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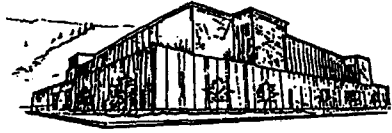
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Missouri Haunting Spells

Reflections on home, wandering, wildness, and small things that matter

by

Tami Brunk

B.A. University of Missouri 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Science


The University of Montana

December 2004

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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Environmental Studies

Missouri Haunting Spells: *Reflections on Home, Wandering, Wildness and Small Things that Matter*

Chairperson: Phil Condon 

Abstract

I am a middle child and the land I come from, too, is in between. Born sixth in a family of nine, I was raised on a small farm lodged midway between the Old World Missouri Ozarks and St. Louis--the Gateway to the West. The Primitive Baptist Church, an old school religion transplanted to the Ozarks from the Appalachians, was my first community outside of family. Our preachers--miners, farmers, and roofers mainly--taught us that the physical earth was no more than a "lure and a snare" and ultimately, a "vale of tears." I disagreed. For me, explorations of the forests and creek on our farm revealed the world as a friendly place, full of adventure, and wonder.

Three days after high school I fled Missouri, determined to avoid the mistakes of my three oldest sisters who had married in their teens. In the ten years since, I have left and returned to Missouri more times than I care to count. I can't seem to leave that green country behind, but staying home too long feels like holding my head under water, and I can't breathe. In *Missouri Haunting Spells*, I weave together my present with my past and explore the influence family, Missouri landscape, and traditional Ozark culture has had on my worldview and life choices.

In "Pete and Velva," I find the roots of my own restlessness in my grandmother's unfulfilled desire to leave the Ozarks. In "Small Things that Matter," I explore my childhood desire to "invoke the world, not improve upon it," and "serve life on earth from a place of grace, not duty." I contrast my mother's rooted gardening life with my childhood fascination for wild crafting in "In God's Garden."

In "A Path Made by Walking," "Black Mesa," and "Shelling Beans with Yajaida," I wrestle with this question--as a wanderer, how can I best care for the earth? In all my travels, to Philadelphia and North Carolina, a Navajo reservation in Arizona and the Peruvian Andes, Missouri bumps along behind, always reminding me of the land and people I come from.

Table of Contents

Essays

Missouri Haunting Spells	1
Pete and Velva	14
Small Things that Matter	34
In God's Garden	46
A Path Made by Walking	63
Black Mesa	77
Shelling Beans with Yajaida	98

Missouri Haunting Spells

Missoula, Montana, is a place you're bound to leave. At least it feels that way midway through February, when the inversion has become intolerable and the sky seems to have exhausted every possible shade of gray. People start pulling out their maps, getting on-line and checking out the job listings in Tucson, Arizona.

But that's February. We're well into April now, and nobody's going anywhere, anytime soon. A friend who was packed up to leave a month ago has just signed a lease on a house with a monthly mortgage that will devour three quarters of his paycheck. Blame his impulsiveness on Rock Creek, a new fly-fishing haven he's discovered just an hour east of town.

People are falling in love, and putting down roots. The air is silk: the perfect composition of moisture and heat. Mount Jumbo, above my house, has sprouted a tender green pelt, and I can hear Rattlesnake Creek, roaring with snowmelt and spring rain from my bedroom window. Cherry blossoms perfume the air, and strangers greet each other on the footbridge over the Clark Fork River with glazed smiles and incoherent, blissful non-statements like, "ohmygodcanyoubelievethisWEATHER?"

I'm not falling for it. I'm trying to stay sober. Last night though, I dreamt I'd found a job here that paid ten dollars an hour. Yes I, too, am caught up in spring fantasyland. But I know I've got to get a grip. I'll admit, Montana is alluring. But like always, I'm thinking, too, of Missouri.

It makes no sense to my Western friends, but because I was raised in country composed of sassafras, whippoorwills, humidity and dense, second-growth forest, I have

never, up to now, felt 100% at home anywhere else. When I hear Iris Dement, who grew up in the Arkansas Ozarks, sing her plaintive refrains about fireflies, dandelions and the “green hills of home,” I get misty eyed. When you leave home, ordinary things become poignant. Which is, perhaps, one reason why I always leave.

Nine months have passed since the last time I left Missouri. Nine months since I visited home over summer break and my mom and I sat on a little concrete bridge that spans Reynold’s Creek, just below the house where I grew up.

“So where do you picture yourself two years from now?” Her question hadn’t weighed so heavily on me in years past. The summer sun had dipped below the horizon, allowing the thick, moist heat that had glazed our skin on the walk to our house to cool. All around us, from the dense Missouri second growth of pin oak, sugar maple and shagbark hickory, cicadas bawled their mad love ballads, intertwined with the furtive calls of early evening whippoorwills.

Mom looked small, sitting beside me, and this was unexpected. She’d always seemed bigger than 5’1 to me, but tonight the curve in her fine-boned back made her almost childlike. I stretched my toes down, as if they might touch water, but the creek was less than a trickle. Like her, so much smaller than it used to be. My voice, when I answered, was not brave.

“I don’t know, mom.” I said, *I don't know*. In the past ten years, I’ve taken up residence in fourteen different parts of the country. Up to now though, I’ve been migratory—returning to Missouri more times than I care to count.

In each new place I’ve lived, Missouri bumps along behind me. Beneath the shadow of Mount Adams in Washington, as I slept beside my lover, I dreamt of a small

Missouri stream, thick with algae and bullfrog tadpoles, and surrounded by may apple and bloodroot. At a hotel in South Dakota, traveling toward Idaho, I lingered over black and white photographs of grandmothers and grandfathers, trying to speak to my dead. During recent travels through Peru, I awoke crying in a small adobe room, gospel songs from my childhood church flooding my mind. My poems and stories return to the grandmother who never traveled as she'd wanted, and the grandfather who shot the last red wolves out of the Missouri Ozark Mountains.

I usually resent that these episodes--Missouri haunting spells as I call them--turn me inside and around, toward my past. Other times, though, I interpret them as fate, telling me I need to go back, and stay for good. But it is as hard to stay as it is to keep Missouri out of my mind when I live elsewhere. It is part of me, but living in Missouri can feel like someone's holding my head below water and I can't breathe.

Mom could tell I was uncomfortable with my answer. So she asked the other hard question,

“What about Seth?”

“I don't know,” I said again.

Seth was my boyfriend when I left for Montana a year ago and though we'd broken up, our friendship had deepened while I was away and we kept in close touch. We still entertained the possibility, seldom spoken, of getting back together should I decide to return to Missouri after graduate school had ended. His life could not have been more different from mine. While we were dating, I lived in Columbia, Missouri, a University town that is the progressive center of the state. Seth lived three hours away in Springfield, near Branson and the Lake of the Ozarks. Springfield is John Ashcroft's native country,

and the headquarters of the Assemblies of God fundamentalist church. Pro-life billboards outnumber those for Branson, which is saying a lot.

Seth is the child of back-to-the landers, who moved to the Ozarks from New York when he was five. They traded the City for the Lake. An unlikely swap, leading to Seth, an unlikely blend of redneck hippy. At thirty, he supports two children with an organic lawn care and landscaping business. I told him from the beginning that I planned to apply for graduate school and when I make a plan to move, I stick with it. We'd become close though, and remained tied to each other after I left, for better or worse.

Because I'm like a fish that's likely to slip away if handled incorrectly, mom has become more careful with me than my sisters and brother. But I knew what she was thinking as we sat together on the bridge. She studied her hands, and I imagined her extending her fingers, browned by summer sun in the garden, one by one. Three times, I imagined her counting on both hands. I would turn thirty-one this year. When she was my age, I was in her belly. She was nursing Trina, Scott was three, Shelly six, Toni nine, and Tracy eleven. A fundamentalist Christian of the first order, she raised us to become Primitive Baptists—a dying religion imported from the Appalachian Mountains to the Ozarks and promoting above all traditional family values. It used to rub me raw that she wanted me to have kids.

“Don't you think that with nine kids you and dad have done your part to overpopulate the world?” I'd ask. Of course, she'd counter,

“Well, which of your sisters and brother do you think we shouldn't have had? You?” Now I understood that my having a child mattered to her because it would allow us to share more common ground. I drew up my legs and petted Pooky, mom's

ridiculously named golden chow who looks like a cartoon lion. I combed the burs out of his matted fur and changed the subject.

I recently pulled out an atlas to show a native Montana friend the spot on the map where I grew up. She'd heard my stories of a backwoods childhood and expected the broad, clear swathes of land still covering much of Montana. When she saw my finger resting instead on a small black dot, dwarfed by the maze of red arteries spreading like cancerous growth from St. Louis, she raised an eyebrow. "That's where you grew up?" she asked, disbelieving. *That's wild?*

By Western standards, Missouri is clearly tame. Hernando De Soto explored my home country fully 250 years before Lewis and Clark set foot in Montana. The last of the Osage Indians left the state by the early 1800's. My great grandfather Jesse, who knew the country better than most, had never set eyes on a wild panther in the Ozark Mountains. But put a westerner out in the woods behind my parents' house in summer and let them wander around for an afternoon. They'll soon see that this land has its own unruly character. If the copperheads, water moccasins or ungodly humidity don't get you be assured—the ticks and chiggers will. If pure orneriness is a prerequisite for wildness, and I would argue, considering our totems of the wild—grizzlies, mountain lions and wolves, that it is—then the Missouri Ozarks, even the foothills I grew up in, are wild.

I was a middle child, number six in a family of nine. And the country that shaped me, too, is in between. Our farm, purchased from our preacher's family, lay midway between St. Louis and my mother's childhood home in the oldest mountain range on the continent, the Missouri Ozarks. The diversity of ecosystems contained within such a short

span of land is testament to its status as a crossroads between the major prairie, eastern woodland forests, and Ozark mountain bioregions. Pilot Knob, the highest peak in my grandparents piece of the Ozarks, has seen sunlight for four billion years. These old mountains have been shaped by the steady, subtle working of wind, rain, and snow, rather than the crushing hand of glaciers. So much time makes possible the development of ancient, never-seen-before species, like the Ozark cavefish that swim, blindly, in the deepest mountain caves. And sprinkled throughout the country are glades of dolomite, granite, and limestone.

Our farm was a microcosm of the region. In the field above our house small fragments of bluestem grasses grew, valiantly resisting the dominant leafy forbs—butterfly weed, queen anne’s lace and stick tie—who joined the cedars in loving us for our fire-fearing ways. Up on the hill above Reynolds Creek was a dolomite glade. Solitary leather flowers, thickly veined and crimson, drooped their trumpeted heads down to earth. A single shortleaf pine stood at the edge, visible from our house.

In the oak-hickory forests that bordered Reynolds Creek, we had all the species common in the eastern woodlands: wild plum, raccoon, mulberry, grey squirrel, may apple. But too, a southwestern desert dweller, the collared lizard, has found a niche in Missouri glades where temperatures remain higher and soil dryer, than in the lowland forests. I once saw one racing across our road on two legs, humanlike.

Missouri is a crossroads in human history too, a place to be visited on the way to somewhere else. “How could you move back to a state known as the Gateway to the West?” A western boyfriend once asked me when I’d once again decided to move back to Missouri. He pissed me off, but had a point. Missouri has a long history as a resting point

on the way to somewhere else.

For better or worse, my family had a hard time leaving and those who did, like my grandfather and I, returned. The trend goes back further still. Grandpa's grandfather left Missouri in the mid 1800's in search of gold. He found his vein outside of Boulder, Colorado, mined its soul out, then surprised everyone by coming home. Grandpa's lucky streak was short lived; he squandered all his fortune on land unfit for farming. In family stories he was portrayed as a failure in a larger sense than his poor judgment in real estate. I've wondered if his mistake was leaving in the first place, or coming back home at all.

A friend here in Montana suggested recently that I write out a list of reasons to *not* return to Missouri. She thought this would help me make up my mind for good. A number of reasons came to mind: summers too hot to backpack, overcrowded parks and natural areas, urban sprawl. I remembered the last drive I took with dad, where I was assaulted with Rush Limbaugh, who tapes his show in Cape Girardeau, a town lying just one hundred miles south of Hillsboro, my hometown. I could go back further in time to the Ku Klux Klan members who paraded on the Hillsboro courthouse steps two years after I graduated high school. Better yet, I could remember last year, when my activist friends were pepper sprayed, humiliated, then locked up for protesting outside of Monsanto's main office during the World Agricultural Forum in St. Louis.

But who am I fooling? Montana has its own conservative talk show host, whose death threats to local environmentalists make Rush appear a friendly moderate. And the racial tension between Native Americans and whites in Montana easily rivals that between whites and blacks back home. My friends' experience with Monsanto was not unlike that of thousands of activists in Seattle during the World Trade Organization

protests in 1999. The difference for me in the West is that I don't have to take these failings personally. It's easier to separate myself.

At home, I am confronted daily by the intolerance and narrow-mindedness of the culture that left its mark on me. I am reminded, too, at every turn of the great divide in political belief between myself and my elders, who gave me so much, but whose path I could not follow. And that is very painful.

Tonight in Missoula, I sit along the banks of Rattlesnake Creek, watching a full moon rise over Mount Jumbo. The still early spring cold has seeped into my skin through the thin layers of my cotton shirt and jeans. I count the months before I finish school in December. Seven. A very small number.

Mom's question returns to haunt me. What next? I consider, and not for the first time, that all my wandering might be a fear of growing up, a fear of responsibility. I want my impact on this old, vibrant world to be positive. I know, too, that the more energy I burn physically—with the oil it takes to drive around the country and fly overseas, and personal energy to adjust again and again to new territory, the less I've got to give to the place where I live.

Over the course of my graduate studies I've gone back to Thoreau, Carson, Brower, and Abby. Discovered Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy and David Orr. They are elders to me, and reading them helps me understand the urgency of countering the destructive elements of U.S. culture. The more I know, the greater responsibility I have to live "right." And living right, it seems to me, means digging in, as Gary Snyder says, and committing to a place. The place I know best is Missouri.

But what if where you are from is a place where there are few, if any, wolves, mountain lion, or elk, and their absence is something you feel, palpably, when you walk through the woods? What if your own parents, bless their hearts, still think Reagan was the greatest thing that ever happened to the U.S.? What if, when you speak with your mom about the thousands of Iraqi civilians killed since the start of the war, she accuses you, in a voice you know is not hers, but a strange repetition of the daily brainwashing of Fox News--of "hating your country?" And what if the beautiful places you remember as a child are now so overrun with ATVs—no Wilderness Areas here—that you can't hear yourself think?

Seth stayed home and fought. He told me that if I didn't like the thought of ATVs roaming around unhindered in the backwoods of Mark Twain National forest then *By Gawd*, get back home and start yelling about it. Get other people to start yelling too. He asked me, if you want to make a difference, why stay in a place that's already crawling with tree huggers when you could raise a ruckus in a place that really needs it? He and some friends have shown me that even in Springfield, stick-at-home people can appeal to what common sense remains and effect change for the better.

The City of Springfield recently reported that in twelve years, rapid population growth and a decrepit local power system would no longer provide enough energy for the entire town. Their solution? Build another coal power plant. Seth and his friends with the local organic club aren't fond of this idea.

So they convinced the city to subsidize a sale at a local general store to support a giveaway of energy efficient light bulbs. Hundreds of shoppers lined the block that day, many vocal of their support for conserving energy rather than building a new plant. Seth

called me regularly to fill me in on the details. He was high on the possibility for change in his own community. His group is now working to convince the city to consult with Amory Lovins' Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado, to develop a comprehensive alternative energy plan. It's downright inspiring what a little community action is doing in Springfield, Missouri.

After these conversations with Seth, I started wondering what it might be like to move there. In the past, my mind would shut down at the thought of returning to a community as conservative as my own hometown. But maybe, I thought—and not for the first time—going home is the brave thing to do.

“Creek seems really small this year,” I said to Mom, looking down, missing the deep pool I remembered in this very spot from when I was a child. She took a moment to answer.

“Well no, it's not much different,” she said. There was an edge to her voice that I didn't understand. I waited, sensing there was something she didn't want to tell me.

“Well,” she gave in. “I guess I didn't tell you, the Erxleben's put in a dam.” Gary Erxleben was our upstream neighbor.

My throat got tight, and what little light remained seemed to sink right out of the evening sky. I no longer heard the cicadas buzzing. Just a strange quiet. This was the first creek I ever loved. I knew every bend from this bridge down all the way to Skullbones Creek by heart. They put a dam on my creek. The worst part was the distance between my reaction and mom's. I felt helpless to respond, as I had so often lately in conversations with my parents. Our relationship was already so fragile. When I lived there for long

stretches I'd argue with her all the time. Now, the unknown distance and time between us in the future made me hold my anger in check.

"Mom, dams change creeks. It's what they do." I said, trying to keep my voice even. Since leaving home I'd watched as more homes built upstream caused storm water to flow into the creek, enlarging the bed, increasing erosion. I heard stories from my youngest sister Tasha about how our neighbor Donald would stand out on this bridge during a big storm and throw in his trash, to avoid paying a fee to the city. Don was Dad's best friend. He was a deacon in our church. What I felt increasingly when I came home was that this creek had no human allies, no caretaker, no steward. Of course, I felt, that caretaker should have been me.

I return from the Rattlesnake, make a late dinner, and then settle in for bed on the living room couch. I started sleeping out here last week, when spring hit hard and I wanted to be closer to everything outside. There is a big window above the couch and from here I can see stars and the mountain. At daybreak, I am closer to the first curdling, thin-toned calls of water dippers, calls that ripple across the water, through the dense cottonwoods, spruce and pine to pierce the pane of glass of the window and waken me.

Outside the small window of my real bedroom, a pair of chickadees are building their nest. I watch from a distance as they scoop bills full of fresh wood, sprinkling the fine powder to the ground, an offering. The cavity is so close that, had I no manners, I could stand on my bed, lean out the window, and stick a finger inside. Another reason I've started to sleep in the living room is my fear that, even through the closed shutters, if I spend too much time moving around in there, the birds will abandon their nest. My

roommate teases me. “Oh,” she says, “I forgot, you don’t live in your room anymore.” I still keep all of my belongings in there of course, and every morning I put the pillow and blankets back on my bed. But she’s right. When the chickadees moved in, I moved out.

Seth is the other reason for my move. I stopped sleeping in my room after his last call. We had our usual hour-long conversation where he updated me on news of the power plant and I told him how I kept rewriting the first chapter of my book-to-be. We were about to get off the phone. He said, *but there’s something I’ve got to tell you*. And I knew instantly the words that would come out of his mouth: *I’ve met someone*. I surprised myself by being surprised. *How long did you expect me to wait?* I could almost hear him say. But he’s too mature for that. I pretended to be happy for him, pretended that yes, this was good, all the easier for both of us to move on with our lives. In the days following though, I grieved. I felt that I was not only losing Seth, but a connection with home that involved hope, possibility for positive change, and a recently growing idea that I could be a part of that.

So I moved into the living room. I needed a broader view to consider this loss and the possibilities it entailed. From the couch I can see the outline of Mt Jumbo above the pines. I sometimes hear white tail deer rustling about beside the house. I know that bears visit the neighborhood in spring and I listen, expectant, for them also. Something beautiful is being built in the live cherry tree beside my bedroom window. I was tempted to leave offerings of sunflower seeds by the stump but have decided to keep my distance. I am learning to let that story unfold without me, while I look out to a different horizon, into my backyard and out even further. I drift off to sleep under watch of two tall pines outside my window and sometimes hear strange night birds calling.

I don't know yet where I will make my home. Tonight I don't want to base my decision on fate, or whimsy. I want to make a choice, and one that will last, at least for a time. I'm beginning to understand why we call that combination of heritage, homeplace, and family "roots." Regardless of where I geographically live, they are the foundation on which everything else stands.

Tonight I accept that Missouri will always be under my skin and wandering through my dreams, seeping into my poems and daily musings. I also recognize that the scent of blooming cottonwoods has begun to linger with me throughout my day and that I've begun dreaming of ravens. I will find my way through words. The following essays are my attempt to weave together the strands of my past and present, no longer struggling to hold them apart.

Pete and Velva

*I was early in life sick to my very pit with order that
cuts off the crab's feelers to make it fit into the box.*

-William Carlos Williams

*This is the way she went on, holy holy holy, spending her life, feeding
birds and being mean until both, I think, were habits she could not break.
Her sting raised welts in all our hearts.*

-Mary Oliver

I come from a long line of dissatisfied women, all born into times and places to which their shapes were bent, shaped, or broken. My sisters and I were the first in this line to choose our own form. This is what we were born to do. If we were hawk fledglings, trillium, or salamander, we would know in our bones, our leaves, our blood, how our lives were made to unfold. As humans though, who've gotten it backwards, we've learned to fashion our own wings from dreams and will, evoke gills and tendrils from soil and air and water and song and breath and poetry. It's a complicated process, very messy, and the results, for me, haven't come in yet.

Jung claimed that a child's life is greatly impacted by the un-lived lives of her parents. When I consider my own restlessness—that is, my difficulty settling in Missouri or anywhere else—I look past my parents to the lifelong dispute between my maternal grandmother, who saw Missouri as a bitter confinement and my grandfather, who was helplessly attached to the land his family farmed, fished and hunted for three generations.

A family story holds that Pete, my grandfather, once captured a screech owl for my grandmother, Velva. I imagine the scene. Early morning sun strikes the spider webs

crushed beneath his mud and shit-caked boots as he heads toward the cow pasture. He notes the dense cluster of hickory nuts in the shagbark hickory trees along the path, and the gray squirrel that sits beside them, chattering and swishing his tail. “Better leave some for me,” he nods to his old competitor. “I’m of a mind to fry some squirrel.” Late summer, and the cicadas hum comfortably from the dense forest on the other side of the creek. In a hollow beside the creek, which has dried up to a trickle, the poke plant whose tender shoots Pete harvested as greens is now an extravagant bush with lush, poisonous leaves. Purple pokeberries gleam from clusters drooping down toward the earth.

He is whistling as he opens the gate that leads to the cow pasture. As he fastens the chain securely around the fence post behind him, his gaze travels the length of the barbed wire fence and lights on a small bundle of feathers perched upon a strand. The bird’s blond-red feathers match the color of Velva’s hair. I imagine his delight as he approaches and realizes that it is fast asleep. He cups his hands around its tiny body, tightens, and feels it struggle mightily against his palms— it hisses, and clacks its beak. Perhaps it bends its head around and grabs the leathery skin of his hand, drawing blood.

Grandma must have been surprised to see Grandpa back so early from his work with a struggling owl in his hands. It was a gift for her because she loved owls. She had knick-knacks of them along her shelves and kept an Audubon painting of a great horned owl on the living room wall. I’m sure she marveled at its tiny feet, fierce snapping beak, and the softness of its feathers. As I’ve heard the story though, it troubled her to see its wings pinned in my grandfather’s hand.

“Let it go, Pete,” she said, turning back to her daily practice of waxing the floors. “I can’t stand to see it caught like that.” Grandma, too, knew something of confinement.

Though she possessed a softer side, I knew my grandmother mostly for her sharp tongue, and the turn of sarcasm she inflicted often enough to cause lasting wounds. Or her cold silences, that seemed to lower the temperature inside the house by several degrees when she was displeased. As a young girl, I dreaded time spent in her perfectly ordered house. The tiled kitchen floors were always spotless. The parlor was elegant, with mahogany table and chairs that she waxed every week. Black and white photographs of pinched men and women leered out of the walls, framed in silver. This room always seemed the loneliest to me, because it was to look at, never to use. We wore socks in every room. I believed she hated me, because I always overflowed her finicky toilet.

It was my grandfather whom I dearly loved, because he knew the secret language of the woods. My grandparents place was composed of two distinct spheres. The first was the house, Grandma's domain, which included the immaculate green front lawn that looked out onto Highway V. Perfect rows of tulips, daffodils and crocuses formed a border between the house and the road. The bird feeder, too, was hers, located as it was directly in front of the kitchen sink, so that she could watch the birds' comings and goings as she washed the dishes and cooked meals.

Grandpa's territory was the remaining one hundred acres that surrounded Grandma's on all sides. This was all grazing land for his cattle, the haying fields, a small pond for fishing, a stream, several acres of forest, and perhaps most importantly, his garden. Grandpa's life was woven into all of this; inside the house he was ill at ease and clumsy. When he was not tending his cattle or garden, he would gather the wild bounty offered by the land—hickory and black walnut, papaws from the inner forest, perch, bluegill and catfish. He'd catch the occasional bullfrog from the pond, and red and gray

squirrels for his favorite meal.

I am sorry to say that my interest in grandma was born shortly before her death. When I was in my late twenties and living in Missouri, she began developing the symptoms of dementia. During her stay with my parents for several months I began, for the first time, to know her. Over the course of that painful year I saw how the severe defenses she'd crafted around herself for so long fell away, leaving her vulnerable, and real. She died soon after my twenty-eight birthday and I suddenly wished I had known her more fully, and understood the source of her bitterness. I began asking my grandfather and mother for her stories, to flesh out the sketch I'd known of her into a full human being. In learning her story, I hoped to understand my seeming inability to root in one place.

Velva Mae had been a wistful child who longed to travel from an early age. Her childhood was marked by tragedy. After giving birth to eleven children, her mother died of tuberculosis. Velva, just twelve years old, helped her older sisters raise the five youngest children. Their father, Frank Inman, was a farmer and preacher who had established the first Primitive Baptist Church in the eastern Ozarks. Crushed by his wife's death, he escaped the weight of his large family with long hours tending the farm and frequent travel to preach at churches in Mississippi and Tennessee.

To my grandmother, Missouri meant heartache, poverty, and a honey pot of love too small to go around. She meant to escape it. She looked up to her older sisters, Geneva and Gert, who had married and moved to St. Louis. Their lives were easier; instead of working from dawn to dusk they had time to read, and owned a few nice things. She told my mother later that she'd wanted to go to college. Most of all, she

wanted to live in a big city. Her desires were vague, cloudy. But they were fed by the tale all farmers' daughters were fed since the turn of the century on into the present—a rural life means a life half-lived.

My grandfather, Pete Hicks, was the only son of a hog farmer and woodsman. He was charming and though he was small, with big ears and a fiery temper, he was popular with the local girls. He liked fancy cars, expensive cigarettes, and women who played hard to get. Velva was the quietest of the “Inman clan,” all tall, willowy, fair-haired young women, courted in vain by many a young man in Iron County. A blue-eyed beauty with a vivid mind, Velva sent her suitors away with little explanation. She soon developed a reputation as being arrogant, or “uppity.”

Grandpa wore down her defenses. He made her laugh, and seemed more ambitious than the others. Still, when he proposed, she hesitated. “Pete, I won't marry you unless you give me your word that we'll move away from here,” she made him promise. “I will not be a farmer's wife.” They'd sat together on the banks of the St. Francis River, from whose waters Pete had plied perch, crappie, smallmouth bass and catfish since he was “knee-high to a grasshopper.” I imagine how pretty Grandma must have looked, her soft red curls grazing the back of her slender neck, sky-blue eyes searching his for confirmation.

He met her gaze. “Velva Mae, I promise,” he said.

My mother was born in Detroit, Michigan, during a period that would be the happiest in my grandmother's life. Pete and Velva had moved there a year after their marriage and after waiting in employment lines for a week, Grandpa brought his charm to

bear on a foreman at a Navy plant and landed a good-paying job welding ship parts. They bought a modest house with a porch swing, so Grandma could sit and watch the world go by. As Grandma settled into her new home, I imagine that she began dreaming of a small cabin off the shores of Lake Michigan. She might have thought of the deep blue of that small ocean as final proof that she'd left the piddling mountain streams and hollers of Missouri backwoods far behind.

A photograph from that time shows Velva, now blossomed into a radiant young woman. She holds my mother, a year old, in her arms. It seems to me that her expression is alive, awake. She belongs to the place where she lives; she is in her own skin. Her hair is dark, pulled up into tight curls, fashionable for that time. I catch a glimpse of her perfect white teeth beneath roughed lips, her eyebrows are arched delicately, and her eyes are dancing. Grandpa, strangely, seems distant in this picture. The lines of his face are blurred, his eyes unfocused, smile faint. None of his signature mischievousness filters through. Mom slouches on Grandma's lap, her fat cheeks drooping, in a little white dress, wearing black Mary Jane's.

One sweltering day in August, after five years and countless hours welding in the dark plant, scorching the skin on his hands and inhaling fresh sparks of metal, something inside my grandfather bucked. Promise or no promise, he knew he had to get back to the St. Francis River, and the green hills he'd roamed in his boyhood. He was prone to snap decisions and stubborn, once his decision had been made. He walked up to his boss that day and shook his hand.

"It's been nice knowing you," he said, "I quit." He walked out of that Navy yard and never looked back. Grandma was the last to find out. I imagine her sitting on the front

porch of their house, singing along with Woody Guthrie on the transistor radio. Grandpa would have pulled up in his shiny car, the envy of all their neighbors. Dinner would have been prepared already; pork-roast, baked potatoes, canned green beans simmering on the stove. I imagine that Grandpa was whistling when he walked up to the porch.

“Pack up Velva, we’re going home,” he said. She didn’t believe him at first. Then she got mad. All her hope and happiness clenched up in her chest, turning in a flash to anger.

“Over my dead body,” she said. “I’m not leaving this house.”

“I’ve already decided,” Grandpa told her. “I done sold it.”

Grandpa still remembers how she cried and screamed at him those long days as they hauled all the pieces of their life together into a trailer to bring back to the Ozark Mountains. She never did forgive him. Her life got whittled down then, into the shape of all the other women in Iron County. She became a farmer’s wife.

Poet William Stafford says, “Everyone has a god and is an animal. Find both.” Grandma’s god, so far as I can tell, was an old testament Jehovah, omnipotent and indiscernible, whose plans, laid down before the foundations of the earth, were as irrevocable as death itself, and often as sorrowful. Perhaps she believed that God had forgotten the godforsaken Ozark country.

If my grandmother had been an animal, I am certain she would have been a bird. Her fierceness and self-containment in later years were reminiscent of an owl. But her love of music, and difficulty with the entrenched life of a farmer, make me think of a migratory songbird. My grandfather has described for me a moment he cherishes from

their first year of marriage. He is driving their new car from Roselle to Alton, Illinois, to visit friends. Grandma sits beside him and they are singing together, their voices blending with Jimmy Roger's "You're The One." When the Carter family plays "Sweet Fern," she turns up the volume and he remembers her singing "just like a songbird." This, he tells me, is when they were madly in love. I imagine how her hand steals over to his, her warm bird body nestles against him. In this moment, she is at home. Wind rushes across her face and she is flying, the song in her throat spilling out into the glad world.

Off the side of Hwy V in Roselle, Missouri, sits a small house built of colorful stones. My grandpa built it himself. He dug the stones out of the quarry along the St. Francis, choosing them for their colors. Dark red granite, slate green limestone, gray, streaked rhyolite. For two years, he layered stone upon stone, smoothing mortar between them. He built a porch like the one they'd had in Detroit, with a swing on the front. He built this house as a peace offering for Grandma, as penance for their move back home.

In his mind, these hours of hard labor were enough. For her, nothing would be. She despised the house, and the one hundred head of cattle that lowed and cropped the fescue on their 130-acre farm, purchased from his father. She would punish him throughout their fifty-five year marriage for shattering her dreams. She would punish him for being the man he was, a farmer, tied by blood and temperament to the land, and for the cost his happiness meant to her. For as long as I knew them, they didn't sleep in the same bed. My mother remembers daily shouting matches over Grandpa's muddy tracks on her shiny tiled floor.

Bitterness stole much of my grandmother's girlhood joy. But she would always love birds and she made of her home a refuge for them. Outside the kitchen window, for

as long as I can remember, a cherry red hummingbird feeder dangled from the eaves. It buzzed with a constant flurry of ruby-throats, darting across the front lawn, drunk with sweetness. In winter, she kept a bird feeder in the front yard filled, and watched for hours as cardinals, blue jays and chickadees stormed the millet and sunflower seed bounty. Nuthatches and red-bellied woodpeckers hung from a ball of suet she'd dropped into a red-netted onion bag. In spring, robins returned from their pilgrimages across the ocean, where she would have liked to travel herself. She struggled with life because hers did not suit her. She could no more root in the rocky soil of Missouri than a bright-winged cardinal could swim.

My friend Diane sat down her fork and asked me point blank.

“So why the big deal about being thirty?” We were eating dinner at the Moose Grill in Chateau, Montana, on our way to Glacier National Park. I'd apparently mentioned my age one too many times. Diane had traveled from Missouri to visit me in Missoula. We'd stayed close after college. She was a link to my past, yet firmly embedded in my present. The Rocky Mountain Front, jagged, immense, had risen up out of the misty clouds to our west as we drove north from Missoula. I'd told her of plans to drill for natural gas there. As we drove in silence, we imagined pumps, glinting in summer heat, pecking like pterodactyls into the prairie soil, a refinery belching its racket out into country still inhabited by the last plains grizzly, lynx, bighorn sheep and wolverines.

“Don't play dumb,” I told her now. “I heard all your complaints when we first met and you were turning thirty. We're supposed to find our life partner, someone

prematurely balding with a decent job and pop out a bunch of kids, or if not that, have a full-blown career to make up for our failings in the domestic department. You know the story.” The waitress, a woman in her forties with spiky short black hair, smiled at us knowingly as she set down a plate of salad. Diane shook her head slowly, her short, ’80s punk strawberry blond haircut with the wild tassel in the front wagging. I noticed, I mean, really noticed for the first time how beautiful her eyes were. They were a kind of amber color. *Wow*. I imagined seeing her through the eyes of her new boyfriend, Steve. *I bet he tells her how beautiful she is. I bet he notices, too.*

She had been single for as long as I’d known her: five years. I was glad she’d finally met a man who made her happy. A year ago she’d been telling me about the stats regarding women her age with an advanced degree, and the slim pickings left over. So now she was dating a guy who was a tradesman in a local factory. And she wasn’t complaining. “I don’t care if he says “ain’t” or plays online football,” she’s told me. “He’s more emotionally intelligent than any other man I know.”

But in this moment, her old self showed through. “You really need to read some second wave feminist writings,” she said. “Adrienne Rich, Gloria Steinem, Betty Freidan... They write about the struggles you’re going through. It’s hard, what you’re doing, being on your own, not succumbing to all the societal pressures.”

”But I have, it doesn’t help! It’s not my story!” I wail, “That was Tracy, not me. She worked through that shit, I shouldn’t have to.” Tracy, my oldest sister, was the feminist in the family. She’d married at 16, divorced, been a single mother, gotten a masters degree at one of the best journalism schools in the country, and developed a reputation as a world-class environmental reporter. She’d had abortions and didn’t feel

remorse for any of them. Or so she said. Diane raised an eyebrow, picked up her fork,

“Yeah, right. There’s nothing left to be done. Everything is now equal between men and women. And you’re liberated.” She bit into her garden burger, grinned with a mouth full of soybean curds.

“Well yeah,” I said, “I’m liberated. After I finish my degree I can do whatever the hell I want.” Two years ago, Diane and I had attended a performance by Dar Williams, one of our favorite female musicians. At the introduction to her performance, Dar had praised Gloria Naylor for her blatantly feminist song “I am woman, hear me roar.”

“Thank God she did that,” Dar said, “So that now we don’t have to. Women are now free to sing, write and explore the rest of life too.” *Exactly!* was the response from the middle of my belly. Let’s tell all those *other* stories that exist in this great big world. Let’s leave that woman stuff behind and be *human beings* together. And I’d tried to leave that woman story behind. Sometimes I felt like I was well on my way to breaking free of old restrictions, living my life by my own rules, making my own path. So why did I feel so lonely now, so... lost?

“It’s really hard to let go of those old stories,” Diane said, from her own experience. When I met her, she was near completion of a PhD in sociology with an emphasis in women’s studies. She was shooting a documentary of the Clothesline Project, where battered women stitched, scrawled, and patch-worked the heartbreaking stories of their lives on T-shirts, then put them on display in public places, so that all would bear witness to their silent suffering. Diane had been pissed at men for as long as I’d known her, for good reason. She herself had miraculously escaped an abusive, addictive relationship. She’d worked through a lot of crap and come out softer, more

human. More real.

She knew I wanted my own transformation to be easy, and that it wouldn't be. "Your shit doesn't just miraculously disappear." She stabbed into a flesh-colored GMO tomato for emphasis. "You have to acknowledge it, wrestle with it, make up a new story, one that fits you." For some reason, these words hit me hard. I just sat there, stunned. Make up my own life story? Wasn't that what I'd been doing for the past 12 years? If not, then what the hell had I been up to?

"Oh my God," I shoveled an enormous leaf of iceberg lettuce down my throat, and stared at Diane as I chewed. "I'm thirty-one years old; I should have found my own story already!"

"Girl, you're hopeless. Give yourself a break."

"Yeah, I know. I should have outgrown this self doubt by now."

The truth was, I'd begun to realize that I had gotten all that feminist stuff wrong. Kate Chopin, Gloria Steinem, Virginia Wolf, all the feminist elders I'd read had children, or marriages that fell apart. I'd done my part, I felt, by avoiding those traps. My twenties were spent engaging, then running away from serious relationships. I'd avoided children, commitment of any kind. When I wasn't chastising myself for my inability to stay single for more than a year at a time I pretended I'd lived up to some feminist ideal, played it smart. But I'd just found new traps. The enemy, I realized, and not for the first time, was not somewhere "out there." It was inside my own head.

I'd been running from the pain I saw in my older sisters' lives, my mother's and my grandmother. For the women of the older generations—too-early marriages, aborted careers. For my older sisters, painful divorces, children left behind or set off to the side in

the desperate shuffle of single motherhood and career building.

Throughout my twenties, instead of dating, then carefully choosing one long-term relationship, I'd had a series of impulsively begun, one- to-two year, usually long-distance affairs. At some point early on I'd discover it wasn't right. Then the internal struggle began. *He's a good guy, what's wrong with you? You're attracted to him, what's the problem?* And in the background always this noise; *something's missing, something's wrong, run for your life!* I'd go hot and cold, he'd follow suit, we'd drag out the ending. At each breakup my remorse was joined by excitement as I made my way back to freedom and the writing I always promised I'd devote myself to fully. A year or so later, I'd begin another relationship, again trying to make it work though my gut told me it would not. I was not alone in this game.

Throughout their twenties, many of my friends were as hard at this exploration phase as me. We began and ended strings of relationships, joined AmeriCorps, Student Conservation Corps, Peace Corps, traveled through South America, Europe or Africa for months, years on end, got our bachelor's and went back for a master's. Throughout our 20s we avoided the career path at all cost, rushing full-tilt into the relationships and adventure our parents had sacrificed for their work and families.

That grace period ended somewhere around twenty-nine, when it seemed that everyone else started "getting serious," settling down, getting married, biting the bullet and taking a job with *only two weeks paid vacation!* buying houses, paying off, rather than accruing debts. But there were a few other stragglers like me. Each of us walked around with a low hum of anxiety buzzing off our chests and foreheads. *Will we make it?* We walked around wondering. *Will we find our own story, and what will it look like?*

Underneath that—*does my life really matter?* Each of us wondered when our real lives would begin.

So it was that when Grandpa caught the owl Velva told him, “Pete, let it go.” In the owl, I consider, my grandmother may have seen herself. To Grandpa and his family, all utilitarian country folk, my grandmother’s desire for larger horizons was uncanny, and her hungry intellect was like an owl that takes up space in the forest, yet never serves man with a pretty song, or use of its flesh or skin. Grandpa’s clan never did take to Velva. She seemed to them arrogant, to have her head in the clouds, never happy, no matter what Pete did for her. And though she kept a spotless house as any good housewife might, she accomplished her duties with an air of resignation that irked Grandpa’s sisters, Lorraine and Bonnie.

My grandfather, who captured the owl by hand and released it at my grandmother’s bidding, practiced a gentler attitude toward owls than his father, Jesse. During the Depression, Jesse Hicks supplemented income from his hog farm by collecting bounties on the pelts and feathered heads of creatures deemed unfit for existence—laws on the books literally classified them as “illegal”—by state and county officials. I have an old photo that shows Jesse grinning for the camera in front of a row of shaggy pelts, pinned up on the clothesline behind him.

A wolf pelt would fetch sixty dollars, bobcat fifty—good money for those days. My grandfather followed him through the pastures, limestone glades and scrub oak forests of the Arcadia Valley in the '20s as he hunted the last of the red and gray wolves out of the Ozarks. Owls and hawks fetched a paltry fifty cents a head, but like many Ozarkians, he

seemed to enjoy taking them down for target practice as much as the wages.

The essays of Russell Pease, a Connecticut native who grew up in the Ozarks through the early 1800s, reflects the double standard commonly imposed on birds in the region. He wrote letters to the editor chastising boys for shooting songbirds, but must have believed owls to be fair game. In one essay he relates how he shot a great horned owl on the wing, then brought the maimed bird home for a bit of sport with his dog.

He set the owl, glaring fiercely, on the ground, then sicced his coonhound on him. The dog attacked, confident, but the bird quickly snared him in the face with a ready talon. Howling in pain, the hound beat a quick retreat, despite Pease's best efforts to cheer him on. After the fight, Pease shot the owl in disgust, finally putting its suffering to an end.

After Grandpa and Grandma had returned from the Ozarks to Detroit, Jesse would come to call and hunt around the property. By this time, the woods were emptied of wolves; bobcats and coyote sightings were slim. One afternoon he sat out on the back porch and called in a barred owl. When the dark-eyed raptor swept down from a nearby oak tree, Jesse took him down with his old .22. Grandma, in the kitchen, heard the shot, and came running. She cried out when she saw the crumpled body on her lawn.

"How dare you, Jesse! Don't you set foot on this property with a shotgun again!" Grandma was, in my Grandfather's words, "mad enough to spit." Jesse, so far as I know, never did shoot another owl on the property. As Grandpa related that story to me, I recognized a hint of admiration in his voice. As a child, he'd been taunted by his father for his "softness" toward animals. Once, on trek far off into the St. Francis Mountains, Great-grandpa Jesse shot an enormous rattlesnake's head off, then made grandpa wear it

around his shoulders all the way home. On another occasion, he made him shoot his own dog because it was eating chickens, then ridiculed him for crying. In Grandma, Grandpa had found an ally for his uncommon tenderness toward animals.

I call my grandfather. I sit on the front step, magpies flitting around my ankles, Mount Jumbo singed tawny above me under July heat and long lack of rain. Aunt Cheri, mom's baby sister, answers.

"Well hello, honey!" her voice is, as always, unbearably cheerful. "Guess what your grandfather and I are doing?" Of course, they are playing rummy. Cheri and I had had a falling out the day after September 11, when I was living in Columbia, Missouri. We'd exchanged heated emails; I felt we shouldn't bomb Afghanistan, she claimed the Lord was on our side. I still hear the strain of those harsh words in our too-friendly voices today.

"Take care, hon. Come home soon." She puts Grandpa on.

"Hello, little feller! Are you married yet?" Oh Jesus.

"No Grandpa, you'll be the first to know."

"Well, all you girls go and get married, then you get divorced. I like to know when you get married so I'll know whether or not you're going to get a divorce."

"Grandpa."

"Oh, I'm just teasin'." And he is, but then again, he isn't. He doesn't understand young people these days, how we live with each other, take our sweet time about getting married, then turn around and get a divorce, easy as pie. In his day, as I know very well, people stuck it out, whatever the cost.

Yesterday Mom and Dad visited him with Allia and Anika, my two nieces whose father is from Bangladesh, and he tells me all about it.

“I fileted up a big mess of bluegill and perch and Judy fried them up and those girls ate like there would be no tomorrow.” I could see it all in my mind. A visit to my grandfather’s means fresh fish from the St. Francis River or the Stall’s Lake. A trip out to the garden with a big white bucket to harvest green beans, broccoli, sweet corn. At least one game of rummy in the kitchen.

“So you’re sure you’re not getting married.”

“Nope, not yet.”

“Well, don’t get in too much of a hurry about that, okay?”

All the trails of my own story lead back to a small house of red and slate stones, standing proud and lonely in the Ozark Mountains. The house was lonely because there was no love in it. No matter how shiny Velva waxed those floors or how diligently Pete tended to his cattle and long-leaved corn, love would not enter there. Such an emptiness can stretch on for years. It can catch the children up in it, swirling them around like an angry storm, leaving them strewn about in strange places, with bruises and aches they pass on unknowingly to their own children, who come out sad and running to catch up with that thing that never was and should have been.

As a young girl, I’d sit on the porch swing looking down into that lawn when I visited my grandparents and feel the emptiness bore down on my neck, whispering low sad songs I couldn’t quite make out. Some people get used to such loneliness. It suits them somehow. But me and Velva, we never could. Flowers bloomed and died, bloomed

and died in neat rows along the grass, looking out into the road as if to say, “We are happy! Don’t believe otherwise!”

I understand her loneliness. I, too, felt lonely for something I couldn’t name. The difference between us is that I have been chasing this unnamed thing my whole life while she had to stay at home. There is a big silence in her story that no one can fill, and which seems to have seeped into mine.

In our conversation I asked Grandpa about the years in Detroit. These questions, I knew, were painful. Why, I asked him, did she like it there so much?

“I don’t know,” he paused. “She just didn’t want to go back to farming. She knew what a hard living that was and she didn’t want any part of it.” He told me that the week before she died, in a fit of rage she’d said to him, “Pete, I told you I didn’t want to move back down there.” This time I spoke, afraid to admit it, “Grandpa, where’d that come from? That discontent. Sometimes I think I have it too.” I may have said it too quietly for him to hear. Or perhaps he was uncomfortable with the idea but in any case, he did not answer. In the end it is my own task to name my discontent, and address it myself. No one else can do it for me.

No, I’m not married yet. I’m thirty-one, soon to be thirty-two years old. This morning, instead of getting the kids ready for school, I hiked for hours in deeply burned ponderosa pine forest in the Bitterroot Mountains of Western Montana. This will be my second summer working as a field biologist and studying the impact of fire on cavity-nesting birds like the American kestrel and threatened Lewis’s woodpecker. My grandmother’s love of travel and birds has lived on in me.

And as my grandfather was apprenticed to the secret language of the green Missouri forests, so too am I now apprenticed to this Montana land. I've learned that house wrens in the central Bitterroots tend to nest in crevasses in the bark of black cottonwood trees that follow the curve of a creek. I've heard males sing from the tops of trees as they begin to seek a mate, and watched them build nest after nest before the picky female chooses her favorite. I've seen a kestrel feeding three just-fledged babies from the branches of a large ponderosa. I am so familiar now with the sound of near-fledging hairy woodpecker babies that I'm convinced I could locate them in my grandfather's forest, were I to visit in the spring.

In her memoir, "Writing my Grandmother's Life," Teresa Jordan puzzles over *her* bitter grandmother's life and its hold on her. She says, "Possibilities were open to me that my grandmother could never imagine because I had other stories to guide me," and yet, "I was caught in an odd paralysis. I was freed of the stories that shaped my grandmother, but her own story was still shaping me." What is this thread that is passed from woman to woman down through the generations? How, in the end, can it be cut, so that a new pattern can be woven into the lives of the daughters and granddaughters? I believe that as I reach back through time to untangle my grandmother's story, I reclaim my own. From here, the path is mine to take.

Similarly, poet Mary Oliver has written of her own bitter great-aunt Agnes, whose life seemed a succession of disappointments and of whom, in her later years, she says, "Finally I think she hated everything, and then there was nothing left but the birds." I can't help but think that Agnes has something to do with Oliver's poem, "When Death

Comes.” Perhaps the last two stanzas are an antidote against her aunt’s despair, to mend the discontent that can take hold of any one of us when our lives unfold differently from what we had once hoped, or imagined.

When it’s over, I want to say all of my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it’s over I don’t want to wonder
If I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing, and frightened.

I don’t want to end up simply visiting this world.

Small Things that Matter

Each Christmas, for the past three years since leaving Missouri for Montana, my mother has given me a Missouri Department of Conservation calendar. “So you don’t forget us,” she says. Seasonal Missouri nature-lore softens the square for each day. Today is the 15th of May: *watch for lightning bugs on warm evenings*. Tomorrow: *wild strawberries ripen in grasslands*. Yesterday: *fawns are born through late June*. Near the calendar in my room, I have built a small altar. Owl feathers, a smooth black stone in the shape of a buffalo, a tuft of elk hair. And Missouri totems: cicada, June bug, tattered luna moth. *Remember us*, said Mom. As if I could forget.

Cicada. June Bug. Luna Moth.

Luna Moth.

Many of us, I imagine, must have a symbol that embodies our childhood relationship to nature. Into this longed-for thing we compress all the expansive sense of wonder for which child-mind is so available. The object, of course, can only approximate, never completely evoke the full wonder-sense in our adult minds, though the poets and mystics among us spend lifetimes seeking it.

For me, the luna moth is that symbol. If the Holy Ghost were a color, I am certain she would be pale, translucent green. And if she tired one night of her vast bodilessness and decided to take form, I am equally certain that she would choose the graceful sweep of the luna moth’s wings.

Actias luna. Though I have only seen luna moths in Missouri, they inhabit the entire span of North America. The Saturnidae family to which they belong includes most

of the large, spectacular moths of the world, often lumped together under the common name: “Emperor Moth.” *Polyphemus*, *Hercules*, *Spanish Moon*, *Io*, *Cecropia*. Emperor moth larvae crawl about in fat, spiky bodies, spin silk, undergo metamorphosis, live brief, gorgeous lives and then die in Africa, Papau New Guinea, India, Australia, even on a humble farm in southeast Missouri.

The luna moth is destined to a brief and hungry life. Less substance than spirit, they exist to mate, lay eggs, and die. They have no tongue, and so cannot forage on the persimmon tree leaves so tantalizing to their former caterpillar-selves. Spanning as much as 4 ½ inches, the luna is an uncanny pale green or blue-green with yellow veins and vivid white-and-brown eyespots on both upper and lower wings. The lower wings stretch down into long, tear-shaped extensions that trail behind as they fly. When I was eight years old, I read in a children’s nature magazine that luna moths would be extinct by the year 2000. Thankfully, the scientists who made the report were in error. Yet for me, the luna moth continues to represent the shock of the idea, applied to an entire species or ecosystem: *you can love something, and lose it forever.*

Who loved what was lost in my homeland before my birth? Buffalo, elk, mountain lion, grey wolf, red wolf, passenger pigeon. Who loved the thousands of acres of shortleaf pine, the intricate plant and animal communities reliant on their shade, and the particular composition of acidic soil made by their decomposing needles? In the “Bootheel,” that old swampland in the extreme Southeast corner of the state, now drained and converted to millions of acres of genetically identical soybeans, are there farmers who still dream of skies blackened by ducks, geese, and flamingos? Are they haunted sometimes by memories of the deafening rush made by the wingbeat of millions and the

wild refrain of their calls?

Last summer, I came home to see what was lost.

My mother and I stepped out the back door and looked out into the field where we grew our first crop of corn twenty-five years ago. Now it was mostly fescue, interrupted with occasional raspberry brambles and poison ivy. Beside the house, what as children we called the “mini jungle”—our own personal forest—was gone. What had once been a darkly lit grove of large trees, living and dead, draped with an unholy tangle of Virginia creeper and trumpeter vine and filled with the calls of a multitude of birds had been reduced to a quarter of its size, a silent, small, tidy cluster of evenly spaced trees. All that remained was one lonely shagbark hickory, a sugar maple, and a couple of white oaks with a hammock stretched between them.

The map in my mind, where as a child I had placed every tree and plant within the parameter of the mini jungle, a rough circle of perhaps 200 meters circumference, had been wiped clean. I looked for the sassafras shrubs, whose roots Mom dug in spring to make a ruby-red tea, beside the old rotted log beneath which we’d find pencil-sized ringneck snakes. I remembered the spot perfectly— it was just below the rock wall, beside our second small lawn— where my sister Toni had married Tom, our neighbor’s son. All gone—wild herb, snake dwelling, marriage.

The elderberry bush beside the clothesline, where I gathered flowers to make elderberry flower fritters. Vanished. I looked up to see naked sky, where once was a dense pattern of branches. Wild ginger, violets and passionflower vines need shade. I could not find them. A friend once abbreviated the Buddhist impermanence concept for me as “the

only constant is change.” But we love what we love. Such profound change enacted on the landscape that formed me as a child was true loss, deserving of grief before acceptance.

I asked my mother why. She listed the trees and reasons—the black locust whose thorns burst the tires of the lawn mower, the chestnut that had succumbed to blight. Perhaps, I thought as she spoke, this little island of a forest, surrounded by lawn and field had been too cut off from the rest, perhaps it was dying, and she was helping the process along. But too, I remembered the many occasions when visitors came and she’d expressed embarrassment because the jungle, to her, appeared so messy. I kept my thoughts to myself. What right did I have, a wandering daughter, to tell my parents how to care for their farm?

I left my mother and my desolate mini jungle, taking the trail my feet once knew so well down to Reynolds Creek. As I walked, I was pulled back through time until I was five years old again, and it was spring.

Green is the color of home. Surrounding our house, big waving faces of leaves. Hidden emerald voice of frogs spilling from trees, lush-tongued. Virginia creeper, passionflower vine tendrils rise and entangle in silent, glacial movement on lichened trunks and branches.

Grass licks my feet, it is dew-covered morning and before all the house-sleepers have awoken. All the way to the creek the air is thick and sleepy.

There’s the garden, and chokecherry tree beside it, lowered bough an invitation. Climbing is a rhythm well known, made by my limbs’ movement among the constellation

of branches. Below, I see long rows of potatoes, bursting out of clay hardpan.

Watermelon plants sprawl, lazy, luxurious.

Back on solid ground, my bare foot crushes wild strawberries—instant fragrance, more found with hungry, groping fingers and eyes. Past the garden the trail bends and a solitary tiger lily has bloomed under the ash tree—fire-orange, flame-like tongues curved downward from the center, flecked with black.

Wild asparagus shoots have risen from moist soil, not many. Kneel, pinch the base between forefinger and thumb—crunch between sharp teeth. Raw succulence tastes like spring.

Below the maple tree, part ninebark and hornbeam along the moist bank, climb down. Cool creek water. Rushing, flowing. Wait. Watch. Listen. *Listen.*

Mid-thigh down to tapering toe, my skin's first memory of joy is here, in Reynold's Creek, wading among bullfrog tadpole, water skippers and silvery minnows. I awaken at sunrise and visit the creek, stalking chance glimpses of creatures I've rarely or never seen. I know that an entire universe is hidden from human eyes. I come in early morning because I've heard that daybreak and sundown soften the wariness of wild animals. I go to the creek because I know that live water draws animals, just as it draws me.

When water recedes in early summer, small handprints arrive on muddy banks. These belong to raccoons, who will pretend not to see you if you sit silent long enough, holding your breath. Other tracks, three-toed, are made by a taller bird than you. Startle her into flight and she may drop you a blue feather.

Later, in strong sunlight, hold hands with a sister and walk the warm-watered

creek, trawling chicken breast behind. Feel the tug of a steel-clawed crawdad, slip him into your Folgers coffee can. Add twenty of his friends. Chop off their heads, build a fire along the creek and boil. Tiny pink tails, rigid and juicy, taste as good to children as to their raccoon cousins.

I wanted to invoke the world, not improve upon it.

The Osage, who wandered my green country in the not-so-distant past, knew something of invocation. According to their creation story, their ancestors flew to the earth on the back of red oak acorns. They were star people, children of the sun. Their bare feet struck red clay and they stumbled when they landed. Imagine: they grew up suckling the Milky Way; their bodies were fashioned of fire, lightning, and the breath of sky gods. Their eyes were made to see far-off things. Now they were grounded, and bewildered, in the center of the young, intimate earth. The dark forest surrounding emitted eerie, never-before-heard sounds: the low croak of a bullfrog at the edge of the river, the scream of a panther, the splash of a large body hurtling into the water.

Colors they'd seen in far-below rainbows were now flying above and creeping near them; vibrant yellow in the Carolina parakeets, bright red in the cardinals. When they beheld the river that stretched before them, they finally saw where the rain that used to fall from the clouds at their feet had gathered. Nothing in their long years of sky-living had prepared them for the closeness of this place. Can you imagine their disorientation? None knew which berries were good to eat, how to catch fishes, which roots were thick and succulent, or which leaves might be plucked to make a healing tea.

The Osage knew their vulnerability, and how to ask for help. They started by

naming things. The first night, hungry and cold, they prepared their first earth ceremony. Each had the image of a creature in her mind when she called its name. One young man lumbered around the fire as he had seen a buffalo do. A small girl whirled and circled the blaze in the shape of a hummingbird. Another made of his body the twisting, doubled-over shape of a wind-worn cedar tree. As each person named their chosen totem, they took the intelligence of each into their bodies. Each *became* what they named, thus knowing what it knew of survival, and of belonging. In this way, the Osage grew fur, wings and claws. In this way, they became native.

As a young girl I, too, tried to win nativity by naming and becoming.

When I was six, I had a favorite game called “wild animal.” In it, I was often a mountain lion. I’d be sitting peacefully in my bedroom, browsing a storybook or building a Lincoln Log cabin when the overwhelming urge to pounce on something overtook me. Suddenly, I sprouted a tan, smooth pelt, long fangs and glittering amber eyes. I’d pad noiselessly through the hallway and into the living room, alert for the smallest sound. I’d slink low when I got to the kitchen. Flatten my ears and scan the tiled floor for unwary feet. Trina, my next oldest sister, would be docilely seated at the kitchen table, coloring and grazing on a purple crayon. On a lucky day, her back was to me. I’d glide then, a mere ghost of a cat, over the tiled floors then stop, tail twitching.

“Yeaooowlllllll!!!” I’d let loose the fiercest screeching, hungry cat noises ever when I pounced on my delectable deer sister. And probably would have eaten her right then and there, had she not at that very instant become—not a deer—but an angry grizzly bear who, when standing, reached ten feet and swatted at me with her enormous, clawed paws. And

she did, in reality have fingernails that would frighten a grizzly, were he to have stumbled into our kitchen.

The day I slunk up behind Trina and she turned from her homework seconds before I could pounce to announce, “I don’t want to play that game anymore,” was easily the most devastating moment of my young life. She said she was too old for such silly games. She was, after all, a third grader. I sulked, and batted at her with an angry paw. She pushed me away, “Grow up! You’re not an animal, you’re a human being!” she said, turning back to her work.

I didn’t fully believe her until the next morning, when I decided I was a flying squirrel. I aimed my small, light body from the black locust tree in our back yard toward a maple down the hill. I surveyed the soft green grass below, and spread my furred wings. I closed my eyes, and remembered precisely how it felt to fly in dreams. Leaped. For a glorious nano-second, I soared. Then my wings, faith and dream-practice failed me. I landed with a thump on the decidedly un-soft grass, the jarring impact putting me squarely back into my human body, a body I inhabited with more than a little disappointment. Not for me, the sky.

Like the old storytellers of the Osage clans, the preachers of my childhood Baptist church told us who we were, and where we’d come from. They were men of the soil—mostly farmers, and miners. One great, strapping preacher in my mother’s childhood church, Travis Eye, harvested and sold wild ginseng and goldenseal to support his family after he was laid off from the Potosi lead mines. Like the Osage elders, he taught us to believe we were born of a sky God. Yet while the Osage came to revere their earth home, our devotion was to always and forever be directed heavenward.

“This world is a lure and snare,” trumpeted Brother Eye from the pulpit, dressed in his Sunday best. I like to imagine that the scent of wild ginger still lingered beneath his fingernails. To love the earth too much, he taught us, was idolatrous. Still, he and the other preachers spent a great portion of their time in the forest fishing and hunting, and in their sermons they invoked stream, tree, and animal as allegory to speak of matters of the spirit. Perhaps it was the memory of his dark years in the lead mines that caused him to curse the land in the next breath, following his exultation. “How much greater will that second home be,” he said, “than this vale of tears we toil in here below.”

I held fast to spring memories as my boots skimmed the trickle of water that remained of Reynolds Creek. Last year, our upstream neighbors had put in a dam. I walked through the willow thicket toward our old swimming hole. Heavy flooding had opened the creek bed, obliterating the pool, but when I saw the enormous sycamore tree on the other side of the bank I knew I had found the spot. It was here that I had discovered the rainbow darters. The moment is still a touchstone, like luna moths. Perhaps it was April. I remembered myself back to nine years old. I am alone, and melancholy.

My prayer-stone hangs over a little waterfall that rushes into the swimming hole we’ve named “Tracy’s bathtub,” after my oldest sister, because after heavy spring rains it reaches up to her neck when she stands flat on two feet. I gaze down into the trickle of water cascading toward the pool. Sunlight flickers on the water’s surface, revealing movement. And I suddenly witness, along the full length of the six-foot falls, a shimmer of rainbows. I kneel, and finally lie on my belly for a closer look. Reach one hand into water. Cool skin. The strain of muscle under my fingertips. I slide my fingers under the

small body, lifting it up into the light.

The minnow lies stunned in my hand-cup of water. Iridescent streaks of blue, green, and silver flash off its narrow body, its belly is shiny and white. I release it, and count forty more in the dips and folds of the limestone waterfall. My nose nearly touches theirs as I dangle from my rock, watching them, raising some up to drop them into the upper pool. The sun rises up into the center of the sky, drifting down into the trees and burning hot orange by the time I leave. By then, all the minnows have completed their ascent; arriving at the home the warming waters urged them toward.

Because I'd experienced such moments, I never fully believed our old preachers. I knew that if this physical, animal world sometimes seemed a vale of tears, it was just as often a holy space for revelation. I sensed something intimate and dangerous lurking just beneath my own skin—a perception mirrored back to me by my fellow creatures. In the front lawn I lay on my belly, eye to eye with a grasshopper. I saw the sky and soil from his viewpoint, nibbled on grasses, worshiped the sun. Wading in Reynold's Creek, I lifted one leg slowly, then the other, stalking minnows and crawdads as I'd seen herons do. I possessed the potential of all these beings, tied up in my body's cellular story.

Yes, I too longed to be spirit, set free from the limits of matter, flying above the earth with a luna moth's wings. But I also delighted in my embodiment as a fully feeling creature. I knew then and sometimes recall now that to be an animal in this green world means to be fully alive. Which means that we will one day die. Someday we, too, shall be lost.

Yesterday, I called home and spoke with my ten-year-old niece, Aniq. Having

spent the first half of her life in Bangladesh, she is more globally minded than most children her age. “Did you know there are only thirty Chinese tigers left in the world?” she asked.

“No,” I said. Such an idea is difficult to conceive.

“Global warming is melting all the glaciers so that soon we won’t have any more polar bears,” she continued. I hoped these scientists were as wrong as those who’d predicted the extinction of luna moths. These days, though, it is hard to find good news.

“I’m so sorry, Aniqqa,” was all I could say.

“What about all the kids in the future?” Aniqqa asked, a question more adults need to be asking. “For them, polar bears and tigers will just be a story, they won’t be real.”

What could I tell her? I thought of the recent Audubon study that showed that thirty percent of North American bird species are suffering significant population declines. And I considered the likelihood that, within her lifetime, thousands of species of frogs and salamanders may join polar bears and tigers as storybook creatures.

It’s enough to break your heart—that is, if you are still brave enough to have one.

The large losses, those that make it into the headlines and classroom—polar bear, tiger, bird and salamander—are composed of small ones—the mini jungle, the dam on the creek. We choose, again and again, our own modern comforts over time spent savoring, and learning from, the intricate expression of the more-than-human world.

I still seek to live my life as an invocation. I believe in serving life on earth from a sense of grace, not duty. Yet love absent action is schizophrenic, an insanity we in the modern world encounter daily. I drive a car now, and purchase my food from a grocery

store rather than growing my own. How can I reconcile my highest ideals with the absurdity of my actions?

I have begun to believe that growing up means understanding that I, too, affect change, incur loss, and that the weight of my body on this earth is substantial. To belong to the earth means to give and yes, to take. Each inhalation is a gift received, each exhalation—to the plants that surround us—a gift given. We must cultivate mindfulness of this process and attempt balance, imperfect though our efforts may be. For urban dwellers like myself, this means driving less, taking care where I spend my money, and joining with others to find local solutions to overwhelming global crises.

My parents, too, seek balance, and I learn from their example. My father regularly hays the field where we once grew corn. Nests of young birds and mice are crushed beneath the weight of his wheels, or the blade of his brush-hog. Such is the way of our world. Yet he and Mom have left an enormous, unruly brush pile at the field's edge where quail, rabbits, groundhog and snakes find refuge. Such an old gesture—this giving of thanks, and setting aside of space solely for one's wild neighbors. In spring, as my mother hangs laundry on the line, she watches as a pair of cardinals court, build their nest in the brush pile, and raise their young. "It's a delight," she tells me, "to see them." I imagine the crimson birds flying to the opening where the mini jungle used to be, and foraging for grasshoppers in the sunlit grass. They return to their hungry babies with beaks full of legs, antennae, and juicy bodies. On the other side of loss, we must hope, we will find renewal.

In God's Garden

It seems to me that the desire to garden is the emotional opposite of the desire to move. People who garden commit themselves to place. They also risk being caught by entropy.

—Claudia Lewis, Ode to Mold

I received a package from my mother today in the mail. Cylindrical, wrapped in cardboard. Its shape and considerable weight in my palm made me wonder... I inhaled as I slid the crumbling, aromatic loaf out of its tin can—yes! butter, honey, black walnuts and distinct persimmon. Curled along the outside of the can is a shaft of cream-colored paper and my mother's neat script. Since I won't make it home for Thanksgiving, Mom has sent it to me two months early via my favorite autumn treat—persimmon bread. Persimmon means frost has hit in Missouri. Her note is a tally of this year's harvest from her garden.

Here in Mom's package she has set side-by-side two objects that distinguish our lives. For her, the domestic art of gardening and for me, a lifelong appreciation of wild bounty. We are more alike than different, my mother and I. We both get easily flustered when called unexpectedly to perform in social situations, and feel more at peace alone, outside. In phone conversations and letters, we compare the activity of birds: *the goshawk's out near the feeder again, Bohemian waxwings feeding on the mountain ash.* And seasonal differences: *Summer's hanging on here, Larches are turning yellow.* Yet we are different, too, in fundamental ways. My mother derives pleasure from growing her own food. My harvest, though sometimes substantial and real like fleshy persimmons, is often ephemeral; gained from the presence of an elegant old tree, say, or the fragrant scent

of wild ginger, uprooted in early spring.

My mother stands with one foot steeped in traditional, Calvinist Baptist religion and the other warily set in soil overturned by the children of the '60s and '70s. She is not one woman but many, struggling always to bridge her myriad selves, and the divide made by the modern world between herself and her daughters. A parade of images, each contradicting the others, floods my mind when I try to recall who she was in my childhood.

In one, she is seated on the hard maple pew in the Lone Pilgrim Primitive Baptist Church. Her hair is dark brown and fine, betrayed into a neat, hair sprayed helmet. She sits perfectly rigid and straight. Tan Mary Kay concealer dulls the skin on her face. Her knee-length blue skirt is neatly ironed. Her high heels look smart, grazing the polished hardwood floor. She stares straight ahead as she sings. There is nothing gentle in her. Her songs are forceful, the will behind each syllable is meant to prove her worth to God. She holds the Old School Hymnal tightly in her hands, a new red cardboard cover around the old, dog-eared pages. She sings, "Just as I am, Without One Plea," and "I Am A Poor Wayfaring Stranger," proclaiming her worthlessness, just as her mother did and her mother before her, begging the mercy of an Almighty, unpredictable God. When the preacher speaks, she listens intently, her mouth a tight line. We kids sit in the pew behind her. When we giggle or fight, the glare she jabs back at us renders us silent, and fearful.

I remember that woman: righteous, sharp and rigid in the church pew; and another, one who loved grace more than duty. I see her kneeling now on that same hardwood floor. Sunlight splashes across her face. In her hand is a white cloth that she

dips repeatedly into a washbasin. She is washing Sister Irene's feet. In communion, behind a door closed to all but members and small children, Mom is Jesus and Jehovah and the Holy Ghost, humbling herself to her sister in God who will, herself, soon be humbled, and wash my mother's feet.

Sometimes I remember her as a Shiva of the kitchen, many armed, of an eccentric hue. She thumbs through a macrobiotic cookbook. Scattered across the table before her are exotic ingredients, alien to the kitchen of a rural Missouri woman. Golden globes of fermented fruit flesh gleam out of their plastic tray, the label reads Umebushi plums. Sheets of glimmering black and blue Nori seaweed. Burlap sacks filled with basmati rice, purchased from a food co-op organized by women like herself—Christian, God-fearing, and skilled at gleaning the best of the countercultural milieu left over from the '70s.

And perhaps most often I see her kneeling, this time on fresh soil in the garden. Tomato plants surround her—dark, velvety in their green. This image is dreamlike, mythic. Sweet pea vines follow the curve of her hips, rise up above her waist, tendrils tangle in her hair, blossoms open above her dark eyes. Wild roses spring from her ears. Her bare feet stretch and divide into rhizomes, rooting her in red clay soil, gently, persistently tying her here to our small farm at the foothills of the Ozarks. All around her, birds flit and sing—cardinals feed from her hands, a goldfinch perches on a purple thistle head near the edge of the garden, its song silver and sunshine, rippling across the trees and field.

My fear of entropy, too, distinguishes me from my mother. Fear of entropy has propelled me, in the eleven years since first leaving home, to move fourteen times and hold down thirty-six different jobs. In love, I can't seem to break the two-year barrier. As

a child, I saw what happens to an old car when you let it sit in one place for too long. Rust begins to creep along the inside of the wheel rim. The door, when opened, creaks loudly. The tires go flat. To stay in one place, I felt in my 20's, meant to stagnate, sprouting thick, slimy algae like our small pond. I wanted to be mercurial and alive, like our quick-flowing creek.

I was drawn from an early age to all things light, fast, and wild. The creek was my domain. Like my grandmother, I was drawn to birds. Until the age of six, I was convinced of my ability to fly. Plants drew me, yes, but those that grew of their own accord, not due to any special favor by humans. I endured the long hours of weeding our garden in anticipation of harvesting the wild bounty that bloomed, fruited, burrowed in the soil and unfurled, a hidden secret to all but the most devoted wildcrafters, like myself.

I was marked, like every child growing up in the shadow of the Cold War, by the gnawing threat of impending apocalypse looming just around the corner. My parents, too, were affected. The oil crisis stirred up memories of Depression-era poverty for them, and was largely responsible for their sojourn back to the land. Dad purchased buckets full of pennies from the bank and we spent long hours in the basement rolling them into dull-orange wrappers. My parents believed that when the value of paper money sunk as it had during the Depression our copper pennies, at least, would sustain us.

Children of my generation grew up with the pressing need to make ourselves useful; to save the world, though we felt terribly powerless, and alone. My contribution was to learn primitive survival skills so that when the bombs hit I could save the lives of my family and neighbors by teaching them which roots, berries and vegetables they could harvest in the woods. I weighed the relative importance of all wild edibles and considered

the roots and nuts most precious, calculating the nutrient content of each; black walnuts and hickory nuts were rich in oil and protein, as were acorns. The roots of burdock and spring beauty seemed hearty and substantial. Would there be enough to keep my large family alive? I wasn't sure.

Wild greens ranked lower on the list. Salads made from violet blossoms, wood sorrel and chickweed were nutritious, but wouldn't put meat on your bones. Crawdads would do in a pinch, and I became adept at catching them. I knew that when civilization came crashing to its knees, something big and furry would have to be killed. That bloody task I'd leave to my brother and father.

One afternoon I found an abundant crop of caterpillar cocoons in the branch of a cedar tree. Unrolling the soft, silky covering, I discovered that it was surprisingly resilient. My crafty survivalist mind hit on a special use for them. I'd been trying to figure out where clothing would come from, and here was the perfect source! By stitching these together, I figured, we could make blankets, and dresses, and shirts.

Fear and the need to be useful were not the only factors that kept me returning to the forest to harvest wild edibles. I can now imagine nothing more natural for a girl child. Consider that for 99% of our history women have spent a goodly portion of time on our knees; digging wild roots, harvesting shoots, leaves and berries. For the vast majority of our ancestors, daily life was firmly imbedded in a matrix of plants. Many speak now of the malaise modern urban men have suffered, separated as they are from the work of hunting and fishing, those practices that shaped them. Less has been said of the tragic loss of intimacy with the plant world women have endured in modern times, particularly those of European descent; persecuted so severely during the Inquisition that we became

divorced from our heritage as plantswomen.

I culled information from plant identification and natural history books and made daily explorations into the woods, eventually developing an internal map that plotted the location of each variety of plant, and an internal clock to follow the seasonal harvests. I tried to always be on the alert, and making the rounds. One spring I noted a colony of may apples blooming in a little hollow in the moist woods below our garden. I visited late in June, to see how the fruits were faring. The drooping globes were still immature—and poisonous for a child. I loved the glossy green umbrella plants with druidic understanding in my blood. I knew, perhaps, what some ancestral grandmother of mine had known—what can kill you can also make you stronger. Though the plant and green fruit is toxic and the root deadly, the may apple's European cousin, the mandrake, was used by pagan-leaning women in pre-Inquisition Europe for numerous ailments, including liver failure. It was also used to induce abortions. Two weeks later, I again visited, to find that each fruit had been snatched from their stems by a greedy possum perhaps, or turtle. I would have to wait another year for my first taste of a may apple.

My mother knew some wild fruits, including the persimmon and the papaw— a sweet, banana-flavored fruit from a tree that favored the deeper south of her parent's farmland. Persimmons grew further north, in a grove behind the bird feeder in our front yard. The spindly trees seemed anemic; the generous weight of their many fruits bowed their highest branches. After the first frost hit, we gathered them in buckets and washed them, trying not to break their tender skins. We pulped them in a small sieve with a wooden mallet, pressing the dense, coppery pulp through tiny holes and making a rich, satiny pudding. We would spread some of the pulp on cookie sheets to dry for a winter

snack; the rest we froze in Ziploc bags for persimmon bread. Some wild knowledge has not been lost. Mother to daughter, a loaf of persimmon bread reminds me of where and from whom I come.

Though she was more at home in the country than her mother had been, as a girl mom, too, had dreams of leaving Iron County. She wanted a career of some kind, and to help people. Even as a little girl, she felt sorry for the poor kids who lived down the road, wondering if they had enough to eat. Like her mother, she wanted to go to college. But Dad was threatened.

“It would have broken his heart if I’d gone to college,” Mom told me once. “He wanted me to be a real wife.”

“What does that mean, “real wife?” I asked.

“A woman shouldn’t have more education than her husband,” Mom said. “It hurts his pride, and threatens the marriage.” Finally, Mom felt defeated. “I didn’t even know what I wanted to do really. It was all pretty silly.”

The night before their marriage, Mom was gripped with cold feet. As the bright moon sailed up above her window, and cows lowed softly in the field, she cried. “Am I really in love with him?” she asked herself. “What if I don’t love him enough?” She feared her mother’s discontent lay hidden inside her, a poison seed. She wanted to give herself to love, though, and the warmth of a house full of children. That night she made her decision—she would marry Gary and come what may, she would not waste her life in bitterness. So she married Dad, forgot about college and made, as she says it, a career of having babies.

Since leaving home I have grown only one garden—if you can call three spindly tomatoes and an anemic pepper plant a garden. An obsession with soil and growing vegetables, so pronounced in my Mom and Grandpa, seems to have skipped a generation in me. Maybe I’ve inherited my restlessness from my father. Recently retired, he’d love nothing better than to sell the house and tour the country in their ‘76 Toyota motor home. One barrier stands between him and his dreams: Mom’s garden.

Mom can’t bear to leave because for the duration of the vacation she’d be thinking of her zucchinis growing overripe on the vine, or the massive undertow of weeds plotting a communist takeover of her virtuous okra and green beans. In our last phone conversation Dad mentioned the unlikely possibility that he visit me in Montana on his motorcycle.

“But your mother,” he sighed, “she just couldn’t stand being away from her garden for so long.”

“So just come by yourself.” I tempted him. “It would be good for you!” But he’s only spent three nights in all their married years away from Mom. For him, the idea is appalling. He’s what some might call “co-dependent.” Others may call it devotion. The problem, then, could be that Mom doesn’t have enough devotion. Except that she does. To her garden.

Mom told me recently that she was tricked into gardening. For the first few years after she and Dad were married, she just grew flowers. She harbored a superstitious fear of planting vegetables, fully aware of her inherited leanings in the formerly direction. For years, while she and dad lived in St. Louis, she prided herself in her begonias, tulips, and

geraniums. Then one day she ignored her inner warnings and planted a tomato. This, she tells me, was her fatal error. Tomatoes led to zucchini, then to okra, then potatoes until one day she found herself in her father's exact position, hoe in hand, surrounded by an enormous garden that demanded constant attention. She was dismayed at first, but eventually succumbed to her fate.

My mother had moved back home—but only halfway. Halfway between the city her mother coveted and the Ozark country her father could not be separated from. She also returned only halfway to her dad's practice of farming—she went organic. Grandpa, who had inherited badly abused soil on his own farm, had been among the first of the farmers in his post-WWII era to embrace chemical fertilizers and pesticides, dispensed at first freely by the Farm Bureau, then later at a steep price from local retailers.

Mom's forays into organic gardening began when I was two years old and we lived in the suburbs outside of St. Louis. Mom was regularly spraying the pesticide "Sevin" on her flowers. My sister Trina was three, Scott five, Shelly seven. At some point, Mom noticed a link between her spraying and our chronic spring colds. She made the leap that, twelve years earlier, Rachel Carson had made at a global level. "Is there a connection between the health of my children, and the insecticide I'm using?" she asked herself. Unsure of the answer, she applied the precautionary principle and stopped using it.

In the years following, her curiosity piqued, my mom began reading all she could get her hands on regarding organic farming. And when, during the oil crisis of the 1970's, my parents moved from the suburbs of St. Louis to a small farm located midway between St. Louis and the Ozarks, she had the opportunity to experiment on a larger scale. She

tried mulch, horse manure, manure tea, compost, and biological predators. She was doing things her own way. She'd moved home, yes, but only halfway.

Mom consulted *Mother Earth News*, the same publication subscribed to by so many "back to the landers" in the early 70's. Though my parents would wince at the label, I tell my friends that my parents were fundamentalist hippies, because of all the ways we lived outside the "system." Mom designed our house and Dad built it, with the help of his brothers. We raised goats, chickens, and cows for milk, eggs, and meat, kept beehives for honey, and grew an enormous garden that supplied us with nearly all our vegetables. Mom had purchased a flour maker and pasta machine, then joined a Christian women's co-op, from which she ordered the majority of our other foods in bulk.

Soon after we moved onto our new farm, mom's depression hit. Depression runs deep in her side of the family—she has told of how in her childhood Grandpa put a gun to his ear and threatened to blow his brains out. It was a known fact that hard work was its only cure. She feared moments of idleness with the same fervor that some fear work. The thought of lying down in the middle of the day made her nauseous with guilt. But for the first time, her physical strength waned. A constant awareness of the impossible weight of work always needing to be done drained the energy from her body and her mind. Her depression took firm hold, and she did not know how to shake it.

"What's wrong with you? Why are you crying?" My father was commuting an hour every day to his job as a machinist in St. Louis, and building our new home on evenings and weekends. Late at night when he and Mom would crawl, exhausted, into bed, she'd start it up again. That quiet sobbing he couldn't stand. It made him feel helpless and angry. He couldn't fix it.

“I don’t know,” Mom would say, crying harder. She tried to tell him how she felt. How an intolerable darkness would grip her in the middle of the day, causing her to fantasize about crawling behind the locust tree to sleep for hours, or die. “It’s not your fault,” she’d say. “There’s something wrong. I don’t know what it is.” He couldn’t listen. She couldn’t name the thing that gnawed at her. Photos of my Mom from this time are frightening. She looks skeletal, dark half-moons under her eyes, the skin along her arms loose, hair thin. She looks older in those pictures than she does now, thirty years later. Doctor after doctor tested her, and found nothing wrong.

Mom’s apprenticeship into organic gardening led her to Dr. Janeczek. As she learned to view the soil as a living organism best cared for through strengthening its health rather than use of poison or addictive fertilizers, she began to consider that her own body might be the same. For years she had chased away her depression through sheer will, determination, and prayer. What stopped her, and caused her metamorphosis, was the limits her body finally forced upon her. By the time she met Dr. Janeczek, her body’s message had gotten through. *Your old life is over. It told her. Time for a change.*

Dr. Janeczek was a counselor and naturopath in St. Louis with uncanny intuition and charisma. I visited him once when I was about eight, and still remember the way his dark eyes probed into mine, looking so far into me that I wanted to crawl outside of my skin. “You can’t make your Mom better,” he’d said, and I’d immediately burst out crying. He pursed his lips together, looked down and nodded as I tried to subdue my sobbing. *How did he know?* I felt humiliated. He’d blown my cover. Everyone thought I was carefree, and happy. It was my job to cheer up Mom, with silly antics and frequent hugs. He was the first to see how I held Mom’s depression inside myself, to protect her.

“I see a lot of sadness in you,” he said.

To Mom, the years of her depression are now a vague memory. But they have left their mark on me. Once, in my mid-twenties, I had a startling dream, in which I revisited this period in my mother’s life. In the dream I am five years old. I sit at a small table in the dark house and have assembled the beginnings of a castle with tinker toys. I look up, to see my mother sitting quietly in a chair facing me; she is gaunt and weary. Looking at her, I find it hard to breath.

Because I am smaller, it is easier for me to remember my true home, my birthing out of the heart of God. There is a great golden light flooding from me, surrounding her. I stay motionless for one thousand hours, for days and years, directing my sunlight toward my mother, but she cannot feel the smallest ray.

A small cylinder of wood falls to the floor and, breaking my concentration, I stoop to pick it up. In this one instant, I look up to see my mother crumbling into dust. There is nothing but emptiness between us now. I pick up a stick and realize that I can resume my work, but my desire has died with her.

Suddenly a deafening roar rises up from deep inside me. There is no limit to this rage which pounds inside my skull. I rush out into my second world, that one which never fails me, and I scream my anger out to the trees and the blurred ground beneath my feet as I run past everything which is green and life-giving.

It is a small vine that tangles below my foot and brings me, finally, to my knees.

I can scarcely describe the sweetness of this black earth I feel between my fingers. I am surrounded by a grove of trees. My feet stretch down deep into this black soil and

my arms, as I reach up into the sky, have become wings. Animals gather around me. The frogs come first, creeping from my left, moving over that rich black soil. Next comes a squirrel, chattering from the tree above my head. A doe steps out from a clearing. From beneath my feet a mole tunnels to the surface. I look up and an owl has flown down into the tree to my right.

“What do you want?” asks Owl. I look up, and know.

“To see the world!” I tell her. I crawl onto Owl’s back. Together, we swoop up above this welcoming forest and soar above the long dirt road leading away from my childhood home. The animals below grow smaller, and I have become a tiny feather floating above a sea of green.

Instead of drawing blood and running tests, Dr. Janeczek asked Mom questions, and he listened. Slowly, painfully, Mom’s secret life spilled out, her hidden thoughts, misgivings, anger. He was the first to affirm what she’d intuited already—that her depression and exhaustion could not be rooted out with pills and positive thinking. He showed her that her emotional life affected her physical health and that the health of her physical body affected her emotions. She was learning the ecology of herself—body, mind, and heart—and their connectedness to each other.

It is strange that Mom trusted a male doctor to cure her. She had done battle with doctors for much of her adult life, and had little trust in them. Throughout her childhood, she’d been taken to a crackpot dentist who, over the years, drilled and removed a good portion of her upper teeth. At the age of seventeen, she’d grown tired of the yearly torture. On the afternoon of her last visit she glared at the dentist from the seat.

“Pull them all out, I don’t want them,” she said. All that long, bloody afternoon as her upper teeth were extracted one by one, she sat stoic, fighting back the tears. She fantasized that she would never again have to visit a dentist. She kept the fact of her dentures so private that I did not catch sight of them until I was in my teens.

When Mom’s third child, Shelly, was born, her doctor told her she should have her tubes tied. Shelly’s blood was incompatible with hers, and it was feared that mom had developed antibodies against it, which might cause her system to attack future babies. Mom wanted more children. She felt God wanted her to have them, too.

Mom asked the elders in the church and my father what they thought. All said, “Well, if the doctor says get the operation, get the operation.” Finally, after my birth, a persuasive doctor convinced her to be implanted with an intrauterine device (IUD). *It’s harmless.* He told her, *it will save your life.* But the IUD caused her near-constant, heavy bleeding. She had two miscarriages over the course of two years, before having it removed. She grieved for years over the loss of her two babies, and blamed herself for having allowed herself to be implanted with the IUD. At the same time that mom’s body was reacting to the IUD, the house we lived in was insulated with Dorvon, which was later revealed to be toxic, similar to dioxin.

Dr. Janeczek was the first doctor to make the link between the chemicals, the IUD, her grief over the miscarriages and her current illness. He was also the first person to tell her that it was okay to express her emotions. He put her on a strict macrobiotic diet to strengthen her body. At first, she made the rest of the family our regular country fare of mashed potatoes, fried chicken, or meat loaf. We’d gawk at her weird food, fascinated and repelled. Her bowl was filled halfway with brown rice, and a half-cup of lentils. On

top, ground almonds, steamed vegetables, and Nori seaweed on the side. Tamari was sprayed over the top for flavor. Challenged by her dentures, Mom would chew at that food for an hour after we'd left the table.

Soon, though, we too were eating rice and bulgur casserole, rice balls covered with Nori seaweed, and miso soup. Mom developed a fascination for alternative therapies and the impact of various foods on the body. She bought *Diet for a Small Planet*, and began practicing yoga with Lillias in the mornings on our black and white TV.

Mom's one-woman revolution didn't stop in the kitchen. Her counseling sessions with Dr. Janeczek shook up the entire household, and the tremors reverberated beyond. She started getting in touch with her "inner child," and wrote a letter to her mother. They didn't speak for a year. She and Dad fought nightly. His reaction to her sudden demand that he communicate his feelings and acknowledge hers was dual: disappear to the shop, or explode. In this difficult time, they began to consider divorce.

After two years, Mom stopped seeing Dr. Janeczek. His questioning, which had led Mom to consider divorce, now pushed her to challenge the authority of the church. For Mom, divorce would have been morally, emotionally, and financially devastating. Leaving behind the religion of her childhood would have stripped her of the only community she possessed. Primitive Baptist church members were not to become intimate with "the World"—i.e. anyone outside the church. She'd already stretched the limits by going to Dr. Janeczek for help.

After Mom stopped seeing Dr. Janeczek, she tried to bend herself back into her old shape. She turned to Psalms and Job for comfort, apologized to her mother, and

strove to become a more submissive and agreeable wife. Some of what she'd learned, though, did not directly challenge her faith, or her marriage. She continued a life-long study of natural medicine and nutritional health, and a more subdued exploration of her emotional terrain. She also continued to garden under a holistic philosophy distinct from her father's methods. Even today she will tell you, if you ask her about Dr. Janeczek, "That man saved my life."

Sometimes a door is opened wide and too much light floods in at once. Mom pushed that heavy door shut but left a little crack with some light shining through. Those long hours with Dr. Janeczek changed her. She learned that in every area of her life she had choices, difficult though they might have been to make. She could leave the church. She chose to stay. She could leave her marriage. Again, she chose to keep it.

I was hiking along Rattlesnake Creek with a friend last week when we came upon a grove of elderberry bushes, heavy with purple, perfectly ripened clusters of fruit. Just like the berries I gathered as a child, in a thick grove of trees behind our house that we called the "mini jungle." In Missouri, elderberries are harvested in early summer. Here, they ripen in the fall. My friend leaned a hand against the hollow stem of a plant and a smattering of berries fell to the ground. We each put a berry in the other's mouth.

"Good, isn't it?" He rolled it around on his tongue, frowning, unsure.

"Seedy, and tart," he said, as he plucked more from the branches. "But I like them."

"Wish we had a bag to put them in," I said, dreaming of elderberry pie.

Last night we shook the berries from their fine heads and washed them, now dark

purple, in a bowl. He sliced green apples from his neighbors' yard; I mixed the flour and salt for the crust. Today I place the persimmon bread loaf from my mother beside the remains of our elderberry apple pie and consider that I have chosen to work in God's garden—and that it surrounds me, in every place I live.

Someday soon, I hope to settle in one place and grow my own garden. Until then, I will rely on organic farmers like my mother to feed my belly. To nourish my spirit though, with something more akin to glee than somber inspiration, I go to God's garden, and pluck from her bounty. This crop is happened upon by pure chance, and serendipity and my fellow harvesters are many. Our garden is of an extravagant size and the more we travel, the greater its circumference grows.

A Path Made by Walking

I still have a dog-eared copy of the Columbia Missourian, August 6, 1986. I'm on the cover, sitting cross-legged on top of a picnic table, a "Bread Not Bombs" logo on my T-shirt, pasting together a paper lantern. I'm fourteen years old. My nine-year-old niece, Tara, sits beside me, scissors in hand, grinning hugely at the photographer. We are making paper lanterns for the annual Hiroshima lantern float in Peace Park. Soon, after the sun has gone down, we will join fifty others along the bank of Flatbranch Creek. Each in turn we will kneel, light a candle, settle it into our lanterns, and push it out into the water. Behind us, the others will sing, "May the Circle Be Unbroken." In my mind, I still see that small line of lights, emissaries for peace, flickering out across the water, each tiny flame trying to throw light into a dark and fearsome world.

Four years later, as I walked down the aisle after receiving my high school diploma, Mrs. Jinkerson, our school counselor, caught my arm and looked at me hard, "Honey," she said, in her warm Kentucky drawl, "passion will get you into a heap of trouble. Finish college first." She had three reasons to worry: Tracy, Toni, and Shelly, my older sisters who had each married at the ages of sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, respectively. "Thank you, I intend to," I replied. I'd already decided I wouldn't marry until I was well into old age, say thirty-five. I would not repeat the mistakes of my sisters.

The next day, my Dodge Omni was packed and I was headed for North Carolina to sell books and raise money for college. From there, I would move to Philadelphia to attend community college and nanny for my aunt and uncle. After two years, I planned to

return to Missouri and finish a Journalism degree at the University of Missouri as my oldest sister Tracy had done, after leaving her husband at the age of 20.

Other than her early marriage, Tracy was my hero. She had graduated with a master's degree in Environmental Journalism. When I visited her in '86, she was involved in the anti-nukes movement, and lived with Tara in an anarchist's collective. Scattered around her house were Mother Jones magazines, the Nation, and pamphlets on the nuclear arms freeze and the School of the Americas. I devoured each article, all of which ran counter to my parents' beliefs. Each lit a fuse in my mind. *Reagan trained cold-blooded murderers in El Salvador? How could that be?* He was, according to my parents, a moral man. *Hiroshima and Nagasaki could have been avoided? Why have I never heard this before?*

As Old School Baptists convinced of predestination, my parents taught us that the universe is in God's hand and that humans, who cannot even save our own souls, can certainly not save a burning, fallen world. Tracy and her friends actually believed that if they gathered together and worked diligently, they could halt a potential nuclear holocaust. I could get more excited about that idea than the other: hunker down, get married, have kids and pray you'll be among the blessed when Jesus appears in the sky to hearken his chosen, leaving the rest to burn, burn, burn.

My mom looks back across the years and sees Tracy's divorce as a wedge that made a small crack that enlarged over time, cleaving her world from that of her children. For me though, on the night of graduation, it appeared as a tiny point of light that would grow and grow, expanding the borders of my parents world and creating, where once were the hard, shiny tiles, a wide expanse of green possibilities, bordered with mountains

in the distance.

I don't remember the drive up Wilderness Drive on the day I left home, except that everything was literally blurry. I'm sure spring peepers were calling, and that the sugar maple trees were the bright green color I love but I didn't notice any of that. The may apples must have been blooming, and the bluebells and spring anemone, but all I knew was that my chest felt like someone had scraped the inside with a pickaxe. As I neared the highway though, my tears stopped as quickly as they'd begun. Turning left on Highway B en route to Interstate 70, I felt lighter moment by moment as the miles fled between me and home.

My aunt and uncle's home in the Philadelphia suburb of Glenside was astonishingly comfortable. I'd had high school friends who grew up suburban—T.V. on at all hours, junk food lying around the kitchen. Walking through their houses felt like walking into a soft, billowy sofa where we could lounge and snack on Cheetos, watch sitcoms on a 20-inch TV, and get served mac and cheese for dinner by a pleasant, in-the-background mom. In contrast, my parents' house was arranged for discomfort. Our old black-and-white TV sat downstairs in front of two discount sofas whose cushions fit the back like felted cardboard. This discomfort was deliberate. If lounging around were so easy, why go outside and pick beetles off the potato plants? Why finish homework, or milk the goats? Mom subscribed to the idea that idleness bred wickedness, and the house I grew up in reflected that.

So I loved visiting my friends with their cushy suburban lives, and envied them their superior amenities. Like these friends, my aunt and uncle kept cookies and potato

chips stocked in the cupboards, and watched TV programs each night, all of which felt wonderfully decadent for the first week. Then I started to miss the country. One night, I heard crickets singing from the poplar out back and got an urge to sleep outside, a frequent summer habit back home. I missed falling asleep under the stars, and waking up covered in dew.

I crept outside and spread a blanket on the little postage stamp lawn, stretched out, and looked up into the sky. The angry eye of a street lamp glared directly down on me, an intruder. My stomach sank. I moved my blanket to the darkest spot on the lawn under the maple tree. With my eyes closed, I could still feel the dull wash of light. I flopped onto my stomach and crammed my face into the pillow. A car drove by, stereo blasting. At 3:00 in the morning, I gave up. Punched in the code for the house alarm and staggered upstairs to my attic bedroom. Drew the shade and lay staring at the ceiling. I'd never felt so lonely. I didn't miss my family, or friends. I missed the country— and suddenly feared I could fit nowhere else.

Still, though I quickly bored of the Philadelphia suburbs, I liked the pace and color of the city itself—the smell of fresh pretzels, piss, roasted chestnuts and car exhaust, the constant bustle of street vendors hawking their wares. I was a regular at the art museum and symphony, and befriended the security guards there. Sometimes I'd eat breakfast out, then deliver the leftovers to the homeless men and women who slept on the heating vents at night. I came to love the subway, and the daily surprise of who might sit beside me. One day I'd be chatting with an Iranian stockbroker, the next a doctor from the Bronx. Once I found myself in the company of a group of hip young Temple students, hotly debating the relative merits of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. I learned to listen, and

tried to imagine what others' lives might look like. It was in the city that I discovered how much I loved people.

I was a white-knuckled city driver, often driving the wrong direction on one-way streets, missing exits and becoming hopelessly lost. I'll never forget the day I made a wrong turn and found myself in the heart of South Philly. Tiny apartments and dilapidated houses lined up right alongside the busy street. Half-dressed children hung from doorways and roamed the sidewalks looking hungry, and hot. White "hoopty" cars slouched through the streets, rap music blaring from the woofers. As my street narrowed, gas stations and convenience stores dwindled while those that remained had bulletproof windows. I passed rows of identical tract housing with doors falling off their hinges and years of grime collecting along the doorway. A shriveled little black woman, her hair covered with a bandana, looked like she'd just been dropped off from the Mississippi cotton fields. Mostly what I remember is that there was no green.

I'd witnessed extreme poverty and segregation in North Carolina the summer before, selling books. I'd met a child of eleven who was pregnant with her uncle's baby. I'd seen old women stand at the doorways, spit a stream of green-black tobacco onto the bare soil then offer a toothless grin, or level me with a baleful glare because I didn't belong there. And I didn't belong there, trying to sell something to these poor people. But inevitably, some white folk would tell me that I shouldn't go to that neighborhood down the way—it's dangerous, people get shot. And my curiosity would get the better of me. Each time was the same. This "dangerous" neighborhood was a very poor community, whose residents were black. I liked the houses in these neighborhoods, painted in vivid, primary colors. I visited these people less to sell books than because they were more

gracious and openhearted than the folks who'd warned me about them.

Like my grandfather, though, who had managed to save some cash while my mom went to school with taped-up shoes, some of the elders in these communities miraculously managed to shore up money for hard times. Or education. Which I did happen to be selling, in the form of a single volume Book of Knowledge. It was a reference book on every subject you could imagine, from how to use a semicolon to the capitol of Zimbabwe.

One woman, Hattie, pulled a wad of bills from the Bible beneath her bed and paid right there on the spot. Her grandchildren gathered around her, big eyed, wanting that book, wanting something new that a strange girl with yellow hair brought. They lived in a big, barren, hot plantation mansion. The only furniture I saw in the house besides three beds was one threadbare sofa in the living room, with foam spilling out of the cushions. I'd sat on the floor surrounded by a dozen children, showing them the book with all the presidents' photographs, and sections on astronomy, physics, and grammar. One solitary metal fan whirred, trying its damndest to keep us cool, a swarm of flies landing on our eyes, our mouths, our hands. God forgive me for taking money from a family so poor as this. Yet I'd internalized my parents' belief that giving things to people demeaned them.

When I stood to leave, a little girl with fantastically rowdy hair took me by the hand and led me into the backyard. Their lawn was trampled, mostly bare dirt. It had an air of confinement to it, and the lifeless earth seemed sad. But there was one tree, a forlorn looking oak with a rope tied around a low branch, and an inner tube swing. Before the little girl settled into it, waiting for my push, she clung to the smooth side of the tree as if it were her mother. In the dusty dead heat of the afternoon, that old tree was a

comfort for her living hands.

In South Philly, the poverty was no worse than what I'd seen in North Carolina, but these children had no trees, no relief from the hard, concrete human poverty. I didn't even see a house sparrow. My eyes burned as I drove by, looking at all that pavement for too long. How could they stand it? I wondered what it might do to a child to grow up without flowers, trees, running water. I'd felt sorry for myself sometimes as a teenager because my parents were so "weird" and we lived so far back in the Boonies. How might I have fared in South Philly? I didn't know if I would have had the will to survive.

I didn't want to sell books the second summer. I let myself be talked into it, though, by the ever persuasive Sonny Crews, manager of Thomas Nelson's door-to-door campaign to "educate" the people of the southern states and fill his pockets while sitting in an air-conditioned office, drinking Scotch on the rocks and praising Jesus. I also stayed on because I'd been inspired by a black woman from South Philly who'd run for city council. I read in the paper of how one day she'd gotten fed up with the poverty and crime in her neighborhood and decided she would be the catalyst for change.

Her campaign strategy was simple, old-fashioned. She walked door to door, visiting her neighbors, asking what they wanted, and needed. This became her platform. I realized that the skills I was learning—and my natural gift with strangers—could be used in a similar way, toward enriching a community, rather than just making money. I promised myself that if I sold books for one more summer, in the future I'd use my selling skills for a good cause. Because I was following in my big sister's footsteps, my work had to be for something bigger than myself; I didn't just want to make a buck—I wanted to be a spark of

change in a world that seemed full of suffering and human-caused ruination.

My last summer in Philadelphia, I canvassed for the Pennsylvania Public Interest Research Group, which we abbreviated to “Penn PIRG.” Here, I met a motley crew of young people, mostly college students from the city or nearby suburbs, who were making cash for college while drumming up support for a new, improved Clean Water Act. The twenty-plus crew of PIRG employees: granolas, or “veggies,” as they called themselves, looked a lot like Tracy’s friends and like them, believed that their work could change things for the better.

Several had dreadlocks, most smoked weed, and when we’d eat out together on Friday nights after work, many ordered the same bizarre food my mom had cooked for us—Tempeh, tofu, and bean sprouts. I was out of my element—these mostly urban, East Coast kids’ rapid-fire conversation and sexual innuendos often flew right over my head. Still, I felt comforted by our shared fondness for weird food, and concern about the natural world.

My sales experience came in handy. I beat out nearly all the others in money raised and petitions signed and within a week, I was promoted to field manager. I spent the summer mastering navigation of downtown Philly with a car full of hippies listening to everyone’s favorite music show “Get the Led Out,” and preaching to suburban Philadelphians about the importance of clean water.

Sheila Ballen was the director of the Philly office. She was a tall, raw-boned, forty-something red-head, abrupt and serious. An activist to the core. When she interviewed Sam, a meat-head looking guy from Conshohocken for the office manager

position, one of the questions she asked him was, “Would you consider having sex with a man?” She had little tolerance for mainstream thinking. She told us she knew of no better question to find out if someone was a bona fide progressive or not.

I quit two weeks before the field season ended to take a field ecology course in Maine. When I stopped by Sheila’s office, she was simultaneously cramming down a Boca Burger, scribbling canvassing routes on a map, and checking her email. I stood in the doorway for a long moment, feeling awkward, then blurted out, “Sheila, I need to put in my two weeks.” In one quick movement, Sheila turned from her computer, set down her mangled lunch, and capped her blue marker. The phone rang, a jangling, hideous screech.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” she said, and we stepped outside onto the little patio that overlooked industrial Philly. As I explained my reasons for leaving, rush hour traffic crawled through the streets, and a homeless man below us with a missing arm shouted out at the inching cars, “Fuck you! Give me money!”

Sheila made it a point not to look at me.

“Do you know the difference between environmentalists and conservationists?” She asked. I said no, I did not. “Conservationists like to bliss out in nature, hug the trees and bunnies, and pretend that everything is A-okay. Meanwhile, all of industrial America is concocting poisonous gases and choking our streets and forests with smog and acid rain. That,” she said bitterly, “no one wants to deal with.”

“But,” I started. Sheila waved me off, pissed.

“Environmentalists are the people who work their asses off so that we’ve got some pretty nature left to enjoy, and so that even people like him,” she pointed at the

disturbed man below us, “can actually drink his water without being poisoned, and breathe without suffocating. It’s a helluva lot easier to be a conservationist than it is to be an environmentalist. And that’s why there aren’t nearly enough people to do this kind of work. That’s why people on that side of town,” she pointed south, “are stuck to live in the filth rich white people—conservationists among them--make.”

She no longer looked angry, now she just looked tired. I felt a little pissed to be hammered with this guilt trip for a couple of measly weeks but knew that there was some truth to what she’d said. I’d been horrified to learn of the extent to which our water and air was threatened by industrial pollution and toxins, particularly in poor areas like South Philly. Up to now, I’d felt good about the work I was doing for PIRG but then, I had always known it was a temporary job.

What kind of responsibility did my newfound knowledge translate to? The idea of devoting a lifetime to battling pollution as Sheila had done was exhausting. An image of myself answering phones and emails all day in an office overlooking a big, smelly city crossed my mind. I shivered. I thought of Tracy, an environmental reporter. She, like Sheila, always seemed harried and stressed, working late into each evening in front of a computer in order to protect the environment in Boone County, Missouri. The margins of her days seemed to be spent in rallies, or at meetings.

Her work, though, had yielded tangible results. Before I’d graduated from high school, she’d written a series of articles that covered the innovative sewage-to-wetlands project implemented by the city of Orlando, in Florida. I’d seen how her long hours of research and writing had pushed the Columbia City Council to develop a similar project, rather than pumping diluted sewage into the Missouri River—the original plan. But what

about her? I wondered. When did she have time to spend outside hiking, or growing a garden? Were I to have followed Tracy's lead I would have become an activist, engaged in daily battle. This, I felt, was what I *should* do. But as I considered Sheila's daily life and Tracy's, I realized, with a sinking feeling, that my heart was not in it. I would choose trees, and bunnies, and a field biology course in Maine.

After two years in the street-lamp infested, desperately ordered East Coast suburbs, two weeks camping out in the backwoods of Maine felt like coming home. For the first week we pitched our tents in the haying fields below Dr. Andren's summer house. We mucked around in the stream that ran through the property. We measured the gradient, tested the water for nitrates (human and/or cowshit), and phosphorous (laundry detergent seeping from inept septic systems), netted mayfly and caddisfly larvae. Entire days were spent learning the names of the plants, trees and birds, taking soil samples and journaling about our experiences. I was in heaven.

Dr. Andren was a rare blend—both a gifted scientist and teacher. He looked ordinary enough—of medium height, slight build with wiry, silver hair and a beard. But when he was on his hands and knees in the field, rhapsodizing about mycorrhizal fungi and their symbiotic relationship to tree roots, he seemed to literally glow. His eyes sparkled, his gestures were animated. He was our own personal Thoreau, thoroughly convinced that his small New England farm was the center of creation. He taught Biology and Ecology courses at Montgomery County Community college in Pennsylvania and tended his farm in the summer, using it as a laboratory for students. He was the first ecologist I'd ever met; the first adult whose life looked like anything I'd want for myself.

We traveled north into Baxter National forest and climbed Mt. Owl, my first big mountain at 6,000 feet. Halfway up, he stopped us to trace a thick orange corkscrew encircling the mountain beside us. All along the sides of the mountain pine, spruce and hemlock were dying, their pungent, long green needles sapped of color and life. As we stood surveying the damage, Dr. Andren told us that we were seeing first hand the effects of acid rain.

My thoughts returned, as they often had, to Sheila, and her belief that building and defending legislation like the Clean Water Act was the only honorable and effective work an environmentalist could do. And I contrasted the impassive faces of prospective donors who'd listened as I ticked off terrifying statistics with those of the students beside me, now bearing witness to the dying trees. A raw silence hung in the air.

As we stood at the summit looking down, Dr. Andren pointed out tiny glacial lakes—black circles and oblong shapes surrounded by dark pines. These were the first naturally formed lakes I had ever seen. In Missouri, every lake I had swum in, water-skied or fished was made by damming a creek, or river. Dr. Andren peered down into the valley, “Would you look at that!” he exclaimed, grasping my arm and handing me the binoculars,

“See there,” he pointed, “That’s a moose.” I looked and saw what appeared to be a gangly spider, stuck in the middle of one of the black smears. I didn’t care that I could barely discern its outline. All that mattered was that I had seen my first moose. My first moose, first glacial lakes, first mountain above 1,500 foot elevation and first real understanding of the vast scale of human impact on the land.

I received a phone call a couple of weeks before leaving Maine that made me realize I could not follow anyone's—even Tracy's—path. Mom's voice on the answering machine was low. *Call home.* She'd said. *Something's happened.* I sat at the edge of my uncle's recliner, and played back the message again. Dialed the number. She answered on the first ring.

“Tara's in the hospital. She's okay.”

“What happened?” The phone was cold in my hand. Tara was my favorite niece, and was now fourteen years old. She was more worldly-wise than I would ever be. She was smoking pot by eleven, opium by thirteen, and often skipped school to roam the streets of Columbia, with her friends—other street kids, and homeless Vietnam Vets.

“She tried to commit suicide last night,” Mom said. “The doctors think it was a cry for help.”

Mom told me that Tara had told her counselors in the hospital that she'd been molested by an older boy in Tracy's collective. The unspoken charge was against Tracy, because she had not intuited what was happening.

It's only now, eight years later, that I can see how Tara's suicide attempt cast doubt for me on the value of Tracy's work. For the first time, I considered how difficult it might be to have a mother who was so rarely at home. Though I would not have admitted it to myself, I realize now that I, too, blamed her, and felt she had sacrificed Tara's childhood at the altar of her political zeal. I had internalized the idea that had been drilled into my mind since childhood: no matter if you have to bury all of your gifts, talent, and passion in the process—there is no greater sin than to “fail” as a mother.

Poet Antonio Machada chides his readers, “My friends, there is no path! The path

is made by walking.” By the time I returned to Missouri, my neatly planned future–patterned after the footsteps of my big sister–had clouded. I was no longer certain I wanted to be a journalist, or activist. And saving the world, as it turned out, was a complicated business. I would have to make my own way.

Black Mesa

In each home I've made for the past ten years, I've hung beside my bed a round, cream-colored purse with a Navajo design at the center. Lucy and Etta Woody spun the yarn and dyed it, using plants that grow on the Black Mesa plateau of northeast Arizona. They sheared the wool from their sheep, which roam the red rock desert foraging piñon pine, sage, and rabbit bush. The design on each side of the purse represents the Navajo dwelling structure, the hogan. Five brown, heart-shaped segments compose the pattern, fitting together to make a circle with a star at the center. Hogan; that is to say, home. Home firmly planted on the earth and round, like the sun. A red sun-circle imposes itself over the brown pattern of the purse's design with an opening at the top of the circle, representing the hogan's doorway, which always faces east.

Beneath the land that surrounds Etta and Lucy's hogan lies the largest known deposit of coal in the nation. Coal from Black Mesa helps to fuel Las Vegas' strip clubs and casinos as well as L.A., Phoenix, and Tucson's burgeoning sprawl. An iron artery 274 miles long shoots from Black Mesa to Laughlin, Nevada. One billion gallons of water is pumped annually from local aquifers to rush coal through the slurry line, whose whirring teeth crush the coal to ready it for the Mojave generating plant in Nevada.

Black Mesa is the site of the largest relocation of Indian people since the 1880s, and the relocation efforts continue. Over the past thirty years more than 12,000 Navajo—or Dineh, as the traditionalists call themselves-- have been removed from their homes. Yet a thousand or so remain. In the face of daily harassment and enticements to sell out, as bulldozers crush their hogans and intertribal Sundance grounds, elders like Lucy and Etta

refuse to move. Separated from the land, they feel they have nothing.

I was twenty-one when I first traveled to Black Mesa. Strong sun heated our windshield as we turned north on Highway 191 toward Chinle, Arizona, but the air was chilly. A raven glided across our windshield, primary feathers tilted perfectly to catch the uplift from our turbulent passage. Back in Missouri, thirty hours earlier, we'd loaded up our van, cramming thirteen sets of sleeping bags between gunny sacks of white flour and sugar, cans of shortening, and mesh sacks of potatoes and onions. We would exchange these supplies—staples for fried bread and fried potatoes— for lodging with families on the reservation. I'd met Dineh activist Tom Bedonie the previous fall when he'd stopped in Columbia, Missouri, on a speaking tour. Maintaining contact through letters and a solitary phone call, he'd helped me organize this weeklong trip through our University's YWCA Alternative Spring Break program.

We pressed our noses against the glass. Windows were thrown open to invite in all the new scents of red rock desert; pungent, wake-up smells. Thick dust flew in, too, and the windows were closed just as quickly. An occasional jackrabbit loped from rabbit bush to red kayenta stone to juniper or pinon tree. Compact hogans were scattered in among plain white houses and trailers. Sometimes a trampoline or jungle gym sat outside the house under the big sky; usually plastic bags, paper and car parts littered the bare dirt. Hungry looking dogs lay sprawled among the trash. Progress was slow; skinny Hereford cows crossed the road at regular intervals. A beat-up old Chevy truck drove past, loaded up with sheep.

My fourteen-year-old niece, Tara, was curled up like a lima bean in the seat beside me, sleeping. Her hair, dyed jet black, fell across her face. Her arm hung forward,

revealing the white line twisted across the inside of her wrist. Eight months had passed and I still hadn't found the words to ask her why. Seeing it made my stomach hurt. I hoped a week free of alcohol, weed, and her asshole boyfriend might do her some good.

And me... why had I organized this trip? The question lingered at the periphery of my thoughts. I had never taken such a leadership role before, never traveled further west than Kansas City. What business did I, a naive Midwestern girl, have dragging a bunch of twenty-something suburban kids to visit a community where people were engaged in a life-or-death struggle? Our exact role, once there, was unclear. As was a full picture of the political situation at Black Mesa.

The van reverberated wildly as we crossed a cattle guard and Tara's hand twitched, her eyelashes fluttering.

"Are we there yet?" her voice hoarse from cigarettes and deep sleep.

Tara was my first niece, and I loved her with a fierce protectiveness that bordered on motherliness. To my parents, she was to have been the daughter of tradition, their best hope for the future. Her father, Landon, was the son of our preacher, Wesley Barnett. My large family and the equally large Barnett clan made up the bulk of the congregation in the Lone Pilgrim Primitive Baptist church that was my primary childhood community. Fifteen years ago, Landon came to ask for Tracy's hand in marriage. Though I am unsure of the exact context for the conversation, I imagine Dad on the roof of our new house, hammering in a row of shingles.

"Pass me another stack, would you?" Landon would have obliged, clambering up the ladder to lend a hand. This was familiar work to him, as his father owned a roofing business. As Dad stood to shake Lannie's hand he would have noted his dark good looks,

like all the Barnett boys. They worked together in silence for a moment, Landon sliding the shingles in place, Dad delivering the nails.

“Getting a handle on the land out there?” Lannie inquired. My parents had just purchased a twenty-six acre farm near our church from Irene Barnett, Lannie’s grandmother. Her husband, Coy, was the founder of our church. Lannie knew before he even popped the question that the answer would be yes. The Brunk and Barnett families, light and dark, were predestined by God for joining.

Had a neighbor passed by at just this moment in my imagined scene, and overheard the conversation she might have paused, imagining she’d stepped back fifty years in time, or to some Appalachian mountain holler where modern mores had not yet taken root. An eighteen-year-old man asks the deacon of his church for his sixteen-year-old daughter’s hand in marriage.

But no, the year was 1976, and my father and Lannie stood on top of a house at 115 Cindy Lane, just twenty miles south of St. Louis, Missouri. What the stranger couldn’t know was that Lannie and my father belonged to an Old World religion. When it came to spiritual matters like marriage, Primitive Baptists did things the traditional way, and proudly.

Tom’s directions were sketchy. Daylight was waning when we arrived at the Bedonie place. Tom, a big man, built close to the ground appeared from inside the hogan and directed Justin toward the back to park. He extended a large, fleshy hand to everyone.

“Yat’eh,” he greeted us, his tone polite, and formal. We tasted the word in our

mouths. *Yat'eh*. Hello. I pulled out a bag of tobacco, the first request on our supply list and, he'd told me over the phone, a traditional offering in Native circles. He took it, his face impassive at first, then turned to his nephew Bernie, a tall, thin, thirty-something.

"See that?" he handed it to him. "Here's our tobacco." He laughed then, a hearty guffaw, tears streaming from his eyes. Bernie laughed too, as he surveyed our group of bedraggled travelers. I looked at Tara, eyebrow raised, for help.

"They meant rolling tobacco!" Tara said, punching my arm. I'd never smoked in my life and the only bulk tobacco I'd seen used was chew. So that's what I'd bought. Three big, fat bags of Kodiak. I reddened and grinned. One trait that's frowned upon on the reservation is a "know-it-all" attitude. My character flaws lay elsewhere.

The Bedonie place would be the base for our five-day stay on the reservation. Tom led the men to the men's hogan to unload. His sister, Leta, led us to the women's hogan, which served as the community space for cooking, eating, and ceremony. We piled our supplies against the wall and surveyed our short-term home. Due to a federal freeze on development funds at Black Mesa, there was no electricity or running water. Leta cooked on a Coleman stove. Their water supply consisted of big barrels hauled in from nearly twenty miles away. Many local sources were contaminated by heavy metals from the mines. Others were rapidly drying up as their aquifer was being depleted by the slurry line.

The hogan was built like a squat log cabin with five sides. Juniper logs provided the foundation, and adobe held it all together. The walls were sturdy and thick and the floor was bare dirt. In the center stood a small wood stove, tended through each night to stave off the desert cold. Tom, his nephew Bernie and his sister Leta all lived in this area,

as did Daniel Zapato, a Latino activist from LA whom the Dineh had adopted as surrogate family. We soon realized that the Bedonie place was one of several hubs where visitors, native and non-native alike, came to support the resistance efforts at Black Mesa.

That night we gathered around the woodstove in the women's hogan as Tom, his face lit eerily by the flames, told us what was at stake at Black Mesa, and the history behind the relocation. We clutched blankets around ourselves, leaned into one another, and listened. He told us of how, in 1860 the Dineh had been forced to leave their homeland to the north and given a square of land near Chinle, Arizona, surrounded on all sides by Hopi land.

Little more than one hundred years later, Peabody Coal "discovered" mineral deposits on land settled by the Dineh. Tom spoke of a Mormon attorney hired by Peabody, who had traveled among the Hopi selecting tribal council members who would be supportive of mining. The traditional Hopi elders and majority of the Dineh and Hopi people were never consulted. In 1966 the Hopi council signed leases with Peabody, granting them the right to mine and build a slurry line. The Navajo tribal council, too, signed some leases.

The Dineh at Black Mesa, largely traditional, refused to move. In 1972 Congress members was told of a land dispute in which the Dineh had encroached on Hopi land. The 1974 Navajo-Hopi Relocation Act was passed, which stated that within ten years all Dineh must move—thus the freeze on any federal funds to assist the Dineh .

The next morning, after we'd swept and watered the dusty hogan floor with a watering can, we loaded up in the van and Tom took the wheel, unloading us in pairs to stay with families scattered across the plateau. Tara and I were dropped off first at the

Begay ranch—a big spread at the top of a hill. From the front yard, we could survey the valley stretching out for miles in every direction. The grandfather of the family came out to greet Tom. He was a tall, rangy man in his sixties who walked with a pronounced limp. They discussed us for a moment in Dineh. The grandmother, a small woman dressed in colorful skirt and shawls, emerged moments later. The surprise in her eyes told us she'd been given no warning of our arrival. We unloaded more flour, potatoes and onions into the main hogan, then she showed us the bunk beds off to the side of the kitchen where we'd sleep.

Kerry, a small, wiry 24-year-old with long shaggy hair, joined us in the hogan. After Tom left, his grandparents disappeared back to their work, leaving us alone, awkwardly, with him. Inside his silver-bullet trailer, which stood beside the primary family hogan, he handed us a big coffee-table book about the Dineh at Big Mountain. As Tara thumbed through the photos, I surveyed the walls, covered with playboy pinups and certificates of graduation from AA and NA programs. Tara paused at the photo of a slender young man wearing a muscle shirt, with the tattoo of a woman on his bicep. His hair hung in his face; his expression was detached and cool. She looked from the photo to Kerry, "Is that you?" He nodded.

"We're all pretty famous up here," he said, flipping to a photo of his grandfather, lassoing a bull. "Lots of people come to visit."

The next day we followed Kerry's great grandmother, a ninety-year-old woman, up to the sheep corral above the hogans. The grandmother let the sheep out, and returned to her hogan, leaving us to follow them for the day. Along the path as we followed the sheep we came upon a sacred site Kerry had mentioned—a large arc of stone rising out of

the earth. It was beautiful, and eerie--out of place for this mostly flat, unspectacular area. We lingered too long, and by the time we'd turned back toward the sheep they had disappeared, leaving in their wake a smattering of hoof prints and clumped black droppings.

We tracked them for several hours, losing the trail when the earth gave way to stone. Finally, we found them, a unified mass of bodies moving west in a canyon below. Though we were lost ourselves, we tried to force them back in the general direction we'd come from. We pushed them, ran at them, cajoled them, and waved big sticks. The sheep just looked at us blankly and continued on their way. By the time the Begays arrived in their truck to retrieve us, we felt we were hopelessly lost. The sheep, though, had led us nearly back to the corral.

"They know their way back," Kerry said. "You don't have to herd them."

"Why were we following them?" I asked, as we bounced around in the back of the truck.

"Just taking care of them," he said. To keep an eye on birthing mothers, we figured out later, or to chase off a hungry coyote or mountain lion. Here on the reservation, nothing was explained outright. We learned by doing, not following directions.

Fried bread, though, was different. That night in the hogan, Kerry's grandmother showed us how to make it. She mixed white flour with baking powder and dried milk. Added water until the dough was thick; not too dry, not too wet. Patted it between her two floured palms and stretched until it was nearly the size of a dinner platter.

"If you can't make fried bread, you won't make a good wife," Kerry translated for

his grandfather. Tara and I looked down to hide our smiles. We were aspiring feminists, after all, so who cared how our fried bread turned out? Besides, it looked so easy. But when Kerry's mother surveyed our first fried bread with the thin burned holes and said nothing, I knew I'd be practicing until I got it right.

Over dinner, the great-grandmother, who spoke very little English, teased us for our sunburns and exhaustion after a long day of herding sheep. She pointed at my bright red shirt, then my face. "Same color," she said, smiling. After dinner, we stood from the table, rubbing our thighs and grimacing. She mimicked our movements with a slow, exaggerated crawl across the floor and facial expressions even more painful than our own. The room exploded with laughter and even Kerry, who usually kept his responses to us to himself, grinned into his bowl. Tara and I were rubbing our aching jaws that night when we walked outside the hogan to pee. My stomach ached from so much laughing.

This grandmother followed the sheep every day through the desert. What was for us a feat of physical endurance was her daily work. I rethought my conviction that my own mother was the hardest-working woman on the planet. This elder made us all look feeble. Her hard living was what the traditional Dineh were fighting for.

That night, as the skin on my face and neck raged, I stared up into the darkness where the hogan ceiling must have been and mulled the trip thus far. The elders I'd met impressed me. They seemed confident in who they were, and their place in the world. It saddened me to consider that their culture was threatened by mining and even more so by encroaching western values.

But I had to ask myself, why was I so drawn to these traditional people, yet repulsed by the traditional nature of my own family? For four generations my mother's

family had been deeply tied to the land in the Missouri Ozark Mountains. Within the context of our church we had well established rituals of worship, clearly defined roles for men and women, and a deeply held ethic of care for the family and larger community who shared our values within the church. All these elements were present within the Dineh culture, and here I saw them as beautiful. Yet my sisters and I had gladly left that community. It all started with Tara's mother, my oldest sister Tracy.

My first childhood memory was of Tracy and I hanging laundry under a starry sky. I was four years old. She was sixteen. I'd asked her why she was getting married tomorrow. What I meant was, "Why are you leaving us?" She'd leaned down low, her long blond braids framing her moon shaped face and her eyes, beneath her cat-eyed glasses, were shiny. "It's a big world out there toady," she'd said, "and I want to see it."

See it she did. She married Landon, then got an associate degree at the local community college. She'd thumbed through the course catalogue from the University of Missouri, Columbia, covertly, lingering over the courses for the journalism school. Then she got pregnant. Bent on keeping Tracy in her place, Landon used the harshest weapon he had against her dream of a career in journalism,

"If you love me," he said, "You'll stay at home and be a mother."

Tracy didn't bite.

Fourteen years later, I lay listening to Tara snoring in the bunk bed below me and considered Tracy's decision to leave. She and Landon had been married in the church. They'd both been baptized soon after, and she told me once that never before had she seen such joy in my mother's eyes. On leaving him, she was excluded from the church. In seeking "the world," she did indeed leave us. Each in our turn, my sisters and I joined

her. We turned away from tradition, security, and community. And in the process, we turned away from the land.

The next day we visited Etta and Lucy, two weavers who lived nearby. They told us more about the hogans we'd been sleeping in for three nights now. Again, Kerry translated. "We sing the hogans into being," Lucy told us. "And we bring baskets with this design—she pointed to the purse she would give me later, "into our hogans to bless them."

As she spun her wool she listed the federal prohibitions on the families at Black Mesa.

We are told we cannot repair our hogans.

We are forbidden from burying our dead.

We are told not to gather firewood.

"Lots of families give in to the pressure," said Lucy. "But it's too hard for us out there. We know what happens to the old people when they move off the reservation. Most die very quickly. Sometimes they kill themselves. This is our home. They'll have to drag us off by force." I pictured a young Hopi police officer dragging these two grandmothers from their hogans and shivered. Three hundred families remained at Black Mesa. Less than one thousand people in a stand-off against Peabody and ultimately Bechtel, one of the most powerful corporations in the world, against even their own tribal council, which had recently added Navajo police to aid the Hopi officers in harassing them.

"Alcohol's poison." Kerry told us the next morning. "Now I just use this. It's

good medicine for my headaches.” He pulled out a stash of peyote buttons and offered to grind us some. “It’ll last for about eight hours, so we should do it now.” Tom would arrive later that evening, to pick us up and bring us back to his place.

Tara and Kerry both looked at me, waiting. Her brown eyes had lit up. I had never, up to this point, even smoked pot. *Oh shit, I thought. I was supposed to be a good influence. But when will I have this opportunity again?*

“I’m in,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

Kerry mixed the powder with water, and slugged from it first. Passed it to me, and I peered inside. It was thick, and sour smelling. My hands felt hot. Would I throw up? Maybe I’d go crazy, like I’d heard junkies did when they tripped. I tipped the glass up, swallowed, gagged. Put my hand up.

“Wait, I can do it.” I finished my third, then Tara made it look easy. Tara and I saddled up a pregnant bay mare, Sugar, while Kerry mounted a small male he’d named Mr. White. We rode straight up, toward the top of Higher Big Mountain, a mountain that, Kerry told us, was considered sacred by the Dineh. Tara led, I sat behind. She’d learned to ride last year in Costa Rica, when she’d visited with her mom. My last experience on a hoofed mammal was when I was eight, trying to ride my sister’s mean-spirited Shetland pony. I still had an ugly knot on the back of my head as tribute to the pony’s profound launching ability.

“Hey Kerry,” I called out.

“Yeah?”

“You sure this is alright?”

“Sure.” Kerry didn’t look back; his voice was flat and noncommittal. I knew there

were strict rules for ceremonial use of peyote and that many tribal members frowned on sharing it with whites. Tara, reading my thoughts, said, “This *is* a ceremony. What could be more spiritual than riding up to Higher Big Mountain?” She didn’t feel a bit guilty. But then, since she was little, she’d had the curious habit of calling herself an Indian. She carried a heavy dose of Creek and Cherokee from the Barnett’s, and showed it in her dark skin, hair and eyes. Plus, she had little patience for rules of any kind.

Sitting in a circle two nights before, when Tom mentioned to the group that according to government documents the land the Dineh resisters lived on belonged to the Hopi, I’d shifted uncomfortably on the hard dirt floor. I knew this, but the fact was difficult for me to swallow.

Tara, though, had sat forward, listening intently, not fazed for one moment. Several months earlier she’d asked me, “When you see a police officer do you feel safe or afraid?” Without pause I’d said, “Safe.” Tara felt fear. She had spent much of her early adolescence roaming with other “street kids” and homeless Vietnam vets in Columbia, Missouri. She’d been arrested for smoking pot and had seen her homeless friends frequently harassed, or arrested for petty offenses.

Plus, Tracy had taught her from an early age about the U.S. government’s brutal intervention to support dictatorships in Central America during the Cold War. So Tara had lost much of her faith in authority, and in standard teenage fashion scoffed at anything resembling rules. For her, the Hopi and Dineh elders’ opinions carried more weight than Federal law, or the tribal council people.

But I had always been the good daughter, bowing to tradition, trying to please. And the traditional practices of these people, including the use of peyote, were off limits

to whites. I knew my place. Blond with blue eyes, I showed my Dad's Dutch blood, not the Miami Indian passed down through my mother's line. But once, when I'd seen a photo of Geronimo, I could have sworn his knees, thick and broad, looked just like Mom's knees, just like mine.

We joined Kerry at the top, long after he'd dismounted, and sat beside him on a small ledge overlooking a broad valley. He pointed out San Francisco Peak to our left. Slightly to the right of that, and far enough away to be tiny, was the sprawl of Flagstaff. Tara's hand clutched my arm when she looked down into the valley below us, where ponderosa and lodgepole pine deepened the green of the juniper-pinon forest. Her eyes teared up unexpectedly.

"It's so green," she said, "so beautiful. It looks like the skin of the earth."

Kerry nodded wordlessly, as if this were the most ordinary of ideas.

"What's that black thing down there?" she asked, and Kerry shaded his eyes as he followed her finger to a small square. "Just as big as my hand."

"That's Peabody," Kerry said. We couldn't make out the details. It was just a black square in the middle of a green valley. But I could imagine. I pictured the wide scar of naked earth with bulldozers scraping off layer after layer of dirt. Backhoes resembling prehistoric birds loaded shiny black coal into a long line of dump trucks. The trees and plants surrounding appeared wan and listless. I imagined the reptilian curve of the slurry line below.

Eyes closed, I felt a sickening pull at my feet. All the water from beneath these mountains was being sucked up out of the earth by the greedy inhalation of a monster

God. I opened my eyes and for one horrifying moment imagined that the mountains beside me and the valley below were barren and brown. A cold wind blew against my face. I blinked. A juniper stood beside me, deep green and miraculously alive.

Before we left Kerry's family that night, the entire family gathered in a circle to tell us goodbye. The grandmother held my hand for a moment. Hers were strong and tough from years of weaving but her touch was light. The skin was dark and dry from long days tending sheep. She said, her eyes bright with humor,

"Come back and see us, so you can learn to make fried bread." I bit my lip, unsure of whether I might laugh, or cry. In this circle of family whom I had known for only three days, I felt the same kind of fellowship I'd had as a young girl in church. Here, neither prayers nor preaching had opened my heart but rather, the simple generosity of people who had, at a moment's notice, opened their homes to us and allowed us to partake in the dailiness of their lives. My concept of "family" had been enlarged. And my heart was opened, too, by a plant I'd felt I had no business using, a plant that had, nonetheless, gifted me with a profound realization of the preciousness of the land and people here at Black Mesa and the heartbreaking vulnerability of life—both human and nonhuman—that remained.

The whole long drive back, Tara and I burst into periodic fits of crying. We spoke with Tom about all the young Dineh who worked in the mines, and of their reliance on Peabody for both water and employment. I told him of my vision of the land as dried and scarred. "That's what they're doing to us," he said. "We're drying up."

It was all wrong.

But too, we had sensed a comfortable intimacy here, closeness we'd lost in our

own family that felt strongly right. Our weeping was interrupted with frequent, belly-splitting laughter as we remembered our pathetic attempts at herding sheep, Kerry's dry sense of humor, and the impossible feat of frying the perfect fried bread. We laughed mostly at our clumsiness as foreigners in Diné country. And all the way, as we laughed and cried, we imagined Kerry watching us, the traffic for the night, winding down the road toward the Bedonie place.

That night we built a fire in the stove in the women's hogan and sat once again in a circle around Tom. First he told us to tell others what we'd seen. "Tell your friends to visit," he said. By this time, we knew that we had not come to help herd sheep, or pick up trash, or to learn to make fried bread. They needed us because they knew, as the Zapatistas in Mexico knew when they invited the international community to join them, that without visibility in the outside world, the harassment they endured regularly would intensify and they would be removed by force.

Then Tom said, "You know, you're not the first people to come here and love it like you do." He spoke to everyone, but I felt as though his glance rested longer on me. "But you can't find what you want in an Indian's culture. You've got to find your own roots. You've got to find where you came from."

Just at that moment, the door to the hogan flew open and Tom's aunt rushed in, carrying a bag of groceries. "Frank's leg's been cut," she said. "He's in the hospital" Frank was Tom and Leta's older brother, who worked in a sawmill down the hill. His leg had been deeply cut by a band saw. Within moments, the hogan was filled with family members and friends we'd never met, bustling around, preparing food for a private ceremony. We helped gather firewood, and then trundled into the men's hogan to sleep.

All night Tom and Leta and their family would drum, sing, and pray for their brother.

There were fourteen of us in the men's hogan that night, including Daniel Zapato. Fourteen sleeping bags all stretched out across the red belly of the mother earth. As we shifted in our sleeping bags, puffs of red dust flew into our noses; we sneezed, and laughed. Daniel told us stories about skin walkers as we shivered in our sleeping bags. Skin walkers were enormous, tall, skinny spirits who stalked living things at night in the desert. When they found a living creature or human, they'd devour it from the inside, then hide inside the skin, pretending to be just another human, or snake, or deer. You knew them by their eyes, which were evil slits, just waiting to find another body to devour. They were very hungry.

I thought of Peabody Coal Company, and other corporations like it who have no real life of their own but instead suck the life and energy out of human communities and the land, using compromised people like the Hopi and Navajo police to do their will. I thought of the Pilot Knob mines in the eastern Ozarks, out of which my own great-grandfather had hauled iron, never considering that the water would be contaminated with lead for future generations, that once the mine had closed, the young people would struggle to make a living off land whose trees had been stolen to feed the lead smelting operations. I thought of another great-grandfather, who had made his living off of the hides of wolves whose howls will never again be heard in the Ozark Mountains.

And I thought of Tara, breathing softly beside me, who was born into the steep crevasse between my parents' generation and my own. Eight months ago she'd slit her wrists out of a desperation whose source perhaps even she could not name. Not only the land is impacted when a people's cosmology sours and their young people are set adrift to

steer their own course. The young people, too, suffer. As do the elders, who are left behind.

That night as we were drifting off to sleep, Daniel sang us a Dineh song without words. We would leave tomorrow and as I heard his song with my heart, I cried a little more, silent tears, to be leaving this family, and the beautiful desert country. His song came straight up out of the earth, through his belly and his throat; it was the kind of song that makes everything else bright and very quiet. And just a stone's throw away a family had gathered to pray for healing of their brother's leg, and the continued strength to stay close to each other, and tied to the land.

Each morning when I open my eyes I see it, the hogan-purse. Ironically, considering my repeated attempts flee my own place of origin, I need this physical reminder of *home*, a dwelling place that sustains long lineages of people who resist at all cost severance from the land, and from each other. I am reminded of the ingenuity and courage of the people who remain, using every legal, political, and spiritual tool available to aid them in their struggle. And when I feel the stiff, durable weave of the purse, I remember the last time I sat in a hogan and Tom's prompting to "find my own roots." What, I ask, in my own heritage is resilient, beautiful, and strong?

The temple I remember from childhood will never be woven into wool, or made timeless with a pattern passed down from mother to daughter. But it held a precious community inside, and for me a memory of true fellowship. We called our temple a tabernacle, and it stood between the plain white Lone Pilgrim Primitive Baptist church and the cemetery. Once a dilapidated old barn, the elders of my church—miners, farmers and roofers—had stripped it down into a barest frame, repairing only the roof. For eleven

months of the year it lay idle. But on the first Friday of August of every year, church members arrived from Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas for our association service. Our church was too small to host such a multitude so we held services in the tabernacle instead. Fresh sawdust was piled onto the floors for the event, and my father helped lug the big pews out under the sky and into the half-open building.

On those long nights of singing and preaching, I'd braid my five-year-old sister Tasha's long yellow hair into dozens of tiny braids. The air was a presence, hot and lingering on the skin, as if night might have a shape you could feel but not see. I looked out into the darkness, where fireflies pulsed, punctuating the sky. On rare occasions, the lights inside drew luna moths—sea green and larger than my hand—and they drifted above our heads. Shiny brown June bugs landed in our hair; their spiky black feet clung to our fingers when we tried to pull them off. Outside, a cacophony of love-hungry katydids and cicadas roared, lured in as well by the tempting lights.

Late into the evening, the preacher's voice began to mingle with the others, just one more creature making itself known to its fellows, and to God. When the “spirit got into him,” as Mom would say, his careful intonation and measured words shifted into a sort of chanting, a melody that harmonized with the wild multitude outside the tabernacle. When I remember those nights, I see communion in the strange merging of human worship with the pulsing, more-than-human life around us, rushing in from every direction. Sharing that feeling with my family and the old men and women who had known me since birth made me understand what the preachers meant by “fellowship.”

And I vividly recall the end of those services as well. When the preacher stepped down from the pulpit he'd call out the number of a hymn from our Old School Hymnals

and we'd all rise to sing. The deacons and visiting preachers all gathered with him there at the front of the room and each member of the congregation turned to another, shook hands, and "hung on each other's necks." Words of comfort and joy were whispered into the ears of each beloved, and we formed a line between the two sets of pews and made our way around the circle of elders at the center. Many of the old men and women wept as they held onto the hands of us young children, seeing hope in our presence there, hope that their old church, their spiritual home would continue beyond them.

I received word from a friend of Tom's the other day, with an update on the Dineh resistance at Black Mesa. Increasingly, as the plateau is drying up and the piñon pines are no longer producing, and as the Navajo and Hopi families surrounding the relocation area recognize that their own land can no longer sustain farming or grazing, more are joining the resistance. Hopi and Navajo weavers have joined forces in opposition to the slurry line and continued extraction of water from the land. And miracle of miracles, as of this spring, Peabody is considering closing the mine.

Is it possible that the continued, concerted efforts of a small group of resisters, strengthened by the council of their spiritual elders and assistance from outsiders, will be able to shut down this operation? Is it possible that day after day of sitting in meetings, testifying, and acting as a many small thorns in Peabody's side has caused this company to finally withdraw in annoyance? I wonder now why the elders in my own church never gave impassioned sermons on the devastation of the Creation at the hands of strip mining corporations and corporate hog farms that devastate the water supply in the Ozarks. Were they to have done so, might we have stayed, and fought alongside them for our

community, and our land?

My father told me recently that he and Brother Donald had finally dismantled the old tabernacle. Piece by piece, they took apart the frame and roof, lying the old, worn boards in Donald's truck so he could use it to renovate an old barn behind his house. This barn would house his farming implements, not the children of God. Over the years, the congregation has dwindled so severely that the small church beside the tabernacle now easily accommodates the association crowd, made up of the faithful wives and those few elders who have not died of cancer from the pesticides they applied to their fields or the coal they inhaled, or the chemicals they breathed as they roofed home after home with tar shingles. The children who attend are so few that after the service they escape to their parent's cars, where they will be spared the hopeful glances of the adults and can covertly listen to a new Eminem CD, or play Nintendo games.

Where our old tabernacle once stood there is now only grass, and open sky.

Shelling Beans with Yajaida

I am shelling beans with Yajaida. She has raised the volume on the radio and now it tosses bright, tinny Chicha tunes out across the courtyard, up above the ceramic tiled roofs, and down along the narrow camino, where it plays in the ears of a small boy who is leading a stubborn, sharp-horned steer toward the plaza. Yajaida's skin is burnt caramel, her hair, the iridescent sheen of a crow's wing. In her shy smile I see fanged jaguars, and bright macaws. She is a jungle girl, transplanted to Urubamba, in the Sacred Valley of the Peruvian Andes. Her fingers weren't raised with this work; they are more used to peeling small bananas, and the thick, green skin of avocado. But they are fast learners, they are quick, piercing the hard covers, opening the soft, spongy inside of the *nuna* bean pods, popping out each smooth, green and speckled bean into a brown ceramic bowl. *Clink, clink*, they rattle in the bottom as my slow fingers poke and pull at the pods, remembering what my fingers knew as a child, what Yajaida learned, what my mother and grandmother knew from long hours of practice.

"What is it like, your country?" she asks me.

"Beautiful, with mountains," I reply, "and too many lonely people."

"Sometimes I would like to be alone," she says, leaning across the table to rock her baby, who has become fussy in the afternoon heat.

"Do you miss home sometimes?" I ask her.

"No," she says. "My family is so backward, they live like animals. Here in town, I can give my baby a good life."

The small bedroom beside Yajaida's quarters is my solitary writing station. A week ago, I attended a week-long environmental conference near Machu Picchu. At the event, nearly 700 environmentalists from across the globe had gathered with indigenous leaders from South America. Together, we shared strategies of resistance against inequitable global trade policies and encroachment of western values through strengthening of local communities.

A week of workshops with spiritual leaders, ecologists, indigenous grandmothers, and ecovillage founders inspired and overwhelmed me. Here in Urubamba, I hoped to ground the ideas swirling through my head through writing. At the Call of the Condor, I had seen that from Capetown to Manhattan, people are waking up. We are saying: global warming is real, limited water and oil reserves are real, extinction of species at unprecedented rates is real, and if we want a world fit for future generations, we have to change course—and quickly.

People all across the globe are saying: *enough*. The vision of progress proposed by a handful of powerful corporations—a McDonalds and Wal Mart on every street corner, millions of acres of genetically identical wheat, soybeans, and corn, reliant on ever-increasing inputs of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides—this vision, we are told, is inevitable. We are saying it is not. One half of this “movement” I was beginning to see—is resistance—to those technologies and economic policies that damage communities and the land. The other is renewal—of respect for earth processes and finite resources and the intricate understanding required to sustain it for future generations. We came to acknowledge and learn from the locals—Andean farmers who have developed sophisticated agricultural technologies in harsh, variable climates, and to promote western

technologies and markets that would strengthen local communities, and people's sense of cultural pride.

I type at an old IBM computer set up by my hosts, the family for whom Yajaida baby-sits, cooks, and cleans. My room opens into a courtyard, with a small orange tree at the center. Here, as everywhere, thoughts of Missouri linger at the periphery. Shelling beans provokes a memory from two months earlier, when I'd visited my grandfather in older, smaller mountains than these; the St. Francis Mountains of the Missouri Ozarks. We sat in his kitchen eating dinner. Instead of Chicha music, named after a fermented Peruvian corn drink, we listened to Jimmy Rodgers. But Jimmy and the Chicha singers are of the same mind, they all sing about lost love, the sweet girl who got away, and the man who did her wrong. That's my grandfather. On their engagement, Grandma made him promise that they would move to a big city and leave the farming life behind. Fifty bitter years later she died, a farmer's wife.

I'd fried potato cakes and perch dipped in cornmeal. Sweet corn from Grandpa's garden bubbled in a pot on the stove. He'd disappeared into the basement and emerged with a ziplock bag from the freezer. Now he pulled a bowl out of the microwave, and put it on the table.

"Do you know what these are?" He'd asked, leaning toward me, his eyes a bright, sharp blue.

"Shelly beans from your garden," I replied. The little bowl was full of green beans, from pods that got too big to eat shells and all.

"Your grandma shelled those," he said. "Velva used to love to sit out on the front

porch and fix those beans.”

Corn

Beans

Potatoes

In America, North and South, two worlds exist. Though everywhere Britney Spears, blue jeans and cell phones seem the stronger trend, the New World–Western civilization–seen through an historical lens, is merely a dusting on the surface of time. The Old World is deep—and a hint of its tremendous influence is nowhere more evident than in the commonest of foods we now consume, first developed by the early agriculturists of the Americas. The Peruvian Andes may well be the birthplace of all three modern vegetables.

The sweet corn I relished at my grandfather’s table was derived from a variety of maize first cultivated in the Andes. The descendants of the farmers who developed the first potato still cultivate their fields with hand tools in the mountains that surround my small writing station in Urubamba. Even the descendants of our modern-day beans were likely first cultivated in the region. Recently, a cache of 11,000 year-old *Phaseolus vulgaris*—the common bean—were discovered in Guitarrero Cave in Peru. The Old World still exists here, generous in its gifts to the new, and sustained by farmers who have been developing diverse strains of potatoes, corn, and beans for more than 6,000 years.

When I was a young girl, I learned to put two pans on the table when fixing green beans. One a little bigger than the other. First you toss the pile of fresh-picked, sun-warmed beans from the white bucket onto the table. Corral them all into a fat, tall pile

and begin. Snap, snap, break off the snaky ends. Next, twist off the fringed tops with the sharp stems, pulldown, stripping the tough connecting tissue between the beans' two halves. Break into two, maybe three pieces, toss into the bigger pot. And all along, punctuating the snapping of fresh green beans, your eyes and fingers locate, too, the beans that have gone over, passed their prime and on into shelly bean territory. These bend drily, their fat fruit bulges out of thin, emaciated skins. Start with the stem, twist, pull down like a zipper and pop those fat brown and green speckled beans right into the smaller pot. The first few will pop and dance at the bottom of the bowl. The rest are quieter; they settle in like comfortable members of a large, well-mannered clan.

At my grandfather's, I took a small spoonful of my grandmother's beans and slid them into my mouth. Felt the smooth-skinned beans under my tongue. Pierced their tender green flesh between incisor and molar. I looked out onto the porch and tried to imagine the creak of chains as my grandmother swung slowly in the porch swing, her beloved hummingbirds hovered just inches above her head. She was shelling beans and singing, a bowl beside her.

Age is a relative thing and in Missouri, where I come from, the old world lives on in the Ozark Mountains. The mound builders, Osage, and Quapaw who once lived here are gone, but some of the old-time mountain-dwellers who resisted the post-World War II exodus remained close to the land and nourished an intimacy that has deepened, arguably, over several generations. My grandfather is one of these people. His tie to the land won out over my grandmother's wish to move to a big Midwestern city. He did try to leave—for the first five years of their marriage they lived in Detroit, where she enjoyed a life of

greater ease. But Grandpa could not stand the daily press of the city, and long hours welding in a factory. He sold the house and, deaf to my grandmother's pleading, moved the family back to his father's 130-acre cattle farm.

Grandma adapted, but bitterly. She focused her creative mind—drawn toward literature and music in her girlhood—to the practical tasks of waxing the floors, polishing the furniture in the dining room, and overseeing the financial affairs of the farm. But her unhappiness was chronic. I don't remember seeing her smile when I was a small child. She was already shrunken with osteoporosis; her mouth made a grim line. She was rigid and self-contained; a closed door to her husband, children, and grandchildren.

Besides my grandfather, all my mother's family has moved away from the Ozarks. The question arises, what to do with the old farm once Grandpa dies? Neither Mom nor her two sisters or brother can bear the thought of living on the old farm. The memories are too painful. Years of angry words exchanged between my grandparents and even worse, long stretches of cold silence. And beneath all that, the ghosts of an old country that the world left behind.

“Mamita, quieres choclo con queso?” After lunch in Urubamba, I boarded a bus bound for Ollantaytambo, an hour south, to visit friends. Now we are unloading, and a woman outside the bus is selling her wares. Fresh corn on the cob, and fresh cheese. All along the drive through the Urubamba River valley, I have seen mile upon mile of *maiz* or corn fields. *Choclo* is corn on the cob. Maiz' ability to be stored as surplus made it the building block of the first large pre-Incan civilization in the region, and the first crop to require the extensive, sophisticated irrigation canal system that draws water from high up

in the mountains to water the corn in the valleys. The “choclo” corn is a hearty meal; the kernels large and meaty. I give the woman a dollar’s worth of change and she hands me the corn, roasted in its husk, and a thick slice of fresh cheese. I alternate, bite for bite, cheese and corn.

In Missouri, several days before dinner with Grandpa, I’d been browsing the Missouri Historical Museum archives and stumbled upon a series of homemade journals dubbed the “Ozarcheologist,” which were put out by the Ozark Archeological Society in the late forties and fifties. I pulled out the March issue, 1951, to see a colorful South American Quetzal bird on the front, drawn by hand with colored pencil. This issue was dedicated to South American archeology. One hand-written article listed vegetables native to the Americas, and traced the lineage of modern varieties to their indigenous roots. Of sweet corn, the author wrote:

Sweet corn descends from maizo grown on the hillside terraces of the Incas. Of course, it is not as developed as the sweet corn we use today. Primitive forms of maizo are still found in Peru. The slow process that was followed by the prehistoric Americans has been sped up by our modern scientists. Plant progress could still proceed without the science of genetics but it would be a slow and costly method of progress.

A slow and costly method of progress. Such has long been the Western perspective on all indigenous technologies and processes that work in concert with—more than imposing upon—the natural world. But this perspective is changing. Indigenous knowledge is finally coming into its own, at the periphery of modern thought. Among the strengths of “prehistoric” agricultural systems was the great diversification of crops. A

growing number of scientists in the Western World are expressing alarm at the rapid rate with which we are losing diversity in our vegetable crops, as much of the world's agricultural production is absorbed into large-scale agribusinesses specializing in a few favored varieties like the Russet Burbank Potato. In the long run, monoculture is supremely vulnerable to pests and disease. To counter this, Western scientists and native people have joined efforts in recent years to save the remaining seeds of diverse food crops developed by native people in the Americas over the past 6,000+ years.

Andean agriculture has historically, through to the present, walked a tenuous line between the domestic and the wild. In the steep Andes, as in many marginal areas, older forms of agriculture still flourish, and nourish the vitality of potato diversity. In the markets here the *papas* are blue, yellow, gold, red, green, and every shade in between. Some are oblong, others perfectly round. Smooth *papas*, and thick, pock-skinned. They are all small. When I first arrived, a man knowledgeable in native plants harvested an original wild potato for me. This was the source from which the Incans and their ancestors had developed 300 + strains in the Sacred Valley alone. Its taste was a first taste—bitter, and real.

To the representative of a biotech firm or a Westerner accustomed to orderly, groomed rows of crops, the patchwork of farms in the Andes might appear disorganized. In the lower valleys, beans are frequently planted among the corn. And in the terraced upper regions where potatoes are grown, strains of wild potatoes frequently surround the domesticated varieties on all sides. Thus, the cultivated varieties are always crossing with wild, naturally evolving species.

Some hybrids will taste better; others will more successfully adapt to the specific

soil type, aridity, slope, and temperatures that vary so widely in the series of specialized microclimates that make up the mountainous lands. Others will be resistant to disease. The farmers frequently sample their hybrids at the periphery, bringing the hardiest and tastiest into their plots for further cultivation. While the whim of the farmer in terms of taste and texture impacts which varieties will be promoted, the influence of the land itself is paramount. What will survive at over 10,000 feet, in dramatically changing environs, is what continues to be cultivated here.

The survival of potato diversity is also nourished by old cultural traditions still practiced throughout the Andes. In a work ritual called the “minka,” farmers from one region will visit their neighbors to help with the harvest. Payment for their labor comes in the form of “potato currency,” which they will eat and also cultivate themselves. Another common practice is the gifting of potato varieties from both the bride and groom’s families as wedding gifts when a couple gets married. This, too, promotes genetic diversity.

To most of us in the “developed” world, aged cultures and the ancient, daily processes of our earth pale in comparison to the innovations of modern civilizations. We are beginning to better appreciate our reliance on the land and those who remain close to it—indigenous people, or even our own modern-day farmers. Yet these people and cultures are still relegated to the margins of our awareness and tragically, the global economy. No one wants to be pushed to the side. Like most people in the developing world, many Peruvians are in a rush to adapt a Western lifestyle. That means leaving far behind the indigenous elements of their culture, including their agricultural heritage.

I had a Peruvian roommate in college who enlightened me on the common

Peruvian perspective on indigenous Andean foods. She'd grown up in Lima and was in many ways proud of her Peruvian heritage. She'd made me and her boyfriend *tipico* or traditional dishes with Burbank potatoes and kept pitchers full of Koolaid-style purple *Chicha morada* corn drink in the refrigerator at all times. One day, though, I brought home a bag of quinoa from the local food co-op. I told her that it had become popular here in the states, because of its high-nutrient value and protein content. I asked if she'd eaten it in Peru. She laughed, astonished that U.S. consumers were paying good money for quinoa. "We give that to our chickens," she'd exclaimed. "It's campesino food!" One morning, though, she'd made up a little bowl with milk and honey. "My grandma used to eat it sometimes," she said. "It's really pretty good."

I stay for a couple of nights in Ollantaytambo, fifty miles to the south of Urubamba and the compound of Don Vidal, a medicine man and breadmaker I came to know while helping to organize the Call of the Condor. Vidal is gone, but Lourdes and her two daughters, Miski and Crisalidad, are here. Miski means sweet in Quechua. Crisalidad means chrysalis in Spanish. Crisalidad is six years old. I sit at the little concrete stoop that opens from Don Vidal's lawn into the dusty road leading toward the Inca trail. Sunlight is strong here at 9,000 feet, a concentrated shine on the page, and I pause in my writing. A truck filled with campesinos and sheep rumbles past, startling up the dust and forcing me back onto the lawn. Crisalidad finds me and rushes into my lap, unsettling the journal.

"Que bonita!" she says softly, tracing the figure of a woman on my T-shirt. The painting on my shirt, titled, "Many Strong and Beautiful Women," depicts a dozen

women from across the globe. Skin colors range from ivory, peach, earth-colored to ebony; some have wiry extravagant hair, others smooth and liquid. The woman Crisalidad has chosen is slender, has pale skin, and long blond hair.

“Fea!” Crisalidad says sharply, pointing to another woman who resembles her own mother, Lourdes. *Ugly*. Copper skin, dark brown eyes, ample hips. No, no. I try to tell her. Bonita, bonita. But she looks up into my face and her almond-shaped eyes, wise and wicked as any six-year-old’s, narrow as if to say– *You can’t fool me, I know how the world works*. *Fea, fea, fea*, she chants, hopping off my lap and prancing around the yard. Up above us, Lourdes is on her knees, washing clothes in a plastic washbasin.

I know that three houses down at a small grocery store a “telenovela” or soap opera plays. All of the wealthy, beautiful women are white, and their maids are indigenous women. Fea, bonita. The old world is ugly, the new world is beautiful. *You can’t fool me*, Crisalidad fingers my camera lens. She has seen the string of foreigners like me, with our cameras and cell phones, expensive tents and backpacks. No, no, I want to tell her, be proud of who you are. Please give it back, I say of my camera. But she is sullen now. Crisalidad knows how the world works. And she wants some of what I have.

Later, on the bus back to Urubamba, I sit beside a newly met Austrian friend’s strikingly blond, eight-year-old girl. A mother, fresh from the fields with a baby in her arms, mistakes the girl for my daughter. She nods at my young friend and smiles, holding out her baby,

“Pretty girl,” she says, “You want trade?” She laughs. It’s a joke. My own laugh is forced. I can visit the Old World but soon, I will fly back to the U.S., where I will again enjoy hot showers, my own personal car, and the choice of whether or not to have a baby.

Crisalidada and the woman on the bus have become my grandmother, in the left-behind Ozark country. In Spanish, Quechua, and country English they ask me—you like it here? You want to trade?

Grandpa and I walk to the creek the next afternoon, the morning after our dinner of beans, sweet corn, and potatoes. I walk ahead, stretching my legs, sure that my grandfather, who has always been so strong, can keep up. But he trails behind. I do not consider that he is wearing rubber boots with smooth soles. I do not consider that the rocks are slick, or that I ought to keep to the easier path. I do not consider that my grandfather is 86 years old—well along in years and not nearly so spry as he once was. A small shout behind me, and a sickening thud. I turn,

“Grandpa!” My grandfather is sprawled upon a hard rock, he has fallen, and is struggling to stand. I reach out for his hand, and as I pull him up, I see a gash along his forehead, blood already beginning to trickle down his cheek. My chest catches. Later, in the house,

“Don’t call the doctor, I’m fine. I know I’m fine.” His tone is sharp, defensive.

“We need to call.” I tell him. He is stubborn. He seems alright. I need counsel.

We call Mom. Grandpa, to my horror, has made of the accident a macabre joke,

“I thought she said “get up,” but she said ‘shut up!’ then she knocked me down.”

He is chuckling, pleased with himself.

“Just keep a good eye on him,” Mom says, and I relent. It seems Grandpa has lost none of his faculties. I swab his forehead with alcohol, and put a bandage on top.

Later, as I am washing dishes, he sings for me the songs that he’d sung to my

grandmother. He sways back and forth on his little bowlegs. “Sweet Fern,” he croons, his eyes intense, just a little crazed, I think, and he looks just like a pink baby bird with a tuft of white feather sticking out of his head— and that godawful bandage hanging off his derelict forehead, reminding me of my supreme irresponsibility, my denial that my grandfather is getting older.

“That’s really sweet, Grandpa,” I say.

“It used to make her so mad,” a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, Fern lived a few houses down you know, we courted before your grandmother and I got married. I always did tell her that if she gave me too much trouble, I’d just go back to my little Fern.”

“You really said that?” Grandpa looks down, the sparkle now gone from his eyes.

“I never was good enough to her,” he said. “I never could make her happy.”

I think to myself, how could you? You were each made of a different cloth. It was not until my grandmother was dying that either she or my grandfather could admit that they loved each other.

The green revolution took some time getting up into the Andes but by the 1970’s, international, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) had arrived with truckloads of chemical fertilizers, telling the people that to succeed they, too, must use these chemicals to make their soil healthy. At first the fertilizers were free. Farmers who used them quickly found that soil accustomed to fertilizers becomes hungry for more. In the village I met families who stack all their fertilizers in a corner of their one-bedroom homes to

protect them from the rain. When they eat dinner of yucca soup and rice, they breathe in the fumes. Babies play on the fertilizers; they eat it too. Some families are forced to sell their livestock to purchase enough fertilizers and pesticides for their annual crops.

Yet many of the old farmers in the Sacred Valley of Peru, and in fact the majority of small-scale Latin American farmers, still don't use fertilizers or the high-yield varieties introduced from the North. Many cannot afford these products, and others are satisfied to keep doing things the old way. Here in the valley most utilize a traditional practice of growing beans with their corn, because corn pulls nitrates from the soil and beans "fix" nitrates, feeding them back in.

During the Call of the Condor, I joined a group of volunteers weeding the cornfields of a farmer. The old, gap-toothed man and his neighbors watched us and laughed behind their hands. They marveled to see how slow we were, and how happy. Eduardo, an activist for indigenous people's rights who spent his days confined to a desk in Lima, was the happiest of all. He belted out a liberation song in Spanish, then leaned over to me and said, "Isn't this wonderful?" His big hands swam into the chunky soil, grasping and tugging at the base of a thistle, as if they were a native species seeking home, as if they belonged here. They did. His ancestors had done this very thing. We came in early spring, but already the bright green corn shoots were poking up out of the soil. Among the corn were bean plants, giving back what the corn took away.

As we weeded, I'd thought again of the quirky Ozarcheologist and its authors' condescension toward the "slow" Incan process of breeding plants. Written in 1951, the writers must have been swept up in post-WWII idealism, and the surety that our advanced agricultural technology would create a better world for all. As I pulled weeds with the

Andean farmers, alongside scientists, scholars and activists, I wondered—what might the authors of this journal have thought, had they seen that global starvation and poverty have been, in fact, largely exacerbated by Western agricultural technologies and “progress,” not alleviated by it? Might they have laughed in disbelief to see us here—seeking less to teach than to learn?

The Peruvian Andes have seen their share of large-scale civilizations. In the 1,000 years prior to Spanish contact, a number of notable civilizations rose and fell in the region along the coasts and in the mountains—among them the Chaviz, Gallinazo, Mochica, Paracas, Nazca, Chimú, and finally the Incan empire. In the midst of all these changes in overarching polities, resilient agricultural systems were developed and many, like the complex irrigation systems known as *andenes* survived into the present. Without pesticides or fertilizers, and with the simplest of hand tools, this marginal land, coupled with production from the coast and trade with the jungle villages, had yielded bounty for millions of people. How had this old understanding survived? As I observed those old farmers, bent from years of hard work but still tender enough to smile with their eyes, I thought that perhaps in its old age their culture had become not brittle but rather resilient, and skillful at the fine art of survival.

Is it possible that my grandmother, too, became more genuine and wise, as she grew older? I am beginning to think so. I am beginning to understand how, like an over-ripened green bean, my grandmother developed her own mad sweetness as her skin was thinning; she bore fruit in her later years. She developed dementia four years before her death. I saw it as a steady peeling away at the layers of her life, the thick defenses that had

shielded her, and us, from her real pain, real joy, her awareness beyond the physical. She descended into the depths of the illness for long periods, then emerged, her old self. Her sharpness did not melt away. In a sense, it intensified, but at last became evident for what it was—a desperate attempt to connect, to make contact, to be seen, heard, and taken seriously.

I lived in Missouri when the dementia began. For several months, grandma stayed with my parents. I visited for a week, and saw first-hand how she had changed. I sat with her for an afternoon while Mom went shopping. Grandma led me by the hand into the room where she was staying, my old bedroom.

“No one believes me,” she said sadly, as we settled down on the tall bed. “But I’ve seen them.”

“Seen who Grandma?” Prickles rose up on the back of my neck.

“The little people. I saw a little girl about this tall,” she brought her hand up about two feet from the floor. “And a little boy.” We both peered into the closet.

“They’re gone now.” She looked at me again closely, to see if she could trust me. “But they were really here.”

“I believe you,” I said. In a way, I did. When I was a child, I’d seen the twisted forms of monsters and demons in the burls of the Formica closet door. In the early morning, they swirled around, took shape, and loomed over my bed, their large, vacuous eyes staring into mine. It is lonely to be the only one who sees such hidden things.

When Grandpa came to visit that night, she refused at first to talk to him. He broke the silence.

“Velva, I’ve missed you,” he said.

“Sure you’ve missed me,” her voice was high pitched, confused hurt running through the anger like a fuse. “Running around with that other woman. I know you want a divorce.”

Grandpa clenched his teeth in exasperation, turned to Grandma and said,

“Now Velva, you know I’m not with any other woman. You’re my only sweetheart.” Grandma broke down crying, and grandpa put his arm around her shoulder. She turned to him, and held him tightly. Mom looked at Dad, astonished. Usually their battle lasted days, weeks, sometimes years.

Grandpa sat stiff and silent for an astonished moment. But when he looked down, his body had softened, and his face was all tenderness and concern.

“I’m here honey, I’m here,” he said.

“Well I never,” Mom said under her breath. We’d all become convinced that the tenderness between them had withered away fifty years ago, as Grandpa packed their car in Detroit. Like a sweet, speckled bean, though, grown fat under disguise of a bitter, wrinkled pod, their love had magically emerged from its husk at our kitchen table, *plink!* into the small bowl my mother, father and me made with our wondering eyes.

Corn

Beans

Potatoes

Each nourished in the Old World, a firm link to the past. Each the foundation for the New

World, yet in their current, reduced number of varieties, threatened within it. The old American civilizations were built on the bodies of corn. The new American civilization was built on the intelligence of indigenous people and their crops, and is now sustained by a belief that our superior technologies can outwit Mother Nature. Our crop, though sweet for some, has been costly to the earth.

How might we plant the old vibrant beans, the best of what our elders knew, into the exhausted soil of our modern times? For myself, I look to my grandparents, who waited fifty years to discover that beneath their bitterness lay an enduring love. We have no time to waste. Let us admit to what truly matters, and awaken to our profound connection to this earth and her children— the soil, water, air, and growing beings. Hope lies in recovery of our ancient ability to traverse the fluid line between the domestic and the wild, the Old World, and the new.

Yajaida, Crisalidad, the woman on the bus, my grandmother. All determined to leave behind the Old World and abandon their past. All afraid of being left behind.

I, too, have tried to leave the past behind and I, too, have failed. But in the process, I have uncovered a secret.

Are you listening?

Listen.

The past is alive.

It is stalking you.

It can eat you, if you refuse to look it in the eyes.

Turn around.

There she is, that monster, the one who for so long has been tearing you apart.

All she wants is to be seen. All she needs is your acknowledgment. A song, perhaps, or a story.

And most of all, your understanding.

Because under the thick fur and the long claws, something new is waiting to be born.

It can't be born until you are ready.

A world fit for our children and grandchildren cannot emerge until we are ready.

Are we ready?

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