This collection consists of autobiographical essays which center around my father, my first husband, and my backyard. All of the pieces are recollections, and most occur either from my study inside the house, or from the deck outside, looking at the yard. The Preface is the story of how I came to be a writer. Chapter I, "Arkansas," traces my thought process in "On Looking in From Zinnias" in which I recount losing a baby that, ultimately, reminds me of my father. This leads into three essays, "Down Home," "The Heart Ring," and "The Boyd Place," that recall my parents' past in Arkansas, a ring my father made, and a trip I took to Arkansas. Chapter II, "Cemetery," recalls a meteorology class field trip to a cemetery where my first husband and father are buried and explores the implications of my first husband's suicide. Chapter III, "Backyard," returns to my father and his craft of building in "Full of His Details." "On the Birds I See" looks at robins and leads to a look at other birds and how I experienced "flying" on a one-time sailing trip. "Ash" recalls when Mount St. Helens erupted and ultimately reinforces the overall theme in the collection: finding solace in remembering details of the past.
Full of His Details and Other Essays

by

Teresa K. Easterling Tuma

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Completed May 19, 1995
Commencement June 1996
I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.
In memory of Jon D. Jensen and Lee Roy Easterling
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must thank those who have helped me arrive at the point of earning a master's degree and of writing a collection of essays: Betsy Wallace for opening my eyes and my mind, for helping me learn to love writing, for encouraging me to go to graduate school; Chris Anderson for continuing what Dr. Wallace started, for helping me grow as a writer, for helping me believe in my ability. The members of my committee, Chris Anderson, David Robinson, Ted Leeson, and Diane Hart, offered invaluable advice and suggestions for improvement of my writing, and without their help, my work would be much less than it is. Thanks are due, too, to the English Department at Oregon State University, for granting me an assistantship while I worked on my degree. All the faculty and graduate students who encouraged me in small ways or responded to my writing can't be left out—their help is reflected in this work, too. My family and friends understood when I was too busy to be as involved with them as I would have liked, and I appreciate their understanding. Most of all, I thank my husband Bruce for his unending love and patience, for his words of encouragement when I was ready to give up, for helping to make my dream of a college education a reality, for helping me learn to call myself a writer.

T.K.E.T.
He who binds to himself a joy, does the winged life destroy;
He who kisses the joy as it flies, lives in eternity's sunrise.

- William Blake
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As a little girl, I remember reading a story in my Sunday School paper one day and thinking to myself, "I can write a story like this." I began one. I remember writing, sitting in my room at my chest of drawers, where I had turned one of the drawers upside down to make a desk. My heroine's name was Delilah (not a terribly original name for a Sunday School paper), but I don't remember who Delilah was or the point to the story. What I do remember is that I never finished the story; I never showed what I had started to anyone; and I never told anyone about it — until now, that is. I decided, then, in the third or fourth grade, that I did not want to be a writer because it would be too hard to write something well, something that someone else would like.

In school, I wasn't terribly creative when teachers asked us to write "What you did on summer vacation." My family never did anything, I thought. I stayed at home and my older sister, Dianne, baby-sat me while our parents worked. I had nothing to say about summer except that it got long and boring. We watched "Jeopardy," "Let's Make a Deal," "Concentration," and "Password." We put on our bathing suits and turned the stereo up loud and laid in the sun. I'm sure I could write about summer vacations now. But my teachers didn't ask me to write about ordinary things, and everyone else in my classes always seemed to go to places like Yellowstone or Disneyland, or they drove to Washington, D.C., and got to see the president. I thought my life was boring.

So, I did the usual student routine and did my best to figure out what the teachers wanted. When I could write a book report or a research paper, I did just fine. Then, I was writing about somebody else's life or discovery. I was always a model student—
thorough, dependable. I should have been a girl scout. I didn't think about writing much until I was long out of high school.

At some point, my life got complicated. My husband, Jon, began having mental problems, and ultimately killed himself. Before and after, there was lots of counseling, crying, anger. I started keeping a journal. I mostly wrote about feelings, and when I have gone back to read this journal, most of it doesn't make much sense because I didn't write down details. I was writing to help myself think straight, not to develop writing skills. But I decided I liked writing; I liked putting my thoughts on paper.

After Jon's death, I found myself at thirty with my life to start over. We had no children. I was not constricted by a thing, except money and my own imagination. I thought about all kinds of things—I could be a travel agent and see the world. I could continue in my legal secretarial career, and work for the most prestigious firm I could find. I could pursue work in my church—they offered me an administrative job in the denomination's regional office. I could join the Peace Corps. I could go to Alaska and work on a fishing boat. I decided, though, to go to college—something I had wanted to do for years—and when I ended up in Writing 101 at Washington State University, I remembered the story I had started years earlier about Delilah. I liked the course. I liked my teacher. So here I am eight years later, writing a collection of essays.

E.B. White says, in "The Essayist and the Essay," that "[o]nly a person who is congenitally self-centered has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays." When I told my major professor in graduate school that I knew I was definitely self-centered, but that I had never considered myself as having effrontery, he said, "Get some." This collection of essays is my attempt to do so, to climb out of a shell that has kept me thinking that my own thoughts and ideas don't matter much, that what I did on summer vacation is, finally, interesting.

My interest in writing had been dormant since I had begun the story about Delilah, but it was never completely gone. My life, even though I didn't consciously consider
myself a writer, was a preparation for writing. When I was growing up, Dad's carpentry work helped me learn about the importance of details. If the table is going to hold together, or the house is going to stand; if it's going to be a beautiful thing or a functional thing, the details, the craftsmanship, are what will make it work. When I was married to Jon, his work as a mycologist also helped me learn about the importance of details. He did basic research on fungi. He would pick a little bark or a leaf from an alder tree and look at it through a small hand lens, something like a jeweler might use, to see what was growing there. My own work as a legal secretary taught me that an error in a sentence or a phrase could create huge misunderstandings between people. As an English major I learned details too. I didn't learn the precise placement of boards or the microscopic details of Gelasinospora reticulospora, but I learned the details of words—studying the minute to understand the huge.

Jon walked through the forest looking for orange dots of color in order to understand how things reproduce and grow. Dad studied blueprints to understand how to put things together. I studied words to help myself grow, to put myself together. To write an essay is to examine and to build. To write an essay is to do basic research into the ways we think about what happens around us. To write an essay is to learn to read the blueprints of our minds. It really makes no difference whether it's science or building things or writing essays. The search, the inquiry, the curiosity, the understanding gained—these are the important things.

When the Delilah story was rekindled, I thought I wanted to write fiction. I took every fiction writing class I could find. One teacher suggested that we take a photograph and build a story around it. The picture that immediately came to mind is the one I have on my bookshelf of my dad. What I ultimately wrote appears in this collection—as part of an essay, not a short story. At the time, I shoved the picture aside—I wanted to write fiction. I did not want to be explicit about me, my family, or its past. It was boring, I
thought, still fighting that urge from those summer vacation stories: nothing I had to say about my life was interesting.

The only thing I considered interesting was Jon's suicide, and I did not want to reveal that in open, real life experience on the page. I thought I could disguise my own stories in fiction, changing the names to protect the innocent—or the guilty. But my most successful short stories are the ones in which I completely abandon myself and truly create a fiction: characters totally unrelated to any real people I know, events totally unrelated to any real ones I know—at least on any conscious level. I kept at fiction, taking workshops, learning about developing scenes, about deepening characters, about getting beneath the superficial.

I came to essays through a circuitous route. I was introduced to writing essays in Freshman Composition, but even then, I wanted to write short stories, and many of the writing classes I took were fiction workshops. While I learned about the craft of fiction, I learned to do yet another kind of writing: freewriting. Peter Elbow defines freewriting in its purest form as writing nonstop for at least ten minutes. The idea is to keep your pen moving, even if you write nonsense. It sounds like nonsense, doesn't it? But freewriting is a tool, a means of invention if you want to go back to classical rhetoric. Elbow's method is grounded in the idea that the creating process is separated from the editing process. I learned to use freewriting to get my ideas on paper—about stories, about difficult concepts, about research for papers I worked on—no matter how crazy they seemed. Freewriting became an integral part, not only of my writing process, but of my learning process. It became a way to know myself, and the more I came to know myself, the less I wanted to hide behind my creations in fiction.

In Court of Memory, James McConkey tells about being dissatisfied with a short story he wrote because, he said, "it was 'made up,' a fiction, one devoid of the sacredness I saw everywhere about me. The only way open to me to communicate the strength of my feelings was through myself—through my intimate experiences, through memory, and
personal observation." McConkey says in moving to writing nonfiction: "I had not escaped fiction: I had simply made myself the central character of a story, finding in my own experiences and dreams a greater authenticity than I could in those of any character I might invent."

Freewriting helped me make a move toward writing essays about my experience, about summer vacations. Freewriting helped me see that my life, my thoughts, my experiences, were not boring. So, the freewriting helped me get to the heart of the matter: that I did want to write about my own experience, that fiction, for whatever truth may be revealed there, was not the best genre for me. But then, where is the line drawn between essays and fiction? How often do essayists remember what they want to remember and not necessarily the "truth" in its literal sense? How often do fiction writers draw from their own experience and write about something that is not a fiction at all? And then, what is truth, anyway? Is it found in literal facts and events, or is it found in the particularities or abstractions of our own minds?

Recently, I have begun to see events in my life as a series of metaphors for essays—building things with wood, Dad. Noticing details in the woods, science, Jon. Sitting in my backyard, thinking, connecting. Mount St. Helens blowing up, rearranging the landscape, essays. But the metaphor is not exclusively for essays. Fiction is a building, an arranging, a discovery, too. A circuitous route to essays, I said earlier, from fiction to freewriting to essays, and probably back to fiction, I think. Not here, now, but another time.

This collection evolved in a circuitous way, too. First, I thought I wanted to write a collection about my dad. I wanted to retell some of his stories about living in Arkansas, and mine about a trip I took there. At the same time, I wanted to write about Jon's suicide, how it affected me. Then I didn't know what I wanted to write so I wrote about birds one day, and my garden and sitting on the deck—all an unrelated mess, I thought.
Now, though, I see that these essays are not unrelated. It is me, there on the page, examining my life, trying to make sense of it, trying to acknowledge it, deciding, once and for all, that it is worth writing about. When I started the story about Delilah thirty odd years ago, I didn't finish it because I didn't see it as important enough. But I realize, now, that Delilah is really me, and that, finally, the story has an end, here, in this collection. I prefer to think of it, though, not as an end, but as a beginning—a house to which I keep adding rooms, a backyard continually in a cycle of change, a freewrite I keep editing. Writing essays has helped me discover the moments of joy, helped me to stop, to look outward and inward, to see what is really there, to begin to understand that my other self—the one that started the story about Delilah—is the one who writes.

So what does all this have to do with my statement early on about having effrontery? It has to do with believing in the words I write down on the page, believing, like Chris Anderson, that "[m]aybe I can put something into words right now, without having to be any wiser or more talented." It has to do with believing that the power of the life I have been a part of, that the past I bring to today is enough. These essays are my attempts at collecting my past and having the effrontery to think that my thoughts about my life and those in it are important. I don't mean to suggest that my life is particularly special or enlightening, but that it is like the lives of everyone else, that all our lives are special and enlightening if we would only examine them, like a scientist examines a specimen under the microscope, like a carpenter reads blueprints.
I. ARKANSAS

On Looking in From Zinnias

Today, I went to the zinnias in the back yard, scissors in hand. Fall is here, but the colors haven't faded yet. A few buds still form on the massive plants growing along the south border of our lawn. The leaves have not yet begun to turn brown. I cut about thirty blooms with long stems—orange, red, hot pink, gold, in a range of sizes from one to three inches in diameter, the daisy-like petals surrounding the yellow-gold stamens in the middle of the flower. I gathered the zinnias, barely able to carry them in one hand. At the kitchen sink, I rinsed the flowers and pulled off most of the leaves, and put them, one by one, into a bright cobalt blue crockery pot. I fiddled with the flowers for fifteen or twenty minutes, pushing and pulling. Mostly satisfied, I set the arrangement on the dining room table, stood back, looking, turning it this way and that, trying to get the angle right. Finally, I picked the pot up, took it to my study, and set it on my desk at the edge of the window. Now, I can look at the flowers in the pot, and see out to the backyard, along the back fence row, where the zinnias grow.

I like zinnias. They bloom early and continuously until the winter cuts off their light. They get more profuse as the summer passes, and the more you cut them, the more buds they produce. They make me feel like a gardener, even though gardening in the last few years has dwindled to keeping the weeds pulled and the lawn mowed and watered.

I had bought a couple of dozen plants in June, and when I decided I couldn't afford to buy more plants, I bought a couple packages of seed: short—about a foot tall, big blossoms; medium—about a foot and a half tall, small one-inch pom pom flowers; and large—a three foot high "state fair" variety, with large, three-inch blooms. I had wanted to set in the plants myself, and put the seeds in the ground, working the dirt around my hands. I planted one or two, but then I had to rest. I had felt sick the whole time I was buying the flowers, but I was determined to bring a bit of color and light to the yard.
Later, as I squatted, the pain in my stomach made me feel faint. I stopped, sat on the railroad tie that divides the planting bed from the yard.

Bruce came out and took over. He brought me a lawn chair to sit in. I watched and tried to direct how he planted the flowers and the seeds. He listened to me, nodded his head, and did it his own way. He made a series of semicircles with the plants and worked in the seeds, randomly, around them. An interesting arrangement, I thought.

Large old maple trees grow all up and down my street. I love fall, but today, I am angry at it. The zinnias are dying. The leaves on the trees are dying. I look at the orange-red tree across the street and think, I don't want the leaves to fall.

Nature is so profuse. Each petal from one zinnia will produce a flower—enough zinnias for my neighbors and me. But I have hundreds of zinnias; I could furnish the nation—the world—with zinnias. The maples, which are so beautiful, are like weeds. Their pesky "helicopter" seeds produce a tiny maple wherever they fall. Each spring, we pull hundreds of maples from our flower beds and yard. But the one tiny life that grew within me for those few short weeks never had a chance.

It's late fall now, and the zinnias are gone. Bruce tilled under the yellow, pink and orange blossoms and along with them the leaves from the yard, resulting in a lumpy, loose, mulchy soil. The ground will wait now, until next spring. Perhaps we'll plant zinnias again. More likely, the volunteers will sprout and grow untended, mixed in with the weeds, until we decide what to do with the garden.

Looking out the window now, I have that empty hollowness that comes to me too often. It is a struggle not to be constantly reminded that we are mortal, after all. Thinking about having a baby excited me. I had mentally rearranged my life to incorporate this new being. I wondered if I could be pregnant, teach, and be a graduate student all at once. I
decided I could. I wondered if I could go on for a Ph.D. with a preschooler. I decided I could. I wondered what it would feel like to hold my own child in my arms.

I look out the window at the naked place where the crumbled leaves and flowers now nourish the soil. I look around the yard, notice that the apple tree has barely begun to turn and that the neighbor's maple is still littering our lawn with leaves.

From the corner of my bookshelf, a small photograph of my father catches my eye. I recall Dad telling me that I was such a small baby that he could hold me in the palm of one hand. "You were just a little tike," he said. I visualize his long, slender fingers cupping underneath my back the way I've seen him hold other babies.

The picture was taken when Dad was in his twenties, he's got his head cocked to one side a little, and he has on a wide-brimmed hat, pulled down slightly in the front. When Dad was in the nursing home, I remember telling him I'd heard a country-western song about him in which the singer wailed about a photograph of her father with a "wide-brimmed hat and a watch on a chain, a picture of a downright handsome man, caught in the prime of his youth." I told Dad I couldn't see the watch or the chain in the picture, but I knew they were there. I'd seen them both, broken, in his jewelry box. "And," I said, "You are a handsome man." He looked up at me, through morphined eyes, and asked, "You wrote a song about me, honey?" I tried to explain, but he was off again, in another doze.

Other mementos of Dad sit next to his picture—a wide, shallow pottery dish holds a chalk line with its red line still wound tightly inside, a small hacksaw that we still use on occasion, a small adjustable square with a level bubble that still works, a pair of tin snips, a large awl that I used to think was a railroad spike. Most of these old hand tools were old when Dad got them; they worked, and he saw no need to replace them with more modern varieties. Beside the bowl of tools is a wood plane of Dad's that my husband has used on door tops in our house to plane off the old paint so the doors would shut more
easily. In front of the plane is the tiny black and white picture of Dad when he was a young man.

I had seen the picture of Dad even as a little girl, and I thought Dad had been a gangster. I didn't know what a gangster was, but I knew that in old movies on Saturday afternoons, there were handsome men in suits and hats. I thought Dad looked like they did. I also thought Dad was Abraham Lincoln. The year I was born, my home town celebrated its centennial, and the men all grew beards. One old, faded picture, which I haven't seen for thirty-five years, shows Dad with his beard. At the bank once, Mom gave me a penny to get gum, and I remember looking at the penny and exclaiming that it was Dad. Mom laughed. "That's Abraham Lincoln," she said.

The picture on my shelf is one I've seen all my life, but this particular picture was given to me by Aunt Fern when I visited Arkansas. I put the picture in a small, filigreed silver-plated frame next to the plane on the shelf. I can see the picture, the plane, and the other tools when I sit in the rocker next to the bookshelf or when I write at my desk as I do now, looking out the window, remembering the zinnias, watching them grow. I think about seeds, how they are planted randomly, by accident; how we remember odd things—seeds of thought—that others have forgotten; how those seeds grow inside us, if we only let them.
**Down Home**

Dad and Mom moved to Oregon in 1943, and in 1946 Dad made one trip back to Arkansas to help Mom's family move to Oregon. After that trip, it was almost thirty years before he ever went back. He didn't even go back for his mother's funeral. Instead, one of his sisters sent him a photograph of their dead mother laying in her coffin. A red and white stationery box in my mom's chest of drawers still holds the picture, as well as a handkerchief and a doily Granny had made. When I was a little girl, I came upon the box one day when I was snooping around in my parents' room. Mom told me never to mention it. I never did, but Dad told me once, voluntarily, "I don't know why your mother doesn't throw that mess away."

In 1972, an elderly couple asked Dad to drive them to Texas, and they'd buy his plane fare home. He decided this was his chance, and he took it—Texas is a lot closer to Arkansas than Oregon is. He didn't tell his family he was coming; he wanted to surprise them. He never could talk about this trip easily. "They knew me right off," he'd say, and he always changed the subject before the tears had a chance to fall.

Emphysema and lung cancer forced Dad to spend his last months in a nursing home, and he and I had lots of opportunities to talk about his life. Dad hadn't finished eighth grade, and when I asked him why, he said, "I always had to work in the fields, and I lost my place in my class. I just told mama that I wasn't going to do it any more, and she never argued with me." One day he said, "I wish I'd have gone to college." I was shocked because I felt he never understood why I had started going to college. I asked him what he'd study. "Oh, I don't know," he said, "just things." I'd always been slightly embarrassed by Dad until then. Hearing him talk made me realize a part of him had always been in Arkansas, a part of him that I really never knew or understood. A part of him that could not be affected by a college degree.

I hated that he was in a nursing home, though it was clean and the nurses were friendly. I hated the green trim on the windows and the courtyard outside with its
blossoming cherry tree. I hated the smell of disinfectant and sometimes the smell of urine or feces of some unfortunate patient. I hated that Dad couldn't eat, that he lived on morphine, but I was thankful that he could talk to me, that I could tell him I loved him.

I saw Dad there in his bed next to the window, his 5' 11" frame withering into a 90 pound collection of skin and bones. His skin became gray, transluscent, parchment-like. His hair, finally coming back after unsuccessful chemo-therapy, was long. I cut it for him one day. His breath was horrible, and when I visited, I flossed his teeth and helped him brush, something my mother, who had been a nurse, could not do. I held the spit tray for him when he spit out the water from brushing his teeth, and when he coughed up the greenish brown slime from his lungs. "If I could just get all that out," he said, "then I could breathe."

What did not wither were Dad's eyes. A short while before he died, my mother, sister and I were there with him, and I remember Dianne standing next to the bed, holding his hand. "I love you, Daddy," she said. His closed eyes opened instantly, blue, deep. He was too tired to speak from his hours of fighting and writhing for air, but his response was in his eyes. Dad didn't pass into a coma. Sue, the hospice worker, told us that when he died, we should be prepared for body fluids to come out of his mouth or to be released from his bladder or bowels, or for his body to jerk. None of those things happened. He stayed awake and then simply closed his eyes and quit breathing. A teardrop in the corner of one eye was the only change we could see.

One of his brothers died while Dad was in the nursing home, and he cried openly. "I miss my family so much," he said. After his composure returned: "Won't you write a letter down home once in a while?" I promised him I would.

After Dad died, I tried to remember all the stories he told us over all the years of our lives, of Emmett and Hope, towns where he and Mom had grown up and had lived. Dad always laughed when he talked about the Boyd brothers who lived with their maiden
sister—they referred to themselves as "We Boyds and our sister." He was less shy in those
days; he and my mother went to Sunday all day "singings" where he used his booming bass
voice and even directed the choir. I regret never having written down the stories he told
us—he was in those stories more than he was ever in Oregon. Maybe capturing the tales
fully on paper would have given me something to study and ponder, a way to keep Dad
alive beyond his days.

I kept my promise to Dad and wrote to Uncle Lile. One of his letters said, "I find
it hard to believe that I have a niece who's in her thirties, and I've never met her." And I
found it hard to believe I had a whole family I'd never met.

So, on my birthday, in August of 1992, I did more than write letters. My husband
and I left on a trip to Hope, Arkansas, where we met and visited with what remains of my
Dad's family—of my family. Out of eleven children, three remained. Uncle Lile showed us
where they had lived and grown up and places where my parents had lived. He even took
us out in the country and showed us what remained of the Boyd place: two chimneys. He
showed us Piney Grove where they had their all day "singings," represented today by a
lone rusty pump in the middle of a field. He pointed out land where they had grown and
harvested cotton. He showed me pictures and told me more stories about my family. I
met cousins and aunts and uncles that I'd only heard about for thirty odd years. I was
overwhelmed with information while I was there and tried to write things down, but it's
hard to capture a lifetime of words and stories in four days. I hadn't had this family, this
state even, to pour themselves into me over the years of my life. I found myself plunked
inside them, wanting to grab, to absorb. But now, away from Arkansas, what remains is
confusion. Time and a tape recorder, a hotel room in Hope, permission to invade the
minds of the family I've only met might help. I feel guilty for not paying attention to the
Arkansas of Dad's stories, and I have touched upon a place that I cannot know
completely. A history—not a geneology—perhaps a movie or a novel might help, but it is
not written except for these brief essays or my uncle's vast geneology that goes back to
the time of the Magna Carta. The history only resides in the minds of those who know the stories.

As we drove around the area I thought how much fun it would have been to have had Dad in the car with us. I often imagined he was. Uncle Lile's lanky arms and long slender fingers pointed out sites and emphasized words with the same movements Dad used. I stared at his hands, fascinated that two brothers who lived so long apart could be so much alike. I saw Dad in Uncle Lile, but I also saw him everywhere we went. I imagined him singing at the Sunday "singings" and sitting down to dinner "on the grounds" with my mother, shaded by magnolias, and dressed in their Sunday best. I imagined him as a boy riding his chestnut horse across the gentle rolling hills of that lush countryside. I imagined him arriving at Uncle Lile's house unannounced after so long an absence with his combination grin and tears and slightly reddened nose revealing him as a sensitive man.

A gentility and quietness of soul existed in my father, and I saw it in Uncle Lile. I also saw in Uncle Lile's children and grandchildren the same feeling of indifference and impatience with their father—a slight embarrassment—that I used to experience with mine. And there was the same feeling of indifference and impatience, the slight embarrassment toward their cousin from Oregon who wanted to know so much. What they saw as everyday life, I saw as a pathway to a different life, one I had not cared to know until Dad began his slow move toward death. Only then was I able to begin a slow move toward understanding the history of down home.
The Heart Ring

When I was a little girl, I used to snoop in my parents' room when they weren't around. I especially liked looking in their jewelry boxes, not that they had any expensive jewelry, but I liked looking at all the pins and beads that my sisters and I had given Mom, all the tie tacks we had given Dad to go with all the ties he had hanging in his closet. It's kind of strange that we gave him so many ties, because he was a carpenter, not a businessman, and he didn't even go to church much except for a wedding or a funeral.

I used to steal fifty cent pieces from Dad's side of the dresser. I thought it was loose change, though even after I realized they were Kennedy silver half-dollars, I think I may have still taken one or two. Tom's Drive-in was two blocks from our house, and I liked to go there after school or on Saturdays to get candy or a soft vanilla cone, and Dad's change trove helped me with my sugar habit. One day he came in from the garage where he had been working on a canopy for his pickup. I could hear him washing up in the back bathroom. He walked into the kitchen, where I sat at the counter having a cookie, buttoning the cuffs on his khaki shirt. "What's happening to all my silver half-dollars?" he asked.

He had caught me by surprise; I had thought he would never miss them. I admitted that I had taken a few. "I didn't know they were worth anything, at first, Dad. I just wanted some change."

"That don't matter," he said, "you shouldn't take things without asking. I'd have given you some money to buy candy with." He didn't spank me or even yell. Instead, he took my chin into his hand and kissed me on the cheek with a loud smack and then reached in his pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and put it on the counter. He took a couple of cookies from the cookie jar and sat down next to me. Later, I put the change in my change purse, but it was several days before I could spend it. Sometimes I think it would have been easier for me if he had just yelled, but he didn't ever yell.
In second grade I decided I wanted to wear a ring I had seen in Mom's jewelry box many times. It was silver, I thought then, with a small, flat heart mounted on it. I asked Mom if I could wear it. "I don't want you to lose it," she said. "Daddy made that ring for me when we worked in the shipyards in Orange, Texas."

They had lived in Orange right before and during World War II. They both worked in the shipyards; both were welders. One day, I don't know if it was for an anniversary, or Valentine's Day, or just because he loved her, Dad made Mom the heart ring. He took a scrap of stainless steel and laid it on the railroad track, and when the train went by, it flattened the steel, making it thinner. He shaped the heart with a grinder and worked the top of it with a file, making a small groove where the top of the heart moves down into a point. He made the ring from a small stainless steel pipe that he thought would fit Mom's finger. He smoothed out the inside of the ring with a rat tail file, making the back thinner—and the front thicker where the heart would be soldered on with silver solder. It shows now, the black tarnish of silver, small dark spots on each side of the heart where the solder wasn't cleaned away, evidence that it was made by hand, not stamped out by a machine.

I promised Mom that I wouldn't lose the ring, so she said I could wear it. I wrapped tape around the back like I had seen older girls do with their boyfriends' rings (Dad was kind of my boyfriend, wasn't he, in that little girl way?), and then painted the tape with pink nail polish. I wasn't sure what the polish was supposed to do, but I had seen other girls do it, so I did too. I wore the ring proudly, and whenever anyone asked me about it, I beamed, "My dad made it for my mom when they lived in Texas." The novelty wore off after a while, and I took off the tape and cleaned away the sticky residue with nail polish remover. I didn't put the ring back in Mom's jewelry box, though. I kept it in mine.

Once in a while, over the years, she'd ask if I still had it. "Don't lose it," she always warned. I didn't. It moved with me, safely, from Oregon to California, to Washington,
back to California, back to Washington, back to Oregon, just like it had moved with her from Texas to Oregon.

When I was in junior high, I got the ring out again. It fit me, though loosely. I didn't need to put tape on it any more (and I didn't think of Dad as my boyfriend any more). I wore it most of the time all through junior high and high school.

It's not a particularly beautiful ring, not dainty or pretty, but it's a little piece of displaced Arkansas—I say Arkansas even though Dad made it in Texas, because Arkansas is where Dad became the man who would do such a thing. I keep the ring safely in my jewelry box, putting it on occasionally when I get in a melancholy mood. It doesn't really cheer me up, but it reminds me that I am part of something, that even though Dad is gone, I still have this reminder of him in his youth, in love with Mom, happy to make something simple.

Just now I looked for the ring in my jewelry box, panicking because I couldn't find it. I dumped the contents of the box on the bed, and the ring was there, tangled up with necklaces I haven't worn since I was a girl. I put it on. I will probably wear it for a while, a few days, a week, and then I will put it away. When I wear the ring, I can imagine Dad making it, can see the train rolling over the scrap of steel on the track, can see the grin on his face when he gave it to Mom and the smile of surprise on hers.
The Boyd Place

When I was growing up Dad used to talk about the Boyd Place a lot, a house owned by some well-to-do folk near Hope, Arkansas, where my parents both grew up. I remember Dad describing the Boyd brothers as "a little on the prissy side." He'd laugh when he explained that the brothers referred to themselves as "we Boyds and our sister"—only Dad said "our" like "ow-were," drawing out his southern country drawl into the more upper class talk of the Boyds. Somehow I didn't really get the impression that Dad saw the Boyds as upper class, but that he thought they saw themselves that way. I can still hear him laugh. The truth is, though, that the Boyds helped my Dad's family—and my Mom's—and continued the tradition with Mom and Dad after they were married. The Boyds owned the local store, and every year would give local families credit until they "got the crop in": Cotton. Dad used to say that $50 would buy them a year's worth of groceries. Of course they had a vegetable garden, and hogs; they never starved. And the Boyds owned the land my parents farmed, too. My parents were sharecroppers.

I remember reading about sharecroppers in school, but it never occurred to me that my parents were sharecroppers. I have a stereotype about sharecroppers: that they were dirty. Maybe that's why I never made the connection until I understood exactly what the term meant: the landlords own the land, the tenants farm it and give back a portion of the profit. After the Civil War, this system favored the landlords who would take fifty percent of the gain. Because the tenants ran out of money before the crop "came in," they were forced to buy everything that they needed—from seed to salt—on credit. It was a poor existence. I can hear my mother saying she "scrubbed unfinished pine floors until they looked like they'd been bleached." To her, poor did not mean dirty.

My parents were lucky. Dad was a carpenter and could build a decent house for them to live in. Then World War II came along, and with it the shipyards, and they moved to Texas where Mom was one of the best welders in the shipyard. Dad carried a picture in his wallet—until the finish wore off—of her standing in front of the porch of their small
house, one leg up on the first step, stinger in hand, the lens of her welding hood flipped up off her face, a reminder of a simpler life. Dad was a welder, too, and went to school to learn to read blueprints. After the war, my parents and my oldest sister moved to Oregon where Dad spent the rest of his life building houses, where Mom spent most of hers as a nurse, where they tried to put their Arkansas past—the Boyd brothers' way of life—the shipyards—behind them. Except for a trip back to Arkansas a year later to get my mother's parents and her younger brother, Dad would not go back to see his family for over thirty years. For Mom it would be closer to forty.

For me, Arkansas was just stories—about "we Boyds and ow-were sister" and pine floors scrubbed white—until my thirty-fifth birthday, when Bruce and I flew to Arkansas. On one day of our visit I found myself standing in front of the Boyd place. It had been a big two-story home, with twin chimneys on either end. I imagined it with a row of windows across the second floor, maybe a porch with pillars on the front. But it had burned, Uncle Lile said, a few years earlier, and all that remained were its tall two-story chimneys.

Outside the air-conditioned car, the humid air stuck to my skin. Uncle Lile and Uncle Homer stayed in the car while Bruce and I wandered around a bit and took a picture of the ruin. I wondered which side of the house had been the living room; nothing remained to show me. The green vines covered all, and tall grass grew where the floor would have been. I don't think there had been a concrete foundation. Tall pine trees and a few magnolias grew on the edge of what had been the lawn. Green covered everything; only the tan brick chimneys poked through. My two remaining uncles (out of nine brothers and two sisters) had done their best to tell me more stories, show me more houses, more land. "We lived here in '38, and Papa farmed that land over there." "Your dad and I were baptized together in the little church at Corinth." "Grandpa Easterling built this house and that one and that one and that one." I took it all in, trying to remember. But when we were in the car, Bruce driving, Uncle Lile waving and motioning with his
hands, Uncle Homer waving and motioning with his hands, all I could see were my dad's hands—Easterling hands—long bony fingers, slender, capable, kind. I wanted his stories again, not these uncles' whose hands were his, whose gray hair curled on their arms like his, whose blue eyes stared at me, vibrant and alive, like his.

My uncles showed us place after place where my parents had lived and worked that were now abandoned, falling down: an old gas station with a restaurant and a half dozen motel units, broken glass, a piano that wouldn't play, weeds growing up through the floor, vines growing over the crumbling walls struggling to cover the old, decaying past while I tried to keep it from being buried. The truth: much of this past remains buried and cannot be exhumed. A spirit, though, hangs in the air, hovers over the ruins, floats in and around the words remembered, opening up a possibility, a gesture toward understanding that goes beyond what is tangible and known.
II. THE CEMETERY

Fir Crest Cemetery south of Monmouth is a perfect place for star gazing. Meteorology and astronomy classes from the college visit the cemetery each spring because it's on a hill, because it's far enough away from town that the lights don't interfere with seeing. Last night, a cool June evening, several classes of students arrived just as the sun was setting, Venus lighting the way. Students milled around, acting like ten-year-olds. The professors had been through it all before: "The first time we brought classes out here," Dr. Wood joked, "the police thought we were having a beer party." Professors yelled out directions and passed out papers, asking us to identify constellations and draw them on a map.

I've been to the cemetery many times for burials—my first husband, Jon; my dad; friends of the family—and it was odd that my group was just a few graves away from where Dad is buried. My brother-in-law's parents were just behind us. Over the crest of the hill to the north, is Jon, and not too far from Jon, lies Bruce's father—Bruce is my husband now.

Dr. Wood set up a telescope, and four others were set up on the hillside, each with a group of students around. I looked at my sheet of instructions with the flashlight I had brought. Looking for Ursa Major and Minor, Boötes, Cassiopeia, the North Star, I kept thinking about Dad and Jon. I always like to think that they are finally free from pain, mental or physical, that they had realized some of their dreams. That would make my dad a man who was not shy or insecure, a man who would have gone to college or, at least, finished high school. That would make Jon able to resolve his conflicts about God and science, a man who could put together his broken mind.

Dad's death resulted from a long, slow fight with emphysema and cancer. He fought for breath until the last, writhing in his bed, gasping, demanding that we open the windows, give him some air. Finally, he stopped fighting and rested quietly, his final
moments lucid and peaceful. I think of him and remember "working" with him in the
garage, nailing scraps of wood together, pretending I was a carpenter like he was. His
death was horrible, but it was natural, expected.

Jon's was more difficult. What I remembered for months was running from the
BART station after work one day to our apartment in Berkeley, finding him dead, in the
bathroom. He had dealt with mental problems for several years, and, mostly, anti-depressants helped. In the last months, though, the drugs hadn't been enough. He had
attempted suicide four times in as many months. Afterward, and even now, it is a struggle
to remember the good parts of our lives together: trips down into the canyon of the Snake
River west of Pullman, Washington, to fish for bass; learning to cross-country ski in the
hills of the Palouse; walking to work in the snow.

What I remembered more, for a long time, were trips to the hospital where his
manic frenzies were tempered with drugs. Then he would stare, glassy-eyed, while I
helped him, as if he were some feeble old man, to put his food in his mouth. He would
hold it there, motionless, until I physically moved his jaw up and down with my hands.
When doctors finally got the combination of drugs right, Jon would become more like
himself, and he would feel sheepish because he remembered me helping him to eat.

Before Bruce and I married, I used to go to Jon's grave a lot. I've visited the grave
since my new life began too, but less and less. I would tell Jon the news of my life, much
like I would write a letter to a friend I hadn't heard from in a while. I told him about going
to college and feeling funny as a 30 year old student in classes with 18 year olds, about my
part-time job as a legal secretary—a job he knew I was tired of—about Bruce and me
getting married.

Last night I felt like I had neglected Jon a little in not visiting his grave, so I came
out here today. I brought my clippers with me to trim around the head stone. I sit down
and begin, in my old pattern, to trim the grass and to tell him about my life; it has been a
long time since I've done so. From his grave I can see Monmouth, a few miles to the north, the coast range to the west, and the Salem Hills to the east. I can see Mt. Hood towering high in the Cascades.

I've been to the cemetery with Bruce, too, on Memorial Day to put flowers on graves, but once we came here to watch falling stars. The clouds were coming in, and people were leaving when we arrived, but we spread our blanket on the south side of the hill near Dad's grave, and sat down anyway. The quiet was disturbed by voices from families and couples sitting on blankets. It was cold, and Bruce hugged me, pulling me close. As we stared into the sky, more clouds moved in, and the clear sky dwindled. We saw no falling stars, and it changed our mood. We had been giddy before we left, talking about the times we had seen seeing falling stars. I remembered getting up at two in the morning once years earlier to watch stars fall—they had been the first ones I had ever seen. Bruce had grown up on a farm in wide-open flat land and had seen lots of falling stars when he was growing up. We walked quietly through the cemetery, back to the car. I didn't know what was going through Bruce's mind, but I was thinking about funerals, about Dad suffocating, about Jon swallowing poison. I was anxious to get home, to be diverted to other memories.

I look north of town, now, to a field I had noticed years ago, to see if they have planted mustard, and then I remember that mustard blooms in late summer. Shortly after Jon died, I had been intrigued with the bright yellow mustard that had grown in that field next to the highway. The field was about a mile north of town, and I had made a point to drive by it several times. One day I stopped the car and got out, walked up close to the mustard. A huge fire had burned in the mountains that day. The flames weren't visible, but a gigantic black and gray mushroom cloud covered half the sky. I remember picking a flower to smell, knowing it would not be sweet, and then tossing it on the ground as if I were dropping my own bitterness along with it. The memory of the mustard field comes
to me at odd times, even when I'm not sitting on the ground in front of Jon's grave. I've never quite understood the image of the field that I've carried around with me these years—of loss and victory in one moment.

I suppose the beginning of my healing really began, before I ever saw the mustard field, with a dream I had a few days after Jon killed himself. In my dream, Jon and I floated in a nothingness that was somehow full of life, not physically in the room, but in the air, floating over the bathroom where I had found him dead a few days before. We said nothing, we just were. A friend of mine told me that what is most important in dreams is how you feel in them. I had a feeling I imagined to be like what Mary felt when she was enveloped by the Holy Spirit, or what Sara felt when she was addressed by God, or what Moses felt after he had been near the face of God. It was as though my mind and Jon's were melded into one. I clung to the dream, the sense it gave me of Jon's spirit at peace, reconciled to a mystical realm that I, somehow, could not fully experience. The bright yellow flowers, their bitter scent, reminded me that pain and joy mingle tentatively, a fragile threshold in-between that can never truly be crossed.

I finish clipping the grass, and brush away the trimmings.

The biggest irony, I suppose, is that Jon was attending seminary when he died. That day when I sobbed hysterically, a kind woman had held me against my will and kept repeating, "Just trust in Jesus," over and over and over. I pushed her away and screamed, "What do you think I've been doing? What has trusting in Jesus done to help Jon? Why didn't trusting in Jesus keep him from swallowing that poison he took?" She had no answers for me.

My solace ultimately came from my faith, but not from the kind she offered. It came from the mustard field, from sitting at the cemetery clipping glass, from looking at the stars.
III. BACKYARD

Full of His Details

It's raining now, and I see the deck outside my study window, the patio rocker overturned from the hard wind we had last night. I should go out and put it in the garage. The wood on the deck needs sealer. The winter has blackened the grain with mildew, and today's rain is not helping. But more rain is in the forecast, and I have to work on my thesis, so I won't be cleaning and sealing the deck—not this week anyway. I see the new house, built last summer, kitty-corner from our backyard. It's painted now, and people live in it, but there's still no lawn or shrubs, no trees to give it character. A pile of bark dust has been sitting in the driveway for months.

Last summer I sat on the deck in my rocker, from time to time, and watched the house being built. I loved the smell of the lumber. Whenever I smell fresh-cut lumber or hear a table saw or someone hammering nails, I think of Dad, remember "working" with him in the garage where he'd give me scraps of wood, a hammer and some nails. I'd put the scraps together in odd shapes—a flat piece of plywood with 2 x 4 blocks nailed on in a pattern only a seven-year old could discern. I often hit my thumb with the hammer, and I'd cry. He would always hold me in his lap and poke a tiny hole in my thumb nail with the tip of his pocket knife, gently working the tip through the nail, to let the blood out. I was always amazed that afterward, the finger would stop hurting, and I was then ready to start my next project.

When I was older, I loved to hear Dad talk about his work, explaining the kitchen remodeling job for Mrs. Cornish, or the bleachers at Parker Stadium. There was a school in Eddyville, a grocery store in Monmouth, a hotel at Lincoln City, the Big "O" Restaurant in Corvallis—he loved to explain how its long V roof was made. One time we went to see a house in Lake Oswego that had solid walnut paneling and trim that he finished. He'd explain how he cut the boards and how they fit together. When he helped build the
CH2M Hill complex, he laughed at the architects when their plans had glitches in them. "I could have told them it wouldn't work," he'd say. Mom and my sisters would get bored and impatient with his long explanations, but I could visualize his intricate details, and when I couldn't, I'd ask him to explain until I did. He bragged about the finish work at the Methodist Church in Corvallis, but he'd almost cry when he told the part about when the building committee sent pictures and a letter saying what a fine craftsman he was.

And then there were our homes—the houses he built for his family. They were never extravagant, just three-bedroom ranch types, typical of small towns. But they were full of his details: fancy kitchen cupboards with trim boards all around (before it was the style), a cherry and walnut mantle and fire place surround, a split level home with a curved step instead of the straight one the plans called for, and, always, perfectly mitered door and window frames that fit so closely, according to one admirer, "they never even need putty to fill in the cracks."

Dad's houses are sprinkled all over Monmouth, and I sometimes think I might own one if one comes up for sale at the right time. Kearney Palmer died a few weeks ago, and his wife Mary now lives alone in a white stucco house that Dad built for them right about the time I was born. It's a nice house, and even before Kearney died, I had often thought I'd like to buy it.

I don't have a house that Dad built, but I do have a coffee table. The wood came from the Willamette River bed—an oak tree that Mr. Tautfest had dragged out of the old river bottom south of Independence. He took it home and left the log to sit for years. Dad and Mr. Tautfest got to know each other when Dad built a new house for us on the bank above the old river bed. The tree had been down not far from our house, and Mr. Tautfest had just left it for years to air dry, slowly and evenly.

When Jon and I decided to get married, we started looking at furniture even though we didn't have any money to buy. There was one coffee table in particular, at Rubenstein's in Salem, that we liked. It was oak and had a glass shelf on the bottom. It
cost $255 in 1975. We didn't have $255. We could barely afford my $75 a month car payments. We had an avocado green, hand-me-down sofa, and an avocado green, plastic, hand-me-down recliner. We had an old trunk for an end table, and bookshelves made of cement blocks and 1 x 12s. We had a remnant of gold and yellow shag carpet on the linoleum living room floor. We had a folding card table and borrowed chairs for our dining room. We wanted a coffee table.

When I was five or six years old, Dad had made a coffee table for my older sister, Brenda, and her husband. He bought some legs and screwed them into a flat mahogany door. It made a nice, solid, practical table. It wasn't fancy. I told Jon that Dad would probably help us make a table like that, and that it wouldn't cost very much. But then we got to looking at furniture, at $255 oak and glass coffee tables. We wanted a nice coffee table, not a door.

Jon drew up some plans, trying to copy the table at Rubenstein's. We figured we could buy the wood and Dad would help us cut it and put it together. I waited until he was in a good mood. He was out in the garage one Saturday, cutting up some baseboards, getting ready to do the last of the finish work on the house. He had on his white painter's overalls that covered khaki work clothes from Sears, and a cigarette hanging out his mouth. I told him we had been looking at coffee tables, and we couldn't afford them. "Would you help us build one?" I asked. We showed him the plans Jon had drawn.

He laughed. "I don't need any plans," he said, "but let's look at what you've got." Dad studied the drawings for a minute. He drew on his cigarette and pointed at the detail of the corner brace. "I think we could improve on this a little bit." He threw his cigarette butt on the garage floor and put it out with the toe of his boot. "You don't want a door for a coffee table, huh?"
"Well," I said. "We figured you could build this almost as easily, and then we won't have to replace the table later. This will be a nice table to start with," I said, "one that we will always keep." I hoped that he would say yes.

"Okie doke." He smiled. "I'll build you a table. Old Man Tautfest has some oak. Maybe I can get some of that." Mr. Tautfest had a lumber planer, and he had made lumber out of the old tree a few years earlier. He gave Dad several pieces. Free lumber. Oak. From the Willamette River just over the bank from where I lived, from a tree that had lived and died before I was ever born.

Next came the weekends of measuring and cutting, nailing and gluing. And shaping. Dad had a shaper that had all kinds of knives that cut edges and grooves into wood. It was big, like a table saw, and had a guide on it to keep everything straight. Dad made a quarter-round edge with just a hint of a lip on the table top. He mitered the corners of the oak frame and cut laps in the oak and the walnut so there would be no crack where the two woods joined together. He cut a v-shaped groove all around the facer board underneath the table top. He cut a lip to hold the glass on the bottom shelf. Jon and I mostly watched or did things like putting glued pieces in vice grips, or sweeping up little piles of sawdust. When the table was all put together, I applied the oil finish. The wood soaked it up like a sponge, and the grain came alive. We wiped the excess off with rags and Dad surprised us one day by finishing the surface with Varathane. We sanded and applied another coat, then sanded again and put on a coat of paste wax. The shine is mellow and deep.

The table sits now in my and Bruce's tiny living room. There is no room to use it as a coffee table. Instead it sits next to the wall, and a tall fig tree sits on one end. When I clean house, I take special care with the table. I throw out the magazines and newspapers and mail that cover it most of the time, spraying on furniture polish, rubbing it to a shine. I take out the glass shelves on the bottom, clean them, and put them back. I adjust the fig tree and the ceramic dish that sits beside it. Sometimes I put a picture of Dad there, too.
I can look around the rest of my house and see—not evidence of Dad's work, but evidence of his advice and influence. Bruce and I bought our little 714 square foot house, and it was a shack. The garage was falling off the house. The kitchen had old lime green countertops browned with food and coffee stains. Fake paneling filled in the space between the countertop and the cupboards above. The walls were loud lemon yellow. The off white walls throughout the rest of house were yellow from the previous owner's smoke. When I cleaned the windows, the paper towels I used turned nicotine brown. The bathroom was the same yellow as the kitchen and streaked from the shower's steam. The cupboard under the bathroom sink was made of fake paneling like the splash board in the kitchen. The carpet throughout the house was new, though, a multi-colored brown and tan. Not our favorite colors, but at least it was clean. We discovered later, though, that it had been laid on top of filthy dirty green carpet. I remember washing light fixtures, thinking they were cream colored—soap and water revealed white or clear glass.

Outside, an old willow tree laid on its side, still growing. Neighbors had used the back yard for their piles of leaves and other outdoor debris. There were old jars of home-canned cherries that looked like they'd been in the yard since the house was built in 1942. The exterior of the house was painted the same yellow as the kitchen and the bathroom, and the foundation had sprays of yellow on the gray concrete. The lawn looked like a pasture; it only lacked the cows. And at the south end of our back yard, Walnut Drive dead ends—not in a cul-de-sac, but in a graveled spot that grows up with weeds every year.

Despite its drawbacks, Bruce and I were happy with the house, even though we weren't sure just how to fix everything. We looked to my dad for advice. He was a journeyman carpenter with over forty years in the Corvallis local, his apprenticeship begun years earlier when he was a teenager in Arkansas—following his brothers' trade. Dad had looked at the place before we bought it and said he thought it was sound enough, though I don't think he was too impressed. Ever since I was a baby, we had lived in new homes,
ones Dad had built himself. He had built my sister's house, too, and I think he wished we had enough money to build a new house and that he were well enough to build it for us. At least he could tell us how to fix this one.

And he did. He told Bruce how to patch the roof on the garage where it attached to the house and how to lay Formica in the kitchen. He told us how to mix up Fix-all and patch holes in the plaster. He told me I needed to sand the kitchen cupboards thoroughly, or the paint would peel off. I didn't do a very good job, and now, every time I look at the cupboards and see little chips of paint gone, I wish I had listened. When he was dying in the nursing home, he told me how to drive his little Sears tractor and till up the back yard and plant a lawn. "If you plant a lawn in the fall," he said, "it will be good and strong come spring." So in-between visits to the nursing home, I tilled the back yard and graded it. I liked driving around in that little tractor. Bruce and I raked the soil, planted seed, kept it watered, and we had a beautiful lawn, though Dad never saw it.

There are lots of other things, now, that we've done to the house that Dad didn't see. We scraped and painted the outside light gray with white trim and a red front door. Bruce built new garage doors that open vertically and have paned windows on the top that match the rest of the house. He put some pressure treated 4 x 4s under the garage walls and straightened it and put a drain around it to keep the water out. We pulled up the carpet and found oak hardwood floors. We built a fence across the backyard so Walnut Drive is hidden. We put in a small garden where we have grown vegetables and zinnias. We built a deck that is almost as big as our house.

Building the deck would have been easier if Dad could have helped us. Instead we spent hours at Fred Meyer's Home Center looking at pamphlets and books about building decks. We checked out books from the library, and drew up plans. We finally got brave and bought enough pressure treated 2 x 4s, 2 x 6s and concrete foundation blocks to build a deck.
We marked out the area and cut away the sod, by hand, and borrowed my brother-in-law’s laser beam level to get the concrete blocks straight. I sat on a bench under the apple tree and watched Bruce digging the holes and placing the blocks, and wondered how Dad would have gone about it. We cut boards and slipped them into the blocks and used metal joist hangers and nails to hold it all together. We laid out the 2 x 6s, spacing them with a screw, and held each board down with just two screws until we got all the way across. Once in a while we had to stop and look at it and walk across the boards, imagining what the whole thing would look like. When we got to the edge, our measurements had been off. We had to piece together two boards for the last plank. I was sure that if Dad had been around, it would have been perfect. After we finished laying all the boards, Bruce screwed them in with a heavy drill and galvanized screws, and we marked the edge with the red chalk line of Dad’s that sits in the big bowl of his tools in my study. We snapped the line, and then Bruce rewound the string too tight, and the end with the loop went inside the metal holder. The chalk line is back in my study, the string still caught inside. Dad had used the same line to mark off a closet wall in my bedroom in the Craven Street house he built. The red line stayed on the ceiling for years.

Our next building project was a fence across the back of our lot to block out Walnut Drive. I thought of Dad as I sawed off the planks with the table saw, and when I nailed the planks onto the rails, I remembered that he said nailing was more of a wrist action than an elbow action, and I was proud when my hammering didn’t leave dents in the wood like Bruce’s sometimes did.

Bruce says that metal is easier to work with than wood, that it is more forgiving. You can be rough, and it won’t splinter or break. If you make a mistake, you can fix it with a weld. Working with wood is more sensuous than steel, I think. You must coax it along, making sure not to press too hard or to bend it. You must not stress it beyond its limits. You must protect it from the rain or the ring of a sweating glass. Wood is warm and resonates with the soul of the person who works with it.
Bruce has done well learning how to work with wood, on fixing things and building decks. The project that required the most finesse, though, was making arched window frames for a historic building we own in Independence. My involvement with the building, aside from cleaning up, was limited to nailing fence planks outside and to painting the walls on the inside, but Bruce's blood is in this building. He tore out old plaster, chipped paint off bricks, tore out square windows that had replaced the original arched ones. He helped the stucco man put on eyebrows over the windows, and he painted the building. It was all hard, challenging work. But the windows were special. The windows made the building, returning it to its historic charm. And it was probably the last project Dad actually worked on.

Bruce agonized over the windows. We needed to save money. It would have cost thousands of dollars to have windows made, so Dad helped Bruce figure out how to do the work himself. One man said he'd make the frames out of fir. Dad said, "Make them out of redwood or cedar. They won't rot, and they'll last a good long time." Bruce bought redwood. One board, he said, was twenty feet long, the grain perfectly straight from end to end. Bruce marked the pattern for the arches on the lumber, and Dad cut them out on an old band saw Bruce bought for $85. Six windows. Nine feet high. Four feet wide. Bruce cut out the rest and put them together. Sometimes Dad would come by on Saturday afternoons when Bruce was working, and cut a few boards, give lots of advice, watch, and, I imagine, think about all the things he had built during his life, regret that he wasn't able to work hard any more.

Bruce became a kind of proxy carpenter for Dad, and I was his helper. When Dad's emphysema and lung cancer weakened him so much, he sat in a chair and told Bruce how to build a roof from the folks' mobile home to the carport. He sat on the porch and told Bruce how to build steps. He sat in a chair and told him how to build a wood walkway from the front door to the driveway. His impatience with Bruce's inexperience showed from time to time. "Naah. You've got to do it like this," he'd say, when Bruce
would start to cut a board wrong. I imagine, though, Dad's impatience was really with himself, with wanting to do the work himself, to get it done right.

Dad hadn't always liked the work he had done. He was proud of the houses, the finish work, of knowing more than a college-educated architect sometimes, but there was also hard labor, shoveling heavy concrete, working hard in the cold and the wet. I remember him coming home early, shivering in bed with chills, and having pneumonia more than once. He hurt his back and had to have surgery, and since that time, the world of building became more and more painful for him. He grew sick and tired. Seeing his son-in-law and his daughter attempt what he had done so well both frustrated him and made him proud, I think. I'm sure he chuckled to himself behind our backs at our crude ability that was only a few steps above my seven-year-old creations out of scraps. What he probably liked most was that we were doing what he had done. We gave his work honor and place in attempting to do it ourselves. He could no longer swing a hammer or climb a ladder, but we could. In seeing us work, Dad could work too, recalling his own creations, forgetting for a moment his frailty, remembering, instead, days of physical vigor.

When I was in seventh grade, the girls took shop for six weeks and the boys took home-ec. While the boys learned how to make cookies and casseroles, we learned how to replace plugs on cords and how to make small cedar boxes with lids. I lapped the sides of my box and used glue and small finish nails to hold it together. I chiseled out a quarter inch lip all the way around the bottom of the lid so it wouldn't slide off the box. I made a square knob for a handle that narrowed inward where it attached to the lid. I sanded and varnished and took my box home.

My box was crude, but it was square, and my lid fit exactly. The chiseled parts were the hardest to do, and the sloppiest. When I chiseled, I remembered seeing Dad chiseling out a place in a door jamb for the latch plate. It was always smooth and perfect, even though it would never show once the plate was screwed in. I was embarrassed to
show Dad my box, but I showed it to him at the table after dinner one night. He smiled and said, "Hey look at that," when I handed it to him. He looked at it closely, and he told me it took years of practice to get good at chiseling. "But," he said, "You're a regular little carpenter." I was proud enough of the box, then, and I gave it to my grandmother for Christmas.

The smell of wood from any new construction, the hammers pounding and the table saws buzzing, remind me of Dad, but I also get a bit of a rush thinking about what it would be like to build a house. If Dad were still here to tell me how to go about it, I wouldn't even be afraid to try. I remember thinking myself a real carpenter when at age five I was allowed up on the roof of our new house (it was a flat roof, and I wasn't up there alone) to nail on tar paper with large headed roofing nails, but so far, my carpentry skills have been limited to "helping" Dad when he was working on a project in the garage, or watching him build my coffee table or one of our new houses. I have sawed off a few boards on a table saw, and hammered a few nails, but that hardly qualifies me as a carpenter. Someday, though, you may find me in khaki pants and shirt, protected by white painter's overalls, hammering away on a house. But my apprenticeship will always remain second hand. I'll think of Dad when I hear saws and the pounding of nails, when I drive by one of the homes he built, when I dust my coffee table, or when Bruce and I attempt another project of our own. I can't know Dad—or anyone—completely, but I can approach knowing through experiencing his kind of work: seeing it; appreciating its beauty, its function; attempting, however crudely, to build something myself.
On The Birds I See

A few weeks ago, my husband raked leaves and picked up apples. Apples have continued to drop from the tree, though, and the robins have been eating them. We've talked about chopping down the tree—it's old and the apples aren't very good—but today I think we should leave it. The robins chip away at the apples, poking at the hard surfaces like woodpeckers, leaving halves and quarters and cores instead of whole apples on the ground. The birds dart from one apple to another, then fly into the tree and peck at apples still hanging on the limbs. Back on the ground, they strut with their bellies full. The birds are satisfied and most have now flown away, into the neighbor's pine tree, or into fifty-year-old maples scattered throughout the neighborhood. There's just one fat bird left; he moves stiffly, as though he's too full, but he pecks again at one last morsel.

Just a few weeks ago, through the same window I'm looking out of now, I saw a male pheasant sitting in the lawn, frozen in the landscape, only turning his bright green head slowly from side to side. Finally, he walked into the fern bed and hid himself among the fronds. I watched him for ten minutes but my patience ran out, and I went back to my work. I looked up from my desk once in a while and found him still sitting in the same spot. A pheasant sits, immobile, as though it's afraid of what's around, cautious and timid; then it will fly away suddenly out of its hidden place in the brush. I wondered how close I could get, so I went outside to see, but he had flown when I wasn't looking.

The robins are back in the yard now, eating the apples again, then quick, up into the tree, down on the ground, eating, looking. I want to hear them. I go outside—quietly opening the back door so they won't fly away. As the door opens, I am bombarded with their noise. I can see the bare limbs of my neighbors' trees—next door, a block away, up the hill—with more birds sitting in them. They have fed on my apples and have flown away singing.

The sun stays mostly behind the clouds. Though we have passed the shortest day of the year and the days are getting longer, it's still cold and wet. Today the robins have
diverted me, helped me keep winter away, at least in my mind. They sing and eat their fill in my back yard.

Soon, one of the neighborhood cats will arrive—or maybe it will be my own cat, now asleep in my rocker. The birds will fly out of the yard; maybe one will be caught. The cat will hide in the ferns, will finally get bored and leave, and the robins will come back to gorge on apples.

I remember hearing geese, one day, as they flew south. I got up and went to the front door and I heard them, loud, and clear, and I saw them in their perfect V. I hurried and put on my shoes, practically stepped on the cat, and went out the back door, and I could still hear them, but not as clearly, and I barely saw them. It was dusk, almost dark, and cloudy. The rain dripped on my head lightly. I avoided seeing my neighbor, who was in her back yard too, because she talks a lot and I didn't want to talk. I wanted to hear the geese until I could hear them no more. I stepped back a bit on the deck so the garage would hide me, watching until they were gone. I don't know why I had such a jolt when I heard them, probably because it had been raining and raining and raining for what seemed like weeks, and I've been going to school for so long—forever—and all I do is work, very little play, very little just living and hearing and seeing what's going on around me.

I remember waking to mourning doves in Pullman, Washington. They sat on the telephone line outside our bedroom window. Their cooing mixed with the sound of the alarm until I shut off the alarm to hear them better. It was several years before I realized they were m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g doves and not m-o-r-n-i-n-g doves. They cooed at dawn, sad, mournful like their name. I often feel that way, sort of melancholic, but it passes.

I see hawks, sometimes, sitting on fence posts or on the tops of trees on my way to and from work. They're still, looking for mice in the grass. It reminds me of sitting at my desk, staring out the window, or in the rocker petting the cat, staring at my study without exactly seeing it. The hawks, are they always looking for something specific—mice? Or do they sometimes just sit, just be?
The yard is still now, on another day, the apples waiting for another flock of robins, but there are no birds today. All I hear going on outside is the sound of my neighbor hammering a window frame onto his front porch. And windows are important, because without my window I could not see the birds and wonder about them.

The robin flits around from one thing to the next, stuffs itself, sings, flies, seemingly unaware of the cats that might catch it. The pheasant sits, interminably still, wary, waiting for just the precise moment to fly away, hiding until its instinct signals it to move. The mourning doves coo. The hawk sits, alone, on its perch. They can all fly away at any instant.

Sometimes I envy the instinctual routine of the birds, and long for such predictability. I see the robin and see a part of myself, flitting from one project to another; or is it a quickness rather than schizophrenia that keeps me one step ahead of the cat that stalks? I see the pheasant, still like a stone, waiting. Waiting for what? The mourning dove's call reminds me that there is much to be sad about. I see the pheasant and see me—cautious, careful, taking care to make thoughtful decisions, to avoid mistakes. Or is my caution a slowness, sluggishness, fear? Am I quick enough to get away from the cat in the garden? Or do I simply sit, melancholic, like the sound of the mourning doves, immobilized by the unknown?

The birds remind me that I am somehow encumbered, that I am not entirely free. I think I would like to be able to fly without some mechanical motor attached. Like sailing on the water, only natural noise to hear, water, wind rushing.

The closest I ever came to flying was on a Hobie Cat on the Snake River on a windy day. Lorne and Colin, two grad students at the lab where I worked as a secretary, were going sailing, and they came into the office and asked me if I wanted to go. Of course I did. I'd never been sailing in my life, and I thought it would be fun. I told them if they could convince Hal, my boss, to give me the afternoon off, that I would go with
them. I was kind of amazed when Hal said okay. So, fool that I was, I went sailing with two men I hardly knew.

These were my single days, after Jon died, before I married Bruce. I was slightly irresponsible, and did irresponsible things like flirt with the men at the lab, but no harm ever came of it. Dorothy, the other secretary in the office, who was old enough to be my mother, often arranged get-togethers outside work that would give the grad students and I a chance to get to know each other. Once, she invited several of us to her cabin on Moscow Mountain for a Saturday hike and barbecue. Hal, and his wife, Sandy, tried to match me up, too. At office parties and lunches, they were sure to get me talking to one of the men. (There was only one woman grad student, and they treated her the same way.) Those were fun days. So, I shouldn't have been surprised when Hal gave me the afternoon off.

Colin had the Hobie Cat loaded on an old trailer behind his rusty, blue 1949 Ford pickup, and the 16' foot mast hung out over the hood. I rode between them in the cab for the thirty minute ride to Waiwai. Lorne and Colin took the Hobie Cat out first, without me, because it was very windy, and I didn't know the first thing about what to do. They wanted to see how well they could manage before they took on a novice. I swam near the shore while they tested things out, and pretty soon they came and picked me up. "It's really windy, Terri," they said. "We could tip over." I told them I wasn't afraid of falling in the river as long as I had on a life jacket. I had water-skied many times in this same place and had fallen in plenty.

I sat on the side and they did all the work with the ropes and the sail. They told me it was really only a two-person rig, but they thought we'd be okay. The wind caught in the sail and we took out, quick. I liked it so much better than skiing behind a loud boat or riding in one—just the wind in the sail, the water, and our voices. Lorne put on the harness and started swinging out. He hit his head on the mast and I panicked, but then he laughed and said he was okay. He did get out of the harness though. The next thing I
knew, the Hobie Cat was up on one hull, and I was on the side that was out of the water, screaming, but not entirely from fear. I leaned way out on the side that was in the air, and Lorne and Colin rushed over to my side to add their weight, and finally the hull went back in the water. "Do you want to go home?" Colin asked.

"No!"

"What are you hollerin' about, then?"

"Because it's scary!" I laughed. We went across the river several more times, me screaming, Lorne and Colin shaking their heads at my unrestrained spirit.

So how did we get from birds to Hobie Cats and screaming? The birds are calm, calming to me as I watch them from my deck or my window or driving to work, but they can fly. I spend too much time being calm. I need to fly more. I want to be like the pheasant in the ferns who is careful, like the hawk in the tree who is a sole hunter, alone, who answers to no one but itself, in control. But I also want the wild abandon, screaming from sheer excitement as loud as my voice will sound, out of control: then, to relax, exhausted, content.
Ash

Jon and I had been to church that morning. After changing from nylons and heels, suit and tie into jeans and T-shirts, we sipped wine and lounged on lawn chairs in our back yard, soaking in the warm spring air. The blue sky hung above us, and I stared at it through squinted eyes watching tiny black dots (or were they white?) dart about. Jon went inside to get matches to light the barbecue, while the wine lulled me to near sleep. Floating, I heard my name. "Terri! Come look!" Slowly, eyes half closed, I walked to where Jon stood in our driveway. A perfectly straight line of black clouds edged the western horizon as far as I could see north and south, solid, thick, like storm clouds in a picture drawn by a child who could not put in the proper shading and texture.

"What is it?" I asked. "A thunderstorm?"

"That's what I thought, too." We stared at the long bank of darkness. "Mount St. Helens blew, and that's a cloud of ash coming our way." I thought of lava, the red hot molten kind like in movies I'd seen in grade school about volcanoes.

Our neighbor, Jack, had heard it all on the radio. Mount St. Helens had erupted and was spitting ash over a mile up into the air. I wasn't even sure where Mount St. Helens was—somewhere across the state. Surely the ash wouldn't come clear to Pullman. That was four or five hundred miles. But come it did, and beyond. Traces of ash were found as far east as Wyoming, and five years later when we took trips to the west side, we could still see ash on the edges of fields where farmers hadn't tilled it into the soil.

The ash had come gradually. Tiny particles floating in the air. We stood in it. Soon the street lights came on. A fog: dense, completely saturating the air. But this fog made it as black as midnight at two o'clock in the afternoon. A snow storm: But this snow was finer in texture and left dirt and grime and produced darkness. We barbecued our hamburgers under the carport roof, while the air swirled with millions of minuscule feathers from some giant pillow broken loose. We wandered inside and out, and Jon took pictures and then thought better of getting dust in the camera. The street light illumined
the sifting powder, but no snowmen could be built nor angels made from this dull, warm 
snow.

I tried to call my family in Oregon to see what was happening there. All the lines 
were tied up. I tried for hours but could not get through. Announcements on the radio 
said not to call out unless you had an absolute emergency. But we tried anyway, along 
with thousands of others, to make contact with the real world.

Sometime we went to bed. It had been night for hours and we wondered if 
morning would bring dark or light. We tossed and turned and got up occasionally to look 
at the powder falling under the street light. Finally we slept.

The next morning the sun was out and the ground was covered with beige 
dust—dirty talcum powder—an inch or more thick. The radio announced: "Wear 
protective masks or handkerchiefs over your nose and mouth. Do not breathe the ash." 
The ash billowed and hung in the air for hours from the traffic as people made their way to 
work and school. Two hours after we had gotten to work, the president closed the 
university. We returned to clouds of ash as we all went home, creeping along at five miles 
an hour. It was thick, so thick we could not see the hood of our car, or the car that almost 
hit us.

"Hose everything down," the mayor had said. We started with the roof and 
washed down the shrubs and trees and the grass and hosed what we could out into the 
street. The street cleaners would be along to pick it up. Water was not the answer for 
one man; he slipped off his roof to his death.

Supply trucks to grocery stores were held up for several days. People panicked 
and over-bought, leaving the shelves nearly empty, but at the same time, impending doom 
brought out a giddiness, a fear, that cut through the usual blank stares and preoccupied 
busyness—a camaraderie: exchanging stories with perfect strangers at the check out or in 
the aisle about what you were doing when the ash came, or about how lucky we were to
be so far away from the mountain. The church had an impromptu potluck, the highest attendance ever, but within a week things were somewhat back to normal. Traffic was back up; the dust clouds were gone, and face masks were no longer part of our anatomy. Water had washed away most of the ash, but places here and there remained immune, a reminder that we cannot reach every surface.

I'm sitting on my deck now, years later, in a different backyard, in a cheap patio rocking chair, on a sunny spring day, tucked between the quince that has just begun to bloom and the big pot of bamboo. I'm sipping a glass of wine, trying to keep myself warm. The sun has gone behind a cloud and I contemplate going inside, but resign myself to being a little cool so I can hear the birds chirping and the water seeping in the ground. The sun comes back out and gives me another few minutes of warmth. The cat sits on a corner of the deck, her feet tucked under her, her eyes blinking slowly, almost ready to give in to sleep, when she darts away, responding to some movement in the grass.

I think back to that other backyard, to that other life, to the day that Mount St. Helens blew. It has been nearly fifteen years. In another month and a half it will be exactly. Some things haven't changed at all: I still like to sip wine in my backyard, to watch my cat (although it's not the same one), to hear my neighbors doing something over the fence in their backyard, to hear the birds, an occasional car, the rumble of the air from the dryer vent. These are the sounds of everydayness, of peace, of not having to worry, at least for a time.

When Mount St. Helens blew, people joked that in nine months there would be a rash of new babies; people get close when something extraordinary happens. And about nine months later, the local paper announced the births of "ash babies." It was easy for us; our landscape wasn't rearranged. When the man fell off his roof, those of us who didn't know him said, "oh how sad," and went on with our lives that had only temporarily been disrupted.
A dog barks, a woodpecker taps on a tree. A neighbor down the street hammers away on his new addition. The dryer shuts off, and now I hear everything more clearly. I keep looking up at the sun, and now it is warm; no cloud hides it, at least for another few minutes. An airplane flies overhead. I smell the smoke from a neighbor's chimney.

I sit and think about the strangeness of Mount St. Helens, remembering how little it really changed my life. It is, though, an oddity to talk about. Just last week a friend said she had been in North Dakota at the time and that they had gotten ash.

A door slams.

The mountain destroyed whole forests, rearranged Spirit Lake, and killed hundreds of people, but the trees are growing back, the water has found new shape, and the families have their memories. But the mountain blowing up has not changed its past. Rather, it has rearranged the pieces into a different order. I have my past, too—my life has been rearranged like that of my parents or anyone who does not live inside a cocoon. My parents brought their history to Oregon with them: the Boyd place, the heart ring, working in the shipyards, sharecropping, small country towns, all day singings on Sunday with dinner on the grounds that were better than anything. But they, too, had disruption and change: they left everything and came to Oregon to begin a new life.

Since Mount St. Helens blew, Jon committed suicide; my father died from cancer; I lost a baby. But I have also remarried, started a new career, and built a deck on the back of my house where I can sit in my rocker, listening to the life around me go on about its business. I can watch my cat and listen to the birds, hear cars go by or an occasional ringing phone. I can watch zinnias grow.