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Selected chapters from:

BEHIND THE ROCKS

by

Mattie Allen

B.S. St. Lawrence University, 1998

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science


The University of Montana

December 2001

Approved by:



Chairperson



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Selected chapters from *Behind the Rocks*

Director: Don Snow



This is a collection of chapters from what I hope will be a full-length book one day. Although the story is not complete here, I selected these chapters with the idea of leaving readers with a sense of beginning, middle, and end. This very personal story is organized by the headings found in scientific papers because, so often, the only story we take as Truth is that of Science and the language of the intellect. But Science is only one story and there are others just as vital. The warm, artful, and emotional language of intimate stories is just as academic and credible, only it teaches us in more fully engaging, sensual, and adventurous ways.

My story of abortion and the story of Utah Wilderness are organically and ideologically united because the boundaries imposed on women's bodies so closely parallel the boundaries imposed on the body of the land. Similarly, the language of the abortion debate is analogous to the politics of Wilderness designation, because although these are discussions concerning moral and philosophical questions, we mask the complexity of these inquiries in order to distill the abstract and the mysterious into sterile equations and precise definitions. Many of us seem to believe that if we could scientifically define at what instant Life begins, our struggle with the morality of abortion would rest. We think we can calculate Wilderness with an equation of a piece of land's size, how "roaded" it is, its scaled beauty, its uniqueness, and its proximity to an urban area. Our attempts at simplifying only trivialize larger, more important inquiries while simultaneously refusing the very personal elements that are often at stake. Although this may be the price of pluralism, I believe that when we are satisfied with definitions and equations alone, when we believe in continuity without difference, we are tinkering with Freedom.

The challenge in writing such an intimate story is trying to find the magic that exists between the Universal and the particular or personal. That magic, I think, is where the medicine is found; the creation of this written story has been a healing, sacred gift to myself, and I hope the future revisions and additional chapters will result in a gift to others seeking forgiveness, solace, and wildness.

Maybe the problem lies with the ease. People are like tea bags, goes the old nostrum. They have to be dipped into hot water to reach their full strength.

—Peter Wild, The Opal Desert

Before I read this poem, I just need to say that I know there are a lot of incredible men out there, and that this poem may seem to exclude them—it doesn't. And I want to say to all the men out there, honey—you got to write your own poems!

-Maya Angelou, before reciting “Phenomenal Woman” at Herbst Theater in San Francisco

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ABSTRACT

Consumption is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity.

-Carol Adams, The Sexual Politics of Meat

When I was eighteen, I had an abortion, and I stopped eating eggs.

I didn't understand it, at first, why an omelet induced dry heaves, or why an egg popping and spitting on the fry pan drove me to tears. I ate eggs only to toss them back up, an interrupted life scrambled and wasted in my vomit.

"You'll learn to like eggs," people said. "Just keep eating them."

One cool, pink, spring afternoon, I cracked an egg into a batch of chocolate chip cookie dough. A double yolk slithered out of its shell.

"Twins..." I whispered. And then I understood my heart's ache and my belly's upset.

I could keep the abortion secret, but not my aversion to consuming dead eggs.

“Are you a vegetarian, or whatever you call it?” people asked me.

“No,” I responded. “I just don’t eat eggs.”

Prepared food was rife with aborted eggs. Cake, salad dressing, waffles, potato salad. It all made me sick. “Who am I to eat an egg?” I sobbed.

Civilized beings tried to console me.

“This is what you were born of, and this is where you’ll end,” whispered the concrete squares of sidewalk. “Just eat.”

“It’s eat or be eaten,” breezed the fertilized and pesticided trees, exotics in ornamental grass lawns. “Just eat.”

“To be fed vittles from a bag is to forget about the world and its messiness,” reasoned my housecat, hunting birds at the feeder from behind the glass windows of our home. “Just eat.”

Then I stopped drinking milk. Whole, two-percent, skim, half and half. It coated my throat in the cream of a cheated mother’s sustenance—I choked on the milky sheath wrapped around my tongue like dead skin. Next, the cheeses. Mozzarella, sharp cheddar, Parmesan, Monterey jack. Stolen baby food coagulated and aged—it tasted like death’s mold.

And butter! Oh, the butter. Just touching it with a knife gave me heartburn—a mother’s breast settled and churned, chilled and melted, cubed and spread.

Finally—shocking, I know—I couldn't eat meat. Sirloin steak, Thanksgiving turkey, herb-crusted salmon, lamb chops, fried chicken, and veal. Especially veal.

“Are you a vegan, or whatever you call it?” people asked me.

“No,” I responded, “my teeth just don't chew anything that had babies or laid eggs, and I don't swallow anything destined for infants.”

I couldn't consume motherhood. I couldn't drink childhood. I refused to nibble on death.

“I want to eat you,” said my boyfriend, the father half of the unborn baby.

“What?” I asked.

“You're so sweet, I just want to eat you up,” he repeated.

I gagged. I made him an ex.

My life wrinkled like skin, splintered like bone. All the juice dribbled from it. Food gave me a toothache all over; I sparsely ate. Dry toast, plain fruits and vegetables, nuts, pasta with red sauce, soy. But it only got worse. I could feel my body rotting, a cavity with dead food inside it.

Apricots bled down my chin. I wept when my teeth ground spinach to a thready pulp. Potatoes had eyes. Pecking at each kernel of corn on the cob was torture. Orange juice, especially the fleshy kind, depressed me for weeks. Eating sunflower seeds induced nightmares.

And despair! Oh, the despair. Life sickened me as much as death, a miracle and a tragedy at the same time. To be given life only to be forced to consume another's. Or, if you refused, forced to consume yourself, one emaciated cell at a time.

"Who am I?" I whispered.

"Who," I asked, "should have to make that choice?"

"This is for you," the new boyfriend said.

He handed me a flower. A spring orchid in April.

Reproductive parts cut from the body, spread open, and splayed on a stem. The blossom of life sliced from earth to be owned, to wrinkle and die, a miracle wasted in the name of aesthetics.

I cried. Another boyfriend bit the dust.

My belly sunk into a drafty, haunted cave because I eliminated food altogether. I tried to ingest only water, Gatorade, soda, vitamins, engineered food bars—nutrition made by machines, not mothers. I drank booze because it felt lifeless already, because it preserved death. I sucked on sleeping pills like candy. I wanted to walk with ghosts.

I floated above the earth, or sunk below—I was never sure which—only that I had tripped and severed myself from the energy of the seasons.

"Please leave," the city structures said. "You have gone crazy."

"Please leave," tittered the tame trees. "You are a menace, shameful to this society."

"Please leave," hissed the housecat. "You are like a diseased, wild animal."

“Freedom,” friends said, “is about ease.”

“Freedom,” family said, “is about independence.”

I didn't believe them. I thought Freedom was about choice, no matter the messiness or the dependence, no matter the fear of contradiction, mistake, or threat of consequence. I didn't think that Freedom had anything to do with consumption, or oppression, or severing connections.

I moved to the desert where the land was lean and the water muscular. I thought the desert would take me in, or else the sun would kill me. I moved to the desert because it seemed the perfect place to beckon Freedom.

“I wanted to pick a bouquet of wildflowers for you,” the desert boyfriend began. “White Virgin's-Bower, Hoary Aster, Crescent Milkvetch, Prince's Plume, Evening-Primrose.”

I shivered.

“But I thought you'd like it better if I just told you how beautiful the flowers were and left them there. How plump with life, how soon they would wilt in the desert sun, and how the petals would return to dust with the seeds.”

A tear drooled down my hollowed cheek.

He hugged me, whispering, “And how they would be pregnant with life again, when they were ready.”

I kept this one.

In the harvesting season, he brought me the juice of a prickly pear cactus fruit. He said, "I scattered the seeds in the earth, and I left the flesh for the coyotes." I smelled the sweetness and sipped the nectar of fecundity from his hand. Lapped it like a pup.

"Sail away with me," he said.

"But this is no ocean," I told him.

"Sail away with me," he repeated.

"But this is the desert," I clucked.

He set sail when winter broke the sky, indigo bucking autumn's apricot light. I dug into the earth and hibernated alone.

I decorated my snowy cave with sage bundles, river stones, juniper incense, and the moon-glitter of desert dust. I gathered pine nuts in my belly. I wrapped myself in silk and wool. Sleep came easily.

I had a nightmare that I flapped in the hot wind like an orphaned kite. I grabbed onto the tail of the river and hung on. But the river reached back, and her hands wrapped around the veined flesh of my neck, squeezing, and she ate me head first.

The throat of the river held me in silence. From the dark sands, the line I knew as Time quivered like a sword and sprouted into a tree, branched and barked, exploding into a green firecracker of loose ends. A caterpillar ate holes through leaves and incubated them in her belly. She wrapped herself in a silky cocoon, spinning her own tomb. I cried.

The cocoon dried out and caved in. When I touched it, the shell powdered into a fine red dust around an egg. It cracked, and a long black hair billowed out with hot wind. I screamed.

I wanted to make something with it. I broke the hair into four pieces, tied the bundle around my toe, and began to braid it like a feather. The hairs grew until I had braided feathers all over my body. A black beak stretched my mouth out, and black pebbles of water covered my eyes. I was a raven. I flew through the river's mouth and fell into the coyote willows. Under the heat of the sun, I watched the red river from my bed of willow shoots.

The sun shone on the river's face. It was my face. My blood pulsed thick and red and my voice gurgled with song. My naked, slick body curved and rippled, succulent in this rendezvous with grace. My flesh ran through the desert's canyons like freedom, taking and leaving pieces of it as I went. That was how the sun meant it. There was no disgrace in that. No shame.

I woke from my dream late in the springtime, sitting on winter's blue back, tame as a wild horse. I touched my belly like a mother. My toes dug into the cave's sand until they found water. I smelled flowers. White Virgin's-Bower, Hoary Aster, Crescent Milkvetch, Prince's Plume, Evening-Primrose. They beckoned me outside like the sweet song of mermaids.

I stepped from the cave into the sun, and a thin desert cow smiled at me. "It is time," she said. "It's been four years."

I rooted deep, like a cottonwood.

INTRODUCTION

We are all filled with a longing for the wild. There are few culturally sanctioned antidotes for this yearning. We were taught to feel shame for such desire. We grew our hair long and used it to hide our feelings. But the shadow of wild woman still lurks behind us during our days and in our nights. No matter where we are, the shadow that trots behind us is definitely four-footed.

-Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Wild Woman Within

On December 24, 1993, I went to bed a virgin and woke up a vessel. I'm not saying it was an immaculate conception, because the boyfriend punctured my hymen like a safety seal on a bottle of white aspirin. There was nothing deified in my "deflowering." Besides, I didn't believe in the God, and the boyfriend and I were drunk.

Sex, my fabled First Time, happened in the small, blurry hours between darkness and dawn. It wasn't dirty though, either, because a strange love stretched between us. But conception worked my body ragged in the hot nap that followed, fingering me with oscillations of shadows and light. I had dreams of walking in the desert, tossed side to side by slapping winds, caught in the crossfire of miracle versus tragedy.

I knew when I woke. I could smell it. Pregnancy's perfume clouded the air around my skin, a revealing internal smolder puffing through my bellybutton, an opiate leaking from my splintered thighs. One could argue it was the metallic tang of blood on the sheets that I smelled, or the musk of exchanged fluids that scented the room. I did smell these telltale stains of innocence lost. But there was an odor that came infinitely closer; my nostrils filled with the aroma of an intimate ripeness.

I didn't feel radiant, like some pregnant women say they do. I felt raw and chapped. I didn't eat because I thought this whole shameful thing might go away if I starved my body. I vomited. I had sharp pains like knives in my belly. A light newness rubbed pink across my cheeks, but there was also something heavy, scarlet, and hot throbbing inside.

I smelled different. I felt different. I looked different with this blush of womanhood, this flush of potential motherhood. The parts of me that starved caved in, while other parts of me that prepared for a birth stretched and swelled. I trapped myself between destiny and shameful accident, wondering if the pregnancy was a brilliant touch of grace, or the punishing fist of a heavy handed god. I thought I had misplaced myself in that night of sleep, maybe, waking up as I stepped inside somebody else's shell of skin, caught between two bodies. But I hadn't.

Please, allow me to introduce my selves.

I think of my life in two distinct segments: before I got pregnant and after. The lives are sliced so neatly, like an apple, that sometimes it seems the before could never attach to the after. The first segment began with a conception, a birth, and a celebration; the second began with a conception, an abortion, and a secret bound by shame. One set of memories begins with the gelling of childhood's fragmented consciousness; the other set commences when my body became two, when my legs parted and cells divided to cradle a little lump of Life.

I often wonder if other women experience a similar division, if their lives illustrate a time of unbitten purity fractured by an event whereupon they believe that they are wild and bad and shameful. I don't know if other women sense that becoming a woman isn't so much a cause for celebration, but a cause for caution, and I wonder if, when they wake up one morning with nubby breasts on their once bony chests, or with a muddy stain of blood in their white cotton panties, or with blood on the sheets from their hymen broken by force or by complicity, or with an embryo in their womb, feel like something is over.

Do these women remember the exact event that wedged between their selves, like I do? Do they feel jumbled and confused, not quite able to understand what's happened, knowing only that they are not made of the sweetness they were made of yesterday? Do they wander around with a hollowed reminder of what's gone, like this new body is nothing but a blown up red balloon? Do they, too, feel like the blame rests somewhere in their flesh? But do they, too, when they're home alone or isolated in the wild earth

somewhere, heed the impulse to take off their clothes, then marvel at the skin stretched into smooth dunes, and feel suddenly freed by love for their bodies, only to hide ashamed in loose, thick clothing when they're back on the crowded streets—or else tight, thin clothes because the less they wear, the more glances they get, and outside recognition or approval of any kind feels better than this shame?

Sometimes, I say “Fuck you” and wear what makes me feel defiant because some nerve inside is wild and “wild” is something I must be defiant to be. And sometimes, I sit and cry next to roads and barbed wire fences extending into every horizon, empathizing with the land, understanding the violation of imposed boundaries because I feel the same legal and moral and societal and ideological boundaries imposed on my own changed body. Curiously, I feel more kinship with beaten dogs and stray cats and captured wild horses than anyone else, and I feel something slip open inside, like a knot coming undone, when the coyotes yip and howl somewhere in the desert outside my window—like somehow, maybe I belong somewhere.

Do other women feel this too?

I don't know these things. I was taught to seek fact, not feelings. I'm guilty of complicity in my silence. But I've had enough of the Language of Fathers. I'm reclaiming the Language of Wild, the Language of Body.

There is a language older by far and deeper than words. It is the language of bodies, of body on body, wind on snow, rain on trees, wave on stone. It is the language of dream, gesture, symbol, memory. We have forgotten this language. We do not even remember that it exists.

-Derrick Jensen, [A Language Older Than Words](#)

While telling my story here, I have discovered that I am more ashamed of getting pregnant than I am of having an abortion. The pregnancy is something that pushes out, something that signals to the world what you have been doing in your private moments. Pregnancy seems like a public affair to me—as if the world were having a baby—and everyone can see this process happening in the swelling over time. If you are too young, or unwed, or too poor, it is a public shame. But in an abortion, something is pulled inward. The pregnancy and the shame become private, and after the abortion, the loss is grieved by one.

A tender, intimate scar forms. It is a silent story.

But some scars are not acceptable, some stories are not allowed to be heard: I am not a victim. I have made ungovernable choices. I am a woman, a life-giver and a life-taker, a sexual, wild being whose body cannot be bound.

A year or two after my pregnancy and abortion, there was a cluster of stories in the news about pregnant teenage women who secretly had babies and threw them away. The pregnancies shamed them into a kind of paralysis. Secretly, they stifled their swelling, ripening bodies, starving them into silence. That kind of silence doesn't allow decisions to be made. You can only fiercely hope that everything will just go away. And so they carried their lonely secrets to term, birthed them, alone, in basements and public bathrooms and hotel rooms, precious secrets they simply threw away.

One young woman from Cleveland secretly gave birth at her high school prom in a bathroom stall, wrapped the baby up, cleaned up the stall, left the whole bloody bundle in the garbage, returned to prom and danced the night away. Another high-school teen from Cleveland also pretended she wasn't pregnant, hoping the whole situation would

just disappear, and when the secret couldn't stay a secret any longer, she labored in her family's basement, then stuffed the baby boy in a trash bag. This young woman had been pregnant before, when she was fifteen, which ended in an abortion that her parents helped arrange. Upon discovering that she was pregnant again, she was so ashamed that she didn't want to tell her parents again; she didn't want anyone to know, and so she silenced her story. Four years later, the prison released her.

I understand why she did what she did. Although this was my first and only pregnancy and the first time I ever had sex, her secret intersects mine. My story could easily have ended like hers. It almost did.

I was ashamed of my body, of its wildness, of its capacity to create and end life. I thought my story didn't matter to anyone but me, that the mysteries of sexuality and sensuality were stories we weren't supposed to listen to.

Women's bodies have been a source of shame since Eve. Unwed girls are not supposed to have sex. A sperm connects with an egg and a new potential life is conceived in the union. We've whittled the stories down to these.

You see, I don't want to know everything—a world without mysteries would be appalling to me. Though I try for answers, someone else's story is not what I seek. I want to hear it from the rock. If I search long enough, feel the skin often enough and listen intently, I will find the answers I need.

-Katie Lee, "Sandstone Seduction"

We are taught that emotions and the language of the body are not valid in most discussions—that we must keep control of our passions or we will not be taken seriously. I have been trained as a biologist to believe that emotional, personal stories don't really matter in the greater scheme of things, that sentiment clouds judgment. I thought that the intellectual language of reason and the stories of science were the only authentic tongues.

We give credence to some stories—Science, Linear Time, Physics, Christianity—but not to others. We do not accept the authority of personal, emotional, mystical, or mysterious experiences because of the internal inconsistencies, the things that can't be plugged into an equation, the slippage, the questions, and the mystery. We are told that these stories are frivolous and insignificant.

But aren't our personal experiences empirical truths? And if these stories don't matter, don't our lives then become superfluous as well?

Science is only one story and there are others just as vital and more whole. The warm, artful, and emotional language of intimate stories is just as academic and credible, only it teaches us in more fully engaging, sensual, and adventurous ways. The questions inherent in these stories are where we generate meaning; the eclipse of Universal and personal is where the medicine is found. More than anything, in the process of healing, I have needed the rich, personal, grievous stories of other women. Just because a law says that abortion is Okay doesn't make me feel that way.

Indeed, the Inupiaq word for "storyteller" translates into English as, "the person who creates the environment where wisdom reveals itself." Mystery descends upon the tellers and the listeners of personal stories and engages them in the Universal, calling forth connections, presenting the complexity of the universal in relation to the particular; we are not told the answers, and yet we understand something. And in this, we know that wisdom is more a bundle of mystery than bits of teased apart information or definitions or facts.

When we abandon the language of the body for the language of the intellect, the result is loosely organized, sterile abstractions that don't recognize the adventure of the

personal, lived lives, the philosophical differences between them, and the relationships that unite them. When we abandon mystery, we abandon the stories of our lives and we abandon ourselves.

I have a “wild hair” as my elders have told me. Now, I see them, these wild hairs, everywhere: the single gray strand growing from the crown of my friend’s otherwise black mane of hair; the one that curls seductively around the nipple of a shirtless river guide; the sharp, thick one growing from a woman’s chin; the coiled one beneath an ex-boyfriend’s bellybutton; that one pubic hair that just won’t stay tucked inside a bathing suit. There are wild hairs that I don’t see, but hairs we sense nonetheless: a hair in the nervous system, the one that’s rooted in the sacrum and grows up through the meat of the spinal cord into the base of the head, the one that sends shivers all the way to the fingertips and the toes in moments of ecstasy, or a cord that curls up in the throat when we feel threatened, or a string that pulls the corners of our mouths around into smiles or frowns or twitches of confusion or wobbly trembles of despair, or a thread that wrinkles between the eyes when the weather changes within and without, or a yarn that coils somewhere small inside and sometimes unravels, when we feel free.

Maybe this strand of wildness is what pulls us inexplicably by the bellybutton towards what we don’t understand, what pulls us in longing for connection with...with what?

What are we all constantly longing for?

Maybe, just maybe, we’re searching for union with the wild strand in other creatures, in landscapes, perhaps within our own selves—union with the wild, sensual,

intimate stories that are being left behind. Maybe we're longing for the integrity of intimate relationships with our own bodies, other bodies, and the body of the Earth. Maybe wilderness is a braid woven of these unions, these unions of what is wild.

And maybe we're always longing because what is wild is broken. Sexuality. Relationship. Intimacy. Love. Flesh. Bodies. Land. Rivers. Ocean. Rhythm. Freedom.

This desire to be in relation is untamed and uncontained and unshaped when most of us understand and are more comfortable with *definition*. To define means more than naming something. "Define" also means to order, to outline, to delineate, to fragment, to isolate. "Define" is an antonym of "unite."

Once something is demarcated, we don't have to think so much about how we live in relation to it. Once it is universally defined, we don't have to think so much about what it fully means. But paradoxically, the universal precision we strive for defies distinction of the personal—we disown union at the same time that we prohibit space for the complexities and intimacies of the individuals.

So why do we insist on definition, particularly scientific definition, to guide the way we live our lives? I see it like this: if we can define it, we can control it, if we can control it, we can consume it. We are grounded in a fear of mystery.

To protect what is wild is to protect what is gentle. Perhaps the wildness we fear is the pause between our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this grace. Wild mercy is in our hands.

-Terry Tempest Williams, "Wild Mercy"

My story of abortion and the story of Utah Wilderness are organically and ideologically united because the boundaries imposed on women's bodies so closely parallel the boundaries imposed on the body of the land. Similarly, the language of the abortion debate is analogous to the politics of Wilderness designation, because although these are discussions concerning moral and philosophical questions, we mask the complexity of these inquiries in order to distill the abstract and the mysterious into sterile equations and precise definitions.

The abortion debate hinges on a single definition: at what biological point does Life begin? The debate over designating Utah's roadless areas as Wilderness has also been distilled to a single definition: what constitutes a road? Many of us seem to believe that if we could scientifically define at what instant Life begins, our struggle with the morality of abortion would rest. We think we can calculate Wilderness with an equation of a piece of land's size, how "roaded" it is, its scaled beauty, its uniqueness, and its proximity to an urban area.

In Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan, William R. LaFleur writes, "Just as we hope someone somewhere—probably a medic or a judge—will be able to tell us exactly what makes a person 'dead', so we hope to be told at what 'point' in time life begins. By locating that exact moment we will, we think, be able to distinguish acts that are innocuous and even charitable from ones that are murderous and cruel. *Thus we try to pull off moral miracles with words and definitions,*" (emphasis mine).

Our attempts at simplifying only trivialize larger, more important inquiries while simultaneously refusing the very personal elements that are often at stake. Although this may be the price of pluralism, I believe that when we are *satisfied* with definitions and

equations alone, when we believe in continuity without difference, we are tinkering with Freedom. We silence the very stories that are vital to the meaning of our lives, stories that are vital to the way we choose to live, stories that are vital in becoming fully human. We become fragile.

I have become conscious of something perplexing in the borderlands of several political debates (the abortion debate, the Wilderness debate, the politics of euthanasia, etc.): we are very much afraid of death—this is not a new or surprising declaration—but I now realize that a fear of Death doesn't come out on the other side as a reverence for Life.

Sexuality and reproduction are wild and elude restriction and regulation. Mortality is also wild and does not heed our need for order and control, and so we fear it. And yet we are the only species that deliberately and calculatingly kill others of our own species—wars, acts of terror, murders, capital punishments. We find industrial slaughterhouses acceptable. It is perfectly acceptable to systematically kill not just individual animals and plants, but whole species, whole tribes, whole ecosystems. To chop down a forest for a subdivision is to tame the wild into squares; to raise animals for death in a mechanical assembly line is to take the mystery out of dying, to make fatality systematic and tidy.

That does not tell the story of a reverence for life. That is instead the story of a reverence for control. We worship the orderly.

Freedom of choice is not orderly. Sexuality is not tidy. Wilderness cannot be plugged into an equation. Women's bodies cannot be governed. Mystery will never be defined.

Freedom can be a thorny thing; in some ways, it would be horrifyingly and sickeningly easier if we had no choice—especially in moral dilemmas. Unbending rules, commandments, and laws are easy to blame our actions and our unhappiness on. We do not have to think or feel, only follow what lies before us.

We would not have to make difficult choices. We would not have to admit that we don't know The Answer. We wouldn't be responsible for our actions. But Aldo Leopold, in his "The Land Ethic," says for conservation what could be said of moral dilemmas everywhere: "In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial."

I see a relationship in the simplification of ecosystems from dwindling numbers of native species and crop variations and the way we choose our stories. When we are satisfied by definition and continuity, our lives become a single, tame string of definitions where we used to have a complex web of stories.

But maybe ethics are like a watershed. Maybe the difference inherent in morality trickles down from all these snowflakes and raindrops and creeks and springs into the same big river. However, if we think about ethics like a watershed, we must remember that a river's boundaries are fluid, that the river bends and curves and sometimes abandons its course, that it sometimes flashes with floods, that sometimes it runs flat and soothing but sometimes it thrashes through rocky rapids—and the perilous parts are the

choices we face and our responsibility for them. But above all, we must remember that a river is not a river if it stops moving. We can't catch a river and ask it to sit still.

I think our stories help the river run.

*When something within us is disowned, that which is disowned,
wreaks havoc.*

-Ralph H. Blum and Susan Coughan,
The Healing Runes

What is wild—bodies, sexuality, connections, Earth, Life—is broken and neatly tied into defined pieces. God forbid we permit civility and wildness to squish around in the mud together. While it seems we do enjoy having “wilderness” around us, or out West somewhere, we don't want the wild within us. Our relationships with the wild are carefully designed and cultivated with the necessity of remaining autonomous, with the necessity of being Master.

We like to look at it. Wild Earth. Wild Bodies.

What is it that we fear?

The hairs are split. We're bearing down on a definition, on an equation, on an answer. We're pushing wildness out. And it's coming out sideways.

Kids like me from places such as Cleveland believe that “wildness” is synonymous with “defiance.” The synthetic reality of cities understands wildness as a threat, and so superimposes “menace” and “danger” and “bad” over “wild.” Being wild means sneaking out after curfew, drinking a lot of booze, doing a lot of drugs, cutting and dying hair with the intent of pissing parents off, wearing leather and chains, cutting class, getting into fights, having lots of sex, being in a gang, telling a teacher to fuck off, or bringing weapons to school. Kids like us tell and admire the same stories; only the geography and the names differ. We think we are listening to wildness in these tales, that

we are setting the wild into motion in our reverence to rebellion. But we've never even seen wildness or wilderness. We do not know those stories.

Even now that I'm in my twenties, even now that I've been to wild places that have no buildings, roads, no trails even, I still catch myself believing that just getting crazy drunk and sassy and sexy and listening to loud music that shrieks fuck-you, fuck-something, fuck-off, or fuck-me every other word will make me that wild creature my body so longs to be. But all I'm doing is pushing that wild nature *out*—out of the brain, out of the body, out of the house, out of the community.

This doesn't make me free. It makes me empty. And it makes me alone. I've had enough one-night stands with myself.

When I was pregnant, some part of me thought that if I didn't eat, everything would go away, go *out* somewhere invisible. The pregnancy ashamed me, and so I silenced it. I felt dirty and lonely in this secret and saw my body as the root of the disgrace. I thought I could starve the wickedness out of me if I didn't feed the flesh. Two forces battled for control of my body, and it took on a strange paradox of swelling parts that the caving parts tried to suck back in.

A tug of war ensued between my selves, and it was a disfiguring conflict. My breasts swelled pink above a shadowed, sharpened rib cage; my hip bones sliced through the skin below a distending belly. My face had a strange glow about it—I think it was supposed to be a pink pregnant flush—but with the sinking of starvation, it yellowed to a glow akin to the jaundiced faces in the overhead fluorescent lighting of grocery stores. My eyes popped out over two charcoal stripes smudged by a shadow thumb. Rumors spread around high school that I had cancer because I had become so sickly and starved

and yellow looking, and because at any given moment, one could find me throwing up in the bathroom.

Days after the abortion, a homeless woman in Cleveland pointed at me and screeched, “I like your hair!” I thought maybe she was complimenting me, so I smiled and said thanks. Then she hissed, “You have *snakes* growing from your head, you witch!” I stopped abruptly and stared at her as she cackled, rocking back and forth on her haunches, inside her sidewalk square. I saw my shadow before her, the wild mane of curls blowing fiercely in the wind, uncontrollable, slithering like dark snakes on the concrete.

Earth cut into squares. Concrete over land. Life turned into stone.

“Medusa,” I whispered. I had learned of her in school, learned that she was some kind of mythic Goddess monster, a wild, bad woman, a seductive woman horrific in her naked presence—the sight of her evil snakes writhing from her skull turned life, turned what is sacred, into stone. I named my shadow Medusa.

I pushed my shame and grief into an alter ego that didn’t exist—trying to separate myself from my secrets, I disowned them as something dark and evil, a Medusa that followed behind me, someone who did bad things, shameful things, something that couldn’t be tamed. I disowned my story. I look at it now, understanding how we have separated wild from civil, wondering if we did that to cover up things about ourselves that ashamed us.

I did it because I was scared of myself. I was scared that if I lost my boundaries, the small part of me I saw as virtuous and good would simply fade into the shadow of my

terrible shame. If I didn't separate myself from that wild dusk, I feared that this was what I would become.

But what scared me the most was that maybe this distinction was some kind of mirage, that the Medusa following me was actually myself, that my shadow was a witch and that witchery was me.

That's why I liked the desert—most everything was already stone.

Years later, that smell unique to the collision of water and porcelain still makes my mouth salivate in anticipation of vomiting. My eyes reflexively water every time I go to the bathroom. If I stare into a toilet for a few seconds, my torso starts to jerk with pulsing gags. These waves of the stomach muscles in vomiting are the same kind of rhythmic pushing the body makes in labor contractions.

Push, push, push. Breathe. It's time to set this free.

Gagging. Acidic juices in my mouth. Tearing eyes. This is the language of the body. This is a voice telling me that these secrets are toxic to my system, that I can't sever them and contain them anymore because some part of me is dying.

The land is offering a similar voice and a similar plea. Don't sever me and tie me up and squish me down like a secret. Set me free. Let wilderness grow.

Local extinctions are occurring even in Wilderness areas—because the acres are too little and too isolated. The water, the air, and the soil are poisoned, and the forests are burning more fiercely than ever before. The salmon can't get home. Something is dying in us as a people. It's time to understand why we feel such shame for wild flesh, why we must cultivate, log, mine, drill, or build upon every square inch of land, why our whole culture is based on consuming as much as possible. Our kids are setting stray cats on fire

and blowing away their peers and their teachers. We're eating genetically modified food sprayed and injected with toxins. Everybody's addicted to something. My friends are committing suicide. We are angry and sad and wanting. We are isolated and fragmented.

Let us begin telling stories.

MATERIALS

THE SECRET:

Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

-Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

The sky melted in the heat outside the shell of my truck. Vail's mountains dripped into the rearview mirror as my mom and I rolled along on the blurry smudge of highway before us, somewhere on the last fourth of the distance between Cleveland, Ohio, and Moab, Utah, somewhere between an ending and a beginning. I was on a mission; Mom was just along for the ride.

Even as the slick haze smeared earth into sky, the division of the elements was clear. "Mom," I asked, looking at the horizon, "do you ever wonder what's beyond that receding line?"

She was reading a beach book with her turquoise bifocals on, and her dark eyes didn't lift from the page when she said, "Huh-uh."

"Never? You never wonder."

She stopped chewing on her fake nail long enough to murmur, "Honey, all that's beyond a receding line is a balding head." We both laughed, but my gut contracted at the same time. Even as many aspects of our personalities and characteristics mirrored one another's, this was our division, the umbilical split between my middle-aged mother and her twenty-two year old daughter: I felt like while I was still probing, she had settled. I thought she didn't want to see the truth if a lie was prettier.

Under her seat, a plastic bag carried a sandwich with factory-farmed, hormone-injected, irradiated roast beef with genetically modified shiny red tomato slices and unblemished lettuce swimming in cancerous pesticides, stacked between slices of mass produced, preservative-laden bread. She had once bought wheat germ and made her own organic yogurt. I had told her of the toxins she was eating, the plight of the family farms, and about slaughterhouses, and the price of organic food wasn't something she had to worry about. She knew, but she simply didn't want to *know*, preferring to settle for the easy and the sweet as long as the sweetness hid the contamination.

I handed my mom's gas station soft serve ice cream cone back to her after several milky licks.

"Thanks... Wanna play 'Hey Cow!' with me?" she asked eagerly.

"No."

The ridiculous game consisted of screaming "Hey cow!" out the window at the dumb beasts, racking up points for each cow that wasted the energy to look up. Not

surprisingly, she had only had one “Hey Cow!” contender, my younger brother—who could be suckered into anything once—so Nancy 1 played against Nancy 2 on all of our road trips.

“Please?”

“No.”

She slipped a CD into the stereo and began belting out Celine Dion tunes like it was nobody’s business—and I *mean* it was nobody’s business. She needed to keep this shit between her and Celine. It was awful. I was beginning to understand why my dad hated to travel.

“Come on,” I moaned.

“Alright, alright, alright,” she said and popped the disc out. Silence stretched out between my mom’s intermittent licks of the ice cream, and I relaxed. No shrieks of “Hey Cow!” and no Celine Dion. Ahhhhh. But then...the dreaded Yanni.

“Oh no. Oh, I really don’t think so, Ma.” I had seen her trying to sneak the CD from its case.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” she asked me, eyes wide and incredulous.

“I can’t do it, I mean, I’m physically not able to listen to this shit. Celine’s bad enough, but life gets about a kazillion times worse when I have to watch you ‘help Yanni conduct’ with one hand.”

“Yanni needs me, Mattie.”

“He needs *something*, that’s for goddamned sure.” I intercepted the disc and told her to commune silently with Celine as I slipped some new music in.

“And I can’t do this,” she said, complaining about my musical choice. Old-school funk.

“How could anyone dislike the Meters?” I asked her. Now I was incredulous. She started bitching about some rule where the driver is not the DJ, and the choice should have been hers.

“The laws keep changing here, Mom. As I recall, when you’re driving, this supposed rule is reversed. Jesus! I had to listen to Nanci Griffith whine all the way across Nebraska!” I told her what I always informed my brother when we played card games and he cheated: “You can’t make up the rules as you go along.”

“Yes I can,” she said.

My mom is a brat. But she can get away with it because she’s also short, and smallness usually equals cuteness. And being cute cancels out being bratty, like the cuteness of a puppy cancels out that chewed boot, or the cuteness of children who aren’t your own cancels out a tantrum.

Everything about her is short. When she got into my truck, she had to mount it like a horse, using the running board like a stirrup for her outside foot, grabbing the side mirror as if it were a scruffy mane, and finally launching herself into the seat, straddling it like a saddle. When she drove, she pushed the seat so far forward in order to reach the gas pedal that instead of saving her in an accident, a deployed airbag would skewer her before it had a chance to inflate. The double helixes of her DNA, if flattened out, would look less like a ladder and more like the letters S-H-O-R-T. Ma’s hair is cut short, and it’s short on natural pigment, too—she’s had to dye it black since her black hair went gray years ago. Her cycle of fashion do’s and don’ts is also short. One day she will strut

around in a scarlet microsueded number, her hair painstakingly tousled; the next day she will don a sweatshirt with puffy-paint snowmen and a Christmas tree pin that lights up, gray roots of hair an inch long.

She has little pink lips and a little pink nose, petite legs and arms, little hands with small fingers and, beneath the fake ones, her nails are chewed so short that only the bloody meat of the nail hangs on. Her squared, elfin feet grow toes so stunted and uniform that the shoeboxes would fit her better than the actual shoes. She's even short a toe on each foot: in a marvelous feat of arthritic yoga, her second toes have begun to curl up and over her big toes, which leave her only four toes per footprint. When we go to the ocean, my brother and I try to piss her off by running around on the beach circling the four-toed tracks with a finger in the sand. We pretend we're tracking an alien, or a four-toed sloth.

But while she has described her look as “frumpy,” complained that her little toes “look like grubs,” and claimed to have “elephant knees,” I would say her petite stature and cherubic features are simply edible because—she would hate me for saying it—she's cute as a little red, shiny apple. Sometimes, she was so cute I just wanted to bite her.

I kept pretending to look in the passenger side mirror, but I was really looking at my mom squealing along to the music we had finally agreed upon. I needed to look at her a lot. Every time I left her to go to a new place, I forgot to just stare at her for a while and memorize her appearance so that I could notice the changes, so I could see the time spent apart illustrated in her features: the way a new small line in her face might fold with a smile, a slight variation in the style of her standard pixie haircut, three pounds lost

or gained, or the way sunlight caught the new golden highlights she would claim she got by opening her Honda's sunroof all the time.

After the next few days of exploring with her, I wouldn't see her again for months. In Moab, I would stay and settle into a new rented house, settle into another new life. This time, a graduate residency in environmental education would define my life for a year. I would work with Canyonlands Field Institute, the same institute I had attended as a high school student. This time, instead of being a student, I would be a teacher, instructing kids and Elderhostel folks at CFI's desert field camp and on their multi-day rafting trips while taking graduate coursework through an extension of Utah State University. Mom would fly back to Cleveland like she always did.

She liked to help "move me" from one place to the next because it gave her an excuse to travel; like THC lingering in her blood stream, my mom felt her dormant gypsy wind blow from within every now and again. It was a wind that once picked her up like tumbleweed in her hippie years, and she had searched for the answers that blew in it, like that Dylan tune she liked to sing all the time when I was little. I wanted to know why she stopped looking, if there had been some kind of satisfying answer in the union of my liberal Democrat, motorcycle-riding, world-traveling mom with my conservative Republican, golf-obsessed, never-wanted-to-leave-Ohio dad, or if it was something she saw in her travels, something terrible that flicked her switch to off, or if something called out to her and said, "Hush. Hush now."

I wondered if I would have told her about the pregnancy and the abortion if I had felt like she was still searching, no matter the rot she was sure to find behind the sweet surfaces. It wasn't that I was afraid of violence or anger if she discovered her daughter

was no longer made of sugar and spice and everything nice. She wouldn't have called me a whore or slapped my face or kicked me out of the house, like many mothers would. Sadness might have entered the space between us, maybe a tear or two, but nothing more.

What scared me was subtlety. Like when you pass a bloody car wreck or you watch the evening bad news, and for a moment, for a slow inhale, you are silently horrified, but you pass on by or to a commercial break, and you delicately shift your emotions and your vision of the world in order to carry on living like you were before. I feared the flinch I would see and the subtle realignment of my mom's body, as if I wounded her with shame and she protected a tender sore. I feared a dryness in the dark river stones of her eyes, as if the way she used to see me was now a blind spot, made opaque by disgrace. I didn't want to see the flatness that said she had to look at me through a filter, a slight tilt of her face as if she were looking through a crystal at an angle, an angle to shave off the impurities and her disappointment in them. I didn't want her to know about my toxic secrets and shame because she wouldn't really want to *know*. I felt this way then, and I knew I still couldn't tell her now, because for me, time had only concentrated the toxicity.

Noxious sins and caustic mistakes have no half-life.

It wasn't just her. Nobody could know. I couldn't even say the word aloud. Abortion. This was the alphabet of despair, the whisper of shame, the fistful of twisted sheets night after nightmared night. Just hearing the word "abortion" crushed my belly as if my abdomen were the abandoned carapace of an insect, emptied and brittle. When I sat around big dinner tables or stood with a beer in circles at parties and the abortion debate came up, I could feel the blood drain from my cheeks and neck and coagulate in a

big scarlet “A” on my belly. I would race to the bathroom and find myself in a line of white-faced girls and women, all of us silent, listening to the discussion escalate in the other room, some other braver, confident women fighting loudly for our choices. And I could say nothing. We’d file into the bathroom one by one and close the door behind us, curling up with cheeks touching the cold tile floors, cradling the emptiness of our bellies with hands clasped around our knees, letting the silent convulsions of shame overtake us. Instead of words, “abortion” pumped a low moan up from a dead womb through a dead throat and lips split like wood, a trickle against gravity blossoming into an orchid of howls. This was all we could say.

Secrecy and shame were something that I had prepared myself for. I made a pact with myself when I was fourteen, when I was just learning about rape and consensual sex, that I would never tell, *never*, if anyone touched me in a way I didn’t want, or if anyone penetrated me when I refused. I made a pact with myself that rape would be a secret.

Maybe I made this pact with myself because of the Muslim girl on the news, the one who had been brutally raped, and her brother—her own brother!—at the request of her father—her own father!—had murdered her after the rape because of the impurity, the shame, and the evil she had inflicted upon her family. Maybe I made the pact not to tell because of the women I’d heard about in Peru, the ones who were jailed for two years for getting abortions, whether the baby was a result of rape or not, and the police who scoured the hospitals looking for victims of botched abortions, and the back-alley butchers who literally get up and run in the middle of the “procedure” if the police come.

Maybe I made the pact not to tell because of the girls I knew about in Cleveland—where I grew up—who had been cast aside, cast into the streets, cast to the dogs in their Catholic hell by their own families upon learning of the teenage pregnancies, even though some of the babies had been created in the date-rape scenarios I was learning about in school. Maybe I made the pact not to tell because of the raped girls who did tell, when nobody believed them, and the boys said terrible things about them and did terrible things to the girls' families, and the un-raped girls whispered and stared, and then the raped girls moved or transferred schools. Maybe I made the pact not to tell because of the “rape kits” I'd heard about, and the further shame and pain girls were subjected to in the hospital, the rape by cold medical instruments and cold medical doctors, the embarrassing questions and the shameful replies. Or maybe I made the pact not to tell when I saw the look on my father's face when he caught me kissing a boy, the look of hardened disgrace that chilled his blue eyes to silver, the look that shamed me, the look that penetrated me to the marrow with the sense that no matter what, it would be my fault, that the bud of this fresh woman-body would be the root of any sexual fall from Eden, consensual or forced, that it would be my shame, my shame alone that would shadow our family.

So when I got pregnant in high school, not by rape, but by being one half of the consensual agreement and a willing receptacle, when I got pregnant, not by miracle, but by dishonorable mistake and by knowingly defiling my body and disgracing my family, of course I made another pact of secrecy with myself. Nobody but my boyfriend would know. And when I had the abortion, of course this too would be secret, because *I was*

trading one shame for another. But lonely pacts like these can make a girl feel very toxic and very confused and very ashamed.

And so I had a secret, a terrible secret that I guarded like a lie. I sensed that this lie, those words I had tried to leave four years ago in the desert, had become a prickly cactus in its watery, luscious bloom. I didn't know what this blooming meant, only that it was time to return, because the sweet scent of the words' blossom was boiling in my blood. I didn't know what I was doing; I just thought that going back might make it go away.

I was thinking about this cactus flower, about how I wasn't sure if I could feel something deep in my belly unfolding, but I thought maybe *something* was trembling in there, and I thought maybe there was something like hope fleshing out my veins as I drove closer and closer to Ground Zero, closer and closer to The Destination, and I was just allowing my dry lips a small smile when I saw the sign and everything started to change.

THE TITS:

Large breasts are like pets. Everyone likes them, but you're the one who has to take care of them.

-Sark, Succulent, Wild Woman

Show us your tits. That's what the teen boys' sign said through the rear window of what looked like a security van. From the passenger seat of my truck behind them, my mom squealed, her right hand fluttered over her heart, and her thin lips flexed into the shape of a Cheerio.

“Show us your tits!” she shrieked. “Oh my God!” Her face looked paralyzed.

The three boys in the reverse-facing seat of the van stared through the window at us with expressionless faces over the sign. Their severe handwriting sliced angles into the letters that were supposed to curve; the shape of the “S’s” in “show,” “us,” and “tits” looked like black lightning bolts.

Mom squealed again from the passenger seat and then erupted into laughter, the kind of laughter that sent tears streaming down her face, ultimately unable to decide between two emotions.

“Hoods-in-the-Woods,” I said to her. The teens were convicted criminals, I guessed, on their way to a desert survival course designed to “break” them of their bad patterns. The boys had been condemned to survive the desert.

At first, it was funny. “Show us your tits.” I laughed. Those horny little tadpoles of men. Ha. But staring at the sign looming in front of us for several minutes gave me the feeling of being groped. I sat separated from these boys by space, speed, our respective metal and glass shells, and clothing; *they* were holding the commanding sign; their fingers couldn’t touch me; I hadn’t provoked anything. And yet, I felt slippery with shame. Was that what they wanted? To make me feel dirty?

I started to think that maybe this had been the convicted boys’ last flailing attempt at elevating themselves into a dominant, authoritative role before being dumped in the desert for weeks to make fire from friction, to crawl for miles every day, to eat nothing more than lentils and rice, to construct shelters and backpacks from tarps and sticks. Out there in the desert, they would have no ownership or power. Out there in the desert, the

boundaries they had imposed on what they wished to control were lost. And those boys were scared.

I stepped on the gas and swerved into the passing lane. “Oh, fuck you guys,” I muttered. “Control this!” My mom turned to me, mock horror on her face eroding into genuine terror when I started to stretch down the neck of my tank top.

“Oh my God!” she yelled. I stopped peeling my shirt from the proverbial breasts, swerved in front of the van, and skidded off the highway into a gas station, laughing and wanting to cry at the same time. Minutes later, I sat stiffly on the gas station toilet, perched on a nest of toilet paper layered between the seat and my ass, and thought about tits.

Why is sexuality so cluttered? All girls wake up one morning during the tender age of greasy skin, gangly limbs, B.O., braces, and (in my case) bad hair to find a pair of mutant zits with nipples perched atop their chests, and the zit-tits keep growing and swelling and pointing in opposite directions... and nobody can control them. Our parents can't demand that we get rid of them or take them back to where they came from, we can't ask for a certain size or shape or perky bounce, and “training bras,” try as they may, can't force the tits back inward. Breasts are inevitable, whether we celebrate their arrival, or think of them as a curse that has been inflicted upon us, or hide them in embarrassment.

Tits happen.

On the puberty scale, my breasts arrived a little late, and I used to shield my abnormally bony chest in thick, oversized clothes. Although I grew up in an extended family of boys believing any sign of femininity was something that could be, and should

be, overcome, abnormality was a powerful fright that forced me to do stupid little exercises in my room to hasten the breasts' onset. But once they pimped my chest, it seemed the breasts wished to make up for their tardiness in size. I furiously reversed the exercises and cursed the tits every night, wishing they would vanish. But they only flamed larger, my exploding sexuality about as discreet as the swollen red raw-hamburger-meat asses of the baboons in heat I'd seen at the zoo. I couldn't figure out any other way to overcome my body, and suddenly I was struck with the topography of a woman.

The tits proved to be useless. My boobs bounced too much to run like a boy. Boy's clothes didn't fit my swelling body anymore. They got in the way of my three-point shot. When it came to picking teams for football, breasts were about as desired as an amputated limb. So I gave up trying to be like boys and tried to get them. Like most girls, I learned to use the tits like men use puppies in parks. And then, like most girls, I learned the shame of forgetting that this flesh was just tit-on-a-leash, that the identity of the breasts didn't always merge with the young woman attached. But I felt shame for being called a "prude" and a "tease" because I didn't want to be touched. Other girls feel shame for getting called "slut" and other hateful names, contemptuous names, even as the same name-calling guys crawl through those girls' windows at night and call them every weekend. Touched or not, this flesh is scorned.

Girls try to understand, but we get confused. Why? Because these breasts are supposed to feed Life, and yet they are a dirty joke, or something looked at in pornographic magazines and movies, or something to be flaunted, or something to hide if

the bearer has the face of Daughter, Sister, Wife, or Mother. Either way, they are censored.

Still sitting on the gas station pot, I thought that we censor and scorn and try to control what we fear, and then I wondered—why are so many cultures so afraid of simple, fleshy handfuls of fat, glands, and nerves? Humans, just like wild animals, are sexual, reproductive beings, born of and nourished by the flesh. Maybe breasts remind us, despite our best efforts to forget, that we are all connected, that we *long* to be connected, that we're not little test-tube autonomous beings, that we're still dependent on some things.

There are some boundaries that we can't impose, some rules we can't make. Maybe breasts remind us that there are still some things that elude our control and manipulation. And so they are an embarrassment, a shame, and a wildness that must be tamed.

There was a popular poster that used to hang in butcher shops illustrating a woman's body divided into "cuts," where her separate body parts were classified like a butchered cow. There is a sign for Frank Perdue's chicken asking, "Are you a breast man or a leg man?" There used to be a restaurant in Cleveland, where I grew up and grew tits, whose menu cover featured a woman's buttocks and proclaimed, "We serve the best meat in town!" The restaurant was called The Hustler before its incarnation as a porno magazine. Is the goal to reduce the body, this shameful flesh, to disembodied parts and faceless meat? Is a woman more manageable that way, more easily consumed?

Once, at a dance club, I was ignoring some guy trying to get to know the big tits, speaking to their cleavage instead of my face, and I imagined a world bouncing with

breasts severed from their keepers—Free at last! the women sigh—and vodka snorted from my nostrils when I laughed at the vision that popped into my head. Boob herds. Freed from bodies and femininity, herds of them just boinged across the plains like non-gender-specific buffalo, where men could hunt them and own them like a trophy on the wall. As the guy wiped vodka and snot from his shiny shirt, I cackled, hee-hawing about how it would be so much easier, how he and his buddies wouldn't have to try so hard to own the woman who housed the breasts, how me and my girlfriends wouldn't have to try so hard to camouflage them or dress them up. As I remember, the man didn't think it was so funny. But think about it—herds of boobs. It's hilarious.

Of course we make ashamed pacts of secrecy with ourselves, because our bodies are the flesh of censorship. How is a young woman supposed to navigate her way through the contradictory maze that is her body? Breasts represent sexuality at the same time they symbolize the milky nectar of innocence. We see breasts and can simultaneously think of sex and of moms and babies. Obviously, sex and babies are connected—but in most religious circles, these thoughts exist on opposite poles of the Virtue-Sin Spectrum, the Virgin-Whore Dichotomy. There is Satanic fucking, and then there are virgin nativities. Sex is evil. Babies are pure. Women are the temptation of the devil. Women are the vessels of innocence. One, we are divided; divided, we are one.

I stood at the sink, my reflection distorted in the gas station's cracked bathroom mirror and dull yellow light. A couple of years ago, when I had the swollen tits of a pregnant woman, I stared in the mirror a lot, staring at these tits, trying to understand them, trying to define their sexuality, trying to recognize my place on the straight line between Lolita and Mary. In all this staring, I discovered that my cleavage always

curved the same direction at the top: to the left, a delicate arc like a hunter's bow, or a crescent moon, or a gentle bend of the river. Somehow, I found solace in that curvature, solace in the flesh that wasn't a straight line, solace in the skin's division that collided into something soft and beautiful. Now, the crescent glittered with a spackling of sweat. Drops of perspiration gathered like dew and trickled down the cleavage's bend, carving my breasts into a wet, sideways smile. I flushed the toilet with my flip-flopped foot and clutched my breasts in two hands, a dough of flesh and cotton spilling between my fingers.

This is the flesh that at once defines women and defies us.

"Ladies," I said to the smiling boobs, "you are nothing but trouble." I splashed water on my face, wiped under my arms with a clump of scratchy paper towels, and turned back for the truck, letting the heavy metallic door crash shut behind me.

THE CLEAVAGE:

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable.

-Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror

Mom and I switched driving positions, and I stared out the window at the landscape that grew leaner and leaner the closer we got to the heart-shaped Colorado Plateau. The landscape had been skinned of the unnecessary, shucked of opulence. All the fat had been melted off. This disrobing of the landscape foreshadows an encounter with something very real—something that might cause you to avert your eyes because

such nakedness is scary, or at least uncomfortable. Scars are visible, and they don't heal very quickly in the desert.

My family came from Cleveland, and Cleveland had always seemed like a landscape sheathed in a costume, a costume made of synthetic materials. It was difficult to find anything real, but sometimes, the truth was so filthy that people found it easier to just keep it wrapped in the dirty sheets of the unspeakable.

Cleveland used to be spelled with an extra "A": Cleaveland. The land of cleave, cleavage of the land. Cleavage: the breasts' division collided. Or: a fragment obtained by splitting.

Or: the divisions of the single-celled zygote that come together as a multicellular embryo.

To cleave meant to both sever *and* to unite, to divide *and* to come together. By definition, "cleave" is its own opposite, its own antonym.

Water is fire's opposite, its elemental antonym. By its very definition, a river shouldn't burn because water isn't flammable. Its molecular structure doesn't allow for ignition—fire isn't inside the bond between an oxygen and two hydrogen atoms. By everything we embrace as truth, the river shouldn't have burned. Yet in Cleveland, Ohio, the Cuyahoga River did, and it burned for over thirty-three years before anyone paid attention.

Imagine a strapping, crooked river suddenly exploding into an inferno, a tango of flames dancing down the river valley, the valley a cauldron filled with a witch's brew of chemicals. Imagine water feeding fire, fire feeding on water: a miracle and a tragedy at the same time. Don't you think someone would notice?

When the Mohawk Indians named this river *Cayagaga*, or “Crooked River,” they did not dream of this river as crooked with a topography of fire or that this river would be a dumpster for volatile petroleum derivatives. They did not know the Crooked River to be the River Styx.

Of course the water didn’t actually burn—it was all of the chemical shit dumped into it that caught fire. By 1881, the steel monster of industry had devoured and polluted almost all available Cuyahoga riverfront land. Rensselaer Herrick, one of Cleveland’s own mayors, called the river “an open sewer through the center of the city.” Small islands of fire ignited almost daily, smoldering and burning themselves out without attention. And it all went blissfully ignored, as if this was okay.

Nobody questioned our use of the river. Nobody questioned its use as a receptacle for people’s filth, or a receptacle for the by-products of our greed, or a receptacle for murdered people—this river was a dead body, a container of unleashed rage, domination, and gluttony, and nobody said what we were doing was wrong. Even when the river said, “Enough!” to the gang raping of her curving waters, even when she said “Enough!” with flames five stories high just upriver from “Collision Bend,” people said nothing. People hushed any whispers of concern and any peeps of alarm, pushing the toxicity deeper and deeper into the realm of the unspeakable, and the lifeless, petroleum sap oozing down the valley began to feel ordinary. Nobody spoke so that the atrocities could continue.

But finally, on June 22, 1969, a month after my mom graduated from high school, a blaze so intense that it burned down railway trestles invited the nation to start wondering how water could ignite. *Time* magazine described this lovely river as one that

“oozes rather than flows,” and a river in which a person “does not drown but decays.” Cleveland’s silence and complicity were exposed, prompting legislature for the Clean Water Act and providing the impetus for federal and state environmental protection agencies.

People then busied themselves pinpointing sources of the igniting sparks, focusing on the “how” rather than the “why.” Nobody asked why humans must destroy that which nourishes them, but some blamed a cigarette butt tossed from a car window. Nobody asked why people assume the role of master, but some blamed a spark from a blowtorch. Nobody asked why we fear and censor wildness, but some claimed refracted sunlight heated the volatile crud. Nobody asked why we must break what is free into cultivated fields and dams and irrigation ditches, but some postulated that the petroleum derivatives infecting the river spontaneously combusted.

Do you know what I think? I think the fires were attracted to the stench of consumption and the sweet hush of ignored evils. I think the fires were meant to cleanse the silence of the unspeakable. “A great flame follows a small spark,” writes Dante in Paradiso.

I was born in “Cleaveland,” after the fires stopped burning, in a twenty-some-hour labor that looked to be more like an exorcism rather than a woman giving birth. From the way my dad tells it, he was simply involving himself in a beautiful miracle, his coaching breaths hee-hee-heeing between his teeth, when suddenly my mom’s eyes turned into the devil’s fire. Her head started spinning around, a sprinkler head of projectile vomit. Then she started roaring things like, “Stop telling me to *fucking breathe!* You try this, asshole!” Closely following this episode, the doctors were more than happy to inject her

spine with a delightfully numbing epidural. Then they clamped onto my head with forceps and yanked me out in a gushing red river—even then, I knew that anywhere else would be better than Cleveland.

The obstetrician described me as a “square baby” with a scalp full of curls and a ripe look about me that defied my newborn status. It was a look so ripe, in fact, that my parents named me after my dying great-grandmother: Martha Helen. Now, a newborn shouldn’t carry the title of an impending death, and furthermore, neither Martha nor Helen was any kind of name that should be slapped on a baby. Martha sounds too much like “Bertha,” Bertha sounds too much like “birthmark,” and birthmark reeks too much of lumpy warts, splotchy purple skin like chicken necks, and moles sprouting stiff whiskers.

I tell people now, when I fuck up, or when I tell them my story, or when they think I’m weird, that I was cursed at birth—by my parents. Not only had I been born into a foreshadowed death and a place where toxic water burned, but my name was a synonym for the red curse of menstruation; “My aunt Martha is visiting,” was the secret phrase whispered in middle school, meaning that the whispering girl was bloated, cranky, and bleeding like a stuck pig. So this is what me and my stupid name were associated with: a fat, crabby, warty aunt who visited monthly to give you cramps and a white cotton pony to ride between your legs instead of the real one you wanted for Christmas. If you look at all these pieces closely, the beginning spells out the story of my fall.

Realizing the curse of this place and this name, I left “Cleveland” after high school, returning periodically for my belongings and to visit family, and I started calling myself Mattie. The cleavage of birth and death, water and fire, miracle and tragedy haunted me, and what scared me most was that the Cuyahoga River *doesn't even go*

anywhere. It starts almost in the same place it ends, running in a big, polluted, crooked “U” from Geauga Springs south to Cuyahoga Falls, and then a sharp turn north empties the river into a deadened, bacteria-plagued, syringe-infested, mercury-poisoned Lake Erie. The Crooked River drains 813 square miles of land in six counties, and the damn thing doesn’t lead anywhere but to another polluted mess of water almost exactly where it began.

Sure, the lake had been resurrected over my lifetime—its plant life resuscitated, a new crop of fish planted, and its waters hooked up to dialysis—but it was still a shit-hole. We still had to limit our consumption of fish to four tiny fillets of Lake Erie perch per month, or risk growing tumors on our eyelids and becoming human mercury thermometers. Some summer days, we couldn’t wade in its waters because the bacteria levels were too deathly, or the stench of dead fish too sickening, or the tinsel glint of syringes too bright.

And this is the place a girl is supposed to call home?

The human body is about eighty percent water, and this crap is the river that runs through my veins, dams in my cells, and falls down my cheeks. This is where I came from, and I didn’t want to follow the U-turn course of a burning river. I didn’t want to go back to where I started, as if I went nowhere at all, as if all those painfully sharp detours and “Collision Bends” were for naught, as if my bowed life meant nothing. I didn’t want to end up in Lake Erie, nothing resolved, my naked body bobbing among the iridescent, rotting fish bellies.

I was born into a cursed name, into a cursed river of fire, into a body severed by shame and put back together by virtue, into a home whose name is its own antonym. I

was a woman, an oxymoron, destined for celebration and censorship, fertility and fatality, a life-giver and a life-taker. A miracle and a tragedy at the same time.

I was only born in Cleaveland; I refused to die there. I wanted to change my story; I wanted a different one. I thought splitting for a different crooked, red river might give me one.

THE DEFLOWERING:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself
I am large, I contain multitudes.*

-Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

"Ma, we gotta stop again." She groaned. "I don't have to pee this time—we just have to stop at the liquor store."

Grand Junction, Colorado: last stop for alcohol before we crossed the border.

Utah is Mormon country, and consumption of alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, or any other sort of drug is prohibited in the Mormon religion. In Utah, everything but "3.2-percent alcohol" beer is taxed to hell. Kegs are illegal. The bars and restaurants serve only beer-flavored water. Liquor is reserved for "clubs" one must pay to be a member of. State liquor stores sell the full strength stuff, but even a six-pack of Busch Light costs ten dollars. And the Mormons are the ones who get all that extra revenue.

Consumption of women and land, however, seemed to be a virtue in the Mormon legacy. And consumption of caffeine is now okay—highly endorsed, as a matter of fact—as long as the caffeine comes from a Coca-Cola product, since the Mormon Church owns the company.

Mom bought me a bottle of whiskey to “warm my house,” and I stocked up on a case of full-strength beer, a bottle of vodka, and two bottles of tequila. Back in the truck, we silhouetted the Colorado River on Interstate 70. We would track the river across the Colorado border into southern Utah, but it would be lost from view until after we dropped down onto Scenic Route 128. Then we would ride the cliffs flanking the river and plunge into the canyon to run with the river into Moab.

“Colorado” means “red” in Spanish. That’s the river I was headed for. A red river that’s not red with fire, but red with sand and a mirror of redrock canyon walls. The red river collides with the Green River south of Moab, the colors of a muddied Christmas and a virgin conception.

Ascetics and mystics flocked to the deserts and their waters in search of the divine, in search of change. When I came in high school, I thought my disgraced body belonged in the “wastes,” and I too came in search of the divine. But what I discovered was earthly, bodily, and wild. And I had no idea I would seek wildness ever since.

When I came here the first time, I was a mid-western girl with big, bad hair and a bigger, badder boyfriend. I knew rivers only to be the dumpsters for deadly chemicals, dead bodies, and emptied cans of Busch Light. Except for my mane, I was clean-shaven and hairless as a newborn mouse. I listened to cock rock and rap music, and I showered twice daily. Being outside was only for baseball games, swimming in pools, tanning, and underage drinking. My friends and I had seen photos of mountains and deserts before, but most of us had never been to a place where metal didn’t scrape the sky; a raccoon squirming up from a sewer was the wildest animal I had seen, and manicured lawns were the wildest grasses I knew. I thought “hiking” was a word of a foreign tongue—Japanese

maybe, or German. Living outside, in the desert, sleeping in a tent, drinking water from the river: these all terrified me. That I would have to shit outside never even occurred to me.

Then: a virgin to virgin lands was deflowered.

When I left, I was desert girl with less-big hair and a tentative layer of armpit and leg hair. The sun and the red earth got into my pores and stained my skin—I never wanted to shower it off. The mountains beckoned and the river seduced me; long walks in silence were a privilege. I even stopped killing bugs. My parents wondered where their old daughter had gone. “Down the river to find the desert,” I told them.

Now, four years later, she finally re-found it, and she would go from student to teacher. Oh, the perfect symmetry of it all, the circuitous drive forward into the past, to revisit old footprints—old footprints laid beneath the new, both sets a sort of pilgrimage. It all seemed a little too perfect, a little too composed, a little too neatly contrived. And it was.

I rolled down my window to look at the earth baked like dry, burnt cornbread. The dust wiggled a hula dance in September’s 104-degree heat. Bullets of sand blasting through the window perforated my forehead. A spiny clump of sage looked like it was giving me the finger. It was the only thing I saw that was alive.

Apparently, I had romanticized my high school memories of this high desert to the point that, in my mind, my mom and I were going by truck to the sacred lands. But this place was not holy. It was hellish.

“Pull over,” I said.

“Are you going to be sick?” she asked.

“Yes.” I walked around for a bit, not seeing anything but barbed wire boundaries to separate the sky from the earth. The heat and the static of dry air made me feel prickly. It was too quiet. My skin felt wrinkly and crusted as the parched earth. I swore I could smell burnt flesh all around me. My boogers were pebbles of sandstone. My eyes felt less like peeled grapes and more like raisins. I licked my lips to moisten them, but my tongue was as parched and bristled as a cat’s. My lower lip cracked down the middle; a bloody creek trickled down the center of my chin.

I started to wonder what the hell I was doing here.

I knew what I was doing when I left Cleveland, but now that I was here, I didn’t. It was easy to find my way with a road map, easy to follow the painted lines and pavement slicing the land in two. But I didn’t remember the desert this way. All hope trickled out of me. My knees buckled. I wanted to cry, but the tears evaporated.

“Let’s go,” I said to Mom. “Please.”

I crawled back into the truck, licking at my bleeding chin. The air conditioning was on inside my truck, but it might as well have been fire breathing through the vents. Mom kept turning the little dial toward the red; I kept turning the dial toward the blue. I overheat faster than most because my body favors an internal temperature of 99.4 degrees instead of the normal 98.6 degrees. Fire runs through my veins. I dehydrate quickly, like a jellyfish taken from the sea. I looked out the window. Everything else but my mom and me had escaped this burning place. Nothing moved but dust devils. Emptiness stretched out like putty. In the fierceness of the sun, even the earth wavered—the land looked like it wanted to get up and run, but it couldn’t.

All of this would have led one to ask a question: Why, then, are you moving to the desert? And this would have been my answer: Fuck if I know.

Maybe because my mold allergies would cease. Maybe because my hair would straighten out. Maybe because I liked to bask naked in the sun by myself. Maybe because I was a coiled snake. Or maybe because I had condemned myself to it.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake,” I whispered to Mom. She nodded.

“I’ve made one too,” she said, looking at the gas gauge. “I didn’t know there would be *nothing* out here. I should have gotten gas in Grand Junction. Shit.” I could see the scenes she played in her mind’s eye. We would be stranded here, delirious with heat stroke, her nails would chip in the parched air, her hair dye would bleach in the sun, and she would be picked apart by ravens and vultures with her gray secret exposed. Was she at least wearing clean underwear? “Shit,” she repeated. Then she looked at me incredulously, like she just realized something. “You *chose* to come to this place?”

I closed my eyes. Somebody make this all go away. Mercy, I’m begging for mercy, here.

“Whoa. There she is...” I opened my eyes and followed the point of Mom’s brown, crooked finger out the window at a muddy brown, crooked river. The Colorado River slid like a chocolate milkshake, down, down, down between the cliffs. She had a direction. She flowed. She twisted and curved. She had rhythm. I remembered this.

I once was lost, but now I am found. Amazing fucking Grace. I realized that I had been holding my breath, so I let it go and inhaled a new one. I rolled the window down and stuck my hand out, letting the hot air slip across my palm. Suddenly, life and

beauty and freedom crawled on my skin like insects, beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

“I can’t believe this is where you live.” Mom said this in the present tense, as if I already lived here, as if I had been living here for years, as if this was where I came from. The road eased deeper into the river canyon, deeper between the red walls parted like thighs around the pulsing water. We entered the desert’s womb.

THE WOMB:

*...A thunderstorm
unties the sky. It composes and decomposes darkness,
and forgives what it has gathered there
by letting it rain.*

*Rain opens like a woman’s shirt and
showers milk on corn.*

-Gretel Ehrlich, from “Other Seasons”

“Turquoise stimulates the throat chakra,” the gray-haired woman in the store told me. She winked. “Enjoy the bracelet.” Mom and I walked through the cloud of swamp cooler-chilled air into the heat outside.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked Mom. “Why would I want to stimulate my throat chakra?”

“Bigger, more impressive loogies?” she asked, trying to help.

“Jesus, you’re a dork,” I said to her, rubbing the five stones against my neck. I swallowed. Nothing—not even a mini-gag. “I don’t feel a thing.” I shrugged my shoulders at her. “Well, it’s a stunning bracelet, anyway. Thank you so much.”

“Welcome home,” she said, hugging me.

We walked down the strip of tourist stores in Moab's redrock valley, stopping for lunch at the hot dog shop—Mom got some kind of intestine and I got a tofu pup. When we started walking again, my head began to hurt and my bones ached. The air pressure changed. I had a nervous feeling in the pit of my gut, like something dark was lurking over my shoulder, and I quickly turned around.

Nothing. Nobody was there. I kept jerking around to find nothing hovering over me, no ax-murderer, no scary ghost, no long shadow. Finally, I realized this feeling was a creeping black cloud from the west. I elbowed Mom and pointed her torso to face the doom. We stopped walking, silently, and watched the wall of black rain erase all sign of the canyon cradling the Colorado River.

The rain thundered toward us, preceded by a smattering of drops like hoof beats, husky drops that left puffs of dust in their wake. I imagined the rain to be a wild herd of extinct animals, reminding us that they were still around, that we could be erased from existence just like they were, that their silence could be ours, that no matter how taut and sharp we pulled the barbed wire, wildness could still get in.

The black sheet overtook us, and rain pummeled us to the pavement. We ran for shelter and stood under an awning on the sidewalk until the herd of wild water moved through town. "Well, that was impressive," Mom said with big round eyes. We started walking down the sidewalk again, watching a sheet of water move horizontally this time—flooding down the street. I couldn't shake the feeling that something more impressive was to come.

A creek ran through the center of town until it reached the Colorado. Mill Creek. It came from the southeast, down from the La Sal Mountains. As we walked over the

bridge, Mill Creek suddenly swelled, frothing and churning, threatening to tear down everything around it, over it, and in it. We ran to the other side.

Red water boiled through the red walls of the small canyon. In a single heartbeat, the creek stood up and recreated its course, curved its line, and nothing could hold it down. In a single breath, the creek roared itself a new name, shrieked of its wildness, and nothing could quiet it. We listened.

I inhaled deeply. The air smelled of opposites colliding, of desert dust meeting desert rain in a duel, and they thrashed it out in the creekbed. Something smelled hot and red, like iron and rust. It smelled like iron-rich blood.

The river smelled like blood. The canyons were bleeding, spilling through their lips. A split-open jugular vein frothed through this town. The slate wiped clean.

My first flash flood, my second time in Moab, my third bleeding river.

PURPOSE

In my midtwenties, I was led to the desert less by a decision of intellect than by a response to blood urgency. Going there was like picking up a baby who's facedown in a puddle.

-Leslie Ryan, "The Other Side of Fire"

I went to the desert because I wanted the chance to beckon Freedom. I chose the desert to call upon Freedom because of the wild, boundary-less land whose loose energy looped through the air like ravens. I chose this particular high, redrock desert in Southeastern Utah because I'd been there before as a student on a field course, two weeks after the bloody abortion, sick in mind and infected in body, and when I could tell no one else, I told my secret to the big cottonwood rooted along Mary Jane Creek. I chose to

untie the bones of my shameful skeleton and bury them here because I thought I could leave them, because I thought a wild, skinless, naked desert was where secrets of the flesh might be accepted, because I thought the way the desert's scarcity scraped up alongside the river's abundance might be the collision to flush the shame away. I chose to go back now, four years later, because my blood boiled with an urgency to return to my messy secret that sat quietly in the lap of the Four Corners, in the crosshairs of the four states that come neatly together in one spot, pointing neatly in four directions.

I wanted to take responsibility for the secret, to gather it up in my skirts and take it home, to take it inside, to take it and make something good from it. All I wanted was to Make Everything Okay, to be free of The Shame.

I thought I had The Map to plot my pilgrimage, The Information to guide me in the healing, and The Book to tell me how to repent. I tried to create The Equation to equal nothing lost and nothing gained, The Ceremony to reverse the evil I had set in motion, and The Spell to tame the disgrace. I thought I knew The Wild that would free me.

I didn't know how elusive Freedom could be.

METHODS

*What I want to say is that it frightens me
this wide sky with its litter of stars.
What I want to say is you could lose yourself
in a sky like this. Looking into the flicker
of history, already dead to somewhere else.
There is so much time in a sky like this,
in our silence and the strangeness
of these ancient stars. Islands of light.
They remind me of my dead friends, my infidelities.
This night with its shadows and monsters
is too big for me. Random, irrational
as love, no matter what pictures we pretend to find.
Is this why we make a dipper or belt?
To contain it, make it familiar?
Where are the gods in a sky like this?
...
Oh how I have wanted things to be clear:
love, promises, the random dark.*

-Donna Masini, excerpts from
"The Sky Could Send You"

1. THE HOMECOMING

Some sell the desert as a place so abstract, empty, and indifferent, it surrenders its passivity to one's own lambent dreams. While you perch on a sunset-drenched butte contemplating eternity, however, Truth is the horrid little bug sinking its thorny little mandibles into your lotus-positioned butt. This desert rakes the flesh, its beauty earned only when blood flows and screams rise in the high-pitched fury against dust and wind, the relentless abrasion of razor-edged extremes.

-Ellen Meloy, Raven's Exile

An apricot tree grew in front of my new house. The fruit hadn't traveled far from its parent; bruised, rotting apricots littered the grass beneath the branches. A sweet and putrid air, thick as a swarm of bees, hovered around the mass of wasted fruit. I

scavenged through the mess of apricot flesh and pits for anything edible, but I didn't find a single apricot that wasn't rotten. Why hadn't anyone eaten them? A miracle, I thought, that a tree could fruit such flesh in the desert. An irrigated miracle, but a miracle all the same.

I could still smell the musky apricot pulp on my skin when I got to the marsh. Half an hour's walk from my front door yielded rare desert wetlands. The Moab Slough, people call it, and the name reminded me of peeling skin. The rich, earthy, black smell of the swamp informed my senses of the decay and the fertilization that cycled here—the peeling of death, the fruit of it peeled off to create life.

The wetlands fed a red creek to the Colorado pumping to the west, blood fed to the great desert artery. The still swamp also offered sacrifice to the sky. I could feel the dead water rising around me like ghosts in the cottonwood, black willow, and tamarisk shadows—evaporation is water's death. It evaporates when it is trapped—when it is silenced. Water doesn't stick around in the desert, because in dammed silence, it evaporates, molecule by molecule. But in murmuring journey, the water is a tensile cord. Taut and fleshy as an umbilicus.

Sometimes, when purple stretch marks distend the sky, the sky rubs up against the earth, and heaven's blue belly splits open. An ocean falls out of the crack. But then the water trips over itself in the getaway, stampeding the dry washes in a muddy haste to get back to the river.

When this wall of water-blood roars downcanyon, desert people say the canyon “flashes”—flashes like Life before your eyes if you're standing above it, flashes like Death's red firefly if you're caught in it.

Right here, the water slides flat as pudding from the swamp into a two-sided box of smooth red cliffs, desert varnish bruising the walls with dark streaks of manganese and iron oxides. The north lip of the steep canyon shapes Poison Spider Mesa while the southern one forms the Moab Rim. A road slices through the jungles of spiny tamarisk infecting each side of the river; on the north bank, Potash Road winds past the chemical rainbow of the potash mine pools, and on the opposite side of the river, Kane Creek Road borders no mines, but the boundary of the Behind the Rocks Wilderness Study Area. Both roads eventually spider out like a cracked windshield into a web of unpaved jeep roads accessing Canyonlands National Park. The river just keeps sliding in between.

In other places, the Colorado and its tributaries shred intruders through funnels of sharp rocks, tentacles of fallen trees like strainers, walls of waves, and hydraulic holes of recirculating water that spin you up and down like a washing machine, or like the regurgitated cud of a cow. These dangerous obstacles have names like from a pirate's treasure map: Snaggletooth, Last Chance, the Room of Doom, Satan's Gut, Fang, the Rock of Shock, and Skull. Sometimes the river sweeps through places that look more like the moon, or Mars. Red rock towers, buttes, spires, and hoodoos point up from the ground like giant alien castles, and the river is the empire's bloody moat.

And sometimes, when the wind calls forth bare flesh into goosebumps, or when the sun warms the thighs just so, or when the river hums a certain low moan, bodies twist and curve and arch and open from the stone—and the river is the blood that runs between the bodies, pumping and rhythmic.

But a couple of days downriver the red river's trap awaits: Glen Canyon Dam. With a foreign plug, the flow is severed, the bodies are flooded over, all of them, and

freedom stagnates, rotting in the heat. A dam is a river's death. Glen Canyon Dam is the Colorado's tampon.

I scrambled through the scratchy branches beyond the swamp to touch the river. The desert people say that a goddess inhabits the Colorado River. They say that she guides the humble downriver and humbles the rest. The River Goddess murmured a seductive song as I decided to shed my clothes.

"Good morning!" the river gurgled, crashing over a rock. It flipped backwards and curled like a palm into a wave. "Goodbye!" The wave stood, virtually motionless against the current and against time. River waves don't crash and float away with the moon's tide like ocean waves; instead, water rears up *against* the flood, and the wave stands still. The wave remains, like a shell, but the water moves through.

A standing wave: the river is always saying goodbye because it is always moving through.

I dipped a toe in. The water moved fast and strong. "Goodbye!" the river continued to wave. I wanted River to wave "Hello!" I wanted River to welcome me.

"Do you remember me?" I asked.

"Goodbye!"

I didn't see any nice eddies where I could swim, but I wanted to feel the current. One foot in—squiiiiisshhh—one foot out. River mud wrapped my ankle like a thick slumber. My left foot joined my right in the river's dreaming. Something uncoiled inside, stretching out like it had been sleeping for a long time. Suddenly, I wanted to swim to the other side of the river.

I looked at the thick brown water and admired its strength. My arms couldn't compete with the desert's sleek bicep. I knew I wouldn't make it across.

"It's moving too fast," I said, trying to talk myself out of it. "Too fast." I took a few more steps and squatted down into the water, curled my spine over my knees, and flexed against the muscle of current, water carving around me like a wishbone. River bones. The river would pick me clean before I got to the other side. I stood up before I lost my balance and my bones to the river. "Another day," I said and splashed my face with the grainy water.

"Goodbye," we waved to each other.

I thought the river was telling me that it was time to go back to Professor Valley Field Camp. I turned and followed the tracks of Coyote, Raven, Heron, and Snake through the mud.

*Are there still memories in the ashes
rains wash slowly from the canyon? The memory
of women weaving baskets
from a time before they were meant for tourists?
Is anguish the only sound of water? Or is it
longing? And what would it mean
if we could walk again together
through ruins years have left behind, our hands
together,
eyes steady on each other's eyes?*

-Sam Hamill, from "Requiem"

I always felt a tug when I moved upriver. Whether by car, by foot, or by boat, gravity lassoed me with a tether thin as dental floss and tugged gently at my gut. Driving up the river road, against the pull of the Colorado toward the field camp, my belly and spine stretched backward with the water's drag. Or maybe it was simply time, stretching me like a rubberband, as I moved forward into my past.

It was exactly as I remembered it. Exactly. Turning south from the river, an unmarked dirt road rolled itself out, a two-mile, dusty red carpet between the deep ditch on one side and the barbed wire of the ranch on the other side. I stepped out of the van to the dirt parking area, and the dust curled around my sweating calves and toes like a nudging cat.

With the first breath I inhaled, my sense of direction vanished. It evaporated like water. That's what happens here when the Colorado River is lost from view. Because the sky is so wide and far away, and because boundaries are sparse, finding your way is a challenge without running water as your guide. There is a loss of perspective.

I walked through the field camp, remembering. It seemed lonely without students and teachers. The kitchen and teaching yurts were empty; the teepee, wall tent, and one-room straw bale house were empty; the area for students' tents was just open, dusty space. I had never been here alone.

I walked up to the pit toilets to use them. I went inside one, then went around to the other side to the other one, convinced that the second smelled better than the first even though the toilet seats perched above the same gaping hole. I walked back out into the fresh air and down the skinny trail.

The last time I was here, I didn't shit for six days. I didn't want to let anything else go. My body mourned the recent emptiness. My tissue mourned the loss of cleaving cells. My womb mourned the loss of a baby. My gut refused to allow anything else to be wasted.

The last time I was here, I lay half naked in the sagebrush, fiercely sunning myself until I scorched the hell out of my flesh. I sunned myself until blisters reared up

and oozed from my chest, thighs, and belly. I thought maybe I could burn the infection out of me.

I stood outside the kitchen yurt—a Mongolian structure like a fabric tent, only round with a tall, coned ceiling and a circle of light filtering through a center domed cap. I could remember standing in the line of hungry teenagers. I walked to the stoop and sat on it, recalling how I squatted here or on the picnic table with my teacher every dawn, even though I hated mornings then, drinking coffee even though I hated coffee then, too—I only drank it here, in the early morning, because I liked to watch the hot black liquid send its white feelers into the freezing air. I liked to smell the mixing of aromas—the thick scent of cowboy coffee seemed to compliment the thick smell of desert. I liked to wrap my frozen fingers around the warm mug.

It was a peaceful time in the desert—the morning. The serenity offered a feeling like nobody had to do anything but be still. Nobody had to hide from the sun, and a silence descended from above, falling as the sun rose. The quiet enveloped us in a certain grace, and the horizon opened to hope in the mornings. That was the only thing that kept me going, then.

Hope for what, I didn't know. Hope for hope, I guess.

Sitting on this same stoop, sweating in the noonday heat, surrounded by all this red earth, I filled with hope again. When I was a little girl, I thought heaven was red.

Instead of imaginary friends as companions, and instead of “evil twins” I could blame my bad deeds on, I created two little red spots that followed me around. The impetus for these spots came from a photo I saw of myself where I had “red eye.” I remember drawing greasy circles with my index finger around the red circles inside my

eyes, staring into them for a few seconds, and running into the bathroom to look in the mirror. I was only five years old, but I knew what pupils were—holes in my eyes—and so these red spots came to be holes into another world, an internal world red like the sun. This other world represented an escape into another, superhero-like self, only this self was inside out, and inside my black-pupiled body. But I could see the red eyes when I stared into the sun.

I can just imagine myself as a young mother turning to gaze out the window into the backyard, smiling Buddha-like as I envisioned my young daughter sitting in the dandelions and grass, laughing in her little white, flowered dress, playing with her dolls. And the Buddha smile crumbling to tears when I instead see a spellbound child, perched on an upside-down Bigwheel, her arms raised in worship, wearing one red tube sock and one blue, a purple Miss Piggy jumper stretched over shorts and a Wonderwoman pajama top, with a wild herd of curly hairs obscuring her face that is staring directly into the sun. What would I do when the young, sun-possessed girl then cackled, and stumbled around, blinded in the center of her eyes by big red spots of scorched eye tissue?

I guess I would be disappointed if my offspring were any less ridiculous. But my mom, who assumed that she was the standard when Webster defined normalcy, screamed at me to get some goddamned sunglasses on. She wept silently. And she spent her days hoping the hospital would call with the good news of a baby mix-up.

For some reason only a five-year-old would understand, the single method of launching myself into the super-heroic life of red pupils was a back flip. I took gymnastics lessons in an effort to learn this feat, but the instructors wasted my precious time on everything from beam routines to the vault. I learned a forward handspring, and

a few other useless moves, but no flips. So I packed up my leotard and my little red pupils, and hit the road in search of a back flip maharishi. But in the small sphere of a child's solo travel boundaries, the closest I came to finding an acrobatic mystic was my next-door neighbor.

She was a real gymnast, on a team and everything. But she had just grown breasts and had started wearing blue eyeshadow, and all she ever wanted to do with me was squirt perfume on my neck, smear fish scale-pink lipstick on my mouth, or tan atop her sun-catching silver Mylar sheet (this was the beginning of the eighties, after all). I realized then that it was up to me to find the force to propel myself into back flips, so I coerced my neighborhood friends into playing rounds of imaginary gymnastic "Olympics" with me.

Backyard grass crash landings proved to be too hard, so I tried to master the back flip by practicing it in the swimming pool. But the day I worked up to, the day that would be my maiden voyage into the world of red-eye—a back flip from the high dive—ended in a collision much more painful and disorienting than I ever thought water could be. My search for the red world terminated in the pool, but water haunted my childhood and my faith in the elusive red world persevered.

In kindergarten, I announced to my mom that I didn't believe in the God, and I haven't since then. But maybe humans have some kind of innate need for ascension, because even five-year-olds who try to back flip into a different reality are looking for something greater. Even five-year-olds have hope for a world better than the painful one we have created, hope for a body less tender and aching than the one that possesses us. Even five-year-olds are saying *there must be something more than this*.

Maybe, I thought, that something we desire so intensely is found in the ecstasy of wild unions. I didn't know. I'm not a wise person. I only knew that the little five-year-old inside of me was hoping that maybe the red world could be found here, in Moab, among the red cliffs and red water, the red hoodoos and red arches. The little me convinced the big me that just returning here would show me the way out of guilt and the shame.

I stared into the sun, burning my eyes until the heat spread into my sinuses and down the back of my nose and throat. Two red dots like bulls-eyes clouded the center of my vision.

I stumbled, blinded, over to my old tent site. My best friend Phoebe and I had shared a tent, and I laughed out loud remembering how we got tangled up in the tent poles and nylon trying to set up our first tent ever. Neither of us had even seen one before. What came out of the snarl was a piece of twisted abstract art. When the tent finally resembled a tent, Phoebe and I crawled inside to shave our armpits and bitch about how our hair *already* felt greasy.

I fingered the tuft of hair that coiled in my sweating armpits now, wondering when the last time I washed my hair was. My, how life had changed from that day.

My temples dripped with sweat. Heat dizziness made my body feel liquid. I walked over to the shade beneath the big cottonwood rooted next to Mary Jane Creek.

"Hello, friend," I said, breathing into the cottonwood's trunk and touching the furrowed bark with an open palm. I had learned recently that the traditional Zuni greeting is to breathe on one another's hand, to give each other a little warmth from the spirit within, and the gesture struck me as an appealing intimacy.

Direction came back to me with the flow of water. I looked around: parts of the split rail fence were blown down, tree trunks and other debris clogged the canyon and lay strewn about the sides, and the sand had a peculiar pattern to it. The creek had flashed recently. A freshness sprang from the earth. I wondered if the same rain that caused the flash on my first day in Moab also caused a flash out here.

I crossed the creek and walked into the sagebrush to lie down in the sun. I wanted to feel the heat penetrate me deeply. Everywhere around me, the skinny fingers of red rock formations spiraled into the sky, and my body rested in the cupped palm of a red-skinned hand. Castleton Tower pierced the south sky. The Priest and Nuns formation, Sister Superior, and the Rectory loomed above, pious and reverent. The La Sal Mountains—*islands of un-erupted volcanoes called lacoliths*—hovered blue in the southeast sky. (An eternity spent with “blue balls,” I thought, grinning at the sun.) To the northeast, the massive Fisher Towers still crumbled in the distance; in the heat of the day, their depth dissolved into the canyon walls behind them, an ethereal mirage only to take shape at dawn and dusk.

My eyes closed to the sun and I tried to locate myself, pressing the small of my back into the earth, turning my palms to the sky, feeling above and below. I wanted to know I was here and not anywhere else.

I tried to find my body on the earth, picturing in my mind where my bones stretched out on the Colorado Plateau. I imagined the warped, faulted, wrinkled, and heaving land borders that made the plateau distinct: the Uinta mountains to the north, the Rockies and the San Juan Mountains to the east, the Mogollon Rim to the south, and the

Great Basin and Range to the west. Those warped, faulted, wrinkled and heaving lands, I thought with a smile, make the plateau an outline of a crooked heart, tipped on its side.

The plateau is a 130,000 square mile landform whose geology differs from everything surrounding it, which is why it is called a “physiographic province.” This province is a tectonically stable uplifted heart of defined rock layers—a geological richness that affords diverse plant and animal life even though less than ten inches of rain per year fall over the plateau. Six of the seven North American ecosystems flourish here among the depths of arches, spires, canyons, mesas, the northwest to southeast trending faults, the sunken salt domes that form great valleys, and the island laccolithic mountains: the La Sals, the Henries, and the Abajos. But amidst the diversity, there is a unity in this landscape, like a family. It is fully and wholly itself.

Nevertheless, the Colorado Plateau has been cut up into four different states. Four different state lines, crosshairs, have been laid over the top, quartering the province. I felt the lines cross over me, cutting across my bellybutton, vertically slicing between my breasts and down between my legs, and horizontally fragmenting my torso from my legs and the tender spot between them.

I fell asleep, and when I woke, I felt saturated with scarlet heat. The sun seeped through me, scorching my eyes even through my eyelids. All I saw was rubies. I opened my eyes, and everything blurred. I stood and felt like I walked on sea legs up the creek canyon in the sun. The sun slapped my skin red. I kept walking, even though I had forgotten my water bottle in the truck. I didn’t even feel thirsty—only a little dizzy. I started running, tripping over stones and roots, splashing mud all over the backs of my

legs. Sweat stung my eyes and blinded the rubies black. Everything seemed very shiny in my peripheral vision. I fell down, got up again, and kept running for something.

What was it about this place? The dance of heat and haze was seductive, like the answers would be found in that slick vapor, like if you rubbed your skin raw against its burn, a genie would emerge from her sandstone bottle. But, as I ran, sweating ferociously, I sensed that no matter how much blood one gave, no matter how many shrieks into the wind one hurled, no matter how far one crawled on her knees through the scalding sand, it would never be enough. The desert would never yield an answer.

Maybe the desert would tell you something wise and abstract, maybe something like: Grace does not sit still in an answer; it is a process; it flows.

And then, you would scream something like, “I don’t give a rat’s ass about grace! I just want the goddamn answers!” like I was screaming right then. “Just tell me what to do! Tell me how to get rid of this *shit* I feel inside!”

My head felt cottony and my tongue thick. My body gave up running and crumpled to the ground. I took my shirt and shorts off and lay in the creek. The desert seemed static, like it didn’t change over time—it should have been comforting. But instead, I started to feel like I was walking inside one of my photographs from high school, not really feeling the way I did back then, but sensing my 18-year-old self nip at the edges of the skin of my present self, tugging it back, stretching it thin in places, distorting it in places where it snapped back. Something felt horribly wrong.

The desert is a parasite, I thought. Its bony air splintered me, and the desert crawled inside. My skin would stretch thin and tanned as buckskin hide. My cells would shrivel into red specks of dust, my veins into dry threads of juniper bark, my organs into

hunks of prickly pear cactus, my womb into an empty, delicate, sandstone arch. I slivered into thousands of tiny shards like glass, like frozen water, pieces of a puzzle.

A large hunk of the riverbank had torn away in the flash flood. One of my slivered eyeballs scanned the new bank from the creek. Bony roots fingered out horizontally, searching eerily like skeleton hands. Wait. There was something else there. Larger. I tried to gather my head back together to turn it, but lightning shot through it. The pain...oh, the pain is...

Oh my God.

A body. A body! The Anasazi, the Ancient Ones, buried their dead in the sides of riverbanks, but I thought their skeletons were only found down in Cedar Mesa. And this looked like more than a skeleton. A body! Here! The flash flood must have exposed it!

Oh shit. I turned over onto my knees. Oh...shit. I can't get up. I began whimpering, crawling slowly down the creek toward the darkness coming from the bank like a long, deep bruise, river stones bruising my own knees and palms.

When I got closer, I squinted to see that curly hair dangled from the body. She looked curiously like my profile. I went no further, covering my eyes with my wet, sandy, bruised hands.

"That's me in there," I cried to myself, rocking back and forth on my haunches. "That's my body...this is not what I want...this is not what I want!"

Time swirled together like watercolors until the edges were so blurred that I couldn't distinguish the boundaries anymore. My body was superimposed over the reel

of the past. Somebody was talking. The dialogue was cluttered, voices talking over one another so that nothing made sense.

Just going back would not make it all just go away. It was all still here. “So what can I do?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

“Drink some water, dumb ass,” the desert said to me, water carving around me.

“What?” I sipped a small handful and laid in the water, regaining strength to walk back to my truck. Need clean water. Need shade. Need to dig up my bones. Need to get my other body back. Need to get my body back together.

“Goodbye!” the creek waved. I had to get back to my truck.

The rocks sneered down at my body bobbing in the creek in a forward and back motion, like the tide. No, it wasn't like the tide, because there was no rhythm in this. There was no rhythm because I was stuck. I was stuck because I blocked the flow. I blocked the flow because I severed it. I severed it because I was wanting an easy way.

This is all there is.

I felt dammed. I felt damned.

“Damn it!” I cried.

This is all there is. Open, don't slice. Curve, don't straighten. Arch, don't flatten. Stretch, don't break. This is all there is, and it's not going away. This is all there is, and this is earthly and divine.

I looked at my body in the bank. It was a thick root of a cottonwood.

I stumbled back down the creek, vomiting once, my head like a brick of sandstone. I'll never forget my water bottle again, I vowed.

Never cut what you can untie.
-Joseph Joubert

Tonight, an apricot sky settled around me, the air thick and sweet. A jug of water accompanied me on the front stoop of my house. White crystals of salt clung to my skin from earlier, stinging a crack in my lip like a bee. I looked up and watched the sky's belly swell with the fruit of sunset. Red veins spidered across the distended blue, stretching to hold onto the sun. The veins popped and the sun fell into the river. When the blood washed from the sky, the air stilled and a dark hoof stamped out the light. In the desert, night fell quickly as death.

B. THE CEREMONY

Wisdom is a living stream, not an icon to be preserved in a museum.

Thich Nhat Hanh, The Sun My Heart

Enough time in the ocean teaches us of origins; enough time in the desert teaches us about the flesh; enough time in the mountains teaches us how to breathe; enough time in the river teaches us how to let go. All four whisper the rhythms of freedom, if we can bow down far enough to listen.

Keep this in mind: Nature has a funny way of breaking what refuses to bend.

Have you ever been to where the desert meets the sea? I have. What I think about often is the strange calm that exists at their eclipse. The energies of the two seem to cancel each other out in the giving and the taking. The moon draws lines between them in the sand, and then erases them.

The identities of Ocean and Desert are opposed, and yet some of their characteristics are parallel: vast, salty spaces uninhabited by humans, an openness that arouses phobias, infinite horizons, extremes of scarcity and abundance, and rhythms that can't be tamed—one, a tidal pulse beat by the moon, the other an intermittent throb of activity piercing the lull of stillness, a pace driven by the fierce sun's place in the sky. One lacks the other: the ocean lacks land, and the desert lacks water. Fresh water is scarce in both. A relationship ensues, a union, and it is a fluid one.

Between them, I see a river.

Moab rests in the seam of a watery cat's cradle. A wild watershed of rivers and creeks weave into the Colorado River, the river that is the common thread, the backbone, the guide, the *way* of the Colorado Plateau. The river's quick yank of gravity unties the laces of boundaries stringing between landscapes, species, people, and time.

The Rocky Mountains give birth to this river, and it trickles down from a womb soft as snow. The river grows thick and muscular as a tongue on its journey through the desert, licking fiercely at the path it chooses to follow, cutting down deeper into the older layers where the Plateau lifts up, carrying pieces of earth from six states in the journey to Mexico's Sea of Cortez. But the water rarely gets to Mexico in more than a silly dribble, because of all we Americans expect of the river, because of how we try to control the river for our use. Only once every ten years, when the water we've owed Mexico over the past decade is due, does the water rush to the sea.

This desert used to be the sea, many times over. The evidence rests in the rocks. Fossils of ancient sea critters—trilobites, crinoids, brachiopods—press upon the stone of the Honaker Trail Formation, a carpet of fossils like in Bloody Mary Wash outside of

Arches National Park. Sequenced rock layers around Moab show a sand to mud to limestone deposition followed by a regressive sequence—limestone to mud to sand—that illustrates sea level fluctuation. Looking up from the Arches entrance, we can see the regression, the layers of rock laid neatly as a layer cake. The Honaker Trail gives way to the Cutler formations deposited by an interfingering of lagoons and sand dunes, to a layer of Mexican chocolate-colored Moenkopi tidal flat deposit, to a crumbly, triangular base of Chinle scree deposited by a river, to the stunning red Wingate cliffs deposited by hot sand dunes, to a thin icing of Kayenta river deposit, to another hot, windy, sand dune deposit of buff-colored Navajo sandstone, petrified sand dunes rolling beneath another sand dune deposition of Entrada cliffs and arches. The rocks show the sea coming back again in the Cretaceous era, rising and dropping, depositing the Cedar Mountain, Dakota, Mancos, Mesa Verde, and Morrison layers. Then, as the story is told, the sea regresses again in the Tertiary period.

I like to think about that, how flux and indecision and instability can be part of something so secure as a “sequence,” and how wavering back and forth can be part of something so round as a “cycle.” I like to think about how the ocean’s tides are different every day, twice a day, how the desert never seems to move, that it seems constant, and yet light never falls on the contours of sandstone cliffs exactly the same way twice, and how even though the river has direction, going down, down, down to the sea, there are so many different currents swirling within, that sometimes the water goes upriver, that sometimes the water defies gravity and sometimes it doesn’t. I like to think about how I can actually see the ocean here sometimes, moving across the rocks like light reflected, how I can smell its salty ghost hovering in the air, how at dawn, the mist of morning’s

tender and fleshy light crafted curling and sometimes thick illusions that I could be wading in tide pools or I could be submerged deep in the underworld of the sea. I like to think about this when I'm floating down the river and, when the moment is right, I feel the sea's breathless, rocking rhythm like a womb. I like to think about how this evidence of fluid boundaries creates something so stunning and so solid and so respected as geology.

I like to think about this because I discovered that a sequence of regression and a confusing cycle of shame mark the geology of a woman.

From a nineteenth-century guidebook to brothels:

The abbess has just put the kipehook on all other purveyors of the French flesh market. She does not keep her meat too long on the hooks, though she will have her price; but nothing to get stale here. You may have your meat dressed to your own liking, and there is no need of cutting twice from one joint; and if it suits your taste, you may kill your own lamb or mutton for her flock is in prime condition, and always ready for sticking. When any of them are fried they are turned out to grass, and sent to the hammer, or disposed of by private contract, but never brought in again; consequently, the rot, bots, glanders, and other diseases incidental to cattle, are not generally known here.

I had always prided myself as a seeker of Truth. And to me, Truth took the skeletal anatomy of Laws found in Science or Equations or Definitions. Truth stripped itself to the bones in scientific experiments, analysis, and peer-reviewed papers.

I was born into an extended family where only boys were bred, and being tough and athletic and rational and confident were virtuous behaviors. My family of engineers, judges, politicians, and western medicine doctors taught me that scientific reasoning and logic would answer my questions. So, when I didn't understand something, instead of

asking others for help or how they felt, I hunted independently for solace in formulas and science theories. I sought definition.

After the abortion, everything scrambled up into a mess. Part of me was relieved, glad this whole terrible thing was over. But that part of me was small. I also felt guilty for the choice I made. I felt the pressure of a small bubble in my belly, both a physical mourning of the emptiness and an inconsolable grief for the loss—the loss of the unborn baby, and the loss of the girl I would never be again. This, it seemed, was my right of passage into womanhood, and I didn't understand it. I didn't understand what any of this meant or why I felt such shame.

Trying to be logical, I lay down on my canopied, white princess bed with an old college thesaurus to finish the equation *woman* = *x*.

Woman, *n.* 1, female, weaker sex. *Slang*, frail, skirt, broad, sister. 2, good woman, goodwife, lady, mistress, belle. 3, hen, bitch, sow, doe, mare, she-goat, nanny, cow. *Antonym*, see MAN and COURAGE. *Adjective*, see WOMANISH.

Oh. So a woman is best described as a fragile doll meant for breeding with a courageous lion of a man. I found the word “womanish,” and a woman's adjectives were these: cowardly, shrill, vixenish, soft, and weak.

Cowardly, shrill, vixenish, soft, and weak.

I looked up “vixen” because I didn't really know what it meant, but the word itself seemed sort of sassy, and that was the only word of the set I thought I might like to be associated with. This is what the Good Book said:

Vixen, *n.* female fox; harridan, shrew, witch, scold, virago, harpy. See FEMALE, EVILDOER.

I followed the trail.

Evildoer, n. 1, sinner, tyrant, destroyer. 2, savage, wildman, fraud, Apache, whoremaster, felon, fallen angel, black sheep, trigger man. 3, hag, Jezebel, nag, murderess, adulteress, prostitute, whore, harlot, loose woman, hussy, white slave, Circe, Delilah, Medusa. 4, monster, demon, devil, fiend in human shape, cannibal, vulture, ogre. 5, traitor, betrayer, snake in the grass. See IMPROBITY.

Improbability, Nouns—dishonor, disgrace, infidelity, looseness. *Verbs*—betray, lie, sin, go to the devil. *Adjectives*—wicked, sinful, vicious, dark, slippery, foul, vile; lost to shame, dead to honor. See IMPURITY.

Lost to shame, dead to honor!

Impurity, Nouns—grossness, pornography, smut, lust, wenching, flesh, incest, perversion, sodomy, pederasty, homosexuality, Lesbianism, sadism, masochism, defloration, abuse, rape, whoredom. *Verbs*—debauch, defile, deflower, rape, seduce. *Adjectives*—unclean, shameless, immoral. See LOOSE.

“Rape” and “seduce” and “losing virginity” were all in the same category. “Homosexuality” was in the same category as “incest,” “flesh” in the same category as “whoredom.” This could not be right.

Loose, Adjectives—free, flowing, vague, incoherent. See DISJUNCTION, BADNESS. *Verbs*—free, undo, unbind, relax. See FREEDOM.

What was disjointed or bad about being free and flowing? I thought maybe looking to “freedom” might give me some answers, but it had all these nicer words following it, like “unbridled, liberty, independence, liberalism, to have a will of one’s own, release.” The book then led me to “choice,” which simply said to see “desire.” I began to understand.

Desire, Nouns—wish, want, weakness; longing, zeal, impetuosity, appetite, gluttony, lust, passion, rage; lover; temptation, seduction, whim. *Verbs*—covet, set one’s heart upon; to be hungry, thirst after, lust after, die for, pant for; whet

the appetite, titillate, make one's mouth water. *Adjectives*— anxious, curious, solicitous; appetizing; craving, hungry, ravenous, famished, insatiable, with an empty stomach; mad after, rabid, devoured by desire. See INSANE.

Insane, *adj.* lunatic, crazy, psychotic, cracked, bereft of reason, possessed of a devil, moonstruck, wandering; nymphomaniac; rabid, touched, vertiginous. See WILD.

Lunatic. Women's free flowing, disgraceful, slippery cycles are driven by the moon, which makes them possessed by something illogical and therefore evil since the cycles can't be controlled, and the cycle is sexual and flesh producing, which makes women vile nymphomaniacs, who, when given the freedom of choice, are loose hussies who pant for, thirst after, lust for flesh and deviant sexual behavior, insatiable in their pornographic carnality.

Wild, *adj.* savage, untamed; bloodthirsty, fierce; frenzied; inaccurate, intemperate, foolish; unrestrainable, desert, uninhibited; rank, thick; freak. See VIOLENCE, VULGARITY, WILDERNESS.

Wilderness, *n.* wasteland, wilds, badlands; desert, sands, Sahara. *Antonym*, HEAVEN. See DESERT

Desert, *n.* waste, barren, wilderness. See USELESSNESS, WASTE.

Waste, *n.* loss, depletion, leakage; extravagance, waster, prodigal; a labor in vain. See FAILURE.

Failure, *n.* dead failure, flash in the pan, defeat, repulse, beating, subjugation; nonsuccess, vain attempt. See ABORTION.

Abortion, *n.* illegal operation; fiasco; monstrosity, freak. See FAILURE.

See "failure." This would lead me back exactly to where I started, and since I had tracked the sequence of associations out on a sheet of paper, I followed them back to

“woman.” Illegal operation, monstrosity⇒failure, abortion⇒waste, labor in vain⇒
desert, barren, uselessness⇒wilderness, wasteland, badlands, the opposite of heaven⇒
wild, savage, vulgar⇒insane, moonstruck, nymphomaniac⇒desire, seduction, rabid,
insatiable⇒choice⇒freedom⇒loose, flowing⇒impurity, flesh, shameless, perversion,
deflowered⇒improbity, wicked, lost to shame dead to honor⇒evildoer, sinner,
wildwoman, hussy, monster, snake in the grass, Medusa⇒vixen, witch, female⇒
womanish, cowardly, shrill⇒weaker sex, sow, bitch, *woman*.

What I saw in the center of all this, in the middle of woman and abortion was
choice and freedom. What I saw in the middle was free, like a river. But purity and
virtuosity meant contained and controlled and rational and asexually reproductive. Purity
was something defined, and a woman was anything but. A woman’s body was a wild,
desirous flesh that ought to be exiled to the savage wastes of the wilderness. I was
eighteen years old and already ruined by my freedoms.

I closed my eyes, folded my hands over my belly, and decided to go to the desert.

Back then, it was a punishment. This second time, it was a privilege.

The ascetism of early Christianity, which turned its back on the world of the flesh, had degenerated, in some quarters of the church, into hatred of those who brought that flesh into being. Misogyny, the hatred of women, had become a strong element in medieval Christianity. Women, who menstruate and give birth, were identified with sexuality and therefore evil. “All witchcraft stems from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable,” stated the Malleus Maleficarum.

-Starhawk, Spiral Dance

By starlight, I walked from my truck down the skinny trail to Mary Jane Creek. The moon was just an albino eyelash in the sky. "I should have come when I had sunlight," I whispered to nobody. Ceremonies in the darkness carried more weight though, I thought. Still, I didn't know how I was going to find it.

I hoped nobody was here. Nothing glowed over by the teepee and wall tent, and I didn't see any cars anywhere. But silence was of the essence, just in case, because I didn't want to have to explain what I was doing here in the middle of the night, digging around the cottonwood tree.

It was a pathetic story, actually. This archeological dig's purpose was to uncover a pregnancy kit tester from the earth under the tree. I had buried it there in high school.

Isn't it sad? *A plastic pregnancy kit tester.*

This was my only physical memory of loss: a slender, smooth phallus of plastic with a plus sign beaming from one end. I had saved it in a cupboard in my room inside a clay jar I fired in middle school. The brightly painted jar was a clown. A green clay hat with yellow balls capped the jar's opening, covering the tester wrapped in pink tissue paper.

I brought the tester with me to the desert in high school, and on the last night there, when everyone was sleeping, I crept down to the creek. I sat there for a long time in the damp spring air, listening to the way water moved, listening to the earth turn over, watching the stars pass by overhead. At my side, the tree didn't move. It listened. The branches reached out to me like fleshy arms. The red earth held me in the tree's lap. Suddenly, the secret dribbled out of my mouth, gathering into a trickle of words. My arms wrapped around the tree and my cheek scuffed against the rough bark. The words

came out with tears, tears that wept onto the tree, and I swore I could feel the tree sucking my story up like water, dark water defying gravity, up through the trunk and branches, out to the freshly budded leaves.

Magically, the distilled secret diluted into a million iridescent beads of pure water, pulled bead by molecular bead through the stomata of the leaves into the wild desert air. My secret scattered with the wind, joining the silence of songs once sung, of breaths once breathed, of other secrets once kept. And so I buried what was left of my loss under this cottonwood.

After the mysterious desert experience, I thought maybe some kind of spiritual guidance would dilute the shame. I attended several churches, cowering over my body at the Born Again Christian meeting I went to, kneeling and standing and chanting at the Catholic mass, listening in on Methodist, Lutheran, and Unitarian services. I even went to a children's Sunday school class. I had hoped that one of these ministers, preachers, leaders, or Books would just fucking tell me what to do.

But I didn't believe in the God. I never had. And nobody was telling me The Answer, anyway. I knew of no place where women could go to specifically mourn the losses sustained in an abortion.

Here in the United States, there are no graveyards for the aborted.

Where does the actual tissue of the fetus go? Why couldn't I have it? It was a part of me, a part of the earth, and I wanted my hands to dig the hole to return the flesh to the earth. I wanted something new to spring from it.

I took the repenting into my own hands. I created ceremonies. I buried things; I dug them up. I burned things; I glued things together. I made herbal tonics and rubbed

herbal salves all over me; I made altars. I stopped eating meat and dairy; I hugged trees. I broke up with the boyfriend; I took him back; I dumped him again. I didn't have sex for a long time; I drank my liver into a pickle; I ate mushrooms, hoping for a vision; I worked on Forest Service trail crews carrying 85-pound backpacks plus heavy whip saws and pulaskis and shovels because I thought beating up my body would make it into something good. I tried to live in the wilderness as much as I could, and I worked and schooled myself all over the world in the wildernesses of other clans. I volunteered for everything; I built houses in Florida for Habitat for Humanity; I was a Big Sister; I taught English in Mexico and ocean ecology in Kenya; I gave away money I didn't have; I restored things. I wrote letters to the unborn baby; I wrote letters to my parents; I wrote letters to Congress. I never sent them to anyone.

None of this forgave me. I was still ashamed. I was still confused.

Then I heard of the sacred significance of canyons in the Navajo culture.

Canyons of the southwest are monuments to the life force of the female energy of water because they represent the womb from which the Earth Mother gives birth. In high school, I had a kind of rebirth here in the land of canyons—a re-creation in the wilderness. I still mourned a loss from my womb. My female energy still mystified and perplexed me.

The canyonlands of Utah would be the place of healing ceremony.

“What She Said”

*The only cure
I know
Is a good ceremony,
That's what she said.*

-Leslie Marmon Silko,
from Ceremony

The headlamp felt too tight around my forehead as I circled the tree. “Right here,” I whispered, dropping to my knees. “Right here.” My fingers dug into the red earth, and dirt packed under my nails.

The tester held high importance in the ceremony I planned. My materials sat up in the truck, gathered into small bundles, waiting for the ceremony in a secret canyon. Little vials of sacred water lined up against the seat, river stones and sand were separated into tiny felt bags with drawstrings, incense scented the air inside, a sage bundle lay next to the incense and two candles, and offerings of cornmeal were sprinkled inside clay jars. I had readings and a lighter, kindling for a fire, and essential oils. But the tester was what I needed.

I kept digging. The dug area grew wider. Where was it?

I thought I had armed myself appropriately and thoroughly with the information I would need for the Making Everything O.K Ceremony. I had books on meditation, women’s self-help, religion, Wiccan spells, and maps and guides to Utah wilderness. But as I dug, I recalled a troubling dream I had the night before I left Cleveland. A beautiful yet haggard woman came to my window, her face framed by the shadows of the two sycamore trees in my backyard. In my dream, it was clear that I thought she was there to help me heal.

“What do you need?” I asked her.

“What do I need? Ha! I’ll tell you what I need.” She smiled wickedly at me, the gap-toothed smile of a jack-o-lantern, and wiped her runny nose on the back of her hand. “Young, silly girl, I need the boundaries of the desert, the red flood of the river, the cycle that governs the beat of tides, and the spark of Life’s beginning.”

“No, really, what do you need from me,” I asked again, scared. I could never gather these things!

Her mouth had a redness around it, like a Kool-Aid smile, only it appeared to be dirt. “A spider web, intact, and the wind must have breathed through it, forward and back.”

“Um, okay. What else?” I asked her, hoping that maybe she’d start to make sense.

“You’re a terrible little thing, aren’t you?” Her nail scraped across my cheek. “I’ll need the whistle of a flute, the tracks of a raven, the prick of a prickly pear cactus, and the blood from a stone.” Spittle flecked the skin of my face.

I was terrified. “Is there anything else?”

She cackled. “I need the twist of a juniper’s trunk to mix it in, thunder to beat it together, and the shard of stone where day’s light first hits to cut it apart.”

I shivered. “One more thing,” she whispered, licking my face like a dog, “You need a sharpened cottonwood stick, with the exact curve of your finger, to write your story in the dust.”

“Who are you?” I asked her.

“The Goddess, the Hag, the Witch. Whomever you need me to be.” She laughed and hissed in my ear. “I’ll be Buddha’s Bitch, if you want.”

“Will this make everything better?” I pleaded.

“No,” she said. “Hell, no.”

The tester wasn't here. It wasn't here! "Fuck!" I screamed, no longer cautious. I hurled a fistful of red dirt into the creek, roaring. And then I realized: the flash flood. The flood had taken it away. The water flushed the dirt clean.

*If a woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man,
...it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' ...to make it hers,
containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with
her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.
And you'll see with what ease she will spring forth from that
'within'—the "within" where once she so drowsily crouched—to
overflow at the lips she will cover the foam.*

-Helen Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

A tiny juniper fire licked the darkness at my feet. All of my ceremonial paraphernalia remained bundled up in the truck. I had a water bottle, my favorite pen—red—and my journal. I sat on a log in the fire pit of the field camp, in a valley instead of a tight canyon.

The ceremony, I decided, had been too elaborate, too contrived, too dependent on a bunch of *things*. It felt selfish and absorbed when I wanted to experience some kind of opening. I wanted to feel a part of something larger, something more essential than myself alone.

Canyons emptied out into this valley I sat in, Professor Valley, and this valley emptied out into the great canyon, the Colorado River Canyon. This valley was a vital organ in the wild body of the desert. If a canyon is a womb, then a valley is the heart.

I wanted to reclaim our bodies. I wanted to reclaim our wildness. I wanted to give our sex permission and our choice freedom. I wanted this fertile water to pump through, clean.

I opened my legs and let the fire's heat, the desert's heat, inside. And I started to write.

Hussy. I ripped the word from my journal and carefully placed it in the fire.
Bitch. I watched it burn. *Lost to shame, dead to honor.* Flames chewed this one delicately, savoring the filth of it. *Meat.* It barbequed. *Wasteland.* The fire laughed. *Shameful. Wicked. Evildoer. Impurity. Vixen. Nymphomaniac. Insatiable. Cowardly. Weaker Sex. Perverted. Whore. Failure.*

The words were ashes. The nastiness burned to nothing. The blood ran clean. The motion started.

With the same red pen, I began writing in my journal. *Woman = grace, round, womb, magic, earthy, cyclic, rhythmic, wise, weaver, beauty, red, fertile, abundance, healing, generous, gentle, strong, protection, playful, reflective, lucid, luminous, respected, desirous, juicy, fluid, limitless, loyal, free.*

Woman is Birth. Woman is Death. Woman is Wild.

Woman is origin is flesh is breath is curvature is wisdom.

Woman is Mountain is River is Ocean is Desert.

C. THE VOW

“Personal Ad”

*skeleton woman seeking flesh
heart needed for drumming
have bones, will sing*

-Suzanne Redding

It occurred to me that this healing process would require some discipline, and since sex and the boyfriend were what got me into trouble in the first place, it made sense to eliminate sex and men from my diet first. I wanted to be a woman on my own. Besides, most of my boyfriends had been beautiful, athletic, charming...and abusive in their own special way.

I always had one at my side, dumping the sane and the sweet in favor of those who had fists like fuses. Hot tempers sizzle and flash in places that are cold and dark.

Science tells us that what feels cold is actually just a lack of heat, an absence, and that heat travels to these lonely places. Maybe other women, like me, attract and choose these fierce, fiery men because the women's insides feel like basements, cold and empty, and the heat is welcome, no matter how scalding or how fleeting.

So I did it. I promised to abstain from guys. I would just say no. I vowed celibacy. I married myself.

And I got divorced four days later. But this time, I opened to a different pattern; this time, I chose sweetness.

We met over applesauce. There he stood, in the kitchen yurt at the field camp, spooning leftover applesauce into old yogurt containers, all blond and bearded, all legs and arms, all dwarfing the seventh graders picking the trough of lunch food clean, all cuteness. He noticed me standing in the doorway, and he looked up and smiled, resting the spoon in the sauce, starting towards me. He moved like a jellyfish—that was my first thought. (When I asked him later, he said his first thought of me was, “Wow. That’s a lot of hair.”)

“Hey,” he said, weaving through the tables, gliding around spilled food, ducking beneath the pans and utensils hanging from the beams. He was liquid. A hand extended from his body, wanting to shake my hand. We shook and, though I didn’t yet know his name, the shake was one of those earthquakes of the spirit. I looked him in the eye and released my hand, still staring. He had told me his name, but I had forgotten already—I don’t think I even heard his voice because I was too busy thinking his eyes were the color

of the ocean. Blue, green, and gray, with flecks of yellow sunlight reflecting off the waves. I bet they changed colors with his weather...

My lips parted. I licked them. My body shuddered involuntarily. I felt like I was swimming in cool water. I had no idea what to do with this.

So I eased, with an obvious suave sophistication, into casual conversation.

“So, uh, are you gonna eat all that applesauce?”

Are you gonna eat all that applesauce?!? This was the stuff of romance. A man can never resist a pig—a pig who doesn’t listen. Just slurp down those five pounds of applesauce, then shake your fat ass around like you just don’t care, and you’re golden. It’s written in stone.

He stared at me blankly.

“Oh, that?” he said with a curious surprise.

He’s thinking I have an applesauce ass, this is what he’s thinking right about now.

“Nope,” he said. “Uh, I’m not going to eat any of it.” He motioned toward the tubs of mush with one of the long limbs and asked, “You want some?”

Applesauce ass.

“Um, yeah. Yes. Thank you. I’m famished.”

He brought one of applesauce tubs over to me. Go ahead—just slurp the applesauce with your face mushed in the tub, slurp it through your pig mouth, squealing your piggy squeals, quivering your blubbery piggy ass in excitement.

“Do you have a spoon?”

When he handed me the spoon, I said, “I’m really sorry, I forgot your name already.”

“I’m Tadz.”

“Tosh? Like Peter Tosh, the reggae guy? Rhymes with ‘Oh my Gosh’?” I asked, my mouth full of the apple sludge. I couldn’t swallow.

“No,” he said, “Tadz, like Taj Mahal, but it’s spelled different. It’s ‘Z-dat’ backwards. Rhymes with ‘Did you see ’dat’?”

“Oh. Okay. Tadz. T-A-D-Z. Rhymes with...lodge. Dodge. Hodge-podge.”

He smiled. “Yeah. So, what’s your name, anyway?”

“Mattie.” I paused. My eyes widened with horror even as I said it: “Rhymes with...fatty.” I wanted to cry. There was an impenetrable silence. I slurped some sauce.

He was looking intently into my eyeballs. “The colors in that shirt bring out all these crazy colors in your eyes. Yellow, green, blue—all from the brown. Wow. How beautiful,” he said. I blinked. And then we dazzled each other.

*There is a time between losses,
days with blank pages, when clapping
is permitted and singing and dancing,
even the kind of madness
that tells you to wear fireflies in your hair.*

-Judy Goldman, from “Between Losses”

“Hello?”

“Mom? I met a guy.”

She narrowly restrained her exasperation. “Really. That’s great. What’s it been? A week or two?”

“No—he *is* great, I swear this one is! He’s even a little bit dorky. He’s the cook at the field camp, for shit’s sake, and he lives in a teepee out there. He’s harmless—I think he’s Buddhist! I’d even go out on a limb and say he’s more feminine than I am.”

“Maybe he’ll get you to shave your armpits, then.”

I ignored her. “We’ve seen each other a few times, out at the field camp—he made me some banana bread, even—but tonight’s our first actual date. We’re going to see a band at the Rio.”

“Just...take it slow, okay?”

“Yeah...Mom, tell me the truth. Do you think my butt looked fatter when you left Moab than when we started driving out here?”

Mom told me that I’ve never had a fat ass in my life, which is what I would pay her to say if I had the money. Then she said, “You’ve got big boobs, is all.”

“Please don’t offer to pay for a boob job again. Please.”

“Oh honey, I won’t. You looked great when I left, radiant even. He’s gonna love you—they all do. Just promise me you’re eating enough—you run practically a marathon every day, and you still think you’re fat.”

“I promise. Mama, I miss you already,” I mumbled into the phone. “How come we’re friends now that I’m forever thousands of miles away, but when we lived in the same house, you were my mortal enemy?” I asked her if this indicated some kind of character flaw in either of us. “Are we psycho?”

“No, sweetie, it’s just because we’re so much closer in age now,” Mom reasoned.

“Yeah, you’re right.” My mom, since the time I was in middle school, had been subtracting a year of age at every birthday. On her last birthday she reached her target age of stasis: she would be twenty-nine years old forever. So she was right, we just kept getting closer in age.

We started our goodbyes. “I miss you too. It was a fun trip,” she said. “You live in a beautiful place.”

“You should visit again soon,” I said.

“Lay off the tequila,” she said.

“Please give those fake nails a rest—you’ll grow a fungus,” I said.

“Eat something besides cereal,” she said.

“You’d better start wearing that toe divider again, or *all* your toes are going to twist into a grotesque, arthritic flipper,” I said.

“Don’t forget to shower and, for the love of God, please shave your armpits,” she said.

“Never. I don’t believe in God,” I said.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

We hung up, and I sat on the porch, watching warmth splash the canyon walls, watching the light move like an underwater reel, watching time uncurl its fists.

I missed her. Everything changes when you grow taller than your mom. Roles reverse, or at least protective instincts equilibrate. You start to worry when she doesn’t call, or if she’s late from the supermarket. You worry about heart attacks when she’s shoveling the driveway or pushing a mower through the thick summer lawn. You worry that her hipbones will slowly be replaced by peanut brittle. You worry her spine is curling like a candy cane. You worry that her behavior is beginning to mimic her mother’s before her.

I worried because *I wasn’t there*. I worried because I felt like I abandoned her.

There is a weakness surrendered when your mom shrinks. Suddenly you look down at her, and she doesn't seem so matronly anymore. She feels like your own child. And then you begin to understand.

You understand the fear of responsibility, the unconditionality of love, the reasons to hold her hand, the importance of relationships, the fierceness of protecting a common blood, blood that runs through her veins, but veins that extend like a handshake into your own body.

Not a drop should spill.

The phone rang in my lap.

“Hello?” I walked in the kitchen to put my sneakers on.

“Is Mattie th—” I cut the caller off, in a hurry now to start my ritual run.

“This is me. Who's this?”

“It's Tadz.” Silence. Was he canceling? I stubbed the toe of my running shoe on the linoleum, suddenly leaden.

“Hey, Tadz. What's up?”

“I'm already in town, and, well, I don't know what you're up to this afternoon, but I'm going out to Ken's Lake for a swim—it's so hot—and I just thought maybe you'd want to come. You know, before we go see the band.” Snippets of thoughts pierced my brain at lightning speed. Yes. Want to swim. No. Need to run. Shit. Pubic hair not shaved. Oh God. First date. Body in bathing suit. No way! No time to shower after. Wet, snarled hair all night. Ugly. First date. Shit. Need to be carefree. Need to be fun. Need to be *spontaneous*...

“Can I think about it?”

“Well, I’m going soon, so—”

“So call me back in five minutes. I just usually go running at this time, and I was on my way out the door, and I just don’t know.”

“Um, okay.”

I hung up, racing into my room to rummage wildly for my bathing suit. I tore off my clothes, wriggled into the striped suit, and sprinted downstairs to the full length mirror in Anna’s bathroom. Shit. Fat-ass. Look at that belly. It’s like an intertube.

“Hey—nice suit. It looks great on you.” Anna was standing in the door.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. Totally. You’ve got really big boobs.” She walked away. Anna was anorexic. I had to assume that any noun with the word “big” preceding it was not a compliment.

Maybe I should just go naked? No. What if he didn’t get naked?

The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey—do you—”

“Yeah. Totally. Let’s go. You picking me up?”

“Sure,” he said. “Just look for the puce green VW bus to come puffing down the street. That’ll be me.” We hung up. I plastered my nose to the window. Ran to the kitchen to drink some water. Got a towel. Went back to the window. Shit. Do I wear the suit? Yes. Ran to my room. Pulled a sundress over the suit. Smear on grape lip gloss. Plastered my nose to the window. Heart beating in my ears. Too nervous, need to

calm down. Cracked open a beer. Guzzled it. Beer breath. Grabbed a piece of gum. Chomped on it. Plastered my nose to the window and made a big breathing mark.

And then I heard it.

Breaks, muffler, anything else that could make noise, did. It was a sound of barely contained joy, the Little Engine That Could merrily scuttling down the street. The bus was still squeaking forward on the driveway when Tadz unfolded himself from the driver seat. When he emerged, his shirt startled me. It didn't really have a color, but more of a sound—and it was screaming. It was so bright, and so...Hawaiian. He had a doofy khaki hat on with the crown cut out so that his thick, straight hair stuck directly up through the top like an herb planter. His head looked like a fruit too big (and too hairy) for the skinny twigs of his body. His old river sandals were duct-taped together, and his legs strung out impossibly long and bony from his shorts. He was singing, loud and way off key. And he sort of danced—a bumbling, gangly, jellyfish dance—as he walked up to the door. His left hand and forearm sliced a crescent in the air before each step, snapping. I opened the door just as the snapping hand curled into a knocking fist.

He smiled. I wanted to say "I love you already," but it came out, luckily, as "Yo."

"Hey," he said.

We looked at each other too long. I didn't think I'd ever felt this awkward.

At the fake lake—a reservoir—Tadz walked behind the bus. I wondered what he was doing as we chatted from opposite sides of the green metal. I chewed my gum and fidgeted around, scuffing my sandaled foot into the red earth, clouds of iron dust circling my feet. When I allowed time for the dust to settle before pestering it again with my

pointed toes, I could see that the dirt drew a line at mid-calf and stuck to my skin from there down with a matte, rich brown. When I twisted a leg in the light, my skin sparkled like a disco ball. Then I saw his little white butt stick out as he bent over, apparently wriggling into some swimming shorts. (When I asked him later, he said he had been wondering if I was going to go naked, because that's what he usually did, but if I wasn't, he didn't want to either.)

When we stood face to face again, I felt embarrassed for secretly seeing his butt and nervous about slipping my sundress off in front of him. Trying to stall the whole terrible body issue, I started talking incessantly. Like an improv comedian, I was telling him story after story, blubbering on and on for my one-man audience. I felt like a T.V. show. He laughed a lot. I didn't remember what I said. I fidgeted around while I spoke, unsure of what to do with my hands—they were alternately in my hair, or twirling my gum, or just sort of swimming and diving in the air like a wounded goose with rabies—sometimes all at the same time. Finally, I stopped and looked up at Tadz. He was watching me, intently.

I still didn't want to get out of my dress. I shifted my eyes sideways, then back, then quickly down to the ground. I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

“Are you always like this?” Tadz asked. My face got hot. I thought for a moment.

“Yes,” I decided. Yes I was. Get used to it. “I'm sort of a mess,” I said quietly.

“Oh, no. Damn, I think this is great, I mean you're great!” He touched my arm.

“It's so much fun to be around you! I love your stories and you just have so much

wonderful energy, and I just thought, wow, I didn't think anyone could be so alive all the time, you know? Does that make sense?"

"Um, yeah. Thanks, I think."

He asked softly, "Do you want to get in the water?"

"Yes, please."

Tadz ran into the water and half dove into it when the water reached his thighs.

When he came back up, he whooped. It was cold. I shook as I pulled the dress over my head. Goosebumps of embarrassment prickled and purpled my skin.

I walked slowly down to the water, conscious of my bared thighs, hoping that walking slowly would make them wiggle less. The water wrapped around my ankles.

"Do you want to swim across to the other side?" Tadz asked.

I squinted my eyes and looked across the blue lake. "Sure." I walked down farther into the water and dove like he did. We splashed around for a few minutes, getting warm again and then started swimming fast.

I was swimming freestyle next to him when the ocean inside me took over. Instead of slicing through the water, I wanted to feel it around me, folding me inside, holding me like a pillow, rocking me on the outside like I rocked inside. I somersaulted and floated on my back, closing my eyes, letting my ears fill with water. Everything muffled; I could hear myself breathing inside my head; I could feel myself bobbing, equilibrated with the water. The sun warmed the top of me, the water cooled beneath me. I could hear the murky sounds of Tadz's kicking feet propelling him through the water; I could hear the murky sound of an airplane flying overhead. I felt like I was in an open

doorway, in neither this room nor that one, and it was okay, it felt good to bob in the middle.

I started swimming like a dolphin; my body arced, plunging my head into the water, swooping down, down, down, my legs and feet the last to slip into the water. I was alive. So alive. I felt the rhythm of it, the rhythm of the ocean in this fake desert lake. I felt my own waves in my undulating body. Splashing and grace, unified by water.

I dove right into him. “Oh! Shit! I’m sorry! My eyes were closed,” I said, and spit some water out of my mouth.

“It was neat to watch you from the other side,” he said. “I thought you were swimming next to me, but when I stopped, you were gone—and when I looked back, I saw this cute dolphin with a little striped suit on, just playing by herself.”

We swam around each other, playing. Everything feels better in water, weightless. When we got cold, we got out. It was late already; the fins of sandstone behind us and the mountains behind them blushed in the alpenglow. Tadz shivered. I didn’t.

“You’re too skinny,” I said, rubbing him with my dry towel as I drip-dried. I noticed a small, thick patch of hair on his chest, a patch the diameter of a dime, where the hairs grew up instead of down. They combed into one another neatly, with the effect of a single, short feather that seemed to sprout directly from his heart. A single gray hair shone in the middle. It was the strangest thing I’d ever seen, in terms of chest hair. Before I could catch myself, I found my fingers tugging on the hairs.

“Ouch! What’s going on down there?” His teeth chattered as he said it.

“These hairs...”

“Don’t pull the gray one—I’ll lose my sense of balance.”

I looked up at him sharply, with interest. “This is your hair of balance?”

“Yep. It’s my wild hair.”

We sat at bar stools, talking over 3.2 beers. My hair felt like a hive, all snarled and tangled together, and my face had a crust of ghostly minerals from the lake water. He didn’t seem even to notice—when he looked at me, it was always in my eyes, or at my mouth when I smiled. He asked me questions, and he listened. He laughed a lot. It was easy.

Some of our mutual acquaintances showed up. Dancing. Drinking. Darkness. Lights. Sweating. Laughing. Drinking. Dancing. Everything spiraled around me, slippery and rhythmic and sparkling.

In the joy and ease of it all, I simply pulled his face towards mine and kissed him, then danced away, across the floor as he looked after me, shocked. He followed and asked, “Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I wanted to.” I twirled around. “Why did you kiss me back?”

“Because I *like* you.”

We left the bar and walked to the city park. We sat in swings, see-sawing back and forth past each other. My hair loosened in the air that slid through it. Everything blurred into something else in this motion. I felt brave and strong in the swing.

I yelled out to Tadz as he whizzed down to my up, “I’m not into the ‘Free Love in the Nineties’ thing going on here in Moab—” he passed me going up “—actually, I’m just not into sex, period—” he passed me going down “—but do you want to sleep over and spoon with me?”

“What?” he shouted.

“Sleep over and spoon with me!”

Tadz worked on the river the next day. He showed up on my doorstep late that night after de-rigging. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you out there.” He didn’t even wait the customary two days. And he brought me peanut butter cup ice cream.

One night, we made a fire at the field camp. He cooked me dinner, and I ate it. Already, I claimed a shirt of his as my own, and I wore it. He told me he had been seeing a woman in Colorado until the day I met him in the kitchen yurt, and that same evening, he wrote her a letter explaining that he couldn’t continue their relationship. He said he wrote it because he knew he loved me as soon as we shook hands. That an electricity passed through the handshake.

The rains came, hard. We were running together down Kane Creek Road when they came. We ran up into Moonflower Canyon, past the petroglyphs to a spot under an alcove where waterfalls crashed over us. We could feel the spirits of the Ancient Ones sitting with us, out of the rain. My own spirit opened in the mist.

* * *

We started sleeping in Moonflower Canyon when the cottonwood leaves began to change colors. We were reading to each other, snug in our sleeping bags, when the full moon came up between two lips of the canyon, perfectly, like an egg. I still refused sex, but he didn't ask for it either.

I found a poem and gave it to Tadz.

“Axiom”

*Axiom: you are a sea.
Your eye—
Lids curve over chaos*

*My hands
Where they touch you, create
Small inhabited islands*

*Soon you will be
All earth: a known
Land, a country.*

-Margaret Atwood

Both of our bodies erupted into mysterious rashes. Poison ivy. We had been walking into Moonflower every night after dark and forgot where the poison ivy was. We lit candles and traded Calamine lotion massages.

Tadz was working in Idaho for a few nights. I lit candles and incense and opened a secret, long tube. It was just a plain cardboard poster tube, but its contents were sacred. I carried it with me everywhere. Posters of babies, other women's babies, uncurled from the dark shadow. For a year after the abortion, these posters wallpapered my room with other women's babies, with toothless grins and knees fat as jelly donuts. Some of the

other women's babies were photographed with other women's men, some were sleeping or laughing or crying, some were dressed in ridiculous costumes like pumpkins or fairies. None of the pictures and none of the babies made me smile. The posters used to be hammered with nails into the walls as a reminder: a crucifix of the baby that died for my sins. Now, they surrounded me like a cage. I punished myself, forcing my eyes to stare at the fingernails tiny as jasmine rice, the wrinkled pink feet with curling toes, and the eyes sparkling like the wings of a dragonfly.

Remember. Remember this. Forgetting is not the same as forgiveness.

We ran up, up, up the steep rocks to the lip of the Moab Rim, and kept going on into the Behind the Rocks Wilderness Study Area. "You run really fast," Tadz said. "Just keep up with me," I said. On the way back down in almost darkness, we both slid and fell. Our legs skinned and blood painted the rocks.

An evening with blood red skies. The sun set between us as we sat on my front stoop sipping whiskey. I felt blurry. I didn't like it. "There's something I have to tell you," I said, sounding like a T.V. actress. "You'll never control me."

"Never say never," Tadz said, smiling over his clear, tinkling glass.

"I mean it. Didn't you notice the 'Goddess' in front of my name?" I said it almost laughing, almost joking.

He laughed. "Well, I saw a 'Brat Princess' in the phone book, but I guess that was the wrong Mattie Allen. Good thing I didn't call that number, huh?"

"I'm really good at disappearing," I said, ashamed of the drama even as I said it.

“Oh, Mattie,” he whispered, holding me.

I found chalk drawings of the desert, rich and matte all over my house, in my truck, in my mailbox, in my drawers. Poetry written in his hand floated down the blue river that flowed through all of them.

I worked a river trip down the upper canyon of the San Juan River. I slept in the sand every night. One night, rafters floated by, guided by the full moon. I slid from my warm sleeping bag and walked from the river off into the desert. I sat down and asked the moon questions. A coyote emerged from the sage moonshadows. She padded tentatively closer, sniffing the air, then sat on her haunches, directly before me. We looked at each other for a long while before she ran off.

Our canoe floated down the Colorado. Dusk crept in from the east, and I laid back to allow myself a bath of the apricot light. I was staring up at the deepening sky between the red cliffs and he said, “If you’re ever feeling disconnected from the earth, from people, from life, get in a canoe on the river, and just try to keep still, just try to stay in one place. I don’t think anyone could do it. But if you could, you’d understand *you’re struggling* to disconnect from the current.”

“Or,” he added, “you could try holding your breath for the rest of your life.”

We do not seek to conquer or escape from our desires—we seek to fulfill them. Desire is the glue of the universe; it binds the electron to the nucleus, the planet to the sun—and so creates form, creates the world.

-Starhawk, Spiral Dance

This is all too easy, I found myself thinking a few weeks after we met, sitting outside the teepee, bundled up with a mug of tea in the chilled morning. Tadz was in the kitchen yurt, fixing us pancakes, and I just sat here, swaddled in a goose down sleeping bag, watching the sunlight gather in the valley like chick fluff.

There were no games. There were no mind fucks. There was no terrifying anger, no deceptions, and he wouldn't engage in the dramatic scenes the other boyfriends had taught me. This is the kind of relationship that happens in the desert, I thought. Stripped down to the bones. Clean. Naked. Sustenance, nothing to get fat and sassy on.

I remembered a piece of a poem, "To Touch the Water" by Gretel Ehrlich:

*I'm afraid of the deep learning
in your body which is bookless and
has no names for feelings.*

Nakedness scared me. I could navigate the mazes of games, I could figure out trickery more easily than anything straightforward, and I understood anger and lies better than kindness and honesty. What I didn't understand was this endlessness, this openness, this namelessness, this lack of emotional boundaries. A fist made more sense to me than an open palm.

I had a hard time trusting the simple, trusting the warmth I felt coming from within, not from without. I was waiting for some kind of evil to come from him—I wanted it because it gave definition to the relationship—it gave it an end. And if the evil came from him first, I wouldn't have to worry about the death I carried with me. I could do the leaving, and the leaving wouldn't be my fault.

But he wouldn't give me an ending.

We ate our pancakes as storm clouds gathered. When rain splattered the red dirt around our feet, we dragged all of our sleeping paraphernalia back into the teepee; last night, we had slept outside under Orion with the howls of coyotes.

I walked in the wispy clouds up Mary Jane Canyon while Tadz split firewood and fixed a fence. The rain stopped, but a storm hovered like a hummingbird in the air. The desert opens deeper in the shadows of an impending storm. The colors brighten—reds, chocolate browns, yellows, electric blues, grays and greens—exposing their palates for moisture. In the wind, yellowed cottonwood leaves took flight from the branches like monarchs, and in the autumn air, I smelled the secret of death to come.

I fingered stones. I poked at coyote scat. I drizzled wet sand onto my bare, frozen feet and licked the sand from a finger into my mouth. I listened to the wind, listened to the hunger of the autumn air. I pasted a wet, heart-shaped cottonwood leaf to my cheek. I breathed wet sage deeply. I tossed a juniper stick into the running creek and read the water. And I understood.

The rain started again when I got back to the field camp, and the weather gave us permission for a late-morning nap in the teepee. We snuggled up and read to each other, but when the rain came hard, the voice of the rain against the fabric of the teepee was too loud for our own voices. A drop of water drooled down one of the teepee poles; we hadn't tied the top around snugly enough. The drop landed on my forehead, and Tadz wiped it away with his finger, tracing a line of wetness down my cheek, across my lips, up the other cheek, back to a new drop on my forehead.

“Just love me,” he said.

Lightning lit up the dusk inside the teepee, and the thunder conjured a dance inside me. I unfurled from within, a fist opening, reaching out, gathering in.

“Are there any rules you have?” he asked, kissing me.

“No pregnancies,” I said.

There are no rules, only cycles, just love me. I’m opening, I’m dancing inside, the beat seduces my flesh, calling for your flesh. My toes are curling and flexing, reaching out, gathering in, fingers everywhere, touch me here, touch me there, body arcing, body opening, body spreading out, pulsing, pulsing, pulsing, rain on me, rain in me, the drums are beating, the storm is coming, waves, the waves, I’m swimming, diving, breathing, the river is running, through me, over me, I’m lost in rhythm, I’m lost in flow, I’m lost in union, breathe my breath, I’m breathing yours, light is passing through, green yellow blue, red sand on my tongue, in my teeth, our bodies are red, we are wild, we are wet, the desert smells wet, I’m slipping, we’re sliding, come with me, please, please, come with me.

The teepee poles dripped on us, a shuddering, wet heap of flesh on the floor. My hair was shiny and slick. Everything felt pink and warm. When we peeled apart, the air started to chill, and Tadz tucked the sleeping bags around us. The rain stopped.

It was the first time I made love inside something so spare as a teepee in the desert in the rain. It was the first time I created love on or in something round, something without corners. The beds were always square in square rooms in square houses. It was the first time I made *love*.

“We come from the desert,” I said to him. Water dripped from the pole onto my temple. I fell asleep nestled in the sleeping bags with Tadz curled around me like a

question mark, his breath warm on top of my damp head. I didn't dream. It was a delicate sleep, one where even the tiniest whisper or movement stirs the senses.

When his lips moved, I sensed it, but my senses stirred thick, like soup.

"I love you," he whispered, thinking I was deep into sleep. I couldn't move to respond. I think he wanted it that way—for me to feel it thick in my senses, thick in my sleep, so I would feel it thick inside my cells and subconscious. "I love you, Mattie, I just love you. That's all."

How does one refuse love? How could one say, "No, thanks, but take it back"?

You'd have to stop breathing. You'd have to stop bleeding.

D. THE PURGING

Freedom of choice is what you've got.

Freedom from choice is what you want.

–Devo, from the song and album
“Freedom of Choice”

The windshield wipers flicked back and forth, smearing the raindrops round and round, chasing the water from one side to the other like some stupid game. I hated this kind of static rain in the desert. On days like this, the light didn't change with the hours. Dawn looked like noon looked like dusk.

Most days, the slow ballet of shadows and the disco of light on the canyon walls were my touchstones, my gravity; I could feel the earth moving in the luminous jazz of igniting and extinguished sandstone. But today, I could barely find the sun padded by the deep, wide bruise of gray sky.

I bit my nails, breathing shallow breaths, bouncing impatiently in the high-backed seat of the VW bus. I rolled down the window and then rolled it back up; the smell of wet rock started to make me nauseated, as if the stone were rotting. The canyons sulked in timelessness. The earth seemed to be stuck, wedged and idling.

It was definitely time to start drinking and driving.

I cracked open a 40-ounce can of beer. I liked the taste of beer better from bottles, but I always thought beer cans looked nicer in the hand, more soulful and earthy. The shimmer of the aluminum was an added ornament to my hand, contrasting nicely with my desert-tanned hide, balancing the turquoise and silver jewelry curled around my fingers and wrist. It felt smooth and pliable in my fingers, like it would hold the contour of my absent hand if I let go.

I thought of Ed Abbey, in *The Journey*, driving with his desert girlfriend, chucking empty Schlitz cans out the window. “Beer cans are beautiful,” he assures us. “It’s the highway that’s ugly.”

If you’re going to drink and drive in the desert, it ought to be beer from a can, windows open, nosebleed-dry air searing your skin, desert-bleached hair whipping around your face like a dust devil, wearing nothing but a wispy sarong tied casually around your neck, steeping in any rivers or creeks along the way, sipping the beer slowly enough that it passes from ice-cold to puke-warm in the time it takes to drink it. Today,

however, there would be no blasting hot air from the window—only gray, soggy sky oozing in with scattered raindrops. I wasn't going to give this beer any time to warm up.

Last night, when we had thought the rain would stop, Tadz and I planned to get up before dawn, divvy up gear and food, completely pack our packs, drive, and be at the trailhead, ready to hike by ten, latest. But at five A.M., the rain pitter-pattered a stay-in-bed-all-day lullaby on the roof, and the alkaline smell of wet dirt puffed in through my window like an opiate smoke.

So much for our alpine start. My alarm clock got "slept" a dozen times before I finally turned it off. At ten, too sore to sleep anymore, Tadz and I struggled to get out of bed, only to be overwhelmed by slow, syrupy lovemaking. When we got dressed, at noon, it was still raining, and it started to get on my nerves. Now, hours later, it rained exactly as before; it was as if time was recycling itself.

In the back of the bus, our gear and food was a dizzied mess of the bright colors and smells of Gore-tex, bananas, wet wool, broccoli, muddy boots, and tortillas. We were completely disorganized, but at the crack of three, Tadz and I had finally begun our drive through the rain to Dark Canyon. Dark Canyon was a proposed Wilderness area, and people who hated the idea of that kind of restriction were cutting roads into its earth at night, hoping that enough roads would disqualify the area from Wilderness status. I wanted to see this place before the roads and controversy ate it up.

"Are you sure you still want to do this? We're going to be wet little monsters," I asked, licking the foam from the top of my 40-ounce.

"Absolutely."

“Absolutely what—you still want to do this, or we’re going to be wet little monsters?”

“Both.” He looked at me and grinned. “You know, I never wanted to have kids before, but when I’m with you, all I want to do is procreate.”

“Well, you know the old adage, ‘When in Utah...,’” I said.

“Does that mean if we get married I can have multiple wives?” His eyes crinkled around a big grin.

I grinned sweetly back at him. “Only if they’re lesbians.”

We started drinking a radioactive concoction of Tadz’s alchemy: vodka swirled with Crystal Light—a sickeningly sweet aspartame dry drink mix I sometimes added to water so drinking the amount of fluids necessary to drink in the desert would be more appealing. Tadz had one shot—he did the driving—while I had several. His recipe had originally elicited flared nostrils and gagging noises from me, but after one shot (“It didn’t suck,” I said, shaking the burn from my throat), I was sipping the stuff from a bowl. It was pretty. The baby blue plastic bowl cradled a rosy sea, and a garden of electric pink sand settled in the bottom. It didn’t matter that the pink garden was probably depositing cancer seeds in my belly. I stared into the brew of breast cancer leaching from the plastic. Strawberry kiwi-flavored tumors of aspartame and cirrhosis of the liver disguised themselves nicely in the lucidity of the vodka.

Even nicer, the alcohol muffled the guilt that crept over me with the shadowed day. The darkness had reminded me not to forget the choices I had made. And this was

how I dealt with the reminder: beer cans crinkled around my feet; pink sludge drooled down my shirt; my head felt dismembered from my body; I had to pee.

When the desert blazed with sun, rules disappeared in the long horizons and oscillations of shadow and light. Categories were a mirage: land squiggled into the sky; life hid inside desiccation, tiny creatures just sleeping inside what appeared to be a dusty death; laws yielded lawlessness; the ocean lived on inside the rocks; barbed wire was a delusion; dreams unfolded in the daytime, luscious and thick as cactus flowers; rocks talked; plants moved.

The heat dissolved distinction, peeled the skin away to reveal the whole. The blades of desert sun were incisive, exposing every layer within, and whether the layers were dark or light, it made no difference because it was all the same. Shade was flimsy, as if nothing could hide for very long, and nighttime lacked the gravity of day.

Darkness scared me for this very reason: when things go bump in the night, when wickedness dwells in the shadows, it's only a thin mask for what really lurks in the light.

It was comforting to think that nothing bad exists in the daytime. But darkness and shadows were only a costume—like in cartoons, when the only way to “see” a ghost is to throw a sheet over it. Well, it's all a lie. A thinly veiled lie, at that. It's only a scant disguise for what really exists.

The shadow is only part of the light covered up.

We try to draw sides: over there, in the fringe of darkness, is evil—over here, in the light corner, is everything good. We try to control everything immoral, everything scary, or anything wild by labeling it as a property of the dark side. On the other hand, we belong to the flank of everything light and good. With the velvet cloak of darkness

tossed over it, it safely becomes Other; it's not part of us, it doesn't look like us.

Sometimes we can't even see it.

But on long gray days like these, the dark parts were hard to ignore. I wanted to think that the shame only followed me around in a shadow, that the sin was conceived in a darkness like this. I wanted to pretend that this darkness wasn't a part of my real self, as if disgrace were placed over me as helplessly and faultlessly as dusk smothered the day. It was so much easier to place blame outside myself, outside the realm of my own control, outside the periphery of my own choices. But this blame, too, is a lie.

And today, marinating in responsibility for my choices, I came to this awful conclusion: it would be easier to be handed a terrible fate rather than to choose it.

I wanted darkness to blame evil on. I wanted laws to blame boundaries on. I wanted definitions to blame choices on. That way, I would bear no responsibility, I would shoulder no freedom. I would have only fate.

And so I tried to drink the conclusions into that place where lost memory goes, horrified at my cowardice and my weakness.

This is the only time you can study both of your shadows. If you sit perfectly still and watch your primary shadow as the sun sets you will be able to hold it long enough to see your other shadow fill up when the moon rises like a porcelain basin with clear water. If you turn carefully to face the south you may regard both of them: to understand the nature of silence you must be able to see into this space between your shadows.

-Barry Lopez, "Twilight"

Dull yellow lights over my head. Metal scraping. Thick air, dirty. Can't move my limbs. Pain, horrible pain. "I FEEL IT! I FEEL IT!" I screamed, and hurled my torso onto the dashboard, eyes popping open.

“Hey sleepyhead—what’s all that screaming about? Are you okay?” Tadz’s voice came from above and behind me, metal scraping as he popped up the top of the van to make space for us to sleep. I grabbed his thigh and put my head against it.

“Will you light some candles? I can’t stand this car light.”

“Sure, honeybee, just as long as you quit that screaming. It’s scary.”

“Where are we? Aren’t we packing up and hiking or something?”

“The road into Dark Canyon is washed out. I tried it, but it’s really exposed, winding around the edge of a cliff, and we were sliding all over the place.” Tadz lit an inferno of candles. “I turned around, so we’re in a little cottonwood grove near Comb Ridge, now. BLM land. We can sleep in the van and try White Canyon tomorrow.”

White Canyon sounded much better than Dark Canyon.

It was really dark outside. “Hey—what time is it, anyway?” I asked.

“Eight.” Jesus. How long had I been passed out? “Are you hungry? I brought some extra stuff from the other night to make more fish-less sushi.”

“Yeah. But my stomach hurts. Ooooh—so does my head.”

“Well, you drank a whole lot of booze. And you haven’t eaten anything in hours.” I stumbled out the door, aching, and stood up to stretch.

I threw my head back and roared. “It’s still fucking raining!” I picked up a handful of mud and let it desperately squish through my fingers back to the ground. “Times like these, I start believing in The God. The Goddesses wouldn’t do this shit to me,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“I gotta go use the tree,” I said, and sloshed away to pee. As I walked away from the van, my shadow, snakes and all, stretched out long before me. I stomped on it with one foot, mud leaping in the air. “I know you,” I hissed, “and you don’t scare me.”

The rain played maddening elevator music on the roof of the van.

“Will you read me a story?” Tadz asked.

“Absolutely.” We crawled into the pop-top, onto the thick mattress, and into our zipped-together sleeping bags. I brought David James Duncan’s *The River Why* up with me to read a bedtime chapter to Tadz.

I began reading Chapter 6, but I got lost inside the words by the fourth page. I was still reading aloud to Tadz, but it was as if the speaking of the vowels and consonants was conjuring some kind of magic glow that surrounded us, or me, at least. I read to him about Gus and Bill Bob, two brothers, and their nightly tucking in ritual where Bill Bob, the younger brother, tells stories about his “dreefee”—a relic of the day’s adventures. In this chapter, the dreefee is a burning pine knot. Gus tells Bill Bob that it makes a good night-light, and Bill Bob asks what a night-light is. Gus, the narrator, explains it as a “light that lights the night.” Bill Bob gets lost in thought, unblinking and not breathing, until he plays on those words and starts telling a story about a “light-knight”—a knight that nights the light.

“How does he night light?” I [Gus] asked.

“By making it darker,” [Bill Bob] said, “like the world’s shadow does to the sky at night.”

“Oh.”

“So now do you know who your light-knight is?”

“No.”

“Dummy.”

"Whaddya mean, 'dummy?'" I grabbed his foot and tickled it through the covers, but he pulled away. He was serious about all this.

He said, "It's your shadow."

"My shadow? Then why call it a 'light knight'? My shadow is dark."

He said, "It may be dark, but it's way lighter than you are."

"Come on," I said; "I'm a whitey, same as you."

"Whiteness don't matter," he said. "Skin weighs more than shadows."

"Ah, that kind of light!"

"Yeah," he said. "But the other kind too, because know what your shadow really is?"

"No," I confessed, wondering if he'd been studying some old riddle book on the sly, "not unless it's the thing on the ground the sun makes, or according to you, my 'light knight.'"

He said, "It's both those things, but it's something else, too. Know what?"

"No. What?"

Leaning toward me, he whispered this secret: "It's your Garden Angel!"

Tadz snuggled closer, and I read on, aloud.

Without the least hesitation he explained, "He looks like your shadow, and he looks like the thing that nights the light. But really he's your twin."

"I get the picture," I said sardonically. "I had this twin brother, born when I was born, but nobody in the hospital saw him come out so he just snuck off and..."

"He wasn't born when you were born!" cut in Bill Bob. "He died when you were born. And he's born when you die."

That stopped me. This was getting complicated. I said, "Wait a minute, Bill Bob. What's the difference between what my Garden Angel looks like and what he is, for starters."

He shook his head at his hopelessly dull pupil. "What your Garden Angel looks like is what you see. What he is is what he is. Lots of junk don't look like what it is."

"Oh yeah? Name me some of this junk."

"Dummy," he said. "Like the world isn't flat and the sun don't go around it and the moon ain't bigger than the stars and shooting stars aren't stars and all and..."

"All right already!" I said. Hmmm. The kid was on top of it. So far, anyway. "You got a point there, Bill Bob, but I'm not letting you off the hook so easy. How can my Garden Angel be my twin when he's one-dimensional and black and gets tall or short or deformed depending on what the light is doing to him, and dies when I'm born, and is born when I die? What kind of twin doesn't look or act like a twin at all? What good is he? What's he got to do with me?"

Bill Bob shook his head sadly. "That's edsackly what your Garden Angel says about you."

"But he's the weird black wavery deformed one, not me!"

Calm and certain, Bill Bob replied, "Not in the place where he lives. Where he lives you look just like he looks here where you live."

I had to stop and think about this one; I could feel battalions of brain cells mustering in my forehead, not about to be routed a by a seven-year-old. I said, "But my

Garden Angel lives on the ground, or wherever the light happens to throw him. Anyone with eyes in their head can see that."

He said, "Anyone with eyes in their head can see the sun going 'round the flat world and the moon way bigger than the stars."

I mumbled, "You got a point there."

His mouth stayed still, but his eyes grinned a little through his glassless glasses. "I told ya twice I had to tell ya somethin'. Now I'm tellin' ya: See, every person in the world has their Garden Angel, and every Garden Angel has their person."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And every person thinks their Angel is just their shadow, and every Angel in the Garden World thinks their person is just their shadow."

"Hold on a minute! Garden World? What's this about a Garden World?"

"Sure, the Garden World—where Garden Angels live. We live in our world and they live in theirs. But if we learn the right things and they learn the right things, then finally we get to be each other's friend and go back and forth to both worlds wide awake forever, which is funner than you can shake a stick at."

Wonderfully confounded, I thought I'd better confuse him before he lost me completely: "But Bill Bob, if our shadow is on the ground, then we should be able to dig a hole and get into the Garden World whether we did the right things and met our friend and all that or not. Now you and me have both dug enough holes to know there's no world down there, right?"

"Wrong!" he said, disgusted and utterly unconfused. "Listen, ya big dummy: I told ya already, you are your Garden Angel's shadow, and he's yours. You think you're standing up. He thinks you're lying flat. Look at your light-knight now...."

I looked at my shadow: it was sitting on the closed bedroom door. Bill Bob said, "Go out that door you're in the hallway, not the Garden World. You don't get into the Garden World by walking there."

Again I mumbled, "I guess you got a point."

Bill Bob said, "The trouble with people and with Garden Angels is they just don't know they're twins." (This obviously struck him as a regrettable state of affairs.) "We think we're growing bigger and older. They think they're growing younger and smaller. We think we're..."

"Hold it!" I cried. "They think they're getting younger and smaller?"

He nodded, very solemn now, eyes riveted on the quivering flame. He said, "You see, Gussy, Garden Angels come from the ground, like carrots, into their world. That's one reason they're called Garden Angels. When they first come out of the ground into the Garden World they're very old, or hurt, or sick, or crippled or sad, but the other Angels help them out and they get better bit by bit, and they're real happy to be there in that world because it's all so pretty and nice, like the nicest garden in this world 'cept the whole place there is like that, and everybody's so friendly and there's nothing to make ya scared or hurt nowhere like in our world. It's such a wonderful place to be that the longer those broken ol' Angels live there the younger and smaller they grow and the friendlier and happier they get, so the ones who have lived there the longest are the kids and babies. And the very longest ones are tiny, and so bright and happy they look like flames burning up out of gladness—like that one!" He pointed at the dreefee: a bubble of pitch had ignited inside it and was sending out a miniscule but brilliant white torch

that glistened and hummed as it burned... but after a time it consumed itself and vanished, so I asked,

"What happens to the oldest, smallest little babies when they burn all the way out? Is that the end of them?"

"No," he said. "They don't ever burn out. Sometimes they burn up. But most often they just get so bright and small that nobody can see them anymore, and they disappear out of the Garden World and enter our world, and we trade places."

"We what?"

"We trade worlds with our twin: we go there and our twin comes here. See, all the time our twin is growing younger and happier, we're growing older and more crippled, till finally we die, and pass through our shadows, and get buried in our ground. Then we journey up and up through a long, black tunnel till we reach the Garden Angel ground, and then we sprout up through it like carrots, and there we are, Garden Angels now, not people—but the big, crooked, sad, new sort of Angels that haven't been there long. And our twin, who has disappeared in a little bright speck too small to see, passes through his shadow and comes here and gets in a lady's stomach and turns into a baby. So it's really not our world or their world. We trade back and forth. Both worlds belong to both of us. We're twins. The shadows we pass through are each other, us and our twins, swapping places."

I felt like weeping. My voice quivered. I thought about the Red World. I thought about shadows. I thought about my unborn baby.

"Bill Bob?"

"Gussy?"

"What about animals, like fish for instance? And what about trees and plants and bugs and all those kinds of critters? They all got Angels?"

He looked me in the eye and said, "Everything that gets a shadow gets a Garden Angel."

"What about a river, then? A river doesn't have a shadow."

"Dummy," he grumbled, shaking his head again. "A river does, but a river's shadow is on the bottom of the river."

The varmint was right; I remembered the strange, vague shadows of waterfalls I had seen. Bill Bob yawned, smiled, took off his horn-rims and said, "I'm gettin' sleepy, Gus."

I sure wasn't. Not with these Garden Worlds and Angels and twins running around practically in plain sight. "Just tell me a couple more things," I begged.

"OK" he sighed.

"Doesn't everything there have a shadow?"

He shook his head again. "Dummy."

"Whaddya mean, 'dummy'? Name me three things that don't have shadows."

Fool that I am I thought I had him this time. But he stared at the dreefee and in a calm, soft voice that sent three chills dashing up my spine said, "Fire. Air. Light."

He was seven, and he knew more than five of me put together. Trying to save face, I said, "I know another."

"What?"

"...Shadows, Bill Bob. Shadows don't have shadows."

"But they think they do," he said sadly. "That's why we don't know we're twins. That's why we get frightened."

I scratched my head to help it along, but it didn't help enough. "I don't get ya, Bill Bob."

He said, "There are no shadows, Gussy. Not really there aren't."

And that's all the explanation he ever gave.

After a long silence he yawned, then said, "We're using another shadowless thing."

"What's that?"

"Words."

I read the last few pages of the chapter, watching the shadow of my hand turning the pages with my flesh and bones. I closed the book and Tadz stared at the candlelight waltzing with the shadows on the ceiling.

My baby never had a shadow.

"Why don't some things have shadows?"

"Some things don't need Garden Angels."

The desert was a mosaic of fire, air, and light on stone and water; maybe that's why I was drawn here, to find her shadowless glow radiant inside the rocks and the river.

"Why don't some things need Garden Angels?"

He smiled, sighed, and kept his eyes shut tight. "Dummy," he said, turning away toward the shadows. "Some things never die."

I woke in the morning to yesterday and the days before. It was still raining. I couldn't find the sun. It felt like the gray was tunneling through the marrow of my bones like a dark, vicious worm. But Tadz was all puppy-like in the morning, warm and blonde and nuzzling like a yellow Labrador, and I tried to think of him as the sunshine. "I promise it will stop," he said.

And it did. After breakfast, while we were looking at maps, the sun suddenly spurted through the clouds. Rivulets of light trickled through the cottonwood leaves, and waterfalls of sun reflected on the wet rock faces. It was like a sudden storm of sunlight.

We drove further south and west to White Canyon and divvied up the weight into our backpacks. We followed a game trail down to the canyon floor. From all the rain, the small creek had recently been a short-lived river; the desert sand was saturated on both sides of the water. We alternated who had to pick the route through the sludge, because the lead person invariably found spots where the mud sucked legs in up to the waist.

When the clouds rolled in a bit before dusk, we set up camp high in the alcove of a side canyon, each of us silently hoping that it wouldn't rain much more over the night. There was no chance of this part of the canyon filling with water; it was too wide and shallow. But I was scared, senselessly, of a flash anyway.

Tadz was rooting through the food bag and spices when the wind pulled me away from camp. I turned to follow it, my hair blowing into my face and straight up on the back of my head, looking like a cross between wriggling snakes and romantic Western movie hair. The wind led me up between the rocks into a little slot canyon close to camp in the alcove. The water rested in shallow pools between the segments of water sliding over the smooth rock floor. The canyon walls looked like they had been the failure of a great piece of pottery thrown on a wheel, like the sides had been too thin and it had collapsed in on itself, undulating and lined by fingers.

I climbed up and through the slot, rock hunting and drawing patterns in the mud with a frayed sage stick I was carrying, singing a little to myself, crooning quietly so

Tadz wouldn't hear me. I squatted next to a particularly large, wet patch of smooth mud, thick as pudding. It was different from the rest, circular and darker, like it was a lid covering the earth's pupil, spiraled up from deep inside the earth. I stuck my index finger on top of the membrane, and I tapped it softly. The mud wiggled around, all of a piece, throbbing in concentric circles around my fingertip. The surface tension never broke. Something about made me think of a womb.

I closed my eyes and tapped it, feeling the waves sometimes come back around my finger. The rhythm became like a heartbeat, and then the heartbeat came from within the mud—my eyes snapped open and I drew my finger back sharply to my side.

I stared at the mud for a while longer, then breathed onto my hand and palmed the mud hole, lingering for just a moment before I stood.

When I turned to wander back to camp I saw a man walking towards me with a backpack rigged from a tarp and ropes. He looked up from the mud and stopped when he saw me, not startled at all, almost as if he were expecting me. We stared at each other for a moment. He was thin with wild hair, and he wore too many weathered clothes for the damp warmth that lingered in the air. I couldn't see his eyes very well through the thick glasses he wore, and I found my eyes locked on his lips. They seemed swollen and stiff, like joints that had been inert for too long. Something about him was hauntingly familiar, and something about him told me not to speak. Before I knew it, our brief, silent encounter slipped through my fingers—he had backed out of the canyon and disappeared into the rocks.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t be so afraid.” I heard his voice, soft but firm, inside my head, between my brain and my ears, but he had never spoken aloud to me. His lips had never moved.

That evening is a fact.

I am still here in its field.

-Elizabeth Seydel Morgan,
from “Every Fact Is a Field”

“I can’t sleep.” I thrashed around inside our double pod, twisting the nylon and down into pretzels. “I’m restless.” Tadz did his best to ignore me and re-folded his body with each of my new postures. “I’m itchy.” Kicking and pouting, rolling over Tadz, on top of Tadz, elbowing him in the mouth and the chest, kneeing him in the groin. “I’m hot.” I whacked him in the back of the head with a flailing arm. Still no response. I pinched his butt.

“Hey! What’d you do that for?”

“How can you just sleep when I’m over here obviously in some kind of pitiful turmoil? Pain, even. I’m in pain, I say.”

“Okay, okay, okay, let’s sleep with our heads out the door. Maybe a blast of fresh air will silence you.” It wasn’t raining right now, and Tadz felt the same way about tents that I did. They suck. But neither of us made mention of this gear blasphemy out loud, afraid the Gods of Technology would kick us in the ass right when and where it counted.

If I slept at all inside tents, I slept fitfully, always gasping awake inside a suffocating dream—most of them were drowning dreams. A couple of times, I had a dream that I was stuck inside ice, black ice, running out of air, hacking away at the slimy dark walls with a pick, eyeballs bulging and lungs turning themselves inside out. Each time, I cracked my way through the ice, only to find myself teetering on the edge of a

chasm, with no way to go up, only down forever. Each time, I woke a startled tent-mate to gurgling, strangling noises and fists punching the tent walls, punctuating the hysteria with a loud “FUCK!”

A friend of mine has postulated that my sleeping self is a wanderer, and she wanders free and far. But when I’m in a tent, she gets stuck, she can’t breathe, can’t deal with being caged. When I asked my friend why my sleeping self seemed to think that wandering within the confines of a house was freer, she promptly told me that my sleep gypsy had no trouble sifting through natural barriers, like wood or glass or stone. It was the synthetic materials she had a problem escaping.

Tadz and I wriggled our bodies, pads, and bags so that our torsos were free from the confines of impenetrable tent walls. We looked for stars and couldn’t find any through the blackness. Only the moon, one day from fullness, lit the sky from behind the clouds.

“I still can’t sleep.” I flopped onto my back and slapped my hands, straight-armed, flat on top of the sleeping bag and kicked once, pouting like a four-year-old. “Will you tell me a story, Tadz? Please?” His stories always put me to sleep. His voice got all whispery and soft, like a feather, and the just the beginnings of the stories took hours—I always fell asleep in boredom.

“Okay, but I’ll draw you a story.” He smiled at me in the moonlight, re-lit the candle, and reached over to pull up my shirt, revealing a belly canvas. Instinctively, my hands snapped over the exposed flesh, covering whatever shadowed emptiness could be seen there. “Hey,” he protested softly, “let me touch you. I promise this will feel nice.”

“I hate my belly. Can’t you draw on my back or something?”

In a gravely serious tone, he said, “Absolutely not.” I smiled a little and he slid his hand beneath mine, cold against my stomach.

“There was a little girl, with a little curl,” Tadz began, drawing a spiral from the outside in, “right in the middle of her forehead.” He punctuated the spiral with a fingertip to my bellybutton. “When she was good, she was very, very good,” he drew a smiley face on my belly, “but when she was bad, she was *naughty*”—he pinched my skin, hard.

“OOOWWW!”

“That’s for pinching my ass.”

We both settled down and Tadz drew a story of warm, wide circles with full palms, quick straight lines with pinkie fingers, and the static of chaos with fingers moving all at once. He drew three-dimensional mountains with stiff pinches as if he were shaping meringue peaks on my belly, rivers serpented from a licked finger, waves curled with a “C” drawn over and over, an echo skipped across my flesh.

The story ended. The moon struggled to sift through the clouds and the night of the sky. The canyon brightened, and moonshadows slithered on the rocks like water.

I heard the man’s voice in my head again. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be so afraid.

“Tadz?”

“What’s up, darlin’?”

“I have this terrible secret...”

Tadz rolled up onto one arm and I could just make out the whites of his eyes. “I know, muffin-head, and it’s okay.” He paused and put a hand on my belly. “I’m listening, if you need me to.”

“I don’t want it anymore, Tadz. I just don’t want it.”

“What don’t you want?”

“This fucking secret. The shame and the guilt of it all. I can’t control it anymore. I don’t know if I ever could, but it just feels like I’m always on the verge of, of...unraveling, or falling down—like I have to balance everything just right or I’ll just topple over and never get back up again. Like it will eat me from the inside out, soon. I can hear it beating in my ears. But I don’t know what to do with it.” He held my hand, and I took it back. I wanted both hands on my stomach, alone. I closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds.

And then I released it. I released it all.

At first, my voice didn’t even seem like my own—it was a spongy, gurgling voice, like an animal taken out of the dark water into the blinding starkness of air. It seemed the words had been there all along, and a hand within was pushing them up from my womb and out of my mouth in a bubbly, watery, stinking mess, clearing the way for the clarity of moonlight to take its place.

I told him everything. I told him how I knew the baby was a girl, how I collected the rows and rows of silky sleeping pills because I didn’t want to make a decision and how that decision of eating the pills seemed so much easier somehow, how the boyfriend and I didn’t have any money so we had to beg, borrow, and steal just to have enough to go to some dirty butcher in a bad part of Cleveland. I told him how I starved myself too small for the butcher to get the baby out even though she was only four months and the size of air inside a cupped palm, about how they had to induce labor with little sticks of some kind stuck up inside me, how the boyfriend held me and stared at me with horrified eyes as I dilated in the backseat of the car because I was too embarrassed to writhe in the

filled waiting room. I told him about the seven hours of waiting my turn, writhing in the car or sitting on the smelly, worn brown carpet against the dirty walls, about how they called it “the procedure,” about the woman at the desk who was there for her eighth “procedure” and how she was crying so quietly against the amazing silence of the packed room. I told him about how I had to call my parents with a wobbly voice from a pay phone down the street to tell them that extra batting practice for softball had run over time and that the boyfriend and I were just going to go to a friend’s house from there, not to wait for me for dinner, that yes I was fine, the boyfriend and I had been fighting a little, that’s all.

I told him how I remembered what I was wearing—a purple Northwestern University sweatshirt, black sweatpants, and black running shoes—and that the first Cleveland Indians baseball game at the new field was that day and I could sometimes hear the crowd screaming while I lay screaming inside the car. I told him how they wouldn’t let the boyfriend come in with me, and I didn’t scream out loud for him even though I screamed on the inside, how I screamed on the inside for him to save me, to wake me up from this nightmare, to not let them cut and suck this life out of me, to not leave me alone.

I told him of the blood, the blood everywhere, how I didn’t know if it was mine or from the baby, but it came from inside me, how they held me down and clamped me open, how the jar glistened like amber and cloudy rubies in the hot yellow lights, how I couldn’t make out the butcher’s face when he held the jar up in front of my eyes and said, “There’s no fetus in here—do you see one? Shit.” I told him how he fucked it all up and had to do it again, how the drugs wore off and I could feel everything and the butcher

didn't care because the drugs cost more money, how I could feel the fingers trying to hold on, could hear the tearing, could see the screaming in the white flashes of light in my head, could feel how wrong this was, how very wrong. I told him about the woman holding my arms down saying, "It's okay," when it was so clearly not, about how I felt like a wild animal strapped down to a table with wild hair and wild, yellow eyes, about how I wanted to bite the woman but wanted this all to be over, how I deserved to be emptied, about how everything was just a big fucking lie. I told him about how when there was, apparently, a fetus in the jar—my baby—I didn't know what happened to it, where it went, didn't see it, wanted so desperately to know where the tens of fetuses sucked out by this man went at the end of the day.

I told him about the dozens of drugged, half-naked, bleeding women in the cramped, grimy recovery room, sitting in small metal chairs with desks attached to them like from a fourth-grade classroom, vomiting in little paper bowls, about the paper cup of water I threw on the floor when I started laughing wickedly through my tears, laughing at the ridiculousness of it all, laughing at the evil that filled my emptiness. I told him about the arm-holding-lady telling me to quiet down, and I told him about my telling her to go to hell with the rest of us.

I told him how when I left the dirty place it had been dark for hours, how the boyfriend took me to a house and lay with me in his friend's bed while I slept into the night with his hands on my belly, how I hadn't worn a big maxi-pad since I first got my period but went through one every hour, how they got heavy with blood, how I couldn't stop bleeding, how I got infected and fevered, how I didn't think I could have babies anymore. I told him how it felt like they sucked out the light from within me, how I

couldn't feel my heart beating for days because I was so used to feeling it in my belly, how I was certain my stomach would implode with the sudden cavity.

I told him about the years wondering where the baby went—both the actual fetus and the spirit—about how I sometimes saw a whispery figure of a curly-haired four-year old laughing with her head back and a space between her front teeth, how I heard her heart beating in the pulse of the ocean, felt her near in the raindrops glittering the earth, knew of her waiting to come back in the persistence of the sun, smelled her sticky child breath in the wind, saw her face in the sandstone, listened to her story in the river.

I told him about how if someone asked me if they took Life out of me, if the point of Life had begun, I would say yes, *but no*, because it was still my own Life, but Life all the same, and they took it out of me, kicking and screaming and bleeding and vomiting, and I would tell them it wasn't fair. I told him how it wasn't fair that I couldn't talk to my parents, it wasn't fair that our family functioned on illusion, it wasn't fair that I had to go to a dirty butcher because I couldn't borrow money from them, it wasn't fair that any of these women should have to be treated like this because they didn't have enough money, because they were too ashamed to speak, because they were too ashamed of what they were capable of doing. I told him how if evil really did lurk in some special shadowed place, that filthy butcher shop was it—not because of the abortions, but because of the life leaked on the tables and floors in fluorescent darkness, and the shame seeping from the walls, and the filthiness of it all—how this all felt like rape in a different way even though it was my choice. I told him how we women were forced into this wicked room because we didn't have enough cash or enough years of age for a nice

sunny suite where people in white held our hands and let us cry and feel sad without pushing us into the dark vomit of immorality for our choice.

I told him how *I* was the one who laid down, how *I* was the one who surrendered, how *I* was the one who made the ultimate choice, how *I fucked up*. I told him how I couldn't forgive myself, how I felt dirty and ashamed and defiled, but how I would have made the same decision again.

Yes, how I would have *made the same decision again*.

I released the past into the present, breathing it out like a dark bird, a raven, into the night. I breathed it out like wind, a big sigh. I told him how when it gets really windy outside, sometimes I think that somewhere, someone is releasing a big ugly secret, and it makes me feel proud of whoever that person is, how to let go of all that energy takes strength, and it's just whipping around in the air, silent and free, but sometimes it exhausts me, all that wildness and energy loosed on the world. I told him about mountain tops and great barren deserts, that they're so windy because all the ex-secrets go out there, where there's less chance that someone will try to cage their silence, because there are fewer mouths for trapping, because there's so much wildness there that nobody tries to understand.

I didn't cry. I hadn't cried a tear when I told him all of that. I stopped telling, and we both stared up at the moon, not talking, not crying. I was exhausted. Without saying a word, Tadz rolled over on top of me, tenderly, and joined my silence, joined my body, joined my love.

There was something so pure, like fire, that we existed in. Something that never died. Innocence. I felt embraced by innocence. We engaged in exactly the act that

created the shadow, but this was precisely the feeling. It was like a big “You are forgiven, and you are so loved,” and it was more than words. It was a light found in the darkness, a black cloak removed. It was the silence part of the secret, the beautiful silence. And it was big and round and whole, just like the moon, wordless and speechless and indefinable. And I cried and I cried while we made love, and he was so gentle and soundless that sometimes I forgot he was even there. I wasn’t empty, for that moment anyway. Everything was okay. And it was beautiful, silent and beautiful.

Dawn came into the country like a secret.

-Terry Tempest Williams,
“Perfect Kiva”

When I peeled my eyes open in the morning, Tadz was gone, leaving me alone in the double sleeping bag, alone with the sunrise, alone with the ghost of my secret, alone with the shadow of my words. The smudge of orange on the horizon filtered through the darkness, dissolving the clouds with its hot breath.

Today was Day of the Dead.

I shucked my sleeping bag like a molting snake and stretched a little. Lengthening my limbs felt good, intoxicating almost, in the rising sun. I felt a little empty, like when you stand up too quickly and all the blood leaves your brain. Movement always made me feel better, so I grabbed a water bottle and climbed into the slot canyon.

Up on top of the canyon, I found myself in a sea of sage and the smell overwhelmed me. I walked back over to the slot and sat above a pool brightening in the sun. I watched the way the water pushed the sunlight out, didn’t let it in, and I burst into tears. Oh Jesus, what had I done? What had I done?

I remembered the man with the swollen lips from yesterday, and hoped he wouldn't come up here today; I didn't want him to see me crying, so afraid of escaped words, so afraid of their freedom. I stared into the pool and watched the water fall into another pool below it. Pool, drop, pool, drop. I thought I saw the man's reflection and I twisted quickly. There was nobody there. And then his voice was in my head again.

"Pool drop, pool drop, pool drop," the man's voice said rhythmically in my head. "It's supposed to be comforting, like a heartbeat."

But it wasn't. There was nothing comforting about it, especially this stranger's voice entering my head, a voice that had never spoken words aloud. What did he know about being afraid? What did he know about comfort? What did he know about guilt and shame released into a new love, into the clouds that would rain this terribleness somewhere else? What did he know about giving up a secret, the only part of your given up baby you still had?

"*Chindi*," I said to myself. The Navajo say that canyons are home of the *chindi*, wicked spirits who spend most of their time in the afterworld located below the earth, seeking revenge for wrongs done to them during their life. They are barely visible, but sometimes they can be heard making noise while wandering through dark canyon recesses.

A bulky sort of silence marked breakfast, packing, and the hike out. The flesh of my belly had been sliced open last night, the secret had come out like a stinky, stale breath, and now the incision flapped loosely in the morning breeze. I had post-partum depression after giving birth to those heavy words.

Tadz sensed the distance I needed, and gave it to me willingly. I shuffled my feet slowly under the weight of my pack. What had I done? What would he think of me now? Baby killer? Slut? White trash? Dumb ass who can't even grasp the elementary concept of contraception? Would he feel burdened with the knowledge, afraid to talk about it because he was afraid that I would burst into tears?

But what really bothered me was this: keeping the secret felt, in some small way, like keeping the baby. If I could keep the secret, then nobody could take that baby away from me—not the boyfriend, not my parents, not the butcher. I was in control. I didn't have to give it up or give it away.

And so on Day of the Dead I mourned the loss of a loss.

I felt like I had listened to someone else tell the story, and this someone else had started something into motion, some curse, some terrible evil that spread across the sky. I looked up. It was sunny. The darkness was hiding. My body teemed with anger and powerlessness, fists curled tightly at my sides.

"Hey you." Tadz was slumped on the ground, still harnessed by his pack, waiting for me. "If we can really hoof it up to the rim, we'll have enough time for the surprise I have planned for you." I stared at him, drugged by my anger.

"Okay." I started walking again, at the same pace, not acknowledging his request.

Tadz motored by me, a Richard Simmons grin brightly on his face, in an exaggerated power walk, all four limbs a whirl of motion. "Come on! You can do it!" Right at that moment, I hated him. I hated him a lot. And I didn't know why.

Half in desperation, half in anger, I pounced on him. I took him out. Flattened him. Used some wrestling trick the boyfriend taught me long-time-ago-when. Tadz's

little puppy eyes peered up at me from a long face, wondering what was going on, sorry for something he never even did. What had I done? What had I done?

I jumped up and stormed ahead, on a mission to retrieve the words I had lost. But I wasn't able to gather them by the time I reached the bus.

Shit, I felt empty. Empty and expectant and out of control. Wasn't something good supposed to happen when you talked about things? Wasn't I supposed to feel relieved and light and fluffy?

We loaded our stuff into the bus and drove away. I didn't know where we were going. It was a secret.

"Pull over," I said.

"Again?" Tadz asked. I couldn't stop shitting. Empty of words, my body wanted to expel all waste, all toxins. I began to worry that I was expelling necessary organs.

"If you can wait five more minutes, you could go in a bathroom," he smiled at me apologetically. "And there would be toilet paper and everything." I could wait. I couldn't imagine using any more rocks, although I felt like scouring my entire body to remove this filthy film I imagined all over me.

We were driving through Monument Valley in Arizona. There was so much space around this garden of skinny rocks. The pink light was soothing. All of my energy had fallen out and I slumped in the seat. The fierceness of my body exhausted itself, and, like a broken horse, I felt some kind of tension snap. The anger curled up somewhere small, trying to keep itself together.

By the time we pulled into the dusty drive of a run-down little ranch, I didn't have to use the bathroom. A couple of paint horses stood in the corral, heads hanging low, bodies still except for muscles twitching where the flies landed.

A big Navajo man stood by three horses tied to a fence rail, and he smiled a grin that almost devoured his face.

"Sunset surprise," Tadz said. "How would you like to go for a sunset ride through Monument Valley?"

"I would love it more than anything," I said. I felt a kinship with these sad horses, and I picked the saddest of the three to ride. She was littler than the rest and dustier. When I smoothed her forelock over the bridle, she didn't even look at me. I stroked and stroked from the white part between her eyes down to the fragile pink skin of her lips, and her head drooped further and further. I rested my chin between her ears and whispered, "I know...I know."

As we rode further into the valley, the sky oozed with color. Over one side of the saddles, the sun set. Over the other, the full moon rose. We rode the space in between.

It was Day of the Dead. It was Night of the Living.

I am a life-giver and a life-taker. I am wild and I am free.

Between my legs, something like ecstasy ripped me open—it was terrible and yet more alive than I'd ever felt. The horse was also in this tear of the sublime, and she tensed with energy, sidestepping it and moving up and down more than she moved forward.

I wanted to do this, wanted to feel this.

I tucked the reins between my legs and pushed my weight forward onto the horse's neck, one hand clasping her mane, the other hugging her neck. She started cantering. We opened up to the valley. Her hoofbeats liquified me.

The words had been birthed, a stream of them like water.

The horse and I galloped, pumping as hard as we could go. The words pumped into something new, from stillness into life. I could make something good from this.

If a canyon is a womb, the valley is the heart. Pool drop. Pool drop. Pool drop. It was like a heartbeat.

I hung limp as a rag doll. "Go," I whispered. "Just go. Go home. Take us home." I rode the heartbeat, rode the pulsating fluidity of it all, rode the freedom of words, rode that inky space between the sun and the moon where everything came together. There was rhythm in all this.

E. THE BLOOD FROM A STONE

“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,” said Scrooge, “answer me one question. Are these the shadows of things that Will be, or are they the shadows of things that May be, only?”

–Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

What happens when secrets aren't secret anymore?

You have to pay to camp, that's what happens. Million-dollar pit toilets are dug, roads are paved, there are entrance fees, windshield tourism swells into traffic jams, and trails are covered in concrete with neat little steps. This is what I found myself thinking about as I stood with three other instructors at the entrance to Arches National Park,

waiting for the bus of local fifth graders and watching the line of cars curl like a slow serpentine through the pay-to-enter station.

On one hand, designation as a National Park defends the land from one set of abuses—industrial, agricultural, or extractive consumption and housing developments—but on the other hand, this status puts the land at risk to the problems popularity breeds. Perhaps this is another reason some people oppose Wilderness designation: we don't like our secret spots to be exposed.

Since Outside Magazine “discovered” Moab as *the* mountain biking Mecca in the late eighties, both locals and longtime tourists say “Outside Magazine killed Moab.” What was once a landscape relatively unscathed by tourism has become an attractive destination.

Magazines like Outside have the Christopher Columbus effect. Subscribers read of unearthed wild gems of recreation, and suddenly the masses descend upon these places that were once unheard of. Herds of people suddenly surround you in a place that used to feel private. The land is developed by recreational opportunities. Campsites and trails and climbing areas get trashed. Roads get paved. Wealthy people and their second homes marginalize the locals. Something of the spirit of the place dies.

Should we say, “Shame on you, Outside--keep our special places secret”? Are we to be selfish and hoard those private moments and places? Should we loathe the newcomers and treat them with contempt? Do we believe that others should not be privileged to this wild beauty?

Maybe. But what is this dilemma really saying to us?

Maybe we should ask why we are so territorial of our “secret” places. Why is a special wilderness ruined when other people discover it? Do we expect loyalty and fidelity from a place that we are only *using*? Do we expect others to respect a boundary we have erected in false ownership? Why am I the lover, and these others, these brutish hacks, the pimps?

Because I was here first. Because I am a better climber/biker/boater. Because I love this place more.

Well. Stick a ring on the woman’s finger.

But why is it that we will tell our friends of our favorite restaurants, our favorite movies, favorite museums, favorite books? As social animals, it’s only natural to want to experience our favorite things with other people because we want to talk about them and have common, shared experience.

But these are not things we must compete for. In this country, good art and good food are not hard to come by, if you can afford it. But skimpy rations of wild, open places are what we in this country have settled for. In the “wilderness” it feels like we are sharing too much—like we’re starving with distended bellies and we must let strangers from the next table stick their forks in our meager bowls of second-growth forest.

When I ask about this dilemma, I hear a voice that explains there is simply not enough open space or wild land. This overcrowding is both the evidence of an overwhelming desire to be in the wilderness and the evidence that the amount of land we haven’t exploited is painfully small.

But another voice also screams out to us, and what I hear is this: we disrespect the earth when we use her for recreational pursuits.

In Moab, you wake up one morning in early spring after a sleepy winter, and suddenly you can't make a left turn from your driveway because of all the decked-out Jeeps and mountain bike-bearing Subarus and SUVs. It takes an hour to pick up some orange juice at the supermarket because the lines are so long. People occupy every square inch of open space close to town, paying to camp in dusty, pocked slices of desert trampled into lifelessness by the cars, tents, feet, and campfires. In popular areas where there are no pit toilets, people pay to stretch their bivies over bricks of human shit and the thick stench of piss eliminated by years of dehydrated and/or drunk recreationists.

You hike a favorite trail and are run down by kamikaze mountain bikers. Supermarket lines queue around classic climbs and bike rides, big rapids, trails to beautiful vistas, and precarious four-wheeling routes. ATV wheels crush the vital cryptobiotic soil crust and leave tread marks and dead earth for fifty years behind them along with grease spots. Dirt bikes echo for miles, muffling the screams of shredded earth. Sacred sites are pecked through like chicken feed, stripped of potsherds and corncobs, and petroglyphs are worn smooth by too many curious fingers. Mountain bike tires cut up the earth and make grooves in the rocks. Climbing fingers slough off the sharp corners of cracks into chalked-up rounded edges, and permanent anchors are drilled into the rocks. Eroding trails are spurred off of main trails. Rafts clog the river and delicate riparian areas are trampled. Garbage is left everywhere.

As time goes on, as people exponentially reproduce, and as more of these people discover places like Moab, the "pristine" land falls deeper and deeper into a state of

injury. As time goes on, other people and organizations must try to undo some of the damage that is done, land and water are parceled into more recreation permits, and you must pay to walk the trails, bike the fins, ride the river, sleep under the stars, and probably soon, climb the cracks.

Tadz said to me, “It seems like when people decide they love something, they find a way to manipulate it.”

“That’s not love,” I responded. “That’s possession.”

Loving our National Parks to Death. That’s the catch phrase of today. As if there could ever be too much love.

I thought about love as I watched the cars waiting to enter the park, puffs of exhaust browning the air. I watched the RVs and SUVs and trucks and station wagons and big tour buses weaving up the side of the cliff after they paid, off to look at the windows in the sandstone through the windows in their cars or the windows of their cameras, off to watch the stone twist and grind and open and arch while they sit safely isolated inside metal boxes or on a paved trail.

This isn’t love. This is pornography.

I remember when I was on a short solo backpacking trip up in the La Sal Mountains, and I unknowingly embarked on the first day of rifle hunting season. On and off trail, I competed for space with growling four-wheel machines; the songs of birds and running water and wind competed with the sonic booms of rifle shots. Two men on ORVs with bumper stickers that read “My Other Ride is Your Mom” guzzled beer when they stopped to try and pick me up.

This isn’t love. It’s consumption.

I remember the carelessly made and discarded campsite I saw where I was hiking one-day: the fragile cryptobiotic crust smothered, the fire-blackened sandstone in a ring, and the plastic wrappers, beer bottles and cans, and tinfoil carelessly strewn about.

This isn't love. It's a one-night stand.

I remember running in a proposed Wilderness area, running over fins of stone without trails and happening upon a Jeep, which was not allowed in this area. But the driver had penetrated where the earth said "NO," and he had gotten his Jeep wheel stuck between two thighs of sandstone, and the driver and passengers were all standing around the vehicle, laughing and patting each other on the back, congratulating their achievement, each taking photos from every sordid angle, each taking their turn spinning the wheels, grinding deeper into the opening, stretching it out, sand flying everywhere, oily spurts of grease saturating the earth.

This isn't love. It's gang-rape.

I remember the land mines of un-buried human shit sprinkled about a popular climbing area without toilets, the un-packed out toilet paper whipping up in the air with dust devils. I remember running up Mill Creek and stopping to watch the dirt bike ripping apart the bank of the creek, the shrieking whine of the motor tearing a deep gash in the silence, tearing a deep gash into my own voice of protest. I remember bullet holes pocking the rock around petroglyphs. I remembered the powerboats gunning upriver, slicing the water, poisoning it with exhaust, terrifying the fish.

This isn't love. This is abuse. Love is a mutual relationship. A mutual relationship is reciprocal. Reciprocity is not parasitic.

I looked up. The cold, granite sky was veined with metallic cloud intrusions. The four of us, “environmental educators” we called ourselves, shuffled our feet and bounced around with hands in pockets, trying to shake off the fierce chill of the wind. I wondered, am I just another parasite? Am I just raking more parasites across the desert, these kids, pretending I’m teaching them something, pretending like they care, pretending that I’m right? Why do we all think we’re *right*?

“Here they come,” Crew said. “Look at them!” Even from a distance, we could see the children screaming and throwing things and throwing themselves about the bus.

“It’s too cold to deal with these kids. They look like monsters!” Heather grumbled.

“Shit,” I said.

Emma turned to me with a wink in her eye. “Just remember—a hypothermic child is a quiet child.” I laughed as the bus emptied a short mass of chaos into the wind and cold. How could anything so small be so loud?

The terror of hope and contradiction surged through me, as it did every time I “taught.” I wanted the kids to open up to the possibility of a mutual relationship with the earth. I wanted them to love the land more than their Nintendo. I wanted them to understand that parasitic relationships were harmful and injurious to not only the earth, but to themselves as well.

And I wanted to do this in one day?

No, no, no. Scratch that—I only had forty minutes with each small group. So I wanted to do this in forty minutes? Are other teachers as ridiculous and pompous as I?

Our day was divided into four geology stations. The students moved through the stations, and the teachers stayed put. My job was to teach them the layers of rocks and what kind of environment deposited them. I made up a game so they could run around, so maybe they'd understand that their bodies played a part in this cycle of erosion and deposition, this give and take, this relationship. But it turned into mere competition and races. Learning and listening were of the least importance. Winning was the only goal—even though there was no finish line, no timer, no points.

I looked over at Crew's group, wondering if she was changing the world in her forty minutes with seven fifth graders. She sat in a circle with them, showing them the fossils found right here in the Honaker Trail formation of Bloody Mary Wash. Suddenly, a child frightfully obese for being so young labored up from his dirt seat and squirmed to the top of a boulder.

"I'll show *you* a crinoid!" he bellowed. Children everywhere stopped what they were doing as he started thrusting his hips to a make-shift porno tune he screamed out—"Da-na-nu-na! Ooooh. Da-na-nu-na! Oh yeaaaaah." Crew got to him just as he unzipped his pants, and stood there, speaking quietly to him as giggles snorted through his nose.

Well, I thought, I am just another zit on the ass of education.

I don't care how many inspired images of Gothic architecture and sacred monuments I invoke, it's just a pile of rocks. It's just beachfront laid down by the to-ing and fro-ing of intermittent seas, by erosion from the Uncompahgre Uplift to the north, by blowing sand dunes that covered most of Utah during the Triassic and Jurassic periods. It's just detritus left in the wake of vast erosional forces that completely stripped 140 million years of deposited formations off the top (all that Dakota sandstone and Mancos

shale—a vertical mile of everything, in fact, that once lay above the Navajo sandstone) and went on cutting down through the Kayenta, Wingate, Chinle, Moenkopi, Cutler, and Honaker formations to the ancestral rock of the Paradox Formation revealed at the bottom of Cataract Canyon.

Or, as one Mormon rancher trying to make a living in the midst of all that scenery once said, “It’s a hell of a place to lose a cow.”

-Page Stegner, “Red Ledge Province”
Sierra, March/April 1994

Tadz snored softly beside me in the sleeping bag. I stared up through the crisp black air, looking at the spaces between the stars. I allowed my eyes to follow the silhouette of Castleton Tower to the north, and I watched the sky pass through the rock.

Dawn would be yawning over the horizon soon, but I hadn’t slept yet because sleep couldn’t filter through and numb the excitement and terror I felt for what would transpire in the daylight. Tadz and I planned to climb the north chimney of Castleton, setting out quite early to hike up the long, steep talus slope to the base of the skinny, vertical finger of rock. Rock climbing was something new to me since I moved to Moab, and I was scared because my experience didn’t equal the climb we were setting out to do. This climb would be several pitches—several lengths of the sixty-meter rope—and to get back down, the rappel off the top would be hellacious. Once we stood on the flat top of the tower, the rappelling anchors would be down on the face of the rock, meaning that I would literally have to throw myself over the edge, falling before the rope I held in my hand would catch me on the anchor.

Climbing is not a hobby born of logic. There is nothing logical about climbing up vertical, sheer rock faces in crotch-enhancing harnesses and painfully small, thin, elf-like shoes. There is nothing logical about choosing danger. There is nothing logical about

choosing to work your body so hard that all of your muscles quiver uncontrollably in an Elvis shake, nothing logical in your toes precariously balanced on a tiny nub in the rock and your leg muscles beginning to spasm and jerk up and down like a jackhammer... and then choosing to continue on up.

But there is no logic in passion.

I stared at the tower and wondered why and how climbing had taken me so wholly like a lover. Maybe, I thought, just as there is nothing half-assed about passion, there is no way to be half-assed when you're climbing. You're either climbing or you're not. You make it to the top, or you don't. And because climbing is such an exercise of passion, it brings you into your body, into heightened senses, into the present, into a focus and meditation. You're either right here, right now, in your body, in your mind, in your spirit, completely balanced, tasting and smelling and seeing and listening and speaking Rock, or you're hanging on the end of a rope hundreds of feet off the ground.

The tower sat still above me, but my mind spun fast as the earth. My body wanted out of this claustrophobic sleeping bag. I wriggled from the down cocoon, and started pacing through the sage and juniper in the moonshadow of Castleton.

Wait—I had it. Maybe, just maybe, I've gotten so obsessed with climbing because I'm obsessed with death. And maybe I'm obsessed with death because I have lived much of my life from a place of fear. And why is climbing some kind of antidote? Yes yes yes! Because there is no room for fear—and there's no room for fear because you're climbing your fear. When I'm climbing, I thought, I can curl my fingertips around fear, I can balance all of my weight on one quarter of one toe to climb up on top of it, and

its not like hand-to-hand combat when you fight fear this way. There is grace. There is rhythm. There is flow. There is form. There is balance.

And there is undeniable, unforgettable, inexplicable ecstatic beauty.

I shook my head. No, no, no. No—climbing is a *fever*, I thought. It's a fever! Climbing transcends boundaries. It is 99.9 degrees when the body wants 98.6, it is high tide when the ocean is pulling for low, it is swimming upriver, it is going up when everything says it's easier to go down. Climbers, I said to myself, are the land's salmon.

And, and...yes! When I climb, it doesn't matter who this land "belongs" to, what city pushes itself mercilessly at its border, what county or state line encircles me, what country's laws bind me. What does matter is this rock's face in my face and the sun casting shadows before me, the same sun that comes up and goes down every day, warming the back of my head and everything everywhere. All that matters is right now, right here, these bodies coming together.

I began muttering aloud, pacing faster. Climbing is freedom, and like insects, like death, it's necessary and beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Climbing offers the liberty to confront death, fingers to cliff, skin to stone, face to face. In this meeting, the freedom to die is the breath exchanged.

Choice is the responsibility of the body.

Thich Nhat Hahn has asked, "Can we take hold of time with both hands and slow it down?" I don't know, but when I climb, I am taking the time of rocks into my hands, I am rubbing the time of death against my fingertips until it breaks the skin. I don't know if I can slow time, but I can take hold of responsibility in my two hands, and I can exist with death.

Climbing, I say loudly, is my dance with freedom, a rhythm drummed out on death's taut hide.

Dawn climbed up into the black night. I stopped pacing, stopped thinking so frantically. I looked up at Castleton Tower. Everything stilled in the rise of morning. My muscles loosened, my brain let go. The tower loomed high above me.

I just wanted to go up. I just wanted to be on top. Maybe if I could just climb on top of geology, if I could *just get up there*, I would have accomplished something great, and I wouldn't feel like such a shit anymore.

Or maybe, I thought, maybe it's just that gravity gets me down.

The day began with the hike up the bouldered talus slope. Some of the unprotected bouldering was a little too technical and exposed for my comfort. I didn't think we were following the right trail—there were so many of them all going to the same place!

“See, this is the problem,” I said. “Not only do all these ‘social trails’ or whatever they call them degrade the landscape, but I'm going to fall to my death following one.”

This spawned a discussion about the pressing political issue of Moab's climbing community: trail building at the climbing crags. The main trail to Castleton—and we did finally find it—was built by a man named Mark Hess, a private contractor and director of Rocky Mountain Field Institute. Controversy pressed hard on this man and the issue he represented.

The climbing areas near Moab have exploded in popularity, and suddenly, but not surprisingly, the campsites and the landscape around the climbs have been seriously

injured. Climbers are notorious for creating terrible trails that erode the land, and with these herds of people suddenly following them and creating new spur trails and creating new campsites, climbers denude the desert more efficiently than the cattle.

At Indian Creek, just outside the borders of the Needles section of Canyonlands National Park, the BLM wants to create designated campsites and big pit toilets. This means that campers will have to pay. The climbing community sees this as a huge threat to their freedom and to the culture of climbers. They see this threat as a result of a secret spot being exposed to the masses. They need someone to blame, and so they blame Mark Hess and his trails.

“If you build it, they will come,” the climbers say.

But Mark Hess takes already existing trails established by climbers and simply beefs them up so that the trails can sustain the climbing traffic without eroding down the hillside. He makes some natural steps with stones, some switchbacks, and some water bars. With his tools and his hands, he covers the spur trails and attempts to re-vegetate them. His trails are obvious enough so that climbers know which are the main trails, and yet the trails are discreet enough so that passerby can't see them. He's trying to undo some of the damage that has already been done.

Hiking up to Castleton Tower, the damage that has been done is still obvious. Skinny trails snake up and down and all around, tangling inside each other, eroding, killing plants, killing cryptobiotic soil. Trails can be made by two sets of footprints in the desert and last a lifetime, even if nobody else walks them—the desert is a fragile landscape.

Climbers in Moab say that Mark Hess is crafting these trails just to make a buck, that it's blood money. But are the owners of the climbing shops trying to say that they don't make money from these rocks? Are they trying to gloss over the fact that their shops and their advertisements draw new climbers to Moab? Are the makers and sellers of the Moab area climbing guidebooks trying to make themselves believe that they aren't exposing the secrets themselves? Do the professional climbers around town who so scorn the newcomers and new climbers, tell me, do they *actually believe* that their walking advertisements, their shiny magazine photos, and their highly publicized expeditions don't draw new people to the sport of climbing and to Moab? Do these folks tuck themselves in at night confident in their scorn for Mark Hess and not realize that they're making their dinner from these rocks?

My point is this: in all of our blaming, we forget to point the finger inward, and the land is paying our dues. When all we do is recreate, we're all using the land for something.

Instead of blaming others for overpopulation, maybe climbers ought to think about how a popular area could best sustain climber trafficking without ecosystem death in the process. Maybe we ought to rethink the way we "love" a climbing area and love the earth. And we, as climbers, ought to rethink our values if we don't support the designation of Wilderness because designation makes it illegal to drill bolts into the rock and illegal to make permanent anchors.

Instead of worrying about new climbers or trails that make a climbing area easier to find or paying camping fees, the issue ought to be this: what is best for the habitat that

climbers claim to love so? How can we give back? The integrity of the landscape is more important than our recreation.

We finally reached the base of the tower. The Rectory and the Priest and Nuns stood at an angle to the tower, and a spine of rock like an inverted, steep canyon connected their talus slopes. Everything was so still, so silent—until the wind ripped the hair from my scalp.

I halted. Sacred stones.

From the ground, the valley of these rocks, Professor Valley, had been my church, their presence above like deities. Standing here, basking in the radiance of their closeness was like seeing a statue of Mary weep. The experience was at once authentic and yet ethereal and yet intimate. I stood still, pressing against the incredible force of wind. I could scarcely breathe.

The Priest and the Nuns. The Rectory. Castleton. I came to the stones in worship.

But isn't coming to something in worship more than simple reverence? Be it God or the Corn Mother or Allah or Buddha—isn't worship also a wanting? With our arms raised, or with our palms pressed, or with our bodies bowed, or with an offering in our hands, aren't we *really* saying, please, show me the way?

Aren't we really saying, please, forgive me?

As we organized gear in the fierce wind, I began to sense that I wanted something from this climb, from this tower, and from this divine rock. Even now, I am ashamed to admit it. I am ashamed that I used this stone so blatantly, disrespectfully, and selfishly.

What I wanted was mercy and forgiveness. I wanted the climb to the top of this holy tower to mean that I had risen above the pain and the ugliness and the shame. I thought that the completion of this physical trial could mean that I had done it, that I had achieved clemency and wholeness.

And I wanted Castleton Tower to give all this to me.

Tadz could sense the expectancy rising in me. Maybe he could tell by my stiffness, or by the sudden fear in my clenched fists, or by my silence.

“It’s intense up here, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“You know,” he said, trying to lighten things before he started climbing, “if you look up at the Priest and Nuns from a certain angle on the ground, it looks like the Priest has a hard-on and the first nun is on her knees, and she’s, you know...” I gasped.

“Don’t,” I said.

The climb began with a terrifying gust of wind that pushed me to the ground as I belayed Tadz from the base of the climb. Then I had some rope problems. Then I got diarrhea. Then a storm looked like it might be brewing over the La Sals. Then, when I was stuffing my feet into my climbing shoes, when Tadz was up above setting his anchor to belay me from above, when I was getting pumped up to climb, I saw long, blonde hair blowing in the sun and wind from around the corner of the tower. The hair was blowing out vertically and low, as if the head it blew from was flat against the ground.

Oh my...

“Somebody has fallen,” I whispered.

“Mattie! Are you ready to climb?” Tadz yelled from above.

I didn't answer because I was staring at the hair blowing in the wind. Was this person dead? What would I do?

"Somebody's down here!" I shrieked, beginning to sob. The blonde strands glowed in the sun. "Oh, shit!"

Cautiously, I untied the rope from my harness and crept over to what I thought would be a body. I drew a sharp breath. But there was no body. The hair was cheat grass blowing from its rocky roots in the wind. There was no body.

I tied back into the rope, shaking. This is all wrong, I thought, all wrong. I'm not prepared. The day is not right. I am not ready. Everything has started with too much confusion, too much death.

But Tadz had started the climb, and so I would have to follow.

I thought of an often quoted passage by Patrick Overton: *When you come to the edge of all the light you have, and must take a step into the darkness of the unknown, believe that one of two things will happen to you: either there will be something solid for you to stand on, or, you will be taught how to fly.*

"I'm on belay," I called out to Tadz. I couldn't see him.

"Belay is on," Tadz yelled from above.

"Climbing!"

"Climb on," he called.

In all of the confusion, in all of the brutal wind, in all of the expectancy, I began to see the climb as a battle, as a duel between the rock and me. The tower was both the obstacle to my forgiveness and the giver of it.

My body joined the wind in fierceness. My mind stopped wavering and hardened. I jammed my hand, hard, into the crack, I kicked at the rock, I scraped up against it, fighting hard. “Fuck,” I kept whispering. This isn’t fun, it’s a fight.

Forget everything I said before about climbing. Today, climbing was none of those things. This windy morning, climbing was not a passion born of love, but a selfish wanting and an obsessed repenting.

Sometimes the crawl of penitence is a crawl done with some rhythm and beauty, but I found myself grunting and bleeding from the knuckles and knees. Guidance is often a dance, but today it was a blind groping. Forgiveness can be an act of grace, but most often, I thought, it is an ugly struggle.

These are most often messy trials because in the quest for mercy, who we’re really asking mercy of is ourselves.

Halfway up the first pitch, my entire right forearm was jammed into a crack, twisted in an almost painful angle, and I struggled to get a piece of protective gear unstuck from the crack with my left hand when my feet slipped from beneath me. My body twisted and snapped—*Crunch! Pop!*—and I hung from the arm stuck in the crack, which was now dislocated at the shoulder. I shrieked in pain as Tadz pulled the rope tighter from above and tried to help me pull myself up to unwedge my hand. Once I got the numb hand out, I popped my shoulder back in—this dislocation was something I had dealt with since childhood.

Still crying in pain, I screamed up to Tadz, “It’s back in! I got my fucking shoulder back in, and I’m going to climb this damn thing! I’m climbing!”

“What? No, Mattie, I’m going to lower you—I saw that shoulder come out!
Let’s just quit!”

“I’M CLIMBING!”

But it was no use. The rock spit me off again, and my right arm hung limp and dislocated. Tadz lowered me to the ground as I cried. I sat up inside the chimney of the tower, shielding myself from the fierce wind, waiting for Tadz to come back down.

I shook as I surveyed my broken body. Blood dripped red from my shredded knuckles and the skin flapping from my right elbow. Blood soaked black through the fabric covering my knee. Blood swelled purple in my shoulder.

Maybe this is what they mean by “blood from a stone”?

Maybe when you try to squeeze blood from the rocks, what you find is that *you* bleed in the process.

How can I teach of reciprocity when I myself am a parasite? How can I scold our nation for wanting too much from the earth when I myself am asking for something that rocks cannot give?

“Do you think rocks like it when we climb them?” Tadz had asked me one day.

“I don’t know,” I had responded.

My hunch was, when we climbed them like I just did, no. So I asked Castleton.

“Do you like it when we climb you?”

The rock spoke back. Wildness, wilderness, rivers, mountains, and *rocks* are not something here for you to conquer, Castleton Tower tells me. The Wild is not a religion to expect answers from; the rock is not The God to expect forgiveness from; a climb is not the ego to expect confidence from.

Climbing, the rock tells me, is ecstatic beauty not because you're cheating death, or because you're defying gravity. Climbing is ecstasy because you and the rock are dancing a mutual story, unique in the world. To climb is an act of passion because it is born of love, and it is love because it is a relationship. A relationship is reciprocal. Reciprocity is not parasitic. Climbing is an act of reverence to the wild when something greater is created between you and the rock. Climbing is the dance of freedom when there is choice.

But how, I ask, can we tell this story? How can we weave this web of mutualism when my footprint alone mars the very earth of the relationship?

Bear witness of my beauty, the rock says in silence. With your fingers and toes, with your eyes and ears and nose, with your love, witness my form, witness the intricacies of the sandstone's contours and clefts and nubs and tiny ledges, witness how I twist and arch and soften and call forth your touch, witness the dampness in my dark crevices, witness the smells and the sounds that come from our bodies touching.

Make love with me when you climb. Let us build a relationship so strong that we can't survive without the other's love.

*There is still a little life
left inside this body,
a little wildness here
and mercy
and it is the emptiness
we love, touch, enter in one another
and try to fill.*

-Linda Hogan, from "Nothing"

I was having just as much trouble with this week's sixth graders. I taught two groups about lichen. Lichen fascinates me—how it is actually an organism made of two. The fungus is the one in this symbiotic relationship that holds the lichen to a place, attaching to the rocks at the same time that it slowly creates a new landscape by chemically eroding the minerals for nourishment. The algae photosynthesize, and like tiny solar panels, provide energy for the lichen.

Together, the algae and the fungus can grow for centuries in harsh environments. Apart, they both die.

I showed the kids what I call “lichen ghosts”—the grayed spots on rocks left behind where the lichen has died and fallen off. Lichen, I tell the kids, create 600 unique chemicals, and their pigments and compounds create antibiotics and dyes. And because lichen are both like sponges of air pollutants and sensitive to toxic chemicals, they indicate when we're not treating the air right.

But it's hard to get hyperactive kids excited about immobile crust on rocks. Actually, it's hard to get adults excited about lichen. Apparently, stuff that isn't dynamic is not very glamorous. I spent more energy stifling the sassiness of Dylan, a severely overweight child who picked on other children ferociously and had nothing but anger for me.

I sat alone at lunch, perched on a petrified sand dune, looking out over the Sand Flats Recreation Area, and I had a cracker with cheese in my mouth when the boy covered in freckles called out to Dylan: “Hey Food Bag!! How many Twinkies did you eat today? A million? Hahaha!”

“Food Bag?” I gasped, incredulous at the nastiness, unable to even stop the name-calling. Dylan sat alone on the rock.

A scrawny blonde boy puffed out his cheeks, curled his arms out in front of him as if he were carrying a big ball, and started running—actually, teetering back and forth from one leg to the other—after a girl who was about a foot taller than he. “I’m hungry, Melissa! Watch out—I might eat you!” She screamed. I remained horribly paralyzed. Crew dealt with it.

Aren’t kids supposed to be precious? “*Food Bag?*” I gasped again.

I didn’t expect Dylan to reply, but he had come over and sat next to me unnoticed. “Yeah. Some of the kids call me ‘Food Bag,’ or ‘Piggy-back,’ and sometimes they just call me ‘Chunk.’”

I let the gravity of this settle. I began to understand a different kind of reciprocity—one where kids like Dylan get all this nastiness heaped on them and so then give it right back.

“Does that hurt?” I asked him.

“Nah. My mom gets mad, though. She’s always saying, ‘Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will scar you forever.’” I could understand that, and nodded in reply. He looked up at me with big brown eyes. “But I like my friends.”

“These kids are your friends?”

“Yeah. Ummm...but I like them better when they call me ‘Viper.’”

“Viper it is then.” I looked down at him for a minute. I had no idea how to handle this. “You know, I like friendships where me and my friends don’t call each other

nasty names or do mean things to each other. I like friendships where we do nice things for each other and take care of each other.”

He looked at me blankly. I ate another cracker with cheese. Viper crunched some Doritos. I looked around at the rest of the kids and decided that my lunch of crackers, carrots, and an apple looked rather wilted next to the elaborate spreads of leftover twice-baked potatoes and burritos, thermoses of soup, pizza, sub-sandwiches, pieces of pies, mini cakes, and fruit salads. One kid brought astronaut food.

I felt a small hand on my forearm. I stopped drooling over the other kids’ food and looked down at Viper.

“I’ll trade you my pizza for those carrots,” he said. “It looks like your mom packed you a boring lunch.”

“Really? Will you have enough food though?” He opened up his lunch bag and I poked my head in to find he also had a steak sandwich and macaroni and cheese and Oreo cookies and pudding and a banana.

“I think this is way enough,” he said, smiling. “Eat my pizza. I need a vegetable, probably anyway.” We traded.

The basics, I thought. We need to get back to the basics.

How can anyone think about the mutualism of fungus and algae or their relationship with lichen when their relationship with so-called “friends” is one that consists of calling each other “Food Bag” and “Butt-face”? How can I teach of symbiosis when I fill myself with pain and can’t forgive even myself? How can anyone, for that matter, worry about developing a loving, reciprocal relationship with the wild when some people have billions of dollars while 35,600 children die of the complications

of starvation every day, or when we're bombing Afghanistan and Anthrax is traveling through the postal system, or when children are shooting their teachers and classmates, or when fathers are raping their own daughters, or when little boys are setting stray cats on fire?

But I say, we need to develop this relationship now more than ever. Because I don't believe that we can commit to loving relationships with each other without committing to reciprocity with the earth.

And maybe a simple pizza for carrots trade between friends is the beginning.

F. THE SOLITUDE

Love doesn't just sit there like a stone, it has to be made like bread; remade all the time, made new.

—Ursula K. LeGuin

Is there a point where a relationship ends, a single point from which our little pink hearts break? Is there a single thing we fear or a single thing we can't commit to? Does breaking up happen in one breath, one heartbeat, when we say, "It's over"? And once it is over, can we look back and isolate a single moment where the union was cleaved, a moment where we say, "Ah, here—I should have known"?

Maybe I could look back on this moment, and say, "Here. Here it is. This is when it ended..."

"Come with me to California," Tadz said again.

"I can't," I said. "I have this grad program to finish." We stood numbed with goodbyes in the warm January sun glittering the melting frost on the loaded up VW bus. The wheels already faced west, always west, always rolling the road to the next day. "You don't even know what you're leaving for."

"There's no work here in the winter, you know that, Mattie."

I didn't say anything.

"Please, sail away with me."

"I don't know how," I said. "We're in the desert. We come from the desert."

"I love you," he whispered in my ear, hugging me.

My arms hung limp at my sides. "Then don't leave."

But, no. That couldn't be it, because as he folded himself behind the steering wheel, I pressed into his palm a poem, "The Kama Sutra of Kindness" by Mary Mackey:

*should I greet you
as if
we had merely eaten
together one night
when the white birches
dripped wet
and lightning etched
black trees on your walls?
it is not love
I am asking
love comes from years
of breathing
skin to skin
tangled in each other's dreams
until each night
weaves another thread
in the same web
of blood and sleep
and I have only
passed through you quickly*

*like light
and you have only
surrounded me suddenly
like flame
the lake is cold
the snows are sudden
the wild cherry bends
and winter's a burden
in your hand I feel
spring burn in the bud.*

Hope still quivered inside. It couldn't have been over yet. Maybe, I could look back at this next moment and say, "No, no, no. *Here*. This here is the one." Maybe the moment came on the phone with my mom, when I decided that I felt abandoned.

"Why?" my mom asked.

"Because, Mom, he left me for a tree."

"What?"

"I think the reason he really left is because he wants to go be a tree-sitting activist."

"Good for him. Honey," my mom said, "he's just going through that same thing that we all go through."

"Oh yeah? And what's that?"

"He's trying to figure out who he is. He's got to figure out where he takes his stand, where the choices he makes come from. And he's got to do that alone, because when he's with you, he's figuring out who the two of you are together. Don't forget that there is a separate 'Tadz' in all of this."

"But he left me for a tree," I said.

“He didn’t *leave* you, Mattie. The two of you are still together—just not together in the same place. And anyway, if I know you, it’s *you* who will do the leaving.”

“Ouch.”

“Well? You know, he just believes in something—whether that’s in the tree or in himself, it doesn’t matter. They’re probably one and the same, anyway.”

“You think you’re a wise old lady, don’t you?”

“No. I think I’m just going through this again myself. I’m almost fifty years old, and I *still* don’t know what it is that I’m supposed to do.” She was silent for a while. “I still don’t know who I’m supposed to be, and it scares me,” she whispered.

“Mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you leave me for a tree, too.”

“I won’t, sweetie. I’ll leave you for a beach.”

Or maybe it was a different phone conversation.

The long distance phone calls had gotten ugly. Phones are flat—only one sense is employed rather than the sensory palate of the whole multi-dimensional person. Where our full-body communications seemed to spiral, our phone conversations took the shape of a pendulum. We added drama in an attempt to make the experience seem more full. We excavated fictional meanings from silences or too much talking, from this tone of voice or that sigh, from this word chosen over another, even from the rate and depth of breathing.

I told him that I had been working with a transmissometer near the ranger station of Island in the Sky in Canyonlands National Park to measure the air quality. A machine positioned over on Dead Horse Point sends a ray of light over to this machine, particulates and pollution in the air scatter and obscure the light, and so the amount of light received is measured against the amount of light sent. Think of a snowball, I told him, throw it from Dead Horse. How big will it be when it gets to Island in the Sky?

“Maybe the polluted air in California scatters and obscures our words,” I said.

Tadz bristled at my need to hear of the everyday happenings. I bristled at his assumptions of access to privileged feelings and thoughts whenever he phoned, and that the feelings would have to be condensed into the twenty minutes he had to talk to me. I told him that I couldn't just automatically access hard emotions with the bell of the phone ringing.

“I am not one of Pavlov's dogs,” I said. He didn't like that.

But, weeks later, we met in Zion National Park and when I arrived hours before he did and he woke me in the middle of the night in the middle of the desert with his scent and my eyes opened dreamily to his warm face hovering above me wearing a dusty green wool hat with flecks of rust-colored yarn perched a little too high on his head, and the tips of his ears stuck out from underneath and folded over, and he looked so much like a tall skinny elf, or a wizard, and all of this made me laugh with joy because I suddenly believed in magic.

I guess maybe, then, the moment was contained somewhere in the next meeting.

"I can't listen to your voice with the face of a phone," I said. "No one is good at a relationship sustained through a phone cord."

"But I'm here now visiting," he reminded me, snuggling closer in our sleeping bags puffing from Indian Creek's sandy beach.

"Yes, but something has lapsed." Five minutes ago, we had been arguing fiercely about the constellations. "How do people who love each other engage in battle over stars?" I asked.

And then we spent the following three days fighting on trails, needling each other in the Needles of Canyonlands National Park. We walked separate ways when we came to the confluence of the Green and Colorado rivers. We screamed through the swirling wind at each other in Chesler Park. A storm brewed in the sky when I realized I had forgotten my raingear. The sun breathed fire onto our skin when Tadz realized he had forgotten his other bottle full of water. We got lost when I refused to follow the trail and the loss thickened when Tadz refused to offer suggestions.

He cut me off in the next few days we spent around Moab. He read alone a lot. So I ran alone a lot. We parted with my words. "Do me a favor. The next time you want to spend two weeks by yourself, don't visit me."

*Maybe what cold is, is the time
we measure the love we have always had, secretly,
for our own bones, the hard knife-edged love
for the warm river of the I, beyond all else*
-Mary Oliver, from "Cold Poem"

But then, I missed thawing my toes on his warm calves, waking with my nose in his armpit, watching his eyes change color. I felt a groaning loss. I ate a lot of chocolate

hearts I found hidden all over my house by Tadz—chocolate peanut butter ones and big red ones with funny faces on them. He must have saved them from Valentine’s Day.

And then one day, I came home from a week at the field camp to find a large, corrugated cardboard box. In my room, I sliced open the box with an edge of my scissors. Crumpled newspaper blossomed like a bruise from the gash in the box. Maybe it’s something fragile? I rooted through the newspaper until I found an awkwardly shaped and wrapped package.

The first layer of wrapping paper was a glossy photo of the desert torn from a magazine. The next layer was a brown bag scratchy as sandstone. The next some gold tissue paper, the color of cottonwood leaves in the fall. The next a part of the comics page, with colors like the desert. The next a bag from corn tortillas. The next a scrap of mauve handmade paper. And on went the next layers like desert geology until all that remained in the palm of my hand was a Band-Aid curled around something the size and weight of a lost tooth.

I un-stuck the sticky of the Band-Aid and unfurled it to see “Forgive Me…” printed in black ink. A tiny, dark river pebble lay beside the words, but it wasn’t an ordinary river stone. This one was heart-shaped and smaller than my bitten down pinkie fingernail.

Indeed, it was a fragile package. I brought the pebble to my mouth, and the heart felt smooth and cold against my warm, chapped lips. I stuck Tadz’s river heart under my pillow like a lost tooth waiting for the Tooth Fairy.

I began to wonder: Can you find forgiveness under your pillow in the morning? Would forgiveness make it all better anyway?

But then I went to visit him in California. This trip must have been the beginning of the end because suddenly parts of him became unattractive. Maybe it was when his once endearing “puppy dog” nose became an oozing orifice, crusty with snot along the nostril edges. Maybe it was when I started to feel that somewhere in the distance between us, he lost the ability to kiss me. What had once felt soft and luscious was now a mouth coming at me, a big tongue piercing me wetly with saliva slime.

But then again, maybe these feelings were conjured in the delirium of fever: I got pneumonia when I was there, and Tadz took care of me. In a fevered moment, I told him about how I didn’t like him kissing me all sloppy and big anymore, and that his nose was absolutely disgusting. Once I got back to Moab, still very ill, I found a very small card in my bag. It said: “Sending you lots of *little* kisses, pecks, really, and no boogers.”

So then I felt terrible and overwhelmed with love and sick and fevered and gasping for air. I thought my body was telling me something. My lungs missed breathing his breath, and when my chest ached with the loss, I could actually feel my heart breaking. “I wish I were curled up in you,” I wrote back to him. “Maybe the closest I can get is writing. Touch my fingers to pen, pen to paper, my fingers to your skin, my thoughts to your soul. Dream with me.”

Okay, so now this must have been it. This was the granddaddy of them all. This is the moment my body knew, because my body knows loss, and it reacts. And suddenly, my body took on the landscape of loss. The pneumonia starved me, yellowed me, shadowed me, caved me in. The absence of Tadz left me hollowed.

My body, though, also bloated in 34 days of bleeding. I looked how I had looked in high school.

“I woke up with this feeling of a hand on my belly,” I said to the phone with Tadz’s voice. “I think I’m pregnant.”

“You think, or you feel?” Tadz asked.

“Well, I felt...and now I think. The pregnancy test is in the bathroom, waiting.” How beautiful this moment is, I thought. A piece of plastic is going to tell me if I have a baby growing in my stomach, and I’m going to tell a piece of plastic if I am which will then tell the piece of plastic attached to Tadz’s ear which will then tell Tadz.

“But how? I mean, I know how, but I just don’t understand how. We’ve been careful.”

“I don’t know. But I’ve been bleeding for a month, and a doctor told me to get a pregnancy test.”

“You’ve been bleeding for a *month*?! Babe, wow. I mean...holy shit. Do you really think so?”

“Shit, Tadz. I don’t know. I don’t know what this blood means.” I felt angry, and I didn’t know why.

“Honey, don’t take the test yet, okay? I want to go on a walk and think about this and feel this. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine.”

“Hello?”

“Mattie, I want to do this. Let’s do this together,” Tadz said with excitement.

Instead of saying, “But we’re not together,” I said nothing.

And he blurted out buoyantly, “I want to be with you forever.”

I sighed audibly. “Great. That’s just great. Forever—the other F-word.”

He said, “I’m serious, here. Is ‘always’ any better?”

“No. Always is, like, short for ‘Asshole—you should’ve known better.’ How can you be with me forever when you’re not with me now? A phone cord is not an umbilical cord.”

“I’ll come back! Come on.”

“No, you come on. Why do you have to use such words? They sound so concrete and unconditional, so, so...infinite. But they’re not. They’re abstract and arrogant and they mean nothing. Those words are just like ‘manana’ for me. You know, tomorrow—forever tomorrow. The sun’ll come out, you know? When the *fuck* is tomorrow?”

“I don’t quite get you.” I didn’t know if I quite got me, either, but I was angry and sad and disgusted with something—so I just let me go instead of trying to get myself.

“Forever means something different to everybody, just like tomorrow—but people use it like it means the same thing to everyone. ‘Until death do us part’—does this ring a bell? Isn’t ‘until death’ even a bit more tangible than ‘forever’?” I took a deep breath. “How many times has your dad been married?”

“Five times.”

“Uh-huh. This is what I mean. What did ‘until death’ mean to your father? What, exactly, does ‘forever’ mean to you? Does ‘I want to be with you forever’ *actually* mean ‘I want to be with you forever until I feel like moving to, uh, Alabama for no particular reason’? Or does it mean ‘I want to be with you forever unless you lose your

breasts to cancer'? Or does it mean 'I want to be with you until I'm fifty when I'll go out and get me some young, tight, 22-year-old ass 'cuz you've got cellulite dribbling down the backs of your thighs'?"

I paused to swallow. I heard him breathing. "Or does it mean, 'I want to be with you *forever* unless you decide to have another abortion and I realize how wicked you really are'? Or what? What are the conditions under which your 'forever' warranty will be voided? Come on, Tadz, make a commitment you can keep."

"Whoa."

"Tadz, I'd rather just hear you say that you love me today."

"Hello?"

"Tadz. It's negative. It's nothing. It's just blood."

*The heart has its reasons
which reason does not know.*

-Pascal, "Pensees"

I hiked up to Hidden Valley, behind the Moab valley's red rim. It was cool and frosty green up here, and the whole valley rocked and rolled like the sea. Thin grasses rippled around me like waves in the wind, their flesh smooth as emeralds between my fingers. My feet carried me through the dreamy, shadowed valley like a glacier, and in the solitude of this watery greenness, I felt I'd entered the intimacy of a secret.

Sunshine beckoned me uphill and out of the valley through a slot of rocks, and I stood at the precipice of another ocean—an orange ocean of petrified sand dunes and canyons. From afar, from above, it was landscape. I felt a loss in the distance.

Tell me your secrets, and I'll tell you mine, a delicate voice whispered inside my head and all around me. I let the wind and the warmth comb through my hair and turned to walk along the slick Entrada cliffs, searching for the secret scratches and pecks in the rocks, secret in their meaning, and secret because not many knew where to find them. I found the petroglyphs, cut white in the dark blood of cliff flesh—bighorn sheep, angular deer, trails of tiny feet, spirals. I could smell the blood of these stories.

Secrets abound in this landscape. Secret light falls on secret canyons and hollows and curves and bumps in the secret Braille of sandstone. Secret nooks shelter secret trees and secret waterfalls and secret varnished pictures and secret kivas and secret cliff dwellings.

The topography of the land of canyons doesn't allow you to see it from afar. It doesn't allow you to remain at a sterile, impersonal distance. The topography of the land of canyons compels intimate relationship.

I am a keeper of secrets. I require intimacy of my relationships. I speak in languages unknown by a telephone.

When I think of Tadz, I think of luscious things. Sensual things. Sweet things. Avocados. Ice cream. Mangoes. I feel delicious naps in the wombs of canyons. I feel my skin dewy in a cool alcove beneath a waterfall. I feel love stories woven in teepees, on rock towers, in naked rivers. I feel freedom in the union of wild bodies.

I do not feel the skin of his face on a plastic telephone. I do not feel the touch of his fingers, the taste of his mouth, the soft, sweeping, brush of his glance along the phone wire. I do not smell his breath, do not recognize his scent over thousands of miles.

I do not feel anything.

I sat down in the shade of a juniper with a pen, my notebook, and a small snack. I licked my lips, tasting the salt. With my finger, I touched the sharp and silky sand at my feet. I breathed the familiar sweet greeting of sage. And I began to write.

I'm eating a dried hunk of mango right now, I wrote to Tadz, and I can't help thinking of you and our relationship. Something is missing in this mango...and it's the juice. The mango's essence is still there in memory, the memory of the juice dribbling down a sticky chin, weaving like an orange river through the funnels between my fingers.

It seems the perfect metaphor for our relationship.

It's tough to be nourished completely on the memory of the juice alone.

I wonder if you can relate. Think of when you've been stuck in a city for a while, or stuck inside for some reason, and you haven't been on a long walk with the wild. You look at your photos of mountains, of deserts, of rocks and oceans and rivers, of places without roads. You try to use words to help you remember. The photos and the words can sustain you for a while, but soon, without connection, you forget what the wild feels like. You disconnect. You feel nothing.

When you were here, body to body with me, I used to feel you in the three most decadent ways I nourish my cells and my soul: avocados, ice cream, and mangoes. But without you here, they feel reduced to the stone of a fruit, melted cream without the sugar, and dry, thready pulp.

I need the juice.

I need sustenance. I need to be satiated. I need succulence. I cannot live so dried and thawed out.

* * *

“It was over before the ‘break-up phone call,’ wasn’t it?” Tadz asked at my doorstep. He had quit his job in the California redwoods, driven here, and now stood, asking me to reconsider.

I did not waver because it was already over.

“Yes. It was over before the phone call.”

But when he left, days later, it was not yet over. How can one explain this? All I can say is that it was over...but it wasn’t.

We said goodbye in my front yard. The timed sprinklers came on at the wrong time, spraying us. He gave me a feather that had fallen from the sky and landed on his windshield on his drive from the redwoods to the desert. He said something about caterpillars and butterflies and flying. He drove back to Moonflower Canyon, where he had been sleeping, to gather his sleeping bag, and then he would drive to Colorado to resume his former job of instructing for Outward Bound.

I called my mom, still not wavering.

“Hello?”

“Mom?” I burst into tears, wavering. “I think I’ve made a terrible mistake,” I sobbed.

“Oh, honey.” We hung up soon, and I ran the several miles down the river to Moonflower.

But he was gone; there had been no mistake. I sat down on the ground and began to cry anew. It was over; no it wasn’t; yes it was; what have I done? Someone biked by me and asked if I was okay.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m just bleeding.”

Some people say that you know when you’re making love to a person for the last time. Other people say that when everything is over, you remember every detail of the last time the two of you made love, going over and over it in your mind, because the end of the relationship began there—something turned over onto its back and said, “I’m done.”

I didn’t know. I didn’t remember the last time. Not even when or where. What does this mean?

I walked down to the river. The way the cloud shadows moved over the cliffs animated them, as if the rock moved from the inside out. I gathered river stones and made a small pile, a cairn, to remind myself that I was not lost.

*Between endings and beginnings
an arm stirs earth
into sky.*

-Gretel Ehrlich, from “One”

I asked my friend Oona why the desert makes her so uncomfortable, and her answer was exactly what I expected. She replied, “Because there are no boundaries.” The desert, it seems, makes many people uncomfortable. They have a lump of fear inside; eyes widen with the terror before them.

Why? Because the desert lacks boundaries. Its limits are not clear, even if you can unravel it. The desert lacks definition. Its form is indistinguishable, one that can’t be interpreted. There is no front or back, no inside, no outside. You fear the red dirt entering your own pores, your own lungs opening to the timeless winds, your own skin

cracking ajar, exposing your guts, your thirst, your spirit even, and you fear the desert might crawl inside, or that you might crawl into the desert.

Why do people love going down the river in the desert? Because there is certain direction, they think. They go down. Downriver. Either one is in the river, or one is not. Their place is defined. One climbs because one is either at the top, or one is not. One walks or rides trails because one is on the right path, or one is not.

Why are we so afraid of getting lost?

Nothing illuminates this fear of the abstract and of the unknown better than love because love is indivisible. Love's language cannot be decoded, its direction cannot be plotted, its presence cannot be clarified, and yet the absence is felt when love has gone. We are pained and isolated when love is lost because love stretches between the divides and unites the gaps.

Love is wild. A relationship is a wilderness.

But we are raised under the flag of freedom, and we confuse the freedom of our lives for independence. We can't commit to love because we can't connect, we can't connect because we refuse to acknowledge intimate unity, and we refuse to acknowledge union because we must be neatly defined.

Maybe, love is the easy part and commitment to that love is what we can't figure out. Aren't we suffering because of our lack of commitment to the wild within and without? The landscape suffers; the river suffers; Bear, Eagle, Tortoise, Indian Rice Grass, Bonytail Chub—they suffer too. We build our glass houses, plot out and contain our lands, divide up our waters, and communicate through the flatness of a computer screen—"cyber sex," even. We are trying to have safe relationships through the safe,

sterile distance of a phone cord. We pretend we are not dependent upon the fertility of the earth by sterilizing the earth's fruits in grocery store cases. In the distance, the juicy essence of the love drips thin and dries up. And it's impossible to have authentic relationships with fictitious things.

Are we afraid of blurring the definitions between what's yours and what's mine? Are we afraid because we don't know the exact moment of the conception of the relationship, or because we don't know the exact number of transgressions it takes to cause it to end? Do we fear loss because we can't predict which heartbeat will first ache with the pain? Do we fear the wild because we might find ourselves lost if we let go?

We can find direction in open spaces and serenity in questions. We can find hope inside mystery. We can find harmony in the commitment.

We can locate ourselves even when we are lost.

Once in a lifetime, perhaps, one escapes the actual confines of the flesh. Once in a lifetime, if one is lucky, one so merges with sunlight and air and running water that whole eons, the eons that mountains and deserts know, might pass in a single afternoon without discomfort. The mind has sunk away to its beginnings among old roots and the obscure tricklings and movings that stir inanimate things.

-Loren Eiseley, The Immense Journey

I sat alone in the Anasazi cliff dwelling. And yet, I was not alone. In the coolness of the rocks, in the presence of spiraling history, I sat with spirit. I sat with the spirit of my unborn baby, feeling her at once in my womb and at my side. Four years old. Ask any mother who has lost her child, and she will know the age that baby would be. I

also sat with the Ancient Ones and their fingerprints pressed into the molded adobe, and I thought about beginnings and endings, life and death.

My finger stretched out to a fingerprint in the adobe, and my rational brain screamed, "Don't touch! Your touch will erode the ruins!" My body, though, didn't think that way. My body's first impulse is to touch, always to touch, and so before my brain could catch my index finger, I found myself whorl to whorl with an ancient Puebloan finger. And then my brain screeched like Raven, "Bad! Bad! Why are you so selfish?" and I felt guilty and recoiled.

The Navajo say the whorls in the skin of our fingertips and toes were engraved by the wind, tracks left by the entry of Winds, of sacred breath, into the body. I wanted to feel the Winds exist here, now, in me, in the extension of the Winds through a fingerprint, to dance with the Winds through the spiral of Time...and so I silenced the Environmental Education Teacher in my brain and heeded my finger's impulse of unity.

The fingertips touched. Whorl to whorl, I couldn't help but feel the eclipse of histories, the swirl of Story descending upon me, the same Winds that etched all of our distinctive, curling lines: We are whorl to whorl, you and me, once again, as never before, as always.

A Buddhist koan asks: What did your face look like before your parents were born? With our fingers together, I can see. The infinity of life breathes into me, the infinity of connection.

My life began like the wind. I don't know where it started, or how. But somehow, I understand how all this life feels, and I know, just as it ends, it begins. It just

continues spinning and blowing and living and dying just like the earth and never stops.

It feels collective and transcendental, like light. Like water. Like wind.

Yet, the pain is still here. There is loss. The loss of lives. From my womb.

From my heart. The grief. The dying. I wonder, doesn't the infinity, the sameness of all this cycling get tired?

I am tired. I am tired of the loss. I am tired of the grief.

"The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death," Kerouac writes in On the Road. Then he asks, "But who wants to die?"

Whirl to whirl, I closed my eyes. I dreamed. I tried to hold onto someone's hand, but the shape of my fingers kept changing. How am I to stay found and not lost? Everything keeps changing, except the sun and the water and the wind, and I merge with these requisites. These things are always there. If they're not, nothing is.

"Good things don't get lost," writes Barbara Kingsolver. Life. Death. Now. Then. Eternity. A moment. "It's the same amount of infinity rolling out in all directions from where we stand."

What did my face look like before my parents were born? It looked like a beautiful mosaic of light, water, and air. And if I look closer, I can hone shapes from the limitless abstractions, shapes that change with the course of time and the adaptability of space. This time includes now—I see my birth and my death, every day, in the past, present and future, in the budding lupine, the frothing sweat of a galloping horse, a red

tower of stone, the spaces between the glittering constellations, the swirling, wet love made in a teepee in the rain in the desert, a fingerprint in crumbling adobe.

Eons pass, and they don't. I can feel the water of the river running through the blue of my veins, and I know my blood flushes red through the canyons. I feel this life within the confines of my lungs in the air I share, the red sand in my hair, in my nails, in my bellybutton, in my nose, between my toes, shimmering on my skin, crunching between my teeth. Nothing ends, and nothing begins.

We just continue.

G. THE FINISH LINE

To walk in this country is always an act of faith...Nobody really knows the way, that is the myth of convention.

-Terry Tempest Williams, "Earth"

Sleep was not restful for me. For some, sleep is luscious, like dipping your spoon into ice cream, a sweet and indulgent nourishment. But for me, when I laid my body down, I assumed a position of death and hoped for morning to come quickly.

Time passed like I was underwater, holding my breath.

Sleep should be peaceful and quiet because sleep is an escape. When you sleep, the world goes away. When you wake, it comes back again. In my sleep, though, nightmares trot through the sultry air, circling me with hungry tongues hanging and tails low like coyotes, their yellow eyes searching for a way in. This other world is no better than the awake world.

Ever since I swelled with pregnancy, something about sleep disquieted me. I feared losing my senses and losing control of my body. The night of sleeping when the pregnancy happened gave me the crazed idea that my body would betray me, that it would sneak up on me unless I kept it on the leash of consciousness. I thought that had I been awake, I would have known what my body was conceiving. And I thought if I had known, I could have stopped it. So every night, I closed my eyes and laid still as stone, and the night shadows slithered like snakes across my skin, and dark dreams entered me.

Some mornings, I rose with dawn's exhale. I patiently watched the plum light, its radiance creeping larger in the window like a foggy breath. I watched the light from my bed while the water heated on the stove. The kettle whistled its single operatic note. Then I sat outside wrapped in a striped blanket, my hands wrapping a warm clay mug, the clay wrapping a steaming puddle of organic peppermint tea. I would stare at the sun somersaulting over the horizon. I would wait for the downy light to unfurl its body over the desert.

And I would simply watch.

Other mornings, I wanted to move the day along. I winced in the darkness, tapping my toes against the sheets, twitching my muscles, and then, exasperated, I would climb out of bed with my running shoes on. I would run run run, always down the river, always in a westerly direction, dust and pebbles in a cloud nipping at my heels.

And I thought I helped the earth turn over into day's light.

Instead of sleep, running offered escape. I had full control of my body, even when I ran so far that the world around me disappeared, sandstone fins peeling away like an onion, and the only place that existed was the two strides always in front of me. My

body was leashed even when I ran so fast that it felt like the river had entered my lungs or when I ran so hard uphill that I vomited the toxins I could not get rid of any other way. Even when I couldn't remember my name because my head swirled in stars and I got lost in time and space, even when I had to stop and shit on the side of the trail or road ten times—I had control of my body. And I could pull rank whenever I saw fit, whenever I felt my numbed thighs loosening: “You *will* run six more miles, and you *will* run them in less than forty-eight minutes!”

A college friend of mine ran hellacious distances in unreasonably quick time, every day. She pissed her pants a lot because she ran so hard—especially in races. She vomited a lot. I thought she was psycho then; I had finally begun to understand her, now.

Running is an easy, and cheap, escape for many, compared to other means we meddle with. You need nothing illegal, you don't have to ingest anything, and no sketchy paraphernalia is required. The only necessary items are your body, your shoes, and a long ribbon of space. I had all of the above here in the desert.

I played a game with myself when I ran, similar to a game philosophical brainiacs like to play. My dad's friend Dizzy taught it to me, and an ex-boyfriend and I practiced it in college: we plopped down on our backs in the grass, stared at a cloud in the blue sky, and tried to make that cloud disappear from vision. I'm told it takes hours or even days or even months to train your vision and perception to do this. I'm not sure what this game accomplished, or what it proved, but I couldn't make that cloud go away.

However, I did a similar thing when I ran, and I was good at this game.

I tried to run until I didn't exist.

*...Now there is no speed,
only the struggle of muscle working to cross
space, the deliberate choice to survive pain,
and the will to remember love is inescapable.*

-Gail Tremblay, from "Surviving"

These past months, I had been training for the finish line. I signed up for a half marathon along the river road into Moab, and I thought maybe once I crossed that tape, I could stop running. Like training my mind to see through the cloud, I trained my mind to overcome my body, and this race would be the test.

I had been running most of the short and longer mountain bike trails, passing the bikers on the uphill sections, much to their anger. Once, when I huffed out a "Hey! Long uphill, isn't it?" as I passed a particularly decked out biker, he dismounted his metal steed and threw it down, hard on the rock, yelling "Fuck you!" Another time, I passed a group of bikers, and the lead biker raced after me, overtaking me on a flat section only to hit a rock with his front tire, flipping over, end over end. I stopped to make sure he wasn't too badly injured, but he screamed at me to get out of his face.

In a sick way, I rather enjoyed this.

Every time I saw another runner, on road or on trail, which wasn't very often, ultra-competitiveness took over, and the only thing that mattered was beating that person. I always passed the runner, whether I saw him or her a half-mile away or one hundred yards. I wanted my body to work better.

Predictably enough, I had a shin splint, a swollen knee, and two toenails missing on race day. I stood still in the sea of runners milling about the start, waiting for the race to begin. I had never run with anybody other than Tadz, and suddenly, there were several hundred people around me in the shortest and thinnest of shorts, and all kinds of gadgets

and gizmos to get fuel and water into their bodies without having to slow down or unwrap anything. They all looked so streamlined.

I looked down at myself. I wore, stupidly, brand new running shoes that had already begun to blister my feet, a pair of river shorts I discovered, too late, were much too loose around the waist to run in—I had to keep pulling them up—a tank top with a big stain on the front, my crusty river-rat visor, and my Walkman. I forgot to bring a snack, and breakfast had been painfully small. I had no water.

I was the only person I saw from Moab—the rest were teams of runners from California, Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Washington. They all had these plans for the race, I overheard on the bus up to the starting area, with terms I didn't understand, running buddies, and teammates who would run back once they finished to motivate the others and help them through the finish line hauling ass. I couldn't believe it!

I think, in some small arrogant recess of my brain, I deluded myself into believing I had some kind of chance of winning. Stupid! The people chatting next to me were discussing their times in the last race they ran—some of them ran six minute miles all the way through. I thought running consecutive seven minute miles was an incredible feat.

I had failed already, and the race hadn't even begun. I hadn't researched this racing business, and I was woefully under-prepared. I started to make my way towards the back of the pack, towards the slow runners, with my head down. Maybe I wouldn't even finish. It was already so hot. My belly already howled with hunger. I was already so defeated.

The race started and I ran way too fast for the first four miles; I wore no watch—I could tell my time by comparing the mile markers to what song played on the techno running tape my brother made me. I ran too hard, irritated with all these people around me, tripping me, slowing me up. I sprinted and dodged, not used to these bodies touching me, surrounding me, overtaking me. I felt folded up, tight as origami, every time I slowed to breathe.

By mile six, things weren't looking good. I couldn't keep running this fast. But these bodies! Everywhere! I had to separate myself because this great sea of flesh made me breathless.

I sat down at the water station marking the ninth mile. Negro Bill Canyon opened to the Colorado here.

"Hey, lookin' good there, hot stuff." My friend Tom was an EMT stationed at this water table.

"You think?"

"Man, I couldn't even run a mile in a half hour." I looked at him, sullen. He looked at the runners, then back at me. "What are you doing sitting here talking to me? Get off your ass and get back out there—don't disengage from all these runners, Mattie! This is an awesome thing! You're running with the river!"

I hadn't even looked at the river. I had forgotten.

For the next mile, I couldn't feel my legs in the heavy heat. I was terribly dehydrated and hungry. I felt like a ghost, my skin and hair grayish with salt crystals, neither in my body nor out of it. I had to shit. I wanted to puke, but there was nothing to vomit. I ran by someone who *was* shitting. I ran by someone curled up on the side of the

road weeping. I ran by three teammates rubbing the back of a fourth whose body undulated in the waves of vomiting. The man running next to me suddenly crumpled to the pavement.

What are we all doing here, I wondered? What is it that we're trying to prove? What is it that we're trying to overcome? Why are we pushing, pushing, pushing so hard?

I tried to push my body faster. "Go, damn it! Go!" It didn't listen. This had never happened to me before. I was stuck, folded up tight, crushed. The red world spun around me, hot and dry. The wind held its breath so I couldn't breathe. Fire burned my lungs. I wasn't even sweating anymore. My lips swelled hard. Great currents of pressure pushed on me from all sides. I felt like I was drowning. The waves of calves and thighs crashed all around me. Color washed from the earth.

Three miles left. I don't care. Suddenly, I don't care if I finish; I don't care about these bodies merging into mine, I don't care about being better.

Take me.

The techno bounced through my head, from ear to ear and back again, reverberating in the canyons of my brain twisting and folding. Everything blurred together except this watery beat.

Take me.

My muscles went flaccid; my brain melted into peanut butter soup. I am liquid. I am flowing.

Take me.

The canyon cliff to my left shaded the sun, a huge, erect wave of sandstone, smooth as water. Dark and cool, blue and black. The river passed me by. Am I dying?

Take me with you.

I started to fall down when suddenly, I caught a current. I don't know if I flew or swam, if I had wings or gills, air or water, but my body ran, tumbling over itself, dancing shoulder to shoulder with other shoulders of other currents of other bodies.

In the last three miles, nobody passed me. My body arched, my face lifted. My feet didn't touch the ground. I didn't need to breathe, even. I heard faint screams of my name in the last hundred yards. Someone was taking photos. I didn't win. I didn't come close to winning. I didn't care. I was flying. I was swimming. With all these bodies, I was alive.

This is what we're pushing for, I thought, my friends hugging me across the finish line. This kind of control over our bodies. This is what we're wanting.

But I was wrong. Very wrong.

It didn't occur to me until much later that maybe we runners were not just separate bodies of sheer control, but a fleshy river running alongside the water, different currents from the mountains, from the wetlands, from the deserts, from the cities, from the farms, from wildness all coming together, running to the sea. I didn't understand that maybe what I felt was my mind relinquishing its autonomy to join the tide, my mind taking my body with it, my body taking my mind.

It never occurred to me that maybe we ran to reconfirm the life that ran through all of us. To say "Yes! Yes! I am alive! We are all alive!"

Don't be in such a hurry to cut your "self" in two. Both are self. Neither is true. Neither is false. They are both true and false. We know that light and color are not separate phenomena. In the same way, the sun of self and the river of self are not different. Sit with me, let a smile form on your lips, let your sun shine, close your eyes, if need be, to see your self more clearly. Your sun of awareness is only part of your river of self, isn't it?

-Thich Nhat Hanh, The Sun My Heart

A few weeks later at the field camp, I taught for a group of students from a "last chance" type of high school. They had all been kicked out of any other school that would take them, and many had been to jail or a juvenile detention center. Some of them didn't have families that wanted them anymore. They fought addictions of all kinds. They had tough hides.

After the introductions and the short tour of the limited facilities and their responsibilities, the students learned how to set up tents. Their chaperoning teacher and I had a meeting. I liked the ease he carried with him. He told me the students here were the ones who would be graduating, that this field school was a reward for a long, tough journey through high school. Then he warned me that in order for the students to "stay with me," I had to be structured and consistent with a recognizable pattern. The students didn't speak to him for a week, he said, when he changed their desks and the room around one evening after school.

I read a short Barry Lopez piece to welcome them that evening. And then I asked them to participate in a writing exercise. Some of them read their words aloud. Some of them hung out to talk afterwards, surprised at how "cool" I was. I filled with hope.

The next morning, at breakfast, the few girls who ate whined to me about greasy hair, and the guys made fun of them. I asked one of the girls, who was skeletal and

probably weighed in at about ninety pounds, why she didn't eat breakfast—or dinner the night before—and she told me that she was positive that she had gained weight on the drive out here. I told her that she needed to eat, that we would be pretty active and I didn't want her passing out or getting sick. She shrugged her pointy shoulders at me. While washing dishes, I innocently found out that “Jimmy and Maria kept us up all night moanin' an' groanin',” from one of the guys who thought I was “so cool.” I thought two of the students were high on something. The cook told me that the neither of the groups assigned to help make breakfast or clean up after had showed up. Nobody showed up to the morning meeting because the girls hid inside their tents putting makeup on and shaving and the guys were throwing rocks at trees and into the river and beating each other up by the tents and smoking up by the parked vans. Nobody listened to me.

I started to feel very un-cool.

“I don't want anyone getting pregnant here,” I told their teacher. “And I almost want to split the groups by gender for the day, so the focus of this week doesn't turn into ‘Ten Ways to Keep Your Hair and Makeup Beautiful When You're Trapped in the Desert For a Week.’”

I finally gathered them to explain today's schedule—different learning stations close to the field camp—and then I wrote a list of things to bring with them in their backpacks. Two water bottles each, a notebook and pencil, a hat, sunscreen, long clothes for sun protection, sturdy shoes, lunch, and raingear. We would be out all day, I warned them, so be prepared for the sun, and stay hydrated.

When we gathered again, the girls sauntered up to the teaching yurt in bikini tops and oiled skin wearing flip flops with six-inch soles. They kept tripping over rocks and

their ankles kept turning. The guys were shirtless and didn't bring a single thing with them. The teacher reminded me we had to allow for smoke breaks every half hour, because that's what they did at school, and they were due for one right now.

I became the un-coolest of the un-cool.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I warned the teacher, "but I'm following my gut on this one—these bodies have to move."

"There will be a change of plans," I announced. This got everyone's attention. "Go back to your tents and bring what I asked you to bring before. These are essential items, as we are now hiking all day."

"What?" "I can't believe this!" "I hate hiking!" "This sucks!" "How am I going to get an even tan?" "I'm going to get so sweaty!" "We can't even shower!" "I haven't exercised since gym class in middle school!" "This is so not cool!" "Jimmy, will you carry me the whole way?"

I heard someone mutter, "Bitch," and I snapped my head toward the mutterer and looked him straight in the eye.

"Excuse me?" I asked. There was no response. "I'm sorry—I didn't understand you. I don't recognize that language you're speaking."

When we had marched across the desert for a bit, I stopped. "Here's what's going to happen today," I announced. "We will stop along the way not for smoke breaks, but for teaching breaks and for water. We will learn some geology and some plant biology and some hydrology as we go." I paused. "But mostly, we will simply walk. I will be in

front always, and your teacher will be the very last always. All of you will stay in between us.”

Some of the young women became quite dramatic, whimpering. The guys glowered.

Later, we walked up Mary Jane Creek. I planned to walk all the way up into the slot canyon until the canyon stopped, and then turn around. “These kids have never walked more than a mile in their lives,” the teacher said to me, catching up to the front and abandoning his role as sweep. “They’re all chain smokers, too.”

“Let’s keep going,” I said.

About two miles up, three of the girls sat down in the water, weeping. They had shucked their shirts and wore the bikini tops again. “What’s wrong?” I asked them.

“I’m so tired,” said one.

“I’m so weak,” said another.

The third just glared at me.

“Drink some water,” I said. “Put your shirts on. Cool off in the creek and then let’s go.”

“We’re not, like, hoods-in-the-woods, or whatever,” one of them sneered at me.

“Yeah, this isn’t Outward Bound, either,” another one echoed.

“No, it’s not, is it. I forgot. This is *high school*. Nobody asks you to know what your body can do—you’re just supposed to know what’ll be on the test.” I wasn’t sure if I could say what I said next, but before I could think about it too long, my mouth blurted it out: “Or maybe you’re just expected to make it from one smoke break to the next.”

The girls stared at me, not weeping anymore, but looking like they mourned something else. I started to feel bad. I didn't really know what I was doing, and there was no reason to speak harshly. "Listen," I said. "If you were ever asked to know your bodies—these young, spirited, completely functional bodies—you would know that walking this far is not an unreasonable request. By the end of the day, you'll be able to count the miles on the fingers of your two hands."

"*Two hands?*" the first one moaned. I nodded.

"Come on," I said. "We can do this." I thought for a moment. I wanted them to learn the kind of control they could have over their bodies. That they could choose this kind of control, that they could have goals. "You can make the choice to do this, or you can make the choice to stay here and wait for us to get back. The other instructor can stay with you." I paused. "Or, you can choose to push yourself and make it to the waterfall."

"The waterfall?" Eyes widened.

"Yes. The waterfall."

Smooth red walls closed in on us. Every voice echoed. The slot canyon was cool and damp, and everyone's pace quickened, bodies electric in excitement.

"I can hear it!" one of the guys yelled back to the slower hikers. "I can hear the waterfall!"

Suddenly, students ran from behind me, racing to get to the falling water. Something magic glittered the air and moistened our skin. The rest of the world went away. We entered the dreaming.

The students laughed and played like small children in the waterfall. Their teacher glowed. "This is beautiful," he said, "just beautiful."

After dinner, I sat with some of the students and talked about the day. They were exhausted, but excited still.

One student lingered after the rest went off to their tents. I had been warned of his problem controlling his temper. We had had one altercation earlier in the day, but something seemed to have evened out in him during the hike.

"I don't want to go to sleep yet," he said, grinning.

"Why not?"

"Because this is the best day of my life." An easiness seeped from him, like a spring or a weeping rock.

"I didn't see you smoke once all day," I said. "How's that feel?"

"Out here, out in the wilderness, in the desert, I didn't think so much about smoking. I didn't think so much about anything, really." He rolled his head back and looked at the sky. "Usually, my mind is going about a million miles a minute, making me so crazy and mad all the time...and walking up that canyon ...standing in that waterfall...all that shit—oh, sorry!" He laughed for second and I shrugged my shoulders. "You know, it all just went away."

I wasn't sure if he'd answer my questions, but he seemed so open and radiant and loose, I thought I would give it a shot. "So, do you think that because you were pushing yourself, pushing your body to go further, you felt like you had more control over it?"

“Oh no.” He shook his head, thinking. “Just the opposite. All that walking made me let go of my brain.” He slapped at his forehead with his palm. “Hiking up that canyon just made all of it come loose, and it made me feel like I didn’t have to control my body, like...I don’t know, like I didn’t have to have control *over* my body. It’s like my brain just finally gave up and all that angry, bad stuff just went away. I feel so good!”

I sat and thought about this for a while, looking up at the stars, trying to understand.

“Hey,” he said. “Let me teach you a trick.”

“Okay.”

“Stare at my head for a while—you can see my face, right?” I nodded. “If you stare at it for long enough, it will just sort of spread out until the boundaries disappear. You won’t be able to distinguish my head from the rocks behind me.”

To teach is to learn.

—Japanese proverb on a teabag

This student was teaching me about body knowledge, I thought as I ran up into Hidden Valley. This student was teaching me about letting go of my brain, letting it all fall out like intestines onto the ground, letting my body pick it back up. I remembered how, after I stared at his shadowy face, his head dissipated into the rock behind him—“The Invisible Head Game,” he called it—and I remembered the running race. I remembered how wrong I was with my Body Control Theory as I watched the rocks accept his face, his face accepting the rock, seeing behind his face, seeing behind the rocks.

The act of running, I realized, is freedom—not control. Feet on earth, hands in air, skin wet as rain, the legs keep up with the earth’s spinning, the wind of the lungs dissipates into the rest, the body dissolves like sugar into time’s solution. The body dances the music of the river.

Bodies, I realized, are made to merge, are made to come together. The contours and the textures ask for it. The curves and the arches call out for their match. The shadows and the light and the mixing of colors paint this story. The rushes of current from between the legs, from between canyon walls, the waves crashing from shore to shore, the plates of earth colliding, the roots reaching out and gathering in tell us in a language we’re not listening to.

I started to sleep more peacefully, less afraid of my body getting me lost, less afraid of my body leading me astray. I wanted the rocks to accept my body, for my body to accept the rocks, to see behind them, to see behind me.

One cool evening, when the light was the color of apricots, I ran along a road, the river on one side of me, the Behind the Rocks Wilderness Study Area on the other. A ringtail cat emerged from the stone shadows, a shadow itself slinking into the road, stopping in the middle. We faced each other, the wild cat and I, both of us still shadows in the cusp of dusk, in the magical center where land meets water. Simultaneously, we both began to run again, as if life itself powered our legs. The cat, on four legs, ran into the rocks; I, on two, ran with the river. But I could not help but feel we ran together.

“It couldn’t have been,” people said about my meeting with the ringtail.

“Oh, but it was,” I said.

*But the final price of freedom is the willingness to face that most
frightening of all beings, one's own self.*

-Starhawk, Spiral Dance

I had always gotten lost easily. I wasn't born with an internal compass, and my lack of direction was a family joke. I liked to call my fault “spatially challenged.” Everyone else liked to call it “you're such a dumb ass.” Someone told me, with the hope of being comforting, that women simply *did not have* a sense of direction.

But my body was tired of following. It did not need to be led.

The Behind the Rocks proposed Wilderness area had always frightened me. Fins of sandstone arched and curled like stony waves, the horizon as limitless as the sea's, and trails didn't exist here. It was easy to get lost and cliffed out, easy to never find your way back down something you went up.

I hadn't trusted myself in this wilderness.

I stepped out of my truck and began to stretch. I strapped on my pack of water. I took a deep breath. And I started to run.

I let my body guide me, trusting its direction. I wanted to know what my body could do. I had written a poem note to myself before the run:

*i do not run
my mind surrenders
to my body
my body surrenders
to my spirit*

I breathed the sweet breath of plants, curled my feet over the roundness of the stone, aligned my body with the bounce of the sun's heat, opened myself to the wild, and sweated the salt of the earth, the salt of the sea. I prepared to lose myself Behind the Rocks.

An hour and a half later, I ran over a sandstone fin, thin and rounded and contoured like a huge upturned penny half-submerged. Its curvature felt familiar to the soles of my feet. Spines of sage near the sun held a familiar pose. The scent of the river filled my bones. A shiver of knowing coursed through me.

When I came out, a man stood against an old, faded orange Ford parked next to my truck, smoking. His truck looked a little like the fins and petrified dunes of the rock wilderness.

"Hello," I panted, sweat soaking me, ecstatic.

"Hello." The man looked at me with curiosity. "Were you all by yourself out there?" he asked me. I nodded, stretching my leg. "What on God's green earth were you doing?"

"Running," I said, stretching my other leg. "I don't know if you've noticed, but this earth sure as hell ain't green." I smiled. "I'm not so sure it's God's, either."

He laughed tentatively and watched me for a moment as I continued to stretch. Then he said thoughtfully, "A man could get lost out there you know."

I chugged some water and turned to look him square in the eye.

"Maybe," I said, "but not a woman."

RESULTS (or, rebirth)

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose wisely.
-Woody Allen

“You stink, dude,” Crew said to me from the driver’s seat.

At six-thirty in the morning, tequila breathed through my pores and oiled my skin. I hadn’t slept because I had been vomiting. I wasn’t sure if I could even drive, so Crew drove me to the boat warehouse with my river bag stuffed full of clothes still dirty from my last river trip.

The past months had been long and hard and hot. I had started sleeping feverishly with another man—a beautiful, blonde, Italian, incredible climber man. Hot air, hot water, hot rocks, hot sex, my brain on booze, frying like an egg. I kept him loose and disconnected because I didn't want anything messy. We pared our activities down to three things: We climbed. Calluses thickened my fingertips and muscles thickened my arms. We fought. Rage thickened my emotions. We fucked. Something once tender thickened between my legs.

I treated him like shit. He treated me like shit. His nasty words were beginning to feel like kissing the backside of a bee. Once, when we were fighting, drunk on the Fourth of July, he squeezed his hands around my neck from behind, and for a moment, I thought I was drowning.

I thought all this made me even stronger than being alone. I thought all this made us mysterious and wild. But mostly what this made me was drunk. And messy.

Crew squealed out of the parking lot as I begged her to work the trip for me, dusting me with gravel. “Thanks,” I muttered.

I left my stuff in the gravel and walked into the warehouse. The early air already felt leaden in the heat. Nicky stood on top of the two 16-foot rafts loaded on the trailer, tightening cam straps. She turned to me, and a forceful “HA!” escaped her lips as soon as she saw me. I looked like shit.

“Yeah-eah! Partyin’ pretty hard last night, eh Mattie?”

“I don’t think the night is over yet,” I said, still dizzy.

“I can smell that tequila from the boats!” Nicky threw her freckled head back, her scratchy laugh erupting from between tiny piranha teeth. She was a sight herself,

standing there like that, cackling with huge, black Jackie-O sunglasses on, her little freckled belly squeezing out from between tiny surfer shorts and a too-tight black tank top that read, “GIRLS KICK ASS” in neon pink. Blue dye was still growing out of her red hair, wild and fuzzy in two barely contained braids.

“He-ey Matt-ie,” Wil, another guide, sing-songed from behind me. He started to give me a hug, but pushed me away, scrunching up his nose, laughing. “Jesus, Mattie! So, what do you think Nicky? Maybe our little Mattie-girl here should stay away from the guests until she has time to air out, huh?”

“Or at least until I can walk without falling over,” I said. “You guys, I don’t feel so good.”

“Well, that’s not surprising, ‘cuz you don’t look so good either,” Wil said. I punched him in the arm.

“Oh, I just don’t give a rat’s ass anymore,” I said. “Help me out, man, fix my hair or something. Make me look professional.”

“Don’t say that,” Wil said. “You don’t want to look—” he flared his nostrils— “*professional*.” He surveyed my afro and poked a finger in it. “There is no help for you. By the way, someone is here to see you.”

“Me? Who?”

“Go look outside.”

I walked outside and saw a puce green VW bus and a lanky body fiddling with something inside the opened door. “Just be back by seven-thirty,” Wil called out.

Tadz turned from the vehicle and smiled. “Damn, girl, you’ve got some big hair there. Rough night last night?” I saw my shadow in the rising sun—even my shadow looked like shit.

We walked toward each other and he hugged me; I hugged back, somewhat tentatively. We separated and I said, “I thought you were instructing a course somewhere in the Rockies. What are you doing here?”

“Well, one course ended last evening, and I’m going out again early this afternoon, starting another 21-day course in the San Juans. I have a few hours in between, so I thought, you know, why not? I got up a little early and drove to Moab to see you for a bit, then I’ll drive back and start my course.”

“But it’s a three-hour drive, four maybe, in your bus.” I thought for a moment. “Got up a *little early*? It’s what, seven now? You must’ve gotten up at four a.m. I wasn’t even in bed yet!” Tadz laughed. “No, really, why did you come? Did you need something here?”

“Yeah—I needed to see you.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I brought you something.” He turned back into the car and grabbed a big brown paper bag. “Don’t open it ‘till I’m gone, okay?”

“Sure.” I set the bag on the ground by my river gear.

“You really do look like hell,” he said. He glanced inside the warehouse at Nicky who stood at the big door staring blankly at something on the ground. “Let’s go get you some coffee. Nicky looks like she could use some, too.”

The coffee shop wasn’t opened yet when we got there. We stood waiting for morning to roll over, talking nervously, the red cliffs in front of us brightening. I don’t

know what I said. I don't know what he said. I kept quickly glancing around, paranoid that my new—what was I supposed to call him? My lover? No. Companion? I don't know—my new climbing partner, maybe. I was afraid that he was crawling out of my bed and onto his bicycle as Tadz and I spoke, riding here for his morning cup of espresso; he was jealous and a fighter, and Tadz was neither.

Luckily, he didn't show, and the coffee was poured without a hitch. Tadz and I drove back to the warehouse, and the guests had arrived, standing next to the white van with Wil.

"Small group," he said, looking at Wil talking to the group of grandparents and their teenaged grandchildren—this was an Elderhostel Intergenerational trip, where elders brought their grandkids. "That's nice." He looked at me. "Which river?"

"The Colorado. It's a seven day trip—we're putting in at Loma and going through Horsethief and Ruby Canyons, Westwater Canyon, all the way back into Moab."

"Wow. That's a long trip. Beware the river goddess in Westwater—I hear the water's pretty crazy right now."

I scuffed my river sandal into the gravel. "I have to go," I said. "It's time."

Tadz had been holding his face up the whole time he had been here, and suddenly it fell. "Oh, Mattie...I..." He stooped down and hugged me tight, his fallen face against my hair. "I just really miss you." He was silent for a moment. Still hugging me, I could feel him pull his face back up. "Even though you stink."

I slapped at his side. "Get outta here," I said. He stood straight. His eyes looked red. "Thanks for coming so far to buy me coffee," I said. "Be safe out there in the hills."

“You look great, even though you don’t.” He stooped down to hug me again, quickly. When he released his arms, he leaned backwards, knees still bent and spread so our heads were level, and he took my fingers and my eyes in his. “Have a wonderful trip. Make some time for solitude and silence. There’s a lot yet to learn from the river.”

And then he was gone.

“Unbelievable,” I mumbled to myself, being careful not to shake my head as I said it—in the wake of last night’s tequila shots, my brain felt like chewing gum and every time I moved, bubbles blew through the fissures of my skull, cracking it wide. I watched Tadz’s bus chug south on the two-lane highway, beginning the second half of an eight-hour round trip for one measly hour of seeing my sorry ass.

“Unbelievable,” I mumbled again. I gagged as I moved my head to take a sip of coffee. When I couldn’t see the green bus anymore, I turned and walked over toward the guests and Wil. Nicky joined my side as Wil paused in his intro speech.

“This is Nicky,” Wil said, introducing us to the guests. “And, uh, this is Mattie. The three of us will be your guides.” The guests stared at Nicky and I in horror, their eyes shifting back and forth between my afro and wrinkled, dirty clothes and Nicky’s wild Kool-Aid-gone-wrong braids, big shades, and her Girls Kick Ass tank. One of the grandmothers instinctively reached out for her teenaged granddaughter, and pulled her close.

Clearly, they thought Cousin It and Janis Joplin on acid were taking them down the river.

*an edge is never
a single or sudden thing*
-Aleda Shirley, from
“The Rivers Where They Touch”

We were driving out of town when Nicky grabbed the wheel from Wil. “PULL OVER, WIL! I need more!” she screeched.

The nervous grandmother stared with big eyes at Nicky convulsing in the passenger seat. “Heroin?” I could almost hear her thinking.

“She just needs coffee,” I said reassuringly to the woman. The grandmother turned to me, unblinking, and nodded, terrified. “Nicky has a slight caffeine habit.”

She limped into the coffee shop as if she were injured from the caffeine deficit. I sat in the van and stared at the brown bag at my feet, wanting to open Tadz’s offering at the same time that I didn’t. I waited.

Nicky climbed back into the front seat, more pleasant now with fresh coffee. I could hear the caffeine in her voice when she chirped: “Hey Mattie—Crazy Mikey’s in there.” Crazy Mikey. That’s what Nicky called my, um, climbing partner. She didn’t like him. “Do you want to go say hi?” I shook my head. I didn’t have the energy to deal with him. Just as our rig pulled into traffic, I saw him saunter out of the shop. I waved. He threw both hands up in the air angrily, and I could see his mouth moving. I thought he said, “What the fuck?”

I didn’t look back.

When we drove by the line of cars already waiting to get into Arches National Park, I reached down into the brown bag, wrapping my hand around something cool and smooth. I pulled out a big ripe mango. Then I pulled out an egg carton and opened it. Avocados. A half-dozen of them, small and sweet ones, filled the little divots in the carton. A coupon for a pint of free Ben and Jerry’s ice cream was folded like a tent over

the smallest one. Mangos. Avocados. Ice cream. Luscious things. Succulence in the hot desert morning.

Folded maps of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the San Juan Mountains sat on the bottom of the bag. A colored piece of paper taped to the front of one read, “Come visit me—I have no expectations.” Unfolding the maps, I saw that Tadz outlined, in red, the routes he would be taking with his students for the next two courses, highlighting with specific dates certain peaks and certain camps where he’d be during his students’ solo weeks.

And then I pulled out a card with one of Tadz’s chalk drawings on the front. One river flowed from the blue mountains; one ran out of a red canyon. The waters came together with swirls and spirals into one river. On the inside, I read a small note he wrote.

*Good morning—
It must be a new morning,
because I can't see yesterday!
As you head off into the wilderness,
And as I, too, journey into the wilderness,
just remember that my love doesn't
fade, or
 wrinkle, or
 lose it's tread.*

I still love you—Tadz

I sat quietly and still in the sticky seat with my hands wrapped around my coffee, the drawing in my lap. People talked all around me. (Wil engaged in a riveting discussion about Martha Stewart with Delores, the eldest grandmother: “But all Martha Stewart can do is glue sequins on pine cones...I bet she couldn’t put gas in a *car*, or, or, or row a *boat*.” Nicky talked incessantly to the nervous grandmother, who looked

paralyzed, about the dangers of Hanta Virus, which she was obsessed with, and about the joy she felt in the mornings when she woke to find drowned mice in the dishwashing buckets she purposely left out.) Everyone chattered except for me and the sixteen-year-old girl who slept at my side. Her grandmother kept trying to wake her for the views out the window. “Honestly, Sally,” she grumbled, throwing her hands up in the air. Then she tittered to nobody in particular, “All she wants to do is sleep!”

I was glad the teenager slept so I didn’t have to talk to her. I just wanted to look out the window, feel the speed at which we were traveling, watch the rocks take in the morning light, and remember the way the river’s currents moved into each other like people. I wanted to taste the juice of this mango.

Maybe someday, Tadz. Maybe we’ll find ourselves in the same river.

I always volunteered to be what I called the “Duckie Queen.” Duckies are inflatable kayaks, and we always brought some along for the guests to learn how to read water and maneuver a small boat. The “duckie captain” had to instruct the guests on paddling techniques and safety, and then spend the day in her own duckie, herding the other duckies, peeling people off rocks, righting the kayaks, and periodically saying, “Oh, yes! That’s a golden eagle!” This was the best way to work on a river: the guests entertained themselves (and me), and I freed myself to lay back, drag my fingers in the cool, silky water, and watch the sky’s shadows roll over me, or, since duckies move faster than weighted down rafts, I could dart from riverbank to riverbank looking for petroglyphs, canyon wrens, and animal tracks.

Riding the river in a duckie is a more intimate experience. Every riffle feels like a great rapid because part of you and the boat are in the water, not on top, and every hydraulic feels like a great sucking hole. Like smooth, muscular, tanned arms, the river closes around you, and you sit in the water's lap. Each current is like a hand—"Come with me!"—and you exist in a liminal space between water and air.

Sometimes, when I closed my eyes and listened to the way fluid moved in my own body and how the rocking pace slowed to the river's, I felt I had been taken by the horizon—I felt like the horizon stopped receding, that it opened and let me slip between earth and sky by water, and I nosed along that thin aperture like chance with the choice to continue on or come back. In these moments, the red and blue horizon offered me my life with a kayak paddle in my hand—I could smell the offering, like the musky smell of the blood of the river, like virginity's blood on the sheets, like the pink, warm smell of a pregnant woman's skin. I thought I had the choice in these moments to take my life and paddle with it, or to pass through the earth's opening and leave my blood in the river.

But my favorite part about duckies was this: "Duckies are self-bailing," I told my ducklings, finishing up my instruction at the Loma put-in, "which means that these holes cut strategically in the floor allow water to come in and flush out. So, if a standing wave splashes over you and into the boat, you don't have to bail because the water will level out. Actually, you'll be sitting in water the whole time, in flat water and in rapids, which is nice and cooling in this heat. And the best part about these self-bailers is this—" I paused for the impact. "*You can just pee in the boat!* Without getting up, without getting out, without even moving, you can pee in the boat and the water will flush it away! Isn't that great?" Delores, who had, upon setting foot to red river sand, stripped off her clothes

and started strutting around in a leopard print bathing suit stretched over her thick, white, cotton underwear that bunched up and wriggled out like caterpillars from the elastic seams of her suit, found this quite humorous.

“*I love it!*” she shrieked. Then she got distracted: “Oh, oh, oh, no honey—don’t toss my bag like that—there’s three bottles of scotch in there,” she yelled, scuttling crab-like in her leopard spots towards Wil, who was throwing Delores’ bag to Nicky to strap onto a raft.

I assigned boats, putting a particularly annoying couple in what I called “The Divorce Boat”—the Double Duckie. For the most entertainment, just put the most loving couple in a double duckie—if the couple is heterosexual, the man will always assume the back steering position—add water, and then sit back and watch. Their paddles whack each other in the head, they both try to steer, they spin in circles, they get frustrated and confused and scream at each other, they can’t find balance between the two of them, and they tip over. Two complete strangers seem to have an easier time figuring it out than couples do.

The man of this couple wasn’t bad, but the woman, who declared herself a famous psychiatrist, was a mental case. As soon as we had arrived at the put-in, she refused to help with anything, instead sipping her bottled mineral water in the scant shade and theatrically flinging the khaki curtain of her dramatic desert hat across her face and over her shoulder. “Look at Lawrence of Arabia over there,” Nicky had laughed in my ear.

“Wrinkles, honey, wrinkles,” Lawrence said to me when I looked at her.

Then she started demanding that we make room in Nicky’s carefully and infinitely packed kitchen coolers for her ginkgo biloba, vitamin E, St. John’s Wort, fish

oil, and protein supplements. “They’re prescriptions,” she had lied. “If I don’t have them, I shall perish, right here, on this riverbank.”

When we set out the snack of fruit and crackers, she informed us that she was allergic to carbohydrates, and wouldn’t we make a change in the menu for her? “You’re telling us about this allergy *now*, at the put-in? When the food is already packed and we’re in the middle of the *desert*?” Nicky asked, the glint of her piranha teeth indicating that she was not tolerant to this kind of ridiculousness. I pulled Nicky aside. “I’m too fucking hot to deal with this,” she said, her face red as balloons. “Nick, how can somebody be allergic to *carbohydrates*? I think she’s probably on that protein diet,” I said.

I probed further into Lawrence of Arabia’s allergy. “So, tell me about this allergy,” I said to her. “It sounds exotic.” Lawrence got excited, putting her hand on my arm and flaring her nostrils. “You see, my dear, I’m *allergic* to anything that breaks down into *sugar*.”

“Hmmm,” I said, “isn’t *everything* we consume a sugar compound?” She nodded with an explanatory, pursed lip look on her face: “Let me spell this out for you. You see, it all happened, this allergy, when I was sailing around the world by myself. I was sleeping down below and apparently there was a gas leak, and I was passed out breathing the fumes for *days*.” I nodded my head and said, “Oh, well, thank you, that clears *everything* up.”

When I had finished inflating the duckies, she changed into her army camouflage gear—why do people insist on thinking that a trek into the wilderness involves war?—she marched over with her husband, strapped her fingerless leather gloves on, declared

herself an “expert,” and demanded that she be allowed to use a duckie first. Within half an hour, the two of them in the Divorce Boat weren’t speaking because they were spinning in circles and had already flipped over in three feet of flat water.

I paddled past Wil’s boat to get the newly divorced unstuck from an eddy and I overheard him saying in his dopey voice, “Everything’s better with Blue Bonnet margarine on it...except cantaloupe.” When I passed him again, seconds later, he was telling brilliant geologic stories as if the rocks spoke through him. Wil had an advanced degree in geology and had the personality of a breed of rocket scientists crossed with surfers. His presence on the river was a comfort to me.

“Some people channel the spirits of deceased people,” I had said to him once. “But you, Wil, you channel rocks.”

I fell behind the rest of the group and floated easily and lonely in the slow water of Horsethief Canyon, listening for the sound of hooves thundering somewhere in the distance. Horsethief is a remote canyon of canyons—major side canyons and short box canyons branch from the river like wild roots—and horse rustlers used to drive herds of stolen horses down the river when the water was low, their tracks hidden, and hide the horses safe and walled in by a box canyon corral. The river people say that some of the horses remain in the canyons, wild, and if you listen, you can hear the echoing thunder of their hooves.

My temples drooled sweat as I dipped my hand into the water moving me, lay back against my river bag, and floated seemingly without direction. My fingers were taken by the velvety pressure of water, humble yet insistent. “Move forward,” the river said to me, moving west, always west, turning with the earth, chasing the moon. The

duckie spun with a spiral of currents. My senses clotted into a glue in the heat. There wasn't a single sign of doom in the sky—just big, beautiful, scorching sunlight.

Here, in this canyon, the world is red and the water slow and stretching. Twenty-five miles yet downriver, the world would suddenly turn black and the water seismic. In Westwater Canyon, a stretch proposed for a Wild and Scenic River designation, the Colorado River funnels deep and narrow into Earth's Precambrian history, constricting the thunderous and frothing water between shiny, onyx walls of metamorphic Vishnu schist. The river runs so deep into Time that there aren't even any fossils; there is no sign of life. There is only this blackness and this thunder.

The dark, pulsing canyon is most definitely a womb: I've heard that the Navajo people classify rivers by sex, and the Colorado is female. They say she is a female river because she is a life-giver and a life-taker, that she is a boundary not to be crossed.

As Marge Piercy has written, "Doorways are sacred to women, for we are the doorways of life and we must choose what comes in and what goes out." Upon entering the doorway of this womb, you don't know which side you're going to come out on—life or death. You are taken by the river, the air thickens with a musky, smoky smell seeping from the naked black thighs of rock, the scent mingles with the bloody smell of the river, the water contracts, and you've either reconfirmed life, or you've entered Hades by river raft.

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

-Blackfeet Warrior, last words

The next morning in Rattlesnake Canyon, I woke to Nicky's cackle. She stood over the dishwashing tubs, cackling and saying, "Fuckers," over and over again to the drowned mice. I sat up and groggily noted I had laid my sleeping bag in the sand too close to the kitchen stuff when I noticed all the little mice prints padded down in the sand around me. But when I saw the pile of mouse shit plopped directly in front of where my mouth had been on the sleeping pad and a stain where a mouse had pissed, I became quite lucid. Humans contract Hanta Virus by breathing the incurable disease from dried mouse droppings and urine. I touched my lips and found a small pellet of shit stuck to the bottom one.

"HANTA!" I screamed.

"Oh no, Mattie," Nicky moaned, crouching down and looking at the prints and shit and piss.

"You better start praying," Wil said.

"But I don't believe in the God," I whimpered, spitting. They both laughed.

"Maybe now's the time to start," Wil said through his laughter.

After breakfast, Nicky and Wil rigged the boats, and I sat with the guests, reading them a story about Horsethief Canyon from River Days by Jeff Rennie:

If there were tracks, they would end at the river. They always do. It's an old trick: make for the river and then head upstream or down. The river won't talk. From this sandy spot along the Colorado River, most have chosen downstream into a series of slickrock canyons that can hide a man from his own shadow. This place has tangled the tracks of a list of horse thieves and outlaws longer than a good hanging rope. It is just the place for people who have a reason not to be found. Even an echo can get lost on its way out. It's that kind of place, a place only desperate people could love—desperate for blue skies to pull down over their eyes like a sombrero, for horizons that could stare down a gunslinger—a desperate place for desperate people, Horsethief Canyon, I began.

The nervous grandmother appeared nervous, and she looked in a circle around her body as if she were looking for something to locate her, a McDonald's perhaps, or a street lamp. Anything but this infinite, deserted desert that spread like a red rash over all that the eye could see.

There are few places left where a person can vanish like aces from a poker deck—the Maze, Hole-in-the-Wall, Browns Park. Horsethief Canyon is the beginning of that country, if such a country had a beginning. It is a place as big as any in the lower 48 that hasn't been chopped by fences and roads: the last of the wide-open West, pure size.

The nervous grandmother looked longingly over to where her rented tent had been for the night, but the tent was now being strapped down in a river bag to the boat. I helped her set it up last evening because she had never been camping, never strayed from the neatness of city blocks, even. After we had shoved the last stake into the ground and she unzipped the door to the tent and crawled inside, she popped her thin, white face from the dark insides of the tent and called out with a wobbly voice, "Mattie! Would you consider sleeping in here with me?"

One of the first thoughts to cross your mind is how strange it is to find a river here at all in a place where the sun is hotter than a buzzard's breath. Eight inches of rain fell this year, and this year's a wet one. More often, the sky plays cruel games and dangles sheets of rain that dry up just an arm's reach above the desert floor: virga. Some days, when it finally does rain, the slickrock can be so hot that a raindrop can fall, evaporate, rise and condense to fall again farther on. A cruel kind of cat-and-mouse game, but then, the desert can be like that.

The grandmother continued to stare at the ghost of her tent. I knew she believed that if she could just crawl inside a tent, if those flimsy walls would just take her in, she could forget this vastness and this openness that rolled out before her. I knew she wanted to curl up on her side, as if the tent were a dark, warm womb, and pretend she could stay there forever. That way, she wouldn't have to face the honesty of open space and the freedom of a lack of boundaries that could get a person lost.

The slow pace makes time seem almost geologic. Time goes as slowly as the river, and gives me a chance to study the rock, looking for the pattern of my fingerprint in the swirls the way some people try to spell out their names in the constellations.

As I ended the story, the grandmother stood and walked with a slight lean, as if she were using a cane—but she wasn't—over to where her tent and her sleeping body had rested overnight. She bent down and, with a single finger, touched the sand that withheld any sign she had been there. She looked confused.

In this country it is best to leave no tracks.

Two days later, we approached the Westwater Canyon ranger station where we were required to present our permits. Anyone can float through Ruby and Horsethief canyons anytime they wish, but Westwater's traffic is controlled by permits. River rangers in lonesome canyons like these have the reputation of being slightly eccentric. One of the rangers at Clay Hills on the San Juan won't answer his radio, even if he's got it in his hand, unless he is addressed as "Double-Oh-Seven." Westwater's ex-ranger, Skip Edwards—who some say has single-handedly saved the canyon from mining with his activism—used to take permits and check boats wearing a clown wig, and he used to float down the river at night, checking campsites, arriving on his rounds wearing his official ranger hat and nothing more. These days, he still rides the rapids naked in his cataraft with his pet goose, Chaco (who he rescued from a rapid when Chaco was a tiny gosling), floating in the water between the tubes.

All was quiet though today, and we continued on down the river without upsetting the grandparents with nudity or clown wigs or Bond, James Bond, wannabes. We camped near Wild Horse rapid, and the world was still red. Black, fluted statues of

Vishnu schist, though, danced from the water into the air with curving shapes like women's hips and breasts, collarbones and the small of the back. The dance hinted of the black walls and the pulsing, wild water to come tomorrow.

I spent much of the evening perched on a shining black rock, smelling the fire that came from its pores, listening to the thunderous hooves of the rapids downcanyon, and watching the red cliff on the opposite side of the severe, dry riverbank. In the austerity of this landscape, I thought about life's seductive dance with death. In medieval Japan, becoming alive and becoming dead were an extended process of growth—not the precision we try to attach to conception or to birth or to a final heartbeat. Children and the aged had a sort of ethereal, otherworldliness about them. As William LaFleur writes in Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan, “Being fully human is not determined merely by passing through a womb and is certainly not to be inferred from the mere union of a sperm and an egg. Potentiality is not actuality.”

But are we still human when we die? What if we die before we become fully human?

The early Buddhists also adopted the notion of a place of limbo for dead children. *Sai-no-kawara*, or “the Riverbank in the Land of Sai,” is the boundary of the other world, the riverbank where dead children gather. Several desolate, stone-strewn rivers that flow through Japan are named as one of these riverbanks. The forlorn rivers draw the horizon between the physical and the metaphysical, and, as I sat on the margins of one river boundary looking over to another, I found myself wondering if netherworlds, too, are affected by time's erosion.

If you look at the cliff on the other side of the river for long enough, if the light is just so, and if your eyes can see in between lines, you can find the huge profile of a wild horse's head etched by wind and water. I saw other shapes too, on the far bank, and a small, innocent face that was either diminishing or emerging from the rock—erosion over time had either smoothed over its retreat, or it was sculpting a promise, or a memory. I watched the cliff on the other side of the river, waiting for some kind of movement as the sun loosened its grip on the sky and began its slow slide down, down, down.

*Life draws a tree
and death draws another one.*
-Roberto Juarroz

I should have known there would be trouble when the nervous grandmother killed the dragonfly inside her tent at dawn. But I sat with her at the river's edge and drank coffee and watched the color slide up onto the wild horse on the wall, peaceful as if nothing could go wrong on the narrow, six-mile stretch of big rapids down the river.

I walked over to Nicky, whose eyes puffed with morning grumpiness. She scratched at a pan of scrambled eggs. "I thought it was supposed to be 'eggs to order' this morning, Nick," I said with a grin, chiding her about the menu we were supposed to be following.

"They all ordered," Nicky barked at me. "Scrambled."

We all ate our scrambled eggs, cleaned up the kitchen, and began packing. I was carrying the bags of tents down to the boats and Wil was chanting "Rig to flip!" behind me when I heard Nicky shriek, a blood-boiling shriek. I turned quickly and saw her back arched, her head thrown back in the air, and her arms crossed before her face.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO," she screamed, crumpling to the ground. I turned back towards

the river. This was her daily morning ritual—as the sun rose and its light crept toward her, she was fine, but once the light touched its flame onto her skin, she shrieked this dramatic “NO” thing, as if she were a vampire caught out of her coffin. We had all grown weary of the summer heat.

When I reached the boats, I found the nervous grandmother standing in the river, the water carving around her just below her slightly bent knees. She held her cotton button-down shirt gathered around her bellybutton in one fist, the boat with the other, and she looked at me with a weird smile on her face. Something dripped down her inner thighs, and the crotch of her shorts was soaked.

“What...uh, what are you doing?” I asked her.

“I decided to try urinating in the river. That’s where we’re supposed to go, right? In the river or in a wash?” I nodded. “Well, I got brave and wanted to try going to the bathroom here instead of using the bucket you set out by the groover,” she said. I looked at the urine trickling down her legs and through her shorts, then back at her face, trying not to laugh.

“Well, this isn’t exactly what I meant,” I said. I never thought I would have to explain to people *how* to pee in the desert once I told them *where* to pee.

Sometimes blood is black, I thought as the canyon darkened around us. The duckies were all deflated, rolled, and strapped to the rafts for the big water, so I sat on Nicky’s boat with the nervous grandmother beside me. I started to feel anxious about the grandma when, after I repeated the safety speech this morning because of the day’s big rapids and dangerous waters, she approached me and said, “You’ll have to save me.”

“What?” I had asked.

“If we flip or if I fall out, you’ll have to save me. I will not be able to do anything. I have never been swimming, even in a pool, and I am terrified of water.”

I was astonished. Weren’t there requirements to go on this trip? She was terrified of water and had never been swimming or camping, and yet she chose to do *this* trip, at sixty-eight years old—*this* trip that was seven nights in the desert and huge water. I touched her shoulder. “If you remember what I’ve told you about flipping and swimming, you’ll be fine,” I told her, almost not even believing myself. “You’re going to have to save yourself, and we’ll be doing everything we can to get you back on the boat. But you’re going to have to save yourself.”

The grandma sat beside me now, not moving and as if she were in a trance. I looked at the water twisting and thrashing and frothing like an epileptic tongue. Thunder came from below, from the water and the rocks instead of the sky above. There was no place for a boat to stop, no place to slow down. There was no place where a person could say, “Nah. I don’t think I can do this,” because you can’t pull your boat out of the water and you can’t get out of the narrow cliffs that wall the water in.

You can’t quit because there is no way out but the other side.

So far, Nicky and Wil had flawless runs through the rapids. The grandma even started to have some fun, although I couldn’t get her to punch the boat tubes down when we hit big waves. Nicky, on the other hand grew visibly stiffer the closer we got to Skull rapid.

Skull is the most dangerous rapid in Westwater, and it has claimed more than a few lives. The river snaps to the left suddenly and oddly, “like a broken bone,” Jeff

Rennicke writes, and the run is deceptive. What looks like the correct line is the one that will take you directly into the mouth of a great, gaping, and, at most water levels, unrunnable hole. If you're lucky, the mouth will spit you and your flipped boat out on river left. If you're not, the water will slam you into the Rock of Shock, or it will spin you into the Room of Doom, a hopeless eddy that has been known to recirculate the skulls of drowned sheep and the bloated bodies of dead cattle for years. Or, the river may just swallow you whole, and you'll never come back up.

Somebody died in Skull just a few weeks ago. He flipped his boat full of family, and the water pinned him to the Rock of Shock, bobbing him there in his life jacket, water slamming I-don't-know-how-many pounds of pressure against him. The water nailed him there for forty-five minutes as kayakers tried to peel him off using ropes. But suddenly, as his family watched, the water sucked him down, right out of his life jacket. Someone I know did CPR on him for an hour.

"Let's scout this one!" Wil yelled from out in front. He caught a tiny eddy on river left, jumped out with a teenager who held the boat from on top of a boulder, and yelled for us to throw a line to him when we got close.

But we couldn't get close. The current was too strong and the eddy too small for Nicky, and she couldn't pull us in. We were on the wrong side of the river to run Skull without flipping, and we faced the wrong direction. Cold sweat dripped along with hot sweat from my forehead.

I yelled out to everyone on the boat. "We're going through this thing backwards! Everybody hang on and listen for directions!"

Terror must have given Nicky one great stroke of adrenaline because we lurched toward the eddy, the front of the boat pierced the eddy line, and Wil was in reach of the line.

“Shit,” I said. “Shit.”

Nicky shook as we scouted from above. Four kayakers shot through the rapid, avoiding the toothed hole. But the raft that followed missed the line and flipped. People scattered everywhere. Luckily, everyone surfaced below the rapid on the left.

“We say that the river is a goddess,” Wil said to our customers, looking dreamily at the water below. “And sometimes, she can be a real bitch.”

“FROM THE BODIES”
*From the blue and black bodies
that walk at times through my soul
come voices and signs that someone interprets.
It's dark as the sun
this desire. Mysterious and grave
as an ant dragging away the wing of a butterfly
or as the yes that we say when things ask us
-do you want to live?*

-Jaime Sabines, translated by W.S. Merwin

“I don’t know why people are so nervous about Sock-it-to-Me,” Nicky said, suddenly cocky from her perfect run of Skull. “Let’s hit the hole, man. It’ll be fun.”

“Nicky! Do you want me to go first?” Wil yelled from the other boat.

“Nah, I’m fine. This one’s easy! We’re gonna go for the hole!”

“Then you’ve got to pull hard as hell away from Magnetic Wall on river left as soon as you get through that hole,” he called out.

“It’ll suck us in,” I said.

“We’ll be fine—the hole’s so far to the right,” she yelled back to Wil.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, but not believing it.

We hit the rapid’s hole and the wave bucked the boat’s front end into the air. Everyone screamed in terrified delight, and water splashed us all. People were still laughing when Nicky and I looked at each other in horror.

“HIGH SIDE!” I screamed as the boat crashed into a boulder before Magnetic Wall. Bodies pounced on the raft tube that slammed into the stone as it slipped sideways up the rock; the immense pressure of the current wanted to tip us sideways and wrap the boat like cellophane around the boulder. The boat bobbed under the competing pressures, and there was a sickening grating sound, like bones being rubbed together. River bones. I smelled fire in the water.

“My oar is stuck!” Nicky screamed. The boat hovered precariously, and I looked over at Nicky, wildly trying to get her right oar from beneath the boulder. “It’s stuck under the boulder! FUCK!” she screamed, her face red as her hair roots, mouth curled into fierceness. “Mattie!”

I saw Wil coming out of the hole behind us. He pulled frantically away from our boat stuck against the rock, and we made eye contact. “Bump!” he sort of whimpered to me, knowing that “bump” would be an understatement.

“Oh my God,” I whispered. Then I yelled out, “Some of you—high side on the other side! We’re about to get nailed!” Everyone just stared at me with big, blank, petrified eyes.

Just as Wil’s boat slammed into ours, I threw myself on the tube he crashed into, but nobody else helped me. Wil’s boat flipped up my side of the boat and sent me sailing through the air, and I smashed into the boulder, face down, and slid into the water.

I thought I was upside down against the rock in the river, and I thought I had done part of a back flip in the air, but there was no way to be sure. All I knew was the great pressure coming from two directions: the water pushed a terrible weight in on my body suctioned to the boulder, and my lungs tried to push out.

I struggled wildly, my body burning from the inside out. But this pressure would not free me from its grasp, and I vibrated in the water against the rock. It was grinding me so hard I saw red, red everywhere, even though everything was also black. I tried to kick and thrash, but I couldn't move a finger because I was squeezed so impossibly. My eyes burned; my throat burned; my lungs burned. Is the river burning?

Time passes like the time of geology when you're trapped underwater. You come to know the eons of erosion, of river scraping down to bedrock. Mountain Time, eternity—these are tangible things when you're plastered on a boulder without air. You start to see patterns, and you understand that the red of life and the black of death are the same thing. In your trapped body, the wild grace of life snakes through death, the undulation of loss and celebration weaving like the waves of DNA.

My body was giving way to the river—the soft flesh giving way to the hard pressure, the hard rock of my bone giving way to soft fluid. I couldn't struggle anymore. I couldn't burn anymore.

“Take me quickly,” I said inside myself to the river. “If you're going to take me, take me quickly. This burns too much.” I thought the river asked me to be silent, so I let go, and my body went flaccid.

Life and death had been suspended for a moment—for moments, for centuries, I don't know how long—when the river whispered in my plugged up ear, *Do you want to live?*

“What?”

Do you want to live?

“What—you mean this is my choice?”

Yes. Do you want to live?

“Well...I don't know. I honestly don't know.” And I didn't. I didn't necessarily want to die, but presented with the opportunity, I wasn't sure that I wanted to live, either. I didn't admire who I was in life; maybe in death, I wouldn't have the opportunity to fuck up. Life was messy; maybe death would be neat. I had grown so weary of the struggling and the loss, of the grief and the shame.

“It's not fair! Life and death are not choices that anyone should have to make!”

And yet we all make them every day.

Freedom of choice, I have decided, can be funny that way. Our freedoms can feel limited by a choice we have to make because the very essence of a thing, like choice is for freedom, can sometimes feel like a lack of the thing—like how the color of an object is actually the one color it rejects from the spectrum. The red of the rocks is actually the only color they are not.

Grinding there in the water, breathless and timeless with the choice of my life pressed to me, I realized that what I had wanted all along was for someone to relieve the fear that I was a shameful whore and an evil baby-killer. I wanted something or someone to give me the sign that I was Okay, that I had simply made a mistake and had lived

through it. In all of the ceremonies and physical trials and promises, more than anything, I wanted someone to say to me, “You have proved yourself. You have repented. You are worthy. And you don’t have to cry anymore because you are forgiven.”

But nobody else can give me this freedom. Nobody—not a boyfriend, not parents, not a God or Goddess, not a desert, not a river. It’s something that I must choose, and I must make something good from the loss. And, I realized, I’ll have to *keep* choosing this as the feelings of guilt and shame come, because freedom isn’t a condition—like the flux of equilibrium, like the wind that etches the whorls in our fingertips and our toes, freedom is composed of fleeting moments that you can’t hold with your hand.

Do you want to live?

The beauty of life is found in the adventure, I thought. And what would beauty be without ugliness? What would wisdom be without mistake? Tell me: what would life be without choice?

Choices are the way we create ourselves; decisions are self-imposed, fluid boundaries. Having choice is what keeps us wild. And though wildness is not easy nor kind, being wild is what I wanted more than anything. Just as choice is the condition of freedom, freedom is the condition of wildness. And so choice is the very element of our wildness. Without it, we are tame, subservient, and mechanical.

To be wild is to be free; to be free is to have choice; to have choice is to become fully human.

I was dead. I was alive. I was in the middle. I saw myself in the rock, a shadow. We looked at each other in this limbo, face to face, body to body, flesh to flesh. There was a death between us.

What can we forgive?

Here. Make your choice. Free yourself. Do you want to live?

Just as I began to feel the word “yes” come from my limp body, the river peeled me from the rock. I think my first finger on my right hand was the first to loosen, and then everything else followed. The river swept me under the boat, which was still stuck on the rock, and my head popped up in the middle of the current.

I cannot tell you what the first breath felt like; but I can tell you how cheated I felt when immediately after that breath, my head went back under, and the body of a woman was pushing it there. I clawed and kicked, ripping the shorts of the woman who held me down where there was no air. With all of my rage, I gave one last kick that connected with something, and I was free.

When I surfaced, I looked directly into the face of the nervous grandmother. I spit water from my mouth and shouted this: “We’re okay! You and me, we’re okay!”

She didn’t respond, and though she was looking at my face, she wasn’t focusing on it. Her lip was bleeding. Surprisingly, coming from the margins of death, I resumed my role as guide, transforming into the confident Vanna White of the river with an outstretched arm pointing to an eddy on river left just downriver of us.

“See that eddy over there?” There was no response. “We need to swim to it or we’re swimming through the next rapid. Follow me!” I chirped and started swimming

ferociously in a ferry-angle against the current. I turned quickly to look for the grandma, who had started to follow me but had stopped.

“I can’t drag you! We won’t make it! But you can save yourself!” The current dragged me dangerously downriver, so I pumped hard as I could to the eddy. Once I was safely out of the current, I turned to see the grandmother swept away down the river. “SHIT!” I shrieked and looked upriver to see what had happened with the boats.

“Oh my...” The boats had peeled off the rocks, but they were spliced together in the front—the oar lock from Wil’s boat had pierced the front left tube of Nicky’s boat and was stuck. Most of the front half of Nicky’s boat was flat, and water stood in both boats—it stood almost to the knees of the grandpa who was bailing. Wil’s right oar had shot like a cannon out of its lock when the boats crashed; Nicky had lost the right oar stuck under the boulder, and was replacing it with her left oar, which was now useless since the boats were stuck together. Wil rowed the double-wide boat with one oar, standing to look for me and the grandma.

“Mattie! Are you okay?” he asked, tapping the top of his head as a hand signal.

“Yes!” I screamed, tapping the top of my own head. I timed my swim, and when the boats were far enough down the river, I kicked hard. So much adrenaline coursed through me I think I swam upriver, if not on top of the water.

Wil met me at the boat’s edge, and his face looked fierce and red. “Wil, get me in this fucking boat!” I yelled up to him, and he grabbed my life jacket under the shoulders, dunked me once, and pulled me up and into the boat on top of him.

“Where is she?” he asked, frantic about the grandma. I pointed downriver at the rapid and the pour-over we were fast approaching just as one of the teenagers grabbed a rope throw bag and threw it to the grandma.

I yelled out simultaneously, “Don’t forget to hold on to the... damn it!” The girl didn’t hold on to the other end of the rope, and the whole bag floated uselessly down the river. Nicky threw another bag to the grandmother and I jumped to the back of the boats with cam straps to tie the boats securely together for the rapid.

“You have to grab the rope,” Nicky called out to the grandma, who was facing us. “Grab the rope!” The woman wasn’t responding to the rope floating in front of her. She was seconds from going over a rock waterfall, and I didn’t think she’d live through it. The guests stopped watching and began bailing the boat with cupped hands—they didn’t want to see this.

Wil roared, “GET THAT WOMAN IN THE BOAT NOW!”

I sat in Wil’s boat and took the oar, preparing to row this double-wide through the tight rapid by myself. I had no idea how to do this with one oar, two partially deflated boats, standing water, and the impending death of a woman.

“YES!” Nicky screamed out. “Hold on! Hold tight! Help me pull her in!” She had grabbed it.

There she is, the One Who Gives Birth. Something can pass through stone. I place one hand on her belly and the other on mine. Desert Mothers, all of us, pregnant with possibilities, in the service of life, domestic and wild; it is our freedom to choose how we wish to live, labor, and sacrifice in the name of love.

-Terry Tempest Williams, “Labor”

“Carnage sucks, man. Carnage *sucks!*” Wil kept muttering this mantra as we all shivered, floating down the flat water, out of the black canyon, back in the red walls.

“I sort of like this double-wide,” I said, high from the adrenaline. “What is life without a reminder that we’re all trailer-trash?”

The nervous grandmother still wasn’t speaking, but her lip had stopped bleeding and some other color was washing out the waxy bluish-yellow her face had taken from the water. I tied my sunglasses strap with the lone arm dangling from it to the front of Wil’s boat as a talisman. Nicky and Wil, each of them rowing one oar, argued about steering like the couples I put in the Divorce Boats.

“Maybe we should sing together! I never get a chance to sing!” Lawrence of Arabia said excitedly. She started singing in her wobbly old lady voice, and finally, Wil could bear it no longer.

“Look, lady, now is *not* the time to practice!” We all stared at him unbelieving. He turned to me and whispered, “I have a bad-itude!”

“Yeah you do,” I whispered back. “Drink a beer.” He nodded and coughed loudly, masking the noise of the can opening.

“Guide meeting,” Nicky called. They pulled up the oars and let the boats float as we huddled together.

“Carnage sucks, man,” Wil said, gulping the beer. “I’m only running the San Juan from here on out, I swear.”

“So what do we want to do here?” Nicky asked. “We could take out at Cisco and look for another guide rig to call in for a pick up, or we could continue on and hope these boats can stay together for the rest of the trip.”

Wil burped quietly and then said, "Yeah, but if we do the rest of the trip, that means two of us will have to row through the rapids together near Moab."

"But those aren't even really rapids. White's Rapid, maybe, but we can avoid most of it at this water level," I said. "And if you two can't row together without killing each other, I'm happy to just row full time."

"As soon as we round the riverbend after the Cisco take out, there is nowhere else to take out for days," Wil warned.

"We just have to make a choice and stick with it," Nicky said.

"Let's do it," the nervous grandma said, overhearing our conversation and speaking for the first time since the "carnage." She turned to me with her now blushing lips, and I could see the river reflected in her eyes. "If I have the choice, I want to continue."

"Mattie," she said, taking my hand, "what do you want to do?"

We continued.