

UNEARTHING

by

Erin Hobbie

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The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
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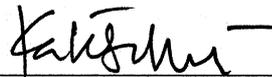
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Katherine Schmitt, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

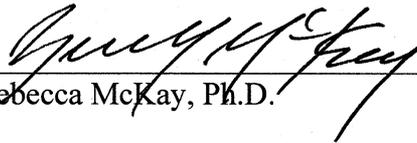
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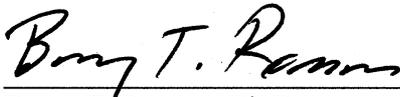
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ABSTRACT

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Unearthing is a hybrid of nonfiction genres, and follows a narrator as she attempts to piece together past and present memories and meditations about family history, travel, and the idea of *home*. Using an orchid as a metaphor for someone who is searching for home, *Unearthing* attempts to expose in the author what might also be found in the reader, an exploration of what is meant by home. By following a trail of biography, personal narrative, and memoir, the reader is given every opportunity to identify with the narrator's struggle with the idea of rootlessness and rootedness, travel and home.

DEDICATION

For Frans, the one I have waited for.

Song of Songs 7:10

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UNEARTHING THE MUSES

A thesis does not emerge from thin air; it is a series of agonizing choices and voices competing for attention; it is a practice of silencing the inner critic at the right times (while writing a first draft, for instance) and paying attention to the voices of experience. And although Annie Dillard might have said that the best place for imaginative writing is in a windowless concrete cell, writing is never solitary. It is a work birthed by midwives unaware, a Greek chorus of voices, authors who have illuminated the way through choices of style or form or genre, or simply by documenting the experience of writing itself. In the same way that we read to know we are not alone, we write in part to continue a conversation that began long before we entered the room.

John McPhee's *Oranges* was a gift from a friend who knew I needed something tangible to help overcome my writer's block. For two years the orange was my muse, a metaphor for the heart, an object to focus on instead of the relentless reflections that threatened to fix themselves in the air like freeze-frame debris in a cyclone, never falling to the ground. *Oranges* gave me a concrete, grounded image to represent emotions too recent to quantify or articulate well. I studied the orange like a pomologist, and McPhee's book served as my primary text.

In earlier writing, I used McPhee's biography of the orange to provide epigraphs, introducing sections of my piece, quotations that to me signified the meaning of the section. For example, before a narrative in which I tell of surviving a broken

heart, I quote, “An orange grown in Florida usually has a thin and tightly fitting skin, and it is also heavy with juice. Californians say that if you want to eat a Florida orange, you have to get into the bathtub first” (McPhee 9). Those quotations served to provide structure, fellow work-shoppers pointed out, but were unnecessary as part of the greater piece. I soon learned to use the quotations I found to provide a scaffolding underneath the narrative. In this way, John MCPhee’s words gave texture and color to my own understanding of the situation, all the while keeping the focus on my own story.

After using the metaphor to its full capacity, squeezing the final drops of juice from the orange’s pith, it was MCPhee himself who became a muse. MCPhee is a master biographer of the inanimate, a writer able to keep the facts alive on the page while forming a narrative. I have a tendency toward sentimentality, and he served to balance my nostalgia by his attentive exploration of the facts of a topic. Since my own heart was an orange, Florida-grown with a thin, tight skin, I took MCPhee’s history and applied it to my imagination. Early in *Oranges*, MCPhee tells of the fruit’s mythological origins: “Oranges were once the fruit of the gods, to whom they were the golden apples of the Hesperides...in successive declensions, oranges became the fruit of emperors and kings” (7). Could my ordinary family somehow be its own version of royalty? My own great-grandmother’s name was Golden Clementine. That name suggested a sort of old-timey, heeled boots on wooden saloon floors, old West-type of dignity. And I wondered about her, her footsteps and convictions, the person who rooted my family, who contained part of me. So, I set about researching her as best I could, with *Oranges* on my mind.

With my ear tuned by John MCPhee to hear metaphor, I found my biographical writing shaped by Janet Malcolm’s metaphorical descriptions of the nature of

biography. Part journalism, part biography, Malcolm's book about the death of Sylvia Plath offers a sophisticated apologetic for a particular type of biography that is at once exhaustively investigative while at the same time considers author intrusiveness. In *The Silent Woman*, Malcolm succeeds in exposing each angle of each story surrounding the suicide of poet Sylvia Plath. She claims the perspective of Plath biographers (as well as Plath's estranged husband Ted Hughes; Olwyn Hughes, Ted Hughes's sister and agent to the Plath estate; and Sylvia Plath herself) by piecing together correspondence, published and unpublished work, commentary, and interviews. Critic James Wood describes this paradoxical attempt at biography "practically analytical" and Malcolm herself "the cat who licked the plate clean."

It is precisely because of a history of "practical analytical" writing untempered by empathy (Malcolm was sued for libel in a case that reached the Supreme Court), that in *The Silent Woman* Malcolm reaches for the delicate balance of truth-telling and a considerate use of the facts that good biography entails. Malcolm inserts herself into the narrative as a character, an eager journalist searching for the truth and is as convincing as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, in terms of being a sympathetic observer. She walks the cold, English ground that Plath once walked, and describes the setting in which she finds herself while pursuing the story surrounding Plath's decline after Ted Hughes's affair, as well as her subsequent depression and finally suicide: "I was thus able to experience at first hand some of Plath's frustration and feeling of stuckness during the winter of her suicide. I had sat for hours in an unheated train...I had walked through the city covered with treacherous hard-frozen snow" (Malcolm 43). Malcolm knows a bit of something about hard times and what must have felt like betrayal from

her own painful experience inside a cutthroat literary world. This is what initially draws Malcolm to the Hughes-Plath story.

In 1995, Janet Malcolm was sued for libel by psychologist Jeffrey Masson, whom she portrayed in a series of *New York Times* articles that became the book *The Freud Archives*. Masson didn't like the way he was portrayed as a character in the book, especially after Malcolm quoted him as saying he had slept with over a thousand women. Malcolm had most of the tapes and notes with which to defend her choices, but was missing some evidence. The jury finally ruled that Masson had no grounds on which to sue Malcolm for libel, but the case stands as proof that careless quotation without proper support can give rise to a lawsuit.

In *The Silent Woman*, Malcolm admits that a journalist's choice to create characters can be dangerous. An important aspect of good journalism is consistency. Malcolm writes that "a fundamental rule of journalism...is to tell a story and stick to it" (69). It is here that Malcolm once again slips into metaphor, to describe what choosing these facts can be like: "Biography is the medium through which the secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world" (10). Throughout *The Silent Woman* Malcolm herself seems to be processing the hair-raising experience of her court trial, searching for a picture of what went wrong while writing *The Freud Archives*, of what Jeffrey Masson experienced as wrongful slander. She lands upon the image of biographer as burglar, stealing the contents of someone's life to share with the reader, the guilty pleasure of doing so, and the danger that accompanies the entire experience.

Malcolm's experiences as biographer in *The Silent Woman* echo modernist artist Marcel Duchamp's sculpture tableau *Étant Donnés: La Chute d'Eau*, or *Le Gaz d'Éclairage* as another visual of what biography can be. Duchamp's *Étant Donnés* is viewed through a peephole in a door. The viewer peers through and sees the nude body of a woman lying prostrate and exposed, holding a gas lamp in one hand. The body is made from pigskin, and the waterfall behind her appears to be moving. Duchamp's image relates to Malcolm's idea that biography is as revealing as rifling through somebody else's secret drawers or even more intrusive, peering through a peephole at a nude body. My conclusion after reading Malcolm's thoughts was to *be careful*. I have somebody else's identity in my power, and it is my responsibility as an author to portray the person the most accurately I am able. I thought of this often as I wrote my thesis, especially if I depicted someone close to me who is living, someone who I could hurt with my words and information. I recalled the advice of Mirta Ojito, who told me in an interview about her memoir, *Finding Mañana*, that some authors must wait to write personal narratives until certain members of their families have passed away. It is a kind of protection, she said. After reading Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* and researching its context, I am more aware of my authorial responsibility and now send drafts to people represented in my writing. I am interested in their perception of what I've written. I may make changes based upon their preferences or I may not, but what is important is that the characters in my writing sense that their perception of themselves is as important to me as my depiction of them on the page.

Besides an authorial responsibility to character, Malcolm reveals another metaphor, this time related to authorial choice in regards to information. Which facts,

Malcolm wonders, does an author choose? She happens upon the metaphor in an unlikely place, the house of a man named Trevor Thomas, a Plath source. Malcolm describes Thomas's house as "a depository of bizarre clutter and disorder...made almost impassable by sagging cardboard cartons stacked to the ceiling...along the walls and on the floor and on every surface hundreds, perhaps thousands, of objects were piled...and over everything there was a film of dust" (Malcolm 203). At the end of her research, Malcolm reflects on the art of biography and chooses Thomas's house to represent the thousands of choices biography or any form of creative non-fiction asks the author to make out of the facts given. Malcolm writes:

Before the magisterial mess of Trevor Thomas's house, the orderly houses most of us live in seem meagre and lifeless—as, in the same way, the narratives called biographies pale and shrink in the face of the disorderly actuality that is a life...the goal is to make a space where a few ideas and images and feelings may be so arranged that a reader will want to linger awhile among them...but the task of housecleaning (of narrating) is not merely arduous; it is dangerous. There is the danger of throwing the wrong things out and keeping the wrong things in. (204)

Malcolm's idea of non-fiction writing as cleaning a house has stayed with me in my own writing process. While sifting through details, images, and facts I hope to make the right choices of which ones to keep, but in the early years of the learning process the cleaning is especially precarious.

In my original thesis process, I wondered about a theme centered around the beginnings of things. Inspired by a short film on scientist, artist, and Darwin-

contemporary Ernest Haeckel entitled *Proteus*, I wrote a lyrical essay weaving both Haeckel and his discovery of the earliest forms of evolutionary life with the creation story in Genesis. I loved the images I found words for: “It was with a flourish that the heartbeat of the world began in the embryonic earth. The DNA in place for suns and crows, expanses of sky and savannahs, wetlands and lava-filled volcanoes, pelicans and wriggling things in the deep that would become things that flew” juxtaposed with “a Fantasia creator conducting an orchestra of planets or a giant potter making balls out of primordial clay.” But as beautiful as the words and ideas may have been, they did not relate to my themes of rootedness and home. So, I saved the piece as one would save a favorite swatch of fabric for a different patchwork quilt. Next time, a writer must learn to say, hoping that she’s kept the right pieces in.

As important as choice is in which details to keep and which ones to discard, an author has to be equally careful in choosing which authors to read. Spending time reading an author’s body of work is a bit like spending time with someone with a strong accent: it is easy to pick up the sound and nuances, perhaps even adopting traces into one’s own speech. Annie Dillard is one author I hope whose accent has made its way into my vernacular. Dillard has three pieces that especially inform my own writing, the first two in terms of the construction of narrative identity, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *An American Childhood*. Dillard’s observations in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are meditations of a pilgrim gazing at a natural iconography that includes birds like Radford Starlings and places like Shadow Creek. As readers we sense that we are tromping through the woods after Dillard; she makes a good guide and can name and explain the

nature we see, but we also get a sense that the trees and animals we're viewing go beyond the material. To Dillard they represent something both hidden and holy.

Dillard explains her natural and spiritual curiosity more in *An American Childhood*, and these undertones give Dillard's observations in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* density and meaning. The autobiography begins with an epigraph from Psalm 26: "I have loved, O Lord, the beauty / of thy house and the place / where dwelleth thy glory." As deeply introspective child, Dillard's narrative begins when she is five, when the neighborhood children have left for school and the men for work. Dillard finds herself almost alone in the house, with just her thoughts. She remembers the solitude and the thoughts it provoked. "Now a self-conscious and stricken silence overtook the neighborhood, overtook our white corner house and myself inside. 'Am I living?'" (Dillard 16). As a small child left to her own thoughts, she uses biblical narratives to provoke her imagination. Staring at her arm and imagining it as soil, Dillard remembers: "I could see, even on my own skin, the joined trapezoids of dust specks God had wetted and stuck with his spit the morning he made Adam from dirt. Now, all these generations later, we people could still see on our skin the inherited prints of the dust specks of Eden. I loved this thought...I don't know where I got it; my parents cited Adam and Eve only in jokes" (25). There is the sense of the separation of the narrator from her surroundings, her neighbors, and even her family. She is establishing her own thoughts, an independence and individuality distinct from her parents and upbringing. A keen observer, Dillard's observations and I suspect, introspective nature, lead the narrative to become an exploration of where Dillard is the solitary narrator of an interior life.

And as if practicing for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard writes, “I walked. My mother had given me the freedom of the streets as soon as I could say our telephone number...I roamed Frick Park for many years...I saw sparrows, robins, cardinals, juncos, chipmunks, squirrels, and—always disappointingly, emerging from their magnificent ruckus in the leaves—pedigreed dachshunds, which a woman across the street bred” (43). Besides her walks, Dillard’s eye for the natural was additionally awakened by an early visit to the library where she discovered *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*. After first reading it in fifth grade, Dillard made it a point to read the book every year. In this way, and by reading books on natural sciences through childhood, adolescence, and into her twenties, Dillard was preparing to write the Pulitzer Prize-winning book at twenty-six, by creating a foundation for a book about meditative walks by a creek. In my own thesis, I learned to be a reflective observer on what my own childhood practices have been, and how they show themselves again in adult life. Nature sings for me now, but when did I first hear the strains if it? *An American Childhood* taught me to remember the first signs of consciousness, and the significance of those first realizations that nature is a symphony.

Dillard’s essay “Expedition to the Pole” in *Teaching Stones to Talk* is an important muse for me because its carefully researched information is gradually transformed into a metaphor with larger implications than just the facts. Dillard creates a dichotomy between two subjects, “The People” and “The Land.” “The Land” segments give the history of polar exploration, and “The People” segments narrate Dillard’s experiences in church. Dillard masterfully draws these two seemingly

opposing topics together with such dexterity that the reader soon sees how “The Land” informs “The People” and visa versa.

The first section begins with a singing group in Dillard’s Catholic church, a motley crew who, to Dillard’s chagrin, are playing guitar. “I have overcome a fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing in order to attend Mass simply and solely to escape Protestant guitars,” she quips (Dillard 30). The second segment, “The Land,” discusses the idea of a navigator’s Pole of Relative Inaccessibility, “that imaginary point on the Arctic Ocean furthest from land in any direction,” also called the Absolute. The Absolute is nearly inaccessible, and as Dillard notes, could be called “the pole of great price” (31). Already, the reader begins to see that Dillard will be exploring the abstract, giving it feet (or groundedness) by connecting it to the empirical. Dillard knows the reader can easily see the absurdity of the Catholic church singing group. But she also knows that we won’t give the singing group a chance, not unless we have explorers to show us how more lauded humans have risked their lives and reputations for the sake of seeing the Absolute. I am in awe of the unique connection she has made, history and the supernatural twisted together to reveal the sometimes foolhardy existence of faith.

I am not the only one in awe of Dillard. Pastor, scholar, author, and Dillard-fan Eugene Peterson writes in his *Theology Today* article, “Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Open”:

Annie Dillard is an exegete of creation in the same way John Calvin was an exegete of Holy Scripture. The passion and intelligence Calvin brought to Moses, Isaiah, and Paul, she brings to muskrats, rotifers, and mockingbirds. She reads the book of creation with the care and intensity

of a skilled textual critic, probing and questioning, teasing out, with all the tools of mind and spirit at hand, the author's meaning. (1)

Eugene Peterson was the first to notice that Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was infused with paraphrased passages from the Bible, stories and descriptions retold in a way that the reader might move through the text unaware of the allusions, lost inside Dillard's descriptions. In his memoir, *The Pastor*, Peterson writes, "It was a tour de force of spiritual theology. I made the comment in ["Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Open"] that there was hardly a page in the book that didn't have an allusion to the Bible, yet there was not a single quote" (244). Subsequently, Peterson wrote to Dillard about this and her response was: "I have been treated very generously by reviewers. But nobody has ever noticed (or at least no one has mentioned it) that the book is saturated in scripture. I wondered if anyone ever would. Thank you for noticing" (Dillard qtd. Peterson 244). Peterson himself is best known for his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, but claims his identity as equal parts pastor, equal parts writer. I once heard Peterson speak at a writer's conference, where he read a passage from his memoir *The Pastor*. Intrigued by Peterson and his unusual facility with both the interpersonal and intrapersonal that allow him to be both pastor and writer, I read the memoir myself just a few weeks ago. I was astonished to learn of a similarity between Peterson and myself: we are both bewitched by Denise Levertov and her metaphors.

Two years ago, I wrote a paper on the English-born Black Mountain poet, and what struck me the most from sifting through pages of research was that Levertov saw herself as an air-plant, rootless, and therefore able to identify with the American search for self-identity. In the essay "A Poet's View" she writes, "Although I own a house and

have steady work, I am by nature, heritage, and as an artist, forever a stranger and a pilgrim.” Levertov’s air-plant identity led me to question my own, and as with McPhee’s orange, I was handed a beautiful metaphor through which to convey a sense of American postmodern rootlessness. Throughout the pages of *The Pastor*, Peterson selected a metaphor from a Levertov poem called “Overland to the Islands:” “Let’s go—much as that dog goes, / intently haphazard.” Peterson felt that Levertov’s “intently haphazard” pointedly described the direction of his own life and vocation as pastor. “Overland to the Islands” ends with a flourish in which Levertov calls the going, “every step an arrival,” crediting Rilke and his poem “Palm” for the phrase:

Hand’s inwardness. Sole, that no longer walks
Except by feeling. That holds itself out
And in its mirror receives
Celestial roads, that wander
Along themselves:
That has learned to walk on water
When it scoops:
That travels from fountains
Transforming every path:
That steps into other hands,
Making a landscape
Of those that resemble it,
Wanders and enters them,
Filling them full of arrival.

The Rilke via Levertov quote moves Peterson, and he chooses “every step an arrival” as *The Pastor*’s subtitle and his own personal mantra.

I discovered the connections as I read, giving me a sense of shared aesthetic, a connectivity to both Levertov and Peterson, both “pilgrims in the country of art.” There is nothing better than to see aspects of yourself in an author you admire, to give necessary adrenaline for a day’s writing. I read about Peterson’s doggish persistence in his vocation, this “intently haphazard” insistence on intentional living, woven and out of his narrative, carefully and subtly. As Peterson grapples with the boundaries of his vocation, as he returns for summer holidays to Montana, the reader can see how Peterson could see himself as a dog running from tree to tree, an explorer who learns to see every step of his continuing journey as “an arrival.” This is where Peterson also is given his first pair of cowboy boots, a nod toward his Montana roots, although most of his life and vocation has taken place in Baltimore. I have small town roots as well, and am saving for my own pair of boots.

In *Gift of the Sea* Anne Morrow Lindbergh marks her meditations by structuring her writing around words that also name her chapter titles: “Channelled Whelk,” “Moon Shell,” “Oyster Bed,” and “Argonauta.” Like Annie Dillard’s observations of nature, these nautical gifts serve as concrete representations of abstract contemplations. Like John McPhee, Lindbergh’s writing focuses on the inanimate, but the largest difference between McPhee and Lindbergh is that as McPhee’s inanimate objects exist to tell stories centered around those objects, Lindbergh’s objects serve the reader as an icon serves a pilgrim. They are reminders of a deeper transcendental truth outside of the object itself. Lindbergh uses the items to spark questions within the self. As she

explores the channeled whelk with her fingers, considering the creature that used to travel up its “winding staircase,” she draws this conclusion: “My shell is not like this.” Then, “What is the shape of my life?” (Lindbergh 22). I borrow this idea a bit toward the end of my own thesis, as I use objects in my home as starter kits for experimenting with possibility. I allow the reader a glimpse into my mind while writing about a glass bowl with beveled edges that remind me of a fly’s eyes. The fly’s eyes take me to pages of *National Geographic*, and here the reader learns about my parents’ collection of magazines. It is here I reveal a bit more about the interior life, all because of a glass bowl.

After introducing an item and asking a universal question, Lindbergh uses the object as a reference point, a visual to return to as she leads the reader through her insight. “I mean to lead a simple life, to choose a simple shell I can carry easily—like a hermit crab. But I do not” (25). Finally, after her musings about life and work and motherhood, Lindbergh concludes, “Channelled Whelk, I put you down again, but you have set my mind on a journey, up an inwardly winding spiral staircase of thought” (35). It is a gift to the reader that we, as well, can leave our own thoughts with Lindbergh and her gifts from the sea. Thereby, as readers we are almost as refreshed as Lindbergh must have been after her month at the shore.

A writer for *The New Yorker*, Joseph Mitchell nearly saved literary journalism from extinction by altering its boundaries. I had never heard of Joseph Mitchell until several months ago. He quickly earned my respect. Together with fellow *New Yorker* journalist AJ Liebling, Mitchell “adopted a creative approach that probed further into the borderlands of fiction and nonfiction” (Sims 83). Mitchell outlines the purpose of

the genre in a genteel manner, lest readers think literary journalism is a chronological presentation of cold, hard facts: “I wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual, but they are solidly based on facts” (Mitchell qtd. Sims 83). In fact, both the setting and much of the dialogue are composites created from numerous people or places. Writing of an old fisherman fishing on the pier adjacent to Louie’s, Mitchell’s favorite New York seaside eatery, Mitchell creates a character who is really a composite of his interactions with several fishermen. Critic Norman Sims writes of a fisherman, “Combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past” (85). The fisherman, however, is introduced after Mitchell has established a concrete setting in which to place him.

I love Mitchell’s primary emphasis on a detailed setting in “Up in the Old Hotel” before adding the characters to the story. I bask in his word paintings, the sets he creates are real places to sit for awhile, as we readers take our time getting to know his characters. Later, setting fills places dialogue leaves open. For example, in the words of Mitchell’s character, Louie:

There’s a boss fishmonger down here, a spry old hardheaded Italian man who’s got a million dollars in the bank and dresses like he’s on relief and walks up and down the fish pier snatching fish out of the barrels by their heads or their tails and weighing them in his hands...the way he conducts himself, he reminds me so much of my father that sometimes, when I see him, it puts me in a good humor, and sometimes it breaks my heart.

(Mitchell 442)

This scene with Louie's description (perhaps also a composite) will not hold as much meaning for the reader without an earlier description of the fish pier where "the smoky riverbank dawn, the racket the fishmongers make, the seaweedy smell, and the sight of this plentifulness always gave me a feeling of well-being, and sometimes they elate" (Mitchell 439). As a reader, the descriptions are so vivid that I find myself with Mitchell and his fisherman on the pier, eagerly waiting for the story to be revealed.

Similarly, in my writing, the Oklahoma setting creates a place for expectations to be fulfilled. The vast open prairie seems waiting to be filled with history. I want the reader to get a sense of place, so that the rootedness of my family to the land makes sense. The scenery is viewed by land and by air, a composite of memories placed carefully on a page to create a sense of history tied to the concept of home. In this description, I want to set down an idea of layering, that the simple farmland and homestead carries more than sentimentality or nostalgia, but the genesis of my existence: "The family homestead lies on the north side of the state, near the Kansas border, where prairie grasses wave and small-scale grand canyons are enfolded into hills. The land appears flat, but under the horizon, life plays within a grand terrain." The scene is set, and it is time for my great grandmother to be born, in the same year in the same town where I write, "a man was said to have climbed on a chair in his house to dust a picture and was shot in the back of the head. The man was America's own Robin Hood, Jesse James." The death of Jesse James creates a historical context in which to place my great-grandmother's birth, at a time where outlaws were still legends, but beginning to disappear, just like the land.

I read biographies. From Cleopatra to Abraham Lincoln, Tupac Shakur to John Adams, an interesting person fascinates me in a way fictional narratives seldom do. I have never enjoyed a biography as much as Claire Tomalin's *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self*. Tomalin's scholarship is second to none, but what I find most helpful to my own writing is Tomalin's conscious use of uncertainty in the transitions between fact and imagination. From *Samuel Pepys* I gained a useful vocabulary of transitions, a way to state supposition as probable and not absolute, without giving it an air of uncertainty. Tomalin's suppositions are also supported by research, and this is invaluable in guiding the reader. For example, she tells readers, "Contemporary books of manners for children give some idea of what was expected at home" and details those expectations. She follows this by a passage about Pepys' childhood home: "Since there was no dining room in the Pepys household, only a folding table in the parlour, meals can rarely have risen to such elegance" (Tomalin 7). Tomalin also leads us toward the probable by leaning into the universal. For example, when Pepys' siblings die of various diseases during his childhood she writes, "Sam must have wondered when his turn was coming, the more so since his own health was not good" (Tomalin 8). And thereby Tomalin transitions into the thorn which was to plague Pepys his entire life: kidney stones. These smooth, transitional phrases helped me with the biographical elements of my thesis, allowing supposition not to sound so much like guesswork.

My experience writing a thesis is that much of it is guesswork, that as the months go by, the stories change along with the narrator, and it is tempting to look upon those older works with the disdain of the older and wiser author. (Either disdain, or a secret shamefacedness sheathed in ambivalence, especially when comparing a fledgling

work to something like, oh, twenty-six-year-old Dillard's Pulitzer-Prize winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.) But the secret to the narrative is to keep writing the story, and to keep our eyes open. The world is on fire with words, and there is always an invisible chorus cheering us on.

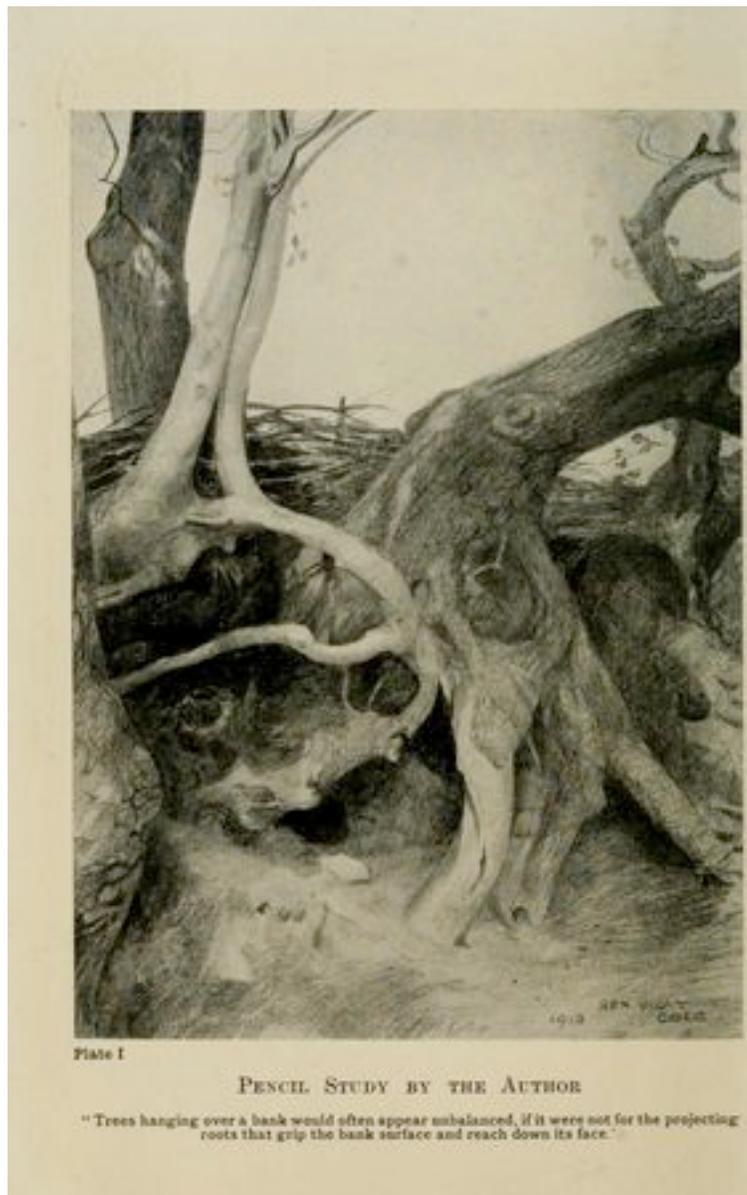


Figure 1. *Artistic Anatomy of Trees*, Rex Vicat Cole (1920).

PREFACE

A tree is strengthened by the winds of a storm. The wind plays a role in a tree's growth, testing the tree's elasticity, bending it this way and that, building strength within the trunk like muscle in a willowy ballerina. Trees in wind-swept places like America's Great Plains have horizontal crowns, branches and leaves shaped flat and long like weathervanes. The canopy of a tree is both a sign of the health and fertility of the tree and also important to the tree's survival. The healthier a canopy, the more protected the soil from the winds and rain. In turn, the soil nourishes the tree by providing nutrients for the roots. The effect of the winds is also determined by the species of tree. British artist Rex Vicat Cole, known for his paintings of trees, writes of the wind: "the slender Birch boughs bend before it, offering no resistance; the stiff branches of the Oak and Alder defy it; Elm boughs sway to it, and the pendant Larch twigs swing in unison. The leaves of the Poplar, Aspen, and Willow flap up and down and also rotate."

In Missouri, the birthplace of my great-grandmother, a tree gave more than shade and protection: the Blackgum became home for chaotic kingdoms of bees and their stores of golden honey; the Eastern Cottonwood was resurrected and hollowed to slip down rivers and streams, paddled by Native Americans; and Missouri's official tree, the flowering Dogwood, boasted a shock-resistant wood, wearing smooth with use. The Eastern Red Cedar from northwest Oklahoma is the tree that grows in my memory,

the greenest of trees. Its waxy blue-white seeds, distilled during Prohibition to make speakeasy gin, were picked up by childish hands pretending to make pie. Every Christmas the lovely cedar was decrowned, christened “Charlie Brown,” and strewn with silver tinsel and blinking colored lights. Shrubby, with leaves that appeared half fern, half pine, it whispered secrets in the white churchyard and around the walls of the homestead.

It is under these trees, the ones protecting the soil in which my ancestors planted crops, themselves, and their families, that I am able to reach into the rich dirt and pull out pieces of debris; I am able to pick the glittering, dull, and sometimes senseless fragments of life, and fashion something out of the pieces. How far into the soil must I dig, barehanded, until I uncover my beginning? There are pieces of gold, fragments of promise: a great-grandmother born out of disappointed hopes. Gold nuggets disappear and another layer of dirt reveals fragments of scrawling cursive on letters postmarked St. Joseph, Missouri. The dirt builds underneath my fingernails, pressing down into the nail bed until it hurts, fingertips finding bits of farm implements. Old trucks and antique cars with broken glass and flat tires. The worst hard times. Love letters, and tire treads of the newlyweds’ car. What of me is buried in the land?

1) THE FAMILY TREE

The Land

I was born in the Bible belt, the third notch down from the buckle, in Oklahoma. The family homestead lies on the north side of the state, near the Kansas border, where prairie grasses wave and small-scale grand canyons are enfolded into hills. The land appears flat, but under the horizon, life plays within a grand terrain. On a winter day some cousins and I rode over our land in a hot air balloon, over brown grass and blown by strong, cold winds. A balloon-chase ensued, the balloon passengers waving to toy trucks trailing dust on the dirt roads and then back again, swerving onto the blacktop, the same roads used for car chases in pursuit of the bride and groom after weddings at the white country church. The car chases had evolved from the old fashioned shivarees, a raucous serenade designed to humiliate the newly married. In the days of the Wild West, Conestoga wagons containing the bride and groom were hitched up and driven into the wide prairie, preceded by a chorus of pots, pans, horns, and whistles. My parents were the first newlyweds in family history to escape.

I grew up into a family tree of farmers. Strong women, hard-working men. My first sense of home involves waking up to yellow curtains playing suck and blow with the window unit. I lay in bed, listening to the sounds of the house, the purr of the unit that had lulled me to sleep the night before; voices murmur and chairs scrape across the kitchen's linoleum floor. I twinkle my toes, feeling the softness of the ancient sheets,

absorbing the feeling of belonging. The sky is clear over the wheat fields. Downstairs in the basement, in the dank underground, the storm shelter sits empty.

I am nineteen when my grandmother passes away and my parents, brother, and I make the pilgrimage from Orlando back to Alva, Oklahoma, for her funeral. Aunt Carolyn and Mom and I gently sift through her things, fingers sliding through ropes of green beads and cheap pearls, and we find old packages of Kleenex in the backs of drawers. A slender watch, broken, a brooch, a letter or two, an old tube of KY Jelly. And then we move to the cedar chest. The chest was a wedding gift from Grandpa to Grandma, whose father promised his fourth daughter a hope chest if she waited until she was sixteen to date. She was a year shy of sixteen, but Grandpa became the man in her life the moment he promised her a hope chest of her own if she would date him then. She took him at his word.

Mom holds up the wedding dress, and it slowly unfolds: dark navy blue, almost black, with appliquéd flowers on the skirt and blouse. Mom and Aunt Carolyn help me slip it over my head. Although I am a little tall for the skirt, the shape fits me well. I show my grandfather, and his eyes grow warm and dim. “Wear it one day, when you get married,” he tells me tenderly. He sits uncharacteristically lost in thought, eyes focused on a distant detail as if playing the memories on a reel. He sits on his dark brown recliner, his shirt plaid flannel, tucked neatly into pants with a wide belt, carved with a story, ended with a statement that is the belt buckle.

I know from childhood that his chest is warm, his breath coffee-scented, and his whiskers ticklish. I have heard stories of the beginnings of my grandparents’ romance: of Grandma throwing her compact mirror into the bushes to draw Grandpa away from

another girl. Of reassurances and love letters written back and forth, full of dears and darlings and simple, rustic promises. Of softball games in the pasture, of hope chests. I wander into the yellow bedroom that had once been my mother's. She has vivid memories in this bedroom, ones involving fighting with her messier, older sister. My uncles tell of sleeping outside on a porch and how to fit three boys on one narrow bunk bed. I also hear of the storm shelter. Damp and cold, the family huddled underground together when a tornado or cyclone threatened skies, crops, and lives.

The Dirty Thirties, those "worst hard times" hit my grandparents hard soon before their marriage. In a small house of grays and browns were born two boys and a girl; when there was a little more money, another boy and two more girls joined the family, my mother the youngest of all. I entered the lives of my grandparents after the family tree had been rooted deeply and its trunk strengthened by the winds of the Dust Bowl Days. I entered their lives after cancer survival and remission and the drowning of a son, a tree planted as a memorial in the yard; after the ponds had been stocked with bass and catfish, after three-wheelers were bought for the grandkids. After the chicken coop my aunt had detested stood empty for a couple of years and they could afford to fill their grandchildren to the brim with ice cream. I knew them after they added a living room to their tiny house, a room covered with orange and brown carpet and a fireplace built with red native sandstone that my mom, as a teenager, had helped her dad load into a truck. All of those moments, those newly added stones I had not been alive to add, built something that I simply enjoyed, at no cost or sacrifice of my own.

The family stories exist somewhere, in someone's handwriting or memory, word for word even though many of the details have been lost. I spent my early years

puzzling over my family's past; kneeling on the shag carpet in the family room, gently touching dog-eared and cursive-labeled photographs of boys in overalls with strange parts in their hair, triumphantly holding bass in the air. Of women in flowered dresses that fell mid-calf, standing with babies on hips in front of the New Family Car.

Glimpsing the face of my own whiskered and coffee-breathed Grandpa in the face of a younger boy, a miracle that repeated itself again and again whenever I turned the pages of the old black album. I remember the first time The Past dawned on me. The idea that people and their stories that existed before I did, their stories having both nothing and everything to do with who I was and who I will become. And the heroes of those stories got old and passed away, are gone and buried in the Oklahoma soil under the Eastern Red Cedars. To them I owe my existence, and my early life. Now it is my turn: the story I live today will either slip away unseen, or be written down and dipped into hours until the page turns yellow. The seemingly small moments are the ones that catch on fire, light the paths we choose. We must make sense of what kept our families sheltering underground, out of the wind and storms, of what it means to be attached to a tree strengthened by strong winds, catching whatever we can from the air. When the dust settles, we bend down to take what is left on the path, to put into our pockets as relics as we continue on.

1, 557 miles to the southeast in the humid green Florida tropics, under the flimsy shade of whispering palms, my own house has artifacts from the past: a piece of foundation from the very first homestead twenty-six miles outside Alva, a petrified tree limb, a favorite picture, the only one taken of my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. They are dressed for Easter, posing in front of the peeling, white church where

my mother would later be married. In this photograph, she is three, the same age as my niece, cupping a handful of berries. Grandma Little stands behind her, wearing glasses and an Easter hat, squinting. Her mouth is closed in a tight line. The most dignified person in the picture is my great-grandmother, Golden Clementine, who wears her name like a crown.

A high school graduation picture of Clementine shows a young woman with soft, brown hair curling above her forehead. A pretty face: small nose, full lips, soft chin. Her eyes are determined, confident, a touch rebellious. Her dress is white and the lace reaches toward her throat. The whole picture is soft, feminine. It belies the tradition of the West, even the West after it was—mostly—won. Visiting friends walk past the dresser where her picture sits, and comment on our resemblance. I wonder how much of her belongs in me, how much of me was present in her. My great-grandmother's full name, Golden Clementine, carries the color of things past, of bygone days of Gold Rush dreams to the tune of "lost and gone forever."

Golden Clementine

In the spring of 1882, Missouri's violets, wild roses, and columbines bloomed. On Lafayette Street in St. Joseph, a year and a half before Clementine's birth in that same town, a man was said to have climbed on a chair in his house to dust a picture and was shot in the back of the head. The man was America's own Robin Hood, Jesse James. The son of a preacher, a Confederate guerilla-turned-outlaw, James had been living in St. Joe for several years under the name Thomas Howard. Recently, the thirty-four-year old had become a bit paranoid, growing a beard to cover a face he was once proud of, and dyeing it black. We don't know if the picture was hanging askew at the

time of Jesse's death, or if he'd managed to straighten it to his liking. I truly hope Jesse James felt the satisfaction of perpendicular angles before the bullet entered his brain.

When Jesse James was a small boy, the United States had gold fever, and thousands were leaving farm roots and family for the promise of wealth and adventure. The first California Gold Rush took place in 1849, giving the name of the first wave of brash young adventurers, "Forty-niners." From the myth of King Midas to the legend of El Dorado, men had been captivated by the promise for gold. In William Weber Johnson's fabulously illustrated book, *The Forty Niners*, Weber describes the irresistible lure of gold:

These streams, pouring down toward the central valleys of California, carried a precious burden of gold washed out of the granite mountains above. Some of the gold was deposited as powdery dust, some as thin flakes. Some of it...worn and rolled to the shape of grains of wheat or melon seeds, and some took the form of heavy nuggets...All a man had to do was pick it up, the dreamers heard, and some came armed with nothing more than a jackknife or a spoon to dig the treasure out. A man would get rich in no time. Every day would bring a golden harvest, each day new wonders.

To this promise young men from all over the nation were drawn. By the end of the 1860s, many now-arthritic Forty-niners were returning back East, giving up the dream of El Dorado for much more rooted ideas of family and land. The get-rich-quick fever that had affected so many young men twenty years earlier had trickled from a rushing dream into an established industry. Much of the glory had fled. Yet this "Gilded Age"

would provide lore to inspire young men yet to seek adventure, a young boy named Jason Sutton among them.

I first heard Jason Sutton's name from my mother, who scattered our upbringing with family stories and connecting histories. There was my mother, seemingly dozing in the living room armchair with a Ken Burns documentary on, its dulcimer melodies playing in the background, only to say sleepily, "Your grandpa has—what we think is—a Revolutionary War relic. It's a cheese box, handed down from his family. It'll go to Stuart's oldest." Stuart is my cousin, the oldest male in the family who has a son. Ben is the chosen inheritor of the cheese box; he is small and lithe and precocious and performed in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* at his elementary school. The family doesn't know where the cheese box comes from or who fought in the Revolutionary War, but in our family relics like these are rare, a prized link to the past. Grandpa's father one day left a wife and seven children, making Grandpa the fifteen-year-old man of the family. Oren Little disappeared before dawn one morning, into the vast stillness of the land, never to be seen or heard from again.

As for my grandmother's side, at the Hada reunion in Alva, Oklahoma I sat under a tree strung with lights on a warm July evening and explained myself. Yes, still living in Florida. Not married. No boyfriend. Yes, in graduate school. Writing when I could. It was then and there decided that I would be the one to tell the family stories. At the end of the evening I was handed two large binders of family genealogy. I humbly accepted them as Ben might one day receive the cheese box, and waited awhile before I looked inside. The contents of one folder dated back to early nineteenth century Hungary, and one began in seventeenth century Switzerland. In order to avoid the kind

of heavy labor digging too far down entails, I removed a few shovels of dirt and began with Clementine's father.

Jason Albert Sutton was born February 25, 1861 in Cottage Grove, Wisconsin, Elisha Sutton and Margaret Delaney Sutton's firstborn. The nation became divided less than two months later. Elisha left his wife and newborn son to enlist as a chaplain in the Union Army. Elisha must have been given frequent leaves to visit his young family, because at the time of his death, he had left his wife with four small boys. The oldest, Jason, was seven. Like most Civil War widows, Margaret was forced to send her oldest son to live with another family to attend school. Jason must have felt this separation keenly, first from his father and then his mother and younger brothers, especially his brother Emory, with whom he would be close throughout his entire life.

Jason didn't wait long to realize these adventures, although it must have seemed like eternity for a young boy. It is unknown why he left Wisconsin, but at sixteen, alone and penniless, he joined a wagon train headed for California. He soon found himself in Missouri, the first slave-holding state to formally end slavery. It is in Missouri that the oral family history begins. The starting line of the rush to California towns like Independence and St. Joe had boomed in the 1850s as Missouri residents became overnight store-owners, supplying Forty-niners the needed materials for the great race to gold. As the train neared the Kansas border at St. Joe, Missouri, Jason heard talk of land for eligible young men. Owning land had become a new dream for those whose gold rush dreams had failed. Jason discovered that as the oldest boy in his family, and because of his father's service to the Union army, he was eligible to homestead land in Kansas.

Barely old enough to shave, Jason arrived on his land with no money, no possessions, and no shelter. His homestead quickly failed, and he found shelter in St. Joe, working for the post office. The Pony Express had operated out of St. Joseph April of 1860 to October of 1861, carrying mail to Sacramento, California. In the days before the Civil War, the Pony Express had been established to transfer information over 2,000 miles. It took an average of ten days, eighty riders, and between 400 and 500 horses to relay the information in the letters, but during the Pony Express's existence, only one letter was reported lost.

Jason Sutton delivered letters six days a week, "through rain, sleet, or snow." He faithfully walked through the elements, covering many miles by foot. One of his routes was past the Register home. Rebecca Ann was the oldest of the union between Josiah and Mary Ann Register. She had two younger full-blooded sisters, Margaret and Eady. But Jason Sutton, United States mail carrier, had eyes for Rebecca alone. Like the biblical Jacob, he was motivated to become successful enough to win her and soon rose to the ranks of postmaster. Surely he asked Josiah for Rebecca's hand in marriage, and Jason and Rebecca married in 1882 at the ages of twenty-one and nineteen. Weddings in the West were simple affairs in a time that called for practicality over pomp and circumstance. Rebecca, like most brides, likely wore a handmade dress that could be used for several occasions, including travel or funerals. A woman never knew what the years would bring her. The marriage ceremony presumably took place in the bride's home, performed by a local preacher, and witnessed only by a few good friends and family members. Afterward, there might have been a fried chicken dinner with potatoes and greens from the garden, and maybe a pound cake or strawberry rhubarb pie.

Rebecca's father sold the newlyweds fifteen acres of land, on which they built a four room house with a shed kitchen in a town still buzzing with the news of Thomas Howard's death. For a town who knew Jesse James by his assumed name, the death must have been a shocking scandal. Even James' immediate family did not know his real identity as a hunted outlaw. It was in this house eleven months later that Josiah and Rebecca's firstborn, Golden Clementine Sutton, was born on the eighteenth of November, 1883.

"Oh My Darling Clementine" as we know it was not written until 1884, a year after Clementine's birth. I do know that family called her "Clema" for short, and found an earlier song, written by minstrel songwriter H.S. Thompson in 1863 called "Down by the River Liv'd a Maiden" in which the name Clema is used. It is possible that young Jason hummed the words and tune of this popular song on his way from Wisconsin all the way to St. Joe. The chorus, "Oh! my Clema, Oh! my Clema, / Oh! my darling Clementine, / Now you are gone and lost forever, / I'm dreadful sorry Clementine" was punctuated by the long-winded tongue n'cheek verses: "Down by the river there lived a maiden, / In a cottage built just seven by nine, / And all around this lovely bower, / The beauteous sunflower blossoms twine. / Her lips were like two luscious beefsteaks / Dipp'd in tomato sauce and brine, / And like the cashmere goatess covering / Was the fine wool of Clementine." It is difficult to think of the motive Jason and Rebecca might have had for naming their sweet baby girl after a drowning one with 'lips like beefsteaks' in a popular minstrel ballad, but perhaps they had a strange sense of humor. Or maybe they were simply unfamiliar with the ballad, and just happened to fancy the romantic sound of 'Golden Clementine.' Or, perhaps when he first glimpsed his

newborn daughter, Jason Sutton finally realized that his real treasure wasn't in California after all.

By the time Clementine's parents started their family in St. Joe, there were forty settlers in Missouri for every Indian. Buffalo were disappearing, stampeding in great clouds of dust further west, most only to be killed with a rifle shot and left to rot. Immigration was completely unrestricted until the year Jesse James was shot. Soon after, all Chinese immigrants were excluded, along with citizens suspected of being mentally insane or handicapped. Yet Missouri was progressive in certain areas. Missouri's women were the first involved in women's suffrage. As early as 1867 a few female Missourians began seeking the right to vote; additionally, many women were joining the Women's Christian's Temperance Union (WCTU). Carry Amelia Moore Nation, who, as a new bride with a six-month old daughter watched her first husband die of alcoholism, was forever motivated to destroy all saloons and the demon drink within them. Convinced she was doing God's work, "Mother Nation" was arrested thirty times, even beaten for her actions. A native of Missouri now married to a fiery abolitionist, Carry had closed all of Medicine Lodge's saloons wielding her hatchet and shouting to her followers to, "Smash, ladies, smash!" Carry Nation, Clementine's heroine, described herself "as a bulldog running along the feet of Jesus."

Land, most decided, was also worth fighting for. This was a time of one of the greatest migrations in history. Settlers flocked west to claim land for themselves and posterity. To own land was the ultimate goal. And the American government was allowing this goal to be realized. Land ownership was part of the American Dream, and many settlers had dreamed dreams. The migration was really a "conquest of the West."

Settlers didn't see a problem claiming the land from the Indians, people who, as they saw it, didn't use the land to its full economic potential. It was over-farming, of course, that would lead to the Dust Bowl Days, the greatest period of drought on American record. It was Clementine's own children who would be plagued by the consequences of this particular American Dream. My mother often told stories about her parents' thriftiness. "Dad was a conservationist. Those tough Dust Bowl Days taught him how to take care of the land." Many farmers learned this the hard way, for farming was about weather and luck, waiting to see which way the wind blew and what came with it.

Often when one first settled, there wouldn't be a well. And young couples like the Suttons didn't have the money to have one dug—water had to be hauled from a nearby stream, and pots and pans were washed with sand. Grasshoppers and prairie fires often destroyed crops. The weather in Missouri was extreme. You either curled up at the ends because of the heat and humidity, or froze to death during blinding white winters. Often the weather swung quickly between the two extremes. A regional joke at the time was about a farmer who was plowing one day. His plow stopped when one of his horses fell over dead from heat exhaustion. Before he could unharness the other horse, it fell over dead from cold.

By the time her youngest brother John was born, Clementine was thirteen years old and assisted her mother with the cooking, cleaning, sewing, and child-rearing. The family would attend church on Sundays, most likely St. Joseph's Lutheran Church. In the family pew, Clema must have nudged her squirming little brothers and sisters to be quiet so that she could listen uninterrupted; like her idol Carry Nation, Clementine would take her faith very seriously, passing her zeal for God down to her children.

Clementine would also later earn a living as a seamstress, so I can assume that she patched many rips and tears on the pant legs of her rambunctious younger brothers as they climbed trees and played, possibly pretending scenes from stories they knew of the James brothers, or imagining what it might be to go further into Indian territory.

For in St. Joe, there was news of the opening of the Cherokee Strip in Indian Territory. In 1889, the U.S. government became greedy, dividing the Indian Territory into two parts. The eastern section was for Indians, and the western portion became the Oklahoma Territory. In Choctaw Oklahoma means, "Territory of the Red People." Oklahoma's people were already diverse: the Five Civilized Tribes had been removed from the South and relocated to Indian Territory; the Jayhawkers, Unionist guerilla bands, had been ordered to relocate to Oklahoma Territory; both Indians and white settlers alike were refugees. The first waves of settlers came into Oklahoma in 1889, captivated with the climate and the scenery. Whatever the reason, they came. On the morning of April 22, 1889, a huge crowd of homesteaders drew near to the district's borders, the promise of land just beyond. The land rush was described by historian David Duncan in *People of the West*:

At precisely noon, bugles blew and the huge crowd surged forward. Some rode horses. Some pedaled bicycles. Others climbed aboard special trains and leapt off at the locations of towns about to be born... 'Men jumped from the roofs of the moving cars at the risk of their lives,' wrote one reporter in Guthrie. 'Some were so stunned by the fall that they could not get up for some minutes. Men fell over each other in haps, others stumbled and fell headlong, while many ran forward so

blindly that...they passed the best town lots.' A wild scramble began to stake claims on parcels of land, but the most valuable locations had already been taken by settlers who had illegally slipped through the night before. They called themselves Sooners. By nightfall, all 1,920,000 acres of the Oklahoma District had been claimed.

Like the Gold Rush a generation earlier, the Oklahoma Territory land rush promised new roots with hopes of a better life. Ironically, despite being one of the first territories gained from the Louisiana Territory, Oklahoma was the last to become a state, not achieving statehood until two days before Clementine's twenty-fourth birthday, November 16, 1907.

The talk of new adventure and land must have tickled the ears of St. Joseph's postmaster. But the Suttons were a large family with young children; the youngest, Mae, wasn't born until January of 1900. The good of the family had to be considered, and besides, Rebecca's entire family had been born and raised in St. Joe. Something else to consider was the fact that the oldest Sutton girls were of age. Margie had a beau in St. Joe, a farmer named David Thorpe, and there was no assurance that if the couple married they would follow Margie's family further west. In 1905 Jason Sutton, who had been in St. Joe now for twenty-eight years, devised a plan. Jason had already used his rights to settle as a sixteen-year-old and could not file a claim in Oklahoma Territory. So twenty-two year old Clementine and her uncle, Emory Sutton, traveled by train from St. Joe to an area twenty miles northwest of Alva, Oklahoma. They then traveled by wagon to the land they wished to claim and filed for eighty acres of land each.

It could have been that Jason was lured by tales of Oklahoma's fertile soil and warm weather, perfect for nourishing a long growing season for crops. The Indians lived from the land, not on it, and therefore preserved the soils and nature which the settlers found so appealing, and eventually ruined. Caroline Henderson, a settler devoted to the land, remembered a time when "the untouched prairie" had a "luxuriant turf of native grass—gram grass, buffalo, and curly mesquite—the pincushion cactuses, straw-color and rose, the other wild flowers which in their season fulfilled the thought of Shakespeare: 'The summer's flower is the summer sweet / Though to itself it only live and die.'"

One descendent of Clema remembered Oklahoma's rich animal life of "armadillos, coyotes, rabbits, mink, otters, foxes, black bears, and buffalo. Skies that were filled with birds." In the Dirty Thirties, over-tilling the soil created dust storms that threatened the lives of these birds. "The land's comfortable, fecund look disappeared rapidly, as industrious farmers burned, plowed, and razed hundreds, then thousands of acres." Lawrence Svobida described the residual losses of the Dust Storms in the 1930s: "Birds fly in terror before the storm, and only those that are strong of wing may escape. The smaller birds fly until they are exhausted, then fall to the ground, to share the fate of the thousands of jack rabbits which perish from suffocation." But the drought and poverty-stricken thirties had yet to arrive when Golden Clementine Sutton first arrived in Indian Territory. Oklahoma still had much of its natural beauty, vistas of sky, grass, and red clay enjoyed by a young woman issued a patent signed by Roosevelt, who lived in a dugout twenty-six miles from the small town of Alva, Oklahoma.

Seas of prairie grass dominated the landscape around Clema's dugout, softening the horizon and the miniature Grand Canyon-esque cliffs of red. The rules for land ownership meant that Clema had to stay on her claimed land weekends. Her week days and nights were spent as a seamstress and boarder in the town of Alva. Established in 1893, the town had emerged from a land office set up in the Cherokee Land Run, one of the largest of all of Oklahoma's land runs. The town was called Alva after railroad attorney Alva Adams, who would eventually be Colorado's governor. At the time of Clementine's arrival, Alva had a population of 1,500 to 2,000 people, boasted seven saloons, and even a Chinese restaurant. Towering over the downtown was a building that looked like a Norman castle and christened the "Castle on the Hill," Alva's normal school would burn down in 1935, rebuilt two years later, be dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt, and become Northwestern Oklahoma State University.

Clema's first home was an earthen dwelling, a home dug into the side of her land and walled in with stones from the creek bed. A settler's hobbit-hole, but instead of a round door, a canvas flap. Living in a dugout meant smelling the strong scent of earth upon waking in the morning, muddy ceilings when it rained, dirt falling into a plate or tin mug, bugs and horny toads hopping across the dirt floor. The perks were that the dugout stayed cool in the summer, the earth a protectant from the sun. A campfire would have to be made outside the dugout to cook food, a barrel of water kept nearby for drinking. In short, living in a dugout was a primitive form of camping, especially for a daughter of a St. Joseph, Missouri postmaster. There are no hints in the family stories that Clema ever complained, but rather embraced the opportunity she was given to own

land. She must have been terribly lonely, however, feeling far away from her family especially at night, half-protected by the earth, listening to coyotes howl.

The dangers in the dugout Friday nights and Saturdays were coyotes, cowboys, and cyclones. Oklahoma is in the heart of tornado alley. Masses of warm, moist air and cold, dry air sometimes collided in the skies over Oklahoma, creating tornadoes.

“Sometimes the atmosphere was so charged with electricity as thunderstorms raged over the prairies that ‘the points of the horns of cattle would at night blaze with tiny tapers of light,” recalled Edward Everett Dale, a Oklahoma farmer quoted in Timothy Egan’s stalwart *The Worst Hard Time*, a book about those early days of the twentieth century. Clema’s land lay in the Cherokee strip, but was rough and had no source of water. She had to haul her water in barrels the miles from Alva.

Clema was young and pretty, and when word got out in the town of Alva that a young woman was staying in a dugout outside of town on the weekends, trying to stake a claim, cowboys found a way out to herd their cattle toward the vast prairie to get a glimpse of the slim woman with the snapping blue eyes and the wind-whipped brown curls. So Clema invited a friend to stay with her, and the women brought a rifle, fired off on occasion to warn the cowboys not to get too close. According to family legend, one of those cowboys was a young man named Fred Hada, at whom Clema took aim, not to hit but to frighten. The tactic was unsuccessful, for Fred and Clema were to marry in 1907.

Back in St. Joe, Jason had met an Oklahoma cattleman who would lease him a section of school land near Clementine’s claim for \$1,000. Jason and three friends went together and bought the lease. Now the family was bustling with plans to be made for

the move West. A railroad car was chartered and in 1906 Jason shipped the furniture, some of the horse-drawn machinery, and the horses to Alva. Jason's thirteen-year-old son Emory was the first to join his sister and uncle, stowed away on the livestock railroad car with his bedding, so as to feed and water the horses on the trip west.

It must have been a day of celebration when the rest of the Sutton family arrived in Alva by train. The family was together again, all but one. Eighteen-year-old Margie had married David Thorpe a year earlier, after all, and had begun her life as a wife in St. Joe. The entire family would never gather in one place.

The new Sutton homestead consisted of a tent, five horses, one cow, and a couple of barrels to haul water in. Jason and the boys soon dug a hole in the side of a hill to make a dugout and put a monkey stove and bed in it. Some of the children slept in the dugout, but winter was here, making it very cold as snow drifted into the dugout. As soon as they were established, Jason and Rebecca bought 160 acres near what was later the Winchester Store. The storekeeper was Mattie Jones, a Virginian with a strong southern twang. The Winchester Store existed until my mother's childhood, with the ageing Mattie tenaciously still holding onto her rusting cans and expired food. Many times Mattie's name and habits were passed around the family table with the food, with aunts and uncles laughing along with Mom.

“Remember, Mattie left the phone off the receiver all the time.”

“What would you do?” I'd ask, feeling young and modern. I knew they were talking about the ‘party line;’ I'd heard this one before.

“Well,” an aunt or uncle drawled, passing the garden-grown green beans once more, “one of us would have to drop by Mattie's store, which by then was really old.

She only sold things when she tied up the phone. We'd buy a five-year-old chocolate bar or a rusted can of tomato soup, and ask to use the phone, and nonchalantly hang up the receiver so that others could talk on the neighborhood party line."

"Oh, the party line!" Scraping the bottom of the bowl of mashed potatoes.

"Remember hearing breathing on the other end of the phone?" Bite of fried chicken.

"Oh yes, she was the neighbor always listening in..." and on and on.

It was between 1905 and 1907 that Clementine met her match. Fred Hada was a renegade young cowboy with sparkling blue eyes, the youngest of the large Hada clan, and the first of his family born on American soil. Older brothers Laszlo, Sandor, and Andor, as well as sister Beata or "Bette," were born in a tongue-twisting town in Hungary called Tizsakanyar, also Kisvarda, and Dombard. Fred was the youngest by twelve years, and most of his siblings had married other Hungarian citizens who immigrated to the United States and had begun large families. Fred was a whole two years younger than the strong and independent Clema. As an admirer of Carry Nation and a strong church-goer, a landholder and a woman who proved she could hold her own in a dugout, Clema couldn't have been easy to court. But court her he did, and successfully. Their wedding picture sits over the old silent theatre player piano in my parents' home. It depicts the handsome Fred sitting cross-legged in a chair, and his new bride standing behind him in her wedding dress, slim and dark in the dress, also a traveling suit. With modest propriety, one hand lightly rests on her groom's shoulder.

The first home of Fred and Clema Hada was on the same compound as Fred's parents, Albert and Rachel Kish Hada. This must have been an interesting transition for

Clementine, for Albert spoke only a few words of English. After this initiation, the young couple moved onto Clema's claim and acquired additional land. Their first home on their own land was of sod on the northwest side and with boards on the other side. At the time sod houses boasted windows, coolness in the summer and warmth in the winter months. Fred kept a rifle handy to shoot the large pack rats that moved into their house. One wonders if, as the rats were picked off, the newlyweds were able to laugh about Clementine's days wielding a rifle in the lonely dugout.

The farming started in earnest. Two principle crops were kaffir corn and cane. Most of their cash came from the sale of cattle. Fred Hada was a cattleman, and cattle were a source of much satisfaction to Fred throughout his life. He was a cowboy in his early life and he rode the range every day; cattle had to be kept in a certain area. Fred also found some trouble. One day he climbed into a boarded up spring for a drink of water; when he tried to climb out with a rope, the rope broke. He spent the rest of the day there until another cowboy saw his horse and investigated. Soon after his day in the bottom of the well, he contracted malaria; a son, Cliff, remembered that Fred had fever and chills lasting for a year. He was often caught in rain and hailstorms, removing his saddle and taking shelter under it until a storm passed. He bred polled, Hereford cattle, and contributed a great deal to upgrading the cattle in his community. He loved to hunt and fish, and kept a family locker at the ice house in town filled with quail, fish, and rabbits. Fred Hada loved the land, as did his bride.

To this land-loving couple was born nine children; their fifth was my grandmother, Estella Mae. Once asked by a grandchild why she'd had so many children, Clema replied, "Every time Grandpa laid his pants across the bed, I knew

another little baby would be born.” The pants method worked in favor of my existence. To Estella Mae and her husband Dwight Little, my mother, Sherry Mae, was the sixth child. It was in her little yellow-curtained bedroom that my first memories exist, gazing over wheat fields parted by land.

2) CHILDHOOD

Nature Sings

In expeditions through Oklahoma pastures as a little girl, nature sings unexpectedly. I listen to the cicadas and crickets buzzing on a hot day, my feet crunching through dry summer grass in a rhythmic beat as I walk, the sky throbbing with the drumbeat of the sun's pulse. Birds pitch a discordant elegance and small animals add percussion as small bushes or high patches of prairie grasses shake with their sudden, fearful hiding. The wind picks up, crescendoing as it lifts my hair and tickles my sweaty arms and neck. The whole picture is of one living organism, pulsing and throbbing with life. Nature sings, the lyrics tell me of something both familiar and far away. It is my first realization that the land is alive.

In my earliest years, just as my consciousness dawned, Dad's delight in nature was a teacher, his enthusiasm contagious. He held me in the crook of his arm as he pointed out creatures in the woods. His curiosity and inquisitiveness matched my childish wonder. "Huh," he would say. "Look at the way the squirrel holds the acorn so carefully in between his paws as he eats it. He instinctively knows where he buried that acorn months ago." With whispered reverence, "Look at that." And we did. In our wonder and awe, we were children together. Through his simple observations, Dad communicated nature as a work of art to be enjoyed, examined, and protected. Nature was Other, a part of something else, the work of a cosmic Artist. Nature had its own voice.

I knew nature had something to tell me. In the backseat on family road trips, my brother and I ran out of tapes to play and games to create. Too carsick to read, I gazed out of the left rear window for hours, wondering about the farmhouses we passed, the fields and dilapidated barns and outhouses. Pretending I lived on a farm, I reconstructed a collage from the day's images, and imagined one farm, one family. I added to the collage whole family histories, combining Gold Rush motives and mail order bride stories like Sarah, Plain and Tall. As soon as night fell, the stars appeared, large and luminous, lulling me to sleep with their bright, constant mystery, faraway burning pinwheels of light seemed to sing of the sky's largeness, and I felt inconsequential. At the same time, I also sensed that the stars winking was evidence of my significance, God's way of making eye contact. Our little secret.

No noise louder than the sounds of murmured conversation between my parents, no light but the headlights, a discordant kicking up of pebbles on the dirt roads, hitting the underbelly of the car, or the steady, lulling beat of seams on the asphalt highway. All was silence, except for the still world, singing. The sound was deafening. Nature sang to me of my significance, my small but important place in a world with very large skies, the soundtrack to invented stories constructed out of the sights of, skeletal barns and weathered farmhouses. Someone lived there, went the chorus. Someone like you, maybe. Someone like you. Years ago, years ago, years ago. And now they're gone. Now they're gone. But there is more, oh there is more. There's a whole universe out there. For someone like you, maybe. Someone like you.

Nature sings. It tells us of what is possible, the odd and mixed up things of nature: stars so large that 200 trillion earths would fit inside; Planet Earth's name

derived from erda, an Anglo Saxon word for soil or dirt even though the earth, like our bodies, is mostly water; the Japanese seahorse, with its long snout and tiny wings that flutter in the water, propelling it forward; Frill-necked dragons clothed in what appears to be Elizabethan collars; the shiny red buttocks of baboons and icy haloed-heads of snow monkeys sitting in steaming springs with knowing expressions; orchids the size of a pin and orchids ten feet tall, epiphytes that grow by clinging to a tree, their roots waiting for the wind and rain.

The Cosmic Upcycler

In church, I lay my head on my daddy's gray-suited arm and use the pew hymnal as a table for drawing pictures, circles with stick legs and arms, circles for hands, and more sticks for fingers. I add waves for hair, and popping-out circles for eyes. I am drawing a family, and the people have a striking resemblance to seedling trees. I tell my mom this picture is called "All of the People" and she labels it in her neat, looping handwriting. I swing my legs, feeling strangely constricted, the hair on my legs brushing against the stockings I wear underneath the Mary Janes my brother helped me buckle that morning. I long to "take the elements" as they pass me in the shining, silver trays shaped like beehives with circles for the tiny plastic cups of grape juice, Jesus' blood. I long to reach into the basket of oyster crackers lined with a maroon cloth napkin, and grab a handful, Jesus' body, but Mom whispers that those are for when I am old enough to understand the meaning behind them. She does allow me to take those plastic cups home to make wastebaskets and lampshades for my dollhouse. I love the music swirling around me, absorb some of the words and sing the ones I know: "What

can take away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow.”

After church there is always a contrasting sense of freedom. At home, the constrictive stockings come off. There is usually running, and partial nudity. My curiosity is piqued by a phrase used by a pastor or Sunday school teacher, and I dive to the bookshelves to look for the answer. My parents encourage my curiosity, and the bookshelves at home are full of everything from Dr. Seuss to Shakespeare, Scottish fairytales to *National Geographic*; there are several illustrated versions of the Bible, one particularly helpful: *Illustrated Bible Stories for Children*. I am drawn to the sensuality and wild violence of the Old Testament stories, where illustrations show women baring their midriffs, decorated with ropes of gold coins, tambourines over their heads. There are floods that cover the land and fireballs coming from the sky and the Old Testament is a place where babies are hunted like outlaws.

I long to have olive skin and black hair, thrusting out a tan hip encircled with gold, waving my tambourine. The pictures strike me as an unusual companion to the church service and Sunday school class I have just attended. I am not just a little girl with curled bangs, wearing a dress patterned like a meadow with a lace collar, but am connected somehow to that exotic woman in the *Illustrated Bible Stories for Children*. I love watching Charlton Heston in the dramatized Ten Commandments, feeling a part of something gaudy and vivid. I watch and listen as Pharaoh’s heart hardens and miracles are performed, unlikely events like water turning into to blood with just a touch of a staff, or plagues of frogs falling from the sky. I find myself looking up at the sky, wondering if miracles still happen.

The Old Testament is like the Old West, full of outlaws and villains, heroes and pilgrims who keep trying to escape slavery and subjugation, but who are forced to leave their home and travel across the wilderness, through deserts and red seas, the first Trail of Tears. God loved a people who were hidden by prostitutes upon arriving in the Promised Land; he called them the apple of his eye: those crowds of people who ended up having wild orgies, playing music, and worshipping a golden calf before Moses went mad and smashed the Ten Commandments.

Even though my faith is prefaced by flannel graph boards in Sunday school where everybody safely sips apple juice and nibbles glazed donut holes, I sense the exotic, a place that existed and comprises the roots of a belief system I belong to. This classroom in the church attic where, after singing “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and “I’m in the Lord’s Army,” the Bible swords are drawn and I race through the thin, crispy pages of the Bible to find 1 John 3:7 before that stringy-haired boy in the gray pants, where my teacher draws a circle on the chalkboard with white chalk and makes a circle in the middle of the larger circle, taking great pains to press down and fill the circle with white chalk until the circle in the middle looks important because it has a van Gogh sense texture and depth.

There is something foreboding in what turns out to be a chalk representation of a target. The teacher talks about girls wearing slacks to church, calls them slacks, and then moves onto the theological premise of God’s will being like this target she had just drawn, and if you make one false step you fall out of God’s will and He will end up not blessing your life and you will be living some kind of Plan B life. Maybe you would

even throw on some slacks and sin enough to find your way out of the range of the target altogether, like a dart being wildly thrown and pock-marking the wall.

So I sip my juice and gobble donut holes with my mouth open because allergies don't allow me to breathe out of my nose, and ask annoying questions that horrify the straight-and-narrow teachers and thrill the really good teacher. After church, we once again return home to smells of Mom's crock pot and beeline for the bookshelf. The target idea doesn't sit right with me, somehow. Had all of these people in the Old Testament, had they all aimed straight and hit bull's eyes? I am skeptical and relish the information I find: King David (gasp) had been a peeping Tom, an adulterer, and would have been convicted of manslaughter had he lived in the 20th century. I find out (double gasp) what Rahab the Prostitute's actual job was.

It will be years before I make the discovery that King David the psalmist and Rahab the Prostitute weren't alone in their misdemeanors. The list was endless: Noah was found drunk and naked inside his tent by his sons, a doubly shameful event; Moses had a speech impediment, and the prophet Isaiah spouted his insights buck naked. Jacob (later renamed Israel) stole his older brother's blessing from a blind father, and was given descendants as vast as the stars in the sky anyway. To a rebellious (and starving) people, God sent manna that appeared with the morning dew and looked like coriander seed. Translated from Hebrew, manna literally means "what is it?" As a child I picture manna as pinches of angel food cake falling white from the sky.

Many of the ancients had not only found themselves outside of the moral circle of God's will, but willingly jumped out of it, and the biggest miracle of all was that God allowed bloodlines of kings and prophets to be formed through them anyway. It seemed

as if God wasn't picky about things like slacks at all, but relished in allowing the misfits to be a part of the family tree. As I grew, God morphed into one of those artists who create beautiful pieces out of unwanted items, things tossed aside until plucked off the ground, brushed them off, and added as part of a larger piece. These artists call their creations upcycling, and in a flash I realized that maybe God is upcycling the earth, and maybe someday all of the offshoots, the misfits, and rejected will see their malefactions, their eccentricities and mistakes turned into a beautiful work of art. God, the urban artist, the original upcycler.

It is the late eighties and my family and I live in Central Florida suburbs. I miss Oklahoma, and remember barefoot steps on red clay and hay bales, pushing away tall prairie grass, feeling hidden under its sky. Oklahoma is untainted by the ordinary disappointingness of life, it is full of things like picking out similar shapes and blues in the eyes of my mother and cousin and watching my grandfather's hands as he tells the old bat cave story: hoisted the girls up on our backs in the pitch black because they were too afraid to keep going. It is strange and unfamiliar to live inside a gridded suburban neighborhood, in one of the flat cement houses constructed in the sixties after a week exploring Oklahoma pastures with my brother. I feel foreign, long for relatives that nap and aunts who tell you they want to take you into town, maybe stopping at the soda counter at Holder's Drugstore for a cherry Coke, or uncles to go fishing with. Florida is too sandy to have roots to go very deep, and even as a child, I know it. Especially in December, I miss white Christmases of cedars and tinsel, truckloads of relatives caroling. I miss Grandma's cooking. I long to wake up in a place that has harvests, seasons, snow. My mind lives for escape, for its imagination to carry it back home, like

a tree whose roots grow horizontally, feeling its way back to its origins before going deeper.

A redeeming value is that across the street live Arnold and Nira Stein, who grow orange trees in their yard. Sometimes when we come home from church they are working in the yard pruning the orange trees, and I run across the street to show them what I have learned in Sunday school, especially if it is the story of Queen Esther and how she defeated that monster Haman. Nira shows me what a Haman hat is, and happily it ends up being a delicious stuffed pastry, and together we celebrate Esther's courage in saving the Jews by laughing over the hats, our shared thrill of a woman outsmarting a man through sheer courage and beauty. I decide that one day I would like to see the place where Esther saves the Jews, that I would like to see the descendants of this dark, beautiful woman who said, "If I perish, I perish." But, I decide, such miracles only happen to God's chosen.

One day my brother and I are invited to come over and pick oranges before it freezes, the day turns into a quest to salvage oranges from the cold. As my brother and I begin to pick oranges, tiny white things start floating down like feathers from the gray Florida sky, and it takes us a moment to realize it's snowing.

3) PILGRIMHOOD

Root Seekers (Switzerland, 2007-2008)

Restlessness is born from rootlessness. Restlessness, as I see it, keeps today's pilgrim moving toward the significant. Once upon a time, a pilgrim worshipped in the here and now; people uprooted to put down new roots and stay. My great-grandparents sacrificed much to transplant themselves in a new land, roots grown deep to give a home to their own children; I imagine that when Fred and Clema Hada claimed a section of red soil as their own, they envisioned generations of children living and working the land. Little did they know that two mere generations would pass before their great-granddaughter felt the pull of the quintessentially American search for identity. That she would feel like a pilgrim in her own country.

I happen upon Denise Levertov one day in my little attic room in a Swiss chalet. I am a high school teacher drop-out, burned out after four years of the kind of quick-change artistry private school teaching requires, the kind where the freshly graduated recruits assume more responsibility than humanly possible. There I was supposed to be teacher, mentor, youth leader, counselor, student council advisor, curriculum director, department head, field trip coordinator, homecoming sponsor, and prom planner. It was also possibly an acute case of self-inflicted "prove myself." As a result, there were whole months where I didn't see the sun. I drove to school in the pre-dawn dark; I drove home long after dusk. I changed classrooms three times. I volunteered with the girl's soccer team, volunteered with the drama department. I felt like I performed every

role badly. The only thing I did well, besides maintain a kind of paranoid control over classroom behavior, was create an environment I hope inspired my students. I took the tenth grade to the opera. I threw lavish Great Gatsby parties in the classroom. I established a night of the arts for students to do readings of their own fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, a night a senior christened Floetry Night. Inspiring, I discovered, is not the same as being inspired. After four years I feel old. I no longer know who I am, I just know who I must be depending on what hat I am wearing at the moment. I decide it is time to get away.

I sell some of my belongings, store the rest in my parents' garage, and say goodbye to family and friends for an undetermined amount of time. I take the license plate off my car while it sits, tires slowly deflating. And like my parents flying down the dusty roads in northwest Oklahoma, I make my escape, but this time through the air. I have taken a plane to New York, Geneva, and from there taken a train to the town of Aigle. From Aigle I wait an hour for the bus, and now that I find my way up switchback mountain highways, traveling by bus up a winding road with dizzying views. I have arrived in Huemoz, the tiny mountain town in French-speaking Switzerland. When I first see the Alps, I feel jaded, disappointed. They are too beautiful, too majestic. I describe them in my journal as "fake Hollywood backdrops."

The small town of Huemoz, Switzerland, sits on the side of a mountain facing the French Alps. It is a difficult place to capture in a verbal butterfly net, especially for those who have never been to a place like Huemoz, or heard of a concept like l'Abri. L'Abri, translated from French, means the shelter. It is truly a place a seeker goes, a place worth making a pilgrimage. Often those who arrive are interested in philosophy or

theology, some students have drug or alcohol problems, or suffer from emotional pain. The shelter is not a rehab program, nor are the workers there trained professionals, but often at the root of some of these issues, at least partially, lie repressed questions about the existence of God and reality and the value of the individual. Founded by American missionaries Francis and Edith Schaeffer, l'Abri's genesis began with conversations, the Schaeffer's late night talks with European university students into the wee hours of the morning, friends their daughter Prisca brought home on holidays from university. These students had honest questions about reality and existence and the world, and Schaeffer had spent most of his life looking for those answers as well. Schaeffer didn't buy into the now-popular answer that there were no answers. So began the l'Abri tagline, "Honest answers to honest questions."

Almost toppling over from the weight of my backpack and the steepness of the driveway, I pass the L'Abri sign to the door marked "Bellevue." I knock, and it opens. There is Steffie, a beautiful Swiss girl who speaks perfect English. She invites me in and gives me a cup of tea. Then she sends me to the basement office of Gian Sandri. In his seventies, bronzed and muscley from making daily mountain climbs with oven mitts on his hands "to improve circulation," Gian stands to welcome me. I notice that his gray hair has been grown out into a ponytail. "You must be Erin."

My eyes are blinded for the first four weeks. I wake up to red geraniums outside my tiny wooden room in the old chalet, once a hotel, that I am staying in with thirty-two other students, and peek outside briefly before I duck my head back inside. Nope, not today. Can't take their beauty in, not yet. I hike in them, forcing myself to stay outdoors, figuring that if I get to know their terrain, I'll be able to soak in the beauty.

Bellevue is a rheumy old chalet, converted from a hotel, that creaks and seems to sway on extra windy days. The chalet is mostly filled with legs swinging themselves over the edges of bunk beds in the morning, feet creaking their way down the hall to breakfast, which someone has made that morning.

On Mondays there is a prayer meeting, and people bring their art with them: charcoals or pastels or crayons to sketch while people share and pray, always knitting needles flashing. No one seems to mind. And the workers gather, and the room fills, and there is a comfortable sense of family, and we are, together, praying for provision, while leaning against the arm of somebody, against the plush and mismatching couches, huddling underneath blankets in winter, warmed from mocha lattes and full of breakfast starches. Afterwards, a quick flash of dressing, thin or thick layers depending upon the season, but always random and wonderful, the same sights of the same clothes worn for weeks now, and they too are familiar. And someone has taken them multiple times out of the laundry basket and washed them, hung them out to dry, carefully avoiding the shadows and following the lines of the sun, the wind slowly transforming them into dry things again.

On days I did laundry, I would often find Gian had begun to wash, or dry or fold before me, as he had done for the past forty years. Gian was l'Abri's first student, a friend of Prisca Schaeffer's. They married, and now live in a house above Bellevue. Prisca and I had tea once. On a walk through the autumn leaves, searching for a salt mine, my friend Rose asked me if I had met Prisca. After traveling deep into the salt mine and out again, Rose and I returned to climb up the mountain, attempting to make it back for dinner. We realized we have grossly underestimated the time, especially as I

watched Rose's calves effortlessly propel her up the mountain while I struggle for my next breath.

Rose used my breathlessness as an opportunity to tell me all about Prisca. Rose's mother had been to l'Abri before, once a few years ago. Rose grew up in an intellectual commune outside of Asheville, North Carolina, and wanted to see the place that she said saved her mother's life. "My parents are both beautiful, young-looking, extremely intelligent." Her large eyes filled with tears as she twists one curl around her finger, but she is articulate, well-educated. "There are difficulties living life in the kind of community my parents chose. In some ways, my childhood was beautiful, so innocent. Some of us literally ran around naked nearly until we were eight or nine, playing in the meadows, wearing nothing but flowers. The problem with that kind of life is, no boundaries." Rose told me of an affair, a sordid one, and the breakup of her family. Her mother, the instigator in the affair, heard of l'Abri and left North Carolina. The people living in Bellevue sent her to Prisca. "Prisca's real. She's strong and feisty, and doesn't take shit. She spent two weeks with Prisca and started eating again." The morning after my walk with Rose, I find Gian and invite myself over for a cup of tea.

Ninety-four-year-old Edith and her daughter Prisca are sitting out in front of the house in lawn chairs, basking in the sunshine and the view. Prisca greets me and offers me a free lawn chair. She also offers me a cigarette, but I decline. "Mother raised us to be rebels," Prisca muses. And louder, "Didn't you, mother?" Her beautiful face a mass of wrinkles, Edith smiles and nods her assent. After a period of silence Prisca, taking a deep drag, offhandedly tells me, "I have seven tits."

I look at her. "You have what?"

Her eyes shine. “Seven tits.” She lets this sink in. And finally, “See those birds in the bushes right there? That species of bird are called titmouse. I have seven of ‘em.” She’s used to rawer material than me, but by the end of the conversation we are talking animatedly, flipping through a photo album, scanning through decades of Prisca’s life. “Got this one for my seventieth birthday,” she says proudly. “It was my granddaughter’s idea. My life in pictures.” Prisca’s life in pictures creates a magnetic charge that draws me toward Prisca’s history here. Together, our heads are bent over, marveling at the olden days of l’Abri. Over the next few weeks, I visit the Farel House, a l’Abri building with a library in its basement. The library is a sort of museum itself: housing thousands of books, tapes, and MP3s ranging on all topics from l’Abri’s earliest days, including philosophy, theology, science, literature, the arts, and music. One rainy afternoon I find a taped labeled with Prisca’s name. The tape is dated 1979 and contains a recording of a lecture on the genius of Pink Floyd.

I first heard of l’Abri from a book I read as a teenager called *How to Be Your Own Selfish Pig* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay. In the book Macaulay explains that her father, Francis Schaeffer, began an informal study center from their home until it grew into a place backpackers visited in the sixties, mostly intellectual hippies in search of enlightenment. The head of the current Swiss l’Abri is one of them. Born on the corner of Haight and Ashbury, Greg took many trips to find enlightenment before arriving at Swiss l’Abri. Tired of experimenting with drugs, he found himself hungry for a place to fill his mind. He was weary of what the movement had become: the newly-termed “hippies” were now using drugs for a simple escape instead of deeper enlightenment. Greg didn’t want simple escape; he wanted answers. He found them at l’Abri. By then,

there were several branches. Now I'Abri is truly international with branches in Australia, Sweden, Holland, the U.S., Canada, South Korea, England, Germany, and Brazil.

It is in the Swiss branch I find Levertov. My roommate Val recommends a book of her poems, and I instantly connect with Levertov's mystical imagination, as if we are friends having a good conversation over a cup of tea, getting right to the heart of the matter with Levertov's precise words and musical tone. A nature-lover, Levertov studied epiphytes, which she later adopted as a metaphor for her own experience as a poet: "Epiphytes... grow upon other plants without taking nourishment from them. Deriving this from the air alone, they are called Air-plants. [Air-plants] thread-like or cord-like simple roots either adhere to the bark of the supporting tree, securing the plant in its position, or some hang loose in the air." For epiphytes to grow, they must cling tightly to a source, or their roots must hang loosely to receive dust particles and rain from the air. Most epiphytes flower, but ferns and Spanish moss, also epiphytes, cover tree canopies or the forest floor. Some begin their lives high in the forest canopy, their roots traveling down the trunk of a host tree over decades, eventually replacing the tree. If I share the essence of an epiphyte, I cling to a tree, praying that dust will be kicked up by the wind.

Within a family tree that included a Hassidic rabbi known to understand the language of birds, as well as a prophetic Welshman interestingly named Angel of Mold, Levertov was a hybrid of identities. Born an English citizen to non-English parents, Levertov's father was a Russian-Jew-turned-Anglican, and her mother was from a refined Welsh family. Of her parents she wrote, "My father's Hasidic ancestry,

his being steeped in Jewish and Christian scholarship and mysticism, his fervor and eloquence as a preacher, were factors built into my cells...Similarly, my mother's Welsh intensity and lyric feeling for Nature...were in the body I breathed with."

Levertov credited this rootlessness to the ability to identify with a common theme in American poetry—the search for self-identity. Even after her identity had been established as an American poet, Levertov wrote, "Although I own a house and have steady work, I am by nature, heritage, and as an artist, forever a stranger and a pilgrim."

On a small field on the side of the mountain where game after volleyball game is played, racing the dark, the moon rises, casting a glow on the snowy peaks. The sun melts away into the sky, forming peach, red, pink, and purple. Someone serves the ball, and eight pairs of bare feet, toes in the grass, brace themselves for the next play. The ball flies wildly to the left, over the fence, and hilarity ensues. Barefoot, someone runs painfully down the pebbled path to catch the ball before it goes over the side of the mountain. On break from the game, I feel the mountains' gaze, and I look unblinking at their rouged tips, craggy faces. I am finally able to take in the beauty, something I could not have, I now realize, until I belonged there. Now their tall peaks welcome me in the morning, and I sense God is there and this is our little secret. L'Abri is a place for restless pilgrims, a strong tree for epiphytes to cling and catch nutritious rain and dirt.

Virginia Woolf (Fall 2002)

In London in the early mornings I climb the stairs of the fire escape to the roof where I can be alone. I sit in the dark, expectant, a flashlight and matches in hand, and open the synthetic little Gideon Bible with the paper thin pages. I pray the Psalms, reading all of the words familiar and unfamiliar, asking God for protection from

enemies that come to destroy me, to overcome evil, I express delight in the trees of the fields I cannot see clapping their hands, ask God how much longer I will cry floods of tears, profess that the Lord is my shepherd. I am walking along the well-worn path of prayer King David had cleared thousands of years before. In the darkness above that ladder with a cup of tea, my spirit flies above the rooftops of London, past chimneys and peaks and marble arches, finding its way somewhere to a quiet place in Hyde Park, near Speaker's Corner. Where, in the soft sherbet colors of dawn, the soapboxes are ghostlike, where tracts and fliers lay discarded and swept away.

And then in the light of day, I climb down from the ladder and leave the flat, tracing in my run to where my spirit has flown, my feet following the path of the Marble Arch, down the Broad Walk, past the corner where Marx and Lenin watched and inspired worker's riots, calling it the English Revolution. Past disintegrated cigar butts and gallows erased from time and culture, but with the rope still hanging there, somehow. I run past the Serpentine, frightening ducks back into the river, past trees changing green leaves for brighter gold and fire-red hues, only to drop them, fallen leaves crunching underfoot. Back for more tea and breakfast, ready to begin the day, to wander down well-worn streets, past circuses and royal parks and black-clothed people looking fashionably forward.

I love these walks. Too poor for tube passes or bus tickets, in walking I am given a gift. A sort of forced slowness, to take in the world by short, quick steps and glances, to take in St. Bride's Church in twenty-five steps, to marvel at Christopher Wren's genius. I know my way all the way from London's northwest side of Marylebone Street and Regents Park, past the lions at Trafalgar Square, toward the

Thames, how to cross the Millennium Bridge and arrive at the Tate Modern. I hold in my stomach until I return to the flat, and know how to stave off hunger with peanut butter and Nutella sandwiches.

I am in London to study, and gravitate between two places, the British Museum and the British Library. The British Museum study room is a place that I always end up staring at for a good twenty minutes before I begin the day's work. Its polished wood gleams, and high rows of books inspire. The temptation used as reward is the national collection of books, manuscripts, and maps. If I am satisfied with the day's work, I allow myself to study the Magna Carta's funny, looped script, the kind where the s's look like f's, slowly passing the Gutenberg Bible, Lewis Carroll's first edition of Alice in Wonderland, and the early version of "Yellow Submarine" scribbled on a napkin. I am researching Virginia Woolf, my chosen author for an independent study. I consult a guide book and find her address, choosing a different route home that afternoon, a route that includes a walk through Kensington Park, in a section of London known as Bloomsbury Square.

I read Woolf's own words, and biographies about her words, her life in London, and walk in her park, noting grass and birds and moths differently than I before. Nature sings to Woolf as well. I imagine her hunting moths and butterflies with her friends, capturing them and putting them in her pockets, saving them for crucifixion by pins on a display board. I walk, knowing that she paid sharp attention to the details of nature in childhood, that somehow growing up in London wasn't enough. She would capture stones and put them in her pockets, and wade into the water, wishing to wash away her

despair. Like a mother's cool hand on a feverish child's forehead, Woolf would let the water pass over her.

But for now, this was her door, her gate, her world when she left the house in the morning, wishing she was a boy, demanding an education for her sharp mind, demanding freedom with her sexuality, demanding intellectual equal footing with her brothers and stepbrothers, possessing a gift for friendship, especially with her sister Vanessa, and writing life as she saw it: small, precise, lovely, and pain-filled. In the end, the pain trumped her earlier wonder, details of wings and antennae lost in the water.

Our families must pass down something to be inherited. The Woolfs, however intellectually stimulating lives they lived, left a hopelessness legacy for Virginia. There was despair after the death of Virginia's mother, Julia. There was despair after the death of sister Stella, a three-month's bride, despair mixed with calm acceptance at the end of Leslie Stephen's life. There was no comfort in religion, for it had been abandoned by Leslie in his schoolboy days at Cambridge, when he decided to give up a life as a clergyman to live a life of an academic. For then, it seems, one was at the exclusion of the other. Her two half-brothers, especially George, tried to acclimate his two beautiful half-sisters into polite London society, but they would have none of it. That sophisticated world seemed strange and lonely. Virginia wrote to her brother Thoby, a student at Cambridge, "Everything is stately and uncomfortable. I wish to goodness I could find myself a home."

Recycling (Summer 2005)

If I am still, I remember the sensation of the wind in my hair, lifting its brown strands and bringing it to a horizontal plane, moving like the sea. The ocean breeze parts the waves and breathes over my damp scalp. Here there is time to pull out thoughts from layered mounds, one by one. On the surface, I silently appreciate a cool scalp after spending a day digging through glass, plastic, and personal items washed up by the sea.

Then the rains come. Like a cup of water being poured out, the tiny island is being baptized by an unseen hand. My friends and I run for cover, the storm approaching the thatched restaurant where we sit, ordering coffee. The rains come in, horizontally, we are drenched, but laughing in short bursts in between breathes. This is a part of the adventure, part of the silent agreement three friends backpacking in Southeast Asia made to ourselves on the plane over the Pacific. We have one month, little money, passports hungry for stamps, and one philosophy: travel light, travel cheaply, and travel respectfully.

It was two months ago that we decided to go to the continent of Asia, to countries where the winds blew us. Once our month is over, we will leave Lindsay behind in Indonesia to teach English. The three of us don't have a clear idea of where we're going or what we're looking for; we know we want to explore, to see what's out there, to have these days together. We arrive in Singapore, and make our way up the east coast of Malaysia, across rope walks and down rivers on narrow wooden speedboats through the Teman Negara forest. We pass water buffalo, lumbering out of the dense forest walls to drink at the water's edge, blinking with surprise as we speed

by, until we arrive at the Perhentian Islands. After three nearly sleepless nights because there is no breeze to cool our sweating skin, and two breathtaking but shadeless days on its beaches, we cross the Malaysian border into Thailand on foot. We are the only westerners, the only uncovered women, and the only travelers. We are followed by strange well-dressed men who repeat a bizarre script: Who are you? Where are you from? What are you doing? Can I buy you a drink? Like a drunk at a bar, the men will not be ignored, so we resort to leaving on the first available bus, to a seaside town called Krabi.

Krabi Town has the best night markets in Thailand. There, free from questions and surrounded by other backpackers, we feast on seafood kabobs cooked over open fires, the flames leaping into the sky like fire dancers; the small round lights swinging overhead; the laughter of the friendly locals, sounding like the tinkling of glass bottles, brighter than the swinging lights. In Krabi we discover the plight of Kho Phi Phi Don. The island had been decimated during the devastating December of the tsunamis that killed tens of thousands of people in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Indonesia. Half of Kho Phi Phi's population had been swept away in one fatal tidal wave. When the waves hit, people one moment drinking their morning coffee or renting a boat for the day found themselves swirling underwater. Salt, sand, and debris filled homes and lungs as they gasped for air pockets. People walking outside on land found themselves under the sea, in a whirlpool of bodies, sinks, boats, broken glass. The survivors, mostly nationals trying to make their living by tourism, find themselves trying to cope with the enormous loss as well as feed their families on a tsunami-devastated island.

We have arrived in a community of sorts. People greet each other, waving across streets, meeting for dinner as if they are old friends or neighbors. Most of the people, bands of backpackers we learn, have only been here for a few days or weeks. They have joined Hi Phi Phi, a tsunami relief organization. One of Hi Phi Phi's founders was a tourist swept into a retention pond. Her body was tossed under a rush of water, and unable to find her way out of the wave, she stuck out her hand, trying to find air. Two men running by saw a small hand waving wildly...reached over, and pulled her out. Those three survivors were the ones that began Hi Phi Phi, an organization appealing to visiting backpackers to help recreate a viable and thriving island, as well as to spend their money at local businesses. This part of the world is wounded, in need of healing and generosity. Well-meaning backpackers flock here, anxious to find a purpose in the middle of their backpacking adventures. We are three of those backpackers. Another is Mohammad.

We are impressed with Mohammad's work ethic from the start. Tall and good-looking, he strolls tirelessly through the streets of Kho Phi Phi, chatting with the locals and avoiding the pretty backpackers working in skimpy bikinis who stop and try to flirt with him. One day, at the end of our work, he motions for the three of us to follow him as he joins the local men for a game of soccer. The guys play amidst the rubble of the old Kho Phi Phi, dodging glass and broken tiles as the ball is passed from player to player, and absorbed in the game, the men have a chance to forget for a moment. As Mohammad stops for a rest, he sits down and asks why we've come.

I start with the usual. Lindsey teaching in Indonesia, three friends in search of adventure, the beginnings of an often told story people usually buy.

“I’m here because of my faith,” he says, nodding knowingly, his eyes following the players on the field, his body briefly tensing as a defender on his team kicks the ball away from the goal. “I found it pointless to try to live life in Canada without serving the poor. Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam, giving to the poor and needy. I wanted to do this in a full, tangible way. So I’m here.”

“I think I understand,” I say. “We’re here for a purpose as well. And in the end, what really matters?” I am afraid to say that my faith teaches that we must love as Jesus loved, that showing up and recycling glass, plastic, and garbage is one way to do that. I am afraid to say Jesus, afraid to offend him. I am used to speaking in masked language, conscious that for many, words like Jesus, the Bible, Christianity, or belief are sometimes conversation killers. More than anything, I want our conversation to continue.

“The end, huh?” He smiles. “What is after the end? Does time even exist as we think it does?” Before I know it, the conversation quickly shifts from the personal to the philosophical, a discussion about reality and the existence of time. He throws out names and philosophical movements that are hazy in my mind; I cannot articulate my beliefs the way he does. It seems as though he is describing a structure, the height and depth, materials and blueprints detailed in his memory. My structures of thought are impressionist at best: reflections on water, wavy lines and colors, blueprints and details out of reach. I have to tap out before the intellectual wrestling match is over. The travelers I’ve met are interested in good questions, and whenever we talk, I felt a pull of a string that somehow connects them to me. It takes a special kind of person to want to discuss the existence of time.

Time passes slowly, on this island. The days seem longer than days, the weeks longer than weeks. A Dutch girl named Maike and I work next to each other; she chats easily, telling me about HR work and Psychology; about nude beaches and the ridiculousness of Americans' embarrassment with the human body. She teaches me simple Dutch words, easy-to-remember words like brood and fleur. How tasty Dutch brood is, and how beautiful the fleurs can be in Spring. How she loves to travel, but has never wished to permanently live outside of Holland. Holland is thuis. "What about you?" she asks. "Ever wish to live elsewhere?"

For not the first time, I am aware of this American shame of not knowing another language. "I don't know," I say. "But your English is awesome. It makes me want to leave America, live somewhere else. Like London. I love London."

"But Erin, where is your home?" I cannot answer her directly, and tell her about parts of Florida that seem like home, tell her about family roots in Oklahoma. Tell her what I believe. And as I say it, I realize that what I am saying I am saying aloud for the first time.

Maike tells me, "You know, what you believe is really beautiful. I almost wish I could believe it."

I stutter, "But you can, Maike. Why can't you?"

Her eyes widen and she almost yells, "I can't. There is no way, Erin. My father would never speak to me after that. He was raised very strictly, feeling what's the word, guilt about all things; he hated it. I was raised to be free of all religion. He would feel as if he failed. No, I cannot do that to my own father." She stands up and walks away.

At night, tired from the day's work of picking up endless piles of garbage, glass, plastic, and tile under the scalding sun, we bathe in the island water pumped from the retention pond and poured into a red plastic bucket, and make our way to Harry's Bar. We sit drinking beers on blankets under the stars with the small community we've developed through our recycling program, and listen to live music under the glow of fire from torches. Charlie, just a nineteen-year-old kid from Perth, Australia, walks up to us. "God, I'm so nervous." One of his purposes in traveling the world before returning to Perth is to overcome his shyness, he's confessed as we worked on our recycling program that day. He has played guitar for years, but never in front of a live audience. The three of us talked him into performing. "It's time," I tell Charlie. "If you neva do it now, ya neva will," I say in my best Australian. With Harry's permission Charlie will perform tonight, playing two or three of his own songs, and two or three covers. I smile at the way Charlie is downing his liquid courage. I don't blame him.

After Charlie's entertaining session, amid loud cheers, the fire dancers come out, swinging torches, circling the living, breathing flames around their dark bodies. Maike's face is beautifully lit by the moon and the fires, and Mohammad is never far away, standing in the shadows, arms crossed, never sitting, listening to the music being borne on the back of the wind on its way out to sea.

And then too soon, our last day on the island has come. We decide to enjoy the last meal in a newly rebuilt outdoor restaurant just reopened. The walls are full of pictures of the volunteers who rebuilt it, and I'm sure our friends' faces grace the wall. Mohammad joins us that morning for banana pancakes and coffee. As we eat, the usually quiet Mohammad begins to tell us about himself. As if the weather can sense the

heightening drama, the winds pick up, lifting our hair and suddenly, mid-summer monsoon rain pours down. He continues his story as we finish the pancakes and sip the coffee, whipped by wind and rain.

Mohammad's story begins in Iran. He grew up privileged, learning Farsi and English, attending a Muslim school and learning Islam before moving on to Canada. There he learned French, and once he finished university, he began his trek around the world as a commitment to Islam. His journey began at the base camp of Everest, and continued on to Calcutta, India, where he spent thirty-six days in Mother Theresa's House of the Dying. He worked alongside nuns caring for dying men, lifting them, bathing them, a practical love shown to the socially outcast in their final days. "Here I was, working alongside these little Catholic nuns, and when my thirty-six days were up, I told them I must go. To thank me, one of the nuns pulled me aside and told me she had a gift for me, but first would I tell her my name. I hesitated, for she was about to give me a cross on a chain. I told her my name, a dead giveaway to my faith, and without hesitating she pressed the cross into my hand. There was something in her eyes, I don't know." His eyes lower as he turns his head toward us. "I see what was in her eyes in your eyes."

From all over the globe, from Australia to Holland, from Iran to the U.S., those of us who wander in our wanderings are like children across the fence with tin can telephones. And somehow, I figure, we are all looking for a safe place to rest. Our travels are more than searching for unknown places, more than anything, I think we are trying to make sense of the known. Who were we and where have we come from? Can we get clearer glimpses of home and family life through new experiences halfway

around the world? What will we discover of ourselves as we dig through the island's debris?

Sisterhood (Spring 2010)

My friend Mary Ann and I meet for coffee over Christmas. In the forty-five minutes of caffeine-propelled chatting, Mary Ann gives me Christmas gifts of orange-flavored and orange-scented things, because Mary Ann was the woman I met for coffee to talk about inspiration and writer's block. And when I tell her of the sinewy toughness in my writing, formal phrasings and cliché sayings that seem to pop up as a protective covering, a hard shell with soft, vulnerable insides, she is the one who suggests metaphor as a pathway back to the heart. I met Mary Ann in grad school last fall. As fellow students and teaching assistants we sit sipping lattes, tucking student papers into our bags before pulling out our own writing to share. We discuss the idea of metaphor, of how an image can represent so much. Our search for God unites us. As does our writing and untamed hair.

We have at least a twenty year age difference, with Mary Ann in the lead. As she has aged, she has grown more fashionable, more eccentric. Her hair is her trademark, a lion's mane. She wears things that look like Haitian voodoo dolls dangling from her earlobes. They might very well be Haitian voodoo dolls. Heavy necklaces that look like ropes of sugared pears grace her neck, above button down blouses with many of the top buttons unbuttoned, always jeans, often scarves, and those shoes that are convex in the soles, designed to tone your rear. When she speaks, she punctuates her sentences with oh my God, and laughter, and fuck. She gestures wildly with a cigarette in one hand. She has a Peter Pan physique. Her mind is so fluid that I often expect wires

suspended from the sky to take her up into the air, fly her to Neverland. She doesn't belong in Boca. When she writes, Mary Ann gets quiet and focuses on details and words, transforming into a teacher. She hears connections in written pieces like a deaf Beethoven leaning down to feel the vibrations of his piano. In short, Mary Ann is a lyrical genius, like some poets I know. And she was brought up as a dysfunctional Catholic, so she is skeptical of the church. But she has an idea.

The story spills out. There has been an e-mail, one that sounds like the beginnings of a lowbrow joke. A nun, a prison ministry for women, and an article Mary Ann wrote in her newspaper days called "The Joy of Crying" have converged and created an opportunity to lead a writing workshop for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. Mary Ann tells me about the nun, a certain Sister Louise, who has asked her to lead a writing workshop for Sister Louise's women-in-transition at a Catholic ministry called Bethany House. We will be traveling to Orange, California.

The parking in front of the large, four-storied, columned building I learn is called the Motherhouse, is marked with a sign which reflects the status of my current relational life: "Sisters Only." Mary Ann and I find this all delightful and are still posing for pictures next to the sign when Sister Louise comes out to meet us. Extending her arms, Sister Louise embraces Mary Ann and me. She's tall and her bosom is familiar-aunt soft. Sister Louise and Mary Ann dance in one another's arms like two lost friends.

I marvel at Sister Louise's baby blue pantsuit and carefully feathered and hair-sprayed salt and pepper hair, accented by black tennis shoes with thick, comfortable soles. Among my first thoughts is that Sister Louise does not—no never—have sex.

Nuns haven't worn habits since Pope John Paul XXIII made the rules a little looser for the Catholic Church in the sixties. I am disappointed. Habits communicate a great deal, I think, chastity being one of them. In fact, habits trumpet chastity very loudly. Pant suits, while modest, are less telling. Over cafeteria trays of iced tea in plastic cups, flat chicken breasts, and a proportionately cut salad, I ask Sister Louise about the habits.

“Do you miss them?”

“Well, it's definitely more comfortable this way.”

“Is it easier for you to blend in with society in a pantsuit? People don't know you're a nun.”

“Sister,” she corrects me. “Yes, but before the rules changed you'd be surprised at how many of the sisters took advantage. One of us would be driving and get pulled over, knowing if we wore the habit the officer would be likely to say, ‘Sorry, Sister,’ and let us off. The habits had their perks but it just wasn't honest.”

This puts a new spin on things.

After dinner, Mary Ann and I are shown into our rooms in the Motherhouse. The Motherhouse is a four-storied building, built and paid for by St. Joseph's Hospital, which adjoins the Motherhouse property. St. Joseph's Hospital was established by the Sisters of St. Joseph, a recent link on a long chain of historical events. The Sisters have a fascinating history, beginning with the Sisters of St. Joseph daring to come out of hiding from the traditional cloistered life to be active in the seventeenth century French communities, providing medical care in people's homes. During the French Revolution, the sisters were scattered; some went back into hiding, some were imprisoned, and some were even executed by Robespierre's guillotine. Those who survived transplanted

to the United States, where the first Sisters of Joseph establishment was in Carondelet, Missouri. The sisters established themselves 310 miles east of St. Joseph, Missouri, nearly fifty years before the death of Jesse James.

St. Joseph's Hospital is impressively brick and sturdy, surrounded by soul-soothing gardens, as beautiful as gardens can be in southern California. The branches of the orange trees are weighed down by their fruit like ornaments on a Douglas fir, newborn gardenias blooms push through delicate leaves, the bright fuchsia of a bougainvillea crawls over terra cotta rooftops. The bottom floor houses the guest rooms in which we're staying, and the hallway opens into the lobby. Off to the side there is a museum room, a holy grail of St. Joseph of the Orange paraphernalia, and then a room with a mid-eighties California beach house feel. Peaches and teals overwhelm the room but the saving grace is a beautiful black Steinway.

The fourth floor is called the Bethany House. There are pillars in the hallway which I think were intended to give the women a semblance of dignity, but which instead remind me of certain television evangelist programs where a man with the tall hair is sitting on a golden chair between two marble pillars and asking all of the dear old people to open up their wallets and their pensions to donate toward more marble pillars. There is a schedule and a sign-in sheet in the entryway, keeping track of the women's comings and goings.

Mary Ann and I have brought donated clothes, beautiful suits given by friends, elegant brands with the tags still on, clothes of all sizes and shapes and colors, clothes that we ourselves wouldn't mind wearing. The women in transition need these clothes to begin a new life, to interview for a new job or attend a family celebration for the first

time in years. We set up a makeshift store in the middle of the wide hallway, spreading the scarves over clotheslines from the laundry room, hanging suits and dresses on metal clothing racks. There are dainty-women dresses and less dainty-women dresses; sensible shoes and less-sensible shoes. Sister Louise comes down the hallway and joins in by putting outfits together. “That scarf with that skirt...oh, what a nice pantsuit. We do like our women to feel beautiful, this is just fantastic.” I glance over Sister Louise’s pantsuit of the day (peach polyester—lighter on the hairspray today) and am startled by the fact that Sister Louise knows a good scarf and skirt when she sees one, yet because of her vows, chooses the pantsuit.

That night over another cafeteria tray of lasagna and lemonade, and in between crunching bites of an apple, I ask Sister Louise about her decision to take her vows.

“I was a farm girl. My parents were devoutly Catholic. All of the people I admired were Catholic. I admired the sisters who led our young people’s group. They had so much joy and were always having fun and I thought, I want to live this kind of life. Plus, I wanted to do ministry and travel, and at the time, for women, taking your vows were the only way to do that, to see the world. It’s not like that so much anymore.”

“How old were you when you decided?”

“Eighteen!” She has that guilty look of those parents of my friends who married right out of high school. “So young! But I just—knew.”

The sisters around her nod.

I look around. There are sweet faces, and there are less-sweet faces. A few are in wheelchairs. I can tell they love one another, love this simple life. The table next to ours

is having a celebration. It is Sister Therese's birthday, a day she has celebrated for over forty years here in St. Joseph's Motherhouse. There is a red tablecloth and purple napkins. A balloon is tied to the birthday girl's chair. A pizza, Sister Therese's favorite, has been baked for tonight's celebration and tall glasses of strawberry shortcake are served. The sisters sit in comfortable silence until someone says something to make the table to laugh uproariously.

“Do you ever worry about the shrinking numbers of women taking vows?”

“Oh yes, of course. The numbers are much smaller, and the amount of elderly sisters we have in assisted living are growing. Every year, we lose a sister. It's really difficult living in a community where so many are elderly.”

For the first time, Sister Louise's demeanor is not exuberant. Her lively eyes dim.

I wonder about the trends, the ebbs and flows of taking vows and sisterhood. Early in the morning, I explore the lobby museum for answers. There is a cute little nun-doll, outfitted in a traditional habit. The plaque next to her explains the history of habits. There are dog-eared, black and white photographs of the original Sisters of St. Joseph, chastely habit-clad, and traveling to the wilds of California from Chicago. In this black and white photo they have constructed a wooden two storied house with a wraparound porch smothered in bougainvillea and stand smiling on the porch. Upon closer look, one sister is climbing the tree out front. In another photograph the sisters are posing, some of them serious, a small group in the corner of the photo looking as though they might erupt into laughter. I know their kind. They were sitting at Sister Therese's table, looking naughtily over at us after making some murmured joke and

dissolving into giggles. In one picture frame, I spy Sister Louise's youthful face in the lithe, tanned body of a young woman. She is wearing a short-sleeved shirt, paddling a hand-hewn canoe alongside native people in tropical waters. Her eyes are alive and bright, and she is smiling at the leather-skinned man smiling right back at her. There is an island with palms in the distance. There is also a plaque next to the photograph.

"I lived in Papua, New Guinea for twenty years when I first took my vows. I loved it there. Was so sad to leave. But...there is good work for me to do here, too."

"You look like you're in your element."

"I would return if they asked me."

Mary Ann and I sit in peach armchairs in the Hawaiian print shirt room of the Motherhouse. The Steinway sits silently nearby, its lid closed. I find myself wishing someone would play. As the women enter the room, I realize my surprise. They are unexpectedly beautiful. I expected them to wear their history like habits, picturing visual scars and bruises, downcast faces, tired eyes. Instead, they wear vibrant colors of rose and Indian teal, reds and cornflower blues. They extend their hands when I introduce myself and we clasp hands like little girls. As the introductions are made and the stories begin, I am terrified they will find out who I really am: a young woman privileged with education and a stable family, unscathed except for a heart-wrenching end to a promising relationship. Mary Ann nods at me, and we begin. We start by introducing ourselves. We are from Florida, and we couldn't be more excited to be there with them. We mean every word.

The power point glows on the screen and Mary Ann and I begin our talk. We talk about words and essence, trying to find the word that describes the basic, real, and

constant parts of us. We pass out the trendy journals and colorful pens and ask the women to write about their essence, to describe it in a word. The women don't hesitate to share. Round and round the circle the words come, forming stories, creating small whirlwinds at times, while at the center of it all a small calm prevails. I am hawk. I am lamb. Some of them are virtues. I am wisdom, I am patience. We learn that one of the women, once homeless, curled up to sleep in a cemetery night after night. Sister Louise leads the way, carefully paddling the conversation into delicate waters.

Mary Ann and I decide to take the women out into the gardens to photograph the women's essences. Rae is in my group. A little younger than my own mother, Rae talks tough, like a rancher. I learn she loves music, plays piano and guitar, and writes her own lyrics. I take pictures of Rae, bending near a statue, grasping the statue's hand. She laughs and chatters, tosses her hair and touches palm fronds and the great, waxy leaves of a magnolia tree. Catherine is dressed in cornflower blue, the same color of her eyes and wears very bright red lipstick, a reminder that sixty can be pretty. Sister Louise joins in the action, laughing and chatting on a bench, quick to point out a camellia bush or a stray beetle. The garden is full of women, out for an afternoon of play, looking for signs of their essence.

Back inside the Motherhouse, a power point is created with the women's words and photographs. Rae opens the Steinway's lid and improvises, playing her own strange music to accompany the sound of women reading words that form who they are and where they've been. I note that there is no longer a hawk present, and we ask dark-haired Desiree about this change: "I'm Native American, and we often pick animals to describe our essence. A hawk is strong and bold and independent, and I see myself this

way. I've raised my daughter by myself. I've been through a lot. I've survived a lot. But as we talked this afternoon, and after walking through the garden, I spotted a hummingbird. I realized that although I'm strong and brave, I'm not a predator. And I'm not as independent as I would like to think. I need God. I need the stories I've heard today, and I need these other women to be strong myself. So, I'm fast and beautiful but need nourishment. I'm a hummingbird."

Desiree's transformation is passed from face to face in the group, a flame catching pieces of paper until everyone is lit with its meaning. We sit in silence, soaking in the experience of the day. I realize with wonder that together, we are sipping of the stories of each other. And each sip revives me. The Caretaker of the garden has been hard at work. We, together, are not afraid. We have survived whatever we've survived only to become stronger and paradoxically, softer. Hawk to hummingbird.

4) FLORIDA SOIL

Seeds of the Day

Once I make something a discipline, and it's a good discipline, full of health and flickering treasure underneath the boring 'to do' list of the day, I find myself needing it. I need to wake, to remember a larger perspective than my own. I need to see myself as smaller, lying there on the bed, small but significant. I need light in the mornings, a tiny light to keep out the darkness, a candle or a lamp next to the floor or chair, a shelter. This is a habit learned from my London days. I need to make a short pilgrimage across the room to sit and read something that reminds me of the parade, to sip something hot is nice, and then I need to write. To write, always, what can only be written by me. No matter where I am.

Even if it's in Florida. But it can't stop with the me who's sitting, light flickering, sipping something hot; no, I must write something, must participate in something that flies out windows and blows the roof off the house, or give off a scent that sneaks under doorways and cracks in the wall, and joins the smell of the outside world. And what are words, but movements of the heart translated into images in the mind and given feet and allowed to travel.

Each day has a centrality, a seed that carries within it the pattern of the day, the emotion, the mood, the color by which I will judge, think, and speak until I drive home in the dark, eat a meal, read a book or talk on the phone, and transform into a night creature, my wrinkled pajamas pulled from beneath my pillow, pulled over my head, as

my body slides under the covers, disappearing from view. The seed grows into something that flowers and wilts by the time the sky darkens and I lay down to sleep. This is no cause for alarm, for a new seed will germinate throughout the night and appear in the morning in the form of a stalk, rising with the sun.

This is how it usually is, this pattern of the damp days of Florida, woven together with seeds not cultivated here, but in other places. The morning alarm, something classical. In the mornings my body creaks along with the old wooden bed, rousing my muscles, my first toss of a seed into this day's soil is the seed of prayer. Sometimes I cannot catch my thoughts soon enough, seeds dropped in the night from dream-plants plague me, those black-clothed creatures I wish to keep behind the scenes, but who turn up on stage as the main act. The person I love speaks harshly to me, or I am unable to control my classroom, or my teeth fall out or I am naked. The rope with which I've been trying to hold my life together unravels, and the many parts spill out helter skelter onto the stage. The audience is frightened. They stand where they are, and some leave. I am just learning that these dreams expose something real inside of me, something ugly and controlling, and I am learning to trust the director behind the curtain, rather than study the features of my audience to tell me if I'm worth something or not.

But if I do speak a prayer as soon as I'm conscious, even if my eyes are closed, a seed of trust is planted for the day, the sense that there is something larger beyond my awareness or what I can control gives me a semblance of peace, no matter the dreams. I open my eyes, either because I'm frightened of what I must accomplish, or compelled by the reminder that some great work is about to be done, despite of its improbability of

being measured as great by others, and my covers fly off. As my feet plod the pavement rhythmically, my mind goes to a creative space. Metaphors come to mind as I run, they always come. Today, for a moment, I explored an old chalet I knew because I once polished and dusted and swept every inch of it. Hundreds of years old, the chalet seemed to sway and creak, a living thing that breathed in and out as I walked up its steps or opened its doors, or cleaned the windows that framed the Alps.

Reminded of the view I once knew, I search for beauty in the now, the next seed. My drives to work are wholly devoted to beauty, and I take the long way, winding down my way along the coast, past mansions and across narrow necks of land between intercoastal and ocean, through tropical green tunnels past golf courses and condos. I love these tunnels most, and feel as if I can really breathe in them, as if the oxygen from the vines and Australian pines can seep through my skin and invade my lungs. I love days when it rains here, the skies fill with water, such heavy-humid-gray skies, and finally, buckets full, they overturn and release heavy drops of rain, purifying the air for a few minutes, washing away the stale humidity and polishing the plants into a pink and green vividness.

Those moments fill something, and Julian of Norwich speaks as she often does, “All is well and all is well and all manner of things shall be well.” My drives are full of endless thinking and analysis, and the beauty must be humbled by what is true. Even the word truth is a word that causes the head to tilt, heavy with thoughtful skepticism. It’s easily discarded as a Romantic term, given a capital T by those who wondered about inscriptions on Grecian urns. We know better by now. Nothing pure or good or beautiful exists as simply pure or good or beautiful. Truth exists in a different form for

everybody, and we are taught how to view things by cultural cues. But there are certain things that I know, just know must be certain truths for all of us, and among them is that wisdom or carefully-formed opinions do not come about through shortcuts and bytes.

At the university, my students want the simple formula, the carefully constructed outline, a Mad Lib. The less thinking they have to do, the better. The quicker the answer will jump into their fingers and fly out of them onto the keyboard as they type their papers, the better. They do not wish to discuss with their peers or consult the text again. They want the A to magically appear at the fingertips as they type. And they get frustrated when this does not happen. I hope I have outgrown this. I used to want the meaning to magically appear, wanted to communicate easily with a reader. I now struggle through words and metaphors and meaning. I am learning how to write as unselfconsciously as a child, and then quickly age thirty years and critique what has been written. As for my students, to challenge and to complicate their ideas and think and wonder just outside of their own understanding, to get them to reach out and ask their classmates and teacher good questions is my mission. My mission reminds me to live outside of my own experiences a little too, a very important balancing act. Otherwise, I would not be able to balance at all, and my act would suddenly end. Writing, I think, and teaching, is the long pole I hold in the middle as one foot carefully steps in front of the other across the tightrope high above the ground.

There's a trust, somehow, that no matter where I am, what is human in me will speak to what is human in the reader. And what gives me the right to bring it under the scrutiny of a flickering candle, and a little shove out the door, is the fact that I'm doing it. When I write out of necessity, I write good, life-giving things, because I forget

myself. When I write out of obligation or pressure, I write things with walls and roofs, things that can't live beyond the deadline, things that live for the approval of others, instead of out of their appreciation for the grand parade they get to march in.

How does Joan Didion take me to the places she goes? She uses dialogue, I guess, and doesn't forget a detail, and loves the solitary time of writing. But even more so, I think the undercurrents of sadness and despair in all of her writings come from a place that gives her writing this gift of inclusion and familiarity. An acute sensitivity, like she's walking around as frail as she looks, that her skin, her being absorbs everything around it, sponges it up, retains it, absorbs it, and then her writing is just a way to squeeze some of it out so that she doesn't have to carry it around anymore.

Maybe I have chosen to have thicker skin. Maybe absorbing it all is too scary for me. Maybe I am a coward. Maybe my intuition is stronger than my ability to remember sensory details. What meaning I ascribe to the details is more important to me than the details themselves. It is the hidden world of intuition that I try to communicate to the reader, rather than letting the details speak for themselves, arranging them in a way as to give the reader the cues he needs to come to his own conclusions. In this way, I serve both as observer and interpreter. Didion is observer, and she uses her details as invitations for the reader to interpret for herself. This is inclusive, and courageous. It takes a lot more courage, because there is room for more misunderstanding. And how I hate to be misunderstood.

Writing must straddle the fence of personal intimacy, what is unique and particular to me; on the other side, figments of paparazzi and politicians must be able to line up and identify with what I've just written. In this way, writing feels like living in a

dollhouse with one side of my home cut away so that big noses and eyes can peer through and study me living life the way I have chosen to live it. And I must not mind the judgment, but live it anyway. This is a people pleaser's fight.

By the time that day's plant wilts, there is often some feeling of satisfaction, and some feeling of homesickness. I think I will feel this way until I die. I long to return to some sort of comfort, and this is where my routines or familiar objects fail me. The cookie jar cannot transform into my grandmother, only represent her. The Dutch artist's painting of an old man in prayer cannot transform into my father's childhood playroom where it hung for many years. I cannot conjure up a family, or will a book into existence. My security, instead, must rest in an only-imagined place, with truth coexists with beauty, mission is imperative, and home is permanent, unchanging. All of the seeds planted within my day are only beginnings of this, and somewhere, through green tunnels with no end, a place where seeds, well-planted, grow into flowers that turn to face the sun as it rises.

Pilgrims

Here in Florida I teach college writing, and one of the concepts I want my students to inherit is the idea that every word has a weight to it, a density and substance that varies from word to word. As Mark Twain famously wrote in a letter to his friend George Bainton, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." The slight variance of use carries within it a different power, a different light, and a different weight.

Words have associations. I experimented with this while teaching high school English. And Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* was one of my favorite twists. I loved announcing the new unit and watching seventeen and eighteen year old students' faces blandly regarding the page in the textbook with "The Canterbury Tales" written in Olde English script and a bad textbook painting of a knight on the top of the page. I loved daring them to test its cultural relevancy. Thirty pilgrims on a journey to the shrine of Thomas a Becket, the eleventh century martyr. Thirty very different pilgrims. Chaucer's caricatures were written for more than entertainment. They were a social commentary, a gift of insight into how greedy, petty, trifle, pious, and wonderful human beings can be. Every time I read *The Canterbury Tales*, I was surprised by how little humanity has really changed. These thirty wanderers: old and young, male and female, rich and poor, intelligent and stupid, driven and lazy, every aspect of society you can imagine, traveling together. As different as they are, they share a like-minded vision. *Canterbury or Bust*.

Words inspire and feed. Depending on the color, texture, and flavor, they delight and satisfy. At times words leave us hungry. I find the texture and density of pilgrim as dense and as heavy as porridge, filling but at times palatably unsatisfying, depending upon who is eating. Is pilgrim a porridge being served to a starving man or a king used to strawberries and cream? Is a pilgrim a poor outcast, clinging to the faraway promise of a King and a Kingdom to which he belongs? Or is a pilgrim a sort of king himself, giving up his pursuits and pleasures in exchange for something he cannot buy, some sort of richness within? A pilgrim, I find, is one who journeys in strange and unfamiliar lands; one who seeks something past the soil of his homeland.

Pilgrim takes on a new weight, a new flavor and satisfying fullness after a particularly heart-breaking year of family cancer diagnoses, funerals, and a broken relationship with a man I had planned to marry. I had everything I needed to write well: in a guest bedroom in my parents' home, I found myself scrambling to make some sense out of life, fighting not to emotionally implode. I had my ancient laptop and shards of prospects. I was a pilgrim in a long line of seeker-worshippers, making my way to some holy place, holding nothing but words. My instinct to use my fingertips in an attempt to create order and cohesion out of chaos and confusion, signified that my life was possible of being created anew. I clung to the hope that through my words, my life could be upcycled, a work of art.

As I wrote alone, the door and windows closed, I became aware of the company I kept: I followed St. Paul, who wrote most of his epistles from a dungeon in Rome. Boethius and Machiavelli also wrote their best works while locked up. Thomas Malory wrote *Morte d'Arthur* in prison. Ezra Pound worked on his *Cantos* while court-ordered to an insane asylum. Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* while in debtor's prison. Sir Walter Raleigh, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela all wrote letters conceiving or outlining their best ideas while incarcerated by the government. All were considered poor and as outcasts by many during their lifetimes, but are revered as kings by most in ours. All were travelers with purpose, in the service of a movement larger than themselves.

Mr. Pilgrim himself, John Bunyan, wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* while in prison for preaching Puritan sentiments in a Church-of-England dominated culture. Born in a class equivocated with that of gypsies, Bunyan was simple, lowly, ordinary. He briefly

attended school, married a woman whose only dowry was two books, and even lacked basic eating utensils, John Bunyan began married life with only words for nourishment. After a conversion experience and four years of inner turmoil, Bunyan decidedly clung to Nonconformist, militant Puritanism and was arrested for preaching “blasphemy” in the fields. Yet, if it wasn’t for prison, Bunyan wouldn’t have written *Pilgrim’s Progress*, only second to the Bible as an all-time bestseller. That is the grace of a broken heart and less-than-ideal circumstances, an increased need to find my voice where I would have otherwise stayed in contented silence. The beginnings of things are sometimes sung from prison cells.

In *The Canterbury Tales* days of teaching, I announced, “We’re going to do something different at the beginning of class today.” I am twenty-two, barely four years older than some of my students, with strange, professional clothes hanging on my body. I am strict this year, terrified that the beachy college girl of last year shows through the cardigan and dress pants.

“Today in your journals, you will be writing from a ‘spark.’ For this test, you need your imagination, and honesty. Be as honest with your descriptions as possible. Go with your instincts, with what comes to mind first.” Dramatic pause. “This first day, you are walking in the woods. The woods are however you want them to look, the path before you however you picture it. You walk down the path and see a...”

Every day that object changed from a bear to a key to a body of water to a dwelling. The students are then asked to “describe the object and then the actions that follow.” These objects, it turns out, are Freudian cues, images that give insight into the personality of the imaginer. I began using these journal ‘sparks’ as rewards, and was

rewarded myself by rows of bent and silent students, so intent on finishing their work so that were a self-disciplining machine—”Shhh! Be quiet so we can take the Psychology Test!”

“You are walking through the woods and you see...a dwelling, a house of some kind. Describe the house and tell what you do.” I was a student myself when the test was first administered. I rested in the sanctuary of my imagination as I described what I saw, forgetting to be self-conscious. A small, white-washed, concrete house appeared in the middle of a clearing. The woods turned into autumn woods, with dead leaves around the outside of the building. The building was small, washed pure white, with red-painted trim around the square, pane-less windows, and a rectangular doorway. There were four sides, two doorways on opposite sides, two square windows on opposite sides. Because there were no doors or panes of glass, the crisp autumn air feely blew in, scattering a few leaves across the simple concrete floor. In the middle of the floor was a water pump, painted the same, bright true red as the window and door trim. Its water, I imagined, was clear and cold and refreshing, but I did not know because I did not stay.

The House

On my morning runs, dodging deviant palm fronds and people walking dogs, I think of things to write about. I worry that my best ideas come then, that I will never be able to remember them again. It is then that I think of my mind as a house, built on the side of a hill so it has a tilt. It is built in the style of old Florida houses, plank board, with a breezeway...the wind blew through one the open door at the front of the room, through the house out the back door. Things, ideas, memories, blow through the house, and the only items that stay are ones that catch themselves on the spider webs of ideas

that have been lying in the room the longest: the themes of my mind. I would be sure to remember, based upon the things that had been in the room the longest, the items I kept coming back to, the items that meant the most to me. Those are the ones that stay in place, those are the ones the friendly spiders choose to wave their gossamer webs around, sticky filaments, and catch the thoughts that threaten to roll or fly out the backdoor, never to be seen again. Now I relax more on my runs. I know that the sticky webs surrounding the symbols that matter most to me will be caught, and will stay, at least long enough for me to return home and untangle the items from the web, considering what I've found, holding it up to the light. I will have time to decide to let it blow across the floor and out the door, or to put it on my mantle and to write it about it later.

“You're walking through the woods and you see something, a vase, lying in the path. Describe it. What do you do with it?”

The vase is made of hand-blown glass, a beautiful, cobalt blue, transparent. It has a tall, slender shape, and there is some dust in the corners of the vase, down at the bottom. Something once was placed here. It gives me an idea, that small remnant of brown, dried bloom. I hold the vase in both hands, carry it home. I set it down gently on the kitchen table as I go out to pick blue hydrangeas, pink roses, purple foxgloves. I fill the vase halfway with water, add the flowers, and place the vase up on my mantle.

“The vase is your spouse.”

At the time, I had miles to walk before considering a spouse. Even so, my mind filled with the possibilities. The vase was masculine, yet sensitive. It had been used before, by somebody else. Yet that did not bother me. I was mostly in awe of my bold

actions, in awe that I had found and kept the vase, had taken it home, filled it with beauty, and put it in a place of respect.

It is over ten years later, and I am dating a man who lives six time zones ahead of me. He is one of the best people I've ever met, and I am hopeful, but it is scary to be hopeful in the uncertainty of six time zones. We have one hundred and ten hours of Skype conversations. He met my brother and sister in law, two nieces and nephew. His face was on the screen, and Katie prepped the kids by showing a globe. "There's Florida. And alllllllllll the way across the Atlantic Ocean, up up and over, that's the Netherlands!"

After the screen darkened and the front door opened, full of possibilities for pretend world my five-year-old niece and I were about to enter, she asked me, "Do you think he is the one you will marry?" I felt myself back on that path, picking up the vase as blue as his eyes. "He lives very far away," was my answer. And then, a surge of courage. "But maybe. I hope so."

Dreams

Today is delicious, and my skin rises to greet it with goose bumps. I sit in that fact, the fact that I am just enjoying what the day freely gives. There is nothing I could have done to create this day, I just must position myself in a place to sit with the warm sun on my back, in a soft chair, feeling a coolness press into the back of my neck as the leaves whisper. Every ounce of me feels it, enjoys the warmth of the coffee and the rising hairs on my arms as I sip and enjoy the light and warmth of the sun. Without months and months of heat and humidity, my enjoyment wouldn't be as acute. I wouldn't feel this day so fully. (I wonder if it will be the same after death. If the buggy

humidity of life will be remembered still, somehow, in the light of being home. If the anxiety will be like a ghost appendage, something mangled we remember but is no longer part of the body.)

I read a book about dream houses and the meanings of the word ‘house.’ The book asked the reader to ‘imagine your dream house.’ In the margin of the book, I wrote, “old wooden chalet side of an Alp with architecture that doesn’t make sense; a mews house in London on a quieter, cobblestone street; a fixer-upper two story, white-washed stone, wraparound porch set in a vibrant, artsy college town near mountains and a city; old, sprawling English manor with hidden passageways and a library.” A garden, yes. Even if it’s just a potted garden on a patio or terrace. A porch swing is my dream. Garden and porch swing. A large one you can nap on. A screened in porch to keep out the bugs, especially if I live in the South. Right now, I’m good if I make my bed, and eat healthy, and exercise, and mow my grass and do laundry once a week. I’m good if I pay bills and catch up with my roommate, and answer student e-mails. I’m good if I listen to a podcast in the car and read a couple articles in The New York Times delivered to my driveway and do my homework for Thursday night class. I’m good if I send my dad a letter and my Australian friend a postcard for a dollar, and my Canadian friend a postcard for eighty cents, and my married friends a postcard for whatever cents in Tennessee. I’m good if I can remember that I’m a spiritual being and rest one day a week if I can, maybe take a walk on the beach, and remember to tell God things and try to listen for a little while each day.

But for now, I live in this little cottage bungalow with Becca, and this morning the subject of houses and dreams came up. We talk mostly in the tiny kitchen, she sits

on the stepstool that once stood in my grandparents' farmhouse kitchen, and I lean against the doorway. We are waiting for a bagel to toast in the oven or for the coffee to finish brewing. We take turns brewing the coffee, filling each other's mugs with milk before the coffee is poured. We take turns buying milk. She is packing lunch; we are talking about dreams.

I've been having strange ones, you know? Really, really weird. Her eyes widen and those dark eyebrows raise. Becca has one of those blending faces that can be anything you want in the moment: she could be Latin, Italian, Israeli, Pakistani, Indian. You name it. Today, at least to me, while describing her dream, she is Israeli. It happens when she's serious and her eyebrows raise.

These deep, terrible dreams. Like I am in a house and there is one dark, terrifying room in the house. And I shouldn't go in; I can't go in.

I take a sip of coffee and ask her what she thinks it means.

Well, I know enough now to, you know, know what those dreams could be about. She looks at me out of the tops of her eyes. The 'I mean business' face. Like there is something dark in me. She sighs. And I wake up tired.

I do know what she means. We battle it out in our sleep, battle those dreams about houses, because those dreams about houses are dreams about ourselves. Those dark rooms, parts of ourselves we're afraid to expose. It's often better when we open the doors and let the winds chase away the cobwebs and shake the skeletons down from the rafters where they hang. O Death, where is thy sting?

Some of the most beautiful dreams I've ever had were about houses. The others were about babies. A dream where I was a baby, sitting on a blanket, fully conscious

but without the words to say what I felt. My heart was full of love for the person sitting next to me on the blanket, my mother. Little things were tickling me, and my baby laugh was a belly laugh: loud and pure. My mother, seeing my delight, laughed along with me. It felt good being a baby again, and making her laugh. Another dream where I was the best version of myself; I could see myself from an airy distance, with a view like a pixie-dusted Wendy. I could see my strengths, my beauty, the graceful way I carried myself. My lines and worries and imperfections were gone. I danced lightly on my feet and stretched my arms to embrace others. I was beautiful, and then I woke up. Those dreams I remember like jewels in the dark because some dreams are foreboding and scary.

But my favorites, I think, are the ones about houses. Dreams where I wake up out of my sleep into a different consciousness, where I wake a large, wood-paneled room. The lights are dim, but not gloomy; the rooms cozy. I realize I am alone in this house, but am not afraid. My footsteps creak on the wooden floors as I make my way over to square stained-glass windows. There are stairs! And they are welcoming, beckoning me to climb. So I take the stairs up and begin my exploration in this house, a house with secret passageways, a library, and rooms full of interesting and lovely things. The books on the shelves are all my favorites, as if handpicked for me by a cosmic librarian, many of them illustrated. I wake up sadly and slowly, not wanting to leave the house.

Household Icons

In my house a window is open, the dishwasher hums, and a carved glass bowl etched with ovals and stars, scalloped at the top, catches view of surrounding

newspapers, a velvet leaf from a plant on the table, the light from the window, translating the view into a view of its own, so that if I was a tiny person, I could stand inside the bowl and marvel at the funhouse mirror the sides of the bowl became.

I am jealous of William Carlos Williams. A classically handsome man, a doctor in cape, in one work-roughened hand a toolbox full of pills and medical instruments, his stethoscope wrapped around his tie, but poetry in the quiet parts of his mind. To make a living from healing, and to make a name as a modernist poet.

On my table: pottery from India, a brightly painted teacup and saucer from Narnunja, sit underneath the glass bowl, the stars on the glass reflecting into the Twinings Lady Grey tea still steaming. The tea cup, one of a matching set from Goodwill, was a find for my roommate's Easter basket, because she has a sister who lives there and spent several months in southern India herself before she came to live with me.

The glass bowl is very nice, but is a gift from a family friend whose children didn't want the heirloom. I did buy the tea, it was from a Twinings sampler set, and I chose the teas based upon where I want to pretend I am, even though my house here is very nice. Today I missed England, and wanted to return back to London. So I flowed my cup of Lady Grey with milk and honey, put bread in the oven to toast, and slathered both slices with strawberry jam and butter, crunching my way through a chapter of a book.

The glass bowl and the tea and the quiet hum of the dishwasher and the blowing breeze from an open window and ceiling fan act like a broom in my mind, sweeping clutter and debris off its edges. One glance at the bowl for assurance, a reminder that I

can escape into some imaginary moment for a few moments if I need to, that my mind can place the object in any space it wants: Virginia Woolf's childhood home in Bloomsbury, my grandmother's house (exactly the thing she would have loved), on a shelf at a display in the Victoria and Albert Museum as my echoing footsteps make their way slowly by.

These objects help me time travel, flit between several imagined experiences, even when I am ball-and-chained to work, reading, my computer glowing in the naturally lit room. The tea in the Indian teacup can be morbid, a cup left on the table pitiful Mary from *The Secret Garden* hides under as a small child in India, death surrounding her in the form of typhus, before she is found and sent off to a distant relative on the lonely moor. The glass bowl is sitting on a narrow wooden table in a garage someday, somewhere, with a price tag stickered on it. I am gone, and my children don't want it either.

In this way my mind moves along blindly, clutching objects like fence posts in a blinding blizzard.

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

I wonder about collections. Is it a way of linking us to immortality, a way to ensure that children aren't left empty-handed once we are gone? Why one object over another? There is definitely something psychologically deep and complex about

collecting. Few parents think about the complications of such an arrangement. If I die with a house full of things, my children are going to have to spend days, weeks even, cleaning and sorting out something precious to me, and probably not as precious to them. They'll have work to do during the freshest part of their grief. Well, maybe that's why.

For awhile, my parents collected *National Geographic* magazines. I remember feeling rich in the eighties and nineties. We may have not gone out to eat out much, and Christmases may have been tight; Mom may have dressed me in hand-me-downs from her friend's older daughter, but we had *National Geographic* magazines, a whole shelf of them. Someone gave Dad a subscription for a Christmas present, and my parents, thinking that one day these magazines might be worth something, began collecting the golden and yellow-edged magazines. I remember thumbing through those glossy pages, turning over and finding jewels and mummies, buried treasures and tribes, people living in dense jungles, delivering their babies and swinging the babies in lose hammocks. This was the first time I realized that babies did not come from a door conveniently placed in the mother's stomach, opened to reveal a whole, naked, clean baby. I asked Dad about it, and as usual, Dad told me the truth in his straightforward manner. He seemed surprised at first, but must have realized that my brother and I didn't benefit from the education he had as a child; a walk through barns and stables were in themselves lessons in sex and procreation.

In this way, *National Geographic* was a portal to another world, a world where women's breasts swung and men's buttocks were painted, their serious faces boldly staring down the camera. Who knew flies had eyes with millions of circles, like pixels

on a TV screen, like ovals in a glass bowl? Flies had sight! If they had eyesight, they must have perspective, too, and for the first time I wondered about the thoughts of flies.

There was buried treasure, too, in those magazines, a whole article about Tutankhamen's tomb, the boy-Pharaoh whose pyramid was buried, untouched by robbers, laden with some of the richest treasure the world has ever seen. This pyramid-tomb gave scholars great insight into the lives of the pharaohs, and a traveling-exhibition was set up to view Tut's goods. It was most recently in Melbourne, Australia, where my friend Kristian lives. She saw the exhibit and was impressed, thousands of years later.

After my ninety-two year old grandfather's heart attack, where he was driving his truck and crashed it into a convince store, miraculously hurting no one, taken to the hospital, and surviving surgery, he boasted that he would never die. Now that he had a defibrillator inserted, our family convinced him to stop farming. He still had a tractor and ten head a' cattle, and since he had the beginnings of skin cancer, he took to attaching an umbrella over his head as he continued to farm his land in northwest Oklahoma, the land where it all began. Everything else had to go. My uncle, who had an adjoining farm, had been waiting for his father to retire. "I can't retire until Dad does. It just doesn't look good."

The sale drew farmers and curiosity seekers from miles around. There was heavy farming equipment, and tons of old tools, tools Grandpa had saved, cherished, collected. There was an auctioneer, a glib-speaking man like good auctioneers should be, and everybody, even my cousins and aunts and uncles, had to bid fairly, right along with everybody else. All of the money went to a fund set up in my grandpa's name. I

wish I could have been there, but my mom, who uncharacteristically fought tooth and nail in a bidding war with a local antique dealer over a rare Winchester hatchet and won, remembers the details, and how it felt to see your family's tool kit, symbols of a bygone livelihood, go to bidders within a matter of hours. The farm and our family history as they knew it was slowly disappearing, but I think they knew that there is something about letting the past sink in, become part of you; of what it means to not allow things to keep you from picking up and moving on. For my uncle longing to retire, this sale was like a carnival hosted in his own yard. Letting go was pure joy.

I live in a house now, a very small, quaint, doll-house of a house. It is a bungalow cottage in South Florida, a historic home built in 1924. It has a new tin roof, and the beams above are exposed. It has a fireplace, and wood floors, and its original kitchen sink and bathtub from the 1930s or 40s. People come over, and ooh and ahh, and tell me, It looks like Anthropologie in here. I wake up in the mornings in love with the view of the built-in-bookshelf, and those beams, and the sunlight coming through the long, tall windows, shining on the wood floor. I love the airy openness. I love my antiques and finds, the horseshoe over the fireplace, the tall wooden mirror from Mexico carved with a woman's face I bought for fifty dollars at a garage sale sitting on the rough-hewn table I once got from the trash helping a friend move into her new condo. I love the bookshelves and the books themselves, old friends that they are, and sinking into hot water in the bathtub that feels like it was made for me, and reading and reading and reading. Naked and clean, toes stirring the water deliciously as I read and read and read.

I love my hip and fresh roommate, a passionate musician who is socially-minded, who loves human beings and has a gift with humor and making others feel comfortable. A free spirit with tattoos of a safety pin and the words hope and take courage in typewriter font, and on her back a Civil War rifle. Her small room is filled with tiny horse statues and books and records and old tapes. We are friends, are like kids taking up tin can phones and talking about the earth and why there are earthquakes and honeybees disappearing; we share the same wish to start a business as pickers, picking things out of the trash to clean up and sell, or putting Joseph Cornell-like displays in empty newspaper stands; we share a sensitivity to spirituality, to God and to Satan and to man. It is Paradise Lost in this house. We love Portlandia clips and SNL skits, and funny women comedians. When Becca's been home for the day and I've been away, there are crumbs in the kitchen and peelings on the floor, the house smells like breakfast, and the windows are thrown open, and her guitar is out, and Bob Dylan's trolling genius fills the rooms.

For nearly three years, this house has been home. I have been here since it became mine, with its roof off and tar paper in the lawn along with roofing nails. We planted checkerboard plots of new sod, but now the lawn is overwhelmed with weeds, and I can't for the life of me figure that out—so I mow the weeds and they continue to take over, as if getting a shave every week or two helps in their movement to take over the lawn. I finally figured out how to host a party and put the patio table and four chairs on the tiny, screened-in porch so that people can sit there mosquito-free. Mosquitoes love my house, they love the yard, and they love my blood. I have had two roommates here, in two years, and a lonely four-month period with no roommate. I thought I was

going to go crazy. Batty. I was becoming that crazy cat lady, and the feral cats were starting to circle the house. It was a dark time.

There are two people who live here, and there are women who come over Wednesday night for a book study, who fill the house with gourmet food and paper plates, books and sweaters and perfume and stories about the week. Laughing, they kick off their shoes and toss their hair, rearranging chairs, giving hugs, sipping wine, lamenting over calories in the dessert. There are visits from the most beautiful man I've ever known as he enters my living room on an almost every-other day pattern by my computer, via Skype. I try to avoid saying 'Skype' because it sounds too weird and chat roomy, and it completely juxtaposes the type of old fashioned courtship Frans and I are practicing. But Skype it is, a word its Scandinavian founders chose because of its roots in Old Norse. Frans enters my home the only way he can, through the lens of a camera onto the screen of a computer, with his deep, sonorous voice, slightly altered, coming through the speakers. Sometimes I am dark, sometimes he is grainy, but it carries some semblance of him, and it is better than e-mails or snail mail.

And then there is my imagination to keep me company. I often picture a house full of people, people coming in to talk or to listen, or to rest. Ghosts of past people and places. People with jokes, annoying people with the same stories, children who need a sandwich made, teenagers who need a safe place to dump. We are all working toward something, working together, we have a small grain of commonality, and that is some sort of shared mission. And then at night, as I rest, I can't help but think of Frans, and wish he was near enough to wake in the morning and greet the day together.

The reality is, that my beautiful home, as quaint as it might be, reaches for the communal feel of a true home, a home that is overtaken, and so must accommodate, a home that doesn't have time to plan, but must supply extra mouths by slicing more bread and putting more water in the soup pot. I will take a poorer place, a watery soup, if community and a sense of shared mission exists. It is that that feeds me more than hearty meal or a beautiful setting, although those things are wonderful, too. I miss the days of Bellevue, of Kho Phi Phi Don and Oklahoma dinner tables, of university life and London flats. Was it the setting? Or the sense of shared mission, shared adventure? It seems to be the need one has for someone else, the need someone has for others when they are outside of the ordinary and familiar. To have a home, to have a culture, you must leave. That is what our culture tells us...that is what is whispered. To have roots, you must be rootless; you must become orchid-like, roots dangling in the air, waiting to catch nutritious dirt.

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