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Stomata: Openings

by

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Most environmental discourse is about conflict. It is about yelling our opinions at the group of people whom we consider to be the “bad guys.” We see this behavior even in government sanctioned events. Regardless of the title, United States Forest Service Public Comment sessions are not about input, they are about conflict. These events defy any sort of empathetic discourse that might bring us closer to resolving problems.

Storytelling, however, is about intimacy. It is about sharing perspectives and scars. Honest stories can, because they don’t have to devolve into the “good guys” and “bad guys” game, challenge strongly held convictions and cause people to question why they behave a certain way. They make us feel less isolated as we try to understand life by emphasizing our common traits, as well as highlighting our unique, individual experiences.

Only in an environment where people feel safe, where they feel that others are willing to listen to them, can we openly discuss what we care about and the things that bother us. For me, the value of being an environmentalist—a storyteller in my case—is listening to other people, and offering them some of myself. Change can come from conflict, but change that lasts—which is what I want as an environmentalist—comes from compassion and from sharing our stories in an honest and reflective way. It comes from listening to other people.

These essays pick at the kinds of wounds that most people don’t like to talk about: illness, secrecy, and shame; but they also reflect on what is valuable about this planet and human relationships. That is my job as a writer: to pick at things that are uncomfortable—to dig beneath the obvious and unearth something alive and fresh.

This is a collection of nonfiction essays that explore relationships between people and their different environments.
Introduction

My mom said that when I was four I would break down screaming and crying whenever a leaf blew across the sidewalk in front of me—torture for a kid growing up in Maine. I can imagine that scene: a little toe-head hanging off his mother's arm, face puckered in anguish as swirling maple leaves lift off the sidewalk. My fear had started with a dream that somehow involved witches. I don't remember it.

Night tremors have always been a part of my life. Some of my oldest memories are of bad dreams. When I was five, I drew a picture of one of my dreams for class. The teachers at my kindergarten wanted all the students draw pictures of their dreams and display them for everyone, including parents. Most of the kids crayoned families—mom, dad, sister, brother—holding hands in rows. Behind them stood their two-story homes with smoke curling from the chimneys. And in the top corner of the picture—right hand or left, they varied—were the token suns with yellow spikelets radiating down towards the smiling faces. My picture, on the other hand, had a row of headless cows dancing around their bloody heads.

Three years ago, I decided to attend graduate school. I left Maine—my home state—for the first time in my life knowing that I would not return for a couple of years. It was a move I needed, a break that forced me to explore a story I had been avoiding for my entire life—a story my gut was no longer willing to hold inside and continually subvert to dream world discourse. I didn't know this when I loaded my high-mileage pickup and drove 3,000 miles across the country; I had no idea that Montana would be the landscape where the story would unravel.

I chose the Environmental Studies program at the University of Montana because it was an interdisciplinary program: a melding of the sciences and the humanities with the intent of activism. I also felt that writing—one of the emphases of the program—was the most powerful tool an activist could have. I came to Missoula thinking that the program would teach me how to change people's attitudes, that it would transform me into an activist writer . . . only, I didn't know what I wanted to write about.

In the spring of 2000, I enrolled in Don Snow's Environmental Writing Seminar, and after a three-
year break, I started writing again. Creative nonfiction was a new genre for me, but I soon discovered my natural voice—a voice that hadn't ever been heard from. It wasn't until after my essay "Pride" was accepted at the Environmental Writing Workshop that I began to realize there was a larger story lurking beneath the surface. "Pride"—an exploration of my days horse logging—didn't cut close enough to the quick. I knew there was a topic that scared me, and it had a tight rein on my writing.

Talking with Don, I also realized that I had a bit of a chip on my shoulder that stemmed from my years working in the woods and with a diverse crowd of people. I was turned off by environmental rhetoric that—like the rhetoric of industry—pits the "good guys" against the "bad guys." I found it condescending that I had to attend a graduate level course where sophomoric words like these were even uttered. Sitting in Don's comfy chair in his office, I kept bringing up the word "compassion" in our informal conversations. I thought the environmental movement lacked compassion towards people whose opinions differed from theirs, and that affects how the two sides approach difficult problems. But I didn't know what to do with this idea, and that bothered me. Don suggested I write with all the themes I had mentioned in mind: compassion, secrecy, conflict, and labor. The stage was set for me to delve into topics I considered unspeakable.

After three years of fairly intense thinking and writing, I think I understand those cows from my childhood dream—I now know what it is I wanted to write about. Those cows danced, oblivious to the fact that they were dead; they were reflecting an aspect of my psyche that, at age five, I was far too young to grasp. Many of us live our lives completely unaware of what we want or need or how to communicate those needs to others. I have spent the majority of my life denying the fact that I was born with a birth defect. I hid it from everyone, including my best friends, because I was afraid of being an outcast; I was afraid of being considered inferior.

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resolving problems. What I have learned from the process of writing this collection of essays is that storytelling, however, is about intimacy. It is about sharing perspectives and scars. Honest stories can, because they don’t have to devolve into the “good guys” and “bad guys” game, challenge strongly held convictions and cause people to question why they behave a certain way. They make us feel less isolated as we try to understand life by emphasizing our common traits, as well as highlighting our unique, individual experiences.

Only in an environment where people feel safe, where they feel that others are willing to listen to them, can we openly discuss what we care about and the things that bother us. For me, the value of being an environmentalist—a storyteller in my case—is listening to other people, and offering them some of myself. Change can come from conflict, but change that lasts—which is what I want as an environmentalist—comes from compassion and from sharing our stories in an honest and reflective way. It comes from listening to other people.

These essays pick at the kinds of wounds that most people don’t like to talk about: illness, secrecy, and shame; but they also reflect on what is valuable about this planet and human relationships. That is my job as a writer: to pick at things that are uncomfortable—to dig beneath the obvious and unearth something alive and fresh.

May the cows rest in peace.
He towered above the other barn animals, 2,200 pounds of equine muscle, fat and recalcitrance. I often laughed out loud wondering about his name, walking behind his rump that resembled a peach, as we headed down the twitch trail. Naming a work-horse Pride seemed to me a risky proposition since the relationship between man and draft animal requires control—and the quelling of any rebellious notions that spring from prideful behavior.

I wondered if it was hubris that drove him to rock forward that day, cocking his rear legs like a screen door pulled to its outer limits, prepared to cave my teeth in. I dove out of the way, somersaulting and coming to my feet with arms outstretched like a gymnast. Pride blew snot out of his nose disdainfully. He didn't know how difficult it was for me to move in kevlar chaps. Cursing him, I undid the slip hook and yanked the chain out from underneath the ash log, leaving the other end attached to the whiffle tree for Pride to drag back to the barn. We were done twitching for the day. No sense working with my German temper up.
We passed Hank in the driveway clinging to his frayed suspenders. His eyebrows climbed slowly towards his ruffled hairline. He wondered why I was back so early. “The fucker tried to kick my teeth in!” I snarled, “we’re done.” His head fell back, exposing large teeth as he let out one of his contrived, abdominal laughs. “You need to meditate,” he said, and he continued to laugh as I led Pride into the barn and removed his harness.

Hank had been a professor of mine at the University of Maine, and I had taken his course, “The Bible and Goddess Symbolism.” The first day of class he announced, “I am a feminist,” and proceeded to give us his life story. Some of the class squirmed uncomfortably in their seats, but most of us appreciated the intimacy of a professor stepping out of the ivory tower and baring his guts. He was a self-confessed Goddess-worshiper and told us stories from his past 15 lives. Apparently, a mysterious man had been chasing Hank through all of them, trying to kill him. I’m sure his ex-wife, who taught in the classroom next door, wished the mysterious figure had been successful before Hank had engaged in three different, extra-marital affairs. Their marriage, which had produced four children with perfect teeth and winning smiles, ended bitterly, sending the English Department into a gossiping frenzy. I guess that’s the chance you take being a Goddess-worshiper: you like women too much; and anyway, not all 60-year-old “feminists” are perfect.

While discussing a paper of mine in his office one day—a paper that, at least in my mind, proved Jesus was the greatest anti-environmental savior this world has ever known—we made a few discoveries: I had logging experience, an interest in horses, and was currently jobless; he had acres of trees, two Belgian draft horses, but no labor on his farm. We cut a deal. I would trade him man-hours spreading shit and haying, and in return he would teach me how to work with horses. He would provide me with free trees. No money would be exchanged. I had access to limitless cords of standing firewood to sell, and Pride. Hank had an able-bodied, somewhat naive, farmhand.

I violently brushed Pride down in the barn sending the dust off his back in great clouds. *You go meditate, Hank!* I tried to get under his skin. I ached to make Pride bleed for a wasted day. My Uncle’s rusted Timberjack 450 seemed like a good idea now. I had worked around that skidder a lot, usually
disgusted by its ability to turn forest floors into rutted pasture land. But diesels don't talk back. They don't kick.

* * *

Linwood's ponytail is losing the war. Every year brings a further loss of ground for my uncle, as his hairline retreats towards the rear of his skull. When I see him without his dented helmet, I imagine him at the airport passing out flowers with inspirational comments attached rather than knocking down pines in the Maine woods. He is a big man with a woolly beard, and I want to be just like him. It is 1992, and it'll be three years before I even know what a Belgian horse is.

"Jesus Chummy! Whaddya doin'?!!" His whiny voice arrests my attention as he throws open the steel door of the idling skidder. I stand at the base of the pine that I have just hung-up; it leans against another tree like an apple ladder. My saw hangs impotently at my side. As usual, his tone is condescending, as in, Why the fuck can't you get it right? The aim of my face-cut had been off only a few imperceptible degrees—enough, though, to drop the tree into the sticky branches of a cat spruce. It hangs in gravitational limbo, awaiting further instruction. *Wet-back Green.* My uncle's unspoken commentary bounces around in my skull and I can feel sweat running from my armpits. Only Linwood can drive home the fact that I am 18, and that I am still the uninitiated when it comes to his woods.

He descends the two-runged ladder of the skidder like a tank commander and focuses his blue eyes on me. They are as pale as a June sky diluted with turpentine. His gaze is full of self-confidence: the eyes of a hunter, precise and unwavering. I fully expect to be gored by the wood hook he carries. Instead, he grabs the saw from my hand and proceeds to dance, his boots barely denting the humus floor. By his hands the remaining pines fall swiftly. Their needles fan the air and sound like the feathers of a bird of prey swooping low for a kill. A gentle *swoosh* as the pines fall between standing birch. The chain bites into fresh cambium while the preceding tree still quivers on the ground. De-limbing, he moves like a barber shaving a judge, deftly removing whiskers and leaving clean, barely nicked logs. The saw screams and fountains of
woodchips arch in the air. They litter the ground like confetti. I stand dumbly and look in the other direction. After finishing, he sets the saw down 200 yards away from me and climbs back into the Timberjack, leaving the choke-setting for me. I guess he figures I couldn’t possibly screw that up.

I had almost become accustomed to his nasally whine that first summer I worked in the woods. As I failed to please him in almost every aspect of logging, his voice accosted me constantly. I couldn’t buck with precision; my chainsaw was never sharp enough; and most significantly, I didn’t have the auditory sense of a canine, failing to hear the orders he barked over the drone of the pulp-loader. He bitched, and he bitched often. I was his sister’s kid, and being his employee gave him ample opportunity to take their strained relationship out on me.

I slip the splintered chokers over the downed trees, cinching the cables with violent tugs. I slip one over my uncle’s neck, as well. He squirms and grimaces until his ghostly form disappears as the diesel throttles from idle to kill—my signal to get out of the way. The trees wriggle as they are reeled in towards the rear of the skidder. I wanted nothing more than Linwood’s respect. I worked earnestly for words of encouragement which never came. My biological dad was lost to the rollcall of delinquency, and my step-father and I had yet to become the best of friends. I wanted to be a man, but I didn’t know what that required, so I looked to Linwood for guidance.

* * * *

Three years later I was cutting firewood on Hank’s land. He owned 180 acres of hardwoods and pasture land in the rolling hills of central Maine. The land brimmed with tappable sugar maples, hophornbeam pecker-poles, white ash, and beech trees as big around as compact Japanese cars. He favored his precious maples and their sap boiled down to nectar in February and March, and he had been trying to murder the beeches for years, systematically girdling their vascular layers with a deep cut. His attempts at desiccation had failed, though, and the beeches sprouted shoots from those rings, flaunting their resiliency.
I dropped the beeches all down a hillside, and their thick branches split as they struck the ground.

It was sweaty work, but anticipation of the movement and noise associated with their falling kept me laboring. Their falls were graceful; the trees cut splendid arcs as they toppled and gained momentum. Then there was the snapping of branches leading up to a definitive *thud*. If you take a moment and kill your saw as a tree falls, there is a silence that sweeps in and blankets the mayhem of noise and sight as stirred leaves and dust settle to the ground. It's simply beautiful.

Pride hated twitching those trees. His back foamed under the harness, and his heart pounded so hard it threatened to punch its way out from behind his left shoulder. Even reduced to 18-inch sticks of firewood, those trees were heavy. They tore at my back and their weight tipped the wood-splitter as if it was made of Styrofoam.

My body ached at the end of those days, and I usually fell asleep by eight. The sleep comforted me. I was a horse-logger and I was living up to my anachronistic dreams, leaving less of a footprint in the woods than I had at other times—no ruts and no diesel. It was easy to let the work consume me since I believed I was putting other loggers to shame.

* • * • *

As the skidder crept along, the differential of its rear axle moved up and down, and side to side, sometimes digging in and pushing soil down into the ruts that flanked it. The ruts were deep and snaked through the woods like cross-country ski tracks broken by Paul Bunyan. The skidder couldn't help but sink and dig, sink and dig—it was Spring. The logs ended up coated with spring mud as they were dragged along the twitch trail, and the saw sparked as it struck rocks. Chains dulled. Time was lost. A different operator might have called it quits until the freshet ended and the winds had dried things out. A different operator might have had unemployment checks or other work appropriate for the season to pull him through to drier weather. My uncle was a loner, though, and bankers don't care about scalped woodlots and mucked-up watersheds. They worry about bottom lines and on-time loan payments.
For many independent contractors, over-mechanization in the woods has become a positive feedback loop. The more equipment you buy, the more payments you have every month; you have more breakdowns and you are forced to work more hours. It starts innocently enough. The lure of independence and freedom draws people to the logging profession. You set your own hours and don’t have a boss looking over your shoulder. But the freedom is a myth. Most loggers have to work a ridiculous number of hours just to cover their financial ass, and their fate is in the hands of pin-striped investors and markets that want products not sob-stories. When the mill closes for a few weeks to protect investors, Linwood has no place to peddle his wares.

Logging is hard work, even when you have all types of tree-processing toys, and most loggers try to ease their labor by any means available. For Linwood, this meant a larger skidder, a feller-buncher, a 40-foot de-limber, a pulp truck for hauling, and a Red Diamond boom-loader for yard work. For Linwood, this meant working many 12 to 14 hour days. And for many small-timers like him, it means logging in places they shouldn’t in seasons that, traditionally, they couldn’t.

* * *

The horseshoe glowed on the anvil as Hank hammered it. Hot iron-flakes bounced off his chaps and the gloves that tickled his elbows. Pride strained next to us, yanking at the rope tied off to a blacksmithed ring. His head jerked in violent repetition, as if he were agreeing to some ethereal barnyard logic passed into the free-stall by the Scotch Highlands. The cows stuck their nosy heads through the pine slats of the stall and wondered if our work involved them somehow. They looked like a row of French peasants locked in the stockades. Pride didn’t like shoes, and he loathed having his legs touched.

Hunched over, Hank struggled to hold Pride’s hoof that he had pinched between his thighs. Pride had an annoying habit of using your body as a crutch while you worked on his feet. He was a leaner. At first, you barely noticed his weight. Then your forehead would break into a sweat, and your armpits quickly dampened. Eventually, you’d be forced to release his leg as your lower back burned. He won. He often won,
because he weighed 2,200 pounds and thought we were pissants. He didn’t want to work, he wanted to graze . . . all day.

The shoe was on and Hank had hammered six nails through the milky hoof to hold it in place, but before he had a chance to trim the razor ends and secure them with a bend, Pride overpowered him, tearing leather and sending him lurching into moist hay.

“Goddamit, Pride!” Hank jumped up and grabbed the 14-inch adjustable wrench, swinging it high above his head. It recoiled off Pride’s rib cage and sounded like an overripe cantaloupe hitting pavement. In a rage he turned to me. “It’s you or them, you understand! He’ll kill you if he ever gets the upper hand!”

_Meditate, Hank, meditate._ I didn’t actually say it, because I knew how Pride had a way of inciting violence. Many times I had felt like wrapping the logging chain around his neck, hooking it to my bumper, and dragging him down the road behind my pick-up. He was a moody adolescent, and my body was covered with cuts and bruises from his tantrums. To maintain control of Pride, the bridle’s bit required precise tension at all times. Too much tension on the reins, and his mouth would harden into scars, ruining him for work for good. Not enough tension could result in broken bones or death as he ran away. It was quite a juggling act when you threw in the fact that he was constantly testing my patience, and he had a way of knowing when I was exhausted and my attention was waning. He took advantage of me whenever he could.

* * *

Some people think that my uncle Linwood has a chip on his shoulder, but I know better; it’s more like a 4-foot piece of fir pulp, weighted with the sap of jealousy and insecurity. I went to college. He didn’t. I disagreed with industrial logging. He couldn’t. He held the rebel son title in the family, and he thought I wanted it.

Linwood taught me a lot about trees and expeditious resource extraction. Hell, he showed me how to tune a saw to scream like a soggy baby. He taught me how to sharpen my chain so it would spit out woodchips the size of bird feathers. But Linwood also never missed an opportunity to denigrate me on the
spot for my mistakes. He whined in a disbelieving voice, especially when I reminded him that, in fact, I could not read minds.

One time I accidentally filled my saw with the wrong fuel. Linwood had told me that the chainsaw gas was on the back of his Chevy as he headed into the woods to grab another load. He expected me to work-over the trees he just dragged out. On the bed of his truck I found three non-descript hydraulic fluid containers, equally greasy, and equally full of fuel. I grabbed the closest one and poured. The saw sputtered to life and released great plumes of exhaust. Not wanting to disappoint him, I proceeded to work as well as I could even though the saw ran as if it had hiccups, and repeatedly stalled.

The skidder emerged from the woods with a fresh load, and I hadn’t made a dent in the previous one. “Jesuuss!” was all he could say after having fiddled with my saw for ten minutes. Then he figured out what was wrong with it. Removing the fuel cap from the saw, he dumped the contents onto the ground and filled it with the appropriate fuel—I had used diesel by mistake. The chainsaw fuel had been in the container next to the one I had used. He shook his head and grimaced as he walked back to the skidder.

I shook in rage while lying in bed at night, reliving the follies of each day working with him. I dreamed of ways to murder him and make it look like an accident. The headlines passed through my sleep:

*Logger Falls: Crushed by Own Skidder; Chainsaw Kicks and Splits Man in Two; Central Maine Logger Flattened by Felled Pine.*

Logging on Hank’s land was liberating. I was no longer green. Years had passed since I had worked for Linwood, and intervening experiences had given me confidence in the woods. I felt like a peer of my uncle’s rather than a mere grunt destined to never get it right. Actually, I felt superior. I was logging selectively—low-impact, even—and I boasted about a horse’s ability to turn on a dime. Horses don’t pollute. They don’t make waist-deep ruts. Other loggers, trapped in that positive feedback loop, were forced to liquidate woodlots, but I felt good about what I was doing. Yeah, I was still feeding the sinkhole of consumerism, but I provided a responsibly harvested product. When I realized that Linwood was never going to respect me or my work, my blood went cold. I didn’t want to be anything like him.
“You can’t make a livin’ that way,” Linwood had scoffed, dismissing everything that I had been doing.

“Bullshit!” I had countered, “You can’t get a horse for a thousand bucks, but that blown transmission cost you five grand and four weeks of work.” Having been bred from the same mulish stock, we both argued to hear our voices cut the wind and walked in separate directions. I worked seven days a week figuring that a social life could not compete with my pride. Besides, I had quiet woods to return to and he only a diesel roar. I had to sidestep grainy droppings, but he slipped in his own grease-tailings. I had it better. And I had it right.

* * *

Reins burned my hands, and blood poured from my knuckles. They had been raked across the corduroy bark as Pride had “jumped” the load again, forcing his freedom at the expense of my skin. He had nearly broken my ankles with the 300-pound log that was now sending up dust as it skittered along behind him. He ran, but I didn’t run after him. I sat down on a stump, exhausted. I can’t say that I blamed him for his desire of momentum. Pulling logs slowly is difficult. It was much easier on his muscles if he began pulling with a jolt of power rather than a trickle. I know a physics textbook would tell me it has something to do with resting and kinetic energy and the force necessary to move mass, but the theory wasn’t comforting, because Pride had won yet another round. I couldn’t hold on to the reins when he jumped loads. I couldn’t run next to him with a high-speed log nipping at my heels. Horses, like humans, know two things: pain and pleasure. They avoid the former, and they constantly search for the latter. He had successfully avoided pain at my expense, and I knew I’d find him standing by the pile of logs in the yard, blissfully munching grass. Freedom was a concept lost on him. He had achieved it many times, but he didn’t know what to do with it. He was trapped by repetition, trapped in the patterns that I had created for him. I had to remind myself: It’s still me or him. My shoulders felt heavy as I got up and walked down the trail, remembering Hank’s hot words.
That summer ended as dry as it had begun, with more rainless days in a row than ever recorded in Maine. I think Pride smiled when he saw me go. His work season was drawing to an end, and the soreness of his muscles would dissipate with the onset of cold winds. I headed back to school with taut forearms and the desire to challenge the loggers on campus. Those loggers stomped to class wearing heavy boots while carrying their helmets and books of numbers—the new forestry-elite, trained in a department heavily funded by the paper industry. My calling had arrived (or so I thought), and it involved setting an example. It involved challenging air-conditioned loggers to be as rugged as the myths they espoused. I was ready to be a horse-logger and return to the basic values of sweaty labor, while living free of that positive feedback loop—a clean break from the liquidation tactics of modern forestry.

* * *

My view of the world has never been black and white. That's why I have never chained myself to a tree in protest or made my feet raw canvassing for an idealistic cause. But the older I get, the gray lines I have drawn in the sand dissolve further. I find that the few absolutes I had in my life have lost their form. Their lines wriggle and melt into other absolutes, diluting the clarity of what were once carefully drawn conclusions.

I am in Missoula, Montana, now—the biggest city I have ever lived in—working on a master’s thesis. I think of Pride often and wonder why I haven’t thrown it all in and bought a draft horse. I once had intended to. I tell myself it’s because I’m not settled yet. I don’t know where I want to risk my taproot, or with whom I want to start that other life. I feel that I am too young to own land, let alone a horse. My peers don’t dream about owning draft horses. I still might do it. Someday. There’s something deeper, though, a reason that gnaws at the myth that I have been building for myself. I can feel its teeth whenever I think of that dry year with Pride, the luxury of school, and my uncle’s frustration.

Bitterness still exists between Linwood and me. Our conversations consist of muted grunts of acknowledgment. Like Pride, we are trapped in patterns we have created for ourselves. My grandmother
tiptoes around us at holiday get-togethers, because she loves us both and wants us to get along; we act like children clinging to grudges, and we are unable to have conversations that don't devolve into pontification. We rarely make eye contact. I know he thinks that I'm an over-educated twit, and I fear that he's too provincial and stubborn to ever break free of the leg-snare of over-mechanization.

I still visit him and his family when I'm home, and I think about them a lot. My grandmother keeps me well-informed about my cousins' achievements. Their talents are almost as amazing as their names—Dusty, Roscoe, and Kaley. I can see them clearly, running free around the junked vehicles and wind-damaged poplars in their backyard while my aunt upholsters furniture in the basement. The station wagon needs brakes again and is up on blocks. It sits next to the battered pulp truck. The bank continues to send notices for overdue payments. And there's a flicker of acknowledgment, a pressure in my throat as I think about them 3,000 miles away. I think about my own stubbornness and pride, and I wonder... maybe I didn't have it right.
I pull back the shower curtain. Dripping, I face the full length mirror hanging on the door. There is my
body. My mid-section and pelvic area look like a road map. I shudder.

Scars.

They run horizontally and vertically. Some intersect at 90 degrees, while others cut angular slashes
across my flesh. They are red or pink, depending on what clothing I have been wearing and whether there
was friction with waistbands or seams. There's one major scar that runs from my belly button to the tip of
my penis. How many times have I heard a tentative lover ask “Will I hurt you?” The answer is always no.

And there is the almond-sized hole in my gut where the waistband falls.

* * * *

I was born in Bangor, Maine, not exactly a thriving metropolis. And when I emerged from
placental immersion the doctor scratched his head, befuddled. Something was wrong. The nurses rushed me
into an adjoining room as he gassed my nervous mother and put her to sleep until he could figure out what
to do. He didn't know what was wrong with me, but he knew I had to get to Boston four hours away—to
adequate care. Attempts to secure a National Guard helicopter failed. It was Memorial Day weekend. My
grandfather had a large car, and he was a truck driver. The doctor figured he could be trusted to transport
cargo safely Three hours after being knocked out, the nurses slapped my mother's face until she regained
consciousness. She saw me for ten minutes, and then we were gone. A week would pass before she'd see me
again.

The Buick was huge, so I'm told, as was the nurse who occupied the majority of the front seat. The
car was a chrome-laden icon of the early seventies. The State Police gave my grandfather authority to "drive
as fast as necessary." And he did, exercising that V-8 as it was built to be used. My father sat on the
passenger side. The vinyl door pull left a red mark in his rib cage since the nurse's girth offered him little
wiggle room. He told me she was like a tube of Pillsbury dough swelling at its seams. She took up space. So
did I, even though I weighed less than five pounds. I rested comfortably in the backseat. The 4-foot
incubator kept me suspended from the elements, warm and germ-free, as if I had never left my mother's
womb.

* * *

My bladder wasn't where it was supposed to be—it was on the outside—quivering like a newborn
chick on the edge of its nest. Exstrophy of the bladder. Doctors don't know what causes this condition. It is
not inherited. They do know that something goes wrong as the embryo develops. Tissues do not divide and
fold as they are supposed to. As I floated in a placental world, my cells were playing a joke on me. They
were not following the blueprint of human evolution. They were not coalescing properly.

My pelvis was affected as well. It can spread by as much as one centimeter in exstrophy cases.
Imagine a person standing behind you with his hands on your hips while wedging his knee against your
coccyx. He pulls and his fingers leave red marks on your flesh as your bones shift without breaking. It's
called diastasis. Some people with exstrophy of the bladder waddle their entire lives like human penguins. I don't, but I had to give up running long ago and take up cycling. The angle created by the hip-joint and femur puts a strange pressure on my knees. When I ran, it felt as if both femurs were breaking free of their cartilage harnesses at the knee. For every 30,000 to 40,000 births, one child is born with this condition. Statistics would indicate that here in Missoula, there is one other person like me. I have never met that person. I have never met anyone with exstrophy of the bladder. Why would I? Unless we let you in on our little secret, you would have no way of knowing we are different.

Growing up, I never lived in a town with more than 30,000 people, which accentuated my feeling that I was different from others—an anomaly. I was very good at being stealthy, at hiding my difference from even my most intimate friends. I used the bathrooms at school only when they were empty. Stalls without locks made me cringe. Thin aluminum walls separated me from other boys visually but there was still sound. Did my urine splash the water in the bowl differently? Would they discover I was different? Would they think I was weak, not as fit as they, and make me an outcast of the pack? Kill me socially? It was a fear I felt deeply, and my stealthiness increased the power this fear had over me: nobody could know.

In my mind, I was excluded from the pack like some outrider watching brethren gorge on antelope. I was a wolf, looked like a wolf to everyone else, but felt like a magpie hovering on the margins waiting for my turn to feast on life. I felt alone.

* * *

The sun peaks over the crags of the Bitterroot Range of the Rockies, illuminating the gaps where rock has eroded over millennia. The blue tent-fly is coated in frost that glimmers in the morning alpenglow. I breathe slowly, enjoying the silence of winter as cool air crystallizes around my noesairs. I leave my snowshoes where they are, sticking out of the snow like the aluminum hands of an avalanche victim—I'll take my chances post-holing since my fingers are too numb to adjust the straps yet.

Twenty-five feet from the tent, facing the sun, I pull the sandwich bag out of my left pocket—the
catheter is coiled inside. I unzip my wool pants. The orange tip of the catheter enters my abdominal wall and the rest of the winter-stiff tubing follows, snaking its way towards its subterranean home. The urine steams as it hits the air and tunnels its way through five feet of snow. I don’t even try to hide. I am secure with acres of wilderness and the snow that keeps most people at home indoors. No one will see me. There are no roads here. There are no snowmobile trails, just me and my friend Ryder, who slumbers in the tent still.

I have a stoma.

That’s what the doctors call the hole in my gut. That’s what I call it. It’s a one-way valve that keeps urine from flowing out of me constantly. I don’t have a bladder. That was burned years ago with a pile of other discarded human parts in a hospital incinerator. Instead, I have an internal pouch crafted from a piece of my bowel.

Ryder grunts inside the tent, and I hear the zipper of his sleeping bag working. He gets the stove going, and soon we are resting in our Crazy Creek chairs sipping hot tea and watching the morning form. Our wool hats are pulled tightly over our ears, and we speak little, afraid that the slightest utterance might shatter our frozen vocal cords. My feet start to tingle. The sun overtakes each ponderosa pine by force, worming its way between snow-laden branches, lighting the recesses.

I wonder if I am drawn to trees because of their inherent beauty alone or because part of my anatomy is modeled after them? We both have stomata. I wonder if I would lose myself in landscapes of trees if I didn’t have a stoma, if I were normal? Surely I wouldn’t be out here in the dead of winter seeking solitude if I were content with myself—and the world.

I do know that landscapes without trees make me uncomfortable. I get hot, and I feel like a target.

* * *

Trees breathe through stomata. They are microscopic valves in needles and leaves through which carbon dioxide diffuses. Oxygen, the by-product of photosynthesis, exits through stomata. We breathe tree
poop. It keeps us alive.

Stomata equilibrate life for trees.

* * * *

"James! James! Where are you going?!"

I awaken and do not know where I am. Two nurses have tight grips on my shoulders and force me back onto my bed. I am fighting, still half asleep. My throat is sore from the GI tube that scraped my esophagus as I yanked it out. My IV is gone as well. I don't know where I'm going.

Sleepwalking has always been a part of my life. I am restless in sleep and have experienced night tremors since I was three. I dream of stainless steel tables, flood lamps, and blackness. I dream of blood. I scare my girlfriends when I sit up in bed screaming like a zombie. They wake me up, and I am at a loss to explain why. I don't know what is scaring me.

Anaesthesia creates a strange world. It's not like sleep—more like a black chunk of life that you have lost. There is nothing darker than morphine-sleep. You don't dream. No light penetrates that world. There you are, sprawled on the operating table, counting backwards from a hundred, breathing plastic-flavored oxygen through a mask while doctors and nurses attend to you. You are warm from the space blanket and from the bright landing lights that illuminate your entire body. The hovering forms ask questions as they attach sensors, and you can hear your voice slur, as if it wasn't your own. Your body feels like goose-down—and you are gone. Almost instantly you are waking up confused at the other end, as if someone had simply drawn a black crayon-smudge across your consciousness. You can see dim outlines of people hovering over you, mumbling amid the beeps and wheezes of life support machines. The pain feels like a fuzzy blanket. And you begin to remember where you are and why you are here, but you still croak in disbelief when you are told that 22 hours of your life have disappeared.

Sleep takes time. You wake up in the morning and you know that time has passed because dreams have filled your mind. You are aware of a subconscious world that your mind lives in.
It is comforting to be aware of this phenomenon when lying on the table as those hovering forms prepare you for surgery. It is comforting to know that you will be full of a hypnotic agent like isoflurane. If you wake up to see a scalpel tracing a 14-inch blue line on your abdomen, you will not consciously remember it. I am glad that I did not dream while I was cut open.

I rarely dream when I am in a tent. I never wake up screaming when I am outside. Out there, I have nothing to run from.

*   *   *

The stomata of conifers do not breathe in the winter. They close when water freezes in their trunks. Hibernation.

Sometimes the weather warms enough to thaw the trunks, and the stomata open, shedding water to the atmosphere. The ground is still frozen, so water cannot be pulled through the xylem to the needles. It is called winter drought. The needles yellow and die.

*   *   *

The air tastes clean when it is cold. My snowshoes are bright orange, and they make a ratcheting noise when I adjust the straps. Ryder and I have broken camp and are heading farther into the canyon, away from the overgrown Bitterroot Valley with its streetlights and trophy-homes. We are getting farther away from people. I feel safe walking on six feet of snow. Everything is asleep, buried under layers of crystal. And under layers of fleece and polypropylene, my scars slumber. They are hidden and powerless in the wilderness.

Out here, I don’t have time to worry about them. I think about how to stay warm instead. I think about how to survive and enjoy myself in a landscape that could kill me if I make poor choices—if I don’t pay attention. The beauty of the landscape overwhelms me. The rocky outcroppings and snowcaps cause
cardiac arrest like Polish sausages and bacon fat. I gulp for air. A cold wind sweeps over us from the west, blowing away any power the scars held over me.

* * * *

At one time I had world-renowned doctors slicing me with their scalpels. They wrote the book on building watertight pouches that resemble bladders. They designed the valve of skin along my waistline—or stole the idea from trees, calling it their own “stoma.” They did a nice job patching me up and readying me for the world. I function as a normal human being. I have a good life because of their ingenuity and handiwork. Born in the wrong place or at the wrong time, I might not have lived. It makes me shiver.

The medical industry fixed me. Like mechanics working over a wrecked Trans-Am, they pounded out my dents and aligned my front-end. I am road-worthy. Black stitches held flaps of skin together, my blood coagulated, and my body healed.

What nobody prepared me for were the scars. Nobody prepared me for the days when I was sickened by the sight of my body and wanted to pull the covers over my head. Nobody prepared me for self-loathing at age fourteen. Nobody prepared me for the anxiety I felt showing women my body during those first intimate moments—Do these bother you? I ask. Probably nobody imagined preparation was necessary: I was a boy who would be a man. My doctors were all men, and men don’t talk about their insecurities. We aren’t supposed to have any. Men don’t talk about scars unless heroism is involved.

The mind heals slowly—long after the body has recovered.

Guilt forced me to keep my mouth shut; it kept the fears inside, burrowing through my core like heart-rot in trees. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful by whining. I had been given life, and really, what more should I ask for? What more could I ask for?

For most of my life I have dealt with the scars, and I believe that nobody could have prepared me for what I needed to discover on my own. Sometimes it is better to let a child burn his hand on a stove rather than telling him not to touch it at all.
The trees helped me.

* * *

I fell into a stream in the Bitterroot Range one morning after breakfast. The stream was buffeted on both sides by 6-foot walls of snow. It seemed like a canyon. I balanced four water bottles and climbed down to a snow shelf that stood a foot out of the running water. I got down on all fours and freed a hand to dip each bottle into the clear, icy water. The sun was not yet high enough to illuminate the snow that surrounded me.

As I was filling the last, crystal-blue bottle, the snow-shelf broke under my left hand. Instinctively I grabbed at the air with both hands to stop my fall but ended up with fistfuls of water. I tumbled in face first. I stood up quickly and let out a high-pitched, airy yelp. The Nalgene bottle bobbed in the stream as it disappeared around the bend.

“What the hell are ya doing!” Ryder asked, peering over the rim above me. I stood in the stream, dripping, too shocked to move. I understood the seriousness of the situation but couldn’t seem to move. My mind was busy trying to make sense of the series of events that led to my unintended swim. Ryder extended his hand as I scrambled up the snowbank and pulled me over the top of the rim.

I had an extra set of polypro underwear and an extra pair of wool pants in the bottom of my pack. Safety clothes. He snapped a picture of me before I changed, and he laughed.

* * *

I pull that picture out every once in a while. My green fleece vest is soaked and hangs off me. My drenched olive pants appear black. My hair was long then and hung damp, as if I had just exited the shower. My right hand is clenched into a fist and the left one is thrust into my pack, reaching for dry clothing. The grimace on my face is frightening. It looks as if I am grinding my teeth into a fine, white dust.
I chuckle at the picture whenever I look at it. The event could have killed me. Wet clothing dries slowly in the winter. And while I had been prepared for such an accident, my forethought did little to mitigate how I felt when it happened. Stupid. I had moved in silence that day, allowing the squeak of my snowshoes to speak for me. How could I have been so careless? How could I have overlooked the obvious? That the snow-shelf could not support my weight.

At one point I remember letting Ryder go on ahead as I stopped to pee. The squeak of his snowshoes got quieter and quieter as he disappeared over a knoll. I found a large Ponderosa off the trail and picked at its puzzle piece bark as I relieved myself. I looked up the trunk and saw that it had been struck by lightning. The lightning must have split its original top because it had developed two main leaders that started about 30 feet up from the tree’s base. They emerged out of a large weathered scar where the main trunk ended, and they paralleled each other for another 50 feet—like a tuning fork. The gray scar was dark and obvious against the surrounding red tones of the live bark. The tree was stunning. It was unique against a background of equally beautiful, undamaged ponderosas.

That day the scar meant very little to me. I filed the image in my head, zipped up my pants, and headed down the trail to catch my friend.

*  *  *

I think about the tree now while I finish toweling myself off. I think about how much trees have taught me so far and how much more I have to learn. That tree bore its scar as a testament to its own strength and fortitude. Not only did it cheat death, but it grew on gracefully.

I look into the bathroom mirror again, and laugh.
The “M”

I met Emie by mistake one evening. In those days I haunted all places where beer could be consumed, and I ended up at his cramped apartment with a few of his son’s friends. The smoke was thick, mixing with the damp air of stale beer and body odor, creating a fog that floated at eye level. Emie cornered me when he found out I owned a chainsaw.

“I’ve got this land,” he said, “where the fir and spruce need to be thinned.” The state paid landowners to thin and limb commercially valuable tree species. It was called “stand improvement,” and Emie was all for it. Not that he thought he’d ever benefit from future timber sales; the trees were small and he was 54. I assumed he wanted to play Lumberjack for awhile–live the romance of manly work in the fresh air. I imagined he thought Paul Bunyan was real.

I gave him my number and told him to call if he was serious, and then I stumbled home to bed, never expecting anything to come of our conversation. I was wrong.

My Dodge sputtered in the drizzle. Moisture had infiltrated its distributor cap. Emie fell into the
seat next to me, smoke curling from his lips: 6:30 a.m. We turned onto Main Street and headed down Route 1, the only major route in northern Maine. It's two lanes of trailer truck traffic, farm equipment, and Oldsmobile 88's—the car of choice for farmers and their wives. The road cuts through hundreds of miles of potato fields, coniferous forests, and rambling farmhouses deteriorating in time with their outbuildings. It is the kind of scene photographers shoot for rural postcards.

My Stihl bounced on the scratched bed, clinking with other logging implements: double-edged axe, come-along, rope, twitch-chain, gas, oil, and a pole-saw. The sky was not promising—a black eye ready to weep. The chance of rain didn't bother me. I liked to suffer then. My work ethic had developed into a masochistic undertaking, the result of dedication to the pain I hoped would result in manhood. The prospect of a day of slipping on wet roots burdened with pounds of saturated denim actually made me joyful. Nature, the dominatrix.

We turned off onto a gravel road in Mars Hill, a town that remains "dry," still trying to insulate itself from reality—the reality of six-packs sold in the next town. It's a hard-working area. If you don't dig, manage, or plant potatoes ten hours a day then most likely you swing a saw, operate a skidder, or work in one of the numerous potato processing-plants and lumber mills. Natural resource extraction and agriculture rule the land, and most people get their hands dirty on a daily basis. There are also people like Ernie, who carve out a less back-breaking niche.

He didn't have much: an angry kid, an ex-wife, and a one-man accounting business. His woodlot offered even less: 80 acres of grown-over potato land that his family had farmed until his generation. Quaking aspen and balm of gilead had pioneered the windrows after the last tubers were harvested in the thirties. Now the fields were covered with trees, but I could still see the ghostly rows of once-turned glacial till.

His family's land, I could see from the streaked window, wasn't much for timber. The landscape was a fusion of one large hayfield the size of a football field that his cousin harvested yearly, acres of poplar, a dense stand of cedar, and a few acres of young spruce and fir. We started our work by thinning and limbing the conifers. Mars Hill mountain stood in the distance, the one rolling hill that rolled a little
higher than the rest. At its top the red eye of a radio tower blinked, a disturbing aurora borealis at night. The tower serves as a lighthouse beacon in the winter, amid the undulating waves of powder snow that bury the endless potato fields. That red eye gives travelers hope during white-outs, letting them know they haven’t strayed too far from shore—from civilization.

“We need to give the bigger, straighter ones room to breathe. Space them about six ta’ eight feet,” Ernie said, as we stepped out of the truck. That’s what a forester had told him. He lit another Winston as we ambled over to the spindly trees.

There was money to be made by thinning. Not much. The state paid just so much per limbed tree and thinned acre, as long as a forester verified that the work had been done. It was treatment for future timber profit, a long-range plan to benefit Maine’s marginal economy. We treated the stand like a crop and weeded it as one.

We labored in the drizzle that morning, Ernie smoking all the while. Cut, shove, snip-snip. Cut, shove, snip-snip. The routine of cutting the trees low to the ground, pushing them over manually, and deliming consumed the hours. The two-stroke exhaust acted as an opiate and I felt like an artistic Samurai marking a canvas: a stroke here, a stroke there. I removed each tree with thought. How will this affect growth for that spruce? The entire stand? I did not move callously. The work was meant to only accelerate natural processes—culling the weaker, less vigorous trees.

Sap from the balsam fir coated my chaps and forearms. It smelled like peppermint and vinegar. Sunlight filtered through the film of clouds and followed my path through the stand, illuminating the dark corners as I removed spiderweb thickets of dead limbs and trunks. This gauzy, gray light filled the space between the remaining trees, cementing in place a change, a new clarity in defined space.

I’d often stop to look behind my shoulder and view the changes I had made. The landscape reflected my presence; it reflected my desire to have my work fit into a natural landscape. Little had changed. The standing trees had more elbow room, and the soil and its decomposers had a backlog of new material to break down. The trees I dropped covered the humus layer like gray latticework, a mat stretching in all directions with spruce and fir climbing out of its diagonal negative space. It didn’t look like a tree
farm with tidy rows of carrot-like growths, waiting for a feller-buncher to harvest them like wheat. The trees in my wake were spaced randomly, non-linearly. Like any artist, I let the momentum of movement and inspiration dictate my choices for expression.

Ernie worked in areas that I had thinned, jerkily removing limbs from standing trees with lopping shears. It wasn't pretty. He'd position the sharpened steel jaws around each victim and give the handles all he had, shouldering into them as if he was busting a door open. When his back faced me it looked as if he were falling into himself, recoiling from the pain of a gut shot. When he faced me, I could see the grimace he made with each cut, as if the Winston clenched in his mouth had been rolled dog shit. If he caught me watching, his face would break into a wide grin and he'd wave. "How's it goin'?" he'd ask, or mime if my saw was making its tinny, idling racket. He was like a kid making sandcastles on a beach, manipulating the landscape for fun, unaware of the power of the ocean.

I could hear the waves breaking behind him, though, behind me, questioning our manipulation. I approached the stand as if it were a canvas meant for human expression. As if I had the right. Our thinning would allow the remaining trees to grow straighter and taller, faster, so someone could come in and turn them into high-value lumber in the future. Left to its own devices, the stand would sort itself out. Some trees would die, some would live.

This troubling current of thought ran underneath all of my movements. It hummed steadily beneath the well-oiled song of the turning sprocket in my saw. It was hubris to believe I had the right to manipulate processes beyond my comprehension. But there I was, enjoying the work, deftly executing trees. This was my pragmatic side, constantly struggling with the fearful part of me that questioned my work. People need lumber, I told myself. We use products turned from the mashed, fragrant innards of trees. This need is constant at this point in human evolution, and if I don't do the work, somebody else will—maybe not as carefully.

We finished the job in a few days, working too quickly. I thought we were done, but Ernie had tasted mud, needles, and exhaust, and he wanted more: "Let's cut some popple," he said, grinning.
Ernie had a 1947 McCormick "M" tractor stashed away at his cousin Leland's farm, and he was hell-bent on using it to log his land. Organizing numbers wasn't fulfilling for Ernie, but it paid the bills. I imagined the thought of working in the woods sparked some primal urge inside his 5-foot-8-inch frame. "When can ya go down to tha woodlot next?" he'd ask me anxiously, as if time was a factor. As if we needed to cut trees to pay the bills. I thought logging was a chance for him to get sweaty and dirty, altering the landscape of his ancestors while redefining who he was. Maybe he wanted to melt into the earth a bit, combine his atoms with those of the soil, the moose, and most of all, the trees. I wanted to alter the land. I wanted it to punish my hands, turn them into watery blisters. I wanted to be part of a system that turned raw nature into something different, while I remained true to the land. I wanted to produce without destroying. I knew you could make an omelet without killing the hen, and I felt the same way about logging.

Leland Clark got out of his sleeping bag, midday, to greet me. He was taking a siesta in front of the TV—resting his potato-weary eyes. He peeled the sleeping bag off like a husk, revealing a lanky, fully clothed frame—two flannel shirts (a red one and a ratty, green one), a sock hat, tractor-stained jeans, and Red Wings that had spent many hours in the field. He stuck out his hand. We walked out the creaking screen door into the mist of another overcast day.

Spread out concentrically from the house were quonset huts, dilapidated out-buildings with missing siding, and rusted equipment in varying degrees of working order: potato harvesters, combines, horse-drawn rakes modified for tractors, woodsplitters, snow-plows, and trucks—lots of trucks. Flatbeds, potato trucks, pickups partially melting into the ground. A young poplar was growing through the windshield of an old International. The "Fodge" really caught my eye, though, looking like a miscarriage aborted on the floor of some Detroit factory. It was a green and red pick-up put together with a 1984 Ford front-end and a full-size Dodge bed. It was a true 4-wheel drive, mud-kicking, "yeeha," four-barrel, potato
field-beater, and I felt envious. People in northern Maine don’t generally covet the shiny, untainted, 4-R
Runner type vehicle. The crappier the truck looks, the more respect it garners on the road. The Fodge
revealed ingenuity: an ability to create an artifact with discarded parts.

What would archaeologists think upon unearthing Leland’s farm 1,000 years down the road? What
would they learn from his exhumed equipment? The Fodge? *Here was a man who survived on wit and
creativity.* His equipment and prosperity had been pieced together with seemingly incompatible parts, duct
tape, and perseverance in the face of economic strain and plain bad luck. The Fodge was unique to Leland
Clark, and he took pride in the way it turned heads, but he viewed it as just another tool he used to pay the
bills—nothing special.

“I like your truck,” I said, nodding in the direction of the Fodge.

“That piece of crap.” He glanced at it briefly, said “Hmmpphh,” gritted his teeth, and
moved on.

Ernie, Leland, and I walked down to the sawmill. Furry cedar logs were piled up, waiting to be
milled. Leland mumbled as he pointed his arms in different directions, and the import of his sentences failed
to reach my ears. He looked like a sailor with his hooked nose jutting from underneath a wool cap,
surveying the horizon while the wind ruffled his dark beard. He didn’t say much, as if pointing at land was
enough emphasis to clarify his meaning. He was like a lot of men I had worked with in Maine, quiet,
diligent. Men who worked at a steady pace and didn’t talk about the task at hand, as if denying its need to
be done made the toiling easier—made the shovel loads lighter, the lumber less splintery, the shit more
fragrant. I respected his knowledge, and I respected the fact that he didn’t need to talk to prove what he
knew. I hoped that I was a little like him, but I realized that I was still too young to move with his quiet
confidence. I watched him with a sideways glance, careful to not let him glimpse my juvenile fascination.
Ernie, on the other hand, jabbered incessantly, a sign of inexperience and of being a little uncomfortable
with it. His talk increased when we arrived at the “M.”

“Ah, she’s beautiful,” he said. I was less impressed. But I had been born into an age of
complicated, computer-chip engines and diesels that moved mountains. The M was a little red tractor
dwarfed by the massive Internationals of industrial agriculture. The stained engine looked like a child placed in an over-sized bassinet: it simply could not fill all the space provided. The amount of daylight between the hood and the frame made me nervous. Would this thing even start? It did. Leland showed me the tricks: proper choking, adequate throttle, and one Hail Mary. The red beast coughed to life and trembled into what was considered a smooth idle in 1947. The logging was going to happen, and nobody was more excited than Ernie. A broad smile cracked on his face as he lit another Winston.

I practiced driving around the muddy yard, grinding gears, chasing chickens, and getting used to the clutch. We thanked Leland for readying the tractor, and I headed out onto the slick mud of the Clark Road. Ernie was out in front, the four-ways of his Buick Century flashing in the mist.

At the stop sign where the Clark Road meets Route 1, the M came to a shrieking halt as the rust scraped off the brake drums. I eased the throttle back and shifted into the highest compound gear possible. A few trucks sped past before Route 1 cleared enough for me to dump the clutch and merge the tractor with the breakdown lane. I did so gently but was forced back in my seat. I must have looked like a pilot managing a nose-dive as the clutch plate engaged the flywheel. The rig was capable of a good clip, even though the steering wasn’t in full compliance. The front end wasn’t sure it wanted to go that fast, and it shimmied as I gripped the dirty steering wheel. The engine actually purred when topped out, and there was the reassuring road-whine of a well-greased drive train.

Two weeks later we had a growing stack of smooth, mussel-colored bolts in the middle of the hayfield, intermixed with the deeply furrowed bolts of older trees. The larger percentage was quaking aspen, but the mill’s guidelines for chip material allowed for a 10 percent mix of balm-of-gilead. Trash trees. Pioneer species. Poplars grow like weeds, and people treat them that way. Industrial landowners kill them with herbicides to make room for spruce and fir. We were getting less than $60 dollars a cord from Huber before deducting for trucking costs. Ernie didn’t care. He was enjoying himself. He could escape the yellowing walls of the office, ledgers of numbers, and rows of filing cabinets. Logging is back-breaking labor, but it forces you to think creatively in order to get the job done. And it’s concrete: at the end of the
day the landscape reflects what you have done with the hours. I don’t know if there’s any feeling of solidity when it comes to numbers and dollars.

He liked to help, but he wasn’t always helpful. He was impatient, and I became more impatient as he stumbled in various ways. He couldn’t run a saw, which limited what he could do. There were times when I had to choke down my temper, and there were times when I couldn’t. In many ways he resembled a child in temperament. He didn’t want to think things through, he just wanted to do.

“Ernie! You can’t do that.”

“Sure, why not? See, this knot will hold.” He had tied a fraying choker cable to the stabilizer bar at the rear of the tractor—his solution to the question of how to pull trees out of the woods. The M wasn’t set up with a winch and it didn’t have a skid plate for the log butts to rest against like a skidder, so we needed to be creative. We needed to attach the tree butts close enough to the tractor to raise them off the ground slightly; otherwise they could snag stumps and rocks, flipping the M on my head. He was right—the knot in the choker would hold, and the log would be cinched by the noose, and it would probably even stay attached all the way to the yard. The problem was you’d need a hacksaw to untie the load-tightened knot in the cable. It wouldn’t make for a very efficient logging operation. I brought a length of 3/8” chain from my pick-up that had a slip hook at one end and a grab hook at the other. The chain could grab larger loads, if set properly. Ernie didn’t get it; his hands moved nervously with the chain, so I did most of the setting, and he drove the tractor. It’s difficult for a 54 year-old man to take instructions from a 20 year-old.

The days working without Ernie were the best. I dropped poplars in a steady succession and slipped into an efficient rhythm unhindered by explanations of process. I knew the logging process by heart and became inefficient when I had to explain it to someone else. There were many places where I couldn’t drive the tractor because of its narrow wheelbase; it simply wasn’t built for the thrashing a skidder can endure. Tree trunks and rocks were capable of disabling its front-end. The hill I was working on sloughed into a basin from the flat trail I was pushing into the stand, so all the trees in the basin first had to be pulled up to the trail before I could drag them to the log piles in the yard. It was tedious work, dragging 50 feet of
chain with my shoulders through the woods, hooking a single tree, pulling it forward until the tractor ran out of space, backing up, pulling the slack out of the chain and reconnecting it to the stabilizer bar, once again driving forward until the front of the M brushed standing trees again. It was like being 16 and learning how to parallel park, trying repeatedly to get closer to the curb. I jumped off and on the tractor a lot, and often repeated this driving forward and backing-up process three times just to get one tree to the trail. It was exhausting, and at times I wished I had a skidder. I wished, in good conscience, I could drive over things that got in my way.

A “real” logger would have laughed at my operation: primitive. I was primitive, maneuvering the tractor in tight areas so I wouldn’t have to fall unnecessary trees simply for driving space; I was primitive, avoiding barking the trunks of standing trees as I dragged out the others; I grunted and talked to myself. I swore when I smashed my knee into the wheel-well of the M, and when I released a log in the yard and it rolled and pinched my index finger against another log. I danced like a primitive praying for rain then, waving my swollen finger above my head as the expletives rolled from my mouth.

With the M, I could maneuver in tight spaces, take only the trees I desired, and avoid turning the forest floor into a tic-tac-toe board of ruts. The process required a lot of energy from me, but I imagined that the soil and remaining trees thanked me for my efforts. I hoped that the browsing moose and grouse would continue to have a place to live. This was not clearcutting. I was not looking to create a lunar landscape free of moss, trees, and birdcalls. This was not scientific forestry or backhoe silviculture. My cutting choices were selective. My practices were meant to be discrete: take a few trees, leave the rest, and be careful how you tread. I felt I could be part of the natural processes of the forest . . . maybe my orange helmet could blend into the green landscape.

* * *

In the woods one day, I turned to find a moose standing 50 feet from me. I killed the saw in my hands and pulled my ear plugs out. He stood in the twitch trail staring at me. He was young, a juvenile rack
on his head. We stood for five minutes, eyes locked on one another. He was curious, I think: *What is this loud, orange creature?* I stared back, thankful for the moment. We probably could have stood that way for hours, but I pushed it and tried to approach him—get closer. I wanted to rub the scouring-pad fur guarding his spine. I wanted to talk with him, get his impressions of my work. As I approached him, placing one oil-stained boot gently in front of the other, he simply walked off into the potato field to the north of us. Slowly, he meandered up-slope, across a sea of rows.

Every creature uses its landscape to survive: squirrels dig for truffles, grizzlies harvest ladybugs, and birds build nests out of everything imaginable. We are no different. We cut, mine, and till to survive. But this line of reasoning is a slippery slope without trees for handholds. This *need* for survival has been used to excuse clearcutting, aerial herbicides, and tree-growing as a farming practice. It has been used to ravage and exploit people and landscapes. Industrial landowners use *need* to justify complacency in their harvesting practices. *Need* is real, but they generally avoid discussing it in the context of *scale*. My fear surfaced when I saw that moose: did I really think my cutting practices were any better? What right did I have to be harvesting trees?

* * *

Ernie was impatient at times, as if this project was of utmost importance to him. “Didja ya get many trees out today?” he always asked on those days we hadn’t worked together. His worries were different from mine.

His eyes glowed from behind rain-speckled glasses as he sat atop the tractor, popping the clutch and jerking his way down the trail. He wore his mesh hat like the farmers do, pushed back on his forehead, the bill pointing towards the sun. It advertised a pesticide. He grinned constantly and laughed his raspy, humbling laugh if I pointed to something he was doing wrong.

“Yer right full of piss ‘n vinegar, arn’t ya?” That was one of his favorite things to say to me, a compliment of the highest order. At the moment I was in a full-tilt tantrum, yanking on my saw’s pull cord.
It wouldn’t run for more than five minutes before dying. When it did run I had to keep a finger on the throttle at all times. A turning chain accompanied all my movements, sometimes biting at the edges of my kevlar chaps.

“Goddamn this thing!” I threw the saw into the pasture and it rolled a few feet, gathering soil and hayfield stubble in its sharp edges.

“Maybe if you . . .”

“No!” I hurled at him, “I’ve tried adjusting the carburetor all morning. It’s something else.” I turned and marched to my truck to have an early lunch and wallow in my bad mood. Ernie came over after a few minutes.

“I’ve been thinking, I need to get a saw for myself. I’ll buy one and you can use it whenever you want.” I chewed steadily, not sure how to respond. I wanted to believe the work would continue—I felt empty with the thought that it wouldn’t—but I didn’t believe.

Two days later he purchased a shiny, new Stihl.

The poplar trees we were cutting were no more valuable in the marketplace than the numbers he crunched for pay. They were no more timeless. I’m not sure why he shelled out money for a two-bit logging operation. But there’s something about working in rawness, and with it, that satisfies beyond words: paddling away wet soil like a mole in order to slip a chain underneath a log, watching blood from your hands seep into dark soil as granules of it work their way into your system. Manipulating a landscape draws you in and makes you part of it—after you’re done it reflects your presence. You don’t work on a landscape, you work in it, and you become part of a process. It’s unavoidable. And maybe Ernie, like me, didn’t like the thought of not being able to participate in that process.

The idea of working in a landscape is abstract. It lacks the concreteness of skidder tires and falling trees. It is abstract like the concept of an ecosystem is abstract: we can explain singular processes in ecosystems, like photosynthesis, but we can’t really explain how an entire ecosystem works. It is beyond our comprehension. We don’t understand how landscapes have informed us either, or how they have determined what we are. And we don’t understand what it is to be part of a system—a multitude of processes—that
encompasses the entire earth, and maybe beyond.

And that is why I am fearful, at times, dropping trees that are my elders, because we don’t really know what we’re doing. I wonder how people in the future will view my work. I have created numerous stumps—fingerprints—and it worries me some nights. I sweat and wrap myself in a cocoon of sheets. There is the fear of being wrong in my work—of leaving behind something reviled like bad poetry, the Ford Pinto, a trashed landscape.

* * *

The grass reached the middle of his shins and parted around his boots as he shuffled backwards. His arms waved frantically as if he were guiding F-14’s on a carrier deck. Chains clanged against steel stakes. The log truck pitched in the hummocky pasture as it crept along. Ernie was helping the driver back up to our piles of logs. The driver didn’t need help.

I stood alone on the periphery of the action, and let Ernie run the show. Sweet diesel exhaust kicked in my nostrils. A smell I have always enjoyed. It makes me think of motion and power. We were sending a load to Huber to be chipped and pressed into 4-by-8 sheets for sheathing roofs and walls.

Ernie stood with his arms crossed, grinning and smoking as the battered arm of the Hood loader grabbed logs and swung them to the bed of the truck. The operator sat twelve feet above us and moved fluidly with the boom, swinging with it like a square-dance partner. Cigarette smoke pooled under his helmet and slowly worked its way around the orange edges, following the helmet’s contours and rejoining itself at the apex—a river of smoke. Logs were piled on each side of the truck creating a narrow road. Our stacks were short since we had no mechanical way to pile. That requires a skidder blade or a boom loader. I had used my back instead—the old-fashioned way—piling logs with a wood-hook. I stacked them carefully and enjoyed watching the piles grow, watching them take up space. I had stacked until my back ached, aware that a log truck driver was happier the fewer times he needed to climb out of his perch to move the truck around. My piling had been courtesy tinged with pride. Our logging was primitive, but I didn’t want
that reflected in the final product.

Soon the logs would be gone, and the emptied space would fill with air and grass. Ernie and I
would carefully comb the field later, searching for poplar frisbees—circular wafers cut off
logs to make a cleaner butt or the appropriate length—and the tree ends that were too short to market. We didn’t want
anything from our operation fouling up Leland’s haying equipment.

Ernie glowed: “Beautiful, isn’t it.” He seemed happy to watch the logs go—knowing he had helped
create something, even if it was only chip-board. I could see him driving the roads craning his neck to look
at skeletal houses forming, wondering if some of his trees were in it—wondering if some of his sweat lived in
the walls. I would wonder too, but I was more interested in the blood I had invested in the woods. I was
more interested in my marked-up forearms and the soil that worked its way under my fingernails and
infiltrated my pores. I felt like Ernie: part of a production. But the production felt deeper than houses.

Logging callouses your hands, you sweat, you bleed, and you do feel rhythms flowing up from the
roots and humus, penetrating bones, muscle, and sinew. Logging allows you time to think about what it is,
exactly, you are doing on the earth. How, maybe, you fit in the landscape you are changing. Moose still
browse on Ernie’s land. The grouse hides, and the red fox dens. Leland still cuts the hay twice a year. To
most onlookers the landscape appears unchanged, but I see it differently. The stumps I carved are mossy
now, melting into the earth. The twitch trail is filling in with pioneering hardwoods and spruce—but I still
recognize its sinuous edges.
“Are you guys ready yet?” I ask, closing the lid of my sun-bleached Lowe pack. I’m trying not to be pushy, but I want to get moving. It is two-thirty in the afternoon and the sun will set in less than four hours. We face a 7-mile snowshoe, uphill 2,200 feet, in unfamiliar terrain. Upper Holland Lake is our destination. I check the map one more time. There doesn’t seem to be anyway to get lost: we skirt the northern end of Holland Lake and head east until we reach the canyon and cross Holland Stream that recharges the lake. Fairly simple.

George stands in front of my truck playing with his government-issue mini-GPS unit. We have been friends for a long time and I have witnessed all his hairstyles: the buzz-cut, the Dutch Boy, and the federal agent. His scalp shows through the dark, close-cropped hair and his blue gaze is unnerving. He learned that look in Texas where he works as a Border Patrol Agent—a long way from the cold winters that tutored us in northern Maine. Dan is re-packing his gear on my tailgate while Kendra searches for a mitten. The four of us left Missoula late this morning—a good three hours after our planned departure: my camping
stove wouldn’t light, George needed to make a last minute Wal-Mart run—out of our way—to get the best deal on batteries and film, and Dan forgot to buy the bagels for our trip.

“I got to pee one more time,” Kendra says as she runs to the brown, Forest Service outhouse. Great! What next? While we wait, George stuffs the GPS unit in the top of his pack and finally shoulders it. Dan has finished re-packing and adjusts his hip-belt. He wears the green and red REI pack his parents bought for him when he graduated from high school. He has adorned it with patches of National Parks he’s visited: Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Teton. The pack looks like it needs a C-section to relieve its stretched seams.

Kendra returns and hefts her purple pack onto her knee before throwing it around her back. We start to walk. We strike out on the trail that looks traveled—on the only trail—even though it heads north, away from the lake. There are several sets of bootprints imprinted in the snowmobile track. The straps of my pack cut into my shoulders—How the hell am I going to carry this thing 20 miles? What could I have left behind? Extra food? No. Extra polypro top? Maybe. Candle lantern? Yeah, probably. I try to remember why I do these trips in the first place. I scan the trail ahead as we walk, watching for it to take a sharp right—east—but it doesn’t.

After 10 minutes of walking, I stop and pull the map out of the breast pocket of my vest one more time. “This trail is not on the map,” I say, “We really want to be hugging the lake.” I’m standing with the map open and George, Dan, and Kendra look on. Nobody’s to blame for the wrong turn. We followed the only trail we could see at the trailhead. I blame myself anyway as we turn around and head back.

We backtrack to where my Nissan is parked and look for another trail. There still isn’t a sign, so we just head for the lake. Dan and I lead through the ice-rimed slash left from a USFS thinning project, cracking and snapping branches with our heavy boots. A shadow blinks across my peripheral vision. I stop and turn my head to identify the moving animal. Bobcat! It can’t be; wild cats do not approach humans. Shit! It is. My surprise turns to horror as the cat bounds towards us, slowing down, barely, to slink underneath a downed lodgepole undeterred by the fact that we outweigh him by 700 pounds. He clears last season’s slash piles with minimal effort, homing in on us—his targets—like a furry missile. George looks at
Kendra, confused, and I look to Dan’s face for an indication of how we should react. His slack-jawed expression mirrors my confusion. *What do we do?*

As a backpacker, I have been brainwashed with so much bear information that I can at least feign comfort the first time I wake up to a grizzly crawling in the tent with me. That is all I hear about in Montana—Griz! Hang your food, pitch tents in dense stands of timber, Do not run! But a cat? That’s something different. I don’t know what to do. This animal must have rabies, I think, or we have disturbed its kits. So what do we do? *Retreat!* In unison, we turn around and walk briskly back to my truck. We drop our packs and all four of us walk circles around its blue hull with the cat in pursuit. *He’s chasing us!* This is not something Wilderness First Responder trained me for. Eventually, the cat tires of the chase-game, sniffs my supine pack, and lifts his leg over it. Then he jumps on the hood of my truck, slinks over the windshield, and lies down on the warm aluminum cap, tucking his paws under his chest. He squints in the sun and gives a wry, dozing smile.

“It’s a bobcat, isn’t it?” I ask. George already has his camera out and is snapping pictures. He’s making me nervous.

“It looks like one.” Kendra answers, but I can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

“George, ya wanna stop that before you piss him off,” I snap in a hushed voice. He doesn’t listen.

Dan stands to my right staring at the cat. After a few minutes the cat still hasn’t moved. He doesn’t give any indication that he’s going to either. His lids remain mostly closed. His whiskers twitch slightly as if a piece of dust has disturbed them, and his ribcage expands and deflates slowly. It is now two-forty-five and I really want to go. We silently put our packs back on, not knowing what else to do, and leave the cat on my truck. I just hope he doesn’t mistake it for a scratching post. As we head east, towards the lake again, I turn around. The cat looks content preening in the sun. He licks his front paw and slides it from the back of his head, over one ear, and out over his nose. He licks his other paw and cleans the other side. He is paying no attention to us. We continue on through lodgepole and Douglas fir and finally happen across a clearly marked trail. There are telltale signs: unearthed roots, compacted soil, and the occasional bootprint in the snow. I’m glad finally to be moving and setting a steady pace towards the mouth of the canyon.
“He’s following us.”

“What?” I look over my shoulder and sure enough, the bobcat prances along 50 feet behind us. “This is not right,” I say, not sure what we should do, or if there is anything we can do. We keep walking and try to ignore him. Maybe he’ll find something else to do. As I’m hoping for this outcome, the cat brushes against my right gaiter. I jump clear off the trail. He accelerates past me up the trail and bobs along for a few paces before veering off to the left into a thicket of rocky mountain maple. He circles to the rear of the column, follows us for a minute, and charges past us again.

“Do you think we should turn around?” I ask. I don’t like being stalked and toyed with. The chill running down my back triggers my sweat glands to work harder.

“I don’t know . . .”

“No.” George interrupts Kendra. He has traveled 1,500 miles for this trip, and nothing short of a nuclear holocaust is going to stop us.

I guess he won’t follow us all the way to Upper Holland Lake—I hope. He performs his circling routine two more times before falling into a trot in the lead. It would be a great picture for one of those glossy, outdoor magazines: four backpackers following a bobcat into the foothills of the Swan Range. I can see the slick and condescending headline: *Nature and Man at Peace in the Wilderness*. This brings a smile to my face, imagining the editors drooling over the story, wondering how many more Jeep adventure-ads they could sell with such an article. After leading for a bit, he veers east and his twitching tail disappears into the scrubby pines.

After a mile of hiking we stop for lunch and sit in a row on top of our packs. None of us has eaten since the bagel shop and George complains about his hunger. Windswept Holland Lake slumbers a 100 feet below. Snow has scoured its icy surface. We can see the Mission Range to the west—where I really want to be, the high points. Their serrated peaks snag the blue sky as if questioning why this state wasn’t named for something solid. We pass around food and water. The sun is hot for March, so I strip a layer off.
“They don’t have mountains like that in Texas.” George’s mouth moves below the largest pair of binoculars I have ever seen. He’s looking at the Missions.

“Where d’ja get those!” I ask.

“From my backpack.”

“No shit. Where did you get them?”

“I use them at work. They’re ‘alien spotters.’”

“Alien spotters?”

“Yeah, illegal aliens,” he says, grinning.

I reach over and grab them. They weigh roughly 10 pounds and measure half the length of my forearm. I couldn’t figure out where in his pack he had been storing them. I look through them and I am pretty sure I can see aliens on McDonald Peak 100 miles away. I can see every line of relief in the creases and drainages of the Missions. Blank swatches of white resolve into cornices and avalanche paths. Sheets of windblown snow seem to hover above each individual peak like sails of an Armada.

“Jesus!” someone says.

I put the binoculars down. George fumbles for his camera again. Then I see our feline friend heading down the trail towards us. Just as he’s about to run into Dan he drops down slope towards the lake and climbs onto the trunk of a bent-over subalpine fir. He stretches like a Husky–butt in the air, front legs out straight–and shreds the fir with his front claws. Sap bleeds from the fresh cuts.

“What the hell’s wrong with him?” George wonders aloud. We speculate.

“I don’t know, maybe there’s a release program nearby for rehabilitated animals. He might be imprinted to humans,” I say, stuffing a handful of gorp into my mouth.

“Maybe he’s a pet. He acts like he wants us to pet him.” Dan says.

“I don’t know,” I say, motioning towards the tree. “I can’t imagine what he’d do to furniture.”

“Maybe hunters and backpackers have fed him,” Kendra says. “Maybe he wants food.” As if he was listening for a cue, the cat leaves the tree trunk and slinks up the hill to where Dan is seated. He tries to
stick his furry head in Dan's bag of trail mix. Instinctively, Dan turns away from the cat and raises the food
above his head. There is an audible group-gasp as we hold our breath in unison: is this it? Is this when
playfulness turns predatory? Will he remember he's wild and he doesn't need to beg? Will he remember
that his claws are sharp?

The cat turns away from Dan and slides towards me. I am sitting on my backpack with a bag of
gorp in my hands. He places both his front paws on the pack between my legs brushing his fur against my
GoreTex pants. I too raise the food over my head, look him in the eyes, and scold him like I would my dog.
"No!" He is close enough to claw my genitals, and the tree-shredding scene plays in my mind. I wonder how
I'll explain this one to the emergency room technicians. For a second he doesn't move. His whiskers twitch
a foot from my face. His black-flecked yellow eyes lock with mine and I feel slightly hypnotized. Then he
lowers his front paws off my pack and walks away. If he had a longer tail, it would have been tucked
between his back legs. He stops once to peer over his shoulder before continuing on and disappearing
behind a rise in the trail.

When we're fairly certain he's not going to return, we re-pack our food, hoist our packs, and
continue to hike. The sun is still several hours away from setting, and there isn't enough snow yet to warrant
snowshoes. We may make it. But the behavior of that cat makes me uneasy. Is there some sign I should be
reading here?

We reach the mouth of the canyon and cross Holland Creek. It runs fast and loud, full of spring-
thaw vigor. The other side is cold and shadowed. The sun is still low enough on the horizon this time of
year that it doesn't peak over the canyon wall. The snow is over a foot deep just across the creek, so we put
our snowshoes on. The trail and canyon are mundane. The walls are not nearly as sheer as the ones Dan and
I had encountered in the Mission Range last November. I break trail. There are no longer boot-prints, just
fresh snow. The trail switchbacks several hundred feet before following a fairly straight, steadily-rising
route. I set a brisk pace and saturate my polypro with sweat. I like exercise, and that is part of the reason
why I move quickly, but mainly, I want to reach our preordained camping spot. I concentrate on my steady
breathing. I fall into pace with the metronomic beats in my chest, and the pulsing blood underneath the
straps of my pack. Kendra is right behind me breathing hard. George and Dan fall back.

We come to a hand-hewn log bridge crossing the creek again. As we cross, George notices something shiny in the water and turns around. The snow banks along the creek are steep, so he takes his snowshoes off and descends closer to the water. He fishes with a ski pole. Ten minutes pass. Fifteen.

“Come on Ferland! Let’s go!” My patience has melted. We have known each other long enough that we forgo niceties when one of us pisses the other off.

“I’ve almost got it!” he says.

“Jesus Christ! Don’t you realize we’ve got a long ways to go still!” He keeps fishing. Kendra and Dan don’t say anything. It is silent except for the steady splash of stream water and the swishing of blood in my forehead. Eventually he pulls a tooth out of the water—either elk or deer. No gold, no wedding band—a tooth. He stashes it in his pocket acting like a kid who has found a rare baseball card. Disgusted, I start hiking before he gets his snowshoes on. We don’t have time to waste.

The snow gets deeper and the trail-breaking harder. We finally reach an elevation where the snow is no longer melting and clumping to our snowshoes. Every once in a while Dan screams in frustration. He had borrowed an old wooden pair of George’s snowshoes, (George bought new ones upon arrival in Missoula). The leather bindings don’t offer any side-to-side stability, causing Dan to slide a lot on the steep hills the trail is cut into. I want to scream! This trip is not working as planned! Snow-slumps from small slides are everywhere. The higher we go, the more regularly they appear. I expect to see the bobcat around every bend in the trail even though we haven’t seen his tracks for a long time.

We come to a V-shaped drainage running straight down the canyon wall. The trail crosses it, and is completely exposed. There are no trees—no handholds—for the entire 200-foot drop to Holland Creek below. I start to cross, carefully kicking the crampons of my snowshoes into the hard-packed snow before putting my full weight on them. The snowshoes shift downhill slightly each time I move. Is this what I came out here for? To be scared shitless. One bad step will result in a broken leg, or unconsciousness—definitely hypothermia. Sweat pools in my armpits and cools as it slides down my rib cage—can’t turn back now. I can’t back out of the trip now . . . we have a destination.
The snow starts turning gray. We have lost the sun. I pull out the map to try to mark our progress, but can't. Except the creek, there are no landmarks, just trees, rocks, and flush ridgelines. The only landmark to come is the lake, which is nowhere in sight.

"Should we stop?" I ask, even though I do not want to.

"I'm tired," says Dan.

"So am I," says Kendra.

"Let's keep going," says George. I can always count on George to back up my stupid notions, or at least entertain his own. We both survived our bomb-making phases in junior high school, so how could walking a little farther be dangerous?

"Yeah, the lake's gotta be up here soon," I say, my hope waning. "We must of gone six miles at least."

We cross another small clearing and I can't find the trail on the other side of it. We scramble through tight fir searching in the twilight and eventually find it. The trail gets steeper, and the steepness of the drop-off more severe. When it becomes difficult to see I stop. Dan has fallen behind several hundred feet.

"I really need to stop," he says, when he catches up. Kendra nods in agreement. I am tired but do not admit it. I could keep pushing, but I vote with Dan and Kendra to call it quits. It's the smart choice. George is outvoted. We hastily pitch our tents on relatively flat ground protected from snow-slides by a dense stand of fir. We shiver through dinner, and I try to pretend that I'm not annoyed. Feeling defeated I climb into the tent I share with Kendra.

I wake up a while later in the tent and turn over, agitating my tired legs. I let out a primal yelp and curl into the fetal position. My hamstrings tighten into fists and it feels like dogs are tearing muscle from bone. Kendra sits up.

"What's wrong?"

"I should have stretched."

"Maybe you should have let someone else break trail for a while," she says. Try to straighten your
legs out.” I do, slowly, and she caresses my head. I start shivering. I hadn’t drunk enough water all day. I hadn’t really been paying attention to anything except elusive Upper Holland Lake, expecting it would be around the next bend in the trail. The pain subsides a bit but I remain still; I do not want to disturb my tired muscles again.

As I’m lying there staring at the opaque tent wall, I start to think: why is it that I do things like this? Why do I willingly strap a 60-pound pack to my back to slog through miles of sometimes heavy, sometimes powdery snow? Questions—old friends—enter my head as waves of pain course through bones and ligaments. My teeth chatter. Why do I have mountain peaks and 20-mile hikes as goals? What is it that I find about sleeping outside in the cold appealing? It’s not waking up to frozen boots or eating dehydrated vegetables and chili powder. I say I go because it’s fun, but I move as if backpacking is a competitive sport and a trip is a mission I must survive. I hike to exhaustion when I could be home watching “Saturday Night Live” or reading a book. And here I am, lying in a tent with useless legs because I’m doing something that’s supposed to be fun. Isn’t there something more I’m supposed to be getting?

The next day we reach Upper Holland Lake—a mile from our campsite. I feel a twinge of regret; we could have made it the night before. We walk to the lake’s edge and gently apply our weight to the ice to see how strong it is. It doesn’t make a cracking sound. Slowly, George, Dan, and I walk 20 feet onto its slushy surface.

“I don’t think we should walk across it,” says Kendra, from the shore.

“Hon’, it’s fine. See.” I jump up and down on the ice, spraying slush in all directions, and smile. She is not moved.

“I’m not walking across it,” she says.

“C’mon.”

“No.”

“Well I am,” says George, and both he and Dan start moving.

“Kendra, it’s not going to break.” She shakes her head and starts walking around the western edge
of the lake.

"Hold on." I walk to intercept her path. I feel responsible for her, and wouldn't forgive myself if something happened to her as she walked alone in the dense conifers that surround the lake. The snow is wet and sticks to our snowshoes. It's rough going--with each step I sink a foot in the snow and pull out several pounds of it cemented to them. Goddamnit! This is ridiculous. Fuck! I try to right myself in the hole I've fallen into but can't--there's too much snow stuck to my shoes. Through a break in the trees I see Dan and George progressing rapidly across the lake. Their legs pump rapidly across the solid surface. My face flushes and I scrape at the snow on my snowshoes with my ski pole. Then I start beating them until the aluminum pole bends. God... Damm... Ittt! I turn to a sapling peaking from the snowpack and swiftly decapitate it. Kendra starts crying.

I don't like finishing last.

* * *

A few weeks after our outing, my graduate-student life returned to normal. Break was over, George had returned to Texas, and Kendra returned to school in Vermont. I was once again trying to balance a full class-load with teaching 25 college freshmen how to construct essays. I was also stressed-out about hatching a thesis idea before the end of the semester. I called a friend who lives in the Swan Range, to talk about our strange bobcat experience. (We didn’t see him after he begged for food.) She and her husband are involved with lynx habitat issues and land ownership in the Swan Valley, so I thought she might have insight into the cat’s behavior.

"She’s a pet," my friend said, without hesitation. So much for the leg-lift over my backpack denoting gender. That explained her begging for food.

"She goes into heat and escapes from her cage all the time," my friend said, "I’m surprised she’s still alive."

"A pet," I said, "why would anyone want to cage a wild animal?" She didn’t have an answer.
I hung up the phone and imagined the steel cage our friend must have lived in—probably a small rectangle resting on sawhorses, maybe attached to the back wall of a shed to offer her shelter from the wind. I doubt she was ever allowed inside, not with her claws. So at least she lived outside. But I imagined her sniffling the steel wires, licking the frost off them, clawing them in defiance, wondering why she could no longer walk through bear grass and hide in huckleberry bushes. I imagined her like a fly exploring every square inch of a window pane, looking for a way out into the sunshine. I wondered how often her owners changed the urine-soiled straw under her paws? Did she even have straw? It didn’t make sense. How could anyone keep a bobcat caged? I couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to.

One afternoon after that phone conversation I was walking my spaniel Willow in Pattee Canyon east of Missoula’s city limits. I was shuffling along a trail with my head down to avoid stepping in spring-thaw poop, when a dog appeared like an apparition out of a grouping of alders. He towered over Willow; she could have easily walked underneath his belly if he hadn’t frightened her with his determined pace. He approached us, tail erect, and he looked like a wolf. His owner came up the trail behind his dog—a tall, pony-tailed guy wearing blue jeans and a confident smile—and said hello as he passed me. Wolf.

When I was nineteen I wanted a wolf. I looked a lot like that guy walking his dog and drove a battered Dodge pick-up. I played the role of logger-man then, and even though the tree-work was seasonal, I wore my muddy boots to college classes. I dreamed of wooing women with my rugged knowledge of woodsly things. I rolled my own cigarettes. I considered myself a sensitive redneck sort of guy, you know, someone who could arc the starter solenoid of a dead truck with a screwdriver and then recite a bit of Tennyson while the engine warmed up. I thought a wolf would complement—would finish—the image I was in search of. I wanted a trophy—own a bad-ass animal and you are bad-ass. But I was nineteen, penniless, and it didn’t look like I had a stable future in sight.

Back then I used to visit George in Boston every so often. He was working on his criminal justice degree at Northeastern University—in the heart of the city. In his first eighteen years of life he had never ventured south of the Maine border. When we graduated from high school, he told me he was heading to Boston for college. I thought for sure he’d end up mugged or stabbed on one of the trains that courses
through the city. The first time I visited him we spent the majority of our time guzzling bourbon and
casting the streets looking for book- and record-stores. The homeless saw me coming—a hick out of place
with my forest-green down vest and thick-bottomed hiking boots—and begged for money. They didn't bother
with George. The gloss of northern-Maine innocence had been scrubbed from his face by the coastal winds.
But me, they could tell I wouldn't refuse them as long as they could make eye contact. I gave them change
until I had none, and then I gave them cigarettes. When I had nothing left, they cursed me like they did the
locals who overlooked them sitting against walls with their palms out. George laughed at me a little
scornfully.

"You'll learn to not see them," he said.

I did not feel comfortable amidst the homeless, the concrete, and the rough coastal accents like 16-
penny nails sinking into my ear drums. I could not concentrate on the Faulkner novel I was reading. I sat by
the window, fourteen floors in the air, and watched pages of a rain-soaked newspaper blow across the
manicured green at the front of the building, and then across a one-way street. I could not orient myself in
Boston. North and south were imaginary designations there. After two days I was clawing to get back to a
place that had forests. The only trees of size were in a park we visited. I say park, but it was more like a
museum. Each tree had a 6-inch-by-8-inch brass plate with its name nailed to its bark in case it forgot: pin
oak, red maple, golden beech. It made me sad imagining their extensive root systems fighting with cast-iron
sewage lines and concrete footers.

My second night there, George and I cracked the seal of a liter of Evan Williams and took turns
taking swigs until it was gone. He went down like David Byrne of the Talking Heads—I swear he was still on
his feet when his shoulders and head hit the floor. He slept half in the kitchen and half in the living room;
the metal bead that separated the rug from the linoleum halved his form at the belly-button. I wasn't ready
for sleep, so his roommate Matt took me for a walk through the early-morning streets. We went to the
football-field-sized reflecting pool in front of the home church for Christian Scientists. The waters were
still. Lights from the city glittered on its surface and for a moment I thought I was on the edge of some
Maine lake watching the stars swim. The waters held my gaze as I sat on the concrete bank, and I waited for
some alcohol-induced revelation. Matt started talking religiously. I began to worry that he was taking my
drunk-ass to some Christian rehabilitation center, so I suggested we head back to the dorm.

A squad car followed us as we walked down one sidewalk. The cop pulled over to the curb ahead
of us, waited until we passed, and then drove a little further ahead. At one point, I walked over to his car
and through the open window said, "is there a problem officer!" I was lucky he was in a good mood. He
squealed away from the curb. There was a problem: two skinny white kids walking near Roxbury early in
the morning. Matt looked at me a little frightened. I needed to get home.

The next morning George and I slopped up greasy eggs with our toast at an Indian-owned diner.
Afterwards, I got in my brown Chevy Citation and followed the signs north. That wasn't the only time I
visited George while he was in school, but I never spent more than three days on any given trip in Boston. I
couldn't.

I never got a wolf dog.

* * *

George, Kendra, and Dan decide that they want to head to the top of the ridgeline that looms behind the
warming hut on the eastern shore of Upper Holland Lake. George yanks me out of my Crazy Creek chair
where I have been napping. I am tired and cranky. The trip seems like a total loss; we aren't going to hike
25 miles in a day or to the top of any tall peak—I won't have any worthwhile stories to tell anyone about this
trip. After a lunch of cheese and summer sausage we strap our snowshoes on and strike out over the five
feet of snow that blankets the bowl the lake rests in.

We cross Gordon Creek, which is shedding its icy glaze, and head east, towards the ridgeline that
peaks 1,000 feet above the lake. We move slowly in the snow and I am glad. I don't want to move fast.
Summer sausage battles in my stomach and bile flak hits the back of my throat. The sky is clear and the sun
warms the trees, melting snow and ice. Water drips from boughs steadily and flashes like diamonds. There
have been small avalanches all around. We walk over the crusted slumps of their outflow that resemble
glacial terminal moraines. Erratics of snow litter the treeless slide areas. Behind them, up-slope, are their tracks—channels cut where the over-sized snowballs had accumulated mass while rolling downhill. It looks as if God and his friends had been playing marbles and had not bothered to collect them at the game’s end.

The endless white terrain dwarfs our column of four.

In less than an hour we reach a plateau at about 7,000 feet and stop to water ourselves and the snow. Steam rises from the snow. After I finish, I turn around and take in the Missions from our new vantage point. It actually looks like we’re higher than them. I knew we aren’t, but I enjoy the optical illusion. My energy spikes, and I start doing headstands in the snow—snowshoes and all. For a moment, I understand why I am outside in the snow, on a mountain, in the winter. For a moment, I don’t have anywhere I need to get—faster.

I look at the upside-down world. Mountains point down like snow-capped stalactites, and I stand in the bottomless blue sky. I can’t hold the posture long because the heat from my head melts the snow causing me to sink. Dan tries to do a headstand, then Kendra, and even George puts down his camera long enough to try. Everybody does headstands until we are winded. Then we sit, silently, and look at the broad expanse of blue sky. My cheeks flush red from all the blood that has traveled to my head. I clasp my hands and place them in my lap. The sun beats against my Gore Tex shell and warms the layer of air trapped against my blue shirt. My eyelids close halfway and I feel myself dozing. I grin like the Cheshire Cat.
Light filters through the gray Boston sky and silhouettes a window pane on the Johnny I wear. I hate hospital gowns. The flaps don’t close properly and expose my butt to the entire hospital. Sometimes I cry and the nurses don’t make me wear one, but I am wearing one today, and the gown opens underneath me baring my skin to the stainless steel table. It’s cold. The walls and ceiling are a drab linen white. I pretend I’m inside an igloo.

The door opens and eight people wearing white jackets enter. They buzz with conversation and swarm around me. My body tenses in anticipation. An older doctor steps toward me, blocking the light, and reaches out with a liver-spotted hand and pulls my gown up to my chin. I am exposed. He pokes at the scars on my abdomen and penis and talks to the residents. They nod their heads and ask questions as they stare at my flesh. I know they are talking about me, but they speak with too many syllables. The liver-spotted doctor steps back, and the others take turns poking and staring. They smile awkward smiles, and their hands shake like dry beech leaves in the wind.
Children’s Hospital is a teaching hospital, so there are always new faces—green residents with unsure hands—each time my parents and I visit. I trust Poor Puppy. That’s what I named the pink stuffed dog my mother gave to me. He is small, about the size of a man’s hand, and his legs stretch out as if he is lying down. I think he’s flying. Poor Puppy calms me down on the operating table. He softens the prick of IV needles and nests in my armpit when the doctor’s outlines blur and the blackness comes.

When I was born my bladder followed a course of its own design and popped out of my gut. The doctors sewed my abdomen back together and left the limp organ where it was. For three years my parents assiduously changed the vaseline bandage that prevented my bladder from drying out. Urine seeped out of the useless tissue like wine through cheese cloth. My parents were twenty-three when surgeons presented them with a tough decision about my future. They had two choices. In one procedure, surgeons could funnel my ureters into an ostomy bag that I would wear on my hip. The bag would collect urine and I would empty it when it filled. My parents didn’t think that I should have to spend childhood worried about the continency of a warm water balloon strapped to my hip.

They chose what was behind door number two—a choice they thought might bring me the most normal childhood. In a procedure called a uterosigmoidostomy, surgeons connected my bladderless ureters to my colon. They couldn’t hook them to my urethra because the bladder’s muscle tissue didn’t function—my penis would have become a spigot without a shut-off valve. Urine and feces mixed in my colon and I shat a muddy river. At three, I didn’t know there was anything wrong with always sitting down to relieve myself.

I enter the white room. Everything is white. White tile. White walls. White light cutting through airborne dust illuminating the row of white toilets. It’s not a clean white that surrounds me but a dingy off-white, like the lines on a well-traveled road.

My footfalls reverberate off the 16-foot ceiling as I walk towards the back wall and the row of eight toilets. They are low-slung porcelain toilets meant for short legs, and they do not offer any privacy. It is a gang bathroom—girls and boys together. I sit down and focus on the door. I perk my ears and crouch.
over the toilet, ready to spring forward at the first hint of others kids. I release my bowels and the bowl beneath rumbles at first and then settles into a sound like cows pissing on a flat rock. Sounds I am used to. Not the toilet sounds other kids make. I hear a throng of voices approaching and I jump up, wipe quickly, and walk the long distance to the door, splitting the tide of rambunctious five- and six year-olds as they enter.

Hill Top school is where the hippie-type people in Bangor, Maine, send their kindergarteners and first-graders. There is a playground with rows of high swings, jungle gyms, and a rotting lobster boat for play. As the name implies, the school compound sits atop a grassy hill and looks down upon the Kenduskeag Stream tumbling towards the Penobscot River. The Penobscot once floated massive log booms to sawmills in Old Town and Orono. It once had an Atlantic salmon run of 50,000 fish fighting to breed. The Penobscot I know floats occasional white bags of trash. I am not allowed to swim in it.

My teacher is a hippie. She has long brown hair and drives a red LeCar. One day she brings tofu sandwiches for my class of five. All partake in the communal meal except me. I cry hysterically.

At least this is the way I remember it—playing in a boat and being terrified of the bathroom and tofu. I don’t know if elementary school experiences—when kids get cruel—mutated my early memories into scary things. But I do know that when I was five all the kids at Hill Top drew pictures of their dreams. My art stood out among the easels of happy homes with smoking chimneys, moms, dads, and kids holding hands under suns with yellow spikes for UV rays. My easel sagged. Four headless cows danced on their hind legs while hoofing around their bloody heads. That was my dream. This my mother has verified. Thinking on it now I’m sure the walls of the bathroom didn’t really scare me, nor did the tofu. I imagine it was change I found frightening. I could have eaten tater tots all day long and used the bathroom without fear—as long as it was empty. Routine got me through the day, and gave me a sense of control. If I didn’t follow my routine I had a mess in my pants. I knew this from experience—this I can verify.

My memories from second grade on are fairly clear. I woke up most mornings in a damp, shit-stained bed. Kids snickered at the way I smelled and the way I walked, at times, clenching my butt cheeks together as I fumbled towards the bathroom. I started to feel ashamed of the sounds and smells I made in the
bathroom. I would sneak into a stall, lock the door, and hope my friends were too busy to notice that I
wasn’t with them at the urinals. Through the thin aluminum partition I learned that boys define themselves,
in part, through their penises. Like dogs, they pissed on walls and each other in bids for power, and I could
hear them discussing whose was bigger and where they had inserted them. Sitting there, alone, I looked at
mine and wondered why I couldn’t pee out of it. I wondered what that meant. How was I going to stake my
territory?

* * *

Maine has one of the oldest, most vivid, logging histories. The first sawmill in North America was erected
in 1623 on the coast in York. Men started logging near the coast where lumber could easily be loaded onto
ships. But the timber barons ran out of trees within easy reach. They then moved north and west up river
drainages, towards New Brunswick and Quebec, as the logs flowed east, in their wake, to Bangor. Ships
sailed up the Penobscot from the Atlantic steadily and filled their decks in Bangor—once the most
productive lumber port in the world. In the nineteenth century, Bangor was a town of loggers and sailors
blowing off steam with whores and beer. They brawled in the muddy streets while the river flowed on,
carrying sawdust and other mill detritus out to sea.

This brawling resource-extraction history is as deep and as powerful as the Penobscot. I was born
in Bangor and this history is in me and every Mainer—a heritage some of us display proudly with a Paul
Bunyan statue and our pragmatic understanding of work. We are born into it, as if we came out of the womb
wearing flannel shirts and wielding peaveys. Many places in this country have similar histories, but those
histories ended when the forests dried up. In northern Maine, the saws still buzz loudly.

We moved to Presque Isle—150 miles north of Bangor—when I was thirteen. Rolling hills with long
views replaced the flat, lower Penobscot drainage. Pine and maple gave way to spruce and fir. Quebec and
New Brunswick replaced our rocky coast border.

Duncan Cullion was my first friend in Presque Isle. We played basketball at his house—a large,
slate-blue, two-story home up the hill from mine—and took turns smashing his remote control monster-van, and lounged on leather couches in his parents' TV den. His dad practiced medicine, and his mom slurped bourbon from highball glasses and always had a cigarette lit. She looked like a prune left to further dessicate in the sun. The Cullion’s house reeked of stale cigarettes and poor health. They owned a jeep, a hot tub, a lake house, and pounds of gold jewelry that suited the tone of their skin. Mainers are very white—resulting from low elevations and high latitude living; but northern Mainers are even whiter. Albinos appeared tan in comparison to the Cullions. I was lonely in the new place—in a landscape far different from the one I had spent my first thirteen years in—and Duncan took me under his red-freckled wing.

“How big’s your penis?” he asked me as we walked in the front door of his house one day. I kicked off my dirty Nikes and grinned sheepishly.

“I don’t know. I’ve never measured it.”

“Mine’s seven-and-a-quarter inches.” He watched my face for an astonished reaction, so I gave him one; I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. I imagined Duncan in his room late at night with a ruler and an erection in his hand, and I wondered if I was weird because I had never thought to do such a thing. His penis was nearly all he talked about besides masturbating, and in high school, I would soon learn, the span of his penile mythology was the rod he measured his self-worth with. Standing amidst a pile of Cullion shoes, I didn’t know any of this; I just hoped he wouldn’t ask me to measure my penis in front of him. I liked him and didn’t want him to think I was a dork for refusing such a request.

Besides his penis, Duncan loved basketball. We bounced around on the little concrete slab in front of his garage—typical, rowdy adolescent games with shouting and soaring tempers. I learned that he had a violent streak. When his face flushed with fire and matched the color of his hair, it was time to vacate the premises. One afternoon, my brother Jason blocked a shot and accidentally hooked his index finger under Duncan’s gold necklace, breaking it. Duncan was fond of his thin necklace—infatuated with it. With impunity he pinned my brother to the concrete and punched him until tears ran down Jason’s face. Duncan was ruthless, but I still thought he was cool. I needed a friend—I had never had a “cool” friend—and I didn’t try to stop the rise and fall of Duncan’s chubby fist. I acted like it didn’t happen.
I crossed a line with Duncan. I thought we were better friends than we were—I thought he liked me. I told him about my surgeries and my scars one day, and his jaw set at a funny angle. His blue eyes paled and went hollow as I spoke. He stopped calling me to come over and play ball; he stopped talking to me entirely. My masculinity was corrupt in Duncan’s eyes. I could not have impressed him even if I had measured twelve inches on the penis scale. I went back to hanging out at home with video games and MTV.

Several months after I told him my secrets, I passed him in freshman hall. Two new cronies flanked him on either side, and he walked with his chest thrust out, legs bowed like he had just dismounted from a fifteen-day horse ride. His arms curved like taught bows and swung back and forth to the counterweight of his balled fists. He walked like he owned the hall.

“Hey,” he looked at me as he walked by, “Didja get those surgeries to fix all your stuff?”

“Yeah, I did.” I lied. I looked down at my reflection in the speckled linoleum and I wished I could slide under its glassy surface. I wanted to hide because I regretted what I had told him, and I worried that he’d tell his friends about my flaws. He smirked and strutted off.

I would not make the same mistake again.

* * *

The leather chair squeaks as I turn and look out the window. One of the urologists is talking to my mother and step-father who sit next to me. I’m not really listening. Instead I look out the window into the bright Virginia sun. I look towards the river we walked past this morning on our way to the office. I guess it is a river, although it doesn’t look like the rivers back home. Concrete walls gird it and force it to flow in a straight line. Earlier, I watched a man with ragged flannel cuffs—even though the temperature had exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit—catch crabs. He leaned into the concrete wall and pulled the net out of the water with a rope. Claws protruded from the mesh and scraped against the concrete, occasionally snapping at their
nylon captor.

I probably should listen to the doctor since he is talking about me. But there is nothing new to hear. They will cut me open, fix a few things, and sew me up again. Old hat. Right now I only want to look beyond the Venetian blinds and try to forget about what will happen in a few days. I just want to be home and out of the specialists’ reach.

“The drainage tube will remain in for a few months until the stoma heals.” The doctor looks at me and I pretend like I know what he’s talking about—that I’ve been listening. At sixteen, I just want it to be over. I want this to be the last surgery. I look at the wall plastered with mahogany-framed certificates and they comfort me. If I don’t listen closely then I won’t hear any apprehension in his voice. I won’t hear any disclaimers.

The humidity wraps me like a soggy blanket as we exit the air-conditioned office and walk to the car. At the Ronald McDonald house I go to my family’s room, lie on the bed, and flip through the latest Rolling Stone. Bart Simpson is on the cover. The sheets feel cool against my skin. Later on I go to the game room to play Ms. Pac Man, and I pass somber looking parents shuffling towards their room. Surgeons opened their daughter today. I’m not sure why she’s sick. I smile at them as they pass and wonder if that’s how my parents look when I am out cold on the operating table—during that time when their child’s health and future remains unknown.

Several days later I wake up to a pup-tent, as if Lilliputians have bivouaced along my abdomen to my thighs. It holds a white bed sheet aloft, off fresh, seeping wounds. I feel like I skidded 200 feet on pavement littered with broken glass. I lift the sheet and look at the eight-by-six-inch bandage covering the wound on my thigh where surgeons filleted a piece of skin to graft somewhere else. It looks like the soiled tampon that absorbs blood beneath a cellophane-packaged steak. As promised, they crafted me a bellybutton where there had been only smooth skin. A yellow latex tube the diameter of my index finger runs out the right side of my abdomen and empties a mixture of mucous and pee into a clear plastic urinal. The fluid looks like chicken broth before the fat has been skimmed. The tube will remain for several months until the stoma, on
my left side, heals. The stoma, protected by several layers of bloodied gauze, is not visible. Thirty-three staples hold my abdomen together. I release the sheet and let the weight of drug-induced sleep pull me down.

The tent embarrasses me when I’m awake. It feels like a big road sign alerting all passers-by, letting them know I had work done down there. I’m sixteen, and don’t really want attention drawn to me, let alone to my groin. I am ashamed when the nurse with the southern accent, tanned face, and long, red fingernails lifts the sheet to attend to my bandages. I want to sleep with her but doubt she would find such a patchwork-quilt nether region enticing. I can’t even fantasize about her—doctor’s orders—until my fresh seams have hardened and the stitches and staples removed. I keep ammonia capsules on my night stand. If an erection stirs beneath the tent, I must break one and inhale deeply to kill it.

While I’m healing, I think very little about the mechanics of the stoma. I forget that I don’t really like my body, and the fact that I’m different from the boys I attend school with. I’m too busy healing to worry about these things. Besides, the hospital ward comforts me because I know that I’m not alone in being different—I can reach out and touch the hand of my bedridden neighbor if I forget. In a hospital you can’t do anything but lie still and heal. The only other choice is to go the other way and get worse. Time passes quickly.

After two weeks they pull me to a standing position and help me walk on pins and needles. After three weeks, my parents and I drive back home to Presque Isle.

Northern Maine is isolated. It is a place matted with young coniferous forests and edged by potato fields. Diversity is a word used to describe potato species, not culture. Manhood is obvious and recognizable: truck tires, grease, labor. Men frost potato fields with fertilizer and pesticides, drink watery beer, and shoot things—they don’t talk about feelings. I attended high school with many kids whose thinking was as clearcut as the woods around us.

After several months of healing at home, I stood triumphantly in front of the toilet and pissed on the seat. For the first time in my life I had control. I was continent, and could do things I hadn’t been able to
do before. The doctors still advised me to take things slowly, and my parents limited my activities to walking on the paved bike path that cut through our town.

My friend George and I went walking one August afternoon, a month after my surgery, and happened across the middle school playground where our friend Mark was racing his go-carts. He let George and I have a turn, and we drove those cars full-tilt around the parking lot, weaving around the two yellow school buses that were hibernating in their off-season. Racing around the parking lot wasn’t exciting enough, so we created a sport to challenge our driving abilities. I don’t remember who picked up the first crab apple, but our driving quickly evolved into an apple-throwing road war. Like jousters, we drove our steel horses at each other and unloaded our harvested artillery. Apples bounced off foreheads, collided with steering wheels, and splatted under tires. The entire lot smelled like a cider press.

At one point, I ran out of ammunition. I spied a few apples on the ground and turned sharply to retrieve them. I looked up in time to see the wall of yellow approaching. I hit the brakes, but it was too late. The cart and I went under the bus. My head snapped back and my neck and chin dragged across the bottom of the filthy bus. I left dragging hand prints where I pushed against the steel in horror, trying to stop my momentum. It may have taken me three seconds to come out on the other side, but it felt like an eternity. Once out, I jumped off the cart, surprised to be alive, and started screaming. George and Mark came running over.

"Jesus!" George said, "I thought for sure you were gonna be decapitated." I palpated my abdomen frantically--worried I might have really injured myself. In a stern conversation, the surgeons had warned me to take care of myself. If I didn’t, they had said they wouldn’t feel obligated to repair me in the future.

"Mom’s gonna kill me," I said.

She didn’t. I hadn’t injured any of the still-fresh surgery. I had a cut nostril, a bruised chest, and a 3-inch, red skidmark on my neck that brought me fame the following week when school started. This is cool, I thought, doing things I’m not supposed to--taking chances. The stoma freed me of inhibitions I had felt about physically challenging my body. I took up mountain biking and ran cross-country and track that year. In the spring, like other kids, I picked rocks to clear the potato fields for planting and harvested...
potatoes the following fall in icy rain. I drank Budweiser with my friends as we drove monster trucks through mudholes in the woods and cheered. The fir boughs shook from our war whoops. I behaved like any red-blooded, rural-American boy.

As much as I acted like one of those boys, I didn't feel like one. I couldn't completely relate to their wanton carelessness—their sense of boyhood invincibility—as if nothing was out of their control. Sure, I took chances, but I knew I wasn't invulnerable to death.

There was another reason I felt different: girls. My friends spent 98 percent of their time trying to undress girls—or at least fantasizing about undressing them. I fantasized too, but I was not prepared to undress myself in front of any girl. The stoma brought me a better—more normal—life, but in an odd twist, it brought home a reality that had been easier to deny before, when I couldn't fully participate in a boy's life: I realized just how different I was from the boys and men who inhabited the northern Maine landscape.

* * *

The skidder tears through the edge of the woods and charges forward with five white pines in tow. They are skim-coated with mud. My uncle doesn't smile from the cab. His jaw is solid and serious. His eyes are hidden behind sunglasses.

My uncle has hired me for the summer. I am eighteen years old and 200 miles from my hometown, a clean break from Presque Isle and the tyranny of home turf. Like most of the "freaks" and "misfits" in high school, I left shortly after graduation. I imagine they felt like me. Presque Isle was not a place where we could grow and figure out who we really were. My uncle has me in the yarding area cutting trees to be pulped at the mill. I get one twitch cut, and have a few minutes of rest before he comes trundling out of the woods with another. He plows over the logs I cut and drops new trees before heading into the woods again. The skidder is loud and dirty. Its orange, steel hull is pocked with rust, and its sharp angles, hydraulic hoses, and oozing sludge make it look like a medieval torture device. Tire chains rattle and tear soil and tree skin. Pines flip and turn, fighting chokers like fish snagged on hooks.
It is my first job in the woods and my first time running a saw. I like the power of a chainsaw: the plume of blue exhaust that wraps around my torso; wood chips bounce off my shirt, stick to my forearms, and nest in my hair. But my uncle stands by to keep me in check. He is like a skidder, hard and in control. He doesn’t give compliments, a trait passed through generations of solid Germans. Instead, he keeps me from floating into the ether of self-confidence with reminders of my virginlike qualities. He pins them to my chest like teacher’s notes meant for a parent’s eye. I stand on a pile of logs with a saw hanging at my side. A breeze cools the sweat around my neck.

The logging landscape tastes like peppermint, mud, diesel exhaust, and sweat. Blood from cuts and broken blisters mixes with wood chips and the oily residue on my saw. Mud coats my boots, and sweet-smelling pine-pitch hardens into black scabs on my face and arms. If not for my uncle, it is a place that could feel like home. I had accepted my uncle’s offer of work because nobody’s tougher than Paul Bunyan, I thought. The saw reacts to my direction and deconstructs trees in a flurry of resin and woodchips. At the end of the day I put off showering so the essence of the woods and work will linger. I like walking into a store dirty, shaking off woodchips like dandruff for effect. Others are watching, I am sure.

“What’s wrong!” She clutches my arm. I am sitting up in bed. The darkness of the cabin lightens slightly as my eyes focus. The woodstove glows faintly in the corner. I close my mouth. My throat is sore.

“What were you screaming?”

“What?”

“What were you screaming?” she asks. I think for a second. Another bad dream. The headless cows in kindergarten were just the beginning of my nighttime forays into the macabre. I have dreams that would make Stephen King shiver.

“I don’t know.” I start to orient myself to the angles of the cabin. I can smell our dogs, wood-ash, and our sex from an hour before. I lay back against the down pillow and pull the comforter up to my chin. A November wind wails across the potato field and penetrates the cedar board-and-batten siding. As I settle
into the pillow, Layla the cat conforms to my head again and begins purring. I am in a good place, and I try to stop my heart from beating so fast.

“What are you scared of? You know you can tell me.” She wiggles an arm underneath the comforter and lays it across my chest. Her cheek presses against my shoulder.

“I don’t know.” It is an honest answer. I can feel a glaze of hot tears forming and am glad that it is dark. I push the sadness back down.

“Boys aren’t supposed to do this,” I say.

“And why is that?” I don’t have an answer.

Andrea’s was the first in a string of voices that tried to convince me that I was a beautiful man—not because I wore chainsaw chaps, but for other reasons. I didn’t believe her. How could I? That would require a level of trust I could not commit to—a plunge into vulnerability. I didn’t trust anyone, let alone a person who had seen me naked. I cut her firewood, managed the woodstove, and drove a big truck. She left with the January snow.

When I was twenty-one I logged with a Belgian horse named Pride on a piece of land not far from where my uncle tripped trees. Hank, the landowner, owned Pride, the cows, and the trees I sold for firewood. It was a different kind of logging. Birdsong replaced diesel clatter. As I worked I could hear horseflies dive-bombing my head, and Hank’s Scotch-Highlands lowing off in a pasture. The sounds were all background music for my dance with Pride. I led with gentle commands: gee, haw, easy boy, and he followed—sometimes. Most days, we moved fluidly under the trees, and our steps were light. We snaked along the trail as a unit and I laid off the bit as long as he didn’t try to run. Beech, ash, and birch logs accumulated against a maple tree in the pasture I was using as a yarding area. The more the pile grew, the better I felt. I equated my self worth with that pile of logs, and the pile of split firewood that grew from my sweat next to it.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to leave those trees?” I asked Hank several times. Massive
beeches lined one hillside. Their crowns spanned 30 feet in diameter, and nothing grew under them. They were beautiful, and I wanted to make sure that Hank understood that I was only a tree-cutter; once they were down, I couldn’t put them back up. He wanted room for his sugar maples, and thought the beeches were impediments to his sugaring operation.

I paused before I cut them and ran my hand along the smooth bark with its intermittent black scabs. I stood there in the silence with one hand resting against a beech before I yanked the pull-cord. The trees tipped forward—slightly—on hinges, and lingered like skydivers at the open door, tasting the air for the first time as it parts their hair at a hundred miles an hour; there was a brief pause, a hesitation, and then they dropped down the rocky slope. Branches the size of my waist splintered and burrowed four feet into the soil.

My right foot slipped on a loose rock when I pulled my saw out of one backcut, and I dropped to the ground with both hands firmly gripping the saw. I struggled to regain my footing as the trunk creaked on the hinge I made. I looked up and saw that the tree was starting its descent to the ground that built it. I knew it would fall slowly at first, gathering momentum, before shaking the earth with its mass. I clawed at the soil trying to right myself. My heart chopped at my sternum with a deliberate rhythm. Get up! When the crown of the tree slammed the ground, its butt kicked 6 feet off the stump, like a kid launching off a see-saw. I was still on all fours. The shadow of the butt hovered over me, it spoke to me with two-ton bluntness and blotted out the sun. I am going to die, I thought. Twenty-one years, and this is it, killed by firewood. I closed my eyes and turned my head to face the ground. I waited for the bone-crunching finish. Whuuuummmmp!

I opened my eyes. The tree quivered where it landed, on the other side of the stump. It had sunk into the soil, like a boot-heel in spring mud. I stood up and my legs buckled. Sitting back down, I brushed the duff off my arms and removed my helmet from my slick head. I dropped my head in my hands. Rule number one: check your footing. Every logger knows that. I had gotten cocky and hadn’t bothered to check my footing before plunging my bar into the tree’s heart. Intimacy with a tool, and the sense of being in control, breeds cockiness. Ask any logger as he watches the life pulse out of his femoral artery in great, red bursts. Some people learn the hard way that control is like a maple leaf, a summer thunderstorm, and a
human life; it is gone before you realize that it wasn't really yours to take for granted in the first place.

* * *

My parents didn't raise me to believe that manhood was about cutting down trees or about brawn. They didn't raise me to believe that it was about control. But we are shaped by other things than family, like landscape—that mosaic of people, land, and work that surrounds us. I grew up around men who forced tired soils to grow potatoes, and tamed forests with straight-line plantations. Doctors battled my cell's inclinations under bright flood lamps and gave me physical control over my body.

My body is like the landscape of Maine. It is a deep topic—steeped in beauty, shame, and secrecy—that is difficult to breach. For most of my life, I have found it easier to hide in bathroom stalls and behind a two-foot bar on my chainsaw than talk about how I really felt. It was easier to blindly follow a pattern cut by other men. I thought it would make me feel alright about the lot nature had granted me. It didn't. It is easier to coerce forests and soils to produce than to acknowledge—to truly open our eyes and see—that there are problems with our treatment of the land we call home. That would be a vulnerable step that most people are not ready to take. As a little boy lying in recovery rooms next to other sick boys and girls, I understood something—I think all of us did—an idea that none of us were old enough to voice: life is out of our control. We had been born with problems beyond human control, and the pulse of life-giving machines and busy white-coated surgeons could not convince us otherwise.

The day that beech tree almost killed me I walked downhill on its trunk and removed the limbs in sweeping motions. After finishing, I sat on the fresh stump and swatted at horseflies. It was a seat big enough for two. I looked downhill at the motionless logs and traced their sinuous edges with my eyes. Limbs lay on the ground around the trunk like freshly sheared wool. The missing tree-crowns created a hole in the canopy, not a big one, but enough to make the sun hot against my face; its rays glinted like gold dust off the bark of the yellow birch up the hill. I wished I was a painter. I thought others should see the way the woodchips were bright yellow against the rusty, earthen tones of the soil. In a few days the yellow would
fade as moisture evaporated. In months the chips would gray and eventually melt into the earth. The limbs would decay slowly, and eventually be swallowed as well.

A girlfriend of mine used to trace my scars with her fingers and tell me how nice they felt—how she had never felt anything like them before. I didn’t believe her then, but I do now. I am different from other men, yet I am the same. Some day I will lie down and expose my scars to the warm sun. Trees will shed seasons on me, and duff will fill around me like water in a tub. Eventually, my skin will slough off, and I will be like everybody else.
The three of us huddle under the roof of the gas-station island. It is three A.M. in Canaan, Maine, and the windows of the store are as dark as the surrounding sky. Rain cuts 45 degree angles in the fog and finds its way onto our shoulders. The thin red windbreaker I wear sticks to my skinny body. This is bad, I think, shaking my head and shivering. The chilled concrete penetrates the chamois in my shorts. We have only ridden 40 miles and still have 260 to go. Headlights approach, and my heart beats faster. Please be the sag wagon. Our ride. The headlights morph into a log truck and it roars past.

Tim, Jim, and I had left the bike shop at twelve forty-five A.M., riding out of Orono, Maine, to the whoops and hollers of college kids stumbling towards the next bar. Our bellies were full of pepperoni pizza and butterflies. What were we thinking? We planned to cycle 300 miles in less than twenty hours. Our adventure was politely titled RATS (Ride Across Three States), but in reality it was a ride meant for Marquis de Sade enthusiasts—painful leather seats, uncomfortable riding positions, and chains. The route snaked through western Maine, following Route 2 through the White Mountains of New Hampshire and green hills of Vermont. Route 2 is hilly, and the deep frosts of the Northeast turn the pavement’s surface
into a spiderweb of cracks, like a winter-beaten windshield. It's a rough road with little or no shoulder for cyclists.

Our rain-soaked attempt was not the first RATS—it was the seventh—but it was the first time for Tim and me. Not only was Jim a veteran but he was the creator of RATS. He owned a little bike shop in Orono that locals frequented, and he established the ride to allow folks the chance to challenge their assumed limitations on a non-competitive and inexpensive ride. He's tough and wiry and makes riders fifteen years his junior sweat to keep up.

The rain continues to pound the aluminum roof as I force myself to eat a Clif Bar. Got to keep eating and drinking. None of us mentions turning back, but I'm thinking about it. They probably are too. Maybe we could save the ride for another day.

No other vehicle has passed since the log truck. I smell gasoline and ozone, pine sap and road grease. Rainbow slicks float in the puddle under my wheel and twinkle in the dull glow from the gas pump. After twenty minutes we remount our bikes. Three months of training and the nervous anticipation that makes for sleepless nights is heavier than the burden of facing a cold July rain. Solid walls of conifers hem in the dark road as we pedal on.

I never really wanted to participate in RATS. I loved riding, but RATS sounded like a dumb idea.

Three-hundred miles on a skinny saddle? No thanks.

"Yeh got that number seven stuff?"

"What? Number seven what?" I asked from behind the counter. He looked at me as if I was retarded, or my hair was on fire. His back arched a bit at the attitude in my voice. Nervously, he straightened the tattered gray flannel workshirt that hung off his belly like a maternity blouse. He bristled for a fight.

"Yooouu know . . . number seven. It kills bugs."

Bugs. He wanted the pesticide Sevin spelled with an 'i'; numbers had nothing to do with it. I rolled my eyes as I walked from behind the unfinished plywood counter and led him and his mute partner to the
pesticide aisle. My nostrils tingled as we neared the shelves of multicolored packages. Like the warning colors of coral snakes the bright packaging screamed: Danger! Poison! Don't fuck with me. My nostrils understood but I doubt the customer or his friend did. I grabbed a bag of the pesticide Sevin off the bottom shelf and handed one to him. He grinned at his partner and unkempt whiskers dipped down to obscure his upper lip.

"Yeah, that's it," he said; he knew it all along, "number seven." I rang him up at the counter and returned to my newspaper and cup of coffee. Thankfully the store was empty, so I could return undisturbed to stories of trailer fires and moose collisions. There were many things that made working at a hardware store difficult. I catered to men whose poor attitudes outpaced mine. I sold them poisons and wondered where they'd dump them. I waited on former professors. Didn't you graduate? they'd always ask.

Parks Hardware was old. The hardwood floors peaked and dropped into valleys that creaked underneath the customers' feet. The dust of 150 years deposited in fine layers throughout the store; we could age pieces of hardware by their accumulated strata. The place had history and the kind of hardware that ends up as subject matter for Trivial Pursuit questions. Cyc, the manager, scared the hell out of me when I started working there. He had been there thirty years and he frowned a lot, I guess from having dealt with the same people for so long. A true Mainer, he said very little—something to do with a Puritan work ethic and not wanting to seem presumptuous. I thought he hated me—just another long-haired punk Linny (our boss) had hired. Another clueless college student. So I swept the floors daily to impress him. I filled the nail bins before they were half-empty. I didn't stop moving for eight hours a day just so he wouldn't think I was a slacker. I wanted him to know I was a hard-working boy from the north and not some lazy southern-Maine twit, that I understood logging and farming better than clerk work. Nothing seemed to impress him. I felt more emotion from the bags of cement I stacked.

One day he farted in front of me. "Watch out for them barking spiders," he said. "They're everywhere." The expression on his face didn't change a bit. He turned on his heels, hands clasped behind his back, and walked slowly down the pipe-fitting aisle as if he were strolling through the park. The Cold War of initiation had ended, and he took me into the hardware fold. He taught me to never work harder than
necessary, and most importantly, to cultivate a curmudgeonly attitude. Of course, he didn’t say these things outright, he taught through example.

Cyc never let a customer get him down. He deflected bad attitudes and uncalled for remarks with a Teflon exterior. “Fuck ‘em,” he’d say, wriggle his veiny red nose underneath square bifocals and walk around the store. The hardwood floor squeaked out his progress. He’d heard it all before and knew it wasn’t worth the effort to get involved with someone’s bad day. “Don’t take it personally,” he’d say. I did.

Negative remarks stuck to me like an egg fried on an unoiled iron skillet. Not only did I have a college-degree chip on my shoulder, but most of my previous work had involved rough men in the woods or on farms. If you took your bad day out on them you risked getting pounded into the rough soil between potato wind-rows. Hardware stores were more civilized than that, so I released my angst on bikes.

Sixty miles into the ride we pull over to huddle in the entryway of a McDonald’s. Nothing but cold hard rain since Canaan. We sip stale coffee. The sky is a gray wash through the windows, and our chances of finishing the ride seem slim. Streaks of street-filth spun up by our wheels run down our faces, and I can feel grit in my teeth. Customers give us strange looks as they walk in. We do not fit in with the regular six A.M. Farmington, Maine, McDonald’s patrons. Our bright colors make us obvious amidst their muted olive drabs and tans. I imagine conversations among the locals as they sneak glances from the plastic McBooths, “I bet they ain’t from around here.” Jim shakes uncontrollably, mildly hypothermic, and I am saddle-sore already. Tim isn’t happy, but he fares better than Jim and me. He chews an egg McMuffin and the Styrofoam viking-horn duct-taped to his helmet moves up and down keeping time with his jaws. Still no sign of the sag wagon.

We commiserate and decide to keep riding and hope the rain stops. Tim finishes his sandwich, and I head into the bathroom with a tube of Vaseline. I slather it all over my thighs and nether regions, hoping to God one of those logtruck drivers who passed us on the road doesn’t walk in. I knew attaining nirvana wouldn’t be easy, but this whole ride seems ridiculous.

I got my first bike when I was seven. It was an orange and black single-speed with coaster brakes and a
“watermelon” seat. A year later, when I was eight, I crashed it. For three days I lay on the blue couch in the living room with a concussion repeating the same questions. “What happened to me?” “Why does my head hurt?” “Why am I lying here?” My parents tired of answering the same question over and over so they wrote the answers down on little pieces of paper and placed them on top of the afghan that covered me. The slips of paper coated me like yellow confetti.

When I turned ten my parents bought me a black and red Columbia ten-speed from K-Mart. Its narrow, slick tires offered a new freedom: I could travel longer distances. In the summer I ventured five miles across the Joshua Chamberlain Bridge—the Penobscot River—to Brewer to visit my grandparents and swim in their pool. I liked working up a sweat cruising over summer asphalt and then jumping into the turquoise water. I had left behind the child’s play of BMX bikes for a slick road machine.

My parents divorced in 1986. They had never fought or given my brother Jason and me any indication that there were problems. Then one weekend they sealed themselves in their bedroom. On Saturday I watched Garfield and the Smurfs on the first floor and looked up the ornate wooden staircase, expecting to see one of them descending to make breakfast, lunch . . . anything. On Sunday my dad called my brother and me to come up to their bedroom. My mother lay curled up under a comforter with deep rings under her eyes. Divorce. That word hit me hard.

One summer day, after crossing the bridge to Brewer, I saw a woman kneeling in the road amidst a lot of traffic. I rubbernecked from my bike as I passed. What is she doing, I wondered. And then I saw the bulldog, slobber and blood running out of the corner of his mouth. He was lying on his side—ribcage expanding and contracting rapidly—and all four of his legs were running towards some unseen horizon. If I run fast enough, he was thinking, I can outrun this. The woman wailed. I looked the other way. When I heard that word “divorce,” I felt like that dog, and I, too, had nowhere to run.

Things happened fast after that weekend. My mother moved out and got an apartment two streets away, and Jason and I started living out of duffel bags—two weeks with Dad then two weeks with Mom. My dad remarried quickly—the divorce had not been his idea. Gene, his bride, had a head of dark gray hair with a white streak down the middle. She looked like Cruella deVille. Maybe skunklike would be a more apt
description. She stank with a slew of problems: alcoholic father, abusive ex-husband, inability to adapt to change. She did not adapt to step-children. Our time with Dad dwindled to every other weekend with him, then one evening a week for dinner at the Ground Round. We tossed peanut shells on the wooden floor and I marveled at the wall of license plates that dated back to 1931. Eventually, the only contact we had was through his alimony payments.

Bob, my step-father, inhabited the other end of the parental equation. He had the build of a Marine—compact and trim. He and my mom had met at the Theological Seminary in Bangor. He was a graduate looking for a church and she worked there as a receptionist. She was also the organist at the Congregational Church in town where many of the students attended church. Bangor was also the home of Pat’s Bike Shop, a tiny little nook of a store in the brick-faced downtown area. Bob was a member of their road racing team.

Jason, Mom, and I traveled to several bike races in Maine in Bob’s Honda to watch him. Actually, there’s very little to watch at a road race. The multi-colored peloton of racers leaves the finish line, breaking into smaller pacelines as the faster riders leave the slower ones behind, and unless you drive ahead of the group and wait under a shady tree for the racers to pass, there is no further action until the final sprint across the finish line. Not exactly the excitement twelve- and thirteen-year-olds crave. Bob would cross the finish line dripping sweat, eyeballs bloodshot from the wind, and he would squeeze my mother with his hairy arms. Salt stains streaked his Lycra outfit with white Rorshach images. He’d come to hug my brother and me—puckering up with a big fake kiss—and we’d run off squealing. I couldn’t figure out why he worked so hard for no apparent reason. Was it for a trophy? How could that be worth training through rain, wind, and sore knees? Was a medal worth shaving your legs for?

The sun peaks through the misty sky and the rain stops for a few minutes. We pull over at the rest area outside of Gorham—nothing more than garbage cans drooling their contents onto the grass and splintered picnic tables. We have just passed the “Welcome to New Hampshire” sign. One state down, 150 miles to go.
Dave and Ryan stand next to the sag wagon. The rusting Econoline van is our safety net. It is a sure ride in case the weather deteriorates or one of us “bonks” (fatigues beyond the point of recovery). Dave pilots the rig. He’s the manager at Rose Bike and it’s his two-tone van—rust and grey. Ryan, also employed by Jim, rides shotgun.

Jim changes into a dry pair of shorts and Tim and I rummage around in the caches of food we had put in the van earlier. I’m disappointed with what I’ve brought: cherries, Clif Bars, packets of slippery GU. They seemed like good bike-food items when I purchased them, but I hadn’t anticipated the strength of my appetite. I crave the bizarre like a pregnant woman. I want salt, ice cream, hot dogs, and a pickle. Tim pulls out pimiento loaf and starts stuffing his face. That, however, doesn’t look appetizing.

“How can you eat that shit?”

“MMMpphhpphhh, plataaa.” He hands me a slice of the stuff. It looks like spoiled meat. I sniff it and frown, but my appetite gets the better of me and I shove the mess into my mouth to be done with it. The sky doesn’t look like it’s done raining on us, but the sun feels nice even if it’s only momentary. I opt to leave my tights on, however. It’s so cold that it’s hard to believe it’s July.

After fifteen minutes we get back on our bikes and continue west. My legs have stiffened during our break. My stomach clenches as Jim talks about the monster 7-mile climb out of Gorham that will take us into the White Mountains. He has done it six times before and knows it has been the breaking point for other riders. We tool slowly past the gift- and gear-shops of Gorham—a touristy town close to several ski hills—and take a sharp left towards the mountains. The hill is startling, four lanes of traffic climbing to a point that is unclear from where we are.

We haven’t had much for shoulders so far, but there is a good one here—over 2 feet wide. Cars pass us steadily and trucks pass slowly, geared down with their hazard lights flashing. I start to sweat, or maybe I’ve been sweating the whole time and hadn’t noticed in the rain. I politely pass Jim and Tim. They have lower gearing than I and even though my legs spin at a slower cadence, I go faster. Even my lowest gear forces me to grind slowly up the hill. I hunker down in the saddle and try to forget about the pain raking over the tops of my knees. The constant traffic helps distract me. Occasionally I stand to fight gravity.
I got my first mountain bike when I was fourteen. We had been living in Aroostook County—where Bob had gotten his church—for two months. The bike was a jet black Mongoose Switchback, and it weighed over 45 pounds. Solid steel. I rode it through every mudhole I could find in the northern Maine wilds. I remember one four-wheel-drive-spun hole that looked like a small pond. It was in the middle of an old twitch trail surrounded by young spruce and fir. It croaked with the small fauna sounds of a pond; it might have been one before the trucks came. I lined my knobby tires up with a wheel rut and gave the cranks all I had. I gained momentum as I approached the quagmire. First, both wheels slipped under the chocolate milk surface, then my thighs disappeared. When my handlebars faded under the murky waters I lost all momentum and stopped. I stayed in an upright position for a few seconds, like a captain perched on the bow of his sinking ship, and then fell over sideways into the drink to the whoops and hollers of my friends who watched from the muddy banks. In those days I always rode for mud.

Aroostook County was different from Bangor. People had French-sounding last names—with a good tail-wind you could spit into Canada—and they tucked their jeans into their red leather work boots for school. Most of the people I went to high school with weren’t looking toward college. They were inheriting farms or looking to futures in trucking and construction. My parents were liberal transplants in a backwater place and even then I appreciated the liberal sensibilities I gained from them. But they never worked the harvest. They didn’t have to try and “fit in” at school.

Potato work was a rite of passage in Aroostook County. We started school in August when sweat dripped from our foreheads onto algebra books so we could have a three-week break in late September to pick potatoes. Most towns had potato festivals and crowned stout potato queens yearly. I joined my peers in the fields and tried to emulate a lifestyle they had known from birth. I liked ending the day covered in mud. I liked the sound of diesels, and the sound of family tempers playing out over slick rows. I liked being called a hard worker as a gnarled hand thumped me on the back several times when we quit the fields. When I finally decided to go to college, I took what my parents had taught me along with an understanding of work I gained from those fields and my peers.
At the top of the hill the burnt-looking mounds of the White Mountains spread out ahead of me. There is a long descent on the road. The sun shines brighter, burning the rain off the pavement, and I feel like a horse released from its bridle. The climb has sent a rush of adrenaline through my system and I want to stretch my legs. I pedal harder, ignoring the pain in my quads—building on it to push myself harder. I want to hit at least 50 mph before reaching the saddle in the mountain road ahead. The wind laps the sweat from my neck and all I hear are my wheels gliding over pavement and the steady rush of blood through my temples. I look at my computer—40 mph—and pedal harder.

At 43 my front wheel starts shaking from side to side. My arms and handlebars follow suit; I no longer control them. The road takes on an unnaturally steep angle as fear distorts my vision. Instinctively, I contract all of my arm muscles hoping to stop the shakes. They worsen. The death shimmies. I have heard about them but have never actually experienced them. Seasoned cyclists talk about phantom crosswinds that grip wheels and forks with amazing strength and shake riders from their bikes—fling them headlong into road ditches. My legs start to shake as I imagine the skin filleted from my chest as I skid 100 feet over rough aggregate. Cars and trucks careen past. The once voluptuous shoulder seems like a tightrope as I struggle to stay between the white line and the soft gravel where the pavement ends.

The force of the shakes increases and bile surfaces at the back of my throat. I look behind my shoulder thinking Jim might be able to help me, and I almost go down. He has seen me shaking and has backed off in case I do crash. He doesn’t want to hit me at 40 mph. The blood’s really pumping through my forehead now. I raise out of the saddle—I don’t know what else to do—and apply the brakes slowly. Standing, I feel more controlled, and at about 35 mph the shimmying stops. I sit back down on the saddle. My body trembles as a sour smell slides down the insides of my arms.

I haven’t always biked. There was a period when I thought I had outgrown it. A period when I thought I was too much of a man for bikes. In between semesters of college I cut down trees. I worked in the woods.

I wrote poetry in college, and feared that writing was a dubious enterprise. I immersed myself in words and images, and loved it, but I couldn’t see how wordplay would ever be valid work. It didn’t make
me sweat. I did not want to end up a graying, pony-tailed professor scuffing through the polished, ivory halls in Birkenstocks. Logging, however, gave me clear results: I could look over my shoulder at the end of the day and see the work I had done: log piles, twitch trails, stumps. It was work I could touch and smell. I could talk to the people I grew up with about logging. I could tell them I was a logger and they would understand. They did not know, nor care, who Walt Whitman was. And if I had told them I was a poet, they would have thought I’d lost my mind.

In 1997, after five years of school, I finished my epic poem thesis and found myself working at Parks Hardware with Cyc. I realized that I was no further along in understanding who I was or what I was supposed to do than when I entered college. I had no “real” job prospects. I worked with Cyc daily and tried to understand how he had walked the same creaky floors every day for over thirty years. Where had he found such patience and contentment? Enter, stage left, post-college angst, mid-youth crisis. I thought old age was creeping up on me, but instead of having an affair or buying a red convertible, I bought a new mountain bike with my graduation money. I thought I had traded in bikes for chainsaws years before, but a full-suspension bike, at the time, seemed like just the thing to slow life down.

I fell in with a group of hard riders and beat the snot out of that bike: I crashed it; I swore at it; I raced it. I rode so much that my thighs outgrew all of my 501 Levis. Biking was no longer about riding for mudholes. It didn’t take long for me to turn into a gear-head. I read bike magazines, talked the lingo, and hung out at Jim’s bike shop. I took one of Bob’s road bikes and started riding pace lines with the guys. It was quite a change from the jolts of mountain biking, but I started to understand why Bob had spent so many hours in the saddle. I was so desperately in need of a goal in my life that I agreed to participate in RATS. Why not, I thought. It gave me something to look forward to while filling nail bins and loading bags of mulch onto pickup beds.

Tim, Jim, and I trained for RATS March through June, building strength and getting used to each other’s habits in a pace line. We told jokes on those backroad rides, philosophized, and egged each other on. Bicycling diverted my attention away from my hardware job and recent college graduation. Biking was all I thought about. It was the reason I got out of bed each morning knowing that I would spend the majority
of my day explaining the benefits of silicone caulk over latex. Living in a small town, most people knew about our upcoming ride, and most of them thought we were crazy; they wouldn’t have ridden their bikes two blocks for a quart of milk, let alone 300 miles for no reason. I thought I was crazy too, but the cadence of steady pedal-strokes filled a void. I wasn’t sure if I’d be strong enough to finish the ride, but I thought it was more reasonable than taking peyote and sitting in the desert for a week. RATS was going to be my postmodern vision quest.

We ride, pop a few Advil, and ride some more through the hills of Vermont. The rain finally stops for good. My freewheel squawks as it spits out the rain that has plagued its bearings all day and I wonder if it will survive the rest of the trip. I feel good. 200 miles! I have ridden 200 miles! The hills float beneath me like clouds passing through a stormless sky. The cup of coffee I had before we crossed the Vermont border zips through my system; I release energy into my pedal strokes. I have been a miser with energy for most of the day, conserving it for the long road ahead, but now I can finally envision a finish line. I believe there is one. A breeze rattles maple leaves along the margin of the road.

Darkness comes again and my strength sets with the sun. Highway 89 now parallels the twists and turns of Route 2. Headlights and the scream of passing highway traffic accompany my jerky pedal strokes. Headlight after headlight glares in my face, making it difficult to focus on the dark road.

My mind slips under the ether of night. I am sleep-deprived and hungry. I hang my head at times, neck stiff, to see if my legs are still moving. Come on James, just keep moving. I barely feel them anymore. What I do feel is light and airy, as if my legs are a slowly-lifting fog. I’m not convinced I’m even on a bike anymore. I might be piloting an X-Wing Fighter, swooping in on the Death Star—I’m not sure. Headlights approach. Jesus! This guy’s gonna hit me. I brace for the shock of collision—I actually think about how nice it will be to end the ride now, on the pavement—but the lights pass 40 feet to my left, just another car on 89. Except for Tim’s blinking red taillight ahead, Route 2 remains empty. My depth perception is hibernating with the crotch I can’t feel anymore.
Working in the potato fields was not my introduction to labor. When I was old enough to push a stiff-bristled broom, my dad hired me to sweep and straighten up his warehouse. I swept around the angle-iron shelves loaded with overhead door panels, door hardware, and worn tools. Out there, in the barely lit interior of that building, shivering as the wind锤mered the tin walls, I first understood what men did with their lives: they worked. Like my dad, they went home at night with blood blisters beneath fingernails and wind-chapped faces.

At that age, my grandpa with his barrel chest and the tattooed forearms—my dad’s dad—was my hero. His forearms rippled from having handled unruly rigs, without power steering, for so many years. An orphan at fourteen, he was forced to drop out of school and start supporting himself. With an eighth-grade education he built a family and a life. When I was six, this story meant nothing to me, but at twenty-two, I started to understand the incredible strength it must have taken to persevere. When I was six, I wanted to manhandle tractor trailers like him, and at twenty-two, I wanted to carry on my family’s tradition of laboring hard.

Even as a kid, he always told me to use my mind and not my back for work. When I got older, and he saw how much I enjoyed logging, he repeated that phrase more often—more fervently. He had worked hard so his family might not have to, and when he said those words I smiled and nodded my head respectfully, thinking I had the work thing all figured out. He knew from experience what a life of labor can do to a man. When he retired and stopped going to work at 4 A.M., five days a week, his body fell apart. He walks a little hunched over now. His tattooed forearms look like deflated balloons, and his ankles are broken teacups—shattered from years of jumping off the backs of trucks onto concrete loading docks.

My family tree is rooted deeply in physical labor. My uncles are farmers, loggers, mechanics, and carpenters. My other grandfather grew up on an Ohio farm. Most of the men in my family have worked jobs that delivered them home each night bruised and greasy. I am the first Lainsbury to get a four-year college degree. I am the first one to attend graduate school, and even though I’ve never been directly pressured to “succeed,” that’s a heavy load to carry just the same. I expect of my life—one that has been easier than my grandfathers and full of opportunities—to find meaningful work. To make my family proud. But I don’t
know if meaningful work wears steel-toed boots or Birkenstocks.

Twenty miles from Burlington—the end—my body goes into mild shock. It refuses all fluids, and I feel nauseated at the sight of food—*got to keep eating*. I chew cherries slowly and spit out the pits. Red saliva drips down my chin and I stare longingly past the opened doors of the sag wagon at the captains’ chairs. Air from the warmed interior sails past my face and dissipates in the cool atmosphere. I want to lie down on the dirty shag-rug floor and sleep to the rocking motion of the van as it heads for Burlington. I want the jolts of the road dampened by shocks. I want to quit, but I can’t.

I am hallucinating now. The green mile-markers follow me like the eyes of a predator slinking alongside the road. Eight miles outside of Burlington with one hill to go, we stop again, this time alongside a guardrail, no sag wagon in sight. I sink to the road when I dismount—unable to stand. Tim and Jim talk next to me, but I can’t understand what they are saying. Their voices are tuned like an out-of-range radio station. I grab a handful of sand that has accumulated in a depression in the pavement and grind it into the palm of my hand. Holding it up against the moon, I release the sand. It cascades into my lap, glittering momentarily in the moonlight. *What the hell am I doing. I’m working at a hardware store and riding bikes. That’s it. I’m afraid I’m going to fail.*

Tim and Jim are ready to go so I grunt into a standing position, eat half a Clif Bar, and wince as I throw my sore leg over the bike. I send out a telepathic hail to the Greater Spirits: *O.K. . . . the ride’s almost over . . . if you’ve got any epiphanies for me, now would be a good time.*

The last hill into town is one of the steepest we have seen. Tim gets out ahead of Jim and me and I lose sight of his flashing taillight. I count streetlights to gauge my progress. My shadow stretches and shrinks under their aegis as I stand and wobble from side to side, losing momentum like a deer running up an icy hill. I nearly dip below the point of bifurcation, where my legs are subducted below the pavement and stilled under tons of dirt for good. I can’t tell if my legs buckle underneath me or not, but I know if I quit turning them it will be over. I won’t finish.

Blinking stoplights and fluorescent storefronts come into view as I crest the hill. Dave and Ryan
stand by the van with their arms crossed. They have parked at a 7-11 to cheer us on motivate us for the last stretch. Two miles to go.

"Where's Jim?" they ask as I pass slowly.

"He's coming. Where's Tim?"

"He's trying to get to the motel before 11:45. Keep his time under twenty-three hours." Time. Is that all I'm up against?

* * *

It's a fine line between fetish and perversion. It's a fine line between enjoying something and letting it rule your life—the difference between an occasional drink and three lines of coke just to get up in the morning. When does a hobby, a pastime, or work turn into an obsession? As a nation we are obsessed with extremes. We have baseball players with 100 million dollar contracts; we deem snowboarding a profession. We cruise in tank-like SUVs while complaining about our dependance on Mid-East oil. We work 70-hour weeks and gripe that we can't afford free-time. Obsession, it seems, is the root for many of our actions. Some of us overwork ourselves so we can afford a lifestyle that might bring some existential understanding to our lives.

RATS had obsession built into it: the training, the sweating, the goal of riding 300 miles in less than twenty hours. Why? To see if we could do it. Yes, Tim, Jim, and I enjoyed each other's company, but the enlightening and witty banter we shared ended somewhere in New Hampshire. Beyond that, the ride was about sweat, determination, and pain. I was also looking for something from RATS that it couldn't deliver. I used it as an excuse to avoid another obsession of mine, and thought, somehow, it might answer the key question to that obsession: what the hell I'm supposed to do with my one life?

We all made it to the HoHum Inn that night (no kidding, that's what the motel was called). Jim lay on the floor while Tim and I each took a turn in the shower. Jim didn't feel well, and we weren't sure he was going to get up. Eventually, he did crawl into his bed, but he didn't get out of his griny bike clothes until the next
morning. The ride had wasted us. I passed out watching the end of Saturday Night Live and looking forward to the next morning, when my mind would have had time to sift through the previous day and could present me with a plan for my future.

The next morning we sat in the sun on the bricked commons of the market area in Burlington, eating bagels and guzzling coffee. Birds were chirping everywhere, excited to see the sun after the clouds and rain had finally blown east. Sitting there, I realized there was not going to be any further fanfare—Dave and Ryan had been it. No epiphanies either. The spirits I had called to while sitting next to that guardrail didn’t respond. Two days later I returned to the hardware store and found myself, once again, waxing brilliantly about silicone caulk and helping a customer who wanted to solder back together her favorite grocery cart.
Papaw grunted as he pulled his red and yellow steel-toed rubber boots on—his cow pasture boots. I had already laced my Redwings up. I named him “Papaw” before I was able to speak coherently, and no one in my family has any idea what the name is derived from. Since I was the first grandchild, and a sickly one at that, the name stuck.

“Are you ready?” he asked. I looked at him and smiled. I held the wooden-handled butcher’s knife in my hand and tested its edge. It didn’t scrape the hairs off the back of my hand, but Papaw said it “would do.” We walked out the back door of the house we built and went to the back of the garage. Papaw grabbed a white 5-gallon bucket. Hardened joint compound frosted the rim and the cylindrical walls of the bucket’s interior.

He unhooked the top barbed-wire and the smooth middle wire of the fence before stepping over the bottom wire. He isn’t very tall. My long legs could almost clear all three but I didn’t often take the chance of getting shocked while straddling the hot wires. The Herefords came running, expecting some sort of treat from the bucket. My grandfather spoiled them with table scraps: corn cobs, banana peels,
muskmelon rinds. He loved his cows even more than he hated wastefulness. He even bought an attachment
for his lawnmower to catch the grass clippings which he then laboriously dumped over the fence for them.
They ate it like it was ice cream. Now, like Pavlov’s dogs, they’d come running from every corner of the
pasture when they heard a two-stroke engine fire into life. Whenever I cut firewood they would stand at the
fence drooling, waiting for me to give them a treat. Bubs, one of the older cows, pushed a smaller girl out of
the way and nosed into the bucket sniffing like a pig. The auburn and white skin of her throat draped over
the bucket’s edge. Papaw nearly tipped over from her weight.

“There’s nothing in here for you girl! Get away.” He pushed her back and then patted her neck as
an apology. He is the only person I know who pets cows. It is not surprising that they nuzzle him for
attention. He often gets teary-eyed while sitting in his easy chair talking, in detail, about what his cows had
done that day.

We walked south across the pasture towards my aunt and uncle’s blue ranch-style house. Grass
squished under our feet. The pasture rests on glacial-marine clay so water doesn’t drain off the fields well.
Thirteen-thousand years ago, this farm was submerged under seawater and the Wisconsin Ice Sheet at the
same time. Like a Sumo wrestler, the weight of the ice sheet held Maine below sea level, and as the ice
sheet melted, adding water to the ocean, sea level rose more and licked at its margins. The clay the farm
rests on is composed of pulverized rock, called “flour,” that streams tunneling through the glacier had
deposited in the seawater as the ice sheet melted its way back to the arctic. Sometimes the pasture feels like
a 20-acre piece of moss. In the spring you have to wear rubber boots.

Flies buzzed around fresh cow flops as we stepped around them. The dessicated remains of others
looked like crumbling wasp nests. They broke into flaky pieces and floated away on the wind. We were
heading to the chicken coop.

Papaw was going to teach me how to kill a chicken. I wanted Papaw to show me how he had done
it as a kid growing up on an Ohio farm. I was going through a self-sufficiency phase. I was twenty-three and
thought I could do everything for myself, from auto-mechanics to sewing, and what I didn’t know I wanted
to learn. I had a notion that one day I was going to tuck myself away on a dilapidated Maine farmstead and
let civilization live on without me. I’d build my own house, raise my own meat, maybe even make my own
clothes. I had also been listening to my grandparents’ stories about farm life—about growing up cash-poor
but rich in other ways—and I knew they both had things to teach me. I had reached a point in my life when I
wasn’t so absorbed with the details of my own life story, and I was open to hearing about others’.

I had remained at the dinner table with them and listened intently, falling in love with what their
lives must have been like. I think they thought it strange that I was so interested. None of the other
grandchildren had shown such interest. My grandmother talked about her mother Osie as a little girl
spearing rats with a haying fork while balancing 30 feet off the ground on barn beams. I couldn’t imagine
my great-grandmother—a woman I remembered as a wrinkled prune—running anywhere. The stories about
butchering day with my grandfather’s family were what interested me the most. The images they planted in
my mind had intrigued me. I wondered what that day must have looked like, what an Ohio fall smelled like,
how it felt blowing across sweaty skin. I could see the pig blood staining the soil, headless chickens cooling
in the breeze, and his mom—the great-grandmother I never met—cleaning intestines to stuff with ground
meat. I had nothing to compare it to in my life. Every so often Papaw mentioned Korea.

We reached the end of the pasture and crossed the southern fence line. Rows of gladiolas sprouted
tall stalks with closed buds. It was still too early for them to blossom. Papaw plants roughly 5,000 glad
bulbs each spring and then digs them up to store in the basement each fall. There were always glads in vases
at my grandparents house in the summer. When we were young, my brother and I used to sell the red, pink,
and yellow flowers three-for-a-dollar at a roadside stand so we could buy G.I. Joe action figures and
Matchbox cars.

We walked around the large weed-free garden that Papaw stoops in all summer long, sometimes
eight hours a day, and through the backyard to the dirt driveway that led back to the woods. Back there my
uncle had skidded all of my grandparents’ valuable pine and most of their spruce and fir. There was still a
pile of fir trees awaiting their sentence and an emergency-orange 40-foot delimber resting next to it
contrasting sharply with its organic surroundings. It looked like a junkyard at that little clearing. Most every
car my uncle had ever owned rested out there underneath the few remaining tall pines on the property.

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There were Opals, Volkswagens, a Willys Jeep, and a couple of Buicks and Oldsmobiles. Most of the windows were gone from the cars, and the seat cushioning had been harvested by birds, squirrels, and raccoons. Hornets built nests in and around the seat springs. Occasionally, my uncle harvested parts from them for other cars or mechanical projects.

Nitwit, a liver and white springer spaniel, ran over to greet us as we crossed the lawn. He dropped a slick, dirty tennis ball at my feet and wagged his stubby tail. I picked it up and threw it for him. He sired my moody springer; she doesn't want anything to do with balls—just birds and squirrels. Papaw filled the bucket with warm water in the house and I carried it to the chicken coop for him. He told me to place it by the small spruce tree near the chicken pen. He went into the red pole-barn that stored hay and came back with some used bailing twine. He keeps the pieces of twine as he doles hay bales out to the Herefords. Once the twine has been cut and knotted in the hay-baler it can't be reused for next season's cuttings, but he can't bring himself to throw the stuff away. There are piles of it in the barn, in the garage, and in his basement. He uses it for everything from pea-vine trellises to holding his haying equipment together.

He came back to the spruce tree and tied a double line between it and a poplar sapling. Papaw doesn't believe in killing a chicken on a chopping block; it's not a very compassionate way to end an animal's life—too many misdirected axe-blows or chickens running around with half-severed heads. Instead, he hangs them by their feet. For some reason, it calms the chickens down and makes the whole beheading process much smoother.

He pulled on a soiled cotton glove with several holes in it. I recognized it as one he found in a box of similar-looking gloves along Marsh Stream Road. Someone else had decided to discard an entire box of holey gloves out the window. Being curious, he had pulled his Buick off onto the shoulder to inspect the contents of the box and was delighted when he found it brimming with gloves. Grandma told me how she caught him trying to replace the needle of her antique Singer sewing machine. He shattered it trying to sew up a hole up in an oily leather glove. Some habits die hard, and the packrat tendencies of poor farm boys die hardest.

The chickens, about twenty of them, scattered when he undid the piece of baling twine—twisted like
a bread tie—that secured the ragged seams of the chicken-wire fence. They squawked and scattered pebbles. Two of them knocked over the red plastic feeder in the middle of the pen. Feed scattered like sawdust under their feet. I climbed in the pen after Papaw and pulled the fence back together as he tried to corner a couple of them. He ran at them hunched over with his arms spread wide and they scattered. I had never caught a chicken before and stood dumbly waiting for instinct to take over. He chased six of them towards me. They washed around me like a river around a rock. I lunged for one, but missed. My face flushed red because we were trying to catch a chicken for me. The whole reason we were out here was so I could learn to kill dinner, so I could learn what goes into getting farm meat onto the table. One of the chickens—the unlucky one—didn’t run past me. When she saw me standing in her way she stopped abruptly and turned to go back the way she came—right into Papaw’s arms. She flapped her wings in Papaw’s face and scratched his arm with her nails, but Papaw locked the hen’s plump body into position between his arm and torso. The chicken stopped moving and eyed me warily with a sideways gaze.

I closed the gate behind us. Papaw held the chicken upside-down by her rough, yellow legs. He grabbed the two strands of baling twine with his other hand and twisted them around each other, creating tension in the line, and then slipped the chicken’s feet through the pieces of twine; they closed around the legs. The chicken swayed slightly like a pendulum looking for balance. She swung, but did not move a muscle. The only part of her body that moved were her eyes that scanned the ground and then our faces. Several of the other hens gathered at the end of the pen closest to us. They watched our movements and I wondered if it was cruel to be killing one of their sisters less than 2 feet from their dwelling.

Papaw grasped the neck of the chicken under its beak and pulled it towards him slightly, enough to tension her body between his hand and the twine. Her legs stiffened in response to his touch, but she didn’t fight. Her small, black eyes watched as my grandfather placed the knife blade across her jugular artery.

“Then you cut like this,” he said, pulling the knife across the bird’s neck without touching it. “Now you try.” He handed me the knife. I looked at my reflection in the blade warily and tested its sharpness with my finger again. I stepped towards the chicken and looked at it. Her eyes moved rapidly now and I saw that
her chest pulsed where her heart beat. *Can I do this?* I wondered. *It’s only a chicken.* I grasped the neck as Papaw did, expecting her to snap at me with her beak. I pulled harder than I had to because I was nervous. I placed the blade close to her neck, exactly where Papaw had, and I felt my heart rate increase. I wanted a clean cut. I didn’t want to leave her head dangling by a thread of flesh. Before I could think further, I dragged the knife across the chicken’s neck in one swift motion and stepped back. The cut felt smooth and easy.

Her wings fluttered as blood spurted from her freshly cut neck. Flecks and streaks of crimson landed on white feathers like the strokes of a Pollock painting. Her wings beat the air rapidly, and then slowed as the seconds passed. Eventually, they hung limp but open, as if the headless body was readying for flight. She stopped swinging. I could hear the steady drip of the last bits of blood draining from the severed neck as they hit a puddle in the dirt. I looked down at the head. It stared blankly at me. I won’t make something up and say that it stared with beady eyes, or that the head gave me the evil eye—cursing me for killing it. The eyes stared blankly; they looked empty, like they knew there was nothing left to wonder, nothing to linger for.

Her head had fallen close to the chicken pen, and one of the other hens stuck her head through the fence and pulled the severed head into the pen. Several other chickens pounced her and fought for it. Dust flew as all but the smallest chickens fought over the bounty. Eventually the biggest girl won, and retired to a corner of the cage with her prize hanging limply in her beak. Distraught, I looked at my grandfather.

“They’ll do that,” he said. “Every year’s batch I pull out a couple of dead ones—pecked and clawed by the bigger ones. They kill the weakest.” I dropped the warm chicken in the bucket of water to soften the skin and make the plucking easier.

Years before we killed that chicken together, my grandfather and I built the house he and my grandmother live in. We started it in 1993, with the help of a carpenter named David who lived down the road. We started the project much later than planned. In May, from my aunt’s and uncle’s house, I watched the excavators dig and the concrete trucks pour several weeks off-schedule. When we finally started building
the first floor, my grandfather was feeling the stress of winter even though it was only June. I didn’t.

I’ve heard that marriages end when couples build houses together. That saying applies to all relationships. Papaw and I yelled at each other almost daily—unable to communicate in other ways. I was young and cocky, and had created the home’s basic floor-plans in high school drafting class—I thought I knew what I was doing. Papaw had built the hay barn, and that coupled with age made him think he knew what he was doing. David found other things to do (like lunch) whenever Papaw and I starting going at it. He remained patient even though he knew neither of us had any idea what the Hell we were doing. “I wouldn’t stake my sign at the end of the driveway there,” he said, pointing towards the road with his hammer. He was referring to a contractor’s sign to let passers-by know who was building the home. I must have given him a look, because he quickly qualified his statement: “I mean there’s nothing wrong with this place. It’s just not the way I’d do it.”

David’s wife could hear us from her horse pasture. She joked with me one day, a bit nervously, as we stood surrounded by the skeletal walls of the first floor. “It sounds like you guys are gonna kill each other.” I stood with my hands in my pockets and toed a pile of windblown sawdust, nodding my head and forcing a laugh. There were times when I thought we would, but the house went up anyway, timber by painstaking timber.

Grandma told me that Papaw’s father was a “hard” man. Germans aren’t cuddly like teddy bears to begin with, and from the stories I knew, it sounded as if his dad had been as cuddly as a crocodile. When Papaw was courting Grandma, his dad wouldn’t allow her in the house because Osie—Grandma’s mother—had been divorced, and he thought that was shameful. When I complained to Grandma about how difficult it was to work with my grandfather’s temper, she said, “You should have heard his father yell.” I found it hard to believe that he could have been louder than Papaw. When winter came, we had the house closed in and heated. I headed back north—home—and swore I wouldn’t work with Papaw on the house again. But I did.

In 1997 we started building a two-car garage between the house and the pasture land. My uncle had an old sawmill at his house, so he logged hackmatack off my grandparents’ land and milled it out.
himself. The sawblade of his mill refused to cut straight. It spit out lumber that was 2 inches wide on one end and 16 feet later measured 3 ½ inches wide. He sent the blade out to be “pounded” straight. When he got it back and installed, it still wouldn’t deliver a straight beam, but we used the lumber anyway. It was green, heavy, splintery rough-cut stuff meant to be handled by a young man. That didn’t stop Papaw. We framed it in no time.

I was working at Park’s Hardware in those days, so he and I worked on the garage on my two free days a week. Our relationship went smoother with that building project. The schedule didn’t allow us to get on each other’s nerves for more than two days at a time—so neither of us could build up and blow like boiler release valves—and there wasn’t the pressure of needing to get the job done before winter came blowing in.

One Tuesday afternoon Linny handed me the phone and took over behind the counter where I had been helping a customer. My grandmother was on the other end.

"Your grandfather is in the hospital. He had a heart attack last night." It took me a minute to comprehend the conversation we were having. Papaw and I had been sheathing the roof just yesterday. He couldn’t have had a heart attack. He had passed me sheet after sheet of that chip board and never complained.

“But he was fine yesterday,” I said, pleading my case—trying to convince her that she was mistaken. She had the wrong grandson.

“He was complaining at the dinner table last night,” she said. “He said his arm was sore. I didn’t think anything of it until he woke me up at two in the morning.” She had called an ambulance. I hung up the phone and rushed to the hospital.

A nurse in a crisp-white outfit escorted me to his room in Intensive Care. It was dark, except for thin shafts of light shining through the closed slats of the window blinds. He was in the middle of the room in his bed, surrounded by flashing and noisy sensors. I walked over to him and swallowed hard when I looked down on him. His eyes had fallen into the depths of their sockets and were surrounded by purple and black rings of skin. The skin of his arms and face was yellowish white—it was hard to believe he had been working outside the day before. If I hadn’t known him, I would have guessed that he had never been in the
sun. He looked like he had lost 15 pounds overnight.

He woke up as if he had been waiting for me and lifted his arm. I grasped his hand gently, not wanting to disturb his IV. He barely squeezed. He smiled weakly and thanked me for coming. I didn’t know what to say. Of course I would come. I don’t remember what I said or how long I stayed. I just know that I cried long and hard that evening at home.

I finished the garage myself. I lifted and nailed down the remaining sheathing and shingled the roof. Surgeons inserted a stent in one of Papaw’s arteries to keep it open. Sometimes living the “clean life” is not enough to keep arteries clean. He had never smoked or drank, and he got more exercise on the farm than most people half his age. It didn’t make sense to me that plaque could have built up in one of his arteries. But I knew that, for some of us, genetic dispositions hold us firmly in paths not of our choosing. I wondered if heart problems were in my future. While hammering squares of gritty asphalt shingles under the fall sun, I realized that I wasn’t ready for my grandfather to die. I barely knew him.

“Korea looked a lot like Maine. There were a lot of rolling hills,” Papaw said. We were seated in the living room with a blazing woodstove. Grandma was in the kitchen cleaning the dinner dishes while Papaw and I talked about Korea. A tape turned silently in the recorder that rested on the footstool between us.

“Yeah, there were a lot of rolling hills, and it was cold. Course, I didn’t spend much time there in the winter.”

I had asked him if he’d mind if we sat down and talked about Korea and his life growing up in Ohio. Ohio seemed as foreign to me as Korea even though half my family lived there. I had been there a couple of times with my parents, but all I remembered was it was too hot and sticky to sleep and that hordes of fireflies—more fireflies than stars—lit the summer evenings. I remember chasing after them with a mason jar and keeping the full jar by my bed at night. For a while, I had been meaning to record some of his stories. I intended to put together a family tree with a bit of shape to it—more than branches with names, births, and deaths. Even though three years had passed, his heart attack had scared me into action. Don’t laugh, procrastination is a trait my grandmother claims I inherited from Papaw’s side of the family. I didn’t
want his life to slip away from me before I had a chance to know what it had been like—what it had felt like to be Harold Grove.

In 1952, UN and South Korean forces were locked in a stalemate with the North Korean and Chinese forces along the 38th Parallel, the political line drawn by the Allied forces and communist Russia at the end of World War II. They had created the boundary out of fairness for political differences: half the country would remain communist while the other half would be democratic. The war at that time consisted of battles along that meandering line of hilly and mountainous terrain. Both sides lived like gophers—in bunkers and trenches. The fighting was a mix of long-distance shelling with heavy artillery and hand-to-hand combat in midnight raids. They played bloody games of King of the Mountain, where victory was short lived.

Papaw went to an area called the “Iron Triangle,” composed of three mountain peaks that offered the enemy a great visual advantage over UN forces. The Korean names for the mountains were Kumhwa, Chorwon, and Pyonggang; for those who didn’t speak Korean, they were Triangle Hill, White Horse Hill, and Papa-san. By the end of the war, they were blistered piles of rubble littered with decomposing bodies.

I listened closely for hidden meaning in everything Papaw said. War was such a foreign concept for me, and I wanted to learn from the wisdom he had gained. The Gulf War had been my generation’s only taste of conflict (luckily), and the way our media described it—the language and images they spun for us—made it seem like nothing more than one, grand video game. I wanted to hear about the gritty men Papaw fought with, and the bloodshed he witnessed. I wanted to ask him if he had killed anyone, but out of respect for his story, I didn’t. I trusted him to tell me what was important.

One night holed up in a bunker on the front, a Puerto Rican man entered the bunker Papaw occupied with several other men. The man had come to say hello to a friend of his, one of the other guys in the bunker—Papaw can’t remember the names of any of the men he fought with. He walked in smiling, sat down on a bench facing the aperture the men fired out of, and pushed his helmet back a bit off his forehead, like he was driving a tractor through some Iowa field and needed to wipe the sweat from his forehead. As Papaw watched him return his forearm to his side, the man slumped forward and fell to the ground.
“A lucky bullet got him,” Papaw said. In the dead of night, a bullet found its way through an aperture that was 6 inches high and 20 inches long—just enough space to stick the barrel of a machine gun through. Luck. Luck came up several times in our conversation. Luck pulled draft cards. Luck aimed mortars. And luck shattered foreheads. “How did seeing that guy die make you feel?” I asked him. “How did the other guys in that bunker react?” His voice got very quiet.

“We were scared,” he said. “Those bunkers were the only place we felt safe. That guy taught us a lesson: don’t ever sit in front of the aperture.” Because luck, I thought, was not to be toyed with. In war, you can’t ever feel safe. He stood up, groaning as he straightened his stiff knees, and walked over to the woodstove to stir the fire. I crossed my leg a different way and tried to imagine what those bunkers of dirt and timber must have looked like. Did they smell damp and fetid? I tried to imagine what it was like being twenty-one in a foreign land protecting a political line that had been drawn by allies in a previous war. A line that determined friends from millions of people who wanted nothing more than to see you die. Firelight played in the creases of his face as he stared at the flames.

Papaw was a second machine gunner of a two-man operation. He carried the water-cooled barrel of an M-80 and the first machine-gunner, another guy his age, carried the tripod and ammunition. Within minutes of the battle for Triangle Hill, Papaw was wounded. A medic on the line dosed him with morphine and sent him through the narrow bunkers on a stretcher carried by two older South Korean men. The bunker was barely wide enough for two people to pass shoulder-to-shoulder under normal conditions, but a stretcher passing through while bombs exploded and dirt flew was a real nuisance.

“I didn’t know Korean, so I had to use sign language to get those two to put me down.” He walked out of the bunker system on his own and down the hill to a waiting Jeep. The doctors at the field hospital cussed at him after checking him over. They were mad at the line-medic for wasting their time because Papaw appeared uninjured. They sent Papaw out of the tent to go back to the front line. They hadn’t checked him very closely—they didn’t even turn him onto his stomach; otherwise they would have seen the entrance wound where a 6-inch piece of shrapnel had penetrated the crease between his buttocks and thigh. It rested millimeters from his femoral artery. He didn’t argue with them—the morphine masked his pain.
Reluctantly, he started back to the line in the dark.

Before he got far he ran into his sergeant who wanted to know what the Hell he was doing. Papaw told him.

“You’re not going back there tonight! It’s too dark to go alone.” Papaw didn’t have his rifle or any gear. He had left it on the front when he was wounded because the medic there had told him he would be out of the war for quite a while. His sergeant gave him his personal sleeping bag for the night and told him to rest up and head back in the morning. That sergeant would save his life twice.

In the morning Papaw woke up and felt dampness in the bag—a pool of blood. When he found the sergeant, he apologized profusely to him for having soiled the sleeping bag. I imagine the sergeant looked at him strangely, Well this is an odd-duck, he probably thought. He’s worried about my sleeping bag. He marched over to the field hospital with Papaw and, in my grandfather’s words, “went up one side of the brass and down the other.” My grandfather smiled at the memory. Papaw wouldn’t tell me exactly what the sergeant said, but he assured me that the language was colorful.

“Well, why didn’t you tell us you were injured?” one of the doctors asked Papaw.

“Well, I didn’t know. You guys are supposed to be the doctors,” he said.

The doctors pulled the shrapnel there, and sent him to Japan—to cleaner facilities—to heal.

That night he slept in the sergeant’s sleeping bag, half of his company was killed on Triangle Hill. The first machine-gunner Papaw had been assigned with—and Papaw’s replacement—both died that night. The woodstove was hot, but I shivered anyway. It is strange when you confront the chance involved with your own existence, when you see that three minutes and one lucky bullet can change everything. It is easy to assume that any story—my story—could never have been different. Before I heard the tale from him, I thought Papaw had been unlucky getting wounded. At that moment, in that easy chair, I realized how lucky I was that he had been wounded. I realized how fortunate I was to hear these stories from an elder in a safe place we had built together.

When I was seventeen, I wanted to handcuff myself to the tracks of the historic Cog Railway train that
carried tourists to Mount Washington’s summit in New Hampshire. The train—as all trains from its time period did—burned coal and emitted great plumes of black, particulate-laden exhaust. Some environmental activists were chaining themselves to the tracks to protest the train and the “desecration” of a wilderness that had started 125 years before any of us were born. I thought it was my duty to go along and protest the use of such an inefficient relic for the tourist trade. My parents refused to let me go.

What my parents understood, and I didn’t, was that symbolic acts needed weight to have any meaning: chaining oneself to a railroad tie was dubious, and my parents recognized the dangerous contradiction in driving 300 miles to protest the burning of resources and its air pollution. They were not going to let me get arrested for that. At seventeen, passion often overrides sense, and I was angry with them. It took me years to even realize the irony I was so willing to jump into.

At the time, I was not interested in the story of the Cog Railway. It didn’t matter to me that the train represented history—that it was symbolic of a time when people viewed wilderness much differently. Northern New England was a wilderness when “Old Peppersass” became the first cog-driven train to summit 6,288-foot Agiocochook (Mount Washington). I did not know this. I had no idea what a wilderness even was, let alone why I should protest a train in a place that was no longer a wilderness. The story behind the railroad is a good one. It is an age-old one of a person defying the status-quo—ignoring scorn—to realize a dream. But I didn’t know it then.

Stories are blueprints for human interaction. Ever since the first hunters swapped stories around hot fires of killing wild beasts, stories have girded human civilization against the challenges of life. We learn how to live with each other through the telling of them, and through listening, we are bound to one another with a shared intimacy. When I was seventeen I thought the path to wisdom started at the Cog Railway—that an environmental ethic could only form with handcuffs and rash acts. I thought that change only happened with loud banging and yelling. What I didn’t know then was my family had been influencing my environmental ethic for years with the stories they shared, and that change occurs when we are constructively challenged to question our beliefs and our reactions to the world—when we are told stories that give us a sense of possibility.
Papaw taught me how to kill that chicken because I asked him to, but also to connect me to his life, on a farm, in Ohio. With that swift kill, I learned more about respect for land and people than a pair of handcuffs could have hoped to teach me. I learned more about my grandfather in ten quiet minutes than I did hammering on a house for six months because we learned, I think, that there is no intimacy with yelling. As the blade sliced away life, my body engaged a rhythm from the past with the current rhythm of my story—and for just a moment, his past and my present were not disconnected.

Each of us has a bit of wisdom to give and only a short time to give it before our one, precious life has faded away. Often, we have one chance to hear another person’s story. That day, I listened.