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*University of Montana*

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OSMOTICANA: STORIES ABOUT BOUNDARY

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 2013

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Nonfiction Creative Writing

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## Fear of Bears

A seven-to-nine second burst of two percent Oleoresin Capsicum in an atomized fog (also known as bear spray) will interrupt a charging grizzly bear at 30 feet. The bear will experience eye irritation and swollen mucous membranes, causing vision impairment and breathing difficulties.

A two second self-inflicted burst of capsicum applied directly to the human face will immediately disable a 110-lb teenager jogging in the woods. She will experience instant near-blindness (as her eye sockets will swell to the size of grapefruits) and swift closure of the throat. She will sound like an asthmatic rhino as she drops to her knees on a dusty mountain road.

Upon inhaling the oily hot-pepper particles of bear spray, the grizzly will likely turn and run, or at least take pause. This will (with luck) give a person enough time to remove themselves from the immediate environment – slowly, as running will inspire the bear to give chase. Bears have been known to run up to 35 miles per hour, and their predatory instincts will take over in the case of fleeing prey. For hungry bears, protective mama bears, or plain mean bears who are riddled with old buckshot: People count as prey.

Upon blasting herself with bear spray (in an ill-fated attempt to defend herself from the neighbor's pit bull which has not once in its entire life been tied up or fenced in any way and clearly has developed a taste for teenage flesh, and sounds exactly like a raging grizzly bear charging through the woods) the jogging girl will first widen her eyes in disbelief. This will allow the hellish cloud to make contact with a wider area of eyeball surface, increasing the

eyeball-to-capsicum ratio. She will then notice, through her tiny peep-hole eye slits, a large orange splotch has appeared on her white t-shirt just above her collar bone. At that point, she will realize her skin has begun to burn with the fire of a thousand ghost pepper jalapeno jabanero suns. She'll quickly understand that she has, in fact, just bear-sprayed herself.

PRO TIP 1: Always check to be sure your can of bear deterrent is facing forward in the holster. If you find the nozzle is facing toward your own body, STOP. Do not pull the trigger. Turn the can 180 degrees to align with the actual threat (bear or spit-slathering death-beast neighbor dog) before deploying extra-potent bear-caliber pepper spray.

Thirty minutes A.S. (After Spray), the bear will likely no longer experience symptoms. Best case scenario, the hiker will be on their way back to the car and the bear will be back snuffling around the woods, eating huckleberries and doing bear stuff.

Only ten minutes A.S., the teenager's agony will start to build to a shrieking crescendo. Her 9-year-old brother will come cruising up the road on his little BMX bike to see if she is in fact dying as much as it sounds like she is. She will try to stand on his grinding pegs to hitch a ride home. He will tell her no, she stinks, she will have to figure it out herself. She will slap blindly in his general direction and take his bike anyway.

PRO TIP 2: Bear spray is NOT to be used as a bear repellent. It's useless to spray the product on tents, picnic tables, or on the body like mosquito spray. It does, however, have

a repellent effect on friends, family members and friends-of-friends, all of whom will avoid the area or persons under the effect of the spray. Avoid applying bear spray to anything but a threatening bear.

Thirty minutes A.S., about the point when a bear would be completely over it, the teenager will jump in the creek, spreading hot pepper oil stem to stern. Oil and water being what they are, the creek won't remove any of the spray from her skin but will instead carry flaming death oil into every crack and crevice of her entire body. EVERY. SINGLE. ONE.

While still in the creek, she'll pry open her eyes and peel off each contact lens. By then, the contacts will seem to have fused to her corneas, and the act of pulling them off will convince her that she has also removed the top layer of each eyeball. She will hold her lids open and plunge them into the glacially cold creek water, which will temporarily numb the eyeball area. She'll start to think the effects might be fading. She'll be wrong.

She'll pull herself up on the creek bank and writhe on the ground, snot streaming down her face like a dying slug. Naturally, she won't notice that she's giving herself the rub-down in a patch of skunk cabbage. Her mother and sister will follow the garbled shrieks, find her there and escort her into the house, while reminding her that she smells very, very bad (see Pro Tip 2.)

The mother and sister will then strip her down and throw away her contaminated jogging clothes. She'll wonder aloud – aVERYloud – if anyone has ever been blinded, paralyzed, permanently disabled or killed by bear spray. At this point, she'd believe it. She's never experienced pain like

this. Every inch of skin's on fire, inside and out. She's never having children. She's never leaving the house again. She's shouting every curse word invented and she's making up her own. "JUST GOOGLE IT, MOM! Just FRUNKING GOOGLE it you JIBBLYNERF FLAPPENJACK! For the love of GOD please DO SOMETHING I am going to ACTUALLY DIE!"

The good news: No one has ever actually died from bear spray.

Her mother will, in fact, Google it, and then run a cold bath with dish soap to cut the oil. The victim will roll in the tub from side to side like a slippery potato. Every inch of skin will turn 40-sunburns-at-the-same-time red as blood rushes into her capillaries. Her sister will kindly offer to sponge off the areas she can't reach herself – and my God, will they desperately need sponged. She will force her eyelids open once again and soak her open eyes in a bowl of soapy water – and it will actually feel quite pleasant, relatively speaking.

**PRO TIP 3:** Use Dawn dish soap, specifically. If it can get crude petroleum off a duck in an oil spill, it can get pepper oil off your eyeballs and nethers.

Two hours A.S., a bear will have forgotten all about his encounter in the woods. He'll have moved on to rubbing an itchy spot on his shoulder against the rough bark of a tree.

Two hours A.S., the skinny teenage girl will start to feel the soothing effects of time and surfactants. Her rough shouts will fade to quiet, resigned mumbles of relief. She'll begin to

believe that life is still worth living, and that the pain of bear spray might, one day, dissipate to a manageable degree.

It is almost guaranteed that the 9-year-old brother who abandoned her to bike herself home will have a friend over on the day she wages nuclear war on her own mucous membranes. That friend will stand open-mouthed as she runs, towel-clad, from the bathroom to the kitchen to the bedroom, tears and snot still flowing freely down her face. He'll waver between thinking her majestic and terrifying, and settle on both. The image will haunt his nightmares for years to come.

Six hours A.S., the bear will continue rooting grubs out of a rotten log like nothing ever happened.

Six hours A.S., the girl will find herself in her loosest pajamas, skin still stop-sign red, snacking on pizza rolls in bed, counting her regrets. She'll resolve to never go jogging again.

PRO TIP 4: Never go jogging in the woods.

Or better yet,

PRO TIP 5: Never bear-spray your own damn self.

## Bear Stories I Save for Parties, As I Recall Them

I lay on the couch, watching my dad nail two-by-fours across the aluminum door. It seemed like a strange thing to do. But a curious grizzly kept bluff-charging the door, woofing and bouncing like he meant business. Although the boards wouldn't stop him if he REALLY wanted in, we'd at least have a second longer to run out the back, jump in the truck and watch until the bear was ready to leave.

The next morning, we would call the friendly neighborhood Bear Guy to see if we could leave the house and head to school. This particular bear had a tracking collar, so it was easy enough for the biologist to locate him by GPS. Usually, he'd have moved on by the next morning.

Sometimes, though, he'd be just behind the house, waiting for three chubby little kids and their mom to come tumbling out the door. On those days, we would call the school office and show up late. When we came home at night, in the dark, after sports practice and clubs, Dad often stood in the door, a silhouette in the porch light. If he mimed bear claws, revolver at his side, it meant a bear watched from just over the line between lawn and woods. He'd join us on the walkway to the door, banging pots and pans until we made it inside.

A close friend – a neighbor, by our standards, but who lived several miles away, in a teepee outside his half-built house – shot a problem grizzly bear in his own backyard. He fired a warning shot that hit her right in the head.

Once, when we were cooking bacon with the windows open, three black bears came in from three different directions to see if they could help themselves. It was unusual to see so many in one place at once time.

Another time, a grizzly bear fell out of the apple tree and dented our house.

Another time, a black bear cornered our nearly-blind cocker spaniel under the porch. After that, the poor pooch hid any time a visitor walked down the driveway wearing black.

Once, I thought I saved my goats from a bear. They were baby Oberhaslis, two of them, and we tied them out on leashes like dogs in the yard. When a bear meandered nearby (a three-legger, if I recall) they bolted, hit the end of their leads and trailed their stakes behind them like a redneck ball and chain. I scooped them up, a goat beneath each arm, and ran into the house, where we waited until the bear was out of chomping range. In retrospect, I would have made a tasty snack, sandwiched between two tender baby goats. It was only luck that saved us all.

Both goats were later killed but not eaten by a mountain lion in the clear light of day – throats torn out, heads pulled through the pig wire, as if the lion stopped tugging when the shoulders didn't follow. We didn't keep goats again. This was not a buffet.

Several years ago, my father and brother buried a sack of fish guts to fertilize an apple tree. A big bear dug them up – once, twice, three times. My mother filled the hole, topped it off with a giant rock and dusted the whole mess with the hottest chili powder she could find. The bear

thanked her by tossing her capstone several yards away, and dug up the tree a fourth and final time, victorious.

## In Understanding Bears

We hold fancy fundraisers and drink sparkling cocktails for the benefit of Wilderness and Grizzly Bear Habitat; paint pictures of land and tree and bruin and sell them at auction; rally for the political protection of “untainted” wild lands. A strange dichotomy – where nature as life meets capital-N-Nature as artifact – infiltrates our social conversations and shapes natural resource dialogue. Nature is beautiful, symbolic, universally esoteric, worthy of protection.

It’s also a pain in the ass.

Nature – that-which-is-not-people – is irritating, inconvenient, sometimes delicious, often only considered along those borders which separate the backyard from the woods. Along those borders hang long strips of vulnerable fear and anxious wonder, and when those borders are breached those strips flutter in the wind. Some run; some hold tight to the ends; still others have become so intimate with the fear and the wonder they believe they have forgotten the boundary exists at all. The edges of humanity are both concrete and traversable, a semi-permeable membrane between the in and the out.

It’s a juxtaposition that has formed not only our most important social and political conversations: It has molded *me*. I wonder about the day-to-day and I jump-rope a line that might not be there at all. Yankee candles and potted ferns; hot tubs and boxed wine. I dwell on the objects material that seem only human, because of this early and constant awareness of something much larger and hungrier than I.

Once, not too long ago, I pulled on a plastic glove, tugged it all the way up to my shoulder. A ewe was giving birth, and it was to be my first involvement in the liminal space of birth.

And as I try to explain it, I realize that I can't really explain it any more than I can explain the value of a corkscrew or a potted fern or the boards across the door of my trailer house. I want to describe the sensation of her body giving way in front of my fingers, her pulse running counterpoint to mine, the warmth and safety and female unity. I want to somehow convey the way I felt when I realized, elbows deep in afterbirth, that the little lump between my fingers was a *hoof*, and the knobbly bit was a knuckle and the biggest lump was the tiny head of a lamb. I want to explain the connection, if there was one at all, the wondering if this will happen to me one day too – if I will expand to accommodate another small set of bones and muscles and skin and teeth, reduced to the physical components of myself and if I will require help then, too.

Later, I'd find out that she didn't really need my help – I'd been fooled into urgency, so that I might learn the feel of a lamb before I needed to. A practical intimacy, a violation, a tool.

Months later, large and hungry, we'd eat the lamb. No one cares what it means. When you are powerful, it is easy to forget.

## The Secret Life of Cheese

I moved from a little country town to a city of 60,000 when I was 20 years old. I didn't know myself, didn't know what I liked, what I wanted. But like most, I had to pay my rent and buy my food, so I took a job in the deli of a natural and organic grocery store.

Behind the deli counter I learned that kamut and quinoa actually weren't exotic birds – and neither were the people who bought them. I served up Reuben sandwiches made with smoked tofu; I learned the difference between deli turkey that could be called natural and that which earned the organic tag; I sliced tomatoes from just down the road and I peeled the rind from prosciutto that had crossed an ocean to reach my cutting board. It was worlds away from my childhood meals, and yet remarkably similar – we ate venison steaks and peas from the garden, every bit as natural as some of the food I served for a pretty penny to customers who didn't bat an eye at the price. To me, the tag didn't matter so much as the taste, and I secretly scoffed at those willing to empty their wallets for many items that I could acquire with a trip back home and a little extra time.

I soon found myself plunging into the milieu of fine natural and organic foods. When I transferred to the “cheese corner,” a fresh universe of gourmet foods (and gourmands) opened up. I might find a new and exciting identity somewhere in this landscape of provolone and pride. The personal growth that had begun with natural and organic sandwich fixins would surely end here, somewhere between the raclette and the Fontina wheel.

These cheeses departed dramatically from the Velveeta and Kraft squares of some of my favorite childhood meals. Most weren't square, nor were they pre-wrapped in neat cellophane envelopes. And they certainly didn't come shooting out of a pressurized aerosol can. Some were round cheesy tires, and some were great orange cannonballs, and some were even moldy. It was

Sebastian's and my job to cut them into manageable wedges, cover them in a special plastic wrap and label them according to name and price. It almost felt like bestowing titles on nobility, sticking those printed labels onto the wrapped cheese, the naming of cheeses as complex a taxonomy as that of wealthy landowning barony of centuries past.

My first imported cheese was a nice Tomme de Savoie, from the French Alps, according to the library of cheese bibles stuffed behind the display case. About three inches thick, maybe eight inches in diameter, the wheel was coated in a thin layer of whitish-blue mold, rimmed with a green fuzz. Moldy cheese! And on *purpose*! It was baffling, exciting, and above all *gourmet*.

I felt one eyebrow raise, curious, as Sebastian walked me through the steps of cutting a wheel of fine cheese. First, he said, you brush off all of the blue or green spots. He demonstrated the proper technique, holding the wheel over the floor mat at a sassy angle and flicking at the surface with a natural-bristle brush that looked exactly like a toilet scrubber. He explained that if the unsavory mold won't brush off of some cheeses, you must wipe them with a solution of rice vinegar and water. But not this one, he said. The Tomme is a washed-rind cheese and some mold must be preserved for flavor and aroma; the porous rind would allow the acidic vinegar to seep into the flesh of the wheel. So we simply cut off the bits that were TOO moldy with a shiny, black-handled slicing tool. Sebastian plopped the wheel onto the stainless platform of the cheese cutter, the device used to cut the literal cheese (cue lowbrow joke.) A stainless steel platform, split down the center, rested on four little rubber feet. A wire fastened underneath, passed through a system of pulleys and springs and emerged through the center crack. A small label indicated that it was made in Britain - that's how you knew it was fancy.

With quick, careful movements, Sebastian pulled the wire from north to south, bisecting the Tomme into two half-moons. The creamy white interior, pocketed with small holes, contrasted nicely with its rind, which looked like it could have been scraped off of the basement floor. Two or three more quick, decisive movements and four wedges of cheese lay neatly arrayed on the board.

“Try it,” Sebastian said. “You have to learn the taste so you can educate the customers.”

It smelled like feet and looked to be coated in food poisoning, but I popped it into my mouth. I forced myself to trust that his intentions – he was my peer in cheese, after all, albeit with a few more wheels under his belt. Sebastian admonished me to slow down and savor the flavor, feel it in all parts of my mouth. He asked what it tasted like to me.

It tasted like cheese. I couldn’t specifically pick up on the nutty notes or the salty creaminess Sebastian identified for me. I wasn’t born with a perfect palate, I suppose. But to Sebastian’s surprise, I liked it. I couldn’t tell you exactly why, but it was *good*.

“That’s a good sign,” Sebastian said. “Most beginners don’t like stinky cheese.”

I was oddly proud of myself for enjoying this moldy specimen. Maybe, just maybe, I had a shot at earning my stripes in the cheese corner crew, since I was so open-mindedly receptive to something new.

My next big cheese moment came the day the department trusted me to cut the Parmigiano-Reggiano by myself. Parm-Reg, mind you, can only go by that name if it was actually made in the designated Italian producing areas: Parma, Reggio Emilia, Bologna west of the Reno, Modena and Montova. Ask me to label these areas on a map and I’ll show you how fast I can work Google. It is a matter of law that only Parmesan from these areas can be labeled Parm-Reg, and if it is certifiably so then the wheel will be slapped with a label that reads PDO,

or Protected Designation of Origin. They try to monitor translated versions as well, but the apparent lack of cheese police makes these matters hard to track.

It was a big deal when they let me tackle the parm. Each wheel can weigh upward of 80 lbs and must be team-lifted onto the counter – the only help I got throughout the process. Management required this because Sharon, a flippy young coworker, once broke her left ring finger trying to prove that she could move a wheel on her own. A heave and a ho later, the wheel rested its heft on the cutting block, so warmly yellow it almost glowed, a carcass for the trimming. I was left to my own devices with a series of pointy steel implements and a suffocating sense of responsibility.

There was no way this cheese was going on the cutter – not only was it spatially too large, but I couldn't move it once it was put down. I grabbed a double-handled knife that looked like a miniature cross-cut saw and began to lumberjack my way through the top of the rock-solid wheel. After 20 minutes, however, I had barely cut through the tough outer rind. I began to hack away at the crevice with a pointy wedge-shaped tool, which I eventually hammered with the handle of a knife like I was driving a railroad spike. I won't even try to pretend that this was proper cheese cutting form.

Eventually, hacking mercilessly, I transformed the giant lump of imported cheese into a pile of semi-consistent chunks of shrapnel. A fine dust coated the countertop and the front of my apron. I grinned at Sebastian when he arrived to take over at the end of my shift, glowing with pride beneath the layer of powdered parmesan.

“You did *alright*,” he said, with a cockeyed look at my mountain of cheese. “I mean, these sharp corners will be hard to wrap, but I guess they always are. Did someone ask you to cut the entire wheel? Usually we only cut a half-wheel. And why did you use *this*?” He held up one

of my dirtied cheese tools. I had no idea what it was, but I couldn't very well tell him that I used it to bash the end of another slightly smaller cheese knife I had wedged into the side of the wheel.

“To cut all the parmesan, obviously,” I replied. “You're welcome.”

Days turned into weeks, wheels turned into wedges and I began to suspect that my gourmet aspirations were nothing but dairy dreams. Very soon, my fromagier façade began to topple around me. The cave-in had a slow start. I was still learning, they said, so it was easy for Sebastian to forgive my mistakes as inexperience. Eventually, however, his easy demeanor began to change.

I can't even recall the first instance that I felt embarrassed in the world of old milk. Could it have been when he pointed out that two cheeses I recommended would never serve well together? Or was it when he informed a customer that a cheese tasted like strawberries and musty leaves, rather than the grassy tones I had described?

Or was it the Manchego and pears? It had to be the Manchego and pears. He dashed from cheese corner to produce department, fetching one variety of fancy pear after another to go with the 12-month aged Manchego cheese. He was preparing a sample platter for the customers, and I was his guinea pig.

“What do you think of that one?” he'd ask.

Chomp chomp. I tried to nibble slowly so I looked like I was thinking hard about the nuances of the pairing.

“Ooh, I like it. Let's go with that one.”

“Nope. Wrong. The combined product has to be better than each element on its own, and this just doesn't do it for me.”

It wasn't the first time I had tried to fake cultural expertise with him – he hailed from New York and had seen more of the world than I, or at least that's what he wanted me to believe. At the time, I ate it up. He spared me no detail of his cultural prowess, including his trips abroad. Once, he decided to give me verbal snapshots of people from various European locales he had visited. "Russians are mysterious," he said. "And the Italians! Man, let me tell you about the Italians..." He told me all about the Italians but I had ceased to care. At the end of his monologue I tuned back in long enough asked him about the Finns.

"Oh, man, the Finns are just *weird!* And they are the *ugliest* people I've ever seen." I should mention that the Finnish language features a lot of soft "J" and "V" sounds, as well as the long "U" and "A." Kind of like the name Jurva. My name is Jurva. I am of Finnish descent. He was mildly interested when I told him so, and that's just the kind of guy he was.

No surprise, I got it wrong with the pears again and again. Eventually, he settled on some sort of red Asian pear, that tasted EXACTLY LIKE EVERY OTHER PEAR SO FAR. "Can't you taste the difference?"

Sure I could. I could taste the difference between confidence and wobbly-kneed insecurity, the difference between his button-down and my Harley-Davidson tee shirt, the difference between east and west. But the cheeses? No. Absolutely not. It was the same damn flavor that I had tried 27 times already that day and yet, somehow, the combination delighted Sebastian and his customers alike.

I truly believe some people can taste the flowers of the alpine field where Madam Sheep grazed just hours before she was milked. There is a difference between a smooth and an itchy mouth feel, and certain bleus taste different depending on the strain of mold injected into the

ripening round and the temperature of the cave where it was aged. I know these things to be true – but by and large, I cannot taste many of them, and not for lack of trying. I know that *this* cheese is good, and *that* cheese is bad, and I can generally tell you why. I deal in words like “smooth,” “buttery,” “sharp,” “mild,” “earthy,” and “clean.” But my tasting notes generally don’t consist of more than “would buy again.” I can’t taste the hazelnuttiness or the strawberry notes on the back of the palate – cheese tastes like cheese, and strawberries taste like strawberries. Not that I let any of this get in my way. I memorized the flavor profiles of my precious cheeses and rattled off the information my more discerning customers needed (or wanted) to know. More importantly, I learned to read which customers wanted to hear the language of cheese, and which ones wanted to hear, point-blank, if a certain cheese tasted like licking a goat. My grandmother was one of the latter – I have been officially banned from bringing anything dairy-related to family functions after the great Christmas Cheese Disaster of 2010. I offered a cranberry walnut chevre, a cannonball of Mimolette and a slightly stinky Taleggio. She still brings up how much she hated it, with a faraway, traumatized look in her eye.

The one thing (other than the paycheck) that kept me coming back was Liesel. She was petite and beautifully wrinkly and she spoke with a German accent, despite having lived stateside since she fled Germany in the war. She raised a dozen children and earned a college degree in her 60s.

Liesel knew her cheeses even better than Sebastian did. But unlike Sebastian, she didn’t do it for the prestige.

“This cheese is good,” she’d say, referring to a goat cheese shot through with cranberries and wrapped in wax. “That cheese is weird,” she’d say, prodding a cheese that had the consistency of a marshmallow. When pressed, she knew that it came from a very particular high

mountain cow on the coldest day of winter on an odd-numbered year. She knew everything a person could know about cheese, and she'd never tell unless a) you asked, or b) you were a customer who clearly wanted to befriend that cow.

Better yet: she liked *me*. It didn't matter that I wasn't any good at cheese. I enjoyed coming to work because when I got there, I could joke with a good friend and learn more about something that I genuinely believed to matter, deep in my heart, even if I couldn't experience the full complexity of the matter myself. Such is life.

I still can't taste all the subtle differences but, thanks to a little time and kindness, I no longer care. Cheese is delicious but snobbery is a dish best served anywhere I am not. They are all quite tasty, minus the mountain-aged gorgonzola which made my throat swell up, and they all look nice on my cheeseboard at a party. And when I throw that party, know this: I'll put out the Comte right next to the can of Cheez-Whiz.

## I'll Take Systems Ecology for \$400, Trebek

I am not a scientist – not a biologist, an ichthyologist, a geologist, an ecologist. I am an English teacher and a sometimes writer. I find nature beautiful and awe-inspiring, you know, the whole thing, with a spirit awake and a sharp woozy inhale in a deep spicy woods.

I also have friends who wouldn't think twice about piling up shot wolves like cordwood, others who in the same breath pull the trigger on the buck of a lifetime and cry when they watch the light dim in its eyes, say a quick prayer of thanks. Who tread carefully around the ladies slippers and trilliums, hefting a chainsaw to a swaying ponderosa, but it's nearly dead, and needs to come out.

That said:

A turkey with a brow wax gone wrong. Imagine a bald red wrinkly Skeksis head on the body of a Macy's Thanksgiving Day balloon.

It wheels on an updraft while a hiker naps under a tree; thought the hike would take six hours. It took twelve. Damn bird thought the hiker was dead.

It poops on its own legs to cool down. I'm not an ornithologist, but I'm pretty sure that's right.

What is a turkey vulture?

\*\*\*

A six-foot garbage monster that scares your dog.

An apex predator that helps maintain the equilibrium of nature.

My muscles tingle when I see them from the right side of the mudroom door, or the car window, or the opposite side of a wide, wide drainage. The feeling is nearly electric when I'm on the wrong side of the door, though that could be my ancient lizard brain kicking in.

What is a bear?

\*\*\*

He repeats the same thing expecting a different result. A punch line, a cliché.

A quiet walker, scrubbing pine boughs on himself, on his wife, next rubbing deer pellets on his camouflage sleeves, next trying to rub them on his wife but that's where she draws the line.

(That's a classic from my childhood, Mom tells it and Dad laughs.)

It's an early-morning biscuits and gravy at the restaurant, but today he eats the fruit because the meat smell wafting from your pores spells predator. And he washed his clothes in special soap and kept them in a plastic bag with more pine boughs, ready to change outside the truck when he gets to the spot.

A hunter is a walk back down the mountain in the dark, when the stars are impossibly many, and he eyeballs the immensity through his spotting scope as wolves in counterpoint echo behind him through the hills. A hunter counting satellites, wondering at the weight of space trash circling the globe. Considers the pale blue dot, regards it, and leaves it; heaves the cold air – he is walking hard – and he is certain he can hear the icy edges of his footfalls in the crust of snow. He actually can.

What is a hunter?

\*\*\*

Settled in, cozy, ready to read the newest issue of Outdoor Life on the commode when suddenly a half-inch beige demon beast skitters out from under the tub spreading destruction on six hairy legs. They aren't supposed to live in Montana but here they are, three of them now, unwelcome guests from who knows where.

We wax poetic about the wolves and the bears and the alpenglow but I feel like I know all that, I've seen that. I don't know it the way one who studies it might know it, one who measures it might know it, one who photographs might know it, and I'm a little embarrassed that I can't speak more articulately about the systems I've swam in for nearly thirty years. But I'm a friendly bedfellow with four furred legs and claws and teeth that keep you inside the house and make you late to school. Who demand a call to the neighborhood bear guy, who looks up this bear's

coordinates (bear's in the chickens, earned himself a tracker) and gives you the go-ahead when it's safe to walk the twenty yards from the house to the car.

What I don't know are these six tiny legs and folded useless wings, transparent, the color of watery coffee, and the musky odor when I squash them.

I didn't know they would stink.

Do you think maybe if no one ever saw one, we'd start a foundation for them? Raise money to save them, and their delicate habitat? There is nothing so beautiful as a wolverine, as a grizzly bear, as an orchid, about a bug. How many insect species croak without so much as a hive mind hiccup? Because they are dirty, and diseased, and because it's harder to imagine a reflection of our own soul in their eyes.

Do they have eyes?

I'm not an entomologist – but I imagine those who are project their own selves amongst the juices of their specimens. Juices, incidentally, called hemolymph, which circulates openly within the body, unlike the veins and capillaries of the human machine. This is a fact I did not know, but had to look up, as I am not an entomologist.

And I imagine an entomology blood runs fresher for an insect, and pulses quicken for the complex net of relationships I only imagine link cockroach to turkey vulture to bear to deer

hunter to – what? To economies? To civilizations? To war and peace and life and death, water conflict and unstoppably rising tides?

Apocalyptic battle bugs are no poster child for salvation because they will not die. (Not all of them, though I can attest to the demise of at least three on my apartment wall.)

Ultimately, that's what every story is about. The meaning of life: That it ends.

But this sense of the existential doesn't warrant these visitors in my home (three of them now! The internet tells me for every one I see there are one thousand more – three thousand mating scuttling pooping garbage toenails) and it is damn difficult to look for the sacred in the profane when my scalp is crawling and the vermin pour in from the fixtures like bubble tea from a nightmare glass.

I comfort myself; it's not one thing or the other, not sacred nor profane; like the billion white dots through the crosshairs of my rifle scope, we are made of Sagan's star stuff, this small brown cockroach and I.

What is a cockroach?

Crunch.

## Gideon the Kitteon

What is a cat but a tiny man in a fur suit who lives in this house? An ersatz roommate in a permanent tuxedo – but *oh!* if he isn't the most *precious* little man! – who, perhaps not unlike some roommates, spends countless hours attending to the grooming of his bum. He sits on top, of the sofa, of the fridge, green eyes half open as if to say “and who are *you* to stop me?” If he can't sit on top he'll sit beneath, quick slash and grab at errant ankles who dare trod the carpet within six inches of the living room couch. He grips the underside of the coffee table, upside down, sliding across the floor, gripping the rungs like an astronaut on a spacewalk. He defies gravity. He leaps from bed to windowsill, fails, grips the sill with wee bean toes and outstretched claws and, then – he is reminded of the oppressive nature of gravity. He growls at the neighbors. He growls at deer in the yard. He growls at his mom (person) when he (cat) is startled from his long well-deserved nap in the lone office chair. His mom (person) chooses to work in the kitchen instead.

At what point did cats become a fixture in the human household? It is not as if primitive man decided that a cat one day would live in his house, sleep on his chairs and leave endless tufts of fur behind the TV stand. Because no way would a cat stand for that. He'll leave his hair wherever he g--damn pleases. Some say cats likely “tamed” themselves, wandering in and accepting bribes of food to stick around, mitigating rodent infestations on their own accord. Or perhaps some were nabbed by that society some 9,500 years ago, hissing and spitting and relocated onto early farms.

Regardless, Gideon the Kitteon stalks the apartment floor, leaping from bookcase to backrest, refusing to earn his keep, and if he did his worth would diminish, Cocteau's visible soul of the home. Cat purrs vibrate at 20 to 140, the human therapeutic range, good for heart

attacks, swelling, healing broken bones, the broken human heart. Too good and too terrible for this world, he stays, that they (people) might stay here too.

## Still Life with Softball

I do not play sports.

As a little girl at tee-ball I stood in the outfield, glove on my head like hat, or a rooster comb, depending on the day. My round purple glasses, in the style of a 1980s dad, slipped down my nose, sweaty in the sun. A thick brown braid fell from the back of my head, hanging heavy to my waist. I scratched designs in the sand until an errant groundball came hopping across the grass, straight for my pudgy face until at the last moment, in a stroke of luck, I'd stand to practice a tap-dance routine I'd later perform for the greeter at Costco, against their will.

I'd run to third after whacking the body of the tee with the short pink aluminum bat, oblivious to the shouts of my coach, family, and rueful teammates more predisposed to athletic success. (This wouldn't be the only place I played by my own rules; on the swim team I made it down to the other end, elated that I was the only one there – clearly I was first! – only to realize I was swimming a 50 and the others were already halfway back to where they began.) In third grade I earned a C in football. I was the only kid in gym class to earn a specific score for football. My teacher wanted to make it clear I was only average on the pee-wee gridiron. In first grade they determined I couldn't run quite right, so they asked me to roll my arches over Coke bottles for... for what? They never did say. In high school my gym teacher asked me if I wore high heels often, because my unusual gait was likely the result of short Achilles tendons. This is the same man who, on BMI day, would unceremoniously grab a pinch of my fat from my middle and deem me a mesomorph in front of a jury of my peers.

After such success, imagine my delight when my now-fiancé invited me to join his family softball team. He'd always been athletic – big shot on the football team, quick runner, first to join the pick-up game of whatever have you – whereas I was generally picked last for teams, a sitcom come to life. Knowing my own ineptitude, combined with a lifelong propensity for anxiety, I protested. But with love comes sacrifice and so I laid my dignity on the line to become one with the Riders of the Pine, a reincarnation of a 1980s softball team that dominated the circuit in the early years of my fiancé's life.

Our first practice was a bust. For me, at least – my future brother-in-law hit homer after homer and my fiancé rounded the bases with speed and alacrity.

“No one except your mom is allowed to coach me!” I shouted at him after roughly fifty thousand missed pitches in batting practice. She was the only one who didn't repeat herself, I thought, more and more loudly, as if my shortcomings on the field were a lack of poor hearing.

My dear sweet fiancé, in his talent and finesse, couldn't fathom person could simply be *bad* at something as simple as hitting a ball. “Just watch it all the way to the bat!” he'd cheer, so I'd watch the ball and swing the bat a full second too late. “Just watch it! All the way to the bat!”

“Lift your back elbow!” with love, and support, and so I'd lift that sucker so high you might land a small plane on my armpit. Heaven forbid I, by some fluke, actually hit the ball and would be called upon to run to first (I'm proud to say I at least figured out the right way to run since my tee-ball days). “Wheels!” he'd implore. “Faster! You've got this!”

But I didn't got this, and if anyone on the field had any kind of speed or finesse whatsoever I'd be *out* before I reached so much as halfway to the base. Shuffle shuffle shuffle OUT! I'd perfected the art of the sheepish grin as I jogged back to our team's dugout. I failed at softball but perhaps I could succeed at charisma, if I tried hard enough. Half the time the other team would high five me and tell me I'd get it next time, I had a piece of it, now I had to take it home. They somehow all knew my name, even teams we'd never played. My pride took every hit I missed from the batter's box. To make things better I'd joke – I was good at that, at least! –

“So when is halftime?” “Who is the goalie?” “TOUCHDOWN!” Hell, if we laughed together, they couldn't laugh at me, right?

I eventually found myself in right field where surely no ball would fly, except once it did, and I had a panic attack right there on the field. Sweating, shaking, right there on the grass under the brilliant blue sky, the smell of hot dogs and popcorn wafting beneath my nose like the world's worst smelling salts. I faked a fight with my fiancé and fled the field. Better to be a bad partner than a big weenie who couldn't catch a ball in front of a small audience, I told myself.

One day I found myself playing third base during a low-stakes game against an opponent I barely remember. By some fortunate fluke, like Randy Johnson nailing that infamous pigeon, I intercepted the ball mere inches from my head. I stared at it, transfixed. Incredible how quick a gal moves when survival comes into play.

“First! Throw it to first!” A red vein appeared to bulge in my teammate’s forehead. He didn’t know I’d never made it this far before, like the fish who finds himself outside the bowl after years of pitiful jumps.

“Hi-YAH!” I flung the thing as far as I could. It sailed through the sky in a massive arc and PLUNK, landed right at the base of the pitcher’s mound. A dash, a grab, and some other teammate managed to chuck my errant ball to its intended destination. By now, of course, the runner had rounded second and was well on their way to third. Still, I celebrated – I’d caught a ball and I didn’t die.

My success was short-lived. Despite my newfound catching prowess my team exiled me into right field during practice, where no pop fly was sure to sail.

False.

While I was daydreaming, watching snow geese fly in front of mountains still capped with snow, thinking about the cheesecake chilling in the icebox back home, a southpaw teammate lobbed a slow hit my direction. I heard my teammates yelling, heard them shout in slow drawn-out tones. “Heads up! It’s all yours! Wheels, girl, wheels!” Again with the damn wheels – if I’d been meant to cruise on wheels I’ve been born a Cadillac. As things were, I was as slow on my feet as I’d been quick to distraction.

My softball tenure was short-lived, but I was glad to discover there was another team on the field: a handful of non-softball partners, mostly wives, who drank wine out of travel mugs on the sidelines. I excelled on the wine team, and to this day I open the game with a fine box of pink rose.

I've since begun to consider "sports" I might explore with greater comfort. I've heard a local kickball team wears silly costumes and drinks beer *on* the field.

Or, better yet, hammock yoga, otherwise known as aerial fitness. I'd been curious about the art since I'd read about it online. Like cirque du soleil, if cirque dangled only three feet from the floor in a converted warehouse in Montana.

I'd been on a special diet heavy in fibrous vegetables. I worried that my first go at aerial fabric arts would result in a less-than-cooperative moment from my protesting body. But still, I walked in, smiled at everyone who passed through the door, checked in with the young guy at the front desk who intermittently stopped to pop and lock it to the music piped in overhead. A teen class was still ongoing, and as they nimbly flung themselves through fabric and rings I grinned a cheesy grin. The others in my class, I supposed, were stretching on mats so I grabbed one too, moved into a nice "butterfly" stretch and then a one-legged hurtler's pose I'd seen at the gym. Meanwhile, the girl in front of me rotated in some sort of gyroscopic backward situp abflex contortion move.

I stared at the loops of fabric hanging from the ceiling with a dumb look on my face, the half-smile I know I get when I'm trying something new. It seems like one of the best ways to keep the sweaty jumpsuit of anxiety at bay, and so I often insist that I go toward the things that scare me. Dangling above the ground in a forty-foot hammock? Terrifying.

I picked out special warm dry socks, worried about sharing my toe juices with others who'd come after, I left my socks on until class began, then discreetly yet cavalierly tossed them aside. No one else wore socks. What kind of dummy wears socks to an aerial fitness class?

Yellows, greens, white and black – not silk, but polyester, I'd learn, material that could burn off your fingerprints if you slid down from an upside-down-three-quarter-Nelson too quickly.

First, we stretched with a resistance band – something called a hitchhiker and some twisting side thing. Then, lean back on the fabric and lift your legs. Then upside down! I hoisted myself into something called “spider,” landing halfway in something I called the “seasick birthing praying mantis” before summoning every bit of strength I had to pull myself upright. The fabric squeezed my ample legs hard, and I bulged in places I didn't need to bulge. But still, I did it – I'd pulled myself up of my own accord. Then we stood in the loop and flopped around a bit more.

My favorite part came last, though. We spread the loops of fabric wide and swung in the pouch like a caterpillar kangaroo hybrid. We flipped back and forth some more, ending parallel to the ground, then cooled down with a lovely sideways-inchworm stretch maneuver that felt cozy, claustrophobic and strangely soothing.

My armpits stank and I didn't figure out half the moves, but I only got my foot stuck one time and I consider that a success. Granted, the pop and locking guy from earlier had snapped photos the entire time, I assume for the website – I hope for the website – but if I become internet famous for working hard while dangling upside down I'll take it as a job well done.

Why did I feel so much better swinging in a loop of shiny polyester with six strangers than I did on a softball team with my family and friends? Perhaps it's the expectation and obligation of family; perhaps it's the challenge of meeting tradition; perhaps it's none of the above and I'm simply more predisposed to enjoy circus over softball.

I do know that the palpable energy in that warehouse room invigorated and refreshed me in a way that running and hitting and generally failing to catch on did. The freedom of the fabric is almost like flying, like swimming, and I look forward to returning to that peace again.

## Love Story in F

“Heather? Where are you? I think your building is on fire...”

Mom’s voice trailed off as I offered a muffled grunt in reply. It was 5:30 a.m., a time of day specifically reserved for college kids to ignore calls from their mothers. She’d called three times, a strict violation of my huffy don’t-disturb-me rule. She’d said it like a question, like she’d heard the timer ring for a batch of cookies and she wasn’t quite sure, like she didn’t want to bother me.

But heck if my apartment building wasn’t on fire. I’d been house-sitting for a friend, sleeping in and drinking their beer a few houses down the street. She explained to me that she’d seen it on the news over her morning coffee. It looked like my building, the address sounded like my building, and after double-checking her little black book she realized it *was* my building.

She shifted from panic toward fixing mode. “Well, you should probably get down there and check.” The question was gone from her voice. I was to go down there. I was to check.

I rolled over, overwhelmed. I supposed I ought to go find out more, that perhaps if one’s building is on fire it’s best to be in the vicinity in case someone – say, a firefighter – were to, say, be searching for building tenants. As I lay there weighing my options – 1) Go, 2) Pretend I hadn’t heard her – my phone rang once more. My sister, admonishing me to call a friend I’d become close with over the previous year. If I didn’t call him, she would, she threatened, so I dialed his number.

No answer. I'd be on my own, I supposed, so I fumbled down to my bike in the dark and pedaled off wobbly down the road. I was drunk with confusion, and somewhat still with beer. Legs flailing, hair billowing wild behind me, I hit a pothole and nearly flipped because I'd forgotten to turn on my university-issued bicycle headlight. Within minutes I saw the twirling berries and cherries of three city patrol cars, an ambulance and five - count them, five - firetrucks parked within a block of my front door.

You know the movies, where everyone is OK after a terrible accident and they sit around and crack terrible jokes? Like that. "Oh man, my clothes are smoky - at least I know a good dry cleaner!" Chuckle chuckle, the apartments were above a dry cleaner and laundromat. I crossed my arms in front of my chest like I'd seen older adults do in times of trouble, holding my warmth close to my chest. We crowded together in the back of an ambulance for warmth. What was I to do? I hadn't been there. I was left out of my own trauma story. I found out I'd been the only one unaccounted for; the fireman had kicked in my door when I didn't respond. My pet tarantula wasn't moving, a fireman reported. She never really moved much anyway, but I thanked him for the news with a somber face and a slow nod of my head.

Sometime in this whizbang of a morning my friend - the one who worked the construction job, the one who my sister had threatened to call - returned my call. He hadn't even heard the tone, I'd later find out. He'd woken in the night and rolled over to see my name flashing on his missed calls screen. His voice was sleepy - "What's going on?" - and after I explained he responded with an "Oh, ok, do you need help?" Not one to bother anyone at that time (I'd once huddled in my bathroom eating hot pies under comforters for three days because I couldn't trouble anyone

to help me light the pilot light) I declined. I used to fancy I was brave; I realize now I was quite afraid.

“Ok.” Click. I figured that was that.

Five minutes later, another call. Him again. By now I teetered between glad not to trouble him, and dejected that he hadn’t insisted on saving my pitiful skin. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the apartment. Everything is fine. No one got h-"

"Hang tight," he interrupted. "I'm about two seconds away."

He arrived within moments. The yellow and orange reflective strips on his work jacket caught the flashing reds and blues, illuminating my then-friend as he crossed toward me. His hug smelled like asphalt oil and crinkled like paper.

“You ok?” And at that point, I was. After a roll-over moment, much like mine earlier that morning, he’d sped through the city streets to make sure I wasn’t alone.

He spent twelve hours with my family that day, shoveling the salvageable into boxes and helping carry the weight. He’d always wanted to kick in a door, so when he saw the firefighter’s dark footprint smudged on my door he landed a whollop right in in the middle. The door frame, already weakened, exploded in splinters. He was satisfied, and I laughed until I cried.

When my mom left that day, she hugged him and said “Look after her, please.” He looked her in the eye and responded, “I will.”

He has. In three months I’ll marry him, now. For five years he’s made good on that promise to look after me, lord knows I’ve needed it sometimes. In return I’ve done my best to look after him. And though we fail more often than we succeed, I’m grateful to fail together. It’s as simple as that.

## Gathering

Gathering things:

They don't follow a pattern, but they do.

I crouched behind a mound of dirt and twigs in a recently-logged swath of Montana back woods, a half-full coffee can of plump deep purple huckleberries nestled in the duff at my feet. My then-fiancé took a protective stance in front of me, the last line of defense between me and a black military-style backpack ten yards away. A foot-long bowie knife gleamed in the sun, strapped to the pack, unsheathed.

“Poke it!”

“No you poke it!”

Sweat beaded on my forehead. Flies buzzed around my ears. A typical huckleberry picking excursion on a Sunday afternoon, except for that we'd found an abandoned backpack in the woods, and somehow convinced ourselves it was a bomb. It wasn't the only strange moment picking huckleberries – once, a woman had screamed at us in a combat picking maneuver; another time, Mom hefted a makeshift club toward a badger on the trail – but it was certainly the strangest.

With a proud resignation to the inevitable – that he'd be blown to bits once he'd tripped the mechanism inside – the family friend who'd joined us sauntered toward the pack. He poked it with a longish stick, and when he didn't explode we crowded in to investigate. Admired the

blade, unzipped the top. Another small bag, some sort of soft lunch pail, inside. Another unzip and – blood pressure medication. Diabetes supplies. Dad posited a war vet, perhaps, avoiding civilization and finding his peace in the woods. Beneath the lunch sack, a hefty bag of seeds. Medicinal, we assumed. Surely for PTSD.

“So what do we do with it?”

We bickered for a moment. Turn it in! Leave it be! Take it home! Although we, together, eventually decided to let it be (imagine if he came back for it, sick as he surely was, and his medications were gone! Our mutual conscience couldn't handle the human cost), we'd later found out the family friend had returned to retrieve it and found that it had gone.

That's the thing about gathering – how inconsistently we find what we set out for, how frequently we cower behind a dirt mountain waiting for a backpack to explode.

Gathering things:

We find them, and we don't.

One Thanksgiving afternoon found my sister armpits deep in a steep snowy ditch, a small rope wrapped around the top of a massive Christmas tree. We were battling that year, both of us home from college, not speaking over some now-forgotten unspeakable sin. Perhaps I'd judged a boyfriend, asked too many questions; perhaps she'd not left a note before a weekend away. Regardless, she was now glowering at me from below the branches of a dignified pine, needles

sloughing off into her hair and dusting the snow beneath her. We pulled tree and woman out of the ditch, hefted the one onto the roof of a late-90s Ford Explorer and the other into the backseat of the rig. The tree flopped off the other side of the truck, because that's tradition. Sister sat, still glaring, with one arm out the window, holding a branch in clutched fist. I mirrored her on the other side, arm hanging out the window, unsure if the ropes would hold and glad for something to do other than glare, myself.

Many years before, we'd found a similar tree down a similar ditch in the same part of the woods. The sharp scent of the pine filled the air and my nose as the sharp saw bit into the slender trunk.

"Pew!" Dad shouted, halfway through the trunk. "Let's get outta here!"

"I think it smells nice!" I admonished, surprised that this consummate mountain man didn't care for the scent of pine.

"You... do?" Perplexed, he raised an eyebrow in my direction.

The family dog had, unbeknownst to me, deposited a wee Thanksgiving turkey on the other side of the tree.

Years later, again, long after the eau de poo, years after the debacle of the tiny rope, I returned to the small apartment I shared with my fiancé after eight weeks in China and a series of delayed flights. I walked in the door, surprised to be met with the scent of pine. He'd found me a real

tree, and it fit into the pattern that I'd come to understand. Find them, you round them up, you move them, you process them. Berries, trees, mushrooms, memories, deer horns, dusty books, constellations across sphere upon sphere.

Gathering things:

A slow accumulation over distance and time.

He, bent over a thick carpet of inch-tall morels, picking through with deft fingers. Me, running ahead, searching for the mother lode, the foot-tall morels like wrinkled brown Christmas trees on the charred forest floor.

Back to the truck – across a wide creek, buckets swinging from outstretched arms. The water freaked her eyes out and so she nearly slipped. I reached out and caught her, shifting 90 degrees in the water, digging my heels into the tumbling stones below.

Gathering things:

A quality of light, accumulation.

## Fear and Injury

I gaped, naïve, at the man in line at the coffee shop. He was a regular customer, my coworkers told me, though I hadn't met him myself – I usually clocked out before he came in. It was my job to make his day a little better, a little brighter – but there wasn't much my smile could do to improve his day, that day. Blood matted his hair, clotted on the side of his face and muddied the dirt on his shirt and jeans. He glared straight ahead and muttered under his breath. The wound on the side of his head resembled raw hamburger and the flesh around his eye was bruised black. The eye socket was swollen almost completely shut. I'd never seen nonchalance paired with the sheen of sweat dripped from some sort of violence. I was no doctor but he needed more remedy than the pot of tea he ordered every time he came in.

I've always been a little squeamish. Human blood, outside the skin, makes me want to vomit. Hard. I'd thought before I might make a good nurse because I can comfort the hell out of the sick and the scared (I have what's been called a "comforting bosom," tailor-made especially for reassuring embraces) but blood is my kryptonite – one drop of the red stuff and my patients would be left to their own devices, figure out their wounds on their own. Don't blame me, blame evolutionary biology: If these were primitive times, and I passed out at the sight of blood, the saber-tooth that was killing the tribe would think me dead and pass over me. Plus, my reduced heart rate would slow my own blood loss. My queasy nerves would put me at an advantage, if I ever found myself prey to a prehistoric beastie.

Perhaps that's why I avoided the terribly hurt man in line at my place of work. Scratch that – it's *exactly* why I avoided him. Eighteen years of upbringing in careful compassion and small-town mores, thwarted by a gnarly bruise and crust of dried blood.

In my defense, or rather to my discredit, the man terrified me without his broken and bloody visage. He peered out from beneath a heavy brow ridge, foreboding, darkness personified, if the movies were to be trusted. His glare recalled the throes of a Midwest thunderstorm, a tornado, a cloud of volcanic ash. A shade of violence clung to him, a shadow that infiltrated the air around him, I thought, simple in my reading of the unsaid. The customers in line to the front and back of him glanced toward him and quickly away, shifted on their feet. The chatter between them quieted and took on that artificial tone that translates every sentence to “we know there is something wrong – if we all pretend there isn’t, it will just go away on its own.”

If the other customers ignored him, it was because I set such a great example of problem avoidance. I suddenly noticed the fingerprints on the chrome espresso machine – I had to clean them RIGHT NOW. Someone else would have to help this oblivious, broken man who was now second in line. I shot sideways glances at my co-baristas, hoping for some acknowledgement that something felt wrong, hoping that they would charge into the battle on a white horse of courage. None such luck. They didn’t meet my eye, either unaware of the imminent danger that I could not quantify, or working even harder than I to deny the presence in the room. To acknowledge the circumstances would be to accept the charge to address them, and perhaps they were just as sweaty with fear as I was. More likely, they just didn’t suffer from the same naiveté I did at the time.

I’d never reacted to another human being that way, and the newness of that brand of fear married quickly with a resounding sense of shame. My pulse quickened. My scalp tingled. The bloodied face and scalp, the bruised and swollen eye socket, the simmering smoldering pocketed rage all paralyzed me with something more than fear. I wasn’t afraid of grizzly bears – I knew

how bears would act, I could predict their behavior – but I was afraid of how much I didn't understand this man. He was the symptom of a social ill I couldn't then begin to comprehend. Someone had to do something about him, and for him. We were driving away customers, for one, and in small communities like these we are expected to look after our own. It wasn't going to be me, though. I kept cleaning that espresso machine, resigned to let someone else do the dirty work of fulfilling the Golden Rule.

I don't even know his name.

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In April 2014, Kody Simonson arrived at the home of Harold Abraham, a veteran who served in WWII. Kody, a young employee of the power company, was there to shut off his stove; it was no longer safe for that old stove to remain connected to the gas. Mr. Abraham didn't have a microwave. "I guess I'll be all right," he said, willing to eat his canned soup cold. After his shift, Kody went out and bought Mr. Abraham a microwave. When word got out, an appliance store donated a new, safer stove. The community then rallied to raise money to renovate Mr. Abraham's home.

I know about this story because it ran in the MDU Resources company newsletter, which I receive because I later worked as a receptionist at a large construction company. Alongside the story ran a picture of Kody and the elderly veteran he helped obtain a microwave and stove. When I read the story, I cried a little. I was moved by the baby-faced young man's easy charity and compassion; more than that, I was struck by the old man's resignation to a fate of cold soup after he had suffered so many cold meals and lost friends in the war (unverified, that he lost

friends or even faced active battle – I am a tender-hearted sap and my wobbly feelings filled in the more poignant details.)

I cried, too, I realize now, because I saw my own moral code at work in a young power company schmoe who bought an old man a microwave, and the absolute sweet nobility of that action earned him a few inches in the company newsletter. In my dream world, this is the stuff worthy of Nobel Prizes and parades. And when I read Kody's story I couldn't help but remember the time I could have been little smarter and a little braver for the sake of a bloody man in a coffee shop.

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A black and silver cordless phone sat ready and waiting at the end of the counter, beside the sink and below the paper towels. A small green light in the corner of the display indicated that it carried a full charge – I wish that it hadn't, because then I'd have a better excuse for being a lily-livered pansy. A better, braver, more courageous person would have called 911 – if not immediately, then at least eventually. As I said, I was a lily-livered pansy at that time, so I waited patiently for someone with more authority to deal with it, and dispel the stagnant air hovering just above our heads. The badness of the whole situation burned too strangely and we all looked down and away.

Then Kathy walked in the door, and I *knew* that she would fix it – she would state the unsaid, implement a solution that would seem obvious after the fact, and set the shop back in cheerful order. Part owner of the café, she notoriously mended all things. She was the kind of woman who took hot yoga classes twice a week and went camping on the Rocky Mountain

Front. She wore her hair cut short, cropped to her head, and although her hair was gray her face was smooth. She drank double espressos, and she always expected us to charge her husband for his drink. She gave the impression that she didn't need to work, but the coffee company kept her busy and made her feel important.

But Kathy walked in the door and became smaller, somehow. She busied herself wiping down tables with a rag dipped in diluted sanitizer.

If the boss wasn't going to act, I rationalized, I didn't need to either. I could model myself after her example and I'd be gloriously in the moral clear. In fact, it would be a clear violation of my role in this coffee shop and in life to usurp her example and call the police. I explained to myself, very thoroughly, that I couldn't possibly undermine her authority to *do nothing*.

All this time that my head had been spinning, and my heart aching, the line to order inched ever closer to the cash register. I don't recall who waited on the bleeding man, because I continued to occupy myself elsewhere, but I do know that it wasn't me. I buffed the counter as I eavesdropped on their exchange.

"Can I help you?" The barista behind the counter feigned a paper-thin normal voice.

"hrrrgh. NO." He shook his head, winced, and scowled.

"I mean, can I get you something?" Tension thrummed between them. I noticed a spider on the floor. Coffee grounds beneath the machine. A hairline crack in the drywall behind the sink.

He ordered a pot of tea. Co-worker Maggie later said he always ordered tea, Gunpowder Green, by the pot and never by the cup. Maggie said that he always brought in a Bible and an old photograph, and he sometimes muttered under his breath or yelled at the photo. Sometimes he

became enraged while staring at it, Maggie said, and pounded his fist on the table, scaring the other customers. No one ever did anything to stop him, she said. Let him go about his business. It wasn't an unusual attitude, even for a small town like this, because coffee shops have become a new third place and a gathering space for all types, from the rich to the poor, the sick, the well, the banal and the odd.

The photo, Maggie said, was of a woman from his past. Despite being much braver than I at the time, and having conversed with him in the past, that's all she knew about that.

As he made his way to an empty table, Maggie finally ducked her head to whisper to me. "Do you think we should do something?" Sweet relief – I wasn't the only one who noticed him.

"I don't know, what do you think?" I really didn't know and more than that, I wanted it to be her job to think about it. I was desperate for her to say something decisive about the whole thing.

"Bill says to leave him alone, and Bill kinda gets that kind of stuff...He doesn't want to cause more trouble for him with the police." Bill was our head cook, who'd been to jail before. It felt safe to jam all rough lives into the same bag – that way, we could justify following his lead. He dealt with some violence, this other guy has apparently dealt with some violence, so that makes Bill the authority on how to deal with people who have been victims of violent crime. Right? Right. It was easy for me to go along with her reasoning in the moment because it let me even further off the hook.

Maggie considered, nearly recanted – "I could call a friend of mine down at the police station, not to get him in trouble, just to check on him" – but the phone stayed on the receiver. The man sat at his table, drinking his tea, blood still drying on his clothes and face. Customers sitting at tables near him glanced at him and, like me, suddenly became interested in the drapes

or their cuticles. A family with young children conspicuously chose a table on the other side of the room.

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Looking back, I can't help but think on history's most obvious cases of bystander apathy. For infamous sexample: On Friday, March 13, 1964, Winston Moseley murdered Kitty Genovese just after 3 a.m. in Kew Gardens, Queens. It was originally reported that 37 people saw her murder and did nothing; although we now know that the facts don't corroborate the original news story, at least two witnesses could have helped her and did not. Joseph Fink worked in the apartment building across from where Genovese was killed – he observed the first of two attacks and then took a nap. Karl Ross, a neighbor, after hearing the first attack and doing nothing, saw the second attack and crawled out the window and into another neighbor's apartment. That second neighbor later called the police. This story has been heavily covered and canonized by the news media, most recently re-examined by the New Yorker in the spring of 2014.

Or this: On April 18, 2010, Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax was stabbed to death while apparently helping a woman engaged in hostile discourse with an armed man. An hour later, the police were called. In the meantime, one man stopped to shake him before moving on. Two others commented on his condition, snapped a picture and continued walking. Numerous others noticed him and simply walked by. This story was covered by the New York Times shortly after these events occurred in 2010.

Even more chilling, throw a child into the mix: On October 13, 2011, 2-year-old Wang Yue was hit by one van and then another. Eighteen people walked by her injured body in the road; finally, an elderly woman stopped to help her. She died of her injuries a week later. Covered by the BBC in 2011.

We as a great big social organism read these stories and together we are outraged. We search for answers, we hunt for sound psychological reasons a person might ignore another human being's fatal injury. We find reassurance in the science. We forget that we are measuring the sliding scale of ethics and morality by good deeds done, affording those who are complacent and afraid none of the very compassion we expect them to provide.

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"I just can't believe some of the people in this town," Maggie said. "They'll hurt anyone just because he's a little different." By now, we had ironed out that he most likely suffered from some kind of mental illness or disability. The general consensus among the staff was that he had been a victim of a ne'er-do-well local rube with a tendency for violence toward and fear of those unlike himself (invariably, we assumed that it would have been a man.)

I wondered if some of the blood might not be his own. Who is to say that he didn't assault someone else, someone who was wandering around out there in worse shape than the guy we had in the café? Who knows, he could have been hit by a car. But my coworkers were married to the romantic notion that he was de facto a victim of prejudicial violence.

Suspicious and grossed-out, I watched warily from the sidelines. Maggie donned latex gloves from the kitchen and wiped his wounds clean with a rag previously used to wipe down

tables. She later discarded the rag, water-color-smearred with rusty red. I don't know how she convinced him to accept her help – she walked out to his table and exchanged some quiet words with him, but when I asked her what she said she refused to tell.

Once, we found an unlabeled spray bottle full of an unknown substance after a customer, who was known to be homeless and mentally ill, had left. Maggie decided that the best way to determine what was in the bottle was to lift it to her nostrils and inhale deeply. The fumes burned her nasal passages so badly she immediately went to the ER, her bottle of chemical in tow for identification. She took me aside when she returned to work and whispered, conspiratorially: “It was muriatic acid. I sniffed *acid*.” Muriatic acid, also known as known as hydrochloric acid, is used in the manufacturing of PVC plastic and cleaning swimming pools, among other things. That day, we learned that it would also clean nasal passages of any errant hairs and/or scent receptors.

Maggie proffered, and general consensus agreed, that sniffing a liquid of unknown origin was not a very smart thing to do.

In light of her character, it was both remarkable and unremarkable that Maggie was the only one to step in and help. To physically help him herself was either an act of great courage or downright carelessness – his behavior was so unpredictable, it wouldn't be outrageous to think that he might lash out violently or otherwise.

If I were her, I told myself, I would have just called 911.

But I am me, and that's not what I did. I did not summon the appropriate authorities. I just stood there, slack-jawed, feet away from the phone, worried sick for Maggie's well-being as well as his, and I didn't do a damn thing. I stood there, cleaned one thing or another, and got progressively sweatier as I became more nervous and afraid.

It seems to me now that I was more afraid for myself than anyone else – out of naiveté, out of weakness – and I realize that I can't fault myself for that. In all these many years, living according to the Mayberry way, I had always believed myself to play the role of the beneficent savior crisis would arise. But in this case, it seemed that I was the one in need of saving. And the only one to do so was the girl who once nearly gave herself brain damage inhaling miscellaneous unknown chemicals.

Obviously, I should have done something, but regret is useless. The person I am today would have called the cops – I don't have to spell it out for myself. Bloody customers are a clear violation of health code – if we can drop from an A+ to a B for a cook eating pineapple while slicing it, we could certainly be penalized for negligent monitoring of customers' biohazard potential. Not to mention the worried customers and his own well-being. Though it was foolish of Maggie to take his care literally into her own gloved hands, I know in retrospect that I should have at least picked up the phone. And I forgive myself for becoming a classic, perpetually-condemned bystander.

We didn't know what to do with his dishes when he left.

## Portrait of a Laundromat

Six washing machines: a row of portholes in a sinking ship. Suds like seafoam, socks like flotsam riot behind round glass doors. Sweater sleeves and bathrobe ties emerge, retreat, fleecy krakens writhing in the deep. Sunlight streams through floor-to-ceiling windows flanking the room. Watching, waiting, I assign us roles. Woman behind the counter in a red polo shirt, green business logo stitched to the breast: the captain of the operation. And behind her, the second mate – youthful woman, slick black hair, same red shirt – swabs the deck, then folds a fitted sheet. Two would-be passengers occupy the room, me and a gentle old man. The man is of means, or cares to affect means: bold gold watch gleams like doubloons in the sunlight; trousers pleated crisp. For all that, the sole of one black side-lace shoe is easily twice as thick as the other; his spine curves sharply to his right. He glowers under thick white eyebrows and peruses the Times. At his side, a cracked and brittle laundry basket – yellow, once white – waits empty to be filled. He and I, we've paid our way – in quarters – and we wait in in silence to depart on a journey we've forgotten all about. No small wonder the ship is going down. The linoleum floor peels in the corners, and a small crack has started in the corner of the closest windowpane. Above, papery ceiling tiles absent or stained the color of a nicotine fingertip. But for all that we are sinking, it is not a bad afternoon. My quiet companion often glances up and breaks his glare to smile toward me, or behind me, I can't be sure. Country music wanders out from behind ironing boards and racks of plastic-shrouded suits. Sharp, clean, soapy smells tickle my nose. I breathe in deeply, and imagine we are soon to embark.

## Eavesdropping: Sandwich Shop

One man held up his thumb and pointer finger about an inch and a half apart. “Went straight through, about this deep...” His voice tapered as if he had more to say, but wouldn’t.

Shaggy blonde curls hung to his shoulders, where they met a swath of dark fuzz peeking out from under his tee-shirt. Beneath the hair, his skin was tan. Beneath his shirt, his skin was nearly translucent – a stark line between the two tones made it clear he wore the same style of shirt every day. And where his skin was tan, minute wrinkles had begun to appear.

His shirt – blaze orange – was faded, some sort of lettering illegible on the back. His thick canvas pants, threadbare and caked with assorted dirt and gunk. He worked hard, and often.

“Did the three of you ever get caught?”

A second man across the table tilted his head, glanced around faux-conspiratorially, over-calculatedly. His hair was black, his face clean-shaven. He wore a crisp button-down iteration of his companion’s fluorescent tee. And on the breast pocket, a logo in blue: “Mountain Water Company.”

His pants were too clean and he couldn’t be trusted.

“Aw, naw, nope –“

The first man demurred, glancing at the second's shining smartphone and company clipboard. He did not elaborate, but instead changed the conversation to something more suitable for lunch break: city politics. Something about piles of dirt, something about "that property," something about water lines and reclamation. He spoke freely now, safe behind the controversy of community land management. Whatever he had done, whatever he was about to mention, didn't matter now. When he leaned in to make a particularly elaborate point, the second leaned away. And when the man with cleaner pants leaned in close to utter a quiet something, the one with torn work pants took his turn and slouched back in his seat.

Both men fell quiet for a moment. Both looked anywhere but toward the other – down at the table, across the room and out the window. One beat, two beats of silence, and then –

"Shall we?"

No word of agreement, no affirmative nod. But after another pensive moment, the first man rose, dumped his tray and led the way out the door.

## Dance Memory Dance

It was the not-remembering that bothered me.

Six 20-somethings – myself included – stood at the back of the orchestra, counting rests the way amateur (read: lazy) basses do: for indefinite periods of time, warped by unending repeats and sparkling strings somewhere near the front of the stage. And also the way lazy basses do, we counted somewhat inexactly. Four pizzicato plucks and we sheathed our bows (titillating, sexy) and, to pass the cosmically vast length of time between those four notes and our next entrance, the nearly inaudible decrescendo at the end, we discussed the great but obscure movies of our youth –

*You know, the one with the pink bird guys who throw their heads around... David Bowie's junk is, like, OUT: in-your-face, 80's style bulging package in those shiny tights...*

*I know, it's all I could look at the whole entire time –*

as if we were some kind of critic's guild, looking back with a wise eye at the quirky entertainment of our shared sunrise days. We were the Siskel to each other's Ebert, and together we doled out a discerning twelve thumbs between us.

Truthfully, we were barely post-adolescent. We believed, deeply, that we could pay our bills with music and love, and avoid the evils of capital — because we were the sole exceptions to the system, to the rules. Convinced we understood the world of the 1980s, not one of us was actually born early enough to remember them. We called the era self-conscious and gaudy, citing the disposability of its media and culture, when the only example of 1980s disposability we knew first-hand were the Huggies we shat in, post-1988. We parsed the complexities of Reaganomics,

derided the War on Drugs and chuckled, insensitive, about the indefinite lasting effects of the Chernobyl disaster. We were utterly brilliant, the way 18-year-old film connoisseurs tend to be.

That day, I talked about the movie – *Labyrinth*, 1986, a George Lucas and Jim Henson collaboration – as if I'd only forgotten the title, a momentary lapse in my incredibly vast and mature cultural memory bank. Of course I knew the film, I said, it was formative in my cognitive development as the true child of the 80s I pretended to be. Truth be told, I couldn't remember anything more than bright colors, bobbling bird heads, high-contrast images and a beautiful woman I later learned was a young, angsty Jennifer Connelly, but I pulled one over on my new friends and deconstructed the sexual politics of costume and cast.

(Of course, I did vividly remember David Bowie's glitter-draped business, because who could forget that piece of anatomical wonder? As far as can recall, the Goblin King provided my earliest impression of the differences in bodily construction, a mysterious presence beneath his shining tights.)

But that was it. That was all I could remember. No one knew my secret – that I was a squirming, stinking child when I first saw David Bowie's glimmering tights-clad bulge, and therefore didn't know or care about the effect those hot pants had on the meaning of life in a universe that doesn't care about puppets or sex. But I *said* I remembered these things. I murmured my appreciation for soundtrack and symbolism of the maze without ever mentioning a specific line or scene. When fourth bass Henry remembered the name – *Labyrinth!* with a cliché finger snap – I didn't have to fake the spark of recognition in my eyes.

What a relief, when Henry then proposed a film screening in his room that night. It would give me a chance to revisit a something I had loved so intently as a child (even if remembered only as a phantom shadow of dancing colors and cartoonish beasts) and I'd have the chance to

bond with a crowd I believed to be cultured, artistic, *alternative*. We'd all show up at 9:00 and drink cheap beer before diving into Jim Henson's world of muppetry and delight.

I arrived at his room promptly at 9:00, wondering when the rest of the crew would arrive. They wouldn't, I soon learned. Everyone else bailed, Henry said. He *hates* it when people do that, he said, but oh well, he said, what can you do, he said, musicians are flaky, he said – a man of many words, Henry was. But we can still watch it without them? He raised a hopeful eyebrow, eager to see if I'd fall for his clever plan – the old group date switcheroo. He lowered the lights, smushed his futon blankets around to make room for us both, and offered me a tepid Hamms.

As young Sarah (Connelly) rehearsed the lines to a play called Labyrinth, oozing angst, I began to recall moments spent curled up in front of the TV in my childhood home, watching and re-watching as she lost track of time and wished her inconvenient baby brother into the arms of the Goblin King. I remembered admiring her guts, her bravado, thinking maybe one day I too would be a sexy virginal teen, adventuring in a land of magic puppets with an eclectic British rock star. The false nostalgia I so trickily invoked with my smart new buddies soon gave way to the warmth of a remembered dream, a found home movie, a childhood story once forgotten but gladly retold over a family hotdish. I tingled with remembering, like slipping into a hot pool on a cold day, sucking every crackle of romance from the moment like a cheesy feelings leech.

My sentimental tingles weren't the only thing warming me, though. With the astute observation powers of a card-carrying adult I began to sense that, just as intently as I was watching the screen, so too was Henry watching *me*. My guts twisted in sharp contrast to the cozy comfort of my old/new favorite cult classic Jim Henson film. The door was closed, the room was dark, I barely knew him and yet here I was, getting the riveted eyeball like he expected me to eventually morph into a 3-D picture of a dolphin or a train.

When Sarah, onscreen, encountered those gangly pink bird-like creatures in the woods, the ones who popped their noggins off their shoulders and dribbled them on the forest floor, Henry spoke. He'd been inching closer to me, although in my efforts to ignore him I didn't see him move. He projected his voice directly into my ear canal. I jumped.

"This movie is so much better when you're high." He gestured up at the smoke alarm, which was covered in a Safeway plastic bag.

Nope. Nope nope nope. I was the kind of girl who never broke the rules, had not yet crossed any line drawn by anyone, anywhere. He might as well have proposed that we dismember my childhood bear and beat Grandma with the pieces. Truth be told, I wasn't uninterested in a little rebellion – but I wanted to break the rules on my own terms. Not like *this*, with Henry guiding me like a horny teenaged Gandalf through the landscape of recreational herbology.

I shook my head. He paused the movie. "Well, lets just fool around then, I guess."

No, Henry, how about let's not fool around, why would you think I want to fool around, why are you saying it like that, like it's obvious I came here with the sole intention of getting frisky to the backdrop of syncopated synthesizers? Was it my friendly demeanor at rehearsal? Was it the way I lent you my rosin when yours shattered on the floor? Was it my presence with you, here, alone in this room? I wanted to watch David Bowie sing about the babe, the babe with the power, the power of voodoo – *who do?* – YOU DO! Do what? Remind me of the babe! and I wanted to talk to another human being about what it means to miss something you weren't even there for in the first place, not really. What I did *not* want to do, quite specifically, was fool around.

But there I was, nervously sipping my beer and avoiding eye contact, having recently been informed that I was expected to make him dance magic dance. I raced through my mental catalog of ready-made doors through which I might exit the scene. I have a boyfriend, my father would kill me, I have garlic breath, I need a root canal —

“Um, maybe, let’s just not?” Nervous giggle, because that’s what I knew. “Maybe we could just, um, watch the rest of the movie?” Eyebrows high, questioning, begging my new friend not to let his feelings get hurt. “I’m just, like, really into the movie right now?”

To his credit, Henry didn’t insist. But he also didn’t speak a word to me through the rest of the movie, at the end of which I turned to him with a smile – look how happy the puppets are, bro! what if we were all that happy! – and he didn’t look back, but instead glowered into his lap like he’d discovered the source of slow Wi-Fi and people who double park, all in one tidy package – his. And you know what? I felt *bad* for denying him his God-and-country-given right to a little sassy sideways Slingo.

For a while, I felt bad for feeling bad about it – for denying myself the right to deny him. Now that I know better, ten years later, it’s still the remembering that really bothers me, and I just can’t let it go.

## Reading Hangzhou: Part 1

It is a remarkable thing to find one's way.

For instance, the woods behind my childhood home: A white deer bone in a mossy hollow marked the turn to the swamp. I never went by myself (bears), but walked the overgrown road with my dad. I thought the land went on forever. The edges of the swamp merged with the falling light in an infinite north, and we waited quietly boots-deep in mud. Ducks settled in like pepper flakes from a shaker. Cigar-head cattails bobbed in the wind, above our heads as we hunkered, together. A cow moose and calf might tread out through the fringe into the water, or we might wait just long enough for the light to begin to change. We were small and we were very, very large.

Twenty years later traffic roared beneath me as I mounted a pedestrian bridge in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. Where once I was large, I was now quite small. From a child in the mountains of Montana, the years had propelled me toward student-teaching abroad, finishing an internship that would round out my qualifications for a state teachers' license and the chance to man a classroom all my own. I was away for the first time. I was traveling alone for the first time. I was guilty of owning spaces as a voyeur. A campground, a KOA, a state park, an art museum. Minnesota North Dakota New York Washington; at least these places fit within the framework I had known and in my stories, I called them mine. I couldn't own China like that, and it rocked my ego to a great order of magnitude. But at least I could own the space occupied by my body and mind, the experiences that come with moving my meat bag body across time and space.

After an eight-week internship teaching high school English in a small rural community in Montana, I survived the 14-hour flight to Shanghai (my first long flight), explored the city for a day and then hopped a school van inland toward Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. The driver, young but clearly experienced, darted through traffic, a hand's breadth away from busses, teetering cargo trucks and gleaming Lamborghinis. Each time we approached to pass another vehicle the driver blared the horn as if to say "toot toooot! We are here! Do not change lanes on top of me!" (This theme, too, that of nearly being squished by cars, would repeat throughout my time in China, my sense of special awareness sorely lacking after a life in a massive state with fewer than one million inhabitants.) The driver and my escort were unfazed. My whole body jerked with each rattle of the horn, with each glimpse of the pores on the neighboring bus driver's nose.

Rattled by the ride, exhausted, I drained multiple bottles of Nongfu Spring brand bottled water, and desperately needed a break. I mentioned this to my escort, bashfully, unsure of whether it would be polite to mention it, and she graciously asked the driver to stop shortly before reaching Hangzhou. Busy rest stop with knick knack shops inside. Rows of squat toilets, stainless steel basins flush with the ground. No "important papers;" in China you must pack your own. I'd later pee in my own shoes at a squatty in an American-themed sports bar, but I got lucky that day. Dry shoes. My school escort kindly handed me a tissue from the van, though later I'd find myself in a public pay toilet wondering how I'd forgotten tissue for the nine thousandth time.

Twenty more minutes in the van and we reached Hangzhou, though I only knew it because my friend told me so. Hangzhou felt like an extension of the city before, slightly greener, slightly bluer of sky, a slow gradation of color over miles speeding past high-rise

apartments in various degrees of construction and crumble. By the time I stumbled into my temporary home, exhaustion clouded my perception – I barely recall pulling up to the school. I know the side gate was open from the alleyway into a paved courtyard, to allow the school van to park inside. (Later, a series of somber guards would press a button to let me in and out of the main gate. At first I wasn't sure how the different guards knew who I was, without introduction; I smiled when I remembered I looked a bit different from other would-be visitors.) Though I tried to carry my own bags my companion insisted I allow the driver to do so for me. I was terrified to see them go, the same way I'd been terrified to fall asleep on the plane without tying my purse to my leg.

For the next eight weeks, I'd be living and teaching at this elite English-language boarding school. My fifth, sixth and eighth grade students spoke some English, with varying degrees of fluency. I spoke no Mandarin, a conceit of the notion that I'd be teaching only English. I'd been reassured that most people in the city, too, spoke English, so I had prepared only the most basic phrases, and even those, poorly. I felt far from prepared enough, but thankfully my fiancé back home had thought to purchase me a set of visual dictionaries for the eventual games of grocery store charades.

First, though, I needed a shower. Desperately. On the plane ride over, during my first visit to the economy-class latrine, I bumbled down the aisle and squeezed through the tiny door, only to plant my buns squarely on the rim of the basin itself. No seat. For a half-second only, my skin clung to the metal, sticky with others' excreta. I'd scrubbed the contact point with hand sanitizer but I was convinced I'd been infected, contaminated, doomed. In addition to the (shudder) remaining germs from my fatal error, a hot mix of sweat and dust clung to my body and pasted my hair to my neck.

So I stepped into the small shower stall in my small bathroom in my small, womb-like dormitory on the fifth floor of a Chinese boarding school. As I turned the knob, my heart beat faster for the upcoming steamy release. A clean body feels, to me, more human, more apart from the material madness of being neither here nor there and both at once.

Cold.

I turned the handle the other way, thinking, of course, that Chinese water handles work the other way, naturally.

Cold again.

And as I smelled quite terrible and I had to teach in the morning, I stepped into the icy stream. Shoulders slumped, muscles tense against the cold, 48 hours of compounding exhaustion boiled, tight in my chest. I was primed for a good cry and so I wept in the shower, cold and alone.

Spent, I dried myself with a small hand towel (the only one I had), brushed my teeth and thanked Heaven above that I'd brought my hair dryer – and a power converter. Oh so smart; I'd never traveled and here I'd remembered to bring such an essential. I felt like it was some kind of insider secret, and with great confidence I plugged my hair dryer into the handy power strip I'd brought which I plugged into the converter and then into the wall.

Quick spark, a blue flash, and I was sitting in the dark, cold, alone, stupid and afraid. With the smell of burned plastic in my nose, I laid back on the bed (extra-extra-extra firm) with my arms spread wide. This was it. I was going to be cold and alone in the dark forever, and I might as well resign myself to that fact sooner rather than later.

Another quick cry later, and I fumbled my way to my suitcase to pull on clothes that, once fresh, now smelled like 14 hours of international flight. I'd imagined that I'd be nonplussed by the bumps along the way but I was thoroughly plussed. I cursed myself for weeping like a big privileged baby, and went about my way. I'd be braver now, I told myself. I'd figure it out, however I could. I'd poke and prod and pester until I was comfortable, like a fat cat kneading a blanket in the warm sun. Except in this case, I was a cold, wet, naïve American abroad the for the first time. And instead of kneading a blanket I'd be pestering those who were kind enough to offer me space in their world for the next eight weeks. And I'd be doing it in a language we may or may not share.

I set my jaw, squared my shoulders and bounced down the five flights of stairs to the offices below. The teachers in their offices below, both Chinese and foreign, were visibly startled by my frantic, arm-waving, gesticulating petition for help – most hadn't expected me, and didn't know who I was. They gladly helped, though, and offered: help running the water heater (you have to plug it in), help turning on the light (flip the fuse!). Help eating my first meal, fish heads with white rice. While those around me filled their bellies I couldn't find the meat. I shredded that fish head between furtive glances at the teachers around me, expertly pecking the meat from the bone with quick snips of the school's wooden chopsticks. I pulled bits of flesh from bone with clumsy fingers, my chopstick skills slow enough I'd starve before I'd finished my meal. Help accessing the internet, so that I might call home and later feel a little less alone. It wouldn't be for another four weeks that the connection worked in my room; until then, I camped out in the fourth-floor teachers' lounge, a glass-enclosed fishbowl with a view of the glittering high-rise apartments, clean clothes hanging out the windows to dry.

## Reading Hangzhou: Part 2

Being in China taught me about reading places. Not reading *in* places, though that's part of it. To almost passively absorb the language in one's immediate environment is a luxury I have taken for granted, and decried as media overload at home in the U.S. Rather, being in China drew to my attention reading places themselves, sometimes like a book, like a story, like an advertisement or a tweet or the back of a cereal box, depending. Semantic units of meaning make up a landscape like letters to a word to a phrase; they combine differently to create different forms of "media." The best way down the mountain or the safest manner in which to hail a speeding Chinese cab – meaning becomes method, and eventually – with retrospect – method becomes story. But still: a bashful child's smile, rain spattered on my outstretched hand, traffic moving like ants pouring from a hill.

My first task in the school was to observe classes, to help understand the culture of the school – quite a task, as I was still fumbling through a culture I did not wholly understand. Forty desks to each room, straight rows, books stacked tidily on the shelf. Wood laminate floors peeled under the sun streaming in, dusty, through the wide window. A broom in the corner, shaped like an L, plastic bristles in three rows spaced a micron further apart than that in my apartment at home. These are the details that read differently the first time around, then eventually, more familiar as literacy of place begins to sprout. Large text on the walls: "To be or not to be, that is a question," or "Time will pass – will you?" At the start of class the teacher would call out "Good morning, students!" The students then stood as one body to respond, in striking unison, "Good morning, teacher!" A quick tandem salute, and then they sat, hands folded uniformly on their desks. When addressed with a question from the teacher, a student would stand, respond in a crisp loud voice, and sit promptly when their response was acknowledged.

“What would *you* take to a farm with no electricity?” after reading a text about a Chinese child visiting a Swedish farm with few amenities.

“Strong?” She smiled. An outstretched hand, fingers together, palm flat, pointing toward the child. Each student had selected their own English name, many reflecting the translation of their own Chinese name.

Strong stood. “I would bring a book, some money, and my mom and dad, because I would be so bored on the farm!”

Chuckles rippled across the room.

“Oh! You would bring a book, some money, and your parents, to keep you entertained without electricity! Very good!” A quick nod, and the child sat, a smile on his lips.

Like any school – moreover, like any interaction between humans – this scenario might vary. A child might falter in their response, misunderstanding the request. A question may be mispronounced; a child might forget their ideas in a moment of performance anxiety. And in some classes, of course, students were invited to respond less frequently; however, the English curriculum and the East meets West goals of that particular school called for interaction and dialogue.

Not long after arriving, I then served as an ad-hoc voice actor. I read and recorded passages for a grade eight sample course, texts riddled with Chinese food and place names I more than adequately bungled to the point of incomprehensibility. I would later find out, in the moment, that this recording was to be presented as part of a demonstration lesson in front of a group of thirty visiting teachers from inner Mongolia, who smiled politely in waves as my wretched diction reverberated out of the speakers and across the quiet room.

Immediately after, I was at the helm of classes of my own, just as I'd always yearned to be. I'd brought books from home, books about football and huckleberries and Montana things, and my students were equal parts intrigued and confused. I echoed their sentiment. I had still yet to figure out the basics of navigating the neighborhood, ordering food, calling a cab or even courtesy on a public bus. I told the students all of this, that I hadn't been away from America and that I didn't speak Mandarin, and as they gasped and smiled I settled into the rhythm of class. The students were glad to teach me words and phrases I would need, and eventually share with me their Chinese names. They giggled when I mispronounced (I struggle to register and duplicate the notes of the tonal language) and cheered when I finally got a word or two right. They helped me, and helped each other when I fell short, and I felt full with the common joy in childhood across culture and place.

Some details, though, felt at first uncanny and then revelatory. I began to consider more deeply the notion the bridged my experience at home and now here: of reading a place, of reading in a place, of multiple literacies entangled in immeasurable ways. I still couldn't yet piece together the meaning in my surroundings, nor could I make meaning from what was literally written there. In myriad ways I saw those around me, too, making meaning informed by past and present culture and place.

For instance: Every child wrote in the same hand – each flick of the wrist, the angle to the same degree, the same flick at the bottom of every letter “f”. If a letter was off by an ink blot, the youngest children might take pause before almost inevitably working through the stumbling block toward comprehension. A teaching friend told me this is because each drop of ink means something when writing Chinese characters, and so that intensity of meaning carries over into

English language writing. A series of photos of Chinese students' immaculate handwriting went viral in 2015. The photos proved controversial in the comments' sections: Some readers questioned the supposed implied conformity, while others lauded the value of beautiful script. Some of my own students remarked that their American teachers' handwriting was consistently terrible (though only when pressed, as they were far too polite to voluntarily comment on a teacher's flaws). The observation was partly true, and partly reflective of these teachers' vastly different handwriting styles. I was embarrassed to think that my students may have attributed my own horrible writing on the board to lack of ability, and that that perception may have interfered with the teaching and learning process.

My true lack of ability was evident any time I tried to travel the eight blocks from my home campus to the school where I taught. By one route, it was easy to walk below an overpass until reaching a small Centurymart grocery store, then turn into the Southern Song Imperial streets (a historical district restored to the city appearance centuries ago.) Other routes, however, led down long alleys serving as backyards for families in the apartments on either side. Flowers bloomed from pots stacked in doorways. Winter melon vines laced from one balcony to another, the green gourds dangling above. Yet other city blocks included shop after shop, from hotpot to bubble tea to tennis shoes to building supplies. In one brimming alcove, a man sat on the stone, repairing windows day after day. A myna bird in a cage.

I didn't know this place, of course, but not only did I not know this place, I didn't know *how* to know this place. The set of rules I'd learned about life in the U.S. didn't always apply here, now, in this place I'd never been. With no Mandarin, I couldn't read untranslated signs; moreover, I couldn't decode the bits of semantic meaning that emerge in every landscape, everywhere, as long as human beings have occupied this great green Earth. Hundreds of years of

stories threaded through each bridge and pagoda. For example, Lady White, a white snake demon, is still trapped under Leifang Pagoda. Or, in other versions, she escaped, reunited with her love with whom she opened a Chinese medicine for the poor. Every friend from Hangzhou knew these stories and the stories helped shape their understanding of the world, as stories do.

But I, however, did not know my way, did not know how to find my way and so every turn, somehow, took me back to West Lake, Xihu, the town's source of pride for centuries and an apparent magnet for directionally challenged Americans who can't read a word of Chinese. Some force directed me back to the lake, again and again. I eventually resigned myself to my daily walk to the lake, an easy task as the hubbub of the district and the stillness of the lake seemed to reconcile some small part of the inevitable contradictions I'd been finding within myself. As a teacher, I'd struggled to find the right balance between art and form; as a human, I vacillated between strict safety and thoughtful adventure – though adventure nearly always won out.

From the classroom to my unintentional ventures to West Lake, I was functionally illiterate, in language and in place. In Montana, I understood what was happening around me the way a native speaker of English understands that a big old red truck can never be a red big old truck. If landscape is a language, everything was written in the same hand with the same familiar alphabet.

Aurally, my weeks in China were a perceptual blank tape of sorts. Walking in Hangzhou felt comparable to being in the woods, in that my language brain wasn't constantly required to turn input into meaning, but different in that millions of people lived, breathed, ate, loved, smoked, endured all around me in a swirling microcosm of human urges and agendas. Policemen and taxi drivers regarded me as a veritable baby, I imagined from the looks on their faces; I

carried my address on an increasingly-tattered blue-lined index card and showed it like a child showing the label inside their shirt.

I couldn't decode, I did not yet fully understand, I wandered blindly into what may have been criminal – or at least frowned-upon – photography of dairy products at the local Century Mart. I was impressed by the incredible variety of products in the five-story grocery store down the street. From smoked ducks to live fish to produce of shapes and sizes and colors I've never seen before, it was a veritable food lover's wonderland. I was, specifically, impressed by the types and quantities of milk available. (Frozen milk! Powdered milk! Shelf stable milk!)

Naturally, I wanted to share this incredible lactose smorgasbord with my fiancé at home. (This is the nature of our relationship: I send him pictures of Chinese milk, he calls me outside to see the thousands of night crawlers on the lawn during an early March rain.) I went down to the store and made a mini-film in which I gave him a tour of the dairy section – or at least, I started to. I ended up with a 20-second clip in which a store employee is yelling (in Chinese) in the background the entire time; it took me that long to figure out the store employee was yelling at *me* as I'd become accustomed to the hum of so many millions of people in a city at once. Although photos are encouraged most places, this grocery store was evidently not one of them. And nervous as I already was, alone and afraid in a place I could not yet understand, nothing cooled my blood more than getting shouted at by an older uniformed gentleman in words that bounced off my ears.

For the rest of my time at the store that day, an adorable little girl – maybe eight years old – followed me around, first at a distance and then right at my side. I talked to her in English and she responded, with a smile, in Chinese, and in this way we wandered the store until I found the few items I was looking for (this is not uncommon; I stuck out a bit and kids are often eager to

make friends.) I am a bit of a worrier, however, and still a bit unsettled from the yelling in the milk aisle. A small part of me was convinced she was a child mole, sent to seek and destroy suspected milk spies. After a few minutes of our conversation I darted down the aisles, circled around, and doubled back – but there she was, ponytails bobbing, at every turn. By the time I made it to the checkstand she had rejoined her parents, like normal, and I was sweaty and confused.

I peeked over my shoulder the whole walk home, noticing who noticed me with greater interest than usual. I was easily noticed, one of few white Americans in the neighborhood. Would I be, for no reason, or a reason I didn't understand, asked to leave? It was an unfounded worry but back home, the 45<sup>th</sup> US presidential election was unfolding and I dwelled on the potential outcomes. Here, students asked me if I liked Trump and roared with laughter before I could answer. Without a full shared lexicon, I couldn't open the conversation I wanted to have, so I settled on a wistful smile that I hoped hit somewhere between affectionate and sad. Over the days to come something prodded a terror of being watched, surveilled, judged by a rulebook I couldn't read. I tried not to think about the truth, that my body was never in the same place twice as we all careened together through time and space and I would return to a home that was different from the one I had left.

## Reading Hangzhou: Part 3

Once, my dad and I visited an old favorite hunting spot after a season away. We hiked the benches and, after a stint in a stand on a rocky bluff, crested a ridge to a known vantage point over a grassy meadow below. Our footsteps crunched in dry grass and skiff of snow, try as we might to tread silently, until –

Thunk.

Danner boots hit dark asphalt. Early morning light glittered off reflective yellow road paint, still dusted with frost. Beyond, tree stumps, slash piles, perc test pipes. Pink survey marking whiskers bloomed in hollows where tracked machinery had crawled. The clues suggested proto-roads and ticky-tacky houses in ticky-tacky rows. We knew what had happened here: money changed hands and changed everything else. I'd read this particular book a hundred times and suddenly, a line of a language that wasn't there before. And in China, clothes hanging from open windows of shiny high-rises, and smoked ducks and geese dangling from coat hangers to cure in the street where gridlocked vehicles belch emissions below.

As I began to place that which I'd begun to learn in the frame of my past, I realized my challenge had become twofold – first, to teach a language I know intimately to children who meet English as a new friend, a new currency, another cog in a long school day; and second, to figure out how to teach at all when the patterns of my students' landscapes might be so different from those of my own, or from school. Knowing a place is a certain kind of literacy, but how does that literacy work together with the written word? How do we value written literacy without devaluing those literacies baked into every student who occupied a physical space, ever? Literacies in languages of which we might not even be aware? I was, and am, humbled by the challenge and eager for ways to learn.

I believe that to teach is to listen. To listen as much as we teach, while we teach, in the spaces before and after we teach, in dialogue and on the page. To what is said, and particularly, to silences. Listen to languages you might not know. Listen all the same.

In the United States, as in my time in China, students' needs — as learners, as human beings, and as equal participants in a vibrant global community — have come to me in a variety of ways, some direct, some indirect, and often in the language of landscape and narrative, as their places become their experiences become their stories. As a teacher of literature and writing, I've more often learned my students' stories through their work on the page. Sometimes, though, it's an uncharacteristic silence in a conversation about trauma. It's a moment between students I was meant to overhear, or maybe I wasn't, but somehow that story still came to my consciousness and has been integrated into mine. Sometimes it is the clothes they wear, the way they walk, the food they carry. If I listen to those stories, whether they are shouted or whispered or displayed in silence, I believe I will be better equipped to serve. Though I believed I was fluent in these unspoken languages before, I learned in China that listening can extend well beyond the cues one might take for granted.

If I consider my moment with the pigtailed girl in the milk aisle in a grocery store in Hangzhou, I wonder if maybe hearing might open a keyhole into the literal and cultural languages I can't yet read. Maybe this listening will make me a better ally for my students through education. Maybe it will not — though I can't imagine the harm in doing all I can to be sure my students know they've been heard.

Before this — before my teaching license, before Hangzhou — I was an assistant in a Montessori classroom in a Montana town near my home. Before that, even, my mother taught

Montessori preschool for years, and I bobbed in and out of the classroom as a volunteer and hopefully helpful hand. I realize now that it was there that I first saw the power of the open ear. Mom, a brilliant teacher with a reputation as such, implored me to listen first, validate second, and question third when kiddos inevitably erupted into battle (think: one child clobbering another with the erstwhile “Peace Rose” in the soft light of the naptime sun, filtered through folding paper shades.) I didn’t know it then but I suppose I was beginning to see that which I now call my Self in hordes of tiny Others, a practice that recalled moments on the mountain listening to wolf tones circling ever closer as we hiked out after a hunt, speculating as to the meaning of their cries. How easy I sometimes forget that others, like I, are agents of their own story. If, like Maria Montessori once said, “the external object is the gymnasium on which the spirit exercises itself,” how much too is the world, external to me, populated with spirits pumping reps on their own external AbBlaster machine.

I once tried to put words to this kind of listening as it appears in the classroom. I called it “animate listening,” a reflection of certain tenets of animism and my interest in the myriad array of Native American teaching practices across time and space. I defined animate listening as “as recognition of the living, vibrant self within the other” and “a humbling of the self in order to perceive and understand the voice of another.” This humbling of self felt noble, in theory, and overwhelming in practice when humility married fear in the West Lake district of Hangzhou.

In day-to-day practice, this kind of listening takes a bit more purposefulness when not predisposed by culture and space. In some ways, it happens in every responsive, successful classroom in the U.S. It is possible, for instance, that cohesive strands across the Common Core show some kind of interdisciplinary listening, some bridging of boundaries between self and other. It is also possible, however, that the top-down organizational structure of some schools in

the U.S. minimalizes the role that this kind of listening might play in the teaching and learning process.

Things get even harder in the face of that firehose of information of Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, a generally one-way differential of thoughts and ideas. Though many rightfully celebrate the interactivity of online media, this interaction is selective, and given the quantity of original content hurling out through various online avenues those responses are often the equivalent of spitting into the firehose, hundreds of commenters, all together in different directions with disparate goals. The information flow is unbalanced, listening too often forgone in favor of a quick headline scan and quicker response. I myself am guilty of this. An outwardly emphatic vector of communication reifies a selfhood that subjugates the other: other human individuals, other experiences, other non-human participants in a material universe. That is to say: When a person can say anything, they often do. Together we forget that classic maxim, to listen first to understand.

In China, I exited this firehose stream of information. I hadn't purchased a VPN to circumvent the "Great Firewall," one component in the Golden Shield Project that blocks or censors information considered harmful to the people by the Communist Party. Or, by others' interpretation, a mechanism to block information harmful *to* the communist party. I wanted to follow my host laws to the letter and so I'd been afraid to circumvent this system. Admittedly, I also wondered about life without the constant input of U.S. news networks and my social circles' opinions thereof. This limit on my former first source of information altered my notion of listening as well, in addition to the literal inability to understand language. I had to rely on greater interpretation of the few articles I could access, or secondhand news from loved ones back home.

When I tried to explain listening, before any of this occurred, I'd become momentarily (occasionally, still) fixated on Walter Ong. A Jesuit priest and scholar, Ong studied the ways human communication moved from exclusively oral culture to the written word. He thought about writing as a technology, a technology that changes the brain. (Does microblogging change the brain? To wit, I've checked Twitter three times in the writing of this paragraph and I still don't feel fulfilled.) Like anyone who's ever had a public opinion about anything ever, his work has been investigated and challenged, expanded and explored, all of those interactive things that go along with having something to say. But his basic premise – that writing changes brains – has become nearly cliché in the world of pop culture. The 2016 alien flick *Arrival*, for example, orbits the premise that as experience shapes language, so to does language push back to alter that very reality.

When I was in China, my reality had shaped and been shaped by a system of language much different from that around me. My language: alphabetic; my friends': arguably ideographic. How did that affect the ways we understood one another? I cannot presume to guess, with understanding of only one side of the coin; suffice it to say I had Ong on the brain as I learned that the bridge-shaped character meant “bridge” and the lady-shaped one meant “woman.”

I've not been the first to consider the complexity of hearing and understanding, and I certainly won't be the last. In the 1980s, Larry Evers and Felipe S. Molina set out to document the traditional oral songs of the Yaqui in *Yaqui Deer Songs/Maso Bwikam* in a way that had not been done before. Previously, scholars tried to transcribe these sacred songs word-for-word via the alphabetic English language, rife with stringent rules enforced by whomever is tasked with

putting word upon page. But think – how much is lost when a performance is frozen in the written word! Scholars of Shakespeare often admonish silent readings of the texts, as they were written to be performed. Similarly, the voice, the setting, the volume, the visual representation of the songs and stories of the Yaqui are lost in traditional transcription. But Evers and Molina, an academic and a member of the Yaqui community, respectively, keep the orality of the literature alive. They realize, too, that their efforts aren't perfect:

The historically exploitative aspects of the relationships between Euroamericans and native Americans, teachers and students, investigators and informants, employers and employees, all cast long shadows around our effort to make this a fully collaborative project. It would be arrogant for us to suggest that we have avoided them completely. By presenting our collaboration in this way, however, we want to remind you that we have tried. At the same time we want to echo a method of the deer songs themselves in which, as we understand it, there are also many voices in one. (Evers and Molina, 9)

Even Molina, a self-identified Yaqui deer singer, didn't come to this sense of understanding wholly innately or organically. He first became interested in the songs as an eighth-grader, and made his first rasper and rubber (notched branch) to accompany himself as he hummed melodies to which he did not know the words. He had seen, experienced, and altogether *listened* to the deer songs since the age of five. Through high school, he lost interest, but upon his grandmother's death he once again returned to the deer songs, this time through a record album of recorded songs. As he listened to the songs, he began to take note of the rhythm and the

words — began to recognize the life-force inherent within those songs — and together with his brother began to attempt to replicate what they had heard. Through a continual process of listening and repeating, and communicating with one another, Molina and his brother partook in a participatory process of engagement with the songs. As they began taking requests to sing publicly, having listened to one another and to the recording, Molina's grandfather insisted that he participate in a true Yaqui *pahkom* (ceremonial occasion of ritual and celebration) to hear the songs of the previous generation.

For Molina, the learning process was not a one-directional knowledge freeway, nor was it a simple two-way dialogue — rather, it was a process of recognizing a web of animate listening that connected each participant in the process, from Molina to his brother to the voices on the recording to his godfather and the people with whom he participated in the *pahkom*.

What I love about these writers is they make it clear that they are sharing only their own particular understanding, as they too pilot their meat bag bodies across time and space, like me in China, like anyone who's ever gone anywhere without knowing exactly what they'd find when they arrived. I love, too, that they recognize the veritable boat load of voices they need to listen to in order to successfully share anything at all.

Before I left for China, my friend and mentor offered me one repeated piece of advice over French fries and dark beers at a local Montana gastropub:

“Just be yourself,” she encouraged, over my niggling anxiety. I knew for sure I would offend, prove a terrible guest, that cliché clueless American abroad. And although I did not know as clearly that which I call my Self as I do now, in these words I strove for bravery I did not always feel, for clarity I did not always see. Evers and Molina saw the inherent intelligence in

people, rocks, trees, and other people; my friends abroad saw the humanness in me despite my outward inability to communicate to the fullest. For that I am grateful.

Like the deer songs, my students are meant to be heard; I too, am meant to be heard. Many educators know the words of Paulo Freire, teacher, writer and philosopher of education. Freire wrote, “[D]ialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance... How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere ‘its’ in whom I cannot recognize other ‘I’s?” Like Montessori, Freire believed this self-in-the-other made the individual more fully human.

While I cannot say that my students in preschool, in China, in the classroom here in the U.S. are by any means more fully human as a result of our time together, I can say without hesitation that I am more fully human thanks to them.

Ultimately, at every stage of development, youth can and will engage with an animate listener, an educator who sees, hears, recognizes the presence of an animate self in the student Other. To listen in such an equitable way dismantles the hierarchies of power that limit student learning and disable any humble participation by the educator in the web of vibrant living systems. When we read, we must assume awareness and self-reflexivity on the part of a writer of a given text, so too must we honor our students in their journey toward becoming more aware and more self-reflexive. Hopefully, then, our students will extend that sense of honor, respect and listening that we provide them outward toward the world. Educators can foster a sense of respect and genuine listening by being present, receptive, and humble, and recognize ourselves mirrored in our own students’ being. I strive to not necessarily demand, to not necessarily exert authority but first hear those who speak, be they old, young, human or non-human. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a more just and equitable ecology of learning.

In China I oscillated between abject fear and profound confidence, and in my moments of fear I somehow doubted that I would ever make it back to the airport in Shanghai at my adventure's close. I sent out at least six emails to confirm that someone, anyone, would be free to escort me there. As a result I showed up to the airport six hours early. I bided my time taking selfies with the dear friend who joined me, mooning over my brother who would surely become her American boyfriend, she decided. I thought this was a grand idea and we hatched a plan for one day, when we'd both achieved great success and the freedom to travel wholly at will.

My flight was then delayed, after which I missed my flight from LAX to SLC. As it was shortly before Christmas, no seats were to be found to Missoula, Montana. I stayed a sleepless night in an airport hotel, enjoyed my first meal back home (a ginormous French dip sandwich with forty thousand French fries) and then hopped a plane to Bozeman, where I ate another ginormous sandwich, this time in the form of a cowboy cheeseburger. The portion sizes threw me. Also, the vastness of space in Montana, the untread hills and unmanicured waterways seemed less full to me than when I had left – though before long, the stories would filter back in. I reminded myself that these places housed stories just as ancient as those of Xihu. I vowed to try to listen carefully here, to the hills and the wind, as I'd listened to so much in Hangzhou. I practiced as I waited several hours for the bus in a small shed inhabited by others who'd been trapped by a Montana blizzard that closed the pass, including a vocal vegan with a chest-long beard, a wry smile and an aversion to religion. I rode a bus through a blizzard to my Missoula home.

My fiancé was about twelve seconds late to the bus stop. Exhausted, I yelled at him. He replaced the ring on my left ring finger (I'd left it behind so it wouldn't get lost) and wrapped me in one of those grips that speaks volumes in love, patience, dedication. I returned home to find he'd cleaned the place spotless and decorated for Christmas, including a real tree, the scent jarring against the odor clinging to my clothes.

I'd set this book aside a while, and I was grateful that I still knew how to read.