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Rūs

Literary Essay

Open Land

By Wendy Lewis

June 2001 – September-October 2008



Wendy Lewis relocated her family in July of 1998 from the urban lively of Minneapolis to the quiet haven of Cannon Falls, a small farming community on the Cannon River, 50 miles southeast of the Twin Cities.

She migrates regularly from small-town life to the cities, communing with friends, performing music occasionally and a day job that calls when there is work to be done. There is nothing she loves more than a ravaged table, guests flush with food, wine and conversation trailing late into the night.

The river runs. The prairie is wide. The door is open. The animals are friendly.

Wendy writes the column Rūs and was the featured writer editor for Pure Hash in Mental Contagion.

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June 2001

Spring has arrived. This year, death is prominently featured in the splendor. In the last few weeks for example, I've been privy to the deaths of seven relationships. Most of the exits were colorful and explosive, if not painful. The remaining ones died the more terrifying deaths of quiet resignation, like tiny candle flames that were slowly drowned by their own sense of purpose.

Similarly, while wandering along the riverbanks and in the woods, I've been tripping over the physical remnants of more death. The snowmelt of spring has revealed mostly unidentifiable bodies in varying stages of putrefaction, the outlines of their skeletons in relief beneath collapsing skins. Coyotes leave evidence of their satiation here and there. I'll suddenly come upon an exploded mess of turkey feathers or a collection of round tufts from the fur of a rabbit clinging to low weedy branches. Surrounding the scene, frantic footprints and perhaps a dog-size pile of excrement but nothing else - no feet, no heads. And I'm not sure why, but it is still the most confounding to my senses when I come across a fallen bird. They seem so out of place on the ground with their wings splayed open looking, if not for the earth beneath them, as if they were still flying. Least offensive to me are all varieties of bones, which often lay in strangely endearing poses, bleaching in the sun. Death is everywhere.

My dog puts his nose into all of it. It excites him. His tail and limbs get stiff, his ears go back and sometimes his hackles come up. Dogs seem at least as attracted to dead things as they are to living things. And a dead thing doesn't fight or run away, allowing a dog the luxury of lingering over it, smelling it carefully and completely. I've seen many dogs take a dead creature into their mouths, an action they appear to execute with such tenderness, even reverence. They take possession of death and haul it off to a private place for further inspection. I've yet to see a person engage with death so curiously or intimately.

I began to examine the dead bodies I was finding on the prairie and by the river, marking them and returning to them to watch their progress, like I would check in on a friend to see how their week was going. I began thinking about graves I've not visited for years and stopping to consider how much death and decomposition goes into fertilizing the soil. I remembered the unmistakable

smell both of my babies brought into the room immediately after emerging from my body -- the smell of wet earth. Fear keeps me from thinking about my own mortality: that my body will bloat, the skin will wither, stretch across my bones and be eaten by a host of scavenging diners from beetles to bacteria. It's the most difficult to imagine not having consciousness.

One thing I've come to expect is that once I begin noticing something and engaging with it, synchronicity comes into play and I am led to places I might never have chosen or even thought of. While working on this essay one night, I was listening to Dry, P.J. Harvey's first release and the song Sheela Na Gig ramped up. Sheela Na Gig, Sheela Na Gig / You exhibitionist - P.J. howled. I'd wondered about this Celtic figure but had never read much about it. Always game for diversion, I impulsively logged onto the Internet to delve deeper.

Sheela Na Gigs come in a variety of poses including those squatting, standing and reclining. They generally sport a combination of the following characteristics: strong, broad shoulders, bulging eyes, emaciated ribs, striations on the cheeks and brows, an over-sized bald head, emptied sagging breasts, open mouth. But in all the representations, the legs are spread wide and the vulva is the gaping and beckoning centerpiece, often with one or both hands pointing to or expanding the orifice. It is unmistakably Christian, not pagan, in its origins. These carved-in-stone icons have been found in church and monastic ruins, along window lintels, on pillars and round towers, embedded in town walls and gateways across England and Ireland. They were also found in Norman-esque churches in and around France and Spain and date back to the eleventh or twelfth centuries.

There are conflicting theories about the meaning of the figure. The obvious first guess, given the prominent display of female genitalia, would be that it falls under the fertility category. But the experts say that fertility figures have a look of plenty; rounded bellies and breasts engorged with milk. The Sheela Na Gig figure carries the gaunt look of death while gesturing wildly towards the birth canal. Some say that the figure represents an invitation to re-enter the birth canal with the full knowledge of death and through contemplating and embracing the fear of death, a person might be released from a lower consciousness. From time immemorial, human beings create symbols to remind ourselves that death is coming and that it is as necessary as it is imminent. It

might not be so tragic or so terrifying. The Sheela offers a Celtic challenge to put your nose, your face, your whole self into death just like you did when you were born.

I think the dogs are onto something.

July 2001

The whippoorwill is a North American bird living primarily in the eastern half of the country. The bird's name was coined in 1709 in imitation of its distinctive call. The whippoorwill is about 10 inches long, clothed in nature's best camo-line of spotted brown feathers. It has a wide mouth fringed with bristles, which aids the bird in snagging the flying insects it eats. During the day, the nocturnal bird usually sleeps on the ground or perches lengthwise on a log. They nest on the ground as well, laying two eggs in a surprisingly casual manner, utilizing whatever is available for a slapdash nest. A leaf or two will do.

The whippoorwill belongs to the goatsucker family, Caprimulgidae. The odd family name arises from folklore legend, which superstitiously accused the birds of milking the goats since they were seen flying around them at night. The birds, of course, were attracted to the goats because the goats attracted insects. Other folklore has the whippoorwill portending possible matrimonial outcomes for young women, turning frogs into moons and wearing the lady slipper blossom as a shoe. Its genus is *Caprimulgus vociferus*. The Latin *vocifer* is a root word which means "to lift one's voice." Other words associated with the root translate "to shout, yell, clamor, outcry." It seems that most people have heard of whippoorwills whether or not they have actually heard them in person. The birds have been cast leading roles in an endless array of songs, poems, carvings, paintings and other works of art for many hundreds of years. But, in my amateurish avian study over the last three, I can say without a doubt that I've never seen a less attractive bird. I mean, I find this bird butt-ugly, and this is the least of its offenses, as you will soon understand.

Three years ago in early summer, we had friends visiting from Woodstock, NY. Their visit coincided not only with one of the hottest and most humid weeks of June, but also with the mating ritual of the whippoorwill, which was being repeated nightly from a tree just outside their bedroom window. With the bird so close to the house, none of us had been sleeping well. They were polite for a couple of days and said nothing. But once the topic came up and the sun went down, there was no avoiding what was to come. For those of you who have never had the grave misfortune of camping beneath a whippoorwill in heat, I struggle to convey in words the

maddeningly repetitive, breathlessly unceasing holler of this bird. Perched on a branch only a stone's throw away, it clamored relentlessly in a volume designed to be heard for miles. Stones, by the way, were thrown, to no avail. I turned to my husband and queried, "Bottle rockets?" We all looked at each other. I couldn't believe what I had just suggested. It felt so barbaric and uncivilized. Of course, there was never any intention to harm the bird, we all agreed. We just wanted birdie to leave the yard so we could have some peace. There was an entire river valley at his disposal and he just had to stake out a tree right next to our house. We lived in the country now. Weren't we entitled to a different sort of territorial behavior, something more primal? Yeh! It was the bird threatening our sanity, right?

Right.

Four bottle rockets later, received without the slightest hesitation or hiccup from our unwanted guest, the bird raged on. Our brains were swollen, our ears were ringing, our laughter was fat with disbelief and stinking with sadism. I turned to my husband again. "Get the shotgun." His eyes grew wide. Of course, there was still no intention of causing physical harm to the bird but that didn't count scaring the shit out of it. Yes. A louder noise than the bird. Scare the shit out of the bird so that he'll just move along, claim another branch further from our property from which to declare his undying, psychotic love, right? Card-carrying pacifists, we sprung into deft military action. The husband went for the gun which was inherited from a long-dead grandfather and heretofore been used only for clay pigeons. Buzzy took 2-year-old Izzy into the house. I brought in the dog and turned out the lights. E.Z. kept a stealth watch from the porch, silently smoking his American Spirit. Suddenly it was as if we had declared war on an unwitting enemy. The stakes had been raised and we were all witnesses to each other's compliance. A death could unintentionally occur! We would all be accomplices. The whippoorwill was up in his tree doing what whippoorwills do. Meanwhile, on the ground, a human drama was on full throttle because of and unbeknownst to this bellowing bird. Never mind that we had plopped ourselves down in his mating arena.

The shotgun had two barrels. E.Z. and I plugged our ears. Buzzy watched from the upstairs window while distracting Izzy with a Walt Disney movie. The first barrel was fired up into the

August 2001

Shortly after moving into our house in the country, I found a secluded spot down along the river. The embankment drops off sharply and the river there does not pool but moves swiftly. Maples, birches and scrub brush mingle with the pines and cedars. In the midst of the trees is a small, oblong, sandy opening surrounded by tall grasses where it is soft to sit. I can watch wildlife going about its business and pretend I'm not noticed. In late May to early June, the honeysuckle bushes are in bloom and their smell is strong and sweet. The wind carries its fragrance in intoxicating waves along the river's edge and there is nothing to do but close the eyes and breathe it all in.

I visited there again one evening last week. I looked down at the sand I was sitting on and watched insects on the move. Beetles, ants, daddy-long-legs and black flies. The surrounding grasses bent over with the breeze. Between the trunks of trees, pieces of field and sky hung between them as if on laundry lines. I could see deer gathering across the prairie just outside the line of trees to the north. The river poured in front of me offering up that sound I've come to depend on - the one that makes me feel like going somewhere. I heard a loud splash upstream and watched the water for what might come floating by. There was nothing. I heard another, busier, splash; still nothing. All around me unseen creatures scurried on the forest floor and in the trees. Amoebic hoards of gnats hung like heavy, quivering fruits over the river. The martins flew slipshod between the trees and the river's surface, effortlessly snatching their witless dinner from the air. I focused my ears on birdsong. The evening was thick with it. I couldn't imagine how many species of birds I was in company with at that moment. I looked into the singing trees but could only spot a few with my eyes. Everywhere was life -- teeming -- all individuals on their particular missions and most of these a mystery to me. I suddenly became truly aware that my little hideaway was crowded. Very crowded and very busy.

I had romantic notions about solitude when I first moved to the country. Urban living had been so noisy, distracting and engaging. It was full of activity and options and people. I loved it. I didn't know if I would like living at the end of a dead end road on a river with acres of prairie and forest at my disposal but decisions had been made and we were off on the adventure. I admit

to having had flowery thoughts about how I might use "the open space to open into," imagining that my writing might be filled with a mystery and nuance that I had heretofore not had the experience to access. I would commune with nature on a daily basis. Now I would be *living country*, not just visiting. This, of course, is not the way it happened. The details are forthcoming. For now, suffice to say, I was blissful and awed for most of the first year, tortured and depressed for the second and as I near the end of the third year, I am finally climbing out of the "open space" I fell into. Some days I feel humbled, aware and energized. Other days I feel sad, angry and defeated. Things haven't changed that much.

Here's the summary. It's just as crowded and noisy in the country as it is in the city. Like my dad used to say, "Everywhere you go, there you are." Solitude opens the door to an unimaginable variety of strangers and most of them illicit fear or resistance initially. The romance I brought here is long dead, thank god, but I don't think I'm moving back to the city anytime soon. It's crowded in here - and I'm busy.

September 2001

Today it was all about the motorcycle. The red motorcycle. The fast, red motorcycle. I threw my resistance up and over the black seat, kicking down the foot pegs. We coasted down the driveway, gravel crunching beneath the tires as we turned onto the county road. I held defiantly onto the grips behind me, bracing my body against shifting gears. We left a morning argument stranded in the yard. Sometimes the conversation begins to hurt the conversation. Sometimes... we just have to stop talking.

The morning was fresh and the fields were pungent, dew clinging to each blade of grass and glistening on the back of every footslogging beetle. Beneath my blue helmet, in the lower anterior portion of each cerebral hemisphere, my olfactory lobe projections pulsed with activity. I closed my eyes and took it all in. Manure, pig shit, turkey shit, diesel fuel, road kill and traces of last night's skunk mixed with the sweetness of hay, the warm aroma of ripening corn, wheat or soybeans and fallow fields rife with late summer weeds and wildflowers. Somewhere beyond my vision a farmer was tending a burning pile with his rake. The engine purred. Or, was it me?

We were a red blur highlighting the bluff edges high above the mighty Mississippi on the Wisconsin side of the river. Instead of driving home a point in a tired debate, we silently pointed out egrets wading in the shallows or eagles and turkey vultures floating weightless overhead. Old faded barns stood like comfortable responses on a dependable landscape. A gray one surprised us with lines from a poem stenciled in white along its broad, weather-beaten body. Wind walking after the storm tracks with moonlight...

We were a red smear dragging through the narrow labyrinth of bumpy alphabet roads with small metal signs in black & white calling out the letters F, E, DD or CC like pop quizzes. It's easy to get lost on these roads and I imagine what they might look like in a crow's eye. I gave myself to every curve, leaning into them like soft, willing, sturdy shoulders. We slowed down only at the edges of towns -- Bay City, Maiden Rock, Stockholm -- and then sped away. Faster. Just go faster!

We were a hot red rush, plunging down into the cool valleys between the river bluffs. I felt a delicious chill as the temperature dropped. Prairie stretched out from the bases of steep, limestone cliffs on either side of the two-lane to the rivers' edge. Birds escaped from the gravel shoulders to the trees, while butterflies numbering in the hundreds peppered the grasses. The damp air was palpable. Wet earth is the sweetest, saddest, most inspiring smell I can think of, and I spent a moment hoping it would be the final fragrance lingering in my consciousness when I leave this world.

The pavement blurred beneath us like rushing, gray water. I stared into it. It seemed that I could drop a foot down into it. He braked hard and downshifted into the next turn. Without warning, fear leapt into my head like an animal into the road. What if some kid drives her four-wheeler up from the ditch into our path? What if a tractor is lumbering along at a fraction of our speed over the next hill? Trust takes on a new meaning at 100mph, especially if you are a passenger clinging to the very person you despised only hours before when you were sitting safely at home defending yourself against the enemy who has proven to be an ally. Things can change so quickly and I just want to go faster.

Plum City, Pepin, Alma. The sun was hanging lower in a pink sky as we slowed down on the outskirts of Nelson, Wisconsin, population 388. A few old guys were smoking cigarettes and drinking beer out of plastic cups while working over a makeshift grill cordoned off by an unpretentious rope. Quarter chicken, chips & a dinner roll all for \$4 to celebrate Nelson Days. 1 beer for a buck fifty, 7 beers for \$10. There were only handfuls of people sitting at picnic tables or leaning up against the city building, but it was early. Under the tent, a band called "Overland" would play in an hour or so, and the woman at the ticket table said they were really good. We watched them set up. All their microphones were duct-taped to the stands.

It was chilly after the sun set. We turned onto Hwy. 19 heading for home, and passed the bright yellow deer crossing caution sign. He put his free hand on my leg, giving the signal. I put my hands deep into his jacket pockets, leaning against him as the engine revved and we shot into the unpredictable darkness, bugs dying in our faces and on our bent knees.

November 2001

I have been having a difficult time collecting my thoughts or using language successfully since September 11. Hence, I have pushed our beloved editor to the brink waiting for me to deliver my essay this month. Finally, I came to one realization: that my artistic process is "in the meat grinder," as I heard myself say from stage at a fundraiser for the Red Cross just a few days ago. Since that night, I feel better knowing that perhaps I am doing something --- I am engaged in the act of patience.

Meanwhile, I try to pay attention.

I was walking west from the end of a stripped cornfield a couple of weeks ago near the end of the day. My dogs had taken off after a couple of does we had surprised when we came out of the woods into the clearing, so I slowed my pace to wait for them. The field lay before me like an enormous rec room with harvest gold shag carpeting that had seen better days. The sky was busy. A front was moving in and a strong, erratic wind stirred gray clouds of varying and intensifying shades into capricious swirls. Amidst all this activity, there was a sunset to stage. I stopped in the middle of this ravaged field to watch the show. Lavender, pink, orange, red, yellow, blue, blue-gray --- churning, shifting, blazing and burning out into darkness. I hadn't noticed that Rocky and Jack had returned and were holding vigil with me. I felt small and heavy, inspired and empty. Invisible and present. We went with the wind and the darkness for miles before seeing the lights of home through the trees.

That night, I dreamed again about the woman in the black dress. She was standing against a backdrop of fire and smoke, lifting her skirts under which hundreds of people huddled together looking out in my direction through the darkness with blank stares. I was stunned but I did not feel afraid.

Regularly, I go to my shelf of books, take one down and open it. This morning, I opened the Tao te Ching (translation, Stephen Mitchell) and this is what it said:

The unnamable is the eternally real.

Naming is the origin

of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations

arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding.

December 2001

I feel the cover closing. Every morning, when my alarm clock goes off at 5:00 AM I move brainlessly to the shower after another night of ungathered sleep. I either rouse after midnight every hour until 5:00, or awake sometime after 3:00 and cannot get back to sleep. I feel shapeless thoughts scraping across my subconscious, leaving me raw but without words. I turn on my side, I lay on my back, my stomach. *Where is my heart?* My irritation becomes a defeated anger, which lays crumpled on my brow. Sometimes I just get up and do something. Dishes. Laundry. I don't trust myself. I move stuff around the house into different positions or places. The dogs follow me, watch me. I think about my mother in a hospital bed, far away. I stare out the dark windows. Safety is a stupid idea. Winter is here but there is no snow on the ground. I am restless. I think about how much hate and greed there is in the world. I try to write but it doesn't matter. *Where is my heart?* People's optimism annoys me. Everyone pisses me off. I want to go away but I can't imagine where. I have lost interest in running the dogs in the mornings. I open the door and they run into the darkness with each other, chasing and playing, smelling the rich air. I don't go with them. I hold myself but I don't want to be touched. I drive to work in the dark. The dogs stare out the dark windows, watching me leave. I rub a stiff shoulder, stretch, take more aspirin. I work in the dark. I drive home in the dark. *I live inside a small, black box.* When I get home, I do and say the wrong things. The dogs run to greet me but I don't care. I feed them. I feed myself. The dogs watch me. When I look at them, I see anticipation. I look away.

November 17. *I'm on a raft.* By 1:30 AM, I am down river..... I am lying on my back listening to another layer of guitars assault the chorus. It feels so good. My body is light; my throat, thick and supple and spent. I have nothing left to say. Instruments nap around the room on the other side of the glass and soft reflections move across its surface. The lights overhead are creamy and yellow, buried in wood. My belly is warm with whiskey. Dope and cigarette smoke hangs in the air. The people I traveled here with are milling around or sitting and staring into *it....* gone and there.... all at once. We gather around the fire. The click of the green button, the whir of the 2-inch tape casting and reeling in, casting and reeling in, fishing for where we have been and where we have been taken. *Listen.* I close my eyes. I hear a chair scrape across the floor and soft voices and the click of the buttons and the hum of the tape and the room swells with sound.

3:30 AM. I am driving in the dark. I am driving home. *What does that mean?* My ears open and her music falls in. *i'm gonna wear this road like a scarf, let it sail out the window and leave a trail unraveling...* I hold onto the wheel. I go with her. I am going home. What does that mean? Where is my heart? 80mph, 85.... 90..... *Meteoroids are the smallest particles orbiting the sun and most are no larger than grains of sand.* My ears throb with music and my heart throbs in my ears. My mouth is full. *Meteoroids become visible to observers on Earth when they enter Earth's atmosphere. They become visible as a result of friction caused by air molecules slamming against the surface of the high-velocity particle.* Tiny lights rip through the box cover. They hit the horizon, skydivers soaked in gasoline set ablaze and dropped from invisible airplanes. They surf the edge of a black wave like luminescent fish and then plunge headlong, gasping, into the sand. They burst through the cover and burn their whole life up in a second. They give it all for a flash of glorious light.

Look. There is light inside the box. Lying on the hot hood of my car at 4:30 AM, my back propped against the windshield, the cool air gathering dew, the show in full swing -- a sky bursting with death, the indifferent field a steady, cool blue beneath it. I feel my heart beating lightly in my chest. The dogs are in the house, sleeping. I am watching the show. I am in the show. Utterly empty.... completely filled. Atoms to atoms, dust to dust.

*If the animal
coming towards us so surely
from another direction*

*had our kind of consciousness
he'd drag us around in his sway.
But his being*

*is infinite to him
incomprehensible, and without
a sense of his condition*

pure as his gaze.

And where we see the future

he sees everything

and himself in everything

healed and whole

forever.

R M Rilke

January 2002

The corner was in the periphery of my left eye. The edge itself was flush with my cheekbone. I could feel the depth of it hollow out behind my ear and expand, changing color and sound with the power subtlety has. If I turned, everything would shift and nothing would ever be the same. Soon I would forget how it had been before and I would carry on not necessarily noticing or needing to comment. Heavily, I surface with a word on my lips. *Reciprocity*. (Is that a political term?) I turn into the warmth and familiarity of the man in my bed. For years I have taken that for granted. Awareness arrives so unexpectedly sometimes. I watch him sleep. The dogs stretch, making small repeated circles on the blue sculptured carpet and plop down again with audible groans, their thin metal tags jingling.

recáíaprocáíáty (r ès' e-pròs' î-tê) *noun plural* recáíaprocáíáties *Abbr.* recipé

1. A reciprocal condition or relationship.

A mutual or cooperative interchange of favors or privileges, especially the exchange of rights or privileges of trade between nations.

One floor beneath us strings of lights, which lent such romance last night, appear pale, limp and impotent as morning arrives. Chairs stand away from a long table littered with the detritus of a grand communion. The stained tablecloth is barren, save some stray dishes, wine glasses and half-eaten cookies that missed collection by friends who would not go home before cleaning up. Crumpled paper and mangled ribbons crowd the sun-streaked floor in the living room. Gifts collect at the ends of the sofa, next to the leg of a chair or lay under the boughs of a shedding pine tree drenched in tinsel and lights and baubles. There are sweaters and jeans, chocolates, a camera, a coat, CDs, books and a stately, cobalt-blue Kitchen Aide mixer standing next to a bright stack of bathroom towels which lean out precariously from a plastic snowflake bag. On the coffee table, empty cups, a plate scraped clean of pie and whipping cream, and a tin of sweets still open. The logs have turned to ash in the fireplace, gray and still.

In an hour or two when I survey it all, I will feel emptied and filled, all at once. For now, I have sunk back beyond sleep, dropped down and rounded the corner, which had been in my periphery. You are standing there. You have a medium-sized box in your cupped hands and you offer it to me. I know there are candles inside which need to be lit and I open the lid. Inside is another box and inside that box, another and so it goes for a long time. I am patient now as each lid opens to reveal another box, and I trust that the candles will be there, however long this takes.

reáicipároácal (rî-sîp´re-kel) *adjective* *Abbr.* recip.

1. Concerning each of two or more persons or things.
2. Interchanged, given, or owed to each other.
3. Performed, experienced, or felt by both sides.

Interchangeable; complementary.

February 2002

The Midwest is enjoying a mild winter this year with record-breaking temperatures. I can barely get myself out the door with the garbage much less with the intention of a walk. It's confusing. I watch the birds busy at the feeder by the dining room window while I eat breakfast.

Woodpeckers, nuthatches and sparrows are the regulars. Just recently, I've seen blue jays and today, the shock of a cardinal which looked intensely red against the vestiges of snow. This weekend, my friend, who understands the nuances of birdsong, said that she heard the cardinals singing love songs. They are dreaming of eggs in February.

Following the paradox of weather and calendar, I ignore the summoning of spring and tunnel deeper into the cave. I fill my head with Edwidge Danticat, Dai Sijie, Ginsberg and Balzac. I read Willa Cather next to Eric Begosia, Joyce next to Jimenez. I slam politics down with a poetry chaser. I watch Hitchcock and Ritchie and then, crave *The Deerhunter* over and over. I become more aware of the involuntary functions of my body and my house; kidneys and radiators, heart and furnace. One day I experience elation as inexplicably as I feel flat and empty on another day. Everything makes sense. Nothing matters. The warm weather and sunshine feel so luxurious and in turn, so irritating. I finally open the Radiohead CD I bought months ago and have saved for some night when I can't sleep, like tonight. I turn it up loud and lay on the floor, arms outstretched, like a star.

I look overhead into the dark glass and imagine huge drifts pressing against the hips of my house from all sides, rocking me from side to side.

April 2002

It all hangs in the margins anyway, defines some edge I can't find the middle of. Trying to understand almost gets in the way. I've cried a lot now and even though it's just as confusing as it ever was, I feel better. I'm so glad you came to pick me up that night though. Thanks. I don't think I could have left if you hadn't come to get me. I felt so weak, atrophied in this deep part of myself, like I had all the will but there was such a disconnect ---- right ----- right, yeah ----- - no, I left a night early actually. I was so ashamed of myself, my inability to spend another night there, but I really was doing no one any good by then. I do love them but the whole thing is so sad I can't --- I mean, that morning when I woke up and looked around the room it was like, the walls are filled with books on God and natural healing and within these walls was no faith and no health ----- we become ----- what ----- yeah. I'd not eaten for days already. I can't eat when I go there. My throat seems to shut. So, I'm weak and I get so afraid I'm going to be like --- -- Fuck it. Or, or ----- no, let me ----- my doorways were too open, my windows without any kind of screens, especially for this trip. Everything just flew in and laid down and died. I don't know ----- you think I'm strong? I can't see that. I really can't. I'll try ----- I will.

Yes. You're right. I have to give myself --- . And thank you so much for feeding me. No --- I mean, the food. Seriously. Let me explain this ----- I can honestly say I've never had a chicken sandwich taste so good. Everything about it --- the olive oil and rosemary bread, the mayonnaise mixing with that stone-ground sweet mustard, the lettuce ----- it was just a sandwich, I know, but it was what it meant to be eating it, as if I had the intention of being here another --- yeah. I know. I wonder if I ever had intention or if it was all just rebellion ----- . I still live that way. I think I just resist because I'm so used to ----- Yeah ---- but that's just the thing. I've already forgiven them all of it. It doesn't matter anymore. I know, but even the guns and the mentality behind ----- It doesn't matter. That's why it sucked to not be able to hold on to my shit for more than a few days ----- yeah, I know there are limits to wha ----- exactly. I mean, as long as we don't talk about anything that matters ----- the cult dogma? Not anymore. I'll challenge a statement sometimes but no, actually, no ----- you ----- you ----- yeah, no shit. And it's so shocking when I don't see them often ----- well, yeah, because it keeps anything from being real at all and then when I go, when I am there in their world ----- yup ----- and I

wish they would just let me pull up the shades. Even just that. Or the dishes, for that matter -----
----- yes and often he wears one strapped to his body all night long ----- yeah, it's loaded!
How much fear does it take to make that your routine? ----- it's ----- yeah----- and
he doesn't sleep until dawn, either. Jesus. I don't ----- what could I do -----?

Yeah, well, here's my favorite mome ----- yes. YeSSS! That was a really good bottle of wine
and didn't we have another one ----- did we finish it? Shit! We did, didn't we? When did I
finally ----- I know, suddenly I just had to be outside. I had to feel small and insignificant in a
bigger way, if you know what I mean ----- right, like get away from the stink of my own shit.
RIGHT ----- smell the shit of the world! Those girls ----- could you believe how they -----
yeah, and it was like they were glow-in-the-dark cows. What kind? Are they Guernseys or
Jerseys? A cow's cow, I know. The polka dot milk cows. My god, how many were there? -----
-- I know, and I was making that low hum and it was like I was saying something to them that I
didn't even understand but they did like it was some kind of distress call or bovine wail that they
could hear me making even though I didn't think that was what I was doing at all. I was just
drunk. But ----- yes ----- uh-huh --- and the stars, and the whole scene was blue, all
shades of blue and blue-gray on the rolling hills and navy on the fence rails and blue-black on the
road, you and I were blue. They just rallied around us, around me. I mean, cows, for chrissakes!
They made a circle around me and my low hum. They were so earnest. They were so big and I
felt so little and so important at the same time, so attended to. I've taken them for granted -----
like the telephone poles trimming the highway.

I just couldn't believe it when suddenly they were licking my arms. My god, what was that all
about? It was so bizarre and ----- I know, their tongues were as long as my freaking arms. It
felt so good, it was ----- yeah ----- I wondered if they would ----- seemed like they would
have licked me until I was gone ----- but what really happened was that they licked me until I
came back ----- I know ----- there are other pastures. I liked being in yours ----- and kiss
those buxom girls for me, okay?

May 2002

It's been a strange month. The weather has been wreaking havoc on any contiguous order. Everything has arrived in freezing pieces and left in smoking shreds and then returned as color or scent. Offered and denied. Promised and broken. Here and gone. Laughing and cursing. Is. Is not. So, in honor of my friend Juliet, who bravely delivered poems in public last week directly (and virtually untouched) from her journal, I am going to follow her lead. I am offering pieces and shreds. Take what you want. Leave the rest. Send me yours.

Stenciled on a barn along Hwy 19 heading east to Redwing, MN

"Green lit limbs fan glances --

shirtless contours in the downpour --

Ancestors folded into valleys

Honey in the burning hive."

I want an organic chicken. Maybe tomorrow.

It's 92 degrees today. Yesterday it was 42 degrees.

FAMILY

FAMISHED

FAMOUS

How I perceived her at 16, at 23, at 35 is not my perception of her now. Perception moves with time and place and circumstance. When I think of her then, I am remembering her with the consciousness of now. Wouldn't this place memory eternally in the present?

Today, it's 29 degrees. What the fuck?

The Aborigines believe that Divine Oneness created the first female and then the world was sung into existence. Rilke said that song was existence.

More snow. A lot of snow. What day is it?

I felt dumbstruck, struck dumb, struck down. Struck. /kurtS/ Curtsy? (beagoodgirl) Struck. Stuck. Stunted. Runted. Shunned. Gunned-down again.

What if the things we attempt, are our best things?

I want to learn a bunch of cowboy songs.

Work is work.

It's not my turn to be God today.

DEVOID

DEVOTION

DEVOUR

This stupid ass band. 1234, 1234, 1234, 1234.

Be the TeeVee.

Rabbit ears -- the whole get up.

More snow. Seriously. Eight inches.

On either side of me each Asian woman peed and spoke to each other in their language. I didn't understand. But I know that women all over the world pee and converse. Women do that. All over the world.

...and then there are all the books and music and errant thoughts.

A few ravens made a racket across the water, fighting between the trees. Suddenly I wrote poems, furiously unwritten on (no) paper. As I wrote them, I read them and as I read them, they disappeared.

"don't worry please please how many times do I have to say it

there's no way not to be who you are and where." Ikkyu

June 2002

A few weeks ago Patty and I walked up the steps of the AG Partners store opening the door to stacks of long, low, surprisingly loud cardboard boxes. Obviously, more people had this idea than just the two of us, but what do I know? I'm just a stupid city girl. Three of the boxes were ours. We trudged out the door with them and then proceeded to the loading dock where a man loaded three 50 lb. bags of chick starter in the trunk. The garage was ready; heat lamps strung on a ladder hung over a casual, circular fence made out of chicken wire. Newspaper was laid, little trays were waiting for feed and the water jars were full. We loaded the peeping chicks in handfuls from the box to the pen and filled the feed trays. The chicks started eating and drinking right away. Approx. 138 in all; 120 broilers and 18 layers. Over the next few days, we lost four of them. The rest have since been moved to the barn now that they are bigger and it is warmer at night. They are 3 or 4 times as big as the day we picked them up. They look like they're half plucked already and their asses are bright pink. It would be hard to get attached to them. All they do is eat, shit and cheep. They sleep too, although it's tough to catch them at it. The broilers will be butchered mid to late July. I'll be writing about that later, I'm sure. The layers, who are growing at a much slower rate than the broilers, will eventually mingle with the other grown hens and begin producing eggs. Sounds like food to me.

*

I've been working on the garden for two weeks. Turning the soil over. Adding rocks and mulch. Identifying the little perennials that are returning for another year. I got starter plants for hot peppers, sweet peppers and tomatoes. Last year, we had 8-foot tomato plants. I'm not kidding. This year, I swear, I'm going to learn how to can. If I give from my larder for Christmas gifts, they'll go with a don't hold me responsible disclaimer in regards to deadly bacteria floating tastelessly beneath Ball jar lids.

And this year, I just poured seeds into the dirt; cilantro, bush beans, two kinds of basil, lettuces, zinnias, poppies, nasturtiums. I've never trusted seeds. I don't ever think they'll show up as plants. It reminds me of planning a party and worrying that no one will come. But this morning,

mere days after introducing these tiny improbables to the soil, I checked the empty expanses of dirt and there are little green shoots everywhere. Wow. It confirms my suspicion that you don't need faith.

*

Yesterday morning I came down from my studio and there was a little brown bird in my kitchen, flying desperately against the windowpane. When it saw me, it flew frantically into the dining room and started to flail against those windows. I backed out of the kitchen into the hallway and slipped out the door, removing the screen from the dining room window and raising the window as high as it would go. I was standing in the doorway when it returned from another failed attempt to escape in the kitchen, landing on a dining room chair. It was so odd to see this little brown bird gripping the chair back in my dining room, cocking its head to look at me, and then dipping successfully out the open window. Meanwhile, I've trapped three mice in the last 24 hours. A sadder look.... those still, bead-black eyes which barely had time to register the startled look before their little necks snapped. I hope they die that fast.

*

Patty got two goats, Libby and Lucy, at the animal swap at the Cannon Valley Fair Grounds. I stopped by to see them and they put on a show for me. They danced on the dog house, the pallets, the logs. They kept looking at me to be sure I was watching. Then, Lucy performed this little dig-horns-into-the-dirt aggression thing. First, one horn to the left, then the other to the right, feet crossing and uncrossing. Libby posed against the fence, feigning a wallflower, I think. She's the shy one. The finale was a munching grass duet.

I'm jealous. I want goats. I'm planning my new pole barn as I write this.

*

The whippoorwills have returned. (*please consult the July 2001 rus essay for psycho bird history lesson*) No one sleeps.

*

Final entry. Dumb girl story. So I fire up the old John Deere lawn tractor (circa '74) and I mow the furthest section of the yard and then stop at the shed to put more gas in, because I think I'm low and I don't want to run out far away from the gas can. I fumble with the gas nozzle and splash gas on my legs and finally pour it in the tank until I can see it nearing the top. I checked. I make the short drive up the hill behind the house and the mower slowly loses power and then dies. I lift the hood to look for broken hoses or shredded belts. The latter had already happened the previous week on the mower deck, and I was supremely proud of having identified the problem and ordered the proper belt from the implement store. Okay, so I couldn't figure out how to put it on but I tried until I was ready to roll the damn thing into the path of an oncoming gravel truck. Anyway, I tried starting the tractor. It won't turn over but the amps are there so it's not the battery. I pull the connector off the spark plug and it looks oily. When I put it back on, it won't even turn over. I abandon the mowing, which is way overdue already, and spend the rest of the day in the garden.

Many days pass. Finally, *He* has time to look at it. My testosterone level is low. It looks like a coil and condenser problem, *He* says. I order parts. They arrive and *He* finally has time to put the new parts in. It turns out to be something different from what *He* thought, but it's related. The mower won't start and *He's* given it *His* allotted time. I call the implement store. They come all the way from town to pick up the mower and figure the problem out. I don't care how much it costs. The dandelions stems are two feet high. Gary, from the store, calls me way too soon for complicated electrical issues.

I hear the tone in his voice. "We figured out what's wrong with your mower."

I say, trying to grease my defensiveness, "I bet it's something stupid, right?"

"Right," he says. I flinch. I wince. "It's out of gas."

"NO!" I protest vehemently, telling him how I stopped and filled the tank from the heavy, red, five-gallon gas can and, YES, I know where to put the gas in and no, it didn't seem to need that much but it was and yes, I looked in the tank and saw that it was topped off and perhaps he should look to see if there is a hole in the tank, please. He says he'll call me back. He does. There's no hole.

I say, "Gary, I swear, I put quite a bit of gas...this is the kind of story that makes men think ... " oh fucking forget it.

July 2002

The sun was shining. The day was in motion. People, cars, buildings, pavement, sidewalks, signs, windows, paint, metal, wood, glass. Sounds piling up on each other; shoes connecting with concrete and blacktop, conversation, shouting, tires on pavement, engines running, mufflers muffling, gas gurgling from pumps, condensation dripping from exhaust pipes, wind blowing, the rustling of leaves on creaking boughs, all kinds of doors opening and closing, airplanes flying over, birds chirping and singing, squirrels chattering, music pouring from open doorways and open car windows, the rustle of clothing, fingers sifting through hair, the click of a lighter and the soft fffft of the cigarette being lit. I sat at the bright red stop sign. My car stereo was turned up loud but I thought I heard breathing. That's why I turned my head.

It was all in the muscle, the moment, a movement. Time suspended itself just in front of me and snapped its fingers, calling up my attention. I watched the flex of his calves - his green shorts, shirt, hat - all green - olive oil green - mustard cloud green - army green - the green of my glasses frames - the green of cedar boughs in winter. His teeth were perfect, white, clenched. They strained against his lips, escaping through the grimace. I tensed my jaw and felt my muscles contract. He pumped his legs furiously, traffic zipping by him, in front of him, passing him from the other direction, and in all his pointed ferocity, through all the tensed focus and flex and breath, our eyes met. Through the windshield of my car, my car, my car, so many cars, [my car only one of so many], at that moment he chose to look at me, into my eyes and at that moment I looked into his. I will most likely never see him again or meet him but we saw each other. It means little. It means nothing. It means whatever I want it to mean. It's not about meaning. It happened, and that is all. That it happened at all is meaningful. Amid all the distraction, the cacophony of a busy intersection, the buzz of people and their intentions, we hesitated and we looked in the same place at the same time and at the moment, my heart quivered, a visceral acknowledgment of a completed connection.

All this in a droplet of time. A tick with no tock. Happening; then, over. Done. That's how long it takes to inhale a first breath or exhale a final one. It's how long it takes to utter a word you cannot retrieve, and how long it takes for that word to dive into an ear and burrow like a fanatical

mole into a consciousness that will record it, even as it loses its shape, becoming letterless and potent. That's how long it takes for existence to open wide and be understood, altering the shape and color and sound of things, and then slam shut, to be forgotten until another time when it arrives only to be forgotten again.

September 2002

Thirty-one days in a row since returning from the East Coast, I have left my house at dawn and walked down to the flood plain, the lower sprawl of young prairie. There, I stand and look due east towards the horizon where the tree line is a convergence of two separate forests. I stand and wait for the sky to take on the light of day. My dogs chase through the tall grasses and emerge with clusters of burrs clinging to their coats; tenacious beginnings hitching a ride to another piece of ground.

That first night, I lay in my bed and watched moonlight traverse the edges of my south facing window until the first bird sang. It was like watching time. It was agony. Images filled and emptied the window panes. A wall of gray water rose up in front of me when the sky grew light. I couldn't see anything anymore.

Some friends came over four days later and knew just what to do. They removed the yellowed shades from the bedroom windows, washed the walls and ceiling, applied fresh paint and ripped up the dingy, sculptured-blue carpet, revealing a shy, pale wooden floor. I stayed downstairs and did things I can't remember. They moved my furniture around and put my bed on the other wall, the east wall, under the window. The room smelled of burned sage. That night, I slept for what felt like the first time in a long time. In the morning, I crept downstairs to the basement where they had taken his dresser, opened the second drawer from the bottom and buried my face in his few remaining tee shirts. Then, I walked to the prairie. The pink, lavender and gray sky was pouring into the horizon as if it were a drain. I watched the dogs follow invisible trails, their determined noses to the ground.

I emptied the bathroom wastebasket on day eleven. I tied up the white plastic bag and found the remnants of his last trim, which had escaped the bag and collected on the bottom. I gathered some of it and I sprinkled it into the palm of my hand. I felt a strange panic rising. I would never have his hair in my wastebasket again. I decided to put the tiny, dark haystack on the top glass shelf of the medicine cabinet, thinking I would get a small envelope later. That night, I saw condoms laying quietly in my nightstand when I opened the drawer looking for a bookmark. I

shut the window against the rain at 2:30 AM and turned out the light, tossing my book onto the floor. The next morning the dogs and I walked through dense fog to the prairie and the horizon was gone.

On day 14, the phone rang. The water heater had broken down. I had been watching a movie at 2:00 in the afternoon. I couldn't stop crying. He didn't hang up. We sat together connected by a wire across a distance we had never occupied.

I lost track of the days. I hadn't been able to run for weeks. One morning, I started. It was curious to feel my thighs flexing, feel my body moving through the heavy air, feel the air moving in and out of my lungs. I loved the sound of my shoes connecting with the ground. She's a runner too. He had told me that once and I wondered why my face got hot when he said it. And then my thighs were pressing against his thighs but his thighs were pressing against her thighs and then I heard this wail and I was turning circles in the prairie. The dogs had run ahead but they came rushing back to me and made urgent circles around my circles, and seemed intent on helping me find what I was looking for.

39 days. I've almost finished using the tube of toothpaste up and then I'll buy a new one for myself. He didn't even take his own pillows. I just bought more coffee. It lasts a lot longer now and I don't have to buy the quart size of half and half. The pint size will do. I want him to come get his shit out of my basement. I miss him. I found his sock in my underwear drawer, slid my hand into it slowly, pulled it up past my elbow. I threw that bar of Ivory soap from the shower out the bathroom window and watched it bounce into the grass even though the smell stayed on my fingers. I watched couples walk in and out of stores and restaurants. I like sleeping in new sheets. There are so many photographs stacked in boxes upstairs and it makes me feel sick. I've been lonely for so long. I stand in front of the bedroom mirror every morning, naked. I look beautiful and sometimes I look as if someone has just called my name. The State Fair is almost over. I didn't go. The new water heater is in. He looked so good in my rear view mirror on Tuesday. The pump house broke down. The John Deere lawn tractor won't start and I know the battery is good. I wonder what kind of noises she makes in bed and if he ignores her yet, while

he reads the Sunday paper. I'm out of orange juice, and tonight there will be Johnny Cash and wine and risotto and chocolate and people filling my house up with conversation.

There is no fog this morning. The blue stem is tall and going gray as summer wanes. The dogs race through it and the dew scatters and they emerge wet and panting from the fields. The prairie won't remember we were here.

October 2002

A few snapshots.

Dew highlights everything on the prairie. The sun rises to my left as I walk the gravel road to the river each morning with the dogs and when I look into the grasses, I see tiny spider webs in numbers I cannot comprehend. One day I stopped to see if I could count how many there were in, say, one square foot. On average, it looked like three. I'm just not interested in doing the math but if there are three spiders building webs in every square foot of every field in America --- what does that mean, exactly? How does that affect the shape and definition of my world? It's too overwhelming, really. When I get home, I count the spider webs in the dining room only. Seven. I feel so outnumbered and misunderstood in my own house.

The soybeans have gone that stunning gold color I wait for all summer. Soon they will be harvested, but until then, the bold yellow leaves press up proud against blue or grey skies in the most spectacular way. Two colors. Two colors, dammit, sharing a square. When I drive or walk by those expansive treeless fields of golden soybeans rolling out to blue or gray horizon, I feel the deepest joy. Nothing else seems to matter anymore.

Last month's personal tragedy blotted out the mentioning of the new family member. We lost one, we gained one. The one we gained was a 4 lb., 10 week old Jack Russell terrier. (His daddy, Jack, lives over the hill from us and had everything to do with my interest in him.) He'd been staring at us from the confines of a Polaroid on the dashboard for two weeks as we tromped around the east coast. We struggled to name him. Days after he came home with us, he ran for a mile on his 3-inch legs and was ready for more. Rocky and Jack were interested in him and then bored and then pissed but now, everyone is settled in. Last weekend, he trotted up from the basement steps with a mouse in his jaws. First blood. He seemed to know just what to do. We now offer King-sized, Regular and Fun-sized canines. Romeo has joined the pack.

One morning this weekend on the daily constitutional, I flushed out a bird whose tail feathers flashed lemon yellow, Caribbean blue and lavender? What the hell? While I squinted into the

tree branches to find this bird, a huge Great Blue heron emerged from some grasses across the river, stumbled clumsily for a few steps and then lofted elegantly into the air. I watched him disappear before returning my attention to the tree where I saw the exotic bird find perch. Finally, I identified him with his striped gray and white back turned obliquely to me, his curved beak and round head tucked into his chest, fluffing his feathers. Parakeet. Yes. Yes, indeed. And how will he survive the winter, this escapee from domesticity? My friend Gail thinks I should hang a cage out there to see if he'll fly into it. Maybe he'd rather freeze.

November 2002

This month I lean back for some support. I reach back to October of 2001. I am grateful to find this, from the Tao te Ching, which I will give you again because what it gives me tonight feels like more synchronicity than I can take in OR that I am simply, endlessly, repeating myself.

The unnamable is the eternally real.

Naming is the origin

of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations

arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding.

Last year at this time I stood under the same churning, autumnal skies in fields either ripe with harvest or recently gathered. My world has turned gray again. Leaves sucked from tree branches are spit onto the ground where they shake off and spin and pile up against whatever buttresses they tumble into. They don't care where they die. The temperatures drop at night and the sun struggles to make an appearance during the day. Hornets stumble and drag, stupefied, like

drunkards heading towards a rest they will never find. It's all happening again. Some things have changed since last year. I have lost a husband and gained a dog. I have lost one drummer and gained another. I have taken on grief like rude, imposing water in a capsizing boat and remain afloat. I have lost my mind but am plumbing my heart. I love my daughters with the same ferocity I had last October and all the Octobers preceding it since 1986. I endure many broken things now that feel like necessities; oven, water heater, pump house, bathroom plumbing, ceilings, kitchen sink, tractor, boiler, computer and as of today, car. I can only fix one thing at a time and some things just can't be fixed. I am reminded that love can be imprisonment and love can be rescue.

Priorities are rearranging daily and sometimes from one moment to the next. Flexibility has taken on new meaning. So have the margins. So has the difference between compromised and compromise although the latter seems much more elusive than the former. I'm working on it. And I believe I have never cried this much in all the previous years added together to date. It's incredible. It's almost interesting but it's far from unique. My dictionary is under re-write and edit. Many of the definitions have returned to questions. It's both a relief and an imposition. And so I'm back where it all starts and where it all ends. In the dark. Where the unnamable takes on weight and mystery only when desire loses ego and falls through despair to return to understanding. Or at least that's what Lao Tsu said and how I hear it. The brevity and repetitive nature of this distillation keeps humans reproducing, I guess. Someone is bound to get it right. Or a savior will be born. Or, perhaps this is just what we humans do. Dogs obsessively seek out the most fetid piles of death and excrement they can find and roll in it making it, in their efforts, perfume - attraction - adornment. Aren't we similarly compelled to scent up and make a scene.

Witness my feeble attempt to put any of this into words and watch me chase my tail. Or write me.

January 2003

The Holidays. The Hollow Daze. Whether you subscribe to it or not. For weeks prior in conversations both intimate and passing, there are audible sighs after the knowing smirks, then, a sideways stare; a brief, forlorn glance at the oft-unmet desire to be moved by something. We all want to feel inspired. We inventory the year behind us and imagine the year ahead. We hope for the best. I don't really know what that means --- but today I just want to say thank you.

goodwill or **good will** n 1. A kind or friendly attitude; benevolence. 2. Cheerful acquiescence or willingness.

The word goodwill is found in the **American Heritage College Dictionary** (third edition) wedged between *goodwife* (the female head of a household) and *Goodwin Sands* (a stretch of dangerous shoals in the Strait of Dover off the SE coast of England). Given the eventful circumstances in my life over the last five months, I find the stacking order tragi-hilariously synchronistic. What a sandwich! It seems that nothing is without significance lately. Perhaps nothing is ever without significance.

Since the end of July, I have been the recipient of more goodwill than I thought was possible. What I have found is that if you ask for help, help arrives. In fact, even if you don't ask for it, it arrives anyway. It has come in so many ways, shapes, faces and sizes. Goodwill has been a neighbor I barely know offering to help with my dogs for weeks on end. It's a myriad of big guys in stained coveralls showing up at all hours of the day and night to assist me with a tantrum house in another fit of rage. It has rung over phone lines, by cyber highway and through the Postmaster General's stubby fingers. It has drawn out my laughter when I didn't think I remembered how and plotted great revenge schemes. It has cruised in on wheels delivering copper pipe and fiberboard and sheet rock and wiring and fixtures. It has hauled away so much garbage in creaking truck beds and economy wagons and all without judgment. It has been there in the middle of the night or at the break of day. It has forgiven my lack of attention or late arrival or not showing up at all. It has even forgiven my inevitably morose self-absorption. It has left dinner in my refrigerator when I least expected it and needed it most. Indeed, goodwill has

poured cocktails and washed dishes, painted walls and ceilings and moved furniture around, leaving a fresh perspective. It has slept with its arms around me all night and it has been there via shoulders and ears never seeming weary even if they were. It has seen the good in me when I'd lost sight of it altogether. Sometimes, goodwill has simply been that look of recognition, eliminating the need for explanation.

As I lean back, looking forward, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the way people show up from the inner circle to the outermost periphery of one little life. While the pain continues, I feel inspired and deeply loved. In the end, I think each of us are the sum total of what we have lost and how we live without it. There is no escaping it. It's what separates us and brings us together, over and over again.

You all know who you are. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Happy New Year.

Here we go again!

February 2003

I am an invisible eyeball, floating through my little world. I watch people pass me on the sidewalk, in cars, down hallways, crossing parking lots, standing in movie theater ticket lines. They don't see me. I watch people in bathrooms washing their hands, gazing into mirrors, touching their hair, applying lipstick. I'm not there. I watch people in restaurants and coffee shops sitting with friends, lovers, co-workers, family members. They are young and old and they don't notice me. They focus on each other and they talk about things. I watch their mouths move and their eyes dart like fish. I watch their hands address utensils and cups, plates of food and creamers and pink sugar packets. They shift in their seats, cross and uncross their legs and sometimes they lean across the space of table between them. I hear the hum of conversation, the buzz of information. I hear some of the words, but not the whole story. They are not talking to me.

I am alone.

I am standing on the prairie in the dark. Stars persist above me and the moon is just old enough to light the tips of the tall grasses. The dogs disappear quickly into them seeming to vanish, utterly. It is very cold. There are no clouds. There is no wind. Silence drags through me like a ghost catching its vapor on my body parts. A weight bears down from the stillness, a crush and release into which I almost swoon. Language leaves, letter by letter, a flock of startled birds escaping. The prairie holds its breath. I am not afraid. I am not lonely. I am not, for all I know. I am weightless sight. I am vantage point. I am view from here, unsure of where here is. I extend my arm, hand in front of me as if to grab hold of the third dimension from which I seem to have slipped, fallen, crashed upright and unmoved, and not where I was. Suddenly I am unafraid of death. Sound snaps its fingers. The grasses part. The return of my panting dogs from far afield puts me among others again at least for awhile. Ever on watch, Rocky surveys the field. Romeo looks at me, cocking his head as if waiting for an answer. Jack leans hard against my leg which is, after all, sprung perpendicular to what I call the ground, and we all drift somewhere on the continuum between midnight and the next day.

March 2003

Lyle told me he could hear different tones emitted by different stars on the stillest, coldest winter nights. He said he could tell which notes came from which stars. He couldn't hear them all the time, just winter nights....

- The Meadow /James Galvin

Desire and the dead of winter.

Books litter the floor around my bed. Poetry, essays, fiction. Dillard, Selzer, Dostoyevsky, Messud, Hooks, Woolf, Barrett . Gilbert, Williams, Ikkyu, Millay, Lorca. There are notebooks, lined and unlined, medium to large. Pens on the nightstand. Words have been scratched in them, pages ripped out, old grocery lists lie atop lyrics atop email addresses between films to see and more book lists and notes and phone messages and letters started but not finished. I don't feel as if I'm reading or writing. CDs are stacked and strewn near a portable stereo I always forget to turn off. An orchid in full bloom on my dresser, a flowering succulent nearby is not doing so well. A painting of a white house on dense white paper. A painting of a man embracing a woman forcefully from behind. They are naked and she seems uncertain. A pair of murdered butterflies pressed into cotton beneath glass. The other walls are mostly bare, a few nail holes. Sunlight fills the room. Empties. Blue moonlight replaces it. I try to sleep eventually. It is very, very cold outside. The window panes are frosted. I wonder about love. I wonder what knowledge really means. I want to hear something.

The night is long. My bed feels secure but vast. I dream. Mostly I don't remember but lately I was kissed just off the corner of my lips, two of my fingers were drawn into a warm mouth, I spooned with an unknown male companion and we drifted weightless and naked through the air of a darkened room that felt like fur against my skin. Everything seems tentative but not unresponsive. 2:17 am. I rouse, toss and finally pick up another book. Every sentence is too much to bear in the middle of the night as my story is replaced with other people and other rooms and other desires. It's too easy and never easy. The next time I wake the light is glaring

and my glasses are askew and my neck is impossibly wrenched. 4:03 am. The stars quiver at my windowpane headboard.

Turtleneck, overalls, socks, hat, hooded sweatshirt, down jacket, tube scarf, mittens, boots. The air hits my lungs, a sucker punch. It hurts but I'll get used to it. The crunch of snow is so loud I feel the urge to tip-toe. There is not a hint of wind only the fog of my breath escaping through my scarf. It must be 15 degrees below zero. Once on the prairie, I look overhead. The air almost shimmers. I wait. Goddammit. The stars aren't singing.

April 2003

I'm at such a loss for words this month and I guess it's my latest excuse for missing my column deadline. Every time I sit down at this computer to have a go at it, I feel as if I can't say enough and I can't begin. Every attempt is a wadded up piece of paper tossed in my trash can like a ruined relationship. Words have never seemed more necessary and less able to convey any meaning or offer any real explanation.

While bombs are dropping on Baghdad and our government's imperialistic intentions become reality, spring is arriving in the Midwest. I stood out in a field far beyond the borders of my property last Saturday with the dogs. It was in the 30's and a light wind was pushing clouds aside to reveal blue sky and the sun rising fast on the eastern horizon which would soon begin melting Thursday's spring snow. I looked around me. The sobs began in constricted bursts soon becoming long vocal wails. Why me, safe in this breathtaking field this morning with blood on my citizen hands? I felt drowned in despair, feckless and furious and - run down by beauty. Beauty as a semi-trailer truck barreling down a hill with no brakes. Beauty advancing with full fire power on my national shame. There was no stopping it. Any of it. The cruelty of humanity kidnapped by the ever present landscape in which these unspeakable acts prevail. The mark and the erasure.

Seemingly disparate thoughts zig-zagged like dogs scattered on numerous rabbit trails. I rested on my knees in the snow staring at my shadow. The dogs gathered around me alerted by my body position and my weeping. They looked confused and tried to distract me with sticks, took turns licking my face, pushed against my body. Finally Rocky just stood there next to me, looking into the distance. The word love came to mind but it seemed abrogated and limp and I hated it. Two soft consonants and two vowels, one short and one silent. Nothing sharp or insistent about it, the genderless el-oh-vee-ee LOVE which is tossed about so casually, spoken and scribed with little thought, really, on a daily basis. Love; the word a scab encrusted on the unfathomable wound. Love - the idea, the expectation, the premise, the question to which all answers are true. Is love obsession? Is love selfless? Is it surrender? Is it love that opens? Shuts? Does love make us stand up and is it love that brings us to our knees? Yes and yes and no and

yes and no and no and no and yes. It's endless. Love of country grants permission, justification and especially honor in acts of war and aggression. And it is the same word that sends people into the streets protesting it. Gunned down by love. Healed by love. It's all about application and in whose hands the brush is captive. To what and whom is one devoted and to what lengths will one go to prove it?

This morning as I walked through the woods it looked as if some of the bigger pine trees had been shot and were bleeding from their trunks near the clearing. Red, orange, pink ... green? And then, the little broken plastic gel casings on the ground everywhere - splat balls. I'd been seeing bunkers and blinds crop up all over the woods for weeks. First they looked like sculpture but now I can see that the forest of my refuge for the last five years has become someone else's simulated war zone. The family who built the massive house last summer which imposed itself on the landscape like a growling tank, knocking trees over, aiming at the river - they have a couple kids. My new neighbors. The ones who haven't picked up any of the left-over construction debris since moving in before Christmas. The ones who race by my driveway too fast just missing my dogs in their Ford Explorer. The ones who never wave. The ones who'll give me another chance to figure out what love means.

July 2003

My mother left this world on Ascension Sunday, June 8, 2003 and was put to rest high in a marble crypt, 20 feet over my head. While the minister recited the Liturgy for the Dead, I looked up and realized that without a ladder, I would not be able to trace her nameplate with my finger or press my cheek against the recessed letters asleep in cool stone. I had kissed her cool forehead the day before; one last agonizing kiss before the cover was closed forever on the body I came from, clung to, yearned for, ran from, held, pushed away, waited for, embraced, and finally released. She alone knew me before I ever breathed.

After the ceremony and the formal gathering which ended when the rain finally came, a handful of us remained and the wake began. We drank too much wine and sang my mother's Irish spirit into the humid air heavy with the scent of magnolia from a low-slung South'ren porch. The cows gathered at the fence across the road. We sang the old hymns, the ones she had sung, a cappella, in full harmony - the ones that are tired and worn and scrawled from the halls of grief and despair, love and longing. Were You There, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Amazing Grace, Farther Along. The songs she gave all her children and grandchildren hung from the branches, fenceposts, telephone wires and nestled into the damp grasses. Her voice writhed in our throats and leapt into the dark night already humming with translucent wings and tiny anxious legs.

I took my children to the ocean. Waterwatersaltwaterwater. Uterinemotherwater from which life forms crawled, gasping to understand air and land and make the necessary adjustments. We ran down the long beach at low tide and crashed into the water, let it chase us, were caught up in the undertow, thrown onto our knees fighting and laughing all the way. The last morning on Tybee Island I sat quietly against the dunes watching the tide come in while the sun reached into low-lying clouds smearing pink with purple and gray. Suddenly I could feel my mother's death detonate within me like a bomb in deep water. The surface remained calm but below, everything flew and tumbled, rolled and shifted as the blast displaced the floor of my ocean forever. Things were no longer where they had been and other things that were buried became visible and bobbing in the aftermath like her hands did as she reached for me the last time I saw her. Wreckage slams into treasure, attracted and opposed, frantic and confused. I can feel a

symphony running me down like a tsunami wave. But it's time to go back to the hotel. We have to get in the car. We have to eat breakfast, pay our bill and drive and stop for gas and drive and drive and I guess I'll just have to carry that heaving, unruly water inside me all the way home.

We drove along meadows which gave way to rolling hills and skylines mocking bluffs. Mom is dead. Buildings cast shadows on fields of soy and corn, and fallow fields spiced with persistent prairie flowers and sexy weeds stretched their bellies beneath shy foothills. My mother died. Foothills pressed into mountains and mountains plunged, helpless, into valleys where rivers curled their silvery tails. My mom isn't alive anymore. Off the interstates, the blue, red, yellow, white and black highways drove deep into the familiar unknown. Earnest cafŽ owners boasting World Famous Burgers and Pies, neat and tidy next to run down and junked up, dead truck yards alongside graveyards, faded lawn decor behind crisp white fences, sidewalks cluttered with kids, ma & pa motels bragging continental breakfasts and HBO. Mom is gone. The pink curtain in my bedroom window billows. The refrigerator hums. I wash the dishes. Mom died. The words clattering in my mouth; so clumsy and new.

My mother is dead. Life will never be the same but we will live it, all the same.

Two mornings ago I was running along the river with the dogs. They sprinted far down the dirt road and disappeared into the honeysuckle. When they emerged, they had broken into a full run and it looked as if they had found another dog in the weeds, a tan dog about Jack's size. They ran hard straight towards me, prairie grasses whipping against their bodies and then I saw the spotted fawn, it's eyes wide and crazy, bleating in terror. It was just ahead of Jack, adrenaline giving it a slim but leading edge. I had never heard a fawn holler for help. They sound like a lamb. I called Romeo from his carcass-sniffing oblivion and we headed in the direction of the chase. About a mile later, I looked to the north and there, standing in the middle of the prairie but not so far from me was a doe. She stared at me and showed no sign of flight in her tensed muscles. She was unmovable, vigilant, steady, present, watchful. She was listening for the small urgent voice breaking the silence of the prairie, pleading for salvation.

October 2003

The Puget Sound was not as I had expected; austere and steep etched in industrial tones, complicated with rigid stands of huge trees. Instead, it was all shoulder blades and knees, hips and breasts curving out of the sea, making ground for utilitarian pines and graceful madronas which twisted impossibly from rounded rock formations. Sometimes the trees just tipped over, roots left gasping in the air for a lack of earth to keep them upright. The colors were familiar; browns and mustards and variegated greens. It all looked like prairie - flipped - with more sky poured over. I rested comfortably against the view while the sea swelled beneath our trawler, rocking me into a stare I couldn't break out of for four days. Porpoises and seals made flashing steel arcs starboard and port while gulls wheeled, screamed and fished. I kept my eyes sharpened for Orcas but they did not show. Two days after disembarking from our boat, the world continued to roll and pitch beneath me and I rode every tilt hoping it wouldn't be the last. I planned to write an entire essay on the experience, so freshly transported from the western slope but life never works that way.

Home, I haltingly made Midwestern movements on my weary maps and it didn't take long before life resumed, replete with all the business I had managed to suspend for six days. And then, before very many days passed after my vacation, a couple of events culminated into the hot rise of frustrated tears which I held in reserve until I could get down to a spot by the river to uncork. I sat on a concrete block just back from the bank near a neighbor's campfire site surrounded in large field stones. The dogs were running in circles up and down the banks, in and out of the river, vying for my attention until I bellowed at them like some kind of scary, alien cow and they scrambled, finally, into the trees.

I listened to the river running. The tears began to come and while less than deserving of it yet, I reached into my pocket for a tissue. I looked up river through a teary blur and saw, to my surprise, a kingfisher playing out his unique method of securing dinner; erratic flight from a low-slung tree branch, a strange, guttural noise and a loud whistle before plunging into the river emerging with a small fish which he returned to his branch to swallow. He repeated this dance over and over again. In the five years I've lived on the river I have never seen one of these small

prehistoric-looking birds at work. Now, there were two - no, three kingfishers all desperate to stake out fishing territory and none of them very good at negotiations. I watched them for awhile.

Returning to my macabre thoughts I was able to get the tears started again after yelling at the dogs one more time - go awwwway i don't want to give you any more attention I don't have anything for you - and then, exasperated, looked skyward. A young male eagle was perched in the very top of a tall dead tree right in front of me. I'd not seen him yet but he'd been there watching me all along. He moved his head from side to side, calmly blinking, seeming disinterested in the dinner drama of kingfishers. I think his belly was full. I slowly examined the curves of the bird; the graceful slope from his head to where the arcs of his enormous wings began, the long stretch of the wing itself and finally the tail feathers rising and falling, testing wind conditions. His beak was golden, formidable, dangerous. His beauty helped motivate me to tears again and this time, I cried hard and then, harder.

I heard splashing but cried through it until I heard more splashing and couldn't help looking up, wiping my eyes with the heel of my hand to see the beaver head poking up and out of a mid-river riffle swimming fervently toward the island sandbar. The woodland and river creatures were not going to agree to this cry I wanted to have. I started to laugh watching that stupid beaver paddle with such determination - the dorky metaphor Mamma Nature decided to finish with after the series of warm up acts. I guess she was hoping I'd call up that Little Beaver That Could inside me to deal with the source of my tears. It was really dumb and I was pissed that my big Hollywood cry was circumvented by this incredible display of wildlife that would never, ever present itself in such a prolific manner on any other day.

When the blue heron flew over moments later, I gave up entirely and crawled up the bank to the dirt road where jingling dog tags could be heard moving in my direction from the woods. At the top of the bank I turned towards the river just in time to watch the eagle bear down on its dilapidated grey perch and take to the air, ignoring everything beneath its heaving wings.

November 2003

It's been another month.

There have been break-ups, breakdowns and breakthroughs. There have been misunderstandings, misinterpretations and miscalculations. There has been a lot of poetry written, sent or read. There has been musicmusicmusic and bittersweet memorial made while Death continues to keep its appointments, leaving us behind. There have been unintended indiscretions and dramatic consequences. There have been surprises, hard work and fits of idleness. There has been crying and then the gut-crunching laughter that can only arrive from real connection. There has been quiet. There has been a lot of noise, phone calls and distracting list-making. There have been dirty floors and dishes. There have been missing things and missing people and people missing each other's presence or present intention. It's been one big emotional mixed-bag of synchronicity and life events culminating in a huge birthday bonfire in my honor into which went blessed and cursed symbols of the last year from all the attendants, including my own contribution; two-dozen-plus tubes of metaphorically charged caulk rolled from the garage to the inferno in a tired, red wagon. We made it through another month and it's all been because of Love.

There has been Love piled upon Love upon Love upon Love upon Love until the whole thing just toppled over. The bottom Love was relieved of its burden while the top Love hit its head in the fall, went delusional and has yet to recover. The middle Love enjoyed the tumble and is still rolling around with the rest in the ensuing orgiastic heap. Such a pretty mess.

Just after my mother died in June, I walked out into a pasture with my friend where a few horses were grazing. I don't have much experience with horses and only ones that were bridled, saddled and tied to a fence or held by a trainer. I had never approached these huge creatures in an open pasture, untethered. They were big and powerful in comparison to me. I felt vulnerable, unsteady, nervous. Lynn had me stand right up against her horse, rub him slowly just above and behind his front legs. She said the safest place to be with a horse is close their body. When he moves, she told me, move with him as if you are dancing. My body was pressed against his, arms

flung over his back, eyes closed and I could almost anticipate the next move as his muscles flexed and softened, head rising, falling, turning. The other horses moved in closer behind me. Soon we were all touching, swaying. My face was pressed against his flesh and I filled my nose with him. He smelled like lovers do after a whole day of sex.

There's a moral to this story. Love is a huge beast that can kick my ass, so I'm gonna move with it and let it move me.

December 2003

It was unsettling to awake that morning and smell death in my bedroom. At first I wasn't making the connection. The familiar fuchsia curtain pressed against a blue sky, divided by white grids. The book I had read until falling off to sleep in the night lay quietly on the sheets beside me, no longer a virgin. The radiator ticked percussively while the dogs stretched and groaned, their tags tinkling and their swollen bladders insisting. I looked at the white ceiling and rolled my eyes around the room again. All was separate in its way. Everything was the same. Something else was vastly different. I felt slightly afraid, slightly excited.

I got up, let the dogs out. Making coffee felt different somehow - or was it the time spent making it that was feeling so ... compressed ? - or, was it actually not compressed but elongated, oval, stretching this way and that as I moved into it? Something felt pliable and spongy beneath my feet and around my body as if the air suspended me just above the grip of gravity. I walked back to the bedroom with a warm cup in my hands. I sat on the edge of the bed, sipping, feeling hung-over, unwilling to put up a fight. I felt the coffee make its way to my stomach, warming my esophagus as it traveled.

After all, the dead bodies have been piling up. I am looking back over the fleshy landscape of pasty shoulders and feet and fingers and lips - lids utterly still, like marble. I've stopped wincing every time the phone rings because bad news [badnewsihavesomebadnews] has begun to ring dull; the hammer, a cotton ball - the corolla flare, grey fabric. My reaction sinks into the quicksand of my skin and can't be heard screaming there, in fact, its open mouth has accepted mud as air; given over - no resistance now, sandbagged lungs. I have lost count of the ones I have loved who are no longer here. The dead outnumber the living and always will.

One morning without warning, loss became the day; loss became the standard, loss mimicked joy. Or did it mirror joy or did it put things just off register, blurred for a moment as if shaken and then, bowing - catching light. I let the dogs back into the house. I feed them. They settle into their beds, stretching and ready to nap. I feel the tug of being entered and exited, my limits loosened and even smeared a bit into a hot pink curtain upstaging a blue sky, framed, as if it

could be removed from its position on the wall, the wire squealing on the nail - a final cry before giving way.

February 2004

Love

My dad's best friend died last week and sitting at the end of a pew, I watched the steady stream of people wandering in who were all wearing that same dumbstruck expression that was on my face. This was the man none of us could ever have imagined not alive; not reaching out for us, not laughing, not picking up a wrench or a dishtowel, not looking straight into our eyes and our lives, not getting us coffee and not getting on to the next thing, whatever that was. When I picked up the phone the week before, my dad's voice sounded pinched, as if he were straining to reach something beyond his grasp. Gene died, he said. He batted the statement away from himself, startled by its sudden, alien arrival. It fell into the plummeted silence between us. The phone line hissed, steady and unaffected.

Having known Gene from a kid's perspective, I learned the more detailed history one finds out at funerals; where he was born, when he first met, fell in love with and married his wife Betty, the schools he attended, what branch of the service he was in. I knew he was a devout musician believing deeply in the power of the arts. I knew he was an entrepreneur and that he and Betty had worked as partners on various business ventures since the early 60's. But what was increasingly evident to me as each family eulogy flowed from the pulpit, even before the wireless microphone was passed around the congregation, was that my impression of Gene Baxter was not overrated.

It wasn't my imagination that as a kid, I knew he cared about who I was. Me. Not me clumped together with the entire pile of sugar-charged kids running around his lake cabin lawn or in his toy box basement, but me - the individual. He made a real, genuine connection with everyone he encountered and the stories which poured from the quivering lips of hundreds of people that night provided overwhelming evidence. In a world where lip service is paid to everything, Gene lived the meaning of the word love. It's about seeing who someone really is and celebrating the space they inhabit on the planet. Being counted. Being heard. The love he so easily gave was so easily returned. It was easy. Imagine that. Imagine a world like that.

I know, I know. This whole line of reasoning seems unreasonable - overblown and overly emotional, idealistic, sophomoric and downright ridiculous. I can hear the slosh of eyes rolling. But that night in that neighborhood church, this fairly cynical writer came unglued. I cried hard, more than seemed appropriate. I cried for my own loveless and broken marriage. I cried for the children whose parents weren't loved and can't love them. I cried for a nation whose leaders promote greed in lieu of generosity; a world power blind to humanity and suffering. I cried because I will never again look into the twinkling eyes of Gene Baxter and feel a glimmer of hope for the human race. This is a man who will be missed by so many because of what he represents. He was a living, breathing, middle-class hero; a symbol of our most evolved species given its best attempt. He was a dependable, humble and tireless pillar in his community; the best neighbor anyone could have hung over a fence with; a devoted father who loved and believed in his children no matter what befell their lives; a man liberated before his time who truly adored, honored and respected his wife; a loyal friend who didn't promise what he couldn't bring. He was a guy radiating warmth just out running an errand, embracing the world as if he owned it and was responsible to nurture it well.

I believe Gene must have simply thought, "This is the way a person lives, isn't it?"

March 2004

Rescue

Late December I was walking the dogs with my father who had been staying with us for the holidays. It was a grey day and very cold so we took the forest path hoping to shield ourselves from a harsh January wind. The dogs ran far ahead and disappeared over the south edge of the bluff. I was discussing the finer points of down jackets with Dad when I heard a strange sound I could not identify. I grabbed his arm to stop him, listening — and then took off running towards an intensifying din, peering through the trees and brush as I went.

At the edge of the prairie clearing below the bluff, the doe was stretched out on the snow, her neck strained in a futile gesture of escape, eyes wild, bellowing like a terrified cow. My dogs surrounded her, their feral capacities distant and poorly executed. Rocky, my German shepherd, exhibiting the worst form, tore mercilessly at her ears while little Romeo ran around her in circles, barking maniacally, occasionally diving in to bite her somewhere, anywhere — then retreating to avoid being kicked as she thrashed weakly and without much heart. Jack, the most experienced hunter of the three, attacked the dignity of her throat but her helplessness made his efforts appear cruel rather than deft. My heart raced, my ears rang and my breath escaped in white clouds (oh,oh,no— no).

My country dogs chase rabbit and squirrel, raccoon, turkey and field mice. Sometimes they catch them and eat them. Every winter they drag at least one entire deer carcass into the yard, leg by spine by rack, some with heads attached, and devour them compulsively. But that feast is merely an offering from the littered fields of country living. This live deer scent stirred something deep in their loins and I guess they did their best to address the situation — but they didn't really know what they were doing. It was painful to witness. My father, a deer hunter in years gone by, had caught up to me by then and stood there watching, echoing my empathetic groans. We didn't know what to do either.

I made a weak attempt to call the dogs off and turning to my dad, suggested that we come back with one of his guns and put the animal out of its misery. Unexpectedly Jack and Romeo ran up the hill in response to my call anxious to continue on our walk, suddenly and inexplicably disengaged from this life and death event below. They stood looking up at me with adoration, bloody and panting. In an act of uncharacteristic dog personification, I felt offended by their lack of follow through, their dispassionate, shallow, on-to-the-next-thing attitude. God. I mean, there is a living creature down there which you two have mortally wounded and now you want to just get back to our walk like nothing....? At that moment they became unconscious, irresponsible, beer bloated hunters to me and I hated them. As punishment, I decided that I would call the game warden that day to have the deer carcass removed from the property so that they would not partake in the spoils of their ignoble efforts. Rocky, however, remained dutifully below us standing near the doe now, not attacking her but holding some kind of vigil, staring off onto the snow burdened prairie; watching, waiting. We continued down the path, sober and without words, Jack and Romeo bounding ahead of us, Rocky staying behind.

That same week, my boyfriend & I drove to a small town outside Bayfield, WI where I had a performance scheduled with a friend. The morning after the show, the theater director took us to a good old fashioned north woods café & bar for breakfast where we scarfed down greasy eggs and hash browns, pancakes, and thin, chemical-tasting bacon with weak coffee. There were a few locals in hunting gear sitting at the bar having Bloody Mary's with little beer chasers. The temperatures had been in the 20's below zero overnight for a week in the city and it was even colder up north and near the lake. As we slid onto the concrete-seats of my car to head home, Brent looked out his window and said, "What is that bird doing?"

"What?"

"That bird ... under the car there by the door?" I stretched over the gearshift, straining to see. A little black-capped chickadee was curled like a cat in the snow, quivering. I mean it. It was shaking violently, actually. I felt my heart collapse a bit (oh, oh, no — no). I got out of the car and approached the bird slowly, crouching, and put my finger lightly on its tiny head. It didn't move away. I cupped my hands, scooping the small, shivering bird up and drew it towards my

body. I brought it slowly up to my mouth and began breathing warm air onto it, a technique, we discovered with our first boxes of broiler chicks, which put them to sleep. It felt instinctual, maternal, I guess. I made a quizzical turn to Brent who was sitting in the idling car, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. I didn't know what to do. The bird was weightless and I felt as if I were holding nothing in my hands. I walked up the steps into the restaurant, not having a clue what I would say to the owner who had just sold me a hilarious homemade "beer chicken cooker" for \$20 and said, "Look what I just found outside. I didn't know what to do so here I am, asking you." It got quiet at the counter. One of the guys at the bar drinking who had watched me buy the beer cooker turned and said, "Well, fire that cooker up and we'll have us some poultry!" I smiled grimly back. "Funny, haha." The bird had stopped shaking but remained still in my hands. I stood there a moment, uncomfortable with this problem I had created. The owner wiped out a pilsner glass with a bar towel and said, "Why don't you just put it near the feeder out there."

The feeder was hung from ample eaves on the south side of the building where the sun was doing its low-lying best to warm something. I stooped down and put the bird up against the foundation behind a small drift of snow hoping it might provide a bit more insulation, and left it there with its busy friends flying to and from the feeder, hoping it would revive. I got into the car feeling overly, inexplicably despondent and we drove the seven miles back to town in silence. When we took a left on the main drag towards Duluth, I looked at Brent who looked at me twice and said, "Do we need to turn around?"

When I reached out to retrieve the bird from where I'd left it, it fluttered and chirped and scrambled up onto my thumb and flew up under the eaves, bitching nonsensically, obviously insulted.

* * * *

The front end loader groaned up the driveway and I climbed up into the lofty cab. We exchanged pleasantries and crawled down the blacktop to the gravel where I jumped out and ran down the path, telling the operator to continue down the hill and follow the tree line to the left until he saw

me. I located the deer carcass from the path and scrambled down the bluff past the pines and onto the prairie's edge, waving the driver down. We stood over the dead deer which was far more decomposed than it should have been after less than 24 hours especially given the cold temperatures. The eyes were gone, the stomach collapsed and the skin taut. I looked up at the patient man who had driven a long way in this slow-moving vehicle and said, "I was here yesterday and listened to this doe wailing while my dogs finished her off. I know that this is where we were I'm confused...."

"This one is a spring fawn, a young doe who was probably a twin," he said. "Her sister was sitting with her yesterday. They do that if one of 'em dies. They'll sit there for days. Her sister was the one your dogs were after. She probably escaped when the dogs left." He loaded the small, stiff body into the bucket and drove me back to my door, shooing away my apologies for his having come so far to retrieve such a deteriorated carcass.

A week later, the sister showed up in my yard, piece by piece. I stood by the window watching Romeo gnawing drunkenly on a chunk of vertebrae in the snow while the black-capped chickadees were busy at the feeder, and thought about the twin sister's vigilant demise and how Rocky stayed apologetically behind. I thought about the compliant and uncontested U-turn Brent made that day. I thought about other cars & places, different eyes looking at me and then being denied silly but symbolic requests. I thought about cold temperatures and warm hands, not knowing what to do and what we can carry. I thought about how unexpectedly rescue can arrive.

May 2004

Spring Windfall

This morning I took the southern walk from my house through the lower prairie towards the river, heading east downstream. After yesterday's record-breaking heat, the high winds brought in a cool front after midnight which left the air feeling light and relieved of its dark abuses. I pulled up the hood of my red sweatshirt. A mixed chorus of drab brown birds in all shapes and sizes were busy rehearsing in dry prairie grasses and as the dogs ran in they were flushed out, taking refuge in the budding saplings and honeysuckle rows lining the banks of the Cannon River. A group of martins numbering a dozen or more darted like white-bellied bats above me, snatching their breakfast from the air while one bright, lone male cardinal sang an earnest if simple solo from the very tip top of an aspen tree. Courting almost complete, and nests being tended now, everyone on the prairie was hungry, busy and just a bit nervous. The Canadian geese launched their scouts noisily from the nesting grounds below us at the river's edge, flying frantic reconnaissance missions overhead, honking. The dogs paused from their tracking and looked around to see what all the fuss was about, unaware that we were the ones causing all the trouble.

Arriving at the campground on the easternmost edge of the property, I slowly sank onto the cool grasses carpeting the hill all the way down to the river and surveyed the scene. As far as I could see, fish mouths broke the surface of the water intermittently to snatch bugs leaving ever-widening and concentric, drifting circles as the sated recoiled to silty river bottoms. A small group of teals bobbed in a clutch along the opposite shoreline swimming in worried little figure eights around each other hoping to distract predators while Rocky and Romeo waded into the shallows and had a drink, perking their ears suddenly to Jack's barking further east near the island. As they scrambled wet and panting up the slope, I just caught site of a blue heron and watched it lift quietly from the far side of the island disappearing around the bend, annoyed with the intrusion or offering diversion to any danger away from its nest. The young eagle I've been watching since late February made a sweeping appearance out of nowhere and then was gone

over the tree line behind me. I am merely an observer here, welcome or not. I closed my eyes and let the wind have its way.

Last night began with happy hour at the local bar, after switching out storm windows to screens most of the afternoon. We were tired and satisfied and the cold beer tasted so good. A series of events led us into a classic, blood-red sedan roaring and digging into gears down back roads, taking the long way to dinner somewhere, anywhere - it didn't matter. Teenaged girls who had tagged along were nested cozily in the back seat, their milky skin poured onto black-tufted Naugahyde. Their high-pitched stories flung into the wind, they laughed at nothing and everything, moving their animated, jeweled fingers across their faces again and again coquettishly plucking strands of hair from their freshly shimmerpinkglossied lips, this time adjusting sunglasses, next time touching an earring - and all the while piling legs upon legs upon arms on necks on bare feet tangled in the unspeakable, lusty romance of the moment. They couldn't see me anymore but the view was heartbreaking and exhilarating all at once from the front seat looking back a million miles and lifetimes away. Bodiless, I was a skewed, blurry point of view from somewhere in the past and somewhere in the future being held gently in the front seat of a 1955 Chevy. There was everything to say and there was nothing to say at all. Longing climbed up my laddered ribs slowly and, reaching the summit, hollered out in a high-pitched lonesome wail, the only song that ever really gets sung even if it is never heard. My heart ached and flew inside my aging skin. The sun was melting onto a gently rounded plate of baby soybean green fields to the west while simultaneously producing the grey ghosted image of our speeding relic on the other side, a Peter Pan perfect replica mocking every bump in the blacktop. Someone took a picture of it, to remember the day.

Night fell as we arrived home with full stomachs and while I sat with my companion on the porch, the winds continued to intensify, running from whatever weather was chasing it. The wind chimes tangled themselves up crashing unmelodiously into the screens and the strung lights lofted from their low tethers, flickering. The dogs filed out one after the other to sit closer to us now as the wind roared again and made a sound in the trees like wild ocean surf crashing on a beaten shore. Ashes and dirt, dead insects and bits of paper swirled around our wicker chairs. But the wind was as warm as my skin and I had to stand up and did, opening my arms above my

head, eyes closed in an helpless swoon. Eventually, slumping into my chair to sip my drink, I felt seduced, roughed up and left. I lit a cigarette. From the hallway, laughter and the slap of bare feet on wood floors and doors slamming and then, finally out into the darkness they ran to the far yard, squealing like the children they still are. The wind howled and they shrieked back, scrambling now onto the trampoline under half moon light and the wind insisting and clothes flying away from their bodies into the grasses and shy stars winking. We looked at each other wide and knowingly, finished our drinks quickly and climbed the stairs to the bedroom where all the windows were open wide, pink curtains billowing with the wind and the delight of our own woodland nymphs calling up the living and the dead. These are the nights country dwellers don't need to talk about in the morning.

After awhile I stood, tightening my sweatshirt around me, wiping my hands on my jeans. The four Canadian sentinels who had been paddling upstream against the current in order to guard me for as long as I drifted on the bank, took wing and escorted me with pomp and circumstance up river until I was clearly not a threat, at which time they retreated, their alarming cries sounding like ambulances driving away with their emergencies in tow. The cardinal had left the aspen, the dogs pounced after field mice like puppies and I walked home with another day chasing me.

July 2004

Fog covered the river this morning like a benevolent wraith. Long, lean and lovely it stretched and sighed, slowly dissipating as the sun crept over the pines. Jack ran far afield and as he bounded through the prairie grasses heavy with dew, the sunlit spray flew from his flanks like tiny fireworks. He leapt and charged, head thrown back, jaw slack, eyes at half-mast. Reaching the treeline he made an arc back toward the field road to rejoin us and as he brushed by the stands of black-eyed Susans and emerged from between tall clumps of blue stem, his face harbored pure, stoned rapture. This dog runs for the sheer, unmitigated joy of it.

While walking along this same stretch of river in late spring with Juliet the Poet, I found my first eagle feather. I've been watching the eagles gather, fish and finally begin nesting near my property for the last couple of years. Their feathers are huge and would seem easy to spot but my birder companion told me they were a rare find. I took it to be a harbinger of the blissful summer I'd been anticipating since falling in love and *far more than* surviving the winter inside a burgeoning relationship. If winter had been that intoxicating, summer would put me into a nirvana-induced coma. I turned this massive if weightless aid to the Aves class of aeronautics around in my hands and snickered at the cheesy timing of it all. J the P and I had been talking, well --- *trying* to talk about love.

Happiness. Contentment. Ease. These words have not ranked anywhere near the top of my vocabulary usage cache --- uh --- I guess I'd have to say, ever. I mean, I've laughed a lot. I've made and choked down countless vats of *lemonade* and found myriad ways of *looking at things* over the course of my life, due in great part to a combination of my sanguine personality driven by a Napoleonic will that trundled doggedly up some mysterious genetic ladder leaned against my interior walls. I have reveled in the adventure of motherhood and been blessed with the most amazing, tireless and true friendships. I have gloriously unburdened myself through song, language and conversations over countless tabletops stained with wine. I have few if any regrets and I have had a rich, loamy and inspired go of it all. But this dewey-eyed joy I had been swimming in since the end of last summer was the most foreign water I had ever surrendered to, flipped on my back, eyes full of sky. This was the conversation I was trying to navigate as I

tucked the prized feather into the back of my pants, and I wasn't delivering it with any eloquence. The river raced alongside us and watching it, all I knew was what it felt like to be caught up in something much bigger than me with a powerful, ancient and unrelenting current.

It's so complex but it is, ultimately, simple -- this Big Love. It's about being *seen*. It's being met and anticipated and understood. It has silently stripped me of my defenses, because they are unnecessary here. There is true privacy because there is no secrecy. For the first time I comprehend the breadth of Rilke's charge to be "guardians of each other's solitude" because this kind of love is born of respect which bears trust. I never knew what an aphrodisiac that combination could be; the slow, fragrant burn. And then, as if to mock my studied sensibilities, the word Fun shows up. Yes, *hilarity* -- I mean, I've laughed a lot -- I already said that, but this is an entirely different kind of comedy, where kindred spirits yuck it up and what's funny becomes high art.

So, to my kind and patient editor and any readers who anticipate words from my little corner of the world, I am sorry for my escalating lack of dependability. Regardless of all life's obstacles, (including the recent computer virus I've been recovering from -- my latest excuse), which have piled up over the last year and gotten in the way of my deadlines here, there and everywhere, the truth is I've been bobbing around in a pleasure bubble. I am relearning how to export from this raptured state and while it's confusing and vast, I can't wait to feel what rushes through my creative portals from here. I am a dog running wild through a drenched field, head thrown back, eyes glazed over, eagle feather clenched in my teeth --- stoned out of my mind.

August 2004

Morning came as welcome relief from a steamy night of restless sleep. I got up early to walk the dogs before the sun began its hot stare over the river valley. When I stepped out the side door there was not the slightest indication of wind and the humidity was already oppressive. The birds sounded amplified in the stillness as did the squirrel's leap from the wooden feeder, which swung wildly as the dogs launched into their ritualistic rodent chase, grey prey escaping up the oak tree -- again. Heading down the driveway, the putrid-sweet stench of garbage met me before I could even see the line of sagging lawn & garden bags I'd trucked down yesterday, cast-offs from Saturday's graduation party, which had been a smashing success.

I was already winded as I rounded the bend, heading up the steepest hill on the property. Aromas swirled slowly into the heavy air and I closed my eyes as I walked, breathing deeply. I could isolate some of the smells; toasted grasses from damp, peeling bark ---the wild, white flox lining the ditches from the overripe black raspberries arcing maniacally from the underbrush on their thorny canes. I stopped often to pick as many as I could snatch before the mosquitos caught up with me, filling my mouth with their musty sweetness.

Reaching the summit through the archway of dark, green oak boughs, the blooming prairie stretched out before me. Diminutive yellow partridge peas and blue spiderwort bowed near the roadside, giving way to clumps of golden grasses embracing stands of purple coneflower, germander and loosestrife. The bald, white tips of the prairie clover emerged comically from their feathery, purple collars like clown heads in a circus show. The shy, blue-belled lobelia nodded coquetishly to the riotous heads of bergamots and blazing stars, playing romance for clumps of white sage looking up beneath them. Occasionally, a flaming orange burst of butterfly milkweed asserted itself in the mix. Bright yellow coreopsis joined the black-eyed Susans, screaming happiness from one end of the hilltop to the other. I was stunned.

I stood there trying to remember how this field looked when it was full of dry, spent corn stalks. It was four years ago one morning in spring when the shirtless, tan, touseled, muscled, animated, blue-eyed Prairie Boy showed up with his antiquated tractor and plow, bursting with anticipation

like a kid in a toy store. He smiled widely and all the time --- and I remember him repeatedly expressing a fondness for the band Weezer. There was no doubt that this guy loved his work --- and who wouldn't? A couple of one-hits with his morning coffee, granola bars in his hip pocket, baseball cap pushed back, water jug in place under the tractor seat. He became a cloud of dust in the distance leaving rows of turned soil behind him into which he flung handfuls of seeds from a series of crumpled, paper sacks resting in his lap. I watched him for days turning up each field. First, the main level acreage, then the upper, and finally the lower flood plain. I even got to drive the tractor around one day. I felt like a mid-wife to the birth of a prairie and that was the intention --- to restore the land to its natural state prior to the influx of farming back in the late 1800's, an oak savannah prairie. On this particular morning, it was evident that we had succeeded. I stood there for a long time, in a blurry-eyed state, slowly merging with my first born for whom this particular prairie has provided comfort, escape and the endless mystery of a million, billion stars on a moonless night.

She's has her story now. It travels across the painful, inspiring landscape of circumstance and happenstance; all the events that have occurred since she arrived on this planet, from the sacred to the profane and all of it under the "guidance" and failings of those deemed her guardians. This spring, she became a legal adult. Over the years, I've told her everything I feel and think about, and loved her fiercely. I know who she is and respect her. Beyond that, there is little I can do or say that could prepare her for, or spare her from, what will invariably arrive and the subsequent choices she will be faced with. Still, she knows I am here if she needs anything.

There is so much I could say now, endlessly, as anyone who has children knows. Instead, I'll let her speak from an essay she wrote for a class this spring called "The Brimming Field," as she wrapped up her senior year.

"This past summer, a family bought the top prairie field. In an attempt to "keep out the crazy party kids," the new owners put up a large cable with an angry combination lock across the entrance to the road that leads to the field. The late, starry nights that I would cruise up to the top of that hill in my car upon just arriving home after a long day are no longer possible. Instead, each night I drive home, a picturesque view of the prairie whirs in my mind as if it was directly

in front of me. Later this summer, heavy machinery will come and interrupt the deep roots of the field, and cement will be poured. I am sure this new family is happier than I will ever know to be able to build their home here. However, I know that they will never understand the true meaning and nature of the prairie as I do. A few short months after the ground is broken, I will be off on a new journey of my own, a new chapter of my life. I do not know at this time whether I will have the courage before I leave for college to venture up to that field once a new, colossal, cookie-cutter house stands there. Instead, I have come to the conclusion that I would rather hold the perfect picture of the place I love so dearly in my memory and visit it in my dreams, because as in life, the things we love most are often taken away."

September 2004

Jezuz.

That guy is moving tooooooo faaaastttt.....

.....squeeeeeeeaaaaalllllllllssssssskkkkccccrrrrraaaaauuuuuuukkkkkkkkkhhhhh..... fuck

am I ??.... where (FUCK....FUCK!) Whitewhitewitefoggycaan'tseecan'tsee.... Door won't open.

Coughing. Jezuz. Head hurts. Oh --- whoa. Airbag. Weird. Head hurts. Leg

....something.....knee.....where are my glasses? Shit..... the door won't open. Shit. Face hurts.

"Are you okay?" Yeah. I'm okay. I'M OK. Legs shakeysh-sh-shakey, holding, holding. Walking

Lamp post. Leaning. Grass under my ass . Sunny sky. Sunny Sun. You okay? "Yeah." Sun

setting over there, over my left shoulder. Neck hot. "Are you okay?" Footsteps. White lab coat,

blue scrubs, bald head, jokes, hospital right on the corner, right there. Ha ha. Ha ha! What are the

chances...?....I'M OK.. "You can come get an X-ray if you want." Truck, truck without running

board, truck in a weird place. Car left in the intersection. Looks like it wet its pants. Sun is

setting. Radiator, oh yeah. Mine. O. Yeah. Mine. Shit. Yeah. Cop. Hi. This. That. And this and

that and this and this. "I didn't see you at all.... I wasn't paying attention. I'm really..... sorry....."

State Patrol. Big Hat. Brown hat. Tan duds. Tan and brown and shiny badge. Clip board.

Official. Wow. No way to start a weekend. Ha. Ha. "I'm really sorry." Let's unload the car. I

have so many sweatshirts in here. Smoke escapes from trunk. Call Brian. "OK." How close is the

cabin? "Eight miles." "What happened," shiny badge, Big Brown Hat staring, official. "I'm

just.... I just didn't see them.... I wasn't paying attention....it was totally my fault." Yeah, I'm

sorry for you too. Sucks. This sucks. "Did you want a new car?" No. No. I really didn't. Two

payments left, engine rebuild 60,000 ago, 52 miles/gallon in this little diesel. Whatever. 10 more

years on this engine, at least. Hi Brian. Hi. Nissa. Hey. Yeah. Whatever. I'm OK. You OK?

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just pissed." It wasn't your fault. "I know." It wasn't. "Yeah, I'm just pissed."

What if we hadn't stopped at the grocery store for olive oil? What if we hadn't stopped at the gas station for cigs? What if I hadn't taken such a long shower before we left? What if the sun had been at our back? What if we had decided to stay home? What if I never left home? What if I'd never been born?

Oooo. Yeah. It's nice here. Look how close the cabin is to the water. This is great.... reminds me of our old cabin.... the view....the set up with the dock and, oh, the boat lift was on the other side but, still. Blahblahblahblahaccidentblahblahblahblah leg hurts blahblahblahblah neck sore blahblahblah leg really sore. You got ibuprofen? Great. Thanks. Four, yeah. Thanks. Will you make me a cocktail? "Sure. Whaddya want?" Irish whiskey, mate.... for the Irish girl who just dodged another bullet, so to speak, anyway. Dinner? Great. We didn't bring much. Package of pork chops. I'm not very hungry. We'll just stay the weekend if someone can bring us home. "No problem."

What if the traffic hadn't been so jammed up? What if we hadn't been so distant from one another for the last two weeks and I hadn't been so checked out in the car? What if it was quieter at home? What if there was space for you to fall into silence? It's so crazy right now. It's crazy. I guess we'll just stay for the weekend and get a ride home on Sunday. Nothing we can do about all this at home 'til Monday anyway.....

"You wanna sit on me? Yeah, I do. It hurts my neck but I'd still rather curl up like a cat on your chest --- listen to your steady heart beat than lay alone on the big sofa. Where is everyone?" "Out on the boat." Oh... yeah. We've been in such a pleasure bubble all summer. I've been helplessly, willingly lost in you. I've been obsessing. It's not a good place to be. But I don't really understand what I've been doing..... I mean the impetus. Is this the cosmic paydown for being happy? That board game kicked ass last night. So fun. You got mad when I didn't get your clues for that song. "Do you need anything?" How about another drink? Yeah. One more. I want to be comfortably numb. The sun feels good on my legs. I think I drooled on you. "You were snoring like a kitten." No shit? I think I'll go soak in that whirlpool tub. You are even more competitive than I thought. Or are you just hard on yourself.

My toenail polish looks great coming up out of those bubbles. Tangerine orange, baby. My feet still look good. Small, well-formed. Man.... how did I get that quarter-sized bruise on my belly? Elbow jerk? My leg is so fucked up. Still can't figure that out ... did I have my other foot up under me? Velocity is wicked strong. It's loud under the water with the jets on. Shit. I think I spent all the hot water from the tank filling this tub. The water heater will be working double

time. I'll just sleep a little. Well, sort of doze off, meditate. I wonder what you are thinking down there while I'm up here. Those insurance companies are sure to screw me.... those assholes.

The moon is up. Let's go out in the paddle boat. Who cares if it's midnight? Who cares if it's cold? Who cares if there's too much weight in it with all four of us? Who cares if my neck hurts when I'm sober because I'm not right now and it means I can pretend anything I want? Who cares how far we drift from the cabin? We'll find our way back. We can always find our way back. Do you still love me? I mean, you know, the way you did before you knew me? Omigod you got so wet back there by the paddles. And you barely complained. You rarely do.

"I'm so glad you didn't get seriously hurt." Me too. "Jezuz." I know. "I had the steering wheel to hold onto." I know. You seem better at holding on than me, steering wheel or not. I always seem to get thrown around but I heal up quickly. I'm not afraid. I'm not. Really. I know you love me. I do. Let's go to bed. Life is long. It feels long tonight.

Buckets of Rain Bob Dylan

Buckets of rain

buckets of tears

got all these buckets comin' outta my ears

buckets of moonbeams in my hands

You got all the love

Honeybaby.... I can stand.

I been meek

and hard like an oak

I seen pretty people

disappear like smoke

Friends will arrive

friends will disappear

If you want me

Honeybaby, I'll be here.

*I like the smile
in your fingertips
I like the way
that you move your hips
I like the cool way
you look at me
Everything about you
is bringin' me misery.*

*Life is sad
Life is a bust
All you can do is do what you must
You do what you must do
and you do it well
I'll do it for you
Honeybaby, Can't you tell?*

October 2004

I woke at 1:30 am on the bare mattress pad where I'd fallen into a deep sleep during the post-presidential debate commentaries, waking stiff and chilled. I stumbled down to the dryer to retrieve the clean sheets and roused B to dress the bed, which he returned to. It's 3:00 am now. I've been writing email and pacing and drinking orange juice from the carton and going out onto the porch to smoke, taking my sweatshirt on and off and on and off. I just made coffee and poured an Irish whiskey. The dogs are following me around the house, confused. I had become increasingly nauseous the hour prior to the debates while high school kids trailed in and food was brought to the table before gathering in front of the TV to watch these two men, one of whom will preside over our country after elections, go at it. I had spent the day reading political updates on the Internet, sifting through the wreckage, NPR humming in the background. I will cast my vote vigorously but I don't feel that I live in a democracy anymore and that's just the tip of the iceberg. And I can't stop thinking about a quote I heard yesterday: "The first casualty of war is truth."

I descended into a cloud on foot last weekend as I walked from my house down to the river. The dogs were soaked from the heavily dewed grasses as they made grand exits and entrances, their noses intent on olfactory dramas I can't comprehend. Turning east onto the field road, the sun began breaking through the shifting fog which back-lit the prairie. From one end to the other as far as I could see, spider webs were strung across acres of baked blue stem and faded coneflower, between crinkled-gone-pink bergamot and slough grass, connecting dried sedge and browning asters. The pasture thistle struggled purple amidst a dying chorus and a few bright, black-eyed Susans sang their yellow swan songs from crevices on the prairie stage. I stopped and stared, dumbstruck with the beauty of it, luminously bejeweled with fog and light. It was dizzying to imagine how many spiders were wrapping or eating their prey, tirelessly repairing and expanding their territory from one vertical opportunity to the next. I could almost hear trillions of busy legs scrambling nimbly around sticky tightropes. I am a supremely outnumbered pair of eyes bearing witness to this spectacle.

After leaving the prairie that Saturday morning, I seated myself along a u-shaped grouping of tables at a coffee shop/dinner theater venue in town. I was there to attend a meeting of the homeowner's association to which I am unwillingly joined, due to circumstances under which I acquired this old, historic house. I share 160 acres of river valley land with 8 other families, two unsold lots notwithstanding. I was living on this land long before the other parcels were sold and new houses built, but that has no bearing on the present situation other than providing my disinterested neighbors with quaint anecdotes, should I choose to proffer them. Having purchased this house and the five acres of land it sits on cheaply many years prior, I knew I would eventually be living amidst individuals who exceed my tax bracket in leaps and bounds, river valley property being sold at a premium. Intentions are pure but life takes its own way. My marriage over, my land baron father-in-law dead, I worried, before buying my ex-husband out of this house, about the potentiality of escalating association fees and residential restrictions on the wide-open spaces I've come to revel in. However, I knew this going in and took on the proverbial "cross that bridge" line of thinking, as is my nature.

I won't go into the endless and predictable bore of discussion held: liability and tax issues, road stability, township and DNR regulations, safety concerns including gates and lighting, "trespassers" and the subsequent alienation of country neighbors, leashing of residential dogs, surveillance (!!) and all things territorial. Suffice to say, it was a funereal morning from which I exhumed myself early, having heard enough. It's difficult to reign away from economically biased judgement calls, but as Juliet the Poet says, "ambition destroys integrity" and I can't disagree. After announcing that I don't even have a key to my house, I asked my association mates, with all due respect for differences in "safety needs," what the perceived threat was. There was a brief silence peppered with throat clearings but no response. The subject changed.

For now, there will be no gates erected and no guards posted. For now, there will be no lights placed on the roads or surveillance cameras hung from trees. For now, our neighbors to the east will be allowed to ride through our property to get to their picnic and camping ground adjacent to our land, which they are happy to share with us. For now, no one will shoot my dogs when they wander through my neighbors' property in search of new friends. For now, we won't take out a

10K liability policy that will be exorbitant and probably never needed since no one is allowed on our land but us. For now, we will live harmoniously.

November 2004

I was celebrating my birthday at the Tornado Room in Madison, WI while she was heading to the movies in Hastings, MN with her friend. It was a Friday night. I wonder what they were talking about when they made a left turn and that car came out of nowhere. I was eating venison in a reduced wine & peppercorn sauce, drinking a spicy Zinfandel and opening presents when the force of the impact snapped her seat belt and threw her from the car. Her teenaged heart, unmoored from its riotous and rightful place, cried out and stopped beating. I was cozied-up next to the warm body of my oldest daughter in the fragrant cocoon of a dimly lit, landmark restaurant. I reveled in her wit and the sound of her laughter, only two of the many things I have missed since she left for college, while her mother barely stood on liquid legs in a small room smelling of disinfectant. Under cruel florescent lighting, she pulled back the white sheet draped over a horrifying stillness.

The morning of the funeral, I opened the door and stepped out onto the front stoop, my bare feet recoiling from the cold slab of stone beneath them. It was Thursday. The dogs vanished into the darkness. There was no moon and the air was heavy with a gathering storm. A sob rose up suddenly from my pelvis into my mouth, and I buried my face in the sleeves of my robe. Every morning for the rest of her life she will wake up and her daughter will not. I wandered to the shower and drove to work in the rain. I don't remember how I arrived there or returned to town or sat upright in that gray, metal chair while the casket was wheeled in. Her mother, a self-described "outsider in the community," rose and walked unsteadily to the stage flanked by her husband and son, and looking out over hundreds of solemn, beseeching mourners, leaned towards the microphone. At that moment, it was as if her courage alone could save us all. Before the collected and projected images were run, before the songs were sung, before more family, friends and teachers spoke in honor of this quirky, comical, talented young woman, we were guided by her soft-spoken mother into an ageless if present grief. With astonishing honesty and intimacy, she offered up a 16-year love story written by her and the child who came through her body into this world, how they grew hungry and thrived on each other's separate and over-arching passions. The room was palpable with the fear, pain and inexplicable joy of being left here -- to go on living.

We rose, row by row and walked up the long center aisle or collected on the sidelines. Clinging to our shredded Kleenex and each other, we began sharing stories about her, trailing them into the anterooms of the community center where bars, coffee, milk and orangeade were served by the women who always bring it. We lingered long in rotating groups of all ages, telling more stories, tossing Styrofoam cups and napkins into garbage cans, our clusters moving slowly down the hallways and hesitating briefly before pushing hard on the heavy exit doors.

The day that followed was as gloomy as the Saturday that arrived after it. I didn't walk the dogs that morning but I stumbled to the shower and drove to the city in the rain. The boxed ashes of a family patriarch had been placed, following the funeral one-year prior, in the back seat of a garaged Mitsubishi Mirage, which had seen better days. This was the day his ashes would finally be inurned. I joined five other idling cars, sheltering various family members from the weather in a parking area outside the cemetery gates.

While processing to the burial plot in our vehicles, the rain intensified as we parked, turned ignitions off and emerged with only a few umbrellas to share. The wind kicked up. Someone was commenting on someone else's new hairdo and another pointing with recognition at matching umbrella fabrics when the officiating minister, not waiting for the entire family to gather, began the charge uphill towards the plot, mumbling inaudible scripture verses. As we approached, I saw two rectangular pieces of carefully carved sod lying between the vault and us that we all stepped respectfully around. A few more verses were called out and hastily read, and perhaps a prayer was said. My eyes drifted around the circle of family members.... such beautiful people to behold; faces chiseled, graceful and subdued - lovely as fine sculpture, all of them.

When my eyes returned to the vault, a cardboard box had appeared on the edge. I didn't see who set it there. Rain hammered on the lid making a hollow sound, and the edges began to sag a bit. In the lower right hand corner, scrawled in fat, red Sharpie, was the name of the deceased. The name and I stared back and forth at each other for what seemed an eternity, or at least 22 years. I could feel my heart beating in my ears. The white box was gently set inside the vault and the cover replaced. His wife stepped forward, a final gesture, and laid one yellow rose beneath the

cover. Light embraces were passed around with casual, easy smiles. I squeezed all the nieces and nephews hard. Directions were given to an Applebee's restaurant on the university campus and we all walked through the soggy grass to our separate cars. I didn't attend the luncheon but was told later that his name never came up but that two of the brothers fired up one of their myriad disagreements while everyone ate. I guess it got quite heated but they all parted with civility, as usual.

While lunch was being served at Applebee's I drove home alone under a tired, gray sky. I imagine a grave digger came to put fill dirt on top of the vault, followed by a single yellow rose, more dirt and finally the two rectangular sod pieces — replaced just so -- as if they had never been disturbed.

December 2004

I don't believe in anything but I believe anything is possible.

Headlights in driveway mean people coming through the door. Boys have arrived unannounced to shoot more scenes on a movie they are making. They know they needn't call or even tell me why they are here at 10pm on a Tuesday night. They don't knock - they just walk in. One has stripped to his tightie whities and covered himself in flour. Another One of them had a birthday today. Eighteen Years Old. He bought a lottery ticket on the way over at the Budget Mart. He says he's winning tomorrow, for sure. And whatever it is they are doing, he says If Wendy Gets Pissed It's Not My Fault.... I'm Not Involved. I don't know what they are talking about and I don't ask. We all love each other and I trust them. They drive away into the darkness of the prairie.

Before they arrived, K, B & I were looking at photographs B scanned in today on the computer while I was at work. They were the best of the best of B, circa 1986. K had just returned from the Cannon Ball where she and her peeps sat smoking after working on the school paper, happy to be in the "happy waitress" section of the restaurant tonight. They *tip* her. They don't tip the mean ones, which, I say, makes them all the meaner. K says, I know and then she says she doesn't like smoking anymore anyway. It was a phase. I sit at the fireplace listening to her story, smoking. It's a phase.

It's just another night at home. So much has happened here over the last month. So much happens in a day or an evening. Something could happen right now, in fact, it is *happening*. This is a magic house. We entertain feasts every day and night of one variety or another; feasts of export and import. I finally figured it out this morning at about 4:30 am; *the prairie has moved into the house*.

Love is being made everywhere. There are smells of coffee and toast mixed with dried grasses. The pipes creak and the wind blows and the refrigerator hums. There is poetry and music and conversation flying into the pines. Sunlight and moonlight swell against the walls and windowpanes. The dinner table fills with food and the communion goes on long into the night.

Wine and conversation flows while birds perch on chair backs and shoulders. The river runs through the hallways and the fireplace pops and crackles as we gather around it. When we fall, exhausted, into our beds to dream, the starry sky erases the ceiling. I can barely tell anymore where dreaming ends and waking begins. Home is a magnet and when I drive away towards the city, I feel it pulling me back. Something has happened here over the last two years that feels like illusion dissolving into my skin. Something I have always known and imagined has become real and I am living it.

I said to B tonight that this house bursting with love feels like death, but it's not scary. He didn't understand what I was trying to say, and I didn't either or couldn't really explain. Finding a language for it is not necessary, I guess. Living it must be the point.

When the Boys return from the prairie, I'm researching *the bardo* from **The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying**. I read some things from the opening chapter. The third red-haired One wants me to repeat who said, "My religion is to live - and die - without regret." I say again, Milarepa, and spell it for him.

January 2005

She came up to me from south'ren climes on a Friday, navigating crowded airports with blizzards diverting planes from Cincinnati and canceling flights. When I finally saw her in the breezeway at the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport, buttoning up her mid-calf shearling coat, hair bundled at the back of her dark, regal head, strong jaw line cutting an edge against the glass, I leapt from the car. It was 1:00 in the morning and I'd been driving in circles for an hour. The last time I'd laid eyes on her, 18 months prior, she had donated her house and yard to the funereal aftermath of communion around my mother's departed spirit. That was a sultry, humid day in June threatening rain, conjuring the misty Irish air my mother's people had come from. The scent of magnolia was beautiful and painful in the mix. When Byrdie walked out into the subzero temperatures, arms open into mine, the smell was there. We jumped around, hollering, loading her bags into the trunk of my car and headed southeast through the frigid night. The *dB's* were on the car stereo but couldn't be heard over the travel journal of the day and the tangential topics spinning off from what was the beginning of our four day immersion into that river we call our friendship.

Our theater stretched between the living room fireplace and the kitchen with no need to venture further than to chop and gather more wood. Conversation trailed on a fragrant vapor between the two rooms while a tree bedecked with lights, tinsel and ornaments, each with their own story, hovered over us like a gaudy, spicy grandmother who listened, smiled and passed out gifts but never said a word. Empty bottles of wine and spirits piled up in the recycling bin just outside the back door and dirty dishes continued to mount each other in the sink and on the counter, sexy, ravaged and spent. Topics and moods shifted as friends came and went and returned and then new players arrived with their stories, burdens and desires. The refrigerator heaved under the weight of delectable leftovers. Beds were made up on sofas and floors and the clock was utterly ignored. The decibel levels tipped from one end of the meter to the other, reeling with laughter and music, folklore and politics, current events of the season. Byrdie spun, dove and soared through the entire production like the aerialist she is. And then she flew away into the white sky of a Monday morning but left her jet trail arcing over us.

Now, it is *this* day, this first day of the new year 2005. I am sitting at a table overlooking Lake Sullivan a few hours north of Minneapolis with friends. It is just one more in the grey repetition of Midwestern winter days, snow always in the offing and it has begun to fall. The only way to tell sky from frozen water is where the tree line divides them. Icehouses pepper the view with trucks and four-wheelers parked nearby to transport their inhabitants to shore when the fishing is over. We spent the final hours of 2004 romping like puppies around the spacious and contiguous living room, dining room and kitchen area, cooking, running mock football plays, eating, raising glasses, starting but not finishing a board game, filling, drinking more, raising glasses again in myriad purpose. And when the LED read-out on the Conan O'Brien show flashed 12:00 we leapt into 2005; we jumped on each other, kissing and hugging and wrestling each other to the floor so grateful to be in good company. Another year stretches before us, so many minutes, hours and days, which will not reveal themselves until they arrive but tonight we anticipate them as if they will all be revelatory and inspirational, kind and flush with generosity, safety and love. But around the coast of the Indian ocean, 117,000 bodies lie still, bloating on the beaches and streets of Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Five million people lack clean water, food, shelter, medicine and anything resembling sanitation after the magnitude-9.0 earthquake and subsequent tsunami wave shattered the peaceful shores of the Indian Rim and beyond. “Unless the necessary funds are urgently mobilized and coordinated in the field we could see as many fatalities from diseases as we've seen from the actual disaster itself,” said Dr. David Nabarro, head of crisis operations at WHO. While we washed the dishes at the cabin sink from one more meal with friends, other families endured one more horrifying day of uncertainty as to the whereabouts of their loved ones who had taken a holiday vacation to sunny beaches. My daughter calls me from home to ask how to mix a balsamic vinaigrette to dress the salad she's bowled for her friends. I know that she is safe and will go to bed sated from a good meal and good conversation in the company of those she loves and who love her. The dogs will curl up in their cozy spots near the radiator, on the sofa beneath a blanket and at the foot of the stairs, while confused and hungry crocodiles crawl to the shores of the Nicobar Islands desperate for food. And when the sun rises, another day in this new year will begin and we will each face what lies before us.

February 2005

I drove under a brilliant winter sky to the funeral held at a church tucked neatly into a modest neighborhood in Roseville, MN. The bereaved family filed down the aisle between sparsely populated pews. I sat alone at the end of an empty one. After a brief introduction by the spry and bespectacled female reverend, a diminutive grey-haired, old gal at the piano musically introduced the hymn we were about to sing. *Amazing grace how sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me....* All four verses were sung. The minister had not known the deceased, and said so, before she began speaking of his life, highlighting what I had already read in the funereal pamphlet. She brought us to our feet again for another song and then, another. I noticed that the pianist played these old hymns like my mother had, so many years ago, with a similar cadence and particular ear for flushing out chords. When we got to the chorus of *How Great Thou Art*, I heard my dead mother's voice filling the sanctuary from my own mouth. I faltered and stopped singing. I stared at the blurry program in my hands, blinking hard and taking a slow, deep breath.

This woman, whose remains lay in a small, honey-colored wooden box on a low table before the altar, was the mother of my oldest friend. Next to the box, a photograph of her rested in an unadorned frame with a vase of comely flowers set behind. Her father had died only fifty-three days prior. Babe and I were born just ten days apart a million years ago, and lived across the street from each other for the first nine years of our lives. The neighborhood, church and church school were built by and for *The Chosen* and under the terrifying and omnipotent eye of Babe's maternal grandfather, we were ministered to with much hellfire and damnation. While it was all we knew then as home and community, ours was a strange and frightening world. Endless days and nights revolved around the church, and the church consumed each child, spitting us out many confused years later on myriad shores, as from the belly of a time-traveling whale.

I watched Babe in the front pew with her children, her hand resting assuredly around the shoulder of her 17-year-old daughter. I could see Babe's long, wavy hair catching light from a window as she raised and lowered her head. Even from this distance, I could see the freckled face she had been famous for when we were girls, the freckles I envied along with her wry humor and incredible talent for drawing. We were inseparable in those days. My mind drifted

through stuffy schoolrooms and liberating playgrounds to the cool shade beneath stands of oak trees in summer. I journeyed to long afternoons and scary nights spent squirming on or kneeling before hard wooden pews, the roar of a white-haired lion pacing before us in his fanatical jungle, pounding the pulpit and pointing his finger, demanding our devotion and obedience while asserting that *all our good deeds were as filthy rags*. I could hear the whir of bicycle tires on pavement, my self-propelled promise of escape from the confines of our tiny world, willing to suffer any punishment for a taste of independence.

By the time we were in 3rd grade, I remember Babe's mother mysteriously absent during entire Saturdays spent at her house in the basement where we gave haircuts to dirty, unclothed dolls and concocted "perfumes" by mixing hazardous household cleaning fluids. There was a door between the bathroom and her brothers' bedroom that was always shut tight and when I walked by it, sometimes I would hear a repetitive shuffling of feet and a croaky mumbling that rose and fell like a sermon being rehearsed. There was a strong smell of tobacco smoke in the hallway, an alarming, unfamiliar smell, which would surely provoke the wrath of God. Once, alone upstairs after using the bathroom, I quietly turned the doorknob and pushed slightly. The door was padlocked from the inside and whatever was in there, made an inhuman bleat as I jumped back and fled down the stairs. Just before the church began to crumble and unravel in scandal and depravity, our family moved to North Carolina and Babe and I lost touch, even though the look on her face as we left her standing in our empty driveway haunted me long after my family began a new life far from that place. There was much I would come to understand as the years went by and there is much that remains incomprehensible, but my connection to Babe would prevail and deepen through time and space.

After a long procession on a series of highways, we gathered around the family gravesite. The sun was shining brightly against a blue sky but did nothing to warm us in the cold wind. We buried my dad's sister on a day like this, and his mother. Others were put to rest on hot days and rainy ones. Each body we bury commits one more life to the mutable and unreliable holding tank of memory. I looked across another grave into her familiar, brave, wise, world-weary eyes, bright with the ease of tears. A huge smile broke across the magnificent landscape of her face.

Babe's mother was finally quiet, her ashy remains safe and still beneath the cool and comforting weight of the dark earth.

March 2005

U.S. Military Deaths Top 1,500

<http://www.washingtondispatch.com/spectrum/archives/000779.html>

Jeff Gannon and Talon News: A Disgrace to Internet Publications

<http://www.washingtondispatch.com/spectrum/archives/000774.html>

If it walks like a duct... Tom Ridge and the Department of HomeDepotLand Security

<http://www.pnionline.com/dnblog/attytood/archives/001515.html>

W.'s Stiletto Democracy

http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/022705G.shtml

After Elections, Violence in Iraq Soars as Doubts Grow

<http://www.washingtondispatch.com/spectrum/archives/000773.html>

Don't Blame Wal-Mart

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/28/opinion/28reich.html>

Is The US Gov't Lying About # of Soldiers Killed-TBR News Reported...

http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=104x3197000

Hunter S. Thompson shoots self in head

"Fear and Loathing" author dead at 67

<http://www.denverpost.com/Stories/0,1413,36%257E53%257E2723492,00.html>

Thompson had end all planned, wife says

<http://www.denverpost.com/Stories/0,1413,36%257E23827%257E2731509,00.html>

Pals taking a shot at granting Thompson's wish

"Pirates" star part of effort to blast writer's ashes from cannon

<http://www.denverpost.com/Stories/0,1413,36~53~2727163,00.html#>

America... just a nation of two hundred million used car salesmen with all the money we need to buy guns and no qualms about killing anybody else in the world who tries to make us uncomfortable.

-- Hunter S. Thompson

Absolute truth is a very rare and dangerous commodity in the context of professional journalism.

-- Hunter S. Thompson

The Edge... there is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.

-- Hunter S. Thompson

April 2005

Road Tripping — Part 1

Back then, the earth's magnetic field as we knew it, was humming across the landscapes of the burgeoning suburbs as they expanded around our little red house. These suburban neighborhoods were platted to make a person dizzy and disoriented, creating a false sense of wanderlust and adventure. My father, The Great Navigator, would take us for ice cream, peppermint bon-bon, on an occasional Sunday night after church was finally done. This ritual was practiced year round with extra miles put on for Christmas light tours, but the summer was my favorite because a thin mattress was thrown in the laid-out back of the tan Chevy station wagon and, against my mother's protestations, the rear window would be propped open, ever beckoning me to dangle out of it as we trolled along. The world was dusk as we set out on our journey and the neighborhood streets we would never live on became the curlicue trajectory of my father's dreams and ultimate emasculation as the head of our family. Streetlights slowly bloomed as we drove by the houses like passive stalkers, my father's longings leading us down winding roads, looping around cul de sacs and loping into glorious dead ends.

These were big, beautiful houses with perfectly manicured yards and bushes set just so, aside welcoming front doors. Shining cars were parked pristinely in accompanying driveways or privately, behind garage doors. We observed pretty families settling into comfortable evenings, no doubt born of comfortable days. The heads of children floated through living rooms where fathers rested in reclining chairs, mothers moving to and fro in sparkling kitchens while our tongues tried to keep up with the melting ice cream dripping down our sugar cones. We stared at them through their picture windows. The radio provided a perfunctory if mellifluous soundtrack; big band hits lead by Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller or Duke Ellington, the stylings of Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra or the buttery alto of Rosemary Clooney. With sticky fingers we adjusted our twisted pajamas squirming from side to side on our bellies, jockeying for the best view in our drive-about reality show. They all looked so happy in their happy little happy homes. We existed only because we could see them. This was how we were schooled in the high art of window-shopping; those who can't have, look.

Maps were all over our house. Single state maps, regional maps, Atlases in trucker friendly or family friendly varieties. Red roads connecting to blue roads to interstates to white roads ruled in black and then, only tiny, curvy black roads whose numbers were illegible. He would chart routes to places with yellow highlighter, drawing circles around mysterious points of interest only he understood. My father poured over his maps accompanied by magazines and tour brochures of places we would never go as a family. I watched from the floor, the sofa, the orange chair. He was obsessed with all things western, having taken one trip out there as a young man, and subscribed to *Arizona Highways*, not one issue of which could be thrown away. I watched him travel miles of desert or navigate treacherous mountain passes in his chair under the tungsten light of a floor lamp. If someone asked him a question, he wouldn't answer. He was on the road.

By the time I was nine, we had moved to North Carolina and he had taken a job as a traveling salesman, peddling musical instruments to music stores peppering six states, most below the Mason Dixon line. It was in North Carolina where he ratcheted his window-shopping up a notch or two. We still rode the surrounding neighborhoods which had lost their romance for me by the time I was in junior high, but that remained superior to the late night strip mall trolls made past closing time in order to gaze into the rows of glowing shop case displays filled with carefully posed items we could not afford. But, my father's greatest achievement, which he accomplished in a meticulously pressed suit, starched shirt and stylish, snappy tie, was to befriend a legion of salesmen at a local, upscale car dealership. Test Drive became our summer mantra.

Since he was a salesman too, he was skilled at their game, one he honed as a fatherless St. Paul street kid with a linguistically gifted mother. He knew how to keep the bait just out of reach, keep the hawks perched on their talons outdoing each other for a potential sale and since he had long practiced a moneyed presentation, he might have passed as a rich if neurotic buyer who couldn't make up his mind, preferring to run a car around for a day to see how it suited him. We'll never really know. It may have been his one, shady pleasure, which displeased my mother though it was only detected in her silence.

Now our Sunday excursions consisted of Dad disappearing after church and returning with, say, a lemon colored Buick Riviera convertible. He knew how to disconnect the mileage counter and his maps were already in the car, along with his jar of dry roasted nuts. After demanding that we gussy up a bit in casual summer wear, we'd pile in and head west on I 40, towards the Appalachian mountains or the Blue Ridge Parkway. We would weave along the tree-lined roads, stopping now and then at a scenic overlook. Photographs would be taken. He'd let us sit up on the back of the seat, waving like the prom queens and kings we weren't. We'd lunch on his business credit card at the Mayberry Mills House or one of the golf clubs. Sometimes we'd look at land for sale. A few times he had already lined up a real estate agent to meet us at the site. Then we would drive home sullenly slunk in the back seat while he spun his fantasies of moving to the mountains, which only meant wrenching us from our friends. My mother would nod and say "mmmm," "uh-huh" and "oh..." It didn't matter to her, these mock displays of ostentation, even though she was the only one among us who had been raised with the comfort of money. Still, these were the salad days of our underprivileged lives, when we magically co-opted the amenities of a class we did not and never would belong to.

Thus began a deep dialogue with Direction and how I came to be Lost.

May 2005

your son guy carl died this morning. stop. 26 August 1960

She picked up the telegram from the floor, where it had floated from her mother's hands, and watched her walk unsteadily to the bathroom and quietly close the door. She didn't come out for a long, long time.

Lola speaks of him as if he's among us - and he is - in the way most of our dead people are. His death "wasn't right" and it has haunted her whole life. The hospital never really said how he died. He got sick and died. That was the explanation. She always said he died of a broken heart, not complications from the cerebral palsy, or even the mumps epidemic that hit Sonoma State Hospital where they had left him in the fall of 1958, as she was told by a trusted local many years later, even though the latter had given her comfort at the time. Her mother would tell her, many years later that it was the hardest thing she ever had to do -- leaving her brother behind. The army did not fly any of the Muellers home from Germany, where Lola's father was stationed together with the family, to give Guy Carl a proper burial. He was quietly interned without a service in the Presidio graveyard in San Francisco.

Two weeks ago, this email.

"..... on a lark i decided to research the mumps epidemic at sonoma state hospital-someone was asking about my brother guy-oh, wendy.....just read this. guy went in 1958, died aug '60. i am sick--and trembling o my god. we'll talk soon--love lola"

I read but don't want to believe the words and phrases as they collect and gather speed, a train tearing into the darkness. "(CBS 60 Minutes) Karen Dal Molin lost her baby brother Mark in 1961... born with cerebral palsy, a condition that cripples the body, but not necessarily the mind ... Sonoma State Hospital no death certificate 16,000 people from state hospitals, including children, had been used in government sponsored radiation experiments (between 1955-60) 1,100 children from Sonoma State Hospital where the cerebral palsy population increased by 300

percent ... no records available ... court order issued to release medical records Mark: specimen #8732 ... suffered unusually high fevers the last six months of his life before dying of a seizure (symptoms of radiation poisoning) brain removed after his death (without family consent) ... between 1955 and 1960, the brain of every cerebral palsied child who died at Sonoma State was removed and studied ... the hospital denies that they were involved in such testing ... the family that blew apart in the wake of this boy's death.



From the CBS transcript: *"They [patients] were the raw material of medical research," says Susan Lederer, who teaches medical history at Yale University. She was a member of the presidential committee that investigated the radiation experiments, and she says she wasn't shocked by the findings because researchers have been using disabled children in experiments for over a century - casual explanation from an Yale-educated woman who was a member of a presidential appointed committee to investigate these "practices." Institutionalized individuals were a perfect "control group." She goes on to say, "One of the ways that medical directors of such institutions sort of connected themselves to the world of medical research was simply to provide their patients as commodities," says Lederer. "I mean, we can provide this many guinea pigs for you." So... after the investigation, what happened? Apparently, nothing.*

CBS 60 Minutes entitled this story "A Dark Chapter in Medical History," and by title alone implies a pre-emptive exoneration for the governmentally legitimized criminals who ruled the halls of Sonoma State and no doubt countless other state hospitals across America, relegating this practice of torture and murder deep into the bowels of history as an *unfortunate event*. The questions pile up with the dead bodies of innocent victims, many of whom were children, and *all*

of whom were unable to grant or deny consent owing to their mental and physical deficits. A "ward of court" means, by definition, to be protected by the government, but clearly, these individuals were instead prisoners being tortured and killed by the very government who was mandated to protect them; harvested in the name of medical science. Guy Carl Mueller was certainly not protected by the US government, while his father served during the war and in post-WWII Germany, but was very likely *murdered* by our government and his medical records, evidence of the crimes committed against him were essentially buried with him. And I can't even begin to talk about the other tragedies Lola's family survived in the birth defect category, her mother under the experimental hands of the military compound medical staff for all her pregnancies.

Where is the outrage of our citizenry? Why weren't there millions of letters being sent to CBS after this story aired demanding justice? How can these medical atrocities already have been "investigated" with no punishment rendered? Why weren't there millions of people demonstrating on the hospital grounds across the nation demanding full disclosure? Where is our collective definition of ethics, our sense of morality? I fear that as a society we are being rendered deaf, dumb and blind by the world we are living in - desensitized by the daily spins from a Big Brother government and media.

I have written and re-written this essay for over a week, while having regular conversations with my grieving friend, and it has become too far-reaching, both aft and fore, to adequately address. Myriad spokes spin out from the hub of this horrifying discovery, which become immobilizing when looked at through the lens of the current events. It is so easy to feel utterly cynical and hopeless. Political positioning and definition is everything. That's how we could condemn and continue seeking justice in Nazi war crimes, among them the appalling medical experiments conducted on prisoners (Jews, sympathizers, homosexuals and the handicapped) during WWII, while sanctioning our own medical atrocities on our own soil utilizing the people least able to defend themselves. I'm sure the Nazi's had their positioning as well. As I read the CBS transcript, all I could feel is that nothing really changes and no one in charge tells the truth. The 1960's that followed the 1950's were a brief blip on the revolutionary screen of our history when an outcry

was heard in the streets of our nation and the unacceptable had to be addressed by the ruling bodies, at least for awhile.

But, the hypocrisies and lies and cover-ups are quick to return. Present tense, whatever America's current corporate driven administration decides to acquisition becomes redefined under the same patriotic buzzwords that have been around since the founding of this country: freedom, liberation, protection, justice, equality. These are empty words and I fear that we are becoming a country without a voice. Meanwhile, in one silent corner of our history, Guy Carl Mueller, Mark Dal Molin and uncounted thousands of other children and adults who could not defend themselves were considered expendable to all but the ones who loved them.

Two nights ago, I stood in a sold-out house at First Avenue Mainroom for a concert. My heart was so heavy with the unveiling of Guy Carl's undeniably murderous death, the political extrapolation of it all as it pertains to my life, my community, my country and the world. The band took the stage, the lights went up and spread out before me were hundreds of people waving their hands and singing in unison the words they knew, the words they believed, the words that brought them out of their houses and into this room. I could barely hear the lead singer in the band for the thunderous choir of participants. I have not stood in a large crowd since marches before the election or near the beginning of America's invasion into Iraq. For a brief moment, I felt hope swelling inside me - the power of human beings gathered together, united, with one loud, insistent voice.

To read the story:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/02/09/60II/main672701.shtml>

If you have ideas or comments, please write me here.

June 2005

Road Tripping — Part 2

Direction and being Lost are one and the same to me. They hinge on movement, both literal and metaphorical, but are inexorably linked by the loose chain of wanderlust. When summer arrives, it rattles that chain and the first urge I have is to buy a new pair of sneakers.

The Aunties would spend days preparing the blue Chevrolet Caprice for take-off. The back seat had been transformed into a veritable child's carnival on wheels and it was their specialty to conjure it with carefully concocted magic. Beverly and Lucille were creatures of extensive planning and exacting habits and loved to pamper their nieces and nephews with the things my parents did not approve of or could not afford. In the back seat were delicious distractions enough to keep us duly entertained on a long, blue highway journey to the comely family cabin on the upper peninsula of Michigan. While The Aunties waved their last wands over the car, I raced around their yard testing the super powers of my new Red Ball Jets or PF Flyers, whichever brand had been purchased that week, leaping over the hedgerows or skidding under the wet sheets my grandmother was hanging on the line, which vexed her, since I often pulled one down with me into the dirt.

After hugs and kisses from Mom, Dad and Grandma, which always ended with my sister dissolving into tears, we were finally tucked into our cozy corners of the back seat, anxious to peruse the plethora of goods. There were books to read and books to color in, the latter accompanied by a fresh box of 16 Crayola crayons and a crayon sharpener. Also tucked in the mesh compartments behind their bench seat were games, writing tablets, Mad Libs, crosswords and cardboard bingo boards with the tiny red plastic windows which slid back and forth. In a well-worn, checkered cardboard box between us on the seat were bags of jacks, new paddle boards, inflatable punching balls in swirly colors, and white sailor's caps. Pails, shovels, Tommy Tippee cups, small red boxes of Animal Crackers with lions staring through the bars and a flat string handle on top (I would transport piles of tiny tree toads in them later), a new plush toy for each of us and boxes of Cracker Jack, the prize waiting quietly inside. Lunch boxes on

the floor were filled with variety sandwiches, twist-tie baggies of carrots and celery sticks and bright orange single serving bags of Fritos. Other zipped cases were filled with M&M's, Snickers and Milky Way bars, Hershey's Kisses, Dum-Dums, Pixie Stixs, candy necklaces, Tootsie Pops, Bazooka bubble gum with the tiny comic folded inside the wrapper and still another with cookies, oranges and apples. Ribbed, silver thermoses of juice and milk leaned against the zippered cases. The Aunties' plaid thermoses stayed up front and regularly, the squeak of a stopper would signal coffee being poured into the red cover which doubled as a cup. Auntie Bev would take a sip and say, "ahhhhh... Lu.... it's perrrrfect," every time. They would give us sips occasionally - coffee with cream and plenty of sugar, unlike the black coffee our parents drank which we didn't covet - and told us, again, if we drank too much our knees would turn green.

We drove north on Minnesota Hwy 61 through Stacy and Rush City to Rock Creek heading east on Hwy 70. When we crossed the St. Croix River into Wisconsin over the Grantsburg Bridge the trip really began. The scenery became instantly lush with pine trees amassed on rocky bluffs towering overhead at the river crossing. As the Chevy floated under the iron girders, it felt as if we were entering the portal to a different world, the flat farm fields of Minnesota behind us. The two-lane cut through forests of cedar, aspen, oak and birch, as we scooted over rivers and creeks, whizzed by blue lakes of all sizes dotted with lily pads and rimmed with marshes where herons and egrets waded. We are drive-through visitors on a back road in Wisconsin where life and death are reduced to aromas and fleeting glimpses. Windows rolled down, noses fill with fecund and acrid presences - skunk, moss, pine needles, cow and pig shit, exhaust, lake water, hot tar. We anticipated each of the white signs with faded, black letters announcing the next small town and its meager population as we slowed upon approach; Alpha, Siren, Hertel, Spooner and Hayward. Children rode their bikes on quiet streets, women moved around gardens with hoses, dogs barked, mowers whined and then we left it all behind in the wake of our acceleration. We wound dreamily through the Chequamegon National Forest along the banks of the Chippewa River to Clam Lake, then northeast to Mellen, Upson and Iron Belt. Unrestrained by seat belts in those days, I would spend time perched on the edge of the back seat, watching the hood eat yellow dotted lines, identifying road kill, and alert for deer through the wide-angle technicolor lens of windshield. I would hang my arms, head and bare feet out the window or dangle a sock to

catch air, which might fly away, but I'd be too ashamed to say so. Or, I would nestle into my corner, and hum sad songs no one could hear over the buffeting wind, feeling safe and lost.

All along the way, there were The Songs - a seemingly endless array of them - the ones we were taught during these summer adventures and the ones I will no doubt be singing on my deathbed retro-journey when departing from this splendiferous world. They were strange, confusing and tinged somehow with naughtiness, a crack in the pure, white eggshell of the cult Christian world we lived in ...

*While the organ peeled potatoes
Lard was rendered by the choir.
While the sexton rang the dishrag
Someone set the church on fire.
Holy smokes! the parson shouted
In the rush he lost his head.
Now his hair resembles heaven
For there is no parting there.*

Or this one....

*Down by the seashore, dimmer - dimmer
I saw a figure, slimmer - slimmer
Her teeth were fossil, her hair was peroxide
I saw by the moon that her eyes were cross-eyed
The ruffles on her petty coats blowin' in the breezes
Sounded like sandpaper rubbin' on her kneeses
Things like these a woman can dooooo ---
to make a man leave home.*

The Aunties never hurried and lived to indulge our every whim. We were as close to having children as they would ever come and they were childlike themselves, which explains why they

knew just what would please us. Grown-ups didn't interest them much. We were their world. They paid attention and loved to pamper us but we knew not to take advantage of their generosity. They would stop if there were a county fair or a pile of rocks to climb or an overlook or a park with a swing set. Inevitably, however, after we were bored with coloring and reading, had stopped a time or two for Cee's bouts of carsickness, weren't allowed any more candy and the creamed & sugared coffee was long gone, I would get restless and start picking on my sister. Had I not been let out of the car recently to climb on more rocks, these exchanges might escalate and be followed with bouts of pinching and slugging, and then either gales of uncontrollable laughter or tears. The Aunties, who never scolded, would simply distract us with yet another song....

*I-I-I-I know a gal I do
Her name is One-Lung Sue
She's chief engineer of the Shirttail Laundry
Down by the riverside blue
Her beauty's all she has
With a face like a soft-shell crab
And a stiff upper lip like the rudder of a ship
By golly, she looks sad.*

*That's where my money goes
To buy my baby clothes
I buys her everything to keep her in style
wulla-wulla-wulla-
She's worth her weight in gold
My coal-black baby
Yes, boys, that's where my money
Go---ooo----oooes!*

Finally tunneling into the tiny, bumpy dirt road lined with raspberry bushes and low-hanging birches, Bliss found its three-week run. Time slowed and then, utterly vanished into events like

watching a mosquito fill its belly with Auntie Lu's blood or submerging with swim goggles again and again to look at the hundreds of fish eggs adhered like a big, gelatinous brain to the dock posts or being lulled to hammock-sleep by the shushing leaves. When we climbed back into the car to return home, the toys had been emptied of magic and my sneakers had spent their rocket fuel but the road stretched out before us like the only way to longing and timeless endlessness.

July 2005

Contented House

The garbage truck just pulled up in front of the house. We had taken two weeks worth down late last night in a post-tornadic drizzle after returning from the city. The recycling pile had grown to epic proportions. Bonding takes on mundane and endearing qualities when two people are nesting well.

Our wedding day approaches. Ramping up to this event might test our conflict/resolution skills, but there seems to be little or no need of them, even with the potential for 400+ guests in our yard the second week in August. Everything seems to arrive or settle just when it should, and the path of least resistance is under our feet. The drama meter hovers around zero most days and we spend most evenings, if we're not entertaining, writing or reading on our respective lap tops set up next to each other on the porch, sipping wine or Jameson after dinner and musing over current or historical events from the conceptual to the practical. Music floats through the rooms and dogs crowd the chairs and floors, panting. Money comes and goes, dishes dry on the counter, gardens are weeded and shed doors repaired. Food fills and empties from the refrigerator and cupboards, laundry gets washed, bathrooms scrubbed and an entire room becomes revitalized when someone's secret plan materializes. This feels like a good utilitarian life.

I have lived on this planet for a while and survived some things. I had come to expect and accept, on some very basic level, that the essence of living is neither comfortable nor fulfilling, but learned to embrace the fleeting moments of joy and satiation with gusto. There was one state of being, however, I had never experienced and had no knowledge of existing until meeting B; the state of Chronic Contentment. When it arrived, I didn't recognize it and didn't know what to do

with it. I am the kind of woman who works out a worry through physical distraction and this foreign feeling interrupted my daily angst-ridden tasks. Somewhat suddenly, projects could wait. Stress was mysteriously eroding, seemingly, on its own. It confused my creative exporting process, which I'd mined for years with struggle, frustration and loneliness. I began preparing more regular meals and finally putting weight back on. Bottles of wine were emptying, I was laughing more and I needed less sleep, even though going to bed wrapped in the arms of this safety and attention was (and remains) intoxicating. Eventually, hours were being spent with B talking or not talking at all and I began to feel less anxiety-ridden about much of anything. In fact, that endless need for "my own space" had all but vanished and, in fact, I became aware that I could spend endless time with him and feel as if I were exercising solitude. It's been two years and the landscape continues horizon upon horizon.

I guess all I can say is that this is a moment in time on my time line. I'm certain Life will hurl its fastball at us and brush us back eventually. But somehow, I am assured that we'll get through anything that comes our way with attentiveness, kindness and grace. I'll figure out how to write songs from this newly charted territory and resume my determined task-mastering for reasons other than shedding anger and confusion. My house is becoming our home and there is boundless love and respect and endlessness within it.

It is within this gentle if surreal reality that I marry this man, very possibly in love for the first and only time in my long and sordid life. I love you, truly B. Life is long.



August 2005

Well. This is it - where it's come to. On the 13th of this month I will be married to the man of my dreams... beyond my dreams. Shit... I didn't even have dreams. Dreams? Dreams were weird - absent - not a part of my reality. I've been through a few things, as I've said before.

Tonight, an old friend came down here around 3:00. We sat on the porch catching up, reaching back, and being here. We've raised our children together, been through thick, thin and then some. We drank gin & tonics in the late afternoon. Then, we drank wine and ate some cheeses & olives.... tossing the bad peach. Then, we took a long walk with the dogs as the sun was dipping below the tree line. It's been hot and humid. The birds are lazy and slow. The black-eyed Susans, bergamot, coneflowers, tall coreopsis and Indian paintbrush were making their presence known across the wide prairie. There was barely a breeze as we walked up the hill. Returning home, I made a navy bean, organic red onion, garlic, cherry tomato & sage compote for our pasta with a bit of French bread and a fresh greens salad to keep it company. We had more wine. Kitty was home and joined us for dinner. Just another Lovely Night on the Porch of Contentment. I wish you were all here. B is with his posse having a weekend of the boys he grew up with and the boys that came along when he became a man - all to celebrate his farewell to a life without companionship even though he has so much of it already. All these things are in keeping with our life and in celebration of the blending of our lives. The paradoxes are everywhere.

Ramping up for this wedding has been nothing if not easy. There will be 350-400 here to celebrate our nuptials. I'll stand up on the deck off our bedroom and look over a yard filled with people I know and love, people B knows and loves and people we both will, no doubt (if history proves us right) love from each other's deep and varied histories. I don't even know how I will eloquently state my intentions standing in my (our) yard in front of these witnesses in a way that can reveal my love for this man. Life is curious, serendipitous, mysterious and sometimes beautiful. All these things encompass our love for ourselves, and for each other.

A prairie surrounds us, a prairie devours us, a prairie brought us together - inexplicably. And now, a prairie will embrace our union in its wide field. Grateful, humble, content.

I've found the ultimate sidekick for life.
Happy trails lead away from here and return here.
Life is long.



September 2005

There are times and there are Times and then, there is *Timelessness* - that place which smears the loose, human concept of *time* altogether a place where those of us In Company, In Union with one another out of time brilliantly converge. I'm no scientist, but I feel certain that one of them would have a lovely if mathematical and implicitly romantic way to scratch on the blackboard what I'm attempting to speak of here.

There were planes landing and cars driving in the direction of those landing strips to retrieve the adored and anticipated. There was recognition exploding from curbsides, arms thrown skyward, happy dances, luggage piled into auto-rear entries, weary but jacked-up travelers transported to what would prove to be a gathering beyond any fore-knowledge or expectation, even though expectation had been a theme we'd all been singing for many months. Pillaged pink naked ladies arrived on graceful, hollow stems from western slopes with Lola & GH, surviving the trip as the true champions they are - pink petals pushing. Beds had been dressed in advance with fresh sheets and new cocktails were concocted as we all moved in a synchronized, unrehearsed dance from kitchen to table. The table was filled, emptied, filled again and again and rife with communion gearing up for The Event - which was already reinventing itself during ramp up. Cars drove up the driveway. The phone rang off the hook. Laughter & tears, recognition & first meetings, reuniting, rejuvenating, recollecting, reconfiguring.

Daddio, Cee, H&G, Byrdie, The Reverend, Eze, Buzzy, Isabel & Sadie. Rob, Maureen, Fatguy, Mike and Lola. GH, Hannah, Franz, Kitty, Amy, Courtney & Jillian. Renee and Mr. & Mz. NGLS. The dogs ran and plundered endless affection from us. Love poured from and between and around every person in our house - our sanctified haven. Poetry rained. Rain poured from tumultuous grey skies Wedding Day/Eve in an unpredictably predictable, ass-kicking display of power and tripmaster-monkeying, proving once again that begging Mother Nature is futile and submission is mandatory, regardless of outcome. Selah. Submission received, this time she chose to smile upon us, grin and then laugh out loud, delivering a perfectly cool and lovely day following, which begged a bonfire blaze after the sun drowned in its own luxurious sink. It is our way and the way we had imagined. And the band played on and on.

I talked to and touched everyone and no one - the night a luscious and intoxicating blur - a lifetime of loving and connecting piled into my yard, heaped into *our yard* in abundance, heaving drifts against both of us like a Midwestern blizzard; a pile of love and what presses beyond it into the white-out oblivion. If you think I'm exaggerating, I'm not.

Sometime that evening, I stepped out onto the 3rd floor deck and surveyed what teemed before me. A hive of 500 humming bees who know and love and surround us, meeting and greeting one another, coming together to celebrate our union on this glorious prairie, in this lush river valley. Scout & Navigator worlds collided gently and emphatically into an impossible if destined embrace around our love, because of our love, and even in spite of our love. This Big Love. We are so grateful to you and you and you and all of you. You hold us high and hold us together.

We were, *alofus*, swooned, helpless and flush as the music swelled again and again. "I Only Have Eyes for You" finally summoned B & I to a tungsten-lit stage as lighters-held-high flickered all around us. My beloved husband held me, turned me, looked into my eyes like a man who knows. Holding me close to his chocolate suit as the song wound out, he dipped me towards earth and into heaven, stars littering the sky as our loved ones littered the ground, cheering & holding their little butane torches high.

Our unity rocket, lit with blue propane torches just hours before, had blazed into a bluer than blue-can-be skyand there was no report, because this love has no end. Forever is here.

Married. Beyond Bliss. August 13, 2005.



unity rocket lighting



married

October 2005

Harvest

The ditches are busy lately. One motionless grey tabby, two and a half bloated coons, a graceful-necked young doe, a few flattened squirrels with bushy tails still swishing in the breeze, a brown and white rabbit, and two days ago, what appeared to be a black & white, Holstein calf on the shoulder of Hwy 52. Its lack of coordination was evident in the way it fell. I winced, imagining the young animal, having wandered inexplicably out of its element, being struck and violently spun, faltering to its feet one last time, one last decision; the final effort in the inertia of a surprise ending.

I rolled over in bed, foggy eyes on a moonlit floor, while access to my uterus had just moments before been in my open palms. The tiny fetuses varied in size depending on length of gestation. Five of them, one for each time I'd had unprotected sex, I'd said, shaking my head. They were packaged neatly in small, slightly discolored plastic wrappers, which were warm and steaming up a bit on the inside. Each wrapper was sealed with an attractive die-cut tag stapled at the top, making them suitable for hanging in a drugstore display case. They looked like bits of candy... colors artificial and endearing but not unique. Fritzie Fresh candies -- *Made to Enjoy! Packaged to Share*. I registered only mild fascination with them but had already decided I was tossing them out -- heading towards a trashcan by the counter, hesitating briefly before releasing them. I felt unattached - there would be more. My companion, who was washing dishes, staring out a window with her back to me said, with vague judgment in her monotone, *you know, the last ones turn out best*. I felt caught, shame flushing into my cheeks. I should never have showed them to her. She would never have known.

The season is turning. The virginal summer flowers in my garden have gone the way of all great beauties but the leaves on the maple tree have only begun to impress us with the fiery wisdom of their final days. One man died when a tree fell in Anoka during our last tornado. He was a nameless, five-second news blip tantamount to the latest 200 dead in Iraq I heard about this

morning driving back from town. Darfur has not been mentioned lately and the Gulf Coast is busy rebuilding their casinos.

Vociferous Owl lives in the forest bordering the north side of the house. He appears to entertain the creative fantasies of a songbird or a whip-poor-will and he is in proud possession of a velvety tenor. Every night for the last few weeks after 10pm *Whoo-hoo-HOO* (short/short/glissando). I'm enchanted by the round, gentle and insistent voice. It sounds like mourning -- or joy, which always become each other sooner or later. In the fields under golden soybean leaves, Owl's audience of small prey scurries away from the concert tree --- rescued, perhaps for awhile, by song.

November 2005

Chance Encounters

The hard, lime-green milkweed pods of spring dry in the heat of late summer, turning the grey-brown color of weathered barn wood. By the time the windy fall days arrive, the pods have cracked open to reveal hundreds of chocolate brown seed heads which, while packed like sardines, are adorned instead with lovely, gossamer dresses. They flutter open when easily urged from the pod, glistening in the low-lying sunlight like the aerialist ballerinas they are born to be. I stood for a long time in the lower prairie thirty yards from the river's edge peeling them from their casing and sending them aloft one by one.

Each took their own individual ascent; some leaving my fingers cautiously, drifting slowly and purposefully until they gained balance and gathered speed, others diving and reaching out to grab the nearest dried stalk of thistle or bent coreopsis where they clung like terrified toddlers. Then there were those that seemed to squirm from my grasp, twirling madly with heads thrown back in escape and I swear I could hear their ecstatic squeals as they took for the thermals above the treetops. I watched one rise for a long time until it seemed to vanish suddenly against a white tumbling backdrop of clouds. It did not vanish, however. It ended up somewhere - in the beak of a bird, or floating down the aimless river, perhaps trapped in the crotch of a tree. It could also have landed back on earth and become part of forest floor fertilizer, or better, onto a well-drained, sun-drenched field where it would take root after a long winter. Any of these things could happen.

Thursday afternoon, I pushed hard on the dark, heavy-planked back door of the U Otter Stop Inn, which creaked loudly in protest. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer greeted me, as well as the old man with his thinning grey ponytail seated at the end of the bar, and right in front of this entrance. He turned and grinned, uttering something I didn't quite understand. He's a regular. He has only two visible teeth and a greasy blue baseball cap, the well-loved brim worn, browned and misshapen. I tossed something unintelligible back at him over my shoulder in response as my cell phone rang. I finished that call and had two more calls to attend to from the table I took

along the back wall before approaching the bar to order a drink. A perky bartender I'd never seen before looked very out of place at this neighborhood watering hole, her freshly flipped hair bouncing jauntily at the shoulders of her pink golf shirt. It was 5:30. She greeted me and filled my order with the careful moves of a novice.

I had endured one of those work days that makes me question everything about who I am and the life I'm living. It's one of those days that wrangles me roughly into a self-protective cage of defiance and judgment where, from between the bars, I snarl and snap and threaten. A meaningless business that fills my days with meaningless drama demanding my attention in order that I feed my children and pay my bills. At that moment, I hated myself and was too aware of how I was squandering my days.

Returning to the table with my drink, I removed my glasses & rubbed my eyes, took a gulp of Jameson, and then grabbed a deep breath, which I shoved out of my lungs like an intruder. I hung my head on the heels of my hands briefly and then looked up towards the opening front door in anticipation of my friend. A couple of guys shuffled in instead, big men with hunting jackets on, laughing in ceremonious comradery. They sat two stools away from a short, stocky dark-haired man who seemed lit up with nowhere to burn; legs jumpy on the bar rail, head turning in the direction of any movement or sound. Five empty stools to the right of him, a small, trollish woman in a Minnesota Twins warm-up jacket, jeans and bumper tennis shoes slipped from her stool and delivered a couple beers to the elderly couple at the round table next to the men's bathroom hunched over a cribbage board with calm, ritualized intensity. We were all here on our deliberate or misguided missions. The tiny woman came towards my table.

"Hello...." she said, her twinkly eyes reaching out before her hands did. Her face was wizened and beseeching beneath her Twins baseball cap. "My name is Bonnie," she offered as she gently but firmly squeezed my hand with both of hers. Her fingers were narrow and long for her size, her nails well attended to, if a bit yellowed and having collected the little dirt line at the nail bed edge.

"Why are you sitting here all alone?"

I adored her immediately. "I'm meeting a friend and he's late - I'm okay.... really!"

"Are you?" she queried, dark navy blue eyes kind, steady, unflinching. Her breath was a sweet burst of whiskey and beer as she stroked my hand in a grandmotherly way. "I just don't want you to be lonely. You can sit with me at the bar until your friend comes." The old bar fly with the grey mane who had hailed me at the door was entering the men's room just then. Bonnie turned to him and said, "She's okay.... see? She's okay!" They smiled in complicity. I had been previously discussed.

I was just about to accept her offer, curious about her, when Friend walked in. The spell was broken and Bonnie wandered back to her stool after a brief introduction. Friend ordered, we slammed our drinks between brief conversation, hurrying to the recording studio next door where we had work to do. While he paid for his drink, I slid my arm around Bonnie's sinewy shoulder, thanking her for looking after me. She said, "You just looked lost.... and I just lost my husband," she blurted. My sudden emotion surprised both of us as tears welled up and spilled.

"O.....Bonnie...." I looked into her suddenly grey, drawn face. "How long were you married?"

"Twenty-seven years, and it wasn't near long enough...." she trailed off and looked away into the depths of her shallow drink, stirring self-consciously with the little blue-striped straw.

"So what.... do you do?" I stumbled.

"I work here a few nights.... and all my friends are here.... so....." she trailed off again, lighting a cigarette absentmindedly even though the recent smoking ban in Minneapolis prohibited it. "But, it's hard.... you know?" She blinked, slowly, the smoke escaping from her nose before she blew it from her mouth, flicking her ash on the barroom floor.

"Yes I know...." I wouldn't tell her all the reasons why I knew, I couldn't begin..... but in that last long look, we briefly became each other.

The next morning, I was returning from the lower prairie with the dogs. They'd worn themselves out in the field; up and down the embankments, chasing scents through the underbrush, Rocky in endless and earnest pursuit of the grey squirrels torturing him from the top of the pines. We were almost home but at the turnaround, Jack & Rocky shot into the tree line flushing out a huge, brown rabbit, suddenly running for his life. He slammed into the daydreaming Romeo with an audible thwack. As Romeo spilled over backwards he reached back with his lightning terrier reflexes and snatched the huge rabbit by the throat, blood immediately soaking its fur, the hind legs pumping air. The eyes went immediately glassy, the fear transformed into a surrendered stare. Romeo dragged the huge rabbit laboriously around the corner and laid it down on the edge of the roadside. There, the creature traversed through the death rattle, blood spilling from its mouth with each expiring exhale. I felt nauseous and a bit chilled, caught in the throes of this feral death, time smearing, and waiting to see what Romeo would do next.

As he lifted the limp lagomorph from the blacktop to carry him five feet further down the road, Jack the Alpha Dog wheeled around the corner, snatching Romeo's kill from his mouth in one, deft move and skidding to a stop, Romeo standing dumbfounded between us. Jack's eyes were fixed on mine. In a broken voice I said, "Jack! Drop it!"

The rabbit lay in the middle of the road. There was no more breath, legs were bent against the weight of circumstance, heart still, the rich brown fur blowing in the morning breeze.

December 2005

Same World, Worlds Apart

The grey clouds roll before us like great bolts of fabric seeming to unfurl a white stitched road from the last in their scalloped, felted regiment. Flocks of dark birds lift and yaw in chorus from corduroyed fields while taciturn silos stand like bulwarks near faded farmhouses and their collapsing, venerable barns. Black and white cows loll behind long, weathered fence lines, raising their heavy heads against the sturdy winds of November. We are traveling East on the highway to Thanksgiving.

K coughs regularly from the back seat where she is stretched out under a blanket, expectorating the grip of a bad cold. Her nose is raw from too many tissues but she is in good spirits. She is reading the Iliad and occasionally shares a particularly gruesome battle scene with us. The last one involved the sword of Agamemnon raised against "some guy who pissed him off." The unworthy combatant was left without his head or hands, just a slumped hemorrhaging trunk with no communication skills. B is driving. He stays primarily in the Left Lane because it's where he feels he belongs, and speaks only occasionally when spoken to and even then, with a decided lack of connection. He's focusing on traffic. I put on my dark glasses, which cut through the grey haze and peer through them at everything on the wide margins of the road and everything is interesting. I'm in my own little movie.

Two weeks ago, cars zipped through the green light behind me while I waited next to an available meter on East University Avenue, listening to the comforting, repetitive click of the turn signal until I parked. I turned off the car and began rummaging through my belongings on the passenger seat to organize what I would bring into the coffee shop while the nose end of a shopping cart crept into my peripheral vision on the sidewalk. An obese man was struggling to steer an ungainly load of fat green army bags, simultaneously stuffing the vestiges of a submarine sandwich into his mouth. He came to a jerking halt with a holler and, leaning unsteadily on the cart handle, leered through the car window at me. I grabbed some quarters from

the ashtray and got out, juggling my purse, date book & laptop in order to plug the meter. I was in a hurry and already on the defensive.

I had the second quarter in the slot when Cart Man shouted in my direction. I turned to look at him as his intensity bore down on me, gaping mouth smeared with mayonnaise and mustard. He was wearing two hats and a couple of jackets stretched over a grimy, tie-dyed t-shirt and disheveled grey pants. He was clearly drunk, teetering and groping for the handle of the shopping cart for support, which was giving him nothing of the kind as it rolled and tipped away with each attempt to steady himself. His acrid smell overwhelmed the exhaust of a city bus roaring by.

"Gimme some chaa-hange!" he bellowed, glaring at me.

I'm a creature of white, lower-middle class guilt. I measure the disparity between me and someone I consider less fortunate, for whatever reason, with overly dramatic compassion, so my disgust with him took me off guard. I tossed my last quarter onto the sidewalk, as if throwing a scrap of meat to a starving mongrel and glared back. Immediately, I felt a plummeting sickness in my stomach. It was a cruel thing to do, even if his angry demands were undeserving of my kindness, and I wished I'd not done it. I wrestled anxiously with my conscience as I watched him wrestle with his uncooperative body for the coin, and as he did, the shopping cart slipped from his grasp and lurched sideways into the door of my car.

"Dude! Your cart just ran into my car!" I yelled incredulously, marching around him to inspect the damage. There was a deep scratch on the passenger door of my otherwise pristine 2004 Golf turbo diesel. My emotions were a scramble of knee-jerk reactions and well-studied intentions like the Keystone Cops frantically careening from the station on the heels of a bawdy if invisible offender. I stood staring at my car - an object, a noun, a possession, an inanimate necessity without which I could not work, get groceries home, haul things, or run the errands daily life demands, which had suddenly become a haughty poster child tacked up between two worlds, receiving its first life scar.

He said, "Awww.... it's okay.... nothing happened," as he pulled the cart away from my stupid, grey European car, purchased at a hard-earned insurance discount after the previous one had met its end in an intersection in Onamia, MN. I pay \$288 a month for this ridiculous American privilege and my self-employment keeps the repo-man sucking his pencil every month.

"It's scratched!" I said, "LOOK!" continuing to crash down this horrible corridor of shameful, upscale behavior. I couldn't believe what was happening. Who Am I?

"Whaddergonna do? Call the cops?" his disgusting breath blasted my cheek.

"Yeah, like that's gonna do either one of us any good..." I sputtered, turning to look into his red-rimmed eyes, beginning to reclaim my humanity, which lasted only briefly. Whaaaaaaa.... "Why don't you just give me my fucking money back!?" He stared at me and I stared back. We were locked in each other's eyes for three bewildering seconds, which seemed an eternity while unspoken stories and excuses pushed each of us towards edges of cliffs where the ground fell away towards hell.

I heaved a sigh and walked away. When I got to the corner, I heard his hoarse voice calling to me from the scratched Volkswagen door a quarter of a block away..... "Sorryyyy....." I didn't turn around. I wouldn't! The Irish hair at the nape of my neck was stiff and unrelenting. I crossed the street and looked back only when I got through the double doors of the coffee shop hoping that sonovabitch wasn't ramming my car with his cart, and absolutely sure he should have been.

Inside, a mentally challenged man was doing a good job rounding up trays and asking if our food was good. He came around and around with endearing and repetitive inquiries, his slurred, overly emphatic speech echoing into the 18 foot ceilings. I engaged with him, met his eyes, asked him how his day was going, gave him my spent plate and rumpled napkin, assuaging myself after my disorienting street encounter. I was numbly extrapolating upon the scenario where one person, well.... each of us.... does what we can with what we have and being a fat, belligerent, drunk street dweller holds no candle brighter than this man.... and, perhaps.... after all, me. Right? I felt like a Hallmark card and my idea went dark.

At the table across from me, a mother and father ignored their two-year old and talked in animated fervor with a female friend who had two older children at the table, also ignored. It would only seem to follow that they ignored the beseeching worker, used to being ignored, who continued happily visiting their table with his carefully memorized queries. The toddler saw him, looked at him, smiled and offered him a Cheerio from the wooden high chair tray. I decided to leave before the next thing happened. I was in my own little movie.

The traffic increased as we neared Madison, Wisconsin embarking upon Thanksgiving 2005. We took the back way into the city, by the municipal airport and down Johnson Street. After retrieving the keys from H, who was anxious to get off work to join us, we unloaded the car into her apartment and set up shop for the Thanksgiving weekend. It would not go as we might have all secretly planned. Nothing does. Even if we all know there is no Santa Claus, we still believe. Everyone got sick in situ and with the ingestion of frightening amounts of ibuprofen and alcohol, managed to have fun and (sorta) do stuff. I'd like to think it's because everyone enjoys each other's company but I'm the mother who threw a quarter down on the sidewalk to a fucked up street guy, cooked a Thanksgiving dinner in a tiny kitchen for six hours while my children watched a six-episode dvd of Sex in the City and my husband of three months sat in an uncomfortable chair with his laptop, ear buds sunk deep into his ears to avoid the television excursion, his face exhibiting all manner of ³eeeeewww² until, finally, it was time for dinner. The toast, delivered brilliantly from the man who not only married us but also joined us for this Madtown Thanksgiving was..... "Here!"

We're all in our own little movie.

January 2006

Gathering

A band of jays, a pitying of turtledoves, a quarrel of sparrows.

I stopped feeding the birds about a year ago. I don't really know why. True, it was a production to buy the 50# bags of differing seed types necessary to feed the variety fowl, haul it all up behind the house, especially in winter, and mix it together in the weathered aluminum can. The feeders attracted squirrels, which consumed far more of the feed than the birds, and their presence provoked the dogs, cause for much whimpering, barking and chasing. But, I loved watching and identifying the birds, so I didn't mind the efforts or annoyances. The plain brown sparrows and finches were plentiful and the juncos playful. The nuthatches scurried up and down the trunk around the woodpeckers. Robins and ravens mixed with bluejays and cedar waxwings. Some rare days, I would be lucky enough to catch a cardinal, a goldfinch and an indigo blue bunting at the feeder together, redyellowblue leaping into harmony. I miss them.

A murmuration of starlings, a siege of herons, a troubling of hummingbirds.

Friends and family trickled in, spilled in, gushed in. All ages, sizes and personalities bringing their hopes, joys, secrets and disappointments. Lights were low, candles and fireplace burning. The ritual food was rich, wild and musty - jammy wine, roasted root vegetables, elk, plum sauce, pomegranate and greens, dark crusty bread, thick slabs of butter. Conversation hummed and simmered, swelling beyond its own embracing rim. The lost were found, the lonely met, the anticipated welcomed; a variety of hearts, humor and wit in impossible sync, glasses raised, "Here.... to family, friends as family, revelation and revolution!" Across town and across an un-flown universe, a confluence of blood, a dissolution of siblings, an entanglement of wives. Years of misunderstandings, assumptions, failed attempts, accusations, isolations, frustrations. We were not invited to their tables and they would not join us at ours. We gather instead on opposing shores while our father flies tirelessly back and forth between us.

A deceit of lapwings, a murder of crows, a conspiracy of ravens.

Among other beloved luminaries, Fatguy flew in from Oregon for the holidays. One of the gifts he brought us were a sublimely tacky, sculpted trio of birds whose bodies are split at angles where magnets were adhered. To play, each half was placed on opposing sides of a pane of glass giving the illusion that they were soaring through the window and into the room. The blue bird now flies in from the south-facing dining room window; the cardinal and hummingbird float from stacks of dishes through the hutch door panes in the same room. The tokens of affection we exchange keep us living in each other's houses. These kitschy clay birds will hover over us the way our love hovers over Oregon.

An exaltation of larks, a parliament of owls, a charm of goldfinches.

This morning, under heavy grey skies, I watched a few birds gather at the foot of the oak tree beyond my kitchen window. They were rummaging through the snow, instinct having led them back to a tree once used for shelter and a feeder once counted on for sustenance.

February 2006

The Time During Which I Attune Myself to My Own Limitations

The phone rings interrupting epic, fragmented dreams. Dogs with full bladders and empty stomachs whine. I sleep in late. Dirty dishes pile up on the right side of the sink and emerge clean, lined up neatly on the left. Olives and cheese and crackers on a plate, possibly with apples. The sound of brown paper bags being folded. The phone rings. Dayendlessdays of flat, grey light. Mail arrives. Writing and writing but nothing gets written. I listen for voices. Birds come and go from the feeder. The days are not short enough. Give me the night. Corks slide easily from bottles. Candlelight is extinguished when bowing wicks drown in the heat of intention. Onions simmer in butter. Soiled cloth napkins are sent floating down the chute. The fireplace is the center of the universe and the woodpile is never enough. Mice scurry across the dingy linoleum out from under the shadow of cupboards. People come in the door, sit, talk and go out the door. We create characters as if we are gods but we can't control what they are doing. Packs of cigarettes open and burn away. There is talk of meaning and process while tired phrases are passed lovingly around a room. I am frustrated, tossing and turning within the drum of my own judgments and shortcomings. Fingers clickclickclick on a keyboard. We speak of poverty and political oppression and don't want to romanticize the community a lack of luxury affords as we sip our wine. Writing and writing but nothing gets written. I stare out the window and watch the yellow bus swallow children. The dogs send squirrels scrambling up tree trunks. I place stamps just so on the corners of envelopes. The phones rings. I make coffee. I fall asleep in the red chair.

The day before the moon is full, fresh snow falls. The luminous orb heaves itself up over the horizon's edge like Lowell's fat man crawling out of the bathtub. It will spend the next twelve hours turning slow, illuminating somersaults over my house.

After midnight, I draw away from the tungsten glow of spent oak logs and go outside. The yard is irradiated with hallucinatory-blue amorphous light, which glares lovingly on everything beneath its lidless stare. The bare oak, maple, lilac and scruffy buckthorn branches make desperate, harsh shadows on the white snow beneath their empty outstretched arms. Everything

is exposed under this brazen if benevolent moonlight, and by the time I descend onto the wide-open prairie, I shrink into reverent confusion. I am even smaller than insignificance.

March 2006

Squirrel Politics

It's February and I am just not getting anything accomplished. Songs aren't getting written and I suck on guitar. My new Quickbooks Pro edition lays in its bright green shrink-wrapped package next to my bed taunting me about taxes I refuse to come to terms with. My studio looks like the police ransacked it in search of criminal evidence. The basement is a moldy nightmare piled to the rafters with shit I don't need in sagging boxes and bedraggled bags. I'm utterly uninspired to write that breakfast scene in a screenplay I'm lucky to be working on with a very patient, focused and intelligent individual whose ability to set goals and meet them is staggering. There is a new baby I need to meet, a birthday card and a sympathy card that need sending, an eye appointment to be made, a car begging to be vacuumed out and washed. Tonight, I just realized I forgot to take the garbage and recycling down and it's 11:00pm. In short, I sorta hate myself right now. It's the perfect time, then, to turn my attention deficits toward a virtually unsolvable American obsession: squirrels eating food meant for birds.

The bird feeder hangs from the gnarly branch of an enormous oak tree at the back of my house, just outside the dining room window. I'd not purchased birdseed for many months, but when my screenplay partner was here for a week from Boulder in January, some synchronistic conversation was had involving St. Francis of Assisi. The next morning, after enjoying a satisfying, greasy breakfast at the local truck stop, we swung into the garden store in town where they carry a wide array of designer bird food. This stuff is ridiculously expensive compared to the 50# bags of low-grade millet sporting scant, emaciated sunflower seeds easily acquired at the AG store, but at the time, it seemed spiritually critical to purchase the Cadillac of avian fare after the saint of little furry and feathered forest creatures had all but showed up in the room the previous night.

I laid my check card down and walked out with the large bag of hand-scooped Happy Birdy Mix #2, loaded with peanuts, cracked corn, safflower and sunflower seeds. I swelled with pride as I filled the feeders, but within thirty minutes, grey squirrels were circling and attacking the feeder

like sharks, emptying it of its contents within a couple days. After Nick left, I didn't fill the feeder again for weeks.... until today.

I had been musing about ways to defend the feeder while washing dishes at the kitchen window, watching the empty cylinder sway in the cold wind. I had thought about using one of those half-gallon plastic orange juice containers somehow.... but never came up with a viable plan. Then, the proverbial idea bulb over my head lit up. It was so simple I could barely believe it. Cut the side off a wine box and attach it to the rope. It would be slippery, tippy, and block the squirrels from attaching to the cylinder. Brilliant. Everyone in the house thought it was brilliant. I prepared the barrier, cutting across the cardboard from one side to the center where I punched a hole, and slid it onto the rope above the feeder.

The next thirty minutes we waited for the creatures to get a whiff of what was now available in the feeder. The squirrels arrived first, of course. The chubby one scrambled out on the branch to where the rope was attached and sat over the strange, flopping cardboard square, puzzled. Then he went head down on the rope, as he was accustomed to, but as he neared the cardboard barrier, the wind flipped it up almost perpendicular to the ground, which scared the shit out of him. He instantly retreated to higher branches. Over the next hour, he attempted myriad approaches with no success. Lola, who was enjoying the breakfast show with me, inhaled her eggs when the squirrel finally braved a step onto the cardboard and slid off, tumbling to the ground, just as I had imagined he would. It was a banner moment.

Enter the younger, more daring, less chubby squirrel. He ruined everything. He tried a few dives down the rope with more conviction and less fear than his predecessor, and on the fourth attempt went for it, stretching his body out, sliding down the plane of cardboard until he could grasp the cylinder with his front legs and arrogantly overtake the barrier. He flipped the cardboard back after his descent with his hind legs in dancer fashion and shamelessly pilfered the cornucopia of nutty treasures in full-on security breach. We were pissed.... standing at the window, banging on the panes, redesigning the barrier in our minds as we watched him gorge with the fortitude of a terrorist.

Greed has no fences. I thought about my shotgun.

The rest of the day, modifications were made to the failed homemade squirrel inhibitor; raising and lowering of the cardboard, stiffening agents, washers and duct tape and all manner of reinforcements applied -- to no avail. At the end of the game: Squirrels - 1, Homeland Security - 0. Ironically, during that long, long day while we fought for the birds, I never saw even one junco perched at the feeder.

Those ungrateful, feathery little bastards.....

April 2006

Creature Comforts

It's a grey, rainy Sunday morning. No one else in my house is awake. The refrigerator is humming absentmindedly and I can see the steam from the dryer wafting past the dining room window where I am sitting.

The last month was my most current example of *that kind of craziness* only Americans can create and pull off with such deliberate, important and exasperated panache. It's how we are raised in this country and it's expected of us as citizens, even at the risk of heart disease, anxiety attacks or the erosion of relationships. I can't believe how many times in a month I say or hear, "It's been so crazy!" Philosophically, I don't agree with any of it, but hypocritically, I find myself cursing at that slow driver in the left lane.

There are windows, however, that float by all the time. I see their frames everywhere. I was looking through one of them on St. Patrick's Day, around 8:30pm from a stage where my band was playing together with another artist for her CD release performance. The audience was 350-400 strong and filled all the chairs, drifting against the walls three to four people deep. It was a surprising mix of styles, colors, genders and ages. We had chosen to play a fairly quiet set, and half way through it I looked up and purposefully took in the breadth of the room. Everyone I could see was focused on the stage. Some were looking right into my eyes and other eyes were closed. Some heads were back or bowed, some mouths forming the words I sang, one woman in the second row was crying. The hum of humanity was palpable in the room, on my skin, into my organs and reverberated from my own mouth. I have been on myriad stages for many years and I can honestly say that I have never experienced anything like it before - not that way. On what is considered one of America's infamous party nights, this theatre was filled to capacity with silent reverence. It felt religious.... and I'm not but within those walls for a few hours, we all had chosen the oblivion of a dark, contemplative ride together.

For the days that followed, I felt haunted and buoyed by the surreal nature of that evening and wrestled again with the truth of life in the 21st century. The politic of America in bed with and irresponsibly procreating for mad consumerism; millions of automobiles on as many daily missions; gas stations, convenience stores, grocery stores, big box stores, office towers, malls, strip malls, mega malls; TVs, computers, cell phones and plastics buried beneath the ever-expanding girth of suburbia; the ringing of morning alarm clocks and the greasy Egg McMuffin packed into another nervous stomach; highways and byways and driveways and parking lots; the speedometer needle buried on the pace car of America.

This morning, two days late for deadline on this essay after somehow making it through another *crazy* week of sixteen hour workdays, I stand at this window looking out over the long easy slope of my lawn. The twenty-four inches of March snow, which roared like that proverbial lion across the Midwestern plains a couple weeks ago, is barely visible now. I'm thinking about the cumbersome old woman in a brown scarf loaded down with plastic grocery bags struggling to get on the bus as I sped by her on Wednesday rushing off in my little silver car to my next important destination. The rain has stopped and the romping dogs are covered with mud. The refrigerator has stopped humming. A small bird scavenges beneath the empty feeder.

May 2005

Falling Monkeys

My shoulder rested somewhere between life under the sea and the architecture of science. *Eye of the Whale, Shark!*, *Fur Seal Island* and *King of the Fish* only a vertical oak divider away from *The Physicists*, *The Emperor's New Mind* and *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. The dust jackets of *Genius* by James Gleick, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who also wrote *Chaos*, were amorously pressed together. I was here for poetry.

Folding metal chairs had been set up amidships in Magers & Quinn on Hennepin Avenue for the Friday night event. The lighting was typically horrible. I always loved the creaking wood floors and mismatched carpeted areas, the slight aroma of mildew, heads bowed in the aisles, but the buzzing fluorescence from high ceilings always casts an unnaturally bright, annoyingly green hue to these holy rooms. A modest lectern had been positioned behind a microphone stand in the front. I took a seat in the fifth row back and listed into the bookshelf on my right. I was tired from a long workweek and was content, even under the brutality of bad lighting, to relax. I removed *King of the Fish* from the shelf and began reading about the demise of the salmon population on the northwest coast until a long time acquaintance took a seat behind me. We moved quickly through the obligatory catch up conversation, which happily leapt to politics and current events. The last statement made before the bookstore owner approached the lectern was how greed and religion continue to fuck up the world. I slid *King of the Fish* back into the shelf.

The room, which had been empty when I arrived, had filled beyond the capacity of available seating. Upcoming events were mentioned before introductions were made and the first of three poets took her place. The PA system was poorly adjusted and did little to enhance the speaker's voice, which sounded hooded and dark but somehow pleasing as if we were all underwater. She began with two metaphorical poems about the current "war" in Iraq, the second of which was quite good. Then I began to drift. I let my head fall against the bookshelf and closed my eyes. I went dreaming off the edge of the American occupation in Iraq into a corridor, which opened out onto a bright, pristine lawn groomed for croquet where elongated monkeys were dropping

gracefully from trees and moving slowly around the yard as if they owned the place. A voice offered me a drink and then, there was applause. I jumped and uttered something unintelligible out loud. The woman sitting next to me shifted in her chair instead of looking at me.

Juliet the Poet, whose published manuscript had recently been released in lovely trade cover, stood and walked to the lectern. She gave opening comments and then began her reading. My ear was well attuned to her familiar voice and I snuggled once again against *King of the Fish* and floated on the current of her rhythm. Her painterly images would swell and plummet, make gentle and abrupt turns, rise up and circle. She read of personal and global failure, loss and redemption. She read of longing and confusion. I thought about the chapbook I had purchased of hers more than a decade ago and how I'd fallen in love with those tiny, dense poems. I thought about the time we'd spent since then getting to know each other; hashing out life and love, philosophy and politics. I thought about the disoriented call she made to me from the North Shore where she was in writing retreat when the Twin Towers were hit. I'd lost track of how many books she had given me, how many words and ideas we had exchanged and dissected over tables, land mail and email. We had dinner after the reading and caught up on the random detritus of each other's lives but in the end, I always know her heart most intimately through her poems.

Weeks later, I parked in an expensive downtown lot and walked across the street to The Dakota Bar and Grill on Nicollet Avenue. Billyboy, with whom I made a recording in 2000, was in town playing for a couple nights and it had been too long since I'd heard him. Gazing over the black and white landscape of the empty grand piano on stage, I sat pondering the infinitesimal possibilities within one octave and what his fingers would elicit when he touched those keys. Billyboy is an American history buff, and when he isn't rendering his haunted version of an old war-era song, he'll weave swatches of that same Americana into his improvisational themes from the civil and world wars; hymns, victory songs, drinking songs, love songs. I was thinking about how myriad artists over the ages have chronicled the struggle of humanity as we have traversed this earth with the best and worst intentions. I thought about how our personal and interpersonal foibles magnify into national and global tragedies which we never escape repeating. I traveled

for the rest of the evening with no desire of navigation or need for gravity within his dark interior theatre - the oblivion of being everyone, no one, everywhere and nowhere at all.

On May 4, 1970, the National Guard opened fire on a peaceful anti-war demonstration at Ohio's Kent State University from a range of 270 to 390 feet. Four students were killed, one was paralyzed and eight were left wounded. The violence shocked the nation. Immediately following, Neil Young penned the song Ohio, which would instantly become the anthem for an entire generation giving voice to millions of unheard American citizens who filled the streets, playing its part in affecting the course of history.

This week, I watched Neil Young interviewed outside an LA studio where he had recently completed his hastily recorded *Living with War*. The controversial title on the recording which has the media abuzz is *Let's Impeach the President* and the bobble-headed, cynical beauty queen reporter would accuse him of "just trying to sell more records." He laughed dismissively, shook his world-weary head momentarily, and quietly resumed his effort for more than sixty percent of unrepresented Americans. I wondered if I was naïve to think that even in the 21st century, a timely creative export could fill vacant mouths with dissent, fill the streets with protest, fill our consciences with the truth of our own violence, greed and shortsightedness - at least for long enough to give us another chance to fuck it up again.

June 2005

Four Snapshots

Jack flushes out an alarmed hen turkey and pursues beneath her shadow as she flies clumsily into the trees on the southern end of the upper prairie. Romeo, Rocky and I continue east towards the house still under construction to have a look around. The owner has draped all the windows with large plastic tarps so I can't see the progress if any had been made. It appears strangely abandoned. Returning down the road, Jack careens around the corner from the field, charges up to me urgently and drops a turkey egg at my feet. He has never done anything like this before. It cracks when it hits the blacktop.

I scramble into my car with coffee to make the hour long commute to the city for work. I turn on the radio. The headline news is typically unmerciful; three more Iraqi civilians dead in a bombing in Baghdad, the insurance and oil companies raking in record profits while US consumers struggle to keep up with rising prices, more bird flu drama, more corruption in Washington, no property tax relief for the citizens of Minnesota and all this in a matter of 3.7 miles on my odometer. I turn the radio off and drive with only the mid-range whine of tires on the pavement and the purr of my little diesel engine. I gaze at the farm fields stretching out lazily on either side of the highway in various stages of planting and watch small flocks of birds rise from the corduroyed rows, darting erratically. A raven picks at some road kill near the median, sunlight bluing his feathers. There are cars ahead of me and cars behind me for miles and miles. When I drive across the Mendota Bridge, the Mississippi River below releases a single blue heron from its sparkling surface. I float onto the overpass, heading west on the Crosstown, the airport landing strip to the south. I impulsively turn the radio back on and hit the college station. Roxy Music fills the car with that eerie anachronistic AM boxed sound. I was there for the downbeat. A plane descends closely overhead from the north, its landing gear threatening to touch the roof of my car. *Now the party's over, I'm so tired. Then I see you coming out of nowhere. Much communication in a motion, without conversation or a notion. Avalon.* A hawk opens its wings, crouches and lofts from a lamppost simultaneously, taking off in the opposite direction of the landing plane. A small cloud in front of me looks as if it could be plucked from

the shelf of the sky. I am underwater caught up in the midst of a school of flashing metallic fish; not steering, not pushing, not resisting. When the samba takes you out of nowhere, and the background's fading out of focus. *Yes, the picture changing every moment, and your destination, you don't know it. Avalon.*

I am in a familiar small town bar on a Saturday night. It's crowded with people, conversation and music. Glass is clinking brightly in the sinks, on the bar and along the rail, and smoke trails in murky clouds beneath the high ceiling. We've been introduced to someone's cousin who has arrived after attending a family wedding. He is at first intriguingly comical in his colorful leather dirt bike jacket, his grey, long-banged, swept-over-to-one-side Kinks hairdo. He immediately orders drinks for everyone on our end of the bar, a move I think he likes to make. He is short and looks out from beneath hooded eyes, his head tilted back slightly and to one side self-consciously and sexually authoritative. He's got his game on. I ask questions. He gives answers with a smirk. Those around us vanish into other conversations and all too soon, he reveals that his children are the whole point and their serial, twenty-year old mothers are meaningless other than providing uterus into which he plants his ignoble seed. The third one is on the way. I don't like this guy. I push. "What would happen if you got involved with a real woman, a grown up, someone who could meet you where you live?" He shakes his head looking down at the bar where his elbows are planted and emphatically states he will never align himself with a relationship and then surprises me by referencing Kant, Nietzsche and Joseph Campbell in defense, before storming off to the bathroom, my voice trailing after him *things are just getting interesting, and now you are going to run away?* I imagine him in the bathroom, looking at himself in the mirror, hopping like a boxer, throwing jabs, getting pumped up for round two. When he returns, he's armed and dangerous.

"I can be a very violent man..."

"Oh really are you proud of that?"

"Seriously, I could rip your fuckin' throat out."

"No you can't." I light a cigarette dismissively, rotate my bar stool seat around to face him.

"Yes, I can." He stares, grinning.

"No..... you can't.....," smiling grimly, I lean into him, he unintentionally rears back a bit. I look steadily into his hateful bedroom eyes and, quietly,"I - am not - afraid - of - you."

Stripping the garden of last year's accomplishments, now dried and tangled and meaningless. Fat bumblebees zoom past my head while honeybees hover over bloomless strawberry leaves, looking for something to do. The shovel makes a dry, scraping plunge when I exact its point into the ground, jumping on it. I turn over clods of rich, black earth, pick and toss the rocks, scatter peat moss and mix it in. Rocky sits heavily under the shade of the oak tree, eyes at half-mast, panting. Romeo is stretched on the stoop drenched in the sun, sleeping. Jack is probably somewhere along the river. I hear a mower humming in the distance while I navigate the wheelbarrow through the woods to the brush pile, returning to the top of the yard. The cacophony of wind tossing the branches of oak, maple, cedar and pine alerts me, and I drop the wheelbarrow handles. The scene compresses suddenly; sky too saturated in color, the edges of leaves too sharp, the contrast between tree bark and distance etched too darkly, each blade of grass too distinct, counted and singing. I can hear the quilt flapping on the clothesline. Just behind my eyes, I deliver brief, pointed soliloquies to my dead mother and a friend who thinks she's fat and an old man standing near the fountain in Washington Square who turns to look at me and a chorus of voices that rise and fall. Somewhere someone is laughing. The air around me feels thick and heavy. I squat and sit on the grass - gone, gone, here, gone. Here. I smile and look down over the long slope of yard before me. Tears slide down my cheeks. My fingernails are lined with dirt and my hands are detached, unrecognizable as mine, and I stare at them for a while. Everywhere. Everything. Nothing. I know that what is seen is not as it appears and understanding it doesn't matter. I ball my hands into tight fists and open them quickly and wide, examining the lines crisscrossing my palms. I return to the garden and plant seeds along the stone wall.

July 2006

View

Across the river from Weldon's campsite, three quarters of a mile due east from our house, a dead-grey, striated elm points dramatically at the sky, frozen in its final, sapless gesture. Most of the massive brittle boughs have snapped off into shorter, jagged appendages over the years but for as long as it remains upright, this elm has been glorified in death as a formidable look-out post for an eagle I like to pretend I have a relationship with. This is her watering hole; from here she surveys the river valley and checks out her breakfast options, possibly including my little Jack Russell terrorist, Romeo.

I've been hooking up with this bird occasionally for a few years now and since the American bald eagle's territory will range from 1,700 to 10,000 acres depending on food availability, I'm assuming it's the same bird. She has staked her claim on our 160 acres and while I've never found a nest, this year I've seen her regularly these mornings since spring when I walk the boys. Sometimes I spot her circling the prairie or flying low around the bends of the river. One day, walking along the riverbank, our eyes met at a distance of only 30 feet. She was perched on the lowest bough of a black walnut tree hanging right over the river and slowly turned to stare at me. Her eyes were enormous, flashing mustard yellow and unflinching. I wondered how I looked through her eyes, into her brain, her discriminating feral observation. She was aloof and unalarmed and after leveling me with her fearless gaze, she looked away, appearing disinterested. Eagles are at the top of the food chain and have no predators, save their collisions with the human race; fatal gun shot wounds, electrocution, poisoning, and even auto accidents most likely causes of death in their 30-year life spans. I thought about death in the city. I stood there for about five minutes fascinated with her size and the subtleties of her movements, held by her flashing glances, finally leaving her to carry on her day as I went on with my own.

One night a few weeks ago, I had a late rehearsal in the city, arriving home just before 2AM. My husband had spent the afternoon cutting up enormous white pine branches on the perimeter of our property downed with the heavy snows of an early spring storm, months prior. He was sitting

by the amber light of the fire pit when I pulled into the driveway. I hauled my gear into the house and poured myself an Irish whiskey, joining him there. A misshapen moon was rising in front of us between two massive white pines on the southern edge of the lawn. We said little. There seemed to be no difference between the temperature of my skin and the still, fragrant air around me. The fire had relinquished itself into the afterglow of its previous, more ardent blaze. The yard was once again transformed into an amphitheatre where the rising sun and moon were always perfectly framed to our point of view. We were gently passing a wordless football of thought between us; how we came to be together on this amazing piece of ground at the same time - this night, this moment in time, this timelessness. I turned and looked into the eyes of this man I love. If my heart had given out at that moment, it would have been the most blissful exit imaginable from this insane planet - consciousness breaking up and dissipating into the bigger picture. Exploded, scattered and sent aloft.

After sound check, there were perhaps twenty-five suspended minutes before the doors of the Walker Art Center opened and the buzzing opening preview crowd swarmed into the galleries embracing the life work of Diane Arbus, and another hour before we took the stage to entertain the hive. We descended the stairs and found ourselves uncomfortably alone, save the invisibility of the guards, surrounded by myriad eyes crawling from white walls suspended in gradated black and white flesh. Their eyes. Our eyes on theirs through the gentle, abducting lens of a camera pressed against her heavy-lidded, insatiable, sad eye. I wondered what of our eye remains after our bodies are shorn off from them. I wondered if what we see becomes limitless in the realm of what happens next. I wondered what she was looking for, and if she found anything resembling it before she took her life in July of 1971.

August 2006

Beacons

I came up the narrow path through overgrown honeysuckle and buckthorn from Weldon's campsite on the eastern edge of the prairie at eleven o'clock. The glow of the campfire and voices were behind me now, echoing down the river where I'd left the boys, who would make a longer night of it than I was able with an early morning commute to the city. A nightcap of Irish whiskey was warm in my stomach and the evening had been entertaining. We had watched the beckoning curve of a crescent moon appear over the river. Fish were jumping and owls could be heard hooting from across the rippling water. Other creatures rustled around in the underbrush while witty lines were passed back and forth with a bottle or another cold beer. I've spent a lifetime in the company of guys and slip into the rhythm of their humor easily. Rounding the tree line, tiny lights blinked on and off in the tall grasses drifting into the woods beyond. I had never seen fireflies on the prairie during the eight years I'd lived here, certainly not in these numbers and I wondered what about this particular summer had summoned them. I wandered into the field and stood there for a while, smiling. It had been a very hot day and the sun-baked grasses smelled sweet and nutty in the cooling, humid air. A flashing at my waist where a firefly rested on my thumbnail, throbbing neon green until the dark wings parted and the little lighthouse lofted silently over my head.

Having cracked the 600 page spine, I'm in an infantry line with the boonierats of the 101st Airborne (Airmobile) Division of Company A (Alpha), 7th Battalion, 402d Infantry, creeping through the jungles of the Khe Ta Laou Valley at a speed of ten paces a minute, less than 330 yards in an hour. Silence is mandatory. Every muscle in my aching body experiences a repetitive series of calisthenic movements, constantly corrected with each unpredictable step and made more painful under the weight of a 100 lb. rucksack and an 8 lb. M-16 rifle clenched in hand, not to mention the extra weight of grenades, sidearm and ammo. The air is claustrophobic and the heat merciless even though light from the sun barely penetrates the canopy to the slippery mud of the jungle floor. I cannot see the person in front of me, only a moist green-textured wall of vegetation. Just beyond the next palm frond or entangling vine, a gun barrel could be in my face

or I might suddenly feel the concussive phafffff of a mortar round leaving its firing tube not knowing if the subsequent kaarrmp will leave me limbless or turn all the lights out entirely and forever. I am beyond terrified and have no choice other than to keep moving because I can't get out of this. I can't go home. I am clumsy, weak and unsteady. The straps of the rucksack have ruptured the skin of my shoulders and my grey feet are steaming in my boots. I'm hungry and exhausted, eating unpalatable C-rations of meat that smell like dog food and not having slept more than a few hours for days. The leeches in the razor edged elephant grass we crawled through on our bellies and slept in last night left welts on my skin that have begun to fester and ooze. I stink of jungle rot and fear. The humming, stinging insects are insufferable, but I must endure them and the sunburn and the blistered lips like everyone else, keep quiet and keep moving into nothing and everything that will inevitably come and I'm afraid I won't know what to do whenever any of it arrives. Right now it's all about right now and it's Mommy Nature and the terror of war kicking my 19-year-old ass in August of 1970. Another shapeless, blind night is descending and the LT has us dug into our NDP on the steep incline of this fucking rainforest and we're not even in deep yet, Whiteboy said, the shit hasn't even started yet. I'm on second watch so right now I'm supposed to be sleeping. Above and below me, the muffled sounds of soldiers settling in for a few hours of nightmares. It's dark. It's so goddamn dark. I'm scared shitless. I lay my head against my ruck, pull the poncho up around my raw neck, my eyes straining to see. The familiar smell of tobacco smoke, grandpa, rescue, my childish eyes following the tiny, glowing string of bobbing amber nightlights igniting one by one, gently guiding me into the tunnel of grateful unconsciousness.

The red, extended-cab Chevy bounced down the tiny, gravel two-track towards the abandoned house and myriad dilapidated-out buildings on the south end of the property. The four of us piled out an hour before sunset and scattered through the tall, damp grasses to check out the spoils. He had lived 90 years on 233 acres: a husband, a father, a teacher, a chicken farmer and an avid gardener. In one building, hundreds of history and gardening books were stacked, toppled or strewn across the dirt floor having slid from broken shelving. They spilled into teaching manuals, calendars, magazines, colanders of all sizes, old tin buckets, stainless pots, utensils, steel cages, broken chairs, useless appliances, space heaters, oil burners and towers of tin cans. One curious

series of small, musty, leather-bound books from the late 1800's were printed in Swedish. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust.

We stepped slowly through stinging nettle and arching raspberry canes to another building where dozens of small, faded McDonald's French fry boxes from the 70's were tacked to the wall and filled with variety seed packets. More seed packets were tacked to the walls individually beneath 2x3" cardstock with undecipherable but neatly printed code, the mad workings of an old pack rat who played God in his garden. We stepped over broken glass, rusty hinges and around nails protruding from window and door frames fallen in under the weight of sagging roofs and collapsing walls. Chicken feathers were matted to the ground and into the corners. We were peeping Toms peering through the shattered windows of this stranger's obsessive if focused, cumbrous life. We waded carefully through poison ivy, waist-high pigweed and thistle to one building after another, each having become a floodplain for his expanding obsessions. By the time we reached the northern end of the property, the sun had dipped below the tree line. We edged along a fractured fence-line of wood stakes and barbed wire, ducked under some low hanging bows and entered a cathedral of old growth pines, which someone had carefully planted 150 years ago in a long row, creating a windbreak from the open fields. The lowest branches were as large as entire tree trunks now, bent down like sturdy arms to accept climbers and then arcing skyward, blocking out the remaining light. It was cool and damp beneath the massive boughs, the ground aromatic and spongy beneath our reverent feet. I don't know how long we stood there or if we spoke.

The sun was gone when we moved cautiously from beneath the pines, watchful for the barbed wire. At the edge of the acreage, where spring wheat waited eager for harvest, I looked south. Amber squares etched through the darkness from distant farm kitchens, and lampposts standing vigil near barn doors drew comparable yellow circles. A pair of headlights appeared cresting the hill on the county road from the south. The stars began showing up, fashionably late. We took another way home, windows rolled down, the truck's beams reaching confidently into the night as if we could own it, conquer it or comprehend it.

September 2006

Love in the Time of Absinthe

Summer is waning; the days are shorter, nights are cooler. One year ago, the B-Rent, beloved present-tense husband and I vowed to love each other for the rest of our lives and threw down an unrivaled party for 500-plus of our closest friends, just to prove it. Love, I mean. The Big Love continues to rule our house. We have just begun dreaming of sweaters, boots and two chairs parked in front of a crackling fireplace. I smell Irish whiskey and long nights spent talking about this... and that... and whatevernots.

So many things have transpired and conspired over the last month. It's the time of transition as summer has its run and runs out, exhausted. A coquettish, all-white-clad Pimm's & croquet bash, and an outlaw birthday party both staged in suburban theatres; the nephew's band at a lo-fi St. Paul bar that never found my ears because their set time was thrown into clubland infinity and past my bedtime on a work week; a mostly amazing and absolutely spontaneous wedding anniversary party. I'll stop here to extrapolate, to the best of my blurred and satiated memory. It is theoretical at best.

Yeah. *Shit* yeah! There was good food of course, for starters, meaning, beast... steak... juicy red-blooded American bovine eye of the fragile rib. There were sweet, Yukon gold potatoes mashed into a delectable mess with garlic cloves. *The Salad*, as it is known in our house, made a glorious appearance in a divine Italian bowl with delicate Bibb lettuce leaves, Granny Smith apples very thinly sliced, dry roasted walnuts and bleu cheese with a fairly perfect, I must say, white wine and Dijon mustard tarragon vinaigrette. There was wine of course, the table lubricant ... pinot noir and red zin and carmenere and very possibly, rioja. It's all about dining. And, most importantly, there was anticipation, due to a package that had arrived days prior to that lovely, serendipitous Saturday night.

Fatguy cannot be genuflected enough. He was our priest. He doesn't forget mentions made around a Christmas Eve fireplace in 2005: flagrant, antiquated asides of ex-patriotism and

absinthe and politics and France and the poets and painters, some of whom died for the passion they could never quite achieve, all delivered that night with wine-soaked panache (and possibly, embarrassment) for those who have heard this a few times before—from me. Suddenly August, erect on a Wednesday night table, was a bottle of extrait d'absinthe ... Absinthe Edouard ... shipped to us, under cover of brown paper packaging. God bless the postal service who would deliver unto us this gift, even though it's been banned in the US since the early 1900's. Just for the record, it's not illegal to possess it in America but it is illegal to commercially import it.

We Googled. How much will bring on the high? How much will render one helpless or, worse, delivered unto alcohol poisoning? This opiated liquor is 150 proof, just for starters. It's the wormwood extract, thujone, a narcotic-like substance produced in the making of absinthe, which creates the clarity of the adventurer amidst the slam-dunk of high alcohol content ... a delicate balance. It's hard to explain the experience, but as one absinthe explorer on the internet shared, "The best way I can describe the effects of drinking five glasses of absinthe is that it is similar to drinking several shots of liquor, eating a single mushroom cap, and smoking a tiny amount of opium at the same time." Enough said. It was quite an evening, and I was idyllically ushered, *finally* into the ranks of Van Gogh, Picasso, Rimbaud, Hemingway, Bob Dylan, Marilyn Manson and Eminem, in having experienced the altered world of absinthe historians.



On the far side of that indescribable event, my oldest daughter moved into her new apartment in Madison, courtesy of her father and sister; dinner with Juliet the Poet, which might have gone on

far past our ability to stay awake had we been able; the birthday of Pal Billy celebrating his 21st year whereupon shots were poured and downed far too late into the night; more work (which is the contiguous thread throughout this essay, just for the record) and ending gloriously with *The Flaming Lips* on the opening night of the Minnesota State Fair. We drove through a break in the Tornado Alley of August 24th, experiencing a brilliant, heartfelt, politically infused concert under cloudy but unrelenting-to-rain skies at the Grandstand until we (just) slipped back into our car at the far reaches of the fairgrounds, heading home. Excellent corndogs were consumed on the way in and plastic glasses of beer were consumed on the way out, compliments of lifer Dudes at the Epiphany Diner. Some things are just meant to happen.

Since then; a night at Le Meson with Lola during which we downed a bottle of wine and three delectable plates of tapas, discussing those peculiar, eerie and inspiring days of luminousness, when children "see you" for blocks and blocks upon blocks ... even through a car windshield. We decided that fear (read, vulnerability) is the entrance into that awareness where there are few if any boundaries. It's alchemy. She was gifted an amazing 1960's vintage green bicycle which was proudly presented to me after our evening. I watched her ride away down the grey, uneven sidewalk after we paid our tab and exited our table. The sky was clearing. I drove home listening to songs B-Rent had written ten years ago... a further window in. Life is long.

Coming up: Kitty, my last baby, moves into her freshman dorm room on Saturday. Our nest is full and filling, not empty. Where does this lonely "empty nest" metaphor come from? It's not about loss, it's about full-on, flourishing, ripe, heading-for-the-horizon love and arrival. There is nothing, absolutely nothing ... better. Carry on.

October 2006

The Commute

This morning I followed the Silestone Majestic Countertop truck all the way down Hiawatha Avenue. The lettering was blue and bluer and the logo utilitarian, but pleasing, somehow. A brash and stupid AM radio show was barking through cheap speakers mounted in the dash of the cab, the driver was on his cell phone, the brake lights flashed too often. Irritating. The light shifted around me and I shook my head to reclaim what I thought was there seconds before but it didn't shake me back down. I was listening to Curt Kirkwood's Snow all the way, enjoying yet another in an apparently routine and varied series of morning hallucinations occurring throughout the summer... *this box of limes, is burning cold from all these moonbeams burning down my door, these dirty rhymes are all I wrote, that's not what it seems crawling across your floor...* *. Kids were heading off to school on their bicycles, piling up in the stoplight corners with trendy stocking caps pulled down over their hungry ears against another chilly September morning. Their energy pressed hard to the rolled up windows, all the shatterproof glass breaking into invisible shards, making not a sound. I smiled in the sparkling explosion.

The skies were a pale, suicidal, paltry-blue while lugubrious clouds dragged their bodies across in surprisingly exuberant grey, laced in varying shades of bruised purple and bloody pink; the black pavement was hosting tired, ghostly lines pretending to separate lanes which had long ago lost their authority. Hot, bright trains bedecked in competitive ad-canned ideas raced me on the northwest parallel and were gaining at each congested intersection. The woman in the buffed forest green Lexus in the left lane sporting a coiffed, blonde head sat too close to her steering wheel, concentrating too hard for the 40 mph speed limit. ... *what a beautiful weapon you've got in your eyes... you hold the flower that never unfolds... I love you, I love you, the rest is a lie... what a beautiful weapon you've got in your eyes...* *

I've not been to the river in weeks and weeks and the dogs have completely given up on me. I feel weak, and I don't care, because the underbelly is exposed. I'm doing other things, barely. I'm filled with fear and inspired. I can't stop until I get to those western slopes waiting in my October

future, danger fucker seals in the surf, dancing and diving against relentless razor cliffs and then the light went from green to red and blurry oil pastel people smeared my grill for the train ... *I feel like lightning for the trees to keep away the cold and rain for your heart...**

The light shifted again. I shook my head again and winced. I was seven minutes from my destination and I would be miraculously on time having left too late again and suddenly what I left stretched out in my bed felt far too far away — that, and the dappled light that fell holy on him through the birds on a wire curtain. This dreamy knife may well kill me in the end but it will be a welcome murderer if it fulfills its delirious and delicious contract. I sold my soul to the devil long ago ... *runnin all around, lookin at the things that I seem to see that are fillin me with wonder, and the other night when you were just a flower and I was a snowstorm right inside the bedroom, I became the bee, you became the scarecrow and we had some trouble cause we took the light bulb, tried to turn it on to eliminate the problem, but it took the darkness and it made it doubtful. I looked up in the sun cause I thought I saw a light there ... up in the air... up in the air...**

*Buy Curt Kirkwood's solo offering, Snow

November 2006

Snapshots and Long Takes: A Heavily Abbreviated Travelogue

Roads and roads and roads connected to other roads to interstates to eight lane interstates to two-lane roads to gravel roads to on ramps, off ramps, rest stops and truck stops, bridges and tunnels. Plains and foothills, mountains and cities and towns. Forests of pine and gigantic redwoods and tunnels and cliffs and ocean off the western slopes. Friends and acquaintances found in houses and yards, restaurants and bars, stumbled on along sidewalks and pathways to here or from there. Broke down motels, thin carpet, and permeable shower curtains which flood the floor and stinky bar soap and towels like sandpaper and bad cable TV and 80's bedspreads and mauve and industrial pillows and Irish whiskey in a plastic cup and bad coffee and powdered cream. Cheap surprise motels with comfy beds and good wi-fi and ice machines outside the door and bottled soap, shampoo and lotion and tiny coffee machines with coffee packs and clean carpet and hellcat shower action.

We'll start here, after Denver and Boulder and amazing, embracing friends. Leaving morning fog and the remnants of mountains, tumbling weightless into sun and cerulean sky over the flat, barren, white plate. 30,000 acres of it. The light, surreal. White, the conflagration of all colors of light, appears refracted, excited, supercharged in a crazy disco dance off the Salt Flats. Were it not for mountains in the distance drawing horizon, one would lose all sense of gravity.

Unimaginable--humans living here 10,300 years ago and then we lost our nerve. More recent passers-by have left humble shrines, a baked-brown pine tree braced into the salt with twine and stakes, a red wheelbarrow, upended, a cross marking the end of a life, plastic flowers that will outlive us all. Messages drawn with pebbles. I rearranged one to Oh because that's all I could say . I stood out there awhile looking around and then pocketed some pink-tinged rocks but when I licked them, they didn't taste like salt. Nothing makes sense.

Tires humming for hours. Brutal, bleak, beautiful and timeless beyond reason or boundary. The terrain sleeps—waits, earthen bodies reclined beneath stubborn, taciturn mountain shadow. Skin. Smooth and tanned and weather-beaten skin: pocked, moled, dimpled and stubbled. Grey

elephant skin. Shoulders, elbows, knees, hips, gracefull crotches and jaw lines turned toward or against the heavens. Later, soft folds of fabric, a dress dropped on a bedroom floor or bolts of fabric dropped from the moonman, and later still, angry accusing angles of the end or the beginning of something. I am dumbstruck. Nevada. This uninhabitable land; it cannot be conquered... no water, no gardens, no trees. Creosote bush and sagebrush and tough, razor edged grasses. Some people live here anyway out of choice, or not. You could get so lost, so so lost l o s t l o s t l o s t l o s t l o s t l o s t

I said, out loud if some pain were too big, too unbearable, I would come here to have it; here, where any and every thought or being or event can be dwarfed. He said nothing. For miles and hours, we both said nothing at all.

Bella's Café and Gentleman's Club. Truckers welcome. Food? OK. When we walked into the homely "updated" cafe sporting hard plastic, mustard- colored booths like Burger King, the pastry case was unmistakably filled with confections fashioned by very human hands. Amidst the redhotred Bella's Gentleman's Club T-shirts available in XL to XXXL sizes only, a horrible (in the very wrong way) greeting card line of unicorns and fairies and cheesy books for sale about being over-the-hill or staying happy-even-though, and what looked to be great coffee beans. The bathroom actually smelled chemically fresh. The first thing the soft-spoken, thin, weathered-blond who might have played out her "pole dancing days" brought me was a fragrant, foaming glass of just-squeezed orange juice. What? I was expecting machine dispensed orange glucose concentrate. Then, giant eggs smiled up with free-range eyes, five thick slabs of bacon, perfectly oiled home fries grilled with onions and red peppers and a killer pureed, fresh, hot salsa offered and homemade bread sliced with a serrated knife and toasted. Damn. Bella's.... if you're ever in Wells, Nevada.

Reno. It was all about Tony the lifer bartender and the excellent Japanese/Chinese cuisine, the crazy collection of diners in for a late dinner from Sumo wrestler types to the white-trash couple who didn't understand the menu. San Fran was a fine city as usual—good food in Union Square and the North End, Vesuvio Bar, wandering The Mission for 25 blocks to no-Make-Out-Room-avail and really aggressive panhandling. My guilt ran out quickly. NO! Cigarettes are expensive.

Buy your own goddammit. Sonoma was all about our pal Matthew Nagan, chef of the Shelleville Grille and non-stop performance artist. Thanks for all those bottles of wine we consumed on empty stomachs and then, firing up the grill to fill them. Baseball on the TV, storytelling late into the night and a discounted room he finagled over the phone.

Up the coastal highway – Hwy 1. What can you say when you are driving on switchback roads for hours that loft you above the cloud bank moving gracefully in over the Pacific Ocean? Not much. Down on the beach at Salmon River. Huge flocks of gulls sitting, milling, rising, screeching. Surfers timing the waves from their boards. A mom and her kid doing things with sand. Enormous driftwood logs parallel to the surf. The remains of bonfires black and jagged in the sand. A lone man, walking away from me. Sand in my hair. Salt in my nose and in my lungs, and on my dry lips.

The Avenue of the Giants eventually led us to Kristy and Dylan in Fort Bragg, CA at TW's Restaurant, a ramshackle, down-trodden coastal town but there we all were on a foggy, chilly west coast evening. Kristy grew up in Sacramento but mentioning Minnesota, she recounted her only visit to grandma's house in Brainerd at 10 years of age. She not only heard Paul Bunyon call out her name in the amusement park, but also contracted Lyme's disease and after returning to California, spent months recovering in the hospital and then, in a wheelchair. Kristy's bored in Fort Bragg, she says, but it's cooler than Sacramento. She's just trying to take care of her kids and buy groceries. Dylan is, yes indeed, named after Bob Dylan and her father is a bona fide freak. Her brother's first name is Zimmerman. It's true. It's always easy to talk to people in these places and I'm not sure why. Once again, the motel bragged wi-fi and lied.

Eureka, CA proffered amazing food at an unexpectedly hip restaurant by city standards, served to us at the bar with also hip but uncomfortable stools by a sweet, innocent, chatty local girl who was off to San Francisco in a few weeks for art school. Dinner was followed by the worst prison cell motel I've ever stayed in—fuck you, EconoLodge. You suck at any price, but we had fun that night watching the Marx Brothers on cable and smoking in bed. Florence, OR brought us pal Fatguy, out from Corvallis, for the weekend and there were sturdy pine trees inexplicably growing out of vast sand dunes and sand surfer dudes and dune buggies and dour, grey skies

languishing on long, empty beaches and Thai take-out in Cooley's Cottage. A seafood curry with mussels, shrimp, scallops, white fish and other sea creatures. Later, absinthe was sipped and a walk to the beach, an out-of-print Roger Miller songbook and Fatguy's voice from somewhere somewhere somewhere on the sofa.

Netarts, OR – an almost invisible town six miles outside of Tillamook. We did have an ocean view from the far corner of a tiny deck off the back of a trashy cottage, which neither the new bright blue carpet nor "grandma's sofa and chairs" and no amount of cleaning could have been worth the price. It was my birthday and we were disappointed, but hell, you gotta rally because here's what's in front of you. We hiked to Cape Lookout the next day, ate very overpriced and sorely mediocre food at Pirates Cove, ass deep in lilac-colored booths which would seat eight if necessary. We listened to the four guys at the table behind us talk fishing, women and business. What you paid for was the view and the waitress calling you honey. There was nothing left to do but find the local bar after sunset.

Schooner's looked closed for the lack of interior lighting but was actually open. Here was the watering hole we had been dreaming of. Cheerful Trish, our young bartender, was busy hanging Halloween decorations from the low-strung rafters above the bar when we walked in. Spider webbing and black bats flying from a wire, neither of which could be seen once she completed her task, she accomplished by walking on portions of the bar, excusing herself to scant patrons. Tacked to the rafters were dollar bills of myriad quantity and denomination, donations to build the kids a skate park, she said. We have a huge meth problem here, she said. A couple guys were sitting down-bar from us, who didn't know each other, but made topical conversation anyway. Fish and chips were recommended and ordered. Candlelight bloomed in the heavy, amber, Medieval votives hugging the circumference of the bar. A suburban couple came in and sat down lightly, looking around with their eyes only, unsure of whether or not they should stay. An old man coughed, smoked and sipped another tap beer at a booth in the side room watching the football game on a big-screen TV suspended behind the pool table. When the game was over, we nodded at him out of respect and then dropped the pool balls.

Midway through our first game, Lavelle sashayed over and put her quarters on the rail. She owned and ran the local restaurant Rachel's, named after the old woman she bought it from seven years prior. She was 5'1" with a long waist, even shorter and bigger below the belt. Her flat black dyed hair had a strange sheen to it under the lights. She was attractive, in her way; tough, loud and self-assured. She told me her story, which ended with her plan to get out of the restaurant in the next year. She was worn out, and so was her husband, who she loved. Amy and Dave put their quarters on the rail next. In no time at all, we were shooting pool with the locals, trading histories and buying rounds. Amy, 43, had six kids (her oldest, 25), one grandchild, and had been married and divorced three times. She was a shy, beautiful woman with long dark hair and a slow-sweet, girlish smile. Her boyfriend of four months, Dave, was a truck driver and predicted "The Crash" between 2008 and 2013. He was not a fan of the government and he looked you dead in the eye when he talked. He's already preparing, he said, confidently adjusting his navy blue cap further back on his head, cropped bangs visible beneath the brim. He's never been married. Everyone warned those two they shouldn't be together but they are anyway. As the night progressed, my pool playing got considerably worse. Before we left, we made a donation to the skate park, tacking our bills to the rafters with a modicum of traveler pride. Back at the sad cottage, we made a fire and dragged the mattress from the depressing bedroom through the skinny, dingy kitchen and out in front of the crackling hearth. Happy Birthday. It was a good day.

From Astoria OR, we descended from an incredible three-mile bridge where the Columbia River meets the Pacific to Washington state and proceeded up a little peninsula dotted with towns like Long Beach and Ocean Side. In Klipsan, we collapsed into an awesome beachside cottage and were happy it was raining for two days. We wrote, cooked local oysters and shrimp, slept in a soft downy bed with heavy quilts. We packed up, chatted with Denny during check out and joined long time friends who entertained us brilliantly in Seattle as we barhopped from downtown to East Lake to Capitol Hill to Upper Queen Anne with a ferry ride to an island tossed into the blur. After paying the cabbie I dropped my wallet on the seat—gonegonegone in the way things are lost. Leaving Seattle, the Cascade Mountains rose up all around, tossing us finally into vast corporate farm fields of potatoes, soybeans, corn, alfalfa and peppermint. Coeur d'Alene, ID wants me back there. I'm going. Montana – mountains and cowboys and elk replete with

impressive racks strapped up to the backs of slipshod campers, glazed eyes fixed on the blacktop. Back through the dreamy hills of Wyoming to the Alamo Motel in Sheridan. Bad dinner in town but good, cheap digs made all the better by our lovely Latino host who graciously ensured we had everything we needed before we even took the key. 850 miles from there to home. Morning was brutal. The Black Hills gave way to barren dusty land. Countless crosses erect, holy and wired for communication whipped by, strung along the desolate, treeless earth. The small groupings of trees here are planted by well-meaning people and forced to try. But most of them tip over from a lack of earnestness or simply die from thirst under a relentless sun. The Badlands. Wall Drug. After awhile, I'd seen enough and sunk into a book.

Turning onto County 17 in the dark I felt as if we were just returning home from town. Twenty-one days on the road was too short, we agreed, and this is a far too shallow recounting of all we saw and heard. So much happened. The west is so big and visually overwhelming. San Francisco and Seattle have alarming numbers of homeless people sleeping on the sidewalks, great restaurants and much corporate big box retail crowding in. Most of the coastal communities are poor and eroding, struggling with joblessness and meth, juxtaposed unfairly against some of the richest and most beautiful landscape imaginable. People who live in these towns are doing their best to stay and make it better, or are drawn back after their initial escapes to the familiar, warm embrace of the tides and towering trees. There were many parallels drawn between our version of country living and theirs. We talked to a lot of people. It will take a long time to process all the conversations and the subtleties of arrival and departure.

The morning after returning home, I took the dogs out for a long walk. We went to the upper prairie and circled back down the steep, wooded bluff onto the forest trail. About a mile down, the dogs suddenly took off running and I happened to glance over to the lower prairie, catching sight of an eight point buck hi-tailing it through the dry grasses. Further along, we flushed out a few turkeys and arriving at the river, I stood still watching a red tail hawk circle over the pine. The river was running strong, water endlessly caressing stubborn rocks in white curls. Birds were darting in and out of the spent honeysuckle. The dead leaves of ash, poplar, oak and maple trees clapped like tiny castanets when the wind played them. I knew then that I was happy to be home. Home. But home is wherever you are, I thought.

The mailman brought a chubby envelope from the Red Lion Hotel in Seattle with a letter from Chris Esteban saying, "I found this in a cab. Hope it reaches you safely." It was intact; cash, credit cards, insurance card, license and the postcard stamps we never used. Later, I went into town to vacuum out the car. Removing the floor mats, the salt and super-fine sand was unrelentingly clinging to the fibers. No matter how many times I ran the vacuum hose over them or shook them or slapped them hard against the tires, what we carried from the western slopes on the soles of our shoes will remain.



December 2006

Shall We Gather at the River?

I walked off trail through the arcing wild raspberry canes, relentless buckthorn and scrub cedar heading down to a part of the river I usually don't visit. Ducking beneath a bent ash, I looked up in time to see a young doe at the water, her white tail flashing. Startled, she wheeled and bounded west along the shoreline, vanishing almost silently into the trees. I grabbed Rocky's collar just in time, and in his pursuit-spirited lunge, he took me down to the ground. Romeo attempted the chase for twenty yards and gave up, circling back. Jack was a mile away, no doubt eating the rabbit he'd spooked from the honeysuckle along the river's edge and chased far into the prairie. The morning sun knifed through the tips of pine, walnut and oak where I lay on my back, still holding onto Rocky's collar. His breath escaped in foggy bursts over my head; ears erect and forward, eyes wide and focused into the woods where the doe had escaped. Saliva dripped from his tongue onto the sleeve of my coat. I squinted, released him and rolled over on my belly, crushing leaves. Birds flitted between low branches. The screech of a red tailed hawk bounced between the jagged bluffs up river, brittle and harsh. I heard a fish jump, slapping back on the water like a huge, shiny, open hand.

Every year for as many years as were remembered in one conversation, a young male college student has drowned in the dark sweep of the Mississippi River where it flanks the city of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Some postulate that the victims get drunk at one of myriad festivals during the year, lose their internal compass and think they are heading back to campus—step—step—stumble—splash—gone. So many die here, in deference to other university towns perched on river bluffs. St. Cloud State, for one, resides on the Mississippi and hasn't had a drowning in twenty-seven years. But in La Crosse—every year—someone's life is sucked into the swift depths of the Mississippi River.

I had been imagining an earnest, pushing-60, balding hippie with a small, grey ponytail and a big dream meeting us at The Pump House Center for the Arts in La Crosse, encircled by his enclave of devoted dams. I couldn't have been more wrong, save the middle-aged female volunteers. The

Pump House presents a monthly poetry reading heralding all manner of literary stars. Juliet the Poet was yet another in a long line of notable headliners, her book *The Truant Lover* (Nightboat Press) having been released this year. She had recently returned home from an extensive east coast tour, and I was invited to perform a short set of music before her reading that night in La Crosse.

"If you want to drown, this is definitely your destination—come here." That's what David Krump said. He's the author of *Ophelia Soft*, a poetic lament about silty ghosts crawling from the Mississippi into La Crosse on any given night, and the very poem which made him the recipient of the prestigious Ruth Lilly Foundation prize of 2006. He'll leave the shores of the Mississippi and cleave to the unfamiliar shores of the Thames for seven separate weeks over the next year, studying at Oxford as part of his prize. He was our host that night, together with the magnanimous and delicious William Stobb. Bill is a young professor at Viterbo University and will soon have in hand a collection of his own poetic work (*Nervous Systems*) proffered by Penguin Books. To add, both of them and Juliet have had their poems grace the pages of heavy-weight literary publications like the *Colorado Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Three Candles*, *Cricket Review*, *Verse* to name a few. I was in rich company sitting at Piggy's with the three of them under broad tungsten lighting, playing out warm-up rituals after sound check. I love and read poetry, but I knew none of the poets of whom they were speaking, so I listened attentively and sipped my Irish whiskey, ignoring Juliet's apologetic entreaties for "leaving me out." I waved her concerns away with the hand dangling over the back of my chair. She should know by now that I love being in over my head. That's where most everything happens.

I was in over my head on two counts that evening; both in the company I was keeping and the fact that I would soon deliver my virgin, solo flight accompanying myself on guitar after twenty years as an "award-winning musician." I kept thumbing that phrase *award-winning musician* with my fingers like an elusive guitar string for the next forty-five minutes while my fear escalated. I ordered another glass of brown medicine from the young, porcelain-skinned waitress with perfect teeth, her entire life ahead of her. I wondered what her goals were while I reset my dingy, vintage Honda hat and unzipped my faded, navy sweatshirt, stirring the whiskey with a tiny red straw. I have relied on the brilliant musicians I've been afforded all these years who have

created the luxurious beds my vocal utterances have bounced and writhed upon. I was both terrified and excited to be perched, at last, on this precipice over dark, open water. My illustriously touted career might be debunked after one short set, during which I could repeatedly crash into the entire length of cliff in my clumsy dive. I decided then and there that I just didn't care about my reputation. I've told my children for years, it's important to do something that scares the shit out of you every day and this was me, practicing what I'd preached. There was no backing out now anyway.

The theatre was warm and cozy and thirty people had shown up—a boon audience for a poetry reading. After a very gracious, daunting introduction, I hopped on stage pretending I knew what I was doing. Mid-way through the set, having cut one song I knew I would not be able to manage after all, given my fright-palsied fingers, I felt myself start to float, enjoying long phrases when I was simply singing and forgetting my fingers, chords miraculously there as if I were not the one executing them. And then, it was over. I took a photograph of the audience with my digital camera, thanked them and exited, stage right.

Juliet took the stage next and delivered her expected brilliance in a more interior voice than I'd heard before, as if she were an informant slowly whispering classified information to counter-intelligence in an airport bathroom with no time to repeat one word of it. I was spellbound—motionless and focused, sunk into my red folding chair. Her words bloomed inside me like tiny, life-altering mushroom clouds.

There was a brief intermission prior to the open-mic event, which was to follow. I slipped outside to smoke a cigarette and escape the room. An old Ginsberg/Kerouac-era hippie approached me to talk about my lyrics and the conversation wended its way surprisingly to and through Nietzsche, nihilism, atheism, ending in my question as to whether or not he'd ever read *Twain's Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. He had never heard of it and I was so happy to have thought of it. I hope he remembers, is able to find it and read it—it would make him smile in complicity. Other individuals approached the periphery of our conversation tossing in this and that as we moved back towards the door, giving me thumbs up on my performance, which did much towards helping me let it all go, let it all be what it was or might have been.

Returning to the theatre, open mic began. It was a perfect undocumented film, which I'll never have the pleasure of airing to anyone. A nervous man dressed in shades of spooked doe; a tan, cabled sweater vest over a white and tan checked short sleeved shirt, tan dress pants, bottomed off with brown, faux-Italian shoes. He read from his new collection. The Navy Sweat Pants Man with a heavy lisp earnestly read from the book he'd won at the last poetry reading ticket raffle. A couple of young, self-conscious men ran through their poems in break-neck monotone speed but the vulnerability of their offerings had stunning moments. The old hippie got up there too and gave us a predictable, if choice, rant about everything from the politics of awareness to the fetid streets in some neighborhood. It was lovely beyond words—their words or mine or anything that might be spoken afterwards. We were all caught in the same current. I felt at one with each of them—exposed, bellies up, beyond our boundaries, at the edges of things, tentative and true with our well-intentioned offerings. All exports are crowbars, after all, lifting heavy lids.

We reconvened with our hosts across the street after the theatre went dark and were joined by a growing entourage; novitiates, escapees, the scholarly mixing with the unschooled, the collapsed and swollen, the shrinking and charging, the lost and found. The flow in the room was palpable as we moved between chairs, the smoking room and plates of food. Conversation hummed, shifted, escalated, blew up, settled, regained strength, falling and rising and falling again. Then, the party drifted downtown to La Bodega where young jazz lads with downy facial hair poured themselves out, shy but strong, into the long, dark room lit up with window hung neon and tabled candlelight. Dance floors were made where we stood and our hoarse voices strained over bar bedlam; bottles broke in trash bins, heads tipped towards an introduction or a repeat sentence, drink reorders shouted over sticky bar rails, the slosh of ice bins being re-filled. I fell in love that night with everything. The smells, the taste of whiskey, another cigarette, laughter, fresh faces leaning in, young poets, artists and musicians, words upending words tumbling into the beleaguered, lush night writing us and wringing us out—and all the while, the Mississippi silently moved alongside us, mirroring our movements and releasing its damp, lonely emissaries into our midst.

This morning I sat by the Cannon River in the tall dry grass. I watched the water bubble around dark rocks and push up against downed trees while the dogs ran their repetitive missions on the shoreline. The river is low for this time of year—the weather has been unseasonably warm with little rainfall. There is no fear of drowning for the meantime.

January 2007

This Time, This Year

I woke to a gentle rain falling in the darkness around my house. B went to the bathroom and returned, spooning into me. I lay in bed for a while watching dawn struggle to lighten the room. There was no anger or anticipation, just an impotent, grey arousal.

I got up, let the dogs out and walked through the dim dining room to the kitchen, grabbing a clean glass from the dish drainer. I shuffled to the refrigerator and reached for the carton, shaking it hard. I poured foamy orange juice to the top of the glass and stood there drinking in the light of the open door. It tasted cold and sweet. The rain pattered in the gutters. It's late December and it shouldn't be raining in the Midwest. I let the dogs back in and followed them down to the basement, methodically scooping brown nuggets into their bowls. They are always so excited for the next thing that happens, especially the thing they expect.

Ascending the stairs, I was amazed and disgusted by the amount of dog hair and sand that had collected there in a matter of days. I wished I could sweep the stairs one last time and be done sweeping them forever. The dogs scrambled up the dirty steps guilt free and piled into the kitchen, surrounding me, staring, wagging their tails, eyes bright and eager. It's raining, I said. They listened, cocked their heads and wagged their tails harder. I told them to go lie down.

Embers were still glowing in the grate from last night's fire. I lay some kindling there and squatted in front of the open screen, waiting. Smoke rose from the sticks and soon, flames. I pushed them around with the poker and added a small, split log, stuffing some newspaper under the grate. Outside, the rain intensified slightly. The dogs were already sleeping again. The log caught fire and began to crackle with dry intention.

I guided the embarrassingly over-sized cart past piles of navy, grey, hunter green and cranberry hooded sweatshirts, mountains of Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren Polo over-stock jeans, stacks of books, towering shelves of electronics and hurriedly past the life-sized, automated Santa stuck

on *HoHoHo* like an autistic child. Fluorescent lighting further insulted the sallow skin and furrowed brows of exasperated shoppers who passed by me, appearing lost, confused and emptied of holiday cheer, assuming they had any to begin with. Sanctimonious Christmas music echoed in the high ceilings feigning inspiration.

Fortunately, I had one specific reason for being here—the procurement of the Christmas Eve Beast. Draping my entire being over the enormous meat case, I examined the six to eight pound slabs of beef tenderloin, marveling at the size of them. I gazed up through the large window behind which myriad butchers were busying about tables and refrigeration units dressed in white coats, aprons and paper hats, dodging enormous hunks of cow hanging from meat hooks suspended from a tall ceiling.

For obvious reasons, I wondered how it ever came about that butchers should wear white. I had been redressing all the meat handlers behind the glass in black Samurai outfits with long, shiny swords, slashing deftly through briskets and ribs as they danced about the slippery industrial flooring when the man standing next to me grew impatient, clearing his throat, reached across me.. Oh, sorry, I said, stepping aside. *My Kill Bill 3: Meat Locker Fantasies* movie ended abruptly.

I wandered between the remaining lengths of coolers after selecting my tenderloin, which lay inert at the bottom of my cart like a shrink-wrapped moray eel. Gallon tubs of salsa and hummos and faux crab dip gave way to giant packages of hormone infused chicken thighs, and trays of sushi as big as semi-trailer truck tires. America. Land of the Free and Home of the Depraved. But everything here is so inexpensive and there is organic food too and Costco is on my blue team, politically speaking, and why not get two gallons of Tropicana fresh squeezed orange juice for \$9.97 instead of paying \$3.99 per half gallon at the local grocery store? Even better, why pay \$6.50 for 4 oz. of French chevre when you can get 11oz. for \$5. True. True. True enough.

I lost an extra hour of my life swimming like an open-mouthed whale through the Big Box Sea, swallowing contact solution and tampons, Airborne and ibuprofen, XXL bags of M&Ms and laundry detergent and deciding against the gi-normous flat of paper towels I would have nowhere

to store in my house, until I finally made my way to the check out lanes, where more confusion ensued. Cart to the right, me to the left, Costco card to the cashier, debit card through the machine and no boxes in which to pack my purchases. Then, the old guy at the door had to peruse my larder against my receipt to be sure I'd not stolen anything. I stood staring at him because I knew him and felt myself being sucked backwards through space and time, poured into hip-hugger jeans and a midriff madras shirt when my nineteen year old belly was firm and lovely.

The old man was the father of a guy I knew a million years ago back in college and because I just had to get out of there, I didn't say "Hey... aren't you Tim's dad?," which would have begun a conversation that probably wasn't worth having. I couldn't speak anyway. My communication skills had been left in aisle 47 where that wizened woman was cooking up sausage patty samples and hailing customers like a junkie barker from the Goodhue County Fair. She was too small and far too old to own a voice like that.

By the time I located my car and loaded all the groceries in through the hatch back, I was in a woozy trance that had rendered me unable to drive. I sat behind the wheel for a long time gazing above the trees lining the distant boulevard. The rain had stopped and the sun was winking coquettishly through silky, pink clouds. Flocks of geese were flying in all directions, appearing as navigationally befuddled as the shoppers in Costco. I rolled down the window. It smelled like spring. I felt like crying.

February 2007

Tasks

I've just finished doing the dishes... again. We don't have a dishwasher. I get so sick and tired of doing dishes. I can't explain the disappointment when I walk through the kitchen and there are more dishes piled there... again. I turn on the water, scrub the large stainless sink, washing down remnants of dried food and coffee grounds and plug the drain. I reach under the sink for the soap, squirting a stream of it into the hot water cascading from the tall, curving faucet. The soap bubbles multiply in gestational splendor, exuding the scent of lemon. Now, I am caught up in alchemy; the massaging of surfaces, the slosh of water, the final rinse and when the last dish or fork or glass is placed tenderly in the rack, I experience an embarrassing, secret nirvana—every time. I gaze out the window over my sink while opening the drain, and listen to the dingy water and languishing suds gurgle down the pipes, away from my hands—these hands—attached to me. My thoughts are detached, drifting. A hushed, ancient sensation of grief drags through me—innumerable fingers, quotidian utility, pulling gently at my internal organs. I miss something, someone. I inhale and turn from it, wiping down the countertops in wide determined swaths, rinse the sponge and return it to the small wire basket on the ledge of the sink where it belongs. It belongs there now. I dry my hands on a dishcloth threaded through the drawer pull. Something is finished. I've achieved a brief moment of *nothingness*. But I never remember any of this when I'm looking at another loathsome stack of dirty dishes.

This morning I stood in queue at the old post office in Redwing. The elderly man in front of me was stooped, leaning on a cane, still as marble. He shuffled carefully forward when the next person finished their business at the window and then resumed his patient stillness. He was dressed in blue jeans, a flannel shirt and a big, blue jean, fleece-lined jacket. His clothes had gone through the wash hundreds of times. He smelled of fabric softener and something else, his kitchen or pipe tobacco. Finally it was his turn. He carried a slightly mangled package under his free arm that he had obviously struggled to prepare for its journey. He leaned his cane against his right leg, freeing his hands. The clerk at the counter spoke too loudly in deference to his quiet questions and answers. I was uncomfortable listening to her shrill voice echo through the lobby,

shattering the privacy of his transaction and assuming he was hard of hearing. She weighed his package and applied the appropriate postage. He needed stamps too, please. *A roll of 100 is \$39 she roared. Your total is \$47.03.* I flinched.

His black and red checked wool cap had the earflaps turned down and fit his head snugly. The scrawny nape of his crosshatched neck was exposed and moving between his downy hairline and the threadbare collar of his faded jacket. He fished in his pocket stealthily with long fingers, procuring a floppy, beloved wallet he flipped open with his thumb, removing a crisp \$50 dollar bill. The clerk went to her cash drawer and gathered his change; two \$1 bills and some coins. He grasped the bills like a praying mantis and inserted them deftly into his wallet, smoothly folding it and slid it into the sheath of his left pocket. The frowning clerk was staring hard at him and fidgeting with the change, anxious to complete his transaction. He offered his right hand, which opened like a lily, and she poured the coins into his wide palm. His fingers angled shut and his arm angled back and down to his right pocket. I heard the dimes, pennies and quarters cascade in a muffled jingle to the bottom, bouncing against his thin leg as he released them.

Watching him, my heart rate had slowed and my peripheral vision had sharpened. The sun slanted through the post office windows, creating long ochre rectangles on the floor, the glitter of infinitesimal dust particles floating across the light and into our lungs. The room was warm. He made a slow quarter turn with his body and then turned his head another to look behind him—at me. smiled. The wrinkles on his face were epic, his skin both rugged and translucent with short whiskers peppering his cheeks and chin. He wore no glasses and his eyes were a cloudy brown. He didn't react but lingered, gazing steadily into my eyes, finally realigning his head to his body and saying to the clerk, as if she had moved stage right, "Thank you for your help." He reset his gyroscope and began a molasses approach towards the door.

My movement to the counter and my transaction felt as if they were made at warp speed. By the time I finished my business, shoved the receipt and stamps into my bag and descended the long, stone steps outside, the old T'ai Chi farmer had navigated down the sidewalk and was addressing a small snowdrift at the curb. I got into my car and watched him in my rear view mirror. He made his way around the bright red Ford Fiesta parked behind me and to the driver's door. He

pulled keys out of his jacket pocket and sorted through them, finally inserting one into the lock. The sun was too bright, the sky too blue, the snow too white, his car too red, the Doric pillars on the post office too large and looming. I felt woozy and uncertain about everything. My stomach growled. I turned the ignition, revved the engine, disengaged the clutch and pulled away from the curb into rush hour traffic.

March 2007

Person to Person

I pick her up at 6:17 p.m. and we drive around the block to the 331 Club. It's easy—her neighborhood watering hole comfort zone. The drinks are cheap at happy hour, the lights are low and the appetizer we order arrives just as the alcohol begins stretching like a lazy cat into our bloodstreams. We don't waste any time. We talk about love and resistance to love. We laugh at the pretense of control and the waste of time it is. I feel relief while she's not so sure. The look on her face is an award-winning photograph not captured, still sweating the salt spray and sex of Savannah. She said she jumped up and down on the bed naked, like a girl. I walk to the back door for a cigarette. She walks to the bar to talk to a friend. Outside the air audibly crackles, my Northerner ears attuned to it only in subzero temperatures. Headlights bob around the corner towards me and then continue on, taillights trailing away from me down Marshall Avenue, destination unknown.

She pays our bill and we walk out together, pushing hard on the heavy oak door standing bravely between our comfort and the ferocious cold. I fumble for my keys through sloppy mittens and drive her to the door of her dark house a couple blocks away, an unlit string of Chinese lanterns tossing in the frigid wind on the second story porch. I watch them dance while we say goodbye. I need to travel to my South with this woman. We have each other's stories tonight.

When I get home I hear music drifting in from another room. I watch my husband, whom I love, sitting just around the corner of this old table, in a dreamy yet driven state, typing. It gives me a false sense of security. Sitting down at my laptop next to him, I open my mail, clicking first on the latest from my darling girl in London and next, on the latest from her darling boy in Asia. I dive the depths of their intention for themselves and each other. I spend an hour reading stories and harvesting images from their recent days and nights. The geography between us ticks off the time zones. It is midnight where I sit, morning where she wakes while the sun sets in India. I think about the long journey a letter used to take from the old country to the New World, how

precious those pages must have been upon arrival and how many other words were swallowed silently into the sea.

Tonight, I live forever. Tonight, I am certain of my death. Tonight, I feel my mother hovering like the wraith she has become. Tonight, I drink an Irish whiskey on the rocks in honor of my Irish mother who never tasted it. Tonight, I feel the presence of my children the way a womb recognizes the cloying insistence of life against its wall, cells multiplying, pressed inexplicably against each other, and against all odds. I look at photos from the *World Press* for 2006. Evolution is slow and each of us unique and all the while, the entire history of the earth as we know it is a mere blip on the cosmic radar screen. I pour another drink and sink into the sink of it all. I spend hours with violence around the globe. I take the violence to bed and roll around with it like a savage, implacable swain.

In the morning, I wake and lie in bed thinking about how I'll prepare an egg. Every couple weeks I buy two dozen eggs from my neighbor down the road for four dollars, recycling the cartons with her from the previous weeks. Opening the carton, I view the pleasing shades of beige, blue, green and blue-green. Each egg is an individual and I take time choosing the one I'll eat, a carnivorous ritual that feels gloriously self-indulgent and pleasing. This morning, I soft boil chosen egg and also choose the small, aqua Bakelite dish from the cupboard purposefully. I crack the egg with the edge of a spoon and scoop it lovingly from the green shell, which, emptied, presents a lovely, deeper silvery-green shade on its interior. I hesitate before tossing the shell into the garbage. The five-minute egg is lovely when it meets the dish—white egg white releasing from its rubbery clutches yellow yolk, pooling against aqua dish—and a small bit of butter, melting. I look up and watch tiny, sunlit snowflakes through the kitchen window above the sink, which appear suspended, having wafted off the tree boughs, held aloft. I carry my simple breakfast to the table.

“You wanna sign my blanket?” We're standing outside on the corner of First Avenue and 7th Street. He holds up a black marker.

“Sign your blanket?” I ask, rhetorically. “Yeah... but I have to think about what to write ...do you have time?” I’ve put myself on the spot.

“Yes, baby, I have all the time in the world...” but he surveys the crowd like a salesman on a convention floor honing in on the next customer.

A comical rubber fish bobs up and down from the crook of his left arm and his locally famous walking stick is clamped under his right armpit. He’s sporting a black stocking cap pulled down low over his graying, wiry hair exploding maniacally from its reaches. His skin is the sallow brown of old chocolate and he only has a few teeth left. He’s a fixture on this corner. Stick Man. He hits up the kids on smoke breaks between sets at First Ave Danceteria.

“Are you OK?” I ask. Do you have a place to sleep tonight?” grasping the marker from his gloved fingers.

“Maybe... but if I don’t, I’ve got this blanket and all these words.” He’s comforting me.

“OK.” I look into his cloudy eyes as if through binoculars scanning a horizon I want to see more clearly. I can smell the sweetness of whiskey escaping on his foggy breath. He is not so different from me. I examine the heavy canvas coat, which has been repeatedly addressed with marker strokes for years and possibly years more. It’s become a work of art. His newer blanket is crowded with words, quotes and names, like the plaster cast of a high school jock. I scribe “warm” on the fold nearest to his face.

“I’ll read that before I go to bed tonight and think about you... is this your daughter?”

“Yes...” we both turn to gaze at her. I say, “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” as if I’m presenting her to royalty in another century, and I feel instantly embarrassed for having said it when there are so many other words I might have chosen that would have done her and myself more justice. He reaches out, gently takes her hand and kisses it with princely charm. She smiles and giggles, looking at me for reassurance. My eyes fill with confusing tears and I turn to him instead.

“Make sure this adds up to some good whiskey tonight, okay? Not that rot-gut shit.” I slip him a few dollar bills. He had me. I wanted to give him much more and would have felt holy for it.

“Yes. I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. Don’t you worry.” His eyes wander again to my youngest child, almost nineteen, a shy smirk on her lips; he drinks her down like tonic or poison. We both covet beauty tonight.

“Hey... Tall Man ... you wanna sign my blanket?” And so it goes until we retreat from the cold through glass double doors lined with tattooed bouncers and back into the dark, cavernous room for Sparklehorse.

This morning I woke at 8 a.m. to heavy snow falling, the forecasted weekend storm finally arriving in full force. If I was on a highway between somewhere and here, I might have felt anxious, but in the safety of my country house with nowhere to go, I descended the stairs and opened the door, releasing my dogs into the blinding white of a Minnesota blizzard. They disappeared into it and didn’t return for hours. If dogs would talk they might have daring stories to tell. Instead they return home, nonchalantly shake off the snow and sleep.

May 2007

In Front of Me at the End of Winter

The Japanese girl is delicately explaining tennis shoes. There is a purposeful design difference between the right and left shoe. I know I am missing something cultural, something bordering on the philosophical, as I watch her lovely, slender finger indicate the rubbery curve of the left shoe and listen to her gentle, bell-toned voice. She is speaking in Japanese and I understand every word she is saying even though, clearly, I don't know how to speak Japanese, but there is no time to marvel over this because I am not grasping the *underlying concept* of her point, which she assumes I understand. It matters more to me that I get the bigger picture. I roll over, surface, open my eyes and stare at the blurry box elder bug making its way down the edge of my pillowcase. I have the same dull headache I had when I went to bed late last night.

I go to the bathroom, swallow four ibuprofen, and return to bed. I can hear B moving around downstairs. I close my eyes against the headache. Eventually, I turn on satellite TV and flip back and forth between a 1940's movie with Lana Turner, a dance hall girl grappling with issues of class at an Ivy League college where she has been mis-invited for the weekend, and an Italian cop & mobster film with yellow subtitles. An attractive, middle-aged woman is being "taken to heaven" by her much younger suitor on a thin, green blanket flung into the dirt on the outskirts of some Italian town when I interrupt them. They had leapt from the car when their lust finally got the better of them. She is gripping the earth and moaning. I am craving pot roast.

I think this God of yours has a pretty cruel sense of humor – a deity that designs so many insects who die on their backs simply because they can't right themselves. I extend my finger into the sink as rescue for the earnest box elder bug that has likely been churning the air with its tireless legs all night long. He grabs on easily and saunters up my finger nonchalantly, as if nothing has happened for the last ten hours, and then stumbles along my hand to the edge of the sink. I make a cheddar dog for breakfast and eat it with sweet relish and no bun. It's Friday. I have no work today. My dogs are all sleeping quietly. Dogs spend so much of their time sleeping. I'm tempted to open a bottle of wine at 11:30 AM. I watch movies and read from a few books for the entire day in bed.

Today, I get into my car at the break of dawn. I drive through dense fog downtown and struggle deciding on this or that expensive parking ramp. I spend eight hours far from windows or a clock, and then lose my way through the Skyway system after 5PM, giving up on finding my way back through the maze to that bank of elevators that is supposed to deliver me to the garage. The desk guards in their crisp white shirts with large button down pocket flaps watch me walk back and forth, eyeing me with deadpan suspicion, especially when I reach into my bag and rummage. I descend an escalator, revolve through the heavy glass doors and onto the street in order to get my bearings. A misty rain appears suspended in the air and color has been sucked out of the picture. People are waiting for buses under shelters and umbrellas, crossing intersections, running to cars paused at curbs, keeping their heads down. The traffic lights embarrassingly over do it in the gloom, like a cheerful mom busting into a junior high make-out party with refreshments. Buses and bicycles float by, engines hum and water sluices through dark iron grates. Thirty minutes later I'm finally underground. There in an impressive echo in the garage and while there are many cars, there are not many people walking to or from them. I look up and think about all the weight girded above me. My car naps on row D like a good dog.

I drive. I listen to the news, which is not news, but instead, a gurgling regurgitation of what someone decides we get to hear. Even bad news feels soothing if repeated often enough. The reporters continue posing the same obvious questions, making the same boring postulations made yesterday. The Dow Jones. The NASDAQ. The rise and fall of things. Forecasts. The pitter-patter of radio voices mixed with rain, wipers, tires rotating, pistons pumping. I glance at the car in the left lane, the car in the right lane, the headlights behind me, the brightly painted eastbound train slowing to a stop at 42nd. I'm treading water, understanding there may be no real explanation before tiring, foundering and slipping under. It feels like surrender. I smile, wave my little white flag and depress the accelerator towards home.

June 2007

Invasive Species

The front door was propped open, serving up a slice of light. With only narrow windows near the ceiling, the room felt womblike, even when the sun was still proud. This neighborhood bar was built in 1899, most recently purchased in 2005 by a man who has enjoyed a long and varied entrepreneurial history in Minneapolis. He remains plenty hip enough to know what works. He built in heavy, north-woody booths with red Naugahyde seats and hung a few large paintings from local artists over them. He added a compact stage at the back, which delivers top-shelf, homegrown and eclectic nightly entertainment: the Roe Family Singers, Chuck and Sean's Trivia, Tacos & Turntables and the like. The food is low country, as in grilled sandwiches, hummus (cleverly served in a martini glass) with pita bread, fries, and *hush puppies*-- rarely seen or cooked properly in the Midwest. (I know this because I grew up in the south.) The difference between a glass of Tempranillo for \$6.75 or a half-price happy hour bottle for \$12 was easy to figure out. The witty, handsome bartenders were running between a small kitchen and the bar and got distracted in their split duty, accidentally incinerating our tuna melt for which we were not charged. Classy.

The owner happened to walk in after our wine was corked and we struck up a conversation, loosely acquainted through the arts scene for many years. From behind his flesh-colored vintage glasses, he ranted about the Mafioso thugs from city hall who have been beating him up about everything from his fryer that didn't meet code to the neighborhood noise ordinance since he opened "probably because I voted for Reagan," he said, which admittedly took me off guard, coming from him. He rambled on, clearly frustrated, about the DFL contingency, which he claims has locked down our state from a time immemorial. I listened to his abbreviated synopsis of the situation and was happy to know that there are art-centric, fiscally conservative Republicans running in our underground tunnels after all, challenging my oft-judgmental views on that spoiled party and where they party. Whatever. There are two sides to every story and this is my favorite bar in Minneapolis.

After another friend arrived, ordered a cocktail and after the three of us chatted awhile, I grabbed my glass and stepped out back to smoke at one of the cedar picnic tables shoring up against the yellow brick wall, the area cordoned off from the street with an iron pipe railing. That meant I could drink my wine out there. I lit up. A small, dark-haired man in his 50's wearing a classic motorcycle jacket was sitting at the next table and promptly asked to bum a smoke. I refused, using my up front 'n' sassy argument about how expensive cigarettes are nowadays and that they are for sale in the bar, which was soon drowned out by yet another perfectly outfitted Harley rider making his deafening, mid-life-crisis statement up University Avenue. I rolled my eyes away from all of it and gulped my wine. We exchanged a few off-handed remarks and then, turning to face him, I asked, "What do you do?"

"I'm a botanist," he responded.

"Really? Prove it," I snapped, with a playful, dubious grin, suddenly interested.

Botanist Bob proved it with anecdotes about land management in Idaho and eradicating invasive species at Custer's Last Stand memorial and went on to educate me on the evils of Monsanto's agricultural takeover, "90% Round-Up-Ready soybean starters," and how this related to his small farm and landscaping business in Inver Grove Heights. He had swollen, chapped, grey farmer hands. He was not a fan of genetically modified food or pesticides any more than I. My companions wandered outside with their drinks, eyeing the situation dubiously, slipping into my table where introductions were made. Botanist Bob commented about the way I wore my clothes, my beautiful eyes (uh-oh!), found out I was happily married, passed me his card and talked about "living within the bounds of nature" and then about how his wife hadn't kissed him in ten years. I told him that wasn't right and he should go home and make love to her immediately, or divorce her. The latter was not an option, as he explained, because, according to Minnesota state law, she would sell off or own half his farm.

Before we could discuss that topic further, Freaky Bicycle Guitar Man, who had been hollering like a street preacher to no one at the corner table, stumbled down the line of tables with someone else's abandoned Bloody Mary glass in hand, into which a couple spent condiment

packets and a balled-up napkin had been stuffed. He slammed it on the table, clumsily removed the garbage from the glass with his grimy fingers and more or less demanded a pour from the botanist's beer glass. Botanist Bob looked at me with his sparkly navy eyes, sighed, and complied. FBGM threw the beer back with conviction, almost choking on the remaining ice in the glass. Then he hollered: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired!" His voice was strained and hoarse, the large veins in his neck bulging and pulsing while he paced back and forth like Rilke's panther, ranting over the state of the world. I could not disagree.

"I know... I hear you," I said loudly, since he was looking at me. And then he raged on about not being granted a slot at the open mic event tonight and when I asked why, he boasted about how he likes to get people worked up because he's worked up and goddammit this and shitfire that and I finally said, "Well, maybe they don't want you to get on stage because you seem belligerent and they are worried about what might happen..." He spewed saliva intermittently throughout his recharged protest, ramping it up until I cut him off.

"Hey... you are getting really belligerent right now and it makes people nervous, especially if you're drunk."

He paused, startled, and, for an instant, my fight or flight hackles rose. But when his face went slowly quiet, we locked eyes and I felt a world and then another pass between us – one rolling beneath his shadow and one beneath mine. Fully softened, he muttered, "Well, you know, I need people to tell me this shit, you know, because I need to know how I'm comin' off."

I smiled. "Well, I'm telling you.... and it's okay... you're okay, right?" I offered impotently. Behind his aggressive agitation he was exhausted and coveted a bottle of booze and other things he'd likely not had for far too long, if ever. Two beats later, Botanist Bob said something that set FBGM off again, and he reclined into the comfortable trench, ranting again, eager to keep any connection with us for however long and for whatever reason.

Exasperated, we were forced to ignore him and eventually, he moved down the line. Botanist Bob escorted me around the corner after urging me to ogle over his circa 70's BMW, which was

parked coquettishly at the curb on 13th Street. This is where we said goodbye. My companions and I moved on to another bar a few blocks away to meet more friends, eat some nachos, and catch up. Eventually, I stepped outside to smoke again. A cop car rounded the corner and pulled up, rolling down the passenger side window. He asked if I'd seen some guy with freaky hair on a bicycle with a guitar. I said, yeah and where I'd seen him, and said he was mostly harmless, just mad at the world. He made notes on his clipboard and murmured as he wrote. I wished him a good evening adding that if he found Freaky Bicycle Guitar Man, I hoped he'd be gentle and that I didn't think he was dangerous. He's just sick and tired of being sick and tired, I said. The cop nodded in complicity. The moon peeked out from behind a tree, staring through its telescopic eye.

Three days later, the rain fell steadily for 24 hours or more. We were mere fractions from drought conditions around the state so the downpour was welcome. That morning, two men arrived in our yard separately, dressed in rain gear, one from Dakota Electric and the other from Frontier Communications, to flag the lines prior to south side tilling scheduled for the afternoon. We'd been planning to expand our garden and get more serious about growing our own food. While we joked with the guy from the electric company, an email flew in from Juliet the Poet, who has been obsessing about the honeybee crisis. Bees of all varieties have been dying in alarming numbers around the world and scientists can't clearly identify the reasons why, but are concerned that it could cause a tragic, global agricultural event of epic proportions. Pesticides and genetically modified seeds are suspect. Upon further reading, I learned that wild buckthorn, an assertive and unwelcome hedging shrub, provides one of the most substantial pollen sources available for bees in the spring and that the eradication of buckthorn and other errant weeds are adding to the endangerment of the bee population.

Buckthorn crowds the wooded areas around our prairie. Its half-inch long spikes scratch our legs and arms, tear at our clothes and sometimes wound our dogs as they plow through the thick hedges to the river. When it blooms, the smell is sickeningly sweet like the odor of last night's drink on someone's breath but there is something alluring about it. We have a neighbor who made it his mission a couple years ago to eliminate buckthorn from the property because of its insistence upon the land. He's had little success.

*.....I don't need your praise
to survive. I was here first,
before you ever planted a garden.
And I'll be here when only the sun and moon
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.*

I will constitute the field.

—From "Witchgrass" by Louise Glück.

July 2007

Starting Over, Again and Again

I'd written the skeleton for July's piece weeks ago and after sleeping for only four hours last night, got up early and wrote for six hours, which took me into the early afternoon, my intention being to submit my essay before guests arrived. After going into the kitchen to put potatoes into the oven, I returned to my dozing computer, unintentionally clicked "revert to" when it reawakened, and lost all of it. It's gone the way of all unprinted words, unsavored. I refuse to resuscitate the essay because it's like trying to save an exhausted, dead relationship. I slapped my laptop shut and went to the shower crying, frustrated as hell. Meanwhile, the phone keeps ringing, the house is filling with people already and I guess I'm just going to write this during the next 12 hours under the forces of distraction.

I'll write in between making coleslaw or replenishing the chip bowl, or starting the grill or holding a conversation about lyrics, touring or what someone might be reading lately or how much ambition it takes to destroy integrity. It'll be an interesting guerilla exercise and reminds me of how I've written most of my songs over the last 20 years. We are entertaining a band of young lads at our house tonight with a summer barbeque. They've recently released their first indie label recording and are probably still recovering from the industry hoo-hah of last weekend's festivities, which we were obliged to attend, due to my husband's involvement.

The label party was typically hi-fi hype with lo-fi substance and zero class. Even the art hung on the office walls was obviously thrown up at the last minute and conveyed nothing. All food and drink was sponsored and they ran out of everything far too early. Wine was being poured by a handsome, flustered, young company man in a hip suit, who kept disappearing. We served ourselves, gratefully avoiding the sales pitch. Later that night, I would watch him roughly ushered out of the adjacent club after the band played by a bouncer who would shout to his cohort positioned on the street, "I don't wanna see his face in here again!" The wine spokesman would sway inertly in his disheveled suit on the sidewalk, rendered utterly harmless. Ketel One vodka cocktails were delivered through a ridiculously gauche ice sculpture contraption run by

two young, sexy, interchangeable blondes with perfect teeth, appearing tired of showing them. The line to that table was as long as one to a featured ride at an amusement park and we didn't go there. The label interns did a terrible job of monitoring the food tables for tidiness or replenishing the platters. On one trip to the restroom I could see them all yucking it up in the back room, clearly drunk, far too early in the night.

The band members, who were the flaunting label's excuse for throwing the party, awkwardly meandered around looking out of place and bored, unrecognized by the partiers, who were all too busy noticing or being noticed by someone who might have mattered. Never mind the amateur label having been clueless and extremely difficult during the entire recording process—it was their night for bragging rights. For our part, it was endlessly entertaining to lean against a wall, sip wine and watch the vapid B-rate movie airing in real time before our eyes. We've both been in the music business for years and we recognized no one as "local industry." Instead, it was peopled with beautiful, young twenty-somethings who had thought way too hard about what to wear, juxtaposed against aging male rocker nobodies, whose outfits were LA, circa 1989—think heavy, Goth crosses, black tees with slashes of white sporting a daring splash of red, and Rod Stewart hair.

This group of merry pop/rock boys are grounded, politically savvy people with brains that churn and sharp senses of humor. They have already figured out, in their late teens and early twenties, how to navigate one of the sleaziest businesses on the planet and they are serious about their burgeoning careers. Their families, with whom we have become loosely acquainted, are solid and supportive of their talented kids, as we are. We were grateful to find them amid myriad posers and trashed wannabes.

Brats, burgers and salads have been served, tiki torches are lit and the beanbag toss game is in full swing. I just finished the first round of dishes and put a pan of brownies into the oven. Laughter and unintelligible if animated conversation is floating around the yard, mixing nicely with music from the stereo, cranked up loudly from inside the house. Tents were pitched before sunset and it's assumed we may be up until sunrise. The weather is perfect, as it has been for many, glorious days, hovering in the mid-70s with clear skies and cooler nights. We've put on

sweatshirts and I've poured myself a glass of wine. A full moon is rising and later I'll convince everyone to walk down to the prairie, work off some of the effects of alcohol and enjoy a moment with Mommy Nature.

This house harbors a self-generating revelry, and while we play the part of hosts, we can't claim ownership to the Mecca for communion, solace and ease that are proving to be its architectural birthright. It seems to possess incarnate powers, separate from but embracing all who live and gather here. Tonight is yet another inspiring night in a series of days and nights with no beginning or ending. But, the brownies are done. I'll be back later.

We processed down to the river with the dogs, drifting into three unspecified groups who were given prior instruction regarding respect for our sleeping neighbors, since it was past 2:00 AM. A low-lying fog had settled in the prairie, illuminated by the moon and punctuated with fireflies. We coalesced mid-way down the gravel road where the view is long and open to the tree line chute, gazing up river. Some stood quietly and others ran like puppies, chasing the dogs around the wet grasses. Someone starting singing something and soon we became an eight-voice choir belting out gospel songs in the middle of the night.

I don't really know how it all happened but it will go down in our history as the first time we brought song to the river's edge. We stumbled across one tune after another, repeating some that took us there, and abandoning others that didn't, laughing at our feeble attempts and bragging to each other about what worked. The stars appeared weak against the proud moon and the dogs panted in our midst. At some point, it seemed time to leave and we carted our exuberance back to the house where some of us belted out Beatles songs at the top of our lungs from the porch, accompanied by acoustic guitar, for a good hour and a half. My vocal chords finally gave out and I joined the other half of our party in the yard. The rest trickled down from the porch eventually, the grill was fired up again to reheat brats and hilarity ebbed and flowed until the sky began to lighten. I turned off the stone porch light, blew out the torches and soon we filed off to bed before the sun rose, like unoffending vampires.

We slept intermittently against our somewhat confused body clocks, finally giving up and getting up three or four hours later. The boys (and one girlfriend) crawled from tents as the sun rose, dragging their sleeping bags into open shade. My tousled daughters have stumbled downstairs. Coffee is being brewed and I've chopped onions and leftover potatoes from the night's fare for hash browns. Bacon is sizzling, cheese is being grated, and sunny side up eggs will be fried.

As I survey the littered yard from behind the porch screens, I think about how randomly life unfolds depending upon the choices that are made. I might have sold this house four years ago when I got divorced and moved myself and my girls back to the city. But that's not what happened. And I didn't plan on falling in love and marrying the local musician who would move into this old, magical house and be such a willing participant in surfing the thermals with me. Sometimes, I get tired of washing dishes, swiping down tables, mopping floors, sweeping up dog hair and planning meals for the next round of guests, but we continue extending invitations and it's always—always worth the effort. We can't help it! This is how we live. And I never know how I'll get my next essay written with all this activity, especially when my computer betrays me, but it works out.

August 2007

Zeitgeist

There are nights and then, there are *nights* that pierce and decimate time and space. It's not profound, in terms of specific environment, information exchanged, anecdotes or clever one-liners; instead, it's the brilliance that arrives when everyone is *there* and comfortable enough to simply speak—the eccentric display of individuality. Each person at the table plucked what bloomed from their brain stem, right then. Fresh, succulent fruit. It's the tiny, enormous statement that spills from a mouth unawares, without any inclination to protect an utterance from opinion or judgment, or the unabashed response, sans theatrics. As I drove home alone after paying an exorbitant bill and hugging each person present as if it was the only time we would ever meet, they filled the interior of my car. It was the only event that would ever occur that way, that night, that moment. I thought about Annie Dillard's obsession with cloud formations and how they hover over our lives. *We people possess records, like gravestones, of individual clouds and the dates on which they flourished.* There is no recounting the revelation that rose and fell back into itself becoming the initial, singular revelation, like the glop that undulates in a lava lamp. I followed my headlights down the highway. All I can say now and all that needs be said is that I got to have it.

That night, waiting for my friends to arrive, I sat beneath a navy umbrella while tentative bouts of rain kept trying to move me indoors. I resisted. I had an impervious need to be outdoors. Buses stuttered slowly by, belching diesel exhaust. Cyclists peddled through swollen rivulets running alongside the curb to the sewer drain, their clothes dampened with exertion. A man and woman attending the AA meeting across the street argued in a doorway. She lit a cigarette and adjusted her baggy pants around her boney hips, pointing her finger at him while her voice became more shrill and accusatory, whereupon he stopped defending himself. He looked at his feet or down the street behind him or at the sky, but never again at her. A dapper elderly gentleman with carefully combed hair sat with his back to me under an awning, offering bits of food to his white, standard poodle sitting attentively at his feet. A couple strolled by with

backpacks slung over their young, unburdened shoulders, laughing and leaning into each other, palpably magnetized.

The afternoon had ushered-in torrential rains, flooding the streets and closing major highways just before the rush hour commute. On the interstates, there was gridlock and detours. My waiter delivered a glass of pinot noir, turning her face skyward querying me about the weather. I imagined that she was thinking how it might affect her night's earnings, as the tumultuous front crawled through the city and kept people home. Another errant cloud opened up but I opted to stay outside. From beneath my umbrella, I watched the cloud formations pushed by the storm front quickly morph from one shape to another. I watched a cow in her entirety, back to front, slowly turning a lazy head revealing her sloping profile, which suddenly tipped forward and grew into a tyrannosaurus rex, then a pelican as the nose elongated further, and finally, briefly, a perfect seahorse; all this occurred within a minute of my full attention.

Recently, I've been aware of my mortality. It's not a fear-based awareness as much as a climbing vine awareness – little feet gripping and mapping the architecture of my body; skeleton, musculature and nervous systems, internal organs competing with body clock and a moment to moment game of chance. It's both thrilling and anticlimactic. I think about these things as I drive 75 to 80 mph down Highway 52 on the morning commute. It could be the fiery crash or the crashing heart, as mine flutters mysteriously like a wounded bird from time to time and I wonder what is happening beneath my rib cage. A 50-year-old friend, who had no symptoms, no signs or family history of heart disease, collapsed on a treadmill in a doctor's office after all his blood work came back looking great, and was flown to the Mayo Clinic undergoing an emergency triple by-pass. After he recounted the story, I asked him what pleasures he had enjoyed his whole life he would now be pressured to do without. He said, "Well, the doctor says I'm good for another 50 years!" bought him a drink. He chased it with another piece of cheese.

There are things I could do differently to improve my chances for "longer life," but in either case, I worry about it less and less. I've had myriad brushes with death and I like being here a lot. I harbor few if any regrets and if it all ended when I put the last period on this essay, I'd have lived a rich, voluminous life and I would only regret missing the party that will be thrown in my

honor. Living long has never been as important as living well, but that's a worn phrase on a refrigerator somewhere and it sticks in my mouth in an unpleasant, trite way, sounding like an excuse for something. When I have a night like *that night*, which happens more and more frequently as my very human and sophomoric measurement of time ticks away, being alive matters not because of what happened before or what may happen next. It's not about following the rules or breaking them and it's not about what I think or what I believe or what I hope for or desire or lose or gain but about who I am in the alchemy of moments—each and every glorious one of them.

* * *

*What makes you think it's gonna last
When everything you've ever done was to be past
Just think about our bodies in this place
And imagine us shooting through space*

*Stop dragging us down
With all your tick-tocking clocks that seem to never slow down
Stop dragging us down
Because eventually this future's gonna swallow you*

*Why do you think it's gonna end
When everything that's ever been around on this echo train
Just think about our bodies in this place
And imagine us shooting through space*

*Stop dragging us down
With all your tick-tocking clocks that never seem to slow down now
Stop dragging us down
Because eventually this future's gonna swallow you*

Chad Van Gaalen

“Echo Train” from the CD, Infiniheart

September 2007

A Small Escape

After reaching Pine City on 35W north, it's all two-lane roads heading due east to the upper peninsula of Michigan—I remember it well. Even though I've not traveled in this direction for twenty-two years, I know the names of these Wisconsin towns by rote memory, the way I learned the alphabet or hold thousands of melodies and lyrics in my head; Grantsburg, Siren, Hertel, Trego, Springbrook. I can still see the view from the back seat, hear the comforting squeak of a thermos in the front seat and smell coffee being poured into the little red cup they shared. I hear Glenn Miller's signature clarinet line floating over the horn section and can see the blacktop unfurling beyond the hood of their baby blue 1962 Chevrolet Impala. Pine, maple and oak tree branches stretch towards each other from both sides of the road, creating a tunnel of anticipation—anticipation heightened by youth and a summer cabin tucked in the woods by a small, unpopulated lake.

Humidity had me glued to the porch chair in front of my lap top attempting to secure lodging on the north shore of Lake Superior to no avail while the rain came steadily down and down. Every cabin, motel and hotel I contacted was booked; it became more and more evident those who plan ahead would thwart our little getaway. Organized, Type A personalities ruin it for those of us who live spontaneously. It pissed me off and the forecast was insuring continued rainfall for the next week so camping had been ruled out entirely. But Kitty had taken off work to have “Mommy Time” and I had to figure something out fast.

I don't remember how it came to me but it briefly lit up the room. Soon I discovered and booked a \$38 room at Bingo's Motel in Wakefield, 12 miles north of Ironwood on the south shore of Lake Superior, an area on the upper peninsula of Michigan that nostalgia had buried in my bones long ago. Charlotte and Eugene “Bingo” Vittone have owned this motel and surrounding 97-acre property for over 50 years. Doesn't seem like they are selling. Charlotte was very sweet and accommodating on the phone and told me that they were officially closed on Sundays so they would leave a key in the door of room #4. Days later, Bingo would tell my youngest daughter

that all four of his daughters graduated from college and that a college education is one thing that no one can take away from you once you have it. This cliché wisdom would be delivered from the other side of Bingo's Bar where he was drying lowball glasses with a red-striped towel. The dryer would be going round and round in the anteroom while four road crew guys with dirty hats would be drinking beer and unabashedly staring at us.

Hayward, Round Lake, Clam Lake, Foster Junction, Mellen. It was overcast with intermittent sprinkles as we drove along listening to mix CDs Kitty had made for the trip: Modest Mouse, PJ Harvey, Deerhoof, Chad VanGalen, Why?, Radiohead, Of Montreal. Two guitars were packed into the trunk, our small duffels and laptops in the back seat, a grocery bag and a cooler filled with whatever food I was able to harvest from my cupboards and refrigerator; cheeses, crackers, almonds, dried cherries, pretzels, peanut butter, six hard boiled eggs, homemade tuna/pasta salad, cookies and two bottles of wine. We had no plans.

Upton, Iron Belt, Pence, Hoyt, Montreal, Hurley, Norrie and finally my beloved Ironwood. A drive through town proffered two prime locations of memory; Joe's Pasty shop, where I'd eaten those coveted meat and potato pies as a kid and the Ben Franklin, which had sadly been transformed into the local equivalent of a giant gift shop, replete with more cheap tourist kitch than should ever be displayed under one roof. The antique store next door had more to offer and we left carrying a paper bag. Most of the houses in town were weather beaten and askew behind crumbling concrete stoops and crooked, exploding sidewalks that weren't bike friendly for kids much less remotely navigable for all the old people living in this sweet, dilapidated town. The main street was deliciously shabby, sporting faded, original neon signs and marquees over shops, bars and the local theater house. Not much had been kept up much less updated. This town is clearly struggling to stay on its feet.

After a long road trip out west last fall, I now know that the upper peninsula may be one of the last bastions for Ma & Pa motels. They were all trying so hard to get our attention as we passed them by on County Road 2 and we adored each of them, but were flush with love arriving at Bingo's. The key was in the lock, as promised. Opening the door revealed more lo-fi glory than we could have hoped for. We hauled the contents of the car into the small, immaculate, 1960's

wood-paneled room, uncorked a bottle of red wine and arranged some cheeses, crackers, cherries and almonds from our cooler on the cover of the vintage Pyrex baking dish I'd just purchased in town. We got some tunes going, set the motel clock to the current time and flopped on the very comfortable bed for appetizers. Eventually we drove back into town and had dinner at Don and GG's where the food was predictably mediocre but the server was earnest. over-tipped her. Late night conversation and songwriting ensued back at Bingo's. We left the windows and screen door open for cross ventilation and crashed by 11pm.

Black River Harbor. Rainbow, Gorge and Potawatomi Falls, Little Girl's Point. There was a day when a red and black-checkered blanket was stretched out in the sand near a huge driftwood log I would roll repeatedly on and over when I was a young, brown berry. I know the picnic basket, the metal pails and shovels, the Aunties' plaid flannel shirts, curly permanents and the endless entreaties for me to come out of the water "your lips are blue, your lips are so blue—honey, come warm up." Stones upon countless stones, licked smooth and silky, are spit onto shore from the obsessive mouth of the great Lake Superior. The stones are so warm and the lake is so very cold it hurt us just wading in—neither of us were going to sign up for blue lips. Our Midwestern "ocean" rolls like the big water and fresh water waves crash on the beach. We walked for hours through forests, on beaches, alongside rivers up and down hills. When the day was done, Kitty wanted to take on the winding roads back to Bessemer, so she drove. I smoked and watched the trees blur in my peripheral vision.

We took our hunger to Joe's Pasty Shop; not the tittie club kind of pasty, but rather, the Finnish kind, made of peppered meat and potatoes wrapped in a perfect, flakey crust and served to us from a worn out but still-beautiful, small town woman who needs a job like everyone else. We all have our stories. She had her pack of Merit 100's and a blue lighter resting neatly on the corner of the counter lined with black Naugahide cushioned barstools. There were huge ashtrays placed every foot down the short counter and at all but two tables in this small room. Non-smokers are ignored or non-existent in Ironwood. There were framed newspaper articles on the walls boasting Joe's Pasty Shop awards and kudos and their bowling team wins back to the 1960's. It must have been her man who came in and sat quietly at the counter until she came out from the kitchen. They exchanged private glances and then sat together speaking in low voices

while we attended to our food, squirting more and more ketchup on our pasties. The day we left and swung by to purchase some frozen pasties to bring home, he was there again. He remembered me, smirked, and gave a nod. His short-sleeved shirt revealed an enormous scar on his left arm—a jagged, splayed scar that ran from under the cuff of the sleeve past his elbow. Looked like a knife wound.

The men are mostly dark haired and permanently stained from whatever work they do. Many are blue-eyed and have that mysterious, closed-mouth allure of carnies, having seen too much. What they've seen makes them silent but their eyes don't shy. The women's unspoken burdens are tantamount and their ears are full up—they've heard it all. Their darting glances are dismissive but their skin emits a low, electrical hum. I imagine they seek escape in each other, open briefly after the sun is gone and the bars close, and fueled by profound dullness take each other—like a drug. I thought about it as I paid her and left them alone together.

We reentered the cocoon of my car, bellies sated. Finding our way to the old cabin wasn't as difficult as I had thought it might be. Here was where I spent a month every summer with my spinster aunts and grandmother playing, swimming and bathing in the lake, watching the Ivory soap float. We hauled buckets of drinking water from the spring, made sand castles for tiny tree toads, picked raspberries for the pie my grandmother would make, roasted marshmallows and hot dogs in the fire, rowed the boat day and night, slept or read Archie comics in the hammock, and played cards on the porch after dinner by lantern light. I slept out there often, happy to battle the mosquitoes for the breeze.

We dropped into Bingo's Bar for directions to Chaney Lake, and headed out past the old Sportsman's Bar on County Road 519. About ten minutes down the road, we saw a mangy creature loping in front of us. was thinking what Kitty was thinking – rabid, natty-haired raccoon. The slow realization—porcupine—then another, road kill, a few miles later. We'd never seen one in the wild—these sloths of the north woods. We found the tiny turnoff just past the mile marker, which had a signpost bearing the names "Gothblad" and "Schutlz." We descended onto the rough and rutted gravel road nestled in a magical way beneath thick, overarching trees. In the clearing down the final hill, a man in a red shirt, red cut-off sweatpants

and a grimy hat carried something heavy in a plastic bag. I slowed, rolled down my window, introduced myself as a relative of Margaret Colman's and wondered if it was okay to see our old cabin.

"Ahhh... I know you," he declared. "You're one of the Lewis clan!" We exchanged familial connections and then he explained that the cabin was still standing but he had to dispose of the bagged porcupine, having already removed his toenails and many of his quills. "I make jewelry," he laughed, "I'll see you up there." Kitty and I wandered around the property and peered in through the dirty windows with drawn curtains. It looked like a storage space now, junk piled to the ceiling, far from the quaint tidy place I had so loved as a child. Invited into the Gothblad cabin next door, I was served rosé wine on ice. As we sat around their table overlooking the lake, I remembered Bob, the junior to his father (now deceased), as the strapping young buck my sister and I ogled over as girls. Recently retired, he'd worked as a chemical engineer for the DNR and his wife Bonny still coaches high school track in Spooner where they live. His blue eyes twinkled as he told stories, offering us sliced vegetables from their garden from a paper plate. Before we said goodbye, he made us guess how many porcupine quills were in two small ball jars he'd set on the table. We were all wrong—it totaled 1,000—and Bob had counted each of them as he removed them. Bonny shook her head lovingly in his direction.

Our family cabin, now shirt-tailed out to other married-in relatives, has fallen victim to disputes between them, Bob said. "They only come up once a year for a day to mow," Bob said, "and once every couple years some of the guys come up to hunt." The outhouse was listing heavily to the right and the door wouldn't close anymore. Meanwhile, developers purchased the land just around the point and are preparing to erect condos. But from our vantage point on the Gothblad's deck, the lake and opposing shoreline looked the same as it had looked when I was a child. The only thing missing was the creaky old dock, which had finally collapsed into the lake.

219 E Ridge Street is where we found my 94-year-old 2nd cousin I'd always called Auntie Muggs. When we got there around 11:00 AM, she had Meals on Wheels arriving at 12:30 and her bridge club showing up at 1:00 so we wasted no time. She really hasn't changed much except her teeth are pretty much gone and her hearing is not far behind. Still, she caught us up on her

kids, grandkids and great grandkids and went on to tell stories from my childhood. She's got mischievous blue eyes tucked into the folds of her doughy eyelids and she's easy to love—a survivor without a controlling bone in her body, which may explain why she's still here. She said she never even takes an aspirin—has no pain—even though she looks unsteady on her feet, and clearly, her mind is in full working order. Her granddaughter recently gave her a subscription to the Star, which she loves reading as much as any other newspaper including The New York Times, the perk being she can hold trashy conversations with the youngsters about the latest dirt on Brittany Spears or Paris Hilton. She reiterated what my grandmother Rhea, her aunt, always told me, “Do the crossword puzzle every day—it'll keep you sharp.” She made a joke about how my Aunties and my mom all took piles of vitamins every day and how she used to give them grief about what a waste of money it was. “And now, they are all dead and here I am!” We laughed hard about that.

Low hanging grey clouds covered us for three days but we never got rained on and it was easy on the eyes. We ate a greasy, breakfast at Mama's Café on our way out of town counting 28 bars along the three-block main street of Hurley, and accidentally added an hour to our trip home because I took the GG scenic route back to Mellen after we'd just come from Mellen. It didn't matter. We were lost in conversation—we were doing time.



October 2007

Four Scenes with Soundtrack

Steam rising into the low slung angle of moonlight, the hollow resonance of droplets escaping the faucet the way they do and buoyed limbs sloshing water; distant strains of Roger Miller's heartbroken country tenor crying from the dimly lit porch far below... the way you hurt me, it's a wonder I'm still here at all, someday you'll wake up and you'll find yourself alone—n' lock, stock n' teardrops, I'll be gone. I closed my eyes, smiled and slipped away under bath water. I knew then the thermals were on the move for awhile.

I could have reached up and peeled that enormous one-dimensional moon from the picture postcard skyline it was pasted on after the long, lean diva delivered an intoxicating aria from *Madame Butterfly* and sent me drifting up a heavy, creaking staircase during intermission. I knew it would take me somewhere. The bee lights buzzed overhead, and the breeze went straight through me. When the light rail glided into the scene from below, I had to grab the banister in order to keep my balance. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. A lone transistor radio manned the bar, serving up 1930's big band ballads, and that unapproachable James Dean look-alike I'd seen downstairs surprised me by walking out onto the patio and sidling up to hang onto me for a while. He was too young and beautiful to be so lonely. "So you're here solo tonight too?" We gazed into the scene together, and he talked about growing up in a small town, his love of food, his latest job as a pastry chef in an upscale restaurant and how much he loved getting high and riding his old bike through the city streets after 2 AM. He's already separated from his child bride, their youngest only 10 months old, but he doesn't want to bore me with all that. He loves his mother, who'd raised him and his four older brothers alone, even though they are mostly fuck-ups. I assured him that I'd lived long enough to know that the pain is worth it, but there was no way to explain, so I left him for Philip Glass's *String Quartet #5* downstairs which only furthered my dematerializing. Even the lively conversation with Christian and his talented band of string players and Avedis the Piano Man post-coda couldn't put me back together again. The evening took and kept taking me deliriously apart, but I didn't speak of it. There's nothing and everything to say on those nights.

The table levitated, I'm sure of it, and beneath the table I could hear the bones of heroic sisters clattering as we stomped on their graves and ate French bread with unsalted butter. We were talking about things. All the birthing since 12th century's Eleanor of Aquitaine's challenging women's roles has delivered a strange female beast into our midst—a new girl is in town eight hundred or so years later. She's a young, demanding corporate debutante with perfect white teeth and skin to match. There are a lot of them, and they travel in tidy, eerily attractive packs keeping ambitious eyes on each other's ladders, balancing on the rungs in designer shoes. They have formidable salaries for their ages but usually sleep alone. They make elaborate vacation plans. They live, I've found, in fashionable apartments right out of college, sip the right wines from the right glasses and navigate well the world of exotic cheeses, which they offer on fabulous plates but rarely eat. I often get next to them, sniff them, turning circles—tracing an infinitesimal section of the evolutionary continuum. These creatures don't smell like my kind, but perhaps there is something I'm missing, so I move in closer and when I get close enough to eventually embrace them, there is no surrender, no vulnerability or space available in their taut, lovely, alien bodies or minds. Yeats has joined us now so we discuss how *things fall apart* and that *the center cannot hold*. We continue with exchanges on how the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. But who are these dispassionate young women? The table quivers and rises again. I've spent a lifetime gathering with my gender, and tonight it happens to be this one and we are mixing politics, anthropology and the deliciously mundane subtleties of living into our Irish whiskeys. David Bowie is preaching and howling in the background just under all the other conversations swirling around us. I look at my trusted friend across the table and raise my glass, and she smiles. Jesus—we've cried a lot over the years but the laugh lines furrow most deeply around our astonished, exhausted eyes.

We've come in and out through the same doors at different times carrying different things. We've been doing it easily for months, as if it had been scripted. We don't function like a school of fish or a herd of cows but rather more like an ant colony; eusocial order mandated by individuality and socially developed through convergent evolution. Still, we need and depend upon each other; we bobble, snag, pass and run with the ball and are living peacefully in a state of mutual disruption and mild if mostly entertaining chaos. When they asked us if they could

move their family into our house, we didn't hesitate for a moment. The need was there, the space was available and so was the love. A garage sale was held, a storage locker procured where boxes and furniture were stacked, rooms were dismantled, repaired and reassembled in the nick of time with scant furniture that would fit. They feed their babies and sometimes we join them. I make a brunch of "different" food and they experiment. We physically come together and split apart as individual needs and schedules demand. There are no frantic phone calls, no form for function and plenty of organic spillage in rooms and refrigerators. But, this table I am sitting at right now becomes a magical free zone at night. Sometimes I'm here when it begins, sometimes I arrive later from the city but it doesn't matter. There is conversation, there is often music in the back or foreground, there are children and animals running in and out for attention; there are topical points and subject changes and there is a river running through it all.

A few nights ago we trickled in one by one and all ended up together by 10 PM, collapsing into chairs. The wind blew in through the screens, the porch lights glowed, conversation roiled and calmed and roiled again until I'd heard enough preaching to the choir; our political rants, survival plans, exhaustive stories from another long week in the trenches. I was tired of resistance—I wanted to hear some music. The songs lined up like faded boxcars on a slow moving train coasting through those small towns of memories and dreams that make up our individual and collective consciousness—where we've been and where we want to go. I looked around the table and watched as everyone drifted out their own window with eyes closed over winsome grins, and I'm sure I heard a whistle blowing that long, lonesome sound.

November 2007

Falling Back

I've been having nightmares lately. My mother has been visiting me in my dreams, and she is neither young nor well. All I can do in this haunting series of dreams is observe her, wheelchair bound as she was in her final year, inhabiting various known and unknown rooms near various windows—it's all eerily backlit. She's only shown up once before, after her death, to inform me *you know everyone in the family just puts up with you*, which was true, I had to admit as I woke, laughing out loud. In deference to her black and white message that night, she presented her creamy visage against deep Kodak Ektachrome-blue spring grass, young and pregnant, beautiful as she ever was, looking up at me coquettishly. She was smiling broadly, and the sun played lightly through her inky Irish curls before she spoke. In these more recent dreams, she isn't speaking, and the point of view is difficult for me, four years past her slow departure from this planet, old and painfully broken, like the last time I saw her—not the mother I remembered from childhood.

Other nightmares have included dark, dank medieval settings with present day vehicles transporting my companions and I into the clutches of those who would harm us; a black dog the size of an elephant emerging from a horse trailer gazing blankly into the windows of our car; crazy alarmed villagers running here and there; steaming cast iron vats filled with unidentifiable, nefarious contents; and an especially insane, doe-eyed brunette bartender who kept bringing *the medicine* to my friends. They continued quaffing her offerings. The doors were creaky, heavy and there was no permission to leave. My companions were drunk, I was the only one aware of the imminent danger, and I was experiencing great difficulty convincing them, in their mead-drenched bliss, *that we had to get out of here... or else*. It's been about escape—in myriad configurations—for weeks. It was a trying summer.

As if my dreams portended it, tonight is Halloween. I sit at my table, listening to Wilco's *Sky Blue Sky*. And now, The Beatles' *Revolver*. No one comes to our door for tricks or treats, because we are remote, country dwellers at the end of a dead end road. As a result, our housemates are

cruising some neighborhood in town with their children on the traditional trick or treat runabout, which the kids have been anticipating for weeks. B and I had dinner alone together and are onto a nice cup of coffee. We anticipate their return: exhausted children and parents doing what's done on this celebratory eve, which has somehow miraculously escaped erasure by the Christian demagogues all these years. They all arrive home and are soon off to bed. We are left alone again at the table.

Yesterday was balmy and unseasonably, intoxicatingly warm late into the evening. I stood out on the stoop after midnight letting it have me. But, this morning the temperature was consistently dropping as I walked the dogs along the river. The wind lifted, increasingly frisky by 9 AM, as the boys detoured repeatedly through the dry prairie grasses just for fun, leaping and feigning a more substantial purpose. As I walked along the river, it occurred to me that I'd been walking this farm road religiously for nine years and that it has never lost its humble, honest splendor. It's not unlike a piece of art one falls in love with and never tires of looking at, except for the fact that you are *in it*, not just looking at it. Some things have changed on the property over the years: trees have grown up, others have fallen down or been removed; the honeysuckle and wild black raspberry canes have thickened; the prairie grasses have grown taller, summer blooms more plentiful; and the buckthorn has taken more ground. Only the river pulses steadily on its course through it all, running high now after the rainiest October on record, while wildlife continues feasting along its banks, some making plans for winter escape as cooler weather arrives. It makes me feel that there is some constant in my unstable life, something I can count on year after year.

I ventured further this morning into the neighboring farmer's enormous field bordering our property, remnants of the soybean harvest still clinging to the short, natty stalks around the perimeter and missed by the sweep of a combine. The wild turkeys will seek out and eat these overlooked beans in the dead of winter. I walked down a quarter mile to a break in the young pines along a steeper bank and stood watching the river run until I lost track of time. Eventually, reluctantly, I headed back to the house where my email was, no doubt, mounting for the workday.

The hard drive on my laptop had crashed a couple of weeks ago, and I hadn't backed up since January of this year—nine months prior. It was yet another example of my life-long lack of discipline, resistance to routine and blind eye to disaster. Were I more concerned, I might have spared myself all kinds of avoidable crisis over the years—I am a chronic loser or winner in this way. For many days since the hard drive screamed out its final and surprisingly vocal histrionics, I'd been feeling as if my house had burned to the ground—much of my creative and business files having vanished into the irretrievable suck of technology's dense smoke. After the initial shock, I wondered what I would truly miss or even remotely remember. I also found myself quickly unhinged from the machine. I read a book, painted the trim on my house, penned a letter to a friend in New York. I trudged down the long, tidy crop rows, marveling at how farmers accomplished that so consistently year after year. I watched the dogs bound and zig-zag in front of me, lost in their reverie, while I dragged my dread behind me like a heavy, antiquated plow.

I reluctantly left for the city around noon, navigated the tangled interstates with practiced ease, took care of some business and stopped in a neighboring town en route for groceries and finally headed home as the sun gradually sunk behind the stately northern pines lining the road. Along the way out of town, I noticed the many thick-skinned pumpkins squatting obediently on serial porches and stoops, in windows and doorways, their fabricated faces carved out by children who covet magic, inexplicably attracted and repelled, as we all are, to the shadows. Without them we would be pasted onto a flat, dimensionless world.

Leaving town, the landscape gave way to bare, harvested fields, trees stripped of tired leaves, the repetitive black wire leaping gracefully from telephone pole to pole along the two-lane, guiding me home. It's the last day of October, which has followed a relentlessly cruel and confusing summer of drought followed by floods. There has been much loss measured between farm fields and homes out-state on both counts. I watched the leaves flying helter-skelter across the two-lane like frantic birds, the inevitable winter prodding the tips of their tail-feathers toward warmer climates. All professional predictions accounted for and noted, it can't really be known what's coming until it arrives. As I gaze over the empty fields on either side of the road, I envision my dogs romping through the tall prairie grasses as they had in the morning and my brief liberation, embodying their noble flight, into what is before them in the moment—there is never hesitation,

only anticipation and curiosity. And I think about how often I and countless others don our costumes in order to leap into another day of work. It's not the same.

I have now crossed the witching hour of October 31st and crept into the wee hours of November 1st. The house is quiet. The refrigerator hums. The dogs are sleeping. The pumpkins, having burned brightly tonight, are cooling and already collapsing under the weight of their yearly, scripted endeavor.

January-February 2008

Upon Singing Amazing Grace

I don't believe in God. It still makes me a bit uncomfortable to say it out loud, having been reared in a Christian cult. The first nine years of my life were spent in a fishbowl of fanatical religion with little or no outside influence to inform or educate me. Having been born into a world where I was "chosen," it was a terrifying step to plunge into the cavernous if ultimately liberating abyss of simply being human.

Before then, my entire being was entrenched in church dogma; church school with kids only from our church family, service twice on Sunday, prayer meetings on Wednesday that went on endlessly (especially when the old ladies would speak in tongues), church camp, church youth group and summer conference and picnics, not to mention dunk tank baptisms and communion, which always meant a much longer service. Then there were the required daily Bible readings morning, noon and night and extra readings when I'd sinned, which was often. God knew every move I made, every thought or secret I kept, every doubt and question—there was a price to pay for each. I think I read the Bible a few times over, cover to cover, before I reached my tenth birthday. We were not allowed to read the book of Solomon though (so, of course we did) which was known to make poetic sexual references, or the book of Revelation, flush with nightmare-rendering stories predicting the inevitable "end times" when earth and all upon it would perish. We, however assured, would be "saved." Just us. Only those of us hiding from the rest of the world off Highway 7 in Hopkins, Minnesota, together with our scant sister churches scattered around the country, were The Chosen Ones. We were the only ones who would be spared God's wrath upon the world. But I had too many doubts and questions as the years went by, so I came to know I would not be among them. My annihilation of religion followed.

All that remains now for me, inexplicably, are the songs. Gospel music is adhered like shrink wrap to my internal architecture, *Were You There*, *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*, *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, *Sweet Sweet Spirit*, *Farther Along*, *The Old Rugged Cross* and on and on and on. I love these songs, regardless of where I learned them. And the mother of all gospel songs,

"Amazing Grace," is the one that is buried deepest in my bones. I've chosen to sing this song on rock stages and have been asked proffer it at weddings and funerals. Every time I sing it, my initial response is to burst into inconsolable tears, even while singing it alone in my car. I think most everyone feels resonance with this song and I continually ponder the depth and application of its words and melody for so many.

In 1748, Admiral John Newton of the slave trader ship *Greyhound* underwent a religious conversion, renouncing his nefarious complicity with slavery, and penned the lyrics for "Amazing Grace." The story is a bit more complicated and debatable than that (and just for the record he didn't write the music, purported to be a sort of Scottish/Irish old country standard), but the song has many years since been dragged across the lines of religion, race and creed as a song of awakening, humility and liberation. Even the Cherokee tribe were known to have sung the song at makeshift graves on the Trail of Tears when there was not enough time for a full native burial of their dead. I am far from being alone in embracing this song as an anthem to awareness, grief, forgiveness and freedom.

When my best manpal Guy asked me to sing "Amazing Grace" at the last minute for his father's funeral last week, I immediately froze, choked up, made excuses and acquiesced. Of course I wanted to sing it, but the singing of that song begins by calling up my own sordid history together with all my dead people and then goes on to unearth antiquity's crimes and forbearances from the mid-1700's to present, and I'm never sure I can get through it. It gets caught in the throat, but there's always a chance that one can sing through it reaching a brilliant, if weighty, nirvana. I told him I would do my best and if I lost it, he offered that he and his family join in.

And so I requested an a cappella version delivered from the back of the Washburn McGreavy chapel in Hopkins on November 13th so I would not have to look at the room. The animated military chaplain, who was clearly dedicated to making this ceremony one of celebration, did much towards lightening the atmosphere. He wanted to announce me as the professional singer, pressuring me for credentials during our little meeting prior to the procession, but I asked him not to. He insisted and I protested—again. It wasn't about me. It was about Max Reed and about "Amazing Grace" washing over his life to the closing refrain.

After an invocation and a long, if welcoming, introduction, the minister gave me the nod. I took a deep breath and held on tight to the last pew in the chapel, feet spread apart, leaning against the wall, head down. I was anchored. I raised my head and began... *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...* (breath, pause, open eyes) ...*I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see...* (another breath, standing away from the wall, still leaning on the pew, looking over the crowd from the back)... *'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fear relieved (digging in a bit) ... how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed...*(what do I believe?... what is belief?... I believe in life and living it completely, whatever that means) ...*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come, 'tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home...* (standing without assistance now, not leaning, not gripping the pew, hands almost cupping my heart, beginning to falter) ...*Amazing Grace.... how sweet.... the sound...*(taking my time, out of time, descending chromatically)...*that saved a wretch...like me.....I once was lost...but now.... am found..... was blind..... but now.... I see.....*

Max's daughter had asked that his casket remain open for the entire service so he lay before us while we honored him that afternoon. I kept thinking he looked like he was napping on the sofa while the football game raged on. He loved football and baseball and basketball—basically any televised sport. Max was somewhere around five feet tall, Napoleonic, ornery, funny, blunt, finicky, honest and generous. He was veteran of WWII, smoked four to five packs of cigarettes a day, loved to eat raw hamburger with lots of salt and pepper, ice cream, butter and lived to 84 years of age. He quit drinking in his later years. These are a few things I know about this man and the life he lived, in addition to having an obsession with painting and repainting his house. He'd experienced his share of hard knocks during his life but over the last five years or so, I was privileged to witness firsthand, my good friend Guy make a renewed connection with his father with increasing embrace to his grave.

We processed to Fort Snelling where Max Reed was laid to rest with full military regalia—color guard, six gun salute, casket draped in an American flag, taps echoing across the cemetery. It was chilly as we crowded close together under a grey sky and the hunter green tent covering

Max Reed's casket flapped hard against the winds of November. There were uniform grave markers as far as I could see in any direction, perfectly spaced, far outnumbering our party of mourners. The dead outnumber the living. No religion on earth is or will ever be the sole proprietor of grace. Grace comes to those who surrender.



March-April 2008

How to Chase Your Tail in the Dead of Winter

It's been a hard winter this year in Minnesota. Everyone around here says so and we offer these statements to each other as gifts— validation for the days behind us, and the many still to come. There have been weeks of sub-zero temperatures and inhumane wind chills, steady snowfalls, some blizzards and endless weeks of low, grey cover. I looked into the Rus archives to see what I'd been doing over the last six Februarys and other than two funerals I recounted in consecutive years, I've consistently written, in aptly torpid prose, the hallucinogenic state of being awake during this time of year when the most feral inclination of a midwestern beast would be hibernation.

I imagine hibernation being a state of existence somewhere between sleeping and death. It's sort of where Snow White was suspended until love found her. In the same way, even if you are a person who enjoys winter sports or depends on winter to make your living, all Midwesterners are held in this semi-comatose state until spring finds us. While variety local mammals, birds and reptiles eat a huge meal in the fall and blissfully crash on their equivalent of a sofa, we humanoid bipeds are, essentially, sleepwalking all winter long. We don't know who we are, what we are doing and should not be held accountable for any of it, state and federal crimes included.

But, this February I had high hopes for delivering a mind-blowing, philosophically flourishing treatise on the human/dog vs. human/human relationship through the dark eye of a nihilistic lens I'd been employing since the New Year. "Something" had pricked my consciousness around the holidays and then I did some substantive reading on "it" and then I had a dream or two and a number of tangential conversations and a rare, symbolic or synchronistic occurrence on a walk to the river one morning and knew I had to try to put "it" into words. I had spent weeks laying out the groundwork when Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* found its way into my DVD player at 10 AM on a weekday (note to readers: refrain from ever watching any of von Trier's work in the morning on any day). I stumbled, dumbstruck, from the bedroom almost three hours later and truly had no idea what I was going to do with my ignited and quickly conflagrant thoughts, since

his film had given credence (*his version*, of course) to everything I was attempting to convey in my essay. All I wanted to do was get drunk with my pal Lars.

There was no way I could write in this over-enlightened state, so my next move was to sit down and calmly type *Dogville* into the Google search engine on my lap top, a cold compress that slowly warmed to body temperature delivering me into hours and then days of contiguous research: unearthed thesis papers written on the philosophical implications of “host and guest,” works by Derrida, Heidegger, Spivak, including a partial refresh on Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” and entire rereading of “To Build a Fire” by Jack London, which had made a powerful impact on me as a child. I was sure I was onto a whole new way to talk about the flawed, romantically idealized notions of “love” and “loyalty” and that the nature of humans is as self-preserving as dogs. If we’re not getting what we need, we simply go in search of another food bowl. Nothing wrong with that—essentially—other than, for example, how we humans are far more dangerous than any animal due in part to the fact that we have written language, which serves to nullify, glorify and/or justify our actions, no matter how depraved.

I didn’t want to appear too literal in my grand expose on human nature, having no official plaques on my wall, so in the “clever,” artsy rewrite, too many loaded boxcars were added and, as often occurs with over-generalized, irrationally fueled trains of thought, a fiery derailment on an weakly engineered bridge soon followed. Boom. Looking back towards the wreckage below, it was a far better ride than any cryptic story could ever have recounted. The residuals were enough for me; it was liberating to have spent almost two months contemplating the impracticalities of “hope,” the self-serving nature of “love” and simply embracing the fact that the human race is not worth counting on. The next morning I woke with a terrible case of the stomach flu, that unwelcome humbler who has not dropped in for about twenty years, bringing its perfunctory purge.

But it’s always about what happens next. My inbox delivered this news: *Biodiversity 'doomsday vault' comes to life in Arctic* by Pierre-Henry Deshayes, Sun Feb 24, 1:25 PM ET
LONGYEARBYEN, Norway (AFP)

February 26, 2008 would mark the inauguration day of Noah's Ark, the biodiversity vault which has been under construction since June of 2006 on the remote Norwegian island of Spitsbergen, a mere 620 miles from the North Pole. The vault, under construction since June of 2006, has "the capacity to hold up to 4.5 million batches of seeds from all known varieties of the planet's main food crops, making it possible to re-establish plants if they disappear from their natural environment or are obliterated by major disasters." The location was chosen due to its lack of tectonic activity, its permafrost (which will aid preservation) and its distance from human strife. The Norwegian government funded the entire 8.9 million dollar project.

Mankind's awareness of its own destructive capacities causes it to put safeguards in place; global dispossession of weaponry, controlling nature or behavior modification all being out of the question, some have the forethought to quietly stockpile humanity's most basic necessity to survive an unimaginable future. I sat in the dark, fumbling with the awkward truth of it all.

May-June 2008

Trees Talk Slowly

Walking down the old railway bed on the bluff above the prairie, I'll sometimes come upon a tall tree that has fallen across the path and become wedged at a random angle onto other trees lining the upside of the opposing hill. The triangulation appears sturdy like architecture and precarious like an accident. Sometimes I push against them to see if they are jammed tightly into the neighboring trees or if, like a pick-up-stick, they might roll away or towards me. In either case, it always gives me a tiny chill to walk beneath their massive reach.

Only two times over the last decade since moving to the country, I heard a tree fall in the woods near my house. It is one thing to hear an owl hoot, a pack of coyotes wail or crickets obsess; they exist on an earthly plane tantamount to mine, their lives more tenuous, like mine. Even hearing a rabbit scream from the clutches of hawk talons is something I can understand, something I can grasp as predictable, albeit alarming. But I think of trees as having the potential to stand forever and hearing a tree fall in the dead of night feels monumental, indomitable, even tragic. I stood upright when I heard the first one fall, as if in allegiance, my heart pounding. Something that signifies permanence to me revealed a weighty fragility—the tree cracked, listed and thunderously crashed, headlong, taking the branches of its stalwart, soldiering brethren down with it. When the three hit the earth, I could have sworn the porch under my feet shuddered.

It's childish thinking—trees don't fall down, parents don't fall down, bombs don't fall down. But when I watch the tallest trees bending with the weight of blizzard snow and raging thunderstorms, when I see them swaying with spring buds and summer foliage aloft, when I lean against them or stand beneath the comforting umbrella of their strong arms, I imagine they embody the notion of forever. Never was that notion more clearly illustrated, than when traveling along the West Coast two years go, driving through the Avenue of the Giants. There is no way to put into words the grandeur and ancient elegance of those towering redwood trees—and the epic force of those that have fallen.

Upstream, enormous spongy cottonwood trees lie like half-submerged leviathans where Pine Creek meets the Cannon River. When I view them from the bluff's edge, I'm not sure one won't suddenly rise up like a breaching whale, spewing silt, wet moss and clicking insects from a rotten knothole. The heavily shaded slough is a gaping, feculent mouth humming with an abundance of all things thriving on death and decay. There is a seductively sweet odor on its cool, moist breath. I'm attracted to it. It smells like cosmic soup, like the beginning of things, even though I know it signifies an end. If I stay long enough, I might witness the entire floor gently undulate as a unified organism or even witness the sum of its myriad parts crawling over and around each other like an earnest army of anarchists. Whether my eyes deceive me or not, I feel it moving—I can feel it moving under my own skin.

The tree I am leaning against is stretching acrobatically over the slough below. It feels so sturdy to me, but its roots are slowly disengaging from the soil and rock it sprung from. It is impossible to tell if it's preparing to jump or hardening its grip. Perhaps it performs both acts simultaneously in a theatre of exchange: the pathos of life and death swapping roles while the plot remains endlessly the same.

July-August 2008

The Nature of Things

I can't change the nature of anything. I can affect behavior or outcome to some incremental degree, but for the most part a dog will be a dog. I can pull a weed but it has either already cleverly propagated or will activate its underground network and work subversively despite all my efforts to stop it. I stood on the prairie this morning under grey skies in a light rain watching dogs be dogs and weeds be weeds. I felt insignificant and clueless and liberated for another day. I continue to be reminded of all this because I keep forgetting how small I really am.

After those planes plowed into the World Trade Center, I carried a book around in my bag for many months written by Annie Dillard called "For the Time Being," the pages of which were already dog-eared-exhausted. She follows a French Jesuit paleontologist, describes in painful detail variety human malformations, like a two-year-old child in a polka-dotted dress whose face is horrifically deformed but has been cursed (?) blessed (?) with normal intelligence, and flayed rabbis who sacrifice themselves for what they believe. She drags the reader through China and Israel, historically well-worn pathways, under dated clouds with a natural history of sand beneath. Dillard, a self-avowed Christian, shakes her fist at her God while she tramples barefoot through only a few ragged atrocities, which is how we perceive them, leaving a trail of unanswered questions behind her. I left religion behind long ago, but this book comforts me because neither she nor I can turn away from what we see regardless of what we believe in or eschew. I have to look, but I might be just another gawker.

All I have to date is this: things are what they are and there is nothing to do but roll with events as they arrive. If I fight the inevitable, I get my ass kicked and the irony is that I'm the only one throwing punches; whatever has *happened* just squats in the grass staring at me, like my dogs, waiting to see what I'm going to do next.

Lately, I've been intrigued by chaos theory. Instead of feeling frustrated by the fact that I don't have a Ph.D. in physics (which I covet), I gaze at the equations and symbols, appearing like

works of art in and of themselves, and then seek out what returns to nature. Mathematicians are simply attempting to understand and put a definitive language to the natural order and disorder of things, and that's what exploration is about. We want to know—something, anything, *everything*. We can't deny our nature, destructive and regenerative as we can be.

I often forget that numbers are really an alphabet, a way to communicate what happens in the world. Since I'm not fluent in this particular language, I gravitate visually, to the nature-bound sources, blooming like metaphors. For example, when chaos theory is graphed, the shape resembles a butterfly, extrapolated in 1972 by Edward Lorenz (“Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?”) into what is commonly known as the “butterfly effect,” loosely translated as *sensitivity to initial conditions*. This delicate creature seems too fragile a mascot. But the butterfly represents the tiny motion made in an enormous system, setting off a chain of events leading to large-scale phenomena. My fretting and spinning in place is smaller still.

“Bad things” happen. People die—even children, lots of them. War is hell and warlords continue to be born and rise to power. Heroes are assassinated and criminals go free. Love, that mysterious seducer and predator, delivers bliss and agony. The best-laid plans fall short and the undeserved go long. We are brought to our knees and lifted to safety. Millions are slaughtered in the hands of dictators, and millions more slaughtered by the indiscriminating sweep of a massive ocean wave or a contagion unseen by the naked eye. This is not tragedy, people. This is just how it is—this is the show. No one gets out of here alive.

Back in the 1980s, I penned these lyrics in a song entitled “Real Life Drama:” *how you live is how you're gonna die*. Like so many lyrical moments, it felt as if someone else wrote those words, moved my hand—but I am far from the first and will surely not be the last. I'm not unique. I am only one brief moment in a vast, incomprehensible universe. Still, that line keeps returning to me, day after month after year—a gentle warning, which has become a mantra—a mother humming and smoothing my hair in the darkdark night, lowering me ever closer to the fragrant, unemotional earth.