2010

Cairn Stones: A Mosaic Memoir and Manual

Bethany Mason Taylor
The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/165

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu.
CAIRN STONES

A MOSAIC MEMOIR AND MANUAL

By

BETHANY MASON TAYLOR

B.A., St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY, 2004

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Science
in Environmental Studies,
Writing Focus

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2010

Approved by:

Perry Brown, Associate Provost for Graduate Education
Graduate School

Dan Spencer, Chair
Environmental Studies

Phil Condon
Environmental Studies

Heather Bruce
English
ABSTRACT

Taylor, Bethany, M.S., Spring 2010

Environmental Studies

Cairn Stones: A Mosaic Memoir and Manual

Chairperson: Dan Spencer

These twenty essays are scraps and fractals of larger stories, windows on coming to understand the world and my place in it. Taken as a whole, the collection tells the story of a formation of open-eyed hope. Roughly, they run from 2001 to 2010, covering the same years as the terrorist attacks of 2001, the War on Terror’s beginnings and toll, Hurricane Katrina, and growing awareness of globalization and climate change. These are big topics, and the only way I can make sense of them, and my coming of age within and around them, is to tell the stories of the connections I found between world events and my own self. It’s not about me, but these are the only eyes and stories I have, the only way I know to point towards a different way. The essays are roughly chronological and do build on each other, but are not meant to fit tidily—the mosaic nature is part of the point.

Partly, of course, these essays are my own efforts to grapple sense and meaning into the very bland and bleak way the world can often be. But, moreover, it is my hope that they will be read as posts and markers to guide a reader towards their own sense of belonging. It’s a manual, use it where and how you may.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people in many places who I owe unfathomable gratitude towards for what they have shown and taught me. Dan Spencer has been a tireless and enthusiastic reader of many drafts and iterations of this, and his unerring feedback and support for my writing into this collection has been an enormous asset for which I am happily grateful. Phil Condon has been both an invaluable committee member and one of the finest writing teachers I ever hope to encounter. Heather Bruce made me see very early on that it was entirely possible to marry environmental writing to social activism and that is a lesson I will carry with me for a very long time.

The community I have found within the Environmental Studies program has been nurturing and reassuring and, more than anything else, has helped me understand that writers are never alone, and that there is both place and need for writing in the world. Thank you.

Of all the friends who make appearances in or have steered my writing this collection, I wish to particularly thank Mary Kuhn and Nathaniel Blauss for their support and pressure—it is better for your input.

I owe all of these stories to my parents, Dijit and Jeff Taylor, who have supported every decision that lead me to these experiences. And, finally, I thank my sisters, Hannah and Emily Taylor, who I would be lost without.

I could not have written this without any of you, nor would I have wanted to. Thank you.
Cairn n: a heap of stones serving as a memorial, landmark, or guide

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

T.S. Eliot
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction p. 1
Dunes and Ghosts p.5
Arcadia p. 9
Patriotism p. 13
I Lift Up Mine Eyes p. 18
Skin of the Apple p. 23
Into Africa p. 25
Truth and Reconciliation p. 31
The Moon on the Night of War p. 35
For Serewa p. 39
Miss Queen of the Ghetto p. 43
Root and Refuge p. 47
A Thing with Feathers p. 51
Shots in the Dark p. 55
A Pink Dress p. 60
Change the Ghosts p. 64
Deep Paths p. 68
Rain p. 72
A Stone on Your Cairn p. 74
Eight Points About Stars p. 78
To Know It Again p. 82
IMAGES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Cairn Block Print p.iv
Patriotism p. 13
Skin of the Apple p. 23
Footprints p. 25
Crushed Truck p. 55
The Pink Dress p. 60
Shoe, Handbag, Trophy p. 64
The Old Crawford Path p. 68
Morning Light towards Tuckerman’s Ravine p. 74
Popham in October Snow p. 82
INTRODUCTION

The café is dark and the space too big for the tables and the Thursday morning emptiness. I am early or Mike is late and for a few moments, he, Terry and I knit around the table.

Mike and I know each other from the mountains, from jobs in the backcountry with a sweetly cultish community of people who find themselves in those mountains. It is a strange coincidence that brought us separately out of the eastern mountains and to this western town, this table. There are moments in life that you anticipate and imagine, but I’d never have thought that Mike and I would be sitting around a plate of bacon in a strange city, talking about Appalachian sunsets with Terry, a writer with the desert in her blood and bones.

I used to feel that my life was kept in separate boxes, neatly organized by geography or time. But in times like this, just now, those barriers break down and my world seems more tightly woven.

Mike leaves and I am alone with Terry. We talk about the disparate natural worlds we cannot live without, the places beyond home we’ve visited. I cannot fully fathom that the woman sitting before me is real, is the writer I’ve read and loved for years. My mouth tastes like the last bits of bacon and burning coffee. Our meeting is nearing its end. Terry, all empathy and eyes, asks what I mean to do with my writing.

I tell her about the loon on the lake. The sodium light at sunset. The plastic bags of feces melting in the slum sun. The bones of houses and nightmares. The krummholtz at sunset. The things I love and the things I wake up nights worrying about. About the parts
of this world that justice doesn’t touch. The things I want to hold. The things that hold me.

I tell her I write because I feel I must tell the stories of these things, to protect them with the only weapon I have from the onslaught of careless living. I pray that if I write these stories down, that someone, somewhere will care, that children won’t live in slums and the sea won’t rise.

“I worry,” I say barely getting the words out, gulping air in the pauses where I collect myself, the tensile silences. “I just worry that it will never be enough.”

And I dissolve, the tears hot with fear and rage and love. With hope.

Terry reaches across the table, her hand on my arm, her eyes spilling over like lakes. “It will never be enough,” she says, blinking her eyes to stem the flood, squeezing my arm for support. “But you have to do it anyway.”

These stories, twenty of them, are those stories. Roughly, they run from 2001 to 2009. I often fear that I am not hopeful. These are the stories to dispute that. In writing them, I found and picked up the threads of faith I’d forgotten. The bookends of these stories are of the beach I grew up visiting. What is between those points changed enormously from what I had anticipated I would write. The beach, along the coast of Maine, the first place I loved, is eroding—slipping into the sea. We all have this story about something, some place that refuses to lock in the time of our memory, but continues to change in our wake.

Yet, to take the tactic of writing stories of a lost and losing paradise, of the helpless sadness and nostalgia would have been dull and, also, I discovered in writing,
almost completely untrue. It is not that the erosion does not bother me. Of the many things that threaten to break my heart, the physical loss of that place is high on the list. But when I returned to the beach this fall, the landscape had changed yet the grounding force, whatever it is that ties me there, had not changed. Sandra Steingraber says “what we love we must protect.” I love that place, and in feeling the love unchanged, I am more committed to its protection, even as it falls into the hungry waves. Hope is in that commitment, the willingness to connect with the world.

Some of these are stories of being disconnected from nature, of the yen to bridge the gap and bring the environment into balance with human society, to belong to and respect that bond. And then there are stories of what happens when people lose that, when the land to which they belong shifts and changes shape under their feet, when it is sold and washed away, when they are violently divided from the land by outside forces. The ugliness of those effects are just fuller proof that we must connect, we must belong to something larger than our own fragile selves. That we do.

Of course, as this is my life, I can clearly see and feel how the iron red dust of Kenya connects to the stars over the Adirondacks, the stonewalls of New Hampshire and the black mold of Hurricane Katrina. The difficult part has always been to tell the stories, and connect the pieces. Words are inadequate for explaining the soft places where love and thought and action combine. I cannot tell another person what to feel, how to act, or what to love. All I can do is tell, as best as I can, the stories of how I’ve come to hold tightly to the things I cannot bear to lose.

I’ve pieced the stories together like a patchwork quilt, a mosaic, a cairn of stones to serve as a guide. Mine is not the one right way, but it is the only guide I can honestly
give. Where I’ve gotten to is the only point I can track my journey from. I wrote these, partly, to share the places I know and love, the things I’ve seen and found, but that is not the real point. I hope they turn you, the reader, towards what you love, to your timeless places, to what holds you and cannot be lost.

I am hopeful, not naïve. I know the predictions of climate change, the rising waters and shifting weather. I’ve seen the slums begot from the lands lost to grow the resources to feed the factories that thicken and poison the clouds. I’ve seen the violent ends of the fights for this way of life and the cost of untold lives. We must wake up and change this pattern.

These are the stories that made me believe this, glued together with my hope that if we all hold onto what we cannot lose, then all will not be lost. It may not be enough, but you have to do it anyway.
DUNES AND GHOSTS

Popham Beach is a sandy crescent, rare along the rocky Maine coast. When I was a child, it stretched endlessly between the jaw of the Kennebec River and a rivulet that runs out of Spirit Pond.

We rented a cabin for a week every summer of my childhood. I don’t like that word. Childhood. It sounds as if the time has passed, as if the imaginings of a child end at some point. The dreams and fears remain, wearing the same bones, so how could we change beyond the forces that shape us? The molecules change, yes, but the story of how to form this body is passed between cells as elements exchange, as organs grow and lungs breath and bones lengthen. And no matter how old or wise our brains and bodies become, there is something that never changes. I do not believe that we outgrow emotions as easily as clothes, that we leave our earliest dreams and fears behind. We carry them forward, buried but never gone.

Because it was not home, Popham was special. Because it was special but familiar, I loved it fiercely and built my life on the memory of the weeks there. I marked the year by how much longer before or after Popham something might be. I imagined I would grow up, buy the little cabin we rented, and live there forever. The happiness of being at Popham—a giddy joy of the salt water hitting my nostrils on the last turns of the road—I now share between other places and people in my life, but Popham is the first place I loved, the first where I belonged.

It may have been the constant heartbeat of the waves, or the silver sound of the dune grass mimicking the ocean as the sunset came and the wind changed. The thick
feeling of the sand, the texture of cornmeal and too hot to walk on in the early afternoon. The sand. The sand itself is like no other I’ve ever seen—orange and black beads in the dun and quartz. When someone told me that if the universe were the size of me, I would be smaller than a grain of sand, I thought of Popham. The individual grains of Popham’s sand are the smallest object I hold in my mind.

There are three islands opposite the beach—Wood, Seguin, and Fox. They reminded me of my sisters and me. Sequin has a lighthouse, and is the farthest from the shore. Wood and Fox can be walked to at low tide, but Seguin was far enough out to sea that it seemed to shift as you walked the beach. It was the middle island from the vantage of our cabin. I am the middle sister. I took this as a tacit agreement between Seguin and myself that we were for each other, that I was of this place.

When I was thirteen, we took a boat out to Seguin and I learned of a lighthouse keeper who had killed himself and his wife over the lonely winter. Years later, when the Coast Guard took over the lighthouse, they planned to empty the house, and automate the light. One man woke up in the night, a white shape shaking his bed and chanting, “don’t take my furniture.” The Coast Guard man, frightened but disbelieving, followed orders and began removing the furniture in the morning. A small cable car was used between the lighthouse and the dock. Heavy with the furniture of the place, the cable snapped and the cart of the ghost’s belongings shot off track and into the sea.

Walking down to the dock after hearing this from the tour guide, I slipped on the cement stairs and gouged the skin above my anklebone. The scar is faint, but when I
touch the spot, I am haunted by the patch of skin I left behind, the blood that mingled with the beach roses and rusting cable track.

But it is the dune grass I mean to speak of. The cabin we rented sat ten feet up from the beach. The rise was covered with dune grass—the edges rough and sharp enough to give a thick paper cut. The blades were long, tapering knives of green with white racing stripes. A set of wooden stairs—gray and salty, polished smooth with the sand and wind and barefeet pounding up the slats—leaned against the incline. Thin yellow plastic ropes hung around the grass, but these barriers were easily slipped and we crouched sometimes in the grass, playing on the bigger logs of driftwood in the grass. The sand squealed underfoot, and the grass squeaked like rubber when the blades rubbed across each other.

My mother told us to take the stairs. Other children, in my earlier memories, ran up and down the dunes. It looked like fun, but Mum said the grass was planted there to hold the land in place. If we ran through the dune grass, the sand would crumble under the thin tableland the cabins sat on.

I knew that in winter the ocean was fiercer than when I knew it in August. The driftwood telephone poles and logs, huge and high on the beach, the seaweed drying at the toes of the dune grass, spoke to powerful and icy waves over winter. Without the grass, the dunes would go to the winter water, and without the dunes, the cabin would crash into the sea.

Sometimes at night, in the hot dark of the cabin room with my sisters, I wouldn’t sleep. The waves were louder at night, seemed closer. Alone, awake in the dark, I would
think about the ways the ocean might take the cabin out to sea. If I stayed awake, perhaps that would prevent this from happening. I could see the hungry ocean eating the dunes, roaring under and into the cabin. I pictured waking up after a night of high water and finding the cabin floating out of sight of land. Sea monsters swirled in the water around the cabin. The longer the night stretched on, the louder and closer the water sounded and the more sure I became that these things would come to pass. Always though, I would sleep finally, waking up afraid to look outside in the morning.

Sometimes, I took the ribbon from my little sister’s teddy bear and tied my doll’s wrist to my own. Worse than the sea monsters and the floating cabin, I feared being alone if this happened. My older sister laughed at me, and I cried rather than explain the silliness of my fear.

Every year, along with the peace of the first whiff of salt air, a silent pebble of fear sank to my stomach that the cabin would have washed away, taking all that I loved and knew myself by out to sea.

If we leave childhood and childish dreams and fears behind, why does a shiver runs down my spine thinking of the ghost on Sequin, demanding his things stay? I do not believe anything once felt is truly lost to time. I keep a clamshell with Popham sand and seaweed on my desk, carefully moving this fractal from place to place, and running a finger through the squeal of the sand when I am homesick for a place to belong.
When I was nineteen, a loon broke my heart.

I suppose that I had it coming. I was nineteen and living in a yurt village on the edge of a lake in the Adirondacks. If a loon were going to break anyone’s heart, it would be the sort of person that is attracted to living in yurt villages, a canoe trip and a long drive from what we call civilization.

Perhaps the strangest part of the yurt and the lake was that this was part of my formal education. My college had set up an experiment in experiential education to see how closely students and academia could come to balancing with the natural world. And so the school built a village of yurts, outfitted with solar panels and a water pump, a propane stove and a solar powered refrigerator, tables and chairs, and twelve students eager for something beyond the brick angles of life on a typical college campus. It was like going abroad, but the culture to be encountered was made up of squirrels and hemlocks, loons and constellations.

Two instructors lived on site with us in the yurts, and other professors rotated through during the week, teaching us about Francis Bacon and Edward Abbey and Noah Rondeau and the shape of the maple leaves while we sat on the dock in the sunlight.

The director of the program had named the yurt village Arcadia. Our first day in Arcadia, when we were hungry for even the hint of a settled life after backpacking for two weeks, he explained that the name symbolized a balance between nature and culture, between the human and wild worlds.
What I was doing, when the loon broke my heart, was trying to write an essay for my philosophy class. The question to be answered was something benign about how closely the ideals of Arcadia matched the reality of life within the little clearing.

Life in Arcadia felt at times like living within the bars of a zoo, as if we were the lab rats for some grand sociological experiment. How close to wild would each of us go, living cheek by jowl with the hemlocks and club moss? How close to wild was Arcadia itself? Certainly our group’s ecological footprint was smaller, living there in the woods than anywhere else, wasn’t it? We had a gray water system set up, a series of Rubbermaid tubs that filtered waste-water through rocks, gravel, and finally, sand, before gushing out—clean—through a rubber hose that twisted off beneath the ferns. Our bathroom was a two-holed pit toilet, and the fifty-gallon tanks had to be wrestled from the outhouse and ferried across a little bay to the truck that hauled them to a landfill.

I tried to look past all this. I wanted to look past all this. I wanted Arcadia to be a place where I could come close to wild things. My proximity to wildness was, I believed, key to escaping the destructive, all consuming world outside Arcadia. The world, the culture, where wild places are paved over, matching houses without souls are built on old forests, where lives are filled with more and more stuff but it never seems to be enough. Where people never say “no,” never have enough and the trash heaps grow, and the wild places shrink, and the air and water are poisoned.

I needed Arcadia to be different, separate from that world. I needed it as my key into wild places that had not yet been ruined, where a different way of being might still be possible. Beyond being a key to wild places, I wanted Arcadia to unlock the way to wildness itself. I found the world outside the woods to be tame and a bit grotesque, and I
was afraid that if I did not find wildness in Arcadia, the destructive sleep-walking of life outside the woods would get me.

In fairy tales, the monsters are in the woods. I don’t know how true this is.

Of course, I knew that Arcadia was different. I could feel it in my arms, pumping five gallon buckets of water from the belching pump on the back dock, lugging them as fast as I could through the village to the kitchen yurt, only to boil it to drink clean water or brush my teeth. I shared a yurt with two other students, each of us with a crate of books, a sleeping bag on the floor and a backpack full of clothes that we wore and rewore, rinsing them in the lake and dressing for the weather, not for appearance. All of this was indisputable proof that life was different in and out of the woods.

I knew these things, but until I sat there, clutching my stubby pencil, alone in the darkness past midnight and trying to write my essay, I hadn’t admitted that I knew it. The truth was I wanted Arcadia to be more than it could. When they explained that Arcadia was a balance between wilderness and civilization, I had only heard wilderness, and really, had only heard the one syllable. Wild.

And as I huddled against the dark in my down sleeping bag and headlamp, behind the walls of a plastic canvas yurt, I saw the tendrils of culture, the fingers—my own fingers—creeping in where I least wanted them. In a truly wild place, where nothing of human society snuck in, I would not be able to survive. The trouble was not how the ideals of Arcadia were played out in daily life, but how my ideals of Arcadia, of wildness and belonging, were played out in the woods.

And then, as if to drive the message home, the night air split like obsidian. A haunting cry out on the lake echoed against the shoreline, the still water. I heard the
sound like icicles on my neck and froze in a strange and sudden fear. It was a loon, but sounded to me like the voice of all things wild telling me that I did not, could not belong to their world.

This is what broke my heart.

But I put the pieces back together, in a different order. There is a difference in ways of seeing and being in the world. I did not go happily feral in Arcadia, frolicking with loons and moose. But nor have I become numb and tamed outside the woods. I see how the balance between wildness and civilization is utterly skewed, and that there are other ways of being. The trouble is that we bring culture into nature, but we do not bring nature into culture. This must change and we are running out of wild places to balance with the other pieces of our lives.
September 11, 2001 was one of the days I was in Arcadia, separate and isolated from the red, white and blue tide that swept the country up. It was a beautiful day, the sunlight on the water like gold glitter on blue glass. The maple trees were the orange and red fire of postcards and calendars and the hemlocks were a soft deep green. It was hot in the sun on the dock and cool in the pockets of shadow within Arcadia itself. The sort of day that begs to be enjoyed. In the afternoon, we went across the lake to the woodshop for class. We dawdled happily, making coffee and lounging in the sun until the last moment when we pulled a canoe into the water and headed across the lake. We followed the shore, hoping to get close to the bald eagle’s nest on the point.
Outside the woodshop, we were told the facts as they were understood at 2 o’clock in the afternoon. There was silence, then tears and strained faces, and then more silence. We went to a candlelight vigil in town, watched the news, and came home to Arcadia.

That was it. Life resumed the next morning with breakfast and chores and classes.

I run the risk of seeming heartless. I did not lose anyone. I’ve never been to New York. I want to say that there is a twisted and violent justice in the Pentagon coming under attack. If it had been only the Pentagon and the war industry that were harmed, then I would, but the needless loss of life twists any semblance of justice. The plane that crashed in the Pennsylvania field—the passengers’ subversion of the jihadists' mission—is proof of some sweet goodness. I hate lives to be lost, parents ripped from their children, friends and lovers separated by violence. My raw heart goes out to the families who lost loved ones that day in September while I canoed across untroubled waters.

But it was just one day.

Mourn the dead, hold onto the living, these are all admirable, human emotions. By why are the American dead more important than any others? Rather, why are the unknown dead of other countries less? I feel the same ache for the families of Israel and Palestine, of Somalia, Rwanda, Cambodia as I do for the webs of victims of September 11. For the families who lose their loved ones to cancers and accidents begot by companies who value profits over human life. None of this is right. And America was not special; we’ve only been lucky. And, despite the events of September 11, 2001, we
remain disturbingly oblivious. If wars were fought on our turf more often, if it were our cities shattered by bombs, would we still be so eager to fight?

In Arcadia, we got a radio and some nights listened to the news as the country swaddled itself in flags and wounded pride. Even the bland voices of NPR commentators talked about how the world had changed in those few hours. The world had not changed. The trees didn’t notice. The lake still slapped against the bittersweet growing on the shore. The stars moved from summer to autumn constellations. The humility that this engenders folds in on itself to become irrepressible joy. The world had changed, yes, but it changes every day and still remains the same.

The media rhetoric struck me as arrogant and ignorant. How much violence—bloody or subtle—has America inflicted on the world? About 3,000 people died in the September 11 attacks. Between 95,000 and 105,000 Iraqi civilians have died in the ensuing war. Thousands more in Afghanistan, where an accurate count is more difficult to come by. How narrow to think that three places in America, three pinpoints along the mid-Atlantic states, were the world.

When I returned from Arcadia in the winter of 2002, I saw a commercial for the Army. The intensity of the patriotism it sold—I was sure it must be a parody. But, looking around the campus dining hall, I seemed to be the only one who’d noticed anything out of the ordinary. While I was in the woods, this blind patriotism and acceptance of a new, more dangerous world, had become the ordinary. I saw the
explosions of red white and blue as no longer symbolic of a love of country, but the foreshadowing of violence and ignorant revenge.

This frightened me more than anything I’d seen or imagined in the woods, where the witches and monsters are supposed to be.

For the most part, the American flag is little more to me than the mark inside my passport, the banner hanging in every classroom I learned in. I don’t think of it often, or think of myself as an American above any other way I might identify myself. And the way the flag appeared on new flagpoles, on bumper stickers and decals, how the country became furiously, vengefully patriotic, following September 11, 2001, made the hair on my neck stand up. This was not how the land I knew should be symbolized. The lands that I loved were peaceful, indifferent, and I resented the intrusion of the flags, the rebranding of a nation, a brand I did not wish to be united with, to stand against the world with.

It is years later now. The war on and of terror continues. I still will not put a flag in my window. I think sometimes, though, that I should. To reclaim the icon, to make it mean more and less than it does in so many places. If it symbolizes the land and the people who live upon it, then let it symbolize all of the terrain and hearts and minds.

In the fall of 2005, after traveling around the world and coming back home to the wild places, I was above treeline in New Hampshire. Since 2001, people have undertaken to plant an American flag on the tops of the highest peaks on the anniversary of September 11. For years, even the thought of this made me cringe, bringing the warmongering to the mountaintops. But on this day I changed my mind. I was hiking alone.
on one of my favorite trails and happened to glance back and see a flag waving on the top of a little crag in the distance. There. Something clicked over. Too many times the flag is a symbol of the things I dislike, atrocities and injustices and crude bloody violence that break my hope. But this too was America. I want the land that I love to be included, to balance the parts of the country I cannot make sense of.

Whatever the intention of the flag-bearer, I saw the flag there on Mount Monroe was not so much a beacon of patriotism in the wilderness, a claiming the krummholtz and scree for the country, as a repurposing the flag, and ideas of country, to include wild places. The humility of the mountains, of the stars over Arcadia as we canoed home on September 11, this is what must be brought back, the art by which we must conduct ourselves, the banner under which we stand.
Sitting on the steps of Hannah’s house, I looked across the western fields of Middlebury, Vermont, towards the forest. It was October and the leaves had mostly fallen off the maples. Hannah was in her last year of college and took me in for the last few days. Arcadia is on fall break, and I had catapulted back into a world beyond the woods. I felt I could handle my sister’s college better than my parents’ house and normal life, but now, the sunset was bringing on the sorts of questions I didn’t ask when I was in the woods, in Arcadia.

The chapel at Hannah’s college is engraved with words from Psalm 95, “The strength of the hills is his also.” It’s one of my mother’s favorites. I get it confused with Psalm 121, “I lift up mine eyes to the hills whence cometh my strength.” The soft green hills surrounding me at Middlebury absorbed my mistake in their indifference. The night wind moved through the blanket of trees like something waking beneath a blanket.

I remember that I was trying hard there on the cement steps, that I kept looking up to the hills for a sign of wildness outside of Arcadia. I was miserable and out of place and looked at the maple trees as if they were familiar faces in a crowd. It should not have been this hard—college is not a foreign country and my culture shock at being out of the woods felt—even at the time—like an act that I can’t stop playing. I annoyed myself with how strange it felt to see more than ten people gathered, or to be in a room with square corners. But the feelings didn’t stop flooding in, no matter how eccentric I knew I was being. By age, these people wandering across the green lawns and limestone buildings were my peers, but I felt like a slow side-show freak in their company.
“You’re Hannah’s sister? The one who’s living in the woods, pretending to be Thoreau?” These weren’t unkind questions coming from her friends and housemates. In actuality, everyone seemed kind and calm and balanced in ways that I could not—cannot—fathom. No one here took off running for the hills, they’d tempered themselves to study Geography and Sociology and Forestry and whatever else it took to live life outside of the woods.

But they still didn’t seem to know what to make of me, lurking in their house and ducking outside frequently when the radiator kicks on. In fairness, I didn’t know what to make of me. I sweated unpleasantly indoors and was wearing the same layers of polypropylene I’d worn since I got to Arcadia in August. It was nearly November. I hadn’t spoken face to face with anyone outside the yurt village in two months. My already shoddy social skills were at a new low.

I saw a judgment in the friendly questions of Hannah’s friends. Maybe it wasn’t intended, maybe I was just hypercritical and self-doubting. But what I heard is, “Kid, what the hell are you doing?”

That’s the question I could not answer. That’s what was chewing me up, what sent me out to watch the sunset over the hills while I wait for Hannah to get out of class. I could not clearly and cleanly articulate what I’ve gone to the woods to find and felt that I should be able to at this point, if I ever was going to be able to. If there were words to describe why I went to the woods, I didn’t know them and the words I did know were never quite right. And it was late October. My time in Arcadia grew ever more limited. The end loomed, and I couldn’t say what I’d found, or if it was what I sought in the first place.
I wanted to say that I went in search of the happiness and belonging, that I went to find a better way of living on the earth, of living with nature. But I sounded like a freaky hippy when I answered like that. People in this world of clean college students, they don’t take barefoot, dirty woodland critters seriously. When I tried to create a reason for choosing Arcadia, I sounded both arrogant and naïve, and wanted, painfully, to be neither.

I feared there was a thread of arrogance in craving the comfort and intensity of the woods, of replacing crowds and buildings for hemlocks and constellations, because the normal world is not enough for me. For the ease of being a socialized, functioning member of the human race, I wished I could be happy with smaller doses of wildness. But I did not want to let go.

Why does it feel so lonely and strange to hold on to ideals, to long for something different than the way things are?

The ways in which we treat the natural world will not change an iota if I had taken off my shoes right then in Middlebury like I wanted to and run for the hills, if I had become a rogue recluse and only came down from my hermitage with sadness and distain. I was going to have to come back to home, back to houses and people and pavement, to re-become full party to the resource extraction and consumption that is breaking forests and mountain tops into smaller and smaller fragments.

Worse, I worried that out of the woods, I’d forget that I ever was in them, and I’d have a culture shock as painful and strange as this when I next go looking for something wild and peaceful. What if I had gone back easily to normal life, to showers and insulation and central heating, and only scratched my head in a few years, wondering
what the hell I had been thinking, going to live in the woods. What if my time in Arcadia came, a few years later, to mean nothing and all my passion for wild things and balance, all this faded to beige and a few funny stories? What if the pendulum swings me back to normal?

This is what I viscerally did not want to accept. My back started to sweat, although I was already outside the house, looking west with the sun. I couldn’t forget the woods, but I couldn’t to reconcile my need for the woods with the human culture surrounding me, suffocating me when I came inside. I felt like a doomed, romantic mutant.

The balance I sought between woods and people, my sister and her friends seemed to have found without the struggle. Their house was normal, square and comfortable. The back porch stored skis and kayaks and bikes. Hiking boots and running shoes littered the entryway. These people were not bland and blind and disconnected from the natural world. The mud in the bike tires, the view from the living room, the things I love from the woods were still here. But smaller, broken, and harder to hold. Is that how it has to be—only wild on the weekends or in a stolen afternoon? How I have to be?

A garage sat across the road and down the hill from my perch under the dwindling rays. The sun set over the trees on the edge of a distant field. You could have drawn a line straight down from the orange glow of the sun to the orange glow of the light over the garage door. The light flickered brighter and brighter as the sun sank lower, the sun’s color deepening and darkening as it went, yolk-yellow to orange to purple-tinged red. For
a moment, the garage light, buzzing with the energy of the sodium inside the wires and plastic casing, matched the hot orange color. The twin color, the glow, folded the distance between the sun and the sodium in, wrinkled it to nothing.

How could it not? This same sun shone on the shallow seas where the plankton who lived, died, and decomposed with heat and pressure and time into fossil fuels. The same sun rose and set on the oil derricks and refineries that pumped the petroleum up and molded it into the plastic of the lamp casing. The sodium inside the light, built in a lab to mimic the sodium that explodes out of supernova, is twisted through tubes and induced to re-give the light of the sun.

_I lift up mine eyes to the hills, whence cometh my strength._ I looked to the hills, to the sunset, aching for an answer to where wildness could be found in a peopled world. The beacon that renewed my faith was not a mark of nature, but an electric light, a stressed fractal of wildness, of sunlight. But it was enough light to see by, to find what I sought. It strains the eyes to look at life this way, to meet the worlds where they connect. To see the grain of wood in a chair leg, the cotton field in a tee shirt, the plankton in a gas tank, and find something wondrous in the unlikely places. It strains the eyes, the heart, but sometimes, it is the only way I can follow.
Here is my answer to the question of why to bother with canvas grocery bags, with bike chains and car pools, and all the other things that, if we could do them, might save us and our home from ourselves and our flaws:

The first day of Environmental Studies 101, I put the sleek tome of my textbook on my desk. The crisp edges, glossy pages that clung together with static, the shiny cover with a photograph of a rushing stream filled me with confidence. The charts and graphs and tables inside promised the answers I craved, the science and solutions to save the natural world.

My professor was a small man, younger than the other professors. He looked nervous, pinned like a butterfly by our staring eyes. The apple sitting on his desk looked incongruous, forced. A set piece to let us know that he was the teacher.
He picked up the apple, tossed it once and caught it.

“Say this is the earth,” he said, looking at us like he was about to tell a joke.

Instead, he pulled a knife out of his bag. “The earth is what, seventy-five percent water? We can’t live on that.” And he sliced the apple into quarters the long way, letting the slices fall, one, two, three, to his desk.

He brandished the remainder. “I’ve got twenty-five percent of the planet here. Now, think about all the mountains that are two high, the deserts that are too dry, or the soils too rocky. Think about all the places where people can’t live. It’s about fifteen percent.”

He cut the apple almost in half across its equator. The larger piece fell to the desk.

“The crust of the earth is 21 miles thick. For this apple planet, that’s about as thick as the skin.” Careful of the blade against his palm, he peels the remaining bit.

The body of the fruit falls to the desk, with the oceans, the deserts, the mountains and cliffs. He held the postage stamp of apple peel out to our silence.

“There’s over six billion people in this world. This is about how much space we’ve got to live on. That’s all we get. That’s why you’re here.”

He gathered up the apple pieces and knife and walked out of the room.

And that is why we must bother, or why I do. I cannot speak for the other six million, skating through the universe on the thin skin of the apple.
In my African Studies 101 course, I read that the Luo women of Kenya eat dirt while they are pregnant. I’ve learned since that here are many reasons that many groups of women do this, but it was the thought that a people see the earth of home place as a vital prenatal nutrient that pushed me towards Kenya in the spring of my third year of college.

There were other reasons I went to Kenya when I was twenty and wanting the world be better than it is. The divide between nature and culture seemed too vast to bridge in American life. We had lost a respect and a reverence, and the necessary humility of balance was buried under the highways and suburban sprawl. I walked around my college campus at night not wanting to be indoors in the light and the heat. I felt out
of place, and strange and lonely for feeling so. It felt unnatural to want to be kinder to the natural world.

I thought that I knew why we treat the natural world so badly, why the balance was so skewed. Western culture—the European, American, and Judeo-Christian traditions of thought and action—was built on agrarianism, which led to settlements and trading, which begot resource extraction and the need to always have more in order to gain and retain power. All of this was blessed and mandated and justified under the banner of Genesis. We were to multiply and subdue the earth, an earth that we had full dominion over.

And we had done just that, and with each new age, Bronze to Roman to Renaissance to Scientific to Industrial, had further distanced ourselves from nature, defined it more and more as the inferior or violent other. All of this added up to stars reflected in cracked pavement puddles rather than open lakes.

But what if there had been a different founding story? In a place where thousands of years of philosophy hadn’t ripped apart the taproots connecting humans to nature, perhaps there would still be harmony.

Knowing little beyond the stories of the Luo women feeding the earth to their unborn children, I went to Kenya for a college semester abroad. Those stories were enough. I needed to believe in a place where the natural world was revered and not forgotten, and so I believed that Kenya would be this place.
We landed in the pearl gray of early morning Nairobi. The air felt thick and moist, with the close chill of a humid day. It felt like a morning fog near the ocean, except the smell of salt was replaced with dust and diesel.

We rode an open truck from the airport to the house in the Nairobi suburbs where we would live for the next few months. We lived in a town called Karen. The town is named for the Baroness Karen von Blixen, who left Kenya for her native Denmark, and wrote *Out of Africa*. The land of the town had been her coffee plantation. The other students and I played Frisbee barefoot on the lawn of our house—what history was in the dirt? Did the coffee grown here taste of it? Does the free coffee on the highways of home taste like it? It all should.

On the road to Karen, wide-eyed and groggy from the long flight, Nairobi unfolded itself. The road ran along a high bank, and a sea of tin-roofed shanties filled the valley between the road and the tall buildings of the city center. It was still morning, and people streamed endlessly out of this sea, lugging bags and bundles. Each new person braided into the line that trod a path parallel to the road. The path was a copper-red mud ribbon through grass so green it seemed to glow. And the people kept coming, kept walking.

First, I was impressed that they all walked to wherever they were going. Then I looked past the churning mass and at the slums below the road, below my perch in the truck. Closer to Karen, we passed a sign that read Dagoretti Corner. The buildings here were the same sort of run-down as the shacks, and people still streamed away, walking along the road or riding rickety looking bicycles.
I’d watched *Out of Africa* the night before I left my parents’ house. At the end, when the Baroness is bankrupt and fleeing home, selling the plantation to another European, she says that the Kikuyu who worked the land for coffee will be safe, that she has found a place for them. The place she sends them—the sons and daughters of the land that became her farm, her profit, her loss, her namesake—is Dagoretti.

After a few weeks in Karen and Nairobi, our group struck out for a safari in Tanzania. We rolled through the Rift Valley in huge trucks, up and down rocky roads I will never find again on any map. We stopped at Olduvai Gorge, the land to which people first belonged. It didn’t happen quite like this, but I couldn’t shake the image of the entire race of humanity walking out of this gorge, walking across the continents as skins and eyes and beliefs tempered in new lands. But the walk began here, the ground and buff-rocks beneath my feet.

We lumbered on in the trucks to Ngorongoro Crater. The steep walls of the crater swooped 2,000 feet up from the floor, creating as one guidebook called it, “a natural zoo.” We camped on the lip of the crater and rode in Land Rovers down to the floor in the morning. Our tires criss-crossed the open plain, our guides on radios to find where the lions were, where an old bull elephant was eating a tree, where the hippos wallowed. Herds of zebras ran across the road like a cloud. Pink flamingos covered the lake shallows like a blanket.

I rode in a Land Rover over a compacted dirt road to snap pictures of the hippos, but people whose ancestors’ bones are in this soil are kept out.
They call this caldera a conservation area. The Maasai and other peoples who have lived in this region since there were people are kept out, and the crater is protected from human interference. The Maasai are cattle people, have grazed their herds in a rotation nearly as old as time on this land. No European set booted foot into Ngorongoro until the 1890s. It has been protected as a conservation area since 1959, as a UN World Heritage site since 1979. The Maasai are now—only recently—allowed to bring their cattle into the crater itself, although they must bring the herds in and out each day. Neither cows nor people may spend the night in the Ngorongoro Crater. Thus is the crater protected from human interference with nature.

Whose interference are we protecting against? I don’t believe I know enough to ask or answer this question but it sprang to mind anyway, driving through the Crater.

The mothers eating earth, the ties to the land, this is being, has been, subverted and oppressed by the same arms of the same history that sew disharmony between humans and nature at home. Here, though, the roots go deeper and there is something that survives, that resists the onslaughts of colonialism and capitalism, the rules of conservation that divide people from their land, and land from its people.

We drove on from the crater the next morning. The equatorial sun was hot and high at noon and we stopped for lunch in the shade of a jumble of rocks and acacia trees. Our guide told of the time they got a truck stuck out here. He laughed, pointing across the open plain to two high hummocks, the spot where a backhoe and a tractor came into the Serengeti to dig out a truck.
My hand on the sun warm rock found a set of small divots. You could set a dozen eggs in the shallow round pockets carved in the rock. A game board. Players drop beads or pebbles or buttons into the holes, collecting and counting to get the most. I rang my fingers over the rough stone, gazing towards the monumets for a truck. Even with the lichen, thick as lace, a game could be played on the rock where someone carved the board ages ago.
TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

While on safari in Tanzania, we stopped in Arusha. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda is based there. We went, and I still cannot make sense of having been there, reconcile the fact that my hands, typing these words, opened doors and clenched against chairs within the halls of that building.

Today, years away from Arusha, I am listening to the radio, a show about the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. History books all but confine such horrific, violence to the Holocaust, as if this was a nightmare isolated in time and space. As if genocide had never been committed before or since. It is certainly easier that way, to imagine that Nazis are the only people on earth who have ever been so bleakly evil, tried to drown a bloodline in its own blood.

I wish this were true.

In Arusha, we sit behind a sheet of mirror glass and watch an hour of a trial. We put on headphones to listen, but the trial is in French. Even if I spoke this, the former language of diplomacy, I do not think that I could understand the tableau before me. There is a man sitting in the witness stand. The other students who can speak a little French whisper what they think is happening—the man was a teacher who was involved with Hutu Power, the group was bent on exterminating and enslaving Tutsis. Was this man’s involvement voluntary? Would he testify which other teachers were more involved?

I am staring through the glass at the man. He does not look evil. He looks like an ordinary man. But he was party to the violence that slaughtered hundreds of thousands of
people, at least as innocent as you or I. I have not killed, but I live a life that kills and endangers others and am not as innocent as I wish.

How did this happen? Like the Holocaust, we too often take these mass killings out of the context of time, out of cause and effect. It is easier to do this than to find ourselves connected to, party to, these nightmares. The European colonials who came to the soil that became Rwanda pitted the tribes they found against each other. I can find no record of inordinate violence between the Hutus and the Tutsis before Europeans invaded. Seeds of hate were sown, following the colonial divide and conquer doctrine. Resources were extracted, the landscape was changed, and the European invaders became rich. During the colonial period, Tutsis were the tribe favored by first Germans and then Belgians. Hutus were repressed and abused, stripped of their lands, which were doled out to Tutsis.

Rwanda became independent from Belgium in 1962, and the Hutu Emancipation Party came to power. A struggle between Hutu and Tutsis cycled and exploded for thirty years with skirmishes and uprisings and a civil war. The Genocide of 1994 was bloody and violent and the stuff of nightmares that the rest of the world turned away from. But it was not an event isolated in time. And its genesis was not wholly within the boundaries of Rwanda. The colonials’ seeds bore this fruit, tended this garden.

Colonialism was the European countries stealing natural resources from other people and other lands. International corporations and global capitalism have taken up this mantle, taking trees and land and minerals with scant regard for the people and places. They concentrate on profit, on providing the cup of coffee, the tank of gas to insatiable consumers. Like me.
To be part of a system that both begets and ignores schoolchildren stabbing each other is unconscionable. I read reports of a child looking at his best friend and saying ‘I must kill you—you are Tutsi,’’ before chasing after his friend with a machete. Or the two sisters, lined up against the church wall, clinging to each other and crying. One is identified as a Hutu and left untouched, and her sister is called a Tutsi and raped and killed. The bloodlines are no longer pure Hutu or Tutsi, but this did not matter in the bloody haze of the Genocide—no one was safe. Neighbors killed neighbors, families broke each other, and people who sought refuge, sanctuary, in schools and churches were slaughtered.

I read that, before the Genocide, if a woman was being attacked or raped, she yelled. Anyone who heard her dropped everything and ran, howling, towards the noise. I read this, and it restores my faith in humanity. But during the Genocide, someone would begin to yell, and the would-be rescuers were cut down as they ran towards the trapped call.

All of this is true, but is it useful? Will detailing the violence and injustice and ignorance that begot this horror ensure that it never happens again? Perhaps not. Knowing the past has yet to prevent repetition. People in the Congolese rubber plantations had their hands cut off if they disobeyed the colonial agents of Queen Victoria. Baskets of disembodied hands were counted. Knowledge of this violence crept through Europe but knowing this did not stop the Armenian Genocide, which did not stem the Holocaust, Stalin, Cambodia, Chile, Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan, or any other places
where ethnic cleansing has sought to erase people as human as you or I. What can stop
this?

I believe, against all odds, that the human stories can. What is miraculous is that
we are still here at all, that we turn up the gas and sharpen knives, and yet, something
survives, lives to tell the story. An ad for a Rwandan aid organization flashed across my
Television recently. A woman’s face stared out. The headscarf she wore made her eyes
seemed larger, and I could almost not look away to see the rest of her face. A long scar
ran along her jaw, from her chin to her ear. Someone had held her head steady and sliced
along the line of her bone with a machete. The scar was creased and wrinkled, as if the
healing flesh had swelled in the gaps between the biting thread of stitches.

She is beautiful. The scar is nothing compared to her eyes. They arrest the viewer.
You cannot look away. Her eyes do not ask for pity. She looks as extraordinarily human
as the man in the suit on trial in Arusha. The players in a game of such violence, we
expect them to be larger than life—devils and angels. But we are all human. Our skins
cover the same concerts of blood and muscle, organs and bones. The man wears a suit,
goes on trial for his crimes. The woman lives with her scar, her eyes refusing to be
ignored. In their atonement and defiance, there is the greatest good, the greatest assurance
that the violence may end.

We must atone for and defy these stories. The scars are not the stories that matter,
the endurance of the body is.
THE MOON ON THE NIGHT OF WAR

On the night Baghdad was bombed, I swam in a river that is known for its crocodiles. The moon was nearly full, or just beginning to empty and the gray light made my skin luminescent as soapstone. The rains had not yet come to northern Kenya, to the unplaced spot on a map where I sat in the still warm shallows. The dry season kept the crocodiles from the river.

The rough and rocky landscape, painted silver and dark with the moonlight, looks like what I wish the moon were like. The warmth of the night, the soft rustle of the leaves—trees I do not know by name—all is lovely and strange. With a place like this in the world, how can a war have begun?

I’ve a knack for being disconnected from my country, from my home, when the grounding events of my generation shake the earth. From where I’ve watched, the earth has not shaken. You expect the wars, attacks, storms, all of it to ripple across the air like a shaken sheet of tin, cracking and reverberating like masquerading thunder. It is not so obvious, the cause and effect of war.

Because of the crank radio that we carried on the trip, I’d heard the BBC report of the bombing before coming to the river. We’d all listened closely for days, chewing our lips and silently wondering if war was coming. The boy whose brother was in the Marines, the girl with four brothers and dreaded the ghost of the draft, they may have felt it more than others, this tension. But, during the day and away from the clipped voices and static of the news, we were largely, contentedly unaware. There were elephants to be seen, villages and farms to visit, camp to make and strike when the trucks rolled through the acacias and rocks. Safari is Swahili for wander, and we did this blissfully.
But then came the voices spackling through the airwaves and announcing that this was real, bombs were dropped and the war in Iraq was on. It has never made moral sense to me why this happened, how this was allowed to happen.

They say that there is no part of history more distant than the recent past. My history lessons ended with Nagasaki, barely touching the wars in Korea or Vietnam or Kuwait, the bombings and skirmishes and occupations elsewhere. I suppose my teachers thought, because this happened in their lifetimes, their adulthoods, this was not history.

Thus we are disconnected from the grounding events of our present.

I used to think that war was more like chess, that soldiers lined up and faced off, and whoever had the most dead lost the war. That the bodies would be counted, and the battle could be quick and organized. I was five or six, thinking this. But the idea of tallying the dead, of killing people at all to solve a fight, didn’t make sense.

Before coming on safari, we’d toured the slums of Nairobi. I’d never seen poverty before, seen the costs and underpinnings of modern American life. Houses are made from cardboard, from cinderblocks salvaged from other rubble, from sticks and paint cans, hammered flat to be shingles.

And then there are the children of downtown Nairobi. They huff bottles of glue, high beyond hunger.

I see war as a vehicle for multiplying such sights across every place it touches. A bomb lands, goes askew and kills civilians. Men, women, children, babies and grandparents, their loved one lost to violence. Grief, in a place where the air thunders with anticipation of death, can lead nowhere good. Children with lost parents will have to
go somewhere, homes and businesses destroyed and neighborhoods unsafe, all this foments poverty, desperation, and most unjust of all, the strain of living with constant terror.

Several years ago now, when the wars were no longer a new shock to be washed away in moonlight, I walked across a college campus where thousands of tiny white flags stood witness for the civilians who had died in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than an acre of the campus was a sea of these white flags. I could not count them, still cannot absorb the number of lives they represented. Each one of those flags had a mother and a father, was a child once and should have grown old.

For a while, I drove a back road from my home in New Hampshire to the grocery store because it brought me past a little white clapboard house. The house had black trim around the windows, a mansard roof like a storybook, and a growing tally of Iraqi dead posted on the front door, visible from the road. The number swelled every week. I love the line of the arm I never saw, drawing the new number on the door, refusing to forget the price we do not pay.

Sitting in the river, I watched the moon rise up. The friend I was with laughed and we made crocodiles noises. It seems impossible that this same moonlight glanced down on the new rubble and wounds of Baghdad. The radio news rang in my ears and I felt divorced from my passport, from the flag I pledged allegiance to for so many years. I wished I belonged to this landscape, but knew that I did not, that this too is more complicated than my eyes as a student on safari can understand, can know.
Every year in March, they broadcast the years that this war has gone on. The number makes me cringe, how a war has gone on and I’ve barely noticed. I see the white flags across the green grass, hear the squeal of a thick marker adding up the civilian dead. I think of the moon, rising in the violet grey sky, in the tear between happiness and regret. We are not meant to smile on days when the war years are added. But it grounds me to know that the world is too large for me to grasp. There may be peace in what I do not know, in what I cannot absorb.
FOR SEREWA

Serewa has no parents. I ask, but everyone is quite sure that she is no one’s child. She must be about five or six years old, a small bean of a girl. At night, sleeping on the goatskins in Cosina’s home, Serewa curls up beside me. She snores lightly.

I cannot speak to her, this little girl who doesn’t let me out of her sight. She speaks Maa, the Samburu language. I can muscle my way through Swahili, but only by the skin of my teeth. So instead Serewa becomes my shadow, holding my hand tight and sitting close and we do not speak.

Serewa has no parents and does seem more alone than the other children who run between Cosina and Josephine’s homes. These two women, the wives of a Samburu elder, take care of the girl. She is clean and clothed and fed, but sits to the side, furtively waiting for her turn, makes herself smaller. Cosina is proud and tender with her own children. Josephine has an infectious laugh, and her face lights up like a candle with her own sons and daughters.

Perhaps there are more orphans who live around the family settlement. Orphan doesn’t seem like the right word. Serewa is not begging for glue on the streets of Nairobi or sent to a workhouse like Dickens’ orphans or sold to a brothel like other little-girl orphans around the world. She is fine, safe and healthy, and surrounded by people who treat her kindly as one of their own, blood-kin if not blood-child. She may never be as loved as their own children are, but these women will keep her safe, and that is better than many.

And still, when we go to the well for water, the child’s stoicism melts my heart. The well is perhaps a mile away, near the school where Cosina and Josephine’s children
go. The women load up with jugs and buckets and we walk to the water. Serewa, who does not go to school, comes along, lugging a jug that is a quarter of her size. She holds the jug in one hand, grips my hand with the other. I’ve got a bucket in my hand, want to take her jug and have her run like a wild thing, like a child. But I do not know the words to offer this, and so we walk. She skips beside me, looking up to smile shyly.

When we reach the well, amid the joking and clucking of the other women who’ve come for water, the containers are filled. Serewa’s jug is maybe two gallons. Filled, that’s about seventeen pounds. A strip of pink cloth is wound around the handle, and she undoes the cloth, loops it over her forehead. The tension of the cloth, of her neck, pulls the jug close to her thin back and she takes off nearly running back home. The jug bounces, faded yellow plastic against the brown and tan flowers of her dress, as her bare feet pound the red dirt with quick steps.

I’ve come to the Samburu district as one of the final cultural field trips of the semester in Kenya. The Samburu are culturally similar to the iconic Maasai of East Africa, the red-blanketed cowboys of travel brochures. They are a cattle culture, semi-nomadic. Historically, the men have taken the cattle herd grazing around the region, staying under the grass is thin and then driving the herd on for new pastures. The women stay home to raise children, crops, and flocks of sheep and goats. It is a polygamous society, hence both Cosina and Josephine being Lenamugi’s wives.

Polygamy, as practiced by the Samburu, is not the nightmare of oppression and fear that blares across the American news every so often. With the men gone for so much of the year, the women need each other, need someone to rely on, someone to talk to. The
interdependence of the women, as if they barely noticed whether their husbands were present or not, surprised me. If anything, the men seemed out of place, uncomfortable in their wives’ lives, in their wives’ homes.

The houses, low-roofed huts made of goat dung and mud adobe on walls and frames of woven sticks, are the women’s. Cosina built her house just after her marriage, and she and Josephine spent a few hours reinforcing the roof while I was there.

I came to Samburu puffed up with indignation over the subjugation of women, the injustice of polygamy, and all the rest that a liberal girl from the States might find offensive. Sitting outside the hut, making beaded necklaces with the children, I watch Cosina and Josephine laugh as they smear mud over the cracks in the walls. Their husband, Lenamugi, and his brother who lived nearby wandered across the plains in the near distance. At least they had each other. The loneliness of men, back from the male companionship of cattle camps and catapulted into a sphere of life where they were nearly superfluous. Soldiers, back from a tour to duty to a home that was never their own.

The trouble is that the cattle camps have always been on public lands, were so before land titles and use were demarcated. And now, the land is being divided for private use, or further divided to protect from private use and exploitation. It all amounts to the same thing—access to the size and variation of public land necessary for cattle camps is disappearing. Without the land, there are fewer and smaller camps, fewer and smaller herds, and the Samburu men’s world shrinks.

The women, their world bound by the distances between their homes, water, and the forest, are less immediately affected by the shifting land. But as their husbands and brothers and sons are losing their identity as cattlemen, are staying home, emasculated by
the loss of grazing lands, the women begin to feel the change. The changes crash into the women’s world, fists and infections breaking millennia of tradition. The diseases of unhappiness, of frayed social fabrics, alcoholism, domestic abuse, abandonment, all set in as the men settle and the lives they’d thought to live slip through their fingers.

When people are tied to a disappearing land, what happens to the people?

There is less land for fewer cattle, and some men leave the Samburu region. They head for settlements and cities, hoping for work and promising to send money to support their wives and children. Some disappear, some come home. Some come home, carrying AIDS from seeking comfort, seeking power, wherever they could find it in unfamiliar places.

Serewa has no parents. The most Cosina says is that her mother is dead and her father is gone. There are a thousand different ways this could have happened. And the story of land loss bleeding into human lives is as obvious as any news headline. We are bored of this story, heard it so many times we’ve stopped listening.

When I left Cosina’s house, I bent down to hug Serewa. Her thin arms around my shoulders, hot hands on the back of my neck—I can feel the heat and the pressure of her weight still. The skin absorbs, remembers, what ears no longer hear.
MISS QUEEN OF THE GHETTO

In the slums of Nairobi, plastic bags of feces lie in the hard dirt streets, burst open and dried to dust by the hotter sun. The smell is fetid with rot and dust, smoke and diesel, the sweat and struggle of living hand to mouth and cheek by jowl.

The slums, squatter towns ring that the city like hands around the throat, do not exist on paper. They are not drawn on maps, although guidebooks will say to avoid them. There is abject poverty, crime, abuse, disease, and in the rainy season, the dirt-beaten streets flood and dead rats float by. In the squalid trickle of the river that flows through the slums, women wash clothes and children swim while garbage, sewage, and animal carcasses ooze downstream. I saw a white goat, four stiff legs in the air like the masts of a shipwreck, flow by the splashing shrieks and scrubbing gossip.

When the tribal lands and ways of life disappeared with colonialism and capitalism, people left their homelands for the cities. The slums sprang up, seeming impermanent because this is not the homeland, this is only temporary. The slums, largely, remain divided by tribal affiliations, by ties to places the children of the slums have never seen, homes they know only though stories. This is the same across the globe.

When I first went to the slums, I held my breath and kept my eyes down, ashamed that I would be leaving and returning to a house with thick walls and glass windows, to a bed with clean sheets. That I could leave this place.

I came back to the slums though. I signed up to volunteer with a business that made sandals out of old tires, because the children playing soccer in the barren dooryard of the shop had rare and lively eyes. The children in downtown Nairobi had eyes glazed over with the thick film of drug addiction. The downtown kids clutched plastic water
bottles, cracked blue and filled with the tan syrup of carpet adhesive they huffed like oxygen. They moved like zombies, begging for money that you pray against hope will be used for food, not glue.

The slum kids, kicking up dust on the hard ground, still had a light in their faces. They laughed, and moved like children. That was hope enough.

The day before Easter, the younger guys at the sandal shop told Pete and me about a beauty pageant in the slums. Could we come? Pete, my best friend through college, who had also seen something good in the slum kids, was likewise volunteering at the shop for the month. We were told, quite certainly by the directors of our program, that it was unsafe for us to remain in the slums after dark. Unsafe for us, but also unsafe for the men and women we worked with.

Regardless, we happily went to the Miss Queen of the Ghetto Beauty Pageant. That, in itself, is a once in a lifetime invitation. At the door of the club, an old converted warehouse, the large sweaty man in a silky green soccer shirt who ran the place found Pete and me—we stood out like sore thumbs—and pushed us through the crowd. Our sandal shop hosts, Joseph and Michael and Maina, hurried to keep up.

Booming a welcome in our faces, spit flying in excitement, the man pulled out two chairs at the apex of a horseshoe of tables. Pete dragged three more chairs over and we all sat. Directly across from our seats, a curtain divided the room into on and off stage. We faced the catwalk, the best seats in the place. I squirmed.
A few minutes later, the sweaty man reappeared with bottles of grape soda and leaned in close between Pete and me. Only just that minute, one of his judges for the pageant had canceled. As we were there, his special guests, would we please step in?

I looked Pete over. His faded t-shirt had a hole growing in the armpit. His nylon hiking pants had mud and worse ground into the hems. The haircut he gave himself with a pair of children’s safety scissors looked like a disease. His patchy beard had grown so big the edges gave his face an orange halo.

I was no better. My hair was long and tangled, too many days from a shower or a comb. I’d lost weight with a stomach amoeba and swam in my clothes, a fleece and zip-off pants and t-shirt I’d worn for several days. We would have been lucky to get picked up hitchhiking after a week in the woods, let alone judge a beauty pageant. But Pete dug his sharp elbow into my side, grinned and said, “Bethany would love to!”

The other two judges sat down beside me. The man, dapper and tidy, ran a business in one of the slums. The woman, sitting right next to me, wore a cream colored pants suit, had long manicured, polished nails, and her thousands of tiny braids were woven and swept up neatly and professionally. She ran a salon in the slums and trained girls to be beauticians.

“Are you ready?” thundered the announcer. “It’s the Miss Queen of the Ghetto Beauty Pageant!” His voice seemed too large for the space and my bones rattled in my skin.

The girls came out, and the announcer introduced them all in a booming mix of Swahili and English. There are several distinct slums in and around Nairobi, and each had
sent their beauty queen to the big pageant. Miss Korogocho, Miss Kariobangi, Miss Dandora, Miss Kibera, Miss Dagoretti, and so on.

The pageant was set up to run in rounds—street wear, evening wear, traditional costume, beachwear. Each new round, the announcer’s voice sent the words Miss Queen of the Ghetto bounding off the walls like a giant rubber ball filled with pride.

I tried to come up with some sort of judging rubric, but couldn’t. I gave points for poise and confidence, for the weight of the cheer that went up from the girls’ home people. In a pageant where girls wear mismatched bikinis and prance out to T-Spoon’s “I Wanna Have Sex on the Beach,” whatever the traditional rules for beauty pageant judging are go out the window.

Miss Dandora won with her safety pinned evening gown and regal bearing. She was Joseph’s cousin, and I voted for her as naturally as if she were my cousin. You cheer for, hold onto your own. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen stronger ties to home and place than at this beauty pageant. Maybe where there is so little, you hold like hell to what there is. Or maybe it’s just the contrast that brings what matters into focus.

And there is no contrast, no greater testament to faith and belonging, than a beauty pageant in the slums.
ROOT AND REFUGE

Mary is the first person I remember saying the words: “I am the best version of myself here.” She said it while we were sitting on a roof, watching a sunset over the looming mountain ridge. It was night on the roof, beneath the mountains, but the sun had not yet left the peaks. What I love most about her words is that she is neither the first nor the last to feel this way about the very place we sat.

I believe that wherever a person finds this feeling is some kind of home, where roots sink in and hold fast. A seed opens when conditions are right. When the air and water and soil nutrient content are deemed right, a radical shoot grows out of the seed, exploring the soil and taking in the nutrients that will enable root growth. Once the roots are growing, pulling water and nutrients from the soil into the seed, the green sprouts begin working their way upwards, above ground for photosynthesis, for blooming.

My own conditions to root were right when I left Kenya. The five months I spent there promise that linear measures of time are an insufficient way to measure the depth of an impact. I saw more incongruities and paradoxes jammed into the space of an hour than I can find in a week in my ordinary life. And, in trying to piece it all together, I wanted a home. Home as a refuge, as a place to be rooted to and, for the first time I felt, a people to belong to. Geography was no longer enough, and never has been since Kenya.

The radical shoots of my homing roots would have, I believe, sprang into any fertile ground that came under my feet. But I wouldn’t have it any other way than how it was.

My refuge was in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Where the Appalachian Trail crosses the skinny part of the state like a scarf, eight little lodges
pepper the trail, ridgelines and valleys and forests. I came to work here, within the insular community of the lodges and the mountains and the people who love them, when I needed to belong somewhere, to people as much as place.

The lodges are staffed by college kids and have been for nearly a hundred years. Five, six, ten kids at each lodge. Multiply the eight huts by the decades by the number of people who work there each season and it comes to a community that slices time like a knife, gives me an ancestry of companionship, of not being the first to love these ancient granite hills. For thirty years, an old airplane propeller was swapped and stolen through the huts. We had it for a few weeks that first summer, and when I touched the metal, the dents and scrapes left by others, I felt the comforting weight of being part of something at once secret and greater than myself. The radical shoot became a taproot, holding me to those rocky soils. Roots stretched out to the other people who had found their way—windblown or deliberately sown—to the same mountains.

I have found some of the greatest friends of my life among these mountains. I believe that Mary is right, that there is something about this place that brings our best selves to the surface. It may be nothing more than the belief that this is so, but it feels as real as anything I know.

I used to think that the shape of the land and the solitude of wildness was enough for me, that what I wanted was to be alone in beautiful places. But that is not right for me. Perhaps I would have come to this, but the way that people in Kenya belonged to each other, in communities and tribes, as naturally as to the landscape that nudged the seed of my roots towards emergence.
The mountains, the lodges, are not unfamiliar to me. I was born just north of the Whites to hiking parents and have pictures of myself as a baby and a toddler on the trails and doorsteps of these places. But I had not encountered them on my own, entered this world through my own volition. And my earlier knowledge of the area, the baby pictures of myself with my mother on the very trails I hiked through my twenties, carrying forty pounds of food to the hut, all this merely tied me closer to the place, reassured me that this was where I belonged.

I feel compelled to apologize, to explain that by burying myself in mountains and backwoods, I was not turning my back on everything I’d seen in Kenya. Being happy was not denying that the world is unbalanced and unfair. It bothers me, sometimes, how easily I seemed to forget.

There is this also: In Kenya, I had developed horrible blisters on the tops of my feet. New sandals rubbed my skin raw and I ignored the hot spots as they opened into sores. I walked through puddles in the slums. My feet swelled, turned red and puffy and hot to the touch. The skin burst over the blisters, buttonholes in my skin with white-green pus oozing out. I had planned to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, the snowy table that sweeps over the plains of Tanzania. I came home instead, and because of this, found my job in the mountains while I watched my feet heal and scar.

I think sometimes, if I had climbed Kilimanjaro, I would not have come to the home I found in my own mountains. I would have taken root somewhere else, but I can no more imagine my life without the New Hampshire mountains, the people I love from that place, than I can imagine my feet without the scars.
The scars are fading now, I can only trace them faintly. I think of Kenya, of hiking in New Hampshire with Band-Aids over the still healing scars. It took the one to get to the other. It is not a stagnant balance I seek. What I want to have roots deep enough to hold me through everything from African slums to shooting stars over the mountains.
A THING WITH FEATHERS

A few months before I graduated from college, in the basement computer lab of a haunted building, the brick walls frosted with thick cream-colored paint, I came to understand that the home I found in the mountains is greater than the refuge I sought. It was not solely an escape from the complexities of the larger world, but a key to the passage between quiet places and the sorts of global issues that are too big to fit your head and heart around. I ran away to the mountains and found a way to reach back out from my refuge. As if the world were ever easily escaped.

They hope in environmental education that by immersing a child in the natural world, the child will learn a love of the place, and eventually extend that love and stewardship to the rest of the planet. Deep ecology spirals out like an endless address of empathy, care beginning with the self, the immediate surroundings and outward, from the tree in the backyard to the river running through town to the people in the town to the geology of the state, the coastlines and fishermen on and on until the whole world is tangible through each fractal of the whole. It is all an extension of empathy, but is far easier to collect the fractals than see them in concert, to connect each one to the rest in all the ways things do.

And there, in the chalk-scented basement and longing to leave school for the mountains, I saw the figures pop out from an international report on the counts of a threatened bird species. Tabulated with all the other findings were the five migratory songbirds I had recorded one sunrise in June. One two three four five. I had fallen into a stream hiking up to listen to the birds and my right hand on the keyboard, tapping through the search engines and files, bore the scar.
I am often overcome with how little I matter in the scheme of things, feel that all the inarticulate passions of my life are useless. Yet, when I look at the scar on my hand, which has begun to fade as my cells and molecules exchange and rearrange with time, I believe in individual actions. It’s not so much my ownership of my actions that matter, but that the actions themselves do. I was merely the vehicle, the recorder. And that was more than enough.

The chain: because I came reeling out of Kenya, needing to set down roots, I went to the mountains. Because I was in the mountains, trained as a naturalist, I participated in an international study of songbirds that breed only in the thick spruce forests that I happened to be working in. I hadn’t cared, had resented the intrusion of the bird study, and had postponed my survey of the route until late in the birds’ breeding season. The thought of learning new bird songs and calls, then leaving my warm sleeping bag alone at three in the morning to hike a mile up to the nearby summit to count birds, all for some science study I didn’t grasp—it seemed like a penance.

When the appointed morning came, the shrill call of my alarm went off at 3 a.m. I figured that I would be, as one friend put it, “moving dumb and thinking slow” and it would take me longer to hike the mile to the summit than usual. I left the room I shared with five other hut workers and began walking around the lake to the trail. The night mists were rising off the water like ghosts, and the fog followed me into the woods, up the trail. The spindly balsam firs were damp and eerie as I hiked by and the trail was wet. I started to run, afraid that I would miss the birds and have to come out again the next morning. I ran to get away from the silly fears of fog and ghosts and woods and pre-dawn light.
And I slipped. My sneaker skidded out on a wet log bridge and I twisted into the tiny stream, the wet rocks, greasy with moss. In the seconds I fell, I saw my head smashed on the rocks, and no one noticing my absence for hours as I bled into the stream. I put my hand out, caught myself and tumbled safely into the water. My pants were wet, my jacket, and my socks. All this for a stupid bird, I thought, and hauled myself grumpily out of the water. A fire-engine-red stream of blood oozed down my hand, thinned by the cold water.

I hated the bird, as I sucked the blood from the cut and hurried up the trail. At the summit, I got out my bandana and wound it around my hand like a Civil War soldier as I picked my sites out and hunkered down to wait, bitterly clutching my data sheet.

But then I heard the bird, all the birds. The dawn chorus is nothing more or less than birds checking on each other, making sure they’ve survived the night. That birds care so beautifully, so melodically, for each other stops me cold. And nothing fits the jagged edge of sunlight over a distant mountain ridge—burning up the ragged rocks like flame on a newspaper—like the lilts and trills of the birds.

And to witness this, to be alone at the top of my little world while the morning unfolded against the fading stars to my west … I fell in love with the birds that brought me here.

Here is what I know now, years after the sunrise and the scar: This bird is the Bicknell’s Thrush. They are small, smaller than robins and a dusky brown with darker brown flecks on white breasts. Their song is cheerily querulous. They breed in the spruce fir forests of the Northeast, a thin band between three and four thousand feet. This is the elevation of my memories and belonging to the mountains. The mountains I love are
small, and there are not many that support the appropriate habitat for the birds. Projections of rising temperatures show the spruce and firs creeping up slope, squeezing into narrower and narrower bands and erasing the alpine zone above four thousand feet. These limits on the breeding grounds are mirrored with the wintering habitats the birds are losing in the Caribbean. There are a few pockets of viable populations in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but forested lands are under threat in those places as well.

I’ve seen people, powerless and removed from their lands, seen land ripped from its way and twisted into an export crop, the forests turned into coffee plantations, the orphans and drug-addled children of ignored poverty. I’ve seen the clearcuts and smokestacks of this country, seen the ways we ignore the destructive machinations that shape our lives, seen how I ignore them.

It all starts to seem quite hopeless. When all of this destruction, the deforestation and the pollution, can be pinpointed to the little brown head of a thrush, it becomes almost manageable. These birds fly between the places I love and the facts that do not account for such love. Does my counting of songbirds at sunrise alone on a mountain stop pollution or injustice or climate change?

I don’t know. I know that doing so reminds me of the ways the world buttons together, of the things that can be done to keep us from flying to pieces.
I watched Hurricane Katrina from the top of a mountain. There is a weather station on the top of Mount Washington and we hiked up from the hut to sit in front of the television and watch the pulsating snowball race across the weather map. The news showed the floods, the cars trapped on the highways, the people praying in boats and the roofs ripped and twisted off.

A few weeks later, when the hut closed for the winter, I was looking for a job that would help people. The news from the Gulf Coast hadn’t gotten better or gone away yet. I found Hands On Disaster Response and they were taking volunteers in Biloxi, Mississippi. I called to ask how to sign up. “When does your plane get in?” the man on the phone asked. His only other question was to make sure I had tetanus and hepatitis vaccines. A few days before Halloween, I joined the ranks.
There is little that hasn’t been said.

I have never felt more powerless.

The labor it takes to empty and gut a single house is physically and emotionally draining. The plaster, falling in dust and chunks, sticks to sweaty skin. Pounding a crowbar into the walls, the teeth sink into sodden wood with a satisfying thunk and squeak. But the motion of swinging it again and again, all the times it takes to rip down the walls that sat in toxic, stagnating water—it begins to take the edge off the rage and frustration, replacing it with a hollow exhaustion.

And that is if the house can be found, the owners contacted, and permission granted for strangers to enter the ruined home and begin the demolition, to strike a match on the phoenix nest.

The work is hard. Even with seemingly every church and synagogue and college in the country sending a team of volunteers, people and resources are stretched thin. The need engulfs, dwarfs, the help we can give.

Sore from the crowbars, I volunteer to navigate the city for a nurse from West Virginia named Barb. Barb is frumpy and religious and an unlikely hero. She jokes about herself, her age, her size, how unsuitable she is for this work. I think she is tireless and brave and funny, and cannot believe she doesn’t see this in herself. Nor, to hear her talk, does anyone else see her as the sweet-faced force of nature I admire.

The street signs were ripped up in the storm and we find them, bent and tangled blocks from where we think they should be. There are some handmade plastic ones on the bigger streets, and we count east and west, left and right from the known places of the map.
The direst needs have been met. The only blood we see are the finger pricks for diabetes. There are no broken bones, just heart disease and diabetes, alcoholism and depression among the mostly overweight, mostly black men and women we find on broken porches and debris-strewn lots. These are the people who had nowhere else to go, no hidden funds or distant families.

Barb and I sit with a man who is having trouble getting his medications and treatment from the VA hospital. The cemetery near his house flooded. Coffins popped up and floated around the neighborhood on the rivers of the streets. When the waters went down, more coffins were exposed. The man, barely able to hobble, tells us he took his gun and stood guard over the graves, that he almost shot a looter stealing from a child’s grave. His eyes look past us, glassy.

I held the grubby hand of a rangy old man with a scraggly beard. His eyes, too, looked distant, and he cried, clinging to my hand. He can’t work because he can’t sleep. He can’t sleep because when he shuts his eyes, a giant wall of water bears down on him. He’s staying with a friend, helping to rebuild when he can concentrate on hammers and nails.

At the Hands On base camp there was a list of the things to always bring with you when you went out to the streets. The last item was “sunglasses, so they can’t see you cry.”

The frustration of not being able to turn back the tides, to lift a house back to its foundation or erase the mold from a family album was awful. Worse was the argument Barb and two other nurses were having. There were crews of Hispanic guys working all
over town for a few construction companies, tearing down and rebuilding the places that can be salvaged. One nurse was adamant that we not give vaccines to people who don’t have any identification. She said it was a question of legality.

That may be true. But she also said we need to take care of ourselves first before giving medicine to any illegal immigrants. We’ve given vaccines to everyone else we’ve seen who needs them—all the white church people from Minnesota, the white and black dregs of Biloxi who hadn’t got their shots yet, two months after the storm. Isn’t need need? How can any boundary remain impermeable in the water’s wake?

When I watched the hurricane plow across the weather map, it had shown no regard for the lines we draw on maps.

I’m with Barb. “I don’t care where they’re from,” she says in her fierce drawl, “they’re working in a dangerous place and if they get sick, well, they’ll end up in a hospital and we’ll have to take care of them anyway. So we’ll just stick ‘em all if they need it and not tell.”

We find our way through the unmarked streets to a low building that looks like a crumpled shoebox. Another nurse meets us, hands over a cooler of tetanus and hepatitis vaccines.

There, by the light of Barb’s headlights, in the gathering dusk, the nurses vaccinate every man who steps forward. Another volunteer and I fill out the forms, leaving the box for address blank when the men do not answer. We fill in Houston, Austin, El Paso, later, drawing on the hometowns of the men who do not shrink from the question.
We have done a right thing. Given all that we cannot do, to do what we can is beautiful.
A PINK DRESS

It could not be a more perfect image. The little girl smiles into the camera in Mississippi, and the skeleton of the house, her house, hides behind her party dress. Her tidy hair and pretty little girl jewelry.

It’s been said that cynicism is the black leather jacket that makes everyone who wears it look cool. To hope, though, is to wear a fluffy pink dress, showing off scabby knees and puffy sleeves.

I twist in this metaphor, staring into the closet of my moods and wondering what to wear each morning. This picture of a little girl—I do not know her or her name—is pinned to the wall near my closet.

There is a danger in celebrating survivors. It limits the capacity of those who have witnessed tragedies to ever get beyond that event in their lives. A friend of mine studied
the stigma of rape—in constantly being celebrated and identified as a rape survivor, the individual is forced to self-identify with the rape. Think of the survivorship culture surrounding cancer, the Holocaust. Too often, we celebrate only the survivors. We do not dig deeply into, prevent, the root causes.

Some days, the little girl in pink is too much for me. It all seems too simple. The house behind her is a crooked, sagging skeleton of a home. The timbers of the roof poke the sky like a shipwreck. The apron of cement steps, the arms of brick, do not meet the front door. The winds and the water of a hurricane beat this home diagonally across its foundation, slamming the back into the neighboring house as if these houses were cardboard boxes skittering through an empty lot. The two roofs buckle like tectonic plates. The chimney is fallen, tumbled and broken like Legos in the too long, too green yard. The nurse I worked with took the picture in early November. A month after the storm.

Rubble and road signs twist and litter the yard, spill onto the sidewalk.

The girl is the only part of this picture that was not underwater. The waterline of the houses in this part of Biloxi kissed the ceiling of first floors, drowned kitchens and living rooms. I do not know where the girl and her family went, how she survived.

Other children were lashed to chimneys as the waters rose and the winds howled. A friend worked with local schools as an art therapist. The children, frozen and frightened still, only used pencils. My friend says the colors would be too stimulating. The children were struggling with the thoughts and images crowded in their young skulls—to decide on a color might have been too much to ask. I suspect that the children,
these children are more resilient than adults, that the adults could not handle the colored pictures these children would present.

I don’t know. I know that I’ve been furious, wanting to rip the pink off the dress, the smile off the girl, the calming ease off the picture. On the black days, her innocence strikes me as ignorance. As if, because the little girl can soldier on like a princess, the damage of the waters has not mattered. The horror is lessened, its power and reality weakened by her resilient, virginal purity.

The shell of the house is eviscerated. This happened, and if the news of the world is any indication, such horrendous destruction has only grown in recent years, no matter how many girls in pink dresses dance on. Do we not stop the destruction because we are powerless or because the pictures and stories of survivors paralyze us by normalizing the horrors, by saying everything is okay?

Victim, survivor…these words carry a sage weight and tired eyes. I wonder if we celebrate the survivors as a way to avoid the horror, as if to say, “see, it is not so bad—people do survive this.” Survive this storm, survive this killing, survive this rape, this disease, this war, this loss.

Ought we not stop the storms, the killings, the rapes and diseases, the wars and losses that leaks through our lives like water rising?

A different day and I am still looking at the picture. I see myself wanting to denounce the girl, her incongruous dress. But who am I to pass judgment on a child in a pink dress, to call her naïve? I have not yet had my home ripped from its foundations, my
house sent sailing through the flood like a toy boat. She, whoever she is, has. And adults suffer the myth that children are innocent, should be naïve. I only want this girl to be happy, to not always live in the shadow of loss as an emblem of survival. I’m afraid of this photo becoming a totem or talisman, not a snapshot of a real little girl. If I show it to a stranger, to a friend, what do they see? The rubble or the princess?

Does anyone see these things as more than symbols? Do we, can we, see that she is about seven years old and her mother brushes her hair? That her family came to Biloxi from Vietnam thirty years ago, that the walls of this house held stories and secrets? She is no icon, no symbol of anything, but an ordinary child.

I think we freeze images of survivors at the time of their survival because it isolates, separates, those who suffer from those who do not. To not do this labeling is too close to admitting that we’re all in this thing together, that every action has a reaction and repercussion somewhere. The North Pole is melted and the waters rise in the Gulf Coast.

I lose sleep some nights because the images of devastation haunt me. But these are not my tragedies, really. This is the root of my trouble with the pink dress—her calm smile shames my dramatics. I give up in the darkness, believing that the world is doomed and that every place I’ve ever loved will be lost. I anticipate the grief like an eager martyr with my cynicism. The black leather jacket looks especially powerful when there are tears in my eyes. I look good—poetic and punk.

But it doesn’t fit. I’ve only borrowed the jacket as I’ve borrowed the imaginings of loss. Those who have lost, some are wearing pink dresses. Hoping. Defiant. Normal.

Mornings now, I try to reach for the pink dress. If that little girl can, how can I not?
I left Biloxi just before Thanksgiving. The television in the airport told me that a man had frozen to death the night before, and that, with the coming winter, he would likely not be the last.

Measured in days, my time along the Gulf Coast was just over a month. But the events of life pound our souls harder, with more depths and divots than a certain number of days, of hours or minutes could explain. It was not hard to leave, but this did not make it easy to come home again.

I want to say that it does not matter what caused Hurricane Katrina. I want to say that what matters is what we do about it. I don’t care who started it. I want it to stop. But the sliver of truth is that we do know pieces of what gorged the storm into a monster. We do. And to not address these realities is shamefully irresponsible. The cost is everything.
After Biloxi, my impotence of not being able to do enough, and more, of not knowing what should be done, what could be done, all this overwhelmed me like a black tide. We could not even get enough blankets and sleeping bags to those still squatting in tents and teetering houses. The simplicity of this failing was, to me, the fingerprint that identified the entire experience—we can’t even get the little things right.

By then, away from Biloxi, it was Christmas time. When I did leave the house, I was bombarded with jingles of hope, of giving. Santas, angels, elves, reindeer, snowmen, nutcrackers, gingerbread men, and images of impossibly perfect families all promised that buying *this* cookie, ornament, dress, mug, appliance, scented candle, car was the way to perfect—the only—way to mark this season, to connect with family and memory and traditions, to fill up the hollows of our souls. I don’t think souls are hollow.

I avoided Christmas as much as possible. But the black-mold depression was incongruous with the message and messengers of the season. I felt as lonely as the Grinch, not wanting to open my mouth and depress people with the truth I saw. More has never felt more less. The shopping carts, wheeling like overloaded sleighs through the mall, bore too close a resemblance to the heaps of sodden possessions outside the ruined homes of Biloxi.

How could they not? It was the creation of these things, these toys and clothes and gadgets and gizmos, that begot the piles of moldy teddy bears and ruined photo albums lying as toxic waste in the streets. The storm was fed by the chemical gasses that power plants and factories and vehicles spewed into the clouds, the toxic soup mutating a force of nature.
We live in a culture of over-consumption, replacing need with want, mistaking can for should, and being surprised when there are repercussions as drastic as our actions. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The clouds cannot hold our excess forever, and they break on a scale equaled only by our willful ignorance.

It is the very oblivion of our consumption that is most disturbing. I lurked in the stores, despising the plastic garlands and commercial jolliness with a sad bitterness I had not known myself to possess. From my Grinch-like vantage, I tried to calculate the relative mass of packaging on the treasures the shoppers rushed by with. How much of the bulk in the cart, juggled in bags, would end up in the trash? And where does the trash go? If the box was destined for the landfill, why did the company expend so much energy in its production? The amount of energy necessary for printing the glossy sheen and art on the box for a television, a doll, a cookbook, must be enormous. Never mind the pulping and pressing of the box. Never mind the product itself. We never mind.

Scrooge, often the epitome of miserly misery, begs for his better future with a vengeance. “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!” he howls when the Ghost of Future Christmas points towards Scrooge’s own death, the terminus of his twisted life.

We emptied the furniture out of houses. One I saw shrink from body to skeleton in a single day. It had been the home of a family for generations. Grandchildren grew up to get married in the backyard. We took out the furniture, the knickknacks, the
photographs, the wallpaper, the carpet, the linoleum, the sheetrock. The waterline of the
house was a thick caterpillar of mold, soft black and fuzzy, undulating around the rooms
just below the ceiling. Everything was ruined, from the photographs and heirlooms to the
bones of the house, soft and weak from the depth of the waters, the strength of the storm.

We scrubbed the mold furiously with wire brushes and electric sanders, bleach
and fungicide and soap, anything that anyone could think of. Word came down, a few
days before I left, that there was no way to insure that a house could be mold free.
Without that certainty, no company would build on the old bones, afraid that a single
spore of black mold would spread and rot a house from the hidden depths. The hours and
blisters and burns of scrubbing the mold, of hoping to save these homes, none of it
mattered.

The last words Scrooge prays to the Ghost are “I may yet change these shadows
you have shown me by an altered life...tell me that I may sponge away the writing on this
stone!”

Tell me.
The old path I am hiking with three friends is not used anymore. A newer trail is cut on the west side of the rocky meadow stretching between the turbulent bald summit of Washington and the clean sweep of Monroe. The old path, running the ridge on the east, is deep with lush plants. The green cushion over the trail is as thick as my splayed hand. The plants of the alpine zone grow slowly, saving their energy under walls of snow and ice. They creep forward, inch upwards each spring. I cannot fathom the springs and summers necessary for this depth, for nature to fold back in on the brief work of men.

The stones under my sneaker, under the blanket of green, were laid by a father and son, Abel and Ethan Allen Crawford, in 1819. The number of the years between me and them mean little as I look at the sunset. At least once while cobbbling the mountain,
they must have looked west and seen the same gold light, the valley mists rising, the dark green hills turning purple with the night.

We hike on, tiptoeing on the old path. It is pounded deep as a trough in some spots, the mark of feet with unknown faces and names. The trail crosses a bald patch. The ground is covered with shards of stone that sound hollow when they touch. Red plastic markers, the size of popsicle sticks, dot the ground. Ana says they point to the replanted sprouts of a flower that grows on this stretch of the ridge. The flower, a dwarf cinquefoil, is endangered. Only these two places button the flower to existence—this patch here and one fifty miles and many ridges distant. We bend close to the markers, but the wind seems to have scattered them like gamblers’ dice.

Before she was my mother, my mother studied these plants, helped to protect them. Cinquefoil, five leaves. My hands, fingerling the sharp-edged rocks and searching for the flower, are hers. Five fingers.

Dave finds a flower and we cluster on the rocks to celebrate. We toast the cinquefoil, its survival or our finding it or both. It is the size of a baby’s fist. Though it is the last day of June, tiny yellow blossoms cling to thin stalks and craggy green leaves. I show my mother pictures later. She says she has never seen one growing, and in the same breath says she is more proud of that work than anything else in her life. I tell her about the hands we seem to share. She laughs.

Farther down the old path, another rise comes up bald and flat. There are vague corners, twists of iron or steel. Nathaniel points to them, the marks of a story we all know. On the last day of June in 1900, before anything was built on the mountain’s
shoulders, two men died along this trail en route to the summit of Mount Washington. Allan Ormsbee and William Curtis. They were well known, experienced mountaineers of their day. A hotel stood on the summit then, and Curtis and Ormsbee were headed to a meeting with other mountaineers and explorers. A midsummer blizzard came up and swallowed them.

After the storm, a somber hiking party set down from the summit of Washington. They found Ormsbee’s body several hundred yards from the summit, in sight of the hotel once the storm cleared. Curtis succumbed on this barren heap of rock overlooking the lakes where we are standing. His head was bruised and his glasses were found, broken, not far from the stones under my feet. The men who found the bodies build a rough shelter here, an admission that no one is immune to these mountains.

A decade later, the little shack was dismantled and Lakes of the Clouds was built. I knew the story, but the difference of hearing it while standing at the stones Curtis fell on is the difference between night and day. The cooling air feels thick and we move on.

“Oh some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs,” wrote Norman Maclean. I find these words on the tops of rocks as well, the timeless nature of the place not kept in a basement but stretched out under the sky, waiting to be read and retold to any one who walks these paths.

I used to want to have the places I love belong to me alone. Lately though, the idea that the feelings are more universal, the places multilayered as the geology, has been more important. “We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is,”
wrote Kurt Vonnegut. And here we are, all together, getting through this thing, in this place.

What I find now are the layers of knowledge and memory stacked like lenses in a telescope, bringing the world into a better focus.
RAIN

One summer I stopped at a traffic light in a rain so hard the red light was a vague smear through the windshield. It pounded like hooves on the roof of my car and the damp snuck in the doors and windows. I love the silver chill of summer rains, the way the air is already clearer in the rain, crisp between the raindrops.

It was the sound of the rain on the metal of the car that brought me back to Kenya. The rain is sacred to the Samburu. The word for rain and God are the same—Nkai. The word is an added breath at the end of nearly every sentence, a prayer woven into the speech patterns.

It was the cusp of the rainy season when I was there. The days were warm and clear, the nights were cold with the promise of the rains. We camped one night amid acacia trees near forested hills that rose up from the flat plains. There was rain in the night and from our tents, we heard elephants in the forests, trumpeting and crashing around.

The rains of the rainy season are not like the showers that I have ever seen at home. The storms are longer, the rains heavier. Endurance rains.

We left our tents and went to stay with Samburu families. Cosina, the woman who took me in, planned to go to the forest for firewood one afternoon. Orleana, another American student, and I joined her, walking the dry and rutted road silently until it became a path. The sky was iron gray, with darker clouds roiling over the nearby hills. Thunder clapped like an invisible giant and the rains came with the force of a soldier returning home. Cosina opened her mouth to the sky, her white teeth laughing at the
bullets of water. We were drenched in less than a minute, the rivulets running off our sodden clothes, the soap-salt taste of rainwater running down our faces.

Cosina pulled us towards a nearby shed and we stood in the narrowing patch of dry ground under the lip of the tin roof. Through the sound of rain plinking against the boilerplate dirt path, the sigh of the dusty husks of grass taking in the water, the pounding of the rain on the tin, the problem of not speaking the same languages, Cosina said we could not go to the forest for wood now—the elephants would be roaming. And she laughed again, musical as rain.

Stopped at the light, it seems impossible that this was real, a memory rather than a fable. I try to picture the globe, place my station wagon on one side and a woman, laughing because the rain and elephants keep her from the forest, on the other. The scale of the world, that I am sitting here, clicking off the radio to hear the rain and in exactly the same moment, Cosina is brewing tea or something else as ordinary—words escape me and I am left breathlessly happy. It feels like this, from Thornton Wilder’s Our Town:

EMILY: Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?

STAGE MANAGER: “No. The saints and poets, maybe— they do some.

In the rain, sometimes, I feel close to realizing it. I wish I could say that whenever it rains, I hear the echoes of Samburu, of the storms I’ve stood in by the ocean, the lightning I’ve seen fork from mountain tops, the people I’ve huddled against the chill with. Of course that is not true. But sometimes, sometimes I can.

The light changes, I take my foot off the brake and turn the corner.
For weeks, I’ve been in Montana, dreaming about stonewalls. Driving around the state, the yellow fields stretch out under the sky like bodies, hills and collarbones. Dark green forests hem and fold around the higher hills, and some places, the jagged combs of stony mountains arch their backs.

Cutting through on the thin highway, untold miles go before and behind the cars, on and on under the distant blue and gray and white of the sky. I’ve stood next to large cows and my head barely touches their shoulders. The enormity of the herds stippled out across the plains, the sheer space each one inhabits dwarfs me. It seems an unknowable land.
The cattle are fenced by miles of barbed wire, strung between sturdy posts in active pastures and lapsed off rotting wood on ghost ranches. Where did the wire come from? Who took the coils off the trucks and trains, lugged them out and pounded the wires to the posts? The wire is rusting, the red-brown color of burned meat. Orange flakes brush off in the wind, sweeping across the open lands. What hands dug the coal and iron, quarried the limestone and forged the steel, spun the wires and sharpened the points?

A Montanan friend tells me “the story of the West is a story of fences.” The rusty lines, crisscrossing the land, are as inscrutable to me as runes. I cannot read these stories, find the open emptiness and unanswered questions eerie. I find it cruel that the stories are not told or that the land absorbs the stories back to silence.

And so I lie in Montana, dreaming of the stonewalls and cairns of home. I dream of walls tumbling down as trees sprout through the stones. Of rocks strewn through forests that were fields like bowling pins. I dream of my teeth rolling out of place. I wake up, run my tongue over my teeth and do not find the bloody gaps I dreamt.

New Hampshire is almost quintessentially stonewalled. Granite and quartz, boulders and field stones are the best grown crops. Early farmers pulled the rocks from their fields, piled them along the sides as much to clear the soil for seeds as to mark their land. Stonewalls are art and accident, function and icon.

Perhaps it’s just that I know the stories of the stones, and not the stories of the wires. That these stories are my story. I see the hands of the men, hard, with dirt filling the cracks, outlining the fingernails. Shiny calluses and scars. I see these hands on shovels, prying. Or under the stones, pushing. Backs strain, sweat pours down red faces.
Their breath is heavy, and the stones are set to one side. Plows and rakes and tractors taken back up, seeds sown and fields cleared.

And then the stones are set, groaning and scraping, piled carefully, trailing up and down the little hills and hollows like a river of rock. The fields grow in, now to forests, and walking through the leaf litter, the pines and birches, maples and beeches, to stumble across the old walls and cellar holes is proof the past has gone nowhere. Their hands placed the gray block my fingers trace and two hundred years blow away like dust.

Some places, where a family name matches the road running parallel to the stonewalls, where this name also matches the names carved into a cemetery, it is possible to name the ghostly builders of the walls. The tactile permanence of stone, bearing names and shaping geographies, this is the braiding of time.

After two weeks of stony dreams, of waking unsure of where I am, I leave Montana, flying across the country to be home. Perhaps the tumbling stones, the chipping of my teeth in dreams is nothing, but I fear that the stories of stones are being replaced by the emptiness of wires and space. That I am losing or being lost to my way.

I visit a friend on her farm. We walk through tall white pine trees towards a field that slants downwards, past stonewalls that earlier farmers labored to built. The pigs in the field snort from the muck. Stumps litter the field and the view stretches north as the quilt of late foliage covers the land. I can see no farther than the summits of the Franconia Ridge forty miles away. The towns and villages between are tucked into the wrinkled land like secrets in a pocket. I tell her I’m afraid of being lost to this land, to the people who built and border the geography of the ways we each belonging here. She laughs, points to everything around us and names friends who remain as solid as rocks, reminds
me I cannot be lost. Reassured, I leave her farm, drive farther north to the mountains, to other friends I’ve been longing for.

There is a Gaelic blessing that translates to “I’ll put a stone on your cairn.” They say it means “I will not forget you.” I think of this, of hiking through the mountains and following the cairns that dot the ridges. The wider ones look like squat pinecones turned to stone. Guideposts and stony beacons, the handiwork of someone who picked their way across rocky terrain before. Proof that there is a way. Each rock placed with intention by a pair of hands.

Once, I was hiking high in the open mountains, laboring up boulders the color of elephant hides but that clanked together with the hollowness of teacups. If the bald summit of the mountain was a head, I was weaving up the neck. Too steep for cairns, I followed yellow blazes painted on the rocks. Below me, the ridge stretched out a fluid and graceful shoulder and arm. A line of cairns, even as buttons, picked across the curve. The red-gold of the old and well-traveled trail ran beside the cairns like a dusty ribbon. That people walk this trail, that people follow the beckoning labor of past hands, this too braids place and space, makes time immeasurable by clocks and almanacs.

Not always, but often, I pick up a nearby stone, adding it to the cairn. The cairns are built, sturdy sentinels that do not tumble, and the quiet placement of a single stone does not swell the size of the marker. I could not find the stone again if I returned to the cairn, my effort will be absorbed. But still, I do this ritual, this placing of stones on the cairns that mark the land I love and cannot escape.
1. Here’s a story: A bear who was trained to be in the movies was flown to New Zealand for a publicity tour. Once off the plane, the bear couldn’t stop looking up. He seemed sad and confused. The unfamiliar stars did not tell him where he was.

2. I once lived in the mountains, in the alpine zone where the plants are small and the skies seem close. My bed was along a window and when I lay there, stretched full length against the glass, the topography of my body mimicked the curve and hollow of the nearby ridge. It was late summer in the Northeast and the winter stars were coming. As I watched the silver world of midnight, the constellation Gemini began to peek over the ridge. The twins rise on their shoulder, stretched lengthwise along the ridge.

My purpose for living on the tops of mountains was to teach about the natural history of the place. People hiked to the lodge, ate dinner, and then I would take whoever was interested outside. My favorite was to wait for darkness and talk about the night sky, pointing out the constellations by the ridges and the summits, the shapes of the rocks around us. The Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Cepheus, the tail of Cygnus and the Summer Triangle, the hints of Orion and the Pleiades arriving with the September chills.

The points of light against the dark blue are the holes left by the needle of time, sewing the world together. I stood in a fleece jacket and jeans, pointing out star formations and telling stories that connect this moment backwards and forwards through time. On unfamiliar ground, I must remember the topography of that ridge to find the right stars.
3. Bill Watterson, the man behind the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, gets this. He drew Calvin, spiky hair and striped shirt, standing under a night sky. “I’m Significant!” he yells up in the second panel. One panel pause. “Screamed the dust speck,” he finishes.

Being so utterly insignificant, so unneeded by the universe, is wildly joyous. They say sublimity is something along these lines, being awestruck by all that is greater than yourself. If the crisp white light of Orion’s stars, picked out in an obsidian blue sky, humbles me to the insignificance of my very being by knitting me into the folds of time, then it also is a clear passage through the years to other times I’ve seen the same formation. The stars take us home to memory and pull ahead toward other nights. The deep notes of a cello, reverberating in your chest, and then the lighter notes of a violin, breathing forward.

4.
When I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.
—Walt Whitman “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”

When I first read Walt Whitman’s poem, I thought I’d never read truer words. I read the poem, and did not want to learn the constellations, afraid the names would steal the silence. Since, I’ve found that the pieces of astronomy and science that I can absorb only add to the poetry of the night sky. I can no more understand the distance and angles of stars, the depth of the sky that makes a constellation, than I can understand the generations who have looked up to the same sky. Sublimity.
The scientists, the learned astronomers, devote their lives to the numbers and formulas because, I believe, they once looked up and could not explain the feeling in their chest, trying to absorb the night sky. Not so different from the poets, wandering in perfect silence under the same cartwheeling light.

5. I have a particular affinity for Orion and the Pleiades. Orion was the first constellation beyond the Big Dipper that I learned. From the three stars of his belt, the rest of his body and story splay out across the sky, details and nuances thawing the cold winter sky into a friend’s face. I looked through a telescope the size of a mop bucket once and saw the nebula of his sword belt—this is where stars come from.

The Pleiades, the Seven Sisters, keep watch on Orion as he battles the bull Taurus. One of the sisters is supposed to be in love with Orion and so they spy on him.

I explained the story of Orion to a group of children in Kenya once. The words are easy: dog, bull, warrior, girl, love. And now, when I look up from home, find the belt and the sisters, there is a second split between here and there, now and then.

6. I once loved a man who kept kosher for Passover with a sweet and unshakeable faithfulness. For him, Passover did not end until he counted three stars in the night sky. This was one of the reasons I loved him.

7. I recently read Lawrence Weschler’s essay “Vermeer in Bosnia.” He writes of a man, a judge for a war tribunal in The Hague, who retains his humanity by going to look at Vermeer’s paintings in a nearby museum. Weschler muses on history and justice and art
and human nature. I felt the violin and cello playing through the entire piece, and wrote to a friend that “I should be able to get past these billowings and collisions of time and space and history and art and emotion, but I can't. There really seems to be no other point besides them.”

8. Stars do this.
I dream that I am standing on the beach at Popham. The beach is narrow and the sky, the sea, the sand, everything is gray. There is a light rain falling, soft knives slashing. The waves come in like mercury, the cream-yellow foam the only break in the smooth color. I am not alone in this dream, but I cannot see the faces or count the numbers of the few people who stand with me.
A wall of boulders rises behind my back. They are the size of sheep, round. And the waters are rising. When I recognize where I am, the tide is coming only up to my toes. As I look around, out into the fog for familiar islands, twisting up to see the top of the rocks, the brilliant green of the grass, the waves come harder and rise to my ankles. My feet seem cemented in the sand.

And then the rocks begin to tumble down as the waves lap at the bottom stones.

I wake up as the wall behind me falls and the waves rush in.

In October, Emily goes with me to Popham. We have the family photo album between us, but because a cold rain is falling, we don’t take it out of the car. Part of the strangeness is that we do not know this place in any season but summer. The rain becomes snow when the wind shifts. The cabins are all boarded shut, but look exactly as they do in the pictures our parents took before either of us were born. It’s we who have changed, and now we who seem like ghosts flitting through the rain that stings our faces. The necessary blinking makes eyelids a flipbook between memory and reality.

We can’t get to the beach. The field of dune grass that covered the hill from the cabins has shrunk to small and patchy efforts to hold the sand. Thicker ropes than I remember, red-slat fences in some places, make it impossible to scurry through the grass and the stairs are roped and fenced off. There are now two short staircases, with a stomach of sand between them—as if the longer, steeper stairs I knew got tired and now recline lazily against the softer slope of the dune.
Going beyond the footprint of our memories, we take a vague path that doglegs from the campground where the car is parked. The path goes through the grass and we run, as if the quickness of our indiscretion serves as atonement.

We walk quickly through the drizzle, listening to the eternal echo and boom of the waves. The tide is low, but the water is closer than in the low tides of memory, of the photographs. I do not think it is only the shift of the season.

The dune grass is all but gone. It stretched down the slope, and then ran for twenty yards from the last step across a flat section of the beach. The sand had always been hottest here, and we had raced the two paths to the stairs. There is no path, only the broken back of the stairs and the sign reading *Keep Out*.

Before I knew the place, people had tried to keep the sands in place. They used boulders, hauled from nearby hills, and built a retaining wall for the higher lands, the land to be built upon. When the rocks failed to stop the sea, old cars from the junkyards were planted in the sand, against the rocks. Everything was covered with sand, the dune grass was planted, and this was the normal I knew.

My father tells me that this summer, headlights and tailfins peeked out of the eroding sands and were removed. More rocks were hauled in, and the sands are sifting in to fill the cracks. These retaining walls are ten and twelve feet tall, barricades where I remember green grass that mimicked the ocean when the wind blew.

Though I’ve been afraid of what I’d find, I am glad we’ve come. All my old fears are in full force. The hungry tigers of the ocean are rising and chewing away the land. I know why the waters rise, why the dune grass cannot hold its own against the changing tides.
What collapses, standing here on the beach in the snow with my sister, absorbing the changed landscape between rapid blinks, are the years. What remains is the visceral pull of this place. I still belong to this coastline. Seguin is still off in the distance and the sand feels like an old quilt under my fingers. My heartbeat mimics the crash of the waves. Of course the molecules in these waves ebb and flow and crash into other shores, become other waters. So too do I go other places. But here I listen as I do nowhere else. That has never changed.

I’ve felt the need for belonging, for the seeking of a place to be known better than my own face. I’ve seen what happens to a people when the land they belong to becomes unrecognizable. These are not metaphors. The orphans of Kenya, drinking filthy water in the slums. The hollow eyes and shaking hands in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I used to think that the lands I loved were safe, that these threats hung heavy on other forest, other coasts, other people. But this is not so, nor should I imagine I could be immune. The seasons are changing in the alpine zone, and both in nightmares and reality, Popham is crumbling to the sea.

This is a poem I love. I keep it near my desk, and some morning, wake up with the lines on the tip of my tongue. It is written by Frank Bidart.

You Cannot Rest

The trick was to give yourself only to what
could not receive what you had to give,

leaving you as you wished, free.
Still you court the world by enacting yet once

more the ecstatic rituals of enthrallment.
You cannot rest. The great grounding
events in your life (weight lodged past
change, like the sweetest, most fantastical myth

enshrining yet enslaving promise), the great
grounding events that left you so changed

you cannot conceive your face without their
happening, happened when someone
could receive. Just as she once did, he did - past
judgement of pain or cost. Could receive. Did.

Bidart’s words echo like the tides. I once stood at a different shore and listened to
the waves run out through the teeth of sea-polished stones as round as billiard balls. The
echoing rattle was like the cogs of a lock opening with the right key.

The ground beneath the grounding events is shifting. Places I knew more
intimately than my own face have changed more than my face in the same short span of
years. We are all in this together. That’s beautiful, and is a start. But no one else will
know what you cannot bear to lose. Find what you love, and hold on tight, because it’s
going to get rough. The holding is a promise, a refusal to let go. You cannot rest.