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Talk Here: A Personal Chronology in Linked Essays

Neva Knott
University of New Orleans, nevaknott@gmail.com

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Talk Here

A Personal Chronology in Linked Essays

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Neva Knott

B.A., The Evergreen State College, 1990

M.A.T, Lewis and Clark College, 1996

M.S.E.S., Green Mountain College, 2012

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Leaving

I watched Peggy Olson of the show *Mad Men* type, “May 17, 1968. New York, New York. For Immediate Release.” Her headline caught my attention because 1968 was a time of global intensity. That date marks the significant increase in American deaths from the Viet Nam war. It also marks the date of student protests in France. That era--the spring of 1968 and beyond--was a time of expanding unrest.

As I watched the episode, I wondered what was going through my father’s mind that same year as he made the decision and the requisite following choices to move his family out of America and into the world of extensive travel in the South Pacific and Asia, of third-world countries. Another line from that same *Mad Men* episode, “People today don’t know where they are going, but aren’t afraid of what’s around the bend.” Did my dad know? As he retired from his thirty-year career at the Washington State Department of Game and maneuvered to live his boyhood dream of traveling, did he think about Viet Nam raging out of control?

While watching Peggy type, I was reminded of my Girl Scout troop going to the airport in Seattle to help with the arrival of Vietnamese orphan babies.

That line also struck me because I realized it’s how I’ve lived much of my life, going without consideration of what’s to come, valuing experience--the journey--over the outcome, the destination. Sure, I have my goals, and ambitions, but sometimes those ideals—the values of my Free To Be You And Me Generation—seem like simple advertising slogans.

I paused—how are those two things connected...my father's choice to take us out of the country at such a tumultuous time and my lose-the-map way of living? Is there a connection? Or is the connection simply my memory of him and my fascination with that time?

I was seven. I remember the leaving. In my little girl mind I was unaware of all the steps—the packing, the selling of house and cars, the intricate decisions one must make about what to take and what to leave behind.

We left our dogs--four beagles. We left my pet bunny. We left our house by the lake.

The night before we flew out, we stayed at grandma and grandpa's--my mom's parents. I asked my grandma to come with us, a simple child's request. She chuckled, and told my parents, "I've been asked to come along." At four in the morning my sister and I were awakened, and left the twin beds in that room we'd napped in so many days of our childhood. The beds with the polyester flowered comforters, one pink and one yellow, the colors we'd fight over in choosing a bed each time we stayed over.

I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave behind my grandparents.

My parents had traveled to Hawaii the year before, something neither my sister nor I were aware of until we found the slides this last Christmas, Kodachrome images of mom and dad as tourists, iconic in their 60s garb and naiveté as travelers. When Rachel and I saw those images, we realized just how green our parents were at travel that morning we left behind the warmth at grandma's. As we left the States, we stopped over

in Honolulu before catching our flight to Saipan, in Micronesia. In Hawaii, Rachel and I swam in the ocean for the first time. We stayed in a hotel for the first time. We swam in a hotel pool for the first time.

Hotel pools were to become the mark by which my sister and I judged the places we stayed and the fun factor of each of many long trips to places like Australia, Indonesia, India, Saigon. Hotel pools were where we formed our bonds as the world got bigger and bigger and we knew we had to stick together.

In Honolulu we shopped at the Ala Moana Center, then a new mall. We did the first-trip-to-Hawaii things—visited the Polynesian Cultural Center and Pearl Harbor. In a sense, that first trip was a rite of passage to our new identities as world travelers, as little girls who knew that most cultural practices were wildly different from our world of Olympia, Washington.

Flying from Hawaii to Saipan was a journey from the first world to a pin-dot on the globe in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean. Because of Micronesia's remoteness, our flight stopped at little islands along the way to drop supplies. When the plane landed on Saipan, a fire truck raced it down the runway, just in case. The airport was barely more than a cement hut.

The first night on Saipan is permanently etched in my mind. I can't ever find the adjective for the sum total of the experience, but I remember the scene. Rachel and I were beyond tired. Our parents were tired. Collectively, we were clearly out of our element,

and even at seven I got this. The hotel was the best on the island, yet we were unseasoned travelers and didn't know what that really meant. Our room had that musty smell I now know is inescapable anywhere in the tropics, a smell I now equate with longing and nostalgia and truth. There were geckos on the ceiling, and my mother was scared of them. They chirped all night. The air conditioner was loud and erratic, also a common feature of tropical hotels everywhere. It seemed dark and dingy in the room, and our parents worked to smooth over the rough edges so that we could fall asleep in one of the double beds.

Our new life awaited in the morning.

The Hotel Hafa A'dai. The hotel's name means *good day* in Chamorro, the mixed language of the islands. During the four years we lived on Saipan, we went to the Hafa A'dai often for dinner. Music played from the bar, and our parents would linger, usually with friends or visitors, while my sister and I went to the gift shop for Cadbury chocolate bars. And we swam in that hotel pool often, especially after I broke my leg. Part of my learn-to-walk-again therapy was to hold on to the edge of the pool and walk until the water got too deep.

Sometimes, I dream of that first night on Saipan. Sometimes, I dream of the Hafa A'dai pool and the beach just beyond its edges. I think I travel in my sleep to that innocent time, to try to get back to whatever part of my soul is still there, listening to the geckos.

Scars

“It’s scar tissue.”

She runs his hand over the lump on her left thigh. It's soft against the muscle under her skin. Just under the lump is a firm indentation. She worries that he, as her new lover, will think it's fat.

“I was hit by a car when I was seven and was never supposed to walk again. The impact fractured my femur.

“The accident happened when we lived on Saipan, an island in Micronesia, in the middle of the Pacific. A pencil dot on a globe. Do you know where that is?”

“Yes,” he answers, and becomes the listener she's been seeking to finally tell this story to.

"I was on the bus to day camp. It was parked along the curb, across the street from a little store. The store's screen door creaked and moaned when pulled open. I was in love with grape Fanta at the time. The can of it in my lunch must have sweated. My lunch sack was wet, and falling apart, so I got off the bus to get a new sack from the store. I left the bus, with permission of course, because that was the kind of child I was. I looked both ways, stepped out, and started across the street in the cross walk.

“This is what I remember. I stepped out, and heard honking--loud, big car honking that wouldn’t stop. I jumped back, trying to get behind the face of the bus. I remember falling. I hit the back of my head. I lost one of my new flip-flops, bought for me especially for camp. My leg stung and hurt and swelled so quickly that my pants

became unbearably tight. I cried because I thought I was going to get in trouble for crossing the street carelessly. My seven-year-old mind fixated on explaining that I had looked, I had held to the protocol of stop, look, and listen.

“Then time moved, though I don’t know how quickly or slowly. I was worried about my lost new sandal. I remember noise and confusion and faces above me. I remember people lifting me--I think even the man who hit me, and it was into his car--and they put me in the back seat of a big sedan, a Cadillac, maybe. I remember the word hospital said again and again. I didn’t want anyone to take me to the hospital without my parents. This must have happened before my dad was there, and that’s what made me worry--the illogical sense that these people would drive me away without my parents knowing that I was hurt. It was sunny, and then my dad *was* there. Medics must have come, because I remember them cutting my jeans off my swollen leg and checking my head. My white-blond hair was matted with blood. The nurses at the hospital had to cut out a patch from the back of my head so I could have stitches.”

She pauses, realizing she has forgotten the mark on her body that holds that part of the memory. She takes his hand and places it on the back of her skull. Maybe this scar marks the secret she can’t tell even herself, the fear of not being able to catch herself, fear of being found guilty of causing her own pain. She realizes this the instant he moves his hand around the occipital ridge of her skull.

“I don’t know if my mom came to the accident site. I don’t remember her being there. It would make sense that she was there, but also that she stayed back to watch my

little sister.

“At camp, we’d been learning to sing *You Are My Sunshine*. I hate that song.”

She pauses for a moment as they rearrange themselves, adjusting sheets and pillows to better mold the coil of their bodies.

“But I can walk.”

She stares into the darkness. To herself she thinks, away from it all. This is the biggest secret, the one she never tells, that she wants to walk away from the pretty little mess of her life. This is just one story. But, the memories are stuck in her body, held by the scar tissue in precise dimensions of her flesh, immobilizing her.

“Healing took a long time. I was in the hospital for over a month. A Navy hospital. On Guam. Most days, my mom was there with me. She taught me how to crochet and how to embroider. We made squares for a child's quilt. My mom traced simple figures I selected from a coloring book onto fabric, and I'd do the needlework. I never put the squares together.

“I was in traction. I had a steel pin in my left knee. From it, my left leg was suspended in a 45-degree angle, in the air, so gravity would straighten my femur. I still have the pin-marks. I was on my back all that time. My right leg lay still and flat. Because of the traction, my left leg is longer than my right, and I have a spinal misalignment.”

She moves his hand against those indentations on her skin. He pulls her closer and says, "Keep telling me..."

"I remember the man who hit me with his big car tried to visit. Even now, I can see and hear my father arguing with him, blaming him, confronting him with the evidence, gesturing toward the small me, lying there.

"My worst memory of my hospital stay is the blood transfusion. That day, my dad had flown over from Saipan. My parents left the hospital to eat. My dinner came while they were out--liver, of all things. And then the nurses rolled in an IV full of blood. Again I tried to argue that my parents should be present before these other adults took over my body. Adding blood to it seemed a big deal to me, so big that, surely, my dad would object. The nurses wouldn't yield to my logic. I looked at the liver on my plate, and at the blood seeping into my arm, and cried, my eyes not straying from the door as I watched for my parents to return.

"I was in a body cast for, I think, about six weeks. At least I was out of the hospital and home. The cast was a weird contraption--all the way down my left leg, and to my knee on the right, with a cross-bar between my legs. I had to lie flat most of the time. My dad was in conspiracy against the doctors who said my destiny was a wheel chair. He devised a way to prop me onto a dining chair so I could at least sit at the table for meals. He also stood me upright at the kitchen counter, and I learned how to swivel on one foot to the next so I could walk around, at least as long as I had something to hold onto. Because of these secret activities, I wore through the first cast and had to have another one put on.

"When the cast was removed, I had a spindly left leg. No muscle, no strength. It

couldn't bear weight.

“My father put me in the ocean. The water held me, buoyed me, so that I could strengthen my legs. I'd float and kick and he'd hold my hands. Once I'd mastered floating and kicking, he put me in the swimming pool. There was only one on the island, at the Hotel Hafa Adai. I'd hold the edge and walk along the bottom, back and forth, from the pool steps until the water got too deep. After I'd mastered using my legs again in the weightlessness of water, my dad taught me how to walk around my bed by steadying myself along the edges and with him holding my elbow. Eventually, I could make it all the way around without his help. Then, he called my mom into the room, telling her we had a present for her.”

She recedes into her own mind. Her thoughts meld with the sensations of his touch. She thinks that her survival, her triumph, marked her first sense of self, though the little girl could not yet realize her strength.

As the darkness retreats into the grey dawn, he moves his hand over the scar tissue, and she knows this won't be their last night together, tangled in sheets and stories.

Punk

It's sweaty. I'm pushed right up front against the stage, to the right of Andrew's drum kit. I don't care about the little groupies trying to get his attention. Caitlyn's here, too, and we've been his best girls for 20 years, so our vibe is *move over, cute little things*. I've been standing in this same spot at Dead Moon shows since the band began in 1987, and have no intention of losing my place now.

It's sweaty, and suddenly the whole crowd pushes at once and I am pinned. Out of nowhere, our old friend Lyndsey stands behind us, creating a barricade and keeping Caitlyn and me safe from flying elbows and body slams. Better to be up front than in the middle of the mosh. The push always happens right about now on a Dead Moon night. The first chord is struck, everyone at the bar slams a last drink, and the night begins.

Andrew's sweaty, and his long, curly brown hair is hanging over his face. As he hits the drums, he glances through the strands and sees me and Caitlyn. He catches my eye. I smile and dance. He smiles and hits his drums. The singer's voice blends with the beat:

"Thunderbolts and nightsticks

Coming out of the sky

Flames overhead

Rain until you cry

My baby's on the highway

Come in from the cold

Never going home, never going home..."

Andrew was my first friend in Portland.

I moved to Portland from Olympia in 1980, just a year after high school, with my high school sweetheart, Terry. Though I'd travelled extensively with my parents from the time I was six until about eighth grade, I was shy, and didn't like new places. I tried to get to know our new neighbors, I tried to make friends at work, and of course, I tried to know Terry's work-mates. But nothing stuck. Honestly, I didn't like many of the people he brought home. So my social circle remained friends from high school, his sisters and my sister, who all lived in Olympia--but we visited often. Terry worked rotating shifts: two weeks of days, two weeks of swing, two weeks of graveyard, and I worked retail hours. I spent too much time by myself, watching 80s detective shows: *Hart to Hart*, *Rockford Files*, *Magnum P.I.*, and *Murder, She Wrote*. I was lonely and scared and lost. I was nineteen.

I spent another three years trapped in my isolation. Our relationship ended just before my 22 nd birthday. I moved out of the house we'd recently bought. The package of my freedom included a one-bedroom apartment, a couch, dining table and bed, a car, and my job as an assistant buyer for a local chain of jeans stores. And more empty minutes.

Jody, a girl at work, befriended me. My loneliness matched hers, but she had different ideas than TV nights and girl talk. She introduced me to the scene. Portland in

1984 wasn't the hipster, sustainable lifestyle, artisan mecca it is today. It was smaller, much smaller, and downtown was the core. Outer neighborhoods hadn't been gentrified and the Pearl was just the warehouse district, where some of the guys I met lived in a space that was so large they had to skateboard to the bathroom.

It was a Thursday night. Pick any Thursday in the winter of 1984, and it could have been that one. We went to the Virginia Cafe for buck night. The line was out the door as was standard, and it was cool to arrive a bit late, but not so late that you *really* had to stand in line. The bartender's name was Fern, and the one-dollar drinks were strong. I'd not really been a cocktail drinker before, but you don't go to buck night and drink beer.

While waiting to order, having finally made it through the door and down the gauntlet to the bar, I looked around, checking out the crowd: guys in tight black jeans and rumpled shirts, some with vintage brocade vests, some with old but ornate cowboy boots. Some with huge jangling belts, and many with dyed-black hair. Girls in short skirts and go-go boots, vintage dresses and coats, worn with black lace stockings with heels. My eye caught this one guy, making his way through the swarm of people and up to the drink line. He seemed to know everyone and smiled as he greeted each person. He had buoyancy to him. He was tall and thin, had black curly hair and he was cute and rich in persona. I looked at Jody and said, "Who's that?" His name was Andrew, and I wanted to know him like everyone else in the room knew him.

Buck night at VC was the Thursday night, Saturday night ritual, but the heart of

the scene was Club Satyricon. Dark, dingy, loud, punk, Portland's version of New York's CBGB. In the early days, the vibe of Satyricon was more that of a corner bar, except we were all young and dressed in black, and the music was live, local, and loud. A decade later, Courtney Love of the band Hole and Kennedy, an MTV VJ, would claim they made the place famous, but if you ask most of us, they were a bit late to arrive, stuck-up poseurs.

I'd heard of Satyricon from a guy at work. He thought he was a little tougher than the rest of us, and tried to scare Jody and me from going, telling us we'd get our asses kicked by punk girls. His admonishments had the opposite effect. I didn't really know what punk was, but I was curious.

The front of the building, painted flat black, looked derelict. The long bar to the left, band posters everywhere, the big red horseshoe booth to the right. The stage was up front, a simple plywood carpeted platform. Every week or month or so, someone would paint the backdrop. It was an ever-changing street-style mural.

Jody and I walked in and sat down on a couple of chairs up by the stage, in the darkness and waited--for what, we didn't know. She was busy evaluating the tough chicks, girls dressed in shorter skirts than us and with more skin showing, wearing ripped stockings and big hair, bleached or dyed. I looked around, taking in every texture, gesture, sound. I felt naive and exhilarated.

We started hanging out at Satyricon, learned the cool bands, got on the good side of the bartender, Melissa, and flirted with the right guys. I'd see Andrew come and go,

but didn't yet have the nerve to put myself in his path.

Summer, and we found ourselves at an after hours party. Somebody knew there was a vacant townhouse somewhere across town, and that the doors didn't lock. The whole bunch of us bought six-packs of beer to go from the club and headed over to let ourselves in. Andrew was there. Jody, by that time, was pretty in to cocaine, so she used asking Andrew if he knew where she could get some as an excuse to point his attention my way. I was sitting on a roll of carpet, and he sat down by my side.

Jody and I parted ways soon after that party. By then we shared a house, but her boyfriend was dealing cocaine and I thought the house was being watched, and I was tired of them snorting and fighting and fucking loudly all night long after we'd been out, still up from the night before, while I was getting ready for work.

I moved into a studio apartment in Northwest, the area of town populated by college students, artists, and 20-somethings at large. Most of us were too broke to have phones, but there were so few places to go that by word of mouth we all got to the right place for whatever was happening. One of my first nights in that apartment, I went down to VC early on a Thursday, wanting just to be out, not wanting to slip back into my lonely evenings with Jessica Fletcher and Thomas Magnum, and wanting some food. I sat at the bar, by myself, something I would have never done just months before. Andrew, without my seeing him, slid onto the stool next to me, and in his casual way asked what I was doing that night. I told him nothing. He said, "Ruby and I are going down to the club-- you want to come with us?"

Andrew introduced me to his best friend, Ruby, and at Satyricon that night, the two of them introduced me to Heidi, Katherine and Alison. We girls danced while Andrew blended into the crowd of guys watching the band. In between sets we drank cheap beer and asked those get-to-know-you kinds of questions. As the night wound down, we bought to-go beer and headed to my apartment. I went in a car with Andrew and two of his friends. Ruby went in a car with the other girls. The driver of our car stopped for gas, and we lost Ruby, Heidi, Alison, and Katherine at the turn. So...I hung out with Andrew and his friends until far too late.

Friday, I ran into Heidi at the grocery store--in the cracker aisle. As I turned the corner and saw her reaching toward the shelf, I hesitated, not knowing what to say, then walked up to her side and said, "Hi. I was worried when we lost you all last night--we stopped for gas." Heidi said she was glad I told her and that she knew something must have happened, but that Ruby was mad and had kept saying, "That bitch took off with all the boys and all the beer."

Music, as I knew it until I found punk in Portland, was the beautiful tonality and sound that circled out of my parents' stereo, or was the loud hair band rock n' roll that my high school friends and I watched strut across the stage of the Seattle Kingdome. Records were objects that people had, tokens of friendship I got at birthday parties. Singing was what my dad did to lull my sister and me to sleep when we were little girls. In Portland, music was more than entertainment or a pastime--it was, and is, the rhythm of the city's

heartbeat.

One Saturday shortly after our cracker aisle meet-up, Heidi invited me to the movie *The Unheard Music* by the band X. I went, thinking two things--what kind of music is "unheard," and what kind of a band name is X? I sat in that theatre darkness and watched a woman with unkempt hair and blackened teeth blend her voice with that of a tall, thin man whose guitar seemed to emanate from his person. The songs they sang were songs *they*, Exene Cervenka and John Doe, wrote. Some were based on ideas, like "Real Child of Hell," a song about the "true trouble...you never see coming," and some were imagery-laden and raw in theme, "Imagine a silver cross on a coat of black leather, swinging side to side on the neck of a wolf." The band's music was poetry mingled with the slow strum of a guitar.

My life changed. I'd never heard anyone express deep thinking like John Doe's idea about the real child of hell as a metaphor for hard trouble--I'd never experienced anyone thinking outside of school. Seeing X on screen was the day I saw music as art, and realized art was something *people* made. The band had formed to "play music that wasn't bullshit." Los Angeles, then, was what John Doe called "an open city," one with no live music. The images in the movie were my introduction to social commentary. As the movie progressed, I learned that unheard music is music denied radio play, music not made for commercial gain. X and their brand of punk was an alternative to the Me generation foisted upon us in the 80s. That perspective stood in sharp contrast to the hair-band sounds of my teen years. I lost a bit of my naiveté that day; more importantly, I

found my creative self in the beat of the unheard music.

A couple of years later, in 1987, I left Portland to attend The Evergreen State College. There, I studied social change, creative writing, and photography. My version of the ethos I saw in *The Unheard Music* developed. I left Evergreen in 1990, and co-founded *Plazm* magazine, an internationally known publication that featured work by emerging writers, artists, and graphic designers. In making that magazine, I made the media I wanted to see in the world, created for artists an alternative to commercial galleries and publications. Andrew and Dead Moon played a few fundraiser shows for us. In fact, they even came to play at Evergreen one time.

Satyricon closed in 2003 after a 20-year run. By then, we--the original denizens--called it "the living room." The club had become famous as a musical seed-bed, with Portland bands like Dead Moon, Poison Idea, Napalm Beach, King Black Acid and with bands that went national like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, the Foo Fighters, playing their early shows on that plywood stage. No matter the band, once they started to play, we all crushed up front, sweating, dancing, slipping in spilled beer, bumping into each other, loving life. Andrew, Ruby, Heidi, Alison, Katherine and I--and others we collected along the way--had made a pact of fun by which we lived out our twenties with the club as the epicenter of our world.

Walking through the doors of Satyricon was transformative. Walking through those doors, I found my way into the heart of the city I'd once been so afraid to embrace.

I found genuine and creative people there rather than mean punk chicks posturing to beat me up. None of us were the headline-making angry skinheads--in fact, we shunned them when they'd try to come onto our turf. Through the friendships I made at that dark, loud, and dingy punk club, I overcame my shyness. I owe my ability to gracefully slide in and out of social situations to that place.

By the time the club closed, adult life had seeped in. Ruby was raising her daughters, Heidi and Alison had moved to California, I was teaching, and we'd lost track of Katherine.

Andrew still lived the rock n' roll life. Our lives are very different, his and mine. He's a famous punk drummer, hasn't had a "job" job since he bartended at Satyricon way back when, and I'd come by on a Monday or Tuesday for a burger and a bottle of beer after taking a night class at the community college. It was on one of those nights I met Caitlyn.

As I settled into my career, I went out less and less--teaching made it hard to stay out late and get up early. But, to this day, when I'm at a show...no matter the band, I know Andrew will walk through the door. A wall of people will glad-hand him on his way in and through the crowd. Always witty and energetic, he has the ability to make each person feel special. He will smile, have a joke for each one of them, then slide onto the barstool by my side and squeeze my hand.

Thirty years now, we've all been friends.

Just last week, X played in Portland. Andrew and I went, the first time we'd been out together, just the two of us, in years. I was in the pre-Christmas funk, overwhelmed by all the commotion of the holidays, so I welcomed the step into that other world, the one of friendship and music. The Blasters opened the show. We stood up front and hung on every note played, every drumbeat, every lyric sung. In between songs, Andrew leaned in to give me his commentary on the history of the band or people in the crowd. There were no cute little things to push out of the way that night. Neither of us knew anyone in the audience and the show was hollow--people just stood and stared straight ahead at what they'd come to see. Andrew kept saying, "Don't these people know they're at a show? It's The Blasters and X..." A punk show, and these people are just standing around. For me, though, when X took the stage it was 1984 and 1992 and 2004 and a movie theatre and this club and Satyricon all at once.

We left during the encore. As we walked out into the rainy night, I heard the lyrics of my favorite X song float across the audience:

"She won't get out of bed, shake her snaky hair

Grab her, throw her in the tub, she says, coffee and a piece of pie...

She never wears a dress on Sunday or any Monday afternoon

This is no goddam country to wander alone..."

When I moved to Portland, I did wander alone. Since that night at VC when

Andrew invited me to hang out at the club with him and Ruby, I have traversed the city in fine company. It's impossible to tell what the future will hold when you meet someone. I've lived my life through my friendships and I don't regret a minute. No longer that shy girl who moved to Portland in 1980 from Olympia, I'm a collector of people. Thankfully, the right ones always find me so that I can add them to my heart.

Next

Dirty dishes are piled in the sink, one cup atop one plate, atop one bowl and flanked by one knife, one fork, one spoon. There's a pan for each day's meal: the saucepan for Monday's soup, the skillet for Tuesday's packaged pot-stickers, and the baking dish for Wednesday's and Thursday's pre-seasoned packaged fresh fish. The wire rack in the adjacent sunroom holds paper plates, a coffeemaker and filters, paper napkins, and a box of extra wine glasses. All are remnants of gathering for meals after the long days at the hospital, and after. The cupboards are bare, and the refrigerator holds mostly condiments and those are from summer at best. The dog hair is piled in the corners, the floor has gone dull from dust and not enough cleaning, though there is a brighter pathway from door to sink, sink to fridge, fridge to counter, counter to stove. The espresso maker looks well-used. The wall near it is spattered with coffee drips.

I bought the house after I returned from living on Maui for a year with my partner, Adam. I had chosen to return to my teaching job in Portland, having taken a leave of absence for our adventure, but he wanted to stay another year--he wanted to be by himself for a year. That's all the explanation I got.

The first time I saw this house the porch was falling off. I had looked at seventy or so houses in this transitional--affordable--quadrant of Portland. Dump after smelly dump. I was ready to give up when my realtor called, "Neva, I think you should see the house I just listed. It's a lot of house for the money and the seller is going to do most of

the work it needs. If the neighborhood isn't too sketchy for you..." So I drove by on my way home from work. I arrived to find the porch unhinged, a 70s van jacked up in the drive way, siding the color of rancid butter and dull flat dark brown trim. Dump. I didn't go in. A day later, motivated by weariness and on the brink of desperation, I called my realtor, "I think I should look at that house."

I navigated the rickety porch and stepped inside the 1920s bungalow, very traditional Portland in style, imagined it painted in a warm color. I stepped into the living room and saw the original nail-top hardwood floors and built-in shelves. I fell in love with the way the light came into the living room through the clerestory windows above the bookshelves. The living room proper extended into a dining area. I love to cook for people, and room to throw a dinner party was on my list of must-haves. I continued to walk through. I fell in love with the huge kitchen. I fell in love with the attic. Never mind the holes punched in the bedroom walls. Never mind the layers of do-it-yourself projects executed with ineptitude over the lifespan of the house. I walked out the back door, into the big back yard, and saw potential. Never mind the decrepit shed. Never mind the viney, tangled, creeping mess that was the back yard.

I fell in love with the house.

I bought it. I went back, and then I signed the mortgage papers, and moved in. It was the first time I'd seen my name in such official print.

Adam called. I shared the news of my triumph. Home ownership was a goal we had in common, so I thought he'd be excited for me. He wasn't enthused about the house

at all. It seems he'd decided he didn't really want "a year." Rather, he missed me and wanted me to come back to Maui, right then. He insisted that, no, he hadn't ended our relationship--he'd just said he needed some time to himself. There was no rationality in his scenario--I had just bought a house. The school year had just begun. I'd quit my job on Maui.

He'd left me sitting alone on a beach to figure out *my* next move, separate of our relationship, *our* life.

The previous owner did most of the work to mitigate the damage to the house, but there was much left to do to really bring the house back to its potential stature. I began with the yard. Blackberry bramble impeded walking and took chemicals and my brute strength to remove. Cherries dropped from the 40-year-old untrimmed trees, onto everything, everywhere. Two branches were reachable, and the cherries sweet, but the fruit was mainly for the birds. Large-leafed weeds grew waist-high, though toppled easily with rain. The shed stood, built from scrap and adorned with a black spray-paint skull and crossbones. The squirrels grew fat with random filberts from the tree intertwined with the wire fence.

I quit the gym, bought a book entitled *Plant* and a shovel, and took a gift of a push mower from a friend. At night I read about gardening, and on weekends and evenings I wrestled the unwanted scraggle from the earth. I jumped on the shovel with full body weight to turn the earth. I discovered that I couldn't rototill because of all the trash that'd

been thrown in the yard for who knows how long. I found a one-inch drill bit, a hanger with a decayed cotton and synthetic blouse still on it, plastic toys, broken bathroom tiles, bottle caps, bottle glass, duct tape, tin foil, wire, spark plugs, batteries, plastic bags, pencils. I jumped, dug in, and turned.

The work ethic of my grandparents glistened in the sweat on my brow. My neighbors leaned over the fence to chat, glad that someone who cared had moved in. Some time in May, I got the vegetable seeds into a patch of soil under the old clothes-line. Some of them grew.

While I worked, I thought about my life, about what I wanted out of life, about what was next, and about all the "nexts" that had come before. I am detrimentally, to a staggering degree, afraid that my life, in the end when accounts are totaled, will be a waste. Because of this fear, I am always planning the next thing.

While I worked, I remembered what it was like to live with Adam.

The counter was laden with fresh tomatoes, limes, and garlic. The floor was swept clean of dog hair, dishes were done, and there was no dust atop the refrigerator. The counter had been cleared to make a work surface. A knife ready next to the cutting board, a skillet warming on the stove, and a fresh piece of halibut draining in the sink. Soft Brazilian music played on the stereo, and the soft glow of the summer light faded outside. The air was fragrant with the scent of fresh limes mingled with garlic. Cooking began to happen in tandem, a ritual of our daily life.

I met Adam while waiting tables at Alameda Brewhouse in Portland. During summers after graduate school, I worked to pay off my student loans. He was the brewer there. A co-worker talked me into going out with Adam. I did, and fell in love with his tall, thin frame and goofy smile. After we'd been together for a couple of years, we moved to Maui. I got us there by getting a teaching job at King Kekaulike High School.

We'd always, from the day we started dating, talked about living abroad. I'd travelled extensively as a child and had wanderlust. Adam hadn't travelled; he's made it from the mid-West, Indiana, to Portland. The most expansive place he'd been was the Pacific coast. The year before, Adam had wanted to move to Japan, having heard the brewing industry there was hot. Then he heard it wasn't, and changed his mind. By then, I was having some health problems, and often emotional. I really wanted a change of scenery, and was a little pissed at Adam for his flip-flopping on Japan.

I remember our conversation after that about leaving. Adam and I were sitting at the Lucky Lab pub. We were at an outside picnic table, and I was leaning my back against the cold cinder block wall. We were having a beer and chit-chatting, as couples do on Saturday afternoons. I looked up and out at the sky. I was looking up and away from Adam in the way I do when I want to avoid what I have to say or don't like what I'm thinking. I look up sometimes to escape my mind. I felt like I was going to cry, and Adam said, "What?" My voice shuddered and I replied, "I don't know. I really fucking hate this place." My eyes descended from the clouds and met his, "I don't want to live here anymore."

The tone of his replay was apprehensive underneath, in the bass note, but his words and voice were encouraging.

Adam had had it with my crying and freaking out about not feeling well, but wouldn't talk to me about it, wouldn't listen, either. And we were having some problems in our relationship I still don't understand. Add to the mix that, for as laid back and happy-go-lucky as Adam was on the outside and to the world, he was a very moody and depressive person inside. We never really talked about the mess we were in. Instead, we took our problems with us to Maui.

Adam really came alive living the island life, and when he began diving he found his calling. I joined a traditional outrigger canoe team. Living on Maui cured my illness and brought me strength. Together, we swam in the warm cerulean blue ocean, learned to body-board, hiked in the jungle, jogged in the pineapple fields, and made our home the gathering place for our new friends.

Somehow, though, things got tangled--professionally for me, and for us as a couple.

I was unwilling to keep teaching there. I taught Senior English and had students who'd never been issued a textbook, assigned reading, or written an essay. I had students who couldn't write a sentence, yet I was expected to graduate them all. The ethics of the situation flummoxed me. I couldn't foresee spending my career and my professional energy in that setting. I had to make a decision--stay on Maui or return to Lincoln.

On the beach one evening, after a swim on the way to the grocery, Adam asked

me, "So what are you going to do?" I told him I didn't know yet. Getting out of Portland in general, and living on an island, had been my dream. I was invested in my profession. He told me that, no matter what I decided, he was staying on Maui. He never said what he wanted from me. He never tried to help me sort out my dilemma. When I asked for his thoughts, he said he wanted to be by himself for a year. "A year," he specified.

I moved back to Portland, bought my house, and returned to teaching at Lincoln. Adam visited for Thanksgiving and we made a plan: he'd come to Portland so I could finish the school year and sell the house. Then, we'd return to Maui together, for good, to make it our home. Adam stayed on Maui until summer, until the day before our mutual friends, Bryan and Theresa, got married. He returned to Portland, very unwillingly, to serve as best man.

Adam came home in July and we knocked down the shed. We pulled up blackberry roots that spanned the width and length of the yard. We planted grass and put in a mini-patio made of pavers. We sat outside to eat dinner or for cocktails.

The grass seed blew or rolled downhill and made a wispy patch where no lawn was intended. The cherry leaves blew in the wind, and there were seeds sprouting everywhere in the dirt from last year's crop.

Adam said he hated the house, hated how much work it needed.

We lay in bed and talked about going back to Maui.

Adam didn't make it home from work on Sunday.

He kissed me on the forehead and left for his shift as the beer buyer at Whole Foods. Late, in the middle of the night, I awoke and he wasn't home. I was pissed, thinking he'd gone to a co-worker's house after work and had not called to let me know. Around 5 AM, I got a call from the hospital, explaining he'd been in an accident, and asking how quickly I could get there. I called Bryan and Theresa, and Bryan said he'd seen the wreck on the news. Theresa came and drove me to the hospital. Bryan met us there, and we walked into hell. It seems it was really foggy that night. It seems Adam had stopped at a bar where one of his friends worked, but didn't seem to have had that much to drink, according to his friend and his blood alcohol level. Somehow, he drove a mile past our house, hit a bridge railing, and was thrown from the car. Three days later, he died.

Friends came and took charge of my house. They sat with me until I could fall asleep at night. They kept my wine glass full. They helped me deal with the cremation and plan the memorial. Whole Foods sent food. Lincoln sent flowers and cards and chocolate. I drank tea and sorted through photographs, the only way I could keep from losing my mind. I drank tea and sat, wrapped in Adam's old college-bed quilt, and stared at the wall. When they finally left each night, I cried into a shirt of Adam's that I held onto as I fell asleep.

Bryan, Theresa and I, and the Indiana friends, wrote these words for the

memorial:

"Adam loved people. He loved the ocean, and beer, and good food, and to laugh. Whether eating a fine meal with close friends or drinking a beer with a total stranger, Adam loved giving his time and attention to others, and he made sure to never leave anyone out of a celebration. He shared his joys in life through mastery of the brewer's craft and by becoming a dive master. His kind and gentle spirit gave him a magnetism that drew people to him. When we think of Adam, we will always remember his smile."

After the memorial, I stayed home for a month. There really was no escape. I lived in the now-empty house just as I lived in my skin. There was an echo of Adam around every corner. I sat on the couch, forever wondering what was in between feeling trapped and that my life was totally out of control. I told myself that the future was all about my goals, my interaction with the world. I could sell and move--back to Maui, or across town closer to friends and farther away from the site of Adam's car wreck. I could move on without accomplishing anything, with all my time here tallied as a waste, an endeavor of longevity pre-empted because of situation, circumstance.

One of my oldest friends asked, "So kid, what's next?"

I replied, "That's the question, isn't it? Until I find the answer I guess I just go to work and pay my mortgage, just like everyone else."

It's been three months since Adam died. This weekend friends came for a visit. Friday night I cooked goat cheese and black bean enchiladas, messed up the whole

kitchen, and we ate together at the dining table. On Saturday we built two raised garden-bed frames and laid black landscape plastic over the clay and stubborn weeds in the side yard. We hauled 24 bags of dirt from Home Depot. We planted seeds: bush beans, snap peas, carrots, radishes, lettuce. We made flowerbeds around the porch. I took the potted herbs outside. It rained the whole time we worked. In the evening we all piled onto my bed and watched a movie. The next morning, while I was making the bed, my friends' four-year-old daughter said, "Adam didn't die." How I wish her statement were true.

Of Language and Doves

I taught at Maui's newest high school, King Kekaulike. KKHS is a beautiful school, spanning 50 acres on the gentle north slope of Haleakala, Maui's volcano. The school sits at about 2,000 feet above sea level; its vista is the world-famous North Shore. From my room, I could take in the day's surf and could see past Maui's edges out into the Pacific. King Kekaulike is an Hawaiian Language Immersion school. Five of my students took all of their other subjects in Hawaiian and came to me for, as one of them said, English as a Second Language (I taught standard Senior English).

As was often true with colonialism, the missionaries deemed languages of the "heathens" to be coarse, base, unintelligible--forbidden, even. Use of one's native tongue was disallowed, and use thereof was punished. As a result, languages came near to extinction, as happened here in Hawaii. When missionaries arrived in the islands, they began their insurgence by forcing the islanders to speak English. In the 1970s, efforts were made to regenerate the speaking of Hawaiian. It is quite a beautiful language, rich in subtleties and nuance. There is a lilt to what is said, and the words seem to flow through the listener as a gentle breeze. All traditional Hawaiian language--story, history, genealogy, daily communication, chants, edicts--was spoken and not written. The written Hawaiian alphabet, a white man's invention, has only thirteen letters. There are few consonants and many vowels: *a, e, i, o, u, h, k, l, m, n, p, w*. As is true in English, the sound of the letters and words changes with intonation. A slight change of intonation can alter the meaning of the word, such as in this example: *lolo* means brain, while *lo'lo'*

means idiot.

Immersion students are required to speak Hawaiian at home as well, and it truly is the chosen language for them. The pride they hold as members of this amazing take back tradition program is something they exude. Immersion begins in Kindergarten and continues until graduation. At the end of Senior year, the participants graduate the immersion program as well as walk for regular old American style high school graduation. I was personally invited to the ceremony by Kamaka, Ululani, Kapeka, Jasmyn, and JoAnna. A great honor--I was one of a handful of teachers there, and none other was invited by all of the graduates. The ceremony took place on May 25th, in the KKHS gym. The invitation was bilingual, but the program was in Hawaiian, as was the whole ceremony.

The gym was decorated with *ti* & palm leaves, ginger flowers, and pandanus mats, in simulation of a traditional dais. The graduating students stood on a platform, the boys in black pants and white shirts and the girls in shifts of unbleached cotton. On the right of the stage sat the elders, in traditional robes, and in front of the stage to the right the parents, also barefoot and in traditional robes. In front of stage left sat the administrators, barefoot and dressed by gender--men in black pants and white shirts and women in *mumus*. The Hawaiian way is to go barefoot. Shoes, again, were forced onto feet by missionaries--to the extent that acacia trees were imported from Africa because they drop thorns, which were seen as a way to make the Hawaiians wear the shoes. Ironically, it seemed to me, the black pants and white shirts the graduating boys wore

were missionary-style.

The ceremony began with children from each lower grade of the immersion program chanting. I have no idea what was said, but it was all done with much feeling and pomp. Then the graduates chanted. After, they danced a *hula* in honor of their parents. Next, the previous year's graduates came forward and danced the *hula* of the myth of Maui who stole the sun to give his people more time to work and play.

After the opening chants and *hula*, the graduating students were wrapped in a symbolic cloth by their *kumu* (teacher), while she sang. Each student was wrapped individually, and quite ceremoniously, in a pale yellow under-cloth (the boys took off the white shirts for this part) and then a pale green top cloth, which had been stamped with the class tattoo. For each graduating class, the *kumu* creates a special design that incorporates the number of students graduating--in this case, nine. Each student has the design inked as a tattoo on his or her shoulder as a proud sign of the life-long unity, a pledge of sorts, of the group.

Once the students were wrapped and instructed by *kumu*, the rite of passage segment of the ceremony occurred. It was pretty intense to watch, and I can only imagine how the kids felt. Actually one fainted and had to sit down for a bit. For each student, one at a time, the parents came up and put their arms in a circle around the child. In this position they chanted down the family genealogy--this is a big deal in Hawaii, as bloodline was an important factor in all facets of traditional life. Traditional Hawaii was a monarchy. Lineage kept the blood-lines pure in terms of social rank and ruling order.

Also, knowing one's lineage was a form of society introduction, a moniker of status and breeding. In the day of kings such as Kamehameha or Kekaulike, any visitor to an island was required to chant this information, and should the chief not like what he heard (the chant possibly elucidating an enemy in the lineage), he'd simply kill the visitor. As white people first came to the islands, they also were expected to do the same. Unable to do so, they were thought odd, crude, coarse, base, or unintelligible because they could not chant down their ancestry. Therefore, they were called *haole*, a term that now means white foreigner and sometimes carries the connotations of a racial slur, but in traditional times meant "of no breath."

After the parents chanted they placed a *haku*, which looks like a Grecian crown of leaves, on the child's head and presented him or her to the audience. After the parents had acknowledged the student's place in the family lineage, the *kumu* told each student of his or her responsibilities to family, community, and the land. The students each listened with serious attention. Then, the *kumu* and the students walked out of the gym, singing.

Outside, we all gathered round to hug the students and give *leis*. Commonly, a *lei* is a flower necklace, but contemporarily, for a celebration such as this graduation, they are also made of all things: money, candy, toys. By the time I got to one girl she had so many *leis* on that her head was covered and she was using her arms to collect the *leis* that we continued to hang on her.

After the usual hugging and tears, the crowd dispersed, some to family barbeques,

some--spectators such as myself--left to continue their day. As I walked to my car, I remembered the words of Ululani, one of the day's graduates who is continuing her love of Hawaiian language by training to be an Immersion teacher, "Languages speak us, we do not speak them."

Long ago, the Baldwins and Alexanders and Hongs and Medieroses were new to Hawaii. They were, at first, welcomed by the Kamehamehas, the Kekaulikes, the Ikikas and Keones and Ilanis. Now, the settlers are blended with the natives. No more pure blood. The warriors have become Paul Keone Lu'uwia, John Ikika Hong, Maile Maria Medieros. Citizens of a mixed place. Mixed cultures, values, religion.

On Maui, old churches and hotel libraries hold the history of comingled experiences of the *ali'i* and the first white ruling families. The libraries, found tucked in corners at hotels like the Sheraton in Kihei or the Hana Hotel, keep safe the narratives of island traditions and the experiences of explorers and missionaries. Texts bound in leather and cloth, gilt edges.

In my mind's eye just now is the quilt in the church in Hana, with a square for every family rooted to that place. The names stand for those who've tilled the earth, harvested from the sea, surfed the waves there for longer than time has been counted.

And then there are the elaborate graveyards with toys and food and odd objects of life. The durable goods are left in the weather, and the foodstuffs are replenished when

they wither and rot. My favorite grave there is that of a child, with toy plastic motorcycles on it. They've been there for over 10 years. These are the true marks of the rubbing together of life and death.

And the old, old Japanese graveyard just near Pa'ia, slowly eroding its way into the sea. The big iron gong there that I've yet to hear, and the trash dumpster just below it, semi-hidden in the scaffolding of the gong. It's the bowls on grave markers there, and cups, the plates of fruit, that are the tactile insistence that ancestors need nourishment.

The still-pure names on the oldest grave markers near the sea remind me this blend wasn't always the case. The churches bear witness to the integration, missionary and islander.

American-style graduation was this weekend.

Saturday was the Senior Luau at school. Friday night some of the faculty gathered at the beach park to roast the pig. I volunteered to help.

To roast a pig Hawaiian-style, a big hole is dug in the sand and filled with rocks and logs. The fire is let and left to burn until most of the wood is gone and the rocks are red-hot. Meanwhile, a few banana trees are chopped down, the leaves removed, and the stumps pounded into a pulp. The pig is then placed, belly up and eyes in head, on chicken wire lined with foil. Slits are made along the legs and back of the pig, and are filled with coarse Hawaiian sea salt. Hot rocks are put into each slit and into the body cavity. When

this happens, the pig's flesh begins to sizzle and stink. The pig is then closed, for lack of a better word, by folding the chicken wire over its body. The banana tree pulp is spread over the hot rocks and then the pig is placed upon the pulp-covered rocks.

The side dishes--sweet potatoes grown on Molokai, turkeys, and hams, are placed in foil roasting plans (the modern way) and put in the pit, surrounding the pig. Then, banana leaves and wet burlap bags are layered on. Lastly, the whole assembly is covered with sand. This all happened quickly, by way of many hands, as is the Hawaiian way.

By the time the process was complete, it was dark. I stood with a few of my colleagues and drank beer, listening to the lap of the waves, and talked story while the pig settled in to cook over night. One teacher had his little daughter with him. She was mesmerized by the pig. Her mom had told her it wasn't what we really eat, and her dad, then and there as she had stared into the dead pig's eyes, told her it was.

Saturday, I helped serve the food.

Sunday, on the football field that crests above the North Shore, I watched my students walk across the stage for commencement. They were dressed in caps and gowns, in teal green and black. I watched the pride of the families as my mind wandered back to the conversation I'd had with my principal two weeks ago, when she'd told me I had to pass them all. I'd argued that some of them couldn't read and many of them couldn't even write a sentence. I gave her account after account of students who'd only attended a quarter of the year. She looked at me in that way people in the islands look at outsiders,

the way they look at *haoles*, and said, "I know, but you have to let them graduate." As I watched them walk across the stage I was saddened by the difference in veracity of meaning in the two graduation ceremonies.

The crescendo of the ceremony was the release of half a dozen white doves. They flew out into the Hawaiian dusk as I tried to find the hope for my students they were meant to symbolize.

Kaho'olawe

There is such fluidity to living in the islands... the connections between people, purpose, and meaning are much less compartmentalized than on the mainland...

The last week of January, I joined a traditional canoe-paddling club. Think *Hawaii 5-0* while the credits are rolling--that kind of canoe. I went with my friend Wendy. It was pre-season, so nobody expected new paddlers to show. The first couple of weeks we didn't have a coach, but were taken around the harbor by one of the more advanced women--any one of them who happened to be around and willing, until our coach returned from the mainland.

A traditional Hawaiian canoe is forty-four feet long and seats six. The hull is narrow and the outrigger, called the *ama*, is for balance. The paddler in each seat has a specific job so that the boat moves smoothly and quickly through the water. The paddlers work as a team. Seat one is the stroker, who sets the pace. Seat two is the second stroker, who moderates the pace and helps keep time, since paddlers alternate sides--three on one side and two on the other. Seat three calls the changes when it's time to switch sides. The call is *hut* for one more stroke and *ho* for time to change. Seat three is also a power seat--that paddler exerts to move the boat forward. Seat four is power. Seat five is modulation--the seat that adds the kicker and rounds out rhythm and speed. Seat six is the steerswoman, setting the direction of the boat and the crew. When she calls *imua*, we go.

Our training began in Kahului harbor, lap by lap, learning precision and mechanics. At the end of practice, sometimes, the coaches take us surfing in the canoe on

the waves that break across the mouth of the harbor.

Then came distance. The first day we went outside of the harbor walls was about the best day of my life. It was just an hour before sunset on a calm-water day in February. We had just passed the breakwater, listening to our coach's admonishment, "timing, girls, timing, when a team-mate yelled, "whales." We lost focus on the stroke. There was a mother whale and her calf straight ahead, showing their pectorals, making nose dives, and dancing around each other with tales in the air. As we watched, the calf breached. After the whales left, we all jumped out of the canoes and swam in the open ocean.

I'd joined Hawaiian Canoe Club, the state champion. I paddled the season, and as it and the school year closed, I was invited to chaperone a group of teen paddlers on a work trip to Kaho'olawe, the uninhabited island off Maui's south shore.

For the past fifty years, Kaho'olawe had been used by the US military as a bombing target practice range. It was full of ordnance, spent and live. In 2003, just before we made our trip there, ownership of the island reverted back to the Hawaiian government. Hawaiian Canoe Club was granted access as a work party, to restore cultural grounds. Specifically, we went to construct a trail to a set of scared whale bones along the shore.

Awakening to the sound of the conch shell, the *pu*, hearing that dream-ending hollow, low sound came as a comfort rather than a surprise. By this third day here, it was a call to gather, organize, or move to the next endeavor. I awoke and immediately went

to the beach near the canoes and took my cleanse, naked and wobbly in my negotiations with the boulders and surf. The water was cool and brought me awake through the refreshing lull of the waves. I used this time to think through my dreams and the remnants of the previous day, and to let go of all that was uselessly left over. Afterward, I joined the others and we sat by the fire to warm and began to move towards the day's events and endeavors. No one talked much at the fire, a fragment of speech here and there, but there was really no need.

A welcome to the sunrise was chanted, breakfast eaten, and then we hiked up a hill above our tent area to see some petraglyphs. This was an event that held little or no attraction for the teenagers, partly because it was raining, partly because they were beginning to tire from all of the work, play, and lack of sleep, and partly because they just aren't as interested in the stationary objects of history as are adults. We also got a bit of commentary from one of the *kuas*, the spiritual leaders, about the types of botany that had been reintroduced and were evidently flourishing. We were told of the proper offerings to make at the fishing shrines, called *koas*, and even though we weren't going to fish, we made them.

There was a lot of work to do on the trail to the sacred whale bones. Auntie Davie, our leader, wanted to wait until the rain stopped to begin the work. While we waited, the kids had the ritualistic mud fight--a part of every Kaho'olawe trip--that turned into a wrestling match and a mud bath. The adults sat on the beach and watched, talking of the fun we'd had, learning from some of the other chaperones about the spiritual

significance of the island, of the religious practice called *makaheke* held here in the winter, of the excellent fishing offshore... of the intent of the non-profit, Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana, to teach as many people about culture and traditions as possible so that the Hawaiian way can live on. The men talked about their ancestry, and how it felt to be on this island that they'd only seen from afar, all the while knowing it was such a part of their heritage, expressing the kind of history that comes into story so regularly in Hawaiian conversations. We passed a couple of hours this way, and it was during this conversation that I knew I'd made the wrong, irrevocably worst, decision to return to Oregon.

The rain stopped after lunch, though later we wished it would have continued as the day turned in to the hottest we'd had. We worked until the *kiawi* trees became too fierce for the tools we had. Walking back, we all remarked at how far we'd gotten.

Hawaiian culture is centered on the ocean. The traditional end to a day of work is a swim. We all swam, for a long time, at the bathing beach, that day. I think we all knew our time there was coming to an end. It wasn't like an ordinary day at the beach, when one knows he can return to that spot again.

Just before sunset, the adult women took the teen girls to the women's *haeiaua*, or temple, which is on the cliff-side above the camp. The girls were tired and resistant, but we insisted. This sacred place holds a broad view of the slope of Kaho'olawe, the beach, Maui, and camp below. The light set the tone for our conversation as the dusking of the sky gave the feel of the day coming to a close and narrowed down the space of the world.

Auntie explained the traditional purpose of a women's place of gathering and worship. Some of us explained our knowledge of, experiences with, and the value we'd found in a modern way with sacred women's spaces. One woman talked about the importance of coming together as women to talk across generations about common experiences. Then we sat. Then the girls began to talk. First the one who'd been hanging on the sidelines the last couple of days explained how hard for her it is at home. Then the girl who has no mom. Then, from almost everyone else... Too soon it was dark enough we needed to go down; the trail was almost invisible, so we followed the male voices in camp below to make our way.

When dishes were done and the kitchen part of camp was packed away, the older boys danced on the *hula pa* the story of "How Maui Stole the Sun." So much power in that dance, so much pride in their expression. Auntie had explained to them that this platform is for celebration, not for silly or play *hula*, and they held that in the dance. One of the girls in the audience whispered, "It's so sexy," and I smiled at this accidental recognition of one of the original purposes of this type of dance--for one gender to get the attention of another.

After the dance, we sat in a circle and each of us shared one thing we'd gained by coming here. Again and again there was said an offering, a chance to contribute, to give while learning, to connect. No one, not one person, made a selfish comment. The fire faded, the talk died, as we each sat in silent recognition of all that had come from the hearts in that last hour. This trip wasn't just another great outdoor adventure where one

communes with nature, is reminded that he is part of the circle of life, readjusts one's citified mindset, and goes home; instead, It brought our spirits alive.

We got to bed late. Seemingly no time passed before the *pu* sounded. It was much lighter than at our usual rising, which meant we were late, and were going to have to hustle. Everyone began running to get gear down to the beach, to help others take down tents, to get the kids organized. We barely had time to drink water or use the bathroom. We launched the canoes and small escort boats, then jumped into the surf to join the line moving plastic bag covered gear to the big boat. Finally, wet and cold, we boarded to head home, sadly.

Maui-side, we unloaded as we waited for the canoes. Mixed in at the landing beach were tourist groups of kyakers, seemingly lost in our busy swirl. The canoes paddled in, we helped the paddlers beach, and then loaded the boats on the trailer. Once all the gear was sorted and the boats were all out of the water, the adults helped all the kids find rides. Duties done, my friends and I headed home ourselves. I drove home with a couple of team-mates. We were so tired, and so in another mindset that driving was dangerous, but we had no choice. We stopped to get breakfast, and once inside the coffee shop looked at ourselves; we were a sight—disheveled, covered in red dirt, half-wet, sun burnt, wind-whipped, but so happy we just laughed.

Cloudscapes

If you've never stared off into the distance then your life is a shame...

Counting Crows, Mrs. Potter's Lullaby

Redmond. This Central Oregon town hasn't changed much since its founding a hundred years ago. It is a typical Oregon small town in the organizational sense; there is a one-way leading in, through, and out of town to the south and there is a one-way leading in, through, and out of town to the north. There is an intersection with a highway to the west and one with a highway to the east.

I came to Redmond from Oregon's big city, Portland, from the north. I came over snow-capped Mt. Hood, then across the dusty, sand-orange colored Warm Springs Indian reservation, dropping down into the Deschutes river canyon with the shimmering black-blue of the water, and ascending back up to the sage-covered plateau. After driving a long stretch across the *res*, I dropped back down and into the green agricultural town of Madras, a place that holds the scent of the garlic grown there. Continuing on, I passed the Smith Rock formation to the left, cross the Crooked River canyon, passed a red cinder rock butte on the right, and was welcomed to Redmond by a bronzed statue of a cowboy riding a horse.

The High Cascade Range of volcanoes creates a boundary between Central and Western Oregon. The Redmond side of the Cascades sits in a rain shadow that causes this drastic and immediate change from the Portland side thick and dense Douglas fir forest with its rhododendron, leathery-leafed salal, Oregon grape, huckleberry, maple

understory to a less dense mix of Ponderosa pine forest, Juniper trees, sage, and rabbit brush. Redmond sits upon an expansive landscape, the High Lava Plains, across which one can see for miles, taking in buttes and mountains.

This is a farm town. The Deschutes County Fair is here, ranching is the industry, and Big R is the place to shop. People here love the land, the hunting life, and outdoor sportsmanship.

I didn't intend to relocate to Redmond. Nor did I intend to leave.

In Portland, I worked at the high-pressure college prep Lincoln High School. Due to constant budget cuts, lack of a district superintendent, and weak leadership from our principal, the general vibe of the school was increasingly dysfunctional. Professionalism was eroded. My colleagues were a group of stressed, strident, self-serving skitterers. The stress was eroding my love of teaching. I also had a personal reason for escaping both Lincoln and Portland. My partner, Adam, had died in a car crash two years prior. Adam and I had been planning on moving back to Maui, where we'd lived in 2002, at the end of the school year. Adam hadn't wanted to return to Oregon.

After the accident, the Lincoln community and the structure of work provided me much support. But after a couple of years, I was tired of people looking at me with the unasked question, "Are you all right yet?" I gave my notice, sold my house and rented an apartment for the duration of my time in Portland, signed a lease on Maui—taking over the rental of a friend who was moving in with her fiancé—packed my home goods and sent them to the shipper. Prepared the dog to pass quarantine. Intended to bartend for a

year and sit on the beach, work on my photography and write, sort out myself.

I gave my notice on June 1, 2007. As I sat at graduation a few days later, I looked down the row of teachers, their slumped postures, wound tight faces, and bad hair dye jobs and thought, thank god I'm getting out of here.

I let go my Portland apartment, spent a week couch-surfing and saying my goodbyes, and then—there is no eloquent way to say it—it all fell apart. My friend's fiancé broke off the engagement, she melted, and obviously needed to retain her lease. Our phone conversation about the situation is the only time in ten years of friendship I've known her to lose composure. She shouted, "If you make me give up my home, it will end our friendship." My household goods were on a boat in the Pacific, I had no job, no home, no recourse.

I panicked. I'd fucked up my life. As much as I'm a traveller, adventurer, and espouser of big dreams, I also value professional security. I grew up in a hard-working, work-a-day blue-collar family in which the job is a prime directive. I wasn't trying to quit teaching with my leave-taking from Lincoln. I was burnt out, traumatized, and grieving, and I knew I needed a break to regain sense of self after my loss. Now what?

Lincoln had gotten a new principal, a woman I knew from graduate school, and she'd been happy with my work the past year. The first line of the recommendation she wrote for me read, "Neva Knott is a teacher I'd rehire in a heart-beat." I called her, and she'd just—that day—filled my spot. One friend suggested I bartend in Portland—I scoffed. One friend suggested I go to Maui anyway—I balked. Without Adam, with no

job and now no home there, with my friend dealing with her own trauma, and with a dog...it all seemed too big, unmanageable. I began having dreams of waves too big to swim through, of being on my favorite beach when the surf would surge, the water turning from aquamarine to a rough, sand-filled grey.

In desperation, I began applying for teaching jobs.

Redmond School District had an opening for an English teacher at the new International School of the Cascades. The description read as if it were tailored to my resume. Though I left Lincoln seeking a break, this was the type of position I hoped to find when I reinvigorated my career. At the ISC I encountered a friendly, smart, fit and worldly group of professionals and really nice, motivated students. I bought a sweet little ranch style house on the edge of town, near a llama field and the Baptist church.

On the High Desert, I encountered an expansive landscape. Open. Clean. Qualities I was seeking in my life and in myself. As I struggled to re-establish the outward aspects of my life, my internal landscape became closed, obscured, and small. I felt lonely in a way I don't think I've ever been before. I photographed nothing. I wrote not a word. I didn't make friends. That type of inertia is not me. The job wasn't really what was promised and I began to question my self as a teacher, began to question my motivation to teach.

Simultaneously, the delayed stress of Adam's death sunk into every fiber of my being. In Portland, I'd had my life to live, and was ensconced in friends and endeavors. As much as there is a line between the Portland side and Central Oregon, there seemed to be an imaginary boundary to what I set out to accomplish. In Redmond, I had only a wilting

hope and the out-of-doors.

Some sort of tenacity kept me there.

Redmond is the type of place where, on a cold winter's morning, before first light, a group of tough construction workers sits in Starbucks, conducting a Bible study. It's a place where the coffee stand man knows your name and greets you every morning when you drive through on your way to work. Where people stop, smile, and wave as they let you cross the street. Where it's effortless to buy local because every business is owned by someone born and raised here. The grocery checkers are always the same and chit-chat with you in a way that makes you feel you've participated in community.

The culture of Central Oregon is built around playing outside. Mt. Bachelor is a ski destination, the Chain Breaker is an annual cyclo-cross race that draws the state's best riders, the Metolius and the Deschutes rivers provide some of the best fishing in Oregon, and Smith Rock is a world-famous climbing spot. I'm not an extreme athlete as are many I met there, but I hike with my dog. After work I'd choose a trail along one of the rivers or drive to the Ponderosa forest just outside of town. Within twenty minutes, I could be in wilderness, which is where I spent my weekends and school breaks. On one summer trip, out to the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, I drove home after sunset with all the windows down. It took four hours to traverse the various ecosystems. I discerned changes in the landscape by scent and temperature; it was a tactile connection made between me and the Oregon I was travelling across in the night air. I shaped my life there around the landscape. In the process, I found all of the attributes of the outdoors lifestyle I sought on

Maui, and I found more—a sense of being grounded, rooted, part of a bigger place than just that which I inhabited. I felt bigger than work and chores and adult-life obligations. I felt bigger than what I'd lost.

Somehow, inexplicably, I needed the lack of familiarity I experienced in Redmond so that I could push myself forward into the shape I wanted for my life. Was I still the take-life-by-the-horns, make-it-what-you-want-it-to-be bad ass I fancied myself to be?

Then came 2008. The recession hit hard in Central Oregon; supposedly, the region was the fourth hardest hit in the US. In spring of 2009, twenty per cent of the teachers in the school district, myself included, were laid off. We were told not to expect to be called back to work in the fall. I'd gone to Redmond with just over ten years of experience; sadly, in Oregon one does not retain one's seniority or years of service when one changes districts. I found myself at the bottom of the pile. On the day I was laid off, one of my students said he felt bad for me. I said, unwittingly, "It's okay, I bounce pretty well."

In the fall, one week before school began, I was called back and placed at a middle school, even though I'd always taught high school. When I explained this to the HR director, she told me I had to take the job, or they'd cut off my unemployment.

I made it until February. I took a sick day and hiked in the snow around Suttle Lake. Afterwards, I sat in a coffee shop and wrote out the details of what I was feeling. I couldn't make it through a work-week without multiple migraines. I cried all the time. I

had excruciating insomnia. I liked the middle school, but the district was in shambles and lay-offs were imminent again in the coming spring. I didn't want another chaotic teaching position, after the erosion of Lincoln. This new upset was just too much for me after the ordeals of Adam and Maui. And, I was losing money by the minute on the house I'd bought when I moved there. I drank coffee and tried to devise a plan, some sort of blueprint to get me out of this mess. The next morning my friend Kate came over and we walked the Deschutes. I stopped, looked at her and said, "I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm not going back to work on Monday." Half an hour later, I got a call for a bartending job in Portland, at a place I'd worked during graduate school. Another move, one more time running home to the safety of Portland. I took the job.

In June, I returned to Redmond to participate in the graduation of the last class of the International School of the Cascades, the new school that held my dream job just three years earlier. The program had been cut in the budget shortfall. I wore the black robe and the mantle of my *alma mater* that signals my stature as an academic. I sat in the front row with my former colleagues, all of whom I respect and admire. I felt sorrow and shame and failure about my professional experience there, and a longing for a life that I know I wouldn't have in this place of grandeur. I drove over Mt. Hood, across the reservation, through Madras. As I drove along the plateau, I looked at the sky. At once, across the High Desert, it was a dark and ominous grey, crossed by a swathe of blue-white. A mile off in the distance, a bright spot of sun shone through and illuminated the grey above me as it pulled the blue out from behind a pink-tinted puff of cloud. The sky's

colors and luminescence elucidated for me the meaning of my time in Redmond. As I looked into the distance, I knew that it was time of cleansing and expansion.

Talk Here

Sandycrest Terrace. The first place I lived all on my own as an adult. The first place I was totally financially responsible for myself. The first place I was in charge of my whole life. Twenty-two, naïve, alone. Just me—paying the bills, figuring out who I'd become. I found myself there after having walked out of the relationship that brought me to Portland, after having walked away from home. The bottom line I offered when people asked what my plans were was to say, *I don't know, finish school.*

I can so easily go back to that time in my mind, but only to the sorrow of it. Only to the encapsulation of my confusion as that twenty-two-year-old girl. That memory allows all of the sadness to refract and land elsewhere. For me, that time of my life has to stay in the shadows so that I can make sense of who I've become since.

Here I am again, back at Sandycrest, twenty-six years later. I needed a place to live on the fly, after another crash and burn of the life I imagined and planned for myself. A start-over homecoming, it seems. I don't know how I first found Sandycrest Terrace, but I remember it felt so real, solid. The brick buildings in their neat four-plex arrangements, one-bedrooms facing north or south, townhouses facing east or west. All neatly platted, with pavement walkways right up to the door vestibules. Now, these brick buildings and door vestibules are artifacts by which I can mark my progress, reflect, and, I hope, move on.

Even though I've been brought here by the two large disasters of my life, I want a seamless adherence to the truth of my choices, a rationale to the trajectory of life I set

myself upon the last time I was here. I want to see the clean progression between then and now, yet all of the past lurking in the darkness just outside of my daily reality wants to tumble out now, to stand as a reflected image, to murmur as an echo, begging my contemplation of the strands I tried to tuck out of the light when I lived here before. As I put my new key in the door, I notice the out-moded intercom box with its chipped green paint. The instruction placard reads, *Talk Here*.

I awake, amongst the boxes and clutter of the move-in. Lucid dream this morning—I dreamt of the Himalayas. I used to have a certificate for having flown over them in a little plane when I was, probably, eight. It was in a cheap frame, brown with gold along an indent in the middle of the molding, glass-covered. The certificate itself looked quite official, with a color-print image of the mountains and a wordy declaration of my feat. My name had been hand-lettered into the form. I was dreaming partly of the piece of paper and partly of the event itself. I looked down and I was above Mt. Everest, and I was in the plane. All of a sudden, as the plane swooped, the snow changed into grass that was lush and electrifyingly green. I realized the scene had changed and I was walking a narrow path through the verdant fields of the Himalayas. I passed a monastery that lay off in the distance, above the path. I looked back at it. Seeing the monks, I smiled. They were emptying large burlap bags of rice into brown ceramic pots. And then the dream switched off.

Later in the day, I go out in the yard to throw a ball for my dog. The grounds at Sandycrest are beautiful, atypical for an apartment complex. Maples that curve over the

street, creating a curtain that veils my apartment from the world beyond, tulip trees that drop blooms that look like fireworks and the courtyard tree with the redolence that wraps around the atmosphere at night.

In 1984, during my previous residency at Sandycrest Terrace, after that first big crash and burn of my then newly-minted adult life, I set some goals—the big life kind:

Teach at a small college

Write and photograph alongside teaching

Make money from other investments

Buy an old barn and convert it into a house

Have a self-sustaining farm

For years, I used that list as my compass. I had originally written it on lined notebook paper and kept it folded in a stack of important papers. A year or so later, I bought my first journal—a hardbound black sketchbook. I pasted the list onto its flyleaf, making it more official, deeming it part of my daily ritual.

I am not a keeper of my journals. When I feel they have served their purpose, that I've chewed on the musings in them long enough, I destroy them, rooting all their mumbo-jumbo in the past. I burned that journal, but before I lit the match, I cut out the list of goals and pasted it into a new blank book. Through a series of cut-and-pastes, I carried my compass with me, forward in life.

Just three or four years ago, I realized I'd accomplished most of the list—or a version of it. I taught high school, the barn idea had shifted into a 1920s Portland-style

bungalow. I wrote and made photographs, and have an investment account.

Simultaneously, I realized I wasn't really happy—not due to the list—I had not planned wrongly, but circumstances separate from my endeavors were bringing me down. I let go of it all and moved, still yearning for the simplicity of the plan of the list, and actually looking for the land for the farm. I knew the list by heart then, so I left it behind in that batch of destroyed journals, as an artifact of the life I was trying to escape.

My first apartment here was on the ground floor. Now, I live on the second. I have a bank of paned windows that look out among the treetops and across the side street. I look eye to eye with the birds. Much of my time is spent sitting on my perch, pondering. I spend some evenings in the yard, often sketching my surroundings—the chestnut tree, so bold in its flowering and germination. The crows, as they taunt my dog and sing out the threat of his presence.

I like the idea of the cloistered world of monks. Of spiritual intellectualism. Of how their days are filled with simple tasks and big ideas. They do not follow compass directions of place, but of heart and mind.

Spring has turned to summer and then to fall. Now it's December. The winter solstice sneaks up with its darkness and then, all at once, is shining light. One year, I was standing on Waikiki, all the hotels and tourist hustle and bustle behind me, brightly lit, and I was alone on that world-famous, usually packed, beach. I watched the moon, walked barefoot and watched the nighttime ocean wander in and then recede. This winter I'm in Portland, a city so long my home. I think, maybe coming back is moving forward.

No matter one's location, the solstice is a sneaky thing, begging internal reflection.

My yoga teacher asked today, “What is hidden in your darkness that you are not letting out?” In Jungian conception, the darkness, the shadow side of life, is two things—it is that which we perceive as weakness and want to keep hidden, and it is the beauty in each of us yet to escape. As I drove through my day, I kept thinking about the question. It is one of the human heart. A daunting question in this world of work-a-day and bill paying.

I thought about my little list, of all the times it had travelled with me, and wondered if the shadow answers could still be found on that slip of paper, penned by a much younger me, on some other day when my mind wandered, trying to make sense of the string of events I was calling my life.

I put my key in the latch of my door and glance at the speaker box and its insistent command to *Talk Here*. Maybe, just maybe, my twenty-two-year-old self was on to something.

Bus Stop Angels

I.

Monday, while walking my dog, Josh, in the rain at the little park by my house, the one next to Rose City Golf Course, I heard from under the boughs of a large tree, "Hello." I looked up to find a man taking shelter from the rain. He was wearing a head turban and had an Islamic prayer book in his hand. He said, while gesturing at the weather, "You know when it is like this we say," and then read me a very long prayer from his book, in Arabic. He explained that the rain is a blessing. Then he began to read again. He pointed to a word, and said, "This is goddess; do you know what is *goddess*?" I replied that I thought I did, but asked that he tell me what it meant to him. He enunciated and the word was *gorgeous*, not *goddess*. He began to read again in Arabic, turning little prayer book page after little prayer book page. Then he stopped and said, "You are gorgeous in the eyes of God."

He told me that he liked to talk to people, but that some people don't like to stop their day to talk. I replied that I like it, too. We parted ways.

Bus stop angel.

I had this room-mate in college, and that was her name for this type of encounter. She explained it as those people whom we come upon while doing our daily doings (such as waiting at the bus stop) and they then impart something wise or special to us.

How nice to begin my day, regardless of my personal belief system, with the reminder that I am *gorgeous* in the eyes of God. This man was not crazy, he was not

threatening or creepy, nor was he trying to hit on me. He was connecting with me through humanity, in the rain, from under a tree.

I hope I gave him something in return.

II.

Last Thursday, Jimbo came in to the tavern I work at to drink whiskey and play pool, as he often does. He's a Northwest neighborhood denizen--he's been around for years. He's the guy who takes your ticket at Cinema 21 and gives you the peace sign or a prayer bow as you walk in. He's the guy who used to come into the Blue Moon, another tavern I worked at, and bus tables as an act of kindness. He's the guy who lived across the hall and down one floor from me on Johnson Street when I moved back from Evergreen in 1990. He had one rocking chair and a rug in his living room, which I could see through his open door from the hallway. He's the guy who, when I was a new teacher, walked through Powell's with me, helping me select American literature titles. When I returned to the city a few months ago and started at the tavern, I had to remind him of why I was familiar.

Jimbo has always been part of my NW reality, but until last Thursday, I didn't really know him.

Come to find out, we went to the same college, Evergreen State. He was of the first graduating class, he told me--eyes shining. He's a Zoologist and he taught Biology at Portland State University for 20 years. In between serving my other customers and

bringing him fresh whiskey, I heard of his time as a carpenter on Lake Chelan, and that he writes letters to Gary Snyder. What he didn't tell me is the story of his brain injury that altered his life. In the end, he said, "People do what they do. I don't need to be some big PhD. I just do my thing."

III.

Last night, a girlfriend and I met at The Hutch for a drink. Neighborhood bar--I like that. Blue collar Portland--I like that.

When I walked in, there was a man of about 50 playing guitar and singing Eagles songs. I was drawn in to his rendition of the one that begins, *I like the way your sparkling earrings lay...* Kinda my attitude toward love lately. He had a nice voice, well-matched for his song choices and he was capable with the guitar. I thought about what it must be like to be his age, to have lived life down the path he's gone, and wondered if he had a 70s teen-aged dream of making music. I'm sure he didn't, at the age of 17, plan on playing cover songs at Tuesday night open mic in a low-brow corner bar.

At a break in our conversation, I noticed a girl walk in, crying and trying to hide it. I turned back to my friend, but pretty soon I realized this girl was really distraught. She was now standing at the bar with the phone book, talking on her cell phone, explaining to whomever on the other end that she didn't have enough money to get home and was scared to spend the night in Portland. She needed 17 dollars.

My friend had stepped away to get another drink and came back to find me counting the money in my wallet. I pointed her attention to the girl at the bar and asked

her what she thought. We discussed the possibility that she was putting it on, and we discussed the reality that she might be in danger. Then I went up to the girl and gently asked her if she needed help. She told me she was stranded, lived in Eugene, was short for a bus ticket, she'd asked Greyhound if she could pay at the home end and was told no, had asked some police officers in the pizza joint next door where she'd been sitting for a long while for some help and they told her to sleep in the bus station, and she didn't know what to do. I gave her the money.

I don't know why. It just felt right. The girl took my address and told me she'd send the money back. I told her that was great, but if she didn't that was fine, too. I said to her, "Get home safe; I've had people help me in all kinds of ways, too."

Back at our table, I enumerated for Emily how many other ways I could indulgently waste the same amount, even referencing the price of the drinks in front of us.

Walking home, I debated with myself: Why did I have to question giving this woman money? Why was my first thought that the man under the tree might be harmful? What the fuck is wrong with us in our world today?

Bartender's Tuesday Night

It's Tuesday, July 5. I'm bartending at The White Eagle Saloon, a small music venue in Portland, with an 11-room hotel on the top floor. The bar is pretty empty. Everyone has the holiday hangover, I guess. My first customers were a nice couple who'd just checked in to the hotel. Just down from Seattle, it's fun to get away. As I'm chatting it up with them, I see a woman take a stool at the end of the bar, backlit by the heavy afternoon sun glare from the front windows.

I get over there, and immediately can tell something is off. She orders a drink, seems really confused, but not in a drunken sort of way. She's sort of slurring, and wants a double. I'm sure she isn't drunk, just agitated. I pour her double vodka and hand it to her. She seems to need to explain, so opens with, "I was visiting my daughter, but she made me leave early." I tell her I'm sorry, stand there for a minute so she feels like we've connected.

I move off to cruise the patio, to see who's out there, what's up. Two of my Monday regulars are in their usual spot, having missed yesterday for the holiday. They come in and drink cheap beer and smoke and talk. Today's topic is cars. I love to get them laughing, so I ask if they have all their fingers after lighting fireworks on the Fourth. They giggle and show me their hands.

Next table is a group of three who come in every once in awhile, though it seems more often lately. These folks typify the usual non-descript backdrop of business at any Mcmenamins pub. They work day jobs, they come in for a quick few beers and a snack

with the people they like at work, usually to talk about work, and share a few cursory personal details. They don't really expect much from us. Happy hour drinks and cheap tater tots. In and out. Their transactions here are pretty much what I imagine their days to be like. In box full, outbox full. I like to open them up. I'm not saying I want to get to know them personally, their nitty-gritty and all, but I do want them to know I see them as people. As regulars. As part of my day. A couple of days ago I had really bad allergies and kept messing up little things on their order. I apologized, and told them I was blaming the pollen. So today I opened with, "I took Zyrtec today. I think I'll be a much better waitress for you all..." They laughed, a little chip in the ice.

So this is pretty much it the first couple of hours—I have my two talking and smoking guys on the patio, my work-talk threesome has left for home, another regular has come in with three friends, and they are on the patio, drinking iced tea. A couple of guys come in for a quick after work meeting, drink Old Fashioneds. As I pour their last round, one orders two dinners to go.

The vodka woman has moved outside and is sitting at a front table, nervously smoking. I understand her emotional state now, and can see it in each jagged move she makes. Each time I've come behind the bar to mix a drink, she's blurted out a detail. Her daughter is in the rehab program across the street. She herself is in what she termed a bad relationship, and today her boyfriend decided to hit her in the face instead of her stomach. She is upset because she took her daughter roses, but made her daughter cry. I stay with her as she talked and finally ask her if she had resources to get herself some help. She's

staying with her son and her mother, alternately. She's looking for work. She graduated from Apollo College, but really wants to be a bartender, but doesn't know how to mix drinks. I tell her you learn as you go. She thanks me for the drink, tells me it helped, uses the bathroom, and leaves. At least I think she leaves, until I realize a long while later she's out front, shaking and smoking.

Janine, the other bartender for the night, comes in. We do a few things to get ready for the night, and chat. Still not much going on. A new group arrives, a mix of men and women. The guys are the sort of amblers who just can't make eye contact or listen to an answer to one of their own questions long enough for you to find out what kind of beer to pour for them. Talking over each other, competing for Janine's attention, ordering then walking off. The woman is one of those super-annoying people who want the whole menu narrated to her and then still can't decide, so she ends the conversation with, "I think I'll just go sit down--will you come wait on us?" Later, we find out they are a Toastmasters group—you know, the public speaking club. The irony is not lost.

The band arrives, creating a little flurry of activity, though it is still slow. We stock liquor, and decide it's slow enough Janine should go home.

Into this mix walks a man looking for a hotel room. I'm coming out of the kitchen from putting my dirty dishes to soak. I look toward the front door and see this guy with a camouflage hat come in, dragging a huge rolling suitcase. He sees me, immediately drops the suitcase half in the doorway, and comes over, saying, "You got rooms here?" I can feel his exhaustion and general wariness, but he's also gentle and polite. There is

something in this combination that alerts me to deal with this guy slowly and calmly and to give him reassurance. We walk over to the hotel computer, and I tell him what we have available. He blurts, “I’ll take it. I’m on the Greyhound, and I’ve been all across the country, but they don’t let you sleep in the bus station here. Strangest thing; I’ve slept in bus stations everywhere else.” As he’s talking, I’m making the reservation. He seems a little worried. He keeps alternating in his expressions, but now he’s alternating from worried to smiling. I see he has no teeth. His shirt is frayed, but he’s clean-shaven. I give him his keys and welcome him, let him know we have music starting soon if he wants to come back down and relax.

About half an hour later, I walk onto the patio and see him sitting there. I take his order and bring him a Bud. I ask him if he got settled in all right, and he says yes, that he likes it here, that it feels good to relax. I walk on by, and he actually leaves his seat and follows me out to the trash pit. He comes back to the whole can’t sleep in the bus station thing. I tell him the area of the bus station has been bad for years because of drugs, and that he’s safer here. I ask him where he’s traveling from. We walk out of the trash pit. As he gets back to his table, he tells me he left Afghanistan, went to Iraq, then to Germany, to Florida, and then on the bus to Portland. In the early morning, he’s going on to Seattle, to the VA hospital there. I get a shiver of sadness as he tells me all of this, even though he’s smiling. I guess this is how our government shuttles around veterans these days. He says it’s good to be home. I thank him, for fighting. Actually, I’m not really sure what I thank him for—fighting, or trying, or enduring. I ask him if he’d like another beer, and I

buy it for him. He stays awhile, then thanks me and goes upstairs.

The band is about ready to play. This new guy headed for the bar is a piece of work. He's all tatted up, I mean really tatted up, even for Portland—got the words on the knuckles and all that. He has a pristine white fashion-brand ball cap on, cocked just so to one side. He has big, chunky black hipster eye glasses, and, of course, a goatee. He sort of acknowledges me when I greet him, but mostly keeps talking really jumpy and to no one, and saying not much. He looks around the room constantly. Finally he asks, "Isn't there a band here tonight?" It's early, and anyone who comes out regularly would know that the opening band is most likely just going to start. Plus, the stage is full of equipment. And, the lead guy from the band is sitting at the bar, about two stools down. So I know this guy isn't a friend. He's here to write a review, but he won't tell me the name of the publication, which is just bad manners in terms of Portland creative culture. He slams a couple more drinks, stays for part of the band's first set. Scott, my favorite regular is watching the guy and laughing at him to me but drawing him into conversation to his face. At the band's set break, he does the bro hand shake with Scott and leaves. Scott laughs at him, and I do, too.

Now that the sun is down, I've got the fire burning outside on the patio, and I chat with the people sitting around the pit. They are talking about cocaine. Then about art. The woman tells me about a great resort in Colorado that has continuously burning fireplaces in all the rooms in the winter. I tell her I'd like to go there, tell her I'd like to teach writing workshops at places like that. She gives me a warning look and explains it's

expensive, says, “But you could work there—they always need people to serve.” I ponder her perspective--the usual assumption that bartenders lack other skills--as I throw another log on the flame.

It's a slow Tuesday with good music on a summer's evening. I start my closing tasks. The band is done playing, and they all leave to drink wine at Scott's. Two of the guys from the Widmer Brew Pub, just across the street, come in and are soon wrapped into a heated, friendly debate about who's the better tennis player.

My last customers of the evening are two hotel guests, here on a guy trip. One of them is moving across the country tomorrow, so this is their last hurrah. I pour them shots of good whiskey and listen to them find a way to say goodbye.

Writing, and Then There is Writing...

I think writers work from events, from the literal to the metaphorical, weaving between the two to build a story that will touch the heart or mind of another. I believe everyone has a voice that matters, that counts. As I so boldly put it as I introduced myself to the others in my teaching program at Lewis and Clark, "I want to empower my students through their writing." Story is an inescapable, inextricable part of the human experience--it is the expression of human nature. These are the beliefs I work from to teach literature and writing. These are the beliefs built into me as a writer.

Friday and Saturday last, I went to two literary events, readings.

Friday was the Write Around Portland anthology release at a church downtown. Brightly lit vestibule. People from all fringes of life. A program started by a student-teaching friend of mine, Ben, who, early on, realized he didn't want to be a part of the school system. He stepped out of Lewis and Clark to build a writing workshop program for street kids. His program now serves all kinds of societal underdogs--he runs workshops in jails, recovery centers, burn centers, low-income housing. I sat in the audience and listened to readers read, and thought about a woman I'd published once in *Plazm*. I was dead-set on her story, "The Peppermint Poisoned Air," making it into the issue. She was fresh from a mental hospital and I loved her words. Come to find out, she was one of Ben's first workshop participants and has continued to work in his program. As I said my hello to Ben, he introduced me to Laura--it was *her*. She recognized me and

thanked me for publishing her work. I replied that her story is one I remember today, and is one of the *Plazm* pieces closest to my heart.

Next, I ran into a teaching mentor, Bruce, who championed my earliest efforts to get kids to write, think, read. He championed me in my career as a teacher. He had now become the student, taking part in one of Ben's workshops, and he said it opened up a new part of his life.

At the end of the reading, I bought my copy of the anthology and went home, thinking about the *then* part of my life, so long ago, the shiny newness of teaching, coming off the high of making *Plazm* successful, a time in my life before all the shit.

The next day, I read the anthology cover to cover.

Saturday was *The Frozen Moment* book launch at The Woods, a converted funeral home, now a performance space. A couple of people I knew from the *Plazm* days were reading. I had a hard time walking in to this one. It was where we took Adam for cremation. Last time I was in that building, a different part of it, thank God, I stood in a room of casket samples, taking a call from a police officer, awaiting Adam's also traumatized dad and brother as they made the arrangements. I won't lie--it was damned hard to walk into that event. I mustered whatever I mustered, and made it in.

The second reader's story was about her lover dying in a car wreck, about trying to make sense of how it happened, how it must have been for him. I was that girl, just six years ago. The next reader's story was about arriving at a hospital to witness someone he'd last seen alive on all the tubes and machines, awaiting organ harvest. Yep, that girl,

too. One story was about a guy making out with a nun, one was about a girl's bracelets she'd grown too big to get off her arm, used as a metaphor for her dysfunctional family, and so on.

But you know what? I sat there and experienced all the emotions of all the stories, I loved all the words, so beautiful and carefully chosen to describe the moments that had changed each person's life, and was glad for being there. Writing is life.

In any good story, and in some bad ones, realizations come through, as do emotions--the stuff of meaning. So those are the events I'm working from to shape this piece, because it won't shut up in my head. I didn't sit there and relive the trauma of losing Adam, the sorrow, the regret, any of that. I sat at both readings and felt the power of writing and somehow was reminded how writing has always been part of my experience. Carlos Fuentes says writers write to live another day. True that.

Then there's the figurative. There's some very obvious symbolism here--the first event in a church, an event that correlates with the beginning of my life as a teacher. The second event, in a converted funeral home, an event that correlates with the end of a whole segment of my life. Bright light at the church, darkness at The Woods.

A very clichéd metaphor, universal at its very core, keeps coming to mind as I think about these events. It's the dark forest, the one we often can't see for the trees, the one entered by Hansel and Gretel that long ago day. I walked into that place just after my teaching career began. So much went wrong in my personal life. I felt like I'd thrown away everything I'd worked hard for, but I walked on. Somehow, I've finally come out

the other end. What I realized this past weekend is that the markers I left were much more permanent than bread crumbs. I'll keep writing, to live another day, and another.

Adolescence Turns Fifty

My high school boyfriend turned fifty Saturday. His wife threw a party for him at Dirty Dave's the pizza parlor in Olympia that we've all frequented for forty years or more. It was a surprise party, and I offered to jump out of a cake. I got off work too late to make that debut, but made the party. It was a bit of a homecoming.

When I walked into that room, I felt like I should know everyone there, but no one looked familiar. The birthday boy, Dave, was buried in the crowd around him. I found Tammy, his wife. We hugged and I admitted to her I didn't recognize anyone. She put her arm around my shoulder so that she could steer me, "There're Helen, and Charlie. There's Eric..." As Tammy continued to navigate my gaze, a smile, a laugh, or a voice granted familiarity, and I saw my adolescence come alive.

Party talk covered the usual reunion topics: families and kids and parents, jobs, and how much time had passed. The time at the restaurant ended, so the core group of us gathered at Dave and Tammy's.

Gail, Helen, and I poured glasses of wine and got down to the deeper conversations. *Where shall I begin, and what shall I leave for last?* This is the question Odysseus asks of his listeners once back under his own roof, and truly was the question for all of us on Saturday. Tammy brought out the pack of pictures my sister had sent-- from my husband Terry's birthday, his twenty-first, the first year we lived in Portland. As we passed the snapshots around the table, we all marveled at our youth, our big hair, and short shorts.

Jim joined our conversation, and we began to talk about how we'd all met each other. I met Dave when we had lockers next to each other in ninth grade, and he'd walk by and sing my name. He wore a big puffy coat, so for a long while I knew him as the boy in the blue puffy coat.

I met Jim on the school bus the same year. We lived out in the sticks. After we returned from living abroad, my parents built their dream house on Nisqually bluff. The bluff is really the edge of Olympia on the way north to Tacoma and Seattle. Then, in the late 1970s, the area was sparsely developed, most of it forested land owned by the railroad. My first day riding the bus from the new house, he walked up to me and said, "Hi, I'm Jim." Later, when he learned to drive, I'd let the school bus pass and sit on the rock at the entrance to our neighborhood until Jim came by and stopped to give me a ride to school. We were pretty much inseparable. He was the brother I'd always wanted and we pretty much, as he'll tell you, "grew each other up." Neither of us--for me, at least after my dad died--wanted to be home much, so we'd put gas in Jim's car and drive around for hours, talking.

Gail came to our high school a year later from the "other" middle school. Summers, she and I spent countless summer days biking to Long Lake, stopping at 7-11 for ice cream sandwiches. As we got older, we became shopping buddies. Then, Jim fell in love with "that little red-headed girl," as he'd call her, so our fates were sealed as friends forever.

Tammy and Helen were friends with our little sisters, Gail's and mine, Charlie and

Rachel.

Many of us in our group are, as Thomas in the film *Smoke Signals* calls himself and his friend, "children of ash, children of flame." Many of us had absentee parents or, at least, parents who thought we could manage on our own. My mom was lost in a bottle after my dad's death, Jim's dad was starting a new life that didn't so much include his seven kids, Terry's mom and dad were young and trusted us, Eric's parents never seemed to have an opinion, Dave's mom didn't say much as long as he did chores and was home on time. Gail and Charlie's parents just plain said "no" often, in protection of their daughters. It was the late 70s, and we kept out of trouble for the most part, so our parents thought we were ok. We were gifted a Trojan Horse called freedom, and we outsmarted most of the dangers found within.

We managed our adolescence by bonding together into an inseparable force that was our group. We drank too much cheap beer, had far too many keggers, and passed far too many joints. Some of us started driving too young—as soon as one of us had a license and a car, it was fair game for all, and the boys always drove too fast. But we were always smart about it, even if it meant sleeping in cars or camping at the party site down some logging road, or by knowing whose house it was safe to hang out at or go home to. We also helped solve each other's dilemmas and helped each other navigate teen life: the crushes, the break-ups, school, jobs, cars, budding ambitions, dreams of the future. Maybe we were a little wild--crazy kids--but we all grew up ok, and are nice people.

As I'm writing this, I'm listening to Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." The

attitude and beat of that song always reminds me of our high school days. We were so close, and just as the characters in the song, we were *laughing and a running hey, hey, skipping and a jumping, in the misty morning fog*. We were finding our way, some of us out of broken homes, some of us out of a high school existence we loathed, some of us just looking ahead as adolescence prompts one to do. This line from the song struck me today: *so hard to find my way, now that I'm all on my own, I saw you just the other day...cast my memory back there, Lord, sometime I'm overcome thinking 'bout...*

Arnold Joseph, the father in *Smoke Signals*, who caused all of the heartache and distance says, at the beginning of the film, “I didn’t mean to.” He had set Thomas's parents' house on fire, an event that ripped apart family and community. Until the end of the film, only the viewer knows he’s set the fire--the other characters only know he caught the child of ash, the child of flame, Thomas, when he was thrown from the burning building. I am no fire starter, but I feel *I didn’t mean to*. I didn’t mean to move so far away from this group of friends. I’m the one who moved away, and I’ve always felt guilty about the distance created when I did.

Jim and I kind of talked about time and distance at Dave's party. Jim explained that his son is having a hard time moving into the career he wants in the Coast Guard because he doesn’t want to go far away. I gestured around the room and said, "Look at his examples—except for me and Terry, everybody stayed here." And, most of them have the jobs or some version thereof that they got after graduation.

Hometown.

Just about then, Dave interjected that I was the brave one. He said it in a complimentary fashion. As I thought about it on my drive back to Portland, I decided it isn't true. Bravery is the lie I've been living for so long, the lie that may be the reason I don't visit Olympia often, the lie that allowed me to grow apart from my high school friends. *I didn't mean to.* I just followed Terry to Portland because that was the plan, and after all, we'd been saving for that plan, a quarter a day, since we were thirteen. My own personal Trojan Horse, I guess.

So I'm not the brave one, but because of the disasters in my life, I've had to be brave. At this point, to quote my favorite Cowboy Junkies song, *I'd trade it all for a cup of coffee and a wedding ring.*

Nostalgia. Friendship. The bond we all have is special. Even though I've felt far away for so long, because of Dave's party on Saturday, I know that I don't have to ask Odysseus's question. I know my story begins with the people at Dave's party, and it will end with them. And just as Thomas learns in *Smoke Signals*, I know that some bonds are unbreakable, no matter how the sorrows of life entwine. I found my way home, my own small heroic feat.

Every Step a Prayer

I.

My mom has cancer, and she's going down fast. You'd think I'd be used to death by now. My dad died when I was 15. All of my grandparents are gone. My partner, Adam, died suddenly in a car crash seven years ago. I've lost a few friends along the way to drugs--not so uncommon, given my generation. Still, my heart breaks as I look at my mom in her hospital bed.

The first cleft is for my mom. She said to me the other day, "I didn't want this to happen." I don't even know what she meant. We all die, some time--as my dad explained to me when I first encountered a death in the family, my great-grandmother Blanche, "everything dies, even the oldest trees have to die." I'm sure it was not the issue of death to which my mom was alluding.

My mom, in her grace, has a huge heart and is generous. She can also be difficult, and I have struggled my whole life to find an inroad with her, having often been slapped down in childhood by her harsh words, her inability to understand me. Yet, she has triumphed over more than one woman should have to--divorce, the loss of two husbands to death, rape, abuse, addiction. At times, these last few days, she has even seemed incredibly strong to me. This is why my heart breaks for her. I think by "like this" she meant she doesn't want to die having so many regrets, having such a burden on her soul. She attunes to beauty, and I think with a sense of acknowledging the beauty of her life is how she would prefer to die.

The second crack is for my family. Both sides, the paternal Knott and maternal Cooper, have fallen apart. There is no center, just memories of a time before. The time when dad was alive, when Grandma and Grandpa were still here. When holidays mattered, when we marked each other's birthdays with cake and pictures and laughter. My mom values family so much, but the dirty little secret is that she drove a lot of us apart with her drinking, her high drama, and her vicious tongue. I should have known how to fix all of this, but I didn't, I don't.

And then there is the crevice within myself. I have never had an easy time with my mom. She has never had an easy time with me. We are different people, except for our love of beauty and family, books and travel. We are the kind of different that rubs raw. Even so, I would have done anything for her these last few years as she lived alone, unable to keep up her house, cloistering herself in the darkness. At least now I have the chance. I have the next few weeks to be a daughter to my mom. Gone are the hopes of the mother-daughter teas, of the long heart-to-heart talks, of having her guide me when I'm lost. But at least I can hold her hand, give her a warm washcloth for her face, bring her myself as many days as she has left--as we have left.

It has been said in my family--and maybe in yours--that we're great with weddings and funerals. Everyone drops everything and shows up, somewhat remorseful that it's been so long. In the past few days I've reconnected with everyone I love, and it makes me sad. I want them to be part of my life, not just my disasters or at obligatory major life events. From all this I'm learning lessons--of what I have inside me to pull

people together. Of what I am willing to set aside to be present for my family. Of what I need to feel connected, whole, and grounded.

Today, I came to the realization that in death, sometimes, come the lessons we cannot learn in life.

II.

I got the call while I was sitting on the couch in my apartment in Portland on a Monday night in May, with the loser ex, wondering yet again why I hadn't kicked him out--which was a sure sign I'd lost my bounce. It was about 10 PM. That day, I'd taken my dog to the vet to generate his pre-quarantine blood work so we could move back to Maui at the end of the summer, when I was done with graduate school. To that date, since Adam's death, my back-up plan was "move back to Maui." Jason and I were watching TV, probably an episode of *Burn Notice*. The lights were off, the dog at my feet, and my cell phone rang. The screen announced, "Uncle Dick." Without answering, I knew. My uncle works early so turns in for the night around 8 PM. The only reason he'd be calling me at 10 PM was because mom was--well, I knew it was bad. He'd taken care of the rush of the emergency, and told me not to come until morning.

I got to Olympia--two hours north of Portland--the next morning, damned early and low on sleep. My aunt drove in from the coast. We met at Starbucks, bolstered ourselves the best we could, and headed to the hospital.

Long story short, my mom had lung cancer, and it had metastasized to her brain. The scan later that day showed she had twenty-six small tumors in her head. Five weeks.

She lived five weeks, and it was my job--with the help of my sister, aunt and uncles--to commandeer her care. The days and weeks were a constant swirl of conversations with rushed doctors in white coats or with touchy-feely grief support personnel.

That first night, the one I'd been on the couch watching *Burn Notice*, letting my mind float between my plan of returning to Maui and the nagging question of why I was putting up with Jason, the medics had told Uncle Dick that, given the conditions mom was living in, she most likely would not be allowed to return home. Harsh news, but what I'd suspected, maybe even feared.

My aunt, Darlene, my mom's sister, and I went to the hospital, saw mom, helped her talk to the doctors, and asked our own probing questions. Mom had to go for more tests or scans or some sort of prodding, so we left for a bit to get some lunch and to swing by the house. I sneaked mom's keys out of her purse so we could let ourselves in. We'd hear Uncle Dick's horrific description, but it did nothing to prepare us...

Oh my god. After my step-dad died in 2000, mom had taken the *fuck it, it's my house* attitude and had started smoking inside. Shortly after, she had stopped letting family come over. I think the last time I was in the house was 2003, and it was so smoke-filled I had to wait outside, for fear of a migraine. Because of that memory, I stepped into this hellish version of mom's previously beautifully kempt house with a cloth over my nose.

Oh my god. She hadn't dusted. The nicotine had mingled with regular house particulate matter and had formed inches thick dreadlocks that dropped from

bookshelves, lampshades, figurines. The kitchen counter was piled with peanut packets and cookie wrappers. The area she nested in--previously the family room--was scattered with clothes and papers. She'd taken to using a dinner plate as an ashtray. It was full, and small trash bags--the kitchen size--of cigarette butts sat on the kitchen counter.

Oh my god.

Walking through the wreckage, I gagged and then cried. My aunt and I left the house and drove to the closest bar, shaking, and had a drink before we returned to the hospital.

III.

My sister arrived from eastern Washington the next day. She came directly to the hospital and, after seeing mom and hearing our report, to the house. In her nervousness, she began to clean. From Mom's hospital bed, she forbade us entry to her house, but we disobeyed--all of us, me, my sister and her husband, her sons, my aunt and uncles. On breaks from sitting by her bed, we snuck in.

The outside didn't look so bad, presentable, even, except for the bed-sheet that'd served as a living room curtain for a few years now. The inside was horrific. I don't know what was more horrifying--the filth or that mom had sunk so low. She was always house-proud. I have childhood memories of her oiling the furniture every Saturday while my sister and I napped. Her house was once the place of family gatherings.

She'd lived there since 1984, and it was chock-full of stuff. Beautiful, ornate, hand-crafted furniture from our travels throughout Asia and the Pacific in the early 70s.

The daily living kind of stuff like sheets, and camping gear, and toys, books, and left over pieces of no longer complete sets of dishes.

The first weekend, members from both sides of my family were here--from my mom's side, and from my dad's. The men took out some overgrown trees, my older sister culled through professional paperwork of our father's and sorted books into piles. My younger nephew pressure-washed the deck, while my sister, Rachel, and I went room by room, pulling stuff to donate to our aunt Mary's rummage sale for an animal rescue.

As we worked, someone would come across an item that prompted a giggle, or a memory, or some other sort of shout-out. I found, while pulling fake flowers out of a basket, the last remaining green and white noodle bowl, and it prompted a round of storytelling with Rachel and our nephew Andy about the hot sauce eating contests the three of us used to hold. We'd each have a noodle bowl full of ramen and, dash by dash, try to outlast the other two in increasing spiciness. Fishing rods reminded me of how Andy and I, when we were any age under six, would try anything on a hook to fish from our dock at the Chambers lake house--raisins, cheese. We figured if we liked it, the fish might, too. One of the big treasures excavated for the day was the manuscript of the story of the county in Iowa where our grandmother Neva grew up--prairie living in the mid-1880s. The loudest laugh came from the finding of peg-legged, acid-washed, elastic waist pants and matching jacket in mom's closet.

And then there was the noodle strainer that I couldn't let go to rummage, since it is the object by which I learned the word "colander," and with which I learned how to

make mac and cheese from my dad. As I pulled it out of the box, the image came to me of my mom veiled in steam as she poured spaghetti from the boiling pot into it. That strainer is coming home with me.

After a couple of hours, I remarked, "This is about the point that, when I'm here alone, I cry, and then I get mad, and then I get sad, and then just keep working."

Rachel said, "I know."

It seems, on the surface, such an onerous and dreadful task to clean out a dying person's home. Especially in this case, when our mother insisted on her isolation. When there are so many good memories, but they seem so distant, so in the past. But also I've come to feel that this is an act of honor. Of honoring the life my grandparents lived (some of the stuff is theirs), of the blending of Coopers and Knotts, of the life my dad so diligently built for us, of the life lived in that house, of the two families my mom and step-dad brought together, of the blending of generations.

I don't know where I learned of this concept, but I attribute it to Tibetan Buddhism, and I think I might have gotten it from watching *Seven Years in Tibet*. No matter, it worked for what was on my mind as I dug through the rubble at mom's: that every step is a prayer.

I was brought to tears on occasion because I couldn't do this for my mom while she lived here, but by doing it now, I know that caring for her precious artifacts is, in a way, sending out a prayer on her behalf.

IV.

Just a few days after we moved mom into the nursing home, I had the nurses dress her so that my aunt Darlene and I could take her outside for a stroll in her wheelchair. We walked the grounds, each of us commenting on the flora along the way. Mom had a memory of her and dad walking with me as a very little girl along the adjacent road--the nursing home is very close to the house my parents built as newlyweds.

As we walked, I paused in my mind to consider my mom sitting there, in a wheelchair. Dressed in striped grey jersey pants and a zip-front cotton top—matching, of course—and her new head turban. She'd grumbled that when I'm not there the nurses just throw any old thing on her. "They just don't know how to put together an outfit," she'd said. There she sat, no longer the Olympia High School Homecoming Queen, but definitely looking as good as good gets with brain cancer.

Darlene and I wheeled Mom back to her room and stepped out to the corridor to let the nurses get her back in bed. Mom's cousin Marvis was coming our way—the family resemblance undeniable. I hadn't seen her for years, and every time I do see her, I attach the memory of her mother pinching my cheeks a little too much at church. Marvis is a sweet woman. She and Mom, the parallel daughters of Elmer and Hazel (my grandparents) and Alfred and Hazel (grandpa's brother and his wife). Two Montana farm boys, two Hazels, and the little girls Lenice and Marvis, starting a new life mid-Depression. Coming to Olympia to set down roots and raise families. Today, it's clear that Mom's and Marvis's lives are much like the Robert Frost poem, "two roads diverged

in a yellow wood."

I talked with Marvis for a long time, sitting on a bench in the hallway. She didn't pinch my cheek, but she did hold my hand for a while, as if I was still small. At first the talk was, expectedly, about Mom's condition. Then it turned to what was in Marvis's heart. There lay a sad tale of how hard she had tried to befriend my mom in recent years and Mom had both acted badly and shunned her cousin's attempts. As Marvis told her story, I began to see in front of me the cousin of my mom. A woman who has stayed true to her Lutheran upbringing. A woman who has had the usual struggles of life but who has borne them gracefully because of her faith and belief in family. A woman who sets her day to give to others. A woman who is the center and centrifugal force within her family. A woman who has cast a wide net of caring and compassion.

My mom says she talks to God every day, but sometime in the recent past when I suggested she go to church, she replied sharply, "NO!" I encouraged her, at both the hospital and here at the nursing home, to meet with the chaplain. Again, "NO!" She says family matters, but has let all her ties to siblings, her nephews, any extended family, fall away. She's a woman who sets her day on misery and holding on to the past and the pains it inflicted cruelly upon her. She is a lonely woman, isolated, alone. She, too, has cast a wide net—a net woven tight around herself by pushing all of us away so that she could stay in the dark with her ghosts.

When I saw this comparison in my mind, I immediately thought of Frost's poem. Marvis took the more traveled path--the traditional Lutheran life, and my mom chose the

road less taken. She did not intend for it to lead her to misery, but somehow, by setting aside her beacons along the way, it did. As Frost says, “way leads on to way.”

I inherited, from both my parents, a love of the path less traveled. As I write this, I am coming to realize that it is not the path so much, but how it affects the traveler. It takes work in this modern world to stay true. I’m sorry for my mom, really.

V.

After mom died, I moved into the house, to manage the estate and the remodel. I’ve been doing a lot of digging lately, in drawers and boxes and files. She’d not sorted much of my dad’s stuff, so even his check registers from the 1970s were still here. She sorted even less of what my step-dad left behind. She did tell me, while in the hospital, I’d find his guns, and I did—between the mattress and box springs of the no longer used king sized bed in the master bedroom. There they lay, unloaded, like steely metaphors for that marriage gone so wrong.

My parents planned a good life for us. The evidence in is the big drawer of dad’s desk. A folder for each category of his accomplishments that, one after another, lead him to jobs abroad, or overseas. First to Micronesia and then to Bangkok. We traveled frequently and to many places in between. While recently digging in that drawer, the magical drawer that can bring me close again to my dad who has been dead for 35 years, I found that he’d had even the next adventure planned at the time of his death. It seems

he'd been investigating Costa Rica, even down to the detail of school choices for my sister and me. I don't know what stage of planning, or dreaming, or spit-balling it was in, but the brochures are still alive in a manila folder, all these years gone.

I remember listening, long after I was supposed to be asleep, to my parents planning the house they'd build, using my painted wooden blocks to map it out on the dinette table. I know my mom was ruined by those plans, the ones that never came to fruition, because I watched her rot in her memories that were more alive to her than her own daughters living out their own dreams, or at least trying to.

All of this digging and sorting has been painful, but poignant, too. I found love letters my dad wrote to her. He was 44, mid-career and newly, painfully, divorced from his first wife and wooing my mother. I know that divorce was bad because my older half sisters, his daughters from that marriage, described it in vivid detail. Dad met my mom at work--he was the Land Chief for Washington State Department of Game and she was a phone operator there. Mom was 24, the beauty, the belle, the ingénue. Wrapped in with the letters from him, I found just two letters from her. Dad's spoke more to his loneliness when she was away, and hers more to the future. It saddens me to think of my dad in some crummy little duplex, writing away his loneliness like that. I only knew him as larger than life.

I liked my step-dad. He shined some hope on the whole dreary situation that was our life after dad died. He was always up for fun, and really cared about my sister and

me, though we were young adults when he came along. He made it bearable to be around mom again. He was a really different man than my father, something my mother never stopped running him down for.

I spent hours one day going through a huge pile of photos of my step-dad's that had been left to accumulate in a chair. As I flipped through each packet, I saw the years move forward, and saw the evidence of all of that hope for a re-built family, and then saw all of it fade away. It was as if a line had been drawn in the sand. On one side of the line was an active, playing-at-happy family, boyfriends becoming husbands, grandkids coming along. Then nothing.

First Friends

The moving truck was loaded. We all paused and looked in. Four lives organized, boxed, and packed for the move across country. I took pictures, and then just stood there, in disbelief that this day had really come. Other friends came to say goodbye, lingered, and left. The next morning, Bryan and his friend would drive off, taking the Fisher family's possessions on the road--destination Boston. Theresa and the kids would spend the night at her brother's and fly out the next day.

Around nine that morning, I was back over there, to spend the morning with Theresa and the kids--Aidan and Cora. We were going for donuts and a walk, and I was going to help T. clean any last nooks or crannies of the house that now stood so empty.

We all stood around, trying to drag down time. Finally, Bryan said, "Let's go." Aidan grabbed on and hugged his dad in that fierce way of a six-year-old, in that way that makes the world stop, in that way of never wanting to let go. I could see Bryan's back, and Aidan's small face nestled into his dad's shoulder. Cora was sitting in the bean bag, playing Angry Birds on her mom's iPad. At two, this was all too much for her, so she was controlling the small universe on the screen, flinging bird after bird into a pole. Her language came in the form of a little girl grunt of irritation. No words. She'd hugged her dad, too, and was now back at her game.

After the truck pulled away, T and I put shoes on the kids and walked up the couple of blocks to Alberta Street, one of Portland's neighborhood hubs. That's where the donut shop was. Cora, usually on the look-out for food, wanted nothing. Aidan got his

pick of the store, and came out with a bag of four donuts, and ate them all, one by one, patiently. Theresa and I sat and drank coffee and talked of nothing much at all. In my head though, the conversation was unending and loud. They're moving, my mind yelled over and over.

The clock ticked away our last minutes together. Finally it was unavoidable--we walked back to the house, and I helped T check drawers and closets, decide what to do with the remnants of cleaning supplies. Then, there was no way left to hold on to time. I knew I had to go. I told Cora good-bye; she was back at the Birds, and just mumbled in reply. I picked up Aidan and gave him a hug, trying not to let him see that I was crying, and told him he was still my favorite little boy. He's not much of a talker. He looked at me and smiled, gave me a fierce hug, and sat down in the porch swing. I hugged T, something she and I rarely do, and exchanged all the usual pleasantries--have a good trip, call when you get there, I can't believe you're really going, it will all work out, I'll come visit.

Then, she said, "There are all kinds of things I want to tell you, but I just can't say them." I choked back my tears again and said, "I know."

But what she did manage to get out was this, "You were my first friend here, you know."

I hadn't known, or realized. When I met Theresa she lived across the river in Vancouver, with a room-mate. We met as new teachers at a local high school. At the end of that school year, Theresa's father helped her buy a house in Portland. She and I had

been spending time together, going to street fairs and poetry readings, hiking on weekends. I began inviting her to barbeques and Sunday dinners. Eventually, she met Bryan, who lived with my boyfriend, Adam.

Bryan, Adam, and a couple other guys moved to Portland together from Indiana. Bryan and Adam had been friends since first grade. Adam's death was such a loss for Bryan, and Theresa, too. After, we held each other together by having dinner, watching *The Sopranos* on Friday nights, going to breakfast on Sundays. They, too, threw handfuls of Adam's ashes into the ocean. His accident was on a Sunday, and we'd had plans for dinner, the four of us, on Monday--they were going to tell us Theresa was pregnant.

As Jack Johnson sings, *one life goes out, one comes in*.

After Theresa and Bryan got married, and Aidan was on the way, they moved to the house we'd packed up and cleaned yesterday. I'd helped paint the walls, shop for curtains, and had since spent countless evenings around their table for dinner. Now they were moving to Boston, to be closer to family. And soon I was moving to Olympia, to execute my mom's estate.

I drove home, Theresa's words loud in my mind.

Sugar Beach

I balance on smooth black lava boulders at the shoreline of Sugar Beach. I make my way just past the soft waves that undulate and dissipate. Ten yards out, the ocean meets the lava. There's no surf, but enough water is hitting the rocks that they are slippery. I stop before I get to those covered in algae. I hold three flowers: a yellow ilima, a purple bougainvillea, and a red epidendrum. Behind me, my friend Gail picks her path so she can stand beside me, an orange bougainvillea in her hand.

Throwing flowers in the ocean is my Maui ritual. My partner, Adam, is buried in these waters. Each time I visit, I pick three flowers, of no special variety—I let them reveal themselves—one for Adam's past, one for his present, and one for his future. This morning, I found the three in my hand while driving along the beach access road.

Adam and I had lived on Maui for a year in 2002. This island is a place to which people come and from which people go, and we were no different than others who'd left the mainland for Paradise. Work pulled me back to Portland, Oregon. Adam lingered on Maui for a few months, reluctant to leave. He made it back to Portland the summer of 2004, at the last possible moment to serve as his best friend's best man. That fall, we decided I'd finish the school year and then we'd move back to Maui, for good. But Adam died in a car crash in January 2005. Our dream of the island life died with him.

This trip, I've come to Maui with my high school best friends, Jim and Gail. I moved from Olympia to Portland a year after our high school graduation. We kept in

touch the first few years, until mortgages, professional obligations and adult life what-not allowed the 100 miles between our cities to stretch into twenty years gone by. We reunited at the fiftieth birthday party of a mutual friend. Recently, I moved from Portland to Olympia to remodel the house I inherited from my mom. Jim and Gail let me sleep on their couch, fed me, and volunteered themselves as my work crew. As we pulled carpet, tiled bathrooms, and painted wall, the gaps between the years filled. In appreciation for their help with the remodel, I hosted our trip to Maui.

Our third night here, we stood in the kitchen of our little *ohana*—a word that literally means family, but loosely translates as mother-in-law cottage and is the common description of small rental properties. Gail filled my wine glass and asked me about Adam’s accident. I’d forgotten she and Jim didn’t know the details. I sipped my wine and let the words roll out, giving the short version of the horror, but giving enough detail that my friends finally understood the magnitude. I’d explained my flower ritual to them while we were planning the trip. When I was done recounting the wreck and the days in the hospital, Gail said, “I want to throw a flower, and I want to say some words.” Later that evening, Jim sat on the couch and put his arm around me. He just kept talking, about anything and nothing, just like we did when we were teenagers, when we’d put gas in Jim’s car and drive around because we didn’t want to go home, until all the world’s problems were solved.

The spring after the wreck, Adam’s family and our group of Portland friends flew

with me to Maui to put his ashes in the ocean. Friends who live on-island joined us. The dive shop Adam had taken scuba lessons through volunteered a boat and captain. I bought everyone flower *leis*. Niccole, a Maui friend, consulted a Hawaiian *kumu*, or priest, and prepared special *leis* for Adam's younger brother, Wes, and me. She'd also learned the Hawaiian way to throw remains into the sea.

We launched with no destination in mind. As we moved away from shore and into the deep water, a pod of dolphins appeared. They escorted us to a popular dive spot near sacred native land. As the dolphins turned to leave, the captain cut the motor. Niccole explained what Wes and I were to do. The tradition is to throw a handful of ashes into the water, and then to dive in for one last swim with the deceased. Wes and I were to stay submerged until our *ti* leaf *leis* floated over our heads.

My hands shook, I fumbled, I began to sweat as I untied the bag of ashes. Finally, I submerged my hand into the container and pulled out a substance that felt reassuringly similar to sand. I threw my handful of what used to be Adam's body into the water and dove in. The others followed suit. I lingered in the water and an ancient green turtle joined me. I felt Adam's presence. The turtle looked at me, nodded, and submerged. I swam back to the boat. After our swim, from the boat deck, I watched garlands of white *plumeria* and those of green *ti* leaves slide along the swell of the water and float away.

This morning, Gail and I threw our flowers. I gave the yellow conical ilima to Adam's past, the perfect funnel shape a reminder of his passage. I let the purple

bougainvillea—the fullest bloom and softest of the bunch—signify his present. The epidendrum—a waxy, firm, sturdy burst of red and gold—will serve as the beacon for his future. They left my hand, one at a time, offered up with a silent prayer. The *ilima* was nudged by the waves and lodged between rocks. The epidendrum floated out along the point of the lava flow toward open ocean. The bougainvillea floated back and forth between rock and shore. Gail threw in her orange bunch. It landed next to my purple clump and undulated with the waves.

Jim and Gail and I walked along the tide pools and collected shells. Then I took my one last swim, again. While in the water, I overheard two women talking, their voices floating across the surface of the water, propelled by the soft Hawaiian lilt of pidgin, “When I was a little girl, my grampa tell me, you feel bad, you go to the ocean. It fix *everything*.”

Chanting *E ala e*

Jim's rustling in the kitchen and the smell of coffee awakens me. It's four in the morning. I stay nestled in my blanket on the couch, listening to him find pans to make breakfast, listening to his wife Gail turn on the water for a shower. The lapping sound of the ceiling fan reminds me I'm in the tropics, not at home in rainy winter Washington. I stretch my arm over the couch. Jim puts a cup of coffee in my hand and says good morning. "I'm up, really," I reply. I'm usually the sleepy head of the bunch, but today we need to get a move on, so I get up, dress quickly, organize a bag for the day, and step out onto the *lanai*, into the still darkness. Our rental is a cabin in Haiku, a residential area just off the North shore. Each Hawaiian island has a wet side and a dry side--Haiku is on the wet side, the jungle-y part of the island. No street lights, curvy roads through gulches and eucalyptus. The air smells clean yet musty, as it always does after a night of rain in the islands. I swing for a while in the hanging porch chair, taking in the warmth of the coffee, the dampness of the air and the silence.

Twenty minutes later, we pile into the rental Jeep. Our destination is Haleakala, the "house of the sun," Maui's volcano ten thousand feet above sea level. We're going up to watch the sunrise, so pitch black is what we want right now, the darkness is why we're up so early. It'll take us about an hour to drive to up. Though I lived on Maui for a year a decade ago, and though I drive up to Haleakala National Park every few visits, I've never been up for sunrise. Haleakala is, in Hawaiian culture and oral history, a sacred place, a place of ancient ritual. In the words of Mark Twain, who visited the islands in 1866,

Haleakala is a place of "healing solitudes."

This trip to Maui is my way of saying thank you to Jim and Gail for helping me remodel my mom's house after she passed away two years ago, my way of saying thank you for the support, the sweat equity, for feeding me and for letting me sleep on their couch for a long stretch while mom was in the hospital. This trip is also a celebration of our reunion. We went to high school together, but lost touch after adult life took over. Jim and Gail have only been to Maui once before, and they had the bad tourist experience. The whole plan for our trip is for them to see this beautiful island through my eyes.

We make our way out of Haiku and to the main roads. I direct Jim the back way through the still-sleeping town of Makawao and onto the rodeo road that connects to Haleakala Highway. Then it's up and up, via an s-curved, two-lane road. We drive, mostly in silence. Jim has said he wants to see the sun "boil out of the ocean on one side of the island, and sink back into it on the other." Jim's request reminds me of the myth of how Maui stole the sun. Legend tells that Haleakala Crater is where the demigod Maui captured the sun in order to convince it to take longer crossing the sky each day, so that his mother's bark cloth could dry fully. Maui held the sun captive in the crater for several days. Finally, the sun granted Maui's wish, so he let it return to the sky. Since, the island has enjoyed full days of sunshine and warmth.

The sky is lightening as we snake up the last few miles. I glance between the dashboard clock, the sky's edge I can see along the volcano's slope, and gauge the

distance to the top. We make it to the parking lot just as the whole sky is turning from gunmetal to coral. Jim parks the Jeep and we jump out. As we start walking to the viewpoint along rim of the crater, we hear voices. Gail asks, "What's that noise?" It's rhythmic and soft, low in tone. "Chanting the sunrise," I tell her, though in my mind, I worry that I can't remember the words. I give a quick explanation of the Hawaiian ceremony of chanting the sunrise as a prayer, and as a way to begin each day with purpose. We make our way to the guardrail along the rim, arriving just as the sun peeks through the cloud layer and bursts into layers of crimson-orange brilliance, filling the sky. For that moment, nothing else exists, nothing except the sun rising out of the ocean, coming through the clouds, lighting the sky, signaling the beginning of that new day.

The sun shifts higher and higher, causing the colors in the crater to change. The cinder rock hills come out of shadow and take on their daylight hue of deep rusted burgundy, the sharp edges of grey cliffs come into relief so that the stone's edges are delineated, the vegetation is now bright green. The angle of the sun in relation to the volcano's peak reminds me of the first time I saw Haleakala come out of shadow. That morning, I was looking toward Maui from Kaho'olawe, the island eight miles off Maui's South shore.

Kaho'olawe was used as a bombing practice target by the US military, for fifty years. In the early 2000s, ownership of it reverted to the Hawaiian government. Because of all the bombing, the island is uninhabitable. Kaho'olawe, like Haleakala, is sacred ground, a place of tradition and ritual. The Protect Kaho'olawe Ohana, a non-profit

activist group interested in rebuilding a cultural connection to the island, sponsors work party excursions. While living on Maui and paddling on the Hawaiian Canoe Club outrigger team, I was invited to join one such trip. I went with my friends Niccole and Wendy, as chaperones of the teen members of our club. Before we were allowed to set foot on Kaho'olawe, we had to learn a series of rituals and chants. This morning, I'm reminded of the pre-dawn cleansing swim and sunrise chant for Haleakala, *E ala e*. As I stand next to Gail and watch the sun take over the sky, I think back, try to remember, and slowly, the words come out of the cadence of the chant I hear along the rim today.

As I listen, my mind drifts back a decade, across eight miles of ocean, to Kaho'olawe, to another pre-dawn awakening. In memory, I hear the group leader blow the conch shell, or *pu*, signaling it's time for the day to begin. I rustle in my sleeping bag, and I reach for my flashlight but decide to leave it off--illumination will only upset the calm of the darkness, and will make it harder to see once I'm outside. I wake my tent-mate, Wendy, telling her I'm going to get Niccole and we'll wait for her before we head to the beach. The last blows of the *pu* drift into the still-night darkness as I unzip the tent flap and step into the cool Hawaiian morning.

Rising before dawn is traditional cultural protocol. After the *pu* sounds, we are to make our way to the water, strip, submerge and cleanse ourselves of anything left from the day before or that crept into our consciousness during the night. The ocean will sweep away negativity, worry, guilt, exhaustion, anger, or distraction that will keep us from living this day fully. Wendy, Niccole, and I are alone at our scrap of beach, just yards

from our tents. The water is shallow--ankle-deep, and the bottom rocky. We wade out as far as feels safe, knowing that darkness is not shark-safe, then kneel, dunk, and splash in the salty water. This ritual makes sense to me. I think to myself, "How can I awaken with such focused intention every morning?" The earth-based, cycle-of-life Hawaiian style of spirituality resonates in me.

After our dip, the three of us gather at the fire the *kuas*, or group leaders, have built. The sky is lightening, but is still some version of a blue-black-grey. After all of the group have made their way from tent to ocean to fire and are warmed and dry, we make our way up a shoreline ridgeline to watch the sun come over Haleakala, for the day to begin with purpose, as we chant our prayer for its climb from ocean to sky:

E ala e Ka la i kahikina (Awaken, arise)

I ka moana (The sun in the east)

Ka moana hohonu (From the ocean)

Pi'i ka lewa (Climbing to heaven)

Ka lewa nu'u (The heaven highest)

I kahikina (In the east)

Aia ka la. (There is the sun)

E ala e (Awaken!)

Just as these words weave into my memory, the Park ranger's voice changes from the soft lilt of Hawaiian words to a tone of admonishment. His voice pulls me back to the present. I look at Gail and laugh, "And that's the park ranger yelling at people not to crush the plants." Haleakala is home to an amazing diversity of rare species, one of which is my favorite, the *ahinahina*, better known as the Haleakala Silversword.

As we turn away from the guardrail, the wind picks up and cold air hits us, and I realize I've forgotten to tell my friends it can be close to freezing up here. I have on yoga pants and a sweater, but am still cold. Gail is in shorts and a t-shirt. Jim runs back to the Jeep for our beach towels--Gail and I wrap ourselves in the hibiscus-print terry cloth, she in blue and me in red. As we walk back toward the Jeep, I suggest we drive the last half mile up, to the observation spot on the very top, to see the Silverswords.

The Haleakala Silversword grows only here, in these volcanic soils, on this volcano, on this island. The bottom of the plant is round and covered in silver-green spikey leaves that grow in a whorl. The flower stalk shoots up from the middle of this ball and grows to five feet. The Silversword lives fifty to ninety years, flowers only once in its life, then dies. The charismatic nature of this plant comes through in its bloom--the petals are a deep maroon and the hundreds of flowers on each plant burst open at once, engorging the stalk with life. The expansive grandeur of the bloom seems to represent the spirit of the volcano itself, seems to symbolize the sunrise, seems to elucidate the cycles of life in the islands.

Early visitors to the Park often picked the Silversword as a memento of having

made it to the top of Haleakala. Local lore explains that it was the thing to do...not really a custom, but something like tossing a coin in a fountain for good luck...to roll the ball-shaped part of the plant into the crater, for sport. I have to admit, it does look a bit like a spikey bowling ball. And, before Haleakala was a National Park, the volcano's slopes were used as rangeland. In addition to the picking and the rolling, grazing goats and cattle caused the plant almost went extinct. By the 1920s, there were just over fourteen hundred plants left. Since the 1970s, Park rangers have re-established the plant's population. Now, about fifty thousand Silverswords grow across this gritty cinder rock landscape.

As a photographer, I'm drawn to the Silversword's Dr. Suess-world shape, prodigious bloom-stalk, and textures. But now we're shivering. My hands are too cold to take more photos. Regretfully, the three of us pile into the Jeep and head down the s-curved, two-lane road. It was too dark to see much detail in the landscape on the drive up. What's beautiful about the drive down is that the landscape changes again and again as we wend from the barren wind-eroded zone of the summit and through the trees along the slopes. Plants change, rock formations change, hill slope changes. Jack London called the landscape of Haleakala, "a workshop of nature still cluttered with the raw beginnings of world-making." Both the North shore and the South shore are visible. I look across the water at Kaho'olawe, and smile.

As we descend, we watch the Maui awaken. It's not quite 9 AM when we roll into Makawao Town, so early we have to wait for the coffee shop to open. Once inside, with warm cups in our hands, and almost unspokenly--in that way between friends of a long

time--we decide we'll go up again tomorrow.

The Frogs' Melodies Tonight

Full moon. That majestic golden orb shines through the still-bare boughs of the maple tree just at the edge of my yard. This morning, even, while I was walking the dog at dawn, I saw it in the sky, too full yet to move on to the other side of the world. Since, it has made its rotation, and brightens my night.

My dog Josh is on the deck, listening to the frog orchestra that began a week or two ago. The field below our house floods in the spring rain, bringing these amphibians that, night after star-bright night, vocalize their passionate search for a mate and signal the change in temperature as the world shifts toward spring.

Each spring evening I've heard the frog-song, I've thought of my father, of a particular memory of him. When I was a very little girl, three or four, we lived on the shores of Chambers Lake, on the other side of town. Across the lake, coyotes roamed along the railroad tracks. They howled, and on those nights, my father would awaken me, wrap me in a blanket, and carry me to the porch to listen, to nature, to the universe. This memory has become emblematic of the legacy my father left me. He died when I was fifteen, but before passing, instilled in me a deep understanding of the connection between humans and the natural world.

In the 1970s my father worked as a zoologist for the United Nations in Bangkok, Thailand, where I attended seventh grade at the International School. He gave a lecture to my class, "Man and the Natural Environment." I have his notes, dated September 17, 1973, in front of me this evening:

The natural environment surrounds us with geography--mountain vistas, high plateaus, low hills used for farming, river valley deltas made into rice paddies, the land itself. The natural environment includes seasons and sunlight and the rainy season and typhoons and all of it culminates in soil quality.

Humans need the soil to grow food. Without good soil, there is no rice, no fruit. Work animals--yak, buffalo, horse, and elephant--live off the land, too.

Humans influence the natural environment. We make our mark by building houses, planting crops, keeping livestock, and using resources to make clothes, travel, and build cities.

Humans need nature, the good environment--clean air, clean water, green scenery, and wildlife. The bad environment is dirty air, dirty water, no green, no wildlife but rats. The bad environment is caused by too many people, ignorance, and the desire for wealth now.

The warning bells are loss of wildlife, loss of green across the landscape.

His endnote reads, "*If they can't live--can man????*" On this part of the note page, it is clear my dad pressed his pencil hard into the paper.

As I read these notes I realize my dad's schema of "Man and the Natural Environment" is the same as the ecologists' schema today. *If they can't live--can man????* is still the biggest environmental question.

These are the notes of the man who instilled in me my love of nature. Even though the last decade of my life has been rife with crises, I live as a dreamer who walks

often along the river, listening to the muted splash and caress of water on rocks. I listen to the softly ensconced echo of the world's sounds as the trees pull sound down and drop it into the river's flow. I take these walks with Josh, who also lives to walk along streams, to find himself tangled in long grass along the banks, and then goes splashing with a distinct surge into the river's tumult and flow.

Nature allows me to survive.

So, when I was left with my mother's house to tend, I dug in. I hacked and pulled until all the neglected heather and azaleas and rhododendrons. I raked up the old grass and dead dandelions and disposed of them. I rototilled and cleared and let my hair clog with sweat and I spit the dust I inhaled back out onto the ground. It was all too familiar, and not much different than after Adam died, but the logic of the work soothed my mind. The physicality of it allowed me to let go of the strain of managing my mom's affairs. Each night, I'd shower and the dirt would run off my skin. My hair was matted and I had blisters, but I was finally reconnected with the earth and my own sense of being.

Finally, the yard is filled with blueberry bushes, herbs, flowers, and copse of new birch trees.

I return my father's notes to his desk. The moon illuminates my thoughts and I imagine the frogs' melodies tonight are the beating of my father's heart as he held me close, listening to the coyotes.

Vita

Neva Knott is an English Teacher and Environmental Journalist. Before she began teaching she co-founded the internationally recognized art and design magazine, Plazm. Currently, she manages The Ecotone Exchange, a blog publishing positive stories of the environment.