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# Life Knots

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Margaret L. Dean, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Life Knots

A Thesis Presented  
for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Meghan Melissa McDonald  
May 2012

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## **ABSTRACT**

This collection of creative nonfiction essays is framed by M.M. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, the concrete juncture of time and space. Chronotopes include technical relationships between those elements, as well as worldviews. Each essay examines a different thing or place as a chronotope, including maps, a well house, boxes, a dining room, periodical cicadas, and a sand dollar. All of the essays, however, share themes, including the search for unity (and for what actually constitutes unity), relationships between ways of knowing, and relationships between the personal, spiritual, environmental, and cultural. The essays span genres, from the personal and academically personal, to memoir and place memoir, to meditation.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I.

“We’re home!” I yelled. I raced out of the red Aerostar and hopped up the front porch steps to unlock the door before Momma had even dismounted from the van. I dumped my backpack at the foot of the recliner and rushed out to the swing set. Silhouetted red and blue cowboys rode their bucking broncos up each supporting pole. I joined them for a few minutes on my wild palomino swing, before galloping off myself to the base of the maple tree, to wait for Momma to recuperate from her day teaching art at my elementary school.

“Meghan, I’m ready,” Momma halloed from the garage.

“To the creek!” I said, running up from around the corner, brandishing a long-stemmed daylily I picked for her.

“Look!” I stopped Momma in the bamboo grove, the entrance to the back woods. I pulled her down to a squat. “You almost stepped on a baby bamboo!” I squealed. The tiny teepees were sprouting up densely on the forest floor.

“I’m sorry, honey. There’s so many of them, it’s hard not to. We’ll have to tiptoe,” she suggested. A perfect solution.

“Whew, I don’t think there are any more,” Momma told me once we had reached the ancient trash pile in what had been a pig lot several generations before. The rusty frame of a car’s bench seat marked a turn in the trail. We followed the narrow, dappled path through to the dogwood-crowned knoll, then down to the creek. White and red oaks towered over the steep bank, where we sat on mossy roots to exchange stories from the day.



## II.

All living organisms move in time and space; all things, living or not, made of atoms and particles and quarks, exist in these dimensions. As abstract facts, time and space are shared, universal. Yet things live and move and have their being according to their own kinds. Time and space are absorbed by an oak tree in a way utterly alien to the sapsucker thrumming into its skin. Mother and daughter experience time and move in space in individual ways. A southern white American woman thinks about time and space differently than a Masai man differently than a Malaysian woman. Time may be seasonal, cyclical, calendrical. Hours may trickle like a creek or roar like rapids. Space becomes concrete and associative in *place*, where movements occur not only physically, but culturally, psychologically, interpersonally.

Many people (certainly I) take time and space/place for granted—think about them when necessary, worry about them when not necessary—but do not assess the integral impacts that time and space/place have on their lives. And what impacts do they have? The answer seems so obvious. But to think about how they combine in concrete ways, at concrete points (a paradox, I believe, from the physicist's perspective), is not an everyday exercise of imagination. I have been repeatedly asked what this collection of essays is about. "Each essay examines an object as an intersection of space and time," I reply. The most typical response to this condensed explanation is, "Huunhh..." drawn out with a slow, slanted nod, a thoughtful half-shuttering of one eye, a flex of one mouth-corner. "Not something I would think to write about." On the one hand, it's ordinary, common sense; on the other hand, when slogging through literary theory, it becomes mind-boggling meta-life-discourse: the chronotope.

## III.

“Momma,” I announced, “I’ve decided to become a *naturalist*.” The word inspired me, filled me with visions of African wildlife and Elton John celebrating the circle of life. I pictured naturalists communing with dolphins and woodland creatures—Disney princesses who did science experiments. I began my quest to become one by reading every word of our battered copy of Peterson’s *A Field Guide to the Birds* and closely studying the visitors to the new hummingbird feeder suction-cupped to the bedroom window. I spent the hottest part of the July days on the window seat, whispering observations to Momma.

“This one’s a girl. She doesn’t have the ruby throat. Oh, Momma, you should see how tiny her feet are!” I chattered. “Did you know that if the light doesn’t hit right, their backs look gray instead of green?”

“That’s really neat, Meghan. You should give her a name.” Momma liked to name everything, from my toys to our favorite spots in the forest.

“How about Gris? It means gray in French.”

Momma assented, but my fancy French word soon evolved into “Glee,” as she consistently mispronounced it. “Glee” fit this tiny, feathered body of energy much better.

## IV.

Fifty to seventy wing-beats per second. Glee hovered rapidly at the feeder: life happens in both time and space; the two can be but artificially separated. Considered together, as the point of origin, (0,0), you have time-space: the chronotope. Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed this term from physics to apply to novels. Most basically, Bakhtin defines chronotopes as “the intrinsic

connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically represented in literature.”<sup>1</sup> Events are organized, meaning is shaped, and genres are characterized by chronotopes, “where the knots of narrative are tied and untied.”<sup>2</sup> According to Bakhtin, they exist in non-novel genres such as epics and folktales, and in the real world. Contemporary scholars, such as James Lawson, also affirm that Bakhtin’s theory makes possible the analysis of chronotopes in nonfiction and indigenous narratives, as long as the chronotopic categories are expanded from Bakhtin’s originals to represent their respective cultural values and truth claims.<sup>3</sup> To that end, Lawson crafts a working definition of chronotopes as “mark[ers for] the outer spatio-temporal horizons of particular activities, developments, or processes” which “capture inner spatio-temporal patterns.”<sup>4</sup>

## V.

Each season, Momma’s *Serengeti Magazine* offered a special stuffed animal amidst clothing and bathroom décor. Every penny made from the toys supported Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. I was determined to get one. When I finally raised half of the cost of the season’s \$25 black-footed ferret, Momma agreed to pay the rest. The toy, dubbed Bandit, did not leave my side for several years. With Bandit, I received an added bonus: My name was placed on the mailing list of all sorts of environmental organizations. Letters, informational packets, and membership offers soon crowded our mailbox.

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1. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 84.

2. *Ibid.*, 250.

3. Lawson, “Chronotope, Story, and Historical Geography,” 405, 408.

4. *Ibid.*, 384.

My allowance paid for me to join Friends of the Earth, World Wildlife Fund, National Wildlife Federation, Earth Island Institute...to adopt animals that, unfortunately, were not adapted to living in Alabama (including an Arctic wolf and a Pacific white-sided dolphin)...to send letters to President Clinton about the state of environmental protection in the United States.

From the White House to the movie theater—*The Lion King* and *Pocahontas* proved Disney loved nature—I saw heightened concern for the environment. The book fair at school was populated by books about dogs, horses, and rainforests. After my fourth grade teacher assigned *Julie of the Wolves*, I learned everything I could about the tundra ecosystem. *Shadows in the Water*, in which four kids and several telepathic dolphins busted a ring of toxic waste dumpers, turned my attention to sea creatures and pollution problems. *Fern Gully* gave me apocalyptic nightmares about tropical deforestation. “The power is yours,” Captain Planet said every day after school. I accepted his offer.

## VI.

I was in the right place at the right time for everything to come together in the right ways for me to turn out the way I have; the rise of environmentalism in the popular imagination, the political regime, my mother’s pregnancy (for which reason I was staying inside with her and for which reason someone had given her the hummingbird feeder), the opinions and teachings of my elders. My childhood story is thus characterized by two of Bakhtin’s chronotopes—adventure time, which is organized around random but precisely-timed meetings; and the family biography, in which the familial/communal context shapes personal development.

Another meeting later in life once again lined up influences in the right place at the right time. I once was under the impression that writers other than Romantics, Transcendentalists, and children's book authors typically paid as little attention to the environment as did my teachers and fellow students. I almost cried for joy—in fact, I may actually have—when Gretel Ehrlich's writings lifted me from the mire of college readings in Jacobean tragedy, nineteenth-century abolitionist literature, and the modernists. Thomas Merton, Madeleine L'Engle, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, bell hooks, Scott Russell Sanders, Mary Oliver, Robert Hass...the flood behind Ehrlich helped me affirm long-suspected, tangly connections between disparate aspects of life. They broadened my interests from nature writing, to ecocriticism, to ecopoetics, to place-writing. They also illustrated the diversity of creative nonfiction—spiritual, scientific, social, and political together or separate; continuous and segmented; image-, narrative-, and idea-driven; beauty and rhythm outside of poetry; form follows function in more than architecture.

## VII.

The children's choir director, a thirty-something, petite spitfire with coiled black hair, took my mother aside one night after practice. I disappeared around a corner, but I could still hear her.

“Miriam, your daughter is showing environmentalist tendencies, and I don't think it's healthy. It's one thing to like animals, but she's going to end up hurting people,” she prophesied ominously to Momma. “You need to let her know that people are more important than rainforests, for goodness sake!”

I wanted to explain the concept of stewardship to her, since she seemed to have forgotten it, but I knew better than to interrupt an adult conversation.

“Yes, we’ll discuss this,” Momma replied. She barely managed to keep a straight face until we got in the van.

“Meghan, we’re discussing your ‘tendencies,’ right now. God created rainforests, ants, and people. Love God, love His creation. And if your choir director says anything to you, please don’t argue with her.”

## VIII.

In “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight,” Michael J. McDowell describes Bakhtin’s theories in *The Dialogic Imagination* as “the literary equivalent of ecology, the science of relationships,” and thus “the ideal starting point for an ecological analysis of landscape writing” because they focus on dialogues between multiple perspectives.<sup>5</sup> The chronotope, McDowell says, can be used to analyze narrated landscapes by unlocking relationships between humans and nature as it unlocks meaning within the narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Chronotopes, then, allow me to explore the relational subtleties of worldviews, land ethics, and my own integrity from a more holistic view than that of environmentalism or “green” initiatives. Chronotopic theory can take into account human history, memory, religion, politics, geography, etc.; within each of those fields, it acknowledges engagements between multiple (perhaps inaudible or unofficial) voices.

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5. McDowell, “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight,” 372.

6. *Ibid.*, 378.

Connecting chronotopes and environmental concerns in real life is a way to break down dichotomies I have grown up with in a small city in the South. I have always defied the binaries: I am an academic country-girl non-Republican progressive conservative environmentalist Christian. Not until college did I realize, though, that these oppositions were not endemic to Gadsden, Alabama, or even to modern America. Juxtaposition of city/art and country/nature is key to the pastoral genre, including works like the *Eclogues* and *As You Like It*, and it figures strongly in later novels like *Middlemarch*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Heart of Darkness*. Within that juxtaposition lies a vast range of spiritual, philosophical, scientific, political, and social inquiries directed at humans' relationships not only with nature, but also with culture and with each other.

Various ways of viewing the natural world—the great outdoors, wilderness, Gaia, environment, nature, paradise or hell—are part of that antithesis, but they are also juxtaposed themselves: in medieval European writings, in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, in Romanticism, and in contemporary science and spirituality. Nature's role—even more essentially, the physical world's role—in spirituality is examined in medieval literature, like *Piers Plowman*, and in not so dissimilar ways in the works of more contemporary authors, like Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, and Annie Dillard. All four explore the tensions and elasticities between physical and spiritual; between innate, academic, and experiential knowledge; between death and birth.

IX.

Fifth grade ended when cool breezes stirred into warm sun. It was perfect frog-song weather, but the woods were quiet. No *plop*'s and splashes greeted Momma and me at the creek.

“Why don't the frogs sing anymore?” I asked her one day. “It's summer! They should be as happy as me.” I twirled, arms flapping, so that Momma knew how happy the frogs should be. Momma had no answer, but I soon devised a plan: a restoration project, like ones featured in the Sierra Club's magazine.

On Father's Day, we visited Papa at the farm on the mountain. I hustled Dad and Papa to the cow pond to scope out the tadpole population.

“Can I take some of your tadpoles?” I asked Papa. “I have to repopulate our creek. I won't hurt your frog population.”

Papa laughed, nudged his Crimson Tide cap further back on his head. “Sure, hon, whatever you want to do,” he said. “Don't lose a shoe. The cows have churned up the flat side.” He looked at my empty hands. “What will you catch 'em with?”

We poked around the carport and the shed together and found a small, cracked pickle bucket. Papa knotted a rope around its handle. Dad and I scouted out a casting point from atop a steeper bank, away from curious cows. From there, I tossed the bucket as far as I could, hauled it in—mud, water, tadpoles, and strange little creatures I did not want to let loose in my creek—and transferred tadpoles with muddy hands to a line of jars Papa contributed from his bee-keeping supplies. My family watched and chatted beneath the cherry trees.

“My creek's not too big—five jars should be enough,” I announced to them. “Just in case, can we do this again on the Fourth of July?”



X.

What follows in this essay collection are figure-studies of real-life chronotopes, which I have identified based on Lawson's definition. Under that definition, "chronotope" can function in several different ways. It can describe the "merely technical" link between time and space<sup>7</sup>—the ticking away of a clock or the stride of the sun; the adventure-time of a child or the exaggerated wait for a holiday. "Chronotope" can also indicate, as it is commonly used in postcolonial theory, an individual or cultural *weltanschauung*, a worldview or "time-space map of the...world"<sup>8</sup> through which the raw data of life can be molded into meaningful experience, through which perception yields interpretation and representation.

Each essay in the collection presents two chronotopes: the real-life chronotope, a concrete object or event on which time and space have left their joint signature, but which also fleshes out worldviews and "chronotopic truths"<sup>9</sup>; and also the nonfiction literary chronotope—the time-space in which the real time-space is represented. Actually, even "real-life" chronotopes are literary ones; time and space come to a point, but the human mind must, in essence, narrate the connection to interpret the chronotope.

Memory, imagination, and worldview are chronotopic because they, like literature, both represent and interpret the world. We imagine how space and time should or do function. Real life becomes story, narrative with actors and actants, setting, chronology. We may not be speaking the story, but we tell it to ourselves in our imaginations, and we tell it to others through our words and behaviors. Through memory, imagination, and worldview, we discover truths

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7. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 151.

8. Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope*, 66.

9. Lawson, "Chronotope, Story, and Historical Geography," 404.

*about* and *within* time-space, such as “truths about process [and] complex causation”<sup>10</sup>, and those that reveal “how [and why] individual agency, historical context, and social milieu interact”<sup>11</sup> with each other and with the natural environment.

## XI.

Home from college on a break, I meandered down to the creek with Momma and a line of cats. We sat on the bench and exchanged stories from the past few weeks.

“Did I tell you about the newspaper article I saw titled ‘Inconvenient Youths: How to Manage Your Activist Kid’<sup>12</sup>? It sounded like me.”

Momma laughed. “No, tell me,” she requested, and we launched into typical creek-side banter.

“So, I’ve been checking out a few landscape architecture schools,” I interjected several minutes later into Momma’s account of my brother’s latest dirt bike feats. “And yesterday, I talked to my boss at the Land Trust about related nonprofit jobs. Sounds promising.”

“You’re determined not to use your degree in English,” she said.

“We’ll see. But the Land Trust just finished another property deal,” I said. “It’s great to see the process from start to finish. The science, the economics, the community’s roles.”

“Who knew you’d end up so tame?” Momma asked. “Maybe you should write about those kinds of things instead of going into landscape architecture.”

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10. Lawson, “Chronotope, Story, and Historical Geography,” 404.

11. Morson, “Bakhtin and the Present Moment,” 216.

12. Gamerman, “Inconvenient Youths,” W1.

This collection seeks in two central ways to enlarge my own and my readers' conceptions of how space, place, and time can function and can be represented in mind, memory, and paper: first, by staying centered in my own place and time; and second, by consciously listening for the dialogues, for interaction between voices—be they individual or cultural, human or non-human. I moved those tadpoles from their native place to help rebalance another...how did I change their movement, their being? How did they change mine? Essays in the collection cluster around the few years after college graduation in which I began to explore time and space as more than factual phenomena, as subjectively-rendered elements of human existence.

The subjects I chose as illustrations of different types of chronotopes have led me away from my intention of writing directly about the environment and towards a few themes that thread in and out of all the essays: unity, change, way-finding and ways of knowing. I worked on all of these essays simultaneously; that was an atypical process for me, but it augmented the dialogue between the pieces. "Maps: Knowing, Imagining, Being" evolved into a loose guide for the entire collection. In it, the chronotope reveals ways of knowing and connecting, and it does so in a way that determined the essay's form—an academically personal essay.

Maps—surveyor plats, specifically—inspired "The Well House," which examines my own difficulties with living out the ideals of the ethical imagination I espouse in "Maps." Generational time surprised me in the essay by challenging and redefining my conceptions of life with the land. "Shadow Box" involves two chronotopes: memory itself—how it arranges time and works with (or against) place in the continual process of identifying oneself, and also the boxes, which concretize my experience of moving relentlessly forward in time and in place. The essay is an effort to map out my recent journeys—not primarily to know where I am going, but

to adjust my bearings on priorities and on knowing myself in a more unified way. “Dining Room Rhythms” narrates an experience in which time stagnated; the meal’s name changed, and we moved and touched in a space outside of change—and yet I changed. The experience re-formed the ways in which I seek to know other people, and in which I let other people know me (which relates back to how I know myself). “The Weight of the Drone” examines my own fearful view of time. Finally, “Sand Dollar Roughs” opens time back out to the eternal, to what lies beyond my limited view. These two essays respond to the quest for unity between disparate worldviews, values, and contexts that is set up in “Maps” by, finally, not forming compound nouns like suburban agriculture (which I consider in that essay), but by stepping back for a broader perspective—not by appropriating the power of a panoramic view, but by encircling the person and community in the natural and the eternal, respectively. Thus, I did, in an unexpected way, write from an ecological perspective. Ecology is the study of relationships; the essays in this collection speak of relationships not only within, but between themselves. In those relationships, knotted meanings are both tied and untied.

### MAPS: KNOWING, IMAGINING, BEING

They never figured this out, but, when I was growing up, my parents could have easily convinced me to clean my room or pick up sticks in the yard if they had drawn a map to guide my way. During the summer, I requested treasure hunts on a weekly basis. My mother would hide small treasures—coins, pretty rocks, anything sparkly—and mark them on maps she drew of the front yard. The best maps had splashes of crayon color, and they named everything—the ash pile, the wicker furniture, the birch trees, the mud puddles, the hollies and nandinas. Although the metal detector was not necessary, I insisted that it be used on our expeditions—it made the treasure-hunting experience more authentic. My dad would hold its handle with one hand, our treasure map with the other. A strawberry blond, seven-year-old me would wield the middle of the metal detector’s shaft with both hands. I wasn’t a treasure-monger, but I loved the eager pursuit after the X’s marked on Momma’s maps. I loved the knowledge that I had a goal, a way to get there, and a view of my kingdom that I could attain in no other way, even by riding on my father’s shoulders.

That goal-love stuck with me after my treasure-hunting craze ended and the metal detector was stored in Dad’s closet. When I began history and geography classes in elementary school, information replaced treasure as the goal. Maps became for me repositories of names and locations. In fifth grade, we had contests at school to see who could name and locate states and capitals fastest on the big U.S. wall map in the classroom. I planned out every trip I went on with my family, friends, or school to see exactly where we were going and to carefully plot our activities. Even outdoors, in the woods and pastures, I wanted to know names and how things worked. My battered copy of Peterson’s *A Field Guide to the Birds* had no need for a table of

contents or index; I knew where each bird's picture and description could be found. I was almost as fluent in the names of wildflowers, trees, snakes, and frogs.

Ten years later, in college, maps often flooded my dorm-room floor. My friend Jimmy arranged topos, plan views, and sections to afford a comprehensive map of Fern Cave. He explained cave routes and underground surveying methods while I pored over the maps, visualizing the landscapes he and they described. I perched in a chair pushed against the wall to gaze down at them. Jimmy crouched over a black binder in their midst. He and a few other men had begun surveying the cave a few years earlier and, though only partially done, they had made enough maps to fill a three-inch binder. The cave was practically unknown before they began surveying it. One man, decades before, had known it intimately, but he had died without passing on much of his knowledge.

With Jimmy, I've looked not only at maps of caves, but also at topographical, geologic, and township-range maps of every location in which I have lived—north and central Alabama, north-central Mississippi, northern Arizona, east Tennessee. His discourse prepared me for the leveling year of Mississippi State's Master of Landscape Architecture, during which we were expected to read, assess, and draft topography maps for construction, design, and water management. I loved making maps—artistic yet mathematical puzzles to be solved without a complete picture for reference. By using our own observations and measurements, Google Earth images, and tax maps, we made overlays—one sheet of trace paper with topology, one with hydrology, others with vegetation, land use, buildings, and streets. Waterways crept and veined over the trace paper in cerulean marker ink; vegetation took shape in spring green; land uses were a prism of Tuscan red, terra cotta, jasmine, mint cream, sky blue, and grayed lavender.

Then we combined all the systems, natural and man-made, by stacking the overlays. From that base map, we constructed our site designs, harmoniously weaving human and wild together on paper. Those maps showed me what I could not see in real life, let me visualize in a way otherwise unnatural to man, unless looking down from a high point, how all the systems interact in a given space at a given point in time. They kept my most imaginative designs anchored in the reality of the site.

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Maps are art and vision; they are also the politics of naming. Maps convey knowledge; knowledge can grant freedom or demand control. Maps organize time and space, and thus they narrate engagements between worldviews, histories, and places. Because they maneuver between concrete realities and abstract interpretations or institutions, they literally and metaphorically embody ways of knowing. They both illustrate and become reference points by which to generate meaning.

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I admire the precision and fine gauge of topographic maps, but my favorite maps are antique ones. Ones crafted before objectivity, political borders, and mass production overshadowed the art of mapmaking, when mermaids, leviathans, and folk heroes thrived, their faces detailed by lore, painted by skilled hands, and when lettering symbolized more to the eye than a sound. Both fact and fancy drafted lands, passages, and creatures.

Imagination and reality merge in the map *Islandia*, Abraham Ortelius's minutely-detailed, vibrantly-tinted map of Iceland, produced in 1587. Three cultures, at least, are represented in this map. Ortelius most likely developed it from source materials provided by the island's

inhabitants; place names are provided in Danish, the language of the island's sovereign; informational blurbs and the dedication to King Frederic II of Denmark are written in Latin, the language at that time of European high culture.<sup>1</sup> Elaborate trompe-l'oeil frames three keys (title, scale, and dedication) in red, blue and gold scrollwork. Iceland's outline is flatter and longer than it is on a modern map—a quick glance suggests a stodgy, multi-tongued crocodile—but it is populated by the same fjords, rivers, bays, and mountain ranges. Tiny red churches and village halls echo the shapes of the peaks. Mount Hekla vomits fire and ash out of its jagged maw, sentencing the rocky landscape to a taste of the perpetual damnation that, according to medieval lore, awaited condemned souls in its depths. The surrounding ocean is populated by incredible sea creatures, from razor-beaked whales and seals, to literal “sea cows,” to a horse-headed dragon. Out of double blowholes on the heads of colossal fish and whales flow locks of silver water. Unconcerned by the monsters around them, polar bears play on ice floes at the eastern edge of the map, just north of a mass of uprooted trees.

I am no scholar of maps, only a distant admirer, but the details of antique maps' Iceland, North Americas, Africas, and Oceanias spur my imagination, as they surely did European explorers', sailors', and dreamers', as much as the maps of Narnia or Middle Earth printed in editions of those books excite readers' fancies. Maps like *Islandia* remind me, though, that those explorers and dreamers knew their world in ways very different than I know mine. Their imaginations were, to some degree, their realities. Centuries later, their descendants' imaginations and realities are more clearly delineated, at least in theory. Sea monsters and mermaids have been proven to not exist, but we do know scientific details about narwhales and manatees. We are encouraged to “dream big,” and “shoot for the stars,” but also to be realistic.

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1. “Abraham Ortelius: *Islandia*.”



Our dreams are plans, which, once we are past a certain age, are commonly expected to be the products of fact and rationality, not imagination.

Modern maps typically purport to illustrate reality and proclaim facts. While providing information, such maps may express hopes and dreams of the future, or even of the present, but they are not products of imagination. If you search Google for “maps,” the results will consist of pages of offers for digital road maps and satellite images via Google Maps, MapQuest, Yahoo Maps, Bing, and other providers. Technology has replaced imagination and art as the interface between map-viewer and reality. In doing so, the representational quality of the map is suppressed. It is easy to ignore the fact that you are looking at a machine-made photograph rather than reality. Our culture is so familiar with the seemingly unmediated reality of satellite images and aerial views—does that familiarity affect how we perceive reality?

After satellite maps (which can be used both for way-finding and for gathering data), Google lists political maps of the world. Switch to an image search, and in the first 15 pages, only a handful of the results are not political maps. Those exceptions include climate maps, terrain relief maps, one seismographic map, and a map of Middle Earth (the one imaginative exception). Only five—four political maps, one historical map of the Roman Empire—were made before the 1950’s.

I recently discovered a delightful map that depicts my hometown of Gadsden, Alabama, which was made before that era. Commissioned by the Women’s Club in 1939, *A Pictorial Map of Gadsden, Alabama, with Scenes of Today and Yesterday* straddles a line between story-telling and modern concepts of mapmaking. It differs greatly from *Islandia* in look and in purpose, yet it uses similar design strategies. It presents the land in plan view so that the observer is looking

straight down at it; it thrusts illustrations of various sights and stories straight in front of the observer, in elevation view, and narrates them with pithy comments. Present, factual past, and local legendary past mix in the different views of the city. Downtown, the map marks the locations of dogwoods newly planted in a “City Beautiful” campaign. A city commissioner carries a sign boasting “Unlimited Natural Resources” into the office. Two original stage coach lines through the town are indicated. The headquarters of General Forrest are illustrated, as is the home of local heroine Emma Sansom, who guided the Confederates across the Coosa River to defend the city against Union troops. One of the longest blurbs relates the story of a town Fourth of July picnic in 1876 “to which everyone was invited, and everybody came.” At that picnic, “the men ate all the food, forcing the women to go home and cook their own.”<sup>2</sup> I hear women’s voices in that narrative. In the map’s snippets of histories, there are stories—facts and imagination synthesized—which allow more than one viewpoint to emerge.

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So many exigencies and purposes for maps: memory, knowledge, direction, discovery, politics, persuasion. What was the exigence and purpose of the very first map? Directions scrawled in the dust? A chart of the stars? Did it imprint civilization on wilderness or other people? Did it illustrate harmony or division? Tell story or fact?

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Some researchers hypothesize that mapping skills and “map-like models” are and have been present in all human cultures, across time and the globe.<sup>3</sup> Mapping, then, links my experiences of the world, in some small way, with human history. Perhaps that is one reason I

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2. Gadsden City Commission, *A Pictorial Map of Gadsden, Alabama*.

3. Blaut et al., “Mapping as Cultural and Cognitive Universal,” 166.

enjoy looking at maps—I subconsciously recognize and relate to other people’s attempts to make meaning out of space and time. But those attempts manifest themselves in great variety, and not necessarily in visual maps. Space and time are understood, represented, and used according to individual and cultural worldviews. The knowledge gleaned from mapping can be represented, for instance, as scientific or provable information, which Western cultures typically prefer, and/or it can be interpreted more holistically as knowledge based on cultural “know-how” and values, which actually direct people’s actions, rituals, and ideas *in* life, not necessarily inquiries *about* life.<sup>4</sup> In maps, then, glimmer real and sometimes radical epistemological differences emanating from different sets of values.

Although “map-like models” may have been used early on the human timeline, Dennis Wood and John Krygier argue that maps likely were not produced in prehistoric times, and, if they were, they probably served different functions than they do in the modern world. In their article “Maps,” written for the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, they claim that, although ancient civilizations had the requisite knowledge and skills, maps were not abundantly produced and used until the rise of the modern nation-state. Before then, oral mapping and abstract schematic diagrams accomplished certain modern functions of maps, like way-finding. Maps themselves served other functions.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, Evelyn Edson says in *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* that the typical European medieval map was “intended as an interpretation,

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4. Dods, “Knowing Ways/Ways of Knowing,” 547-48.

5. Wood and Krygier, “Maps,” 423.

not a copy of physical reality.”<sup>6</sup> Having seen a few early medieval tripartite maps, fittingly referred to as “T-O” maps, I can see how that could be true. Medieval maps are commonly divided into four dominant categories, only one of which is more representational. The goals of the other three categories do not include mimesis or navigation; rather, they combine history, genealogy, cosmology, art, and poetry to illustrate a way-finding simultaneously physical and spiritual.

The tripartite maps most obviously interpret the world according to prevailing understandings and structures of medieval worldviews, which esteemed classification and both biblical and Classical authorities. They sought unity between the biblical past, the intermediary Classical traditions and knowledge, and the mapmakers’ present, in terms of geography and society.<sup>7</sup> In them, a dark oceanic “T” divides the white spaces of the three known continents within the “O”: Asia looms in the top half; Europe and Africa each possess one lower quarter. Eden or Jerusalem may be represented on the Asian continent in earlier maps; Eden is represented as an island in some later ones. Symbols, a few words, or a block of text may fill each third of the T-O map. In earlier ones, that text is likely to be a genealogy of Noah; each continent was assigned to the descendants of one of his sons. In other maps, lists of cities, both Biblical and contemporary, may fill the sections; in later maps, the cities were represented visually, as well. These maps narrate the “logical inseparability of history and geography”<sup>8</sup> by interpreting medieval society as the latest link on a chain extending back to creation, forged by God within concrete historical time.

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6. Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 145.

7. *Ibid.*, 52-53.

8. Woodward, “Reality, Symbolism, Time, and Space,” 519.

The T-O maps typically accompanied texts, which explained the sequences of events depicted or listed in the maps.<sup>9</sup> But the maps themselves represent time synchronically. Various periods of human history populate a place simultaneously; the viewer witnesses a section cut through the place's history as if it were canyon wall. Time here is not a vector, nor is it a then-now/cause-effect paradigm. Beginnings follow no ends. Growth, not change, accrues in the synchronic pictures: ancient genealogies beget older cultures beget contemporary cultures, so contemporary events and people belong where they are, when they are, due to what has come before them (and, ultimately, because God planned it that way). Time is not a thing to race or to beat; not a thing to dread or to pray to end. No fear of misusing it. It flows upward, geyser-like, shuttling past into present and present into future—nothing ends beneath its wake.

Such a sense of time suggests to me a strong sense of belonging in the world, despite (because of?) its fallen state. In the landscape architecture program, we were taught the value of “place-based” designs, which aim to connect members of the human community, the natural environment, local cultures, and local histories. The design maps lack the spiritual and cosmic elements, but the connections they espouse are surely replete with spirit when they are strong, for they cultivate in individuals a deep sense of reciprocal belonging—they belong to the place and the place belongs to them.

The more artistic, poetic medieval maps (as judged by my modern sense of both qualifying terms) stretch the unity between space and time from the inner workings of the human body, to the natural elements, to the highest heavens. Isidore of Seville created such a series of maps in *De natura rerum* (*The Nature of Things*), a book about physics. The most complex of his circular maps, the *Year-World-Man* map, depicts five concentric rings encasing a T-O map of

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9. Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 24, 164.

the world. The rings line up the four seasons, cardinal directions, physical qualities (heat, cold, humidity, and dryness), elements (fire, water, earth, wind), and humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood).<sup>10</sup> Isidore, according to Edson, had described man as “a world in miniature, and this [map] shows the relationship” between time, space, and the body—“the coordinates of human existence.”<sup>11</sup>

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When I hike, I examine and remember tree bark, wild flowers, rocks, bird nests. I orient myself by these things and lose a larger sense of direction. Trail maps for the Great Smoky and Cumberland Mountains stay in my backpack so that I am never without them on a spontaneous trip. When I do anything else in life, it is the same way. I am so detail-oriented that I easily forget the big picture. Details get blown up like massive illuminated posters of a pea flower or a furled fern frond, except never so wondrous or pleasant. More like a blow-up of a little black ant now visibly armed with pinching jaws. To limit the over-whelming details, I compartmentalize my sense of self. I box up each facet until the proper occasion calls for it. I instate boundaries according to prevailing tastes between the cardinal points of existence (religion, politics, community, personal). Emotions I try to keep in storage, to no avail. Financial habits go there, places I’ve lived over there. These boundaries allow only selected parts of me to be available at a time to know and be known.

Isidore’s elements do not intersect, but ripple outward in harmonious liquid response to disturbance. My elements, on the other hand, I confine so rigidly they are apt to stagnate if I do not frequently stir them up with use. His T-O maps diagram a concept I want to apply; how do I

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10. Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 42-43.

11. *Ibid.*, 44.

draft a personal version? For I must map out my weeks, months, years, sometimes even days, to stay headed in the best overall direction. Otherwise, while I bustle endlessly forward on the outside, I will be wandering in circles, lost and waiting to be found on the inside. Personal development finds a shady trail and impatiently waits. Perhaps the sense of unity I see in Isidore's maps has been carried forward to me through design maps, with all their systems. I need the base plan for my life, each of the overlays—social, emotional, spiritual, physical, intellectual—layered into a snapshot of their interaction, if I am to wisely develop any part of myself.

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Increasingly more accurate navigational and geographical maps developed alongside the interpretive T-O maps. The former aided the development of nation-states, and they later served as a tool of conquest for empires. Maps and nations rose hand-in-hand, Wood and Krygier say, particularly around the global north, from Mesoamerica, to Europe, to Asia. Increasingly complex, impersonal governing and cultural structures used increasingly more accurate maps to define and shape their own formless chaos.<sup>12</sup>

Comparison between the shapes of the T-O maps and the later geographical and political maps suggest changing epistemologies that are yet both based on order and connections. Circles suggest equality and unity. Time and space, Earth and cosmos, current and past generations swell out from one point of origin. Theological and social hierarchies and categories function harmoniously, in theory. In contrast, rectangular maps like *Islandia* and more accurate modern projections frame space with firm borders and sharp corners; the nation-state or empire could instate order and connections according to its own perspective. Simultaneously, the maps

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12. Wood and Krygier, "Maps," 428.

remove any frame from time. (Exceptions are not as likely to be commonly mass-produced as varieties like political, topographic, or way-finding maps.) They present newly instated boundaries and shapes as if they were as timeless as God, existing from everlasting to everlasting. They naturalize what, in fact, was contrived and contingent. And they keep projecting that promise, unless or until the borders or shapes change, but they ignore the time change.

I knew that maps have long been used for political purposes, but my fascination with them alarmed me after a brief research excursion into postcolonial theories of time and space, in which maps are consistently vilified. Those theories envision European maps, in particular, as both products of the imperialist worldview and tools to oppose and oppress indigenous conceptions of time and space. Like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, I delighted in maps as a child. What had I unknowingly imbibed from the remains of imperial/empirical representations of space?

Paul Smethurst suggests in *The Postmodern Chronotope* that maps not only prohibit “play within intertwined histories and geographies,”<sup>13</sup> but also that the “straight lines and directions of Europeans’ historical time and cartographic space” remove a sense of living mystery from the land.<sup>14</sup> Landscapes (land plus its inhabitants) are communities of conversing voices, languages, lives, and stories. Maps, in the typical Western sense, speak one language at a time in “the only approach to ‘reading’ [the landscape] that [yields] stable, replicable findings.”<sup>15</sup>

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13. Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope*, 266.

14. *Ibid.*, 260.

15. Lawson, “Chronotope, Story, and Historical Geography,” 391.



Monoglot maps, like topographic and Township/Range maps, reject imagination and story for stability (although my imagination still finds wonders in them, especially if I am separated from their original context by time). One voice states its claim in those maps: this terrain is steep, this terrain is suitable; this square mile is so many miles from this meridian. Even if such a map is not actually political, it is yet a statement of appropriation and power. Man-made standards of measurements—feet, square miles, acres, meridians—can be more important than the land being measured. Lawson describes geography as “knowing things spatially”;<sup>16</sup> these types of maps, then, contribute to knowledge about spatial relationships, but not about spaces. The measurements, translated onto a map, define properties but not the mysteries of natural systems.

Maps have been my way of gaining logical foreknowledge of places and spaces—like the way data is mapped out for topography or precipitation rates or temperatures. Needing to know has yielded knowledge, not knowing—a product, not an action. Of course, I have always joined that knowledge with first-hand experience and observation, but I start with the impersonal and move to the personal. I have always imagined myself as part of the landscape and vice versa, but my imagination may have, in fact, obscured the reality of how shallow my reciprocity actually is. If the two—imagination and reality—are less closely joined in my life than I realized, how do I remedy that?

“Thus all things were kindred and brought together by the same Great Mystery,” Luther Standing Bear writes in “Nature.”<sup>17</sup> Mystery does not yield data; instead, it yields an ethical imagination. Over time, personal and cultural experiences grate and gnash against each other,

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16. *Ibid.*, 392.

17. Standing Bear, “Nature,” 39.

grate and gnash against the land; over more time, this pearl of perception is added to cultural values and know-how. N. Scott Momaday names this concept in “A First American Views His Land,” in which he describes it primarily in terms of millennia-long adaptation of a culture or race to a land.<sup>18</sup> As child to a culture with no such imagination (or sense of time), I emphasize the personal possibilities. An ethical imagination allows a person to conceive of kinship (which is not so obvious in mainstream American culture) between himself and the landscape. Rather than projecting nonexistent creatures, lands, or relationships into perceptions of reality and thus separating a person from actual landscapes, an ethical imagination connects spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional aspects of life into one “most fundamental experience,”<sup>19</sup> similarly to the way in which Isidore’s maps weave together human, world, and cosmos. However, this ethical imagination does not imply that all of those aspects of life will sync with one another. But without the context of the others, one aspect cannot be wholly and wholesomely known, appreciated, or cultivated.

Ethical imagination opposes compartmentalization, within oneself (as I am wont to do), communities, and cultural worldviews. A collection of data maps, each highlighting some different type of information depending on exactly the sort needed at the moment, exemplifies compartmentalization. Think of a collection of data maps for the United States: one each for population density, political affiliation, religious affiliation, average temperatures, geology, topology, and so on. The landscape becomes an anonymous data set.

A direct opposite of the static, stable modern map, according to Itala Vivan, is the indigenous African “aesthetics of nomination,” a way of relating cultural history to the land

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18. Momaday, “A First American Views His Land,” 18.

19. *Ibid.*, 18.

through the spoken (and now written) word.<sup>20</sup> Vivan shares poems—products of imagination—to illustrate this aesthetic. “The image of an Africa ‘belonging’ to the African is rooted,” she says, “in the African’s peculiar awareness of his/her territory and in the way such awareness is articulated in words,” that articulation being a mark of ownership through which “the land is embodied metaphysically in the identity of the individual human being.”<sup>21</sup> An invigorating idea—“know thyself” explodes outward to include knowing the land and the history it shares with one’s ancestors. This system “is a dynamic geography, reflecting the historical condition and preventing the possibility of a fixed and definite map.”<sup>22</sup> The dynamic oral map allows for movement and time passage; it is an organic and personal process, to which each generation and each individual adds.<sup>23</sup>

To try to fathom this metaphysical African geography, I try to see it. Vivan’s description of “land...embodied metaphysically” reminds me of two maps much closer to home: the two included in the back of *Jayber Crow*, my favorite of Wendell Berry’s novels about citizens of Port William, Kentucky. The first map pictures the area around the fictional town of Port William. It is populated by family homes, barns, special features of the landscape, creeks, schools and churches, and the Ohio River. Each place is identified by family name or its local designation. A family tree overlies the second map. It inscribes onto the land interrelated

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20. Vivan, “Geography, Literature, and the African Territory,” 58.

21. *Ibid.*, 57.

22. *Ibid.*, 65.

23. *Ibid.*, 63.

genealogies of several families who lived in Port William for five, six, and seven generations.<sup>24</sup>

Family and community histories root and unfurl in place; they cannot live elsewhere.

These maps are the best I can envision Vivan's concept, for they, like the 1939 map of Gadsden, are chiefly oriented by local realities of land, community, and stories, rather than by contrived measurements. They are oriented by factors outside, yet inclusive of, the individual. However, the superimposed genealogy hints at a double meaning which is also explored in the novel: While the land has influenced human identity and history, humans have literally inscribed themselves on the land. We have transformed it into our own representations.

The African oral maps, like the T-O maps, represent places within a sense of temporal dimensions that extend much deeper than my own three-generation family paradigm. For those three generations of my family living in one place, the land acts as a central reference point by which to make meaning of time and space, by which to understand spiritual truth and physical needs. But we tend not to examine that fact. We take the land for granted as personal property—as beloved setting, which lacks agency. Thus, we oscillate between those two types of inscription illustrated in *Jayber Crow*. Community connections, however, exist only insofar as the land ties us to Southern rural culture.

I would give no thought to my immediate desire to visualize the “aesthetic of nomination”—I am a visual learner—except that Vivan emphasizes the static European map's basis in vision, rather than the word.<sup>25</sup> Russell West-Pavlov develops the vision/word antithesis when he describes the imperial worldview of former colonial powers. In such an outlook, space

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24. Berry, *Jayber Crow*, n.p.

25. Vivan, “Geography, Literature, and the African Territory,” 58.

is panoramic—for a panorama is composed by a viewer stationed high up, in a position of power, outside the scene. The viewer—a pair of eyes, no body—is the reference point by which meaning is wrought from space and time.<sup>26</sup> I envision the scene from college: I’m sitting on the chair, looking down at maps of the bowels of the earth, while Jimmy sits in the middle of them. A panorama from a mountain peak is as close as a human can naturally get to the view of a large-scale map; from that perspective, details are invisible and landforms are evident. There is no knowledge of particular spaces or places, but one can determine how best to use the land as he sees it laid out before him. West-Pavlov sets the panorama in contrast to Australian Aboriginal oral mapping, which, he argues, exemplifies a worldview of reciprocity between mankind and nature. The Aborigines conceptualize themselves as part of their surroundings, and vice versa. The land’s history is their history, and that history resides in stories and songs.<sup>27</sup> The land is the reference point by which they create meaning. They possess an ethical imagination.

How do I morph my still-extant need to know the names and locations of things into an “aesthetics of nomination” that cultivates an ethical imagination, that perhaps allows me to better change with time and space, rather than, like a map, projecting a future and sticking to a never-present goal for reality?—that allows me to endeavor to know things, not to know about them—to set aside the cultural dichotomies that Robinson does in Michel Tournier’s *Friday* but also to climb down from the scenic overlook for a unified sense of self that allows me not to be an overlay on my place or on my community, but to live in it, with them.

In *Friday*, Smethurst says, Robinson and Friday can live harmoniously as long as all the European dichotomies like master/slave and man/nature are suspended in a sort of holiday time

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26. West-Pavlov, *Spaces of Fiction/Fictions of Space*, 126-27.

27. *Ibid.*, 200-201.

breaking up the normal schedule. “The only problem,” he says, “with this back-to-nature...sentiment is that it only occurs within his subjective perspective, which now encompasses the identity of the island and Friday.” The imperial vision of a panorama is camouflaged to look green; Robinson still places himself at its center, as the viewer. “The timelessness and unity of space perceived by Robinson,” Smethurst continues, “are derived from his subjective mapping of the island, so the old European mindset still has its imperial way....”<sup>28</sup>

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Maps are crucial for architects, landscape architects, engineers, urban planners, conservation biologists—careers concerned with stitching together individuals, communities, and nature. I may find in their maps an attempt at unity akin to that in T-O maps; however, the very centrality of maps to those careers’ goals reminds me that those goals are expressions of particular worldviews. I had accepted the details of goals like sustainability and community in the way I accept satellite images, as nearly unmediated products of reality. They do descend from worldviews that used maps for knowledge as power to instate contrived boundaries and dichotomies in visions of reality cleft from imagination. I am discovering that those goals and worldviews do not necessarily represent all people, cultures, or places.

Even in our green, sustainable, smart initiatives, mapped out in dozens, perhaps scores of overlays, we cannot take into account all the voices of the landscape—the land itself, the flora and fauna and natural systems, human voices who tell of poverty and riches, stasis and movement. Often, then, even those initiatives are narrated by one voice, which tends to ignore long-standing Western cultural dichotomies (city/country, human/nature, “other” races/white) rather than work through them. Efforts at urban renewal, for instance, have been criticized for

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28. Smethurst, *The Postmodern Chronotope*, 239.

displacing minorities and lower socio-economic classes through gentrification. Green initiatives, some of which are popularly used in urban renewal projects, become trends identified with middle and upper classes, something to be desired as status-markers. Even urban agriculture, a valuable effort to reconnect inner city populations with nature and, specifically, with healthy food, is becoming more closely associated with expensive, isolated, planned communities that can even hire farmers to work their gardens, as is advertised by a recent development in Montgomery, Alabama. In an article about the award-winning community Serenbe, in Chattahoochee Hills, GA, the author points out the connection between the national popularization of local food and the development of agriculture into an amenity. Agriculture, it seems from this article and perusing Serenbe's website, can now take golf's role in new developments. Ag-centered communities "[offer] the rural appeal of farm living without the farm hassle," adding vistas, volunteer opportunities, healthy food, and increased property values.<sup>29</sup> Agrarianism is taking root in suburbs and cities, but diverse inner-city voices are losing volume in the planning. Rural values, ideas, and voices, likewise, remain in rural areas; the actions and scenery only are being appropriated.

Serenbe is a ground-breaking example of sustainable and progressive planning and design in the South, and it represents environmental principles that I enthusiastically support. I try to envision the data, steps, and overlays that eventually led to the site maps now posted on Serenbe's website, which particularly emphasizes the community's goal (from planning phases to the present) to create harmony between individuals, communities, and land. I recognize tension in the mapped unity of (sub)urban agriculture (and thus realize that not all voices are represented in that unity) because I straddle the two lifestyles being joined. My own ideas are integrally

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29. Kimble, "Serenbe, Chattahoochee Hills, Georgia."

entwined with cultural dichotomies; I separate agricultural and (sub)urban experiences because that antithesis has shaped me from a young age. I have watched rural places and values scraped away by bulldozers and sliced by new roads. When I visit my hometown, my friends point out to me in disgust the most recent farmland to be sold and subdivided for “city people,” big houses, and lawns (as opposed to yards, which turn brown in summer and winter). We share a few minutes of mourning for the continuing erosion of rural values and identity. Small, city-oriented organic farms who sell to high-end restaurants are not viewed as a renewal of agriculture; they represent a different set of values than those we are losing. They are considered yuppie and are, to varying degrees, scorned.

Much as I laud sustainability and organic practices, the popular focus I see on those types of farms feels like a veil drawn over rural loss. Over the past few years, I have read a few articles about land planning and agriculture-centered communities that do emphasize rural land preservation, but they fail to mention rural lifestyles and values. The title of one *New York Times* article from 2009 bluntly states where its interests lie: “Organic Farms as Subdivision Amenities.”<sup>30</sup> The tagline from one *Wall Street Journal* article identifies farm-centered communities as “the hot trend in suburbs.”<sup>31</sup> Many people I know talk about sustainability and environmental initiatives in the same way these articles do: as trends, with a set of buzz words, from the urban or suburban perspective, and typically related to economics, health, or political agendas.

Such mindsets share a trait with modern mainstream maps: they naturalize instated political or cultural boundaries. Trends are naturalized while they are fashionable. Trends

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30. Appelbaum, “Organic Farms as Subdivision Amenities.”

31. Simon, “An Apple Tree Grows in Suburbia.”



change surface behaviors, but they are not integrated into people's identities. Only the trait of trendiness is. The reasoning with which trend-setting initiatives like urban agriculture are put into action pertains to improving human and environmental health, but that reasoning shares at least one characteristic with the very conditions and circumstances that the initiatives aim to change: it encourages dichotomies. In particular, we still create boundaries between land uses (although urban agriculture changing that), between races and socioeconomic classes and generations, and between humans and Earth. There are still conceptions of a solely political "environmentalism," an apolitical, recreational "outdoorsy," and a religious (and acceptable for conservatives) "respect for nature." Aspects of relationships between people (including service-based and career-built relations) are delineated in similar categories. The hybrid discourses of culture(s) could potentially be reconnected to each other and to place, if trendy images and dichotomies were exchanged for authentic personal connection and ethical imagination.

But, could environmental trends be an attempt at connection? They signify that environmental education is increasing, although many people may not learn a relationship between recycling or voting for new building codes and their personal lives. Researcher J. Dwight Hines, in an ethnographic study of "postindustrial gentrification" in rural Montana, decided that one of his participants was not, in fact, mindlessly jumping from trend to trend in outdoor recreation (in this case, moving from urban California to rural Montana for snow skiing and mountain biking), but that he was actually attempting, via development as a skier and a mountain biker, to know an authentic personal connection with nature, community, and history. He was attempting to define his own identity by "pursuit of progress" in outdoor experiences.

Another of Hines's participants found authenticity in the role of responsible, active citizen.<sup>32</sup> Such a role could include green initiatives like recycling, conserving water, or shopping at the farmers' market. For some people, then, environmental trends may serve as new paths mapped out to take a person closer to his or her idea of "authentic experience." Interestingly, Hines refers to such people "appropriating" and "collecting" experiences in a tourist-like manner, even when they reside where the experiences are to be found. Maps, too, appropriate real spaces, landforms, and narratives, and translate them into visual yet narrative representations. Hines says that an important part of defining identity is then being able to narrate one's life by telling about those collected experiences.<sup>33</sup>

A person's appropriation of places (like farms, or inner cities), actions, or values in the recreational, touristic manner Hines cites in the phenomenon of rural gentrification is in fact an act of imagination. A local radio commercial croons the praises of luxury rental cabins in the Smoky Mountains, to which you can escape for a week or a weekend. People can visit such places, have fun, explore and discover, then go home; they can live out their imagination and day-dreams. Perhaps imagination and dreams are not suppressed or ignored in modern Western mindsets as I thought, but rather earmarked for certain times and places.

But that kind of imagination reminds me again of the explorers and sailors who surely gazed in curiosity and ambition at maps like *Islandia*. It is an imagination of consumption—re-directed from physical goods to experiences and "authenticity," but consumption nonetheless. It separates the consumer from the essence of an experience to which he is not native. It is separate from ethical imagination that, for the sake of wholeness, seeks connections in which cultural

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32. Hines, "In Pursuit of Experience," 299.

33. *Ibid.*, 295-96.

know-how and values are preserved, stories are told, voices are heard, and experience is a matter not of appropriation but integration.

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On my bedroom wall hangs the last design map I made in the landscape architecture program. It depicts my redesigned commercial center of Russell Street in Starkville, Mississippi. That project called for a master plan—a total reorganization of the street—and a detailed map of one or two blocks. I spent three months immersed in this design, from the initial overlays to a literal “commercial park” featuring gardens, plazas, and biotic stormwater systems. This commercial block anchored a mixed use district in the master plan. The map is hand-drawn and rendered partially by hand, partially by Photoshop. Jasmine, pink, and cool gray dominate the map and pull together the multi-colored trinkets and postcards arranged on the bookshelf beneath.

Some of my friends question the map’s presence. “You decided not to be a landscape architect; why keep a reminder of what’s in the past?” they ask.

“But look what I accomplished!” I tell them. “That is what I want to remember.”

The map represents me as much as it does Russell Street. It maps all occasions in which I have gazed at it: obsessing over finding God’s will; sleep-deprived and doubting I will ever finish what I started (including the map itself); awed at the world’s complexity and my own ignorance; quietly satisfied with life. In each of those occasions, my outlook on the world differed slightly. Time chased me or we ran a clean team race; I sought information or truth; my energy channeled into action or into abiding.

A lovely thing about this map: it records a continuing present that joins my past with hopes for the future. And the primary hope it embodies? That all the connections I attempted to make in the map, I will also attempt in life. Attempt, therefore, to know place, time, and people by an ethical imagination. To search for unity, not of suppression or erosion, but of dialogue between elements. And thus attempt to know myself.

## THE WELL HOUSE

For 25 years now, I've been told the well house is over 100 years old. It's been leaning at a worrisome angle for the last five or six, since the giant American elm growing flat against it finally pushed apart several long-splintered wall-boards, and the writhing, all-consuming wisteria vine can no longer hold it upright. Two boards on the back wall fell off completely. My father nailed them back, only to have those below shaken loose. I suggested threading the well house together with rope, but, as he pointed out, the wisteria had already failed in a similar endeavor.

I try to convince my grandmother, an artist, to paint the well house before it falls over. "My painting abilities," she replies, "have beaten the well house to it." We instead resolve once more that we'll come up with some way to save it. "And it needs to be saved," she says. "You know that it's over a hundred years old..."

The well house is the oldest standing object on my family's homeplace, with the possible exception of a few oaks and cedars. It knows the story of this lay of land better than anyone or anything else except the rocks, the creek, and the soil. The old barn, its slightly younger cousin, was engulfed and finally felled by the wood line (with some help from my father, in need of boards) when I was ten. The next oldest structure, hardly noticeable in passing, fares almost as poorly: A few rusty strands of barbwire mark the east edge of a forebear's piglot. My grandfather built our house in the 1950's over the "little white house" that had sheltered at least three previous families. Located just beside and slightly in front of the well house, that earlier façade may have been built over an earlier structure, fraternal twin of the well house.

The homeplace is 20 acres of mixed pine-oak-hickory woods at the base of Shinbone Ridge in Turkey Town, just outside of Gadsden, Alabama, in the Coosa River watershed. The

current shape of the property, which incorporates portions of four township sections, evolved in the 1940s and '50s, when my grandfather's aunt and uncle moved there from Lookout Mountain, and six years later, my grandparents moved there in 1952. In the house they built, they raised my mother and her brothers; my parents moved there in 1979 to start their own family.

I love my land—"my" as I would call a lover or best friend—but I lamented the state of my woods for years. A best friend the woods were, yet one that I feared no one else would understand or find special. I tended to overlook the land's lovely yet too-obvious topography to yearn for old-growth, a perennial creek, and more than the typical stock of tree species. When I talked of going out in the woods, outdoorsy friends inquired if they could hike on the property. I had to explain to them that traversing my woods is a walk, not a hike. And when ecologically-minded friends inquired into the state of my woods, I embarrassedly told them that they are less than 60 years old, they were pulp-wooded a decade ago, and they are crisscrossed with dirt bike trails and Chinese privet, with a small hunting plot at the back.

I started Mississippi State's landscape architecture program with that mindset. The professors spoke in terms of systems, in terms of how everything we designed for human use fit into contours of the land. Before we began a design, we mapped onto trace paper the topography, waterways, and existing vegetation of a site, as well as existing roads, buildings, and land uses. We stacked the transparent overlays: small systems fit into larger ones fit into larger ones. A landscape, then, is an integral synthesis between human and nature, even between human and wild. Land is not a setting; humans are not an unnatural overlay. When I moved back home for a few months after my year at State, my land whispered stories to me that I had never heard before. Stories not only of running water, aging trees, sheltered frogs and birds, but

of drinking water, re-growing trees, and sheltered people and livestock. Of violence, of death and birth, of family solidarity. Stories of how people before me had lived on, against, and with the same ground, rocks, watershed, and weather.

Those stories are difficult to access in any other form, as story-tellers move and die, and records are locked up or burned. And, on outlying farms, even if prosperous, photographs and records from 100-plus years ago are scarce outside now diasporic families. The well house shares tales (or points to other tale-bearers who speak) of livelihoods on the land, from farming, to farming and gardening with factory work, to work with gardening and recreation on the side. At least five generations of three different families have lived beside it, using it in various capacities that reflect how they lived on the land.

“Alas! How little does the memory of these human inhabitants enhance the beauty of the landscape!” Thoreau cries after sketching vignettes of his predecessors near Walden Pond.<sup>1</sup> No, knowing about former inhabitants of my homeplace does not enhance its beauty. Knowing does somehow enhance my understanding of my own relationship to it, though. It ties my story to theirs, ours to the land, and the land to the region. It gives me a glimpse into the land’s recent memory.

Wendell Berry points out in “An Native Hill” that Americans are still trying to figure out how to live in place<sup>2</sup>—we have not lived here long enough, like the Cherokees of the Southeast did before us, to learn the slow, slow local rhythms. Rapid changes in Southern society over the last century have distanced many of us from the land, disrupted the transmission of what our predecessors had learned, and buried their shortcomings by naturalizing them. “I knew the men

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1. Thoreau, *Walden*, 210.

2. Berry, “A Native Hill,” 611.

who took their lives from such fields as these,” Berry says, “and their lives to a considerable extent made my life what it is. In what came to me from them there was both wealth and poverty, and I have been a long time discovering which was which.”<sup>3</sup> Even lacking many details about my predecessors, contemplating their lives—hardships, inconveniences, balances of work and play, of clearings and growth—allows me to contemplate a little more deeply how to live in place, on this particular lay of land.

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The well house and the house face a U.S. highway laid upon the track of a coach line, which was laid upon a trail, connecting the area to Rome, Georgia. While the house is parallel to the road, the well house is perpendicular to it. Four cedar trunks anchor the corners of the structure; two more support the front edge of the corrugated tin roof, six feet past the doorway. It has always seemed larger to me, but the enclosed shed is only eight feet wide by ten feet long. Rough horizontal boards cascade down its sides. Few share the same grain, width, or outline. The covered front wall retains a partial coat of whitewash; the other three sides sport a healthy coat of flat pale lichen, some patches the color of sea foam, others chartreuse. Lichen also dots the back half of the roof, which is perpetually shaded by a cluster of elm, mulberry, and black walnut trees.

The awning protects the well. At some point, the well was enshrouded by a lidded cement cube. Peering down it, I cannot imagine why someone would disguise such craftsmanship with such an ugly medium. Stacked rocks extend 30 to 40 feet down, past the soil and debris which fill the void at about 20 feet. No odor, coolness, or mustiness escapes when the lid is removed, but a flashlight’s beam makes visible wispy ghosts rising from the depths.

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3. Berry, “A Native Hill,” 621.



Diamond condensation encrusts some of the rocks. Did the rocks formerly lie hidden in the woods? Some of them match the flat sandstone rocks still occasionally unearthed at the back of the property. But there are so many rocks in this shaft; it is hard to imagine them back in the ground at the back, where, now, there are the least surface rocks in all the property.

Behind the well, one vertical, half-hung board signifies the well house door. Step up over the threshold (now uneven because of surfacing elm roots), and you enter dark, dry, stuffy coolness, even in August. Your eyes must adjust before stepping further inside, or you run the risk of tripping over a wisteria vine or a gardening utensil. Gaps in the wall boards glow softly. A high shelf runs down the right wall, a low one on the left. The rafters, low despite the high peak of the roof, are lined with unbreakable bungee-cord cobwebs and broad strips of tin nailed to the bottoms. My mother covered the spaced-board-and-dirt floor with a giant canvas tent when I was young to prevent skinned knees and snakebites. She sprinkled moth balls under it each summer.

We don't know much about the well house's origin. Land grants in the respective four sections date from the 1840's (the beginnings of the city of Gadsden, five miles southwest) and the 1880's. The earliest land grant recorded for any part of the current property boundaries dates to 1843, under the name Lawrence Brock. The area on which the well house stands was first deeded by the United States to Peter Lenehan in 1844. The grant records are blank for the other largest section of the property until 1893, when surveyors' plats mark the Bramlett name over large areas of the local map. The known history of people on this land begins fuzzily with this family, who may have built the well house and dug the well which it protects, 119 years ago.

The well itself may have been built before its house, but the land had been property for about half a century by the time the Bramletts may have built the latter.

The history of the land as property began with violence, culminating in 1838, when the Cherokees were forced out of the South and the federal government prepared to officially grant tribal lands to settlers. Not long before Brock and Lenehan's advent, the land lay near the center of Turkey Town, capital of the Cherokee Nation in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first of the 19<sup>th</sup> under Chief Little Turkey and his successors Black Fox and Pathkiller, before the capital was moved to north Georgia, and from there, to Oklahoma, under the leadership of John Ross, who was born in Turkey Town. Arrowheads, knives, scrapers, and half-worked flints litter the farther reaches of the property. Assuming present-day streams were accessible at that time, the Cherokees had for their needs an ephemeral creek welling with filtered mountain run-off, a perennial stream at its end, and the clear, cool, riffing waters of now-named Turkey Town Creek a mile and a half northeast. They had no need, it would seem, for a well. The Cherokees farmed and raised livestock, so areas of the land may have been cleared originally by them, not by white settlers. I envision the wholesale clearing and conversion of the countryside to agricultural land to have happened, abruptly, perhaps not without care, soon after the Cherokees' departure.

The well could have been built before the Civil War, before musket balls and slag joined the arrowheads during General Forrest's defense of the Coosa River from then-colonel Abel Streight, or when Joseph Wheeler halted the Union's Turkey Town Valley Expedition. Another well, with a small roof over it, stands a mile and a half towards Gadsden, now joined by one granite monument to mark both a skirmish site and sacred Cherokee land. If our well had been built that early, I imagine the owner would be a small farmer; the nearest plantations were five

and seven miles northeast. However, more likely, the well could have been built after the Civil War, after the incorporation of Etowah County in 1866, during the growth of Gadsden's iron and shipping industries in the last quarter of the century.

Death, birth, and marriage within one family shaped the surface features of the land on which the well house stands for at least half a century. Two members of the Bramlett family came into possession of the land on which the well is built as late as 1893, and held it into the 1940's. Elias A. and Leo W. (father and son if "Leo" is "Lafayette Washington," records of whom I found through *Ancestry.com*), owned adjacent properties until the former's death; "Mrs. E. A. Bramlett" then appears on the plats in 1902. Within a few years, Leo owned all the family land.<sup>4</sup>

I have no way of knowing what these men looked like, nor do I know much about their lives besides a few dates, property coordinates, and clues gleaned from the land itself. I grew up familiar with the name Bramlett—we still call the property beside ours "the old Bramlett land." The name never belonged to faces in my imagination, but to tall, wiry bodies modeled after my father's grandfather, himself a farmer and the son of a sharecropper. I imagined the Bramlett men were as severe as him, too. The wives had no faces and no names but their husbands' (although I have since found Mrs. E. A.'s name: Ann League). The family would have lived by the sun and the seasons in full, slow time. They would have needed time to be slow: Their properties, though sizable, were probably only large enough to overwork the family and a hired

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4. All names and dates of ownership are drawn from surveyor plats available through the Office of the Secretary of State, Lands and Trademarks Division, State of Alabama, <http://arcsos.state.al.us/CGI/SOSLND00.MBR/MENU>.

hand or two. Perhaps Elias's wife had a maid with whom she cooked, cleaned, and toted water between well and house.

She may have spent many late summer and fall afternoons shelling and canning peas, or stewing tomatoes Elias and their children had picked the day before. Did she enjoy putting up food, or was it just one more duty? She would have rinsed the tomatoes in a bucket of well water, taking particular care to clean the mud-splattered fruits that had hung lowest on the vine. Then she would have boiled two big pots of water on the stove, one for the tomatoes and one for the jars. While the pots boiled, she and her granddaughters would have sat on the front porch, watching the clouds and chatting while they shelled peas. She could watch their hands deftly pop peas from purple hulls the soil had grown and her husband's hands had picked. Perhaps she was thankful for that; perhaps it never dawned on her to be thankful for that, but only for the time to sit down before preparing supper.

Elias and the other men, I imagine, would return home quiet, tired, and stern when they quit the fields in the evenings. Like older couples do, Elias and his wife may have quarreled and nagged at each other over dinner, but, perhaps, a quiet stroll in waning light to look over the livestock would have lifted both their moods—hers lifted by beauty and peace, his by pride in the results of his labor.

The pioneering American spirit, hewn from ingenuity, industry, and perseverance, displayed itself here like it did all over the Eastern U.S. The original old-growth forest had surely been felled long before the Bramletts purchased the property, and they kept the land cleared while they owned it. Judging from the property's trees, all but the biggest oaks on the creek banks, and perhaps a few cedars at the back of the property, were cleared, probably for

livestock—cows, maybe a few hogs or horses. The land here ripples out from the ridge towards the Coosa River, where cotton and crop farms are located now and, it seems likely, would have been located then. The Bramlett properties extended across the road, towards the river; they may have raised livestock on this side, and crops (cotton and vegetables for their own consumption) on the other. Too many loose rocks—not to mention anchored outcrops—fill the clay soil and dot the surface of the property for it to have been cultivated under the plow beyond the current backyard, whose soil is deep, relatively loamy, and free of rocks. The topography of the woods is quite varied; erosion resulting from clearing and livestock surely changed it, but the land appears not to have been leveled or filled in any significant way. Of course, it is difficult to tell if a particular landform is actually natural, since most of the surrounding areas that would serve as reference points were long-cultivated. I don't know what the land here should look like without human industry upon it.

The well may have served the animals during dry spells if they were barred from access to the perennial stream that crosses portions of the then-Bramlett land—if it were accessible at all one hundred years ago. It may also have served for any small gardens around the house. It did certainly serve the household. The well house itself was built as a storage shed for food and perhaps tools. Smoked meats or raw cuts in the process of being cured would have hung on thick nails and pegs that poked down through the tin-lined rafters. Canned and dried vegetables and fruits would have filled the shelves. Stacks of firewood would have remained dry and ready to use under the awning.

Beginning in force in the 1930's, the Bramlett property (under the ownership by then of T.A. Bramlett, according to the plats) was divided between heirs and new owners; familiar names

appear in the appropriate places on the surveyors' plats, and the current social fabric of Turkey Town was woven between the '30s and the late '50s. After dividing their property, the Bramletts did not move to town, as other families were leaving their farms for Gadsden's factory jobs and improved health care. They moved from the old white house to a small, meager cabin at the back of their remaining property until Mr. Bramlett died. His widow sold the land and removed their surname from the local map.

Twenty years before his death, though, in 1942, a Mrs. E.M. Collins acquired portions of Bramlett land; our property took its current shape. She kept it two years, then transferred ownership to a man who sold it in another two years to Louis and Mary Sheely, my grandfather's uncle and aunt. This is the only time that the property has ever passed hands so quickly.

Louis and Mary moved from near Noccalula Falls in 1946. The youngest of their three daughters had moved to Birmingham, Louis had just retired from the army, and their new home was miles away from the bustle of post-war Gadsden. The couple had only lived in the "little white house" a few years, however, before Louis died. Mary sold the property to my grandparents and moved to downtown Gadsden to live near her sisters. By the time my grandparents moved there, the house did not appear too shabby on the outside (as judged from a photograph taken just before my grandfather commenced re-building it). White clapboard sides; a brick-fronted, arts-and-crafts-style porch with four-by-four posts in lieu of columns. Perhaps it had been added onto previously to make it asymmetrical. My grandmother, however, swears, "It was a shack inside—you could see through the floors!"

We have one photograph of the well house from 1949, three years after the Sheelys bought it, three years before my grandparents moved there. It is bare. Without its shaggy, viney

coat (and with the view under the awning thus afforded of the backyard) the well house appears small and unremarkable. Though much straighter than it is now, the visible cedar posts all stand at a slightly different angle. The walls have not yet been white washed. The current elm has not yet sprouted, but a large one, perhaps its parent, flanks the other side of the well house. This tree, along with the dense ranks of stately elms in the front yard at that time, would all die 15 years later. The mulberry tree is a few inches at breast height. The cement cube already hides the delicate masonry of the well under a layer of ugly modernity.

Parts of the Sheelys' daily lives are recorded in the photo. Mary may have carried water for cooking and cleaning into the house in the shiny bucket that sits on top of the well, hooked onto a rope dangling from a pulley in the ceiling beam. Since the pig lot ended above the creek, Louis may have lugged water to the trough in older, rustier buckets like the one on the ground in front of the well. A pie safe, topped with bowls, cans, and pitchers, snuggles into the crevice between well and front wall. The Sheelys, like the Bramletts, used the well house as a root cellar. Mary was particularly fond of canned meat; rather than hanging smoked meats, she prepared ham to can and then stored it on the shelves. She was also fond of snuff, which she stored there.

A plow wheel leans against the wall beside the pie safe. Louis, and perhaps Mary, would have used the plow in the small garden behind the well house. They grew their vegetables in the same plot where my grandparents and parents later planted orchards, and where my brother and I planted a miniature baseball diamond.

Although not visible in the photo due to a slight crest, a small barbwired pig lot separates the yard and garden from the wood's edge. The Sheelys never had cattle, but they did own

several hogs. When my grandparents moved in, they kept only one. “What did you do with only one pig?” I asked my grandmother once. “We ate him,” she replied. “And that was the end of pig-keeping.”

The nearest corner of the old barn is just visible in the photo, safely distant from the nearest trees. The wood line, sparse and young and full of pine trees, begins about where the current one does. Judging by the photo, the visible portion of trees behind the pig lot had been allowed to grow for 20-25 years. The Bramletts, it seems, may have begun to let the woods behind the house grow back in the 1920s, about the time the property began to be carved up between heirs. The parcel of land to the side of the house opposite the well house, however, was just growing back by the time of my mother’s earliest memories. As a child, she frolicked in tall, lion-mane sagebrush and picked blackberries.

The woods were only slightly older than my grandparents, James and MaLou Smith, when they bought the property. They had lived in town the first two years of marriage, but moved to the country to raise a family. They bought the land with her inheritance; it had been set aside for education by her grandparents, who had died before she met James, fell in love, and left Blue Mountain College two years shy of a degree in art.

The first of my grandfather’s improvements to the white house was running water. He outfitted the well with a pump, located in the newly-dug basement, and he ran the pipes to bring water to the kitchen sink, the bathroom sink, and the toilet. He routed the used water to flow out of the hill on the other side of the circular driveway, where the elm-topped plateau dropped and rolled away into young pine woods. He eventually had a septic tank installed in the backyard,



but gray water from the washing machine bubbled and spouted out that pipe until my father re-routed it into a later septic tank that also services our second bathroom.

My grandfather worked three jobs most of my mother's childhood (perks from his job at the post office included rights to unclaimed mail-order plants, specifically nut trees, and the wisteria now holding up the well house). My grandmother also worked; she served as Art Specialist for the Gadsden City School System. Even with so many jobs, their family depended on a large vegetable garden hidden away in the middle of the sage field. Vegetable gardens were an important part of livelihood after families in the area moved away from farming. They grew a little bit of everything; the only common vegetable or viney fruit missing from the selection was the potato. The well house was still used for storing food and the tools necessary to grow and preserve it. Both of my grandparents canned from the garden and from friends' gifts. Icicle sweet pickles were her specialty; peach and pear preserves were his. The new basement and the well house were used interchangeably, although my grandfather's money-making schemes, like the chinchillas and the mushrooms, more often lived in the basement.

Despite the work, the family enjoyed much play. My mother, in particular, enjoyed playing in the dirt under the well house's awning. She rediscovered a buried hoard of Aunt Mary's snuff in the shed and added it to her mud pie recipe until, one day, she offered her mother a bite of pie. The pretend bite brought the concoction close enough for her mother to smell it. The snuff was missing the next time my mother gathered ingredients.

My mother's other favorite place to play was at the creek. The woods were left alone to grow as they would, disturbed only by climbing, singing, skipping children (and a little pyromania). By the time my mother played in them, the young woods were about 35 years old,

still shrubby and scrubby in many parts, starting to mature in others. More mature oaks and dogwoods—those left by the Bramletts for convenience and perhaps to shade the cattle—lined the creek and divided it into three kingdoms for the siblings. My mother was awarded the narrowest, steepest segment of creek, but she had the largest of the white and red oaks for her royal advisers.

Fire was the only disturbance to the woods' growth while my mother was a child. The well aided the fight against forest fires—very necessary help with two pyromaniac boys living there, if you could catch the fire early enough. When Frederick was about 10, he and a friend set a patch of back yard on fire; my grandmother noticed smoke wafting into the front yard, and, knowing her son, ran straight to the well. From inside the shed, she grabbed a bucket (it had remained handily nearby even after the pump was installed). She, the boys, and a neighbor who happened to stop by formed their own fire brigade. They managed to get the fire out before it reached the woods. A few years later, when her other son started a fire, they weren't so lucky. The well could not help that time. A large patch of woods burned across several properties. My mother was sent to the neighbors' house across the road; she watched smoke enshroud her home from their living room window. Firefighters, allowed to help only if houses were threatened, watched the flames' progress until it eventually burned itself out.

By the mid-seventies, the well no longer supplied water to the house. My grandfather, fearing health risks from it, had joined a co-op, which piped water in from a local community well. While I was in middle school, cases of water-borne diseases increased in the region, and the co-op switched from well water to city water, supplied from the Coosa River. I distinctly remember the switch. We traded sweet cold well water for bitter, fluorinated, chlorinated river

water. It didn't help they had to lay new pipes and disturb old ones, causing mud and rust to get into the water. After the water cleared, however, the taste did not improve.

Having no direct business with our well suited my mother, who feared I would manage to hurt myself near it or in it. The cement cube over the well, too heavy for its position, had begun sinking down before I was born. It has not made much progress, but as a small child, I was not allowed within two feet of it. I never minded; my interest lay in two other places: the mass of vines that walled in the open front third of the well house, where I could practice being a monkey only a few feet from the ground (the perfect set-up for a child afraid of heights) or curl up and read; and the inside of the well house, where I imagined one day I would unearth buried treasure.

During that time, the well house became outdoor storage for everything we just couldn't get rid of. Every spring, my mother would deep clean it, and then, for part of the spring, I could play in it. Summer there were too many snakes about, but I would return in the fall to the delightful, earthy coolness. Toys that my brother and I mostly played with outside were moved permanently into the well house; I had the higher shelf, he the lower. On my shelf sat a plaster-cast print/track kit with information about all the animals likely to make prints in my area; a set of small plastic dogs representing over 30 breeds; some older model horses who had a special farm under the pear tree; and a collection of tidbits I had found outside: rocks, pieces of glass, arrowheads, and—my prize—a class ring from 1931. I unearthed it in a puddle in the front yard. I never found the stone, but the ring has a star-burst that would have been visible through it, and which extends in a rectangle beyond the gemstone's edges. The gold ring hardly fits even my small fingers. It is plain by today's standards of class rings: only the year, in a small art-deco shield, adorns the sides. I wonder how much it cost.

It belonged to K.M.B, a daughter, I assume, of T.A. Bramlett, the owner of the property from 1927-42. I've often wondered what her life was like. She would have had attended Gaston School, a mile up the road. Did she walk to the school? Its white, two-story building burned before my grandfather graduated from it, in 1942. She would have sat at a little wood and iron desk like the one on our front porch: the table joins the back of the bench in front of it. When she finished for the day and arrived back home, would she have raced through the fields with the dogs, or taken her homework to the shade of an elm tree? Would she have (more obediently than I or my mother before me) gone inside to learn womanly trades? Did the well house shelter her imagination, or only the preserves and hams she was sent to retrieve? Perhaps, on rainy days, she cuddled with a barn cat in its dimness, listening to the rhythm on the tin roof, envisioning the garden's growth and her own.

The use of the land during my childhood certainly differed from the lingering agricultural uses during hers, as well as from the time of recuperation and growth during my mother's. My parents did not take the hands-off approach to the woods that my grandparents had. The woods were in fairly good health, though too dense with underbrush and loblolly pine, until my parents pulp-wooded to pay for a new roof. The loggers cut many more trees than just the pines they were contracted to harvest. I was devastated. My woods were in shambles for the next decade. There were, however, some benefits besides the roof. Formerly inaccessible nooks and crannies were opened to exploration. I actually became much better acquainted with the topography and the geology of the land. Quail and woodcock moved in. Wildflowers I had never seen flourished. I learned first-hand about succession.

When squid dissection in eighth-grade science proved I could not be a veterinarian, I turned my attention to plants, learning as much as possible in the woods. Several years after the grasses and wildflowers had adorned new meadows, blankets of loblolly rose up from the soil. No need for time-lapse photography; you could practically see them grow with the naked eye. Then, a few years after that, sweetgums pierced through the pine mantle. I donned the role of forest manager, so confident was I in bits and pieces of knowledge gathered from magazines, scientific journals, and, later, college ecology classes. Succession would be sped up, I thought, and my woods more quickly restored to glory. I accordingly cut and chopped the pines and sweetgums, cleared out around baby oaks and cherry trees, and, for no rational reason, loathed winged elms. I also chopped a species that I deemed exotic after being unable to identify it in my field guides; we accordingly have a dearth of tupelo saplings in certain areas of the property. Those trees and areas of the woods not destroyed by the pulp-wooders I regarded jealously. Multi-use became an increasingly unacceptable paradigm for me, unfortunately, at about the same time my family purchased an ATV and a dirt bike.

But before the clash between conservation and preservation, before the onslaught of pine trees, the delight of new wildflowers in the woods had encouraged me to learn also about domesticated flowers. The well house then offered itself in a new capacity as a gardening center. Pots, soil, tools, a few air plants, and rooting African violets lived then on my shelf. Eventually, they lived all over the well house and spilled out the door.

At some point it housed what could have been a viable money-making scheme, if I could have managed it right: Well house Nurseries. I painted a sign and hung it on the back of the well house. I would raise plants, particularly trees that we had in excess (i.e. redbuds, sweetgums,

and beautyberry), and sell them. My mother and I dug up saplings of all species and potted them in the black plastic pots left over from my recent gardening excitement. Unfortunately, the local nurseries wouldn't buy them, and no one I knew wanted them except my grandparents. As last recourse, I determined to set up on the hill by the road to peddle my wares. No one stops for trees like they do for old clothes and knick-knacks at a yard sale.

For the next decade, I wanted to work at a plant nursery—it was my dream pre-career job, but temp help at nurseries was only needed during the school year. Since selling plants never worked out for me, I devised plans for a vertical monopoly. I would raise the plants, then design gardens and install them. I eventually slipped off my forest manager role and re-imagined myself as both horticulturalist and landscape architect.

The idea behind the nursery is the closest I have come to depending on my land's resources for livelihood. It is also the closest I have come to using the well house in its traditional function as a holding place for the earth's bounty, the step between harvest and consumption, once people have altered it in some way to make it last through cold and heat. The first, maybe second, generation of people who used the well house depended directly on the land for their livelihoods. They stripped the land, grazed it, and used it—but they lived from it. The Sheelys and my grandparents supplemented their incomes with food from the land, tended by their own hands. My parents, in pulp-wooding, were even depending on the land's resources. But I—the most environmentally-conscious, non-interventionist of them all—do not directly depend on the land. (For emotional stability and mental stimulus, yes. But not physically.) Those parts of life that were slow-time processes for the Bramletts have gradually been divided into small steps (and this process itself as seen on this property is a microcosm of mainstream

American culture). I myself do not participate in the processes, although I consume the products. There are a hundred steps (maybe that many hands) between me and the land in so many of the things I have and do and use and even eat.

This past summer, my family planted a vegetable garden for the first time since my grandfather died. He and my grandmother lived next door to us (she still does), and we used to grow a garden together in their backyard. We were excited to have it again. We watered the garden from rain barrel collections (at the onset of summer) and a hose whose water was initially pumped from the river. The well pump, rusty under its thick coat of red dirt, remains in the basement, but we have no way now of drawing any water from the well.

We added a few new vegetables—onions, potatoes, and cabbage—to what had been our usual repertoire. The onions refused to increase in girth, the cabbages were devoured long before they matured, and the potatoes are still waiting to be found. Too bad my grandmother has no desire now to pickle; she could have made enough pickles to last the next 20 years. Those cucumbers outdid even the field peas.

Some of the knowledge we once had, we realized, had really only been my grandfather's. We took notes this year on what worked and what did not, to help us own such knowledge: cucumbers can take more shade but okra cannot; cantaloupes should go higher up on the slope; potatoes need a bigger mound; do not plant so many cucumbers. We could not figure out how to help the onions. Next year, we plan to expand the garden to take up most of the backyard (minus the swings and the picnic table) and also to re-learn how to can, pickle, and preserve. We aimed to do that this year; Mom rescued my great-grandmother's cookbooks and canning guides from the depths of the kitchen cabinets, and she found the old pressure cooker in my grandmother's

shed, where it had been collecting pollen, dust, and wren nests for a decade. After a trial run with pear preserves, we realized we needed a larger harvest, begun earlier in the season, to make the process worthwhile and realizable before the onset of the new school year, when neither of us would have patience to peel and chop the season's unusually tiny pears. Worse, after two cans, my burst of excitement at learning was already sputtering for air. Again, I'm at a step removed: I *want to want* to learn how to can.

The health of the woods certainly suffered in earlier decades, but the relationship between human and land was transparent and (theoretically) holistic. People were part of the landscape. They needed this particular plot of land. I need it, but not in the same way. I actually need many other plots of land, which provide the produce and meat I eat, the fibers of my clothes, the wood of my furniture. I don't depend on *my* land. Of course, people have not depended solely on this property, most likely, since the Cherokees, and even they may not have during their last years here, when manufactured goods were easily available to them. But no generation before me has had such an easy life or been less dependent on the property. The well house's contents attest to that. So does our decision to delay learning how to can.

How can I, who will inherit the property, participate in its processes? How I can integrate ecological health, the sense of play the land has fostered over the last two generations, and the ethics of land-work-provision that have been fading for a century? The answer might start with cleaning and re-using the well house, rather than simply wishing to preserve it. A few jars of pear preserves may huddle forlornly in the dust for the first year, but more preserves, maybe figs and pears, will join them the next summer, then green beans and okra, then sweet pickles (we will have learned the recipe by then), pickled okra, and stewed tomatoes, plus dried peas and



dried huckleberries from the woods, and collections of pecans, black walnuts, and hickory nuts. And then, one day, Mom and I will arrange the last batch of jars and bags, and the shelf will be full of winter's food and Christmas presents. We might have to put a few jars on the other shelf, where toys and tools mix together. I'll tidy up the dirty Matchbox cars, model horses, and lightning bug jars, scoot over the clippers, bush axe, machete, and watering can, and line up the jars of peppers in the newly opened space between.

I will have to wrestle with my own will and patience to ever realize that image, to see those fruits and vegetables through from seed to preserves and pickles. I suspect that it is in just such a struggle, though, that I can learn the most from my predecessors and leave the most for my successors. In such a struggle, I can remember I am a middle link in stories the well house whispers about the land.

## SHADOW BOX

I have a fetish for boxes. The smaller, the better. Wooden, cardboard, glass—if you can hide some little nugget of treasure inside, I will. Under my bed at my family’s home, I store a cache of cardboard boxes, nestled inside each other like Russian dolls, just in case they are ever needed. Small and oddly-shaped boxes that originally contained jewelry, perfume, porcelain figurines, a lava lamp, and Scooby-Doo socks have been recycled for a decade of Christmases and birthdays. It took an embarrassing force of will power to recently throw away two-thirds of them.

Memories—mine, at least—are like those boxes. They nest into one another: To find a particular one, I must open others up, dump their contents, open the next.... Each memory hides and stores another, and even the outer-most is stored away in a cool, dry place—at home, not at my current residence. Some part of me needed to remain stationary: I moved five times in the three years after college graduation. Hoarding the memories at home during the continual search for what I should do next (grad school—a break—a job—where?) made it easier, I thought, to cope with more changes than zip codes.

According to ancient Chinese thought, memories continually bind together new versions of a person’s self. I have been afraid to open the memories to let them, as if they could escape. At holidays, family birthday dinners, and funerals, or with a best friend (whose memories are stored more like shoes: arranged in tidy lines, all equally visible, just inside the closet door), those boxed memories are pulled out, dusted, emptied and reused. I wrap them up in shiny paper and a bow (hiding what they originally held) to present to anyone other than close family and friends.

### **Horse Box: Do-It-Yourself**

Both boxes and memories can come ready-made, or you may create them yourself. Careful, artistic constructions allow you some degree of control when circumstances hand you nothing you care to remember. At age eleven, aided by cardboard and Scotch tape, I assembled the horse box from a small 1996 calendar featuring horse photos. Three years later, it guarded my happy high school moments—movie tickets, football ticket stubs, notes from family and friends, my allowance—until, my senior year, I added to its treasures two old, brushed-silver, cardboard jewelry boxes. In one, thin black and orange satin strands, pinned through to make the ubiquitous cause-ribbon, testify to the high school’s unified grief for my classmate’s suicide. In the other box, a carved-antler wolf head nestles in cotton. My grandparents had commissioned it from an artist at our church long before Christmas, but my grandmother presented it to me by herself that year, months after my grandfather had passed away.

I don’t remember that solemn eve well. It may not have been outwardly solemn. The family gathered at my aunt and uncle’s house on the lake for the only Christmas Eve in over two generations not hosted by my grandparents. The house had actually belonged to them when I was growing up, but I had not been in it since they moved four years earlier. My aunt, a talented decorator, had completely redone the A-frame. Lace shrouded the picture window. Soft white paper veiled the oak wall panels. The antique mahogany loveseat had been re-upholstered in vibrant white. All the other furniture was new. I felt lost.

Present life transposed itself atop memories like a double-exposed negative. Suddenly, I could not envision my grandmother’s paintings on the walls, the ceramics on the mantel, or the baskets on the hearth. They were hidden beneath generic prints and wallpaper. I nervously

rubbed circles on the small silver cross weighing on my chest, and tried to stay close to my grandmother's side. She had somehow stayed the same.

That necklace was the last birthday present my grandfather lived to give me. I don't wear it much anymore, but it was basically the only piece of jewelry that I wore from my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday until I went to college. It vouched for hope during a year of storms. My junior year, I commenced that clichéd phase of “finding myself” by showing off my country-girl sensibility at the city high school. It was my best unique trait. I practiced my drawl, started saying “y'all,” and reported every outdoor weekend activity. I had just discovered myself, I thought, in an acceptable city-to-country ratio, when my grandfather died without warning—in fact, with the false assurance of a new pace-maker. A part of that self I had just found faded in my grasp over the next few months. All my calculations of identity required readjustment. By that Christmas Eve of my senior year, I thought I had myself figured out, and I thought myself sufficiently prepared for moving away to college. I would be like my grandmother, unchanging in the midst of chaos.

### **Cardboard Boxes: Packed**

Tricia and I emptied our apartment just like we had emptied our rooms in Gadsden and Flagstaff four and five years earlier. Big cardboard boxes stamped “Coolers” and “Textbooks” slowly ate our living room and shared bedroom. My artwork and vases, Tricia's photos and artifacts, our books and office supplies all were slurped up. The day before graduation, packing was complete. Those boxes we'd rescued from recycling bins now contained our lives. Only bare college-issue desks, dressers, and beds remained. We took a photo by the stacks of boxes, framed by empty taupe walls, in the same pose we always struck.

I had decided to take a year off before graduate school—a bold move for me, but spawned by indecision. For a year, I had been planning out the path my life was to take after college. I had chosen my career, landscape architecture, at about age 15. I had, however, chosen a college that offered no remotely related programs. I majored in English, and then applied to Masters of Landscape Architecture programs. I was going to attend Auburn University, and my plans were going to work out perfectly.

Then I had to pack for a service-learning trip I didn't want to go on. I had made plans ten months before, and I always followed through on plans.

The old winter clothes missed the open suitcase. Or maybe the suitcase was waiting on the bed, and I was just flinging the clothes out of the closet to an open space in which to semi-fold them. I asked my friend Paul, who was probably sitting on Tricia's bed, "What should I do? Should I go?"

"Yes, I think so," he said. That was the eighth or ninth time he had answered the question. "Want to hear the story of the prophet who second-guessed what he knew he should do and got eaten by a lion?"

I went on the trip; the trip progressed successfully; my question lingered. It nagged and poked and prodded my brain until it zeroed in on the real target: grad school. I asked Paul, but he had no answer for me. One and a half months before graduation, I simply knew I should not start it yet. I was terrified. I knew nothing but school, and I was good at it. My sense of self depended on a student ID card.

By a week after graduation, Paul had gotten married, our friend Eileen had departed for her home, 4 hours and Atlanta-traffic away, and Tricia had left the country for three months.

Within a few weeks, she would meet her future husband in a stroke of divine match-making. I was stuck in Birmingham for the summer while I negotiated a move to Arizona with her via Skype. We would move out there when she returned to the U.S. Until then, I was boxed in by my own thoughts in a house downtown. After two weepy weeks there, I determined to follow the advice I had heard so frequently: do not waste time looking back at college life. “Forward, ever!” even the *Alma Mater* chorus commanded. I mistakenly thought that, by that point in life, I was merely figuring out what to do with myself.

I had never before lived by myself, nor lived inside a city, except within safe campus walls. It was a charming little house, which had been painted inside by a former renter with fashionably artistic taste. Unfortunately, half of Birmingham’s spider population lived in the house’s colorful, 60-year-old nooks and crannies. I slept with a large can of spider poison by my bed. I emptied it in about two weeks. Spiders pounced from above; they popped up from below. Once, hot after showering, I curled up in my wing-back chair in the corner to read, wearing a bra and shorts. My shoulder tickled just a little, and I automatically moved to brush back my hair. A large spider came running to my collar bone to meet my fingers. It waved its spindly arms angrily at me and threatened to bite me. I jumped and screamed and batted at my shoulder like a person possessed. The spider probably abandoned ship willingly, but I ground him into the floor anyway.

When I wasn’t alone fighting off the hairy arachnid hordes, I was working at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, where my summer internship allowed me to get a taste of practically every aspect of business, organization, design, and maintenance at the gardens. Much to the office staff’s amusement, the petite “porcelain” blond and the burly, brown-skinned,

grizzly-faced men in brown Carharts and khaki BBG Staff shirts were wielding shovels and lily bulbs together outside the gate of the Japanese Gardens at the end of my first week on the job. The men did not speak to me the first day I had come out to the greenhouse and timidly inquired for the supervisor. They continued to swap “woman jokes” and stories from their Saturday nights until their boss (a woman) appeared and assigned me to their care. They were clearly not amused by this little joke the indoor staff had pulled on them. I could not tell if they wanted to insult me, or if they found me unworthy of the effort to curtail their normal conversation. Either way, they surely despised me as a weakling, a push-over and aspiring yuppie. I was glad to be weeding and watering annual beds by myself for the first few days. It felt right to be alone.

Then, at the end of the week, I was assigned to the group planting the lilies. I insisted on walking to the site, instead of squeezing between two hefty men on one of the BBG’s fleet of electric golf carts. Once we had assembled at the bare soil patch, someone handed me a shovel from the back of the golf cart and one lily bulb. I’m not a skillful shoveler; I have little upper-body strength and little weight to put behind the effort. Sweat poured into my eyes and plastered my bangs to my forehead, but I chipped at the impenetrable red clay until I could victoriously stick in my bulb. I looked around for the next marker at which to dig. And blushed—I was too red-faced for it to be noticeable—when all the men looked back and laughed. They had finished all 29 in the time I had finished one.

“Well, what did you expect?” I asked. “Hercules?”

“You sure know how to get out of doing labor!” the de facto supervisor chuckled, patting me roughly on the shoulder.

The other men laughed and agreed. After that, coarse language was stifled; “woman jokes” came with a wink in my direction.

But all summer (and much of the next few years) I pondered my own ineptness. I dismissed my small victory, boxed it up and forgot it. The confidence I had carefully built since age 16 began to ebb away in this new place of solitude and spiders.

A few days later, I helped the men remove a giant agave (rather, they removed it, and I rearranged its offspring). The men’s gloves provided for me repeatedly slipped down, exposing my wrists and palms to the agaves’ razors. The parent agave, tall as my torso and much wider, was dying from love. An abundance of romances had elicited an abundance of graffiti. “Jose ♥ Carla,” “Maria + Jaime,” and a dozen other names, carved in size 72 font, decorated every rosette layer. According to the men, this tradition came from the deserts of Mexico—lands without beech trees, which serve the same purpose in central Alabama.

In northern Arizona, where I did move when my internship ended, aspen trees served as the roll books of lovers. En route to Bear Overlook, Tricia and I threaded through aspens and knee-high ferns. Bear claws had scourged the powdery trunks, yet even in that pristine grove, at least one tree also bore initials. On the edges of Hart Prairie, name-scars were numerous. I brushed my fingers across the incisions, from one tree to the next, in lament for old wounds. Tricia expected her name to someday be joined with a lover’s in the growing paper. Honestly, if the guy I was in love with had found my name a fitting adornment for the aspens’ beauty, I would not have dissuaded him from carving it. But he was no Orlando, and I, no Rosalind in disguise; that was partially why I had moved to Flagstaff. I needed to know whether I was deeper than a name he called up on the phone as a backup plan.



Tricia and I seldom met other hikers in the aspen groves, but when we did, (polite Southerner that I am) I struck up conversation. If conversation progressed, I introduced myself: Meghan. If the hikers were local residents, they usually repeated it back: Māghan. Short and clipped, with a lilt at the end, not like the Southern rural pronunciation: May-gan.

Hikers were more likely to respond to my friendly overtures, but passers-by in parks or downtown regarded such behavior suspiciously. Once, a woman draped her hand protectively over her purse when I told her “good morning” outside a coffee shop. I learned, sometimes rather abruptly, what being Southern meant for me: smiling when you don’t feel like it, conversing with strangers, not overstaying your welcome, slow but exact time, egg sandwiches, “barbecue” meaning pulled pork, and, of course, sweet tea. Yet the return home was the most enlightening leg of the journey. Back in Alabama, over time, I was surprised to discover what was Southern, and what was *me*.

I returned with a heightened sense of myself, of my own complexity, as if I had completed a strenuous mental yoga session. But it was tiring to hold onto. Flagstaff had been a place of creativity and of fear; cold shadows brooded beneath the golden light of aspens. To keep hold of the good, I had to remember the vague fears that had constantly swirled around me. Fear of my future, of the nation’s future—the recession was gathering force—fear of political turmoil, war and rumors of war. Fear of my own faith and the holes therein. Fear of who I no longer was.

The fear crested during my climb up Humphrey’s Peak, the highest point in Arizona. I am terrified of heights—more accurately, I am terrified of falling from a height. I had dutifully completed every hike recommended to me; I had lagged far behind my friends so they could not

see me scooting downhill on my backside, but they had always been available to rescue me. On Humphrey's Peak, I was, for all practical purposes, alone. I hiked up through the aspens, the hemlocks and spruce, then lumbered past the ancient bristlecone pines; finally, I inched my way across the alpine tundra's talus slopes.

What was I doing? I asked myself when breathing became difficult. Several sets of young parents with kindergarteners passed me. What was I doing? I asked when I slipped in loose rock. Two white-haired women bounded up the incline like mountain goats. I kept going.

Two false peaks before the summit, I stopped. Scree sprinkled softly down the unbroken slope when I moved. No shrubs to grab for balance. Ice glazed the handholds and patches of the trail. What should I do? I did not trust myself to move without falling. I seriously considered whether I could afford to be airlifted off the mountain. Desperately I prayed. Fear of admitting failure to my Orlando back home (who had encouraged this mission) finally compelled me forward. Six hours after my sunrise start, I arrived back in the aspens. Whether I'd completed a victory or a loss, I did not know.

I did not want those fears to follow me back home. So, I packed the good and bad memories in a cardboard box with my souvenirs from Arizona: NAU paraphernalia, postcards of the Grand Canyon and Saguaro National Park, sketches of my favorite places, and an array of gifts from the international students I had tutored. Once that box was wedged under my desk beside the one holding college binders, graduation cap, and diploma, I turned my attention to what I was going to do back in a Birmingham zip code. Finding a job and hiking unintimidating foothills were my top priorities.

**Koi Box: Given**

A mighty dawn redwood marks the center of the Japanese Gardens at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Tricia, Eileen, and I spent many hours during college studying and relaxing in the outdoor rooms partitioned by meandering paths, sluggish streams, and boulders. When Eileen took her photography class sophomore year, it was the site of much modeling. Two years later, a few days before graduation, a group of our friends toured favorite Birmingham sites in front of Eileen's camera lens. We ended the day in the Japanese Gardens, where we balanced before the camera on cypress knees poking up in the bamboo grove's mud, crested the red half-moon bridge in various attitudes, and fed the turtles and the koi with tortilla chip crumbs. Our reflections rippled under the bridge and dispersed.

Three carved koi swim amidst finely-inscribed water flora on the lid and front panel of the jewelry box given to me by the BBG office staff when I finished my internship. The small, oval, bronze-clasped box houses my favorite earrings and the cross necklace from my grandfather. It is made of antler. Each time I open it, a pungent odor like smoked pork rushes out from its unlacquered interior. It smells just as strongly years later as it did initially. I cannot imagine why antler smells like Bay Springs Campground on a childhood Fourth of July, but retrieving earrings is a brief olfactory glimpse into memories with my father's family. Afternoons were for riding the Jet Ski and swimming with my uncles and cousins. In the warm, breezy evenings, we chased lightning bugs and threw horseshoes. They and I had no complexities, no hidden sides, and no fears. There was no reason, certainly no *need*, to ask who I was or where I was going. The latter answer could only have been "home," "school," or "the lake," depending on which place I was already at.

### **Ring Box: Inherited**

Beside the koi box sits a red velour one that shelters my great-aunt Magdalene's ruby ring. Her parents, my great-grandparents, gave her the ring when she was about 12, a gift of enormous value for a farming family at the onset of the Depression. A few years later, she was diagnosed with one of the earliest known cases of leukemia in Alabama. Her family moved into town to take advantage of new health care facilities and techniques that were not available when pneumonia had claimed her infant brother five years earlier. She died at age 16, shortly after the move.

My great-grandmother kept her clothes, jewelry, and school mementos. My grandfather inherited them in a few 1970's cardboard boxes stamped with a stylized wood grain. I inherited one when he died. Magdalene's ruby ring, though, he had presented to me when I was about 10. It was the first precious gemstone I had ever owned. The delicate silver filigree slipped around even on my index finger. Fearful of losing it (and hesitant to wear such elegance), I lost its stories by hiding it away for years.

When my grandfather died, still I did not wear the ring; my uncle was the repository of family stories then, and he kept Magdalene's memory alive. He died without warning of a heart attack when I was a junior in college. He and my grandfather, the story-tellers, were the only ones with strong memory-capacity. They told us the same stories over and over, and we loved them. But we had learned to hear without listening, and many memories cannot be recovered.

I wore the ring to my uncle's funeral. I had grown into it.

One year and a few months after we graduated, Tricia placed a ring inside a much more colorful box to begin her own family memories. That day, her nine-year-old brother carried

down the aisle a small box he had painted and decorated with photos of Tricia and her fiancé. In it lay Tricia's wedding ring. (He had refused to carry a fluffy pillow; the box was his compromise.) Tricia's fiancé gently removed the promise ring her father had made when she turned 13 and exchanged it for the silver band inside the box. That box now sits on Tricia's new dresser, the resting place for the promise ring until time to bequeath ring, wisdom, and memories to her daughter.

### **Koi Box: Taken**

I flew back from Tricia's wedding a week before I moved to Starkville, Mississippi, for one year in a landscape architecture program. Finally, I was going to fulfill the original plan. The program was rigorous, stressful, and satisfying. My professors, however, continually referred to the necessity of being able to envision yourself as a landscape architect. They spoke of their profession in a way I had never before heard from doctor or office manager, engineer or teacher: Profession and identity enmesh like an artist's, writer's, or musician's. The profession is not something you do, not something you choose to fit your personality. No, it is something you are.

A written narrative accompanied each design project, and so I wrote as much in the first semester of the MLA program as I had in the previous year. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed it. On a gray day after one project was due and before the next was assigned, I came home ready for a nap. I felt fruitfully lonely. Agreeable longing, empty and wholesome. I wanted romance, but I was finally free from an unhealthy love. I missed my distant friends, but we all were dispersed around the globe. The distance was shared.

I climbed into bed, but I picked up the koi box instead of my alarm clock to set. The ivory antler was warm, the metal cool. I rubbed the fish and thought back to modeling in the Japanese Gardens. A sketch of the box, I thought, would be simple and satisfying to write. I climbed back out of bed to grab paper and a pen.

At the end of the first semester, I applied to another program, a writing program...just in case. I renewed my inquiry: What should I do? For months, I obsessed over the same question I had exactly two years earlier. The result? In May, I packed up my belongings, dropped off a few memories at home, and headed to Tennessee.

But this time, there was a difference. I was moving again; I resented giving up completely my plan of becoming a landscape architect. But, along with the normal question, I had asked, “Is this me?” And I knew it wasn’t. I had recovered from no longer knowing myself through friends, school, or accomplishments. Already, I had been unconsciously readjusting to a new role, like I had when my grandfather died, like I had when my uncle died. This time, thankfully, no one had died—except my own static idea of myself. I could not articulate it, but I had inherited this new role: keeper of my own history, however it may relate to places, friends, family, and even fears.

### **Shadow Box: Waiting**

Tricia’s second child will be born in two months. I am living in the fifth house, fourth city, fourth state, and fourth year since I initially decided not to attend grad school—forget the metaphor of a double-exposed negative; that film’s ruined. Everyone I meet looks like someone I know...from somewhere.... I dig haphazardly through the mental boxes, flinging memories everywhere, but I am unable to find the right box before the familiar new face or place is itself in

the past. Even my students remind me of former acquaintances—one has Ben’s personality (Flagstaff), one has Wilson’s rose-olive complexion (college), another has Josh’s eyes (high school). A half-semester of looking at them three days a week was required to figure out those connections. To figure out which version of me framed the view.

I have lived in this townhouse for two years, alone except for tiny, unthreatening spiders. I wear Magdalene’s ring regularly when I teach. Graduation will soon disrupt my routines, though, and necessitate another move. The question, “What to do next?” ingrained itself so deeply in my consciousness over the last four years that I am tempted to focus on it again. But no longer am I seeking a right or wrong answer to “Should I do this?”

This time, I am *unpacking* before I move. The flurry of after-college moves brought so many external changes that hoarding the memories at home seemed the best way to preserve myself. Of course I knew I had changed during college, but they were adjustments, not ontological hold-ups. I tried to reach the end of the coming-of-age process before it was time. I felt grown, and so I focused on the next step: what to do with life. When those things by which I had defined my sense of self—school, community, location—were stripped away, I continued to push forward, asking, “What to do next?” instead of re-evaluating, “Who am I?” Whether I would already be settled down by now if I had asked the right question to begin with, I don’t know. I don’t regret the paths I have taken. But I have surely missed joys and richness growing along the sides while I raced breathlessly ahead to the next crossroad.

There is no end, no definitive arrival to my identity—at least, not for a few more years. I don’t know if it ever *must* definitively end; I suppose it depends on whether or not I keep changing places and situations, and thus always have new challenges and slightly different

perspectives. For now, it is an on-going act of layering, of encasing the old in the new, like a tree girds old wood with new growth. Like I add new boxes to the series stuffed away under my bed.

I do not want to unpack the memories; they're dark and cobwebby, fraught with spiders and fear and incompetence. Whether I do or not, though, they are shaping me. By drawing on the past, on memory, I can embrace the opportunity to be a new person every day, with a new set of knowledge, a new (even if only slightly different) perspective, and a new past. To ignore the chain of memories is to ignore a crucial sequence of events and changes, which forms a bond between who I was and who I am, between where I was and where I am. To ignore that chain is also to be surprised when another move or another return proves, again, that identity is an on-going process. No wonder I have fear and indecision in such a state of fragmentation. If I can learn to recognize and value this chain of memories—how they connect me to myself, my friends, family, community, culture, and place, even when they are far away—I can wholly *be*, where I am. I will no longer fear shadows in the boxes. I will expect treasures in the darkness.



## DINING ROOM RHYTHMS<sup>1</sup>

I start holding my breath out in the hallway. No matter how frequently I enter the kitchen, the Clorox-grease-urine odor attacks me as a stranger every time. And at supper, its force is greatest. I pass from the dim hall into the eye-aching fluorescence of the basement kitchen at Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco. The church, whose steeple could once be seen from every direction, sits in the shade of a five-star Hilton on the corner of Taylor and Ellis Streets, at the edge of the Tenderloin, the city's most infamous neighborhood, known, rightly or not, for poverty, drugs, and murder.

"Hey, Debra. Hey, Darion," the fourteen of us in my college group each say as we file into the "kitchen," which actually encompasses a drafty dining hall, a dish washing station on the far end, and a snug industrial kitchen tucked behind the L-shaped steel serving line counter, from which three hot meals are served, 364 days of the year. The kitchen only seats between 150 and 200 people at a time, so people are encouraged (or forced) to come through the line, sit and scarf their food, and circle back into the line if still hungry.

"*Alright, alright, how y'all doin' to-day?*" a burly-voiced staff member greets us at every meal. Darion, the big-bellied assistant kitchen manager, just grunts and tosses the hair nets, gloves, and aprons onto a table for us. Debra, the manager, eyes us warily and returns a curt hello. After a week and a half of working two meals a day with us, she is still cold and intimidating. We seem to her only a mechanism by which to catch Darion giving faulty instructions. This is *her* kitchen. Because Darion thinks otherwise, Debra constantly scolds, and he constantly sulks.

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1. Names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

My group is here to serve Glide however we are needed for three weeks. We have helped at the weekly Senior Social, stuffed envelopes with donor thank-you notes, and sorted toy donations. Our primary duties, though, are in the kitchen. We learned the routine quickly. Fill out the yellow volunteer information slip every day, not the pink slip for the Government Assistance workers. Tie on the plastic apron, slip on the hairnet, model the latest lunchroom-lady style, and then slide on the giant plastic gloves that will soon be stuck on your hands as if your sweat were super-glue. Mill around aimlessly or huddle to keep warm until assignments are doled out. Get in place—either behind the food counter, behind the trash cans, or out on the floor to bus tables—and dance to tunes from the radio nearest you. Darion keeps the radio above the colossal coffee maker on R&B, but the GA workers washing dishes keep theirs on classic rock. Once the people start flooding in to eat, you dance to a different rhythm.

This evening, I'm on the outside elbow of the food line. Members of my group rotate through duties in the food serving line and "out on the floor," which is Debra's term for bussing tables and dumping leftovers into the trash cans. At my station tonight, I take the trays from the next person over after they toss in salt and pepper, hurriedly grab one sugar packet for each tray with my oversized gloves, slide the trays around the 90-degree turn, and boost them to the end of the counter for another girl to pick up and hand to each person coming in the door. The assembly line moves rapidly; if the rate slows, Debra chides us for slacking. We get in a rhythm, scooping rice, ladling gravy, tossing on bread and oranges, dumping on hand-numbing portions of salad. We pass, balance, and slide trays. Our team could be the first to win gold medals if synchronized food service is ever added to the Olympics.

I enjoy my outside post. People speak to me as they pass, and I feel less like an observant robot. “Evening,” a stooped older man whispers to me.

“This looks repulsive,” a woman in her thirties snaps at me when she passes. She wears tall black boots, skin-tight black jeans, and a baggy sweater, topped off with a ratty beret. “Are *you* eating this tonight?”

“Strawberry shortcake!” the woman behind her exults. “I haven’t had it in ages. Thank you, honey.”

“Can’t I get another sugar packet or two? Please? Come on, won’t you let me?” People plea or argue, as the case may be. They can come through the line as many times as they want, but Darion had warned us that many people will get the whole tray of food for the sugar, which helps alleviate the effects of coming down from a cocaine high.

Pairs and trios pause and look up from their plates to bargain for sugar packets. In fact, that seems to be the most common dialogue, not pleasantries, or weather commentary, or the running conversation of regular acquaintances.

“Want your sugar?” a wild-eyed young man near the counter asks the older man to his left.

“Yah,” he answers quickly. “You want your tamale?”

“Might be willing to trade it,” the young entrepreneur remarks casually.

The older man weighs his choices. “Here,” he snaps, tossing the sugar packet and hungrily scooping up the tamale with his fingers.

I valiantly try to follow Darion’s orders to not give out extra sugar packets. But when the person wanting the sugar is more stubborn than I am (which is often), I cave.

“Listen, just one. Don’t ask me again, please.” I try to sound firm, just in case the man staring intently at me doesn’t notice that I hate saying no. “Just between you and me,” I whisper confidentially, glancing furtively around to confirm Darion’s absence before I slap two packets onto the man’s blue plastic tray, “I’d divvy up the basket between all y’all. I’m just following orders.”

“Thanks, thanks, baby,” he breathed. “Say, where you from? Your accent’s addicting.”

\* \* \*

Glide administers over eighty social programs to aid its community and San Francisco as a whole. The majority of people who use Glide’s programs are poor, many are homeless, and many are substance abusers. Crack cocaine has been a major killer in the Tenderloin since its American debut in the 1980’s; alcohol, heroin and other drugs are also serious problems. The church’s drug rehab programs pioneered the way for other social endeavors, which, by 2008, include subsidized apartments, a youth and child care center down the street, and a free health clinic.

I had encountered drug and alcohol abuse while volunteering in high school, and my team had read about crack use and addiction-related homelessness in the Tenderloin. I had not realized, though, that mental illness is such a significant factor in homelessness. At almost any point during a meal, one or two people are present who talk to themselves or ramble incoherently to their neighbors about non-existent places and people. One man sits at the back table and loudly sings a few lines, over and over, of “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain.” He says “hill,” though, instead of mountain. Another man, who sits alone toward the ends of meals, argues with an unseen adversary. He flails his arms, curses, and pouts. His food sits untouched.

I am not sure how (or, honestly, whether) to interact with these men. Nor do I know how they would react with me. I have avoided them so far, a choice that other people in the kitchen also appear to make.

However, at lunch one day, a man began telling me about his medication schedule for schizophrenia. I was surprised; he was clean, neatly dressed, and quite articulate, and he had no apparent symptoms. He hinted that more people at Glide have mental illnesses than I could guess simply by watching them at mealtimes. But many mentally ill people, he said, lack the means or the moral support to take their medicine consistently. He explained that the ultimate goals set by many social organizations for the general homeless population—setting them back on their feet by providing them with private housing and job training—are thus an unrealistic vision for many of them.

When the man excused himself from me, I watched him thread his way to a back table. Long folding tables with six chairs to each side form two columns down the dining room floor. The fluorescent lights high in the ceiling do not add much brightness to the room, nor do the small windows lining the top of one wall. The walls are drab blue-gray, but children's artwork affirms the life nourished by food and company in the dining room. Large pieces of painted paper are taped to each other, simulating quilts on one long wall and the two columns along the center of the floor. The acrylic colors are bright, stimulating. Painted families hold hands, painted rainbows hold promises.

\* \* \*

To ensure a safe environment, everyone in line to eat must check their belongings in with security personnel at the building's front door. The security men, who are typically Government

Assistance workers, can search belongings and persons for weapons. Another worker lingers near the kitchen's entrance to keep people in an orderly line.

Despite these measures, tension and uncertainty are a counter beat in the steady rhythm of interaction in the kitchen. Neighbors at a table may quibble over personal space, or one may accuse the other of somehow insulting him. People grumble about the quality of the food. Some are angry that they must eat so quickly. When a security guard brusquely reminds them to hurry, they may curse or lash out. Others worry aloud that the guards will let someone steal their belongings.

Sometimes the cold, calm façade erupts with that frustration and suspicion. A fight nearly broke out at supper one evening.

"To hell with you, man." The words detached themselves from the dully echoing din. I paused at my station, icy salad in hand, and looked for their source.

"Damn it! Get out of my face!"

The aggressor leapt up from his chair into the narrow space between the two tables closest to the serving counter. Background noise and movement ceased. The man had no weapon (security had done its job), but his anger felt like a wave that could potentially push everyone else's hidden emotions out into the open. I wondered what had provoked him, if it was worth such a reaction.

He glared and cursed and shouted insults, but he never touched the other man.

A volunteer tried from a safe distance to calm him, but to no avail. The security man at the door yelled angrily and repeatedly, "You're out of here! Now!"

Eventually another volunteer and a GA worker were able to escort the man out.

The kitchen quickly calmed, and my discomfort seemed irrational—what harm, after all, could have befallen me? The only tension still visible shivered in my team members’ and my hands. I must have been unconsciously expecting trouble. Why?

Although they react angrily and overtly to each other if provoked even slightly, people in the kitchen have behaved, for the most part, respectfully and politely towards us. In fact, some of them act like we are in need of being sheltered from the truth of their lives on the street. One man, who was telling me a string of disconnected anecdotes about dreams, his family, and other people’s adventures, paused after saying “damn” and apologized. He assured me he would omit any further cuss words because I should not hear such language. The Government Assistance workers, too, take a bemused concern for us and warn us away from the kitchen’s shadier regulars. So I likely have no real reason to be afraid of anyone here.

But that relationship between them and us is itself troubling. Division is enforced by their respect towards us, our returned politeness, and any suspicions we harbor. How can I love people if I am suspicious of them? How can I help them when there is such a divide—particularly when all I am doing for them is sneaking them extra sugar or doling out clumps of salad cold as the night they temporarily escaped?

My teammate tapped my arm with a tray—the line was operating again. I dumped my handful of lettuce. The kitchen’s volume crescendoed, and a man sat down to eat in the newly-available seat at the front table.

\* \* \*

“Good morning! How are you?” slips out of my mouth before I realize what I am saying. I stand at the end of the food line, right inside the kitchen doorway. It’s breakfast, and it’s my

turn to hand out trays. I am not sure how the bedraggled young woman shivering before me in mismatched layers could be having a good morning. Uncombed hair nearly covers her lowered eyes; ammonia's odor filters through flowery lotion. I offer a welcoming smile—welcoming her to a free, not-so-tasty meal. She does not reply.

Polite Southern linguistic habits fail me in this setting. The next few people in line glare or grumble when I greet them. I feel hypocritical standing here in this advantaged position of handing out food and asking empty polite questions. We all know I could not understand if they were to truly answer.

Each person's entrance debunks another common greeting. "How are you?"—*the high's gone and hunger's back*. Perhaps something less formal will be better: "What's up?"—*Sleeping in a cold doorway and lining up for food at 5:30 a.m.* "Enjoy your meal"—strike three; I can't help wrinkling my nose at neon yellow breakfast casserole slathered in Styrofoam-thick gravy. The greeting dilemma flusters me. After a few more tries, I decide on a hearty, non-committal "here you go" with a slightly tempered smile.

The line of people proceeds. "Love your hairnet. Those are so cute, angel," one young man gushes. His eyes glitter. The veins on his forehead and neck bulge.

Some people do not respond to my greeting, or even look up at me as they hastily or timidly grasp their trays. Others look me straight in the eyes with piercing gazes and greet me before I can say anything. And still others mumble quiet thanks or shout curses in response.

I try not to take the curses personally, but I worry about how the people at Glide view my team. My own impression of our experiences here now changes from day to day. Are we simply white college students with the naïveté or audacity to think we could help by serving meals for



three weeks? Or are we a good conversation piece, curiosities from the far away land of Alabama, a place where (so we've been told) no one wears shoes?

The tide of stories and tragedies entering the doorway overwhelms me. There are so many injuries, fresh and old—crooked and misshapen legs, a broken arm, cataracts, a missing eye. I avert my eyes from one man's face; his eye is veiled with a scabby abscess.

One woman shares with me the origin of her black eye and bruises: "I came back here a month ago from New York, where I was working at a thrift store that funded a daycare. I went to college here in the city. I wanted to come back."

I keep passing trays while she talks to me, but I try to listen. I wish I could stop and focus on her.

"But right after I came back, someone stole my wallet—all my money and my ID. I've just been trying to get by. And then some man on the street—I didn't have any money, so nothing for him to steal—he punched me!" She pauses. "For no reason."

I pass a tray and try to think of a deeper response than "I'm sorry."

"I'll go now," she says, "and stop distracting you from your job." She slips away before I can protest.

Other people tell me snippets of stories about failed careers, failed families. Some people are cleaner and neatly dressed; others are layered with the dark places of San Francisco: filth and odors, ill-fitting layers of jean jackets and sweats, long scraggly hair and beards. I grudgingly hold my breath several times. One man's outstretched palms are ebony with caked filth, contrasting with the worn olive hue on top.

I grab a tray from the counter and step forward to meet him. His fingers brush mine as they close against the blue plastic. My fingers jerk slightly. Suddenly I know—like I would know an icy Pacific wave—that my work at Glide is unnecessary for anyone but me. Someone else could hand this tray to this man. I feel numb, but I keep moving, physically and figuratively, in rhythm with everyone around me. I should let them lead this dance.

The man walks away. I step back to grab another tray, step forward, hand it off. Another set of hands reaches, grasps, moves away. I slide out of the way for Thomas, the head cook, to step behind the serving line counter and into the kitchen. I step forward with a tray, step backward as Thomas comes out.

Thomas looks like Morgan Freeman. But he's been an ever-scowling version of the actor up until today. Our team learned quickly to expect curt answers to questions, and our attempts at conversation fizzled out quickly. Before each meal, Thomas leads us down the hall to a metal cabinet in which we lock our coats, purses, and random paraphernalia. Our staff advisor from the college was the last person to deposit her belongings before breakfast this morning. She bent down to stack her purse, jacket, and scarf on the bottom shelf; when she stood, she whacked her head on the top one. Thomas, who stood behind her with the key, was the only witness. To her amazement, he laughed. And he started talking. Now, later in the morning, he responds to our comments and conversations. The ice has been officially broken.

Thomas's domain is the kitchen behind the food serving line. Steel and filthy cream are the colors of the kitchen. There's little unoccupied space on the tiled floor. Industrial stoves and ovens line one wall; the opposite wall is taken up by a glinting steel prep table and various other colossal kitchen necessities. On the far wall, titan cooking utensils, pots, and pans hang from

hooks—oatmeal pots as tall as my waist, broiler pans as long as my legs. Or so they seem from a safe distance. I have yet to enter Thomas's territory.

Once he has passed with a steaming stack of washed trays, I step back up to the corner, ready to greet the next person in line.

"Baby face, you're back again!" a tall, classy-looking black man greets me first. He has a model-quality smile.

"You bet. How are you doing today?" I feel he has given me permission to ask.

"Blessed. Blessed with another day to live," he responds. I want to learn his name and his story, but I cannot leave my post today. For now, I'll call him Daniel.

A tiny Asian man with a gentle, masking smile shuffles in for breakfast after Daniel. He takes baby steps, purple bare toes clenching wide, gray foam sandals. He travels slowly to the end chair at the front table, beside Daniel. Daniel offers the boiled egg on his tray to the old man, who is enthusiastically downing his own. The man takes Daniel's gift, and wordlessly points around his tray, nodding towards his neighbor.

"No, no, I don't want anything from you—I just want to give you this," Daniel says, almost sadly. He hefts a giant Whole Foods bag onto the table. Sifting through it, he pulls out cartons of cigarettes, bags of coffee, and various foods. "Want any of this?" he asks the Asian man first, and then extends the offer to the entire table. The men around him, sullen and silent up to this point, smile and start trading—or, if Daniel can convince them, simply accepting the gifts.

I listen to Daniel ask the same question I cannot: "Good morning," he greets each new arrival at the table. "How are you, man?" As he chats with them, chinks appear in the invisible

walls around each man. I hear only snatches of their conversations—“colder last night than it’s been”—“my back hurts from that sidewalk”—“I still haven’t heard from my daughter.”

One man rises to leave, a carton of cigarettes in hand. “See you, man,” Daniel says. “Wish you luck finding a place to stay.”

My initial romantic vision of the kitchen as a place for fellowship and community had been swept away; interactions swirl briskly around food and not much else. Daniel is a minor light in one corner of the room. What am I? I said that I wanted to know his name and story, and I do, but learning facts of his existence in answer to my inquiries does not equal knowing his story. I cannot know these people’s stories by serving meals for three weeks. If I were in Daniel’s place, would I simply sit and eat in silence, cowed by hunger and shame? Would I try to reach out and know people’s stories?

\* \* \*

I take a deep breath as the first man sits down in the back corner with his lunch. My job is to refill the pitchers of coffee and water on each table, clean up any crumbs or spills, and take finished trays to the trash cans. And to listen, intently, to the cadence of stories shared in the dining room. I’ve nervously awaited this assignment. But the classic rock tunes wafting to me on the breeze of hot Clorox-water melt my anxiety. “We may lose and we may win,” the Eagles wisely sing, “but we will never be here again. So open up, I’m climbin’ in—take it easy.”

The flood starts, and I can hardly remember which table the pitcher I hold belongs to. I set water down and brandish my germ-killing rag, ready for the next spill. Someone calls to me. I end up sitting down beside Chuck, a thirty-ish-year-old man with a mop of thick honey-colored curls topped by a pink toboggan. He launches immediately into conversation.

“So, Alabama girls are very pretty. But I mean that in the most respectful way,” he says as soon as he introduces himself. “But you know, things have gotten real bad for women in the Tenderloin. You know that? Don’t any of you go walking around the Tenderloin without a man with you. Have you done that? There’s so much violence against women around here. No respect!” he says. I don’t have time to reply except by nodding.

“So, have the men been respectful of you ladies here in the kitchen?” he asks, scooting his chair towards mine. “I mean, how do they talk to you? Have you heard them saying bad stuff about anybody on your team?” His knees touch mine. “It’s terrible if they don’t respect you. Me, I’ve got the utmost respect for all you lovely ladies,” he says, vigorously patting my knee.

Surprisingly, I do not feel uncomfortable with this contact.

He shifts gears suddenly. “So, how are the respect levels in Alabama? You know, on the telepathic waves?” In response to my blank look, he clarifies, “You know, is there a lot of telepathic noise in Alabama?”

Chuck must have been the man who carried on a ten-minute, one-sided conversation about telepathy with my teammate earlier in the week.

Someone beckons to me from across the room.

“I don’t think so,” I say. “It seems rather quiet, at least in rural Alabama.”

I excuse myself from Chuck and cautiously cross the flow of traffic running between tray pickup and the trash can, almost toppling over when a colossal man with a hat pulled over his eyes whirls around from his chair. But I make it over to a man motioning for more water.

His smooth head gleams faintly in the fluorescent light. I am so attracted by his eyes that I do not even notice what he looks like otherwise. His meditative expression hypnotizes me: This man *knows* life, in a way I do not. A photograph flashes to mind: serene Buddhist monks sitting cross-legged on a temple plaza; their gazes are penetrating yet detached.

In the split second that it takes for me to look at him and grab the pitcher, his sea-black eyes look into my soul and graciously allow me a window into his. He smiles gently but does not speak. I timidly smile back and rush off to fill his pitcher.

Perhaps I should not worry whether someone else could work in my place. I am in this place, not someone else. This exchange is what I am learning.

\* \* \*

Debra, the kitchen manager, is an enigma for me. When she does not look stern, she looks sad. I feel guilty, ridiculously so, whenever she points out that I am not scooping the rice or the gravy or the salad according to the best method (hers) or in the proper portion.

“No, baby doll, like this.” Debra grabbed the ice cream scoop from my hand yesterday at lunch to demonstrate the proper procedure for scooping from the vat of neon yellow rice filling the vat before me. I cringed. I can’t tell whether she uses “baby doll” as an insult or as evidence of familiarity, but it is the only way she addresses me.

Darion gripes at the portions I serve because they are too big, but Debra comes behind him and demonstrates, sometimes two or three times in one meal, how to scoop up more of the rice substance.

I am still too intimidated by her to ask about her story. When she prepares to leave the kitchen each day—she does not stay for every meal—she mentions going home to her TV, her

meal, and a way to put her feet up. Unlike Darion and a few other kitchen workers, she puts on no airs of superiority around the people who eat in the kitchen. She eats these meals, too. I wonder if she had once lined up three times a day in front of Glide for a free meal and a mealtime's worth of safety from the danger of the streets.

After everyone had been served yesterday, I helped prepare a take-home box for her. I scrutinized my scoop of rice from all angles, added a bit more, and carefully piled it into the box.

\* \* \*

After each meal, we clean the kitchen. Wipe down the tables and fold them up, stack up the chairs, sweep and mop. The brooms are stored in a leaky stairwell that leads from the back of the kitchen to a concrete-and-dirt-constructed storage room. Thus, sweeping means brushing mud around the floor, although most of the crumbs are removed, if for no other reason than that they stick to the wet bristles. The trash cans at the back of the dining room stand in a layer of muddy water, and, since one must walk through the puddle to deposit the brooms and mops (which do disperse the brooms' streaks), footprints always decorate the floor. Then we unfold the tables and line the chairs back up, six to each side of a table, according to Debra's instructions.

In an hour, everyone who just finished eating will line back up outside Glide's doors. The line will wrap around the block, maybe double back on itself. In two hours, people will crowd back inside the kitchen, bringing dirt and filth and stench and life. Their crumbs will fall back on the floor, and the rhythm in the kitchen will crescendo.

## THE WEIGHT OF THE DRONE

A mechanical drone nudged me out of solemn meditation a few miles from the house. There, only a few downed roadside trees hinted at the devastation wrought throughout Alabama two weeks before by tornadoes. I put on my blinker and turned off the highway, headed for home and a few weeks' vacation in Gadsden. I suspected the noise marked the end of a rare three-month stretch without a trip to the mechanic, but I made it home, parked by the front steps, and turned off the Jeep. The noise, however, did not stop.

I opened the door and stepped into a twilight zone. The world appeared exactly the same as home, except for the whirring drone that pressed down onto the landscape. Its volume drowned out semis barreling down the road and filled tornado-gaps in the tree-line. Dale, my family's youngest cat, met me on the steps. A red-eyed, orange-winged buzz emanated from his chin. He pawed the hitchhiker loose, adjusted his strategy of attack, and successfully crunched it in his mouth. Brood XIX of the periodical cicadas had re-surfaced.

Periodical cicadas survive thirteen or seventeen years underground as nymphs that suck nutrients from plant roots. Brood XIX, which is on a thirteen-year cycle, emerged during the first week of May, 2011, in Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. Bright eyes and wings and slender green-black bodies differentiate them from July flies, their annual cousins. Friends who live closer to town recall this seeming plague hitting their farms thirteen years ago, but my family and neighbors do not remember it occurring around Turkey Town Creek. These insects would be difficult to forget once they had shown up en masse. "Alien ships," my mother described their sound, recalling her childhood terror watching *War of the Worlds*. "The



Langoliers are coming for us,” my father said, referring to Stephen King’s monstrous guards of the past, which reputedly eat people who waste time.

Time had been much on my mind for the past weeks. Horrible destruction had occurred, seemingly outside of time—it had nothing to do with age, or the known advent of death, or the results of some action carried out over a period of time. Why were the storm victims given however many years, days, hours, until that moment? How are the rest of us to now use the unknown time allotted to us?

Periodical cicadas must know something about time; they are older than many of the animals in the woods by the time they surface. They use time so slowly as to be exorbitant, never rushed or harried, and never fearing waste. They are what they were created to be, do what they were created to do, perfectly and exactly in the time allotted them.

I tried to be excited about these mysterious visitors, new to me yet intimate of the earth. I had no problems observing them; they bellowed from every available surface. I could hear nothing above them. The buck’s burps and hisses, the snake’s rattle, the yellow-jacket’s hum were all absorbed into the male cicadas’ variety of deafening songs. To the observing eye, the cicada seems perfectly still as it sings a hummingbird vibrato. For an operatic rendition of the flying monkeys of Oz (figures which often populated my childhood nightmares), the cicada raises its abdomen to open a slit on the bottom between it and the thorax. The topside division between head and abdomen shivers to attain a higher pitch. The drone itself sounds like granite.

Their cousins the July flies croon the soundtrack of summer like Beach Boys of the insect world, yet the periodical cicadas’ drone is oppressive, abstract, distant—the weight of 13 years bottled and released. The courting buzzes, rattles, and quivers were near, locatable, but I could

never discover the source of the drone. It receded as I progressed, into the woods, up the trees, down the creek. It doubled back and lingered behind me. I imagined that a person lost deep in mountains, surrounded by the dark green noise, could lose his senses—rather, become nothing but senses, and perhaps lose his sense under the weight of the drone.

Unlike the drone, the cicada itself is the product of one very particular space. Females slice open pencil-thick twigs with their sharp ovipositors and deposit eggs, 24-28 per slit, in five to 20 slits per twig. Once the eggs hatch, the nymphs drop from the trees, burrow into the soil, and harmlessly feed on the roots.<sup>1</sup> One tree may incubate, hatch, and nurse a cicada nymph.

For thirteen years, the very soil weighs on the nymph before it surfaces, the walking dead, shrouded in brown paper skin that cracks under air's soft caress, springing the adult from darkness and all confines but its exoskeleton, which it will shed in death one month later. The newly-emerged, creamy white adult dries, turning dark, and then takes wing.

Adult cicadas swarm in the treetops—encouraging the misnomer “locusts”—and frequently dive kamikaze-style at unobservant passers-by. Birds, possums, coons, and even coyotes supposedly dine on these bugs, but the birds around my house apparently lacked interest in them. Dale was the only creature I witnessed eating them.

After a few run-ins with the bugs, I don't blame the birds for keeping their distance. I thought a fierce new animal had moved into the woods when an unfamiliar growl—audible over the drone—halted me on a wooded trail. The growl rumbled forth repeatedly, loud and malevolent. It seemed to be at my feet, but I could see nothing in the thick undergrowth. Something tapped my bare ankle, and I jumped backwards. There, on the tongue of my shoe, was the strange, threatening creature: a mating pair of cicadas growling in unison. Later, sitting

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1. Hale, “Insects: Periodical Cicadas,” 3.

on the front porch, something tickled my neck. I raised my hand to sweep away stray hairs and yelped when something grabbed hold of my finger and screeched in my ear. I jerked, nearly ripping off the cicada's legs, three of which were embedded in my index finger, the others in my shirt collar. He detached himself and zoomed off with a banshee shriek.

When cicadas began to fall dead from the trees and litter the backyard, I sat in the shade with them and hoped, for a few moments, to let my senses and surroundings merge and keep pace with their rhythm. Dale curled in my lap to clean his paws. His long, silky fur brushed my bare legs; his tongue scraped my leg as often as his own. Honeysuckle, clover, mulberries, and little bluestem flavored the wind. Heaven surely smells like May in Alabama. The drone, undiminished, drowned out all sounds but mother crow cawing over the pines and the bluebird family scolding a snake by the pond. Late afternoon set silky grass seeds aglow; moss on the dying cherry tree burned green fire. And yet I was thinking, thinking too heavily about writing it all down and using that time.

I scooted Dale off my lap and walked along the wood line, arms out, contemplating the drone to no coherent end. Warm sun, cool wind, relatively low humidity: my skin seemed to effervesce into the air, leaving no barrier between light and soul. Perhaps that is how a dolphin feels all the time, moving as one with the water.

Near the cluster of stumps that once supported dense pine crowns and a never-finished tree-house, I found three tornado scraps that had survived the mower. A week before the cicadas emerged, two-hundred-plus tornadoes ripped through the Southeast from April 25-28, 2011. Over two hundred people died in Alabama alone during the outbreak, which the National

Weather Service has listed as the fourth deadliest in U.S. history. It is the only outbreak listed in the ten deadliest to have occurred since the 1970's.

I had sat under the stairs, a state to the north and oblivious to the destruction at home, listening to hail ricochet off the windows and fretting about a book review I couldn't work on in the closet. Supper routines proceeded uninterrupted in the apartments around me, but, like a good Alabamian, I had run to my safe place, armed with water, food, and a radio, as soon as the tornado warning was posted. The only radio station concerned about imminent tornadoes had tuned into a local TV channel's weather report. The meteorologist announced that he was playing a video from the mile-wide tornado that had just swept through Tuscaloosa, parts of Jefferson County, and Cullman, Alabama. The sound flickered, then a person panted raspily into the camera. "Oh, my God," the meteorologist whispered.

In many of the tornadoes' paths, nothing at all remained. No piles that were formerly houses. No debris. No snags. Swaths of glacial passage cut through communities and forests. Bodies in those paths were wrenched from their safe places and thrown miles from where remnants of their homes landed. A family friend's brother and sister-in-law were torn up with their house while they hid in the crawl space, and flung with it into the woods. A Jefferson County man was reported to have been found in a tree in Ohatchee, a small town over 20 miles from the JeffCo line.

For weeks after the storms, debris was found in yards, forests, and streets, sometimes hundreds of miles from its home. Photographs, sketchbooks, college notebooks, bank statements and financial documents—people's lives were strewn about three or four states. "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," ripped from a hymnal, settled in front of the only house unscathed in several

blocks of a Jacksonville neighborhood. A tin roof landed in a friend's pasture; it will soon top a new hen house. A cache of 1960's receipts from Tuscaloosa Drug Retail landed in our front yard, over 120 miles northeast of its origin. Papered wood panels and pink insulation littered the woods behind our house.

The cicadas' drone echoed the tornadoes' roar as I picked up those scraps of other people's memories, now become mine: a yellowed snippet of a recipe, a page from a devotional for high school graduates, and a photo from a yearbook page. In the photo, the subject's hair and shoulders were intact, but the face was skimmed off, revealing rough white paper-core. I gently laid the three atop an empty dog food bag in the big outdoor trash can.

Tornadoes are expected in April. Each spring during my childhood, my parents hustled my brother and I down into the basement. Dug out of the clay, damp and spidery, it terrified me more than the tornadoes that we sometimes watched from the garage, where, clasping my father's leg, I peeked out at the funnel descending into the treetops that divided pasture and river. If the tornado stayed on course, it followed the Coosa River into the Coat's Bend community a few miles away. About the time I was starting high school, winter tornadoes became common, too. The earliest one that I remember deviated slightly from the normal route and struck a friend's home while her family was visiting relatives a week before Christmas.

Catastrophic tornado outbreaks do not abide by the predictable schedule of clashes between pressure systems each spring and winter, nor do they develop with the unwavering chronological accuracy of periodical cicadas. "When I was growing up," repeats my father, watching continuing news coverage of rescue and clean-up efforts, "this kind of tornado just

didn't come so often." Historical storm data does not support that statement, but death and severe destruction have resulted from both super-cells and typical tornadoes with increasing frequency over the past decade in places to which my family and friends are connected. In my corner of the South, the period of destruction has been from Etowah and Tuscaloosa Counties, Alabama, in 2000, to Enterprise, Alabama, in 2007; to Yazoo City, Mississippi, in 2010; to central and north Alabama, as well as parts of Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee, in 2011.

Tornadoes damage houses, trailers, and fences along the Coosa River every spring, and people rebuild. Building, re-building, adding on—those are expected. Death, even if you know it is coming, happens unexpectedly. The period for grief, unlike that for cicadas or tornadoes, is not so easily measured by a particular end point marked by a subsequent occurrence. Next month, a decade will slide past, a glacier formed from first experiences of grief that has carved a passage through my life. On an evening ten years ago, I last caught lightning bugs as a child. It was a superb evening: cool summer breeze; katydids and crickets harmonizing with July flies; bats and chimney swifts darting and dancing faster than starlight; the entire family together. Then the phone rang: my best friend's brother had been killed in a car wreck. Summer, though just begun, was ended.

Grief returned two years later, then one year, then three years. Grief comes more frequently for my parents; for my grandmother, who has outlived one son, her husband, and all of their friends; for a teenage girl at church who lost both parents within a year. Perhaps for many of the people who lost loved ones, homes, and livelihoods in the tornadoes.

Joy, too, is often periodic. It vacationed with me the last summer of college, then, a year later, accompanied my explorations in northern Arizona. Joy visits for friends' weddings and

then babies, each, it seems, a year apart. It played in the snow on the first white Christmas in Alabama since the 1940's. It lingers in fall leaves, spring flowers, and cool stream water. In blue skies and beginnings.

The onset of each season brings joy, except summer. Semesters and seasons twine forward and up as a double axis by which I measure time; when one pauses, its yoke-mate also halts. Thus, when the bluestem is sweet, the stress of school yields to nostalgia and reflection: This beginning ends some other beginning. At the onset of this summer, the cicadas droned without ceasing, "What have you squandered? Have you lost what you should have gained?" The drone opened a thin threshold, a sliver between dimensions of time and memory, curtained with periods of grace and confidence and togetherness, with periods of weakness untranscended, of solitariness unused, of fear untransformed.

Why do periodical cicadas spend thirteen years underground, when July flies prove development can happen much faster? Perhaps the drone is their answer. They know the weight of time and earth; it makes them sing.

## SAND DOLLAR ROUGHS

The little toilet paper and tape package peeks hopefully up at me from the clutter of pens, pencils, and sticky notes on my desk. I'm cleaning, and I had forgotten about the tiny bundle. Gently, I untape and unwrap the delicate sand dollar I picked up from a Gulf beach. It's nearly perfect. A tiny chunk is missing above one of the four indentations in the edge. Like a good story or Coleridge's conversational poems, the sand dollar is a subdivided circle, with holes and indentations strategically placed for sustainability of the organism.

I hold the sand dollar up and look through the tear-shaped hole beneath the center. I see myself holding it up triumphantly a few months before on an early morning treasure hunt with a best friend. In jackets and rolled-up pajama pants, we ogled delicate shells and danced with the breaking waves like shorebirds. Joy was ours for the hour: The shadow of imminent change under which we were living as second-semester college seniors had receded temporarily.

Two grains of sand are lodged, one in the dead creature's mouth opening, one in the slight groove leading up from the hole like a tear duct. If I sniff violently enough, I can smell the beach, its mix of freshness and mustiness, clear-eyed air and stinging salt. Hopeful, I clamp the sand dollar's slightly concave underside to my ear, but it is silent. Like a toddler experimenting with all her senses, I intuitively touch my tongue to the disc. The ocean's flavor is stronger than its smell.

Faint grooves on the underside lead to its mouth. The live sand dollar experiences its life on the ocean floor by tasting, ingesting, and digesting. Are humans so different? We experience, analyze, and synthesize. We put every experience into our mouths, and we translate the actuality



of experience and feeling into language. No musing or mulling, and the experience escapes us—we lose rich nourishment.

I've been rubbing my finger on the rough sand dollar as if it were a worry rock. The surface catches the ridges of my fingerprint like unpainted ceramics. Dainty alligator scales nestle in concentric rings. The peak of each scale is the gray of unfired greenware, while the trough barring it from the next is whiter, the color of all the unpainted figurines in my grandmother's studio. My great-grandmother fired those figures or bought them, but she never fulfilled many of her designs. When I was very young, my grandfather taught me how to make and pour the mix, how to fire and paint and glaze the pieces. Now his knowledge, and his mother's before him, is lost. After so much time and change, I cannot remember his words—only his wise hands.

My own hands seek to spell out the meaning of five nearly imperceptible petals blooming around an upside-down star in the center of the sand dollar. This nickel-sized creature is its own story of creative genius, but my fingertips are not sensitive enough to read the Braille beauty of its life and death.

A full yellow moon loomed over watery, gold-flecked blackness the night after I found the sand dollar. Chanting waves steadily shifted shape, each crest and trough, like the glinting light, a conveyance of energy, a rate of movement governed by other times and places. In darkness my friend and I stood, silent at the edge of an eternity in flux. We watched the womb-dark depths continuously swell and bring forth life from their folds.

The life of the sand dollar was cut loose from that realm. The skeleton may be exposed and fragile, but, perhaps, more beautiful than its living cousins. It testifies to what lies beneath life, to what upholds it, even after life has dissolved back into silence.

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## VITA

Meghan McDonald, a native of Gadsden, Alabama, graduated *summa cum laude* from Birmingham-Southern College in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a minor in Environmental Studies. As a college senior, she was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. She then persisted in following her dream of being a landscape architect, but, after a year at Mississippi State University, she realized that she should approach the passions that had led her there through writing, rather than design. Accordingly, she began the Master of Arts degree at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she accepted a graduate teaching assistantship. She graduated with a concentration in Creative Writing in the spring of 2012.