

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Lisa S. Ede

The 13 personal essays in *Water over Stones: Oregon Watershed Stories* explore the author's experiences in dozens of Oregon watersheds. Using the genre of the personal essay, the author, a fifth-generation Oregonian and amateur ecologist, writes about her life and family relationships in stories that are saturated with the waters in which they have lived, logged, fished, and died. These stories are no defense of her family's past, but neither are they a condemnation. Rather, these personal essays are an inside look at the conflicts that arise in the author and in her family relationships when she discovers a protective love of her watersheds, marries an environmental scientist and then tries to negotiate her family's values with environmental values attached to her home waters. This negotiation dives deep into personal waters that flow from childhood anger to religious ecstasy. The author's negotiation of these waters demonstrates the personal essay's unique use as a tool for exploring issues that underlie the science of watershed; specifically: people and their relationships to each other and to their waters. These essays are drawn from the author's experiences in watersheds as wild as Lawson Creek in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, where her family was lost, and as tame as Ash Creek in the Willamette Valley, where she now lives.

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Water over Stones: Oregon Watershed Stories

by

Gail D. Oberst

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes the release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Gail D. Oberst, Author

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The author expresses humble thanks to all of the people who have made this document possible, which includes all of her kin by marriage, blood and friendship. Without her family, friends and mentors, these stories would not be possible.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late mother, Bonnie Lou Bowder Oberst.

It didn't matter to her what I wrote.

She was always proud of me.

Water Over Stones:
Oregon Watershed Stories

By Gail Oberst

BETWEEN THE FALLS: LITTLE LUCKIAMUTE

I am sitting on the rocks above the big falls at Falls City, Oregon, as I had a hundred times before, for years too many to remember, exactly, unless I count them against the age of the boy who is with me here today. I had brought this boy here dragging his river-slogged diapers around his chubby thighs, so wet that at last they fell away, and then he grew up soaking and splashing on this bank each summer until this, his sixteenth. Today he has hiked upstream along a trail he loves, past the poison oak patch I have told him to avoid, under the annual wasp's nest I have warned him about, to the upper falls where the Little Luckiamute River slides over rocks and crashes six feet below. The upper falls is low and less dangerous than the 40-foot falls below me. Where he is headed, there are flat rocks that form a chute so he can slide down into the pool below. I know he will return because I have the Snickers and his favorite orange Crush in a cooler nearby.

At my place halfway between the low falls and the high falls, I have spread out my clothes in our favorite spot, where the rocks are flat, where I can stand up and see the speck of him 300 yards upstream. It is a place where the sun keeps shining longest around the huge Douglas fir tree that shadows the rest of this side of the river in the early afternoon. We know this because we have been here a hundred times when the shadow falls. This is the best place to lay for maximum exposure, and so I have taken off my hiking clothes and stretched out in the sun in my swimsuit. When I get hot, I dip myself into the water that never warms much, fresh as it is from the Coast Range which begins where I am stretched out. It is the beginning of a ritual: dipping and heating and turning on

the flat gray-black basalt, my belly and thighs scraping on the gritty surface of the rocks washed and then exposed to the blue sky and sunlight, a kind of bone-satisfying exposure. This day, after the ritual, I turn on my stomach and scoot close to the river, my face almost level with the river. I put my hands in the water and rest my chin on my hands, my hair dripping into the water, floating with the current. The rock where I am lying is hot against my stomach. The sun is hot on my back. If I stuck out my tongue now, I could taste the river, and I wonder if I could smell it, like it was home, like a fish does. I half-sleep in the sun, half-listen for my son's voice above the noise of the falls, of the Little Luckiamute River.

How and when did I decide to assemble a thesis full of water images? Perhaps this thesis is inevitable, predestined, with origins a billion years ago, when my planets spun into orbit, setting into motion the alignment that occurred in the early hours of Nov. 2, 1956, the day I was born with a Scorpio sun, Scorpio moon and Scorpio rising, to a Pisces father and Cancer mother, water signs, all of us, a trinity of Father, Daughter and the Holy Ghost. Or in a similar but less mystical vein, perhaps this collection of watery essays began with the realization that I am water, like every other earthling, made more of water than of anything else, the non-water part of me amounting to about 15 pounds of gritty sand. Is the 90-plus-percent water part of me drawn inevitably, inexorably to water, as the eye to a mirror, as the child to a mother's voice? Is it genetic, instinctual, to think of oneself in terms of water? There again, I often write about the intrinsic nature of water, and my ability to accept it, or fight it, or use it – work with it, as if water were my God.

Perhaps the spiritual aspects in these essays about water spring from my social environment, beginning with my Church of Christ preacher father, who, despite his gypsy wandering spirit, always insisted on situating his family near water. Perhaps I am longing for a new god – one I can touch, immerse myself in, and yet fail to understand completely.

Or maybe these essays trickle out of this place where I live – western Oregon – where water falls out of the sky, runs over the land, crashes up against or flows past the borders on three sides, accumulates in lakes and rivers and creeks wherever I go. Perhaps water images come naturally to Northwesterners because we live with them everyday. We draw them on our cave walls and tree trunks, unable to separate the water from the physical land of our lives.

But I believe in retrospect that all of these influences came to bear, with some understanding, one summer in the late 1960s along Ash Creek, in Independence, when the lost and lonely 12-year-old girl who became me forged a mile-long trail between Talmadge Middle School and her family's run-down apartment overlooking the Willamette, a trail along a quiet creek with no outstanding qualities outside of the power she gave it to calm, to inspire, to organize drops of anger and loneliness and solitude and confusion between dirt banks and send them down to the confluence of the Willamette, across bridges and logs and through blackberry bushes and past geese and nutria and half-buried junk. Perhaps I am the girl walking on the banks of Ash Creek, or the woman on the rocks between the falls on the Little Luckiamute River. I am half-sleeping, half-listening for voices above the sound of the water. I write.

From my position on these rocks between the two falls, my face on my hands, my eyes are three inches above the surface and I can look across three channels that come together into one just below my rock. The channel closest to me is broad and slips shallowly over flat rocks – mossy in places – an extension of the one I am spread out on. It is the first channel, the nearest one, the channel through which my boy waded and slipped, laughing and sliding over the mosses and lichens, during his diaper years, before he swam. Over the natural ledge that begins to my left, there is a sandy gravel bar that has formed at the land-end of a pool in the basalt. This gravel bar and pool make up a slower back-eddy in the fast river; there is where I taught my son to respect the water. I let him toddle from the safety of the gravel into the deep basalt pool and lose his footing and slip in, over his head. I grabbed him sputtering and coughing out of the clear gray-green; I warned him on these rocks, before he was fully able to speak, “deep, deep.” From this rock composition springs and flows down, from me to my son. From the tone of my own Mama’s voice in my ears before I could speak, from the shock of cold water on my baby skin, from the sound of the falls, from the smell of places the water took me. Here is where my love for this place began to take the shape it has today: in the calm waters closest to the shore, where the big rocks hold the bank to the bed, in the rocks that emerge between falls. Here is where I teach my son to swim.

I could have gone through life without writing this down, without describing my watery relationships, my dewy history, my soaking metaphors. But in my adult life -- which has been spent happily writing for newspapers, married to a scientist and raising our two children, Emmylou and John -- a political

sensibility has condensed in me surrounding the basic need for water. Attracted to both water and politics, I joined the Ash Creek Water Control Board of Directors and then the Polk Soil and Water Conservation District Board of Directors, both of which combine politics and water. In these gatherings of farmers and engineers and scientists and government folks and environmentalists, I first began to realize how difficult collaboration can be among those who differ. And yet, amazingly, they stick with it, and most of the time they make it work. In politics, however small my part, I began to realize that there is something deeper than bylaws that prompts our work in the watershed. I must admit that, even now, I am still unsure what it is. This thesis is part of my personal search to evoke that unnamed bond formed when disparate folk work together, live together, in the watershed.

The far channel, where the main current and the majority of the water flows, is narrow and swift and three or four feet deep in some places. It is a channel formed by rocks that emerge from underwater this time of year long enough to grow rushes and sedges. At the farthest edge of this far channel is the opposite bank, covered entirely with blackberries that smell hot and sweet this time of year, like jam boiling over. We have been there, my son and I, swimming or paddling on an inner tube or an air mattress through the quick current to get to the sweet berries. I look from my rock, across the channels, and I can almost taste the berries, a memory that makes my mouth water. This channel must be forded to get to berries, but it also is the channel strong enough to sweep us away downstream. This channel is the only one deep enough to take us downstream from this place, even, if we wanted to die, over the falls that crash down 40 feet over jutting rocks and into deep pools. We don't want to die, but sometimes for

the thrill of it, we follow this current right up to edge of the falls, paddle to shore and then peer over the precipice at the water that once carried us. Sometimes we throw leaves or sticks over the edge and watch them smash into the deep green gorge carved out by the falls. At the edge, we breathe in suspended droplets that escape and float back up from the roaring falls beneath our feet.

If I am a Water Woman, then my husband, Michael, is equally a Water Man, a specialist in fisheries biology and watershed health, an employee since 1974 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Corvallis. Our love of water precedes and precipitates our love for each other. Ours is a romance between science and composition, and our dedication to understanding each other inspires my writing and, I'd like to think, expands his understanding of communication's role in the science and politics of watersheds. His knowledge, my love for him, my talent to express the things we both see, his willingness to see things the way I do, and his patience in describing scientific data and procedures – all of these issues are married in our union. This is our family, perhaps a microcosm of impossibly different people at work in the watershed, literally and symbolically.

I don't make such a broad statement lightly. This is a challenging marriage, the literal one and the metaphoric one, the blend of waters, the merger of science and composition. In more ways than one, my experience with negotiating my blended family has helped me understand and negotiate information on the page.

Imagine my husband, Michael, an Iowa-born, San Francisco Bay-area-raised handsome man with long lashes, dark brown eyes, a deep voice and graying hair, roundish in the middle, and a few inches shorter than me. He has

been a scientist for the Environmental Protection Agency for 30 years this year, but was working part-time when I met him. He had been twice-married before me, with a daughter from each marriage. We met at a school board meeting in 1986 and married in 1989. In the middle of this new family was me, the Oregonian, daughter of pioneers and loggers and mill workers, a new mother, a journalist, a self-indulgent, self-sufficient girl-stud. Until I met Michael, and even for two resistant years afterward, my intentions were to raise my baby John alone. My negotiation skills were embryonic, which is a nice way of saying I am independent and right, all of the time. All of this changed when we formed a family. I discovered quickly and to my surprise, how deeply motherhood and wifely collaboration were embedded in me, how natural was my instinct to protect my stepdaughter, Emmylou, and my son, John, the charges in our new family unit.

Imagine that my marriage is one of those passes between peaks in the Coast Range where a raindrop falls and it could go east or west, or north or south. We two could have gone in opposite directions, could have failed to get to the sea of tranquility so to speak. But fifteen years later here we are, still married, our children healthy and happy, living a good life by any standard. Negotiation was key. Change was required. Understanding was imperative. Too much was at stake for us to fail. This pass, this decision to stay together, to find common ground, to negotiate complexities, this has changed me for the better. I am still arrogant and impossible, just like my husband. We still argue and disagree and are always right. We are still working through our differences. But we have learned to negotiate, to agree that disagreements are not terminal, that we will abide. Our partnership, our convergence, is stronger, wider than our separate tributaries.

Above the big falls and below the small one, where I am spread out on the rock, there is another channel between the far fast channel and the flat mossy channel. This middle channel is a braided series of little rivulets that make their ways around small rock islands, some with saplings growing out of them, their red root tendrils waving in the water around the rocks, like underwater hair. I know this is happening underwater without looking, because I have spent long summer hours inspecting them, wondering at the bare redness of the alder and ash roots washed clean of dirt. I know that if I were to get up from this place where I am, if I wade the close, mossy channel and then jump from rock island to rock island in the braided channel, I would be able to make my way to "the jacuzzi," so called because it is a hole gouged out of the basalt by water falling from the rock ledge above it. So many times we John and I have sat in the tub after chasing out the crawdads and let the cool water push on our shoulders like a water masseuse, beginning when John was small enough to sit on my lap. And I know that if I were to get up from this place and wade the mossy channel, jump the rocks on the braided channel to the far channel, I could throw myself in, floating butt-down in the water feet up, bumping down to where all of these channels come together at the pool where my son learned to swim. I could bump down almost to the big falls, climbing out long before the Little Luckiamute throws itself over the watery cliff that gives this tiny town its name.

But today, I don't get up. Instead, I am listening to my son's voice far off over the rush of water between us and smelling the blackberries and noticing the way the sun reflects off the water and wondering if this has anything to do with the way I am feeling right now, so high and floating and eternal. Wet hands

dripping on paper, I write this down – details, colors, smells, the feel of grit on my belly, the sound of my son's voice.

When I write this, the moments gather up into meaning. When I write this, I am revisiting, remembering, catching, following my waters, making real the places and their connections to me, and my connections to them. Here are invocations, evocations surrounding water. For example, this spot in Falls City is a piece of land and water, just a tiny speck of Earth where two people, my son and I, have spent countless moments in the summer sunshine. This summer I am writing about, when there is no more worry about whether he would drown or kill himself jumping from the rocks or get covered with poison oak, when Emmylou was married and my own marriage had moved from rocky to granite – right now, right here in this spot, there is a moment of clarity and peace when I can gather up other moments I had not noticed until now were connected. Only in peace, only in this place, only in this water could I notice. It strikes me, like the glancing of sun off the Little Luckiamute, to keep my eyes open, to create peace, to keep returning to the watery places I know, to honor them, to be baptized in them, to preserve them, to give them to my children, to my husband, to all of my families.

COAST RANGE, NESTUCCA RIVER

I am on a mountain pass in Oregon's Coast Range. Out of the rocks bubbles a spring, clear and clean. That spring trickles out into the air, tentatively, follows gravity down to join other springs, flows into a larger creek, joins a river, rushes down, down, joins a larger river and finally, splashes out into the sea. I am a lone writer, but I am not alone. I create words that join with my mother's love, with my father's sermons, my family's and my community's expectations, my history, my education and experience. This is how I imagine my writing: The sound of many waters, all mine and yet, not much mine, in the end.

As anniversary gift to each other, my husband, Michael Cairns, and I are taking a trip to the Oregon Coast from the north Willamette Valley, over the Nestucca River Road. It is a paved but curvy and winding road through a Coast Range corridor that begins in the wine country of Yamhill County, follows the North Yamhill River as it cuts between the Tillamook State Forest and the Siuslaw National Forest, slips between Trask Mountain to the north and Mt. Hebo to the south, and eventually comes out at a little town called Hebo, near the Pacific. Eventually we'll get there, have a nice lunch, and drive home on Highway 18, up the Salmon River. But now, we are stopped at the top of the pass between the Nestucca and the North Yamhill rivers.

We stop at a kiosk erected by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, owners of this patch of land. This is a road begun in 1924 by George S. Zimmerman, whose "foresight and untiring efforts ... made this road possible," according to a brass plaque I read, which is set in concrete on a boulder. This boulder attests to a road that cuts through thick history, through an area used by

white settlers for commerce and recreation for the last 150 years, and through centuries more of Native American history, as it is their trail to the coast that that his road follows. As I read the plaque, I am lost in all I know about this place – the huge fires that destroyed it 60 years ago, my own grandfather's and great-grandfather's hand in logging it before that, the controversial decisions that must be made about this forest's future, things I know both as a long-time newspaper reporter and a fifth-generation Oregonian. Context, I think. This place has context, and it is not the same for everyone who visits.

At the three-paneled informational kiosk, I stand before a huge map of the Nestucca River area. "You are here," is written on the sign, a red arrow slashing through the wilderness, pointing at a yellow dot on the map. The wind gathers up and thunders across the tops of huge Douglas firs surrounding the kiosk, as loud as a passing train car, frightening and real in this isolated place.

Michael, meanwhile, has wandered to the edge of the road and is peering down into the Nestucca River or North Yamhill River or a tributary of one of those; we can't decide which because we are at the pass, the place where waters go either east or west. All waters in Oregon eventually go west to the Pacific, but here in the Coast Range, water's journey west can become circuitous, indirect. Maybe this water will first go east, to the Yamhill River and then to the Willamette where it will flow north to the Columbia before turning west again to the Pacific, an extra 200 miles or so more than the waters that fall just a few hundred yards away.

I am thinking about where I am, and where I am going. I am thinking about my own reason for being here, right now, which is a celebration of love, of the 15th year of my marriage to Michael. I look at the map, looking for direction,

for place. Someone has written on the side of the map: "We biked this mountain twice. What fun!" Underneath it, I scribble my own reason for being here: "G.O. + M.A.C = 15 years."

My husband interrupts my vandalism with astute observations about watersheds. He is scientist and a watershed volunteer deeply involved in the life and times of salmon habitats and water quality issues. He is pointing to piles of logs in the stream below us, and I leave my map to see what he sees. The stream in the ravine below us moves as streams do when they are moving from high places. There are riffles over gravel below the tangle of fallen trees and brush and leaves in the water; there is a low waterfall over huge boulders above it. There are ancient trees falling into the water and younger ones sprouting from the bank. There are signs of bear, deer, elk, cougar all around us in scat, tracks in the mud, broken branches decorated with fur.

"Structural complexity creates biological diversity," he says, after showing me all these things. "What?" I say. I make him repeat it several times. I write it down in my notebook. Next to it, I write "Discourse." I play with his words, rearrange them, trying to maintain the image of this place, the complexity of it, the merger of its values in me, in how only I can speak of it. "Vocal complexity creates social diversity," I write. I am thinking of my specialty – rhetoric and composition – of one log in the jam, one tree falling in the water, one stream flowing to the Pacific. Later, I looked up synecology, the study of ecological interrelationships between organisms. Unable to let go of the science-composition connection, I asked Michael to write for me an answer to this question: Why is structural complexity important to the ecosystem? He wrote:

What we're really concerned with in any ecosystem is a fully functioning system. Biological diversity arising from structural complexity provides multiple layers of life that contribute to all the necessary processes that an ecosystem needs to perform. It's a little like having backup systems in a spaceship. Because we don't fully understand the totality of the functions of either a spaceship or an ecosystem, it's best to have contingency systems. When heat shields start coming off a spaceship or plant/animal species start disappearing from an ecosystem, critical processes may malfunction. Some say that a corn field containing one species is a functional ecosystem, but what happens when a new species of corn borer comes in?

When I read his paragraph, the image of the mountain pass and the river returned to me – how it joins other rivers as it flows to the ocean, how a thousand people may take the same journey we took and write something completely different. I can't speak for them.

Back at the Coast Range pass, I can write what I see. I can write words that fall like rain out of the sky or pop out of the ground. They come together to form springs, and gravity pulls them down. They come to a place already saturated in a dozen discourses and there they blend, absorb, merge with others. I listen to my husband, who thinks in the language of science and of salmon-friendly waters. My heart pumps the blood of a logger's granddaughter with a head full of stories and legends that glorify the logging lifestyle. To this merger I bring my 47-year-old white woman self, I bring Oregonian pioneer stories, I bring 25 years of experience as a reporter and writer, I bring education and an insatiable curiosity, all of which impact the way I interpret what I see atop this mountain. Negotiating all of these influences is so complex that I must step back, use a metaphor, a synecdoche. Water is basic. Water is endemic. It becomes my medium, my palette, my touchstone for describing this conflicting, crashing convergence of voices inside me.

Here are some ways the metaphor works for me: I am standing on a pass, and it is not the high point or the only pass in these mountains, and yet, from here many waters flow to the ocean, taking various routes, sometimes following their own courses. Water blends with other waters and then is indistinguishable only in retrospect, in tracking the flow backwards to the source, sometimes hidden in the densest rushes, in the skunk cabbage. Or I am on a rock between two falls, at the edge of three channels, or on a rock in the middle of Lawson Creek where water rushes around me, protective and yet dangerous. Water's nature – its movement, its urgency – draws me to write about it and about my father, the man who also loves water, and my grandfathers, the fishermen, and about my family, the water people. Because this is so, water infiltrates my deepest memories, my discoveries, my moods. Finally, there is something else about water that for me symbolizes hope: water cycles. It doesn't end; it evaporates, forms clouds, falls on the Coast Range and flows again.

This essay is but a drop in the ocean. But writing it has forced me to negotiate complexities that are different for every writer. This skill, this negotiation is new power for me, and at the same time, a source of new humility. My own understanding is fed in a complex way by those who teach me. Complexity is required for biological diversity.

This is my voice. Voice flows, voice yields, voice merges.

ASH CREEK

This is me, sitting in my kitchen nook, reading the *Itemizer-Observer*, my town's local paper. I am sitting in a kitchen two blocks from Ash Creek, six blocks from the Willamette. There is evidence in my basement that my house sits on a confluence, a floodplain. My basement is perpetually wet. The old wallpaper in this bright room is streaked with moisture. It is 1990, and I am working as a correspondent for the *Statesman-Journal*, the regional daily newspaper, which allows me to write from home while I care for my new marriage to a man with a pre-teen daughter, our toddler son, and this lump in my throat that is my mother's sudden death less than six months before. This is me, reading the whole paper while my toddler Johnny sleeps and Emmylou is at school, sipping coffee, going over the local pages, drifting in and out of the lives featured there, when I see a small article about the upcoming election, the deadline to apply for two boards who need members: one board governs the local cemetery district, the other governs the Ash Creek Water Control District. This is me, for whom the words "Ash Creek" prompt a thousand images. This is me, in mourning, in motherhood, in marriage, living on Ash Creek.

The first image seeps up through the walls of this house, like the indigenous Willamette/Ash dampness. Three years earlier, single and unaware that I was pregnant, I had returned to my pre-teen home of Independence to take a job as a reporter at the local newspaper, *The Sun-Enterprise*. Something had drawn me to this newspaper job, back to my pre-teen watershed, one of a string of watersheds my preacher father took us through in my childhood. Ash Creek

arouses this image because it was there, when I was 29, standing in ashes not 200 yards from the confluence of Ash Creek at the Willamette River, when for the first time in my nomadic life, I felt connected to a place's past and present, with me in both. Was it the tiny life in my belly demanding roots, requiring a home, that caused me to superimpose images of my own burned-out childhood on this new life?

I took the job at The Sun-Enterprise in May 1986 and within a month I was stepping through the wet ashes of a fire in the very apartment where I had loved as a child. I was walking past charred mattresses and sagging sheetrock with gray streaks like running mascara, melted pieces of dolls and toy trucks and a sofa and walls missing from my parent's old bedroom. I could see that the fire had started at the kitchen stove before it took over the living room, which was actually an extension of the kitchen. Standing there, reporter's notebook, pen and camera in hand, with the fire inspector from Polk County Fire District No. 1, I could see that the fire had moved into my parent's old bedroom, eaten that up and at some point turned to my bedroom and my brothers' down the hall. Eventually, the fire headed out the back door, headed toward the Willamette, but was stopped by the marshy ground created by the persistent spring floods of Ash Creek.

I was thinking, as I stood there acting the reporter, that of course these charred rooms hadn't belonged to my brothers or parents or me for maybe 20 years. I had lived a lifetime since my father brought his family of six to live in Lee Terrace Apartments, better known as Felony Flats. This is when the underwater feeling kicked in, kicked out, as if I were the fetus floating in embryonic fluid. The irony, the weird coincidence that the very apartment in which I had lived would, 20 years later, burn and that I would be the reporter

called to cover the story of my own childhood's burned-out ruins, hit me. Was I brought here by some invisible hand to see something deliberate, necessary? Was I standing in the middle of the ashes of my former life and missing something? This was a fire set by accident when an 11-year-old girl left a pan on the stove to chase her baby brother who had fled out the back door toward the river. What was the message? I stayed, poking around like it was part of my job as a reporter and photographer. Ashes, I thought. Ash Creek. I, I thought.

"Take your time," said Dan, the fire inspector, stepping outside for a smoke, "but mind your step. There's a lot of glass mixed in with the other garbage." People are like that with reporters. They give us boarding passes to places most people don't get to go, and I usually don't abuse the privilege. I didn't tell Dan, the fire inspector, that this had been my home when I was a kid and that this is why I came to get in person a story I might have otherwise written from my desk, calling witnesses or fire department talking heads. It's not that I minded his knowing that I was so poor growing up that we had to live in Felony Flats; it's just that I wanted to think about it for a minute, without discussing it with this big, ex-football player fire inspector who liked to hug me after every interview.

Ash Creek. The word evokes the ashes, but also the life of the girl who lived in Felony Flats. Maybe it is 1969 and she is me. Maybe it is 1986 and she is the girl who caused the fire. At any rate, they are nearly the same age, 11 or 12, and she is walking along the creek bank, head down, kicking at the kid-stomped trail between her new school, Talmadge Middle School, and her family's apartment at Lee Terrace, more than a mile downstream. It had been a brutal day for this girl who doesn't quite fit into the pre-formed cliques she found when she

moved here with her family two months ago. She learned her new home's nickname when she told someone where she lived. She was in class. She told a skinny girl in clean and pretty clothes, and the girl said: Oh, Felony Flats. Pretty girl's friend in the next seat giggled. This girl, this 12-year-old, she knows from experience that there will be no belonging to the pretty girl's crowd, so she makes quick friends of the less discriminating smoking, drugging crowd. It hardly matters who her friends are. Her family is going to move again next summer, after Dad finishes his degree at Oregon College of Education, or whenever Dad gets a job. Walking along the creek, slowly, not in a hurry to get home, she sits down on the grassy bank and she watches the water flow by, still shallow from summer but charged up a little bit with late-September rains. There are ducks paddling around a car body sunk deep into the mud in the creek at one end of a pool, and above her, cottonwood trees are beginning to shed leaves, but not too many yet. They flap around in the breeze and she lays back on the bank, the sound of water and ducks in her ears, soothing and sweet, something falling away, like nightmares after waking. This will be her way home every day after school: along Ash Creek, over the railroad bridge, past the mill pond, stopping along the way to discover new, beautiful items for wondering – a tiny spring trickling from the bank, a small patch of skunk cabbage, the mark of beaver teeth on ash and willow saplings – until the creek rises in December over its banks and she has to take a different route to Felony Flats, along the paved road.

This was me, in 1969, or maybe it was the girl of the same age in 1986, who lit the fire that burned our apartment.

Felony Flats has always been its nickname because its cheap rent attracts people with tattoos and motorcycles, migrant workers and people who grow pot down among the cottonwood and ash trees along the river. But I think all of that bad karma might have started with my friend Deborah's sister, before I moved there in 1969.

The front doors of all 30 units at Felony Flats opened onto a square with worn brown grass that didn't seem to die or get green. In the middle of the worn grass in 1987 was a low hump, all that was left of a swimming pool that had been filled in with dirt. I knew it had been a swimming pool because Deborah told me. In 1967, just before Dad moved us all to Independence so he could finish college in nearby Monmouth, the concrete pool was still intact but empty, and Deborah's little sister fell in and broke her neck. Just before we moved in, the apartment owner filled it in with dirt.

I know this because Deborah had been my best friend that year. She was a year younger than me, with dark circles under her eyes, a little chubby and ragged, a skin-color yellowish tan I'd come to associate with the Baltic people who lived in our complex, Deborah among them. Her folks and her four surviving brothers and sisters lived next door to us in Number 12. We lived in lucky 13.

One weekend day Deborah and I sat on top of the hump and built a little altar for her baby sister with rocks we dragged up from the river banks. It was early spring and we stuck daffodils and dandelions and narcissus into the rocks. I sat there in the sunshine while Debra lay on her stomach on the hump, her head in her arms, maybe asleep. I remember the sadness mixed with some springtime adolescent restlessness. I was thinking of my own sad, long winter pressed into that tiny apartment with my Mom and three brothers, of my Dad studying behind

his bedroom door, of the smells of cooking coming through the walls on either side of us – sour cabbage and beets from Deborah's side, chili peppers and cumin from the other side, where Daniel lived. I was thinking about being in love with Daniel, although he didn't know it and, possibly, didn't know me. He was thin and dark, black hair hanging in his eyes. He was already working in the strawberry fields even though school wasn't out yet for the year, and for once I looked forward to working there this summer with my mom and brothers. I'd fallen in love with him on my way home from school last fall. I spotted him walking ahead of me on the Ash Creek trail and wondered who was going my direction. All the way back to our apartments I felt drifty and excited, connected to someone going where I was going. Sitting on that memorial hump, thinking of Daniel, and thinking of our family moving again in a few months, my legs began to ache so I got up and walked back behind Felony Flats, down to the floodplain to look for flowers growing farther up the river, where Ash Creek comes in. Down I went, over the bank into the fields the water had covered just a month ago, over to the river bank where the ash, cottonwood and willows sent up sweet-smelling shoots that left sticky sap on my hands when I grabbed at them. I was wandering lazy up along the Willamette, looking for flowers but not really looking.

I was stopped by a pile of logs and root wads and old branches, so I climbed to the top of the first log and looked over them, to where I knew Ash Creek was coming into the Willamette. Between me on the log pile and the creek a marshy plain opened up, filled with blue flowers spotted here and there with white flowers. I remember feeling like I was lifting off the ground, like the day I saw Daniel and fell in love. I wanted to be in the middle of the marsh, among the

flowers, and so I jumped through the pile of washed up sticks and logs into the muddy wetland. Out in front of me, along the bank of Ash Creek, a huge blue bird jumped into the air and spread its prehistoric wings and I fell back on my butt into the mud, sucking in breath as it tucked its legs underneath and pulled its long, long neck back and flew away toward the river. For a minute, I sat there in all those flowers and spring mud left by the river and the creek and watched it disappear away across the Willamette. I remember thinking then, as I have many times since, that this bird is so big it could carry a small child on its back, far, far away. I remember this because I wrote it in a diary I kept under my pillow, written in words wistful and naïve and lonely. I remember because I went back and tried to tell my friend, Deborah, who was still sitting on the mound. She nodded and sighed. Later, I would learn names: camas lily, great blue heron. Later, I would think of these things as mine, as my secret selves.

Names and long-gone friends and adolescent crushes didn't bring me back 20 years later to work at this newspaper. Something else did: The camas and the heron and the water; the unnamed connection I made with the water; the soothing power of Ash Creek to calm and clarify my life. These moments, these lives along the creek brought me back here.

It's weird, ironic, a paradox to walk pregnant through ashes and have your memory unbidden fill in the burned-out holes with the past, a superimposition, a layering of life. I wonder if sometimes pain, happiness, connections get shoved down into corners and cracks by all the things that happen afterward, and they can't be seen until something disastrous, like a fire, like a death or a flood, removes a wall, burns through a bed, and then there it is again, the memory of the connection, revealed. What happened to the people who lived here, I ask Dan the

fireman who is outside the front door smoking, looking out over the grassy hump still visible in the courtyard. He takes a drag and points upstairs to a mother leaning over the railing, looking down on us, two toddlers hanging on her and an older boy, maybe eight, kicking at the post. She looks like Deborah might look if she were grown up, if she had never left Felony Flats. For a minute, I wonder if by magic she had never gone, had stayed to preserve the memories I had lost. I look up and smile and wave. "She don't speak English, only Russian," Dan informs me, throwing his cigarette into the ashes of my Lucky Apartment 13.

Up Ash Creek six blocks and three years after the fire, back at my kitchen table, married, Mommy, mourning, I circle the article in the newspaper that had caught my eye. "Board members needed for the Ash Creek Water District," reads the headline. I read requirements, carefully – Ash Creek watershed resident, check. Lived in the area three years or more. Check – I look up from the newspaper, out my window at our garden, at my flower patch, and realize: I have remained. I have lived here longer than anywhere else in my life. Why here? Ash Creek, maybe, I think, looking back at the paper. I am building something on the ashes of my past life, here on Ash Creek, on my memories of it, on my connection with this watershed. This day, with a small commitment to a small watershed, I begin a journey that requires me to stay put, stay in one place, so that I might learn how to love, to learn to protect, to define the needs of a watershed, and of a family, and of the community which I was beginning to think of as mine, as my public selves.

Ash Creek sneaks into the Willamette behind everybody's back. I can walk right down to the river and stand on the old boat ramp at the north end of Riverview Park in Independence and not see the creek slipping in 100 feet downstream. That's because you'd have to wade through the marsh the creek creates along the river in the summer, and in the winter, the Willamette fills Ash Creek at the mouth, making the water too high to approach the confluence. But once in the spring, after the waters receded a little, Michael and I put on our boots and waded the marsh to the mouth. In the spring, there are things stuck in the mud washed out of houses and creek banks that are older than I am – a golden glass pill bottle, bits of blue-print crockery, mason jars, bricks and tiles. We wondered at the long life this town has had, bits and pieces of which we were turning out of Ash Creek's mud. I picked at the goo and pulled up an intact bottle with a shimmery glaze, its bubbled glass and rough joints a testament to hand-blown origins in fire, in heat, in the past, the mud a reminder of where it ended up. I placed it on my window sill.

There's something comforting and permanent about the layers of muck and bits of junk washed out and laid down by floodwaters and weather and shifting ground. This is something I could not see before: there is no way to know a place until I've stayed still long enough to dig into its layers. Ash Creek's waters move past my house. Two blocks to the west, the south fork joins the main stem. There was a time when I would have moved with it, unable to sit still. That time is past.

LITTLE LUCKIAMUTE

Michael and I take Black Rock Road up the Little Luckiamute for at least three miles of mountain logging roads so narrow in some spots, I can look down from the passenger seat of the Chevy pickup, down my arm hanging out the window, down the edge of the truck, down to the tires that are riding on the edge of a gravel road that drops suddenly into a ravine formed by the river a thousand feet below. Behind the truck, the dust we kick up forms brown clouds against the blue April sky. I lean farther out the window. Maybe it's not a thousand feet down. But it's still frightening and I imagine a sudden slip on the loose gravel taking us down, rolling us bumper over fender in some fiery crash ending in the pristine stream. I take a deep breath, resigned to the passenger seat, my husband at the wheel. If I die now, it wouldn't be so bad, I think. I'd be looking at this awesome view and then suddenly, I'd be in the drink, gulping my last breath. I smile at these crazy thoughts and pull my head into the cab.

Maybe it's the altitude that makes me giddy as we drive around fallen trees and branches felled by the snowstorm last January, and then more branches sent down by the wind in February. Or maybe my vertigo comes from the reason we are here. Michael wants to show me a place he and a forestry class had visited on September 11, 2001. At the gate to Socialist Valley, named for a community of 1920s union settlers, we park.

Michael and I sit on the tailgate of the truck. There is a ceremonial shodding of shoes and gathering of supplies. We've packed sandwiches we bought 20 minutes ago at Falls City Market, owned by Joe Huff, and just going there started us telling stories about those crazy Huff brothers, the only successful

people to ever come out of Falls City, but even so, the Huffs get married and divorced about once every five years, with kids scattered all over this side of the Coast Range, as is the custom in these parts. Joe's turkey and Swiss sandwiches, water, diet Snapple, little packets of mayo and mustard, and my digital camera all go into a cotton book bag which I flip over my shoulder, the string strap across my chest. I finish the shodding. Michael bought me these hiking boots for Christmas with this exact vision in mind: that I would be putting them on, just like this; getting ready to hike, just like we are now, with all of the appropriate gear. I know him in some ways like I know this terrain. He has a perfect vision of process and order and loves the preparation for things wild, like foreplay. But there are things I can't say exactly about him, and one of those things is that I'm not sure why he wanted to come here again. Maybe today's uncommonly warm weather on a Saturday in April, mixed in with an essay I wrote about the falls he read, all of that maybe reminded him of something. He says he wants to show me where his watershed, where his river, begins. Maybe more, he wants me to write down what he doesn't know how to say.

Properly outfitted, we walk through the open gate to Camp Tapawingo, toward the woods. On the road to our left, on every fence post, there is a wooden bird box, bluebirds flying in and out of them. I stop and pull out the digital camera, and with it pressed to my eye cautiously approach one box with two bluebirds, tiny cigar-shaped male and female, maybe, blue on the back, white stomachs, black-tips here and there. I get about 10 feet from the box before they fly away across the meadow of blooming mustard beyond the fence. I press the button on the camera but I know there's no way I can stop this beautiful

movement, so I come out from behind the lens and watch for a minute, Michael quietly behind me.

We walk up the hill, past the camp and the caretaker's house, higher and higher into the woods. At a fork in the road, we stop a minute and look up into the canopy closed tight over our heads with Douglas fir, maple, alder. We both call out the names of plants: He speaks Latin: oxalis, rubus, vaccinium, gaultheria, polystichum, prunus. I speak common language: Sweet grass, salmonberry, huckleberry, salal, sword fern, mountain cherry. Look, I say, excited. It's chittum. And sure enough, the same sort of alder-like tree my Dad and I used to peel for money when I was a kid is growing, tentatively, behind a rotting old-growth stump. Cascara buckthorn, he says. Wow. He's heard my chittum stories before, and encourages me in them. Michael once planted a chittum tree for me in our back yard. It is twenty feet tall today, growing berries.

We take the fork that goes in the direction he's been before, past a sign that says "No trespassing." No problem, says my husband. This is the way we'll go. He is hunting for a patch of old-growth trees, which I know reassures him somehow that his watershed is not completely compromised. He thinks he knows where to find the patch. When we get about a half-mile up that road, he takes off into the underbrush calling back to me, "This is it." I stand at the edge watching his green T-shirt disappear into forest thick with poison oak and ferns. I know I have to make a decision, one that would be easy if I could trust my husband, if I could trust that Michael, an Iowa transplant, had a sense of direction or memory for trails already traversed. He is looking for something significant, scientific, but I am looking at the road I am leaving as I yell at his back that I'm right behind, and I step into the woods, memorizing every detail along the way, an act of

survival. There is a tree with a number and then another. I pass some odd window shutters on the ground, strangely out of place. Oh yeah, I think. This will be easy. I can follow the trees back out. Ten minutes later Michael stops in the thicket ahead but isn't yet ready to admit he is lost. Instead, he tells me why these trees have numbers. These trees are part of a study. The students will come back in five years or so and measure the growth. Each number is an identity. Well, back to the trail, he says, before crashing off into the woods the wrong way.

Maybe we want to go this way, I say gently. There's old 198, I say. Remember we went past those shutters on the ground? He changes course and walks through the brush toward me and we make it back to the main trail, alive. We start back down. I'm suddenly more hungry for Joe's sandwiches than for the sight of an old-growth tree patch.

We eat the sandwiches by a little stream that's been dammed up for Camp Tapawingo's water supply, and I swear I've never tasted anything better, I'm that hungry. I wash it back with some water that's flowing over the dam, sweet and dangerous, possibly loaded with bugs that Michael calls giardia, but that I call beaver fever. He chews and points out a salamander, brown on top, yellow belly, slipping into the rotting underwater leaves. I take pictures of the dam, wooden slats holding back the water, ferns and lichens growing up the side, leaking.

On the way back down, we pass a little spring. First-order stream, he calls it. It is seeping out of the ground, trickling over mossy rocks and leaves and forming a tiny pool next us before falling down through a culvert to the river below. The water makes a noise like small sticks falling together, like booted feet treading cautiously on abandoned logging roads, like high spring wind in Douglas fir trees. As I walk, I try to imagine metaphors for the sound of the water.

Michael stops in the middle of the trail and tells me to come and see the biggest earthworm he's ever seen. I come up and see a snake, worm-like with its new skin, lying in the sun, its smelling tongue darting out, forked. It looks skinny, grayish and lifeless, but when I try to lift it with a stick, it slithers away, slowly. Its scales are still tiny and not very well formed. I laugh as I tell him I'll gladly keep this whole snake-worm incident to myself for a small price. We laugh because we're hiking and the day is blue-sweet with spring.

Just below the snake-worm, Michael shouts that this is the trail he was looking for, which we'd missed on the way up, but this time he says he will go in first and be sure. I watch him crash away again into the brush, swearing I'll go in after him if I lose sight of that green T-shirt. But before that he turns all excited and yells: Here it is. This is it. I crash through brush to a landing overlooking a valley with a ridge on the other side of it. The landing has about six huge old-growth stumps surrounded by brush. He is standing on top of the biggest stump. I pull out my notebook. I try to imagine myself in the skin of a scientist, a husband, a father, a settler. I try to imagine the thoughts he cannot speak. I write directly to him, for him:

You are standing on top of an ancient stump in your watershed looking across to Fanno Ridge, Little Luckiamute forming below you, fir trees humming in a high wind, and you are trying to remember the day you were here last, a day when things didn't seem as fine as today. You are thinking how you haven't found any old-growth trees in your watershed today, but you have found something fine and sweet and old and it is here, still, we are all here, which is something you doubted that other day. You are thanking your lucky stars about this when your woman comes up behind you, takes a picture with that quiet

digital camera of hers and then hands it to you. While you take pictures of Monmouth Peak across the ridge, she turns left and climbs a stump of her own, everything quiet again as you think, not in Latin, but in a different language, a language you feel but that you don't quite understand. You feel the thing here in this place, and when you feel it, you try to speak it, but for you, this is not always necessary. After a long while, you take a picture of her on her stump, climb down with her and walk back – past the fallen trees, past the camp and the Tapawingo caretaker's house, past the bluebirds, back to the truck.

At home, a week later, I lift my pen and kiss my husband as he reads this essay. Is this how it was for you, I ask him? I don't want to put words in your mouth, feelings in your heart that weren't there. He smiles, my greatest fan, my encourager. It's all great, he says.

RIVER BAPTISM

Elk River

Two hundred million years ago, when the Coast Range and the Willamette Valley were nothing more than underwater dreams in the Pacific Ocean's sleepy bed, there were the Klamath Mountains, a range of mountains that formed a curved coastline from what is now southeastern Oregon out into the ocean between Cape Blanco and White City. As I read about this in my favorite *Roadside Geology of Oregon*, by David D. Alt and Donald W. Hyndman, my husband and I are driving around Mt. Humbug, and I am thinking of my own history in this ancient range, a range my Department of Geology writers suggest were seashores formed by "schists" 400 million years ago, before the seafloor descended and the limestone reefs and volcanic islands rose, before the ocean floor and the North American plates collided, pushing the Klamaths up, before the granite batholiths intruded, before the Klamaths were separated from their sister Sierras, before the jamming and descending ocean crust formed the Coast Range and released the hot basalt that formed the Cascades. Before all of that, there were the Klamaths, and there is where Elk River flows.

Michael and I are driving up the Elk River to find the origin of the main stem, the beginning of the whole river, where the north and south forks come together, the place where two tributaries come together to form a single line on the map, in the basalt, in the Klamaths, a place neither of us has seen before. A scientist for the Environmental Protection Agency, Michael has volunteered to take some of his vacation time to place a temperature logger in the north fork, just above the confluence with the south fork. The logger will record the temperature

fluctuations of the north fork for the next three months, after which he'll retrieve the logger and download the temperature information from the quarter-sized computer embedded in an 8-inch tube no wider than the end of a broom handle. Michael's mission is to tie the logger and tube to a brick, place it at the confluence of the north and south forks, and then come back in a few months to download the data it has recorded. He does this regularly in various watersheds. I rarely get the chance to go with him and see him at work.

Michael is collecting this information to add to what scientists know about how forest disturbances, including logging and fire, might affect the temperature of the river, and therefore, the survival of cool-water-loving salmon and steelhead. What scientists know is that tree stands on the inaccessible upper reaches of the north fork Elk are ancient, more than 400 years old. They know that native chinook salmon, sea-run cutthroat trout, winter steelhead, and some coho salmon thrive in this region. What they know is that this nationally protected stretch of river, designated Wild and Scenic in 1988, is home to the northern spotted owl, bald eagle and one of the largest populations of marbled murrelet in the nation. They know is that these fish, upon which the birds and other animals depend for food, tend to get sickly when temperatures rise. What Michael and his collaborators are unsure of is whether disturbing the forests through which the river flows has any impact on water temperature. The Elk's pristine reaches through old growth forests are among a dozen that will be tested, compared and studied for temperature inflections that speak truths I only understand marginally. The truths I know are from family stories told, from seeing with my own eyes, from catching fish, from having loved and cared about these waters for so long.

I like to believe that I played a part in Michael's decision to place these temperatures loggers in the Elk, these tiny monitors that will record the vaguest fluctuations in temperature every 30 minutes for the next three months. I like to believe it is my enthusiasm for this place, my connection to this river, that prompted him to choose it from among several others that fit the criteria for his study. I like to think that without me with him, he might not have undertaken the extra work it takes to drive 26 miles up the winding Elk River road. After all, he could have sent an intern on the journey, which is his option as a principal investigator. We have been married a long time, and I like to believe I influence him as much as he influences me. We've come to the point in our collaboration where I don't know where my history leaves off and his begins. This convergence makes our journey up the Elk feel predestined, magical. Maybe I place too much importance on this transcendental, gut-level joy a person feels when she comes to the place in life where interests merge, become one. All the way up the river, I thought about our marriage – inexplicable, real, transporting, fundamental, a collision, a convergence of two forks in the same river.

My view of this river begins with my family: Both my mother's and father's families have been coming to Elk River to camp since the 1920s, possibly even earlier. I have in my boxes of family treasures hidden in the attic a wonderful story written by my father's sister, Dorothy, about her early adventures camping at Sunshine Bar, a locally-beloved spot on Elk River. Down to a detailed description of a fight with the bees, her story reads remarkably like my adventures at the same place, where I have camped with my parents, my aunts and uncles, my children, my husband. I have in my heart the stories told around campfires set down on Butler Bar's gravelly banks up the river a few more miles, the sound of

the Elk splashing behind us, told by my mother's sister, Debra, about a long Bowder connection to this place – my grandfather's fishing trips, my grandmother's berry picking. My brother, across the campfire, tells his own fishing stories.

As Michael and I drive east, past granite walls covered in dense trees on our right, the river on our left, its far bank the steep sides of Grassy Nob Wilderness, rock and snags and trees so old that no white pioneer family had even touched this continent when their seeds sprouted, I tell stories of what I have seen here. I tell about the cougar I saw running behind my car on my way up here several years ago with my kids and my brother and his kids. I talk about the tent we pitched right next to the river, sandy gravel under my head, the stars as clear as stars can be seen from Earth, and my inability to sleep that night knowing there was a cat that size, unpredictable and wild, hunting where I lay.

After Michael and I pass Butler Bar, the road forks and we stop. We have several maps, and Michael pulls them all out. One is a larger scale map of the Siskyou National Forest, which is what the locals call this southwestern part of the Klamath Mountains where they get all mucked up with the Coast Range, the Cascades and the Klamaths. Another is a close-up map he calls a 7.5 minute quad, which shows the roads and basic geographical features of the very specific area we must find – a spot on Earth where two rivers become one. A third map shows the elevation, the topography, but few of the elements or roads are named. We must combine the information from all of these to get to our destination, to plant the logger in the water.

All of this attention to detail nags at my Oregon girl-stud survivalist sensibilities. In that capacity, I sometimes ridicule the tiny, miniscule particularity

of my husband's job, which to me, sometimes seems a futile waste of time. I secretly believe that one quarter-sized temperature logger planted in one tiny stream in the giant cyclical and infinite ocean of information can't possibly provide enough data for us to save this stream or even one single salmon. I secretly believe that this trip, which will take a good four or five hours, will not change the world, and therefore, scientifically, must be wasted time. But the girl-stud in me is consoled. There are hikes to be taken, new territory to be discovered. I am sorry, even ashamed to think this way about my husband's work. But the more time I spend with him, the more I write about his work, the less I feel that it is futile.

Despite his maps and my long experience with this river, neither of us knows exactly where we are going, and so we get confused looking at maps, especially because it is possible that the confluence of the north and south fork of the Elk might be inaccessible. However, I am determined to enjoy this trip. I love this place, and that thought is what revises my innate urge to ridicule scientific study of this kind. My brothers, my uncles, my aunts and my grandfathers have pulled great salmon and steelhead from this river. We have monitored it in our family way for nearly a century. How wonderful to have someone also monitoring it with a view to saving its wildlife. I feel the Oregon girl-stud rise to protect the past, the ancestral waters. I halt my critical, cynical tongue by reminding myself that I am spending time in the company of my beloved, in a beloved place, doing something that might benefit them both, and that this cannot be wasted time. With Michael, I am something more than what I was.

We decide the maps are not helping, but we both have memories of this place. Michael remembers my brother once taking him up the road that eventually

goes to Laird Lake, which is on the South Fork. I look back at the map and note that we are still following the main stem, that we are on this road that goes toward Laird Lake, so we combine our memories and our maps to deduce that the south and north will have to meet here on this road, somewhere.

We drive forward, slowly, looking on the left for a spur road mentioned in the note, a road that looks on the map to go close to the confluence. We pass a milepost marker: 23 miles from the highway, Michael says. As we skid up the steep and narrow thick-gravel road, we are shaded on our right by big-leaf maple, red alder, myrtle and madrone. Ninebark, elderberry, salal, foxglove and fireweed fill the understory. I can smell minty pennyroyal in the warm summer air. We must be close, I say. Orange Columbia lilies nod at us from the roadside. We pass two trucks in a pull-off at the side of the road, one outfitted with a brush cutter on the side, and another pulling a small travel trailer. The two men look tanned and weathered. They are dressed in the uniform of the Oregon woodsman: blue-gray cotton shirt, red suspenders, blue jeans, dirty Cat hat, sweat and dust on their faces, calloused hands, black steel-toed boots. I see the mix of curiosity and distrust in their eyes as we pass in our shiny green Chevy, and recognize the look of ownership. I know this look, have used this look.

There are occasional pull-offs and overgrown spurs along the steep road, but we have no idea which is the right one. A mile past where our road should be, we turn around and finally stop in the road to see if the maps or the directions can give us any other clues. They do not. But while we are looking, our local brush cutters arrive and stop. As our truck is blocking their progress along the narrow road to Laird Lake, the man driving the brush cutter climbs out.

Behind him the other man pulls up with the trailer in tow, possibly a temporary home for them while they are working. The other man waits patiently while Brush Cutter walks up to us. Michael steps out of the truck and shakes Brush Cutter's hand and tells him what we are looking for – a spur road that goes down to the place where the two forks come together.

Michael points to his map and his directions, but Brush Cutter shrugs and smiles, his broad shoulders hunching up the road, his arm following it, his finger pointing. Up the road a piece, he says, there's a high deer fence. Brush Cutter says he doesn't know who built the deer fence, but it's been there forever, and there's a gate, and then past the gate, there's a road sort of hidden by the brush. We went down there a couple years ago and cut all that back, says Brush Cutter. But the ice and snow last winter fell some trees and blocked it the spur road again. He and his brother (here's where we learn that it's his brother in the truck behind him) pulled the brush away from the entrance, but you can't drive over the logs that they piled down in the spur road about 500 feet or so. He looks at our truck, as if to be sure. Nope, can't get all the way in, but there's a trail. Pretty steep. But it goes down to the south fork.

Michael asks for more details, specific distances, points at the map, but Brush Cutter shrugs. Past the deer fence, he says. You'll see it. Then he tells us about his mission. We can't get by until you guys pull off the road up there, he says. We'll wait. He is already headed back to the truck, expecting us to move, which we do. We turn around and go back up the road.

Of course we find the spur road, past the high deer fence, drive into the grown-over entrance, over a rutted roadbed grown high with grass, right up to the pile of trees that had been pushed down by the snowfall and piled by Brush

Cutter, blocking our progress. On our side of the pile, we spot a ribbon of striped tape blowing in the summer breeze, a breeze that was getting hotter as the day grew later. Let's check this out, I say, and sure enough, there is the trail, a dusty switchback cut in the side of a bank that falls almost straight down into a gorge whose bottom we can't see.

Michael begins his ritual pack loading, and my girl-stud love for simplicity, for survival with minimal tools, kicks in. Into his backpack: chest-high waders, wader boot with felt bottoms and small spikes for walking on slippery rocks, the temperature logger and activating devices, bricks, a notebook encased in a metal protector, pens and pencils. He is a scientist, he tells me. Scientists need these things. I am a wild girl, I tell him. Meanly, I make him pack his equipment down the trail and we descend, not knowing whether this is the right place, not knowing whether to trust Brush Cutter and this symbolic marking tape, not knowing anything for sure, we move down the trail, a combination of sliding, climbing, side-stepping. Michael has forgotten his knee brace, an essential tool for someone whose anterior cruciant ligament has been gone since his high school sports glory days. Still full of my own survivalist simplicity, I encourage him to continue but do not take his back pack for him. He complains about whether Brush Cutter knew what he was talking about.

We are somewhat reassured when we get to the bottom of the trail and find more striped tape tied to brush, a sign that others had been there before us, a sign that at once reassures us that this hike is on course, while at the same time disappoints the girl-stud in me that someone has been here before us. We walk across a flat flood plain filled with grasses and berry bushes, past a circular fire pit made of river rocks – another sign that someone else had made this journey. We

light as to not be there at all. The families are singing Jesus, I Come on the shore as my father holds my hand and leads me into the ice-cold waters of the small lake. "Out of the darkness, into the light," they sing as my bare feet sink into the muck of the lake and the cold, cold water rises up past my waist. My father's hands smelling of Old Spice rest on my shoulders and he raises one and speaks an incantation whose words I can't recall, but which sums up for all a choice, made public, to accept the traditions and scriptures, to affirm a faith in God. I am asked to say something in response to "Do you take Jesus as your personal savior?" and I must have said yes because my father takes his lifted hand, places it over my mouth and nose, puts his other hand on my back and tips me backwards, into the water, icy cold and shivering, then quickly raises me up again in time to hear him say "... to walk in a new life." My hand in my father's, I am pulled ashore, out of the muck of my sins, into a warm blanket held by my mother, into the arms of the ladies of the church. Water drains from my hair and my nose and ears. This was to be the death of sin, the symbolic burial and rebirth, the washing away of the old life, the new life just begun. As I stood that day shivering in my skinny eight-year-old's body, I watched other people and their baptisms, sang other songs about water. In retrospect, I wonder if my father realizes how well his baptism took in me, how I might have wandered from the religion, but not the transcendence created by this watery act, how I re-enact this immersion over and over in an attempt to revitalize my own life and somehow, connect these waters to my own.

Michael is exhausted because, without my help, he has carried 50 pounds on his bad back and bad knees, an exhaustion made worse by his oxygen-thieving habit of sneaking cigarettes at least two or three times a day. He recovers nicely, though, and with his proper place on the river firmly established, he begins to put on his wetsuit-like waders and boots.

While Michael gears up, I gear down, entirely, a ritual meant to honor the girl-stud in me who doesn't need gear at all, who can stand the freezing cold; but also to honor the preacher's daughter, the lover of water, the child who was baptized in an ice-cold Alaskan creek, the woman who wishes to unite with this place that she loves without gear to divide us. I wade across the main stem to a gravel mound topped with young ash and willow trees. The mound of flat boulders of every size has a sandy bank. I go there, and look back across at the South Fork, splashing into the North Fork and realize that this sand is the creation of the joining of two rivers. This is the result of destruction, the fallout created by the energy of water washing against rock, eroding 200 million years of geology down to this very sandbar under my bare bottom – not for me, mind you, but under me, anyway. I watch the South come crashing into the North, and listen to what they have to say. It is a song. Upstream from the confluence, my husband in his gear is wading, searching for a place to drop his logger. I want to hear the song completely and so I finish undressing, slip out of my shorts and T-shirt and wade naked into the place where they two rivers collide. I am naked and I swim in the deep, cold pool gouged out of the basalt by the two rivers. Underwater in the freezing cold, but not too long, and above the water where the sun is hot, I listen to the song without understanding, and I let it drive bubbles into my body, so maybe the understanding can take place there, in my body, through osmosis.

Above the colliding waters, above the confluence of the north and south, my husband sings science songs and points at the place where he has dropped his logger. He claps for me as I jump in, naked, downstream from the place that is now being measured, every 30 minutes.

On the hike back up the hill, I carry his gear.

Cottonwood Creek, Wasilla

I was eight years old when I was baptized for the first time at Cottonwood Creek Christian Camp, near Wasilla, Alaska, the second year of my father's ministry to the Church of Christ in Anchorage. I had not intended to give my life to Jesus that spring when my mother and father packed up our clothes and bedding and drove us out to the camp to join 50 other families with children in the rustic cabins set on permafrost tundra. My intention, as it had been the year before, was to explore with my friends Rachel and Debbie the spongy sinkholes in the ground, the series of small lakes formed from melted ice, underground springs and liquid snow running in creeks toward the Susitna River system. But this summer, after watching all of my friends join the saved and redeemed, I asked my mother if I, too, could be baptized. I remember her smile and her hug. I vaguely remember the questions my father asked me about my motivation. Even at eight, I knew the right answers and the next day, along with several other kids older than me, I was baptized in the lake formed by dammed up Cottonwood Creek.

This was not a baptism like any other that followed it, but from this event came the underlying, transcendental connection I associate with baptism, with water. I am dressed in the thinnest white gauze robe, light as an angel's wing, so

light as to not be there at all. The families are singing Jesus, I Come on the shore as my father holds my hand and leads me into the ice-cold waters of the small lake. "Out of the darkness, into the light," they sing as my bare feet sink into the muck of the lake and the cold, cold water rises up past my waist. My father's hands smelling of Old Spice rest on my shoulders and he raises one and speaks an incantation whose words I can't recall, but which sums up for all a choice, made public, to accept the traditions and scriptures, to affirm a faith in God. I am asked to say something in response to "Do you take Jesus as your personal savior?" and I must have said yes because my father takes his lifted hand, places it over my mouth and nose, puts his other hand on my back and tips me backwards, into the water, icy cold and shivering, then quickly raises me up again in time to hear him say "... to walk in a new life." My hand in my father's, I am pulled ashore, out of the muck of my sins, into a warm blanket held by my mother, into the arms of the ladies of the church. Water drains from my hair and my nose and ears. This was to be the death of sin, the symbolic burial and rebirth, the washing away of the old life, the new life just begun. As I stood that day shivering in my skinny eight-year-old's body, I watched other people and their baptisms, sang other songs about water. In retrospect, I wonder if my father realizes how well his baptism took in me, how I might have wandered from the religion, but not the transcendence created by this watery act, how I re-enact this immersion over and over in an attempt to revitalize my own life and somehow, connect these waters to my own.

The North Umpqua, at Susan Creek

It is the morning before my 30th high school reunion in Roseburg. To prove that I am still the girl who graduated from this southern Oregon town, I have pitched my tent along the North Umpqua at River Forks. Now, groggy from lack of sleep, I drive up the North along Highway 38, past Glide, stop for a drink at Peel, take a hot hike with the tourists up to see Susan Creek Falls and the Indian Mounds for the umpteenth time in my life. Awake at last, I hike on a new trail from Susan Creek up the North Umpqua, past the new Susan Creek campground. I scramble down the layer of dust over the indigenous rock and find myself on a shelf above the river. I lower myself over the shelf to river level, where a 6-foot wide gravelly beach accommodates my privacy. I strip off my sweaty clothes and throw them down, throw off my shoes, feel the hot air hit my sweat, cooling. I step into the river, feel its incredible coolness, look into the green for any jutting rocks and, seeing none, dive, headfirst and naked, into the water. Cold, breathless cold hits me, all over, but I swim deeper, to the coldest part. Shock. I open my eyes and see the green-gray, see the bubbles come off my skin, look up a body's length above me at the upside-down ripples of the surface, the sun a slanted prism of light in the airy world, the other world. My heart is jumping with the cold, but I want to stay here as long as I can, looking up, looking around. Things are fuzzy and gray green, and I wish I had my snorkeling mask, but instead, I must guess at what I see: A long, fish-like shadow near the rocks – a late summer steelhead? A flash of silver – a trout? Something drops on the surface – a leaf? With my land eyes, I can see only what I suspect may be here: bubbles, mottled colors, shadows, surface, rock, fish. Without special tools, I can't see clearly underwater.

But this does not bother me because I am full of weightless joy -- and so I push my chest and stomach out, throw my head back, kick my legs and accomplish a backwards loop halfway, stopping when I am upside-down to put my hands on the bottom of the river. I can stand on my hands here, see? I show off for the shadowy steelhead. On land, I have not been able to stand on my hands for 20 years. In the water, I am young again. I am the teen-ager who graduated from Roseburg High School, 1974.

And now it is time to surface, to take this joy, this baptism, back to land, to add it to the others. I am an air-breathing mammal. Too much cold, too much water, can kill me. But a little can revive me. When I climb out of the water, onto the banks of the North Umpqua, I feel the pull of earth on my body parts again. I am heavy, but with the memory of lightness.

Blest be the tie that binds. This is the song the Christians sang to me as I was helped out of the waters of Cottonwood Creek, dripping into the air of a cool Alaskan summer. It is a song of the rivers, of baptism. It is a part of me.

Other waters in which I have been baptized:

Opal Creek, at the falls.
 Bradley Lake and Bradley Creek, Bandon.
 Cook Inlet, Anchorage.
 Columbia River, Sauvie's Island
 Willamette River, at Riverview Park, at Buena Vista
 Ash Creek
 Rickreall Creek, at Nesmith Park, at Black Rock
 Little Luckiamute, at the Falls
 Pedee Creek, at Monmouth Peak
 Luckiamute River, at the Park
 North Umpqua River, between Diamond Lake and River Forks
 South Umpqua River, at River Forks
 Deer Creek, Roseburg
 Diamond Lake
 Crater Lake

Umpqua Hot Springs
 McCreddie Hot Springs
 Cougar Hot Springs
 Belknap and Foley springs
 Calapooya River, at Sutherlin and Nonpareil
 Union Creek, south of Prospect
 Fish and Buckeye lakes
 Illinois River in the Kalmiopsis
 Sixes River
 North, Middle and South forks Coquille River
 Deschutes River at Sunriver
 Paulina Creek
 Little Lava Lake
 Upper and Lower Klamath Lakes
 Clear Lake, at Lakeport, California.
 Crooked and Ochoco rivers at Prineville
 John Day River
 Sandy River
 Mollala River
 Dean Creek
 Cow Creek at Canyonville
 Cavitt Creek above Glide
 Little River near Knudtson's place
 McKenzie River at the bridge near U of O
 Siuslaw River
 Nestucca River at Beaver
 South Santiam at House Rock
 North Santiam at Fishermen's Bend
 The Indian Ocean at Colombo
 The Little Basses, Sri Lanka
 The Atlantic Ocean at the Fortella, Portugal
 The Mediterranean, Spanish, French and Italian shores
 Main River, Germany
 Neckar River at Tubingen

At night, I drink margaritas and smoke clove cigarettes with my girlfriends
 from the Class of 1974. We talk about running rapids in our inner tubes, from
 Amacher Park to the Forks. I tell them I camped out last night and then went
 skinning dipping in the North this morning. They laugh and tell me I haven't
 changed a bit.

LUCKIAMUTE RIVER COYOTE

As the new chairman of the Luckiamute Watershed Council, Michael is on a mission to see every important part of his charge, and furthermore, to take me there too. Today, he is taking me to the top of Monmouth Peak, the highest point in the Luckiamute River watershed – the main stem which is to the south of the Little Luckiamute. Although he has been here before, he is easily lost so he has meticulously, scientifically written down every turn, every road number he took on his last trip. We are going up miles of four-wheel-drive Pedee Creek Road and then up another road with only a number designation following a smaller creek and then up other numbered roads where there are no longer any creeks. These gravel roads were built for and are used primarily by logging trucks. We drive in and out of federal and private forest land, the boundaries between the two starkly obvious by the sudden absence of trees on private land – or if there are trees, they are young and choked with scotch broom. But despite the clear-cuts, high places are never without their awesome beauty. As we round the bends, pickup tires sliding on the gravel at the edge of the world, we can look below us down the Coast Range to the south, or east to the Cascades, across the valley drained by our Luckiamute. We drive through areas that look as if bombs have hit them, burned and blasted away whatever was there, leaving only great blackened stumps of once-glorious trees perhaps, or something smaller, like an owl or a foxglove flower. Still, looking back over our shoulders, it is possible to see that not all is devastated in the clear-cut world, that there are patches of green and gold and darker green and black thick forest above and below us.

We go as far as we can go on this road until we get to a locked gate, where Michael stops and announces: this is it, I got us here. We high five each other and

I reach down for my bag to begin preparations for hiking the remainder of the way to the top of Monmouth Peak.

Just then, not five seconds after we had stopped, Michael turns his head from the rear view mirror and tells me low, quietly intense, “Get the camera. Quick. There’s a coyote right behind us.”

I grab the camera and turn my head, lean out the open window and look. Not 20 feet behind our truck, loping away down the road in the opposite direction, is a gray coyote, healthy and certain. I draw my camera up to my face, thinking that I could at least catch its retreat, could catch the bounce of its hips, the shape of its ears, the color of its thick fur in a setting not quite wild and untouched but nonetheless, suited to this animal. I thought I could catch its retreat but instead, about 50 feet away, it turned and looked straight at the camera. I took a picture, and then looked back. This is where time stops, where I lose myself.

If there is one thing I will take away from my higher education, it will be this: Education has helped me hone my talent for making something large of something very small, like the glance of a coyote. Mountains of molehills, a cynic might say. Belly-button inspection – I’ve said that myself. When I read the essays of my favorite essayists, “The Tucson Zoo,” by Lewis Thomas, and “Living Like Weasels,” by Annie Dillard, for example, I first rolled my Oregon girl-stud eyes at their astonishment at two events much like the one I was experiencing today with Coyote. My pioneer survivalist reaction was to scoff at their city slicker fascination with wild animals. What a bunch of Easterners, I thought, four-wheeling across their essays with my nature-girl mentality, arrogant in my hiking, canoeing, fishing, hunting, making fire, identifying and gathering food plants and

shelter-making skills. As disarmed as I was by Dillard and Thomas and other essayists' skills at writing of the natural world, my first instinct I confess was toward one-upmanship. I have had meetings with wild elk, deer, even cougar. But I have come to understand the essayists' deeper intentions. They ask me to look closely at the world outside my own arrogance, outside of myself. Look at the complexities in the natural world. Lose yourself in them, they say. See what they have to tell you.

A minute, maybe less, has passed since Michael told me to grab my camera. In that minute, the coyote paused in his unconcerned saunter, turned for a moment and then slowly loped a ways farther up the road toward a dense stand of trees shored up with thick underbrush. After I took my two or three photos, Coyote turns again to look at me, ears erect, and now stands his (or her?) ground to look at me again. A minute has passed and still he stands there, looking.

This is memory: the look is frighteningly close, directed at me. Coyote is large and meaty, its coat thick and standing on end, its legs muscular, its whole bearing dramatized by the huge fir trees behind it. Memory makes Coyote strong, threatening, a look directed at me. Memory is self-centered and egotistical. Memory, and the writing of it, establishes me and the Coyote as players on a stage where we are the stars, the only players. We are the menace and the intruder focused on one another.

Looking at the pictures a few days later, I realize that memory can distort reality, but also that pictures don't tell the whole story. Coyote is smaller than I remembered, and farther away. His fur is thin and patchy. His tail is tucked between his back legs. He is not looking directly at me but probably at the green

truck in which I am sitting, a truck that for Coyote, might be a herald of noise and destruction. More importantly to me, my pictures failed to catch the connection I made outside of myself that day, the imaginary connection I made with a wild thing. I had hoped my camera would capture the wildness, the incredible look, the feeling of awe I felt when I saw this wild thing, but what I found is the photo was not enough – at least not in my hands. I have discovered that I need words, I need to write, I need to make more of Coyote than what I saw with my eyes to make real my connection.

Back in the truck, my husband watches me finish taking pictures and warns, half-joking: “That bad boy could tear you from limb to limb.” We watch the coyote lope off slowly, his head hung down as if he were following a scent in the opposite direction, into the darkest part of the woods, away from the clearcut and the road and the green monster truck in which we are sitting.

My first instinct is to agree with my husband and remain safely in the truck, doors closed, hiking postponed for the day when there would be no dangerous wild animals to threaten my steps on their land. Tucking that instinct instead into my hiking bag, I climb out of the truck and walk toward a pile of sticks discarded by the logging operation that leveled the trees below us. I choose a long, hard, sharp-ended one about an inch thick and taller than me. I tell my husband it will make a wonderful walking stick, but I am really thinking (inspired by Coyote’s nearness) that it will also make a decent weapon. I take a few practice stabs at the air with my stick, looking over my shoulders often as we begin our climb. Eventually I fall into the rhythm of climbing up the steep path up Monmouth Peak, the edge of Coyote’s look cutting into the back of my neck.

The thing about climbing to the tops of mountains is this: you look up and it seems the top is just a few feet away and then you round the corner of the trail and there it is again, another, higher hill to climb. Michael-of-the-bad-knees is prone to setting an impossible pace for himself, and so it generally falls to me to be the slower-downer, the encourager, the not-giver-upper, which is, in retrospect, a positive spin-off of my girl-stud make-up. Barely 500 feet up the steep hill, my husband stops and suggests we have gone far enough. I laugh and say something like "let's just go up around the corner and see what's there," and this keeps him moving, slowly, stopping often to look at digitalis, noble fir, daisies, ferns, incredible panoramic views of the Luckiamute's valleys merging into the Willamette. A cool, strong wind is blowing from the southwest but we are protected on that side most of the hike by the intact forest, the deforested portion falling away in patches below us to the east. At one stop, Michael and I argue over whether a short, yellow pea-like plant is a young scotch broom or some other plant, Michael on the side of "some other" and I on the side of the invader species, the interloper. Carefully, my biologist husband shows me the difference in the leaves and stems between the two plants. One has rounded leaves and delicate stalks, the other, sharp dark narrow leaves and hard stalks, completely different except for the flower, but even there, the flowers are grouped differently. This knowledge evokes for me at once wonder and fear. Wonder in that this native plant is so similar to the invader, and fear that this is an invader that can take over every inch of ground bared by tree-falling.

Later, back at my house with my *Wetland Plants of Oregon and Washington* handbook opened before me, I see that this pretty yellow plant that looks like a young Scotch broom is probably a trefoil, of the pea family, and that

there are two kinds, a native and a similar introduced, invader species. The native bog trefoil is indigenous to Oregon's wet prairies and wet woodlands from sea level to the mountains west of the Cascades. The native can be solid yellow or cream colored or both, but the invader is pure yellow. I look at the pictures I took on the mountain and am still unsure which trefoil this was.

Back on the mountain, almost to the top, I am unaware that there are any invader trefoils as I round the corner and see them spread before me, a creamy-yellow carpet spread out on the mountainside. I take a deep breath of surprise, enough to stop my feet in front of the meadow full of trefoil, gently waving in the forest-protected breeze. The meadow, maybe two acres (or maybe my mind dramatizes this, too, as it did the look from the coyote), slopes down from our path on the ridge, ending in a wooded area of conifers. Yellow heads a foot off the ground, compound oblong leaves green and smooth smiled and waved at me. Yellow flowers in mountain sunshine. The happiest moments are like this: unexpected fields of flowers on a mountain where anything could happen. You could be torn from limb to limb by a coyote. You could be replaced by something stronger, bigger, more durable than yourself. You could be waving your head in a coastal breeze on a partly-sunny spring day on Monmouth Peak. Whether I am the interloper, the invader or the native, there is the keen awareness of my precarious situation, the source of joy, of fear, of wonder. That is why I came here.

There was another look when time stood still: two years ago, north of Monmouth Peak at the Little Luckiamute, at my favorite place on the flat rocks above the falls at Falls City, in April on a fine sunny day. The water was still high when I walked down the trail to my place on the rocks, to the water-scoured-out

hole in the creek bedrock my son John nicknamed “the bathtub,” not be confused with “the Jacuzzi,” which is in the middle channel. The bathtub is aptly named. When the water level falls in the summer, the bathtub edges emerge but stay full of water refreshed from the foot end, which faces upstream. The back of the bathtub is at the edge of my favorite sunning rock. This is place where, in the summer, I dip quickly into the freezing coolness of the Little Luckiamute, a shock to hot skin, a ritual never performed without squealing intonations, yelps, poetry of the skin in mountain-fed river.

But on this early spring day two years ago, I did not intend to swim in the biting cold water. I was in no hurry as I approached the bathtub that April. The popular swimming hole above the falls was desolate and empty that day, still clear of the diapers and cans and other trash that would eventually litter the rocks here in the summer. I walked up to the bathtub, intending to put my bare feet in, to feel the coldness for a few biting seconds, to know this place through my skin. Just upstream from the bathtub, a copse of poison oak shades a huge boulder which sits in the stream collecting gravel. I have wondered some summers lying on my stomach, looking into the tub and the gravel upstream, why the tub does not fill with gravel too. All I can guess is that the river hits the tub directly here before it bends slightly around the rock I am on, depositing its gravel to one side, scouring this hole directly before it.

On this spring day I am a ballerina with my toes poised above the water. I bend at the waist, hands holding back my hair, looking over my feet into the tub at the reflection of my face in the water.

But I am not alone in there. Beneath my reflection is a monster, stout legs perched on the bottom of my tub, gills flared out like dragon’s wings, looking at

me with wide open brown eyes. This is a miniature dragon underwater, I think, and I put my prima donna foot down on the rock and step back, scared that this animal – it seems three, maybe four feet long! – will come charging out of its watery tub to bite my feet, pull me in, eat me alive, kicking and screaming and thrashing without anyone knowing what had happened. A split second passes and my curiosity and senses recover. Feet on the ground, I cautiously bend over the tub again to see. The animal has turned and is swimming away, upstream. I see it is less than a foot and a half long at most, its movement waving and snake-like underwater, its long tail and the flash of a lighter-colored underbelly the last thing I see as it moves upstream. It looks like a giant salamander with a scaleless body, smooth-looking brown splotched skin, four powerful legs drawn back for streamline swimming, rounded face and now, gills drawn in and flush to the body. I do not know until later, when I tell my husband this story, that I have made an apt comparison, that I have seen a Pacific giant salamander, an uncommon animal not usually seen this far down in the watershed. I do not know that this amphibian may have been flushed out of a higher stream by Boise Cascade or Willamette Industries or even smaller company logging operations working this spring on forestland above these falls. From field guides and dozens of websites that worship the world's largest salamander, I learn that this animal is the only salamander with a voice, a barking voice usually emitted through snapping jaws when confronted by man. I also learn, that like its smaller rough-skinned newt cousins with which I have been more intimately engaged as a child (picking up, throwing, torturing, chasing, capturing) this salamander also carries poison in its tail. Unlike my smaller prey, however, this giant salamander can whip its tail around and sting you with the poison.

Post-experience, safe from the possibility of attack, I am intrigued by this danger. I look at the website pictures that show the massive head, the strong shoulders, the beady eyes, not yellow as I remember them but reflective, clear, and the gills flaring out, smaller than I remember, but nonetheless imposing.

If you could write this essay, Coyote and Pacific Giant Salamander, what would you tell us? We invade your home and I am moved off-center, out of the spotlight. Darwin's evolutionary ladder, which places me at the top, in the reflection of Coyote's look, seems skewed and misguided. I write about the connection, about what belongs and doesn't belong in the Luckiamute watershed, but you two, what would you write? This I must suppose by dropping arrogance, losing myself and looking into the face of nature. It is looking back, and I must confess. I don't know how, exactly, to read the look. I must confess. I need help to read it.

SKUNK CABBAGE WADER

Today I am the mother and it is Mother's Day, and so we are driving to the beach, my husband Michael at the wheel, my teen-age son John in the back seat. We cross Ash Creek three blocks from our house, and then again at Highway 99W. Right there, my favorite bird starts up out of a grass seed field, over the power lines and telephone poles, its neck crooked for flight, its dinosaur wings spread in a slow-motion flapping, more ancient than any bird I've ever seen. Herons love the wetlands. They love the slow waters; they are lovers of muck, skunk cabbage, weed waders, sneaking up on hapless prey, picking through shallows, ignoring the flowers, sneaky. But when they fly, wings spread across the sky, 100 feet wide, they are like poetic renditions of themselves. I suck in air when I see this. It is not possible that this bird can rise from the muck, lift its heavy wings, in beautiful flight.

My dad loves birds. I grew up with a bird-lover, and so did he. He loved to tell me and my three brothers stories about his own dad, a millworker, taking him for walks in the Coos Bay marshlands, listening for the songs, looking for the flash of feathers. His father could name birds by the sound of their songs, my father said. My father speaks of these walks with his father with a sort of holy reverence, and so when I see a bird like this heron, I think of my dad.

It's strange how something like a blue heron starts me back up a stream I thought I'd already crossed. A heron flies up and there I am, reliving my mom's death in a highway crash, blaming my dad the driver, a blame derived from layers of my own muck too thick to shake easily from my feet. As clumsily as this huge bird, I am weighed down in unreasonable anger, weighed down in childhood

memories of being a rootless gypsy girl, moving from place to place. Heavy are my mother's gentle tones as she announces the family's next move, from Alaska back to Oregon. Mom is comforting, pleading, asking us to understand. But I am nine and I don't want to leave my friends again, and so I cry and rant and demand that she stay behind in Anchorage with me, never thinking about her, that this move back to Oregon is a return home. What kind of a girl thinks of her mother as hers alone, and not someone who might also be tired of wandering? The same kind of girl who holds in her childish heart anger at her father that weighs down her flight out of the wetlands.

Here's the muck that weighs me down. I have good reasons to be angry with my father. He spanked me and my brothers with sticks and belts, and he followed the beatings with excuses like "this is because I love you." As a mother, I am appalled that a parent could treat a child with such violence. Righteous anger, indignation holds me, sucks at my feet. I spent the first 18 years of my life sitting on hard bench pews, anchored to the floor of the Church of Christ of whatever town we lived in, three times a week minimum, squirming with restlessness, unable to move away from the incessant noise of preaching. Stagnant anger, a cesspool, anger held and rotting and bubbling with bacterial justification. Don't I have a right to be angry? Weeds grab at me. I cannot fly.

This is what the heron sets off, what I tell my husband as we turn off Highway 99W up Orr's Corner Road. He's heard it before but he is listening politely because it's Mother's Day. Less polite but present, our son has headphones on, heavy metal angst drowning out my discord.

As we drive west, we follow Ash Creek upstream into Dallas. The creek here is confined to a straight, uncompromising ditch, made of waters gathered

from farms and mills and factories and even borrowed from Rickreall Creek, which flows parallel to Ash Creek, within blocks of it in places. These two creeks would be together in a sort of harmonious swampy wetland but for human hands that divided them up, drained the rich soil beneath the swamp and sent them both to narrow ditches that flow quickly to the Willamette. Left to themselves, both creeks might have slowly wound across five miles of Willamette River bottomland, maybe never finding their ways to the river, maybe sitting around, percolating slowly into the clay and loam. But farmers don't like that sort of indecision so they tiled the bottomland and funneled the water into Ash Creek's ditches, nice and neat. This whole creek diversion history created some unnamed bad blood among those who govern these shared waters, people who thought the water belonged to them. Those people slog around in their unnamed anger sometimes, like I slog around in my righteous indignation.

We drive west on Highway 18, through Grand Ronde and into the Van Duzer Corridor, a low, slow sliding pass through the Coast Range, the same set of mountains that supplies fresh rain and spring water for my diverted, ditched Ash Creek. We are in the mossy wet upper reaches of several watersheds, and I am distracted, trying to figure out which waters we are driving over, which bridges belong to which rivers, trying to put the waters in their places. But even at high points in the watersheds, beginnings are not always clear. I get mixed up in the watersheds. I know the South Yamhill flows to the east, to the Willamette, and I know it goes all the way to the Columbia, past Portland where I was born, past Warrenton at the mouth, where my parents lived when I was spawned. This I can trace with my finger in lines black and blue across the map.

But as we pass the Coast Range's Rogue River, I can see out the window pieces of another creek or river up here in the corridor, and I realize I'm not sure where they go, east or west. With my eyes, it looks to me as if even the rivers themselves are not quite sure where they are going. I see swampy pools full of skunk cabbage. I see water is running clear and clean through them, beautifully watering dense oak, mossy overhanging maple, I see Oregon iris popping up in dry spots, but then the pools seem to stop and stay there, all calm and sweet-looking. This irritates me for some reason. How can I know where one creek leaves off and where another begins? How do these creeks leave their little mountaintops? I feel the cool, clarity of anger bubbling up again, and am determined to follow it out west, to the ocean. I look again to the map, a guide, but it is too broad, too general. I fold it up, impatient. Maps are sometimes helpful, sometimes not. Sometimes there's no specific river out of the skunk cabbage. Maybe it all seeps down into the bedrock of the Coast Range until it finds a weak spot and springs up, into the air, to join a new creek, a defined creek, and then a river and then the Pacific.

When I was 19 my dad's mother died, and he and I went down to Coos Bay so that he could help his sisters and brothers close up her house. It was spring. I was a restless freshman at Umpqua Community College. While Dad and his siblings worked, I wandered down to the docks in Coos Bay. There, I got a job on a commercial fishing boat and took off a week later, fishing for salmon out of Coos Bay. After a month or two, I hitch-hiked up the coast to Ilwaco, where I got a job on another boat, fishing for salmon and tuna. This is where my Daddy issues get all mucked up. My dad brought me to Coos Bay and blessed me on this adventure, possibly against his better judgment. What's more, he wrote poetry

about it, like he wrote about everything. I still have a worried poem he wrote one stormy night when he knew I was fishing off the coast maybe 100 miles out into the Japanese currents, with nothing but me and a skipper and a 47-foot piece of flotsam to save me from swells as big as mountains. It starts out with something like "Far out, far out on the ocean tonight ..." and when I first read it, I thought he might have longed for the danger and freedom that I had, the deck jumping under my feet, salt spray and fish scales on my pillow. He's a writer, my dad is. He's written two books about the Bible, a bajillion sermons, and then of course, the occasional poem. I'm a writer too and, sometimes, I write poems for my dad. He also wrote a hundred love letters to my mother, all of which I have in a box, stored away in my attic, a box I pull out now and then because they speak to my mother in a way I could not. My father wrote poems to my mother, too.

I lift my finger off the map as my son and husband and I enter Lincoln City. We drive through Lincoln City, to the beach at the end of 51st Street, past Mo's Clam Chowder. I have asked to come here because I have fond memories of many summer afternoon trips there with my son, with my older daughter Emmylou, and with Michael. John loves the chowder here, swears it can only be enjoyed when it is served hot in a Mo's Restaurant, after which we all take a short wandering walk along the Siletz River to the Pacific followed by sandy play until we get tired. This is the routine I plan to reenact today, although this time, our college girl, Emmylou, is not with us.

But plans are maps, sometimes too general, indistinct, devoid of experience. Before we get to Mo's, we pass my mom's old school, now the boarded up DeLake Grade School, and then a sign that says something about

“Taft.” With a shock, I realize we are driving on sacred ground, that I have tricked myself into something meaningful, that this is Mother’s Day and I have accidentally come to the place where my Mother was a girl, was raised. I start to tell my husband and son sentimental stories about her. I talk about the love letters and how much she fell in love with my dad— a love, pure and simple.

Look, I tell my husband. I’m sorry about what I said about my dad, and my husband nods. He knows how it is because 15 years ago he was there lying next to me in bed when the phone call came. Dad had been preaching in Coos Bay. It was late October, a stormy night, Highway 42; they were returning home to Roseburg. It wasn’t his fault that a chip truck crashed across the wet curves just ahead of him. It wasn’t his fault that my mother, who hated seat belts, had loosened hers and tipped back her seat to sleep. It wasn’t his fault that he slammed into that truck, throwing her through the window. None of that was his fault. But sometimes this realization makes me feel swamped, divided, as if I don’t know where I am or how I should feel. Anger may be the hardest thing to identify among all the other things a skunk cabbage wader like myself must navigate; harder to know than winged joy, and more pervasive.

Waters flow around on top, until eventually they sink in or get diverted or cut off. Meanwhile, skunk cabbage takes root and grows, everywhere, flourishes in the muck left behind. That’s the amazing thing: that life goes on. My boys and I eat chowder where the Siletz flows into the Pacific, at Mo’s, at Taft. These are places I know.

My belly full of Mo's chowder cooked up from clams grown in my momma's own back yard, we all walk down to the beach and while Michael watches us from his perch on a log John and I walk out to a sandy peninsula we know will soon be underwater because the tide is rising. We know because we can see the tide chomping away at the shore, eating banks of sand and swallowing other peninsulas nearby. Yet we go out onto the spit of sand and try to second guess the Pacific; we poke at shells and stuff them in our pockets, kick down sandbanks, skip rocks out to the seals whose heads are bobbing in the surf, play a little "you're it" which I can't win anymore because John's legs are now longer than mine and he's far faster than I. When the tide cuts off our last connection to the mainland, we are on a sand island of our own and for a few minutes, I feel dangerously alive. I want to let the tide cut me off, let my body float or swim, out the Siletz to the Pacific, over the salmon and the tuna, out to the Japanese currents, helplessly, happily, without any direction. I want to tell my son that my mother was an incredible woman who loved her husband and her children and her life, a woman who would have loved to skip with all of us in the sand along the Siletz with bare feet and kites flying. I want to tell him how useless it is to hold onto anger, but instead we roll up our pants, wade the tide back to the shore. The water is shallow and warm. My husband waves at us from his log. Seagulls are nagging over our heads. I check myself and look again. "Terns," I say to my son. Those are terns. I know this because my father told me. And then I tell my son stories about how my father loved birds and how my mother loved my father.

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ORIGINS AND DOMESTICITY

My cat, Mouth, is dying, and I can't stand it. He doesn't seem to mind much, his eyes closed, unable to move, but I do, waiting here intolerably long for him to die, helpless, unable to make anything work to stop the inevitable. We have taken him to the vet and fixed everything that can be fixed. But there is no fixing old age, the vet tells me.

My cat takes this in stride, or perhaps that is an unfit metaphor for a cat that can't rise from his favorite patch of bark chips behind the flower bed. This morning my husband picked Mouth up out of the chips and brought him inside. Mouth was covered in morning dew and purring, but I could feel his bones through his fur, hard reminders of what lies beneath us all, flimsy stuff, not much that is solid or real; breakable stuff, delicate, the only thing between us and our hearts.

This week has been the only time in Mouth's seventeen years he has stayed still inside the house, uncomplaining. I've brought him inside today where it is at least warmer in the morning and not damp, where I can watch him. For once he does not stand at the door waiting to bolt out, crying to be let out. He hates the indoors. He is an outdoor cat.

My husband's parting words hang over me, the cat and I: "Maybe we should take him to the vet and put him down." There is pain in Michael's face when he says this – real concern for our cat's suffering – but "we" means me. Michael is on his way to work 25 miles from here. It falls to me, the person at home, to decide when Mouth will die, but I am reluctant as long as he is uncomplaining and peaceful. For now, I let him sit on my rug near my desk in the

kitchen nook, in a patch of dappled sunlight. When I talk to him, he looks at me and I see his yellow-green eyes are glossing over, foggy. His neck shakes with the effort of lifting, then his head goes down on his paws. He is still purring. I don't know how long I will wait until I take him to the vet. I watch for a sign from my cat, but I realize this is silly. I decide that he will die at home. That decided, I take a drive. Secretly, I am hoping my cat will die in the dappled sunlight, quietly alone, without me watching, but three hours later when I come home, he lifts his head for a moment and sighs, complains for the first time in a long, yeeeowww, and then returns to his labored breathing and deep sighing.

While my cat is dying, I return to writing letters to businesses situated along Ash Creek. I am asking them to pick up trash under bridges near them, to help improve the creek. Suddenly, I can't sit and write anymore.

For three restless hours, I went to find the source of Ash Creek. I wanted to find out how things begin, how this creek that flows through my neighborhood begins, and how it became the urbanized, channelized, unwild thing that it is once it reaches my house. With some measure of guilt surrounding my domesticated cat, maybe I was hoping the creek would speak to me about its domesticated life. I was looking for the *raisons d'être*, for the creek and my cat, their reasons for existing. In Oregon, in the Northwest, with watershed restoration efforts focused on the wild and rugged rivers, the salmon-bearing streams, the urban watersheds have been fiscally neglected, set on the back burner. Domestic streams, in their highly culverted, diverted, channelized states, do not evoke the wonder that salmon-bearing streams do. This bothered me on this day of the dying cat, and when I am bothered, I drive, I move. Maybe I was looking to the creek for

comfort, as I had when I was 12. Maybe I was looking again to Ash Creek for answers about how life is measured from the beginning to end, looking for a reason to honor this domesticated water, this urban pet, this home life.

Ash Creek flows maybe 14 miles from source to its confluence at the Willamette River, a creek that flows through all of Polk County's major towns except for West Salem. It is a creek that, through all of those towns, is largely ignored, hidden, abused, given only the barest notice. Maybe it is my complicity in that neglect that causes me to speak in guilty terms when I describe my cat and my creek. But as I drive away from my dying cat, upstream to the source of my dying creek, I wonder if there is something more I can do for myself, for my creek; something more than feel sorry that we have not been wild for some time, and that our wildness may be lost. Domestication requires more complex thinking than does wildness. Wildness is clearly original, the basis, the building blocks. Domestication requires stopping, slowing, organizing, confining. My husband compliments me on cookies I've baked from scratch, calling me a "Domestic Goddess." I tell him I'd rather die than be domesticated, but this is just our ritual banter. He knows I think of myself as wild but live a domestic life and love it.

North Fork Ash Creek is domesticated, ditched, channeled and fed from springs and drainage pipes, from its source in the hills between Dallas and Falls City, to its confluence with the south and middle forks. I know this, and yet my creek has its roots in wildness, just as my cat is related to cougars and bobcats.

Ash Creek was not always channelized. All three forks of it, with the exception of its main stem's last mile, were once swampy wetlands, the home of frogs and fish fry and herons and rushes and reeds and a whole host of wetland

amphibians and mammals and plants that counted on the way the water sits on Willamette Valley loam, a silty, thick and sticky clay that holds water gently, like a baby, not like the gravel or rocks, which let the rain slip quickly down through their fingers, passing it off to the rivers. Early settlers here did not see the swampy wetlands as nursing mothers to wetland creatures, however. Instead, when early farmers came to this wet land above Ash Creek and saw the brown-red-gold earth beneath the water, they heaved a sigh of relief because they could farm this land, they could drain the wet away and plant grass for their dairy cows or grow rye and wheat, or fruit trees or berries or anything. And so my Ash Creek, the entire middle of its north and middle and south forks, once unchanneled fingerlets and ponds and swamps, in the 1930s through the 1960s was tiled into dug-out channels, and those channels were funneled into ditches and, gradually, farmland emerged, like islands of hope for farmers who worked to feed America – a hungrier America than we now know. I have a book that recounts the history of this draining of the Willamette Valley's wetlands chronicled by the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, a group to which I belonged for several years. "America's attention became focused upon the problems of soil erosion and its tragic consequences during the devastating Dust Bowl of the mid-1930s, when once-fertile farmlands were reduced to aridity by drought, insects, dust storms and the lack of soil conservation practices," wrote Charles V. Liles, in his introduction to the book. The Depression, a killer combination of joblessness and hunger, prompted local farmers to ask of Ash Creek's wetlands a big favor: become something else, something less free, something less wild, something constrained and conservative. Become our tool for survival. Please, grow our meals, feed our children, keep our homes.

Today, those waters that were once wetlands – once spread unconfined atop the flat Willamette Valley flood plains, once drying and cracking in the summer and muddy swamps in the winter, once havens for diseases and breeding mosquitoes, once out of control and filled with life – are now drained and confined to ditches. Ash Creek's ditches now trickle through pastures and under roads and through 10 blocks of Weyerhaeuser mills and into sluggish-brown mill and private ponds to be sprayed over fields of nursery stock or lawns or log piles before it seeps back to the channel past Van Well Lumber's huge warehouses and through the back dump yards of Tyco Electronics computer chip manufacturers and past Kinzie Machine's welding shop and through horse pastures and Riddell's endless grass seed fields and across Highway 99W, meeting up with the middle fork near the Monmouth sewer ponds and then continuing past Talmadge and Ash Creek schools and past a thousand residents who live in apartments and houses on the edge of the creek in its deeply trenched bank at last with trees shading it, closer, closer to the Willamette now, into its natural channel past Pioneer Park where it joins the south fork at last whole and flowing and less than a mile to the Willamette, past Johnny's Auto Wreckers tumbling over car bodies sunk into the water, past my childhood trail under the old railroad bridge, past Boise Cascade's mill and its old log pond, past more houses, more lawns, under the new railroad bridge and Moothart's Market and past the old Indian burial grounds, long washed away, then out to the Willamette at last, at Riverview Park. What a life.

Yet, it is a life, and a life I love enough to understand better, to find the source. On my drive, I find the source of the North Fork up Liberty Road, in the foothills just northeast of Falls City. Ash Creek seeps out of the ground and swamps down a draw in the grass, past barns and cows and oak trees. It is a

swampy beginning that is humble like Jesus, like Moses, like Mohamed. Worthy of honor.

I don't know how to be both wild and domesticated, and I'm not sure how to honor the parts of my Ash Creek that must be both. I could look back and criticize how farmers and loggers and developers and homeowners have changed the creek. I could suggest that they should have not done what they did to the creek to save their own lives, and mine in waiting, and furthermore, that no more development take place on the creek, that its wildness must be revived. I could be angry and demand that Ash Creek be let alone, that it be left to wander and flood the wetlands forever. But in the blood that pumps through my domesticated heart, I know there is no going back for Ash Creek. We have built our cities and our farms and our mills and dairies on its banks. This cannot be undone. Just as I cannot return my cat to the jungle, where it would surely starve or be eaten, I cannot return my Ash Creek entirely to the wild without harmful consequences to it, and to me.

Michael and the Luckiamute Watershed Council, which he chairs, are focused on preserving and restoring salmon habitat. Ash Creek, which is included in his council's watershed concerns, harbors juvenile salmon at its mouth, but its forks have no history of salmon migration, and so the council's projects for habitat recovery in this region are focused on the Luckiamute River just south of Ash Creek. The Luckiamute is a river with plenty of history in steelhead and trout despite that river's use and abuse for more than 150 years by timber operations in the Coast Range and farms in the flatlands. Michael's council wants to

concentrate its conservation efforts on the Luckiamute River, where there is still hope to save the salmon.

Not entirely rational because of my emotional ties to the creek, I have often argued with Michael that Ash Creek should not be left to die, that improvements to it and protections for it are worth the efforts of the council, in addition to saving salmon. We live in the Ash Creek watershed, nearly 25,000 of us, I tell him. I show him a list of the names I have gathered of 71 businesses, farms and schools with property near or bordering the creek. Despite its lack of wild salmon, this is a creek we Ash Creek dwellers relate to every day. Whatever improvements the council makes to this domesticated creek will be seen, lived with, understood by more people than in the entire watershed of the rural and sparsely populated Luckiamute River. Could we begin to understand wildness by studying our compromised, domesticated, ditched, backyard creeks? I ask this, and my throat gets tight. Michael understands me, but he is practical, scientific. As it turns out, right now funding for projects on waterways in the Willamette River and Coast Range systems favors salmon habitat improvement. Unfunded dreams don't generally fly. But he agrees to this: Projects on Ash Creek could open some eyes to needs elsewhere.

My two cats would not even be here but for human interference in their natural genetic process. Seven thousand years ago in Jericho, according to archaeological records, cats were bred from small wild cats, possibly resembling the Northwest's mountain lion (I call them cougars) or the bobcat. Not surprisingly, cats and humans were domesticated together. Those of us who settled down and became farmers rather than hunter-gatherers needed a rodent-

eating friend to keep our grain stores intact, and cats fit the bill. By 3,500 B.C.E., the Egyptians were breeding cats for pets and worshipping gods made in their images. Domesticated for 7,000 years, how much of the wild cat remains? My healthy cat, Kharma, a Persian, hunts ferociously, lying in wait for the incautious bird that dares to touch down on our lawn. We have bird nesting boxes in our trees, but they remain ornamental, unfilled, thanks to our tree-climbing Kharma. For 12 million years, my cat has been an ambush-killer of smaller prey. Who am I to stop him? Creeks will meander. Kharma will kill. Conversely, Mouth, my dying cat, does not kill birds. When provoked by Kharma, however, Mouth will fight back. In fact our doctor has suggested that it was a bite from Kharma that began this killer infection that has weakened Mouth to death.

Kharma came into our lives about five years ago. I found him flopping on the road just a block or two from my Ash Creek trail, and I thought for sure he wouldn't survive the night. I was driving up from the Ash Creek bridge and had stopped at the intersection of Monmouth Street, at Central Plaza, when I saw Kharma fly out from underneath a truck, spat from oversized wheels. I saw the truck driver look back at Kharma's small flailing body on the street. I saw the driver slow as if considering what to do, and then speed up, away. At the green light, I crossed the road to Kharma.

Kharma was writhing around on the pavement, flopping, noiselessly, unable to move his back legs, dragging himself across the road with his front legs. It was pitiful and nauseating, but there was no blood. I guessed a broken back. I looked around quickly for a rock to put him out of this misery, thinking it was the kindest thing I could do. But this was a busy intersection, entirely paved and rockless, so I opted instead to pick Kharma up, put him in my back seat, still

flopping, and take him to Ash Creek Veterinarian Clinic nearby. There, I thought, they could give him a peaceful death. I offered to pay the bill and left. Two days later, the vet called me and asked me when I wanted to pick up “my cat.”

This is how Kharma – and Ash Creek – came to me. From wreckage, from an impossible situation. I cannot believe what cats and creeks can survive. Domesticated, settled, ditched, run over, yes. But still wild and strong-willed, able to recover a life that may not be perfectly wild, but a life, still. Kharma is the hunter of birds, of mice, of strings and pieces of ribbon waved before him. Kharma is young still. Mouth, on the other hand, is slipping fast. With cats, there may be a time when one must say goodbye. With creeks however, I’m not sure when that time is. So I hold on to Ash Creek, my panting, domesticated, dying friend.

I can’t put my cat to sleep, let alone shrug my shoulders, heave a sigh and quietly write off the Ash Creek watershed. There must be a point at which those of us who live along Ash Creek, who have a connection to her, will want to halt her degradation, preserve what remains of her wild ways. Where is that point, though, I wonder. Where does use of the creek turn to overuse. Where does use turn to greed and abuse. Am I trying to protect an imaginary wildness at the risk of losing housing for college students built in its floodplain, jobs for workers at a new factory that dumps its waste in its waters, homes for young families who fill our schools? Are we residents unreasonable to ask that developers install provisions that prevent polluted runoff; that grass seed farmers consider allowing 10 acres out of 500 to flood where Ash Creek will in the winter; that mill and

factory owners re-vision the creek as something more than a convenient dumping ditch. Is there a point at which we can agree that enough is enough?

I am clearly not the best person to decide, hanging on as I do to the domesticated and doomed, long after he should have been put to sleep. What I can see clearly though, is that Ash Creek is not the wild and scenic North Umpqua River, nor can it ever be. Even so, this domestic creek is valuable and I want it to live, to continue to teach us. Those of us who live here may know nothing more of wildness and freedom than what we experience along its banks. Are we willing to let that last, bird-eating vestige of wildness flow from our lives, too?

In the 1980s, when Charles V. Liles wrote the history of Oregon's conservation movement, I found it surprising that a group that emerged philosophically if not actually from the dusty, waterless world of Oklahoma's dried out grasslands would so quickly drain the wetlands of Oregon, letting loose of the water, the life-giving stuff whose absence had doomed their previous farms. Finding it covering these Oregon valleys, they directed the waters quickly off-site, an act that may someday doom then to the same kind of dusty death that gave life to the conservation movement. This drainage effort employed farmers and thousands of jobless workers in the Civilian Conservation Corps program, saving lives and families from starvation – which is no small consideration historically or personally, because that same Corps hired my teen grandfather, a job Grandpa Bowder claims made a man of him. By the 1940s, farming in Oregon refocused its efforts on providing a starving planet with groceries, and the freshly-drained bottomland of the Willamette Valley was poised to provide them. “Primary

emphasis on wartime productivity,” reads the conservation district’s calendar of events for 1943. By 1966, according to Liles, Polk County had formed its own conservation district in which “One of their primary activities has been drainage improvement within the area,” Liles said. That is not to say there weren’t a slew of new ponds and reservoirs proudly dug out of the wetlands, reservoirs of safely confined and useable water. But I wonder today what might have happened during this post-war ditching and draining of farmlands if my husband and I had walked the edges of Ash Creek’s wetland and begged: “Save it for the Western pond turtle and the red-legged frog; they need this land.” What if? We would have been laughed off the farm. Retrospect, review, regret, rethinking, repentance – all this is done in leisure, around warm, home fires, in the caves of domesticity, our bellies full of chowder. Louder than the need for wildness is the growling stomach, the crying baby, the sound of gunshot overhead. Croaking frogs, the blink of a turtle’s eye are sweet, soft sounds heard by those who live with the luxury of time to listen. I think it must be a waste of time to blame those who changed Ash Creek to feed themselves, and the world.

At some point though, my domesticated creek has become an abused, battered and mistreated creek, used for greed, not feed. This abuse, this overuse, is ruining its ability to teach us anything about wildness, and as a result, residents here seem to have lost respect for it, forgotten its potential.

My friends John Burt, long with the Oregon State University Extension Service, and Ken Hale, a technical advisor for the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service, smile when they tell me about some of the mistakes their agencies have made in the watershed, because they were made in the sacred name of water and soil conservation, of farming, of feeding people. When they first

arrived in their jobs, Ken's and John's concerns surrounding Ash Creek's watershed were farmer-based. By then, in the late 1960s, farmers were concerned with keeping the creek to its manmade banks, which were prone to erosion as the creek attempted to meander. "Creeks meander; that is their nature," John says now. But that was not what farmers wanted to hear. They wanted to hear how to keep their parts of the creek where it was – in the ditch along the property line, connected to the tiles, draining the wetlands that by that time were under the plow and yielding crops aplenty. So Ken and John and their contemporaries complied, found the perfect grass for keeping the banks intact – canary reed grass, a non-native grass with roots that plunge deep into the soil, holding it fast through floods of any kind offered up in the Willamette Valley. Thirty years later, they regret the decision to plant this grass, an expensive pest whose foothold in the creek has formed islands of tufted grass midstream, diverting Ash Creek around the islands and into the very banks farmers wanted to save. Thirty years later, top among priorities of the Ash Creek Water Control District is to kill the canary reed grass out of the creek, using poison or shade or both. "We didn't always give the best advice," Ken admits now. In retrospect, all is clearer.

This admission gives me hope. I see farmer Dave Riddell, a landowner on the North Fork between Dallas and Monmouth, turning several acres of his land back into wet, swampy fields. I see him and his neighbors planting trees for shade along the creek ditched by their grandfathers. At the same time, I see development in swampy fields where I once heard frogs croaking under a full moon. I see the cities of Independence and Monmouth and Dallas failing to follow through on promises from developers that they will mitigate or build for the frogs, for the turtles, for the trees, for the future of the watershed. Restoration, revival,

restitution, mitigation, swap, trade. In my long observation on Ash Creek, an observation both personal and professional, these are words that planners use when they realize what they are about to do, or what they have already done, may cause great damage. These are signals to those of us who love the creek that something is amiss. These are opportunities to ask: Do we need another development, or do we need to protect what is left of Ash Creek?

Two hours after I return from my trip up to Ash Creek's source, Mouth dies, quietly. I look at his fur moving in labored breaths one minute, type a few lines and then look again, and his fur is not moving. It is 4:30 p.m. on a lovely spring day in June, a day Mouth would have spent laying in the sun on our deck. When my husband comes home a half-hour later, we dig a hole next to our dog's grave, in front of our rose garden, under the ash and filbert trees, and place Mouth in it. As Michael shovels in the dirt, I hold Kharma-the-wilder, the Persian survivor. We scatter forget-me-not and zinnia seeds on the mound of good, rich, Ash Creek soil.

WORMS AT THE BOWDER REUNION

I am sitting with my uncle Brad at a reunion of the John Bowder clan, my mother's family. The reunion this year is near Remote, on Myrtle Creek, which eventually flows into the Middle Fork of the Coquille River at Highway 42, not 10 miles from where my mother died. Brad is my mother's youngest brother, and what amazes many non-family members is that Brad is also two years younger than I am, younger than my brother Bruce. The confusion of generations is because my grandmother, Eloise Hamar Bowder, was still having children when Mom left home at 17 to marry my father. "I turned 18 two weeks later." She reddened when, in my younger years, I marveled at her youthful marriage. A little more than a year after I was born, my mother, her younger sister Marilyn and my grandmother were all pregnant at the same time – my mother with Bruce, Marilyn with our cousin Rick, and Grandma with Brad, her last child.

I am sitting with Brad in the dining hall of the Myrtle Creek campground where we have gathered for our annual Bowder reunion. We have just eaten lunch, and the dishes are being cleared away by the lunch crew (I'm a dinner crew member). Across the table, we begin talking about water, about my work on this thesis, but Brad has steered the conversation to Christianity. It is a subject I try to avoid at our family reunions, but Brad has opened the can of worms and spread them out, slimy and wriggling, on the table before us. Why have I left Jesus, he wants to know.

One advantage to staying put, or disadvantage, I used to think, is that families stay in touch with you. I am settled now, but even when I was not, family

reunions were a summer mainstay, a touchstone, a promise of rootedness. My Oregon girl-stud persona thrives, mellows, expands at these reunions. My father's family, the Obersts, meets the fourth Saturday in July; we met last summer in Sherwood at his grandfather's farm. My grandmother's family, the Hamars, gathers the last Sunday in July in Dallas City Park. My grandfather Bowder's sisters and their families gather each summer at Honeyman Park. These afternoon picnics are quick catch-ups with family and friends. I didn't fully appreciate them until I was older, until I had children of my own. Until recently, I didn't fully understand how these families shape me, fill my personal watershed; how they have influenced my ideas, my thinking patterns, my stories. The watersheds I share with my family go deeper than the water, deeper than the blood, deeper than the genetic material. It goes to bedrock. Brad's can of worms won't puncture this rock, although I think they will try, to the death.

The weekend campout reunion with my mother's parents, brothers and sisters and their families – a campout that last summer included more than 60 – began in 1976 as an annual celebration of several birthdays in July, including my mother's on July 7, my grandfather's on July 11, and my aunt Marilyn's, also in July. Although attendance at the Big Bowder Reunion preceded this one, which included my grandfather's sisters and their families, as the John Bowder clan grew, they began gathering annually at my mother and father's house on the North Umpqua River. My mother was the oldest of seven children born to Eloise Hamar Bowder and John William Bowder. In our family's front yard, a two-acre oak savannah that sloped down to the North Umpqua River midway between Glide and Roseburg, on this incredible spot just below a portion of the river

declared Wild and Scenic, our relatives pitched tents and parked campers for an entire weekend of swimming, boating, and stories.

A serendipitous sandy beach, shallow and perfect for younger waders or for launching boats and rafts, formed annually below the sloping yard, despite floods that rose each Thanksgiving to wash it away. A cool, deep channel flowed between the sandy beach and the island across from the beach. There were hiding places on the other side of the island where cousins, aunts and uncles could sit and drink beer and smoke cigarettes out of sight from the tee-totaling clan. There were shallow channels above our house that flowed over gravelly rocks and boulders. These were channels that could be explored on inner tubes or in rubber rafts. In the summer there were sudden drops in the river that fell into rush-edged pools lined with snails, a natural tub in which I would sit for lazy hours during our reunion campouts, talking to cousins, to brothers, to aunts and uncles.

There is not enough room in a thousand essays to tell the stories I've been told around campfires, over tables, on walks, while sitting on beaches or while watching children swim. They are told over lunch or in slips of the tongue. They are told to inform, to teach, to correct, to entertain, to bind us together. Sometimes, I get them mixed up with other stories. Sometimes, a story I believed for years suddenly becomes clearer, more understandable and intriguing, when another piece is added. The story of how my Grandpa and Grandma Bowder became born-again Christians, which prompted the meeting of my mother and father at a church in Bandon, is one of those.

"Oh, no," Lois corrects me when I repeat what I know. "Your grandmother was the last one to give up smoking and drinking and go to church.

It was John who went first, and later on, Eloise followed with the whole family.” My great-aunt Lois Hamar is my grandmother Eloise’s youngest sister, having been born almost a generation after Eloise, she is only a few years older than my mother. Lois is one of my many aunt-friends, and on this recent day, when yet another family story was clarified, Lois was visiting me at my house in Independence. We were talking about our lives, about how we have settled down, about how wild we were in our college days. Lois and I share the same alma mater, the University of Oregon, where she graduated and went on to a career in teaching. She is one of several of my aunts who did not marry, or who married in their later years, choosing education, careers, and adventure over families. These women are my heroes, my sources of strength. Because I knew it could be done, I began imagining at an early age a life for myself without a husband, without the responsibilities of a family. I learned from my aunt-friends, my Oregon girl-stud relatives, that a woman could live on her own. I didn’t marry until I was 32.

My grandfather – my mother’s father John – is not a man prone to telling long stories, preferring instead to listen, occasionally punctuating stories with wisecracks, jokes, chuckles or grunts of approval or disapproval. But over the years my grandfather, my mother and her siblings have corroborated the story of my Grandpa John’s born-again conversion. It was a conversion that would spread to his entire family, both uniting us and dividing us.

Grandpa John was born in 1916 on a farm west of Eugene, but when his father’s land was flooded under what is now Fern Ridge Reservoir, Grandpa – a farmless teen with an eighth-grade education in the Depression years – joined the Civilian Conservation Corps and learned a few new skills – logging, drinking and

smoking. It was while he was logging with my great-grandfather Louis Hamar that he met Louis' oldest daughter, Eloise.

Lois, youngest daughter of Louis, is a devout First Christian Church woman who is not irreverent about her older sister, but neither does she gloss over the truth about my grandmother, around whose large waist I loved to wrap my arms, from childhood until her death in 1984. Lois admits that her college days were "a bit wild." We are talking about smoking and drinking. I admit to her that I used to smoke, and she shrugs and tells me she did too. But when she tells me that my grandma did too, I'm a little shocked.

It is no family secret, nor is it anything especially surprising even in those days, that my Grandma Eloise was pregnant with my mother when my Grandpa John led her to the altar. While my mother was alive, however, it was not often talked about. I have a picture that Lois gave me long ago of Grandma and Grandpa before they were married. They are sitting on the front porch of the old Hamar homestead, at Nashville, Oregon, near the Benton-Lincoln counties line, land that includes the headwaters of the Yaquina River. They are sitting on Eloise's grandfather's land claim, a spot where the rain that falls on the Coast Range might go east to the Willamette or west to the Pacific, depending on the wind that day. My grandfather John is smiling, and his curly hair is high and wild. I can tell from his smile that he has just told a joke. My grandmother is fuzzy with movement. She has thrown back her head to laugh. There is a bottle in her hand. I used to think it was a soda. Now I think it might be a beer.

New information changes perceptions. After I found out she was pregnant when she got married, I looked at the picture with new eyes, looking for signs. Was this the day my mother began, I wonder. Did this merry moment end in a

union that preceded, prompted my family. I love this picture, for all that it says and doesn't say.

A single day can make or break you. The day that made me was the day my grandfather heard the word of God from Brother Archie Word, a Midwestern, Bible Belt tent preacher who came through Bandon a few years after my grandparents were married. "Brother" Word wound up saving my Grandfather's soul, and by association, my mother's. Brother Word also had a hand in influencing my father's life, and by association, mine. During Brother Word's sweep through Oregon to save lost souls for Jesus, he saved Grandpa's lost soul one night in Bandon, the town where Grandma and Grandpa had settled with my mother, 12, and her siblings that followed. Having heard the Word from this fire-and-brimstone preacher dozens of times until I was 18, I can imagine how compelling it must have been for my grandfather, a rogue-turned-father who was ready to change his ways.

A few years later, when my mother was a teen, she met my father at another Brother Word revival in Coos Bay. I can imagine how compelling these revivals might have been for my mother and father, two sentimental youths from similar families, mixing two transporting loves – a love of Jesus and a love for each other. When they married, there was no untangling the two passions. My father's letters to my mother, written while he was away attending Bible college in Portland, are tangles of physical longing cloaked in religious garb.

I am certain that my grandfather's wooing words to my grandmother were more straightforward than my father's poetry. My grandfather's sentences are short, direct, loaded with meaning. I've never heard him lecture or preach, as my father can, at length. My Grandpa John didn't like to tell stories about himself and

he shuns cameras. These two styles of telling pull me in two directions when I write, and I never know whether I will flow east or west, whether to be blunt or poetic, to drink beer or preach. Sometimes, it depends on where the water falls.

Somehow it is comforting when Lois tells me that her sister, my grandmother, didn't stop smoking and drinking until some time after Grandpa was converted. She resisted, Lois implies. I read into our conversation that Grandma was as wild as we were; and furthermore, that if there is hope for her, that if she saw the light, then there is still hope that I will see the light, too. I hear this message, underneath Lois' story. It is hard to reject this message. I owe to Jesus and to Brother Word my physical existence. Nevertheless, I do reject it, but quietly.

This familial wish for us all to be united in Jesus is also underneath my conversation with my uncle, Brad, my mother's youngest brother, who has attended reunions with me for all of our lives, including this one. We are at the table in the dining hall overlooking Myrtle Creek, on the west end of Highway 42, in the Coquille watershed. My uncle Brad took over Grandpa John's log trucking business, married a Bandon girl who gave birth to five children, traded his father's trucks for construction equipment, moved his company from the south coast to the booming Salem area, quickly made his millions and recently sold his company so he could spend more time doing the work of Jesus – evangelistic work he was practicing on me. Our conversation slips into an argument about absolutes and perceptions. I tell him the parable of the blind men and the elephant to suggest that we all need to talk to each other to understand the whole picture. He calls this "relativism" and tells me that there is a final authority, an all-seeing

god who we can trust to describe the elephant accurately, absolutely. He tells me that not all opinions are equal, and I have to agree. But who decides who is right? I ask him this. He points to his Bible, his guidebook, his map. "You know in your heart what is right, Gail," he tells me. "We are all born knowing, but we fail because we are human."

In his words, I hear an echo of the preacher's voice, my father's voice, Brother Words' voice – a familiar, familial, endemic passion for the transcendental truth, the unknowable and yet personal god and savior. I cannot explain why I do not give myself back to this truth of my youth. I left Jesus because of doubt, because of sex, because of beer and cigarettes. Even after the beer and cigarettes had lost their taste for me, Jesus did not come back. I could no longer accept, in faith, with childish innocence, the stories of Jesus. Too many other stories pointed to a larger Good, a bigger Elephant than the piece I had been given by Brother Word, by my father, by the ministers of the Church of Christ. When I say this to Brad, it sounds arrogant, as if I am telling him that his insights are narrow and archaic and uninformed. What I really want to ask him is if we can agree that there is more to know, and that we need to keep talking to each other, that God would want us to keep an open mind. But it seems to him that I am asking him to be uncertain, unsure, uncentered; that I am asking him to jump up to Heaven from a moving point. It may seem to him that I am asking him to reconsider history.

What I do know for sure is this: When we are done talking, Brad and I rise from our table in the dining room hall, and grab hands and then hug and say that we love each other, and of course we do. This is the overriding mantra of my family that I have heard a hundred times at our weekend campouts: I have to love

you; you are family. I have to hug you; you are family. I have to kiss you; you are family. You are family. This is first. My family's love is like water over stones. It rolls over me, has worn me down to water, to the part of me that is them. In Jesus, or out, there is this love, this acceptance. I swim in it, soak in it. It is what centers me, brings me back.

Seventeen years ago, my future husband Michael sat down for the first time at a huge Thanksgiving dinner table loaded with the best Bowder food, including my grandpa's clam chowder. At this table, my mother is alive and well and happily talking to one of her four sisters and two brothers. My grandfather is sitting among them. Emmylou is feeding baby Johnny in his high chair gobs of Bowder chowder, and it is running down his chin.

My father rises, smiling. "I think Gail and Michael have an announcement to make," he says. My mother looks at me, beaming, proud, happy that at last her 30-something daughter/ unwed mother will be married. She can't contain herself. "They're engaged," she blurts. Everybody at the table already knew we were engaged, except for my Grandpa. He raises his glass of apple juice and smirks in his sideways grin. "About time," he says.

My Aunt Debra is a troublemaker. I love her, but still. She grins. "Ask him what he does," she says. I glare at her. Everybody, including Grandpa, knows he is an environmental scientist. Debra thinks she is being funny.

Michael grins and says he is a scientist. There is a sudden quietness among these members of a multi-generational logging, mill-working, trucking family. An entire history, generations deep in the woods, comes to bear on this moment, this awful choice I made to love the enemy of the logger. I am the breaker of

traditions and he is the destroyer of a lifestyle. At this moment, my husband is just as unmoving in his environmental opinions as my grandfather is set in his opinions. Compromised, unable to fight while in a conversation about love, my husband is sitting at my grandfather's table and suggesting that he join this family.

My grandfather stabs at his Thanksgiving turkey and looks down at his plate. "Spotted owls," he mutters, a challenge, but he is looking at me, and there's that look on his face, a half-smile that lets you know he's joking ... maybe. Everyone looks to my future husband, who opens his mouth to argue. I elbow his ribs and he shuts it.

Outside of the dining hall at the Myrtle Creek Campground, fresh air on my face made hot from my conversation with Brad, my baby boy, now 17 and six-foot-four, is playing volleyball with Brad's son and daughters. Michael is sitting in the sunshine, talking to my Grandpa about fish. They have found that common interest. Michael loves to hear him tell tales of historic fishing expeditions. My grandfather finds the greatest delight in telling Michael he showed scientists from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife where to catch fish for tagging. I have heard Michael mentioning to others his association with the Bowders, to a logging family. The thought strikes me just then that my family has come to think of Michael as sort of a beloved oddball, whose ideas are interesting and sometimes quotable. And I have heard my husband recently defend some logging practices to other scientists, beginning with "My wife's family, who has logged here since the turn of the century, always..."

This is how family works: on love, on tolerance. This is how we see the
elephant: together.

KALMIOPSIS – LAWSON CREEK

On July 13, 2002, Michael and John and I were on our way to Lakeport, California, via Highway 101. We were on our way to visit Michael's widowed mother, Joline, who has made northern California her home since marrying her second husband, Roy, 25 years ago. We make this trip at least two or three times a year, usually speeding down I-5 in a race to beat the average 10 hours it takes to get there. But this trip was leisurely. We were not in a hurry to return to the hot inland valleys, so we lingered on Highway 101, spending the night before with Aunt Debra in Coos Bay, setting off this morning headed south, taking in the cool Pacific breezes, the incredible rocky bluffs and lighthouse at Cape Blanco, the Heads and Orford Reefs at Port Orford, the high, winding vistas of the Pacific south of Humbug. We were headed for the Avenue of the Giants, through the redwoods. But before we got there, we were stopped by one of the most destructive fires in the recent history of the area.

We thought nothing of the smoke when we spotted it, white and thick, billowing from the hills to the east of us, toward the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, in the Siskiyou National Forest. But we hardly paid attention to what was in the east, the Pacific spread wide below us, to the west. We didn't pay attention to it at all until after Brookings, after we crossed the Chetco River. Fires, after all, are common in this area, and this was fire season. It seemed far away.

As our truck approached the Winchuck River, the river at the border of Oregon and California, we pulled off at a road appropriately named "Boundary Lane." Ahead, we knew, was the agricultural inspection station, and so we decided to hide our cooler full of contraband garden produce we planned to

present to Grandma Joline – home-grown peas, some basil and thyme, a few early peppers, red potatoes, and roses from my front yard I hoped would survive the trip. But while we were on the side of the road piling suitcases on top of the cooler full of contraband in the back of the truck, the sun turned dark orangey-red.

“Look at that,” John said, pointing at the sun, and that’s when we realized the once-distant plume of smoke to the east had suddenly blown west, over our heads, out to sea, darkening the sun. Marveling at the oddness of the color, I pulled out my camera and took a picture of Michael, the red-brown dot behind him, smoke gathering over the Kalmiopsis.

A few minutes later, our garden vegetables stowed furtively away, we heard the news from the border inspector: “Lightning, maybe campers lit fires up at Galice and Sam Brown Camp in the Kalmiopsis,” he said when I asked him about the fire, leaning out of the passenger side the truck, the side closest to his booth. My effort to distract him from our illegal cargo was successful. He was gazing up over our cab, into the Siskiyou in the east, his ear tuned to a crackling radio in the booth. “Sounds like there might be another fire down on the Smith or the Klamath. It might be a little smoky down there if you’re headed that way.” His eyebrows went down as he looked from the mountains back at our truck. “Any fruit or vegetables ma’am?” he asked me, the passenger, the smuggler. My son, who would surely point out my error, had his earphones on, missing my lie. The inspector motioned us on without further attention, looking instead into the Kalmiopsis.

The rest of the trip to California, and long after, I imagined the Kalmiopsis on fire, its Illinois and Rogue rivers and its Lawson Creek choked with ashes black, white and gray, its thousand-year-old trees and rare lilies charred and

colorless. The Kalmiopsis fire, later named the Biscuit Fire for a creek in the southeastern corner of the Kalmiopsis, ignited in me a hazy memory of 1962, the year my family was lost in the very wilderness area we had just passed.

For the next year, the memory of that summer rekindled as I wrote newspaper stories about the destructive fires in the Kalmiopsis and throughout the West. I wrote an entire special edition of newspapers stories centered on fire's impact on the timber industry, on the environmental damage, and on the loss of rare species. By the time the rains set in that fall, nearly 500,000 acres had been touched by fire in the Siskiyou National Forest, with the Kalmiopsis as its center. That year, I could not read or write about the Kalmiopsis without feeling that something personal was ending, something unclear was burning away.

According to U.S. Forest Service reports, the fire may have started near Sam Brown Horse Camp, a camp that is about 25 miles east, as the eagle flies, from the place where my family was lost 40 years before. At first, the memories were indistinct and hungry rumblings in the pit of my stomach, accompanied by flashes of starlight in back of my eye, the smell of pitch lodged in the membranes of my nose, a constriction in my throat, the feeling of blackberry thorns on my skin. And then in quieter minutes, I heard the sound of my father's voice, telling the story from the pulpit, our family's loss in the Kalmiopsis transformed into parable, into metaphor. What was uncovered that year, the year of the fires, was a hazy anger and blame, directed at my father, who took us on this hike, a feeling at odds with the equally hazy relief, even joy, at the sound of my father's voice as I imagined it when he rescued us: I thought I heard him hooting up the river, his voice bouncing from the canyon walls, tumbling upstream to where our family

waited for him. But the fire had burned away the relief and left another memory, another life exposed.

As my family drove to California with the Kalmiopsis burning behind us, I opened a book I had intended to give Dad, but had kept for myself: *Roadside Geology of Oregon*. Tucked inside the book was a 1989 article by Lou Ramp of the Oregon Department of Geology, printed from the Siskiyou National Forest website.

“The Klamath Mountains physiographic province of Southwestern Oregon and Northwestern California is very complex, and especially the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area,” begins Ramp. His description of the geology of this area that follows is complex, scientific and is followed by two pages that define terms. I pulled out a map tucked in the side door pocket of the truck, this one printed by the Oregon Forest Service of the Siskiyou National Forest. I looked at the names of places listed there: Silver Prairie, Grapevine Camp, Conner’s Place. I put my finger on the map on Lawson Creek, the only name I could remember, and waited for something to change in me. What did I expect from a map? Peace? Resolution? But no change came. I wrote and I wrote about the fires that year, but still, no change came.

Finally, at the annual Bowder reunion, five months before I called my father, I asked my co-wanderers, my brothers, what they remembered.

“You were the oldest. I was maybe 4. You probably remember the most,” said Bruce, sitting next to Doug at a long wooden table. We were eating lunch in a camp hall, Bowder clan conversations backgrounding our own. Doug’s grandson was asleep on his shoulder. Doug shrugged his shoulders as if to agree with Bruce.

Bruce and I began talking about the bees, the dislodged rocks, the half-baked trout, the apples and peanut butter, and Lawson Creek. Here was where I noticed a difference in our stories. Where my story began with “when Dad lost us,” Bruce’s story starts with “when we got lost,” as if it were a group effort, and I begin to feel, as I often do around my good brother, petty and wrong. I began to feel that his version focused on the happy ending, and mine still wallowed in the details of the subtext, in the anger, in the sickness, in the scratches on my skin, in the welts on his body. Here is where the wish started to be clearer, even happier about what happened to us in the Kalmiopsis. But instead, I stewed over lost details, over a lost Kalmiopsis, over imagined childhood wrongs. Outside the window of the reunion hall, the water from Myrtle Creek splashed in the distance, trickling north to the Coquille. I could hear Bruce’s daughters, Aubrey and Aimee, and Doug’s daughter Jennifer and her oldest child, Kendra. They were all down in the creek, already finished with lunch and splashing in the cold water or shouting at swimmers from the bridge above the creek.

I remembered being lost for one day and one night. No, Bruce corrected me. It was three days and two nights. “How did you remember that?” I asked him. “Dad’s sermons,” he smiled at me. “I was paying attention, not writing stories and notes.” I looked at him and smiled back. He is my good brother, my Christian brother, his father’s namesake. There is an understanding between us, and so I knew he wasn’t really scolding me for my lack of attention. Instead, I felt him evoking a dramatic scene in which we were both players, a scene in which my father was the preacher, the storyteller, the keeper of details, the playwright. Bruce follows this comment with a suggestion that I ask Dad. He wants me to talk to Dad about all of this, and I promise him, I will, but of course, I didn’t talk to

Dad about the Kalmiopsis for another five months, preferring instead to gaze into the darkest waters of Lawson Creek and wonder what was beneath the surface of my memory, a memory disturbed by fire.

I tried to drag Bruce into my darker waters. Surely he must harbor some resentment? I talked about his swollen head, hit by a rock dislodged by his father, about the yellow jackets, the welts, Mom's horrified face as she splashed him while he screamed and cried. But Bruce does not defect. Dad was stung, too, Bruce reminded me. He was holding me, carrying me because my head hurt, Bruce said. We jumped into the creek together, Bruce said.

The dark waters clear and I saw a shadow of a thing I could not see without my brother: That there might be another side to the Kalmiopsis story, and that story may be brighter than the dark, ashy residue of my experience. But enlightenment is temporary for me. I am stubborn and anger came up in my throat. "What kind of a man would take little children into the Kalmiopsis? What kind of a man would put us in harm's way, subject us to that kind of danger?" Bruce squints at me and his lips close together tight. "He didn't do it on purpose, for Heaven's sake," he said to me. "We got out didn't we? Dad got us out."

I looked at Doug for support. Doug, the middle brother, had been listening to us, quietly nodding or shrugging, as is his habit. Like my grandfather, my brother Doug saves his words. He is the curly-headed deliverer of zingers and one-liners, with one exception: He will talk endlessly about mushrooms.

"That fire produced one hell of a bunch of mushrooms," Doug said, and Bruce and I looked at each other. "We're going down there next week with the camper, and we're going to make a lot of money." He said this smiling, nodding to Deana, his wife, who was picking up dishes. Doug makes a modest living

maintaining computers, but the work is irregular and seasonal, and so to make ends meet, he picks mushrooms in the Coast Range/Siskiyou/Klamath hills and forests surrounding his Coquille home. Doug made of himself an expert on edible mushrooms of the Northwest. There's no hiking with him anymore without hauling away a basket full of mushrooms.

At the lunch table, his grandson on his lap, mushroom stories about the Kalmiopsis spreading before us, I began to see the Kalmiopsis again, this time with my brother hiking through the black ash, spotting his chanterelles and hedgehogs, gathering them into his baskets. I began to feel his thrill with bounty, mixed with Bruce's hope and respect. The Kalmiopsis had burned, but it was not dead. We had been lost, but we were found. Another picture was rising out of the ashes and it was something new, hopeful, and edible, something I could keep down.

Any reasonable person on a quest to fill in the details of her lost life would reasonably go to the source, to the person who wrote it all down. That person is not me. I wander, I get distracted. I hold onto dark thoughts when all around me there is sunshine, a pathway out. I just don't see it without help, without first blaming, getting angry. The day I finally called my father was the day I got a phone call from my Aunt Muriel, my father's older sister and another of my aunt-friends. She called to invite me to her new house in Coos Bay, but I turned the conversation to my own dark thoughts.

"Why did Dad take us to the Kalmiopsis," I asked Muriel. I am sure she heard the bile, the blame in my voice.

"He was always a dreamer, the impulsive and passionate one," my Aunt Muriel said. She is the sister who loves him as I love my brothers: no matter what.

“You are just like him.” And on this day, the day I called my father, I knew this was a compliment, and that it was also true. “Why don’t you just call him and ask him about it?”

Two years after the Kalmiopsis is burned, two years after smoldering, I finally picked up the phone and called my father. “Help me remember,” I asked him.

It was the summer of 1962. Dad had just written his first Bible commentary, *Letters from Peter*, and he was anxious to take a break, make up for lost time with his children. “We wanted to get out of Portland,” Dad began.

We borrowed Grandpa John’s VW bus so that we could camp there and hike the next morning. I was almost 6, Bruce almost 5, and Doug, 3. My baby brother Paul was too young to come with us. He stayed behind with Grandma Eloise in Bandon. A vision of us all in the bus came back to me then.

“Why the Kalmiopsis,” I asked on the phone, and for a minute, Dad was silent. “Was it because of the news surrounding the area?” I suggested. Two years after we were lost, the Kalmiopsis would become an officially-designated 180,000-acre Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area, the center of the million-acre Siskiyou National Forest in southern Oregon and northern California. But my father was unsure why he took us there. “Maybe,” he said. “I didn’t write that down.” Then Dad told me that, as we are talking he is referring to his sermon notes written a few weeks after we were lost. Irony compounds. These are the sermons Bruce and I remembered, the sermons I secretly resented, closed my ears to.

Dad continued. The day before we got lost, we drove up Pistol River along a road into the Kalmiopsis that begins on Highway 101 about halfway between Gold Beach and Brookings. “We were headed to Panther Lake, but when we got

to the lookout near there, the ranger said the lake was nothing but mud this time of year, so we changed our plans. That was my first fatal mistake,” Dad said, and his voice raised a register, high and sorry. I was in a mood to understand and forgive, so I laughed. “Not fatal, I guess. We are all still here.”

Instead of hiking to Panther Lake as planned, Dad drove the bus over gravel winding roads north to Wildhorse Prairie, about 10 miles away, and it was there that he parked the bus and made a camp for us near a meadow alongside the road.

“My grandiose idea was to hike to Lawson Creek,” Dad said. While he talked to me on the phone, I spread out my Siskiyou National Forest map, put my finger on Wildhorse Prairie. “Lawson Creek looked really close on the map. And it looked like an easy hike from where we had camped. Your dad wasn’t too smart, was he?” Looking at the map, I was about to say “It’s nowhere near Wildhorse Prairie,” but Dad was contrite. I could hear it again his voice, high and tight. I held my tongue for a minute, and then: “Tell me more,” I said.

We had a huge breakfast and expected to be back in a few hours, Dad said. He remembered Mom’s shorts because it was unusual for her to wear them, but it was hot and secluded. “She was always so modest,” he said. It looked like an easy stroll through a grassy meadow. “But then the going got terribly rough and brushy,” Dad said.

As Dad talked on, I could feel the dry grass on my new white sandals as I stepped from our VW bus. “I was wearing shorts too,” I interrupted him. “Were you?” he said. I remembered my favorite summer outfit – cotton shorts and a matching cotton shirt with a fringe around the hem of the shirt. I could see the bag

Mom had slung over her shoulder with our lunch in it. "It wasn't much of a lunch," Dad said. "We thought we'd be home for a big dinner."

It was hot when we started out, but the dew on the grass hadn't dried yet. I know this because I remember walking through several meadows, remember feeling the grass through my toeless, strappy sandals, as inappropriate for a hike as any shoe can be, but pretty, and a testament to our short-term intentions. I remember the long trail through the grasses that eventually turned steep and stickery, dry braches scratching at my bare legs. I remember the series of slides down rocky banks. I was unable to get a foothold with my tractionless sandals. Dad remembered Mom, her shirt ripped and her bare legs bruised. "Like Daisy May," he said, and then he returned to the children on the trail.

"Another big mistake," Dad said about the increasingly difficult hike with three small children. He talked about beating down bushes to get to a trail he could not find. He talked about our being trapped in a ravine along a tributary of Lawson Creek, and about tumbling down the bank with Doug in his arms. Dad peppers his story with apologies, regrets. "Dougie, I called him here," Dad remarked, looking at his notes, amazed at the youth of the boy who now has grandchildren. Dad's tumble with Doug dislodged a boulder that fell onto the top of Bruce's crew-cut blonde head below, raising a knot so dramatic that we all had to stop and inspect. A few minutes later, Bruce now being carried in Dad's arms, they crossed a log, stirred up a nest of yellow jackets and in seconds, Bruce's body was covered in welts. I remember watching then jumping together into the creek. I remember what seemed like hundreds of tiny red bumps rising from Bruce's back, belly and legs. Or was it my father's sermon I remember?

More images came back to me as we talked – dusty, slippery-steep trails, rocks flying, fine dirt in my shoes, black toes, broken toenails, cut-up hands, more blackberry scratches on my legs. Some of the thin straps on my sandals had broken or come unglued. After a day of forging trails and nursing wounds, we finally found Lawson Creek, and then darkness came along with the realization that we were lost in the wilderness. Amazingly, Dad recalled, Mom had brought along some matches. She lit a fire and somehow, Dad caught a fish. “How?” I asked him, wondering idly if my father, like my son, could catch fish with a safety pin and a string. Dad couldn’t remember. I remembered the fish, though. I remember that we tried to cook it on a flat rock, heated by my mother’s fire. I remember the flat taste of half-cooked trout. I remember Mom dividing up the last bits of peanut butter sandwiches and crackers, and an apple. I remembered the taste of it all coming up in the night. I remembered leaning over the river and seeing a reflection of myself throwing up into Lawson Creek, the rippled water picture of a white-headed girl in pigtails, pale as the moon behind me, the quivering stomach emptying of everything but fear.

On the phone, Dad said I was not the only one who was afraid. My mother, who hated snakes, was so afraid that rattlesnakes would come out of the Kalmiopsis rocks to warm themselves by the fire that she carried us to a huge rock island mid-stream in Lawson Creek, where we slept that night, huddled together, our backs to our parents, the gurgle of water surrounding us. Dad said he didn’t sleep and was amazed to see us sleeping, exhausted, with our eyes half-open. This is in my father’s sermon notes, written in his memory: Our eyes half-open, sleeping on a rock in the middle of Lawson Creek. He gave me this memory back, and I was pulled for a minute between my anger and my amazement. Dad

kept talking, and gradually I realized, he had been pulled, too, between worry for us and anger with himself for bringing us there. I hear that, resurrected, in his voice. I recognize the blame. He is taking it back from me.

In the morning, he left us there on the bottom of a basalt canyon formed by Lawson Creek.

This is where the sermonic script kicks in on the phone. It is my father's story now, and I stifle a resentment that rises, almost automatically, when I hear the repeated theme. This is the sermon in which our family was a flock, and the children were lambs lost in the Kalmiopsis. This is the sermon in which my lost life becomes something surreal, something abstract, like a parable. But instead of indulging in my usual critical darkness, this time I listen, like a reporter, like a collector of details, of facts. I listen for colors, for smells, for the sound of waters not my own. I depend on my father to remember. He was there, too.

He has left us at the river in the morning, and all day, he hiked through brush and berries. "I was scratched and bloody," Dad told me. Finally, late in the afternoon, starving and weak and knowing his family was lost behind him, he came to a familiar clearing, a meadow. There was a crumbling cabin and a shed. Somewhere out of the meadow was the trail to the road, to the VW bus, to help. My father circled the meadow, past the cabin, but he couldn't find the trail. "I was hysterical, crying. I crawled on my hands and knees, I was so weak. I cried out to God. I was angry, I was praying," my Dad said.

This was something new. The field-circling, the praying – that I remembered from the sermons. But the anger? My father angry with God? My preacher father was lost, and he was angry with God, demanding to see the path out of the field, into the forest, not evoking special privileges like some priestly

superhero, but demanding, blaming, like I do. My father, like me, was ready to accuse the Big Man Himself of failing to help him. My father told me he was crawling, but he did not give up. On the last pass around the field, Dad found the path and made his way out to the bus just as the sun set. His family was huddled lost and hungry in the Kalmiopsis and he was safe at the bus, Dad said. Just minutes after he arrived, with hysterical relief Dad said he saw the spotlights of the rangers from three agencies shining on him. "They'd been looking for us all day," Dad said. "Dad Bowder wanted his bus back."

I remembered vaguely the night before our rescue. Out on the island in Lawson Creek for the second night, this time without Dad, I was shivering up next to my mother, our bare legs with matching scratches and mosquito bites, Bruce and Doug sprawled out on the flat rock, curled up together. Mom and I were tangled up in each other's arms surrounded by the sound of the river. Above us and around us were the clearest black sky with starry highlights and the sounds of crickets and coyotes and brush rustling behind us. I don't remember sleeping, but I remember my brothers crying. I remember the sound of her voice – soothing, comforting us. "It'll be okay. We'll be fine." I was almost six, but already, I felt in my stomach a doubt rising, a conflict between her words and what I suspected might be our awful fate. My stomach shook with fear that I might be right and that my mother might be wrong. Maybe here was where the anger and blame settled in deeply, so deep, that it took a devastating fire to uncover it.

On the phone, I told my father about my own relief the next morning at the sound of his voice hooting up the river, from above us, from downstream, bouncing off the sides of the canyon. I told him I remembered Mom shouting

back “here we are.” I remembered all of us weakly rising from the river rocks. I remembered the feeling of a man’s strong arms carrying me up away from the river, along a steep, narrow trail. I remembered asking my rescuer to stop so I could throw up water again, and as my stomach came up, I stood on the trail, my new white sandals gone by then, my bare feet on dusty rocky gravel, I remembered leaning over the edge of a precipice that fell down into the Illinois far below, the hot sun on the back of my head. I remembered thinking that the clear water coming out of me sounded for a minute like the river far below, that rushing, bubbling sound. It was hot and I was sick. Huge hands picked me up again and carried me out. I remembered looking back over a shoulder at my brothers being carried behind me. None of us kids were walking anymore. This I repeated to my dad on the phone.

“Hooting up the river?” My dad interrupts a lyrically neat and tidy ending to my own sermonic story. “I didn’t come back for you. They wouldn’t let me. I was too weak and dehydrated to hike back,” Dad said.

Secretly I snapped my fingers. A pox on reality, I thought. I made a note of the new fact, tried to fit it into my own sermon. Dad continued. “But I couldn’t rest until you all were back at the bus. I knew you were close when I heard you crying on the trail. Then I knew you were alive.”

On the day I called my father, on the day he read his sermon notes back into my memory, on the day I listened and was not angry, I knew the Kalmiopsis was changed forever and that those who remembered it in 1962 were as rare as the wilderness itself. On that day, I suddenly wished to hear my mother tell me everything would okay. Instead, I imagined my father’s voice on the phone, hooting up the river, rescuing memories.

HIGHWAY 42: COQUILLE AT BEAR CREEK

The road from Roseburg to Coquille has always been a winding one, full of switchbacks and hairpins and blind corners that jump between the south fork of the Coquille and the Umpqua River watersheds. That's not to say that the Oregon Department of Transportation hasn't spent most of the years of my life trying to straighten out Highway 42, building maybe a dozen bridges over the South Fork in an effort to improve truck, trade and tourist traffic moving between the busy inland Interstate 5 corridor and the natural resources on the coast.

But those improvements fell short of saving my mother and father's car on Oct. 22, 1989, the rainy night my mother lost her life on that road. More likely, more ironically, it might have been the improvements that killed her, causing as they might have increased confidence in the two-trailer chip truck driver who was rounding the corners ahead of my parents' car, a confidence that might have increased his speed. Perhaps the improvements to Highway 42 were what caused Stalcup Trucking – one of the largest carriers out of Coos Bay – to assign Mike to drive this highway in the first place, rather than to Highway 38 further north. Ironies were precipitating on Highway 42, like the heavy fall rain that slickered the pavement. There was a double-trailer chip truck, loaded to the hilt, speeding west ahead of my parents' car. My mother was in the passenger seat; my father was at the wheel. As it was after 10 p.m., the chip truck driver, Mike, might have been in a hurry to get his load delivered so he get back home to his own family, a family I would later discover to be distantly related to ours by marriage or business or both – I don't have the heart to find out. A truck coming west, a car headed east. The road did not care who was in these rigs. The road was a medium, an augur, a connection between two families who lived in Coos County, two

families who were about to meet abruptly, intimately, accidentally, on Highway 42.

You would think that after fifteen years, a person would get over it. But there I was, fifteen years later, driving the road again, as I had a hundred times before, mourning my mother. On this particular day, I was driving east to I-5, headed home to the Willamette Valley from the Bowder reunion east of Myrtle Point, on Highway 42. Ten miles down the road from her father, her brothers and sisters, her nieces and nephews and cousins and their families, ten miles away from the gathering of her grandchildren and their children, I pulled off of Highway 42 at Bear Creek. There is a convergence, where Bear Creek dumps into the Coquille. Half-way to I-5 at the line between Douglas and Coos counties, where the watersheds go east or west, I pulled my car into Bear Creek Park, a half-mile from the spot where my mother died. I got out of the car. Summer sun reflected from Bear Creek as it rushed around rocks, searching for a way under a foot bridge at the park, out to the South Fork Coquille River on the other side of the highway. I walked out onto the bridge and looked into the water rushing under my feet. Blame me, says the water. I was falling on the road that night. Blame me, says the road. I was curving unexpectedly. Blame me, says the Douglas fir, leaning into the creek. It was a truck full of my chips that killed her. But I am stubborn. These things are not enough. I want to blame flesh and blood. I hold onto my anger as if it were my mother's own flesh, as if letting it slide away, downstream, out to the Pacific, would be a final admission that she is gone.

Then blame me, says Mike, the truck driver.

I know this road and I can guess how it was with Mike. Going west, those curves come up fast, suddenly. A driver can be lulled by the long, straight stretch through Camas Valley and Tenmile and then, out of the blue, this first of a hundred curves comes up on you, just as you enter the South Fork Coquille watershed. Mike was going too fast; that much is in the evidence files. Truck drivers are required to have a little black box attached to their speedometer, which digitally logs the speed of the truck and can be retrieved for cases just like this. Mike didn't know how fast he was going. But his black box did. Mike didn't approach the first big curve in the road, right at the border between Coos and Douglas counties, thinking "Yeah, tonight I think I'll dump this trailer across the middle of the road so that Bruce Oberst will crash into it, throwing his sleeping wife through the front window, into the side of my trailer, onto the wet asphalt, breaking her neck, killing her." Mike didn't say that. Mike was speeding, the way I always do when I round those corners. But then, I drive a little blue sports car that can barely contain my suitcase and tent, let alone two tons of chips. Mike was driving a double-trailer, 18-wheeler. I want to be angry with Mike, point at the black box, tell him he broke the law and that my mother died because of his mistake. Instead, as I watch the water rush under the bridge at Bear Creek, I think I have forgiven Mike. All I really know is that he lost his job driving trucks. I can assume the rest: out-of-work on the south coast means family problems, maybe a divorce, over-drinking, a job at a fast-food place or at a grocery store; a smaller, meaner life for Mike than before the accident.

I have a hard time blaming Mike. Still, I ignore the sunshine, the nearness of my mother's family and their love, and sullenly think that blame must be awarded. From the bridge, I tap my father, the driver.

The night my mother died, she was riding in the car he was driving, headed east to I-5, returning to their home in Roseburg from the Coos Bay Church of Christ. This beautiful 1920s Colonial Revival church is where they were married and where my father was ordained. My father was often invited to preach there, and on that particular night, he had written a special sermon to preach at his hometown church titled "More Beyond." It was a sermon of hope and joy about heaven, about the Christian afterlife. At my mother's funeral, a childhood girlfriend of my mother's told me she had been at the Coos Bay Church of Christ that night. "Your mother and father looked like newlyweds," she said. She had been at their wedding, too, 35 years earlier. "They hadn't changed a bit in all these years."

The irony of my father's choice of sermon topics that night was not lost on either of us. When it came time to choose a headstone for my mother's grave, I suggested "More Beyond" as appropriate epitaph. Dad looked at me, puzzled for a minute that I, a backsliding agnostic (my take, not his), would honor his sermon. Nevertheless, he agreed and so it is etched in stone, this nod to eternity. As I stood at the Bear Creek footbridge, I imagined her body lying west, under the headstone at the Sunset Memorial Park, above Isthmus Slough, above Coos Bay, ocean breezes gently tossing the petals of the roses I placed there yesterday. And then I imagined my father, his head down, standing that day on the same grave, his face sagging and sad, tears falling on his boyhood hills, his childhood sweetheart beneath them. "My beautiful Bonnie," he said that day. It is hard to blame someone who was as devastated by this loss as I was, and yet, for years, I am ashamed to say, that is what I did.

I know the story of the wreck because I heard it from Dad. We both agree that my mother's last moments were typical. She was a car sleeper, a trait she passed on to me and to my son. We are lulled by the engine and the irregular movements of the machine. She had given up wakefulness, taken the passenger seat, loosened her seat belt, reclined her seat and closed her eyes. "I don't think I'm going to make it," she said, and fell asleep, gently snoring. I don't think she meant that she would not make it home alive. Her last words were an apology that she could not stay awake to talk to my father, to listen to the radio, to watch the road. As it was, he remembered her last words as being prophetic. Of course she didn't mean them that way. They just were, in retrospect, prophetic and ironic.

I kicked a rock into Bear Creek and instead of scripture my Aunt Debra's earthy saying splashed up. "Shit happens then you die." I wanted to give myself up to sorrow again, prove that life sucks, lose myself in the Coos County rain and fog of that old October, throw myself under the turf of my mother's grave. For a minute on the bridge, I imagined my family standing on my grave as I have stood on my mother's, looking out over Isthmus Slough. This was a frightening, dark thought, and I quickly threw it to the waters, let it float away.

"There was nothing you could do," Bob Ringo told my dad, his hand on his shoulder. Bob Ringo was our attorney in the lawsuit that followed the accident. His team of investigators absolved my father from any blame.

Oddly, a scripture pops into my head: "Neither do I condemn thee." It is out of context. It is Jesus, speaking to a sinful woman. "Go thy way and sin no more." Despite incongruities, the scripture comforted me, blended with the sound of water in Bear Creek, initiated some sort of release. Doubt is part of me, but so

too, is this hope that there may be more beyond, like my daddy says. I realized here on the bridge that I do not blame him, am not angry with him.

Long after the October rains, after Highway 42 was cleaned up, long after the blood was washed away and the chips were scooped up and the truck was righted and hauled off and Mike's civil trial was over and the lives of Bonnie's children and grandchildren were resumed – long after that, here I was, still grieving. In that somber mood, my mother's death rushed up from the road in the form of a real and immediate chip truck, loud air brakes blurting in the distance as the driver approached the corner where she died a mile down the road. My mother would not want me to feel angry and sad for so long. I looked into the creek and began to think it is possible that I am missing the nuances of sunshine in the shadows. But on this day, I was drawn to the shadows, to doubt, to blame. Blame us then, said the hills. We brought your mother's family here. Blame us. If we were not here, she would not have died.

Highway 42 begins near Roseburg, in the South Umpqua watershed, at the place on I-5 where "civilization" drops off, not picking up again until south of Shasta, the ice cream cone mountain at the end of the Siskiyou. The area on I-5 between Roseburg and Shasta, and between Coos Bay and the far end of the Redwood Forest is roughly the boundaries of the State of Jefferson, an imaginary and real territory full of people who once tried to secede from the United States and to form their own state, an idea that has taken root and persisted here for good reason. This wild country is full of misfits and oddballs attracted to both the open spaces and the isolation.

The Jefferson succession movement has been spoken of with varying degrees of reverence all of my life. Since 1941, the movement's supporters have promoted Jefferson as the 51st State. "Jefferson is a state of mind," says its web page, www.stateofjefferson.com. But it is a state more concrete than thought. At one time, it nearly became a reality.

Says the website: "The abundant supply of minerals and timber in this region was largely inaccessible due to the lack of sufficient roads and bridges into the rugged mountain border country. The local pioneering people grew weary of unfulfilled promises from Salem and Sacramento to help fund sufficient highway projects in the region while building campgrounds in the cities where there were more votes." On the site, there are links to activities between Roseburg and Redding, Fort Bragg and Bandon, Susanville and Lakeview.

Salem and Sacramento are different from us, both politically and spiritually, suggests the writers of webpage, and immediately, I recognize something familiar, something like family lore, something like a community secret, approved and retold only to initiates. It is a secret that I rediscovered when I returned from college to my parents' home in Roseburg. I had landed an enviable job as a reporter for the daily *News-Review* and was assigned to the territory nobody wanted because it was a long drive – southern Douglas County. Included in my wanderings for the next year or so were the Jefferson strongholds of Riddle, Myrtle Creek, Glendale, Camas Valley, Days Creek, Tiller.

In 1984, with my new degree in Journalism from the University of Oregon in hand, I began to write stories about Jefferson, about the home of my people. I wrote about a commune on Barton Road north of Riddle whose residents raised marijuana in patches in the remote hills to support a dozen or more unadoptable

children – children whose bodies were twisted, diseased, abused; children who had been cast off by their own parents, or worse, by foster or adopted parents. In this story for the newspaper, I omitted the marijuana patch, a gesture meant to protect my people, believing that non-Jeffersonian readers (my stories sometimes made it into Associated Press newspapers that were distributed nationally) would not understand these well-meaning folk.

Just down the road from the commune was another huge, two-story house inside a fenced-in compound almost visible from the freeway. This religious commune, called the Brides of Christ, was made up of mostly young, local, female members who followed a wild-haired man who took his orders directly from Jesus, from a Christ who spoke to him from a disconnected television set outfitted with two large speakers. Many of the girls were pregnant. They worked the land wearing long skirts and white handkerchiefs on their heads. A land-use dispute brought me to their door. But my coverage of this incredible community, with its odd prophets and pregnant virgins, was blandly centered on the land-use problem. I avoided the oddness, protectively editing it from my story, refusing to characterize these people as nuts. If they had been from somewhere else, maybe I would have told the story.

I avoided stories that gave away our secrets. I didn't write about my friend Sonny Smith and his woman and their three blonde boys who lived on a creek in a log cabin on land that was not theirs, panning gold out of Coffee Creek, never paying taxes, refusing to get social security numbers. Secretly, I considered myself and my kin Jeffersonian. Although I do not think my mother's and father's families embrace this thought, I do.

My father's mom and dad came to settle in Coos Bay in the 1920s, when my grandpa Henry Oberst migrated from his father's farm in Sherwood to take a mill job. I always imagine that they stayed because this is a place where they felt at ease, and because they loved the wild features of this land. My mother's family was the same. Grandpa John and his sisters gathered their families to this region. They made their livings in the mills and in the woods, or they drove log trucks or grew cranberries. On the bridge, I tried to think of how my family fits here, why they stayed here. Whether they say so or not, my family is Jeffersonian. This is a source for me of both pride and embarrassment surrounding my people, my place. Why did we come here, I asked Bear Creek, leaning over the bridge, spitting into the water and watching the foam swirl around my stuff. Why didn't we just stay in Portland?

Blame Jefferson, say the hills around Highway 42, between the Umpqua and the Coquille watersheds. Blame Jefferson.

On the night in question, Oct. 22, 1989, my parents were driving home to Roseburg, to a comfortable two-story house on two acres on the North Umpqua River, a river whose southern fork drains through the heart of Jefferson State. They were driving on a road that might never have been built but for the legendary demands of the Jeffersonians, my people. From my station on the Bear Creek bridge, I think about the irony of this, that my Jefferson collaborators and possibly my own kin came to this area for its isolation from civilization, that they demanded, and continue to demand secession from their neighbors, and yet they required roads for their mills, for their forests, for their chip trucks, and so they demanded this very road on which my mother died. This is the conundrum not

restricted to Jeffersonians. We want to be left alone and yet, we need help in that endeavor. We need roads to and from our isolation.

Highway 42 winds off to the east, and to the west of my bridge. To the west, its curving switchbacks lead to my kin, some of whom are still at the family reunion on Myrtle Creek. Highway 42 South, which continues up the west side of the Coquille to Bandon, dumps out on Highway 101 at a corner graveyard where my grandmother and grandfather and a dozen other of my mother's relatives are buried. This road leads, in other words, as all roads and streams in Oregon do, to the Pacific Ocean.

I can't let go of this Jefferson blame, but I giggled to myself as a scene from the movie "Deliverance" popped into my head, complete with the banjo-picking, guitar-answering duet that begins the story line of the city folks boating down an isolated river, a river that looks like the Umpqua or the Rogue, wild and rugged. In the movie, the river bank natives are depicted as shotgun-totting crazy folk whose sole purpose is to terrorize the civilized folk in the boats. My first impulse is to side with the riverbank yokels, the Jeffersonians. But there is a complication with that vision. I was, after all, born in Portland, educated in Eugene and married near Salem. My claim on Jefferson is only tentative: there is the blood connection to my relatives, and I lived there for six or seven years, off and on, in Roseburg and Bandon. I am the swirling eddy of a conundrum, the place on the pass where the watersheds get mixed up, flow both ways. I'm not sure whether I should identify with the civilized group in the boat, or with the shotgun-totters on the shore. I am not sure my mother would want them included in this tribute, this meditation on her death.

She would want me to point out that not all of the folks who live in this region of southern Oregon and northern California are Jeffersonian of the riverbank yokel sort. There's a Shakespearean Festival and a university in Ashland, huge enclaves of retirees who, during earlier tourist visits, were enchanted with the area's natural beauty and rock-bottom land prices, and who returned to spend their golden years here in Grants Pass, Brookings, in Bandon, in the mobile park villages at Coos Bay. Or, similarly, around Roseburg and Medford and Ashland and around the new wine regions of the Umpqua and Rogue, there are civilized communities filled with the cultured, the educated. My mother would want me to point that out. But I see that even these are often odd communes of people who are escaping something tamer, something more contained; that even these civilized enclaves have a Jefferson character.

Maybe Mom and I, both critical and proud of our roots, would agree that Jeffersonian wildness and isolation could be seen by some as poverty and cultural stagnation. According to the Oregon Economic Development Council's literature, southern Oregon is still home to the poorest of the poor Oregonians, retirees and imported Southern Californians notwithstanding. There's been less than a one percent growth in population in Coos and Curry counties in the past four years, while the rest of Oregon gained 4 percent. The median annual income level is nearly \$10,000 less than the rest of the state, and 15 percent of the population is below the poverty level. The unemployment rate in Coos County is nearly always two or three percentage points higher than the state average. Fish, shipping and timber remains Coos County's mainstay, a fact unchanged by modern technology, modern industry.

Our Jefferson kin can be blamed for building Highway 42 to get their isolated, wild goods to the civilized, money-holding world. Before I was born, before my mother was born, my kin laid the road that would kill her. Blame Jefferson? I asked myself this again, from the bridge on Bear Creek. I can't blame my own people. I close my eyes and imagine her blood on the road, mingled with wood chips, washed by the rain into the muddy Coquille.

Behind my eyes, I see the shadows of myself and of my family. The shadows are memories of pictures of my great-grandmother, dirt on her white apron, standing in muddy laced-up boots in front of a moss-covered cabin without a foundation, a pale baby in one arm, an Indian basket in the other, a basket full of wormy apples. I see my brother's ramshackle place in the hills above Coquille, and I shake out the two threads I share with my mother: Shame for our family's humble circumstances, and love for this place, the same love that drew us here, that kept us here.

In June, Michael and I and John, with our advanced educations and Willamette Valley home, sat in the audience of my nephew Jesse's Coquille High School graduation. Jesse is Doug's son, and his family – including Doug's wife, Deana – embraces the Jefferson lifestyle. After graduating from high school in Roseburg, Doug and Deana have lived in Bandon, in Sutherlin and for the past five years, back home in the Coquille Valley. Jesse's graduation was a surprise to all of us, including his mother, who called us at the last minute to invite us to the ceremony at Coquille High School. Jesse is a brilliant and creative kid, like his father. They are both distracted by motorcycles and dogs and girls. They both overcame that distraction to get their high school diplomas. "Too bad they don't

give grades for tearing down an engine and putting it back together again,” Doug said when we arrived at the high school. Jesse and Doug have the genius of a Jeffersonian – they are survivors, self-helpers, do-it-yourselfers. Jesse has inherited this genius from his grandfather – Deana’s dad, Bob Florea, was a Roseburg mechanic – and from his great-grandfather John Bowder. In Coquille High School’s graduating class, Jesse’s kind of genius is common. I secretly admire Jesse’s skills – wish them for my own son and husband.

Coquille High School graduates filed forward, feet clipping on the gymnasium floor to incantations about their plans for the future. Someone wants to be a hairdresser. Another wants to attend the local community college to be a machinist. Future gas station attendants, Avon salesladies, trade school and community college students solemnly took their diplomas. Even the musical entertainment seemed underachieving by Willamette Valley standards. It was an a cappella tune (the tape player was broken) sung by a cocky boy who prefaced his number by telling us he is one credit short of graduating and that is why he was not wearing the dignified graduate robes or sitting with his classmates on that day. The long, soulful song was made more poignant given that we knew this boy would not graduate, nor, judging from his lack of talent, could he ever hope for success in show business. Again, I felt the confusing mix of shame and protectiveness, as if this boy were my brother or my nephew.

After the graduation, we drove four miles up the Coquille for a barbecue at Doug and Deana’s singlewide trailer, a trailer he proudly bought for \$500, dragged up Beaver Hill’s unpaved road to his seven heavenly acres, up from the mud flats of the Coquille Valley. This already-beaten down trailer he hooked onto a shed, which now serves as Doug and Deana’s living room. There are times

when I visit my brother, when I am sitting on his rickety porch, that I look to the southwest out over the salal and huckleberries and bear grass and pine and fir and myrtle trees growing on his property, down across the flats and pastures of the Coquille River, out to the setting sun. The Pacific is close and there is always a cooling breeze, smelling of salt and fish and cows and river. When I sit there on that porch sometimes, I get to thinking my brother and his wife are the luckiest humans on earth because they get to live in this paradise, this Coquille watershed. But then the falling-down insulation from the shed gets down my sweater and the puppies piss on my shoes and there's no heat but a woodstove and the roof is leaking and all my brother can talk about is how many mushrooms he found over in the Kalmiopsis – and then the dreamy world dissipates and I am complicated again, wanting isolation, and yet, wanting all that civilization has for me. Damn Jefferson, I said to myself on the bridge. There is no blaming something you love.

Back on Highway 42, back at the bridge, I thought about the Willamette Valley, where I live now in a small town named Independence, where I have raised a good family, lived a good life, a civilized life. In the refined Willamette Valley, the rivers between the Coast Range and the Cascades flow indirectly to the Pacific. The Coquille, however, flows directly west. The slow and direct Coquille flows unlike my Ash Creek, the creek near my house that meanders first east to the Willamette, where it joins waters headed north through Newberg, over the falls at Oregon City, through Portland, where it joins the mighty Columbia and flows past Astoria, past Warrenton, finally dumping into the Pacific. Independent of Portland, independent of civilization, the Coquille gathers its waters from the Kalmiopsis, from the Siskiyou, from the Coast Range and winds

and wanders alongside Highway 42, passing under 17 bridges in 40 miles before it widens into flat floodplains-turned-cow pastures at Coquille, before it slowly sludges out to the sea at Bandon. The river between Coquille and Bandon flows so slowly and lowly that tidewater affects it 20 miles upstream, past my brother's house.

The tides do not affect Bear Creek. This bridge is at the top of a pass between the Umpqua and Coquille watersheds, right in the middle of the curves where my mother died. I suppose as I stood there, I was wishing for my mother to rise from the wet chips where she fell after her body slammed through the car window. Not unexpectedly, as I imagined her crumpled under the truck trailer, another chip truck roared by on Highway 42, and the smell of fresh chips wafted by me, sharp and sweet, the smell of my family's life and of my mother's death. I lifted my arms off of the railing, turned slowly and walked down from the bridge, down to the water.

In the middle of Bear Creek, upstream from the bridge, is a huge boulder that has not moved in all of my 47 years of coming to this place, maybe because of the hugeness of the rock, or maybe because I not lived long enough to see it moved. Walking down a set of steps and then up a short path along the bank, I climbed out to the rock and sat in the mild sun of the Coast Range or the Klamaths or the Siskiyous or whatever we want to call this complex region, and I wondered if this rock will someday move, because everything around it has moved or changed. The park has picnic tables. The pool where my bothers and I swam below the rock when we were little has moved farther downstream, and is not as deep as it was. The falls are lower. The old log bridge has been replaced with a new one, and the new bridge is higher, has steps to it. The old Highway 42

that now dead-ends a hundred yards from here has been replaced by a new Highway 42, the highway that crosses the Coquille River 17 times now, rather than follows it. I am trying to empty my head of all but my mother. My rock was cold and the sun was hot. Bear Creek was loud and I was sitting in the middle of it, sweet sap big leaf maple trees making a shadowy movement behind my closed eyes. I fell into a hazy, warm dream where all of the sounds and smells and shadows and temperatures meld into a rhythm, a white noise that became the background of my thoughts.

Minutes, maybe an hour had passed. It was time to move. I climbed off of my rock, into my car, and drove through the geological crush of the Siskiyous/Klamaths-Sierra-Nevadas, Coast Range and Cascades, a crush uncovered by the construction of Highway 42. I began to think about my people, a people moved by ancient and multiple collisions and upheavals in the soil on which we settled, causing our allegiances to shift and divide, exhibiting us in awkward and irrelevant lights, causing our waters to flow freakishly or sometimes, to sink and disappear. My people live in a land where the seafloor sank and the mountains came up and the Klamaths, which are also called the Siskiyous, moved to the west, out of the continuous chain of Cascades and Sierra-Nevadas from Canada to Mexico. My people live in a land that is related to the Coast Range and yet also a part of the larger world, of the entire west. "It is really quite unusual for a segment of a developing coastal range to detach itself from the continent and move offshore to become an island. We can't explain why or how it happened," says David Alt and Donald Hultman in *Roadside Geology of Oregon*.

So I am driving now, on Highway 42, past my mother's wreck, past bare cuts in the road revealing these geological, Jeffersonian anomalies. Windows

down, I breathe in the dust from 60 million years ago, stirred up at Tenmile Creek by road construction. I have crossed into the Umpqua watershed. At Camas Valley, I drive across sandstone, a newer sea floor pushed up by the pressure of the multiple ranges, shifting and moving. At Winston, I drive through volcanic Cascade andesite rocks, split through with belts of green serpentine from the ancient seafloor. To the south of me is the Kalmiopsis, home of the some of the oldest rocks in the West, made of crystallized sediment 425 million years old. "Unfortunately, they are in a nearly inaccessible region of very rugged mountains and there is no easy way to see them," wrote Alt and Hultman.

The cell phone rings as I merge into I-5 from Highway 42. As I pass Roseburg, headed north, my husband asks. "When will you be home?" He is calling from Independence, from Ash Creek, from the Willamette.

Soon, I say. I'm on my way.

THE PACIFIC OCEAN

1975

Far out in the Pacific Ocean tonight I am rocking back and forth in my boat cradle, a sleeping bunk in the bow of a troller, my feet on the wall that separates my bunk from the engine room, the vibrations of the idling diesel like a low throbbing heartbeat. My bunk edges are adjustable board slats that are snug against my shoulders so that I don't roll back or forth, or off of the bunk in the night. Two months ago, sleeping in my bunk belowdecks would have made me sick, but tonight, for the first time, I realize the rocking is a lulling motion, unpredictable but comfortable. It had not been that way the first time I went to sea. I got sick then, and stayed sick for three days before I got my sea legs. I look up through the glass porthole in the deck over my head, up into the stars over the Pacific Ocean. I am drifting in the Japanese currents.

Two months earlier, my dad sorted through his late mother's things at his Bunker Hill childhood home, while I read the *The Coos Bay World*. Nineteen and finished with my freshman year at Umpqua Community College, aching to get away from Roseburg, I had come with him to Coos Bay, hoping to find a summer job. It must have been difficult for my father to return to this empty house, but I remember only being focused on my own restlessness, unnamed, without focus, twitchy.

I flipped through the paper's pages until I came to the classified ads. There is where the voyage began. The ad read: "Deck Hand wanted. Percentage of take or straight salary, DOE. Apply at Coos Bay docks, *Sansouci*." There were several

other ads for deckhands like this one, but this job was within easy walking distance. I kissed my dad and walked down Bunker Hill, went north up Isthmus Slough along Highway 101, the slough of my father's birth and youth. I walked across the bridge to downtown Coos Bay. I stood on the edge of Highway 101 looking at the docks, a row of dilapidated downtown businesses at my back, the docks divided from me by a double set of railroad tracks. Later, leaning over maps of channels and topography, my skipper's finger tapping the pages, I would discover that this single row of docks floated in a part of Coos Bay that was not clearly slough, bay, marsh or river channel, but rather a place where all come together. "Here is White Point, across Isthmus Slough from where we tie up," my skipper later showed me. "Here is Marshfield Channel, where Catching Slough, Coos River and Isthmus Slough come together to form the upside-down, U-shaped bay we know generally as Coos Bay." The railroad tracks and a steep bank down to the dock were the only things separating me from this new knowledge, from the *Sansouci*. I saw three boats, but from the road, I couldn't see which boat was the *Sansouci*.

I'm walking this exact place again today, 29 years later, along a beautiful boardwalk that was not here the day I applied for a job on the *Sansouci*. Before me three docks, not one, float serenely in the river. A new adjustable ramp, wheelchair accessible according to the sign, connects the boardwalk to the docks. Moored to the new docks are sailboats and yachts and what looks like a tourist fishing boat, although one boat looks like it could be a working shrimper, a trawler. *Venus*, *Amanda*, *Relentless*, were the names of the boats. The thought crosses my mind that this has stayed the same – the relationship between ships'

names, women and the sea. But much more has changed. I hardly know what is fished for anymore, or what these boats are properly turned out for. I see a large boat called *The Discovery* and wonder if it is some sort of research vessel. As I am thinking about this, remembering that first day, three couples stroll by slowly, passed by one grey-haired walker in pastel sweats with matching tennis shoes. The couples stop and gaze out at the river and at the plaques attached to the wooden railing above the boardwalk – plaques that inform visitors of Coos Bay's timber history. "Early Times," says one. "Boom Times," says another, "Changing Times," says a third. At the north end of boardwalk there's a huge covered observatory with more information about local birds and trees and all I can think of is, for Chrissakes, covered! Glassed in! This is not how I found the *Sansouci* the day I answered the help wanted ad.

The day I went to sea began when I jumped across railroad tracks, the smell of tar and piss and fish guts and low tide seaweed filling my nose as I scrambled down the gravel bank to the dock. Before me, three boats, two tied to the dock and a third tied on the port side to a double-ended boat named the *Jennifer*. From the bank, I walked onto the dock, up to the *Jennifer*. A man watched me from the deck, where he was untangling pile of nets. Could you tell me where the *Sansouci* is? I asked him. He corrected me, smiling. "San-sooey, not San-soo-cee," he says. Then he stood up and held out his hand. "Tom," he introduced himself. Holding his hand, he pulled me up onto the *Jennifer*. "The *Sansouci* is on the port side of us," he said. Later that day, my skipper would tell me that *Sansouci* was a Japanese word for a rare, legendary wind that blew gently from the south, drove away evil forces and brought perfect fishing weather to the

high seas. Even later, I would discover his story to be suspect, as are most stories told on fishing boats. *Sansouci*, I discovered, is not a Japanese word at all, but French, meaning “without worries,” which seems a good name for a boat, after all. My skipper, as much as I grew to admire his sea senses, apparently had named his boat according to faulty translation, but it had all turned out the same. As it was, I have never found any evidence that any but the Coos Bay skipper I signed on with that day had ever heard of that legendary wind. However, the word is often painted on the sides of boats, from pleasure cruisers to flat-bottom trollers, like the one I was about to board.

I remember jumping across another boat, following the man on the *Jennifer*, a tall and slender man who may have been old or just rough-skinned and bronzed, I couldn't tell which. When I stepped down onto the *Sansouci*, it gave a little and then recovered, rocking vaguely. The boat was heavy, made of something that looked like cement, and it sat low in the water. The decks were wide, wet and clean, smelling of fresh fish and fried potatoes. I walked around the front, onto the bridge, and that's where I saw Jim. At first, I didn't notice anything else but his huge shoulders and neck. “I'm here to apply for the job,” I blurted to his back. He had *The Coos Bay World* spread out in front of him, but when he swiveled his captain's chair to look at me, I saw that his legs hung shriveled and limp and his arms did not go up into a handshake. “Paraplegic,” he said to my silent staring. And then with his elbow, he tapped a button and spoke into an intercom: “Patience,” he said. I thought it was an appeal, but it turned out to be his wife, a muscular woman with short blonde hair who did everything that Jim could not do. She arrived quickly, eyed me skeptically, introduced herself and her

husband, told me to sit. "So you want to be a deck hand," Patience said to me. Until that minute, it had been a lark, a crazy notion, something frivolous. "Yes," I said.

What was my father thinking when I called him that day from a phone booth in the lobby of the Tioga Hotel, four blocks uptown from the boat. What did he think when he brought me my suitcase, met the first mate, Tom – the bronzed man who had helped me across the *Jennifer* – and Jim and Patience? I wondered this rocking in my bunk, two months later, reading a worried letter from him, anxious about storms, about my unknown life on the boat. I wondered about this again 29 years later, the mother of a 17-year-old boy whose impulsiveness sometimes mirrors my own. I wondered if my son would someday wonder about his parent's worries when he is far away, following his own river to the sea.

The haul out of Coos Bay and then out over the bar to the ocean seemed to take forever because I was anxious to be gone, to leave the land behind. But there are preparations to make and miles of fresh waters, sand bars, rocky shallows and narrows to navigate before we reach the sea. I had no idea, really, until I got there, how it would be. I still don't fully understand why I love the ocean, why the thought of it thrills me still, and turns my stomach.

We waited until about an hour before high tide, and then I helped Tom and Patience push the *Sansouci* away from the *Jennifer*. They told me to pull in the cushion buoys – the round orange balls that kept our two boats from crashing against each other, wood on wood. And then the engines chugged in the water and the boat began to move downstream, the greenish mud of the shoreline stirring up

behind us. I was young and free of land. What a feeling! What a euphoric, buoyant mixture is youth with salt and land air, sunshine, fish smells, diesel, and the sound of an engine pushing us out to sea. I looked behind us at the Tioga Hotel, the tallest building in Coos Bay in 1975. It disappeared behind the cargo ships that dwarf us as we chugged between the towns of Coos Bay and North Bend.

To get over the bar to the Pacific, we first had to travel due north toward North Bend, out Coos River several miles, in a ship-deep trough through sandy banks lined with cottonwood and chinkapin and big leaf maple on our right side. On the port side, we passed huge ships piled high with logs and cargo containers, giant oil tankers, piles of chips in front of the mills. If I could have seen into the future, into today, I would have seen the mill replaced by a Casino, the huge ships dwindling in size and frequency. This day in 1975, however, shipping commerce was still "boom times." As the tourist plaque would later quip, "changing times" were around the next bend.

Around North Bend, a bend in the bay turns us to the southwest, toward Charleston. At the tip of the bend, we passed under the huge McCullough Bridge, the longest in Oregon, the bridge of my childhood, the bridge over which my brothers and I would hold our breaths in a game of endurance, an impossible game to win. As our boat passed the shadow under the bridge, I exhaled with a whoop. Tom looked at me, sideways, smiling.

After the bridge, there were still several miles of waters to travel before crossing the bar. Headed southwest now, we chugged past log pilings that spoke of historic docks and buildings washed away or left to crumble into the bay; past banks covered with yew and red alder and myrtle trees and then passed Empire, a

messy, run-down and unfriendly little village midway between the bridge and Charleston. After Empire, the river narrowed to a single channel, sand dunes on one side, a thick, tangled forest on the other side that cleared occasionally with glimpses of Cape Arago Road, the road to Sunset Bay, the bay of my father's family reunions. As we neared Charleston, the trees on our starboard side, the side away from Cape Arago Road, have disappeared, giving way to a sand spit. On the road side, I watched a teepee burner, a huge brick chimney, slide by. I began to feel, without know what I was feeling, the slight swells of the bar. Like a child I asked, "Are we to the ocean yet?" Tom told me from the flying bridge that we were almost there. Slowly, we passed by the entrance to Charleston Harbor, the last port before the ocean.

Charleston Harbor, at the confluence of the South Slough and Coos River, is surrounded by high sandstone banks which protect the entrance to the harbor. Standing at the flying bridge with Tom, I looked into the harbor past the layers of orange and tan sandstone cliffs topped with trees and seagull shit and could see the red rooftops of houses around the slough and the fishing boat poles in the harbor, but soon we were nearing Coos Head and the swells were rising, regular and deep, and on the opposite side the sand dunes had fallen low enough to see over them, over to the ocean, and I pointed at it and Tom nodded. From the time we had left the Coos Bay city docks, Tom had been navigating the boat from wheel on the flying bridge. Now, as we neared the bar, he took out his binoculars, gazed at the ocean quickly, went below into the boat's house and motioned for me to follow.

As we went inside, I saw to my left the Coos Head Lighthouse flashing a goodbye. To my right, I could hear the surf pounding on the beach, flat and empty. Seagulls swooped behind the boat. The slow rocking of the river back and forth became a forward, backward motion as we passed out of the jetty, out of the safety of the bay.

The harbor buoy moaned, and from the same direction ahead of us I heard a bell ring, its red color bobbing in the sea as I climbed into the boat's house. Tom was looking at the maps, and Jim had his elbow on a giant wheel. Jim tipped his chin to me and I walked clumsily over, tripping as the irregular swells hit the boat. "Take the wheel," he said, backing his wheelchair around to the maps. "I need to look at something," and just like that, with less than a half-day on a fishing boat and a minute at sea, I was the captain of a ship. Although I didn't know at the time that the boat was on automatic pilot, Jim let me feel I was in charge of the ship for a while. Looking at the maps with Tom, Jim pointed at the depth-finder, an electronic readout that showed the shape of the seafloor, and told me to mind the shoals. He pointed to the red buoy I had heard earlier, now straight ahead, and told me to point the bow at it, slightly to the left. "Keep your bow into the swells, he said. No more instructions but those, and then he wheeled out the door to the deck, pulled at a lever and lowered the boom on the trolling poles from the mast. Later, I would learn this is done for stabilization, and that he did it for me, to make the transition between fresh water and ocean smoother as we crossed the bar. Then, however, with the wheel of a boat in my hands and an eye on the machine reading the bottom of the sea, I began to feel less the captain of a ship and more a piece of flotsam riding the swells of the Pacific out of my home watershed. The heady feeling of freedom was fast turning to seasickness.

I was sick for three days before I could actually drag myself for an entire work day out of my temporary sleeping berth above and behind Jim's chair in the steering house. From there, he patiently taught me navigation between my dry heaves. I had no choice but to get better, to get my sea legs. This four-person crew would not be turning back for me, or for anything else on its week-long fishing haul between Neskowin and Coos Bay. Sick or not, I was to get up every morning and pump out the bilge by hand, a rotten stinking job I still remember in my stomach because, for the first three days at least, my stomach released whatever was there when the smell of the bilge hit my nose.

I got over it. What choice did I have? We were at sea, and I was learning my first lesson in obedience to it. I went to work cleaning and stowing and scrubbing and polishing and untangling and cooking and sometimes, if I was lucky, navigating. More than anything, I loved the feel of the wheel in my hand, the crisp navigational maps before me, the depth sounder beeping out lines to my right and compass to my left, the ocean spread wide before me.

In two months, I had been purged of my landlubber security, my steady legs had slipped and staggered, I'd been pounded by salt spray, by orders shouted above the wind by my paraplegic skipper, his mate, and his wife. At the end of the days, fish scales drying on my skin, sunburned cheeks on the pillow, I fell asleep. I dreamed of my days, of pulling and slinging tuna over the transom. I watched them flip wildly until I banged them over the head with one end of the gaff. I hooked them with the other end of my gaff, tossed them down into the ice-filled galley. I dreamed this over and over again, dreams merging with reality, every day, every night, until my shoulders ached. In my sleep, the engines throbbed at my feet, disengaged. The anchor dragged at water, the bottom too far below for it

to reach. The shore was a hundred miles away. We were in the Japanese Current and we expected to drift south, wake up, engage the engines, and then fish north. It was an educated expectation, but there was no knowing for sure.

Eventually, I came to love the rocking of the swells as I slept. Swells that had once sickened me now soothed my sleep with their irregular and unpredictable rhythm. I had my sea legs. I had come to an agreement with the sea. I had agreed to change, to adapt, to conform, to balance, to adjust. In turn, the sea became a part of me. The rhythm of the sea is mysterious and sweet.

July 26, 2004

It is Friday at sunset, and magenta, silver, green and yellow light the tips of tiny riffles stirred by wind on Coos River, at the Empire dock, where my grandfather's body was hauled ashore just a few days earlier by the Coast Guard. Flashes of silver glint from beneath the colors as schools of candle fish dart by: a thousand fish moving in tandem. A dozen cousins, the grandchildren of John William Bowder, are standing on the dock as Uncle Dennis begins to tell the story. We are grandchildren afloat at the mouth of Coos River, feet on wood anchored to piling pounded deep into the silty mud and sandstone here, piling that keeps us from drifting slowly out to sea, over the bar. After the funeral, we have come to this dock to hear Dennis tell us how Grandpa died. We aren't ready to let go. We want to know why.

Dennis says: We dropped your grandfather's boat into the water up at Charleston. Dennis said he and Grandpa rode the choppy waves back upstream a ways in time for the negative low tide that unveils the spit of soppy sand known

as Clam Island. It was a minus seven-eighths, says Dennis. Perfect for clamming.

We were on the water by 6:30 a.m.

The day Grandpa died was supposed to be a clamming day like any other of a thousand he had been on before, like any of my childhood excursions with him along the Bandon shore, shovels prodding at bubbles in the sand, digging into the muck, pulling at the shells that would sink quickly away if you did not move fast enough. Grandpa and Dennis expected to get their buckets full of giant, squirting, sucking Empire clams and then take them home, shuck them, chop them for chowder, or fry, can, or freeze them.

As Dennis talks, we are all staring into the water. I am thinking about the funeral. The dock rocks slowly as a boat passes by. It has been a perfect day on the coast. Sunny skies, warm breezes, oddly warm, as we buried his body next to my grandmother's in the I.O.O.F. Cemetery in Bandon, a small graveyard at the beginning of Highway 42 South. Nine grandsons hauled the casket to the plot. Nine grandsons placed their boutonnieres on top of the casket. Nine grandsons stepped back into the group of more grandsons, granddaughters, sons, daughters, great-grandchildren, great-greats, sisters, cousins, nephews, nieces, second and third cousins, and friends.

After the cemetery, we crossed the highway, and ate a potluck dinner prepared for his family by Grandpa's friends at the community hall. Uncle Kenny, who is my cousin Tonya's uncle, came up to me and told me a story about how Grandpa had launched Kenny's career as a mechanic by leaving him, at 16, to repair an engine in Grandpa's Union 76 Station. "I wanted you to know about that," Kenny said to me.

After we ate, as the sun began to set, we drove down to the docks at Empire, at the river where Grandpa left his life, near the mouth of the Coos River, near the place where the ocean meets the river, where they hauled his body out of the Coast Guard's boat. That is where we are now, listening to Dennis.

Tonya has picked dahlias from my Aunt Sherry's back yard in Coos Bay. They are a rainbow: pink, red, yellow, orange, purple, greenish-yellow, bluish, some multi-colored – yellow in the center or red with another surrounding color. She has placed them in a box that sits on the dock. We are standing on the dock, afloat in Coos River, a river half-saline, half-fresh. We are the grandchildren of John William Bowder, listening to his son-in-law, watching seagulls and pelicans flying overhead. Dennis' voice is quiet. I feel the nearness of Grandpa and yet the distance of his life, flowing out to the inevitable sea. I imagine him in a heaven like today, on a dock on a river full of sparkling fish, checking for the low tide, thinking about clams. The sun's low angle to the west, downstream as far as it can go, changes the flickers of light on the ripples to red and orange. Dennis clears his throat and continues.

"I want to tell you what happened," he says. Uncle Dennis has been many things in his life – most recently a nurse, but also, a preacher. We all love his tenor singing voice, and for that, he is most often tapped to lead song services at church. On this dock, bobbing in the red-tinted wavelets in Coos River, Uncle Dennis has his hands in his pockets and his head is bowed. He keeps looking into the river, at the candle fish, and then downstream, toward Clam Island.

It was 6 a.m. July 19 when Grandpa and Dennis launched the boat at Charleston. They reached Clam Island just in time for low tide.

“There, you can see it,” Uncle Dennis points downstream, to a buoy and a red light on top of the nearby piling. “There,” he said, “across the river from the light, that’s where Clam Island comes up.”

The island is not visible now because the tide is not low enough, but I can see the buoy, the buoy I had passed all those years ago on my way to sea. Dennis detours in his tale to explain to us the fine art of finding mud flats perfect for clamming, an art he may have learned from Grandpa, or maybe from his own father, a Coos Bay native. “Minus seven-eighths, the tide was that day,” he said again. It needs to be at least a foot negative for the island to come up, Dennis explains. By the time they got out there, the sand flats had emerged, bubbling with clams. Both men waded into the mud and began to dig.

Empire clams are famous for their size. Dennis reminds us of this, echoing Grandpa’s words, that a single clam is nearly enough to stock an entire kettle of Bowder Chowder. We have heard this before because we have clammed with Grandpa before, have chased the sand bubbles with our sticks and shovels, with bare feet or with muddy boots, since childhood. We all have squealed and hoorayed, pulled the water-squirting, sucking-noise clams from muck and thrown them into the bucket. We know the joys of clamming. We have told this story ourselves, this family legend of the single-kettle clam. But we hear this story with new ears. Dennis is telling us about Grandpa’s last clam.

After a few minutes of digging clams near the boat that day, Dennis left Grandpa and wandered down the mud flat a little way, out of sight, following the bubbles. Within 10 minutes, Dennis said, he had dug his limit and filled his bucket with the clams sucking and squirting. He headed back to the boat.

At first, he couldn't see Grandpa and figured the old man had walked the other way, in search of sand bubbles. But when he neared the boat, he saw Grandpa, face down in the water. Grandpa's arms were stiff at his side. Dennis-the-nurse dropped his bucket and pulled Grandpa out of the water, feeling for his pulse and, feeling none, began CPR. Had Grandpa been taking his heart medication? Nobody knew. After a few minutes of CPR without response, my uncle dialed 9-1-1 on his cell phone. As we stand on the dock, we hear the tone of frustration in his voice, the panic rising as he can't get through, a panic doubled because this is not a patient but a beloved body before him, stranded on this temporary Clam Island, a lifeless, pulseless beloved body. Finally, Uncle Dennis tells us, he got through to his son's house and directed his daughter-in-law to call 9-1-1. When the Coast Guard found them 20 minutes later, there was still no life, no heartbeat, no breath in my grandpa.

Dennis finishes the story hunched over, like an old man, still looking into the river. Grandpa's body was hauled ashore there, he points at the end of the dock, and taken to the morgue. Dennis winds down, talking about practical things like retrieving the boat and the buckets of clams. His story drifts off like the river, like the winding down of the life of a man who began this line, this clan gathered on the dock. As we speak, the clams gathered are bubbling in a chowder in Aunt Sherry's house, in a chowder she and her sisters, the daughters of John William Bowder, are cooking up for his clan, his people who have come to honor him in the event of his sudden – but somehow not unexpected – death. We knew he would die in the ocean. We just didn't know how or when.

Back at home the next day, I did two things. I looked up Empire clams, to see if they really are the biggest and best, as Grandpa always claimed. I read in a brochure, put out by the South Slough Estuary:

The most popular bay clam is the gaper, locally known as the empire clam, presumably after the Empire district of Coos Bay, where the clam flourishes in nearby mudflats. Diggers look for round or slightly oval holes in the mud, about an inch or so across. There's no mistaking the gaper's presence when you poke a finger in the hole and feel its rubbery neck retreat. Average gapers will be four to five inches long, with the largest exceeding seven inches and residing two feet deep or more. It takes effort to dig big ones out, but it is work well rewarded.

The next thing I do is place on my shelf a jar of canned clams gathered by my grandfather. Empire clams, it says. They are finely chopped, floating in salty liquid, ready for chowder. Some day, some sentimental day, that is what I will do. I will eat those clams. I will put them into chowder following my grandfather's recipe, the recipe I have engraved on my heart. I will feed it to my family and wonder where in the wide-wide ocean he is.

Meanwhile, the ocean is a comfort, a mystery, the end of my watersheds.

AFTERWORD: A REFLECTION ON THESE ESSAYS

For the sake of presenting this thesis and graduating, I had to stop writing. I didn't want to. In fact, as I write this afterword, I have already begun two more related essays – both about the Yaquina River watershed, where my great-great grandfather established a land claim at its headwaters near Summit, and where he and many of my Hamar relatives are buried.

Truth is, I am hooked on this watery theme, and on the genre of the personal essay. I plan on following this stream until I run out of subjects, which is likely to be never.

This confession shocks me. I came to Oregon State University intending to write fiction. I had a novel in mind and I was determined to see it written, so I applied to enter the MFA program, an application that was rejected. Imagine the disappointment of a 40-something woman whose dream for the past 20 years was to finish this book! Despite that setback, I had allotted this time in my life for higher education, and I was determined to learn what I could from professors and fellow graduate students in the English Department. It was here I discovered the personal essay.

This is what comes of education, of embracing and inspecting and then overcoming disappointment, of re-visioning goals: a new writing life. I discovered the personal essay late in my studies and fell immediately and hopelessly in love with the genre. I found it lets me use the talents for observing detail that I've developed as a reporter, but grants me the freedom to express my own relationships with those details, something not encouraged in my newspaper world.

I don't know what will come of my new romance with the personal essay. I have ideas of course, including plans to expand these essays into something book-sized and publishable. And like any lover, like the evangelist that I am, I want to share this experience with my friends. I believe that the discipline of composition, and the genre of the personal essay, has something to offer watershed councils, scientists and volunteers who bring their expertise to their work with water, but who often aren't asked to share their passions, their past, and their connections to the water. Maybe, if they are anything like me, they haven't found the fire that burns away their resistance to a new idea. I am hoping, with these essays, to show what can be done when one person places herself at the pass, lets herself be drawn downstream, merging with other streams, following gravity, bumping up against rocks and stones on her way to the sea. I'm wondering what could be done if we could all try to write our own watersheds.

Gail Oberst