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# Scoria: Poetry and Prose

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**Scoria: Poetry and prose**

by

**Taylor Clinton Brorby**

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

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The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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*For Logan, Noah, Alexander, and Oliver*

*The pen is mightier than the pump jack.*

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PART ONE  
CRUDE: POEMS





## MANIFESTO

Thrum in the cracks of soggy river logs  
nestled next to the fungus and bacteria  
about to bloom into mighty mushrooms.  
Squeeze of sage between fingers, its oil  
a musk of wildness. Calling out to the  
cottonwoods and herons and beavers  
I slip into the icy Knife River in spring  
then lie down on brambly prairie dirt  
cotton white clouds sailing across the sky.

## THE AGES HAVE BEEN AT WORK

Those silent sentinels  
grass and butte, stream and rock  
chambers of the global heart  
worked by the ages  
grow in might  
on the hissing prairies.  
On the hard bedrock  
I wait for a revelation of meadowlark,  
bison, cougar, and coyote.

Trickster, what is it you know?  
What ripples across  
the waves of a deep lake of being?  
Tell me the secrets  
of those matters of blood  
too deep for words.

As I scrape the edges of canyon walls—  
mica, granite, and sandstone—I hear  
the crumbling high-speed life.

I climb buttes and bluffs  
searching for holy ground  
the night sky on fire.

The small break of dirt  
as grass climbs higher, what heights  
does the prairie measure as thunderheads  
billow like a shook blanket against the wind.

## LITTLE MISSOURI

To wake up to the purple pink sunrise siltstone slides  
into seams, a needle weaving through fabric.

Kingfishers duck and dive, seek silver fish, glittering  
coins in your crevices.

Slide over rocks that cause your skin to ripple and roil,  
deer flick delicate tongues, steal your blood to fuel  
their bodies.

Bison lumber and heave their burly bodies, your space  
transgressed by every winged and wooly thing.

As the sun sizzles its dying rays upon your breast, what  
sends fright through your veins as saltwater spills from  
pump jacks?

## EARTHEN VESSELS

In the stubble behind my house  
fish too small for words from the  
muddy creek. The brown green  
hills spread like Moses parting the  
sea. I became a pirate then an  
artist then a sailor. The infinite  
rests in finitude. Mice snatched  
by hawks in the golden field  
coyotes trotted for a meager  
meal. I knew danger lurked  
in this still place amidst  
the serenity of wild things.

## PALLID STURGEON

The armored tank of the prairie, a letter from the dinosaurs. Sliding in silt, you sift to the riverbed, hunker down, slurp roots and minnows through your vacuum mouth. Five rows of plates plank your body, a 70-million-year seal of safety—until now, oil swirling in the eddies of rivers, gateway to extinction.

Your black eyes gazing into tomorrow, you warm with the whiteness of old age, a century of certainty behind you—swim through the maelstrom, to the end of compassion, your certain demise.

## THE HUNT

Five pump jacks circle the state park,  
a ring of fire flashing in the distance  
as I hike. To hunt bison, the Arikara  
burned dry prairie grass, fireworks  
erupted over hills, spread  
like rippled waves across the sea  
of grass. Fire drove bison over  
cliffs, into corners, circled them.  
Bison died on impact, skulls cracked,  
crimson blood poured over brown fur,  
their black tongues dried from the heat.  
I walk in this circle of flares and my  
nostrils burn, eyes water as fire closes in.

## JUNEBERRIES

My small hands, next to grandmother's liver-spotted hands, roll ripe balls between little fingers like squinting to look into a crystal ball. For every two berries dropped in the bucket one finds its way to my wine-colored tongue. My teeth clamp down, a flood of nectar—sweet with heat of long days.

My Bridgeman's ice cream pail stained with the blood of juneberries. A family of pickers finds glinting berries heavy with the summer sweat of rain.

This place, hidden among brambles in the Missouri River Valley—silver hair flashes through the green foliage like a lighthouse onshore.

## SWEETNESS

Sage like sweet cigar smoke  
fills my lungs with prairie.  
This is why we walk: to push aside  
clay and clover, to dust our pant  
legs with green gray pollen, sage oil  
oozing into pores. To crush it  
between thumb and finger press it  
into journals fill pages with the  
wide open space of prairie—  
windswept, omnipresent as salt in  
the ocean. I want to hoard it like  
emeralds, keep its secret hidden  
deep within this land, worrying that  
its whispering will draw others  
here, that ancient call that brings  
the traveler home, back to the  
sweet smell of sage which is to say  
back to ourselves.



## SQUARE BUTTE CREEK

Girdles chocolate colored mud  
as it flows towards the Mighty Mo  
where Lewis and Clark dug hickory  
oars into the current, wondered  
what the current carried, beyond  
the crook of the river.

Here water springs from the coarse  
soil of Oliver County, from rich cropland  
laden with wheat, oats, barley,  
and beets, those crimson  
colored vessels of the land.

Where sight vanishes and memory  
begins, slips below the surface,  
pike float, suspended by hunger,  
ready to hurl towards meat, towards  
desire, craving the fuel of flesh.

Serenaded by switchgrass, I slip  
into the symphony of sound.

## COTEAU

Glacier of my childhood,  
 I loved you though I didn't know.  
 The potholes—pools of calved ice—  
 mirrors across the prairie, rippling  
 hills, mounds of bread  
 crumbs the ice dolloped on the  
 trail towards home, rocks  
 and pebbles, letters left from the great  
 white north, no return necessary.

My playground, the glacier's footprint  
 slicing Dakota in half like an apple—  
 not quick, not like ripping  
 a band aid. More like the slow  
 letter press, imprinting  
 symbols on paper, inking  
 the shifting page of the world.

Before I was born, before  
 the Revolution, the Magna  
 Carta; before Christ, Socrates, or  
 Cleopatra, the glacier left traces  
 in sand; before Mosaic Law  
 and pyramids. Before we knew ice  
 carved and pressed canyons into  
 homes of wonder, shaped rivers  
 into arteries of continent,  
 layering chocolate soil.

My love gurgles like a stream,  
 snaps like strong wheat, slinks  
 like sand, for glaciers as they  
 slip behind the curtain, exit  
 the stage, forever.

## OIL

—after John Donne

You ooze and flow over every rock  
and crevice, looking for an outlet  
into the free market of my soul  
whose price you have taken captive  
whose beauty you hold ransom.  
Why can't we leave you under rock  
where pressure and force can hold  
you at bay? Toxic, your force is too  
much—you slather your hands and  
dap your knuckles as you count with  
fisted fury the almighty dollar singing  
God Bless America. But I will not  
call you blessed. Destroyer of land,  
you shall not enter here, the sweet  
space of my longing. Stay in place.  
Four hundred million years of work  
shaped and formed you and another  
four hundred million years will  
bring you to mighty ruin.

## LITTLE MISSOURI STATE PARK

North on Highway 22  
driving out of Dickinson  
dipping into a land  
of Indian wars, past  
Killdeer Mountain,  
where General Sully,  
sent by Lincoln,  
slit throats as arrows  
fell on dry ground.  
Further north, new statues  
of liberty flare gas  
and burn through  
the night, past ridges  
run with oil rigs.  
I slip into a sanctuary  
of chirping grasshoppers,  
silver sage, stippled clay  
decide to hike the new normal,  
a pump jack in the distance.

## PRETTY BUTTE

I don't want to climb you.  
 You look like a bitch—  
 steep and intimidating,  
 like a woman who paints

her lips red just to titillate  
 the boys in the bar. You lured  
 me in with thorny charm.  
 So I climb, rip at your skin.

Like a lover, I pull at sage  
 and sweet clover, a beau  
 ripping your head back  
 in delight. I follow scoria

curves painted red  
 by electric fire smoldering  
 deep in your veins.  
 I wanted your name

to be a misnomer,  
 wrapped in swells  
 of sweet clover,  
 you looked regal

from a distance.  
 At the summit I study  
 your curves up close,  
 sit in your cool shade.

Smitten by your firmness,  
 I forget why I came.

## WHITE EARTH VALLEY

In the crook of my mind you sit sideways like a saddle hitched to a horse. You shake the hills to the horizon like a piece of foil glinting in the sun. Ash, elms, and birch dance as their roots sink deep into your skin, hug against the soft beat of the river flowing through your valley. When they came with their steel and grit and flame, did you quiver like a flower in the wind, did you open your arms, fling open the gate, display yourself against a commotion of sound and say, Take me as I am? No, not you, you gentle valley. The sun continued to shine as they came, as they ripped and dug and dipped into your pores, taking what they could—like hungry children stealing cookies from a cracked jar. As I float down the river I long to know what you know. Tell me, what was it like to have glaciers push against you, moving rock against sand against ice against time. Does your surface crack like dry skin, break when pulled too taut—or does the rain that ripples down your sides, running rivulets of wonder bring you rest. Sage of the ages, where does your strength come from?

## HANDEL'S HORIZON

I sit on a butte, peer down  
 a rabbit hole look west, like Lewis  
 and Clark, search for the rumored  
 passageway. Clouds furl like smoke  
 from a put-out fire. The flicker of  
 flame dying against the night.  
 Cobalt cajoles among purples,  
 lavenders, turquoise. The sun  
 streaks and breaks the clouds.  
 Billows pulse and swell.

Handel, slamming  
 open his shutters shouted,  
*What are the billows?*

A stumbling man, blear-eyed  
 looked up at the potbellied  
 German, *The waves!*

Handel muttered over his candle-lit  
 score, closed his raven-clawed eyes  
*The waves!*

Waves meet me on the horizon,  
 whisper like the sun-scorched  
 scoria, saying, All manner of thing  
 shall be well.

## HILLS

Behind the wheat fields over hills  
my frail bones bore the weight of  
tackle, rod, and reel, paint, canvas,  
and palette. I fingered through  
reeds, past lonesome cottonwood  
trees, guarded against the burning  
noonday sun. In a channel stream  
kept secret from friends and family,  
I sat, slept in wonder, and captured  
the color of nature. Along muddied  
banks I threw lures hurled like rocks  
to hook the furious pike.



## FLIGHT

pull your jackknife, release the reel like  
a trout into the stream, take hold of  
the cord like a chicken about to flop  
in headless flight, cut the twine that is  
bound to your heart, release dreams  
too small for this world, and know  
tomorrow is another wild-full day.

## PRAIRIE

silent as a whisper  
where wind fingers through  
wheat and ripples over rough  
bark of cottonwoods. Do not drill,  
rip, scrape where water ebbs along  
muddy riverbanks where  
prairie wheat tosses the sun  
like a copper coin. The buttes  
awash in pink, orange, purple, blue,  
cranberry. Prairie, like my grandmother's  
wedding band handed down through  
bloodlines of land, water, sky, air—  
our very arteries pillaged,  
lungs, skin, and sweat grown toxic  
drilled, ripped, scraped,  
brought to ruin.

## BIGHORN

Custer's fractured skull leaches  
cranberry blood, colors his golden  
locks red against the brown-stippled  
prairie. Buffalo Calf Road Woman  
pants, lungs heave. She drops her  
club, streaked crimson and walks  
towards the general. Custer wheezes.  
Glazed eyes against a creek of  
blood, life seeps down the coulee.  
She clasps Custer's face and turns it  
against the sun—lets out her victory  
cry, the beginning of silence,  
beginning of pain.

## CLIMBING BUTTES

Press my feet into bentonite  
scrape my sandals against scoria  
as I pull sage from the side  
of the tombstones of the Rockies.  
I carry bourbon in my backpack  
fill a flask with muddied river water  
add a single droplet to my drink  
a bourbon and branch my trophy  
when I ascend prairie mountains.  
I drive dusty rock roads sweep  
through carpeted clover dive  
into the bad lands of my  
childhood imagination. Rusted  
weather vanes swing in the breeze  
mark the grave of a never known  
farmstead. I dance the sage brush  
step at the top of the butte and notice  
pump jacks flare in the distance.

## EULOGY

—for the Badlands

You were beautiful  
a rough land of rock  
awash in fuchsia, cobalt,  
sienna. Your spinal cord  
of scoria granite and quartz  
sturdy glistened in the noonday  
sun. Arteries of streams  
muddied and brown  
pumped through your core,  
life in a quiet way. But the world  
destroys beautiful things.

What is it like to look over  
the horizon and see  
nothing but ruin? Your  
permanence lost in the veil  
of progress, a veneer of fortune.  
On your deathbed you whispered  
to me as flares flickered in your  
eyes of delight. Tears muddied  
my face and you said, Risk hope.



## PUMP JACK

You plant your feet firm into soil  
cock your head back in wild delight  
as you plunge and pull crude  
from deep within earth's sacred core.

You look right then left, peck hard  
like a chicken against scratch  
hoping no eyes take out their  
telescopes glint in an excited passion.

You work at a fevered pace like a man  
against the assembly line, hurry and bury  
and pull and pluck and ram into a place  
of subtle refuge.

Your heart beats like mosquitos' wings  
furious for the last remaining  
drop of blood.

## CHRISTMAS

—Bakken oil fields

*When are you coming home, Daddy?*

He told her each week each week he  
told her *Next week, Darling, next week*  
*Daddy is coming home*. He said he lied  
lied to his daughter each week. Swirled  
his bourbon as his eyes searched the  
alabaster floor. *She's going to have the best*  
*Christmas this year*. He said she was  
getting twenty-five hundred dollars for  
Christmas. *That'll make it all worth it*  
*all worth it all worth it*.



## QUESTION FOR A BUTTE

When my ear tings  
with the whisper of water  
coursing through my body—  
through your body—  
my heart thrums  
with the shock  
of death, the storied  
decay of your body  
the flow of water  
over stone, cactus  
clinging to rock.  
What is it like  
to be slashed, to have  
your throat slit, to bleed  
rock from your veins of coal?

## CUSTER

Banished to Dakota  
after going AWOL  
after drinking draughts  
of pillaged villages,  
after slitting Indian throats.  
His blonde curls, bleached  
by prairie sun, fumed  
his desire to destroy  
the established way  
of life, the first people  
living here, to settle  
the frontier for cities  
and stagecoaches.  
He kept a bobcat  
in the cellar, captive  
wildness to match  
his own desire  
for glory, for conquest—  
so maniacal, so blinded  
that the Arikara  
led him straight  
into the Battle  
of Greasy Grass.

## FORT BERTHOLD

In the land of burning ground there is no rest,  
only sweat, work, and pain. And courage  
is sold for a quick profit from horizon to horizon.  
No more green leaves. Pronghorn die faraway  
and ruin, the spirit of everything.

THE PLAINS KNOWS BARRACKS  
—Fort Buford, 1866

Built of stone and water,  
stiff and strong, secured  
and fastened to vital prairie  
soil at the confluence.  
Slashed open the frontier,  
slit Indian throats, spread  
trade and trappers like a virus  
up the Missouri through  
the stomach of the country.

## COTTONWOOD

Waxy leaves twitch in Missouri River air.  
This tree, whose seed, shipped by muddy river  
water, knew Lewis and Clark, the scent of sweet  
Hidatsa tobacco, the clap of General Sully's  
pistol as it shot metal into brown-skinned  
bodies. Too, this tree watched the grizzly flee  
west, the wolf leave the brown carpet prairie,  
and the bobcat clamber in the night. Ring by  
ring, this tree inches towards the rippling sky,  
sinks roots into the sandy sludge bed of the Big  
Muddy. General Custer knew this tree.  
Lincoln's four score whispered on the wind,  
washed its bark as the frontier split open.

## HIS VOICE TRAILED OFF LIKE SMOKE

That man covered  
in oil his safety shirt  
gold like the noontday  
sun had acid holes around  
his belly his stomach hair  
peeking through like tulips  
in spring. Looked down  
when he said  
he hadn't had a day  
off in five months  
hadn't seen his nine  
year-old daughter in as long  
hadn't told her the truth  
each week when he talked to  
her on the phone.

## WORKOUT IN DICKINSON

In the gym men puff up like peacocks  
flex and pose their bodies in mirrors  
expect to be labeled Hercules, Leonidas,  
or Thor. Filled with overtime and cheap  
beer, come here for a release, to find out  
who's alpha and not omega. *I showed her my  
pump jack last night* one of them told his  
tattooed buddy. *Pumped her full of my oil*  
he said as he picked up his rusted barbell.

## BEAR DEN BAY

Shit happens they say happens  
every day in the land of fire  
in the land of no rest where men  
and women drive to the bone  
in blear-eyed delight for cash.

Shit spills they say spills often in  
the ditches where the knobs are  
turned like water flowing to the  
hose pouring saltwater into  
wetlands.

The pipe yelped a fissure of cracks  
salted the earth.

The brine coursed its way down  
the ravine like an eel flopping  
towards the shore.

The leak spilled into the lake  
then sucked through a pipe  
separated like arteries flowing  
into a glass a child raised  
towards her mouth.

The sage wilted and shriveled  
dried and died on its way back  
to the land.



## SAGE GROUSE

Warble and whoop  
hurl your head in a  
display of heat. I sit  
behind a lonely sage  
bush masked in wildness  
soaked deep into clay.  
As you throw your chest  
skyward through mud  
brown wings, I gaze  
towards the lek, the circle  
of your strut. Your egg yolk  
breasts out of sight, like a child  
playing Hide and Seek and I  
eye your feathered feet with envy.  
I crouch lower, my torso caked  
in dust and release a silent  
prayer for one more spring.

## DIVIDE COUNTY

hugs Canada to the north  
and lays against Montana's  
eastern breast. A landscape  
pressed by copper coins  
whose basins fill with the  
drip drip drip of cold  
alkaline water. That land  
where dirt and clay enclose  
family rips at my chest  
breath beating, a train at the  
tracks.

## SCOTT

They never said what killed him.  
Such things are not talked about  
in my family. Maybe it's that he  
was the baby ten siblings before  
him draining away the nourishment  
he needed like piglets sucking teats  
having their fill. Perhaps it started  
when he shot himself in the foot  
setting off a bang like a packet of  
firecrackers in the night leaving some  
wound that festered never healed.  
Or was it that his life was marred by  
work in oil that oozed into the air  
wafted to his nostrils like sweet tobacco  
furling and flitting with delight  
as it coursed its way into delicate lungs  
pink because he didn't smoke  
and ripe like an apple for the picking.

When they said it, I sat down.  
We don't have a history of it. And yet  
it showed up like some bastard child.

I saw him once before he died.  
Yelled at Mom for not telling me  
that it could be his last weekend.  
But it wasn't.

A tumor grew in him  
a golf ball one week  
baseball the next puffing  
and pumping into a basketball.  
The sports analogies  
kept coming. Did he miss  
the shot or did we?

In a cafe in Wenatchee  
I got the news. That  
four-lettered word fell like  
a vase breaking on the floor.

I smoked pot and floated  
the river hoped to wash  
away my uncle.

I didn't attend his funeral.  
His sons told me they  
needed me there. I declined—  
even at twenty-five  
I felt like a child like I needed  
to be cradled needed to be told  
that it was going to be all right.

## WHITE EARTH VALLEY II

Your jaw ripped open  
a dentist filling cheek  
walls with Novocain  
squirting the enamel  
of rock and sage  
and bluebells with bitter  
water. No. Your toes  
anesthetized shot  
with liquid flame  
and numbing saltwater  
the pain of ingrown  
toenail of rock and grass  
about to tear from delicate  
skin. No. Your pudenda  
touched felt-up by some  
intruder without consent,  
you lie naked in your stream  
bed tears coursing. No.

## MANDAREE

In a place few don't know,  
past prairie, over bentonite,  
across creeks, cancer clusters,

sacred land fumes with flares.  
You thought you got  
rid of them once

took their land  
relegated them to patches  
of brown earth squares

and called them sovereign.  
The boom bleeds their blood  
now. Flares carry carcinogens  
to pink lungs.

LETTER MUCH TOO LATE  
—for North Dakota

This won't work anymore. You've  
changed too much. I thought  
I was ready but you were worn  
and weary an impatient teacher.

The cranes no longer stop and slink  
through mirror water hunting and  
striking at delicate minnows. And when  
the pronghorn became rare like a fine  
jewel hidden and mysterious their  
presence no longer seen only  
remembered like a waft of perfume  
you straightened like a rod and reminded  
me that this was the way of progress.

I tried to change, see the positives turn  
the other cheek, then turn the other  
cheek too. But when the godwits left you  
said you didn't notice even though they  
were your favorites.

Are we better off? We the most invasive  
species marking our compass on a path  
that prides profit.

I pack my bags and place them in a chest  
of dreams praying like Julian that  
All shall be well all shall be well and all  
manner of thing shall be well.

But my monastic recitations rip at my  
chest leave me burning with a fever  
in a land of fire and a blazing babel of  
boys knowing that fuels feed comfort  
convenience and complacency.

When I asked about the sage grouse  
and the sanctity of throats thrumming  
in springtime joy you said that they were  
better off elsewhere. So I leave you like a  
hiker along the road winding and  
meandering along my way only to find  
that when I arrive here too is ruined land.

## AN ANSWER

Are you happy to return to  
civilization? she asked. Happy to  
get out of this hellhole happy to  
get away? It seemed simple.  
I knew what she wanted knew  
she wanted me to say Yes knew  
I should say Yes in a state filled  
with silence.

As I drove home past Dairy  
Barn past oil tankers black  
like a panther past brick  
and stone and wood the radio  
played sweet jazz.



## IN A LOUNGE IN WILLISTON

Desta sits sidesaddle  
on my lap swirls her  
drink like a mother  
gently stirring soup.  
Her shapely legs wrapped  
in black tights—a tear  
uncovers milk skin as she  
shifts her weight to fit my  
form. Her wine-laced  
voice tingles in my ear  
as she whispers  
*Take me away from here.*

## REVELATION

Pastor told me that flares  
haunt his dreams.

Grass, he said, grass had gone  
missing. Ocean of turf  
tossed in the wind.

He said he went blind like Saul, said  
he couldn't see anymore, flames  
broiled at the back of his neck, sweat  
streamed down his back.

He prayed for rain, thought it could  
kill the flame like two moist fingers  
pinching a candle wick.

But flames grew. Each day he drove  
his car the lake of fire grew and he  
said he could find no raft.

What would come of it, he asked,  
Where would we turn?

Smoldering, he opened the door  
to check on the coals in the grill  
and the door seemed to flicker.

## GOSPEL

In the beginning was the dust  
and the dust crumbled  
and built a foundation  
where the bone cracked  
and flesh broke  
and leaves fell  
where humus built  
and oceans foamed  
and dry land bloomed  
roses in midnight glow  
orbs on the prairie

In the middle time water  
and streams flowed,  
shined copper coins,  
glinting in the sun, cottonwoods  
steadied to mark the passage  
of water from source to mouth  
to belly to body to wash us  
in the living thing.

In the end time pump jacks  
rose on dry land  
black snakes slithered  
the horizon a bright orange flame  
sent ripples of fear when—  
bang—the last bird fell.

## DO YOU REMEMBER WHERE YOU LEFT ME

across the gullies of longing, towards  
Painted Canyon, where you told me wind  
whispers childhood secrets? We sat in sage,  
twirled the grey green plant between thumb and  
pointer finger, crushed it, like a mortar and  
pestle, only to have its scent wrap around our  
skin. And what happened to you as we peered  
into coal veins, that deep place where diamonds  
form, where sun glistens in the flecks of long-  
dead plants. Where was your heart at that  
moment we climbed over buttes and bluffs  
to see bison lumber towards the horizon,  
sharp-tailed grouse puff like a red hot balloon in  
their fit of lust. Your shoulders sank, as if snow  
slid along your ridges, when I told you that  
pronghorn no longer call this home, their  
palette of brown, white, and black never to  
return, you stayed silent like a flickering flame.

## KILLDEER MOUNTAIN

A tattered American flag flaps in afternoon sun, faded, as dry corn stalks crackle beyond the Killdeer Battlefield. Here, General Sully ambushed the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota. Children screamed, mothers fell like cut cottonwood trees. Cannons, sent by Lincoln, hurled lead into quiet tipis. Indians slipped past elms, over the tabletop butte, Killdeer Mountain, to Medicine Hole, oasis of bleeding people.



## JOY

Pick juneberries on ridges of earthen valleys pickle  
tomatoes into jars where the smell of sage stings  
nostrils, where oceans of clover shock senses like  
an electric current jolting a kite. Where the heart feels  
the reel of fishing line going downstream like a trout  
in a flurry. Good does outweigh bad, refashioning  
of tamaracks in golden splendor turn greed green  
with envy to dream in the bleak black darkness  
of a shifting planet. Plant cottonwoods along river  
bottoms, believing tomorrow—somewhere—roots will  
hold the world in place.

## COMFORT

Cirrus clouds streak cobalt sky  
as the sun heats my back, dirt  
dusts my shoes, coats my throat  
as I drink cool water in rough land.  
To hell with convenience, I want  
to struggle—to trample through  
blonde stubbled fields, the yip  
of a prairie dog to my march  
up sage-colored switchbacks.  
I want my calves to burn,  
my muscles to ache  
as I navigate prickly pear  
and sawgrass. Too many  
gadgets in the world—  
too much New and Improved.  
I want rock, layered by fire,  
cut by ice, rippled with water,  
to cut my feet, to root me,  
to return me to my animal self.



## NIGHT AND DAY

I go to bed when birds rise, singing  
their sweet and sonorous strains  
across the dew wet grass. I go to  
bed when the grey blue morning  
light filters through my pane like  
the slow drip of the morning brew  
not yet made. In the midnight of  
my fits and flashes I comb the  
beach of my mind like a sojourner  
looking for a message in a bottle.

Other days I rise when the world  
has not yet rubbed its eyes  
cleaning sleep from its baby blues  
or shook its head to rattle  
the imagination of the day. I turn  
on a light, a watch-lamp  
in the neighborhood, a lighthouse  
keeping an eye on sailors. Over the  
din of the brewing coffee, I carve  
words like a sculptor with chisels  
break away rock reveal the jewel.

## LITTLE MISSOURI

Near the Elkhorn Ranch  
that cradle of conservation  
I stumble past cottonwoods,  
grasshoppers, a sea of sage  
swept across shallow  
river bottom. A lonely place,  
for sure, perfect to mend  
wounds from a wife lost  
in labor, a dead mother.  
The noonday sun stings  
my back. One eye ahead,  
watching for slinking fur,  
one eye scanning the ground  
for the shake and slide  
of scales. Buttes stippled  
with switchgrass slide by.  
I proceed this way, one  
careful step at a time.

## SCORIA

In the cracks of your pinkness,  
hid from the waiting world  
rain and wind beat their way  
into your trammeled pathways—  
lightning lit the prairie  
an electric grid of fire and smoke.

You were meant to be burnt—  
to glow through the years,  
change and morph, to shed  
your skin like a chrysalis  
revealing inner beauty.

## THEODORE

Perhaps Bully is best before supper  
instead of saying grace. To look around  
glaring, the world like a mirror struck  
with a flashlight, soaking in the lemon-stained  
lace across the mahogany table. But Bully  
implies a pound, a fistful of fury, it means  
to put on your boots, caked with earth  
so black it looks like the night sky, to grab  
life by its scruffy throat, jingle it like a pocketful  
of coins, and clasp your friend's hand one last time.  
Did you say it when you slugged Kermit on the  
shoulder, when you told him to leave you  
in your fevered panic along the Rio da Duvida.  
Did you grab that pulpit and smash it against stone  
like a porcelain teacup only to holler, *Bring me more.*

## AMERICA

To the Captains of Industry,

For selling out for the quick profit,  
convenience, and short-term gain,  
a royal Fuck You. May you be  
skinned alive and set upon  
rough-barked scaffold so the hawks  
and brown-toned mice may nibble  
at your greenback carcasses.

To the Government Officials,

Because, of course you're all *men*,  
I'd like to kick you in the balls.  
Pride wrapped you in wintertime  
as pump jacks pulled dinosaur blood  
from deep underground. Hope your testes  
hurt as bad as I feel when I look over  
broken bentonite bluffs while America  
chugs on its way to the fiery sky.

To the Native Americans,

I learned your sacred sites by different  
names. Learned that my ancestors *settled*—  
or so we thought—the prairie, forced  
Sitting Bull to hand over his rifle, the way  
of life forever changed, altered, broken.  
I don't know the names of sacredness,  
only the wind and the word *loneliness*.

To the Future Generations,

I knew better, and so did everyone else. We ate greasy  
potato chips, watched reality television while  
extinction, desecration slipped in, while vampires  
and werewolves filled the pages, we clapped  
with glee. While responsibility skid into complicity,  
we turned the volume louder, heard the football  
score, BMWs rumbled along broken pavement, gazed  
at gaudy boob jobs and blow-jobs about to happen.

## MEMORY

Enveloped in a sea of golden husks. Stiff and strong, they prick my face as I lie down. Sun shines, a few clouds dapple the sky. Wind streaks through golden waves of grain. This is my America: quiet to most, insanely alive. My bare legs are the first to rest, then my bottom, lower and upper back, and finally my head, upon the coarse soil. Clumps of dirt give way to my weight and become dust. How unique this is. I never see anyone else run and disappear in an ocean of wheat. From afar this looks huge: acres of wheat bursting through the soil, reaching towards sky, vast and intimidating. Lying down I am a jungle cat, unseen and able to surprise anything that comes my way. But I'm the one who is surprised. Below me are worms, above me dragonflies hover and hawks look for any field mouse who leaves the safety of his burrow. I tend to think this field is chaos, but from down here it's ordered. And this field is ordered: rows upon rows sewn into the broken earth, hoped by the farmer that his measly seeds will break through the earth yet again. I'm thankful for something as ordinary as this field: it takes me out of the busyness of my parents' lives and delivers me into the business of the bees and worms and grain.

## WILDNESS RETURN

## I.

return to the place  
 place of longing  
 longing for the hope  
 hope of days  
 days marked by dirt  
 dirt of familial blood  
 blood too bitter  
 bitter dashed dreams  
 dreams childish things  
 things caught in the net  
 net soon lost like a jewel  
 jewel lost souls wandered  
 wandered field of clover  
 clover of kin  
 kin witness to the ages.

## II.

water and wind and soil  
 rivulets of memory  
 the prints of my fingertips  
 soothed the cracks in my skin.

## III.

skin brought me back  
 back to land confused  
 confused land of greed  
 greed grew in earth  
 earth watered by rain  
 rain across the prairie  
 prairie of Dakota hearts  
 hearts pull and pump  
 pump across time  
 time too short  
 short profit of pump jacks.

## IV.

prairie of childhood wonder  
wandering in time  
nestle against broken bark  
calms my crackling mind.

## V.

mind in love with land  
land of mica and quartz  
quartz glistens in fossils  
fossils rooted to sage  
sage fades from the prairie  
prairie of stubbled horizon  
horizon mixed canyons  
canyons scented with clover  
clover what I want  
want in parched land  
land where I miss grass  
grass where color  
color of sienna brown  
brown too drab  
drab for the fast  
fast-moving world.

## VI.

whorled into wildness  
land of longing  
strut with grouse  
rubble from the Rockies  
this place knows love.



## DELIGHT

I like people who hurl  
themselves at their passions  
who live inside their furies  
who rant and rave. People  
who take the months of winter  
to build canoes for summer  
who knead bread because they  
need to smell yeast and flour  
dancing to become one.

In my youth I looked, brush in hand,  
at the whipping wheat on the berm  
behind my house, wondered  
*What does the bison think?*

I fought like a pike with a hook in its mouth,  
unrelenting and fierce for a world filled  
with the necessity of beauty.  
I genuflected to the cottonwoods,  
milkvetch, mica-speckled stones,  
as my chest swelled like the robin's.

## CAMELS HUMP BUTTE

too close to Interstate 94  
 the sound of traffic  
 drowns the symphony  
 of meadowlark  
 horse fly and grasshopper

the summit craggy  
 strewn with lichen-covered  
 boulders—green, mustard, seaweed,  
 burnt orange—faded by the sun

to the east are the Badlands  
 world worked on slow time  
 by artisans of water and wind

three black and yellow butterflies  
 spiral like a trail of smoke higher  
 and higher, black angus graze  
 below the base of the butte

wind ripples my cranberry shirt  
 the sun heats my sweat-soaked neck.  
 I drink cool water from my canteen.

up here the dome of the sky, immense  
 clean aquamarine deepening into cobalt

sage and coarse prairie grass—  
 pretty, sentinel, and bullion buttes  
 stand silent to the south

rocks upon the ridge bleached bone white—  
 broken, like a pelvis, from the sand, ice, and wind

mule deer spring across the ridge,  
 red-winged blackbirds stand watch  
 the silent butte bears witness

## STRUGGLE

On the steppe,  
silver sage swings  
against a backdrop  
of brown earth,  
foams near the horizon—  
my mind flares with fury.

When blue grama blooms  
across the dry lands  
stalks unfurl toward sky  
buds snap like firecrackers  
stiff and golden, combing  
through the breeze.

Its body sways, three-four time  
oom-paa-paa, oom-paa-paa  
the flow and pulse across  
a floor of dust.

## SHOWERING

I didn't shower today  
because I felt that damn  
good—like a child  
swimming in a sandbox  
whose hair is filled with  
the soil of imagination.  
Should I have stayed  
in bed, splayed like  
a mighty river whose  
current is dark and deep?  
Where would I have gone?  
To church, that hollow  
tomb of promises that  
leaves me a sojourner in  
the night? Maybe to the  
store, probing the  
archipelagos of my desire,  
too deep for friends to  
understand. Instead,  
I wrote. I cut paper  
with pen, pierced  
into my caverns  
crooked and bright,  
like a path illuminated by  
fire. The meadowlark  
called to me from my  
room, like a lover  
whispering, Tell me  
your wild song.

## RADICAL

means to form at the  
root, that sturdy place of  
support where streams of  
water flow upward to aid  
the fibrous spread of life.

We will not protect a  
place we do not love—  
we won't speak for the  
speechless.

Friends invite me to their  
faraway homes. Elders  
tell me: travel when you  
are young. See the world  
in all its splendor. I  
decline my friends but  
heed my elders.

I look at the roots of  
things—streams,  
meadows, oceans,  
forests, fungus. I praise  
the uniqueness of  
sycamores, the necessity  
of Norwegian maples.

I may not see the Taj  
Mahal, pyramids, or  
Machu Picchu, but when  
I die let worms weave in  
me patterns of passages,  
paths trodden and  
followed, my hope  
to return home to the  
root of all I have loved.



## BADLANDS

Spine of my childhood  
 crevices of awe, I clambered  
 rough bluffs and buttes.  
 Buoyed by rock and dirt  
 grass and sage patchwork  
 of colors on a palette of stone.  
 Orange, pink, purple, lavender, scarlet  
 smeared and stippled down sides  
 of granite and scoria.

Ripped like an abscessed tooth  
 from a jaw. This land, raw and real,  
 pushed and pressed to give up  
 sacred blood: oil. Blood of the land.  
 My blood. No separation.  
 Forgiveness from the children  
 of children yet to come. Plunged  
 and pulled through pipelines.

Pretty Butte. Bullion Butte. White Butte.  
 Silent sentinels that mark the passage  
 of time before we arrived  
 weather the storm. I sit on soil  
 and rock. Skin. My skin.  
 Broken. Bruised. Rippled with the wind,  
 these ties that bind—dirt, wind, water—  
 will they wither like a twine cord.

Flares flash in my heart. The horizon  
 scorches a scene of remorse. The wind  
 whispers something I cannot hear  
 and my lungs flare with a desire  
 for more air. Breath. Life.  
 Breezes wash my skin as clouds  
 gather. The horizon bends  
 like a taut bow, building  
 with forms shiftless and subtle.

## RIVER

I pool  
whirl  
roil, flow lift  
silt slides like  
dark molasses.  
Press and rail  
against the known  
and the new,  
burst through barriers,  
and break in oxbows.  
Am I lazy. Am I flowing  
through the motions of  
riverbed—squeezing  
through crevices  
of rock, sand, and sludge.

My current swirls inside  
your gullies, pulls you  
in the undertow.  
Do you quiver  
when I touch your skin?  
Gush as I wet your hair?  
Everything you have built  
I will break.



## THE CYCLE

And where were you when the  
first leaf fell as it flopped  
floated its descent to a field  
shifted to gold? I watched you  
quiver as the first fall chill  
cut across your skin.

Winter folded its cold grip  
the slashed red of dogwoods gave  
hope that grace stumbles—  
a prayer crossing a frozen creek.

When tulips pressed and pushed  
in the garden you got on your  
knees to coat coal black soil  
around your flowered vision.

In the light of long days the web  
of things—loons whimpering  
in twilight frogs in their gurgling  
chorus the stars hitched  
to the dust of your body.

## WAKING UP TO THE WORLD

I turn off my phone so that I can  
hear the newspaper whack  
the front door. Texts and You've got  
mails silenced. The dings pings tings  
I look for the pulse that vibrates  
to the beat of a world being  
made new. Slowing down  
it is not easy. The dust of words  
settling upon the page, taking pen  
in hand to put ink in the book.  
Soon the bumble of cars  
and the changing lights—  
I open the gate and greet the day.

## RESISTANCE

Resistance lies in rhythm—  
the beat of a heart against  
the caverns of our bodies  
pump and pull  
press and push  
the blood ways that pulse  
and course through bodies—  
and swirls with struggle.

As a child, in swift streams,  
water pressed against my  
narrow back sent me  
downstream. As I skirted along  
the stone-lined bottom my  
mind flowed into the Missouri  
River, past Lake Oahe, along  
Iowa, near Nebraska where the  
Platte slides in sideways,  
pooling, whirling into  
the Big Muddy.

My mind flowed on to the  
River of Twain's before  
emptying into the Gulf  
and on into the ocean,  
the ripple of our heart.

Where I first learned rhythm  
in the body of pole, heaved  
fish to shore, the skid of strong  
legs, the pull of oar.

Perhaps we know the force  
of nature as our bodies  
flow inside themselves—resist  
the ruin of every living thing.

## CREDO

—For David James Duncan

In the beginning God whispered the world into being and the bluegills I love came into being and the meadowlarks I love rattled their throats across the sage-scented prairie because a song, desperate to come out, was inside their wind-whipped bodies, and the bison wallowed in that gray-colored mud and the sage grouse did the sagebrush step to the tune of the coyote call rolling across buttes, bumping over bluffs, snaking through the brown rivers of the dry heart of the continent, nestled in the nooks and crannies, and held like a lump of lignite ready to ignite, ready to burn, to change into the scoria pebbling the roadways, streaking the brown palette of the prairie in that luscious red smeared on lips that make clergy simmer in envy because a friend told me that God might be the Great Mother that adores soft voices, the voices that slip in sideways, shifting muddy river channels, whorling wood into mighty river teeth, rolling a single grain of sand one mile every million years over the bottom down dank mud, through the muck of a fast-moving world, the open places where ancient sea beds run through switchgrass where our own soft voice weaves a new song, and we listen just because it feels that damn good.

PART TWO

[INSERT TITLE]: PROSE

## COMING ALIVE

Sage swirls around the muddy banks of the Cannonball River. I've returned home to North Dakota to witness something incredible: the Standing Rock Sioux fight for their sovereignty and stop the Dakota Access Pipeline.

It's a rainy day in August when I pull into the Spirit Camps. My friend Carolyn and I have driven from our home in Ames, Iowa, to bring blankets, jackets, and food to help aid in the battle against the Dakota Access Pipeline, a 1,172 mile pipeline that begins near Stanley, North Dakota, swings west toward Williston, barrels under the Missouri River, crosses South Dakota, and cuts Iowa in half, before connecting to an existing pipeline in Patoka, Illinois.

This damn pipeline has made me into an activist, a label I hate for its politically-heavy association. I moved out of the Bakken oil boom in 2014 to begin writing books and essays about extractive economies, sex trafficking, my home in North Dakota riddled with pump jacks and oil spills. I moved to Ames for graduate school, thinking that, eight hundred miles between the Bakken oil boom and me would be enough space to reflect and rally the troops against the fossil fuel industry. And then, in September, two months after moving to Ames, I first learn about the Dakota Access Pipeline.

In December I attend a public meeting in Ames City Hall, once Ames's old high school auditorium. Graduate students from Iowa State University, who organized the meeting, direct people, have us fill out name tags, write why we're for clean water and soil rather than oil on poster board. I walk into the auditorium where the stage is filled with various non-profit representatives, an economist from Iowa State University, and lawyers. I listen to each person give her and his perspective on why we need to stop this pipeline.

I, too, want to stop the pipeline. For the past three years I've traveled around North Dakota, monitored the development and progress of the country's major shale play, the Bakken oil boom. I've read the six major state papers every day for three years. I've kept a file on my computer—"Bakken Project"—with articles about sex trafficking, oil spills, man camps, drug trafficking, infrastructure development. I've lifted weights with roustabouts and wildcatters in Dickinson, and I've seen hats blaze orange with "Big Cock Country" written on them, and t-shirts for sale that say "Going Deep and Pumping Hard" and "Frack That Hole." I've had Americanos at the Boomtown Babes Espresso, a pink drive-thru coffee shop that advertises "The Bakken's Breast Coffee." But no one in the auditorium knows this; no one has been to the boom.

I signal to Angie, another graduate student I've met, who's walking around the auditorium with a microphone, monitoring questions and comments. I stand up and face the audience.

"My name is Taylor and I've just moved from the Bakken oil boom." I speak for a few seconds and roll out some figures about pipelines, and I notice Carolyn's eyes are fixed on me. People are paying attention.

When I return home, I'm nervous. I don't want to fight a pipeline. I close my eyes and become dizzy because coal put food on my table in childhood. Brorbys made their fortune by digging luminous lignite coal from the cocoa-colored soil of western North Dakota. When my grandfather was my age, the country didn't know about climate change. James Hansen was still a year away from testifying before Congress about global warming when my mother was pregnant with me—the same age as I am now, twenty-nine. But I now know different. I know the seas are rising, that coal erases the ozone layer, that oil spills contaminate drinking water. I know that my home, western North Dakota, is on fire.

Above my writing desk sits the biblical adage, “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Coal paid for vacations to Disney World, saxophone lessons, bicycles, my car, and college. Coal kept my family out of poverty and paid for the boat we’d fish from in the muddy Missouri River. We know coal—and fossil fuels as a whole—do one thing really well: they warm and weird the planet.

Inheritance. My family’s love for the outdoors colored by coal, colored by the destruction of the land the adults in my life claimed to love—the Missouri River, the badlands, sage grouse, walleye, paddlefish. I inherited a land I love, and I decide its time for me to fight to protect it.

As Carolyn and I begin to unload the car, I notice license plates from Washington, Utah, Colorado, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Wyoming, South Dakota. I hurry back and forth from car to supply tent, loading my arms with the weight of wool. We hear the protest will go through winter. A trained lawyer, Carolyn has come to offer her legal counsel. I’ve come to stare slack-jawed at the protest in my home state, a state in-bed with the fossil fuel industry.

While Carolyn meets with the Camp’s legal team in the supply tent, I go to the open-air medic tent, look at the green-brown hills surrounding the camp. I am the only white man. Dressed in a red Marmot rain jacket and Chacos, I look like the epitome of the granola observer.

“How are things going?” I ask to everyone and no one, immediately wanting to take it back.

“Fine,” comes a reply.

“Shitty weather, huh?” *God, Taylor, shut up.*



“Yep.”

I unzip my rain jacket and reveal my white-lettered blue t-shirt, which reads, “Stop the Pipeline.”

“I’ve come from Iowa where we’re fighting this pipeline. I want to help.”

A large man, what the Sioux call a fryboy, looks up from his cell phone, turns to me, and extends his arm. We shake. He goes back to his cell phone.

I stand in the tent, not quite sure what to do. A woman using a garbage bag as a rain jacket comes into the tent. Donna tells me she and her husband have come from the Twin Cities to join the protest and that her daughter is traveling in from Utah tomorrow.

I ask Donna questions—What does it mean for your people to fight this pipeline? Please, tell me your history. What do people need to know about Native struggles? What questions don’t white people ask? I hate my ignorance, and ask her questions for hours.

Growing up in coal country, I learned to fear Native Americans. When our little town played basketball against Standing Rock teachers commented that, if we lost, the school would get trashed—garbage cans overturned, windows broken, graffiti lining the hallways. The term “prairie nigger” floated through the hallways.

Earlier in the summer, in July, I traveled to Bismarck to visit my sister’s family. My nephews—ten, seven, and twin five year-olds—shook the beams of the house and rattled me out of my quiet life. For several weeks Logan, the oldest, asked his parents about fracking—how it works, what it is, why he hears about it on the news so much. When I stayed with them, I asked Logan if he’d like to go on a buddy date in the Bakken. We agreed to leave the next morning.

Early morning drives in North Dakota ripple with tranquil beauty—a cobalt ocean of sky gives way to a forever-present horizon, occasionally broken by brown buttes or a lonesome grain elevator.

Logan and I decided that his job should be to announce whenever he sees a new flare.

“What’s a flare, Uncle Taylor?”

“That, right there,” I said as we headed north out of Dickinson, one hundred miles into our trip, the southern tip of the oil boom, a blast of orange against a cobalt sky.

We traveled to Killdeer Mountain Battlefield, a small historic site west of the town of Killdeer. This place, the battlefield, is where, under the orders of President Lincoln, General Alfred A. Sully attacked Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota peoples. One hundred fifty men, women, and children were killed. Crimson blood flowed across bluebells, milkvetch, sawgrass, the brown palette of the prairie.

Logan had just finished fourth grade. I asked him if he learned about Killdeer Mountain in North Dakota Studies.

“I’ve never heard of it.”

Nor had I at his age. I only learned of the battle in my mid-twenties through reading Native American oral accounts. Logan and I kicked at the grass, the broken bentonite buttes of the badlands just out of view. I wondered what Logan’s thought, if he thought the battle was no big deal, another detail kept from the great narrative of American “progress.” I wanted to tell him what school doesn’t teach him, how Native Americans are holding up a multi-billion dollar project, how the only way to protect what I value, and want for him—clean water, forests, community—is to stop the one thing corporations value: money.

Instead, Logan and I stayed silent, soaked in the field before us as pump jacks rocked in the distance.

We got back in the car and continued to head north.

“Flare, Uncle Taylor!”

We turned off Highway 22 when I saw bulldozers and earth-turned ridges.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to see what’s happening up here. We can’t leave the car, okay?”

Logan nodded his head.

As we continued down the gravel road, we saw construction men. I waved—didn’t dare smile—and pretended that I knew where I’m going. What I didn’t know is that the road was built only as an access to build this pipeline.

“There it is, Logan.”

“What?”

“That’s the pipeline that will go all the way to Illinois. It can carry 25 million gallons of oil a day.”

Just ahead of us was green pipe, set up in piles, laid out over the broken prairie, chocolate earth turned over to make a bed for the pipeline. I pulled off the road onto an approach and snapped a few pictures. I saw the construction workers stop what they’re doing and look at us. I waved. *Why the fuck did I wave?*

“Another flare, Uncle Taylor,” and I felt Logan pull on my shirt.

“Yep, buddy. We gotta go.” I dropped my camera and backed onto the road. We got back onto Highway 22 and continued north. No construction workers followed us.

“More flares.”

“How many is that?”

“33.”

I reached for my coffee. We drove past bentonite badlands—brown, orange, streaked pink from scoria and black from coal—and crossed onto the Fort Berthold Reservation.

“There are still Native Americans, Uncle Taylor? I thought they were all dead.”

I didn’t know what to say. First, I thought that maybe my nephew was one of the few blessed people who doesn’t see race; I mean, my god, his best friend is half-Native American. But then I thought more and got angry—maybe his teachers only taught him the history of Custer, whom I sang songs about in my own childhood, or Lewis and Clark, who, sixty miles from here, survived only due to the generosity of the Mandan people.

I breathed in. “This is where some Native Americans in North Dakota call home. Native Americans are still alive.” I rolled Logan’s comment around in my head, clicked my fingers on the steering wheel. It’s not him I was mad at, it’s the People in Charge that shape mythic narratives.

“More flares, Uncle Taylor,” and an ocean of fire spread before us. We drove along Lake Sakakawea, sang along to Bruno Mars, Lady Gaga, and Sia. We stopped for lunch at Subway in Williston, known as Boomtown, USA. Pick-up trucks lined the parking lot, some with metal testicles hanging from the hitches. I put my arm around Logan as we walked into Subway.

“Tell the lady what you want, Logan.”

“A foot-long Philly cheesesteak.”

“Are you sure you can eat a foot-long, buddy?”

Silence.

“I’ll have one, too.”

I struggled to eat mine as Logan licks his fingers.

“I’m a growing boy, Uncle Taylor.”

“Yes, I know. I only grow horizontally now. Go wash your fingers.”

As I looked around I thought of what the oil boom has done to Williston. A quiet town a decade ago, Williston doubled in size. New gas stations, hotels, grocery stores lined the street. But with the falling price of oil, times turned difficult in a town where people used to make seventeen dollars an hour at Wal-Mart.

I checked the time, looked around the restaurant—mom and dad, two daughters. Two oil workers silently ate together. I wondered about the upcoming election, about what would happen if Trump took office, or what would happen if he doesn’t. What does the world need? I swirled my finger on the plastic table. I turned over and over my frustration in my head. *Why is it so difficult to be good, to not harm the things I love?*

I looked at the oil workers, crafted a narrative of how they needed this work, how they needed to, somehow, provide for themselves and their families; how they’re from out of state and have no choice. I knew this boom is not their fault.

And yet I want to sink the oil industry, to tell these workers that their jobs can—and will—go away, that ruining the planet isn’t an honest way to make a living. I wanted to sit with them and tell them that their health was at stake, that we need better leaders to help us provide stable, sunshine powered jobs so their children still have a world to fall in love with, rather than one ruined by free market economics. But how do you tell the victims of corporate greed not to feed their families, not to save for retirement, how to leave their job and, somehow, find other work?

Logan returned, wiped his hands on his jersey shorts.

“My turn. Can you watch my stuff, buddy?”

While I urinated, I panicked. *Shit*. I left him alone. I tried to hurry. Figures of missing children raced through my head. My sister! *My sister! Oh god!* I nipped myself. I washed my hands, trembled. *I'd left my nephew alone in the oil boom!*

I ripped open the door and it slammed against the wall. Everyone looked at me. Logan was refilling our sodas.

“Why are you sweating, Uncle Taylor?”

“Wasn't it hot in there to you?”

“No.”

We left Subway and headed south out of Williston and crossed the Missouri River. More flares. Eventually we ended up west of Killdeer Mountain.

“We've made one big circle today.”

“Yes we have, buddy. How about a dip into the badlands?”

“Yes!”

We pulled off Highway 85 and entered the National Grasslands. North Dakota contains nearly one-third of the nation's 3.8 million acres of the National Grasslands, an ocean of grass under a sea of sky.

“Another flare, Uncle Taylor!”

The road sank down between two bluffs. I slowed the car and we hit strawberry-colored scoria roadway. I slowed some more. We curved around a bend and there it was—a gray, red, black, beige bentonite bluff. Sixty-five million years of earth's work, leveled like a dining table, a pump jack bobbed up and down up and down, like a chicken pecking at scratch.

The car idled. Eventually I killed the motor. A moment passed, an eternity.

“Our bluffs are never coming back, Uncle Taylor.”

Our second and last day at the Camp Carolyn and I again split up. I meet Betsy, a retired Boeing worker and native North Dakotan, from Washington State. We walk to the Cannonball River for a boat launch. Boaters will paddle into the Missouri River, praying along the way. Song, chant, prayer flow over the water. I join others atop the bridge to watch the ceremony. Flags snap in the breeze, oars smack glistening water.

I walk back to Camp with Betsy.

“You’re looking red,” she says, and offers me some sunscreen.

“White men burn easy out here” a man yells at me. We chuckle. I see Donna and wave.

“Come meet my family!” she waves me over. I meet Donna’s husband, their daughter Iktomi Was’té Wigan (Good Spider Woman), who fights fracking in Utah. We sit and share our struggles—mine in this place, North Dakota, fighting the industry that put bread and milk on my table in childhood, and she, in Utah, against an industry attempting to erase her and her culture. A woman passes, carrying a bucket of smoking sage, and we wash ourselves in the perfume of the prairie.

Iktomi Was’té Wigan gets up to stretch and I leave to use the porta potty.

Afterward, I stop by a car from Oregon, slathered in bumper stickers: “Stop Public Lands Ranching,” “Visualize Industrial Collapse,” “Subvert the Dominant Paradigm,” “You Cannot Simultaneously Prevent and Prepare for War,” “I ♥ Mountains,” “A world of wanted children would make a world of difference.”

I return to the tent and sit in my camp chair. A small girl with cropped brown hair, perhaps five or six, comes skipping through. Her shirt, riven with gems, has the word “love”

splayed over her chest. She skips as if to pass by me—stops, pivots, stares directly into my eyes. Her chocolate brown eyes narrow.

“It’s time to let go of anger.” She skips on. I wipe my face.

A few minutes later Iktomi Was’te Wigan returns. I tell her what just happened.

“Oh my god, Taylor, that little girl came up to me on walk, pointed to our tent and said, ‘Someone in that tent is angry’ and skipped away.”

“We’re all angry, “ I say.

“Yes, but you white people look really angry.” We laugh.

Carolyn and I meet at the car to leave Camp, exhausted at the work ahead and the work to come. We head north on Highway 1806. We stop at the Dakota Access construction site. The fence, lined with tribal flags, bursts with color in the late afternoon sun. On the approach to the construction site are two make-shift tipi frames, on one side sits a sign that reads “Mni-Wiconi Water IS Life” in blue and white paint, on the other side another sign, “No more stolen sisters” in white and black paint. An upside down United States flag—the universal signal for distress—flows in the wind. At the entrance to the construction site another sign in simple red lettering: No Access for Dakota Access.

We hop out of the car, both of us in our blue “Stop the Pipeline” t-shirts. I snap a picture of Carolyn. She does the same for me.

“Ready, Taylor? Three-two-one.”

I flip off the construction site.

On August 31 in Pilot Mound, Iowa, forty-five minutes northwest of my home in Ames, the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition, a grassroots group fighting the Dakota Access



Pipeline, holds a meeting for a nonviolent, direct action training against the pipeline. I ride along with Carolyn.

In Pilot Mound, we listen to a lawyer about potential outcomes if arrested. We hear veteran protestors share stories of being arrested. We listen to Frank, the leader of the training, guide us through what we are to do.

“We’re here to demonstrate. If you’re here to cause trouble, we don’t want you. Now is your time to leave.”

We continue on for an hour. Ed, the leader of Bold Iowa, one of the members of the Coalition, asks those who came to risk arrest today to please stand. In emails, I’m told that Bold Iowa expects a low turn-out at the event—maybe thirty of us, and that ten would probably risk arrest. Today there are one hundred people in the community center at Pilot Mound.

Thirty-six of us stand. A pen falls to the floor. I wipe my eyes.

“Stay standing,” says Ed. “If you aren’t able to risk arrest today and are willing to risk it at a later time, would you please stand?”

Another twenty-five rise. The room erupts in cheers.

Frank leads us through a series of role-playing exercises. I partner-up with a man named Chris, a bicycle mechanic from Cedar Rapids.

“One of you will be a protestor, the other will be law enforcement.”

“You’re older,” I whisper to Chris, “I think you should play law enforcement first.” I sit on the floor, imagining I’m blocking construction.

“Now listen here, young man, it doesn’t matter what you do. We’re building this pipeline no matter what.”

I stay silent, choosing not to engage with Chris, the pretend-police-officer.

“Time to go. You don’t want this on your record.”

I flinch. He’s right. I don’t want this on my record. I don’t want to have to explain to potential employers why I was arrested for wanting clean water. Standing Rock flashes through my mind. And then, one by one, my four nephews, right in the path of this pipeline. I stay silent.

Chris has run out of harassment phrases and shrugs. We giggle. He sits down, his turn to protest.

“Now listen here, old man.” Chris raises his eyebrows. “Oh, did that get you upset? Well, you’re not going to be happy spending a night in the slammer! Can you even afford bail, you little environmentalist hippy?” My chest heaves; I think of what I would never want to hear in this moment. “You don’t matter. This pipeline’s a done deal. You can’t stop it. No one will remember what happened here. Get up.”

Chris sits still, mumbles, “I ain’t moving.”

“What’s that? You think this matters? You think *you* matter?” I turn red and continue the assault.

“All right, that’s enough,” Frank hollers. I help Chris up and we pat each other on the back. We continue training for another hour before breaking for a potluck lunch.

I can’t eat and, instead, wander around. I decide to go outside to the playground and swing on the swing set. A father and his infant son swing too. A little girl comes up to me.

“Hey, are you getting arrested today?”

“I hope not. But I will if I have to.”

“Thanks!” She waves and runs away.

Carolyn waves me in. It’s go time.

“All ready?” Frank yells. “Let’s do this.”

A long caravan leaves Pilot Mound, heading south to Boone, the exact middle point of the Iowa section of the pipeline.

“Look at that,” Carolyn says.

I look in the rearview mirror. Cars, trucks, vans as far as I can see. People waving to each other, honking. We dip into the Des Moines River Valley and see where the pipe will cross under the river. Mocha-colored earth is overturned, a section of trees, clear-cut.

“That poor farmer,” says Carolyn, “has to look at this every day.”

We continue toward Boone. During the meeting the leaders of Coalition decide we’d block the assembly site for the pipeline near Boone, where hundreds of farmers are gathered at the fairgrounds for the Farm Progress Show.

As we turn into the fairgrounds we see state troopers. We host a rally, listen to landowners bemoan the destruction of their land, and we begin walking in the ditch toward the construction site. I spread my fingers and feel the tall prairie grass as the sun warms my back.

Those willing to risk arrest break off into groups of nine at the four entrances to the construction site, enough people to prevent machinery from exiting and entering the assembly site.

“Good luck, Group Four!” a supporter shouts.

Groups Three and Two take their places at each entrance. I am in Group One, joining my new friend Julia and old friend Jan, a retired professor.

As we approach our entrance, my heart slams over and over. We leave the ditch and the white gravel crunches below our feet. I am at the far end of our group. We join hands, nine of us spreading ourselves across the entrance, a human wall blocking metal machines.

Click, click, click. A flash here, a news anchor there. We're documented. Our story ripples across the web.

I turn to Julia. "How do you feel?"

"I'm nervous."

I squeeze her hand tight. "Hey, nothing's going to happen. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

What I thought would be a quick procedure drags on. Naively, I thought we'd trespass, get cuffed, and then be hauled off to jail. The troopers don't move. *Damn, I knew I should've gone to the bathroom.*

A woman with sunglasses and white hair waves to us.

"Who's that?"

"That's my mom," says Julia.

I wonder what my own mother would say if she could see me now, risking arrest, trying to stop a pipeline. We haven't spoken in months. My activism a difficult thing for her to swallow.

"What do you think she's thinking?"

"She probably thinks I'm crazy."

"I bet she's really proud," and I squeeze Julia's hand. A tear sizzles on the gravel.

I see Frank cup his mouth. "All right, this is it!"

The lead State Trooper tells us that anyone who stays will be arrested. I grip Julia's hand. Here we go. No one steps out from our line. I look straight ahead and see Carolyn taking notes.

I feel a tug on my arm, and my hand falls away from Julia. The slamming in my chest quickens. In and out, in and out. I focus on breathing. And then I see her—no one else does, but I do—the child from Standing Rock. I know then, *It's time to let go of anger*. I smile.

“3:30 p.m. and you’re the first one to be arrested, Taylor,” shouts Carolyn.

“Are the cuffs too tight, sir?” asks the trooper?

“No.” I smirk, thinking, *I've always wanted a big, strong man to put my arms behind my back*.

I’m turned around and led back behind the earthen berm, away from my friends, out of the media’s sight. More officers are waiting.

“Hello, sir.” The officer asks me my name. “Mr. Brorby, we’re going to take your possessions and pat you down.

Away goes my belt, my blue Minnesota Twins hat, my pocket change.

“What’s this?”

“That’s my insulin pump. You can take it, but then we’ll really have some trouble.”

I can tell now is not the time for humor. Every part of me—every part of me—is pat down before I am loaded into the back of the van. Stepping up and navigating to the back of the van proves difficult. I wobble, unable to use my hands for balance. I’m hunched over, suddenly feel old as I slowly turn, then sit, leaning forward so as to not press my arms. The officer turns on the air.

One by one I see other protestors led by my van. Mariam, part of the group 100 Grannies for a Livable Future, squeezes next to me in the back of the van. She’s been given the fashionable zip ties to bind her hands.

“Those look more comfortable,” I say.

She rolls her eyes.

Jan joins us in the van, sitting in front of me in a bucket seat. Kathy, from Iowa City, joins Mariam and me in the back. The last one to join us is a middle-aged man, Nick. Nick, we soon find out, is prone to motion sickness.

We make it to the Boone County Jail. One by one we exit the van, a little uncertain of how to walk. When our cuffs are removed, Jan and I moan and swing our arms.

“Damn, I should really do more shoulder exercises if I’m going to be arrested” I say.

Jan and I are moved into a temporary cell, now wearing flip-flops—mine pink, his yellow—since our footwear has been taken away.

“You can use that drain if you need to go to the bathroom,” says the officer.

“I’m afraid I need to use it, Jan.”

Jan stays in front of me. I’ve never pissed before another human before while trying to maintain eye contact, hit the drain, and have polite conversation. I think, there must be a gold medal for this.

“Have you ever been arrested before, Jan?” I want him to talk so I can finish my business.

“The last time was in the Sixties when we tried to levitate the Pentagon.”

We spend the evening in the Boone County Jail with thirteen other men who are arrested. The officer, whom we nickname Barney Fife, tells us this is the largest single arrest in his forty years at the jail. We eat bologna sandwiches on white bread, a slice of Kraft American cheese for plastic flavor. Cheetos, a cookie, an apple, a pint of two percent milk. We ebb and flow between conversation and silence, surrounded by white cinderblock walls, a perpetually open bathroom door, showers without metal rings—to help prevent injury—steel chairs

attached to steel tables. It takes awhile and then I realize everything here has been engineered, been thought through for potential injury or weaponry. *I am in one of the most thought-out environments.* The television whizzes in the background.

“Tonight, at six, thirty people arrested in Boone County, attempting to block the Dakota Access Pipeline,” booms the anchor’s voice.

Someone turns up the volume.

The news story centers around Julia, the young female farmer. Later, while being fingerprinted, I tell Julia and the other women about the news. The men are held in the back of the jail in one of the two pods designated for longer-term inmates. We’ve displaced an entire group of inmates. The women are held up front, in cells similar to the one’s where Jan and I were first held.

“Of course,” says Julia. “Focus on the young woman.” She rolls her eyes.

When I return to the pod, I sit off to the side by myself, realizing I haven’t checked my blood sugar in over six hours. I don’t have access to my medical supplies. *How long will they hold me?*

Later at night we hear footsteps coming down the hallway of the jail. Barney Fife opens the door.

“Mr. Brorby,” he waves for me to follow him.

I’m the first one released from the day of protesting. Carolyn has posted my bail and, seven hours after I’m arrested, I’m freed—but not before being told the jail has misplaced my possessions.

I walk out into the warm night air, shoeless, joking that I feel like Jesus. Friends snap pictures on their phones. Carolyn and I begin the drive home under the inky Iowa sky, stars glistening every now and then.

Once home, I go to my room, set my phone on the pile of books next to my bed. I turn it off and cry. My shoulders heave as tears hit my bed sheet, then books. Some splatter my toes. Since entering the fray over fracking, I've only felt anger—I've raged against hijacked politics, traveled the country to lecture against destructive industry, and have been consumed by writing about fracking.

I close my eyes and see the switchgrass swaying in the wind at Standing Rock. The muddy Cannonball River gurgles its way to the Missouri River. I hear singing, I hear prayer, I hear chanting. The world made new and the task before us: the resistance against the ruin of every living thing, the building of community beyond boardrooms and backroom deals, the ability to stand as witnesses, protectors, and activists to build an imaginative future forward, one where clean water flows. And then I see her again, the child. I cry some more, realizing I've now come back to being fully human as my anger slips away.

I never intended to be an activist—the label usually put upon me by others. If you get arrested, surely you must be an activist. What I really want to be is a homebody—to read, write, and struggle to make art. But my home in North Dakota is on fire—flares fume across the mixed grass prairie, bentonite bluffs are leveled and pumped to bleed oil, the Missouri River, the artery of the continent, now contains radioactive material. The pallid sturgeon is predicted to go extinct in my lifetime, the sage grouse too. My home in Iowa, devastated by industrial agriculture, now faces one of the nation's largest pipelines going under its eight major waterways. Water, in Iowa, already toxic due to nitrate runoff, stands to be ruined by a rupture in the Dakota Access Pipeline. I close my eyes when I think of these things and become dizzy.



I keep coming back to that word—*activist*—wanting to pick at it like a bur in the saddle. The root meaning of *activist* means “to drive, to do.” What I’m driving at is a world of diversity, a world where my being gay doesn’t preclude me from living in certain parts of the country, where being black doesn’t mean living in fear of being stopped by police for a ticket, where strong women are celebrated, where Native sovereignty is a right, just like clean drinking water. I try to live out my own., Why doesn’t this country live up to its ideals?

I’m driving at a world of diversity because we know nature flourishes with many species—just like humans do—rather than a few. The prairie I love is a web of intimate and interconnected roots that secure topsoil, which provides clean water, which creates healthy fisheries, which feed mammals and birds. We cannot separate our thinking from the tapestry of life—once one thread is loosed, the whole unravels.

## SWALLOWING WATER

In winter, in summer, Nelson Lake in south-central North Dakota does not freeze. Its bathtub warm. Viewed from the air, it is shaped like an arctic seal, grown from a stream to a 573-acre lake in the last fifty years.

Due to the year-round warm waters of Nelson Lake, bass, crappie, bluegills, and other fish that swim in the lake grow heavier and longer than fish in nearby waters. Leon Rixen caught the state-record largemouth bass there on February 11, 1983. The thought of his eight-pound, eight-ounce bass lodged itself into my mind as a boy.

In childhood, we called it The Lake. High schoolers partied at the Lake; friends went fishing at The Lake; parents worked by The Lake. The Lake, like a family picture, was forever present on the wall of my mind.

My grandfather often took me fishing on the riprap, navigating rough rocks put in place by machines, to get near the water's edge. In winter, Nelson Lake held secrets of ghosts as I watched steam swirl and rise across the Lake, obscuring the other side.

Summer in North Dakota is marked by increasing humidity, with thunderclouds billowing throughout heat-ridden afternoons. In fifth grade a friend, Kyle, had his birthday party in late June at Nelson Lake. Kyle and I shared a love of fishing. Boating, inner-tubing, and splashing about in water was not an option for classmates whose birthdays were in fall, winter, and spring. Kyle's party fell on a blue, cloudless day—when there was no wind. Instead of looking forward to it, I grumbled, “But, Dad, it's too hot to go swimming at the Lake today.”

At Kyle's birthday party my friend Connor and I decided to leave the party and swim across the Lake. Wrapped in our child-sized lifejackets, we figure it would be fun to see how close to Minnkota Power we could get. While friends are skittering and screaming across Nelson Lake behind an inner tube, Connor and I pump and paddle our way, stroke by stroke, out into the widening lake.

"Watch this," I say, and blow bubbles in the warm, green water.

Connor repeats.

Eventually we both stop, shifting from being horizontal to vertical, trying to get higher in the water. A storm of coughs erupt like thunder, and Connor's face turns red. We've swallowed Nelson Lake water.

Kyle's dad brings the boat towards us, two bobbing buoys in the water.

"You can't be out here," he says. "You might get hit by another boat."

Connor and I haul ourselves up and over the steel-hull edge, sitting on the crimson-colored carpet. The boat roars across the lake and we are deposited ashore.

My grandfather often takes me to Nelson Lake, rambling around in his silver station wagon, filled with fishing rods, red and white bobbers, and a small, silver net. The drive to Nelson Lake is four miles south and east of Center, my hometown. Passing the Square Butte Creek golf course the road curves east towards the Lake, bringing the smokestack of Minnkota Power into view.

Pulling off the road the silver station wagon hits gravel—my favorite part of the ride—and we begin to rumble our way towards the fishing dock. On the east side of the road a steep embankment leads to a channel, a manmade feature, where water that is used to

cool Minnkota Power's turbines is released, warmer and ready to flow back into the Lake. He points, "That's where the largest fish live, Taylor."

My father told me it would be trespassing to climb along the steep embankment, searching just for larger fish. I don't want my mother to risk losing her job at Minnkota Power just because her son wants to land a larger bass.

My grandfather and I make one more final turn, past the boat dock, and into a parking lot of dust and dirt, heading closer to the lake, before parking by the fence line along the channel. My grandfather will not trespass here, but we'll get as close as we are damn able to catch larger fish.

I'm the first one out as my grandfather turns off the car. I open the trunk and listen to the whoosh as the door lifts on its own. I grab my fishing rod and blue-gray tackle box, complete with my scrawled writing: Taylor Brorby, 416 Prairie Avenue, Center, ND 58530. My priceless treasure trove, filled with crankbaits resembling the shape of small fish, colored blaze orange, chartreuse, silver, sky blue, sun yellow—some jointed to mimic the movement of small minnows, some filled with rattling balls, drawing fish through sound; an assortment of bobbers—yellow, orange, red, white, sphered, conical, oval; split-shot in case I need to weight my line; an assortment of hooks—barbed, barbless, and treble; and spinnerbaits, my favorite, a lure with a skirt that looks like a hula skirt, with wire bent at a 70-degree angle away from the lure, complete with blades that revolve like a propeller, sending vibrations and reflections of light throughout the water.

I hurry to where the dirt meets rock, leaping between boulders like a squirrel between branches, and my grandfather is left to grab his own rods, fishing bucket, net, and the lunchpail. I want to catch the first fish and the biggest fish; we always bet a dollar for both.

Across the end of the chute, where warm water roils and foam floats as it is discharged from the channel, buoys a large log. I often contemplate running across the log, having observed in cartoons where lumberjacks bounce across lakes on floating timber. My grandfather tells me it's not a good idea. The water is too fast and there are too many sharp rocks below the surface.

“This lake used to be a trickling stream when I was your age.” He points, “This used to be a wheat field.”

Nelson Lake came into existence in the early 1970s when Minnkota Power Cooperative developed a coal-fired power plant to power homes in eastern North Dakota and western Minnesota. By 1970, Young 1, and 1977, Young 2, the energy stations, began generating electricity for distribution. The total unit output is 705 megawatts, powered by more than four million tons of lignite coal every year. Nelson Lake was created as a type of natural coolant for the very hot process of burning enough coal to create and distribute electricity—the added benefit for residents in south-central North Dakota was a hot spring available in a cold weather climate.

My childhood obsession, bluegill are a palm-sized fish. Marked by a black circle on the edge of its gill, a bluegill receives its name due to the slash of blue, resembling eye shadow, across its head and chin. Striped with five to nine vertical bars, ranging in color from forest green to puce, these fish can resemble a watery relative of the zebra. The belly of the bluegill is cut by a yellow or deep autumn-orange that extends across its abdomen. When held horizontally, the bluegill approach the thinness of a pancake. The fish, to me, look odd. They're temperamental and indecisive.

Breaking the tension of the water with a bobber, I wait for the bluegill to eat my worm. Like a child taking small bites of a cookie, slowly eating until it is gone, bluegill will nibble around my hook, slowly and methodically ripping the worm apart, bit by bit, until only a small circle of flesh is left on the hook. The entire time this feeding frenzy is occurring, my bobber will glide across the surface of the water, leading me to believe that, any moment, I will catch a fish. My bobber suddenly stops. *What happened?*

“You’re probably out of worm,” my grandfather chimes. I hoist my bobber from the water, noticing a golden flash. Damn, my worm is gone.

At thirteen I receive my own boat, a pond-hopper. Nine feet long and green in color, my boat is ideal for fishing small lakes, large ponds, and streams. Powered by a trolling motor, the boat creates its own gentle wake as it takes me to places my father’s large, eighteen-foot long boat cannot. I feel like I am now a hunter, a rite of manhood. I am in control. I can stalk elusive piscatorial prey to my heart’s fulfillment.

Where Square Butte Creek flows into Nelson Lake a large swath of cattails and reeds bob in the wind. During fishing excursions with my father, I noticed a waterway that leads into a grove of cattails—but where? Now, with the power of my own boat, channeling Lewis and Clark, I strike out to find a new passageway in the small Square Butte Creek.

I sidle up near the entrance, swing the trolling motor to a sharp left to pivot the boat right, and blast into the green-walled world of reeds and water. The reeds are tight, like books on a shelf, and sway back and forth in the wind. I am met with a symphony of birdsong, but see no birds. I slow the boat. I don’t want to get in a place where I cannot maneuver back into the main channel of the Square Butte Creek. The inlet narrows, bringing walls of reeds closer to the boat. I have no idea how long the inlet is; my slow speed slows

time. Ahead there is a barricade of rushes. Damn. I look behind me and slowly back up. I hit the motor full throttle, which throws me backward in my seat, heading fast towards the green wall. I break through and find myself in an oasis—an island of water—in the reeds.

Thwack! A beaver signals to the other animals that an intruder has just arrived. Red-winged blackbirds and finches sway on the reeds in the afternoon wind. I look behind me, the tee box for hole number one at the Square Butte Creek golf course is visible. Has anyone has been monitoring my expedition this entire time?

Why did I come here? Is it the lure of larger, more elusive fish, of fish that may never have been caught before. Maybe it's that I want a world to myself, a world that is walled in by green reeds, bobbing cattails, and water. Maybe it's traveling to a place where only I've been, a place I can tell my father and grandfather about with expert knowledge, revealing detail by detail the uniqueness of this waterhole.

My line goes taut—fish on. After a few seconds, my rod tip striking through the air like an electric current, I land a crappie—my favorite fish—and hold it in the afternoon sun; it glints like a silver coin, its eyes, large and black like onyx, unblinking. I slide the fish into the water, release my thumb from its mouth, and watch its fins propel it forward.

I set my fishing rod down in my boat, turn off the motor, and slowly let the wind push me across this lake within a stream. At thirteen I have not yet begun reading in earnest, having not yet acquired my adulthood hobbies of music and literature, and am left rolling along the water, soaking in the serenity of this solitary moment.

Thwack! The beaver is back and I take it as my cue to leave. Muskrat skirt the reed edges, dip under the surface, reappearing several dozen feet further along the reed line. I push through the reed wall again, this time navigating the inlet faster, and return to the stream bank, hauling my boat out of the water and into the back of my small pickup truck.

My sister and I talk about Nelson Lake—about the fish my grandfather would keep, throw on ice, and then eat—with trepidation.

“What do you think we were exposed to?” Tanya asks, “Did you ever swallow the water?”

My eyes close. Please remember you didn’t, I say to myself over and over. You didn’t swallow the water.

“A few times,” I say.

My sister stares at me. “I think I did, too,” she says. We exchange stories. Tanya was not much of a fisherman. She is ten years older than me and spent more time at Nelson Lake, drinking and partying in high school, swimming in winter, and riding in friends’ boats. I moved away from Center at fifteen, the age many friends began driving and were on the verge of underage drinking, and so I missed the sodden rituals of Nelson Lake.

“What do you think is in that lake?” she asks.

I stare beyond her, looking out through the wall, into the nothingness of thought. Nothing, surely nothing, I think to myself. A sting of fear hits my throat.

Like many other lakes in North Dakota, Nelson Lake is littered with beer bottles, potato chip wrappers, used condoms, and dead fish. The surrounding hills and pastures empty into Square Butte Creek and Nelson Lake before flowing on to the Missouri.

I now think beyond deer urine and cow manure, focusing on the smokestack.

I think back to Kyle’s birthday party, to Connor and me pumping and pulling towards Minnkota Power. What was it we wanted to see? I wanted to be near power, find where the water was sucked in, follow the heat of my desire into the hot water of the power



plant. I wanted to see where my mother's money came from, what kept food on our table, see the manmade feature that warmed the water and burned the coal. I wanted to see power.

“Tanya, do you think anything bad went into the water because of Minnkota Power?” I ask.

“I don't think anything good can come from a lake that never freezes,” she replies.

My veins and arteries are now passageways of Nelson Lake. As a child, soaked and saturated by its warm waters, I frolicked while fishing and swimming. The lakes of our childhoods connect to the larger lakes of our beings. Water now troubles me.

## CONFLUENCE

The Yellowstone and Missouri rivers meet in North Dakota like a Y-bone—the Missouri from the west, the Yellowstone from the south, both from alpine springs nestled in the intermountain West.

The Yellowstone slips in sideways, a smooth ride into the mighty Missouri. Lewis knew the Missouri better, and Clark the Yellowstone—this, the confluence, their rendezvous point.

But that's not quite right.

Geologically speaking, the Missouri is a young river still searching for its bed. The channels change, the silt shifts, and all the while the winter snowpack high in the Gallatin Mountains swells eddies, fills in whirlpools, speeds up the Big Muddy.

In its infancy, the Missouri was three rivers—one flowed north to the Hudson Bay, another flowed south near the Mississippi, and another ran west to east. In the last ice age, a glacier pressed and pushed sediment, rolled rocks against mud, against water, and changed the course of these rivers. When the glacier began to retreat, when it created potholes on the prairie, the largest water highway on the continent was unveiled, was revealed.

The two rivers, as short as 150 years ago, met head-on. More than ripples, beyond gurgling, rapids roared at the confluence, made passage difficult for steams, keelboats, and canoes. No rocks below to break wooden bows, just a constant washing machine chirring and churning, waiting to overturn anything coming its way.

Now, the two rivers meet—the line where the Yellowstone pours into the Missouri a fusion. That's how it looks when you stand in the sand, slowly sinking, the sun streaking

over your back, staring at the meeting point—a ripple, a squiggle, nature in itself—as two western rivers merge into one.

In the afternoons, during summer pelicans sun themselves at the confluence, a white sheet of feathers flapping against a brown background. And toads the size of nickels burrow into baking mud, search for cool cover. Cottonwoods flicker in the afternoon breeze.

If you lie down at the confluence, silt your belly, legs, and arms, push yourself out to the point like a turtle and submerge your head, you can hear the Yellowstone speak in one ear and the Missouri whisper in the other. That two rivers, together, pull you towards the Missouri, float you like a log, and roll you towards the sea.

In fall, fishermen weighed-down with treble hooks, thick fishing line, and sturdy rods line the Yellowstone and Missouri. This is paddlefish country.

The paddlefish, a large, slate gray fish, is ugly. Tiny onyx-colored eyes lodged in its head, a heterocercal tail balances its head, and a large, paddle-shaped snout protrudes from its face. The snout is shoveled into the bottom of the silt-heavy rivers to dislodge roots, small shellfish, and anything meaty.

The paddlefish is not a delicacy. But it is a hell of a fight. Fishermen cinch treble hooks to monofilament and hurl them far from the riverbanks. Once the hooks begin to sink, the fishermen start to pump their poles, ripping the razor-sharp hooks through the water. When a paddlefish is snagged, the fishermen holler; hooks scurry across the river's surface, and the fight ensues. The paddlefish does not want to be hooked—the barb lodged into its muscle tissue dislodged only by chance, or if the fish can take so much line and break it from the pole. More often than not this doesn't happen.

Depending on its size, the paddlefish fights for hours—swims upstream, then swings down, the tug and pull of the rod tires the fish. Eventually the whiz of the reel ceases and the rot tip bends—the heavy pump-and-reel commences. The fish has given up or, due to stress, died.

I suppose I mean to say this place, this gathering spot of water, contains significance. More to the point: This place contains story—a story of two men sent by a redheaded president in search of the watery Northwest Passage. A story of a seventy million year-old fish that sucks and slurps zooplankton. And a story of convergence, of joining, of confluence.

Humans relish stories. We repeat stories to stay alive. We dig through stacks of yellow paper, search for something sensational, something memorable. Like this: When a lady from out East asked a leathery Missouri River captain why he drank the silt-heavy water of the Big Muddy, the captain replied, “Cause it scours out your bowels, ma’am.” Or this one: A thousand miles beyond the Confluence, when debating which side of the Columbia River to build Fort Clatsop, Lewis and Clark put it to a vote. Yale, Clark’s slave, and Sakakawea, the Shoshone guide woman, participated, marking the first time in this country’s history a black man’s and a Native American woman’s vote counted as equal to a white man’s.

The New York journalist Horace Greely wrote upon seeing the Missouri that “Its color and consistency are those of thick milk porridge: you could not discern an egg in a glass of it.” So I keep gazing for the story of my life, an egg in a glass of river water.

For me, the Confluence serves as the best framework to understand myself—I, like the Missouri, shift and change as life, like the Yellowstone, continues to come at me from the side.

## THE STORY OF CHANGE: A LETTER TO A NEPHEW

At five, you build your own putting greens, spell your name in uncertain, quaky letters, and wrestle with your brothers. And I'm writing to you now as a gift from the past for the future because, at five, you help remind me to give way to my emotions, to my passions, my fears, my joys.

You and I come from the same soil—the dark, dank earth of western North Dakota. You and I have scraped knees across the same land, salted the same earth with our tears, swam the same streams. Our bond goes beyond blood, goes deeper to the humus of North Dakota.

In your life you will know that the earth is warming quicker than anticipated, that more people than should populate the planet—largely, people who look like you and me take more than we should—that capitalism will have run its course. Climate change will not be an abstraction for you.

At five, you like to paint, to draw pictures, to produce art. But popular opinion, the world *out there*, will try to tell you that the world does not need another artist. In this regard the World is wrong. Some would shift the phrasing and say that the World doesn't care if there is another artist. Again, in this regard, the World is wrong. Art hits you in the gut, it shifts your vision; art pushes you to *feel* and to feel deeply.

Here is a story about the importance of art. The University of Wyoming paid a sculptor to create an installation on campus. The sculptor gathered bits of dead pine trees killed by pine beetles. Due to the lengthening of warm weather, the pine beetle lives longer and loves to

munch on pine trees. It nibbles and gnaws on the luscious pine tree, eventually eating away so much of the tree that the tree dies away.

The sculptor created a whirlpool of dead pine parts pulling towards the center of the sculpture. In the middle of the sculpture was a black, shiny piece of coal—the very item that helps increase the earth’s temperature. Coal—together with natural gas and oil—accounts for seventy percent of Wyoming’s economy. Coal helps fill the coffers of the University of Wyoming. Coal helps send students to study at the University of Wyoming. Coal helps miners’ children study Cicero and Socrates, Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Ann Bradstreet, James Baldwin, Rachel Carson, Picasso, Kahlo, O’Keefe, the piano, ballet, study medicine, engineering, botany, physics; it helps put bread on the table. And coal sent me to college.

Coal lines our family pocketbooks. Your grandparents worked at coal-fired power plants. Your great-grandpa spent his entire career in the coal industry.

Some would say we should be thankful for coal. I disagree. We should be thankful for friends, for family, for birdsong, for fall colors, for our health. I am thankful your grandparents provided for me—but I am not thankful we benefitted from the fossil fuel industry. During childhood, I watched the glimmer of dragline lights lull me to sleep as we drove home from visiting relatives; too, the power plant, with its large smokestack of blinking lights, oriented me like a compass both by day and by night—it was my Polaris. Coal was the center of my life.

But now we know that coal not only powers our lights, it also warms the planet. Coal is the dirtiest form of energy. And it seems unfathomable to some—even some in our family—that I should speak out against coal. To some, it feels like a type of treason, to others it seems like a mild lunacy—speak out against the very thing that put me in piano lessons, paid for my saxophone, sent me to Yellowstone National Park.

My father's two brothers worked in coal—one at Falkirk mine, the other at Mid-Dakota Utilities, which provides electricity created by coal. One of my uncles on my mother's side has spent his entire career in coal.

There is an old adage, To whom much is given, much is expected. I have received much because of coal—baseball gloves, painting lessons, vacations to Disney World, a family lake home—on and on the list could go. I have also received a warmer planet because of coal. I have watched the prairie, ripped from verdant land, struggle to regrow because of coal mining. I swam in a lake that never freezes in North Dakota, a lake whose green water helped cool turbines in the power plant where your grandmother worked, where your mom and I worked in the summers between college. It is because of this—all of this—that I believe I am obligated to speak out against coal. Only now in adulthood can I see my life surrounded by coal. Minnkota Power, Falkirk Mine, Coyote Station, Antelope Valley, UPA, Leland Olds Station. Some power plants, bricked on the Missouri River, were anchored navigational points during childhood fishing trips; some were nestled in the mixed-grass prairie west of my hometown.

The installation at the University of Wyoming was eventually removed and destroyed. The administration found the art that powerful. You see, art does not speak truth *to* power, art speaks truth *about* power. The power in art is in its ability to move us, to reframe our received wisdom, to shift course in a strong current of complacency and complicity.

When I was your age, a cartoon about a wallaby named Rocko and his friend Heiffer, a cow, was on television. I watched the show regularly. One song from the show sticks with me: “R-E-C-Y-C-L-E, recycle. C-O-N-S-E-R-V-E, conserve. Don't you P-O-L-L-U-T-E, pollute the rivers, sky, or seas—or else you're going to get what you deserve.”

But the truth is, you don't deserve this. You don't deserve a ripped apart world, a world where we don't know if the polar bear will make it, where the pallid sturgeon will be extinct by the time you read this letter. A world where more people will be born and more demanded of the land we desperately depend upon. At five, you deserve to play with Tonka trucks in your sandbox, have staring contests, build putting greens with buckets and sticks and plywood. You deserve to laugh, to roll in the grass with your brothers. You deserve to live in your imagination and dream.

Coal transforms. When compressed, diamonds. When smoldered, scoria. Strawberry-colored rock, scoria stipples the Badlands near your home. We use scoria to create backcountry roadways, line garden beds, and we watch it paint the prairie in rays of red in the morning and at the close of the day.

When I was small, I kept a glistening piece of coal locked in a chest. I read somewhere—or heard from a teacher—that coal, over time, changes into luminous diamonds. Something dirty renders, eventually, into something precious.

When struck by lightning coal sizzles. Throughout the Badlands there are black strips of coal that ring buttes—but those luscious strawberry strips that catch the eye are the charred remains of coal cooked for centuries, baked for millennia. For centuries as the coal cooked, Indians used the smoke from coal seams as guideposts, as markers for meetings, as beacons across the dusty prairie. For centuries, the prairie smoked. As our ancestors came West, they smelled sulfur waft across the broken Badlands, perfume their clothes, flavor their bread. We can, when we want, transform.

Socketed in the southwest corner of North Dakota are the columnar junipers. These shrubs grow vertically, and when the first growth is plucked from the dusty soil, the junipers



scatter their seeds. These seeds grow. And the second growth, instead of reaching high for the heavens, spreads wide. This is a fitting visual for the present time. Many people in this society reach high and yearn for more—more security, more money, yearn for more things. But we must be like the second growth, which spreads wide, which reaches *out* towards others rather than up for itself. The *Tao Te Ching* reminds us,

A society that rises too high  
will fall;  
that extends too far  
will contract;  
that gathers too much  
will lose it all.  
This is the natural way of things.

Force will not be necessary.  
The renewal we seek is part  
of the natural way of life.

Our work will be hidden and subtle  
but it will bring healing to all.

\* \* \*

Right now, the Missouri River, a stone's throw from your house, carries radioactive material in its waters. Right now, flares fume across the prairie, burn natural gas, streak the night sky orange and yellow and red. Right now, the beautiful bentonite buttes in North Dakota are cut open, pressed for oil, made to bleed black blood. I do not know then how to protect this place. I do not know how to protect you. I thumb through my pocket guidebook of plants in North Dakota and wonder which pages we will rip out in the future, which funerals for flowers will go unnoticed, wonder which petals will go extinct. Beyond this, too, I wonder what land will lay in ruin in western North Dakota—salted, sterile, and left to rot.

I have salted the earth with my own tears. The godwits no longer nest near Lake Sakakawea, now marked with pump jacks. Antelope rarely bound across the badlands. And

the sacred sage grouse, diminished, is a ghost on the prairie, its leks overtaken by fracking sites. To watch a sage grouse do the sagebrush step is a marvelous thing—the males rumble around the lek like bumper cars, coo and call to the elusive females. Their pointed brown tails fan out like spikes, reach toward the sky, as their white underbelly brushes the ground. And then: the males heave their yolk-colored chests towards the sky, call out, hold nothing back, all in the hope that the line will continue, that sage grouse chicks will come, ready to do the sagebrush step.

The world needs more curious people. In life we're told to be humble, to not stand out, to get along well with others. This is prudent. But curiosity is not boastful, it is not harsh or grating, it is an inquisitiveness into the way of things, which is to say a pathway into ourselves. Perhaps what I can best recommend to you is a practice, a ritual—something you do in your own time. I do not mean attend church, though you might; I do not mean meditate, though you may find it helpful. What I mean is something that stirs you, is solitary in some way, and that that stirring will move you towards peace, towards your passions, anger, joy, stir you towards relationships. The common narrative in the world is to get as much for yourself, keep it from others, and protect you and your loved ones, others be damned. This is cold. A person who's not generous, patient, kind, a person who is only self-interested, lacks curiosity and kindness and leads a small life. The greatest challenge of your life is to know yourself—to unearth your curiosities, your passions, your vocation. This challenge is like feeding a fire: it begins with small, delicate kindling; it begins with attention and care; and it ends with a glow and warmth that is contagious.

My fire led me into the fray over fracking. While I learned about Kierkegaard and Chaucer, Rushdie and Heraclitus, the largest shale play in North America boomed. I learned

about virtue ethics as pump jacks were placed across the prairie. I studied Nordic sagas as the land Norwegians “settled” was again ripped open for sweet Bakken crude. I was away from home when the land was raped, the place I love destroyed.

In college, I learned what it means to have a place, what it means to be of a place, and the privilege of being placed on the prairie. So many of us spend our lives attempting to escape ourselves rather than running towards our own becoming, rather than listening to our own wildness.

The prairie imprinted itself upon my life; it is the framework for how I understand the world. Here is what I mean: Before the prairie blossoms, before you or I see a blade, grasses send down their roots to test the climate of the soil, debating whether or not the right conditions are met for them to grow, for them to call this home. Then—and only then—do we begin to see the grass emerge from the surface, break through the clay soil of the American West.

You have been planted west of the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian, that land of little water, parched, harsh and starkly beautiful. In time, you will test the soil, consider your own desires, and you will choose whether or not to stay. Where one is born does not necessarily mean it is where one will remain.

The prairie is a community of roots—intertwined, webbed, and dirty. Together, the grasslands hold other plants and secure soil in place. The prairie does good work: it sends down nutrients, increases minerals, provides sweet clover for bison and sturdy passageways for prairie dogs. The prairie is more diverse than the Amazon rainforest.

But, to the untrained eye, the prairie is open, vast, intimidating, desolate—and perhaps worst of all—seemingly empty. The prairie, though, is home to badgers, eagles, meadowlarks, bobcat, turkeys, pallid sturgeon; milkvetch, buffalo berry, primrose, green,

Jerusalem, lance-leaved, little, mountain, pasture, salt, and white sage—and that’s just in North Dakota. The prairie holds stories of Cowboys and Indians, of Lewis and Clark, of Custer, of Roosevelt, of Sitting Bull, of Sakakawea. The prairie provides a lens into our history—of settlement, of greed. The prairie sends water to the muddy Missouri River, the once fiercest river of the continent, where Father Pierre-Jean Desmet said in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, “I fear the sea, but all the storms and other unpleasant things I have experienced in four different ocean voyages did not inspire me with so much terror as the navigation of the somber, treacherous, muddy Missouri.”

Change, too, is constant. Euro-American immigrants “settled” the prairie; the United States government attempted to decimate American Indians; the prairie, cut into sod bricks, was used for building houses; dams were constructed—and attempted to tame the Missouri River; oil was discovered; populist politics originated on the prairie; Charlie Russell painted the fleeting way of life of the American Indians; coal was ripped from the ground; Peggy Lee was born; Mr. Bubble was created; Louise Erdrich wrote lyric prose of the prairie. You were born. And you are the *ādāmas* of the prairie.

The Badlands are our backbone, sage our perfume, and the sediment of the Missouri is the grit we scrub over our bodies. We are of this place.

Perhaps that is why I have entered the fight over fracking. The Oil Empire destroys what I love most—the prairie. Air chemicaled, water radiated, buttes battered, soil salted, roots ripped apart, people rendered speechless. At times like this, and in times to come, it is easy to keep quiet, to trust the Big Guys, to be optimistic.

But there is a difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is bland, beige, and lazy. If I’m optimistic, I stake nothing, bet nothing; I do not invest myself in the outcome.

Hope, as Emily Dickinson said, is the thing with feathers. Hope is fierce. Hope is mysterious. Hope is the mouth guard you wrap around your teeth before entering the game. Hope is radical, takes us beyond ourselves to invest in each other, in the future, and in the world. Hope is what makes governments, corporations, and tyrants nervous. Hope is bound in your being.

I am not optimistic about our future, but I do have hope—if not for us, then the future of the planet. Right now you and I live in the Sixth Great Extinction the planet has witnessed. Scientists tell us that every fifteen to twenty minutes a species goes extinct. In the time it takes me to write this letter to you, numerous insects, plants, reptiles, fish, birds, quadrupeds, and bacteria will be gone, erased from the page of the planet's history. I grieve—for you, for me, for the unborn. We are impoverished. I do not mean to convince you of blind faith that everything will be okay. During your lifetime water will be more valuable than oil, more people will inhabit a harsher, scarcer planet, the choir of birds will have lost several members, the poles will be ice-free in summer, and I will tell you about the pallid sturgeon and it will be as if I have seen Tyrannosaurus Rex. It is necessary to grieve over this.

To distract you, people will say technology will save us. Remember: technology brought us the atom bomb, weapons of mass destruction. Technology made us reliant upon corporations. Technology brought us fracking.

Still others will say that technology will bring jobs. Jobs are different from careers and are different from wealth. A job is a piece of work, a task. It is employment. A task, a job, employment can end; they can be taken away. A career is a course, it's one's progress through life, a profession, an occupation. In its intransitive state, career means to rush wildly.

No one rushes wildly towards his job, though many, if given the chance, hurl themselves towards their occupations, their obsessions, their passions. Remember this: a job does not equal wealth.

Some would have you believe that wealth equates to what is dollarable. This is a lie. How many dollars equate to the right amount of pleasure? How many dollars is a wild prairie rose worth? The number of items human let alone increases global wealth. Perhaps wealth—the greatest wealth—equates to the ultimate habitability of the planet. Currently, we are losing return on investment.

As time passes we see more clearly how much the wool has been draped over our eyes. It was released in 2016 that ExxonMobil knew about climate change in the 1950s—thirty years before James Hansen testified before Congress, alerting the country and the world to the change humans put into motion on the planet: the changing of the climate.

I have mulled over corporations—their responsibility and our complicity in the world's destruction. In America, so many jobs are sent elsewhere to poorer countries where people whose skin is different from yours and mine live, work white people would rather not do. When we think of jobs that need to be done to pad and cushion our comfortable lives, we must now ask if we would subject our children to those jobs, if I would be content to have you, my nephew, do it. If the answer is No, then we have our answer. The reductionist economics of the world, however, do not work this way—we expose people to particulate matter, flared natural gas, pesticides; we spill oil in the oceans; we harvest too many krill. We, as a culture, do not push for the creativity we are capable of.

In small pockets our creativity shines. In 2016, the world's first solar-powered plane flew; the country's first completely solar-powered hotel is open in Oberlin, Ohio; and the Bullitt

Center in Seattle is, perhaps, the most incredible building on the planet—designed completely within its bioregion, no building material comes from more than six hundred miles away, the building is powered by solar in a city where little sun shines; if the building gets too warm, shades automatically drop to help cool it; at no point are you more than thirty feet away from natural sunlight—not only so the light can get to you, but so you can get to the light—and the building pushed forward new legislation in King County. The Bullitt Center collects and purifies rainwater on site so when you drink it, you’re drinking recycled rainwater. One of the best aspects of the building is that the toilets are compostable. Sixteen months later, the human waste is hauled to area farms for fertilization. Imagine: our shit is useful.

This is the way I am fierce for us to live on this planet—it’s creative, it’s philosophical (remember creating a building not just so the light gets to you but so *you* can get to the light?), it’s relational, meaning we situate ourselves in a more right relationship with nature, it’s active (remember new legislation introduced to help create the building?).

Beyond this type of technological innovation, which many would have us believe is the only place now where creativity resides, is also a type of remembering. On the prairie in central Kansas a group of researchers is studying how best to reimagine agriculture. Instead of large monocultures, Wes Jackson proposes that agriculture might be best practiced if it imitates the prairie—a type of biologically diverse community of plants that feed nutrients back into the soil, rather than take nutrients out, and create a more resilient type of farming. This method of agriculture would insulate from large-scale crop failures, shield against the invasive insects targeting specific crops, and slowly, slowly, create more of the topsoil the world so desperately depends upon.

These type of innovations—or the best type of innovations—begin as a type of dream or reimagining. The world in which we live does not encourage time for silence, stillness, or reflection. In your life and throughout your life, you must be fierce for time to yourself, to remember that you, too, have dreams, have ideas for how we might better live on the planet.

Throughout your life you will encounter naysayers, some of which might be your closest friends. You may listen to them, but listen deeper to the chambers of where the Right and the Good exist. In an odd way, many people will hurl the “money” comment towards you. “That costs too much.” “We can’t afford to do it.” The reality is we can’t afford *not* to change how we live on the planet. Right now, food deserts exist in inner city Detroit, meaning a largely black population does not have easy access to safe, healthy, and nutritious food. Right now, the waterways in Iowa are not safe to swim in due to nitrate runoff from industrial farming—and if they’re not safe for swimming, are they safe for drinking? What are the *true* costs of what we are doing?

But money is not the issue, though many people will attempt to convince you that it is. The issue is a lack of imagination. In childhood we play, we imagine. You and I pretend we’re pirates, rhinoceros, chimpanzees. But it is more difficult for me to imagine that I am these things than for you to imagine that you are a pirate, rhinoceros, or a chimp. Imagination, like caring for a garden, needs attention, care, and cultivation. This is hard work and it is good work. Once one imagines, and if he imagines well, there is a responsibility to share these imaginings with the wider world. We are more impoverished without the sharing of painters, writers, musicians, poets, and dancers.



Imagining can push us into uncomfortable territory—it means we must look at the world as it is and then perceive new ways of being, of operating, of existing. James Baldwin wrote about this in regards to race, though I believe it applies also to our lack of imagination and notions related to environmentalism: “It began to seem to me that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one’s own life, accept these injustices as commonplace, but must fight them with all one’s strength.” Now the road before us is great—so great, in fact, that the human species now displays posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms before the Big Event—whatever the Big Event is—even happens, a type of pre-PTSD. This shows us the world is anxious, that many of us are afraid. And my worry is that this leads to the type of complacency Baldwin speaks about, or worse, it leads to apathy. This places us, then, right where the Powers That Be want us: it makes us reactive; we lose our agency. To react in this way strips us of our power and pushes us into tight spots; it means the ball is not in our court. But the truth is this: The Powers That Be are more afraid of what is to come, indeed what is happening, than we are. The Powers That Be want us to rely on extravagant consumerism, want us to be distracted with commercials, feed us with propaganda that fuels our fear of people who look and act different from us. The Powers That Be want us to sit back and watch the world burn, believing the entire time that there’s not a damn thing we can do about it. This is wrong, both morally and spiritually. Ours is an age of great consequence. What we do now, what we dream now, has not been done before, and the very habitability of the planet is before us. We should not cower in the corner and wait for the Great Moment to come, we

should, instead, undermine and overthrow, if necessary, the status quo. We should dream big dreams in our small corners of the world because, after all, a one-size-fits-all mentality divorces us from our place—from the soil, sky, and water of our individual bioregions. This would be easier if so many hurdles were not in our way—but that is also another difference: there is an *our* on our side.

Throughout your life you will be sold a type of radical individualism, along with a healthy dose of American Exceptionalism. Both of these are poison. Like the prairie, if we are parsed into smaller pieces, we will become separated, sterile, our actions will be futile, and we will become speechless, unable to remain rooted to our communities and to each other. Strength lives in community. Wonder lives among others—other humans, among birds and reptiles, trees and oceans. Compassion lives in our neighborliness. With exceptionalism and individualism—like all –isms—we have been sold a lot of shoddy goods; it is time to trade them in for something better.

And this is where the “our” comes into play. In our culture the focus is on the *I*, on the *me*. If I fail, it’s because of something *I* did—or didn’t do. If I don’t get the job, it must be because of some deficiency in me. If I’m not pretty enough, if I’m not strong enough, if I’m not successful enough...And this snowballs into our environmentalism. We are reduced to consumers and led to believe that it’s up to us to shop our way out of this predicament. If it were that easy, I would take you on a shopping spree.

Before being arrested, Bill McKibben, the noted author and environmental activist, was asked by a young man, *What can I do to help save the environment?* McKibben’s response was simple: Stop saying *I*.

Here is an unpopular idea: I believe the human species will go extinct. Your knee may have just jerked or your eye twitched. In some way you reacted. Most people will want to argue with that statement, will want to disprove it, will want to say that we'll colonize Mars—look at what colonization has done on *this* planet—will want to say I'm wrong. I've watched both your great-grandmothers go extinct. Numerous friends of mine have gone—and will continue to go—extinct. You will watch me go extinct. Extinction is the one certainty in life. If, at a café, you make the claim that the human species will go extinct, your friends will frown, their faces will turn sallow. But if you remark that the pallid sturgeon, the sage grouse, the Bengal tiger face extinction, people will merely remark that that is sad. They'll continue to eat their salad without pause. We must face the fact that we are self-interested and that when I say we must acknowledge our own extinction I mean White People. I mean people who've created an economy that makes its money by unmaking the world, that have developed and perpetuated systems of slavery, that because of our inventive minds, we took Alfred Noble's creation of dynamite and reimagined its use to hurt others. White People—our people—believe us to be extraordinary. If we would look soberly into the mirror, we would weep, we would beg forgiveness, we would commit ourselves towards new ways of living, and towards compassion.

And this is where a radical type of love comes into play. I loved you before you had a sense of yourself; I loved the idea of you—you as a person, as a feeling animal, as a being to bring joy into my life. I loved—and still do—to delight in you. But my love extends beyond you—to your home on the prairie, the Northern Great Plains; my love extends to the stories we share and the ones to come. When I first held you, I was head-over-heels for you. I committed myself to you and your protection—and that protection extends to your place and the place you call home. This is a risky endeavor.

Terry Tempest Williams writes of love—its complexities and our own fears—in her essay “Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough”: “I think of my own desires, how cautious I have become with love. It is a vulnerable enterprise to feel deeply and I may not survive my affections. Andre Breton says, ‘Hardly anyone dares to face with open eyes the great delights of love.’ If I choose not to become attached to nouns—a person, place, or thing—then when I refuse an intimate’s love or hoard my spirit, when a known landscape is bought, sold, and developed, chained or grazed to a stubble, or a hawk is shot and hung by its feet on a barbed wire fence, my heart cannot be broken because I never risked giving it away.”

It is better to be supple than to be hard. Suppleness does not imply weakness—it gives, it absorbs, it reacts. As people age, as people fill with fear, as people grow cold, they become hard. Hardness might appear strong, but it develops and resides in fear. It is the enemy of the Good.

In a world that is hotter, more crowded, and a world with the potential to become meaner, we must redouble our generosity, our kindness, our ability to love. Remember: Love is a verb; that is, it is an action more than a state of being. To love we must enact love—we must choose it—and, as Terry Tempest Williams says, that action is risky, it may come with a cost: you might get hurt. I do not wish for you to get hurt, but I do wish for you to grow into a person of principles, of ethics, of action.

But with action—with movement—we also need models of ideas. Time in thought, time in solitude—whether walking or writing—has been my own best anodyne to a busy and confusing world. You may need to leave the world of people at times so that you may recommit to the world of yourself, your work, your wider world. Undoubtedly, you will find

your own ways of thinking, you'll find writers that stir your emotions and fuel your thoughts. Here is a passage that fuels my own.

In 1910, Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech entitled "Citizen in the Republic" at the Sorbonne in Paris; the following section is known as "The Man in the Arena."

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who pints out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory or defeat."

Dare to feel deeply. Feeling, at different times, goes out of vogue in this country and is replaced by objectivity. Some believe it is better to be objective than subjective. I call bullshit. You experience the world differently and separately from others. You must listen to this difference—be able to articulate it, honor it, and speak it towards others. It does not mean your subjective experience is better than others but it does mean it is yours—yours to hold, to witness, to develop and defend, yours to love. This subjective experience will promote a deeper awareness and sensitivity in you; it will make you a more complete human. In these spiritual matters be patient, they will take time. Be like a young river—search for your bed, your deep channel; play to the edges and change course; whirl, swirl, and roil when necessary. Continue to flow.

To be a river will help you in moments of anger—stay the course and commit to a deepening change. Going deeper, rather than flooding outward, is what we now need. The systems upon which Western Civilization created its great wealth—systems of domination, of slavery, colonization, economic disparity, ecocide, genocide, and now the proliferation of ignorance, have run their course. We know better.

The world you have grown up in is drastically different from the one of my own childhood—screens populate and proliferate our lives, you have grown up in a large city compared to my small town of six hundred. In my own generation my life feels more akin to friends' grandparents' upbringings than their own: I spent my childhood fishing along muddy creek banks, sending small wooden boats over gurgling rapids. I caught tadpoles in tiny slack water pools. Though I was not encouraged to read books, I was encouraged to pay attention, to notice my surroundings.

This year a friend of mine received an honorary degree from a school of environmental science and forestry. In his remarks, Chip drew attention to the Oxford English Dictionary and its decision to eliminate certain words in the edition for young readers, making room for new words. Some of the eliminated words include *acorn*, *buttercup*, *fern*, *heron*, *kingfisher*, *newt*, *otter*, and *pasture*. These words were bedrock in my young life. Behind our house was a pasture, otters swam in the nearby Missouri River, herons struck fish in the shallow water of Nelson Lake, ferns grew in tree-laden coulees, and acorns fell from neighborhood trees. It is as if my own framework for understanding the world has been erased.

Here are some of the new words in the dictionary: *blog*, *celebrity*, *broadband*, *bullet-point*, *voice-mail*, and *committee*.

The new words paint a picture of a cold, sterile office in my mind's eye while the words that were replaced are textured, allude to the possibility of experience. They are rich and varied words.

Chip went on to highlight a statement by the noted thinker, Rebecca Solnit: "Joy is a revolutionary force, and so is beauty, because what we are trying to defeat is so many kinds of ugliness. Remember what's beautiful is remembering why you try, what's at stake, who we could be, and who else is out there." These who's and what's and whys Solnit mentions are important because they either take us beyond and out of ourselves, or they push us deeper into the caverns of our own beings to grapple with ourselves and how we interact with the world.

This deepening of self is difficult in a world that appears hell-bent on reducing us to dollars, to our bank accounts. If you can resist this—if you can resist the sales, the buy-one-get-one-frees—then you will have stood against one of the most insidious acts committed in the name of capitalism: you will have stood against the manipulation of your mind.

Your mind is your most beautiful gift. In your mind you hold the possibility of the world. Your mind is a coveted asset which capitalism seeks to control through commercials, through media, through the dead political language we hear today. To lose one's mind is to cede agency, it erases our sense of self.

As I've written this letter to you, I've stared at the San Andreas Fault. Each day I walk to my writing shed, coffee in hand, walk into the cedar-scented shed and commit words to paper, commit words to you. Each day here—each day—however fleeting, I have a moment where I confront death. It is not the death from bullets or war, starvation or poverty, but death from a very deep primal force—the splitting open of the earth. I am literally writing on the

edge. I came here to Point Reyes Station to work on poems and essays on fracking, wildcard as it is, and instead began writing to your future self, to the person you will grow into. That commitment, that promise I made at your baptismal font—to bear you, to teach you, to love you—is manifest now in this letter. It is only through writing on the edge that I have seen a glimpse of reality. Each day egrets wade into the tidal cove, their long, scaled legs lift and lower in the salt slack water; oysters, small fish, shellfish are what they're after. And each day, too, a pair of quail scurry and coo across my path; hummingbirds sip nectar from the backyard flowers as turkey vultures ride the thermals. Yesterday, an osprey, carrying a limp black snake, flew over my shed. You see, so much life lives at the edge. And that is what we know now as the earth warms bit by bit before our eyes: so much relies on stability, certainty, and continuity.

But now everything has changed. The oceans acidify, seas rise, superstorms thread into the fabric of the world, land disappears. I say this not to scare you but to thrust us both into the real world we live in. Many believe it idealistic to imagine a way into and through this, but that, regardless, is where we are headed—we will lose species, we may very well lose our own, but we will lose more if we do not practice virtues, if we do not commit to the task before us. Staring at the Fault has taught me that by looking soberly at what will come, we are then free to act. We are free to act. Most people confuse freedom with means—*I have the freedom to travel wherever I like; I have the freedom to buy whatever I damn well please*. Freedom is spiritual; freedom is a state of being. A man in jail may be more free than a man on Wall Street.

This freedom, if you pursue it, will cost you—friends may grow envious, family distant. So many forget that at the end of his life Martin Luther King, Jr. was alone. The Black Movement deserted him due to his radical commitment to nonviolence. As King said,



“I take nonviolence to be my loftily wedded wife.” This is not an attempt to speak for Black History or to hijack that history, it is to help reveal how isolating, lonely, and filled with struggle this type of work—this type of radical self-work—can be.

The type of spiritual freedom I’m speaking about comes partly by chance, partly by hard work, and partly by education. True education is not preparation for a job, nor even for a career. Education is a life’s work and whose work is to shed light on history, on philosophy, on ethics, on literature, on our humanity, and most of all, on possibility. What is possible does not imply that you will have the answers or, in economic-speak, the solutions. This education, this searching, means that you will be more equipped and adept at shedding light, which will guide us and pull others in. This is a reverence for life—a reverence for what is good, for what is just, and for what is holy in the largest sense. If you dig deep enough, if you listen to the inner workings of your heart, this type of reverence will blossom. It will nourish you, it will feed you, and it will inspire you to keep going despite all that we face. This type of reverence is bedrock in an education that seeks to be prophetic and speak truth about power. An education is not a means of exclusion but a radical means of inclusion—it brings you into story, or a version of a story, which, if we’re on our toes, is always up for revision.

Love,

Uncle Taylor

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“Coming Alive” (*Coming Alive*, Ice Cube Press, 2017); “Swallowing Water” (as “Nelson Lake,” *On Second Thought*, Spring 2015); “The Story of Change” (forthcoming from Riverfeet Press).

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