I saw a movie once about standing;
how to stand at a funeral, straight-backed,
bowed head, one hand clutching the wrist of the other.
If there are flowers involved, say tulips,
then the blossoms droop down. And if the tulips
are yellow, tilted at just the right angle,
I’ll be standing in a circle at James Jeffries’ funeral.
James jumped from the grain silo.
His body was found lying flat on the gravel.
Who found the body? Who went out into a rainy night
not expecting to see James Jeffries?
Who went to the movie in time to buy pale
yellow flowers? If the body were found in the river
I think I’d understand better. I think somebody told me
they found the body in the river.
That’s impossible. James jumped from the silo.
He saw himself dead. He kicked his legs out from the rim,
straightening his body as the ground grew closer.
We are in the park together, the tulips doing
what tulips do.

Karin Schalm

This issue is dedicated to James Jeffries, 1963-1993

Cover Art: Nancy Erickson

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*Winter 1993—1994 - Camas - 1*

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Tom Watts

Water

I am dripping water from the knees down. Ice cold water. Water from the river that runs in front of our cabin. My knees are oozing from scraping on the rocks. I have been after minnows, on my belly, on the rocks.

I look around and find a good poking stick. I find a good straight stick and kneel down by the fire and give it a few pokes. Sparks fly off on the breeze. The fire feels good on my wet legs.

Daddy squats by the fire, working on a shell. He has it apart, and turns it over and over in his treeroot fingers. The bullet he has laid on a stone by the fire. The powder is carefully folded in a green leaf. Daddy bites down on his lower lip while he works. It makes his beard quiver. It’s not good to interrupt him when he’s like this. I sit and turn the end of my poking stick in the coals.

There is a dent in the lip of the shell. Daddy pries at it with the tip of his fingernail. The dent changes shape, but gets no smaller. Daddy searches around his feet for a tool. I offer him my poking stick, the end all black and hard. He squints at me through the squiggly air rising up from the fire. He looks over at the sun, which is way over the roof of the cabin now.

“Go get the water,” he says. “Go get the water for Raisin.”

He goes back to working on the shell and I sit and watch him pry, hoping he forgets about it. I was hoping that we were going to eat. I was hoping that today he would go and get the water.

He dents the shell in the other direction. I am twelve years old, he reminds me without looking up. Any day, I’ll be a man. I get up and walk away from the fire.

The water is away from the fire, away from the river, up on the little hill in back of the cabin. A thin path cuts through the hemlocks up the hill. It’s barely wide enough for my shoulders.

The hemlocks are everywhere. As far as the eye can see on this side of the river. On the other side of the river, other kinds of trees grow, poplar, beech, and some others, and
down the river away is swamp with red pine growing around it. Over there are hemlocks too, but they grow in islands, surrounded by the other kinds of trees. The islands of hemlock are growing out there, getting bigger, melting together. Every time a beech falls, the hemlock ooze in and take its place.

They are barely taller than Daddy, the hemlocks, and their trunks are tough and gnarly and the lower branches are bare dead spikes that’ll cut you in an instant. Inside the hemlocks, you can only see a few feet in any direction. The sun never shines in there.

The ground is soft and springy with dead needles under my feet. The air smells like dead wood, cool and damp. I walk with my hands on my knees, pushing down as I step, because the trail is really steep. Every twenty steps or so, a hump rises up in the trail and runs away into the hemlocks on either side. The humps are soft and damp and come apart in chunks if you kick them. If I get down on my hands and knees I can see through the little clear space under the dead branches and I see that the humps run out into the hemlocks for fifty steps, maybe more. They go quite away. Daddy says that these are the trunks of big trees that have died and sunk into the ground. Daddy says that before I was born, there were trees that were a hundred steps high all over the place. The little hemlocks weren’t here at all. All the big trees died and fell and the hemlocks came and grew over them, thick as fur. Now there are humps in the hemlocks which are the graves of big trees. I stop in the trail and turn around and sit down on one. A splinter has gotten into my foot and I pry at it with my fingers.

Daddy says that nothing lives in the hemlocks except for birds because the trees are so thick and dark and impossible to walk through. He says that there is nothing to be afraid of in the hemlocks. Of all the places around, Daddy says, the hemlocks are the safest place to be. You don’t have to be a man to go up into the hemlocks, he says. You have to be a man to go across the river alone.

Bob is my uncle. He comes to stay with us once or twice a year. I don’t know what Bob really looks like. He has a beard that starts under his eyes and ends under the collar of his shirt. Daddy’s hands are like the roots of the twisted hemlocks. Bob’s hands are like the branches of big trees, trees a hundred steps tall.

When Bob comes to stay with us, he sits by the fire and leans over until I can feel his beard tickling me on the shoulder. The dogs go up in the hemlocks, he tells me. That’s where they sleep days away. Four or five of them all huddled together, noses on each other’s backs, he says. You never hear them out in light of day, do you, he asks, beard tickling my ear. They sleep in the hemlocks. And if they hear something pushing its way through the hemlocks, they prick up their ears, and come crawling over on their bellies. You’ll never see them out there, says Bob, but you’ll hear them coming. You’ll hear them whining in the branches, their tongues slapping against the sides of their jaws, their bellies scratching in the needles. Listen close, says Bob. Listen close and you’ll hear them coming. Just hope they don’t come out on the trail between you and home. Daddy frowns and tells Bob not to feed me this trash. I look from Bob to Daddy. Who to believe.

I can’t get the splinter out. It doesn’t matter. I can feel hot yellow eyes out in the trees. I get to my feet and run to the top of the hill.

On the top of the hill is a rock ledge. I sit down on the ledge facing the trail and catch my breath. No pant and whine and scratching of paws from down around the bend in the trail. Just the hissing sound of the hemlocks. They turn their needles over in the breeze. I take a deep breath and get back to my feet.

From the top of the ledge I can stand out in the breeze and the sun and see down all around. The river is down below, and the smoke from the fire is rising out of the trees. I can see the corner of the cabin roof. Down to the south is a line of mountains, all gray and hazy in the afternoon sun. We come from behind those mountains originally, Daddy says. We moved up here before even Raisin was born. They seem too far away for anyone to have come from. They are too far away even to describe.

Off in the east, is the lake that the river empties into. The man they call Dr. Todd lives down there. I can see his cabin on the shore. He once gave me some tin foil, but I lost it.

Daddy and I have raised a tarp up on the ledge, stretched between some poles. The center of the tarp sags down, and we have cut a little hole in it. Under this we have hung a galvanized can. When it rains, the water runs down the tarp, through the hole and down into the can. I unhook the can and look inside. Two dead moths and a leaf float in the water. I skim them off with my fingers, throw them on the ground, and hold the can up and take a sip. The water is sweet. Water for luck. Water for Raisin.

Raisin is going to have a baby. When we found out she was going to have one, Daddy and I came up here away from the river and the smoke, and put up the tarp to collect the water from the rain. While we sleep, the rain comes down
and runs down the tarp and falls through the little hole and into the can. Good water. Lucky water. When someone is going to have a baby, it is the only water she should drink.

After Raisin has her baby, she’ll go back to drinking the water from the river like Daddy and I. And she’ll go back to eating meat and fish and sitting out by the fire.

But not for now. The baby must be a right baby. And Raisin must take care. The Walkers, who live up the river six or seven bends have a boy that is not right. Mrs. Walker did not take care. The boy spends his days down in the wet country where the river meets the lake. You can see his tracks in the mud everywhere. At sunset, they say, he comes home and slams the door shut behind him. He has never spoken a word to anyone in his entire life. Daddy says that he thinks the boy thinks he’s a deer. Bob says it’s a wonder that the dogs have never got him.

I myself have only seen him once. Down by the river. I was all by myself, scaring up frogs, and all of a sudden, there he was, half in the trees, watching me from the far bank. Skinny as a stick and not a shred of clothes on. He slipped back into the trees as soon as I raised my hand and I’ve never seen him since. There is something not right about that boy. It’s not the way he looks. It’s the way he looks at you. I think that his eyes don’t focus. I don’t know. It’s hard to describe. Anyway, Daddy says to stay clear of him, and I do.

I swirl the water around in the can. There is a good bit. Enough for a couple of days. It’s good, because there’s not a cloud in the sky. I take another drink and tuck the can under my arm and head down through the trees. I go really fast and spill some of the water.

Daddy still sits by the fire, working on the shell. I show him the can. It is a good bit of water, he says. I take the can and go into the mossy dark of the cabin.

Raisin is in the corner, lying in her bed. Her head comes up when I step over the threshold. She is lying in a little tent of fine mesh that daddy got from Dr. Todd for six shells. Flies and mosquitoes and spiders are bad luck on a person who is going to have a baby. One can’t tell what a stray bite might bring. One wrong bite can ruin the baby. Ruin the baby while it’s still growing inside its mother. So Raisin lies inside every day under the little tent of mesh, drinking rain water and eating things that grow from the soil. Onions, beech nuts, marigold leaves from the swamps. Good things. Things that bring luck on a person having a baby.

In the dark of the cabin her body glows white like a snow drift deep in the shade.

I set the can down by her bed. “Water,” I say. She lifts the mesh and takes the can and draws it inside her little tent. She takes a long drink. Some water runs down her chin.

“We children are all named after things that there aren’t any more of.

“IT’s good,” she says and sets the can on the floor. I push the mesh back a little so I can sit down on the edge of the bed.

“Feel my stomach,” she says. She takes my hand and guides it under the tent and places it on her stomach. It is warm and round and tight, like it is bursting with water. It goes up and down as she breathes.

“It feels fine,” I say. “It’s going to be a good baby.”

“Do you think so?” She has covered my hand with hers.

“Yes,” I say. “I know it is.”

She presses my hand down hard on her stomach.

“Sometimes at night I can feel it move,” she says.

“That’s good,” I say.

“Can you feel it moving?”

“No, now,” I say. “Maybe it only moves at night.”

Raisin lies back on her pillow. She draws the mesh around her. “It feels like a good baby,” she says.

Raisin is my sister. She is two years older than me. There was another child between me and her.

Raisin is named after a fruit. A wrinkled dried fruit that used to grow on trees. There are no more raisin trees, daddy says. They all died. We children are all named after things that there aren’t any more of. My name is Winston. I am named after some kind of burning stick. There are no more of those either. I don’t know how they were grown. The adults all have different names. Names that don’t mean anything. For instance, Daddy’s name is Jack.

I take my hand off of Raisin’s stomach and get up and go back out to the fire. Raisin has gone back to sleep. Sleep is good for the baby.

I find my poking stick and give the fire a good stir. sparks fly. Flames jump up. Daddy is reloading the shell, carefully creasing the leaf and pouring the powder back into the casing. He taps the bullet into place. Gently he lever the shell into his rifle.

Daddy never lets the rifle out of sight. When he goes to sleep, the rifle is propped up by his bed. When he goes out by the fire he takes it with him and sets it up against a tree. Daddy’s rifle is never out of his reach. And he never lets a shell go to waste.

Daddy takes a worried look over at the sun which has gone into the trees behind the cabin. He is thinking if he has enough light to go out and shoot. I can tell from the wrinkles around his eyes. He sucks on a corner of his moustache for a minute. I poke the fire some more.

Daddy gets to his feet and cradles the rifle under his arm. He is going out. He walks around the fire and lays a
hand on my head. When I look up at him, he is standing right over me. He looks so tall. Tall and straight, like a tree a hundred steps tall would look. His beard falls down like sweeping branches loaded with needles, way up in the sky.

"Keep the fire up," he says. "I'll be back in a while." He takes a look around, as if he's looking for something he may have forgotten. "Close that door come dark," he says, tipping his head in the direction of the cabin. I nod. Daddy pats me on the head again and walks off. I sit by the fire and watch him pick his way down the bank and across the river. He disappears into the trees on the other side and is gone.

My stomach is complaining. Daddy and I haven't eaten all day. I sit and hope that I hear a shot real soon. Daddy is deadly accurate. I put down my poking stick and draw my knees up under my chin.

Bob will come back when Raisin has her baby. The baby is half Bob's. He is going to live with us. He will be the baby's daddy. I will be the baby's uncle, just like Bob is to me.

Right now Bob lives a long ways away, down past the mountains in the south. When Bob is here, he sits by the fire, running his big branch fingers through his beard, and tells me about that place. There is hardly any water for drinking down there, he says. And the land is flat as a rock, and so hot during the day that you can't walk where the sun is shining without burning your feet. Bob says that once, when the sun went down, it went down right on that land down behind the mountains. Everybody ran off in all directions when they saw what the sun was going to do. When it hit the ground, it dried up all the water in one big sizzle. The land was all hilly and covered with trees and grasses, but when the sun came down it squashed all the hills and trees and cabins and everything down flat. Then it kept on going, right through the ground and out the other side. What was left was burned flat ground, with the churned up rocks and bones and broken tools of a thousand years. These things lie all over the place, says Bob, and they can be quite useful if you've got a mind for fixing things. There are lots of people living there, Bob says. And the people fight all the time. Fight over the water.

Why do you live there, I ask him. Why don't you live up here with us? Because of the people, he tells me with a laugh. Then he leans over towards my ear. And because there are no dogs.

I can't imagine a place like that. Daddy says that we're never going to go there.

The fire is dying down. It's getting chilly. I get up and look around for some more wood. I find some sticks and toss them on the fire. It eats the wood slowly, coming back to life. It's getting dark enough for the trees down by the river to lose their color. Daddy hasn't fired a shot yet. I stand by the fire and watch for him. I can see the moon coming up the valley away.

I go over to the cabin and look in the door. Raisin is still, back in the corner, glowing in the dim light. I can hear her breathing. I reach for the door and quietly pull it shut. I go back and sit by the fire and keep an ear out for dogs.

I've never actually seen one, but I've heard them plenty. They never come around a burning fire. But they'll sit off in the woods down by the lake at night and yip and howl till your scalp is crawling with invisible spiders. And in the middle of the night, if you wake up and lie real quiet, you can hear them sniffing around the crack under the door, and sniffing out the places by the fire where you were sitting just a little while before. They're just waiting, Bob says. Waiting and watching. They're very patient.

I find some more sticks and throw them on the fire. It is getting really cold. I sit down and wrap my arms around my knees. Daddy is nowhere in sight.

Daddy will come back. Food or no food. He always does. And Bob will come back. He'll come back when Raisin has her baby. Bob is bringing me a rifle, he says. When Bob comes back, I'll have a rifle of my own. I'll be a man, and I'll go across the river and shoot deer. And Bob will stay with us for good. And Raisin will have her baby. And when Raisin has her baby, we'll go up on the hill and take down the tarp that catches the water while we sleep, and Raisin will come out and sit by the fire, and we'll all drink from the river once again.
Words On The Way

From The Bay Of Galveston And Further Along

I'm learning to pray with my lips sealed.
An ear pressed on the ground to listen.

It's like this:
sky is the color of water

on the black grackle's tongue.
Like the last time with my brother

on the bay of Galveston, saying Don't be afraid little friend.

You are in the lap of an old scar.
The dirt is your keeper.

You shall not want.
I drive through towns, Arco and Challis

over the Big Lost River
that cries for its water.

When you make a religion of loss you bow down to nothing.

Alec Cargile
We Think of the Living

We think of the living when the dead wave goodbye.
We don’t know
Where those disappearing arms
will take us.
The glorified body’s arms light up
and move through love’s air.
We believe this, but the same questions
remain unanswered.

When we walked, as children, near waves
of a rocky beach in June,
Or read of elk in the forest
and owls
Who search out prey at night; their knowledge
thrilled us
With recognition. When will love come
and claim this body?

That beach was a path. Our thongs
cushioned and outlined stones.
The sad, slow ache of the chest
we accepted as we moved
Through the daily death of the childhood.
We wanted it—
The future. Breasts that rose
And dresses that fell to the floor.
That was light,
But we wanted radiance, like Joan of Arc,
who burned for a principle
Of purest love. Barely a woman,
and absolute courage
Would follow. The wind blew up gray waves
and we rode them.
Courage rose in us as a tropical flower
that grows overnight — the stem filled with green water.

So we clung to inner tubes as water
bloomed through our mouths, our noses,
And our legs grappled again at the rocks. Rain
joined the waves, catching us between them.
The death of childhood is a wish granted.
As you look up at him, or her, and see
A muscled arm and a smile that calls up
the flower in you,
Look beyond, through a window,
to a lake near the radiant woods.

Bette Tomlinson

The Name of the Sky

The sky is a gourd
that grew on a long vine
there were different names for it once
orchard pennon
meadow sea —
things borrowed
with no strings
strung upside down in the eye like a hanged man
because that is the way with a thing
when it is first seen

I walk hours toward the moon
that part of the sky which has no stem
there are trumpet vines and sleeping swallows
outside the one window a light is on in

I remember the sun
how its warmth goes away
toward dawn
where animals cry the names of things
in their different animal tongues
like water at the rivercrossing
which has nothing to do
with either road it is the end of

Alec Cargile

Winter 1993—1994 — Camas — 7
The Journey

I saw my first mountains through the tinted windshield of my mother’s 1972 Chevy station wagon. To my eleven-year-old eyes, that wagon, a behemoth gilded with glitter-blue paint, sparkled like treasure. The mountains, hunkered frankly in front of us at the edge of the plain, held far less allure. Across three long, hot states, I had anticipated a purple mountain majesty, but these mountains were neither purple nor majestic. They were brown. They rose gracelessly from the flats into messy outcrops and eroded hills like wrinkles. Their dull slopes were awash with scruffy patches of pine, laced with swatches of dead trees and, here and there, untidy snatches of brush. Slumped and indifferent on the hot vinyl of the wagon’s back seat, I turned away from the mountains and back to the game in which my two brothers and

I were clandestinely engaged.

Charley, the oldest by three years, sat strategically in the middle. This gave him access to both Thomas, the youngest, and me. The game consisted of slipping your arm around your sibling-neighbor in a gesture of good-natured camaraderie and then digging your knuckles into the soft parts of the back. The kidneys proved an especially effective target. The trick was both to keep from crying out in pain and to inflict the greatest pain on your opponent, in the hopes of paralyzing his attack on you.

This game had no winners.

My mother, settled before us in the passenger seat, announced rapturously, “There they are: the Rocky Mountains. Aren’t they wonderful?” I looked again and saw only brown earth, thinly covered with lumps of grass, rising up into bulky swells of rock and dirt. Dilapidated fence posts lurched up the hillsides; stray jack pines jutted out at bizarre angles. My father rolled down his window to smoke a cigarette, and

a hot, dry wind roared past his temple, tearing at my hair.

“Aren’t the mountains beautiful,” sighed my mother. Faltering at last, Thomas let out a whimper.

My mother shot us a menacing glance. “If you children—” she began, but Thomas had already succumbed to the emetic effects of the game and the car trip and, pitching forward, vomited onto my shoe.

I once read of how young egrets will sometimes commit siblicide while their parents sit calmly by. The dominant chicks in a brood will dispose of their rivals by bludgeoning them to death with their bills, all this under the placid gaze of their parents. While my brothers and I have survived physically intact to this day, there are elements of that story that ring true for us—although I would not characterize my parents’ gaze as placid. It was more indifferent, distracted as they were by their own rivalry, taken up with their own games.

I looked down at my shoe in horror. Charley howled with laughter.

“That’s it,” pronounced my mother, pressing her lips into a thin line. “We’re going home.”

You cannot grow up in Minnesota without having at least one relative somewhere in your family go through treatment for chemical dependency. I have met people from other parts of the country who, upon hearing that someone has “gone through treatment,” ingenuously ask, “Treatment for what?” This is the sort of response that makes a Minnesotan smile knowingly. In my case, there were two in my immediate family and others scattered about—grandparents, cousins, distant aunts and uncles.

Alcoholism was an elite club. Why, it was even fun! My father had been in the club since he was a college boy, sending my mother portentous postscripts to his love letters which read, “Regarding your concern about my drinking, I want you to know that you have nothing to worry about, darling, as I have it all under control.” Years later, his first-
born son would join the club as soon as he was able, which for Charley was at about age fifteen. Club members joked together about their bygone drinking days, recalling past acts of sordidness—committed under the influence—with witty and genuine nostalgia.

The rest of us were expected to laugh along with wagging complicity and cheer from the sidelines, all the while working ourselves on getting better and better and better. We were to rally around the afflicted and support them with an unconditional, take-no-prisoners love. We were to be perky and to persevere, keeping our eyes fastened like radar upon the prize. If we faltered, if we became depressed, despondent, despairing, we were to remind ourselves of how much better things were now than they used to be. Be grateful, we were told. Don’t wallow in self-pity, we were chided. For God’s sake, let go of it all, already. The past is past; things are so much better now! Isn’t it wonderful?

"Isn’t it wonderful how your father has changed?" my mother asks me dreamily. "Isn’t he much better now than he used to be?"

"Yes," I say. "Yes, he is."

"Honestly, I can’t believe he’s the same man," she says. "He’s so much nicer to live with now, isn’t he though?"

"Well, Mom, I don’t live at home anymore. I haven’t for a long time."

"Well, yes," she concedes, frowning at me. "But I can tell you, he’s a lot better than he was when you kids were at home."

Surrounding those family members not active in a recovery program of one kind or another, there buzzed a sort of greedy speculation. In my family, if you were not a club member or a cheerleader, you were snubbed. You were out of touch or in denial and chances were, you drank in secret.

There were many secrets.

Consider this: On June 7, 1939, a baby, aged nine months, is admitted to St. Mary’s Hospital in Minneapolis. He is severely undernourished. The cause of his condition listed on his chart is “Unknown.” He is kept isolated in a square, white room with a door containing a small window fitted with a sliding panel. No one is allowed to enter the room with the exception of the doctors who care for him and the nurses who feed him. The baby eats hungrily. Once a day, his mother is permitted to view him through the window in the door. When the panel slides open with a click, the baby snaps his wobbly head around to see the blond, smiling head of his mother framed in the window. Immediately he clamps his mouth shut and refuses to eat. This goes on for weeks, until the doctors forbid the baby’s mother to visit, though they never probe the parents for an explanation, and none, of course, is ever offered. The baby is my father.

And this: In December of 1965, my father passes out on the living room floor of our home in Richmond, Virginia. It is Christmas Eve. My mother is left alone to clean up after the guests and to set out Santa’s presents for her children, who

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East of the Divide

The raccoons have finally tumbled the roofslats from the house; what have you bought here, hanging on to land? You proved, at least, that something could be done through your own will, your life, your children’s loss; taught them hard work, hostility, and sheltering walls; never trust no one but the family. They fanned out, married well, proving you were right, gave nothing away to strangers. What I recall is a curious emptiness at center, a space where someone forgot to put the eyes in, in a face. For all they spoke of family, it was the one thing you didn’t pass along. I remember we climbed the hill behind the house one spring to pick wildflowers; you’d put them in a dish: O, hear the meadowlarks, you said; feel the spring wind!

Even the slats from the windmill have fallen away from purpose, the nails that held them point skyward in the overwhelming grass to space where the vacant air is busy with mare’s tails, edging towards winter, and another canvas. It tells you if ever there was a sky that didn’t give a good God damn for your intentions, it was here. Someone else can look hope in the eye, and call it blue.

Laulette Malchik
The journey continued from p. 9

will be up and eager to open them in a matter of hours. But the doll’s house, which my father has built for me, is too large and too heavy for her to carry up from the basement where it is shrouded beneath an old blanket, so she kneels down next to my father and pounds on his chest with her two fists. He responds finally by raising his leaden arms and wrapping his fingers around her throat, squeezing shut her windpipe until she, too, blacks out. The next day, I creep downstairs to find the doll’s house beside the Christmas tree, where I play quietly all day.

And this: On December 27 of this past year, we are gathered to celebrate the thirty-second birthday of my brother Charley. His fiancée has joined us, along with her four-year-old son, Sam. My family—Charley most of all—dotes upon Sam. Charley offers to take him along in the car to pick up a few last-minute items from the grocery store. He returns with Sam four and a half hours later, blind drunk, his eyes sunken like dull red stones in his frowzy face. He is annoyed that we find this situation intolerable. Days later he reveals to us that since treatment four years earlier, his longest stint of sobriety has lasted perhaps three weeks. His stricken fiancée confides ashamedly to me that she finds it difficult to trust him.

The secrets we keep alienate us, from each other and from a more free and full experience of life. The shame and self-abhorrence that my father and mother harbored in their walled hearts and which they taught to their children kept each of us separate from the other. Life is about making connections: connections to people, connections to places, connections to the earth on which we live. But we were not worthy; we fought against those connections. We distanced ourselves. We disconnected.

My family made that journey to Montana in 1974 to mark the beginning of a new life together. It was just one month after my father had attended treatment, and it was the first time my family had ventured out as a unit beyond the Minnesota state line. By the time we reached those first mountains, we had braved the thick, swampy heat of Minnesota, crossed the searing plains of North Dakota, and made our way over the baked hills and through the gulches of eastern Montana. We did not turn around, as my mother decreed in that moment of swift rage so typical of her, but stayed for the full ten days.

I don’t remember much of that trip. I remember the scrubby, stony sparseness of the land, which was different from the rich, airy woods, the gentle hills, and the verdant lowlands and lakes I knew. I remember the birds were slightly off-color, and the flowers were small and wan and looked like weeds. The trees were different: they were nearly all pines—scaly spindles with branches sharp as icicles and a scent that bit the nostrils—unlike the round oaks and elms and maples of home, whose broad leaves gushed greenly from plump, sturdy branches. I remember my father made an effort to talk to me occasionally, which was also different. It surprised and embarrassed me, and I wondered what good thing I had done to deserve it.

I realize now, looking back on it, that for my mother, this was to be a journey of redemption. At least, those were my mother’s fierce intentions. For her, it was a journey that delivered her from a wretched past, a shipwrecked marriage, a shattered sense of self, to a more hopeful future. Unfortunately, as it turned out, it was her journey, not mine. As our station wagon wound through those mountains, she locked her eyes onto the far vistas, gleaning them of serenity. But the mountains seemed distasteful, cluttered to me.

For my father, I can only surmise that this was a trip that had to be endured in his quest for forgiveness from his mother. He went along with it because it made her happy. Or at least because it was what she said she wanted.

“Didn’t we have fun on that trip!” exclaimed my mother recently, when I happened to mention some detail of it. I looked at her, trying hard to remember. She noticed my hesitation and said, “Oh, we did! We had a wonderful time! Don’t you remember the card
games we played?"

I remembered different games.

How could I have so completely missed the loveliness of that land? The indifference and distaste I felt at that young age for the Western landscape could be attributed to the normal self-absorption of children, by whom the world is perceived largely within a radius of some twenty or thirty feet of their own bodies, and for whom such high-minded notions as beauty and serenity rank down alongside a balanced diet and making your bed. But in my case it was more than that. The inner fear and turmoil I knew colored the world I perceived. I was the second born, the middle child, the forgotten one. More importantly, I was born female, a crime in my family which rendered me nearly invisible with the shame of it. My hold on a secure world was so tenuous that anything unfamiliar threatened to loose me into chaos. I did not, as other children did, welcome new experiences, seek out adventures; I avoided them. I sought protection and solace instead, and solace and protection originated in the known and were banished among the strange.

The known at that time included the lake that lay at the base of the hill near our house in Minneapolis, where hemlocks towered and willows bowed and wept, and pin cherries and crab apples tossed their blossomed branches in the May breeze like rustling bridal bouquets. In the middle of the lake, a pair of islands offered themselves to the wildlife that sought refuge from the city closing in on all sides. Here great blue herons made their deliberate perambulations up and down the wooded shores, now and then sounding their squawking alarms and lunging into flight. Painted turtles clawed their way out of the shallows up onto the sunny trunks of fallen trees, and there perched all in a row like spectators at an event.

The known included the woods and fields where I rode on my pony, galloping through tall grass and wildflowers, and along the edges of tilled fields, the damp black earth standing in thick riffs like corduroy, and past a pond on the shallow of a hill where swans unfurled their necks to watch us as we thundered by. We rode out late through twilight into evening, under a sky that lowered itself upon the land in a purplish dome, rich as enamel, spreading darkness over the prairie like poured cream.

But the mountains—the mountains were strange and threatening to me. Therefore, I ignored them.

My brothers had different experiences for which they evolved different strategies. Charley and I were diametrically opposed. Charley was my father’s pride and my mother’s joy—and tribulation. He was a handsome boy, slender and athletic, with a dark fringe of hair sweeping low over eyes of cerulean blue and a mouth perpetually fixed in a sly grin. His compact body was packed with shored-up energy, his movements sudden, impetuous, possessed of an effortless grace, even as he did nothing so much as pick a flat stone up off the shore of the lake near our house, and drawing back his sweatshirted arm like the cocked wing of a bird, send it skittering across the water.

Charley excelled at the physical and the social, but went about failing or coming close to falling each of his classes with a calculated nonchalance. He was wildly popular at school—especially with the girls who, when the weather turned warm, would line up like blackbirds across the top of the back fence of our yard, swinging their bare legs as coquettishly as they could imagine and calling to him to come out of the house and pay them some attention. Charley was seldom home, but when he was he would obligate the girls just enough to stroke their infatuation, sidling out and charming them with his genteel teasing. His teasing ways with me did not take nearly so charming a turn: with me he could be nasty, mocking and derisive, and in a reactive way the hatred was mutual. “What’s he really like?” the schoolgirls would ask me during recess, grabbing my elbow. “Is he as wonderful as he seems?” I pondered this; I pondered their willingness to consider the validity of my perception, and said finally, “He’s a jerk.”

Thomas was altogether different. He was a waif, small and towheaded, with delicate, almost hollow bones, and freckles brushed like pollen across his nose and cheeks. Thomas had a sweet innocence about him that caused me to wonder whether he would ever be capable of functioning as an adult. (I figured I could always take him in, if the need arose.) There exists a picture taken of us when he was ten months old and I was a little over two. It is one of the few photographs that was taken of us as children. In the picture, we are seated together on a couch, Thomas in front of me, slumped like a sack of flour against my small body, and me with my arms wrapped around this toppled baby as though I were holding on for dear life. Whether I was holding on for his or for mine, I’ll never know.

While my mother and father lavished Charley with a sort of laissez faire devotion interspersed, on my mother’s part, with periods of raging frustration, then ignored and neglected me, they regarded Thomas with something like mild yet forgetful amusement. That is, they were alternately pleased with him and oblivious of his very existence.

Thomas reacted by throwing tantrums. He would scream and scream with a gusto that belied his frail body. He would squeeze shut his face, raise both arms like Christ dying on the cross—arms that ended in clenched, trembling fists—open his mouth, and project his voice to the heavens. Our parents termed it “steaming.” Once, faced with the prospect

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Grant Creek, October Nineteen

— for Alec

"You can’t even step in the same river once,” someone in the circle advanced.
A boy with thin lips and precision on his teeth stated that Lucretius thought all matter moved like fallout
or obedient traffic, no path crossed another, and it was good but then there was the swerve.
Another man, the physicist whose radio plays the last words of quasars who died before Earth was a gleam in this galaxy’s eye, asserted that, since Einstein, it’s all a great curve, that absolute space and absolute time are things of the past.

But space-time, now, that’s another matter.

However, you and I sat today on the barkless log above the stream, today we did, just moments ago, the water rushing on beneath us like visions at high speeds
of the car taken away and just the two sitting bodies hurting above the road, with the golden rim of wet willow leaves growing against the rock, and the open net of wavering light laced
so gently upon the pebbles, it seemed to vow "your roundness, the turquoise, the rose of you will not be swept away."
Larches hovered there, lifted from behind by the light, their boughs as blackly certain in the yellow stubble as signs on bees, and creekflow rigid in their veins. The running air brushed our cheeks and riffled the leaves in our hair, and you said if you were to write about sledding down the hill, holding tight in the irretrievable snow, to one you love, that only a corner of the icehouse would show up in words.

Where ferns curl under the shaded lip of land and moss creeps the trees, in the place where horsetails stand like unripe arrowshafts shot down, cleaving what the trees had once upheld, what they’d shaken in the face of thunder, I bowed and pushed the hot, flat part of my head into the not-same water.

This planet spins so hard that day soars off behind the ridge pines. It spins hard enough to cast away a star ten times its weight and everything rushes away, they say. Sailing on the edge of an expanding crest, Pleiades, the seven sisters, are light-years apart already and gaining, and soon enough, no one will even know they’re kin. Each night I lie wide-eyed beneath the calm of their divergence, and the heat of me dissipates into the space between their flying fingertips. If things keep up this way, any night now Orion won’t be able to reach his belt if he ever does want to unfasten it, with only an obsolete ache too deep to notion and the receding shapes of memory to tell him the distance grows like silence. You say follow that curve, you say not the great one, but the one where the path bends, here, I hear you say, where beargrass tufts green in the reddening brush, where rose hips stoop, willow ages dark, cottonwood leans fire in a splay of naked twigs, and alder tawns on the wing, where plants go in colors of sunsets, of mammals, of nests, all but beargrass, so green I almost shyly look away — so sweetly unaware, that it crushes me a little, and I smile: immersed in greening, beargrass could not be less concerned with the customs of fall or the acquiescence of its neighbors, just as kids who play at dusk would never think to stop because it’s time, their shouts echoing in mahogany strands of sky.

You say then we’ll never know if I have heard you through the words, or if you’ve heard me, in the way that two who agree on green never know if one sees blue but names it green instead. A papery raceme rattles as we pass, and the path widens to an old road, so we walk side by side. The physicist said you bet, no doubt, it’s a curve, except no one knows if it curves out, so parallels will draw apart, or if it curves in, so they’ll meet, no one knows that.

And yet, you know and I know today we transpired there on the crumbling log, feet suspended just above the flow, waterborne yellows tingling on the fringe of sight as dusk elapsed in a hush, and for a moment we were so close we could have touched.

Leslie Ryan
Under the Lilacs

I don’t want to write about childhood; it’s difficult, picking words like crayons from a large basket, trying to find the colors to describe it. Then too, there is the sense that there is no pattern; here you are, a small child, dutifully rendering the monotony: a house there, the school there, everything faithfully described with as much realism as you can manage, and in chronological order, while someone smiles sweetly and passes on to the next child: very nice, but look closer, dear, you’re missing the point. Here are two children hurling rocks at each other, the ice floes breaking up against the pilings under the bridge, here is the classroom where fear and desire sit squeezed together in my desk like Siamese twins, sharing
a single sweaty pullover and an envious heart: my hair is lank, a no-color blonde, my shirt is pulled out, but it doesn’t matter. I long to be noticed, to be outstanding; on the other hand, I am terrified to be seen, to speak. Pull one half away from the other, they both bleed to death.

When I first moved to town, I was looking for pattern, although I didn’t think of it as that. What my mother had in mind was suitable friends, “someone you can talk to.” The rules she brings are from somewhere else, where the best families entertain each other’s children, but as far as I am concerned she is my guide, this may be the truth. On the second day of school a tall, skinny boy who looks as if he might be friendly, smiles, nods at me, and says to no one in particular, “She’s the ugliest girl in the room!” I understand that difference is visible, like stigmata, and will have to be erased.

On the way home, I meet my best friend. It happens this way: two blocks from our house (which is a quonset, and even I understand is ugly), the sidewalk gives out, and I can walk in the weeds, or along the street. I am walking in the weeds when a boy I have seen before rides by on an old bicycle; the bike is rusty, his pants are too long, and I have seen his nails in class, they are dirty, as black as his hands and the back of his neck. Two dogs, a brown and a yellow, are snarling at each other, tangling in the wheels of the bike. He gives me an indifferent look. “Sic’em!” he says. I am too shocked to understand what is happening, something that seems to be true in many situations, an unforgivable stupidity, but the dogs are already on me. They neither bark nor growl, as I remember, one leaps on my shoulders, tearing at my throat, while the other rips at my legs. I must have been six years old, I may have screamed, I began beating at one of them with a stick which I must have been carrying; in this way my hand gets bitten. I am near our yard, but too disoriented to know it. Then another person is there, throwing rocks, I think, at first, at me, but one hits the yellow dog.

“Daryl Milledge, you leave her alone!” She heaved a rock at the boy on the bicycle. He gave an indifferent whistle, and the dogs ran away. A lanky girl, her hair in sausage curls that didn’t suit her purposeful face, stood beside me. Her last rock caught Daryl in the center of the back. “The Milledges are no good,” she said. “My name’s Cleo. I know you, you’re the Hansen kid. Why don’t you come home to dinner?”

Walking home with my friend, under the blue sky, beneath the rustling leaves of the cottonwoods, it was easy to feel safe, as if I might belong after all. Cleo came from a large family of heavy, comfortable women and lean men, dark, uneducated, and canny as badgers. Her father worked on the railroad. She had four brothers and two sisters; one of the older boys was slow, but none of them were stupid. At school, I understood I was on my own, but here, in spurs, Cleo undertook my criticism and education. “Why do you talk about books so much?” she asked. “Those clothes are dumb.” Cleo’s mother made all her dresses, cotton ones with puffed sleeves; we weren’t allowed to wear jeans to school, and my father had outfitted me in tweed skirts and sweaters, things she might have ordered from a catalogue, or even Lord and Taylor’s, one of the places she used to shop. All those places were just names to me, and the luxurious promise of color and fabric, which I understood would change my life. In the catalogues, the children whose figures I used to cut out for paper dolls wore these clothes; in fact, their lives seemed to be going on contiguously with mine, in another place. I invented whole lives for them, their faces smiling acceptance at each other, admiring, poised, on the verge of friendship.

Cleo and I played with paper dolls from books that we bought at the Five and Ten. Most of the dolls were movie stars, and they always appeared to be smiling and well-loved, it was a simple given that they could never hurt anyone, or wish to. Cleo’s favorite doll was Betty Grable, but I could find myself in none of them, not even Elizabeth Taylor, whom I loved passionately. We started making paper dolls of our own, cut from her older sister, Norma Jean’s, magazines; I showed Cleo how to glue them on to cardboard. Looking at their faces, we knew what their names were.

Cleo’s house had four rooms, and a kitchen, so we took to burrowing into a far corner of the closet in the bedroom she shared with her two sisters. Here Norma Jean found us more than once, sending us immediately out of the room, throwing the paper dolls out after us, scattering the houses which we had constructed so carefully to contain the lives we made for them. In summer it was better, we could play in a secret space under the lilacs, on an old quilt thrown between two bushes of the giant hedge fronting their yard. The bushes here grew thick to the ground, and the suckers had

*Continued on p. 17*
Iowa City

The Permian floods have returned for now risen again to meet the lowlands between the seas. This water — fallen angels — comes from rain. I have seen the fields covered with their wingless remains, passed through with water touching the road. Fenceposts crack the surface of reflected clouds like steeples through fog. Ducks float on low shoulders and I wonder if they too were invited to the Ark.

Through all this strangeness the meadowlark remains familiar, singing out from some perch unseen at first. Only the herons seem to have fled, refusing to adapt, withdrawn to the highlands. They return to the bottoms only for food, where the hunt is quick and brutal, impersonal. The herons watch the intrusive waters from above — a distant outcropping somewhere, their talons clutching the straining age of precambrian stone. I saw one once perched strangely on a lightning-stripped elm, clumsily hawklike, a solemn witness with no hopes or wishes for return.

From the receding waters reemerge the shapes and remains of lives from a time before — Devonian coral wiped out by Permian floods. These waters have returned and fled to reveal them like tea leaves left behind in a fragile cup, stripping them of the comforts and secrets of a life hidden in time. Uncovered they are exposed like families on rooftops — bared and alone.

On-lookers move over them aimlessly like rescue boats lost at sea, pushed on mindlessly by the tide. Do they know that a flood like this one will come again, and that perhaps one day eons from now a heron will kill a watersnake on this very spot, and scratch with mild interest at some strange carvings in the stone?

That will be their own remains there, calcified and forgotten as easily by the world as they have chosen to forget that a flood has made possible these very revelations. Do they know that it is an awareness of something beyond ourselves that makes us what we are, insures our survival? Like the coral. It has earned its own survival in a life of pleasing hardness, and if we ourselves choose to be forgetful, indeed we will be forgotten.

David Harrison


Under the Lilacs, continued from p. 15

grown up so tightly that the entrance to this place was like a rabbit’s tunnel, sealed off from everyone, so even her brothers couldn’t find us, and the rain didn’t penetrate the thick leaves. Here, under the lilacs, the dolls quickly grew secret, sexual lives of their own. Speaking them aloud, it may have been our own lives we were telling, but telling their stories to each other, it was clear we were telling no one, and we never spoke of them outside of this place.

Doris Scott may have appeared in our school in third grade. She came in the middle of the year, I know that, the year there was an oil boom in the county, something that seemed to promise wealth and change, but moved past our lives after all, touching nothing. Doris’s family was one of a number of those who had moved in to drill wildcat wells, my mother and the other women would refer, in talk, to “one of the oil people,” or “those families from Oklahoma.” True, she told me, as always, to “be nice to that girl,” but Doris’s family didn’t go to our church, none of them did, or to the Catholic church that Cleo’s family and all her many relatives attended, where, Cleo informed me, the priest had told her that our family would burn in hell. This situation, like the one in school, was beyond her responsibility.

Doris sat across the aisle from me in school, and the boys, who seemed to have grown tired of taunting me (I hoped to be noticed one day, when I had grown beauty and power, but until then, it was good to be a part of the landscape, a rock or a stone), woke again, and noticed Doris. Doris was a tall girl with brown hair, brown eyes, and a rather golden skin; she seemed older than the rest of us, though not by much. What strikes me now is that I cannot remember how her voice sounded, or ever hearing her speak, although I must have. She wore listless cotton dresses which clung to her body, where her breasts were beginning to bud; she seemed to move more slowly than we did. Her face, as I remember it, was pretty; like her secret body, it seemed finished in a way that didn’t belong to the rest of us, who wore our personal faces like tiny masks of what we would be one day, mouse-faces, scrubbed and pulled back by hair skinned into tight braids. Doris’s hair was long and loose, but what you noticed first about her was the long red birth-mark or mole, running down the front side of her right leg where her calf showed beneath her skirt. It was dark brown and bright red by turns, ugly and fascinating, and I guess Doris must have found it fascinating, too, because sometimes she would pick at a scab on it and it would bleed, and she would have to go the principal’s office.

Because she sat across the aisle from me where I could see it, the scab made me extremely uncomfortable, and I took pains not to talk to Doris, although I couldn’t help looking at her. The deliberate cruelty that came gracefully to many of the others — shoving her face in the drinking fountain, yelling taunts at recess — was a skill I couldn’t seem to master. Above all, I didn’t want anyone thinking I should be associated with her, and this was difficult, because in school we were forced to speak. She asked me, once, for help with a math problem, and when I began to explain it, the teacher called our names and put them up on the board together for whispering; my name, which I always hated to see or hear anywhere, on the board, together with Doris Scott’s stared at me all day.

At recess one of the boys — Roger Bush, who was tall, and looking for attention — pushed me down. I felt dirt in my mouth.

“You like her, don’t you? Hey, stinky Doris has a
friend, Hansen here likes her!" I saw Cleo’s face in the group behind him, blank as a stone. There was a cut on my forehead. My hand found a rock; I had never been able to hit anything, but this one hit him square above his left eye. It started bleeding, Roger’s face turned white, and he began to cry.

"I hate her!" I yelled, getting up. I felt power in my fingertips, I was ready to kick dirt in his face, to kill him, but the playground teacher was coming over. "And don’t you ever say I like her again. You like her, you can kiss her!" I had to sit in the principal’s office after school, in disgrace, but it was no disgrace. Bobbie Davidson, of all people, came over to me in line after recess.

"Roger had it coming," she said. "He’s stupid."

The next day, Doris was sitting on the swing set alone, Cleo, Bobbie and I were playing at kick-ball, when we saw a bunch of boys surround her. One of them, a boy named Dennis, came up behind her, stood on the back of the swing, and rubbed his crotch against the back of her neck. Doris sat like a stone child, hunched in misery. "Look at her! She likes it! She doesn’t even move!" Where was the playground teacher? I have no recollection, or even an idea that we thought he should have been there. Mr. Simmons had been quick enough to pull me off Roger the day before. But today, there was no one around.

"Hey, guys, let’s pants her!" It was Roger’s voice, he was always the meanest of the lot, because he did whatever he thought Dennis would want him to do, looking at him with the eyes of an adoring dog.

"Yeah, let’s get her — you hold her legs." But just then, the recess bell ran, and we picked up our kick ball and ran into the building, unaware that we had been frozen, staring. Across the aisle from me I could see that Doris’s leg was bleeding, and Roger’s face had deep red scratches on it.

Doris lived in the old, stone gray apartment building, two blocks past the library, that we walked past every day on our way home from school. As we were going down the steps after school, Cleo whispered to me, "They’re going to get her."

"Who?" I asked, although I knew perfectly well who. We were walking together with Bobbie Davidson, past the crumbling steps of the Masonic hall, where a stunted crabapple tree pushed its way up past the bricks. The crabapples were sour, but Bobbie liked to eat them, even though they puckered your mouth; Cleo pretended that she did, too. It was a cold day, a fall day, with whispering clouds; it didn’t seem as if the sky would ever be anyone’s friend again. As we passed the library, we could see Doris Scott walking, her books cradled against her chest, two blocks ahead of us. She wore an old sweater over her dress, we hadn’t had time to go home and change into our jeans, but we were wearing warm-up jackets, our uniform of the time, and the wind didn’t cut through them. I wondered why Doris always walked so slowly.

"Hey, look," said Bobbie. "There’s Dennis and the guys." She said it in a different way than we might have; sometimes they paid attention to her, but in a way that made you know she could move freely though the air, be visible, and not wait to grow up to be someone else.

"Hush up," said Cleo. "They don’t see us."

"I don’t care if they see us," said Bobbie matter-of-factly, raising her arm to wave, but no one was looking in our direction. They had spotted Doris. She saw them too, and began to run, but awkwardly, like someone in a dream. Two blocks was too far for her to outrun them, especially in the wedgie shoes that her mother, for some unimaginable reason, allowed her to wear to school. "Come on," said Bobbie. "Let’s go!" We ran without asking why, I can hardly remember when it was possible to run like that, feeling the pain in my side but not losing my breath, my tennis shoes touching the pavement. We stopped perhaps a hundred feet away. Doris was backed up against a fence, across what used to be a church playground, but was now a vacant lot, the building boarded up. Behind her was a slide, but the boys had her surrounded. Slowly, Doris began backing up the slide, I remember wondering that she hadn’t dropped her books. She kicked out like a deer at a pack of dogs, but they were tearing at her anyway, and we couldn’t have not known who would win.

Perhaps someone did see us for a moment, because one of the boys called out. "Hey! Bobbie! Hansen! Come on over here! You want some of it too?"

My stomach knotted, but Bobbie just looked at them. "No thanks, you guys can take care of it yourself."

"Do you think we should tell her mom?" Cleo asked. Bobbie only looked at her, and I understood there was nothing I could say to anyone in any language I shared with adults. Cleo and I picked up our books, and started towards home; Bobbie lived in the other direction. It was marvelous how we blended into the sky, into the clouds, into the background.

"Is Jerry going to go out for football this year?" I asked her. I didn’t care what her older brother did, but we seemed to need to practice learning to talk about something.
eidolon

Louring day down the Bitterroot
draws me dragging grey streaks
up from broken sleep
to where the creek walked
in the black woods
her arms flung wide
wheeling like stars:

Your body rising, lapping
like her running in the night,
lost here in the light barren
as everywhere between
the banks of day
where you are not.

Joel Thomas-Adams
The Journey, continued from p. 11

of three cooped-up young children for a thirty-hour car trip for a temporary move we made to Richmond, Virginia, our parents administered drugs to each of us to knock us out for the duration of the drive. Charley and I sank instantly into stupors, but Thomas, bless his heart, reacted in an opposite fashion and steamed vociferously for the entire thirty hours.

Aside from the mostly silent dinners we spent together back in the early days of my youth, the only time my family interacted as a whole was on summertime excursions we made up to my grandparents’ island. It was one of the few places where my mother was truly happy. She found comfort in the wildness—a sort of recovering wildness, considering the land had been skinned of nearly all its trees seventy years earlier—and she imbued in me the gentle love she felt for that landscape.

It was in the summer of 1963 that my mother’s parents bought that island of ten acres up on Whitetail Lake in the north central lake region of Minnesota, some eighty miles south of the Canadian border. The entire northern part of the state was logged out in the early part of this century, leaving bright birch forests and the rotting tresses and trestles of James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railroad laid like partially ripped-out stitches across the watery fabric of the landscape.

The lake teemed with waterbirds. Mallards paddled contentedly around the island and nestled in its bushes. Wood ducks, blue-winged teals, and hooded mergansers with their bottlebrush pompadours lived shyly in protected coves and down the secluded stream, its gentle current blanket ed beneath water lilies. Double-crested cormorants, goldeneyes, buffleheads, and pintails were strewn like glass marbles across the bays. Shovelers dipped their broad, spatulate bills into the rich shallows, and fat coots bounced like water toys, grazing the marshes. Osprey and bald eagles circled high overhead to fish the waters, or sat as sentinels in the few remaining red and white pines that had escaped the loggers’ greedy saw and jetted out over the young forests. “The bald eagles build nests big enough for a full-grown person to lie in,” my mother told me. “The biggest one ever found was in Florida: it was ten feet across, fifteen feet deep, and weighed two tons.” I wanted to know how they were able to weigh it, to which my mother replied, “It got so heavy it broke the branches of the tree the eagles built it in and fell to the ground.”

Our favorite birds were the loons. They glided silently and low through the water, dipping their heads and diving for minutes at a stretch. They built spongy nests of hollow reed and cattail at the tip of the island’s narrow point, and during the early months of summer they torted their fluffy chicks around upon backs of glossy black flicked with white paint. On still evenings, the loons would lift their necklaced throats and call with pure, sweet tremolos that pierced the bluing air of dusk.

My father fished. He would fish just about anything—northern pike, lake trout, largemouth and smallmouth bass, crappies, sunnies, muskellunge, and the king of the northern waters, the walleye. (Once my father hauled in what he supposed was an big, fighting northern, or a muskie, only to discover that he had caught a loon who had snagged the lure in the crook of its wing. Another time he landed a snapping turtle.) Back in his drinking days, he preferred to fish alone or with Charley, but on rare occasions he would allow the rest of the family to accompany him.

On these outings, my mother would sit in the bow of the boat with a book, glancing up when my father exploded with stifled fury over some “technical nightmare” or other—a snagged line, a lure cast inexpertly by a child into a tree, a motor that killed suddenly in a brisk, onshore wind—to roll her eyes at us in an attitude of disgust. The rest of us would arrange ourselves according to his directions on either side of the boat, our poles pocking out evenly over the water, our eyes struggling to focus the spiderly filament that descended into green depths shot with dusty shafts of light. We watched carefully to see that the line was not too slack, not too tight, not too close to any other line, holding the rod gingerly, alert to sense the sudden drag that meant seaweed, or snag, or, if we were lucky, an actual bite, and waiting in silence for the moment when something would happen, or when my father would state the two words that meant he had given up on us and we were heading somewhere else or back: “Reel in.”

It was after one of these long, hot afternoons spent sitting still and silent in the boat and with no fish to show for it that we headed in to find my grandparents, along with assorted disgruntled aunts and uncles, not, as they had promised, putting the roast on the grill in time for dinner at six—for which we were already late—but entertaining half a dozen of their cronies from the mainland, tossing back martinis and filling the cabin with their blaring laughter.

Now, my father made it a point never to go up to the cabin when my grandparents were there, simply because he so loathed their company, but he had made an exception this time after my mother promised him that they would be sure to behave, that she would see to it that they not invite any of the neighbors over for cocktails, that it would be a nice, quiet weekend, and that he’d hardly even know they were there. So when my grandmother turned her soaked eyes upon us where we stood at the door, exhausted, sunburned, and hungry, and, clapping her hands together, exclaimed, “My God in heaven, you’re back so soon! Did you catch anything?” my father responded by pulling curled lips back over his teeth into a wolfish smile and asking with a sneer, “How’s dinner coming, Carol?”
“Your father was a real asshole,” my mother recalls recently.

“Why did you marry him?” I ask her. “Why did you stay with him all those years?”

She thinks about that and says, “I could see he had potential.”

We ate hotdogs that night. The cocktail party cleared out, and my grandparents attempted to assuage my father’s still-smoking temper with quantities of scotch whiskey and cards. We all played—all twelve of us packed around the dining room table—and a few hands into the game Thomas, who was having a typical run of bad luck, hurled his cards down onto the pine floor and started screaming. Charley laughed at Thomas, which made him scream all the louder, and I watched as my mother tried to calm him. When his screams abated and we took up the game again, I made some playful, prattling remark that I do not now remember, at which point my father, dropping his head forward in a gesture of hopeless weariness, said something I didn’t catch but which caused the face of every player at the table to go slack. No one spoke. No one so much as acknowledged his remark. After the game, Thomas related to me in the bunk-bed room we shared that what my father had said in response to my words was, “Somebody tell her to shut up.”

Years later, I am having lunch with my grandmother.

“You know, Molly,” she says, “I really don’t know what your mother was like when you kids were children. I know she was awfully worried about your father and his drinking.” She pauses.

“Were you happy?”

Blanching, I falter, “It was difficult. I’m happy now.”

She looks intently at me for a moment, then shakes her head and declares, “Your parents should never have had children.”

In that summer of 1974 following our trip West, my mother was fresh out of my father’s treatment program as a codependent spouse, armed with a quiver of quick-fix, self-help maxims, and faced with a litter of lost children and a dismal history of failed parenthood. So she did what any self-sustaining parent in recovery would do. She sent us to Alateen.

All through the next winter and for several years thereafter, we were shunted from one group to the next. When we raised objections—we didn’t like it, we didn’t understand why we had to go, couldn’t we please miss just this one week?—our mother was resolute.

“You’re sick,” she explained, her expression lugubrious, her voice replete with compassion. “You need to get better.”

I didn’t understand. “Why?” I asked, my voice reedy with despair. “Daddy was the one who went through

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Dependency

upon a mountainside where the next trim turn frees unsuspected vistas, and each bootstrap crackles tops off the dry spotted knapweed, we come to a hemlock shrub, nestle in, back-to-back, lean in mutual dependency, as do two nearby ponderosas — we shiver as they sigh — and even this rude April day of snort and snicker winks toward June — see there the gleam of moist jade buds — but now a taut rouge fox, the fingerprint of this silver field, parts straw, strides over balsamroot, passes glacial lily, halts, turning slowly westward toward the rugged range of blue-black mountains, and lingers, line-to-line, in silence.

Ed Chaberek
Symphony in Early Winter

Symphony seats creak with the weight of old women, husbands long gone.
They lead one another into the theater clutching hands, winter winds bending them towards the town.

Some remember rougher hands
pushing them gently onward,
hands which grew slack, tired in the music, or others which would tap lightly a knee or armrest.

My grandmother went first.
Now her husband eats ice cream for dinner,
falls asleep in front of the evening news.
She laid down one day and refused to eat,
said her friends were all gone and she was tired of cooking dinners. I imagined it was the winter wind blowing up on the hi-line that chilled her more each year, hollowed out her bones till there was nothing left.

Say what is hard to say.

That in the end she told my grandfather she hated him and these words are what he can’t forget after sixty years of marriage.
I say she was just tired of days filled with silence, the same face at the door each night, the repetition of years.

The symphony is over and ladies converge on the sidewalk in woolen coats and furs huddled close against the cold. They walk away in pairs, arms linked, silver hair catching the glow of streetlights.

Beth Ann Cogswell
The Journey, continued from p. 21

treatment, not me. I didn’t do anything wrong."

“It isn’t about right and wrong,” replied my mother.

“It’s about living with an alcoholic. You’ve lived with an alcoholic your whole life. That makes you sick—it makes us all sick, everyone in the family.” She thought for a moment. “It’s kind of like having the flu,” she said, adding, “I’m sick too,” and she smiled brightly, as if to entice me.

Sometimes she offered us “choices.” “You can have your choice,” she’d say, as though she were indulging us. “You can either go to group, or miss hockey practice for one month.” Or, “You can either go to group, or miss your riding lessons for one month.” When I gave in to her demands, she would smile in mirthful triumph, sweep the bangs from my forehead, and croon, “Remember that you’re sick, honey.”

But I didn’t feel sick. I felt creepy.

“Are you a prostitute?” my mother asks me. I am twenty-three at the time, and make my living as a free-lance writer.

“What?” I say. “What? What are you talking about? Why would you ask me that?”

“I just worry about my children,” she sighs, adding tentatively, “So are you?”

The groups were held in someone’s basement, or in the basement of a church or social service building. The rooms were invariably shabby. (I have always been terrifically affected by surroundings—perhaps peevishly so.) Stained carpeting was rolled out over cracked linoleum; school surplus chairs lay littered about. Fluorescent lights or bare bulbs illuminated walls of plywood and cinder block upon which tawdry posters slouched like pin-up calendars in a body shop. In these rooms, ten to fifteen adolescents flopped in a circle and talked sardonically, unwillingly, bitterly of their lives—or refused to speak, eliciting a spate of interrogation and harassment from the group’s co-leaders—mothers or fathers of the kids present.

“What are you hiding?” they demanded. “Why are you so angry?” they accused. “How does this make you feel?” they challenged, pushing a child to the floor and sitting on him.

Tales emerged of fathers who beat, of brothers who raped, of mothers who abandoned. When it came around to my turn, I spoke politely of a silent father, an indifferent mother, a mean older brother—crimes so slight in comparison. The co-leaders ordered us regularly to beat each other with batakas, long, cylindrical pillows shaped like baseball bats with handles for swinging. This, we were assured, was the stuff of healing. We were charged with being emotionally dishonest if we balked.

Occasionally my mother joined the group as a co-leader. She was tough-talking and hard on the other kids, but when my brothers or I spoke of our lives, she sat silently watching, her eyes peering out at us through a veil of anguish, the slopes of her cheeks lacquered with tears.

My mother had good intentions. Sometimes I must remind myself of this. But when I think back on those shabby rooms and of what went on between the wretched confines of their cinder-block walls, what I remember is the anger and the guilt and the shame of those group leaders as they raged against these, their sad and bewildered children, in a desperate, confrontational attempt to heal their wounds. You can force a child to jump through certain hoops, all in the name of health and wellness, but you cannot force her to experience a level of maturity which is beyond her years.

I know this; I was one of those children. I longed to bolt from those rooms, to escape the rantings of the co-leaders and dash outside into the startled cold of winter—a cold that pierces your nostrils and seems to fill your shocked lungs with helium. I longed to run out onto the black ice of the lake near our house at night and take refuge on those islands whose trees spread stark and vein-like branches upwards like black sea fans through the indigo sky, and where, among the tangled branches, black-crowned night herons, their long, white crown feathers slung like silken strands over their shoulders, flock to nest in the spring. I longed to climb the willow that overhung the shore and sit among the gossamer catkins which streamed down like green-gold hair, enclosing me within their flaxen tendrils. I longed to ride my pony deep into the heart of the Big Woods.

Nature heals in a way people cannot even hope to understand. The hours I spent riding my pony through the woods and prairies did more for me than all those weeks and months and years of “group settings” (a term my mother firmly applied). It was out in the woods and lakes and prairies of my youth that my heart opened to the world, that I was gathered up like a weeping child into a mother’s arms and comforted.

I feel I ought to say that it wasn’t all bad. Nothing ever is, is it? We lived in a nice house near a lake. We had a nice yard. We had pets (although my father routinely threatened to drag my dog—a shamefaced mongrel named Sally whom I rescued from starvation and who never relinquished her habit of peeing in what she must have supposed were unobtrusive corners of the living room—down to the lake and shoot her. One evening, upon hearing his threat for about the fiftieth time, my mother turned to him and snapped, “Fine, go
ahead.” He never brought up the subject again.)

We lived in the city, in a neighborhood that was built on the soft, rich landfill from a dredged swamp. Back around the turn of the century, some scheming developer drove men and shovels down to the swamp that engulfed the southern section of Minneapolis. They scooped the swamp into a lake and built raised beds of neighborhoods with the muck that remained.

Our house was perched on the top of a small hill. Lilacs, lily-of-the-valley, dogwood, and forsythia blossomed at edges of the yard; trillium, transplanted by my mother from the northern woods, clustered in shady, overhung corners. Sally the dog would sit regally on the stoop, watching with disdain as the pair of brindled shelties next door loafed and dawdled about, exploding suddenly into circular flight at the approach of a stranger and shrieking their sheltie shriek. I remember these things with an almost pastoral fondness. Still, when I visit the home of my young cousins and see once again the pale yellow beds inscribed with rose and blue flowers that once graced my bedroom as a child, I wonder why it all happened the way it did.

“What was it like for you, growing up in our family?”
I ask my brothers during a rare reunion a few years ago.
They shrug. “I don’t know,” Thomas says. “I don’t think it was that big a deal.” He looks irked. “Why do you ask?”
Charley laughs. “I was a lot happier when Dad was drinking. He was great to me,” he says. “Afterwards, he started paying attention to you, and that really pissed me off.”

The second time I saw the Rocky Mountains was four years ago. I was twenty-five, accompanying my mother on one of her trips, this one to a ranch in the lush cradle of the Sunlight Basin of Wyoming. The Sunlight River slid over the bottom of the basin, then cut into it a canyon with green fields sloping up on either side, jutting upwards into red-, yellow- and black-rock mountains covered in ponderosa pine, white pine, Douglas fir, spruce, and lodgepole thicket. The mountainsides bloomed with lupine, larkspur, meadowsweeet, phlox, fireweed, buttercup, bluebell, aster, purple virgin’s bower, and Indian paintbrush. In the forests we saw elk, mule deer and moose; on the prairie hillsides we saw coyotes, marmots, and pikeet pins. Way up high on the steep sides of mountains, big-horn sheep clattered along impossibly narrow ledges with their young following close behind. We rode all day and took long walks in the evenings.

One morning, we wake early, pack a lunch, and drive back into Montana, back to those first mountains I ever saw. Though it is June, snow is falling from a sky of laundered cotton, the flakes hitting us in the face with great, wet swacks and veiling the distant hills so that we catch only glimpses of them, overlapping each other like hearts on a Valentine, before snow drops again like a curtain. We hike a trail up into a canyon where a warm creek tumbles down in a series of waterfalls, carving out pools in the rock. The banks and boulders and trees along the creek are covered in velvety emerald mosses, wildflowers, and bright, delicate, creeping plants. Tiny jewels of water nestle like diamonds on the verdant pillows. Finally, we climb onto a flat ledge overhanging the creek and unpack our lunch.
"Well," says my mother. "Well... Isn’t this just wonderful?"
And I feel the old anger rise within me.

Any other person saying those words in such a setting would elicit nothing but the most genuine agreement from me, but the fact that it was my mother saying them, and the fact that they were the same words she had used in so many other contexts—contexts that were not what I considered even remotely wonderful—made it almost impossible for me to maintain civility.

I wish it could be different. I wish I could say, "The past is past," and let it go at that, but the past sometimes rises up around me like a tide, and I am swamped in it as surely as if the mound of earth on which our old house was composed suddenly crumbled away back into the marsh. I stagger in it; I reel in confusion. I think, "But perhaps I am not remembering all there is to remember." I think, "Perhaps I am being unfair."

After all, the person you become is a personally biased composite of all the experiences that go before you, and the truth of your life is something that can only ever be partially seen and explained. Moreover, truth is a liquid thing, changing minute by minute. Scenes recede, rumble around, run cloudy and clear, shift perspective and shift placement in the landscape of your life. Other scenes are remembered, pitched into the jumble. And I am supposed to make sense of it all, to judge it fairly, to understand. But I do not understand. I am supposed to have reasons for not understanding. But I do not even have that. What I have is a child in a car, the wind tearing at her hair, her brother grinding his knuckles into the small of her back. What I have is a shabby room with a circle of sad-faced children, refuge on the back of a pony at twilight, the sudden flight of waterbirds over a cold lake. What I have is this rock ledge, these delicate, creeping flowers, this snow.

South of Chinook

The Milk River crawls
October low
a few leaves
color
cottonwood
branches
ranchers
from the south
country
rumble the bridge
there
is a breeze
and clouds float
spare
across blue sky
it is good
to sit alone
away from town
though
its sounds echo close by
I grew up
on this river
my clumsy skates
knew its lumpy
ice
its chlorine
laced water
quenched my young thirst
the play
of its current
created
and devoured
my demons
the big old white house
with green fake shutters
has been sold
four days now

Dad
and I (Mom when able)
have been
sorting memories
and the objects
that evoke them
stick figure
drawings
early grammar lessons
photo upon photo
timorous
tenuous
ties to the past
strings
of Christmas lights
crumbled easter egg
shells
candles
of humble ceremony
packed
for sale
finally the open air
calls me
the soft breeze
the dance
of the Bear’s Paw
hidden
in cloud
and I walk
to this river
sand
where now I sit
the Milk crawls
and cloud
briefly hides
the sun.

—David E. Thomas
Cedar Waxwings

Once every year they passed through our town and appeared on frostbitten mornings when our backyard was silenced by a gathering of white crystals. I don’t recall their sound just voluptuous shapes against the weeping birch the split second synchronicity with which they rose. My sister and I hung back from the window as still as those birds, watching our mother watch as if remembering a measure of beauty that was gone from her life, that had dissipated into the vast biting air of the prairie.

Beth Ann Cogswell