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**Flight of the Ouzel**

by

Colin Backlund Chisholm

B.A. The Colorado College, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of


Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1995

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## Prologue

I began writing this collection less than two years ago, inspired by the writing of Leslie Ryan and the words of Bill Kittredge. From Leslie I learned the value of taking risks, of looking inward for answers while applying the lessons to the outside world; Bill showed me form, structure, the simplicity of "just saying it." In a highlighter pen and big boldfaced letters, he wrote BULLSHIT in my margins when I was getting too abstract or melodramatic. Somehow, I learned to take it as a compliment.

Under the influence of Bill and Leslie I began my first of a series of essays about my mother's Yu'pik Eskimo background, "Through Yu'pik Eyes," which I see now was really an outline for what really needed to be either a book or a collection of essays. This collection is neither, but rather a collection of essays loosely connected by a few things:

At least half of these essays focus directly on my parents, Doris and John Chisholm, both of whom have had a tremendous impact on my life and my writing. Lucky for me they both lived lives worth writing about.

All but one of the essays is grounded, at one time or another, in, my hometown. This might lead me to call them by the overused nomenclature, Essays of Place. In fact they are all rooted in Squaw Valley, but via the personalities of my mother and father, as well as many other characters who have played roles in my life.

From the canyons and mountains of Squaw Valley the essays all inherit a wilderness ethic, or at least I hope so. Without conking the reader over the head, I do hope the essays are connected by a strong environmental ethic, one

that takes seriously the value of non-human animals. Four of the essays are stories of animals and their ability to help humans see beyond their humanity.

All of the essays are intended to be stories which might have bubbled out of the bathtub, as in "Eyes from the Bush," in which my father tells stories of the saber-toothed tiger while bathing with his sons. Many of the essays employ a child's perspective, viewing the natural world through a child's eyes; which is to say seeing the world as magic.

Finally, each and every story is about risk - emotional, natural, physical. From the physical risks a child faces during a snowstorm, to the emotional risks a boy takes when he tries to hug his mourning father. The risks of lightning and the risks of rootlessness. The risks of lions and the risks of letting a loved one go. The risk of losing wilderness versus the risk and hopelessness of trying to save it.

There is no linear order to these essays; one might read them in any order. But hopefully the unifying themes lend a sense of order to the collection.

## Into the Fish's Mouth

"Do you know who your parents are?"

-Oedipus Rex

I recently read about a fish that reminds me of my mother, and the kind of family that she concocted. I use the word "concocted" quite literally - that is, "to prepare by combining crude materials."

The fish about which I speak is the Mouthbrooding Cichlid fish of East Africa. Like my mother did, it employs a unique method of child-rearing. The female Mouthbrooder takes the eggs into her mouth during spawning and guards them there without interruption for ten incubation days, at which time a brooding territory is established and the now-swimming young are released from her mouth. The mother guards them for another week, and when the young are in danger she again takes them into her mouth.

Even more relevant to my mother's story, a new study has shown that adoption takes place between Mouthbrooders. Scientists separated a brood from its mother and placed it in the brooding territory of another female Mouthbrooder, and in almost all cases the test brood was adopted (i.e. taken into the adoptive fish's mouth). The

study concludes "that the decision whether to adopt or to reject a foreign brood does not depend on the brood's characteristics."<sup>1</sup>

My childhood house in Squaw Valley was a kind of brooding territory, where our Mouthbrooding mother was exceptionally free with her open mouth; our family of seven was made up of eight completely different genetic backgrounds, four breeding pairs, and fifteen or twenty mixed ethnic origins. Among the five of us kids and our two parents we seemed to have an endless number of stories to share, combine, and recreate.

One of my earliest stories, which my mother, to my chagrin, loved to tell guests as we sat around our giant octagonal dining room table, was the story of my brother's adoption:

When I was almost a year old my little brother, Brad, came into the world. My mother drove over the mountains through a snowstorm, five hours from Squaw Valley to San Francisco, to get him. He was a pea of a child, just over five pounds with a little tuft of carrot-colored hair sprouting from his crown. I have no memory of any reaction to my new brother, but I remember the story my mother used to tell.

On the way home my mother stopped for groceries at Ikeda's, a fruit stand and health food store in Auburn, on the western slope of Donner Summit. She came out with a bottle for Brad and a paper cup with a straw for me. In the cup was carrot juice. I had never seen a straw before, but I was beginning to learn to drink from a cup; I had seen how it was done. I looked at the straw quizzically, and my mom, understanding my confusion, demonstrated by putting the straw in her mouth and taking a sip. I smiled in understanding, grabbed the cup, put my lips over the straw, and in one fluid movement arced the cup over my head in order to drain the juice through the straw and down my throat. The cup had no lid on it.



My mother always laughed herself to tears as she described the look on my face as I sat there dripping carrot shreds. My eyes were big and round in surprise, my mouth open in startled confusion. We made it home with no further mishaps, but ever since the day we brought my brother home I've hated carrot juice and I'm not partial to straws.

What strikes me in remembering my mother tell this and other stories is not so much the story itself, but how she told them, and even more importantly, why. My mother had five children, three of whom were adopted. But her stories never focused on the technicalities of the adoptions, and she never discussed the politics or social implications of adoption; to her adoption was simply another way of having children. *Therefore she told our adoptive stories in exactly the same manner she told her stories of childbirth:* she didn't speak of the birth itself, but of the beauty and humor of the resulting child. Her stories were meant, I think, to teach her children how beautifully different they all were, and how we could laugh at our origins. The beauty of her children; this was everything to her.

For my own part, being adopted became a kind of entertainment more than anything else. The seven of us laughed about each other's stories while sitting around the table my parents had ordered, specially built for a family of seven and one guest. I remember wondering if that one extra place at the table was made just in case my mother happened to find another child looking for a home.

In reality the adoptions seem as natural as if she had born us, and that is what this story is about. My mother's inclination towards adoption came naturally, as if that was how it was supposed to be done, no question about it. Her own upbringing prepared her, in no uncertain terms, for a life of bringing people in.

\* \* \* \*

My mother was half Yup'ik Eskimo, born in 1929 in a little fishing village named Kotlik, which is spliced by a tiny slough arm of the Yukon River as it drains into the Norton Sound on the Bering Sea. My mother's mother was Yup'ik, and her father a Finnish trader who owned the trading post in the village. How they met is a mystery to me, but he was forty years her senior and took care of her entire family in hard times. I can only guess that it was a relationship based on necessity.

For the Yup'ik, adoption was common, something that occurred naturally and necessarily living in the harsh conditions of the Alaskan bush. People often died young, leaving their children to be raised by family, friends, or in many cases, even strangers in distant Yup'ik villages.

In Yup'ik lore there are stories of Yup'ik children lost in the wilds and saved by animals. In one of these stories, a young girl is lost out on the ice while playing hide-and-seek with her brothers. She is near death when a great bear finds her and takes her home where he raises her as his own. Then one day he marries her, and they have children, half human, half bear. Years later the brothers kill the bear and take their sister and her cubs back to the village, where she is welcomed by all. But eventually she begins again to transform into a bear, and fearing she will harm her family, she takes her children and returns to the wild. I like to think the story implies a certain power of adoption, of nurture over nature, a belief that our stories define us even more than our genes. Adopted by the bear, Bear Woman becomes a bear; there is no going back.

When my grandmother, Dora, died of tuberculosis, my mother was raised by her aunt Justina, Dora's sister. My mother's journal speaks of the village as a family, a unit that took her in and made her a child of everyone. She was never given the chance to feel like an orphan, because, in fact, for the Yup'ik there was no such thing. Her father, my grandfather the Fin, supported her financially, but his presence seems

to have been limited. In any case, he died not long after Dora, soon after he sent my mother and her brother, Carl, to "the lower forty-eight" to get an education. With his death, my mother was cut off from Alaska, and her Yup'ik family, for the rest of her life.

She was adopted, once again, by Swedish friends of her father's, who lived on a small island near Seattle. Adoption, at the time, was not a mainstream American institution. It was often a financial arrangement, in which the family received money for caretaking a child. This was the case with my mother: her father had left her a relatively large sum of money from the sale of the trading post, and a share of this money was delivered to my mother's adoptive family, the Agrens, to pay for the cost of raising her.

But with the Agrens it was more than financial; at the core of her adoption was the family's desire to take her in as one of them, similar to the Yu'piks, though definitely more self-conscious; adoption didn't come as naturally to them. They were in a conservative community that noticed my mother's high, dark cheekbones, her dark hair and eyes; it wasn't as if she blended well. But whether it was their connection to her father, or simply an openness of mind, the Agrens raised my mother to believe she was an Agren. In the short term this allowed my mother to be accepted in a foreign place; in the long term it separated her from her beginnings.

When my mother moved to Seattle she was old enough to never forget her childhood in Alaska. But her emotional survival must have depended on a certain degree of numbness. She became intensely aware of her dark skin and she tried to hide everything that was Eskimo about her. Her mother's picture vanished, her beaded skin slippers, chewed soft by her grandmother's worn yellow teeth, lay hidden in the back of the closet; her favorite rag doll with black eyes and hair from an Alaskan bear "disappeared." She soon blended into the community and the memory of her old life faded away. She did well in school, grew into a beautiful all-American girl, went to

college, became a nurse, and married at twenty-seven. Her name, Inaqaq, disappeared with her past into the shadows of her Alaskan landscape.

When I was growing up the Agrens naturally became my family, though its odd to think of all of us gathered at the old house on Vashon Island, three generations of five completely different genetic backgrounds, all calling ourselves one family. Pop Agren was my grandfather, a quiet old Swede with a love for sweets and a sparkling eye when he looked at my mother. I have no doubt he loved her as one of his own. Nanna Agren, my grandmother, treated my mother as if she were still the shy Yup'ik child just arriving on Vashon, telling her to sit as she pushed plates of homemade raspberry pies in front of her. Nanna died when I was seven or eight, and I was terribly grieved. Genetic or not, I knew I had lost my grandmother. It was my first experience with mourning, which knows nothing about DNA.

\*                     \*                     \*                     \*

Natural adoption of black bear, grizzly bear, and polar bear cubs in the wild has been reported by a number of studies. These studies indicate that though it is rare, given the opportunity bears are likely to adopt an abandoned cub. One study found the following: "Twenty-four orphaned black bear cubs were placed in or near the entrance of natal dens. Twenty-two(92%) were adopted and observed with their foster mother a minimum of ten days later. Orphans often vocalized(cried) at the time of introduction. Adult females usually responded within a few seconds by giving a series of grunts, approaching the cub, smelling it, then picking it up in the mouth and carrying it into the den, and depositing it in a natal nest with their own cubs."<sup>2</sup>

The bear was an important mythical and real figure in the lives of the Yup'ik; they came to know the bear as kin. Just as the story of Bear Woman demonstrates the intimacy of this relationship, so does the hunting of bears. In Kotlik, where my

mother was born, the Yup'ik used the bear for many things: food, clothing, shelter, and most importantly, spiritual ceremony. The teeth of the bear were used to create powerful fetishes. In my mother's journal, written in the year before she died, she wrote of her favorite doll, with hair from an Alaskan brown bear. "I missed my family, and I'd sit for hours stroking Waka's(the doll's) head, the bear fur soft on my fingers. But eventually I began to forget(I was so young), and Waka disappeared."

I wonder if the Eskimos knew the bears well enough to know that they adopted; I wonder who learned from whom.

\* \* \* \*

The Agrens were a family of seven, including my mother. Because of this, I think, my mother always wanted to have many children. And she was incredibly tenacious. After marrying my father she gave birth to my two oldest sisters, Michelle and Heidi, but a couple of years later she was diagnosed with a tumor and had a hysterectomy. Her dream of five kids seemed over, until she came to the natural conclusion of her upbringing: adoption.

Four years later she adopted my sister, Heather, who came into the world screeching like a bluejay, my mother was told. Light-skinned and blond, she must not have looked like my mother's child, and I wonder if it was strange to view Heather as her own, much as I wonder how it would be for me, a white person, to raise a black child. But of course Heather didn't notice, and neither did Heidi nor Michelle, so with no morning sickness, no swelling, no painful contractions, her family became one bigger. My mother used to laugh when people asked her if she had missed giving birth to us.

"You must be crazy," she'd joke, "it's the best way to go! You can wake up and say, 'I think I'll have a baby today!'"

However much it was a joke, there was some truth to that statement. As my father tells it, that's pretty much how I came into their lives.

"I was in Washington D.C. on business," he'd say, "doing one thing or another, and I call home to check in with your mother. She says to me, 'John, how would you like to have a son?' I didn't quite know how to respond to that, but that's okay because she beats me to it with 'You're now the father of an eleven pound baby boy!' Just about knocked me off my feet. All I could think to say was 'I'll be home as soon as I can.' I wanted to get home before she rushed out and got another one!"

Brad rounded out my mom's magic number five, on that fateful carrot-spewing winter day in 1968. I shudder to think what it must have been like for my parents to raise three babies, each within a year of the next, plus two young girls. Not to mention the three cats, our dog Flossy, and Heidi's pony, Princess, as well as the entourage of friends who wanted to ride her. I look at an old black and white photograph of us three youngest with my parents: Heather is giving her camera smile that hasn't changed in the last quarter century, Brad's lips are puckered with concern and constipation, and I am looking up at my dad who is looking at my mom, whose smile threatens to swallow us all; her teeth seem huge and alive. This is how I want to remember her, glowing with children, her's, someone else's, any that would come. Her maternal energy injected our house with warmth, and people and animals of all sorts came and went through our door.

One of these people was a man named Ed, one of the oldest of my mother's adult adoptees. He was a small, wiry Irishman who loved to speedskate. Everyday he'd skate at the rink, doing lap after lap of graceful, long strides, his hands tucked behind him, his body low and angled forward like an arrow. The rumor among the kids was that he had been an Olympic speed skater. He must have been at least sixty then, his hair was silver and his face deeply carved with wrinkles. That's all he did, as far as I knew, he

skated. My mother said he was lonely and she invited him over for Thanksgiving, the first of many he would spend with us.

As the years went on we learned Ed's story, one that seemed full of despair to a boy who knew nothing of the world. Ed had children only a few of hours away, in Stockton, but they never came up to see him and he rarely went down there. Apparently there was bad blood between him and his kids, though I never knew why. His wife had died a few years before. During holidays he was depressed, and when he came over I could always smell the whiskey on his breath. But the moment he came in he cheered up and my mother would welcome him with open arms, as if he were one of the family.

I, on the other hand, didn't trust Ed. He smelled bad and little yellow flakes fell from his head. He drank too much and told dirty jokes when my parents weren't around. One Christmas I asked my mom why we couldn't have just the family home for Christmas. She looked at me, surprised, and said, "But Colin, all of these people are family, in one way or another."

But a few years later Ed did what, for my mother, was unpardonable. He had a mangy little mutt that he'd gotten from the pound to keep him company, though he hardly paid attention to the poor thing. He never walked it and never let it outside except to shit, and my mom did him the favor of walking it from time to time. Then one weekend, unexpectedly, Ed moved away. When my mom hadn't heard from him for a while she went over to check on him, and in the vacant house she found the starving dog lying in its own feces. She took the dog to the pound, then came home, crying. Ed never again came for Thanksgiving dinner, though he did move back to town. I never knew if he had asked and she had refused him. If so, I think it must have been the first time she ever refused someone in need.

Though my dad joked about his powerlessness in our adoption, he was my mother's compatriot in inviting strangers home to stay with us, and I have vivid

memories of many of the bedraggled vagabonds that he picked up out on the highway. It would terrify all of us, including my mother, who was vehemently against hitchhiking ever since a friend of hers was murdered while hitchhiking in Hawaii.

One rainy night my parents and we three youngest kids were driving home from Reno when a bearded man wearing an army coat appeared out of the drizzle as we sped by. Before we had time to protest my dad was swerving our orange VW van off the road, then backing down the highway towards the man. My mom's jaw was rigid, and she stared at my father with hard eyes. But we didn't have time to argue.

I piled in the back seat with Heather and Brad, who were wide-eyed, leaving the seat behind my parents for the new arrival. He slid open the van door saying "Thanks so much," and sloshed himself onto the seat. He smelled horrible, a mix of alcohol, cigarettes and urine.

"Where you going," my dad asked as he pulled the van back onto the highway.

"Sacramento," the man answered, "to see my sister."

"We can take you as far as Truckee," my dad offered. "That's where we turn off."

"Thanks," the man said. "I appreciate it." He was soaking wet, his medium-length brown hair stringy on his neck, and he sat with his shoulders slumped over. He looked about forty, and the only thing he carried with him was a large plastic garbage bag, filled with what I knew not.

But I imagined plenty. The bag sat next to him on the seat, and for the duration of the forty minute ride I flinched every time he appeared to be reaching into the bag. I pictured him pulling out a gun or a knife and forcing my dad to turn off on some little side road where he'd kill us all. All of us, except my dad, I think, were equally afraid of this man.

But after a few minutes of silence my dad began asking him questions, and as the rain turned to snow on the asphalt, we heard a little part of the story of this man's life.



It was one of the first times in my life when I saw the world beyond the protective jaws of my brood.

After being in the army he had moved to Las Vegas from somewhere in west Texas. He was some kind of electrical technician, but he couldn't find work in that field so he worked as a card dealer at the casinos until he got fired for drinking on the job. He worked odd jobs until his money was about gone, then in one last ditch effort he dropped his last two hundred dollars on a poker table in Reno. He lost, and for the last month he'd been living under the Virginia Street underpass, begging during the day so he'd have enough money to eat a 99 cent buffet breakfast at Harrah's.

But it was late October and the weather was turning bad. He had a sister in Sacramento who might take him in, though he hadn't talked to her in ten years. He just wanted to get somewhere where it was warm. He had a low, evenly pitched voice, and as he spoke I became a little less tense about his gun or knife. I didn't really know how to feel about this man. I was afraid dad would ask him to come home with us. Which he did.

But the man refused, saying he needed to move on, and he thanked my dad with a handshake when we pulled off at Truckee.

Before the man got out of the van, my dad said, "You know, it'll be snowing like hell over Donner Summit. Why don't we drop you at the bus station? They run every hour to Sacramento - here's enough money." He put a small wad of cash in the man's hand.

He looked at my dad, and for a moment his eyes glazed over and I thought he was going to cry. But he just said thanks and sat back down, and ten minutes later he was sitting on a bench outside the bus station nodding goodbye to us. It was snowing hard by then. All the way home none of us talked, and I couldn't stop thinking about the man and what his sister was going to say when he knocked on her door. When we pulled into Squaw Valley the sky was filled with great sheets of snow covering everything.

\* \* \* \*

When my family sat around our dinner table, the topic most often repeated was our genetic history. We took great pleasure in discussing the countries of our origins, and we learned at a very young age that being adopted was a privilege, not a stigma. I knew, for example, that I was half Yugoslavian, and the joke in my family was that everyone in Yugoslavia had huge hands and huge feet. "Land of the bigfoots," my dad always said. But I was grateful to also have a quarter each of English and Irish, because I thought that it somehow connected me to my dad's Scot blood. Brad is half Bohemian, a quarter English and Irish, and Heather is French, English, Italian, Dutch, Apache Indian, and who knows what else. The three of us would argue about which of our homelands was the best, and I dreamed of someday going back to the land of the bigfoots. Our family was a living collage of DNA; seen all at once we were identifiable as a clan because of the way we interacted; however, seen individually there was very little resemblance between, for example, me and my mother. As a child it didn't bother me, but the older I got the more often people who didn't know I was adopted would say to me, "You know, you don't look anything like your brother." Or your mother. Or your father.

Because of this, over the years I've become fascinated with meeting relatives of people I know, just to pick out the similarities, both obvious and subtle. "You have your mother's nose, but your father's lips." "You're built like your dad, but your coloring is your mom's." "You and your sister have exactly the same chin - it's so weird." Of course it's not weird, it's normal to look, at least vaguely, like your family. But this is something I've never experienced. To my knowledge I have never met another person who is packing around the same kit of DNA.

When I was in college I studied for a time in Yugoslavia. I had this idea that somehow I was returning to my homeland, that I would see people who looked like me. Obviously I couldn't have been further from the truth - genetic makeup in Yugoslavia was almost as mixed as America. Still, I did wander around the streets of Zagreb constantly watching for my twin. I was sure he was out there. Once, in the northern republic of Slovenia, I thought I had found him.

I was in Ljubljana, going to the zoo. I went up to the ticket booth, and there he was, there was me, staring at myself in the glass. And he was stunned, too. We both stared at each other's features: same height, same hair and skin, same big noses and small ears, same damn crooked teeth. Meanwhile a line was building up behind me and people were starting to push at my back and say nasty things in Croatian. I asked for a ticket and then tried to ask the man where he was from and what his name was, but my Croatian was horrible and he spoke no English so we jabbered at each other for a few moments before I was pushed ahead into the zoo where I spent the day feeding peanuts to elephants and thinking how strange it was to be feeding elephants in Slovenia while my twin sold tickets at the zoo. I got the nerve to go back to the ticket booth later, but he was gone and the skinny girl who replaced him there looked at me like I was crazy.

Now I'm content just thinking about the likelihood that somewhere out there I probably do have brothers and sisters who share some of my physical characteristics, maybe even mental and emotional similarities. I wonder if my zoo friend hurts or loves in the same way that I do, if he grows bunyons on his heels, if his beard is patchy and pathetic when he lets it grow out in the mountains. As I get older I have more and more questions, and far fewer answers. I love my adoptive family, but the apathy I felt towards my birthparents as a youngster is vanishing, and I want to know who they are. The same thing happened to my mother a few years before she died; Yup'ik voices started calling to her in her dreams, and she woke up tired and lonely.

My mother died too young, of cancer, when she was 57. She was just beginning to know herself, at least that's what she said in her last days. She wanted to go back to Kotlik and know her Yup'ik relatives - it took her over fifty years to figure this out. Just before she died she gave me a fetish that a Yup'ik relative had sent her, urging her to return. It is a small bear carved from stone, and strapped to its back with deer sinew is a small turquoise arrow. The fetish is supposed to protect the traveller on her journey, and the arrow brings good hunting. I'm not sure why she gave it to me, instead of one of her other children. Perhaps she thought I, her most difficult child, needed more protection in my travels. I was always getting into trouble. Or maybe it was simply an inclination of her's, something inexplicable and intuitive. She might have known I'd go back.

Two years after her death I clasped the bear in my sweaty hand as I boarded the plane for Anchorage. From Anchorage I caught a smaller plane heading west to Bethel, the nearest city to Kotlik. Flying in Alaska is a humbling experience. It is the largest, emptiest expanse of snow I have seen in my life. I expected mountains; instead, I saw rolling hills and flatness, dissected by thousands of frozen rivers and streams, dotted by a million little lakes. Every so often we passed over what looked like a settlement, small clusters of buildings tucked into bunches of trees. Once I thought I saw a person on a snow machine, a small speck of black moving fast down a river, then swallowed up by the curving whiteness.

The plane began its descent, and up ahead I saw the lights of Bethel, where I stayed only as long as it took to hire a bush pilot. Bethel, bigger than a village but smaller than a city, was the only place in the region where large planes like the one I was on could land. I felt the isolation of Bethel as we approached its lights out of the limitless darkness. I had never been to a place so far from anything. My doubts about coming there began to surface. What will these people think of me? They don't know

that I'm adopted. I wonder if they expect an Eskimo to walk off the plane. All they knew was that I was Doris' son, home to meet the family.

The plane landed and I was shocked into the reality of the place. It was twenty below zero. My contact - a nurse my mother had written to - met me at the luggage claim and soon we were cruising down the mainstreet of Bethel in her pickup. We passed bars, video stores, a big bowling alley. All of it looked tacked up, like army barracks. The thing that startled me the most was the absence of people: I saw only two or three men as we drove through town. But the bars and bowling alley were lit up. Bethel didn't seem as much a small town to me as an outpost. But it is the region's hub and I knew that Kotlick would be a great deal smaller. I fell asleep that night listening to the sound of dogs barking and the sheet metal of the house flapping in the arctic winds.

The next morning I flew due north, the only passenger in a small, single engine Cessna. My pilot was Earl, from Texas, an ex-investment banker trying to get away from it all. He left his wife and kids and said he'd never go back. He liked to hunt. I asked him if flying up there is dangerous, and he answered, "Shit, the flyin's safe. It's the not-flyin' that'll kill ya." He went on to tell me about a friend of his. Lost his engine north of St. Mary's, landed smooth as silk in powder, got out of the plane and sunk up to his neck in snow. He ended up burning parts of his plane to stay alive before a search party found him four days later. And he was lucky. Earl told me there are upwards of two hundred plane crashes a year in Alaska, many more per capita than in any other state. I asked him why and he explained, "Look around ya. There's nothing to guide by out here. You can fly for a day without seeing a damn thing. Combine that with a white-out blizzard and you can't find find your pecker to piss. You fly around in circles till your fuel runs out. Then it's all over."

Looking around, I saw what he meant. I had never been in country that big. Endless whiteness in all directions, like a giant down blanket thrown over the earth.

Alaska is three hundred and seventy-five million acres, a fifth as large as the contiguous forty-eight states. But that statistic doesn't explain the feeling of being in it. Flying to Kotlik I sensed a seed of loneliness planted in me, one that grew throughout my stay and has never fully left me. I felt, for the first time in my life, my own smallness, a tiny bloom in the midst of immeasurable wilderness. I thought again of my twin at the zoo, and I wondered if he knew how it was to be alone.

From the air Kotlik didn't look like much. It runs about a mile down both sides of a tiny arm of the Yukon River that drains into the Bering Sea. It is a fishing village. The air strip sits on one side of the river, the cemetery on the other. People move back and forth on boats, and there are no cars nor streets. A wooden planked boardwalk connects house to house, school to store, store to house, people to people, a squared-off umbilical cord, the social lifeline of the village. As my plane approached I saw people gathered at the end of the runway.

As the plane landed and taxied down the small dirt airstrip, I realized the group of people was waiting for the plane. Waiting for supplies, I assumed. Looking around me in the plane and seeing nothing but my backpack, I became a little edgy. "Looks like you've got a welcoming committee," Earl said. "They sure ain't waitin' for me." There were about fifteen of them, all wrapped up in big coats with fur-lined hoods, faces barely visible. Some were hunched and old, a few were children, feet covered in miniature fur mukoluks. Some were sitting on a little fleet of snow machines.

The plane stopped and before I was completely out the door I was surrounded by strangers. One man came forward, said his name - Matt Andrews, my second cousin. He shook my hand, then shyly embraced me, a little awkward but heartfelt. Through his fur hood I saw dark eyes behind thick glasses, black hair, a moustache. His skin was brown and wind-burned. Then he went around introducing me to the others, each embracing me in turn, some saying "wak," which means hello, some saying welcome,

and one, my great aunt Justina Mike saying, "Welcome home." I learned later that she speaks no English. She asked Matt to teach her those words so that she could greet me properly. I said goodbye to Earl and found myself in Kotlik. My pack and me were loaded on the back of a snow machine and minutes later I sat in a warm house that smelled like smoked fish, eager faces all around.

The family is large and complex, and over the next month I struggled to get all the names right, tried to build a family tree. It seemed everyone in Kotlik was related, and therefore wanted to meet me, son of their long lost relative, Inaqaq, who left as a child and never came back. They didn't seem to notice my whiteness, even though I was the tallest person Kotlik had seen in a long time. I was a relative, and that was all that mattered. I could have been leperous, crippled, antennaed, and I don't think they would have flinched.

I was overwhelmed by how much my mother had remained in their memory. On that first day, my great aunt Justina pulled a small wooden box from under her bed, opened it, and produced a black and white photograph of herself, her sister, Dora, my grandmother, and my mother. I'd seen it before. It was the only photograph my mother had of her childhood in Alaska. I imagined my mother looking at the photograph over the span of her lifetime. As a child in Seattle she probably hid it away with her other things, embarrassed about the truth it revealed. Later, maybe in college, she pulled the photo from an old box and tried to remember who those people were, what she used to be. Maybe as she grew older she used the photograph to imagine how her life might have been, what it was in her that never let go.

And Justina. That old Yup'ik woman with a face crevassed like summer glaciers, her mouth perpetually smiling, her teeth yellow and black like corn. What had she imagined over the years for that girl in the photograph? She held the photo like a jewel, and I noticed that it was in perfect shape. She spoke to me in Yup'ik, a

clicking and clacking that comes from deep in the throat. Natalia, another cousin, translated.

"She says your mother was always quiet and sad, like her father. That he was generous and gave away so much that he was never rich. She says your mother looked like her father. She says your mother was old for such a little girl. She is glad you have come. She says she has been waiting a long time." Natalia finished just a moment after Justina. The room was quiet and I heard the fire popping.

"She wanted to come back," I said. "But she got sick, and..." I didn't know what to tell her, but she nodded as if she understood and spoke again for a moment.

"Qweena," she said, and then more undecipherable words.

Natalia translated. "She says thank you for coming. You are part of our family. It is good that you are home. I am your new grandmother. You must call me grandmother."

I remembered the bear and quickly dug it out of my pocket. Over the last two years it had always been near me. I held it out and showed it to Justina. There was recognition in her face, her lips softened into a sad smile, and small tears formed in the deep creases of her eyes. She took the bear, closed her hand around it, and shut her eyes to sleep.

I breathed in deeply, the fish smell new and soothing. In the silence that followed, I let go of my fears and watched my grandmother sleep.

\* \* \* \*

A couple of years ago in Colorado a friend of mine introduced me to a friend of his, a forty-six year old artist who lived in the mountains and made stained-glass windows. I spent a few days watching her at her craft, trying to learn a thing or two, and talking with her about our lives. On the second day I mentioned casually that I'd



been adopted; she flinched and dropped a big purple pane of glass. It shattered at our feet and left us staring intensely at one another.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's not your fault. Let me explain." We walked over the broken shards and sat on the stools by her bench, where she told me how she lost her child.

"I was nineteen when I got pregnant. And I was in love. I wanted the baby but Tim would have nothing to do with it. When I said I was going to have it, he left, and that was that. And, I don't know, I guess I was just too young...I was so scared. So I had it, but I put it up for adoption. It was the hardest thing. I was pushing and pushing, and finally she came out, and I was so filled with relief and joy, and then they put me out. When I woke up my baby was gone. I never even got to see her."

She began to cry, her face in her hands, and I sat there, numbness coming on.

She went on, "I'm not sure why I reacted to you like that, maybe it's because she'd be your age now, she *is* your age. And I've never had any more kids. I registered with an adoption service - you put in all your information and intent to reunite, and if the other party registers than a match is made. I registered eleven years ago. Every day when I check the mail I'm looking for a letter from the adoption service. Every day."

I learned a little about stained glass during my time with her, but I learned more about the other side of adoption. I've never talked to her again, but I wonder often if her child thinks about her, if someday they'll meet again. And I wonder if somewhere out there a woman(or a man) is checking her mailbox for me.

I have a family that seems infinite, a collage that has no borders, that is always growing to capacitate more. When I went to Alaska my collage quadrupled in size. Every time my dad or mom brought someone or something home the walls stretched; our universe expanded. So I register with the central adoption computer; I place my being in a microchip and wait for a match. Not so my life will somehow become

magically complete, but simply to allow for the possibility of reconnection, of closing circles, of spanning the bridge between wandering broods.

The night before I left Kotlik, my grandmother Justina told me the story of Bear Woman, the same one my mother had told me when I was a little kid. As she told the story her old body became young again. Her hands and arms moved gracefully in circles, and her chair wobbled with the motions of her body. Her voice changed pitch dramatically, most tense when the bear was slaughtered by the brothers. Then the clicks and clacks of her voice receded to gentle murmurs as she described the fate of Bear Woman:

The sky is dark and the village sleeping. There are lights racing across the northern horizon like fireflies dancing. A woman pokes her head out the hide door of her home, looks around and smells the air. She looks afraid, this woman, but somehow strong, determined. Her eyes are fierce and sad. She moves out into the morning, followed by two children bundled up in furs. The three of them moved towards the edge of the village, towards the trees and the hill where they picked blueberries that summer. All the dogs are awake and silent as they watch the woman and her children pass. But there are curled lips and teeth showing, and fur erect and hunched on the back of necks. The woman moves into the trees. The woman moves into the trees. Her children wade in her footsteps that grow and grow as they climb the hill and drop into home on the other side.

## Eyes from the Bush

The lion's teeth were tucked away in a little drawer of my dad's mammoth roll top desk, along with other articles from his young adulthood: his Canadian Cavalry pin, an old photo of him boxing in college, twenty or so pairs of old reading glasses, all broken in one place or another, tape holding the lenses in. But for me the lion's teeth were the best. There were two of them, incisors, each about two inches long and curved into points as sharp as knitting needles. I would go to his desk, sit in his favorite swivel chair and swing circles as I held the teeth in my palms, dreaming of the creature to whom they once belonged. It wasn't the teeth alone that fascinated me, but the knowledge that these teeth had years ago been firmly embedded in my father's right thigh.

He has four holes to prove it, each a half an inch deep, two on the front of his leg, two on the back, like giant dimples. As a small child I'd stare at the holes, imagining him in the bush, the lion charging, my father covered in blood. Later, when I was old enough to understand, he told me the story over and over again as we sat in the bathtub. I ran my fingers in and out of the lion teeth holes, totally mesmerized by his story. And later, from some dusty crate came an old 16mm. film which we watched as a family one evening after supper. It changed my vision of my father forever. I had known him only as a quiet intellectual - a genius many people called him - his head always in some report, his glasses getting thicker by the year. After that movie he became a sort of hero to my

friends, the kind of father an eight year old can brag about without reserve. For me the movie had a different effect.

His boxing name was "Red Chisholm," because of his bright red Scottish hair. It was 1949 and he was fresh out of MIT with an engineering degree. He was, as I see it now, a classical "outdoorsman" of that period, seeking adventure in wild places, and in most cases, using those wild places as an adventure playground. Africa was a giant playing field where the young men of his social class went to prove themselves by hunting big game. This is where the film begins, with Red Chisholm in Africa on a safari with a friend of his. They are there to hunt big game.

They are hunting lions.

My father's hair is red like I've never seen, and he has a matching beard that contrasts smartly with his safari khakis. He wears a khaki hat, one side flipped up and buttoned to the top, giving him a military look. He is tall, freckled, lean. At first I don't recognize him - my eight year old mind can barely make the connection between the burliness of his past and the wrinkles of the present. He carries a rifle slung over his shoulder, and he tips his hat at the camera before stepping into the Land Rover and heading out across the veldt.

The film clacks on. My father bathes naked in a watering hole, wearing, of course, his hat. Gazelles bound in herds across the road. Baboons perch on the hood of the Rover staring in the window. Giraffes and elephants and zebras move over the screen, and I am awed by my father looking on as if the place were his.

"Where are the lions, Dad?" I ask. I have always been obsessed with cats. I want to see the lions, the leopards, the tigers(which I believed all lived in Africa).

"In a minute, son. Hold your horses," he answers.

And I don't have to wait long. Suddenly there one is, hanging from its rear paws, skin sagging downward, its golden mane dragging in blood and dirt. My father stands next to it, half the lion's size, his rifle over his shoulder, a calm smile on his face, his posture relaxed. His first lion kill.

"Dad, did you really kill it, I mean shoot it? What did it do to you, I mean, did it try to kill you?" I was out of breath, trying to find the Red Chisholm in my aged father.

"Son," he says. "it was different then. "We didn't know...." His voice wanders off, maybe realizing I will not understand, not yet.

There are more dead lions after that, in one scene my father's friend standing over his kill, his foot braced on the lion's chest, one hand around the barrel of his gun, the other on his hip. The lion's tongue is pink, like our family cat's, and it hangs loosely in the dirt.

My father is quiet as the film sputters on, and the darkness in our family room seems filled with tension. We children are forbidden to kill anything; I was scolded once for killing a spider in the bathtub. It is strange to see my father killing. He shifts in his chair, breathing soft but fast. I am hot, watching.

Suddenly the camera is still, focused in on the bush. I can see only trees and thick leaves. The camera darts back and forth, as if searching for something, and passes a quick flash of yellow in the bush. The camera focuses. A male lion rushes from the bush, too close already. A rifle barrel jumps and smoke fills the air. I am awed by the lions speed, the power of three or four quick strides, the leap....another rifle shot explodes.

The screen is black.

Then I see my father on the ground, his leg covered in bloody guaze, a drugged smile on his face. Right up against him, as if they are the closest of friends, the lion is sprawled. It is still snarling, and I see the teeth I have worshipped all my life, the mouth from which they came dripping blood, the lips drawn tight. Next to them is the man who saved my father's life, a tall African with large, nervous eyes, speaking quickly to the camera. He seems very happy. With a huge smile he bends down and shakes my father's hand. It is the saddest sight I've ever seen, why I don't know. In the silence that follows I feel no pity for my father. He is taken off on a stretcher with a hero's grin, and the final scene is their airplane taking off, bound for America.

For years after I questioned him about Africa, about the lion's attack and the lion bite. It was as if I couldn't, or didn't want to, believe the man in the film was my father. He spoke of it as if it were in another lifetime, as if he were talking about someone else.

"So goddamned beautiful," he'd say as he looked past me and through the wall.

"Most beautiful place on earth...."

And then he'd put on his glasses, go back to his papers, and I'd think of that hunter he was, disappearing into the bush. I'd wonder what happened to the man who killed all the lions. I knew he was in there somewhere.

\* \* \* \* \*

I can't say exactly when cats first came into my life. It may have been with Flora, named after my great aunt who died on the same winter morning the cat showed up, having somehow crawled through three feet of snow to claw at our basement door. My mom was cooking pancakes for breakfast and the cat ran in, jumped up on the stove and started licking the pancake batter off the hot grill. She was greyish blue, her tail striped lightly black, her eyes the deep green of lake water. It was a blizzard outside; there was nothing we could do but keep her.

I was four years old; we'd never had a cat before. I was awed by her movements, by the ease of her leaps up to the counter. Her speed amazed me, and through the years I never grew tired of testing her agility, sometimes holding her upside down just inches off the ground and dropping her, testing the theory that cats always land upright. She almost always did. I liked to drop her from high places, watch her tail arc wildly to maintain her balance in midair. I stopped when I dropped her off our twelve foot deck and she didn't come home for a week. I thought I'd killed her and that she'd limped off into the bush to die.

I loved to watch her stalk the hummingbirds under the aspen trees, her body sleek and low in the grass, muscles tense and quivering, eyes as wide as sky and in them earth a hummingbird. She slid jointless over ground, like water on rock. I discovered then, and believe to this day, that cats are ever wild. I knew she didn't need me. We could all pack up, move away, and she would survive. The predator was in her.

Usually the hummingbirds were too quick for her, and she'd slink back to the house, dejected. But many nights I woke to her muffled call at the door, her mouth full with mouse and bat. Or wild screams in the night when other cats would come around. She'd come home with terror in her eyes, her tail puffed up like her dark twin. She'd stare out the window or look through walls for the rest of the night, hinting that all was not well in the world. She could never tell me what she knew, but I knew, watching her, that I knew almost nothing. She was a paradox to me - on one hand a purring warmth at the foot of my bed, on the other a creature capable of wondrous violence that shocked and thrilled me.

Like most cats, she was unpredictable. One moment she'd roll over and purr as I scratched her belly, the next my arm, scratched and bleeding, would look like something she'd dragged in in the night. She was beyond my control, and for that reason I've always preferred cats to dogs.

Most of my friends were faithful to their hounds, as their hounds were faithful to them. I've always been a little disgusted by the sight of a dog trotting next to its owner, looking up at him as if he were a god. Or even worse, the commanding voice of a dog owner saying "Sit," "Lie down," or worst of all, "Shake." I've seen nice people turned into tyrants when their dogs chance to disobey a command and follow their instincts too far into the woods.

Tell a cat to "sit" and it will look at you as if you are mad. For that reason many people hate cats. They don't fulfill the human desire to command, to control, to dominate. Flora was fiercely independent, and I learned to equate that with wildness. She was

absolutely never tamed, beyond coming for Tender Vittles once a day, and even then it was on her terms.

Twenty-four years later she died of liver failure. For the last ten years of her life she should have died ten times. She meowed like a courting frog. One of her fang teeth fell out and she walked around with a permanent snarl on her face, her pink tongue sticking halfway out of her mouth. Her green eyes turned almost completely black, and we wondered if she could see anymore. Her hearing was gone; bluejays would stand behind her and screech at the top of their lungs. Her claws fell out and never grew back. Her purr sounded like a sick engine. Her hair fell out in clumps.

But we loved her for all these things. My brother renamed her Timex, and we made bets on how long she would live. Friends would come over just to take a look at her. Even in her old age she'd still sit by the window and watch the hummingbirds, and as she watched, a moan seemed to build inside her until it climaxed in a high pitched whine, like a Volkswagon in reverse. That's where she died one day, in her spot by the window, watching the birds outside. I was away at college, and until I came home months later it was impossible to believe she was gone. She came when I was a small child, she was there when the last child left for college. She outlived my mother. She outlived some of my friends. During her stay with us she outlived three generations of dog. For several years after her death people would walk into the house asking, "Where's Timex?," as if there were no question she was alive.

I still love cats, in all shapes and sizes. I'm not embarrassed to admit this, even to my most macho dog-loving friends. Cats thrill me. They remind me of where I touched the edge of wild, where I first looked in to the beautiful viciousness of the non-human world.

\* \* \* \* \*



My father was educated as an engineer, but despite his terminally mathematical mind he was a wonderful, if not poetic, storyteller. He loved to sit back, take off his glasses, and tell us about the "old days," when the world was full of magic. We lived near a wilderness area, in a small mountain town, and his stories were born of the natural world in which we lived. We learned about the Fairy Waterfall, where the water ouzel lived. We learned about the Owl Tree, and the Three Grey Ghosts that were dying old growth redwood trees. There was the Weasel Tree, home of the Long-tailed Weasel, and the Elf Forest, where ferns grew higher than my head. These stories defined my child's world, and I used them like a map when I walked into the mountains behind my house.

But my favorite stories of all were ones about the Sabre-toothed Tiger, a series that began and ended in a bathtub with my brother and my father. My brother and I would yell and whine for him to come take a bath with us, not because we liked baths, but because we loved the stories. We never asked him to tell us a story; it was always the bath we asked for, knowing a story would emerge with the steam and my father's toes treading hot water.

My father would undress as we watched him from the tub, bending over finally to take off his socks. He always took off his socks last, and I remember he seemed very old to me then, crouched over, grunting as if it were an unusual act to perform, his glasses teetering precariously on the end of his nose.

He'd step into the tub and stand above us for a few seconds, and I remember being in awe at how tall and big he looked from down below, his penis, arms, chest, neck, and cheeks falling downward, as if melting. His body was covered in a mix of thick red and grey hair, and he looked to me like a smoldering giant, a towering redwood tree about to fall in the forest. His legs were lean and muscled, his right thigh marked by the lion bite. He'd slide down underneath my brother and me, and we would prop ourselves up, one on each of his legs, picking and poking at his body. He'd suck in one deep breath, blow out a long, long sigh, and close his eyes with his head resting on the rim of the tub. It took him a while to get started, and we patiently entertained ourselves by pulling on his toes,

poking his stomach, and stretching his earlobes. I especially loved his earlobes, long and elastic, and I couldn't help laughing at the way they jiggled when I let go. He never said a word as we picked at him, and I think in our child's minds he was a giant doll, a creature who felt no pain and told stories in the water.

The stories always began the same: "Once upon a time when animals talked...." My brother and I would sit back in the tub and listen intently for the giant cat to walk from the tip of my father's tongue. The Sabre-toothed Tiger was a giant mountain lion with teeth like the tusks of an elephant. He lived up on the Granite Chief, in a cave that overlooked Squaw Valley. My brother and I spent many summer hours searching for that cave, both wanting and not wanting to actually find it. I guess we wondered what the Sabre-toothed Tiger would be like when we met him in real life, and we were afraid.

The stories varied in theme and length, but usually they involved the Sabre-toothed Tiger doing some good deed, saving a small child during a snowstorm, rescuing the Three Grey Ghosts from the evil Tree-Cutters, or saving the Water Ouzel from The Hunter. I didn't know it then, but my father was trying to save the world through his stories, maybe trying to bring back to life at least one of the cats he had killed as a young man. The tiger became a symbol to me, one that later in my life emerged as some kind of environmental ethic.

There is one story I remember better than others. I asked for it again and again over the years; each time it came out a little bit different. It went something like this:

Once upon a time, when animals talked, a great cat lived in the mountains above Squaw Valley. He was striped orange and black, his teeth were as long as sabres and sharp as nails, his tail as long as any young boy, his claws like razors. He was as big as most bears, and his coat was as bright as the sun. He lived in a cave on Granite Chief and came out only at night, when no humans were around.

Despite his fearsome appearance, this big cat was very nice. He was friends with all the creatures of the canyon - the owls, the trees, the big flat rocks, coyote,

bluejay, marmot, pinecone. But more than anyone, he loved the water ouzel. They were best of friends and spent the early morning hours by the Fairy Waterfall, telling jokes and stories about their lives. The Sabre-tooth helped the water ouzel by protecting it from weasels, and the water ouzel returned this favor by picking lice from the Sabre-tooth's fur and grooming his coat to a shine. If one was lucky he might see them at sunrise, the water ouzel hopping around on the Sabre-tooth's giant shoulders, his coat catching the sun's first soft light. All was peaceful in the canyon.

One day, late in the morning, the Sabre-tooth was brushing his long fangs and preparing himself for the first of his many daytime naps, when he heard a cry of help and something running up the hill. He came out of his cave just in time to meet squirrel, out of breath and screeching that the Hunter had come and taken the water ouzel away. The water ouzel was rare and considered valuable for its feathers which humans ground into dust and used for a love potion. "Just like the humans," thought the tiger, "to take what we love to make love for themselves."

Instantly the squirrel jumped on the Sabre-tooth's back and they rushed down the mountain towards the human trail, where the Hunter was escaping with the water ouzel tucked tightly under his belt. Now tigers are fast, but nobody had ever seen a tiger run as fast as the Sabre-tooth ran that day. He ran through the Great Grey Desert, by the Owl Tree and Fairy Waterfall, and faster than lightning he caught the Hunter slinking like a snake down the trail. Before the Hunter could reach for his gun the tiger snatched it away and swallowed it whole.

"Hunter," Tiger said, "if I were not so nice I would eat you this minute, for I am very hungry. Give me the water ouzel and I will let you go free."

Without a second thought the Hunter relinquished the water ouzel, disheveled but unhurt, and he ran down the trail as fast as his legs would take him. Which, by the way, wasn't very fast compared to even the slowest of tigers. The water ouzel hopped onto the Sabre-toothed Tiger's back, and they ran back up the canyon at a full gallop just for fun, laughing all the way. The End.

By this time we were all white and wrinkled from the bath water. No matter how many times I'd heard the story before, I was mesmerized by the water ouzel on the tiger's back. When I was too old to bathe with my father anymore the stories came to a close. Maybe he thought I was too old to hear them anymore. We never talked about it. But I kept looking, for the rest of my growing up, for a glimpse of that cat. I suppose I'm still looking.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is another side to the Sabre-toothed Tiger story. When my parents came to Squaw Valley in 1955, there were still a decent population of mountain lions. My father even had the luck of stumbling across one once, up in Shirley Canyon. I try to imagine what that must have been like for him. Without a gun, I mean. I imagine him locked in his footsteps, staring at the cat's yellow eyes, wondering if it is payback time. When he spoke of the incident it was with a certain reverence, and I think now that he must have made some kind of apology to that mountain lion, a prayer of forgiveness.

One thing I know for sure is the pelts of the African lions never showed up in our home. I asked him what happened to the furs, and he told me they had gotten lost in transit. I believed him then, but now I have a feeling there is another story there. I don't think he wanted to live anymore with the deaths he made. As long as I've known him, I've never seen him hurt a fly.

By the time I was old enough to hike with my father the mountain lions were mostly gone. There was one left, people said, living up near Granite Chief above the water ouzel waterfall. Every once in a while someone would see it, and small dogs and house cats disappeared with regularity for a number of years. It became a mythical figure in our community, and we'd sit around campfires and speculate about where and when he'd show up next. I suppose that's where my father got the fuel for his Sabre-

tooth stories, though as a kid I never made that connection. I just felt surrounded by the mystery of cats; that was enough for me. To this day I can't move in the mountains without an eye out for a lion.

\* \* \* \* \*

And I think in this empty world there was room for me  
and a mountain lion.

And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might  
spare a million or two of humans

And never miss them.

Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frostface  
of that slim yellow mountain lion.

-D.H. Lawrence

For the last few years I've worked as a mountaineering instructor and wilderness educator in Colorado and Utah. Mountain lion country. At least that's what they say. I, for one, have still never seen one in real life. I've seen hundreds of paw prints, lion scat, fresh kills, even a claw once in Lavender Canyon. I've had the hair on my neck stand erect, known that I was being followed. I've done pirouettes on sandstone, almost panicked in my certainty that something powerful was watching me from not too far away. Once, going back the way I'd come, there were lion tracks covering my fresh boot prints. Maybe I've even been stalked. I'm always looking. Three summers ago I came close to seeing one.

It was in the La Sal mountains outside of Moab, Utah, and I was instructing a 23 day mountaineering course. We were camped at 9,000 feet in an aspen grove, looking

down on the desert below, the Behind the Rocks area glowing red with the liquid light of sunset. We'd traveled ten miles that day, my ten students were exhausted, and we were climbing a peak the next morning. I was tending to my blisters while the students went for water and began preparing dinner. I was thinking about the lion tracks I'd seen in the mud by the creek.

The sun went behind the Henry Mountains to the west and I got up to get water from a small pond a few hundred yards from camp. As I crested a small rise, I saw one of my students, Bill, squatting dead-still, watching the other side of the pond with an intensity I'll never forget. Just as I focused my eyes on the far bank the silence broke, and I heard something moving quickly through the brush beyond the water. It lasted only for a second and then Bill turned and ran up to me.

"Oh my God, did you see it? Unbelievable. A mountain lion. I was filling my water bottle and looked up and there it was. Staring at me. Like I was a pork chop. Oh my god, it was big. Did you see it?"

I had to admit no, that I hadn't seen it, that, in fact, I'd probably scared it away. We went over to look for tracks and found them, right where he'd been looking, some of the largest tracks I'd ever seen. I was filled with an intense jealousy, that this rookie mountaineer student of mine should by chance walk into a creature that I'd been searching for my entire life. Then my jealousy was replaced by a sense of awe, grateful that the lion had let itself be seen by anyone, even if it wasn't me. And seeing that mountain lion did something to Bill. Before he'd been a needy, loud, self-conscious nineteen year old fraternity boy. For the next week he rarely spoke, he looked around a lot, he took care with how he traveled in the mountains. He was always looking off into the distances, as if searching for an answer to some deeply hidden question about his life.

He was lucky to see one; most people will never get the chance. They are elusive creatures, and nobody really knows how many are left in North America. Estimates range between 2,000 to 7,000. Hunting them is still allowed in all but two states, Florida and New Hampshire, victims of the Teddy Roosevelt era when mountain lions

were viewed as varmin, threatening the hunter's supply of elk, deer, and other game. "Lord of stealthy murder, facing his doom with a heart both craven and cruel," wrote Roosevelt at the turn of the century. Between then and about 1972 mountain lions were brought to near endangered levels until federal laws restricted the use of poison in mountain lion eradication programs. The only state that doesn't allow sport hunting of mountain lions is California, and that was a very recent and controversial victory. It is important to note that whether or not a state allows lions to be hunted is irrelevant if there are no lions remaining in that state; this is the case for the majority of states.

It seems that lions are up against more than sport hunters, though. As Maurice Hornocker says, "Lions, however, are specialized killing machines....They are at the apex of the food chain, and thus they reflect the general health of the ecosystem." "Bears," he says, "are incompetent compared with lions." Humans don't like not being at the top of the food chain. And so, like bears and wolves, they threaten the human ideology of dominance over nature. We don't like to go out in the woods if it isn't safe; we don't like the thought of a creature who can rip us to shreds; we are threatened by anything higher on the food chain. Mountain lions, to some, represent evil in wilderness, and are seen in much the same light as they were in 1738:

"The Catamount has a tail like a lyon, its Legges are like a bears, its Claws like an Eagle, its Eyes like a Tyger and its Countenance a mixture of everthing Fierce and Savage. He is exceeding ravenous & devours all sorts of Creatures that come near."<sup>1</sup>

For many of the same reasons, cats all over the world are moving towards extinction - India's and Russia's tigers, Africa's leopards, and smaller varieties of wild cats around the world -following in the paw prints of their now extinct ancestor, the great sabre-toothed cats.

I think of my father hunting in Africa, how much the times have and haven't changed. I want to believe that he was a product of his time and that we are beyond those times when hunting lions for sport was as acceptable as it was considered "manly." But

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<sup>1</sup> Boston Gazette(1738),qouted from Edward Abbey's *A Journey Home*.

then I think of Texas, where the mountain lion is still considered vermin and can be killed at any time for any reason using almost any method - poison, traps, dogs. Ethically is this any worse than the Big Game designation it has in many other states such as Montana or Colorado, where lions are hunted for sport? The point is, men are still filling their egos by using dogs, traps, and rifles with huge scopes to kill an animal as beautiful as it is rare. We are, I think, a long way from Edward Abbey's desire to "shake hands with a mountain lion."

Still, I find hope in my father's ability to change, in his redemption through stories, in his transformation from a lion hunter to a man who can sit for hours watching the water ouzel. Maybe he saw something in the eye of the lion, something besides the "beast" he'd been raised to believe in. Whatever he saw, I forgive him.



Breathing Snow:  
Memoirs of a Snow Child

The first time I got lost in snow was a few days after my second birthday. Early April in 1969 was one of the biggest snow years in Squaw Valley's history. For two weeks the sky unloaded almost constantly, wet quarter-size Sierra snowflakes that I've never seen anywhere else. The snowbanks along Lanny Lane, the road to our house, were over ten feet high, in some places as high as twenty feet. The porch on our house is nine feet off the ground, and that winter one could step straight off the porch into snow.

Which is what I did.

I was big for my age, and I knew how to open doors. I never asked my mother what she was doing while her toddler slipped out the door in a Sierra blizzard, but she had four other children including a one year old, plus a dog and three cats, so she was always pretty busy. My father, as usual, was away on a business trip. I was a restless, difficult child, and it was rare that she got a rest from me.

The day before had been the first clear one in weeks, and the sun had come out just long enough to create a hard crust on top of the deep snowpack, just thick enough to support a forty pound two year old stumbling along on his thick little legs and oversized hands. Another storm had come in during the early morning, adding nearly a foot of new snow on top of the hard crust. I set out in that snowstorm in late morning, after

pancakes and a bath, wearing diapers, my Eeyore overalls, and a pair of green cotton socks. I was a pretty solid walker by that age, but in the snow I crawled, carving a little trench that filled in quickly as the storm thickened. I'm fairly sure that I was enjoying myself immensely, that as I crawled through the thick flakes I was smiling as I stopped from time to time to play with the snow. I imagine the cold didn't bother me somehow, and that I felt totally at home out in that storm. It's a feeling I've never lost, and I like to think it began on that morning.

I don't think I had any route in mind, but I headed west, uphill towards the Onorato house, a quarter of a mile away. I ambled through the willow bushes behind our house, then headed straight uphill, making pretty good time, given the stubbornness of my legs.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed before my mom realized I had disappeared. Of course she panicked. With the help of my three older sisters she searched the entire house, looking in cabinets, drawers, the washing machine, the refrigerator. She looked under beds, behind doors, in the back of closets. She knew something was very wrong when she found the front door cracked open and our dog, Flossy, sniffing at the snowflakes falling through.

Had the roads been open that day my mother might have called Search and Rescue or the fire department. But the roads had been closed for the last three days. Our nearest neighbors were the Onoratos, and getting to their house wouldn't be easy. My mother took one look at Flossy sniffing those snowflakes and knew the dog was my only chance.

Flossy was a Vishala, a medium-sized dog with short soft fur, long velvet ears, a barrel chest, and a short chopped tail. She was viciously protective of us children, and once when a man walked too close to the car where we were waiting for our mom, she stretched out the open window and bit his arm. When I was two she must have been old

already, for I remember her with a nice chromoly trimming her forehead and long narrow snout.

My mom got dressed in her down jacket and boots, grabbed her snowshoes, told my three older sisters to watch my one year old brother, Brad, and walked out the door saying "Find Colin, Flossy. Find Colin." Flossy was the kind of dog who would chase a tennis ball endlessly. If it got lost in the bushes or floated down the creek she would search for hours until she found it or another one in its place. That morning she may simply have seen me as another tennis ball.

They trudged out into the storm, this short dark woman on snowshoes and her greying dog sniffing at the snow. The snow was still falling thickly, and my track was already filled in. Nevertheless, it took Flossy less than ten minutes to lead my mother to me, fifty yards uphill from the house where I had finally stopped. I was sitting in the snow with a crown of snowflakes, digging down into the snow as if searching for some buried treasure. My mother said that when I saw her and Flossy coming, I looked disappointed at first, as if they were interrupting something of vital importance. Then Flossy came up and licked my face and I smiled, blinked, and seemed to come back to the world.

My mother carried me home and spent the next hour checking me over and over again, taking my temperature and soaking me in hot water, convinced that I was hypothermic. But I never got cold that day. It was a warm storm, as Sierra storms often are, and somehow I didn't even have frostnip. I like to think it was mind over matter. I didn't even consider the possibility of cold; therefore I was warm. Though I get colder much more easily now than I did then, I still find myself sitting in the snow for hours, digging and digging, watching snowflakes melt in the palms of my hands.

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In Squaw Valley skiing wasn't a form of recreation; it was, very seriously, a way of life. It was, after all, a ski area before it was a place to live (at least for white people). It hosted the Winter Olympics in 1960, and from that point on it became a world class destination for skiers. Growing up in Squaw Valley and not liking skiing might be compared to growing up in Florida and not liking the sun. Except it wasn't necessarily a matter of *liking* it; whether one liked it or not was never a question. We all skied because that is what you did if you were a child in Squaw Valley.

I began skiing when I was two years old, a short while after I began walking. At first it was in between my dad's legs, him holding me up as we snowplowed down the bunny slope. But before too long I was cruising along by myself, heading straight downhill in a completely uncontrolled twenty mile per hour snowplow. When I see little kids skiing like that nowadays, I wonder how it is they survive, little munchkins leaning back in their big plastic boots letting gravity pull them towards disaster. But somehow they make it, most of them, as I did. When I was four I joined the Mighty Mites, the local junior ski team, and in our well-known orange and blue wool hats and sweaters we'd speed by the tourists like a gang of midgets wired on speed.

And we were a gang. We did gangly things. We'd yell at people as we skied by them, "Get out of the way, Turkey." Turkey was our name for tourist. We'd spit off the chairlifts onto unlucky Turkies, who would sometimes chase us but never catch us. We'd steal hotdogs and pretzels from the cafeteria, break windows with ice-filled snowballs, even pee from the chairlift. The Mighty Mites were terror on skis, and we loved it.

But it was also intensely serious. The competition began when we were four and ended, for most of us, when we were eighteen, when we either made the Olympic team or, defeated, chose to attend college or find some kind of work. Snow, rain, or sunshine we would train. Slalom, giant slalom, downhill, and for some of us, cross country. We ran gates all morning, ate a quick lunch, then free skied in the afternoon. When school began we skied everyday after school. We missed weeks of school for racing. During the

summer we did dryland training for skiing, running up hills with ski poles, then sprinting downhill using trees as gates.

By the time I was thirteen it became pretty obvious who was going to make it and who wasn't. Billy Hudson, Eva Tworokans, Hansi Standtiner, and Tamara McKinney were a few who did. In 1988 over one third of the U.S. Olympic ski team was from Squaw Valley. I was one of the ones who didn't make it, along with Peter Guilford, Skip Lasky, Andy Kellermyer. For me it was easier because I had never been that good and I had college to look forward to, but for skiers like Peter it was a major life crisis, one that neither he nor his family will ever really get over. He was born and bred to be a ski racer, and when it didn't work out his life became a series of failed attempts to renew his racing career. He is almost thirty years old now, and he still says to me once in a while, "I think I'm going to give racing another shot." I can see us when we're eighty years old, sitting on the porch in our rocking chairs, him saying, "Colin, you know, I think if I give it one more shot I just might make it." That's what skiing did to some of us. We had snow on our brains.

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There are five basic types of snow crystals, with an infinite number of variations on each. There are six-sided plates, six-pointed stars, the six-sided prismlike column, the long thin needle, and the six-layered scroll. The hexagonal structure of the crystals demonstrates their atomic design; the molecules of hydrogen and oxygen in frozen water are arranged in a hexagonal pattern. The type of snowflake most often pictured on Christmas cards and snowflake art is the stellar crystal or the plate, and in fact these forms are the most "pure" of the snowflakes, in that they are the building blocks of all the other kinds of flakes. The arms of the stellar crystals, under the right temperature and humidity, grow and collect more water vapor, forming what

are called spatial dendrites. These dendrites look something like how one might picture an asteroid, a solid mass with knarled jagged arms extended.

As a kid my evaluation of snow was much less scientific and much more practical. In our snow forts making snowballs, there was either "good snowball snow," or "bad snowball snow." Good snowball snow was wet snow that stuck together well to form big snowballs. They were easy to make; it took no body heat to bond the flakes. Bad snowball snow was dry snow that didn't bond well. Those snowballs took a lot of packing, and we had to use the heat of our bare hands to make the crystals bond. In Squaw Valley the snow was almost always good for snowballs, heavy wet snow made up of large stellar crystals with long sticky arms. I was surprised when I went to Colorado for the first time and realized how lousy the snow was for snowballs; the temperature there is generally colder and the resulting snow crystals are columns and needles which don't bond well. The general rule is the warmer the temperature the more the snow bonds; the colder the snow the less it bonds. Sierra snow was perfect for all of our needs.

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Growing up in snow country was like growing up in a world where a child's hands are tools of great power. Snow became whatever we wanted it to become. I'm not talking about simple snowmen here. I'm talking about castles, kingdoms in the truest sense of the word. Sometimes we had twelve feet of snow to work with, and all the time in the world. On days when school was cancelled and the ski area wasn't running because of avalanche danger, Brad and I would bundle up in our warmest clothes and go to work in the snow. We'd tunnel all day, creating mazes of underground passageways, leading to giant rooms and secret caverns. We lit the tunnels with little skylights, creating a dim, eerie but magical light that reflected off the snow. Some of our castles were three or four stories, sinuous passageways connecting room on top of room. We filled the rooms

with candles, sleeping bags, stolen boxes of Frosted Flakes and Lucky Charms, Oreo cookies and Playboy magazines. The tunnels were too small for most adults to crawl through, and the snowcaves became our refuge, a world wholly belonging to us. Still, we hid the goods behind secret panels of snow, and each of us had our own stash.

It was a boys' world under there. We'd invite our friends over to play after skiing, but never girls. As it got later in the winter the tunnels would grow more and more complex, and many of our friends had their own rooms in our castle. Sometimes we'd spend hours stockpiling snowballs, which were stored in the battle station room, always situated nearest to the road. We'd crouch in the open-roofed fort-like structure of the battle station until a car came by, then stand and fire iceballs at the passing car. If we connected we'd wait to see if the car stopped, and if it did we'd rush back into the depths of our cavern where we knew we were safe. Once, at night, we hit a police car and heard glass shattering. The car stopped and the policeman got out and came up to the fort. The policeman yelled in to us, "You boys are in serious trouble. Come on out of there!" We tried to be silent but Peter couldn't help snickering. "I said come out, boys. This is serious business!" When we didn't come out, the policeman went up the stairs to our house to get our parents, who, luckily, weren't home. He came back down and jumped on top of our tunnels, destroying much of the top story but unable to get break through to the lower levels. I remember lying there in the dark, a single candle lighting the glistening ceiling as it began to crack under the policeman's weight. I was terrified, yet unsure whether to laugh or cry. The policeman left without even leaving a note for our parents. I've never been able to figure that out. Maybe he figured he'd done enough damage.

Our other favorite activity was jumping off roofs. The roof on our house was the local favorite - its pinnacle is at about thirty feet. There had to be two of us at least, one to jump, one to dig the person out down below. I'd bundle up, pull a wool hat all the

way down over my face, then swan dive twenty feet into the ten foot snowpack below, where Peter or Brad would be waiting with a shovel to dig me out before I suffocated.

Jumping off the roof like that felt like nothing I've experienced before. One moment I'd be arcing into the air, my arms outstretched like a bird, totally free, and the next I'd be buried like a bullet in a piece of wood, totally paralyzed. For the first few moments it was completely peaceful, the quietest moments of my life. Snow is an amazing sound barrier, and in total darkness, total silence, unable to move a muscle, I was as close to death as a live, perfectly healthy person can be. Much closer than I might have imagined back then. A friend of my brother's, Tim Grimes, decided to try it by himself from his deck. When he didn't show up for dinner his parents initiated a search. The whole community searched overnight for him, but it wasn't until the next day that his father found him just over the railing of his deck, buried in six feet of snow. I still wonder how long he stayed alive under there.

I remember how peaceful it felt at first, all that quiet and not a reason in the world to move. Then I'd begin to run out of air and begin to panic a little bit, but just as I did I'd hear the swish swish of Peter's shovel, and him saying, "Chis, Chis, you okay?" Then I'd feel the shovel on my back and I'd break free from the snow and breathe in as deeply as I could, wheezing in delight. "That was so cool," Peter would say, or "Man, did you fly!" or "Shit, I thought I'd never get to you." Then I'd trade him the hat for the shovel and he'd run up the ladder to the roof where he'd do just as I'd done. We'd do that over and over again, until we ran out of light or my parents came home. Snow was like that; it made us euphoric, day after day, all winter long.

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When I left for college I was burned out on skiing. I thought I might never do it again. The last eighteen years I figured I had lived through 360 major snowstorms,



upwards of 4,320 inches of Sierra snowfall, enough, I figured, to last me for the rest of my life. I had been in hundreds of ski races, gone through more than thirty pairs of skis, frozen my nose and ears at least 1,100 times, my toes and fingers another 360 times. I felt like a ravaged victim of some Scandinavian war. I'm done with snow, I thought, that's it.

I did well, considering my dysfunctionally snowy upbringing; my abstinence from skiing lasted for almost two full years.

I started skiing again two years into college, though this time in a much different form. It was a backcountry ski trip, and we skied that day to the top of a 14,000 foot peak in Colorado. I was with a new friend, Tom, and, as we skied up and out of the trees at treeline and looked down around at snow-covered Holy Cross Wilderness, I remember knowing that skiing and snow would always be a part of my life. In Squaw Valley skiing had always been competitive, fast, pressured. In the backcountry, I found, it was slow, quiet, a means by which I found my way into another landscape. Skiing in the backcountry for the first time might be likened to suddenly realizing how beautiful is night's landscape under full moon. It is the same world, yet it is another.

It was also on that trip that I first began to learn about snow's immense power. A brilliant alpenglow was lighting our way down the east ridge of the peak when we heard a terrific rumbling and the ground began to shake under our skis. We looked up to the north face just in time to see a gigantic avalanche turn the horizon into a mass of churning, bubbling snow clouds. It was far from us and we were in no danger, but the tremendous instability of that moment erupting from the solitude of that perfect day and that lazy alpenglow was enough to put me on edge for the rest of the descent. I had grown up in avalanche country, had seen the total destruction of houses right above our home in Squaw Valley, but I had never actually seen a slide let loose its power, had never felt the earth shake under my feet. Snow had always seemed a stable, solid substance, something I could always count on, like the ground. I felt as if I'd been tricked, yet while I was

scared I was also fascinated by the energy of snow in motion. I've never skied in the backcountry since without my senses tingling with apprehension and magnetism.

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The other general rule of snow is that the colder the temperature, the less snow will bond, and therefore the more likely it is that it will avalanche. But this is a rough rule, and the more you learn about snow dynamics and avalanche safety, the more you realize how unpredictable snow is. I began studying snow soon after my experience in Colorado with Tom. I went to avalanche safety courses, read every book I could find, spent hundreds of hours in the winter backcountry digging snow study pits. And still I find myself shaking my head and saying, "I'm just not sure - it probably won't go...but it might." I can factor in everything - the weather, wind, temperature, slope incline, snowpack, water content, slope history, human element - and nevertheless come up without a clear answer. Basically, if a slope is 30 degrees or steeper, it can slide.

I'd like to think my confusion is purely personal, but experts prove me wrong all the time. Four years ago in the La Sal mountains outside of Moab, Utah, a party of five skiers was hit by a mammoth slide. All of them were experienced backcountry travelers, three of them were considered experts, one of them was the avalanche forecaster for that region, the person you hear on the recording when you call to find out avalanche conditions. Out of the five, two survived. The others were buried under fifteen feet of snow. Rod Newcomb, Exxum guide and founder of the American Avalanche Institute, once told a group of students, of whom I was one, "Don't ever become an expert - we're the ones who get killed." What that says about experts I'm not quite sure, but what it says about snow is obvious: it won't necessarily do what you think it will.

This is especially true once it is on the ground and has been sitting around for a while. Snow changes dramatically throughout the winter. The snowpack temperature

varies throughout each of its layers, and while the ground temperature is always around 32 degrees F., the snowpack is constantly exchanging heat with the atmosphere. One of the most dangerous results of this exchange is called surface hoar, which is a thin layer of surface snow that forms when the water vapor pressure in the air exceeds that of the snowpack's surface crystals. It usually forms on cold, clear nights, and the result is a thin, delicate layer of snow crystals that will not bond to one another. The danger occurs when this fragile layer is later buried under a heavier layer of snow, creating a trigger device for the collapse of a snowpack. All it takes is the step of one skier to fracture a slope held together by a layer of depth hoar.

The other quality of surface hoar is its exquisite beauty. It is the beauty queen of snowflakes, covering the earth and trees and rocks like a layer of white feathers. Given extended cold periods it can grow three or four inches tall, transforming landscape into a world made of glass. Skiing through it one day this winter, I had the impression I would shatter the trees if I breathed too hard. It is one of those things that is difficult to live with, yet you wouldn't wish it away for anything.

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I've only been caught in an avalanche once, four years ago. I was skiing with my brother in the Granite Chief Wilderness, the backside of the Squaw Valley ski area. We had been skiing all morning, climbing up to the ridge and dropping down some steep chutes into Shirley Canyon. We had dug a snow pit to check the snow conditions, felt pretty good that the layers were stable. There were no obvious signs of avalanches. As the day progressed we skied steeper and steeper terrain.

After lunch we decided to drop into Shirley Canyon towards home. I suppose we were getting lazy, too sureheaded, and maybe a little competitive about our skiing (you

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know how brothers can be). We found one particularly steep chute and stared down into it, the tips of our skis hanging over the edge.

"What do you think?" Brad asked, not giving away the slightest bit of apprehension.

"Looks good to me, let's do it," I said, and seconds later I launched myself into the chute, landing in a fine two foot layer of powder. Within seconds I felt the snowpack collapse underneath me. I was sucked into the quickly moving slide before I had time to breathe. This is it, I thought. My life is over. You dumbshit. My body tumbled with the snow, and I remember being amazed at how tiny I felt, as if all of a sudden I had been sucked into outer space and was looking back on the micro speck of flesh that represented my life. It was similar to being in a big wave in the ocean, where fighting is absolutely pointless. I let the snow take me. But just as quickly as it had sucked me in, the snow spit me out like a prune pit, where I lay exhausted and bewildered in the snow as I watched the slide rip through some large trees and come to standstill a hundred yards below.

I don't know how long I lay there before Brad skied down to me, his face white. "Holy shit," he said. "Are you okay?" I hadn't thought to check yet and his question startled me into action. I took a deep breath, ran my hands over my legs, my arms, my head. "Yeah, I think I am. I think I am." And then from somewhere we began to laugh, simultaneously and uncontrollably, tears covering my face. My ski was broken, my gear was spread out over about fifty yards, my hat was gone, and it was snowing again. And we sat there laughing and laughing until my stomach hurt and the snow began to grow thick and heavy on my head.

Hopefully it won't ever happen again. My relationship with snow has changed since then. We are friends, but ours is a tenuous relationship, based on unpredictability and constant guesswork. As I approach thirty, friends begin to disappear. Some of them have been taken by snow, a few by avalanches. Ritt Kellog was one of those friends,

swept away by an avalanche on Mt. Foraker in Alaska. I often wonder what his last moments were like. I wonder if he had a chance to realize what was happening, if he knew, as I thought I did, that his life was nearly over. I wonder if he was killed by the impact of falling down the slope, or if he lay buried for a while waiting for his air to run out, like me when I used to jump off the roof. I wonder if he fought the snow, if he began to hate it, or if he felt at peace in those final moments, awed by the quiet and cool darkness of his grave. I suppose I could ask someone these questions, but in truth I don't want to know. I don't even know if they recovered his body. I prefer to think of him lying in his own castle deep in the snowpack, at peace with the medium on which he chose to walk. I like him better there, where I know he'll last into the next millenia.

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I wish I had written a journal throughout my life, starting from that first winter wandering in 1969. If I had, I imagine it would be a chronicle of snow occurrences, my everyday life intricately tied to what the weather was doing outside. It might go something like this: Jan. 11, 1970 - A cat came to our house this morning during a blizzard. She's a little grey cat who must have crawled through the snow to get here. She came in the door, jumped up on the stove and licked the pancake batter off the hot grill.

December 23, 1970 - Christmas is in two days! The power has been out for a week because of the snow. Mom's been cooking on the woodburning stove and Dad hooked up a generator to run the Christmas tree lights. We're the only house in the valley with lights!

Feb. 25, 1971 - Brad's birthday today. He's acting like a brat. I hit him in the face with a snowball and he told Mom.

Jan. 1, 1972 - We're in Boston this holiday. There's not much snow here, but it's cold. I miss Squaw Valley and jumping off the porch.

July 23, 1975 - Went swimming in Shirley Lake today - jumped further than Peter on the rope swing. He got mad and said he can ski faster. Which is a lie. The ski team is playing soccer for dryland training - and sometimes we go for a run. I can't wait for winter.

Feb. 3, 1977 - There's a big storm right now. Dad was driving me to my Cub Scout meeting when his old green bug slipped on the ice and we ran into a snowbank. Dad drives too fast.

March 19, 1980 - Peter beat me in the slalom this weekend, but only because I caught an edge on the fourth gate. I wax my skis better than he does.

March 31, 1983 - It's the biggest winter in twenty years, Dad says. It's my birthday and I'm trapped at Todd's house in Tahoe City because an avalanche closed the road to Squaw. We haven't had school for a week, it's so great. We watched TV all morning, but then Todd's dad made us shovel the roof. I guess roofs have been caving in.

March 31, 1995 - I hiked up Wishard Ridge today and skied some new terrain in the fourth and fifth bowls. Beautiful clear day, not a cloud in the sky. Rare for Montana. Brad called to wish me happy birthday - he said Squaw Valley just got six feet of snow in twenty-four hours. I miss those winters. Up here we haven't really had a winter at all. Still, if you get up high enough there's good snow, and it's nice to get out of the rotten egginess of Missoula. It was at least sixty degrees up there and I skied in a t-shirt. The snowpack was solid - no need to dig a pit. No sign of avalanche. I got a wonderful birthday present in the form of bobcat tracks, which I followed along the ridge until they disappeared in a clump of trees. I felt like I was being watched.

Earlier in the season when I skied up Wishard Ridge, I closely examined the snow. I usually take a magnifying glass and try to identify the type of snowflake in each layer.

I am always surprised by what I find, by the variety of crystals, and I have a strange desire to collect these flakes like a rock collector collects rocks. But that's the beauty of snow crystals - I can't take them home with me, let alone look away for a minute. In seconds my masterpiece of a spatial dendrite might metamorphose into some round icy blob, one of millions. The beauty of snow is fleeting on almost all levels. In Squaw Valley I was always thrilled by the lofty freshness of a storm, always disappointed at its dirty frumpiness in later weeks. In Missoula I wake exuberant to a layer of fresh snow, but by the time I've showered it's melted into sludge. I love the first snow of winter; I mourn its loss with the muddiness of spring. Maybe it has something to do with trying to hang on to my childhood. Whatever the reasons, its unpredictability and constant transformation always keep me guessing.

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There is an old Yakima Indian story that tells of coyote bringing winter to the world. Coyote and Eagle steal the sun and the moon, which are kept in wooden boxes, from the powerful Kachinas, hoping to use the light for their own hunting. But Coyote, always incurably curious, opens the boxes to have a peek, and as he does the sun and the moon rise into the sky. As soon as this happens the world begins to turn cold, and snow begins to fall. Metaphorically the release of the moon brings death and desolation to the world. "'Now your teeth are chattering,' Eagle said, 'and it's your fault that cold has come into the world.'"<sup>1</sup> Coyote, the trickster, is blamed for the coming of snow.

I, for one, can't imagine a world with endless summer, though I know people who would like nothing better. If I were to write my own myth it would be a celebration of coyote for bringing snowballs, sleds, snowcastles, and skis into the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Erdoes & Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends*, p.142

Eskimo mythology, though thankfully void of coyote, overflows with stories about winter and snow, how is it both life-giving and life-taking. Their language distinguishes at least two dozen different kinds of snow. There is windblown snow, new fallen snow, soft snow that fell without wind, snow for walking on, wet snow belonging to springtime, the walk-anywhere snow of early morning that comes after a cold night, corn snow, sugar snow, snow for igloos, snow for hunting, snow for traveling by dogsled, sun snow, moon snow, moose snow, seal snow. It is a language, and a life, as close to snow as one can get.

Yet skis have never really caught on for them. While visiting western Alaska five years ago, I spent a week in Kotlik, a fishing village at the base of the Kuskokwim river. After a few days I decided to venture into the backcountry, and I asked around to see if I could borrow some skis. I was shocked to find that none of the Yu'pik had any. The only person who had skis was a white school teacher from Colorado. If the Yu'pik want to go in the backcountry they either ride a dogsled or a snow machine. Skis are relatively useless for them in terms of survival. Still, I borrowed those skis and had a blast skiing the small hills surrounding the village (which earned me some strange looks that evening). The point here is that for me, snow has always been associated with recreation; for the Yu'pik, snow is as part of their life as the air they breathe. They know no life without it.

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Though I like to think that Squaw Valley has the most snow in the world, there are places that have more. Montanans and Alaskans alike might be surprised to know that the U.S. record for a single snowfall, 189 inches in seven days, was set at Mount Shasta, in California. And the record for the greatest depth of snow at any time, 451 inches, was



set in Tamarack California, in 1911. California, despite its sunny stereotype, is one heck of a place for a snow crystal connoisseur to spend some time.

But lest Montanans get grouchy over those facts, they can rest easy knowing that they have the record for the largest flakes. On January 28, 1887, the *Monthly Weather Review* reported that for that year, near Fort Keogh, Montana, snowflakes "larger than milk pans" were sighted by a mail carrier who was caught in the storm. He said that the huge flakes made small craters all over the local fields. I like to imagine the look on that guy's face.

Another journal from Britain reported the following: "Snowflakes of exceptional size, variously reported by postmen and other early risers to have been 'enormous,' 'as big as saucers,' and 'about five inches across,' fell in Berkhamsted town and neighboring districts of the Chiltern Hills."<sup>2</sup> The largest snowflakes I've ever seen were about the size of a silver dollar, and I remember standing outside with Brad and catching them in our hands, enthralled by this new miracle. We ran inside to tell our dad, who calmly told us about the early days of Squaw Valley when snowflakes were as big as his hands. I never thought then to question what he said, and even now I tend towards believing that story, even though it sounds unbelievable. After all, if Montana can have milk pan size flakes, certainly it's possible. Anyway, I look forward to the day when I'm skiing along some ridge and snowflakes the size of frisbees start to fall from the sky. I don't care where it is. I'll take a break, sit back in the snow and let it cover me like a new layer of skin.

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<sup>2</sup>Hawke, E.L.; *Weather*, 6:254, 1951

## Guns in the Woods

An eight year old boy sits on the stairs in front of his house, watching butterflies. His hair is blonde, almost white, and his eyes are blue and shaped like a cat's. His chin rests in the palms of his too large hands, and his elbows balance on his skinny, scabbed knees.

It is a clear day in the mountains where he lives. He hears bluejays, which he hates because they wake him in the morning. A small creek trickles nearby, and off in the distance a dog barks. His mother is inside the house cleaning. He can hear the vacuum moving from room to room, and it makes him tense because he knows it was his job to vacuum. Now his mother will ignore him the rest of the afternoon, to get even with him for arguing. Anybody walking by would see a little boy watching butterflies.

The boy's cat eyes fall on a monarch butterfly, bigger and brighter than any he has seen yet today. The boy has been waiting for this one. At least that's what he thinks as the butterfly rests on a donkey ear flower less than three feet away from him. The boy's eyes narrow and his body tightens. He thinks of himself as a cat. He knows he is quick.

The butterfly's wings move up and down very slowly, the orange and black patterns reflecting in the boy's eyes. The butterfly cleans its black legs which bend like thread at their tiny knees, its antennae quiver. The boy watches for a long minute, then in one quick motion lunges forward, brings both hands around and swiftly cups them around the butterfly.

The boy feels the softness of the wings on the palms of his hands. He feels the wing dust his mother has told him about; it coats his fingers. She has told him butterflies cannot fly if he destroys their wing dust. He doesn't believe in magic or he might think the dust has special powers. But he likes the wing dust; it feels like silk on his skin.

The butterfly beats its wings frantically inside the cage of the boy's fingers. The boy looks in between his fingers and watches the butterfly thrash around. He is not smiling. He feels sorry for the butterfly but he keeps watching anyway. He cannot not watch.

The vacuum inside the house is still going. Just to be safe the boy walks around the side of the house where no one can see him. He sits down on top of a big granite rock and holds the globe of his hands out in front of him where he can watch the butterfly tire itself out. Soon the wings cease flapping and the boy thinks he can see the butterfly's little chest heaving in and out. That is strange, the boy thinks, that a butterfly breathes like me, that it has tiny little lungs and a heart as big as a speck of dirt that is pounding and pounding right now. The boy tries to feel the butterfly's breath on his fingers. He looks in and sees the butterfly's eyes, but he can't tell where they're looking because they're black and solid and don't seem to be looking anywhere. The boy imagines himself inside the butterfly's body, looking out of the giant fingers into the blue cat eyes. He wonders what it would be like to be trapped inside someone's hands. It scares him to think about this so he decides to move on.

Very carefully the boy reaches his ring fingers inside the cage of his hands and pinches one of the butterfly's wings between them. He unlocks the rest of his fingers and

holds the butterfly dangling and flapping just a few inches from his nose. He looks into the butterfly's face, thinks he recognizes fear. The boy is still not smiling. He doesn't like this anymore but he's gone too far to turn back. He can't stop himself.

He puts the butterfly down on the rock and bends down over it, still holding one wing between two of his fingers. Then with the forefinger and thumb of his other hand he holds the butterfly's other wing. Very gently he starts to pull apart with both hands. He senses the fragility of the wings between his fingers, feels the wing dust slippery against his skin. He stares into the butterfly's face as he pulls harder....

the left wing shears off in the boy's hand.

He can't tell from the butterfly's face but he imagines it must have hurt a lot. Something is oozing out of the butterfly from where the wing ripped loose. It isn't blood but maybe something like it, a yellowish mucous. The boy lets go and watches the butterfly flap its wing as if it still thinks it can fly. With every beat it tips over to the wingless side, off balance.

The boy still isn't smiling. In fact he is closer to crying. He feels sad for the butterfly, maimed and hurting as it is. But he watches for a little while longer until he hears the vacuum cleaner turn off upstairs. Then quickly he stands, hesitates for one second before he smashes the butterfly with his shoe and grinds it into dust against the granite. He walks to the woodpile under the stairs where he lifts a single log. Beneath the log are four other wings of different varieties, along with a menagerie of legs and wings from ants, lady bugs, grasshoppers, bees, flies, mosquitoes, various and sundry beetles, and most importantly, his prize possession, the burned carcass of a big spider that he found in the bathtub and burned alive leg by leg with the careful use of his father's lighter.

He places the big monarch wing on top of the other things and puts the log back in place. He is just in time. His mother comes out the front door and sees her little boy coming up the stairs. He is still not smiling.

"What have you been doing?" she asks him.

"Nothing," he answers, "just playing."

And she knows he is lying and he knows she knows he is lying, but it doesn't matter because the deed is done and will be done over and over again, repeating itself endlessly in ways the boy cannot possibly imagine.

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In his story "Hook," Walter Van Tilburg Clark explores the life of a hawk, named Hook, who is thrown from his nest early and left to fend for himself. Hook learns what Clark calls a hawk's "three hungers" - flight, killing, and mating. Hook learns to fly and kill almost simultaneously. As Clark says, "Hook had mastered the first of three hungers which are fused into the single, flaming will of a hawk, and he had experienced the second." But Hook's hunger to kill transcends his desire to simply eat, and throughout the story he kills "joyously," "enthralled" by his taste for blood. At one point he kills five seagulls "vindictively," seeking revenge for the farmer's shot which has left Hook crippled. Hook lusted to kill, and it had nothing to do with eating.

Many other animals have been known to do the same thing. Wolves, for example, are well known for their playful methods of predation with small mammals, batting mice around with their paws or tossing a live groundhog from mouth to mouth, sometimes without any intention of eating it. They have also been known to slaughter caribou or deer and leave the carcass. Bears have been known to slap dozens of trout from a stream and then eat only a few. Domestic cats are the most common example. What cat owner has not seen his cat swat a mouse around like a kid with a ball until the mouse expires and the cat gets bored and leaves? What inspires a cat to do so? Is it pure playfulness? Maybe it is part play, but it would also seem to be part of the hunger about which Clark writes

in "Hook." Cats kill not only to eat but also because they like the taste of blood; they kill because they like to kill.

It is possible that humans have a similar hunger for blood. Clark's "Hook" can be read as an allegory of human development, the youth being kicked from the nest to fend for oneself, feeling the thrill of love, lust, competition for survival. Maybe Hook's three hungers are similar to our own. As carnivorous animals, early humans killed to survive, to feed themselves, and maybe they sometimes killed for the fun of it. In the last couple of centuries we have killed for less reason than to fill our bellies; we exterminated the buffalo, left the hideless carcasses to rot on the prairie. We slaughtered the Indians, then later we made movies to glorify the bloodshed. The Nazis used some of their best scientists to find creative ways of killing the Jews. The list goes on and on. Humans kill humans for a multitude of reasons, including pleasure; perhaps we kill animals for similar reasons.

When my father was a young man he went to Africa and killed lions. He didn't want the skins, the meat, the teeth. He wanted to shoot them, and by doing so prove himself. He wanted to take the life of an animal more powerful than he. There are pictures of him with his lions. He stands proudly next to them with a gun in his hand; the lions hang from a tree limb and drip blood in the dirt. Today in Africa, white tourist hunters pay thirty or forty thousand dollars just to kill one elephant bull and bring home the head to mount as a trophy. What do these stuffed heads really mean, what pleasure do they bring the killer? Some hunters will tout the "natural" experience of it, arguing that it helps them "get in touch" with nature. In a sense they are right: if a hunger for blood is part and parcel of being human, then by killing, one is reaching back to the primal self.

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When I was a kid I loved guns. I couldn't get enough of them. I saw photos of my dad in Africa, a dead lion underfoot and a big rifle in his right hand. I imagined the lion rushing, the powerful explosion of the rifle that brought the lion to its knees, the rifle that saved my father's life. I bragged about it to my friends because I thought the gun made my father more a man than he could be without it. And it worked. My boyhood friends were all as gun-crazy as I was.

There were four or five of us who on any free afternoon would dress up in our camo garb and go into the woods to play "Army." We spent our allowances on toy guns of all kinds, though there were unwritten rules of coolness about firearms. One, the gun had to look real. None of that clear plastic, sissy-colored water pistol stuff. And no Lone Ranger cap pistol cowboy stuff, either. We were looking for the guns closest to contemporary killing machines: fake metal M-16s bought at the Salvation Army, big replica 45 caliber handguns, Rugers, ouzies, preferably black, heavy, without any of the artificial sound mechanisms that so many kids' guns came with. We made our own sounds, explosions and gunfire much more violent and dramatic than the toys could produce. And silencers were cool, too, so with only a quick "pwoof" through puckered lips we could silence our enemies.

I remember the cool summer afternoon when I killed both my best friend, Peter, and my little brother, Brad. We didn't mess around with the good guy/ bad guy duality - ethics or values weren't what we were fighting for. It was pure Darwinian playtime. Either you killed, or you got killed, no two ways about it.

That afternoon I was dressed in black karate pants and a gray turtleneck, and I *imagined myself as some kind of James Bond figure, probably from France or some such place.* Whatever I was, I was lethal. I had a replica M-16 that I'd stolen from a kid down the street and kept hidden under the porch so my parents wouldn't find it. It was black,

heavy enough to seem very real, and I thought it was the baddest looking thing since Rambo.

I had another friend, Roger, on my side, and Peter and Brad were "the enemy." Brad carried a small handgun and Peter a double barreled shotgun(that was actually the real thing, but empty), so I knew their firepower was limited. The power of Peter's shotgun worried me a little, but after all, he only had two shots. I crawled along on my belly over the deep humus of the old growth Sierra forest, listening for the movements of my enemies. A chipmunk chirped its warnings down to me, I heard the low coo-coo cooing of an owl up in the trees. Right near my face a big butterfly rested on a mossy tree stump.

I made two more snake-slithers forward before I realized I had them. Without even meaning to I had snuck up on Peter and Brad, who were crouched behind a boulder focusing their guns on a tree, behind which I could see Roger's outline. I reminded myself to keep breathing, then slowly raised my gun to fire.

Again, the coo-coo cooing from high up in the trees. Yellow and green speckled light danced across the forest floor, and I felt the chill of the daytime darkness of thick trees. I held my fire, watching Peter and Brad whisper to each other, making a plan. Brad's freckled nose brushed Peter's round cheek, their heads touched. I saw that my brother's hair was slightly red, and that it stuck straight up in the air from last night's sleep. I noticed their breathing, controlled like my own, but excited, so excited that it gave me shivers. Then Roger ruined it all by stepping from behind the tree...

and suddenly I was cutting Peter and Brad in half, my M-16 hot and jerking in my hands, the spit flying from my lips as I "bradadadadadadad"-ed them. I saw the shock in their eyes, that single moment when they knew they'd been killed. And like gentlemen they took their qu; they dropped their guns, screamed and gagged, jerked their bodies in a pathetic, spastic death dance, and fell to the ground, their limbs tangled and twisted and run out of life.



Roger was running towards me screaming, "Yeaahh, you got 'em, you got 'em, yeaahh!" I sat on the stump where the butterfly had been and I stared at my dead brother and best friend, and I remember being confused because I couldn't figure out if I felt good or bad, if this was supposed to make me happy or sad. It all seemed so real that day, and I was afraid of the widening possibilities.

Finally they got up from their deaths and we all marched home together along the creek. Our guns were holstered and we laughed as we walked. They kept asking me how I had snuck up on them, telling me how "rad" I was. Peter was ecstatic about his death, proud of his final throes. I wanted to ask them if they had heard the owl, but I didn't know how.

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A few years later, when I was twelve or thirteen, I got my first real gun. My brother-in-law, Ed, a Vietnam veteran whose roughness scared me, bought two old single bolt-action twenty-two caliber rifles at a garage sale and gave them to Brad and me. He said he would help us fix them up, refinish them, teach us how to shoot. Of course we were overjoyed.

They were beautiful guns. Mine was bigger and the stock was made of some darker reddish wood, like cherry, and the barrel and chamber area was black and slick. The bolt was silver. Brad's gun was the color of a palomino horse. It was rounder than mine, comfortable to hold, and the barrel and chamber were lighter black, almost gray. We spent hours and hours sanding the wood of our guns, smoothing out the edges and putting indentations right where we wanted to rest our fingers. Ed helped us, showed us how to clean the barrels, taught us the proper etiquette of gun care. He was terribly serious about it, and I remember feeling we were working on something of vital importance. No joking around, just sand, sand, sand, polish, stain, polish.

It took us a couple of months to finish our guns, and the day we were finished Ed offered to take us out to the firing range to show us how to shoot. Brad and I grabbed our guns and hopped into the back of Ed's truck. All the way to the range I stared at Ed's collection of guns, some in cases, some wrapped in blankets, some just laying out next to me. He had a Browning twelve gauge shotgun, a 20 gauge double barrel shotgun, a 30.06 Winchester rifle, a .270 Remington, a .458 Magnum, a .222 Swift, a .300 Weatherby magnum, three or four gigantic handguns which I later learned were a .38 special, a .44 magnum, and a .357 magnum. But I was most enthralled by his giant antique Hawkins buffalo gun, which Ed told us was once used for hunting buffalo. Brad looked at me, his eyes big and impressed, and maybe just a little scared.

I had never been to a firing range before. On the dirt road going in I noticed that all the road signs had been shot until they were unreadable. It was a weekend and there were a few other people at the range. Loud shots echoed and vibrated up and down the canyon walls. The ground was strewn with litter, broken glass carpeting the high desert floor and glittering in the sun. There were thousands of empty aluminum beer cans, most of them riddled with holes, empty gallon milk jugs, gas cans, plastic buckets, broken pieces of fluorescent clay pigeons, old broken furniture, appliances, seven or eight televisions. And all around my feet at the place where we stopped to shoot were millions of empty casings from an untold number and variety of guns.

As Ed unloaded his arsenal from his truck I looked at the rifle in my hands, my little .22 that I had, only a few weeks earlier, thought to be the most powerful weapon on earth. Now it seemed small and impotent, though its beautiful red wood gleamed in the sun. Brad looked more than a little afraid at this point, and he stared down the road at a man who was emptying his pistol into the trunk of a juniper tree that grew maybe thirty feet from him. BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM and then countless echoes before a ringing silence. The man reloaded and the tree stayed where it was.

We helped Ed unload cans and bottles from the truck, and he took them out into the field and lined them up in a row. He also lined up five one-gallon milk containers filled with water. I looked at Brad and he shrugged his shoulders in confusion. Then Ed proceeded to teach us to shoot. He showed us how to hold the stock firmly but lightly against our shoulders, how to sight down the barrel of the rifle, how to breathe gently and pull the trigger while exhaling. I was so excited to shoot my gun, whom I had secretly named The Lion Killer, but when I pulled the trigger the little pop that came out seemed a joke next to the explosions coming from down field. I went through a box of bullets before I hit a thing, and once I did I was hooked. In less than an hour Brad and I used up all of our bullets and our faces were flushed with hunger for more. I remember looking around and wishing I could shoot at birds, squirrels, anything alive; bottles and cans soon became boring.

When Brad and I were finished Ed began shooting his guns. He gave us earmuffs to wear to protect our ears, but still my ears hurt from his guns. He fired them all, one by one, going through them methodically it seemed, blowing his targets to smithereens. He saved the Hawkins buffalo gun for last, as well as the water filled milk jugs. I'll never forget the sound of that gun going off for the first time ten feet away from me, like a cannon or a bomb. The milk jug erupted. I couldn't tell how it happened, but all of a sudden there was a fountain of water rising out of midair and rainbow colors falling to the ground. It was beautiful and terrible all at once. I had recently learned that the human brain was ninety percent water, and I couldn't help thinking about that, about human brains flying around with rainbow colors.

I don't think I asked to shoot that gun, but neither did I refuse. Brad on the other hand, was scared out of his pants and said he didn't want to. Ed said, "Brad, you go first," and shoved the gun into Brad's hands. He was shaking when he pulled the trigger, then he was flying backwards onto his butt, holding his shoulder and crying. Ed was cursing at him for dropping the gun.

When I shot that buffalo gun the world went black and my mind went numb, but only for a second. There was pain in my shoulder but I managed to stay on my feet, and I saw vividly the milk jug turn to brains and all the colors falling to the earth. And I liked it...

no, I loved it. I loved that feeling of power, of knowing that nothing could hold back that power, that in my arms was a weapon that turned me from a skinny pimply little boy into a man. A powerful man. With that gun nobody, *nothing*, could say no to me. I yearned to know what it would feel like to take a life.

\* \* \* \*

I took my first life not long after that day at the shooting range. I was forbidden to shoot my gun around our house, but my parents were usually gone during the afternoon when I got home from school. Brad didn't join me anymore; he had lost interest in his gun, or any gun for that matter. He told me his shoulder was still sore, but I knew it was more than that. I also knew, deep down, that he'd never use his gun again.

I went on a shooting spree. I shot woodpeckers, bluejays, signs, windows, snakes, frogs, tires, houses, mice. It went on for a month or two, and somehow I never got caught. I cleaned my gun regularly, and my best friend, Peter, stole bullets from his uncle Bob. What frustrated me was that it was all too clean; I'd shoot a bird, go find it and hold it in my hands, still warm. But there was rarely blood. It was as if the body had sucked up my bullet through an invisible hole that I could never find. I needed more blood, and it wasn't long before I found it.

I was with Peter the day I killed the squirrel. We spotted two of them, fifty yards away on a rock, and one look from Peter inspired me to run inside to get The Lion Killer. I had one bullet. I loaded the gun, leveled the rifle and fired. One of the squirrels somersaulted through the air and then they were both gone. I thought I had certainly

missed; it was a long shot and I still wasn't very good. But Peter and I ran towards the rock, and when we got there we found blood, a little trail of it wandering off towards the next door neighbor's house, over pine needles and rocks and grass.

We found the squirrel underneath the neighbor's porch. I had hit it right above the eyes, blown off half of its head. But it was still alive, had crawled fifty yards with only half a brain. It was breathing heavily, a tiny wet whistling coming from its bloody nostrils. Peter was mumbling, "You got 'em, you fuckin' got 'em." Then I heard a high screeching sound, and looked up to see the second squirrel on a tree branch above us, staring down at us. Suddenly it hit me what I had done. There was the milk jug rainbow brains, and there was this squirrel's brains, and they were two very different things.

I had no bullets, and the dying squirrel was still breathing. I picked up a large flat rock, and with the second squirrel screeching like a wounded soul, I smashed the remaining life out of his mate. That was the last time I have ever willingly killed.

\* \* \* \*

I have a friend named Tony who lives in a fairly wild place in Colorado and hunts to feed his family in the winter. He has thick black hair with a matching beard, and I have seen him walk out of the mountains as if he had been born there, as if the earth had cleaved and sent forth another child. He lives off his land as much as he can, rarely travels, and he is the fourth generation of his people in that country. His children play in the woods along the creek behind his tiny log house, and they are almost always dirty and dripping snot. He and his wife don't believe in sending them to public schools because, they say, "They teach them that the earth is dead." They live as close to the land as anyone I know in the lower forty-eight.

Tony is what I would call a low impact, spiritually motivated hunter. He believes deeply in the sacredness of all things, and when he hunts he thanks the animal for letting

him feed his family with its life. He believes that humans belong in the food web, but for him we are the spider in that web; therefore we are allowed, if not responsible, to eat anything caught in our spun destiny.

He kills with a gun when he hunts deer, or when he kills one of his sheep. "It's the most humane," he says. "Most people who use bows aren't very good at it and they end up wounding the animal first." He argues vehemently that it's natural for little boys to want to play with guns, that it is part of their natural desire to kill, part of their hunger. When I tell Tony about Van Tilburg Clark's "three hungers," he agrees with them. Just as Hook is enthralled by his taste for blood, so, Tony would argue, are humans. "In order to live close to the earth, we need to take part in its cycles, and killing for food is a part of that cycle. I like meat, I think we're meant to eat it, and if I'm going to eat it I want to kill it. At least I can celebrate the life of the animal, which I could never do by buying cellophane wrapped steroid-injected so-called meat at a supermarket."

I've tried for years to come to terms with Tony's wild ethic, and I accept it on some levels. I respect his searching for the sacredness of animals, and I believe he may be right about our place in the food web. My Yu'pik relatives in Alaska live by a similar code, and I once watched them bring down a moose that fed two families over the winter. I watched them thank the moose and the Great Spirit, down on their knees next to the huge animal, their hearts obviously connected to their actions. I was moved by it, then disheartened as they cut and quartered the moose before loading it onto the snow machines which roared away into the whiteness.

I have another friend who loves ducks with a passion, has ever since he was a kid. He had twelve stuffed animal ducks and dozens of duck toys. His license plate reads DUCKLUV, and his apartment walls are covered with paintings and photographs of a wide variety of ducks. And every year since he was in grade school he celebrates his love for ducks by going out into the country and blowing them out of the sky with a twelve gauge.

I remember him as a kid sitting on the steps of his house plucking his recent kills, noting the beauty of the feathers. He wanted me to love them, too, but I never really understood his love.

He is one of thousands, millions even, who celebrate their love for animals by killing them. Here in Montana the love is rampant. I know committed environmentalists who go out every season and get a deer, who explain it any number of ways but most frequently by claiming it helps them feel closer to the natural world. Maybe this is part of Clark's idea that we are ruled by blood hunger; maybe the blood hunger is really a need to connect with the natural world.

Still, when I hear of someone going out to commune with nature by hunting, and that someone ends up wounding the deer who slowly bleeds to death overnight, I have my doubts. And I hope that that someone has doubts, too. We need these doubts, after all, if only to keep us thinking about what it means to celebrate life, and death.

It is fall. Hunting season is upon us. Yesterday I went for a hike in the Rattlesnake Wilderness near Missoula. It was a cool day up high and the colors were already beginning to turn, but still some late wildflowers hung on like brilliant purple buttons hanging from a yellow blouse. I was walking fast, my bare legs feeling strong and light, and every once in a while I'd break into a run for no other reason than that I couldn't help myself. I saw six or seven deer, a couple of hummingbirds, and I thought I heard the low hoot of an owl, though the time of day was wrong. I found a wondrous pile of bear poop, berry-filled and nearly a foot high, and I nearly squashed an empty hornets' nest that had fallen from a tree and landed in the trail.

It was almost noon when I came across the hunter, a big man with a big belly, a red cap, and a very big gun, what looked to be maybe a .222 Swift. And what happened next is hard to explain for its lack of eventfulness. It wasn't even really an event, but more a feeling. I caught up to him and went to pass, nodding hello as I did so, and as I

passed he asked me if I had "seen any game." I realized as he said this that the birds had stopped singing, the little creatures had stopped scurrying about the underbrush, and the world seemed intensely silent. "No," I said, "I haven't." And then, strangely, I almost added, "Good luck." I raced to get ahead of him, away from his gun, even though I know he posed no threat to me.

On a switchback above him, a safe distance away, I stared back at the hunter and his gun. He ambled along, chewing tobacco and looking around with no real passion for game, and I tried to picture him as a kid playing in the woods. I wondered how it was he felt, if a blood hunger pulsed through him like some sacred, ancient ritual. I wondered about his ceremonies. A mile up the trail the sounds came back, and finally I stopped thinking about that gun.



### Flight of the Ouzel

But the ouzel never calls forth a single touch of pity; not because he is strong to endure, but rather because he seems to live a life beyond the reach of every influence that makes endurance necessary.

-John Muir

No moon. My brother and I sneak out the house at midnight, armed with flashlights but not using them yet. We cut through old man Big John's front yard and duck under the log fence that surrounds the meadow. Horses graze there, and through the pitch dark come the snorts of the herd. As we come closer we see the dark outlines of the horses standing still, some lying down, all bunched close together. It is cold, air comes thickly from their nostrils. I pull carrots from my pocket, hand one to Brad, and slowly, quietly, we walk flat-footed towards the horses with carrots extended.

There is a general flurry of movement. Then they adjust, smell the carrots, maybe our familiarity, and move towards us through the dark. Brad searches off to the left for the appaloosa he likes, and I feed my carrot to Mrs. Fox's palomino, whom I've been horsejacking for years. I pull a halter over her head as she eats,

wrap the lead rope over her neck and tie it on the other side, creating makeshift reins. Then with a grunting lunge I'm aboard and kicking to catch up with Brad galloping into the night.

Riding at night is like swimming underwater in the dark. Only better. I can hear the horse's legs pounding ground and wind in my ears, and me hanging on to the mane, my legs gripped tight. Once before, the palomino had tripped and sent me flying into the night, and I'd done a belly flop on the meadow and thought I was dead until my air returned in heaving gasps. But the cold air on my face and our powerful movement cutting through blackness like a shooting star is worth the risk.

I catch up to Brad just before the beaver ponds at the meadow's north end, and we stop to let the horses drink. I can hear Brad breathing but we don't speak. After a minute we turn upstream, heading for our favorite fishing hole. I feel the horse's breaths spreading my legs in and out, the strength of its frame and me tiny on its back.

Willows line the banks of Squaw Creek. We tie up the horses downstream from our fishing hole and walk quietly along the bank. When we get there we take out our knives, cut two thick willow branches and began carving the sharp tips and the notches an inch up so the fish won't slide off when we pull them from the water. Satisfied, we take off our shoes and socks, roll up our pants, and wade into the cold knee deep water. When we get to the middle of the creek I whisper okay to Brad and we turn the flashlights on. I point my light at the creek bottom and walk in slow motion upstream. The first fish to come into my beam is too fast for me and my spear digs into the mud. "Shit," I mumble. "Ssshhh," Brad hisses back. I hear Brad's spear slice water and then the slapping of a fish against rock. "Huge," Brad whispers loudly. "Ssshhh," I say. "Shut up!"

I continue walking upstream a few feet before a big trout moves into the flashlight beam. It stops and hovers in the light, trapped like a deer in the headlights of a car. But I hold off, my spear raised above me and my body tense. It

is a rainbow trout, maybe fourteen inches long, calmly undulating back and forth, flashing pink and silver in the light. I can see it so closely, a tear in its tail fin, its gills pumping, its bulging eyes. I think for a moment that I shouldn't. Then I plunge the spear through the water and into the fish. I watch it skewered like that, the spear stuck in the river bottom, holding the fish in place and it still trying to swim away.

When I reach Brad downstream he has speared one more fish and is almost finished cleaning them. I sit with him and hold his light while he admires my fish, then slices and guts it. We string them on a piece of kite cord and head back to the horses.

When we get there his horse has pulled loose and taken off, so we both jump on to the palomino and ride double back across the meadow, me in front and him in back holding the fish in one hand, my shoulder in the other. We ride slowly, and smell the fish and hear our breathing, and give the horse one more carrot before we slap her butt and send her back into the meadow's night.

\* \* \* \*

My father first came to Squaw Valley in 1952, looking for good skiing and someplace to eventually settle down. Squaw Valley was, at the time, a tiny ski area with one lift and a jigback, an old one seater chair on which the skier sits sideways. Lift tickets cost a couple of dollars. Mostly just the locals skied there. The one road in was dirt, and the town consisted of a post office, a general store, and the Bear Pen, a two story bar with a giant rack of elk antlers hanging over the door. From the moment he rounded the fourth curve in the valley road and saw the snow-covered meadow surrounded by mountains, he knew that Squaw Valley would become his home.

Four years later he and his new wife packed their bags and drove west for good. They settled in a small cabin just above the long green meadow that ran the length of the valley and was split by a small creek winding its way to the Truckee River at the valley entrance. They thought that they had found their paradise. Behind our house, up Shirley Canyon, were hundreds of square miles of wilderness, including what is now the Granite Chief Wilderness Area. Shirley Canyon was a mixture of huge granite slabs, giant old growth trees, and lush fern forests cloven by the granite troughs of Squaw Creek running through. It was the main feeder of the valley aquifer which lived under the meadow on the valley floor. Because of the massive Sierra snowfalls there was always plenty of water, and Squaw Creek turned into a raging water monster in the springtime. But the meadow soaked up much of the water and was always covered in waist-high grass and innumerable wildflowers. From my parents' cabin they could watch the entire length of the meadow, all the way up to the looming cliffs of Granite Chief Mountain.

My father, John Peter, still tells of watching the meadow in early mornings, coyotes trotting through the cold fog that hovered ethereal just above the grass. Squaw Creek was the meeting place of animals, and my parents watched deer, beaver, raccoons, coyote, and bear navigate around one another on their way to a morning drink. There were mountain lions, too, they knew from the tracks, but they never saw one. I can see my father, there on the deck of his little A-framed cabin, his hands down the back of his underwear scratching his butt, his then-red hair ruffled and his steel blue eyes looking out over his place. He did that every morning, looked out over the valley like a king over his kingdom, though as years went on the changes in the landscape registered on his forehead as deep, curving grooves that came and went and then finally, one day, became the permanent contour of his face.

My mother, Doris, was half Yup'ik Eskimo, born in 1929 in a small fishing village named Kotlik, where the Yukon River drains into the Bering Sea. Her

Eskimo mother died of tuberculosis when my mother was two, and for her first five years she was raised by her extended Eskimo family. When she was six her Finnish father became ill and arranged for her and her brother to go to Seattle for school, living with Swedish friends of his. Her father died soon after and she never saw Kotlik again.

Confined to rural, conservative Vashon island, she became intensely aware of her dark skin and avoided anything Eskimo. In her journal, written forty years later, she chronicled her transformation: "My mother's picture 'vanished.' My beaded skin slippers, chewed soft by my grandmother's worn yellow teeth, lay hidden in the back of my closet. My favorite rag doll with black eyes and hair from an Alaskan bear 'disappeared.'" She tried to blend into the community and the memory of her old life gradually faded away. But the photos I have seen from her early life belie that blending. Dressed in the long skirts and knee socks of the late forties, her brown skin and wide face stand out among the Wonderbread all-Americans with whom she is pictured: the football boys on her arm, her blonde cheerleader friends, her pale Swedish adoptive sisters, who conspired with her to hide the differences by showing her how to use makeup and how to dress just right. She is always smiling widely, in contrast to her brother, Carl, who seems sad and also out of place. They are both displaced, but he, at least, seems hurt by it, as if he recognizes his loss. My mother, on the other hand, looked to her future to bury the past.

For my mother, I think, moving to Squaw Valley was like taking a step back towards the more wild landscape of her Alaskan youth. As the years went on she spent more and more time exploring the wilderness that surrounded her home. I think, though, that she never forgot Kotlik, and despite her love of Squaw Valley and Shirley Canyon, she was always a person displaced.

By the time my brother and I were born, eleven months apart, in 1967, Squaw Valley was already long gone as paradise. The winter Olympics had come in

1960, bringing with them all the growth required to house a world community. In those two weeks Squaw Valley was transformed from a tiny, little known ski town, into a world class destination resort. Part of the meadow was covered with sawdust to make a massive parking lot. Much of the mountain was stripped of its trees to create new downhill ski course. The Olympic Village was built at the base of Shirley Canyon. The Olympic rings hung like gold from the rafters of the concrete and steel Olympic ice arena. More chairlifts were constructed to connect the valley floor with the upper ski mountain. Suddenly the locals were sitting on millions of dollars of property and the entire Lake Tahoe basin was transformed into a year round recreation boomtown.

My parents must have seen it coming, and from early on my father and other early locals fought the Ski Corporation for every stand of trees they clearcut to make room for more groomed ski runs. After the Olympics things calmed down a little . The monolithic monuments fell into ruin, until virtually all of them were torn down. In a way it was like growing up in an Olympic ghost town. We still had the meadow and Shirley Canyon, and for many years after I was born, my parents still lived under the influence of their early visions of Squaw Valley. I think they thought the worst of it was over. It was twenty years down the road before they realized how much trouble they were in.

\* \* \* \*

My mother loved to hike to the water ouzel falls. When I was old enough to walk she'd pack a lunch of peanut butter and honey sandwiches, strap Brad on her back, and off we'd go up the trail into Shirley Canyon. It was a long walk for little kids, maybe two miles, and I remember it seemed to take forever to get there. Along the way my mom would point things out to us: the Three Grey Ghosts, 400 year old Jeffrey pine trees; the Big Flat Rock, a piece of granite flat as a pancake and as wide

as our house; the Bathtubs, huge pools scooped out of the granite by millenia of water; squirrels, hummingbirds, pine cones that came up to my knees. We marveled at the things she showed us, and it made the journey go faster. We were always excited, too, because we knew the water ouzel falls was her special place.

After coming through a thick ferny forest we'd break through the trees, crest a small rise and go left to the falls, a series of cascades spaced out on a long sloping slab of white granite, like a long smooth water slide. The main drop was about five feet, and behind the water pouring over this drop was a wide horizontal cave, in which water ouzels made their yellow and green mossy nests. The grapefruit sized nests were built mostly of moss, but intricately interwoven with pieces of driftwood and rock appendages to which they were anchored. Sometimes, when the water flow was low, little flowers would grow off the moss and color the inside of the cave. My mom told me once that the water ouzel's house was alive, and that someday she'd like to live in a house like that. I didn't really understand at the time, but now I feel her craving, her need to live in the breathing belly of home.

She'd sit for hours and stare at the waterfall, waiting for the water ouzel to appear, while I played with Brad on the sloping ramps of granite that shouldered the creek. My mother was beautiful. She had deep hazel eyes that curved into gentle frowns at the corners, like the points on a sliver moon. Her skin was walnut brown and soft. Her fingers were long and graceful and she used them when she talked as if she were painting her words in the air. She had high cheekbones and a wide round face, and when she smiled her face lit up with a huge jaw of teeth. She'd sit in her yellow bikini, her knees drawn up to her breasts, her journal resting on her shins. She'd sketch the water ouzel falls, the trees, her children.

The water ouzel is an amazing bird. I learned that from my mother. They are virtually unaffected by weather - they sing all winter long, seemingly aloof to freezing temperatures or violent storms. As John Muir noted, "The ouzel sings on through all the seasons and every kind of storm. Indeed no storm can be more

violent than those of the waterfalls in the midst of which he delights to dwell. However dark and boisterous the weather, snowing, blowing, or cloudy, all the same he sings, and with never a note of sadness." Once my mother snowshoed up Shirley Canyon in midwinter to see how the birds were doing. She was gone all day.

When she returned at dusk she was as happy as I'd ever seen her. "The falls are frozen," she said, "and through the ice you can see the nests. Like looking through glass into someone's home at night."

Later, she told me, a water ouzel poked out through a hole in the ice and disappeared downstream. When it returned it was carrying a little tuft of moss. "Piling on the blankets," she said.

Ouzels are the size of robins, with slick bluish grey feathers, sometimes brown on the head and shoulders. Their beaks are long and pointy, and their tails are alertly erect. Their real beauty for me, though, is in their flying and acrobatics. They fly like bees or hummingbirds, the wings buzzing and the movements quick and magically vertical. Flying is how they commune with water.

The first time I remember seeing the ouzel I was four or five years old. I was watching with my mother when suddenly the ouzel flew straight into the whitewater rapids downstream where the creek narrows. I thought it had made a mistake, had drowned, when in a split second it reemerged from the water like the phoenix rising from the burning lake. It continued diving in the same same spot for an hour, returning to its nest in between dives to deposit whatever food it had found beneath the water.

Often the ouzel is seen wading upstream, dunking its head under water like a crane, picking at the stream bottom. And always the water ouzel is seen on, by, or above water. Perhaps that is what my mother so loved about the ouzel: its fidelity to place. The Shirley Canyon water ouzels were born in the falls, made their living along the creek's mossy banks, and died when the water carried them away. I think my mother saw in the water ouzel how she wanted to be and could not. She never



went back to Kotlik, though over the years she often talked about doing so. Shirley Canyon became her surrogate landscape, and she invested in it the love for place she could never manifest for Kotlik.

\* \* \* \*

If Shirley Canyon was my mother's place, the meadow was my father's. He'd take long walks along the banks of Squaw Creek, and together we'd skip rocks across the wider pools down near the beaver ponds. He was gone a lot, on one business trip after another. He was an engineer and worked all over the country on various projects, and my mother said he loved his work. He never talked much, and when he did it usually had to do with business or environmental issues. I have no doubt they loved each other. They loved to hike together, and some days after work they'd take a walk in the meadow or up Shirley Canyon. Later my father would walk around his property checking on the hundreds of various trees he'd planted over the years. Gradually our view of the meadow was cut off by growing trees and by houses sprouting up like weeds all around the valley floor.

"Sons-a-bitches," my dad would mumble, when a new house blocked our view to the meadow even more. We saw it happening all around us, the whole Tahoe basin becoming a kind of wilderness suburbia.

One summer when I was home from college, the final straw came when the Poulsens, Squaw Valley's founding family and local real estate dynasty, sold most of the meadow to a large development corporation. What was a ski area without a golf course the developers reasoned. They planned an eighteen hole course and a matching resort area with a twelve-story hotel. A group of property owners, my father included, took the developers to court, charging that the proposed development would contaminate the aquifer, the valley's main source of drinking water. The property owners won a few small concessions, but eventually were overpowered by the

developer's economic force. A few years later, bulldozers were plowing up the rich meadow soil. I remember driving into the valley after being away, and seeing huge piles of excavated dirt waiting to be molded into putting greens. During the time we were losing the meadow, we also found out that my mother had cancer.

My brother and I dressed in black every night for the rest of the summer and tore up stakes, poured sand in tractor engines, broke windows, shit on the hood of the foreman's truck - stupid, hopeless games. But we felt reckless and angry and didn't know what else to do. We used to sit on the porch and look down at the black thing growing into the sky, and talk about how great it would be to have a rocket launcher.

My dad kept fighting, in public hearings, in court, even on his evening walks if he happened across a pro-development neighbor or two. When he read in the newspaper that vandalism - "environmental terrorism"- had taken place in the meadow he pulled Brad and me aside one night.

"You horses' asses..." he said. "If I ever find out you're doing these things...." He shook his head, took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Brad and I looked at each other, silent. There was nothing to say, no reason to argue.

"You know we can lose everything," he said. "You have no idea how much power these people have. We can lose everything. God damn it!" Then he turned and walked into his office, slammed the door.

I saw, for the first time, that he was really scared. I realized I had no idea what was really going on. The developers had enough capital to bury my father in court, and his neck was on the line. On top of it all was my mom's cancer, growing by the day. In the end, I think what hurt my father the most was his powerlessness. He stood with my mother on the old porch of our house, his arm around her too-thin shoulders, watching surveyors stake out the meadow, and he knew, I think, that none of it would last.

\* \* \* \*

My mother died four months after she was diagnosed. She tried to heal herself through macrobiotics and massage and anything besides surgery, and part of her healing was to maintain a low level of stress. When we talked, we talked about school and the everyday things in my life; we never talked about whether or not she hurt, or why her skin was turning yellow and hanging off her bones. She was confined mostly to bed, and I know she missed being outside. When I came back from hiking up Shirley Canyon she'd ask me to sit by her bed and tell her what I had seen, how many ouzels, how fast the water was flowing, what the colors were like. At the end of the summer I went off to college because I didn't know what else to do; she died three weeks later.

She wanted her ashes thrown in the water ouzel falls. But my father could never get himself to do it, so they sat in a tin box in a closet for two years until my aunt's patience wore out and she had them buried under my mother's headstone in a cemetery on Vashon Island. It was five years before I went back to see the water ouzel.

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Horses no longer graze or run in the meadow. The golfers aren't willing to share their fake mounds or putting greens. The once tall, flowing meadow grass is covered by nature's equivalent of astroturf. Golf carts race around. On the far side of the meadow is a twelve-story hotel and resort area. It's constructed of black reflective glass and looks like Reno's version of Darth Vader's Death Star. My father calls it the Black Elephant. Rooms start at 160 dollars a night. Eighteen holes of golf goes for a hundred.

Squaw Valley's aquifer is drying up. Squaw Creek often flows a dirty trickle that looks out of place flowing through the wide, dry banks. The ski area sucks up a great deal of the water for its snow-making machines. My father argues that the aquifer can't supply the massive amounts of water needed to water a golf course and make fake snow. Now they may impose water-use restrictions, and there is constant talk of drought.

Still the growth continues. The developers lobby for multiple new hotels, claiming that their "analysis" has shown very little water degradation. The ski area has expanded into the upper end of Shirley Canyon. In 1988 the Ski Corporation received a county permit to cut 2000 trees for a new chairlift in Shirley Canyon. There was a public outcry and a judge ordered a hold on the permit for further review. The owner of the ski area, Alex Cushing, ordered his men to cut the trees anyway. He was quoted as saying, "What can they do? The trees will be gone and all they can do is replant them." They installed their chairlift just in time for the first snow. The base of the lift, a huge slab of concrete and steel, sits about two hundred yards up from the water ouzel falls.

With the help of Bill Hewlett, who used to hike in the area as a child, a lawsuit was filed against Cushing, out of which emerged a unique court ruling, which not only fined the Ski Corporation a quarter of a million dollars, but set aside a portion of Cushing's private property as protected from development, keeping him, in effect, from fulfilling his dream of developing Shirley Canyon from top to bottom. The ultimate irony for me is that the Ski Corporation, it seems, owns the water ouzel falls.

The fight continues. My father, seventy-one years old, has dedicated himself to preserving the lower half of the canyon. He doesn't think about much else, and when I call him on the phone and ask how he is, he answers by telling me the latest developments in the valley's ecosystem. He realizes that Squaw Valley will never be again what it was when he first came there, but he believes that what is left is still

worth fighting for. He knows there are very few beautiful places left, and all of them are threatened. He recognizes cancer when he sees it.

It is late spring in Squaw Valley. Brad, my dad and I go for a hike up Shirley Canyon. My dad is old and his knees are weak, but in the last few years he's begun hiking again. We hike along the north side of the creek, by the Bathtubs where Brad and I strip and go swimming. It feels good to be running around naked on the rocks with Brad, my dad watching like time has reversed itself twenty years. Further up the canyon we stop for water on the Big Flat Rock, and my father points out the old fire ring we'd used when we were kids and our family had camped up there.

An hour later we come to the water ouzel falls. I'm nervous being there with him, wondering if he is thinking about my mother and the ashes he never threw. Spring water is rushing over the falls, but I can see at least one nest underneath. I haven't been there in years, but it looks exactly the same as I remember it. My dad points to a large stand of trees up from the falls, says "That's where it is, the lift. Through those trees. We're lucky they didn't plant it right here." I can't see it, but the thought of it being so close is unsettling. It is hard to believe such ugliness exists so near to the water ouzel.

We sit on the rocks and watch the falls, hoping to get a glimpse of an ouzel. We can hear their singing so we know that they are there. It's strange being there with my dad, because most of my childhood memories there are associated with my mother. After a while with no luck I sit back and close my eyes, listening to water and the water ouzel's song. I hear my dad's breathing, and I wonder what he is thinking.

"Colin, Brad, look," he says quietly after a few minutes, "the ouzel."

I rise up and there it is, hovering just above the water twenty yards downstream. Then it darts to the side and lands on a rock in midstream, where it begins its dance of plunging head and rising tail, every once in a while extending its

wings for balance. I think of all the winters this bird has endured, its singing through the storms, and how good it is to come here and find the ouzel still in place, still building its mossy nest and flying low over the water.

My father clears his throat, as if to speak. The ouzel looks up, alert, then buzzes into the air back upstream, disappears into the waterfall.

"Beautiful," he says, "isn't it?"

"Yeah," I answer. "It is."

"You boys know," my father says, "your mother, she loved this place."

It is the first time in eight years I've heard him speak of her, and I let the words hang in the air for a while around my head, the ouzel's singing blending with the small roar of falling water. I think about the ashes, about asking him why he can't throw them, but then I realize it doesn't really matter. It is good enough just to be here with him and the water ouzel, and I know someday after he is gone, Brad and I will remove the ashes from her grave on Vashon and sprinkle them over these waters. Maybe we will have his ashes, too, and we can throw their ashes together into the creek. Maybe that is why he has waited all these years.

I picture their soft flakes of bone, borne along the current over the water ouzel falls, winding down the canyon and into the depths of the meadow, where someday long grass may grow again.

## Driving East

When I was eighteen I went off to college in Colorado. My mother drove me there, 1,000 miles across highway 50, "The Loneliest Road in America," through Nevada and Utah, into the Colorado desert. That last drive with my mother stands out in my mind as the last time we had together, though I saw her again the following summer. But by that time she had cancer and was gone to me. On that drive though, the illness was dormant, and I had her to myself as we sped through the basin and range landscape, over tens of small desert passes, the smell of wet sage heavy and exhilarating, my new life just beginning on the open road before us.

In regular life it was rarely just the two of us. Our family of seven was often extended to include the neighborhood floaters, the kids from bad homes and the old men whose children had grown up and left them alone. My mother welcomed everybody, and because of that I often resented these lonesome people, taking my mother's attentions away from me. Christmas was like that, her energies spread among a dozen guests, and me wishing we could just be us seven. Or better yet just her and me. I suppose I thought I was starved for attention, but the truth is she had an amazing capacity for giving, and no matter how many people she was giving to at one time, she always managed to

have more food to give out, more pieces of herself like little pieces of chocolate given on a rainy day.

But I loved to have her to myself, and that trip "back east" was no exception. I loved to drive, fast, and she let me drive most of the twenty hours it took us from Squaw Valley to Colo. Springs. I remember letting my mind drift into the desert as we were driving, the window down and my arm riding on the door, seeing myself in the rear view mirror, hair blowing in the wind, thinking, "I am really going somewhere now. I am really moving forward." It was my first experience with long distance driving, and I was instantly addicted to the motion, the long expanses of road on highway 50 that drop off the passes into straight sections of road that seem endless, disappearing off the edge of the desert into some different world. My mother and I played a game trying to predict how long those straight stretches of road were, and always we came up short, by a long shot. I was being introduced to the immensity and inpredictability of the desert, as perplexing as a new age of magic, foundations unknown.

My mother was quiet for much of the trip, but the silence was natural and seemed appropriate to the dry, seemingly barren landscape we were crossing. She would turn to me every once in a while and say, "Colin, slow down a little, will you please?" And I would let up for a while and then forget myself again, until finally she said, calmly and matter-of-factly, "I'm just going to say it once. You get a ticket, you pay for it. Okay?" I never got a ticket on that drive; I never even saw anything resembling authority out there.

In the long silences that passed between us, I'd watch my mother from time to time, looking out her window to the mountains and desert passing by, intent on what she was seeing, breathing deeply, her lips straight but not



unexpressive. She looked peaceful, as if the drive were taking her back in time, thirty years earlier when she had first driven that road with my father when they came west. She told me not much had changed on that road, all the tiny towns along the way looked exactly the same, gas was overpriced, the distances between towns were breathtaking and scary. She thought if they broke down they might die out there, so few fellow travelers. They stopped at a hotel in Ely and she gambled for the first time, amazed to find a casino in the middle of the desert. When we passed through Ely she pointed out the casino. "That's where I lost my first dollar," she said. "And you father kept putting quarters into those machines." I pictured them, together with my two oldest sisters, Heidi and Michelle, him with his crew cut of red hair, tall and slim with a sly grin, and her smile filling her face, her high cheekbones curving into her gently sloping eyes, like upside down sliver moons. She was short, thin-boned, her hands delicate like wings, papery thin, but suprisingly strong and fluid. In those days her hair was brown and cut shoulder length, wavy curls that she must have manufactured.

Seeing photographs of her from that time period, I am struck by the fact that my mother was a beautiful woman, not in the stereotypical sense of the word, but in the striking contrast of her features. A stranger looking at her might have wondered, "Is she Indian, Russian, Swedish, Mongolian - what is she?" She had the high cheeks of her Yu'pik Eskimo mother, as well as the wide set of teeth that so distinguished her smile. Her skin was a blend, darker than her father's Finnish white, but a shade lighter than her mother's must have been. She had deep set, hazel eyes, the color of lake water, which looked exotic sitting above her shelved jawbones, and which always seemed to be changing shades. For that reason, if I ask ten people the color of her eyes, I will get five different answers. Her beauty was not easy to define. And of

course back then I didn't look at my mother in those terms; I was only slightly aware that she was different at all.

When I was growing up I never liked Nevada. We lived in the mountains near Lake Tahoe, on the California side, and to me Nevada seemed like one big, barren desert, a nuclear wasteland. On that drive a new sense began to stir in me, one that recognized the slightest hint of beauty in the desert. It rained off and on through Nevada, and I remember turning to my mom and saying, "I can't believe that smell - I've never smelled anything like it."

"Sage in the rain," she'd say, nodding as if she understood my amazement. "The smell of sage in the rain."

I remember climbing up through the little town of Austin, trying to imagine what it would be like to grow up in a town like that, one gas station, a general store, hotel, post office, bar, run down school, how different my life would be. And I'd say to my mom through every small town - Fallon, Austin, Eureka, Ely, Delta - "How can people live here? What do they do?" And she would answer, "Colin, they see it through different eyes than you. Maybe they are even happy to be here." I didn't really understand at the time what it meant to see through different eyes. I know now that while we were driving that last drive together, she had many different sets of eyes, more than I know. When she watched the rain falling as we dropped into the Great Basin, she was seeing ten different shades of green light mixed with the sulphurous glow of lightning, and I was wondering how far it was to Grand Junction, imagining the breasts and wondrous sex I would have as a free, roving co-ed, trying to predict my glorious future. Yet I sensed the power of those last moments

together, and I can't help but believe I was beginning to grow new eyes of my own, whether I knew it or not.

At each summit driving through basin and range, my mother would say, "Do you want to stop, get a breath of fresh air?" And I would shrug and drive on, because I wanted so badly to get where I was going. The present meant nothing but getting to the future. I'd say, "If you want to I will, but I'm fine. Maybe in a while." And we'd keep on driving. We stopped once, on Pancake Summit above Eureka, mostly because we liked its name. We got out of the car and walked up the hill a few hundred feet. The sage bushes were wet and sprinkled raindrops on my ankles. My mother picked a small bunch of sage and held it to her nose, breathing deeply as if she could not get enough. She stared off into the juniper and pinon forests below us, and breathed deeply, and hummed under her breath, and smiled at me when I said I didn't know that there were mountains in Nevada.

By the time we got to Grand Junction we were irritated with each other. She kept looking out of the corner of her eye at the speedometer to check on my speed, and we were both tired because we had been driving straight through for fourteen hours. She wanted to stop and I didn't. We stopped for the night but I acted rebellious about it, and we went to sleep unhappy with each other. The next days drive through the canyons of the western slope were tense, and we argued about everything from rest stops to the volume of the stereo. She would have preferred no music at all and I wanted loud Jim Morrison. The closer we got to Colorado Springs the more tense the atmosphere in the car became. I couldn't wait to be out of that car, and I was sure that she couldn't wait to be rid of me. All the years of arguing, me being a difficult child, seemed about to come to an end. We should have been rejoicing.

In Glenwood Springs we stopped at a reststop and my mother told me a little about her and my dad's early days in Aspen. She had been a nurse there after college and my father went there on a ski trip. The year was 1940?.\*\* My father broke his leg and my mother nursed him is how the story goes. For a while they visited back and forth between Buffalo and Aspen, and after my mother's shifts they used to come into Glenwood Springs to go to the hot springs. I tried to imagine my mother and father as young people, flirting with each other in young love, but I was irritated with my mother and could only see an old woman, overprotective and unexciting. She wanted to drive through Aspen, take the long, mountainous route to Colorado Springs, but I was in a hurry and I got my way. It is easy to see in hindsight that I should have let her drive through Aspen. She hadn't been there in twenty years and something was pulling her back to the place where her love had begun. She said she would do it on her way home.

We arrived in Colorado Springs at night and immediately got lost trying to find the hotel. By that time we weren't speaking, and it wasn't the peaceful desert silence of Nevada; we were pissed. When we finally found the Holiday Inn I was too wound up to sleep so I left her and went to find the college. I walked around the dormitories, the athletic fields, the classroom buildings, imagining myself in this new place, the new life before me. I did a lap around the track. I forgot about my mother, and when I got back to the hotel she was asleep with her clothes on, lying on the made bed where she had been reading and waiting for me to return. I felt sorry and wanted to tuck her in, take her clothes off and kiss her goodnight. But when I touched her shoulder she shrugged me off in her sleep and rolled over. I turned off the light and lay in my bed, hardly sleeping at all that night. When I woke in the morning she was up and gone, having breakfast by herself in the hotel coffeeshop.

We spent the next few days busy with college orientation, her touring around with parents, going to lectures, buying me sheets, toothpaste, and underwear. I was caught up in meeting new people, registering for classes, going to parties. It lasted three days, at the end of which I stood on the sidewalk outside of the dorm and gave my mother a hug goodbye. Our anger was gone, replaced by guilt and sorrow. Quite suddenly I realized she was leaving. The car was packed and sat idling by the sidewalk. She hugged me, held my hand and said, "You let me know if there's anything you need. I'll write you letters and you write back. Okay?"

I nodded and felt tears building up. But I wouldn't let myself cry because I thought it was a time to be rejoicing, not mourning. My mother squeezed my hand, then let go. She turned, got in the car and drove away, waving her hand out the window. I waved back. And I felt, for the first time in my life, that something inexplicable was leaving my life. I wanted to run after her car and tell her that I loved her. I had never said that to her before. *I love you.* When her car disappeared around the corner I was left staring up at Pikes Peak, and I had the sensation that I was one of the smallest things on earth, and that I was more alone than I could possibly have imagined one minute earlier. I pictured her driving back through Nevada by herself, and I felt her loneliness, saw her propelled, a tiny speck of dust across the great expanse of grey green desert. In my first letter home, I asked her to "please, send sage."

### Raining Squirrels: Tales of Lightning

My hands are already near frozen, and I'm breathing too hard. Rob and I are at 13,700 ft., and we've been moving since first light this morning. It must be about four in the afternoon. We should have been off the peak two hours ago, but we had trouble route-finding and got our rope stuck in a crack. We have one more pitch to the top of the Crestone Needle in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of Colorado. We are both tired and ready to make tea in our tent down at the lake.

The clouds appear out of nowhere, and grow as if on fast forward. Until now it has been a clear, flawless Colorado day, not a cloud in the sky and we can see as far as Pikes Peak to the northeast. They are some of the darkest clouds I have ever seen, unnaturally so, like something burned or soiled with ash. The daylight grows quickly dark, as if a shade has been drawn over the sky. When I look down I can see Rob's teeth. When he gets nervous he grinds his teeth and his forehead becomes a map of valleys and

ridges. I hammer in a piton, clip the rope to it with carabiners and nylon webbing, and try to move past a large bulge in the rock face.

Before I make two moves up the rock a bolt of lightning rips the air and instantaneous thunder rolls down into the valley. Within seconds I am soaking wet and covered by rain and hail. I look down and can no longer see Rob. There isn't a trace of blue sky. I realize I haven't been breathing. Water is pouring over the rock bulge and my feet are slipping. I stop breathing again when my hand slips and I fall outward into the storm. I scream out against the downpour, hoping Rob will hear the warning, "Falling!" In that split second between fear and space I think how small my voice sounds.

I carom into the wall ten feet below, grateful that the piton held my weight. I lean forward against the rock, breathing hard and fast, and I hear Rob's voice yelling from below. I jerk twice on the rope to let him know I'm okay, then find a small edge to stand on to take my weight off Rob's belay. I find a small crack in the rock, jam in a metal stopper nut and tie myself off to it. I sit back in my harness and force myself to breath deeply.

\* \* \* \*

I've always been frightened by lightning. When I was a kid in Squaw Valley it hardly ever rained, but when it did there was always lightning. The clouds would build over Squaw Peak and the birds would stop singing. The squirrels disappeared, and our dog and cat would slink into the house, tails tucked between their legs. I've always believed animals more than people. The look in their eyes told me that I should be scared too.

In August, the year I was twelve, I was alone in the house watching afternoon cartoons when the television went off and I noticed the darkness. The power was out.

Then the sky erupted and the hair on the back of my neck stood erect for the first time in my life. I'd seen it happen to dogs and cats, when they were angry or afraid. I'd seen our cat come in at night puffed up like a dark shadow. I felt like an animal for the first time. That is, I felt instinctual. I knew I had to hide, get away from the creature on my neck. I crawled into the back of my parents closet where I found, to my relief, our cat, her eyes round and her fur erect.

The storm raged for an hour. Lightning bolts came near the house, each time lighting up the inside of the closet and the cat's fear. I tried to pet her once and she bit me hard on the thumb, drawing blood and making me cry. The pain was nothing compared with how alone she made me feel. When it comes to lightning, she seemed to say, you are on your own.

It was the worst storm in the valley's memory. The power was blown out all around the Tahoe basin. A huge old growth sugarpine near a neighbor's house was ripped to shreds. Pieces of it were found a hundred yards away. Dead bluejays, dead squirrels, dead bugs were scattered like confetti around the burned stump. At least four big trees around the valley were hit. Old Big John was hit in his pickup driving over Squaw Creek. He said sparks flew out of his dashboard and his hands were burned on his metal steering wheel. Our dog, Enakak, wouldn't go outside for a week. Every time a door shut she'd freeze in her tracks. I can't say for sure that I didn't do the same. I do know that ever since I've been paralyzed by lightning.

\* \* \* \*

It is hailing hard now, five or six inches of hail are piling up on the ledges. As I pull the rope to set a rappell I'm aware of the beautiful purple conductor sliding through my hands - nothing like a wet rope to transfer electric current. I tug on the anchor to make sure it's solid, double check my knots and my harness, and rappell off



the edge. As I lower into the whiteness I experience vertigo. Then I hear Rob, whistling Vivaldi's Four Seasons through his frozen beard, and before long I can see his red jacket through the blowing hail.

The whistling is a fake. Rob is nervous, I can tell by his eyes. Usually they are calm, almost lazy in the droop at the outside corners of his eyelids. I think of my cat - Rob has eyes like that now, intense, round, too wide-open. As long as I have known him he is always in control. He has climbed all over the world, on three eight-thousand meter peaks, and he is well known in the mountaineering world. I have learned a great deal about climbing from him, and I've never doubted his abilities to handle emergency situations. He begins to set the next rappell and I take courage in his quick, precise handling of the anchors and rope systems. The lightning has diminished a little.

We have maybe eight or ten rappells before we can descend a snow gully on the south side of the mountain. On the second rappell the lightning and thunder become more frequent, and as I join Rob on a ledge I look up to see his head surrounded in an intensely beautiful yellow, orange and violet glow, an electric halo. In the same moment I smell a strong sulphurous stench.

"Do you see what I see?" he says, simultaneous to the sound of a rattlesnake in my ear, which, as I turn and look, is the pick of my ice axe spitting sparks into my face.

"Get rid of your pack!" he screams, and we both drop all of our gear on the ledge and downclimb to a ledge ten feet lower, where we crouch in lightning position, elbows to knees, fingers in the air like little lightning rods. The hair on my neck is moving. I reach to scratch it and am sparked by it. The air explodes around us, and I see Rob as if in a black and white picture, his hair standing straight out to the side below his hat. The blast is so great that I think I am hit, *feel* that I am hit. The light and sound are instantaneous, and I think of the sugarpine with its top blown off.

When I begin breathing again, in raspy gulps, Rob is looking straight at me, his teeth showing through his beard. We wait in silence as the thunder rolls all around us. The hail begins to lighten, and soon the air is still. We are covered in a thick fog. I have never heard such silence. We are crouched on a rock face, everything around us is white, and it seems there is nothing moving in all the world.

\* \* \* \*

Whenever I'm cowering in a storm I try to think of John Muir dancing in the rain. He believed nature really shows itself in thunderstorms. In one essay he even writes of climbing a tall pine tree during a storm in order to experience a storm from a tree's perspective. I'm not so brave, though the terrible beauty of lightning fascinates me. On a recent trip in Colorado I found myself huddled in my sleeping bag on top of my insulite pad trying to avoid the ground currents. I lay there mesmerized by the patterns of light left by the lightning for a split second on my tent walls. I wished I could walk into that light and be *in* it for more than the instant it allowed. It was a glimpse of beauty, and I understood in those moments what John Muir might have been looking for, a dimension we only get to see in rare, fleeting moments, on the edge of perception.

Sometimes I work as a mountaineering instructor, trying to teach people how to be safe in the mountains. I try to scare them at first, brand them with lightning fear. Most of what I tell them is true. I tell them lightning is the second leading cause of death among climbers, second only to avalanches. I tell them lightning kills more people than hurricanes, blizzards, floods, tornadoes. It can blow off your feet, your hands, your head as it exits your body like an alien trying to escape. It has a temperature of 55,000 degrees F, enough to boil your blood, many times hotter than the sun. It travels at 90,000 miles per second, close to the speed of light. I show my

students burned out trees and say "that's what will happen to your brain if you stand on a Colorado peak in the afternoon." I tell them about my friend Mike, who swears he was thrown ten feet through the air when his ice axe was hit. He says that's the day he started balding, that lightning short-circuited his hair growing cells. I tell them about the sugarpine tree in Squaw Valley, the day it rained dead squirrels. When I'm finished talking I wade through the silence that follows to the questions that I know will come. If I've scared them enough they'll want more of an explanation. *How does lightning happen? What do we do if we're caught in a storm?*

The hows and whats are more difficult to explain. Lightning has been interpreted spiritually throughout history, and misunderstood by science for hundreds of years. Zeus's thunderbolt is Greek mythology's most feared weapon, while the Brule Sioux Indians explained lightning and thunder as Wakinyan Tanka, the great thunderbird who used bolts of lightning to save the humans from the water monsters. All American children know about Benjamin Franklin discovering electricity in 1752 by flying a kite during a thunderstorm, but few have heard of Professor Richmond of St. Petersburg who was killed in 1753 while trying to repeat the experiment.

Lightning occurs in three main types: cloud to cloud, ground to cloud, and the most common, cloud to ground. In the case of cloud to ground, lightning is created by an inequality in positive and negative charges, caused by the break-up of air molecules by turbulence within a cloud. Positive charges build-up on the ground, and the bottom of the cloud gets heavily laden with negative charges. As the cloud moves over the land its main goal is to reunite negative and positive charges.

The flash we see is not moving from cloud to ground as it appears to the eye. The leader negative charge moves towards the ground, and when it is within a hundred feet of earth the positive charge reaches upward. Contact is made and the return stroke is basically an intense ionization that burns through the air as it climbs back towards

the cloud. The return trip is the light we see, travelling at 90,000 miles per second, and thunder is the sound of air expanding under the 55,000 degree heat.

Lightning is dangerous to mountaineers because they are often in high, exposed places, walking jagged ridges or hanging from unprotected cliffs. But there are a few main rules that one can follow in order to avoid getting fried. The main one, in many western states, is don't be on a peak after noon, especially during the rainy season. Get early starts and make sure you have escape routes. There are lots of stories about climbers who finish difficult routes only to get zapped on the summit while enjoying cheese and crackers.

If you find yourself in a thunderstorm in an exposed place, descend as quickly as possible. If you are on a ridge move off to one side. One of the most popular myths is that you are safe under an overhang. This is what is known as the "spark gap." The current, while traveling over the ground looking for its positive mate, will travel around the overhang and use your flesh as a way to connect with ground. If you find yourself in an exposed place with no shelter and lightning all around, such as in an open field, crouch on dry insulating material such as an insulite pad. Get in the fetal position with elbows touching knees and your hands on your head. Don't touch the ground. In this position the current is less likely to pass through vital organs. At least, that's the theory. The reality is that a direct hit is so powerfully charged that it won't matter what position you're in; it will probably be fatal.

There are two types of hits: direct and ground current. Direct hits are rare and usually result in death, as 54,000 degree heat cooks your internal organs on its way to the ground. Ground currents are more common and are often survived as the current is often less charged and less likely to travel through your body. The safest place to be is within a forty-five degree shadow of the tallest object around. Lightning is more likely to hit a tall tree than a person standing ten feet away from the tree. On

the other hand, standing right next to the tree might result in a ground current from the tree, or more likely, a branch on your head.

Despite doing all the right things, lightning might still get you. It behaves in mysterious ways, many unexplained. One report from 1873 describes horizontal lightning that traveled over five miles just above the trees until it descended on two school children and killed them.<sup>1</sup> In other reports people have seen lightning in a wide array of colors. "During a thunderstorm last night[Ontario, October 7, 1927] a flash of lightning started from the top white, and about half-way down turned to a vivid green. Possibly I am very unobservant, but I do not remember ever to have seen green lightning before."<sup>2</sup> Many people have experienced lightning without sound, or even more rare, lighting from a clear sky.

Most bizarre are the "lightning figure" incidents, where a photographic image is burned on to the skin of a lightning victim. In one case a man struck down near a maple tree was found to have clear imprints of leaves and branches along his torso.<sup>3</sup> Stranger yet was the sheep incident in Bath in 1812, where six sheep were killed all at once by a huge fork of lightning. When the sheep were skinned a portion of the surrounding scenery was found on the inside surface of each skin. Locals who saw the imprints had no doubt they were seeing the landscape surrounding where the sheep were grazing.<sup>4</sup>

Just as lightning can be unpredictably violent, striking out of a clear sky to blow off the hands of men, so can it be perversely kind as it wanders through someone's home.

During a hailstorm at Mors, in Denmark, a few days ago,  
a flash of forked lightning struck a farm, and, having

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<sup>1</sup>Symons's Monthly Meterological Magazine, 8:106-107, 1873

<sup>2</sup>Nature, 120:695, 1927

<sup>3</sup>Monthly Weather Review, 47:729, 1919

<sup>4</sup>Symons's Monthly Meterological Magazine, 18:81-82, 1883

demolished the chimneystack and made a wreck of the loft, descended into the living-rooms on the ground floor below. Here its career appears to have been most extraordinary; all the plaster around door and windows having been torn down, and the bed-curtains rent to pieces. An old Dutch clock was smashed into atoms, but a canary and cage hanging a few inches from it were quite uninjured. The lightning also broke sixty windows and all the mirrors in the house. On leaving the rooms it passed clean through the door into the yard, where it killed a cat, two fowls, and a pig, and then buried itself in the earth. In one of the room were two women, both of who were struck to the ground, but neither was injured.<sup>5</sup>

Rare as these stories are, they illustrate well the unpredictability of lightning, and they put into perspective my own experiences with Wakinyan Tanka, the great thunderbird.

\* \* \* \*

Four hours and six rappells later we come to the steep snow gully. The mountain is fogged in but the storm is miles away. It is getting dark and we hurry down the gully, plunge-stepping and not being nearly careful enough. We are on avalanche terrain, but at this point we're out of water, food, and the temperature is dropping fast.

An hour later we do one final rappell off the lower cliff band. We've left nearly all of our equipment, hundreds of dollars worth of gear, up on the mountain, forced to set anchors and leave them there. But at this point we don't care. My feet hit the ground, I turn to Rob, can't help but grin a little.

We haven't spoken all day, being so focused on the technicalities of getting off the mountain. His voice startles me.

"I've never been that scared," he says. "Thought my head was going to explode."

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<sup>5</sup>Nature, 37:64, 1887

For some reason I'm glad he said it, admitted his fear. I didn't expect it but it makes me feel a little better, as if him showing fear makes mine more real. We trudge back to the tent, make tea and soup, lie back to sleep. I close my eyes and under my lids a light flashes, again and again, like a camera flashbulb.

"Rob, are you awake?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "I see it. Weird."

We fall asleep that night to lightning without thunder.

\* \* \* \*

I find out later the halo around Rob's head is what's called ball lightning, more commonly called St. Elmo's Fire. It is a rare phenomenon that occurs when electrical forces from a storm create a glowing ball of light in the air around a potential conductor, such as a ship's mast or an airplane's wing. Supposedly, ball lightning is not charged enough to be dangerous, and it rarely hurts people. In one case a woman saw a "flame-coloured halo," bright blue and purple, come into her kitchen during a thunderstorm. She tried to swat it away like a fly and it disappeared with an explosion on contact. Though her hand wasn't burned her clothing was slightly melted.<sup>6</sup> No reasonable scientific explanation exists for ball lightning, though many theories have been tested, and it is regarded with a high degree of superstition, especially to sailors, who see it as a sign of oncoming bad weather.

I remember how beautiful Rob looked in the light of that sulphurous afternoon, and I like the fact that the glow around his head isn't really explainable. I like to believe it was offering another understanding of beauty, like my cat's eyes lit up on that closet-bound afternoon. Like lightning, with its blast of new beauty, I wish I could hold that light beyond my moment of fear.

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<sup>6</sup>Nature, 260:596-597, 1976.

### Taking Care of Squirrels

My father, it seems, is taking care of squirrels. I called him the other night to check on him, and he couldn't stop talking about the squirrels that have built a nest in the woodpile just outside my sister's old bedroom window. He sits in her room by the window and watches the squirrels, puts out little bits of food and then sneaks back inside to watch them eat.

One might wonder why this surprises me. You have to know my father. I have never seen the man cry. Or if I have it was in an embarrassed, secretive fashion. There were five kids in my family, all of us spread apart by only ten years, and my father was rarely around to do much fathering; he was away on business trips, sometimes gone as much as six months out of the year. This is not to say he was neglectful, nor unkind; on the contrary, when he was around he was fun, gentle, even fatherly. But he played the *role* of father, he didn't actually do any fathering. I'm not sure he knew how. He brought home the money, supported us well, and sometimes came to athletic events.

But I can't say my father has ever hugged me. I have tried to hug him, many times, most recently about a month ago. He goes rigid. My father is not a nervous or insecure man; almost nothing rattles him. One of the things that



does is physical contact. Because of it I grew up not knowing how to touch other men; I was petrified of holding anyone, man or woman, too close.

I learned how to hug sometime in college. It was hard but I caught on. I remember the first time I came home from college, sometime in my freshman year. I was overjoyed to see my parents, and the moment I stepped off the airplane ramp I tried to embrace my father. I might as well have shot him with a stun gun. He went rigid, he stopped breathing, every muscle in his body tightened. His natural reaction was to turn to the side, so that we ended up shoulder to shoulder, our arms awkwardly draped over each other's shoulders like we were school chums. I was embarrassed beyond belief; I couldn't understand what I'd done wrong. Luckily my mother was there to break the awkward silence and embrace me.

Over the next ten years I tried from time to time to show my father affection. I should have learned ten years ago it wasn't going to happen; I suppose my learning curve is near horizontal. At my mother's funeral my father did not cry. After the service our family lined up in the front of the chapel to accept condolences. People came up and walked down the line, offering us hugs and tears. It was awkward as hell for me, and I couldn't help looking down at my father, wondering how he was enduring all these hugging people. I felt so sorry for him that after the service I tried to hug him. He was stiff as a board, though obviously heartbroken. I could not get through to him.

So now it is curious to me that he is choosing to tend squirrels. He still lives in the mountain home we grew up in, a big house with many rooms and many more memories. He has lived there for forty years. Recently my brother got married and moved out of the house, and for the first time in his life my father expressed his loneliness. "What am I going to do with all this space?" he said. "It's going to be a lonely place, full of empty rooms." I was

home visiting, and I felt a change in my father. He's seventy-two now, and yet he seems to be getting younger, more playful. More *fatherly*. He seems to want his children around, but we are all leaving. Finally I'm beginning to have a father, but I'm nearly beyond fathering.

Still, the hugging is hard. This last visit was the best I've ever had with him; we are becoming friends instead of adversaries. He came out on the porch to say good-bye to me, put out his hand for me to shake. I took his hand, then reached over with my other arm and pulled him in. Instant recoil. Shoulder to shoulder, he patted me on the back, wished me well. Good-bye son. Drive safe.

Now his house is empty of kids but he has his squirrels. I'm not sure how this should make me feel. There are seven of them he says, just like our family. He keeps track of what time they get up in the morning. As an experiment he put food out earlier than their normal wake-up time and was ecstatic when a drowsy rumped squirrel head poked out to get the food. My father loves muffins, eats them every morning for breakfast. He used to get angry when my brother and I occasionally ate his muffins. But he laughs ceremoniously when he tells of the squirrels filing their little cheeks with his blueberry muffin. "They eat grapes and cherries and flowers," he says. "But they like muffins the best." When I warn him about bubonic plague, he answers "Oh, they don't need to worry - I won't give it to them." They are privileged as only the youngest child sometimes is; they are part of his new clan, a new generation of child.

Still, I don't think he's hugging them yet. I woke with a chuckle this morning after dreaming of my dad asleep in bed, a pile of squirrels tucked up under his arm. I think of him there by the window, looking out at the woodpile in the early morning, and I wonder what he is thinking about. Is he

remembering his five kids playing out among the aspens, Brad and I always trying to dam the little creek that runs beside our house? Is he recalling his life, and waiting, as so many abandoned old people do, to die? Does he wake in the morning and hear the stillness of the open rooms, the lack of movement, the solitary beating of his own heart? I can only guess at my father's emotional landscape; it has always been posted with a NO TRESPASSING sign, like private property. But I am glad he has the squirrels. I am glad he hears their whistle in the morning, their scurrying against the outside walls of the house, the grass rustling as they move through it. They bring him some kind of peace, somewhere to focus the nurturing he has learned maybe a little too late. Or maybe he has learned it just in time. Either way, I welcome the squirrels into what was once my home.