

Skagit River Dust

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by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

Whitman College  
2017

*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Samuel Guilford Traylor has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

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Professor Donald Snow

Whitman College  
December 8, 2017

*For Tina*

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks first and foremost to both of my families – the Traylor and the Thomases – for supporting my intellectual and exploratory adventures onward from birth.

Next, I'd like to thank my advisor, Don Snow, for his inspiration and aid since my first year at Whitman – his cameo in Bob Carson's Fall 2013 ES 120 class is the primary reason for this work. I'd also like to thank my second advisor, Julia Ireland, for inspiration so radical it led me to declare a second major in Philosophy in my senior year.

Aside from these two faculty members, I'd also like to recognize Tom Davis, for his explications and creative readings on many of my sources, Emily Jones, for her emphasis on *things*, Rebecca Hanrahan, for introducing me to Coetzee's life-altering work, *The Lives of Animals*, Christopher Leise, for introducing me to another life-altering work, Robinson's *Gilead*, and finally both Kate Shea and Michelle Jenkins, for grounding my work in the roots of the Western tradition.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editors. Thanks to Nonny for her perspicacity and diligence at all hours. Thanks to Mitchell Cutter for his discernment on dreams and his work with grammar. And thanks to Erin Hennessey for her love of grammar, and her company while writing.

## *Prologue*

*“Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined.”*

-John Ames, *Gilead*

I dreamt about Tina again last night. She is at our place and we leave the house to go into the woods. Mom, happy for the first time in a long time, leads. Then David, then Michael, then me. Then Tina comes down out of the house with a candle, and she comes stiffly but she is *running*. She sort of bounces down the stairs, all movement and life so I think *wow, I don't remember the last time I saw Tina run*. I don't remember Tina *ever* running. Just walking. And I thought she was gone, five years ago gone. But she bounces (stiffly) down the stairs and she is happy and we walk the path toward the chicken house or maybe the treehouse. It doesn't matter, it's all in the West.

But David and Michael and Mom go ahead and then it's just Tina and me. We are standing on the border of the yard and woods, under the bark-carved cottonwood tree near the stone bench. Only it isn't a cottonwood this time but a weeping willow and the leaves hang like strips of gold. Tina looks up at the tree and smiles. (I am young and I am very much looking up at Tina and she soars over me.) She looks up at the tree and smiles. It's autumn so the tree is alight with gold, and light from the sun trickles through the leaves, dappling her face as if she were underwater. She takes a deep breath and breathes at the tree... Just breathes... And the leaves begin to quake and shimmer as the Skagit River in sunlight and they tear off the tree like a

murmuration and go coalescing up against the sky. They clatter in a shroud and then twist like the river and rush back behind our heads, back toward the yard. They boil and merge and wheel and turn *just* like starlings. Then they hurl back toward the chicken-house and dash themselves against the roof and come showering down like a fresh snow.

I look at Tina and laugh.

She is smiling and humming. I recognize Amazing Grace.

Then she does it again. The leaves ride the wave of her breath and go winging back and forth, shimmering in the sky, before dashing themselves against the chicken-house – they snow down, those waxy chattering leaves. I turn to the tree and now it is bare and I think *now winter can come*. She hums and her eyes shine and they light up the world. Suffused.

In the dream I think that I haven't seen Tina spry in so long, and suddenly I remember that it's been almost exactly five years since I last looked her in the eye – it's been so long since anyone has seen her. I wonder if she has cancer latent in her body. It seems completely vanished. She seems so well.

Now this is strange:

I see Tina and the tree and I am blown away partly because, even in the dream, I remember Tina's illness, and the way she lay in that old green mesh hammock we had strung there years ago, outside the dream world, between the cottonwood tree and the cedar. I remember Mom sitting on the bench beside her then, and rocking her back and forth while the light poured through cottonwood leaves and onto their hair like glory. I

remember the dust swarmed in the light but didn't touch them. And five years ago, the sadness, the direness of cancer. In the dream, I think how wonderful it is that she is okay again, and that her demise has become her victory. Right here. That her sadness and grimness has become her healing and glory. This tree.

So that morning when fully awake, I pull out this notebook, writing *September 1, 2016, 6:31 A.M.* at the top of the page. I nestle my back up against the cedar tree, facing the other, and remember the last time I sat like this – on a mossy branch leaning out over the west-tending ocean. The waves lapped in sound then, and now, as I begin to write, it seems like the Skagit rushes suddenly in my ears and I begin to write.

## Part I

*“I have been thinking about existence lately. In fact, I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly.”*

*- John Ames, Gilead*

My family’s farm is in the Skagit Valley, and the Skagit Valley is in northwest Washington. The Cascade Mountains cradle in from the east and the Pacific Ocean laps in from the west, and between them lies the golden ramp that is the Skagit Valley. The Valley comes into being from the foothills of the mountains, where white granite spires along the Cascade crest give way to crags and then rolling fir-cloaked hills as you move west. The Skagit River eases out and across the belly of the valley from these hills. It begins in the Canadian Cascades before trickling south into Whatcom County and then Skagit County where the foothills flatten it into a broad waterway. From there, the river wends through fields, farms, and river trees, east to west, until it meets its end at last, pouring into Skagit Bay. This place in truth is what I love.

While the river once ran wild, drying and flooding by season, it now flows through levees. The Army Corps of Engineers dug out the river, then drained it, and finally diked it, enclosing waters like beasts in a cage so that it runs channeled and straight through farmlands that are drawn and quartered by parcel. Now, all the great soil from the Cascades that used to spread across the fertile valley now lands in Skagit Bay, and the bay fills slowly with silt, like sand in an hourglass rising upward to water

level. If you are quick, you could walk this sandflat from the mainland all the way Whidbey Island while the tide is out, and I have tried to do it.

The valley's significance to me is subsumed in time by its significance to others. First, the Skagit people lived here – part of the greater Salish tribes. The Skagit do not talk about the river anymore. I asked a friend from the Swinomish tribe about the change in the water.

“Are there records of the river before it changed? Is it still in the memory?”

She nodded.

I hesitated, “What was it like?”

“We don't talk about it.”

“Why?”

She shook her head. “We don't talk about it.”

In reading about the damming of the Columbia River and the inundation of Celilo Falls, I learned that the Klickitat people viewed the river as a Being. In one interview, the tribe's hereditary chief recalls that his family made him avert his eyes on March 10, 1957, the day Celilo falls were flooded by the Dalles reservoir, “We were not supposed to be here,” he said. “It was like someone dying.”

Everything is named Skagit. The name Skagit refers foremost to the people of this place – those who were the first in the valley and who still live there, though they have been pushed onto reservations. But the name Skagit also signifies the river, the valley, the bay, the hills and the very earth itself. In this way, it is a land with many meanings. The river is the most pervasive of these meanings because the meaning is

water. Waters carve the ramp of the valley, soak the earth, and fill the air with mist. In the morning, the whole valley lies like a bowl of fog, and the fog clabbers so thickly it clots your breath. As night comes over the valley, all moisture falls fast, descending back into the river. It is a land full of water, and water is the chief matter of the land. It is water that matters most to me, in its irreducible strangeness, its otherness. Water and light.

When home, I bathe in the river – always in summer, sometimes in autumn, and once in winter. And the scent of tillage rises up from under the plough, and into the air. So swimming in the water is how I came into the meaning of the land, and how the land rose up like meaning within me.

In the summer, the valley floor lies tan and gold with grass and grain, and the soil dries hard. But in the winter, waters rise out of the ground, pouring themselves into the rutted fields and turning the fields into huge puddles that reflect a soggy sky. Then the ground is soft and brown as rotting leaves. The earth here is like a breathing creature that inhales waters and exhales mist back into the air.

Even the tide moves like breath. The Skagit Valley lies so level with Skagit Bay that high tide backs the river up into itself, raising the water level several feet up and causing it to run sluggishly. But at low tide, the whole bay sucks the river westward, lowering flows and letting sandbars appear. The river then is wild to behold.

The mouth of the river is a great grass estuary with soil that never fully dries. It's a place you cannot go by yourself – it is too fluctuant. If you take a boat, the boat must be shallow-bottomed and you must go at spring tide. If you walk, it must be at the lowest of tides and you will need a full set of waders. Here, the sweetwater and the salt

are indistinguishable and even the soil draws no distinction from the water. They mix together and darkly mirror the sky back heavenward. It's a place in flux. It's a land that is constantly walking and the only thing constant is its movement. The delta here is stability and instability as one, perhaps an impossible thing to think in the mind, but clear to sense in the body.

Now, I go to the river. When young, I went to the woods. I remember stepping into the woods where sunlight or rain, and sometimes both, poured through the canopy. I thought I was going into nature. If we examine the etymology of the word "nature," we find that it comes from the Latin *natura*, meaning character or birth, as in "nativity." So every time we enter the woods or the water, or even the garden, we are born again.

In first grade, I was assigned the task of naming my favorite activity. At first, I wrote "soccer," but then crossed it out and wrote, "exploring." I did not know how much that moment meant – the thin red line through one word and the firm round print of the second. In black ink. At the time, I had the woods in mind. It would turn out to be much more. An exploration. A Searching. A pilgrimage.

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In the summer of 1995 my parents moved north out of Seattle, Washington, toward my mother's birthland. They settled near Mount Vernon, Washington, and took out a mortgage on this farm in the foothills of the Skagit Valley. It was not a political move, but a return. My mother comes from a family of loggers in the hills of

Washington and my father comes from farmers in Indiana. They met at a Christian college.

During their first year living in Mount Vernon, my parents found a church and planted a garden. Soon, they were attending Bethany Covenant every week. Soon, the garden yielded vegetables and flowers. Before long, my parents put cattle and chickens and goats on the land, and since then, they have worked themselves slowly into the soil. My father is a doctor and my mother a secretary, so the place is truly a hobby farm, and in one sense they wear the agrarian idyll like a coat. But in another sense, they stepped fully into the agrarian idyll as soon as they stepped into the Skagit Valley. They rise early to drink rich black coffee and read Scripture before heading out to work the place, and then after work they come home and we eat together. And before bed they read more Scripture.

As long as I can remember, there have been two stacks of Bibles in my parents' room – one on either side of the bed. They all have different colors and covers: white, red, paper, leather, cloth. I used to wonder why a person needed so many, and when I was young I asked my dad.

“They have different translations. See: this is how John 3:16 goes in the NIV: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

“Annie,” he looked toward my mom, “What’s John 3:16 in the King James?”

And she recited it.

The Bible usually on top of my mother's stack is coated in white vinyl with a brass zipper running around the edge, and the pages are greasy from fingers. It was her father's, who died of colon cancer when she was six. She still calls him Daddy. It is all she has left of him.

So I grew up in biblical language and in worship music so that rhythms and words from Scripture burrowed themselves into my subconscious. Snatches of Scripture have always, and still do, leap into my mind when I get into the flow. I remember playing soccer when I was young and running the field to a thundering pentameter from Philippians. I never wondered why the words arose then, as if the forest and the river rocks were composed themselves of letters; but something drove me to wonder as I grew older.

I believe it had something to do with the mind and the flow of running. In positive psychology, there exists a particular state of attention designated as *flow*. Flow is marked by intense attention to the task at hand, and the perfect meshing of one's abilities to what is required in a given task. It's the sort of mind-state that happens to endurance athletes and dancers when they've fully entered into their activity and no longer think. Curiously, flow is also marked by an asymmetry of significance between the person and the surroundings. That is to say, when a dancer gets fully into flow, the dancing becomes greater than the dancer. To say, then, that it's a state that *happens to* someone is entirely accurate. It cannot be willed. Flow is the surrendering of the self to an activity to such a degree that the only thing left *is* the activity coursing through the person like water. Subsumed. Suffused.

While some activities lend themselves more toward flow, it can happen at any moment and for any length of time. It can happen at work. It can happen at play. It can also happen with *things*. If you take a jug, then, and give it the proper, fitting attention, you can enter into flow. In a peculiar sense, your attention makes itself evident as an “in-seeing,” sight in, or *insight*. In this way, the flow of things may rest on insight. The signature of flow also makes itself evident in time when you suddenly realize that time has passed and you never noticed it. In this way, it is meditation.

For me, getting into flow meant that first the activity took me over, then the words of the Bible did. This happened first to me by way of wandering into the woods, and then through soccer, and finally through work. When I was twelve years old, I worked my first summer job – picking strawberries for Hayton Farms. The cadence of crawling and bowing through strawberry vines brought Scripture to mind. For hours, I would quote verses under my breath and I would become empty of everything else.

After a day kneeling to the dust, it became impossible to tell where silt ended and skin began. I could not look at my body and say, “Here the earth ends and I begin. Here, I am separate from the land.” By the end of the day everything turned into dust. And in my mind, that dust grew into something more, as if it actually *is* the irreducible clay of our bodies, like some sort of essence of Being. So dust grew into Scripture and into work, and the three became inseparable.

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I remember having pneumonia when I was in third grade, and sleeping every night in my parents’ bed. Something about the fevers elevated my hearing so that I

couldn't stand the incessance of sound. Sheets rubbing against each other drove me restless. Sleepless in my bed at night, I tried staying as still as I could but every breath moved the dusky covers and the noise fell on my ears like the very quaking of the earth. The crackling was quiet though, like some insidious consonance at the doorway of hearing. I remember lying awake, listening, while the room spun and the ceiling bellowed silently in and out like a great drum threatening to crush me against the bed. The room was dusty and seemed to scream voicelessly, endlessly.

When I woke up from night terrors, my parents took me into their bed, but I wouldn't fall asleep, lest the whispering commence again. So my mother turned on a lamp and read to me from her father's Bible. I followed along with the words while she read about David and Goliath, then Joshua and Jericho. The light from the lamp pooled like oil on the page and they flapped hugely in the light. She read from the story of Zaccheus and I remember wondering why some words were red, but being unable to ask.

When I awoke sometime in the night, everything was silent and vacuous. The lamp was off. My parents did not seem to breathe. I sat up in a cascade of silence and looked out the window. The moon shone still and full on the field and the skeletal trees that fringe it. It must have been mid-November. A shadow crossed over the moon and I watched as what appeared to be a huge moth swept across the timberline. As I looked out, the moth became a barn owl and flapped back and forth across the field, the moon bleaching its back bone-white. A shadow chased it across the grass. I couldn't hear a thing. But I could almost *sense* the mothy dry wings as they moved. I thought I was deaf. Suddenly the owl dove into the field and disappeared in its own shadow.

Something flickered in the grass. Then it rose up thickly into the air and came across the field toward the house.

I had never actually *seen* an owl before. Sure, I'd looked at owls at the zoo, and occasionally spotted them in the woods. A barn owl used to live in our hayloft, before we fenced out its entrance. But I believe this was the first time I actually *saw* an owl. Years later, a couple friends from the Swinomish tribe would explain to me who (not what) owls were to them, and why it was important to listen to them. I would also read Paul Shepard who, drawing heavily on Claude Lévi-Strauss, claims that in the myth-mind of people like the Koyukon in Alaska – free from over-ratiocination and thought, open to creativity and dreams – animals carry messages, and *are* themselves meaning.

Shepard claims that in the mind of the Koyukon, animals know more than humans, and even run the human world, rather than vice versa, as if, when humans fade away from self-centeredness, animal knowledge rises up within an inherently animal being, so animals *mean* us because we *are* them. Shepard claims that animals represent transitional and liminal spaces for humans – it is at the fence of identity, the line between *me* and *other*, where they show up.

James Welch supports this idea in his novel, *Fools Crow*, about a young man from the Pikuni Blackfoot. In the novel, the main character follows animals in both the dream- and waking-world to navigate the unstable 19<sup>th</sup> century world. And in that dream-state the man steps into clarity of being via the crossing of a river and communion with animals.

As an eight-year-old, I knew nothing of this. But there was something vivid in the owl that has stuck with me, and this vividness opened up into significance and

portention. Actually seeing that owl was like seeing an angel or some other, higher being come in from the sky.

It moved closer and closer, until I felt the wing strokes in all that world-space and saw the tail of a mouse whipping across its beak. I couldn't breathe. The owl grew massive, then lit upon the windowsill. Silent. Its face a dinner-plate, its eyes abyssal. The mouse in its beak still twitched and I saw three moonlit drops of blood twinkle onto the windowsill. I opened my mouth and tried to scream. Nothing came out. I heaved. Silence. The owl swiveled its head and matched my eyes, and its eyes enveloped the world.

Then it was gone.

When I woke up in the morning, both of my parents had left and a pale morning light slanted through the blinds. I propped up on one elbow and the aural displacement had also gone: sounds were as they should be, the sheets were neither silent nor deafening. I leaned over to look at the windowsill and saw nothing at first. Then the light shifted. Three drops.

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When I was seven years old, my dad gave me my first knife. It was a folding knife that he had found in the barn and the blade was nearly rusted shut. When we finally greased it open, the blade was thin and speckled with rust and it smelled of iron. Former hands polished the handle smooth so the wood gleamed as if with oil, but the

hinge was caked with dust and lint. Dad sharpened it, stropped it, and then let me loose, after saying,

“Promise me you’ll be careful.”

To which I replied, idiomatically confused, “Dad, I’ll be careful as a mouse.”

After carving up all the trees in the vicinity with my initials, and after whittling several “swords,” I began wondering what else this knife could do. One day in maybe early fall, I was outside playing with the cat before school. We had many barn cats, but only one indoor cat. This was Henry, *the* cat. Henry was a frumpy codger of an orange tabby who spent most of his time leisurely tearing up furniture inside the house, and the rest of his time hazing field mice in the ditch.

After his breakfast kibble on this misty morning, I followed him out from his food bowl, knife in hand, with a distinct plan in mind: to help him slaughter mice.

I do not know where my yearning to kill came from. Since I was very small, I made weapons out of Legos and drew swords and knives on napkins. My first work of art, lying in a storage box somewhere, was a smiling human blob with a gun and a sword for hand, and lines for feet. It was done with an old goose quill.

It is not a necessarily wicked thing to kill, and perhaps especially not as a child. Thoreau, in his essay “Higher Laws,” encourages children to run free in the woods, hunting and fishing at will. True, it may lead to senseless killing at first, but Thoreau indicates that this tendency could itself be the crux of education. He writes that, “no human being, past the age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure he does.” I propose that hunting educates so well because it

puts the child face-to-face with death in the flesh – death actualized. It allows one creature to take the life of another *away* so blatantly that it mirrors mortality back upon the killer.

More than just a locus of education, though, hunting is a spiritual practice. Thoreau claims that killing provides an entrance into the original self, which is a “primordial and basic,” life – carnal in its essence. This opposes his “higher life,” which is a life of the mind. While Thoreau recognizes the primordial life as naturally human, much of *Walden* is an endorsement of higher life as the better, more spiritual path. Yet killing combines the two. It brings the polarities into agreement – taking that which is basic and elevating it, while simultaneously tempering that which is higher. Hunting and killing, then, is the active enmeshment of *lives*. It’s the marriage of body and mind. In this way, it is the practice of conscious embodiment.

For Gary Snyder, the hunt is also important, but the period *after* the hunt is especially sacred. In his essays, “The Woman Who Married a Bear,” as well as “Survival and Sacrament,” Snyder expounds on this theme, which appears in much of his poetry as well. The theme is one of reverence for the dead, dying, and those who are killed in order to be eaten. The hunter arrives at the state of reverence by realizing that he or she might be the next meal for someone else, that his or her back is not safe, and that everything acts on the will to eat. According to Snyder, this awareness also comes about by way of entrance into nature. It’s a rebirth of ethics. It’s a rebirth of the mind.

When a person fully meshes into the woods, the hunt, and what we might call the natural world, Snyder suggests a step authentically into the most important rule: “the precept against needlessly taking life is inevitably the first and most difficult of commandments.” Martin Heidegger agrees whole-heartedly with this rule in its emphasis on death. Proper reverence for death, in Heidegger’s mind, provides the fundamental basis for a meaningful, or “authentic” life. Heidegger speaks only to *human* death, not *animal* death, as if they were different, and I don’t know if they are – but I know that when one human dies, it is the end of the world for those close to her. On this day, animal death was my concern. Not in a thoughtful way, of course, but by the end of the day, death would arise in my mind insistently. I would see that, when death arrives, it implicates all – the dying, the viewer, and the killer.

Henry sat patiently next to the ditch, mist encircling him like incense around some tubby idol. I sat cross-legged nearby, trying to emulate him. Only his tail twitched. I raised my hand slowly to scratch my nose. Henry turned and gave me a peeved look. Then he looked back at the ditch and perked his ears. I saw him tense. His tail stopped twitching. Suddenly, he vaulted into the air.

His aerodynamics were incredible. From a drooling old bat in one moment, he became a vicious puma in the next, tail outstretched and body in sleek relief against the morning drear.

He disappeared in the ditch with a thump. I heard a distinct squeak. Then he rose up out of the ditch, his eyes red and mad, dangling a mouse from his maw. He

leapt out of the ditch and began trotting down a trail in the yard toward the barn but I leapt up after him.

“Henry, leave the mouse. Henry, drop. Drop!”

That cat was no dog, and spiteful as well, so he started loping. I followed. The mist turned to rain.

“Henry, drop!”

Finally, he stopped, then wheeled, muzzle low to the ground looking at me. My eyes met his and in his face was pure fury. He began growling.

Sonically, the growl of a housecat is hardly noticeable. It's low and scratchy and a bit mournful. That domestic growl could hardly threaten a human, even a portly seven-year-old. But I remember seeing in the eyes of that cat some strange and fiery terror, ancient beyond this farm. At that moment, my wits and reason evacuated, and lost all thought.

Jumping up and down, I opened my mouth and tried to yell, but no words came out. Only silence. Then I too began growling. Standing over the cat, I started a growl in the back of my throat that slung up into a coughing hiss. It sounded nothing like Henry's growl and his sounded nothing like real danger, but it was enough. In one fluid motion, Henry crouched down, dropped the mouse, and fled.

Instantly, I was left alone in the rain with the mouse running blindly in circles at my feet, squeaking brokenly. The space between us collapsed and then I dropped to my knees and unfolded the knife. I held the blade out in front of me, saw it quiver once as my pulse surged down my hand, then dropped it like a guillotine across the little body.

If I had been more thoughtful or older I would have done it differently. I would have stabbed instead of sliced; I would've made sure to hit the neck rather than the back. Moreover, I would not have executed a mouse at all. But when the knife fell in the real world, it landed squarely across the creature's furry back with a delicate crunch. I believe I broke the spine without breaking skin. The mouse stopped running and started wriggling as if on fire. Its squeaks turned to screams. At that point my tears began to fall. The knife fell again, and then again and again, and though its cries quieted, the mouse still wriggled. My knife became wet with blood, my face wet with crying.

“Stupid Henry,” I whispered. “Stupid cat. Stupid, stupid animal.”

At last the mouse lay twitching. I knelt there, infinitely close to the little body, one knee up against my chest, hair plastered to my forehead in the rain. I swiped some of it out of my eyes with the killing hand and saw its paws – delicate and perfect and twitching in death. Its tail still moved where it met with soft fur, and warmth steamed up from the blood. It had delicate yellowing teeth, open with a last gasp. One eyelid skittered over the jet black eye-pool. A single tear dripped off my nose. It landed on the corpse.

## Part II

*“I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen.”*

-Terry Tempest Williams

When my sister, Julia, was two years old and I was two months old, my parents trundled everything they owned from a condo on Seattle’s Queen Anne Hill, northward to the whitewashed farmhouse in Mount Vernon that was to become our place.

As we grew there, my mother raised my sister and me the same way her mother raised her: as a church family. Every Sunday, we woke up early and together, then all took turns in the shower before dressing up for the weekly pilgrimage into town. I distinctly remember running a wet comb through my hair, parting it side to side, and feeling the cold water trickle down.

Something about the ceremony of leaving for church makes it sweet in my memory. There were daily feedings for the animals and often, family dinners; but the ritual of preparation and actually leaving the home-place for town made it somehow special, especially in a culture so destitute of ceremony. So it was not necessarily the ceremony of *church*, but rather the ceremony of *leaving the house* for the purpose of church that is sweet in my mind. This was the big ritual we had. Robert Pogue Harrison, in his book *Dominion of the Dead*, recapitulates the philosopher Giambattista Vico’s claim that marriage, burial, and religion are the “universal institutions of humanity.” That is, even when all other institutions are stripped away, these three

remain. Religion represents the future, in its orientation toward eternal and afterlife, marriage represents the present as it connects predecessor to progeny, and burial represents the temporal past in its reverence for the ancestor. Heidegger calls these institutions the three temporal ecstasies in that the human being, via participation in them, transcends the self by *care* oriented toward a greater-than-self.

I loved the orientation itself, the potential and yet impending way of entering church. This is why I loved the mornings first, and then the approach. We invariably rolled up late to Bethany Covenant, and Dad would idle the car under a great pillared awning there so that we could avoid the rain. I would run ahead to swing open the heavy wooden door, and the lateness of the hour meant that the singing had already begun. A whoosh of warm air and the hush of the empty narthex careened out at us, and with them, the unanimous host of voices in the distant cordoned sanctuary, both vast and quiet. And standing there was like standing on the brink of an ocean, thundering just moments away, all froth and fury, awaiting the instant when you take a deep breath and jump into the Sound itself. Standing there was the embodied experience of possibility. Then, as a unit, we traversed the narthex with its coarse nylon carpeting, before arriving at the doors to the sanctuary. Those doors, not unlike the exterior doors of the church, were set into a tall wall such that the hall inside felt even grander than it already was. As if there were something great going on. Something important that grew near and sonorous as we approached the door.

Then I do not remember actually entering the sanctuary. And few of the pastor's words come to mind. But I do remember being there – standing among hundreds of people packed into that soaring room, voice and breath all one. And

sometimes, in the midst of song, a great lift washed under me and then buoyed me upward so it felt like I rose to the flying ceiling and the rosy windows. I remember the way light filtered in from the windows was glorious.

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There is one sermon I remember from when I was young. Raising my head above the pew, I saw the pastor point at a single candle.

“This fire is the one that burns in you. All of you.” Pastor Kent lifted up the candle so the congregation could see.

“And when you say, ‘I hate,’ that flame dims. But when you say ‘I love,’ or even ‘*I live, I am,*’ that candle flame burns brighter. And the dust of this world is opposed to the candle. If you read Genesis, you will see that the dust and light do not mix.”

He says there’s a light within and a greater light without. He speaks of humans like candles, or little lights, and God like a sun, whose rays light up the good and the blessed, and their countenance and very face may reflect that light. He says that God is a pervasive light and the people who follow God may also be filled with individual light.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on the subject of light. In a lecture on George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends, Emerson writes that the inner light is the fundamental source of both political action and religious ideals. It is

evidence that “God is within us.” He writes that the inner light “is a person’s own and only window on the real light, the molten core, the one deep well of life.” Though Emerson’s church was Unitarian and mine is Evangelical Covenant, they agree.

Martin Heidegger has an even more transcendent vision of light. In his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, he revolutionizes the concept of the human being to the human-*Being*. Heidegger calls this human “Dasein,” (in German, literally “Being-There,” or as he denotes it, “man himself”) and claims that it is always a locus of light, as “disclosure.” Actually, the human for Heidegger is unique, in and because of, its status as being present – which he names “Being-in-the-world.” Heidegger gets to the fundamental structure of this Being-in-the-world via an intricate explosion of Greek and German words. What he arrives at is this: humans, in their active being, illuminate the world by their own nature, which is itself one of illumination. The structure of this illumination is one of clearing or “disclosure,” meaning that the world opens its truth up to the human. In turn, disclosure rests on Heidegger’s concept of the world as it *is* and the human as it *is*.

So illumination, for Heidegger, is the necessary state of a human being. Whereas Emerson suggests that a Godly light lives within us, Heidegger claims that we *are* light, and as we walk about the world, we pour that light out on other entities. Except it’s a mutual act and free of intentionality in such a way that it moves outside of empirical causation. As we walk through life, the world and the human mutually suffuse each other in light. This is the act of standing in Truth.

In the sanctuary, Pastor Kent puts the candle down. “If you love God and follow Him, you will join Him in Heaven, because of Jesus. Because of his martyrdom. And Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father.” If you do not do those things, you will not join him.” He picks up a brass rod and reaches towards the candle.

“This is what happens to those who do not follow God.” He snuffs out the candle. Smoke curls lazily upward.

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At the same time my parents moved north, their friends, the Thomases, did too. Scott and Tina Thomas’ second child had just been born when they moved from Redmond to Arlington, Washington. The move was incidental, but the friendship was not. Tina and my dad had met in college but hadn’t kept up communication afterward. Several years later, Tina and my mom started coincidentally attending a Mothers of Preschoolers program together. They grew to like each other quickly, which was rare for my mom. I believe something about their pasts pulled them together. I do not know what happened in Tina’s past, but I know it was bad. And I know that in my mother’s was the death of her father, and more – a brutal mother. When my mother applied to colleges, her mother told her in that honeyed voice,

“Oh hun, we don’t do that. Not us.” And then she did everything in her power to stop my mother. Emotionally and physically. But Mom went anyway, and now they do not speak.

So there was something between my mother and Tina that grew into a *fit*, as if each of them bore some complementary aspect of being that met its perfect match in

the other. At that point my sister Julia was less than one year old, and Tina's firstborn, David, was the same age. They were born almost exactly two weeks apart, and so there was also a pragmatism and mutual support to the friendship. My dad was in medical school and residency full time; Tina's husband, Scott, was a firefighter, working 48's and sometimes 72's. With little support at home, Tina and Annie turned to each other. They would spend whole days at parks in Seattle, talking and laughing and sometimes crying. They read Scripture to each other. Tina had grown up with three wild brothers in a stagnant Catholic church, but after high school a friend invited her to a Pentecostal church and she fell in love.

"I thought: this is it. This is *it*," she told me once. "Sammy, that was where healing happened and *praise*. Just praise."

She would use that word, "just," when she was talking about something actual, something real. Something that raised her soul up. She always used to say, "Your mother is *just* wonderful."

And that's how I knew she meant it.

Tina had never liked the Catholic church, and the badness from her past finally drove her away from it. So she left Catholicism but the Pentecost drew her back in like an embrace. She studied Scripture at the Pentecostal church and went to weekly praise gatherings at a house in Seattle. The house was owned by the Wasser family and the Wassers introduced Tina to my father, Gil. He was a transplant from Indiana by way of California, and Tina was a transplant from Catholicism by way of the Spirit, as she liked to say. They got along fabulously. Soon the Wassers also introduced Scott to Tina. He had just finished Bible college in California and was studying to become a

firefighter. Scott is a flaming redhead and he's one of the quietest people I know. Tina was tall and brunette with soft Italian eyes and a constant mellifluous voice. He's always early, and she's always late. I picture them like the meeting of fire and water: insightful, inciting, and somehow utterly balanced. Soon they were dating, and then they were married. After a couple years in Redmond, Scott and Tina moved north and started paying mortgages on a small yellow house in Arlington tucked between forested hills.

We celebrated birthdays and Christmas and Easter with the Thomases, and this too became a ceremony. Tina's Italian, and vegetarian, too, because she cannot stand to harm animals. This meant that our suppers with them were at least two hours long and achingly delicious. If it takes a village to raise a child, then this was our village: three boys, one girl, two mothers, and every once in awhile a father or two. But mostly just the moms. That's how we would refer to them: "the moms."

We spent most weekends together, sometimes at our house, but usually at theirs. Sometimes a mood grips my mom so she can't clear her mind or get away from her own thoughts, but getting out of the house helps, so most of my memories from time with the Thomases come from their place in Arlington. Their house is small and their barns are falling down, but trees surround it all.

"I'd love to move North," Tina would say. "That Skagit Valley is so beautiful with the light and the openness and the river. That water and light." Tina had a great light of her own, and it showed through her face. Her eyes lit up whenever we talked, and she invited a great welcome always. When she and my mom spoke, Tina leaned

forward, saying “yes, *yes*.” The two of them would go on long walks around the property, or down the road. I don’t know what they talked about, but they called them “healing walks.” Healing walks and healing talks.

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Sometimes, in the weekends of my youth, Mom and Dad were both busy, so Julia would spend the weekend at her friend, Sophia’s, and I would stay with David and Michael. Mom would drop me off on Friday, stay for dinner (then stay after dinner), and pick me up on Sunday after she stayed for dinner and wine again. This meant that when I didn’t go to Bethany Covenant with my family, I went to church with the Thomases. To me, it felt like an exploration.

Bethany Covenant had a certain structure: you had to enter the narthex first, where great corridors led off to classrooms, and then the sanctuary. Oaken pews in the sanctuary led downward toward the pulpit, and the pulpit was on a stage. The worship team also stood on the stage, and a great convex wall of staves rose like a fence behind them. Behind the fence was a large white wall with a cross mounted on it, and the cross was flanked with stained-glass windows that let light into the sanctuary. It is the only church I have attended with my family.

David and Michael, on the other hand, accompanied their mother and occasionally their father, to innumerable churches. When I went to church with Tina and the boys, there was nothing staged, nothing habitual, and nothing rote. “This is *it*.” Tina might say, gently. “This is praise. Just praise.” And it was.

Among the many churches, one stands out. It was called Vida Nueva and it was in Burlington, twenty minutes north of my house. It started at four P.M. every Sunday, so Tina and the boys would ease into our driveway around four or maybe a little after. She drove an Oldsmobile station wagon painted white with wood paneling, and the thing rode like a boat. So after mooring up next to the elm tree, maybe David and Michael would stay to play, or more often than not, Mom, Julia, and I would climb aboard with the three of them for the northward journey. The first time I went was in third grade, as I recovered from pneumonia.

We always arrived late at Vida Nueva, but we were always greeted with smiles. The church met in a musty old bank building with big windows, big exterior heaters, and rusty water. The pastors had chosen this building for two reasons: the first was that it was next to the homeless camp in Burlington, and the second was that it was a gift. It was a miraculous place and it was true to its name – that’s why Tina went.

After we arrived, there were songs in Spanish and most of the people rolled around on the ground or laughed and cried or spoke very quietly in tongues. Then communion would happen, and it was different than the way Bethany Covenant did it. At Bethany, the pastor stood up front and recited 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26.

...The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup>and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>25</sup>In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” <sup>26</sup>For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

After the recitation, he cracked a matzo in half and lifted a pitcher of grape juice. Then a diagram flashed up on the projector so that you knew which pew-serried aisle to walk into from where you sat. Music began and lines formed along the aisles

leading down into the front. When you got to the front there were little stations, each with two people who carried silver platters, one with matzo flakes and one with thimblefuls of grape juice. The platter-bearers were usually ordained, and they stood on the stage. You had to take a crumb of matzo and chew it somberly, then take a plasticky sip of grape juice to wash it down while the folks bearing the silver platters smiled down and said,

“The body of Christ, broken for you.”

“The blood of Christ, shed for you.”

Then you had to say “thank you,” and peel away down a different aisle so that you could file back into your proper pew. It was very orderly. It did not feel natural.

At Vida Nueva, there were no pews, but at an unspoken moment, everyone got out of their chairs, or put down their canes, or got up off the floor and gathered in a circle, side to side. The pastor was in the circle too, and she said a prayer, then talked about breaking bread, citing maybe Acts 2 or Luke 22. It varied.

Acts 2: 42-45: <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup>Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup>They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Luke 19-21: 19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” 20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. 21 But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.

I think Vida Nueva liked to leave Judas’ betrayal till the end, but Bethany Covenant liked it up front. After the recitation, the pastor unsleeved a loaf of bread from a paper bag and tore it in two, passing it to either side. She procured a clay jug and poured two chalices with thick red wine and passed those either way too.

Following the chalices went two candles. I had never had wine before Vida Nueva, but I watched other people and copied them. When the bread came into my hands, María passing it to me murmured,

“Cuerpo de Cristo, roto por su.” In my memory her hands and the bread are warm.

Then she held the chalice low, candlelight trembling in the rich pool.

“La sangre de Cristo derramada por su.”

Everyone else had dunked their portion into the vessel so that small crumbs soaked in the liquid. I looked up at her and noticed that she had no hair. None on her head, no eyebrows, no lashes, nothing. I blinked. She cracked a smile, so I quickly dunked my hunk of bread into the wine and stuck it dripping into my mouth. The wine was bitter, but after I swallowed, a glow blossomed in my belly. I smiled back at her and took the chalice. I turned to Michael on my right with it and said the words. He was always smaller than me, and he fumbled a bit tearing the crust. But he did so, and dipped it generously and ate of the bread.

After communion, the music started and we left to go play outside on the train tracks. I remember stopping in the doorway of the building and looking back. María sat baldly on the floor with her eyes closed. Pastor Grace and someone I didn't know had hands on her chest, front and back. She looked down at the ground, grimacing.

The next week when we walked in, music was playing but María wasn't there, and I asked Tina where she'd gone. Tina smiled just a little. She looked up at the water-veined ceiling, eyes full, and shook her head.

“She is not here.”

The music began to crescendo. I looked up and a fine dust rained down from the ceiling, passing into sheaves of windowlight.

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Not long after that, Mom drove me over to spend a day at the Thomases. It was frosty at our house, which meant it would be even colder at theirs. Sure enough, when we pulled into their driveway the gravel popped and glittered, and as we stepped out of the car, the mud lay rimed with ice and frozen underfoot so it crunched like leaves. The Thomas' house has hills on three sides and a creek on the fourth so they are in a cold sink. This normally means that winters turn their yard from grass into mud and going into the woods means putting on rubber boots.

David, Michael, and their dog, Misha, roiled out of the house yelling and barking, while Tina stood on the front porch in clogs.

“Hi Annie,” she smiled, ushering us in. “Hi Sammy.” She always called me “Sammy” or “Cousin Sammy,” and though I didn't give it a second thought then, I now realize that that made my mother her sister.

It didn't take long for the moms to get settled in. When they did, David, Michael and I stepped back into the mudroom to put on boots and sweaters. We were going exploring. I looked back through the door. Mom pulled her Bible out of her tote and Tina picked up a coffee mug from the counter where it steamed. Her Bible lay open next to it and she hefted it one-handed. They made their way into the living room where a warm woodstove ticked slowly.

We headed into the woods on the other side of the hill. The Thomas's land used to back up against a huge forest that still had some old-growth trees in it. We would walk into the woods with the dog, hop a couple barbwire fences, and then roam into a woodland more jungle than forest, more cedar than deciduous, and more ferns than anything else. It still had elk. It still had owls. David would explain fauna to Michael and me while we went exploring. He said there's more life in one square yard of ground here than there are people in nearby Everett. On days like this, when the frozen woods warmed with sun, I would breathe in the steaming, misty air and imagine I was breathing in all that life.

It was like boiled wool, the mist. It thickened and coiled through the nave of boles, tenuous as being, palpable as flesh. The mist was always moving in a wind that wasn't there. It would contort into strange shapes that twisted and morphed silently in and out of being.

Sometimes the mist lay as thick upon the air as the ferns upon the land; walking through it was like swimming underwater. It even obscured the skin of the earth: first mist, then ferns, then moss. We marked movement through the obscurity by detail: a dripping branch here, a skein of dangled moss there; here a vine maple where before a *cascara*.

We coursed through those woods without compass arrow or path to follow. Taking a step from the blind floor of the woods took faith in release. We never knew where our feet would go when they rose. Once in the air, we never knew where they would fall.

On that day, we went into a deep patch of old-growth cedar where everything hushed and warmed, and came out the other side into a scrubland of alder and lichen. Misha started whining and then a peculiar smell met us.

“What’s that smell, David?” I asked. “Is that normal?”

“That wasn’t here last time we came back. It smells like silage.”

“It smells bad!” Michael said.

“Where’s it coming from?” David said. “Let’s find it.”

“I don’t want to,” Michael said.

“Oh come *on*, don’t be such a baby,” he said. Michael quieted. The smell was terrible and it strengthened as we followed it – like silage and cow manure and rot.

Misha whined louder and looked up at us.

We waded through alders and came out on the edge of a clearing.

“Holy cow,” David said. “It’s putrid.”

“What’s putrid mean?” I asked.

“Look.” He pointed. “*That’s* what it means.” Michael and I flanked him and looked where he pointed. In the middle of the clearing, lying on a bed of black and rotting leaves, lay death. It had grey skin, lank hair, and a grossly swollen belly, and the sun splattered the head with warmth. Flies buzzed thickly around the eyes and mouth and other sun-spotted flesh.

“Is it a horse?” Michael asked.

“No it’s a cow,” David said.

“I think it is a horse,” I said. David shrugged. “Let’s go take a look.” We laid our walking sticks down on a stump and covered mouths with sleeves. Misha wound circles close around us, her tail between her legs. We got maybe twenty feet away and the smell stopped us like a wall. The dog slunk back to the stump.

“Oh my gosh,” I heard David muffle. “It is a horse.”

That close, we could look full on at the carcass. Its hindquarters were half eaten – the blood had pooled then frozen and lay half soaked and claggy on the ground. Bowels coiled out of the bloated belly and looped all shredded around hock and flank, themselves carved and ground by teeth. The hide had probably been silvery but now stretched over the bulk of the carcass dully grey. It was tattered and torn at the hind where flesh slurred viciously into dirt and leaves, and furrowed and bunched about the shoulders. Black hair from the tail and mane lay stringy about the body and some of it hung up in the thornbushes with blood so the sunlight guttered coldly over it like fishing wire.

Michael was starting to moan. “David, I want to go back.”

But David was rapt. “Look,” he pointed. “Look at the front.”

The left foreleg was stretched out along the scuffed dirt, but the right one lay curled wrongly underneath and a shard of bone thrust like release itself through the loose skin of it. A small patch of sunlight flickered over the snapped bone end. As we watched a fly perched on the apex.

“Look,” David said. “Look at the head.”

The jowls of the beast dug into the ground and the lips slacked bloody and huge over old teeth. The mane clung ragged to the skull and curved around stark

cheekbones. But in the middle of the forehead was a hole out of which something not unlike jelly leaked coagulant. It was black and purple and angry red and it had frozen and thawed and now steamed mushy under the light of the sun, effluvium backlit by the frosty light. Around this feast and around the soft eyes swarmed huge flies. One of the eyes was slit open and I could see blackness pooling beneath it like a well – empty and stark and cavernous.

I heard Michael retch, and turned to see him with his hands on knees and eyes shut tight.

“Come on,” David murmured, eyes still riveted to the corpse. “Come on, let’s go.”

That was my first encounter with *big* death. Death in the flesh; huge and actualized, there on the ground. Michael and David and I talked about the carcass for weeks afterwards, and sometimes we still do. In our world of light and church, such carnal loamy things as blood and rot had not entered our thoughts. It was only an animal, an animal without a name known to us, and yet the presence of its death snuck into our minds. The fact of its mortality and its demise worked into us too. We did not talk about it like that, but the sense rose in the air. *I could die too. Someday I will.* I did not know at the time what that moment meant. I did not know that it would resurface. Then resurface again, and still again.

It turns out that the neighbor’s horse had broken its leg. The neighbor hadn’t even called a vet. I imagine him leading the horse, screaming with pain, out to the woods – halter in one hand and pistol in the other. I imagine the sound of the gunshot

and the silence after the horse's instant evacuation. I wonder if he looked in her eye as he raised his pistol.

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Two weeks after we find the horse corpse, Tina goes to the doctor with digestive issues. Another two weeks and she's diagnosed with colon cancer.

I can't remember the day she was diagnosed, but I remember a short time later, when I spend another weekend at David and Michael's house. It's rainy, so all day we build a fort in the rafters of their garage. We truck boards and supplies from the burnpile, and carefully navigate the place. It's the domain of their dad, Scott. Clutter buries his workbench: old saws, new screwdrivers, two cases of drillbits still in their packages, all sorts of things bought on bargain. He has a couple of freezers filled with beef and frozen vegetables. Nearby sit three rusty bikes, one shiny bike and towers and towers of canned food, just in case. A ladder in the middle of it all reaches up like a sunray into the rafters. All day, we run up and down the ladder, David's inspiration on us.

"We need blankets! And food!"

"What about this chalkboard?" Michael asks.

"Yes! We can draw maps."

"Can we bring the baby chicks up there?" I ask.

“No, they’ll make it too dirty.” David looks down from the rafter, face alight. I’m underneath. “Will you hand me those Christmas lights? We need light to tell stories.”

“What about my stuffed animals?” Michael asks. David rolls his eyes.

“Okay, Mikey, go get them.”

Michael and I run into the house and as we head up the stairs, I catch a glimpse of Tina’s bedroom, through the half-closed door. She is wincing with discomfort, but she’s looking up and out the window, smiling, and I wonder why. Then Michael calls me and I scramble up the stairs.

We call it Fort Thomor, which is our last names coupled together: Thomas and Traylor. Every time we go up there, David spins stories. He tells Michael and me about otters and owls, waterways and wastelands, lichen and lakes. Sometimes he breaks into song. The fluorescent lights below us tick a quick tempo for his words. We stay for hours at a time. Whenever we go up there, we take a marker and write the date on the rafters. The first one says, in careful, shaky figures: NOVEMBER 14, 2006.

The next day, I go to church with them. Scott stays home to work on the water well, and after he finishes that he plans to start re-siding the house — it’s been covered in Tyvek for half a year now. In the car, David says this church different than Vida Nueva but more “charismatic” than Jake’s House, the one they’ve been attending in the morning. I ask him what charismatic means. He says it means they are Pentecostal. I ask him what Pentecostal means, and he says that things move at the church. I still don’t understand but I will find out soon. Before we get to church, Tina talks to us

about faith. She tells us stories of miraculous healings she has witnessed. She says faith is like freedom. Michael asks,

“What’s that mean?” and Tina says,

“Freedom means release from bondage.” Michael asks about bondage and she explains, almost wistfully, how all humans are bound. David stares out the window but I listen carefully and want to believe and explore. Michael hearkens fully.

The church is in an old warehouse in Arlington, and someone painted a sandwich board outside that says, “Welcome to Judah Praise Center.” We walk into a sea of music. Everyone is dancing. The whole room moves to “Amazing Grace.” Tina is on some medicine to help her belly; she’s in the middle of the room, holding a purple flag with a fiery chariot on it, dancing. She moves to her own time, swaying as if underwater. She is rapturous with bliss and her mouth stays open with laughter. Her eyes are closed, but I think I see tears on her cheeks and I don’t understand why. She is full of joy and sorrow. Her feet hardly touch the ground as she flows with the music. I watch her for a long time, until Michael asks what I see. I see her full of light, suffused in light, but I don’t have the words to describe it. Then David says,

“C’mon, let’s go for a walk.”

When we get back, the pastor is laughing and crying up in front of the room. He preaches from Matthew 6:22 – “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your vision is clear, your whole body will be full of light.” I like what he says. He makes the words feel alive. We sit down next to Tina, but she doesn’t notice us. Her eyes are closed again and she’s humming.

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I visit Michael and David a lot over the next five years, and their house feels different every time. In the first year, Tina and Mom spend less time walking and more time reading. In the second year, they stay in her bedroom instead of the spot in front of the stove. In the third year, Tina stops cooking. She reads Psalm 103 every day. Passing by the table one day, I see her Bible next to a candle with the whole chapter highlighted and underlined. Verses 3 and 4 are triple underlined.

<sup>4</sup>Praise the LORD, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—  
<sup>3</sup>who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases...

In the fourth year, doctors come to the house because she can't leave it. Pastors come to the house to pray for her – first for recovery, then for healing, then for hope, and finally for the pain. She starts reading about Elijah in 2 Kings: 2. David and Michael learn to cook for her. And in the fifth year, Tina goes on a constant IV drip for the pain. Scott moves a hospital bed into their room. One day she tries to leave it but she can't.

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In the fifth year of Tina's cancer, I get my driver's license. The first thing I do with the newfound freedom is skip soccer practice and go to visit David and Michael. When I get to their place, I say hi to Misha, who still growls at me like normal in a world where nothing is normal – then rubs against my legs when she remembers who I am. Michael has been trying to stay out of the house — he says the noise bothers his mom — so we're planning to go for a walk. I quietly climb up the porch and tap on the door. I wait for Michael to come out, but Tina opens the door instead.

She's fragile as a shell and shrouded in a hospital gown. She clutches a blanket around her shoulders with one thin-boned hand. I can see tendons under her skin. She leans on an IV pole.

"Hi Sammy," she says.

I haven't seen her standing in months. I look up at her and my heart jumps into my throat. Her face is hollow and grey. Her nose is nothing but two holes, and I can almost see through her skin to the skull beneath. But her eyes are like rivers. They're huge and they're overflowing with emptiness, and the emptiness flows over her whole face. I don't think I've ever seen eyes that are black that way. Then Michael comes into the mudroom, shoes in hand. He hugs his mom tenderly and we head outside. That was the last time I looked her in the eye.

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Some white-mist morning a few days later, I buckle my seatbelt and slide onto the road toward school. Mom has just sent me off with a kiss and a prayer, like she has every day since kindergarten.

I've come to love the morning drive to school. It moves from east to west. The rising sun dissolves more mist from the myriad waterways that lace and line the belly of the valley. The waterways grow more frequent the more westward you drive, so it's like diving down a morphing fractal of water and earth, the land growing sparse, then sparse, then not at all. Toward the end of that road, the earth lets you go, and if you keep driving you will fly into the sea, as if the water there meant *end* itself. That's where the Swinomish reservation lies. It's on a wooded island in Skagit Bay. On the mainland, looking west toward the island, squats Seahome High School.

Seahome High is small, and almost everyone plays sports. It's also half-Native, so after practice the white kids head east to the farm fields and distant hills and the rez kids head west to the island. Swinomish Channel is a deep blue slough that separates the two. The channel lies so close to school that sometimes an errant soccer ball ends up floating out to sea during practice. Occasionally after practice I visit my friends Hilary or Andy on the rez. Today, I head east.

I take the side road home because it's a warm grace of a rain and there's good music on the radio. I bear down the straightaway road, slowly this time. It's mostly dark out by now, but the chipseal in my headlights glitters and seethes with rain. The breeze picks up to a whirlwind here on the island, and I can just make out the river trees across the near dike. They toss in the rain. The last few leaves of autumn, lashed off by skeletal branches, frenzy down into my headlights. I approach the patch of cottonwoods, standing rank and skeletal, their branches arching above, thrashing in the wind like tendon and bone twisting for release.

As I enter the woods, a form like a great moth slants down from the trees and seizes up in the air in the middle beam of my headlights. It rides perfect wings and I swear I can feel their dusty dryness. It's an owl. It buoys in the cone of light and soars in exact flow with the car. The world dances wild and frenetic but the thing stays perfectly still in front of me. We glide through the tunnel, and then we're back in the wind, and the stop sign swims up distant through the rain, but the owl doesn't stray. It's poised rigid with the car, swinging it from ropey light like maybe it's the one driving and I'm just along for the ride. I move to push the hair out of my eyes, but even as my hand passes over my sight the thing is gone. No turn. No curve. Vanished. I stop the

car in the road and cut the engine. I step out. The car ticks like a bomb. The world howls and drips onto my skin.

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The next day at school, I walk with Hilary to Algebra. She's a quintessential cheerleader, and it's Friday, so her make-up is done precisely and she's dressed up in her skirt: red, white, and blue. Hilary's whole family used to come to every football game to watch her. They stopped a year ago, when her sister died of leukemia, and now she misses school often and spends a lot of those missed days at the sweatlodge. She's the junior class president, so I ask her about some upcoming event and then say,

"Hilary, can I ask you a question?"

She looks at me with big dark eyes, "What's up?"

"I was wondering what birds mean in Native culture. Like, do you know anything about owls?"

She sighs, "Of course, but there's a lot of things they mean! Like it depends on the bird and what it's doing."

"What about owls?"

"Owls are messengers!" she says. "They *always* have news to bring. Did you see one?" Her eyes are bright.

"Yeah! I saw this owl last night after school, and it flew in front of me. Like for a long time, like it was leading me or something...I watched it in my headlights for awhile." I'm holding her gaze until I say "watched," and then she looks down. She wraps her arms around herself. The clock ticks a *presto* tempo, the bell rings and everyone floods past us into class. The hall goes quiet and her eyes flick back up at me.

“You should keep your family close to you for the next few days.”

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That was when I started waiting. I don't know what I'm waiting for or whom I'm waiting for, but every moment feels weighty, every conversation seems important. Two days later, and it's November 14, 2011. I'm sitting in class and the teacher drones on about the cones and rods of the eye. My eye strays to the clock — it has stopped ticking. I feel my phone buzz and wait for the text to stop. It keeps buzzing so I pull it out and see Michael's name on the screen. He never calls. My heart leaps into my throat and it's hard to breathe. I cannot answer it. After class I walk outside and sit on the cold concrete steps, heart heaving and breath fogging in the air. I watch seagulls wheeling over Swinomish channel. I try to cry but I can't. I walk into the office and ask to be excused — the secretary doesn't ask me why but she gives me a note and a look and says, “Take care.”

I take the long way home again, but the road is dry this time and the air stands still. The sky is overcast and the clouds look bruised. I drive through the cottonwood tunnel with my breath held and don't realize until the other side that I was waiting for something. When I get home I send Michael a text.

*Can I come over?*

*Yeah* he replies.

I pull up and see a candle guttering in Tina's window. Misha is quiet. Four horses out in the pasture hang their heads over the fence and watch. Michael is outside and I go up to give him a hug. His eyes are big in a white face. David sits motionless on the porch with his head between his knees, jacket bunched about his shoulders.

Scott has his hands in his pockets and he's looking up at the sky. It's as if the world has ended. The ambulance is already here — the chariot emblazoned on its side seems out of place. We all watch while the paramedics, shrouded in white, wheel an empty gurney into the house. They wheel it out full, with a white sheet draped over.

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I tell myself that she loved this world dearly, and that's why she struggled as she was torn from it. I know she's in a better place but that doesn't make it easier to let go. In those days, I fully believed in heaven — one above that we could look up to. I also believed in the world. Now I'm not so sure about heaven, and Tina's death is like the eclipse of the world. But I am certain that wherever Tina is, it's a better place than the absurd one she left. During the last five days of her life, she was in senseless pain, while those around watched helplessly. During those days, I am told she was unable to speak, though her mouth remained half-open. Her medication was multiplied by a factor of two, then six, then twelve. It didn't help. During that time her eyes flashed open once.

Scott slept every night beside her.

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The next week I skip school again, this time for the funeral service. I have trouble finding the cemetery, but finally I meet the Thomases there. The sky is a painful blue, the sun gazes down coldly, and a dry frost lies heavy on the ground. Tina is in a small wooden urn the size of a shoebox with a horse painted on the side and Scott cradles her while the pastor says a few words. He asks Scott and the boys if they

want to speak. Scott shakes his head. Michael looks down at the ground. Then he looks up.

“She... she wasn’t just my mom. She was a Mother. She was my mother. She is my mother.” David hides his face and starts shaking. I try to cry but I can’t. Then Scott stands heavily and picks up the box. One step and he kneels next to a small hole in the ground. Two breaths and looks up at the sky. Three tears run down his nose and fall sparkling into the earth. Three drops. There are more lines on his face today. He picks up the box and looks down into the hole, then reaches in and places it deeply down. After he sprinkles a handful of cold dirt, the boys follow, and then he looks around for a shovel but doesn’t find one. He fills the rest of the hole with his hands.

It’s another five years later – almost winter – and there’s no reason to be thinking of Tina. I’m on the wrong side of the mountains from Scott and the boys. I saw them a couple months ago in September, but I haven’t talked to any of them since. I wish I could say that I think of her every day, or that her absence weighs terribly on me, but that’s not the way it is. I used to remember her often when I read my Bible, but I haven’t picked it up in a year and a half. Every once in awhile I forget for a brief moment that she’s gone, but those days are rarer and rarer. But still, she’s like a second mother to me.

Then last night I had a dream.

The dream is back at my house, and it seems as if everything is underwater. The whole family is over for dinner. I get off the road late but it’s still light out. When I walk in the door, everybody is sitting at the dinner table and there are candles next to

the pasta and Tina at the head. She's humming. When I walk in, the conversation stops. She looks right at me and smiles that old amused smile I suddenly recall so well. Her face is open and her eyes are soft and brown again. She looks happy, like I can hardly remember and I realize that she's come back, and this excitement starts filling my belly and then my chest so I move to the table and sit down.

There is a place for me next to her and across from Michael. I sit down and still can't believe it's her. I reach out to touch her side and her skin is warm. The conversation starts up again. The house is lit with yellow warmth and the food tastes hot and good; then I realize that things have changed since Tina was here last and no one has filled her in. I'm about to re-introduce her to her sons, and tell her how proud she should be of them. I want to tell her how I don't have the words or perception to describe our friendship, that I don't even understand the meaning in my life of such light. I want to tell her how good of a mother she was to us all and my chest is aching with the message. I want to show Michael to her, because she would love to know him now and they could talk for hours and hours. I want her to know that he's a man of God, and he's practically pastoring the new church he's at. I'm about to tell her that he's the only reason I still believe in a God, though he hasn't yet convinced me to believe in Jesus again, but he's trying, Tina, he's trying hard, and you would love to know who he's becoming.

Before I open my mouth, Mom leans toward her and gently asks,

“Why now?”

Everyone looks at Tina but I turn my head toward Mom, and beyond her something catches my eye out the west window. The sun's last light pours through the

cedar and cottonwood and I watch something slant in from the west and through the trees. It crashes against the outside of the window and falls down below.

It's an owl. There's a gasp at the table.

I'm still looking out the window but I lower my head into my hands and now the tears start finally flowing. Tina's chair is empty.

### Part III

*“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.”*

-Heraclitus

Leaving the Skagit Valley was something I chose to do. There was work in the valley that summer – my friend managed a farm and looked for help – and there is a good community college I could have gone to in the fall. But it was only three days after high school graduation that I went north. I have loved that phrase, “going north,” as if the cardinal direction itself sanctifies the action of moving. I shipped north with one backpack and two Rubbermaid bins, filled with almost everything I owned: T-shirts, canvas pants, towel, swim trunks, boots, belt, sandals, sleeping bag, flashlight, harmonica, my old pocketknife. One collared shirt for Sundays. A bundle of envelopes and stationary, three ballpoint pens, two dozen postage stamps. I left all my books, except for two nestled between a pillow and the top of the bin: my father’s copy of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and a Bible.

It was a graduation gift, and on the inside cover, my mother copied down Proverbs 4:10-13.

<sup>10</sup> Listen, my son, accept what I say,  
and the years of your life will be many.

<sup>11</sup> I instruct you in the way of wisdom  
and lead you along straight paths.

<sup>12</sup> When you walk, your steps will not be hampered;  
when you run, you will not stumble.

<sup>13</sup> Hold on to instruction, do not let it go;  
guard it well, for it is your life.’

I think she liked the invocation of wisdom through study in that verse. I liked the idea of unfettered movement.

I was headed to Beyond Malibu, a YoungLife camp in a fjord along British Columbia's Coastal Range. If two words fit Beyond Malibu, they are *remote* and *religious*. Getting there takes a day of travel from the nearest outpost of civilization via three different boats or one float plane. As you come into the sound, the camp reveals itself as an unimpressive cluster of buildings, crouched under a canopy of trees, perched on the only shingle of flat land between peaks one mile high and ocean half a mile deep. There's no internet, heating, or phone service of any kind, and electricity in only one building. Tapwater is gravity-fed from the creek. Any music came from us, and at night we would go to the dock and play by moon and candlelight: several guitars, one banjo, my harmonica. Kirsten had taken the trouble to ship up her cello, and the sound of its strings floated across the fjord. At times the people were overly pious or obsequious, and then they felt false. Sometimes they seemed real – usually when we went swimming or played music. But the place itself, the mountains and waters were always constant and there. Just there.

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After a few weeks living there, my dreams shifted. Before, they all had taken place in my high school and been about the people in the Skagit Valley. Now my dreams were about the inlet, and there were few people in them. I have always had vivid dreams, and put a bit of stock in them. They offer a rising of the subconscious,

and a subtle view of some truth as it flits through the forest of the mind, eluding actual thought and captured only in dreamscapes. In some belief systems, dreams carry great import and in others, dreaming itself calls the world into being. In James Welch's *Fools Crow*, the main character enters into a crucial dream sequence via a river crossing on his way south. My dream changes came from northward movement, and they also came by water.

At Beyond, I dreamt about the tides changing and the orcas and salmon that swam through the inlet, and I dreamt about an ouzel that lived in the creek, and about the Great Horned Owl nesting outside the barn. One night I dreamt that all the leaves of the cottonwood trees turned from green to gold in an instant, and a great wind blew them off the branches and carpeted the skin of the water with gold. The whole fjord was floored with gold.

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I started that summer eager to dive into devotional time. The devotion is why I went North. I thought that if I read my Bible diligently for the entire hour, I could read it cover to cover in a summer. I'd read the entire thing while I was in high school but it had taken me a year and a half, and I wanted to let the text speak more cohesively. During the hour of devotion, then, I would brew a cup of tea and walk into the woods to explore the place, find a spot, and dive in. Initially, I read fiercely. But a couple weeks in, I was partway through Leviticus and started falling asleep with my face planted between the leaves. Then I stopped trying to read.

I started leaving my Bible in my bunk and found a massive old-growth nursing stump that leaned far out over the water of the inlet. It was a cedar, but moss and

huckleberries covered it thickly. It rose maybe fifteen feet off the ground before a huge old limb spread out toward the water. This too was covered in moss and good to sit on. I'd lean back against the trunk, nestle in, and look westward – out over the inlet and the shallows. It seemed to me that I gazed out toward the end of the world, at some crease where life ended and the afterlife began. Some seam toward which all teeming life and I myself tended. That's what West came to mean.

After one devotional time, I told a friend that I'd stopped reading and started just sitting. As we washed dishes, he nodded.

“That's called *lectio natura*. You know *lectio divina*, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It's like meditating on Scripture, right? Like slow reading?”

“Yep, my professor calls *lectio divina* ‘creative reading.’” He scrubbed a plate and handed it to me, “but she calls *lectio natura* ‘divine reading.’ If *lectio divina* is reading the book of God, then *lectio natura* is reading the book of nature.” Josh was headed back to his final year of divinity school after the summer.

I dried a water jug and put it on the shelf upside down to finish dripping.

“But I'm not *trying* to read anything,” I said. “I'm just sitting.”

He wiped his forehead on his shirtsleeve and looked at me. “It does sound like meditation. But we're always reading. Reading and measuring. That's just human. Besides, reading nature isn't like reading a book.”

“Hmm,” I said.

“Yeah.” He rinsed tomato sauce off a spoon. “Nature is Creation, right?”

I agreed.

“And Creation is the mark of God’s hands. So *lectio natura* is like reading the hands of God. It’s reading God as Godself.”

The next day, I went back to my stump. It had become a *place*. Steinbeck says everyone needs a place to be alone, to think. A place with water and trees. I looked toward the west and tried vaguely to read something from the water, dubious about Josh’s words. The water ripples made it look like the mountains were walking. I tried to read something in that. As expected, nothing intelligible arose, so I changed positions from sitting up to lying facedown on the branch, with my arms and legs draped on either side, looking mildly down at the water.

A shadow crossed over the surface. *It must be a cloud*, I thought. Then another one passed. It was too dark to be a cloud. I saw a third shadow flit across. Then I realized the shadows were in the water, not above it. The water wasn’t deep – maybe three feet, and it was clear enough to see the bottom. The shadows appeared again, one smaller and two bigger ones. The small one splashed.

“That a fish?” I muttered.

It was big for a fish – maybe two feet long – and it darted back and forth in the shallows. One of the larger shadows chased directly behind it, and I saw a flipper flash. The large shadow was a seal. Two seals chasing one salmon. They harried it narrowly, whirling back and forth along the shoreline, flitting in and out of my sight incredibly fast, but always staying in the shallows. The salmon slashed the water loudly a few times but the seals never did. They continued for several minutes – chasing and evading, fast as light, small as terror. I watched them herd the salmon up into the

scalloped bank and it splashed again. Everything was very quiet. It was hard to see them from above, dark-backed as they were, but I saw the salmon break the surface one final time, struggling frantically. Then a blossom in the water, a blossom of red. I winced.

A nose broke the surface deliberately, and I heard the seal clear its nostrils. Only its eyes and nose were above the water. Then it lowered again and I watched it rip the salmon in two. Another blossom. The hunt lasted so long and the death happened immediately. The seals each took their portion and faded instantly into the deep without a ripple.

I returned the next day, hoping for meaning from death. Nothing. I returned every day during devotional time, looking at the water, looking at the sky, and seeing nothing. I wondered if this was what *lectio natura* was supposed to reveal: a vast nothingness, the Great Empty. Maybe God arose *ex nihilo* to create the world and vanished like the seals, without a ripple. Maybe God was too vast to be read, like looking at Nothingness itself. Maybe God was more comprehensible as a void, that which is inherently incomprehensible. I came back to my seat every day.

One day, when I got there, I saw something else in the water. A white moth had fallen into the shallows, just where I'd seen the salmon. It beat one wing frantically, without rest. Apparently the other was sodden. There was no way it would live, but its vivacity was unreal. The moth beat circular ripples into the water that spread out for hundreds of feet. The water was still that day, and I saw the ripples move out and out and out to the edge of the sound. I couldn't tear my eyes away. It was like watching a

fire, like watching a candle burn. I watched it living there, dying there, until the bell rang, ending devotion. At the end of that hour, I left my seat shuddering and the moth still beat.

I told Josh about it, but I waited till the next day while we built a trail.

“I was going to tell you yesterday, but I couldn’t. I was still thinking about it.”

“Hmmm,” he listened.

“And I saw a salmon the other day getting hunted by seals.” I swung my machete at a chokecherry. “These animals seem so important – it’s this idea I have, that I’m exploring. But they’re just fish. A fish and a bug. I don’t know why they’re on my mind so much.”

He kept raking. “Maybe it’s just life. They’re living, you’re living. You’re both *moving* – you’re running with life. That matters.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But does that make them important?”

“I guess so,” he said, prying a rock. “At least for you. Movement is important, bodies are important.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They are. Like all day yesterday when we were splitting wood, all I could see was the moth stuttering in the middle of those rings. Like a target or something. Like death means something in the world or in my mind, but I can’t read it. It made me think of God too, like God is unreadable. I don’t know. I have this weird feeling about it.”

He stopped raking and looked at me. “That day was a god.”

“What?”

He just smiled.

“That day was a god.”

There were other days like that at Beyond Malibu. I started reading my Bible again during devotion. I think I did it because it made some sort of sense. It was intelligible, easy, but it was not imperative or instant, the way the moth and salmon were. I had no feeling when I read, the way I had when I saw the salmon and moth. Now when I look back, that’s all I remember. I just remember the moth and the salmon and the seals. I remember the way the sun rose above the peaks. The way it set over the water. Kirsten’s cello. The dock. Tides ebbing and flowing. Leaves changing and falling into the water. The unintelligible in all its meaning.

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Michael picked me up in Egmont, BC, after my summer at Beyond Malibu ended. He drove me back home, and I remember on the ferry back as we made peanut butter sandwiches, he put down the jar, put down my pocketknife, looked me straight in the eye and said,

“You’ve changed.”

“Mmm...” I said around a mouthful of sandwich.

He folded his hands on the table. “Do you think,” he asked, “that you found what you were looking for?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know. It was a pilgrimage I guess – going North. I thought I’d feel closer to God. That’s why I went... That’s the point, right?” I put my

sandwich down. “That’s the punch line of Ecclesiastes. There’s just suffering then death. Praise God.”

He looked out the ferry window. “You like Ecclesiastes too much. ‘The Teacher searched to find just the right words’ and he said ‘here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments.’”

“*You* like Ecclesiastes too much,” I said, folding up my knife. “That’s *verbatim*, isn’t it? I

can’t get over the first sentence of the book:

‘Meaningless, meaningless... everything is meaningless.’ And then later, ‘death is the destiny of everyone.’ But we can’t control it. The salmon and the moth – I told you about them, right? That death was so arbitrary, it could’ve been a different fish that died. It could have been me.”

“Yeah,” he said, leaning forward. “It reminds me of that horse from when we were kids, er, *younger* at least. I guess we’re still kids.”

“Yeah... I don’t think I’ve found it man – what I’m looking for.”

“Well,” he said. “You don’t feel closer to God then?”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t think God is the right word, but I definitely *feel*. I feel a lot closer to *something*. I don’t know, maybe I just feel *closer*.”

He looked at me and leaned back. “Huh. Sounds like the place spoke more than God – like the salmon’s death and the mountains and water were louder.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s true, that’s really true. I know less than before I went but I feel better about it.” I laughed and tossed my knife back on the table. It clattered and spun. “And I know that death – and the land – *mean* a lot.”

After Michael dropped me off at home, I spent one night there before leaving for college. I remember he stayed for dinner and my dad grilled hamburgers on the back deck. Beyond Malibu can't afford meat, or any other forms of protein for that matter, except chickpeas. The only flesh I'd had all summer was salmon we poached one day from the inlet. I remember eating three hamburgers at home and being full for two days.

After dinner and after I'd packed for college, I went to bed late. But the bedroom that I'd slept in my entire life did not feel the same, nor did it feel right. Maybe I really had changed. Maybe I just wasn't used to being inside. The light of a full moon shone in through the blinds, in my eyes, and beckoned me. I took blankets outside and lay down on the earth, and the cat came up and lay next to my head like always, and I watched the moon watching me. I was asleep in an instant.

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I stayed at college for the next nine months, and when I came back to the Skagit Valley the following May, I hadn't seen it, except for that one night, in an entire year. And before, it was a place I had hardly left.

The day after I came back home, I began selling berries for Hayton Farms – the same place I'd worked as a child – and I started leading Bible studies again with Bethany Covenant. Farm dust still crept in under my fingernails. Scripture still worked into my mind. I started that summer working sixty hours a week, but by the end I was

only working twenty. The Bible studies fell apart and my Bible grew dusty on the shelf. Change started slowly at first, but then it moved faster, and finally it flooded.

The change that summer started when I met Sam Wellander on the first day of work in the Hayton's barn. Later I would see ecstasy like a spirit light up his eyes. I would watch the way he swam through life without any words of explanation. He followed no religion but he burst with wild spirituality.

The first time we met up outside of work was late one day on the North Fork of the Skagit River. We went to the delta where the river branches then splinters and drops at last into Skagit Bay. Marshland follows the river where it flows sweet, but where the sweetwater turns to salt the grass turns to sand. Everything changes. A riprap dike delineates road from marshland, but a person, or a group of persons, may clamber onto the dike to stand on the cusp of liminality itself. Here, the marsh follows the river's flow for perhaps a mile. Then it stops at the bay, and the bay is huge. When the tide floods, seawater covers all the sand and the grasses stop precisely where waves lap the shore. Here the river flows clear and pure as distilled spirits until it reaches the seawater and then both mix into brine.

But when the tide ebbs, seawater disappears and the sand flats rise up and stretch across the bay to Whidbey Island. When the river hits these sands it stays clear and quick and sweet so that within the heart of Skagit Bay, surrounded by charted ocean on all sides, you may stoop to the earth and dip your cupped into one of the braided streams that run through the alluvium, and if you taste of the cup it will be

fresh and pure. This is the magic of the Skagit Bay. There is nothing static about this place.

A wooded rock outcrop squats on the fringe of the delta. It stands just at the threshold of the sea so that when the tide is high, waters lap one half of it and marsh grasses grace the other side. When the tide is low, a main body of the Skagit River comes in from the north and coils deep and swift around the west side of this rock. It is called Delta Rock. The river runs feral to Delta Rock and it runs feral out to sea.

Sam and I met up to go camping at Delta Rock. We went in the last week of June, when the days are longest and most golden, and I met him at the trailhead on the dry side of the dike. He pulled up in an old blue Honda Civic and someone else came with him. Sam introduced me to Alec Scheibe.

Alec was a year older than Sam and had also grown up in the Skagit Valley. Alec walked with huge strides and had a deep chuckle that rolled and rolled like thunder. His eyes were different colors, one green and one blue, and when he laughed they both crinkled shut. Once, he had gone to Whitman College for a year before dropping out and coming home. He told me it was for spiritual reasons, because he was uncertain, exploring.

They poured out of the car and into the sun, and the long shadows of the sun, all shuffle and leap and guffawing laugh and back slaps.

“Got a backpack?” Sam asked, zipping up his own.

“Yeah. You have a flashlight?” I cinched my pack straps down.

“Totally.” He pulled out a tiny guitar from the backseat of the car. “I’m bringing this too. And here, take this.” He tossed me something silver that flashed in the sun.

I caught it. “Harmonica?” He nodded.

“I have another!” Alec said, and waved a huge harmonica in the air. “Is there water out there?”

“Just the river and the sea,” Sam smiled. “Bring your water bottles.” He made sure his car was unlocked, then slung the keys inside and shouldered his pack.

“Ready to walk?”

We clambered up one side of the dike. Alec stopped on the top and looked around with his hands resting on the straps of his pack.

The Cascade Mountains to the east were caked thickly in snow and the sun turned them orange and pink as we watched. The Puget Sound to the west flashed the falling sun back up to the sky.

When we dropped down the dike onto flatland, Sam began to strum his guitar.

The notes floated shimmery and sharp on the breeze. Sam played along with the beat of the wind. Soon, Alec whipped out his harmonica and began to blow. As we walked along the turf, I suddenly realized that they played along with the beat of our footsteps. I walked in time behind them, caught completely off guard. My mouth fell open. I watched them play and their movement was something to behold. The music they played was the blending of minds and the minds that once were separate became one thing and that thing was greater than either in itself, and it soared in music.

They were in flow.

Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that, in their timelessness, music and poetry lead into flow; he claims that they arose in human history as the first measures of time. Before the tempo came into being, all was varied, non-linear, and incoherent. But the advent of music provided some cohesion to the world, not because it extracted or abstracted anything from the human or surroundings, but because it *integrates* the human with the world; music “arise[s] out of, or echo[es] the flow itself.” When the human meshes with surroundings, the meshing turns into an overflow. While visual arts express our lives, then, music, poetry, and maybe dance fundamentally *are* our lives. And they mark the space between birth and death with a time signature. With a ticking tempo.

When we got to Delta Rock, we walked up its side to a small patch of grass that grew sparsely on the soil, facing west. The sun was still up and it turned everything buttery and yellow. The music kept coming out of their mouths in hums and blows when we stopped. Sam and Alec dropped their instruments and packs in unison and then Sam faced west and closed his eyes and stretched his arms high above his head. He took in a deep breath.

The tide was out today, so the bay was all sand. Fractals of the river snaked and coursed out through the flats. Sam and Alec looked at the thick riverbranch that swept in from the north, and it flowed by Delta Rock swift and deep.

Sam turned to Alec and gave him a look that said,

*Well. What do you think?*

Alec raised his eyebrows.

Sam started laughing.

Then Alec stretched and I could almost hear him say it.

*I don't think.*

*How do you feel?*

*I feel good. I feel really really good.*

They both started laughing. Then Sam tore his shirt off.

The two were naked in the blink of an eye, and they clambered down to the outcropping that swarmed above the river and jumped without any hesitation into the water.

The river swallowed them. It gulped. Stillness.

Twenty feet downstream two heads erupted and whooped and whooped as the river carried them out. The arcs of their stroking arms threw shards of water against the sun. By this time, I was undressed and hustling down to the river. I stood on the edge of the outcrop and looked at it.

The river was clean and dark. Fear burst into me. Safety flashed through my mind. Then I thought of responsibility.

How would I go to work? How would I lead the Bible study?

I took a step forward with my feet. I took a step back with my mind. Images wheeled by in my head: the sanctuary at church, berry fields, the chicken coop, my Bible on the shelf, the moth in the water, the horse carcass. Tina. Life itself.

I began trembling. I took a deep breath. And crouched. Paused.

I jumped.

I remember the way the sunlight flashed. Then the river swallowed me.

It was like jumping into a vat of ice. I felt the shock of it in my chest and the current slammed me on the bottom and tore me downstream. I think I yelled with the cold but everything was rushing with silence. Bits of wood and stone tumbled by, also headed out to sea. I pushed off the bottom and exploded up to the howling surface, up to the air yelling and whooping. The river was so frigid it hurt my chest. It hurt deliciously.

Joining that water was like leaving behind a world of dust and words and joining another one made of water and light and embodied feeling. Fears and responsibilities dissolved. It was a dangerous and wild world.

Now I was in the flow.

The river dropped me on a shoal covered knee-deep in water, and I knelt against the setting sun, spitting. The taste of that water was the taste of the entire land. There was grass in it and good farm soil and cedar scent and granite specks and the very flavor of the Cascade Mountains shone in the taste. All of it was pure and fresh and sweeter than the finest sugar. The taste of that water was like the taste of electricity and it spread through my whole body.

I turned and saw Alec and Sam like spirits under the same spell. They stood on the shoal diving in and out of the main channel as it flooded by. The sun set behind them. They dove with their hands at their sides so they looked like seals, and Alec's laugh sounded like a seal barking. The sun glowed on their skin as they dove, and the arcs of their dives turned them into wild things gunning westward for home. They

popped out of the water laughing every time and they did not fight the river as it carried them west out to sea.

After a time, Alec stopped and stood, knee-deep in the bay. He watched the horizon and it seemed to me as he eyed the sun and as the sun eyed him back that he was listening; somehow he was hearing something. He knelt in the water and breathed. He was between the sunset and me, and I saw him silhouetted and hunched and it looked in that moment like he prayed to the river. Behind him, the rim of the horizon crackled like the edge of a smoldering paper. Then he raised his head. He looked at the water. He gathered a double handful of it, tenderly, and bent to it. In silhouette, I saw his lips touch the water. He slurped. He swallowed.

Then he played to the river. He began singing, and he gathered another double handful of water, but this one he threw upward. He looked up and the drops fell like music notes onto his wondering face. He gathered another handful, and another, and he threw them like a child, still kneeling, still laughing. The chunks of water morphed and blobbed upward into the air and at their apex they fractured and scintillated down to join the skin of the water beneath them. Alec looked at them wide-eyed as they flew. He peered the way a jeweler peers at the finest gems. He was not enthralled. He was enamored. His play was like wild worship.

That summer flooded into an exchange for me. It started at Beyond Malibu: an exchange of words, explanation, scripture and dust for the joys of not-knowing, of emptiness, movement – water and light. Dust unbound itself from Scripture as the

Scripture came free from my mind, and the two were meaningful only in themselves and in my visceral experience of them. It was an exchange of brain for body, of calculation for meditation, and experience instead of thought as the site of meaning. Heidegger claims this is the best way of living, calling it “Authentic-Being-Towards-Death,” because real living only happens from within an awareness of death.

Authenticity acknowledges human finitude in every action. Authenticity is the way we *are* when death is in sight. Emerson is excellent on this point. Alec and Sam showed me how to live a full life, arising out of spontaneity, creativity, and adherence to the clear doctrines of the self.

Over the course of that summer, I spent less and less time working and less and less time in the home where I’d grown up. But every week, Sam and Alec and I played in water. The Skagit Valley is effulgent with water, so we spent time in the river, time in lakes, and a lot of time on islands in Skagit Bay. Every day was a festival, every meal was a feast. We would trade leftover berries for vegetables and bread at Farmer’s Markets and cook over fires by the water. Alec didn’t eat meat so neither did we, just good fruit and vegetables and bread, washed down with plenty of market wine. I asked him about his vegetarianism once, and he quoted Pythagoras to me:

I, for my part, marvel at what sort of feeling, mind, or reason that man was possessed who was the first to pollute his mouth with gore, and to allow his lips to touch the flesh of the murdered beings; who spread his table with the mangled forms of dead bodies, and claimed as his daily food what were but now beings endowed with movement, with perception, and with voice.

In that moment, it sounded like truth, like I had found something present and actual: “Don’t eat meat.” “Don’t kill living beings.” At the end of that summer, I had no words to describe the transformation that had taken hold of me, but it was one of

mind, ethics, spirit, and music. I had no words to think of but I had direct familiarity with it. And I had a body to describe it. Pure embodiment. Pure spontaneity. This too was true.

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I remember them kneeling in the shallows of the Skagit River, watching the sunset. They kneel in a place that should hold brine but instead holds only sweetwater and the particles of mountain ranges. They are flinging water iridescent to the sky. They laugh upward. Last light pours easy on their faces while they play like worship. They play like wild. They play in the water.

## Part IV

*"Whoever told people that 'Mind' means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles, and grasses."*

-Dōgen

I go back to school after that summer with Alec and Sam. I go back to school where everyone seems stuck in a circuit. As if we were mechanisms in a factory. I become sardonic and grim. Walking by other people, I smirk at them and stop seeing their faces when I even try to; but the best I can do is just look at them.

In his purist distillation on ethics, Emmanuel Levinas bases treatment of other people on the face of the *other*. The face, to Levinas, is more than just a human face. It is a philosophical concept that announces the kinship of self and other by its very expression, which calls to attention the vulnerable space between the two. He claims that viewing the face of another human being literally announces his or her “precariousness” to the viewer. I like to think of it as “vulnerability.” This vulnerability harkens back to Cain and Abel and at one end of its logical extent lies peace. At the other lies death. So truly seeing the face of the other acknowledges death. In its extremeness, then, the face acts as an imperative to promote peace – not violence – with the other.

Levinas speaks particularly to the human face (though he proposes that the face doesn't necessarily have to be a *face*; it can be a hand, or the yoke of the back as well), but I believe this view is limited. I believe the face does not only pertain to humans. Dogs have face, cats have face, horses and birds have face. Even serpents have face.

And the face demands ethical treatment for them too, but after seeing Tina, I know that the human face speaks louder, and maybe demands *more*. But the imperative for peaceful action still lies with the powerful, and in that case, it usually resides with the human. That means *you* are responsible for peace. But first you have to be able to see the face. So ethics comes down to the ability to see. It's in your eyes.

At school, I see students walking the same paths every day, at the same time, to learn the same things in grey classrooms with fluorescent lights. Their movement seems scripted. The topics I study seem so difficult to untie, but we untie them and explain them as if the world itself can be broken down into numbers and words, and I hate the meaninglessness of their abstraction. As if the world were made up of only ideations and not *things*. My brain fills with numbers and words. My mind is empty. I stop eating meat, emulating Alec, trying to find some sort of meaning here. Desperate, I call Sam, who's in his last year at another college.

"I've been feeling the same way," he says. "Like my head is this huge balloon and my body is just shriveling up. I'm spaced out all the time, just thinking about academics."

"Yeah yeah," I say. "That's why I go for runs – that continual movement does something. My brain is like a strainer and there's all these bits of knowledge that get poured into it. But they clog up any water from filtering through, and running clears it, puts me back in the body."

"Yeah!" he says. "And the brain-water is the important stuff, the meaning! The mindful stuff." He laughs. "School is so brainful and I just want to be mindful."

He tells me that he's started taking dance lessons and that the movement is spontaneous and good. Except he draws out the word "good" so it's *goood*, like he's really savoring the taste of it.

"And Alec is doing MMA right now." He says that MMA is a kind of fighting. "It's really fun, we spar whenever we see each other."

I tell him about the German philosophy I'm studying, about the way it can twist your mind. I tell him how I walk around campus hardly seeing anything I pass, or anyone I talk to. I tell him I feel old and bitter. He says that most philosophers probably just need to meditate or get in a good fight.

"I'll have to try that myself," I say.

"You really should, man, at least the meditation. All I want to do is read, run, sleep, meditate, and fight."

We make plans to see each other next time we see each other, which are no sort of plans at all, and I doubt that anything will come of them. But several months later, Sam, Alec, and I end up at Tahoma One-Drop Zen, a small monastery on Whidbey Island. We go on a whim – it's close to home, Alec has been before and I'm just learning to meditate. One of my friends at school does and she's taught me how. She sits for thirty minutes every morning on a special meditation cushion. I don't have a cushion, so I use my Bible instead. I'm dubious to actually go to a monastery. *What would Pastor Kent say if he knew? Should I tell my parents?* But Sam and Alec are going, so I will too.

That week at Tahoma sees the three of us grow calm and sensitive to the world, and then it sees us grow into each other. We spend almost all our time together, yet we hardly speak – we play games and music and walk in the woods, but somehow any meaning among us arises from bodies and expresses itself in bodies and the looks on our faces and the space in our eyes. I find no truth in sitting – it’s a pure exploration, an exploration of mind. It’s a peaceful time. Yet the meditation itself is not peaceful. Zazen is wildly, viscerally uncomfortable. At the monastery, it involves sitting for two hours at a time, cross-legged on very small cushions, watching shadows lengthen and candles burn on the altar. We try to bring first breath, then body, then mind into unison, in the hopes of falling into a state of pure mind. Alec calls it “worldmind,” because the boundaries between thought and world are supposed to fall away. And all this because of breath.

And they do sometimes. When they do, it’s flow. It’s kind of like jumping into the river. But it’s not without much pain, in mind and body.

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That summer, I return to the monastery on my own. Alec is in Portland, Sam is in Spain, and my family has been fighting. Mom’s health has gone south, and she’s headed into the hospital for a long operation. Worse than her physical health, though, is her mental health. It’s bad enough, it’s loud enough, and it confuses me enough that I move out of the house and into the chicken-house, trying to clear my head.

Rainer Maria Rilke talks about “klarsein” in some of his poems, which translates loosely to “being-clear,” or “clarity of being.” I’ve decided that’s a good word for last summer – it seems to envelop the quality of light that hallows it in my memory. I’ve also decided that’s the farthest thing from now, at a time when clarity is what I’m looking for most.

The week before I go to the monastery, I come home from another day of selling berries, let Henry in the house, and walk to my sister in the kitchen. As I set down my bag, she asks if I’m going to church with her tomorrow.

“Hmmm,” I say pretending to think. “I don’t think so, I’m working the farmer’s market.”

“But it’s Mom’s last day before the operation,” she says. “We were all going to go together.” Her voice is fragile.

“Ah shoot,” I say, “I forgot to ask for it off work.” I’m lying through my teeth. Julia probably knows that, but neither of us is willing to say it. I change the subject.

“Whatcha cooking?”

“Spaghetti. Want any?”

“Yeah!”

“The sauce has meat in it.”

“Oh.” She shoots me a meaningful look. “Well, I guess I’ll have a bit.”

After we eat I head to the door.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“Out to the barn.”

“Oh... okay.” She hasn’t gotten used to my sleeping outside. “Well, have a good night.”

“Goodnight.”

I step out of the house, under the elm and in its shadow. The sun has set over our field, and the fringe of cedar trees at the outskirts of it tooth at smoldering corn-tassel clouds. I walk barefoot to the barn, thinking.

I’m wondering about the church. I was home for Easter last, and they had just finished a remodel. The sanctuary was totally different than I was used to: huge projectors had been installed in the ceiling, and they projected nature imagery behind the band – snowflakes in winter, trees and light in fall. I watched dust swirl in the projector beams, utterly revolted.

Church started right on time now and ended at 12:00 P.M. sharp and everything moved in strict accordance with the program. I guess it always has but I just hadn’t noticed it before. The pastor was new that year too – three of the five staff had moved on and been replaced and I didn’t recognize the faces of the new leadership. The pastor preached on lambs that Easter, calling Jesus a lamb, talking about the death of a lamb and its blood and the miraculous possibility of rebirth. The words were good but I wasn’t sure of the meaning behind them. And the pastor’s face was plastic and set. He had a smooth smile the whole time, and spread his arms wide at the beginning of the sermon, where they remained throughout.

But of course, the remarkable thing about Jesus was the way he died. He died willingly and specifically *for* others. Heidegger opens Division Two of *Being and Time* with a lengthy discussion on the ontology of death. As the end of life, he says, death is

that toward which humans constantly tend, made evident not only by our actual finitude, but also by our capacity to extend into the future. Because of the human's constant temporal extension, Heidegger states that we always *are* our individual death. In other words, death makes each individual unique and constantly informs our individual lives. No one can take one's dying away from the other. No one can die the death of another.

Because each life is always informed individually by death, the time remaining until death is all that we have to spend. Because of our finitude – and our awareness of an indeterminate end at any time – we are left with the *possibility* of death at any time. Living with this possibility in view then, is unfiltered possibility. It's pure possibility. Heidegger puts so much stock in possibility that he undermines most of the Western philosophical tradition, and especially Aristotle, by saying that “possibility is greater than actuality” actuality is death. Possibility is life in the face of death. It's *new* life in the face of the end.

The remarkable thing about Jesus is that he *did* take on the death of others. He died *so that* others may have new life. I used to believe this meant an afterlife, but now I'm not so sure. Now I think this new life might mean the possibility for the human to change life in a meaningful way. If that's the case, then Tina is the closest person to Jesus I have ever met.

I get to the back of the barn, take the first step up to my door, and stop. We've just mowed the field beyond and the short grass calls. I step down the stairs, hop the fence, and walk out into the open.

The church feels empty but going to Tahoma feels strangely empty too. I will tell Julia that I'm going tomorrow and I know what she will say,

“Sam, why do you go there? Isn't one religion good enough for you?”

I won't have a reply for her. Something about it feels necessary though, like there's no other option, as if the path that I'm walking doesn't involve me *walking* so much as it *taking* me.

“I don't know,” I'll tell her. “It feels right though. Like I'm looking for something, and Tahoma answers that curiosity, at least a little bit.”

“Hmf,” she'll say. “Curiosity killed the cat. Don't let it kill you.” And we will look at Henry, plump on his pillow, and laugh. And I will pack my bag anyway.

I feel uneasy about Julia's disapproval, and figure my parents feel the same the same as her. I don't have a good explanation for them: going to the monastery feels clarifying. But the thing about meditation is that it's not clarifying. It just feels empty and painful, and sometimes scary. Sitting seems kind of meaningless, but so does going to church. *At least church has people, and conversation, I think. Tahoma is just silence. No truth, just emptiness. It's listening.* But church is too much noise, any meaning seems like it gets covered up with words and rhythm, dogma and tradition. And those projectors. *Good Lord.*

But Zen master Dōgen says that the accoutrements of Zen do not matter if a person just sits. Sitting is the essence of practice, and practice is the essence of Zen. My experience of sitting is one of emptiness and meaninglessness, and that is

structurally acknowledged in Zen. So there aren't any answers with Zen, but at least it's honest about the lack of them. I wonder if there are answers with Christianity.

I shuffle my feet in the grass. It's starting to get chilly but I feel warm. Hot head and cold feet – the word “embodied” comes to mind. Feeling the grass, then, I remember reading about embodiment in J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*. How we share embodiment with animals; how, even though animals are different – perhaps less conscious than we are – they are as fully embodied as we are. Perhaps they're even more embodied. Coetzee claims, through his character, Elizabeth Costello, that the animal's “whole being is in the living flesh.... Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life.” This *holding* alone, as the sympathetic meeting of our human and animal bodies, proves the value of animals. Perhaps in their ability to evoke such sympathy in us, it also indicates their sentience. Coetzee's book convinced me to stop eating meat. In the book, Elizabeth does the same. She does it out of compassion and heart, not ethics. I like that because it doesn't take learning. No philosophy or environmental studies degree is necessary to sympathize with and respect animal lives. This sympathy is the possibility of changing life. Both the animals and yours. It also offers an excuse to occasionally eat meat. If ethics grounds in the heart, then animal ethics *can* be superseded by human ethics, when the heart speaks. So when my sister offers meat out of her care and goodness, when her face calls to me louder than the face of the beef, I will eat of it. I tell myself it's because of compassion, because I couldn't refuse her eyes in that moment. And to be honest, I feel good with the bolognaise in me. Embodied.

A train whistles in the distance. I look up at the crescent moon. The sky is still cloudy but everything around the moon is limpid in its light, as if it and the sky were reflected in one clear dewdrop.

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Several weeks later, I pack my bag and leave for the monastery. Mom is recovering from her surgery and depression is palpable. I feel guilty about leaving, but I can't be around her without feeling depressed too, and something else pulls me away. The search. I drive across Fir Island, across Fidalgo Island, and onto Whidbey Island. The day glistens with light and water.

The monastery greets me differently than in winter – where everything was grey and rain before, there now seem to be ten thousand shades of green: nettle, fern, fir, arbutus, maple. Sun spots shift down through the trees and blanket the brittle grass.

During zazen, I get achingly bored and wait for the walking meditation break that comes in the middle of each sit session. But despite myself, as the week rolls on I slow down and start to pay attention. I think about *flow*, and Alec's words: *We're getting sensitive man! It's worldmind*. Each night I have wild dreams, vivid and colorful. One night they're all in black and white.

Towards the end of the week, I start going for walks around the grounds after evening sit. I'm stretching my legs in the gloaming around the bunkhouse – named Tending Clouds – thinking very slow thoughts when a silent explosion on the fringe of

the forest catches my eye. I wheel to see a huge owl burst up from the grass and flap over my head, cross the clearing to the west, and light in a fir tree next to Dairyō's office. I stand watching it with my mouth open thinking *oh no, oh no, I've killed Dairyō. What would Hilary say? Tina...* I wonder about my mother. *I hope she's okay. Her surgery...* I don't have a way to contact her, unless I ask to use Dairyō's office phone, but I'm sure that a zen monk wouldn't approve of such attachment.

I stand watching it for a long time as the light fades earnestly, a humped shape darkening the limb thirty feet up. Eventually, it gets too dark to see and I wander back to my room, hoping that this time the owl has no meaning.

The following night, after meditation I walk around the field again, trying not to think, trying to just breathe. Just live. Datse, a monk in training, told me at lunch about the way she came to Tahoma. She's from the country of Georgia, and was kicked out of the home nation due to unrest. She said she was stateless. She speaks quietly and softly always, but the story made me hearken gutturally. I feel sick at the thought. *Stateless. No home. What sort of value does human life have? She said she was totally replaceable. Stateless.* I finish my circle around the grounds and head back toward Tending Clouds, yawning. Walking by the clothesline, something catches my eye and I stop dead.

Not twenty feet away, the owl sits on the clothesline crossbars, watching me.

It stands a little less than two feet high, stocky, all black and white. It has a pale face and dusky breast, and streaks of jet whip down its front. A collar of flaky white and black ruffles the neck, and its face arches dish-like, a yellow beak hooked in the middle. But its eyes are what stop me. They are the darkest color I have ever seen. No,

they are darker than color. The eyes of the owl are the color of emptiness. It looks squarely at me and I fall in like a vortex.

In Dōgen's discrete view of time, there are only moments, and the moments do not have a time signature. Moments can't be measured or counted because each moment is its own size, with its own qualities, unique yet identical. So if moments can be measured, it's only by experience, and maybe not even then. The moment of the owl's eyes is immeasurable.

After a moment, I raise a foot, very carefully.

I am pulled toward the owl.

Looking back, I cannot say if I myself stepped, or if the owl pulled, or if it was the space between us that moved me, but I know the movement had to do with its face and its eyes. In moments that cannot be measured, I come close to the owl.

I see it breathing. I hear its heartbeat.

Suddenly it jerks its head down sideways, casting its gaze into the grass. The smallest of feathers rise on the side of its head. It's listening. I follow its gaze. I think I hear something rustling. We stay like this. Eventually the owl whips its head and looks at me with a gaze, a gaze like a razor. That look haunts me.

The owl does not move and we stand eye to eye until full darkness falls and the pools of the eye expand and envelop the world.

At breakfast, I tell Dairyō and Datse about the owl again. They are also excited.

"I'm sure it's a Spotted Owl," Dairyō says. "We have a pair on the island, and I'm sure that's what it is. This is the place I'd come if I were an owl. Here, I got some

photos the other day.” He leaves the kitchen and returns shortly with a bird guide and his DSLR.

But when we compare the photos he took and the images in my memory with the drawings in the book, they do not match. But they do match with the Barred Owl.

“Oh, but Barred Owls are edging out the Spotted Owl!” he says. “They’re a real threat!”

“Why’s that?” Datse asks. She seems a little uninterested, but always polite.

“They’re very aggressive!” Dairyō says “And they’re common. Spotted Owls are endemic to the West Coast, they don’t get much farther north than here. But Barred Owls grow like weeds. They’re from the East Coast but they’re moving west recently and kicking the Spotted ones out of their territory. It’s kind of like all the East Coast people moving to Washington and kicking us West Coasters out.” He laughs. “There’s a big debate over whether we should kill Barreds so that Spotteds can remain.”

“What do you think?” I ask Dairyō. “Do you think we should kill East Coasters? Barred Owls?”

Each morning, our breakfast chant claims our endeavor for “infinite compassion,” to “liberate all sentient beings.” In most sects of Buddhism, animals are considered sentient. In some, insects are too. In still others, the earth itself is considered a sentient being. Taken to its radical extreme then, like in Jainism, everything becomes invaluable and the potential for harmless human action does not exist. This is the logical end of valuing animals other than ourselves. It becomes crippling. While I fundamentally don’t live a life like this (and I don’t think Datse or

Dairyō could or would either), I support the logic behind it. Sympathy for the other is radical. If it takes the human to radical extremes, that is both fair and good.

Datse stands up and starts clearing the table. We join her.

“Well, I’m conflicted,” Dairyō says. “On the one hand, every animal is important and Spotted Owls are only special because humans cast value on them and say they’re special. On the other hand, they are very brutal creatures and I don’t like brutality.”

Datse looks up suddenly. “Value is not for us to decide.” I’ve never heard her speak so firmly. “Ask the bird if her life is valuable. Ask the owl.”

During *samu*, or work practice, I’m tasked with mowing the monastery grounds. A man from Langley swings by to help with the work – he will stay for evening meditation. Tomorrow morning, I will hear him chant in flawless musical harmony with Datse. Dairyō puts him on chainsaw duty in the forest. He sharpens the blades delicately before he starts, chainsmoking the whole time.

Datse mixes gas and oil for two wheedwackers, then she and Dairyō set about trimming the edge of the field. They swing the big arms with practice, like they’ve been doing this their whole lives. They both wear head rags and canvas *samu-e*, a kind of work kimono, as they dance around the grass. I put on earmuffs and fire up the push mower. We are a riot of noise. I don’t think a monastery has ever been so brassy.

It’s heavy work in the sun – the grass is knee-high and the old hummocky ground makes pushing even more difficult. It tears into rotten stumps, chewing them up and spitting them out. Alec was right about the sensitivity – this noise is deafening, and

it's actually a little painful to mow up the stumps. It seems like senseless violence. I'm surprised at my reticence.

I'm mowing big swathes by Tending Clouds, near the owl's clothesline, when I see something small and grey streak across the shorn lane. I keep going but then another streaks by. I slow down and look closer. There, in the freshly mown aisle, half a dozen mice run from the noise of the mower. They flee madly, crazed with noise and dust. One races blindly toward Standing Cloud, smashes against the concrete foundation, and flashes along the wall. It vanishes into a crack in the concrete. I push the mower on. Soon, more mice dart into the lane. They look frantic. *They're homeless.* More of them scurry toward the building, then race for their lives back and forth against the concrete. The urgency of their movement makes me afraid, and I imagine a machine proportional to the mower, were I mouse-sized.

But I shake it off, the knowledge and of and proximity to the animals, and push on. I'm mowing right next to the clothesline now. No one's mowed around the posts in awhile, so the grass is especially long. I get to the grassy spot the owl and I looked at. The mower chews over it, and as I step into the short grass behind the machine, I feel something crunch and squish beneath my feet. Looking down, I glimpse a nest of horrors.

A knot of mice clusters below me, their skin peeled and tattered, showing muscle, bone, skull, brains. They seethe madly, two dozen of them, flurried in gore and tearing at the grass. *Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.* One thrashes away from the rest, squirming wildly, cut clean and laterally, its brains leaking over one ear, its legs a mess of muscle. It slows, then shudders. Another drags itself forward on front paws only, its

rear half connected by vague tendon and thready skin, back legs kicking and tail whipping. A third scurries in circles, its hind sliced between tail and flank, half of its face chopped off. The nose lies in the middle of the circle, whiskers whirling. I can't distinguish the rest – they're a mass of twitching fighting gore and they buck and hurl as if on fire, spurting thin streams of blood onto my shoes and into the fresh mown grass. *Ohmygodohmygod...*

All that moment in one instant

My thoughts rip into a roar and the scream of the mower drowns even that. I yank backwards on the handle, backwards over the nest, slam the machine foreword then back again –back and forth, back and forth, grinding the blades into dirt and grass.

I stop the mower over the nest and stand on top of the mowing platform, it shaking me insanely, stomping it down and gritting teeth and watching small chunks of flesh and tiny bones cough out the side of the blades. Then I jump off. I push the mower quickly forward and step over the spot without looking, continuing on.

Then I think *no*.

*No*.

I let go the handle and let the engine die. It's suddenly very quiet. The weed-whackers and chainsaw drone in the distance. I take three steps back to the spot, hearing the grass crumple moistly under my feet. I count two deep breaths. Then I kneel down close. The spot is angry red and wet but there's no movement. I feel my shoulders drop and let my head hang down. One bead of water drips off my nose. It lands next to a chunk of a tail, naked and small and dripping. I loosen my glove, finger by finger and pull it off. Then I reach down, pick up the piece, and move it over toward

Tending Clouds. There's loose soil around the foundation, so I scoop a shallow hole, tuck the tail in, and tamp more soil on top of it.

I finish mowing the field. It takes three more hours. It could have taken an hour to finish the field but I go slowly, trying to let them get away. But it doesn't work. At first I count the mice. I run over seven more individually and another nest before I decide to stop counting, even though I can't stop caring. Each time I run one over, I back the mower up three times, then stand on the deck, grinding the blades down into the wet grass. I'm not sure if its pity or compassion or resignation or pure macabre, but I cannot watch the mice thresh like that, so I end them completely.

I wish it could make me sick. I wish I could say I cared that deeply about animals.

I finish the field and push the mower to the shed, then walk to the work closet, hang up my *samu-e*, and step over to Tending Clouds to take a shower. The water feels like grace. At evening sit, I don't even try to count my breaths because I cannot help thinking of the mice. I feel sad and very calm. After the final bell, I stand up, bow to the cushion, the building, the painted circle on the wall that represents the wheel of life and death, and walk outside. I do not walk around the field this night. I pass the clothesline without looking at it.

That night my dreams seem familiar, but in the morning I don't remember them.

*August 30, 2016, 4 A.M.*

We sit for two hours. Afterwards, we walk to the kitchen, eat formal breakfast, and chant to liberate all sentient beings. When we finish, Dairyō turns away from the painted circle in the kitchen. “Another day,” he says.

*But it's not.* The moment of looking at the mice still convicts me. As if seeing their frenzy was looking at Levinas’ “other” in the full embodiment of pain. And thus I cannot turn away from today’s imperative – I cannot knowingly eat an animal that has been raised in a situation that both Heidegger and J.M. Coetzee liken to the death camps in the Holocaust. Because liberating all sentient beings, at its logical extreme, means animals too.

The phone rings and Dairyō goes to answer it.

“Sam, it’s for you,” he says.

I take the receiver.

“Hi Sammy,” my dad says. He sounds tired. He tells me that Mom’s surgery didn’t work, that she’s going back for another.

“She’s not doing well,” he says. “The depression’s really bad and she’s been crying all day. She keeps talking about Tina. She keeps saying ‘I miss Tina, I miss Tina.’”

“Oh my God,” I whisper. *It’s been five years.*

“Nonny came over and held her.”

I tell him I’ll be home soon. He hangs up and I put my hands on my knees and bend over. This time I do feel sick.

I load my bags into the car, then walk toward the kitchen to say goodbye. On the porch of the kitchen, Dairyō shakes my hand. Datse isn't around.

"Here," he says. "I printed off something for you." He hands me a piece of paper.

"Take care," he says, then walks off toward the zendo.

I flip the piece of paper over. On the other side is a black and white photograph of the owl. It's sitting in the fir tree that grows next to Dairyō's office. As soon as I see its eyes, my dream rushes back to me, my dream from last night.

It's the same one I had five years ago, but this time I'm outside looking in. I'm in the cottonwood tree, peering into the house as the last cords of sunset slant through the leaves and light up the dust motes. From my perch, I watch myself come into the house and walk up to the candlelit table where I take a seat across from Michael and next to Tina. And everything is so warm and beautiful and perfect: I reach out and touch her side. She smiles, eyes all light again, and overflowing with joy, joy like you wouldn't believe. I spoon sauce onto my pasta and we laugh as the bread and wine go around the table. And then I stop. From the tree, I watch myself pause, a glass of water in one hand, the other fallen on my lap. I remember that I haven't seen Tina in five years, that she's been gone, and it's so right and good to have her back, and now is the time to fill her in.

So that urgency wells up inside me and I'm about to tell her that Michael's finishing college, David's already out, and he's started praying again, he quoted the Psalms to me yesterday and I thought we'd both forgotten, but Tina we *haven't* and the words felt good and light again and Michael is laughing and the way we miss you is an

ache in the belly, but we're trying hard to move on without you because you're like a mother to me and to everyone, so we still need you Tina, we need you bad.

And in the dream I'm outside still but I watch myself set the water glass down so I can use my hands to talk, the way she does, and as I lift my hand from the facet of the glass, I hear Mom ask,

“Why now?”

And I know what will happen next so I try to tear my fingers from the smooth glass and try to leap out of my seat and throw myself at Tina, to bury myself in her arms and hold her down fast to this world. And outside I leap off the tree branch, all vector yet so slow – back then leg then feet and finally hand, God if I can just get my fingers off just now *please* I need to keep her here, *please*. And in that moment, my fingers just hardly tearing from cold glass inside and the smooth bark outside, something slants down from above, plunges through the last cord of sunlight, and dashes madly into the window.

There's a gasp at the table.

Then I'm on the cold breathing earth and I lower my head into my hands.

## *Epilogue*

*“No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose they are like himself. Now, sitting in the Place out of the wind, seeing under the guardian lights the tide creep in black from the dark sky, I wonder if all men have a Place or need a Place or want one and have none.”*

*-John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent**

At home, I sit on the stone bench under the cedar tree, looking at the initials carved into the cottonwood. Young, I would come here when Mom had an episode. I haven't sat here for a while.

I had passed their car on the road. It was the final stretch before our house and I'd sped all the way from the monastery, but they were rushing to the hospital. They passed at speed. Dad raised one hand. I saw my sister's hand and Nonny's too, one resting on each of my mother's shoulders. And Mom's face through the glass: her eyes wide, mouth half-open, wet streaks down her cheeks. Soon, I will leave, but first I will sit on the bench and search.

Sitting, the mice come to mind, and Mom's face. It reminds of that look Tina gave me in the doorway of her house five years ago, the last time I saw her alive. Staring straight ahead, I cannot see the other tree, only Tina's eyes, my mother's eyes, and the eyes of the owl. Faces like wells of essence, piercing and demanding and soft. The eyes of the bird and the eyes of Tina are the same.

And this is all I know. There is no meaning in the earth and no cipher of language with which to write it. There is only watery death, and in truth it is an end. And because of death, life – for owls and mice and mostly Mom, and once, Tina. Once. In her eyes glimmers infinite emptiness out of which light pours endlessly, and all that we signify here – every thing of taking and giving and killing and living, all fur, flesh and feather... All things to which we hearken and cleave and finally, finally, this hurled world itself – endlessly out of her eyes.

“I miss Tina,” she said.

*Jesus Christ.*

## Notes

### *Prologue*

**pg 6) *Existence seems to me* ...** The tone of *Gilead* has been the greatest inspiration in my writing. Before each writing session, I read a passage from *Gilead*, and also J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*.

### *Part I*

**pg 9) *I have been thinking*...** *Gilead*, again.

**pg 9) *Pouring into Skagit Bay*...** I take the general form of this paragraph from Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, which starts with a similar outline of the Salinas Valley, California. Steinbeck has been a great inspiration in my authorial voice – particularly through *East of Eden* and *The Long Valley*. “Pouring” refers to Heidegger's lecture “The Thing.” More on that later.

**pg 10) *Everything is named*...** Tom Robbins lives in La Conner, not far from my high school. In *Another Roadside Attraction*, he writes “October lies on the Skagit like a wet rag on a salad.” This sentence has helped me write about the Skagit Valley with humor as well as romance (247).

**10) *In reading about*...** This whole paragraph refers to Karson et al's

*Wiyáxayxt/Wiyáakaáawn: As days go by: our history, our land, and our people--the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla*. This is an excellent book written by members of, and published by, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, in Pendleton, OR. It concerns both the history and presence of the greater Walla Wall area from an indigenous perspective.

**pg 11) It is water that matters most...** in 476 BC, Pindar wrote “water is best,” and then gold. Since Professor Shea mentioned this to our *Nature Writing Tradition in Greek and Roman Thought* class in spring 2014, it has stuck with me and become extremely important to this thesis.

**pg 11) It’s a land that is...** This refers firstly to Snyder’s chapter in *The Practice of the Wild* entitled “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,” and secondly to Master Dōgen’s chapter entitled “Sansuigyo” (lit. “The Sutra of Mountains and Waters”) within his 75-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō* (lit. "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye"), to which Snyder’s chapter refers. Both texts grant animism and sentiency to landscapes. More on these texts soon.

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**pg 12) When young, I...** *The Practice of the Wild* (8). Snyder’s etymology hashes out the OED nicely.

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**pg 13) John 3:16...** “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” All translations, unless otherwise noted in text or notes, come from the New International Version of the Bible, though my favorite version and most-used background source is the New Oxford Annotated Bible.

**pg 13) John 3:16 (KJV)...** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

**pg 14) I never wondered...** The idea of words, especially Biblical words, composing or underlying the actual world comes from the final lines of Normal MacLean's *A River Runs Through It*.

**pg 14) In positive psychology...** (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 90)

**pg 15) In a peculiar sense...** This idea of insight, or "in-seeing," as it's translated, comes from Rilke. It's an empathy technique used to write his "thing-poems," (Corbett).

**pg 15) If you take a jug...** Heidegger uses the jug as his chief example in his Bremen lecture, *The Thing* (pg. 4 especially). Both he and Rilke set the stage for more advanced thought concerning "Thing-Power;" see Jane Bennett here.

**pg 15) So dust grew into scripture...** Genesis 2:7 – "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." I am particularly interested in the way dust, breath, and being are introduced this way into the Western mind.

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**pg 17) I would also read ...** Paul Shepard wrote *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, which has some useful things to say about animals and atavism, though his works should be taken with a grain (or many grains) of salt. Some of his citations are loose and outdated (see Lévi Strauss' *Savage-Mind*);, moreover, he essentializes, racializes, and especially romanticizes cultures that are not his own. Despite this, he has interesting and valuable theories regarding the intersectionality of human psychology and sociology within his "primitive" anthropology (62, 59).

**pg 17) James Welch supports...** see *Fools Crow*, by James Welch. The main character in this novel not only realizes clarity of being, but also enters into what appears to be a dream landscape. This landscape may be considered “pure,” though “sterile” is more suitable (328). The river crossing into that world comes by way of southward directionality at 318, and though totemic animal references are myriad in the novel, I’m thinking particularly of a little dog at 323. Welch was also a member of the Blackfeet tribe. His novel is problematic and interesting in many ways regarding race, gender, and temporality, but it is also an excellent representation of indigenous life among the Pikuni people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gary Snyder also has useful things to say about dreams, especially in *The Practice of the Wild*, “Good, Wild, Sacred.”

**pg 18) It moved closer and...** The word “world-space,” comes from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and his references – especially in the first elegy – to *weltraum*, translated by Edward Snow mostly as “worldspace,” and once as “cosmic space.” To my reading, this “world-space” is a radical vacuity, particularly in regards to any trace of humanness. In my writing, that human absence is represented by the window separation between the owl and me.

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**pg 19) It is not a necessarily...** See “Higher Laws” in Thoreau’s *Walden*.

**pg 19) True, it may lead to...** Pg. 212 in *Walden*.

**pg 20) While Thoreau recognizes...** Pg 21 in *Walden*.

**pg 20) For Gary Snyder...** Here, I’m referencing his Pulitzer prize-winning *Turtle Island* collection, especially “The Dead on the Side of the Road” and “Plain Talk,” as well as *The Practice of the Wild*: “The Etiquette of Freedom,” (16).

**pg 21) When a person fully meshes...** This quote comes from “The Etiquette of Freedom.”

**pg 21) Proper reverence for death...** Heidegger elucidates “Authentic Being-towards-death” in section 53 of *Being and Time*. Exercising this way of being leads a person to “freedom toward death,” a remarkable state of fully authentic being. This section is the most important for my project, but understanding this section (in Division II) requires a fair understanding of Division I of *Being and Time*. Many thanks to Professor Ireland here, and her Spring 2017 class, “*Heidegger’s Being and Time*.”

**pg 21) Heidegger speaks only to...** Whereas the human death can be an authentic or inauthentic phenomenon for Heidegger, the animal’s death is simply an end of life, or “perishing,” in his words. He claims that thinking about animal death “threaten[s] to bring confusion to the interpretation of this phenomenon,” (*Being and Time* 285). This flies in the face of his Bremen essay *Gestell*, where he compares modern agriculture, and thus slaughterhouses, to the Holocaust “death-camps.” Rilke’s “Eighth Elegy” in *The Duino Elegies*, is also excellent and similar to Heidegger’s conception of animal death, though Rilke casts more value on animals than Heidegger.

## *Part II*

**pg 24) Robert Pogue Harrison, in...** See *Dominion of the Dead*.

**pg 25) Heidegger calls these institutions...** I’m drawing directly on Harrison’s *Dominion of the Dead* (Harrison 81-82).

**pg 25) Standing there was...** Being-toward-death for Heidegger is fundamentally “Being towards a possibility,” since death is “certain,” “indefinite,” and “not to be outstripped” (*Being and Time* 303). Because of its nature, experiencing possibility in

any sense ties to an interruptive sense of *angst* that in turn ties to authentic-being-towards-death via possibility (305). This sense of possibility makes the human distinctly mortal and also distinctly precarious, since it can be annihilated (305). While I'm referring consciously to this sense of possibility in the linked text, I'm also referring to liminality itself.

**pg 26) And when you say...** As a Calvinist with a strong background in Emerson, Marilynne Robinson imbues *Gilead* with strong doses of Congregationalism and Quakerism, both of which hold that the individual "inner light" holds radical truth in it, more truth perhaps than even the Bible. (Robinson 44).

**pg 26) He says there's...** John Ames, in *Gilead* writes, "an impressive sun shines on us all," (Robinson 91). While Robinson never fully clarifies the point, Emerson does, by representing God-as-universal-existence with *light*, that illuminates humans (Richardson 162).

**pg 26) And the dust of this...** Adam's curse in Genesis 3:17-19

...“Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.  
<sup>18</sup>It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.  
<sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground,  
since from it you were taken;  
for dust you are  
and to dust you will return.”

**pg 26) Ralph Waldo Emerson is...** I stole this sentence directly from *Gilead*, where Ames mentions a candle surrounded by the light of the moon (Robinson 119). In the novel, this provides a subtle, though expansive, entrance into the text as it links to Robinson's symbolism of light. Again, this signifies the human surrounded by the light

of God-as-universal-existence. This idea comes straight from Emerson, who took it from the Quakers – specifically Mary Rotch and George Fox, who probably took it from Baruch Spinoza (Richardson 160, 162).

**pg 26) It is evidence that...** (Richardson 160, 162).

**pg 27) In other words, the inner light...** (Richardson 272).

**pg 27) Heidegger calls this human...** (*Being and Time* 32).

**pg 27) Actually, the human for Heidegger...** (*Being and Time* 78).

**pg 27) The structure of this illumination...** (*Being and Time* 171).

**pg 27) Martin Heidegger has a slightly...** These two paragraphs come from *Being and Time*.

**pg 27) Heidegger calls this human...** (*Being and Time* 36, 22, 171).

**pg 27) Actually, the human for...** (*Being and Time* 78).

**pg 27) The structure of this...**(*Being and Time* 171).

**pg 27) In turn, disclosure...** (*Being and Time* 91, 32).

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**pg 29) She would use that word...** A direct idea from John Ames (Robinson 28). In this instance Robinson uses “just” when speaking of water pouring, which hearkens to Heidegger’s gloss of the jug as that which fundamentally pours (Heidegger, “The Thing”). So, in this passage I’m referring to existence in its essential self.

**pg 30) That’s how we would...** The idea of a multi-generational family vaguely refers to Shepard’s theory of neoteny, as a sort of anthropological and familial development

over the course of human time in his chapter “How We Used to Live,” within *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*.

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**pg 31) Behind the fence...** The phrase “windows that let light into the sanctuary,” refers to the passive construction of the world when God says “*Let there be light*,” in Genesis 1:3 (italics mine). It also shows that, despite the human art and artifice of a church building, a world of light can still enter, signifying the presence of God.

**pg 32) 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26...**

...The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup>and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>25</sup>In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

see note on Luke 22 for explanation.

**pg 33) Acts 2...** I’m referring particularly to the advent of speaking in tongues (Acts 2:1-4), and especially the emphasis on communal living (Acts 2:44-46)

“<sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.”

**pg 33) Luke 22....**

<sup>20</sup>In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>21</sup>But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.

The key difference between Luke 22 and Corinthians 11 is that the latter frames the passage at the outset “the night he was betrayed,” whereas the former frames it as “when the hour came.” Luke still ends the passage with betrayal, and in Jesus’ own words (versus the words of the writer, as in Corinthians). Luke’s ending however, makes the betrayal seem like an addendum. Here, I show that Vida Nueva was not interested in betrayal, whereas Bethany Covenant was more so, or at least not as aware of the tone of opening the Eucharist with such strong words.

**pg 34) “She is not here”**... María died of breast cancer, despite chemo-therapy. The cadence of this passage came from Terry Tempest Williams’ *Refuge*, especially her mother’s line regarding an impending mastectomy: “Diane, it is one of the most spiritual experiences you will ever encounter,” (Williams 282).

The sentence construction also refers to the words of the angel to Mary outside Jesus’ tomb, in Matthew 28:6, “He is not here...” This is the reason Tina looks upwards instead of downward.

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**pg 39) I imagine the sound**... I imagine it through Bill DeBuys’ wonderful chapter, “Geranium,” within his book *The Walk*. In that chapter, the author vividly shoots his horse, Geranium, between the eyes. Incidentally, exposure to that chapter via Professor Snow in Professor Carson’s Fall 2014 Environmental Studies 120 class, is the reason I declared a major in Environmental Humanities.

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**pg 42) Matthew 6:22**... “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.”

**pg 43) She reads Psalm 103...** A 22-verse Psalm of David. Tina loved Scripture, especially the Psalms. Of these, she read Psalm 103 most. And her son is named David, which, I believe, was a very conscious reference to Jesus' predecessor. She was hopeful for healing, to the end.

**pg 43) 2 Kings: 2...** "Elijah's Ascent Into Heaven." Elijah remains the only person to ascend without dying first, and it happens by way of a whirlwind and chariot and horses of fire.

**pg 48) The ambulance is already here...** A reference to 2 Kings 2, Elijah's ascension by chariot.

**pg 48) But I am certain that...** The support for this paragraph comes directly from Emmanuel Levinas' essay, "Useless Suffering," which promotes an ethics based on Jewish (and thus Christian) values, rather than more familiar ethics (at least in the Whitman Philosophy department), based on German and thus Greek values, via Plato and Aristotle. Levinas bases his ethics on the *other*. This is a theme throughout my thesis, but especially in the Prologue and Epilogue. The face of the other (In Levinas' essay "Peace and Proximity") acts as an ethical imperative. Levinas furthers this idea in "Useless Suffering," by proposing "useless," and "senseless" suffering are utterly *absurd*. That is, suffering and pain are fundamentally and phenomenologically *for nothing*. In this way, they have no meaning. Yet when one sees another in this state of pain, it is possible to almost enter into their experience via the face, and offer compassion and support. This is ethics. Tina's suffering was indeed senseless – as well as brutal in its magnitude. Scott's being-beside-her is ethics itself. Furthermore, Levinas' mentions the "half-open" mouth as an indicator of pain and thus an entrance

into ethics. In that way, though Tina could not talk in her last days, her mouth *spoke* to those around her.

### *Part III*

**pg 53) They offer a rising...** My background sources on dreams include not only Shepard's *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*: "How the Mind once Lived," Welch's novel, *Fools Crow*, and David Abram's Watson Fellowship-driven work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. In *Fool's Crow*: Chapter 29; Abrams' *The Spell of the Sensuous*: "In the Landscape of Language;" "Dreamtime;" Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* (especially "The Place, the Region, the Commons). Abrams discusses the way landscapes reify dreams. *Fools Crow* includes many dreams over the course of its narration, which strengthens the dream sequences within my thesis by way of other people also giving credence to dreams. Shepard and Snyder come in mostly thematically.

**pg 56) Steinbeck says everyone...** "Now, sitting in the place out of the wind, seeing under the guardian lights the tide creep in black from the dark sky, I wonder if all men have a place or need a place or want one and have none," (*The Winter of Our Discontent*, Chapter 3). I love Steinbeck's parataxis throughout his corpus.

**pg 56) I tried to read something...** The reference is again to chapter 14 of Master Dōgen's *Shobogenzo* "The Sutra of Mountains and Waters," or *Sansuigyo*. One of my favorite lines is also one that Snyder quotes in *Practice of the Wild*: "Being in the mountains means the blossoming of the world," (142).

**pg 55) I dried a water...** A reference to Heidegger's lecture "The Thing," wherein a jug calls into being the entire world, including its fourfold-in-singlefold constituents: divinities, mortals, earth, and sky. A similar realization was occurring in me during

devotion time via a sort of land-and-water-meditation. The entrance, as in Heidegger, is by way of water, though seawater rather than jug-water in this case.

**pg 58) I watched it living...** The image comes first from Virginia Woolf's short essay, *The Death of the Moth*, and secondly from Annie Dillard's slim book, *Holy The Firm*. In both texts, the authors watch a moth die, though in two very different ways. Annie Dillard's book is one of my favorites as it takes place near my home and it helped me recover from a concussion. Her sentences here are astounding.

**pg 58) That day was a god...** An obvious steal from *Holy the Firm*, the first line of which reads: "Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time."

**pg 60) He looked out...** Michael's line – and the thread of our conversation – is a shameless reference to U2's soul-searching song, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." It's the first track on the 1987 *Joshua Tree* album.

**pg 60) The Teacher searched...** Ecclesiastes 12: 9-14.

#### The Conclusion of the Matter

<sup>9</sup>Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. <sup>10</sup>The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

<sup>11</sup>The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>12</sup>Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

<sup>13</sup>Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the duty of all mankind.

<sup>14</sup>For God will bring every deed into judgment,  
including every hidden thing,  
whether it is good or evil.

Ecclesiastes, more than any other Biblical book, bridges the gap between Christianity and Buddhism. It's exhortation to meaninglessness resurfaces thematically during my field-walk, after my conversation with my sister, and before going to Tahoma.

**pg 60) I can't get over...** Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

Everything Is Meaningless

<sup>1</sup>The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

<sup>2</sup>“Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

Ecclesiastes 7:2

It is better to go to a house of mourning

than to go to a house of feasting,

for death is the destiny of everyone;

the living should take this to heart.

**pg 60) Sounds like the place...** This refers to meaning latent in landscapes, in

Dōgen's *Sansuigyo*, Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild*, “Good, Wild, Sacred,” and

Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*: “In the Language of Landscape:” “Dreamtime”

(esp. 167). The idea in the first text is that mountains and waters *are* meaning. DeBuys

directly echoes this sentiment in the final pages of “Geranium:” “The mountains rise

like meaning to the sky,” which I reference as I leave Beyond Malibu. In the second

and third, the idea is that storytelling, language, and landscape are isomorphic, such

that travelling through a certain land necessitates a particular story be told, and

travelling at different speeds dictates the tempo of the telling.

**pg 65) Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that...** *Dominion of the Dead* (3).

**pg 65) When the human meshes ...** I'm thinking of Matthew 12:34. “<sup>34</sup>You brood of

vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the

heart is full of.” I'm less interested in the first sentence than the second, which includes

a notoriously hard concept to translate from Greek to English. The concept in Greek is

ὑπερεκχύνω, or “huperekchunnó,” which is often translated as “overflow,” or

“outpour,” though here it is simply “full.” The word signifies much more – a sort of

*superfluidity* or *superabundance*, as in a cornucopia. The concept runs throughout the Bible, especially the New Testament, notably at Luke 7:36-50, when the “sinful” woman anoints Jesus’ feet and washes them with her hair. It is this same concept that Heidegger applies in “The Thing.” He claims that in-seeing or *insight* into Things leads to superfluidity, which in turn connects to the fourfold world. The connection between superfluidity occurs as the libation and sacrifice that is the outpour of the jug. This outpour is the very essence, or jughood of the jug. Thanks to Tom Davis for insight into these texts

**69) Emerson is excellent...** Authenticity and full living are, of course, major themes in “Self Reliance.” This is also a theme throughout Heidegger’s work, especially in a lecture entitled “Gelassenheit” (published within *Discourse on Thinking*) that discusses the topic as its title. “Gelassenheit” denotes a human’s pervasive posture of calm composure inherent in the structure of “letting.” While Alec and Sam don’t seem calm, they do *let* things happen to them – some come from within, some come within. Emerson would be proud. In both Heidegger, and the lives of my friends, embodiment shines through.

**pg 69) I, for my part...** The original quote is by Pythagoras, though I quote Alec, who quotes Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, wherein Costello quotes Plutarch, who quotes Pythagoras (38).

#### *Part IV*

**pg 71) I go back to school...** Heidegger discusses the *circuit* in his lecture “*Gestell*,” or “Positionality,” as a sort of mechanistic arrangement into which the human, as an

object, is conscripted. The structure of the food industry and concentration camps – as death factories – mirror the structure of this arrangement (28).

**pg 71) In his purest distillation...** See “Peace and Proximity” by Emmanuel Levinas.

**pg 72) Their movement seems...** Another reference to “*Gestell*.” Heidegger claims that humans within the modern, mechanized world are *requisitioned* and *conscripted* into circuits of interaction that limit their being and ultimately annihilate their humanity (29). One example of this is the phenomena of school periods marked by bells that cause students to move among classrooms, as if rehearsed.

**pg 72) As if the world...** Rainier Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* explore the topic of a human world of abstraction vs. Things. In large part, the *Elegies* lament the loss of the world of Things and thus a sense of the *actual*. In a letter to his Polish contemporary, Witold von Hulewicz, Rilke writes “our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, ‘invisibly,’ in us,” (Rilke 70). I interpret this through the exhortation of Things in the “Ninth Elegy:” “What if we’re here just for saying: *house, / bridge, fountain, gate, jug...*”

**pg 75) Rainer Maria Rilke talks...** Here, I refer to “The Seventh Elegy” within *The Duino Elegies*. The line in German goes: “*nicht nur, nach spätem Gewitter, das atmende Klarsein...*” or, as Edward Snow translates it: “not only, after late thunderstorms, the *pulsing clarity...*” which understates the word (emphasis mine). Literally the word Klarsein is “clear-being,” which I endorse here with Heidegger’s fully ontological sense of “being.”

**pg 76) The remarkable thing about Jesus...** See the Nicene Creed, for example. Also, Isaiah 61:1-2, as Jesus quotes it in Luke 4: 18-21

“<sup>18</sup>...He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor... <sup>21</sup>He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’”

Thanks to Professor Davis, who, in his class *The Grammar of Forgiveness*, which I took under the title *Phenomenology of Religious Experience* in Fall 2016 provides a phenomenological reading of this, and other key passages, in Luke.

**pg 79) Hot head and ...** In “The Lives of Animals,” Elizabeth Costello argues for an animal ethics based on sympathy for animals, which in turn is based on their utter and obvious embodiment: “Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life... their whole being is in living flesh,” (65).

**pg 80) The sky is still cloudy...** Professor Takemoto’s *Nature and Haiku in Japan* class, exposed me to Dōgen’s image through his book, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, of which my favorite line is “The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in one dewdrop on the grass,” (71).

**pg 82) Looking back, I...** See “Peace and Proximity,” Emmanuel Levinas.

**pg 82) I hear its heartbeat...** Another reference to U2. The song is “Mothers of the Disappeared” – final track on the Joshua Tree album – which concerns the Argentinian mothers whose children “disappeared” during military regime in the late 1900s.

**pg 82) That look haunts...** Another reference to Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” referring to the face, and I claim the eyes, as ethics and sympathy.

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