near my house. I don’t want you to spray near my land,’” he said.

This battle between farmers and other community members has caused lawsuits. For example, the voting residents of Addison, Maine, passed an ordinance against aerial spraying in March of 2003. The farmer who wrote Addison’s ordinance, Parris S. Hammond, Sr., composed it after recovering from a lung cancer he believed was caused by the aerial spraying of chlorothalonil and diuron on wild blueberries. Bob Spear, as the state’s Commissioner of Agriculture, challenged the ban by claiming it violated Maine’s Right-to-Farm Law of 1981.

Under the law, as long as farmers are using “best management practices,” often guided by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, then they’re protected and allowed to go on doing whatever it was that they were doing on their farms.

Over the years, other lawsuits have been brought against the Right-to-Farm Law, claiming the farmers’ protection doesn’t always protect the health of local citizens. It’s not a new struggle. But it’s one on people’s minds more as organic markets grow.

They’ve also had their own run-ins with chemical complaints. A couple of years ago, the Department of Agriculture called the Spears wanting to know what Bob’s son Jeff was spraying on a pumpkin field in Jefferson, Maine. Everything they’d applied was acceptable, but the call changed their spraying practices. “Now,” Bob told me, “we spray at night.”

As he finished his story, I thought back again to playing in his corn, and wondered how close to spraying times I’d run through it. He said his son Jeff, who was in my sister’s class throughout grammar school, called the couple who complained—the wife was pregnant and especially concerned—and they worked out an agreement: Jeff would call the couple whenever he planned to spray and tell them what they were doing and when they were doing it. Bob said he thought it was important to establish a relationship with neighbors, and added that the couple was very nice about it—they just wanted to be kept in the information loop and know what was sprayed in their back yard. I’d want to know that, too. Even though I grew up on a farm, I believe there’s a lot we don’t know about the long-term effects of chemicals.

It took Dale ten minutes to read the required booklet on pesticides, ticking through the dangers of chemicals, the workers’ rights to know everything about them, as well as the exact date when the fields were last sprayed and for what: the blueberry maggot. “Within twenty-four hours you could go into the fields and a week later you could eat the berries,” Dale told them.

Larry and Dale spray for the maggot when the Maine Cooperative Extension, supported by the Blueberry Tax Law, tells them to. They're also trying the new perimeter management for the fruit fly that the newest integrative pest management (IPM) research has suggested is effective. I thought back to all the blueberries I'd eaten in all the fields I'd been in; when I raked for the canning factory there was no telling how or when the fields had been sprayed before raked.

Dale is concerned about how some neighbors might view their pesticide use. In one nearby hay field, five houses were built ten years ago and some have already changed hands three times. It's hard to know your neighbors when they're moving through so fast, and hard for them to get to know you; it's also easier to file formal complaints against people you don't see every day, against neighbors you don't get to know over time. Although the DePatsys have bordered the Scotts' farm for years and understand that the Scotts are farmers, the land on the other side of their blueberry barrens changed hands recently from grandfather to granddaughter, and they don't know if she'll sell.

"Right now she's holding onto it," Dale said. "But if she decides to sell, we might get somebody over there complaining about our pesticides and wanting us to stop spraying."

Chemicals aren't the only thing that neighbors complain about these days. The Scotts also haul chicken manure from a local egg farm for their hay field and were told by the city of Waldoboro that there was a complaint about the chicken manure the tractor's tires left behind on the road; they needed to clean it up. I spent my childhood on rural roads, and I know that tractor tires often dumped manure on them; living rural means living with rural ways. I imagine that the right person, one with a garden but no livestock, would've considered the manure more of a gift than a nuisance—it was, after all, free fertilizer left for the taking.

Unfortunately, some of the people moving in to rural areas now want the view and smaller populations but not the rest that comes along with it, not realizing that if the farmers feel too much pressure from this crowding out, they'll eventually sell their land, their farm, and more houses will get built and more people will move in until the very thing that brought the quiet-view-seekers there to begin with will be gone and the only view left will be that of somebody else's fence, yard, or house.

Dale shoveled up the road, as the city told her to do, even though the tire tracks weren't in the Scotts' direction and didn't implicate them—many others in the area haul and use the same chicken manure. What she got, she said, “Was not even enough to fill a five-gallon bucket.”

When I visited, it had been raining almost every day in Maine, keeping the Scotts and their crew from the fields. The rain put them behind in local fresh pack orders which have to be raked dry. They were nervous about the rain, about the season, because they hadn't made the critical break-even point yet. But even with all this, and while trying to keep a new crew of twelve-year-olds at task when they'd rather either flirt, socialize, or just eat the berries, they allowed old rakers like me to enter their fields and just hang out for a while, allowing the blueberry bonds from summer-jobs-years-past to go on from where they first formed.

On the day of my visit, it was perfect raking weather. Cool. Enough cloud cover to keep the sun from bearing down too hard, and a near constant, easy breeze. On one walk by, Larry stopped. “We were going to tell you,” he said. “Albert died about three years ago. We don't know how.”

Really, it's not the pesticide talks or the updates on blueberry farming that brought me back to their fields. At first I thought it was; I'd wanted to feel the outrage of how there was no place for me in this new world of migrant farm labor and mechanical rakers. What I didn't

expect was this: the land and what it creates—a culture of unlikely people, people you’d never see getting together and joking on their own accord, coming together to tend this valuable strip of land.

As Dale put it, “You could have the doctor’s kid and the clam digger’s kid and after two weeks they’re best friends. They’d never talk to each other in school, but out on the field they’re best friends.”

Without hand raking, this phenomenon will disappear, and many people won’t know the leveling experience of a shared, hard labor rewarded by individual effort and perseverance. From a farmer’s perspective, I can see why land is essential. But after working Larry and Dale’s land once, I believe the hammer itself isn’t the point—it’s what gets built when the hammer is held.

SOMETHING WILD RUNS THIS WAY

There was a woman I loved. A patient where I worked who was frequently admitted to the locked adult psychiatric unit at St. Mary's Hospital. She mostly came in manic, frightful. Scaring all the depressed and timid clientele with claims about how she owned the place and cared for no one. She'd march up and down the halls with her eyes wide open: stalking, watching, waiting. Stalking, watching, waiting. Until it was time for another cigarette. Or phone hours. Meals. Visitation from her mother. She avoided group therapy during these times, and she paced between routine activities until the medicine took hold and equilibrated her frenetic movements, her inability to sit still for too long.

She once, in her mania, used her phone time to call Sears and place an order. "I want sixteen pairs of underwear," she yelled into mouthpiece. "Not the cheap kind. The expensive ones. Don't give me the cheap kind. Give me the good ones."

Next in her order came bras and I could only imagine the vexed salesperson on the other end of the line who tried accommodating the woman's vague but demanding order. So many undergarments; what would anyone need with nine new bras? And all of them the same. One of the psych techs had to get the charge nurse—the woman was loud enough to be heard behind the nurses' station anyway—who called the woman's mother who then in turn called Sears to explain everything and cancel the order.

I thought about what "expensive" might look like, what "good" could mean, and about how she knew the kind of thing she liked well enough to describe it over the phone without a catalogue item number. I lacked such command. My own bras barely fit because I didn't know

how to size them right, and spending money on something like panties irritated me; beyond cultural expectations about decency, what was the point of even wearing them? The woman may have been unnerving in her boldness, but she at least knew what she wanted. Even if she couldn't sit still, she could at least order up the certainty she knew belonged to her. I wondered how I could be that way, too—without causing those around me to startle with wildly intimidating assertiveness and motions.

Then, one evening, I glimpsed the woman another way. It was without the disquieting storminess of her manic disposition, without the unwashed heaviness of her depressive cycles, and it was while doing my job: the hourly checks ensuring that every door was locked as required, and every patient accounted for and “safe.” I found the woman in the bathtub, soaking. The water was a clear plain, a still and clear lowland, and her body rose up out of it like a giant too large for its liquid, potted bed. The bulk of her leaned back against the tiled wall, rested on a white sky, her eyes closed. Her arms rested down her body's length with fingers planted in the transparent soil. Her breasts hung like two soft bells, slightly sunken, relaxing upside down, and her belly rounded out like a welcoming foothill. Her hair—her glorious hair—was a long, loose, frizzing wave of freedom.

That's it, I thought, guiltily glimpsing her longer than a decent person would have: that's the beauty of a wild thing lying still. Without motion, wildness let me see it before moving on again, as if I could gain in on it, catch it, keep it for myself. The woman I saw in that moment was not a picture of mental illness off its medication. There was nothing wrong with her at all. She just happened to live in a world that didn't understand how such rawness, such unbridled authenticity was something to look up to and strive for. I got to glimpse it long enough to be

unafraid. What that woman had, that's what was missing from my life, I decided. After that, I spent my time figuring out how I could get it, experience it, and live it.

In my search, I thought about leaving Maine, where I lived at the time. I didn't think about home then—the idea of it, the finding of it—I just thought I needed to leave, get something more from my existence, what unbridled moments I wouldn't get from a place I already knew. If wildness was a destination then certainly there would be wild places left to live. That's how I saw it—as if turbulence and the uninhabited could be ordered up in a tour guide package.

I was twenty, walking through the sixty acres of woods my parents owned, when a voice entered my head saying, “Montana.” Montana. It sounded so exotic, so unknown. Wide open with what had to be an authentic and un-shucked wildness. Isn't that why they called it Big Sky Country? Because the sky was so wide you could get lost in it? Shaded—nearly hidden—under the canopy of maple, beach, birch, and evergreens, the sky restrained with branches, and concealed from my view, it sounded like the place I needed to go.

As soon as I decided on Montana, even before I saw the place, I found all the ways in which Maine was inferior. Maine was too tame, too burdened by people congregating in tight coastal towns, too overtaken with settlements attracting even more traffic through tourists and second-home-summer buyers. I'd drive back country roads, away from development, where farmland left a few wooly spaces, and still I'd be disgusted because even there folks dressed up their lawns like they were city storefront window. Bears, insulted by cutely stuffed replicas—sometimes wearing pink striped dresses and matching bows—were propped in yards, climbing trees, or rolling on their backs in the grass. As if that's all a bear had to do each day. I'd pass the wooden frames of painted flowers erected in yards, the plastic ducks pretending to waddle across green plains, and I'd think how Montana would make more sense. They wouldn't insult the bear

there in Montana, or litter their lawns with weatherproof nick knacks and other outdoor trinkets badly evolved from the Florida flamingo. When I saw pictures of the mountains in Montana, saw the rugged countryside and what I imagined was its refusal to be tamed, I thought I was leaving a culturally desolate region for a wild place; they'd have the real thing wandering through their yards. They'd have no need for replicas.

Montana was alive to me, breathing and beautiful like some boy I'd catch to call my lover. When I got there, the lover came through. In towns, brown old-style-wooden-western-storefront designs gave a heavy, authentic look with thick posts and beams. The rugged structures, both inside the stores and out, fit my notions of rustic. Even better was the land outside the towns. Valleys rippled with tall grasses. Pines swayed, threatening to tip as they creaked in their anchors. And what Maine called a mountain was really just a foothill.

I entered Montana's middle from the south, and my ride to Bozeman passed through a corner of Yellowstone where bison and antelope grazed casually in open fields. Then I wove through miles of canyon, a deep chasm flanked by mountains, and followed a river that romanced wading fisherman and collected outdoor joy seekers as if the rapid, cold water was itself a man with the rod and fly. I'd wanted a West where rivers bucked and trees spoke a new language, and I was there.

At the bus stop in Bozeman, my final destination, a woman invited herself into the conversation I was having with other travelers. I'd noticed her on the bus, sitting behind the driver. She wore cotton pants, a turtleneck under a dress, a sweater, a quilted vest, a winter hat, and it was July. When she spoke, she moved her arms as if directing planes on a runway. She started hugging us each individually, and then hugged us all together in one big group. Her smile

was wide and unrelenting, and she interjected it with each frequent pause she made while speaking.

“I heard a voice,” she said, “that told me to move to Bozeman, Montana.”

She reminded me of the woman back at St. Mary’s Hospital. Instantly, I loved her for this.

Adding her smile every couple of words, she said, “And now that I’m here, I’m going to find the people that I’m supposed to meet. And we’re going to get together because I heard a voice that told me to move to Bozeman, Montana.”

She was honest. She was hearing voices. She said what I hadn’t dared admit to anyone else but myself: I felt called there, too. It was a voice I’d heard in the woods. But voices were for crazy people, and instinct isn’t easy to explain to people who understand moving for a school or a job, but not because of scenery, for wildness, for an abstract need that elbows out from the soul. She said what I couldn’t. I knew then that, regardless of the mountains and bears, Montana called people there. Montana was not the lover I’d catch; instead, I was the one courted and then cradled in seductive grasp.

What I wanted, whatever that vague notion was, seemed to hang in the air like Montana’s August snow, crisp, and fluttering instead of falling and collecting on the ground. Towns were circumferenced by dirt roads washboarding into impassability, going both nowhere and everywhere. There were enough trails crossing the mountains rimming Bozeman to keep hikers stepping on new ground their whole life. And since many people were there for the land, not for the malls or fast food chains, most folks looked as if they were going on a hike. On campus, in between classes, travel mugs dangled from packs with carabiners used for rock climbing. Students wore layered clothes sewn for function as the fashion. In winter, many looked like

they'd either just come off the slopes, or were heading there after class. I didn't know what it was that those "other" students had that I didn't, but I wanted it. Not their North Face pants and Patagonia jackets, but their rosy cheeks, white smiles, and frisky energy. Was that the essence of the woman I'd loved back at St. Marys? A bodily freedom and strength giving way to images of lean sculpted bodies dangling off cliffs by one arm? A readying to make the final pull to the top of the precipice?

Back in Maine, when it was spring and summer, the predominant color was green. Once in a while some tree trunk would peek through, teasing a little brown, but mostly it was all green. In Bozeman, I'd drive through the golden wheat fields outside of town, or hike up Bridger Mountain's southern switchbacked path and watch the long buttery valley below. I couldn't believe how yellow my world had become.

I settled in to my new colors, and Montana became the place where I met my husband and married. The place where I first became a mother by taking in a foster child. The place where I starting thinking about home and about community. But the place was changing; there was talk of how small towns all over the West were growing fast. Too fast, and in 1994, the year before my husband and I moved away, Bozeman was one of the fastest growing towns in one of the fastest growing states. Even celebrities had moved in: Ted Turner, Tom Brokaw, Whoopi Goldberg, Robert Redford, and a host of others. Moving to Montana was the cool thing to do.

The reported population of Bozeman when I moved there in 1992 was roughly 23,000. Two years later, it was estimated at 35,000. "Bozeman is like someone who's gained a lot of weight but refuses to loosen a notch on their belt," my husband said before we moved away.

It felt so sudden, the change. People became hostile. If you weren't from there, you were an outsider. The once friendly place where strangers shared a favorite hiking spot, acquaintances

handed out phone numbers, and passersby made eye contact accompanying a nod or polite, “How are you?” was gone. The coldness instead begged, “Where are you from?” Were you, too, going to drive up the price of real estate?

Californians, who made up the bulk of those moving there, were the lowest form of life. Seen as aliens in a Hollywood summer blockbuster, they’d ruined their own towns and now they were moving on, and moving in, to ruin someone else’s. The kindest tee-shirts and bumper stickers read, “Welcome to Montana. Now GO HOME.” Or, “Beautify Montana: Put a Californian on a bus.” The more frank ones, reflecting the anger and frustration many natives of the state felt, read, “Keep Montana Beautiful: Kill a Californian.”

I’d considered the mountains part of my home, and I couldn’t imagine not living under their shadow. It was a landscape that simultaneously searched and filled my soul. In the Bridgers, in 1995, twenty acres couldn’t be touched for less than half-a-million. I, too, was angry that I couldn’t afford the land I wanted. Worse for me was that I’d found “home” only to see it lost to those who had moved in behind me—lost to those who were probably searching for the same things I wanted.

Marriage called up a domesticity I didn’t know I had, and I forgot about my search for wild things. The amnesia I developed culled my desire to settle. And the hostility of Bozeman was not the place. Instead, my husband and I shared romantic images of living in a desert with wind-blown sagebrush. We discussed adobe houses coming to us complete with good jobs and a welcoming community of friends who’d embrace us as part of *them*. It felt as if a new life was calling, and we had to listen.

Spending two weeks searching for what we came to call, “The Perfect Town,” we entered each place—Cortez, Taos, Mesilla, Las Cruces—and contrasted the selling points against the less

desirable ones: job opportunities, cost of living, desert views, character of the town, and character of the people. We sought out locals and asked them the same question: “What’s it like to live here?”

“Well, it’s nice,” they’d say hesitantly. “Lots of people are moving here.” When we recognized the weary look on their faces—the same expression we were trying to leave behind in Bozeman—we’d move on.

Arizona was an unexpected surprise to us. We were planning to see Silver City, New Mexico, when we detoured through an eastern edge of Arizona for a faster road. Lured by the smooth salmon-pink rock formations, the open green and yellow striated valleys under a brilliant blue sky, and the tall cottonwood trees, we kept on going and never saw Silver City, moving instead to northern Arizona, to Flagstaff.

Technically, we were still in the desert—the high desert. But there were ponderosa pines, thick and tall. And white aspen quaking their spaded leaves on spiraled stems, shivering. The San Francisco Peaks, rising an entire mile above the town, loomed volcanic, and nearly in my backyard. The south side of Flagstaff borders a 1,000-foot cliff, the Mogollon Rim, dropping back to saguaros. The Coconino National Forest surrounding the town covers almost two million acres of land and gave me miles of quiet to walk. Historic Route 66 runs through Flagstaff, and I loved the novelty of knowing that my town was in a song sung by many who covered the original Nat King Cole recording. Even better, when my husband and I first moved there, we rented an original Route 66 cabin that’d been moved to a ranch near Winona. People could motor my way, on the highway; for that hip California trip you’d journey through Flagstaff, Arizona—just don’t forget Winona.

There was Lowell Observatory, where Pluto was discovered. There was the medical center where I was employed. There was the university where both my husband and I went back to school. Flagstaff felt like something I could swallow in easy, bite-sized chunks. There was always something to do, but I could also read the paper from cover to cover while sipping my morning coffee.

We moved there in June 1996, just in time for the two largest fires ever on record in the Coconino National Forest. Combined, the Hochderffer and Horseshoe fires left 24,765 acres black on the western side of the peaks. And the town, or at least the Chamber of Commerce, was trying to revive itself. Claiming the title, “Gateway to the Grand Canyon,” the small city of about 50,000 was re-vamping its downtown in hopes of attracting more tourist dollars. It was also trying to claim the last open space downtown, a dirt parking lot, to transform it into a plaza with an amphitheater now known as Heritage Square. The goal was to have a place for outdoor entertainment—a living room for the community. Flagstaff hadn’t been “discovered” yet in the way that other western towns had. It wasn’t growing; our arrival was met with nonchalance.

Community felt real there. Our local joke was that, because of the high cost of living as compared to Phoenix, Flagstaff was starvation with a view. Both as individuals and as a collective community, we lived there because we wanted to. Because we loved the town and what its surrounding areas had to offer. I appreciated the fact that so many people not only cared about their town, but that they cared about what would happen to it as the population grew. When an area known as Dry Lake went up before the County Planning and Zoning Commission in 1997 to be converted from a 450-acre grassland meadow into the Flagstaff Ranch Golf Club, an upscale golf course with a gated community of 300 elite homes, locals rallied. The Friends of Dry Lake started with a handful of people—three biologists, two city councilmen, a local writer,

and some outdoor enthusiasts. It ended with the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the Grand Canyon Trust, and the roar of local citizens calling to leave Dry Lake undeveloped.

Dry Lake wasn't just a meadow. It contained a 40-acre wetland, a study area for the Mexican Spotted Owl, basalt cliffs on the southeastern side, and a wealth of gambel oak, aspen, and ponderosa all situated in the flat bottom of a volcanic crater. In late summer, after the monsoon rains, the yellow grassland turned green and bloomed, revealing the short-lived lake reflecting sun spots under mountain views. For me, it was a symbol of what a community could do. Public protest led to letters to the editor, city council meetings, and facing the developer, Jim Mehen, who owned the land and had his own campaign against "These unreasonable and misinformed groups that threaten Flagstaff's ability to grow..."

The anti-growth, anti-business, and anti-development name-calling went on. Developers there liked to call people advocating for "smart growth" the "close-the-door-behind-you types." I've heard it said better. "Everyone wants to be the last to arrive." It gets to the heart of what I felt when first moving out West. I had wanted to arrive like a pioneer. If someone had asked, back when I moved to Bozeman, I would have closed the invisible door behind me if only it meant that I could stay. Flagstaff, now listed in magazines such as *Outside* as being in the top ten great places to live, was starting to face the same challenges in growth spurts that I saw Bozeman fail at. But Flagstaff had time to think about it and prepare. It had time to decide what kind of a town it wanted to be. The outcome of Dry Lake spoke to where I thought Flagstaff would land; after three years, Dry Lake was saved from the development.

Then, after making a career change, my husband accepted a job in Orlando, Florida. With our two daughters in tow, we drove out to look at houses. It was congested. The franchises on every corner branded, blanded, and bled the towns together. Everything looked the same. Aside

from bold artificial colors announcing stores—reds, yellows, and black—the dominant color was grey: concrete buildings, sidewalks, and pavement faded by sun. Power lines stretched between palm trees, crisscrossed less developed countryside connecting-the-billboard-dots announcing happy relief in more of the same. Everywhere was the presence of others pressing in on me. The mountains had defined both my landscape and my internal compass for ten years. Once again I was closed in, unable to see past the foreground into the miles of beyond, and I became lost in a landscape of traffic. My horizon didn't rise. I wanted to feel the rough rusty-red cinders pushing against my finger tips, flex and stretch my calf muscles on a steep slope, smell vanilla in the air, and feel the universe of an open, untouched space.

Living in such an expansive city reawakened in me an extreme weight of dissatisfaction. Needing more than groomed hedges and brand named foods, I started craving, once again, wild things. But everywhere I went, and all the people I met, felt subdued. Housebroken. So, I looked for escape and became a second home hunter spending summers in another place.

Although I always felt welcomed back to Flagstaff each year, my absence the rest of the time distanced me from the city's changes, reducing me to a visitor watching bitterness work its way towards anger in my friends as they worked full-time professional jobs but were still unable to afford a fixer-upper in town. I watched the big box ordinance—once hailed as a grand achievement—get turned around by public vote because many people wanted the second Super Wal-Mart on the other side of town; it seemed “starvation with a view” turned from a friendly joke to a truth that resonated painfully. I've also watched, for too long now, people talk about how small mountain towns like Bozeman, Flagstaff, Taos, Moab, Telluride, and others are being loved to death. There are few places with a view that don't know the struggle of locals who love their town but can't afford a home in an over-inflated market driven by vacation home buyers.

There are few people moving in who can't say they're not witnesses to the same generic suburban sprawl they were trying to leave behind. All of us who migrate to these towns are leaving an invisible door open.

There's a travel guide and website for Flagstaff that claims, "They don't make towns like this anymore." The irony is they do. They're all over the west. Bohemian with a view sells now. Everyone seems to want it. All of these once unknown, undiscovered towns now have the same desirable amenities: a stunning view, near by hiking trails, farmers' markets, quaint downtowns, summer festivals, golf courses, shopping, and services for food and health that can be found in larger cities. Flagstaff is nothing special.

Visiting Bozeman, Montana, over the years, I've seen the once-was-cowboy-town turn into every other town that's out there, identified by its art galleries and throngs of tourists I used to only see the likes of summers on the coast of Maine. When I'd moved away, the first of the big-box stores was built: Wal-Mart. Now, there's a Target, Costco, Barnes and Noble, Borders Books and Music, and in a once empty valley now sprawls tangled arms of suburbia.

Visiting Maine, I drive by barns caved in, pass houses badly in need of paint, roofs sloping sadly, and the thick woods, the meadows showing summer's green everywhere. Poplars and brush threaten to take over fields. Cattails clot ponds and the only way to get them out is to plow the whole thing under, start over.

I walk my parents' woods, and the woods of others behind them—the same place where I once decided to move to Montana—searching for the tree whose upper branch grew directly into another tree yards away, forming a bar of connection between them. My father said it was cut down for lumber, and I need to see this crime for myself; I need to find the empty spot to see if it will tell me why anyone would cut down such a natural marvel tucked deep from people's view.

When my orientation falls apart in the thick bush growing back to replace the once-was-forest, I long for a horse, to feel withers shivering off flies between my thighs and to ride for hours through the long forgotten trails of a place I once knew: Maine. A horse would know its way home while I would surely get lost.

Wanting this now—a barebacked horse smelling of sweat and dander to carry me under overgrown canopies—I see how I’ve been lost in my thinking all these years. The song and churn of chainsaws gnawing on wood, the sound of my childhood, tells me this now. What I gathered while viewing the woman in the bathtub at St. Mary’s Hospital was the wrong message. I believed glimpsing her turbulence in a tranquil state told me wildness was dying and I had to search for, find wildness somewhere else—as if wilder forms could be found only in the remotest regions of land. I was afraid of that woman when she was so beautiful, so still. At the same time I wanted to peer at her, I wanted to escape her, escape the death calm; I read her body like an omen, like rawness was dying if it wasn’t on the move. Outside of her body, in the land I knew, for every kayak store, a Dunkin’ Donuts was built; for every park-and-play-lake access, hotels and tourist shops strung out across the view. I thought Maine a dead place, an unruly storm of a person that’d been chemically restrained, cut back and ordered into ruled calm.

But her perfect calmness was showing how wildness couldn’t die, just hide or pretend dormancy until it’d bloom into something uncontrollable when the rest of the world wasn’t looking. Wildness lay everywhere and I was being shown how easy it was to find. She was not a wild thing still; she embodied wild in the stillness. Wildness existed everywhere, away from me or in front of me, if only I’d see it.

There’s hope for all western towns, and even for the suburbs and the city where I live. Wait long enough and the unbroken boldness will creep in on the silent tip of green tendrils,

nurtured by rain and yellow light. Wild things make me feel restless, it's true. They turn me towards busting out of where I am to find more of it elsewhere—everywhere—like wildness is on the move and I need to follow it, keep up with it, be it. No matter where I am, I'll need many places at once—like I'm the wild thing myself, refusing to be tamed, captured, lawn ornamented, or caged. I look for traces of it in people now, in a spirit that won't give in even if the body does fatten and tame. I see now how something wild still runs this way, runs that way, runs all the ways there are, and how I'll always chase after it, grateful it's wild enough for me to never catch but alive enough to still be seen.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

Phantom Pain

I'm often asked how I got from nursing to writing. Sometimes the question suggests disapproval, as in, nursing's so practical and writing's not. I understand this bewilderment since I was eighteen when I entered nursing school with adults who'd had other careers, or degrees they'd found useless in the working world, and went into nursing as a second, more practical career choice. I did the opposite and considered nursing a pit stop, a secure job that decently paid the bills, while I did what I really wanted—read, write, travel, hike through the woods—on my days off. Regardless of how the question is posed, many people don't see the connection, the common thread between these two professions, and so I answer by posing two questions of my own, followed by their answers: What's at the heart of nursing? People. What's at the heart of writing? People.

It wasn't, in fact, until I'd been asked how I went from one to the other that I realized my luck at having so much good training for learning about the nature of people. Nursing has provided me with a multitude of observations and experiences where I see people at their worst, at their best, and at every possible moment in between. More important, it taught me how to read people, observe the nuances of personalities and respond to them, which in turn helped me understand how to read and develop characters. Likewise, certain characters or voices have influenced who I've wanted to be as a nurse. For example, when Barbara Kingsolver's Hallie in *Animal Dreams* explains that living inside of hope is like “running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides,” I want to bring that same moving and perceptive voice to my patients who have lost hope or to my coworkers having a bad day.

Back in nursing school, the writer in me was awake in my observations. Both science and medicine have many beautiful words that I took advantage of and used as often as possible. I still joke about how I went through nursing school saying “micturate” (which means to urinate) as often as possible because I liked the sound of it. However, I’d only use the word with my peers because if I’d said it to patients the response would be a very puzzled look; my nursing education taught me a lot about language and the levels of diction through the levels of professional terminology. Some people will understand words and phrases like urine specimen, defecate, or bowel movement. Others need to be asked, “Would you piss in this cup?” or, “When was the last time you pooped?”

The way something’s said influences a patient or family member’s perception of the medical procedures being done. For example, if someone says they’re “taking a patient out” when discharging someone to home, she or he is corrected: we don’t “take out” anyone, by means of innocuous wheelchair rides or by the gun-toting-mafia-movie-image that the term might imply. The first time I discontinued someone’s IV, my nursing instructor said, “Don’t tell them you’re going to ‘pull it out.’ Tell them you’re going to ‘remove it.’ See the difference? See how they might react according to what you say?”

Through my nursing experiences, I’ve become quite practiced at crisp descriptions that explain complicated processes, and I was quick to recognize the usefulness of similes for converting medical terminology to layman’s terms. Instead of telling patients they have atelectasis or diminished breath sounds after surgery, which may mean nothing to them, I’ve found it’s more useful to explain that their shallow breathing, while lying in bed under the influence of pain medication, is preventing their lungs from opening properly; their grapes are becoming like raisins, and if they don’t walk the halls, cough, and take deep breaths, then their

raisins are going to turn into a mush of pneumonia. When explaining diverticulosis and what it looks like in the colon, the simile “like a water balloon through chicken wire” gives an instant image. When explaining the effects of a conscious sedation, saying it’s like being drunk is always effective.

Beyond these practical uses of language, I feel that nursing has shown me how the heart, mind, soul, and body are all one. I don’t mean on the practical level where patients need to be treated holistically for an ultimate outcome; I’m talking about the names of diseases and medical conditions, how one physical manifestation can mean so much more than what it’s intended to mean. My favorite example of this is phantom pain. Sometimes, after a limb is amputated, something goes haywire with the nerves. Even though the physical source of pain, the extremity, has been removed, the nerves will still go on firing the same old messages to the brain as if the limb were still there. For me, this could be used in so many ways because it speaks to what can’t be seen but is felt, and to what is physically gone but emotionally remaining. As a writer, I see phantom pain representing my own challenge every time I sit down to write: I need to take something that can’t be seen—a memory, an idea, an emotion—and turn it, with words, into something so real it’s palpable for the reader. This is why much of my writing is image dense; my role models are Gretel Erlich, Annie Proulx, and Toni Morrison—writers who make you feel what they’re trying to show.

To use this metaphor another way, I believe that phantom pain represents my writing life in general. I’ve dreamed of being a writer since grammar school but never considered it a realistic goal, and I thought the transition from hobby writer to a professional one was a switch made by other people who were smarter and braver than me. In fact, when someone told me—openly and in public with others standing around to overhear them!—that they wrote poetry or

had some great ideas for a couple of novels they were jotting down, I was embarrassed for them. Why would anyone admit to such a thing? My own desire to write more was the thing that was there but never spoken about. It was the missing limb, so noticeable for its absence, never spoken about or pointed to out of politeness, and I was afraid of how a tucked sleeve or pinned pant leg would mark an obvious difference between me and everybody else.

The first year or two after I'd passed my state boards for RN licensure, I kept expecting the state to contact me and say there'd been a mistake—I hadn't passed my exam and I wasn't an RN. This type of self doubt plagued me throughout my early MFA experiences; it was at least a year before I realized there'd be no tap on my shoulder that said I shouldn't be in the program. It took me even longer to understand that no one was going to tell me that I should stop writing, or even that I was "good enough" to keep working at it. One of the most important things I've learned is that my ability to function as a writer has little to do with that elusive thing called talent. It's about desire. I'm a confident writer now, and I'm able to discuss my writing without feeling silly or shamed, not because I think I'm good at it but because I've both accepted and embraced that writing is part of who I am. I'd thought writing was a handicap, but I've stopped pretending there's an empty place that shouldn't be acknowledged, and by reclaiming the missing extremity I now feel whole and complete.

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