Casting Withers and Other Stories

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The College at Brockport
Casting Withers and Other Stories

by

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Abstract

This collection of four personal essays centers on the author’s childhood on a dairy farm. Issues of discussion include family dynamics that emerge as a result of a move from a stable, middle-class, manicured lawn environment to an unstable, dilapidated, environment. Also discussed are issues of environment and man’s relationship with his environment, including but not exclusive to: environment as property, environment as commodity, environment as social obligation, environment as history/past, environment as teacher. As a collection, it is the author’s intent to piece together the entire picture of both time and landscape. The author intends to formulate this entire picture through the use of each individual text as a piece of the setting, in reference to both time and landscape, without an obvious amount of overlap between the texts. Through this focus on creating a complete narrative through separately indulged pieces of time and landscape, the author aims to emphasize the important of environment’s role as a character in the personal narrative.
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Introduction

...the mind is trying to find its place within the land,
to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement.

- Barry Lopez

My thesis began as a protest. In my summer of 2004 American Romantics Literature course, I read Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. To say I read *Walden* understates my relationship with the essay. I read the essay as a man walking in a desert might drink water. I ravaged it. Thoreau’s language was how I imagined my father would speak if he had finished high school and gone onto college. I wrote my notes for class that week as if preparing for a sermon. I praised Thoreau for seeking a more authentic self by going into the woods. I praised him for admitting how man pretends to know the predictability of the land. I praised him for declaring how easily man makes a permanent path in the woods, marking it forever. However, when I arrived to class that Monday, my professor pulled a chair into the circle, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and asked, “Did you know that Thoreau walked from Walden Pond to his mother’s house in the village everyday for cookies?” I couldn’t speak. I didn’t speak. I felt so betrayed. I had framed Thoreau in a self-sufficient, simplistic light, a man who admired the sights of nature because he knew they might look different tomorrow, a man who admired the sounds of nature because he knew they might sound different tomorrow. In my mind, Thoreau spent his days educating himself in the practical ways he preached, relying on what he preferred: “the solitary dwelling” (Thoreau 68), but after learning of his daily skips to town for cookies, I no longer saw Thoreau as a Romantic.

As our class discussion continued that evening, wandering from Thoreau to Emerson, I decided that Thoreau was not the Romantic I mistook him for. He was like
any other man going west to settle the frontier and capture the wild, only his West was Walden Pond. The more I re-read what I had highlighted in the book, the more I realized he didn’t seek to live in harmony with nature. He moved to the woods and acted as a spectator, and sometimes dominator, of nature.

In an interview by Kathryn Wagner, Lee Gutkind, the “Godfather of Creative Nonfiction,” answers a question about the starting point in the writing process. He states, “a crisis occurs which causes a writer to revisit an aspect of his/her life and begin to think about it and subsequently recreate it.” This couldn’t ring more true in my reaction to Thoreau. Within a week of my Romantic’s class, I concentrated my anger of Thoreau's hypocrisy toward composing my own mini-Walden, telling the story of my father moving our family from middle class security to the world of farming. In the beginning, my intention was simple: write a nonfiction piece that shows a man living in deliberate harmony with nature. My father and the Upstate New York farm he moved us to, I figured, paralleled perfectly with Thoreau and Walden Pond. I wanted to create evidence on paper that man possesses the ability to coexist with nature.

Then, of course, simple intentions bred complicated ones. The handful of pages I wrote existed as a narrative in my mind, a story that presented my father not taking over the land, but acting as its teammate in the game of harvest. Even as I wrote the narrative, larger issues exploded from the lines. I cringed when, in reading Walden, found Thoreau criticizing farmers for reaping only from extrinsic rewards; like the harvest, and setting clocks in time with the railroads. I wanted to write against Thoreau’s thoughts on farmers, attesting that only the bourgeois find it necessary to give an account of their relationship with nature. I wanted to back Thoreau into a corner by writing a narrative on
Emerson's premise in "The Poet": "[farmers] express their affection in their choice of life and not in their choice of words". (293). My purpose strengthened and deepened and I didn't know how to react. All of a sudden, I wanted to be the martyr for the dying farmer's voice. With my martyrdom in tow, fear took over, and I stopped writing about the farm. I don't regret packing the rough draft of my narrative away. I pushed my new intentions aside, and forced myself to return to the library's bookshelf.

I reasoned that my intentions grew numerous and heavy because I was angry. I wanted to bellow back at an essay that, although written by the esteemed poet-naturalist, offended me. Remembering back to an undergraduate class in rhetoric, I dug out a piece I wrote against a woman that was suing me for cutting her off in a busy Albany intersection. My professor handed back my first draft with one comment scribbled on the first page. "You are too angry right now to realize your purpose. Stop. Refocus." I rewrote that essay three times; the less anger I allowed into the paper, the stronger my argument became. I lost the case, but ended up with a strong paper that my lawyer used in the deposition. My Rhetoric professor's comments applied to my narrative; I was too angry. I needed to refocus, so I went to the library and looked for works that compared to my narrative; but didn't make me angry. I found more books than I imagined possible, which led me deeper into my intent: What will my story add to this topic? What do I have to say that is different?

These questions brought me back to my intent, which I broke into categories in hopes to unearth a certain combination of personal characteristics or past experiences. The categories grouped my underlying messages and stories I wanted to tell into four focal points. First: the economics and daily life involved with making a living off the
land, including the relationship between the farmer and the land, the treatment of farm on
the larger environmental scene, the traditional and non-traditional methods of farming,
and bioregionalism. I first discovered the term bioregionalism in a Statement of Intent by
Tom Montag. In this statement, he reveals “There were twenty questions developed
years ago by Leonard Charles, Jim Dodge, Lynn Millard, and Victoria Stockley as
bioregionalism was emerging as a movement, questions that ask one to ‘trace the water
you drink from precipitation to source’ (#1) and to identify ‘what spring wildflower is
consistently among the first to bloom where you live’ (#20).” I find it necessary to
include this term because it scientifically labels what my family did in the name of
pleasure and tradition on the third Sunday of every March: we looked for pussy-willows,
the first Spring wildflower to bloom on Beecher Hill. The second focal point: The
characters and vernacular of northern small town life. Third: Growing up on a farm,
more specifically growing up as a girl on a farm. And fourth: Social Issues within small
town/farm life, including class and race. I thought somewhere in this list I could find a
combination unique to me, and then I could understand how my narratives fill in a gap in
the creative nonfiction genre.

I delved into non-fiction books that focused on life on a farm and/or in a small
town, turning first to Larry Brown’s book Billy Ray’s Farm: Essays from a Place Called
Tula, simply because I opened his book up to the page that started “It was four o’clock
when I found the black heifer with the white face…. When she stood up I saw the long tail
of the birth matter hanging down” (39). How could I put that book down? I was reading
my own story. After Brown, I found Verlyn Klinkenborg and Chris Bohjalian and Ted
Kooser. Barbara Kingsolver’s Small Wonder fell into my hands one day, which started a
female environmental writers, which somehow led me to the path of Southern women writers to their anthology, *Downhome*. Once on the path of fiction, I had to reread two books I found rubber-banded together in a corner of an empty Missouri apartment while in AmeriCorps: Michael Dorris' *Working Men* and William Kittredge's *We Are Not in This Together*.

I read and read more, and became more discouraged. With each book, I added to a list of events and people I remembered from the farm. This list reflected the personal in my stories. The list grew and the stories overlapped. I remembered hired hands I hadn't thought of in years. I remembered particulars of the land that had become vague in my mind. William Blake says, in *The Book of Urizen*, "[A writer] is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them." Looking at my list, I felt strong about my personal content, but when I applied my list back to the question of unique intent in my story, fear surfaced.

Just as much as my story is personal, my story is not different. Sure, not every farmer's daughter watched her father lie in a fetal position on the living room floor after his finger was chopped off in the silo blower; but, every grown farmer's daughter knows someone who knows someone who accidentally chopped a body part off. Not every farmer's daughter fell asleep in the back of a green Duetz tractor while her father planted the corn; but, every farmer's daughter knows how her father walks with his shoulders wider and head higher when he's planted the last seed and the weatherman is calling for light rain. Amidst my fear and frustration, I searched for the middle ground. My story had to exist, I told myself, somewhere between the personal and the not-personal.
Leila Philip, in a 2001 craft talk at Colgate University, said “if you truly believe your experience to be not unique to yourself but emblematic of [sic], or standing for the experience of others, then actually you will be writing toward empathy, not narcissism, pulling in life, rather than spiraling down to observe your own navel.” Philip’s quote redirected my focus in answering questions of intent. I looked at my list and asked myself: how can my personal experiences translate to readers that have never lived on a farm?

Generations ago, Emerson said, “the vast majority of the people of this country live by the land, and carry its quality in their manners and opinions” (Klinkenborg 78). This isn’t true anymore, not for the majority at least. But there is a minority that does live by the land, and their vernacular confirms this. These people don’t need rulers or rain catchers to measure the weather. In The Rural Life, Klinkenborg describes a new snow saying, “by nightfall the snow in the fields was fox-deep” (9). Any analogy or comparison these people make naturally connects to how they make a living. In his story “The Benchmark,” Michael Dorris’s character is a pond digger and carpenter. When referring to his children, the character describes himself as “the loose board in their floor” (4). The way we live creates our vernacular. If I maintained a consistent, realistic quality to the voices I use in my narrative, I can gain the trust of the reader who is unfamiliar with the language.

In each book, the author is writing in a voice that is part of me, and if it isn’t my voice, it is a voice I heard growing up. In that voice, what is personal to them becomes personal to me. I knew in making this connection, I was closer to realizing my narrative’s intent. In The Rural Life, Klinkenborg writes: “In America we’ve learned to
locate the meaning of rural life in the past, thereby dismissing it...To speak from a rural conscience...is to speak from a place of silence where no one expects to hear wisdom anymore” (22-23). I thought back to the books I read. They told stories like mine, in voices like mine, with characters and places like mine. As a whole, they speak of that fading rural conscience that Klinkenborg talks about. They also speak of it individually, but without the other books to make a chorus of rural points of view, they are not as strong.

I discovered my intent in this strength that comes from the range of points of view. The books, essays, and stories I read covered each point of view: the farmer, the farmer’s wife, and the farmer’s child, but I hadn’t found an essay that partnered the farmer’s point of view with his wife’s or his children’s, tackling each one as first person. This point of view plays out as my strongest technique. Not many creative nonfiction farm pieces exist that take on multiple first person points of view. I remained very conscious of the accuracy of the different voices. I wanted the mother in “Casting Withers” to read as consistently weary of her situation. I wanted the father to convey a range of emotion, from pride to fear. I constantly read the daughter’s parts of “Casting Withers” out loud, like a child, to see if each part matched the others. I wrote the very first draft in first person, from my point of view as a child, but I couldn’t finish the piece without incessantly calling my parents to verify details or events that I did or did not remember. It didn’t take me long to realize how subjective my memory was.

Without recognizing it as research, I began a long process of interviewing. I filled page after page of stories my parents told around the dinner table. Whenever I visited my grandparents, I left with scrap pieces of paper filled with my scribble. I even returned to
the focal point of my thesis, the farm my parents have since sold. When I revisited the farm for the first time, I took my sister with me, and asked her to talk out loud as she saw things that triggered memories. I wrote everything down as she said it in an attempt to see the farm from her point of view. The second time I visited the farm, I brought two out-of-state friends with me, and promised to pay their bar tab that night if they let me serve as their tour guide on one stipulation: they write down everything I said. I wanted to be aware of what I pointed out and, almost as importantly, what I didn’t point out at all. On my third visit, I asked my dad to accompany me. As I anticipated, he turned my offer down. Just weeks before, the current owners of the farm tore the corn crib and chicken coop down and sided the old red garage so it matched the house. I didn’t press my father any further; I knew he believed that my childhood farm only existed in our stories.

I haven’t gone through half of the interview notes and stories I wrote down. I haven’t succeeded at marrying all the details and specific descriptions I have with the stories. I also haven’t fully integrated my research on farming techniques now considered old-fashioned, like square baling, and other techniques my father used twenty years ago that farmers today are just discovering as ‘green,’ like strip cropping and irrigation tiles.

I succeeded in realizing the story I wanted to tell, but I’m still struggling with how to ensure my stories don’t read in-terms of the fading rural conscience. I want readers to see them as realistically present day. I accomplished the non-fiction aspect of exposing my read to people/situations that hadn’t been exposed to before. I didn’t succeed in
developing complicated characters. I don’t have dialogue; I have a great deal of dramatic monologue.

I am continuously working on this. In a recent revision, I changed section seven of “Casting Withers” to include more dialogue and scene. I also added section nine into the mix, for scene purposes. Also, I took out four sections that reeked of dramatic monologue. I added particular stories that begin to fill the lack of scene in my thesis. Other scene particulars stand out in my notes and they will become stories. I don’t know if these particular stories will become the backbone of the collection or not. I read the stories I’ve added and see how much more lively they read compared to “Casting Withers.”

However, “Casting Withers” is a large product that represents a long personal process that I am proud of. The process brought me closer to my intentions and forced me to do what I’ve always said I’d do: write down the stories of my childhood. And it was the process that brought me back to the farm, literally, where I felt barbed wire scratch my palm again and I walked the uneven ruts of an underworked field.

I catch glimpses of a product I will be proud of, but I don’t see the full view yet. My grandparents lived on top of the large hill in the back pastures of our farm. When my sister and I walked up the steep hill to their trailer, we walked with our heads down and our arms swinging; we refused to look up. We learned quickly that looking up only make the hill steeper and the walk harder. I practice that same walk now with my thesis. My final destination seems pretty hard to get to. I’ll get there though, with my head down and my arms swinging.
One: Father

It was December of '82 and the kind of winter that a man can’t help but remember. Snow fell almost every day and as I fell asleep, my wife whispered reminders of the feel of the pillow of summer grass under our feet and the smell of black soil just tilled in the garden behind the house. The snowflakes looked like soft petals as they fell on white sun-baked layers and on early weekend mornings I watched my two young daughters walk through the new snow as if it were fresh loaf of baked bread. Each step was noiseless as they stood on the crisp outer layer, but as their weight bore down, their boots crashed into the soft wet snow hidden beneath, getting stuck in its cushion.

But it wasn’t the weather that makes that winter stand out. It wasn’t the weekend mornings or the endless snowfall. It was one brief moment buried deep in a deer season morning. Tony, my youngest brother and I set out just before sunrise for a few hours of deer hunting, hoping to catch that 8-point buck he had seen wandering the hills that surrounded his farm.

We separated early on that morning. I started at Perrine Road making my way west, a little south, toward some wooded acreage where I thought the buck might be. I walked about a mile before hitting the dead-end dirt road that led to the top of a hill
covered in forest and abandoned corn fields where I imagined uncut stalks trampled and suffocated under the snow. I followed the road so I could find a spot to sit and watch for the buck. My heavy boots struggled and the snow felt thicker the higher I climbed. My breath quickened and my left hand struggled to keep my shotgun parallel to the ground. Once at the top, I stopped to catch my breath, and turned to see the valley below me, where an old farm sat. The fields were overgrown even in the snow and most likely unfertilized. Even from my distance, I saw that the buildings were in dire disrepair. There were holes in the roof of the house and the barn. I saw the haymow door swung open on its tracks, a large hole in the back wall shining white from the snow it framed. I looked at the fields surrounding the farm. Even in the snow, they looked like waves slowly rolling and lapping into one another. There was no clear fence line to be seen. Brush had taken over the tractor lanes coming away from the barn like bullies on a playground and even the ice frozen over the pond was mucky and brown. I remember thinking no person in their right mind would have the desire to salvage this land. In a few years this farm would be buried in overgrowth and fallen buildings. The fields would rut and the grass would brown without cows to graze or plows to turn the soil.

I stood on top of that hill, leaning on my shotgun. The snow has stopped falling and the silence in the air settled around me like seeds from a dandelion. In the distance I heard a deep creaking. Deeper than the sound the trees make adjusting to the cold in winter, the creak echoed in my ears. I looked down into the valley, but couldn’t see anything. I pulled my gun up, looking through the sight at the end of my barrel. I scanned the land around me as the creaking grew louder then quieter then louder again. I pulled the farm into my cross hairs and skimmed over the length of the house and barn.
As I heard the loud creak once more, my site crossed over the barn door swinging open. I held my gun there, keeping the door in my cross hairs and saw that it was opening and closing, the creaking calling to me from across the snowy fields. I realized that I wasn’t breathing and inhaled deeply, holding the cold, silent air in my lungs. I pulled my gun away from my shoulder, down to my side, while down in the valley the door creaked again. I exhaled, sending a fog into the rutted fields between me and the farm.
Two: Daughter

I am four and my new house is green and the paint is coming off like Sheba’s dog fur does. And we don’t have any glass in the windows. All I know is that I have to sleep on a mattress next to my big sister in what would be a fancy person’s living room, but since we’re not fancy people it’s our bedroom now. And I know that my Daddy isn’t the butcher anymore. And he won’t be away from before breakfast till after supper anymore. He’ll just be behind the house in the barn. That’s just one hop, two skips, and three jumps away: That’s what Mom says. Me and my big sister know it’s not really that because we counted and after the last jump we weren’t close to the barn at all; we weren’t even close enough to hear the calves calling for their morning bottle. But we were close enough to the roof that we like to throw rocks on. It’s the best roof in the whole barn because the rocks slide right back to you. Only the little rocks though, the big ones get stuck and they make too big of noise and Daddy comes out of the barn and says, “Girls! What did your momma and me say about those big rocks I hear you throwing?” And when he asks stuff like that my big sister and I know that you don’t really answer, but you just say “yes, Daddy” and he knows you know what he’s talking about. And then we stop throwing rocks and go play in the haymow where Shell and I can pretend we are monkeys in the jungles of Africa because my big sister learned about Africa in her school and she says there are so many animals in the jungle that if we wanted to be a different animal every day, summer would be over before we got a chance to be all the animals. That’s a lot. That’s more than we have here. We just got cows and chickens, and pigs, and one mean, ugly horse named Randy. And last week we found a fox in the grain bin. Daddy had to shoot it. All the neighbors were talking about it because one of the farmers
on the other side of the hill, past the blackberry bushes says that he had a calf eaten by a fox once. And then he told us that he found that fox and shot it faster than you can say horse shit, and all the other farmers leaning on the tractor tires laughed like shooting a fox is the funniest thing they heard all year. Saturday night is the best night of all.

Daddy lets Robert, our hired hand, do the milking and Mommy and Daddy take Shell and me in the big truck Daddy calls Elvis to Grandma and Grandpa’s house. Daddy likes to name things. He wants Mommy to call her car Priscilla, but Mommy says “over my dead body.” Saturday nights are fun because if it’s hot out Daddy lets Shell and me ride in the back of the big truck. We get to ride almost all the way to town, but then Daddy stops before we get there and makes us come up front between him and Mommy because he knows that Grandma would be so mad if she knew we were riding in the back, especially on the way to her house. We get there and Grandma always makes ham and potatoes together in one big square bowl and she gives me extra applesauce on my plate because she knows I love it the most. And then, if we’re good, Mommy will take us next door to Edna’s house and we can swim in her pool. We always bring Edna some blackberries we picked that day to say thank you to her. Saying thank you makes you a good person, my mommy says. And Shell and me swim and jump off the side to see who can splash Mommy the most. Then when it gets dark, we go home. Mommy wraps us in big towels and we give kisses to Grandma and Grandpa and say thank you and get back in the big truck and go home. This is my favorite part because I get to lay on Mommy’s lap and Shell lays her head on Daddy’s lap and Daddy smokes his pipe and it makes the whole truck smells like cherry’s cooking in the oven. And the windows are open a crack so I can hear the wind outside and I close my eyes and Mommy tells us stories about when
she was a little girl. The ride home always goes fast and when we get home, Mommy and Daddy think I am asleep but I’m really not. I pretend because if they knew I was awake they’d make me walk to the house, but I pretend because they carry me like a baby and are real quiet and tuck me in with the blanket right below my chin just the way I like it.
Three: Father

It's been six months and I don't know how we've gotten so much done. Each day, we sweat and labor and wonder how many moments we used to take for granted. In the first month, before we bought the herd of cows, we prepared the barn for inspection and cleared the fields. Because money was so tight and the fields, overgrown as they were, didn't give us good feeding hay, we pastured the cows. Building a solid fence was first on the list. Fence posts and barbed-wire filled the hours between early morning fried chicken eggs and late hamburgers. With that done, we took to finishing the fields. I wanted to plant corn before mid-July so we'd have a fair amount of feed for the winter. Before the cows came in, we had to repair and clean the old milkers, fix the barn cleaner, knock out some old mangers and pour concrete to smooth out the floor.

Each evening after the day's work is done, after my wife and I put the girls to bed, their eyes closed before we finish tucking them in, we lay a blanket on the floor of the screened-in porch and whisper until we fall asleep. More often than not, I feel like my wife isn't happy here. Sometimes, I think she is just putting on an excited face for me and all the years I dreamt about owning my own farm. I know she didn't always share my dream. She asks about what's gotten done and what we still have to fix in the barn, but I can see it in her face, her eyes. She is trying hard to be strong and she is. There is no woman like her. Even with two little girls and a house with no sink, no real furniture, and no glass in the windows, she gives me a thumbs-up when I say we need to install two new windows and a door in the milkhouse in order to pass inspection. I dream about fixing the house up, too, but we both know that the barn needs to be first.
Not every night is like that but when they are, when I see her face, I wonder if moving to the farm was the right thing to do. Then nightfall comes and I lay down and before I know it, I can’t wait to wake up because each morning makes me feel like a little boy again; I get so eager to go to the barn to start the morning chores and talk to my cows. Every day, I get to watch my corn grow and my calves grow. Each day, I have dreams about doing this right. Next summer we are going to do strip cropping and drain tiles. This spring we’ll put in a manure pond and the cows will pasture as much as they can. I know that by doing it this way, we can make sure it’s just like nature wants it to be and that makes me so proud.

And it makes me proud that my girls will see a baby calf born, that they will know how hay bales are made, that they will know the names of the trees in the back woods and what silage is made of. For them to learn about nature is a great gift. For me to be the one to teach them is my greatest reward.

Before I leave the barn each night, I do one final chore. I start at the far end where we will put our first calves when they are born and scrape the center aisle all the way down. I slowly push the manure and stray pieces of bedding kicked out from the stalls into the drop that sits like a ditch between the cows and the aisle. Working my way to the other end of the barn, I talk to the cows, ‘my girls,’ as my wife calls them, telling them to eat up and get their udders full for the morning. And they respond with their tails brushing each others’ backs to scare the flies away. Their jaws move up and down pushing the cud from stomach to stomach. Their large heads turn to look behind them where I stand in the scraped clean aisle, and they stand there, not looking away, as they rub their bellies with their noses.
Four: Mother

I’m scared to say out loud that I regret coming to Germany Hill, for regret can quickly swallow any hope I work each day to muster. The eyelids of summer are quietly closing, exposing how much we rely upon the heat to make us forget about our lack of hot water or enough blankets to cover four sleeping bodies.

Seven months have come and gone. Sunrises, gentle and eager, have woken us with new strength that comes from our determination to defy what everyone says we cannot do. I find myself loudly defending our actions to our family and friends as if volume alone will make them believe we are doing the right thing.

It was mid-winter when my husband came home from a morning searching for a buck that had been teasing him and his brother Tony. Even though he had no deer in the cab of his truck, he flew in the door more excited than I had seen him in weeks. "A farm," he told me while he stood in the garage peeling off layer after layer of his hunting gear. "I found a farm for us on Germany Hill." I knew Germany Hill. My grandmother and mother had grown up on Germany Hill.

My husband walked past me into the kitchen, rubbing his stomach, smelling the apple pie I had put in the oven before he came home. He began to tell me how he found the farm, climbing the large hill near Tony’s place. The look in his eyes was one of a little boy after shooting his first kill. I knew that Wayne dreamt of owning a farm, he brought it up every now and then, but I thought he was just talking. We had a wonderful home with just enough acreage to satisfy his hunger for land. But his eyes held a vigor that I heard in his words. I began to create excuses in my head. *It's too complicated; there are too many hoops; we don't have enough money for a down payment.* Still
standing in doorway to the garage, I stared at his camouflage suit cast in a pile on the floor. The oven buzzer went off and I was happy to have something interrupt the conversation, something to keep my hands busy. As I opened the oven door, brown mitts loose on my hands, the smell of baked apples flooded the room. To this day, when I smell a fresh apple pie, the feelings from that afternoon come rushing back. My gut twists and my mind races with the imbalanced blend of exhilaration and doom.
Five: Daughter

Mommy says school’s gonna start after three more nights. I’m gonna make new friends and learn how to count how many cows we have, not even using my fingers, she says. She even took me to get new school clothes in Aunt Becky’s attic. I get to wear Jaime’s clothes that she wore when she started school.

We live in a new house, but it’s only new to us. Mommy says it’s older than her and Daddy and even older than old Grandma and Grandpa Nickels. I can’t remember back that far. I don’t know if anybody can.

I remember moving here, though, to our new-old house. My sister and I helped pack everything in boxes. Mommy put us in charge of the kitchen; it was a very important job because there’s sharp stuff in the kitchen and I had to tell Shell how to put the sharp stuff in the shoeboxes. Everything we need for cereal and pancakes and hamburgers goes into one shoebox, but they gotta be wrapped in a little towel so they won’t rattle like a rattle snake. We helped so much that Mommy told Daddy to stop and buy us a root beer float at the Tastee Freeze on the way to the new-old house. That’s only happened once before on a hot hot day, and just like that time, Daddy drank half the root beer on his walk back to the car. Shell got mad at him because that’s the part she likes the most, but I didn’t care because the vanilla ice cream is better than the root beer.

It took a long time to get to the house. There where hills our car would climb up and climb down. There were big ones and little ones, too, where the car feels like it flies over them and your tummy goes “whoo” like it’s jumping rope. We went around curves and had to slow down for a dog in the street. He was standing there like a stature of a dog instead of a real dog, blocking our path. We got to the top of a hill and the sun was right
above us and Daddy turned to Mommy, put his hand on her leg and said, “Here we are. Home again, home again, jiggity-jog.” Daddy stopped the car in the dirt driveway and got out. Mommy sat in the car, she wasn’t talking or anything, just looking straight ahead, her hands buried together between her legs. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to get out and play. A big new-old house with new-old hiding places and big barn with a haymow, and piles of hay to jump in. But I didn’t want to be excited if Mommy wasn’t excited, so I held all the play right inside my chest, it was jumping around in there like burps after a soda, but I held tight and kept it in.

It was hours and Daddy came back to the car and peeked his head in Mommy’s window and kissed her cheek, whispering secrets. He opened her door and took her hand and she got out of the car. Right then, my chest just opened up and the playing burst out like somebody untied its arms and legs. I grabbed Shell’s hand and ran to the new-old house. Everything was a mystery. It was like us and the house were playing hide-and-go-seek.

Shell and I ran to the corner of the house I’d been looking at in the car. It was a room you could see through, like it had no walls. When we got up close, it did have walls, but they had holes in it. It was window walls. That stuff you put behind the glass to keep the flies and bees out. A whole room of window walls! Daddy came and said it was a room of screens, but I never saw a room like this. It was a porch, but not like our old porch. We went into the real house and I still was thinking I never saw a house like this. I remember thinking it really wasn’t a house. Not like our old house. There wasn’t any windows. Well, there was holes for windows but they were all just holes. Flies and stuff could come in and out. I told Daddy that maybe somebody took the screens out of
the windows and made them into the walls for the porch, like a crazy person. And then I told Daddy that the Boogie Man could come in easy, but he told me and Shell that the Boogie Man likes to scare little girls but he would know that any little girl that could live in a house with no windows would be too hard to scare. My Daddy knows everything.

All the rooms were empty. There was nothing in the whole house. There was pretty patterns on all the walls. And the floors were wood. Me and Shell could play jacks in any room we wanted to. And that’s what Mommy let us do while her and Daddy brought all the boxes in.

The first night Shell and I slept on a mattress between the two couches that Mommy and Daddy slept on. It was like camping, but different because on camping trips we would get in our sleeping bags and Mommy and Daddy would tell us stories about the stars, but that night everyone closed their eyes and fell asleep. This new-old house was gonna be a lot of work because we really didn’t have nothing.

I told Mommy that, but she said, “We got us,” and then she said, “As long as we got us, we got something.” She was telling us about having things and working hard while we were washing the dishes in the bathtub. That was real fun. It was a bubble bath for the plates and forks and spoons. The whole bubble bath Mommy was telling us about working hard, that hard work makes good people. And when we were done, I took Mommy to the room with the window walls. We could hear the chirpers best there, we were still in our house but right up close to everything outside. I told Mommy this. I said to her that with a room that lets us hear the rain so good but not get rained on and to see the lightning bugs so good but not get bit by the mosquitos, to have a room like that
means you got all you need. She smiled when I said that, squeezed my hand, leaned down and kissed my cheek, whispering secrets.
Six: Mother

I tell my daughters that my Grandma Zorn grew up on Germany Hill, but that is not how the stories from my childhood go. Those stories say Germany Hill raised my Grandma Zorn. Coming from a girlhood in town, she fell in love, married and moved to Germany Hill. Then she grew up.

I have one picture of her that matches the picture wedged in my memory. Her wiry hair is pulled back into a loose bun. Her cheekbones hold the dark circles that never went away; she constantly looked weary, happy, but weary. Along with the dark circles, circles that I see constantly on my mother’s face, she wears a mischievous smile as if there were secrets leaping around in her mouth, tickling her tongue. In the picture, a floral house apron covers her dress that hangs to her knees, two pockets in the front. Her hands are buried so deep in the pockets that I can’t see them, but I can’t forget how incredibly large they were for her size. In one of her buried hands I know she holds a white, cotton hanky. Rarely do I see a hanky anymore; even the word seems to have disappeared from our language. But Grandma Zorn had one in her pocket each day; it was perfectly square and always as white as table sugar. I can imagine a thin silver watch on her wrist and a gold ring with a large yellow stone on her right finger. I am familiar with the woman I see in the picture, but the porch she stands on, the house it sits in front of, they are both strangers to me.

Hours after Wayne came home to announce he had found our farm, we lay in bed, a silent world filling the space between us. I wanted to tell him that I dreamt of Grandma Zorn, who died early on in ’82, nearly every night. She stands on the porch in front of her house, a bucket of fresh peas at her feet, daffodils wild in the yard. I stand far away on
solid ground, not grass, but dirt. Rich brown dirt. Even though I am far away she knows I am there and every now and then, she glances my way. I always wave to her, but as I stand there I am neither coming nor going; I'm rooted in the dirt, as natural as a tree to be there. And then each time, right before waking up, I feel the earth below my feet fall away, a landslide that threatens to take me with it. But it doesn’t. Everything around me falls and all of a sudden, all of my roots are naked, raw in their new exposure to the air. The landslide happens so quickly each time and each time when it’s done, I see that my roots, do not go down into the earth and spread like I’d expect. Instead, my roots go in one direction, weaving in and out of each other, until they reach what feeds them, the dust-covered porch where my grandmother stands.
I took care of my first herd when I was nine. Ma heard through Edna Waite at church one Sunday morning that old Ed Hardigan needed some help on his 28-head dairy farm. She came to me that afternoon, the only kid out of her nine that was always begging for an animal, and asked me if I wanted to go live with Ed for awhile. My bags were packed before word got out to my brothers and sisters.

The next day after school, Ma drove me over to Ed’s place. As our Chevy pulled into the rutted driveway, Ed stood up from his chair on the porch and walked toward us. I grabbed my bag from the backseat and leaned into the door to push it open when Ma grabbed my arm and pulled me to her. Both of her hands came up, cupping my cheeks. They smelled like flour. She said, “You’re a Middendorf, Wayne. You always remember that. You’re making me and your dad real proud.” She kissed both my cheeks and gave me a shove out of the car door. Ed was standing in front of the Chevy, his hands deep in his coverall pockets. He gave a nod of his head to Ma and reached over to shake my hand. I squeezed his hand tight, like my father had taught me, and gave one squeeze and a little shake before I let go. “You know what, neighbor,” he looked down at me, “it’s going to be a nice day.” With that he turned and walked toward the porch. “Come on in the house now,” he called back.

On the third day, as I followed Ed out the door in the dusky morning, he stopped on the porch and turned toward me. “You’re strong for your age, neighbor, and a quick learner. I suppose tomorrow I’m gonna let you gather the cows for yourself, if that’s alright with you.”
I nodded. "Yes, sir, Mr. Hardigan." I waited till he turned back around to smile; I couldn't wait to get the morning chores done and get to school to tell my brothers and sisters. I knew they would run home and tell my father. I could picture it in my mind. Dad would get home from building houses all day, walk in the door, take his coat off, then his shoes. He'd walk past the stairs to the kitchen, grab Ma from behind, giving her a kiss on the cheek. She'd yell at him. "Jerry, get your dirty hands washed. Can't you see I'm making dinner here?" Dad would let go, tip his head back, and laugh, his belly shaking. He'd pull his hands in front of him and rub them together, something everyone one of us boys does when we laugh. One of my sisters or brothers would hear him and run into the kitchen. "Dad, guess what? Old Ed Hardigan told Wayne this morning that he could get the cows all by himself tomorrow."

Dad would lean against the counter, nod his head, and say, "Is that right?" He wouldn't say anything else, and whichever sister or brother told him would know that he wasn't looking for an answer to his question.

As Ed and I walked down the gully to get the cows that morning, Ed told me a couple of times to slow it down. "I gotta keep up with you, neighbor," he'd holler from behind me.

The next morning I was up at 4 a.m. The house was quiet as I pulled my coveralls on. I tiptoed my way down the stairs and out the door. I jumped down the porch stairs, skipping most of them. My breath came out like smoke from my mouth and disappeared into the air. Daylight was just barely breaking through the trees as I started down the ravine. Without Ed there, everything was a little scarier. The trees looked a more scraggily, their branches reaching out a bit farther. The fog got thicker as I went deeper
into the ravine. I got to the bottom and started climbing up the other side before I heard the cows’ bells ringing. I started jogging up the hill; I’d feel safer once I could see the cows. I was nearly at the top when I heard the bells clearly and I started to make out the cows up the hill to my right. I stopped to catch my breath, leaning down with my hands on my knees. I knew my favorite old tree stump was up ahead; I figured since I ran up the hill, I could take a minute and rest there. I worked my way up the hill again, slowly this time, when all of a sudden, I saw beady eyes directly in front of me. On the stump, staring at me dead on, stood the largest bald eagle I ever saw. His beak opened up and he cawed in my face and flew right at my head. I thought I was a dead man. I took off running down the hill and tripped over my own two feet. I rolled a few times until a large birch tree stopped me. I lay on the ground, talking to myself, as if I just had a bad dream.

“Wayne, you scared that eagle just as much as he scared you. Calm yourself down and go get the cows. Wayne, you gotta go bring in the cows. Ed’s gonna be waiting for you.” I took a deep breath in and picked myself up. I jogged back up to the ravine and realized the cows had scattered when I ran from the eagle. By the time I found the brood cow and the rest of the herd fell in line behind her, the sun was up and shining in my eyes. Ed met me as I swing open the barn door.

“You get ‘em all, neighbor?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered. We milked the cows together that morning. I was skittish the entire time, tripping over my buckets of milk. When all the cows were done, I ran to get the lime, scattering it from the bucket onto the floor. I couldn’t get the eagle out of my mind and wondered if Ed could tell how jumpy I was. I had half the barn aisle swept
with the lime when he hollered from the doorway, "Neighbor, you're gonna wear those bristles right off the broom. You slow down. That eagle's long gone by now."

I turned toward him as he laughed and started walking back to the house. I finished sweeping, put the broom away and walked to the end of the barn. Before sliding the door closed, I turned around and listened to the cows chomping on their cud. As if an airborne disease, right then and there, farming snuck into my blood and stayed, refusing to leave, as if it had no place to go.
Eight: Mother

Wayne’s meat cutting job took over our lives. Every day of the week but Tuesday, the girls woke up asking for their father, who had already left for work. Each night I tucked them in, making promises that their father would kiss them goodnight when he got home. I was showered, cleaned up supper, and wrapped Wayne’s plate when he got home. As he sat and ate, I would try to remember the things the girls did or said during the day that would make him feel as if he were there. It was too often that I couldn’t remember.

Overwhelmed and unsure, I went to my mother in January of ’83. I sent the girls off to play as she put the teapot on. I had yet to tell anyone about the farm Wayne wanted me to see. But as I sat at the round wooden table I grew up at, feeling the warm tea cup between my hands, my account of Wayne coming home with a dream to uproot our life unspun from my mouth like thread from its spool. My cheeks grew wet as I drank my tea. My mother filled my cup again and again as the story came out. I didn’t look at her as I spoke; instead, I watched out the picture window next to the table, watching the snow fall from the sky like feathers after a pillow fight. It wasn’t until she sat down, placing her hand upon mine, that I saw her face. She leaned closer to me, her brows furrowed in question.

“Where did you say this farm is?”

“Germany Hill, Mom. Somewhere near where you grew up, where Grandma Zorn’s house was. Near Tony’s farm.”

“Did Wayne say it was the farm in the valley south of Tony’s farm.”
“Yeah, that’s where they were hunting for that buck he’s been talking about.” My mother’s face looked away from mine. Her hands went over her mouth as she scanned the buried landscape outside.

“Cindy, you know that farm. It belonged to Dutch and Nina Ulrich. When I was growing up, people would talk about that farm, saying it was the best in the county. Nina kept a perfect house and Dutch shipped more milk than any other farmer on the hill. Last I knew the daffodils still bloomed up there. My mother became good friends with them after my father passed. Cindy, the house I grew up in, the land that your Grandma Zorn lived on until her death, the barn that my father raised calves in, the one that he died in, is on that land.”
Nine: Daughter

It was the day after I got scared of Daddy that Mommy woke Shell and me up in the morning, whispering “Girls, your father wants to be a farmer now.” He was a meat cutter then. He went to work and held a knife all day, cutting up animals that were shipped to him in cold boxes from a place Mommy calls the Midwest. At night, he came home and tell us about his costumers who came to him for their meat because they told him, “Wayne, you are the best butcher in the county.” I sat at the dinner table while Daddy ate supper from that square, plastic plate Mommy kept in the microwave to warm up as soon as he got home and pictured him standing behind his Grand Union meat counter talking to his customers, all that red meat lying in rows between them.

The day I got scared of Daddy started when Mommy told us we were going to kidnap Daddy during his lunch break and take him to McDonald’s. As we drove to Grand Union, she kept peeking back at us in the rearview mirror, yelling, “Almost there, we’re gonna kidnap him,” and she bounced her head from side to side. I remember noticing how high Mommy sat in the car. I could barely see her gloved hand at the top of the steering wheel over her shoulder. Mommy always put her hands in the same spot when she drove. One hand was on top of the steering wheel and the other hand stayed on the radio, in case Rush Limbaugh got fuzzy. When she wasn’t yelling to Shell and me about kidnapping Dad, she was yelling “Oooh, I love to hate that man.” I fell asleep during the kidnapping ride and woke up to the loud snow tires crunching in Daddy’s parking lot.

Mommy jumped out of the car and got Shell and me out. I had to run to keep up with her because she was walking so fast. When we got to the cereal aisle, I watched for Trix and Lucky Charms, wondering when Mom would let me stay at Aunt Becky’s house.
again. Aunt Becky kept a box of chocolate chip ice cream on the second shelf of her freezer and Trix and Lucky Charms in the Lazy Susan in the corner between her sink and dishwasher. She also made us watch parts of *Gone With the Wind* when we spent the night, telling us about the greatest fire the South ever saw, using words I never heard of, like sharecrop and antebellum. I saw Dad’s meat counter ahead of us as Mommy grabbed our hands, all the meat surrounded by little cubes of ice. Daddy wasn’t there so Mommy took us over to two plastic swinging doors. She stood on her tip-toes to peek in the plastic window and pulled us closer to the doors. I felt their cold against my body. I heard her say, “There’s your father. Let’s go!” She knelt down and took Shell and me by the elbow. “You stick right by my side and don’t say a peep. We’re gonna go in and grab your father and come back out. You hear?” I was startled because she was whispering and I remember her saying ‘kidnap’ and I thought maybe we were doing something that we might get arrested for. But when she took us through the cold plastic doors, I forgot all about being illegal and grabbed my mom’s thigh as tight as my puffed up winter jacket and gloves allowed me. There was meat all around us. Rolling shelves with trays of red spaghetti-looking meat. Big bodies of pink meat sat in freezers with see-through doors. Long bodies hung upside down with pig heads at the bottom and no eyes where they should be. Chickens with no feet or legs hung next to the pig heads. I buried my face in Mommy’s thigh and told myself to think about Trix and Lucky Charms, but I couldn’t. I peeked out as Mommy shuffled along the meat cooler and saw Daddy at the end of a row. He turned and stopped cutting, put down his knife and walked toward us. Shell yelled out, “Daddy we’re kidnapping you!” I wanted to tell him that we’re only kidnapping him to McDonald’s but I couldn’t think of anything but all the
dead pigs and chickens. He looked at Mommy, shook his head and put his hands up as if shooing us out of the meat freezer. I screamed then and let go of Mommy’s thigh and ran for cold plastic doors. I wanted to be back in the cereal aisle. I wanted to find the big orange box of Wheaties with Mary Lou Retton on the front. I heard Mommy running after me and Daddy was running after Mommy. She caught me before I even passed the Honeycombs, and knelt down with her hands squeezing my shoulders. I wrapped my arms around her neck, burying my face in the crook between her neck and shoulder. I remember feeling like it was hours before I could stop crying, Mommy asking me the whole time what was the matter. I tried to answer her without looking up, I didn’t know if Daddy was still close to us. She couldn’t hear me and grabbed my chin, lifting my head up. I pushed away from her hands and put my mouth to her ear. In my head was the picture of Daddy with his hands up, shooing us away. His hands were covered in white gloves and there was blood all over them. I whispered to Mommy, “Daddy killed somebody.” And the next day Mommy told us he wanted to be a farmer.
I can’t remember when my days weren’t filled with heavy work. My arms and legs grow stronger everyday, and my breath keeps up with me now, where before I always felt winded. I don’t think of the things I used to have much anymore. Routine and habit make new things become almost natural. Washing the dishes in the bathtub as we still wait for the kitchen plumbing to be fixed seems the normal thing to do. During the first few weeks on the farm, the girls couldn’t wait to finish dinner. They cleared the table, took the dishes to the bathroom, all before my husband and I finished chewing. I found them sitting on the edge of the tub, plates stacked on the toilet, waiting for me to plug the drain and start the water. But now after months have passed, doing dishes in the tub is as unappealing to them as making their beds before they go out and play.

Their excitement, though, for the farm itself hasn’t waned. It is as strong now as it was on that Sunday afternoon when my husband brought us to see the farm for the first time. On the car ride out of town we told the girls where we were headed, but we didn’t tell them why. They knew that we were going to visit a farm; they didn’t know, I didn’t know, that two weeks later the farm would be ours.

As soon as we got out of the car and stepped into the barn the girls began firing questions. They asked why the barn was empty and about the cows that used to live here and cows that might live here later. They asked about the haymow that occupied the story above the barn: Can we swing on the ropes? Why is the hay square? What are the ladders on the big beams for? We wandered into the barn and the girls pressed on the water bowls between the cows’ stantions, jumping back when water filled up the bowl. They ran through the empty haymow surprised when they heard their footsteps echo off
the old boards. They tested the ropes and discovered that they could swing from one to
the next. They climbed the ladders, their fearless limbs taking them to the top.

When the questions slowed, we took them to see the house. The house, in itself,
makes me unsure of how and when I agreed to raise my children here. Large and old, it
greeted us that day with peeling, green paint. The windows had been stripped, the glass
taken by the old farmer who had left town two years ago before the farm was
repossessed. The kitchen provided no sink and even with three floors we had one
bathroom. The stairs to the second floor looked so narrow and steep, I was scared I
couldn’t climb them without slipping. As my husband acted like a silly tour guide for our
daughters I stepped to the back door to catch my breath. I remember wanting to cry, I
tried so hard, willing tears to my eyes, down my cheeks, yet none came. I looked ahead
and saw fields and pastures that would offer its seeds and their growth. In the distance,
up on the hill, I saw the pines that would give us a place to picnic and find shade in the
summer.

But while looking at the land around me, I couldn’t cry. That day my shoulders
were not yet sore from all the wheelbarrow trips to feed sileage to the cows. I knew
nothing of sleeps interrupted by the neighborhood dogs who could jump through the
empty windows. I didn’t know that it takes weeks, months to make a farm profitable,
that I would buy bedsheets at the Open Door Mission to lay as a tablecloth. I didn’t
know that my little girls would still share a twin mattress come September or that my
sister would give me clothes her older daughter had grown out of, I would wrap them and
pretend I went school shopping for my daughters.
Yet, it is that day that I remind my husband of after we lost our first cow to childbirth. And while I wash our dishes in the bathtub. And it's that day, that view of strength and hope that I come back to when I cannot stop the tears.
Eleven: Daughter

I’m going to first grade next year, just like Mommy said I would. Every morning before the bus comes to get me, Daddy and me go to the barn. He milks the cows and I count them. Practice makes perfect, he always says on our walk to the morning chores. And he is right, too. I got an ‘E’ for Excellent in Math. I got an ‘E’ for everything else, too, everything but writing. I think writing is really hard. I use the pencil in my left hand, just like Daddy. I like that I use the same hand as him, but sometimes I feel like my hand is fighting with me because it tries to cover the letters up when I write them on the paper. I got an ‘I’ in Writing, but Mom says that is great because it means I am getting better. I told Mom I’m gonna practice every day so I am really good when the bus starts coming again. She said that I don’t need to practice every day. Besides, she said, there’s work to be done.

She’s right about that. We don’t wash the dishes in the tub anymore, we got a new sink with two bowls in it. One for washing and one for rinsing. Me and Shell got washing dishes for a chore. We got taking care of the calves, too. And scraping the manure. Some days when Daddy is real busy we even have to feed the cows sileage, that’s corn and grain and everything mixed together in one big tall building called the silo. Me and Shell decided that the silo looks like a huge, huge thumb. That chore is the hardest because of the heavy wheelbarrow. You put the wheelbarrow at the bottom of this chute that blows out the food. The blower fills the wheelbarrow really full. Then we roll it, I push while Shell stands on the side so it doesn’t tip over. We roll it all the way to the end of the barn and then dump a little out for each cow. They get real excited, like they think it’s ice cream or a root beer float or maybe macaroni salad. Their hoofs scrape
underneath them and they blow out their noses while they try to poke at us with their mouths.

Calves are good at poking with their mouths, too. Only they really like to suck. If you have a big sweatshirt on, they take it right in their mouths like they think it’s dinner. Then you gotta pull away and push their mouths at the same time. Calves are strong. They don’t know how to do too many things yet. Part of taking care of them is feeding them with a bottle. We gotta do this one time in the morning and one time at night. The calves don’t each lunch. Shell and me, we take powder out of this big bag and mix it with water, then we pour it into the biggest bottle I have ever seen. This chore has to be done together, teamwork, says Daddy. I take the calf and put it between my legs so he’s under me and hold his face tight. Then Shell sticks the bottle between their teeth till they start sucking. It doesn’t get easier once they start sucking ‘cause they buck their heads because that’s what they do when they feed from their mama. But the calves wouldn’t grow any bigger unless we get all that milk in them, so it’s important.

My friends from school think it’s the funnest thing to come over and feed the calves. If they had to get dirty every day like that, I don’t think they would think it’s still the funnest. But they like to play at my house the best. We got the haymow and the creek, and the woods. Me and Shell have discovered all the best places to play here.

I think the haymow is the best part of the farm. Especially now that it’s summer. Every day, there are wagons of new hay that come in and Daddy has given us our own special part of the haymow to build forts. We can make tunnels and holes and secret hideaways. Sometimes at the end of the day, the boys that stay with us to help with hay will play with us in the haymow. They make the best tunnels ever. They are long, like a
maze. I wish they would do that every day. There are ropes, too. If you close your eyes and then open them back up again, you can pretend it's one big jungle and you are a monkey, swinging on the vines all day until Mom calls you in for supper: I found a way to practice my counting at supper. We planted a part of one field with sweet corn so every night, we have it with dinner. The boys that help with hay always try to see who can eat the most corn and I am the judge. I have to count their plates when they are done. The winner doesn't have to help clean up. Someday I'd like to try to beat them because I have to clean up every night.

Then we all sit in the screened-in porch and listen to stories about haying and tractors and football and wrestling. I like it when the stories run out and everyone but the chirpers are quiet.
Wayne has hired three teenage boys to help with the summer season. We talked about it all spring. He was dead set on getting three cuttings of hay in the mow before fall and we both knew it would be impossible to do by ourselves, what with all the cutting, mowing, raking, and baling involved in each cutting. The boys moved in after school got out, just in time to help us start the second cutting. I'm not sure what I expected; I'm not even sure if I had any expectations at all. I'm only used to my two daughters who get up in the morning and dress their dolls before they dress themselves. Who, after putting their unfinished bowls of cereal in the sink, go outside to paint rocks from the driveway, in hopes to convince the mailman that he needs to buy one or two or four. Normal to me is spending evenings fighting them to take a shower then hearing them argue over who's turn it is to get their hair braided first.

Two little girls, even two tough little girls, did not prepare me for three teenage boys. It seems that from the moment they moved in, the house was crowded, and the cupboards were empty. Their stomachs were never full. Wayne woke them in the mornings from the bottom of the back stairs, his voice bouncing from the curved walls to the steep stairs all the way to the top. Scott was always the first one downstairs, his shirt barely over his head before heading out the door. The first morning Randy and Mike were slow in getting down to the barn and on the second morning, Scott and Wayne had already started the milking by the time Randy and Mike got out the door. So, by the third morning, when the milking was halfway done and there was no sign of the two boys, Wayne sent me upstairs with the ice pitcher.
We started the ice pitcher when my brother’s kid, Mike, lived with us. He had moved in to help with the chores when we first moved on the farm and we quickly realized that teenage boys and sunrise mix like oil and water. By the end of Mike’s first week, Wayne and I realized scolding him was not going to get him up in the morning. It was my idea. I had seen my father do it to my only brother Tom growing up. I shouldn’t say I had seen it, I really had only heard it. It is as crisp in my mind as the smell of my mother’s johnnycake. My room was across from Tom’s and I can still hear my father, that first time, opening up Tom’s door and, as loud as the pastor on Sunday mornings, saying “You don’t get your ass out of that bed, Tom, this pitcher of ice is getting in with you.” It felt like minutes, silent minutes, before I heard a thing. Being just as nosy as any little sister naturally is, I snuck out of my room and was a few steps away from peeking in Tom’s door when I heard the soft clink of ice falling. Before I could get close enough to the door to see, Tom was out of bed, his mouth spitting words that would get him the belt and my father was on his way out of the room, empty ice pitcher in hand.

It had worked like a charm for Tom and Mike, so by that third morning Wayne had had enough. He came in from the barn halfway through chores, a rare site, reached into the cupboard and handed me the empty pitcher. I did it just as I remember my father doing it. Warning them first, then dumping. The only thing I did different was run like the dickens as soon as I dumped the ice onto Randy and Mike’s beds. When I iced my nephew, he was out of bed before I could move far enough away not to get caught in his flailings, which put me on the floor. I dumped on Randy and Mike and ran away only to find Wayne coming up the stairs with another pitcher full of ice in his hands. Those two
boys didn’t talk to me for the rest of the day, but after, for the rest of the summer, mornings were quite peaceful.

What wasn’t peaceful however was suppertime. I was unprepared for the appetites of three teenage boys. In the early evening, I would watch out our kitchen window that faced the barn. From there I could see the center aisle between the cows where the boys would put the wash bucket full of teat cleaner at the start of the evening milking. When I looked out the kitchen window into the barn, I could watch the boys move the wash bucket down the aisle as they milked. I learned that when the bucket was too far down the aisle for me to see from the window, I had about half an hour before I had three boys and one man running for spots at the picnic table on the porch. That summer I made what was cheap: macaroni salad, potato salad, jello. I cooked what was growing in our fields and stored in our freezer: venison, hamburger, chicken.

The boys would run into the house, through the kitchen, all the way to the screened-in porch on the side of the house where the picnic table sat. Like hungry stray dogs, they would line up on one side, waiting for Wayne to come in. They would eye the bowl of spaghetti or plate of hamburgers with animal-like stares. The boys smelled like sweat and manure and hay and I had to force them to wash their hands and even when they did that, the smell did not go away. They would peel their shirts off and throw them to the floor and my daughters would sit across from them, making silent gagging motions as they stared at the boys dirt-filled neck creases. More often than not the boys wouldn’t notice our two little girls sitting across from them, at least not until the sweet corn was served.
Sweet corn was the one thing we had in abundance and those teenage boys helped us to take full advantage of that. Two nights a week, I would husk and boil as much sweet corn as I had time for and when the boys came in for dinner I would place all the steamy, full cobs in two large casserole dishes and carry them to the table. As I walked to the porch, the boys would turn and start to holler. "Ooooh, I'm feelin' hungry tonight, boys" and "Put your silverware away, fellas." Just like every night, I would shoo them to the bathroom to wash at least one layer of grit off. After saying grace, the contest would begin.

The corn on the cob dinners were like most other summer dinners, except they would not be over until all the corn was gone. It was a low-key competition until the other food was eaten; then it went into full throttle. The three boys sat side by side by side, their dirty plates in front of them. Our girls would serve as the judges, strict and demanding. As each boy set down an empty cob, the girls would get on their knees on the picnic bench and lean forward, their faces peering at the boys over the empty dishes. Peering at the knawed-off cob from all sides, they would give the boy a thumbs-up or holler at them to pick it back up and finish the kernel or two they left behind. It was a site to see, those two little girls living out their dream, being able to boss those boys around. The same boys that finished the whole cereal box in the morning, leaving nothing for the girls, who squirted milk at the girls while they ran through the barn during milking time and. The same boys that would laugh at the painted rocks that sat on the porch at the end of they day, pick them up and hurl them into the pasture. It seemed that during the corn-on-the-cob contests, those little girls remembered every bad thing the boys did to them. As judges, they had no mercy. And they could do this because the
boys wanted to win. With each finished cob they became more protective of their pile on their plates. They would have one hand holding the end of a cob as they twisted it in their mouths and the other hand would be sneaking to the plate next to them looking for an opportunity to steal an already eaten cob from another boy's plate to add to their pile. This would continue until they got sick of each other and sick of corn. This usually didn't happen until the corn was gone. Once this happened, each boy would tap out, like true professionals and the judges would pull their plate over doing a final count of the cobs, until a winner was selected. It was an honor to win because that meant you didn't have to help clean up.

When an evening came and the girls saw me boiling more corn than usual, they would beg me to take part in the contest. Sure, they valued their spots as judges, but what was more valued was the chance to watch everyone else in the house scurry about, clearing the table, cleaning the dishes, as the winner sat back in the rocking chair, feet up, a kitten on their lap, rocking back and forth, back and forth, like their was nothing else in the world to do.
Shell and I have a secret. Nobody but me and her and Mommy and Daddy know about it. The secret is a barn filled with a jungle that has monkeys and snakes and alligators that bite your toes. And there are ropes hanging from the ceiling that are really vines and they help you get away from the monkeys and snakes and alligators that bite your toes. There is only one way to get to the secret barn with the jungle inside. You gotta follow a secret path that starts at the end of the porch and runs all the way to the barn, but you can’t see the secret path unless you know about the jungle and the kids at school are never gonna know about the jungle. That’s because it’s in a barn that nobody uses in the way back corner of all our fields. And nobody would really look at it till you took your finger and pointed and said, “look way out there in the corner, there is a barn that nobody uses.” But I’m not gonna do that and Shell is not gonna do that, and Mommy and Daddy are too busy to do that, so I guess that nobody else is gonna know that it’s there.

Except the other day at school I almost gave it away. In my class, during snack time the teacher was asking everybody what they were going to do over summer vacation. Everybody was saying what they always say. “I am going to the beach” and I am going to camp” and “I am going fishing.” Then my teacher asked me what I was going to do and all the kids were listening. I didn’t want to say that I was going to the beach because I wasn’t and I don’t go to camp. I almost told her that I was going fishing because we do that sometimes out in the pond two pastures back from the house, but somebody already said that so I said “I’m going to the jungle.” Mrs. Macey just nodded her head and then snack time was over because it was time to line up for recess. When
we got outside I ran fast to get a swing. Some kids came over and told me that I was lying when I said that I was going to the jungle. I pretended that they weren't there and pushed my feet harder so my swing went higher than their heads. Then Mike Shumway, the meanest boy in the whole school yelled up to me on my swing and said “So, how are you gonna get to the jungle, huh?”

Mike scares everyone in my whole class, I know it. But he doesn't scare me. He lives in the trailer beside our biggest cornfield where Shell and I play chase with the dogs. Sometimes Shell and I get really close to his house, close enough you could spit on his porch, and we hear Mike's daddy yelling louder than a cow pushing a calf out of its belly. Sometimes when his daddy is yelling, Shell and I can see Mike under his porch, crouching down, picking the grass with his hands and crying.

So that day on the playground, when he yelled up to me on the swing asking how I was gonna get to the jungle, I wasn't scared and I poked my chin out farther than my chest to show him I wasn’t scared and said “we’re gonna get there on our bikes, Mike.” And then I really did ignore everybody and I swung as high as the playground because I knew that I wasn’t lying about the jungle. But I was lying about getting there on our bikes because we can’t really ride our bikes on the secret path that takes us to the jungle. You could ride them on the secret path till you get to the cow barn, but past there it’s too bumpy. After the barn you pass the manure pond that Daddy built last spring. Shell and me, we always hold our noses and run past the pond till the manure smell is behind us. Then you gotta jump across the crick. The path takes you over the crick at the part where there are rocks so your sneakers don’t get wet. Then you gotta go towards the blackberry bushes up the hill, but you gotta get through the two fences before the blackberries and
they are the barbed-wire kind. There is only one way to get through the fences. You gotta have a sister that will hold it careful for you, careful like you’re holding a brand-new baby kitten that just came out of its mommy. Shell’s gotta hold the fence for me and I gotta hold the fence for Shell because we’re too short and the fence is too tall. We could crawl under the fence but sometimes the grass is tall and wet and Shell says that snakes and spiders live in grass that is tall and wet, so we don’t crawl under the fence. Best way to get through is to have my sister hold up the middle wire at the place on the wire where it is not prickly. When she is doing that, I hold down the bottom wire and lift one foot over the wire and the tall grass, all the way through to the other side. I gotta be careful not to let go of the bottom wire too quick because I did that one time and it scraped the bottom of my leg and it hurt worse than a bee sting and blood ran down my leg getting my sock dirty and Mommy saw it and told me that I couldn’t climb through fences for a while. So now I tell myself to hold down the bottom wire till I get both my feet all the way through and then after I get all the way through, I hold the wire for my sister like she held it for me.

And then when Shell and I are done getting through the fence, we follow the secret path straight through the blackberry bushes, up the hill just a little bit and there is the barn. It’s not a new barn, it’s really really old and you can tell its really old when you see it up close. Shell says the walls are brown, but if you put my brown crayon up close to the walls you would see they are two different colors. So I don’t think that they walls are brown, they are just wood and wood is the way I like it, it let’s me pretend that the walls are any color I want them to be. So some are green and some are brown because that’s what a jungle would look like.
The secret path ends where the concrete ramp up to the barn starts and Shell and I run up it and pull the heavy doors open and they fall against the wall making a big thud and the sun lights up everything in the barn and everything turns into the jungle. Me and Shell run to the ropes hanging from the ceiling and climb up fast before the alligators bite our toes. Me and Shell climb all the way up the ropes to where the birds are in the ceiling and swing from one end of the barn to the other, fast enough so no one can catch us.
Fourteen: Mother

As if we didn’t have enough to do, we had to burn down the old barn this morning. It was a beautiful old barn, with its crumbling walls and swinging doors. The girls had fallen in love with playing out there. When they first discovered the barn, Wayne was unsure that it was safe for them, but after swinging from rope to rope ourselves we decided they were sturdy enough. We told my mother how much the girls enjoyed that barn and of course she loved that because she spent most of her childhood there. She told us how wonderful it made her feel to know that her granddaughters would make good memories out of a barn that lives in her nightmares.

The girls wander out there in the mornings and at lunch time I am able to take a break from chores to wander through the fields and retrieve them. Just yesterday, my mother was visiting when lunchtime came around and together, we slowly walked out to the old barn. My mother’s footsteps were hesitating as we passed each field. She would pause, resting her hands on her lower back, her elbows sticking out. She sighed with a deep loud breath and each time would speak to me as if everything was a proven fact that she just remembered. “Last time your father and I came here, before he died, the daffodils had taken over the old foundation. She didn’t look at me as she spoke, but her words were quick and light, as if happiness saturated all her memories of this land.

The girls grew louder and louder as we walked. We could hear them squeaking and squealing like monkeys. I yelled “lunchtime” out to them as my mother and I walked up the concrete ramp into the wide doorway. Before our eyes adjusted to the dusty dark inside of the barn, I heard Shell yelling that she was stuck. I could see Lisa running over to a rope and then Shell came into view. She had somehow gotten tangled trying to come
down. I could see that her hand was caught in one of the footholds and she had part of the rope under her chin as she tried to free her hand. Lisa called to us for help. I ran over with out thinking and climbed the rope to untangle Shell’s hand. As soon as her hand was free, she slid down right above me, unharmed. As I caught my breath I turned around to see that my mother was no longer inside the barn. The girls noticed this too and ran outside to find her. Within seconds, we heard a shrieking and all three of us ran down the concrete ramp to find her, thinking that she had fallen or was hurt. I saw her at a distance in the field, the alfalfa hiding her kneeling body. Then it hit me; I knew immediately what was wrong and told the girls to stay back. I did not want them to see their grandmother like this. I walked toward her silent, not knowing what to do. When I got closer, I saw her hands covering her face and listened as soft wailing came from her mouth. I picked her up and told her to walk with me back to the house. She apologized over and over, her words soft and heavy, but I knew there was nothing for her to truly be sorry for. She just didn’t know what else to say.

We got back to house and I drove her home, telling the girls to stay in the haymow with their father. The looks on their faces were full of questions and I knew these questions would be hard to answer. How could I explain to such small girls that their grandmother was a private woman, a locked cabinet? How could I tell them what she never even told me, what I had to learn from my extended family? I knew parts of her story would slide off my tongue. With ease, I could tell my daughters that their grandmother grew up in the house that used to stand on the old foundation that is next to the barn they play in each day. But how would I tell them the rest? How would I tell them that their grandmother used to go to bed hungry because her father spent his entire
paycheck on whiskey and gambling. That she used to swing on those very same ropes that they swung on today. That when she was not yet a teenager her father came home from a night of drinking and killed himself with a rope hanging from the barn. How could I tell my daughters that when their grandmother saw Shell hanging from the rope, tangled, she really saw her father, hanging by his neck from the center rope in the old barn, when it wasn’t so old.
Fifteen: Father

This year’s spring thaw has been kinder than I expected. The snow melted slowly as the manure we spread this winter seeped into the land at its own pace. The mornings were damp and chilly but each day the blue sky seemed to promise a day’s warmth. The cows took well to pasture, taking the first few days to blow the winter’s stink off, running like children just let out for recess.

There is a sense of completion in my routine now. Winter gave us time to silence any fixing that so loudly called our name in the beginning. Our water pipes didn’t freeze in the cold, like other farmers said they would. The silo unloader and barn cleaner held out through the cold, snowy months. And as I stand next to the near empty silo to fill my wheelbarrow with silage, I stick my hands under what is falling to feel its heat.

Unlike other years, I was thankful to have new snow fall everyday this winter. It gently blanketed the hours in the days that unexpectedly turned up empty. During the first year after our move, my father-in-law became a fixture on the farm. Newly retired, Phil had time on his hands and was a great help in preparing the barn for inspection and the land for harvest. We worked side by side for days those first few months as we re-wired each fence. When the first winter came and the one after, the hours would quickly pass as I spent free afternoon hours on Phil’s couch while he shared with me what he knew about strip cropping and new irrigation methods and raising calves.

But, last spring, Phil passed away. Leukemia and Hepatitis B fought a winning battle over his immune system. His mind was very much alive up until his last few weeks so even though the spring season is a busy one, I freed up a few hours a week to spend on Phil’s couch, soaking up all the knowledge that I could, knowing that my time
with him was ending. I would watch him leaning back in his recliner as I sat in the middle of the couch. As the days passed, he would tire easily and we would sit together in the living room, both of us quiet. There was a clock that hung behind Phil’s brown chair, a grandfather clock that filled the silent room with its tick-tock, tick-tock. Often after Phil had tired from talking, I would glance over at him. He sat reclined, his hands behind his head, elbows out and eyes closed, his breathing was faint. Behind him I could see only part of the pendulum’s swing as it swayed behind Phil’s head.

I often wish that I had the forethought that spring to know all of the questions that would come to mind in the days after Phil’s death, questions I knew he would have answers to. Even after a year has passed, these questions still come, though less and less often as days come and go. But last week, the pain from needing him here was stronger than I could stand.

It was a very wet morning, the cold raindrops fell quickly even though I urged them to stop. I had just begun the first milking of the day when I realized that one of our cows was not in her stall. It didn’t bother me that much because I knew she was very pregnant and it is not uncommon for a cow to stay in the field to be alone in her birth. My wife came to the barn with the girls to say hello. She, too, remembered that this cow was pregnant and asked if she could take the girls out to look for her. Looking for a cow and its new calf was one of the girls’ favorite things to do. I told Cindy where I had pastured the cows last night and she and the girls set off.

About half an hour later, I noticed her running toward me. The girls were running too, but had fallen behind her. She called to me and her cry sounded like fear itself. “Come,” she said, out of breath and she didn’t need to say anymore. I knew the cow was
in trouble, my mind raced. A breech birth, a dead calf, I couldn't think fast enough. We passed the manure pond, its top layer of ice mostly melted by now, and veered right, heading deep into the forest. The girls slowed down, tired, and their mother told me to go, that the cow was in the far corner of the pasture. I continued into the forest, past the pines and heard the cow's cries before I expected. They were quiet and pained and I shuddered at the sound. Deep in the corner where the fence line turned south, she lay under a nest of pine trees. As I got closer, her baa-ing softened and my run came to a quick halt. I was surprised to see the calf was behind her, crying loudly, its feet trying to stand. But between the calf and its mother was a pond of blood and internal organs hanging from the mother's buttocks. She had cast her withers.

There are times when a birthing cow's body refuses to stop pushing after the calf has been born. Her body tenses and urges first her uterus to detach itself. As the cow continues to push, one by one, as if cars in a train wreck, the internal organs, although still hooked together, come out of the mother and hang from her buttocks. It is an amazing, dire sight, as if the cow has been turned inside out, as if a pillow had fallen out of its case. With each organ connected to the next, I saw the intestines and stomach, the liver and kidneys. That day in the corner of the field, I cursed myself for thinking that I was getting a handle on things, knowing that moments behind me, my little girls were running to this same spot and I would have to explain to them later what had happened to this cow. As her cries weakened, I could see life exhaling from her mouth and there I was, a child chasing summer bubbles that I knew would pop if I caught them. I heard my wife and the girls approaching from behind and I leaned closer to the cow thinking about the times I heard this happening on other farms. Farmers would tell stories of
reassembling the insides and tucking them back in. I looked at the pool of organs that lay in a strand and realized that I wasn’t going to try and put them back in. I couldn’t pretend anymore that I had the courage.

The cow died minutes later, her sides stopped moving and her head lay limp on the ground. As I gathered my thoughts, I watched as the calf gained enough strength to stand on its wobbly black and white legs. The girls were behind me now and their reaction was mixed. They had started to approach the new calf, wanting to pet it and feel its mouth grab at their clothes, bucking them as it would do to its mother while feeding from her udder. But when they saw the cow, lying dead in the muddy grass, they stopped short and ran to stand behind their mother who had knelt down on her knees, her hands covering her mouth. I turned to face them, but couldn’t look in their eyes. Did they know I could have saved the cow if I was more brave of a man than I am? My wife broke the silence first, suggesting we take the calf back to the barn to let it feed from another new mother. And that is what we did. I looked over the calf and saw that it was a bull. I picked the calf up to feel how heavy it was, anticipating the money it would bring if we sold it. I laid it over my shoulders, its body behind my head and its legs held in my hands holding them tight to my chest.

I called the vet when we returned to the house and made arrangements for the cow to be picked up. That afternoon, Phil was constantly on my mind. I wondered what he would have done in that situation, with a cow whose body rejected its own insides after giving birth to new life. I couldn’t get him out of my mind and the only thing I could think to do was to go to Phil’s house. My family came with me and told my mother-in-law the story. I sat there, my energy drained, as I looked over to Phil’s chair, willing him
to be there. My eyes began to water and I quickly wiped them away as my family came into the living room to sit with me. I looked to the floor, willing my eyes to dry and my wife came over to kneel down in front of me. She whispered something too quiet for me to hear and I looked up into her eyes, leaning forward, hoping she would say it again.

She returned my gaze, her hands covering mine and said, “I’ve seen my father cry and it was then that I loved him the most.”

I stared at Phil’s chair and my tears started to fall. The grandfather clock sounded off to mark the hour and I looked up to see the entire swing of the pendulum.
I woke up this morning and knew exactly where I was. I sat up and opened my eyes, knowing that my feet would touch our new, blue carpet. I heard Daddy going by the house in the green Duetz tractor we call Bullfrog, taking the night’s manure out to the fields. And I can hear Sheba barking, chasing Bullfrog all the way to the end of the driveway.

When we first came here, to the farm, I didn’t know where I was in the mornings. Every morning before opening my eyes, I reached over to make sure my sister was still there and as soon as I felt her, I would open my eyes and get used to things all over again.

But now, in the morning, when I wake up, I’m starting to not remember that I used to never live here. My Daddy keeps telling me that he can see the farming sneaking into my blood. Once it’s there, he says, it’s never leaving. I don’t tell him this, but now I’m starting to dream about the farm. The red barn that curves down on both sides. The steel roof that almost reaches the ground, close enough it makes you wanna throw something up there because you know it will roll right back at you. Shell and I threw rocks up there till Daddy caught, then Grandpa gave us some of his old golf balls. They fall softer than the rocks from the driveway and they roll better than rocks, too.

Sometimes cows are in my dreams, always mooing and calling for their calves. And Daddy brings the calves in every time and lets them suck off their moms’ teats. I had a dream one night that a big black and white mama cow was having a baby and she was mooing and wailing up a pussy willow of a storm. In my dream, Shell and I were peeping in the barn door but nobody else was there, and all the cows were just chewing their cud, pretending nothing at all was going on. And while Shell and I are peeking, the
wailing cow has her baby and Shell and I stand up and cheer because the calf is making baby calf noise, baaing and starting to kick her legs. But then the cow starts wailing again and she lays down and as soon as she lays down, Shell and I run into the barn knowing that’s not the right thing for her to do. The cow is laying down like she doesn’t know her baby calf is already out of her, like she doesn’t know that she’s supposed to be standing up getting ready to feed her calf. But then another baby calf starts coming out of her, just sliding right out. And when it gets all the way out, it doesn’t do anything but lie there. It doesn’t baa or kick its legs. I remember thinking in my dream that God forgot that He already put one baby in that cow’s stomach and just stuck another one in there. And there wasn’t room enough for them both, so one calf took up all the space and the other one didn’t breath with only a little space, so she died in there.

The mama cow is still lying down and she’s not looking behind, because in my dream she knows something that grew inside of her is dead and she knows better than to look at it because if you look at something like that, that is all your eyes see for awhile. That’s what my mom says. And then the mama cow lays her head down, right in all her sileage that she didn’t eat because she was too busy having babies. And right before the dream stops, the little calf that’s breathing and making noise and kicking its legs gets up and comes up to the mama cow and starts licking her like she is the one that needs to be cleaned off.

I tell Mommy about this dream, but not Daddy. I think he would cry if he thought about one of his cows having a calf that was dead. I’ve never seen Daddy cry, but I think this would make him cry. I have seen Daddy laugh, though. Nobody has a bigger laugh than Daddy. When he’s laughing, it’s like the whole world stops to listen.
His head rolls back with his mouth open wider than a cooking pot. He puts his hands together and rubs them like they are too cold or something. Sometimes, at night, I get scared and I call Daddy and he comes in and I ask him to laugh for me. He stands up real tall, opens his mouth, and it all comes pouring out. As soon as he starts laughing, then Shelly and I start laughing and Mommy comes running upstairs like she’s missing something and she starts laughing too. When that happens, I close my eyes and think that I’m hearing everyone else in the world disappear and when we stop laughing, it’s just gonna be us and miles and miles of farm. I keep thinking about this as Mommy tells Daddy that laughing time needs to stop so sleeping time can start. I think if somebody watched me fall asleep on those nights, they would say that I fall asleep smiling.
Amidst this fog of chaos that has settled on our lives, I find solace in believing that it is my mission to cleanse and polish this small portion of God's Earth that has been given us. The labor that my hands, feet, and muscles endure each day still takes me by surprise. What a body is capable of would startle one with the greatest of endurance.

What a mind is capable of is even more perplexing. In one moment I can feel so many things for this house. There are hours when we become two partners in one slow dance, working in step with a natural tune. Sometimes, my ears refuse to hear the music or my body repudiates the day's rhythm and the house and I ensue in a stripping battle.

When family and friends come to visit, my instincts tell me to be embarrassed, yet I hold my head high. I push back thoughts of what I gave up: carpeted rooms, a dishwasher, and cable television. All to let my children eat and sleep amongst acres of hay and cornfields, among cows and their calves, chickens and their eggs, among creeks cut out by a constant flow of water. My husband and I are proud, full of gumption, schooling ourselves in the ways of common sense and practicality. And when I tell our story to company, I feel hopeful, knowing the potential that our hearts and labor behold.

A few days ago, while cleaning out a forgotten bedroom closet, I came upon a picture. There, in black and white, stood a couple, a man and woman in front of a house and barn that looked vaguely familiar. I stared for a while, noting the similar features of the house and couple. Clean, simple, content. I placed the picture on the windowsill and continued cleaning as the wind blew the picture to the floor. Upside down, I noticed writing on the back. The penmanship, faded and neat. 'Dutch and Nina, Beecher Hill,
1954,' it read. Turning the photograph back over, I recognized the house as if we were being reintroduced.

The days had been filled with scraping the paint off the woodwork of the dining room window and door frames. Gallon after gallon of paint thinner were emptied with each layer that I found. Seven, in all. Seven different colors lay on the floor in piles of chips. What did these women look like that painted this wood? How did they feel about my removing their paint? What furniture and carpet did they have to match the different colors? Each layer let me create a story in my head, a lifetime. And this new photo gave life to my characters.

After finding the photograph, I had gone back to cleaning for only a few moments when I came upon a book on that same shelf. Pulling it out, I realized it was a diary. There was no name on the book, but my imagination quickly tied it to the woman in the picture. In the days following, that diary has served as my rock in times of chaos and hopelessness. In the many mornings and afternoons of complete disarray surrounding me, I can sit on the floor and open up to read a life of routine and simplicity.

*Today I did laundry, what a beautiful day to hang clothes! I have almost finished canning this year's jam. Tomatoes from the garden are so red, juice squirts everywhere when we bite into them. We are planning a trip to town this weekend.*

It is difficult for me to imagine such a house producing that methodical life. Each day I try and try again to make it neat. We have no extra money for nice things like tablecloths, but the girls and I have made an adventure of going to the Open Door
Mission to find the most beautiful old sheet that will suffice on our makeshift dinner table. I brought it home and washed it twice in hot water, but I still hold qualms about my family eating on someone else’s thrown away bed sheets.

There is an abundance of peonies lining the road. Every other day, the girls and I will pick a new bunch to put in the middle of our bed sheet. Most of our clothes are still in boxes, as I’d like to keep them from getting dirty and ripping with the days’ work. The shoeboxes the girls so diligently packed even now serve as our cupboards.

We’ve settled the loft, where the girls sleep. A neighbor was replacing old carpet, which he kindly let us take. It’s blue, the girls like that. A ladder serves as the gateway to the loft, as the stairs are still too steep and unstable for their young, quick legs. They asked last week to hang their Sunday dresses on the railing surrounding the steep stairwell. They seem to enjoy having their best hanging for the world to see.

We’ve gained a sense of routine in the evenings. After the dishes are washed, the last hour of daylight is kept for a walk in the pastures. Often we go to the back pines; the ground is so soft there. The creek is a favorite of the girls. The water is cold and clear, and its flow keeps the banks very clean. These walks have welcomed us to our new land, throwing its arms around our shoulders, patting our backs. Unlike the house, I have never felt a stranger to this land.

The house is coming around. In the afternoons, as I sweep the day’s dust of the porch, I find myself smiling. Just the other day, as I was watching storm clouds roll in, I noticed the girls’ bikes at the end of the driveway. I called to them, wanting the bikes on the porch before the clouds broke. Down the driveway they ran, racing each other to the road. I was taken aback at how long their legs seemed, how fast they were running.
Shell hopped on her first and starting pedaling back just as the rain began. I saw Lisa hop on her bike, pedaling fast to beat the threatening downpour, but when the rain began to fall harder, she stopped. My gut instinct was to run out there and help her back; I didn’t know why she had stopped. But before I could jump off the porch, I saw her stand up tall, thrust her head back and throw her hands straight out as if they were spoons to catch the drops. She stood there, bombarded with the heavy rain, and began to spin. With her head still back and her arms still out, she spun and spun and spun. While watching her, I suddenly realized how soaked I was getting just standing on the porch. I called out to her, yelling for her to get out of the rain. She grabbed her bike and ran the rest of the way to the house, pulling her bike up the steps with her.

“What were you doing out there?” I asked her.

“Mommy,” she said, “I’m washing the dust off. The rain, it’s washing it all away.”
Part II: Other Stories
None of the drivers saw the bull maneuvering under the rusted barbed-wire fence next to the seven-acre pond. And none of the drivers saw the bull saunter, cocky and foolish, toward the homemade ice-racing track, cornered by square hay bales and orange cones stolen from the highway department’s nearest garage. None of the drivers saw the bull because it all happened during the twenty-fourth lap of the sixth heat. With one lap to go Aunt Brenda, standing on her makeshift plywood flag-stand covered in bumper stickers reading “If you can read this, get off my ass!” and “Real men love Chevys!” had pulled the white flag, waiting for the old VW Rabbits and Dodge Omnis and Honda Hatchbacks to come into the fourth turn.

Aunt Betty had seen the bull first. She sat on an overturned crate in the cab of her Dodge truck serving 50-cent hot dogs and cups of hot chocolate to the wives and children of the men of the Glenmary Corner Ice-Racing gang. As soon as she noticed Old Blue she yelled to Cindy to yell to Brenda to throw the yellow caution flag. But it was too late. The drivers had spotted Old Blue and were fighting to miss him and fighting to stay on the track because the rule was once you go off the track you’re disqualified and the pond beyond the track was closer to the edge where the ice was melting inches at a time.

It was the first weekend in March and the big championship weekend for these twenty drivers and their old four-wheel drive cars. It wasn’t nearly as cold as it should be
for the championship race and when the families gathered from all corners of the
countryside, the wives tried to talk their husbands off of the melting ice, but the men
would have none of it. The winner of this race held bragging rights through the spring
thaw, through the four cuttings of hay season, summer barbeques, the fall harvest,
through half of football season until the frozen pond was deemed ready for racing to
begin again. Besides, the men argued, Bill has a new Duetz tractor he’d love to bring
over and use to pull a car out.

A few minutes had passed and four drivers sat, their cars idle at the flag stand,
waiting impatiently behind the Plymouth Colt pace car to get the final lap under way.
The crowd: women biting their lips, daughters hugging their mothers’ legs and sons up
front, watching with envy, remained on the snowy bank. It was a rule. If no one is hurt,
let a driver do his thing until he calls for help or until his car goes through the ice.

My father was in the fifth car and I knew he’d be angry if anyone came to offer
help. His wheels were spinning over the melting ice on the far edge of the pond. His car
was going nowhere and after a couple of tries he stopped and got out. He yelled at Old
Blue, who had sauntered back through the barbed-wire fence by now. His hands were
gesturing towards the bull while he began to circle the car, strategizing.

It was his own fault, really. We owned the pasture on the edge of the pond. The
pasture connected to a farm beyond the hill; that was ours, too. And the bull in this
pasture belonged to us. And everyone knew this, and they knew it was his fault. But
nobody was going to tell him that.

Dad knew: you don’t put cows out to pasture in the winter when the snow is two
feet deep and you don’t separate the bull from the cows when he could be inside “making
some babies," as Grandpa would say. Bulls hate this and will do anything to get back at the farmer that would put him in this position.

We bought Old Blue when Linus got too old to breed. He was 36 months old when he arrived and already twice the size of our biggest heifer. The first year we had him, he continued to grow. And he was as mean as he was big. "That doesn’t matter," my dad would tell us at the dinner table, "Old Blue, he has himself a saving grace." Dad was right; Old Blue was of an elite Black Angus breed. His sperm would put at least one, if not two extra zeros on the price of our calves. He was production and efficiency at its finest.

But by Blue's third year with us, his success rate had gone down. Our heifers weren't freshening with strong healthy calves as frequently as my father had predicted. When the fourth year came and went without making money on calf production, Dad decided Old Blue had to go. It was November when the breeder was called in to take the place of the bull.

We all agree that Old Blue knew what was going on. He stopped eating his grain and would buck at any hand that tried to rub his head. When we would scrape his stall, his large hooves would kick at the pitchfork. It wasn’t until February, after my sister left the barn with a black-and-blue eye under her broken glasses, when my dad wrapped a chain around Blue’s neck, connecting the other end to the John Deere. The bull bucked and refused to move, his hooves scraping the icy drive all the way to the back pasture by the seven-acre pond. Old Blue would stay there until the butcher could pick him up. We never thought he could get through that fence, until that first Sunday in March.
While my father circled his car, everyone watched in silence. We all knew there wasn’t much time before it broke through the ice. But until he yelled for help, we weren’t allowed to run to his aid. That was about the only unbreakable rule we knew, besides never talking back to your mother. We watched him stand, his hands on his hips, then circle the car, stand, then circle the opposite way. He finally reached into the car and grabbed what all the drivers had in their backseat: four old, long, ratty pieces of carpet. He bent down next to each tire, wedging the carpet as far as it would go. My dad of course, as with anything he does, was taking his time, being patient and foolish. Uncle Bill had already gone back to his house to retrieve the new Duetz tractor, anticipating the inevitable. When the carpets were all firmly in place, he got back in his car, revving the engine. He threw the transmission into first and we all held our breath. It bucked, it spun, and started inching forward. Our sidelined bodies leaned forward, our knees bent, ready to raise our arms and cheer. The car inched forward again and our bodies straightened, our arms lifting high. And then we heard it. A crack boomed as if God had struck the pond with lightening. While we were watching my father, Old Blue had come back to the ice, only he wasn’t sauntering this time, he was running. His oversized impotent body darted toward my dad’s car which was slowly heading toward the back of the caution line.

That’s when the crack came. Everyone stopped, the cheers fell silent. We couldn’t see the crack, but we heard it spreading. The tiny sounds of smaller cracks fell on top of one another, until again we heard lightening strike. Old Blue stumbled, his front legs falling into the water. He was bawling, and as mean as he was, I felt sorry for him.
By now, the men had turned their engines off and were running toward the scene. Uncle Bill had arrived with his tractor, going full speed around the pond to Blue. The women had retrieved the chains from the hot chocolate truck and two of them were following Uncle Bill, struggling to catch up in the deep snow.

It all happened fast, like this type of rescue was something the Glenmary Ice-Racing gang did every day. My father had gotten out of his car to grab the end of the chain Aunt Betty was throwing. He leaned over the broken ice on his belly, stretching for Old Blue’s neck, who was struggling to stay afloat. The chain slipped over the bull’s neck and everyone backed away. Uncle Bill began pulling with the tractor and seconds later, Old Blue slid out of the water toward the bank. Those still on the sidelines cheered, those on the ice surrounded the bull, with my father up front.

They say that a farmer and his bull are partners in crime. They must work together, as one team, to charm the ladies of the barn. It is a widespread wives-tale that when one partner decides to push the other of the shared throne, things on the farm will go awry and the partners will begin to plot the other’s demise. Old Blue and my father were no exception. My father thought he was in control, donning the crown by himself, up until that thawing Sunday race. As everyone celebrated the successful rescue, no one gave notice when the ice began to sound again. This time, slowly and gradually louder, as if to beckon our attention, the hole in the ice caved in and we all watched, helpless. Old Blue had sunk my father’s car.
Purple Ants

*Tomorrow I am going to wake up and be just like my sister, Michelle.* At four years old, I would tell myself this each night as I lay in bed. With my pillow shaped like a dragon, stuffing sneaking out through the tail, thrown to the floor so my cheeks could feel the flat coldness of the sheeted mattress, I would peek over at my sister on the other side of the room, already asleep, and imagine myself stealing her courage.

As she lay there, her head buried deep in the pillow and covers pushed to the bottom of the bed, I would picture her courage as an army of ants she kept hidden in her fingers. These ants were purple like the velvet patch on my grandmother’s quilt that I rolled around my body like a Boy Scout’s sleeping bag. My fingers would rub the velvet as I fell asleep, one way rough, the other way smooth. These ants were her courage, they were what made her brave and I wanted to be brave like her, instead of scared like me.

I wasn’t always scared. Up until I was four I didn’t have much to be scared of. My family and I lived in a ranch house with red shingles and white shutters. We had a front yard my father mowed in diagonal rows like a baseball field and apple trees in the back. My mother stayed at home with my sister and me, letting us turn the pages as she read us stories in the afternoon, letting us knead the dough as she made bread for dinner. My dad left every morning of the week but one to go run the meat department at the grocery store three towns away.
One evening, four weeks before my fourth birthday, my father came home from his job. After working his normal twelve-hour shift, with calloused hands and tired eyes, he came into the warm, carpeted bedroom of my sister and me and snuck kisses on our foreheads, while we slept in wooden bunk beds. If this was a normal night, my father would have sat with my mother at the round kitchen table to eat his dinner that was kept warm on a covered plate in the oven. They would have spoken quietly and sadly about his long hours and absence from home. But this night was different. There is a farm, my father told my mother, on Beecher Hill. It has sat, unused, for two years and tomorrow we will go and buy this farm.

A man of his word and one who follows his heart, this is what happened and six weeks later, we spent our first night in our new home. Our new farm house, with glassless windows and bare floors, seemed like a naked and cold castle. The downed trees and unmowed acres of lawn added to the feeling of an exotic land. The dilapidated barn and its matching buildings made me feel smaller and less significant than before. At our old ranch house, I could stand on one end of the yard and talk to my sister who stood at the other end as if she were right next to me. Our new home and its surroundings resembled nothing familiar and from the first night we spent there, I was scared.

It's not like I would spend my days and nights cowering in the corner, a small child trembling from fear. My parents did everything they could to make this move an adventure where I could, like into a cold pool, enter at my own pace. My sister jumped, practically cannon-balled into the farm itself, splashing water onto my body, standing on the side. She jumped from the haymow loft into the stacks of old stiff straw that lay forgotten on the floor. She swung from the pipes in the barn that took milk from the
cows to the bulk tank, as if her arms were made of gorilla muscle. She sat in the middle
of the old, leaning corn crib stacking the dried cobs as high as she could before they
would, like apples in the grocery store, tumble onto her, tangling little pieces of corn into
her hair and pants pockets. When the cows pastured during the summer days, she would
see how close she could get to each one before the bull came toward her, nosy and
sniffing. And each morning as our mother pushed us out the door to collect the eggs, she
would race down to the chicken coop, throwing open the door to announce herself,
doubling over in laughter as the chickens answered back with angry flapping wings.

The first few months we lived there, I watched her fearlessly take on the farm as I
sat on the steps of the porch, knees pulled into my chest. Each day the thought would
creep in my mind: my sister, spending all day out there, is going to forget about me. As
the younger child, I wanted nothing more than for my sister to like me. This thought got
louder and louder in my head, constantly running through like a marquee advertisement,
until I couldn’t take it anymore. As the weeks proceeded, I would venture closer and
closer to the barn. First, I spent a few days standing in the middle of the rutted dirt
driveway, finding stones to throw in the puddles. Soon, I was inching closer and closer
to where my sister played and before I realized it, I was standing next to her in the corn
crib. I was only steps away from the door leading into the barn where my sister helped
my father milk the cows. And when Mom handed us the basket to fill with eggs, I found
myself running right behind Michelle, then standing outside the cage, my fingers gripping
the wire fence, laughing with her as she threw open the door.

But that was as far as I could go. Try as I might, counting to three, time and time
again, I couldn’t make my feet go any farther. I couldn’t step inside the barn or the
chicken coop and I would run out of the corn crib when I thought my sister piled the cobs too high. I would lie in bed at night staring at my sister, wondering how she could stand in between the cows rubbing their large soft bellies while I couldn’t go to the bathroom alone when it was dark. One night, the moonlight shining in the window, I got bored watching my sister sleep. I began to trace our bedroom’s new sculpted carpet with my hands. As I was following the lines, creating patterns with my fingers, I spotted an ant crawling toward my sister’s bed. Pulling my hands off the floor and safely inside my blanket, I watched as the ant got closer and closer to her blankets hanging from the mattress. I watched it crawl up the headboard and disappear and this is when I discovered how my sister got her courage. Ants, my four-year-old mind decided; she was hiding ants in her fingers, brave ants that pumped courage into her mind.

I thought about this for a night or two, these ants hiding out in my sister’s fingers, and convinced myself that it was possible for me to be like Michelle. No more lingering outside the barn’s door or chicken coop. All I had to do was get some of her ants to come hide in my fingers.

Most nights I just wanted to borrow them, maybe for a morning or maybe for a day. I would stare at her fingertips and command just a few of the brave, purple ants to march out through her bitten-down nails, down the posts of the metal bed frame to the carpet, using its blue sculpted pathways and my whispering voice as a guide. I would lay my hand on the carpet, fingers spread out, and as they marched toward my fingertips, I would whisper to the ants why I needed them. It’s Derek again, I’d say. Derek is bossing me around and hogging all my Cap’n Crunch cereal and tomorrow I’m gonna tell him to stop. The leading ant would pry open my nails and beckon the soldiers in.
Derek was one of the teenage boys that stayed at the farm for the first few summers to help with hay season. Once school was out, there were usually four or five of them that came, sleeping in the attic on mattresses my mom used to say were “older than sin.” The boys were rarely nice and I only remember a few times when they played with us, building forts out of the new hay bales in the barn. Derek was the meanest and he came three summers in a row, so he was an expert in being nasty to us. He would hide behind the silver bulk tank in the milk house with snakes in his hands, wriggling about, waiting for Michelle and me to come in with our arms full of empty calf bottles and as we stood at the deep sink up to our elbows in soapy water, he would sneak up behind us throwing the snakes into the sink. I would scream and run to tell our father, but he couldn’t fire Derek because Derek was the butcher’s son and the butcher set the price on the cows we sold for meat.

While I lay in bed at night after a day of running from Derek and his snakes, I dreamt of borrowing Michelle’s courage just for the morning so, as he threw the snakes into the milk house sink, I could stand there, just like Michelle does, with my hands never dropping the green sponge. And I could turn my head toward Derek, look him right in the eyes, grit my teeth and say, “I’m not scared of you, Derek, because I’m not scared of someone with Dumbo ears.” And then I would turn back around and finish washing the bottles as if there weren’t any snakes in the water at all.

When I thought about Derek as I fell asleep, I knew borrowing the ants for just a few hours would do the trick. But there were other nights, nights I couldn’t fall asleep because scarier things wouldn’t let me fall asleep and I would dream of stealing all of
Michelle’s courage. I would call the brave purple ants from her side of the room and they would make their way, like a silenced marching band, to my splayed fingers.

The courage would affect me instantly and my mind would race, thinking about the things I would do tomorrow, the things that I was too scared to do today. In the morning, I would dream of going with Michelle to herd in the cows for their morning milking. I would be the one, not Michelle, to unlatch the yellow rubber handle of the gate in the electric fence. I would be the brave one, pulling the wire taut so it would reach the hook on the closest fence post, all the while my hands never touching the electric part. And when the time came to herd in the cows, I would walk around the group and come from behind to yell, “Giddy-up,” like an expert. And if some of them started to run in the wrong direction, as they usually did, I wouldn’t hightail it for any corner of the field the cows weren’t running toward, as I usually did. Instead, I would do like my father showed me and corral them in, like a cowboy from the West, tricking the cows so they would run toward the open gate and into the barn.

I would dream that later in the day after chores were done, Michelle and I would explore the hill past the pond and when the neighbor’s mean black dog started running after us like he always does, I would be the one, not Michelle, to stand right up to him, yelling real loud, “Go home, Devil,” even though I knew his name was Duke.

For months after discovering the source of my sister’s courage, I would lie awake willing her ants to come to my fingers. But one day, cropping up out of the blue like a rainy day in the dry season, it all changed.

Mom and Dad had hired some men who said they could fix the upstairs and roof of our new farmhouse. Michelle and I got really excited the morning the men started
working. But before we could climb any of their ladders or sneak any of their tools to play with, my mother yelled to us from the kitchen, ‘Ladies, you get your bottoms to that barn right this minute and clean out the pig pen.’ And we knew, when our mother said pig pen, the day was over because it took hours to haul all of the pig poop out to the manure spreader. We also knew that we couldn’t say to her, “No, mom, we’re not cleaning the pig pen out,” because there was no saying no to our mother.

Hours later, when Mom called us up for lunch, Michelle and I didn’t believe our eyes. The carpenters had taken the whole roof off the house. Not to say that the roof was lying on the ground; it was hanging in the air above the house. And it wasn’t just the roof hanging, but some of the walls and green siding was with it so there was this huge gap between the real house and the lifted roof. I remember thinking that our house was like a cake and the carpenters sliced off the top layer. There was a large crane in the front yard that was hooked to the peak of the roof and Michelle and I stood and stared as the men stood inside the second floor, placing vertical boards in the corners of the house.

Four days went by and the top of the house was like that the whole time. Mom made sure Michelle and I had a list of chores to do each morning so we didn’t bother the workers. We picked Mrs. Whitmarsh, the neighbor, two buckets of blackberries. We took the four-wheeler to the back pond and caught fish for our father. But each time we returned from a chore, Michelle stood at the bottom of the ladder, staring upstairs until Mom called her in. And every time Mom called her in, Michelle asked the same question. “Can we go upstairs tonight after the carpenter’s leave?” Mom gave her the same answer each time. “Over my dead body will I see you walking up those stairs. You hear me?”
Early, on the fifth morning, Michelle’s curiosity got the best of her. Mom and Dad were sitting in the kitchen with the two men who delivered our grain from Agway, knee deep in grain talk. With the calves and pigs fed, we sat on the porch husking that night’s corn. Michelle leaned over to me and whispered, “I thought of a plan. You gotta do it with me.”

I husked faster, not looking up. She kept talking. “I just wanna peek upstairs and then come back down to see if any of them noticed.” My hands started to sweat just by the thought of doing something my mom and dad told me not to. “We’ll be really quick. They’ll never know and it’s only walking up the stairs and down, just like we did everyday before the roof was off.” I stopped husking and stared at the driveway. Before I could say anything, Michelle stood up and starting walking away. After a couple of steps she stopped and, without turning around, whispered “Baby,” just loud enough for me to hear.

I was mad. I did not want my sister to think I was a baby anymore. I threw the half-husked corn cob into the paper bag next to me and stood up. “Let’s go,” I whispered back.

We walked around the house to the front door and tip-toed to the stairwell. Michelle went first and I followed her lead, going up the stairs on all fours so our feet didn’t make as much noise. When we got to the top step, Michelle turned to me and said, “This is better than sneaking up to the church steeple during Mom’s choir practice.” I sat down on the landing and looked around. The upstairs looked mostly like it had looked before, just with a high, hanging roof and a different floor. The carpenter’s had ripped out the old blue carpet along half of the boards in the floor, leaving pink insulation
sticking up like a checkerboard. As I looked around, I saw Michelle start walking out on
the floor. I started to tell her that the pink stuff wouldn’t hold her, but before I could say
anything, she disappeared through the floor. I knew immediately we were in big trouble.
She started yelling for Dad and I started yelling for Dad; I didn’t know what else to do.
He opened up the door at the bottom of the stairs and was nearly on top of me before I
could yell again. “Where’s your sister?” he shouted. “There,” I said, pointing to where
she was before the floor had swallowed her. He ran back downstairs and all of a sudden,
I got scared that I was going to be swallowed to, so I ran after him.

When he got to the bottom, he ran over to the wall where he and Mom had piled
the box springs from our bed. They were against the wall because they wouldn’t fit with
the mattresses we slept on in the living room and they couldn’t stay in the bedrooms
while the roof was off. The box springs didn’t quite lean against the wall; they were
standing straight up by themselves and we could hear Michelle yelling somewhere behind
them. Dad ripped them down and they crashed at our feet, falling on top of each other,
one at a time. When he got to the last one, there Michelle was, squished between the box
springs and the wall, her arms over her head. She was crying a little, but with her
eyebrows scrunched and mouth tightened, I could tell she was trying not to. Dad yanked
her away from the wall and sat her down on the pile of box springs and then sat down
next to her, breathing like the wind got knocked out of his chest. Mom was checking
Michelle for bruises and kissing her cheeks and the Agway men were standing behind
Mom, one of them still holding his coffee cup.

I was scared of getting in trouble so I didn’t say anything, but Michelle kept
repeating, “Sorry, Daddy; Sorry, Daddy,” over and over again. He didn’t say anything
either which made me more scared because we knew when he said nothing, it was a clue that his anger was boiling inside him like water in a cooking pot. He stood up and went to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

I sat down next to Michelle and Mom, not finding any bruises, took the Agway guys back to the kitchen. I thought about Michelle’s courage and how it didn’t do her or me any good. Michelle stared up at the hole she made in the ceiling. We sat for awhile before she grabbed my knee with her hand and whispered, ‘C’mon, let’s do it again. If we push this pile of box springs up against the wall, we’ll fall right down in them. It won’t hurt at all.’

I sat there, looking at my fingers and looking at Michelle’s fingers. I remember not seeing any purple ants in any of them and it was then that I started to wonder if I really wanted those purple ants anyway. I thought about making Derek not so mean and chasing the cows instead of them chasing me. And I thought about not wanting to fall through any floors. If taking her ants meant that I would start thinking it’s okay to do stuff like that, then I wasn’t so sure I wanted them in my fingers. So, looking at my sister and trying to make my voice sound like hers when she tells Devil to go home, I said, just like Mom would, “Over my dead body.”
My mother warned us that Kenya Blue from Staten Island would be different. “She doesn’t live on a farm like us, girls.” My sister, Michelle, and I knew a lot of kids from school that didn’t live on a farm; they all lived in town and had dads who worked at IBM. They spent their weekends riding bicycles on the sidewalks and swimming in the town’s pool. The dry summer day before Kenya Blue arrived Mom pointed out Staten Island on our New York State map. “It’s different down there; it’s the city.” She said ‘city’ like she said chicken pox or Protestant: slow, her teeth holding onto each consonant, as if emphasis alone would save us from catching the disease.

Michelle and I lay in our beds that night, whispering to each other from across the room. “What’s she gonna be like?” I asked. I was nine and thought my ten-year old sister knew everything. She was going to middle school next year; she knew how to do long division and she read Babysitter’s Club books every morning during breakfast. Of course she knows what girls from the city are like, I thought.

“She’s black, I bet,” Michelle answered, “like Olivia Leach.” Olivia Leach was the new girl in school and the only black girl I knew. Her family had moved to town from the city three weeks before school got out and in those three weeks, she had pushed me off the slide and stolen my seat in lunch, the seat right across from John Pollack, the boy who I was going to marry even though he was a Jehovah’s Witness.
I dreamed that night of a mean, fat black girl knocking down our front door, eating our whole quart of mint chocolate chip ice cream, breaking all my clarinet reeds, and telling my mom and dad that I cheated during Communion every Sunday, crunching the wafer into little bits and swallowing instead of letting it melt on my tongue the way I was supposed to. I lay in bed as long as I could the next morning. “My stomach hurts,” I told my mom, when she called up to me. If I was sick, I thought, she might forget to pick up Kenya Blue the Greyhound station.

“Get up, Lisa Marie!” She yelled from the bottom of the stairs. “You need to get your chores done now. We have to pick up Kenya at noon on the dot!”

Our station wagon pulled into the bus terminal ten minutes past twelve. Michelle and I sat in the backseat and stared at the group of kids huddled together in the front of the station. Most of them were sitting on bags and suitcases, their hands shoved into pockets. Mom told us to stay as she got out of the car, joining the group of parents crowded around a loud black woman. “I told you,” Michelle whispered, “she’s black.” We had yet to meet Kenya Blue, but I knew she was right.

Looking at the group of kids I remember thinking about the cookies that our grandmother kept in the top shelf of her freezer. Michelle and I could only have the cookies after we ate all our dinner, and only when our mother wasn’t there. Grandma called them Woopie pies, the vanilla batter-like stuff in the middle was frozen, sandwiched between two chocolate cookies that we quickly sunk our teeth into before we chickened out from the cold on our gums. On very special nights at Grandma’s house, she melted fudge on the stove and called Michelle and I over to the counter. We took two leftover popsicle sticks and poked them into the Woopie pies before sinking the
whole cookie into the fudge. Grandma made us put the chocolate covered cookies back in the freezer just long enough for us to put our pajamas on. Michelle and I would run into the bedroom, rip our clothes off, and run back to the kitchen while we tried to pull our pants up and get our arms in the sleeves. My mouth still waters when I think about sitting on the couch, under a warm blanket, as Grandma brought the cookies over. The fudge made the cookies black as night. The kids clustered around their luggage at the bus station made me think of the cookies, the white parts had disappeared entirely.

From that first moment, even before Kenya was mean to me or did anything bad, Michelle and I decided that it was us against her. In the car, as we stared at the group of kids, Michelle looked at me, pointed her finger at my chest then at hers, and said, "there's two of us." I knew what she meant. We watched the group of fresh-air parents move closer to the pack of kids. The loud woman started yelling out names. "Kenya Blue," she called. In the backseat, Michelle and I unbuckled our seatbelts and poked our heads out the half-open window.

A short chunky girl with braids coming out of her head in all directions, she wore jeans that hugged her fat legs and stomach with a long-sleeved red shirt. She looked at the ground, walking toward the car and my mother motioned to Michelle and me to get out as she carried Kenya's blue plastic suitcase. We didn't say anything; we were waiting for her to speak, certain that as soon as she opened her mouth she would prove to us and Mom that she was as mean as Olivia Leach. But she didn't speak, her mouth didn't open as Mom offered her the front seat of the car, or as Mom pulled out of the parking lot, it didn't open as we drove the forty miles home. And because she didn't open her mouth, Michelle and I didn't open ours either.
The entire week she stayed with us is a blur to me, everything but her last day. As we sat at the kitchen counter that morning, Kenya told me, while shoving her third bowl of Captain Crunch into her mouth, that I ate cereal like an old lady, sucking the milk off of the spoon first instead of shoving the whole thing in my mouth, like I was supposed to do. Before Michelle could respond in my defense, our mother sent us upstairs with the laundry basket to put away the clean clothes and get Kenya packed to go home.

Michelle and I sat on the floor and began to separate the clean laundry. Before we were done, Kenya yelled to us. “Hey,” she growled, sitting on the end of my bed, holding my pink, glass nightlight as high as her fat, black arm would reach. I was sitting on the blue carpet, my hands in the half-empty laundry basket that sat between me and my sister. Our folded clothes were scattered on the carpet around us in piles. Underwear. Socks. Shirts we wear to the barn. Shirts we don’t wear to the barn. Pants we’re allowed to get dirty. Pants we’re not allowed to get dirty. And Kenya Blue from Staten Island’s clothes.

“You’re not supposed to put my Sunday dress on the floor. It’s gonna smell like cow. I can’t go home smelling like cow. I’m gonna throw your lamp if you don’t get my Sunday dress off the floor.” She reached higher, the nightlight touching the panels of the sloped ceiling.

I stared at Kenya Blue’s pile of clothes. She was supposed to be putting them in her suitcase. Her yellow dress sat folded in half at the bottom of the pile. It had white lace around the collar and a white ribbon sewn at the waist. Kenya wore it the night before to Saturday evening mass and my sister and I laughed at her when we saw the white ribbon disappear between her rolls of stomach as she sat down in the pew.
“I’m gonna throw it. I can’t be smelling like cow when I go home.” I looked up from the pile of clothes and watched her yell. “They don’t let cows in the city.” Her top lip curled up and her nose wrinkled. She said cows as if someone had just thrown baking soda on her tongue and she was trying to spit it out.

I didn’t want her to throw my nightlight. I was ten and scared of the dark. The nightlight was the only thing that Mom let me keep on while I fell asleep. If I didn’t have a light on in the night, I had to hold my pee till the morning came and holding it didn’t always work. But I didn’t tell Kenya Blue to put the light down because I was also scared of her. The third day she was here, she kicked a chicken against the coop’s fence because she said it smelled like a hooker. When she said that, my sister yelled out from the henhouse door, “Chickens do not smell like hookers, Kenya. You smell like a hooker.”

“You don’t even know what a hooker is!”

“I’m gonna tell my Dad that you kicked the chicken and he’s gonna send you back to the city.” Michelle walked out of the henhouse as she said this, her arms full of dirty, yellow eggs. Kenya stopped chasing the chickens when Michelle said that. She walked out of the fence and stood next to me. I was too scared to say a word.

And I didn’t say a word as Kenya Blue huffed my nightlight at me. It flew past my shoulder and crashed into the wooden dresser I was leaning against. I stood up, holding back my tears. I picked Kenya Blue’s pile of clothes up, all except her yellow dress. My mother came running up the stairs and my sister stomped over to meet her at the top.
“Kenya Blue threw a nightlight at Lisa. It smashed and now it’s all over the carpet.” Michelle kept yelling as I followed Mom into our room. “And Kenya kicked the chickens and said they smelled like hookers.”

“Kenya Blue,” my mother shouted, “You’ve got two minutes to get your suitcase packed and get downstairs.”

“She put my dress on the floor-or!” Kenya jutted her chin out and pointed at me as she ran over to my mother. I bent down and moved the laundry basket to the side. My foot slid forward and caught part of her yellow dress under its sole.

My mother yelled back, “Kenya. Now! Michelle and Lisa, get in the car. The backseat. Now.” I turned my sneaker against the material and dug my foot into the carpet before I ran downstairs behind my sister and out to the station wagon. We didn’t speak as Mom and Kenya got into the car minutes later.

The entire ride to the Greyhound station was quiet. My sleeve was covered in snot. I kept wiping my nose because I didn’t want Kenya to know that I was still crying. When we got to the bus station, most of the kids were already on the bus. I could see their suitcases and bags piled up in the open compartment under their seats. Their fresh-air families were standing near the building, waving goodbye and blowing kisses. Mom parked the car and told Kenya it was time to go. Michelle and I got out, but Kenya didn’t budge. My mom told her again, “Kenya, it’s time to go. The bus is waiting.” Kenya jumped from the front seat into the back. She stuffed her stiff black body under the front seat of the Chevy station wagon, taking the unwound seat belt with her.

“You can’t make me go home! I’m staying!” Her shouts were muffled behind the floor mat that lay over her body like a blanket. I sat on the trunk, hot in the midday sun,
peaking in the rear window, staring at the hundreds of braids held together with plastic, pink barrettes sticking out from under the seat. “Miss Cindy, I don’t want to go.” She was sobbing now and my mother closed the car door and marched across the parking lot towards the NYC bound bus to find the fresh-air child chaperone.

The same big black woman Michelle and I saw on the first day came over to our car and opened the back seat. She said to my mother, “this happens all the time,” and smiled at me as she asked my mom to take Kenya’s suitcase to the bus. She whispered something I couldn’t hear into the car and Kenya got out and stood there. The woman stood at Kenya’s side, wrapped her arms around her shoulders and walked her to the bus. I watched as all the other families and all the other black kids on the bus stared. When Kenya was finally on, I brought my sleeve up to my nose and sniffed, wondering if they could smell the cows.
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