

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Karalee N. Rhoten for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on July 30, 2004

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The words we use to define our lives are often determined by the way we render any given moment. Every instance of writing is a moment of remembering, and a non-fiction essay gives the author free rein to unravel an instance, paint a portrait of what time has already come to pass. The three distinct chapters presented herein are representations of three distinct aspects of a writer's life. "A Warm, Dark Place," presents an analysis of the way that losing oneself often results in being found. "The Temple of Language" discusses the way that words not only allow human expression, but also determine how that each recorded instant will be shaped. Finally, "Inside" unravels the relationship between the wilds of an untamed place, Alaska, and the wilds that remain equally untouched within an author.

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How We Live with Words

by
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Karalee N. Rhoten, Author

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How We Live with Words

Introduction:

This thesis began by writing; I wrote about anything and everything that came into my head. Because this collection was going to be a series of essays, some related, some not, I did not reject anything at first. By the time I began the process of cutting out materials, I had more essays than I needed, and so I began to cut out those essays that did not fit within the larger scope of my thesis. The process by which I cut out essays was fairly simple; I cut out essays that did not fit the larger topic—the theme of writing—or were not written well enough. I focused very closely on finding essays that showed some level of significance, even though I did not decide upon the significance of those essays until later in the revision process.

Ultimately, the model for this project was Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*, a series of essays that often seem so disconnected as to be disconcerting. Dillard talks about everything from archaeology to infants, and her meaning, the one that unifies the book, is about her relationship with humanity. It was after reading Dillard's book that I decided to craft a similar project. I chose to create

three chapters of somewhat disconnected essays that address one major theme: my approach to life through words. The components of this larger theme include being lost and found, loving language, and my relationship with nature; the chapters in this project are arranged accordingly, as I believe that I have found my own sense of self by losing myself, rendering the world through words, and finally accepting my own inability to control nature. I chose these themes because they not only provide a construction of myself, a picture, but also give the reader a sense of their crucial elements in one writer's life.

With this framework in mind, it is helpful to understand that the key to this project is its non-linearity. By "non-linearity" I mean the ebb and flow of the words, the way that I move from one topic to another without telling the reader precisely why I chose to do so. I quite purposefully did not provide a detailed road map for understanding these essays because, like my life, there is more than one way to see these essays, more than one way to understand the movement from topic to topic. As a writer, it makes me uncomfortable to tell the reader—explicitly--how to view my words, my experiences. Further, these essays no longer belong only to me, and I do not presume to tell the reader how to comprehend what is now a shared object.

At the same time, it was not my intention to confuse the reader, to cause too much discomfort while reading these essays. Like every writer of narrative, fictional or nonfictional, I shape my material in what I do and don't say, in how I

juxtapose pieces and scenes, in patterns of imagery. Like every writer, I intend my readers to have a certain kind of experience of what I have written.

With that understanding, I have a few suggestions for someone who reads this project. First, I invite you look at the negative space, the emptiness between the words and the essays. These spaces are deliberate ones and require the reader to take a step back to see the larger picture that I try to form with the essays as a whole. As in a piece of art or a photograph, the empty spaces are as important as the words. Part of what I am talking about is found in what I do not say. Secondly, I suggest that you take notice of the way that I choose to omit details; in some cases, this is my own way of allowing the reader to see what she or he would like to see rather than what I have found through my own words. There are places where I am trying to foster that sense of wanting more details, more story--just more. It's a feeling I want the reader to experience, as it is a theme crucial to this project overall. I believe that much of life comes from seeing what you cannot have, that life is about relinquishment as much as ownership.

A favorite poetess of mine, Adelia Prado, once said that,

Words only hide something deeper, deaf and dumb,
something invented to be silenced.
In moments of grace, rare as they are,
you'll be able to snatch it out: a live fish
in your bare hand.
Pure terror.

The analogy works well with this project. The better part of my life will be spent reviewing past moments, some of those that have been recorded on the previous

pages, some that will never live in ink. The moments that are held captive on the following pages were most certainly “invented to be silenced” by ink on a page. Like Prado, I address the “pure terror” of living through words and phrases, pages and books. And, like most of life, there is often no obvious or easy connection between one word and another.

For now, I will continue to live in the wilds of Alaska, and hope upon hope for that “live fish.” If I see it, I will snatch it in my own “bare hand.”

Chapter 1: A Warm, Dark Place

I.

When I was younger, much younger, I was forced to wear pajamas. Mostly, it was the doctors and nurses who insisted on this, believing somehow that my bouts with asthma, the ones that landed me in the hospital anyway, required that I lie in my bed under scratchy blankets wearing pajamas. While all of it was humiliating, from the bedpans to the way the physician's assistants would whack my back each night to loosen the cloying, horrible phlegm, the pajamas were the worst. I recall one nightgown in particular, a rather pretty one that mother bought me for some holiday or another; this nightgown came to represent sickness and loss of power over myself.

Today when I sleep, which is sometimes a rarity, I sleep in my clothes. It was only a few years ago that I would even get under the covers. I have seven pairs of pants that could, in a pinch, serve as clothing. But these are things in which I sleep. I am, to be perfectly honest, most comfortable sleeping in whatever outfit I wore on a given day. I've slept in wool blazers with silk shells, pantyhose, all manner of skirts, jeans, sweatshirts, button-down blouses, dresses. I have even slept in shoes, from boots to heels. If I had my way, I would never wear pajamas, I would never remove my shoes, and I would never have to get undressed to sleep. I enjoy hiking because it's expected that one will wear clothing to bed; I hated

sleepovers because the crowds of pre-pubescent girls did not understand when I would hesitate to slip into a nightgown.

I own plenty of pajamas today, and sometimes spend the better part of an afternoon wearing them, but the loathing hasn't diminished. Still, it's the knowledge of my own impotence that has been so influential, so powerful. My hatred of nightclothes is most certainly a hatred of powerlessness.

II.

My Search and Rescue final is this: a long day of grid searching for a subject, followed by spending the night alone with only what you've carried in your day pack. Sleeping bags and tents are "contraband," but you're allowed to have a tarp and emergency blankets, which I do. I also bring six different ways to start a fire, knowing that I'll need them. It's been a wet spring, the wettest in 50 years, and they'll require me to start and keep a fire going all night long. I'm okay with building the shelter, with sleeping without a sleeping bag, but I'm nervous about the fire.

The day starts early, at the briefing room, and I'm pleased to see several dogs, one of whom, I later learn, is named D O G. There's Buddy, the young gangly Shepherd-Rottweiler mix, and Alice, the neurotic beagle who shivers and whines when her mother steps away. D O G is my favorite, however, because she is a surreptitious snuggler, and she uses my feet as a seat.

We pile into the bus that usually transports Benton County's elderly and drive up a bumpy, muddy road to another equally muddy road, where the adventure begins, after what seems to be an overly-thorough briefing at the communications van. We get our radios and set off in two teams of four with leaders to begin a grid search of the northern part of a road where the subject was last seen. They call this the path of least resistance, or the most likely method by which a lost subject will travel. Roads and streams, downhill rather than up, clearings instead of thick underbrush. We find peanut shells and call them in to headquarters. We locate several wrappers and mark them with flagging tape. Our subject, apparently distraught, suddenly takes a turn, off the road, up a muddy embankment, and into the woods. We follow him, ever aware that this subject does not in fact exist. At this point, we combine teams and create one long line of raingear-clad volunteer searchers, but it's not easy, and the walking is hard because there is no trail. The line splits, bulges where some Search and Rescue (SAR) members are forced to scramble over downed logs or particularly thick bushes; there is a lot of yelling, trying to maintain the integrity of the line, counting off to verify that we're all still there. It feels very much like trying to keep a group of kindergartners still. I focus on my compass, which is resting on an orange cord around my neck, and the ground, which changes from snags to mud. We find the clues they left us, the black hat and pile of peanut shells, and when we reach the other side of the forest, which is demarcated by another logging road, we eat lunch standing up. Bill, the friendly

retiree, points out that I have ripped the seat out of my rain pants. It's a welcome bit of hilarity, and I welcome everyone to laugh at my ripped pants, welcome the mildly sexist jokes and slightly inappropriate comments. Jack, a former technical writer like me, loans me duct tape, which does not work.

By the time we reach the last part of the search, the one where the subject begins responding to our coordinated whistle-blows with his own whistle, it's been raining hard, and everyone looks wrinkled and sodden. When we find a pink squirt gun, I want to laugh, but instead concentrate on the portly man wearing a blue rain jacket and matching pants, carrying a camera carefully wrapped in plastic. And when it comes time to carry the subject out in a litter, the small thin high school boy who has agreed to feign being lost for the afternoon, everyone is tired. The litter is heavy, even with the twelve pair of capable hands that carry it, and my boots, along with everyone else's, have a hard time finding purchase in the sticky red mud. But we get him out, and when the exercise is blessedly over, the chorus of muddy SAR volunteers begins again; my pants have ripped even further, despite Jack's duct tape. Micheal takes a picture with his expensive digital camera. The last part of the search and rescue final exam takes place alone, a fact for which I am grateful. After stealing some hot water from a giant pot near the communications van, I head out to the designated shelter and fire building area to find my home. I pick two other places first, and even go so far as to erect some logs against the first before I find my house. Some time ago, perhaps a year or more, a

large tree fell and died, and a few other trees sprung up near it, creating a tiny hollow. I lean six logs about the size of my arm against another one, tied to a standing tree with parachute cord, and then spread out my taupe colored tarp over the logs. I finish the shelter by covering the windward side with some ferns and branches, and call it complete. Later, the various SAR instructors will stop by to stare at what is apparently a pathetic shelter, but I like it; it keeps rain off of most of my body, and I make sure to try it out in the afternoon when one especially dark cloud lets loose.

It's the firewood gathering that exhausts me, and I sneak a candy bar before collecting a huge pile of wood, the one that must sustain me throughout the night. I manage to create a myriad of pretty bruises, and I throw out my back trying to fetch a particularly beautiful, overly large log, but after several hours I hunker down at the opening to my shelter and begin praying that my fire will start. And for two hours, my prayers go unnoticed, because despite the cotton balls soaked in Vaseline and the candles (both recommended highly by various instructors), my fire just smokes at me, causing my eyes to water and a series of throaty coughs. At the height of my frustration (failure), there are some five instructors standing about my shelter, alternatively giving bits of advice or saying apparently encouraging things. My fire comes to life after the combination of Ken's bundles of wet leaves, which, miraculously, dry out quickly and ignite, and Tim's long, pitch-covered sticks. It is, after these long hours of smoke and tears, a strong, sure fire that burns

comfortably, even when I shove in a number of large, wet logs. I am pleased, very pleased, and probably show it on my face when the instructors stop by to check on all of us every two hours throughout the long, cold, but blissfully dry, night.

I eat coffee beans to stay awake, fearing the demise of my beloved fire, and listen to the other SAR members, my neighbors and classmates, some of whom are close enough to be heard. Micheal stops by twice, to the dismay of one of the instructors, and feeds me macaroni and cheese and coffee; he leaves only when the teacher threatens to extinguish his fire. Sean comes down to inform me that his shelter is more like a smoke house because of the wind's direction, and is also sternly reprimanded for leaving his fire. Tim stops by once, the only one of the three who does not get caught, to shove another piece of pitch wood in my fire before disappearing again.

I do not sleep, despite my exhaustion, and I shift positions every few minutes to more evenly warm my body. At 2:00 a.m., I come close to running out of firewood, so I go tromping about in the underbrush and locate a few more logs. I keep my fire going all night, and it's a veritable collection of glowing coals and hissing logs. At 5:00, the cowgirl tracker with the intense eyes tells me that I can let my fire go out, that I can deconstruct my shelter. It takes only a few minutes to remove the string and toss the logs, and when my fire goes out, when it becomes but a memory of igniting trees, I fall asleep sitting up, against my backpack, wrapped in my blue emergency blanket. Sean tells me this later, while we're

sipping coffee at the communication van, and laughs. His eyes, a pale blue color, crinkle with joy as he informs me of my sitting-up nap, and I take a picture of Tim when he falls asleep with a piece of ham halfway to his mouth. Micheal is quiet, but shoots me all manner of stares, and Aaron, another instructor, wears the shell-shocked look of one who is not ready to be awake. He was the one who crept up to each camp that night, wearing an alien costume.

The costume, like the night, and the ripped pants, and the smell of dirt, made me smile. I did not know, however, if he could see my smile in the thorough darkness of the woods, so I clapped my hands in the manner of a child, just before he moved along to scare someone else.

III.

I read a book recently, and in it, the author said something that made it into my quote diary. Majell Axelson, in the middle of a particularly breathtaking exposition of a broken woman, talks about what it is that I fight. "Bitterness is an ancillary disease. It affects those who have not been allowed to grieve properly." After I wrote these words, I went to the dictionary to review my understanding of ancillary. Bitterness, Axelson says, is a subsidiary to the person who carries it. I see many of kinds of bitterness, and there are days when the air I breathe tastes so bitter as to make my eyes water. I hear small herds of women mutter about the various failings in their lives, the men who carry Axelson's parasitic disease about with them in their scooped shoulders and withered faces.

My grandmother, an amazing and brilliant woman, speaks the language of bitterness, such that I cannot recall a time when she has lived without it. She is bitter of her never-ending poverty, the fact that her eldest daughter was born with a brain four steps too slow, the way that she failed to fulfill all those dreams that once sustained her. For my mother, this bitterness is an ache, a verbal lashing, a reminder of her mother's own ineptitude at finding and maintaining happiness. It'll be a demon for my mother long after her own mother has ceased to live. We speak of it now and then, and I tell her, gently and with some hesitation, when I hear her mother's voice come from her own lips. Now and then, of course, I hear my own words, and taste that unmistakable flavor of an unripened perspective. It's not only my grandmother's plight.

I used to love bitterness; it was delightful as a forbidden drug. I would fall into it, sometimes unaware, and then would revel in this malicious and most certainly purposeful unwillingness to see beauty. The best part, of course, was that it was all mine. I could swallow any amount of pain, tuck it away, and appear to forget. But, as Axelson knows, such unaddressed pain is but emotional sludge; there is always an effect to that forgetting. Today, I take my pain with me for long walks in the woods, and along the way I parcel out bits of it until it's all gone. Those pieces of misery are breadcrumbs I've chosen to leave behind.

IV.

They return. During their time away, I absorb muddy water into the seat of my pants from sitting on the ground. My feet bleed freely. Chris and Laura say they have found a perfect campsite. Close to the river. Away from the wretched idea of a cabin behind you. The campsite, however, is occupied. I am counting my bleeding blisters, tuning out Laura's insistent voice, up to number twenty-three when her words take meaning. People. We are twenty-five miles from the nearest road, forty miles from the nearest telephone pole, seventy miles from the nearest cup of coffee. The people we meet in such remote locations are usually quite friendly, other hikers who enjoy sore muscles and the purity of true darkness. But these are not hikers, says Laura. They are hidere and we have found them. These men are wearing wet suits, although the river is too low for diving, have piercings in places where flesh doesn't grow, do not talk or smile or look. Their strangeness creeps over us like a shiver of cold. My rear grows wetter from the ground that supports it, but I do not move. The chill of the men overtakes the chill of the ground.

It is a soured hiking trip, one short walk turned into a painfully, frighteningly long one. Perhaps the map misled us, or our sense of geography misled us, because there was no water on any of the streams marked so plainly on the green surveyor's map. The four of us hiked further and further, running out of water three hours into the hike. Perhaps it was hope or sheer stupidity that caused

us to keep hiking, as if the next stream would have water. No water, no streams. Just the awareness of thirst, the knowledge of water.

The only water we find all day is a mud puddle, scummy with dead insects, scarcely large enough to wet my big toe. And yet it is water, and we drink from it. Greedily. We spend twenty minutes perched alongside the mud taking turns with the water filter. The mosquitoes are relentless, but I ignore them and suck from the bottle, an infant in hiking boots. After the group has stopped gulping and begun drinking, the four of us decide. We passed the point of no return several hours ago. It would take too long to get out again, we are all beyond tired now; the only recourse is to go down to the river. We feel sure that the river will not run dry and so begin the sharp descent. Each step downward means a doubly painful step upward tomorrow. But we must drink. The puddle is almost dry.

It is virtually straight down to the river on an old and steep mining road. When I fall down, which is often, the mosquitoes suck the wisps of blood resulting from these spills and I am too tired to wave them off. The hike is demanding in a way that is new to me. It is demanding because I must continue on in pursuit of water, so there is no stopping or resting or decision to cut the hike shorter. The water we carry will be gone before long. And if we do not hike quickly, darkness will wrap its way around us.

And now I am down by the river, comforted at first by the unmistakable sounds of running water. Slowly, and by degrees, as my thirst dries up so does my

initial feeling of satisfaction. For this place, I think as I sit in the dirt with my feet bleeding badly, is not a refuge at all.

Behind me there is an old cabin, called Mary's Cabin by the map that misled us. It is strange in itself, a cabin so far from the nearest power line or flushing toilet, and the look of the place is cruel. The building is aged, a hodgepodge of materials somehow brought down the trail and forced into the shape of a dwelling. There are two windows with glass so old it looks runny, a door with gaps large enough for an eye to peer out, a tin roof being successfully taken over by green moss. Mary's Cabin looks like a miserable old woman who died standing up.

The cabin is worse inside, a child's warped version of domesticity. There are two rooms downstairs, with a small bedroom off to the back containing a mattress so lumpy at first I thought the previous occupants were still in bed. There is a kitchen of sorts, with anachronistic items like a refrigerator and two small electric stoves with no electricity to run them. Unwelcome reminders of the world I left behind. One of the stoves has become the residence for a nest of squirming, pink baby mice and the refrigerator holds an old glass milk bottle containing two dead spiders. Upstairs, more furniture sags in corners, covered by large filmy sheets. The place reeks of time gone wrong and I find myself rushing back out into the forest.

No one wants to stay near the gruesome cabin with its rooms of old furniture and bad memories. But the strange men. And we are too tired to hike any further. So we set up the tents, cook a small meal, and build a fire that hisses at us because of the moisture in the ground. The night is heavy with heat and fear and watchful creatures. I sleep fitfully and dream of tangible sadness. The men have disappeared when we leave early the next morning.

The next day is relentless, although we manage to get out of the river valley after twelve hours of hiking uphill. That night, many miles away from the cabin, I am filtering water from a quiet lake. The moon is out and I am sitting on a dead tree, gripping the water bottle between my thighs while I push the handle of the filter slowly back and forth. Alone, with the members of my party a quarter mile away, I hear a sharp crack. A loud, muffled thud. And then another branch being splintered. There is something walking out there, across the lake, and it is coming to me.

I stop and listen, my heart beating fretfully, my mind scanning the possibilities. This is a large creature and I recall the enormous and frequent piles of bear scat. This is a bear, I think, but continue filtering after only a moment's pause. The bear makes her way closer and closer to me, but I do not yell or cry out. Exhaustion makes escape impossible. I do not want to draw attention to myself. So I keep filtering the water.

It is only when she is a moving shape in the trees to my right that I stop, stand up, and turn. I cannot see her clearly, while she can most certainly see me. There is a pause, a silence, a moment of perfect clarity while I wait. But she simply watches me for a spell, hushed. An eternity later, perhaps three or four minutes, she is turning on her massive haunches, crushing dry dead branches under her enormous feet, walking slowly away.

I sit back down on the slightly damp log for three quick breaths. Then I begin picking at the sticky knots in my hiking boots. Left boot, right boot. Socks stiff with blood, filthy pants. Damp t-shirt. I stand, naked, and then slip silently into the lake. The water is cooler than my skin, warmer than the air. A brave fish brushes my ankle. I can hear the bear as she becomes a small noise, a pinprick of sound. Calmed, I lean back into the arms of the lake so that I can gape at the moon. Legs slowly scissoring, arms waving as a beauty queen would, I am suspended.

There is only the hum of mosquitoes. The knowledge of the bear. The push of water against my skin. The sweet darkness of an undisturbed place.

The night yawns, and eventually, so do I.

V.

On this particular Saturday, I'm dressed in pants usually reserved for hiking, a fleece that is, as always, covered in cat hair, and a pair of rubber boots usually reserved for milking cows. It's raining just slightly, and I'm standing in

deep stinky mud that will later try to steal my boots several times. In my right hand is my brand new Silva Ranger compass. I'm on Tim and Micheal's team, and we're on the compass field exercise, the one I've been looking forward to all week. Our first position is 65 degrees true; because I've a fancy compass with the declination set to the required 18 degrees in Oregon, I don't, unlike Micheal, have to do any mental math to determine the difference between true and magnetic north. The three of us, two short men and a tall woman (me), dial in our coordinates and head off in three different directions. After watching us incorrectly interpret our compass readings, one of the instructors, a quiet man with a puke-green poncho, follows us around for the remainder of the afternoon. After the first coordinate, we decide which of the many arrows on our compasses we should indeed follow, and then it's hunting flags through mud and cow poop all afternoon. The thick mud tries to claim my boots several times. After the first four instances, my team members stop asking me if I want help; they grow accustomed to seeing me bent over, struggling to free my rubber boot; it probably looks like I'm smiling and laughing at the mud, which, of course, I am. Happiness, in its millions of forms and shapes and sizes, is a pair of rubber boots that threaten to stay behind, even if you're ready to move on.

VI.

At the dog park, Mady runs away from us, but she looks back now and then, especially if she can't tell where we're standing. I call her, and she ignores me, having found a new friend, the schnauzer, the pit bull, the husky.

At the first dog park, the one near Autzen stadium, there were two other dogs named Madeleine, a boxer and a mix with dark, sad eyes. We stood for a moment with these owners and chuckled at the coincidence. The boxer's dad said, "We must all be reading the same books." I smile faintly, and Josh says nothing at all, but he keeps smiling. On our way out, we pass a man who gives another dog owner a poop bag, the latter saying apologetically, "I must have these bags all over the floor, but I keep forgetting to bring them. Thanks."

Shy, Mady poops in the dying grass near the canal after we leave the dog park, and I have a terrible time peeling away one of the conspicuous blue bags that we have permanently attached to her collar, the ones in a miniature garbage pail that says in cheery letters, "Bags on Board!" Having grown up with cats, I find this picking up of the poop distasteful. But Mady is terribly impressed by what I've done, and seems encouraged. She stops every few feet and thrusts her pink and brown nose in the direction of the bag, which I carry in my left hand.

At night, Mady sometimes whimpers, but we keep her in the crate so that there won't be any accidents and so that the cats can more comfortably grow accustomed to this demon in the box. Before the lights go out and I fall to sleep, I

see Dallas or Morigan walk past her cage very cautiously, as if she might explode at any minute. They, of course, do explode if she gets too close too quickly; I've several angry claw marks on both of my thighs, and Mady's nose is sometimes pink from the bloody scratches these cats leave behind. The cats are learning, though. They know she can't see them very well, and that she doesn't always know that they are there. They slink about, just outside of her peripheral vision, and watch her from the second story landing. I don't know if she is aware of being observed, or if she simply doesn't care. She is certainly more interested in the cardboard box that Josh gave her, even though the slobber is starting to break it down.

In the afternoon, just before the sun gets ready to set, we take her to another dog park because she's antsy and wiggly and our home is simply too small for an overly energetic puppy. The second park is hillier than the first, and since it's later in the day, there are fewer dogs and people. Mady takes off again, just inside the fence, and pretends to be an independent dog, without need of an owner. Just after we start down the muddy hill toward the other side of the fence, a man stops to pet her and exclaims as she prances away, "She looks like she's wearing pants!" This man watches her for a moment longer, and then says, "And boots. She looks like she's got on pants and white boots!" Josh and I watch her butt as it moves steadily from us and we agree. Without dismay, we realize that in a few moments both the boots and the pants will be quite dirty. Watching our dog, I recall the beauty of

being dirty and my own love of slogging about in the mud. For me, spending time in the dirt is something like bathing; it's unadulterated nature.

VII.

Getting lost is easy, and I do it all the time. I get lost in the city, any city, even the ones in which I've lived for some time.

I get lost in my house, forgetting and remembering sometimes in the same instant the reason that I walked up the stairs or drifted into the kitchen. The reason for standing in the bedroom. The thing I meant to find in one room or another. The reason for moving, the problem with finding.

I am not impatient with loss, not really. It's me, it's a comfortable part of my personality to forget a lot of what I thought I remembered, and anymore, I just smile when I'm lost.

My husband grows frustrated with me sometimes, especially when I'm supposed to navigate while he is driving. Unlike many hikers like me, I don't read maps any more than I have to, so when faced with a large grid of lines and figures, icons and drawings, I become confused. I don't navigate terribly well, really, which is perhaps just a sign of my comfort with being lost a lot.

The getting lost analogy works so very well with respect to life, although it's only recently, when I'm sitting in front of the computer tapping out words, that I think of it in that way. I've been lost in the woods, in a mall, in the confines of a

dressing room. I've found myself looking for people, items, objects, things. I've found myself looking for me, just around the corner, over there, perhaps to the left. It's a rhetorical question to ask if I find more than I lose. Is there something better about knowing where you are in relation to the rest of the world? Is there something inherently mystical about not always realizing or wanting to know what it means to be found?

Of course it isn't always comfortable, this sense of loss. Of course it makes one nervous to meander and wander too often, too much, but there you are: I am lost more often than I am found, and in this, I find comfort.

So today, I sit in the parking lot of a community college somewhere in Washington state while my husband, the man with whom I've decided to grow old and love, tests for a job in the ugly squat building just ahead of me. I know where he is right now; I can even see his blue shirt and dark hair across the parking lot, through the window. For now, he's found, as am I. That's for now.

VIII.

We go to the Lava Beds National monument, which is a park just outside of Klamath Falls. It's actually in California, which is pleasing to me, as I assumed that our weekend adventure would be an Oregon one; it sounds so much more impressive to say that we traveled all the way to California to go spelunking for the weekend. It's a long trip, six hours, and because we don't leave until I get done

with work, we get there at 2:00 a.m., and while Josh is setting up the tent, I'm wandering around in the campground with a twenty dollar bill clutched tightly in my hands, searching for the pay station. It's terribly cold, and I imagine that my hands are that unattractive reddish-purple color that they used to get when I was in marching band. Of course, while the moon is light enough to render my petzel unnecessary, I cannot tell the color of my sad hands. I spend ten or so minutes wandering about, nearly running into a camper and probably frightening several campers as I blunder through the desert undergrowth, but I am pleased to locate the pay station and its cleverly hidden pencil. After trying to recall the date, writing in a description of Josh's truck in lieu of his unknown license number, I spend a minute with my head tipped back, looking at my quickly-cooling breath as it drifts upward toward the moon. After a time, I wander back again, where we crawl into the tent and talk about quiet things before falling into a blissful, if not cold, sleep.

I wake up early, as I am often wont to do on outdoor adventures, and I am pleased that it is not my demanding bladder (the infamous Morning Pee) that has awakened me. Josh is still sleeping, a small tuft of black hair, and he hardly moves when I shift out of the sleeping bag and out of the tent, but it's only a bit later that he arises to make me peanut butter oatmeal. We can't eat as much as he makes, and so place the remainder of the oatmeal in a plastic bag where a particularly crafty squirrel will take it later that day, one oat at a time.

Then there are the caves, which have made me nervous since we decided to make this trip. I've been to the Oregon Caves, have wandered up and down on that nifty mini-train, but these caves are for real spelunkers, and I wonder vaguely, just before we enter the first of our caves, if I am a closet claustrophobe. I wear a pair of knee and shin guards for hockey players, a yellow bump cap sporting a happy bat that I purchased at the visitor's center, and my petzel, which will be a necessity in the darkness where we intend to tread. We enter a cave called the Golden Dome at 10:00 a.m., and there is a desert sun warming my black fleece, but the moment we walk down the stairs, past Headache Rock, the light is extinguished, the air is wet, and suddenly, we're in a cave.

Josh makes me lead, although I've never been spelunking before, and so I head off into a tunnel to the right wondering again if I am going to like this activity, but realizing at the same time that it's too late to do anything about it. The cave starts out large and grows increasingly smaller, and strangely, so strangely, I like it. I am the one who stops us often to shine one of four flashlights toward the bumpy rocks, over the bits of bacteria that cause the ceiling to look like gold, toward the crevasses and cracks made when the lava slowed down oh so long ago. At one point, we are walking on a stream, albeit one made thousands of years ago, but with ripples and textures so real as to make me think that it is still moving. There is one tunnel so small that I have to lie on my belly, using my toes and fingers to propel myself forward. In another one, we find one of the few signs of life, a spider web,

while much farther back, several twists and turns, there is chamber after chamber decorated with fool's gold. Josh tells me the name of this mineral, but I am more interested in staring at its texture, at the way my pathetic flashlight shines so prettily on this false hope-giver.

My favorite part, though, is about twenty minutes after we've entered the cave, after we've taken enough turns to be lost if we did not vocalize each choice with a "we took a right turn there" or "that was a left," when all lights are extinguished, and we just stand in the dark. Having been a long-time hiker, I have always supposed that I am somewhat of a connoisseur of darkness, but there is nothing at all like the warm (a constant 55 degrees) darkness of the cave. I am not afraid of this blackness, although it is almost so shocking as to cause my eyes to tear. Caves are not entirely silent, although there are few living things in them, and as a result, the blackness feels comforting, so much so that I stand there, listening to Josh breathe, hearing small plinks of water fall from the cave's ceiling to the ground, wondering what it would be like to get lost in such a place, wondering at what point the darkness would be frightening rather than exciting. Josh, however, turns on his light after 10 minutes, and I find my eyes revolting against the light, much like a rebellious teenager or a particularly independent cat. We move on again, taking another left at the corner, but I take that dark moment and tuck it away. It's a keeper.

Chapter 2: The Temple of Language

I.

Says Michael Cunningham's fleshed Virginia Woolf, "one always has a better book in one's mind than one could manage to get to paper," and here I sit before the computer in a house empty of people and full of cats, thinking just the same thing. There's too much promise in the words I might write tonight, and too little reality in the ones that I have written already. Still, I force myself to sit here and type and type and type because I imagine myself a writer, and spend too little time actually trying to write.

Wrapped in a comfortable cloak of excuses, I spend time wondering why I do not write more often; is it exhaustion, or the fact that I write all day long for a living? Is it my *Bartleby*-type life that makes me want to say, "I do not care to," when I come home to my love at night? Impossible to know. Writers love to talk about their craft, as if any one individual can really tell another how to fill up his or her bubble of self so that words spill out everywhere, in rapid succession, and fall in beautiful, poignant sentences. My sentences are not often poignant, I think, unless I'm not thinking too much or I'm in the mood to write. Those days are far between anymore. When I read *The Hours* in a camper on a lake in Alaska, when I read that book all in one furious, hungry gulp, I kept nodding and confirming,

sometimes grunting. I underlined or checked off the more resonant phrases, knowing that I would want to return to them again sometime sooner or later. I found this book infinitely more helpful than many of the essays I've read about writing.

For me, then, writing is terribly personal. It's me, naked, standing stripped of the overly-friendly mask I carefully apply every day. I do not care to hear how to write from anyone else, although I am sure that each writer knows more than any other when it comes to the craft of writing as an individual. Tell me your pain, your joy, give me some stories that circle the issue carefully without ever really saying out loud, and I'll hear you. There's loudness in hearing what is silently stated. I think of my writing instructors, the best ones anyway, as those who took one look at me, the person, and then let me be. Their lessons were not mine; their wisdom was not forced.

Why do I write? Why do I sit in the upstairs room of a small apartment, a room with a litter box, several boxes, an ironing board, and five lamps that are never lit? I could not say, except to suggest that writing is an ache, and that this ache is mine.

II.

My grandmother is dying now, a fact my parents and I discuss with some frequency. It's a quiet conversation, and our heads always seem to bow slightly

under the weight of her impending death, but what can you say about it that will make it come undone? She is dying; we are not yet.

My friends will ask, politely or with genuine interest, after her welfare, and I will tell them that she is good, quickly followed by the fact that she is dying, that her body is giving up, that she won't live for too much longer. What else can you say about it, really? Sometimes I cry about her dying, knowing that she'll be gone eventually, and I'll have to miss her the way that you miss those who have left before you. I act braver than I feel because that's the way people want you to react when someone is dying: strongly, and with courage.

Still, when the time comes, I won't be brave. I will mourn, and loudly. I'll carry handfuls of slightly damp Kleenex with me, and hug my family frequently. I will be filled with the ache of loss, just because I'll miss her, just because I love her.

Three years ago, I found out about my aunt's unexpected death moments before I had to teach an English class. I sobbed heartily at my desk, in the comforting darkness of my office, before pushing back and plodding slowly up the stairs to my classroom. My eyes were red, my nose splotchy, and my face was a tired monument to how grief ages everyone.

I told my students, a particularly boisterous group of kids that term, to be careful. I warned them that my sadness had taken away the patience that is so becoming in an adult, and left behind the tiredness that you often see in a three year

old child. Twenty-five young faces regarded mine silently; they were respectful, quiet. When the class was over, I went back to my office and continued crying, fat slothy tears that leaked continuously over the next week of mourning. I did not care who saw me, who heard my grief. It was my sadness; I carried it alone. But even in the midst of my sadness, I can see that there is something natural to my grandmother's death, that we are both playing the parts given to us at this moment. Some day, I'll die as well. Like water or dirt or moments of joy, death is meant to exist. It's an element of life whether we like to admit it or not.

In the meantime, I tell my grandmother that I love her. I tell her this over and over again. She usually doesn't say anything in return.

III.

In the middle of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, just before the characters get naked and do interesting things with flowers, Lady Chatterley has a conversation with a lesser character whose name I do not remember. (I do, however, remember that she does not sleep with him.) He tells her, in effect, that water should not be so wet, but it is. This statement has little to do with the plot or rising action in the novel, but it's what I think of when contemplating Lawrence. The remark is so true. Water ought not be the blood of life, what sings through our veins, the stuff that transforms dry dirt to sticky mud. But it is. Water is the purest of extremes, perhaps the only thing in this world that manages to achieve it so well.

Annie Dillard is one, the first extremist I read in high school. Sandwiched in a 1700 page anthology in between Orwell and Walker on whisper thin parchment paper, she leaped out from the page, taking hold. I was in awe of the way she grabbed normal words, "weasel," "dry," "bone," "teeth," and, swirling them around, fashioned a stick of words. Bigger than a Big Stick and more negotiable than a backhoe, Dillard slapped me right across the sensibility, leaving a lasting welt. It's been eleven years and I still have that welt. At fifteen, I was young and stupid, so it took me some time before I realized what had happened. Now that I am older and stupid, I see what Dillard does with her words. She exhibits, thrusts, pulls, yanks, cajoles. She moves me, and does it by pure excess. It's a gift and she knows it. Using words to club your reader is not an unconscious act any more than screaming is a quiet one. I read her essays, that one in particular, when I feel I need a shove.

The next on my list is the platypus. I truly love the look of the platypus, with her webbed feet, billed mouth, oily coat, and flat tail. It's a ridiculous look according to the rules for all the other mammals, but I believe this creature wears that suit just right. Perfectly. The platypus' bill is covered with a soft skin and is sensitive to the touch. The webbing on the forefeet is perfect for swimming underwater and folds up, fan-like, for digging on land. The best of this creature is really that she lays eggs, like a reptile. Platypuses are mammals, you recall, but they don't follow the rules for the rest of us milk-bearing types. I imagine God

picking and choosing among the different evolving traits, as if shopping. Yes, let's have a hairy mammal, but one that lays eggs. Yes, let's have the sex organs reminiscent of reptiles, but include a flat tail. Yes, let's have a bird beak, but a soft one. And the animal is a success, of course. Evolution is the best measure of victory as far as physical characteristics are concerned. Platypuses are extremists, no doubt, and have been for 135 million years. Too much of this and too little of that makes for an odd creature with a penchant for survival. If I weren't already human, I'd choose to be a platypus.

The last on my Short List of Successful Extremists is not an animal. It's in dreams. Or rather the dreams themselves. I could talk about the wonders of the human brain if I had stayed awake during my college psychology courses, but I don't contemplate my brain after a long night's sleep. I focus on my dreams. Sometimes it is clear where these disproportionate night visions come from, such as when I am surrounded by endless stacks of horribly written student essays. Other times, I am baffled both in and out of the dream. In one nightmare, I stood in a house with slick green walls and a sighing frame. It was the kind of house I imagine in Louisiana. My lover was there, holding an alien creature in his hand. Suddenly, he took out a big knife, splitting the creature open, peeling away the bumpy red skin, pulling out a disgusting white thing. He held it out to me and said, "This is what they make clam chowder out of." Maybe that's a dream about my

fear of the chewy nature of those suspicious pieces of clam lurking in my soup, or maybe it meant nothing at all. Either way, I can't eat clam chowder anymore.

But water. Water is really the only thing in this world that manages to be a million different things at once. The singer in the stream, the ocean, the tap water becoming tea, the rain that bathes the sidewalks and streets. Water is polluted and protected, revered and ignored, hushed and cacophonous. It's everything that we see or even imagine. Water is the air that we pull in and out thoughtlessly. It even washed the computer chips that make these words appear as I type. Usually, I ignore water except when it sneaks into my shoe from a puddle or fails to come out of the tap as directed. But there is one time when I worship water. There is one time when I am thinking and living with its elemental success.

This communion occurs while standing in an unpolluted stream in the middle of nowhere, taking a bath. I bathe on every hiking trip, no matter the temperature or weather. I stand naked in the middle of what used to be snow and, without soap, wash away sweat, dirt, bad days, and sadness. My feet turn red, as does the rest of my body, but I keep bathing. My scalp aches, my skin puckers, and feeling starts drifting from the furthest of my appendages. And I am joyful. The other hikers, my friends, always laugh at me because they suspect a bit of insanity in anyone who chooses to stand in freezing cold water. But they do not understand. My baths are not really about washing or cleaning. They are a brief epiphany about living, made all the more powerful by the frigidity of the water. I never feel so

clean and complete as after a bath in the middle of the woods. I can't contain that feeling with words. Even if there were a way to explain my baths, I would not share it with you. All I can say with any certainty is that Lawrence had it right.

The rest of us are only swimmers.

IV.

She does not always say I love you when I tell her that, even though I end every phone conversation with the phrase, even though every card, thank you note, and letter concludes the same way. It's true, I love her, and I wonder always why she doesn't always return the sentiment, why sometimes, and not others?

After the heart attack, when she's lying pale and wane in the dwarfing hospital bed, she's pretty free with her love, as I am. That's expected; near-death always makes us want to profess love to those around us, as if saying it will stave off the inevitable, and make the pain of our passing any better at all. But now, over a month hence, when she's still living and still dying, she won't always say it, and I can't make her, and I won't ask her why, either.

There's a lot that I would like to say to my grandmother, this amazing 91 year old woman with white hair and all of her own teeth. I want to ask her about the Way it Was, but she doesn't always like talking about the past, except sometimes when her fancy is struck by something or another. Sadly, we don't ask enough questions early on, and eventually, it is too late.

I visit her, after work, blurry from hours of working and driving. We sit, her in a bathrobe with a hissing oxygen mask shoved up her tiny nostrils, me in some sort of outfit that resembles professionalism. I sit for a spell, never too long of course, and we talk. Last time we talked about her grandfather's immigration from Germany. We looked at the old letter, written in German, and commented over the stern faces in the family portraits. It was a good talk. I listened, and asked questions, and even managed to get her to eat.

When I left, though, she was tired already, and I can see that she's tired of living, even if we're not ready to have her go. My family is open enough to recognize and talk about it, but we don't talk about it with her, except circuitously. We talk about her funeral arrangements, but not how the fact of her dying makes her feel. It seems odd, dying this way.

Three years ago, my father and I went on a holiday. We rented a house in Sunriver. We rode bikes and hiked. We talked about all manner of things, and then happened upon a television show about death and dying on OPB. The show was beautiful; even I could see that through the cloud of tears that I leaked the entire time. It was something else; I felt my sense of the world shift, just slightly. After it was over, my father and I talked about our dying, what we want to have happen when it's our own time, and I cried some more.

With my grandmother, however, I am quiet. My eyes are dry, mostly. When we talk, we discuss people who are already dead, and we talk about them in the present tense.

V.

This morning, over a cup of my mother's delightfully strong and rich coffee, my father approaches me with the *Eugene Register-Guard*. Without a word, he points out three pictures: one of a soldier holding a (presumed dead?) little girl; another of a screaming child, whose eye is bleeding from a wound inflicted, no doubt, by American activities in Iraq; a man who is holding his daughter, having learned that his wife, his daughter's mother, is dead in what the newspaper calls "crossfire." I do not read the newspaper anymore; I do not watch television, so when my dad comes to me with this pictorial commentary, I am transfixed, especially by the picture of the soldier holding the little girl. Her feet, I notice, are much smaller than one of my hands, and there is an uncomfortable amount of blood on the arm of her formerly pink sweater. I stare at the picture for a very long time; I won't ever be able to forget it. If I were able to cry more than every six months, there would be tears running down my face. After five minutes, I put the paper face down on the coffee table, and take another sip of coffee. Inside, there is my own war.

Yesterday was a warm day, so I had my windows open and could hear my neighbors talking about the war while they smoked cigarette after cigarette. The tall man who lives two apartments down with his stepdaughter and wife murmurs something about the war, and the other man, the one across the parking lot with three very tall mentally retarded sons, says that we “need to kill them all.” The suicide bomber, the one who killed four American soldiers, precipitates the conversation. I listen to the words, which are made indistinct by the rise and fall of the wind through the trees, and then I get up from the couch and move to the back of my house. Their voices, while still present, do not carry so well, and what they say to each other is nothing I haven’t heard before.

At my weekly search and rescue class, there are two former military men. When I come into class this last evening, they are discussing the protestors, the ones who stand outside the Benton County Courthouse with signs and flags bearing the insignia of peace. The loud one, who often discusses with pleasure the differences between various kinds of guns and the joy of killing animals, makes loud and disparaging remarks about these protestors. They comment on the “stupidity” of these people; they comment on the audacity of anyone who does not believe in the power of war. The other one does not make an overt comment, but they are clearly disgusted by the prospect of peace. Tired, and realizing the futility of engaging these men in a discussion, I say nothing. But if they looked at my face, which they do not, they would see my own frustration with their words. If I

weren't in class that night, learning how to treat hypothermia, I'd stand out there as well. As it is, I wave encouragingly at the protestors on my way home. To my right, in his Japanese car, I see one of the pro war men from class. He's staring at the protestors and shaking his head as if to the beat of some private rhythm.

Over a beer, one of my new friends tells me that he was impressed by the recent images of the war. He says, "they," presumably the media, "have taken some really good pictures." I don't know this man well, don't know what he means by "good," so I question him. I ask, "Good pictures of war propaganda, or good anti-war photos?" He stares at me for three beats, takes a sip of his dark micro-brew, and says, with some trepidation, "good pro-war pictures." Because he does not use the word propaganda, I see that he is in support of the war, so I move the conversation in a new direction. That's the extent of our discourse about this war; our opinions are outlined in three sentences, my choice to use the word propaganda, and his decision not to.

I remember the day the last war started; I was on my way to my clarinet lesson, on my way to sit in a small shack and struggle through various finger-twisting exercises. This time, what I'll remember about the war is the sadness. This time, I was at work when the war started, and the air there was heavy. My boss, a sensitive woman with kind eyes and an almost tangible sense of goodness, sits with me for a spell. We talk about tension, the sorrow, the ache that throbs through the sterile office building. Some people talk about it; some people do not,

but it's there, surrounding every single person. War is ether. It fills me unpleasantly, quietly, surreptitiously. Some days I do not have the words to contain it. Some days, there is nothing but silence.

VI.

I learned about language from a beekeeper. I recall my uncle's farm, trailing after him in too-large protective gear, carrying the smoke pot, watching the bees with fascination, listening to their endless hum. My uncle told me that the bees were talking to one another without words. He'd place a shallow bowl of sugar water across the field from the hives and then we'd sit back and watch the bees come. If I remained still, he would remove the top layer of the hive and let me watch the bees dance. That's talking, he'd say. And after an indeterminable amount of time, the bees would exit the hive all at once, lighting down on the sugar water so far from the hive, as if by magic, their hum still audible from a distance.

Until the late 1960s, humans were set apart from non-human animals by the ability to create and use tools. Then Jane Goodall in her infinite patience as an observer of chimpanzees discovered that non-human primates also make tools. The ramifications of this discovery were huge; what is it then that separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom? Language, one of the supposed distinguishing features between humans and animals, was opened to debate after

the loss of our beloved ability to make and use tools. The question revolves around whether or not *Homo sapiens* are the only animals in possession of true language.

Few linguists or scientists would debate the fact that animals communicate with one another. It is whether or not animals possess the fundamentals of true language that creates problems. The scientific community has accepted that humans and animals differ according to rational thought for a long time. For instance, Aristotle's model in *De Anima* differentiated between humans and animals according to Plato's definition of the soul. Said Aristotle, "Now it is clear that perception and intelligence are not the same thing. For all animals share in the one, but only a few in the other. And when we come to thinking . . . neither is this identical with perception." Thus humans have both a rational and "animalistic" soul, which are kept separate from one another, while animals possess only the latter. The Aristotelian model, when applied to language, suggests that humans possess an innate capacity for language that is lacking from animals. While Aristotle's definition of animals and humans is based upon a mythological foundation, it is clear that the idea of difference between humans and animals still exists today. Both "hard" and "soft" sciences view humans as capable of real language. Humans define language in such a way as to prevent any possibility of encroachment by animals, despite the fact that the difference between human language and animal communication has become increasingly ambiguous.

So how does the definition of language perpetuate the idea that animals cannot “speak”? According to Noam Chomsky in *Syntactic Structures*, all language possesses certain inherent structures, and these structures can be used to understand that given language. For Chomsky, language is a set of ordered structures presumed to exist only in human communication. But there’s the problem with this definition. When we define something, we construct it; even Chomsky admits that. And is not the act of defining language simply a way to expel animals from having the possibility of rational thought? The current definition of language reifies Aristotle’s view: humans possess an innate capacity for language and animals do not. Thus, says Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, “it is also assumed that none of these formal mechanisms that are said to underlie thinking are present in any species other than humans.” Animals don’t have our language, our sense of the world, our constructions. Animals do not talk.

The exclusion of animals, specifically non-human primates, from the world of true language relates to what Roger Fouts calls “divine trauma,” or the realization that humans are not the center of the universe. Copernicus’s discovery that the sun does not revolve around the earth is similar to the notion that humans are not the only creatures capable of rational, unlimited thought. I’ve watched a chimpanzee break off a blade of grass, pick a hole in a termite mound, insert the grass to withdraw the prize, and I see that linguistics, too, falls under the guise of exclusionary definitions. We define ourselves in terms of abilities that animals

don't possess. The human capacity for language rests not so much upon cognitive ability as on the way in which language is defined to exclude all other species. For if humans are not the only ones who speak, then what is the difference between animals and humans?

Why do humans feel the need to create impossibly narrow definitions that delineate humans from non-humans? The destruction of the planet by humans, including flora and fauna, provides an interesting response to the reasoning behind the lesser status of animals. Eric Linden says that "[o]ur notions of human nature and language are not just dry textbook ideas; they are our excuse for plundering the planet." Cutting up animals to create pills or perfume is not cruel because animals are not aware or are not conscious of life in the same way as humans. Because an animal cannot form what Chomsky calls a "syntactically structured thought," that creature cannot possess higher intellect or true emotions. Darwin, in his book *The Expression of Emotions in Animals and Man*, tries to determine whether or not animals emote. And while many of his observations seemed to support that idea, the book was largely ignored. Humans, at that time and to the present day, find discomfort in the notion that animals possess an intellect capable of producing genuine emotion. "No doubt as long as man and all other animals are viewed as independent creatures," said Darwin, "an effectual stop is put to our natural desire to investigate as far as possible the causes of expression." Darwin's examination of the relationship between human and animal emotions was dismissed by those who,

in his words, “wished to draw as broad a distinction as possible between man and the lower animals.” Dismissing true emotion in animals is analogous to the way in which linguists dismiss the idea that animals possess language. Thus the exclusive definition of language not only separates humans from animals; it serves as a justification for the spread of civilization at the expense of all other forms of life. We take what is ours; we do not hesitate to ponder the significance of our actions.

Until humans began attempting to teach language to animals, the debate about the difference between human and animal linguistic capabilities was a philosophical one. The catalyst for the debate surrounding animals and language resulted from such non-human primates as Washoe. Washoe, a yearling chimpanzee captured from Africa, came to live with Allen and Beatrice Gardner in 1966. This was not the first experiment involving chimpanzees and language, but is considered the first in which an animal was taught language. Washoe was raised in a human environment with human parents and taught American Sign Language. After three years, Washoe demonstrated knowledge of eighty-five signs and used at least three or more in combinations. Despite her apparent success, Washoe’s linguistic abilities came under heavy scrutiny. She did not seem to comprehend when others signed to her, she tended to repeat signs unnecessarily, and did not learn new signs unless she was taught them. She wasn’t human, of course, and the debate wasn’t ever resolved.

It was a different story with Kanzi, a bonobo (*P. paniscus*) or pygmy chimpanzee. Kanzi's adopted mother was taught a system of lexigrams or symbols. While her success was minimal, Kanzi learned language by simply spending time with his mother during her lessons. He recognized signs that his mother had been unable to comprehend after two years of intensive learning. The significance was immediately apparent; here was an animal who had learned language of his own free will. Savage-Rumbaugh immediately changed Kanzi's lessons so that he now controlled his own learning environment. Prior to his introduction, trainers made anthropocentric-based assumptions about his abilities. That is, each lesson was based on a set of preconceived notions about what he or she could actually understand. He was the one who exerted some degree of control over his learning environment. Apparently, an animal that is given more freedom over his or her environment excels with respect to language.

Historically, humans have been defined as rational creatures in possession of an intellect not found anywhere else in the animal kingdom. Humans have built an identity that is ultimately, irretrievably exclusive. Even as animals are discovered to possess more attributes formerly considered human, definitions are restructured so that the current hierarchy is maintained, and clearly the current definition of language is impossibly narrow. The naturalist in the field may assume that she understands the series of calls of a wild bird, but the meaning is still nothing more than an educated guess. She does not speak the language of the bird,

if it is a language after all. And teaching the English language to animals presents a similar problem; humans do not know what an animal really thinks. I've debated this issue with friends. I've sat with a glass of wine in a finely decorated home, and tossed back and forth the idea that animals understand, that they are more than pets, that there is something here, right in front of us, that we do not understand. I've talked and listened, listened and talked. But when it comes down to it, the thing that makes me sure is my own sense of fallibility, the knowledge of my own unending ignorance. I don't know if they speak; I don't know if they do not speak. I talk to my three cats and one dog, though, and I talk to them every day, as if they understand, which I personally think they do. The linguists can argue, the animal behaviorists can lobby, but when it comes down to it, I'd rather walk away from our elaborately-built temple of language, the one that welcomes only humans. I'd rather wonder. Perhaps it isn't ours to know.

Chapter 3: Inside

I.

In January, we move to a town called Soldotna, which most people have a terrible time pronouncing and spelling. It isn't the easiest word, although by the time we move there, I've got the spelling right. According to the Kenai Historical Association, the word Soldotna comes from the Dena'ina Native word for trickling creek: ts'eldat'nu, although the book I've been reading confesses that by the time settlers came to claim the area in 1946, there weren't any natives left, just a butchered word left behind.

Nestled between Soldotna Creek and the Kenai River, the town was a Mecca for gold-seeking homesteaders, who came to the area in droves in 1947. World War II veterans took advantage of their exemption from the one-eighth cultivation requirements. After seven months in a livable structure, they could claim the land as their own, and many did just that. A lot of these homesteaders set up along the Sterling Highway, Kenai Highway, or the Kenai River, and very little has changed in that respect; I drive the Sterling highway and Kenai highway, called "the Spur," daily. Both highways overlook huge mountains, which I take notice of each clear day.

Today, Soldotna, called "Slowdotna" by those who have lived here before, is a town of varying population, depending on the source. I've seen the population

listed as anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 people, although I think it's closer to the latter, given the number of people I see in town. There's a Safeway and Fred Meyer, both of which are always busy. My husband tells me that this is due to the fact that people from all the outlying areas have to come into Soldotna to get their supplies. Regardless, I fear the ice covered parking lots, especially given that the drivers rarely slow down for pedestrians. I'm still getting over the fact that there are so many people in these stores. I supposed that I would never again see a queue when I moved to a small town, but the lines here are worse than either Eugene or Corvallis. I like the town, though, aside from the traffic and the long lines.

Because of the cold, a lot of people leave their cars running when they go into a store or restaurant. My husband and I are still shocked by the sight of a parking lot full of running cars. The most amazing part is that no one steals these cars, ripe as they are for mischief and thievery. We've only kept our car running once or twice, and still we locked the doors. It's too much to keep the car running with the doors unlocked. I am not sure if we'll ever get to the point where we can leave things open, although I did take a walk the other day, and purposefully left my keys on the table, the front door unlocked.

People drive terribly here in Alaska, which my husband explains away as a result of many people not being used to driving in traffic. It's almost impressive the way that people simply dart out in front of me, or follow so closely behind that

I can almost see the color of their eyes. It's odd, the drivers, but we've increased the amount of insurance that we have. I expect that I'll get into at least one car accident, but hopefully not with a moose.

According to the sign on the way out of town, 267 moose have been killed by cars this year, and that is only along the Kenai Peninsula. The Peninsula includes Soldotna, its larger but less attractive cousin Kenai, and the even smaller town of Sterling, and a lot of land that belongs pretty much only to the moose and caribou. It's an area well known for its bountiful supply of salmon and other fish. From what people tell me, the town triples in size during the summer, and turning left becomes nearly impossible because of all the traffic. I'm hoping to stay out of the car during the summer, although given that we live six miles from town, I'm not sure if that is a realistic goal.

Wildlife here is truly wild, although there's the anachronistic feeling of seeing a huge moose lunching in the Safeway parking lot, or a herd of mountain goats making use of a recently plowed rest stop along the highway. I've lived my whole life in appreciation of all things wild, but this is unlike anything I have yet experienced. The Alaskan moose are the largest of their species, and have little to fear other than the occasional wolf or bear, and of course the influx of people. Even now, in the depth of winter, the forest outside our house prickles with life any moment; I can feel and sense that I'm not alone whenever I go outside. I'm trying to get used to this feeling of sharing "my" home space with so many enormous,

powerful creatures, but the hair on the back of my neck still prickles sometimes, and I anticipate the spring, the awakening of the bears. To assuage my fears, I read books about bears, fill my head with facts instead of fears, and prepare myself for what is an inevitable meeting.

In the Kenai, which is what locals call the peninsula as opposed to the town of Kenai, which is stated without any article in front of it, people give directions by landmarks. I like this method, as it's how I've always tried to find my way. My husband, a firefighter and paramedic, does not care for it, as he has to go on calls where locations are "the log house behind Pizza Boys." When we drive around, he stares at buildings and streets; he's learning this town for the sake of someone's life. Even the phonebook leaves out addresses. It's only the rare building, usually new ones, that have an address attached to them. Papa Murphy's, for example, lists their location as "next to Wells Fargo." The building where I take Mady for obedience class is listed at mile 15 of the Spur highway, although you can't see mile markers because of the snow. The cross-country ski trails we were trying to find yesterday were "near the sports center," according to the nice gentleman at the wilderness outfitting shop. We spend a lot of time looking for places, and we're getting used to not finding them. I suppose that we'll be able to find things after we've become acquainted with the shops and stores in the area. Until then, we make illegal u-turns, use parking lots to turn around, pay attention to the proximity

of one building to another. One of us is always watching the landscape, as if that will prevent us from getting lost here in the brutal wildness of Alaska.

II.

When I take the dog out at 3:00 a.m., it's snowing. The snow comes in sideways, and with force, a sudden snowstorm that blows the hair from my face and sends tendrils of cold down my boots. I can see that it's going to be a disgruntled sort of Alaskan day.

Later, after it gets light at 9:00 a.m., which is, according to the soft-spoken woman on Alaskan Public Radio, an additional four minutes of daylight over yesterday, it's raining. I can hardly believe that it is rain, and so stand outside for several minutes to watch the drops fall onto the now-slushy snow pack. When I come back inside, I can hear the drops, hear the distinctive zipping sound as the snow falls in great sheaths from the metal roof, the sound of snow hitting snow. It's a sound I know now, but it startled me the first few times I heard it. The rain is the first I've heard since moving here from Oregon, and it relaxes and delights me in equal measure. I find it odd to have such warm weather in February. When it freezes again, which it will, everything will sparkle with ice crystals, and I'll fall down more than I usually do. Still, it's rain, and I enjoy it. Mady's hair curls, and so does mine. We watch the rain from the window, listen to it from the log cabin, enjoy the sound of transformation. Listening to the rain, I remember to be

comforted by the softened water, by the unwavering attention of nature. I am bathed by the sound.

III.

My favorite night in Alaska is the one next to Johnson Lake, just outside of Kasilof, a town so small you really mustn't blink, a town we'll live just outside of in three short months. There's no one in the camping ground that we choose, not surprising in the early cold of Alaska's September, and we pick a site very close to the small lake. I want to watch the lake through the windows of the aging camper.

Since the camper leaks, we put the tarp on; we misinterpret the dark clouds and forceful wind as a sign of impending rain. It never rains, although we have to get out twice that evening to affix a few more bungee cords here and there, slightly nervous that the wind, that very strong wind, will simply take that tarp and cause it to sail away.

I'm reading *The Hours*, a book so delicious as to cause me to mark many pages and occasionally grunt with pleasure over a particularly beautiful passage. Josh is reading a book called *Passage to Juneau*, which he seems to enjoy. Since we're in love, since this is our long-awaited honeymoon, we look over at one another ever so often and smile. I love this man, the book that I will start and finish by that lake, the wind that alternates between howling and crying, the moment. I love this moment.

After awhile, we eat dinner, which warms the camper, and tastes unreasonably good. We start reading again, take a few more photos of the lake, and spend time enjoying the newness of our marriage. Josh eventually takes a photo of me, and when I see it, two weeks later, my nose is red, my eyes are slightly watery from the cold, and I'm gripping my book with obvious force. I'm joyful, content, filled.

IV.

He has to wear a radio all the time; the fire station gave him two, one of which is quite small, about the size of a piece of toast. He wears that one on his belt everywhere we go.

At first, I'm disconcerted at the voices that come from the radio, slightly embarrassed when we're standing in the grocery store, or talking with the insurance agent; the radio comes on at inconvenient times. There's the noon and evening tone tests, which consists of an unpleasant but mercifully short squawking. Then there's the reason for the radio: fires and injuries. I can't see if there is a rhyme or reason to the frequency and number of calls, although the weekends seem busier, the nights more prone to accidents.

Yesterday we were sleeping when a large fire broke out on K-Beach road. Two-story house, fully consumed. The dispatcher, a woman, said that there were flames coming out of the roof. They didn't know if everyone was out. Although I

was quite tired, I couldn't sleep anymore. I just had to lie there in bed and listen to the increasingly frequent radio calls. The ones from the different fire engines as they prepared to extinguish the blaze. The troopers called to alleviate the problems with traffic. The difficult time trying to find the house. The fill station at Arby's. The medics on stand-by. We sat in bed and listened to the calls, and I wondered if he'd get called back in on a company seven. That's when they recall the previous night's shift to help out. For an hour the radio clicked and cawed, whispered and shouted. I could hear that scream of the sirens in the background of the radio calls, and then heard them again when they passed our house.

Slowly, however, the radio fell silent. There were a number of 10-23s, which, as my husband explained, means that the engines are returning to the station. Eventually, a strong male voice called dispatch and said that the fire was under control. And then everything went pretty much quiet.

I, however, was awash with the sounds of this emergency, one that I would not have known existed but for Josh's radio. It dawned on me then that my marriage was a ticket into a formerly unknown world of caring for strangers, of risking life because that is one's job. When I heard the first descriptions of the World Trade Center bombings, I cried for the suffering of innocents. Now, however, I am differently connected: I am married to a would-be hero, a man who willingly goes into the fray. I am married to a firefighter. Now when the radio comes alive, I am pricked. I sit, quietly, and I listen. And although I don't tell him,

I worry. None of the other wives admit to their worry either. That's our burden to carry, I suppose, and some days it feels heavy.

V.

The Yukon sounds much more exotic than it is, although honestly I'm not sure what to expect anyway. If I weren't navigating in between driving, I wouldn't probably have noticed that we'd left British Columbia. The landscape certainly does not know the difference.

It's quite beautiful in a rough sort of way, something like an older woman who was never pretty in the traditional sense finding beauty through the passage of time; the land here is assured of itself and of my place in it. I do not have a place in it, not here, not ever. This land belongs to itself, and I can even taste that on the air when we stop the car to let the dog out, or when I'm standing at a forlorn gas pump, watching my money click away. The air is terribly, brutally cold, and makes everything from the moisture in my eyes to the front of my teeth ache; it is the kind of cold that recalls Frost's "Fire and Ice." Standing at one rest stop, pleading with the dog to urinate so that we can return to the warmth of the car, I think about death. Cold death, the anesthesia of freezing, and picture ice crystals forming in my veins. Mady must be thinking something similar, for she finishes her business post haste, and hurries back toward the purring Subaru, pulling me along with her.

Watson Lake is the town we've chosen as our destination from Fort St. John, but it isn't listed in the AAA book, and the *Milepost* has but a few sparse paragraphs about this town. I honestly can't recall if there is even a lake in this town, although it would not matter. By the time we get to Watson Lake, it's quite late, and the town is completely wrapped from both itself and the outside world by equal measures of fog and darkness. I'm driving then, my turn, and feel a distinct sense of discomfort at the prospect of having to stay here; the town looks familiar, but only because I've seen too many horror movies; this town really should host the next slasher film.

From what we can tell, and we do not try to investigate, the town cropped up along the Al-Can, and is probably less than a mile long all together. Running parallel along the highway on either side are small access roads to presumed businesses and houses. Josh and I are hoping for a cheery hotel with a bustling restaurant, but see only dark houses with inherent shadows and several dark side streets. The town looks dead, and the impression is not helped by the first hotel we visit, the one that is "closed for the seson [sic]." There's another one just down the road, but we both agree that we won't stay there, that there must be something else. Something else is the first motel we passed on our way into town, the one called Rustic Cabins. Part of the neon sign is missing, and I'm feeling less and less certain about this place, but we've no other choices: it is sixty below zero, past midnight, and the next town is over ten hours away.

There are four banks of cabins and one large house; I try the latter first. And although I hear the sounds of construction, nails and saws, no one answers the door. When I finally notice the note on the door, I've already knocked several times. "Managers in cabin 4." Off I go to this cabin, wishing that I'd put on my gloves. My hands are aching already. I pass Josh on the way; he's outside trying to get Mady to go to the bathroom, something she ends up doing in the hotel room because it's too cold outside.

Cabin four looks promising, if only because there is the unmistakable flicker of a television set, and the sounds of movement from within when I knock on the door. Standing two steps down, the door swings open, rushing out to meet the brutally cold air, which immediately turns the warmth of the cabin into a veil of steam. From within the steam comes a short man wearing brown coveralls and large snow boots. I think I remember to smile at him, although I can't say for sure if I do. My face is so cold that any movement hurts, and the transaction begins after I tell him that we want a room for the night. They've only one, he tells me kindly in an accent I haven't heard since I left Minnesota seven years ago. It's the one right next to theirs, he says, and gets the key from the peg next to the door so that I can see what I'm getting. He's kind, and asks me polite questions back at the house, where two interested workmen stare at me from a mostly skeletal kitchen and ask me cagily about the purpose of my visit.

The room is as we expected; two small beds with dirty turquoise bedspreads that haven't seen water and soap in far too long, a suspicious bathroom, and a threadbare chair in the corner. It's ugly, depressing, and I find myself suddenly worried that the house we've rented in Alaska, the one we have yet to see, will be just like this cabin; the perfect place for a suicide. Josh unloads the car while I stand in the room, not really wanting to touch anything. Madeleine senses my disquietude and begins pulling on the chair and barking despite my pleading. One forgets in these moments that dogs don't understand much English, but Mady reminds me, as she is wont to do.

Josh and I don't want to lie in the bed, which is covered with too many wispy strands of white hair, but we're tired, so tired, and so we lie down in the narrow bed. We lie down in shifts, though, because Mady continues her temper tantrum far into the night. At some point I sleep. I dream of things uncomfortable and silent, and wake up well before it is light.

We leave early, much earlier than we will from any of the other six hotel rooms that will hold our dreams while we drive from Oregon to Alaska in the brutish cold of January. I give Mady a short walk outside of the cabin, but her feet freeze quickly. She does an odd dance of sorts, shifting her weight from one frozen paw to the next. I end up carrying her back to the car. Mady weighs thirty-five pounds, but on this morning, she feels light, much lighter than she will ever feel again. She does not complain about getting back in the car, and the three of us are

silent until Watson Lake is far behind us. The day is unreasonably beautiful, we see two large caribou, and listen to the rest of *The Hobbit*. These miles put between us and the town feel important, necessary. I find myself thrilled by the thought of our leaving, one of the first times during our adventure to Alaska that I realize how much I am stretched by our journey. Despite its spot on the map, Watson Lake is too lost, too dark. It's a boundary, and the one just beyond what is comfortable.

VI.

Mady has been hearing them for weeks. She will stand on the supposedly forbidden couch and bark at the window. She'll bark loudly, and with meaning, but no matter how many times I look outside, there's nothing there. She stops barking eventually and I drift into another part of house, the unseen creature forgotten.

I see their footprints in the snow, and start watching for them when I take Mady outside to do her business. Some days there will be new footprints crossing right over my own, and I feel a mild thrill to know that a moose came by after I was last standing outside in the cold with my dog. Surprisingly small cloven hoofs gracefully defacing my own uninteresting boot prints and those of my fluffy dog.

In obedience class, they talk about moose as if they are talking about the price of gas or the state of the weather. Some people recount stories of moose who have stomped dogs to death, and one woman even tells of a human fatality. I'm

more moved by the dogs that are killed by the moose, but I arrange my face into an appropriate expression of empathy. I wonder how my dog will fare, if she'll know enough to be scared of the moose, if she'll run away as she is supposed to do.

Today, however, when Mady begins her relentless chorus of barking there is something. A huge female moose with a waddle hanging from her neck stands near a fallen aspen in our comfortably large driveway. She's eating from the dead branches. She is enormous, one of the most beautiful things that I have ever seen. Standing over eight feet tall, the Very Large Female Moose is preternaturally calm, seemingly unaware of my presence. She is a mixture of different shades of brown, with a thick dark coat and huge ears. Her ears, I notice, are ringed in light brown and swivel back and forth just like the huge satellite dishes I see standing in nearly everyone's yard here in Alaska. The moose has beautiful eyes, and that feature more than any other catches my attention. She has the eyes of a deer but with a flash of amber in them. When she moves, I can see her long, lanky legs, those of a teenage girl only graceful. What legs, what eyes.

Mady is outside, tied to the house with a retractable leash, and I can see by her body language that she is scared, but that she will protect me from the creature that is probably more than ten times her size. She gives a small jump with each bark, the fur on her back waving back and forth as she moves, trying to get closer to the moose. After a time, the moose makes a move toward her, a half-hearted lunge, but I am already outside, reeling her in like a huge hairy fish, amazed to be

standing so close to so enormous an animal. Mady does not let up, and would she have been free, I have no doubt that the moose would have killed her. I intervene, though, bring her back inside, and so all the moose does is walk calmly in front of the house, pausing on the deck, framed perfectly by the window in the front door. I take a picture.

All this while, Mady is barking lustily, with real anger, and her barks reverberate from the top of this gabled log cabin. It sounds like there is more than one dog here, although it's just me, three hiding cats, an angry dog, a moose. The moose, however, just keeps eating the tree. She is aware of our presence, but does not seem to care. Her jaws move thoughtfully from side to side, crushing, chewing.

Eventually, she moves away, having had her fill of the tree and of us; this is our first encounter, but not our last. I like to think that she has stopped by for a visit, that she came through the driveway because he wants to meet the new neighbors. She's a good neighbor, I have to say, even if she does leave huge swaths of frozen urine and impressive mounds of pebble-like feces in the snow. Mady doesn't agree, and she listens for her more often now, knows what she is hearing. She shoves her nose into the moose's footprints, smells her. She knows her better than I do already, than I ever will, having already decided that it is necessary to hate her for our sake. Unlike my beloved dog, I cannot smell her trail, although the picture I took of her that day turned out beautifully. I'll frame it, put it next to the door while I watch for her, ever hopeful.

VII.

Mady and I are enrolled in agility class through the Peninsula Dog Obedience Group, which meets in a large room attached to the Richards Veterinary Clinic. It's a 15 minute drive from the house. I heard about the class through our obedience class, which ended a week ago. This class is run by a short woman with small, round glasses. She's a nice lady, although her voice jumps up three octaves when she talks to the dogs.

There are nine other dogs in the class: a lab/pit bull mix named Dixie, a chocolate lab whose name escapes me, a German Malinwa named Bailey, a Great Dane named Jaja, a small yipper dog named Grizz, a blonde cocker spaniel named Aly (even though he is a boy), and a Newfoundland named Moe. Mady is a Bearded Collie, a Beardie. Aside from one 13 year old boy, most of the owners are married women in their late thirties or early forties. I feel sorry for the boy, as he is an awkward creature anyway; spending an hour and a half with a group of grown women must be odd for him. I talk to him whenever we are next to each other in line.

Agility involves putting the dogs through various obstacles. There is the weave, which is a series of poles through which the dogs are to run. The tunnel, which looks like a child's toy. There is a jump and a teeter, although we haven't started working on the teeter yet. A lot of what makes this class difficult is that

each owner has to teach her dog what to do, and many of the activities aren't at all natural. The tunnel, for instance, is illogical. When I put Mady in it and run to the other side, I can see her thinking, "why go through the tunnel when I can follow you around the outside of it?" Apparently, however, agile dogs don't question. Mady is patient with me and my strange requests; she goes through the tunnel, she jumps over the small fence. She eats the treats that the helpers give her. And then she does it again.

Because there are so many dogs and so few obstacles, much of class involves trying to keep one's dog from smelling or fighting with the other dogs. The room in which we work is fairly small, so there isn't much room. Ten women with their ten dogs and four or five helpers makes for a noisy hour. Sometimes I just stand back and watch the others, listening to them bark out commands to their overly-excited dogs, rewarding them with bits of cheese from hidden pockets, enjoying a surreptitious pat or snuggle for a job well done.

I've started bringing water for Mady to drink. The cheese is salty and makes her thirsty. After the first class when Moe decimated the supply of water (Newfoundlands are huge), I leave the water dish out for all the dogs to share. It's something Mady likes anyway, and the owners seem to appreciate this. I like to see them drink from the water while Mady and I wait our turn across the room, crammed in a corner near the boxes of cat litter used to keep the parking lot ice free. By the time we get back around the room to the water dish, it's usually

empty. Neither Mady nor I mind, of course. I fill it in the small bathroom at the back of the room, put it back out again. Mady never hesitates to share the dish with other dogs, even if she has already started drinking. It almost makes me want to cry, watching her stand back from the dish in the midst of her own thirst, waiting for one or another of the dogs to finish. When they're done she drinks again, sighing contently, and gives me a cool, wet kiss. Mady's kiss gives me a sudden, welcome sense of normalcy. It's so strong a feeling that I fear I might cry.

VIII.

They call it breakup. The closest thing that I can compare it to in Oregon is spring, although of course an Oregon spring is nothing like an Alaskan spring. They call it breakup because that's exactly what it is; the ice and snow begin to thaw, breaking up into chunks of a forgone winter until there is only the ground, very muddy and tired from eight months of winter's spawn. Here in Alaska, you really notice it when the ground appears again.

Breakup lasts about a month, although the time is largely dependent on the severity of the winter, the amount of snow on the ground. People keep telling me that it's horribly muddy, that my fluffy dog will be a filthy nightmare. They always temper these stories with assurances about the beauty of a summer in the Kenai Peninsula, and inevitably talk about the endless days. You can go fishing at midnight, they say, it's light all of the time. By the time the conversation has

ended, I've almost forgotten about breakup; I'm already thinking about the things I'll grow in the greenhouse in our backyard. I imagine tomatoes the size of cantaloupes.

Last week it warmed up. Nearly every day the temperature soared to around 40 degrees Fahrenheit, and slowly, by degrees, the six or so feet of snow began to melt. It wasn't an all once kind of thing, of course. On the way to town, I would notice a patch of ground that had been hidden. On the next day, there would be a bent tree or bush that had spent the winter covered with snow. I imagined that the moose enjoyed the warmer temperatures and indeed, I did see many more of them dining alongside the road on newly thawed plants. My friend tells me that it's been a hard winter for the moose. You can tell, she says, because they've been eating the bark off the trees, which is something they don't do unless they are truly hungry. I haven't lived in Alaska long enough to know if the moose are indeed hungry, but I assume that they are glad to see the ground again, almost as glad as I am.

Yesterday, though, I woke up to a milk-white sky, which I now know means one thing: snow. And it snowed yesterday, all day. Huge, impossibly fluffy flakes fell from the sky, accumulated on the driveway, covered the bits of ground that had peeked through from the past week of warmth. On the way to Anchorage, it was almost like going back in time. You couldn't tell that spring was on its way the further north you went; by the time we reached Anchorage, we realized that

Soldotna's false spring hadn't come to Anchorage. I couldn't even see the ground there, and by the time we got back home, we couldn't see the ground there, either.

So I don't know about breakup. I don't know about the irritation of the mud and slush because I haven't seen it yet. Tonight, I stood outside and listened to the muted silence of an Alaskan winter night. I could see one patch of sky, just over the trees, and a hint of the moon behind. I could hear the shushing noise of snow falling on snow. I could feel the cold air as I breathed in, exhaled, and breathed in again. It's still snowing. Inside, it is still winter.