2000

The language of trees

Melanie Dylan Fox

Iowa State University

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The language of trees

by

Melanie Dylan Fox

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

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Sheryl St. Germain

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2000

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Melanie Dylan Fox

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
DEDICATION

For everyone who has helped me understand and translate the voices, memories, and stories of the sequoia forest.
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Prelude

Bloomington, Indiana, late spring 1992, I packed up all of my possessions and drove across the United States in a battered, green Volkswagen bus. I'd finished college there the previous spring, and since then had been working a "real job" with a small, educational publisher. On a whim, my friend Rachel and I had applied through the mail to work for the summer with the concessions company in Sequoia National Park, California—a decision that would turn my entire life upside down. Within five weeks of receiving our job offers, we signed contracts to work in a place we'd never seen, said goodbye to our Midwestern friends and our families, and suddenly found ourselves in an unfamiliar place half a world away.

The thought of moving out west had long been tucked away in mind, like a pleasant daydream I occasionally remembered, but actually following through was something I'd never before considered. On a superficial level, having a job waiting for me justified my leaving; I could escape my glorified secretarial job, escape spending eight hours a day under the same fluorescent office lights, and instead live and work in a beautiful place in the mountains. On a much deeper level, going to Sequoia that first season was the beginning of a long-term relationship with the park, an experience that has affected me profoundly. Beginning in 1992, I returned to Sequoia every year when winter shifted into spring. During the 1996 season, I became restless, my thoughts filled with persistent questions about my future. As much as I loved being in Sequoia, I
needed to make a life-changing choice between two incompatible options—leaving to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing, or continuing the seasonal, transient life in the park I'd come to know so well.

Almost four years have passed since the night I drove away from Sequoia for the last time, glancing over my shoulder and trying to memorize the trees as their shadows faded into the nighttime forest. I now live two thousand miles away, my graduate degree is nearly complete, and my life little resembles the one I led in Sequoia for many years. Still, memories of the park and my seasons there linger, clear and strong images in my mind; my brother and many of my friends still return to the park, season after season. I have searched for a way to preserve the memory of Sequoia—the place I still consider "home"—while learning to appreciate the landscapes where I now live.

I've also struggled with my choice, with leaving behind my gypsy-like life in the park in favor of graduate studies. After looking out my cabin window every morning at the giant trees, the transition into the plains and plowed fields of the Midwestern landscape was an awkward one. Despite the fact that I'm building a future, a writing career, which would have been impossible in Sequoia, my ties and longing for the forest and mountains there are still strong. Sequoia was the single place I'd lived longest since leaving college. It's a landscape I know more intimately than any other, a comfortable, familiar place that has the power to evoke a sense of belonging in me. The distance of several years has given me clearer perspective on my seasons in the park, and has allowed me to finally begin writing about them, to work through and understand what Sequoia has meant and continues to mean to me. Perspective has led me to write this collection of essays.
Before beginning this collection of essays, I'd never really experimented with creative nonfiction before, and wasn't sure how to begin to describe an experience like my seasons in Sequoia. How to condense and translate five seasons' worth of experiences and people which all held meaning in my life? I simply jumped right into the first essay, "Nighthiking," typing from memory, from the powerful images so clear and distinct. When finally pausing to rest after a long time, I realized that I'd written eight pages without stopping. For the first time in my life, I wrote wholly intuitively and from a place inside I didn't know existed.

From the first essay came all the others, finally allowing me to re-create the sense of the places I loved and missed so deeply. In writing these essays, I've begun to unravel and understand my experiences in Sequoia. What I hope for in my writing is to create a sense of place strong enough so that readers can know what it feels like to stand far out in the quiet forest, surrounded by immense and overwhelming sequoias, and smell the damp, rain-heavy earth in the summer. These essays have been created with that goal in mind—to render the place and people so tangibly that the reader forgets, for a moment, the distance of words on a page.

During the writing process, I've often asked myself whether readers really need another book about our national parks, when writers like John Muir and Edward Abbey have already explored, through expert writing, many of these landscapes. Most people can call to mind the "big" national parks, the "famous" national parks: Yosemite, Yellowstone, Glacier, Grand Canyon. Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (geographically separate parks, but usually referred to as one), are less famous, less visited—one of the reasons I returned every season. But
their details, the beauty of their physical landscape is every bit as remarkable as that of the big parks, able to inspire as much awe and wonder as nearby Yosemite. So, I reassure myself with the hope that these essays may show readers a new landscape, a quiet and unfamiliar place, perhaps inspiring them to seek out the sublime beauty of parks like Sequoia.

This collection as a whole has grown from my attention to the details of the natural world, both positive and negative, whose significance we often take for granted. The essays are crafted in the tradition of nonfiction nature writers Edward Abbey and Mary Austin, writers I admire a great deal for their own detail-oriented prose. I have tried to focus on the details of the Sequoia landscape, straightforwardly, honestly, and at times, bluntly. I consider it important that these essays not overly romanticize the Sierran landscape, as a visitor perhaps might. A disparity often exists between how people perceive the natural world and the reality of that world. Many of these pieces come not from a wide-eyed and innocent admiration for nature or what we believe it should resemble, but from the intimacy of having lived in Sequoia, from having seen both its beauty and its ugliness, and a larger appreciation of both. The essays "Nighthiking," "The First Words," and "Communion" focus on the reality of human relationships to the wilderness, the sometimes unpleasant or difficult experiences of such relationships.

Likewise, these essays strive to go beyond and challenge the male literary tradition of the solitary wilderness experience. In Sequoia, there is little room for solitary communing with nature, little room for even everyday privacy. Employees spend their summers looking at the same 200 faces, unavoidably becoming part of
a closely-knit community that participates daily in a shared wilderness experience. In this way, it is impossible to write about Sequoia without involving the other people who shared these experiences with me, and who remain an inextricable and important part of them.

Also strong in each of these pieces is my desire to explore humans' relationships to the natural world, and to bring readers to a greater awareness of the historical, cultural and ecological implications of these relationships. This quality is particularly important within the genre of nature writing, and not simply for the sake of providing the reader with a vivid, visceral experience. I hope that these essays cause readers to think more strongly about their own connections and responsibilities to whatever landscapes are important to them. The nonfiction work of Scott Russell Sanders has been particularly inspiring as I address these complex relationships in my own writing, teaching me to think more deeply about what it means to know a particular landscape. In a time of global warming, international de-forestation, and oil spills, readers need now, more than ever, to appreciate and understand that they are not separate from the land, and to reevaluate their relationships to it. The essays "Giant Forest," "Through a Fire's Eyes," "Ursus Americanus: The Idea of a Bear," and "Recognizing Beauty," all focus on the continued need for exploration of human connection and responsibility to the natural world.

At this writing, I haven't returned to the landscape in Sequoia National Park that I left four years ago. That landscape has, in my absence, undergone changes as monumental and profound as the changes in my own life during these years. Each year, as the spring arrives and slowly gives way to the warmth and sunshine
of summer, I keep hoping that this will be the summer I finally return. In writing these essays I've learned to more fully understand the "language" of the sequoia forest, the significance and meaning of my five seasons there, and more importantly, how to appreciate whatever landscape now surrounds me. I am now ready to go back to Sequoia—to stand again beneath the giant trees, to remember why that place is still important to me, and to listen quietly to the many stories created in the forest while I've been away.
THE FIRST WORDS

Today is my twenty-third birthday, early May in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. Six days have passed since my friend Rachel and I arrived in Sequoia National Park. Our summer season here stretches out before me like an unwritten story with an uncertain ending, full of images of unfamiliar people and places. Rachel and I haven't thought about what we'll do or where we'll go when the season ends in late October, what comes after this moment. All we care about is that we've left the slow, sloping hills of the Midwest. We've reached the destination we've only talked about for many months, in the midst of mountains and the tallest trees we have ever seen.

In Pinewood, the shantytown of old, rickety cabins where we live, the other seasonal employees light a bonfire tonight. I pretend for a moment that it's a birthday celebration for me, a baptism by fire. The flickering hot flames just out of my reach initiate me into this new life in the mountains, into life in a wild place.

Other employees sit around the fire pit, clumped in scattered circles. Voices murmur low and steady like a faint hum in the silent background of the forest, against the repetitious, hollow beating of a drum. I don't try to make out the voices completely or join in the conversations. I strain my eyes in the semi-darkness and try to write in my journal by the steady pulse of the fire's amber light.

Rachel is still working in the gift shop tonight, and her absence compels me to stay and warm myself around this fire, rather than returning to my empty cabin.
We share a one-room cabin in which the pine boards of the walls no longer fit together tightly, and the cold air comes in through the cracks. Graffiti covers the cabin walls—carved deeply with pocketknives, written in thick, black permanent marker—immortalized remnants of all the people who have lived in this place since the late 1950's. For six nights while trying to sleep, I've stared at the blurred and faded words above my head, thinking about the many others who've also made the decision to work here. Rachel says, "Living here is a little like being away at summer camp, only with bears and alcohol." But this time we won't go home, back to the Midwest, when the season ends. Our jobs in Sequoia are only for the summer, but we plan to stay in California. After six days, I've still not absorbed the reality of our decision, still can't accept that this is my home or understand the reasons that brought me here.

The other people around the bonfire seem comfortable, at ease, as if they've lived in Sequoia forever, understand the forest and its secrets completely. More than getting used to an unfamiliar place, I'm uncertain about how to get along here, forced to question my independence, my self-sufficiency, the skills I thought I'd brought with me, carrying them across my shoulders like a proud possession. A rusted, box-like wood burning stove stands in one corner by our cabin door—our sole source of heat here in the wilderness. Neither of us knows how to build a fire, both too embarrassed to ask for help. Instead, Rachel and I stuff the stove until it overflows with newspapers, drench them with hairspray, toss a lighted match inside and hope that the whole mess catches fire, burning steadily like the warm bonfire tonight. The stove usually glows hot and bright for a few minutes, then
burns itself out; it has no substance, no strong wood foundation, a flimsy fire. Nothing has prepared me for being here, for something as simple as fire-building.

Each night we've been here, in the cold air after the fire has gone out, Rachel and I joke about the breath we can see in front of us when we're lying in bed, at the way it hangs in the air, suspended by the weight of our voices and our shallow breathing that still hasn't adjusted to the higher altitude, to the thin air. We laugh at the dirty, once-orange curtains in the cracked cabin windows and the way light seeps through the places the curtains don't cover completely. We've spent our entire savings getting here, driving across the country in my old, Volkswagen bus; for dinner we eat Spaghetti O's, cold out of the can, waiting another three weeks for our first paychecks. We pretend to be comfortable, at ease, not wanting to admit that this isn't what we expected, or questioning ourselves.

Later tonight, Rachel's voice, though, her laughter, jokes, and thoughtful conversation, will comfort me. I'm grateful for her companionship among all these strangers. Life in Sequoia seems to revolve around a sense of community, a shared rather than solitary wilderness experience. Everyone knows everyone else, like close friends who've grown up together. Rachel's friendship, the presence of someone who knows me so well, feels like a small step closer to becoming part of this community. Rachel and I share our own stories—each day it seems we've each discovered something new that can't be kept to ourselves.

After I finish my job each afternoon, I wander slowly through the forest, taking new trails, stopping to study sequoia trees and fiddlehead ferns in the meadows, learning the subtle differences between chickarees and ground squirrels.
I spent almost an entire afternoon watching carpenter ants in a hollowed-out, rotten log, working diligently. Their cooperation fascinated me, so focused and tireless. I'd never seen such large ants, their size indicating that the colony has lived in the same log for a long time, carving out their smooth home in the moist wood, each individual ant belonging to a larger community among the sequoias. The new knowledge of even these simple, organic beings is dizzying, the way even they understand their place in the forest.

And later tonight, after the fire has burned out and we all return to our cabins, Rachel will be there, reminding me of what I'd be doing at that exact moment if I hadn't come to Sequoia. Each night we've been here she calls my attention back to this image, and each night her reminder has been a small, reassuring gesture about our decision. Back in Indiana I'd be answering telephones at the publishing company where we'd both worked, typing letters and filing invoices, bickering with my roommate, sighing as I walked down the street and looked at the same, too-familiar faces of a small, college town.

Instead, I think now about going to work in the cafeteria tomorrow morning, taking money for guests' breakfasts, smiling. I work early, before dawn, a time of day when no tourists are awake and only the thought of bears keeps me company when I take the trail past Round Meadow to work. I expected that the quiet, natural beauty of the forest would free me from distractions, provide focus and clarity for my life that the Midwest couldn't. The questions surrounding this clarity keep me awake now, sitting silently at this bonfire when I should have been asleep hours ago in order to be rested when the alarm rings tomorrow at 4:30 A.M. But the silence, too, keeps me awake with an intensity stronger than the years of
insomnia I've known since childhood. It seems it should be simple, willing my mind to sleep, free from the sounds and pressures of city life. But the quiet of the forest is disconcerting, distracting rather than focusing. Rachel is the only person I know here and she keeps the silence from feeling lonely. Instead of sleeping I continue to sit on a splintery picnic table at the outer edge of the fire pit circle. Until Rachel returns from work, I want to be with other people tonight.

A cloud of cigarette smoke mingles with the smoke from the bonfire; people drink beer and cheap whiskey straight out of the bottle. Someone has brought a tape player, and a girl with long blonde hair dances at the edge of the fire. She rocks back and forth, moving her skinny hips to the vibration of the drum a young hippie boy beats with closed eyes. She smiles at everyone, trying to steal attention away from the flames and the alcohol. Although I don't feel like talking to anyone, being surrounded by strangers is somehow comforting, as if their presence alone draws me in, envelops me like a soft, fleece blanket, welcoming me.

On the bland winter day in Indianapolis when Rachel first suggested we leave the Midwest, I hadn't known what to say to her, how she wanted me to respond; I'd stared at her as if she were a vaguely familiar stranger in a dream who'd told me something terrifying and wonderful all at once. In that greasy diner over breakfast, a premonition of blue skies and trees and warm sunshine had flashed in front of me. A curious and hopeful vision in the middle of restaurant chatter, loud Muzak, burnt coffee, and cold pancakes.

Rachel had been deep in thought, then smiled and twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "Go west, young woman. Definitely west. Let's go to California," she said.
California. A state I'd visited once, but which seemed far away, as unreal as a faded outline on the atlas in my car. I was filled immediately with doubt, how we'd ever have enough money to leave, where we'd live, how we'd ever find jobs. Stronger than doubt, though, was hope, challenging and defiant in Rachel's eyes. I hesitated only for a moment. "Yeah, okay, California. Let's do it." I pushed away all the uncertainties.

It had been uttered and made real. There could be no going back.

The strange, buoyant power of those simple words had carried us through the rest of the winter in southern Indiana. It didn't matter that we didn't know how or why, just that we would go when the seasons changed. And the ad for Sequoia that appeared in the newspaper a month later, the one that lured us to "Come and live and work in the mountains of California for the summer," symbolized the freedom we both wanted. The thought that we were running away to something, not just running away, was enough to make us believe that our lives as we had imagined them for so long were finally beginning. It would be the first truly impulsive thing I had ever done.

This impulsiveness has brought me to Sequoia, to this moment, surrounded by fire and people I don't yet know, wondering if I've come to the forest for the wrong reasons. I was certain that I'd learned everything the Midwest could teach me, certain that the mountains were where I should be. I'd lived on my own for a long time, supported myself through college; living in Sequoia should be as simple as learning to build a fire. After being here for almost a week, I realize I'd made this decision without thinking until tonight, about what I'd hoped to find.
I know that I'm not the first person to be captivated and drawn in by the myth of the Western United States as wild, large and untamed, redemptive. No matter how I like to think that by coming here I've entered an unmapped landscape, I'm aware that this experience, while still mine, is unconsciously shaped by the experiences of others before me. I suspect, though, that my desire to come here has been most informed by the myth of westward expansion. More than the romantic notion of nature as religious salvation, the wide-open spaces of the West have come to symbolize a place for personal discovery. They are an unsettled land in which a person can shed the confines of civilization and discover an independent spirit.

It is difficult to ignore this created myth; the pull and weight of history are seductive and strong. I succumb to the idea that here in Sequoia, I, too, will find identity, independence, self-renewal, community. Perhaps this is what I've really hoped to learn from this forest. I left behind in the Midwest a bland, too-busy, too-complicated life, thinking that the only place in the world where I could learn to be truly self-sufficient was here, in the mountains, in the sequoia forest. I know now that this goal is perhaps naïve, but this forest is quiet enough for me to listen and try.

In the fire's flickering light the trees feel like shadows hovering far above me. They are beautiful, comforting, their size imposing, as if I'll never be able to see them entirely. Earlier today, many hours ago, I watched a mule deer, a doe, grazing beneath the trees in the shallow ravine behind my cabin. I've never been close enough to touch one before. I could have reached out to her, stretched my hand to pet her short, coarse fur. I wanted to know her brown and white fur under
my fingers, know it as intimately as my own human skin. The deer continued to graze without noticing me, unimpressed and unconcerned by my presence, her movements slow, simple and focused. For as long as I stood there watching her, I didn't worry about making sense of anything. I've gone through each of my six days here with that reminder of awe, absorbing each sequoia tree, the bears that roam in between the crowded cluster of employee cabins. My desire for touch swells from a larger desire to make the forest mine or to belong to it—to clarify and strengthen my decision to come here.

The morning that Rachel and I arrived in Sequoia is strong and recent in my memory tonight. We'd already come 2500 miles. As Rachel read the map during our drive, followed each red and blue line that took us crookedly, farther and farther away from our homes, it had been hard to imagine a physical distance that great. Neither of us had lived more than a day's drive from our families. We were both more than ready to stop, though, to arrive, to feel we had finished something so that we could begin something new. Settling in this place we'd decided upon months ago would bridge the distance between past and present lives and places.

When we'd passed through Three Rivers—the tiny town in the foothills just outside Sequoia—we knew that we were only eighteen miles from Giant Forest, from the place where I now warm myself next to this fire. Giant Forest is one of the largest groves of sequoia trees in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, the place where we would live and work for the next six months. The anticipation I'd felt the night before, driving through the desert, increased as I followed the road.

The stretch of the General's Highway into Sequoia National Park's south entrance is twisty and narrow, fifteen miles long. The initial portions of the original
road had been constructed over several summers beginning in 1885. The land of the "Big Trees" had not yet achieved national park status, and the early settlers who built the road were part of a fringe group of Utopian socialists known as the Kaweah Colony. Commune members claimed ownership of the Giant Forest area and constructed the first road from the foothills up the side of the steep mountains—a straight path to all the timber riches in the forest for which they also claimed ownership. As the road neared completion, Congress set aside the area for Sequoia National Park in 1890 and forced the Colony to give up the land, never reimbursing them for the time and labor spent on the road to the top. Although the highway stretches past Giant Forest to parts of the park I haven't yet seen, in the semi-darkness tonight the road seems to end here, leading only to this exact moment filled with warmth, strangers, and memories.

Everything that Rachel and I owned in the world had been packed tightly into my bus, the back seats piled to the ceiling with clothing, books, Rachel's guitar, my futon mattress. It amazed me that two complete lives could fit entirely into that small space. I wasn't yet used to the idea that I was itinerant, without a place for my things. Once we unpacked everything, though, I'd been sure we'd finally feel settled in, comfortable, home.

My bus sputtered and wheezed at the task of slowly following the switchbacks on the narrow road; in fifteen miles, we gained almost four thousand feet in altitude before we reached the top. I tried to imagine how arduous it must have been to make the journey on horseback through the forest or in a horse-driven cart a hundred years before. I imagined that I understood how early settlers must have felt, believing that despite the uncertainty about what will happen when
you arrive, there is something important, life-changing, awaiting you there. Now, I think that perhaps that was what I craved, what pushed me forward into the spontaneous decision to come here—the overwhelming intensity of newness, of ending up someplace unknown, in the presence of unfamiliar people.

The change in landscape as we snaked up the road had been shocking, a change I couldn't have imagined. The foothills of the Sierra Nevada are dry and brittle, with desert grasses, sage, tall, slender yucca plants, eucalyptus trees and manzanita bushes, the immense white flowers of jimsonweed plants. I'd heard that native people harvested the jimsonweed seeds for their hallucinogenic properties, but that even the slightest variation of the dosage would be enough to kill a human being. In the foothills, everything exists in hues of brown, even in the late spring when the water runoff from the mountains is high, saturating the plants and grasses.

"Wow, this isn't at all what I expected." The monochromatic evenness of the foothills didn't mirror the image I'd created of Sequoia, the image of where we'd live. For months I'd tried to picture it, a dense, green forest. And in that moment, I worried that I'd been wrong.

Rachel murmured something like "Um hmm," the last thing we would say to one another until we arrived in Giant Forest.

As the elevation increased, the brown hue of the foothills changed into green, like a chameleon, as the forest suddenly established itself. The trees were taller and lush bunches of ferns grew by the side of the road. I'd never seen such dense forest before; it was unlike even the deepest woods I'd known from the Midwest. The forest finally matched the image I'd been carrying in my mind for
months. That image of only six days ago now feels distant, blurred, impossible to call back as I fix my eyes on the trees and cabins, trying to memorize the real sense of the forest tonight.

I still remember seeing the first sequoia trees, a group called the "Four Guardsmen." Two immense trees stand on either side of the road, a road that suddenly looks like a narrow footpath under their sheer height and weight. I pulled the bus into a turnout and we'd stared at them for several minutes. From there I knew it must only be a few more miles. When we passed through those four trees, standing watch over the entrance to the sequoia forest, I sensed for the second time that there could be no turning back; this would be our new home.

That morning I breathed deeply the air that had grown sharply cold and I shivered in my T-shirt and sandals, feeling lightheaded. For a moment I was tempted to turn my body around as we got back into the car and drove ahead, with a quick glance at the four sequoias. Instead, I'd kept my eyes fixed firmly on the rest of road, not looking over my shoulder, not looking back. I rolled my window down and tried to imprint in my mind the forest's unfamiliar, musty smell. Like the deer I saw this morning and the closeness and familiarity of the people around the fire tonight, I'd wanted to make it mine.

The crowd gathered by the bonfire has grown larger now, swelling and expanding to embrace the people who have just finished work, others who leave their cabins and follow the sound of laughter to the center of Pinewood. I recognize
a few of them and struggle to remember the names all mixed up in my mind. I am hesitant to approach them, unsure of what to say, how to begin.

Each day here I've questioned whether I will discover what this forest has to teach me, trying to learn how to pull together the pieces. I may never fully understand its secrets, but I would like to keep trying. No matter how I search for the one, single reason I've come to Sequoia, I know that it doesn't matter. What would I do with a reason if I found one anyway? What is most important to me is that I appreciate where I am now, every moment in which I am fortunate enough to wake up to the image of sunlight shining through tall trees, this moment of shared solitude at the edges of the fire circle.

Rachel will be back from work soon and I find myself clinging to the idea that the awkwardness of being here, making the small effort to talk to people, will be easier with her by my side. I don't know what to do with this new sense of insecurity, having discovered something about myself that I hadn't ever noticed before. Discovered that the reasons why I came here and what I hoped to find can't be unraveled by just this place or even by the friends I'll make. I thought that the actual distance traveled in coming here was the journey, this forest was the end destination, and that once I arrived everything would make perfect sense. Being here is really the journey itself, a slow journey of each day. Learning simple skills like fire-building, independence, self-sufficiency, and building community. They are all pieces, intertwined, of the many things I still have to learn.

The bonfire's light grows dim until I can't write in my journal any longer, the words hidden in moving shadows on the pages. In this moment, I finally feel part of the forest for the first time since my arrival. I wish to lie on the ground, feeling
the gentle prick of pine needles against the hollow in the small of my back, letting go, trusting my decisions. The smoke from the bonfire spirals toward the tops of the trees in perfect rhythm with the music. Woven with the smoke, my expectations and desire to make sense of everything swirl above the trees in filmy strands, falling away from me, dissolving in the forest, carried away on the cold spring air.

In the shadows at the edge of the bonfire I feel as if I am looking through a window, opaque with a layer of the dust of many memories, stories, histories and lives. In this light, others like me sit by themselves on the dusty ground, warm by the fire. They, too, wait tentatively for someone to ask them in, welcoming. Some of my insecurity wanes, following the suggestion of the waning crescent moon, and this circle of strangers no longer feels impossible, belonging no longer feels impossible. It is up to me to take the first step, utter the first words aloud, strong and real.
GIANT FOREST

Who of all the dwellers of the plains and prairies and fertile home forest of round-headed oak and maple, hickory and elm, ever dreamed that the earth could bear such growths, trees that the familiar pines and firs seem to know nothing about—lonely, silent, serene, with a physiognomy almost godlike...?

—John Muir, on the sequoia trees

I've known from the beginning that I cannot stay. I carry this knowledge close to me like a secret, through every day that passes in the sequoia forest. It has become part of me now, woven in layers beneath my skin, entwined in muscle and bone. It is deep like the roots I've planted in the hard, rocky granite earth at the edge of a mountain peak, the roots which make this my home. It speaks to me, calls to me quietly late at night on wind that rises from the San Joaquin Valley and wraps around the sequoias. Sometimes I almost forget that in a few years, every part of my life here in Giant Forest will be gone.

In a box underneath my bed I keep an old photograph, its edges now curled, the image scratched and dull. The season was late spring, in the weeks just before the change into summer. Rachel and I had spent three long weeks crossing the United States in a wandering, crooked path, driving further and further south until we reached New Orleans and then west toward our summer jobs in Sequoia National Park. We drove into the park, tired and elated all at once.
A tall, wooden sign stood at the park's entrance in the dry, dusty foothills. We had arrived. I pulled the car to the side of the road and stood next to it while Rachel held the camera clumsily. I leaned my back against the sign, the wood worn smooth, bleached from years of sunshine and rainless, central California heat. The sun that afternoon was hot on my face and my stomach tightened with a nervous twisty ache. The figure of Chief Sequoyah was painted on one side of the sign; the colors settled in the deeply carved lines were faded and blurred.

In the photograph Chief Sequoyah looked off into the distance and up the side of the mountain, eyebrows etched into the straight, hard stare of the stereotypical Indian. That afternoon I imagined that he looked into the future of what would become my life, my own history with the forest and mountains already being written. I thought for a moment about the millions of others who had stood in that same spot, taking snapshots as they began their drive up the hill, something permanent to remember that they were really there.

Now the entrance sign is gone. Sequoia National Park now sees over a million visitors every season, and during the 1995 season, the National Park Service began widening the road to accommodate this huge, yearly volume of visitors, removing the sign during construction. It would not be returned for several more seasons to its place among the long-leaved yucca plants and poisonous white jimsonweed flowers that bloom large throughout the summer. The image of Chief Sequoyah has been replaced by a long wall of artificial granite boulders which now border both sides of the twisting mountain road. A recent drive back from Visalia, the nearest major city to the park's entrance, reminded me
that this gesture was the first real indication I'd seen of the deconstruction process taking place in Giant Forest.

This season is my last here. I’ve said that before. Each summer when the days grow short and cold and I decide where to go for the winter, I say that I'm not coming back. It's time to move forward with my life, go back to school. I joke that I can't hide in the mountains forever. And then as the winter ends, bringing the first, faint taste of spring, I am unable to imagine a summer without being here. Often during a summer in the park I wish to be anywhere else. But in the same instant I understand intuitively how I'd feel if I never saw the trees again, and the strong sense of longing I'd also feel if the forest were no longer a part of me.

A vaguely unsettled feeling surrounds me here in the forest. Not an unpleasant feeling, just the smallest thought in my mind, a tiny grain of sand in an oyster. It is there, no matter how many years Sequoia has been my home, or how familiar I've become with the shape of the trees and the subtle changing seasons. It's strange to begin life in a place this way, always waiting for the inevitable ending. I've had lovers like this. From our first, passionate meeting I'm able to see with absolute clarity that it will end. I'm not always certain how or when, only that something inherent holds us back and prevents us from being together.

This time the decision to leave isn't mine. Next spring when I pack my belongings and prepare to leave my winter residence in the desert, the National Park Service will begin tearing down the buildings in Giant Forest. They'll begin undoing a hundred years of damage that humans have caused to the landscape. My home for five years will be gone, replaced only by the stillness of the forest as it existed long before me, before all the other humans who have also called it home.
Scientists believe that the sequoia trees' range was at one time widespread and diverse, existing in such states as Pennsylvania and Texas, and as far away as western Europe and Asia. The sequoia trees now grow along a 260-mile stretch of the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains in a band of seventy-five scattered groves. The largest clusters of these trees are found in the southern region, which extends from Yosemite into Sequoia National Park. Here the soil is fertile and moist enough to support their shallow root system. One of the largest and most spectacular of these groves is Giant Forest, where sequoias 200-feet tall overshadow most of the other trees and plants. In 1852 when Hunter Dowd first stumbled upon a grove of sequoias in what is now Yosemite National Park, he had trouble convincing his fellow miners of the existence of such immense living things.

Hungarian botanist Stephan Endlicher named the California coastal redwoods *Sequoia sempervirens* in 1856, when they were first discovered by Euro-Americans. The sequoia trees, distant relatives of the taller and narrower coastal redwoods, were named *Sequoia gigantea*. This name was commonly used until 1939 when the sequoias were given their current name *Sequoiadendron giganteum*. Historians guess that Endlicher's passion for linguistics inspired him to name the trees in admiration after the legendary Cherokee chief who had invented a simple, influential alphabet for his tribe.

I, too, live in the sequoia shadows. From my cabin window I can see the broad, spreading base of the trees, the dense leaves growing at the very tops. It can take as many as twenty people grasping hands to encircle one of the sequoias. Their fuzzy bark is the exact color of sweet cinnamon sticks. I stand at the base of the tree just outside my house and touch it gently with my hands. The bark is soft
and fibrous, almost fur-like, and it feels like I'm petting a large, docile animal. If I knock gently on the wood, the sound is low, as if the tree were nearly hollow inside.

Some trees bear the scar of fire that has swept through the area—ashy black gashes that cut through their bark, shallow in places, deep in others. The sequoias rarely die as a result of fire. Most continue to grow up and around the charred, damaged parts. Along the nature trail I can stand inside one of the trees, its underbelly hollowed out by the intense heat of fire, the upper trunk and branches still curving and growing upward.

I am amazed at their resilience, their adaptation to the elements. Sequoia bark is strong despite its soft and vulnerable appearance, nearly impenetrable to insects and other pests which would kill an ordinary tree. Some of the trees are estimated at three or four thousand years old. I think about young saplings standing in the dizzying sunshine of this forest during the rise and fall of empires, the exploration of the planet, the birth of nations and generations of people. I am drawn to the abilities the sequoias possess, remaining solid and unwavering in the midst of flux, chaos, and disaster.

No matter how I'd like to believe they'll stand guard, watching over Giant Forest for many more lifetimes, the sequoias are not invincible. Human impact from logging and tourism has been more destructive to them than any of the natural elements. In our desire to respect and protect them, we have overlooked the consequences of our devotion and admiration. The National Park Service now fully recognizes the problem of human impact on the sequoia forest. The only solution to this problem, the only way to truly preserve Giant Forest, is to remove the buildings and concession facilities from among the sequoias.
Giant Forest has existed as a national park since 1890, the first park created in California. Few people know that Sequoia is one week older than Yosemite and has the distinction of being the second oldest national park in the United States. Over a century ago, George Stewart and Frank Walker of the local newspaper the Visalia Weekly Delta recognized the need for preservation. They wrote to every governmental figure they could find and published editorial letters asking for the establishment of a public park to prevent the threat of logging to the Big Trees. In reality, the sequoia wood was of little practical use. Because of their size, the trees were difficult to fell by hand and the wood was too soft for substantial building materials. These immense trees were relegated to use as firewood, toothpicks, fence-posts, and many were shipped around the country in sections and displayed as public exhibits. Native tribes also believed in preservation; local Mono Indians held the Wawona, or sequoia tree, as sacred and warned that bad luck would follow anyone who destroyed them.

Instead of destroying the sequoias, people came to appreciate the Big Trees, to worship them, amazed by their immense size and tremendous age. They came to photograph them, touch them, and trample them. And now, over a hundred years later, the trees show subtle signs of wear below the ground in their roots, and in their halted growth.

The current plan for the removal of facilities in Giant Forest is the culmination of a longstanding battle to preserve the sequoias. In 1926, prominent forest pathologist Emilio Meinecke published a report at the request of the park director, which detailed for the first time the negative effects of human impact on the forest ecosystem. In the early days of Sequoia National Park's growing
visitation and tourism, Meinecke’s findings were disturbing and difficult to accept. He showed that many trees in Giant Forest, particularly the sequoias, had already suffered significant root damage. He concluded that human footsteps, which compacted soil surrounding the trees, and the construction of roads, water lines, and buildings all disturbed the sequoias’ roots. To prevent the trees from incurring any further damage, Meinecke recommended that all construction in Giant Forest be halted and that all recreational activity be moved to a less sensitive location.

The report confirmed the park superintendent’s fears. Colonel John Roberts White, Sequoia National Park’s longest administrator, had suspected for some time that Giant Forest couldn’t continue to grow and support its tourism without long-term problems. In addition to the documented environmental damage to the trees, Colonel White expressed concern for the quickly diminishing aesthetic environment in Giant Forest. Based on his observations of the park on July 4, 1930, White wrote to the park director a few months later:

The problem of handling such numbers (of visitors) in the congested central Big Tree area at Giant Forest is a serious one; and much study and planning must be given to developing new areas for hotels, house-keeping camps, public camps, etc. in order to accommodate the increasing crowds. If we do not plan carefully and transfer the major part of present activity away from the heart of Giant Forest, the beauties of that area—already badly tarnished—will be further impaired.

The same day that inspired White to write this report brought nearly 1,200 cars and almost 4,300 people into Giant Forest. The heart of the grove had become
a sprawling maze of cabins, tents, people, and traffic jams. But to close the facilities would mean taking part of Sequoia National Park away from the people who loved it—an impossible dilemma.

Over the next several decades, the debate over Giant Forest continued alongside growing numbers of visitors and building development. In the 1960's scientists discovered that air pollution from rapidly growing nearby towns was being trapped in the San Joaquin Valley and spreading to the mountains, killing young sequoia saplings and oak trees. From the huge granite boulder of Moro Rock which overlooks this valley and the Great Western Divide, the coastal mountain range used to be visible. Now I take my parents there when they visit, and we see a heavy layer of sepia-colored air on the horizon, hanging in the sky above the valley floor three thousand feet below, obscuring the mountains.

During my seasons here I've been asked more times than I can possibly count why the National Park Service is closing Giant Forest. My friends and I are not employees of the Park Service; we work instead for the concessionaire who operates "Guest Facilities" within the park's boundaries. The rangers lead nature walks and patrol the park; we are the ones who make beds in the hotel, sell plastic, kitschy souvenirs in the gift shops, or serve three-course meals in the fine-dining restaurant. Yet we've each memorized the answer to this question. It is deeply embedded inside of us. We are inseparable from the knowledge that Giant Forest will eventually be gone.

I'm still not used to the sound of the words I say to the tourists who question me every night in the Lodge Dining Room. The rehearsed speech about the closure of Giant Forest is automatic, instinctive. I often feel that the spoken
words come from someone else, someone other than me. I wonder if perhaps I
won't allow the words to become real. As if, by uttering them aloud and really
understanding them, I'll finally reach acceptance about this changing forest. I
can't reconcile the idea that when the forest returns to its natural state, my image
of it will be just a memory, a series of still-life photographs I keep in a box beneath
my bed.

The most important reason that the National Park Service has decided to
close Giant Forest is to protect the trees. They are already "protected" in the areas
within the park, safe from the long-ago days of commercial exploitation. Yet they
aren't thriving the way they once did, they aren't repopulating themselves as they
have for thousands of years. While the diminishing range of the sequoias can also
be attributed to climatic changes—an increasingly warmer, drier environment—
there is an increased emphasis now on encouraging regeneration of the remaining
groves.

During two out of the five seasons I spent in the park, one of the sequoias
fell. The Park Service has determined that nearly a dozen others lean at dangerous
angles. It is a remarkable event, to see one of these massive trees collapse. The
sequoias have a root system only three to five feet deep, which spreads out in every
direction surrounding the tree and intertwines and tangles with the roots of other
nearby trees and plants. The networks of roots, often encompassing up to an acre,
tether the trees to the ground and maintain their stability and structure.

I find it remarkable that the roots' small fraction of the trees' actual size
maintains such a vital function. If anything should interfere with the roots the
sequoias' tenuous grasp on the earth is compromised. The unnatural weight of too
many human footsteps near the base of the trees, directly above the fragile root system and the complex underground pipe system, can only weaken the trees from the ground. During the park's early years when visitor use was not closely regulated, guests could actually park their cars and pitch their tents right alongside the sequoias.

The Giant Forest area has housed tourist facilities such as restaurants and lodging since the early 1900's. The surging influx of visitors demanded that the Park Service build more structures to provide them with what they needed. Indoor plumbing was a natural part of this service and Giant Forest now has a complex system of water and sewage pipes running beneath the ground. This, too, interrupts the natural workings of the sequoias' root system, preventing the roots from spreading out enough to provide the stability the trees need.

I didn't see a sequoia fall during my first season, but I arrived almost immediately after one fell. I'd just finished work at the gift shop when the noise began, impossible to ignore. It rumbled and shook the ground as if we were in the midst of an earthquake. I followed the direction of the sound to the source, a tree near Round Meadow. From the exposed tangle of taproots, a violent rushing river of water poured into the earth. The sequoia trees depend heavily on water, pushing an average of 300 gallons through their roots every day. The roots had become so saturated that the tree snapped in half, unable to withstand its own weight any longer. For weeks afterward, the color of the tree's broken inner wood was deep, crimson red, a raw, open wound.

This is the most common way for a sequoia to die. The wood, though, survives for much longer once the tree has fallen because of its high tannin
content. Few insects and other pests disturb the acidic fibers. Some sequoias remain little changed on the ground in the same place where they fell hundreds of years earlier. Carbon-dating tests on sequoia fragments indicate that some trees may have fallen over 2,000 years ago.

When tourists ask me why Giant Forest is closing, I also mention fire, which plays an integral part in the regeneration of the forest. Sequoia trees need occasional fire to clear out the "duff" — the debris and underbrush on the forest floor. Unlike the park's white firs, which can thrive in the shade, the sequoias need clear areas of direct sunlight for saplings to survive the inter-species forest competition. Natural wildfires also spread through the forest, the heat from the flames cracking open the small, green cones and scattering the seeds throughout the forest. Some of these seeds will take hold, place their own roots into the ground, and become sequoia saplings. When I walk through the forest I see these young trees, narrow slivers of wood that will eventually grow into mature trees a few hundred feet tall.

Because more than a million people visit Sequoia National Park each year, allowing natural wildfires in Giant Forest would jeopardize the safety of the people, destroy buildings, and of course, negatively affect tourist business in the area. For many years the National Park Service has relied on the technique of "prescribed burning" throughout the forest to mimic this vital, natural force which keeps the sequoia species alive. Ironically, a long history of overprotection from fire in the park has severely slowed the trees' rate of re-population.

To manipulate the land, the natural elements, can only be a temporary solution to the question of fire in Giant Forest. The largest groups of thriving
young sequoias were saplings during the last, natural wildfire in the park, almost eighty years ago. The absence of newer, later growth indicates that this forest needs more than infrequent clusters of burns in small areas.

Fire brings another danger. Prescribed burns don't always remain within the control of the park rangers and biologists. I've seen huge, raging fires spread through the dry foothills, taunting and teasing dangerously, creeping toward the forest. A prescribed burn once changed direction suddenly with the wind and we spent several days waiting uneasily to hear the word "evacuation."

These reasons are part of the story I tell the tourists, night after night in the Lodge Dining Room where I work. The deconstruction of Giant Forest has been publicized more domestically than overseas, and curious tourists have usually seen an article about the park in a local newspaper or magazine.

I spend five or ten minutes giving my speech, while the family of tourists nod their heads as if they're really paying attention to the answers. They don't understand the pained expression on my face, that each new telling of the story is a reminder of a difficult and inevitable knowledge. When I finish, one of them usually says something like, "Yeah, that's too bad." A short pause. "They shouldn't close Giant Forest." So I wonder if they've been listening at all, if they've heard a single word. That the well-being of the forest overshadows everything else. It really doesn't matter how I feel, how any of us feels about it.

The nature of working in a National Park is that you come in contact with many tourists from all over the world, a six-month blur of faces. Some of these people you may see for a day, two or three days, occasionally for as long as a week. When it happens that you remember someone from one season to the next, the
impression is clear, distinct, and surprising. Each season that I've worked in the Lodge Dining Room, the Stantons have come to visit.

An older couple from near Sacramento, for over a decade they've spent their yearly two-week vacation in Sequoia National Park, staying in cabin #65 at the Lodge. On the first night of their stay each year, Mrs. Stanton greets me with a warm hug and asks me about my winter. During the off-season, which I occasionally spend in the Sonoran desert of southern Arizona, she often writes me letters and sends photographs of her life outside the park. The Stantons know each of the staff members' names and home states. During their nightly visits to the restaurant we linger at their table, sharing stories about Sequoia. They are the sort of people who still have something to say to one another during dinner, after forty years of marriage. And they have many more things to tell us about Sequoia.

This is the last year the restaurant will be open. Even though the rest of Giant Forest will be closed gradually over the next several seasons, the Park Service has decided that the Lodge Dining Room will be one of the first structures removed permanently after this season. Like most of the other buildings in this part of Sequoia, it was constructed in the early part of the twentieth century. Each concessionaire has neglected the buildings, hesitant to spend any time or money repairing what will eventually be reduced to splintered boards and nails.

This is another reason for closing Giant Forest. Most of the buildings were never designed to endure fifty years' worth of visitors, families and children on their summer vacations, bear break-ins and rowdy employees; many are literally falling apart. The building which houses the Giant Forest Market is the oldest building in the park, and will be one of the few structures spared during the
deconstruction process. It will remain standing just as it does in seventy-five year old photographs, becoming an informative visitor center.

The management plan calls for all the buildings in Giant Forest to be torn down and replaced by a new, large hotel up the road six miles. The new facility, Wuksachi Village, will be a self-contained complex, with hotel, restaurant and gift shop all in one central location. It will stand surrounded by fir, oak and lodgepole pine trees, away from the sequoias Giant Forest. When it is completed, guests may be able to spend their entire vacations without ever leaving the hotel complex to explore the park.

To celebrate the Stantons' last night in Sequoia this season, each of us signed a card, knowing that we would not see one another like this again. The whole dining room staff gathered as a group around their favorite table by the window. Mrs. Stanton took a sip of white zinfandel from her stemmed goblet and smiled at all of us. As she opened the card and read each message, her eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you," she said as she tried to maintain her composure. "You all mean so much to us, this place means so much to us." "Do you know that I used to work here? Fifty years ago I was a waitress in the restaurant, where the cafeteria is now. Just like most of you are."

As she spoke, she seemed to look past us and out the window to the two unnamed sequoia trees overlooking Round Meadow. I glanced at the family at the next table. They had stopped eating and were listening to our conversation.

"I was a busboy," Mr. Stanton said. "I was a busboy in the restaurant fifty years ago. That's where I met Ruth, when she was a waitress." I pictured the two
of them, twenty years old, taking long walks through these trees, using the same winding trails that I do now. How much the same had the forest looked to them?

"Of course," Mrs. Stanton said, "things were a lot different then. We had to wear stiff, starched dresses to work."

We laughed. "I'm sure that's not all that's different," I told her.

She clutched the stem of her wineglass, as if holding it tightly would prolong and capture this moment. For as long as she held on and didn't let go, she could preserve this memory, adding it to many layers of images in her mind. That instant became a mental picture we would all remember, when the forest itself was different, when it was no longer our home.

The stillness of the moment was broken. "Well," Mrs. Stanton finally said, thoughtful, "it's just something you get used to. Something you just can't dwell on." She said what we'd all been trying to convince ourselves of, words we didn't share out loud but wanted to believe. Words that lingered, long after we all returned to work that night.

I think often about that conversation, remember it clearly. I can only imagine the years and years of changes Mrs. Stanton has seen in Sequoia. Some have passed almost unnoticeably, the next ones will be huge, shocking. What emotions will Mrs. Stanton feel when she returns next season and the next and these buildings are gone?

I'm not the only one who is affected by the sound of the words or the knowledge that it will all soon be gone. Others have lived, worked, and loved here before me, have found a home in this same place. People like Mrs. Stanton, whose histories and memories are intricately woven with the mountains and forest,
surrounding the trees, spreading in every direction. Providing stability like a sequoia tree's roots. Even though I know the preservation of the trees is the only way, it's hard to ignore the pull of my memories, not to dwell on it. Still, I know that to feel sadness about Giant Forest is selfish. I have neglected more than just the trees.

Mrs. Stanton's voice reveals no sense of sadness when she talks about the closing of Giant Forest. She speaks fondly and reverently, undisturbed by the idea that the forest is changing as it always has. I admire her acceptance of the changes here. It is as if her memories and images are enough, enduring as strongly as the sequoias themselves. I must believe that my own memories will also be enough.

For the first time I can see past my nostalgia and sadness to the life I am leaving here. Here beneath the General Sherman Tree, at the summit of Mt. Whitney, in the clear, rushing waters of Buck Creek in the springtime. My home is not about the buildings and the places where I have lived, the physical shape of the landscape. My history remains in the moist, fertile earth of the forest floor. I am able to see through and past what I thought was the ending, to what lies beyond. The hope of healing and room for the trees to grow.
When we want everything to change we call on fire.
—Terry Tempest Williams, from Desert Quartet

I awaken just after dawn, throat burning and raw. My head feels heavy and cloudy, as if I had too much red wine last night. A cough catches in the back of my throat and I stretch my arms above my head, willing my chest to expand. But my lungs won't open wide enough, can't fill fast enough or deep enough. The air this morning stings, bitter and acrid. It has been dense and hazy with smoke all summer. We are on fire.

And now we're surrounded on all sides. I learned this yesterday from Jose, one of the National Park Service trail crew guys. He spends weeks at a time in the backcountry, constructing bridges, shoveling dirt, moving boulders and clearing branches away from the High Sierra Trail that leads to Bearpaw Camp and later becomes the John Muir Trail.

I've always wanted to take that trail as far as it will go. I've often imagined spending three weeks or longer following it past Mt. Whitney—the highest point in the lower forty-eight—and nearly two hundred more miles all the way into Yosemite National Park. But there's never been time for a trip like this during all the seasons that I've worked in Sequoia National Park. Something always gets in the way.
During the late summer of 1875, John Muir made that trip. Alone with his mule, he spent two months in the mountains, hiking from Yosemite Valley into the sequoia forests, and back again. I admire Muir's work for his commitment to capturing the sense of these mountains, but envy more the freedom with which he followed this commitment. It bothers me that I've never made the time, have never been able to find three uninterrupted weeks where there isn't something else that I have to do. Even at the beginning and end of each season, when time is still fluid and transitory, some reason not to go always surfaces. A broken car, a trip to Ohio to see my parents, or the leftover snow, mud brown and hard in tightly packed drifts by the side of the road. The trees are so tall and shady that I've known summers where the winter hardly gets a chance to leave, and long backcountry trips are impossible.

This season I'm tired, so used to the routine of seasonal work that my naïve enthusiasm of earlier summers has waned. During my first seasons, I'd carefully plan all the things to see and do in the park, undistracted by the demands of work or too little free time. In this new landscape, each mountain peak, each meadow, tree, and wildflower could be known intimately. My entire life before Sequoia was spent living in the Midwest, yet I have learned this landscape more intimately now than any other. Each intricate detail of life in the forest is so strong that even hiking trails at night, in complete darkness, comes without fear of falling. And I often wonder what comes next. What is left to learn when you are so close to a place that you feel you know it more clearly than you know yourself?

Jose has done it, walked the trail all the way to Yosemite. He tells me stories about it whenever he comes into the front country. He says, "You should
know what it's like to wake up one morning shivering in your sleeping bag, damp and cold. And then you notice the sky is red and orange over those white granite cliffs. It's enough to make everything else you do in your life worth it."

Sometimes he spends weeks out there, blasting with dynamite. The crews clear the trails in the spring after the snow begins to melt and the rivers and creeks are swollen, pregnant, rushing. It always seemed strange to me, that there would be a dozen men and women in the forest working together to control and reshape the land, the flow of the waters, preserving the path for each new season's tourists. Their work against the natural shape of the land is always temporary. Next spring, it will happen all over again; the trails will be blocked by immovable granite boulders, or washed away by water running fierce and cold down the sides of tall mountains. Our desire to preserve the landscape we love is strong, but never strong enough.

Tonight, Jose is back in Giant Forest for a few days before he begins another blasting project farther along the trail.

I tell him, "They're going to have you blasting all the way to Yosemite, aren't they?"

On his days off, like so many of the other trail crew members, Jose spends much of his time drinking in the bar of the Lodge Dining Room, where I occasionally fill in for the regular bartender. His is a different kind of drinking than I am used to. My friends and I sit in cabins when we drink cheap red wine or scotch that burns warm in the back of my throat, talking, writing, and laughing.
His drinking comes from someplace deep inside, a desire that can only come from spending five weeks in the wilderness, working with the same group of people all summer, the same people he's worked with for many seasons before this one.

Bartending is actually more enjoyable than my real job as manager here in the restaurant. The solitude it gives me is comforting, mixing martinis and Campari sodas and not talking to anyone, depending on my mood. Some nights, I talk to every foreigner who comes to the counter and says, “Budweiser,” carry on conversations with French Canadians in French or eavesdrop on families from the Netherlands speaking a pleasant singsong language I think can almost understand. A few off-duty employees usually sit at the bar, too. Some of them get so drunk that they forget which jokes they've told before and I just nod in my sympathetic bartender way and laugh.

Jose doesn't seem to mind that I'm not a National Park Service employee. He shares news about what's happening in the park as if I was one of them, rather than someone who simply works for the park's concessionaire. Some of the rangers and other National Park Service staff do mind, and I've seen contempt in the eyes of more than one over the years. We are curious opposites, each living and working as if a grudge existed between us, a grudge from a bitter, long-standing fight.

Concessions companies that provide lodging, food, and attractions for tourists have been part of Sequoia National Park's history from nearly the beginning. In the early part of the twentieth century, a number of small, independent concessionaires operated in cooperation with the National Park Service, and constructed restaurants, hotels, and cabins. Beginning in 1920, the
Kings River Parks Company took over as the sole concessionaire in Sequoia. Since that time, five different companies have overseen guest facilities. I am part of this long tradition.

I know the National Park Service employees often think that we don't love these mountains and forests like they do. To them, our intentions can never be entirely pure, honest, grateful. We will always be the ones who exploit the park with our cafeterias, hotels, and tacky tourist gift shops. And they will always be the ones who preserve the park, clean up rubbish after the tourists in campgrounds, lecture people on native flowers and educate them about protecting the wildlife. Each night in the restaurant, though, I answer complex questions from tourists about the history and ecology of Sequoia. I, too, educate unknowing guests about how to properly store food in order to protect the park's wildlife. Still, Park Service and concession people live and work side by side, and never seem able to bridge the final distance that lies between.

We learn to tolerate each other's presence. Concession employees become friendly with those who have gone from our side to theirs, the ones who are now rangers instead of cooks or housekeepers. To maintain good ties, we invite one another to parties. These invitations are superficial, unnecessary. We know intuitively that we are interdependent. The visitors to the park need us just as much as they need the rangers, naturalists, and biologists. Our lives and histories are also connected, intertwined, just as each of us is inextricably linked to the tall trees, the wild meadows, and the mountains.

I smile when Jose sits down at the bar and he gives me his usual half-grin as if he doesn't want to exert too much effort. "This is vacation," he's often told me,
"no work now." He’s here tonight with two other trail crew members whose names I don’t know, and all three of them sit at the long counter and smoke cigarettes as they drink.

They look so much alike, with longish hair that is still damp from the first shower they’ve taken in weeks. Their skin smells of fresh Ivory soap and clumps of moist rolling tobacco. Jose’s thick hair curls just on the ends, shiny black, like smooth strands of obsidian heated into glass by fire. Tonight he ties it back with a piece of strong twine, the kind used to wrap packages that will be sent a long way from home.

They each drink a different kind of liquor from heavy highball glasses, as if to assert their individuality. This gesture must come from spending so much uninterrupted time with the same people. I understand that sort of sameness. I’ve known it in the days here that all run into one another in a blur, season after season. I know the people and place so well that we almost become one living thing, as if I’m an indistinguishable and transparent part of the forest.

I fix my gaze on the ends of their crooked hand-rolled cigarettes. With every inhale, the cigarettes glow red and bright in the dim room. Like the fires that surround us.

“Have you heard the latest about the fire down the hill?” Jose asks. Whenever we talk about leaving Sequoia and going to nearby Fresno or Visalia we say we’re going “down the hill” or “off the hill.”

Jose is talking about the fire at Ash Mountain, about fifteen miles straight down from where I live in Giant Forest. A few weeks ago, a family at one of the campgrounds in the foothills built a fire to roast marshmallows. The wind picked
up suddenly and blew hot embers into the bushes. The ground cover, parched and brittle from a summer of little rain and 110° heat, caught fire almost instantly. I wonder what this family must have thought and felt as they stood and watched the fire grow, swell and spread. They left hurriedly without saying a word to anyone, and never even stopped to tell the campground ranger. By then the fire was already dangerous—swallowing, devouring, moving quickly across the curving contours of the land.

I shake my head. "Last I heard we were going to have to evacuate, and then they called it off at the last minute."

I'd already faced the threat of evacuation twice since the fires started. It's a strange feeling to know that you are living next to something so immense and powerful. I know it is there, at every moment. The rumbling, vibrating sound of helicopters dropping water awakens me in the mornings. Half a dozen trucks filled with firefighters from all over the country go up and down the hill every day. And the smoke. It covers everything like a thick coastal fog, weaving among and around the trees. The ominous shade of yellowish gray that eclipses the usually cornflower-colored skies makes me uneasy, nervous. I don't know how to answer truthfully the worried tourists who ask me if everything is going to be okay.

The strangest thing about these fires is that I can't see them in the daytime. The hue of the sky and the smoke are a constant reminder, but the fires themselves are omnipresent, yet invisible. And we can't forget them. Until nighttime. Last night after work I went to the top of Moro Rock, 1500 feet of granite cliff that is one of the highest places in Giant Forest and one of the single largest granite structures in the country.
The smoke had made the skies seem even darker. At first, I couldn't see anything, knowing only that the San Joaquin Valley floor spread out before me, 3500 feet below. And then, finally, I could see the fires. Probably ten different places in the hills where the ground was illuminated with bright, round flecks of light. It looked like the gods had rolled up fire between their hands and thrown it over the metal railing into the darkness. And still it had seemed very far away from where I stood. In the daytime, the only reminder is the stinging, smoky air.

"If the winds change direction again like they think they might—" Jose pauses and takes a long, slow drink—"we'll be out of here for sure."

"And the wind?"

"Hard to say. The fire could go over the ridge and straight up into Giant Forest." Both of his friends stare into their drinks and don't say anything.

"If it changes direction? How long?"

Jose gives me his half-smile again and shrugs. "Probably not long. No choice, we'd have to leave. Most of these buildings are too old."

We're burning on the other side, too, the side that cuts north and west and into Kings Canyon National Park. Along the General's Highway, for the nearly thirty miles that stretch from Giant Forest to Grant Grove, fires smolder next to the road. These are supposed to be controlled, "prescribed" burns. The Park Service has spent the summer doing a series of prescribed burns all along the roads, concentrating in the heaviest sequoia groves. These fires are manipulated just like the trails next to rivers that pour down the mountains each spring.

Two distinct types of fires occur in most national parks. The first is wildland fires. These happen naturally and frequently, usually as a result of a lightening
strike in a forest. The National Park Service considers the location, danger, and severity of these fires, and determines whether or not to let them continue burning. Wildland fires are usually allowed to burn and extinguish themselves naturally.

The other type of fire is prescribed burns that the National Park Service starts deliberately and monitors closely. The idea is to mimic the natural fires that control forest growth and help break sequoia seeds from their cones. The regeneration of the Sierra Nevada forests depends on this crucial element. Because many types of saplings need clear areas of direct sunlight in order to thrive, fire clears the duff, or excess fuel and debris, from the forest floor. Without the extra space fire provides, many saplings would not survive in the shadow of the hardier trees. The intense, concentrated heat from fire also splits open the sequoia trees' hard, green cones, and scatters their seeds throughout the forest.

In the United States, non-native Americans have had a long, difficult, and uneasy relationship with fire. We have always believed that fire is something to be feared, something dangerous that must be tamed and controlled. Until recent decades, we exerted every possible effort to maintain this illusion of control. Fire was bad, and we insisted on preventing it and eliminating it from our wilderness areas.

Humans' uncomfortable relationship with fire is particularly noticeable in the history of the national parks system. Most people can remember the National Park Service's spokesperson, Smoky the Bear, in his stiff ranger hat, sternly teaching us to "prevent forest fires." Until the 1950's, park administrators didn't allow any fires, natural or deliberate, to burn within park boundaries. This decision is understandable, even noble when we think about the motivation. In
addition to wanting to protect park visitors, no one had yet truly realized the significant and important role that fire plays in the processes of the forest. Because fire was dangerous for humans, it only made sense that it must also be dangerous to plant and animal life.

Several decades of research beginning in the 1940's confirmed that the sequoia forest needs fire to survive; it is an essential part of the forest ecosystem that cannot be ignored. Not allowing fire to exist as part of the forest results in a too-homogeneous environment, one in which many diverse types of plants and trees would no longer survive. Major wildland fires had always occurred in these ecologically diverse areas that we tried to protect. The local Native American Mono tribe had regularly used fire to improve the forest environment for hunting and to stimulate plant growth.

Park administrators began to experiment with returning fire to the forests, to restore the natural processes that non-native people had suppressed for nearly a hundred years. Sequoia National Park was the first to implement a fire management plan, and many other national parks soon began to follow this important lead.

These programs have led to the current use of both types of fire in forest ecosystems. Visible remnants exist, though, of our long history of over-protection from fire. The rangers setting and controlling fires by the side of the winding mountain roads, Jose and his crew clearing trails far in the backcountry of the park each spring, are clear reminders of our past.

It surprises me how much light these fires give off in the darkness of the forest. On my way back from Fresno last week, I was driving by myself after it had
gotten dark, staying awake by singing along to the radio. The San Joaquin Valley in the summer is unbearable, with its oppressive, stifling heat; it's always a relief to return to the cool forest. The light glowed above the trees, pale orange illuminated against the black sky, for almost a mile before the first burning fires. In the daytime the fires had been unnoticeable, nothing more than smoldering piles of wood on the forest floor, rangers in fire suits nearby, observing and scribbling notes on clipboards.

I pulled the car to the side of the road, as close to the fire as possible, and watched. The flames shot twenty or thirty feet into the air. This was the first big fire I'd ever seen. The fire gave off waves of intense heat and my eyes watered and stung. It was hard not to wonder about all those other prescribed burns during my previous seasons here, whether they really had been under control. It must be easy to lose a tenuous hold on something that unpredictable, that volatile.

"One of my friends, Julia, is out fighting that fire," I say. It is quiet and Jose and I remain silent for what feels like a long time. "Once, I asked why she does it. She told me that she likes the adrenaline rush."

It must run deeper than that. I've known others who also risked their lives to fight fires. Playing with fire, they joke. They all share something I can't understand, some curious respect and passion for fire. For its tremendous power to change everything, both the landscape and the people who live there. Their eyes shine bright like light from a fire, as if each person actually burns from the inside, rather than the outside. Perhaps being in its midst, actually seeing through a fire's eyes, thinking and feeling like a fire, allows you to recognize what drives you forward, realize your own internal fires.
"Yeah, I know. I have friends out there too." After a while, Jose hands me his empty glass. "Me, I'd rather be in here drinking." The alcohol I serve him is like a small but powerful flame, quickly burning. A brief and intense fire with the force to turn ordinary rock into glass, or to make you forget. It simply takes another shape, changes into a different form of escape from whatever burns inside.

I have to smile. I pour him another gin and tonic and listen to them talk about what else they'll do with their time off. One of them jokes, "If this place doesn't blow up."

The fires affect everything, everyone. Despite the distance between concession employees and National Park Service employees, in many ways we are all the same, each touched by the power and urgency of this natural process. We all know people who are in its midst, working together to preserve the environment that we care about so deeply. And we're all seeking a way to understand its source and meaning, whatever that is for each of us. It occurs to me that the final distance between us is never really so great after all.

The image of fire creeping up the mountain overwhelms me. How quickly could I leave if I really needed to? It would be strange to leave abruptly and not return, by necessity and not by my own choice. The noise would be deafening, with panicked people screaming, throwing things into their cars haphazardly, frantically. What would happen if my cat were too scared to come home? I push the thoughts away. Even though the fire is there, all around me, I can only trust my own reassuring words that things will be okay.

When the fire is finally out the foothills will be changed. A long scar will sprawl along the ridge, burnt and black. The thought reminds me of the
mountains in Wyoming. For miles all you can see are the skeletons of the thousands of trees that once stood there, before the fires. The image of this burned-out land is haunting and deceptive. I've seen these trees in the springtime too, surrounded by brilliant wildflowers pushing up through what looks like dead, lifeless earth.

In July and August of 1988, strong winds and dry fuels spread fire across more than 150,000 acres in Yellowstone National Park and surrounding areas, closing facilities and roads, and threatening local residents' homes. And across the country, many of us watched television footage throughout the summer as more than 25,000 firefighters attempted to control the seven major fires spreading across the landscape. Even while watching the television screen, I remember having a sense of the fires' magnitude and immensity. It was almost as if the rising and spreading heat from fires thousands of miles away was palpable, tangible.

About 1.2 million total acres were burned during the 248 fires in 1988. Of this total, nearly 36% of Yellowstone's acreage was burned. Millions of dollars of property was damaged, and more than 400 animals died in the fires. Despite these incredible figures, long-term studies indicated that the massive fires had little negative effect on most plant and animal populations. Many plant seeds and roots survived the fires' heat, and a number of plants—especially the park's species of wildflowers—actually showed improved growth as a result of nutrient-rich soil. Fire gives life, however small and imperceptible the signs. We still have much more to learn.

The fires this summer will eventually be contained. The winds will cooperate and Giant Forest will be spared from the heat and force of fire. Even
after the threat of evacuation is gone, though, and the fires themselves become
little more than remnants of smoke, the image of fire will remain strong and
present, with me constantly. I'll see Jose only once more this season, in the
restaurant bar, drinking gin and tonic from a heavy highball glass, as he always
does. And his image will remain fixed in my mind, the image of how we each learn
to accept and endure our own forms of fire. We may never understand completely
our fire's source, but we can accept its presence, the different forms of warmth,
and the change heat creates.

It could be a very long time before we all notice new growth in the hills near
Sequoia. Many more seasons may pass before I see tiny saplings growing up
around the trees, the beauty of a brilliant, shocking display of color in a meadow of
wildflowers. But I know it will happen. For now I will learn to enjoy the way the
earth and I feel as if we're glowing, burning white hot and blue and bright.
COMMUNION

The magnum of cheap Merlot in my backpack is heavy. The awkward, smooth green glass thuds against the small curve of my back. My steps fall into a familiar, rhythmic pattern as I follow the trail past the restaurant toward Lower Kaweah, where most of the summer employees live this season. Even though I've made this walk dozens of times, walking quickly at night is a habit, a remnant of my first season before I'd learned there was nothing to fear in the darkness.

It's already late. The accounting paperwork at the Lodge Dining Room took me longer than usual tonight, and I'm not looking forward to spending the evening with my friends. We'll stay up until the first hint of light filters through the trees, drink too much wine, and reminisce again about the worn-out stories we've told over and over. And the stories will probably remind me too much about the places I still haven't seen during my five seasons here.

But I'm leaving soon, and have promised to do this one last time. I won this bottle of wine two seasons ago—in a contest among the servers in the Lodge Dining Room—and have carried it around with me like a tangible burden ever since. During four moves the wine has been wrapped gently with tissue paper, placed in a wooden box, and packed into the back of my station wagon. I've saved it for a special occasion just like this one—possibly the last moment we'll all share together before the season ends.
I come down the dusty hill toward the employee cabins in Lower Kaweah. The air smells like pine needles and stale beer—cheap canned beer with a watery, metallic taste that promises a bitter headache in the morning. The lights from the nearby hotel are dim, but visible shadows reveal a large group of people. My immediate thought is that the black bears have broken into someone’s cabin. No, it can’t be the bears. We are all too used to their habits, and most of us sleep through the night without noticing their destructive acts. Still, after five summers here I can sense when something is out of place in the forest. I stumble over a small rock in the road. My heart beats faster and I try not to acknowledge the hollowness tightening and pressing in my chest.

The group is larger than I expect; dozens of people stand in the paved parking lot talking and smoking, some of them with bottles in their hands. Disconnected strains of music come from scattered cabins—heavy metal music from stereos, bluegrass strummed on an acoustic guitar. An employee whose name I don’t know passes by quickly and I grab his arm.

“What happened? Someone get arrested?” I’m only half-joking. Someone getting arrested for pubic intoxication or for a fistfight seems somehow easier than hearing about another accident. In the sister park to the north of us, Kings Canyon, someone usually drowns each season in the swift, rushing Kings River. Drownings are common knowledge, something the rangers warn tourists about. During almost every one of my five seasons in Sequoia, an employee has been seriously injured in an alcohol-related accident. These accidents we keep to ourselves, like a shameful secret.
“Yeah, that guy from the LDR, what’s his name? Keith?” The tightness in my chest grows stronger and I sit down on the cold pavement. “DUI, the rangers took him down the hill....” He keeps talking, but I stop listening.

Keith is my assistant manager, and I shake my head because my very first thought is that tomorrow is supposed to be my day off. My second thought is a split-second image of Keith, drunk, cold, and confused. He is my closest friend here and no one can tell me where they took him or when he might be back.

But nothing surprises me anymore. In the thick stacks of photographs from my seasons here, especially the first, so many images share the same, conspicuous details: people, smiling and laughing, and somewhere in the photograph, usually displayed proudly, bottles of liquor or drugs. There are photographs too, of the sequoia trees and mountain peaks, but these images of nature are overcrowded by images of an incongruous part of life in Sequoia. More than the changing seasons and the familiarity of this landscape, I have come to accept that alcohol and drugs are a part of this life.

As I sit on the cold, hard ground, thinking of Keith, images flood through me, insistent and uncontrollable. Not of the trees or mountains, but of the life captured in my photographs. One by one they flash clearly, like the rapid shutter of a camera, blurred snapshots which draw a crooked, but consistent line through each of my five summers in Sequoia. The pictures keep moving through me like water, moving forward from the beginning to this moment. Why do I choose these images to remember, these memories which endure more strongly than images of sequoia trees or meadows? After five years I’ve become numb with acceptance
about the drinking and the drugs. We all have. It's impossible though, to ignore this fractured record, a continuous but interrupted narrative of my history here.

My first season. Just before my friend Rachel and I arrived in Sequoia to start our summer jobs. We drove west toward California in comfortable nighttime silence. I turned off the radio near some small, nameless town outside San Antonio, when all the signals grew faint and blurred into scratchy static. The only sound was the steady hum of my 1978 Volkswagen bus, encumbered by the weight of all our junk crammed into the back. My eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. Through the windshield the sky stretched, wide and impersonal. The millions of stars were illuminated clearly and vividly, without the dimming haze of city lights. I held the steering wheel numbly and focused on the straight, almost infinite distance between us and the mountains of New Mexico.

Even in the silent car I still tasted unspoken excitement in the air. We were finally free from the smallness of the Midwest, beginning new lives and new adventures in Sequoia National Park. Every once in a while I had to remind myself that I wasn't going back when the season ended, my ties with routine life in Indiana severed.

"Ten. That's ten dead armadillos so far." Rachel kept track of the wildlife we encountered during our trip in a small spiral notebook. "Are there armadillos in California? I'm driving myself nuts trying to picture what it'll be like." Rachel echoed the jumbled mess of thoughts that hadn't left me once during the month before we left.
I'd driven to California by myself last summer, and I tried to make those memories fit in with the way I imagined Sequoia would be. "Yeah, me too. There'll probably really big mountains and lots of trees." It sounded so ridiculous that we both laughed. "When we get there, I'm going to quit smoking for real this time, and go hiking every single day."

I imagined that for the first time, others who also cared about the natural landscape would surround me. They would be clean-living people excited by nature, who understood why I was a vegetarian, and who would rather wander alone in the woods than make small talk with strangers at a party. Just like me.

"I'd like to learn to rock climb. When I'm not working, that is." Rachel sighed. "I want to hike and go swimming, see and do everything." Rachel's pitch rose on the last part of her sentence, her words slow, definite, and emphatic. I admired the eager sincerity of her enthusiasm.

I could never have pictured that soon after we arrived, Rachel would go out one night with some new friends, and fall immediately and feverishly in love with a stranger while trying the drug Ecstasy for the first time. After just four weeks in Sequoia, she would leave to follow him after he was fired for being habitually late to work. Just like I never pictured I'd spend the summer without her, I also never pictured how different everything could be from the way I'd imagined it.

Someone drops a beer bottle on the ground next to me and it rolls toward my feet. The sound shakes me loose from these old memories of Rachel. I hadn't known, as we were driving across the country, how much Sequoia National Park
would now come to remind me of the cliché, "miles from nowhere." In Giant Forest, where I've worked during all five seasons, I have access to the usual tourist facilities—cafeteria, gift shops, hotel, and market—and little else. To buy a new book, have a cappuccino, or shop in a dizzyingly large Wal-Mart, I must drive south or northeast for at least an hour and a half. Entire days are spent "off the hill" driving in the dusty, brown foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, checking items off the lists my friends give me. After so many years of being here, it's pleasant to escape from the quiet chaos of the park; I don't even mind when it's 110° and my car's air conditioner doesn't work.

The tourists come to Sequoia for vacations. They'll spend three days, sometimes a week, frantically trying to make up for months of stressful jobs, deadlines, faxes, and emails. Forced relaxation. Keith tells me that when he reached the summit of Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous United States, dirty and exhausted after hiking for over a week, he was disgusted by the first thing he saw: a man standing by the restrooms, talking on a cellular telephone.

Those of us who make our home in this isolated place have a different notion of what it means to get away from it all. Instead of hiking into the backcountry during my days off, I ride roller coasters at Disneyland, visit friends in San Francisco, or read on my favorite beach near Santa Cruz. I want to be where there are more people than trees. Where, instead of silence, I hear the shrill scream of sirens and moving traffic.

When I don't make the trip away from the mountains, I gather with friends after work in someone's cabin. We joke that there's nothing to do here. And nearly
always we share these thoughts while passing around a bottle of something, wine, Wild Turkey, scotch. Or we go to the Fireside Tavern, the same bar, nestled in the space between the Giant Forest Market and Cafeteria, where Keith had been drinking earlier tonight. We go to the Fireside when we need a change of scenery or feel like "going out" for the evening.

Here in Lower Kaweah dozens of semi-familiar people surround me, drinking, laughing, and having a good time. Yet no one talks to me and a strong sense of loneliness also surrounds me. Perhaps it is exactly our isolation here that causes us to wander an easy path to using alcohol and drugs. Two hours from any city; we live and work all summer with a group of people that's always changing. In seasonal work, little is stable. Employees constantly arrive and leave, an ever-shifting flux of faces and names, with just a small group of us who return every year.

It's common to become close to someone, only to discover that, in the nighttime while you slept, they quit their jobs and left the mountain, virtually disappeared. Often you never even get to say goodbye. My first season, I exchanged addresses with everyone, not realizing the artificiality of this gesture; most people I would never see or hear from again. During the height of the summer, when more than 400 employees work in Giant Forest, it's still easy to feel alone, distanced from others. Through the effects of alcohol and drugs, we seem to find the smallest way to ease the burden of both our physical and emotional isolation. My memories continue to push forward against the tightness in my chest, against loneliness triggered by an awareness of Keith's absence.
Another moment halfway through my first season. That afternoon, I had leaned back against the pillows on my bed and pulled the down comforter tighter around my body. It was only August but my hands and feet were numb from the unexpectedly cold weather. I glanced at my backpack, half-open and hanging from the open-beam rafters of my cabin. It was just where I’d left it when we abandoned our 3-day trip into the backcountry because the weather forecast hinted at rain.

“Can’t you hurry up with that?” I watched Adam fill the small wood burning stove with pieces of damp pine.

“Relax,” he said, “it takes a minute to catch.”

The microwave chimed and Adam poured clear liquid into the mug from a bottle on the table. He handed it to me.

“Peppermint Patsy?” Adam repeated our nickname for the drink.

I wrapped my hands around the mug, feeling finally coming back into my fingers for the first time in days. The hot chocolate was almost boiling, but I took a sip anyway. The too-sweet taste of peppermint schnapps and milky chocolate was instantly intoxicating. I took three more gulps and wondered if I should slow down—it was only two o’clock in the afternoon. This had become our day-off ritual: Adam and I would both write, listen to “Patsy Cline’s Greatest Hits” on my roommate Sarah’s stereo system, and drink many cups of alcoholic hot chocolate. Sarah worked in the Giant Forest cafeteria, and we decided to share a cabin after Rachel left a few months before.

Adam sat down in the chair next to me. “What do you want to do today?”
I stared into the mug. “I don’t care.” I didn’t know if it was the sudden chill in the air or laziness that made me not want to leave the comfort and warmth of my bed.

“Want me to go get a movie?” Adam asked. Sarah had brought her 21-inch television, along with her pet rabbit and countless other unnecessary things to this summer job in the wilderness. These comforts went against my hope to live simply in the forest; but I admitted that I secretly enjoyed the guilty luxury of cooking spaghetti in her electric skillet or watching videos whenever I felt like it.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Sarah to get back from work?” I knew she had gotten off work an hour ago, and I was starting to worry about her.

Adam cleared his throat. “I doubt she’ll be back any time soon.”

“Huh? What’s that mean?” Sarah had been acting strange for a while. She was out late nearly every night—not too unusual, I thought, for someone from Los Angeles. Some nights she didn’t come home at all, and when she did, it seemed she picked deliberate fights with me. I kept searching my memory for some fragment of conversation, some forgotten moment when I annoyed her. I also searched for some way to apologize for whatever it was.

“You don’t get it do you?” Adam shook his head at me.

“No, I guess I don’t. What do you mean?” I put the mug on the nightstand and sat up.

Adam stood up and walked over to the window. “I can’t believe you don’t get it.” He turned back around quickly. “Crystal.”

“What?”
“Crystal meth, Mel, you know, methamphetamine, she’s on speed.” His expression and voice softened. “Don’t you know anyone who does meth?”

I’d come to Sequoia from a small, Midwestern college town. I’d never even heard of crystal meth—the most my friends in Indiana did was smoke a little pot. I felt stupid now as Adam looked at me, understanding finally why Sarah had seemed so edgy, nervous, constantly on the verge of a fight. It made sense—meth was why she stayed out late, probably going days at a time without sleeping. My foolishness mingled with anger too, at myself for not understanding what was going on, at her for not telling me, for making me feel like it was my fault.

“Sorry,” Adam said, “I thought you knew, it’s pretty obvious. It’s everywhere up here, everyone does it.” He paused. “Among other things. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s dealing, too.” Hypocritical thoughts raced through my mind. I could handle marijuana, which was also everywhere here in the park, but the thought of having speed anywhere in our cabin made me nervous. Both were illegal, and something I never expected to find either in a place like Sequoia.

I remembered a trip Sarah and I had taken to Bakersfield a few weeks earlier. I’d been up since 5:30 A.M. and slept almost the entire three-hour drive. We sat in her friend Paul’s Cherokee behind some shabby apartment buildings for a long time, waiting for someone to meet us. It was hot that day, and I fell back asleep while we waited. Drowsy from the heat and sleep-deprived, I shrugged off the package under the passenger seat we brought back. It was just pot, nothing serious. I was too sleepy to worry that we were driving into a national park—where even the smallest infraction is a federal offense. The worry I hadn’t felt those few weeks ago suddenly surfaced, like a hard and stinging slap; nothing in my experience had
prepared me for something like this. Detached and distant, I didn’t even know what to say to Sarah, or how to begin.

A familiar sense of foolishness at how serious this memory still seems overwhelms me tonight. Nothing happened after that incident; Sarah denied everything, neither of us was arrested for drug possession. After that first season she didn’t return to work in Sequoia, though she occasionally sends postcards from L.A. Still, my complacency about this way of life is shocking. I take the alcohol and the drug use for granted now, take for granted that there will always be slurring, drunk employees who put their fists through cabin and car windows, employees who fight violently with their girlfriends in whiskey-induced rages. After five seasons I’ve come to accept this side of life in the midst of this awesome place.

My awareness of how entwined I am with our social life here is heightened each time I stay after work in the restaurant to have a glass of wine, or share a bottle of scotch with my brother Christopher, who has worked in the park as long as I have. Its evidence is omnipresent, visible in more than just photographs. I work with people who have come to this same park every season for fifteen years or longer. Each summer, like a nightly ritual they sit at the bar in the Fireside Tavern and drink, telling the same stories to the bartender, forgetting they’ve told them before. They talk about the peaks they’ve climbed, with a glass of liquor in one hand and a hand-rolled cigarette in the other. In a place other than Sequoia, we’d call them “alcoholics” or think that there’s something wrong with this behavior. But even when I’m the one serving the drinks, filling in as relief bartender, I still
don't see them as alcoholics. They're only my friends and people I care about as much as the trees and meadows.

I watch the new employees closely, the ones here in Sequoia for the first time. They haven't yet learned how to reconcile alcohol and drugs with the solace of this forest. My first season was like this, an exciting summer when I had many close friends, and drinking was fun, a way to share our closeness. Sarah and I had parties nearly every night, just like most newcomers to Sequoia, enjoying the first taste of freedom from the constraints of parents, school, and home. This passion for the unknown intoxicates.

It's difficult to learn, like the longtime employees who sit at the bar every night, how to make these pastimes fit into a summer in the forest, if this is even possible. Going to the wilderness allows many people to engage with the world, provides an isolated place in which to commune with nature. By drinking you can also engage with the world, in a different sort of communion. Both provide the same intoxicating effects, seductive and elusive. In Sequoia, though, the strange connections between drinking, drugs, and the forest seem to isolate and separate us from the landscape, rather than drawing us closer. It's as if our desire to engage with the world has been misplaced, and drinking is an easier path than climbing a tall mountain peak. Now, in my last season, I try to understand how much drinking has to do with all the places here that remain unvisited. I keep thinking about how much Keith resembles me, four seasons ago. Concern overcomes me and replaces the loneliness in my chest. Another memory surfaces.
A night during my third season. I slowly dragged the clean, damp towel along the imitation-wood bar counter for the third time. Even with the windows open, the early summer night was warm, without any hint of a breeze. I couldn't stand to hear another James Taylor song humming through the dining room while I waited for the last few tables to leave. I took the bar towel to the hostess stand and started to wipe the menus, sticky with thick steak sauce and sweet mango relish.

"Mind if I have a smoke?" the hostess, Emma asked me.

"Sure, I'll watch things." I glanced into the dining room to see how many tables were left. Just a few couples, but it was already 9:30. I thought about all the paperwork I had left to do and worried that I would never get home to my big, soft bed.

The glass front doors to the restaurant slammed open. Probably some more Europeans—they always seem to arrive just as we are closing. Without looking up from the menus I said "Sorry. We closed at 9:00."

"No, no, you gotta help us." The words were breathless, slurred.

I put down the menu in my hands, annoyed. "What?" I said. Two young guys stood at the hostess stand, out of breath as if they had run all the way. They were both employees. One clutched his chest, bent over so that I couldn't see his face exactly.

"Accident, there's been an accident, we need to call the rangers." At this time of night, the Lodge Dining Room was one of the few places still open. He smelled strongly of beer, and was having a hard time getting the words out. The urgency in his voice, despite the numbing effects of alcohol, was unmistakable. I didn't argue.
"Here." I pushed the telephone at him. "Just dial 9-1-1, the dispatcher will connect you." He yanked the receiver off the hook and dialed, his hands trembling.

The other employee had regained his breath, and stood up. He looked at me through narrow, watery eyes, as if he might cry.

It seemed as if Emma had been gone a long time. "What happened?" I finally managed to ask.

He didn’t say anything for a second. "Jeremy, he fell, he fell off Moro Rock." He took a deep breath. Jeremy had served me breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria nearly every day during the past month. He was shy, he had a crooked, naïve smile, and he was only nineteen years old. "We were up there hanging out, having some beer—he just fell over the side." His friend shouted into the phone, almost unintelligibly.

A horrifying image flashed through me. Moro Rock is a huge boulder 1500 feet tall—one of Giant Forest’s most popular places. Tourists wait patiently to climb, single-file, the concrete staircase that winds around and around the grayish-white granite. At the top, they see a panoramic view of the entire San Joaquin Valley. I thought about the metal railing that surrounded the top of Moro Rock. The only things over the edge were more, jagged granite cliff faces. And then, 3000 feet of nothing to the foothills below.

He spoke again. "I, tried to catch him, you know?" His body started to shake, slowly. "I tried to grab his foot as he started to fall...." He turned away. His friend hung up the phone and began shouting again, rapid confusing words I couldn’t put together. Other restaurant employees rushed to the hostess stand.
I stood there in a jumble of voices and questions I didn’t understand.

Yesterday I’d waited in line for a long time to use the pay phones. Jeremy had stood next to me, silently kicking rocks on the dusty ground. When it was his turn, he shrugged his shoulders and said, embarrassed, “Have to call the parents—you know how they are.”

I had gone to Moro Rock with a bunch of friends and countless bottles of wine more times than I could remember. I’d climbed over the railing and leaned back in a weather-carved indentation in the rock, dangled my feet over the edge as we laughed and talked, and kept drinking. It was already very dark in the forest that night. Even if he were still alive, the rangers would never find him before morning. I’d never even get a chance to say goodbye.

I am dizzy with the memory of Jeremy’s lingering smile, hidden in the tall trees that surround the cabins in Lower Kaweah. After five seasons I’ve become used to this once-new landscape and the people. In many ways, each season in Sequoia resembles the life I so desperately fled back in Indiana, wanting to shed the flatness, the monochromatic landscape of a small town and the sameness of the people there. I’d seen the Pacific Ocean at sunrise and I wanted to know the exact feeling of awakening every morning to the enormity of the western trees and mountains. The dramatic size of the western landscape is humbling, allows me to put my own life, my burdens, into perspective, in a way the Midwest never could.

In Sequoia I fall into a comfortable pattern, following the same routine day after day. Perhaps it is exactly the sense of familiarity here that leads to my
acceptance of the physical landscape, and the drinking and drugs that are part of it. When I first arrived, I noticed everything, spent hours watching ground squirrels and black bears, hiking through granite cliffs in the backcountry, trying to take in my surroundings all at once.

Tonight, I think that this is why so many of us have become complacent. Why we choose to spend our free time drinking and trying to get away from the stillness. We've become so intimate with the Sequoia landscape that it is, in a sense, boring. It's almost as if we have become so familiar with the forest that it's easier to rely on the feeling alcohol and drugs evoke than it is to recapture that sense of wonder we all felt at the beginning. We keep searching for the intoxication that the forest itself once brought.

The flashing images of my seasons here blur together and settle, slow like a quiet, low tide. Many more still haven't surfaced but they're still there. These are my strongest, clearest memories because they are painful, a burden like the bottle of wine I still carry around. Although I don't drink now like I used to in Sequoia, I still use it to escape my desire to recapture the emotions, the awe and wonder of my first season. The painful memories remind me that we can't go backward, that the happiness of my first season is unrepeatable, preserved in memories and photographs. I must search for other ways to relearn the landscape.

I raise my head to look at the shadows of people and buildings. The cracked concrete digs into my skin through my clothing, and I'm cold. It seems inappropriate, but I'd really like a glass of wine right now, something to warm my body. The crowd has thinned; individual figures disappear into the background of tall trees and cabins. Fragments of conversation fade as people disappear into the
forest darkness—laughter, stories, words which no longer have anything to do with this exact moment. We just pretend to forget so quickly here, thankful that it wasn't us, that this happened to someone else, this time. I know without thinking that the others will go back to their cabins, continue sharing stories as they pass around a bottle of something. But we'll always carry the images with us.

I notice that those who remain are first-season employees, still watching, standing by themselves, listening. In this silent summer night, we're all trying to make sense of what's happened. I may never understand my friend Keith's longing, the burdens he carries in the forest, or those of the countless people who've blurred in and out of my life here. My only understanding is that they are part of us, holding fast with each season that passes, surfacing to remind us of what we each carry, just as Keith will carry the memory of this night.

I stand up quickly, without brushing the dirt from my clothes, and turn back toward the Lodge, toward my own cabin, still dark and silent. I start walking, and my arm brushes against a young man, still almost a boy. He can't be older than eighteen or nineteen. He looks down at the ground, the smooth skin of his forehead twisted in confused worry. I walk past him, thinking about reaching out, touching him on the shoulder. He glances up at me, and I smile, hoping that this gesture alone is reassuring.

Halfway up the small hill next to the hotel, my eyes follow the road that will guide me home in the darkness. I reach for the straps of my backpack and shift my weight. With a slight pull, the heavy bottle falls backward. My backpack is slightly open, and the sound of breaking glass startles me for a moment. In that first instant, the sound scares and surprises me, then the emotion blurs into
annoyance. For two years I've carefully and deliberately saved this bottle of wine, preserved it through everything. On the ground, splinters of green glass shimmer in the faint yellow glow of the streetlights, a dark red stream trickles down the road.

When I look closely, the glass reminds me of bright sunlight through sugar pine trees. All I can do is laugh, relieved now of the weight. My laughter echoes loudly in the night, a clear voice rising above the sounds between the cabins. Kneeling down on the ground, I pick up the large pieces and turn back to the road.
The sound of splintering glass, the mesh, metal screen being torn from the window, shakes me. I awaken shouting, without thinking, still half-dreaming of something mundane and pleasant. The rotting wooden frame that holds the pane falls onto the foot of my bed, pushed in by the black bear outside my cabin. Sitting up with a sigh, I feel around for the switch on the lamp. Faint red numbers on the alarm clock read 2:13. I've just barely fallen asleep, and already the intrusions have begun, as they have every night for the last month. Bits of glass shimmer in a reflection of light on the brightly colored blanket a friend brought from his last visit to Tijuana.

I hesitate. Listen for a moment. Wonder if she is still there. Waiting. For me to flicker the light briefly, decide it's nothing, and settle back to sleep, waiting to approach the door again, the back of the cabin, the other window, panting low, scratching and reaching for whatever she believes lies inside the flimsy walls. I listen for her hollow, grunting noises. I am waiting, too. In a nightly ritual, the bears start all over again with their relentless determination to get inside this cabin. Sometimes as many as three different bears awaken me on the same night.

The black bears this summer have been more active, more destructive than any other summer since I started working in Sequoia National Park four seasons ago. In both Sequoia and Kings Canyon, the sister park that borders Sequoia National Forest to the north, over three hundred bear reports have already been
filed this summer. The bears have caused tens of thousands of dollars' worth of damage to vehicles and buildings. And the season will last for another six weeks. Six more weeks before I pack my belongings into boxes and leave to spend the winter in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. I wonder how many more confrontations can possibly occur between the bears and the humans who live here in Giant Forest. How many more nights will I spend like this, restless, awake, waiting to chase them away from my home?

Since I moved into this cabin at the Giant Forest Lodge, I haven't slept a full night for almost a month. When I was a little girl, my family used to joke that I could sleep through hurricanes, tornadoes, probably even earthquakes. Here, though, I sleep lightly, superficially, overly sensitive to the slightest noise or movement outside. My cabin is at the outer edge of the tourist lodgings, the walls made from slatted pine boards so old they no longer fit together tightly like a safe dwelling should. The wood is cracked and graffiti-covered, remnants of the summer employees before me. The cabin has settled slightly with the shifting of the forest ground, and at night narrow bands of pale light come in through the walls. Few other cabins are nearby. One side of my house overlooks a shallow, wooded ravine and stream, and the sandy volleyball court where we sometimes play against the park rangers. I am isolated. A perfect bear target.

Of the eight species in the world, the only bear that lives in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Sequoia National Park is *Ursus americanus*, the American black bear. While all bears share a common ancestor, little is known about black bears' evolutionary history in North America, though their species is believed to have arrived early in the Pleistocene era (about 1½ million years ago). Black bears
are native only to North America, with a range that stretches from southern portions of Canada into Mexico.

For most people "bear" brings to mind not the black bear, but *Ursus arctos*, the brown bear, the most widely known and diverse species of bears. In North America, the Kodiak and grizzly are both members of the brown bear family. In California, black and brown bears used to live side by side throughout the state. Grizzlies are now extinct here; the last known brown bear in California was shot and killed near Sequoia National Park at Horse Corral Meadow in 1922. To call them "black" bears is misleading—I have seen bears as varied as their individual personalities. They can range from blond, to cinnamon, to deep black, still part of the same genus and species. Even related bears can be different colors from those of each of their family members.

Black bears in Sequoia are much smaller than brown bears, with adult males rarely reaching even 400 pounds (compared to an adult male grizzly who can weigh up to 1500 pounds). Female black bears are considerably smaller than males, up to 250 pounds when fully-grown. Black bears breed faster and more often than browns and live shorter lives, and for a black bear to reach the age of twenty-five is unusual. Black bears also differ from brown bears in the physical shape and size of their teeth and feet, adapted for the differences in their habitat and diet.

The black bears in Sequoia are exquisite, beautiful creatures. I often watch them from a distance, admiring the way they move gently and gracefully for such weighty, cumbersome animals, hardly rustling the tall meadow grasses and plants. Some cubs are small, weighing only ten pounds, less than the dogs I see on leashes
at cluttered sites in the Lodgepole campground. Others are significantly larger by
the end of a summer season of foraging in the meadows, scavenging in
campgrounds, in dumpsters and trashcans.

Although black bears are technically considered carnivores, in Sequoia they
eat little meat. Most of their diet comes from various plants and insects—they love
carpenter ants and yellow jackets and will spend hours overturning logs and rocks
to find them—and in the fall, acorns. Only occasionally will black bears scavenge
from carcasses left by the park’s other animals or actively hunt for meat. Adequate
food supplies for black bears are often scarce, less plentiful than for brown bears,
and they have to work much harder to prepare for the coming winter seasons. I
think of them more as omnivores, eating whatever is closest and easiest to find,
unconcerned and not particularly fussy as long as they can sustain themselves.

Sierran black bears in the wild are disinterested, timid, independent—they
care little for me when I encounter them on the path to work. Even when I hike in
the backcountry, my loud clapping is enough to scare a bear away into the forest.
The bears who scratch at my window every night are no longer truly wild. They
have become used to humans, unafraid. Many of them no longer pick wild berries
and tear apart fallen logs in search of ants. Instead, their “normal” behavior is to
follow human habits in search of food. Black bears unaccustomed to people
usually forage in the dim light of dawn and dusk; the bears who try to break into
my cabin instead wait until humans are asleep and scrounge for whatever is left
behind. They’ve stopped relying on their instinctive survival mechanisms. These
are bears that will eventually die not only because they have become too much like
us, but also because they have come to rely too much on humans.
Wildlife biologists usually distinguish between two types of "problem" bears. Bears considered "habituated" aren't generally dangerous; they have simply lost their fear of humans, unlike most wild black bears. In Sequoia, these are the bears that refuse to be chased away, often staring back at people with what seems like a strange sense of rebelliousness, defiance. More problematic and potentially dangerous are "food-conditioned" bears. These bears have learned that humans are an easy food source. They actively, often aggressively, do anything to try to get that food. Like the bears that scratch at my front door every night.

Tonight, I still don't turn on the lamp in my cabin. I brush off the broken glass and pull the dusty green curtains away from the window, following the bear's familiar outline in the moonlight with my eyes. If she comes too close, I'll shout loudly again and take an oak branch from the woodpile by the stove, and beat it rhythmically on the front door. I won't call the park rangers in the morning to fill out another bear report, even though it's what I should do. How many dozens of reports would be mine alone if I reported every incident, every night? Although my intentions may be misplaced, I don't want the burden of knowing I've contributed to their destruction.

After having lived alongside black bears, my own understanding of these animals has changed. When I first came to Sequoia, the bears' cultural and historical associations influenced my idea of them. Images of bears are pervasive; they exist in prehistoric cave drawings, oral legends, fairy tales and fables, contemporary literature and film, in the plush toys we give to children. Even the flag of California still proudly "bears" the image of the grizzly, despite the fact that they've been extinct here for seventy-three years. Perhaps these images are
inspired by the immense size and seeming ferocity of the brown bear; we've come to associate it with power, danger, untamed places. In fact, only black bear populations continue to grow, while many brown bears are disappearing. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that fewer than 1000 brown bears remain in the continental United States, found only in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Washington, and possibly in Colorado. Approximately 50,000 brown bears used to roam across nearly every state in the lower forty-eight; the remaining brown bears currently occupy only 2% of their original range. My own relationship though, is less informed by the idea of bears as dangerous and powerful, than by personal experience with the black bears that live in this forest.

I have a difficult time relating to the bear as a metaphor for wild country. My sense of respect for bears is strong, but it comes from a different place, one in which humans and bears are inseparable. The bears' forest habitat here is not defined by huge, open expanses of land such as can be found in, say Alaska, where Denali National Park alone covers more than 6 million acres. Sequoia is large—Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks together cover about 900,000 acres—and stretches far into an undeveloped wilderness that most tourists never see.

But the black bears have learned to thrive easily in their smaller range here, in many of the park's non-secluded areas. The bears are obvious, highly visible; they wander around the parking lot by the cafeteria, forage next to the highway, and knock on cabin doors at night. It becomes impossible to separate my home from that of the bears, no matter how hard I try. Each summer I am fully aware that I am living, however temporarily, in their home, imposing on their home, creating rules about what they should and shouldn't do, enforcing those rules
rigidly. The edges of our lives in Sequoia intersect, overlap, and we learn respect for these blurred boundaries. We have to.

It's even more difficult to associate the bears with a sense of fear, my fear of their power to kill me—though there's no doubt they could if they really wanted to. I am no longer afraid of the black bears here. They are generally not as aggressive as I've heard grizzlies are, even when unprovoked. Although the actual number of maulings and deaths caused by grizzlies in national parks like Yellowstone and Glacier is very small, the few disturbing stories are impossible to forget; they color my image of brown bears and my perception of their relationships with humans.

The black bears in Sequoia instead interact with humans only when competing for food. They come to my house late into the night because they have probably found food in this same rickety cabin before, and act only on the strength of that memory.

The first bear I ever saw during my first season was a small black yearling, away from his mother to fend for himself for first time. His fur was the exact color of the charred fire marks on many of the sequoia trees. I remember only that he was very small and he stepped in my path as I left the communal bathrooms in Pinewood, the employee housing area. That first time I was scared—startled by his presence. He looked at me for a split second and disappeared into the shadows of the forest. It took several minutes for my breathing to calm after he was gone.

Whatever sense of fear I once felt has now turned into a stronger sense of protectiveness, particularly for those bears no longer afraid of people. They are the most vulnerable to human carelessness. Most problem bears become problems directly through the actions of humans, usually from improper food storage. Even
without contributing directly to their habits, I still feel responsible, as a human, for
the problem bears—even for the mother bear who bluff-charged me for ten minutes
one Sunday morning, protecting a cub still trapped in my house.

I can't blame the bear who's shattered my window tonight. The radio collar
and yellow ear tag glint in the light, and I know she isn't responsible for the pieces
of glass and metal I'll sweep up in the morning, or the window that will have to be
replaced. This past winter in the Sierra Nevada was barren and interminable. The
snowfall reached near-record proportions and the bears were forced to do anything
they could to find food. The eating habits of most bears—including black bears—
correspond directly to the weather and the availability of food resources. After
hibernation, many begin foraging at lower forest elevations and move upward as
the summer progresses and the snow melts. If little food is available at the lower
elevations, black bears will immediately seek out alternative food sources, often in
areas of dense human populations. Confrontations are inevitable. In mild seasons
when staple foods like acorns are plentiful, some park bears actually forage at
lower elevations all winter rather than entering dormancy in December or January.

I don't know for certain which bear has tried to break into my cabin tonight.
There are several I see regularly at the Lodge, and identifying one with certainty
will bring it that much closer to death. In some mistaken way I hope my silence
will help save them. The Park Service and the concessionaire for whom I work
discourage anthropomorphizing the bears, giving them human or pet names. We
are instead encouraged to refer to each individual problem bear only by the
number stamped in black on the ear tag. After a bear has again tried to knock
over the rusty, metal barrels where we store the restaurant's leftover fryer grease,
the bear technician will ask two questions when she fills out the report: whether I clearly saw the tag's number, and whether I can describe the animal's markings. These questions help confirm the identities of problem bears, so that destructive behavior is attributed to the right ones, the really "guilty" and most troublesome.

I can only guess that not naming the bears is intended to prevent us from developing relationships with any of them that live in Giant Forest. Numbers of course, are more impersonal than names. Many native tribes' customs also follow this act of not naming the bear. The Ket, a tribe of Siberian Ostyaks, the Blackfeet tribe, and many North American Eskimos believe that the bear hears and understands human language. It is considered impolite and dangerous to criticize it or even to speak its name. They use euphemisms to refer to both the bear itself and to the act of hunting it. One maintains respect for the bear's spirit and the success of the hunt by refusing to name the bear. Most of us in Sequoia, though, do name the bears with whom we share the forest. Our naming them seems like another form of respect—an expression of respect for each individual bear and a way to avoid placing human beings' importance and well-being above theirs.

The tradition of naming the bear raises other questions for me, as a writer. In many ways, the English language is impoverished when it comes to defining and describing humans' relationships to the animal world. Because, after so many seasons, I have come to recognize and know many of the bears in Sequoia, I find it nearly impossible to follow traditional grammatical rules when sharing my experiences. As I write these stories about the bears, I am uncomfortable referring to them as objects, as "it" or "that." I find it easier to describe them as I would a close friend. Here, I say things like, "the bear who broke into my cabin, she was
especially determined last night" (in my experience Sequoia's problem bears tend to be female). These human terms are more satisfying, richer, and I believe these terms also translate my experiences more truthfully.

Whether the bears are named or numbered, I still find it difficult not to regard them almost as companions as we try to coexist in the sequoia forest. Most are recognizable by sight now, especially the problem bears, and I care about their behavior and what will happen to them. As a result of their trying to break into my cabin every night, this season my idea of the bear has changed in other ways, too. Fear and protectiveness now also bring me to annoyance, at their determination and consistency.

Bears, especially cubs, are said to be extremely moody, emotional animals, expressing themselves with an surprisingly wide range of vocal responses. My experiences this summer confirm the truth in this description. The black bears seem almost like pesky younger siblings, tugging at the back of my shirt and asking unanswerable questions, no matter how I try to brush them off. I can shout at them and chase them, throw rocks and sticks at them constantly (which I do), but the bears keep returning, determined to find a tasty morsel in my house. I have actually been awakened by the sound of a bear, fully a quarter of a mile away, breaking into a building, overturning a restroom trashcan. And, while my responsibility for protecting them and educating the tourists about protecting them overshadows the moments of irritation, I can't help but wish some nights that they'd just let me sleep.

In order to understand their moods, their motivations and determination, I'm trying to learn to think like a black bear, to determine what really provokes
them to visit this same cabin night after night. Why instead they don't scratch their long, sharp claws at the door of the cabin opposite mine, the one nearest the showers, or the one by the ice machine where some tourists have ignorantly left their cooler outside, candy wrappers in the dirt, so tempting. More than just understanding how they're able to recall distinctly past sources of free food, I want to understand what causes these bears to abandon the way of life they should know in favor of ours. The slightest understanding of their behavior might reveal many of their secrets, this knowledge becoming a path for preventing them from becoming used to humans in the first place.

I suspect that the bear whose shadowy outline I still see twenty feet away from my cabin is C91. I know that she is a sow, a mother bear with a couple of year-old cubs and a fondness for entering cabins through the windows. She is one of the more difficult of the dozen or so tagged and collared problem bears in the park. She has become amazingly adept at breaking into old, unstable buildings. At night, I hang a carefully washed, empty soda can to the outside of my door to warn me of a potential intruder bear—many have learned to turn doorknobs with their paws. The black bears in Sequoia are clever and remarkably intelligent animals, particularly when determined to find a source of easy food. The National Park Service has monitored and tracked C91's behavior by radio collar for several seasons.

Earlier this year a friend came home from work one night to find a mother and her cubs in his cabin, possibly one of the same bears who scratch at my window every night. He opened the front door to find a sow standing in front of the open refrigerator, food strewn sloppily across the floor. Her two cubs sat quietly on
a table, observing intently. He jokes that it was as if the mother was giving the
cubs a lesson in the proper way to scavenge food from humans. A true reversal of
"Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

I think I can understand C91's behavior. She is simply trying to provide
food for her cubs and herself, to ensure their ultimate survival, stealing food from
humans because it's so much easier than foraging in the forest. I can almost
understand her motivations too, knowing what it's like to follow the path of least
resistance. While I am inextricably linked to my forest home, I've returned here
season after season because it's the easiest thing to do. Easier than settling in an
unknown place, finding a job, starting over. Sequoia National Park is familiar and
comfortable, and I'm at ease here. From the moment I return I know what my life
will be like. Six months of every year time stands nearly still, and I always know
what to expect, just like the bears always know where to find food. If I were one of
them, I might also search out the simplest life.

The bear outside has wandered away from my cabin. The night air carries
the faint sound of humans shouting in the distance, down the hill toward the
Personnel office. She's probably startled some sleeping tourists, people who don't
expect to have their vacation interrupted by a bear reaching a swift paw in the
window. I wonder if they're reaching for camcorders from their suitcases, if they're
standing on the small porch calling to the bear, luring her closer and closer so they
can take the perfectly captured image with them back to Europe, Japan, or Los
Angeles. After all, everyone wants to see a bear when they visit Sequoia National
Park.
Just as I don't blame the bears, I don't always blame the tourists, either. I don't blame them for wanting to see one of these magnificent animals. I can almost forgive them because they don't know any better. They don't realize that when they stop to feed G95, who begs for human food by the side of the highway at the Big Fern turnout, they're doing more than getting a good photographic shot for their friends back home. The tourists are encouraging her, reinforcing the destructive behavior that most of us work so hard to prevent. And, they're contributing to her eventual death, though it may not happen for many more seasons. Still, appearances are deceptive, and because of their small size, black bears do look harmless and cuddly, like the cartoon character Baloo from Disney's adaptation of *Jungle Book*.

In addition to the idea of the bear as powerful, dangerous and wild, the idea of bears as benign, sweet, and friendly has also become pervasive. Look at one of the most familiar role models, Winnie the Pooh: endearingly clumsy, lumbering, kind, but not very smart, and a loyal friend to his human companion Christopher Robin. There's nothing scary or dangerous about Pooh, even when he's focused on finding a pot of the honey he loves so much (in reality, black bears are also said to have a fondness for sweets). Bears are also portrayed as caring and protective; in "Goldilocks," it is the bears who are responsible, compassionate, with strong family ties, and the humans who are manipulative and deceptive.

To further convince us of the good nature of bears, we have teddy bears, named for Teddy Roosevelt after a 1902-hunting incident during which he refused to shoot a young bear cub. The popularity of teddy bears has firmly instilled the image of bears as tame and unthreatening. I've always disliked teddy bears.
finding something distrustful about them. Teddy bears seem too happy, always smiling, predictable. As a child, I preferred bizarre stuffed animals that retained some sense of mystery, creatures that were foreign and unknown to me: a long, rainbow-striped snake, a raccoon with glassy eyes, a creepy, imaginary monster with long fangs and a furrowed brow.

I do own two teddy bears, both expensive stuffed bears made in Germany. The first was given to me by a family friend at my birth. This bear, now dull and almost thirty years old, does somewhat resemble a wild bear physically, but has the feature of making a curious “bear” noise when turned upside-down. The noise sounds much more like a plaintive, mooing cow than a bear. My other teddy bear is fluffy white, like spongy campfire marshmallows, and wears a lacy pink collar around her neck. She also makes a “bear” noise, a breathy, squeaky, mouse-like noise when you squeeze her perfectly rounded potbelly. Both bears remain unnamed in a dusty cabinet; perhaps it was their un-bearlike qualities that kept me from naming them, as most children do. Even now, I find it hard to respect them as I do the black bears here in Sequoia.

Tourists forget that most bears, because we perceive them to be good natured and harmless, are still wild animals. While the black bears in Sequoia aren’t generally dangerous to humans, they aren’t animals that have lived in artificial zoo enclosures or performed tricks in a circus ring. Even the bears that are now used to humans can be unpredictable. More importantly, the tourists don’t realize that human ignorance causes the death of bears nearly every season.

Humans have tried to “tame” bears throughout history. The gypsies of Eastern Europe used to force bears to walk over red-hot metal while they played
music in the background. Eventually having learned to associate music with the sensation of intense pain, the bears would begin a fire-induced "dance" at the first sound of music. In California, bear fights were a popular weekend and holiday activity from 1816 to the early 1880s. Grizzly bears would be placed in arenas with Spanish bulls, while spectators cheered on the fighting animals.

Similar practices continued into the early part of the twentieth century in Sequoia National Park. Here, the National Park Service operated a tourist site called "Bear Hill" from about 1920 to 1940. Rangers would take the daily garbage to this small, dirt arena. Hundreds of park visitors would sit tightly packed into wooden bleachers and watch excitedly as groups of black bears came to rummage through the trash. Years later, when dozens of bears showed up nightly at Bear Hill and rangers regularly had to intervene in human-bear encounters, the staff finally realized that entire bear families now preferred garbage to their natural food sources. It was only then that this appalling, twenty year-old practice was finally abandoned.

Remnants of these long-ago practices still exist today. Park visitors unintentionally store food in places where the bears are certain to find it. Black bears have a highly acute, long-range sense of smell. They can smell a peanut butter sandwich or a bag of potato chips in an automobile trunk. Even the fragrance of toothpaste, deodorant, and perfume are enough to attract them. The bears in Sequoia have a particular fondness for the sweet strawberry-scented air fresheners many people hang from the rearview mirrors of their cars.

Last season I had left work one evening and was walking through a nearby parking lot. I saw a large, adult male bear standing fully erect next to a small
imported sedan. The bear placed its forepaws on the car's roof and rocked it back and forth violently. I yelled, threw a couple of rocks and chased it away. Just as I did, a tourist who had been videotaping the bear came over to me.

"What the hell are you doing?" he barked at me, waving his arm in the direction of the retreating bear. "You screwed up my shot." I looked at him incredulous, not believing he could possibly be serious.

"Idiot," he muttered as he turned and reached for the hand of his young daughter. She had watched the entire interaction. My hands trembled with anger. I wanted to shout back that people like him have taken the wildness away from these animals. They have turned them into "problem" bears.

Did he know that if this had been his car the insurance company probably wouldn't pay for the repairs once the 300 pound bear had forcefully peeled the metal roof away like the top of a sardine tin? Did he know that once bears learn to associate humans with food, they break into cars and cabins even if they simply suspect there might be food inside? I have seen a friend's truck gutted and mangled only because he had accidentally dropped a candy bar wrapper on the floor. Did this man know that the National Park Service issues fines for feeding the bears, for even unintentionally leaving food where they can find it?

I locked eyes with this man's daughter. What I wanted to tell her was what eventually happens to the bears because of human ignorance. In Sequoia, bear management strategies are two-fold. The most effective methods are proactive: providing bear-proof containers for guests to store food, enforcement of food-storage rules, and most importantly, ongoing public education about black bears and how to decrease their interactions with humans. Reactive techniques like
aversive conditioning and relocation are only a short-term solution to the bear problem in Sequoia, having few positive, long-term effects on bear behavior. More effective is preventing bears from becoming used to humans in the first place. Some national parks are trying new tactics, experimenting with using specially-trained breeds of dogs to encourage positive bear behavior.

Whatever the technique, The National Park Service is committed to exercising every possible option to save the lives of the park's black bears. Bears that exhibit problem behavior are first trapped and tagged in the ear, to isolate individual bears' actions. If conditioning and prevention are unsuccessful, the next step is to track problem bears by radio collar, often for many seasons. Sometimes, though, no matter how many chances park biologists give them, these problem bears become aggressive and dangerous to humans. The only remaining option is to destroy the animal.

I can only imagine how the park's wildlife biologist must feel as the Bear Management Committee weighs the options about destroying a problem bear. By then she's spent years observing and monitoring a certain bear, learning the bear's habits, patterns, likes and dislikes, every color and mark on her body, her musky, heavy scent. The wildlife biologist can anticipate the bear's every movement in the forest, her daily rituals, and has reached a long-term understanding of the bear.

In the meeting, the biologist listens closely as the committee discusses the problem bear's behavior in terms of monetary destruction, average numbers and frequencies of break-ins. The vote is taken and is rarely unanimous. They say it is in everyone's best interest to destroy her.
One last time she is tracked by the faint signal of her radio collar, cornered and trapped. The Wildlife Biologist administers the bullet or dart containing a euthanasic drug. The bear falls. Once her body has grown completely still, her worn radio collar is removed for the first time. She is pushed over the edge of a small cliff, a resting place as it would have been in the wild; only in death does she finally regain her wildness. I don't know if I could perform such an act. I don't know if the bear would understand and accept my silent apology for what we have done to her.

While picturing what happens once the committee decides to destroy a bear, I am reminded of William Stafford's poem, "Traveling Through the Dark." In this poem, the narrator finds himself by the side of a dark canyon road, wondering what to do with the body of dead deer he encounters. The final lines of Stafford's poem are evocative and powerful: "I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, / then pushed her over the edge into the river." These words embody the same tension the Wildlife Biologist might feel in a similar situation. She must consider deeply both humans' connections to the animal world, and the nature of humans' ultimate responsibility to that world. The struggle in making the decision, the hesitant moments before a bear is actually destroyed, haunt me. Can one know with clarity that the choices humans make are the right ones, respectful, caring choices that reflect what is best for an animal? It is both easy and painful to visualize the events that lead to a bear's destruction. But it is always most difficult to imagine accepting the weight of our responsibility to the bears here, the uncertainty of facing such final judgements.
In my seasons here I've seen more black bears than I can remember, and have come to accept them as part of my daily life. My friend Adam loves to recount the story of his first week in Sequoia, during our first season. I'd been there for several months already, and as Adam excitedly shared the story of seeing a bear, my indifferent response was, "Oh get over it, I tripped over one coming out of the shower last week." Even a bear leaning against a tree at the Lodge, eating granola stolen from the window of a tourist's cabin, surprises me only for a moment. I am now more afraid for the bears than of them.

Outside my cabin window, the forest returns to nighttime silence. The human shouting has stopped and I can no longer smell, hear, the bear outside. My heart beats steady and even, my annoyance wanes and turns into something that resembles sadness.

Yesterday at lunch I left the employee dining room to read a book outside on the wooden deck that overlooks Round Meadow. As I sat down, I realized that C91's reddish-brown cub was sitting by a large boulder about ten feet away. He's a small bear, with thick, wiry fur the exact color of soft sequoia bark. He doesn't wear a tag in his ear or a radio collar. Not yet. He didn't move or notice me. He had a half-eaten sandwich in his paw and was more interested in eating, undisturbed by my presence. Walking over to him I called out, "Hey, you."

He looked up at me from the sandwich, didn't run away. The bear and I stared at each other for what seemed like a long time, gaze locked. I willed him to read my thoughts.
Taking a deep breath I pointed at him. "Go on, you can't stay here," I said sternly. "Someone might see you. You're going to get in trouble." The cub seemed to shrug his shoulders, and resumed eating.

I picked up a large slab of rough granite from the ground. I yelled, "Go away!" at the bear cub over and over, and threw the rock in his direction, close enough to make a loud noise without actually hitting him. He looked at me, surprised for a moment, but not at all frightened. He paused, then turned and galloped on all fours toward the meadow and I chased after him wildly, still shouting.

NOTE: Appendix B contains an excerpt from the 1992 Sequoia and Kings Canyon Bear Management Plan which presents the official procedure for the destruction of the park’s "problem" bears.
NIGHTHIKING

The season is over. I know it in the way the air tastes first thing in the morning when I look out my cabin window past the trees. The grass in Round Meadow is brittle, dry and low. All summer the meadow has been tall with grasses and flowering plants.

I take the nature trail to work every day, a path that I have used since my first summer here in Sequoia National Park. This "Trail for All People" follows a short, concrete loop around the meadow.

I walk slowly, stopping to look at the different plants. Each summer I discover a new wildflower I haven't noticed before. In the wide, open spaces of high elevation forests, velvety stickseed produces both pink and sky-blue flowers. The flowers rest in bright clusters at the top of long, narrow stems covered with green hairs. They are soft and fine to the touch. The common name stickseed comes from the plant's ability to attach prickly fruits to whatever touches it—a way of spreading seeds and ensuring its survival. How often have I unknowingly carried these seeds with me on my walks through the forest? Even though the pale pink flowers are now curled and brittle, I'm comforted by knowing they will return again next season and the next, long after I leave the forest.

My favorites are yellow-throated gilia, sometimes called mustang clover. The plant has small flowers, almost unremarkable, that favor the dry, rocky areas of the forest. Often they grow like a subtle carpet of grass near rough outcroppings of
sharp, granite boulders. The ones up here at this elevation have five lavender petals with a whorl of yellow in the center surrounded by black and white spots—a surprising starburst of color among the earthy tones of the forest.

Few plants bloom this late in the season; the meadow looks brown, tired, without color. The indigo colored elderberries I always stop to pick are now hard, like small, bitter pebbles on a tongue that expects sweetness. We'll have to wait until next year when they are again full and ripe with juice before we can make wine.

A full pot of coffee has almost finished brewing before I remember that most of the others have already left Sequoia. Every morning, as I've done for five seasons, several friends and I would sit outside my cabin, drinking coffee around a small wooden table that my brother made as a birthday present. Departures here are quiet, almost unnoticeable; my friends have left to spend their summer wages on traveling and visiting friends before they arrive at their winter destinations—ski resorts in Lake Tahoe, Steamboat Springs, a large hotel in the Virgin Islands.

I suddenly remember that no one will be here for coffee this morning or the next. When the sun breaks through the dense tops of the tall trees I'll sit alone in front of my cabin in a white plastic lawn chair. The mugs that we've used all summer are still unwashed in the stainless steel sink. They will remain that way until I begin packing to leave. I'll wrap them in faded newspapers, place them into a box in the back of my car. This season is different too, because I am a manager and many of my friends are also my employees. They seem hesitant, unsure about spending time with me. Only a few people still come to my cabin in the mornings
for coffee. In earlier seasons I had so many friends, many whose names I no longer remember.

I know the season is over in the way the ceramic mug in my hands doesn’t warm my fingers and the murky Italian coffee cools faster than I can drink it. What I taste in the air is silence. The absence of children’s happy screams and laughter. The absence of parents with still-sleepy vacation voices calling to them to quiet down, behave. My cabin is at the edge of the guest lodging, where tourists’ voices and laughter have awakened me every day for the last four months. Even the animals, the chickarees and golden-mantled ground squirrels, notice the shifting season, moving through the forest with a quiet urgency I didn’t notice yesterday. They dig in the thick layer of pine needles and bury sugar pine cones that they’ll return for later in the winter. There is a stillness in the air of leaves about to fall.

The equinox is still a week away, but closing my eyes and breathing deeply, I can pretend it’s autumn in the Midwest, in my parents’ backyard. The scent is so familiar, almost imperceptible at first, and it fills my lungs and clings to my hair. For as many times as I’ve done this before, for as many endings as I’ve known in this park, I am always surprised, never prepared when it happens. One morning in September I awaken with an inexplicable sadness. Like I have slept restlessly in the night, dreaming of saying goodbye to someone I love over and over again.

I heard the rangers say that we may have snow by the weekend. The air will turn cold and dense, the fog creeping upward from the foothills, surrounding the dogwood trees until it is as tall as the sequoias. It will catch the tourists off guard as I laugh at them in the Village parking lot—dressed in shorts and tank tops and
flip-floppy sandals. "But this is California, it's supposed to be warm," they'll say to each other as they shiver and pull their arms in closer to their bodies.

Business has slowed too. Last night, the Lodge Dining Room where I'm the manager, was only half-full with foreign tourists and young, childless couples from Los Angeles. Sometimes this late in the season we get older couples who decide to take their vacations after the crowds are gone. I like the park most when I can hike a trail without seeing anyone at all.

One of the reasons I've come back here for five seasons is that Sequoia is quiet, little known—unlike Yosemite, which is only five hours away. Both Sequoia and Yosemite are part of the Sierra Nevada range and share many of the same geographical features: large, wild meadows, tall trees, high mountain peaks. But even in the height of the season Sequoia doesn't have the same crowds, lines of hikers on the trails, trailers and RV's backed up in long traffic jams along the only road in the park.

The older couples are difficult to watch. They usually ask for one of the tables by the windows that overlook two sequoia trees, hoping to see a bear in the meadow. They silently sip wine as if they have run out of things to say to one another. In the background last night I could hear the voice of one of the rangers giving his fireside talk in the outdoor amphitheater. His voice sounded resigned, like he was finally tired of repeating the same speech about black bears that he'd given nearly every night all summer.

The rest of the staff and I had lingered in the dining room bar where the heat from the radiator is warm and dry. From the bar the servers could keep a disinterested eye on their customers eating prime rib and lamb chops. I overheard
some of my friends talking about where they're headed for the winter. The question of where I'll go when the season ends haunts me from the moment I return each year, hangs suspended in the forest air like a cold autumn fog.

I feel like I'm always looking ahead, never able to enjoy each moment in the park. The quiet, persistent thought about what I'll do when this is over in October is always in the back of my mind. I try to answer this same question from the tourists nearly every night, making up different stories about where I'm from and what I do in the off-season, not really wanting to think about the future.

I haven't belonged to my friends' conversations and plans, not this season. I'm Management—not one of them anymore. Not like all the other summers before when I was just a waitress or a clerk in the gift shop. We are segregated, a fact I haven't been able to get used to. I don't live among them, in their cluster of one-room employee cabins with wood-burning stoves, with their roommates who leave clothes on the dusty floor and open bags of potato chips for the mice to get into. Now I have a too-large three-room cabin, with a heater in every room, a telephone, and my own bathroom. I share nothing.

I haven't been invited to their parties after work each night. Even just last year I'd walk the trail in the dark to my brother's cabin, seeing by the light of my headlamp. When I got there we would drink Glenlivet and Wild Turkey and talk about Hesse or Rilke. I let them think it doesn't matter that I'm excluded. I let them think that it doesn't matter anymore because I'm not coming back after this season ends. When I pack my things into boxes this time and leave the mountain, I don't know how long it will be before I see this forest again.
I continue drinking the coffee even though it’s cold, wishing I could crawl back into bed with Hannah, my cat, the propane heater on the wall hissing comfortably. Or if I had the day off I’d hike to Alta Peak, Rim Rock or to all the places I never found time for in five years. So many peaks and canyons and clear alpine lakes I still haven’t seen.

But this time of year I have a hard time finding enough people to fill the jobs in the restaurant as employees begin leaving for the winter. Most of the time I’m the one who has to wait tables, tend bar, or prepares Caesar salads in the kitchen when we’re shorthanded. I still have inventory and a wine order to do, and it occurs to me that most of the summer is gone and I haven’t been able to do any of the things I thought I would during my last season. Far into the Sierra Nevada backcountry stands a mountain called Black Kaweah, which I have tried, and failed, to climb. I have never felt the clear, cold waters of Emerald Lake on my body in the springtime.

Later that night, after the last dishes have been washed and the floors have been vacuumed, I walk back to my house to get my car. I’m required to drive the day’s deposit to the hotel’s front desk, even though there’s little chance of being robbed along the trail. The concessionaire has relocated the front desk away from the Lodge and the hotel into the Giant Forest Village, away from the ancient sequoia tree that leans next to it, towering precariously.

Nearly a dozen more sequoias lean, unpredictably and almost invisibly, over the buildings and cabins of Giant Forest. I still have a photograph of myself,
looking small and unrecognizable, standing in between the splintered sections of a sequoia that fell during my first season. The inner wood of the broken tree was crimson for many weeks, like an open wound that would not heal. Like the tree, when I leave Sequoia this year, my own ties to this forest will be broken at the roots.

I wonder briefly what would happen if I just keep going in my car. If, instead of turning into the parking lot, I drive west all the way to the ocean, all the way to Big Sur, Monterey, Santa Cruz. I would arrive at dawn and watch the sun crest the mountains behind me, the skies turning deep orange and pink, spilling light over the waves crashing against the high cliffs. I wonder who would notice and if anyone would miss me.

But instead I say hello to the night auditor, Thomas, at the front desk. He is an old-timer; just like me, he has worked there for as long as anyone can remember. He is indeterminately old and devoutly Christian. I've never seen any expression on his face but a smile. The way he seems so content, peaceful, fills me with admiration and a little jealousy. He's doing a crossword puzzle and we talk about whether it will snow this weekend. Sometimes in the Sierra Nevada, even an early autumn snowfall can leave as much as eight to twelve feet of snow on the ground.

Then Thomas asks if I've ever heard the story about the bear. During an overnight shift one winter, a bear was walking around on the roof of the hotel when some of the shingles gave way beneath it. The bear fell right through the roof and landed next to him on the office floor.
Thomas is terrified of bears but he loves to tell this story. At least once a week he asks, "Have I ever told you the one about the bear?" I answer "Which bear? No, I don't think so." Still smiling, tonight he begins the story I already know by heart.

After I let him finish, nodding my head at the appropriate times, I put my money into the safe and say "See you tomorrow," just like every night. Even after hearing this story many times, Thomas' overly animated gestures and excited voice still make me laugh. I appreciate this moment of constancy, knowing that, for however longer he works here, Thomas will always find someone to listen.

Outside, instead of getting into my car, I sit down on the curb and stare up at the Sentinel tree. It's not the oldest or the largest sequoia, but it is one of the most famous, standing over the Cafeteria and gift shops. The Sentinel is also one of the most photographed trees, one of the first "Big Trees" tourists encounter when driving into the park. The first time I drove into Giant Forest, I too got out of my car to admire this same tree.

The area known as the Giant Forest Village has existed since the early part of the century. The market has stood in its original building mostly unchanged, since tourist services were first offered in the early part of the twentieth century. It will be one of the few structures in Giant Forest to survive the eventual deconstruction process. The other, worn-out buildings will be removed by the National Park Service and replaced by a new, modern hotel complex, Wuksachi Village, several miles up the road. This will give the trees room to grow, repopulate, survive.
The lights from the Cafeteria glow faintly; the vague outline of the janitor moving a mop back and forth across the floors is visible through the window. At least once every season we have a wicked thunderstorm and all the power on the entire mountain goes out—all the way from the Ash Mountain Visitor Center in the foothills to Giant Forest where we live and work at 6500 feet. The last time it happened was in the middle of the summer when the ground was dry and parched. An uncontained wildfire had destroyed one of the nearby power stations.

We were cold and dark, for two entire days. It is nearly impossible to describe the sort of darkness that settles into a forest like this. The trees are so tall, the leaves on the high branches so dense, that the forest becomes impenetrable to light. The sky grows quiet and dark as the last remaining sunlight disappears over the dusty, agricultural towns of the San Joaquin Valley below. It happens quickly, sometimes almost without warning. Even in the bright beam of a car's headlights, long and desolate stretches of road exist in complete blackness between the tourist sights along the General's Highway.

I've never before known such a powerful darkness, have little in my memory with which to compare it. I can only imagine it like the ocean at its deepest, farthest point, a deep and inky darkness where few creatures survive. Or perhaps this is the imagined darkness of myth, native legend, or childhood fairy tales of terrified little girls lost at night in the woods. In these stories, the darkness is almost always something unknown, and anything that can live with its overwhelming presence is something to be feared.

During my first few months in Sequoia, both the darkness and the quiet scared me. Coming to the park from a small college town had left me unprepared
for the stillness. I worked at 5:30 A.M. and would take the same trail I still use, carrying my flashlight in one hand and a mug of coffee awkwardly in the other.

Each terrifying morning when I moved half-asleep from the amber colored lights of the cabins into the dark, my breathing became shallow, raspy, and uneven. The cold air and the still-unfamiliar scent of the sugar pines was dizzying, intoxicating, like the aroma of heavy beads of sticky sap on fresh, Christmas tree branches. My heart beat rapidly, echoing in my head. I would sing the loudest song that came to mind, tricking myself into being distracted, instead of worrying about what I might meet headlong in the darkness.

Distractions from fear are no longer necessary. Startled, surprised and scared too many times already, I now expect something to come out of the shadows. The darkness has brought bears no longer afraid of humans, a kicking, panicked deer, concern for a friend who was arrested and taken to jail by the park rangers. The exact color of darkness defies words, but my associations with it have created so many unforgettable stories.

I'm now as comfortable in the darkness of the sequoia forest as if it were my own skin. When insomnia awakened me at night as a child, I would feel my way deliberately down the hallway and across the furniture, without turning on the lights, remembering instead the placement of each obstacle in my path. Mastering the darkness was exciting, the way it tested and forced me to be brave. The darkness taught me to see with my senses, not simply through my eyes. It is the same way now with the forest.

Tonight I decide to hike to Sunset Rock to sit beneath the stars for what may be the last time here. My headlamp is forgotten in my cabin but I don't care.
The slivered moon remains hidden behind the sheer granite faces and heavy forest canopy. I drive my car to the chained service road near Round Meadow. On the other side of the road the path is wide, the direction it takes overly familiar from my years of use. I walk straight until the soft ground turns hard, then right when the forest thins out. From memory my feet follow each twist and bend along the trail at the edge of an old pine forest. Twigs and fallen branches snap under my hiking boots as I walk slowly.

I do this more to savor the act of walking than to feel my way in the darkness. Nighthiking becomes an instinctive act. I move forward. Eyes open, then closed. My heart beats loudly, rhythmically, but the sound doesn't frighten me. Still unable to discern tangible and familiar shapes, but it hardly matters. This is a darkness to which human eyes cannot adjust. Like swimming in a blueblack ocean under a moonless sky.

There is always the possibility of falling, stumbling over a large rock underfoot. I trust. With each movement, each step, my feet will meet solid earth. I walk without hesitation. With the same sort of ignorant faith that once made me believe a former lover, when he had lied to me many times before. The air overflows tonight with the scent of decaying organic matter on the forest floor.

The trail isn't long and when my boots scrape the huge granite boulders, I know to stop. In a clearing now, out of the darkness, my eyes focus on the outline of the valley below. The moon has risen slightly and the rocks reflect the pale light, illuminated white and shiny. We came here once my first season, to see fireworks on the Fourth of July. How could I have known that the towns would look so small, flecks of light in the distance, or known that the ledge where we watched
was much higher than the tiny, far away explosions? I remember disappointment, because there was no sound, no loud booms or firecrackers, only the midsummer sounds of crickets and owls.

I've spent so much time here. We came to these rocks to drink wine and tell ghost stories, to watch sunsets, and to sunbathe in the late summer before the weather turned cold. If I could put all the time together in a straight and continuous line, Sequoia is the one place I've lived the longest since I was a child. This forest is my home.

A dark human figure far to the right of where I'm sitting catches my attention. He is higher up on the rocks, and next to him towers a black object. I watch for a moment. He doesn't notice me right away when I walk over to him. Moving closer I cough loudly, asserting my presence, understanding how easy it is to be startled in the forest.

The shape next to him is a telescope, taller and more powerful than any I've ever seen. A folding card table with a laptop computer and a chair stand on the other side of the telescope. Curious, I ask the man questions, who is he, where is he from, what's he doing on top of Sunset Rock at eleven o'clock on a September night. An accountant from Los Angeles, he tells me. This is his hobby; one weekend a month he drives to the mountains to view the stars and skies.

"There's too much light pollution in L.A.," he tells me. "You can't see anything. There is too much light pollution in a lot of places. This is the best time of year too, the skies are clear and bright in the fall."

"It looks heavy, how'd you manage to get it all the way out here? How much would a telescope like this cost me?"
He laughs instead of answering my questions. "If only this were my real job," he says, then pauses for a moment. "It's too bad I only get to do what I love once a month." The words stay with me, as I think again about all the unvisited places in these mountains.

He asks me questions too, but not many, as if he is distracted and just being polite. He is more interested in what the telescope reveals than in hearing about life in the park. Our life here sounds embarrassing when I talk about it out loud like that. It's hard to tell him that we don't do much in our free time really. That, after many seasons here, all the hiking we excitedly planned our first summer has given way to drinking as the predominant pastime.

"Want to have a look?" he says. "Jupiter is really bright tonight and several of its moons are pretty clear."

Through the lens I see a bright circle and three smaller fuzzy circles surrounding it. He shows me the points he plots on the computer which tell him how to turn the telescope to the correct, right angle. We take turns looking and he shows me what he calls a lacework nebula. It looks like layers of finely spun spider's webs, radiating out into an endless sky. For a moment I forget that I'm seeing something billions of miles away.

It's difficult to see my own life that clearly, unhindered and unaided. I sometimes spend whole days here without remembering to notice the trees, the plants. I wonder if I have taken the forest for granted. Or if it is this life that I have taken for granted. It often feels as inaccessible and far away as what I see through the lens.
Pulling my eyes away, I notice voices and shadows in the distance, moving closer. Some of them are recognizable from work and I don’t want to talk to anyone right now. I mumble "Thank you," and retrace my steps back along the rock. A few moments later, someone else starts asking the same questions I’d asked fifteen minutes earlier. I sit back down on the rocks, far enough away so that I can’t hear anything. I had forgotten to ask the man his name, never even saw his face clearly. I’d never know him if I saw him again.

Against the rocks, the granite is cold and rough on my back. I look up at the sky and try to find the few constellations I know. Aries, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the Pleiades. Since I was a small child I’ve searched in every clear nighttime sky for those same constellations. Always comforted by knowing they are there, fixed and constant.

At this high elevation the stars seem close enough to touch if I reach out my hand, the Milky Way a curling ribbon of smoke that weaves in between and around the stars. The planet Jupiter looks like a single star, not much brighter than the others. And in the place where I know the lacework nebula exists, I see nothing.

I am feeling very small, humbled by the vastness of such a sky. I’ll need to make a decision soon about where to go this time when I leave. I have clarity enough to know that I’ve learned what I needed to from this forest, have learned many of its secrets. Feeling very small, but not scared of this open expanse of life. The shadows and tall trees will outlive me.
RECOGNIZING BEAUTY

The place is more like the materials of the art itself—the stretched canvas and paper. In the flatness, everywhere is surface. This landscape can never take us emotionally in the way smokey crags or crawling oceans can. We stare back at it. Beneath our skins, we begin to disassemble the mechanisms of how we feel. We begin to feel.

—Michael Martone, on the Midwest

One day past the autumnal equinox. The sky this morning is the color of dirty chalk. It reaches past my living room, past the turn-of-the-century farmhouses of this small town. It stretches farther, past the hypnotic, even rows of brittle, brown cornfields ready for harvest. The sky tautens, wraps itself around faint, almost unnoticeable remnants of these indigenous Iowa prairies.

I stare out the window at the carefully planted rows of oaks and maples that line my street. Most of them have not yet begun to turn violent colors of red, orange, yellow. The trees are still full, fertile, with lush green leaves as if it was still summer. Only a few months ago I was still standing in the fields, planting wild sunflowers.

So often here, I hope that staring long enough, hard enough, at the plain midwestern landscape will change it. By the strength of my desire alone the flat earth might twist upward, growing steeper, until it reaches the sharp edges of tall, rocky mountains. I would see manzanita bushes, bent branches of Douglas fir trees, granite boulders, winding dusty trails. And beyond, the Pacific Ocean. The
landscape would change into a familiar one. The one I’ve left behind in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California in Sequoia National Park, and the one I still occasionally dream about late at night.

The relentless drizzle becomes snow. In September. I watch the heavy, dense flakes. They fall slowly at first. I see one out of the corner of my eye, then another. Until soon I can no longer see the outline of the trees and the entire world is covered in unexpected whiteness. The snow is just the kind I drew as a child, waxy round dots of white crayon on a rough sheet of vanilla colored paper. The flakes are too saturated with moisture to last—they melt as they meet the warm, gray concrete.

I run outside without reaching for my coat and stand on the front porch, looking up into the sky as if it had all the answers in the world. The answers which will teach me to connect myself to the dark, Iowa soil, the way I had been in Sequoia. The snow seeps through my shirt, wet and warm, leaving large droplets on my face, in my eyes.

The wild sunflowers I’ve planted in the yard bend and sway in the wet wind. They stand ten feet tall, towering over me. The sunflowers only bloomed a few weeks ago—hundreds of tiny, mustard-colored flowers. I watched them all summer, touching the unopened buds as I left the house each morning, waiting for them to open. I stand in the midst of the first snow of the season and wonder how long it will be before the sunflower petals drop to the ground, and the trees along the street are empty and bare.
That summer had been my last in the Midwest, my third since moving there for graduate school. In the relentless, humid July heat, I leaned against my shovel and rested. The sun was intense, unbearable. No matter how much water I stopped to drink, my thirst was unquenchable. Rivulets of sweat collected in the tangles of hair at the back of my neck. This summer job was as intense and strenuous as the summer weather. I couldn’t keep up with the other employees. Most of them were native Iowans who had spent their entire lives working on their families’ farms. Ever since they could talk, they’d gotten up before dawn to milk cows, work till nightfall during each season’s harvest, and bale hay till their hands were callused and no longer bled from the sting of labor.

Intuitively I’d known that I wasn’t strong enough for this job. My own hands showed calluses only from where I gripped the pen to grade my college students’ composition papers each semester. But this was the last chance I would have to know what it felt like to be a part of this landscape. To know how it felt to look at miles and miles of fields I’d helped plant with my own hands.

I worked for the Iowa State University Plant Introduction Project. A cooperative venture with the United States Department of Agriculture, Plant Introduction grew and harvested hundreds of kinds of plants and vegetables. This wasn’t unusual in Iowa, where crop production makes up much of the state’s economic livelihood. But this was different. This project was only about seed, nothing more. In the main building, a refrigerator the size of a small warehouse contained hundreds of thousands of seed in glass jars, from every imaginable country. Inside, the room always remained the same temperature, cool and dry.
safe from the elements. We joked that, in the event of a crop famine in a far-away country, Plant Introduction would help feed the world.

The plants themselves, grown large, ripe, and luscious after a summer of relentless sun and heat, were useless. At summer's end, we'd harvest the seeds from each plant, leaving the fruit behind, forgotten. It was hard for me to consider that none of the seedlings we planted all summer had any aesthetic or intrinsic value, that only what the plants contained was precious.

I'd been assigned to the Sunflower Crew. For three months we built enormous metal and mesh screen cages, and replanted thousands of sunflower seedlings. My back ached. I put the shovel aside and knelt on the ground. I dug in the clumps of hard, black earth, gently making sure that each plant stood tall and straight toward the sun.

I planted fifteen seedlings in each rectangular plot inside the cage. Any extra plants from the flats we transported to the fields were supposed to be dumped outside the cages. We shook the soil and roots out and left them in the sun to burn and wither. These plants would never have the chance for their roots to take hold in the ground. They would never have to endure summer wind, rain, and tornadoes. It occurred to me that, until this very moment, after months of planting sunflowers whose beauty was unimportant, I felt much the same way. I had spent most of my two years here trying to plant roots in the ground. The act of tethering myself to this temporary, unfamiliar place had become what was important, overshadowing the beauty I might find in the plains and plowed fields.

The gift shops in Sequoia National Park, where I'd worked for five summers, sold live sequoia seedlings—miniature versions of the small saplings that grew in
sunny spaces of the forest floor, the same size as the sunflowers I transplanted every day. For less than five dollars, tourists could own a piece of the forest, a memory encased in a narrow, plastic tube. The tourists would stand at the cash register in the gift shop where I worked my first season, holding the seedlings in their hands. The expressions on their faces were hopeful, as they imagined sequoia trees in their backyards or in their rooftop gardens, growing tall and strong toward the sun. I couldn't tell them the truth, that, while the sequoia trees were hardy and resistant, the seedling probably wouldn't thrive in the rain-soaked climate of England, or in the too-confining spaces of Japan. No matter how carefully and lovingly the seedlings would be tended, these environments were too unfamiliar.

I understood the desire to bring some part of the forest home with them. This desire was the same reason that other people buy postcards, heavy glass paperweights imprinted with pictures of far-away places. We want to have tangible markers of where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. We want to know that even in the places we call home, we haven't forgotten the others. In Iowa, as I often looked through my heavy box of photographs from Sequoia, I understood even more the inherent need to remain connected to familiar, inspiring places.

I thought of the weed I sometimes I encountered while hoeing the sunflower fields. "Field bindweed" or "creeping Jennie" as I learned to call it, is a perennial whose tangled mats of narrow vines stretch out along the rich soil of cultivated Iowa fields. Its complex, intertwined root system sprawled stubbornly far and deep underground. Each time I struck a plant's primary, fleshy root, I uncovered more
and more. Despite how forcefully I cut and scraped, more roots always emerged from the ground, as deeply embedded as the first, burrowing deep into a place I couldn't see, one I couldn't reach completely.

And always as I'd struggled and cut I could think only of the mountains of California, of the trees and meadows of Sequoia National Park. Like the creeping Jennie, my connection to the landscape there couldn't be severed completely. It was as if I'd managed to cut only the parts I could see. But the unseen roots were still there, still growing beneath the forest ground. I had to be careful too, with the creeping Jennie remnants that I did manage to remove from the locus of the plant. The roots were strong, determined, and they could again bury themselves in the soil, taking root. My own shallow roots that I'd salvaged and brought to this prairie landscape were still trying to right themselves and find a place in this new ground. They competed for open space, sunlight, and nourishment with invisible roots still thousands of miles away.

One afternoon I'd asked my supervisor if I could take home some of the unplanted sunflowers. I wanted to plant the leftover seedlings in my front yard. Sunflowers have always been my favorite. When I was a little girl, my parents' neighbors planted a long border of sunflowers along the edge of their house. Every summer they grew quickly, almost infinitely tall, looking as if they'd never stop reaching upward until they broke through the sky and finally touched the sun. I'd watch their progress, fascinated not so much by their size, but by their friendliness. They seemed to smile at me as if they knew some secret place, hidden just beyond the clear Ohio sky, that only they could reach. My supervisor had looked at me, puzzled for a moment, not understanding why anyone would do such
a thing. Many of the varieties of sunflowers we planted appeared on the State of
Iowa's list of "most noxious weeds." He couldn't guess that even now, part of me
still hoped to discover that secret sunflower place. "Go ahead," he said, and
laughed.

So, at the end of the day, I carried as many flats as I could back to my car.
The seedlings stayed outside for a long time, black plastic flats leaning against my
house, waiting for clear weather. When they saw the seedlings outside, my
upstairs neighbors immediately approached me. Did I really plan to put those
things in the yard, they asked. Did I know that, once planted, the sunflowers
would unnoticeably and uncontrollably drop hundreds of tiny seeds in that same
place, every, single year? From that summer on, my sunflowers would keep
coming back, keep growing next to the front porch, long after I was gone. I hadn't
known, I told them, but certainly no one would mind, didn't everyone like
sunflowers? It was impossible to explain that this sense of constancy was what I
wanted. Planting the sunflowers would be a permanent gesture, a gesture I
wanted—their reappearance each year a reminder that part of me belonged here,
now.

When the summer rains ended I'd finally placed the sunflowers in the
ground, spacing them evenly so each seedling had a clear, sunny place to grow. I
planted stem after stem, my back aching. But this time I didn't mind; the
sunflowers were mine, and planting them would help settle my transient life. I'd
spent five years moving from place to place, leaving and returning over and over
again to Sequoia National Park. Such seasonal work is emotionally and physically
exhausting. At the end of each season, just as I became comfortable and stable,
the yearly closing of the park's facilities uprooted me and took me away from the forest. The distance would last until the next season, when I again had to relearn the subtleties of the forest to feel reconnected to Sequoia. And, after five years, I had learned not to get too attached to people or place—they were only temporary. This distance followed me across the country to Iowa. Here, out of habit, I resisted my strong desire to belong in this place, anywhere. Now, it was too difficult, expecting to leave just when my surroundings became familiar, as I had done in Sequoia.

But this time I was determined to create some physical sign of my connection to this place. I wanted the sunflowers to become part of my life here. When they bloomed, I would look out my window and know that this was my home now, that I belonged here, for however brief a time. I would appreciate their simple beauty and their ability to remain rooted to the ground, growing tall each summer. Perhaps this gesture would erase the other ache, the one that came whenever I stood in the fields and thought about the trees in Sequoia and the people I missed.

This afternoon's snow is gone as quickly as it began. The telephone rings. I'm nearly asleep, unable to tell for a moment if the sound is part of my vague dream, or the real, cold nighttime. Here in Iowa, I find myself falling into a curious rhythm, more in tune with the natural patterns of the land than I've ever been before. The days grow shorter, my body slows, prepares for sleep, as the skies darken and night falls.
Now that I've been away from Sequoia for three years, I come to understand what late night phone calls mean. My friends and my brother call to say hello, from half a continent away. They forget the two-hour time difference between the West Coast and these plains, expecting me to still be awake, as they are. My friends also forget that my life here is not the same as the one we once shared.

I've come to understand, too, the sounds that the nighttime here brings. The sound of the trains, which travel through this town a dozen times a day, no longer catches my attention. The nights here are so quiet that I almost forget that I'm not in the mountains.

I reach for the telephone and turn on the light. A long pause, and then the quiet words of my friend Grace. She asks if I'm still awake. I do my best to hide the sleep in my voice and don't tell her that I have to get up early in the morning for a biology field trip. She's just finished work in the new restaurant, and stands outside at a pay phone in the cold, mountain air. I murmur in agreement and she begins talking. She tells me about working for the new concessions company, the new facility at Wuksachi Village. She tells me how lonely Giant Forest looks with the wide-open spaces where the buildings used to stand before the National Park Service removed them to protect the trees. She says now she can imagine the forest as it was, thousands of years ago.

With closed eyes I try to connect Grace's words with specific details, tangible and concrete. I want be able to invoke some fragment of memory, an exact of image of her as she stands in forest darkness. I search for a clear picture of the way the forest looks at this time of night, what it smells like in early autumn, and
the sounds of the quietness. She comments on the sound of a train whistle from my end of the phone, far off in the distance. Hadn't even heard it, I tell her.

We don't talk long. She knows that I'm lying about being awake. She laughs and tells me to go back to sleep as she hangs up the phone. I wait for a moment. Perhaps waiting and listening will reveal the memory I'm hoping for. I'm unable to go back to sleep, waiting for the sense of sadness that always comes after a late night phone call from someone still in the park.

Months can pass in which none of my friends from Sequoia call. And in those silent months, I begin to think that perhaps I've made my own sort of peace by starting over here, in a different place. I teach myself to notice small, but remarkable details through the monochromatic flatness of the Midwest, details which make me smile, contented. I don't catch myself thinking about the forest and mountains as often. And days will pass when I don't think of them at all.

I toss the cordless phone onto the floor next to the bed. Instead of going back to sleep I leave the light on. Another conversation with Grace earlier this summer, after a long day in the sunflower fields, comes back to me. She had told me that the restaurant where she worked was shorthanded, and they were looking for employees. We joked about my coming out to California to work for the summer, as if it would be simple to abandon my job and my graduate class. Grace gave me the phone number of the personnel manager, and before saying goodbye, I assured her that I'd call right away.

Without thinking I began to dial the number Grace gave me. I hadn't finished dialing the numbers before I stopped. My heart swelled, and I longed for the forest more in that moment than in any other since leaving. The coffee table
was piled with my stacks of unread textbooks. My three cats curled up next to each other, sleeping in a pool of summer sunlight on the couch.

I knew I couldn't leave. All my possessions no longer fit in the back of my car. I had responsibilities, to school, to myself. And, in a strange way I still couldn't explain, to this place. I'd chosen this new life that had little to do with the old one in Sequoia, except in moments like these. Two years had passed and I still hadn't gotten to know my neighbors or the exact names of the wild prairie grasses which grew next to the straight, flat roads. In these moments, my ambivalence about being settled was strong. I wanted to memorize the names of every plant that surrounded my home. But I didn't want to admit that returning to the life I'd led in Sequoia was impossible.

Even though this moment happened months ago, I'm unprepared, again, for the sudden sting of emotion as I lie in bed remembering this conversation. It is an unpleasant and unwanted emotion—urgent euphoria and disappointment, all at once. I wonder how it is that in this instant, I can't remember the last beautiful Iowa sunset, or the last, swollen, amber harvest moon. Even though I've tried to notice details like these, my only thought is about what I simply can't have. I'm not lucid enough to know if this is something I even want anymore. My acceptance of this landscape yields to the strong pull of the forest's memory. The memory is still rooted firmly into ground I don't know when I will see again.

The next day I'm tired and unrested. The waist-high water is numbing. I stand in a bend of the South Skunk River and stare at the next fifty-yard stretch
along the right riverbank. My carefully chosen layers of fleece clothing are inappropriate and inadequate. I'm still not sure how to adjust to the unpredictable climate here. My shirt clings, sticky and cold, to my stomach, and the water flows slowly in and out of my expensive waterproof hiking boots. The sunlight reflects every imaginable shade of brown in the murky water and shows swirls of sand and heavy silt. I inhale, letting the autumn air fill my lungs. The water smells like only a river in the Midwest does—musty like the scent of wet, rotten leaves and dying animals. I compare the smell to the one I remember of the Pacific Ocean—bitter, salty and clean.

The day is unusually clear, the sky an intense, opaque blue that looks like a plastic candy-filled Easter egg. All morning and most of the afternoon ten of us have driven in a van through the Iowa countryside. Past postcard-perfect red barns, open fields, and horses with smooth coats that shimmer in the sunlight. I'm here as part of an undergraduate biology field trip. We stop at three different locations along the river, near home.

We are looking for freshwater mussels. At one time these bivalve mollusks were plentiful in every river in the United States, including this one. Most freshwater mussels are in trouble, with over 70 North American species listed as endangered, threatened, or of special concern. Despite that mollusks are extremely resilient and belong to the second largest phylum of animals (about 550 million years old), freshwater mussels are one of the most rapidly disappearing groups of animals in the world.

The longevity of freshwater mussels is astonishing. They live longer than any other invertebrate and several species have life spans as long as 100 years.
Mussels form countable bands of calcium deposits which reveal their age, much like the rings inside a sequoia tree. The presence of mussels also reveals the quality of a river's water, as well as its original, physical configuration.

Now, these animals' habitats have been decimated by water pollution, soil erosion from agriculture, and forcibly dammed waterways. Over-harvesting by the pearl industry also continues to threaten freshwater mussels. In Asia, mussel shells imported from the U.S. are sliced and shaped into perfectly rounded beads, then inserted into marine oysters. In defense against the irritant, the oysters' secretions, or nacre, cover the foreign piece of mussel in layers, eventually becoming pearls. This method allows the oysters to produce high-quality pearls very quickly, often saving several years in the process. I'm overwhelmed to discover that about fifty million dollars' worth of shells are shipped yearly to Japan, with the U.S. buying millions of dollars of pearls in return. Our purpose on this field trip is to determine if any populations of mussels still survive in these dark waters.

Three distinct types of mussels may still live in the South Skunk River. *Actinonatlas ligamentina*, or muckets, are small, smooth-shelled, pale. Three-ridge mussels, *Amblema plicata*, are larger, with wavy ridges across the top of each of the animal's valves. And *Potamilus alatus*, pink heel splitters, are the largest we hope to find—bumpy, mud-colored mussels which have a rough edge on their dorsal surface. If I accidentally stepped on one, barefoot or in flimsy shoes, the sharp ridge could cut through to layers of wet skin. All three species are considered threatened.
The professor who directs this trip insists that enough remnants of these populations still exist to warrant our presence here. As I shiver in the semi-warmth of the late afternoon sun, I'm still not sure. After a half-day's search, we've found nothing.

I shuffle slowly through the water to the next stretch of river. Unlike the students, for whom this trip is mandatory, I've volunteered my day to help collect this data. The trip director's father and teenage daughter are the other two members of my "team." The company of people who are also less-knowledgeable strangers among the others is comforting. The daughter, Nicole, is quiet. Her expression hasn't changed—a defiant and passive sort of scowl, as if this really is the last place she cares to be on a Saturday. I imagine her father waking her this morning, too early after a long night out with her friends.

Nicole's grandfather, John, smiles the same, faint smile he has had all day. He reminds me of my own grandfather. John keeps up easily with my quick pace as we hike through dense woods to get to the edge of the river. The thick, closely knotted trees pleasantly surprise me.

I recall driving toward my new home here a few summers ago, my gaze fixed on the miles of fields that blurred by through the car window. The disappointment was overwhelming when I first sensed that there was nothing unpredictable about the landscape here. When I finally leave this place, what I'll remember most distinctly is the lack of trees, the wide spaces of land that look so much alike. Earlier this morning when John stopped along the trail to point out the names of unfamiliar trees and plants to me, I realized that I'd stopped looking for the unexpected here, taking for granted that it's always the same. Spending many
years in the sequoia forest was the same way—I didn’t take the time to notice the unexpected until it was far away from me.

A blue rubber bag on the riverbank marks the next research area. We collect the data in random, one square meter sections, which I learn are called “quadrats.” I’m in charge of measuring these sections for my team. The quadrat marker is made of pieces of lightweight PVC pipe fitted together to form a perfect square. With each forward step the dark water grows shallower and I can nearly see the river bottom. A fish nips behind my knee with a brief tug, startling me.

I stand deliberately in the only patch of sunlight along the bank, and close my eyes. We need to preserve the randomness of the data. I take the quadrat from around my neck and throw it, far ahead of me. Each section of pipes has been drilled with small holes, and I catch a glimpse of the quadrat as it sinks to the bottom. Perhaps this time we will find something.

John and Nicole follow me and we bend down toward the water. I’ve begun to dry off, just a little. At first, the cold water on my arms makes me flinch, as I would with the unwanted touch of an estranged lover. At this point we’re tired and don’t try to exchange conversation. We reach our arms into the water, searching the river bottom with our hands inside the plastic quadrat, feeling for mussels.

My fingers are numb but the silt is soft and smooth beneath the water. Something sharp stings my hands. I pull the object to the surface, into the light. It’s a large, square shaped rock that only vaguely resembles a mussel. I toss it into the water behind me and listen to the deep, hollow splash it makes. I start to reach into the water again. John just shakes his head at me. “Nothing,” he says.
Nicole has already gone ahead of us, sighing loudly as she throws her quadrat down into the river.

"Look at that," John says. "You're covered in dragonflies and damselflies." Looking up from the water I see a dozen, brilliantly colored insects swarming around my head, hovering above my arms and my back. They are an indescribable, bright green, and I'm sure I've never seen such a vivid color before. The wings of the dragonflies are transparent, nearly invisible, with finely woven strands. The dragonflies and damselflies seem to move as if they share a common rhythm, in a soothing, hypnotic dance.

Although I grew up in the Midwest, rivers like this one were never a part of my childhood. We lived close to them, but I don't remember playing on the banks or in the waters. Dragonflies aren't unusual; we've seen them all day, skimming the cloudy waters. But for a moment I'm standing in the midst of something unexpected. Last summer, or even yesterday, I probably wouldn't have paid attention to these flashes of color moving around my eyes.

"Over here," Nicole calls. "It's not in the quadrat, but I found one." John and I exchange smiling glances. We wade over to the place where Nicole points to a shiny, pale mussel on the shallow river bottom.

I look down into the water. The mucket is much smaller than I imagined. Freshwater mussel shells, made of calcium, consist of two halves held together by a strong dorsal ligament which act as a hinge, allowing the halves to open and close. They are uncomplicated creatures, with no eyes, no ears, no outer appendages. Their shells contain only muscle tissue, reproductive organs, and an intestinal tract. Simple, straightforward, honest.
Mussels are usually found upright—their shells vertical in the water with the open edge reaching out, filtering food by siphoning water through the digestive tract. This mucket lies on its side. It may be dying. I'd like to pick it up, replace it so that it stands tall and upright in the water, the way it belongs. But it's not my place to interfere. I wonder if I'd have known this one was even there, distinct among all the rocks worn smooth from years of flowing water. My hands may have brushed over it, touched it lightly, not knowing, not recognizing its uneven shape.

The mussel itself isn't beautiful, not much different from the rocks I've pulled out of the river all day. In the reflection of the faintly flowing water, it had looked shiny and bright. When Nicole holds it in her hand now, the surface is not as smooth as it appeared. I can see imperfections, tiny fractures and ridges along its shell. As the mussel dries in the sunlight, it no longer glows white. It reminds me of handfuls of desert sand, bleached into hundreds of almost unnoticeable colors. The way you don't notice the desert's distinctive beauty until you think about the sheer difficulty of survival in such a place, the adaptations of plants and animals. Many species of mussels can actually change as their environments change; many have the ability to fasten themselves firmly to solid objects, holding fast, letting go only to find food in a new place. And most mussels spend their entire lives in a single river or stream, never knowing another home.

What is beautiful about the mussel is its singular presence here, along the riverbed. The mussel survives through all the river's changes, in spite of a home that no longer sustains it completely. The Midwest landscape may also never sustain me completely. In many ways I will probably always equate it with absence—of mountains and sequoia trees, meadows overflowing with plants. But I
learn. How to adapt to its changes, how to take nourishment from what I do have, how to appreciate intricate, subtle colors. These mussels also know how to adapt, to a river home that provides very little. Absence in this landscape doesn’t always mean emptiness. The radiance of sunlight in open spaces can be amazing.

The sun is warm and the trees seem part of a dense forest. The tallest trees here in Iowa stand small and unremarkable next to the ones still in my memory of California. But it doesn’t matter. After living in a place like Sequoia for so long, it becomes easy to believe that nature is supposed to be huge and awe-inspiring. That it must leave us breathless and without words. I’ve felt distance from the landscape here because I expected too much from the wrong things. I haven’t been looking in simple places like a still river next to endless cornfields.

I breathe deeply and try to memorize the river. I want to remember these trees and the exact scent of Iowa water, instead of the too-predictable postcard cornfields. I’ll leave Iowa next summer, long before my wild sunflowers bloom. But I know they will. In the mountains, when I stand again beneath the sequoia trees, and see the people I have carried in my heart and mind, I’ll know that this place is also a part of me. Shallow roots have, without my knowing, taken hold in this midwestern soil. My ambivalence subsides. Belonging has less to do with this exact place than with recognizing its shape and meaning. Recognizing the beauty of a sunflower for more than the seed it provides, and admiring the changing nature of a single, freshwater mussel.
APPENDIX A. MAP OF GIANT FOREST AREA
APPENDIX B. BEAR MANAGEMENT PLAN EXCERPT
BEAR MANAGEMENT PLAN EXCERPT

5. Destruction and Disposal

a. Bears in the front country and backcountry exhibiting any of the following behavior patterns may be considered candidates for destruction:

(1) Bears that bluff charge, chase, or injure people in an unprovoked situation

(2) Bears that persistently break into structures, vehicles, or backcountry camping gear (tents, packs, tack, etc.) where food has been properly stored.

Bears are not destroyed without positive identification and after all other alternative management actions have been considered.

The Bear Management Committee will review the records of bears which are candidates for destruction and discuss management alternatives. The Committee will be composed of the appropriate area District and Sub-District Ranger, Wildlife Biologist, Temporary Bear Management Park Rangers, individuals invited to the Committee meetings by designated members, the Wildlife Scientist, and the Fish and Wildlife Biologist (Chair). The Fish and Wildlife Biologist will present the Committee's majority recommendations and dissenting opinions to the Superintendent through the Chief of Resources Management in writing. When the Committee recommends destruction, the Superintendent will be advised verbally as soon as possible after the meeting, followed by a written recommendation. The Superintendent will make the final decision.

b. Any bear approved for destruction following the above criteria or any bear that has sustained a serious injury from a person (broken bones, gut shot, broken back, etc.) may be destroyed by a qualified Ranger or Fish and Wildlife personnel as expeditiously as possible. Before any injured bear is destroyed, it should be inspected either by Fish and Wildlife personnel or someone qualified to evaluate the seriousness of the injury. Such destruction applies only to bears which can be identified with certainty. Such incidents will be thoroughly documented and reported to the Superintendent as soon as possible.

c. If a sow with cubs must be destroyed, the Fish and Wildlife Biologist will decide whether the cubs are old enough to wean. If they are, they may be released. If they are not, the California Department of Fish and Game and/or other agencies or organizations may be contacted by the Fish and Wildlife Biologist for an outlet. If no alternative is available, the cubs will be destroyed. If the cubs cannot be captured, the Fish and Wildlife Biologist will decide what action to take from alternatives described under IV G 2k.
d. Bears that are to be destroyed may either be drugged first and then shot, killed with a euthanasic drug, or shot while free roaming, depending on what is most desirable for safety and is the most humane procedure.

e. Except in emergency situations, bears will not be destroyed in sight of visitors.

f. Discretion will be used so that the carcass of any bear killed is far enough away from roads, trails, and high-use areas to minimize offensive odors.

Disposal along roads will be over a steep embankment. Sites will be selected to prevent multiple carcasses accumulating at any one site. Burial is an acceptable alternative, if the carcass cannot otherwise be removed from areas where it would be obnoxious to the general public. All portions of dead bears may be sent to museums or bona fide research facilities; such transfers will be coordinated by the Wildlife Scientist.

g. All tags, transmitters, and markings affixed to the animal will be removed and returned to the Fish and Wildlife Biologist.

h. No part of any Park bear will be retained by anyone for personal purposes. However, the Research Biologist should be queried regarding specimens needed for bear research. With approval of the Superintendent, bear parts may be used for interpretive purposes.

—1992 Sequoia and Kings Canyon Bear Management Plan
REFERENCES


