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A ROAD OUT OF NAKNEK PART ONE: THE TIDE TURNS

By

Keith Catalano Wilson

THESIS

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A ROAD OUT OF NAKNEK PART ONE: THE TIDE TURNS

This thesis by Keith Catalano Wilson is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

A ROAD OUT OF NAKNEK PART ONE: THE TIDE TURNS

By

Keith Catalano Wilson

I make an annual summertime return to Naknek, a town on Bristol Bay where the salmon have made their own annual summertime return for thousands of years. My thesis is a series of nonfiction essays about my background there, both as a commercial fisherman and my upbringing. It is something I consider the “Part One” of a book still under the process of writing. It is a series of essays, alternating these two motifs of the salmon and of my experiences growing up somewhere like Naknek.

I constructed this thesis to read like the tide. Bristol Bay salmon go out into the ocean and follow various patterns before returning to spawn. This thesis will be an exploration of these patterns, their interconnectivity, and what they mean. I plan to continue alternating stories of fishing with stories of my life outside of fishing in which the “ebb” represents the time away from Bristol Bay. The “flood” is when I return. In my adult life, I have found myself living in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Wisconsin, Kansas, Peru, Guatemala, the Upper Peninsula again, Montana, Oregon, and the Upper Peninsula a third time. Although I have had different jobs and pursuits in various locations, like the salmon I return to Bristol Bay every summer. My thesis is what leads up to this part of the narrative I want to tell.

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THE TIDE

Gravity between Earth and the Moon pushes and pulls the ocean from one shore to the next in a rhythm as dependable as night and day, summer and winter, spring and fall. It is a rhythm older than life on Earth. The first life on land was washed ashore from the ocean by the tide, and amphibians turned to reptiles turned to birds and mammals. Frogs fed on flies, snakes slithered across the soil, ravens scavenged for scraps, and great apes picked fruit dangling from trees. Animals spread, changing shape, feeding and multiplying, but kept a balance, allowing each other to continue as species.

Then there were people, a form of life claiming ownership of ground, trees, minerals, other animals, and even each other, leaving footprints in Earth's surface. The tide, however, washes away away footprints just as it does fallen trees. It washes them into the ocean, a mysterious expanse of depth, darkness, and things unknown. The place for people was on land — still, tame, and comfortable, but some of them couldn't ignore the ocean and built boats and ships and submarines. They scoured the ocean, harvesting shrimp, shellfish, sharks and sardines, decimating populations.

There is the ocean and there is the shore, but the line between them is indistinct and formless, but if people remain close to shore with patience, and allow the tide to bring them what they need, there can be a balance. Mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and life still in the ocean, have all depended on the tide. The tide, however, considers none of their needs, wants, or desires. The tide, without fail, continues its rhythm between shores, pondering no conception, meaning, or interpretation of people or others. The tide cares nothing for any of it. The tide waits for no one.

On the surface of the ocean, fish leap and splash, whales spew faithful geysers, and birds swoop to scoop plankton and minnows, but beneath it is an unfathomable vastness. It teems with great white, black-eyed monsters, mammalian torpedoes speaking in sonar, water-breathing exoskeleton spiders, and egg-legged monsters with the ability to change color and texture and disappear against any surface. In the darkest depths and deepest canyons, anglerfish navigate with flashlights sprouting from their foreheads. There are catsharks, seahorses, and lizardfish with lights illuminating through their skin. Mountains range between the North and South Pole, and life thrives at their every level from the floor to the surface. The Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, and South Ocean are all one world mass of saline water, ebbing and flooding onto the shores of all continents, ebbing and flooding into rivers and streams, but the Pacific is the largest portion.

The Pacific alone covers more of Earth's surface than the continents combined, and as ice caps melt, high tide rises even higher. There was once a land of Beringia, separating the Pacific from the Arctic, joining Russia and Alaska, but as the ocean's surface climbed, Beringia was reduced to an isthmus. People hiked the Bering Land Bridge from Siberia to the Norton Sound, following mammoths, muskoxen, and antelope until the tide was too high and never ebbed low enough again to forge from one side to the other. Surrounded by a rising ocean on either side, the isthmus narrowed until the Pacific joined the Arctic, forming the Bering Sea.

Now the tide ebbs and floods onto the shores of Russia and Alaska, Beringia is but another ocean floor where no foot has stepped for thousands of years. Some people migrated south and gave themselves names like Cherokee, Shoshone, Shawnee, and Sioux. Others migrated north and named themselves Inupiat, Suqpiaq and Inuit. In all directions, people spread

across the Americas, separating into groups distinguished by customs, clothing, language, and the places they called home, their ancestral land now as estranged as the ocean floor.

Some people like the Yup'ik, the Unungan, and some Athabascan, remained pressed against the Bering Sea, and established villages there. Maybe they were left behind, or maybe they shooed the other people away, treasuring the Bering Sea and the rhythm of the tide. The Unungan settled all the way out to the farthest island on the Aleutian Chain, living surrounded by the Bering Sea. The Bering Sea narrows into Bristol Bay, a corner above the Alaska Peninsula, where the difference between ebb and flood transforms the villages like sunrise and sunset or the changing of seasons. Using the tide, people learned to harvest their sources from the ocean with driftwood baidarkas, harpoons, hooks, and grass ropes. They stabbed whales, clubbed seals, and caught trout, smelt, and the seasonal herring, feeding their families, feeding their villages.

But the most abundant harvest from the ocean was the salmon, returning every summer, surging with the tide into the rivers along Bristol Bay, forging toward the headwaters to spawn. Every summer, millions of salmon — chinook, chum, pink, silver, and sockeye — gather to Bristol Bay from the Pacific to fulfill their final purpose. After a life in the ocean exploring, wandering, feeding on plankton and other fish, their time comes to congregate back in Bristol Bay.

First, they mill and swirl in the saltwater like the spiral of a hurricane or the tick around a clock, each one waiting for the right condition, the right temperature, and the right moment in the tide. Then, in schools and surges, they disperse into the freshwater rivers along Bristol Bay, led by an acute sense of smell to their natal lakes and streams. They forge against the current miles against the freshwater current, abandon their desire to eat, and keep moving straight ahead. Then

they spawn, they die, and so continues a pattern in existence before the first rope was woven, before the first baidarka was built, and before the first human hand ever touched the water.

It was Yup'ik people who established the village of Naugeik along one of the rivers of Bristol Bay, where the tide climbs onto banks on either side, distilling the sand into swirls and flows of thick, brown ebbs and floods. The Yup'ik were the first people to catch the salmon there, filet and cook them, or dry them over a rack in open air before saturating them in smoke of slow-burning birch and alder brush, beads of oil dripping from deep red meat with a strip of skin and its golden luster shining in the sun. They named their village after the word for a muddy place. It was Russian invaders who mispronounced it, and Naknek was the name of the village. Russia claimed Alaska as their own and exchanged it with people who had claimed land in the south. They traded it for something they called currency.

Currency was promised in Bristol Bay, so newcomers from all over Earth arrived in villages like Naknek. These newcomers were catching salmon not just for physical sustenance, but for monetary gain. Like the Yup'ik, they learned to work with the time of ebb and flood of the tide, and depended on it to launch their sailboats and release their nets. Canneries were erected, ports were constructed, villages sprouted into towns, and salmon was gutted, shoved into cans, and shipped on barges along the coast and across the ocean.

The village of Paug-vik, across the river to the north of Naknek, was soon connected by a dirt path to King Salmon, a town up the river revolving around an Air Force Base in place as defense from Japan during World War II. With the advent of air travel and the King Salmon Airport for civilians, more newcomers flocked to Paug-vik than to Naknek, and Paug-vik was soon the new Naknek. The first Naknek, once Naugeik, was South Naknek.

Meanwhile, down the continent, across the Pacific, and across the Atlantic, salmon populations were already disappearing. Some people didn't know or care, but some people wanted to prevent it from happening in Bristol Bay. Some of these people gathered and called themselves the Alaska Territorial Fishery Service. Like invading Russians, they were self-proclaimed. Unlike invading Russians, few people believed their claim. First, Alaska had to be called a state. Then they could be granted imaginary numbers as part of the system of currency, and they would be taken seriously.

When the Alaska Territorial Fishery Service became the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, their rules could be established and their suggestions could be taken. Now, based on escapement, nets are allowed in the water during a designated time coinciding with the rhythm of the tide. It's an instance where people have learned not only to accept the ancient pattern of Earth and the Moon, the ebb and flood, and the annual influx of salmon, but to work with it, and to limit the harvest and enable the salmon's return again and again.

Today, at low tide on the Naknek River, the water is not much more than a trickle around ever-shifting mud flats. Skiffs and subsistence nets slope downward with the beach. Businesses and canneries reach out onto docks on top of crooked, splintering pilings. Lines from drift boats hug around them and tie to each other, a line of vessels stretching out into the channel. Flocks of seagulls gather, flapping and squawking, pecking at guts and grime from processors. Skiffs lay in the mud with the flukes of their anchors stabbed into the flesh of the beach, waiting for the tide to take them back afloat. As the water level sinks, pilings are like trunks of trees rising, canneries reaching toward the sky. Tributaries as thin as fingers trickle down the mud into what's left of the channel. Then, after the water has disappeared into the forever of the ocean, there are the moments of stillness when nothing flows. Nothing ebbs and nothing floods. No sticks or bubbles

move on the surface. Then they slowly shift direction. They move faster, and faster, and white water gushes in over the mud flats and boats rock and thrash as the waves chop like axes. The pilings sink back into the water, and it's high tide again.

Outside the mouth of the Naknek River, to the north and to the south, in the Naknek-Kvichak District of the fishery, salmon swim into nets anchored between two buoys, placed there by setnet fishermen. In the deeper water, they swim into the nets floating behind driftboats. Their big, aluminum and fiberglass hulls smash into each other for the optimal spot, where fish swim thickest. Everywhere, cork lines splash with heads and tails on the surface. Below the surface, more salmon jerk down the corks. Millions of salmon are caught, delivered, processed, and dispersed across Earth from Seattle to Tokyo to the markets of London.

Above the water, above the towering cutbank, most traffic downtown is cannery workers on foot, between meals at Peter Pan, Red Salmon, Silver Bay, or whatever cannery employs and houses them. They linger along the paved shoulder of the Alaska Peninsula Highway downtown. They travel in packs assorted by the places they call home. There are Japanese workers with their notorious knee-high gray rubber boots, Ukrainian teenagers with dreadlocks and bandanas, white trash with neck tattoos and face piercings, mustached Mexicans blaring music from phones, and lanky West Africans, tall like the telephone poles lining the Highway.

People linger out of Naknek Trading with plastic bags of Kraft Macaroni, cans of Bush's Baked Beans, and bananas as brown as the beach, before heading back to their boats, back to their camps, back to their bunks at the cannery before they can fish again. They stumble off the steps of Fisherman's Bar, Hadfield's, and the Red Dog, hoping the money they've made this season hasn't disappeared into the Barmuda Triangle. Boxes of leftover pizza leave D&D Restaurant in cars, onto the backs of fourwheelers, held down by a bungee cord. The aroma of

grease and scraps attract the tagless dogs wandering town like the silent homeless population they are.

By the end of July, the numbers of salmon taper and fade to the occasional splash or bob of a cork. Then there are none. Boats fill the boatyards and canneries board their windows. Seldom is a car on the road, and foot traffic is no longer people, but the occasional dog or brown bear wandering for scraps. Off in the distance, a sudden shout or a gunshot might echo across town without question. The gate in front of every cannery closes, and Naknek is still, like the river in the moments between the change of tide. 500-some people stay, picking berries, hunting moose and caribou, chopping firewood, and winterizing pipes. Yellow leaves fall from birch and alders, and cold air creeps its way across the tundra like a ghost, leaving it brown and dead in its wake. The days get shorter. The nights get darker. The air gets colder. It will be months before the salmon return. It will be months before the masses of people fly into the King Salmon Airport, and flood into Naknek. From Bristol Bay, the Bering Sea, and the depth and expanse of the ocean, the tide ebbs and floods, ebbs and floods, ebbs and floods as the Earth makes its orbit around the Sun.

DRIFTWOOD

Long before my first ultramarathon, my first marathon, or arriving last-minute and jogging my first local five-kilometer fun run, I ran for hours on wooded trails and the paved bike path along the shore of Lake Superior in Marquette, Michigan. I had little idea how fast or how far I was going, but I didn't care either. It was about getting outside and moving forward. It was about breathing in and out, salt escaping my pores. It was about looking over a gigantic, blue lake with the appearance of an ocean, no sight of land on the other side. The pavement was just as endless. Like Forrest Gump, if I had the persistence, I could run clear across the contiguous United States. There was no finish line until I'd decided to stop, and even then I still had to make my way back home, whatever cramped dorm room or musty apartment it happened to be at the time. The idea of endless possibility on any route excited and fascinated me. I was raised in Naknek, where one end of the road met the other end of the road, and travel beyond it involved a boat or a plane.

During my runs along Lake Superior, I was an English major at Northern Michigan University. Every semester, even after fulfilling my liberal arts requirements, I took full loads of classes in different fields like Exercise Physiology, Political Science, Environmental Science, and Art. I took Yoga, Archery, Tennis, and Tumbling. I half-assed my through all of it. With funds from commercial fishing every summer with Dad, I never had to work during the school year, and had plenty of time to run and study, studying of course often taking the back burner.

Lots of passion with almost no sense of direction is the perfect way to describe me. When I had to decide, I decided to go into teaching, which is unfortunately an all-too-common reason to choose the profession, but it seemed logical to me. Mom was a teacher and Dad was a

fisherman. Somehow I was settling into becoming both. They had even gone to the same University. Because they were alumni, I paid in-state tuition at Northern. Like the Bristol Bay salmon, I had found my way to a freshwater lake, following the same path as my parents.

When I was born, Ronald Reagan was President, the Soviets were testing nuclear weapons, and some pissed-off Irishmen had just bombed a hotel where Margaret Thatcher was staying. 1984 had reached its climax and was beginning its falling action. Indiana Jones had escaped the Temple of Doom. The Ghostbusters had saved New York from the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. Jason Voorhees was once again left for dead after murdering a camp full of horny teenagers. None of these things were relevant, because Naknek had no theaters, internet, cable TV, or cell phone service. Back then, everyone shared one telephone at the Borough Building. Media and current events outside of Naknek were something far away and separate, but on this dark, cold October midnight, Mom and Dad were there, in Anchorage, at the Humana Hospital.

When they moved to Alaska in the late 70s, Mom and Dad learned Anchorage to be the hub to load totes, boxes, and coolers of groceries to send home through the post office and checked baggage. This city, in southcentral Alaska, was once like Naknek. It had no roads in or out, and was established by descendants of people who walked across the Bering Land Bridge. They were the Dena'ina people, and they were taken over by newcomers who built a tent city for railroad construction. Then the Alaska Train began operation, and the tent city turned into a concrete city. The concrete city sprouted highways in and out, connecting to nearby towns, and villages, and soon connecting to faraway places in Canada and the Lower 48. Apples, Snicker's bars, ammunition, and VHS tapes of movies like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* had

easy routes to Anchorage, to Costco and Fred Meyer. Anchorage was the place to shop, visit a dentist, check in with an optometrist, or in this instance, deliver a baby.

Like always, Mom and Dad loaded totes and coolers and shipped them home, but this time they took their midnight son onboard as carry-on luggage. Bundled in blankets, in a turbulent little plane shaking and rattling, I flew for the first time over the jagged, snow-capped peaks of the Aleutian Range, the endless expanse of tundra and ponds, approached the Naknek River, and rolled down the runway at the King Salmon Airport. Dad drove us down the Alaska Peninsula Highway to a house he was still finishing on the tundra in Naknek. There, I was raised on wild salmon, wild caribou, wild blueberries, vegetables from Mom's greenhouse, and cans of SPAM and boxes of Kraft macaroni from Costco.

The Wilson household was in Gottschalk's Subdivision, a plot of tundra with gravel leading to various homes. It was a neighborhood where many of the teachers like Mom lived. It was a close little community within a community. When Bob Swanson, the principal, put a corner of his own house on our property by accident, Mom and Dad didn't mind much. There was plenty of tundra between homes, and they were friends of our family, even when little Kasey Swanson pushed me out of my highchair.

Ours was a house designed by Lindal Cedar Homes and built by Dad from its concrete basement to its triangular roof. Before Dad built a garage, the basement had sawhorse benches, power tools, and a seasonal caribou or two, skinned, hanging over the drain in front of the furnace room. The main floor had two bedrooms at the end of a hallway with a bathroom across from the kitchen. The dining room and living room together were a spacious expanse of red carpet in front of windows overlooking the tundra and the river. Above this space was a bedroom loft for Mom and Dad, and a fan in the middle of the angle the ceiling made. Dad said he had

always imagined building his own house for himself and his family, a safe structure for a new generation of Wilson.

It was a name Mom was reluctant to take, but no guys with unique names would go to Alaska, hunt and fish for food, and build a house with his bare hands. Still, she saw Wilson as almost a symbol for the boring and mundane. It has been the name of one US President, Denis the Menace's grumpy neighbor, the title character of a Mark Twain novel, and a volleyball that kept Tom Hanks company while surrounded in ocean. Long ago, an Anglo-Saxon named Will had a son with the same name as some other kid in the neighborhood, so the other Anglos and Saxons had to be specific. George? Which George? Oh, George, Will's son. The name drifted across the Atlantic, into Hudson Bay, and trickled down tributaries to the Great Lakes where Grandpa George Wilson was named after his Grandpa George Wilson, and he named his son George Wilson, who I call Dad.

Mom and Dad agreed her maiden name was worth passing on, so they made it my middle name. It's a name originating from refugees of the Spanish Inquisition. When Jews, Muslims, other non-Catholics, and suspected non-Catholics were gathered for conversion, torture, and execution, masses escaped through Catalonia, the region of Spain farthest to the east, bordering France and the Balearic Sea. Even then, Catalonia wanted independence from Spain, and its use as a land bridge no doubt aggravated the feeling. Catalans poured into Italy and assimilated into a culture of pasta, olive oil and, in a wicked twist of irony, Catholicism, as Catalanos. Carmine and Tomasina Catalano migrated to the narrow streets of Little Italy along the Chicago River, flowing from Lake Michigan. Carmine borrowed money from Al Capone to make ends meet raising Joe and his siblings. Joe married Marvelle Gunderson whose parents were the direct

descendants of ancient Norsemen, rowing across the ocean to plunder and pillage. Joe and Marvelle raised Cynthia Catalano, whom I call Mom.

Mom and Dad had no intended meaning for my first name, but Keith is Scottish, and some kind of deviation of a word for wood. Generations of translation changed the word the way the ocean changes a fallen tree washed away by the tide. Each branch breaks away, floats between ebb and flood, and drifts to one shore or another, washed away again and again, bark peeled, flesh rounded by time. The wood transforms into something unrecognizable from the tree from which it came. The first Wilsons and the first Gundersons believed Odin made the first humans from driftwood he found on the beach. He breathed life into them, and people branched across Earth in all directions.

Mom and Dad arrived in Alaska in the 70s, seeking excitement and adventure in a faraway land. Alaska drew them in with its magnificent landscape, majestic wildlife, and interesting people with fantastic stories. They went North the the Future, to the Last Frontier, to the wild west beyond the Wild West. Alaska had Kodiak with its tidal pools of starfish, Denali, a mountain taller than Everest from base to summit, the Tongass rainforest of the Southeast producing the magnificent art carved into towering totem poles. Mom and Dad chose the muddy river.

They grew up within eight miles of each other, butt hey met in college. Mom was from Birmingham, a suburb of Detroit, where she lived with her two sisters and wrote in her diary about boys like Dad. Her dad, Joe, was a radiologist, and her mom, Marvelle, worked the stock market. They loved skiing, golfing, traveling, and throwing big parties on the weekend. Dad grew up in Ferndale, another suburb of Detroit, fighting over food at the dinner table with his three brothers and younger sister. The Catalanos, despite Joe's strict upbringing, were not

religious at all, but George and Eleanor were strict, and sent their kids to Catholic school where nuns smacked kids with rulers and enforced uniformity in both routine and clothing. Dad's dad, George, was almost completely deaf from spinal meningitis during childhood. His mom, Eleanor, was completely deaf from the same cause. It's why Dad's voice is still deep and loud and carries across an open space whether he means to or not.

Mom was working on a degree in Special Education, dreaming about a knight in shining armor who would sweep her off her feet. Dad was a tall, strong, handsome conservation major with a shiny Harley, curly brown hair, handyman skills, and a horrible sense of humor with gems like, "I slit the sheet, the sheet I slit, and on the slitted sheet I sit" and "Just because your head is pointed doesn't mean you're sharp" I've heard hundreds if not thousands of times.

Mom told me it was love at first sight. Dad told me she gave him her number, but he never called. After all, he had a girlfriend and she had a boyfriend. When the girl I know from Mom as Dogbreath broke up with Dad, he left for the forests of Colorado and Wyoming to watch for wildfires and live out Clint Eastwood illusions. He adopted a cowboy hat and belt buckle, puffed on Swisher Sweets, climbed mountains, and hunted and fished for food. Back in Marquette, the guy I know from Dad as The Guy Who Stole the Skis used Mom's car as a getaway vehicle after loading as many pairs as he could from the shop at Marquette Mountain. It didn't work out well for him — with Mom or the cops.

Dad returned to his cabin after work one day, and his roommate said some girl had been looking for him. The girl had hitchhiked all the way there from Michigan, he told him. Kitty, he thought she said — a name Mom got from the kids she taught as a student teacher in Oconto Falls, Wisconsin, who couldn't pronounce Catalano. Dad rushed out to find her. He did, and I exist. Dad proposed under a tree in the backyard of Wilson house and they were married in the

backyard of the Catalano house. They loaded a van with all their material possessions and drove north.

Dad caught fish in lakes and streams of British Columbia, and cooked them over a propane stove. After reaching Alaska, they established a base of operations in a trailer in Anchorage. Mom waited tables and tended bars where gross guys made passes. When Dad picked her up, he was solicited by prostitutes he was never sure were men or women. When they were done exploring, Mom applied for jobs teaching Special Education, and was given several offers on the same day. She took the position at the Bristol Bay Borough School in Naknek, where kids also drove from King Salmon and flew across the river from South Naknek to attend. Dad started working for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, taking samples, helping regulate the fishery.

Mom and Dad saw newcomers driven out by the cold, the dark, the cost of living, the isolation, or a combination of any of the above. They made friends and watched their friends move away, back to the places from where they came. Most of them returned for the fishing season until they didn't anymore. Mom and Dad, however, were taken with rural Alaska, and became the old timers of Naknek by the time they were in their 30s. Then I, the descendant of Medieval Knights, Norsemen, and refugees, was raised by two Midwesterners in the isolation of a southwest Alaskan fishing town. By the time I was a teenager, I was running back and forth on the shoulder of the Alaska Peninsula Highway, in some desperate search for a way out.

OUT THERE

There is story about a boy who was disrespectful of salmon, who instead of finishing his meal, would chuck hunks of meat and bones into the bushes, disregarding the life taken to nourish his own. Then one day, he went swimming in the river with the other children of the village and was caught in the current. He drowned, and the salmon swarmed his soul and took him deep into the ocean, where he saw the salmon were people and he became one of them. They explained to him that only if all their meat was eaten, and all their remains were returned to the water would they come back to life and return to feed the village. When it came time again for the salmon to return to the village, the boy went with them and was caught by his own mother. She recognized him, took him home, and he became a boy again. He spent the rest of his life teaching the people what he'd learned.

From Bristol Bay, the tide floods into the Meshik, Igushik, Egegek, Togiak, Ugashik, Nushagak, Kvichak, and Naknek River, feeding towns and villages along their shores. The tide floods into streams large and small, named and unnamed, where salmon swim against the current to reach the spots where they spawn. Through an acute sense of smell for minute chemical composition in the water, salmon seek their natal streams. Each species has a pattern and every salmon has a place to find. Chum, pink, and king salmon spawn in lower reaches of rivers and streams, while sockeye and coho spawn in the headwaters.

There is a function and purpose to their different patterns, but no matter the species, every salmon heads toward a specific tributary trailing down from higher grounds, where water distills into a rich gush of oxygen for fertile eggs, restoring the salmon once again. Those that don't make it feed hungry stomachs. Those that do make it spawn and die. Females lay their roes

of red beads, males spray them in white clouds of milt, and one generation begins the next. The old salmon die, decay, seep into soil, and fortify trees climbing into the mountains. The mountains range to the edge of the ocean, and their peaks cut into the sky. In both life and death, Bristol Bay salmon head back to what's out there, in the ocean and in the sky, to the rest of the known and unknown.

What's out there might be infinite, where everything in existence has existed in every variation imagined and unimagined. It also might be a limited space of matter like everything people recognize. No one knows. What's out there exists without distortion, interpretation, or attempt to categorize and systemize with symbols and language, spoken and unspoken, literal or figurative. Salmon don't create meaning for themselves. Every salmon is an individual vessel of consciousness, no matter how basic, but they don't adjust their fate.

Each species has a lifecycle, and places to gravitate toward during their ocean life. Pinks, or humpies, live as far north as the Arctic. Coho, or silvers, swim around Russia and Japan and return on the tail end of summer. Chum, or dogs, explore as far as the California coast. Chinook, the king of the salmon, roam the expanse of the ocean up to seven years, gaining size and strength, becoming massive creatures thick with oil and muscle. Sockeye, or reds, pour from the Pacific, the Arctic, and all the waters in between, by the millions, into the rivers of Bristol Bay. They are the lifeblood of Bristol Bay.

All species are here to spawn, but some end up swallowed whole, some end up chewed in half, and more are caught by the gills by a nylon mesh. They are all here to die. From the time they are embryos, almost no salmon survive. Birds and other fish eat most the eggs. When the eggs hatch, more hungry birds and other fish eat most the emerging fry. Two years is a typical

time it takes a fry to escape downstream into the river's brackish water, where it meets Bristol Bay. Here, the salt transforms them into smolt with silver scales ready for life in the ocean.

Each of the returning salmon to Bristol Bay has spent two to seven years in the ocean, feeding, exploring, gaining size and strength. Many are captured by ocean trawlers. More are absorbed into the digestive tract of an orca, a salmon shark, or other danger of the deep. Of three thousand eggs, hundreds hatch. About a tenth of the hundreds make it to the ocean. Three, four, maybe five of them become adults. Like sperm cells through fallopian tubes, it's uncommon for more than one salmon to swim far enough upstream to continue the cycle.

At first, a human embryo is more fish than human, with slick skin and a tail, engorged in fluid. Then the embryo changes. Instead of fins, arms and legs form with fingers and toes. Instead of a tail, a nub of bone remains under scaleless skin. The baby is born with blurry vision and no concept of distinguishing objects and material. The mind makes no separation between the body and what's out there, beyond the body. Then, sometime in those first two years, experience becomes observation and observation is translated into meaning. A king is different from a sockeye, a river is different from a stream, a male is different from a female, and Naknek is different from the rest of what's out there.

A connection is lost to language and symbols, and attempts to replace it leads to conquest, consumption, invention, and production. It happens to us as individuals, and as a species. The first people to catch salmon used spears and bone hooks, in the rivers of Bristol Bay, and around the world. Salmon thrived in all oceans, and returned by the millions to Norway, the Iberian Peninsula, Asia, and all along the Pacific Northwest. The source seemed endless, because they would always return no matter how many were speared and hooked.

Then people invented nets and types of weirs, cutting circulation of the salmon upstream. Whoever was upstream could only attain their catch after the people downstream caught enough. Then there was never enough, because people invented supermarkets, sidewalks, and global markets, and salmon were feeding an entire planet. Filets appeared not just near coasts and riverbanks, but in landlocked freezers and refrigerators, where people may have never seen the water. Salmon disappeared from rivers, and salmon farms were built to compensate. The farmed salmon were pumped with dyes and synthetic fertilizers, spewing feces toxic with altered chemicals, leeching into the ocean. Smaller fish caught for feed were annihilated.

The salmon of Bristol Bay could have disappeared as well, but it was stopped by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game before it was too late. They began a strict regulation through means of test fishing, and counting, and making season forecasts. It is not an exact science, of course. There is no such thing as an exact science. There is plenty that people don't know about the patterns and habits of salmon in the ocean, but we do know where they are going, and that they need to get there to maintain a pattern in existence long before the meddling of people.

NO DIVINE PLAN

When Raven created Earth by collecting twigs, mud, and grass, and rolling them into a ball, it was still tough to see anything. A shaman kept three sources of light in three separate boxes — one with the Stars, one with the Moon, and one with the Sun. Raven, the trickster, was compelled to release them. The shaman, however, knew Raven’s wily ways, and was always one step ahead. That was until the shaman had a daughter. He told his daughter he would love, love, love it if she gave him a grandchild. Raven heard him, took the form of a pine needle, and drifted onto the surface of the shaman’s daughter’s tea. She swallowed the needle deep into her stomach, into her womb. This was the immaculate conception of Raven in the form of man.

“Uppa,” he said one morning, putting down his toy firetruck. Can I open one of the boxes?”

“No way, Jose,” said the shaman, although Raven’s human name was likely Timmy or something cute like that.

“Ah, come on Uppa! Just let me take a little peek,” little Timmy said. “You’d be way cooler than Uppa Charlie.”

The shaman hated Uppa Charlie, that good-for-nothing shaman up the river. He shrugged, thought to hell with it, and handed his grandson the key.

“Oh boy! Gee golly willickers,” said Timmy, running to one of the boxes.

“Be careful,” said the shaman.

“Don’t worry,” said Timmy, finagling with the lock. Then the lid flew open, and trillions of stars shot like sparks into the cosmos, sticking to the blackness.

“Oh, shit,” said the shaman. “That was not just a peek.”

The shaman didn't babysit for his daughter for another couple years. Timmy was mischievous, and finding a babysitter was tough, and between working at the bank, grocery shopping, and attending PTA meetings, she was busy, distracted, and desperate enough to beg the shaman to watch Timmy just this one time for a few hours. He reluctantly conceded.

"Uppa," Timmy said, looking at the remaining locked boxes.

"Uh-uh. No way. No how. I remember what happened last time."

"It'll be different this time, Uppa. I promise."

"We can't risk it. This one is way more dangerous."

"I learned my lesson last time, Uppa," said Timmy. "I'll be careful. Please?"

"Nope."

"Pretty please?"

"Not a chance."

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?"

"No chance in hell."

"I'll never ask again."

Timmy kept at it, wearing down his grandfather like thousands of years of current over a stone in the river. He rolled his eyes, and said, "Fine!" This time the moon floated into the sky.

"Oh, for chrissakes," the shaman said.

It was almost six years before the shaman's daughter had the courage to ask him to watch Timmy again. There was a younger brother now, who had asthma and diabetes, and needed more attention. She was a single mom with a second mortgage on the sodhouse, she was working a second job. She just needed a little extra help this one time. Besides, Timmy spent most of the

time with his nose in his Gameboy. The shaman sighed and agreed to watch Timmy for just an hour.

“Uppa,” said Timmy sheepishly.

“No! I know what you’re going to ask, and you’re out of your mind.”

“Come on, Uppa,” said Timmy. “I’m older. I know better now.”

“No,” said the shaman. “The last one is way, way, way too dangerous.”

“You can open it yourself, and I’ll watch,” said Timmy. “I’ll stand way over here, across the room.”

“It’s been in there forever,” said the shaman. “Even I don’t even know what will happen if it gets out. It might burn the whole place down.”

“If it’s been forever, it probably needs air,” said Timmy. “Don’t you even want to see what it looks like, Uppa?”

He looked at his grandson, looked at the box, and sighed. “Okay, but you have to stand way, way the hell over there.”

Timmy walked to the other side of the room, where the shaman was pointing, and shoved his hands into his pockets. The shaman inserted the key, twisted, and the lid unlatched. Timmy transformed into Raven, his true form, flew over, pushed the shaman onto the floor, and the lid popped wide open. The brightest light either of them had ever seen shined its way into the sky, illuminating the sky, the trees, the land, and the water. Raven flew away, laughing as the shaman shook his fist in the air, knowing he had been fooled by the old trickster all these years. This is how Raven brought people the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars.

Mom and Dad read some version of this story to me. They read it to me among other books like *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Pat the Bunny*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and *Green Eggs and*

Ham. More than once, Mom added green food coloring to scrambled eggs. She told me it wouldn't work with ham. I loved the different places books could bring me, and before I learned to read, I memorized the words to go along with the pictures, or at least memorized a version of them.

Both Mom and Dad said I was an easy kid, not like Timmy at all. Their friends, mostly staff from school, agreed. I was quiet and introverted and adults often commented on how I never said much, how they never knew what I was thinking, and how I was barely there. I usually responded with a shrug of my shoulders, unable to conjure an explanation as to why I didn't feel compelled to say much. At my first birthday party, I was sound asleep in my crib while Bob Swanson smeared chocolate frosting on my portrait in my highchair. The portrait, everyone agreed, talked about as much as me.

I spent plenty of time outside, playing with rocks and sticks, running around the lawn, and jumping into fox holes in the tundra, but inside the house there were books, and toys, and a living room with dark red carpet. Fisher Price people, Disney characters, Ninja Turtles, and trolls with up-combed, colorful, crazy hair hopped across pillow and Lego islands surrounded in lava. They battled and conversed and celebrated and mourned. They did the same things adults did, like checking the mail, putting fuel in their vehicles, and shopping for groceries, but when they hunted, they hunted for dinosaurs.

They lived life avoiding a split-second fall into volcanic, infernal perdition. Trolls plummeted from the peaks of a Disney castle. Lego homes were smashed, sometimes as soon as they were erected. An old woman dissatisfied with her haircut beat the barber to death. A mailman was mauled alive by a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Cars soared over the edge of the wooden

rocking chair, leaving scratches all across the seat. Dad had to haul the chair into the garage and refinish the surface at least once.

They had cars and trucks, and even a stuffed elephant to ride, and everyone shared their modes of transportation in what seemed like a widespread, communal agreement. There were disputes of course. Pirates raided in their ship, but soldiers fought them away. When Shredder, Bebop, Rocksteady, and Foot Soldiers attacked, the Ninja Turtles could always defeat them with the aid of their Turtle Van and Turtle Blimp. No one ever starved, no one ever ran out of money, and when someone died, they could come back to life.

I was three when I discovered another way to create. All it took was some paper and my newfound ability to hold a pencil, a marker, or a crayon. By holding the tip of the utensil to paper and moving it, I could create anything I imagined. If I could conquer this ability, the possibilities would be endless. No longer would creation be limited to physical material. Plastic would be obsolete for imagination, reserved for the reality of polluting the ocean, swirling in a massive island with the surface the size of Texas.

At first, buildings, clouds, flowers, trees, and even entire families ended up as scribbles. Then I was able to channel my power and focus on first drawing different parts to make a whole. Concentration was strenuous. Ideas flowed and my hand struggled to match them. With my imagination pulsing and my hand yearning to move in different directions across the page, I managed an oblique circle. Then with more concentration, I put another one adjacent to it. One more circle was needed, but it had to be smaller for my idea to work. The effort was taxing, but when it appeared on the paper, it was indeed smaller. I had brought forth a one-dimensional manifest of what had only existed within the depths of my mind. It was Frosty the Snowman, the first thing I ever drew that looked like something. It took three circles to complete the bulk of the

project before moving to the corncob pipe and button nose. Then I moved onto more complicated characters like Mickey Mouse, whose basis was also a group of three circles, but in a different arrangement. Circles were atoms. By arranging them differently, they made molecules. Molecules made life forms.

Of course school had a way of putting a damper on my imagination, but it had ways of nurturing it, too. Preschool was in a module on a gravel lot next to the rest of the Bristol Bay Borough School, and it was a place with a different set of toys in every corner. There were stacks of blocks, stacks of books, and a sandbox with scattered toys in the sand. On Halloween, Mrs. Feriante dressed as a witch, in a black gown and tall pointy hat. I remember her standing in front of a mirror, painting her face green when some classmates and I approached her. She turned around, cackled a scary witch cackle, and we ran away, laughing and screaming. Then we did it again and again. She was an adult who understood the need to create, and live in the imagination, and he encouraged it. She encouraged us to bring each other into our little worlds. Sharing, she called it.

But when J.J. Gardner launched a chunk of interconnecting red blocks across the room, other kids ducked behind a bookshelf as the blocks scattered upon impact.

“No throwing blocks,” she said. I decided this must not have been sharing.

“They’re not blocks,” J.J. explained. “They’re bombs!”

“Then no throwing bombs.” She put them up high out of our reach.

It must have still been Halloween time when I discovered the costumes. One of them had a set of white, fabric horns and a black and red cloak. I needed help tying it, but once it was on, the world was mine to torment. Chasing them throughout the room, my classmates ran and screamed. Maybe it was just the girls who ran away, and I would attest to this as a teenager, but I

was exhilarated as they evacuated the wooden rocking boat, the block center, and the Playdough table, scattering in different directions. Madness and mayhem spread across the preschool.

Sharing was fun.

Heidi Jo Robertson was entertaining herself with the contents of the sandbox, and I recognized the opportunity to plague this desert civilization with a sandstorm. With my hand full of sand, I brought a wrath upon this peaceful realm by flinging it across the plastic people, animals, and their belongings. I laughed wickedly and scurried away. I hadn't seen the sand spray Heidi Jo's eyes, but she was brushing them frantically with her hands, her facial features scrunching tightly as they flushed with red. As much as I wanted to deny it, I knew exactly what was about to happen. I had seen too many other kids go through these same stages. First, there was a moment of shock. Then there was a critical decision for her to make. I studied each of her minute movements, hoping it wasn't about to happen. But it was too late. The decision had been made. Heidi Jo began to cry.

Well, son of a bitch.

Mrs. Feriante rushed over to her, and the other kids were frozen mid-movement, devoting their complete, undivided attention to this tragedy. Grains of sand ground against the insides of Heidi Jo's eyelids. My stomach sunk. Time stood still. Standing dazed with my limbs limp and my stomach tightening, I lifted the horns from my head and watched them plummet in front of me and drop flaccidly on the floor. I never wanted to do anything like that again.

"So what happened today with Heidi Jo?" Mom asked later at the dinner table.

I put down my fork. "How do you know about that?"

"Mom knows," Dad said, smiling.

Mom was a teacher. She worked at school. She knew everything that happened there. When Raven brought the Stars, the Moon, and the Sun to the world, it was good for the people. Now we had light, heat, and the tide. Raven wouldn't cause a sandstorm or send someone plummeting into molten lava. He was a trickster, but not evil. He wasn't benevolent, but he wasn't malevolent either. He wasn't an angel or a devil, but a prometheus character, providing for the people, with a greater good behind the trickery. I stayed creative, but kept it to myself. The world of adults was above of my own, and they watched over me the same way I watched over the people in the land of lava.

THE RIVER AND THE ROAD

Dad starts the red F-150 and Mom once again shows me how to buckle my seatbelt. She's holding Erica who has stopped crying her gargley cry for the first time today. In Naknek, in the 80s, car seats aren't a thought, let alone standard for any kid under the age of six. Besides, it's only a half mile from the house to the pavement, and from there we aren't going much farther to the skiff. Sometimes we find Mosie, Auggie, and Bonkers there, wandering around, wet with the dead fish smell they've been rolling in. Dogs get everywhere by walking, running, following smells, following each other, following instincts to wander toward the river. They're like all furry animals we see, but they have collars and names and they are allowed inside the house. We go looking for them when they wander away and disappear, but they never seem like they're lost. Then one day Bonkers disappears, and we never see him again. Mom and Dad think someone liked him and took him upriver.

Neighbors are taking care of Mosie, Auggie, and Bonkers this weekend, so they aren't in the back of the truck. Instead, there are blue plastic totes, a red cooler, cookware, sleeping bags, a tent, and the same tan suitcase Dad carries when we get on a plane. We're going camping in the Bay of Islands, a place on the far end of the North Arm of Naknek Lake. Dad says we'll do some fishing while we're up there. It's the kind of fishing where we use a pole, Mom explains, and not the kind where Dad makes money. We're going camping to get away, and to be outside, which I've gathered to be anywhere not in the house. Outside is just beyond the door, in the yard, or on the porch, or on the tundra behind the house, but adults like to drive trucks and boats.

Dad cranks the stick shift in front of me, once, twice, three times as we move down the driveway, rocks kicking into the undercarriage. Dirt has gathered between the black swirls of

texture on the floor and I can see bear faces in the pattern. Mom and Dad don't see them. They seem confused when I point to them and tell me looking out the window would be much more fun. I can't see that high, so I stare at the bear faces and wonder if the cab of this truck counts as inside or outside, and if it is inside, if it means the camping stuff in the back of the truck is outside because there is no roof.

The truck moves down the gravel, onto the pavement, and onto another dirt route to City Dock where red, orange, yellow, and white metal storage containers tower into the sky. The Dock stands on pilings, some of them crooked, some of them straight. The pilings are never the same height from the water. The beach is never the same size. Down on the beach, the wooden purple skiff is floating to the side of the pilings. The Labamba, Mom and Dad call it. Dad uses a pair of chestwaders to get to it, start the motor, and bring it in for us. Mom and Dad load the camping supplies. Then we all put on life jackets and rain gear, and Dad drives the Labamba up the Naknek River. I think the Labamba must be outside since it doesn't have a roof, and the walls aren't much higher than Dad's waist.

Like the salmon, we forge against the current of the Naknek River, beyond the reach of brackish water, beyond the soft, brown river bottom shrouding their line of sight. We go beyond the tide and beyond mud beaches and eroding banks. We go through grassy walls and green reeds carpeting the edges. This is how we get to Naknek Lake, where the mountains tower over us, and their meltwater collects into the deep blue pool expanding into the North Arm and the Iliuk Arm, which is even bluer. The surface of the water is a mirror, reflecting no houses, buildings, or any sign of people other than us. The only other movement is fins circling, occasionally splashing, moving in waves when the Labamba approaches. I think this place is why Mom and Dad stayed in Naknek.

The Naknek River runs parallel to the Alaska Peninsula Highway, but it's more than twice as long — 35 miles between Naknek Lake and Bristol Bay. The Highway is 16 miles. It's a finite stretch of pavement with two ends 16 miles apart. Fisherman's Bar is one end. The King Salmon Airport is the other, connecting two towns without alleys, detours, intersections, or traffic lights. There are small gravel tributaries from houses like ours. When heading to King Salmon from Naknek on the Highway, there are miles of moss, lichen, and clumps of grass grow to the left, just inches above the layer of permafrost. To the right is more of the same, but there is also the Naknek River. On a clear day, mountains like Katmai appear in the distance up the Highway — but the road ends long before they are anything but tiny blue ridges, still in the distance.

When I'm eight, Mom and Dad buy a Starcraft boat in Marquette, not long after Luke is born there. Dad hauls it on a trailer across the United States with Mom's new Jeep. Erica rides in a carseat and I ride shotgun, watching towns and cities woven together by an intricate system of public and private roads — of pebbles or pavement, one lane or six, with speed limits, weight limits, and Dad's limits of patience for other drivers. They all cruise along the roads, heading to our different destinations, seemingly unaware of each other. Dad puts the boat and the car on a barge in Seattle, we get on a plane, and the car and the boat arrive at City Dock in a month.

Naknek, King Salmon, Marquette, Seattle — they are all the end and beginning of a road. Each of these places is a collection of cars, boats, buildings, TVs, and grocery stores. It's like a lake collecting water from its tributaries, but the tributaries are pavement and bring manufactured materials and worldly possessions.

In the Bay of Islands, foot traffic of moose, bears, foxes, lynx, and wolverines tread over terrain to water, food, and shelter, making pathways in the dirt. Then the pathways turned to

roads. Villages turned into towns which turned into cities with streets, sidewalks, and exhaust pipes sending smog into the sky. Dad says that before pavement, before the advent of asphalt, and before other concrete examples existed, oceans and waterways were the first means of mass transportation. For this reason, Seattle is between the Puget sound and Lake Washington, where barges arrive from Asia. Marquette has its ore docks along Lake Superior, trading with Canada to the North. King Salmon is near the freshwater spawning grounds of the Naknek River, and Naknek is along the River where the salmon first arrive.

As pathways in the dirt developed into roads, people had less of a need for waterways. Now there are places like Las Vegas, a sprawling mass of lights, concrete, horns honking, and beer-dispensing helmets in the street, nowhere near water except plastic bottles in vending machines trucked into the city for tourists to obey thirst with the swipe of a credit card. Naknek still depends on waterways for transportation.

If a village is a lake, a waterway is a road. What, then, makes Naknek different? Freight barges arrive into the Naknek River and park at City Dock with precious cargo. At the end of the commercial fishing season, barges head back to the Pacific with cans and refrigerated container vans of frozen salmon filets. The salmon arrive on their own, without a ride on a barge or a truck along a highway, bringing food and fertilizer to Naknek where people live inside houses, telling themselves they are separate from outside.

In the morning in the Bay of Islands, on a peninsula we call Double Beach, the tent is on the sand on the calmer side. Mom is awake, nursing Luke, when she hears two bears wandering toward the tent. She wakes Dad who says it will go away. I don't know if he means it. Then one of the bears approaches the rainfly. With one step, another step, and another, he presses his nose against the transparent window, peering in at three children, a mother, and a father unsure about

what to do. The layer separating inside and outside is but a thin layer of fabric. Inside, we go about as though outside isn't there. Outside, bears follow the same paths they have always followed. The separation means nothing to them. Bears have been known to break through the garage door. They can get through a glass window, or the layers of wood and sheetrock if they wanted. The layer between inside and outside is so thin, it is almost imaginary. Maybe it is imaginary.

The bear turns and walks away to join the other bear at the boat. Dad shoots upright, yells, claps his hands again and again and again. Two pairs of bear paws drop from the outer edge of the boat, take a glimpse at the tent. Both of them stare one more time into the layer between inside and outside. I wonder if they even see it. Then they turn and jog away down the beach, into the bushes, disappearing into the paths they've always followed.

UP, UP, AND AWAY

When I was in third grade, I learned about the first planet discovered outside of our own solar system. I wondered if it had tides or people or life of any form. If there were people, I wondered if they had teleportation and flying cars, or if they were still cavemen, learning to start fires by banging rocks together. Mostly, I wondered if it was anything like Krypton, the home planet of Superman.

After *Get Smart* on Nick at Night, the introduction to the next classic program would begin in a black and white blur of stars and planets, a shooting star crashing into center screen, transforming into the title.

“Look! Up in the sky!” the TV said. “It’s a bird! It’s a plane!”

My red and blue pajamas had the ‘S’ insignia on the chest just like George Reeves. I never wore the pajamas to bed. Instead, I ran down the hallway from my bedroom, leaping into the sky, up, up, and away for just a second before landing onto the couch, bouncing a time or two, and running back up the hallway to do it again. I ran back and forth and back and forth through the hallway hundreds of times. Sometimes I climbed over the railings on the porch to leap over the lawn. I always landed in the grass, red cape floating behind me.

I don’t know what happened to the cape. Maybe a tree branch pulled against the velcro, or maybe it got caught on the metal slide next to the monkey bars at Martin Monsen Park. Part of me still thinks it entered the Phantom Zone through the washing machine, and is still there, floating among lost underwear and unmatched socks. Santa Claus replaced it with a cape more crimson than red. It was a sturdier material, and had a black ‘K’ on the back of it.

If I could have just one wish, it would be to have all Superman's powers, and I wrote it in my third grade journal. Questions on the chalkboard asked *What famous person would you want to meet?* or *What is the American Dream?* The questions called for a limited and formulaic response, but a wish had no limit. I wanted powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, to change the course of mighty rivers, and bend steel in my bare hands. I wanted to be faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and leap tall buildings in a single bound. Most of all, I wanted to fly. I wanted to leap into the sky above me with my arms up, cape flowing behind me, and land anywhere I wanted. My classmates laughed. The appropriate response was wishing for world peace. I had no clever comeback. Their wish was the same as Superman's. It was a bulletproof wish.

All Naknek and King Salmon kids took regular trips to Anchorage out of necessity. Any time someone came back from Anchorage, they had new clothes, had cleaner teeth, talked about the latest movies, and played the latest CDs loud through headphones attached to a Discman. When they reached middle school age, South Naknek kids flew across the river every weekday morning. Homeroom was the first period of the day in case weather delayed their trip. They trickled into class in a fog, unsure if they'd make it home in the evening.

Sometimes I felt like my classmates were always taking trips to Anchorage, maybe once or twice a month, but unlike most kids, I got to fly far away from Naknek. Our family used to spend every other Christmas in St. Pete Beach, Florida, where we stayed with Grandma and Grandpa Catalano. It was St. Pete where Mom and Dad rented *Superman: The Movie* for me, and I watched Christopher Reeve leap into the sky, his red cape behind him, off to save the day over and over again.

When we flew somewhere, I never knew which cities we were in until we landed. It could be Portland, Seattle, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Atlanta, or Dallas, but it didn't make a difference to me. The inside of one airport was like the inside of any other airport, but with different color t-shirts for sale. What I wanted to know was how much time we were going to spend there. Sometimes we waited for hours, sleeping on the floor, wandering the stores with candy and magazines. Then sometimes we had to run to our next flight when we landed, shouting to the gate people to keep the gate open. Tampa was the last stop where Dad would pick up a rental car and we walked outside for the first time in over a day to drive to St. Pete.

Grandma and Grandpa lived in a three-floor pink condo on a white-sand beach where the tide was small but the sunset was big, and surfers moved back and forth on the waves. I made sandcastles, but even with the small tide, sometimes they were too close to shore. I'd watch a wave wash it away, or I would find it gone in the morning. My structure, my own little spot on land, was destroyed. I'd invested my time, effort, and all my available resources into it, and it vanished into the ocean as though it never existed. Once, some kids passing by stomped on it, laughed, and scurried away. I exclaimed that it was my sandcastle as they retreated, and they confirmed, that yes, it *was* my sandcastle.

It didn't bother me too much. Florida meant a trip to MGM Studios, the Epcot Center, and the Magic Kingdom where I could see an actual castle. Mickey Mouse, Peter Pan, Robin Hood, and the Ninja Turtles were there. We rode the current surrounded by pirates, blasted off aboard ships with aliens, and took an underwater voyage aboard the Nautilus. Captain Nemo navigated us to the North Pole, the ruins of Atlantis, and the Abyss where bizarre alien lifeforms lived. Through the voyage were clawed crustaceans, turtles without masks, shipwrecks, sharks, and of course all kinds fish. There were mermaids and sea serpents and of course a giant squid

attacking the submarine with its menacing tentacles. The ocean below the surface, I discovered, was filled by the imagination of people.

I had seen *Jaws* at least a dozen times, a movie that told me the less people know about life in the ocean, the more terrifying it is to us. In the ocean, there is more room than anywhere on Earth to fill with possibilities. When Erica and I dug in the sand on Venice Beach with strange, distant cousins, looking for shark teeth, I wondered how many of the teeth belonged to sharks still lurking just offshore, waiting for me to step too deep into the water.

Sometimes we visited Grandma and Grandpa in Marquette, where they lived in the warmer months. Aunts and uncles and cousins and friends of Mom and Dad lived there, too. Friends and relatives lived all across Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan along the shores of the Great Lakes where the tide was so small, it went unnoticed. It was where the water was never salty, where the salmon runs were stocked by people and the fish themselves were small and weak.

Wherever we went meant toy stores, comic book shops, and movies on a big screen. Marquette is where Mom and Dad took me to *Batman Returns*, and I saw a hero who couldn't fly square off against Catwoman and the Penguin. Batman couldn't fly, but he could *be*. Anyone could be Batman. Superman was an icon of truth, justice, and the American way, but Batman worked in the shadows, taking down villains in a guise of darkness. Sometimes a bat would swoop in front of our house on the Alaskan tundra, swallowing unsuspecting mosquitoes, whitesocks, and no-see-ums. Bats were quick and mysterious, their darkness blending into the night. They didn't crash into the windows like the bright, beautiful birds found dead on the porch.

Third grade was the same year we learned about Martin Luther King Jr, and how having a dream got him shot. Then Braden Adams told me George Reeves had shot himself in the head. He was gone with the wind more than 30 years before we were born. When I was in fifth grade, Christopher Reeve was thrown off a horse and paralyzed from the neck down. It was the same year OJ Simpson was found not guilty and our class watched it live from the classroom. When my classmates whispered a collective “Yessss...” I knew how different my ideas were from theirs.

When I was ten years old, Ted Kaczynski threatened flights into LAX. It was during the fishing season, so just Mom took me, Luke, and Erica to California. Kaczynski's true identity was still unknown. Instead, he was known as the Unabomber, with a disguise of aviators, a mustache, a wad of curly hair under a hood. The sketch was all over the news channels. He was a real supervillain with no real Superman or Batman to stop him. Erica and I cried on the couch, begging Mom not take us.

We landed over the endless lights, spreading into more endless lights, connecting into more endless lights, and I wondered how many lights there could possibly be. I wondered how many lights people needed, and with all these lights, if the Sun the Moon and the Stars were obsolete. We got off the plane safely, and Uncle Ed took both Erica and me to Universal Studios where Jaws jumped from the water, King Kong rocked our tram, and we met Kevin Bacon and Zsa Zsa Gabor. Uncle Ed took me to see *Batman Forever*, where the hero was haunted by dreams of a bat flying toward him.

The first time I drove a car, I pretended it was the Batmobile. It was from a place called Rent-a-Wreck in Marquette. The car rumbled down a thin dirt stretch of dirt down to my Aunt and Uncle’s house in the woods. Trees towered over us from both sides, and the car shook and

gyrated, splashing in the occasional puddle rippling over the dark brown surface. Mom screamed, “Brake. Brake. Brake!” Driving was not flying, but it was something I could do.

The planet I learned about in third grade wasn’t Krypton. Krypton was destroyed as infant Kal-El was sent to Earth by his parents. On Earth, Superman gets his powers from the Sun, as opposed to the red star Krypton orbited. Every time another teacher asked us to share our dreams, a voice rode shotgun, telling me to hit the brake. I was in a class of future NBA and NFL stars who would get there by lifting weights, running hard, and practicing, practicing, practicing. It was the same way Bruce Wayne became Batman. I guessed that’s who I wished I could be.

PROFIT

In the winter, I have to wear snowpants to and from kindergarten or else I can't ride the bus. I watch other kids from my class get off the bus on the side of the Highway, but our house is too far up the gravel. The bus driver takes me all the way to the end of the driveway, where Dad shovels snow and piles it to the sides. Icicles dangle from his mustache and beard, white from frost accumulating in his whiskers. Crystals form in his eyelashes. He walks with me to the house, puts the shovel to the side, and we go inside where he makes me a sandwich, and turns on Sesame Street. I hope it's peanut butter and jelly. I like to watch the jelly splatter onto my plate. When we watch Sesame Street on the little black and white TV with the antennas, Dad's beard is brown again.

When no more snow falls, and I step off the bus, Dad comes inside from transplanting another tree around the lawn. Soon, the whole yard will have a wall of them. Later, when daylight lasts after bedtime, there is no more school. Soon, Dad goes fishing. Mom tells me it's the kind of fishing where he makes money, and not the kind where he uses a pole. The tooth fairy brings me my money, and I wonder if it comes from the same place.

Mom makes my sandwich in the summer, but she doesn't use as much peanut butter and jelly. Nothing spurts out onto my plate. It's okay. I go out to the greenhouse with her, where there are flowers and green plants. I help pick green beans and put them in a basket. I get to eat some of them, too, but can't have too many, or there won't be enough for dinner. Dad comes home sometimes, but he isn't around long. He spends most of the time sleeping in their bedroom loft above the living room. Mom says to stay quiet when he comes home. Dad doesn't get to sleep much when he's fishing.

Then there are times we go with him. We load into the Labamba at City Dock and go to a place Mom and Dad call Fish Camp. Sometimes they call it Graveyard. It used to be a town, they tell me. Now just fishermen live there, and only in the summer. At Graveyard, there is no TV or refrigerator or lights or running water. There is just the white paint, the pans on the wall, and the sink that doesn't work where Mom and Dad wash dishes by heating water with a propane stove. They tell me it used to be a hospital. We don't spend much time at Fish Camp.

Most of the time we are in the Labamba. It has ribs, like the ribs I see in the caribou hanging in the basement over the drain, after Dad cuts off their skin, but the Labamba has square edges. They move when a wave crashes from underneath and a splash sprays into the side. It's salty when I taste it. The waves don't stop when the Labamba stops. Water in the bottom gushes from one side to the other, and it pours into the stern where it pools. When we move again, Dad pulls a wooden plug and the water pours back into the Kvichak. I always hope it doesn't pour back in.

When we stop, it's so Mom and Dad can lift a net over the bow. It has a line of corks and a heavier line full of lead. The web is in between them. That's where the salmon are tangled or dangling toward the ribs in the floor. Dad is in front of the corks. Mom is behind the leads, with her back to us. They pull along the lines and the net moves over the bow. With every pull, there are more fish in the mesh of web between the lines, emerging from the water.

"One!" A fish flies from Mom's orange glove, and lands into a big bag tied between two metal bars across the skiff.

"Two!" Dad tosses another one. His gloves are blue, and his fish is in the air before the first one lands.

“Three!” I shout as the next one is on its way, and I keep counting until the numbers are too high for me to remember. Mom and Dad start shouting them for me.

“Eleven, twelve, thirteen...” I repeat. When Erica is old enough to count, she repeats them with me, but I think she learns them quicker. Adults say I do well in school, but she knows how to talk to adults. She asks for more peanut butter and jelly on her sandwich, and she gets it.

She and I stand in a gray, plastic tote with a blue, plaid picnic blanket we crawl beneath when it gets cold. When it rains, or if the waves start splashing over the sides. Mom and Dad fold a tarp over us. The tote is shoved between two ribs and we are shoved into the tote, but we both fit fine. More fish are shoved into the bag, and after counting to numbers I’ll ever remember, Dad drives the Labamba away from the nets. The ribs bounce again and splashes spray from the side until we pull up to a big, black and yellow boat with a white cabin. A crane lifts the bags of fish as a man pulls two levers. Then Dad climbs aboard.

“This is the part where Dad makes money,” Mom says.

I imagine a machine composed of metal mechanisms, steam shooting out from whistles as metal coins and paper dollars project into a big pile on the floor. I imagine people aboard scooping them up and collecting them into big bags with a big money symbols printed on the side. When Dad climbs back into the skiff, he has a pink slip of paper he tucks under his raincoat. Mom tells me the pink paper says how much the fish weigh. At the end of the season, Dad gets a piece of paper from the cannery and he puts it on the counter at the kitchen next to all the pink papers. Dad takes the truck to King Salmon, and he hands the paper to the man behind a counter at the bank. Then we walk away without anything.

“Where’s the money?”

“It’s in the bank,” he says. He tells me it will be there when we need it.

I wonder how much money is out there, and what fish have to do with it. I see much more fish than money. Most of the money I ever see is in a basket of coins Mom and Dad keep on the window sill in the dining room. Sometimes they take out the coins and put them in paper cases. The paper cases stay in drawers until there aren't enough fish.

Most of the time, Mom or Dad swipes a piece of plastic they call a credit card. At Costco, Sam's Club, and Fred Meyer, boxes of oranges, oatmeal, raisins, peanuts, Tang, and a toy if I'm lucky, pile onto the cart. Then the cart gets pushed through a line, and Mom and Dad don't give anything to the lady behind the counter in return for it all. Mom explains it's not stealing. The credit card means they pay later. The lady behind the counter waits for her money like Dad waits for his. He tells me at least she knows how much she'll get.

Mom and Dad pay when an envelope comes in the mail with a number on a folded sheet of paper. Dad gets out a leather booklet, writes the same number, tears it out, and puts it in his own envelope with a stamp. There is only one envelope, and it goes into the blue mailbox outside the post office. I don't think it goes to Costco, Sam's Club, and Fred Meyer all at once. It's one piece of paper. It can't go to all those people behind all those counters.

At Costco, there are filets of fish like the ones we have in our freezer, like the ones Dad cuts and Mom puts into bags. In Seattle, men in raincoats shout and toss them to a crowd. Mom and never buy fish. Mom and Dad don't give it a thought. They push the shopping cart as though they aren't there, but I wonder if we've seen any of them before. Mom and Dad pick up things like grapes, and take the grapes home to eat. Somehow, money is part of it all. Dad picks the fish, the fish go to the cannery, the cannery sells cans to the store, and someone at the store takes it home to eat. Instead, could we find the grape people and trade them for fish? Fish swim into the net, Dad brings the fish to the big boat, the big boat gives him money, he gives the money to

the lady at Costco, and he gets to take a box of Cheerios. Could we just take fish to Anchorage and trade it for Cheerios? What if we ate fish for breakfast? We wouldn't need Cheerios. I wonder what we need money for.

When I ask my questions, Dad laughs and says, "Pull the net to make the money to buy the bread to gain the strength to pull the net."

A WHOLE 'NOTHER STORY

Long ago, whenever a person died, the body decayed and disintegrated into the soil, enriching it for the foliage. In this way, people died like salmon, unconcerned about dissipating into the rest of what's out there. Then people invented embalming, slowing the process of rotting, allowing the body one last attempt to keep itself separate from nature, but there is no avoiding the inevitable. Everyone dies. Salmon die by the masses every summer, and we live pieces, salmon felt the vibrations in the water. When the October Revolution began putting Soviets in power, salmon were swimming along the Siberian coast. When an atomic bomb vaporized Hiroshima and Nagasaki, salmon were beneath the waves, feeding on plankton. As people live their lives on land, salmon live their ocean lives with their time to die always approaching.

Uncle Stan wasn't my uncle. He was Joanne Bradford's uncle. She and her husband, Gary, owned and tended Fisherman's Bar, and the was Uncle Stan to everyone who went there. He lived in an old house behind Fisherman's, rolled his own cigarettes, smoked his own fish, and never had anything good to say about religion. His wife had loved both him and Alaska, but she loved Jesus more and moved back to Minnesota in 1950. Uncle Stan lived alone, with a radio tower on his black-shingled roof, and he would sit behind a switchboard in the living room, fiddling with buttons and knobs, communicating with voices from around the globe.

It always reminded me of the cockpit of a plane, there to navigate anywhere out there, but Naknek is where he had come, and Naknek is where he had stayed. Uncle Stan had arrived in Naknek before his wife, before Mom and Dad, and before Alaska was a state. He had the experience of going north to Alaska like Jack London or a John Wayne character, and he fit the

Last Frontier as an old old-timer. Whenever Mom and Dad took me to Uncle Stan's for a visit, there was a bowl on the kitchen table full of smoked salmon from an ancient Aleut recipe he had learned upon his arrival to Alaska.

Short, bald, and big-eared like Yoda, Uncle Stan told us about the conversations he had through the radio tower, but Mom and Dad were more fascinated by stories of trapping and subsistence fishing on the Naknek, Ugashik, and the Nushagak River, in a time of sailboats and post-World War II wariness. They listened and conversed while I wondered about voices from the sky. I wondered where they came from and what it was like in their corner of the world.

We chomped on salty smokefish from the bowl, trying to satisfy an instant addiction from the first bite. Uncle Stan had a walk-in smoker behind the house where the next batch was always hanging, soaking in the rising flavor. Mom badgered him for the recipe, which he gave her in the end. Whenever Uncle Stan thought I looked bored at the small table in the kitchen, he would pull out an envelope of noisy rattlesnake eggs, a projectile-loaded peanut jar, or a chicken egg from the fridge that refused to break when he told me to throw it against the floor. They were things an uncle might have laying around to amuse visiting nephews and nieces.

When he died, the town of Naknek lost an uncle. Mom delivered the eulogy at Fisherman's, and it was the first time I had seen Joanne there in front of the bar instead of behind it, serving me free Shirley Temples or slipping me handfuls of quarters to dump into PacMan, Terminator Pinball, or the Ninja Turtle arcade game. I fought Foot Soldiers on the streets of New York while Mom drank beer and talked adult talk. Joanne knew the Ninja Turtles were my favorite cartoons, because I picked them out from Fishermen's rental VHS tapes and often watched them at her house when she babysat me. Sometimes she would bring me back a new action figure from trips her and Gary took to places where stores sold toys.

Toward the end of the eulogy, Mom assured us Uncle Stan was in heaven despite his opinions about religion. I believed her, but I wondered if he even wanted to be up there, sitting around on a cloud, wings spread, strumming on a harp, a home-rolled cigarette in his mouth. If he had his own celestial fridge, he probably wasn't allowed to fill it with beer or place pictures of naked ladies on its door with magnets like he had in his house.

Joanne was always at church when we went, and we went whenever Mom felt the urge. Whenever I protested, she would ask me where I wanted to go when I died, and I'd think she wasn't so sure about Uncle Stan's fate after all. I sighed, dragged myself away from whatever character I was drawing, comic book I was reading, or TV show I was watching, and avoid eternal damnation one more week. Then the family packed into the F-150 with the cracked windshield, and squeaked, rattled and rolled down to the community's Catholic establishment.

St. Theresa's was part of the Holy Rosary Parish in Dillingham, a town about 60 miles across the tundra, on the Nushagak River. The church was a derelict building from a cannery, moved and mounted on top of a hill in downtown Naknek near Tibbets Air Field. It was a short walk for Father James Kelley, one of the Parish's flying priests who would pilot a Piper Cherokee from Dillingham to the smaller villages like ours. He alternated villages on Sunday, which is why sometimes church was in the morning, and sometimes it was at night. If it was in the morning, I didn't know if we were going until Mom or Dad was in my room to get me out of bed.

The church was painted sky blue and I was sure there were more chips of it scattered on the ground every time we went. It was like God was letting pieces of the sky fall around it. There was no heat inside, and water would drip from the ceiling during mass on a rainy day. Familiar faces towered above me, but they seemed not themselves reciting words in unison, sang

songs, knelt, sat, stood, and knelt, sat, and stood again as the bald man in the dress conducted them. Father Kelley was a retired Navy pilot, and like Uncle Stan, he told us stories, but instead of a radio tower on top of the building, there was pointy white steeple.

“Do you want to hear a story?” he would say with a grin.

“Yes, father,” he’d coerce us to say, his hand cupped around his ear. His stories about his military days were entertaining, but unlike Uncle Stan, he punctuated his tales by telling us something God or Jesus would want us to do, and unlike Uncle Stan, we couldn’t hear the voice he said was coming from the sky. Unlike Uncle Stan, when I was bored, he didn’t pull out rattlesnake eggs, exploding jar of peanuts, or unbreakable chicken egg to throw on the floor. I kept track of time by asking Mom how many songs were left, and without a word, she showed me the countdown with her fingers, teaching me to count backwards.

By the time I was eight, the parish had built a new church between King Salmon and Naknek to join Catholics from both communities in a warm, dry place to gather and worship together. As Joanne was a devout member, a pile of bar money from Fisherman’s was donated and poured into a beautiful building with wide windows, a spacious floor, a platform in front, and a clean basement to stay after mass for baked goods when it was Social Sunday. The building was still new when I was studying for my first communion, the part of service when churchgoers get in line to accept the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist, which I called the cracker, became the body. A dry merlot became the blood.

Transubstantiation, the adults called it. It was hard to pronounce so I called it hocus pocus. I was to take part in the hocus pocus upon conquering required knowledge and understanding necessary to be a good Catholic. There were passages to read and prayers to memorize out of a stack of books. It was like school, but instead of worrying about bad grades, I

had to worry about hell instead. To stay out of hell, there was a different prayer to accompany different things I did throughout the day. There were words to recite upon rising, before eating, before going to bed, after sinning, whether it was an accident or not, and more prayers I guessed were just for extra credit.

Memorization was hard, but Father Kelley would come to the house on occasion to guide me. He wasn't a bald man in a dress then, but a bald man in a black shirt and a white collar shoved into the neck. Whenever Mom offered him something to drink, he requested a glass of the Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice Cocktail from a plastic bottle in the fridge. When I had to pause during a prayer, Father Kelley was never angry or frustrated. He would smile, take a sip of Ocean Spray, recite it for me, change the subject, and then come back to it again. I liked Father Kelley, and I often thought if weren't a priest, he would be a pretty cool guy.

Mom and Dad helped me practice, too. Even though Mom had gone to Lutheran church, and wasn't allowed to take communion at our church, she said the prayers and the stories were the same. Dad was raised Catholic, but most of what he had to offer were stories of the nuns at school smacking him with a ruler for asking questions. They were some of the same questions I had.

Where did all the other people come from after Cain killed Abel? If God made all the animals at once, when did the dinosaurs come in? The beginning of *The Land Before Time* had offered me a glimpse of germ-looking things turning into fish-looking things turning into lizard-looking things. What about cavemen? Didn't cavemen come after dinosaurs? At school, I had learned it wasn't like *the Flintstones*.

“Well,” Mom said. “It’s okay not to believe *some* things in the Bible.”

She asked Dad for assistance.

“Yeah, I mean I don’t believe *every little thing* the Bible says,” he told me. “I’m not just some big, strong, Catholic.”

“But when Father Kelley comes over,” Mom said. “Don’t go asking ‘what about the dinosaurs’. The dinosaurs and the cavemen are a whole ‘nother story.”

“Oh,” I said. “Then is it okay if I don’t believe in Adam and Eve?”

The school library had books with pictures of dinosaur bones, and books with pictures of people skulls that looked more like gorilla skulls.

Mom started borrowing Bible cartoons for me from the public library, which was operated by the Pentecostal community in town. I loved cartoons, and was less likely to question them. A wooden vessel survived the flood with two of every species of animal, and none of them ate each other. Jonah lived inside a whale. Moses parted the Red Sea. Jesus walked on water and fed thousands of people with two fish. Four mutated turtles were trained in the art of ninjutsu by a rat named Splinter.

At Christmas time, J.J. Gardner explained it was impossible for a man to go to every kid’s house in one night, even if it is just the good kids. He had a point. We flew to Grandma and Grandpa’s condo in Florida every other Christmas, and it took us over a day to get there. We had much less ground to cover than Santa, we didn’t make as many stops, and we were carrying fewer presents, but how fast could eight reindeer be compared to a 747? It was hard to keep believing in Santa Claus.

Those winters we went to Florida, we celebrated Russian Orthodox Christmas when we got back to Naknek in January. Mom and Dad had fewer presents to haul to Florida, and we’d get a smaller, second Christmas with my Godparents after the magical hue of the holidays had faded. In our house, every other year, Jesus had two birthdays.

Other kids always celebrated Russian Orthodox Christmas, or at least when it fell on a school day. When Russians invaded Alaskan villages in the 1800s, they bashed men's skulls with a club and bred with the women. No longer had Raven created the Earth by collecting mud and twigs into a ball. In the first chapter of Genesis, God let there be light before the Earth. Then he created fowl from the water, which means Raven couldn't have been there. Then, in the second chapter, God created fowl from the ground. Even in the same book, there was always a whole 'nother story. A whole 'nother story at school was that birds had come from dinosaurs in a continuation of *the Land Before Time* phenomenon.

In middle school, Mr. Klein taught me about astronomy, atoms, changing climates, and Charles Darwin. He taught me the universe is a complex system of complex systems, ever-changing, ever-shifting, ever-expanding. Subatomic particles become organisms, solar systems, galaxies, and black holes. I was 21 when Mr. Klein died, and I wondered if he had believed of what the pastor said at his funeral at the Naknek Community Bible Chapel about God, Jesus, and life after death.

When I was still eight years old, I could already see that some things are unknown and unexplained, because no one was giving us answers through a steeple or a radio tower. We don't know how much we don't understand, and we don't understand how much we don't know. After people wrote the stories, other people figured some things out, but some things are unknown and unexplained, because no one is giving us answers through a radio tower.

Before I could accept the body and blood of Christ, I met with Father Kelley one more time for my first confession. This time it was in his office at the church, which I think was a glorified broom closet with a table.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," I said. "This is my first confession."

He nodded.

“I don’t believe in God,” I didn’t say. “I don’t believe in Santa, Raven, Superman, or the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles either. I believe in dinosaurs. I believe in a world out there, but I can’t see it all, and I don’t know it all. To say I believe in God or Raven would be making a wild guess.”

After some silence, I told him I didn’t listen to my parents one time. I didn’t think to mention any specific time. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Maybe there’s something to did to your little sister?”

“I did,” I said. “I kicked her.” I don’t know if I actually did.

“Are you sorry?”

“Yeah.”

After absolving me of my sins, he walked me through the details for the following Sunday. He reminded me how to approach the cracker, and which hand goes on top of the other.

“Then that’s the part where it turns into the body and blood of Christ, but that’s not really what happens. That’s just a story.”

He said it, not me, and I said nothing. I was too stunned. Then he handed me a coloring book. It was a dinosaur coloring book. Maybe it was a final test. Maybe it was his way of telling me it’s okay not to believe *every little thing* the Bible has to say. Maybe it was a trap — a subtle way to get me to ask questions, but I didn’t say anything. I wish I did. I’ve wanted to ask Father Kelley about the dinosaurs my entire life, but on Palm Sunday of 2001, Father Kelley crashed his Piper Cherokee into Tuklung Mountain, a peak southwest of the village of Manokotak. He died on impact.

He had spoken at Joanne's funeral not long after that of Uncle Stan. He reminded us we'd see her again if we were good and kept those prayers memorized. We can guess there is somewhere out there we go after death, memories intact, where we sprout wings and play harps on top of clouds. If there is such a place, maybe I'll get some answers. Maybe Uncle Stan is there, still talking to people through the sky. Maybe Joanne can hand me a roll of quarters to put into the Ninja Turtle game. Maybe I can still ask Father Kelley about the dinosaurs. I don't think it's anything like that, however. I think it's a whole 'nother story.

A supercluster of stars, the structure of the cornea of an eyeball, the life cycle of salmon, and the rhythm of the tide might all exist and correspond by pure chance, but people don't know. To believe it's all chance is a belief just as much as a religious one. To choose a belief out of an infinite number of possibilities is to take a wild guess.

Before the Pleistocene Epoch, salmon didn't have the rivers of Bristol Bay to reach. The freshwater was still frozen as glaciers and ice sheets. When streams of meltwater first poured into Bristol Bay and became the Meshik, Igushik, Egegek, Togiak, Ugashik, Nushagak, Kvichak, and Naknek River, the water was too thick with debris for salmon to survive, let alone spawn, but there was a summer when they did. Fry emerged from the eggs and fed on bugs and larvae. Some of them survived long enough to head into the ocean.

The oldest salmon fossils, however, are found in fresh water, not the ocean, suggesting the first of Bristol Bay's salmon arrived from somewhere else. It suggests they left another freshwater body to brave the ocean before beginning their pattern in Bristol Bay. Then again, it might suggest the first salmon died somewhere too deep in the ocean for a human hand to reach. Their origin is unknown. Each Bristol Bay river is a conduit from the ocean. Maybe the consciousness existing in every lifeform is a conduit as well. Maybe when we die, the stuff of

our consciousness dissipates like our bodies back into what's out there. I don't know. What I know is that when I stepped to a platform to accept the body and blood of Christ, I tasted a dull cracker and the taste of wine, overpowering to an eight-year-old palate.

GRAVEYARD

After a vacation to Los Angeles, Mom sends me fishing with Dad. He's been at it since before we left. While Mom, Erica, Luke, and I were riding around streets in the back of a van, Dad was driving the skiff back and forth on the Kvichak River. While Luke stepped off the sidewalk to pee in a neighbor's lawn, pants to his ankles in two-year-old fashion, Dad was whipping it out over the side of the skiff. While I was sleeping in a guest room bed at Uncle Ed and Aunt Claire's house, creaped out by the doll in the chair in the corner, Dad was getting short shots of sleep at Graveyard. While I was on the tram at Universal Studios, while I sat in a movie theater watching Batman Forever, and when I was sprawled over a blanket in a field under Fourth of July fireworks, Dad was in the Labamba, pulling the nets to make the money to buy the food to gain the strength to pull the net.

Mom says fishing is something I might want to do next year if I want to make money, so she sends me to see what it's like. If I make money, I can buy a new bike. When I'm old enough, I can buy a car. Later, I can go to college. Someday, I'm going to be an adult, and fishing is my way out of Naknek. If I go fishing, I can start to grow up. For now, my raincoat is big enough to fit a puffy coat underneath. It reaches over my hip boots to my knees. A pair of orange gloves dangles from my raincoat's sleeves, which are cut in half and still too long. I think I've seen Fourth of July Fireworks for the last time.

Dad stands in the stern, helming the motor as I sit on the bench between Luke and John. Luke has been fishing with Dad for three years now, but it's John's first time in Alaska. All three of them have been fishing long enough this summer for scales to speckle their raingear, and for whiskers to grizzle their faces. For the first time, I notice white streaks in Dad's chin. John doesn't have them, even though he is Dad's age. They were roommates in college and John still lives in Marquette. Luke's mom is Mrs. Feriante, and he's the babysitter who watches Ninja

Turtle and brings over comic books and handheld video games. Mom says my brother isn't named after him, but my brother wouldn't be named Luke if Luke were a crappy kid.

Corks and lines and webs are heaped in the skiff, and I don't see how any of it can ever make it into the water without making a tangled mess. Then I watch John leap out, ankles splashing in the water, tie onto end of the net to a screw anchor on the beach. Luke holds the skiff, John hops back into it, and Dad drives the skiff out toward the channel as the net uncoils flawlessly into the water, a line of corks on the surface, splashing and bobbing with heads and tails. The outside end of each net is tied to a buoy attached to another screw anchor on the bottom. Then I watch them go through this process three more times, a leadline sinking and a corkline keeping the mesh stretched to the surface. A net looks like a curved line of white corks between two round, pink buoys. After the fourth net is in the water, I watch the tide rise up onto the beach and pull it into this curve. I watch white water rush faster against the corks, the splashes of heads and tails accumulating in the net.

Dad pulls the Labamba up to the corks and Luke and John lift them over the bow. Then they lift up the lead line, and all three of them pull along the net, picking out fish and throwing them into brailer bags. It's my job to tie them up. Dad says to tie the tight, as tight as I can get them, and to tie the knot like I tie a shoelace, but not the way I tie a shoelace, because my shoes always come untied. Four brailers fit between the bulkhead behind the bow and the bulkhead in front of the stern, each able to hold about 1,000 pounds. When the skiff is full, we go to the tender parked in the channel. A crane lowers down, lifts the bags, and the weight is taken. Dad goes on board and comes back with a slip of paper he tucks into a pouch. Then we head to Graveyard.

Graveyard used to be the Aleut village of Koggiung, thriving on the summertime operation of the salmon cannery owned by the Libby, McNeill & Libby Company. It was built in 1910 by cheap Chinese labor, many of whom died from the smallpox and tuberculosis epidemics of the time. Graveyard might be named for the cemetery full of their remains, or it might be named after the Aleut burial ground nearby. Today the tide has eroded Graveyard's edges, pulling coffins from the banks onto the beach, with the occasional skeleton dangling down, reaching toward the shore. The cannery burned down in 1959, and Koggiung's last year-round residents are those skeletons.

Dad sits in his spot across the table, by the window, and explains it was Mom who started the family fishing operation in the early 80s. She and Bob Swanson wanted to experience the seasonal industry Naknek revolved around. They took out loans, bought gear, leased fishing sites, and staked their claim in the doctor's office at the hospital. They painted the outside of their skiff purple and described the operation as a *Cheech and Chong Go Fishing* movie never made. In 1984, she finished the season with a broken arm from falling out of her bunk. A fisherman named John Schandelmeier splinted it with wood and a t-shirt. I was born three months later with no obvious defects, and Dad quit his job with the Department of Fish & Game so he could take care of me at home during the school year. Mom kept teaching, and Dad took over the fishing operation.

In the 80s, he chainsawed a doorway between this room and the medicine closet, and tonight I walk through it to the doctor's office. A sink installed into the makeshift counter drains water into the ground through a PVC pipe, and behind it are hanging pans, spatulas, ladles, and insulated mitts. Dad lights a propane lantern hanging from the old light socket. I spread peanut butter on pilot bread and brush my teeth in the sink with a cup of water.

The hallway is covered in handprints from visiting vandals who discovered the contents of the medicine closet years ago. The hallway is where we keep the totes, the cooler, and spare rain gear hanging from nails in the wall. There are rooms on the right used for storage, where my brother used to stay, where my brother-in-law used to stay, where my sister used to stay, and where more Koggiung patients used to stay. Outside, we start putting on chest waders, lifejackets, raincoats, and gloves, and the wind keeps howling. The porch slants and the boards in the steps are loose. We start our walk down to the creek.

The board walk is in worse shape than our staircase, but fishermen have nailed boards and sheets over some of it. I know where to step so a board doesn't slap me in the face. Telephone poles lay broken and rotten, staircases covered in moss crumble, and old plumbing protrudes from the dirt. The bushes have grown, but I think the giant furnaces at the front of Graveyard will always be there. Charred pilings line the creek where we park our skiff, and rusted pipes, furnaces, canning equipment, and other artifacts lay strewn all over the shore and the rest of Graveyard. On Dad's birthday, John finds a wooden cork, gives it scrap metal fins, and paints an eye. He nails the fish to a plank, in the middle of the outer ring of an old dartboard. He affixes it to the wall at our camp. It is the first piece of artwork hung there. Some of my sketches go up later.

Luke is often interested in what I draw in my sketchbook. It's his last year, and John won't come back. The wood cork fish remains on the wall, among mosquitoes with the year of the kill inscribed in pencil. Luke and John's names remain written on the wall by the cast-iron pans, next to the year they began and the year they ended. My name will be there in 1996 with no end date in sight.

GOING NOWHERE FAST

Our driveway was a stretch of gravel reaching through lines of alder bushes Dad had transplanted over the years. Some rocks were more familiar than others. They were rocks I found camping, rocks I found on the beach in the mud. They were shiny rocks, rocks with bright colors, and rocks with a crystalline or metallic luster. A collection made a line across my bedroom windowsill until it disappeared and I'd have to collect again. Mom was throwing them into the driveway. They were the familiar rocks reappearing in the gravel. Nick was the one who recognize one of them as a fossil. He explained he learned in school that it made sense because Naknek was once covered in water. Nick knew this, he explained, because his teacher told him. Riel said he was full of shit. Naknek was covered in ice.

Nick was a couple years older. Riel was a year younger. They lived across the gravel street, down a sloping dirt driveway surrounded in bushes. Their house was a derelict building their dad had hauled to their property in the 80s. The summer before I started third grade, Mom made me go over there and introduce myself. I shuffled my feet, scattering rocks the entire way to see both of them in the back of their dad's truck. Riel came over to my house, but Nick didn't. Riel explained Nick was pissed off because he was going into fifth grade, so he was going to stay home. He liked his fourth grade teacher, and he knew, just knew, he wasn't going to like this new one. Both Nick and Riel became two of my oldest and closest friends, but with Nick, it always depended on his mood. Riel and I saw each other almost every day.

We played SEGA Genesis games like *Mortal Kombat III* and *NHLPA Hockey '93* plugged into the TV in the basement, both of which we played for the fighting, and both of which warned us for graphic violence because of the blood. We played game after game plugged into the TV in the basement until Mom told us to go the hell outside. Riel and I spent most of our time together wandering around the yard, or wandering around on the tundra, just talking,

cracking jokes, me learning new ways to use swear words. Sometimes Nick, Riel, and I played pitcher, batter, and outfielder on a patch of tundra between our houses. Our bases were tufts of grass, and we always played with lots of ghostmen.

Bikes were the regular mode of transport down the driveway, down the hill, gravel crunching under our tires. Rocks scattered at the bottom as we skidded with brakes engaged, leaving another streak exposing finer dirt. There was a dirt pit at the end of the gravel, past the school bus stop, next to the River, where we were told to be wary of bears in the summertime. Older kids rode circles and went airborne on fourwheelers with loud engines. They were scarier than bears, and when they arrived, we left. I was the only kid who could pedal all the way back up the hill. I was the only kid who cared. I'd inherited the bike from a teacher's daughter, and I kept my butt on the seat, because the seat had a picture of Rainbow Bright and unicorns on it. Riel knew about the seat, so I don't know why I bothered.

I was small and vertically challenged. Nick and Riel were huge kids. They were both at least a head taller than me, and both were hefty guys. Part of Riel's reliable ability to make me laugh came from a self-deprecating humor about being fat, but could be funny about any topic, and made me laugh all the time. One of his daily goals at school was to make juice pour out my nose, and he was often successful. Most of our time spent together was walking around my house, shooting the shit as we called it.. We had deep, philosophical conversations about religion, nature, comic book characters, and what kids at school we thought were dipshits and assholes.

Sometimes Nick, Riel, and I had squirt gun fights, which escalated into battles with the garden hoses. One of us would stretch one of the green rubber hoses onto the lawn from the front of the house while another one of us would stretch the other green rubber hose from the back.

We prayed Nick didn't get his hands on one, because he would move forward no matter how much he was sprayed and soaked. The kid didn't move fast, but he had more charisma than I'd seen any other kid have. He stepped slowly, accepting the spray into his face, take the hose from his attacker and then he'd have both of them. Erica often joined us, and would soon retreat to the greenhouse to get dry, and warm in a towel, in the heat refracting from the ceiling. She was always the smartest Wilson kid.

When Riel was still on the younger kids bus, just Nick and I were dropped off where the Alaska Peninsula Highway met the gravel, which was about a half mile away from our houses. One time I thought it would be funny to lay down across the gravel and ask Nick, "Don't you wish a car would come by?" One did, and I shot up, running like a madman. Our neighbor in his truck swerved, but didn't honk, didn't stop, didn't tell us crazy kids to get the hell out of the road. It was just those neighborhood kids again.

When we were older, a big, circle, gravel turn-around was made for the bus, and the bus driver dropped us off about a quarter mile from the top of the hill. If I was dropped off alone, I liked to see if I could run all the way home from there. If I could bike it, I was sure I could run it, and I was right as long as I didn't experience a horrendous side stitch. Of course sometimes a pack of neighborhood dogs stopped me in my tracks, surrounded me, and barked their heads off. Dad told me their barks were bigger than their bite, and taught me to throw rocks at them, and even pretend to throw rocks at them so they would back away. If Nick and Riel took the bus that day, I'd walk with them and we would tiptoe past the dogs together.

Mr. Bakun, the PE teacher, lived in the house across the tundra to us, on the side of the hill. Bob Swanson had built the house, and lived in it with his wife and kids before leaving Naknek to be principal somewhere else. Mr. Bakun told me he saw me sometimes, making it to

the top of the hill, on my bike, on my feet. He told me it was impressive that I was the only kid in the neighborhood who seemed to be able to do so. I was impressed that someone cared.

At school, we likened Mr. Bakun to a drill sergeant we respected. More often than not, PE was a source of anxiety for me. Making a basket was almost impossible. Catching a football took a miracle. In a game of dodgeball, I was often the first one out. After we ran our laps, Mr. Bakun led us through drills, scrutinized our movements, and then the games would begin. I wished running laps could last all day. I liked that Mr. Bakun switched up our activities every few weeks, but I hated people seeing my lack of athleticism.

My favorite unit in PE was during the President's Physical Fitness Test. The test involved passing specific requirements for strength, flexibility, speed, and endurance. Whoever passed all requirements would receive a sew-on patch. I liked the Fitness Test, because no one else was good at it either. Pull-ups were tough. The shuttle run burned my lungs. The V-sit and reach stretch, I was convinced, was designed only for girls whose leg muscles were made of rubber bands. I liked the mile run, because it took a while and it ensured putting off embarrassment during the next obstacle. Maybe that's why I wasn't fast enough.

Mr. Bakun told us if we wanted to try any of these parts of the test again, he'd be around after school, and we could try to our heart's content. No one else ever showed up, but I did. Mr. Bakun set up orange cones in the crude grass field behind the school, and he stood with a stopwatch while I huffed and puffed and ran my five laps. I tried again and again, but I never could finish the damned course fast enough.

When John Chilkott moved to Naknek for our fifth grade year, he fascinated me because he talked about life and school in Montana, in a place with theaters and malls and roads. He was another kid Mom forced me to invite over to the house, and we became friends by default. We

were an odd pair, because he was athletic, and into basketball. His favorite team was Orlando Magic, and he knew what music was cool, like Nirvana and Bush. Girls flocked around him and everyone wanted him on their football team at recess. It didn't take him long to figure out he could be one of the cool kids, and our friendship ended.

When we were friends, however, John and I rode bikes to each other's houses even though we lived about four miles away, down different gravel driveways. I didn't realize kids could ride bikes that far, or that Mom and Dad would think it was okay, but they didn't mind as long as I asked permission. John was at my house when he hatched a plan to ride our bikes all the way to downtown Naknek, an entire five miles away. Mom was home, but I didn't want to ask her about it because then John might not think I was cool enough to make my own decisions. We got on our bikes, and two kids hit the not-so-open road. We rode the dirt shoulder all the way there.

Unlike the millions of times I'd been in the cab of an enclosed vehicle, one way and the other, on this road, I'd never seen it up close, at this pace. For the first time, I noticed some of the boats and old vehicles tucked into the bushes. I noticed street signs on the gravel roads, and the rocks in the gravel. We met wandering dogs, were waved at by cars, and stopped to talk to other kids riding four-wheelers on the side of the Alaska Peninsula Highway. John's mom worked at the Camai Clinic where we stopped in to say hello. That's where I called home to matter-of-factly tell Mom I'd gone into town. My mistake was telling her I was at the Clinic, and John's mom had to grab the phone from me and explain I was not hurt.

I started riding my bike to school in the morning on days with nice weather, and I kept doing so long after John had disappeared into the cool crowd. With no combustible engine, I could get from one place to another down the Alaska Peninsula Highway. It gave me something

to look forward to in the morning besides school. Nick and Riel remained my closest friends, but they would never be interested in riding a bike that far. We continued talking about religion, comic books, and movies, and the kids we thought were dipshits and assholes. They introduced me to bands like Black Label Society and System of a Down. They introduced me to stand-up comedians like George Carlin and Sam Kinison and made me laugh with their own wicked senses of humor. They complimented the personality I had, but the part of my personality with the desire to propel myself forward down the road had to be on my own. I was okay with that. In fact, I preferred it. It was a way to travel inward while traveling forward at the same time.

BAIL

“This is the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in King Salmon with an announcement for commercial fishermen in the Naknek-Kvichak District.”

The words from KDLG are surrounded in soft static, and hold the tension of a net in the minutes before high tide. They have the power to bring Bristol Bay’s returning population of people to a halt. Conversations end in the middle of a boatyard. A game of cards in a remote cabin comes to a standstill. An afternoon of trying to start a stubborn outboard motor stops. During the fishing season, aside from the voice on the radio announcing our fate, the world pauses. Openings are designed to begin with the incoming flood of the tide, and the tide waits for no one.

“The time is 3:00 PM. and the date is Thursday, June 30, 1996. In the Naknek-Kvichak District through 2:00 PM today, Naknek River escapement was 51,700 sockeye for a cumulative of 130,800. The Kvichak River escapement was 264 sockeye for a cumulative of 14,200.”

The pause is long enough to understand the numbers, but not long enough to decipher what they mean. The fishing districts of Bristol Bay are some of the last sustainable commercial fisheries in the world, and have remained sustainable with the regulation of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game since the 1950s. Sample fishing, prediction, and someone standing on a counting tower up the river decide our fate. Then it’s relayed to the radio station.

“The Naknek-Kvichak District will open to set gillnet gear for a seven-and-a-half-hour period from 8:30 AM until 4:00 PM Friday, July first, 1996. Drift fishermen in the Naknek-Kvichak District should stand-by at 9:00 AM Friday, July first for possible short-notice opener. The earliest an opener could start would be 10:00 AM Friday, July first.”

Fishermen, both setnetters and drifters, gather to Bristol Bay every summer from faraway lands, seeking glory and gain, harvesting millions of pounds of wild-caught Alaskan salmon and

collecting a check at the end of the season. Some fishermen spend one summer, live out an authentic Alaskan experience a little too authentic, and never come back. Some of them leave everything behind, buy a boat, lease a site, and maybe even stay in Alaska all year. Then there are the spawn of those people. There are those of who start fishing because of a dad who asks, “Want to go fishing next summer?” as though we have a choice in the matter.

In his early 30s, Dad fished by himself, not something done by any mere mortal with a wooden skiff, an Evinrude outboard motor, and a couple of 25-fathom gillnets, but he had only one permit at the time. After acquiring a second one, allowing him to fish an additional 50 fathoms, he’d hired different crew over the years to help with the extra workload. The permit went under the names on the wall at Graveyard, like Alan Levinson, Luke Donkersloot, and his Vietnam-weathered brother Pat who flew all the way from Michigan.

I stand four-foot-nine, weighing in at 87 pounds on the photo ID I’m required to have on board. The gloves on the ends of my arms can’t reach the cork line from the bow. This is why Dad recruited Cameron Porter. Dad put an ad in the classifieds, and Cameron responded to it from Oregon after Marine training ended with a faulty oxygen tank. He has a hacking cough, but he’s a non-smoker, a non-drinker, and built like a small bear. He has a typical Marine goatee and looks like he has the strength for a summer of pulling nets and lifting anchors. He met our entire family at the Ted Stevens airport in Anchorage during a trip this winter. Cameron’s wife is a flight attendant and got him on board from Portland for free.

“He looks good. Strong,” Mom said to Dad as we walked away.

Cameron and I stand in the water on the beach in Naknek below City Dock, holding the purple skiff. It’s not a dark purple. It’s a lighter, lavender kind of purple, like a Forget-Me-Not. It’s not the original Labamba, either. The original Labamba was thrashed in the waves so much,

it's been replaced like another purple coat of paint around it. Although the change is undetectable to most people, the shade of purple has ranged between Extravagance, Flowered Tundra, and my personal favorite, Pansy. We mostly resort to calling this skiff the Purp.

Cameron shoves the Purp off the beach as I hop in, tumbling over the side. Dad starts the motor, and we head out of the Naknek River and turned into the Kvichak toward Graveyard. Dad motors into the creek, and Cameron jumps out with the anchor. I jump out and sink into mud. It holds me by the thighs, and the more I struggle, the harder it is to pull myself out. Cameron stands to my left. Dad stands to my right. They grab me my the armpits and hoist me up. I scramble up the bank, onto hard dirt. Dad and Cameron unload the totes, the cooler, the heater, the stove, the propane tank, the water jugs, and our bags and we all haul them across the dirt path through the trees. Then we go out to fish.

We don't catch much in the first week. It's Free Week, Dad explains. Free Week is when there is no regulation by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game other than a schedule of 9:00 AM Monday to 9:00 AM Friday. Then the regulatory season begins. Free Week, we catch a few, but not much. That will change.

There is a green skiff Cameron drives out to the Kvichak behind Dad after our first trip back to Naknek. We keep it parked by one of the nets in case there are too many fish to handle before the closure. My most important jobs are tying brailers, throwing fish into them, holding the skiff off the beach as the tide goes out, and bailing out water, bailing out water, and bailing out more water. The Purp has a significant leak somewhere in the bottom of the stern.

We need the green skiff when the Purp is full of them. Dad pulls it up to it and Cameron throws out the bow anchor to keep it in place. They hop into the green skiff and Dad starts its motor. He tells me not to let the skiff sink, and that there was a candy bar and a soda in the snack

box. He pulls back his raincoat sleeve to look at his watch, what I have learned means the opening will be over soon. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game will see our nets from a chopper and pull no punches in punishment. The least they'll do is give us a fine. The most they'll do is take the nets, put the delivered fish on their own tab, and take away our fishing privileges.

Dad and Cameron disappear into the distance, their wake rocking the green skiff side to side. Small waves never stop splashing against the sides, even after Dad and Cameron are gone. Around me is gray sky and its rough reflection on the water. It's the first time on the water I'm not daydreaming about being a superhero, or a comic book artist, or a kid who isn't spending his summer in a skiff. I stay hunched in the stern, scraping the square edge of a plastic bucket against the bottom, between the ribs, scooping water, brackish with salt and blood. The blood thins as the fish stiffen. Each splash into the water is clearer. Each splash into the water means more water to leak back in. The fish are no longer bleeding, but the skiff still does. Soon, Dad and Cameron will come back. We'll deliver two skiffloads to the tender. I don't think this is my last season. I don't think this is the last time I'll stand alone in a sinking skiff.

RANGER

Luke slept in a miniature bed in Erica's room until he was approaching his fourth birthday. Dad figured the next natural step would be for the boys to bunk together and give the girl her own space. After his Catholic parents stopped reproducing, his dad joined the room where all four brothers slept. Mom reminded Dad that his mom also used to bring a vacuum cleaner camping and convinced him to build two walls around a corner in the basement, and then I had my own room. Even Mom wasn't too keen on the idea, however, because both of them thought I spent way too much time drawing and reading and not spending time outside or with other kids. If I was given my own isolated space, they told me, they might not ever see me again.

By then the basement had a linoleum playspace where toys were always scattered, and a carpeted area with a futon, chair, and TV. At first it was a small box of a TV with antennas and thirteen buttons to find stations glowing from the bubble of a screen. As Naknek collected more channels, there was a bigger box of a TV. On the other side of the screen was a civil war in Rwanda, an Earthquake in the San Fernando Valley, new episodes of the X-Files, and a talking chihuahua letting us know about something called a chalupa at Taco Bell.

Luke, Erica and I had numerous Nerf gun fights and Lego-building extravaganzas. In socks, we skated against the slick blue surface of the floor, pretending it was ice. At Christmas time, Dad would set up his Lionel train set from his childhood around Mom's Christmas Village and we watched it move around. The basement was where Mom and Dad hosted our birthday parties, and kids played games like pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey.

The basement was partway above ground, and the slits of windows looked at the front yard from beneath the porch. There was a door to some stairs, leading to a boardwalk toward the front of the house. The back room had food storage, the furnace room, with the water heater, and the washer and dryer were behind the futon, and we shut the door during a movie. There was a

wide-open space between four wooden beams, directly below the dining room upstairs. Dad built my new room in this spot, and all three kids had a room of their own.

I read Stephen King novels, trash vampire books, and issues of comics accumulated from trips to Anchorage. I spent hours drawing superpowered characters at my desk, first sketching them in pencil, then adding ink and erasing the unwanted lines, and adding color if I felt like it. They wallpapered the room where I always had music playing. First, I listened to the CDs I'd received as gifts, hearing the same songs over and over without realizing it as my right brain took over. Then I gathered them from a Columbia House membership when I was old enough for a checkbook. When I heard a song I liked on KDLG, or saw the video on VH1, I peeled stamps from the catalogue, licked the back, affixed them to a sheet, put the sheet in an envelope, dropped the envelope into the big blue mailbox at the Post Office and waited six to eight weeks for delivery. Red Hot Chili Peppers, Collective Soul, Nirvana, Disturbed, and Insane Clown Posse repeated their songs from the speakers, and I only paused them when Mom often barged in to ask if I'd like to invite a friend over. My introverted nature, to her, was dangerous anti-social behavior.

It's not that I didn't have friends. Friends came over often, and I visited them often, too. Nick and Riel lived across the street, Shoosh lived up the road, John lived not far from him, and after Joey's house burned down, he was next door to John. All of our parents spent plenty of time driving us back and forth on the Alaska Peninsula Highway. Sometimes we got our parents to take us to the new pool, built across from the school, where we jumped off the diving board until we got bored. Oftentimes Riel knocked on the basement door when he came over, and we played SEGA Genesis games like *Mortal Kombat III* and *NHLPA Hockey '93*, both of which warned us for graphic violence of disappearing blood. We played game after game until Mom told us to go

the hell outside. Riel and I spent most of our time together, wandering around the yard, or wandering around on the tundra, just talking, cracking jokes.

At school, my class was sitting on top of our desks, watching some cartoon or another a reward for good behavior. The bell rang, and it was time to get in line and walk to recess. Instead of scooting off my desk, I stepped to the next one, the next one, and the next, walking across an entire row of desks, and jumped down into line. Mrs. Gasca sent me to the principal's office, and my life was over. On another Day, I sat in the office, pretending to be in trouble, waiting for Mom to see me in there. When she didn't come, I sent Braden Adams to her classroom. She still didn't come. I went in there and told her she ruined the joke. She said she was glad it was a joke, because she was just about to call Dad and tell him she had second thoughts about giving me present I was about to get for my birthday.

Mom and Dad had wrapped a gigantic box. They smiled with anticipation as I unwrapped it to find another box inside another box. Inside the smallest box was a booklet with diagrams of a fourwheeler, and different chapters on safe driving and troubleshooting. I had no idea it was an owner's manual as I flipped through it, and I feigned excitement about a book of tips about how to be a more skilled driver. Then Mom and Dad told me to dig for the key, and they led me to the garage where my new fourwheeler was waiting.

It was a Honda 200, which was a small fourwheeler, but I was a small kid. It was a basic design — red, with a storage compartment in the back, and most important, and electric start. One push of a button, and the engine started without ninja-kicking downwards or tearing at a pull-cord. Like the threewheelers, it changed gears with a lift up or a push down with my left foot. Soon, I was riding my fourwheeler to friends' houses and to school. A lot of kids did, and we took off at lunch time to ride down the Beach Access Road to the platform overlooking the

River. As my other friends received fourwheelers of their own, it turned into a main form of recreation — as it was in Naknek, Alaska for teenage kid.

When I was fourteen, Dad, and two of my friends, Joey and Aaron Roth, took our offroad vehicles up the King Salmon Trail to a cabin at the end of it. Dad rode his threewheeler, and Aaron borrowed his other one. Joey and I drove our own. It was around my birthday, and we treated this expedition as my party. We were in eighth grade. Shoosh was in Point Hope that year, and no one else's parents were as excited about. Maybe they were right. On the way back, Aaron flipped and the threewheeler landed on his leg, breaking it. He was a star basketball player and the season was about to start. He didn't talk to me much after that.

The summer after my freshman year of highschool, Mom and Dad encouraged me to buy my own vehicle with my fishing money. Dad had won and sold a Ford Ranger at Fishtival, and it seemed to have been a good fit. A smaller truck was more efficient on gas, as Mom and Dad told me, than a larger car. What I cared about most was when I went to college, I could throw my things in the back. I wanted four-wheel drive for obvious reasons, and a stick shift because it was cool to drive a stick shift, even though it was tough for me to learn. I don't know how I didn't blow out the clutch of Mom's Jeep.

Before the fishing season, Dad and I went to Seattle, and went truck shopping. Men in ties swooped like seagulls at every dealership and pecked at us until we either left or made a purchase. First it was one tie. Then another would join. Soon, three, four, or five ties ganged up on us, sweetalking us toward signing papers. If I were by myself, I would have run as quick as I could down the sidewalk, never to be seen again. Dad, however, was more apt to get sucked into their traps. He's a guy who took the time to talk to telemarketers during dinner while Mom

screamed at him to hang up and get back to dinner for chrissakes. I didn't want to be sweet-talked by a telemarketer. I wanted to buy a truck I wanted to buy.

At Harris Ford, in Lynnwood, Washington, we were just about to leave after another bombardment of swooping ties when I saw a cherry red Ford Ranger with a stepside, an extended cab, stick shift, and three-liter, six-cylinder engine. I knew what four of those six details meant, but it was a truck I liked, and I saw it first. It's the truck I bought, and Dad directed me through the stoplights and intersections of Seattle traffic, my muscles tense and every movement outside amplified.

Mom, Luke, and Erica arrived in Seattle after I'd bought the truck, and they took it on a cross-country trip while Dad and I returned north for the fishing season. That was the deal. Mom got to borrow the truck, and she and Dad would pay the shipping costs to get it to Naknek. Of course she loaded it with dry goods from the Costco in Seattle before sending it on the barge. I was still 15 and couldn't drive on my own yet anyway. I still rode my four-wheeler to school. After the truck arrived on the barge, it sat in the garage for months before I was sixteen. Then I took the driver's test, which was a lap around the Air Force Base, and I was given a card with a license to drive. I was free to travel in my own truck, in one direction down the Alaska Peninsula Highway and the other.

I lasted about a month before I filled the truck with diesel fuel. I didn't know anything was wrong until morning when the engine died after I backed out of the garage. I pushed the truck back into the garage and took Luke to school on the fourwheeler. MOM and Dad couldn't believe how stupid I was, I didn't know how stupid I was, and I didn't want anyone to know how stupid I was, so I told kids at school I did something bad and that my truck had been "taken away" by my parents.

“What did you do?” kids asked every day. “What did you do to get your truck taken away?”

“Something bad,” I said. “Don’t worry about it.”

I had this conversation maybe 47 times a day.

Dad needed a new fuel filter to fix it and when he ordered one, the the wrong one arrived. He ordered another, and it repeated. It was the wrong one. The truck was such a new design that no one needed a new fuel filter, so he had to order directly from the factory. After two months, my truck was on the road again.

Within a month, I put two scratches in the sides parking in the garage. They weren’t small scratches, but long, deep scratches over all panels, front to back. Every time I parked, Dad had told me I wasn’t close enough to the wall for Mom to park the Jeep. I was lucky to be parking in the garage in the first place, and if I didn’t learn how to park close enough to the wall, I’d need to park outside. I came home from wrestling practice like any other day, hungry and exhausted. This time, I turned the wheel hard and the side of the truck grazed the side. I got out, inspected it, saw it was unscathed. I figured the rubber lining on the door must be for this purpose, so I pulled forward and put the scratches in the truck. I spent the evening screaming, throwing things, and scaring the hell out of my little brother.

The story I conjured was I parking and couldn’t hear the scratching because the stereo was up too loud. Then I walked out and saw that, oops, I had tarnished the shiny cherry red paint, deep into the metal. Neither that story nor the real one could keep everyone from knowing my stupidity. When I scratched the truck, it was still winter. It was dark when I went to school and it was dark when everyone went home, but by spring time, when daylight shined on my truck, people started asking about the scratches. The winter wasn’t enough time to come up with a good

story. Eventually, I paid Mike McClain, the maintenance man at school, to touch up the scratches, but I always knew the scratches beneath the surface.

Maybe my mishaps in motorized transportation were a resistance I had deep down. I moved back and forth on the Highway in an enclosed space, separating the wind, the weather, and the elements from myself. The windshield was a mere screen, like the screen I stared into at news stories and movies and commercials. Outside the windshield was real and imagined stories. I knew it was there, but it felt like it wasn't. This type of movement was just another way of being content inside.

SPECIAL HARVEST

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has counted nowhere near the expected numbers of returning salmon. The Kvichak has the lowest numbers of them all, and Dad, Cameron, and I were there less than a week before an Emergency Order period opened six fishing periods in only the Naknek Section of the District.

By the Fourth of July, the entire district is closed, and the Kvichak run isn't getting any better. The entire Naknek-Kvichak District will be shoved into the Naknek River Special Harvest Area for the first time since 1982. Fishing will happen inside the Y, inside the Naknek River. In the River, fishermen are allowed one half the gear, which means we are allowed 50 fathoms. Established sites are non-existent and, according to law, anyone can set a net anywhere, as long as it's the legal distance from the next site, but no site is official until the opening is official. Friends, relatives, community members, and strangers scramble to get a spot first.

Dad is on the beach when the special announcement for commercial fishermen in the Naknek-Kvichak District happens, and he jams a sign close to where he thinks the border would be. He doesn't know it's the first site in the Special Harvest Area. The next site down, he claims for Lynn, a friend who used to teach in Naknek, who's staying at the house right now, since she can't fish from her cabin. The positions of the signs, however, are binding in no way except common understanding among people. They have no legal status. Legal status of a site belongs to the first net in the water upon the opening.

Dinky is built like a crane and squawks like Batman's adversary, the Penguin. Like the Penguin, he's committed some crimes worthy of jail time, and a cigarette always dangles between his lips. Dinky isn't about to let us have the first site without a fight, and Fish & Game told Dad if this conflict isn't resolved, both he and Dinky will be fined, and neither of them is getting the site..

There are only moments before the opening as Dad and Cameron prepare. Skiffs line both sides of the river with nets ready to uncoil. Troopers are gathered on the beach around their white trucks. Locals lollygag and looky-loo. Choppers swoop from above and news reporters wait patiently with cameras. Driftboats in the channel wait for the opening as well, and crouched in a skiff behind one of them is Dinky in his aluminum skiff, ready to swoop like a bird of prey. Dad stands in the stern with the motor idling, and Cameron stands knee-deep in the water, holding the bow on the beach. Mom won't let Dad let me in the skiff, so I'm on the beach with her as she paces back and forth with worried moans.

Watches along the beach make beeping noises. It's time. Dad twists the throttle and the purple skiff forges toward the channel, one cork after another releasing into the water. Cameron jumps in and lifts Big Bertha, our biggest anchor of 60 pounds, ready to throw when the net stretches all the way out. Dinky revs his motor, beginning his own set from the opposite direction. Fathom after fathom shoots out, and his aluminum bow smashes into the side of the purple skiff. I clench my eyes. Mom cries out.

Dinky has wrapped his own net in his propellor, and Dad's skiff has continued unharmed, successfully setting fifty fathoms of net into the river — 25 for Dad's permit, and 25 for mine. Cameron tosses Big Bertha and with a quick splash of water. Big Bertha's flukes are in the floor of the river. The first site is ours.

But the excitement isn't over. 300 feet up the beach, a local brother and sister are trying the same thing on Lynn. They aren't quick enough, and they float away without a site.

“We shouldn't be fighting each other,” yells the sister. “We should be fighting them!”

She points to the troopers on the beach. Mom tells her she's wrong. Without the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, we don't have a fishery.

Dad and Cameron pull in more fish than anyone all summer, and Lynn comes in a far, far second. Drifters at the front line stop fish from collecting in any nets other than ours as they splash, charge, and barge each other to lay out a net in front of each other.

Governor Tony Knowles calls 1997 a disaster. 33.6 million salmon were expected to return to Bristol Bay. 19 million do, with 13 million caught, half of them in Egegik. All districts suffer. On the Naknek River, I drive back and forth on the beach with my fourwheeler and see most fishermen cooking their catch a couple filets over a bonfire.

No one can prove why numbers are so low, but everyone knows why the economy of the communities suffer. Dad says the low numbers are due to over-escapement of the parent year. He and the other veterans of fishing all say the same thing. I hear them talk about it for years. The headwaters are only so large, and too many fish would break a delicate balance. This would mean nature needs fishermen like fish need water.

I'm not so sure. I'd like to believe the fishing districts of Bristol Bay have harmonized people with the tide and life of the ocean. I would like to believe, by catching salmon, we do nature a favor by preventing too many of them from overflowing the headwaters.

It seems like every time people get involved, the natural cycles and processes suffer. Extra salmon in Bristol Bay weren't introduced by people. People have only removed some of them from their lifecycle. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has learned to sustain the salmon by restraining us. Is it really possible they can restrain us too much? No other resource in the world can be harvested at this rate and still renew itself the way the salmon do. They spawn and die, spawn and die, spawn and die, and spawn. Then I remember every salmon caught is one less for a seal, one less for a beluga whale, or one less for a brown bear to tear apart and leave its

carcass on land to fertilize the trees. One way or another, how much of a difference in numbers are to the credit of people?

ANGELS

I was a Bristol Bay Angel, purple and gold, expected to demonstrate Angel Power, Angel Pride, Go-Angels-Go attitude, and so on and so forth. Wrestling was in the fall, Basketball was in the winter, and Native Youth Olympics was in the spring. Volleyball was during the wrestling season, but no boy had ever joined. There was no way any of us were putting a pair of those shorts. No matter the sport, it was never competition with others to bring me to the games. Contributing factors were the raw appeal of a physical challenge and the fear of missing out, but mostly the chance to fly somewhere other than Naknek for the games and meets and tournaments.

Like any Naknek kid, I played basketball from the time I was in third grade in the youth program. I played because at the Bristol Bay Borough School, it was expected of me — even though I looked at the ball to dribble, my shot was atrocious, and drills were hard for me to remember. In other words, I sucked, everyone knew I sucked, and kids at school reminded me how much I sucked by saying things like, “You suck.” They weren’t making fun of me, because they weren’t having fun. They had anger in their eyes and hate in their hearts regarding my skills on the court.

“You fucking suck, Keith,” I heard often.

“You’re a piece-of-shit player, Keith,” I heard a few times.

“Why don’t you kill yourself, Keith?” This was only once.

Confident enough in my positive attributes and reasons to live, I went through the motions as expected. Basketball started in elementary school. Kids were split into teams to scrimmage on the weekends. One team grabbed blue mesh jerseys from a bag and the other team had the luxury of running up and down the court with nothing flapping in their faces.

“Stay between your man and the basket” was easy to follow, but I always hoped no one would pass me the ball. Mom and Dad told me to be more aggressive, but grabbing the ball meant scrutiny over what I did with it. I’d hear it at the lunch table during the week.

In middle school, I went on my first overnight trip to Dillingham. Nine kids at a time climbed into the nine-passenger Cherokees at King Air Field in Naknek, sputtered down the runway toward the Naknek River, and took off over the sprawling tundra, the loud hum of the engines in my ears the whole way before landing on the paved runway at Dillingham Airport.

We took a bus to the school, and slept on the floor of the Science room on the second level of the building. It was across a similar room, next to the elevator, and down the hall from the KDLG studio next to the bathroom. We rearranged desks to claim spaces for our sleeping bags. The better players fought over the spot behind the teacher’s desk. Pete Hill, our coach, slept by the door. Between three sports, I must have slept in that room dozens of times. Sometimes, if I’m sleeping on a floor, I almost expect Pete to start dictating pushups to silence troublemakers during the night.

I didn’t wrestle until ninth grade. The outfits were even more revealing than volleyball shorts, and rolling around in purple spandex with sweaty guys didn’t seem appealing. Doug and Eric Moorcroft were twins from a local family who lived in Naknek freshman year. They convinced me to join. It was another way to take trips out of Naknek.

Wrestling was tough. While the volleyball team practiced in the New Gym, an addition of the building in 1992, we were in the smaller and more rustic Old Gym, running laps, performing calisthenics, practicing drills, learning new moves, and sprinting across the gym, sprinting across the gym, and sprinting across the gym again. When we thought it was the last sprint, we’d have one more sprint. Back and forth across the mats we went, sucking wind, insides screaming. I’d

go home dizzy, famished, dehydrated, muscles full of acid, and collapse onto the couch for hours.

The junior class of all boys were on the team. They didn't make it any easier. They liked to throw basketballs at freshmen during our laps. They had a hobby of shoving us behind the mats when they were rolled against the wall. Their favorite game was holding us down and pounding our foreheads with their knuckles until we could name ten kinds of candy bars. When I could name them without pause, they started asking for car manufacturers or brands of spark plugs.

I tried to decide it was worth it at my first wrestling match. It was at home, and I stood inside the white circle in front of the bleachers in front of the community. Each pair of eyes in the audience belonged to a name I knew — and they all knew the name of this purple bull's-eye, exposing the size of the bulge or lack thereof in the crotch. My opponent's massive arms dangled low and he had the kind of hands meant for strangling whales to death to feed his village. With his foot on a strip of red tape and mine on the green, we shook hands, and I could feel his raw strength. At the whistle, everything I'd learned in practice blew clean out of my head. Single leg? Double leg? Sprawl? What was my coach shouting? What were they shouting in the bleachers?

My entire body tensed, like I was trying to summon an exoskeleton for protection, but the only armor between reality and me was a thin layer of purple spandex. With my arms and legs locked in a hold I couldn't name, there was nothing I could do but flop like a fish underneath a guy I couldn't name. Too soon I was underneath the weight his sweat, skin, spandex, and muscle until my back was held flat against the mat. After the whistle, I scurried to the locker room to not be seen.

I lost most matches, but practice pushed my physical limits, and I was curious to find out what they were. When the older guys gave me a hard time, it was just guys being guys. They were bullies but fun bullies, and they often offered their knowledge and guidance. Their smashing and squashing and knuckle taps on freshman foreheads were all about making us tougher. Whether or not it was an effective method, it was the intent. I hated it, but I understood it. When we took a trip somewhere, we were all in it together. Even in our small school, the wrestlers were a niche group. They were the tough guys, and I liked to think I was a tough guy.

It was during the final months of the schoolyear when it was time for Native Youth Olympics, the teenage version of the Arctic Winter Games or the World Indian Olympics. Although not a drop of Aleut blood flowed through my veins, and not a Y'upik bone held the structure of my scrawny body, I started in seventh grade, as soon as I could. The State Tournament was in Anchorage, and almost everyone on the team got to go.

The Kneel Jump began from knees on the floor and ended with feet planted as far as possible from where the knees had begun. In the Wrist Carry, it was usually a smaller person dangling from a pole by the wrist as two teammates carried it in laps around the gym. In the Stick Pull, two kids, usually heavysset, sat on a mat with their feet pressed against each other and played two-handed tug-of-war with the stick horizontal. Leg Wrestling, also mostly for heavier kids, started with the two of them on their backs. Then one kid brought the other to the mat with leg strength or pure weight. In the Scissor Broad Jump, jumpers made a fluid series of four leaps before landing with balance on the floor.

The other events involved a ball suspended by a length of twine. At the State Tournament, it was sealskin. Everywhere else we went, it was a wiffle ball dangling from a basketball hoop. The One-Hand Reach involved balancing the entire body on one hand while

reaching or the ball. In the Alaskan High Kick, kids took an awkward position with one foot on the floor, one foot in the opposite hand, and kicking with the other foot. The Two-Foot High Kick was a jump from both feet, kicking with them still together, and then finding balance again on both feet. For the One-Foot High Kick, the jump was from both feet, the kick was with one foot, which was the same foot on which the kicker had to land and maintain balance. This event was always the most exciting to watch when it was down to two or three kids, the others weeded out by a ball raising by the inch every round. When it was down to one, the audience watched running starts, flips in the air, and impeccable balance when returning to the floor.

Then there was the Seal Hop, which was always the final event at any tournament. The Seal Hop was my event. From a push-up position, we started facedown at one end of the gym. Then we hopped with flat backs and straight bellies on our knuckles and toes. It wasn't a race. It had nothing to do with getting their first. Whoever made it the farthest won. When we reached the other side of the gym, it was time to hop around in a circle and start our way back in the other direction.

The Seal Hop involved no specific skill or talent, but it took strength, endurance, and the raw ability to withstand pain. During practices after school, as everyone else leapt and jumped and pulled and tugged, I did as many pushups and situps as possible before falling on my face. Then I'd do it again. Once or twice, I'd give myself a trial hop as far as I could down the gym floor, burning core, burning triceps, burning chest, and bleeding knuckles, earning a ticket to Anchorage.

I claimed the Seal Hop in eighth grade, when I realized I was the only kid in school who could do it. We spent our nights at the Marriott and spent the days at the campus of University of Alaska in the gymnasium where the NYO events opened with traditional ceremonies of drums

and dancing and sealskin trampolines held by human hands. I was the only middle schooler from Bristol Bay Borough at the State Tournament, tagging along with highschoolers at Fifth Avenue and Dimond Center Mall where we watched *the Matrix* in the theater and killed aliens in the arcade.

When other vans full of Native Youth Olympians were near us at a stoplight, one van would begin rocking, the weight of a dozen kids shifting weight side to side. The other van would follow suit. After the dance at the end of the weekend, a fleet of vans rocked at intersecting roads throughout Anchorage. Some teams had driven from towns like Seward, Kenai, Homer, and Valdez. The rest of us were in rental vans and flew from faraway places off the road system, like Togiak, Koliganek, Kokhanok, and Naknek. Our vans rocked harder than the others, like waves in the channel of a river or middle of a large lake. We had our different homes and our different teenage experiences in our humble little towns and villages away from roads, but we'd all gathered together as one force returning to this annual event.

PREDATOR AND PREY

One theory suggests a one-direction migration of meat, like mammoth, moose, muskoxen, and caribou first brought predators across the Bering Land Bridge to Alaska. People and wolves both chased them down for sustenance, and when they migrated, so followed the predators. Another theory suggests there was a longtime, seasonal migration between the two continents — an ebb and flood of feet flowing back and forth across a narrowing isthmus. Either way, the Pacific and the Arctic climbed the Land Bridge until the ebb was never again low enough to cross one way or the other.

“Keith,” Dad says, pointing down the beach. “Look.”

The two of us have just finished setting the second net of our two lower sites, our sites closer to Naknek and Bristol Bay. I’ve hooked the outside buoy to the bow, and now we’re waiting for the tide to rise high enough to set our other two nets upriver. Where Dad is pointing is a lone caribou standing on a sandbar a few feet from shore. He’s far away, but I recognize the animal by the magnificent set of antlers branching over his head. The sandbar is not much bigger around than his body, but as the tide flows upward into the Kvichak, water ascends toward his hooves.

“I think those are wolves,” Dad says. “See them?”

I didn’t spot them right away, but he’s right. On shore are two figures, watching and waiting as the caribou’s sanctuary disappears. With every breath, every hunger pang, and every drop of drool from their jowls, the caribou is closer to making one of two choices — drown in the current, or be taken down for food.

“Wow,” I say. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a wolf before.”

Although I’ve never seen one, let alone a pair of them on the prowl, I have learned a little about wolves in school. Sometimes they act as scavengers, picking up scraps like the seagulls

swooping our net, but they always prefer their own kill. I've been eating caribou since I had my first set of teeth, and understand the taste for it. Mom tells me not to gnaw on the bones when I dig into them with my teeth, trying to savor every last strand. Sometimes I chew on a chunk of grizzle for the better part of a family dinner before I deem it safe to swallow, but I chew it until that happens. I depend on my canines.

Sometimes I go with Dad when he hunts caribou — by fourwheeler, by snowmachine, or by boat. Once we were on an overnight trip far up the Kvichak when the tide reached our feet snuggled in sleeping bags. We moved the tent and packed it wet in the morning. When a hunt is successful, Dad hangs the carcass from the ceiling in the garage, and skins and butchers it himself. Mom makes steaks and chops for dinner with a side of potatoes, pasta, or rice. Hydeless caribou hang in the garage, and Dad has to chase away our dogs who love to lick blood dripping down.

It's hard to think of any of the dogs we've had, Mosie, Auggie, Bonkers, Cooch, or Murphy, with their big brown eyes and floppy labrador ears, descended from wolves. It's much easier to think of ourselves as domesticated bipeds who chased prey to exhaustion and killed it with rocks and clubs. Wolves teach their pups how to stalk prey, and pounce with stiffened front legs to grab its throat by the teeth and collapse its windpipe. People use a boom-boom stick.

The first animal I killed was a willow ptarmigan with Dad's .22. I carried it back in the back compartment of my fourwheeler. We ate it for dinner. Once, I saw Murphy, take off after a caribou. He disappeared for an entire day, as he often does, but the only animals he ever brings home have already been killed. Our front yard is often littered with severed legs, antlers, and one time a frozen chicken still in its plastic wrap —which of course we ate. Even though Dad said I was a one helluva shot, I never got much into hunting. The instinct isn't in me, I guess.

Caribou, moose, salmon, and the occasional ptarmigan are standard protein at dinnertime, but chicken, turkey, and pork sometimes find a way onto our plates as well. When it's easier for wolves, they feed on carrion. When it's easier for people, we find food at Costco in Anchorage. The difference is when wolves choose the easier option, they clean the Earth of food already going to waste. When we choose the easier option, it is something already created by other people. Cattle are rallied into corals, roped, castrated, branded, and raised for the butchering. Chicken and turkey chicks are shoved onto a conveyor belt and raised in shoebox-sized coops. Pigs are slung slop until they are fat enough for slaughter. When people create the easier option, we create also a soft, sedentary, less-sustaining meat, and often make more waste than we can clean.

As these wolves wait on the beach, the fish splashing into our net are not domestic. They arrive from cold corners of the ocean, contributing only to a cycle created not by people. Wild salmon are an elite superfish with the strength and endurance to fight miles upriver through a gauntlet of predators after years surviving in the ocean. Still, the fish we catch in the present are future fillets and contents of cans on shelves in stores we'll never shop. The survivors die anyway, but their bodies would not risk going to waste.

Without us, no salmon would make it into a shopping cart, next to a bag of potatoes, package of pasta, or box of rice, wheeling its way through aisles of price tags. Without us, no salmon would make it across a conveyor belt behind a cash register, into a paper or plastic bag taken to a kitchen from which we would never eat. Without us, the salmon that have made it this far would likely arrive at the headwaters, spawn, die, become fertilizer for plants and food for scavengers.

But without the farmer in Idaho, we wouldn't have potatoes to eat with our caribou steaks. The wolves on the beach will never see a potato, nor will they need to see one. The codependency of people is why a man on his own is called a lone wolf. People delight in the exploits of wolves because we share similar motives. Wolves, however, learn and adapt without altering their environments. They kill without guns, spears, clubs, or rocks, and they eat without refrigeration, stoves, or microwave ovens. The wolves on the beach in the Last Frontier will never depend on wolves devouring livestock in the Gem State, summoning farmers from their houses, shotgun in hand.

As the water closes in on the caribou, the wolves take small steps backward, patient for him to choose death by collapsed windpipe over death by a windpipe full of water. Dad doesn't like it.

"Let go of the net," he says and starts the motor.

We charge toward the wolves, chasing them up the mud, behind the bank, into the brush. After there is no sign of them, the caribou waded to shore. He saunters down the beach, moving along with the visible vapor drifting against its surface. We head upriver to set our other two nets.

Of course having no sign of the wolves has nothing to do with whether or not they are present. Wolves have been nearby my entire life, and I had never seen one. Although we don't see it happen, our interference has probably only delayed the inevitable kill. They'll spring from their hind legs and their drooling jowls will clinch the caribou's windpipe. They will devour him alive. He will kick until they have devoured a carcass. They will have their fill and the scavengers will take care of the eyes and the remaining strands of meat. The tide will wash away the bones.

ESCAPE FROM ANIAK

On September 11th, Korean Air Flight 85 was about to land in Anchorage, and Dick Cheney and the Gang wanted the Air Force to blow it out of the sky. Mom and Dad were in Anchorage for doctor's appointments and grocery shopping, and Mom called the school to tell me they were about to be evacuated. The plane was diverted to Whitehorse, and one less load of passengers was unfortunate that day. No one was evacuated, but no one was allowed to fly for a couple days either. Mom and Dad couldn't come home, science camp on Lake Becharof was canceled, and the Air Force escorted private planes to the ground. Hunters and trappers had flown away from internet, TV, and radio, and had no idea the attacks on the World Trade Center had happened. I wondered if I'd have preferred to be on the tundra somewhere, unaware of the devastation, panic, and confusing aftermath.

I didn't need to go anywhere to feel the awkward combination of patriotism and fear spreading across the country. On TV, people were told to be afraid of terrorism, and to go shopping. Even in Naknek, flags flew from car antennas, and the talk of war was in the air. Then school was canceled for a day and a half when an envelope arrived with a trace of white powder. The studentry gathered into the auditorium and cheered at the announcement.

Commercial flight was never the same. TSA wanted shoes off, pockets empty, no knives, no sharp objects, and no liquids, gels, or pastes. They said to step through and put your hands up. Then Dick Cheney and the Gang said to go shopping as they sent troops into Iraq. They compiled a list of songs not to hear, shows not to watch, and movies not to see, including the upcoming *Spider-man*. They'd tell us who our heroes were, goddamnit, and it wasn't some teenager in tights.

I was in the midst of wrestling season, and kept my own tights in an underwear drawer, ready to be taken out when the time came for battle. Our regional wrestling tournament was in

November, in Aniak, a village to the north of us, on the Kuskokwim River, and the Yup'ik word for "the place where it comes out."

Despite all the recent commotion, getting there required no security protocol whatsoever. We threw our bags into the back of the plane, and we were allowed on board as long as we wore a coat, snowpants, boots, a hat, and a pair of gloves. Me, Riel, Kyle Peters, Kyle Anderson, Joyce Angasan, Caldon, Ronald, and Saeng-Kul Chu got on board with no problems. Most of us carried water bottles, and I had a knife in the left pocket of my snowpants. After an hour of earplugs drowning the engine noise, we landed on a gravel landing strip and stepped into a one-room terminal. A van picked us up and brought us to the school, where the parking lot was full of fourwheelers and snowmachines. There were no cars.

Food was waiting for us on a fold-out cafeteria table in the commons area. It was village food. Gatorade splashed into Dixie cups from plastic pitchers, and stacks of sandwiches were piled onto paper plates. Each sandwich was a slice of processed cheese, two slices of lunchmeat, and a half cup of mayonnaise oozing between the spongy white bread, soaking in the room temperature.

In Alaska, what was once a place of mass consumption of seal oil and whale blubber, this concoction in plastic jars assimilated as a condiment for pilot bread, fries, fish, and fingers fresh for the licking. I scraped as much of it off the bread as I could. I dumped mounds of it onto my paper plate, passing it to anyone at the table eager to take it. It churned in my stomach all night.

The first morning in Aniak, our team awoke on the linoleum floor of the Home Economics room in the satellite building across the parking lot. We scurried over to the gym for breakfast, frostbite chasing us the entire way. The chill factor outside was around 100 below zero, but the boxed milk in our Cheerios was as warm as the mayonnaise.

My tights were under my warmup pants and hoodie like everyone else. They were snug against the skin, so far unsalted by the sweat to profuse from pores in the following hours and days with no showers. Bob gave us a speech. Like Henry V or Winston Churchill, his words motivated us to move mountains. If we pushed to the best of our ability, gave it our all, and were willing to work, we could do anything. I didn't believe that. I figured there had to be limits to our physical potential, but I was sure I hadn't reached mine. I was sure almost no one ever did. I wasn't the best wrestler, because I lacked the killer instinct, but a thrill came from fighting to get free. I was like a salmon grilled by a web, kicking and thrashing and fighting for my life. I fought with the instinct to escape and continue with what I still had left to do with the rest of my life. It was a struggle

Nothing could calm my nerves before a match. The announcer would announce who was now wrestling, who was on deck, and who was in the hole. By the time I was announced as in the hole, I was already jumping side to side, dropping to push-ups, jumping back up to run in place, and doing everything to get fired up, and shake away the nerves. On the mat, I couldn't hear the crowd cheering while me and another kid rolled, sweat, grabbed, and took turns taking each other down against the mat. Then I pinned him. It was one of my few pins. Even when I won, it was usually with points. I soaked in sweat from the bleachers and watched my teammates take on similar feats.

On day two, our team was gathered around a TV in our room, watching *Saturday Night Live's Best of Adam Sandler* in a VCR. Then the building started shaking. It was footsteps. The Bethel Warriors raided our room, surrounding us. The Togiak Huskies followed after them. Then it was the Kotzebue Huskies. Soon, all kinds of husky kids, skinny kids, muscular kids, and odd-shaped kids were in our room. Smoke was rising from the roof of the gym across the parking

lot, in a dark, gray spiral. A fire had started in an air vent and everyone in the building was shooed out. It seemed the safety of our humble little abode across the parking lot was the place to go. Hundreds of teenage boys and a handful of teenage girls crammed between desks, into mini-kitchens, and against the walls. Shoulder to shoulder with the Bethel Warriors, I watched Adam Sandler sing “Lunch Lady Land” with Chris Farley.

I didn’t win another match, and welcomed the time to fly home. Once again dodging frostbite’s jaws, with bags in hand, we boarded the van to the airport. Scrambling out, we regrouped inside the terminal to wait. A salty crust stuck my skin to my clothes, and I assumed all of us experienced the same feeling. We lay scattered over the pile of duffel bags in the room not much larger than a jail cell, and we waited for our plane. Then a pudgy woman from behind the counter waddled over to us. Her breath was a spew of bad news and the smell of cigarettes.

“Are you the boys from Bristol Bay?”

Bob nodded. We stared, too.

“Your plane is broke. You guys can leave tomorrow, uh?”

The Alaskan *uh*, like the Canadian *eh*, suggested her statement was a question, but we had no choice. No one said anything back to her, but she stood still, waiting for a response.

“Okay” seemed to suffice.

She waddled her way back out into the wind and cold, a new cigarette already between her lips. The van once again brought us to the school, and we glumly found spots for our sleeping bags in a classroom down the hall from the commons area. This is when Bob and Bucko, the assistant coach, relayed what they had just been told by the principal. We weren’t going anywhere tomorrow. Aniak was expecting a blizzard for the next two days.

The next day was Monday, and we were awoken early to move into the library, as much out of the way as possible. Outside was white wind and nothing else, but the library also had wall-sized windows into the commons area. Before school, students peered in at us, tapping on the glass. None of us reacted. We just looked out at them, knowing that when class was in session, we had 50 minutes to roam the halls, living the secret lives of zoo animals.

In the afternoon, we shot hoops with local kids, and other teams stuck in Aniak. At night, we forced the latch of the kitchen door with a pocket knife to scavenge for food. We found Neapolitan ice cream, a jar of pickles, a jar of peanut butter, two loaves of white bread, and a big bowl of macaroni salad floating in mayonnaise. The sight and smell of it sent my stomach into a stir. That night in my sleeping bag, I held my stomach with my hands until I felt the need to fumble for my flashlight and stumble to the bathrooms. Nothing erupted but dry-heaves as I bent over the stains and streaks in the toilet bowl. I listened to the howling wind outside as I wandered back to the room in the dark.

We were on a plane on Tuesday, and I watched Aniak disappear beneath me, behind an oval of double-layered glass. I shoved in my earplugs, closed my eyes, and dreamed of a shower. I felt too hot wearing my snowpants in the fuselage, but I thought maybe new sweat would break away the old sweat, and I embraced it. Then a refreshing cool draft gently brushed the back of my neck. I turned around and the winter wind blasted me in the face.

Riel was in the back seat with his eyes wide open and his hands gripped tight around the door handle. Kyle Anderson was next to him laughing hysterically. The wind was gushing in from the open door, and I could see the endless miles of snow-covered tundra soaring beneath us without a shield of glass in front of it. The reality of being airborne, blazing through the sky, had never been as apparent as it was this moment. A window was a barrier between one reality and

another, but a thin one. It was like the fabric of a tent, or the screen between me and the towers exploding on the other side in New York City.

The pilot said the door wouldn't open any more, but Riel didn't take his word for it. His grip on the handle didn't loosen for the rest of the flight, the open space next to him exposing the open space all around us. Aniak was one small settlement in the middle of it all, and where we landed was just another one –but it was home. I drove to the house, let the shower burn away the stick and salt of five days, and I plummeted face-down onto my bed. Although it would always be there, only a small distance to the north, Aniak could continue to exist without me for the rest of my life.

School was out in an hour and Riel had convinced me going was pointless.

Then the phone rang, and I groaned and got up to answer it.

“You better get down here,” Mom said. “It's called skipping if you don't.”

I put on clothes, drove the three miles down the Alaska Peninsula Highway, and walked late into English class. I was just in time for an assignment to write another poem about September 11th.

THE HILL AND THE MUD

It's not the wind or the waves but the sound of the motor that wakes me. The tide is about to turn. It's time to check the nets. Starting the motor is Dad's way of letting me know. The skiff's wooden ribs are pressed against my own, but a raincoat, lifejacket, chest waders, sweatshirt, and long johns soften the pressure. My head is propped against the anchor and my boots are pressed against the bulkhead in the bow. Both legs are asleep, so I reach to the rim of the skiff and pull up my cold carcass. Dreaming, I don't notice the blood recruited away from fingers and toes to heart and lungs. Awake, I feel the numbness and the cold in my limbs. It's an involuntary function of my body to stay alive. I learned in school that if I can shut off the shivering, I'm fine. I can, but I don't want to, because it provides an illusion of warmth. I'm alive, and I can reach down to the buoy all right, but gripping the line to the net takes more precious bloodflow, and I make as many extra movements as I can.

The Naknek section is open, but the Kvichak Section is closed, which means we can't fish our own sites. Between the Nushagak River to the north, and the Egegik River to the south, Bristol Bay narrows into the Kvichak Bay, and the Kvichak Bay narrows into the Kvichak River. The Naknek Section is maybe a third of it. It stretches from the once-was cannery of Libbyville, north of the Naknek River, to Johnson Hill, south of the Naknek River. From Graveyard, Johnson Hill is a pimple on the planet's surface. North of the Naknek River, between the Y and Libbyville is a line of cabins along the bank, without a single open site. The stretch of beach by Johnson Hill has open space, where we are likely to find enough space to set nets the required 300 feet from the next ones. It's common practice to take a nap on the floor of the skiff when the fishing is slow, but at Johnson Hill, we don't have a camp. We lay out the nets and then stay all night.

25 fathoms into the pulling net, there have been six fish. I don't want to stop pulling to pick them. Pulling the net keeps me warm. The muscle contractions in my back and shoulders combined with the friction of the cork line against my gloves creates a minor amount of heat, and I hope it spreads through the rest of me. My legs have full feeling by the time there are nine fish, but I'm still shivering my the time we are through the first net.

When we get home after a measly delivery, there is a new announcement. The Kvichak Section is opening, so Dad and I head out right away. We take a full tote and full cooler of food, and haul it to Graveyard before going out to wait. When the time is right, we lay out the nets. Now there are fish. Here, there are fish. In the newly-opened Kvichak, our nets load up, and they keep loading up. In fact, after two deliveries, they keep loading up. Dad checks his watch. We're running out of time, and the tide is going out. We pick as fast as we can, roundhauling three of the nets, but there is still one net in the water, still full of fish when there are twenty minutes left of the opening.

"There's only one way out of this," he says.

He drives us to the outside end of the net, and I untie it from the buoy. I wrap the line around the rail, and we drag everything into the beach, fish still splashing, kicking in the mud. The net lays horizontal against the shoreline for a moment as the tide sinks. We anchor, wade into the beach, and start picking out the fish, placing them in piles. Fish and Game's chopper swoops over us, but our nets are all out of the water.

Dad is faster at picking, and I'm better at moving up and down the beach. He keeps picking, down on his hands and knees, mud splattering all over him, and I start carrying them down making sure to rinse the mud from each fish before throwing it in a brailer, just like Dad says to do. I slog down to the skiff, as many fish in my hand as possible. At first, I can carry five.

My index finger, my middle finger, and my ring finger of my left hand, each holds a fish by the gills, the tip of the finger spitting out the mouth. My right hand carries two fish, since I don't have a free hand to place them there. Sometimes the gills break, and I don't bother to pick them up. I keep going as my fingers burn, all the way down to the shoreline, splash their scales clean, and tossing them in the brailers.

The mud sticks to my boots, and my boots sink into the soft spots. Sometimes I'm not quick enough and I lose my boots. The more I follow my own footprints back and forth, the softer the spot gets, and I have to choose a new route down. My fingers soon lose ability to carry more than one fish in each hand, but I continue on as Dad pick, pick, and pick, piling more fish onto the mud. My legs lose ability to lift high enough as the hunger pangs taunt me more and more. We haven't eaten all day. We haven't slept either.

Our neighbor, Vince, sends his crewman, Pat, over to help us. Pat was in Luke's class. Dad asks if he's heard from him. Pat says he's doing well. Dad picks the last fish, and the three of us carry as many fish on our fingers as we can, down to the skiff, splash off the mud, and toss them in the brailer. Dad and I straighten our roundhailed nets, and pick the fish out them. Pat disappears, like another crewman on the wall. Six hours go by, and the tide comes back to our net. We pull it into the skiff, Dad starts the motor, we head to the tender, and make over a 20,000-pound day. Then there is an opening in six hours.

A ROAD OUT OF NAKNEK

Fishing gear was in the netlocker and senior year was about to start. Dad was spending most of each week in Iliamna, where he'd been hired on the crew to build a hospital. At the same time, he was finishing a spec house on Wolverine Drive, a gravel loop closer to King Salmon. In my basement bedroom, my mattress absorbed my body as I watched the world through the TV in front of me. Corn Nuts crunched between my teeth so I swished the Barq's Root Beer to wash them down my throat. Wrestling season was on its way, and I wanted to enjoy junk while I still could, but I'd overdone it. My gut jiggled when I poked it with my finger. Any time I bent forward or to the side, it folded and creased, pestering me with its existence. It was weight attached to me, holding me to the ground.

I'd been thinking about running off the weight holding me down, and now was a good enough good time. There was no wind, there were no mosquitoes, and the sky was clear and blue. With basketball shoes, sweatpants and a hoodie, I left my bedroom and walked out the basement door, up the stairs onto the wooden plank walkway next to the lawn. I stared down the gravel driveway, already breathing hard from the stairs. In each fist, I clutched the mass attached to my waist. I wanted to tear it off and throw it to the side, but it wouldn't happen as much as I tried. I'd have to outrun it. To the highway and back was one mile — down the hill a quarter mile, up the other hill another quarter mile, turn around, run downhill, and run uphill again. I did it when I was in third grade, so hell, I could still do it.

One small stride at a time, the gravel crunched beneath the rubber of my long-dormant basketball shoes. By the time I reached the end of the driveway, I was panting and swearing. The left side of my digestive tract burned, the nerves in my legs shocked my brain, and my lungs stretched inside my chest, but I didn't stop. My shoes shuffled in the gravel toward the bottom of the hill. I didn't stop there either. No stopping was allowed until I got to the stop sign, where

the gravel met the road. Then I could catch my breath, let my legs cool, extinguish the burning in my side, and see if any fat was burned away.

When I turned toward the highway, my lungs sucked wind like turbines. The stop sign didn't seem to get any closer, but I wouldn't stop to rest until it did. Then four gasps per shuffle forward, I struggled my way up the hill. My strides were short and my chest stung as my lungs pushed to capacity. Then, in big white letters in a red octagon, I read my message. I was happy to comply. I planted my shoes with my hands on my knees, breathing out and breathing in, waiting for my breath not to be so labored.

When I moved my hands to my midsection, no blubbery baggage had budged. I don't know what I was expecting other than having to carry the package of sludge back to the house with me, back to the basement, back to my bedroom, back to probably gobble down another candy bar and forget this dumb idea. Wrestling in the next weight class wouldn't be so bad. I wasn't even fat. I was just a little heavier than usual.

On the first day of school, my class sat in the back of the auditorium while Miss Dahl, our current principal, introduced my class as the new seniors. Then our traveling superintendent from California spoke in a monotone voice about a school he cared less about than we did. Some teachers talked, too. They all had similar things to say. The clock was ticking toward college and career choices, but first we had to go through the motions — homework, sports, teenage drama, and tests.

Then Mr. Krepel, our science teacher and longtime friend of my family, announced he was sponsoring a running club. Anyone interested could show up after school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The studentry was silent, more silent than it was during Superintendent Hephardt's speech, but my interest was held. I'd be there for sure. I'd run if someone else made

me run. Thrice-weekly outings would start right after Mr. Krepl got back from the Spirit of Becharof Science Camp, and I'd get down to the 152-pound weight class..

I was at Becharof with him. Last September's flight ban had snuffed science camp, but this year I was there, my first get-out-of-school-and-get-out-of-Naknek ploy of the year. I answered a questionnaire explaining how much I loved math and science classes with my real reasons for hating them. There was one absolute answer to seek rather than using creativity. Me, Shoosh, Kara Schoneman, and some juniors splashed onto Lake Becharof in a floatplane with Mr. Krepel. Kids from other schools met us there to learn about weather, birds, bears, fish, and the pH balances of ponds.

After almost 18 years in Alaska, I learned bears were attracted to insect repellent. I thought this group of environmental conservation-minded adults was trying to scare us from using harmful chemicals. Then one of our scientist-chaperones sprayed it on a stick and threw it to a bear sauntering by the main quarters. He rolled back and forth over it the way a dog would roll over a rotting squirrel.

Dad had told me a million times that you didn't need to run faster than a bear. You just needed to run faster than someone else. I thought about whatever bears were still wandering around Naknek when Mr. Krepel and Mo started a small group of kids on our first run where I learned a mile was not the pinnacle of human endurance. From the school, to the neighborhood where the Jesus people lived, and back to the school was four miles.

"Can humans really run that far?" I asked.

Mr. Krepel must have thought I was an idiot. Single file, on the gravel of the Alaska Peninsula Highway's left shoulder, we ran to Jesus and back. At a relaxed pace, my basketball

shoes covered more distance than they had ever covered collectively. Then I came home to the smell of chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven.

“Who wants a cookie?” Mom called as I opened the door.

I didn’t respond but she repeated.

“I said who wants a cookie?”

“No thanks,” I said.

She was confused.

“I guess I should get started on dinner. How do BLTs sound?”

As she started frying bacon, I asked if I could put turkey on my sandwich instead. My diet wouldn’t be perfect, and I had much to learn, but I wanted to make the best decisions I could with the options I had. I always ate what Mom made for dinner, but took small portions of pasta and cheesy casseroles, and pulled the skin off of deep-fried fish. I took second helpings of brussels sprouts, salads, and steamed broccoli. I already had no problem leaving mayonnaise of a sandwich.

In three weeks I ran nine times, didn’t touch a candy bar, a soda, a chip, or a Corn Nut. My mouth and my gut and my brain demanded them, cried for them, screamed for them, but all I had to do was not go to the pantry, not open a wrapper, not put the junk in my mouth, not chew, not swallow, and not feed the blubbery parasite possessing my mouth, gut, and brain. It was so easy, yet so difficult at the same time. I lost ten pounds. I walked upstairs every day to Mom and Dad’s bathroom and checked with the scale until Mom insisted I just take it to my room.

When wrestling season started, I still had three more pounds to go. Under my sweatpants and hoody were long johns and a long-sleeved T-shirt — layer of cotton on top of layer of cotton. Bob had me, Riel, and Shoosh lead calisthenics after laps. Then he dictated our drills,

sprawls, and sprints as sweat soaked the cotton until the top layer tasted of salt. After practice, I was four pounds lighter, and when I was finished drinking water, I was four pounds heavier again. I kept at it anyway, because the number on the scale moved a fraction of a notch every day until I made it to 152 pounds.

Our first tournament of the year was in Seward, a town on the Kenai Peninsula, but there was room for just one person from each weight class. Zach Klein and I had to wrestle for the spot. The team was instructed to stay silent during our match — no cheering, no encouraging, and no advising. I could hear them breathing. Zach was two years younger, and I was in the best shape of my life, but I was still not a great wrestler. We went for three rounds and I lost by points.

Losing to an underclassman didn't bother me. Having to wrestle at the 160-pound weight class bothered me. I didn't even hesitate to tell Bob I could go to 145, and it wasn't hard to convince him. Bob was one of those coaches who believed anything is possible if you set your mind to it, if you give it your all your dreams will come true, and all it took was some hard work one day at a time. I'd already signed a waiver about my lowest possible weight, but all it took was another physical examination at Camai Clinic to sign another one.

I got the physical, signed the waiver, and started running on weekends. I ran over the driveway, down the hill, up the other hill, and beyond the stop sign. I ran toward King Salmon, because on a clear enough day, I could see the mountains in the distance beyond the airport and beyond the spawning grounds. On most days, it was overcast. On plenty of days, it rained or the wind nearly knocked me over. Three days after my 18th birthday, we moved to the house on Wolverine Drive, and five miles closer to King Salmon. Sometimes I ran all the way there, but as far as I went, I still had to turn around and go home.

I wrestled in the 145-pound weight class in Seward, Dillingham, Bethel, New Halen, and even Anchorage, all before the 2003 Regional Tournament on the floor of the Bristol Bay School's gym, at home in Naknek. On Friday, I won my first match and lost my second. There was nothing to worry about yet. Anything was possible and my dreams would come true if I set my mind to it and gave it my all. All it took was some hard work one day at a time and other inspirational. On Saturday, I lost two matches, didn't qualify for State, and I retreated to the locker room to hide in a stall and cry.

When I emerged to watch the rest of the matches, Mom sat next to me in the bleachers. "This is the best shape you'll be in your life," she said. "Enjoy it. It's all downhill from here."

I thought about that for a long time. I thought about it the rest of the tournament and all the way home. I never stopped thinking about it.

"Maybe this will make you feel better," she said at the house. She had made some kind of chocolate-covered cookie bars. I picked one off the tray and glared at it. It had been four months since I'd eaten anything like it. Anything like it had been burned away in the laps and miles and sweat and struggle. I shrugged and bit into it. I ate the whole thing. The sweetness wasn't unpleasant but foreign, and I felt my inner blob of sludge awaken and feed, asking for more. The sugar and the lard were feeding a dormant parasite waiting to grow, waiting to hold me down, keeping me from hard work one day at a time for my dreams to come true, which were possible if I gave it my all and put my mind to it, and all of that stuff I didn't know what to make sense of anymore.

When I woke up in the morning, I stayed facedown on my pillow, absorbed into the mattress, now in a different room in a different house, eight miles from Fisherman's Bar and eight miles from King Salmon Airport. There was no reason to run, but the thought of striding

forward one leg at a time, the rhythm of my feet, the perspiration, the accelerated breathing, and the drive forward, brought me out of bed.

I ate some cereal, put on my torn and tattered sweatshirt and sweatpants, washed and intended only for fishing from then on, and stepped outside onto the gravel with the same pair of basketball shoes. Each shoe fell into the grasp of gravity for just an instant before propelling up, up, and away one more time and falling into gravity again. As my shoes traveled the miles alongside the Alaska Peninsula Highway, my consciousness surged thousands of miles through synapses and limbs. Time between instants disappeared as thoughts branched outside my vessel of bone and muscle. It expanded outside instants of force from the ground in Naknek.

From the shoulder of the Alaska Peninsula Highway, I looked to the mountains reaching to the ocean, scraping the sky. My thoughts were out there. The time between foot strikes, the time between heartbeats, and the time between breaths merged. The rhythm of my shoes was part of the harmonic chaos of the cosmos. It was stillness within movement. The distance didn't matter because distance was infinite, and Naknek disappeared. I had arrived at the airport in King Salmon. I was at the end of the road. The mountains and ocean remained in the distance. I turned around and headed a back toward Naknek.

Every day after school, I fueled up with a snack and hit the road one foot at a time. On the weekends, I'd run after digesting breakfast. I wasn't burning away a parasitic fat-monster anymore. I was burning away stress, teenage hormones, frustrations, and the ground holding me. I was looking forward to graduating high school, taking our class trip to Puerto Vallarta, and attending Northern Michigan University. After the upcoming fishing season, I'd arrive at the King Salmon Airport, board a plane, and fly up, up, and away.

Every time I ran, I picked up another piece of myself along the way. It wasn't a search. The pieces happened to be there and they fit together as I gathered them, like Dad building a house or Mom teaching a child with special needs to be successful. Running is how I found myself. It's where I had been all along. I'm still out there, moving in the one direction or another, like the rhythm of the tide, or the lifecycle of a salmon, moving forward on a road out of Naknek, but always turning around somewhere up the road and heading right back.

SIX HOURS

My only source of light is the beam from a headlamp strapped to my forehead, illuminating mist in the air, pouring rain, and the waves splashing against the bow where I stand. The rain stings my face like a shards of glass, and the splashes cool the pain. We just finished delivering a boatload of fish to the tender and we're coming back for more. I look back at Dad in the stern, helming the motor. Water splashes against the small part of his face not concealed with the hood of his raincoat cinched tight.

Stumbling up to the bow with my boat hook, the pounding from the waves shoots through my legs. The humming of the motor quiets as we approaches the wobbling, blinking white light attached to the buoy. Something is wrong. I can't see the line of white corks usually sprawled horizontally across twenty-five fathoms of water.

"Holy shit," I whisper. It's under the water, and I scoop for it once, twice, and again before hooking it. The tide is moving like a stampede, and my sockets need to hold together as it yanks my chest against the bow.

I pull to the first cork. I barely lift the net out of the water when I see what I see. So far, this season, we have been catching may twenty fish in an entire net. There are about twenty fish right here in the first half fathom, splashing me in the face.

Dad runs up and joins me. He holds the corks and I work my hands down to the lead line. His grip slips and he swears. I pull harder. He pulls harder. The square hooks dig into my calluses. After a one-two-three- oomph and another one-two-three -oomph, we manage to get the net over the plastic slides on the sides of the bow.

With our feet against the splintering side of the skiff for leverage, we pull along the lines. Fish pour in and bury our ankles. They slide down our legs, thumping against the bottom of the skiff as they kick and jump like they have a chance of escape. There is no escape from this operation. We squeeze our fingers into the square hooks, pull away the gills, and toss them into brailers. So far, we've needed one, or maybe two of them. Now fish overflow all four of them. That was one net.

Exhausted, the two of us lean against the sides of the skiff and look at the fish flooding it, sinking the bow. We throw fish in the stern for balance, and Dad starts the motor again.

No more than two inches of purple rock above the surface of the water as we putt to the tender. After the crane had pulls up the bags and dumps the fish into the awaiting tank, Dad collects the ticket, they throw the bloody, slimy bags back to me, I hook them over a pipe to rinse them. The tide moves so fast, it takes a matter of seconds in the waves and current to rinse the blood and gurru out of them. This time, I don't fold them. I tie them up again right away.

When Dad hops back into the skiff, I look at him waiting for the number.. It's over four thousand pounds, as I guessed. Then he pulls back the sleeve of his raincoat and his sweatshirt underneath to look at his watch. I know what this means. He's worrying about the closure.

“Untie us! Let's go!”

He starts the motor and we race back to the nets. There is still net we haven't picked yet, and the net we have picked has duplicated. Dad stops the motor as I grab the net. It's plugged. Fins, tails, and heads protrude from the water, still splashing, the net still catching more. I've never seen so many fish in one net. Each of their wide, unblinking eyes taunt me. It was not time for celebration. Dad turns to me with fear in his eyes and fish slime dripping from his mustache. He says two words.

“We’re fucked.”

He’s right. We have one hour left until closing time with these two loaded nets still in the water. They keep splashing. Fish keep coming. We begin picking the net. Each pull into the skiff takes all our strength, and each pull takes more than one try. The skiff leans to the side as we resort to picking them from the net still outside the skiff. We do not pull by the fathom. We pull by the inch. Dad looks at his watch one last time. He looks out to the net in the water, pauses, And looks at his watch again. He sighs.

“Round haul.”

It isn’t real roundhauling, where we pull the net into the skiff, fish and all. We have to pick out enough fish just to be able to lift the net. Only when we get enough of them out of the net and into the brailers can we continue roundhauling, piling net on top of net with fish still in it. I stand to my hips in fish and tangled net. Most of them are dead, but still limp, cold against my legs even through my chest waders. Dad looks at his watch again and says nothing.

“How much time do we have?”

At first he says nothing. Then he says what he’s never wanted to say — what we’ve always gone to great lengths to avoid.

“We were supposed to be out five minutes ago.”

We keep pulling. It’s all we can do. Then Dad stops.

“Let’s at least turn the lights off so it’s harder for Fish and Game to see us.”

Then it is dark and only dark. It is black and only black other than mere outlines of the objects surrounding us. Fish by fish, and fathom by fathom, we finish without the aid of light. Sweating, grunting, and looking over our shoulder, even into the darkness, we get every fish and every inch of net into the skiff. We aren’t pinched, but we do sit dangerously low in the water.

We tie up to the tender and pick the fish out and organized the net until dawn. Under an orange glow of morning and the cool sweat saturating our clothes, we deliver over 6,000 more pounds of fish, putting the total for the day over 11,000 pounds.

There is a story about a woman who, in the dark of night, whispered magic words into the water to conjure salmon. She caught more salmon than she had ever seen, but wanted them all for herself. While her family slept, she cooked them and ate them one by one as the daylight approached. Her son, however, awoke early and caught his mother shoveling salmon flesh between her teeth. He ran to tell his father, and his father told the shaman. The shaman, who believed no kind of animal was more despicable than the fowl, transformed her into an owl. The woman, however, loved her new form, as she could fly from tree to tree, swooping down at will to scoop up whatever appealed to her.

