

2011

# Not a land for tourists

Rebekah Ann Beall Warburton  
*Iowa State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Beall Warburton, Rebekah Ann, "Not a land for tourists" (2011). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 12052.  
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/12052>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

**Not a land for tourists**

by

**Rebekah Beall Warburton**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:  
Debra Marquart, Major Professor  
Neil Nakadate  
Stephen Pett  
James Pritchard

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2011

Copyright © Rebekah Beall Warburton, 2011. All rights reserved.

## Table of Contents

A Place Well-Used	1
Badlands National Park, South Dakota	11
Cut and Run	12
Rowe Degner	24
The Geopolitical Landscape	25
I'd Rather Be Gardening	31
Betty Lou Hughes	46
Oregon Trail	47
Badlands National Park, 2005	47
Wall, South Dakota	56
Terrible News	57
My Glowing Moses	68
Bighorn National Forest, Wyoming	79
How to Be a Tourist	80
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming	90
Parkophilia	91
Don't Talk to Strangers	98
To Instead of From	112
How I Fell From Grace	123
Lorena Degner	137
How it Works	138

Eastern Oregon to Western Wyoming	148
Unlayered	149
Atlantic, Iowa	155
In Opposite Directions	156
The Men in My Family	169

## A Place Well-Used

My grandparents globe-hopped through retirement--China, New Zealand, Peru, and Scandinavia--returning with photos of the Great Wall and fuzzy llama figurines. At seven I decided to retire too. My grandmother said I caught the itch early. This term sounded like a disease, and maybe it is--the restlessness, the unsettled life. My retirement would not include sipping wine in Paris or bustling through New York City; instead, I planned to bushwhack through pine forests, slide a canoe over lake after lake, flit across alpine passes. From the corn-stubbed flatlands of Indiana, I mooned over Lewis and Clark and the voyageurs and Huckleberry Finn. My standards weren't too high. I just needed a few mountains, some crystal-clear streams, a little untrammelled wilderness.

A few months ago, browsing the library, I found *The Lonely Planet Guide to the Middle of Nowhere*. I opened the glossy cover to the map. It shone under the buzzy florescent lighting.

With the open book balanced on my palms, I walked between the stacks to my husband, "Do you want to go to Tonga? Or Wittenoom? Aappilattoq?" I rolled the words around my mouth.

Seth smiled a little and shoved a fly fishing book back onto the shelf, "Sure, Bekah, whenever you come into some cash."

Seth is in love with water. Before we moved to Iowa, he fished cold streams shadowed by hemlock. When we met, when his dark beard was still short and rough, he

built New Hampshire's trails. His crew worked ten-day hitches, eight of them rocking in a van, the back stuffed with camping equipment, chain saws, and hand tools.

On his days off he taught me to see trout, light-dappled like the bottom of the stream. I watched him arc the long line over his head and drop the fly on an eddy. I watched the trout rise.

While Seth studied maritime history, we learned swamps and shorebirds in North Carolina. Now it's my turn, and I've landlocked him in Iowa. The Midwest is my home, but I still can't shake the itch.

The *Lonely Planet Guide* centered my coffee table for a month. During those weeks--cocooned on my couch against a winter that snapped with cold, between grading essays and spooning what Seth calls "blizzard food," nutella and ramen noodles--I read the book.

I didn't feast on the pictures only; I read the text, every bit of it. The essays bristled with "profound silence," "turquoise rivers," and the "spell of solitude." The authors began the essays lost, draining their water or portioning out their last power bars, in the world's most spectacular landscapes. By the end of their (apparently near-death) experiences, they found themselves awash in profound, life-altering thoughts. One essayist marveled at his existence as "a hiccup in this vast universe." The photos alone--snow-studded peak here, sculpted desert there--made me want to clean out my savings account and catch a plane.

I started down the table of contents, ticking off the nowheres I'd visited. While studying abroad in South America, I rode a bus for three days--lengthened by one car-on-

bus collision and an explosively ill little girl--to reach Argentinean Patagonia. In Southern Chile I hiked to a lake fingered into the Andes. In the Atacama Desert, where some residents never see rain, I watched geysers steam on a frigid morning. I visited Tanzania with my grandmother on a tour meant for retired people. On family vacations I'd seen Yellowstone, Las Vegas (someone got creative with that addition to the guide's list), and backpacked the very trail to the very primitive campsite described in the Glacier National Park entry. The guide listed fifty more, and I found myself restless, feet itching to visit South Africa and Easter Island and Alaska and Borneo. My life won't be complete without seeing El Hierro in the Canary Islands, once marked on maps as the edge of the earth.

That's the draw of these places: the edge, the extremity. I turned the pages and found extreme beauty, extreme weather, extreme isolation. Wind deformed ancient trees. Caravans crossed blank expanses of snow or sand. Climbers ice-axed their way up mountains. People run away to these places, covet these places, collect these places. People search out these middle-of-nowheres.

I'm from the other kind of middle of nowhere: the kind people end up in by chance--for a friend's wedding or funeral or, more often, because they're lost. When they drive into my nowhere and see the flatter-than-a-pancake terrain, the rows on rows of corn, and the tiny church-anchored towns, they groan and push the gas pedal to the floor. With other people from nowhere, I sometimes find myself competing for my-hometown-is-more-podunk-than-your-hometown bragging rights. I often win.

When people ask where I'm from, I say, "You've never heard of it" or "Northern Indiana." These responses are true. If they insist on specifics, I lie, naming the largest nearby towns, watching their faces for recognition. "Winamac?" I ask. Then, "the Logansport area? You know, south of South Bend?" And finally, because these descriptions also mean nothing to them, I recite, "If you draw a line between Chicago and Indianapolis and put your finger down halfway between them, that's where I'm from."

My home really sits halfway between Thornhope and Star City, two towns too minuscule to serve as reference points. Star City measures five city-blocks square with a population under 400. It consists of two grain elevators, two churches, a post office, and a bar. At half that size, Thornhope only has a grain elevator.

Tucked into the backseat of my parents' car, this elevator marked the end of trips away from home. The elevator rose three stories above the Winamac Southern Railroad, a kind of monument to grain. The building looked like a giant bread box turned on end and capped with a peaked roof, impressive only because of its height and loneliness on that tabletop-flat landscape.

A slim metal chute dangled over the railroad tracks, ready to pour streams of corn into waiting freight cars. All that corn pooled together--the dented, tooth-cracking-hard kernels already stripped from the cob--made a golden flood at harvest. Liquid, I thought when I saw it shooting from the combine into my grandfather's wagons.

Corn drowned one of our neighbors. He stood on the corn in his grain bin. It shifted and sucked him down like quicksand. No one heard him, but I'm sure he screamed.

Corn still makes me think of drowning--acres and acres of it, mindless in its sameness, the exactitude of the rows, a great green sea. When I was six, my mother told me not to go into the fields surrounding our home. I could be swallowed up and lost. The stalks rose high above me, and the leaves met above my head in narrow tunnels. She trusted me in our woods, but there were no landmarks, no reference points, in a cornfield.

In movies people from the coasts imagine these towns near my home as the heartland, full of neighborly, round-faced, ultra-conservative hicks. They picture neatly mowed lawns with American flags and God-fearing children riding bikes down quiet streets. The people and places are as interchangeable as corn kernels, symbolic of hard work and provincialism.

For many people, this straight-laced, buckled-down version alone would explain my escape. The beat-about-the-face reality rarely shows up--downtowns with paint peeling, bricks crumbling, "closed" and "for sale" hand-painted across store windows, empty lots instead of schools--and if it did, they wouldn't expect me to give a second thought to running.

I'm from the country between Thornhope and Star City: Section 20, Van Buren Township, Pulaski (pronounced to rhyme with *sky*, not *key*) County, Indiana. And that's nowhere. But I'm tied to this nowhere by culture and family and memory.

My mother is a blonde, blue-eyed farmer's daughter. I look like her. Her nose is a little rounder, but our hair crowns in the same places and our fingers lean the same direction, slightly outward.

On summer days we shopped at Scott's Grocery, and I hung from the end of the cart while my mother pushed, my feet on the undercarriage, catching a ride. I hopped off at the produce section, relishing the cold air flowing over the carrots and celery. Air conditioning was a luxury. Elderly women I didn't recognize stopped us in front of the cantaloupe and, patting my face, said, "Don't you look just like your mother at that age?"

I heard the same phrase in church. And at the post office. And in the bank, until even at eight I tired of hearing it.

My father, perhaps feeling left out, covered my eyes and nose with one hand and my hair with the other and joked, "But she has my forehead, don't you think?"

For almost a century my mother's family milled lumber and tilled several hundred acres in Pulaski County. I am a farmer's granddaughter. But I never learned to toss around terms like binder or seeder. I barely know what an auger does. I don't know herbicides or pesticides or a good yield.

When I was young, my grandfather set me on the bench seat of his blue Chevy pickup, and we drove Base Road along his regiments of corn. The tassels waved at the top in blurred gold. He shifted the shiny gear knob between us. With the other hand he tilted his seed cap back to wipe sweat from his forehead, then slung his elbow out the open window. Indiana summers always felt ripe. We never had air conditioning, so I lived in the grassy smell blowing through open windows.

My grandfather didn't talk; he teased, lifting me high and rubbing his stubble against my cheeks. These trips out to "the farm" were a treat.

I slid forward and stretched my legs to reach the cab's floor. The farm truck was stripped down and boxy, the dash and seats made of plastic and vinyl. In summer those seats scalded. A knob tuned the radio, moving a red needle back and forth across a row of numbers. My grandfather only turned the radio on to catch the farm report--how many cents for a bushel of corn, the going price for hogs.

The farm--as in "I'm going down to the farm" or "Your grandfather's over at the farm"--meant my mother's childhood house, a white ranch now rented to cousins, and the three hundred acres behind. Yellow roses climbed one wall, and a brown fence hid the full-sized pool where my grandmother once gave swim lessons for extra money.

My grandparents had long since moved to a smaller house on the family's river property. My great-aunt and great-uncle lived across the road, and all manner of cousins--second cousins and third cousins and cousins removed and not removed--had strung their houses up and down that stretch of highway.

At the farm a pole barn built to house equipment rather than animals dwarfed the house. White pines lined the end of the barn edged by fields. My grandfather pulled the truck into the wide gravel lot and parked in the shade of the trees. He swung open the pickup's door and slid his long legs out. He walked around the truck to open my door and lifted me to the ground by my armpits. I ran to the windbreak pines to build a fort in the duff as he put his shoulder to the barn's enormous sliding door, opening a cavern in the building's side.

That was the farm for me--not the corn, not the six hundred forty acres he worked, but that small circuit of gravel parking lot, the barn, the pines and the line of barbed wire behind, the farm truck, and the machinery I knew could crush me. By the time I was old enough to be of use, we had long since moved away, and my grandfather had retired.

My mother, the oldest child, who once shocked me by saying she would have taken up the farm, never learned to drive a tractor or work the crops because my grandfather didn't teach her. He taught his sons. It would have been no different with me.

Still, something of the farm passed to me: this nostalgia for a place well-used and intimately known, and not just any place but Pulaski County in particular. I find within me both love and bondage, along with the sense that I should know how to settle in.

Gravel pinged the wide Lincoln, windows down and hot air rushing the backseat. Queen Anne's lace floated in the ditches. My grandparents watched crops--whose fields were clean, whose corn was ahead and whose behind. I saw no difference, but even at nine I paid attention to the attention they paid. My Grandma Betty, whose father, Rowe, raised her to farm, sat in the passenger seat while my grandfather drove. In the backseat I rode my hand on the breeze and watched the back of her head as she talked.

My grandmother no longer permed her hair. In my mother's high school yearbook, I barely recognized my grandmother in the faculty photos, not because she was young, but because of the full-skirted dresses, belted at the waist, and the brown hair curling around her face.

Looking at old photos, she said, “I hated having my hair done.”

“Why’d you do it then?” I asked.

She studied the picture: “I don’t know. Everyone did. I was a teacher. They expected it.”

Now, retired, she went to my grandfather’s barber and told him to “cut it short.” The barber clipped her hair into a man’s cut, parted at one side and short enough to comb. At home she dyed the new cut blonde. When asked how she was, my blonde grandma always said, “Fat and sassy!” As she finally let her hair go gray, she used the phrase less often.

Rowe passed part of his farm to my grandmother. My grandfather had been a landless farmer when he married Grandma. She knew every family and every acre for miles around. We’d pass a neighbor’s farm with dirt hilled in a field and plastic tubing ready to be buried and she’d say, “Look at that, Tetzloff’s are putting in more tile. What a waste. They drain and drain, and as soon as we get a dry year, they have to irrigate.”

By a hillside massed in lilacs with thick woods behind, she’d point, “That’s Brown’s. The house used to be there, and we’d go over to berry pick. There were nice raspberries in those woods. The son’s logging it out now. Old Brown never would have let him.”

Forest pushed against both sides of the road. A house with blank windows and chewed up sage siding appeared in a gap. “A woman shot gunned her husband there. Then she killed herself.” The house passed by, hidden in the woods. “He didn’t treat her right. Didn’t have many friends, and no one found them for awhile.”

At an otherwise bare intersection of county roads, she marked a lone pine tree and a bush: “My best friend’s house in high school. You wouldn’t know there’d ever been a place there. They auctioned everything and pulled it down in the seventies.” She shared what seemed trivia--who had lived where, what had vanished or changed. These anecdotes weren’t for my grandfather. He’d lived in the county for forty years. They were for me.

Later, my footloose grandparents rolled down highways in Minnesota or Colorado or Texas. They bought a camper with a bench couch, a table, and a bed bunked above the cab. My grandfather drove and my grandmother sat in the passenger seat. When we went along, my cousins and I snapped cards down in endless games of war or pressed our faces to the window. On these trips, up to a month long, I was the only kid who never cried at night from homesickness.

My grandfather watched crops--whether the beans grew ahead or behind Indiana, which fields looked weedy, which corn curled and spiked with drought. My grandmother navigated, picking out stops on the map--the Pony Express Museum in Nebraska, an enormous statue of Babe the Blue Ox in Minnesota, Crystal Springs in Florida. We drove from cousin to cousin--Nancy in Fort Worth, June in Wisconsin, the Young’s on the Clinch River in Tennessee. Little had changed. My grandparents had just broadened the web. I wonder, now, if my grandmother lived in this space too, caught between a desire for home and a need to keep moving.

Badlands National Park, South Dakota  
September 1, 2005

A bison scratches his back in a slow rub against the limb of a cedar. The branch angles out just above his spine, and he stretches the block of his body, straining his shaggy head forward, extending his back legs, slow, deliberate, before easing back again. I'm perched on a butte, looking into the draw. He kicks at his head and turns around, angling the branch behind a horn. The tree shakes. He turns again and works at a spot just above his tail. It's like watching someone in his bedroom, a man scratching his balls, attending to the needs of the body.

I drink water from my bottle and move downhill, skirting the bison. The creek runs low and laden with sediment, near dry here and there. When it rains, water pulls fossils from the soft bluffs: teeth and femur, bits of carapace. I touch a pearly shell, cracked out of stone into a land of meager water after millions of years.

Further down the creek bed, I find a single bison bone, the length of my arm from elbow to shoulder, knobbed and thick but lighter than I expect. It's white and porous, stripped of all trace of flesh.

## Cut and Run

Here, the dinosaur spine of the Badlands broke the tawny roll of the prairie. In the morning and evening, the Badlands blushed, and the grasses turned bronze and ran under the wind. At night the dark was punctuated by stars, by lightning, by headlights. During the day, the place baked with hundred degree heat and desiccated in hot wind that whipped grit through the parking lots. People learned fast to hold on hard.

Or they self-destructed. My co-workers and I in the national park heard early and often of handguns pressed to the roofs of mouths, drunk driving at ninety or a hundred or a hundred and twenty miles-per-hour, men beating their wives and wives beating their men.

Summer burned along, and I learned to love the magpies hopping through the visitor center parking lot, picking through the debris: sandwiches dropped to the pavement, pretzels, potato chips. Jaunty and bold, they dined well, keeping an eye on snacking children. I waited for one to swoop and snatch a cookie from a tourist hand. I loved their lizard legs, their hard black eyes and sharp beaks, their glossy blue-black plumage. Most of all, I loved them in flight, fanning open their elegant tails, flashing their white wing patches. I imagined, as they raided bird and rabbit nests for tender pink flesh, as they picked apart carrion, and haunted the garbage cans and parking lots, that they could teach me about ruthlessness, about surviving in a land where the dirt bakes so hard it sheds water like a pie plate.

In this place it seemed logical to my friends and me to spend the summer drunk. So we did. We downed cheap beer, ate watermelon spiked with Everclear, sucked Wild Turkey out of the bottle and passed it on. Then we rode in trucks driven fast across a dark roadless prairie or laughed as men swung at each other outside the bar. There was a sense of unleashing. We were all on the move, working as rangers or, like me, interpretive interns--just after college and before career, marriage, kids--ready to try anything once. For four months we eddied in Interior, South Dakota--population 67: one church, one cafe, one grade school, two bars--on the highway between the park and Pine Ridge Reservation. We worked together and lived together by chance in the middle of the plains. That was the contract, that was the job--hired on for a season, the length of the summer. We knew we'd leave and never see each other again.

All the seasonal workers, interns and paid staff alike, lived in the park, directly behind the visitor center in a hunkered complex of one-story apartment buildings. Each building contained four apartments in a row. The four buildings formed a rectangle, facing inward to protect a rabbit-mauled lawn strung with sagging clotheslines.

They assigned the apartments by division: biologists and wildfire-fighters in one building, law enforcement in another, interpreters occupying a third side of the rectangle. The biologists kept to themselves, working at dawn and dusk and in deep night, tracking swift foxes and black-footed ferrets. The fire guys kept on their toes, lusting for natural disaster, for prairie burns, or to be called in on big blazes out West. In the absence of anyone else, the interpreters and law enforcement rangers and a handful of student

paleontologists coalesced. Under slow construction, the last apartment building, the fourth side of the rectangle, sat gutted and open the whole summer, and we gathered there after dark to sit on sun-warmed plywood.

Most of us were from green places: Indiana and Pennsylvania and New Jersey and Michigan. We reacted to the bald blue sky, the treeless horizon, the hard bones of the Badlands by flocking together. We tried to make ourselves bigger under the eye of a place we sensed could eat us like small fish or newly hatched birds.

When we went out to drink in Interior, we usually drank at the Horseshoe, the bar on the highway, although sometimes, for variety, we walked the two blocks across town to the Wagon Wheel. But that bar, on a gravel side street, was dark and not entirely friendly; the locals, blued with florescent light from beer signs, quieted and stared when we walked in. Fights tumbled into the parking lot more often, and after a beer or two, we usually drifted back into the street toward the Horseshoe.

Most locals didn't like Greg, the operator of the Horseshoe, citing his rumored felony conviction. They couldn't tell us what he'd done. They only said, although he made the decisions, his wife held the deeds and licenses to the bar. Locals drifted into the Horseshoe on weekends the way we drifted into the Wagon Wheel, for variety, to spread gossip. They waited for Greg and his wife to divorce, hoping she would take everything. Except for a couple of die-hards--pudgy, soft-spoken Orville with his skinny friend next to him on the same barstools every evening after five--the Horseshoe catered to transients: park employees and tourists looking for a rough-edged thrill.

At least two dented, rust-tinged pickups always decorated the muddy gravel parking lot. A line of duct tape covered a long crack down the bar's front window. The door of Greg's house trailer almost opened into the back door of the bar. Inside, the pool table sat at one end of the long room, and the juke box sat at the other. The glossy wooden bar, with dusty jars of pickles and pickled pig's feet wedged between the liquor on the shelves behind it, faced the line of split and punctured booths under the window. After seven Bob bartended. He didn't talk much, wasn't good-natured. His gut hung over his belt buckle, and he always wore a neatly ironed cowboy shirt with pearl snap buttons and a white cowboy hat.

We worked weekends and had staggered weekdays off--Monday and Tuesday or Wednesday and Thursday or some other combination. We felt obligated to keep whoever was on his "weekend" company at the bar. On these days, at dinnertime, when we were Greg's only customers save the regulars, he made homemade turkey-noodle soup or sliced open warm tomatoes from his garden and served them for free.

This was our pattern. We spent much of the day driving the park roads alone, back and forth, stopping at overlooks to talk to tourists or give a program. The tourists asked the same questions over and over. They hopped out of their air-conditioned cars and raised their video cameras, consuming the red-striped spires and shadow-blackened draws, the wind-whipped grass and crackled soil. They turned to me, standing hunched against blowing grit and sun, wiping tangled wisps of hair from my face, and asked, "Why are

the Badlands called bad?" I explained about early French traders, about the constant wind, the heat. I answered on cue, with a smile--an amateur talking head in dozens of home movies.

But I wanted to say, "Take a look around for God's sake." I wanted to point to the cactus hiding in the grass, the unmitigated sun, the rattlesnakes. I wanted to take them to the river and show them the water, milky with silt and undrinkable.

They wanted to know why the Badlands existed. When I first started working at the park, I tried to give them the full geologic explanation, describing sedimentation and erosion. I told them the stripes on the formations were *paleosols*, fossilized soils once alive with grubs and plant roots. Each red or yellow stripe represented a time when oxygen touched that layer and a grassland or jungle developed. The layer would have been soil underfoot. After thousands or millions of years of growth, a cap of sediment deposited by flood or wind-blown ash preserved the soil layer. Everything that had been living there, either left or died. When the flooding or ash fall ended, the process began again. Now all the layers, world on world, were being both exposed and destroyed by the same forces.

But I realized the tourists didn't care, so I whittled my answer down to two sentences: "Basically, it's like a big pile of mud, and every time it rains, some of the mud washes away. The erosion creates the formations, but also means that, eventually, the Badlands will disappear." For most people that was enough.

They wanted the vista--the long roll of prairie stuttered with wind-sharpened buttes. Most things they saw through the camera lens, making pictures to take home.

They wanted a simplified landscape. It took me a long time to realize the people I talked to were on vacation. They spent a day in the Badlands, maybe two, on the way to Mount Rushmore and Yellowstone.

Our brief season in the Badlands also disoriented those of us who worked there. We learned the questions and memorized the answers. We rummaged the park's library. We carried books in our backpacks about bison and prairie dogs and shortgrass flora. When we took tourists on a hike, we walked the route alone first, picking out stops, looking for anything they might ask about that we didn't know. A month into the summer I could spout facts and names--twelve inches of rain a year, needle grass, oreodont teeth--but every once in a while a tourist would ask a question, and I would answer, "I'm not actually from here."

John, the custodian at the visitor center, told me about the magpies: how he and his brother used to go out and shoot them from their roost, one after another until they made an iridescent pile at the bottom of the cottonwood. They shot them because they thought they picked sores open on the backs of cattle. They shot them because they could. Magpies believe in safety in numbers. After they mass and settle for the night, they're hard to spook. It made them easy pickings for teenagers with shotguns. Vultures found the dead. Nothing wasted.

I never learned to find fossils. With long practice some can read the land, seeing the way rare rain runs across the sharp teeth of the buttes, pulling out bones. They find bits and pieces of long outmoded creatures--three-toed horses, tiny camels, giant pigs. Experts can see the ancient landscape in the Badlands layers: ghosts of ponds and

waterholes, once busy with life and now rich with bones. Sometimes they find articulated skeletons, but more often the remains are scattered and pulled apart by ancient scavengers or simple erosion. Even more commonly they find lonely teeth or scraps of turtle shell.

The picture is rarely whole.

This was our pattern. After work, instead of hiking or bird watching or polishing the leather on our boots, we poured into the bar, sun-chapped, with voices strained from speaking over the incessant wind. The bar was air conditioned. It was dim. We began to drain beer into dry throats. Someone would start the juke box, and Sam, a frenetic, wiry graduate student paleontologist, doing his second summer season, would set up the pool table. Kath, another intern, and I sat on barstools and split a cigarette, passing it back and forth. Neither of us smoked too seriously: one now, one or two later. She would wrinkle her upturned, freckled nose when she tapped the cigarette out of the pack but light it anyway and order a beer.

Later, she huddled with Troy, a newly minted law enforcement ranger, always sandwiched in the booth between him and the wall. He leaned forward, and she leaned back, giggling while he bought her beer after beer. Later, she would tell me, "I like him, but I'm not serious about it."

After a few rounds of pool with Orville and a couple of beers, Sam would fill the cab of his truck and drive to the National Grassland. From my swaying position above the smooth, straight highway, I watched the headlights tunnel the dark, following the yellow

centerline with my eyes. Sam drove slow down Highway 44, afraid the sheriff might be cruising near the bars.

A few miles down the highway he turned onto government property. The Grassland was terrain nobody could survive on but wasn't pretty, so the government was stuck with it. They leased part of it back to ranchers and part of it was closed to the public because of endangered ferrets, but anyone could do anything they wanted to with the rest. So it was crisscrossed with two tracks and potholes. The truck tires threw up white dust. Sam sped up.

The game was to drive as fast as possible over as much as possible without wrecking or launching over a rise into a mule deer. Sam had done this once last year and described the explosive smear of blood and hair across the hood.

I became a person I'd never been before and will never be again. I drank Budweiser and bought cigarettes one at a time from Bob. After three beers I lurched across the battered carpeting and slid quarters into the juke box and punched the numbers to play "For You Blue." I danced with ranch hands. I danced with bikers passing through on the way to the rally in Sturgis. By midnight at least four nights a week, I was drunk enough to dance with anyone. After five or six beers, dancing gave way to good-natured bouts of bloody knuckles. I'd approach friends. I'd approach familiar strangers. I'd put out my fist and tell them the rules: a straight-on punch, just one, don't patronize me by holding back. I chose the biggest men I could find. I insisted. We lined up our knuckles. We drew back. If, as often happened on the first try, our fists whiffed past each other, we tried again. And again. And again, until our knuckles cracked together.

At one or two or three in the morning, we drove back into the park and slept hard until our shifts the next morning. Twice that summer, after we were in bed, helicopters chucked by low and loud on their way to nearby car accidents. The searchlights broke through our windows. Some of us woke and parted the venetian blinds, searching the sky. The next morning others, who never woke, said they'd dreamed of war. The employees trained in search-and-rescue dressed quickly and drove over to help. Those of us who stayed could see the lights from the accident scene miles in the distance. In each case, the drivers of the cars, drunk and despairing, plowed into the prairie without letting up on the gas pedal. They launched off the pavement at seventy miles an hour.

For awhile, we moved together--three across the backseat bench of a car, two more in the hatchback trunk, migrating from park to bar, a herd, a flock.

Summer waned, and our group started to break apart. Things got ugly fast. At our last big party, on a local friend's ranch on the White River, with the stars unhindered as usual, we drank until we passed out around the fire or in the beds of pickups. Earlier, Sam roared his truck back and forth across the rain-starved river. We could hear the truck engine and the water cascading away from it, but we couldn't see more than a brief flash of glass.

Kath told me of long conversations with Troy on the couch in her apartment. Maybe she still wanted the boyfriend she'd left at home, she confessed to him. She

wasn't sure what she wanted. These conversations ended with Troy in tears, leaning in and gripping her hands hard, thumbs pressed into her knuckles until it hurt.

When Kath finally ended her relationship with Troy, he said to her, "Why don't you kill yourself? I'll go get my gun." A week later someone spotted Troy with a local girl--sixteen or seventeen, too young. Her parents worried. She wasn't coming home at night. They cruised the prairie in his truck, stopping only in the loneliest places.

Just before he was scheduled to leave, Sam, maybe drunk, maybe not, drove into the prairie one last time. Kath told me how she and another seasonal worker slobbered against each other on the bench seat, knee knocking knee, elbow brushing rib. The three of them crunched from the Horseshoe's gravel lot onto the smooth highway, headed for the Grassland.

When Kath told the story, it was easy to imagine myself where I wasn't, watching dust-coated grass whip against the fender, gripping the handle above the passenger window, peering into the dark beyond the headlights.

The truck clunked across the cattle guard into the prairie. Sam sped up. He turned the wheel hard, angling around low buttes--mounds of mud scattered here and there like fill on a construction site. Now and then, the Dakota fish-tailed in loose dirt. The two track rose and fell under the headlights. Sam put a window down and rode one hand on the hot wind, playing the steering wheel under the other. The truck rocked and jounced.

When he swerved to miss what?--a deep rut, the spark of animal eyes?--the truck rolled all the way over and righted itself. Almost too fast to notice. One second they rode upright, whole, the next they found themselves covered in glass. I know they screamed in

that flash when they dangled from their seat belts, upturned in the sound of panic and metal grating metal.

The roll bar kept them from being crushed. Sam put the truck in park. Did they run a hand over their own skulls, their own bones, before looking in each other's faces? Did they examine the soft skin on their foreheads and cheeks, the tender undersides of their wrists? They found not a scratch or puncture to prove their fear. Unhurt, they said, unmarked.

They writhed out the driver-side window, catching their clothes on the bent frame. They huddled for a moment in the dark, crunching windshield underfoot. They turned their faces up to look at the Milky Way sprayed across the sky. A near miss, they kept saying. A close thing. By the next morning, by the time Sam called the insurance company, the wrecked Dakota had become a joke--Sam's ticket to a new truck.

But I lingered on those moments after. A quirk of memory puts me there, stunned and bruised from the seatbelt, safety glass crumbled over my clothing and caught like stars in my hair and the collar of my shirt. I don't know why I wasn't in the truck. I don't know why I found myself undamaged. I can picture a different ending, one in which I wasn't home, asleep, by the time my friends smashed into the prairie.

Fire started easily here; lightning strike or cigarette butt, and the prairies raced with flame. In front of our apartments the night before I left, the four or five of us still there built a fire in a charcoal grill. In a land of few trees, we fed it all the cottonwood limbs we could find. Then we cracked apart a broken picnic table and piled it on. The fire burned high, lighting the courtyard. It hadn't rained in months. The thin metal of the grill

glowed red hot. Sparks lifted into the night. Even after dark we sweated, and in the heat of the fire we sweated more. Someone made a baked Alaska, and we spooned the ice cream and cake into our mouths with our bare hands, licking them off and wiping them down our shirts.

In memory we seem so gluttonous, open-mawed. We reacted to the way the soil baked hard enough to resist footprints, but I think we also found the behavior in our nature. We acted like frontier species, like weeds. My co-workers and I came together knowing we would come apart again. We took what we could get while we were there.

We hit to see what would hit back and thought it didn't matter. But from the things we saw and taught we should have learned--despite its apparent hardness--how impressionable that place was, how it held the past only to spit it up again, broken and half legible.

There I learned the luxury of mobility. I learned to move on, burying one self in the Badlands soil, letting it fossilize, and becoming someone new in the next place. After four months rocking on a bar stool, I felt bloated with other people, hungover on carelessness. The job ended, and like everyone else, I left.

Rowe Degner  
b.1892-d.1963  
Buried: Winamac, IN

Maybe my great-grandfather, Rowe, could see into the future: how his family would splinter and leave, slowly leasing and selling off their parts of the farm. He had a knack for premonition: before the banks crashed in 1929, he pulled out every cent he had and bought land in Florida and Minnesota and added several hundred acres to the farm in Indiana. His “instinct,” as my grandmother tells it, kept the family from losing anything.

My family passes on this anecdote as good advice, as scripture: *Land bought and paid for will always serve you well; trust dirt to get you through.*

Maybe Rowe mistrusted banks; maybe a little loony, he stuffed cash under his mattress, then profited from his ruined neighbors' misfortune. Maybe he just got lucky. In any case our family spent the Depression without a dime but wallowing in land.

In black and white 1940s snapshots, Rowe, the dirt-wise seer, looks indistinguishable to me from the other men in the photos--black pants, white shirt, sagging face, slight curve to the stomach, head tilted, never a smile. These men look tough; they look hard. I can sense his position as an enforcer, a patriarch not to be crossed. But when my mother and grandmother point out my great-grandfather, they inevitably say, “He was always land rich,” until in my mind it becomes his middle name--Rowe “Land-Rich” Degner.

## The Geopolitical Landscape

Moon Ditch cut an angle straight across the neighbor's cornfield. The banks dropped five feet to murky water. On camping trips to other places, I walked creeks barefoot, looking for minnows and odd stones, but Moon Ditch never tempted me. It drained a slurry of silt and chemicals from the fields. The banks clogged with brittle tubes of scouring rushes. In the spring the farmers burned the banks to clear brush and weeds. The weeds grew back rank and tall by summer. The ditch ran brown as milk chocolate.

My brother had a microscope, and we begged my father to on pull on waders and slide down the bank to dip several mason jars of water. We wanted to see microscopic life twitching and swimming. The ditch's mucky bottom sucked at my father's feet as he leaned down to fill each jar. He stirred the water and raised the smell of bubbling black decay. He handed the jars up to us, one after another, and we could see how the water swirled brown and evil-looking in the sunlight. In one jar, a black leech wriggled. As a child, I thought it natural for creeks to run like rulers and fill with silt.

My family lived in a woods--five acres once rooted bare by hogs and now recovering. Like most of northern Indiana, it had been squared. To the east ran a dead-end dirt road, quiet enough for a line of grass to grow down the middle. On all other sides, fields: barren and spiked with crop stubble in winter and thick with corn or soybeans in summer. A low rise of sand stretched through our woods. We named it "the sand hill," but few others would have noticed the elevation change.

My brother and I searched the neighbor's field for arrowheads after the farmer turned the earth for planting. The sand tongued from our woods into the field, then faded to sticky black soil. Our feet left crumbly prints. Sean followed the furrows along the rise, methodical, eyes down. We looked for pale chips in the sand. He bent to finger hard corners. I flitted from stone to stone, still too young to follow straight lines.

Blindfold me. Drive me in circles through the County. Take me to the farthest corner. Stop the car, trundle me out and spin me to confuse all sense of direction. Leave, and I'll pull off the blindfold and walk straight home to the woods.

There's no trick, no magic. I learned geometry young. Pulaski County defines itself by Thomas Jefferson's township and range system. Under this system, surveyors prepared America's unsettled territories for private ownership, for the plow, by cutting them into boxes. Pulaski

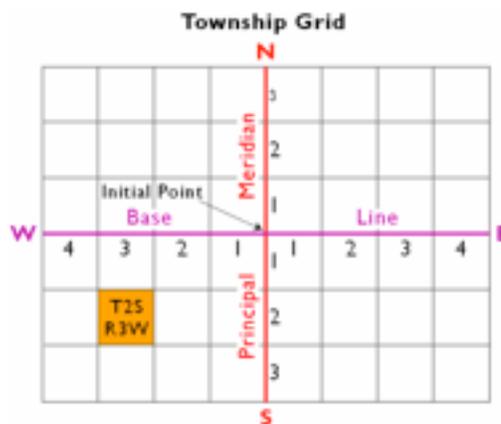
County's maps teach order, property, and symmetry. The rectangular county is cut into twelve rectangular townships, stacked three high and four across on the map. The township is gridded down into square sections and quarter sections.



Second Principal Meridian,  
Indiana Historical Bureau

The Second Principal Meridian runs along the east county line. Community leaders petitioned the Indiana Historical Bureau put up a marker to commemorate “the line from which all east-west land descriptions and measurements [for the state] are made.”

Every time we visited my grandparents, my family drove the survey grid. County roads ran the lines at even mile intervals. Gravel showered the car as we turned right-angles. Queen Anne’s Lace wavered along the roadside. In August the corn was dark green, looking cool and endless on either side of the road. We moved along the cardinal directions: two miles due west, two more due north, another mile west, then north again on Base Road. When I learned about the compass rose in social studies, it made absolute sense. I could stand at any county intersection and see the compass laid out in asphalt.



Department of Geography, Penn State University

I learned to interpret the road signs nearest my house--S 300 E and E 800 S. I lived in the southeast quadrant of the county, three miles east of the county meridian and eight miles south of the base line. I could never be lost again.

My family doesn't have any origin stories because no one kept them. For all we know, we grew from the Indiana soil we farmed.

Of course, this isn't true, but we're very good at pretending.

"The Tourist's Pocket Map of the State of Indiana Exhibiting its Internal Improvements, Roads, and c." of 1839 shows Pulaski County as a blue square. My hometown does not yet exist. My family won't exist in the county for another fifty years. The county lines are freshly surveyed. Except for the county name, the Tippecanoe River, and the words "Country Ceded by the POTTAWATOMIES"--the blue square is blank.

Everyone's heard of the Trail of Tears. The Potawatomi called their march to Kansas the Trail of Death. The newcomers to Indiana never learned or recorded the names the tribe gave the creeks and village sites, prairies and woods. The mapmakers wiped the landscape and started over.

On the sand hill in the soybean field behind our woods, my brother found a use-smooth scraper and enough beads to string a necklace. He turned up countless arrowheads. We don't know their name for the place.

Maps of other counties showed borders rippled by rivers or curved by the Great Lakes. Pulaski County's founders made no concessions. To keep the boundaries square, they hid the meander of the Tippecanoe River in the center of the county. I imagine, had they been able to, they would have happily realigned the bows and curves of the river to parallel the meridian.

Farmers straightened and channelized the smaller waterways. They make neat geometric cuts through the section boundaries, draining toward the Tippecanoe. No one

calls these waterways creeks (or even, as an older generation might have, “cricks”). We call them ditches, named for their use.

Millions of years ago, Indiana swam in a shallow sea, shelled creatures curling and trailing through the deep. Tens of thousands of years ago it was burdened with ice, more deeply submerged than Antarctica. My brother and I accepted arrowheads as gifts of the soil, curious as glacial erratics, barely considering the human hands that divoted the glassy stone to a point. Where the Potowatomi saw a gentle prairie savanna slope to the long-grassed, meandering slough, we walked bare, furrowed soil along the straight line of a ditch. By the late 1800s, my ancestors had cut their own square from the prairie. In 1938, 1,720 farms patchworked Pulaski County--one my great-grandparents', a spread of farmland, woodlots, and meadow along the Tippecanoe River.

Despite the crops fuzzing up each year, all the corn and beans breaking through the deep black soil, my home is as unnatural as any city. We have no enormous bodies of water pushing waves hard against black stone. No deep forests of trees unable to be circled by open arms. No elk, no bison, no mountain lions.

In Pulaski County we can't even claim hardship, or at least no more than anyone else. My grandparents could tell stories of the Depression but not the Dust Bowl. Our lands aren't marginal; we rarely run out of rain, and it rarely rains too much. We're as temperate as they come.

We are a landscape of straight lines--straight roads, creeks straightened to ditches, squared lines of two-story farmhouses, railroad tracks, corn planted in ruler straight rows

all the way to the flat horizon. All these lines made me want something glossy and shiny, something exotic and wild, a bit of disorder.

## I'd Rather Be Gardening

No one in my uncle's house cooked. Bruce and LeeAnn happily rifled the deli and bakery sections of the grocery store or opted for meals they could slide from the box and heat in the microwave. They had three sons and other things to do.

So when I went to Indiana for a Fourth of July visit, the vegetables tucked into the flower borders surprised me. I leaned over the porch rail to peer between the petunias and day lilies: "Are those green beans? And tomatoes?" I asked my Aunt LeeAnn.

"Oh, yeah. The plants are all Bruce's. I don't touch them."

My uncle ambled out of the pole barn with his two big labradors. He is my mother's younger brother but the oldest son. He looks like a farmer--over six feet tall and somehow square all over, shoulders, hands, short hair bristling over square head. But he's a pathologist. He has his father's nose, round and blunt. When I hugged him, I thought of my grandfather when he was my uncle's age, coming in from the fields and lifting me high and rubbing his five o'clock shadow against my cheeks until I squealed.

The vegetables anchoring Bruce's beds glowed with perfection: lush, slightly fuzzed tomato foliage standing at attention, hung with taut green globes. His garden held none of the jungle I remembered from my parents' vegetable gardens--plants vining over each other, beans overshooting supports. The vegetables interspersed between shasta daisies and roses felt like specimen plants, just enough for a taste of summer. Not enough to feed the household. These were Better Homes and Gardens plants, footed into bright red wood chips. These were county fair plants.

In another household I might not have asked. It might not have seemed odd. I love the idea of replacing lawns and flower beds with edibles. A book I own called *Food Not Lawns* advocates permaculture, rails against industrial agriculture, and suggests we turn the wasted space in our yards into food. Several of my friends spent seasons as WWOOFers, volunteering on farms in Hawaii, Vermont, and New Zealand. I wouldn't have batted an eye at kale and lettuce borders around their houses.

But Bruce's family is hyper-conventional; I would even say unimaginative--solid Midwesterners keeping up appearances. Bruce hasn't followed a trend in his life, unless it had something to do with pro-football or golf. His father farmed conventionally--corn and soybeans--his entire life. Bruce's son, Bryce, went to Purdue and, at the same time I was taking creative writing and environmental studies classes, chose his major in order to make seventy thousand plus straight out of university.

He became a food scientist. For his senior project, he invented a new gummy snack. As soon as he graduated, he took a job as a floor manager for Red Gold ketchup. I doubted the vegetables infiltrating Bruce's borders meant my uncle was a burgeoning locavore or Alice Waters disciple.

Our garden in Iowa hooked me as soon as I started pulling shallow rows through the beds and sprinkling in radish, lettuce, and carrot seeds. My husband, Seth, and I started beets, swiss chard, cauliflower, cilantro, and dill. Every time we visited, I dropped our tote of supplies at garden's corner and made a tour, walking each row to stare at the soil. I waited

for the first curled sign of a sprout. When the shoots appeared, I sat back on my heels and watched, convinced I could see them reaching upward, unfurling ever so slowly. We'd never grown a garden before.

Paul and Marsha, the landowners in Iowa, had advertised through the university for sustainable agriculture students. None turned up, so they had to take us instead. In exchange for weedy half acre behind their pole barn, we agreed to grow vegetables organically and give them a portion of the produce. They owned over a hundred acres and gardened in their own way, restoring and reconstructing prairie.

I'm sure we looked as naive as we felt: my husband, a historian working as a librarian, and me, the writer. We didn't feel we could handle the whole half acre. So Paul and Marsha gave us a quarter (and if we'd known any better we would have realized even that was too much), and a local woman with a family took the other quarter. Paul and Marsha put rain barrels behind the barn to catch water from the tin roof, and the first time we brought our shiny straight-from-Lowe's hoes and spades they gave us a key so we could store them inside.

For the last few years, Paul and Marsha had planted a food plot for wildlife in the garden space. Early that spring they'd burned off the plant debris and shallowly disced the soil. Seth and I marked out beds with stakes and twine. Seth bit the spade deep into the soil and turned it over. I followed behind with the hoe and broke up clumps and smoothed the soil. At the end of three hours, my back and arms ached. Even in early spring, sweat puddled at the small of my back. I had to switch between hoe and rake to give my muscles a rest. Now and then, Seth spelled me on the hoe, and I took over the

spade, jumping my whole weight onto the blade to drive it in. We dug one bed while still too wet, turning over solid bites of soil. I thwacked and hammered with the hoe, but the soil dried into golf-ball-sized, stone-hard clumps.

We bumbled along, carrying the *Guide to Iowa Vegetable Gardening* and a second-hand copy of Rodale's *Basic Book of Organic Gardening* next to our seeds and gloves. I learned the definition of the word "friable" as I lifted the soil from our beds and rubbed it between my fingers and palms. I've always loved soil, the smell of it, the feel of it under bare feet. Like my home dirt in Indiana, our garden soil in Iowa looked so black and rich as to be nearly edible.

Later, in the back of the garden, we hoed up hills and pressed the big, pointed seeds of watermelon, cantaloupe, and squash (summer and winter, six kinds total, including two types of pumpkins) into the warm soil. We planted scarlet runner beans and too many tomatoes and peppers (both sweet and hot). I put in a row of zinnias, marigold borders, and a couple of sunflowers. Just before we left for Indiana to visit my family, I scattered the too-tiny-to-see seeds of oregano and basil into a bare patch and smoothed soil over the top.

Every time a plant sprouted, I felt like a success. I don't know what I was expecting--utter failure perhaps. But plants grew and kept growing until we had thick-stemmed, bristly squash plants, a jungle of tomato vines, and feathery, medicinal-smelling carrot tops.

My parents moved back to the land in 1982. They bought five acres in Pulaski County. My father stripped down a hog barn, put in walls and windows, and laid a pine floor. They moved into the nearly completed house in the fall after I was born. The single bedroom with a built-in bunk was my brother's. My parents' futon doubled as a couch. I slept on a foam mattress on the floor between their bed and the rectangular, black-enameled wood stove, our only source of heat.

The stove stood on slim legs in the center of the house. In the winter my father packed it with wood he'd cut and split. He touched a lit match to the fuel, and the front vent became a roaring orange eye. I sprawled in front of the stove to roll marbles along the smooth floor and build Lincoln Log cabins.

In spring they started planting--apples, pears, plums, a hopeful peach tree, red raspberries, strawberries, grapes, rhubarb, and an enormous vegetable garden. I chased roly-poly bugs under the straw, and my mother hoed. My waxy half-moon fingernails turned black. My fingers looked like pink worms against the soil. I picked wild strawberries into my mouth while my mother picked her cultivated patch into baskets. My parents never intended to become farmers. They just wanted to feed themselves.

The back-to-the-land movement reached its height in the late seventies. My parents caught the downswing and by no means represented its most radical faction. We lived less than ten miles from my grandparents' farm. We had plumbing and electricity. We had a phone. Some of my parents' friends didn't.

Back-to-the-landers are not left-over hippies (although no doubt there is some crossover). *Countryside & Small Stock Journal*--one of the central and continuing publications for back-to-the-landers--centers the movement in intentional simplicity, “a reverence for nature and a preference for country life,” and a desire for “maximum personal self-reliance.” Some back-to-the-landers sometimes call themselves “homesteaders” or “new pioneers.”

These people live on the fringes--odd hybrids of Thoreau’s “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately” and Jefferson’s self-reliant yeoman. Most quit. With more nostalgia and ego than practical skill, the average homesteader didn’t anticipate the work required to sustain a family on a piece of land. Those who survived often grew up on farms or approached their project on a small scale and maintained a side job. For the most part, it was another fad.

We lasted about ten years before my parents’ careers took us away. I never got old enough to think our lives strange. Our house was small, and we heated with wood. We spent a lot of time in the garden. Those were about the only differences I could see between us and other families. But one of my mother’s second cousins dropped off a house-warming present, took one look at our life, and refused to visit again.

Even now, still in my twenties and impossibly young, as I plant a too-big garden and attempt to grow my summer produce, my parents’ decision seems like a naive experiment. That life is so much work. It requires such idealism. My parents lasted longer than many because my mother was a farmer’s daughter, because my father’s father was a

gardener and raised steers for meat, and because they were country people, born and raised.

I tend to forget. Bruce was a farm boy. He and my mother and their little sister and brother grew up on a farm. The farm boys I went to high school with wore round-toed, well-used Redwings and too-tight jeans when oversized, drooping pants were the height of male fashion. They dipped and showed off big belt-buckles. They said “crick” and “warsh” and talked unabashedly and enthusiastically about 4-H and livestock. It was hard for me to reconcile my golf-playing, doctor uncle with these representatives of agriculture.

Although my cousins and I know my grandfather farmed (and his father farmed and his father’s father farmed, and before that I don’t know, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they were farmers), we never fully conceived or imagined what that meant. One generation removed, the farm is already an abstraction, something we can’t visualize beyond corn and beans, brief memories of the barn, riding high in the combine, and the neatly hung row of my grandfather’s seed caps. When my grandfather retired in the mid-nineties, Bruce bought out the siblings to keep the farm intact. I think he looked at the farm as more than an investment. He’s the oldest son, and after seeing his vegetables, I sense nostalgia.

I know there’s a reason Bruce rents out the land rather than farming it himself. My grandfather made his living by corn and beans. He did well. Temperate, not a risk-taker,

he made enough for my grandparents to take a different overseas vacation every year of their retirement--Costa Rica, Peru, Scandinavia, Britain, New Zealand, several trips to China, Thailand. My family doesn't talk about money, so I don't know whether this comfortable retirement resulted from a highly frugal life and long savings or selling the farm to my uncle. But at market value in the mid-nineties, farmland in Indiana sold for two to three thousand dollars an acre, and my grandfather owned over three hundred acres outright. My family's isn't the old story of the farm crisis and foreclosure. We weren't Farm Aid's poster children. We never "lost" the farm.

At the time my grandfather retired, my mother told me those three hundred forty acres owned added up with another three hundred rented (which seemed like an enormous sum of land to me) weren't enough to keep a family anymore. And no one else was selling, and you couldn't find an extra acre to rent. And it's hard and risky, and she and her siblings had worked to become professionals--two doctors, a professor, and an educational consultant. None of them had prepared to farm, and farming looked like a way of going backward.

My garden lust started when my mother sent me a food-spattered, second-hand copy of *Stocking Up* from Rodale Press. *Stocking Up* details everything the neophyte needs to know about canning, drying, and freezing fruits and vegetables. It provides illustrated plans for root cellars, instructions for making butter, cheese, and yogurt, and step-by-step

how-tos for turning an animal into any product, even headcheese and scrapple. If I had a top ten most influential texts shelf, this book would be on it.

*Stocking Up* represents the knowledge of skilled people. My grandmother learned to farm from her father, to care for cattle and chickens and crops. She made the double-ring quilt on my bed. The interlocking rings and starry patterns stitched together from scraps wrap my husband and me in warmth through the winter. My father makes tables and stools. In a pinch he could build a house. My mother sewed her own wedding dress, the same wedding dress I wore, from white cotton eyelet. She can grow food and preserve it in rows of glowing mason jars--some filled with ruby jelly, others floating with green beans and corn.

My mother told me three years in a row that she had a canner (an enormous pot with a special metal rack and a lid) she wanted to give me. Finally, she stopped waiting on me and brought it along in the trunk of her car when she came to visit. I couldn't say no. In my one teen-aged encounter with the water bath canner, my mother and I spent an afternoon using a wooden pestle to pulp some kind of steaming produce (berries? tomatoes?) through a funnel-shaped strainer. I lifted the rack of empty sterilized jars from boiling water and worked quickly with my mother to fill and cap the jars and return them to the water. The lids sealed with a pop as the processed jars cooled on our counters. I wanted to try it again. I wanted pretty pickles and clear jellies and quart after quart of tomato sauce.

So I started by growing the vegetables. Seth and I were almost entirely inexperienced gardeners. After my family moved to town, when I was in high school, my

parents still planted small vegetable patches behind their houses. Because my father was a pastor, we moved often, and at every new house my parents ripped out a rectangle of lawn to plant summer squash and green beans and tomatoes. So I'd been *around* gardens most of my life but as a teenager felt I had better things to do than get my hands dirty.

Still, once in awhile I picked a few glowing red tomatoes and tender, finger-length yellow squash, blossoms just fading from the ends. One year, when my parents' tiny plot produced more cucumbers and zucchini than they had imagination to cook, I'd been party to a vegetable ring and run. We left the squash in a bag on a neighbor's front porch, rang the doorbell, and hopped back in the car before he had a chance to refuse. But I'd never been responsible for a garden from beginning to end. I didn't learn the practical skills-- the craft or magic or whatever it took to make things grow.

In our garden in Iowa, grass consumed our sprouts and lamb's quarter sprung up everywhere. We realized we should have started with mulch, any kind of mulch-- newspaper, grass clippings, straw. The weeds grew better than the vegetables. The weather cooled when it should have heated up, and for a few weeks it rained and rained. Black spots appeared on our stubbornly green tomatoes. The rabbits munched down our cauliflower, and we developed a serious groundhog problem. We found our green beans devoured to the ground every time they sprouted a tentative leaf. Had I owned a gun, I would have decided bullets or shells or shot met the requirements of organic gardening and taken up target practice. By the Fourth of July, I expected our main crops to be foxtail, zucchini the size of baseball bats, and green tomatoes, in that order.

My grandmother hated to cook. A mother of four, a farmwife, and a teacher, she embraced store-bought canned food long ago. My grandparents loved to buy in bulk from Sam's Club. My grandparents lived with Mountain Dews in hand and got twitchy if the supply ran low. They ate dinners of canned peas, iceberg lettuce salad, and hash. Afterward my grandfather always slipped a Little Debbie Nutty Bar from the cardboard box by the refrigerator to eat during Wheel of Fortune. When my grandfather died and my grandmother prepared to move, we cleaned boxes of expired canned goods from their cabinets.

But I can't remember a year when my grandmother didn't fiddle in the garden, whether from long habit or frugality or love. She planted odd little bunches of snowdrops and crocuses in her garden plot, these flowers breaking the bare soil as her first crop in spring. My grandfather tended a tiny patch of red raspberries. We picked them together, so soft and ripe and pink they bruised and fell apart, and we hurried them to the table to top vanilla ice cream or eat straight from the bowl. My grandfather knew all the best berry patches--from cultivated U-pick strawberries and blueberries to wild black raspberries, blackberries, and gooseberries. Across the road, my grandmother's older sister, famous for her fiery horseradish, planted a backyard garden long into her seventies.

After they retired to Florida, my grandparents picked grapefruit from the tree in the yard and scavenged road-side truck stands and U-picked tomatoes from the fields.

When visiting Minnesota, they ate fish pulled from the lake in front of their cabin every night.

My grandfather's kind of farming didn't have much to do with the green beans and tomatoes my uncle grew in his flower beds. In Indiana farmers grow corn and soybeans, and you don't *eat* field corn, not straight from the cob. But in Pulaski County, people knew how to get food for the table out of the soil. When I visited my grandparents in early spring in Indiana, I would as routinely turn my nose up at bright, freshly steamed asparagus--the first precious vegetable from my grandmother's garden--as I would gorge myself on fried morels plucked from the woods.

My grandparents' children learned the heated weight of a tomato, eaten out of hand from the garden, and they knew the hollow-thumped, chin-dripping taste of Indiana cantaloupe. They also knew how to make those fruits grow. And that, I think, is why my uncle planted vegetables in his flower borders, and why, after we finished our meal, he and my grandmother took a pail into the woods and picked it full of black raspberries.

My grandfather's hands, twisted as a tree root, frightened me. His blunt fingertips looked as if he could handle a hot pot without being burned. Other farmers had lost fingers.

I've never really worked--not as my grandparents defined it. Their work knobbed their knuckles formed and marked their bodies. As they attended graduations for BAs and MAs and PhDs, I felt my grandfathers looked at these skills in teaching and writing and counseling and wondered where the work was.

But there's something attractive about their kind of work. The skill becomes visible in the product. My family members know how to take raw materials and make something whole, from scratch. The thing is there, beautiful or not, but always useful.

Huge kettles of boiling water and a kitchen of hot glass don't mix with young children, so I keep only one strong image of my mother and grandmother standing side-by-side at the sink. My mother filled one side with cold water and dumped in a bucketful of blueberries. She swirled the bobbing fruit, lifting a glistening handful to make sure it had been cleaned of bugs and stems and berries too green or too ripe. She dropped the fruit into a clean container.

On the other side, my grandmother pared mushy spots away from a bucket of bruised plums, scavenged from some neighbor who had planned to throw them out, saying "They make the best jam when they're this ripe." She slipped the skins into the compost bucket, then held the fruit over a pot and drew the knife through the flesh toward her thumb, her whole palm wrapped around the plastic handle, forefinger against the back of the blade. The pale fruit chunked and fell away into the pot, leaving my grandmother holding the pit, hands bathed in juice.

I remember so clearly the dexterity of hand and knife that when I stand at my own sink peeling the skins away from scalded tomatoes I can only think of my mother and grandmother and plums.

By the time of my Fourth of July trip home, I had turned gooseberries gleaned from a county park into a beautiful ruby jelly. I'd experimented with pickles made with

homegrown cucumbers and dill. I'd run out of my limited stock of Mason jars. While I was home, my mother took me into her basement, and when I saw the boxes and boxes of jars, the huge bag of sealing rings, and three more canners, I finally understood the scope of her garden during the her back-to-the-land phase.

"I had no idea," I said.

My mother was giddy. She pried open the flaps on boxes to check the contents, "I got most of it from my grandmother. She gave me these." She lifted out a jar and unwrapped the paper. Inside, I saw a pale blue jar, thick-walled with tiny bubbles in the glass. *Ball* angled across the front in script with PERFECT MASON stamped below it. It was beautiful. She rewrapped it and placed it in the box, "You can't have them yet." She pulled a box of quarts and a box of jelly jars down, then dragged out three boxes of pints. We loaded them into the car for the trip back to Iowa.

Some of the tomatoes in our garden ripened eventually. I consulted *Stocking Up*. I simmered the peeled and quartered tomatoes in a stock pot, working them down with a potato masher. Our Giant Oxhearts and Mr. Stripeys turned into a beautiful orangey-pink sauce. This process sounds easy, and it is, but I stood in the kitchen all day. I waited for the tomato skins to burst in boiling water, for the sauce to thicken, for the jars to sterilize. I filled the enameled canner and muscled it onto the stove over and over. I dropped the rack of filled jars into the boiling water, careful not to splash myself. The kitchen filled with steam when the water returned to a full rolling boil, clattering the canner's lid.

I may give up gardening and canning. The work takes hours. Those beautiful Mason jars may find a shelf in my basement and stay there for years, wrapped in packing

paper, empty, unused. But right now I'm in love with the process, from seed to fruit to sealed jar. I'm in love with not only the tomato ripening on the vine but opening a rich red sauce in dead white winter and washing the blue jar to use again.

Betty Lou Hughes  
b. 1929  
Pulaski, Indiana

With a string of older daughters, her mother turned the youngest, Betty, out of the house. Rowe replaced his sons--one dead, one shunned for escaping to college--with a daughter groomed to farm. The gruff old man and little tomboy pulled on coveralls to work in the barn. They milled timber. They climbed into the rowboat to fish, coming home smeared in worm slime and fish scales. Instead of frying chicken and baking pies with her mother, Betty learned from her father to beer-batter her catch.

In a desperate step, her new husband taught her to fry hash from potatoes, ground beef, and onions. During the rest of their fifty-year marriage, he refused all kitchen duties but the dishes. For holidays, she learned recipes for scalloped potatoes and apple-marshmallow salad. She emptied the cupboards and refrigerator onto the counters, buffet-style, heating canned peas and setting them next to carrot sticks and sweet gherkins and store-bought pie.

She never managed to become a housewife. Maybe she had a premonition too. Maybe, her oldest sister Lucile---at home all day with the laundry, kids, and cooking--lived too close.

Oregon Trail  
Badlands National Park, 2005

Playing Oregon Trail, I often killed my family before I reached the coast by buying the wrong supplies at the beginning of the computer game. The oxen clopped across the top of the screen, pulling my wagon at a *grueling* pace. I punched in chunky white numbers to ford the river. I got bored and stopped to hunt too often, aiming the rifle sight over blocky deer, clicking the mouse to fire. But I loved the adventure of setting out. So when I found myself with a couple of months between jobs, I headed for Oregon.

Earlier that day, before I left my summer job at Badlands National Park, I popped the trunk of my teal Plymouth Neon and checked the supplies stowed against emergency: coolant in case the car overheated again, a dusty gallon of windshield washer fluid given to me by my father years before, new jumper cables, and a spare tire but no jack. My Neon lost oil, so I planned to buy a couple of quarts when I first stopped for gas. Because the water in the creeks ran white with sediment, I always stowed a couple of full water jugs in the trunk.

I tucked my heavy blue Maglite into the space between the driver's side seat and the door. A friend of mine carried mace on her key chain, but since one of my early solo trips into Canada, I had carried this flashlight, solid, and so large my fingers could barely circle it, somehow thinking I could do damage if I wielded it like baton. It served as more charm than weapon, like the tiny worry dolls I kept in a pouch under my pillow as a child, fingering them now and then in the dark.

I left the trunk open and turned back to the square of dun-colored quadplexes where I lived with the other seasonal park workers. I'd woken late that morning with a slight headache from finishing a bottle of wine the night before. The wind already blew like a hair dryer as I packed, hot and on full blast. The leaves of the big cottonwoods around the apartments skittered against each other, imitating long absent rain. The courtyard was empty. Everyone was already gone for the season or at work in the nearby visitor center.

I propped open the door to my unit, shouldered a duffel bag, and headed back to the car. The car was second-hand, the air conditioning long since shot but fortified with a full tank of gas. The driver's seat held the shape of my body. When I worked in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan during summers in college, I lived out of my car for several weeks before I could find a place to rent. I fit much the same gear into it now as then-- sleeping bag, tent, backpacking stove and a box of food, a few clothes, books and CDs.

The week before I had pared the things I would carry down to essentials, mailing sheets and quilts and extra clothes to my parents' home. I took this planning seriously, drafting list after list in the back of my journal, trying to balance traveling light with being prepared. I wanted no luxury, just what I needed.

I finished packing in only a few trips. I opened the driver's side door, got in, and turned the key in the ignition. I slammed my door shut and rolled down the windows to let in the hot wind. I put down the sun visor and checked the rear view mirror. I backed out of the parking lot and headed for the interstate.

Everything felt new--the sun-washed buttes, the gray stretch of road. I scanned the grasslands for fast-springing pronghorn. I wanted a blessing to match my mood: something with speed.

This trip wasn't a great journey into the wilderness. I've read books. I've heard stories. Trapped and unhappy in my enormous institutional high school, I dog-eared and reread accounts of seventeen-year-old Eric Sevareid canoeing from Minneapolis to Hudson Bay and Colin Fletcher backpacking the length of the Grand Canyon. My father had talked so often of meeting Will Steger--a modern adventurer, a man who had dogsledded across the Arctic--by chance in Ely, Minnesota that I could tell the story for him. In these tales, adventure was lonely and wild: men in canoes, on sleds, on rafts, long-hiking with everything they needed on their backs. As much as I idealized them, that was not me.

A few months earlier I had graduated from a small liberal arts college in a small midwestern town. We'd marched down the quad between wings of lush grass and proud parents on one of those dewy May days.

I'd studied creative writing and literature. I sat in classes of ten or twelve at round wooden tables, and we discussed big issues: postmodern treatment of history, the nature of truth, the world constructed through language. In one class, I studied Adrienne Rich, a poet I learned to love fiercely. We talked about feminism. We talked about fear.

The professor--a woman I respected for the questions she wrote in purple ink on my papers, for the hug she'd given me when my grandfather died, for her wisdom--

suggested women suffered from shadowy fears, and these fears did us a subtle kind of psychological violence. How many of us lived with the idea that if we ventured into the world alone, unprotected by our fathers or husbands or a gaggle of women friends, something would happen to us?

She asked the female students sitting at the table, “Would you be willing, driving solo, late at night, to stop at a lonely rest stop?” We stared at the table. We twisted the ends of our hair. We stroked in circles and boxes on our notes.

I imagined it, pulling up to the low cinder block building, easing past idling semi after idling semi at three or four in the morning. The plaza in front of the restroom building would be empty--no fathers holding their pig-tailed daughters’ hands, no retirees in high socks and belted shorts grumbling about the price of gas--just pooled yellow light and perhaps a man in the shadows, only visible from the red spark of his cigarette.

Or at least this is what I was meant to imagine. The women in our class shook their heads. No way we were pulling into that situation.

Something with a taste for young, female flesh certainly waited in the shadows. We thought of stories of men hiding under cars in dark parking lots. We had been trained to search out lights and people if a car followed ours on the highway. At our freshmen orientation years before, our residence hall assistants encouraged us to travel in groups after dark and never walk through town alone. Even in that class, as my professor made all this fear visible to us, she encouraged us not to be stupid, to take care of ourselves, and watch our backs. Maybe we weren’t safe. Maybe we should feel like prey.

All these instructions angered me. My father's grandmother lived to be one hundred. She was the matriarch, the family power center. She was not a small woman. She took a shot of Jack Daniels on every birthday well into her eighties. She told a story about sitting on the front porch holding a kitchen knife, watching moles run underground. She lifted her arm high and whipped the knife into the ground. She said she didn't miss.

My mother's mother, Betty, had been raised to farm. A neighbor caught her, at seventy, soon after my grandfather died, with a chainsaw, felling trees behind her house. She loved to fish. She thumped bright gasping bluegill just above the eye with a hammer before sliding the filet knife in. I believed these women equal to anything, and I believed my mother, my aunts, and I had absorbed enough of them to venture into the world too.

A month or two later, I was driving I-69 home at eleven-thirty at night when a putrid smell blew into my Neon through the heating vents. A few minutes later the heat cut out. When I finally thought to look at the gauges on my dashboard, the temperature needle hovered in the red. It took three hours to reach my home from my college, and I was only half way.

I eased to the shoulder and set my hazard lights blinking. I turned the car off. Semis whipped past without slowing. In my rearview mirror, they rushed toward me in floods of light and shook the car as they thundered by. The February night was black. I blew on my fingers as the car chilled. I sat, waiting for the engine to cool, hoping the car would restart, so I could creep along the shoulder to the nearest exit. I could see gas

station lights half a mile away, but my thin ballet flats and jeans wouldn't keep me warm walking in five-degree weather. I turned the key. The car started.

It's true. At night, when you're alone and uncertain, the world seems to be peopled with men. Big ones with creased faces, long dirty hair, and boots made for stomping on small creatures. Inside the gas station, I scooted to the line of pay phones near the restrooms, darting around big-bellied truckers fingering bags of chips and caffeine shots. I lifted the receiver and dialed the number for a collect call.

I let the phone ring and ring. No answer. I hung up. I dialed the silver buttons again, and when my father picked up, I could tell from the phlegmy sound of his voice that he'd been long asleep.

When I explained, I wanted my father to say, "Sit tight. I'm on my way." I expected him to sound worried. Instead he said, "Have you asked somebody for help?"

"Who would I ask?" I looked around the gas station. The cigarette-thin guy in zip-up overalls with tattoos peeking out at his wrists and neck? The trucker with the ZZ Top beard? Instead of feeling comforted by its bright fluorescent lights, I felt exposed, as if I had a sign over my head that announced "Unprotected Female."

"Isn't there anyone there?" He sounded slightly irritated with me. "Somebody in that gas station knows about cars."

I ran my thumbnail along the bottom lip of the phone box and felt as though I'd exposed myself as a child.

"If you can't find somebody to help, you'll just have to find a garage."

I went to the checkout counter and told them the situation. The manager called out to the overalled, tattooed man now considering his candy options, “Hey, Frank, her car’s overheating. I have to stay behind the counter. Can you help her out?”

I led Frank to my car and unlatched the hood, thankful I at least knew how to do that. He showed me the dry reservoir and then took me back inside to buy coolant.

Back at the car, Frank instructed me, “Pour it in here, but don’t overfill it. You might want to buy some more in case you need to fill it up again on your way home. Keep the heat on full blast, and you should be okay.”

Years later, I’ll ask my husband--who played football in high school and adopted a thick beard after leaving the Navy--whether he ever senses fear. He’ll tell me how he avoids following women too close, how he doesn’t look them in the eye. At times, at night, when the streets are lonely, he sees how others see him as a threat.

I knew the score. All summer long suburbanites from Appleton and Madison and Minneapolis passed through the Badlands on grand tours of the national parks. In my Neon I’d join the line of tourists stretched from the Black Hills to Yellowstone to Glacier to the Pacific Coast.

I was a short, midwestern girl with a degree in creative writing. The Badlands had seemed raw and dangerous to me. For the first time, I learned to think about thirst, heat, snakebite. Further west, I expected lonelier places, dense forest, grizzlies, maybe a few whackos. I wasn’t sure.

I considered preventative measures. I had read pamphlets but suspected clapping, bells, and pepper spray mostly made tourists feel better. What did one actually do when confronted with a bear or a member of the lunatic fringe? (For some reason, these two creatures shared the top spot on my unlikely-to-meet-but-really-scary mental list.) Would I be able to fumble the safety catch off the pepper spray or did it serve a purpose similar to a child's binky or safety blanket or my Maglite?

In my parents' woods, I learned young to travel alone: barefoot with eyes open for brambles and poison ivy, avoiding the pond where I could drown and the cornfields at the margins of our property where I could be lost, knowing how to choose wild strawberries and raspberries over nightshade or pokeberries.

I inked myself with berry juice and made forts under the windbreak pines, recreating stories of adventure. In elementary school, I curled into the couch while my mother read me *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I imagined Huck and Jim on the raft in deep dark between the shores of the Mississippi, maybe scared but with the sky sparking open above them.

For all my imagination, Indiana felt safe. Not a hotspot for risk and danger. The woods was five acres: postage stamp, minuscule. Perhaps I could be bitten by a rabid raccoon. In the eighties and nineties, we never locked our doors against the possibility of whackos--not at night and not when we all left for work or school. I didn't have a house key until I was at least twelve, and then I tucked it into my backpack and forgot about it.

Danger came from outside, not within. When, after I'd gone to college, a man raped and murdered a teenager, dumping her body deep in a cornfield, the community

emphasized his recent move to the area from Nebraska, rather than his family ties in Pulaski County. They believed the owners of the local restaurant, who hired him to wash dishes while the girl waited tables, should have had better sense. The restaurant closed down.

I don't consider myself a risk-taker. I wasn't brave enough to backpack the Pacific Crest or step out into the Alaskan wilderness, so my car became my raft through the West. I wanted to prove I could go out alone and return unharmed.

I can see where I was headed. Two years later, in the months after my brother burned in his apartment in Indiana, I felt the streets, the branches of the trees, my own body turned to glass. I felt nowhere safe.

Wall, South Dakota  
September 7, 2005

In the garage, a mechanic works on my Neon. I can see him through an open door. Music blasts over the sound of power tools. At the counter in front of me another mechanic presses the blender button with a blackened finger. The strawberry pulp and yogurt whirl together. They've diversified--drinks on one side, Jiffy Lube on the other. He pours the smoothie into a plastic cup, snaps on the lid, and pushes it toward me.

My car's a rolling joke--teal with a thin pink stripe down the side, windows tinted black, big speakers. I got it used. It sucks oil down and burns it out the tailpipe. The car needs all the help I can give it. I pull the dipstick at gas stations to check the levels and have the oil changed religiously. My first car--a fourteen-year-old Mazda--ran out of oil. The engine seized, clunking and grinding. The smoke blowing from under the hood burned my throat.

In the waiting area, I peel the wrapper from a straw and punch it through the drink lid. I flip through a magazine. The linoleum is new enough to shine; the asphalt outside bakes black against crisp yellow parking lines. Down the street, tourists cluster in Wall Drug, sipping free ice water, counting jackalopes.

This summer I've lived in sunscreen and long sleeves, face shadowed by a hat. Exposed, I would crackle and slough. I imagine the pain of stretching my neck's tender-roasted skin. I carry gallon jugs in my trunk in case of overheating, in case of dehydration. I force myself to drink the tepid water.

But some days I want to wet a hollow in the cracked earth and wallow like a beast.

Terrible News  
Devils Tower National Monument, 2005

My car sailed tawny slopes scudded with fast shadows of clouds, and my eyesight sharpened and extended. The bucking bronco on the Wyoming welcome sign assured me this was the West. I liked watching each horizon. I felt the gift of space, empty distance, and wind. I was setting out, lighting out, dropping out, hitting the road. Enclosed in a metal capsule, speeding along the interstate, nothing could catch me.

Devils Tower rises from its own island of pine in the midst of grass. Although part of the Black Hills, it sits far to the west, a last outpost for travelers entering a long stretch of empty plains. I'd been to Devils Tower earlier that summer. Just after the Fourth of July, tourists crawled over the region. I avoided the hotspots--the Deadwood casinos, the Needles, and Mt. Rushmore--by traveling dirt roads and looping up the western edge of the Black Hills, crossing for the first time into Wyoming.

It doesn't take long to find the middle of nowhere. Creek banks bloomed with bee balm and black-eyed susans and lush grass. Between country music and religion, the radio blurred with static. Occasionally, a rancher in a pickup passed, giving a two-fingered wave over the steering wheel. Cows grazed in grassy valleys. A few elk ran through a herd. I'd never seen wild elk, and in contrast, the cows looked slow and dumb.

As soon as I hit asphalt again, I joined the trail of RVs and mini-vans headed to the Tower. All of Wisconsin seemed to crawl along this highway. The air conditioning was broken. My hair felt wind-blown and gritty, and my back sweated as I crept along. With one hand on the steering wheel and one eye on the road, I opened a Nalgene and

glugged lukewarm water, spilling some onto my chest. When I passed through Sundance, Wyoming, NPR finally crackled from the radio fuzz. I turned it up, so I could hear the words over the wind. The highway curved north, and Devils Tower appeared, an anomaly: symmetrical bald stone upwelling on the horizon. The flat-topped tower's mass and incongruity in a wide-open landscape made it a marker. It looked like a volcano peeled away from its frozen core.

The radio pulled my attention from the scenery. I'd seen disaster before. My youth felt punctuated with violence, public and massive, timelined along the course of my schooling. While studying abroad in Chile the previous year, I watched the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings on a tiny TV, translating the details from Spanish. Early in my freshman year of college, I listened to Peter Jennings exclaim "My God!" as the World Trade Center Towers collapsed. As a sophomore in high school, I watched CNN footage of pony-tailed teenagers sobbing against each other outside Columbine. I hazily remembered videos and photos from Oklahoma City.

So at Devils Tower, without video newsfeed, I could see the London bombings. On the radio, a witness described a roof blasting off a double-decker bus. He heard a thud, then smelled the fumes. The lack of glass and fire surprised him. "People wanted to walk away as quickly as they could from what they'd seen," he said.

Passengers evacuated from un-bombed portions of the Tube grumbled about being late to work. Rescue workers didn't tell them about the bombings. Outside, when they learned of their escape, annoyance shifted to panic. I remembered reading about

backpackers deep in the wilderness on September 11. They knew something had gone wrong when the skies went silent and blank.

Devils Tower lifted off the plains, framed in my windshield. Traffic slowed even further at the border of the national monument. Before passing through the fee station, cars turned into the “Trading Post” gas station to refuel with popsicles and western kitsch souvenirs. Tubby children in shorts and ratty hair piled out of cars, so their parents could photograph them with hands raised against the sky, trying to cup Devils Tower in their palms.

But I didn’t really see them. I saw people boarding buses in the morning, standing, swaying in rush hour, packed next to each other. They gripped hand rails, gripped brief cases: slightly balding men on the way to the office, students folding backpacks against their stomachs, and women in heels.

I stopped at the entrance station to pass money to the ranger. The road bent toward the foot of the formation and moved from grass to scattered pine. Devils Tower hulked above me, growing massive as I drove closer.

I didn’t turn the radio off, didn’t turn it down. I imagined people sitting on trains with headphones on or eyes down or books open, chatting, humming, snoozing against windows.

The dirt showed red at a prairie dog town. Tourists in shorts and sun visors clogged the edges of the road, out of their cars. The prairie dogs stood at the mouths of their holes, unwary, chirring and chucking. Children squatted and reached toward obese rodents.

I didn't imagine screaming, terror, or orphaned limbs. I imagined the moment before the onset of grief or paranoia. I saw commuters still without second thoughts about stepping onto a subway car or bus--fear not yet woven into the daily commute. They were still like us.

In a slow line of campers and minivans, with my windows rolled down, I could hear the chatter, adults calling out directions, children shrieking when one of the prairie dogs moved toward them.

At that time, I went the years between funerals without crying. I didn't cry at movies or weddings. I didn't cry when I hurt myself. I didn't cry when I heard about a family burning in a house fire in Memphis or soldiers dying in Iraq. I didn't have the full imagination for grief, but in traffic, isolated among Fourth-of-July tourists, looking at one crowd and listening to the destruction of another, the news got to me. I cried in my car, staring through my windshield at a Winnebago, for myself, for us: the vulnerable crowd and another wave of fear.

I approached Devils Tower for the second time that summer. The stone, scraping the sky, alone and stark, invited speculation; my mind turned to the center of the world. I thought again, as when I climbed Bear Butte and camped alone in the Black Elk Wilderness, of the navel, the axis mundi. I'm suspicious of religion and co-opting spirituality, but I couldn't help myself. I tried to keep my mind on the old argument I have with myself

over God. But I couldn't. I thought again of the London bombings. For me, Devils Tower is circled with tragedy and the arrival of grief.

The park road curled around the base of the tower; boulders had smashed at the bottom of the vertical wall. I pulled into visitor center parking lot. Cars radiating heat crowded the asphalt. Tourists swarmed around them, pulling coolers from their trunks, digging for lost flip-flops under seats, wiping sweat from their faces. They drank Cokes, holding the cans steady in one hand while straining to look up and up, pointing at climbers dangling high on the rock, pixels of color on the face of stone. Cameras clicked. I eased through the parking lot, circling to find an empty space, and tumbled from my car to join the crowd.

At Devils Tower, I did what tourists do. I stepped out of the sun into the combined visitor center and gift shop. The CCC-built log and stone building overflowed. We danced, holding in our elbows and twisting through gaps between bodies to grab pamphlets and trail guides. We shuffled in a line through the displays. In an old painting, a giant, long-tailed bear reached for American Indian children panicking on the Tower's summit. Long claws scored the stone from top to bottom. Nearby, a kid whined to return to the KOA campground, so he could swim in the pool.

I went outdoors and down the stairs to the building's basement to wait in line for the bathroom. I pulled out a geology pamphlet while two women, sweating and jiggly in pedal-pushers and sandals, complained about the two-stall bathroom.

It's my annoying habit at parks to actually read the information on signs or pamphlets and then repeat the highlights to my companions. Chalk it up to too much time

spent planning programs or my interpretive instinct. Chalk it up to my general geekiness. “Did you know,” I’ll start, proud of my newfound knowledge, “that Devils Tower is a laccolith?”

The bathroom women wanted cold sodas and scabbled through their purses for change. I decided not to test their interest in geology. I kept reading, re-composing the information for an audience. I imagined myself gesturing at the hulking rock while circled by a crowd of eager, bespectacled tourists--the kind who rarely show up.

Early geologists thought the tower resulted from lava spewed over the landscape. It looked like the solid core of a volcano. It looked dangerous. But Devils Tower represents the remains of deep violence, a side effect of the earth buckling and tilting as the Rockies and Black Hills pushed up more than 50 million years ago. (I would reproduce the uplift with a sheet of paper.) Across the western United States the strata created by the gentle, continuous settling of ancient seas was stirred and disturbed. At Devils Tower a plume of magma rose, consuming neat layers of sedimentary rock. (Insert image of igneous intrusion.) Below ground, the magma cooled, contracting and cracking, forming regular vertical fluting in the new igneous stone. (Here, I would point out the columnar cracks in the tower.) This greenish-gray porphyry was much harder than the rock it pierced. After several million more years, wind and water wore down the soft sediment to leave the plug of stone rising 1297 feet above the river that carved it free. (I would point downhill toward the Belle Fourche.) The magma never breached the surface but bubbled there as potential destruction, the possibility of devastation.

The route of Captain W.F. Reynolds, who headed the first government expedition to map the Yellowstone region, roughly paralleled mine. His party plodded through the same crackling grass under unbroken sun on horses and mules. The sweat ran from their bodies, pooling along their thighs and the smalls of their backs. They would know the meaning of shade and water. They must have felt exposed and too much alone.

When they neared Devils Tower, Reynolds sent Zephyr Recontre, his Lakota interpreter, and J.D. Hutton, his topographer, to investigate the landmark. Recontre probably knew Devils Tower, called Bear Lodge by the Lakota, quite well. The Lakota consider Devils Tower (and the rest of the Black Hills) sacred. The Black Hills are the center of the world, the place where they began. It was here, at this center, that Recontre abandoned the party. Or rather, he decided to stay home.

Reynolds' imagination took a different turn. In the journal entries recounting this day's events, it's easy to read his thoughts. "I cannot believe he mediates mischief," he wrote of Recontre. Reynolds recorded the presence of "signal fires" in the direction of Devils Tower and repeated at the end of the entry, "Although it is certain the Indians are watching our movements...I cannot yet believe that they intend hostilities; but, for reasons of prudence, and to guard against possibilities, I have ordered the guard to be doubled."

Violence with good reason or without has been part of my ancestors' interaction with this continent from our beginning here. Shadowy fear haunted the wilderness for Europeans: deep woods, big animals, strange men. My ancestors were people out of

context, uncertain, groping. Today, with the maps made and the routes marked, fear lingers.

We are vulnerable, soft, oblivious. I looked up the massive slab of rock. Halfway to the top, a climber rested on a broken flute of stone, gathering strength to conquer a sacred site. As tourists, I realized, we don't know how to read what's around us. We can't save ourselves, don't have the map in our heads.

I circle around that moment of imagination when I bridged distance and strangeness and pictured violence. I've rubbed these memories smooth. They may have reshaped under my fingers. I've learned how it works. If I were in that car today, hearing the news again, I would see it differently. I would imagine my father's voice and the phrase he used again when I called to wish him a happy sixtieth birthday last month.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. I tensed. My memory started unreeling the sentence.

The deaths of grandparents: "I have some bad news."

My brother's death in a fire: "I've got some bad news."

My father on my twenty-sixth birthday blurting over the phone: "I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Your cat died."

This time it's one of my parents' friends, a figure from my childhood. Her husband found her dead on the floor when he came home from work. My father sounded shaken, "We went to the funeral yesterday. She was sixty-two."

This time he started to just say it, “Barb. She’s dead.” Straight like that. I could hear him start, then stop, falling back to the rote phrase. The slight stumble gave him away. For the first time, I picked up the pattern and began to suspect my father is a professional. I realized, as a pastor, he deals with death and grieving often. His coursework at seminary included classes in grief counseling. At one point, he interned as a chaplain at an intensive care ward. People call him when bad things happen. He sits at bedsides. He delivers notice. He blesses people into the ground.

His professionalism fell into place for me as I watched a series of murder mysteries. I’m slightly addicted to these shows--particularly those based on detective fiction from the twenties and thirties by the “Queens of Crime:” Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Dorothy Sayers, and Margery Allingham. They present puzzles. They resolve death neatly. There are rules to be followed, realities to be ignored.

Recently though, I’ve branched out to police procedurals from the eighties. I only watch British productions. In filming, they tip their hats to noir but treat social subtexts earnestly, while floating cheesy, operatic scores through the background. I pick up slang like nick and knobbing and, my favorite, skint. In one, a crumpled, middle-aged detective inspector spends half the show wadding up his paperwork and winging it against the wall. He then turns to his (statistics-and-funding-obsessed) boss to deliver a sermon on racism or gender discrimination or the effects of poverty.

But each episode begins with a police officer knocking on a door. The unsuspecting next-of-kin undoes the lock and chain and backs into the entry to allow the

officer inside. There's never any small talk, just, "Could you sit down please? I'm afraid I have some bad news."

The *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* confirms my suspicions. The police and military, clergy and social workers, follow an accepted practice. The encyclopedia refers to the notifier as the bearer, as though they serve death on a tray. The bearer, it says, should remember that the notification may be etched into the survivor's memory--crystal-clear even as other memories of the event fade. It needs to be done right: "The bearer should simply say that they have bad news and then tell the survivor(s) that their loved one is dead." An instruction manual from the Iowa Attorney General's Office insists police officers use the word "dead," as opposed to "lost" or "passed on." Or, God forbid, "expired." Like moldy bread. Dead crosses cultures; everyone understands dead.

The next time I listen to reports of massacre or terrorism or natural disaster I will imagine the moments after, the moments when the sentence begins working its way outward like a wave: "I have some terrible news."

Turkey vultures coasted updrafts, fifty or so circling Devils Tower like sparked-out ash. I stood on a trail as dry and red as powdered brick and looked up the sunlit green-gray face of the stone. In contrast with the European name, many American Indian stories of the Tower's formation contain seeds of salvation. In most accounts, several children run from a bear. They call out to the Creator, and the earth lifts them beyond the reach of the

animal, whose claws scar the stone with vertical stripes. The earth responds to human need, placing the children beyond danger. If only I could be on top of the tower: untouchable. If I could find such a refuge.

## My Glowing Moses

My parents kept Moses in their china cabinet. Eight inches high and carved from heavy stone, the replica of Michelangelo's statue sat in a high-backed chair like a throne. His beard poured down his chest in long curls, and, as an odd Renaissance symbol of radiance, a pair of horns nestled in his hair. At six the horns disturbed me. When my parents allowed it, I unlatched the cabinet and lifted him to the pine-planked floor. Sitting cross-legged in the heat of the wood stove, I touched the cool stone of the Ten Commandments tucked into Moses' armpit. The tablets were small and slipped toward his thighs. Moses looked away from them, his hands playing in his magnificent beard. His robe fell back from his arms to show biceps rivaling the Incredible Hulk's. This man could crush small sinners under one palm.

My family went to church in a bell-towered building at the center of a five-block-square town. Our church had an unused choir loft, a trumpeter, and red carpets from a 1970s remodeling. Each Sunday our congregation sat upright in wooden pews watching the pastor in his raised pulpit. I slid down the smooth wood and pulled myself upright, slid down and sat back up, until right after the pastor gave the children's message, all the kids under twelve tumbled down the carpeted aisles, lifting dust into the bright patches of light cutting through the stained-glass windows. Several ladies from the church accompanied us down the stairs. In the basement, we squirmed in lace-trimmed ankle socks, skirts, and patent leather. We kicked our legs on rows of folding chairs through a child-sized service involving a short lesson and multiple verses of "This Little Light of

Mine,” blowing on our fingers and clapping our hands on cue before they finally got out the M&M cookies and lemonade. We trained for endurance.

When we learned about Moses, I imagined our stone-muscled version, powering through loose rubble with his beard flowing off his shoulders, palming the heavy tablets, ignoring the dust gathering in his sandals, nimble and strong as a mountain goat. He leapt up Sinai to speak to God, barely breaking a sweat, spent the requisite forty days and forty nights, and came down shining, Commandments in hand. Our translation of the Bible actually said Moses “was radiant,” not literally glowing, but I took this description to mean he was lit like a lightning bug.

I focused on Moses the glowing man, the superhuman, because Indiana is flat. Hoosier Hill, the highest point in Indiana, is only 1,257 feet above sea level, and I’d never been there. I’d climbed the 123 fire tower steps at Tippecanoe River State Park, and I thought, looking down on the leafy forest, that that was high. My family drove twenty miles through snowy fields to find a decent sledding hill.

If left alone, the woods and prairies in Indiana grow a thick fur of trees and grasses and flowers. If cleared and plowed and planted, the land greens uniformly into corn and beans. In 1989, when I was six, Indiana was no wilderness. It was (and is) a well-tilled place of rain and black dirt. Just as I couldn’t imagine a mountain, I couldn’t imagine an untamed place. I couldn’t imagine Moses preparing himself, strapping jug after jug of water to his back, carefully packing bread, swathing himself in cloth to keep his skin from burning. I couldn’t picture the bald rock of the desert, cracked and tumbled, nothing but light and dust and a rare plant growing where meager water once caught. I

couldn't imagine a man on the way to meet God, weighted with stone and water and struggling, breathing rhythmically, thigh muscles burning, wanting to stop. There was no sweat, no smell, no loneliness, no fear. My weightlifter Moses breezed up Sinai and came down glowing.

After Moses returned, the Israelites were afraid. They were so afraid of Moses' shiny face he had to cover it with a veil. I'd only seen Jeannie's veil on reruns of "I Dream of Jeannie," so in my imagination I applied a sheer bit of fabric across my powerful Moses' nose and mouth. The glow still peeped through like light behind a curtain. Instead of fearing the glow, I loved the glow. I wanted the glow.

In Indiana people did not glow. I had never even heard someone exclaim to a woman who was engaged or having a baby, "Aren't you just glowing?" as characters sometimes did on "Little House on the Prairie" or "The Waltons." Instead, women at my church wore hose under slacks and pinned up their hair and covered it with plastic rain bonnets. Their knuckles bulged crookedly; their husbands had lost fingers in farming accidents. These men slicked their hair into comb-overs, and the sun turned the back of their necks into the tanned geography that I deciphered from my church pew. I couldn't imagine any of them radiating even the gentlest light.

Sometimes I felt the world alight. My father and his brother played together in the garage--my father on a fiddle, my uncle on guitar. They unfolded a card table and two chairs on the concrete slab with a bucket of beer at their feet. When they opened the door

to come inside, cigarette smoke drifted in after them. They weaved through the living room where my mother and I watched TV, unsteadily working their way to the bathroom. Later, in my bedroom, I fell asleep with music pouring through the walls. The next morning, while my mother cleaned up, I showed off my math, counting out the empty beer cans and cigarette butts.

On weekends, they played for larger audiences at friends' parties or dive bars. They made something of nothing. My uncle wrote the songs, and their fingers and voices made them real. They stood behind mics in the corners of picnic pavilions or small gazebos. They moved with the music, bobbing slightly from the waist. My uncle's face twisted, as if hitting the high notes took physical effort. My father slashed his bow hand up and down, his fingers working the strings. Later, I watched his fluid wrists--the way they flexed and bowed--at the dinner table or as he flipped the pages of a book, believing they held some magic.

People's fingers began to tap, their feet began to shuffle. They clutched Budweisers, sipped. Their smiles broadened, faces reddened. Now and then someone would swing his girlfriend around. Music and beer liberated people, made them warm and talkative. The next morning they woke up early for church.

Perhaps instead of fearing Moses' radiance, the Israelites should have feared (as I did) the covenant he brought down with him: the rules, regulations, and consequences. I could

spout the nit-picky details of the covenant between God and Moses because my father received the “call.” At nine it sounded like God had rung him up on the telephone.

My family moved to Wilmore, Kentucky so my father could become a Master of Divinity and a pastor. We moved from a five-acre wood surrounded by cornfields in northern Indiana to a two-bedroom apartment in family housing at Asbury Theological Seminary. The two-story building fronted a road and a tennis court. Behind it community teams played softball on a field every weekend. At night the tall lights flooded my windows and the crowd cheered. Paul and Gloria Manana, the kids next door, told me stories about the big blue bicycle they left at home in Nigeria. I told them about our big garden in Indiana, about picking raspberries and playing in the woods.

That first summer in our new neighborhood, my friends were the children of missionaries, pastors-to-be, and visiting professors. We were all from other places: Indiana and Africa and Alabama and Eastern Europe. We were all homesick. We looped circles around our apartment complex on skates and scooters and bicycles. We ran the bases on the softball field. Our apartments were too cramped, too drab, so we spent most days outside, barefoot, toughening the soles of our feet on our new concrete landscape.

At dinnertime we went inside. My family ate at our kitchen table, the varnished wood a honey color, transferred from our house in the woods into the apartment with cinder block walls and cheap linoleum. Afterward, we read the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and on, straight through the begat, begat, smote, begat, smote, smote of the Old Testament. I bowed my head over slayings and incest and

piety. Bright blonde, moon-faced, a fourth grader puzzling through and absorbing the fear of God.

My father shuffled through his Bible, making the tissue-thin pages rustle. We read aloud, taking turns, passage after passage. I gripped the hard covers of my Bible and stumbled through God driving out the Philistines, destroying the Perizzites and punishing sinful Israelites--God's own chosen people. I stopped, so my parents could help me through the names of tribes. Continued, "The earth opened its mouth and swallowed the rebellious Israelites."

My father read, "the Lord sent venomous snakes among them," pressing his fingers through his beard.

My mother took up the passage: when the Lord appeared to Moses and the Israelites on Mt. Sinai, He shook the mountain and descended as "thick darkness." We were to serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Fear was the beginning of wisdom and understanding.

God had rules, and I knew it. Some seemed irrational, and others were inapplicable, like "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" and "Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck," both of which God slipped into the covenant he made with Moses on Mt. Sinai. I knew I should follow the Ten Commandments, and I knew the consequences of messing up.

I feared fire, at night, coming up from beneath the apartment complex, cradling the building in flames, consuming my family like a lamb on the altar. I don't remember if I imagined charred skin and choking smoke, but I prayed against it. I had a ritual. With

the lights off in my room, I curled down under the quilt my great-grandmother made and clasped my hands and squeezed my eyes shut. Whispering, I thanked God first, sweetening Him up. Then I unloaded my sins--I only practiced my violin ten minutes and said it was fifteen, I hid candy in my room and ate it before dinner. I asked for forgiveness. Finally, I made my demands.

My demands were thorough and detailed. If I was praying for a doll for Christmas, I mentioned the brand and the color of her hair and dress. I knew God was tricky. I didn't leave it to God to decide what I meant by "keep my family safe." I named names. I started with grandparents--quite a list once I named my great-grandmother and all the step-grandparents--then moved on to my favorite cousins and friends, and finally, made a special plea for my mother and father and my brother, away at college. I made sure to be specific, saying, "Please don't let anyone's house burn down tonight, especially ours." To cover all my bases, I topped the whole thing off with a quick recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

I believed my family's safety depended on me. God needed to be appeased through my nightly prayer. In my childhood conception of God, He was dangerous: a natural disaster with a tracking system. He was an earthquake collapsing mountains. He was plague. He was wind stoking fire.

Over the years in Kentucky, while my father studied Greek and Hebrew and Old and New Testament exegesis, I learned the lingo. I had a heart for Christ. I passed the peace. I

made a covenant with God. I had millions of brothers and sisters. I learned the history of United Methodism--John Wesley, the Articles of Religion, the Book of Discipline, the Sacraments, the schism over slavery, charge conference, the ME and EUB, and PKs. The preacher's kid. That was meant to be me.

In my mind, the preacher's kid wore cardigans and skirts and clapped in time to praise hymns. The term offended me--even if I did occasionally wear cardigans and skirts, I refused to clap in time or lift my hands in mock ecstasy. But people expected me to join the club. "Peaches and cream," the old ladies at church called me. "Such a good girl."

I expected transformation in my parents, immediate and total. My mother told me to go through the laundry and check the pockets for loose change and kleenex; I found crumpled packs of cigarettes in my father's shirt pockets. He never smoked in front of me. The silver pull strip dangled from a nearly empty pack. I left them on the pile of stray quarters and dimes. My mother laughed at me, "Your father's always smoked." I didn't say anything to him.

My mother and father drank in front of the television, splitting a bottle of wine or a couple of beers after a long day at work or seminary. It embarrassed me as much as it would have embarrassed his new congregation. I lived in fear that we would run into one of them at the grocery store while toting a twelve pack around in our cart.

My father was a student pastor while he worked on his degree. Although not fully ordained, he could marry, bury, and baptize. The church assigned him a two-point charge--Lockville United Methodist and Pleasant View--an hour north of our home. We

woke early on Sunday morning and squeezed into church clothes. I begged from my mother a pair of shiny black pumps with bows and wore them religiously.

In the dark, we drove winding roads into the hills. The sun rose, and the white fences around rolling pastures near Lexington appeared. The long horse barns with their weathervanes and cupolas and green roofs looked more luxurious than our house in Indiana. The roads curved and angled and crossed. We followed low walls of slave-lifted stone north from Frankfort. The lush bluegrass, fenced and cropped, faded into scrubby woods cut with small tobacco fields. The dirt showed red between the plants. We followed the Kentucky River to the first church.

I hated the hills. I stretched upward, straining against my seatbelt to see over the next rise before we dropped back down, but trees or more hills blocked every view. I missed the horizon. Locals called the valleys “hollows,” and some of the congregation lived in them, their houses hidden away at the end of dirt lanes, cupped and secret. Both churches were country churches: white frame buildings that appeared suddenly around curves.

My father did more burying than baptizing. Lockville consisted of four elderly couples. Pleasant View had thirty people in the pews on Easter. We went to Lockville first, then packed back into the car and drove twenty minutes to Pleasant View. I heard the scriptures twice, the hymns twice, the sermon twice. At Sunday school, I was often the only member of the “youth class.” I memorized the banging of radiators at Lockville and the pattern of the tin-molding on the ceiling at Pleasant View.

Before services, I prepared the body and the blood for the Communion servers. In a back room, I popped the tab on a single-serve can of Welch's grape juice, poured it into the chalice, and covered the chalice with a cloth. The chalice didn't hold the entire can, so I guzzled the last three swallows. My father baked a fresh loaf of bread on Saturday nights. I pulled it from its Ziploc and wrapped it in a napkin, then placed the bread on the serving platter. The ingredients of religion began to look common. They sat on a small table in the vestry until late in the service when volunteers from the congregation bore the bread and juice down the center aisle. Later, my family would cut away the part of the loaf plucked at by the congregation and eat the rest for dinner.

In the afternoon, we visited church members, crossing thresholds to eat ham and blackened beans or pat the backs of bed-bound hands. Afterward, at Pleasant View, my father stretched out in a pew and snored. Or sometimes I lifted the cover on the piano and plunked out "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" over and over. Or I chased the massing Asian lady beetles with a dust buster. I went through the stacks of old Sunday school books, flipped through the hymnals, flipped through the Bible. I could play a mean game of Bible Trivia.

In the evening, about half the morning congregants returned, and we had a hymn sing. I requested "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Freely, Freely" every Sunday until we could all sing them without the hymnal. It was a form of resistance. They couldn't say no. When the service finished, we locked up the church, and my parents and I drove home in the dark. About halfway there, I curled into the back seat and slept.

At eleven I was old enough to have my own conceptions of a pastor's family, and we weren't it. A pastor's family should be demure. They should look at their soft, pale hands with small smiles when speaking. They were the kind of people who said, "I'm just giving Him all the glory this morning" and looked at you to reciprocate. They weren't real people; they were waxy, God-radiating mannequins.

My father slowly lit with something I didn't trust. The pews at Pleasant View faced south. Each Sunday morning, light washed through long rows of east-facing windows. My father performed his sermons like a rock star, walking the center aisle, lowering his voice before lifting it again. The congregation called him Brother Paul, and he embraced this southern title. He encouraged his congregants to respond during worship, emphasizing key points with "Do I hear an amen?"

"Amen," they mumbled, examining the wrinkles on the backs of their hands.

"You can do better than that! Do I hear an amen!"

"Amen!" they obliged.

He bounced on his toes, reached out with the closed Bible and shook it slightly. This Bible would begin to flake. He would thumb the pages yellow.

The fiddle went unplayed. It leaned in a corner of the dining room, propped against the china cabinet. The strings sagged. The bridge wobbled. The hair on the bow disintegrated and hung loose.

Bighorn National Forest, Wyoming  
September 12, 2005

The car climbs, straining up steep grades. Honky-tonk country whines under the noise of the engine. I turn it up. *There was a time when I believed that you belonged to me.* All my life I've been a follower of trails: skittering across cobbled beaches, curling through the rust shine of white pine needles, cutting across cool black soil. Barefoot or hiking boot.

*Now I know your heart is shackled to a memory.* The road switchbacks, up and up. I rise from the grasslands. I see deep into the distance. Here, trails meet and travel on. They extend the length of human memory. Pale shadow-lines angle across meadows, faint remains of travois trails. Relict paths lead to the Medicine Wheel on the sloped peak of Medicine Mountain. The stone spokes linking cairns mark solstice sunrises and constellations. The Plains tribes have walked these mountains for centuries. When the known world's circle was smaller, surely foot to ground felt momentous.

The road straightens through a mountain saddle. Wedges of pine darken rocky meadows. Hank Williams finishes: *The more I learn to care for you, the more we drift apart.* I pull over and step from the car, walking over a shoulder of land. What if, as you passed border after border, you knew you would never turn and walk back?

How to Be a Tourist  
Yellowstone National Park, 2005

A guy named Larry shifts on the hard bench. He keeps his knee bouncing. “I saw Giantess the last time I was here. When was that, 2000? Total luck. Got great photos. Spectacular.”

He plays a game of geyser one-upmanship with his new friend, Barry. I sit two benches behind them, with my journal open on my lap, eavesdropping. Most of the other late-season tourists around me speak languages I can’t understand. I check my watch. Old Faithful erupts in thirty-eight minutes.

Barry and Larry spout names and details of eruption intervals: Beehive, Lion, Plume, Anemone. They sound like collectors. Old Faithful. It’s the big one, marked and charted and eagerly anticipated. If I wanted to, I could watch Old Faithful on the internet on a webcam, year round.

But I sit in the loud chatter, with my back to the hotel and gift shop, the parking lot full of tour buses and cars. Thirty-two minutes.

I am a tourist too. This trip results from the pleasure and luxury of having something extra: time or money or both. For years social scientists ignored tourism as a subject, seeing in it frivolity and privilege. Sharon Gmelch, an anthropologist, says tourism “represents the largest ever movement of people across national borders, eclipsing emigration and immigration, refugee flight, pilgrimage, business and educational travel.”

Think about all the reasons people move from one place to another--the Irish potato famine, World Wars, Mecca and Jerusalem--and tourism beats them. Unleashed by leisure and income, humans give in to restlessness and curiosity. Bruce Chatwin, the travel writer, argues each person has “a migratory ‘drive’ or instinct to walk long distances through the seasons; that this ‘drive’ [is] inseparable from his central nervous system.” Perhaps this need, deep-rooted in our evolution, lingers in some of us more than others. Perhaps here is the location of my urge toward movement.

Some tourists adjust the laces on their boots and shoulder their scuffed backpacks before declaring, “I’m not a tourist; I’m a *traveler*.” Travelers seek the cheapest campgrounds and hostels, the most boulder-strewn trail. Travelers scoff at Old Faithful with its crowds and bison-jerky-laden gift shops. They prefer the tent to the fully outfitted RV, the bandana to the visor, boots to flip flops. Discomfort leads to all-important *authenticity*.

I fear I fall into this self-important realm of tourism. I have more time than money, and given a choice between the campground with hot showers and the one without, I choose the one without. I carry a one-burner backpacking stove instead of a two-burner Coleman. My tent fits one person and folds down to the size of a bread loaf. Vacation means getting along with as little as possible in the wildest place I can find. While RV tourists consume Old Faithful snow globes, Yellowstone t-shirts, and bison burgers, travelers consume the view, the experience, the interaction with “real people.”

Consider this: traffic stops when a bison puts hoof to groomed roadside. A dad parks the car in the road and hops out with his camera, car door dangling. He edges

around the car's hood and begins to click. This is dangerous. For a good close-up, he risks being gored by a grumpy bull. The kids hang from the window. Five more cars stop to see what the people in the first car see. At home, people hold out the photo as proof, as currency, to impress their friends and family: *Look at how traveled I am, look at the things I've experienced.*

I stop too. Bison don't live where I live anymore. I want a good photograph. But at home, when I click through the photos on my laptop, that bull bison disappoints. I have as much attachment to a photo cut from a magazine. Edward M. Bruner, an ethnographer, writes that "experience may be the ultimate tourist commodity," but experience only has value when created, in speech, photos, or writing, as story at home. The photo doesn't show the traffic jam, only the wild.

At the Badlands visitor center, a magnetic park map filled the wall behind the long front desk. The map reflected the grassland outside: tan background, brown borders. My coworkers and I used the map to give directions. At least once a shift (sometimes three, five, ten times a shift), a tourist would ask, "Where are the animals?"

Sometimes I wanted to say, "We pushed bison and big-horned sheep out of horse trailers this morning here," pointing to Bigfoot Pass. "They'll meet us for pick-up at five.

Or perhaps they expected this response: "We chained a herd at the bottom of Pinnacles Overlook. Just look for the big brown smudge in the valley."

In response to demand, we clicked bison and sheep magnets onto the map to show recent sightings. The handmade magnets looked like children's toys: ballooned ceramic, shiny with glaze.

We mocked the questions, but rangers driving the park roads didn't call in minute-to-minute or even hour-to-hour animal sightings. We never moved the magnets. Today, six years later, I would expect the animals to be in the same place.

The bison herd was fenced into the wilderness area. Several loved to stand humped and statuesque, pawing bare dirt, in the middle of the prairie dog town near the wilderness rim road.

A group of big-horned sheep spent the day grazing the roadside on the west end of the park, accepting an occasional handout from a tourist's cooler.

Some animals--black-footed ferrets and swift fox--we never exposed. Fox kits tumbled around an old power transformer just outside the park border. A co-worker and I spent an evening with our Park Service Dodge Ram pulled into the gravel access road, marking their numbers and activities on a clipboard. Two kits rolled and chased around crumpled sheets of corrugated metal, diving in and out of their hole under the equipment shack. We watched until the evening shadowed with blue, and the binoculars no longer picked up enough light. We knew where they were, but we never told.

Twenty-six minutes. Larry and Barry are at it again. “You ever hike into the backcountry?” Larry fiddles with his lens cap, popping it off and on. He’s twitchy, all bones and nervousness.

“Now and then. I hiked the Shoshone Geyser Loop last time. Eighteen miles in one day. A ball-buster but worth every step.” Barry pulls his ankle over his knee to examine the sole of his boot. He picks a pebble from the heavy tread. His build indicates he compensates for height with muscle.

“I’ll have to get up there sometime,” Larry looks at his tennis shoes.

“Ever seen Steamboat?”

“Never been that lucky.”

“Wouldn’t that be something--tallest geyser in the world.” I imagine Barry smacking his lips. The biggest. The most powerful. They discuss visiting Norris Geyser Basin together--lanky Larry and short, thick-muscled Barry--an odd couple, training their binoculars, tense and waiting.

Today, I worship at their church. A wide promenade leads to a low viewing deck circled by rows of benches. The ground nearby is ash gray, stripped of grass by tourist feet. The design feels like a parody of a cathedral: knave leading to raised altar. Attention centers on Old Faithful’s low white mound. I look down at my Dickies and pilled sweater, up at the distant furred ridge. I’d be a profane worshipper in any other church. Anthropologists suggest tourism unfolded from pilgrimage. They see sacred ritual on a secular stage.

Seven or eight other tourists stake out seats. They pile their knapsacks around their feet, cameras dangling. More tumble from the parking lot behind.

I want the purity of a wilderness shrine, but when I look at the green blotches designating parks on my atlas, I felt the construction of the experience. Yellowstone spreads across northwestern Wyoming. It's big, but from this perspective, I could circle it with my finger. I could measure it out along my knuckles. If I chose, I could bypass the park on I-90, shooting along the interstate from Billings to Bozeman without stopping. Politicians with pens stroke in remnants of wildness on the map--areas "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Even on the ground it's clear. Where the trail crosses the line, the government puts up a sign, usually made of wood weathered gray. "This is wilderness," they say, "that isn't."

Eleven minutes. The benches fill as the main event approaches. A ranger wanders through the crowd, taking advantage of an attentive audience to advertise his evening program. He looks young--maybe twenty-five--but is mantled in the park service's dun and green authority. His flat hat sits at a perfect perpendicular to his rail-slim body, the strap cinched at the back of his head. A sweaty red line would slash across his forehead when he took it off. He speaks to a family with two children, and a prominent Adam's apple scales his neck.

Some rangers carry sidearms and travel with shotguns in their patrol cars. They serve as the park's police officers. Some rangers spend long days in the field, studying wildlife or lichen or geology. They avoid the public if possible. The interpretive rangers work the crowds.

The ranger wandering through the tourists asks questions about people's homes. He answers questions about geology and wildlife and where to find the restroom. But behind these casual conversations lurks training and certification in Informal Visitor Contacts. Informally, interpreters call this activity "roving." They intend to "facilitate intellectual and/or emotional connections" between the audience and their surroundings.

This phrase comes from an application for employment as a National Park Service interpreter. Applicants fill out a multiple-choice questionnaire about their skills and qualifications. The dry, clipboard-and-number-two-pencil form surprises me every time I see it. Interpreters use the language of writing. Another question asks applicants whether they can use metaphors, storytelling, and analogies to reach audiences.

A textbook for interpreters "boils" their task down to three key goals: "helping people to perceive more acutely the world around them, the cultures that preceded and coexist with their own, and how they can affect the future ways in which humans will live in this world." If the park is a church and tourists are pilgrims, interpreters are the preachers.

Before they leave home, tourists also create narratives and cling to them after arrival. People come to Yellowstone to see wild bison, unfenced, un-ranched, a throwback to the Wild West. But for the animals, a blurry, somewhat permeable boundary

exists. They can cross it, but they not might return alive. Until the 1950s, rangers at Yellowstone ranched bison. They corralled them and fed them hay like cattle. Sometimes they bred them with cattle to build the herd's numbers. If visitors wanted to see bison, they stood outside the pen staring at the shaggy animals hulked together, as if at a zoo.

Today, the animals aren't locked between Yellowstone's borders. They can wander if they wish, and during the winter, they often do. They follow the migration pattern they followed before borders existed, moving to lower elevations or thermal springs to browse. In the 1980s, they started migrating over the park boundary onto private land or National Forest land leased by ranchers.

Ranchers fear brucellosis, a disease bison have and their cattle don't. When the animals spill across the border, government officials on ATVs try to frighten the bison back into the park. If that doesn't work, they shoot them. In 2008, the government killed 1,600 of the park's 4,700 bison either because they had already crossed the line or to prevent them from being tempted to cross the line. They killed them until they realized a rough winter had also been culling the herd, and the population had nearly been cut in half.

I had my own narrative. In high school, I fell in love with Jimmy Stewart. But not the Frank-Capra, *It's-a-Wonderful-Life* Jimmy. I fell for the post-World War II Jimmy. I fell in love with his transformation. In *You Can't Take It With You*, another pre-war Capra film drenched in optimism and mid-American morals, Jimmy Stewart dances in the park. He's young, his face smooth, body lanky and lost inside his tux. He's built of nothing but long bones strung together. His hips swivel and knees fly. His hair falls into long strands

around his face. Sprawling across a park bench to rest, he reaches up to slick it back. He knows how to use his hands. He does something with his wrists to make his fingers flutter in a gesture of abandonment. They hang long and loose near his chin in the moonlight for a second. He draws attention to the lightness of his eyes, the way the lashes curl up toward his ivory forehead. I could take him or leave him then. He was obviously an Eagle Scout from a small town. A good guy at heart but one with soft hands and a boring disposition.

A few years later, in a series of Anthony Mann westerns, he gallops in on a horse. World War II is over; he's killed men, and his chin is stubbled, forehead lined. His cynicism catches me off guard. He dismounts, walks straddle-legged under the weight of chaps across a mountain meadow. He gives that look, sliding his blood-shot eyes slowly up and down my face through the screen. He says he's been hunting a man for months. He says he will kill him; he's only in it for the money. He's close, and he won't stop now. He leaps back onto his horse and leaves me standing in the middle of the wilderness.

That's the narrative I brought to the West, but I didn't want to be the blonde Shelley Winters character, caught by the arm and dragged along, tearfully pressing a fist to my mouth. I wanted to be Jimmy. I wanted to be the one transformed. I believed myself too safe.

Once I arrived in the West, I was a tourist. Yellowstone kept me feeling unprepared and awed while jostling shoulder to shoulder for a view. I feared putting a foot through a geyser. Signs at trailheads warned me not to travel alone. At night, squeezed between tents and campers, I woke to snorting and stamping and thought a

bison might be near my head, but how would I know what a bison sounded like? I didn't want to risk unzipping my tent. Maybe bison hate zippers. During the day, I saw them at the creek or near the bathhouses. They might wander closer at night when the tourists were silenced. The thin fabric around me felt useless. A startled bison might stumble into my tent. My skull would pop, melon-like, under a hoof. I clung to my car as a thin shell of safety, sticking to overlooks and busy trails.

Old Faithful went off on schedule. Larry, Barry, and I lifted our cameras together, snapping the preliminary spurts, then the geyser at full force rising in an undulating plume.

A dad near me narrated to his video camera, "There it is--Old Faithful. Listen to the roar and water splashing." He paused here.

I could hear it, over the "bi-beep" of cameras and the "woooo" and "ahhh" of the crowd.

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming  
September 13, 2005

Down the hill, geysers smoke in the evening light. The field puffs and breathes. Everything grays: my hands, the soil, the vapors trailing toward the sky. I hear something familiar, a sound I want to decipher. It must be two children echoing each other on flutes. One calls, the other answers--clear and ringing but no particular tune. Back and forth, on and on. I know this sound.

But it should be wild and strange and, to me, entirely new. The fluting cuts through the shapes and shadows of half-light. I think, if I wanted, I could follow.

It takes me only a few minutes to think elk. A big ungulate. At the visitor center, the rangers warned that elk mated in autumn. "The rut," they called it. The males go wild with hormones. They compete with anything that moves. They lower their spread of antlers, bone grown fast as frost over the summer, and charge a thousand muscled pounds into a minivan or SUV. And they bugle in the dark.

I'm well-versed in facts. I read the roadside displays. I run my hands over the furs and antlers in the visitor center and grab pamphlets. I carry field guides and histories on my journeys to help me read new landscapes. I unfold the park map and double-check the route.

But sometimes, now for instance, on this hillside, with an animal I've never seen singing in the black, I wish I lived with an edge to the earth. Sometimes I wish I lived before maps: when every time you met an animal the word you put to it became its word and the word itself was new.

## Parkophilia

When I move, I start looking for new parks: city parks, county parks, state parks, national parks. I'm indiscriminate. I need a trail or woods or even a patch of grass. On vacations from college and after I graduated, I worked in parks--Badlands National Park and New Hampshire State Parks and a North Carolina environmental education center.

My first job was in a park. The state of Michigan hired me onto a campground crew at eighteen. I scoured toilets and cleaned shit off the shower tiles. I shoveled out campfire pits and sold sites. The next summer, at nineteen, I worked as an interpreter at Indian Lake State Park. They sent me to the Upper Peninsula alone with only a week of intensive training and no place to live. I spent two weeks living out of the back of my car in a Forest Service campground eating cold beans and graham crackers before I found a hunting cabin to rent.

That summer, I was out to spread the word, to infiltrate America's families and inspire an army of ten-year-old environmental activists through my nature programs. I sugar-coated the hard facts about water pollution and invasive species with games and crafts. In my program on neotropical migrants, I dazzled the kids with the thousands of miles a hummingbird flies to reach the Caribbean. They ooohhed over pictures of small yellow warblers on the way to South America. I cut to the chase, "These little birds fly farther than we can even imagine, but unfortunately, millions of them never make it." I defined fragmentation and talked about habitat loss.

Then I marked out a rectangle with orange traffic cones, and the kids lined up on the side, representing the United States. They had to “fly” to South America (the other side of the rectangle). A tagger stood in the middle and pretended to be a plane. He prepared for his role, making zooming noises. We never said the word dead, but kids aren’t stupid. They knew what happened when an airplane hit a flock of birds.

“Test your wings!” I called to the migrators. The kids spread their skinny arms and flailed their hands through the air. “Flap!” I yelled, “Flap!” I shouted go. The birds raced across the field, squealing and dodging the plane, but he managed to pick off a couple of slow kids. Most of them made it.

The downed birds would now help the plane tag others. We brainstormed obstacles to assign the new taggers: wetland habitat drained for beachfront homes, collisions with airplanes and skyscrapers, house cats waiting for an easy meal. The kids were inventive: “Alligators!” they yelled, “Hunters!” By the end of three or four rounds, the rectangle filled with death traps: “Power lines! Poison!”

The remaining migrators faced certain death. They shifted from foot to foot behind the starting line, while killers grouped around them, waiting. After I yelled go, the migrators ran back and forth along the start boundary, looking for an opening. As they stepped across the line, mobile skyscrapers and power lines swarmed. Birds rained from our imaginary sky.

Mark, my regional coordinator, watched this program. He visited my park once a month to observe and give me suggestions. He had a gift. He could hold out a chunk of shelf fungus or a handful of dirt, wave his hand over it, and kids would group, eager to

touch, to look. He was twenty-three, ruddy-cheeked, with a gait on the trail that said he belonged there.

“You know,” he said, “kids don’t really need to worry about this stuff yet. It just freaks them out. Let them love where they are first. Then they’ll actually want save the world later.”

Mark, I learned later, repeated a classic tenet of David Sobel, guru of place-based education and author of *Beyond Ecophobia*. At the time, I felt rebuked. I was horrified at the thought of causing harm. As soon as he explained what he meant, I understood. When I considered why I wanted to do this job, I didn’t think of elementary school lessons about the Amazon Rainforest or elephant poaching in Africa. I thought of walking the railroad tracks near my home in Indiana with my brother, looking for tiger-striped monarch caterpillars chewing through milkweed.

In those days, caterpillars massed on the plants like strange mobile fruit. We plucked a few leaves and a caterpillar into a mason jar. At home, Sean punched air holes through the lid with a hammer and nail, and we set the jar on the kitchen table to watch. On another day, he wiped the sticky foam spittle bugs produce for protection out of the crook of a goldenrod and revealed the green alien body inside. Everywhere we made tiny discoveries.

After my brother went to college, I walked the tracks by myself with field guides, studying butterflies and beetles and spiders, drawing them into a journal, writing about them. In Indiana, the rails saved the land from the plow. Near my home, the railroad makes a long conduit of remnant ground, blazing with prairie flowers in summer and

humming with insects. I located other bits and scraps of wild showing through the gaps between the fields. A half mile down the tracks I discovered two acres of unplowed prairie owned by our elderly neighbor, Mr. May. It filled a triangle between the unused road grade, a ditch, and the railroad. At the sharpest point of the triangle, Mr. May dumped rusty machinery, barrels, and rolls of wire. At the heart of the scrap, a small circle of bare soil dried into thick, peeling flakes. Here a train derailed (at least that's what my grandfather said) in the thirties, and spilled a chemical that seeped into the soil and killed everything.

Gradually, the survivors at the fringes grew back toward the center, but seventy years later, I could see why this place had survived. It had been damaged and forgotten early enough to be left alone. This tiny prairie remnant became my bit of wilderness. After rain, I sat at the edge of the dead spot and watched butterflies puddling at the center pool. Blazing star spiked pink against bluestem. I learned the dusty green of rattlesnake master and the slim lean of coreopsis. I learned the shape of wind in tall grass. I learned to be quiet. I learned to look closely.

David Sobel asks children to map their neighborhoods. They draw animal holes and forts and climbing trees. They know their places. In Iowa where I live now, there's a pocket park in my neighborhood--one tiny stamp of open green bordered on three sides by subdivisions and on the fourth by the Union Pacific. I don't often see kids on the slide or the swings and never in the open barren of groomed field. If I see them in the park at all, they are clustered in the strip of brush and trees between the mowed grass and the railroad embankment. There's an open-armed willow there. The kids jam the angles of its

low branches with sticks and dry cattails. They gather in this makeshift neighborhood clubhouse as the trains roar past.

My favorite topics to teach are those often overlooked or ignored--prairies (who cares about grass?), geology (boring), spiders (eww). Maybe, no matter how hard I try, I can't shake the Christian foundation twisted into me as a child. Maybe I'm unconsciously channeling "whatever you did to *the least of these*, you did to Me." But once children learn how a jumping spider moves and hunts like a quarter-inch cat, they eagerly search for them sunning on picnic tables. They have no fear. I teach them to wave their fingers an inch from the fuzzy spider's big eyes and note how it turns its cephalothorax back and forth to watch. If a child can learn to love spiders, how much better prepared will she be to love the bigger creatures, all the way up to humans?

It's a way of seeing circles and links in the world. (A spider's silk, stretched from branch to branch, is ten times stronger than steel.) It's a way of leveling the playing field. I've heard people say they can't justify being an environmentalist because they feel compelled to take care of people first. But isn't limiting the concept of "justice" to humans another way of reiterating the narrow perspective that led us to ravage our homeplaces to start with? It feels like another disconnection of the planet's health from human health and happiness.

I don't fantasize that people walk away from parks and interpretive programs as nature warriors. I really don't. I just wish on them a little more thought the next time they

crush a spider underfoot because it's there. Instead, I'd like to see them shepherding it into a Tupperware and dumping it outside. If they love a spider, how much more able will they be to see land alive and vibrating under their feet? (So many spiders live in our world that, if distributed evenly, you would find one on every inch of earth. Now imagine tiny insects. Now imagine the soil full of grubs and microbes. If possession is nine-tenths of the law, rethink your place in the world. Rethink your concept of where wilderness resides.) How much more imagination can children have for the places other people live, for the places they pass through?

I get agitated when people look around my Indiana home and see "nothing," "nowhere," and "boring." People feel free to insult Indiana and the rest of "flyover country," which, if you consider a map, condemns a great swathe of the United States. They do this because, unlike our spectacular national parks, our center contains no mountains or oceans, and through some strange group delusion, visitors read only flatness in the topography.

I do it too, complaining during long drives across Ohio and Nebraska, complaining about the flatlands where I grew up, but sometimes I find myself goaded to their defense. Sometimes I find myself irritated into making broad, derisive claims about the Great Lakes surpassing the oceans--which, incidentally, I believe. Like many good Midwesterners, I've been trained toward politeness and away from open displays of anger. But after years of listening to insults, I'm getting pissed off. I want to tell people who grew up near mountains or the ocean (or worst of all, both) to shut up already and

maybe just try *pretty please* to figure out what's valuable about the places they'd rather skip over.

It's easy to love places like, for instance, Yellowstone, the park of parks. Yellowstone is the most titillating of nature porn. Geysers erupt; the earth bubbles and steams and heaves. Bison wander here and there. Wolves howl. Waterfalls cascade. Snowcapped mountains line the horizon.

It's harder to love Indiana. But most of us visit Yellowstone and live near farm fields and strip malls and suburbs, in places reshaped and regulated.

When I teach in parks now, I try to consider what visitors can take home. Because we have trouble seeing wilderness along the railroad tracks. We have trouble seeing nature in our towns. I met someone recently who asked me, as if her own city were vacuum-sealed, "Are there spiders here?" The answer: yes, of course, everywhere, a wilderness of them.

Don't Talk to Strangers  
Glacier National Park, 2005

The men camped next to me on the single loop of the campground trooped back and forth to their car, gathering gear for the next day's hike. The trees, still wet from the morning's rain, dripped lightly onto the fabric of the tent as I bowed the short rods into place, then pushed the stakes into the ground to pop the tent upright. I stood up and pressed my damp hands against my face to warm them. One of my neighbors slammed the car door and called out to his friend, "Have you seen my headlamp?"

"No." He leaned over a map of Glacier as the other man joined him at the table, "I'm still not sure I want to do the Highline tomorrow."

An RV on the main park road roared over the sound of Lake McDonald lapping on its stony shore. I bent down again to spread the yellow rain fly over the narrow tent and clip it down. The tent, a bivy style, had space enough for my body and nothing more. On dry nights, I would leave the fly off and peer through the mesh at the stars. Tonight, though, after a day with my hands just damp enough to be cold and my nose just cold enough to drip, I looked forward to snuggling down into my sleeping bag, sheltered from the residual wet of the morning's rain.

The car door at the next campsite slammed again. The men had lined everything they needed up on the picnic table: map and matches, headlamps, extra clothing, food, water bottles, rain gear. They were in their mid-thirties, nearly interchangeable in their North Face jackets, caps, and un-scuffed boots. They had the well-trimmed look of men with routines and careers: an hour at the gym before work, the commute to the office,

then home for dinner with the wife and kids, football games and church on the weekend. Now, on a hiking trip, they were head to toe in rip-stop nylon and name-brand fleece.

I stepped off the wooden lip of the gravel pad onto the cushion of hemlock needles and crossed to my car. I opened the door and folded my water bottle into the crook of my elbow, then loaded my food bag onto one arm and the box with my backpacking stove and nest of pots and dishes into the other. At the sodden picnic table, I stood and unpacked my stove to boil a cup of tea before the last light faded. My hands streaked with soot as I unfolded the triangular legs, jiggling them into place around the small burner and fuel cup. When I looked up, my neighbors were crossing the narrow strip of un-groomed space between our campsites, carrying their map. I dug out my lighter. They stopped a few feet from my picnic table.

“Hey,” one of them started, “We were wondering if you’d ever hiked the Highline Trail.” He stretched his vowels the way I remembered from when my family lived in Kentucky. He pointed to the map and smiled.

“Yeah, years ago, when I came here on vacation with my parents.” I unscrewed the top on my fuel bottle and replaced it with the valve to attach it to the stove. The men came up to the picnic table, standing over the wet benches. “It was July, though. Warm and dry.” We talked about the trail for a few minutes, how it wound along the continental divide with streams seeping down the Garden Wall to fuel lush explosions of wildflowers in summer. Birds wheeled below, and the mountain dropped away so fast it was like standing in the center of the sky.

“We heard it snowed up there over the weekend,” the other one said. He fiddled with the map, eyes down, opening it slightly, then closing it. The embroidery on his cap read Asbury College.

We looked up at the drooping tree branches as though we might be able to see the peaks. “The trail isn’t too hard, but it might be slippery if it’s snowy. I don’t know. I’ve never been here in September.” I put the end of the fuel line in my mouth to lubricate it and then connected it to the fuel bottle and worked the plunger. I looked up at his cap again as I pumped. “My dad went to Asbury--the seminary, not the college.”

I didn’t usually share this information. For those in the know, it was code for “I’m in the God club too” or “You’re my kind of Christian.” It made people assume I believed what they did, but there, at the edge of over a million acres of wilderness, with the sun dimming, I found myself reassured. Still, I found myself giving the men lip-tight smiles as they told me how they had been best friends in college. Dan, the one with the accent, never left Asbury, taking a position in the admissions office. David now worked for Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs. Once a year, they hiked together.

Dan asked, “What does your dad think about you being out here alone?”

I didn’t say, “He doesn’t have much choice,” just shrugged and said, “I’m going to light this stove--you might want to stand back a little.” I opened the valve, let out some fuel, and then closed the valve. I could smell the white gas and see the wet shine in the cup.

“If you were my daughter, I’d lock you up and lose the key,” David put in.

I smiled, clicked the lighter, and touched it to the white gas. The fuel lit with a sound like the intake of breath and a tall orange flame leapt from the burner, lighting our faces in the near dark.

I didn't tell them how my father had disappeared for several weeks when I was small. I'd ask my mother, "When's Papa coming home?" Then as days passed, "Is Papa coming home?"

He had disappeared into Canada to talk to God; my Thoreau-reading father called it a "spirit quest." He wrestled with his calling, trying to decide whether to move his family away from home to go to seminary, whether to set us moving from church to church, town to town through the rest of his career. I imagined him in the North Woods, straining his furniture-moving, fiddle-playing, construction-working arms against something big and undefined, like Jacob with the angel. He came home bearded and smelling of wood smoke. When I hugged him, he seemed bigger, stranger. He held out reindeer moss and a giant water beetle as gifts for me.

I opened the valve on the fuel bottle again, and the flame settled into a steady blue hiss.

"David's not sure he wants to risk his bum knee on the Highline. Would you want to go?"

I'd made my own plans, narrow and safe as they were, and I didn't want company.

The next day I woke before six and wriggled out of my tent to drive Going-to-the-Sun Road. The clouds hung low again, and the trees still dripped. I decided to let my car do the work of gaining elevation, stop for a short hike at Logan Pass, and hope for better weather the next day. As I passed the end of Lake McDonald and started up steep grades, I realized the views from Going-to-the-Sun Road were those I don't believe when I see them on nature documentaries on TV. I assumed the scenes on the television resulted from patient waiting, from a confluence of good weather and the perfect camera shot. But here even I could snap a photo and come away with an image worth framing.

The road threaded up glacier-sharpened mountains, barely clothed in dark firs, breaking into stark stone along their spines. Along the way, the laborers who picked and pried the road from the wild provided narrow pullouts, lined with boulders to prevent cars diving over the edge. I passed parked cars, people photographing ribbon waterfalls cutting white through stone and fir from deep pockets of old snow. My car strained and growled up the grades. I drove with my hands clenched at ten and two, easing around curves, a flatlander conscious of the several-thousand-foot drop. When I finally pulled the parking brake up at an overlook, I turned back to see mountain stacked on mountain into the blurred, bluing horizon, with Lake McDonald pocketed in the valley. I set my car chugging again, up the side of the range toward Logan Pass.

Perched on the Continental Divide at 6,646 feet, Logan Pass buzzed with tourists in the summer. In September, I was nearly alone. As I turned my Neon into the visitor center entrance, I remembered how, during our summer vacation when I was fourteen, my family circled and circled the parking lot in our rental car, waiting for a mini-van to

pull out of a space. I parked in a spot just below the A-frame visitor center. Three or four other cars were scattered across the large lot, probably hikers out on the trails radiating from the visitor center. I turned the key to shut off the engine, and I could almost hear my car groan with relief after the long, switch-backed climb.

The sky was spitting rain. Outside the car, my fingers started to stiffen with cold, and I dug my gloves out of the pocket of my raincoat. I climbed through low piles of slushy snow to the visitor center. Its peaked roof mimicked Mount Reynolds behind it, hunched and dark. In a month, the road would be closed, and the wind would blow snow through the pass, over the Divide, to form hundred-foot drifts. The visitor center was already closed for the season, but I pressed my face to the dark glass, looking at the boxes stacked around the gift shop and the displays covered with sheets. The last time I was inside I put my palm into the mold of a grizzly track more than twice as long as my hand. I fingered the toes and long claw marks.

The rangers at the year-round visitor center in Apgar Village posted highlighted maps warning of bear activity in Glacier. As the park headed toward winter, the bears were gorging themselves at lower elevation, often in sight of tourists, near lodges and campgrounds and trails. On the east side of the park, the part I wouldn't be visiting, grizzlies ambled along the sides of roads, and tourists sat on the balconies of their hotel rooms, sipping coffee, watching quarter-ton bears on the slopes, now and then lifting their binoculars for a close-up of the animals' famously humped shoulders.

Two afternoons before, after driving all day to reach the park, I stopped where McDonald Creek flowed into the Flathead River near Glacier's west entrance. The sun lit

the creek all the way down to the stones at the bottom. I pulled off my boots, turned up my pants, and waded into the cold water. I stumbled across the clean, water-smoothed cobbles, feeling toward the middle of the current with my toes. When I looked to the other side of the creek, I saw a black bear standing on its hind legs, pulling berries down from a bush. We were alone. It didn't acknowledge me (maybe it didn't see or smell or hear me, but I like to think it didn't feel threatened). Still, I waded out of the ice-clear creek and slipped behind the wheel of my car. I watched it mosey along the water sampling berries and then sashay into the brush, the hulk of its body disappearing in moments.

Three weeks earlier, a grizzly mauled a man and his nineteen-year-old daughter on a popular trail on the opposite side of the Divide from my campground. It was the classic bear attack--they rounded a rock outcropping and surprised a sow with two cubs. The daughter's instinct to run triggered the bear's instinct to chase. They survived, but the bear crunched through the man's eye socket, broke his neck in three places, and peeled his scalp away from his skull. The grizzly clawed through his daughter's cheek, opening the side of her face from cheekbone to mouth. In their panic to escape, the father and daughter jumped from the trail, skidding down a steep slope. The bear followed.

The rangers at Apgar didn't mention the attack when they warned us to make noise on the trail and carry bear spray and keep our campsites clean, but we knew. The news passed from tourist to tourist in whispers: the scalp, the skull, the ripped mouth.

In fact, as signs around Lake McDonald warned, more tourists drowned in the park than died any other way, and I knew bears rarely attacked. For over twenty years,

my uncle had worked as a forester, traveling alone, on foot, in prime grizzly habitat in Alaska, and while he encountered bears often, he had only been charged once. It didn't reassure me to hear about the lifted rifle, the shots, the coarse hair and claws and the smell of the warm body as he skinned it. Forest Service regulations required him to recover the hide, and he packed the thick skin out on his back.

As in Yellowstone, a sign nailed to a post at the beginning of every backcountry trail in Glacier reminded visitors in bright letters: "There is no guarantee of your safety" and "Traveling alone is not recommended." So I started safe. Here in Logan Pass, I'd hike short, do the six-mile loop to Hidden Lake that hikers traffic-jammed during the summer--families with little kids, overweight RVers. If I twisted an ankle in the slush, I imagined someone would find me and help me hop back to my car. If I fell (not unlikely--my flatlander upbringing made me clumsy on slopes), I knew from my wilderness first responder training that Hidden Lake Trail and the nearby parking lot would be easy terrain for littering me out to a waiting ambulance or chopper. I told myself these things as I stepped past the warning signs, reminded again that I was a visitor to this remnant.

I didn't mind the risk. The presence of big predators made the world seem more fair and more real, less like an encounter in a zoo. I'd feel out the sensation of being alone in all this--the mountains, the sky, the silence--in a place where accidents happened, and I could imagine injury and even death--an impersonal death, without malice: the kind of death that might come to any creature too weak or ill-prepared, just an incidental closing of a fist.

I shouldered my backpack and stepped onto the trail. Patches of snow stretched irregularly across the alpine turf. Here and there, angles of reddening grasses and flows of meltwater cut the white. Peaks lifted all around me, cragged and steep, dark and striated with snow. Clouds capped the nearest ones, while far down the throat of the pass, sun lit stone. Near the visitor center the trail started as a broad paved path, then changed to a boardwalk designed to keep people's feet off the fragile alpine plants.

Alpine passes like Logan Pass amaze me; after all the heart-hammering struggle up the mountain, they feel broad and gentle. They make me half-believe the scene from *The Sound of Music* when Julie Andrews spreads her arms and begins to sing, running across the hills. Even with several inches of wet snow on the ground and thick clouds on the summits, flowers peeked through, a reminder of recent warm weather. I stopped to photograph a big clump of yellow-orange blooms, some kind of coreopsis or sunflower, nested into a split boulder next to the sloppy trail. Despite their toughness against harsh weather and the teeth of roaming mountain goats, these plants would give in under the onslaught of tourist feet.

The trail climbed easily through the bouldered meadow. The boardwalk ended, and the trail continued over slush-covered talus. My feet slipped back slightly with every step, and meltwater soaked the bottoms of my pants. I decided I might be happy, even exhilarated as I hiked along, arms swinging at my sides, pleased by how well my boots fit, stopping every few minutes to turn and look back, to try to suck down everything I could with my eyes. I pulled off a glove and leaned down to squeeze some snow between my fingers. I tossed it toward a peak. When I stepped onto a broad stone, bare of snow, I

searched for frozen ripples lifted off an ancient sea bottom. I hoped for a shaggy white mountain goat. For a minute I stood still to quiet the swish of my rain jacket and listen.

I rounded an outcropping. Behind it, a man crouched to photograph his own boot tracks through the snow with mountains layered in the background. I stepped into his frame. I nodded and quickly scooted around him, trying to avoid too much eye contact.

One other person's presence made the trail lonelier. When I was small in Indiana, I lived in the only house in a square woods near the end of a dead-end country lane. My parents taught me to pluck shining black raspberries and eat them. They taught me to leave the equally shiny and equally black pokeberries alone. I learned the leaves and shapes, the smells and sticky white ooze of poison. In the summer, I ran the five acres alone and barefoot. I learned to pull burs and thorns from my own feet without crying. At night, I would walk in moonlight, catching fireflies and listening to owls call, learning the sound of a raccoon's shuffle and knocking tree limbs. But when I heard the unexpected crunch of tires on gravel or saw a pick-up parked in the field access at the end of the lane, I knew to go inside and tell my father because these were strangers--sometimes trespassers and often men eager to empty guns into stumps or signs or animals. They made me feel our isolation. In the woods in Indiana, where anything with teeth and claws and a propensity to use them had long been extinguished, people were the unpredictable megafauna--the only animals I feared.

I hiked over the last rise. The trail started down, and the lake came into view, cupped against the feet of two peaks, with mountains cascading into the distance below it. Short firs bristled against the lakeshore, and the sun finally started to break up the clouds,

a streaming cliché of religious ecstasy. I stopped and lifted my camera again, framing and reframing the image. The man clattered down the trail behind me. I resisted the urge to turn and face him and instead stood there with my camera aimed but my ears tuned to his steps. I felt ridiculous, and I couldn't stop thinking about how alone I was with him. He smiled at me as he passed. He walked slowly, watching his feet on the downslope, lifting his arms out slightly with each step. I watched his blue-jacketed figure pick its way down the trail. He carried nothing but a small camera bag strapped across his chest. He was a tourist like me, innocuous, out for a spectacular photo. We started leapfrogging each other as we stopped for pictures along the trail.

I reached the overlook built into the slope over the lake first and, after taking a couple of pictures, tried to decide whether I really wanted to hike the last steep descent to the lakeshore. The man arrived behind me.

“Would you mind taking my picture?” he asked. Hatless, his hair graying at the temples, and a little pot-bellied, the man looked like my Great-Uncle Tommy. Like most of the men on my father's side of the family, Tommy inherited what my grandmother called the “Black Irish” gene. Dark-eyed and dark-haired, he could have slipped in as an extra in *The Godfather*. “It's all set up. Just push that button.” He handed me the camera. He leaned sideways against the railing of the overlook, elbow propped up, and smiled.

I snapped the photo and handed the camera back. We stood next to each other, looking down at the lake. Even though we could see sun over the lake, at the overlook rain started misting down again. Water beaded on our jackets.

He crackled a granola bar out of his pocket. He ripped down the wrapper. “You want some?”

I shook my head, “No thanks. I’ve got lunch in my backpack.”

“You need some water? I got an extra in my pocket. Unopened.” He fished a Dasani bottle out of his coat pocket and held it out to me.

I pointed to the full Nalgene in its holder on the outside of my pack. “I think I’m just going to start back. It’s getting a little cold.” I figured I could hike fast, no stops, and lose him.

“I’ll join you.”

From behind me, Joey kept reaching up for my elbow as though to steady me, never quite touching my arm. He unreeled stories, keeping up a constant stream of words. In 1968, he told me, he saw a photo of Glacier in a magazine. He slowed and started panting as we climbed to the top of the pass. He stopped and dug into his back pocket for his wallet and held out the creased and re-creased photo.

“I cut it out and saved it,” he said. The photo showed bear grass lit with bloom against a cobalt lake high among the mountains. “I had hair down to my ass in the sixties. When I quit being a hippie, I cut off my ponytail and put it in a box with this picture.” Joey folded the photo into his wallet. “Now I’m here. I grew up in Brooklyn.”

We started hiking again, feet sliding down through the snow and stone. I told him I had a friend living in Brooklyn. We ignored the scenery now, no photos, watching the trail, trying to put each other in context.

“It was different then. I was the skinniest kid in this Irish and Italian neighborhood.” He looked down at my feet. “How are your boots? Are they waterproof?”

I stopped and lifted the hem of my pants slightly to show off my heavy leather boots, trying to convince him I was well-prepared. I wanted to laugh.

He pointed to his. They didn’t come up over his ankles, and I could see an inch of wet sock between the top of his shoes and his jeans. “Mine are waterproof. Good boots. Got them just before I came out here.”

The trail striped gently down the pass now, an easy-to-see line across the pass. If I had been alone, I might have started into wide-stanced, scrambling jog, lifting my feet quickly before I had a chance to slip. The visitor center and parking lot sat a half-mile away, small in the distance. I could have given him an excuse, told him I had to meet someone and left him behind, but I’m too Midwestern, too reluctant to offend. I liked his stories, and he seemed lonely.

I slowed to keep pace with Joey as he started again, “I paint houses on Fire Island now. I used to be retired, but I got in with the wrong loan officers. You know Fire Island? Right off Long Island?”

I told him I didn’t, that I’d only been to New York City a few times and never for long.

He told me about the barrier island, the beaches, how small the towns were, full of bikes instead of cars. “It’s not like the City. You’d like Fire Island. Everybody knows me on Fire Island. You visit, you ask for Joey Chico. Ask anybody. They know me.”

“Okay.”

He didn’t say anything for a few minutes, concentrating on the snowy trail. We stepped back onto the boardwalk and started moving faster. I pointed out the flowers I’d photographed.

We stepped under the overhang at the visitor center, and he finally asked, “So you’re all by yourself?”

“I’m on my way to visit a friend.”

“She live around here?”

“Portland.”

“In Oregon?”

I nodded.

We slowed as we walked down the paved path toward the parking lot.

“So you’re all alone?”

I nodded again. We stepped onto the asphalt, right beside my car. I started digging through my pockets for my car keys.

He said, “Hey.” I stopped and looked up, and he stared me right in the face, eyebrows raised, mouth straight and serious. “You shouldn’t tell people that. You shouldn’t talk to strangers.”

To Instead of From  
Eastern Washington, 2005

The sky is empty blue and bald as an egg. The speedometer hovers between eighty and eighty-five. With the Rockies behind me, I pay less attention. I-90 runs straight. I ogle the few towns set in the grassy blondness.

Tonight the interstate will cross the mountain spine, and grassland will turn to dense, dripping forest. After that: saltwater and starfish and black rock. I avoid thinking of reversal: east instead of west. I steer around a semi and begin to tick off ways of escaping, naming them to the Neon's sealed air. Parachute. Motorcycle. A flight to Buenos Aires. The long trek to the mountaintop hermitage. I'd traveled alone for three weeks. At the Pacific perhaps I can find a ship and keep sailing. I approach the hinge: the moment when I start *to* instead of *from*.

A tractor creeps across the wide plain. Dust rises in clouds; topsoil shears away in great drifts. I guess they must raise wheat in this dry place. I can't imagine the heartbreak or insensibility of watching land rise like smoke and blow away. If I lived here, I would run from the wind and the dust. Motion makes me feel better--packing the car, tires on the road, the humming of even, gray interstate.

In Indiana, we children were attuned to motion: strange license plates, the curve of the river, trains thundering along the railroad. When I was young, the railroads hummed through the autumn dusk. Engines hauled harvests to Indianapolis or Chicago. Later, the

trains became rare. When the crossing whistle howled, I ran outside to watch the cars flash along the distant tracks. By the time I entered high school, the Winamac Southern Railroad had scrapped the tracks and ties, leaving only the crushed limestone grade. Railroad companies call this process--first ending service, then removing the tracks--abandonment. I walked the grade, searching for rusted spikes and moon-shaped scraps of iron.

After our abandonment, we dreamed the train, especially those who lived near the railroad. We gathered in the school hallways, crew cuts and pony tails, sneakers squeaking on linoleum, and whispered, "Did you hear it last night?"

In train whistles and cars fast flickering along the line, lingered old hopes of places we wanted to be. In the 1840s and 1850s, our towns were hypothetical metropolises, penned into existence by railroad surveyors, connected to everywhere by the tracks. Residents believed their towns to be potential new Chicagos. Now they were a constellation of nowheres, pocketed into cornfields.

*Sunstroked*, I say to the car. *If South Dakota was sunburned, this place is sunstroked*. I might as well listen to my own voice. Eastern Washington doesn't change. The radio picks up pop country and religious advice. I hit scan, and it rolls through static. I turn it off.

A small town slumps at the side of the interstate, jumbled houses with windows plasticed over and dirt yards bounded by high fences. Half an hour later, another cluster

of paintless buildings leans against the prairie. I wonder if people can live there. Plastic tricycles and beat up cars tell me they do.

At a rest area, I see I've underestimated Washington's breadth. A map is pinned across one wall, and a red arrow points to my location. I search out Olympic National Park's green outlines four hours away. Seattle and its suburbs sit between here and there in pink and yellow blobs. Perhaps the children in the towns scattered across the dry Washington plain keep their eyes on Seattle as my classmates kept their eyes on Chicago, seeing it rise on the edge of our flatness. We thought the railroad tracks of Pulaski County led to skyscrapers and Lake Michigan's shining curve. To escape.

My father dropped fries into hot oil at Dairy Queen. Burns spattered his hands. His hair and uniform smelled of fast food. At forty, after years working construction, he had enrolled at Purdue University. He couldn't find another job to fit around his commute.

My mother and I visited him on his dinner breaks. High school students in red visors punched our orders into yellow-gray registers: a Peanut Buster Parfait for my mother and a hot fudge sundae for me. One stuck his head through the order-up window and called to my dad, flipping burgers in the back.

My mother and I took our ice cream and slid into a hard booth. My father came out in his pin-striped uniform shirt, sipping coffee from a styrofoam cup, and sat next to my mother. He leaned back, throwing one arm around her. His stomach was beginning to expand and sag. He rubbed his fingers through his mustache. For a moment, my mother

settled her head into the crook of his arm. He ruffled her short hair. She took small bites from her long red spoon, measuring out soft serve and peanuts. I started on the ice cream from my sundae first, leaving the warm fudge to spoon up at the end.

My father reached over and stirred ice cream from my sundae into his coffee, “Cooling it off.”

“You’re eating it all!” I protested, on cue, pulling the small plastic cup away from him with an exaggerated pout. At seven, I loved the ice cream.

Later, I learned to compare this life to others. My aunt lived in a ramshackle farmhouse four hours away in Bloomington. My face mirrored hers even more than it mirrored my mother’s. The city grew around the house, making the big yard an oasis within walking distance of restaurants and shops. When we visited, I worked the defunct hand pump in the backyard. I loved to slide across the hardwood floors in the living room.

She would be a professor, and I imagined her charmed future, curled into the couch in a beautiful house during the week, painting and papering and restoring on the weekend, inviting her professor friends over for dinner. Later, she broke even farther away, living in Malaysia and later China, sending us postcards of temples and the Great Wall.

In the black of my tent, I press the light button on my watch. Four-thirty. My body has fallen into the rhythms of dawn and dusk. Most days, I wake at first light. Today, I’m

awake even earlier. Today, I will see the ocean, a silver plate stretched to the horizon. This state park is an hour outside of Seattle. The night before I decided to stop short of the city to avoid rush hour. I worm out of my tent. The roads might be lonely, still yellow with streetlights. I can miss traffic. I pull down my tent and throw it in the trunk.

At the campground entrance, I find a gate pulled across the road, padlocked. I can't get out. The night before no one had checked into the campground but me. The pay station had been self-service, no park staff.

I leave the door of the Neon swinging, headlights trained on the gate. Maybe it only looks padlocked. I jiggle, then yank the chunky metal lock. It scrapes my hand when I lose my grip and stumble a few feet backward. I expect a ranger to jump from beneath the dark line of trees, laughing. There must be some trick. What if there was an emergency? What if it poured rain? I imagine soggy, riotous campers crowded behind the gate in the middle of the night, brandishing their hot dog sticks, demanding freedom to return to their suburban Seattle homes. But the gate is locked. I can't get out.

I return to my campsite and shut off my car. The campground makes a perfect setting for a horror movie--drooping firs in a dark valley between low mountains, the locked gate. I wad a sweater under my head and try to nap. The day before I had passed a "Prison Area. Do Not Pick Up Hitchhikers" sign. How far back had that been? I open my eyes and peer into the fading dark. I press down all the lock buttons on my car, stretching through the back seat to reach the last one. Every hour or so, I drive to the entrance to check the gate.

At eight, the gate is open. By the time I near Seattle, traffic zooms, heavy and fast, with commuters hustling each other to reach work. A semi tailgates me. Concrete dividers funnel cars along the interstate. For the first time, I feel pummeled and harried. I slow into the right lane and fumble the state map up to the steering wheel, trying to double check my exit number. On signs, the names of towns become difficult to twist around my tongue--Snoqualmie, Issaquah, Sammamish.

My family jammed our red Toyota Corolla full of camping equipment, then strapped on a car topper, fat and hard as a snail shell. My father, mother, brother, and I piled in.

We drove to Lake Superior every summer. My parents never questioned whether we could afford it. Summer required traveling. My mother inherited this attitude from my grandmother, Betty. She once convinced her children to give up Christmas presents in exchange for a winter trip to Florida. The family, with four children, couldn't afford both. In Florida, they lived cheap, collecting coquinas, clams no bigger than a penny, from the beach to stew with onions and potatoes.

To get to Wisconsin from Indiana, we skirted Chicago. My family pulled over at a gas station long before we reached the suburbs, so my father could take the wheel. My mother sorted change for the toll, cracking open rolls of quarters she'd gotten from the bank just for this purpose. She unfolded the Illinois map to the city inset. My father watched as she drew her finger along the route to show we were ready. We paid for the privilege of going on vacation with the ordeal of straying near Chicago.

On the interstate, my father white-knuckled the wheel. “Keep up with the traffic, you have to,” he said, determined to fit into the flow of cars. The interstate widened to four lanes. The roadsides bristled with signs for personal injury lawyers and triple X nightclubs. Concrete ramps swooped overhead. My father cursed when cars zipped around him or drifted into his generous following cushion.

I watched for skyscrapers, pale and blurred in the distance. My brother sat in a teenaged slump against the gray upholstery, Walkman headphones clamped to his ears.

“Left, Paul, left!” My mother called out exits and lane changes.

“You have to give me more warning!” My father lurched the wheel to avoid an exit. We passed Gary. “Armpit of Indiana,” my father called. He always reminded us that, for a while in the nineties, Gary held the top spot on the yearly per capita murder list. The steel mills smoked along Lake Michigan’s shore.

From the interstate, I saw the backyards of brick houses, lined up one after another. When I read “The Three Little Pigs,” I imagined the last house like these, square and solid with long vertical windowpanes trimmed in black. I tried to picture the people inside. But my father said this neighborhood was unsafe. That was the difference. Here was the face of danger.

We passed the Robert Taylor Homes, tan high-rise apartment buildings grouped along the Dan Ryan Expressway for over two miles. “The projects,” my father said. Chain-link fencing darkened the balconies. I wondered how could anyone live so high up, next to the birds. On the other side of the interstate, the White Sox stadium flashed past.

My parents worried about being pulled by some rip-tide onto an exit ramp. On Lake Shore Drive we would lose ourselves in one-way streets, small and vulnerable in our Toyota Corolla. Cabs would honk while we circled and circled. Buildings blocked the view in every direction. There was no opportunity for reversal; once the city latched on, it didn't let go.

Early American accounts of the inland wilderness called it chaotic and evil. People feared the wild. If wilderness is defined by fear, then surely, driving the Dan Ryan Expressway, we were at the edge of ours.

The most direct route to Olympic National Park takes me on an old two-lane highway through the suburbs of Seattle, where farmhouses alternate with strip malls. Some houses sag with mismatched siding. Old horses graze small pastures next to boxy retail buildings. The Muckleshoot Casino slides by, rainbowed in faded colors. Small towns meld into each other, main streets now strung together by Wal-Marts, gas stations, and sprawling apartment complexes and subdivisions. Some towns are surfaced in liquor stores, plastic and neon signs.

Fresh paint and gilding resurface other towns. Tasteful condos shoulder against brick downtowns in a developer's image of small town America. New owners remake farmhouses in pastel colors with contrasting trim.

I meet stop signs and traffic lights. Brake lights flare and die and flare again. I quit trying to tell one town from another and focus on the car in front of me. The shreds of farms disappear. My foot hovers over the brake.

At a strip mall grocery in Tacoma, I stop for a cheap bottle of wine and clementines to celebrate the ocean. The cashier works her gum with her tongue and shuffles her fingers through her over-sprayed up-do. She beeps my purchases across the scanner and bags them, then holds her hand out for my ID. When I hand it over, she looks at it, then me, “This is from out of state.”

“Yeah.”

She pulls the wine from my bag and puts it under the counter. “We don’t sell alcohol to people with out-of-state IDs.” She pushes the clementines toward me.

I break through to the other side, and the suburbs fade. The road winds along inlets. Bays finger and fold into each other. Shingled boat sheds lean at the edge of the water. On my left, forest fills in and darkens. At two o’clock I reach the national park visitor center. The ranger at the desk is dark-haired and young, with a large nose and small chin. He hands me a park map, and my hand shakes as I reach for it. He notices. I realize I’m caffeinated and tired. “How far to the ocean?” I ask.

“Two more hours.” He points out a nearby campground and the road to another visitor center above the tree line. “It only takes half an hour. It’s beautiful up there. You could take a hike this afternoon and be at the ocean early in the morning.”

I give in, happy for once to stop moving.

I used to dream of sitting on a grassy slope in Buenos Aires, peeling clementines, the thin skins stripping away, the flesh perfuming my fingers. A family picnicked nearby.

Children tumbled down the slope, and in the distance shone the *Río de la Plata*--the silver river, the river of money--so broad and bright that I couldn't see the other side.

My brother saw his future in Chicago, on the radio, hosting a drive-time show. Maybe he imagined his neighborhood--coffee shop downstairs from his apartment, record store down the street, concerts on the weekends. He landed in Lafayette, Indiana, an hour from home, writing and recording used car and hair salon commercials, intro-ing hard rock classics he hated. He lived in a pale, generic one-bedroom apartment near the dog food factory. He had a used car, shabby clothes. He spent all his money on music. Over six hundred CDs stacked the walls of his bedroom. He spent his life with headphones cupped around his ears--another kind of escape.

In Iowa, where I live with my husband, the Union Pacific rumbles a block from our apartment. I-35 runs from our town to Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican border or Duluth, Minnesota at the lip of Lake Superior. A couple of days on I-80, and I could land in San Francisco. We live on US-30, the Lincoln Highway, one of the oldest coast-to-coast highways. Here is the ideal position from which to flee.

On impulse, I make Seth throw some clothes in an overnight bag, and we travel a few hours north or south, east or west. He drives. I watch: silvery brown stubble blankets the fields, mirrors of puddled rain stretch through the ditches, wooly gray clouds drift.

We pull into a Microtel near an interstate interchange at Clear Lake, Iowa. It looks very much like where we came from: Wendy's and Burger King compete outside one window, Comfort Inn glows next door. But when I think too much of my brother's death, flight, even this feigned flight, calms me.

How I Fell From Grace  
Oregon Coast, 2005

Want

Turning back to see how far I've come, I find the beach peopled with figures in ones or twos, dark in the morning mist, pointing or crouching. One woman kneels, maybe picking up rocks, maybe taking photographs. She is turned away from the ocean, away from the tide pools and sheer black islets rising from the water. She bends nearer to the cobbles, her hair falling around her face, almost brushing the stones. Decaying kelp writhes along the wrack line. The fleshy smell must rise to her. I hope she is praying. I hope she is turned to the east and praying for us all.

This wish shocks me. I haven't prayed in years. I suspect the woman has dropped her lens cap or is scrabbling for change among the rocks.

But as soon as I see her, I want this image of contemplation to be real. I've carried my journal everywhere during this journey from South Dakota to the Pacific. I open the soft leather cover and write: *A woman is praying*. If she isn't, in memory I will make it so.

My father was my pastor. My father baptized me in front of his congregation, ladling water over my ten-year-old head with a clamshell. My father confirmed me. I sat on a folding chair with a herd of other teenagers, learning about John Wesley and the Articles of Religion. For my high school graduation his church gave me a copy of *Mere Christianity*.

### An Autobiography in Four Bibles

On my bookshelf at home, four bibles sit in a row between *Annals of a Former World* and *Walden*. When I take them down, I find balls of dog hair and dust. On the oldest bible's cover, tape patches roll up and make tacky seams. During the long afternoon hours between my father's morning service and evening hymn sing, I sprawled in a padded pew and bubble-lettered "God is Love!" across the inside, adding a thickly inked exclamation point. Sometimes during my father's sermons, I rifled a pen from my mother's purse and doodled crosses on the taped cover. Religious drawings were okay--even if my limited artistry produced four-fingered praying hands, broken-necked peace doves, and amorphous pentecostal fires. It counted as paying attention to the main subject of a long Sunday.

Don't be deceived. This is serious religion: none of your wishy-washy we-all-have-our-own-path spirituality, but the kind of religion that makes people uncomfortable, complete with Heaven, Hell, and the Book of Revelation. This is the kind of born-again, Jesus-is-the-only-way religion I eventually learned to either make fun of or tsk tsk over.

### Foreign Languages

A want long discredited surfaces like a sea monster. When I look back along the beach, the mist has burned away, and the woman is gone. I crouch to touch the orange starfish highlighted in the black rock tide pools. Soft-fleshed anemones and snails cling to the

dark stone. These pools speak a foreign language--everything for me, a Midwesterner, unnameable--swift little crabs and fish, alien vegetation sprouting lettuce-like underwater, or spilling bulbously across the beach.

I try to lose myself in landscape. After paddling my fingers in the pool, I check over my shoulder to see no one watches, then lick away the salt. I sniff at the ocean's edge like a dog, inhaling that wet smell of decay and ocean. It took me years to isolate worms and saturated soil as Indiana's after-rain perfume; here I'm lost. When I stand, the rock has skinned my knees. I step carefully from ridge of stone to ridge of stone, across the glimmering pools. The horizon moves with waves. But I can't concentrate. I turn back to the place where the woman kneeled.

Will I ever be able to ignore the twinned texts of my upbringing--the land and the bible? My parents thumbed the pages of three books soft, and from this attention--the crumbling covers, the underlining--I knew they were important. My father turned the pages of his New Testament yellow, and I could smell on them the oil of his hands and the faint scents of cologne and pipe smoke.

The other two were *Walden* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, one my father's, the other my mother's. These I now own, the covers entirely remade with cloth and tape. Each spring of my childhood, my family walked through the woods, and I was indoctrinated in this other language. My father carried a staff, my mother a small pack of bird and wildflower books, snacks and water. I tucked my moist palm into my mother's hand.

My father taught me a signal. When he raised his hand beside his head, the fingers relaxed and slightly curled, I froze and began to look where he pointed, without speaking, for a bird or animal. We walked together slowly, discovering the ephemerals unfurling from the just-thawed duff. They snowed the woods, in progression, opening rapidly to catch the sun before tree leaves blocked it: hepatica, faintly lavender and thriving in frost-prickled soil; dutchmen's breeches, waving tiny pantaloons above feathery foliage; blood root, starry blossom grown and gone in a blink; and the one I marbled in my mouth over and over like prayer--anemone, anemone, anemone.

Why should I fear making my own prayers? I've swallowed the beats of religion since my christening in a long white dress, my chubby baby hand stretched out over the congregation as if in blessing. I've participated in all its sacraments and rites-- Communion (Body of Christ. Blood of Christ.), baptism (I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.), marriage (I Will. I Will.), funerals (Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust).

### An Autobiography in Four Bibles

In high school, I got serious with a soft blue New International Version embossed in silver. I underlined and highlighted passages, checked and plussed the margins. The rhythm of the verses--"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"--added grain to the poetry I wrote in my journals. I approached this

bible with discipline, flipping on the reading light by my bed and propping it on my knees, reading a chapter or two every night before snuggling into my quilts and praying.

I strung my life to this architecture--keeping the holy days holy--for so long it would be easy to take up ritual again, take comfort in the liturgy, repeat beautiful words for beautiful words' sake. I believe in the power of language, and I'm afraid of it.

### Agnostos

I don't know what to call what I see. Great chunks of black stone pop from the ocean, some tufted with vegetation, others scoured clean. They dot the surface far into the distance. They must have a name I don't know. Logs of driftwood--entire trees with their roots twisted into the air--jumble the beach. Waves lift and smack and spray, one surging forward while another draws back. I can say rock, tree, sand, saltwater, sky. I can write the color of the ocean: mud, foam white, storm blue with frog-back brown rolling underneath.

But I can't be more specific. I know the colors on this day but not any other. I don't know what these things mean when put together, how they touch and change each other, their names and ecology. I stand in a wholly foreign world.

I can tell you I've always been afraid of swimming in the ocean--waves surging over my head, saltwater pushing and rolling my body. I imagine being sucked out to sea. My skin would bleach; my hair would float, and fish would nibble at my bloated limbs. Today, I'll do little more than dip my feet.

My best friends from high school feared me because of my religion. Me!--short and so shy I rehearsed basic greetings and polite questions in my head before meeting new people. I learned from my church and midwestern upbringing to be comically slow to anger. Even if enraged, I gave broad, toothy smiles--dangerous, sharky smiles--instead of speaking. I knew from a young age that others' faults and sins must be accepted and forgiven.

Hope, Daniel, and I spent the summer after high school out late, chasing fireflies and playing tennis in the dark. Daniel drove us around in his car with the windows down, and Destiny's Child turned up, singing along to "Bootylicious," shimmying his shoulders behind the wheel.

We wandered Wal-Mart, popping bright plastic balls out of their wire cage and bouncing them down the aisles. We were small-town kids. Once, when rolling through the supermarket parking lot long after midnight, a drug dealer walked up to the car window and invited us to his apartment to buy pot. Hope wanted to go, but Daniel and I didn't.

Hope and Daniel didn't want to tell me. After we split apart to go to college, I worried about Hope. She fell in love too easily. Something about her skin--clean and soft as kneaded dough but blushed in all the right places--made her seem vulnerable. In Boston, where she lived, she got on a bus with a boy and rode it until they ran out of money in Ohio. They hitchhiked as far as North Dakota before they decided they couldn't

stand each other, and there she was, stranded, but always capable of finding someone else to take care of her.

She instant-messaged me every night from Boston. Bekah, she would always start, as if addressing me by name bridged distance.

I'm moving to Washington  
 Bekah, I'm not moving to Washington because I'm in love  
 Bekah, I painted my kitchen orange  
 and I'm a vegan  
 I tattooed my collarbone  
 Bekah, I'm in love  
 if I have a baby, I'm naming it Esme  
 Bekah, I ate ice cream cake  
 so I'm not a vegan anymore  
 But I think I'm addicted to cocaine  
 Bekah, I'm bisexual  
 I'm in love with a girl named Kash

Later, she told me another of our friends from home--someone whose father wasn't a pastor--stopped speaking to her. She thought I would also.

Daniel waited even longer to tell me he was gay. He knew about religion. His parents raised him Southern Baptist.

The United Methodist Church--my church and *the* "mainline" American church, second in membership only to the evangelical Southern Baptists--says in its *Book of Discipline*: "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." I knew this. The church reconsidered its position on homosexuality my senior year of high school, and the controversy shook the denomination with the possibility of schism.

I'd seen the fat red *Discipline* in my father's faux-paneled office and knew it served as the church elders reading of scripture. My God, like Daniel's parents' God, would send my friends to hell. I had a choice. I could agree with Him or protest through disbelief.

#### An Autobiography in Four Bibles

A month before I started west, I laughed when I slit the packing tape on the box mailed from my father's church in Indiana. My roommate grimaced when she looked over my shoulder and saw the New Revised Standard Version and the praying hands night light. They were a college graduation present. I thought of them as a last ditch effort to reclaim me, as if seeing those hands glowing by the toilet would lead me back into the fold. I left the nightlight behind when--with time on my hands between a job at Badlands National Park and an Americorps position in New Hampshire--I started my road trip to Washington and Oregon. But I kept the bible. Through four subsequent moves, I've hauled it along. It's untouched on my bookshelf, brand new, no thumbprints or markings.

Church elders gripe about the loss of faith in America. Gray heads filled the churches where I grew up, and most of the congregation was female. I knew the stats when I was young, and I keep up with them now, oddly gleeful when the charts and graphs come out in the newspaper and I learn "unaffiliated" continues to be the nation's fastest growing religion. According to the 2008 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Study, the biggest chunk of those unaffiliated people describe themselves not as atheists (1.6%) or

agnostics (2.4%) but as “nothing in particular” (12.1%). Among my generation, the Millennials, twenty-six percent claim no formal religious affiliation.

Fear of God still perches on my shoulder, an ugly bird with a sharp beak. Most of the time I forget it's there, but at moments--for instance, when I laugh to a friend and throw up my hands and say, *Oops, I guess I'm going to hell*--he grabs a bit of flesh and twists. For a moment, I believe. Sometimes, I wake in the middle of the night panicking about my eternal damnation. I can't help myself. I'm like an addict--long clean but occasionally tempted.

I feel uneasy writing about prayer. People in my recent surroundings--universities and government jobs--teach me to avoid approaching this subject with any kind of earnestness. No one wants to talk about prayer over a ham sandwich at lunch. They assume at some point you will want to hold hands and bow heads.

## Edges

I knew I should be awed by the Pacific. I'd read Lewis and Clark. I'd driven one thousand six hundred miles to see the ocean. And I was awed. It could roll me like a stone.

I grew up where prairie once lapped at forest. Here was the edge: dark canopies opened into oak savanna and tall grass sparked with flowers. A sea of grass, early settlers said, an ocean of grass, rolling with wind. Sometimes I tried to imagine emerging from

those trees. Under the windbreak pines, at our west property line, I squinted my eyes at a field of corn--still midsummer green, still shorter than me--but I could never see it.

I'm the kind of person who moves through the world with a book. Turning away from the ocean showed my discomfort. When I walk my home woods, I can categorize and name the plants, name the birds, name even the spiders. I see my surroundings in patterns. If I can't, I open my field guide and start keying out organisms by shape and characteristic. Here, on this beach, I had nothing but my senses: no companion, no text, to tell me what I saw. That beach was the edge of mystery for me. The tide pools lip inky depths too foreign for our bodies to visit.

Prayer is one of the oldest forms of human expression, so no wonder I can't slough it off so easily. Perhaps this is instinct, a way of bridging a gap in the face of ignorance and raw disorientation. Prayer steadies us in our fear.

At twenty-two I thought I knew a lot. I'd traveled most of the United States alone. I believed I could take care of myself. Travel helps make scale real; it three-dimensionalizes geography, but I was only beginning to realize the size of our world.

### An Autobiography in Four Bibles

When I married, my uncle sent me my great-grandmother's bible. It's the only King James version, and in it she recorded births and deaths. This bible is the family record; he tucked my grandfather's eulogy between the pages. I added my wedding and my

brother's death to the lists but never cracked the scriptures. I keep the bibles as relics on my bookshelf. I don't know how to get rid of them.

While I don't want to participate as a believer, I'm fascinated by the whole knotty mess--the way religion continues to bind me, the way it's woven into our nation's founding and attitudes, the way it continues to destroy and build the fabric of our human and natural world. Fully eighty-three percent of Americans identify with some religious tradition, and seventy-eight percent call themselves Christians. One look at the world's headlines, one passing flip through the history books, shows that religion--for good or bad--matters. Because I've thrown off personal religion doesn't mean I'm unchained.

Old women in my rural churches folded hands around worn bibles. Their flesh bagged from their chins and the backs of their arms, and when I shook their hands, their skin felt soft as a baby's, and their bones rolled between my palms. These women had lived lives, even if the circuit of those lives was small, one town or one farm. They taught school, married, cooked big meals, cleaned up after children, helped on the farm. They watched husbands, children, and friends die.

My great-grandmother was one of them. She had Queen of England hats and blue eyes that hooked you. She took a shot of whiskey on every birthday and lived the full course of a century, from 1900 to Election Day, 2000.

I saw this tough old woman cry only once. We opened flimsy manila boxes in her kitchen. Light poured in from the sunporch, through the canary cage, onto the kitchen table. Black and white photographs loaded the table, scattered among cards with spidery handwriting, and precious scraps of fabric--baby booties and caps, her mother's

handkerchiefs. My mother, father, and I sat around her, pawing through relics. My great-grandmother paused over a brittle picture of a little girl, maybe four years old, in a white dress. "My baby, Amy." She wiped her eyes and, explaining no further, flipped the image over and continued through the stack, listing her dead.

She, and many others like her, believed in prayer. They were smart and tolerant, and I believed in them.

## Swim

This is no conversion story, but at home--six years older, married, and carrying my own dead--I begin to explore the forms of prayer. I type "prayer" into the library catalog, and it returns *Pray*, a CD of contemporary Christian music. And *Sleepy Time Blessings*. And at the top of the list, *The Yada Yada Prayer Group Gets Down*, a novel for "Christian women." The cover shows a line of feet dancing in socks with lime-green zig-zags, pink polka dots, and yellow and orange geometrics. These texts are not what I'm looking for. This is fluffy Christianity, empty comfort, and I've been to plenty of revivals, Christian rock concerts, and church services where people hold up their palms and sway.

When I click out of the library and into Amazon, I find the other extreme--more fundamentalism, hatred, and manipulation than even I--immersed in Christianity's facets from childhood--am prepared for. My stomach roils as I scan through the subcategory "Religious Warfare," reading descriptions of *Prayer That Routs Demons* and *23 Minutes in Hell*, designed to clamp adherents into a life of fear and opposition.

I can't help but believe prayer started somewhere else. I want to know other people's prayers: ancient prayers and strange prayers and, most of all, wild and riotous prayers.

On Google Books, I find *Prayer: A History*, and I'm hooked from the first page. I learn prayer can be a wheel, spinning out the words with every revolution. A poem is prayer. A prayer is chanted. A prayer is sung. The Papago people in the Southwest drink liquor in prayer for rain. Later, reading Kathleen Norris' beautiful book *Dakota*, I learn the Benedictine motto: Work is prayer.

I follow the logic--dance: prayer, pressing a squash seed into warm soil: prayer, food to lips: prayer (think body, think blood). Surely for some sex is prayer (my God, my God). For others, it's watching a blank dome of sky. Some cultures hold their prayers secret.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton notes St. Anthony's words: "the prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer realizes himself or the fact that he is praying." The act of prayer becomes as "spontaneous and instinctive as breathing." Every day of my life I swim in someone's prayers.

During a phone conversation when we're discussing prairie plants and the Gulf oil spill, my father says, "My spirituality is locked up in prairie."

He's watched the last scrap of prairie near our home plowed under. He makes the connection, railing against the oil companies, sounding like a perfect environmentalist, adding "Don't get me wrong. I'm not turning into a leftist."

But he sees the intersection. He understands how he feels when he walks in or tends his prairie plants. The connection is deep, not just a surface appreciation of beauty, not just a hobby, but an interaction woven into the fabric of his identity. He's careful to say he doesn't worship nature. But when scarifying seeds or planting grass plugs or walking through black-eyed susans, he admits he finds himself at worship. So when he hears of the oil spill, he reacts in the same terms, realizing that no matter what the thing is called, there are people along the Gulf Coast losing more than a livelihood. There are people being spiritually damaged.

I don't know if I believe my actions are prayer. Surely prayer requires intention. For the most part I blunder through my day, and I suspect others do too. I have trouble believing in my father's God: God the Father, so I call myself agnostic. But in spite of myself, I believe in a holy thing, insensible to me.

When I sit to draw a seastack, tracing its outlines, moving along every bump and curve with my eyes, I hope for prayer. I begin to hope my steps speak, as they chatter the round stones. And perhaps I pray when I kneel to touch an orange star fish. And when I breathe as I struggle up the steep path away from the beach. I hope I pray when I turn the car key in the ignition and as I watch clear cut and slash on the left and ocean on the right.

Lorena Degner  
b.1898-d.1923  
buried: Winamac, IN

My mother pasted a photograph of my great-great-grandfather and his daughters into an album. They pick apples on the bluff above the old gravel pit on family farm. They lean back against the heaped weight of fruit baskets. The photograph shines with heat. I can taste the afternoon. The trees in the background dapple and blur the faces, and light layers across the sinews of their forearms. The women wear long white dresses and their hair piled on their heads. One has woven an umbel of Queen Anne's Lace into her hair. It adorns her forehead like a tiara. She sits slightly apart from her sisters, making a space that, as a child, I wanted to fill, wearing my own long dress, hair braided and wound around my head, holding a basket of crisp-fleshed apples.

I can't put names to faces although I know how some of them ended. My great-great-grandfather: sudden heart attack, leaving his widow to farm and struggle. Dorrit: a degree from Indiana University and a nurse during World War I. Evalyn: married to a local boy at seventeen. Hazel: on the farm, working in a pair of her father's pants belted tight. Lorena: the wanderer, far from home, scattered down a railroad track in Oregon. A train smashed into her bus, dead at twenty-five. They're all buried in the cemetery near where they grew up, bodies still home or brought home.

How it Works  
Pocatello, Idaho, 2005

You laugh until you cry:

When he was sixteen, my brother planned to be a pharmacist (despite hating math and chemistry) but spent hours listening to and imitating Kevin Matthews, a disc jockey on WLUP-FM “The Loop” out of Chicago. Matthews made crank calls and frequently voiced characters--Jim Shorts, an abusive sportscaster; an exaggerated Fred Rogers; Dick Withers, a DNR officer and “master baiter”--more than twenty distinct personalities. It was stupid drive-time comedy. My brother wandered our house, repeating tag lines, distorting his voice, dropping it low and then raising it to a hilarious strained pitch: *What are ya goofy? What are ya gooped up on gop?*

I was five, and when he had to babysit, he practiced, recording whole monologues on his rectangular silver stereo. He pushed the tab buttons to rewind the tape, play it back, rewind, re-record. A skinny teenager with chipmunk cheeks and thick-lensed glasses reinventing himself over and over. When he wasn't working on his voice, he played music, loud, saying *listen to this*.

After college, when he started working as a DJ (a *radio personality*, I'd learn to call him), he'd adopted the John Lennon look--hair long enough to curl, wire rims, and a new girlfriend every month.

This is how it works:

Your mother leaves a message on your phone. It's a Tuesday. You've just come home from work. You've been preparing for your first semester teaching at a North Carolina high school. You know it's not good even before you call her back. Your boyfriend is standing with you in the living room, and when your mother answers the phone, you start mouthing to him: *It's not good, it's not good, it's not good.* She says, *Your dad has something to tell you,* and hands the phone off. Your father says, *There was a fire.*

One of the last times I talked to my brother, I was traveling, a chance call home from Pocatello, Idaho. Before I started out for the Pacific Coast, my parents asked me to call them once a week or whenever my cell phone had a signal. I called from the places I stopped for groceries, for email, for gas. I called from Cody, Wyoming early enough in the morning for cold fingers and pink clouds. I called from the public library in Missoula, from a laundromat in Coeur d'Alene, a friend's house in Portland, and on the way home, from Pocatello. I had spent hours driving through the high desert of eastern Oregon and southern Idaho: light and shadow, pale powdery dirt and brown clumps of grass.

I caught my family at home at dinner after they helped my grandmother sell the last of her furniture in an auction so she could permanently settle in Florida. My mother passed the phone to my father; my father passed the phone to my brother. I sat on a bench in front of the Super Wal-Mart talking to him while I waited for the mechanics to finish my oil change. I don't remember what we talked about. I remember watching people rattle shopping carts through the parking lot. It was hot and windy, and they all seemed to

be juggling stained, screaming children. I remember being afraid of ever looking so squeezed and dusted.

My brother came home the next Thanksgiving, but I didn't. We saw each other at Christmas. I called the radio station where he worked and spoke to him for a couple of minutes in July, on his birthday. Then he quit answering his home phone, didn't answer his door when my parents knocked, moved and didn't give anyone his new address, didn't get in touch at the holidays.

There was no explanation for this silence. There still isn't.

I could have found him; I knew how, but I didn't. At thirty-four, he could make his own decisions. I wasn't sure what had happened but trusted him enough to believe he was all right. I was angry enough to let him call first.

How do I explain my silence? I can't even try. Not yet.

Mix tape:

Between finding out and getting on a plane for Indiana the next morning, I logged into the message boards at WOXY, his favorite online radio station. They already knew, had known since the morning after the fire, while we waited two days for the news to go through official channels. We waited for the police to verify his identity. We waited for the police in Lafayette to find my parents' address and ask the police in Muncie to knock on the door. For my mother to leave a message on my cell phone.

I asked them for music.

His friends said these were the songs my brother would play:

- Spiritualized- “Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space”
- Manic Street Preachers- “If You Tolerate This Your Children Will Be Next”
- Radiohead- “Street Spirit (Fade Out)”
- Regina Spektor- “On the Radio”
- Regina Spektor- “Fidelity”

I added “Hey Jude” because he taught me the chorus in our grandmother’s living room when I was five or six. I sat on the carpet, a marbled brown shag that I made countries out of in my imagination, inventing whole atlases. He sat on the sagging brown couch. We sang together. I sang, as always, a little out of tune, but his voice was sure.

I burned a CD for the funeral.

You listen to it twice ‘cause the DJ is asleep:

At my brother’s funeral, in between going to the front office to ask them to turn the music up, I talked to his best friend--a woman I’d never met before named Heidi. She had bleached blonde hair, cut short and styled spiky. She wore thick eyeliner, lots of mascara, and smoky eye shadow to make her eyes (were they blue, brown, green?) pop. She told me my brother always asked her to wear her “smoodgy” makeup when they went to concerts together. She told me that once, when my brother was drunk, he told her how he really felt about her, and she asked him to stop. I imagined this memory was one of those

that kept circling her, coming back and back, as she sat at the service trying not to cry so her makeup wouldn't run.

My brother was autopsied. Several months afterwards, I read this fact in a newspaper clipping about his death. Two and a half years later, when I read Joan Didion's account of her husband's autopsy in *The Year of Magical Thinking*--"chest open like a chicken in a butcher's case, the face peeled down, the scale in which the organs are weighed"--I jerk away from the page. I hadn't thought about it before but now I do. "The face peeled down" circles. There have been several moments like this one in the three years since my brother's death, and I imagine there will be more. They come back to be fingered over and over. Someday I might finally lay them down.

He died charred and alone, curled against the apartment window after trying to escape.

My mother told me about the window shortly after the service (no body, the body disappeared for cremation). I wonder if it caught in her mind the way it's caught in mine, if her telling served as a kind of exorcism like this one.

It's a curse. Imagining the choking in the dark, the hand against the window, palm against window, the beat, beat, beat.

Home in Indiana for a death and driving through the dark. It's January, it's cold, the sky is sparking, and the icy air burns. I have to turn off the heat to keep awake (my body wants oblivion), to keep my mind on the road, to keep my mind away from char and the palm against the window.

In North Carolina where I live, I dream of speaking with my brother, alive and whole. We've been sitting on sun-warmed concrete by the ocean in a busy city center. I've run into him by accident, as you would an old friend, small serendipity. His hair is long, curling at the nape of his neck. He pushes the length of it behind his ears as he always has, using all his fingers at once, not comb-like, but flat and parallel. Someone skateboards past. We look out at the sea, too blue, too smooth, sea gulls circling and settling. He tells me he's on an extended vacation and not to tell our parents. He tells me it's all right, he needed a break from the iron-gray Indiana winter, and he'll be back soon.

I tell myself fairy tales in my sleep. When I wake, I stumble into the heat-weighted North Carolina dark. Cockroaches skitter off the front porch when I push open the door.

It feels a little worse:

I made the kite from an old blue and white piece of sail and the shafts of two wooden arrows. When I first moved to North Carolina, I lived and worked at an environmental education center where, in addition to lessons about plankton and water quality and the

tidal zone, we taught low ropes and sailing and archery. I had just started on seasonal staff, and I was broke. I sawed the points and the nocks off the arrows with a pocket knife and peeled away the ragged fletching. I tied the dowels into a cross with twine and laid them onto the sail to trace and measure the fabric. I thought my brother might like the kite, even if homemade, even if childish. When he was twelve or thirteen, he knitted me a scarf. I still have it, sized for a child and too short for me now, shoved deep at the back of the closet.

When he didn't come home that Christmas, no call, no contact, my parents mailed his presents to the radio station. After he died in January, the box of presents was returned to us. (By who? I don't know. The few things that hadn't burned began to appear after the funeral in furtive handoffs designed to avoid either facing us or heightening our grief.) The presents hadn't been opened, hadn't burned because they were still in his office. My parents gave the kite back to me.

Top Fifty:

This week my father forwarded me an email that a friend of my brother's had forwarded to him. My brother left behind a lot of lists, and this was one of them: his top fifty favorite bands. He was a music snob in the Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* sense. His top five bands are:

- 1) the Beatles
- 2) Manic Street Preachers
- 3) Spiritualized

- 4) Radiohead
- 5) Blur

Since he died, I can't listen to much music. Every Christmas he gave me a new CD and a mix CD of songs he thought I would like but not yet know. Every Christmas, after we finished opening all the presents, we would open the music. He would pull the security tape off for me because I would end up picking it away in slivers. We would spend the afternoon listening.

When I listen to music, I say "I like it" or "It's really good" or "All his songs sound the same" or "Eh." For my brother, music had "rolling basslines," "galloping piano" and "fuzzed-out slide guitar." Music had "squonk" and "arpeggios" and "sing-speaking;" lyrics were "daedal and disjointed."

When I open my CD case, almost every album reminds me of my brother: the Beatles, the Beatles after the Beatles, Gomez, Spoon, Arcade Fire, Nick Drake, Paul Simon, Jeff Buckley, Bob Dylan, Stars, British Sea Power, the Shins, the Fiery Furnaces, Badly Drawn Boy, Johnny Cash.

For a while, I don't listen to anything. At twenty-three my music collection goes into premature stasis. After a year or so, I start listening to Billy Bragg, Manu Chao, Old Crow Medicine Show, the Chieftains, Doc Watson, Bela Fleck--folk and bluegrass and Latin--the kind of songs my brother once told me sounded all the same to him.

Many years from now, I might be able to listen to my brother's own voice, on the CD he produced at work after finishing commercials for used cars and hair salons, his hands picking out chords on the Fender Stratocaster that burned with him.

### Paper Trail:

You can google him and get hundreds of hits: newspaper articles about his death, the script on his commemorative bricks at the National Center for Music Education, emotional accounts of his death on blogs and forums posted by his friends and acquaintances, the short tribute page from the radio station where he worked, and his own words, thousands and and thousands of them: on his blog, his Myspace page, posts on WOXY detailing his opinions and reviews of music.

Three years later, for the first time, I can do this: I can search, I can read through the websites and posts without looking away. It's a kind of spying, something I was reluctant to do when he was alive. I wonder if all of this will slowly disappear like memory. I wonder if I should print the pages so I can hold onto them or whether I should let them fade.

I find myself gathering scraps, fragments, forming a reconstruction pasted together from bits and pieces, messy and inaccurate.

The gesture was trite, a bit melodramatic, certainly sentimental, but I was tired of the kite propped in the corner of my house. My husband and I took it to North Carolina's Outer Banks when we went in May, almost a year and a half later. People call this coast a graveyard--the ocean floor is littered with shipwrecks. I tied a roll of twine to the kite, intending to fly it high above the ocean and then let it go on the hard winds near Kitty

Hawk. I imagined it floating above the stone gray sea, before settling onto the waves and slowly sinking.

It was chilly, cold and damp, and the beach was empty. The kite kept diving into the sand, never rising more than ten feet. I tried to let it skitter low, let it get caught in the wind, but it just thudded to the ground and stopped a few feet away. Finally, when another car pulled into the parking lot, I tucked the kite against a dune before anyone could come down to the beach to see me, and we drove away.

It's three years later. My parents have the ashes. We could scatter them. We could wait for a windy day in fall when pale corn husks are flying out and up behind combines and the birds are flocking and rolling across the sky. We could launch the dust and bone fragments on the wind to disappear. But we won't. Instead, in the summer I will go home. My father will take a spade and dig a hole, and we will bury him and set a field stone with a plaque attached over the place. We will keep his ashes together, weighted into earth.

Eastern Oregon to Western Wyoming  
October 7, 2005

I avoid the interstate and take state highways across the Cascades from the Oregon coast. Once I cross the mountains into the rain shadow, I feel dust-choked and sun-struck. Eastern Oregon fades into southern Idaho. I drive, watching shadows thrown by clean morning light. I drive up ridges and down basins. Wyoming looks cracked and broken, everything parched. Empty pop and water bottles roll along the floor of my car. The radio crackles in and out. I pass stretches of road marked with warning signs: *No Gas Next Forty Miles*.

When the gas stations appear, lonely by the side of the road, they are slasher-movie scary, the bathrooms lockless, with blood-spattered, reeking toilets and shit-smearred walls. At one, I watch a man in knee-high rubber boots hop out of his rattling pickup and run into the convenience store. The truck starts a slow roll backward, stopping in the center of the parking lot. He runs out clutching a forty, screaming “Fucking piece of shit.”

This is not a land for tourists. I’ve stepped into the film where the hero drives into town, maybe a little long-haired, maybe a little scruffy. He stops for directions at the diner, and a local stares him up and down, spits a wad of mucus at his shoe, and says, “You’re not from around here, are you boy?”

Unlayered  
Kemmerer, Wyoming, 2005

By the middle of southern Wyoming, when I came to something, anything, painted and well-lit, I stopped, whether part of my initial plan or not. Near Kemmerer (Home of JC Penney Mother Store & Museum, the welcome declared), I visited Fossil Butte National Monument. I unfolded myself into the empty parking lot. The morning light scrubbed the dusty landscape with an over-pure brightness. I walked toward the visitor center, feeling exposed and greasy in a thread-bare wool sweater and pigtails. This light felt utterly unfamiliar: not hot but weighty and tangible. It changed ordinary objects and made every imperfection clear. Bunch grass threw spiky shadows against pale soil.

In the way my grandparents used to watch crops, comparing quality and lushness to fields they once kept at home, I pay attention to dirt--red clay, rich black loam, the popcorn crackle of the Badlands. The soil here was moonlike--pale and powdery enough to hold a footprint. It looked dead.

The visitor center squatted in the basin, framed by low, bare ridges. The buff stone walls matched the surrounding soil, but the building looked brand-new and shiny against the Wyoming desert, an expensive investment for an area with more pronghorn than people. Cool air exhausted into my face when I opened the door.

I didn't know exactly what I was walking into, but I knew something about fossil hunters. At the Badlands, I prepared a program about Othniel Charles Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope, famed 19th century paleontologists, and their intense, self-destructive rivalry. During their "Bone War," they tried to outgun each other by digging up ever more

exotic fossils: three-toed horses, the Apatosaurus, great finned crocodiles. They exhausted their fortunes. They published furiously. They fudged reconstructions. (For generations grade-school children crayoned an inaccurate Brontosaurus green. Marsh put the wrong head on it, and Yale University didn't admit his mistake until 1981.) They name-called and worked to ruin each other's reputation. Their crews threw rocks at each other. Marsh had his men blow up a field of fossils rather than let Cope gain any glory. This rivalry was pure hatred.

I'd met live, working paleontologists at the Badlands. They didn't seem that much more sane. They sat in a pit all day wielding small brushes or walked into the field as soon as the sun rose dressed in CSI-like, white head-to-toe jumpsuits. They all seemed twitchy and weathered and kind of malnourished. But the seven-year-olds who spouted off geologic epochs without breath, pause, or prompting at my fossil programs (...triassic-jurassic-cretaceous-paleocene-eocene...) provided the strongest evidence that ancient bones turn people a bit loopy.

I'd never been that into fossils, not even at seven. I'd never obsessed over Triceratops or T-Rex or Stegosaurus. At the Badlands, instead of getting excited about Brontotheres (weird-looking rhino-like mammals) or giant carnivorous pigs, I liked coprolites (poop) and paleosols (soils) and learning how a certain kind of ant harvests minuscule fossil teeth to cap their mounds (which paleontologists then raid).

For me the stop at Fossil Butte meant a clean bathroom and a break in the brown monotony of I-80. Inside the visitor center, the usual dun-shirted ranger hunched at the desk, but around her the room swam. Flipped crocodiles cut through a swimming-pool

blue background lined with palm trees. The mural showed light shimmering at the water's surface. Below, a fish opened its jaws to capture a minnow.

In the exhibit room, whole schools of bony fish finned across flat rectangles of stone. They appeared like sharp shadows on the tan rock. I could see scales, delicate fins, and the outline of tiny teeth. In another glass case, I found stone spiders and sycamore leaves nibbled by insects. A dragonfly showed wings and every segment of thorax, as if a collector had just pinned the body to cardboard. Here were birds, turtles, and stingrays, all caught, their tissues and bones mineralized.

Fossil Butte sits on the shore of a stone lake. Subtropical waters once stretched across southwestern Wyoming and into Colorado and Utah. The monument protects one small lobe of this fossil complex. These fossil beds are famous. Forty-eight million years ago, the ancient lake's waters lapped gentle and shallow. At its edges, fine-grained sediments sifted over dead organisms, leaving them undisturbed, layering and swaddling even ephemeral flower blossoms and the soft bodies of frogs.

All of these delicate fossils remain in their matrix. In big museums wired-together dinosaurs hulk over schoolchildren. Here paleontologists never remove small creatures from the strata where they died. Instead, they remain in two dimensions--like intricately cut paper--inadvertent works of art.

But it was the bat that stopped me cold, complete and undisturbed, its wings folded against its body, small bat fingers and toes articulated, each bone twig-like, and if not for its cradle of limestone, snappable.

On this trip west and back, the Pacific Ocean should have been the climax. My heart should have swelled; my midwestern sensibilities should have been overwhelmed. But that wasn't the moment. Among all the choices--a double rainbow over Lake McDonald, bear and bison, hiking to a mountaintop--I chose a stone bat as the moment when I paused, bowled over with awe to stare. This bat had wings enough for me to see it darting above water, flitting in the near dark, snapping up mosquitoes. I saw a living world, whole and near enough to my own, in a place I had labeled in my mind as dust, sagebrush, wind.

In this dry, stark land, unfit for the plow, requiring thousands of acres to ranch, paleontologists unlayer a world, rich and nearly complete. They call it a *paleoecosystem*, but I imagine something less scientific. I imagine them out there, walking the shores of this lake in their minds, every step turning up a puff of dust and the thought of shade and water and the rich smell of humus.

I walked a trail to an old fossil quarry, worked before the government established the monument. In dry draws, small aspen groves quivered in the wind. Their leaves already shimmered gold. In the visitor center, I learned moose--an animal I had always pictured mouthing stringy plants from wetlands--lived here. So I searched every aspen grove as I walked. I wished so hard for a moose that I convinced myself of a moose track in the powdered trail. The track was big, but I am no expert and suspected myself of a

classic tourist move: pointing at a mule deer and repeating “Moose! Moose!” insistently in the face of all attempts at gentle correction.

I wandered back into the sagebrush. The trail was short. The quarry didn’t look like much. I hiked along the contours of a tall bluff. Limestone slabs lay cracked and tumbled at the bottom of a vertical wall. If not for the sign, I would have walked by the place. I toed over a few stones, knowing every school kid and tourist who’d passed had done the same but still hoping.

The loop continued through open desert toward an A-frame hut. In the distance, it looked like a pup tent. Nearer, I could see weathered wood beams and neatly shingled planks. A sign next to the hut said a fish prospector, David Haddenham, had summered here, working the quarry between 1918 and his death in 1968. I bent to look through the doorframe. The shack contained a low wooden platform topped with bare metal bedsprings. When he stood up from bed, his head brushed the cardboard tacked to the ceiling for insulation. It reminded me of my tent--space only for the body.

A picture on the sign showed him sitting in a doorway holding a fish fossil, its stone matrix cut in a neat rectangle and balanced on his knee like a canvas. His mouth was as collapsed and beaten as his hat. He had folded his thick pants into cuffs above his boots. He must have been intimate with the properties of stone, tapping a chisel to pop apart leaves of stone.

Today, paleontologists keep searching. The Field Museum in Chicago sends a team to the area each summer. Their paleontologists work on private land (because although the federal government allows long-term loans of fossils, they ultimately retain

ownership). Paleontologists use the language of mining: “prospecting” and “quarrying.” The National Park Service calls their fossil beds a “nonrenewable resource.”

But these workers aren't after copper or coal. They look for bodies. They extract delicate fossil images. They use frontloaders to push the “overburden” off a promising limestone block. Then they sweep the remaining dust from the table of stone. The Badlands paleontologists worked on hands and knees in dirt all day, but here the fossil hunters use rock saws to work into the stone, quarter inch by quarter inch. They cut clean rectangles and split the fossil-bearing slab away from the rest of the block with shovels and chisels. It comes up neatly, pulling apart like a page in a book.

They use light to find the fossils. They only work when the sun casts shadows. They watch the rock face for nearly imperceptible darkening on the otherwise smooth, buff stone.

The fossil hunter would have worked much the same way. I thought about him out there, each summer for nearly fifty years, surely a bit crazed, waking early every morning in that sharp, drinkable light. He must have used the sun, face pressed near the surface of stone, watching for the faintest of shadows, reading rock. He was a miner, yes; he made a living, yes, but this idea of opening worlds, unlayering time, working downward in place, must be addictive.

Atlantic, Iowa  
October 12, 2005

Driving under a glass-blue bowl of sky, I find the land billows. The car sails up the soft rise of a shaken sheet, a silk parachute held by a circle of children. We used to play this way in gym class, gripping the smooth hem tight, then lifting and dropping our arms. The teacher tossed an armful of plastic balls into our center. We flipped them across the fabric, trying to keep them from tumbling off the edge. The balls leaped and popped. They juggled in bright colors, rising and falling. I picture the houses and barns, my car, skimming along a surface of heaving land.

I understand the terror of hills rolling to horizon. How easy to see it all coming unpinned and flying away in a hard wind. Maybe the survey grid etched across soil, the clean lines of interstate and county road, are a way of chaining us down.

## In Opposite Directions

### I.

Every time I move, I anticipate love, that this will be the place I'll stay forever. In Iowa, back in the Midwest, I try hard. I get new license plates and a library card. I raise a garden, visit a postage stamp of native prairie. On the internet, I find old plat maps and read about Jefferson's survey system gridding townships over the land. I look for layers under the corn in a way I never have before. I try to find a community, to become a resident.

During a May camping trip, I take my husband, Seth, mushroom hunting. The county and state parks allow foraging, and on hikes we'd seen the mushroom hunters walking slow, peering at the ground. Seth finds Iowa foreign and somewhat difficult. He grew up framed by the humped shoulders of the Appalachians. Roads ran through wooded gaps or broad valleys marked with small dairy farms and orchards. He knows hemlocks and the pink flare of rhododendron rather than the featureless sea of corn and beans. By taking him mushroom hunting, I hope we can both settle into that other Midwest, the one I remember from my childhood in Indiana. Here I try to identify with what Wallace Stegner termed the "nesters" in my family, those who stake out a plot of earth and stay.

Mushroom hunting requires almost no equipment: a bag, perhaps a stick. Only seeing the leaf-colored mushrooms against the forest floor is difficult. The mushrooms can be at a hunter's toe without being seen. After setting up our tent at Elk Rock State

Park, we gather gear for the hunt. I pull two mesh onion bags we've saved for this purpose from the car, and Seth shoves one in his pocket. Mushroom hunting protocol requires these bags, so the spores can drop and scatter as we carry our harvest through the woods. I load a couple of field guides, binoculars, and snacks into a daypack. We plan to be out for most of the day. We both tuck our pants into our socks. Already this year, the ticks have been thick, and we will be walking off trail, shoving through brush. I prefer keeping eight-legged bloodsuckers outside my clothes.

The trail from the campground tunnels the woods. The soil, moist and padded with decaying leaves, spices the air as we walk. Small leaves filter a bright green light to the forest floor. We stroll, enjoying short sleeves and sunshine after subzero temperatures and weeks of snow. Two men in camouflage hurry past carrying GPS units. They look serious with boots laced up their ankles and gear belted around their waists. They will use GPS to locate old mushroom spots and mark new finds. During other seasons, they hunt deer or turkeys. It's odd to find myself in such company.

Morels often grow in the same spot from year to year, so hunters return to favorite locations. People say to look near dead elms, in old orchards, on burn sites, but I think it comes down to luck. The mushrooms tend to spring up in groups, usually only a handful, but sometimes, I've heard, there can be hundreds nestled along a single hillside. I imagine us filling our bags, piling mushrooms in our hats, hammocking them in the fronts of our shirts. We would walk from the woods sagging with bounty, and the other campers would double-take with jealousy. They might ask where we found them, but we wouldn't tell.

Somehow, GPS units seem like cheating. I like the idea of knowing a place well enough to walk back to a fallen log or hollow from year to year without the aid of technology. At home, people secreted their favorite mushroom haunts from season to season, generation to generation, like misers hoarding treasure. Hunters might share mushrooms with their neighbors but rarely where they found them. In Indiana, my grandparents had their patches.

I had my own spot, discovered at four years old. On the Brown property across the highway from our woods--land my grandfather leased and farmed--lilac bushes covered a sandy hillside. The lilacs marked the old house site. In spring they lit the hill with lavender and perfume. My mother took me there to clip flowers to fill our house. While she worked, I wormed into the bushes. It was dark and quiet. I imagined rabbits quivering in the dim light, hiding from foxes. I worked my way further in. At the very center, in a kind of bower floored in bare soil and roofed with lilacs, I found a five-inch morel. I squeezed back through the maze of branches, careful not to crumble the delicate mushroom.

When people share their spots, it's an initiation, a sign of respect. The mushrooms are a privilege of growing up in the rural Midwest. And they taste good. Old men more comfortable with monosyllables turn poetic as they attempt to describe their flavor. My mother floured and fried them in butter until they turned a golden, bubbling brown. Some people eat them on toast or toss them with pasta, but I've always felt them too precious to dilute. I eat morels hot from the pan, holding them with the tips of my fingers, taking nipping, ginger bites into fleshy meat. I brought my backpacking stove and a skillet, but

Seth and I will have to hope for good luck. Elk Rock State Park has thirteen miles of trails, and we don't know where to start.

We walk farther down the trail, guessing that others have cleaned out any patches near the campground. I trail Seth, watching the tattered hems of his pants and his cracked boots. We're willing to work for our mushrooms, and it's a beautiful day. I'm reminded of how I loved Indiana's verdancy. In the spring, seeing the black soil beginning to fur green with crops and the woods spark with flowers, I felt my home rich and deep enough to support all roots. I try out a joke from John Madson's *Where the Sky Began*. "So there was this farmer in Indiana."

"Yeah."

"And he was in town when they were doing a drill for an atomic attack. Everyone was supposed to go to the nearest shelter."

"Lot of good that would do."

"But this farmer just sat down in the park and watched everybody scrambling around. Afterward, a friend asked him why he hadn't participated, and he said he wasn't afraid of the Bomb because he figured if one fell on Indiana it'd just lay there and grow."

Seth doesn't laugh, but I'm terrible at set ups and punch lines. Still, I liked the idea of the soil's mythic power to turn anything into a seed.

Wildflowers petal every inch of this part of the woods. The spring flowers bloom in progression, catching light before the trees leaf in. This year I've felt at home, knowing which flowers to search for first--skunk cabbage, then hepatica. Sometimes these two can be found blooming through snow.

“Harbingers,” I say to Seth.

“Really? That’s what you’re going to go with? Harbingers?” I can hear his smile.

By the time we go mushroom hunting, there are bluebells in the woods, bloodroot starring out, trout lily nodding--all the ephemera of my childhood. I stop to look, crouching to lift blossoms. I name them for him, showing off a little. Seth stands by my side, shifting from boot to boot, bored by the botany lesson. He gets distracted by birds high in the trees. When I look up, he has the binoculars out, training them on the canopy.

It’s just as well. We hike deeper into the woods, and sometimes when I stop, I struggle to remember names. The flowers have become like childhood classmates. I should know who they are--their faces are so familiar--but I don’t.

Seth bends to one with small, belled flowers and toothed leaves, “What’s this?”

I’m embarrassed. I can’t pull the name from my mind. “I know this one. Give me a second.” But I have to use the field guide.

Spring Cress. One of the wildflowers my father transplanted near our fire ring between the garden and the house. Our oldest oaks grew here, shedding flaky gray bark and broad limbs. Bricks circled the fire ring. He used the little patch of wildflowers as a teaching garden. Each spring we practiced the names. Now, twenty years later, humus has buried the fire ring, but the flowers still bloom. In this garden, he buried my brother’s ashes.

The wood opens slightly in an oak grove. Huge white oaks stand spread-armed, finger-to-finger, and saplings grow in below. Before settlement, the saplings would have burned off in wildfires, leaving behind the thick-barked oaks and, beneath the trees, an

open parkland of grass and wildflowers. The land slopes away toward the reservoir. We'd crossed the lake earlier on the way to the park. It showed white caps and a sterile brown ring where the water level raised and lowered. Power boats roared up and down its length.

We leave the trail, deciding this is as good a spot as any. We push through stands of saplings and step over downed logs. Seth has never been mushroom hunting, so I tell him what my grandfather told me at six years old on his land in Indiana: watch your feet, be patient. We walk slow, heron-like, eyes on the duff, watching for morels pushing up. They look like bits of coral or small brains. I tell Seth when he sees the first mushroom to stop and kneel, to train his eyes on it and then, without standing, to look for others.

We spread out, methodical. Each of us takes a patch of forest and walks it back and forth in transects, scanning the leaf litter. We find a pink orchid and neon orange slime mold creeping along a log. After two hours, we've gathered about twenty ticks each in a variety of sizes. Back on the trail, tick hunting becomes our game. Whoever walks behind watches the other's pants for small brown spots crawling upward.

"Want to try one more place?" I ask.

He hitches the backpack higher. "Might as well on the way back."

I know two hours is a weak effort by mushroom hunting standards, but I don't want to tax Seth's patience for staring at the ground.

Seth finds them. He bends and picks one, then another, working in a circle around his feet. He looks over at me: "There's one a foot to your left."

For several moments, I can't see it. Then my eyes adjust, and I pick out the pocked, pointed cap of the mushroom. I slice my thumb through the stem and hold damp weight in my palm before dropping it into my bag. With my eyes trained, I see them everywhere around my feet, and I work bent, picking until the patch runs out. We end up with twenty between us--not the mythical haul I'd imagined but enough for a meal.

We want to celebrate, so we drive to the nearest town, Prairie City, to buy orange juice and a bottle of cheap champagne. The SuperValu sits at the corner of an otherwise blank-faced Main Street. Down the rest of the block, white paint chips around the sills of windows bearing "For Lease," "Closed," and "For Sale" signs. Only the essentials are left--grocery store, bar, church, and post office. The concrete silos at the grain elevator tower over all.

The door of the grocery is propped open in an attempt to pull in the spring evening. Inside, the grocery smells faintly of condensation and meat, rubbery celery and overripe melons. It smells like my childhood in Indiana. It smells like the payoff for running two blocks with my allowance clutched in my fist for Dr. Pepper Bubble Yum. I know the scuffed linoleum and the overweight high school student stocking shelves in the flicker of florescent lights.

I take a lap around the grocery and find Budweiser and wine coolers but no champagne. I return empty-handed to where Seth waits in the car. A couple slams their truck doors shut across the block and walks toward the bar.

Seth turns the key in the ignition and says, "I feel like I'm being watched."

"You are," I tell him.

## II.

Seth loves birds like I love plants, so he sees them first. We sit at our picnic table. Our dirty cookware is still scattered between us, and we each turn the pages of a book. At the first blush of dusk, a staggering angle flies overhead, fifty, seventy-five, a hundred birds.

When Seth calls out “Pelicans!” at first I don’t believe him. He already has the binoculars to his eyes, his face tipped up and hidden except for the point of his beard. Their bodies glint like the bellies of airliners. Watching the birds sail along the smooth arc of the sky feels like the kind of dream that’s a gift: where you fly or talk to a dead loved one or curl back into childhood.

“Are you sure they aren’t geese? Or could they be swans?”

He passes the binoculars to me. I lean back to see their wide white wings cut with black, spread and held, moving without effort, refugees searching for the sea. Seth is right. They hold their bodies like bombers; a recognizable trait even at this distance.

The pelicans glide out of sight, and Seth, the consummate researcher, has already gone to the car to get *Lives of North American Birds*. We carry *Sibley’s* field guide when we hike for identification, and this book, heavy and full of photographs, in the car when we travel. I gave it to Seth for his birthday when we lived in North Carolina and found new birds every week--a profusion of shorebirds and warblers, many of them common there but strange to us. I love the title. It promises a glimpse into desires and personalities.

The book confirms Seth's identification. White pelicans migrate through Iowa every year, spring and fall, from the Gulf Coast to the Upper Great Plains and back in huge flocks. They spend thousands of miles on the wing, stopping only briefly to scoop small fish from lakes and rivers. With a nine-foot wingspan, the pelicans are easily picked out as they migrate. Seth reads to me, triumphant, "Despite its great size, it is a spectacular flier, with flocks often soaring very high in the air, ponderously wheeling and circling in unison."

I want to follow them to the ocean. I thought I was ready to stop moving. I'm trying to make my own home in Iowa, but after a year, if I'm honest, I'm restless, longing for mountains, for saltwater, missing places I've never seen. Before I was married and when I owned fewer books, I could pack all of my belongings into my Plymouth Neon in a couple of hours. This ability allowed me to think I could set out whenever I wanted. I'm addicted to the feeling of cresting a horizon, looking around the next bend. But I start to wonder if I'll always live with this tension, never committing one way or the other.

Seth turns to an inset about bird migration. I lean over the picnic table to read along. Flocking birds, it says, must learn their migration route from their elders. They travel by landmark, hopping from one to the next, or by smell, honing in on the familiar; some researchers believe shorebirds can hear the surf pounding from miles away.

For years, my migration felt forced--packing up boxes every two or three years to move to another church, another empty downtown, a house my family hadn't chosen, a new set of friends. I learned to beg boxes from the grocery store. I learned to joke when we turned up at a new parsonage and found my room had lime green shag carpeting or

pink paint with a blowsy rose border. My mother let me pick out new curtains to match, trying to give me some control over my surroundings. The cheap fabric crackled under our fingers as we slid valances and swags over curtain rods. I wanted to go home, to the woods, to a place I felt to be ours.

Instead, I learned to make every new home temporary. I taped a map of Pulaski County to the new walls--cement block, wood paneling, cream yellow paint--until I graduated from high school. The map showed township and range, each box a different color within the perfect rectangle. I penciled in a small box where our woods would be. I needed to locate myself in space, to feel a thread, however frail, extended from where I was to where I thought I wanted to be. I haven't spent more than four years at one address since we moved away from the County--I really am from nowhere--but I've practiced homesickness as much as I've fed my addiction to travel.

A Pew survey on American mobility calls this idea of being threaded to one place no matter where a person lives having a "heart home." In the survey, people are either "stayers" or "movers." I fall into a category of "extreme" movers. Extreme movers have lived in at least four different states. In twenty-seven years, I have lived in seven states. Within those seven states, I have had fifteen addresses. Most extreme movers graduated from college. Most extreme movers move to jobs. Most extreme movers move away from family. By the time I reached the end of high school, the urge to move on became natural, a comfort even, understanding when I was miserable that eventually I'd leave, that this wasn't the place I really belonged. Problem solved.

Surveyors asked movers this question: “When you think about the place you identify with the most—that is, the place in your heart you consider to be home—is it the place you live now, or is it some other place?” My answer: Some other place. More than sixty percent of movers say they have a “heart home” besides or in addition to the community where they live now.

Surveyors don’t ask this question: If Pulaski County is my heart home, why not move back? I become a tourist of my claimed home. I learn the Tippecanoe is one of the most biologically intact rivers in the United States, that there are dime-sized jellyfish wobbling through Indiana’s lakes, that elk once lived in Indiana too.

I miss walking the railroad tracks and the spring flowers. Sometimes I miss the green rattle of corn in summer. I miss mushroom hunting. I still love the soil. But I can’t stand the claustrophobic small towns, dying one by one, or the job I would have to take to live there. And although I have distant cousins in Pulaski County, no other family remains.

My grandparents winged back and forth on a north-south pattern chasing warmth. Snowbirds, they call retirees who start the migration. In summer they traveled north to a cabin on Boy Lake in Minnesota. In the fall they started south, stopping by nieces and nephews, cousins. They stayed at the house in Indiana for a few weeks, maybe through Thanksgiving, then started on to Florida. In spring they reversed the pattern.

Relatives learned to expect them at certain times of the year--to have a deck of cards and some clean sheets on hand for when the call came: “We’re a few hours away. Have a bed for us?”

After my grandfather died, my grandmother sold her house along the Tippecanoe and bought a furnished double-wide trailer in a Florida senior citizens' community. Rather than packing her furniture and knick-knacks, her lifetime of goods, she held an auction. At the time I was somewhere in Wyoming or Idaho, on my big adventure.

Autumn in Indiana flies; corn husks and wisps of cloud raked across the sky. On the lawn, neighbors and strangers worked their way through folding tables piled with her things, weighted against the wind. The antique clock with a blond Alice on a swing, kicking back and forth in a blue dress and pinafore to the chiming hour. The one-legged, ratty-haired porcelain baby doll that had stared at me, glassy-eyed, from the top shelf of the china cabinet. The souvenir bells, nearly a hundred, brought home from every trip. My family grouped them into boxes by color or type--cranberry glass, Wedgwood blue, floral. Two big unbreakable cowbells from her childhood laid out alone.

The auctioneer stood on a box and fast stuttered through the lots, saving the big ticket items--the antique furniture, kitchen appliances--for last. The neighbors came to buy and measure her life against theirs. My grandmother's friends, big women with cottonball hair, tottered on arthritic hips. They walked with their husbands on their arms, bent forward, skin like dried apples. Former students from the high school showed up--the tough boys my grandmother took under her wing, no match for her blunt words and steel gaze. And cousins and grand-nieces and nephews. They chipped in to send her off. In an afternoon the accumulation of seventy years disappeared. Most of it sold, the rest junked.

I want this freedom. I want to shed my belongings. Pack novels and poetry collections off to the library book sale. Put a “free” sign on my furniture and abandon it on the side of the street. Take clothes and knickknacks to Goodwill.

In Iowa, landlocked again, I find myself planning for the break, the next place, attracted to the exotic, the far off. Recently, it’s Newfoundland, two years in the future. The name would be a constant reminder of the known world’s edge and people sailing beyond it. Maybe here I could finally settle.

Maps show St. John’s on the easternmost tip of Canada, forty-nine full hours of driving from here to there. I trace the route: between the Great Lakes, along the St. Lawrence to Montreal, skirting the northern border of Maine, crossing from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland on the Port aux Basques ferry. On the internet I look at picture after picture of icebergs, wooden two-story houses painted pastel and stacked up the hills around the port, ships in harbor. I investigate visa requirements and check the weather. A travel agent I meet by chance tells me St. John’s feels British and asks if I like strong black tea. I imagine walking treeless headlands, grass-green and sloping toward the sea. I imagine cold and salt and a slap of water.

In Iowa I begin to see pelicans everywhere, winging over lakes, plashing in the Mississippi, close enough to see their orange triangle feet and long beaks. I see one in town, again at dusk, this time solo, tracing the city street I follow with my car. We move in opposite directions. I crane my neck, disbelieving, trying to keep an eye on both the road and the pelican’s easy soar until it crosses out of sight behind me.

## The Men in My Family

Paul, Jeff, and Scott Beall, 1979: My father and his two brothers sit on the bench seat of my father's old Ford pickup, in the late seventies, when a case of beer on a dirt road was still a good time on a Saturday night. My father wears a down vest and a wool shirt as he rests his arm over the steering wheel, cigarette cocked between his fingers. The driver's side window is open, and they lean toward it to stare down the camera: unsmiling, dark-haired, still slim and muscled with youth and long hours at shit jobs. In this photograph, they look like the kind of men to avoid outside a lonely bar in the pooling streetlight. Later that night, on the way home across the dark fields, they will see a rising glow, flickering orange against the frosted skyline. They will spatter gravel against the truck as they race down the right-angled roads to stand under the shelter of my uncle's pines in the warmth of the fire and watch his home snap and burn.

Scott Beall, 2007: My Uncle Scott moved to Alaska to cruise timber for the Forest Service. He runs marathons and has learned to appreciate wine and eat seaweed and wild salmon. We see him about every five years when someone dies. He shows up in a suit, muscled, hair still dark, the only brother with my grandmother's pale blue eyes and tendency to talk too much.

In the parking lot after my brother's funeral, Scott pops the trunk on his rental car and hands me my brother's headphones: a gift from my father years before when my brother still came home at holidays. My brother's apartment burned and these fatly

insulated black cups came from the radio station, passed off to my uncle by some co-worker in the confusion of the service. It's an odd, accidental gesture coming from this uncle, the baby, the one the farthest away. It's a gift but somehow wrong that he should be choosing who receives it.

Eight months later, for my wedding, he sends me my great-grandmother's silverware passed to him by her in the absence of a daughter or granddaughter. It comes in a chipped veneered case, gleaming heavy-handled against blue felt. Inside the case, on the felt, he had written "Eudora Moorman Grandstaff, Dorothy Grandstaff Beall, Scott Beall," leaving space for me to add my name in permanent marker. He also sends me her bible in which she and he recorded deaths. I add my brother and find the eulogy Scott had written for my grandfather in the back with notes about big fish and liberating the Bataan Peninsula. I've become the keeper of these artifacts, proprietor of the family record.

Everett "Charlie" Beall and Paul Beall, 1969: Father and son across the kitchen table: the son thumbing something, guitar pick, magazine, a pack of cigarettes; or perhaps eating in a calculated rhythm, fork to plate to mouth, without pause as the blocky radio spews birthdays and draft lottery numbers in a slow stream. Nineteen years old and waiting. The father curling and uncurling his hand from a Budweiser. They both hunch, made uncomfortable by each other, by the radio. The son doesn't look at his father wiping the sweat from his beer with his heavy hand. He's seen the swords from Japan, the silk, the parasol brought home for his mother, a few grinning snapshots of his father and his buddies outside Nagasaki after the end. He looks at the kitchen: oak table with a heavy

grain, black and white linoleum tiles on the floor, checked drapes hiding the snow-covered arms of the sycamore outside the window.

He's just failed every class but Religion in his first semester at a Catholic university. He's in the middle of listening to the man on the radio chant through the first week of February and come to his date: February sixth: number 347. This is before the Pepsi bottling plant, driving a taxi, moving furniture, selling film in a camera shop. This is before he plays dives in a band, is kicked out of the house, smokes pot, marries the girl already thick with his son. Long before my mother and God lead him back to church. Nineteen, very lean, his nose prominent and hooked, hair just beginning to curl around the ears. 347: it's a high number, a good number, but still, unbelievably, his father leans forward and says: *If you are called up, go to Canada, run. I want you to. You don't need to do this.*

Paul, Jeff, and Charlie Beall, 1963: Paul and Jeff play in the back yard in the bluster of the wind with a BB gun. They've shot down a pile of their father's beer cans, aimed and squeezed at a couple of sparrows. Paul tells his little brother to run out across the lawn: Cowboys and Indians, Allies and Axis, Shoot the Commies. He works the lever and raises the gun. His father has been watching through the kitchen window, sees the shot plink against Jeff's windbreaker, and launches through the back door, screaming, "Get over here! Get over here, God damn it!" The boys cringe and come, Paul holding the gun up as awkwardly as some broken limb. Seconds after the gun is in their father's hands it's

splintered against the doorframe, beat to pieces against the house to the drill of *Do Not Aim At A Human Being Ever: Do Not Even Aim*.

Paul Beall and Sean Paul Beall, 1989: At six years old I don't remember what the argument was about. My brother was seventeen; it could have been anything: music cranked too loud, no job, lawn un-mowed. I only remember the bedroom door slamming back against the wall and the shiny black doorknob shooting into the plasterboard, leaving a perfect, round hole. My father put in the floors and walls of our house himself, but he never patched the hole he put in the eggshell blue wall of my brother's room.

Paul and Jeff Beall, 1971: Empty beer cans and cigarettes sit in a nearly empty apartment with sea green walls. My father and his brother play with eyes closed in bare summer light while heat wavers through open windows. A wasp thumps and drums against the screen, a rhythm for the music reeling around the room. My father learned to play his great-grandfather's violin from the nuns at St. Joseph's Catholic School—the same nuns who rapped his knuckles with a ruler taught him to draw the bow, curl his fingers around the neck, vibrato, double stops. Now, after lifting furniture all day, he slashes the bow up and down, elbow working wildly, improvising to Canned Heat. Jeff fingers out the chords next to him. A month ago he slammed out of his father's house: the final argument about no job, no prospects, music cranked too loud, Angie, the long-haired, no-good girlfriend—take your pick.

Diane Hughes Beall and Paul Beall: When my parents are fighting, my mother calls my father “Charlie.” “Yeah, right, *Charlie*,” and this is her ultimate insult. Calls him the man who slams his hand down on the dining room table expectant with Thanksgiving dinner: oyster dressing, turkey, a golden ham, mashed potatoes, and green bean casserole. We sit there watching the food get cold because of that fist on the table and my uncle an hour late and a *God Damn Son of a Bitch*. She says you’re the rigid insistence on pork chops hot on the table at five o’clock on Tuesday. The asshole who cheated on your mother with a widowed store clerk from The Golden Rule. The man we all try to placate, who causes us to wheedle, guess, tip-toe. After my grandfather dies, she does this less often, perhaps because she feels she’s speaking ill of the dead, perhaps because it reminds my father too strongly of his loss.

Scott, Paul, Charlie, and Rebekah Beall, 1991: We slide down the mud bank through the fleshy stems of jewelweed with fishing poles and tackle. My grandfather has guaranteed we will catch something; earlier, he opened his trunk to reveal his secret weapon, his just-in-case: stinkbait, a bucket of rotting meat, ripened in his shed and flavored with anything he could think of. In the photograph on my wall, everyone is smiling and the Wabash River’s wide, brown surface churns, lit with sunlight.

This is a good day with my father and grandfather helping me sling my lure far into the river in between paying attention to their own casts. Although my father would never admit it, neither of us have the patience to be a good fisherman, and we spend

much of the afternoon wading downriver from my grandfather and uncle, watching crawdads scuttle backwards under rocks.

At the end of the day, my uncle sets up his camera, and we line the bank, backs to the river and the dark green riff of the opposite shore. My grandfather cocks his fishing pole off to the side, hand on the reel, my uncle's arm around his shoulder. I'm small between my grandfather and father with huge black sunglasses taking up most of my face and an old blue and white striped engineer's cap covering my long blonde hair. My father stands at the end of the row, a little separate, one hand holding his fishing rod and the other in his pocket, smiling through his beard.

Paul, Jeff, and Charlie Beall: Christmas 2004, May 1962: After all the gifts have been given, Jeff steps out to the porch for a smoke. When he comes back, he holds a staff. It has a natural crook at the top, has been carefully sanded, smoothed and oiled by my grandfather to a buttery gleam. Jeff hands it to my father, one last present. My grandfather used the stick for mushroom hunting when the soil first warmed in spring, and Jeff, who still mows Bea's lawn, found it high in the rafters of the shed.

For a moment, I can see them, the father and the oldest sons stepping slowly through woods snowed with spring beauties and blood root, the father turning old leaves with the stick, searching for the pale, pocked bodies of morels, two little boys trailing quiet behind, the baby at home with his mother.

Beatrice Walker Beall, Paul and Diane Beall, 2001: They sit in Bea's pristine living room, shoes resting on snowy carpet, minding their elbows around her slim glass vases. After death, there are things. Through objects, lives open to speculation in a way they couldn't before. My step-grandmother reaches a box down from the back of my grandfather's closet, carries it to the living room, and spreads the contents across the table where she does jigsaw puzzles. My parents sort through piles of old photographs from the war and fishing trips, medals, a couple of my great-grandmother's thin, lacy handkerchiefs embroidered with violets. And things they don't recognize: an old cork, matches from the Fireside Lounge, a bracelet with the links gleaming against the sun, a bag of shark's teeth.

Bea is not the kind of woman to treasure keepsakes, to hold onto things for which she has no use. Her body has always been thin enough to look crackable, especially in the months leading up to my grandfather's death, unable to abide even the extravagance of a comfortable layer of fat. In the days after my grandfather's funeral, she cleans out the closets, pulls his things from the garage: shot guns, fishing poles and tackle, gardening tools: one pile to the garbage, one to Good Will. She gives his truck to my uncle. She bags up his clothes. The disappearance is sudden, everything gone in a week, maybe two. My father comes home loaded, arms full of his father's things.

After my brother's death, there will be almost nothing: only the things from his office: the headphones, a box of Christmas presents mailed to him by my parents and still unopened, a couple of CDs from my brother's band, passed on by a friend.

Sean Beall and Rebekah Beall, 1988: My sixteen-year-old brother dances wildly across the pine-planked floor in bare feet, cradling an imaginary guitar and screaming out along with John Lennon—*Go, Johnny, Go, Go, Go*—to the big, silver stereo thumping on a shelf above the dinner table. His fingers curl around chords, riding up and down in the air. Our parents are out; he is babysitting, and I bounce up and down on the futon to the music. Our tiny house steams with motion. The slim-legged, black wood stove sits wide open and roaring in the middle of the house. Outside, in the woods, snow falls thickly, feathering down over the old oaks; half a mile away, the neighbor's barn light sparks through the flakes.

My brother shouts—*Someday you will be a man, and you will be the leader of a big old band*—jumps onto the futon, then off, curling his legs under him high in the air before coming back down.

In memory, he's the opposite of his photographs. In pictures, he always appears with the same half-cock of the lips—almost a smirk, no teeth, no exuberance—dark-rimmed glasses, brown eyes, careful part to his dark hair. As he gets older, he will come home at holidays restrained under long hours at work and my father's questions about how long he can stay, girlfriends, money, church.

Sean Beall, 1999: When he is twenty-seven, my brother won't tell us he bought a smooth-bodied, cream and black Fender Stratocaster and started teaching himself to play. He won't tell us when his band performs in bars around Lafayette. He won't tell us about the CD he produced late at night on the radio station's equipment after working on

commercials for car dealerships and hair salons. But later, we will see my brother on the cover, snarling in dark sunglasses, black suit and tie, standing in the middle of a gravel road with an old acoustic guitar shattered in the dirt.

Paul Beall and Sean Beall, 1996: The auditorium is huge and packed full of suited, skirted spectators. My father kneels on the stage; the bishop lays hands on his head, pours oil over his hair, lays a stole over his shoulders. My father comes back down the aisle an ordained elder, grinning, the doves on his stole rising like white flames toward his face. Two weeks earlier, we sat for hours through my brother's graduation from Indiana University, listening for his name in the roll of thousands.

Norma Sales Beall (later Richards, later Dailey, later Clark) and Paul Beall: February 1951, November 2006: My grandmother thinks about drowning her first-born son in the bathtub. Her hand on his sleek little belly and her husband at work at the post office. Garfield Avenue is slushed with old snow, and inside the house, she and this child—tiny, screaming, demanding—don't know what to do with each other. She has run the water carefully, testing it with her wrist, then floats the one-year-old on his back. He frowns up at her when she puts her hand over his face, thrashes when she pushes him under the water. They still won't know what to do with each other over fifty years later when she's ripe with wine at Thanksgiving, and this story spills over just before she starts dancing the Jitterbug, ginger-haired and shuffling in time with her fourth husband, Bob.

2007: My father holds a baby in his arms and ladles water from the baptismal font over its head with a clamshell. The baby curls and uncurls its hands, blinks and screams during the recital of the liturgy. My father has come to rest in a small country church circled by rich, flat earth and Amish farms. My brother's apartment burned. My father stands up at the front of the funeral home, a standing-room-only event: people squeezing out of the two large rooms and down the hall toward the front door: eulogy, sermon expressing his only hope of bridging estrangement, and then improvisation: my uncle's voice raised, cracked and raw in song: *And in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make.*

At home later, my father and his brothers, a case of beer, bottles of wine. We all drink fast, ignore food, until the room is weaving and stumbling, jerking with hands beating aimlessly to music whining from the CD player, my grandmother jitterbugging back and forth across the room. Scott, stiff and thickly muscled in his pin-striped suit, talking too loudly, too quickly. Paul and Jeff, arms around each other's shoulders, pot-bellied and mustached, cigarettes cocked between their fingers, stumbling into the frost-sparked night.