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Breath beat, heart beat: Intoning the rhizome

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Breath beat, heart beat: Intoning the rhizome

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2009

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*Breath Beat, Heart Beat:
Intoning the Rhizome*

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A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

The Shape of the Story

He tells me I do not take risks. And he is right. I have never lived without a safety net of family and resources. I have never been sick and wondered if I would be able to get care. I have never been hungry and wondered if I would get food. I have never been cold and wondered if I would ever get warm again. I have never gone hiking and wondered, “If I lose my way will I be found?”

But I have known frivolous risks. Risks that involve jumping over rocky rapids, walking on ice, climbing trees in thunderstorms, diving off of cliffs. But these are not real risks. I have never doubted that I will be cared for, that things will work out somehow.

This book is a spiral of moments. Moments that illuminate connections. Connections that become visible as the moments unravel and twine around each other. Through new ways of looking, of perceiving maybe we can find our way together towards a new way of being. This is not a lesson in how to perceive and open the wondrous senses of the bodymind. Others have already begun those conversations. Rather the moments I give to you here are just the tangible perceptions that flow through this rhizomatic feminist bodymind.

I am trying to figure out the particular shape of the story that makes me wake up each morning with a feeling of urgency to do something, to change something, to learn as much as I can. A friend asked if I were to be a guardian of something what would it be? I didn't answer her then because I couldn't quite formulate the image in my mind. But the image is a story. The stories that need to be told, but get lost in the unhealthy structures of our social system. The stories of risk that aren't recognized. The stories of class. Of

interconnectivity. Of learning to care, to value others. Stories about human welfare and natural welfare and the structural problems facing both.

I write these moments so that readers can pick them up, run their hands over the experiences. Feeling the creases and ruts. Understanding the deep connections between our ecological and social selves. Opening eyes to privilege and risk and value. And growing a relationship to place in a sentient and more than human world.

I. opening spaces

The same passion that fuels our erotics of the body also fuels our relationship to place, that fundamentally, it is a physical intimacy that links us with the earth, and by which we can understand her... if the earth is the matter that gives our bodies definition, and if our primary relationship with the earth is a perceptual one, then it is logical that the earth is also the root and the first call of desire.

Maia Cheli-Colando, *The Spirited Review*

Desert Capillaries

This bodymind is salt, minerals. Gypsum dried from water. A mountain ringed basin. An expanse of white sand. Formless fluidity. A place buffeted and moved.

Gypsum left at the bottom of an ancient sea was dried and heaved upwards. The blossoming lavac heat pressing up into a dome, a climax, an arcing back tense and quivering. Then falling, collapsing, tumbling back in upon itself, the concave sloping down from the ridge line of ribs.

I am a playa in the mountain ring. Filled for a moment. The salt, sweet, sweat pooling in the sacred space between my belly and the world.

I am a valley holding the remains of water. Water evaporated from an ephemeral lake. A gorge filled with the solid parts precipitate from a million years of water.

I am the matter that was held within water and water still holds the power to dissolve me, to disperse me, but it cannot exist here. No river drains this basin. In this depression, this basin, this place named for a water vessel there is none. The wind, the heat coming from above and below pull water away into clouds, raining gypsum into gypsum. Trapped within.

I swell and sway. Cresting, slumping, churning, vibrating. Each moment realigning grains of sand transpose my existence.

Low domes emerge in the deepest places. They crawl with the wind, a ball half submerged rolling, rolling. Each second new particles are exposed, held within the same exterior shape.

I curl into a barchan dune against the southern wind. Allowing energy, fire, creativity to be buffeted into the crescent I am. Thirsting for the hot blood that has cooled. The roux, the molten wildness that forced a cwm, a ring up from the earth around this place.

You are the stem elongation. The growth that has learned to dwell in this place. Wind tries to bury this leafy anomaly. But you evolve. Rapid growth twines your body up around mine, holding me. Refusing to be buried. Your presence opens parabolic spaces. You invert me.

Held places begin to situate across this landscape. Flourishing linkages. Transverse dunes come together in long ridges of gypsum. Plants slow the dunes, anchoring this place, this bodymind. Tranquil, lithe.

Able to Float

Disbelief covers fear. If [poverty] and hunger can happen to others, it might happen to us. Surely [poverty] is a personal problem, a character defect.

Greta Gaard, *The Nature of Home*

“Don’t let the tiny people drown.” This is what my swimming teacher told me when I was four. I shivered in the cold pool water. I was going to have a pool party for my fifth birthday. “Pretend your tummy is a raft and there are lots of people standing on it, so if you let your tummy sink they will fall off and drown.” I pressed my eyelids shut and I could see their small pleading faces and I tried. I tried so hard. Tense muscles felt so afraid. And my tummy slipped underwater. And the tiny people drowned.

*

At preschool I drew the ‘my family’ picture with mom, my baby sister and I standing in an airport waving to dad, who is a face looking out the plane window. My life and my sister’s life began because of an income that allowed my parents to go to a world-renowned infertility institute. But the job behind the income had a price. My dad was constantly flying around the country overseeing construction sites. Home for three days, gone for five. The dream of having children also included spending time with them, and so he quit his job. Sold the house they had built. And with their savings they started a dairy farm, another dream.

*

Great horned tomato worms crawled between me and my lunch. A slender red spike curled off their tails into a point. Their faces looked old the way a catfish does, only without whiskers. Pin prick black eyes ringed in yellow. Rippled chartreuse bodies slashed with white

stripes and pretend eyes look impossibly hard to squish. They crawl along the tomato plant and my sister and I decide it would be too icky to kill them. But lunch is the slice of homemade bread in my hand, spread with butter made from the cow slowly chewing her cud on the other side of the fence. And the tomatoes underneath the tomato worms. I set the bread on the fence post and look for sticks.

There was a house and food and family. My sister and I did not notice what there was not. Mom would make worried faces when we ate lunch straight from the garden. But the sun is shining, she had no peanut butter, and she had no reason to give a seven-year-old girl why it makes her sad she eats lunch grazing in the garden. Why the dream of dairy cows is not working.

I found a stick with a fork at the end and my sister got a bucket. Worm by worm we pry them from the tomato plants. Section by green wrinkly section they unstuck, plunked into the bucket. Without squishing any worms we place them on the tall itchy weeds blocking the path to our favorite climbing tree. Maybe they will like to eat these plants instead. We don't want them to be hungry.

*

Mom tells me to relax.

“If you relax you cannot sink. If you trust the water it will hold you.”

We wade out into the lake until I can barely touch. I lean back, away from where I can touch. Her palm is against my back. My toes begin to lift from the bottom. I stay half floating with her palm on my back. The water moves against and under me in gentle ripples. I watch the clouds and think about seaweed and lily pads, the great big fish tank we had when Dad flew around the country designing buildings, before the farm and the garden and the cows.

“Bodies want to float,” Mom whispers.

I remember how if a fish died it would float at the top of the tank, bright teal. If the fish was dead it wasn't trying to float, the water was just floating it. I take a deep breath and try to be still, not quivery. I lay my head back in the sun warmed water. I didn't notice when her palm left my back. She floated next to me, on our backs, moving our arms a little sometimes. Round and round the lake for hours letting the seaweed tickle our legs.

*

My sister and I come into the house, with tomato juice on our faces and dirt under our nails. And a handful of gold. We are so proud. Under our tree house we found small pieces of the shiny gold metal. We dug around and found as much as we could, a whole handful. We think mom and dad will be excited. We are excited. We come into the house and mom is sitting at the table, crying. We hurry towards her with our hand full of gold but she is holding something even more interesting. Sheets and sheets of colorful money. It hasn't even been cut apart yet, the way it looks coming out of the machine on Mr. Rogers. But this isn't just plain green; it has lots and lots of colors. She sniffs.

“Wash up girls, we're going to Fareway.”

We do not remember exactly when the last time we went to a grocery store was. We get milk from the cows and we make our own cheese and butter and yogurt. Eggs from the chickens. Honey from the neighbor. Vegetables and fruit from the garden. Grains from the food co-op truck that comes once a month. We cannot think of what we might need at Fareway, but we are excited. For my sister and I this trip to town is about what we don't need, but what the colorful money will buy. Orange juice, peanut butter, the Peter Pan kind with pixie dust on the label that I am sure will make me fly. Bananas. Avocados. We want to get Oreos but Mom says it would be bad to buy junk food with the colorful money. The

cart is so full. At the check-out the clerk makes a funny face when Mom hands her the colorful money. We are used to seeing funny faces, and we don't connect it to the money. I stand up tall and tell her its okay my sister and I are not at school. We're home schooled. And grocery shopping is part of math because you have to figure out how much each item costs per unit so you find the best deal. When we are all in the car Mom starts to sob.

*

At the lake my sister and I spin in the water. Faster, faster; as fast as we could push our small bodies against the force of the water. When we were dizzy we submerged ourselves. Fascination. Eyes pressed tightly closed the water pulled us down, down, down into a magical world where using colorful money did not cause fights. Where asking for help was not somehow different for grownups. Where milk was not something to cry about.

*

We are making cookies because we are selling the farm. The hospital in our old town wants to hire Dad. To make him in charge of planning new building projects. To give him a salary. Our parents tell us this means that there is always the same amount of money, not like milk prices that can disappear. Dad tells us he went into the bathroom and cried when they told him about the salary. My sister and I cried when they told us we had to sell the cows. At nine years old cows made sense. Salaries did not.

We are using sugar to make the cookies. My sister and I haven't seen sugar since we can remember. Our neighbor has honey bees. We gave them milk and they gave us honey. We run water over our fingers and dip them into the sugar. We laugh as the dissolving crystals tickle our tongues. Mom smiles and lets us. From now on there can always be sugar. We each eat a cookie after dinner. We all spend the night together in and around the one bathroom. Our bodies had forgotten how to digest sugar.

Origin Story of an Extra Miraculous Miracle Baby

I write to make peace with my questions.
 I write because I believe in words. I write because I do not believe in words.
 Terry Tempest Williams

“This is the wall of extra miraculous miracle babies, and there you are at the center.” Mom points to a collage of several hundred photos pinned down the main hallway of the Pope Paul VI Institute. “And Lara, there you are.” She points at my younger sister’s picture a ways down the wall. We’ve heard the story over and over, all of the babies Dr. Hilgers helps parents to have are miracles, but we are extra miraculous because there is no medical explanation for why mom did not miscarry. After all of the tests and treatments she went through to get pregnant her progesterone levels were too low, even with constant surveillance and weekly, sometimes bi-weekly shots. Her body tried to fail us, but God really, really wanted us here, and so we are. As a child I believed this story. Believed in the naturalness and purity of Dr. Hilgers’ methods. In the power of god. In my own divinely inspired destiny.

My sister and I were conceived at the forefront of Dr. Hilgers’ research and development of NaProTechnology, natural procreative technology, which has become the Catholic Church’s response to Artificial Reproductive Technology. Developed out of a desire to fulfill the mission laid out in Pope Paul VI’s encyclical “Humane Vita” Dr. Hilgers has discovered ‘natural technology.’ But can there really be a ‘natural technology.’ What does it mean to be a child of technology-aided reproduction. To be an extra miraculous miracle baby. What does it mean to have my very existence tied up in class privilege. What is

considered artificial and where do hopeful parents draw the malleable line. Whose body must be manipulated, to what extent?

*

I dreamt all night about trying to run away. I woke up and had to pee. After a seven year search I had found my favorite Belgian beer state side the night before at a pizza place on State Street. I snuck an empty bottle out in my purse, rinsed it out and set it next to the hotel sink. Duvel. Evidence. I've always thought I was infertile, even hoped a little. But the dream. I pull on boots, button my long wool coat over pajamas. If I'm going to do this it has to be the first pee.

There is steam rising out of the drain in the street. Mixing with morning fog. It's been almost ten years since I saw that for the first time, just a few blocks away from this corner. The CVS is open. I imagine it always is. One pink box, one green bottled smoothie. I walk slow and try to decide.

Three plastic sticks are lined up on the counter in front of the washed out beer bottle. Evidence. I am supposed to be infertile. At least protected anyway. But I am not.

*

My parents were married in 1978 and for the first year mom took birth control pills. Then she stopped and nothing. And still nothing. In 1980 after a year of nothing they

found Dr. Hilgers who was just getting started. He had not created 'NaProTechnology' yet. He had not yet founded the Pope Paul VI Institute. He was still refining his methods. My parents were there when it all got started. He taught Helen the Creighton Model Fertility Care System he created for women to chart their cycles and told them they must continue trying on their own for a year. Making sure they always had sex on the fertile days. William was working for a construction company overseeing jobs around the Midwest. But every month they manipulated schedules. And every month nothing. Questions of personal moral failure as a reason for infertility began to be asked. Of being somehow unworthy to be a mother because of previous actions.

In early 1981 William was tested for fertility. But the Institute did not want to make men masturbate into a cup. So they devised a means of collection that could occur during intercourse without withdrawing. The philosophy was always to keep 'natural' intercourse intact. The collected sample had to be brought to the clinic within thirty minutes. They lived an hour away. Enter the first cheap motel. Environment was irrelevant, it was the act that mattered. The women's body and comfort become subservient to the man's. The test was positive. William was fertile. The problem then must be in her body.

*

You were uninvited. But are you also an interloper? We decide that you are not.

*

Only one test could be performed each month to ensure the most accurate results. They start with many ultrasounds at different stages of the cycle to see if the woman is ovulating completely. Selective hysterosalpingography was done, in which dye is injected

into the uterus and then x-rayed in order to see if the tubes are open. Blood tests are done to test the hormone levels at different stages of the cycle. Many of the ultrasounds must be done immediately after intercourse, requiring couples who live out of the city to find somewhere to have sex. It would be too clinical for them to have intercourse at the Institute, not sacred. Somehow all of these tests are natural. They do not disrupt the divine plan for procreation between husband and wife. By not performing IVF and other similar procedures the Institute claims that what it does is natural, not artificial. But artificiality does not reside only in a specific procedure.

In July of 1981 a laparoscopy was done to visualize her abdominal cavity and endometriosis was discovered. She was relieved that there was something medically wrong. That the infertility was not in her head. That she just was not trying hard enough. That she had a medical problem. In August open abdominal surgery was done to remove the endometriosis. This was deemed natural. Or rather, there is not so much concern that what is done to the female body in order to discover the cause of infertility be natural. What must be 'natural' are the coming together of the egg and the sperm inside the uterus. The potential fetus is prioritized and placed in a more sacred place than the body of the mother. The woman becomes a dysfunctional vessel that must be probed and examined in order to find and mend the flaw.

And then there was pressure. Once the endometriosis was removed there were at best three months to conceive before the endometriosis began to grow back. September, negative. October, negative. November, the twenty-sixth of November 1981, conception. Euphoria.

Her hormone levels were not what they should have been. And the progesterone injections began. Once a week they drove sixty miles to the city to have her levels tested and to get the injection.

The progesterone was made in the lab of a family owned compounding pharmacy that works closely with the Institute. Kubat Pharmacy was started in the 30's by a Catholic graduate of Creighton University. Three generations later it is still family owned. Still Catholic. Still creating natural progesterone from soy and yams and suspending the hormone in peanut oil. It is called 'natural progesterone' because it is extracted from plants, not synthetically created. Injecting a plant form of a hormone into a human is counted as natural.

Is the desperate attempt to maintain that these technologies are somehow natural just an attempt to be cloaked with the approval of the church? Is it a way of coping with a rapidly changing world? By making sure that the conception happens inside the uterus and not in a Petri dish, are the rest of the technologies somehow absolved?

In a world where it is possible for a couple to have a donor egg joined with sperm, implanted into a surrogate and then have the ensuing baby be naturally their child ideas of natural are hard to sort out. What is the cost of pretending that what is artificial is natural? The Institute is creating cyborgs, in the image of the Catholic god, who have no notion of their true identity.

*

Sweet clover pollen sticks to the taunt fabric of the large men's shirt stretching around my abdomen. A honey bee follows the zig-zagging lines gathering up what I

accidentally collected while pulling clover from the prairie. I yank these invasive plants from the ground. Nurture the invasion growing within.

I am growing you in tall grass prairie. Growing you in red rock desert. Growing you in misty mountains. Growing you on western plains. Growing you without chemicals. Feeding you whole local foods. Learning to love you.

*

During her pregnancy with my sister, two years after my birth, Helen had to increase the shots to twice a week. Between pregnancies there were more infertility treatments. February 1984 was the last month to try. After that they would begin the adoption process. In February they conceived my sister. In May Helen's body went into premature labor. She had an incompetent cervix. Again the woman's body is blamed, demeaned, shamed through the medical name of the condition. They performed a cerclage. They whip-stitched her cervix shut. Until October she was on bed rest. Not to lift more than two pounds. The success of the cerclage was celebrated as a miracle, not acknowledged as an artificial means of bringing the pregnancy to term.

Only gods, not women, are given credit for miracles. If a particularly difficult pregnancy is brought to term and a healthy baby is born then it must be because divine intervention helped to make it so, it is a miracle baby. Divinity is praised above the sacrifices of the mother. Her willingness to have her body manipulated, prodded and objectified are secondary. She is thanked, but the gods are thanked more. Yet if she miscarries, if her body fails the life 'god created' she is the only one to blame. Officially you cannot blame god, you can only praise him.

After a certain point it was just too hard to keep trying to have more children. After so many years and so many surgeries, after the miscarriage seven years after my sister was born, it needed to be over. So she had a tubal ligation. I asked her if they had discussed William having a vasectomy instead since she had already been through so many surgeries, so many invasive treatments. But they did not.

“No...huh...that never even occurred to me, to us. It was my body that had the problems and so it had to be my body that was made surgically infertile.”

Not many years after the tubal ligation she had to have a hysterectomy due largely to all of the lesions and scarring caused by years of infertility treatment. And afterwards instead of seeing a heroine, an incredible woman willing to sacrifice so much of her own body to procreate, society paints the post-hysterectomy woman as hollowed out. The hallowed space removed. Caused her to question the validity of her own womanhood. Of her continued worth.

We are still learning to understand artificial reproductive technologies. We are still discovering how to tell the origin story of artificially technologically reproduced babies. I am not an extra miraculous miracle baby. Neither are you. We exist you and I because a woman chose for it to be so. A woman chose to undergo medical procedures. A woman extended an invitation. There is no miracle.

I wanted to read through the medical records from the infertility treatments leading up to and of her pregnancies. But her medical file at the infertility clinic was so large they split it into two parts. Part one, from 1980 – 1985 has been misplaced. The official medical story of my origins no longer exists.

*

I clasp my toes together the way fingers do in prayer. Crouched as if to pounce but I am forcing the energy down, down and out. Opening. Palms pressed together fingers arched back and open. Collecting Ujjayi breath. Bringing in air from the open window. Breathing in through nostrils, spaces in the throat held partially closed. Fingers come together, palms open. Drawing the breath inwards. Whistling, ocean breath. Hands and feet mimic each other. Ujjayi breath crescendos to a guttural roar as our bodies unravel from each other in a sforzandic burst of breath. And I help pass your body under my leg, lay you on my thighs, take the scissors and cut the final thread.

Apple Pie

There are nine of us baking pies. Divided into two age groups. My sister in one, me in the other. We are spread down the eighteen foot counter. Each person has just enough room to roll out a pie crust. There are rules for this championship:

1. You must bring all of your ingredients except water.
2. You must bring all of your equipment.
3. You cannot have assistance.
4. You must make your crust onsite
5. You must clean-up your site.
6. You must include your recipe with the finished pie for judging.
7. You must assemble your pie in less than one hour.

We believe the other seven people do not have a chance. Filling to crust, our pies have secrets. Secrets not written on the recipe card. Secrets hidden by varying shades of skin. Secrets traveling through history.

*

Madeline lets go of her mother's hand and starts to spin in the empty rooms. Twirling and twirling on her three year old legs. The two rooms above the grocer are small, noisy and free of her former husband. This is a place that is all her own. A place where her daughter will be safe. Where she, Agnes, is in charge. Agnes O'Grady. She shapes the words. Sends them into this new space, this new decade, 1920. Agnes Davis has come and gone. She had a short life. A brief life that has legally ended, been dissolved, and returned Agnes O'Grady to life.

Granny Smith apples, with tart and crisp flesh, are ideal for many uses. Their skins are light green. Discovered in Australia in 1868 in Mary Ann Smith's backyard, the apples made such delicious dishes that Grannie Smith marketed the fruit.

There is a rhythm to cut apples for pies. In half then into quarters with the big knife. The skin slides off with the smaller knife. Snakes off the seeds. Pulls towards the thumb. The slices are thin enough to dissolve but still dense enough to retain their form. Repeat.

*

My Great-Grandmother Madeline and I walk past the abandoned building on our way to the park. Each time she tells me it's where they lived, she and her mother, up above the store. She has not forgotten that I already know. She is not worried I will forget. The grocer, the tiny house around the corner where they later moved, and the house she now lives in, back across the viaduct. These places are who she is. She sings the song lines of her past.

French Vanilla Apples, butter radish sandwiches, cucumbers soaking in vinegar and spices, tomato slices with sugar. This is what I ate at Great-Grandma's table in the fall. I don't know where she got the French Vanilla Apples. We didn't put them into the pies—they were much too sweet. I bit into mine, she sliced hers. Pulling the knife towards her thumb, making contact but never cutting her flesh. That table sits in my dining room, that knife is in my drawer—I'm still looking for those apples.

Braeburn apples hail from New Zealand and have greenish-gold to red skins. The flesh is sweet with a hint of tartness that adds spicy-sweet flavor to pies, cobblers, tarts, and cakes. The apples taste delicious and store well.

Our pies win.

*

For four generations one woman had one daughter. But then there were two. My sister, me. Over a hundred years of one and now there are two. We are two, but not autonomous.

The heart of the pie has a history. A Lineage. But the binding, the crust did not come from Agnes or her daughter Madeline or her daughter Patricia. The crust came only from our mother. It is anomalous. Breaking free from its lineage. Crafting a new way, a better way. A more forgiving dough that can be rolled and re-rolled without becoming toughened.

Jonagold combines the tart taste of Jonathan with the supersweet flavor of Golden Delicious. Fruit varies from pale green-gold with faint red stripes to solid red. Use this apple for fresh eating and desserts of all types.

Filament

Prominences and filaments are actually the same things except that prominences are seen projecting out above the limb, or edge, of the Sun. ~NASA

Brilliant woman, silhouetted against a girl, anchored in shadow. Wild threaded webs form boundaries between voids. Weaving recesses of inner solitude. Continuous lengths of bodies longing, search outward to darkness syncopated with stars. Impossible to find escape. Eyes focus, unable to break apart from the space behind. It is all one piece. The woman—the girl. The background changing how she looks. Creating dark filaments held close—bright prominences tangling forth. Both dissolving, renewing, unexplained.

Wind Twisted

Now it is gone. Cut off. Overcome by the landscaping goals of the leaf mowing authority at the university.

I first found my tree, tucked behind two others, along a passage. It grew at a forty-five degree angle from the earth. Invisible from the path.

The tree started at forty-five degrees, at hip height it leveled for the length of my thighs, then began to rise again following the slightly skewed curve of my back. A reading tree, a sleeping tree, an eating tree, a thinking tree.

*

Trees tell the story of the wind across decades. The windbreak on our dairy farm was not the typical liner majesty of straightness and might. Trees filter, calm, direct the wind so it cannot beat against the house. So it will not whip the tomato plants, tear the morning glories out of their tangle around the flag pole.

The windbreak at rural route two box thirty was wind twisted. Trees grew in shapes you couldn't find other places. Bent and changed so severely by the wind as saplings they continued to grow in their new unanticipated shapes. It was our fairy kingdom. Where the trees moved into these positions when my sister and I visited, shifted back when we left.

*

For two years I kept a journal of the tree marking its seasonal transformation. I know that the leaves in the lower right corner always changed first. I never looked up its species. I watched the leaf vacuuming machine swivel around unable to sweep underneath.

But I have been in different buildings – frequenting other passages. I had not seen my tree for a long time. Until tonight when during a class I was asked to go find a tree. And I already had one. Thought I had one.

The sidewalk light buzzes in my mind as I search for my tree. Looked where it appeared in my memory. Looked lower for a torn limb, for the consoling raggedness of a stump severed by ice. My hand found the cruel smooth surface left by the cut of a blade. A blade petitioned for by the leaf mowing man. A recent blade, the stump not yet dried or calloused.

I lay my hand on the stump, my other palm rests in the muddied earth, I balance in this squat and try to be magic. Try to re-birth the tree. My hand is sinking in the earth, the tree is not rising.

Breath Beat, Heart Beat

The slow adagio of blue smoke rising upward; rain coming down in a soft staccato; and rage.

Muscles are tensed, frozen, sustaining the dissonant unwavering emotion vibrating through my body, threatening to tear again old wounds, ripping through scar tissue barely able to sustain the growing resonance. I feel myself rocking but I have no awareness of propulsion. Before me rises the raw, red mass of a clay butte. The rain batters it, breaks at its crust – trying to carry it away in the swollen creek at its base.

Towering Cumulus Swell to Cumulonimbus

Sap-covered arms clasp the body of the ponderosa pine tree. Balled fists press thumbs into parts of the trunk I cannot see. My bare feet curl around the gooey bark. Toes trench into spaces they create. I am cradled in the upper most branches of the pine tree. Five body lengths separate me from the ground.

I am supposed to be hiking on a trail. To return down the stamped, graveled, smoothed path named human space by a yellow silhouette painted on a small square of wood. I recoil from such confinements. My body needs to dance, to whirl to rush into unmaintained places. To let human skin be scraped away, replaced by other skins. I followed an antelope trail. Followed it over hill and hill, higher and higher. Hurlled forward by grief larger than myself. To this tree. Incineration blanched.

Behind me the mountains continue to rise. Cambrian layered by Devonian layered by Miocene, spiraling, broiling up and around from a far away handful of stardust. Bits of the tree, the ground, pieces of the flora and the fauna, all that I came through sink into the fissures in my skin. A billion years of blood, hunger, sex, agony enter my body.

To the west, the valley opens between cliffs. The diamond space between my legs when I press the soles of my feet into themselves. A red arid basin. Liquid pours forth from the cleft canyon, the river tries to last until it reaches the coiled foothill toes in the west.

Clouds dog-pile on the setting sun – they roll upwards forming a thunderhead. Building a battering ram to tear into the wall cloud. Sheets of rain drench the far off basin. There is no safety mesh. Observation decks have a weave so tight a finger won't slip through. At the top of these mountains I poke my head through the needles and breathe the effervescing storm.

The pine begins to rock. It sways as much as two feet with the wind. I clutch the branches tighter. The tree won't fall, but still, I instinctively tighten my grip. Lightning strikes the red earth of the valley. I hear no thunder – it is still several miles away. I want to stay here for hours – rocked by the wind, supported by this aged tree. My body slipping into the tree. Sap, blood, flesh, bark, without boundaries.

The storm, the tree, my body. We billow harder. Bitter sharp and broiling. Split pea soup sky. A writhing sforzando. Sweeping, sucking, drawing blurry the lines of beings. The storm plunders the basin. It cracks, strips, stark mashing the furry and blood. We are a full gale.

Erupting, inferno rage. Eyes bulging. My veins pulsing visibly; my body ripping itself internally. I fly across time and unfreeze myself. I knock him to the floor breaking the uninvited penetration. I feel the satisfying warmth of his blood and my fist against bone. Tears and rain run into my mouth and I hear my self screaming. It bellows. The scream pours from my mouth ejaculating briny tear filled spit into the rain. But the blood is my own. I am still clinging to this tree. My body still lies frozen and ravished in the past. I have cut my nails through the flesh of the tree and into the flesh of my hand. Sap seared blood.

I wait for unison – the speed of light with the speed of sound. The crack. Thunder enters my body, the tree, the mountains. Our bodies resonate the thunder. Invited penetration.

Breath Beat, Heart Beat Reprise

From branch to branch I slide down. I untie my bag from the lowest branch, pick up my shoes. I walk barefoot down the antelope trail, down the mountain. The rain moves beyond spitting and I separate from the trail. I follow instincts beyond myself that urge me. The red dirt, sage brush and bunch grass are exploded into the vibrant greens of a glen as I push my way through two firs. A small brook runs through this place that's name comes from the Welsh words for clean and purity. I can still hear and smell the storm, but in this glen it is no longer visible. It is not raining, the wind is buffeted around this place. I try to enjoy it, to love this calm, but I long for the tree.

Molted

i.

As a child, my shoes stayed on the porch in the summer. My sister and I beg and ask every day when the snow starts to melt. Is it warm enough yet? Are you sure it's not? We don't want to go to parks or playgrounds because we can't be barefoot there. We run across the gravel driveway and don't notice. Our feet are free.

ii.

At least five cups worth of scraped off flesh mounds on the towel before me. My flesh. My bark. All of those toughened layers. Densified over my lifetime, gone. Grated away as part of a pedicure. Part of a grooming ritual to welcome him home after several months away.

“Ah, so much better now.”

The assessment made by the woman working on my feet. At home I stare at my pink and white toenails. Trace the lines on the velvety soles of my feet. The pile of flesh is burned in my mind.

iii.

We are hiking up a narrow canyon housing the west fork of the Gila River in the Gila Wilderness area of New Mexico. The first river crossing looks so easy. It is too wide and deep to cross in shoes but the sun is warm and high. Walking across calf-deep water barefoot sounds simple enough. I love being barefoot. I have never been barefoot in a river with a fifty-pound pack on my back.

The glacial chill wraps my feet in a false warmth. I forge a path between mossy rocks balancing between moving fast enough not to freeze my toes and slow enough not to

fall. I curse the pedicure with each step. Its been over six months but I am convinced my feet will never be the same. My partner has both feet dry and one boot on by the time I scramble up the bank.

iv.

I thought it was a food grater in an oddly curly-cued box. It was a foot file in my Christmas sock, the first year I had someone to go home to after the holidays. A tiny note from my mom said, “you’ll want to have soft and pretty feet now.” I smiled. Thanked her. It’s still in its box in my drawer. I’ve learned I would rather keep up with him in the wild.

v.

In a forest in Vermont eight people are asked to remove their socks and shoes. Mine have been off since I arrived three days ago. People begin to feel moss, bracken, snails. Unleashed toes curl and trench. And the language becomes sensual. Charged. Passion follows when you awaken the senses.

II. hearts of a rhizome

How the mud goes round in the mind – what a swirl these monsters leave, the waters rocking, the weeds waving and green here, black there, striking to the sand, till by degrees the atoms reassemble, the deposit sifts itself, and again through the eyes one sees clear and still, and there comes to the lips some prayer for the departed, some obsequy for the souls of those one nods to, the people one never meets again.

Virginia Woolf, *An Unwritten Novel*

WideEyes

I reached the ditch and the tire screech was still all I could hear. I almost tripped. Her blood was on the highway. Her body was not on the highway. My blurred vision extended the eternity it took to find her. WideEyes. Maybe it wasn't her, I only heard it. But I knew her voice.

My sister tells me she didn't hang up the phone right away. I tell her she should not listen in. She tells me our brother is dead. I tell her she must have heard wrong. She didn't listen to the whole conversation. But she is sure. The day is clear. We are sitting on the well cover in the back yard. Four-by-four-foot cement square slightly elevated from the ground. My sister begins to cry. I believe that she is wrong.

The first time I helped birth a cow I was six. WideEyes was a kitten then. My sister and I watched from above until the calf was out. Breast bones pressed into loft beams. Hands folded under chins. The heifer was young and weak, she needed help. Dad connected one end of the device to the barn wall, in the corner where it was strong. The other end he reached in and attached to the calf's feet. In the middle of the contraption was a ratcheting lever. At first he moves it quickly, removing the slack. It becomes more labored. She starts bellowing. Dad and mom coax, trying to help her exert effort. The emerging figure is distorted. I know it is hooves and a nose but I cannot convince myself. The rest of the birth happens at once. The encased body slithers forth, scored to the creaks of the chain. He crashes to the ground. I forget the pile of hay and gasp. Knowing for sure he must have shattered bones. But he is fine and my parents are already pulling the sack back over his head, clearing his airways. The mother is not doing well. My sister and I are

called to come down from the loft and begin cleaning and warming his body. We used clumps of fresh hay to rub the mucus off.

My sister and I are on the miracle wall. Why shouldn't our brother join us? Mom and dad had fought for us. We were born. Why shouldn't Matthew be? His heart had been beating for several weeks now. It cannot have stopped. We have been so careful. We had been so careful. Mom has had her shots. I did not sit on her lap. She told me it was ok, but I didn't want to take any risks.

I found WideEyes in the ditch. There wasn't much blood but as I cradled her body I could feel the damage. I brought her into the house. I rocked her – on the couch where my mother had soothed me as a child. It squeaked a comforting familiar sound. I rocked as much to soothe myself, to drown the screeching wail. I could feel the energy in her body fading. I cried. I sobbed. I had found her a few moments after her birth and here was her death. Life, the natural beginning and end of it. Six years. As I continue to age the span of six years lessens. But at that moment it was more than half of my life.

When my parents confirmed what my sister had heard I did not cry. When we had a ceremony for healing with the indistinguishable form of my brother in a glass jar I did not cry. When we went to the mass grave site where the Pope Paul the VI Institute has purchased a space and a stone for those bodies too small to be universally recognized as deserving burial—I did not cry. For years I never cried because how could I? I couldn't cry when my brother died but I sobbed for my cat.

WideEyes' mother was fierce. She fought till she was missing bits of herself to protect her kittens from predators. She saved her daughter from stray Toms. She protected and raised her. She curled next to me watching the life fade from WideEyes. Not purring—just present, her twelve years exceeding my own. I cradled and rocked WideEyes after I

knew she was dead. She was growing cold, warmed only through me. I buried WideEyes swaddled in my favorite doll blanket. Pale sea green, cotton, soft. Now disintegrated in the ditch grass.

I should have an older sister. Melinda. My mother was forced, coerced by her parents into having an abortion. I remember the day she told my sister and me. It was early spring. Mom said she had something important to tell us. I was mad. I cried. In a secret place I was glad to still be the oldest. Mom, my sister and I were laying on the oversized king bed my dad built. Safe in our magic protected walnut square. The nightmare she relayed clawed at the edges. Scary patterns emerged in the lace curtains as I let my eyes go unfocused.

I remember the walk we took later. The way it had all changed. The trees and hills were in their usual places—but my grief had been displaced. Understanding brought the return of my tears. The complications mom fought to bring us here. The fight she lost with Matthew. It was not a natural one. It was not her body repelling us. It was not some oversight or mistake. Matthew had not died because my sister had sat on Mom's lap. It was the un-natural damage caused years before. Inflicted by parents unwilling to embrace the choice of a young woman—by her mother unwilling to fight for and support her daughter's right to choose.

Funeral Rite

i.

The dead body is presented to the immediate family. Twenty-three living bodies. A widow, two sons, four daughters, six spouses, nine granddaughters, one grandson. Pulsing towards and away from the casket. Holding, shuddering, wailing. It is okay to wail when it is only the immediate family. I am unable to produce a wail for the painted shell of my grandfather.

ii.

Thursday evening, the first public viewing and rosary. Mascara has been re-applied, lips have been redrawn. Extended family, distant relations, golfing friends parade past the dead body. Hug twenty-two misty eyed non-wailing immediate family members. Take their seats for the coming rosary. I watch from my corner behind the harp. The notes form in my hands. I weave my shield in music—creating a place for their minds to disappear into. I am a collector of thoughts. A gatherer of grief. Rosary beads dangle from the music stand, I do not intend to vacate my stronghold.

iii.

Friday evening is the same as Thursday—almost. Tonight there will be a prayer service and a rosary. Again people parade in, hug the bereaved. Again I am behind my harp. I had only planned to play one night, but she needs me to be here—his wife, my grandma. She doesn't know how to call herself a widow. Her purpose was to please him, to give him a first born son, to keep house, to raise six children. Not dwell on the little boy that died. Not to handle the finances. Not to make the decisions. She navigates to a place within the music. I see

the shell of her body hugging people—she is woven gently into the melodies of Danny Boy. He died on their 65th anniversary.

iv.

My father is the eldest. He must lead the rosary—kneeling in front of the casket. His voice aimed at the wall—yet circling, engulfing the room. *Hail Mary, Full of Grace, The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.* The crowd joins in yet is not able to cover his voice. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen.*

v.

Saturday morning. There is a final viewing of the body. Death has been frozen. We spent three days with the prepared body. It has been six days since he was pronounced dead. But there has been no decay. No stench. There is nothing but the stillness to convince us he is dead. The senses are confused. An attachment has formed to this embalmed version of Roman. The twenty-three are here again. How do you say farewell to a painted body for a fourth time? Twenty-two cannot bear to leave this static body. I have not yet shed a tear. Uttered a wail. Shivered with grief. All sins are absolved in death.

vi.

Saturday morning. Thirty minutes later. The Funeral Mass. It is February. Overcast. Drizzling. Funeral weather. Black clad bodies emerge from cars. Form a line at the base of the brick steps. Watch as the casket is pulled from the hearse. The sounds of mourning form a shroud as we process towards the nave. Over five hundred people have come.

Songs, Prayers, Readings, a message by a man who knew him only a few years. How bravely he fought his disease. How much more brave to acknowledge you're sick while there is still hope for a cure. Communion—complicated by a casket filling the aisle that just barely accommodates two lines of people. Some turn sideways. Some lay on a hand as they pass. Some remain in their seats.

The final blessing. Prayers for the departed. Consecration to God. They begin to wheel him away. We are supposed to file out. Follow the casket in orderly lines by twos. Stoic German elegance. She has no room for orderly today. Her body hurls itself arms outstretched onto the casket.

“ROMAN.”

Her toes drag as she is pulled along with the shell of her husband. Her wail reverberating from the columns, the cavernous ceiling, his name lifted and continued by the shudder of lungs before a sob.

vii.

The Cemetery. On a hill, overlooking the small town. His body will be under a tree. Next to his son who died at four. The ground is covered by rugs, which mimic grass. The sky blotted out by a blue tent. There are no signs of the earth. Of the hole into which the body will be placed. There are no thoughts of decay. Decomposition. Thoughts of what happens next are not welcome. Death is no longer permitted to be a leaf fading into the soil. It is blocked by cement grave casings, plastic lawn bags. It is all neatly disguised. The folding chairs are swathed in velvet. Twenty-one guns salute an unspoken of time that he

spent in Korea. A granddaughter plays taps on her trumpet. We are each invited to take a rose from the arrangement that hides the mechanism which lowers the casket into the ground once everyone leaves.

viii.

There is a full dinner back at the church hall. Over six hundred are served. Roast beef, potatoes, corn, beans, rolls, jello salad, three kinds of dessert. I lose count of anonymous hugs. Consoling me for a grief I do not feel. I am here to absorb the grief of others – not to seek consolation for my own.

ix.

Saturday evening there is a commemorating Mass. We all went to mass in the morning. But Mass Saturday morning does not fulfill the Sunday obligation. We bundle ourselves back to church. The final formal lament.

Pink Lined Caskets

Grandma Norma loved the color pink and she loved cornfields. She was my best friend's biological grandma, not mine, but she refused to go by any other name. Twice a week she wrote the township's news report. Erroneously referred to by city folk as the gossip column. It was published by the county paper in town. If you didn't know why it was important to publish that Ira and Emma's second cousin was in town from the East and ate roast beef at the local diner, well there was no use explaining.

Norma was a comfortable person, to touch and to listen to. She cooked hundreds, maybe thousands of casseroles. When babies were born, relations passed away, people got sick, or just didn't seem to be up to their usual perkiness Norma's casseroles always arrived first. I never saw so many nine-by-thirteen pans in any other kitchen. Her refrigerator was magic, or she was. It didn't have any shelves and was always stuffed but she could stick her hand into the jumble and pull out exactly what she was after. She snored loud and sometimes her false teeth got stuck to caramel apple pops.

We loved her fiercely and then she was dead. One minute the crops were good and then a hailstorm. It was natural causes, natural in the same way hailstones strip a stock of corn. We buried her in her favorite bright fuchsia suit laid out in a pink lined casket. When my turn came I hugged her body. The material of her suit cringed against unmoving flesh.

Afterwards there was roast beef and jello-salad in the church basement. Her obituary and her last news report were in the same paper, that's how fast time crawls around here.

Warm Irish Whiskey with Honey

Howard told Maddie he loved her every night and every morning since 1933. But he didn't say it when the clock radio went off that morning. She curled beside him in the dawn, drawing his last heat into her body and prayed a rosary before making the call.

My maternal great-grandfather died in his sleep the night before I took the SATs. There was a blizzard that night. Instead of driving ourselves, Dad drove my sister and me in the truck—bouncing through thirty miles of unplowed roads at dawn. We drank thick coffee and listened to Morning Edition on NPR. He left us at the high school with good luck wishes.

We were only half out the door when we saw it. If we had been carrying anything it would have been dropped. A yellow VW bug was sitting in the circle drive. Joyce was standing beside it, tears running down her cheeks. She was a mentor of sorts, the certified teacher we had worked with until high school. We knew someone had died.

When we got to the house his body was gone. Great-Grandma had warm whiskey and honey waiting. "I think we all have a cough today." People kept coming and the whiskey kept flowing. We helped Great-Grandma make from scratch macaroni and cheese. She didn't want to sit. To be still. Because she couldn't be still enough. Could not yet be as still as he was.

The first time Madeline saw Howard he was driving down Broadway on a motorcycle with one leg fully encompassed in a cast and propped in the sidecar. They scraped out places for love amidst turmoil. They created new life. They were married in mid September and Patricia, their only child, was born in March. Madeline was barely 16, Howard nearly 19. Their marriage lasted sixty-nine years.

There was a private viewing just for the family. He hadn't wanted it – his daughter insisted. At least they didn't put him in a suit. Maddie insisted his body wore the knit blue and grey jacket he had worn everyday. Zipped over the favorite blue shirt he thought Maddie had thrown away—it was threadbare.

My sister's soprano voice lifts above the nine-foot ceiling of the harp studio. Danny Boy. When Irish Eyes are Smiling. She is going to sing in the morning, I am going to play. We haven't told anyone but Dad. The night swirls around us, away from us, encrusted in ice. In the morning Dad comes to drive us to the funeral.

The funeral was on Valentines Day. That morning Maddie found her last card. He'd signed it with love in his shaky hand—hidden it in the drawer with their good clothes, embarrassed. The only time they had been apart was when Maddie had traveled by train to be with her daughter in Arizona for the birth of my mother. Even the gas station he frequented sent flowers.

Just a simple little ditty in her good old Irish way.

And I'd give the world if she could sing that song to me this day

Maddie's funeral came almost five years after my great-grandpa died. Her funeral was only a few days after her body died, but her spirit had left the year before. Great-grandpa had told me he was going to take her.

I woke up in my sleep and he and I were sitting in their house. She was out running errands. We walked through the kitchen and the front room to the back bedroom. He stood leaning against the dresser and said.

"I've waited several years. I can't wait any longer. I miss her too much. I need her, she needs me. She's coming home tonight."

I woke up outside of my dream to a foggy morning and ringing phone. It was my mom telling me her mother was taking my great-grandma away from her house. The next time I saw great-grandma after my dream I told it to her. She said,

"I know. Howard wants me. I want to go. But my daughter isn't ready. She never will be. Maybe I can just slip out."

Her body continued to live for a year after she was torn unnecessarily from the house she and Howard built from a chicken coop during the depression. She ceased to be. He had reclaimed her spirit, her body began to decay.

My funeral was at their house. The last day I was there. The vegetable garden, tucked into a bend in the interstate. The handmade wind chime. The row of tiger lilies by the fence. The rose bush in the front garden. My eulogy is on these pages

I forfeited my last chance to see her body alive. Her daughter, my grandma, was passing through with her, on their way from Texas to Minnesota. They were staying at a casino. Cheap room. The chance to make more excess money. I stayed home. Great-grandma and I had already said good-bye.

And so I called and said I had a cough. And she told me to drink warm Irish whiskey with honey. And I did. In the dark, humming toora loora to the empty room.

Five Stories of a Rural Township and a Highway

Place cannot be understood simply as a specific geographic location defined by convenient political boundaries. What is required is that place be understood from the perspective of the person's life story.

~Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock*

THE LOOMIS ABSTRACT COMPANY
INCORPORATED
 RED OAK, IOWA

1856 - United States to State of Iowa

1879 - State of Iowa to Burlington & Missouri River Railroad Company

By 1881 - School Established in Montgomery County, Pilot Grove district

1929 - CW Alm deeds sliver of land for road construction

1942 - CW Alm deeds another sliver of land for road construction

1967 - Pilot Grove School deeds land to Darwin Alm

1974 - Darwin Alm to ML & Marilyn Pickens

1976 - Pickens to Rubey Anderson

March 21, 1978 - Anderson to Robert M & Mary Fenstermann

March 27, 1978 - Fenstermann to David & Jane Fritz

July 18, 1979 - David Fritz Divorced, land deeded to Jane Fritz

Dec. 31, 1980 - Jane Fritz to Kloewer

June 23, 1988 - Kloewer to Doane

March 20, 1992 - Doane to Kloewer

i. Section Thirty-Three

Our house is located on one perfect square acre, the former site of the Pilot Grove School House. Section thirty-three—settled on the highest hill in sight. *Always live on a hill.* It is one of Dad's mantras. Poplars fade into firs on the north—filtering dust from the Level B maintenance road; lilacs and peonies guard against the highway to the east; Buckthorn tress form a gate in the south-east corner; fields pounds at the south and the west.

Pilot Grove became a township of Montgomery County in 1870, the population peaked ten years later. In 1880 there were 880 optimistic people trying to call this newly defined land home. By 1950 the population had dwindled to 489. There were 215 people in 2000. I have caused the number to drop to 214. Policy attempts to define this land. Montgomery County has twelve townships, each township is dived into thirty-six square sections, there are six-hundred forty acres per section. The boundaries that draw the land erase the people.

Pilot Grove Township never grew up, never became a town. It achieved a school and a church and stopped—our house has a patchwork of membership. Our house is in the Red Oak zip code, the Griswold school district, the Stanton telephone book and the Elliot fire department. We are joined in these municipalities by 6,000, 1,600, 500, and 300 people. We are separated from these municipalities by fifteen miles, twelve miles, seven miles, and six miles.

To my sister and I, this was the definition for the middle of nowhere. Without a town, a school, or a neighborhood we could only define ourselves by the land underneath. I belong to that precisely drawn square acre. I exist within the scent of lilacs, the taste of mulberries, the shelter of the pine woods, the fluidity of the creek.

The thread that connects Pilot Grove outward is County Highway M63. It runs north and south in front of our house. It is not a long road. It has no aspirations to cross state lines. The whole highway is about twenty-five miles long. It is capped on both ends by two miles of gravel before ending in a T. It spans one county and heaves itself across the line into a second before expiring. It passes through two towns, Stanton and Bethesda. Only Stanton has a post office. Bethesda has a church and an empty brick building. M63 does connect Highway 34 to Highway 2. But it is sandwiched between two other highways that also make this claim, in addition to other grander ones. All traffic is local.

ii. Cougar Prints

We share the hill. Across M63 is our nearest neighbor—what’s left of our nearest neighbor. The land is rented to big time farm operations—the house is ignored. A family of badgers live under the front porch. Skunks have taken over the kitchen. Raccoons peek from the upstairs windows. Cougar prints lead away from the side door. The orchard is as wild as the house. Over thirty trees once filled local freezers and pantries—applesauce, apple butter, pie filling. Dandelions sun themselves in the garden. Wildness is coloring in the blanks left by cultivation.

Grandma Irene was the first to make contact when my parents bought the one-square acre and mostly burnt schoolhouse.

“Call me Grandma Irene. I’m 79 years young. Come visit anytime”

Her living room was a fantastic jungle. Plants lined three walls. Some knocked flocking off the ceiling when you watered them. The picture books were the best, better even than the stream of ginger molasses cookies. Grandma Irene had covered the world since her husband died some time in the early seventies. She took hundreds of photos. Her mission in traveling was twofold—first to make sure she didn’t stop learning, and second, to show her photo books to people stuck in nursing homes. Our favorite was the Mayan book. Grandma Irene always wanted to know what we were learning about—she added what she knew on the subject. Her necklace had traveled to America on the Mayflower.

In the county all the mailboxes are placed on either the west, or south side of the road. Grandma Irene lived on the east. Even when she had to use a cane and then a walker she refused to let anyone else cross the highway to get her mail. She won, the post office conceded—her mailbox was placed in her driveway. Grandma Irene gardened until she was

taken away. She'd scoot herself down rows of vegetables in a white plastic lawn chair—bending over to weed or harvest. Each morning she made oatmeal for her cats.

My sister and I walked over almost every afternoon for our story and cookie. This day she was more animated than she had been since conceding to a wheel chair. *Pick your battles careful girls.*

“Girls, I’ve been thinking all week and I’ve figured out what I’m going to do if there is a fire. I can’t get myself wheeled over the doorstep to go down the ramp so I’ve come up with a plan. I’ll open up the back door, roll forward into the kitchen doorframe, and give myself a great push. The force should be enough to propel me out of the door and clear the steps. If I’m lucky I’ll land upright and not break anything, but I’d rather heal a bone than burn to a crisp.”

When we were in high school her children put her in a nursing home. She promptly died. Away from the cats, the garden, the houseplants, the orchard. She died away from the land in a sterile blank room. I like to think she would have welcomed the cougar, would have made extra oatmeal, would have shot at the men who came to shoot it.

iii. Badger Claws

As a small child I was sure that if we left the house going one direction and returned from the other we must have traveled around the world. Once I could read I measured distances in chapters. One-to-two chapters to Red Oak, six-to-eight chapters to Omaha. I almost always quadrupled my Book-It requirement of four books per month. Going to the grocery store, the library, running errands—it was a once a week production. If, mid-recipe, Mom was short on something—she called one of the neighbors. There was a community grocery between the people in a five-mile radius. Everyone had a certain set of loaner containers for that purpose.

This little highway has a slow evolution—its soil froze, cracked, melted with the seasons for its first hundred years. The pavement process began in 1958, it was done in four-mile segments until it was completed in 1962. The county decided in 1989 that since there are fifteen-foot ditches on either side, the road should have shoulders. In the early 90s Montgomery County gave the county roads street names. M63 became “O” Avenue. Nobody calls it O Avenue—that is just what you write on envelopes instead of RR 2. The essence of what M63 is did not change.

Driving on M63, I don’t count miles. Sometimes I count hills, or if I lose count I know which house belongs to each hill. The residents of M63 are integral appendages to the ribbon of its body. When you turn onto the beginning of the pavement in the north you are greeted by the Lawn Ornament people. Their yard and roof are filled with bending over wooden butts, accented by decorations to compliment the season. Over one and a half hills are the Pretentious Façade people. They re-designed the front of their house with an elaborate porch and brickwork, the back has peeling paint and rotting siding.

On the fourth hill stands the Pilot Grove church. It was built in 1887. The church is economical. A centennial celebration book tells how “the aisle was so narrow that at funerals the casket had to be lifted over the pews to be carried.” The church still stands, is still attended. It is where we turn around if we forgot something. Past the church things stay forgotten.

Tarkio Creek cuts a northeast to southwest diagonal through Pilot Grove. It crosses M63 in the valley beyond the Church. Some people say Tarkio was a Native American word for turkey. But linguists are not essential here. Corn and soybeans and bridges that are wide enough and strong enough for farm equipment are counted essential.

South of the Tarkio are twin hills. On one the Scrap Metal guy, “Mr. Clean” sits perched in his windblown nest. On the facing hill one of the county supervisors lives in a tidy yellow house. His brother, the local drug dealer, lives in a plastic sided trailer two trees away.

In the valley before our hill I found the badger. She was sticky. The white stripes of fur were jig-sawed over her body—misshapen pottery. Her limbs cemented at odd angles. We saw countless dead raccoons and possums and pheasants and deer. But I’ve only seen one badger dead on the road. I waited for the sun to dry her. I took the blue handled needle nose pliers from my dad’s shop. I wore my work gloves. A dandelion bloomed by her head, the petals pressed into the matted course fur on her ear. The skin on her nose was dried, altered, taxidermy of the sun. Her body was twisted and swollen but not broken open. Turkey vultures sit on the transformer across the road waiting for me to finish, waiting for their turn. I want to take off my gloves. Press my hands into her sun warmed body. Feel

the stillness. But it is a rule not to touch any wild animal with bare hands. And even though I was alone I did not disobey. But with gloved hands I stole her claws.

Past our hill to the south is the Yellow House whose wife ran off with the husband of the Brown House ten miles down. There is the Insulation House. They started re-siding twelve years ago. On the next hill is The Dog House, it has new residents about every two years. It got its name from a woman who trained drug dogs. She spoke German and Italian so she could train dogs internationally. A rounded metal trailer sits next to the house where the dog owners lived during training. The Separate Drivers live another mile down the road. Each Sunday they leave at the same time in separate cars, drive to the same church, leave church at the same time and follow each other home.

The second of five stop signs is at the crossing of Old Highway 34. The garage-based gun shop is situated next to the Christmas tree farm in the two miles before Stanton. The only town on M63 is guarded by The Swedish Coffeepot water tower, which can hold 640,000 cups, and the Swedish Coffee Cup water tower, with a capacity of 2,400,000 cups. There is a law that says all of the houses in Stanton must be painted white. South of Stanton the road loses some of its familiarity as it trots on through the remains of Bethesda and ends a few miles later in Page County. My neighborhood had a radius of ten miles.

iv. Eroding Sanctuary: a rural fable

Peanut butter and small crumbles of bread are stuck to Lara's chin. Her petite mouth is stained with the juices of wild blackberries. She sits on a round floral tablecloth spread over the crest. Her pudgy hands wave at a monarch. Sarah, her older sister, stretches to reach the top of the fence post where her cat is perched. Their mother sits reclined against a yellow plastic wagon.

The earth falls away in all directions. This is their special spot. A forgotten field entrance at the top of any hill. A mystical mountain accessible only by crossing the paved barren expanse while dodging metal dragons and then passing through the fairy lane.

The fairy lane leading up to this place is enclosed in a rich arch of foliage, secured at the base by thick brackets of thorny raspberries. The barrier is important, for just on the other side is the hut of the evil flying monkeys. But they cannot pass through the barrier of foliage with their poisons meant for fields. This place is safe. The girls are safe.

*

Things are peaceful in this sanctuary of wilderness. The girls grow and are able one day to cross the paved barren expanse on their own. They become the queens of this realm. They know all of their fellow inhabitants. They create beds of leaves for their dolls. Chains woven from daisies cover the ground. The queens learn to eat clover and violets, the flower juices mingle with the berries on their mouths.

Each spring they protect the brown fuzzy worms. Each fall they have a banquet to welcome the golden flock of Monarchs that come to rest in the trees above the milkweed. The queens sit for hours and watch the fluttering of orange and black gauze.

The queens are not aware of the deep ruts being gouged from this place by the growing mechanical dragons. They see filigreed windows in the roof of the fairy lane, not holes torn in the foliage, branches broken. They are too young to see destruction, brokenness. Their imaginations transform damage to beauty. They only have their joy.

Their doll friends have ceased to accompany them. Now they bring books. They curl into the crevices and read. We warm each other in the spring. Cool each other in the summer. Mourn each other's absence in the winter.

*

We think it will never end. The planes and their poisons are forgotten and they began to fly higher. One spring they flew high enough to penetrate. Their dense cloud of poison drifted down through the holes in the foliage torn by the equipment. The berries and wildflowers were lost. The queens came and there was no food to give them.

Then one summer the queens left. They were not there to cast their protective spell as the leaves fell. They must have flown away. But they returned the following spring. They needed this place. It needed them.

So this became the new ritual. They arrived with the end of spring and left with the end of summer. Only one season in their kingdom, but it was enough.

*

They do not see the worsening damage. They do not want to see it. Larger than natural leaves hide the holes left by broken branches. The poisons were dripping into the sap. The walls of bracken had grown so thin conversations could be heard on the other side. Men said this place provided too much shade. That this place was stealing their gold. Their potential for a few more bushels of gold. The men said sinister things.

The day this world ended echoes in the ruts. It was the end of spring. The queens should be retuning any moment. The yellow dragon came into this place, but did not pass. It stabbed, gouged, hacked at the trees, the bank, the milkweed, ripping apart nests, crushing young life. Uprooting the sanctuary, this place of dreams. There was a scream. It was the oldest queen. She was running, flying, attacking the dragon. Beating her fists on its unconcerned body. She begged to be given time, just four more hours. The other queen would be home, at least they could say farewell to this place. She cried and fought and they carried her off.

*

There is no more shade. There are no more butterflies. There are no more Queens. There are no more berries or clover or violets. There are no more barriers, or roots to hold the banks. Their fields of gold are eroding, washing down in ruts.

v. Eroding Sanctuary: a rural truth

I left section thirty-three almost ten years ago. I have moved more than fifteen times but I have never figured out how to call anywhere else home. I know intimacies of the towns, the streets were I've lived but I can leave them—without the need to return. Barely two hundred people live in Pilot Grove, yet at least twice that many still call it home. My generation has predominately left. We have erased our presence from the land we came from, but we don't know how to erase the land from who we are. We don't want to.

The Pilot Grove School “Sunny Dale” was consolidated into another district in 1967. Since that time seven people have owned the ground I call home. The longest duration of ownership was seven years. We have lived there for twenty-four. When we re-bought our home mom mail-ordered blue spruce trees. They arrived in a business envelope—six small twigs. My sister and I were skeptical. Today they loom over twelve feet, I am dwarfed by their accomplishments. I am inspired by what they have achieved.

A connection, a sense of belonging has existed for generations in rural places, yet it does not exist as the glamorized sought after myth. The mythos of connection to the land, of the need to respect the land, of the worth of the land beyond property value is not a new metaphor. It exists in pockets of urban life, it thrives in the rural. The powerful, the wanderers, the disconnected—they must learn to value the rooted people who do have a relationship with the land. Since the turn of the century the rush towards consumerism has been slowly poisoning the land, the rural community, the value of what is local. The land under the pavement.

Country life is often made idyllic by environmentalists. Rural folk are held up as knowing how to value what is local. But rural communities are approaching a dangerous

threshold. For decades they have been under pressure to consolidate, to globalize, and to sell out to the big time farm operators. The consumer driven economy gives no value to a wildflower, to an un-poisoned mulberry, to a healthy creek, to a patch of milkweed where butterflies rest. Those who still farm are pressured to new extremes for a few extra bushels. Century old groves of trees are torn out because of the thin strip of shade they cast on a field—farmers do not have time to think of the erosion this will cause next year. They must eat this year. How can rural people continue to value the land if they are forced to poison it, to ravage it, in order to compete in a global consumer market?

Ruts engulf my feet, rise to my calves. I bend; trace my fingers through the silt. I can see for miles—I hate this visage. Trees once enclosed this quarter mile stretch of dirt road running east and west behind our home. Mulberries and raspberry bushes once clung to the banks, holding them steady. Monarchs once cloaked a now torn out tree, above a now extinct patch of milkweed. My sister and I belong to this desecrated kingdom. We were once queens here.

The sun glared off the cleaving yellow bulldozer. I rushed it. I beat my fists against it. I cried. I yelled. I did not have enough strength to stop it. My voice was not yet loud enough. It is getting stronger.

III. tangling onward

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections.

Can one be a rhizome artist?

Can one form a rhizome with the world?

Who can map the underground?

Terry Tempest Williams, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*

Introductions

Forty people sit in an unorganized series of half circles around five or six circular tables. Some face forwards. Some sideways. Some crane their necks to see who is talking. Some move their whole bodies to point in the direction of the speaker. Roughly half of the people have spoken. Told why they came. Why they write. The room is drowsy. The ceiling arches triangularly. Exposed wooden beams have listened for over a hundred years. The cycle repeats itself, “my name is...I’m from...I am a... I wanted to come because...I write ...”

Silence.

And the energy changes. He hasn’t spoken yet but he leaps from his chair and moves his body in fluid and awake ways that awaken the bodies around him. The ceiling beams creak. A nighthawk cries out its short burst of sound.

This voice is aware of the air it uses, of the way the air moves the words around the room. That air is the intermediary to communication. Effecting real bodily changes. Word magic.

Dawn on the River of the West

Colors are stretched, pulled up from the eastern horizon. Body still. I float. Dark blacks and blues fade into violet and pale blues. Muscles relaxed. I trust that the water will support me. That the current will move me onwards. A violent orange into yellow brilliance. Hair swirls around my face. A sunset in reverse.

My ability to trust this wild water has come from a life of trust and community. From a childhood in a cohesive family. From always having enough. I have grown up cared for and now I expect the same from this water. That it will care for and support me. That I will not sink.

Coyotes across the river howl a farewell to darkness. Birds sing the warmth of dawn. A sporadic cow bellows and fish begin to jump. I feel the sun swell above the bluff. The presence of a beloved approaching from behind. Wrapping me in an embrace.

Entwined

i.

Entwined with your surroundings, roots surge with witness to each moment.

Constrains of time tick, rush past. When I first gazed, I almost didn't see you. My vision splinted, acuity dulled from scurrying.

Teach me to communicate with *forest*. Through conversations of bodies. Bodies that carried you down to the mouth of the lake and up the stone precipice where you could let the wind bring you scents of decay and river, sounds of birds and quiet scamper of marmots. Where you could feel vibrations in the ground. The weighted footfalls of moose and bear. The whirling blue heat that changed you.

At twilight, I return to the confines of artificial light. A world of intrusion where odors overpower scent, and do not form bouquets. I think of you, existing simply, a presence absent of artificial desires.

ii.

Prostrate on the protruding bank the upper half of her torso is bent—cracked by flames.

Arms obscure her face frozen in a wild succulent expression. Legs still embedded in the earth stretch down the cliff, roots through rock. She is of the nettled beings. Singed branches yawn toward the forest's crown an eternal reach eastward tips entwined, folded together.

Bark once fired to a glistening black now fades to a silvery gray in filtered sunlight.

Discounted

“I think we just interrupted a game of paintball.”

This was my partner’s interpretation of the men walking towards us with guns held across their chests in the desert at night.

But before the men with guns, when the twilight had not faded to full dark, when we could see a few stars, when the waning moon was almost gone. The food we bought at Rodolfo’s Taco Shack was still warm in my lap. The Styrofoam container covers both my thighs.

The car is full of the smells of cheese, spicy meat, cilantro. Mixed with unbathed bodies. Dog breath. Bits of the desert stuck to our hair and shoes and backs. Dried raindrops from the afternoon thunderstorm in the Huachuca Mountains. We just want to find a place to camp. To pitch out tent. Eat our food and sleep.

A ranger we met this morning told us about a campground on BLM land just outside Sierra Vista, Arizona along the San Pedro riverbed. He didn’t tell us it closed at dusk. Now we have spent over an hour driving along the perimeter looking for a way in. We know we have the right to camp anywhere on the land. But we have to find a place to leave the car.

I joke that our search is like Goldilocks.’ Nowhere is just quite right. The first place closed, the next too close to the highway, the next too close to train tracks. Each turn in is just not

quite right. But here at the last turn in on the map, our last chance to camp without driving for an hour it seems perfect.

The tiny dirt road has wound over a half mile away from the highway. The washboard ruts knock my teeth together and I grip the food tighter but there are no cars, no trains, no reason not to stay. We start to let our bodies ease into the comfort of the now we are home for the night feeling.

We see the eyes at the same moment. They are human. I wish they weren't. I wish it was a javelina, or even a cougar. After a week in the wilderness it is humans that seem dangerous. The eyes dart between yucca shrubs in the shadow of the headlights, but are still faintly visible. We both caught a glimpse of the gun.

Many scenarios have presented themselves to my imagination. None of them match my partner's explanation.

"I think we just interrupted a game of paintball."

This makes the second pair of eyes less alarming. Even the third and fourth don't seem unusual for a nighttime game of paintball in the desert a mile from Mexico. It is a ridiculous interpretation. Ridiculous, simple and safe.

But now twelve sets of eyes have appeared. And they keep appearing. Moving towards the Volvo in a tight circle. A military circle. A circle that you do not escape from. The guns across their chests are not filled with paint balls.

His breathing makes a foggy wet area on the outside of the window by my head. I'm not sure where to look. I want to glance at the man with a gun breathing on the window. To see if I can discover from his clothes who his orders come from but I don't want to make a mistake in the role I am now playing. And so looking down seems the most innocent, the least guilty. Because I do feel guilty. Only I can't think of anything I've done to make over a dozen armed men want to surround us. The dogs are growling. The food on my lap is much hotter than a moment ago, or perhaps, I am suddenly colder.

My partner rolls down the window because the armed man closest to the drivers side made a roll down the window motion.

“Where are you from? What are you doing out here this late?”

I think that our Iowa license plates should have made it obvious.

“We're from Iowa, we're down in Arizona hiking, we were hoping to camp on the BLM land and go birding in the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area in the morning.”

There is a pause. They consider the sound of his voice, the way he formed his words. The words he used. The whole group leans in a bit, looking in the back of the car at the piles of backpacks and gear. At the dogs. At the color of our skin.

“Well, don’t mind us then, we’re on the lookout for a pack of Coyotes. There are plenty of places to pitch a tent just over there.” He motions beyond the yucca he just hid behind.

“Have a good night.”

I glance at the man still breathing on my window. Border Patrol. I look back at my partner. He is rolling up his window. And they are gone. Almost before the window is up. All the eyes have disappeared back into the yuccas. We’ve been granted permission but neither one of us has any intention of camping here tonight. Listening for boots and guns and people who are counted illegitimate.

We are counted legitimate. We are discounted. We do not look threatening. And all of a sudden the food feels cold, and sweat is dripping off my neck, sliding down the pale skin on the underside of my arm. And I wish we were helping people cross. As we drive away north I want to run to somewhere I’m not supposed to be. I want to make use of the lack of suspicion I raise. To take advantage of this privilege that I have only ever taken for granted. That I have meandered through life using only for myself, never risking. Never subverting.

Patchwork Quilt

Two groves of trees grew about a quarter mile away from our house on M63. The closest was a pine woods. Because of the shade and thick layer of pine needles on the ground itch weeds didn't grow. We could enter it year round. The big woods was further, beyond the pine woods, more elusive. It could only be entered in early spring and late fall. By late spring the itch weeds formed a seven-foot high, twenty-foot deep ring around the big woods. Barring us from the woods until frost.

“Why do people try and pleece up the land? Would it really be so bad if native grasses grew tall in yards? You can't walk on chemically sprayed lawns anyway.”

My partner pinches his eyes together. “Do what to the land?”

“Pleece.”

“Again, what?”

“Like fleece except with a ‘p.’ You know, pleecing.”

He doesn't.

As a child my mother tells my sister and I we must pleece the house for company, pleece ourselves after playing outside. Pleecing is like pretend cleaning. You clean a little, but mostly you are doing things to make the house, yourself, the land, appear to be clean. To be tidy.

Near the farm there were a few patches of tall grass prairie that had never been plowed. It was so massive as a child to try and imagine that this ground had never been plowed. Never disturbed. When I first enter a prairie the grasses look the same, not exactly the same but all mashed together. Until I start to look for a particular grass. *Koeleria Macrantha*, June

Grass. And then you see it, and see how intricately different it is from all the plants around it. In the prairie snakes, spiders, and small mammals do not startle me. I am the visitor.

Chicago is the first place I saw steam rising out of the drain covers in the street. I used to want to live in downtown Chicago. The masses of people. Coffee everywhere. The train. But the coffee is only one brand. Repeated on every other corner. Alternating sides of the street. I sit in Grant Park and look back at the city through my dad's binoculars. In one of the circular towers is a condo with a harp in the window. I imagine the sleek lines of the high-rise dwelling welded to my life. That fantasy has corroded.

In late summer we dig to the bottom of our play clothes drawer and pull out our Mulberry clothes. Garments polka-dotted in purple smears. On the farm the mulberry tree was in the yard, between the apple trees. At M63 the Mulberry tree was in the ditch on the way to the pine woods. We took containers from the kitchen but my sister and I never gathered enough to be of any use.

My body is discombobulated. The weather is in the seventies but it is dark by five o'clock. I anticipate feeling cold. Put on a hat, scarf and gloves and open the door to a warm wind.

There is a billboard outside of town that has not been changed since I was three. The text has worn away, the picture too. The bank it advertised is no longer there. I do not remember what it said. I do have a memory of looking at it before I could read. Even now I cannot make out the words in my pre-literate memory. It is a crisp undecipherable photo in my mind.

I saved a bee who flew into a small bowl of cream. Throughout the rest of the afternoon a bee kept landing on me. Crawling up my arm, down my back, between my toes. A bee spent many minutes exploring my barefoot. I'd like to think it was all the same bee. The one I lifted from the bowl. Gene Stratton-Porter writes about bee immunity. I've always wanted to know if I am bee immune, today I decide that I am. Being bee immune does not have anything to do with allergies. It means that bees trust your scent.

To Repair a Mountain

The process

Pry many hundred pound rocks from the mountain.

Using stone cutting tools chip them into the shape of steps.

Using the griphoist, mattocks and pry bars place the stone steps into the stairway.

Pack and secure each step into place with rocks you have crushed into gravel.

The Rules

All work must be done at least three hundred yards from the new trail.

When hiking on the new trail you must not be able to see any signs of the work.

The stairway must appear pristine and as though it were dropped in place, or just always existed.

I am damp from two directions. Sweat dampens the thin wool layers next to skin. Rain mist dampens the outer gortex layers over the wool. The sledge hammer lifts, swings, crashes. Artificial boundaries of mind and body blur in the rhythm of the hammer. Of the sledge and my body smashing rocks. Crushing. Splintering apart minerals formed over millennia. Sparks burst as time fractures.

Eight hours, swing by swing, time collapses with the rocks. Each moment is held as they collapse into twilight and it is time to leave. Time to replace the hammer under the tarp. Spread pine branches over the tool cache and return, through the worksite, past the new trail, also hidden under branches, to the original eroding path. To slide one mile and fifteen hundred feet down to camp. To quinoa and cheese and sleep.

To return again to unmake more of the mountain in the morning. We are building a stone staircase to the bald summit. Ten years, roughly six-hundred steps. I crush rocks for six days. Not quite enough for three steps.

Clarence loves the mountains. Is of the mountains. He volunteers all season. He wipes the mist off of his thick wine glass shaped lenses. Shoves up the sleeves of his plaid flannel shirt and repositions the pry bar under the three hundred pound rock he is levering out of the mountain.

“Here I go, unraveling more of the mountain.”

Moss covers the peat. Peat fills in the places that are not root or rock. Roots grip the rocks for stability. We are removing the rocks. We are unraveling the mountain. Building a staircase that will appear to have just been there. The unseen bank we erode slides away unnoticed, unknown. The eroding trail needs to be mended.

Does it matter? Is the unraveled bank worth mourning? Does the mountain need to be climbed? Should it be a right to go where we want? See every patch of wildness we want to see? How much do scale and purpose matter? Unraveling a section of mountain for a hiking trail. Filling up a marsh for a mega store. Both are destruction for human benefit. Where do we draw boundaries? Who has the scope, the empathy, the understanding to ascribe value and worth? Is the damage to the mountain ok because it at least will be able to mend itself?

And even though I know about the hidden bank. Or maybe because of it, I will return in four years when the steps are finished. When the mountain has been unraveled and re-knit three hundred yards to the east. I will walk up the steps, over the realigned story of the mountain and see the bald peak for the first time.

Body Control

I must pack seven days worth of everything I might need into 4,600 cubic inches of space. I ponder the pile of Ziploc bags filled with dehydrated meals and try to guess their weight. It takes me five arduous minutes to get the pack on my back for the first time and I have to use a table. There will be no hip-height table in the wild. I step on the scale and panic a little. Can I even carry sixty pounds for ten miles a day?

Sweat pours down my back, catches in my eyebrows, spills down my chest. My breathing is labored. My foot slips between loose rocks. I crash to the ground, my descent encouraged by the extra sixty pounds on my back. I lay wedged between humiliation and a weeks worth of food a mere quarter of a mile down the trail. My partner continues to hike on, oblivious. How could he not have heard my thunderous fall? I manage a muffled *wait up*, not really wanting to alert him of my fall, but knowing he's bound to look back at some point and discover I'm not in sight. I run an inventory of my appendages – moderate bruises on one thigh, minor scrapes on my palms wrists and forearms – nothing to deter the trip.

I thought of the weight, and whether my body could handle it, but not of maneuverability. I can walk along canyon ridges, jump wobbling rocks in a river, and leap from ledge to ledge over rapids – I've done it all before. But that was before the pack. Now if I lean too far in any direction I become incapable of righting myself. Tense muscles cannot find a new balance.

On other trips, in other groups I have been named the alpha female. I know how to set up a tent, build a fire, find a trail. But here, in New Mexico with a pack I have become a

child, not even capable of putting on my boots with agility. I am no longer the one with the greater confidence.

The morning of day two I hold my breath as I poke my head through the slightly stiff shell of my hiking shirt. It reeks. I make an attempt not to smell myself. I can't wear deodorant, with no way to wash it off each day it would just build up and cause problems. Attract bears. As the day progresses I find myself less aware of my own scent and increasingly overwhelmed by the bouquet around me. The morning of day three is colder. I hurry from nightshirt to day shirt and forget to hold my breath. I did not smell anything awful. I did not smell anything at all. My nose was not clogged. After three days of physical exertion without bathing I had reclaimed my scent. It is no longer an offensive scent to dwell upon.

Wind rushes around me as we climb out of the canyon. At first all I can do is feel it, warm and strong. I can feel the tiny bits of dirt, leaves, sand that begin to coat my skin. When breathing is again possible I begin to smell and be aware of all that is rushing past. The first scent is grass, not the smell of neatly manicured city grass, but the exotic dry scent of wild desert grasses mixed with sun baked sage and cholla. There is the scent of the earth, dirt mixed with sand and decomposing plants from the riverbed. Buried deep is the musky scent of animal sweat, fox, javelinas and wolves.

I am drenched as I near the climax – the goal of this day's hike. It could be a hidden mountain lake, an elevation-revealing ledge, miles of uninhabited forest. Today it is the plateau of a canyon, a one-mile, twenty-five hundred foot ascent woven through rocks and boulders. Breathing has moved from an unconsciously managed function into consciousness demanding attention.

At the summit I peel off my shirt and wring the sweat out over the needled spires of a cholla. I give back from my body the water I drank from the river. In these places of unmasked existence I revel in the exhaustion and perspiration of my body.

Seven days after setting out we return along same rocky beginning. I have both gained and lost my sense of bodily control. We have hiked over nine miles since breakfast and while I am tired I am not spent. I try to locate the spot of my initial fall and cannot see anything treacherous enough to tumble me.

On your rock

you have discovered a connecting thread, a unifying source joining you with your surroundings. The contentment in your being merges you with the solid quietness of the rock on which you sit. You have for the moment foregone the imposed structure of what so many people depend upon. Your history, your story are unknown to me as mine are to you, but for a few seconds each of our presence is united in an unnoticed moment.

Beginning to stir, to flow again

wild depths of imagination boil out as I allow myself to meld with the splendor that surrounds me. Barriers long guarding against intense emotion; crash away. My heart tells me you are true. I listen to my heart because it wants me to succeed. I seek the clear and uninhibited moment of the morning's embrace.

On the Little Island

You learned to dwell in me and you hold me. You refused to be buried. You evolved, twining your body around mine, holding me, anchoring me. Your life has come together with mine and I no longer know how to separate it. Your presence opens parabolic spaces. You invert me.

You have taught me how to grow roots that do not bind. The fluid roots of a dryad. You came into my house with your one truck load of stuff and made it a home filled with boats and tents. I vow to nurture our home to care for and support the ground where our roots entwine. I vow to love you as earth.

Today the wind is full of the sweet tangy heat of summer. A gentle wind filling up this sacred space. Breathing in and out of my body, in and out of your body. I vow to breathe with you through all winds. Through shredding winter winds, bountiful and succulent harvest breezes, through salty gales and whispering pollen gusts. I vow to love you as wind.

Water fills the crevasses between rocks, roots, toes, flowing in and around. I vow to love you with formless fluidity. Filling up every place without judgment, caressing and patiently smoothing over time the sharper places. Oceans ebb and flow but they do not leave. I vow to love you as water.

We challenge each other the way fire challenges everything it encounters. I vow to always challenge you with the creativity of fire that transforms sand into glass. To allow the old

growth and bracken to burn so new growth can emerge as we continue evolving our place together. I vow to love you as fire.

You have created a rich and rooted place in my heart. Your patience has taught me to trust you. You understand me. You opened my heart. I vow today with my heart and with my spirit, the blood that flows through all life. I vow to keep my heart open to yours. I vow with my spirit to love you.

Dwellings

i.

My friend recommends a book to me. He rises, crosses the room and pulls it off of the bookcase. The bookcase that is also a casket. It is light colored pine, sanded smooth and stained so that it looks like it has not been. He bought it because he needed another bookcase. Because he wanted to accept and welcome his mortality. Wanted to avoid some other type of casket.

This bookcase is the place his body will reside for more years than any other place. He wants it to be a place he knows. A place with which he is familiar. A place his friends and family know. A comfortable place where his favorite books have lived. A wooden place that will nourish the soil.

ii.

Two years before I was born my parents built their dream house in the country. On one perfect square acre, on a hill, fifteen miles from town. When I was five my parents sold their dream house. We moved an hour north and with their savings they started a dairy farm.

The new house was located a mere two miles outside of town. It was a novelty. If we returned home from errands and discovered we'd forgotten something, we went back to town. I think Mom purposefully forgot things for a while, just because she could. My sister and I could even see the town from our bedroom windows.

iii.

For her thirteenth birthday my sister asks to see the mountains. She declares Colorado the place she loves. The place that whenever she returns to feels like coming home. And she keeps finding her way back.

My friend has decided Portland is her home. Not because of friends, family or a job. Just the place. It calls. She must go, and so I help her. We caravan across the country and I wish that I could find a physical manifestation of the place I imagine. The place I want to call home.

iv.

Pictures of grade school fly through the snow. I dart between traffic chasing the contents of her box. Memories dissolve into dirty salt. But she is not sad. “They are just pictures. I still have the memories.”

There is a box in our attic labeled summer clothes. That label is a lie. Inside are shoe boxes. The oldest is from a pair of sandals I had when I was four. The shoes have been left throughout the years. The boxes hold moments. Bits of paper, letters, a doll shoe. Tangible evidence of memories.

I threw a fit when my parents wanted to give away my first bike. It would not fit into a shoe box and so I could not secret it away. There were memories attached to it. Memories I feared might get lost if I did not have the tangible evidence of paint scratches and dents to remind me.

v.

Home has become people. The person I found. The person we created. But no new place. Accidental roots have gone down here and there but not the deep stabilizing tap root that binds and balances a person to a place. A place that without its people would still be home.

vi.

Three tiny ocean houses live on the top shelf of my bookcase. One is egg shaped, a milky backdrop with brown leopard spots. My favorite. The other two are types of conch shells. One ivory and brown, the other shades of golden yellow. My seashells from New Orleans.

When Dad flew around the country he brought back presents. Always a spoon. Sometimes something else as well. From New Orleans he brought me three shells. Bigger than three year old hands. Big enough to hold the ocean inside. Transient houses. Houses that the sea creature could take along wherever it went. Where did these sea creatures go?

My dream house is a multiple choice of transience. Yurt, tree house or house boat. People tell me those are all impractical. I say they are more practical than my childhood dream of living in a seashell.

vii.

The dream of the dairy farm and the novelty of living so close to town ended five years after it began. Descending dairy prices demanded we sell the farm. And providence

provided, the stars aligned, the gods led us home, the odds were challenged, strange shit happens.

The hospital in our old town asked Dad to drive down for a meeting. They presented it as a one time consulting meeting. He arrived and they offered him a salaried position designed just for him. They were scheming to lure him away from the cows. They had no idea he was trying to find an escape route from cows. He accepted the offer.

And then we re-bought the very same house that Mom and Dad had designed on M63. The house that was not even for sale. The house the interim owner jokingly offered to sell to the neighbor the day Mom was in the area looking at property. Mom went to church that morning. Prayed she would find a house. Ran to the rectory and called Dad to tell him she just heard god tell her he was “taking us all the way home.” Mom thought someone had died when our old neighbor showed up at the tiny moldy house the realtor was showing her.

“Everyone’s fine. But you should still sit down. Send the realtor home, we are going to look at your house.”

We came home and put all of our belongings in their places. Our growth charts were still on the wall in the garage. Our drawings still on the wall in the basement. Dad’s inscription still written under the stairs. Few things had changed during the years we were away. We were all the way home.

Topographical Sound Waves

Timid steps to the ledge grow confidence. The edge – the overture, first glimpses of a masterpiece. Waves of color crafted on the basin walls by eons of topographical evolution unfold the score. Mozart’s overture to Don Giovanni, a precipice overlooking Devil’s Kitchen in the Big Horn Basin. Each note in is the rock. Wild promiscuity of evolution, craft the basin walls. Melodies and rhythms of a composer, who never crossed the Atlantic. Still, I hear it with my eyes. Time building up, tearing down topography. Creating new layers, new harmonies.

The notes of Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 In B Flat Minor rise and rush at me from the painting. The opening brass chords slash across the canvas in orange. Later I learn they were supposed to do that. The artist paints music. The painting I saw was the piano concerto. She paints her favorites, commissions from others. Favorite songs mounted above the mantel.

Composers write the land in harmonies. Painters use brush strokes to image sound. Chefs use taste to capture a place. Synaesthetic experiences. When the senses blur themselves. Moments when boundaries thought to be solid become transparent. Sounds are seen. Words become a spectrum of colors. Melodies acquire a taste. But who pronounced the senses bounded? Perhaps we are all on a journey of tangled senses.

Song in the Night

Rocks break and shift each night under the waves. The salty wetness stings the bottoms of her feet. She walk this way most nights. Walks the rocky beaches till dawn. Dreaming, creating, purloining melodies and rhythms from the coasts. Maine holds the mystery she seeks.

She walks at night to listen. To capture the deeper more lurid and uninhibited songs unhearable in the sun. The breakwater is her destination tonight. A quarter mile path of rocks jutting into the harbor, designed to soften the waves, which reach the shore. Seven miles. She needs the water on the ocean side of the breakwater.

Tonight she is pursuing the tantalizing thought of notes snared into her body the night before. It was the first bird song of dawn, a song she had never heard. A new sound. She comes back to explore this melody, to let its language unfold, to come forth, to expand, to breathe.

Moonbeams play with the rhythm, unfolding it in her mind. Two bodies. A dance. A choreography presenting an illusion of spontaneity. Reds oranges, ambers calamitously met with blue, lavender, violet. Thin fine hairs tangle with coarse thick hairs creating momentary tapestries. Bodies breaking their assigned boundaries. A union of harmony – one that lifts and plays each notes vibrations off the other, spiraling stirring, coloring outlines of potentiality.

She strains her energy to focus on these pitches – to modulate in and out of them with her body. Her foot slides on moss. Balance falters. Shins grate along a boulder – her chest a rough pizzicato against bramble. Flat. Arms, hands protected are behind her back.

Stillness – her body holds the position into which it fell. An extended fermata moment. Fingers unlace, shoulders relax, curling arms under her body. She presses her palms into the mixture of mud and sand. Grit presses back. It fills in the lines in her fingers and hands. Instead of rising she rolls. Over and over allowing her body to arpeggiate down the beach into the edges of the water. She lifts to her knees.

Rocks along the center of the Breakwater have been worn smooth. A walkway easy to trod if the path is known. She comes here to swim. To immerse herself in the unsheltered brutality of the ocean side.

A dissonant interval – the minor second. This is the sound of swimming in Maine. The body contracts – shrinking to its smallest form in response to the swirly barbs of fifty degree water. Droplets of salt water triplet into her ears as she floats on her back.

Night air is warmer than the water but just. The atmosphere is transparent. Stars decrescendo towards the curvature of the earth. Icy rhythms of the water tangle themselves into the fiery melodies. She rolls onto her belly and surface dives towards the sea floor. Her skin is brushed by sea life – delicacy at the border of ravenous currents. She allows herself to be lifted over a rock on a wave, pushed up back onto the Breakwater. She is wedged. Waves pass over her body, but it is impossible for the sea to pull her back.

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