Someone Else's Life: Columns from Insider Iowa

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Someone else’s life: Columns from Insider Iowa

by

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Mary Swander, Major Professor
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# Contents

## Prologue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strangers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Heredity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Rememberers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and White Life</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five Sisters</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heredity</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Someone Else’s Life</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moberly: A Reunion Story</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Easy</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrion</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concoctions</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matchsticks</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Naming Ceremony</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woods</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strangers

“How many strangers have we occasion to hold in our arms?”
-Annie Dillard

It could have easily been a story overheard on the No. 4 bus. The bus that runs from Southeast to Downtown: Portland, Oregon. One of countless tales that recycle themselves in the ears of strangers the way the buses circle their routes: knocking loose new bits of gravel with every turn and return. This particular story was relayed to me by a friend, but it is, for our purpose, an anonymous story – an anecdote that belongs to all of us and none of us at the same time.

It was night, or, more exactly, late evening. A young woman was cycling home from the climbing gym, where she had stopped after work to try and ‘send’ a route that had been troubling her for a couple of weeks. To send, in this case, being a term particular to the sport of rock climbing. There are myriad ways to make it to the top of a route on a climbing wall, different plastic holds that one can use to propel one’s body depending on size, strength, and center of gravity. When a climber has worked out the best way for him or herself to complete it, and does this successfully, the route is said to have been ‘sent’. The problem cast off, I suppose, like a letter in the mail – worries that have been penned down and put out there for someone else to solve.

She succeeded. She left the gym. She put her helmet on, turned on her headlight. She smiled as her feet pumped the pedals – her cheeks were flushed. The
familiar rhythm comforted her, the familiar route home. She was heading west on 20th Street toward the Clinton neighborhood, where she lived. The occasional car or SUV sped by her on her left, its back draft billowing her blond curls behind her and drying the sweat on the back of her neck.

It was late evening. She was cycling home from the gym. In front of her, merely a half block ahead, a sedan swerved around something in the road. She adjusted her headlight, furrowed her brow. A glint of red reflective plastic, a patch of peach skin. Her sweat glands kicked on again. She broke her easy rhythm and pedaled fast for twenty feet before braking, hard. She lifted her light, aluminum bicycle frame and dropped it curbside. It clattered, the chain rattled, but she didn’t hear a sound.

She knelt by the man, and here is where the details have gotten lost in the telling. But I’ll tell it as I imagine it: His clothes were shredded from where his body had skidded across the asphalt. His eyes were blue and slightly milky. His helmet was still attached. Blood dripped from both nostrils. She took hold of his hand, which was trembling. A glimpse of silver swerved around them. No sound of brakes, no sign of slowing down. Time took on the viscosity of syrup. The young woman screamed. The man tried to speak, but could not. Her curls were soaked once more with sweat, stuck to the back of her neck. She could think of nothing else to do but hold his hand. She might have whispered, hold on, would like to imagine that she had, but she cannot remember.
Eventually, someone stopped and help arrived. It was probably sooner than she thinks. But all she remembers is the metal swerving past them, not slowing down. His lips moving without making a sound. The story speeds through my ears like those cars sped by the young woman and the dying man. It travels the same streets as the car that hit him and left him there to die.

On the jog I take each morning, I pass by two trees with small signs attached to them: they are carved from white wood - each with a date and name handwritten in black marker. And on the ground, near the roots: a bunch of flowers in red, white and purple, that someone takes care to keep fresh. The flowers, like the stories, remain anonymous. They could have been placed there by anyone: the driver, a friend, a lover. A witness with blond curls. It was late evening, she was cycling home. It is morning. My body wants to jog on past these sites, these places haunted by failed helmets and bent metal frames. My feet want to continue in the familiar rhythm home, but I force myself to slow.
Heredity
The Rememberers

We are disconnected, my family and I, my people and I, as this narrative is disconnected. We are dust and stone, sand and bone – particles loosely circling each other in weakly magnetic fields. So how to forge a family amidst all these tenuous connections? I am one-quarter Irish, yet the only one in my family who seems to have retained their ability for storytelling. Thus I know little of my parents’ childhood, or of their life before me. I don’t even know very much of their life after me. My grandfathers both died before I was born, and they remain as ghosts, photos I’ve seen once or twice stuffed in the back of a dusty album. And so, while working on a memoir, I set out to find out who these enigmas were, these ancestors, these bits of wisdom coded and hidden in my blood.

As a start, I asked both of my parents to tell me about the grandfathers I never knew. They became my rememberers, letting me in on pieces of history that should have been mine but were denied to me by fate and circumstance. And as it turns out, by parts of our national history that intervened on the trajectories of many American families.

His friends called him ‘H’ . William Harold Samuel Clark. My paternal grandfather: born 1907, died 1977, 3 years before I was born. He grew up in Missouri, had an 8th grade education, and then worked road construction and married Lucille in 1929. He would have been 22 and she 19. My father says that they were very happy
together. They lived for a while, together with their 3 children and grandpa’s brother, his wife, and their four children, in a two room log cabin. During this time, Grandpa helped to build the U.S. Army training base Fort Leonard Wood, near Rolla, Missouri, where my father would go on to live for a few years in his sixties. I do not know if my father knew that his father had once lived in this town. But his move to Missouri enabled me to start college in Missouri instead of Iowa, and allowed for the circumstances to exist that would eventually cause that place to haunt me. And perhaps it was a seed, a mental note taken long ago when hearing his father talk that made my father take a job option in Rolla, Missouri even though others had come his way.

My father says that my grandfather was “the most honest man I ever knew”. He loved to play baseball with his children, and card and board games with family and friends. “He could look at a side of a hill and tell you how many yards of dirt you could take off it to build a road.” I imagine he was a kind, helpful, and loving man. A bit of a dreamer, like his youngest son. Like my father, he always regretted not being able to fight in the war of his times. He was ineligible for the service, having had flat feet, a hernia, and 3 children at home. But war did not escape him. After working the construction crew on Army training bases, he helped to build one of the first nuclear plants in Hanover, Maryland. My father suspects that that particular job is what planted the seeds of lung cancer that would kill my grandfather at a spry 70, making sure I never met him, and a good 15 years before
the ages everyone else in his family had died. The Clarks have a gene for longevity that was tainted in my grandfather, it seems. Yet it makes me hopeful that my father, at 72, will live to tell me many more tales of him.

When I attended my freshman year of college at Northwest Missouri State, because my father was living in Rolla and through him I had residency, I met a young man who would change my life forever. A young man who would lock me in a room, and strip from me a way of seeing, and even a way of remembering, that before then had been solid and sure and unwavering. I did not know that I had family and roots in Missouri. I did not know of their ghosts yet, haunting the land, but it is possible that my blood remembered, and now I have shed blood, too, in the same landscape as my ancestors, so that the land now holds the memories until we are ready to retell them.

My maternal grandfather, who also perished this earth before I entered it, was Frances Waugh, called ‘Frank.’ His widow, my grandmother, tells me that he could tell where a vehicle had been from the dirt that was left on the tires. A sheriff’s deputy, he was often a boon to my mother’s teenage existence. She’d come home from a date and he’d prod her: “You’ve been driving through Fairmount Park, haven’t you?”

Fairmount Park still exists in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where I grew up. There are winding roads that lead through its moderate hills, one in particular that leads to an overlook where teenagers in the fifties and sixties would park their cars and
‘neck.’ My mother’s own neck, turning, I’m sure, a bright flushed pink when she’d come home from these outings only to have her law enforcement father inspect the dirt residue on her car.

But I was also told a story about how my grandfather took my mother out on a different kind of date: just the two of them, father and daughter, the middle child of five who was often overlooked. I am told they went shopping for a present for my grandmother: his wife, her mother. That they stopped for dinner and ice cream afterwards at some soda fountain long torn down, and my mother got to inhabit the spotlight for once in her life, having had all of her father’s attention in a way she hasn’t had before or since. A father who made her feel special was all she ever wanted, and when she saw in her husband, later, the father of her two daughters, that he lacked this particular knack, it may have contributed to her leaving him. If she hadn’t left him, neither he or I would have ever moved to Missouri. A butterfly flapped its wings.

Memory is notoriously unreliable and exists in fragments. So I have to seek out those who still remember my family and pull out the fragments like bits of shattered glass, piecing them together into a mosaic that will become my history, my background, a place to move forward from. I was in a car accident in August of 2007. Returning home from a backpacking trip in Wyoming, I was traveling the last stretch of interstate between Des Moines and Ames, Iowa, where I lived. I had approximately 20 miles to go when a car sideswiped me, and I overcorrected and
went in the ditch. I would have rolled to a stop, eventually, but for an underpass that happened to be coming up, so instead I hit a guard-rail nearly head-on at sixty-some miles an hour. The force of my skull lurching sideways shattered the driver’s side window, and for two years afterward I found pieces of safety glass working their way out, reminders that past traumas are always present, that past histories shape our future.

There is no nuclear power plant in Hanover, Maryland. My original deduction when my father said Hanover, Washington was that he was referring to our nation’s capital. I know now that the project that may have killed my grandfather was located in Hanford, Washington in the Pacific Northwest, another place I would eventually call home. The site was located along the Columbia River, where I have swam and kayaked, and was established as part of the Manhattan Project. It was home to the ‘B-reactor,’ the first full-scale plutonium production reactor in the world. Plutonium from Hanford was used in the first nuclear bomb, tested at Trinity, and used in ‘Fat Man,’ which detonated over Nagasaki, Japan on August 9, 1945. There is a photo in the wikipedia entry of workers building the face of this ‘B-reactor.’ One of them may have been my grandfather, who his friends called ‘H.’

In 1943, when Hanford Engineer Works broke ground, my father would have been 5 years old. I imagine, then, that Lucille and the children were left at home in Iowa or Missouri, while H went to stay in the construction camp with 50,000 other
workers. It was said, however, that fewer than one percent of these workers actually knew what the fruits of their labors would be. The Manhattan project was still quite classified until the very public bombing of Hiroshima, at which point someone had to explain.

My maternal grandfather, Grandpa Frank, wasn’t always in law enforcement, I am told. He entered it late in life. Before that he drove buses and trucks, and worked as a mechanic in a garage he owned with his brother. My mother says he dreamed of going into the FBI, but lacked the education. Still, it seems to me enough of a feat for a day laborer to make it into even local law enforcement, and this particular trajectory I have yet to uncover from the memories of my rememberers.

I have his belt buckle, but no photographs. I have a vague idea of what he looked like from an old photo of him and my grandmother, the only one my mother possesses. My mother, his own daughter, had to consult with others to paint a picture of him for me with words – a collective of words and stories pieced together from the memories of more than one person who knew him. It is interesting what survives: one man’s dream, another man’s downfall. An implication that this country fails to make a man’s dream come true, time and time and time again.
I forget that my father had a life before this one. That he is the winsome young man in an Air Force uniform smiling from a remote corner of my mother’s sock drawer. I forget that he had a first wife, before his second or his third, and that he fathered six children before me – one who was lost. I forget that he is the youngest of three brothers, forever shamed by the fact that he was too young to go to Korea and too old for Vietnam.

I want to tell my father that I, too, am familiar with in between places. I want to remind him that both of his brothers are alcoholics, and one of them has already died from it, childless and a bachelor. I want to tell him that despite his two failed marriages, at least he tried to make a dream come true in ways his brothers never did.

Then again, who am I to judge? What was my father’s life really like before this? I have few stories or clues to go by. I know that he’s been to Libya and Germany, that he went to banking school, that he wore brown suits. I know that he always seemed to be making up for something, with me. But I’ll never know quite what it was. My family isn’t one to hold the past to the light – we are of the type who bury things. Flowers on the graves of former whims and fancies.

I saw a photo, once, from my father’s black and white life. He was lying on his side, propped up on one elbow – watching one of his children crawl on a picnic blanket. It must have been Lori, his first daughter. He wore a white t-shirt with a
pack of cigarettes rolled in the sleeve, that contrasted sharply with what must have been strong, tan arms. His hair hung loose and slightly long over his forehead.

As modern and world-weary and travel-hungry as I am – a part of me longs for this black and white life. For a view of fields in winter, the slow rise of a belly like bread, a man with strong arms who is not afraid to use them. A part of me wants years defined by yields and harvests – a part of my father did, too. But we haven’t been farmers in nearly a century. My family hasn’t defined themselves by any sort of paradigm, labor-related or otherwise. I grew up without tradition, under the notion that things change. And they do, although not often for the better.

There is something about manual labor that has always attracted me. The idea of an honest day’s work, the sweat on a brow, the exertion of energy that wasn’t wasted. To toil in the fields sounds romantic. My friend Matt, who holds a top engineering job at Intel, once told me that all he really wanted was to live in the mountains and be a tradesman. He dreams of a blacksmith shop or a pottery – of a world where form is still married to function and one knows exactly the ways in which the products of their labor will be used. We are thousands of years from peasantry, from communal living, from clearly defined “trades,” and perhaps this is our downfall. Perhaps the modern “identity crisis” stems from the fact that are aren’t clearly defined roles in our society with which to align oneself. There are still the familial roles, sure: mother, brother, cousin, lover, friend – but even these lack clearly defined functions. Who feeds the child? Why, the daycare center of course.
What does a Mother do? She drinks. She gambles. She works. She won’t let me leave the light on at night.

I’m not against progress, of course, I’m just not sure what it means. And as a victim of rape, I’m certainly not against feminism. But I tend to agree with psychologist Barry Schwartz that we are paralyzed by too many choices. My father grew up during the depression. Food was scarce and a family ate what they could afford. You believed in your country, even if you didn’t know what that meant. You went to war, even if you didn’t know what the implications were. You didn’t question your options, you simply chose from a limited number of them.

How easy it is to forget that the world existed before we did, and how strange. I’ve only seen one photo of my father as a child, taken after he was stricken with polio: it’s a sepia toned image in an oval frame of a little tow-headed boy in trousers and suspenders, leaning on a miniature cane. But he was only three when the illness struck him, and it left no lasting effects on his health. Still, there hasn’t been a case of polio in the country in years, and it’s hard to imagine that my father came from a world where it took the lives of children every day. It’s hard to make history relevant.

Did my grandmother sit with my father in his sick bed and wipe the sweat from his fever? Or did she give him a shot of whiskey, tell him to buck up? It seems like the memories should be mine, but they are not. It’s no cliché that my father
actually does have a Cherokee grandmother, but the Native American storytelling tradition must not be in the blood. So far, it has only appeared in mine.

I don’t think my father had a horrible childhood, but he never speaks of it, never tells me stories. I have no idea how he met his first wife, or what sports he played in high school – no sense of the boy before the man. And just as it is impossible to tell the sort of woman I will be in twenty years, it is impossible for me to see in my father the young man he once was.

Recently, my father and I visited the Space Needle in Seattle. We took a boat tour around Elliot Bay. He stood next to me with his digital camera ready to point and shoot at the skyline and I tried to ignore how his hands shook with palsy as I squinted into the sun. And how his blue eyes were turning slightly milky at the edges, his white hair thinning. When we walk up the stairs to Pike’s Market after the tour, we have to stop every ten stone steps for his heart to take a rest. Some sort of valve problem that he’s never properly explained, evidenced by a capsule of nitrous pills on his keychain. And I have to remind myself that he’s nearly seventy years old, that he was well into middle age when I was born. I try to take his arm, but he pulls it away, hanging on to his self-sufficiency as tightly as he does to the cigarette wedged between his two trembling fingers.

But what if this degeneration spreads? It’s only natural, after all. First his hands, and then his arms. Perhaps he will have a wheel chair to roll alongside me as when I finally walk down the aisle. If he even makes it that long. I don’t have a
boyfriend at present. Rarely do I have a date. If he doesn’t see his youngest
daughter married, I’ll feel that I have failed him, that I’ve failed myself. But there’s
nothing for it. The ground will level out. His heart will slow. I’ll see the sweat
rolling down the back of his neck, from the top of his head, which is balding. I’ll
offer him a drink of lemonade, but he’ll refuse. He’ll plunder forth on his unsteady
legs, ready for the next sight, the next sound, the next taste. For whatever it is that
he’s sure is just around the corner, which will make him satisfied at last.

I have a copy of that photo of a young man in an Air Force uniform – a small black
and white oval that once fit into a locket. One side of his mouth is stretched into a
half-smile and his eyes glint and sparkle – maybe with mischief, perhaps with hope.
He would have had a quiet confidence, of this I’m certain. He would have offered
his tanned arm to the girls at a dance, asking them without saying a word. He
would have been the kind of man who snubbed his cigarette out as he walked:
efficient, always moving ahead into the future. I would have been the kind of girl
who lingered too long to make sure the fire was out, letting him leave me behind.

The past is a tricky business. If there is a part of my father that is still a young
boy stricken with polio, or struggling to swim in a lake after his brother threw him
in – is there a part of me back there also? Do my cells, which share genes with his,
remember, somehow, the long nights of fever, the acrid taste of lakewater in my
lungs? I look at the photos and I can watch my older sister crawling on a blanket
and notice the way time seems absent, or so abstract a concept that it seems it will
stretch on forever. And then I can look at my father, shouldering his way through
the throngs of Seattle streets, and worry that each breath might be his last. I was
there, in his black and white life, as a possibility, and I am here, in this life, as a
resting place for all the hopes he didn’t get to see through. I am the teller of both of
our stories, trying to work with what I have – even if I can only represent it in
shades of gray.
I have five sisters, yet I was raised as an only child for the most part, and so never learned the ways in which women relate to each other until well into my adult life. Five sisters by my father, that is, all of whom resented the affection he showered on me, his baby, his last child born when he was forty-two. Strange to have so many siblings and grow up with imaginary friends – the favorite of which I didn’t give up until I was nearly twelve years old. My other friends were characters in books, or characters in stories I wrote – the imaginary friend turned concrete via pencil on page. For they were more real to me than my actual family ever was. I understood only separation, isolation, the ways in which we break each others hearts, instead of the ways in which we are connected and come together bound by bonds of blood, yes, but also of shared community and shared history.

I have five sisters, and I don’t know when any of their birthdays are except the one who is also my mother’s daughter, the one I lived with for half of my life. The other four remain vague entities, figures huddled together and whispering at a wedding, faces in shadow and tears at a funeral. I don’t know how they look when they wake in the morning, or just before they go to bed. I don’t know their favorite colors, songs, television shows, or the stories of their heartbreaks. I have five sisters - born sometime before my time, circling my periphery like stars.
The number five represents the pentacle – the Star of David, when pointed in the proper direction, is representative of the species of man. Four elements united by the spirit of mankind in a starlike web of five. Five daughters makes a complete set, count them off on five fingers. Five fingers, five senses, five oceans, five continents. Five wounds of Christ on the cross. But six – six reaches beyond five to what some call the perfect number, a continuous curve without angle, without line, reaching towards infinity. I have five sisters. My father has six daughters. We are connected by numbers if nothing else.

Two of my sisters have two sons and one daughter, and another has two sons and two daughters. One of them has just two daughters, and another has no children of her own at all. Three of their sons were born before I was, and so we were raised as cousins, even though this isn’t technically true. One of their daughters I taught how to read when she was seven and the school system had failed to find a way. Now this daughter is a successful nurse at twenty years old, ten years my junior, with a pension plan and a better career than I will probably ever have. Some of their sons and daughters now have children of their own. Which means that some of my sisters are also mothers and also grandmothers, yet we are all our father’s daughters and we are defined and not defined by these roles.
I have always enjoyed the fable about the six swans. The story goes that a great king had seven children from his first marriage: six sons and a daughter. He remarried, and the token evil stepmother resented the children and turned them into swans, all accept the lone daughter who was hiding in the forest cottage and so escaped the curse. This left the little girl alone to lift the curse that had turned her brothers into birds, and to do this she must remain mute and isolated, knitting sweaters for them that would lift the curse and return her family to her.

And so it is that sometimes I think of my brother and sisters in this way – as birds long flown away. And my family as one that is cursed by the things that keep us from each other – time, distance, heartbreak. It is up to me to find the threads of story and weave them together like a shirt so that we may be united once more.
**Heredity**

I buy my mom twelve red roses on the way to her house. I know they are her favorite flower, but I’ve never asked her why. A classic, sure, but they risk being boring. Why not a color other than red? This is what she wants, I know, but I don’t know why. I don’t know what motivates her, really, to do anything.

My mother has just had surgery, her left hip replaced with a metal disk. She laughs when she shows me the business-sized card the doctor has given her to keep in her wallet to show airport security. Maybe at the thought of going through the metal detector, her fake hip setting it off, being frisked by a young, handsome guard. But I laugh more at the irony of it than the thought of it – because she never travels in the first place.

A Native author, Louise Erdrich, writes: “In our own beginnings, we are formed out of the body’s interior landscape. For a short while, our mother’s bodies are the boundaries and personal geography which are all that we know of the world.” I have a fascination with the concept of landscape: how we are defined by it and yet also defined in spite of it. I am one who believes that home is where you make it, but also that there are forces stronger than our own free will, the connection to our mothers being one of them.

Which leads me to ask the question: what is my mother’s landscape? Suddenly, when I try to pin her down, I have no idea who she is other than a
constant, sometimes nagging presence. A chest to bury my head in. Fingers stroking my hair back at the temples at night.

My mother has been diagnosed with a terminal disease. Perhaps not terminal, per se, but incurable, at any rate. The disease is autoimmune, and also hereditary. It’s called primary biliary cirrhosis, and it causes the body to attack the bile ducts of the liver. It will eventually kill whoever suffers from it, but it could take twenty or thirty years. My mother tells me this news nonchalantly over the phone. “No big deal, really,” she says. “I just have to take a pill every day for the rest of my life.”

For a while, I am able to follow her logic. After all, she’s right. It could be worse. She doesn’t have to lose any body parts, undergo radiation, lose her hair. She doesn’t have to get hooked up to dialysis machines or endure any more surgeries. This danger, it isn’t of the clear and present kind, so why worry?

And yet – these are the ties that bind us. As I sit here writing and sip a beer, I wonder if my own liver will suffer the same fate. Though I’m told drinking plays no part in the process of this particular disease. But these are the ways in which we know we share one another’s blood. We are bound by our defects, by our shared medical histories, as much as by the natural selection that has kept us alive so far.

The hip surgery went off without a hitch. It’s the second one she’s had replaced, and my mother claims to be ready to return to work after only two weeks,
even though the doctor is making her wait for six. She’s still using a walker, and a raised plastic toilet seat, but other than being a little slow, she’s fine. And she’s bored, having to refrain from the roles that have defined her for so many years: secretary, mother, housekeeper, cook. She is, at times, just as determined as I am and it’s the first time I’ve realized this about her. Determined to keep her life on a steady and even path, while I am just as determined, it seems, to see how far I can let mine spin out of control.

This second time, I haven’t sent any roses, not because I’m not thoughtful but because I can’t bear to think of them wilting on the dining room table, my mother sitting there night after night watching them fade and refusing to throw them out until the petals start scattering themselves like a blanket over the faux wood.

Another time I phone my mother frantically at 8 o’clock in the morning. She’s been at work for an hour, but usually at this time she is at her desk flooding my inbox with forwards she thinks are funny or endearing. This time, I think I’m on to something she hasn’t seen yet, but I’m wrong.

“Mom!” I nearly shout. “Check your email. You have to see this lady sing.”

Silence on the line for a few seconds as she clicks the link and then I can envision her smile on the other line as she realizes she’s one up on me this time. Her whole office had already gathered around the screen the day before to watch it.

I’m sure by now all of us have seen the unflattering yellow lace dress, the eyebrows thick as my thumb, and, sorry Susan, the ample hips that the “cheeky”
Scottish woman is wont to wiggle around. And I’m sure, also, that many of us have found ourselves bringing a forefinger to the inner tearduct of our eye, suddenly finding something in it.

I grew up loving theater and musicals, and *Les Misérables* was always a favorite – but it doesn’t explain the inexplicable emotional reaction I felt when watching Susan Boyle sing. Or the way she had touched so many of us, internationally, in such a short period of time. So what gives?

I have moved back to Iowa, the state I was raised in, four times now. Which means I’ve moved away four times as well. Each time I left I thought would be the last, and each return I viewed as temporary. But as I prepare to enter my thirties, I think this time I’m home to stay. And yet what does any of this have to do with a woman from a small village in Scotland? Because listening to Susan Boyle somehow feels like coming home.

On the other end of the line, my mother is telling the story of how her office mates reacted. She is telling a story that numerous citizens around the globe can relate to, because we’ve all watched the same thing. She’s sharing a dream with me, finally, and with a whole community of others who have united in support of a woman who isn’t even from ours. We’ve gathered around a screen not to watch a wall fall down or towers collapse into rubble, but to listen to hope in the form of a song rise out the mouth of a most unlikely source.

Outside my apartment window, the sky flashes with the first lightning I’ve seen in awhile. In Portland, the drizzle never stopped and the thunder never came.
I didn’t want to admit it, but I had missed my home. I missed the flatness, the way I could always see the storms coming from a distance and prepare to weather them. I missed the open spaces that we travel across to reach each other, time and time again.
Identity
I am a wanderer. I was uprooted as a child from the only home I’d ever known, and this may have contributed to what was to be, for me, a perpetual state of flux. Curiosity and intuition have driven my decisions, rather than logic, or a plan. There’s an old adage about tossing a feather in the air and setting out in the direction that it lands – and this is, to an extent, the philosophy I have lived by. I have lived in five states, spent time in thirty of them, and in one country abroad: Ireland. And in almost each and every new place I visited, I would find some wondrous thing about it that I connected with, that drew me to it, and weave that idea into a story of home.

For instance, I visited the Atlantic for the first time when I was thirteen. I stood on the shore in Camden, Maine, and watched the sun slowly burn off the field of fog that had descended during the night. My feet were rooted but a part of me dove into her gray waters and still lives there, exploring. There’s a photo of my face, hair blown across my pale cheeks by the wind, a dead seal purple and rotting on the beach behind me as I squint at the lens, bits of sand lodged in my eyelashes.

I had come upon the seal while taking off on my first beachcombing adventure. My stepmother, who grew up on coasts in Rhode Island, Florida and Maine, was as connected to the beachfront and the lifestyle it represented as I was disconnected from any sense of landscape at all. I had visions of the posters that hung on the beige walls of my biology classroom. Those metamorphosing forms in
their slow struggle towards land. Standing there I felt something calling me back, something that still calls, the black water beckoning me to return to my first home, the one we all evolved from.

Shortly thereafter I decided I wanted to be a marine biologist. I had watched a documentary on orcas until I’d memorized the narration. The gravelly voice rose and fell in rhythm with the black fins following the waves. That worn out video dad had bought for me in the gift shop at Sea World. I wanted to run my fingers over the rubbery skin of a whale. I was sure I’d find answers there.

Another summer in my identity forming years, I wanted to move to Alaska and work with wolves. I had seen a show on cable during the long hours I spent in front of the television while my parents were at work. There was a woman who lived up there who raised wolf pups and then trained them to be reintroduced into the wild. But it wasn’t the woman I identified with, or the task she had undertaken. It was the wolf pups themselves that I felt were my kin. Born into a domesticated, fenced in place that could not contain them. Feeling a hunger they didn’t yet know how to express. They didn’t want to be coddled, or sheltered from danger. They wanted to be allowed to run free, and take all the pleasures and dangers of life, even the pulse of life itself, under their own paws and rip into it with their tiny, sharp teeth.

Escapism is a defect of my generation. Burdened by the pressures of too many advances in technology, by the bad decisions of our parents, by the looming
millennium that is now upon us and the great unknown that lies ahead of us, we turned to grunge rock and booze and heroin and unsafe sex. We turned away from the drudgery of our own lives, lives that were supposed to be different from those that came before us, but instead are falling drastically short. The Lost Generation, indeed. Now we’re still dying of AIDS and consumed by consumerism and wasting not only our time, but our resources and our once bright minds.

I grew up, like most of us, in a neighborhood, in a city, in a state that I can point out on a map. I could glean the latitude and longitude if I wanted, or, these days, consult the app on my phone that would give the exact GPS coordinates to the street where I lived. But none of these things brought me closer to the people around me. What it still came down to was that our street was dark at night, and we were all alone in our beds with only our own dreams in our heads. There was never a sense that dreams were something one built upon, as a community, together.

The more I think about this concept, the more absurd it becomes. How can a world full of competing individuals ever survive? It remains true that we all die alone, but we do not live alone. When I walk the moonlit streets at night, there are people behind the darkened windows, and their suffering is my suffering, their joy is my joy, because we live and work and strive together, in the same community, even when we are not cognizant of it.

In this failing climate and failing economy, don’t we need anything but another generation of youth too mired in despair to rise? Perhaps I’m leaning a little bit too far toward the dramatic here, but it does seem, from the limited distance I
have gained, as if this new generation is doomed to make the same mistakes as my own. You see, it only came to me recently that I’d been trying to live someone else’s life. There was a series of failed relationships that I had tried on like new outfits, the 16 different addresses in 3 different states in 12 years, and the inevitable change of majors in college from computer science to biology to anthropology and English. I used to blame my parents for allowing me too much freedom, and for never pushing me in any particular direction. I always like to tell everyone that I should have gone to med school, and could have if only I’d had the drive – or perhaps a sense of direction in the first place.

But I am no different than anyone. I’ve simply been living out the American Dream, the Westward Movement, the pull of the land, so to speak. I was trying on identities like outfits, always looking outward, never quite looking inward enough. The longest relationship I’ve had in my entire adult life so far has been a 10 month long stint with a man who never even saw the inside of the apartment I lived in. I was so ashamed of my tiny one bedroom with one window, and the cat hair all over the furniture, and the kitchen too small to cook in, and my whole unaccomplished life so far, that it never even occurred to me to invite him over. A near year of meeting his friends and family and planning our future lives, and he never even came close to inhabiting mine. I thought I could simply step into his story, cut off the one I had been telling mid-sentence, and that only the ending would matter. But then this begs the question: what sort of ending are we working toward?
I came back to Ames, Iowa, where I live, from a visit to my hometown this summer to find it flooded. I was cat-sitting for a friend, and had to get into town, so I found the only open road and took it. I passed the grocery-store parking lot overflowing with those who had come to suddenly stock up on supplies they would need for days without water. I passed a trailer park that appeared to be floating and wondered what had happened to its residents. I passed more than a couple of police blockades and frustrated drivers rolling their windows down for answers on how to get around them to reach the destination they were seeking. But the thing is – this had all happened before, and the current predictions say that it will happen again and again. How, in a span of seven years, in a community populated by those who work for a university of science and technology, did we manage to become so short-sighted as to not have been fully prepared for another flood?

I have a fledgling theory that the lack of a long sordid history on this continent is a boon to the American psyche. That our rootlessness has become detrimental to the way we approach the future: of our families, our nation, our planet, our species. Most of us don’t have the sins of our father to atone for or years of oppression to rise up from underneath. We have only our own arrogance and uncertain futures that we stumble toward like toddlers. For we are a nation built on promises made without the solid evidence of the past to found them on. Futures were bought and sold in shares, and in many ways still are.
Last night, I drank wine on the porch with one of my roommates. A recent transplant here from Texas, she was relaying her fears to me about fitting in in this new place and I was doing my best to comfort her homesickness with a retelling of my own life experiences and my certainty that time truly is the great healer of all things. Still getting to know each other, we have the ability to talk for hours and so we did. We shared stories of old lovers, and fights with girlfriends, and of course, how we got along with our mothers.

Eventually it got late, and the bugs were out and her ashtray was full and the bottle was empty. I had paid for the evening, but the monetary value of the experience hadn’t crossed my mind. Until I saw a frown cross her face at the empty bottle and say that she would buy another one as soon as she got paid. And then I started to wonder, not for the first time, how it is we come to value our experiences by the amount they cost in hard won dollars?

It’s a tough economy right now, and everyone knows it. Dad’s lessons over the piggy bank penny pinching when we were younger suddenly have come leaping once again to the forefront of our minds. But my roommate and I, we have a different spin on things – and I think it might be because we are both from places where community still means something, where the people who surround you still mean more than the things that they have.

I have never been to Texas, but I’ve never met a Texan that hasn’t been kind and generous with whatever it is that they have, and Cassie is no different. The conversation turned around to a concert we both want to attend at the state fair, and
Cassie offered to fund the trip. I had shown her hospitality and tried to ease her loneliness during a hard time, and she wanted to reciprocate.

Still, neither one of us is keeping a running tally. Which is what, by the way, the financial experts recommend one does to remedy a debt-ridden situation: keep a record of where all your money goes and then eliminate what isn’t necessary. But who’s to judge what’s necessary? Cassie and I subscribe to a different set of rules, one I’ve dubbed “the reciprocity theory.” We believe in investing in one another instead of in a mutual fund and we believe in living beyond our means at times if it means adding meaning to our lives. Because the value of experience should always weigh more than the value of a dollar. And the value of a community that has been nurtured by shared experiences is one that is rich in happiness and satisfaction even if poor in economy.

I am still bogged down in uncertainty as to where my life is headed. But every bit of this current confusion is my own. I’m educated, broke, and somewhere on the fringe between happiness and despair. And I suppose if the dream of sharing someone else’s life is what allows my own life to continue, then I’ll continue to do so for as long as is necessary. As I finish this reflection, I’m sitting on the patio of the café where I work. It’s windy out. Sunny, and bright. And it’s hard to escape the gorgeousness of this one single moment: the sun slanting through trees, reflecting off the rose wine in my glass like a jewel. The soft click of bicycle spokes as students make their way from their dorms to the campus, and back again. Without the
weight of history it’s so easy to linger in the promise of each new day. And if it remains unfulfilled, to know that there will be a thousand more of them. See that young man there? He might be on his way to finding the cure to leukemia, or the genetic marker for a debilitating mental disease. Or he might drop out after his first year, become an alcoholic, take a minimum wage job. And all of that might depend on all of the someone else’s he meets along the way.
Out where the road turns to gravel is where you’ll find it. A giant rock quarry on the left, filled in with a gray sort of sludge; and on the right, at least a square mile of barbed wire fencing, razor wire coiled above the chain link, obscuring the view of the brick guard towers that look like something out of a video game involving short swords and knights. In a reversal of fortune, however, it is my prince who is waiting to be rescued from this tower, and I, a chain smoking princess standing in the parking lot in the cold November air willing myself to go inside.

But I do it. And it isn’t so bad. It’s like the airport, only without a line – merely a bored guard with coifed blond hair staring at her fingernails and smacking gum as I walk through. I’m waiting for the director to yell ‘cut,’ but instead it’s eerily quiet, so I keep walking the path they tell me, through gate after gate. I get buzzed into the visiting room by a short man in a white collared shirt and he easily sizes me up as fresh meat.

“Relationship to the offender?” he asks.

I say friend with confidence, but he just shakes his head.

“Friend with a grin.” He pretends to study the half sheet of paperwork I have given him and tells me to follow his ‘worker,’ an inmate in gray prison pants and a white Hanes t-shirt, to a cushioned vinyl bench where I am assigned to wait for my beloved for agonizing minutes.
I have driven the long four hours down here on my psychiatrist’s advice. He gave it to me nine years ago, and I’ve been ‘sleeping on it’ since then. I traveled back and forth across the country, trying to shake the shadows I was sure I could simply leave behind. But Brian’s letters continued to find me even in the dead of winter in Oregon. Or tales of his failed phone calls to my mother’s house. With or without my acknowledgement, my past existed and if I wanted a promising future, I was going to have to face it.

I aspire to work with gifted students someday, especially those at risk of straying from a successful path. But someone once asked me how I could heal others if I hadn’t first healed myself? I had accomplished things, yes. And my body was fine. Hell, I was training to run a marathon. But spiritually and emotionally I was still full of holes, and in order to truly do the good work I wanted to do in the world, I was going to have to fill them in, or be stuck in a sort of limbo state forever.

I sit alone on a vinyl bench for what seems like hours but is actually only about thirty minutes. Brian doesn’t know that I’m coming on this day. I’ve chosen to surprise him. So he won’t be prepared and waiting in his cell for the guards to come get him. When he does arrive, his face looks first confused, then shocked, then elated. I go up to the white taped off area to greet him and the comfort of his arms tells me the only story I really needed to know. He doesn’t want to let go. Or rather,
he hasn’t let go, in all these years of a love I thought was lost to another possible universe, forever.

We walk in silence back to our assigned seat and for a while he just stares at me while I stare out the window at the brick enclosed courtyard with bright cartoon murals painted by the inmates.

“What?” I ask and he grins that infamous grin.

“Nothing. I’m just looking at you.” He pauses. “Wow.”

His voice takes on a sort of breathless quality, like a six year old who has just come downstairs on Christmas morning to find a bright shiny bicycle, complete with a bell just waiting to be rung.

I have a hard time looking at him for fear of being overcome by an affection that had lain long dormant. Instead I sneak glances out of the corner of my eye. Become defensive. We make sarcastic jokes at each other and though I was sure I would cry, we laugh and laugh for the whole two hours.

Brian has done well for himself, in as much as was possible. He hit a low point, much like I did, where he had to choose to either take control of the rest of his life or succumb to despair entirely. He chose, as did I, to rise. Now he is a peer mentor for younger men in the substance abuse program, he has an office job at the metal shop, and he is a spiritual leader for the Wiccan community inside. He has read voraciously, more even than I, and he writes short stories in his long hours of spare time. He has learned to play guitar and plays in two bands, is on a softball
team in the summer, and lifts weights. And he is eternally optimistic about his future life after these final four years are over with. His eyes are bright, his hands are warm, and his face radiates a cautious hope.

“Prison changes a man,” everyone tells me, but it isn’t true this time. He has grown, yes, but in ways that are good and solid. Like me, he has lived these past years clutching a dream close to his heart and refusing to let them take it from him. And now, it seems, the dream might just come true.

Before I even leave the parking lot of the penitentiary, I know that my decision has already been made. I loved him 11 years ago and I love my Loki still. I thought I had come to close a door but instead I threw one wide open. Turns out I had just been stuck in one long fall and finally it was time for me to land.

I pass signs for Truman State on the way back to Iowa and I think of all the students who are just settling in to a new school season. For some it will be their first, others their last. I think of the sweltering day I moved into my own Missouri dorm room, full of a vision of the future, full of hope. Full of dreams that I would soon be forced to bury, but not so deep that I haven’t been able to pull them out on this balmy September day, dust them off and hold them to the light once more.
Big Easy
(or, Why I Suddenly Became a Football Fan)

I was a little white girl come to the big black city. If not black, at least brown and grey with grime, shoved as it was against the swamps, carcasses of crawfish piling up against its thin strips of shore. How’d I get there? Well, I just decided to follow the river one day, Huck Finn style. I grew up under the influence of a man who was sort of like my Jim. He was big and burly, and oftentimes crass. He guided me through a childhood in which I was a white girl at a school of white kids where we sang Negro spiritual songs in choir without having any idea what they meant. He taught me to “tell it like it is,” and I still strive to do this. The problem of course being pinning down exactly how and what “it” is. He wears shorts year-round and puts Louisiana Hot Sauce on absolutely everything, and aspires to the life of a Cajun while strutting around the house on wide bare feet playing the blues on the cheap harmonica we bought him. So it was that I followed the notes of these same blues blown through different instruments - worn out saxophone reeds and rusting trumpet bells - followed my own beating heart down the length of the Mighty Mississippi and landed in New Orleans.

This was May 2003, two years before the storm, when She was all beads and brilliance and booze. After fifteen hours in the car, in the dark, my friend Rae and I arrived at 9 in the morning, strolled the French Quarter, watched the city’s workers showering the sidewalks from last night’s indulgences with big blue hoses, streets
already steaming in the sweltering heat. We gulped down “famous” Bloody Marys, Mimosas and eggs Sardou – a benedict-like breakfast dish with ‘cajunized’ Hollandaise sauce. We drank hurricanes out of 20 oz plastic cups that we were allowed to carry with us as we walked the streets. And then we picked up a bottle of tequila at Walgreens that we weren’t allowed to drink in the street. Liquor was allowed in public as long as it wasn’t in a glass container.

Presumably, this is a liability issue, but more than that it is a symbol of a way of life that defines the people of New Orleans. They promote life in the French Quarter as a sort of continuous party to which anyone, from anywhere, is invited. You needn’t be rich or well-dressed or of a certain color. Life’s a parade, one need just grab a trumpet, throw a string of beads around one’s neck, and join right in. Of course this is sarcasm, but it is also a shade of the truth. The people of New Orleans recognize the need for an outlet, a release, from the drudgery and the heat, the dismal stench of swamp – and they recognize the need of the middle class white folks to leave their brownstones and get their feet dirty on the cobblestones of Bourbon Street, to immerse themselves in the dirtiest things they can think of, or just to be where nothing is expected of them at all except to enjoy a slice of life. It is true that the tourist industry also exploits this need to an extent, but in a capitalist society, why shouldn’t it? It’s a poor, black city in the end, after all, why shouldn’t its people be allowed a chance at rising out of it?
One song that sticks with me that I always thought was a spiritual, but was actually written by a white guy in the seventies is called “Shut De Do.” The lyrics go something like this: *shut de do/ keep out de debil, shut de do/ keep the debil in de night, shut de do/ keep out de debil/ light de candle everyt’ing is alright.* Imagine this sung by a chorus of twelve-year-old white girls in matching mustard yellow sweatshirts, trying to mimic a reggae accent they’ve never heard, back when the mention of God or His nemesis, the Devil, had not yet been driven out of public schools. Standing there, on the carpeted risers, we had no idea what we were supposed to stand for, and this problem would plague some of us for much of our lives.

The community I grew up in was not entirely poor, but far from rich either. So there were hints of things in these songs that we identified with – a kind of yearning for things that we knew had been denied to us, but did not know how or why. Many of the parents of children in my school were chronic gamblers, alcoholics, or addicted to methamphetamines. Many of my classmates would fall victim to the same fates, and have babies while they were still babies. We began our freshman year of high school as four hundred students newly grown out of our old mustard yellow sweatshirts, but only half of us managed to make it to the end of the four years to stand on risers and sing once more.

The thing about the Big Easy is, she does feel easy – which I suppose means everything before her seemed unnecessarily hard. Walking her streets was like rocking in a cradle, only with fireworks above. The alcohol creating just enough of a
dream-state to let down my defenses for a while. Defenses or pretenses, New Orleans didn’t need them. And then Katrina came, straddled the city between her big thighs and let loose, drowned her in a fury of fluids. My friends that reside there got out before the storm, but I know others that went down to help with the relief efforts and, like those who have returned from battle zones, barely dare to speak of the devastation they encountered.

I couldn’t bear to go, myself, because I couldn’t bear to see what I had come to think of as “my city” in that way. Since 2003 I had gone back every spring for JazzFest, or later in the summer just to visit, and New Orleans became an extension of myself, a place I thought of as home. A place that embodied what I thought home should feel like, because the one I came from never did.

There are those who would say “they had it coming.” For reasons of sin or sheer stupidity, one supposes. But the people of New Orleans, in my experience, were anything but stupid. They all knew they lived on the brink of something – all the more reason to live each day like it might be your last. And thus, the people of N’awlins learned how to celebrate better than anyone else I’ve ever met. In a way, they embody the principles I was raised under. They ‘tell it like it is.’ It is dirty, and gritty, and hard. It is hot, and much of the time smells like brine and rotting fish. But it’s the ability to get past that, to accept the way it is, and even to revel in its brokenness, and find a kind of comfort there, that sets the people of New Orleans apart from those who surround me in the Midwest.
And so, I’ve chosen to follow football this year, once I heard that the Saints had a fighting chance at making it to their first Super Bowl. I don’t even much like the sport, and yet, many Monday nights and Sunday afternoons this season I’ve been sitting in front the TV referring to those men in black and gold as ‘we.’ And when ‘we’ snagged the win at the Superdome securing our spot in the big game, I only wished I was right there in the heart of the city, another famous Bloody Mary in hand.

Perhaps I have no business writing this, skinny white girl from Iowa that I am. But in the middle of a cold winter, I am sending my heart down to the warm south – along with my hands, which will be just as loud as anyone’s clapping during every Saints’ score, knowing that for the people of New Orleans, the victory has already happened, and it doesn’t matter if we win.
Carrion

At first it was just a speck in the distance, and then it began to take shape. A grayish form hunched over a victim not its own; right on the dividing line between the westbound lanes of the Kansas-10. It was the first to arrive, before even the ants, and it had claimed this carcass, traffic be damned. A lone scavenger in the mid-morning in the middle of the road. We saw each other, disregarded each other. And that turned out to be a mistake.

I had gotten up that morning and put on the coffee as usual. Read the NY Times online, threw in a load of laundry, showered, and prepared to visit a friend I hadn’t seen in over a year. Alexa and I met when we both lived and worked in Portland, Oregon, and now our paths have converged near the wheatfields of Kansas and the great Missouri River. It was fortuitous that fate brought us within driving distance, and we were excited to see each other again.

It was a blue-sky day. The kind of blue you only find in places that once were prairie, bright like robin’s eggs, fading to white near the horizon. A good day for traveling. A day where bad omens are completely unexpected. But is the vulture really a bad omen? I saw it from about a mile away, its hunched form, wings bent like shoulders over its victim, neck long and crooked, eyes intent on what would be, if it weren’t confined to scavenging, its prey.
There are those who theorize that humans were scavengers once. That in our first faltering steps upright we lacked the agility or sensory reflexes to hunt. What we did have, these anthropologists say, is intelligence, and it was this trait that kept us alive where others failed. Perhaps the same holds true for the vulture, then. According to the Red Creek Wildlife Center in Pennsylvania, “Of all the wild animals we handle, vultures possess a noticeable intelligence… only seen rivaled by parrots.” Parrots who seem to hold a key to another human trait that ensured our survival: language.

Why, then, didn’t this particular bird ensure his own survival? He looked up, saw the metal beasts coming towards him, and returned to the rotting feast. Only when I was a few short feet away did he lift his heavy body in an attempt at flight, meeting my windshield with a crack like baseball bat hitting a ball. I couldn’t swerve or brake, for other vehicles were both next to me and behind me, so I kept going, stunned, looking for his body to fall aside in the rear view, but it did not. He flew away, probably with ribs broken, and surely to die.

In Native American mythology, animal totems are a large part of the belief system. Totem animals make themselves known to the individual, and become that individual’s spirit guide. The individual is chosen by the significant being, not the other way around. Because vultures are scavengers, they are seen as residing between the worlds of the living and the dead. They perpetuate the cycle of life, by
breaking down the spoils of others’ kills. To have one enter your life as a spirit
guide, then, is actually considered a good omen. The vulture provides balance
between positive and negative forces. The vulture navigates the currents effortlessly
so as to use the most minimal energy possible to reach a destination, and in turn,
will help the individual navigate the emotional currents of his or her life.

So here I am on this blue-sky day, somewhere between starting a new future
and reminiscing about the past with an old friend. We are, both of us, uncertain
where the currents of life will take us. But as my winged friend reminded me, many
great beasts have walked these same paths before us, and many will follow in our
wake. Tomorrow morning I will put on another pot of coffee, read the *NY Times*
online, fold and put away the laundry. I will cycle back through old patterns, make
the same mistakes or make new ones, rekindle old friendships and forge new
relationships. And in some blue or not so blue sky above me will be a vulture, gaunt
and homely, effortlessly riding the currents, circling for an ending life to shepherd
into death, showing me the way.
Community
After living alone for most of my young adult life, I am now, at the age of 29, trying my first experiment in communal living. We are five graduate (and nursing) students strong, who decided to move in together in a big yellow house in Ames’ historic district. Mostly, our driving force was economic – in these times and on student wages, well, we’re pretty sure you can do the math. Yet another money saving aspect of this venture is sharing food. As half of our household consists of Sustainable Agriculture students, you can imagine that they are very interested in the impact of food on economies, and thus it is reflected in our own microeconomy here in the yellow house.

Sarah, a new face in Iowa hailing originally from Pennsylvania, is now famous among us for what she deems her “concoctions.” Here’s the scene: I have just driven my 30 mile commute from nursing school in Des Moines in the dark. I park my car in the back of the house, open the gate and make my way up the walk. I may or may not run into Jenny coming back sweaty and hungry from a run. For my own part, I’ve been in class for long hours with short breaks and I’m starving as well. So it’s always a welcome surprise to find Sarah at the stove in the kitchen when I get home.

“What are you making?” I used to ask. But I’ve learned now there’s no need, for the answer is always the same.

“A concoction!”
Suffice it to say that Sarah is not a formally trained cook. For one thing, she only knows one way of cooking meat and that’s to slap it in a frying pan with some butter. But this is what I like about her: she doesn’t worry unduly about the outcome, just throws some spinach and rice and tomatoes into a pan with chicken and maybe some spices grabbed at random, some last minute melted cheese – and then eagerly takes a bite when it’s finished to see how it turned out. Not how well it turned out, mind you – simply how.

Of course, the first ‘concoction’ of Sarah’s I tried was delicious. Not all of them have been, but that clearly isn’t the point here. We are five nearly strangers, cooking each other food, throwing ingredients into pots with reckless abandon and trusting each other enough to take a taste. We are a community. We feed each other, clean up after each other, leave the porch light on. When I lived in a larger city, I was surrounded by people but I had never felt more alone.

One night, sitting around a table having beers with friends – another member of our crew called to say her car had broken down on the way to meet us. The man she was dating was already among us, cigarette stuck behind his ear, legs stretched out under the table, a half drank bottle of beer. He didn’t step up and offer to go help her or wait with her for AAA to arrive. None of the males present in our group said a word. They simply shrugged and said something like “That sucks.” So it was that, in dresses and heels, the ladies trudged out and drove to meet our stranded passenger, and help her change her tire by the side of the road.
Portland is a progressive community that talks a lot about community building and has structured its city in ways that supposedly foster this. And yet I found there that whenever I needed anyone, it became a question as to whether they’d be there. Here in the Midwest, I know I’ve always got a line of folks ready to stop and change a tire, or help me load a moving van. Self-interest either hasn’t occurred to them or hasn’t yet gotten in their way. I have looked down upon my fellow Midwesterners for years for not being sophisticated, or forward thinking. For living their lives in a sometimes haphazard way – making ‘concoctions’ and slapping things together. I come home from 12 hours of studying and school, and there’s Sarah, standing at the stove, smiling while she throws a brick of hamburger in a pan. And I am grateful. And I am ashamed.
I get up at 5:30 in the morning to pick up a friend of mine who is into birds. And it turns out I’ve gotten hooked too: invested in a hundred dollar pair of wide-lens binoculars and pored over field guides for hours. But I am still an amateur, at this and other things. He’s prepared with a thermos of coffee when I pick him up, heavy socks, a coat to break the chill of the morning. I, in my short-sightedness, thinking this was spring, am wearing cropped pants and have my bare feet stuffed into running shoes. My hands shake so hard I can hardly hold the binoculars to my face.

We are out looking for a Northern Goshawk, a somewhat rare find around this part of Iowa, but he’s been sighted here at Ada Hayden park north of Ames for the last week by a few avid birders. A diurnal raptor, a bird of prey, the best local legend of him so far is an image of him on a log eating a coot (local waterfowl). Morgan has seen the photo online, and this is part of what drew us here to seek the bird. Incidentally, we run into the guy who snapped the photo, but of course he hasn’t seen the hawk all morning.

Quietly, we trudge the trail, moving quickly enough to keep the blood flowing on a thirty or so degree morning but not so quickly as to accidentally disturb what we seek. Morgan points out the different species of waterfowl for me and I scrutinize them while he searches the distant tree stands for the Goshawk. I try to focus on the flock of blue-winged teals and how they look in flight, or the long black bill of the shoveler. I try to maneuver awkwardly back and forth between scanning the skies with binoculars, natural sight, and looking up species in my field guide.
Problem is, on this particular morning, all I can think about are chickens. There are none to be seen, of course. Dirty and flightless birds that they are, why would we seek them out? But it goes back to a conversation that keeps coming up among myself and another good friend. It seems every time we have a few beers lately, he tells me he wants to settle in the country. In southern Iowa, where he grew up. He wants to raise a garden, a few kids, and some chickens.

And then I’ve lost the flock of teals, and am instead catapulted into my own imagination: my leather-clad, motorcycle riding friend bending down to spread the feed. Maybe even clucking, softly, his worn boots scuffing up the dirt. I have to smile, and with my binocs to my face, Morgan thinks I may have found our prey, but instead I have only found a longing in myself that I didn’t know was there. And I’m not sure what I’m going to do about it.

We don’t find the hawk, and instead leave cold and disappointed. But it was a bright morning. The sun rose early for us just like she always does. And underneath the cold threat of the wind, I could start to feel the promise of summer coming. And the promise of some elusive, rare bird, finding its way, even if briefly, into our sights.
Matchsticks

I was mesmerized this morning by the trees turned white. And yet they seemed so fragile – living things encased in ice and in this way, easily broken. I meditated on them for a while, while I sipped my coffee and stared out of the window. How their deep roots sustained them through sleep. How the hard wood learned to bend under the frozen water. And then I was reminded of another chalk-white image – one not as beautiful but just as broken. On the cover of the NY Times a man lay covered in what I can only imagine was cement dust from the rubble. He had once been a citizen of Haiti, and now his body was exposed to the millions of readers who would view the paper that day.

I teach freshman composition at the university, and once, my students and I discussed this type of journalism and whether or not it was a necessary form of exploitation. Are we actually seeing, as the photographer intended, the ache after it has left the body? Or are we losing our ability to empathize, becoming inundated with too much information?

I showed them images of Abu Ghraib, which had exposed a national scandal. And I showed them an image of a young girl being thrown by her mother out of the window of a burning house – the child would live, caught by those on the ground, but the mother was engulfed in flames. However we, as viewers, could not see those on the ground. We could not, by image alone, know her fate. Visible only were the
tattered ends of a blanket hastily wrapped around a small dark-skinned body, thin arms outstretched through billowing smoke. Shouldn’t the moments before death be private? Some would argue. Shouldn’t they be between the individual and whatever gods they happen to believe in?

My department, at Iowa State, is about to host a symposium on wilderness and the environment. This year’s topic is “Finding Beauty in a Broken World,” taken from the title of a book by Terry Tempest Williams, who is also a keynote speaker. This work encompasses the author’s experience trying to save a population of prairie dogs and also documents her experiences in Rwanda working with genocide survivors to rebuild and reclaim their identities through art and writing. She draws parallels between the natural world and the human world, and finds community in unlikely places. However, she also points out the burden of being an individual, and the difficulties of feeling true empathy. For empathy involves a level of understanding that is not always possible. I do not have a child, therefore I cannot truly empathize with the woman in the burning apartment building tossing hers out of the window in an attempt to save her. “What is understanding but a shifting set of perceptions,” Williams writes, “each of us with our own associative memories?”

Before I even read it, however, I was drawn to its title like moth to flame. For isn’t the broken world itself what is beautiful? Or the vulnerability of it, the moments in which something is so fragile in the sustaining of life, the moments when a breath that would barely lift a feather could take that life forever…
I come from a family that has been both torn apart and glued together by loss. My father and mother were torn apart by the loss of an infant in a natural way; my mother, sister, and I brought together despite great difference by the loss of another infant in a decidedly unnatural way. I lost my own sense of self for a long time after being a victim to sexual assault and seeing my dear friends go to prison for murder. I was broken, but there was beauty in it that I would have never seen otherwise.

One of my mother’s sisters and her only brother are estranged from the family, only showing up every tenth Christmas or so with overly expensive gifts – money enough to stretch across the great span of time that they were missing – except, of course, that it didn’t reach. My mother burned the money her brother sent her in reconciliation last year – money she needed but didn’t want to touch. And those flames, in their way, were devastatingly beautiful.

The great trees are still slumbering through this long winter. They don’t know that the ground beneath them could give way at any moment and uproot them. They don’t know I could choose to step outside and snap their ice-covered branches like so many matchsticks. And southeast of here, where it is not so frozen and fragile, thousands of people stare through tears at the rubble where their home was, and their capitol building, their grocery store, their bank, their hospital, their church, their community. One more reminder that what we’ve built can always be broken down. And yet – the man’s body lying there is beautiful, in an eerie way.
And the faces streaked with tears that I can empathize with but not understand - fragile arms lying across each others’ shoulders like branches, eyes reaching out to the rest of the world, for those who would see, with something like cautious hope.
The Naming Ceremony

We are on the highway, driving past the subdivisions in West Des Moines, when my friend tells me that where she comes from, the names of things came from the places they sought to describe. She is from Pine Bluff, North Carolina, which you can find, of course, by the swaths of pine trees dotting the bluffs. It’s a simple thing, really, and not really notable except when one thinks in terms of how communities define themselves by the places in which they reside.

I am from Council Bluffs. Named, I’m told, after an event that occurred – a treaty meeting held between American Indian tribes and settlers who wanted to stake out a claim on that land. And it’s the claiming part that bothers me, and bothered the American Indians, too – for possession leads to obsession, and from there everything tends to fall apart.

I have heard of neighbors calling city officials on one another for a tree overhanging a fence, an overgrown lawn. They are mired in what it means to possess the space in which they reside, and by extension rule over it. So defined are we by a well-manicured green lawn that we are willing to pump water into deserts, even if it means shortening the life-span of our species. It stems, I think from the idea of creation – what we create, we possess; what we possess, we must maintain. But at what cost? is the question not often enough asked or answered.
I turn down the radio and tune into my friend, who tells me that the whole cluster of communities in her area were all named for the pines and their associated landmarks, and what has become a running joke now, in an age of disconnectedness, prompted her to seek out the history of these names, and the history of the people who were there before her. After all, we have built upon their infrastructure, and we walk upon their bones...

When an infant child is born, almost every religious tradition presents the child to its community via a form of naming ceremony. In Judaism this is done at the *Shabbat*, in Christian traditions at a christening. In Wiccan traditions a child is given a special name (symbolizing a rebirth into the faith) that is only used among other practitioners, and in Hinduism the child is given a name based on the date and time of their birth and how this corresponds with the Sanskrit alphabet. Clearly, names are important to us for many symbolic reasons that have nothing to do with the function of a name and everything to do with its form.

So why are names so often only important to our *selves*, yet disconnected from any place or community? In rural Ireland, I’ve walked dirt paths past stone walls encircling homesteads that are still known by their names instead of numbered addresses: *Avalon, Cedarwood, Evergreen House, Seaview Cottage*. If to name a thing is to possess it, and by extension to care about it, why not take pride in the naming of our homes, our neighborhoods, our communities? Why not seek to understand the history that wove us together or drove us apart?
My sister named me when I was born and she was 8 years old. My parents couldn’t agree, and so they let her decide on ‘Amy Lynn.’ Thus I am named after a second-grade friend of my sister’s, who our family didn’t know very well, and who faded into the background when we moved out of the state. There is nothing of her, I’m sure of it, in me. And so there is a disconnect in my identity as there is a disconnect in my sense of community. No land was passed down in my family, no tradition of naming, nothing sacred. If I asked my parents what it meant to them to be from a place called Council Bluffs, I can guarantee that they would not have an answer.

There is a paradox here, though, in that it doesn’t really do to build cottages out of stones any longer. Tradition for tradition’s sake is not enough. I say let us christen the ground we walk on with something other than a sprinkler system and a fence post. Let us come to know the names of things – new or old, it does not matter – and then we may recognize the things we have lost the names for and make them up, together.
Woods

Somewhere in the conglomeration of my childhood memories are miles and miles of woods. The kind that Robert Frost talked about walking through before sleep. The kind that tower above a little girl’s head, always reaching and stretching skyward, spindly and full of needles, forever evergreen. Brief are these memories, these trips to the Rocky Mountains that surrounded our Colorado home when I was five, and six, and seven. I picked up rocks and put them in my pockets. I delighted at the soft sounds of mountain streams. I waited for the white blanket of winter with breathless anticipation, for the chance to glide through these green trees on skis, and afterward: hot chocolate in the lodge.

I read recently in the New York Times that grammar school students’ aptitude for science is steadily falling. The study cited showed that only one out of every 100 students in 4th through 12th grades placed as advanced on the aptitude tests given nationwide. The article did not speculate at the cause for this lack of science smarts, but I am inclined to blame the woods. Or rather, the lack of them.

The nature vs. nurture debate has grown cold. We are largely products of our environments, shaped by the things that surround us – which, in the urban and suburban settings that most of these students are educated in, are largely fabricated environments. Environments rich with connectedness, perhaps, but the connections
have evolved and largely involve technology and wires. Headphones to keep self-absorbed thoughts in and the sounds of the urban environment out.

I am a product of one of these urban environments. My childhood-after-Colorado days bring back summers of riding bicycles through our middle-class neighborhood, sneaking cigarettes in the stack of tires at the playground, bubblegum ice cream from the gas station and crouching on the hot sidewalk in front of our house pulling weeds. None of these weeds was I able to name, nor the trees that lined the streets, nor the various species of grasses that lined the ditches we threw our cigarette butts in as we pedaled by.

I could not tell you what an invasive species was from a native one, or what the flat land we now inhabit used to hold. In school, we learned only that there was once prairie, and there were once pioneers who wore bonnets and rode in wagons and made their own soap and candles. But it was the people and what they did that we focused on, not the land or any connection they might have had with it.

We played Oregon Trail on the green and black screen of Apple IIe computers. We shot deer and rabbits and bison to feed our fake families. We applied tinctures and laudanum for snake bites, and forced our wagon and oxen to ford through rivers. We decided that if this were really the way life was around here, it would be laughable. Although even those of us who did venture into the woods on occasion with our families did so wearing safety orange.
I do not know if I would have a better aptitude for certain kinds of science had I grown up in the Rocky Mountains, my first home. But I do know that it was a landscape that demanded more of my attention, more of my inquisitiveness about the way things worked – and I feel like I would have wanted to try and rise to its demands in a way that the flatness here does not ask me to. Nearly every great scientific concept was gleaned from observing the natural world. So how are we supposed to teach it in an artificial one?

I did ok in high school biology, excelled in anatomy, and don’t really recall any of the rest of my science education except for a few trips to the planetarium in Omaha and feeding caged snakes my freshman year. We did get bussed to a nature preserve once when I was twelve, but spent most of the time in the museum housed there, looking at taxidermy products and old farm tools. None of this had anything to do with us. We had no woods at the edges of our yards, no mountains or canyons or a vast ocean nearby. We have one percent of our state’s natural prairie habitat remaining, and none of us knew what that meant, or what our landscape should have looked like had it not been razed and plotted out, settled and farmed. Nor did we know that history is not so far removed from the present, and inextricably linked to the future. Or that our cities depend on the woods and the ocean and all the things we cannot name that dwell in them; that we were once creatures that dwelled in woods, and before that the ocean; that once, we wanted only to know them and would never have dreamed of destroying them.
Weather

It’s April. Nearly time for the tornado sirens to start being tested. And this time of spring brings back memories of drills when I was in elementary school, knees to our chests on the tile floor of the gymnasium. I studied the way the painted concrete bricks made mazes where they interlaced. It was just a wall, yes, but to me it was a wall with paths running through it. But the point is, none of us really thought the tornado would hit. We found ways to bide our time through the warnings and then returned to whatever served as life-as-usual.

This particular stormy day in April I am organizing files and receipts and packing boxes for my next move – south to Kansas City to start a new life with the man who will be my husband. I have loved this big old yellow house that I’ve been living in, but it wasn’t mine. The neighbor’s Colts flag snaps and waves in the wind. But still, it’s relatively calm compared to what’s been forecast. I’m still waiting for the windows to rattle, for the sounds of the sky opening up.

I lived in Portland, Oregon for a total of 18 months and it rained steadily for days, but never once did a storm rip through. Portland inhabits a sort of melancholy, thoughtful greyness, whereas the Midwest reaches towards extremes. Long winters drenched in deep snow, sweltering tropical summers, tornados ripping homes from their very foundations and dropping cows off in neighboring fields. So it is this landscape that has defined the way I approach the world. I
actually enjoy being ripped from my sleep in the middle of an April night by a crack of thunder so loud the only sound that fills the dark room after is that of my own heart pounding. Because it reminds me that peace and peaceful moments are gifts, not to be taken for granted.

I just watched the film, “Precious,” nominated for many of this year’s Oscars. I’d been putting it off because I knew that the story aimed straight for one’s vulnerable core. And it did just that. Like the storm brewing outside, the narrative was relentless. It addresses many of the most sensitive issues plaguing our nation today: poverty, drug and child abuse, incest, obesity, and the sorry state of public education. And like I said, I’ve been packing up boxes for my big move to the South to start a life, and a family.

Like the first moment of thunder, even when you expect it it’s terrifying. Terrifying to think about bringing children into a world where such things are possible. I can’t wrap my head around how anyone can even survive, let alone thrive, after being abused in that manner for the whole of their known life. Or any one of a number of other atrocities that children live with every day. But it’s one world only. It contains just as much wrath as anything else. For some, fear and anger and hatred are just life as usual. And those mazes in the walls I saw, some of them had dead ends. But many of them didn’t. What we learn is that there is almost always some way out, some form of salvation.
It’s getting light out now, but I know enough not to trust that it will last. Even the foundation that holds up the very structure that shelters me might not be enough to lash it to the earth someday. But that’s the thing about houses, they can be blown apart by a storm and become rubble which will never become a house again. People, on the other hand, don’t always succumb to the forces that work against them. They survive. Sometimes they thrive. And that’s why I ask the storm to go ahead and descend already. It’s nothing we can’t weather.
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