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BLACK DIRT, MUDDY RIVER

By

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M.A. University of Northern Iowa, 2002

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Sciences


The University of Montana

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Black Dirt, Muddy River

Director: Don Snow



The Cedar River of Northeast Iowa is one of the most damaged and filthy rivers in the nation. But despite the strain that a century of row-cropping and landscape alteration has put on the Cedar, it—and the Iowa landscape itself—is resilient, and remains wild, if confined. This creative thesis is a collection of stories that address the redemptive nature of the river, not only for the river itself, but for the people that rely on it for a connection with the wild.

PREFACE

As a kid, the only wild places, the safe places, the only real solitude I could find lay along the river. The river meant miles of wooded trails, backwater eddies, hikes along the train tracks, and secret green places in which to grow up, to watch the river flow. Iowa ranks 47th in public land holdings—the old prairie is now row crops, and there are no empty spaces on the map. But while the prairie is long gone, the countryside squared and leveled, the streams channel-cut into black scars of muddy run-off, the rivers alone seem wild and powerful enough to check “progress” and the hubris of agriculture. Indeed, the series of hundred-year floods in the 1990s are evidence of the river’s resurgent power—rapid tile drainage and the loss of wetland flood buffers have yielded “natural” disasters the likes of which no amount of engineering (barring restoration) may prevent.

The Cedar River stretches from near Austin, Minnesota, just north of the Iowa/Minnesota border, to the Iowa and Mississippi Rivers in extreme Southeastern Iowa. It winds for hundreds of miles through the limestone bluffs, rich soil, and rolling hills of Northeastern, Eastern, and Southeastern Iowa, before merging with the Iowa River and

emptying into the Mississippi between Dam 17 and Dam 18. The Cedar drains 6780 square miles, 93% of which is row crops or hay/grain fields. Throughout Northeastern Iowa the river flows at anywhere from 6000 cfs to 25-40,000+ cfs, in drought and flood respectively. Average flow in the summer months is approximately 10-20,000 cfs.

The state of Iowa itself is an engineering marvel. Little remains of its pre-Eurosettlement landscape. Of 30 million acres of tall-grass prairie, only a few hundred acres remain, scattered throughout the state. Of 7.6 million acres of mixed prairie marsh and marshland, only 110,000 acres of marshes and riverine wetlands remain. The prairie was plowed and prairie marshes drained and filled, converted to cropland. But we are still draining the wetlands—it is an active process; under most fields lies an elaborate grid of plastic “tile” that funnels excess water from the soil, directs it to grass waterways, to channeled streams, culverts and pipes that lead to the rivers.

Thus midwestern rivers, and especially the Cedar, have come to more resemble open storm sewers than natural systems. Eighty percent of Iowa’s streams and rivers are unsafe to wade according to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), a state organization that is at best hesitant to raise environmental alarms. According to USGS data for 2000-2001, the Cedar River ranked 31st nationally in tons of direct source waste dumping, ahead of the Hudson, the Cuyahoga. The Cedar is the disposal system for solid wastes, water treatment centers, high-density hog lots. But the Cedar’s main contaminant issues are not cataloged as direct point pollution. According to USGS surface water quality data for 2000-2001, the Cedar, tested in its industrial banks south of Cedar Rapids, was the 5th most polluted river in the nation. Crop runoff, “accidental” hog manure confinement breaches, and reported and unreported pesticide spills are just a few

of the causes of these persistently high toxic contaminant levels. In addition to high levels of nitrates, nitrites, fecal bacteria and pesticides (in a recent study, 99 of 100 Iowan kindergartners tested positive for the pesticides Lorsban and/or Dursban in their urine), the Cedar also boasts high levels of caffeine, Prozac-style antidepressants, aceteminephen, and antibiotics.

Despite this, the river was where my friends and I became the people we are, and any one of us now, years later, will recant stories of those river times and places with a reverence and deference that borders on the creepy. We are not alone. Almost all Northeast Iowans have a special slough, ditch, stretch of river, or grove of trees that was and is important to their construction of who they are. The culture of my home is directly tied to the processes of the land, and despite fighting to do the work of “progress,” even the staunchest right-wing, pro-hog lot farmers typically hold a great understanding and affection for the land—even as they work to alter and customize its natural functions. The following is a collection of narratives about the people and regenerative powers of this damaged place, and how, to spite ourselves, we hunt the wild in this landscape, this experiment gone wrong.

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BLACK DIRT, MUDDY RIVER

TADPOLES

Summer vacation yawned as wide and open as the prairie sky. While I might go to the pool with Ross Mills, or see others from school at the library, when bus 31 dropped me at the end of Jepsen road that last day of school, I walked into my own world. The June that I was eight was hot and wet, and I explored every old tin-roofed shed on the farm, built a lean-to fort of scrap metal with a padded floor of alfalfa against the railroad ties stacked behind the arbor vitae. I climbed through the cabs of the Steiger and the combine, unused in the machine shed while the men dragged cultivators through the corn and beans. On one sunny day, I climbed every climbable tree on our land, even the giant white pine in the front yard that was scarred twice by lightning. Standing in its highest crux, sixty feet above the ground, I could see over our woods, over the gently rolling hills of the neighbors' alfalfa—corn and soybeans and zig-zagging grass waterways clear to the horizon. My head swam, not from the height, but from the frightening bigness, the broad sky and sea of land, this odd angle of perspective. I stared intently at the grave cracks in the rough bark as I forced my trembling body to climb down.

July's grass was thick in the yard. Afternoons stretched out on the lawn, blades of grass tickling my ears as I stared at the sky until I saw spots. Our farm was actually my grandparent's farm; we lived in the little brick house that my mother grew up in, and my grandparents lived in the big white house, in which mom's grandparents lived before them. The rhythms of the farm had been established in the forties. Not much was expected of a kid, a few chores; my main job was to keep myself entertained.

The last time the crick had not run dry by summer I was too young to take the half-mile walk along the road alone. Now, walking in the bare sun, my Keds scrunching the small ground gravel along the shoulder, I felt free, but exposed, alone on a road that stretched farther than I could see. I was big enough, I told myself, and placed foot after foot down the hill, to where the crick ran from our waterway through big ceramic drainage pipes under the road and met the drainage from our neighbors' pasture on the other side. I climbed through the deep ditch, the wilderness of grass and cattails biting hard and rough against my legs and shoulders. Red-winged blackbirds made me duck, almost turn back. I carefully worked my way over the barbed-wire fence into the pasture.

The cows were black and big, but far enough away, and here a small pool undercut the dense grass and black soil. Tadpoles writhed like meaty commas in the water. I tried to catch them. I'd try, stop, watch, try again. And then, wriggling slimy in my cupped hands, I had one—just like from some science filmstrip, but with shiny eyes and flexing gills, its tail translucent on the edges with spots and veins. Its struggles tickled my fingers. I dropped it back in the pool, and ran back to my house.

My mother tried to tell me some story about when she and aunt Jan were little and raised tadpoles in an old livestock trough one hot summer, but I didn't want to listen. It sounded too much like the standard lecture on responsibility, maturity, and privileges. After much pleading she relented, granting that holiest of indulgences: permission. She was still trying to talk about the tadpoles when I ran out the door. I returned to the pool like I owned the place, with my old wagon and six plastic gallon milk jugs.

Kneeling in the rough dusty rushes of the crick, I filled the jugs one by one with brown water and tadpoles, carefully negotiated the barbed wire, and didn't spill a drop. I slowly pulled the wagon clattering up the road, through the back gate, into the yard. Behind the chemical house was a weathered metal barrel; I rolled it behind the old feed mill, past the grain bins and the dryers, the corncrib, up the gravel back drive past the duck pens into the back yard, skinning my knee once when I tripped. I filled the barrel half way with water from the garden hose. I emptied the milk jugs into the barrel.

The next weeks I watched what tadpoles do. They darted near the surface. They hovered with their tails barely twitching. Tadpoles grazed my fingertips when I held my hand still in the water, zipped away when I curled my fingers, reaching. I put an old window screen over the barrel, for shade. Occasionally I tossed in a handful of grass gone to seed, thinking maybe they'd like that. In the mornings I'd lift the screen and check the tadpoles, standing on tiptoe to reach my face close to the water. They were changing, some of them were, growing legs with their tails still waving, their heads changing shape, shrinking. Every morning I would watch the tadpoles, in the afternoon do something else.

One cool morning after a heavy rain, I lifted the screen and a toad hopped onto my wrist. I stared. It was smaller than a penny, grey-green against the pink of my skin. It squatted, still, new, with barely a nub of a tail, and tiny folded rear legs, tiny little toes. A set of bumps rose on its hips and by its shoulders. There were tiny spots in rows between the ridges between the bumps. Its forelegs curled around my thin blond armhair. Its mouth small, a distinct white throat. Pinprick nostrils, and black shiny eyes. Here was a discrete, whole, other life. I watched it blink.

I propped up the old screen with a stick from the white pine, notched the gnarled limb into a dent in the bottom of the barrel. There were more tadpoles still swimming, with shorter tails but real legs, arms, toad heads. I thought they could climb up the stick and jump out when they were ready. I thought they would escape to the garden.

I worked my first paid job for grampa. I walked beans for 30 hours the next week—hopping the rows and hoeing or pulling weeds and volunteer corn—in return for 5 2-lb. bags of Snickers. There had been a candy sale at Woolworth's. Every morning I got up at six, did my regular chores, and rode in the back of the pickup to a remote section of field that I had never seen. Each day I was dropped there, alone in the field with a mason jar of ice water and my great-grandmother's hoe, rounded and sharpened to a silver half moon. Around noon my mother would arrive in the pickup, bucking along the rough endrows with my lunch beside her on the dusty bench seat. At suppertime it was back to the farm in the back of the truck, to hose the black dirt from my legs and hair before Mom would serve me macaroni and cheese or tater tots with some sort of meat.

It was hot in the field that week. The thunderstorms built in the west through dusk and it rained hard and windy in the night. As the sun grew high over the beans, the wet black dirt sent up waves of moist heat. The wind died, the sun beat, and the chest-high canopy of beans knotted together across the rows, across my body and shins, shimmering mirages in the distance. The dirt coated my sweaty skin as I hacked at stout milkweed or yanked at the base of ditchweed that overmatched the cut of my hoe. At the end of the week, grampa picked me up early, said it was too hot, and took me home. I got the Snickers, took a shower, and rode to the grocery store with Mom, in the air-conditioned Toyota station wagon.

We were walking up from the front gate when Mom said, “What’s that stink? Is something dead?” and raised her eyebrows. I ran around to the back yard, balked at the stench, walked toward the barrel.

The smell was thick and fruity, heavy, hanging in the air, seeping into my pores, grasping at my clothes. By the time I was an arm’s reach from the barrel I had my t-shirt over my nose, covering my mouth, trying to filter the air. But I could still taste the smell, like a hundred dozen nightcrawlers left in a car in the sun. I awkwardly removed the screen with one hand and looked in the barrel.

The stick had slipped. The screen, no longer propped open, had trapped the toads in the hot barrel. Not even the algae had lived. At the top of the stick, clustered in some places three deep, were shriveled bodies of dried-out baby toads. The water was a congealed mat of bodies, metamorphosis gone rotten. Thousands of tiny, shiny lives.

I ran and told my mother. She told me to clean up the mess before I went to bed. After debating several methods, I shouldered the barrel over, hosed it out, rolled it away.

But the dead clung to each other, in a grey mass matting the ground, blanketing the stick. I washed it all away. Sometime near dark, hours after the stink was gone and the last tadpole was soaking in the wet, black dirt, my mother called to me to come in. I was still holding my shirt over my nose, my right hand locked around the end of the garden hose, my thumb knuckle white from the pressure and the cold, pressing down on the stream of water. I could not let go.

My mother knew about the screen. She knew I didn't check on the tadpoles. She knew about the beat of a baby toad's heart against pale young skin, and she let it, made it happen anyway. Maybe I learned a lesson, or maybe learned how to learn, but that's not what I remember. I remember the loss, the hot pain of my hand locked around the garden hose, and how, in the half-light, the broad heavy blades of grass shone silver.

HIGHVIEW FARM

My youth passed in seasons, and seasons came in places—the same places as it had for my mother and grandfather before me. August meant lying in the twilight in front of my second story window, listening to the drone of the cicadas in the maple outside. The screens were new when my mother was a child, odd things with green angled flatwire slats, separated each inch by vertical stripes. Grampa bought them to shade the room from direct sunlight the years before the maple hadn't yet grown to shade the house. October was raking pine needles and leaves into the garden, and burning them in great smoky piles. January meant tunneling through the twelve- or fifteen-foot snowdrifts piled by the cold wind against the north windbreak. April I spent watching the dirty black snow melt into little rivers, sometimes carving a tiny, fleeting canyon between the orchard and the pines. June was a long blue sky, and soft, cool shade grass.

I have vague snapshot memories of the house in Sac City where I lived the first year and a half of my life. Blue shag carpeting, a red firehat sticker in my bedroom window. Green vinyl chairs at the hospital when my sister was born. The long cord on the phone in the kitchen. But I don't remember being *me* in any of those places. I wasn't

me, not until the day we moved into the little brick farmhouse next door to my grandparents.

Highview Farm, at least the first eighty acres, was purchased by my great-grandfather Will Isley in 1918. The previous century had seen the conversion of thirty million acres of Iowa prairie and wetlands into farmland. Will's plot was new cornfields and unplowed pasture lands around the farm buildings—a house, garage, barn, outbuildings and silos. He farmed—sheep, pigs, corn, cows—and he paid off his loan. He married Katherine, and my grandfather was born in the old farmhouse in 1923. As grampa grew, he worked the farm. Great-grampa didn't trust corporations, didn't trust stock, told Grampa at an early age that only the fatcats profit. He wasn't big on banks, either. When the stock market crashed in 1929, Will Isley's money was safely stashed—maybe in Cedar Falls Bank & Trust, but more likely in the floorboards of that old farmhouse.

My grandfather worked the farm with his dad, attended school in a one room schoolhouse that he had to walk to uphill both ways. As the national economy tanked and swooned and tanked again in the thirties, Will Isley's farm made a steady profit. It was hard work. A successful farm required a farmer successful in all aspects of production. Corn was the primary food of livestock, grown by each farmer to feed his hogs and sheep. Iowa's fertile soil resulted from the composted millennia of tall-grass prairie. But from prairie to row-crop is an engineering leap—these prairies were pocked with marshes, fens and potholes, and because of the general flatness of the landscape, every spring, every rain would gather in low-lying parts of fields. When, between 1850-1900, the prairie was wholly converted by the plow, the big marshes of Iowa were all

drained and converted to fields by digging channels and ditches and culverts. But each field still had its wetspots, cattails and cricks, and these areas constantly needed draining.

The answer was tile—ceramic tubing laid in trenches—that would channel the excess water to the streams and rivers. There was always tile to fix, trenches to dig—a farmer in Iowa didn't drain the wetlands (they come back) as much as he engineered a new drainage for them. Will and my grampa, George, spent back-breaking summers digging trenches in the black dirt, laying heavy tile. For my grandfathers, corn was the destiny of the prairie.

When Will was a child, harvesting the corn was a slow, laborious process, involving chopping off the stalks, and bundling the corn into shocks to stand and air dry. If corn stands in the field too long, the ears drop to the ground and rot. Although dry to the touch at harvest, unlike sweetcorn which is picked young and wet, field corn still contains enough moisture to rot in storage; thus the corn air-dried in shocks or open-air silos. When my grandfather was a child, picking the corn meant drawing a wagon through the field with horses and picking the corn by hand, throwing the ears into the wagon. The ears would then be shucked and loaded into the corn crib to air dry. Later they would be ground for feed, or shelled in hand-machines for grain.

Grampa tells a story of corn shocks every Halloween. One fall when he was a boy the front field stood crisp with frost and the shocks of corn cast scary shadows. Great-grampa had heard that some liquored-up high school kids, probably Catholics since a good English Presbyterian certainly wouldn't do such a thing, were riding into the county and knocking shocks over as a prank. Will put on some old clothes, a wool cape with a high collar, and a wide-brimmed hat. He waited by the window, saw a Ford roll

past the driveway, kill its lights. He trotted into the field, and when the kids came to topple the shock he hid behind, he jumped out with a growl and a flourish, waving a scythe in the air. The kids screamed and ran to their car, and in their haste, drove right into the deep ditch. Great-grampa laughed as he pulled them out with the old Allis Chalmers tractor.

On Highview farm, the Isleys raised sheep and plenty of hogs, turned some cows out to pasture each day. The livestock required feeding, tending, breeding, fence fixing, clean bedding, butchering, shearing, dressing. Will spent each day working fields, repairing equipment, tending buildings or livestock. My grampa's chores started in the cold, hours before daylight.

In 1939, my great-grandfather's family—wife Katherine, daughter Wilma, son George—moved into the old garage, and the old farmhouse was lifted from its foundations and sold. They dug a new foundation, and Will designed and built a new big white farmhouse. The old one was moved to a site along the highway to Fredsville, and someone we don't know lives in it now.

My grandfather had a choice of either going to college or staying and buying into the farm. Will would have liked his son to go to school, but George stayed home to work the fields. When the war started, Grampa thought about becoming a Navy fighter pilot, but didn't. At the end of 1941, Grampa took his savings and a \$4000 loan from Will to buy the eighty acres to the east at \$150/ acre. Isleys now owned the southeast quarter of Section 17 on the Cedar Falls Plat.

George married Lorraine Nielson, my grandmother, at the Little Brown Church in Vale, in Nashua—the same church from the smarmy song. They built a small house with no running water in the orchard behind Will and Katherine’s white house. Wartime was rough on the farm, to hear my grandmother tell of it. Metal was scarce, scrap metal went to the war, and canning garden vegetables was even more important, due to the dearth of canned goods. Just before my Aunt Jan was born, Grampa had saved enough money for a refrigerator, but they couldn’t get one because appliances, and metal things in general, were still scarce. They petitioned the state, but heard nothing, and then went to Montgomery Ward and pleaded with the manager, argued that they needed a refrigerator to keep milk for the baby. The Wards man came through, and later, so did the state, and they bought two refrigerators—one for the white house, and one for the tiny house in the orchard.

The farm produced wool and mutton, corn and pork. Demand was high. The Isleys were frugal, and they lived a largely self-sufficient life. American postwar Progress translated to rural Iowa as the farm modernization movement—and the changes on Highview farm exemplified it. In 1945 and 1946, the Isleys built a new hoghouse of red tile brick, and a corn crib of hollow red tile brick. In 1947, construction began on the barn, a red brick hulk with long, arching, cathedral rafters made of pressed wood by the Rilco company up in Austin, Minnesota. That winter, construction also began on the little brick farmhouse just to the west of the big white one, at the eastern edge of the cow pasture. By summer of 1948 construction was completed on both, and by the end of 1949, they had also built a four-stall brick garage, selling the old building to the Bulhuis’ up the hill. It still sits next to their barn. A mill was added, to grind feed for the

livestock. By the time my mother was born in 1950, the oldest building left standing on the farm was the 1938 red machine shed back behind the barn.

When they were old enough, my mom and her sister worked chores; within a few years after his birth in 1955, my uncle Gaylon did too. To listen to my grandmother tell it, they had an idyllic childhood of hard work and play worthy of a Norman Rockwell painting. My mother insists their youth smelled a lot more like sheep shit than any magazine cover. They rode to school in a makeshift school bus—a livestock truck with folding chairs and lingering odors. It was hot in summer, and cold as hell in winter. All year the kids raised geese and ducks for slaughter at the holidays. The Isley kids sheared sheep, hauled pigs to market, milked their cows, and made hay while the sun shined.

The Iowa countryside then was full of livestock—Highview farm was mostly sheep and pigs, with a bit of corn, mostly for feed. There were no soybeans. The Isleys rotated their crops, turned their cows out into fields in fall. Hundreds of sheep, dozens of hogs, and quite a few cows roamed the partitioned farm by day, and were penned in the barn or hoghouse by night. Will and George even started breeding farm dogs, English Shepherd mutts, and turned the new garage into a dog barn, Highview Kennel. An old plank and raingutter contraption still leans against the wall of the barn, its shoestring and leather straps tattered and rotten; over the years Great-Grampa Isley put hundreds of dogs out with ether, strapped them to that plank, and neutered them with an ivory-handled straight razor.

In 1962, Great-Grampa Will was killed in a head-on collision with a drunk driver on a hairpin-curve in Kentucky while visiting his sister. Great-Grandmother Katherine

took it hard, and rattled around in the big white house. She moved into the little brick house several years later, and my grandparents' family moved into the big house. Great-Grandmother moved into the Lutheran Home two years after that. The farm kept rolling. Sick of the sheep, George farmed more grain, renting and farming the Lewis 160 across the highway to the south, and in 1965 paid cash for the eighty acres to the north. Then, when my mother was in junior high, the combine permanently changed the agricultural landscape of Iowa, and Highview Farm.

By my mother's time, they had a corn-picker, a two-row tractor attachment that ripped the ears from the stalks and moved them on a conveyer belt to the wagon behind the tractor, and the ears would still be dried whole in the corn crib. After drying, if they used the corn for feed, they ground the cobs in the mill. If it was to be sold as grain, they rented a big corn sheller, a motor-powered grinder someone hauled out to the farm. It would grind the kernels from the cob, and the grain would spiral up an auger into the truck, to haul to a co-op in some town nearby, to sell by weight. The chaff would blow pink in the wind, the cobs would be hauled off somewhere to be used as bedding or fuel. The kids shoved long poles through the hollow bricks of the corn crib, poking out fat, confused mice to dance for ten or twenty waiting cats. There are always cats around the farm, and there always will be, as long as city people dump their litters in the first ditch outside of town.

Then in the mid-sixties, Highview farm got its first combine, a two-row model. The combine was a combination picker and sheller; it pulled the ear from the stalk, shelled the corn, and augered out grain, all while rolling down the rows. In as much time as it took to just pick the corn, they now had shelled grain. This presented a storage

problem, as the kernels were still wet enough to rot, yet would fall through any open air drying system. The result was the grain dryer; a large rectangular bin with a rolling drum inside like a clothes dryer, but huge, with large, loud, high powered blowers on the end.

My grampa went for the grain. The corn crib was lined with steel, and he bought a grain dryer. He added new grain bins to the old grain bin from the forties. He built a grain elevator to move grain from dryer to bin to truck when the market was high. The pastures became corn fields, except for a half-mile strip he drained and leveled and turned into an airstrip. He had learned to fly in the early sixties, stored planes for the old-timers from town, and flew himself, in his spare time, snapping aerial photos of the farm and his fields. He wouldn't own his first plane, a Cherokee 140, until 1972.

My mom went off to college at the University of Iowa in the late 60s, where she met my father. I was born in March, 1972. We lived in a blue house in my dad's hometown of Sac City in northwestern Iowa. The house had ants. Sac City was the site of a terrible Army massacre of Indians, and home to the World's Largest Popcorn Ball. Dad worked as an activity planner for the mentally disabled. Mom worked recess duty at the school. They both had sociology degrees, my dad a poly-sci double major. He ran for mayor either shortly before or shortly after I was born, and lost by seven votes. He had taken a full-page ad out in the Sac City Sun, but the man who ran the paper was the brother of the incumbent, and the ad ran the day after the election. When I was two, a school bond issue failed for the Sac Schools, and the school was condemned. My sister was born, and the kindergarten was meeting in the hatchery on the outskirts of town. My dad got a planning job at Goodwill over in Waterloo, and we moved into the little brick

house next door to Gramma and Grampa in fall of 1975. My parents only planned to live there temporarily. We stayed fourteen years.

It was raining when my mother told me to wave goodbye to the old house out the back window of Dad's blue Nova. Then there was a clot of cleaning at the farm, particularly the old fruit room in the basement, and the dog stuff in the unused garage stall. They found my uncle's kid-sized snow shovel, blue paint flaking off of rust, and it became mine.

The farm got big. In 1975, Highview Farm was 240 acres, but Grampa and Uncle Gaylon farmed three times that, renting fields across the highway, and over into Grundy County. Gaylon had tried ag school, but couldn't stand taking classes in how to grade eggs. He wanted to learn real ag business, and did, by coming home and buying his way into the farm with work, as his father had. But as "better" production yielded more grain, grain prices dropped, and it took a lot more corn to support a successful grain farm. This meant a lot of land to grow that corn, and bigger and more farm equipment to do more and more at once.

Highview farm went corporate—Grampa and Gramma and Gaylon formed a limited corporation, Isley Farm Limited. Isley Farm took massive loans to buy monstrous farm equipment that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Farm built the largest grain bin around, and built a 100-foot grain elevator that towered above the fields. My grandparents and uncle were the only owners of stock, and drew salary from the Farm. The Farm bought a spray plane, and built a chemical-mixing house, and hired a

pilot from near Forest City to fly the cropduster. They created another business: Ag-Air Ltd.

I remember the day they got the magnetic Ag-Air signs for the sides of the trucks, and Grampa let me slap one on the side of the El Camino. We rode into town, sign crooked on the door, field dust blowing in my eyes. The sun was bright on the sidewalk in downtown Cedar Falls, and my dad bought shiny chain and big eye hook screws at the Coast to Coast hardware store. High up on a ladder in the still summer evening, Grampa helped Dad drill and screw those eye hooks into the fat overhanging limb of the towering white pine by the front gate. They cut a board, painted it white, and made a swing with the chain, right where my mother's old tire swing hung in the fifties.

At sun-up dry summer mornings, the sprayplane took off from the airstrip. It was window-rattlingly loud, the heavy load of liquid pesticides vibrating and the engine roaring. The men, including my dad on weekends, flagged for Ed in the plane. Sprayplane pilots don't automatically know what field they're spraying, or what swath they're on—it was up to my dad and grampa to guide the plane with the El Camino, or the old pickup, both equipped with flashing orange lights that Ed could see from the sky. Grampa rigged some sort of counter—a tap on the tires hooked to a dial on the dash—to give accurate read-outs of distance so that both flaggers would remain parallel on the gravel mile-section roads. I rode along a couple times, and it was dusty and boring as hell. Gaylon worked the fields, and rushed back to fill the sprayplane every couple hours.

Isley farm bought eighty more acres to the north in 1979, and Gaylon moved from his crash pad in town to renovate the old rotting farmhouse on the new section of land. I spent the hottest summer of my life helping shingle his house, and then the old red

machine shed. He bought a cherry red Corvette, after a string of Firebirds, but was afraid to drive it on gravel. He didn't want to chip the paint. He would drive it slowly across the waterways of the fields to race up and down the grass airstrip. Before long, he sold it back to the guy he bought it from.

In 1981, the Farm paid cash for the eighty-acre field between Gaylon's and the 1965 north section, and Gramma still protests the \$4200/acre price tag. Isley Farm Ltd. now owned the eastern half of section 17, and a slice of 16, too, 400 acres in all. Grampa and Gaylon farmed a total of close to 1200 acres. They worked from two hours before light until after dark in the summers, tending their own fields and running Ag-Air. Filling the plane was like a pit stop—fast, efficient, with lots of big hoses with special fittings and clamps. The chemical house smelled sweet and synthetic. Gaylon could identify a brand of pesticide from a mile away by smell. Ed clipped a guy line once, and lost a wing. That wing sat in the hayloft for a year. Ag-Air bought a new sprayplane.

In the fall they put in the same hours combining and drying grain. In the winter they repaired their machinery, in the spring, geared up for another go-round, all the while hauling grain to ADM in Cedar Rapids to sell as the market dictated. The prices at the local co-ops were always a few cents off the big buyers a hundred miles away. The weather was always against them. Too wet to work the fields, too dry for the corn, too windy to spray, too much erosion in the winter. Grampa seemed to take it in stride, but Gaylon was young, a perfectionist, and worked nonstop at worrying.

Grampa was the soil conservation commissioner, and Isley Farm was among the first to use terraces to prevent erosion. Between the forties and the seventies, the state's

tractor agriculture boom, Iowa fields lost up to two and a half feet of their original rich, dark, prairie compost topsoil to erosion, down to the Mississippi Delta. Grampa was always at the forefront of ag-conservation, contour plowing, minimizing pesticide use starting in the early seventies by employing bug-counting entomologists to identify which insects to spray for, instead of blanket-spraying for everything like some farmers still do today. He and Gaylon contour planted the rolling fields to minimize run-off down hilly crop rows, pioneered low-till and no-till planting, constantly retiled the fields with the rolls of new, black plastic tile.

Iowa's soil is some of the most fertile in the world, and the landscape is largely flat, making for ideally tillable farmland. Two hundred years ago, Iowa was millions of acres of tallgrass prairie, pocked with fens, marshes, potholes and sloughs. From the beginning, there was tiling, and my grandfather remembers digging trenches with shovels and backhoes with his father, laying ceramic tile to drain the wetspots into channels, culverts, cricks, streams, into the river. The troughs of the fields became grass waterways, a place for water to drain while minimizing soil loss. As rowcrop farming went huge, a uniformly and sufficiently dry field became even more important—spots that are too wet slow and stunt plant growth. The entire field must be ready to harvest at the same time, and there's always an eye on the yield. Not to mention the hassle of getting a tractor stuck in the mud. Gaylon began taking aerial photographs of the farm with special film that showed the wetspots, hotter and more moist, glowing red in the fields. They incorporated terraces into the tiling, digging trenches, laying black plastic tile, and building mounds over them that would run as grassy stripes into the field, to catch and drain water before it could wash the soil away.

Isley Farm was among the first in the country to use computers, and it got them on the cover of some computer magazine in 1983. They bought one of the first, most expensive personal computers on the market, and my mother helped Gaylon set up databases and spreadsheets that not only kept the books, but calculated dry grain weights, moisture contents, yields. The Farm had a big pit dug and a gigantic steel-girder and cement weigh scale installed. They weighed all their own grains, kept careful record on every aspect of production, kept current with farm technology and machinery.

When I was little, I followed Gramma around the yard, watched her work the garden, and she told me about the trees. The yard was several acres of deep lawn surrounded by fence, some chain link, some old rusty arching wire with old creaky gates. In and around it towered seventy foot white pines, a huge windbreak of spruce, crab apple trees, plum trees, pear trees, a cherry/apple tree that my grandmother grafted and explained to me.

At first, I wasn't allowed outside the yard, what with the heavy traffic of tractors, grain trucks, planes. Queen, the yellow English Shephard, stood outside the gate and barked if I tried the latch. By kindergarten I had free range of the windbreak and the hedges behind the bin—although Queen wouldn't let my sister out of the yard, and followed me with a suspicious eye. The windbreak was scary—the tall spruce creaked and whined in the slightest breeze, and roared and rocked in any wind. One tall, lanky tree bore rotten old boards nailed in a ladder up the trunk. My mother and aunt used to bounce on a low-hanging limb, pretending to ride broncos. Gaylon built a tree house up

there, reduced by the weather to a couple splintered 2 x 12s by my day. Mom forbid me to climb the ladder.

The trees held other history. The playhouse by the garden, a tiny, dirty red mini-house on pallets that my grampa had built for my mom and aunt, complete with sink and curling old floral linoleum, sat beneath the behemoth bows of the tallest tree on the farm. The trunk of the white pine, at least six feet in diameter, split into a mighty V three feet from the ground. In that crux, great-grampa had set the blade of a hand-plow, a triangular walk-behind iron thing, after plowing the garden one spring. By the next year, the tree had grown around the blade, and claimed it. When I was little, I would hang from the handles and spin the big wheel that still turned free.

The white pine by the front gate was nearly as tall. At its highest crux there was a steel stake, a fence post, trailing some rusty wire from a rust-locked pulley. When Gaylon was a teenager in our little brick house, he ran a wire from the tree to his bedroom window as an antenna for his ham radio. Two white scars ran down the spruce next to the white pine—a bad lightning storm that prompted Grampa to cut that old wire. About forty feet up the concolor fir between Gramma's house and ours, I found the balsa wood skeleton of an ancient kite. Half-way up a Norwegian spruce in the windbreak, I found the partial skeleton of a cat, likely mauled by a coon or a weasel.

There was always dead stuff to poke at. Birds in the windbreak, or pigs waiting to be buried, rabbits that Grampa shot and tossed onto the lip of the barn roof so the dogs wouldn't get into the carcass. Once mom ran over a den of baby rabbits with the lawn mower and they screamed. Late at night one fall I woke to a shrieking like a parrot or a grieving widow. In the morning, every duck and goose grandma raised, over thirty in all,

was slaughtered; a tracker showed up, and identified the print as a bobcat. He killed it two weeks later near Eldora, just before they were listed as Endangered Species in Iowa. That was the end of poultry on the farm for a few years.

Around third grade, we got ducks again. They were for me to raise. We picked six ruans and two mallards from the hatchery. I fed them cracked corn from the mill, and herded them into the pens in the orchard each night. When the small, wiry mallards bred with the fat ruans, it produced a big meaty duck, not prone to flying. For the first couple years, we clipped their wings in fall, and within a couple generations they were domesticated, but not tame. I rose every morning to feed and water them, turned them out of their pens into the long grass beneath the Norwegian spruce of the windbreak, herded them in and counted them each night. One year, I had 112. Each November, all but six or eight hens and two or three drakes were slaughtered. I held the wire cage full of ducks while my dad chopped off their heads on the old stump out by the hog house. I didn't much care for that part. Then my grandmother and mother, for a duty of a couple ducks each, cleaned them. We took an ad out in the paper, and sold duck to city people at Thanksgiving and Christmas. I made hundreds of dollars. I liked that part.

Grampa was always doing something—building something, taking something apart. In the fifties, he built sprayer rigs and sold the designs. He built a removable bucket-loader for their early tractor, and sold the design to the Calhoun tractor company. Over the years, he constantly modified and souped up their old tractors, owning a string of Allis Chalmers, Massey Fergusons, Olivers, International Harvesters. He maintained Will Isley's bias against John Deere's until all the other tractor companies went under, somewhere in the late seventies-early eighties.

As I got older, I followed Grampa around more and more. I rode in the combine with him, climbed up the ladder into the back of the big blue truck, the straight truck they used to haul grain from the field. I would climb and play in the smooth cool corn at the front of the truck while the swing arm of the combine churned a yellow mountain into the back. When he made stuff, like turn signals for the combine, a light rig for the spray truck, or shelves for the living room, he always gave me something to do. He taught me basic wiring with old switch boxes and light fixtures, and a twelve volt battery. He gave me shelves to sand. When he resingled the old red machine shed, he gave me math problems to do, to figure out how many shingles we needed.

I helped him on plenty of big things, too. Grampa loved the big project. There was a pile of steel girders outside the barn, and sometimes I would catch him standing there, looking at it with a pencil and a little notepad with a seedcorn brand on the cover. He built a motor driven, ten-foot tall arching cable-suspension retractable dock for his cabin on the lake in Minnesota. A big, square, boxy grid that I used as a jungle gym became a hydraulic press after Grampa's welding torch merged it with the pressure cylinder and arm off an old bucket loader. The shop on the farm had everything—a hydraulic lift, a two-ton ceiling-mounted winch, drill presses, grinders, saws, every possible tool, air tool, spare part, pipe, bearing, chain, a weird machine that would strip a tire off a wheel. My favorite was watching Grampa weld—I got to wear a tinted visor that turned the white-hot flame blue.

The Farm sold the remaining hay in the barn, and I helped sweep the hayloft clean. It was a cavernous, arched place, and my dad screwed an old basketball rim to a sheet of plywood, bolted it to a beam. Grampa cut a large hole in the floor, installed a

staircase with a flat, floor-level door that would rise in the air and be suspended by counter-weights of gears and auger parts hanging by a cable from a pulley on a rafter. Next to the stairs, grampa built a freight elevator from scrap steel and powered it with an old augur motor. He stored stuff up there—spare lumber, the motorcycle, the snowmobile, the severed wing from the sprayplane.

When it rained that fall, I shot baskets in the hayloft while Grampa built a heated woodshop in one corner. I shot baskets even in the winter, and could sink a couple over-the-rafters shots sometimes when I played horse with Dad. Dust rose whenever the ball hit the floor.

My dad raised pigs with Gaylon for some extra money, fed and weighed and tended them when he got home from work at Goodwill. He helped on the farm as an hourly worker too, and I got to ride along and sleep in the new John Deere. When they laid tile and built terraces in the northeastern section of the land, Grampa pressed my palms into the fresh cement. My palm prints dot other concrete around the farm—the scale, the slab beneath the fertilizer tanks, the cement under the big bin.

But for all my running around on the farm, all of my learning how things worked and raising of ducks and riding in the combine, it was still somehow clear that I was not going to be a farmer. Gaylon, when I was in seventh grade, asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I didn't know, and he told me, "Never, ever be a farmer." Grampa told me he'd pay for my college if I became a corporate lawyer. It was more than their admonishments though. At school, I wasn't like the other farm kids because my parents didn't farm. I was never was a member of 4H, and as a child was not fascinated by big engines and farm machines. When my uncle was a kid, his toys were all little tractors

and bucket loaders and Caterpillars and Erector sets. I had Erector sets and Legos, but my mom gave me books and bought an Apple IIe. While the farm kids learned to disc and cultivate, I mowed the airstrip and the considerable yard. While the city kids played pick-up games and ran around their neighborhoods, I read, shot baskets by myself in the barn, and went to summer school to learn computer programming. I was supposed to leave the farm. I was supposed to go to college and get a job that paid lots of money.

In the mid eighties, the farm economy buckled under Reagan's deregulation schemes. Our farm was five miles west of Cedar Falls, a bedroom town which ran into the small industrial city of Waterloo—combined, the cities' population was about 80,000. Deregulation meant plummeting hog prices, beef prices, corn prices. Rath meat-packing in Waterloo went out of business, laying off 5,000. John Deere tractor works laid off 9,000, Viking Pump fired plenty, too. By the time I was in junior high, there were 1,500 people waiting for any opening at McDonalds. Unemployment hit 20%, one in seven Waterloo residents moved away, and abandoned houses lined downtown. When Walmart opened in the empty Woolworth-Woolco building at the mall, they had 15,000 applicants. The government handed free cheese out of the back of a truck. The Food Bank ran dry.

But the problems in the city were just a symptom of the problems on the farms. Family farmers suffered the Reagan middle-class tax hike, and years of grain export embargoes left a massive surplus of corn and soybeans. Grain prices plummeted. The only hope for a farmer was to farm more land, produce more grain, which meant buying more land, and more equipment. Land prices exploded, as did interest rates. Small

proprietorship farms took huge loans for land and machinery. It only took a couple of dry seasons for everyone to feel the pinch of their loan payments—and the savings and loans themselves, risking everything to compete with the deregulated banks that Reagan now allowed to issue loans, made riskier loans, and lent far too much money on little collateral. As savings and loans failed, they called in past due loans, and farm after farm folded. In the same speech that he explained homelessness as families enjoying sleeping under the stars, Reagan announced that the family farm needed to be run like a business, and suffer failure like any other. The hog industry buckled. Without the “grazing rights” subsidies of western cattle states, it wasn’t profitable to graze cows on \$5,000/acre land. Eight out of ten Iowa farms went under. The entire economy collapsed. Restaurants, furniture stores, department stores, hardware stores and other small businesses died. Half of the stores in town were boarded over, the mall was three-quarters empty. Iowa lost 20% of its population in ten years.

But Isley Farm Inc. survived. The Farm had amassed enough land before the crisis, and the entire Farm’s production had been converted to grain long before the utter collapse of small-scale livestock agriculture. The houses were all owned by the Farm, the utilities were expenses of the Farm. As a corporation, Isley Farm enjoyed a tax cut, and enough capital to leverage decent interest rates on loans for new, behemoth farm equipment. I started discing the fields in the fall, and cultivating in early summer. By the age of fifteen, I had visions of fixing up some old muscle car in the shop, and saving money for flying lessons.

Then in 1987, my dad was offered a job in Des Moines. He turned it down. They doubled their offer, four times his current salary. We moved in June.

No one calls it Highview Farm anymore—it's Isley Farm, and Isley airfield. Gaylon still farms it—Grampa helps out around harvest, and by doing odd jobs like running around the farm with a chainsaw, pruning trees and cutting limbs that Gaylon hires me to come load into the truck and burn in a big pile behind the unused hoghouse. The countryside is different than when I was a kid. There are no cows in the pasture across from the Farm—the pasture itself is a cornfield now. On a quiet afternoon, there is no sound of hog feeders clanking, no squealing from the farms down Jepsen road. Hogs and cattle are still raised in Iowa, but it's all corporate high-density feed lots now—giant buildings where livestock is penned with hardly enough room to turn around, and fed engineered feed, watered by sprinklers in the ceilings of the “confinement facilities” to prevent heat stroke. Any other way is no longer profitable.

I live across from the old fairgrounds where my grandfather used to take rides from barnstormers in the thirties. It's been a mall for thirty-five years. I teach at the University. I still work for Gaylon sometimes, hauling corn from the fields, mowing, following Grampa's golf cart around and taking yard work direction from the grandparents. Gaylon got married and had two kids, Katherine and Will. Last summer, Gaylon's family moved from his place a mile away into the big white farmhouse. Gramma and Grampa, who had been renting the little brick house to a family that since moved down the road, moved next door, into the little brick house. Gaylon got an English Shephard puppy in Galena, and the kids named her Curly Sue. Katherine got some ducks last fall, when Aunt Jan brought them up from Missouri. They were wild mallards, and flew away when they were grown.

Curly Sue had puppies, nine of them, on April Fools day. We took the baby of the litter home with us, a smooth coated yellow girl like Queen that we named Stella. Grampa kept a puppy for himself, and emails me digital pictures of him from six miles away. Sometimes I take Stella out to the farm, to see her brother and mother, and to visit with Gramma, who interprets for Grampa, whose hearing is shot. Stella tears through the yard with Freckles, Grampa's puppy, whipping through the thick arborvitae that Gramma planted when I was in third grade, around the garden, past the plow in the pine, Katherine's new, clean playhouse. "She sure likes the farm," I always say to Gramma."

"Yes, she does," Gramma laughs and elbows my ribs. "But she's kind of uppity now that she's a town dog."

BITE

His pilot's license was signed by Orville Wright, and he showed it off whenever he had the chance. In the twenties and thirties, Bite and John Livingston would buzz small midwestern towns in army surplus biplanes, drop from the sky to land in grassy fields, and give the locals five dollar rides to see their towns and farms from the wide blue sky. John Livingston would win the Transcontinental Air Race from New York to Los Angeles in 1928; by 1931 John was the fastest and winningest racing pilot in the nation. Bite followed his brother into the air, forming a passenger and then freight airline company with John, delivering the first airmail in Iowa, and living the life of a dashing, cavalier flyboy. But to me, Bite was the crazy white-haired old man with horn-rimmed glasses who shouted everything he said.

In the early sixties, my grandfather learned to fly. Our farm was a big one, a brick barn and out buildings and shop and mill and grain bins, with a big white farmhouse and a little red brick one. By the mid-sixties, Grampa had built himself a half-mile grass airstrip that ran along the length of the buildings and into the field to the east. John Livingston signed the petition to bury the powerlines along Jepsen Road at the end of the

airstrip, allowing safe landings. His brother Bite stored his 1946 Taylorcraft airplane in Grampa's machine-shed-turned-hangar, and flew several times a week from our farm for years before I was born.

Some of my earliest memories are of the airstrip and the planes. Long before I was told to look both ways before crossing a street, I learned to look to the sky for circling planes before crossing the airstrip. Isley field gained regional notoriety as an old time airfield, a throw-back to the days of barnstorming, when flying was a courageous, gentlemanly pursuit. Rare, restored biplanes occasionally roared in, first buzzing the airstrip and tipping their wings in greeting before circling back to land and gas up at the old rusty pumps beneath the oak tree. I took a ride once on my grandfather's lap in the open cockpit of a giant yellow one. The wind was terrible, and I was too small to look over the edge of the cockpit. When I was four, in 1976, more than a dozen old restored planes and new trick planes dropped in on their way to Oshkosh for a bicentennial airshow. And always, at least every Saturday, Bite rolled down the gravel drive in his Cadillac car, parked in the shade, throttled his plane engine up to a roar, and shot into the sky.

Bite flew like a madman. He started his takeoffs at the west end of the airstrip, in front of our little brick house, and was always in the air before he drew even with the shop—only about 150 yards of runway and roaring engine. Once he aimed his plane directly into the south crosswind, taking off across the width, maybe 30 yards, of the airstrip. In the sky he would climb and dive, roll in tight lazy eights, work stalls and falls and spins. He loved the dead-stick landing, cutting the power while he was still hundreds of feet above the runway, landing with just his stick and flaps, no throttle. He would

throttle up again after the landing, and taxi too fast down the runway, cutting the engine again as he passed the machine shed. He would coast fast, prop still spinning, rolling dangerously close to the buildings, nearly clipping other planes before jacking the handbrake within inches of the hangar wall. I know of at least one time he hit that wall, snapping his prop.

Another time, while I was spying on Grampa who was dealing with two strangers, seedcorn men who had parked their rental cars around the corner of the hangar, I saw Bite come tearing around, slamming into the Lincoln Continental, his prop chewing through the hood and roof, shattering the windshield. Bite climbed out of the cockpit, spitting mad. "What the hell did you park that damn thing there for!?! Jackass!" he hollered, shock of white hair waving in the breeze. The strangers about shit themselves, and Grampa broke into a laugh. I was told to avoid open spaces when Bite came to fly.

I made it through school fine, but lived for the summers. In summer, I was boss, safe and solitary in my kingdom, the farm. I knew every crevice between buildings, knew the tunnels through the hay in the barn, the best climbing trees. I climbed around in the cockpits of the stored planes, pretending to fly them, climbed the steel ladders into the combine and the Steiger, imagined piloting great weird space ships. Summer was the solitude of made-up adventures, the smell of sun on my young skin.

When strangers came to the farm, like the seedcorn men, like Bite, I surveiled them, kept track of where they were while trying to stay out of sight in the trees or peeking through the cracks of a shed. I'm sure that more often than not the men from Pioneer and the pilots and parachutists saw me, saw where I hid, but in my mind I was

invisible, a spy covering ground. One day of the summer between 2nd and 3rd grade, when I was sure no one saw me, Bite scared me more than I'd ever been scared in my short, sweet life.

Bite was sitting on the ground, picnicking with Delbert Jensen, another old-timey pilot who stored his plane at our field. Delbert was kind, less scary and loud than Bite as a general rule, and ran a greenhouse in town, next to the high school. He flew troop-transport gliders behind enemy lines in WWII, and stored a one-man glider, an engineless, sleek, white, elegant thing, in the hangar next to Bite's plane. Bite would occasionally tow Delbert in the glider behind his plane from a cable. When they reached the appropriate altitude, Delbert would hit the release lever, separate from the cable, and glide silently through the sky, riding thermal updrafts, maneuvering smoothly, eventually touching down without a sound in the long grass of the airstrip. On this day, though, they spread a blanket at the fringe of the airstrip, behind the shop, and brought a picnic basket—something I'd never seen them do. And they had a woman with them.

I went back to my room, and donned the comically oversized aviator sunglasses my uncle had given me. I had a plan. I rode my BMX-style bike through the yard to the back gate, past the duck pens, around the back drive to the flat cement behind the barn. The barn ran lengthwise from north to south. Behind the barn, to the east, was this stretch of cement, once the floor of the back pen for the cows that lived in the barn when my mother was a child. Now it was bare, save piles of scrap metal and the bucket loader for the John Deere. The east border of the cement slab was the back wall of the machine shed/hangar, parallel to the barn. To the south of the slab and the hangar ran the old barn-red machine shed, perpendicular to the line of the hangar, with a narrow swath of

weeds between the hangar and the red machine shed creating what I liked to pretend was a tunnel, leading out to the east, behind the big drum of diesel fuel. South of the red machine shed, on the other side of the drive, was the shop, bordering the airstrip, which ran east-west, on the southern perimeter of the farmyard.

Bite and company were stationed twenty yards east of the back of the shop, roughly parallel to and twenty yards from the big diesel drum. My plan was simple. I would sneak around the south wall of the shop, and peek around the corner. I had a pocket full of gravel. If neither Bite, nor Delbert, nor the mystery woman were looking, I planned to toss a rock onto the drive behind them—I wasn't trying to hit them, I just wanted them to hear something behind them, and turn to look. By that time, I would have circled back around the shop, and to the flat cement behind the barn. I would navigate the tunnel like some guy on Hogan's Heroes, and emerge, spying them from behind the diesel drum. In my plan, they would be looking behind them, wondering what that mysterious sound was. I would then lob another rock close to them, causing them to whirl again. Then I would loop back around the shop, and revel in their confusion, hucking another rock behind them, running, and etc. My bike was for the event of a hasty escape.

I'm not sure exactly what I hoped this plan would accomplish. I hadn't clearly defined the mission, but I knew that I needed to confound and confuse the enemy. I thought they might think they were haunted, that a ghost was toying with them. Maybe they'd pack up and leave.

I left my bike leaning against the bucket loader—purposefully not lowering the kickstand, which might slow my escape. I snuck around the edge of the shop. My heart

beat into my throat, my fingers tingled, and I had to struggle to quiet my breathing. I inched to the corner and stopped. The rock was chalky in my hand, and my sunglasses were slipping down my nose. I held my breath and counted to three. I peered around the corner, silently declared the coast clear, and tossed a rock toward the gravel drive behind them.

I didn't wait to see where it landed, and sprinted around the shop, back behind the barn, and stumbled through the broken concrete and weeds of the tunnel. Pausing to catch my breath, I dug another rock from my pocket. I was shaking from sheer exhilaration. I could taste the drama.

I crawled on my hands and knees, and stole a glimpse of Bite and Delbert and the woman from behind the diesel drum. To my dismay, they didn't seem confused, or even curious—unless thinking about ghosts made them hungry, they weren't feeling haunted as they munched their sandwiches. I lay back in the tall grass and thought for a minute. I tossed my little piece of gravel away, picked up a bigger rock from the grass. Looking around the corner, again I silently mouthed “the coast is clear.” I stepped out quickly, and this time lobbed the rock high, and waited to see it land ten feet behind them before ducking back behind the drum.

I didn't run for the shop, as was my plan. Instead, I froze, back against the drum. I needed to know if they heard that one. Maybe I should throw another rock, or a handful. I counted three, held my breath, and stuck my head around the corner.

“COME HERE YOU!” hollered Bite, not ten feet away, marching towards me, pulling his belt from the loops of his old man pants. “COME HERE AND TAKE YOUR MEDICINE!”

I shot through the tunnel and tripped, scraping my knee on the cement by the bucket loader. I hopped on the bike, tore through the yard, skidded to a stop at our back door, sprinted into the house and up the stairs, and slammed shut the door to my bedroom. I was alive and tingling. I stood there, panting, while the rush of the chase subsided into a dark, sickening knot in my stomach. Bite thought I was trying to *hit* them with rocks! Would he come looking for me? Would he tell Grampa? My mother's punishment was never as simple as a spanking or grounding, instead more resembled a psychological debriefing, an analysis of my actions—*why* would I do whatever it was I did wrong? I did not relish the idea of explaining the haunting concept to her. I didn't know what Grampa's punishment might be, but I suspected it would be similar to Bite's medicine. Oh God, what if he just turned me over to Bite?

All afternoon I sat in my hot room, sick to my stomach, while the blood congealed on my knee. My mind whirled, and I sank into a surreal trance of foreboding and dread. I watched the clock, and watched the driveway, hoping to see Bite and Delbert roll away, disappear. By four o'clock they were still somewhere on the farm. My mother called upstairs, "Nathan, your Grandfather needs you." I almost puked. It took a serious effort to put one foot in front of the other, to descend the stairs.

I found Grampa in the mud room. "Get some shoes on, and follow me."

"Grampa?" I said.

"Huh?" he asked, holding the screen door open and looking over his shoulder.

"Nothing."

I followed him into the front yard, and certain doom. He handed me a rake.

"Follow me. You're gonna like this."

Like this? How could I be punished with something I liked? Could it be he didn't know about my throwing stones at Bite? We walked out the front gate and across the drive, onto the airstrip. Bite's Cadillac was still parked in the shade by the shop.

"Now the wind's died down, we're burning the ditch." The ditch was overgrown with weeds and relict prairie grass. Grampa himself had a relict pioneer dread of the grass fire rolling across the prairie—part of his rationalization of turning a broad swath of prime farmland into a lawn grass airstrip was that he liked to keep wet grass between the fields and the buildings. Burning the ditch, a controlled burn, would ostensibly control a fire hazard, as well as help the native grasses that seemed to be making a comeback. He had been talking about it for weeks. I had been encouraging him, unlike Gramma. Burning stuff is fun.

Awash in relief, I still felt exposed on the open stretch of grass. I kept looking at Bite's car. We crossed the airstrip and walked into the ditch to the south of the farm, a deep, dusty and dry trough between the corn and Jepsen Road.

Grampa lit an Ohio Blue Tip, touched it to three snarls of grass in the bottom of the ditch, and I forgot everything but fire. The first blades to go curled in a mist of smoke, blackened by an invisible flame. Then the flames licked up in orange tongues, and the grass crumpled. A whumph, and a rush of crackling, and the tall stalks buckled and snapped, the air above the ditch wavered, and little black floaters of char wafted through the blast of heat.

"You stay up by the road, and make sure the tall grass bunches at the edges burn. Rake the fire up, and down the road. I'm gonna play down here. If the sheriff comes, tell him someone flicked a cigarette butt, and we're trying to put it out." Grampa stood on

the corn side, dipping his rake into the deep fire, dragging it along, up the edges, wincing a smile through the smoke.

Staring at fire until my eyes were hot, occasionally I got to drag a flaming rake through the tall grass. We burned a quarter mile of ditch in what seemed like minutes. We patrolled the fringes, making sure it all burned. I was staring through the ashes, absentmindedly raking through the dry papery flakes, when I heard a crunch of gravel, and there was Bite, leaning out his car window, talking with Grampa.

I was too shocked to feel anything, and I went numb. When I heard Grampa say, “Really,” and turn to me and holler, “Nathan, come here,” I dropped my rake and plodded right over.

“All right, Nathan, Bite here has a story to tell you.” I looked at Bite. He shifted his bony frame within the cavern of his Cadillac car, squared his shoulders to the window.

“I was out there eating a sandwich,” he hollered, his voice hoarse, “when a bad boy, about your size, and with a blue shirt like that one, but with sunglasses on, threw rocks at me. What do you know about that?”

“This shirt is green,” I said. “I’ve been wearing it all day. I didn’t see anyone.” I looked up at Grampa, and down at my feet. My stomach rolled.

“So it must have been some other bad kid running around the farm?” Grampa smiled.

“I guess.”

“Must have been a Huntley or a Van Hauen from down the road then, huh?”

“Must have been. I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Grampa turned to Bite. “We’ll keep our eyes open.”

Bite grabbed my arm with his papery hand. “You know what happens to bad kids, don’t ya?” I shook my head. “They turn into old, old, men. Next time I see you, we’ll work on your aim!” Bite laughed, and drove away. Grampa went back to the ditch. I wandered back inside.

I knew that I was getting off easy, and that Grampa, for some reason, was pretending to believe me. I grew a pit in my stomach thinking about it, and in silence tried to convince myself that maybe he did believe me. My shirt was green, not blue, and maybe he had forgotten my sunglasses. I tried to forget about the feel of Bite’s hand on my arm, his dry laugh. I didn’t talk much at dinner, and at my bedtime, dusk, with cicadas droning in the maple outside my window, I fell asleep and dreamt I was alone in the cockpit of a plane, too little to see over the instrument panel, my legs too short to reach the flap pedals. The engine sputtered into a stall, and I fell into a soundless fall.

The next time I saw Bite, he didn’t give me pointers on rock throwing. But he did hammer a board to an old stump and make me a bike jump. And he stood behind the barn, yelling advice to me on how to ride a wheelie. The crazy red-haired human interest reporter from the local TV station came that day to interview Bite. Bite told him the same stories of his crazy youth that he’d just told me. On the news, in the background, there was a thick column of black smoke rising from behind the hog house. That was a twelve-foot pile of ditchweed my uncle cut and burned. He sat in a lawn chair down wind with a six-pack of Old Milwaukee. Bite thought that was hilarious.

A later summer, a skunk crawled in the dryer vent of our little brick house, and took a tumble with my dad's good dress shirts. My mom smelled skunk in the basement, and heard scratching in the dryer. My uncle and his friends carried the dryer and all the ducts out into the yard. It reeked. The skunk hid in a six-foot section of duct. They carried it out to the airstrip, and my mom and sister and I gathered around with my grandparents, uncle, uncle's friends, Bite, Delbert, and some of the college parachutists who spent Sundays folding their chutes in the shade by the gas pumps. My uncle ran to the house, and came back with a .357. "Why dincha get a rifle?" Tom Damgaard asked.

"That wouldn't be sporting, now, would it?" my uncle smiled, proud and eager to test his marksmanship. Grampa lifted one end of the shiny duct, and the skunk tumbled out the other, blinking, confused, and outdoor fresh.

"Why, that's no skunk!" Delbert exclaimed. "That's a civet cat!" And it was. Instead of stripes, it had big white spots. We looked at it for ten full seconds before it sprinted off across the airstrip toward the field. At about twenty paces, my uncle took aim.

"Don't ya wanna tame it and keep it as a pet?" Bite hollered. My uncle paused to cast a sideways look at Bite, and when he looked back, the spotted skunk disappeared into the corn. I silently thanked Bite for distracting him.

We moved to Des Moines, but I still heard stories about Bite. Labor Day weekend 1987, the same weekend that was supposed to be my glorious homecoming to Cedar Falls, Bite flew a mail drop in to a ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of the first airmail drop in Iowa. He came in low, too fast, and overshot the target,

dropping the sixty pound mail bag in the middle of the mayor's speech. It bounced just yards in front of the podium, scattering the crowd.

In high school, when I was in town, we cut across Bite's house on the bluff to get to the river. He didn't recognize me. But every day he would be out there, white hair wisping in the wind, and every day he would tell us the same story about the guy who caught a three-foot catfish down there yesterday. He was the one who lay the shingles in a trail between the tracks; it was his old deck staircase that provided our access to the river's edge. I spent hours just down the hill from Bite's house, hucking rocks at an old dented switchbox down the tracks. Sometimes he would shuffle to the edge of his yard as we walked past, and tell us stories of the good-old days, the beautiful women that followed him and his brother through the towns they barnstormed. He showed us his pilot's license, more than once, with the careful cursive signature of Orville Wright.

I was in college when Bite pulled into the Magic Carwash gas station and commenced filling the trunk of his Cadillac car with high-test. The attendant tried to stop him, but Bite beat him back with a tire iron, and the cops came. Then it was into the old Lutheran Home with Bite, and into the great blue yonder shortly thereafter.

The papers made it sound like he was a feeble, crazy old man, that his mind just gave way. But they never saw the way his jaw worked a story, the way he chewed the marrow from his life's bones. Bite didn't go crazy; he was an outlaw, a wick for crazy. The legend of himself burned through him, singed his edges, burned dry.

I still walk the tracks down by the river, now and then. The shingle paths have long ago rotted away, and the staircase into the river was torn away in the flood of '93.

But the sun still beats down, and the creosote stink rises in waves from tracks, and I often catch myself pausing, listening for Bite hollering around the bend.

A young family with kids lives around there now, and it's their playing that gets me listening to ghosts. The change doesn't really bother me. I only go there to throw rocks. I can hit that dented old switchbox ten times in a row.

THE RAVINE

In a certain slant of September sun, or the heavy air of an Iowa July, a place lingers like a taste in my daydreams. The Ravine bordered Royal Oaks to the east and north. Royal Oaks was a suburb-style development, if there can be such a thing fringing a non-urban, sleepy, Victorian-styled river burg like Cedar Falls. By today's sprawling standards, it was tiny; a couple dozen homes, nicely built but relatively small, lining two looping streets. Most of its residents were executives at the John Deere plant in Waterloo, or executives at Viking Pump, down by the river. Surely some were lawyers and bankers who quite nicely survived Iowa's economic crisis of the eighties and built houses in there too. When I was little, my family sometimes took Sunday drives through Royal Oaks to ooh and ahh over the new houses of the rich. Our brick house was 600 square feet. My father's sole dream in life was to live in a house with a fireplace.

I visited Jeff's house—his father was an electrical engineer for Deere—shortly after we met in Sunday school. We must have been about eight years old. Their house was big to me, and had a huge fireplace. We muddled around for awhile, and then Jeff and I outfitted ourselves for an expedition; we stuffed peanut butter sandwiches into the

hip pockets of our Toughskins and headed across the street to the Ravine. His mother caught us, scolded Jeff, and made us go play in the back yard. Instead of showing me, he told me about the Ravine.

“It’s in the woods, and its huge! It’s a big deep ravine.”

“What’s a ravine?”

“It’s like cliffs on both sides but they’re made out of dirt and not rock. It’s steep, but you can get down it, and at the bottom there’s a stream.”

“Can you see houses from there?”

“No, it’s in the woods. It’s far away from the neighborhood. But not that far.” I imagined some grand, spectacular scene, a grand canyon, but I didn’t know Jeff very well and figured he was lying, even though his mother seemed to believe in the Ravine. I never saw it until the hot summer after 8th grade.

Most summer days that year, I biked the five miles into town to Jeff’s house, and we sat in the ultra-cold central air conditioned basement of their split-level ranch, watching werewolf movies and scanning cable for any flick that might show breasts. I’d ride my bike home by five, and mow until dark. Weekends I spent almost entirely at Jeff’s. Dave was usually there whenever I was. I met Dave in preschool when he beat me over the head with a play phone. By now, at twelve or thirteen, Dave had graduated to mild vandalism, stink bombs, and the occasional pack of smokes he lifted from his older brother; he was a good deal more fun.

By the end of July, sitting in Jeff’s super-cooled basement eating peanut butter out of the jar in front of the TV had grown old. One restless afternoon, as Jeff impatiently

flipped through the channels, I read and re-read a dog-eared issue of *Penthouse Letters*. Dave cut leather logos off his high-tops with a pocket knife, and absently burned the fringed holes at the knees of his Levis that he always wore in spite of the heat. "This sucks," Dave proclaimed, and we resolved to actually go outside. Jeff suggested the Ravine.

The air was thick and wet and the heat rose in sheets in all directions. We squinted under the weight of the sun, crossed the street from Jeff's house, cut through some rich guy's back yard. Under the canopy of trees our eyes adjusted to dark, thick shadows dappled by the July sun. Our T shirts hung soaked from our bony shoulders. We wove through the thickets at the edge of the lawns, deeper under the trees where the shadows killed the shrubs, to the edge of a steep slope. It was suffocating under the trees. The air tasted like wet dirt. It felt like a jungle, like Vietnam. We had just watched *Platoon* on HBO.

We slid down the steep slope of the ravine, maybe a 30 foot drop of slippery dark dirt and sucker trees. A stream ran trickling through the bottom. We followed it north, downstream. The brambles grew thick again and gouged our sweaty arms. Thick trees hushed our curses. For fifteen minutes of fighting shrubbery we bitched at each other over the sting of nettles. But around next bend lay the center of the universe.

We stumbled, smeared with dirt, soaked with sweat, into a pocket of grass and a break in the canopy. The stream ran six feet wide here, rock bottomed and clear. On the east bank of the stream lay a big hollow log. Across the span of the ravine, especially steep here, was a downed tree, bridging the stream about seven feet above the trickle. We climbed it and sat on the mossy log, the stream chortling beneath our dangling feet.

It sounded like singing crystal. Each direction was a wall of green, rustling in a phantom breeze. We were alone with the world, in a halo of sun.

“Well,” Dave said, lighting a Marlboro, “This is it.”

“This is what? I asked.

“I don’t know. It. We’re there.”

Dave was right. I sat and saw the golden light twinkling through the fat green leaves. The stream shined and sparked and my body cooled. But the sun was still hot on my brown skin, and I was withered, rooted, like another smooth mossy branch reaching from the downed tree. We fitted into the place, into the scene, a trance. When we snapped out of it, we surveyed the woods, found we were at least a hundred yards of dense woods and thickets from the nearest suburban backyard; no one could see or hear us. We learned the most painless way through the undergrowth to the downed logs, and over the next months of summer wore a path along the stream.

When we stole a bottle of whiskey from Jeff’s dad’s liquor cabinet to get drunk for the first time, the Ravine was where we puked up hot lunch corn. When Matt had troubles at home, we would find him here. Sometimes Jason Sweet would appear, as we sat philosophizing our adolescence away on the downed tree. Dave and sometimes the rest of us would store contraband—cigarettes and liquor—in the hollow of the streamside log. When Dave got his ass kicked by Troy Nichols, he returned to the Ravine the wiser for it. “If you ever get in a fight,” he told me, poking my chest, “grab him like this at the collar, push his throat, and punch him in the nose over and over and over until they pull you off!”

“Oh yeah? is that what you did to Troy Nichols?”

“Nope. That’s what he did to me. And then I yelled ‘I give up!’ But before the fight started, they said we’d fight until someone said ‘Uncle.’ So I figured I was clear on the technicality, and when he got off of me and turned his back, I grabbed a big rock and went after him. Then Thayer stopped me. He didn’t like my ‘Uncle’ reasoning at all. Now I’ve gotta fight Thayer on Tuesday.”

We were a strange group. Our school, like any school, was very class conscious. Our community, too, was largely divided. It was Reagan’s America, and Waterloo was Northeast Iowa’s industrial center; Rath meat-packing closed, laying off thousands; Viking Pump laid off hundreds, Deere laid off thousands. There was a 1,500 person wait-list for jobs at McDonald’s. Our school was full of kids that were either management-spawn or blue-collar grunts, and the line between the Jocks and the Grits was etched in stone. We were neither, and had run-ins with both sides. Even though we would sometimes have popular girlfriends, none of us really fit in.

But the Ravine was a different world. The more time we spent there, the more at home we were, and the space began to grow. We followed the stream downhill, under the giant stone arches of the railroad bridge, to the river, and that stretch became ours. We climbed the embankment to the railroad tracks. Here, west of town, two tracks ran parallel to the river—one track a dozen or so feet up the steep bluff from the other. Closer to town the tracks crossed, the upper became the lower. Along the lower track, someone, years before, had laid a couple old staircases down to the river’s edge. It was a tunnel down through the underbrush, the thick nettles and shrubs, to a small piece of muddy shore, some flat rocks, and a rotten dock half sinking in the river.

Sometimes we would walk west, through the heat and smell of creosote on the railroad ties, to where the woods grew dense and thick. An island rose up between the river and the tracks, separated from the rough white gravel by a thin slough of cattails and red-winged blackbirds. A mile down the tracks, a pile of rock, mud, and broken railroad ties bridged the ditch. We camped down there once, at the end of the summer, lugging a huge cooler and lawn chairs and tents through the afternoon heat, through the woods, down the hot tracks to the island. It was wild to us, wilderness, a solitary space of thick flood brush and river trees, cedars and cottonwoods and willows. We set trot lines for catfish, hacked a trail through the poison ivy and stinging nettles to the river's edge. The train roared in the night, shaking the ground, and beyond the campfire circle great horned owls hooded each other. Raccoons burgled the cooler. In the morning, smudged with mud and itching from weeds and bugs, we cooked bacon over a smoky fire. Matt reclined in the sun, Dave crunched away, grass-stained from head to toe. Jeff went to shit in the woods. I stretched, and could feel each muscle alive after a late night on hard ground.

As our range from our home in the Ravine expanded, we encountered other people scrounging around in the weedy, raggy river bottom. Everyone had their own secret spot, their own home base—Virgil Hansen and the North Cedar grits congregated in the backwater flood plane north of town; the kids from the big houses on Cottage Row knew every downed tree on the Cedar's eastern beaches, and hopped sandbars for miles when the river was low; Brett Williams and others for several blocks around first street knew the train tracks and the spooky cemetery and the old box factory on the rocky bluff overlooking the river; downtown kids knew the spillway behind the ice house, and fished for flathead catfish beneath the dam; Mike Assink and his crew of volatile dirtheads

fought with each other out at the gravel pit. We saw others, too, in the scraggly strands of cottonwoods, boxelders, and willow switches down by the river—scruffy men with feed corn hats and work shoes carrying fishing poles, river rats, railroad and foundrymen missing fingers, kids from the college with cameras and hiking boots.

Everyone seemed to have their own special ditch or clutch of wild trees—even the city kids found wilderness in weedy vacant lots—and encounters with others in the woods along the river were always hurried and embarrassed. No one wanted to reveal their inner secrets, their secret places, especially to an interloper. Even my uncle and his friends had their own secret crotch in the river, and a rumored swimming hole off in a field somewhere, but they wouldn't really talk about it. We of the Cedar Valley maintained a reverent silence about these places—almost traditional, superstitious. My friends and I never talked about it either, but we had found each other and found a place, and by summer's end I was strong and confident, nourished by my faith in the Ravine, in the River.

In the fall I rode in the back of the schoolbus, unintimidated by the older kids' stories of parties and girls. I had stories too. I had some classes with Jeff and Matt, and saw Dave in the halls. On Fridays a delicious nervousness twitched in my stomach, anticipation of the Ravine, or the River that night, football games and the smell of girls' hair. Through the Fall into Winter, we tramped paths through the leaves and snow to the Ravine for debriefings after school, rendezvous on the weekends. Even in the bitterest cold, we huddled around little fires in the Ravine.

Then in Spring, my parents announced we were moving to Des Moines. I went through driver's ed in May with Dianne, a girl that I had obsessed about since I was eleven. And then I was gone.

That summer I spent in a 12x12 room, staring at the texturized ceiling of my alien bedroom, listening to the drone of traffic on 82nd street. I rode my bike to the video arcade at the mall and played one game, over and over. In it, I was this little guy running an obstacle course. I was great at it, tripled the high score. In mid-July they got rid of the game. I almost got hit twice on my bike on Aurora Avenue by drag-racing high-schoolers. Across Meredith Avenue was a big grassy field and an old red barn. I searched the vacant lot for cover, a replacement ravine. I settled on a ring of oaks behind the barn, but by August it was subdivided and leveled for a new development of cheaply-made \$150,000 houses. I wrote letters to Dianne. I closed each letter with some sort of blue-balls-angst musical quote.

By fall I was ready for school. Urbandale High. I was ready to meet people, find somebody to hang out with. I had never lived in a city before, and had visions of after school parties and girls with red lips. Walking to school that day I felt more exposed than I ever did dodging Bite on the airstrip.

School was horribly disappointing. I was a sophomore, but my morning classes were all with seniors; Urbandale's academic standards were tailored for the football team, and by transferring there I essentially skipped a grade or two. Fourth period Biology was my first class with kids my age.

Science had always been my best subject. My junior high science classes had provided my family the excuse they needed to talk lovingly about the land and their own secret places. Grampa took me over by the crick where he found his first arrowhead when I needed soil samples. Gramma took me rock hunting to a washed out ditch near her favorite country hillside cemetery, and I found a blue and red agate in the clay ditch. When I needed to observe the stars, Mom took me to one of her favorite spots as a kid, the Big Rock, a massive flat topped glacial boulder in a field a mile away. Science gave these places meaning, validated their uniqueness.

Sophomore Biology at Urbandale High was taught by Mr. Winters, a pot-bellied, suspended, bald, black-bearded giant of a wrestling coach. That first day, he took role and stumbled over my name. He started a lecture on geology straight from my 4th grade Earth Science textbook, smearing words onto the overhead in blue pen. I fell asleep, the first time I ever slept in school. I dreamt I was falling and woke with a start; my desk jumped and screeched against the linoleum in the dead center of the classroom. I was surrounded by titters.

I tried to follow the discussion. The lecture had made it to evolution. The wrestling cheerleader behind me raised her hand.

“Mr. Winters,” her voice rose at the end like a potty-training child calling for daddy to wipe her ass. “Do we have to learn this evolution if we know it’s not true?”

Now they had my attention. Cedar Falls was a college town where even the most superstitious folks weren’t threatened by science. I had read articles in the paper about the creationists—hell, grew up watching Reagan on TV—but had never seen one my age

and in person before. A creationist in a Biology class! This would be good. I waited for Winters to lower the boom.

“Well Terri, you know and I know that evolution just isn’t logical, but the State makes me teach it. There’s a few reasons why evolution just doesn’t make sense.” My jaw dropped. “First, it means that everything has changed through mutation.” I snapped my mouth shut. “We know how rare mutations are, and they’re usually fatal, so the odds against everything mutating and surviving are astronomical.” He raised his hands above his sweaty pate, and his eyes grew big. “There just hasn’t been enough time for that to have happened!”

“But the main flaw is just common sense—everything in nature tends to break down, become less complex. There is no evidence in nature that anything ever becomes *more* complex—that’s just not the way things work. It’s common sense—everything you see is God’s work.” He shrugged and sighed. “But they make me teach it, so there you go.”

Mr. Winters sidled back to the overhead. I thought twice, hesitated, but couldn’t resist. I raised my hand.

“Yes?” he raised his thick eyebrows.

“Ignoring for a minute that it is variation within species and not mutation that drives natural selection,” my seventh grade science class spent a whole unit on natural selection. “About there being no ‘evidence’ that things get more complex: don’t atoms attract each other and form more complex molecules? Helium is more complex than hydrogen, and if you get hydrogen hot enough it fuses into helium. Don’t you believe in molecules? Don’t you believe in helium? What about the sun? What—”

He cut me off with a grunt. “This is about LIFE, not molecules. This is Biology, not Chemistry!” he said, hard and even. The class cringed. The wrestler to my right snickered. “ANYway,” he sighed, and turned back to the overhead. I sat conspicuous, with my ears burning, for the rest of the period. The rest of that first week was more of the same, and I gave up on high school.

My real life existed somewhere in my idle daydreams, in the backseat of the minivan rolling down Highway 30 to Cedar Falls. Labor Day weekend, the weekend after the first week of class, we returned home to Cedar Falls to visit. My parents would stay with my grandparents at the farm; I would stay at Jeff’s house. After months of epistolary flirtation, Dianne had asked me to Homecoming at the end of September, and this would be the first time I had seen her since I had incredulously accepted her invitation. I had a shoebox full of her letters, and a head full of ideas about my triumphant return. After three years of adolescent longing, I thought this weekend I might actually get to kiss her.

Dianne was cheerleading at the junior varsity football game. I met up with Dave and Jeff at Jeff’s house, and Matt met us in the Ravine. The log beneath my ass felt right, the rustling of the leaves in the breeze felt right, the air *smelled* perfect. It was like stepping into the sun. I was home, and we laughed and I told them about Urbandale and they were appropriately appalled and I listened to their stories of the first week in the high school, who was depantsed by whom, who got beat up, who was hot on which new girl.

“I’m surprised that you even showed up.” Dave said over his shoulder, pissing on a boxelder shrub.

“How’s that? This is MY town!”

“I’ve got third period with the Jocks, and they’re all talking about how Brett’s gonna kick your ass.”

“What?!” Brett was my best friend in sixth grade. He was the son of a cop, and, although built like a runningback, could out-benchpress the linemen. I was built like a twig.

“Brett’s gonna kick your ass for banging Dianne while they were still going out. There’s a standing warning: if you show up at the football game, you’re toast.”

“Fuck that. I’ve never touched her. She’s the one that dumped him, is he gonna kick her ass?”

“Nope,” Jeff said, “just yours.”

We finished our beers and walked to the football game. This was not the homecoming I had in mind, but I wasn’t going to let go of my glorious dreams. We would go to the game, I would see Dianne. My stomach rolled thinking about it—I told myself that I was excited to see her, not scared of Brett.

The game went fine. Dianne smiled up at me in her cheerleading uniform from the astroturf. She returned to the stands and she sat next to me, and when I put my arm around her, something swelled in my ribs and I couldn’t speak. Her parents were out of town with Jeff’s parents; she would be hosting a cheerleader sleepover at her house, loosely chaperoned by her senile grandmother. I watched her mouth as she talked. There were whispers in the student section around us.

I didn’t see Brett; the football players sat down on the field for the varsity game. I left with Jason Sweet, an old friend of mine who had transferred to Waterloo East. We

stopped at Jeff's so I could get something before heading to meet up with Jeff and the rest at a party in the neighborhood, Katie Wilmore's place—down the street from Dianne's. I would see my friends, bolster my confidence with a shot of liquor, and go see if I could kiss Dianne on her back patio with the rest of the cheerleaders tittering in the wings.

I was coming out of the bathroom when there was a pounding at the door. Sweet checked the window. "Nate, you're gonna wanna stay inside."

"What, is it Brett?"

"Yep, and Woods, and Wolf, and Witham, a couple other guys. They pulled up in a blue truck. Stay here. Stay inside." He opened the door and was gone.

I paced one lap of Jeff's family room, and couldn't take the shame. I marched out the front door.

The driveway light blared a yellow circle, and I blinked as if under stage lighting. Brett was pacing in front of Jason, arms straight down, hands balled into fists. "I told you to stay inside," Jason said. "Go back inside."

"Hey Brett," I said, and looked around. There was a blue pickup in the driveway. Jason King was kicking the grass on the lawn. I knew him from summer basketball. Mark Hamilton, a wrestler spaz I met on a church ski trip, stood talking to a laughing Jason Witham. Witham was the son of a rich car dealer, and I had spent nights at his house before, playing basketball on his indoor court. Jon Woods, whose mother was a friend of my mother, stared at me from the front of the yard. Paul Wolf, whose parents damn near stroked out screaming at referees and Paul every game they played, looked uncomfortable, like he wanted to leave. I glanced across the street, to the dark woods of the Ravine.

“Hey Brett,” I said. He stopped his pacing, and stood, half in silhouette, haloed by the driveway lights.

“Hi. How ya doin’. I’m just great. Let’s fight.”

“Why would I want to fight you?”

“I want Dianne. You want Dianne. Don’t you? Don’t you want her?”

“Yes.” I said, and I looked him in the eyes. In sixth grade he spent the night at my house, and I helped him write a love letter to Anne Crum. I broke into his Dad’s porno collection with him. I saw MTV for the first time in his basement while his brother play-fought him until it wasn’t play anymore, and Brett, red in the face, grit his teeth through tears and flailed at his brother with all he had. I tried to hate him, standing there hating me, I tried to remember how important all this was, all that he had that I would never have, just by being here, the river and friends and pickups and biceps like grapefruits. But I liked him. Then I betrayed him. All fear left me, and I felt a rush of what felt like courage, but wasn’t.

“I’m not gonna fight. But you can kick my ass if you want. No hard feelings.” I raised my palms in a broad shrug.

“No way, you’re fighting me,” he said, and poked me hard in the chest. “Come on!” He put his fists up and stared at me.

“No.”

“Come on, I’ll give you a free shot.” He uncoiled his fists and showed me his palms. “Two shots. Come on!” he pleaded. “Three shots. Anywhere.” He looked down at his groin. “If you can’t drop me in three shots, you’re a pussy.” Witham laughed. Paul looked away.

“No.”

“Goddammit! I gotta fucking hit somebody! What about whats-his-name? Freiberg? Dave?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” I was stunned, awash in relief that this standoff might end.

“What?”

“He’s over at Wilmore’s.” Witham said. I shot him a look, but he didn’t care.

“Is Dave at Wilmore’s?” Brett asked me.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, and then realized that I had volunteered Dave for a fight.

“But—” and then they were piling into the pickup and peeling out down the street. I looked at Jason Sweet wide-eyed, yelled “Shit!” and we took off sprinting through Jeff’s back yard.

Jason was a track star, but I wasn’t far behind him as we flew across suburban yards, hurdling fences and flowerbeds, sprinting across two huge looping blocks of yards, trying to beat the jocks and their pickup to Wilmore’s. The house was lit up like a castle, and music blared. We sprinted up out of the darkness of the backyard to find Dave and Brett toe to toe on the back patio.

They didn’t fight. Brett had lost his steam, and seemed defeated. He and Witham and one or two other Jocks came in to Wilmore’s at Dave’s invitation. Matt, drunk somewhere upstairs, had been yelling at the remaining jocks in the pickup, who poured up the drive and pounded on the door. I rounded the corner in time to see Matt facing off against the wrestler spaz.

“Who you calling a fag, dick!?” the wrestler yelled.

Matt responded, slowly, gravely, "My name is not Richard." Matt swung a roundhouse at the spaz, missed wildly, and fell. The wrestler was on him in a flash, pounding his face and somehow Matt's shirt came up over his head. Brett and I hauled him off Matt, threw him out into the yard. Matt was ushered away, to get ice for his face.

Soon the house was full of people, and I guzzled from a fifth of vodka. Music was blasting and there was a porno on the TV, and the jocks were harassing this drunk girl who was walking around naked. I sat next to Brett on the couch. He held his head in his hands. "I just want to hit somebody. That's all. Why can't I just hit somebody?" he mumbled. After a time I left for Jeff's and stopped at Dianne's along the way, told her and the cheerleaders about the night. I think I could have kissed her at the back door when I left near dawn, but she looked so pretty in the soft light that I melted and couldn't move. I would see her the next night, Saturday.

Dave and I sat on her front steps the next night, with Wendy Lee. I caught Dianne's eye a couple times, and it made my cheeks hot. When we went to leave to walk over to Jeff's, suddenly Brett and Jon and Witham and some other jock were all around us. Dianne and Wendy walked off ahead, and Jon punched me in the mouth when I wasn't looking. Then they left me alone, and Dave and I walked over to Jeff's.

"There's a lot of blood in my mouth. And there's a huge hole in my lip."

"That's what happens when you get punched when you have braces. Tears you up."

"Yeah," I said. "But dude, I don't *have* braces."

Back at Jeff's we discovered that when I was punched my mouth was open and my lip curled over my teeth and was sliced almost clean through. If I pulled my lip up, I could see light through the transparent skin holding my lip together. The jocks paraded through Jeff's kitchen, and marveled at the wound, before giving me a ride to the emergency room. It was humiliating.

My mom showed up from Gramma's, hysterical, demanding "Who did this? Who did this?" The doctor told her to talk to me about it later, and she turned on him. I told her, just to get her out of the room. They sewed up my lip with four stitches. It swelled to the size of cherry. They took me back to gramma's, and I slept in the spare bedroom with the portrait of Will Isley staring from the wall.

In the morning Grampa sat in his chair with a baseball bat across his knees. "Let's go get him," he smirked, only half joking. I blushed.

But it only got worse. My mother called Jon's mother, and Brett's mom had heard too, and my mom arranged some big pow-wow at Jon's house, where Jon and I had to spend ten minutes alone in his room, the time our mother's agreed it would take him to him apologize to me. I had never been so embarrassed in my life, even when I couldn't find my underwear after gym, and didn't realize they were sticking out the leg of my jeans as I walked into Industrial Arts. Jon seemed really upset, and genuinely sorry, but I didn't care.

"I don't care about the lip. You want to be an asshole, you're an asshole. Whatever. I don't care. What pisses me off is you got our mothers involved, and now I have to sit here for this!" I told him. And I didn't get to kiss Dianne, I thought quietly. I

just wanted to go, get out of the damn house, away from everyone, get back to the Ravine, to the River.

Now, years later, I have become one of the scruffy men wandering the river woods, although I don't often carry a fishing pole. I wear my grampa's old red DeKalb seedcorn hat in order to remain true to my memory. Sometimes I see high school kids out looking for a safe place for a keg, sometimes older men with shotguns or fishing poles they use as excuses for walking the river bottom. I see giant fire rings, and two years ago someone built an impressive hut from downed limbs among the brush where we camped all those summers ago. Some people still find themselves out here.

But most of the folks that used to run these woods as kids never come down as adults. Witham's a car dealer; Brett is a deputy sheriff; Matt lives in Seattle, Sweet is an artist in Manhattan. Dave works for the BLM in Idaho, and Jeff does some sort of GIS work in Laramie. There's a feeling in this town, an unspoken rule of this culture of white housewives wearing sweaters with bows and bells and quilted holiday designs, that running around in the woods is only hardly acceptable for kids, certainly not a pursuit of grown men. Thus the hunters and the fisherman and the kids with their kegs—no one wants to admit that these places are special, intrinsically important, worth a walk or an afternoon of their own accord, their own wildness. If we did view them as special, valuable, we would have to be appalled at the tires dumped in the ditches, the garbage clotting the weeds at Ulrich park, the toxicity of the river itself. It's comforting to see an Old Mil pull-tab can half buried in a sand bar, just like when I was little—not so much out of nostalgia for the filth of the past, but because the litter and dumping and the

uniform degradation of these scant, few untilled acres help us convince ourselves that these aren't special places, aren't sacred, aren't worth fighting for.

And so I return to the river alone, or with Dave and Jeff when they're in town to visit their families. We return to mourn not only the loss, the development and garbage and change in the river bottom, but to mourn the loss of a sense of loss itself; we return to regret our complacency and complicity in the destruction of our own sacred ground. But it only takes a couple hundred yards on the sandy trails through the woods, a few minutes of watching the powerful brown river current roll along, unchanged, a few seconds following the smack of a beaver's tail or the crashing of a whitetail buck through the shrubs, to forget the mourning. That same rapture and regeneration returns. The land is still there, unrepentant, still exists of and for itself.

That tenth-grade afternoon, after my mom was satisfied that Jon and I had resolved our differences with due diplomacy, Dave and Matt and Jeff and Aaron and I met down at Bite's stairs into the river. We were a sorry lot: my lip throbbed and stuck far enough out that I could see it; Matt's cheekbone was purple and frighteningly swollen. We sat in the green and watched the muddy river roll by. We threw the white rocks of the railroad at the switchbox down the tracks. Dave told a hilarious story about his brother. Jeff hacked at a green branch with his Swiss Army knife. Matt stretched out in the sun. And, despite my lip and the inglorious return to the river, I felt good, really good, for the first time in months.

Then they took me back to Des Moines.

THE WIND-TWISTED CEDAR

I was halfway across the frozen river when the ice cracked. I felt it before I heard it. It ran beneath my feet, a rumble and release, a roar like a cannon volley. The heavy sound nonchalantly rolled downriver, hushed by the thick snow in the willows and cedars and cottonwoods crowding the riverbanks. The impatient river still ran eight inches below the windblown surface and tugged at the underside of the ice sheet, slowly dragging the miles of ice. Where I had stepped onto the river, there was three feet of open water before the ice, scouring the black cutbank. Before I jumped across, I could see the bottom of the sheet, a jagged cold landscape in miniature, inverted, carved by the constant current. And now the ice sheet had buckled.

When walking on river ice it is wise to carry a branch, a long stick, like the pole tightrope walkers carry. Only on the river, the pole is a different sort of balance—it evens the nerves. Falling through a hole into the current is certain death, but if the branch spans the hole it might be possible to belly crawl, clothes freezing solid on contact with the air, to the safety of the ice, then the hurried careful walk to the shore, to the car, to the hospital for the hypothermia, alive. I had not even attempted to pull a frozen branch from

the solid snowdrifts of the woods. This thought flashed through me when the river snapped. I threw my arms out to my sides for balance. Another loud crack that I could feel, and the ice sheet rose eight inches on a fault line in front of me. Crows took wing shrieking from the trees through the after quiet, and the ice rumbled faint in the distance. I stood still, my pulse hot in my ears, holding my breath, listening.

Seven years before I came home to the river, I left my family's new home in Des Moines to go to college. That summer break I worked at Garcia's Mexican Restaurant as a busboy. A lot of the other busboys were Vietnamese refugees, and we taught them English over margaritas. Heip could speak it well but could not read and someone had told him that the word for an attractive woman was "hair pie." Chanh had been rail thin when he started at Garcia's five years before, but hit the bustub buffet harder than most, growing fat on half-lard refried beans and leftover Pollo Fundito. He would eat anything for five dollars. Once the kitchen manager fed him a six-inch serano pepper, and he drank so much water that he puked between sections one and two. We were both on fourteen hour shifts that day, and that night in the break room I saw him come out of the bathroom wincing, holding his crotch. Through the haze of my cigarette I asked him what was wrong, and he said "It hurt go in, it hurt come out!" and pointed at his ass and his groin, his face a caricature of astonishment. Bao was quiet. At some point in his hazy past someone had cut out his tongue and it never grew all the way back. Once when pocketing his paycheck, a brown photo fell from his cracked leather wallet. I picked it up. It was an old photo of a child wearing a wide brimmed hat, a man's shirt, sandals. Slung over his bony shoulder was ridiculously disproportionate belt of ammunition and

in his hands an M-16. “Me,” he said pointing at it, grabbing my arm, his eyes deep and brown. “Me!”

Anne was a waitress. She was twenty-seven, I was seventeen. When the waitresses tipped us out at the end of the night, she always insisted on tucking my wad of ones down the front of my pants. She was an Amazonian blond, an opera singer, a pianist, a jazz flutist. She made enemies easily with her false confidence and callous New-Age-Feminist attitude which belied her desperate sensitivity. But I was in her favor, and her flattery was like the warmth of the sun. Because, of course, she had Leo ascendant.

Her friend Jackie was a hurricane. Jackie had hair standing eight inches straight from the top of her head, hairsprayed into a stiff plateau. The back of her head was a maze of cornrows becoming waist-length dreads, woven with jade and colorful string and beads carved into scenes of Buddha. They took me out one night, into the dark wet streets. We went to Bags, a blues club which took its name from the thousands of department store paper bags on its walls. It was deep in the boodum, the hard part of town where the city had used concrete barracades on most of the streets from ML King parkway to Forest, creating one-way-out cul de sacs. Easier for the police to pin down the drug dealers in their low-riders, theoretically. Gunshots would ring out like firecrackers on the Fourth of July, but it didn't seem to bother anyone. We were going to see Jackie's Rasta boyfriend James play bass in a reggae band. There was someone Anne wanted me to meet.

I had never had beer from a pitcher before, had always carefully meted the contraband doses in cans and bottles. Soon I was spinning, lost in the bass, the hard riffs,

the writhing, sweaty crowd. The keyboardist had gone to music school with Anne, before he was kicked out for smoking a joint during his senior recital. His playing was tight, but he was sloppy, plump, with his hair and beard slicked into ringlets by his sweat. He looked and sounded like Joe Cocker. In the bathroom, in line to piss in the sink, I was accosted by an old Japanese man smoking crack who insisted that he was a congressman from Nebraska and that he would wait there for me to bring some dope and we'd share a joint. I told him that would be just fine, and melted back into the crowd. The band played Marley's "War," the bass thudding through the crowd and the heat, out into the night. There was a car accident outside. Jackie got into a fight with a girl who tried to steal the gold Nefertiti from her neck. Anne danced close to me.

Out back, after the show, Anne introduced me to Mark, the keyboardist, as he loaded his gear into a beat-up station wagon. "Mark, this is the kid I was telling you about—Nate. Nate, this is Mark Jung." I put out my hand for a handshake, and he batted it away, hollering "Hell, pardner, gimme some love!" and picked me up in a hug and carried me to the street, slipping in the greasy puddles of light summer rain, collapsing on me, on the hard concrete. "Nice to meet you," I said, limp under his sweaty bulk. He smelled like speed. "Damn nice meeting you!" he bellowed, and jumped to his feet, raised his arms above his head in the street and turned his face to the sky. "I am a cello in a country-western world! Sweet Schizoid Jesus Night! God! Stars!?! Hey. It's raining. Can you drive?"

In the car, lost on unfamiliar streets, I asked Anne about him, learned he was adopted by Carl Jung's nephew, and they always joked about childhood psychological experiments. Mark claimed that *he* was the collective unconscious. He lived in a roof-

top apartment not far away with the rest of the band. His portion of rent was \$35 a month—he lived in a walk-in closet. “Most psychedelic closet in the Western Hemisphere!” he screamed, hanging out the back window like a dog, howling in the wind.

When we pulled into the alley behind his place he exploded from the backseat and hit the gravel rolling. “Dammit son, stop the car before I get out!” he yelled from the ground, and sprinted up the wooden stairs to meet the rest of the band. We followed.

It was raining steadily. The deck, the roof of the warehouse below, was lit with tiki torches and they had rigged a huge duct-taped tarp for protection from summer storms. They hadn’t paid their electricity bill, Mark explained, so the after-hours jam had to be acoustic. “I love to unwind after a show with a little guitar!” he shouted in my face. “Dude, you keep spitting on me, man,” I said, and he said, “Sorry, but what’s a little spit between friends? Hey, follow me.” He led me into the dark apartment.

While the rest of the band scuffled around by candlelight with their gear, Mark dragged me into his “room.” There was some crashing and cussing in the darkness before he lit a kerosene lantern. “Have a seat,” he said, motioning to the closet floor. I sat cross-legged at the foot of his sleeping bag. One wall was prescription pill bottles with the labels torn off, hundreds of them. Against the other wall were tattered books, teetering. The walls were draped with tie-dyes made by the Jamaican bongo player and strung with dozens of strings of x-mas lights and there were scribblings and drawings and sheet music hanging by clothes pins from them. Bolted to the ceiling was a glass mirror-ball and two stage lights with gel inserts. There was a strobe light in the corner. “You should really check this place out sometime when we’ve got electricity,” he said.

He was rummaging through a pile of stuff at the head of the sleeping bag, opening and shutting briefcases. Three briefcases, mumbling to himself. I didn't know what I was waiting for. "Hey man, what am I sitting here for?" I asked. "Hold yer horses, sonny," he growled, and tossed me a rifle cartridge. "Nice little means to an end, there, eh?" he said. "Or an end to a means," I replied, trying to be cool in a hot closet with a strange sweaty man. He spun around with twinkle in his eye. He smiled and stared through me for a moment. "Open your mouth," he said, and I did, and he placed god knows how many hits of acid on my tongue. "The sacrament," he said, and then we were back on the roof, the Tarp Utopia.

He laid into the guitar with a controlled reckless fever. He was hoarse and the chords flew beneath his fingers. Jackie's boyfriend brought out his uprighteous bass, some girl in a bikini top and sarong played the other Dave's conga. Anne left and returned with her flute. A scrawny guy in a funny hat walked up and asked if they minded playing with strangers. Mark responded, "We're all strangers here," and turned it into a tune. The guy returned with a sitar and another scruffy fellow carrying a talking drum and a violin. I did not think it odd that a stranger would materialize in the rain with a sitar. It was the way it was. Anne's flute twirled arpeggios between the chords. The music twisted and turned upon itself and the rain kept time against the leaky tarp above my head. I danced, unaware of the impending dawn. It was a siren song, angels on fire.

I fell in love with outlaws and nights and a year later dropped out of college. Anne was my ticket into this weird new life, so when Anne moved to Iowa City, I followed her there. My friends from high school were gone. The last I knew, Dave was

living with some guy from Kathmandu and stunk of curry. We abandoned Jeff after he would not crawl out of his Scotch bottle, but rumor had it that he had grown sober. Matt lived near me in Iowa City, but had written me a letter detailing how he thought he was being watched by the TV and in his car, and that he could transmit thoughts to others, and felt he owed me an apology for not answering his door or phone. The name on the return address was Billy Dee Williams. Kara was still insane, although instead of quietly slicing patterns into her skin with a razorblade, she was now engaged to a philosophy major with the obligatory pony tail, trust fund, and Harley. I moved in with Anne and bought a bass guitar.

My parents divorced. Then my mother was in love with a short, bald, fat man with a huge record collection, heady connections with power-hitting legislators, and a vintage bong that looked like Nixon. He lived in a hotel penthouse apartment in downtown Des Moines next door to an aging Tiny Tim. My mother cried, in her new first apartment, telling me how when she had been out of town on business he had married a Russian ballerina to save her from deportation. Later, my mother, the same woman that I had watched deftly clean a thousand chickens and fill our attic with drying wildflowers, sat in front of me in a power suit discussing 2nd world microfinance and condom distribution over tumblers of Jameson at the Gotham Club.

I reminded my father of my mother, and when I spoke to him on the phone he would cry and beg me to love him and make me promises that he didn't know he would not keep. He recovered, and remarried—a woman with blond hair like Mom's, and a son, seven years younger than I, and a daughter, seven years younger than my sister. At the wedding reception I overheard his wife instruct her children to stay away from me.

They asked who I was, and why they should stay away, and she said, “He’s bad. He’s the one with the long hair.” My father hovered around her family, and I pitched horseshoes with my uncle Jerome, the greasy mechanic. Dad moved into a new house in a new subdivision and his wife sold my toys at a garage sale.

Things with Anne went bad.

I stood on the frozen river with adrenaline aching in my joints. The ice had not opened up beneath me. There wasn’t even any water seeping through the crack, which I slowly and carefully approached and examined. I rationalized the sudden upheaval. It was very cold. The weathermen had been boasting about below-zero temperatures for a month. Today, –25 F, and the river here was a half-mile wide. In mid-stream rose an island, 3 miles long and narrow. The ice was flowing down the river, slowly, split by the wedge of island. I hadn’t caused the bucking of the ice beneath my feet; I merely witnessed it. The ice was solid, just shifting. I stepped onto the raised sheet of ice and hurried across to the island.

Deadman’s Island sits uninhabited and undisturbed in the Cedar River north of Cedar Falls. It was named either for a dead man who was found there, or a man who had hanged himself there, or a public hanging that was held there before the city was a town. Most recently one of the 16 American Indians in Black Hawk County had been arrested for selling weed to some biker gang, and the papers rumored that he grew it on Deadman’s. That was bullshit, as the soil on the island was far too sandy to produce marketable weed.

I stood in the snow on the shore. Two hours before, I had put on my grandfather's old ice-fishing boots, and two layers of long underwear, and jeans. I wore a huge down coat with a preposterous pink wool scarf and my rabbit fur hat with the big fluffy ear-flaps. But there was no one there to see me. And ridiculous attire is almost required for such cold. My breath condensed and froze in my nostrils—if I squeezed them together they stuck shut. I thought about the Jack London story where the guy lost in the cold spits and it freezes before hitting the ground. He gets wet and realizes that he's going to die, so instead of running in a panic toward a village too far away, he sits beneath a tree and greets his death with some sort of manly dignity. I spit, but I didn't hear it freeze and I couldn't see where it landed because if I looked straight down, my breath would fog my glasses. So I turned to the woods and took off running.

The snow was deep but crusty, and I sprinted several yards before my boot broke the surface, sending me careening into a stump and onto my face in the snow. I jumped up and ran again, fell again. I wanted to be lost. I ran until I was hot and my skin tingled. I lay panting in the snow.

When my glasses unfogged I examined the rock I was leaning against and realized that it was not a rock, but the largest possum head I had ever seen. It was frozen solid, a head alone with a stomach or some other red thing trailing from its chewed and shattered spine. Its eyes were shut, but its tongue lolled, frozen, defying gravity. Dead Possum Island.

I tried to build a snowman but it was too cold for snow to stick, so I built a snow mound. On top of the mound I placed the possum head, and wedged snow around its

innards as an anchor. I admired my work. Dead Possum irreverently stuck his tongue out at me. I wandered off.

There had been an ice storm a week ago, but the terrible winds had not reached the center of the island. Every branch and twig and tree was encased in thick crystal. I stood, staring at the grey sky through the frozen branches until I saw spots. The spots became snowflakes, and a faint wind grew stronger. The thin willow branches above me clattered against each other, and little bits of ice fell like hail, bouncing and sliding down the crust of the snowdrifts. The snow swirled in the bitter cold, and the woods grew loud with falling branches and ice. I thought I heard something, someone calling me, my name scattered in the wind. No, I *smelled* something. Just barely, and even through my frost-lined nose, I could actually smell something. I followed a frozen streambed upwind.

Things with Anne were bad. Four years after moving in with her, I got a phone call from Jeff, who had gotten my number from my mother. He was driving Old Blue, the family van, and filling it with everyone we knew, a reunion headed to the Dead summer tour in Chicago. Dave, Timmy, Kara, Jen, Jones, Lootch, Tortoise, Shag, Truck—everyone who used to drink beer and fish down at the river would somehow be on tour. I asked Anne if I could go, and she knocked me unconscious with a clothes iron. A month later Jerry was dead, and I was in my car, headed back up the rutted road to Cedar Falls.

It was not a clean break. She had a dozen credit cards in my name. When I tried to move my great grandmother's wardrobe to my mother's apartment, she locked the

bedroom door and guarded it with a chef's knife. She sliced at my wrist but I took the knife away from her, and broke it. I turned to walk away, and she grabbed me from behind, by my hair, and dragged me off balance on the slippery hard wood floor. On the stairs I regained my footing, and struggled. She flipped me over the banister, and I landed on my back on my piano. I left that piano, and my furniture, and my books, and my music, my *Rolling Stone* collection, the credit cards, the childhood memories I managed to rescue from the garage sale. I left my shoes, and drove barefoot through the night.

By dawn I was bouncing up the crumbling road to Cedar Falls. I did not think about it until I passed Isley Farm. I pulled off on Hearst road, and parked on the dusty shoulder. I was crying, and then I wasn't; I sat and listened to the wind rustle the beanfield. I washed my face with a bandana and some stale water, and turned back toward my grandparents'.

My grandmother nearly died of glee when she saw me. She fluttered me inside and immediately began shredding a potato to make hashbrowns for me. "Eat! Eat!" she would titter, making fun of herself. She asked me why I didn't have any shoes and I made something up. She asked me why I was in town, and I told her I was considering going back to school. She asked me to bring in my bags and stay, and I told her through a mouthful of good, hot food that I would be staying at Jeff's. My grampa came in from the shop and stood smiling, and then told me about how the dog had been digging in vain, searching for his lost bone. He talked about taking the train to Seattle, showed me a brochure of the accommodations. It was all so real. I sat and lied to them, and then took a shower and left. I went to Wal-Mart and bought some cheap sandals.

I did drive to Jeff's house, but no one was home. I saw Dave mowing in the old neighborhood, and stopped and honked. He greeted me with a hearty "What the Fuck, Man?" and we talked about Jerry and the show I didn't go to. "He sang 'I will walk alone by the black muddy river,' and when he was done he pointed to himself and then looked to the sky," he told me. We met later for beer and pool and greasy bar food. He asked me when I was going back, and I told him I didn't know.

I signed up for classes. My grandparents paid the tuition. I stayed with them often, when I was hungry and tired. They thought I was still working in Des Moines, and commuting the two hours. I would go to class, dump my shit in the car, and drive down to the river. I lived out of my hatchback and ate baked beans and Cheetos over smoky campfires. I slept on the gravelly shore listening to the carp snuffle in the mud. If the mosquitoes were too bad, or if it rained, I slept in the car. I went to different river accesses every two days, showered at Gramma's when I stunk too bad. One week a band of hobos waited by the river, waiting to hop a specific train as it slowed for the bridge over the river bend. They showed me how to start fires from nothing in the rain. I drove Pete into town to buy wine.

Frost came early that year, and sleeping by the river was cold. I began to hit the bars immediately after class. I would order a shot and a whiskey coke and a beer, chase the shot with the whiskey coke, place my next order, and drink the beer while I waited. I became excellent at pool. I met many entertaining women. I discovered enclaves of nouveaux hippies with floor space within walking distance. With money I won in a contest at school, I put money down on an apartment down the block. The day before New Year's Eve I borrowed a mini-van from a friend and headed to Des Moines.

I staked out Anne's house. She had been trying to find me; the messages had filtered to me through my mother and grandmother. I waited until her car was gone, and peeked in the windows. I could see my poor cat—he jumped onto the windowsill and rubbed his cheek against the glass. I drove to where she worked, and confirmed that her car was there. I went back to the house, and used my key.

I half expected a boyfriend in hiding to appear, but the house was quiet and still and my cat knew me and loved me. I intended to swipe everything that was mine, everything that was on my credit cards. But it was just too much. I couldn't take that bed, that couch, any of those things, the things she made me have. The house smelled like her. I grabbed my books and some art and Bob Marley's "Talkin' Blues" and my computer. I took some token things from the kitchen, gifts from my family. I cradled my cat, loaded him into the van, and went back to Cedar Falls.

By spring I was broke. I tried to make ends meet by selling pot. I wasn't very good at it. The general rule of volume pot sales is a 25% profit; if an ounce is \$150 the quarters are \$50, the eighths \$25. If I sold three quarters, pot etiquette dictated that my own quarter sack was free. This works well with small amounts, a couple ounces. But I started driving to Iowa City and picking up pounds. The 25% rule dictated that off every pound I profited 4 ounces. There was no way I could smoke 4 ounces before I picked up the next elbow. After a couple months of investing my new student loans in weed I had a little money and an underwear drawer full of my personal stash. But the pot was worth more to me than money; I didn't want money, and I would give away bag after bag, or sell it at cost to my friends. Everyone was my friend. I swapped fat sacks for sheets of acid and mushrooms and wrote bizarre papers on Hamlet and Hemingway, winning

awards and invitations to conferences where I had to wear shoes and pants without holes and braid my hair or wear it in a pony tail. I dined with Pulitzer prize-winners and nodded at their cocktail conversation, occasionally interrupting with a story about the river.

There is something beautiful and seductive about being strung out. I didn't live for the high, but for the morning after, the birds roaring an hour before dawn, the flat-line exhaustion and the swirling eddies of the green river in the raw morning sun. It is the self-pitying martyrdom of victimhood, pushing the mind until the body disappears. I wandered through the days and nights separated somehow, looking for something.

By winter I was tired. I felt it in my bones, like the marrow sponged up my blood. The world was flat and black and white and I was grey and could not look in mirrors. The winter was cold, and the town shut down after a brutal ice storm, shook in the icy wind of the long dark nights. My bar didn't open until six on Sunday, and I had nowhere to go and couldn't stay in my house with myself. Bundled in silly clothing, I drove out to a river access, hopping snow drifts in my little blue car.

I beached my Honda in a snowdrift. I knew I had a tow strap and a come-along somewhere, and there were plenty of fenceposts, so I left it. I walked down the drifted lane to Ulrich Park. There were no footprints under the canopy of trees. I slogged through the hard snow, over the hill, down to the frozen stream that ran through a tunnel beneath the raised railroad bridge. On the cement walls was graffiti from generations of keggers. I found where I had written "Nate is here," in white crayon, now a batique of moss and my own immortality. The crunching of my boots on the ice echoed off the walls. I heard a train clatter far away. There were no birds, but I could hear the scurrying

of chipmunks. I followed the stream to the banks of the river. The trees stood silent in the bone cold. There were only little sounds, hushed by the seriousness of old trees in hard winter. The river had frozen over. There was three feet of open water along the cutbank, where the ice sheet did not quite meet the banks. Across the span of ice: Deadman's Island.

I walked up the streambed that transected the island, two islands, really. The wind died as quickly as it rose. But the scent remained, ruthlessly cold and clean. Where the stream met the river I stopped and stared. A sixty, maybe hundred year old cedar lay shattered on the hard white snow.

I approached it slowly. I laid my hand on its trunk, grown gnarled and twisted from years of wind on the edge of the river. This last great wind, this burden and weight of ice had torqued the cedar and shattered the joint where the single trunk became two, five feet from the ground. The old and grotesquely knuckled branches, frozen and laden with ice, shattered on contact with the hard ground. It looked like the tree had exploded: there were shards of gold and red cedar chips strewn in a circle for twenty-five feet. They glowed against the white. And from them rose a clean, hard and powerful odor, an overwhelming scent of cedar. I could taste it, I could feel it through the needling air in my lungs, scouring my veins. The smell dropped me to my knees and I thought of fishing the river with my father as a young child, bored and hot. I thought of my mother chuckling as she cleaned the tiny bluegill we caught. And then I didn't think. I sat in the snow and gathered cedar shards into my lap, and rubbed them between my fingers.

There was no metaphor. The shattered tree on the bank of the river was not me crumbling under the weight of my life. The glowing shards against the white snow were not the terrible beauty of destruction. And the overwhelming scent, that call to the edge of the river—it was not an epiphany, not a moment of clarity, not a call back to the path that I had abandoned. I don't know what it was. But it pinned me in my body in a place in a time, and emptied me. When the flat light cast long shadows, I rose. I collected some small bits of fragrant rubble, let them drop and left them. I don't need them. When I close my eyes and breathe slow, I can still taste the cedar in my mouth, feel it running in me. And that is enough.

BLUE SPOTS

It is bright, humid, late summer in Iowa, and I have skidded in mud from last night's rain, missed a jump over a log, and somersaulted sliding in the slough grass, my bike crashing down on my hip. I am stunned, knocked from my natural rhythm, crumpled in the tall grass on the banks of George Wyth Lake, trying to figure out what hurts. I move my bike away from the trail, and stumble down the eroding bank, slipping to a seat in the black mud. I'm panting, suddenly nauseous, and there's a gouge in my arm, thick dark blood, and a seed husk buried too deep to dig out. I exhale and curse the mosquitoes and breathe. The sun beats blue off the water, and clouds are building in the west. My skin a sheen of blood and sweat and mud, I stand, and hear a quiet clumsy splash. I look to the shallows. It may have been a leopard frog. But it may have been a blue-spotted salamander.

The blue-spotted salamander is a medium sized salamander 4-5 1/2 inches in length. They are blue-black to grey-black with bright light blue flecks on their sides and down their tails. They are more than half tail. Although terrestrial, they do take to water. Sometimes they break the water's surface, slashing these tails. Sometimes this is the best way to spot them. I learned this watching filmstrips in sixth grade.

I stand motionless, ignoring the mosquitoes, scanning the surface and the shallows and the steep bank for amphibians. The blue spot begins its life in Spring, in water, the female laying eggs singly or strung in small clusters, attached to submerged logs and plants. They are forest dwellers, requiring forest ponds in which the larvae live until transforming into their terrestrial form in late summer. Adults forage in the moist soils and thick cover of riparian forests, feeding on earthworms and insects and snails. Here in George Wyth, the forest floor is thick with stagnant ponds. Last year's leaves protect pools of mosquito larvae, an assumed favorite food of the blue spot. On land, burrowed shallow into moist soil, they are a rare find.

I want to see a blue-spotted salamander on the banks of the lake. I wouldn't go so far as to dig in the banks or the woods for one—not merely out of etiquette, but also because to do so would technically be illegal. Not that the DNR would object to my “harassment,” but the blue-spotted salamander is an endangered species in Iowa. The Black Hawk County population, here at George Wyth State Park, is one of only two populations in the state.

I saw my first salamander when I was four. My parents had moved my sister and I to the house my mother grew up in, on the family farm, a brick house on Jepsen Road, rural route 4, Cedar Falls, Iowa. Next to our house, up the hill, was my grandparents' house, three generations in two houses surrounded by a 500 acre farm of corn and soybeans. The glaciers of the last ice age scoured the earth from Canada south, flattening the land and depositing at its southern terminus, the plains of Iowa, the richest topsoil on Earth. When white settlers advanced on Iowa more than 150 years ago, 20% of Iowa was

forested with white oak, maples and pines. The rest, six million acres of it, was tall-grass prairie, a third wetlands.

The prairie was pocked with marshes, fens, sink-holes. The first settlers found the earth unsuitable for crops—the wet earth advanced decay, shortening the growing cycle, producing deep peat bogs that in times of fire could smolder for years. They soon learned the value of the three feet of topsoil beneath the wet tall-grass prairie, thousands of years of organic decay and rich glacial deposits, and began to drain the wetlands, first with drainage ditches, later with tile. The sparse highland woods disappeared as well, changed, grew on only the most untillable of land, the new flood plains of the now black muddy rivers.

I saw my first salamander while watching my grandfather and uncle and father lay tile. Their farm, in my grandfather's youth, was in Spring more marsh than field. By the time I stood in the ditch at the side of the road, watching my uncle work the arm of the backhoe, there were only a dozen or so "wetspots" come snowmelt and April rain. But tiling and terracing are "modern" soil conservation strategies—between 1860 and 1950 Iowa lost 95% of its wetlands and nearly two feet of topsoil to drainage channels and modified streams.

Tiling entails digging a trench, laying eighteen inch corrugated plastic tube "tile" three feet beneath the surface, and building a terraced mound over the trench, perpendicular to the contour of the land. Water running downhill is prevented from washing away soil by the terraces, and the tiles beneath them drain the excess water to streams and grassy waterways. That day when I was four, they were completing the drainage, creating a mini-reservoir, cement floored, in the small southeast corner of the

field at the bottom of the hill. The backhoe tore into the terrace, exposing the tile to be connected to the corrugated pipe leading to the fresh-poured cement my father was smoothing into a slab. And out of that moist earth, across the wet cement, came three salamanders skittering toward me.

They were black and wet with orange spots and bands, tiger salamanders, common to Iowa. My grandfather held one cupped in his hand, wriggling black and smooth when I touched it. It should have frightened me, an alien serpentine body with smooth skin and stout flailing legs, living in another world beneath the soil so close to my home. But it didn't. I touched it and looked in its small black eyes, at its round mouth. When they finished smoothing the slab, my grandfather held my wrists and pressed my palms into the wet cement, next to my name and the date. Water no longer stands in that field along Jepsen Road.

The blue-spotted salamander was listed as endangered in Iowa under the Endangered Species Act in 1976. It was also first discovered in Iowa that year. In the Bicentennial parade the blue-spotted salamander got its own float, resplendent with a grown man in a black felt salamander suit under July sun, red-faced, tossing candy to children. The news of a previously undocumented local species on the verge of extinction was an ironic source of pride for this economically depressed agricultural/blue-collar community.

This is not to say that the blue spot did not exist in Iowa before 1976, merely that this was when it was first noticed. It is quite possible that the species once thrived throughout the state; it is still common in neighboring states with similar percentages of

wetland and riparian woodland loss. But of the six states that have had similar habitat loss, only Iowa lost almost all of these wetlands before 1950. The conversion of Iowa's wetlands, unlike similar habitats, was complete 50 years ago; recent drainage has been of resurgent seasonal marshes, like my grandfather's, land long ago converted to field. The experts simply do not know where the blue spots may have been before. The two cryptic populations in Iowa, in Black Hawk and nearby Linn counties, are both found in forest lands and marshy areas adjacent to the Cedar River. Studies statewide of similar habitats have yielded no further reports of blue spot populations. While we do not know what the populations may have been before, and while we do not know what their range was before Iowa's habitat so drastically changed, we do know why it is that we do not know.

Every square inch of Iowa landscape has been stared down by a farmer and assessed for economic viability. The draining and tilling of 20 million acres of prairie and wetlands did not come without effort, without planning, without government subsidy, manifest destiny, and an unwavering confidence in a great chain of being, the right and duty to make the land produce. It was not an easy life, and little effort was spent on "luxuries" like wildlife biology. Most native species became nuisance species, competitors in a losing battle for vast tracts of viable soil. Native Iowan Aldo Leopold's land ethic here translates into stewardship of the land's economic value; conservation is the maintenance of the soil for future crops of corn and soybeans, to feed the beef and pork that feed America's affluent taste for meat. Only since the 1970's, since the Earth Day swell of environmental awareness that swept even Nixon away in its current, has attention focused on the degradation and recovery of Iowa's natural landscape. Before,

and maybe even now, who but a kook would have the time to muck about counting and classifying salamanders?

No one has suggested that the blue spotted salamander is an “indicator species” for wetland and riparian forest loss in Iowa. The whole concept of indicator species has become popular only since these habitats were already lost, and the blue spot has only been an official denizen of these two of the few remaining marshy woods for 25 years. It could be that Iowa is an indicator *state*, twenty or fifty years ahead of its peers in wetland degradation, perhaps foretelling of the extinction of unknown species in other states where critical habitats have been destroyed, where a couple more decades will witness the gradual whittling of biodiversity into small, fragmented areas, into the J-curve anonymity of extinction.

But the blue spot populations in Iowa, to hear the experts tell it, are doing fine. The DNR at George Wyth Lake has no particular management plan for the blue-spotted salamander beyond leaving them alone. The DNR maintains this state park, mowing the Kentucky blue grass into lush green picnic areas, submerging debris in the lake to attract stocked bass and panfish for the fishermen that come here. They come seeking respite from the silted and stinking rivers and streams, sludge-bottomed open sewers fit only for carp and catfish, choked with eroded soil and runoff from the millions of acres of fields. And despite the perplexing and individually inexplicable extinctions of amphibians the world over in recent years, the Black Hawk County blue-spotted salamander is hanging on.

Other species are hanging on as well, resurgent even, in the engineered landscape of Iowa. The ban of DDT has fostered a noticeable increase in raptors; small predators

like the fox and ermine are finding new homes in the increasing areas of grass and wetlands, fostered by a farm subsidy program that not only pays farmers not to plant, but allows them additional tax incentives to leave a 20 yard swath between fields and the dead streams. Fields are being purchased by private and public conservation groups; tear up the tile, and within 3-5 years the marsh returns. The land is resilient, waiting for the opportunity to express its indigeneous populations. The 100-year floods that now, thanks to wetland extermination, come at least every 10 years, are leaving water behind, wetlands that the farmers, under subsidy, are not draining. Prairie grasses, many extirpated by the plow and invasive species like Brome, and formerly relict only in limited preserves, are appearing again on lands public and private, no longer the enemy of all Iowans, as the economy shifts from fighting the land in coveralls and boots to fighting itself in the service industries of urban areas, shiny Italian shoes and powersuited former farmwives. Prairie grasses return, like this slough grass which has buried a seed husk in my arm. I can't get it out.

It is a humid, red-skied, late summer afternoon in Iowa, and I am sitting on the banks of Alice Wyth lake. The landscape has been stunned, knocked from its natural rhythm, crumpled in the tall grass as we figure out what hurts. The sun beats red off the water, and clouds are piled in the west. I stand again, another splash. I look to the shallows. It may have been a leopard frog. But it may have been a blue-spotted salamander.

FLEEB, THE CELEBRITY CATFISHERMAN

When I first heard the rumors my stomach dropped into my shoes. Tales of horror, humiliation, physical danger and permanent marks trickled down to us through older brothers and sisters, as if life wasn't already tough enough on the 3rd grade playground. Each year the stories grew more specific, and by 6th grade, I knew each atrocious legend by heart. On the school bus that we shared with the high school kids, Shad Nichols' older brother, who didn't speak much, told me it was all true. But nothing could have prepared me for the real horrors of 7th grade P.E.

Mr. Chase was a solid, chiseled man who spoke with a clipped Maine accent. He wore a white collar shirt, a whistle on a string around his neck, and white socks pulled to mid-calf, just covering the chest of the mermaid on the outside of his lower left leg. He was a Navy man, and ran P.E. like training camp.

There were two punishments for all offenses committed in Mr. Chase's class, one bad, and one horrible. Most offenses, such as talking in line or goofing around, resulted in catwalks—"walking" on hands and feet, down and back, down and back, in the gym, or on the cement next to the pool, or around the cinder track. "Catwalks till someone

pukes,” he would bark, blow the whistle, and we’d clamber down the line, Mr. Chase following and swatting at the stragglers with his clipboard, until Dean Schmadakie or Randy McCunniff was able to cough up some bile.

The other penalty: swats. Corporal punishment was “elective” at Holmes Junior High, which meant that a kid caught stealing, fighting, swearing, or talking back to Mr. Chase could have a choice of five swats, or, say, a solid week of in-school suspension, replete with parental conferences, regular trips to the guidance counselor, and weekly interviews with Mr. Argotsinger, the sneering assistant principal, for the rest of the year. Five swats seemed, to the naive, the better deal.

A swat was a process, a ritual in itself, that I witnessed shortly after the start of the semester when Chris Finke, one of the good kids, was caught snapping towels and laughing. Mr. Chase offered him a swat, or a conference with his parents to discuss his “penchant for slapping other boys on the ass.” Chris, later a high school linebacker, chose the swat. Mr. Chase took him into the glass-walled cubicle that was his office.

The class stood in line, against the wall, watching through the windows. Chris turned his back to Mr. Chase, pulled down his gym shorts in front of the entire class. As he did, Mr. Chase lifted the paddle, a flat board with holes in it and a baseball bat style handle, taped with white athletic tape. Mr. Chase concentrated, took a slow, measured practice stroke, got set. He looked like Pete Rose. The air whistled, and Mr. Chase was not a teacher but a man, leaning into his swing, finding the sweet spot, the thud and smack of oak against meat. Chris fell forward, and his face burst into red, and then he turned away to pull up his pants and hide his tears. Later that fall, in separate incidents, four football players each chose in-school suspension instead of swats.

But that first day of gym, I wasn't only concerned about Mr. Chase. I didn't know anyone else in class, except for a couple guys that I didn't really like. There was a shocking amount of body hair on my classmates. I was virtually hairless. They towered over me as I changed out of my parachute pants and into my very first athletic supporter. The jock itself was frightening, the way it left the ass uncovered, and it came with its own mythology, stories of 7th graders hung from showers by the strap. Swirlies, Nair in the jock, hidden underwear—not to mention showering in a big room with a dozen nozzles and these stinking pimply behemoths while Mr. Chase stood supervising, watching to make sure we all got our hair wet. So many chances for humiliation and ridicule. Even in class, even with the girls on the other half of the gym, Chase scrutinized our every move, announced our weaknesses to the class. 3rd period, MWF, was an intricate web of possible waking nightmares.

But despite my worries, I was never singled out, never targeted for a single humiliating joke. And somewhere in my mind, I felt I owed much of that peace to Fleeb.

The second week of gym class, just when the bullies were feeling each other out, sniffing out the weak, they “mainstreamed” the special ed kids. P.E. would be the only class at Holmes Junior High that they took with the general student body. There were five or six of them, with bad haircuts and no coordination, wandering eyes. There was no introduction, no sermon from Mr. Chase, just suddenly a handful of new kids in the class, confused or scared, changing across the bench from the rest of us.

It didn't take long. One kid, thin, tan, with a long narrow face and sandy brown hair, managed to get his jock on sideways, and was ogling the bright red shorts of his P.E. uniform when Randy McCunniff stepped up to the plate.

“What the hell do you think yer doin?” Randy sneered, his fat, freckled face squinting in disgust. I knew Randy, sat next to him in fourth grade and watched him use the scissors from his desk to cut the wires off his braces. He had absolutely no body hair, but on his head, a haircut like Kevin Bacon’s in the movie *Footloose*. “What are you doing? “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

The kid slowly turned to look at Randy. Last year in sixth grade Randy told Robert Gurtis that he needed to wear a bra, and Gurtis grabbed him by the back of the head and smashed his face into the wall, breaking Randy’s tooth and tearing out some hair. Since then, Randy only picked on kids who posed absolutely no threat, like this tan boy staring at him blankly.

“What?” the kid turned, holding his shorts, the jock covering his hip, his penis just hanging there.

“Can’t you even dress yourself? What’s wrong with you? Are you a retard?” Randy stepped closer to the tan, thin kid. “Are you a retard? Can’t you dress yourself? What’re you, a retard?”

“What?” the kid said again, still holding his shorts.

“ARE YOU A RETARD?” Randy jeered, louder. By now the whole locker room was quiet. “WHAT ARE YOU, SOME SORT OF FEEB?” Randy laughed.

The kid looked at Randy, threw down his shorts, and in a loud, flat intonation, bellowed “IAMNOT IAMNOT! I am not a FLEEB!”

From that moment on, the tan kid was named Fleeb. Mr. Chase, roused from his office by the laughing, marched into the middle of the room. He took one look at the

scene, and ordered everyone but Fleeb to go start catwalks. “Boy, you’re a regular village idiot,” I heard Mr. Chase say to Fleeb as we filed out the door.

From that day on, the pressure was off. Fleeb became the subject of every joke, some not even so mean—like when he would start a gangly sort of tremor and then give every appearance of wrestling himself if someone suggested he breakdance. He smiled and laughed with everyone else when he picked himself up from the floor. Mr. Chase was less critical of most of us, busy trying to keep goofy Fleeb in line, and doling out swats and catwalks to Fleeb’s jokemakers and those who laughed. Sometimes Fleeb would crack dumb jokes that were somehow hilarious, and laugh a bit louder than everyone else in response. He turned out to be good-natured and friendly.

But this made simple teasing all the more cruel. When Mike Assink hid Fleeb’s underwear, Fleeb got more and more flustered as he looked through his things, standing there naked and wet from the shower, until his face was bright red and tears were streaming down his face. The rest of us, already dressed and primed in front of the mirrors, stood in line waiting to be dismissed. Mr. Chase looked right at me when he asked, “Who made the village idiot cry?” I didn’t say anything, and neither did anyone else. Catwalks until Brett Williams puked.

Another time, Brian Bogatin and Chris Chandler played keep-away with Fleeb’s gold necklace, which he had taken off and hung from a peg in his locker. Spinning from running back and forth between them, Fleeb tripped and slammed head-first into a locker door. He lay there stunned, and then his face bunched up, and he began hitting himself in

the side of the head, slowly, over and over like a metronome. Bogatin took suspension, Chandler took five swats, right there in front of us all, after the nurse came for Fleeb.

I know that a couple of times I spoke up and told people to cut it out. Many times, especially early that year, I didn't say a word. A part of me was simply grateful that it wasn't me. Because Fleeb ran interference for everybody, I even grew to like gym. I hit puberty, and was able to climb the rope to the ceiling of the gym without using legs, did a handstand on the parallel bars, a backflip off the rings. Autumn Thompson asked me out, and she was in the girls' class on the other side of the gym. I spent a lot of time looking at her. No other girl made the red striped girls' gym suits look more fine.

The attacks on Fleeb grew less and less frequent. It was more like the guys were flipping him shit than really attacking him. He was a good sport. Guys would tell him to say Arnold Swartzeneggar or Robert de Niro one-liners, and he would comply with hilarious results. He liked to make us laugh. He would sing silly songs, and look so damn goofy that we just couldn't help it.

Late in the year, we had the physical fitness tests, and Fleeb's best event, the bend box. The bend box was a wooden box with an overhanging board, that we would sit straight-legged in front of, our feet on the box under the overhang, and stretch as far as we could past our toes. The overhanging board was marked by inches—where you put your hands was how close to or far past your toes you could reach. Fleeb set the school record with plus 12—he could reach, straight-legged, a foot past his toes—maybe even farther, if the box measured farther. With little effort Fleeb had just flopped over like a

rag doll, face on his knees, and laid his arms on the box. It was an astounding secret talent. Kids congratulated Fleeb, and slapped him on the back. He smiled.

After the showers, as everyone was getting dressed, things turned. It started with Randy. "Hey Brian, I bet Fleeb could suck his own dick."

"No fucking way. Can't be done."

"So you've tried, huh?"

"Fuck you. I'd bet five bucks he can't." Randy shook him on it, and they walked over to Fleeb, sitting in a towel. I couldn't just stand there, so I looked away, walked over to a sink around the corner.

A door slammed, and I whirled around. Mr. Chase. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?" he yelled, grabbing Fleeb by the bony arm and yanking him to his feet. "S-S-S-SON," he sputtered, "Boy, this is it. You deserve some slack boy, but there comes a time," he looked up, to a petrified Randy and Brian, then to the rest of us. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "There comes a time when you just have to KNOW when to NOT do what they TELL YOU!"

His voice echoed off the smooth concrete floors, and nobody dared move. Fleeb was wincing, shying away from Mr. Chase. Mr. Chase said, quietly, "Stand up straight, boy, look at me. You've got a choice." Fleeb stared at him, slack-faced.

"You've got a choice," Mr. Chase said, "One week in-school suspension, or one swat."

Slowly, deliberately, Fleeb said, "Uh, a swat?"

"That's your choice, son," Mr. Chase guided Fleeb by the shoulder into his glass-walled office, shut the door. He lifted the swat board off the wall, and said something to

Fleeb. Fleeb looked up at him blankly, lips working a question that he didn't ask, a wisp of drying hair in his eye. Mr. Chase said something again, and Fleeb, stark naked, turned around mechanically, and bent over.

Not one of the class, lined up at the window, dared to hope Mr. Chase would let it go easy. He didn't. He wiped the sweat from his brow, took a measured practice stroke, and lifted the board high above his shoulder. He swung, connected, and knocked Fleeb into a sprawl, chest and face skidding across the floor.

We all winced at the impact. Ross muttered "Oh, fuck," under his breath, Brian blinked his red eyes. Randy turned away, hand over his mouth. I watched Fleeb. His lip quivered a little, but the expression on his face never changed.

Often, and for years now, I find myself trapped between the lean hours of early morning and a bitter empathy that paralyzes me. I sit in my grandmother's rocking chair, listening to the clock tick and the house settle. The faces in the world around me stream by in the dark, eyes deep with trouble, faces leathered by strain, worn by pain. I chew on it. It is hard as a long grey night.

But it's not just the suffering, not just the easy cruelty of what people do to each other that whitens the knuckles on my four fingers of whiskey. It's what they do to the places of my memory. It's the new golf course they built in the empty pasture where my father taught me to fly a kite. It's the new housing development that stretches, shining in fake brass and false brick fronts out 4th Street across the old marsh almost to Union Road. It's the tires washed up on the bar of the stinking river, which itself never in my lifetime has been clean enough to touch. I can not make a move, afraid to disturb the

wounds that bleed all around me. And yet, for all my indulgence in sorrow over the years, until last fall, Fleeb never crossed my mind.

Biking the trail through the tall grass that circles Alice Wyth Lake, I saw a bike parked just off the trail, leaning against a downed cottonwood. I looked for an owner as I coasted past, and silhouetted against the lake was a tall, thin man. Something in the posture was familiar, and I slowed, stopped, and rubbernecked. The man stood there, feed cap on, holding a fishing pole between his legs, tying a lure onto his line. I lay my bike in the grass, and took a couple steps back down the trail. I saw a five gallon bucket, and a catfish on newspaper. When he cocked his head to bite off his knot, I saw the cheekbones, the slack jaw. By God, it was Fleeb.

I returned to my bike, without saying a word, and rode off, trying to wrap my mind around this new addition to my internal lists of sightings-while-riding. Beaver, oriole, hummingbird, Fleeb. Meadowlark, Fleeb, grey squirrel. The stories, the mornings in gym class, the smells of the locker room came cycling back as I rode home. And so did some guilt—not even so much for my behavior as a scared little kid, but for the simple fact that in my own mind I still named that guy Fleeb. I thought about it every time I rounded that bend in the trail.

Maybe two weeks later, I saw him again, at a different spot, this time on the Cedar River, over behind Hartman Reserve. I stopped, straddling my bike. “Hey,” I said, kind of loud.

He turned toward me, fishing lure in hand. It was Fleeb. “Hi,” he said, squinting into the sun.

“I think we were in school together at Holmes Junior High,” I said, holding out my hand. He shook it. “What’s your name again?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I don’t remember.”

“What’s your name?” I asked again.

“John.”

“Yeah, John, I’m pretty sure we went to school together.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said, bending to his tackle bucket and swapping lures. “You probably know me from the papers.”

“What papers?”

“You know, I was in the papers because I caught a 46-pound catfish. From the river.” He motioned over his shoulder.

“When was that?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. You know,” he said idly, and threw a cast out to the snag in the eddy line.

“Well, guess I’ll let you get back to your fishin,” I said. He held his hand up and nodded, like a farmer at the wheel of a pickup.

While no one would mistake me for a fisherman, I’ve done my fair share of fishing, and done my fair share of fishing with folks who live to fish and talk about fishing. The way I understand it, fishing is to these folks what biking the deer trails is to me—a mainline into the egoless state, a sort of mindless yet conscious participation in the body of the moment. And I’m just talking about spincasters here, not even the poetry-addled minds of the ascetic and aesthetic fly-fishermen. And here was Fleeb, or

John I suppose, a celebrity catfisherman, who must certainly know that exact same release of self.

Biking home, I thought about John, and how the perfect cast must feel to him, the fight of so many pounds of catfish on the line. I felt great pride, almost an envy of *his* moments, *his* Cedar River. The River doesn't care, doesn't feel, will dump a ton of earth and stinking filthy shit one year, and the next tear it all away, and the new bridge to Beaver Hills Estates with it. Its muddy power is my sanctuary, sings a great clean, clear, apathetic song, and here it had sung the same to Fleeb. Hell, the Cedar made him a celebrity catfisherman! And I realized that all these years somewhere in my mind I had been pitying John, calling him Fleeb to distance myself from the guilt I felt at feeling superior to him. But there was nothing to pity him for—he lived in the same instants that bind all things, felt the same mindless joy that brought me churning down the trail to him. The river saw to that.

And maybe that explains the kids who teased him, Mr. Chase who beat him. Maybe they were showing him a degree of respect by *not* pitying him, not protecting him from their own weaknesses.

No, I can't buy that. Those were some nasty kids, and Mr. Chase was a twisted asshole.

In May, riding along Alice Wyth lake, I saw John mounting his bike, hooking his bucket to the handlebars and readying himself to leave. I stopped by him. "Hey John."

"Hi," he said, unceremoniously, and looked about ready to pedal off.

"Catch any more big catfish?"

“Any more?”

“You know, like that big one that got you in the paper?”

“Oh, that,” he chuckled, put his foot on the pedal. “People are always talking about that.” Ten yards away, he laughed over his shoulder, “That’s OLD news!”

LAURIE

“I need you to take me for a walk in the woods. Right now—Please.”

“Are you OK?” Her voice sounded a half-step sharp.

“I’m fine. I just need to walk in the woods. Can we go, or what?” Something was wrong—I didn’t see much of Laurie anymore, and when I did, she wasn’t herself. I told her that I’d pick her up in 10 minutes. “I’ll be out front,” she said.

I met Laurie in a King Arthur seminar my first semester back in college. She was always early; I was always late, and she would wink at me from the middle of the auditorium as I shuffled up the stairs to the open seats in the back row. She was white-blond, with short hair, funky horn-rimmed glasses and red lips. She made me nervous, the way she glowed there, grinning, every Monday and Wednesday at noon in Seerley 112. We never spoke until she sat down next to me in a poetry workshop the next semester. I warned her that I probably stank, and that she should feel free to move if she couldn’t stand the smell of me. I had spilled gasoline on my shirtsleeve days before. She

thought that was hilarious, and by the time I saw her later that week at the bar we were friends.

When I saw her later that week at the bar, she was dancing on a table, twirling a football player's baseball cap, singing and kicking some song from *The Music Man*. But this was not a cabaret, nor a strip joint for that matter; it was Pour Richards, a dive of a small college-town bar and grill that boasted the flattest beer around. The football player was not amused, and when he reached for his hat, Laurie jumped down from the table and kicked him in the shin, hard, with her hard little patent leather shoe. She twirled, curtsied, yelled "Ta Da!" and flung herself into my arms. The football player encouraged me to "throw that bitch in the river." Laurie bought me a shot.

A couple nights a week we would meet at Steb's and sit in the window, drinking beer, watching the drunk college kids stream past on the sidewalk. Sometimes I would have to duck to avoid making eye contact through the window with some girl that I had accidentally had sex with, but more often, it was Laurie telling lewd stories about guys strutting the streets. Laurie's men were short, tall, preppy, hippie, beautiful and ugly. Laurie would always leave after a couple of beers, to go out dancing with roommates or some other friends—Laurie called them "the pretty-pretty girls."

I'd usually see her later, as I shot pool at Pour Richard's. She would turn up after midnight, in fancy clothes, her eyes glazed over from a night of drinking. She'd dance and sing, pick fights with jackasses, run to the bathroom to puke, and emerge laughing, triumphant, stumbling. Sometimes it was me she would kick in the shin, and I still have the scars. But somewhere in her swelled an uncontrollable joy. She was a force of nature, and each night she would run her course.

But in the daytime there was something caring, wounded, beneath her hard edges. Once, while eating free at the subshop where she worked, I watched her refuse service to a city councilman because he was staring at her chest. Another time, this po-mo posterchild from the English department, who we called Dude Noir because he dressed in black dress-clothes and fancied himself an existentialist, beat his girlfriend until she had to be hospitalized and drop out. His girlfriend never pressed charges, but Laurie would tell her story to anyone near Dude Noir if she saw him in public: bartenders, waitresses, convenience store clerks, girls he talked to. She stalked him for six months. It was her poems, though, that drew me past her frenzied surface. In her poems she was a frightened little girl with wide open eyes.

I knew immediately where we would go. In Iowa there is little in the way of public lands, and what there is is weedy, buggy river access, little snippets here and there, broken with pasture and fields of corn. But outside of town a trail of county land runs from Black Hawk Park north, three or four miles along the river, to Washington Union Access, a county maintained boat ramp and fishing access on the Cedar River, just beneath the convergence of the Shell Rock and the Cedar. A swath of land maybe sixty yards wide running four miles along a river—in Iowa, a good dirt trail is a wilderness dream.

It was a muggy, grey late August morning. It wanted to rain, but didn't quite have the nerve. The air was humid, but not sweltering, more clammy and soggy. I laced my favorite hiking boots, brought my rain coat and a jug of water, even pocketed a compass with a chuckle. I had only ever gotten lost in the Iowa countryside once, and

even then I knew where I was; I just couldn't make a straight line through the deadfall and stinging nettles in the dark of a new moon. I wound up swimming the stinking river, and had a terrifying run-in with some thing part beaver and part bloodthirsty grizzly.

Laurie lived two blocks over and two blocks down, on 2nd and Tremont. The short drive allowed me just enough time to tune the car stereo to my mood: acoustic Grateful Dead from the early 70s to counteract the disaster in Laurie's voice. I saw her from a block away, pacing in the street in front of her apartment. She waved and smiled and hopped from foot to foot, and jumped in the car before it came to a complete stop. "Phew!" she said. "Where we goin'?" I noticed she new had glasses—her last pair, the horn-rims, she had thrown years ago, on a whim, into the racing river off the suspension bridge at Thunder Woman.

"Nice glasses." I said, meaning it. They were nice looking glasses.

"I love being able to see, but I can't stand how they feel," she said, taking them off and tucking them into her fanny pack. I noticed a deep furrow between her eyes—no smile lines, just worry. She looked pale, tired, weak. "So where are we going?" she asked.

"Out north of Black Hawk."

"Oh, poor Esmerelda," she said, reminding me. Once, years ago, I took Laurie to the woods down by the river in Black Hawk, and she spent the day skidding though filthy river mud, trying to catch a frog. Finally, in a brackish green flood puddle, she walked up on one and grabbed it. "I will call her Esmerelda!" she cried. I hooked her up with an aquarium and stuff to feed her. The next night, when Laurie came home from work, she chastised Esmerelda. "All you do is sit there. You never move. And you sure stink!"

Laurie shook her finger at the frog. An hour later, Laurie realized that her frog was dead, and had been for some time, in her hot summer apartment.

“Way to catch a dead frog,” I said, turning onto Center street and heading for North Cedar. Laurie punched me hard in the sweet spot of my arm with her fist of bony knuckles.

“She was ALIVE when I took her HOME!”

“Way to kill a pet frog,” I said. She was quiet.

Then Laurie said, “I’m preggers.” She fake laughed. “Again.”

The first time Laurie was pregnant was less than a year before. My life had grown gradually less crazy, and although Laurie had dropped out of school because her father lost her college fund, and their house, and their car to gambling, she seemed to be doing well. Stable, at least. She came back to school with money she made waiting tables, and plopped down at the computer next to me in some copyediting class we both took by default. She turned and announced to me that she was pregnant, and that she was keeping it. I asked her who the father was, and she told me it was this guy named Carl. Carl hung out at the bar where she worked, and she fucked him occasionally. They weren’t sure whether or not they would stay together, but they both were going to be parents to the kid.

“If you ever need anything, let me know,” I had told her. “A ride, to borrow some money, a place to stay, whatever.” Laurie had been instrumental in encouraging me to write, and I credited my interest in writing with saving my life. I owed her.

“I don’t need anything, Nathan,” she told me. She was the only person other than my grandmother who called me Nathan. “I have to be responsible now. I’m not taking anything from anybody. I’m in control.”

She worked and took classes and saved \$1700 before she had the miscarriage. Carl was with her at the hospital, and cried for a week solid. By the time I met him, he was a ghost. They moved in together, and made each other miserable. The Laurie that danced on bar counters and did cartwheels in crosswalks was replaced by one that carefully tallied her expenses, socked away cash, drank away the nights, and fought with Carl when they weren’t desperately making up. She quit writing and reading poems. “I wanted to be a writer when I was a girl. I have to be a grown-up now.” She was curt and terse, or wasted—not much fun to hang around—and she didn’t come around much. When she did she seemed embarrassed when I asked what she was up to. She didn’t make eye contact, and she would never stay long.

“Holy fucking shit.” I said, and looked at her. “Did you do it on purpose?” She told me shortly after she miscarried that Carl wanted to try to have a kid. A redemption baby. He couldn’t handle the guilt, that flash of relief, the realization that his life seemed to have become much simpler that horrible afternoon at Sartori Hospital. Maybe she couldn’t handle it either.

“I don’t think so. I’m not too excited about it. I would’ve told you sooner, but I don’t really want to talk about it.” She looked at her feet on the floormat. I turned left on Lone Tree road, passed the water tower.

She was quiet. We drove past the horse farm, and she didn’t look up.

“You’re a regular fetus mill, girlie!” I told her.

“Suck my ass!” she grinned.

We drove through Black Hawk Park, 1,400 acres of mown grass, shade trees, picnic sites and RV “camping.” We curved on the gravel, weaving through thick-trunked weeping willows and giant oaks and walnuts. At the back end of the park is a shooting range, usually occupied by a farmer or two, or maybe a wannabe gangster or two from Waterloo. Past the shooting range, where the road circles next to a pond, we parked. We climbed out, walked around the gate announcing “Public Hunting” and “No Motor Vehicles” onto a gravel lane, winding into the trees, our feet crunching the white rock.

“Didn’t you get lost somewhere around here, and run away from a beaver?” she asked.

“Yes, it was around here, but no, I didn’t run away from shit,” I paused. Added, “and that beaver was ferocious.”

“Oh, Nathan.” Laurie sighed. “What trail is this? This goes all the way to Washington?”

“Yep. This gravel part used to be in the park, they moved the boundaries during the Reagan economy. It fizzles into dirt double track up here a ways—used to be a four-wheeling trail. Up past that, it peters into a single track through grass, and then round the corner and it’s Washington Union.”

“Fancy,” she said, and took off.

Now I wasn’t any world class athlete, but I had been riding my bike about twenty miles a day, and I usually ran three miles every night. I was getting in shape for an extended backpacking trip in Wyoming’s Wind River range. I felt good. Laurie made

me feel like an old man. Her quick long gait ate up trail, and within 100 yards she was a bend or two ahead of me. I explained to my ego that she had no car and walked wherever she went, and that she must be pretty stressed, and my ego was satisfied. She rocketed down that trail. I wouldn't see her again for miles.

Once in high school I was caught by a thunderstorm on this trail. As a child, we rode out many summer tornado warnings and lightning storms in the basement fruit room, listening to, feeling the impact of the thunder on the ground all around us. That afternoon in high school, I sat on a sand bar, napping and absently hacking at willow switches with my Buck knife while the clouds in the west piled themselves into a 30,000 foot supercell, towering orange and black over the horizon. I watched the sun set prematurely, burning the edges of the monster clouds.

At dusk, the west wind swelled, then stopped. The heat of the day rose in wet waves as I walked the bar back to the trail. I paused at the bank of the river. The half-light was green, leaden, important. I watched the green fade to black, felt the woods cool. Then the breeze rose again, this time hot from the east, sucked into the storm.

The horizon strobed with lightning to the west, although the thunder was far off. I thought about hightailing it down the trail to my car, but couldn't resist the coming storm. As I stood there, on the banks of the river, the breeze became a roaring wind, and the trees groaned and squealed, dropping sticks and branches, clattering against each other like sparring bucks.

When the rain came, it fell in cold fist-sized drops, then in a thick, violent sheet. Lightning flashed above and all around, and I could see the rain tearing the surface of the

river, the whole Cedar churning and frothing. The wind changed back to the west, and the rain blew horizontal. Old rotten trees broke and crashed. I ran through the woods, my arms thrown over my head, to the trail.

The trail was a washout, six inches deep in sandy mud, and I ran sliding toward the car, two miles away. The thunder rocked the ground, turned my knees to rubber, and I stumbled through the white terror of lightning and its afterimages blistering the blackness. I could smell ozone, burnt cedar, and the crack and rumble and weight of the thunder was more than I could bear.

I ran from the trail, ran from the woods, to the east, and vaulted a fence into a forty-acre section of pasture. I tried to find a ditch, and instead threw myself into a slight hollow in the ground, panting, twenty yards from the trees into the pasture. The storm raged over me, and I pressed myself, face first, into the mud, rocked by thunder.

When I was stuck in a summer hail storm on the side of a mountain near the continental divide, outside of Butte, Montana, I huddled against a boulder not ten feet from my friend, but it might as well have been ten miles. We were cut off by a bouncing, white wall of hail. I was isolated from the entire world; it was me and the rock in front of my nose and the storm that throbbled around me. When the storm passed, the world grew back, and we walked down the mountain silently and solidly in our own minds.

But in that muddy pasture I turned my face to the storm. The sky was snarled with lightning above me, and the thunder rolled through the ground against my back. The trees of the woods snapped and growled, and I could see the angry bulging clouds in the light of forearm-thick lightning. But instead of focusing me into myself, this storm

beat me into so much clay, drove my mind, my sense of myself, out into the mud and grass, the snapping trees and raging sky.

When I returned to my car that evening, shivering, with mud caked in my hair, I stripped down, threw my clothes in the trunk, and drove home naked, purified and empty.

Laurie didn't call me to talk to me about her problems, or for any pity or sympathy or any of that shit. She called because she needed the wild-eyed exhilaration, needed to lose herself for a little while, and knew that I understood, that I could help her. Or, more to the point, that I would drive, and leave her thoughts to her.

Alone on the trail, I found my stride. The remnants of late blooming bluebells and buttercups became smears of color in the green periphery. My eyes searched the woods, spotting movements—a goldfinch, a doe, a great horned owl—while my feet found the trail on their own. I lost myself, little by little. My body became a machine, my breath burned fuel through all this meat, the air moist and earthy and tasting of rain.

Following the trail out of the woods into that same clearing—river on one side, the old fence line I vaulted now snarled with black-eyed Susans on the other— I almost tripped over Laurie. She was bent over the trail. “What’s wrong?” I yipped, hopping over her at the last second.

“Shhh!” she looked up, raising a finger to her lips. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed, that furrow on her brow was gone. She held her shoulders square, mouthed “look!” and slowly raised her other hand. A monarch butterfly sat on her palm, beads of rain on its flexing wings. The sun came out, and I stood smiling at Laurie smiling at the butterfly. Something in my belly felt like the old joy.

And then the air around us exploded like stained glass in a fire; thousands of monarchs filled the air, fluttering from the weeds, shimmering in the space between and all around us. We stood there, swaying, arms lifted among the butterflies, dancing in the clean sunlight of a clear afternoon.