

Meditations on Place and Spirit

By

Lisa Schlegel

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Chairperson Thomas D. Lorenz

William J. Harris

Kenneth L. Irby

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The Thesis Committee for Lisa Schlegel
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Thomas D. Lorenz

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Abstract

This is a collection of essays loosely grouped under the subject of “nature writing.” Each work focuses on a specific place and experiences I have had in the natural world. I focus on western Kansas, where I was raised in a farming family until I was 22. A couple essays mention my latest home, Lawrence, Kansas, and describe some of the differences between the two places. All essays exemplify an appreciation and awareness of the natural world while considering the implications of agricultural land over-use and a loss of my ancestors’ way of life: earning money by living off the land. Several of the essays discuss the conflict farmers face who care about the land, and their dilemma to make a living and afford land and equipment, without over-using or abusing the land that provides them income and happiness.

I am writing from the perspective of a farmer’s daughter, the fourth generation of my Volga-German family in the United States, and the first not to be a farmer. Throughout, I explore my ideas and inner conflicts in regard to what is being done to the land in the name of Capitalism. An overarching theme is the interconnectedness of land health with the health, physical and mental, of humanity and animal life. Awareness and imagination are encouraged and developed through my personal experiences and talks with my father, and our experiences with the landscapes of Kansas. Readers can expect to witness nature’s cunning, intricacy, and power, while learning some historical and geological information about the state. I also touch on ideas of craftsmanship and quality, honesty, respect, and tradition in regard to work ethic.

The essays describe how minor interference can affect the biotic community in ways humanity is incapable of fully understanding. I attempt to capture tiny pieces of the endless puzzle that make up the intricate natural world not only so I can be more aware of my surroundings, but with the hope that others will gain understanding as well. Through exploring the significance of weather, place, plant use, and land health, I aim to dig deeper into the intuitive connections humanity has always had with the earth. I aim to help change humanity’s “crisis of morality” Wendell Berry describes as our shortfall, because as he says, it is not a crisis of *technology* humanity faces.

Acknowledgements

This collection of essays took 3 years to develop. During my first 2 ½ years I learned to stop wasting time saying other people's words and to, as Tom Lorenz taught me, *tell the stories only I could tell*. That was the most important lesson I learned during my time at KU, well, that and being persistent. I went from dreading writing, from *holding on too tight*, to writing for fun about things I was simply curious about. I stopped fearing other people's reactions to my work.

My writing went from trying to persuade to trying to LIVE. I went to the place of appreciation and happiness I felt during my times out of doors instead of letting the fear and anger about the damage humans are doing to the natural world overshadow my writing.

In the words of William Least Heat Moon, there were times I wrote when I know it was not just my words alone. These works are a result of letting go, cultivating love and appreciation instead of fear, about the joy nature and Her creatures bring to my life. It is my hope that through reading this, people will become aware of the spirit present in the natural world around us all, for we are all connected. In the words of Wes Jackson, "Redwoods, ospreys, Holsteins, or humans—we're all made of the same 20 amino acids and the same 4 nucleic bases."

I thank God and the Great Spirit, my family and friends, especially Dad, for his wisdom and example. Warm thanks to Dr. Dan Kulmala who helped me get to a place where my voice could be heard. Thanks also to Billy Joe Harris and Ken Irby for their many kind and supportive words.

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By Lisa Schlegel

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The world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet and learn to be at home.

-Wendell Berry

Above all else the world displays a lovely order, an order comforting in its intricacy We are part of something with roots stretching back nearly forever and branches reaching forward just as far.

- Scott Russell Sanders

Fly-Over Paradise

I should not feel scared to be outside alone even if for days at a time. I need to understand my place. Land, once prevalent in humanity's daily life, is almost completely absent from mine. In my search to understand my captivation with the wild lands of central Kansas, my home place, I want to understand how other populations coexisted with the land in the past. The Iroquois saw the world as built on the back of Grandmother Turtle. When Grandmother Turtle died, they believed, the world ends. Many native populations of the North American continent believed they arose from the land, directly from the ground. They did not know about the land bridge their ancestors crossed to reach this continent. Their lives each day depended upon their knowing how to live with upmost consideration for the animals and plants around them. As a person who spends most of her days indoors, I am trying to understand why it is I find myself increasingly contemplating my home place.

I was closer to nature there. I spent more time outside, depending on the weather, taking care of a garden, going on walks, reading a book in the late afternoon sun. Here, I feel a word needs to be spoken about nature because *civilization* dominates my daily life. I long for a balance between my time spent out of doors and inside. I find that I want to, like many friends I talk with, spend my time living instead of making money to live. For example, rather than work nine hours a day to earn money, I would like to work three hours a day tending my garden, eliminating the need to make money to buy food. What else does money do? It buys shelter, clothing, and warmth. All of these things may also be provided by an individual without money. However, this is not possible for most people today because we would not know how to survive without our modern conveniences. Our natural right to land is gone, only to be earned back with money to buy land.

One day I found myself thinking of my old place. It was during February, the month of the big famine, as the Iroquois called it. In Kansas during the months of January (the month of the little famine), and February, there isn't much wild food available. If I were to live in the wild, I would survive on what I have stored or dried, along with any wild game I may come across. On this cold day I stood on my second floor apartment looking out my window at a blizzard and thought of what it would be like to have to live in this weather without the buffer of technology. Fifty mile per hour winds blew snow toward my window and I sat inside, warm. Around lunchtime I noticed a handful of people getting in their cars, warming them up and shoveling so they could drive. Where could they possibly have been going? To get food. What would they do, I wondered, and what would I do, if my apartment complex was without power and heat at this time? The last time I lost power I was happy I had some canned goods, but since my can opener is electric, I was without food. I was dependent upon technology and unable to take care of myself without it. Without power for two weeks in this city, I would starve or freeze to death in my apartment during the month of great famine. I want to know how I could survive, but I don't know that there is an answer. I have no land to live from, just a bunch of concrete and decorative bushes, and roads. It was at this moment, standing by my large window, I realized the challenge to balance knowledge of the land with technological prowess humanity has achieved. Is it even possible? Maybe it is true that it is humanity's own cunning that will do us in. Will it be our bombs, our biological warfare experiments, our nuclear energy? I knew that from that moment I wanted to engage in the smartest way of life possible, considering both the convenience of technology and my mode of survival should that convenience be removed at any point for whatever reason. I wanted to find a greater balance in the way I live my daily life.

I want to know my place, have titles for its months, be able to live alongside other animal life, and while I do that, I want to have the benefits of technology to a reasonable degree. I want to take from the earth without taking too much. Humanity knows how to do this. Many conservationists warn that if we do not use our resources more wisely that our children will pay a heavy price. If we refuse to go without power for one day each week, our children might be forced to go four days in the future. Our soil resources, our aquifers, our air, our plant and animal life are all being used and damaged faster than they are being replaced or protected. It is a weighty fact not to be denied. In my new place more than ever I find myself obsessively asking myself *why*. Why when I was watching that blizzard did I think of the words of Black Elk when he said that civilized man will die standing next to their square gray boxes? There are practical reasons that demand people know their places better than they do now.

Right now is a time of illness for Grandmother Turtle, but there is a natural cure for her disease, a preventative medicine, and many scholars and scientists say the health of our planet depends on the choices our population makes now and in the near future. Planetary health is a complex thing to measure, as there is a cycle of life, a circle, and everything depends and is related to everything else, even if we may not understand those relationships fully. I think of the relationship between the monarch butterfly and the milkweed, both creatures I see often in the state of Kansas. Milkweed contains a toxin poisonous to humans and many animals; however, the monarch butterfly is immune to the toxin. Not only is it immune, it absorbs and reproduces the toxin within its body, making birds who eat it throw up. To follow nature's cunning a step further, there is also another butterfly that participates in this strange dance. The viceroy butterfly looks a lot like the monarch, black and orange. It mimics the monarch to ward off predators, hoping (if an insect can hope) they will mistake it for a monarch and leave it alone.

Nature's creativity is certainly boundless, a mystery humanity still does not fully understand and is in danger of understanding even less in the future due to both the increased separation we have from its operations and to the fact that much of it is being knowingly and unknowingly destroyed by our actions.

* * *

In my home place, north central Kansas, I stand on a bank of the Smoky Hill River, and resting around my feet is beach sand in Kansas. I know that over 80 million years ago Kansas was a shallow ocean, home to a variety of marine life. Its sandy beaches, frequented by prehistoric visitors, now rest under grass-covered prairie and wash out in river bottoms like the one near which I stand in the geographic center of the United States. Most people don't think a Kansan has access to beaches at any time during the year, but if one looks, beaches are commonplace around every river and lake in the state. My beaches are the Smoky Hill River in central Kansas and the Saline River, the beach of my best friend and cousin Callie. The Smoky Hill River owes its name to the fog that rises around it, surrounding the trees along its banks with a *smoky* aura. I have heard the mist around the Smoky Hill River is moisture evaporating from trees' leaves, and maybe even moisture evaporating from the river. It might be both.

While its waters are not as immense as that of an ocean, there is a different kind of immensity about them. Kansas wildlife needs water, so at one time or another every day, prairie creatures are seen around the beaches of the Smoky Hill River. Surrounded by various berry bushes, mulberry trees, shrubs and cottonwood trees, its river bottoms and tributaries are the veins of life for prairie inhabitants. The rhythm of life around the river is vibrant and loud. I am reminded of Kansas' prehistoric past when I see the table-sized nests of cranes sitting high in cottonwood treetops, placed like watchtowers so the mother and father bird always have a view

of their young. When they fly they look like illustrations of pterodactyls gliding over wind currents atop the small canyons of limestone.

A couple years ago I saw the ocean for the first time, and one thing I felt was fear. I did not want to go in more than knee-deep. It had nothing to do with the coldness of the Pacific on that day in May, but of the pulsing rhythm of such a large amount of water and what lived beneath it. I didn't know this place. Its loud sound startled me. The waves of the lakes and rivers of Kansas are created by the wind, not determined by the pull of the moon's gravity. I am comfortable here because I understand the weather and the life of the land.

* * *

In addition to the ripples on the surface and the tiny waves of Kansas lakes, a lot of my favorite things about my homeland are created by the wind: the sound of wheat stalks brushing each other in the dry, hot summer gusts, the sound of thousands of glossy cottonwood leaves chattering above me while I stand in the calm of the trunks sixty feet below. Author Peter Steinhart described the wind as the provider of plant music, and explored the idea that many religions derived their name for spirit from their name for wind. When I get impatient with the loud and omnipresent companion of the western half of the state, I think of plant music and consider the wind as possessing a quality of bigness to it that is hard to describe. Often I will walk into a valley and press my body against the hill, out of the wind, and feel like I can hear on a whole new level. The feel of solid ground beneath and behind me eases my focused, always-on feeling that constant blowing wind seems to bring on.

The beach sands of Kansas possess that same comforting quality, whether wet or dry. When dry, the sands cover my feet, warming them if it's spring and burning them hot if it's summer. However nature provides a counter for even this fire. I step on grassy plants growing

on sandbars, and they cushion my feet. The sand keep bugs off too. My cousin and I mixed sand and mud, rubbing it over our bodies for sun and bug protection. Without sunscreen or bug spray, looking back on our river adventure, I think a long-sleeved shirt and some light, cotton pants would've been a better idea, for we were burned severely for the next several days. It seemed the beach sand had acted as a magnifying glass for the sun on our skin. This is the way to learn in nature when you don't know your land: try things and you *will* learn what works. Unfortunately, some mistakes are big enough that you don't get the opportunity to try again. That's the promise nature provides: the most intelligent of animals will survive the longest.

* * *

The warm damp sand, from the caress of the river's temperate waters, folds in between my toes. It makes a lovely place to rest a towel and a tired body on. There is nothing better after a hike than sand on my feet. Near the shore, I make a small bowl-shaped hole and bury my feet in the sand, watching the shiny black water beetles and spiders walk on the water in front of me. I am on a private beach when I wonder, *who has the luxury to live like this?* I do, the daughter of a Kansas farmer. I spend at least one afternoon every summer alone by the river. One of my favorite things to do after taking a dip is to step out of the water, trying to avoid too much muddy clay on my feet, and find a high spot outside of the river valley where I can stand and let the hot constant winds dry my body. There's nothing like it to make one feel as though you have in fact been born out of this very ground, this dirt, this sand.

The Smoky Hill's waters are usually shallow, though they can drop to a surprising five feet or more at any time if you happen to walk without *feeling* where you're stepping. A frequent river walker as a youth, I was also used to different "bottoms" of the river bed. Some are sandy and soft, some rocky and a bit painful, and others, slimy and muddy. The muddy

places contain dark, cold, coal-colored, clay-like mud that swirls around my feet and gets under my toenails. As soon as I step into areas like this, the smoky cloud blocks my vision and turns the translucent water opaque until the swift river washes it away. This is not a good thing if I am scouting for catfish or carp, for raised dirt warns them of a predator's presence. If I do get stuck, to remove my foot from the prison of dark muck I pull, releasing a sound like a suction cup being pulled off a window. Remnants of this cold mud fill in the lines around my toes days later, and when I look down at them I remember why they look that way and smile.

During my walks on the river, both out of necessity and curiosity, I find myself looking down often. There are the trenches and sharp pieces of limestone, the pervasive rock of the area. All the tropical plants and shallow-sea creatures compacted over millions of years to form the limestone, the dominant construction material of the earliest plains dwellings, houses, courthouses, school buildings, churches, and the main rock of the cliffs around me and on the river bed below me. A break from walking gives me the chance to look up and of course, I start thinking again, but I try to stop, for I don't want to think here; I just want to live. I want to spend my time earning my right of presence here. If I can see the bottom as I walk in the waters, it means I'm not interrupting the other creatures around. I'm not splashing or raising mud, not making a loud ruckus, and I'm able to scan the riverbed for rocks or anything I might find interesting or useful. My curiosity has won me several things including shark's teeth, rocks, and petrified wood. I have also come across crawdads (Kansas shrimp), mussels, turtles, carp, catfish, and bullfrogs that should I need food, I could catch and eat. With all that surrounds me, I could construct a hospitable shelter.

Knowing some history of this land, I want to understand the water that slides slowly all around my feet as I walk. It has traveled to Kansas from Colorado. It's been all over the world.

I wonder how many more feet have felt the coolness of the Smoky Hill River water envelop them over its 400-mile journey. The water that reaches the river flows through deep canyons and over flat plains. It starts small, barely river-worthy, and as it heads east, more creeks and streams flow into it, making it a large tributary to the Kansas River by the time it arrives there, my place now, over 250 miles away.

Aside from being a place to simply be alive, a place that teaches me how to live, my time by the river provides therapeutic relief. Looking at the water itself takes me to a different frame of mind. “Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it,” said Lao Tzu. To come across a turtle sunbathing on a branch nearby, or a bullfrog buried in the mud next to the shore, shows me that I am not alone in my love of the river or need for it in my life. On its banks grow beautiful plants, a woody bush whose indescribably sweet, puffball-like flowers attract all manner of bees, butterflies, and insects. It is a flower I do not know the name of, but I have only seen it growing along Kansas rivers. Does it grow anywhere else I wonder? I rest my nose above the soft, sweet ball. It caresses my face as a light breeze moves the bush and around me I hear the sounds of singing cottonwood leaves, buzzing insects, and trickling water. These moving and living things move and live with my body; the matter that makes them makes me, and I have around me a sense of reality and mystery absent on other days when what surrounds me are things I understand, things I am bored with.

Living near the river, one must in some way schedule one’s life around its behaviors. There are times when it floods and times when all it holds are sand and broken logs. It is home to beaver that gnaw over trees to make a calm fortress in the middle of a running river. That fortress is home to other calm water fans like snapping turtles, painted turtles, and the soft-shell turtle whose white skin and delicate underbelly connect seamlessly to its shell. Its snout-like

nose protrudes the water in a pinprick giving it air while its body rests covered in the soft mud near the shore. This turtle is so still that I usually step near or on one before I know it's there. I am lucky enough to have not been bitten yet, for the majority of snapping turtles are best described in two words: smelly and mean.

What lies beneath a swiftly flowing river remains mysterious. Its power forces one to be mindful and aware of the life around, the snakes, turtles, fish, coyotes. It's a place where one can come to turn off, but one must never turn off completely, for the life around you requires you to be ever-present and awake. During the last several summers the Smoky Hill flows smaller than it did in my childhood. The city of Hays has put more wells along its shores and more people are tapping its waters for crop irrigation. On top of the more extreme weather the last several years, the hotter, drier summers, and the colder, longer winters, more water is being demanded of a smaller river.

As a young girl I didn't know much about the river. I asked my dad all the questions I had about it. Being near it, in the small thirty-foot limestone canyons, surrounded by plants and animals made me think about everything; my imagination ran wild. I used to get dressed for school and think to myself, *What could I wear today that will look good and be comfortable to wear on a river-side hike?* I used to want to be an adventurer or field geologist, and I still like learning about the earth, knowing how weather would affect me should I live outside in it, what plants I could eat if I didn't have a Dillons store twenty minutes away. My curiosities arose because of the rocks, shark's teeth, and creatures I saw on the Smoky Hill River. I stumbled upon things I never expected. Several years ago on a mild fall afternoon I walked the bottoms with my mom and brother, and we discovered a cluster of thousands of monarch butterflies. There is an area thick with trees whose limbs hold hundreds of grapevines and all manner of

ining plants, such as the orange flowering trumpet vine. Hanging from vines and covering trunks and branches of trees we saw monarch butterflies numbering in the thousands. The bark on the trees was alive with their twitching bodies. I knew they must have stopped because it was quiet here by the trees of the river valley, an escape from the wind. We stood for long moments without talking, and with every step we took in the wonder of the silence around us. The butterflies seemed to be sleeping, though the occasional butterfly flew delicately around us waking the others surrounding it so that there were always a few fluttering around choosing a vacant spot. As the sun set, gold light shone through the thick stand of trees accentuating the color of the orange butterflies, somehow making every color around us deeper and more vibrant.

Every summer I witness the constant changing of the river's sandbars due to the fluctuating volume of water that passes through. A place I sat on during one visit can be non-existent, its land washed away by the current. The same place is restructured according to the will of the seasonal weather. During August, the hottest part of the summer season, Kansas plains are sun-scorched, threatening any trickle of river remaining. However, should some thunderstorms out west produce heavy rain, the Smoky Hill can flood at very short notice, making it too dangerous for navigation or exploration of any kind and filling the river bed for mere days until it later returns to average flow. These floods often occur in the spring or summer, times of year I was always ready to go tubing. A flooding river was faster than I could imagine, and much more powerful. Many obstacles were hidden below the dangerous fast-moving water. I learned this lesson firsthand when I went tubing,¹ a Kansas country kid's favorite hobby, with my cousin on her childhood river, the Saline.

¹ "Tubing," pronounced "toobing," is a term used to describe floating on an old, black tractor-tire tube (much like the tube in a bicycle tire) filled with air. It looks like a doughnut.

I was twenty-three and she was twenty on our first day-long tubing trip, and we had arranged to be picked up down river eight miles from her farm at the end of the day. We spotted cows, cranes, and sunbathing turtles. Early in our journey, we came across a “swimming hole.” Such holes are common in rivers, because when the flow of water changes direction to weave across the landscape more easily, the swiftly travelling water is slow on the inner edge of the bend and faster on the outer edge (picture a corner in a race track when the cars must crank the wheel to stay on the track as the car wants to whip outward). The water wants to do the same thing, so it whips downward, digging the hole deeper, and outward, carving out the side of the canyon as water flows past. This particular hole was so deep that neither one of us could touch bottom, so we had to tread water to stay afloat, and swim to stay in the hole as the current pulled us down-river. We were being pulled closer to the edge of the root-covered cliff, and trying to swim out of the corner was surprisingly difficult, especially for a time when the river was considered slow. The power of the calm-looking water was scary and gave me a new respect for the power water has, its heft even in calm conditions.

After we had enough of treading water in the swimming hole, we decided to get back on our tubes and keep moving because we had about three hours left until we were due at the pick-up spot. We were tired and ready to float and relax when not a minute later we came across another bend. As we got closer, we noticed the bend was different than we had remembered it. There were some fallen logs blocking the usual route, and so a very small and swift section of river was all we could squeeze through. We were forced to go with the flow and improvise quickly. She went first, and I hung back on a branch to wait because I knew the water would shoot us through much quicker than normal. She passed through and held onto a flexible handful of grass as the water violently tried to pull her ahead of me. I let go of my twig and entered the

fray. I was sucked into the corner and couldn't get out because the velocity of water pushed me against the dirty cliff-side. So I decided to get out of my tube cautiously and give myself a boost. Callie yelled for me to be careful. I thought I had the scary corner licked when my right foot started sinking. The sand I had stepped into was much colder than it should have been, colder than any sand I had ever felt in all of my times on the river. And my foot kept sinking. I gave it all I had to get out of the muck, and had to step in with my left foot, placing it as far away from the right foot as I could. Both of my feet were solidly stuck. The water in this nook was cold and Callie had a look on her face that was unlike what my adventure buddy had ever had on her face before. She pulled herself back along shore and grabbed for my arm, as I got my left foot free. Then she grabbed my ankle, still holding onto her bunch of river grass. She pulled and I pulled, and after about three minutes of maneuvering terror, I was free of the quicksand, something I didn't even know Kansas had. When I got home I asked Dad why the sand was so cold in the middle of summer. Since it hardly ever moved and was always saturated, it held its cold longer than the other sand that moved with the currents and was exposed to fresh water.

At the end of the day, we saw a crane dipping its long thin neck to about six inches above the water in full concentration, focusing on one section of it and scanning for a fish. We sat upright, balancing on our tubes, holding onto roots on the cliff-side to keep from scaring it away. There was nothing for the crane but the focus it had on getting what it needed to survive, and for the brief ten-second glimpse we caught of its wild ritual, we held our breaths in awe of the independent creature.

That river excursion was different than the others I had as a youth with my brother. Back then I just wanted somewhere to play, to imagine what my life would be like as an adult. I didn't think much about wilderness survival, whereas lately, I find myself wanting to feel that if I was

stranded out there for a month I could survive, build a shelter, light a fire, hunt and gather my food. How could it be that people long ago could do what I cannot? These were things I did not think about on my two-minute childhood river floats. These floats were so short because my brother and I had to walk our tractor tire tubes back up-river for ten minutes every time we got too far away from the parents. Doing so took five times the work, but the leg-busting walks back were well worth the float for two young kids. We wished to float along lazily for hours, but wouldn't dare think of walking against the current to get back to the beginning. We were the only navigators to explore this tract of the Smoky Hill River. His white, small brimmed hat was always more tan than white. He would take it off, hold it upside down, and scoop a hat-full of water into it and throw on his head when he was hot. Then he'd wear it wet until it dried again and had that stiff, river-water starchy feeling to it. Though he is two years younger, I have always wanted to be like him – free enough to throw water on my head and confident enough to risk that jump over fences instead of taking the time to spread the barbed wire and safely crawl through. Much faster than I, he was slim, wiry, and tough, as my dad tells me my grandpa was. Grandpa was so tough that at 80 in his hospital bed, he reached up to grab the bar above the bed and did pull-ups. When he was young, he loaded beets in Colorado all day long, and for fun afterwards, he and his friends lifted weights. I think my brother got the lucky genetic pool of “strong” genes from Grandpa, so I have always pushed myself to be as strong.

River time with him was a lot less treacherous, mostly because we were simply exploring and only when it was deemed safe. We'd dodge fallen limbs using a stick we carefully picked out before entering the river to pull ourselves over shallow parts of the sandy-bottomed Smoky Hill, while sand accumulated in our shorts and the belly of the hot, black tube scraped along the bottom. Many times it was so dry we spent more time scraping than floating. The only cool

places on the tubes were the spots where our legs rested absorbing the heat themselves, looking like pink tissue paper for at least three days after each expedition.

Today no matter what river I float on, I let my arms and legs hang off the tube, and my head fall back over the top of the tube so that it almost skims the cool water. Sometimes I think of my grandma who grew up on the Smoky Hill River eighty years ago only one mile from where our river bottom is, and she told me how she always loved going to the river each day to cool off, sit in the sand, and collect berries. She and her siblings often had to go to the river to check and protect the still from authorities. Not only was the river a fun place for her to relax, it was the place that kept the family of sixteen thriving. It was their water supply and the place they made alcohol to sell to support themselves during the Great Depression. One day's work at the still paid more than a week's wage as a farmer. One of Grandma's jobs was to watch the hillside for a black car because revenuers or feds drove those. Her dad was the first to tap the still and fill his pocket canteen. If a tablespoon of the liquid burned clear when lit with a match, he knew it was good to go. It's hard to imagine that this is the same river I fish and play in.

Often I will look up at the sky as I float along, swirled with wispy cirrus clouds, reflecting the many colors of the atmosphere as the sun slides further down to its resting place under the horizon. I think of what the river meant for my ancestors and what it means to me now. It still is a lifeline, a water source for cows and wildlife. But looking up makes my eyes water, yet I can't look away. It's like when I look at the sun, blood red as it sets in the western sky, almost dim enough to get a good stare at before it leaves a permanent green spot in its place. I smell the water, mossy and fresh with a brown-green, nearly clear color, until it is disturbed by the foot of a thirsty cow or a pair of adventurous explorers. I think to myself, *My grandma grew up playing in this water, and now so am I. I want it to be around for my children too.*

On cool, calm evenings there is a place where I hear the hoot of an owl who has lived in the same tree for years. If I get lucky enough to sneak up on her, I stop to watch her sit on the thick, sturdy limb. She turns her head, facing me with her big yellow eyes, without moving the rest of her body. Every feather is still as her glowing eyes survey the potential enemy. After a few moments she turns away, and I hope she senses that all I want to do is admire her. The animal life that surrounds me is always on my mind as I walk back to experience my float again. I try to not make a ruckus and scare off the animals. I move my feet in rhythm against the current, treading slow and strong. I feel a good sting of soreness in my legs that no machine can give. But the water reacts to every tiny leaf, speckle of sand or prancing bug that touches its glassy surface with a ripple, each one encouraging me to walk even more smoothly.

This Kansas stream is warmer than the mountain streams to the west. I dream of travelling the world, but when I feel the cool air blow across the water on a hot day, I realize the world I dream of is right here. Often at the end of a long summer day, all I want is to feel the mild breeze and look up at the stars. When I try to describe the perfect temperature, I think of these nights. Sometimes drought forces me to lie on my back to get totally submerged by the water. To dry off, I step on the sandbar, the sand clinging uniformly to my arms and legs until it washes off when I dip my warm body back into the river. When I submerge, the sand lifts off of my skin in a sheet and floats to the top of the water. Water that first posed so much resistance gives me such a feeling of peace and comfort now.

In the river valley at night, I feel nothing more than a sporadic breeze, barely enough to blow the bangs from my eyes, yet outside of it, the wind still blows, and the trees protect the river bottom and its inhabitants. Kansas is named for its early inhabitants, the Kansa tribes, the “People of the South Wind” or “Wind People.” The south wind still blows every summer, and

the farther west you get in the state, the stronger it blows. It makes the leaves of the cottonwood blow high above the rivers and creeks, and the state tree carries with it a history of its own.

According to author William Least-Heat Moon, some Plains Indians believed the shadows cast by the cottonwood could counsel the troubled soul. I think the sound and strength of these giant trees, standing straight in the wind, is what makes them deeply spiritual connections for me. So many times when I feel numb, I will lay my hand upon the trunk of a cottonwood for just a moment, looking up toward the top of its branches, and as its cotton falls during the hot summers, it's as if it's snowing in sweltering heat and taking with its floating cottonwood seeds, my worries.

A closer look at Smoky Hill River beaches rewards the searcher with treasures like tiny, intricate snail shells, different sea fossils, and sharks teeth, all reminders of Kansas' geologic past. I have always had that inexplicable need to look down to see what I can find. Once I found three sharks teeth lying in the sand, all very near each other, proof that this was once an ocean, and I tried to picture what it looked like—that hill in the distance that would either be an island in the Kansas Ocean, or entirely submerged. There are many treasures to be found. Big mussel shells (five inches by three inches) are usually broken and on shore, but one time my brother and I discovered a fully stuffed, slimy gray mussel in a brown shell and chose to set free so it could produce more of these amazing mussels for us to discover later. The shells of the dead were great for use as little trinket holders on my dresser at home, and if left on shore, they shone in the sun like I would imagine Hansel and Gretel's shiny, white pebbles the moon lit up when they were trying to escape the scary witch on that deserted path alone.

* * *

Before I floated on the river, I walked by it, and played on the fallen trees surrounding it. I was eight or nine when my aunt showed me the beach sands of the Saline River bottom, a decade before quick sand captured my leg there. Her farm was in the wilderness, about thirty minutes from a very small town in western Kansas. Fossils are in abundance here, where the Ogallala formation is ripe with skeletons of a previous civilization. In the formation's cliffs and valleys, I found my biggest shark's tooth – an inch-and-a-half long – lying on the chalky hillside after the heavy rain washed away some of the limestone covering it. My aunt often suggested we go fossil hunting after the rain, so when I found this jewel, all I could think is that I would show everyone I've ever known, but since it was not on my land, I had to ask my cousin if she wanted it. Her mom said that if one of us found something we should keep it. Years later I was saddened to find, in a rock shop in Colorado, that my priceless geological find had a price – \$5 and that there was an entire box of them even bigger than mine.

My cousin and I spent our times by her Saline River as young children dreaming of the day when we'd fall in love and each meet the man of our dreams in the wilderness. We'd have to have a reasonable explanation though. We pretended I was Pocahontas (because of my dark hair), and she was the escaped daughter of an English settler, and yet somehow my sister. *What can I say; we were kids.* She had the blond, angelic curls and I had the long dark brown hair reaching below my shoulders. Together we'd in the woods by a huge fallen cottonwood that created two beautiful den forts, one for each of us. We'd meet our cowboys, a pair of handsome brothers and fall in love. Once they'd see our mud pies, elegantly covered in flowers, rocks, sticks, and bark, we thought, they couldn't resist. We played this out dozens of times until we knew better.

* * *

Now when I recall river adventure as a child, I think of things other than sharks teeth, sand, and Pocahontas. Walking over trodden dried mud that had been touched first by American Indians, next by explorers, Old West wranglers, countless animals, and now me, I wonder what will become of this exquisite paradise in the future. As each year passes, the water seems to get lower and lower. My dad told me recently that Kansas was entering a dry period that could last ten years or more. What does that mean for the river? I am also concerned about the sheer amount of spray that local farmers spray on their fields, and it all runs off into the river when it rains. I worry that I shouldn't get in it even when I can. But I do anyway, because I love it and the memories it holds. This river I can sometimes jump over, but one that most people fly over or drive past, unaware of its existence and magnificence, is a lifeline for Kansas. This thing that defined my childhood is to someone passing through, just a bridge to drive over. It is a detail you notice when you have nothing else to distract you like a shopping mall or video game.

I will forever remember this place as my own paradise, green and flowing with water. Normally a flat, brown, elevator-streaked landscape, there certainly are mysterious jungles and small waterfalls hidden among the simple flatness here. I find that no matter where I am, if I look close enough, there are many places where paradise is hidden. I finally understand what Thoreau meant when he said "...It's possible to travel in your own backyard."

A Day in the Death of a Cicada

For two weeks I have seen dead cicadas, their carcasses clinging to fences. A few days ago, a cicada's corpse clung, frozen in stillness, to a bush where it will remain until it withers. This fall there are thousands of cicadas. I hear them when I walk to class in the morning and when I go to sleep. This two week period is their time to live. After that, a translucent, tan, hollowed-out beetle with wings, its alien-looking claws clinging to bushes, fences, and trees remains. The last one I saw made me think of death's imminence. The intricacy of the 17-year process of its growth underground, the frantic beat of shiny hard wings, the calm when the loudness ends or when a foot steps too close to the buzzing insect, all of that for two weeks of loud chatter in tall trees. There must be more to it than that. Why does it take a human fetus only nine months to form, while a green bug, its huge eyes poking outward from its head like ears on a teddy bear, a creature much less complex, takes so much longer?

Inevitably, several times each fall I try to pick up a still cicada as it clings to the sidewalk where feet rushing to class are constantly avoiding it as they walk. It stays so still it looks dead; I wonder if it is. People probably think I'm a weirdo, but I crouch down to look at it. I bring my index finger closer to my thumb, sensing from the insect tension and a need to be left alone. It's alive; it grips and clings with its giant claws as I gently attempt to lift it from the ground to place it in the grass. As I lift upward, trying to break the seal between its feet and the pavement, it churns out a quick buzz, loud enough to scare me and keep me from moving it further. Times before I have only wanted to see its underbelly, examine its striking patterns, look at the round shiny eyes that remind me of those big goldfish I used to see in fish tanks. I picked one up the year before with the same motive, to move it to some grass, but it was dead and perfectly

preserved. The patterns on its wings were intricate, the colorful design of its underbelly, yellow, green, and brown, vibrant and unique.

Every time I interfere with the life of a creature, even insects, I hear my dad's voice as he told me to leave bugs alone so they could be happy and wild. To his concerns I would many times reply with a totally legitimate reason for doing something with the bug. *I just wanted to see it or keep it as a pet*, etc. This time I figured my motive was to help it survive just a little longer by moving it from the pavement. I'm sure it would be grateful for the help. But never has that been the case.

When I see one sitting on the ground, usually in the middle of all sorts of chaos, bike tires, joggers, walkers, I know it's dying and obviously wants to be left alone, like I do when I have the stomach flu and lean over the toilet. I don't want a person there, asking me how I feel. Their presence doesn't bother me, but it distracts from feeling the whole process. Not like I want to drag out the process of waiting to vomit, but I feel the need to focus, to feel what is happening, and get to the end result. I always feel so much better afterward. But right now I'm about to puke my guts out, right on the edge, and I don't need you watching, I usually say in a totally desperate and weak state. Maybe this is what the cicadas feel like this as they sit, silent and still, waiting and focusing, going back to the soil they crawled out of only weeks before. Death is the natural end to its two-week journey of doing what it was meant to do, find a mate, rub its wings together in song, crawl to treetops, and grace the world with its simple presence.

The last cicada I spotted this season was on one of the stillest coldest mornings of fall to that point. On my early morning walk I saw the tan carcass of a dead cicada on a bush in the foggy mist. I wasn't looking for it; my eyes were drawn to it, through the mist. That morning there was not a car in sight in either direction, and I felt like I was almost the only person on

earth. That lasted for about a minute. At the very moment I recognized the feeling of being in solitude, I saw a car and the moment had passed. Still drawn to the bush, I walked toward it. The car had passed and I was alone again in the heavy fog. I walk during this time so I can be alone, and this morning gave me the feeling I was looking for. This street, normally a constant flow of traffic, was startlingly calm. I turned in all directions to look all around me; no one was around. I guess the fog made people, at one time I was one of them, want to stay inside all morning and sleep. The still air reminded me of how much I love the total lack of wind. Where I am from in western Kansas, every day is windy, all the time. But these tree leaves were absent of all motion. Even the grasses in the ditch were still. I looked up to see if the fog was moving, but it was one solid mass of mist. The day felt eerie as I stood in the middle of the road looking up and around taking it all in. As I remembered I was hungry and wanted to get home for breakfast, I still wanted to take a closer look at the cicada. Perhaps the stillness allowed this little guy the right to hold on for just another day or two. It must have been the wind, the reason I never noticed cicadas clinging to fences or bushes in western Kansas.

On my way up a hill toward home, the sun rises, burning up the morning mist, and the colors of the space around me fade a little. The cicada was still on my mind. I thought in a way I had not before about death. The subject had been coming up a lot lately. On that evergreen bush clung the six strong legs of the cicada carcass. It holds on eternally, waiting to be absorbed back into the earth, to re-enter the cycle of life in another format at the hand of the great erosive forces. By next season it's likely that no trace of it will remain whatsoever. It may hang there for a number of days weakening under the strains of sunlight, water, and wind, before it falls to be smashed underfoot with leaves, dirt, and grass clippings. Watching it, observing it, analyzing it seems crazy if I were to bother thinking about my actions in that moment. But I don't and I

didn't. In that moment, wondering, curious, appreciative, I looked at its body. A woman that stares at a dead cicada carcass has a lot on her mind.

What do I know about the cicada? To this point I have been privy to mostly random information surrounding the cicada, thanks to my dad, the ultimate curious adult who knows so much of everything. It has always been one of the "cool" bugs for our family. If my brother or I saw a cicada, we reported it repetitively and immediately to anyone who would listen. The cicada was right up there with the centipede, scorpion, praying mantis, and huge spiders in our world of bug mystery. I think I have inherited his sense of amazement at everything around me. A thing he says to my mom playfully after telling her some random fun fact, that is, when he gets a non-response or a flat *oh, that's neat*, is *Well, you don't really give a shit, do ya?* It has always made me laugh. Sometimes I tease Mom because now it is me, in addition to Dad, telling her what weird thing I learned today and noticing that she is trying to focus on making dinner and saying yes and uh-huh over and over. She'll respond in a way that confirms she is just saying yes without really understanding.

So Mom, what did I just say? She'll always smile and say, *okay, say it again; I was distracted.* I'm sure that I shared my cicadic knowledge with her at some point, awestruck at how some insect forms in the earth's womb for almost twenty years before hatching, living two weeks, making a hell of a lot of noise, and then dying. When I was young saw a cicada, which was a rare thing (and sensibly because they live in cycles of seventeen years) I ran up to it, reached out to pick it up, only to hear Dad say *Why don't you let it alone?* He wanted it to be free and live in its natural habitat. *The poor bastard only gets to live for two weeks and you want to imprison him!* was probably more of the way he said it though. Dad has always taught my brother and me to respect the rights of all living things. He told me the same thing, *Let 'em*

alone, about baby rabbits, horny toads, lizards, crows, hummingbirds, and pretty much any other animal I encountered and wanted to keep for a pet.

There was a time when my family was taking a walk in the pasture and I saw a cicada sitting on the ground. At the pinch of my fingers the green-winged, big-eyed, flying beetle made that buzzing sound that until then, I had only heard from thirty or forty feet away in tree tops. It was so loud it scared me and I jumped back. The iridescent bug was dying. That day in the pasture I explained to Dad how I could build it a little cicada ecosystem, just like nature. It could climb a branch; I'd put leaves and sand in, a little dish of water, the works. There, it could be safe and happy, I explained. To this plea, Dad smiled and I just barely recognized a look of what seemed to be pity. *Safe from what?* he must have thought. In his face I saw hope he had that someday I would understand these things for myself, that bugs and animals had lives of their own. They are comfortable in their world without my interference. I should be comfortable in mine.

Something changed. I thought I could provide all the cicada needed in an aquarium. I was wrong; wrong like the scientists who thought that biosphere 2 contraption could mimic nature in a glass dome, wrong like the people who think genetically modified foods, despite their sometimes harmful effects on animals, are just as healthy as native varieties. I remembered that day a lizard my brother and I caught. We found it near the creek bed sunning its tiny green and brown body on a piece of shale. A day after living in the mini ecosystem my brother and I had created, the peppy lizard became bored-looking, slow, tired. I freaked out. The response I got from Dad was reassuring. *Maybe if you turn him loose so he can run around, dig, catch bugs, and explore, he'll feel better. You've had some time to watch him; set him free where he belongs.*

I wondered what made the cicada die two weeks after coming up from the dirt. How is all that detail worth it? The intricacy of one example in millions astounded me. I felt wonder, the same kind I feel when I look at the stars when I'm in the country, when I can see the Milky Way cross the sky. There was a satisfying feeling at seeing it on that fence, still in the morning, alone except for me. It lived and died, no complications. It gripped that fence with the life-force of the last molecules in its body, and it was still holding on. No child moved this creature to a more comfortable place. It isn't pricked to a board in a museum. It's on exhibition where it lived and died, and it says to me, *I slept in the black, rich, and fresh-smelling soil, those quiet layers of earth, maturing while you were in your eighth year.* Small, young, alone in the wild, it had everything it needed, was perfect as it was, and didn't know what it was like to want things like an afterlife.

A Gathering Urge

Heraclitus compared life to a fire that is in measures being both kindled and extinguished. Matter and time flow like water. Leaves decay, becoming food for the growing tree in the spring.

At the end of June, with the ripening of the mulberries, what rests on my car in white splotches is no longer white, but purpled and flecked with tiny seeds. And yet, I like this part of the summer season, for I too spend it seeking out the wild, organic fruit of a tree native to central Kansas, the mulberry tree. Despite popular belief, Kansas land produces many types of fruit. Wild grapes, gooseberries, chokecherries, and mulberries grow around my childhood farmstead.

The most prevalent of these fruits, the mulberry, emerges from a dry brown, once fragrant, bloom, as a small white cluster topped with tan-colored seeds. As the cluster matures, the whitish translucent berry glistens in light with a hint of pink, like a soap bubble in the sun. The cluster later changes to a bright reddish-pink, and finally matures as a royal purple berry, almost black, the size of the top half of my thumb. It looks like a raspberry, but is softer and more delicate when ripe. Mulberry season is short. Berries ripen, fall, and rot within a three-week period, and if one wants to harvest, checking the trees every day is necessary, with the Kansas wind blowing the delicately hanging berries barely clinging to the branches.

Mulberry harvest requires no human effort, no watering, fertilizing, or spraying. As a solo berry picker, I gather on my own, close to the harvest, not removed from a process as intimate as placing food in my body. The berries digest, finding a place in complex human body function. The various compositions of wild fruit make me thrive in mind, body, and spirit, as I find that the closer I place myself to the act of getting my own food, the more alive I feel.

When my family joins me on the hunt I am glad to have partners to roam the rivers and pastures picking whatever berries are native to that area, eating foods in season. The harvest allows me fruit smoothies throughout the summer and winter, along with the occasional mulberry pie cooked on a late night when the heat has died down. If I focus on yield instead of experience, sometimes a mulberry gathering becomes industrialized. To get more than a bowl full at a time, I use a technique my grandfather taught my mother as a child: the mulberry drop cloth.

I roll a blanket I don't mind getting stained with mulberry blood under my arm, and each member of my family grabs handfuls of bowls. We walk alongside the Smoky Hill River where old mulberry trees grow in clusters. Around thirty feet tall, their branches hang low with the weight of ripe, dark berries. The berries are plentiful, larger and sweeter than the berries from smaller trees.

Mulberry hunting keeps a tradition alive. At least two of us hold the blanket while a third taps a branch lightly and in rapid succession. The arms and necks of the two blanket holders tire quickly. The more berries fall, the heavier the blanket gets as its center moves closer to the ground. When my neck hurts from looking up to gauge where the berries are to fall, I think of something I heard about the hunter gatherer cultures of early humans. Humans used to look up to spot food in trees, whether it was fruit or animals to hunt. Rarely today do people look up for anything. Is my neck evolutionarily growing weaker?

Along with a plentiful harvest of ripe berries, come leaf stems, twigs, and bugs. So before berries move from blanket to container, we pick out the waste, eating our fill of the ripest of the succulent, delicate berries.

The act of gathering keeps me coming back for mulberries. I can think I have picked a tree clean, and if I walk away for an hour and come back in passing, should I feel like grabbing a handful of fruit, it is there; all I have to take is the time. The earth provides for me just as it does the birds and bugs that live below the tree's leaves and above its deep roots. A mulberry harvest reminds me of my connection to earth, my dependence on its providence, and our partnership of life. When I stand beneath a mulberry tree, in its shade gathering berries, I am cooled and nourished by its shade, and so are the berries.

* * *

Last spring my mom got the phone call that Grandma was dying. I didn't know what I thought or felt. There had been so much pain waiting for her to recover, knowing that she never would. And I knew this was what she wanted after always hearing her own pleas for death every time I visited her. Immediately after the phone call, Dad left to go see her. He said he would call if anything happened, and after he left, I could do nothing but grab a container, my cowboy hat, my sunglasses, and go outside barefooted to pick mulberries from the trees in the backyard.

Outside, the still, hot, and humid air coaxed moisture from my skin. My hat kept air from reaching my scalp. Quiet storm clouds gave me comfort as they bloomed in the distance, building and growing. It was eerily calm, so calm I thought if I could listen closely enough I might hear the tall cumulonimbus clouds growing in front of me. I began to pick berries, to think about grandma, wondering what she was feeling, what she was thinking about. Did she think of Heaven as a new dimension? Between the cluster of three young mulberry trees I had already gathered a *Cool Whip* container half-full of ripe mulberries. My feet were cool on the bottom, moist with the juice of ripe berries that had fallen to the ground. They ripened before my fingers

could grasp them, blown off by the south summer wind, or released from the tiny shriveled green stem that connects the berry to the mother tree.

I harvested mulberries like Grandma had taught my dad, who taught me. I stood, pivoting around the trees, looking at branches from different angles, moving leaves away with one hand, and using the other to gently loosen each berry from its branch. I gathered, welcoming any light breeze, any chance to feel the life around me, the energy in the air, the same particles that reside in my body and beyond the sun that warmed me as I stood there, sinking my toes deeper into the grass, searching for any coolness I could find. Maybe I would go on a jog later, run until I couldn't run any more, run until my legs kept moving without my brain commanding them to do so, looking past everything and everyone I saw toward the edge of the horizon, into the space that encompassed my body and my grandmother's, not knowing though, for how long that would be the case. Standing there focused on my task, I felt like there was at least something I could do, something I could control.

Meanwhile, life was leaving my Grandmother's body from the feet upward. Was it how she thought it would be? Did she think of Heaven as a place to be with God, like the Blue Room she told me about, the one she saw in a dream, where Grandpa waited for her. *It was the prettiest blue*, she said, like the blue she saw in the sky one day. That day she stood on her porch in the valley, looking south at the sky above the horizon. She said there was not a single cloud to be found anywhere except above the tree on top of the hill. The tiny cloud floated, and as she thought about Grandpa, suddenly and for no apparent reason, it vanished in a poof. *I wonder what made it do that*, she told me. I longed to ask her what she was feeling, seeing, thinking, but she could not talk. She struggled, making loud sounds, but giving up, stared straight to the ceiling. I was scared and wondered why she could not speak.

Annie Dillard wrote about death, wandering in places in search of ideas. To her, feelings and lives on earth are something like pieces of a woven scarf of intricate textures, unlimited depth, endless colors. I imagine this scarf she wrote about floating in quiet blackness, swirling at the behest of a mysterious energy, looking flat once, and dimensional upon a second look. Perhaps deep in the weave of such a scarf, Grandma lives in another dimension, watching everything she did not understand here, excited to finally see the things she was unable to see while she lived like I do. Sometimes I ask her to help me see what she can see now, that life is now, that I should not worry about little things, that I should take chances and live like I am dying, because I am and we all are. It might be that she is no longer distracted by the visions of others, but has only one vision in mind, the ultimate vision, the vision of the universe as one breathing entity, connected infinitely, each of our minds a strand of DNA in the great living organism, a leaf on a branch connected to a tree full of leaves rustling in the wind.

I thought of connections there, beneath the tree that day. The Native Americans believed the cottonwood tree to be sacred, a reminder of a Higher Powers. The leaves give a face to the wind. The wind carries life in its particles. Emerson says *we live in particles*.

One of the vivid colors in the scarf is the purple of a mulberry as my hand picks it from a tree in the summer and places it in my mouth. It becomes a part of me, mixing, nourishing, fulfilling. It enters not a segment of linear time, but a phase that begets another phase. I am calm.

Now. Beneath the trees picking my berries, robins and red-winged blackbirds rest on bending branches, undisturbed, within five feet of me, eating berries. They are comfortable with my presence, and we gather mulberries together.

They switch between eating berries and drinking from the birdbath. The wrens, cardinals, sparrows, robins, and blackbirds splash their fluffed wings and feathers, cooling their bodies in their drinking water.

In the spaces between leaf and sun, I feel patches of light touch the top of my feet. The warmth penetrates my skin, and I know that this is more than skin deep. The body takes the sun's energy and converts it to Vitamin D, moving life and vigor to my bones. The sun is high and my feet burn with the intense energy until I move them to a shady spot. I am like the birds, ready to fly at any sudden urging, singing for reasons I can only guess at. I am here because of the trees, because they give me a vision of what life and death, light and dark, wind and calm might be. No people are around, and I feel for a moment that time has given me a brief rest, like it's saying, here are two minutes, and then we will resume.

When I move to another spot on a tree, though I have circled the trees several times, the places I have covered have still more mulberries. Maybe I will leave these for the birds, ants, bees, beetles—the throng of life that has come to the trees at the behest of the mulberry. My focus shifts from near to far, from mulberry to horizon, and my eyes, watering from the brightness of the sun on the whiteness of the monstrous clouds, cannot look for more than a few seconds. I lift my sunglasses to my face. To my right lies the remote southwest; in front of me, straight east. I see a long band of cumulonimbus clouds, the ones that any Kansas native knows mean big storms with lightning, thunder, and hail. The bubbles of humidity churn and bulge in the great quiet, and without the aid of my binoculars, I watch them bloom like a marshmallow in a microwave.

I stood there, a few mulberries in hand, the rest of my harvest waiting in the shade for the cool refrigerator, and looked at the line of thunderheads. Some gaps indicated “super cells,”

lone, small, unpredictable systems that independently rotate and build, especially dangerous because the only certain thing about them is their guaranteed severity and unpredictability. All we can do to understand them is follow them as they grow, observing new signs as they arise in hopes of understanding the storm. Humanity has figured out some of Mother Nature's secrets because of the urge to understand, the signs that follow what Einstein called "holy curiosity." I watched these clouds move east, their violent beauty building. And with a perfect view, I was nearly positive that I was not in danger; for the clouds were merging into a line of storms and moving east.

I suddenly felt the need to capture my feelings, the wonder, the calm, for I knew it could not last. I ran inside with my mulberries, and grabbed my camera. I exposed a reel of film to the light and orchestrated its landing on a dimension of amber-colored plastic. Three photos captured the entire storm line in panorama.

Results: three or four hours picking berries and watching clouds. A task becomes the possessor of all attention so my thoughts are only on the present. A mulberry bursts sweet on my tongue, smooth liquid like syrup with mulberry seeds encased in clear membranes, sliding down my throat, past my heart and through my system, nutrients to my blood, my skin, my brain and out again, back to the earth. The act of picking mulberries, one by one, with a gentle touch, is spiritual, connective. After a few minutes, my fingers flow gently from berry to berry without thought. Flies land on berries that have fallen to the ground or rot on branches. Butterflies drink from the purple mush that falls on living leaves and old limestone fence posts. Bees buzz around. Creatures hum with activity around a fruiting tree. This complex chain of life rests in one contained ecosystem for a matter of a few weeks.

Not a single berry is unaccounted for. Animals on the ground, birds in the trees, insects, beetles, bacteria, field mice and rabbits, all eat the berries in their various stages. The droppings of animals litter the ground around the trees, a loop in the circle of life as the waste of each feeds nutrients to the other in a synthesis that leads to deep roots. My hands, fingernails, cuticles remain stained purple for a day or two in respect of my place in the energy of the harvest. The shirt I wear becomes tie-died with the blood of a mulberry hunt. And the more of any of these results, the more successful I am.

There is a naturalness that comes with gathering my own food in this way, saving it over the winter, enjoying a luxury grown from a place on the land that is remote and independent of human aid. As a mulberry gatherer and lover of nature I live in particles, like the rain, the sun, the dirt, the air. An animal at the top of the food chain, I know my place in the cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth through decay that I witness at my feet every time I stand beneath a mulberry tree. The seed that germinates into a fast-growing tree blooms and bears fruit its first year, in the innocent vigor of wild life. The fruit becomes the ground through droppings or fallings, and in a bursting, its purple blood mixes with dirt in a pact of mud that promises eternal life.

Pear Grove

The smell of pears lying on the ground under branches bending, heavy with the weight of early October's pear harvest. It was the first thing that reminded me I was alive that day. A grove of pear trees is located at a busy round-a-bout where most campus traffic passes by. I walk by a fountain just before I pass the pear grove every morning and afternoon on my way to and from teaching and class. Surprisingly, to me anyway, I never see anyone picking pears, ever. I had discovered the pear grove during the fall of my first year on campus, and it reminded me of the joy of picking fresh fruit straight from the tree. When I first saw the tree hanging heavy with fruit I didn't know what fruit I was seeing. Upon walking closer to the trees that night, after a long night in the library, I discovered pears. I took off my backpack and filled it full. A friend told me pears are best when picked in September when they are green. Then you place them in a brown paper bag and wait for about a month or so. They ripen to a soft yellow and taste gritty and soft at the same time.

Not knowing this information in my first year, I took a wild guess and figured out on my own how to get the perfect pear. I could tell these pears were green and knew a dark paper bag makes the best home for any unripe fruit or vegetable. I had two paper bags about half-full of pears each that year.

When I reached for the branches to pick my first pear I wondered if anyone was watching. Maybe they would think I was just really weird. Maybe a cop would drive by. Maybe some creeper was watching me. All I knew was that I wanted pears and here they were. My heart was beating fast. It was getting harder to see the pears as it got darker. I had to climb one of the trees because the branches on it were much higher. Several cars passed me and I hoped to God they didn't see me. *And if they do see me, I thought, please don't stop.*

It's not that it wasn't nice getting all those pears. That night was exciting for me because fruit picking is an experience for any child raised in western Kansas. Sure we had some fruit, but not like this. Once a year we would get lucky and get a bucket full of apples if the raccoons had not gotten to them first. And if we were really lucky, the raspberry plants would do well, providing us with about five raspberries each every day. I would like to imagine if people on my campus back home saw pears like these they would flip out much like I did, but who knows, they might not care either. The problematic part of this first fruit picking experience was my unease. I felt scared and worried the whole time. *This is not what most people do*, I thought. Some people had *heard* we weren't allowed to pick pears from these trees on campus, though they had never gotten in trouble or knew anyone who did. Was I trespassing? Stealing? From the large amount of fruit lying on the ground and the fact that I wasn't harvesting a bushel full, just a few, I decided to risk it. That night I left with my bag full and a release of a breath I was partially holding for the entire twenty minutes. No one should partially hold a breath that long. It was just one of those many indicators of my being what I sometimes refer to as *tightly wound*. I was all alone for the first time in my life, in a new town, picking pears.

* * *

There are places I remember picking fruit in dry and windy western Kansas, prone to late freezes that kill the sweet, white buds of few peach, pear, and apricot trees planted in places I knew—my great aunt's, and both of my grandma's houses. The perfect storm for a fruit tree: It seems to be an early spring; it has rained a few times; the tree is setting on buds, coming out of its winter dormancy. Then out of nowhere, buds on the trees, a freeze happens. It gets down to around twenty-five degrees, what my dad calls a *hard freeze*. It is because of this typical occurrence, I can count the times on one hand when we harvested anything. Twice I picked

peaches and twice, apricots. My family was surprised to hear that fruit trees were so successful in Lawrence, especially considering that Lawrence, Kansas, and Hays, Kansas, are on the same line of latitude. The difference here is more moisture that seems to keep Lawrence milder once it starts warming up. Flowers bloom sooner, and most importantly, the last freeze of the season occurs earlier in the year. Hays still feels the shadow of the Rockies, a more extreme landscape, drier and hotter in the summer, and colder longer in the winter. The folks were surprised I lived twenty minutes from a peach orchard and a vineyard. It appeared eastern Kansas had its benefits.

I always hear the saying, *You don't know what you have until it's gone*. But I didn't know what I was missing until I got here. My fresh pears tasted unlike anything I had in a long time, and I thought back to the first fresh peach I plucked from a tree. It hung wet on the branch after a thunderstorm at my grandma's house. She lived in Munjor, the small, unincorporated town a few miles outside of Hays. Her house was on the town's farthest western street, *Samara*, situated in the middle of the biggest lot in town, and right next to a field. Her back porch was the perfect place to watch a sunset or a storm come in because everything to the west was empty—no trees, no houses, just that big, flat field and the open sky. A couple hours before I picked that first peach over a decade ago, storm clouds moved in and it began to rain. The thunder rumbled so deep and low that it vibrated the windows. The bright afternoon, hot and still, became dark and cool, fast. Munjor Grandma (I called her this because she lived in the small town), turned on the weather and the two of us watched the familiar red blob moving across the screen from west to east outlined by yellow and green. The redder the blob, the more rain. If the blob was pink and the sky was green outside, there was hail, and those were the circumstances that afternoon. I knew at the young age of ten, more about the weather than any person except a meteorologist

should. But since I live in tornado territory to this day, I've decided it can't hurt to know more than average about the weather.

That afternoon the two of us sat in front of the television, listening to the rain falling hard, tapping the windows from the west, whipping the leaves into each other, and bending the trees with the wind. The two of us looked up at the ceiling and then back at each other in shock at the amount of water we heard falling from the sky. We both knew that the peach picking on our list for tomorrow morning should have been on the list for *this* morning, and would now be on the list for this evening after the storm. If we didn't get out there then, the raccoons would get to the peaches, or the fruit would lie on the wet grass all night, getting smelly and soft.

We could tell by the radar that though this storm dumped huge amounts of rain, it was not a storm system (that would make it rain off and on for hours), but a super-cell, a small and tall bunch of clouds with high winds, hail, and plenty of lightning and thunder. Used to the frequent storms, we could tell this one was one of those fun storms—the ones with morphing clouds one can watch grow with a pair of binoculars. Severe enough to be entertaining but not deadly, and not with big enough hail to ruin our beloved peach tree that had not produced peaches in four seasons. We both enjoyed the storm and the cool air it brought behind it.

After fifteen minutes of watching Merrill Teller, our local meteorologist, prance across the screen in his fancy suit, pointing at the colored blobs, we looked out her back window on the west side of the house. I moved the off-white lacey curtain to see a bright blue streak of sky behind the dark cloak of heavy rain. We could still hear Merrill talking from the living room. He seemed so excited when spring weather started up. He talked about weather radios, as his eyes widened and his breath seemed shallower so that he could get all of his words out at the fastest possible speed. Dad ends up ultimately saying every year, "Geez, I think Merrill's getting

a woody off this storm.” Inappropriate, I know, but that’s Dad. And I was always glad when company wasn’t there to hear these kinds of comments during severe weather.

Munjoy grandma’s comments about Merrill were more tame, and always summed up by the statement, “I don’t know why he thinks he needs to get all gussied up to do a ten minute segment on the weather.” Even as a child I told her that the news people made him, and that he’d probably wear jeans and a t-shirt if he had the choice.

When the storm was over Grandma said, “Grab some buckets and we’ll go pick peaches.” She has always been the person who doesn’t say much, at least not more than absolutely needed. She also doesn’t say goodbye before leaving. One morning after she spent the night with us in town we woke up and she was gone. I used to think she was mad or something, but I think, after too many years trying to decipher her different behavior, that this is just how she is. There’s no bullshit with her. If she wants her lawnmower blades sharpened, she leaves them on our porch and when we get home, Dad knows he has some work to do before we see her. She still leaves rather abruptly. Like if she’s talking with my mom and me and I get up to go use the bathroom, sometimes I’ll come back and she’s gone. And it’s a totally normal occurrence, one that happens almost every time I see her. I used to get so bothered about it I would ask mom what was up. One time she told me that Grandma’s family was just different. They didn’t hug much, and they never said I love you or anything of that sort. Mom said that they were the most loving and generous people she had ever met, especially my great grandmother. I felt like a fool after asking her because all this time I thought it was because Grandma didn’t really like us as much or something.

One of those times when I didn’t really know what to think was that first time I picked fruit from a tree. Shouldn’t she be more excited? The whole time I asked her questions that she

answered as briefly as possible, picking peaches, placing them in buckets according to condition: ripe—*save*, fallen and bruised—*eat immediately or throw out into the neighbor's field*, not worth keeping—*let's not mow over them*, and perfect—*eat as you pick*, were among her categorizations for certain buckets. I was especially excited when, between my constant questions of where to put this peach and that peach, she said, “Here, Lisa,” and handed me a perfect, fuzzy, apricot-sized peach. There was not a hint of green on it, and she explained how surprised she was that it had managed to stay on in the storm. She gently plucked it from the tree, handed it to me and said, “Enjoy that one.” I took it, surprised she didn't eat it, and I bit into it, rain-washed and cool, sweet and tart at the same time. It was half the size of normal peaches from the store. It tasted more than twice as good. This was the first time I knew for sure she was a genuine person exactly because she only said what she meant and meant what she said. There was no need to say anything. She was picking peaches and showing me how it's done. That was the first day I remember not only eating fruit from a tree, but learning how to just do something, without pomp or narration or all the extra talk that pollutes moments.

* * *

After I tasted my first peach, I wanted to learn all about peaches and other fruit trees, especially cherries. I couldn't understand how one year we could have peaches and the next year we didn't. Mom and grandma both said it was because of the freeze, and I thought, *Well it freezes all the time*. I later found out that if a fruit tree of any kind begins to bud and bloom, and there happens to be one last cold spell before spring turns to summer, the bloom dies, turning black and indicating that there will be no fruit. However, it is possible that a fruit tree with buds can survive even if it freezes, and it seems to depend on how much below freezing it gets and how far opened the buds are.

One year, and this was one of the two times I have seen our apricot trees bloom and actually produce fruit at Farm Grandma's, the trees began to bud and it froze, dropping to about twenty-six degrees. Farm Grandma, my dad's mother, lived about twenty minutes from Munjor, on a secluded farm by Big Timber Creek, not far from the Smoky Hill River. She had several apricot trees on the farmstead, and years earlier had apple, peach, and pear trees, but they had died when I was too young to remember them. That season, we thought our much-anticipated July apricot harvest was nothing but another lost dream. But luckily, the buds were tough enough to take it.

I went out the morning after the freeze with my brother and we looked at the blooms. They weren't black and crunchy. This meant we had reason to hope for two weeks of apricots for breakfast in cereal, apricots after lunch, apricots frozen and blended with banana, vanilla ice cream, and strawberries for an afternoon smoothie, apricots for dinner in a glaze on chicken, and apricots for desert in freshly baked, warm apricot crisp.

Over a decade since my first fruit experience, I came to Lawrence, Kansas, further east on the same line of latitude, a place with a lot more rain where people grew apples, peaches, pears, apricots, strawberries and more. I came here to study and got the added benefit of entering fruit heaven. One of the first things I did with my family was travel to the peach orchard to pick peaches. We purchased twenty-two pounds, over five pounds of peaches per person, and ate them within a week. I went to wineries with my friends, tasting wine and picking grapes. I bought apples at the farmer's market. And I picked pears on campus even though my first graduate professor, a scary short woman, told me it was illegal when she heard me telling my friends before class that I made delicious pear crisp the night before with the campus pears.

* * *

Walking by the pear grove this October, my last fall in Lawrence, I smell the scent of sweet rot, hear bees buzzing around the fallen pears, and make my way across the street to the grove. There have been pears on the trees awhile, but now they are ripening, turning yellow, and falling. Usually I wait for a late evening to pick pears because for one, it is a high traffic area and people stare. Two, I feel like my old graduate professor from three years ago will pop out from behind a bush with a cell phone and call the campus police to tell them that I have been illegally pilfering pears throughout the duration of my graduate career.

Despite these somewhat ridiculous reasons, this day I decide it would be nice for people to see someone picking pears whilst looking prissy. *Why go home and then come back later, I think.* Still in my teaching outfit including fancy shoes that made noise when I walked, a skirt that one of my students told me vibed “cat power,” and a shiny shirt that turned light tan to dark brown from top to bottom, I grabbed a bunch of pears straight from the ground. When I exhausted those, I reached up, shaking the tree, hoping some would fall. Two did. So I shook harder while simultaneously swinging the branch left to right. *This must be a great show for all these people driving by,* I thought. This year had been particularly taxing, so much so that I forgot about early pear harvest in September, and now got a taste of tree-ripened pears instead. I also have stopped caring as much about what other people think. I am hoping this is what Oprah calls getting older because she has always claimed that getting older is much more fun than being young. You’re supposedly more confident, less uptight, comfortable with yourself, the works. This seems to be on track with what I’m feeling, so bring on the confidence. I’m picking pears, and I don’t give a damn if you think it’s weird. Oh, and guess what, I eat these too!

The smell of the oversweet pear juice crystallizing in the dirt, the pieces of leaves and dirt and twigs falling in my groomed hair, the feel of stickiness on my hands, and my caked-with-

pear-mush shoe bottoms remind me of someone I deeply miss. For the two years prior to my last pear harvest on this campus, I had a partner in crime. My cousin Callie pear hunted with me here. The two of us, both from western Kansas, love camping, getting dirty, and consistently making people wish they had enough guts to do the things we did. “Is this allowed?” I asked her the second time we went, bags in hand to the pear grove, mostly just to emphasize that it probably wasn’t allowed, but that we would do it anyway. She responded with an exhale and a laugh. “If it is, then let someone stop us. We’ll say we didn’t know and then come back to get more pears later.” Or maybe I said that.

We exchanged a mischievous smile as she handed me the bags and climbed the pear tree to get more than we could from the ground. With my eagerness to do new things and her confidence in her own ideas of what we are both capable of, the combination can become a bit crazy—say for example, when we’re hiking a high-altitude mountain trail in the afternoon, a time when lightning is prone to strike in the Rocky Mountains. But that is another story. Let’s just say the kind of crazy I’m talking about is pear-picking-without-express-permission crazy.

But now, during my last year in Lawrence, I pick pears alone, and not only that, but I am doing so in broad daylight. Callie has moved to Rochester, New York, to study opera, but I’m still eager to take advantage of the local, organic, free food provided by my campus. It’s not the same without her; I have to psyche myself into going alone again. I open my book bag, move the pencil case and water bottle from the smaller large pocket, and pick pears from the ground, one by one, examining them for black splotches or squishy parts. If they pass the glance, I drop them in. For ten minutes, hunched and holding my bag by the top tiny handle, I bend under branches, step over gooey ground pears, and loaded up on nature’s harvest, careful that an

unexpected gust of wind can't catch my skirt and give the passers by more entertainment than I already was.

As I gathered pears, cars passed by and students talked on their cell phones. One Asian girl stopped and looked at me, then up at the trees, then kept walking. I almost yelled over to say the pears were good, and that she should pick a few, but she seemed too aware of all the people around us. I stopped caring if people were watching me pick the pears. The worry of cops didn't enter my mind in any way. And my teacher who had warned me two years earlier still didn't know because she never asked or tried. But that isn't what I thought of while I was gathering the fruit. I focused on watching where I stepped, selecting quality pears, and not saying too much while doing it. I closed my bag, zipped it at least five pounds heavier, and thought of Callie in New York, over a thousand miles away. Then I crossed the street and headed home to make some pear crisp and call her.

Following Stars

“To confine our attention to terrestrial matters would be to limit the human spirit.”

-Stephen Hawking

Terry Tempest Williams on a healing pilgrimage in the Utah desert: “A meteor flashed and quickly disappeared. In the West Desert of the Great Basin, I was not alone.”

William Least-Heat moon by a campfire on the Tallgrass Prairie: “A circled presence, like a miasma, pressed in, and how long it remained I don’t know, but a meteor, the slowest falling one I ever saw, dropped right across the Great Bear like a thrown spear, and then the circle seemed to loosen, and things regained their accustomed positions, dispositions.”

One more time, I whispered under my breath. Let me see it one more time.

From the crashing satellite that in a moment of shock I thought might spell doom for Earth during a high school football game, to the meteor with the power of 1000 Hiroshima bombs that just missed Earth on March 4, 2009, by an astronomically small 12,000 miles, stars, both “shooting” and steady, captivate me. Years ago I learned of the causes of meteor storms: Comets. Behind these collections of ice, rock, and dust follow long tails of debris that enter the Earth’s atmosphere as “shooting stars.” What I observe as falling golden specks are pieces of space “stuff” breaking up in Earth’s atmosphere. Falling stars are visible anytime, but “peaks,” “showers,” or “storms” occur on certain times of each month when comet’s tails regularly pass by Earth.

I have been an avid meteor watcher for over half of my life. I tell everyone I know where constellations, planets, and meteor showers are and when. I am an encyclopedia of general astronomy information, as some friends call me. So when I caught myself wondering when it was first discovered that meteor showers occurred regularly and from certain points in the sky, I wanted to know more. I picked up a book in the science library on campus and found out that

people knew little about meteor showers until 1833 when the entire North American continent east of the Rocky Mountains was introduced to the most spectacular meteor shower in recorded history. During November of that year, scientists estimate that up to 200,000 meteors fell every hour. It was so bright people were awakened in the middle of the night by bursts of light outside their windows in the night sky. Newspapers of the time wrote of the meteor shower as Judgment Day, for people had no idea of the origin of meteor showers. It was this spectacular shower that finally led to investigation of the causes of the regular occurrence of falling stars, and it was eventually discovered comets were the culprit, after many other theories were shot down. The meteor shower, the Leonids, was titled such because the apparent *radiant* or *origin* of the falling stars in the night sky, was and still is today, the constellation Leo, the Lion. The Leonids has been called, since its first discovery in 1833, the “King of Meteor Showers” because of the characteristic long-lasting trails of the meteors and the varying colors of “fireballs,” as this shower’s meteors are often referred to.

While I am fascinated with meteor showers, stationary stars and the heavens in general are my imagination’s playground. The ancients believed the heavens were home to the gods and that falling stars signified the descent of a god or its image to Earth, for example, the Star of Bethlehem that proceeded the birth of Jesus Christ, the son of God for Christian religions. The Babylonians said the passage of a meteor across the heavens, especially if it was bright and had a long tail, was an omen of good fortune. Even today, one of the greatest treasures of the Vatican is a painting depicting an Italian meteorite in the form of a fireball, as though the stone is animated with a divine spirit.

Stars, falling or stationary, are fascinating, beautiful, and often taken for a sign or spiritually significant moment. One six-mile wide falling star put an end to the largest reigning

creatures on Earth, bringing with it not only what must have been one hell of a show, but an enormous, destructive power beyond imagination. I wonder what a six-mile-wide falling star would look like. Why did past civilizations, especially the Greeks name the stars? Could they have known their hobby would help us find our way in the world? Did they guess that millennia later, humans would still use their maps to hunt for extraterrestrial objects with crisp precision? Maybe they never imagined their nights out on blankets under the stars, naming eighty-eight constellations would create a map for NASA to use in locating star clusters, galaxies, and other space mysteries like black holes, red giants, and white dwarfs. Could they imagine that humans would one day know of a star in one of their constellations, Orion, and discover it was a red giant, Betelgeuse?

* * *

That first encounter of mine with a meteorite was during my last year of college. My geology professor took a group of us students to a site near Wilson Lake where some campers claimed to have seen a small explosion near their tent the night before. Their dog was in his pet taxi outside when he started barking suddenly, waking the two campers who saw a small, black, charred section of grass along with a hole in the ground and flames burning around it. Another family near the tent said they saw the flash and believed it to be a meteor. Caution tape surrounded a ten by ten foot section of ground, adding to the excitement. I learned that even if one sees a meteor fall and land, it's hard to determine how deep it is for we do not know its speed, plus we are unsure of its angle of trajectory. It is for these reasons that meteors are most easily found on the ice sheets of Antarctica where the white ice and snow are smudged by their coal-black paths. Like our group expected, we dug but to no avail, for our search revealed no material results.

In astronomy class I learned that red and blue shifts in the light spectrum tell scientists if a planetary body is moving closer to or away from us. Right now a red shift reveals the universe is expanding; the space between everything is increasing. A star is made of gases, hydrogen, and helium, and all of the stars burn at different rates until they run out of fuel to burn. Each one of those stars has a solar system of its own that may resemble that of our sun and its nine or so planets. My study of science has taught me that there is not one human body or item on this Earth that doesn't have the same building blocks, the same bits of carbon and iron that have been circulating in the farthest edges of the universe both before and since the beginning of time on Earth over 4 ½ billion years ago. In that collection of debris, Earth formed; sea creatures and trilobites became the first vertebrates lying on the ocean floor driven by volcanic ash and fire. Extra-large dragonflies and insects flew; leafy plants, huge dinosaurs, and mammals arose. And so did I.

I find that there is not one person I have met that isn't fascinated when I point out constellations or tell them about the next meteor shower coming up. All we have to do to leave the solar system is look up, though that can be hard for the majority of the population that live in cities, prevented from doing so by light pollution. The light on the surface keeps people today from being able to look up and see the mysteries of space that our ancestors were so keen to decipher for thousands of years. Author, sailor, and navigator Philip Gerard captures some of the wonder of star gazing when he writes: "Now look up at the sky and imagine that discovery of order on such a vast scale that even level-headed scientists cannot comprehend its scope." Stars act as maps for navigators on the sea, helping a sailor fix his position accurately without radar or GPS technology. The constellations were mapped thousands of years ago by ancient Babylonians and Sumerians, and first documented by the Greeks as constellations, and serve today as a way

for NASA to find its way around the universe. The North Star helps backpackers in the northern hemisphere get our bearings if we happen to be unsure of where we are.

Stars like our sun have planets orbiting them, so as I look into the night sky at stars much larger than ours, I recall what author Carl Sagan wrote in *Contact*, provoking readers to consider that if one out of a million solar systems like ours had life, and if one out of a million of those had intelligent life, that there would literally be billions of planets like Earth in the universe. It is a captivating thought to consider that intelligent life may exist on other planets, in other solar systems, in other galaxies. The silence of the night is only pierced by each twinkle of a star. And as Stephen Hawking said, “We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special.”

My first infatuation with the cosmos. It occurred on an August 11 when I was a young middle-schooler. The annual Perseids meteor shower, so-called because the radiant of the shower is the constellation Perseus, is the second-best meteor shower in my opinion (behind the Leonids). That year’s Perseids was expected to have an unusually large turnout of well over 100 meteors per hour, according to Merrill Teller, chief meteorologist of Channel 7 News. My dad mentioned it to my brother and me as something potentially interesting, probably figuring that neither of us might care, but it turned out that a candle inside me that still hasn’t burned out, was lit by this suggestion. I hated getting up early then as much as I do today, so I know I must have been very compelled to see what this meteor shower would bring.

The night before that early morning, I borrowed an old ticking alarm clock from my mom and set it for 2:45 am, which was the suspected peak of the shower. I asked Dad where the constellation Perseus was located so that I could watch the appropriate part of the sky and increase my chances of spotting some meteors. That night when I went to sleep, I remembered

hearing about Haley's Comet passing and not coming around for almost 100 years. I remembered how angry I was at having missed Haley's show a few years earlier, and I knew that our local weatherman's warning of "the best in a lifetime" would not elude me this time, at least not just so I could get some extra sleep. If nothing else, I figured that I would at least know what this "meteor shower" was instead of wondering what I missed out on. My brother decided to join me on my first meteor watching expedition. As went to sleep that night, I pictured meteors falling, squirting, blasting all over the north-eastern skyline, and I knew I needed to sleep fast.

The next morning I woke feeling more rested than I knew I should, alarmed that day was breaking outside. I turned to the floor next to my bed and saw my ticking alarm clock lying on its back, the tiny button depressed. It was 5 am. I got up as fast as I could, knowing it was still possible to see a few meteors if I hurried. *It's never too late.* I woke Ken and we got in our sandals and ran out the back door. We stood in the big yard to the west, looking into the southern sky, for the sun was rising in the east and that was the brightest part of the sky, and brightness is something we wanted to avoid. We stood there, in our pjs, still in waiting, not moving at all as we stared, faces up-turned. The sky was colored in a way I had never seen before: a combination of light pink turning to peach with a hint of gray. The remainder of night setting in the western sky was a mystical shade of purple that faded into the peachy color as my eyes followed it from the zenith eastward.

Above the silhouette of pine trees, and framing the horizon line of the southern sky we saw meteors falling all around us. There were hundreds of fast meteors falling from the ever-brightening sky. Thievery! The meteors were so fast and faint, and the sky so close to lit I felt an even deeper loss for what I would not have missed had I woken up when I should have to a dark sky. Even an hour earlier would have been enough. I don't know one person in my new, more

modern place who would wake up with me to watch a meteor shower. I have asked many people with pleas similar to, "I'll live while I'm alive and sleep when I'm dead," (Thank you Bon Jovi). *A meteor shower is worth waking up for; please come watch it with me, I'll say, but to no avail.*

Yet I will keep asking because once during my birthday month of November, when the Leonids fireballs fell, slow and bright, their long-lasting deaths revealing colors of green, purple, blue, and gold, my friend Stephanie joined me, two blankets, two lawn chairs, and a gallon of hot chocolate at 2 a.m. in her apartment parking lot to watch the meteor shower on that school night. We talked about guys to keep us awake while I gloried in the shock of my seemingly studious friend who wanted to do something adventurous. We were outside for a total of three hours, interrupted only by intermittent trips indoors to get refills of cocoa or something to chew on so our teeth didn't chatter. Our viewing was limited by city light, but not terribly. Unfortunately, there weren't many meteors that night, but Stephanie saw three while I only saw one. Her excitement over the three she saw diminished my disappointment. Throughout the night I repeated something similar to the statement, *There are usually so many more than this, and they are long-lasting and colorful, not fast and dim.* I wanted her to watch meteor showers in the future. Since then a few more of my friends have watched with me, and I remind them of how much fun my friend had, yet many people simply aren't captivated enough to consider it worth losing any sleep over.

One puzzle I work to solve when watching a meteor shower alone is how to catch this miracle on film. I can hear my dad in my head, telling me to just enjoy the experience and not worry about capturing it on film, the thing he'd say every time we happened to be on vacation and I forgot my camera. There's something about photographing the stars, gathering my tripod, lenses, and old camera and getting into my car to go outside of town to be alone with the night

sky. The world feels connected in a we're-all'-in-this-together sort of way because I am the only one looking up at the universe around me, yet there could be countless people around the world looking at the exact same sky, as they have been for thousands of years.

On the coldest of nights, my breath condenses as it hits the air, yet I hold the shutter button of my camera, waiting to capture the movement of stars, hoping to see something. I stand and watch, waiting for a surprise “storm” of meteors, or even just one good one. A good one being one that I have *time* to notice, one that falls slowly enough that I can watch it and say “whoa” before it’s gone. One night I went out to my deck hoping for some sort of sign that the confusion I felt in that moment would pass. I only wanted a good, long meteor, a gold or blue-trailed one that would fall for at least two or three seconds. It was cold outside, so I started to walk in after about fifteen minutes. As I grabbed the black screen door handle I felt a weird sensation, a sudden and forceful urge to turn immediately and look straight up. I jerked back as though the door was electrically charged to take one more look at the sky. Two seconds later, straight above my head I saw a brilliant gold meteor, three seconds long, and the perfect size. Pretty lucky, I thought. I captured that photo in my mind and think of it often.

My hobby (star photography) that keeps me busy during my hobby (meteor-watching), requires a certain dedication as well as a certain type of equipment. I am lucky my dad purchased a top-of-the-line 80s camera back then, because now it is my Canon AE-1. This single-lens reflex camera made the familiar west side of town where the darkest sky lives a new place for me. I was hoping for a shot much like I had seen in National Geographic: tents glowing on a hillside, a desert floor lit entirely by moonlight, stars leaving trails in the sky overhead. I imagined how other-worldly this site, cactus and all, might look during full moon, light reflecting off the white sand desert floor and creating a midday version of light. My site,

though not as imaginative for me as a white sand desert, was the west end of Hays, Kansas, with grassy pasture in the background and a water tower for scale. Capturing the movement of the stars, which is really the movement of the Earth, with a waning moon in the background would make my land look entirely different. A photo of a place one sees every day can look like another planet when taken at night by moonlight, can make me step out of myself for just a moment, and feel like I am in an entirely new place, like I have the chance to be new today simply because my place, while still the same, looks entirely different to me.

In my pictures of the night sky, the stars burn their paths onto the film because the tripod keeps the “eye” (the camera) at rest. The “eyelid” (shutter) of the camera blinks open for five minutes or more as it sits on the surface of a rotating Earth, recording the movement we cannot feel as our planet constantly turns. When I stand out at night, I have proof that I am actually standing on a huge rotating ball, like a needle protruding from a ball of yarn, and my camera captures this. My body, pulled downward by gravity, moves through space as the universe separates, rotating on the Earth, revolving around the sun. Alone with my camera I wonder what were they thinking, thousands of years ago? Lying on my back looking up, at odds with no one, total darkness encloses me, yet I am in the wide open, the airy breeze slips past and quietly silences itself, resting on the dewy blades of grass, waiting to be pulled up with the moisture from the ground toward the moon’s gravity. We rest here on the ground, worlds apart yet still together, me and the ones who named the stars, the ones who looked up and wondered, the ones who shaped stars into beings so that there were some fences to enclose the infinite breadth.

Their pictures seem closer to my nose than my face is, the swan flying over in the summer triangle, Hercules fighting battles eternally, strong, forbidding, hovering, yet frozen in warm time here for me to see in a snapshot as he perpetually glides across the heavens. The

Eagle Aquila escaping the arrow of the thing I fear, time. A dolphin leaping, Delphinus; The Serpent sliding across the sky, they keep me company. I like to go around the winter and summer sky mapping the different constellations that populate each, and saluting those that are visible year round, like Cassiopeia and Draco. I start with the dippers, and move to my favorite, Draco, whose tail falls between the two cups. My southern favorite, Sagittarius, The Teapot, pours the Milky Way across the summer sky from South to North in a strip so full of stars I can't see the farthest one. I recently found Scorpio, my astrological sign, snaking its way across the southern horizon line, a much more elusive subject to capture as it's only visible in the northern hemisphere during the summer season.

My first timed-exposure of stars was captured on film at my cousin's farm in the middle of Kansas wilderness. I opened my camera's aperture all the way, the way a person's pupils fully dilate in the dark. I held the button for the full five minutes on that ten-degree night, my cousin breathing on my thumb so that I could keep the feeling in it. I didn't own a "cable release" that would allow for me to depress the shutter for the entire night, capturing full rotation of the earth and a complete circle of stars, so I settled for a movement of a couple inches instead.

The moving of the film image to paper allows me to enter a different kind of darkness, a red night punctuated with the sounds of trickling water, sour vinegar scent, the radio playing the same CD. It is equally comforting in a wholly different way. Again I am alone working, focused, making my vision appear magically on paper using chemicals I don't understand to create something I do. Two hands move; this is not thought at all. In this dark, red room, I am the creator, nothing and everything, emptiness and fullness. One tray to the next, I move the paper as the images become clear with each new touch of chemical. Rinse, hang, dry. I pick up the picture and hold it in my hands. Perfect. This is what I have waited for. When I looked at

my shots under the light box, I only tried to remember that shade of night I saw as my eyes stayed open to absorb the light. I kept my lens' eye open for five minutes, and depending on if I faced east or north, I got city light in the background with half-inch streaks crossing the photo, or stars circling Polaris like ripples surrounding the interruption of a single drop of water.

During my junior year of college, I wanted to take an astronomy class *just for the hell of it*. The first time I measured right ascension and declination, terms for using the stars as a map and creating a ruler for distance, a quiet fellow decided to let "the girl" do some measuring. It was a crisp and calm September evening and the twinkling city lights illuminated a white chalk road heading toward the western horizon and inky black sky. Looking out toward what local college students called Blue Light Lady Hill, a car swerved along the road, a cloud of dust following behind it, the headlights pulling me back to Earth and out of my cosmic fantasy. My friend believed the Blue Light Lady would howl like a coyote, her grave located at the top of the hill, when she planned on finding someone to join her lonely spot with her. These lights weren't a shooting star or a falling satellite, but a creation of humanity, and nothing but a minute speck of dust to whomever might be watching our planet from a distance, and I forgot about them quickly. And though I never really understood what was happening when I used these compass-like tools to measure distance, I was fascinated by the system that actually works for sailors who still use the very accurate, yet archaic method to test themselves while at sea occasionally. Those who find their way on the sea by using the old technique say doing so is an experience of spiritual release unlike any other. In writer Philip Gerard's words, "Fixing one's position under the stars is humbling and compellingly precise." It is more like following one's instincts about where they are, he says, than relying on instruments. If something feels off, more than likely you are going in the wrong direction.

I worked at the University Observatory the same semester I took the astronomy class, and I was given a green laser to point out constellations to visitors. I needed the aid of the laser because the light in my moderately sized town of about 25, 000 people, blocks an amazing amount of the night sky. It is a strange thing that most of our society is kept from seeing what earth's inhabitants have witnessed for thousands of years. The light we create is blocking the light of our universe. And even if it weren't, how many people would look up at the dome above their heads? Even in my small town, the stars used to seem so dim to me. I longed for the summer nights in the country where the Milky Way was always visible. Now that I am in eastern Kansas and light pollution is a commonplace and overlooked menace, I am lucky to look up and see the dipper and Cassiopeia. Coming back to Hays, I feel like I have been placed in a space Imax; the night sky is actually black. The last time I went out to the farm, the stars looked so plentiful and so bright that I had to stare upward in amazement for minutes before I even started searching for my typical maps. All I could look at was the enormity of it, the beauty of space currently untouched by people, unpolluted by light, technology, ambition, or boundaries. When I explained how the Big Dipper has been called many other things besides a measuring tool, but has only been called one thing twice: a bear, people wondered why, as did I. Both the Greeks and the North American Indians over 2000 years later, saw a bear, whether cuddly or grizzly, we'll never know. Those eight stars were important enough to be called a plough, a saucepan, a parrot, and a chariot by the Europeans, Mayans, and Chinese.

Since that September night when I measured distances of millions of miles using a hand-held devise, I have continued to watch the constellations and look for meteors every chance I get, considering the amount of space out there, forever reminding me to think and consider the depth and breadth of a thing so incomprehensible as the universe. Nearly every month is blessed with

a passage of a comet's tail around our green and blue haven. I think that if I can look far enough, that if some scientist builds a big enough telescope, humanity may be able to look back at the beginning of time. I look at the stars when I feel overwhelmed with this life, like there is no escape, so the images of forever right at my fingertips force me to stop considering the things of this life so seriously, for everything has a way of working out, of passing by. Stephen Hawking writes in *The Theory of Everything* about his endless search for the mysteries of the universe revealing that one of his goals in the study of physics is to discover the mind of God, and thereby unravel the mystery of time, a mystery he believes will be able to be understood in broad principle by all.

I can at any time look up to see the inanimate sky creatures named by my predecessors, that both fly and stay still in the universe, and they remind me of my scale, of my place, of my being measured against the vastness of my city, state, country, continent, planet, solar system, galaxy, and universe. And yet I still cannot comprehend the vastness of existence. Oh, let me at least be blessed with the ability to look up at night and see more than fifteen or twenty bright dots! For it is when I look up in the city sky that I can see the constellations best, made only of the brightest stars, the only ones visible in city light. In the country, I am blinded by the thousands of stars I see, making it harder to pick out the brightest and find a shape among a group of stars surrounded by thousands of other companions.

A Call to Move

[Geese] were my criterion for beauty, my definition of wildness, my vision of paradise. I had little idea of where they had come from and even less conception of where they were headed. I knew only that I must be there to see them, to become a vicarious part of something I couldn't begin to understand, but which to me represented the primordial energy of life.

-Paul Johnsgard

During a walk to lunch, a new friend told me how much she enjoyed seeing geese and cranes migrate as we spotted a skein of geese flying north overhead. Until I moved to Eastern Kansas, I never saw geese in such large numbers. This part of the state is a major fly path for migrating geese and waterfowl of various kinds, both in the spring when birds go north to breed and in the fall when they head south to survive the winter.

There are two places near me where geese and cranes rest during their journey, which covers thousands of miles during spring and fall migrations. Nearly half a million geese stop at Cheyenne Bottoms near Great Bend, Kansas, and estimates of the same number of cranes stop around the Platte River valley west of Omaha. The large-scale migration allows millions of birds to call Kansas a home for a brief time twice each year as they follow their instinct to move. Until I moved to Lawrence, only once in my life did I see a group of cranes take flight from their rest in a patch of prairie grass in Western Kansas. From the field, the birds gained altitude in spherical patterns, like a cloud of rising smoke. Watching them rise, circular layer by circular layer, the group of birds strategically gained enough altitude to fly comfortably north.

The first time I saw geese in Lawrence was during the fall semester as I stood in a grove of trees with low hanging branches full of ripe pears. The wings of geese that night, flying low above me, sounded like large ventilation fan whirring in a building. The rhythmic pumping of

their wings, slow and steady, low to the ground, let me know that they were looking for a place to stop for the night. Looking toward the night sky, a dab of turquoise still on the horizon before complete darkness, I felt their wing air move over my body. The moon sat high, a beacon overhead, small and encircled in humidity as I picked pears and placed them in my bag. What must it be like to hear the smooth whirring on a trip for thousands of miles, to be one of the geese, I thought.

Just as my bag is filled with pears, I hear another larger skein of geese fly over. They are much too high for me to hear their wing sounds; instead I hear a few leading honks, and they appear to be in full formation, ready to fly for hours. I rest my bag full of pears against the trunk of a tree and stand with rapt attention below the migrating geese. Night fog, in light puffs of loosely gathered humidity, moves quickly above me. I quiet my movement to hear their sounds, like faint yelps of a litter of puppies that get louder and clearer until the geese have moved past my place on the heavy ground.

Traveling steadily, their celestial music surrounds the air beneath the canvas of the Big Bear, the Harp, and the Swan. I imagine the silence and darkness of night drives them to continue their journey as the lights of cities twinkle below and the rivers and grasses keep flowing, but stiller, the wind, calmer. Between the space of translucent tails of clouds, I cannot keep from looking up in curiosity at the geese who travel with their mates across the continent of North America.

* * *

In the fifth grade my teacher gave me a handout on geese. I called my mom about this “goose handout” hoping it was still Scotch-taped to the inside of our pantry door. She told me it was, so when I got home I opened the door and read it for the first time in years. The author told

readers that geese fly in Vs because, as each bird flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird following it, adding seventy one percent to the flying range of a single goose. When one goose gets tired, she explained, and falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the full drag of the wind's resistance, and by trying to fly alone, tires quickly.

A lead goose flies at the front of the V, taking the brunt of the wind alone. When it tires, the geese from behind honk to encourage it to keep the pace. To recover, the lead goose rotates back into formation and another goose takes the lead. When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot, at least two drop out of formation with it, follow it down, and stay with it until it is ready to take flight again, or until it dies. Later, the geese either catch up with their own flock or join another formation. These loyal birds stick together, and the author's admiration for their strength and perseverance is something I share.

Of the migrating birds, a goose's mothering instinct stands out. She sits on her eggs during the Arctic spring, as the twenty-three day incubation process elapses. During the last half of incubation, she becomes increasingly devoted, rarely leaving her eggs, even to get food, exhausting herself to near starvation to protect the eggs from predators. Her gander sits nearby, grazing what grass is available surrounding the nest, never losing sight of his mate or their eggs. Both geese lose substantial weight they will need to put back on when they take their journey south at the end of their three-month stay.

Reading the old handout, my curiosity grew and so I did some reading and discovered that geese migrations have piqued many imaginations for thousands of years. Art depicting their travels has been found on damp cave walls, revealing how early humans found geese worthy of attention. Terry Tempest Williams questioned if a goose's instinct to migrate might be an ancestral memory, an archetype that "dreams" birds thousands of miles to their homeland, or a

highly refined intelligence that emerges as intuition, the only true guide in life. Her notion matches a theory that migrating birds participate in a cycle driven by magnetic fields, landmarks, changes in temperature, in daylight, and maybe something more that scientists admit to not fully understanding.

The goose is also admired for its desire for a monogamous relationship with a life partner. Ganders put on a mating display, flying around the females, whose response is concise. Did he fly swiftly, shaping his wings this or that way? Is he striking, colorful, strong? I recall seeing a pair of lone geese on Yellowstone Lake as a child. On vacation, I sat in the back of the car, watching the streams, the wildflowers, and incessantly asking Dad to stop the vehicle so I could get out and look at something, anything wild. We stopped by the lake whose small waves, and black volcanic basalt mud captured my curiosity. I stepped near the shore's edge and watched a pair of geese float, allowing the incoming wave to dictate their movement toward the shore. The female goose moved rather close to me, probably expecting bread crumbs, while the male goose, the gander, stayed to the side, protectively watching. "Just look at those beautiful birds," Dad said after he explained that he could never shoot a goose because its life partner would be left alone. And when the partner dies, a goose may or may not seek a new one.

* * *

It is now late February. I see a goose flying alone, the long neck and beak, solid black, cut by a triangle of white behind the beak and below they eye. This is a Canadian Goose. Its white underbelly looks heavy with hunger, and black tail feathers shift up and down with the pumping of its wide and tired wings. Its neck pushes forward as it pumps its muscular body. I walk to my car, hearing the unmistakable sound of its call, every two seconds, as it flies low to the ground. Its cries sound tired and lonely, and I imagine the only reason it flies in this manner

is because it is searching for an injured mate. The sadness in its calls echoes off walls of brick buildings around me. I pause, pulling my key back from the locked car door, deciding to watch the goose fly east until I cannot see it any longer. Then I unlock my door and drive.

* * *

The *place* of a goose: anywhere. Their various species exist all over the world, from the Arctic to Australia, all migrating in their own system, attuned to their place in the season of things. The goose lives by getting food, breeding, travelling, raising young, protecting its mate and family, watching out for the tired geese in formation, and relaxing on a man-made sidewalk, eating bread crumbs. E.B. White called the eye of the goose “a small, round enigma,” perhaps because it is a temperamental animal, sometimes tolerant of the human presence and at others not so much.

* * *

Author Paul Johnsgard is equally captivated by the goose and its mysteries. In *Song of the North Wind*, he writes, “The spring return of the geese represented my epiphany, a manifestation of the gods I could see, hear, and nearly touch . . .” The migration of the geese and their lifestyle so enthralled him that he devoted his life to researching them. In a native Indian legend, “Song of the Bird’s Nest,” Johnsgard read of a wandering man who was open to learning of the powers of the prairie. As the man wanders, he spots a nest with six eggs starting to hatch. He notices the parent birds sitting near and thinks of the troubles he longs to solve within his tribe, and how some parents do not properly care for their children. Many days later he comes back on another of his walks, hoping to see the nest again. He finds it overflowing with little birds, stretching their wings, balancing on their tiny legs, and making ready to fly while the parents encourage

them. Upon seeing this, Johnsgard explains that the man knew if his people would emulate the geese, the tribe would be strong and prosperous.

As another spring season begins I consider the belief of the Navajo Indians. For them the snow goose indicates the passing of seasons, and its white feathers, the breath of life. The birds are seen as messengers between the spirit world and the earth. When I sleep under my white blanket of goose-down and other waterfowl feathers I consider myself lucky and am thankful. During my first year of independence, the blanket was one of the only things that gave me comfort in my new place. My nights under the blanket of feathers that warms instantly, gives me a deeper respect for the life of a goose and how it enriches mine. I know where my blanket came from. I am happy to use it and full of hope that every night I am reminded of the happiness the natural world provides for me. Somewhere between a wakeful and dreaming state, I picture the feathers next to my body for maybe when I wake I can be more like the waterfowl of the world: instinctual, loyal, and alive.

Harvest at *The Farm*

Going to *The Farm*, the place where my dad grew up, the place where my Farm Grandma lived, and home base for my family's harvesting equipment, is something I have enjoyed doing since childhood. Unlike most farming families, we lived in town, so leaving for the country was a soothing retreat. We'd get in our farm clothes, pack the cooler, and pile into the cab of our truck. A day at the farm meant pop, Dr. Pepper (we always called it D.P.) and Pepsi, because according to Dad, these were the only real pops. We also loaded water and tea in glass bottles, and bologna, ham, cheese, and bread for sandwiches into the cooler. On the short ride there I always sat snugly next to my brother in Old Blue, our 1984 Dodge pickup with the Ram on front precipice of the faded, now almost gray, hood. I remember there being a string of Ram thefts; people took their Rams off of their hoods so they wouldn't get stolen. We did not follow suit because Dad thought it ridiculous that we should have a hood ornament in the house. A few weeks after he said this, someone decided they wanted \$50, so they ripped the Ram off the hood and from then on we have looked at a Ram-less hood. That is fine with us.

A lot of summer times were spent driving to our different farms to harvest. One farm was at my grandma's house, where Dad grew up. Another was about ten miles west of there, and the last farm where my grandmother grew up, and the place where my relatives first settled in this country, was about two miles east of Grandma's house. Dad drove unless we were moving the disc, under-cutter, planter, or some other farm implement back to the farm from another field. In that case, Dad drove his Massy-Ferguson Tractor or Gleaner Combine while mom drove the pickup, either pulling some other implement or simply providing a ride back to the farm for Dad after he got his tools where they needed to be. Driving got to be one of my favorite activities, seeing how much land could change in just a span of twenty or thirty miles

from farm to farm. I liked riding in various places in the truck, on one of the two tire wells in the truck bed, standing behind the tool box resting my crossed arms on the top of the cab, feeling as though I was flying, or sitting on the tailgate, feet hanging off the back as the sand road below moved by in a blur. I could see everything for miles around in every direction.

The solitude of country roads is only broken for one reason: visiting. We caught friendly waves each time we passed people on the dirt roads, and sometimes we would stop right in the middle of the road, cars parked next to each other, so the parents could “catch up” right there. If I became impatient and wanted to leave, I knew if I heard the sound of one of Dad’s laughs, we were in for a long chat. The special kind of laugh I refer to is not a regular laugh, but one loud and exhausted only when the breath is lost after a huge gathering in the lungs, followed by what I can best describe as a squealing wheeze to remove the last possible bit of air. At times like these I couldn’t interrupt the jollity of my Dad, his face red and contorted, and truly “cracking up.” If you heard the laugh or if one person turned off their ignition, we knew we were in for a long haul.

While riding I scanned the road for interesting things, two in particular, rocks and turtles. In the “lucky seat” next to the passenger window, my right elbow was bent so that I could feel the wind blow over my hand and arm. Sometimes I would hold my hand out in the wind until it felt tingly and a little numb from the cool of the evening or the feeling of wind blowing over all of my tiny arm hairs. Then I would pull my arm in and feel the weird sensation of calm warmth. Trying to hold my hand straight up against the wind resistance as we drove at 35 mph amazed the easy-to-entertain farm kid. I enjoyed sitting on the soft seat, just watching the land move by as we drove along the dirt roads of Ellis County.

Sometimes when riding in my luckily acquired window side seat, I looked at myself in the rearview mirror. I never had my hat on while in the truck; it was for sun protection and I didn't like it. It made my hair flat and sweaty. My face was framed with a caption at the bottom of the mirror that read: *Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.* I saw the collar of my light blue, button-up, long-sleeved blouse. When I didn't like wearing my long-sleeved shirt or hat, Dad showed me his leather patch, a spot on his upper chest shaped like a V where his shirt didn't button up any higher and that he built up over forty years of working outside in the sun. This patch of skin is so dark and leathery that he can't even really feel it anymore. "It's been baked by the sun," he says. "You don't want your face looking like that do you?"

Farm clothes were an entire wardrobe. Mom still has way too many shirts that she refuses to give away. "Oh, well, that shirt's for painting, or for when I go out to the farm." I look at her and smile and say "Mom, there is no way you need thirty shirts for painting or going to the farm." Dad on the other hand has worn only one kind of jean during my lifetime: the black Wrangler. He has about four pairs of them on hand at all times: one for church, one for in town, and two for farm work. He also wears long-sleeved, button-up shirts all of which are thin and well-worn.

I wanted to look good in my farm clothes, as good as I could anyway, because we passed through Schoenchen, KS, pronounced Shen-Shun, on the way to our farm west of Grandma's. The drive through the tiny town was the most exciting part about going to the remotest of our farms. For my brother Ken and me it was the dullest farm. There was no water source and a ton of rattlesnakes. But going there meant that I might perchance run into my middle school crush who lived in the town of two stop signs and a bridge. Nearly every time we drove over that bridge to head west, I hoped to see Danny, say hi and ask him to jump in the truck bed to hang

out with us all day. We met in sixth grade homeroom where he'd sneak a look at me behind the cover of his book on "Reading Day Monday." Every time we entered the town limits, I glanced at myself in the 4x6 inch mirror with those familiar eight words on it, trying to look as good as I could with farm clothes on and no makeup. The local FM radio station, Mix 103, played Red Hot Chili Peppers and Collective Soul in the background and I hoped every time that I might randomly spot him out on the road. One time I actually did see him walking on the bridge away from some of his friends, but as is the story of my life, I was too stunned to say anything so I just watched him in the rearview mirror until I couldn't see him anymore.

When I wasn't looking for Danny, I looked for turtles. Once we'd get off the 183 highway and out of the view of law enforcement, Dad would stop to let Ken and me jump in the back of the truck. We jumped over the tailgate and sat on the wheel wells looking for turtles. When we saw one we yelled for the parents to stop. The vehicle immediately slowed down and we both jumped off, racing to catch one of the beautiful ornate box turtles that populate Kansas roads, before it quickly climbed into the ditch where snakes could have been. A turtle provided a day's worth of fun and entertainment. We caught grasshoppers to feed it, and watched it crawl and search for food. We didn't want to keep the turtles in the cab while transporting them from road to farm because they would pee and sometimes get stuck under the seat. These were always just "pets for a day" until we found my pet turtle of 17 years, Fefe (pronounced Feefee). The day we found her, Ken and I rode in the tractor with the cab door open wide because it was so hot outside. Dad spotted her and so I climbed down the ladder and quickly hopped onto the sand road, followed by my brother, our feet burning. We caught her just before she got into the deep grassy ditch, and the moment we picked her up and looked at her kind brown eyes, we could tell she was a friendly turtle. My neighbor, Virgil called her *Fefe Schlegel*, with an accent and an

emphasis on the second syllable of each word. She is an American turtle, though he seemed to think she was French.

Schoenchen days were full of unique events including riding a few rounds in the combine or tractor with dad, napping in the wheelbarrow in the shade of the only tree on the property, and exploring the barn on the land to the west, an old barn with peeling red paint and loose boards, no windows, and a non-functioning corral. Our best find in this barn was a family of raccoons, a mom and three cubs, the size of month-old kittens and cuddly cute. Even though coons cause a lot of damage, Dad (who often referred to them as “son of a bitchin’ coons) admitted that they were cute, but he didn’t like that they ripped off shingles and ate grandma’s garden. Beyond this barn to the west, was a valley with a cow pond that Ken and I ventured to only twice in all of our years of harvesting. To get to the valley, we had to climb down hills steeper than usual that were glistening with gypsum, a clear rock that looks like quartz or calcite. If you hold a piece of gypsum over a word on a piece of paper, the word will appear double due to the chemical bonds of gypsum crystals. And these hills were littered with it; the sun shining on the hills made it look like broken glass bottles had been smashed across the entire hillside, a geological hint of times past when Kansas was once an ocean teeming with sea monsters. Inching down the hill, we watched and listened carefully for rattlesnakes, for we knew that there were several Dad had killed: death by decapitation with shovel. We even had one cleaned and cooked. It tasted like chicken, only better. Once clearing the hills and reaching the pond, we were disappointed—a smelly and stagnant pond with several markings of regular cow attendance, mud as black as coal, and an occasional green clump. I still can’t believe we got in, it was not fun cleaning our feet off to get back in our shoes. But the reward of water on our toes on such a hot day was almost worth it.

Though Schoenchen was usually the first farm we'd harvest each summer, Farm Grandma's was my favorite place to harvest. We had creek bottom to explore, nearby cliffs to climb, and a piece of creek with a bridge built over it that we got in trouble for going to one time, big trouble. We decided right before nighttime that we would walk up there and throw rocks off the top. The ledge was also nice and wide so that we could safely sit on it and look down below. Of course the degree of safety was much different between my brother's opinion and my grandma's. We walked along the sand road and enjoyed our exploits for about thirty minutes and when we came back, grandma wasn't there and the door to her cozy house wasn't open. I got a feeling that wherever she was, she was not going to be thrilled when she got back. So we went into an outbuilding we called the playhouse and waited for the light in the house to come on. I was worried because I knew she went off to look for us and was probably worried sick. About twenty minutes later both Ken and I saw the top of her head (she was a very short woman) skim past the tiny window of the playhouse door. Oh no, I thought. We both knew we were in deep. That moment was followed by a lecture on how she didn't get why we liked such dangerous places, like our other favorite place—a large, odd-looking tree that had lots of cow bones under it. I wondered if cows went there to die or something. It was the place to go to pick up a bone and fetch the best stick possible because for some reason we liked to find *cool* sticks too.

The last harvest I spent at Farm Grandma's was beautiful in a new way. It is the first time I really thought about harvest as an adult. I watched Dad circle the wheat field, considering how most farmers worked thousands of acres while we worked a few hundred. We used old equipment while our "hungry" (as Dad calls them) neighbors used quarter of a million dollar tractors and combines followed by fleets of new implements and trucks. That evening I

wondered if Dad would get the crop cut before an approaching hailstorm that made the southwestern sky light up with lightning and fast-moving cumulonimbus clouds arrived. The lightning illuminated the shapes of growing cauliflower in shades of pink, purple, and green. That night, with only a few rounds of wheat left to cut before the storm arrived, Dad was driving his Gleaner-brand combine, only one of the two headlights working, to light the field ahead of him. This was the first time I had seen dad use the lights on the combine. Ken and I always begged him to use them as kids, but “It’s not dark enough to need em,” he’d say. The vintage gleaner looked like a space rover; a box with a light on the front, shining down at the blades as they pulled in those last stalks of wheat, ready to shake and separate the grain from the wheat head, to shoot the hulls and stalks out the back in a cloud of dust. It was near midnight and because Dad had to finish up, he was ready to keep going until the field was cut, for if he didn’t, either the wheat would get wet and be uncuttable for a few days, or the hail storm would damage the wheat stalks that remained.

My brother and I had an important job to do on that night: step the wheat down in the tall, red truckbed with our feet. We took off our shoes and jeans and climbed up the metal ladder attached to the truckbed. With only this small, old wheat truck that was nearly full, we had to fill in the corners, level out the wheat so Dad could empty the Gleaner’s auger full of wheat into the already-full truck. We had to utilize every nook and cranny, for the elevator was closed and we had no other place to store the grain. Standing with Ken, knee-deep on top of that load of wheat, so high in the air, watching dad circle the field surrounded by a slow-moving cloud of wheat dust, or chaff, as we called it, I looked at the calm prairie around us. I caught myself wondering if this would be one of the last harvests I participated in. It replays in my head as though it repeats over and over in some alternate universe, at times when I wonder what I am doing with

my life. In that moment, I thought about my future, the future of my children. Looking up at that sky, storm approaching, I suddenly felt like the farm again seemed large to me as it did in my youth. I looked back in my mind, flashing between memories of then and now. I pictured the place as I had seen it in those carefree childhood days when things seemed oddly big.

Everything was simply much *bigger*—Grandma’s front yard when I’d catch fireflies in a jar as she and my Denver grandpa would sit on the porch drinking coffee, the walk to the bridge, the creek, the distance from her yard to the cliffs south of there. Everything seemed mysterious, far, and amazing. Her front yard seemed so big to me that going all the way to the east side, too far to be well-lit by her porch lights, on those dark evenings was scary. Usually, when I see the farm yard, it seems smaller now, endangered, and different without her there during the summers. I am certainly attached to this land, wondering if I should stay near it as I grow older and start my family. I’m torn between finding a place of my own and holding onto the beauty and peace of this place. I felt some peace, some adventure and mystery, and some hope for my future, while feeling a loss at the same time as if on the precipice of new thought. That moment was special, because it was then that the farm seemed big again as it hadn’t seemed to me in years. As I stood on the wheat truck, ten feet in the air, darkness approaching, in the calm air before a storm, I kept trying to permanently store that childhood memory in my mind, right next to the memory I made in that moment.

Standing there in the dry, deep, cool wheat entirely surrounding my legs below the knees. I know now how people suffocate if getting stuck under falling wheat; it simply fills in every vacant spot it can. Stamping was more like shoveling with our bodies. Standing there in my underwear (a totally normal thing for a farmer to do), wind caressing my legs, I felt free and happy. As we stamped down the wheat in the dark, stars bright and clear above us, unpolluted

by city lights, quiet and twinkling above, I pointed out some constellations including Sagittarius, the Teapot, and drew my hand across the sky, outlining how the Teapot poured the Milky Way Galaxy directly above us from South to North. Half of the sky was twinkling and calm, while the other half was churning angrily. We heard the low rumble of thunder in the distance, slowly and steadily approaching. Dad kept harvesting, and we stood there and watched amazed by the beauty of the storm, the quiet sky to the east, the stars above, our dad working the land in his humble old machinery. I stood there thinking that this was the best time I had during harvest, but remembered one day when Mom, Dad, and Ken took a load of wheat to the Toulon elevator while I stayed behind, excited to avoid the sticking of my legs to the blue, vinyl seats of the old wheat truck. I stood alone near that same hill we were parked on, had a sandwich and some D.P., and was still roasting hot. With some time to burn, I decided there was a better way to cool off, so I poured water over myself as I stood in 97-degree wind and sun. I never told my family about this, and I thought about it, but I didn't have time to reminisce about that five minutes of freedom, for it was "go time." Ken and I rapidly and efficiently filled the corners of the truck and waited for Dad to deliver the last load, prepared to be covered in itchy wheat chaff. We knew we had to be ready to frantically, yet safely spread the wheat when Dad augured it into the truck.

When the loud machine was quieted and the last of the wheat was spread, he turned the combine off. We heard crickets and a closer, deep rumble of thunder and saw lightning beginning to snake its way overhead. That day was hot and windy, but the evening before that storm was calmer, with only the slightest of breezes. Wheat harvest in Western Kansas occurs in late June, early July; on this day it was July 4th. I remember because usually, we would race to finish up so we could speed back to town and see the fireworks at 10pm. This year we were

racing only the storm, knowing that we had no fireworks to miss because they were cancelled due to lightning and dangerous weather. Finishing up in the nick of time was a great relief. We stood around for a moment, dusted off our arms and legs as best we could, and joined Dad in the wheat truck to drive our extra-full load of wheat back to the farmstead. Tarp on, to protect the wheat from the sprinkles starting to fall, we drove the truck over a hill and through the creek bed on its way home to the grainery. Its long-handled shifter with a shiny and well-worn blue knob controlled its old and tough transmission. The motor, steady only in its groaning and pulling, lugged and ebbed as it carried a heavier load than it ever had before. To this, Dad said, “She’s workin.” As Dad drove the load in, Ken and I sat quietly, our pants, socks, and shoes now covering our chaff-covered bodies. Ordinarily, wheat chaff makes my nose, sinuses, and lungs itch unlike anything else I have encountered, and I was covered in it. But I didn’t sneeze once. I felt so good.

It was at this moment, in silence next to Ken and my dad, that I knew bitterness and anger, fear and worry would not protect the job I grew up watching my dad do. Sadness wouldn’t help me find a place where I could raise my children where they would have as much fun as I did. Loss of place and change would not make me forget how much visiting brings me back to those times. I knew then that I too would find a place, just as my grandpa did when he found “The Farm” over 65 years ago. I knew that I could be just as happy as I was at that moment, as I was as a child over all of those summers in a different place if need be. I was no longer a child in that passenger seat, carefree and absent-minded; I was a woman who knew what I treasured, so I now seek to protect it and to protect those that are still making their living out on the farm, working the land. And I know that every time I go to The Farm, though my grandma is

no longer there, I will go there at the end of the day to barbecue, take walks, and explore, to appreciate the abundance of beauty all around me.

Killdeer

Dad told me today he saw a killdeer. What's a killdeer, I asked. *A bird that builds its nest on the ground, in the cover of grass and debris, he told me. I saw the momma bird flying back and forth from the field to her nest.*

Dad made his rounds in the tractor, pulling the red shining disc implement behind him, overturning soil and pulling the weeds by their roots before they could seed out, producing more weeds the next year. He was preparing the soil for a planting of wheat. As he made circle after circle, the nest moved closer.

He told me that he stopped the tractor, slowly made his way down the springy ladder, and so that he didn't scare the momma bird too badly, approached so that she could see exactly what he was doing. With his worn-smooth leather gloves, he cradled the nest in his thick, rough, glove-covered hands and moved the nest to the patch of fresh, soft dirt and overturned weeds. He reminded me, as he has countless times, that it was nice to get out of the tractor and smell the dark rich dirt that had just been worked. "There's nothing like the smell of dirt," he always says. And he is right. I remember him picking up a scoop of dirt with his hands in a cup-shape and putting it right up to his nose, almost touching, and breathing in deeply. God, what an aroma. I love it more and more, especially now that I'm away from home. The smell of dirt brings something alive inside of me. It makes me feel close to the earth.

By the time Dad told me the story about the killdeer, I already knew how tender-hearted he was toward everything living, insect and animal. He doesn't hunt, and he only shoots an animal to put it out of its misery, something he hates to do. He told me about how one time when he was a kid, the family dog was very old and sick, could hardly walk, couldn't control its bowels, and so Grandpa told him to take the dog out and save it from suffering. Dad can hardly

talk about it, but told us it was the first time he had to do it instead of Grandpa. “It wasn’t nice,” he said, looking down and likely remembering what it felt like.

One time my cat was sick for over a week. She wasn’t eating, and Dad mentioned that he might have to take her “out to the farm.” We all knew what he meant, and he got that look again, the same look he had when he told us about his dog. I avoid telling friends about Dad’s animal policy because I figure they won’t understand. “When an animal is suffering, there is no sense in letting that continue,” Dad says.

Roger, the Neighbor

Roger owns the pasture south of our farm. There his six horses graze every day, sometimes at the top of the ridge surrounding the valley, where their silhouettes and that of a solitary tree cut the pale blue of the sky with their black figures, so crisp against the brightness.

When Roger purchased the land, the first my family heard from him was a letter, type-written (with an old typewriter) introducing himself and saying how he hoped we'd enjoy seeing the horses graze in the valley across the road. We do.

Roger is from a small town sixty miles west from our "western" Kansas. He stops by to visit whenever he makes the drive to check on the horses or to repair fence. The last time he stopped by my brother was the only one on the farm. It was hot and Roger was thirsty. They had a drink together. As usual, Roger sent his many thanks a few days later in the form of another letter, typed on the usual 6x8 stationary.

His notes have been a regular fixture, a must see for me every time I come home. I love to see Roger's letters so much so that Mom notifies me when he has sent one, and remembers to go to the drawer in the kitchen where she keeps all his letters. I didn't let them know that I liked the last one so much that it made me cry when I read it, or that I snuck over to the drawer after Mom put it away when I read it the first time, to sneak another peek at it, to write down some of the inspirational things he said so that I could look at the sayings whenever I wanted. I'm 26 years old; I shouldn't want to be reading some old guy's notes or writing down things he says. That seems kind of odd for some reason.

But I did it nonetheless. The last note contained the usual what-I'm-doing section, an update on weather back home (not much different than here), and his thoughts on life on the day he wrote. This last one has been the best yet, of the four I have read, that is.

I came home last for Thanksgiving and one of the first things Mom said to me: “You have to see Roger’s latest note.” When we got to the farm on my second day home, Mom went straight to the kitchen and I helped get supper started while my dad and brother worked on some electrical wiring for the remodel job on the place. In the middle of our preparations, I noticed Mom heading toward that drawer where she keeps Roger’s letters and random things like letter openers and dried up pens. She opened the squeaky drawer and pulled out Roger’s letter. She took it over to the counter and I asked if it was the letter she told me about.

I hurried to clean up my hands from making supper, and dried them well before reaching for the small envelope that contained the beautiful stationary folded in thirds. On the outside of the folded pieces of stationary was one of those small inch by inch and a half sticky notes. It was pink and said something to the effect of, *I read these lines when I get all tied up in LIFE.*

I peeled it off and carefully laid it on the table, being sure to remember to put it back on there, because I knew it must have meant a lot to Dad for him to reattach it after letting Mom and possibly Ken read it. Roger’s notes are always written to Dad because Dad spends the most time on the farm and is usually the one there when Roger stops by. And if the rest of us are here, it is usually Dad that Roger hangs out with, looks around the farm with, drinks a beer with. The two of them are close, and I get the feeling Dad looks up to Roger and probably talks with him about life and stuff like I talk to my girl friends about, stuff that I can’t really talk with my parents about because they know me too well. I get this feeling because of the things he says in his notes, and for the fact that he always starts the letters saying *Dear Myron.*

As I unfolded the two sheets, knowing Dad was outside, I felt like I was reading something sort of secret, but not in a bad way, something that was a message between friends. There was another sticky note, this one bigger, and it said *Thank you for the beverage and nice*

visit. It hit the spot. That's one thing my Dad loves to do: visit with people, people in the store, on vacation, at the mall, while hiking—it's his favorite thing. He has told me many times about how when he was little their families would always get together for the weekend, every Sunday, and sometimes stay overnight after a day of eating big meals, desserts, and plenty of drinks—my relatives are German and *loved* good drinks. I find myself wishing at those times that we were this close with our relatives, while at other times I am equally happy that I see relatives once a year or less.

Opening Roger's letters, I paid attention this time to the design on the stationery finding it odd that a man, especially of that era (I think he's about 75) types letters to people on personalized stationery. *Where does he get it?* I wondered. The top right half of the paper has a sun setting over some rolling hills, rays protruding to the sky. The bottom has a quote: *May the wind be at your back and the sun shine gently on you. Your friend Roger Kuntz.* Below this is a picture of what looks like a town city hall and his address.

At first I stood amazed just seeing an older man with such beautiful stationery, and more so amazed at a man so open to discussing things most men, especially western Kansas farmers, don't talk about. His first letter asked us to *call if the horses got out. I hope that don't happen,* he typed. *I tried hard for a good fence.* He wrote of how much he enjoyed seeing the *friendly waves* as he drove the roads around here. This is pretty typical farmer talk, but what else was in his letter was the weird stuff. And each successive note became more personal as he got to know my family better.

This latest note was most endearing, much more personal, and longer. It was as usual addressed to my dad who has been at the farm a lot lately as my family nears completion of the remodeling. When I talk to Dad on the phone, now that he is staying the night quite frequently

to avoid driving in the dark early morning hours to meet construction workers, brick layers, and concrete pourers every morning, he sometimes mentions how he gets lonely out there. I know it's been a little weird for him because he has never lived alone, so even a night seems lonely. It's times like these that remind me that I am the first in my family to live alone.

I picture what Roger's and Dad's last visit must have been like, with the usual walk around the farm, sitting on the front porch swing overlooking the valley and Roger's horses if they were nearby. I imagine they had a nice talk, and maybe talked about some serious things from the tone of the letter.

Myron, after going home from the last visit with you I felt you should know how much I appreciate being a part of sharing the change in your place, your life. Also, as a person who likes GOOD ENGINEERING, (my dad always buys and builds the best as a carpenter, uses the thickest wood, more insulation, bigger bracing boards, the whole shebang) I must pat you on the back. You can never over insulate or over build. A lifetime of returns comes from your efforts right now. Most of all thanks for your politeness and kind reception you always have for me. I wish you all the best.....till we meet. Signed Roger.

The second note was full of blocks of writing, and so I looked back on the pink sticky note attached to it: *I read these verses when I get tired and question LIFE. I'll share it with you.*

Where did they go?

Nowhere. Everywhere.

What did they accomplish?

Nothing. Everything.

-Arthur Beiser

Years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the things you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the tradewinds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. – Mark Twain

Beneath this quote was a picture of a sail boat. I have always wanted to go sailing. Then there were three final quotes:

We spend most of our lives getting ready to live but never really living. – Unknown

You can't try to do things; you simply must do them. – Bradbury

And the final quote:

Imagination is the highest kite one can fly. –Unknown

After reading this letter, I thought of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. That book repeats the line that many people's lives are lived in vanity in a chase after the wind. Several times the author tells people, and this was around 300 years before the time of Jesus according to the scholarly preface of the book, that life is a gift from God that is to be enjoyed. Have a few drinks; spend time with friends; enjoy the fruits of your toil; have good times; don't let anxieties permeate your life. The writer, whose long name starts with a "Q," says that life is filled with more bad days than good and to enjoy the good while it lasts, for there is a time for good and for bad. Yet another old guy that has something worth my listening to, I guess.

Eating the Dough

In my hands I squeeze a mixture of flour, white cake mix, baking powder, and eggs into a smooth dough. My fingers are covered in gloves of tacky sweet-smelling dough that I want to eat plain, as I prepare a double batch of my grandmother's recipe for cinnamon rolls. Mom works in the kitchen next to me, melting the butter and greasing the glass baking dishes with Crisco, though I am tempted to tell her it would be healthier to use olive or coconut oil. I refrain, thinking, *Really Lisa, you are about to eat four cinnamon rolls fresh from the oven with at least one cup of coffee. I don't think the oil the baking dishes are coated in makes one damn bit of difference!* Here's where I tell myself I don't sweat the small stuff. Plus I plan on having at least two cups of coffee with whole cream in it alongside the rolls.

* * *

"I want these to taste like Munjor Grandma's (she's from Munjor, a small town about seven minutes away from Hays). Are you sure there isn't something we're forgetting?" I ask my mom. Almost every time I make cinnamon rolls I hear about how they are good, but not quite like Grandma's, or not quite like the ones the lunch lady at the high school, where my dad used to teach, made.

"Sophie made the best cinnamon rolls. They were twists (I have never been able to make twist cinnamon rolls—they turn out like two, half-inch ropes of hard bread, the opposite of fluffy). And Dad always mentions them when I make cinnamon rolls. "They were melt-in-your-mouth soft and warm, and she had pans full of them as everyone went through the lunch line." I imagine Dad flashing his handsome smile and asking for two rolls. He tells the same story every time, and I can only imagine how perfect these rolls must have been for him to remember them from way back when he was student teaching, and to tell me about them for the two hundredth

time. He ends the cinnamon roll story by telling us that as he walked through the line to dump his tray, he saw people who didn't even touch the cinnamon rolls. "It was sad, all those good rolls going to waste." I think Dad told this story to remind me not to be wasteful.

* * *

As I work to perfect my cinnamon roll recipe, I have discovered that using white cake mix in addition to the flour gives the rolls a sweet taste and seems to help with the "fluff" problem. I can also use less flour and sugar. As I write these words I wonder if sifting some flour and sugar might give me the extra fluffiness I desire. Hmmmm. Well, it's been about four months since I had cinnamon rolls and I don't want to mess up now, so I roll and shrivel the sticky dough gloves off my hands and add the crumbles to the ball of sweet warm soft dough. Then I make a big round ball and slice it in half with a steak knife, careful not to smash it as the yeast begins to make it rise. In two hours, depending on if the dough rests near a warm spot in the house or not, I will be able to start rolling out the dough. I know after several years of baking these that it's best to warm the oven to about 120 degrees and place a towel over the rising dough so that the yeast is encouraged to expand faster.

The only thing that has kept me from eating some of the dough at this point is that I know when I roll it out, there will be uneven edges that I will be forced, by obligation, to eat, again, simply to maintain even edges. No one wants to eat a crooked cinnamon roll. They just don't sit in the pan as nicely as the flat ones.

Throughout all of my roll thoughts, my mom works next to me the whole time. Cooking together is one of our favorite things to do, and is something I want to do the minute I come home from graduate school. Living alone for the first time has made me appreciate how much my mom did for me when I lived at home, the good food, the clean house, the perfect yard.

Aside from our walks together, the thing I miss most about living at home was cooking and baking together. It is always a fun team effort—thinking of what we want to make, going shopping to get it, drinking tea or coffee as we cook or popping in a movie for background noise.

Around the time I check to see if the dough is ready to roll out, I hear mom in the distance telling me to make sure it's risen enough. "The dough should have doubled in size or the top of it should be touching the tea towel that covers the deep stainless steel dish the dough rests in. Don't roll it too soon." Mom still has to remind me not to jump the gun, as Dad says, when it comes to cooking. I am the cook who, when she's not looking, turns the oven timer from 25 minutes to 20, or uses my hand in a cup shape to measure as a teaspoon. My theory is someone invented this recipe a long time ago and had to make the best guess, so if I'm a little off on the measurement, it shouldn't matter much. Well, tell that to the bread pudding that I put nutmeg in instead of cinnamon. I haven't had nutmeg since and neither has my dad. In my defense, the bottle looked like the cinnamon bottle, and the nutmeg itself is the same color as cinnamon. It's like the movie *9 to 5*, where the rat poison looks like *Skinny and Sweet*—can you really blame me?

Most likely it is either fall break or Thanksgiving when we make rolls for the first time in awhile. We don't do it in the summer because we don't like to use the oven when it's hot outside—that just wouldn't be logical. And the first meal I cook after getting home from school, four hours away, solidifies that I have an important place in the family. I feel like myself. I bring my bags in from the trunk, sit them in my room with the help of my brother, go to the bathroom to wash the four hours of road time off my face, put my hair up and head to the kitchen. Yes, most of the time I arrange my departure so that when I arrive in western Kansas, it is time for one meal or another. Dad and Ken, after helping me unload my car and look through

the goodies I brought home for them (I usually have some sort of exotic food they can't get in Hays such as raw pumpkin seeds or fresh milk from the local dairy farm near Lawrence), go back to watching TV and reading, respectively. What news I miss out on without a TV in my apartment in Lawrence, I catch up on the first night of being home. It's the one thing I don't miss about my old life: news, news, news.

I talk to my mom as we cook in the kitchen, comforted by the presence of Dad and Ken doing their own things. I learn something new almost every time we cook, or am reminded at least of the things I keep forgetting over and over. This time she tells me that Grandma, who will oddly enough be visiting tomorrow, likes to put a little cream over the flat piece of dough after the butter, sugar, cinnamon are all on there. I look over at mom in her cute outfit and wavy black hair as she washes out the dough bowl and cleans up the counter and floor covered in flour. She's my mom; if she can keep up a sweet tooth like mine for sixty years and still look that good, then I should inherit some of that luck. "Your great-grandma ate rolls and dumplings, meat and potatoes, whole milk and pie, sweets and breads every day and all she wanted of each, and she lived to 94. It's B.S. what people say about being healthy these days." I think to myself, yes, she did, but she was also about 230 pounds I would guess, a big, strong, healthy German woman.

Mom does have a point though. All of my relatives ate a ton of food, still do, and are old and healthy. I think the quality of food played a part. Even my parents grew up on farms raising their own animals and gardens. Raw milk, free-range chickens and beef, garden fresh, organic fruits and vegetables, fresh pasta and bread, all good to taste and good for the body.

That's why as I make these rolls, I feel warm and at home, ready to reconnect with my family over cinnamon rolls and coffee. After rolling out the dough, careful not to roll it too thin,

usually about a quarter of an inch, I cover it in butter, sugar, cinnamon, and not to forget, the couple tablespoons of cream. Then I roll the 9x12 inch piece of soaking sweet dough snugly into a cylinder of unbaked cinnamon roll glory, ready to be cut into two inch pieces. Mom picks the raw rolls up and places them in the greased pans. In twenty minutes, I will be having a great time.

“So how does it feel to be home?” my dad asks. My week has been hell. I am working on my thesis and haven’t been home for over a month. A guy I like does not feel the same way about me, and I have no one on my thesis committee. I am graduating in, wow, I haven’t even counted until now, six months, and I don’t know what I am going to do with my life.

“So good,” I say. It feels great to be home, and at the same time I wonder if I’ll be moving home after I graduate, well not *if*, but for *how long*? I remind myself at times like this, when I am glad to be home, cooking with people, coming home to at least one other person, that it will be fine to be back here, that I will be strong enough to be myself instead of just the daughter in the family. I freak out a little in my mind, as my brother asks me a question he has asked at least a couple times before.

“Do you feel different coming back here? It’s weird because it feels like you have never left when you’re back.” I too feel like it’s like I’ve never left when I come back, and that is both a good and bad thing. When I’m there I feel like I am not Lisa, the woman, but Lisa, the daughter and sister. Living independently, I now have my own routines, my way of living, so coming home is nice because it reminds me of how fun it is to have a family surrounding me, but it also forces me to be strong and sure of myself so that I don’t retract into *their* routine, but instead, share my routines with them. When I get frustrated with lack of personal space during long visits, I remind myself that I am the first person in my immediate family to have ever lived

alone—that I’m blazing a new trail and that it’s okay to bring my routines home and expect they will accept me. For example, I do morning yoga, meaning I get up earlier than the rest of my family. When I lived at home, we all got up around the same time. I am also a lot more conscious about my diet, avoiding many of the delicious, but at times unhealthy, traditional foods my family cooks that contain a lot of white flour and butter. These new routines can make for some awkward moments at times. Do I feel different? Yes. Everything is, in fact, not the same, but no matter what different things I do, I still love coming home to be a part of their lives, hoping that if I am strong enough to not fall back into their routines at the cost of losing my own, they will accept Lisa the woman, not just Lisa, the daughter and sister.

* * *

“So what should we make for lunch tomorrow?” Mom asks.

“Well, after we take a walk in the morning, a long one on the levy, we should go to the grocery store to get some bread dough. I want bierocks and Grandma will be here to help make them perfect.” At this, I am thinking, wow, it really is great to be home. Tomorrow I will be biting into a round, buttery, hollow piece of bread about the size of a big man’s hands folded in prayer. Inside his hands then, would be a mixture of cabbage, onions, and hamburger. Scratch that. I will be biting into at least three buttery hot beirocks fresh from the oven made by three generations of German Schlegel women who love good food and lots of it.

Spray

I am crossing the limestone cliff flanking the north bank of the Smoky Hill River, named such because of the mist rising from the river at dawn and dusk in the river valley that makes the trees and area surrounding the cliffs and hills look “smoky.” The 183 Highway cuts right through the cliff, as I gain speed on the way down the hill toward one of many Smoky Hill River bridges. At this point in its journey, the river is relatively small, sometimes just a trickle in the heat of the summer, catching various creeks that flow into it, one of these running right through the backyard of the farm. However, as it flows east it gets much larger, eventually joining the Arkansas and Saline Rivers. The only time it isn’t small is when western Kansas gets a lot of rain in the summer. Then it gets frighteningly large, and fast. Picture a cottonwood tree, fifty or sixty feet high, buried under water. This happens, as evidenced by some of the treetops after a flood: debris rests at the tops of the cottonwoods’ limbs. As a child I remember standing in the river valley, looking up into the previously flooded treetops and trying to picture what that kind of water would look like. Dad said he’d seen it like that before, and he called it *scary*. And that’s the only word he used, *scary*.

* * *

The land in central Kansas is flat, flatter than a pancake according to someone who actually mapped out the ratios—why someone would do that I have no idea. The way to our farm is no exception, excluding the limestone cliffs around the Smoky Hill River valley we traverse at least once no matter which route we take south. The otherwise flat landscape dotted with grain elevators is nothing special to the typical passer by on the way through Kansas. But the Great Plains are much more than a place to hold grain in tall white buildings, as they are much more than a place that just grows grain. This part of the country is the breadbasket. And

as signs on I-70 remind drivers (who I have heard become bored with the plains) “One Kansas farmer feeds 128 people + You.” Much of the pasture and grasslands are used for grazing cattle. Between cattle, wheat, milo, and various smaller crops, Kansas lands are fully put to use, and as a farmer’s daughter, I have always been very proud of my state. But the feeling of pride has changed lately into one of many colors: fear, sadness, loss, worry. The fear isn’t from something in nature, like a flooding the river, but from something under human control.

* * *

Since moving four hours east of my family farm, I am still in the state of Kansas, but in a very different part. I have become aware of more facets of my home state. Land is over-worked and much of the topsoil covering it has been lost. Grasslands are over-grazed. Crops are heavily dosed with fertilizers and pesticides which damages groundwater, rivers and streams, insect and animal life, and can cause higher rates of cancers in people living in agricultural areas. Genetically modified seeds are also being used which have not been proven safe and are known to be lethal to some butterflies, birds, and bees. Upon writing this I recall my grandmother saying how many more different types of birds she saw around the farm and how many of them are now gone.

I cannot remember the first time I heard the word *spray*, but that word is the reason why my feelings about my home place have shifted from pride to worry. On those drives from Hays to the farm, I remember Dad pointing out something sinister about farming, and I’m not talking about how farming is one of the most dangerous jobs based on accidents with dangerous chemicals or equipment to just the farmer, but dangerous to the world around him or her, and to life itself: spray.

At the root of my latest concerns is why more people aren't as concerned as I am about the health of the land. So I have turned to exploring the question of what a place can mean to a person in the hope that if one knows things about a place, it becomes more important in their life. They notice when certain animals are missing, when things smell odd, when there aren't as many wild flowers or different types of insects. They miss them and want to know where they went and why. Perhaps the same goes for the land too. If one is aware of what has been in the past, how intertwined it is in the lives of past inhabitants, how it is intertwined still, perhaps they will care about its health and biodiversity.

* * *

Without radio or air conditioning, drives to the farm are relaxing times to sit and watch the land go by and think about stories I have heard about this place. Grid-like patches of flat, *workable* land comprise the landscape, making it in some way more *human* than wild. The look of the human-controlled land is still beautiful, but lacks the imaginative impetus that wild land provides. And there is something else that destroys it for me entirely. Occasionally, and more often as time passes, drives to the farm are interrupted by a breath-holding session. Why? If a farmer wants to get high-yield crops, he sprays.

"Hold your breath," Dad used to tell the family. He said this just as he took as small amount of air as possible into his lungs, because of course, by the time you smell spray, it's too late; the breath you take will have poison in it. I remember looking over at him, watching what he did, and that told me I should only take in as much air as I would need until we passed the sprayed field. He had a calm look on his face, but after he told us, we sat, quiet and still, so as not to make it necessary to breathe more than we had to. I knew I should keep calm so as to

lower my heart rate, just as I had been told to do if bit by a rattlesnake, so that the venom travels through the bloodstream more slowly.

To estimate how long I had to hold my breath, I'd look to the fields, beyond the ditches and try to find the white toilet paper that marked a sprayed field. Which way was the wind coming from? I looked at the tall blades of grass in the ditches, their lean with the wind told me how much longer I would have to wait for clean air. I never understood how toilet paper, something that could blow so easily in the relentless Kansas wind, could be used to define a sprayed field. So did the pilot whip out his roll of TP and just throw some out the window? I don't get it. Technology . . .

As I took my breath in, I heard my brother, Ken, take a breath too. We made a game of it. I counted the seconds I could hold my breath. I didn't have a swimming pool to play those games in, and the river was not a place I ever dunked my head under, at least not by choice. Sometimes we had to take another breath, but by that time, we'd be desperate for air, and so our breath would be deeper, and we knew we'd be inhaling some of the dangerous fumes. I find it odd that as I think back, I don't remember asking Dad why the spray was bad to inhale, or why people sprayed at all. I knew that it was to kill weeds and pests. I knew that we didn't do it on our land because it harmed animals and water. And I knew that since it harmed all of those things, it harmed us too, even if we couldn't notice it right away. I didn't have to know that all life on earth is made of the same four bases of DNA, so it wasn't common-sensical science that told me this stuff was definitely not good for my body if it could kill insects. I didn't know Atrazine turned male frogs into females. I didn't know that all the organophosphates used on lawns in town and on crops attacked the genome within the cell, causing cancer—which is not a

natural disease to die from but rather a mutation of normal cells. I didn't know any of the scary things I know about chemical pollution today.

All I knew is I didn't like the smell. And now, knowing what I know, I hate it. As I've grown up, I have noticed this smell even more, now on city lawns, campus lawns, playground lawns. I have read about what herbicides and pesticides can do to people. Yet sterile patch after sterile patch of green, dandelion-free yards cover cityscapes. When did this green lawn fetish develop? It takes money and work to keep a lawn green. And dandelion root is a potent, homeopathic herb that revitalizes the liver and metabolism—something *good* for people. In fact, I just bought some dandelion root tea the other day at the health food store. I could have picked some from the green space on campus, but I know from experience that the university sprays the grass, so I purchased my tea instead. Besides being a healing herb, dandelions also provide bees with a source of pollen they are so desperately running out of. But humans are bent on having a neat green yard, free of plant and insect life, and farmers buy into the chemical industry's racket. Even a girl who read this piece in my workshop class commented that she liked having a dandelion free yard. *They take away space from the roses*, she said.

Knowing something about dandelions because I have been around them my whole life, I wonder what the “weeds” are in other places. We used to have a lot of sunflowers around too, but those are eliminated when trucks spray the ditches. I wonder what it would be like for insects if all of the ditches and center strips of grass were left to grow free. There would literally be thousands of acres more for wild plants to grow.

To live in a place and see its wildlife, plant and animal, gives a person a view of a small section of the cycle of life, the interdependence of organisms on one another. Seeing this daily as a child, I know one important thing we do to keep land somewhat “wild.” On our farm and in

town we have beautiful green grass (albeit not as *green* as our neighbors) that is independent insofar as it does not need watering to stay alive, although occasional weeding is helpful. It's native buffalo grass, key word being *native*, meaning it's meant to grow here, in this climate without any extra work on the part of people. It doesn't need spray to survive or look beautiful. Simple observation of the grass people choose to grow indicates a serious jumbling of priorities among people. Why not grow grass, if you choose to grow any, suited to your place? Farmers often get blamed for using so many chemicals, and I am the first to do some blaming, asking that they simply consider when it is absolutely necessary to spray and to only do it then, for example, if it is a really bad "cheat" year. ("Cheat" is a type of grass that loves Kansas soil). It looks like wheat, which is why it's a *cheat*. People need to consider why they do what they do, being mindful of the effects their actions have on the entire biotic community, including themselves.

The problem, as my dad has explained to me, is that farmers make it a habit of spraying many times each year, putting down a pre-emergent, fertilizing, spraying again, and doing who knows what else now that the initiative to "save the topsoil" (after four feet of it is permanently gone) has encouraged more farmers to do no-till farming. Instead of working the weeds and wheat stalks under (tilling), you leave it all there and spray it all dead instead of uprooting it. Sure, this prevents future dust bowls from occurring, as loose soil blows, but this practice itself promotes an endless cycle of "using" the land instead of working with it to survive.

It's the little things that help keep land healthy, the things we overlook, having been separated by technology from the land for so long. Last spring I walked across campus on my way to my writing class. I was writing about land, reading Thoreau, and in need of the beauty of the green space in the center of the KU campus before I headed inside for another three hours. I approached the sidewalk along the front of the Art Museum and smelled the scent that my dad

used to warn me about. I tried to hold my breath, but I was walking, not sitting in a pickup truck. I headed uphill, getting angrier with each step because I *had* to breathe, and the smell was so strong. I saw wilting dandelions, sick with death, and I felt my eyes burn and my sinuses tighten as the sweet, burning scent permeated my body. This time, I didn't count the seconds, and I didn't think of my relatives; I thought of what I had learned about chemicals and how they act once they contact the body's cells, genetically altering and harming cell functions in sinister and deadly ways. I also thought about how the dandelions had seeded out already, guaranteeing that some would survive next season anyway. Had these people sprayed *before* the plant seeded, it would've at least been effective. But instead of using common sense (and Dad is right; it isn't that common) that little problem would be solved by using a pre-emergent herbicide next year. The rule appears to be, rather than to understand growth cycles and either work with or interrupt them in the worst cases, to kill. Kill the plants. If you hit them at the wrong time, try killing them again. Kill them until they are dead. When did it become okay to destroy life instead of live alongside it, to hate the pests instead of simply work around them? If a mosquito is bothering you, put on a long-sleeved shirt and hat. But for the love of nature, don't spray poison on yourself so that mosquitoes, sensing the danger of being near the poison, stay away from you.

Here in Lawrence, when I take a walk with my friends and happen to smell spray, I always tell them, like my dad told me when I didn't know better, "Hold your breath; that's spray." They usually listen without questioning why. I think it is because we all know that it is not good to smell things that kill plants and insects. What I have learned has prompted me to avoid having my apartment sprayed for bugs. The dude came by anyway and tried to spray. When I told him that I preferred not to, he said all the spiders and cockroaches would come here.

I've seen it happen, he said. I told him that I didn't have them spray last year, or the year before either, and I haven't seen more than two or three spiders. His response: a confused look.

What I wanted to do was say, *See, nothing happened, maybe you're spraying for nothing. Do you have any idea how much stuff you're exposed to when you go around doing this for a living?* I didn't say anything though, hoping that he would see, based on the facts, that spraying might not be as necessary as he thinks. The dangers arise not from one exposure, but a little bit at a time that builds up in our bodies, slowly altering our cells, haunting us as we age and our cells are no longer able to replicate themselves because the code has been damaged and confused so many times. The cells can no longer get back to where they used to be because what they replicate is not themselves, but an altered version. Perhaps our using technology as a crutch has similarly altered our ability to see all of the little things we used to have to do for ourselves that were dependent upon us knowing our land. Technology has taken us so far away from these things that they are not only removed from our immediate thoughts, but in most cases, absent altogether.

One result of this separation from interacting with our places is increased dependence on chemical use common in our homes, on our land, in our yards, at our workplaces, in even in our bodies in the form of legal pharmaceuticals. Even environmentalists that fight to save the soil quality struggle with new practices such as sustainable farming. What we're doing now is trying to fix what we've irreparably damaged. A new farming practice, No-till drilling (planting seed into soil without first plowing under the old stubble, weeds, and dirt), supposedly saves soil by keeping it from blowing and becoming dry, but it requires special tools and a lot of spraying so that the weeds can be killed without having to break the dirt. So we are forced to choose: topsoil

or clean groundwater and air. Dust Bowl or Environmental Poisoning. This should not be a choice we have to make.

When I first heard about No-Till, I asked my dad if he was going to do it. He immediately said no, but he's never been all one way or the other on environmental issues. Sometimes when weeds are especially bad or dangerous to a crop's survival he will spray, and when he does, he isn't happy about doing so. Last year he had to spray for bindweeds that vine up and around the wheat, choking it off. I was sad to hear he had to, but I am proud of my dad for knowing that chemicals are dangerous, teaching me that at a young age, and for using them only when it is necessary.

However, I still find myself wondering why chemicals are used at all? They pollute groundwater sources and rivers, kill insects, and are harmful to the health of humans and animals. They are expensive. But being raised in a capitalist society, I have come to accept them as a necessary evil. There is a place for them, simply because our country supplies food to our citizens as well as to the world, as the U.S. is one of the world's Big Five Grain Producers. Therefore, to get as high quality of grain as possible, and to get as much as cheaply as possible, both spraying and planting genetically modified seeds, designed to protect the plants (mostly corn, Milo, and soybeans) from pests, must be used. Or must they?

At the beginning of November, Dad harvests his Milo crop. I called to ask him during last year's harvest how it was going. He expected about a twenty bushel per acre yield, which is not high. In fact, it is pretty low. A good crop gets about forty to sixty bushels per acre. I never paid much attention to what Dad did in regard to spraying when he had to, but I asked him this time if he had to spray. I wanted to understand more about how this worked, keeping in mind that other farmers were typically much more liberal with the use of chemicals. "Well, I fertilized

this year, and I had to hire a guy to spray for broadleaf weeds. He used a newer chemical; I don't know what it is."

"And even with fertilizing and using the broadleaf spray, you still got just twenty bushels per acre?"

"Yes. If I hadn't, I probably would have got no crop at all, at least not one worth cutting."

"So what else could you have done to make your crop better than twenty bushels this season?"

"I could have used a pre emergent [kills weeds before they can germinate] herbicide like Atrazine to kill the foxtail [a grassy weed]. Without the foxtail, my yield could be twice as high, 40 or 50 bushels. Those grassy weeds take a lot of moisture and make the Milo poorer."

I know why he didn't use Atrazine. I had just told him not long before about what I heard in Lawrence about the chemical. It costs a lot of money to remove it from the city's water supply, and it does funky things to frogs, giving them extra legs and changing their sexual organs. The first time I told Dad about this he seemed shocked. *Well, I've always been told that Atrazine is one of the friendliest chemicals because it has such a short half-life. It kills the weeds and becomes inert quickly afterward. But I didn't use it this time because I don't like to spray unless I have to, and it is an unnecessary, up-front expense that I have to cover. If I get a crop at all, sure, it would've been nice if I had used a pre-emergent because it guarantees higher yields. But if I happen to spray, and for one reason or another, don't get a crop (hail, too much rain—preventing a farmer from getting in the field to cut), then I have spent money on spraying and got nothing out of it, and I've polluted the land more on top of it.*

Dad's explanation of his situation illuminates the situation of farmers in this part of the country. As a smaller-acreage farmer, about 200 acres, my dad is not the conventional farmer.

Most have much larger fields, bigger crops, newer machinery—semi trucks to haul grain, \$250,000 tractors and combines, colossal field-work tools. They need the guarantee of a high-yield crop to pay the mortgage and afford the tools they use to keep farming. One year of a failed crop spells doom for farmers of this type because payments don't wait when they're due, and a job on the side won't pay off a quarter-of-a-million-dollar machine or a house payment. These are the challenges farmers think about.

Knowing these things, I find myself in a battle. My dad participates in an industry that is responsible for helping pollute and “rape the land,” as he calls it. I talked with him the other day about the land. Grain is on the world market and the stock exchange, so it has to be a reasonable price for people all over the world. The U.S. is wealthy and the price of grain that our farmers get will be low, because it cannot cost so much that poorer countries cannot afford it. This need to feed an ever-growing population makes it a necessity to have high yields. But high yields come at a price that currently, farmers, consumers, and the government are willing to pay. As someone very concerned about the future of humanity in regard to health, I wonder when the price gets too high. Cancer, an *unnatural* disease, takes millions of lives. What are we losing by using genetically modified seeds, by eating lower quality food because it needs to last instead of being nutritious, by pushing the land to its limits with insecticides, pesticides, and chemicals? These are questions tied to my beautiful place that means so much to me simply because of what it is. It is now intertwined in a battle for survival as it loses something every season.

* * *

When I am out on the farm, I feel completely solitary. It gets so dark out there. If I walk about 200 yards away from the house at night, I cannot see. The stars twinkle; the Milky Way covers the dome of the sky from south to north, as it seems to pour out from the constellation

Sagittarius, known as the “Teapot.” I may not be far from civilization, but I feel like I am and that’s all that matters when I’m there. I imagine Dad feels like this as he works the field, going around it over and over again, the shape of it shrinking as he works toward the center, until the work is done. “You have a lot of time to think out there,” he says. There’s a place where we walk up to enter the field or bring Dad food. It is at the top of a gradual hill, overlooking the fields and the horizon to the west. When it’s dark, I hear an owl hoot every time I walk by. Songbirds sing and coyotes howl in groups. Possum, raccoon, deer, beaver, and rabbits all depend on the water and the diversity the land. What makes the place beautiful and alive are the things that live here.

I am attached to this land because of its history and because of my history here. The limestone cliffs, the patches of fertile soil, the animal life—all a cross-section of the history of the Schlegel family in the United States. I don’t want the river to be dangerous to swim in, like it is now, though I still swim in it anyway. It would be nice to know though that it’s clean instead of considered dangerous to swim in. I want to see people working to understand the power of the land to help us, to learn how to read its signals and to work with it instead of pitting ourselves against it. I want to walk out there and know there is still wildness to be found. I want my children to see it as I have seen it, and if possible, to see it even nearer its natural state.

* * *

The last time I saw my aunt and told her I wanted to write about the river and what it meant to me, she said she wanted to tell me a story. I listened, intrigued, wondering what it would be. *I remember that time we went carp fishing on the Saline. Your dad and Elmer (my uncle) had a bucket to hold the fish in, and that first fish they caught, you went right up to that bucket and just looked at that carp. You stroked its body with your whole little hand, looking at*

it. I mean, you stared at it for a good long time. I could tell you just loved it. It was like you were comforting it, thanking it for being our food that night, looking at its beautiful body, its eyes, its scales. It just captivated you, and I knew you loved and appreciated animals even at such a young age. I do remember that day when we fished, and I remember loving every time we went to my cousins' farm because there were so many different animals there. I was captivated and I still feel this need in me to protect the life around us because for me at least, my life would not be near as exciting or fun without the times I spend outside with other life.

* * *

How should man interact with the wild world around him? I think of the natural spring on some of our land, farther northeast of the farm that comes out of a hill and is visible from a good distance away on the road. On the slightly hilly pasture, in a little valley, on the place where the ground lowers toward the river, and right at the top of the land before it turns into the limestone cliff that runs along the river, there is a green spot that turns into a water grass trail and winds along the valley for about 200 feet. Even in the dead of winter, the spring runs out of the side of that hill, making the trail of water grass perpetually muddy and green all year round. Dad rents this pasture to a friend, and as a favor to the man, he constructed a watering spot for the tenant's cows. Dad has also shown my uncle in the county west of ours, about an hour away, how to find springs and tap the water for his cows. On our land, Dad put a small stock tank near the hillside, and pushed a pipe into the side of the hill right around the area where water bubbled out of the rocky soil. In the summer, on a hundred-degree day, the water flowing out of that pipe is clear and cold. I resist the urge to take a drink because Dad says the aquifer may be polluted by sprays—he doesn't think so, but he's not sure.

Looking at Three Patches of Land

“Hi Lisa, CB here. I got your phone call and I’ll have at least two gallons of goat milk for you, maybe three. I won’t have any eggs though. My girls aren’t happy right now.”

CB is a woman who lives near the Smoky Hill River a few miles east of our farm. She raises goats, horses, cows, and chickens. She is superwoman, hardly ever leaving her farm since she and her family have to take care of the animals, a daily commitment, regardless of weather, need for a vacation, or any type of convenience most average people would consider absolutely necessary. Her family prides themselves on being able to raise the majority of all the food they eat, and CB sells many different goat products, including milk, cheese, and soaps, to make her income.

Her comment about her “girls” meant that her chickens didn’t feel like laying since it was so cold outside. It always gets like this around Thanksgiving. Usually the first really cold spell in Kansas happens around this time.

A few days prior to me calling CB, an “arctic clipper” moved in. It was “colder than a witch’s tit,” as Dad says. On radar, I saw the blue line with downward facing triangles falling across central Kansas like a necklace on the very day the front was moving through. “Future track” forecast predicted the front would move through at 1 pm. It was 12:15 when I heard the first gust of wind hit the west garages. Goodland, a town two and a half hours west, had 50 mph gusts earlier that morning. The chickens must have known it and wanted to conserve their energy.

I thought her message was so cute I told my parents right away how she called her chickens “my girls.” I was home for Thanksgiving break and wanted one of my first stops that week to be CB’s goat farm to get some raw goat’s milk, one of my favorite things in this world.

About ten minutes after the phone call, Dad and I got in the old Dodge truck to head over to CB's farm about four miles from the ranch on the roughest and hilliest of Kansas back roads. This was not our first trip there and we knew what vehicle to take: the crappiest one we owned.

About two years ago I found out about CB's family farm, right before I moved to eastern Kansas for graduate school at KU. My brother got on the internet and found Weston Price.com, a site listing local food sources that helps people locate people like CB and her family. I also found another raw dairy farmer in Eastern Kansas so I could have access to healthy raw dairy while away from home. The only difference: instead of having goat's milk, my connection near Lawrence sold cow's milk—equally delectable and full of the healthy fats and enzymes I can't get anywhere else, for they are destroyed in conventional dairy by homogenization and pasteurization. Not only does raw milk taste heavenly, creamy, and rich, it is free of antibiotic and hormonal residue present in regular dairy. Plus, I get to see the farms on which the animals are raised.

On the ride over to CB's house, Dad and I had some time to catch up. We have grown closer since I moved away from home. Before turning left from the county line road about a quarter of a mile from the ranch, we looked out over the hill down to the valley between the "crick" (as Dad calls it), and the Smoky Hill River. There lay the three patches of land my family has farmed for almost a century. Not a week to go until Thanksgiving, the wheat was a few inches tall.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Dad looks down from that hill every time we go to CB's house with satisfaction and appreciation of what he calls the miracle of growing something. I didn't say much in response, and never do because I look down at that valley every time too, knowing how much it means to be close to the land in that way, to work the soil, plant seeds, wait, and

trust. A stunning sight, up until the last couple of years I couldn't really comprehend how the path we drove toward the fields weaved around the creek and toward the river from that high up. Things looked distorted to me, and I remember my mom asking me back when I was much younger, "Do you see the wheat coming up down in the field?" I responded *yes* every time even though I was sort of confused about exactly which field was ours.

"It may not look like Harvey's (our next-land neighbor to the west) over there but I refuse to spend my money buying fertilizer that destroys our most valuable resource." Dad was referring to the soil. Scientists, biologists, farmers, and normal citizens have for years been asking hard questions about the damage being done to the soil. Authors write about how many feet of topsoil have been lost since the agricultural revolution, how many living organisms are present in one square inch of soil, how the nutrient value of our food depends on things like this that we do not yet completely understand, yet continue to exterminate at exponential rates. What are we killing and how are we affecting ourselves when we kill billions of microorganisms by over-fertilizing, spraying for insects and funguses, and over-working the soil? We still don't know, and there's no way we can know because never before in the history of the world has the land been subject to so many harassments.

* * *

Over my childhood Dad has avoided a trap many farmers have fallen into: debt from newer, bigger equipment that handles more workable acres and higher yields. For example, Dad's fifteen foot header on the Gleaner combine with a smaller grain tank than current combines takes more than twice the time to cut a field of wheat or Milo than our neighbor's thirty foot header, not to mention the fact that Harvey has three combines and multiple semi trucks to handle the large yield of grain.

Last harvest in late June, I was at the farm when Dad started on the bottom patch of wheat, usually taking about a week to finish all three patches due to the time it takes when using one combine and one truck. Dad makes several rounds, unloading in the truck every time his tank overflows with wheat, and when the truck is full, it must be taken in to the elevator. That has to be done before he can continue, because he does not have a second truck to keep on the farm while one of us takes the truck to the elevator. In the time that he finished working the bottom patch, Harvey and his three combines and two semis finished his entire crop in one afternoon in a precise march of industrialized farming. And his high yield and fast harvest came at a price that supported many industries: fertilizers, multiple herbicide applications, both emergent and pre-emergent (on crops themselves and on the bare soil).

My Dad is more “old school.” It took him long enough to complete one field that it was necessary for us to bring him lunch in the field, to make food runs, stay overnight, do all the stuff “old timers” used to do, like make a brown lunch sack full of food – at least two bacon sandwiches, a couple of eggs, a big jar of Dr. pepper (three cans worth) with the large ice cubes in it. If it wasn’t over 100 degrees I liked to walk the food out to dad about a mile and a half from the house, and across a creek that in the summer is easy to cross by stepping on rocks and balancing carefully.

Instead of using machines that cost, for a combine, a quarter of a million dollars, and semi trucks, over 50 grand, I think Dad made the best decision, avoiding the debt trap farmers are in that causes them to depend on a consistent, large crop every year. A consistent crop comes at a price: genetically modified seeds, high quantity and low quality of grain, and over-worked, nutritionally-depleted soil. This doesn’t include the damage done to animal life by both chemical pollution and habitat displacement. The consistent bills a farmer is required to pay:

equipment repair and purchase, fuel cost, seed purchase, weed control (a vicious circle of fertilizing and using various types and applications of fertilizers and herbicides), property taxes, require that he or she have a consistent income regardless of the effect it has on the land or animal life.

As we drive to CB's, I can't just look down and see how beautiful the fields are without thinking of all the messy details anymore. Once you know how the animal industry, the food industry, and the agricultural industry work, you might get ambitious, thinking there has *got* to be something you can do to change things, to save the land around your farm at least, the animals, and still make a living farming. I have always told Dad that he should start a new farmer's coop that refuses to participate in the rape of the land, where farmers only produce small crops of non GM seeds for a higher price and not every year. I am always hoping for some way for the people to get the power, for local business to take off, for local communities to support themselves and treat each other and the land justly. It's one of those things I can't let go: I want justice and I think it's possible. People say, oh, but the price of food will go up if farmers get paid more, if yields are lower, if there isn't as much supply of grain.

My response to that argument is that we should pay more for quality food. And this isn't just about grains, but about all agricultural sectors like fruits and vegetables. We in the USA pay less per person for our food ratioed with our income than most countries—and we pay the price with our health. It gives me hope that people are catching on to organic, and hope that people will see how our food industry needs to become a non-industry if we are to treat ourselves, our land, and our animals the way they should be treated. Overcoming the habit of gauging success *economically* will be the challenge to overcome in this case, as it is in most.

For as long as I can remember Dad has explained to me, my family, and other farmers why he doesn't participate in this deceptive "racket," as he calls it. *Everyone else is doing it*, is a common saying among the few farmers I have talked to. The higher yields aren't even necessary—I have seen piles of wheat on the ground many seasons, and it is as my parents have said too many times "enough to make you sick."

It hurts me to see my dad look out at his crop with sad eyes, with all that he's said in the past, with all that has remained unsaid about what happens to all the fields around ours. I found myself thinking a few days ago about what Grandma said when she was alive about how there used to be so many more song birds. I read recently that it is proven more birds are dying because of the latest fertilizers and herbicides. And *Silent Spring*, the book that blew the initial whistle on chemical use and its effects, has been around for nearly half a century. We should know better.

My brother purchased a book of North American songbirds this past summer at a garage sale. We've used it to look up the birds we constantly spot on the farm: the mockingbird, blue bird, blue jay, several varieties of woodpeckers, the oriole, kingbird, sparrows, swallows, hawks. Tilling the soil ruins the ground nesting birds' habitats; essentially they are unable to nest. Birds like the killdeer, whose nests my dad has repeatedly picked up and moved while tilling (to the freshly worked soil) depend on undisturbed ground or the merciful hand of a farmer.

I will be the first of four generations not to farm. If my brother or I wanted to farm, we would be forced to buy new equipment (as Dad's is on the "last leg" as we like to say), and the repairs, as they have been for my parents, would outweigh the amount of money made farming. For the last twenty years or so, repairing my Dad's equipment has worked for my parents. Farming smaller crops allows us to opt out from the more common desperate farming practices

required to keep many farmers financially afloat. I find myself asking the same question of government officials that I blame economic problems on that I ask of farmers that “farm industrial.” Can I really blame them? Part of me says “Hell yes! If you do it, do it right; we will all be held accountable for our actions, to the last small detail.” Another part of me sees how complicated and intertwined all of it is, industry, money, etc; and I tell myself when I get too angry about it, a familiar quote, that I have actually had told to me more frequently (which worries me): “Change the things you can; and don’t worry about the things you can’t.”

Wheat Crop

I enjoy knowing every generation of my family has been farming the land for as long as we have lived in this country. My generation is the first who will likely not farm to make a living, unless I marry farmer that is. I hear the words Dad has told me since I've been young. I remember him saying it sarcastically, but at times I think he was serious, and that made me sad: "Lisa, just don't marry a farmer when you grow up." The thing is he never said this when we were picnicking during harvest in the wheat field. He said it when the western sky clouded up and the weatherman predicted hail. He said it when he was all flustered, walking around in his flannel shirt and yelling at the evening news. Mom said things to my brother and me like, *Don't worry about your dad; he says he's not stressed out, but he always gets like this during harvest time. There's a lot to worry about you know—bad weather, enough rain, machinery breakdowns...* (because of course machines don't break down in the winter when they're not being used.

* * *

There's a story Dad tells every year or so. "Remember that time we had 90-bushel wheat over at Pfeifer?" (For the layperson, 90-bushel wheat is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and sometimes not even that. And for a farmer like my dad who doesn't use fertilizers or pesticides, it's a miracle). "Man, that crop was a dandy, wheat heads bursting with full, ripe kernels, not shriveled by the heat like they usually are—most beautiful crop I ever had. Those wheat heads were that wide." Dad holds his thick rough farmer hands up motioning toward his forefinger proudly. "That year was the best wheat we ever had, and the hail shredded it to nothing." Dad was so proud of that crop that he and mom took pictures of themselves standing in field amongst the wheat heads. The one of dad shows him looking down at the wheat moving his hands

through it. Looking at the picture I can hear the wind blowing fast through the “amber waves” no matter how cliché it sounds. The blowing wheat stalks sound like water, and the sun, iridescent on the golden wheat heads makes them look like actual waves. The writer of that song knew what a field of wheat looked and sounded like in the Kansas wind.

The other part of the story: that crop was uninsured. Even though farmers have insurance for their crops most of the time, my dad decides some years not to insure. And that is a big gamble, one that forced both of my parents to get other jobs the year we lost the crop. Despite the economic hardships that came with losing that crop in particular, Dad always seemed much more attached to the fact that he lost such a beautiful crop.

Several times I have been at farmer’s dinners and get-togethers and heard Dad talking to people about their damaged crops. One friend whose crop was damaged by hail mentioned how glad he was that he got insurance money without having to harvest. *The hail saved me a lot of work*, he said. I remember the look on my dad’s face. He didn’t say anything, and I could tell he was somewhat sad and disgusted that farmers who work thousands of acres as opposed to hundreds start losing the feel of what they are actually doing. That man’s crop died. He planted it one fall, it germinated and grew through the tough winter, and near harvest in June, the crop died, and this guy didn’t care. To me Dad is the tough Kansas farmer, the one who respects the process, understands it, and doesn’t let a thing like money cloud the reality of the situation.

The times when my family faced economic hardships due to losing a crop unexpectedly were not spoken about much. And this rings true to how my dad is. When I ask for advice or am going through a rough time with whatever it is, he tells me, *Just do something; keep busy. At least plan little goals, little things you can do to make whatever it is better.* If we lost a crop, we were careful about what we spent, not going out to eat much (which we hardly did anyway) and

never getting things like candy at the store. There were times in our childhood when both dad and mom were forced to get jobs to make up for what farming could not provide. And we saved money very well. *It's not how much money you make; it's what you don't spend*, both my parents say. I don't know how many times I heard that statement. That stuff I hear on TV, the ground-breaking money management ideas from Dave Ramsey and Suzie Orman, that's what I call "Old Hat."

* * *

One day after church, I heard Dad talking with his uncle's daughter, Evelyn, about harvest. Dad was incredibly close to his uncle, and the only time I remember him crying, ever, was at his uncle's funeral. Dad was telling Evelyn the 90-bushel wheat crop story, when I heard her say, *I get attached to my flowers in my front yard!* She said it with sympathy and an I-can't-imagine-what-that-feels-like look in her eyes. *When it hails I cover them with all the blankets I have. If I had a whole crop out there, I'd just want to protect it like this.* When she said that, she reached her arms out in front of her like she was placing them over a big, round ball. I could tell she understood what farming meant to men like my dad and her father as she said she couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose an entire crop you planted in the fall and watched grow through the winter and summer into such a miracle. A year of work gone in twenty minutes of wind and hail—that's the gamble a farmer takes every year, a gamble with his heart and a gamble with his livelihood.

Sparrow

A sparrow insists on building her nest on my parent's front porch above the porch light, affixed to the side of the house about one foot to the west of the front door. This high traffic area happens to be the most well-protected and enviable spot for a young sparrow to build a nest for her young.

The lovely sparrow is endlessly patient, sitting perched on a spruce branch overlooking the house from the southwest until the porch is clear of people. She refuses to fly near when people are in sight. All four of us felt bad for her because we were always on that porch. We sit on the swing looking at the valley to the west, full of limestone cliffs and four grazing horses, reading a book, walking in and out fetching food or drink between breaks of construction on the new garage and sunroom addition. All the while the little bird daintily sits waiting for a chance to feed her little ones. The barn swallow took a different approach.

The barn swallow's nesting spot was *hers*. She got physical and vocal about her displeasure at our proximity to her nest of young birds. Like the sparrow, the barn swallow began nest construction knowing the volume of traffic surrounding her chosen building site. Unlike the sparrow, the barn swallow swooped violently under the overhanging porch. She did a high-speed fly-by in the 7-foot space, chirping bird lingo resembling, I would imagine, something similar to what a person would say during a bad bout of road rage. All four of us were warned.

The bird came within less than an inch of my face as I sat on the porch to eat my bologna sandwich for lunch. I had to bring our broom outside to protect myself. The barn swallow was relentless. But after about four weeks of this, her young grew big enough to leave the nest. Thank God.

Before that happened, the swallow drove me to an anger I had never had toward an animal. When beetles crawl inside the building at work in the fall, I sometimes pick them up and take them outside instead of smashing them. I may be slightly crazy like that. So the reaction the barn swallow drove me to was surprising. I'm not going to hurt your nest, I thought. If I wanted to hurt your nest, I would have done it days ago. I would have taken this broom to it and in one swoop be done with this constant harassment. The bird knew as it built its nest that the porch was a busy place. We spent more time out there than in the house. And the bird witnessed this repeatedly, yet built her nest alongside our much bigger house.

Could it not tell that I had no interest in harming its young I wondered, impatient. When I bought out a cold glass of water and a sandwich, I was victim to the bird's rage. In a high-speed, premeditated dive, as I opened the door with my right foot, balancing my drink and sandwich in my left and right hands, the bird dove at my face. Its wing grazed my bangs and the glass fell out of my hand and onto the ground. The sandwich landed facedown (I guess there are only so many ways for a sandwich to fall though).

I went inside for the broom, sandwich on the ground, dog eating sandwich. I thought of Mom's words of a few days prior: *we should just wreck the nest; it shouldn't be here anyway*. But we all wimped out at the thought of toppling hairless, eyeless bundles of gray and purple skin out of the nest and onto the dry white concrete. That just wouldn't be right.

Swallows have a habit of what I like to call dive-pestering. My dog, cat, and I are all victims. Here's how it goes down. A group of swallows, or more commonly just one swallow sees its victim. I'm mowing the lawn. Swoop, swish, fast, flash. The dog is looking up at a cottonwood tree. Dive, swish, bark, jump, and run. The cat stalks, thinking she's smarter,

thinking, I'm going to be licking your blood from my pretty white whiskers in five minutes. I do things for sport too, she thinks. I kill for sport; my food comes in cans.

The cat continues to creep, stalk, slink, runs, body contorted stiff and still as her head looks helplessly upward. Then she feigns a loss of interest three or four minutes in, walking away to preen. The dog is still watching, enthralled, jumping around, fifteen minutes later. He is still entertained, unaware of the fool he's being made of by what I can only imagine as a group of eight laughing swallows. This bird likes to taunt, to play with animals, and it gets away with it. Like mom said, if it's too annoying, all we need to do is wreck the nest.

Why I wondered was it worth all of this predatorial contact for a bird to build a nest here. Well, all four sides of the nest are protected. The porch light is in a 4-sided decorated glass housing. So the nest is covered on the north and south sides by a wall and a lamp. The other two sides grant access but are alongside over twenty feet of wall running from east to west. No wind or rain can touch the nest. No animal but birds can get to the nest. Only two have been crazy enough to pick this site. But crazy seems "evolutionary" at this point.

A few days ago I was on the porch with our German shepherd. Relaxing, I noticed a frantic chirping, a squealing that I mistook for a rattle or loose chain. After several minutes I looked for the sound and found it above my head and to the left. Three baby sparrows. And to my right fifty feet away on a spruce limb, the mother sparrow waiting patiently to feed her young. I got to my feet and called the dog, Hector, to follow me to the back porch, leaving the sparrow at least fifteen minutes with her babies.