

POPULATED

By

Megan Maassen

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

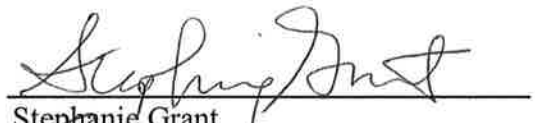
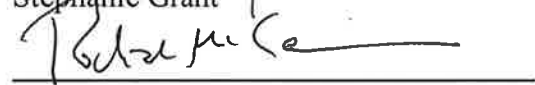
the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

In

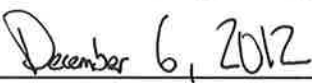
Creative Writing

Chair:


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Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences



Date

2012

American University

Washington, D.C. 20016

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For Adam

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ABSTRACT

Populated is an original collection of essays that explores the ways in which identity is linked, formed, and shaped—perhaps even reimagined—by the influences of place, personal relationships, and history. I found myself in a complicated relationship with Wisconsin when I moved, six years ago, to Washington D.C. Wisconsin was the place I was dying to leave behind but longed to hang onto once I'd left. These essays discover an identity that straddles a thousand miles and that is populated by unexpected and sometimes resisted influences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Richard McCann and Stephanie Grant, my committee chairs and workshop leaders, who never failed to provide generous and thoughtful feedback that helped me develop and more fully understand my work; I am truly indebted to both of my mentors. I am also grateful to many of the American University faculty who guided me throughout my degree: Andrew Holleran for ever-so-kindly putting a microscope on both my ideas and grammar; Glenn Moomau for helping me find and refine my skills in reportage; Janet Auten and John Hyman for encouraging me to teach college writing at American University.

I owe my peers, in both American University's MFA and MA program many, thanks for reading, editing, and commenting on countless drafts of my work, and pushing me intellectually and emotionally to better myself. I am especially appreciative of many video chat discussions with Allison Sparks and Wei Tchou, who were often my sounding board on initial drafts of my work. In addition, I'd like to thank my college writing students at American University, who may or may not realize that reading, discussing, and thinking about their work helps me to better understand and diagnose my own writing.

I will never be able to thank my parents enough for their repeated sacrifices and endless support. Not only did they help me crack open Northern Wisconsin—driving me through the woods, making introductions, taking photographs—but they've helped me, over twenty-eight years, to become and see the world as a writer.

Finally, I owe Adam a lifetime of gratitude for spending afternoons reading *The Elements of Style* with me, discussing commas, mapping story lines in colored pencil, and reading draft after draft after draft without appearing disinterested. Without Adam, these stories would never have been told.

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WHEN THE LAKE MIXES

The water is always cold. In the winter the portion of Lake Superior that can be seen from my grandparent's kitchen window is thirty-two degrees, frozen solid, for eight to nine feet in Wisconsin's best, most severe winters. Between Bayfield and the largest of the Apostle Islands is an ice highway, an extension of County Trunk H where normal traffic rules apply. The route is marked with evergreen trees slotted into the ice, something that strikes me as northern Wisconsin pageantry, but is actually a safety measure helping drivers follow the designated road in times of low visibility, times when the shore-winds bluster with snow obscuring the Chequamegon Bay. As winter carries on the path oscillates between crisp and dingy, the white snow cover is plowed, banked, and sanded in a streak across the bay.

In June and July, winter lingers twenty meters below the surface where the water temperature stays an almost constant thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit. Four steel hulled ferries cross the water every half hour between 6:30 am and 11:00 pm, traversing the same diagonal route across the kitchen window. At its warmest, sixty-seven degrees, the water is cold enough to inhibit bacterial growth, making the surface waters uncomfortable (the average swimming pool is kept between seventy-eight and eighty-four degrees Fahrenheit) but worth submerging in: open eyes will see the pocked track of a rock covered bottom and, on average, whatever might be within twenty-seven feet.

When my family and I arrive, following a six hour car ride from Madison, my grandmother asks me what I'll be having; five-o'clock is happy hour. I've found the best response to be "whatever you're having." Their liquor cabinet is slim and predictable, a bottle of Jacques Bonet brandy, sweet vermouth, mini bottles of Cabernet for my mom, a dusty bottle of

unopened something—likely a gift, and a six pack of Bush for Vera, my great-aunt, who always drinks her beer in a glass with ice.

The drink of the night is Manhattans. In Wisconsin a Manhattan is made with brandy, as is the Old Fashioned. It's a default you see nowhere else, and I knew nothing else until I moved away: brandy is our liquor. Korbel distributes 385,000 cases of brandy a year, 139,000 of which are directly shipped to Wisconsin, but none of which my grandparents buy because they are Jacque Bonet brand loyalists. My grandma pulls out a heavy bottom tumbler for both of us while my grandpa does the same for himself and my dad. He can only handle two glasses at once because his grip is shifty, having lost both of his index fingers in two unrelated encounters with a band-saw nearly fifty years apart. Though he's adopted the explanation that he cut off the second one to "even things out," he is noticeably frustrated with his new, untidy handwriting.

Ice from the reused two quart ice cream bucket in the freezer is added to each glass, and I watch as my grandma measures two ounces of brandy into each drink. Then she tips in a capful of vermouth, skipping her own glass. She tells me they don't have any maraschino cherries as grandpa announces this is the first time they've used vermouth in weeks. "Water?" she asks. I nod yes and she swipes the glass through a stream of tap water, well water that she claims is far superior to the junk my parents have in Madison. It is, of course, captured ground water flowing towards the Great Lake. "Merry Christmas," she says. It's December 22nd.

Their house is modest if not small. I will sleep on the floor and my parents on the hide-away bed in the mostly unused living room. The great room, an addition my grandfather built nearly sixteen years ago, is stocked with four recliners, a gas stove, and sturdy oak furniture made by grandpa, stained and varnished by grandma. MSNBC, which I suspect is a compromise

between the Home and Garden channel and John Wayne, murmurs in the background. In two-and-a-half years, the time since my last visit, very little has changed.

My grandpa eats Fun Size Snickers Bars, Hershey Kisses, and peanut brittle during happy hour. The small trash can next to his chair is filled with wrappers. They tell us their holiday plans: to join Aunty Vera, who is ninety-four, in a Christmas Eve sleepover with Vivian, but they will sleep at home. They tell us the holiday news: Ronnie Parks isn't doing so well. They tell us the holiday gossip: Karen Peterson can't find a tenant because she listened to her hot shot son and is asking for city prices, too much in this neck of the woods. Out the window I notice, in the dim evening light, a ferry crossing the bay; the ice must not be too thick. Grandpa offers me a Snickers Bar, then cups a knobby hand around his mouth making the conversation just his and mine. He says he's always weighed 145 pounds. Or at least within four pounds either way.

Before dinner Grandma presses the red button on her phone, the one the manufacturer clearly intended as a speed dial for the hospital but that she's programmed to speed dial Vera. They chat four or five times a day. Grandma and her oldest sister Vera look just alike, except the rich white hair Vera gets done every Friday in Washburn. In twenty-eight years my grandmother's gently permed crop of auburn hair has never changed. It's a wig. I used to press my fingers against its coarse texture, crowding the hair toward her scalp and letting it recoil back into place. This, I thought, is what old hair feels like. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I learned her hair fell out when she developed toxemia while pregnant with my mother. I've never seen her without the wig or her few strands of natural hair pinned to a curler resting just outside the gathered silk of her night cap. That night when we celebrate Christmas together the last thing my grandma pulls from her stocking are two silk night caps from my mom.

Five miles down Highway Thirteen is the Onion River. It's a spring-fed trout stream that flows into Lake Superior. The cold clear water is where trout and salmon spawn and juveniles spend two years before migrating to the lake, before becoming adults.

Aunty Vera owns a segment of the wetlands that fringe the lower reaches of the river just before it fuses with the lake in a small estuary. On a small clearing off the highway stands her screened-in porch and one-bedroom house. When I was young her house was complicated, the kitchen stretched in a straight line across the living room wall, and on the other side of the long kitchen wall, through a maze of her bedroom and bathroom, was her mother. I never had memorable conversations with my great-grandmother; not only was she old but the goiter that hung from her neck, never covered, made me sheepish and certain that we were not alike. It was the front of the house where I would drink milk from a bag and convince Vera to take me to the barn with a curved metal roof where Mr. Haney, her donkey, would eat apples I skewered on a stick, too afraid to let him eat from my hand.

Twice a year the lake mixes. Near both the winter and summer solstices the water temperature is a consistent thirty-nine degrees top to bottom, which means it is also a consistent density top to bottom. High winds, which can be counted on, circulate the water from the surface to the floor, redistributing nutrients and oxygen within the water column so that the aquatic insects, invertebrates, and mollusks can survive on the bottom, and the steelhead trout, yellow perch, and walleye can be well fed at the top. The water mixes almost entirely, then cools or warms into layers where each tier supports its own portion of the ecosystem. The lake drifts and settles into distinct bits.

On December 23rd I wear Thermopolis running tights, Under Armour, gloves, a knit hat, and my hooded running jacket, hood up. There are lake effect flurries in the air and the thermometer reads twenty-one degrees at eleven a.m. As I'm lacing up my shoes, my Grandma tells me I ought to run into town on Highway 13 instead of the dirt railroad bed that skirts the lakeshore; she doesn't trust that the black bears are fully hibernating in this mild winter. Peering out the side window she also tells me if a white Cadillac is parked outside the shop, ah yes—there it is—go in and see Harold. He likes you kids. Both are suggestions I'd like to ignore. The rail bed, a dirt foot path encircled in oaks, birches, and evergreens, has more charm than the shoulder of a sleepy two lane highway, and I'm not certain Harold, my second cousin, will even remember who I am.

I find myself walking toward the uninsulated mechanic's garage that stands two hundred feet south west of my grandparent's house. It's owned by Harold, as is my grandparent's house, the eighteen-wheeled log truck, a collection of lumber harvesting equipment that pluck trees from the ground and scrape away the branches, and the fleet of Bayfield County school buses that come and go from the shared driveway. Harold is seventy-five and strikes me as the kind of man who eats oatmeal, cream of wheat, or buckwheat pancakes for breakfast. Something sturdy. When I walk into his office that morning he's wearing a hat I have no vocabulary for, some sort of wool baseball cap with an exterior hatband—made of the same felted wool—fixed above the brim with a simple string bow. It turns out to be a Stormy Kromer cap, a hat named for a semi-pro baseball player turned railroad engineer whose wife modified a baseball cap to provide warmth and grip when the wind blew along the Chicago & Northwestern railroad. A downward tug of the hatband provides ear cover. Harold's office manager wears the same hat in a different muted tone, hatband up.

Harold wears things like buffalo check flannel, work boots, and suspenders. He looks like a lumberjack because he is a lumberjack. The cluster of three steel garages that interrupt my grandparent's back window view of Lake Superior are called "Viking Motors." Not surprisingly, there is almost no information available on the internet except a yellow book listing categorizing the private company as a logging/general auto repair/school bus service established and incorporated in 1951. There are no reviews on Yelp.

A woman carrying a tray of what appears to be homemade Christmas cookies walks in behind me. She, unlike myself, knows where she is going and does not wander past the vehicle lifts and precarious machinery to ask a young mechanic—who is startled to see an unfamiliar woman protected only by spandex running clothes—if Harold is in. I learn a door on the left leads to two small offices with furniture that might have been purchased in 1951. I linger outside the second door frame with the cookie woman, who has wool socks pulled over her jeans, and we hear Harold finalize the sale of a camper he'd recently towed across Alaska. He hangs up. Thirty days in that thing was plenty.

Harold cocks his head and looks at me, filing through names and relations, because really, what is the word for your mother's sister's granddaughter? He comes up with "cousin" and lets his voice slide up at the end because it's all very confusing, but he lands assertively on "Megan." Cousin is apparently a link too ambiguous because the woman asks me the question that I've come to notice is characteristic in a community of two-thousand: who do you belong to? And at this point I know who I belong to, but not if I belong. I don't know if this place, this place where I didn't grow up, wants me or if I want it. When I tell her my grandparents are Bea and Buster and point in the direction of their house, she nods her head wanting to make the connection, but is at a loss. Linda and Joe Maassen are my parents. It all seems to lead to

disappointment, a feeling that somehow we ought to be connected by a conversation where she can say something intimate about the people I am intimate with, like “Oh that Buster Kelly, he sure is a sharpshooter,” peeling away our anonymity, knowing me by knowing my family.

A taxidermy steelhead trout stretches across two feet of Harold’s office wall. Its dorsal side is speckled with green and brown and its mouth hangs open. When he tells me to take a seat it’s the first thing I anxiously show interest in, it’s my attempt to avoid being a city girl, to avert my own perception that I am inherently haughty because I am from somewhere else; I want very desperately, in nearly all parts of my life, to be at ease with what surrounds me. And with family it becomes being one of them. I pretend to command small town Northern Wisconsin sensibilities even if it has been two and a half years since my last visit. Even if we both know that that is my relationship to the region, visitor.

Harold’s voice is almost gravelly and he almost mumbles, which makes him sound gruff, as he explains he’d pulled two steelhead from the water that day, how he told the other ice fishers he’d be happy to run a seminar on how to catch the big ones. He laughs at his Northern Wisconsin machismo, and I join in.

I’ve never ice-fished. I’m uncertain how Harold even found himself drilling a hole in the ice, widening it with a chisel, setting a tip-up—a device that is rigged to raise a flag when tension of the fishing line changes—sixteen miles from the mainland just off the coast of Michigan Island, an Island the National Parks Service warns is a challenge to visit. “Snowmobile” he tells me.

Had I gone to high school here I’d have known that. I’d have know all that and wouldn’t have to research tip-ups because I would have used one in Mrs. Collins’ physical education class.

Harold's metal frame desk matches the filing cabinet towers that stand in a line against the wall, each seemingly designed to get the job done, nothing more. The most complex device in the office is a multi-line phone with yellowed paper labeling the speed dial options. It's prominently placed, more central than the Bayfield County phone book and logging equipment catalogs piled out of reach at the desk corner. I find it a spare desktop in comparison to the ones I've known.

He conducts business over the phone. He finds no need for the internet. A few days earlier he heard there was a new diesel engine supplier in the area, so he called them up, thought he'd check out their prices, and asked them to send a catalogue. The guy on the other end curtly welcomed Harold to the twenty-first century and told him it was all online.

He rests back in his desk chair, hands clasped over his assertive belly.

"I told him I made more money scratching the back of this here tobacco tin than he'll ever make, and then hung up." I don't see a tobacco tin anywhere and don't believe that he's done dip (what people in the upper Midwest sometimes call snuff) in years, but his bulky hands make a scuffing motion. "I'm in the business of making paper."

None of what he says is surprising. That the paper industry isn't what it used to be. Manufacturers try to tell him how to log. Him refusing their way. Them saying our way or else. Him choosing "or else." Them stunned, what will you do without us? Him twisting his knife of good old fashioned control, "Since when do you care about me?"

He carries pride in his autonomy, a sense that the world won't change him. But I also get no sense that he wants to change the world; it's the familiar that he, like so many of us, preserves. And then I'm struck by the memory that he neither drinks nor smokes. His father

drank too much and his first wife was tethered to an oxygen tank for the final years of her life. And maybe that is why I'm sitting in his office getting lessons in the lumber trade. Because family means something.

When I get up Harold tells me to sit back down. I haven't talked about myself yet. So I do. He responds to my graduate studies with the same foreign interest as I have in logging: "I was never much at school." And I say something about experience, that it's worth something too, but he already knows that. I'm stuck with myself trying to camouflage my out-of-town values, not noticing that he doesn't expect us to be alike, not noticing that maybe he likes being my docent to the Northern Wisconsin woods.

When I stand up again the mechanics are coming in for a mid-morning coffee break. I'm invited to stay for coffee with powdered creamer and the first Christmas cookies of the year, but I decline--I'll drink coffee after my run.

"You're going to burn all your energy on the road?" Harold raises his hand as if to say "suit yourself," and I realize I've never held a job that required more than yogurt or a piece of toast for breakfast. For me the water is always cold and I find the forested rail bed a nice place to jog. I don't inherently see trophies in the lake or my livelihood in the trees. I will always be a visitor up here. As I walk out of the shop Harold calls after me, "You should try and make it up more often." And I know part of what he means is Grandma is eighty-four and Vera ninety-four. But what I don't quite realize at the time is that maybe I'm a visitor who belongs.

Tossed below Lake Superior's cold water are twenty-one shipwrecks. The *Finn McCool*, a logging barge, sank at her mooring; the *Clarence*, a gas screw, exploded; the *Moonlight*, a

three-mast schooner, sprung a leak; the *Fedora*, an 1,848 ton wooden bulk carrier, caught fire; the *Noquebay*, a schooner barge, ran aground at Stockton Island; and the *Lucerne*, a three-mast schooner, lost control of its anchor during a snowstorm—with only its masts above water, a light keeper found the crew tied to the rigging, covered in six inches of ice.

The lake is unforgiving but never forgets. The cold, fresh water, free of corrosive salts and bacteria preserve the vessels. It also causes bodies to sink, and without bacteria to generate gas, never resurface.

SHELTER OF NOWHERE

I woke to find the head and mouthparts of a deer tick embedded in my abdomen. Its body, which houses a digestive tract, reproductive organs, and legs, remained, much to my disgust, on the outside. I'd slept the night on an inflatable mattress in my grandparent's living room, where, in the early days of May, summer had yet to emerge. Northern Wisconsin's nighttime temperatures remained just above freezing. However, coming from 1,000 miles away in Washington D.C., where warmth and humidity had already descended upon the city, I'd brought flimsy pajamas and my Grandmother had offered me her pilled sweat suit instead.

Undoubtedly I'd found my interloper in the woods. The two-lane highway connecting the collection of small towns on Lake Superior's coast is a mere hallway in the dense forest. Pitch and pine needles mat my grandparent's balding lawn. Nature is inescapable up there. So the tick who had, with its scalpel-like mouthparts, made an incision through my skin, and anchored its barbed needle appendage in my tissue where it fed on my blood, was not a surprising discovery. With my grandmother's teal sweatshirt lying on the bathroom floor, I stripped the matching pants from my legs, and eyed the crevices of my body. Blemishes were abundant: a course blister on the ridge of my toe, a scar creasing the skin of my index finger, a mole on the flesh between my armpit and chest. Goosebumps covered my chest as I waited for the shower water to warm. The tick was, unlike the other blemishes, not made of my own skin, but rather made of this place. It was the ecosystem categorizing me. Mammal. Warm blooded. Host.

I stepped under the water with the faint hope of discomforting the tick. The tick's legs wavered as water coursed over the round of my abdomen. Instead of finding pleasure in the distressed movement of the characteristic eight legs of an anachrid, the parasite's movement

caused me anxiety. My goosebumps had evaporated into the steam, but the tick remained. This blemish was not mine to control; it was alive.

I toweled off before tugging at its body with a tweezers. When I pulled on its hard shelled thorax my skin followed, lengthening into a taut peak, stretching from its mouth toward my body. The tick's saliva served as an anti-coagulant to keep my blood flowing while it secreted an adhesive substance to anchor itself in place. Subsequent yanks on the body did nothing. So I stood naked in front of the mirror as I plucked a leg from the parasite. Then I covered it all up with a Band-Aid and put on my own clothes.

At 28 years old I'd come to the Bayfield Peninsula, the place where I'd always been a visitor, the place where both my parents grew up, searching—broadly—to understand life in Northern Wisconsin. I thought, ah yes. These people are interesting. Maybe I can show the world a place that feels unexplored. Maybe I can understand the lives that came before me. However, I wasn't looking at this place, these people, in terms of "we."

I started by scheduling a ride along with the Washburn chief of police, Ken Johnson. Thursday, 8:30 am, City Hall. He'd take me on his morning beat. The City Hall lobby felt dim, as if another era lurked in the fifty-cent Pepsi machine or the dais that was shoved, haphazardly, in the corner. Of twelve globe light fixtures only five were lit. A woman with grey hair and eyebrows penciled in brown greeted me, apologizing for the clutter, "With so many elections recently, we took the pews out." I waited for Ken Johnson at the dais.

The first stop of our morning was Ken's parent's house, up by the Washburn cemetery. On the ride I noticed his cruiser was orderly. His personal effects were limited to a travel mug of coffee, a tin of sugar-free Altoids, and a stray Honey Bun wrapper under his seat. His reddish

hair was balding around the crown of his head, he wore wire glasses, and there was a noticeable gap between his front teeth. The handgun and taser on his hip were largely unused. He wasn't dubious of me—an outsider whose last name he didn't recognize—but couldn't quite grasp why I wanted to go on a ride along. The truth was that I didn't quite know what I was looking for, what I hoped to find in this place, or how I planned to find it in the front seat of a Washburn police cruiser. But, quite generously, he accommodated me. He explained, in his mild manner, that his parents forgot to let the dogs out before leaving on a day trip that morning. He hoped they'd left the doors unlocked, but lamented that often they didn't; in a community of 2,000 people, barking dogs and a broken money box at the marina were more common than theft of personal property.

He let a dark Labrador Retriever and Chihuahua into the front yard, under the tall canopy of deciduous forest, and pointed to an ironwood tree—He told me they have a lovely bloom in the spring. A few years back his parents found a collection of human skulls and bones buried in the yard. The Madison crime lab revealed them to be over 100 years old. “Pauper graves,” Ken suggested. We got back in the cruiser.

The morning continued at the same leisurely pace. We dropped keys for a cruiser at the repair shop. We drove around town. He told me about Operation Desert Storm where, on field duty, they'd used cigarettes as poker chips. We drove to Tetzner's Dairy to see the view of Lake Superior. We drove back to the cemetery to patrol the woods where “not just high schoolers” go to have sex. He showed me the helicopter landing pad just behind the fire department—it works better than the high school football field. We walked the lakeshore path while he drank his morning coffee. Along the path he pointed to a cluster of small bushes where he'd found a collection of marijuana plants. “People always go to the same place for their shenanigans,” he

told me. “There’s a difference between a human and animal pathway. I just look for where the grass is trampled.” He’d uprooted the marijuana and left a sign indicating that the plants—should the owner wish—could be claimed at the police department.

Ken is an outdoorsman. His ring tone is a duck call. He forages chanterelles by the fish hatchery. He mows trails into his property. He owns four horses. He raises chickens. He grows raspberries, blueberries, apples, plums, okra, and shiitakes. However, he seemed most proud to call himself a turkey hunter. At his house, the last place we stopped that morning, he introduced me to his turkeys. A Jake and two Toms strutted slowly with hitched steps while staring at me. “Turkeys have amazing eyesight,” he said, and then explained that the prize of a Tom is his beard. He originally bought the turkeys to study their behavior. But since his children named them, he won’t slaughter them as he once envisioned. A name was all they needed to become members of the family.

As we drove back to City Hall Ken told me that nearly every house in town had a name. People would report “a ruckus down at the Lizotte house” instead of giving an address. In a community where he knows all of the residents this wouldn’t be confusing, except the house name doesn’t always match its current occupants, but rather a family from the past. Chief Johnson lives in the “Jack” house. My dad and his siblings own their childhood home on West 3rd street, a white two story that, for most of the year, is vacant. I can’t help but wonder if Ken didn’t recognize my name because it’s unoccupied.

Ticks are of the subclass *Acari*. They are mites. Four things characterize mites. Size: Small. Speck-like really. They rarely grow longer than a millimeter. Age: Old. Mite fossils date back 400 million years to the Devonian Period. Prevalence: ubiquitous. Mites have

successfully colonized every known terrestrial, marine, and fresh water habitat. They are found in alpine extremes, mineral soils as deep as 10 meters, subterranean waters as warm as 50 degrees Celsius, and frigid sea trenches as deep as 5,000 meters. Relationships: symbiotic. Of the 200 mite species some are parasites, some are herbivores, and some are detritivores—consumers of dead organic matter. Most have a major impact on their host.

Biology lumps my tick with all other small, old, ubiquitous, symbiotic Arachnids. Acarologist Gerald Krantz suggests mites are most easily recognized by what they are not: other arachnids.

My maternal grandmother's eldest sister, Vera Warmuth, makes a trip to Carol's Hair Salon every Friday morning. This, I thought, would be my chance to experience Washburn's ageing population. I drove my grandfather's GMC Jimmy, the model *Playboy* magazine rated truck of the year in 1995, down State Highway Thirteen to pick up Vera.

Vera used to be five feet and eight inches tall, but with ninety-four years on her shoulders, she's lost a good bit of height. Her fair complexion is soft, and though her cheeks are settled caverns she doesn't appear wan. That Friday she wore not oversized but ample glasses, pants she called "lumberjack slacks" due to their dark color, and a turtleneck under a tweed jacket. Her delicate white hair-do, she suggested, had wilted.

Carol's hair salon was comfortably small. Vera took precise, drawn-out steps that lingered but didn't shuffle down the planked ramp that ran from Washburn's main drag to the side door where we entered. The space was one big room with bays and alcoves prepared for different steps of the hairdressing process: washing, styling, and drying. Carol, who, like myself, is Vera's great-niece, was finishing the still-auburn curls of an elderly woman, Dorothy, when

we arrived. She'd be ready for Auntie V momentarily. I settled on a padded folding chair and Vera adjusted the seat on her walker.

Vera's voice is mild with no sharp tones. When greeting Dorothy she, ever so slightly, projected her voice, then, at a conversational volume told me Dorothy babysat for Harold and Nancy, Vera's children, some sixty odd years ago. Observing Dorothy's abundant hair Vera remarked, "Carol has to look hard for mine."

Vera's hair is meager. She moved to the shampooing station on the back wall, the wall beyond which Carol's living room lies. Dorothy walked with ease towards the door but paused at my chair. She stood silent for a few moments then told me in slow and labored speech, "We were hell raisers." It occurred to me that she'd suffered age different from Vera. Physically she moved well, but something—Alzheimer's, a stroke—strained her words.

This salon was a place where women knew each other. Time and small place bound them in ways different from the anonymity of cities, different from my experience. These women never had a chance not to know each other.

I heard Carol, whose voice carried charming enthusiasm, tell Vera she overslept and thank goodness for the world's shortest commute. Pinned back out of her face with a barrette, Carol's hair fell in blond-highlighted waves over her shoulders. Her diminutive eyes were deepened with charcoal liner, and her hands were slender with French manicured nails. An empty coffee pot and trunk trimmed with Spiderman stickers sat on a tall bookshelf in the corner. The black paint of the plywood front counter matched the card table display of hair products, and the wood-paneled walls were painted periwinkle. The space could have been tawdry, but it wasn't. It was smart, and only a close look beneath the paint revealed Carol's expertise. She could make the hardscrabble town feel soft.

Only after Vera was shampooed did I realize that her hair, if simply combed, wouldn't conceal her scalp. For the first time I understood the typical hairstyle of elderly women, not as mature taste, but as the best illusion. The wispy perm, even after a week of wilting, cloaked the nakedness of age. Vera walked, steadying herself with a hand on the wall, to the styling chair where Carol would wrap clusters of hair around blue curlers.

Another client, Ilene, arrived, escorted by her husband. He was a stocky man who wore plastic framed glasses with a double nose bridge. Before leaving he was sure to tell Carol not to let Ilene leave the salon alone for fear she'd fall.

"I'll tie her up if she tries to get frisky," Carol responded.

Ilene had a full head of tight red curls and was of the same generation as Vera and Dorothy. She wore jeans that ballooned at the hips despite slumping in the rear, a soft plaid shirt, and casual nubuck shoes. When the door closed behind her husband she quite unexpectedly gasped and broke under anxiety. Carol brought her tissues.

"He makes me nervous," Ilene said, referring to her husband but not indicating why. Vera, seated under a domed hairdryer, directed her gaze to *The Bayfield County Journal*; she's not the type to stare.

"You're with friends now," Carol told her and lightheartedly added, "We can get you a shot of whisky or something." She'd recently bought alcohol for her wedding which was a month away. A whole case of whisky sat on the other side of the wall.

"Vodka," Ilene replied with blank inflection.

Ilene went on and divulged the details of her trip to the emergency room the night before, telling Carol she did "nothing but wait." Talking calmed her. Carol leaned Ilene back and

gently rubbed the shampoo into her hair. “The doc was good looking,” she said with little intonation, then told Carol she ought to go for him.

“I think it’s a bit late for that,” Carol responded, moving Ilene to the styling chair.

After twenty minutes of drying, Carol removed Vera’s curlers and loosened the ringlets with a comb to create an orb of hair. Her hands moved deftly as she coordinated the strands into full coverage. They discussed family because grandsons, cousins, and uncles were common ground. Uncle Junior, who’d been in and out of prison his whole life, had a son facing eleven years for something marijuana related.

Carol reacted, “Ugh.”

“He’s a nice fellow,” Vera claimed.

I suspected neither woman knew Junior’s son well, and wondered if my name elicited the same generic responses. I, of course, shared the same classification as Carol—great-niece—but, thanks to distance, my life was a collection of vague bullet points:

- Washington, DC
- Unmarried
- Almost thirty
- Student

I wasn’t unimportant, just never around long enough to be specific. But it didn’t occur to me that perhaps I didn’t want to become specific. Maybe by trying to understand them I was just attempting to reassure myself that I wasn’t of this order.

My tick, *Ixodes scapularis*, takes only three meals in a lifetime. During each feast the mite grows fat—nearly doubles its size—on the proteins and lipids of mammalian blood, while slow intercellular digestion allows pathogens to survive and circulate to the next host.

Once nurtured, which often takes days and days and days, the tick abandons its host to transform. The satiated larva sheds its exoskeleton to become a nymph. The satiated nymph sheds its exoskeleton to become an adult. The satiated female sheds its eggs to become a carcass.

I stopped by the tribal cemetery looking for a past to latch onto. The cemetery was an overgrown pocket in the woods of the Redcliff Indian Reservation. It was adorned by a gazebo, a birch flag pole, and no uniformity. Plots were scattered. Granite headstones marked some graves, meager crosses made from intersecting pieces of wood or metal marked others, and several were mounds marked only by flower tributes. An empty bottle of Patron, a ripped pink belt, and dozens of silk flowers rested at a granite headstone engraved with the name Timothy Hanson. A Lego figurine lay under the wood cross where Gary Donney's name was written in black ink. A picture of a young man had faded under the tape holding it to the center of a metal cross. I knew no one buried there.

I moved on to the Washburn cemetery which was full of familiar names, some resting on the Catholic side labeled "Calvary," others on the public "Woodland" side; only a paved center path divided the cemetery. The two sides appeared uniform, expanding from the middle, and though none of the plots were exactly the same, the clean rows created order, as if grief followed rules. But I wasn't there to grieve. I was there to digest the names that'd spent lifetimes in these woods.

I found Vera's name twice, inscribed on both her first and second husband's gravestones. She had two different last names—Warmuth and Maki, no middle initial, and no year of death. Only days later when retrieving her prescription from Lunsford's pharmacy would I notice the thin capital letters of the label read "Elvira," a name I never knew as hers.

Though I'd covered the tick with a Band-Aid, fear set in. I couldn't help but see the anachrid as a mobile hypodermic syringe carrying the spiral shaped bacteria that would bore into my tissue and infect me with Lyme disease. I knew little about the disease, like that it was rarely fatal, that it often came with a bulls-eye rash and flu-like symptoms, or that it was discovered in Lyme, Connecticut where the disease was thought to be local, as if the bacteria *Borrelia burgdorferi* was their own. Regardless, I'd already begun to mourn my health. So I went to the doctor.

There was one general practice physician in Washburn, Dr. Stephen Kreuser. He is a serious, small-framed man with reedy grey hair. On the walls of his clinic were framed photographs of the Apostle Islands' sea caves, all of which were his own artwork. Saying nothing, Dr. Kreuser seemed to disapprove of my tweezing, and drowned the tick in isopropyl alcohol. I lay on his table fully clothed except a gown replacing my shirt. I lifted the gown to my ribs. His silence told me that people who knew the woods knew the proper way to rid themselves of its harms. I could be nothing other than a stranger, which should have been a relief. I didn't belong to these woods. But I felt uncomfortable. It seemed I'd disappointed him by being inept, by not being able to figure out the woods. He extracted the mouthparts causing a trickle of blood to run from my wound. A soft gauze pad became saturated with the protein and lipids of my blood. The second pad soaked up very little, and I was sealed with a new Band-Aid.

“Who do you belong to?” He asked.

“Bea and Buster Kelly are my grandparents,” I told him.

He shook his head. The names weren’t familiar.

“Vera Warmuth is my great-aunt.”

This was his patient, a name with iterations he knew and wrote prescriptions for. Her name categorized me, but Dr. Kreuser remained detached, clinical. Our relationship didn’t matter; treating me was all he could do in one visit.

Dr. Kreuser sent Lunsford’s my prescription for 600 milligrams of Doxycycline, an antibiotic that would kill any *Borrelia burgdorferi* left behind by my tick. He cautioned me of sensitivity to sunlight.

Three days later I would take myself on a jog up a relentless hill leading through the neighboring town’s cemetery. It was, like the Washburn cemetery, divided Catholic-public. West of County I was “Evergreen Cemetery” and east of the sleepy two lane road was “Cavalry Cemetery.” After eight miles and only a scab left on my abdomen, I would be sunburned; the blemish had become my own skin.

There are three types of biological symbiosis: mutualism, commensalism, and parasitism. In a mutualistic relationship both species benefit. In a commensal relationship one species benefits while the other is not impacted. My tick was a parasite, benefiting at my expense. The stability of a community relies on an assortment of symbiotic relationships.

My dad took me to Harvey Demars’ hunting shack. Our Toyota rolled down the Chequamegon National Forest’s numbered roads until we reached Fire Road 262, which the

locals call Battle Axe Road. Battle Axe was once the primary rail line from Iron River to Washburn. Now it was dirt. The rocks kicked up by our tires rang hollow in the wheel well. The uneven terrain was a rough ride. As we continued, I became lost. I didn't know if we were traveling north or south, east or west. Every plot of dense forest was the same greenery to me. But my dad, a lawyer who'd left these woods long ago, was still deeply located there. His bearings were not those of a compass but locked in memory. Our final turn was onto a two rut road where the brush and branches pinged against the windshield. The Flag River, a trout stream, was not far off. At what my dad recognized as a "fork in the road" and I recognized as a large oak tree straight ahead, he told me Harvey Demars' shack was just to the right. The hunting shack, made of corrugated metal and covered in green asphalt siding, blended with the vegetation. A 1960 era white refrigerator, streaked with rust down the front panel, leaned against the exterior wall, under a window. Before going inside I walked one-hundred feet through knee-high brush to the latrine where a blue sign said "Men" at the top and a stick-figure crossed his legs while both hands covered his crotch. I wore long pants and Deet, but would still find a deer tick crawling about, not yet embedded but on my pants during the ride back to town. I would feel the small hairs on my arms raise in fear before brushing it out the window.

I stepped up to the shack. There was no lock on the front door, allowing it to open with ease. The inside was a box. Four bunked pine sleeping platforms stood in the back corners. An empty box of Goldfish crackers and bottle of Advil sat on a card table. The forest—dirt, webs, scat, and ash—coated the linoleum floor. And while the shack was far from town, standing in a directionless place, everyone was here. Scrawled on the walls, windowsills, shelves, and doors were names. "Tuffy Lizotte, Jimmy Lizotte, October 3rd 1959. Temp 42 degrees" was written in strong capital letters. "Ralph and Joe Maassen, October 6th 2000, rainy day shack dry." Bold

strokes of marker told me that Casey Fox and Mark Koller saw “two dandies.” “10/17/76, Cool-sunny, Doc and Jim and Patches had steak (T-bone) no partridge.” It was a shack of disordered memories, each caught in a web of nature where names are not markers for bodies or ownership, but rather a day in these woods.

Individually, few of the names meant much to me. But I found one that stood out: Vera Maki. The penciling of Vera’s name was aged and grey but hung on to the wall, surviving among many, in the shelter of nowhere. In black ball point pen I left my name alongside all the others.

PROMISING WATER

At 4:50 a.m. the glow of two bare incandescent bulbs diffuses against the rust painted interior of the Twin Disc—a commercial fishing boat—but from the wharf the same light, radiating through the circular portals that run the length of the vessel, is intensified beside the pre-dawn sky: yellow on complementary blue. The only other light comes from a porch lamp mounted on the side of Bodin fisheries, one of two small processing plants in Bayfield, Wisconsin. On June 4th, the Peterson's are the first of eight independent crews preparing for a day on Lake Superior's waters.

Marty Peterson feeds dried drift wood to a wood burning stove in the cabin. Curls of smoke rise from a dark stove-pipe that extends above the Twin Disc's wood roof. The sky is periwinkle with cloud cover, and its fifty-seven degrees outside. Marty steps up through the vessel's door—a rectangular opening that floats flush with the mooring—and greets me saying, "You're on time," as if my punctuality is respectable. Marty's comment is soft but not without an earnest edge that reveals a thin disbelief that I'd shown up. "We're just waiting for my brother," he says.

Marty's son Zach lies asleep on the floor of the fishing boat. His entire body is tucked into a sleeping bag that rests on a camping pad, a half-inch buffer from the wood-planked cabin floor. The only hint of his presence is the engorged nylon of the sleeping bag; I cannot even see the crown of his head.

I'd only met Marty and Zach four days earlier. I hadn't been looking to meet them in particular, just people like them: commercial fishermen. I wanted to understand the profession that once supported the Chippewa and the European immigrants—largely Scandinavians, Germans, French, Poles, and Belgians, often involved in the fur trade or missionaries. So, on a

Thursday evening following a 5:30 meatloaf dinner with my grandparents, I walked the half mile from their house into town on the brownstone foot path, an old railroad bed that bends five miles along the coast of Lake Superior. When I reached Bodin's, the slip appeared dormant. All eight fishing tugs were tied up and dark. Propped in a window of the small show room, a bungalow type appendage of Bodin's processing plant that beautifies the building with its white siding and red scalloped trim, was a Closed sign, the words painted in hunter orange.

I walked around Bayfield, which felt similarly abandoned before the warmer summer days would fill the seasonal candy shops and homey art galleries with tourism from the Twin Cities. Bayfield knows it is a destination. It's been managed with visitors in mind. In the height of summer, yachts and sailboats fill the marina at the base of Rittenhouse Avenue, the main street in town, and mooring space follows the waterfront condominiums south. I walked back to the fishing tugs, which are tucked away from the town center, to find a red pick-up truck with its bed facing the Twin Disc and Marty Peterson inside the boat's cabin.

Marty is about six feet tall, keeps a dark mustache that curves past corners of his mouth and ends just below his lower lip. He is greying only at his temples. At eight in the evening he wore small rectangular sunglasses, as that far north the sun would not set for another hour and a half. I pestered him with questions, though he didn't seem bothered. "I've got nowhere to be," he told me. I learned an important set of details that night: 1,000 pounds of white fish was a good day on the water; it was whitefish and trout season—herring, which are lucrative for their eggs, will be fished starting at the end of September; Marty's father, Martin Jr., fished these waters for sixty years; his son, Zach, was attending Vermillion Technical School, studying to become a game warden. At the potential of his son policing him, he chuckled. "I went to school and ended up coming back to this." While his frame is neither slight nor hefty, the flexors of his

forearm showed distinct sinew as he leaned over a slatted board fixed to the base of the door, which, for all intents and purposes, transformed it into a window. When asked where he attended college, Marty responded with a sense of self-judgment, explaining he'd learned the trade of cable TV installation and it was "only technical school." Before I headed back to my grandparents' house, he told me they'd be offloading around 1:30 the next day. I could stop by if I liked.

I missed the offload by fifteen minutes and puttered around the dock while Marty, Eric, and Zach rolled their gill nets around a spool. The gill nets are hundreds of feet long with sinks strung along the bottom and floats along the top, allowing the nets, when dropped in the water, to stand across the bottom like the net on a tennis court. When fish swim into the net their gills become tangled in the grid.

There was talk of restringing the nets. In places, the delicate four inch square mesh of fish line was fractured where heavy driftwood had torn holes between the top and bottom twine of the net. Amid rolling nets, Marty called me over. He would bring me to Bay Fisheries, the other processing plant in Bayfield on the far side of the wharf, to see their catch. Bay Fisheries is much like Bodin's with its small white bungalow showroom facing Wilson Avenue. We walked in the back warehouse door where, stacked on the cement floor in bins, were three-hundred pounds of Marty's whitefish. A disappointing catch. Steel sinks lined the right-hand wall where a friendly woman wearing rubber boots and gloves fileted the fish of the day. "You want to help?" she asked me. I declined telling her she wouldn't want me hacking up the fresh catch. I'd never gutted or fileted a fish in my life. Even at the urging of another employee, a young man in blaze orange oilers—waterproof overalls—who told me "you'd have trouble

messing it up,” I expressed doubts. My foremost goal was to talk my way onto Marty’s boat, but he was walking out the door. I followed.

I wanted to understand the lake, the body of water I’d never lived on or from, but seemed intimate to the place my parents came from. I knew economics and convenience made my parents return only as visitors; they’d wanted opportunities for their children, and I could understand that. What I’d never tried to understand was why people stayed. I couldn’t quite grasp what kept them here.

“Would you ever, uh, consider taking free labor out on the boat with you?” I asked as we rounded the corner lawn towards the sidewalk, trying not to sound presumptuous while inviting myself on a complete stranger’s fishing boat.

He didn’t seem hassled by my request and replied, “My son asked, ‘If the girl really wants to see it, why doesn’t she just come with?’”

“So if I showed up in the morning you’d take me along?”

“We leave at 4:50.”

When we reached the Twin Disc, Eric and Zach had finished rolling up the nets. Marty beckoned Zach and told him to get my phone number.

“Is there anything else I should know?” I asked.

“Just bring along any food you may want during the day.” Marty started walking away, and I saw Zach glance at my shoes. I was wearing an outrageous pair of glittered slip-ons, skinny jeans, the sunglasses I purchased in an effort to mimic Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and I carried a leather handbag large enough to fit three cantaloupes.

Zach caught his dad’s eye with a quiet simper, “Work clothes?”

“Yeah,” Marty added, “wear something you won’t mind getting blood on.”

When Eric arrives at nearly 5:00 am, I'm milling about the cabin, which is split into two levels, the front third of the boat a double-step down from the stern. There is no uncovered deck space on the Twin Disc. Before Marty hoists himself out the door and bounds up to the roof to direct Eric around the tightly packed port, he switches on the marine weather radio. Over a garbling diesel motor and the snaps of the wood fire, a sterile female voice reports a northeast wind around five knots increasing to ten knots, isolated showers and thunderstorms, and waves two feet or less. We will be headed about twenty-two nautical miles through the Apostle Islands to retrieve nets set just off the coast of Devil's Island.

The Apostle Islands are a group of twenty-two landmasses scattered just off the coast of Wisconsin's Bayfield peninsula. Gull Island, the smallest, is three-and-a-half acres, and Madeleine Island, the largest and only island with year round residents, is 15,359 acres. Given the matching sandstone bedrock of the islands and the mainland, it's likely that the Apostle Islands were once joined with the peninsula. However, the glacial patterns that divided the land benefit the fishermen: the cliff shores where waves have created caves, arches, stacks, beaches, sandspits, and tombolos are ideal spawning grounds for the lake's whitefish and trout.

Eric sits on a metal framed bench, with slumping upholstery, in front of the ship's helm. A porcelain coffee cup rests just behind the wheel. He is taller and heftier than Marty, with a round face and deeply set eyes that more immediately suggests his Chippewa heritage. He wears a blue checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up on his forearms, and situates his tennis-shoed feet on a steel box that appears to be a permanent ottoman for the navigator's seat. Since their father passed away nearly a year ago, Eric has become the pilot.

His jewel-toned eyes stare out the string of five port-hole windows. The view skims the length of the bow to the open water. On a shelf below the middle windows—a dashboard of sorts—are three Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pies, a bag of Old Dutch potato chips, an eagle feather, a small American flag, miscellaneous lures, and a pack of Marlboro Lights. Not a single cigarette is smoked while I'm aboard the ship. Eric points to the small Garmin screen where the GPS location of the Twin Disc blinks just south of what is called the "West Channel," a waterway between Basswood Island's west coast and the mainland. The sun glows red over the distant island's tree-line. He flips through different screens showing me that the boat is moving at eight knots an hour, the rate, he tells me, which is most efficient. "It's a slow ride to China," he says.

When Eric reminisces about his father—Martin Peterson Jr.—he says things like, "Dad navigated by compass and speed," or "Dad would wake us up to see black bears swimming between islands." He never uses the possessive "my dad," and somehow the simplicity of letting his father belong to everyone or no one, of letting him be an individual, gives his comments a sense of sincere longing. Eric's gaze drops to Marty who is sharpening knives in the lower portion of the cabin. "He's usually asleep like that one," he motions to Zach whose hand is now visible at the top of his sleeping bag. "Marty's just trying to look busy today." The corners of Eric's eyes crease into crow feet when he smiles or laughs, emphasizing the affection of his jest.

As we continue on the two hour cruise toward Devil's island, Eric tells me about his two other brothers, one who works on a government research vessel "doing the same thing we do" but making more money, and the other, the youngest, who manages a casino near the Twin Cities. His two sisters live on the Red Cliff reservation just outside Bayfield. "I told you it is a boring ride."

I look out the back window. The clear water peaks in streams of wake. The ruddy layers of Oak Island's sandstone ridges approach out a side port hole, and though it's hazy, rays of sunlight streak through holes in the cloud cover. I sit down on the ledge and let my legs dangle between the upper and lower portion of the cabin. I'm starry-eyed, thinking I've been missing this my whole life. I've never had a love affair with northern Wisconsin, and suddenly, dawn through a port hole has me wondering why not. Eric sits just behind me, his eyes closed and forehead, momentarily, resting on the wheel.

The Twin Disc was built in 1937. It was originally a test vehicle for gears manufactured by the Twin Disc Clutch Company in Racine, Wisconsin, but after two years was sold for \$4,500 and leased to several fishermen. In the early 40's it had a short stay in Chicago, then moved back to Racine under new co-ownership, and, when that partnership dissolved, it ended up in Michigan where the Peterson's bought it in 1982. From what I can tell, the vessel has undergone very few upgrades over seventy-five years. In the main corridor the burnt-umber paint of the floorboards is worn to the wood grain. The wood burning stove, made of heavy cast iron, has two cylindrical holes cut from the top panel. A standard paint can filled with lake water is settled into each. Wearing dense work gloves, Marty transfers the warmed water into one of many five-gallon buckets on the floor then refills the paint cans from a garden hose siphoning water from the lake.

The Garmin shows us about forty-five minutes from the nets. Eric and Marty point to the Raspberry Island light house in the distance. From our position, it's a white obelisk guarding maples and birches and spruces from the waves. Off in the west, Eric spots another fishing boat, one his nephew crews, that uses trap nets—a labyrinth of nets that divert fish into a holding cell

with no exit. More fish are pulled up alive he tells me. But the water, currently at thirty-four degrees, will refrigerate anything that dies, making the Peterson's gill nets as effective as the trap nets.

Unlike many of the larger ocean-going seine-net vessels that track and plot the movements of entire schools of fish, the Peterson's set their gill nets according to water temperature. In a few weeks, when the water is warmer, they will set up just off the coast of Bear Island, which we pass by. "They're going to be there," Eric says of the fish, "just not yet." He adds, "It's all just trial and error," but he doesn't acknowledge his thirty-two years of observation.

In the lower space of the cabin, Zach emerges, rolls his bedding, and flips it onto a table in the corner. He wears jeans tucked into rubber boots, a camouflage print baseball hat, and an orange sleeveless shirt with the words "Lutheran Youth, Change the World" in cursive across the front. Running from his shoulder down his bicep, almost reaching to his elbow, is a tattoo: four elongated "S" like lines arranged in a crosshatch and shadowed in red. At about five feet eight inches, he is shorter than his father and uncle, but exudes the musculature of a young--in his case nineteen year old--adult.

Appearing bleary, he approaches the stern of the ship. Eric responds with cheeky laughter, and, perhaps for my entertainment, asks, "What the hell are you doing up a half hour early?" Zach doesn't answer. Instead he opens the nearly full-sized back door, lies on his stomach, and fills a Gatorade bottle with lake water. It's clean and clear. He lingers in the cool lake air.

"It's too hot in here," Zach says, his tone more unobtrusive than a complaint. He seems neither amused nor bothered by my presence, but as Eric laughs I realize that Marty, in the way

he might look out for his two daughters who are just five years younger than me, has kept the cabin comfortable on my behalf.

Marty and Zach ready the boat for hauling in the fish. Marty, who wears a Jeff Gordon T-shirt, Wrangler jeans that wilt in the back, and a Kalhenberg baseball cap that is dark with residue at the front of the bill, opens a large rectangle window on the starboard side of the ship. He swings the arm of a net hauler from its indoor resting place into a position extending over the water. The arm will act to guide the nets into the teeth encircling the cask-like body of the hauler. A small engine that starts with a pull string, like a lawn mower, powers the apparatus. A slim metal table that resembles a simple playground slide with its two raised lips runs diagonally from the starboard window across Zach's sleeping quarters and ends just short of the port side wall where it rests on hinged supports unfolded from the siding. The thigh-high rollers stand about a foot and a half shorter than the table, and bring to mind an elongated abacus. They stretch down the port side of the vessel and are used to move the heavy bins of coiled net to the stern. Marty drapes a pair of orange oilers over the rollers, and hangs a larger grey pair next to Eric's seat. Once the cabin is transformed, and various bins, which are the same shape as those used by TSA in American airports but larger, are placed under the rollers and table, both Marty and Zach pull on hooded sweatshirts, oilers, and rubber boots. Marty calls me over. He suggests I might want to put on the oilers he placed over the rollers.

"I should probably do that," I respond not quite realizing that my reply sounds unenthusiastic.

"They'll keep you dry," Marty advises.

Zach and Marty exchange the same amused look they'd shared over my shoes three days earlier. I've somehow managed to muddle my excitement; inwardly, I'm dying to wear the fishing gear. Stepping into the oversized overalls makes me feel like I could belong. I've made myself an urbanite, someone who thrives living in between "Gloria's Puperseria," "Le Caprice" bakery, and two corner-stores: one who prepared an entire Ethiopian meal for my birthday, the other that the police recently revealed to be selling crack cocaine in addition to Ziplock bags of Q-tips, breakfast sandwiches, and ten-cent candies. As much as I've chosen the city, and my parents chose the city, for the first time Lake Superior is more than water that fills the bay outside my grandparent's window; I'm starting to see inside the water. I'm starting to feel what has kept generations of not only my family here.

I pull the oilers over my cargo pants and raise my hood before grasping for the bib straps dangling at my back. Marty, as he passes behind me, lifts the straps to my shoulders, helping me ease into my fishing attire.

Eric stands next to the hauler at the window. To his right is a second steering wheel, attached to the back navigation with chain-link. Zach takes up the center position at the table, and Marty stands to his left. "One day," Eric says, "Dad pushed to the window and lifting became my job." Zach puts on rubber gloves and reaches above his head where he retrieves a wood-handled tool with what appears to be a nail protruding from its end. He places it, nail down, in a small hole bored in the lip of the table.

The Twin Disc approaches their buoy and Eric retrieves it using a hooked stick. The bouy, a ten foot stick with red floats, orange flags and tags indicating the boat license: "RC 21," the depth of the nets: "2850 ft," the quadrant of the lake: "Grid 1209," and the date the nets will be pulled: "June 4" is passed down the table and followed by a long stretch of rope. Next Eric

drags an anchor through the window. Then the nets begin. The first hundred feet are empty. Eric watches uncomfortably as the hauler pulls in hemp and gridded fishing line. Zach snakes the net, and Marty coils it into a bucket. “This is bad.” Eric says as if to reassure me that they actually do catch fish.

“It’s trial and error, right?” I say, repeating his earlier words, hoping to ease his discomfort.

“This is all error.” He laughs, making noise of the disappointment. Marty, on the other hand, keeps any letdown to himself, exuding a quite sense of poise.

The first fish pushed down the table is a motionless longnose sucker tangled by the gills. Its fleshy rimmed mouth is positioned to vacuum algae, aquatic plants, insects, and small mollusks from the lake’s bottom. I snap a picture. “You don’t want a picture of that, it’s dead and nasty.” Zach tells me. They keep the suckers only as feed for the eagles on the ride home.

Soon enough, I see an entangled whitefish writhe down the table. Whitefish feed at the bottom of the lake, living in deep water schools. When pulled up from the significant depth the bladder can bloat and break through the flesh of the lower filets, rendering the fish garbage. When the fish reaches Zach, he takes the nail tool and punctures the fish’s underside, the center of the ventral side, popping the buoyancy bladder and letting air audibly escape from the fish. In 118 years this procedure has changed very little. An 1894 report from the Joint International Commission—a commission established by the United states and Canada to monitor our shared waters—observes a turn-of-the-century tug lifting gill nets: “The fishermen use a stick with a sharp nail at the end with which they puncture the fish either after or just before it is taken from the net, making a small hole through which the air rapidly escapes.”

Zach moves the de-bloated fish, its eyes wide and gills splayed, to Marty who, with bare hands, untangles the fish and tosses it in a bin before coiling the net in another. Lake trout come in the same way but don't need to be punctured. Marty handles the fish with an experienced grip that controls and anticipates the animal's struggle. As the rate of fish coming in increases, Zach helps untangle and toss, his dexterity less cultivated than Marty's. The fish occasionally flubs from his hands. Eric watches Zach pass a trout to Marty. "Zach likes the whitefish better." He grins. "They don't have teeth like the trout. He's gotta protect his pretty hands." Zach gracefully takes his uncle's ribbing with a soft smile that reveals a slender gap between his two front teeth. Marty continues untangling.

Eric gestures me to the window. A lake trout that, to my inexperienced eyes, looks the size of a shark, is caught in the net. It fights the water with muscular thrashes. Eric stops the hauler and lifts the net by hand. They won't keep this one, though they could Eric explains. There is no size limit on Lake trout caught in a gill net.

Native American vessels are governed under tribal law. The Red Cliff band's regulations happen to be similar to Wisconsin state statute, which govern all other commercial fishing boats in Wisconsin's outlying waters. Together, state and tribal biologists determine things like the total allowable catch of lake trout, the only Lake Superior species in danger of overfishing, and issue colored tags that resemble zip-ties. Each fisherman is allotted an equal share of the catch for the season, and must string a tag through the gills and mouth of any trout taken from the water. When he runs out of tags, he exhausts his privilege to fish trout for the season.

Whitefish, however, are treated differently. There are no limits on the number of whitefish a commercial fisherman may take, but rather limits on size. According to Wisconsin

state statute it is only lawful to take white fish that are seventeen inches or larger. However, under a tribal law provision known as “home use” it is only unlawful to *sell* whitefish measuring less than seventeen inches; undersize fish may be kept and consumed by the fisherman and his family. Eric comments, “The white guys have to throw ‘em back.”

After retrieving three separate gangs of net, we head back towards Bayfield. Zach and Marty clean the fish. Two wood slabs—rough cutting boards—are placed over the lips of the table creating a trough under each. Marty starts with the trout, cutting out the gills—a radiating bristle of red tissue—then slits the stomach and scrapes out the ashen gurry. The offal seems listless against the vibrant gills. Zach measures a white fish by placing his round gut blade into gash in the board and presses the fish’s mouth against the flat side of the blade. Its tail fin extends just beyond the end of the board; it is over seventeen inches. Zach prepares the fish by running the blade down its belly, and, like Marty, strips the innards. This particularly determined fish flails throughout the process, caught between life and death, struggling, but eliciting no response from Zach or Marty. Zach separates the offal, removing the liver from a lattice of orange intestine and deep shades of organ.

The Peterson’s sell the livers, exclusively, to a Bayfield restaurant called “Maggies.” It’s a kitschy restaurant known for two things: flamingo décor and whitefish livers. Livers, stewed in milk and seasoned with salt and pepper, were an old Scandinavian fishermen’s delicacy that was transported to the shores of Lake Superior in the late 1800’s. Maggie’s serves them battered in cornmeal and lightly sautéed.

The Peterson’s will not have difficulty selling their fish; there is plenty of demand in Wisconsin where Friday night fish fry is a weekly event. Taverns up and down the state, nearly all of them, partake in the tradition. What started as a Catholic tradition associated with the

Friday meat ban during Lent, turned into a tavern custom during prohibition; taverns offered free fish to attract crowds that would buy alcohol under the table.

At Patsy's Bar, one of two bars in neighboring Washburn, the chalkboard, on a Friday, reads "Fish Fry, Bodin's Whitefish, \$11.95." At 5:30 there isn't a table to be found. This is, the chief of police told me, the best fish fry in town. All food is prepared on the flat grill and two fry baskets behind the bar. When Mike, our stocky waiter with a thick grey beard, approaches he asks, "Anyone not getting the fish fry?" By 6:30 they're out of fish.

At the end of the morning, just around noon, the warm water from the paint cans has been mixed with dish soap, and the work surfaces, including Zach's blood-streaked oilers, are scrubbed. The cabin is clean. Standing around the navigation, the three men discuss where they ought to drop the nets for tomorrow. There is little science or technology involved in the conversation, it's more a matter of opinions and uncertainties that become a decision to drop the entire gang off Madeline Island's near shore.

Zach takes over the navigation. Marty and Eric, still wearing oilers and boots, open the back door. The day has become bright and clear. A five quart bucket of warm water and dish soap are poured over the coiled net. Zach slows the boat, and Eric drops a flagged buoy into the water. It bobs away from the boat, but remains linked as coiled twine slowly unwinds into the water. Next, the anchor is dropped. Then more twine. Eric and Marty stand across from one another, ready to release the net. Marty grasps the weights strung along the bottom rope, and Eric holds the floats. As the boat edges forward, they let the stretched net drop, and it disappears below the surface. The nets leave a track of lathered suds from the bin out the door. When one net nears its end, Zach fastens it to another, drenches the next net with soapy water, and returns

to the helm. The process is a smooth cooperation between the men and the nets. The anchor is dropped, and the last buoy, hundreds and hundreds of feet from the first, leaves the Twin Disc.

Maybe it's the perpetual game of hide and seek, the notion that bottomless possibility might be pulled from the water tomorrow or Wednesday or Thursday or Friday, that makes me fond of the lake, makes me want to stay. Or maybe it's believing in tradition that makes the water below my feet deep and promising. I watch the orange buoy as it shrinks into the distance, floating above it all, waiting for tomorrow.

THE DISTANCE

I met Paul Berg the summer following my junior year at the University of Wisconsin, and it was no accident. I lived in the third floor flat of an ancient white house with four roommates, two of whom I'd passively aggressively fallen-out with, mostly because I found one—Rachel—a perfidious nuisance and indulgently gabbed about it behind her back. The other was her best friend who'd decorated our living room in purple leopard print. As for Jess and Dana, the remaining two roommates, I liked both, but considering it now, I'm not sure they liked me. Or at least should not have liked me. They shared a room because I reneged on my original agreement to share and then claimed the solo bedroom off the kitchen—the space most isolated from the other girls. I was private and selfish, the sort of roommate who would wash every one of my own dishes, but never touch the dirtied pile that mounted so severely in our sink that it was often transferred into a storage bin resting on the kitchen floor: *I* hadn't used those.

So, when my dad was out of town and unable to meet his college friend, Paul, for lunch, I was the obvious back-up. This was not the first time my dad had, curiously, shared a highly educated and successful friend with me; I was frequently invited to join his lunches with Jerry—a department of Justice lawyer, and Chuck—the former Majority Leader of Wisconsin. In my parents' rolodex of friends, Chuck, Jerry, and Paul belonged to him. Perhaps they were the three that he wanted to be. I never thought to ask why he shared his friends with me. Why not with my older, more eloquent and extroverted brother, Nick? It strikes me now that my dad always knew Nick would go on to be an orthopedic surgeon. Test scores would get him where he needed to go. But me? I could use help with social lifting. Maybe he thought he'd taken me as far as he could. He'd come from a small lumber town in Northern Wisconsin where, for his family of eleven, putting maple syrup on Saturday morning cream of wheat was a luxury. He'd

become a transportation lawyer, in part, to fulfill his own intellectual curiosities, but also as a way to give my brother and I more, to give us a comfortable place to grow up. Maybe the people he looked up to could show me a bigger world; my dad would always be from Wisconsin.

Certainly Paul, a man who'd spent his career as a Foreign Service Officer in Bombay, Brussels, Rome, Mexico City, Hanoi, and Bogota, was hoping, on his two weeks of home leave from his post as the Counsel General in Medan, to have lunch with a prickly college student. I had found escape from twenty-one years in Wisconsin, a place I'd decided was too familiar to be fashionable, through university courses like "Comparative Politics of South East Asia" and "Indian Writers Abroad: Literature, Diaspora and Globalization." Meeting my dad's worldly friend for lunch would allow me, for one afternoon, to flee the drab white house.

Paul suggested we meet at L'etoile, a French restaurant overlooking the bethel white granite of Wisconsin's capitol. It was largely considered Madison's finest restaurant. While excited by the idea of dining in sophistication, at some unknown point in my life I'd decided I didn't like things like cream cheese, sour cream, yogurt, or mayonnaise, not because of texture, smell, or taste, but because each, to me, looked unpleasant. This avoidance of white condiments was my attempt to recreate an idiosyncrasy of my father—the man I looked up to. He didn't eat cooked vegetables. His aversion came from a childhood of mushy canned vegetables my grandmother required her nine children to eat because, much of the time, there was money for little else. I feigned the quirks of picky eating with no hardship or principles validating the choice, just a desire to be someone else.

I'd also grown up under the assumption that all meat was to be ordered well-done. Ketchup was what made hamburgers edible, and margarine stood in for butter. My mom had taught me that TV dinners and premade cookie dough were lazy, but that cakes came from a

Betty Crocker box, Bisquick made pancakes, Ragu was the best jar of tomato sauce, and anything other than elbow shaped Kraft macaroni and cheese was a gimmick. Of course, all stews and casseroles included some form of Campbell's soup, and I understood the power of malt powder in a milk shake; 1950's Middle America was alive and well in my tastes.

My mother's cooking was, more often than not, comforting. It reflected the time and place she grew up, the struggles and triumphs of her parents. My grandparents had lived through the great depression and World War II. In food, they valued abundance and convenience. My understanding of food reflected the working middle class of my family's past, which, in no way prepared me for rillettes, pate, or a coursed meal.

I did nothing to ready my palate for L'etoile. At the time, it didn't occur to me that food could be an experience, a way to see the world, a way to assert sophistication. I didn't know that looking at a menu could be more than reconciling the price of chicken vs. the price of beef, always choosing the lower cost. Dining wasn't a set of choices that refined my world, but rather selections that reinforced who I already was. Chicken breasts and white rice; hamburgers and french-fries; whitefish and dinner rolls.

I did, however, prepare to meet Paul, a man I'd never before seen. I googled him, finding he was a cask-shaped man—broad across the shoulders and torso. He was tanned a dark shade of honey with ruddy cheeks and eyes of translucent sapphire. His hair, straight and white, lay thinly over his scalp, rallying at his temples. The dark center of his mustache suggested it was once brown. I read a profile from the *New Yorker*—a magazine I knew as no different from *The New York Times Magazine*. In about 900 words, the article followed a four course meal at Paul's home in Medan, while charting how Paul's posting on Indonesia's largest island, Sumatra, had gone from sleepy to vital following the devastating Boxing Day tsunami of 2004. There was

something in this article that I vaguely wanted, but what it was I didn't know. A four course meal? Notoriety? A feeling of importance? The article was titled "Our Man in Medan," a reference to Graham Greene's political satire about vacuum cleaner salesman James Wormold, a local Cuban turned reluctant MI6 agent who fabricated reports and quite unexpectedly watched his fabrications come true; I missed the reference entirely.

The morning of our lunch I coached a group of eight-and-under country club swimmers—my summer job. I more or less ensured the children of members—the Madison elite who didn't care to do their putting on public greens—went off the correct starting block, swam in the right direction, and attempted the appropriate stroke. We coaches, three of us, pleased the parents and swimmers as entertainment. Every meet we dressed in costumes parsed together from a local thrift shop: kitty cats, ghost busters, robots, dinosaurs, monsters, fast food characters. I went home and put on a cotton crepe dress I'd worn to a friend's wedding just weeks earlier. It tied around my neck and fell, in white billows, just below the knee.

The white dress wasn't for Paul. Ours would never be a romantic relationship. On his tour in Belgium he'd married a woman, but less than a year later they'd split. Paul fell deeply in love in Mexico only to have too few years with his partner, Franco. Franco had died of AIDS related complications years before I met Paul. And, at the time of our lunch, I knew something of this, perhaps not all of the details, but enough to know that I wasn't courting Paul. I was courting status.

L'etoile was closed. I sat on a bench outside awaiting the consul general whom I'd recognize by his white hair and notice he wore a thick silver chain around his neck. Naturally, I bore a look of searching bewilderment, my eyes following each passer-by but locking on him

with both certainty and uncertainty: I knew who he was, but not how to approach him. So I waited. Paul moved towards me, likely having read my clumsy stare.

“Megan?” His voice was generous and ardent, as if he suspected me to be the college student he was looking for, but knew—in the way a diplomat knows—to temper his assumptions.

We modified our plan and ordered sandwiches at L’etoile’s street level bakery, Café Soleil. Paul drank two bottles of San Pellegrino and told me stories of Mexico City where locals called him Pablo, of meeting Hoa—his closest friend and cook—in Hanoi, of reviewing visas in Bombay, of the keys that hung in his door, rattling, the night of the tsunami. At moments of self-deprecation he closed or crossed his eyes and placed his fingers, lightly, at his temples, animating what he wanted to express as foolishness. He stammered, connecting thoughts with a rolling, “da-da-da-da-da-da,” his way of saying so on and so forth. The world he spoke of, though sometimes tragic, seemed rich and inviting to me; a collection of fascinating experiences.

Café Soleil closed around us. Chairs were lifted on to tables, and the floor was swept. Just before exiting, he told me I’d be welcome, anytime, to stay with him in Indonesia. I walked home wanting to be Paul Berg.

In first grade I wrote an essay declaring Madeleine Island, the largest of Lake Superior’s Apostle Islands, my favorite place on earth. At six-years-old, I found it to be the most exotic of my travels and within close proximity to my Grandparent’s house, criteria that allowed me to claim the coarse sand bars and cold but clear water just off of Big Bay County Park as my own: surely none of my classmates knew my island.

Over time, Madeleine Island and the Bayfield Peninsula fell from glamor. I came to pity the small populations that lived without private swim clubs or tennis courts, without shopping

malls where the latest Abercrombie and Fitch fashions could be found. By high school I was a Madison chauvinist, believing our public schools, where I failed to learn grammar, calculus, or critical analysis skills, to be superior to any other--particularly rural--schools in the state, and perhaps, but less ardently so, the country. I was proud of Madison's characterization as "seventy-eight square miles surrounded by reality." I was proud to separate myself from the bulk of the state.

In high school our country and the people who inhabited different regions were abstractions. I had very little thought on whether I wanted to be associated with another region because I didn't realize that other places, beyond geography, were all that different from Wisconsin. By college, I had grasped the perceived lowliness of the Midwest. The University's largely Midwestern student body internalized our own sense of inferiority and wore it as a badge of honor, thumbing our noses at the trendy east or west coast students wearing Uggs, and calling them, what we considered a pejorative nickname: Coasties.

Wisconsin, much like any place, was complicated. I defended my state while looking down on the rural communities. I was proud to be a hardworking commoner, but felt the allure of coastal urbanites. I raved about the natural beauty up-north, but was endlessly happy to have grown up in "the city," though I knew that my city wasn't quite city enough. I didn't want to give up my city, nor did I know exactly what I was after, but I'd glimpsed something—whether it was real or not—at Café Soleil.

My first time leaving the North American continent was no simple route: Madison to Minneapolis to Portland to Tokyo to Singapore to Kuala Lumpur to Medan. Thirty-six hours in the sky and airports reunited me with Paul. I'd e-mailed him, asking if I might take him up on

his offer, and three days after graduating college, I made the trip. Weeks before, Kerri, a close friend, had backed out of the travels after discovering the State Department had issued a travel warning for Indonesia. I e-mailed Paul again. He replied, telling me I'd be safer in Medan than in Los Angeles; he said we wouldn't be going to the tourist attractions where American's had been attacked; he urged me to come to a place where I'd be surrounded by people different from myself. So I'd go alone and stay with a man I'd met once over sandwiches at Café Soleil.

There were no jet bridges at the Medan airport, just stairs to the blacktop, and a crowd waiting at the door. Nearly a head taller than the crowd, Paul stood out. His driver Indra, a lissome man with short but rich black hair and hesitant eyes, blended in.

Medan was a city of two million people. The streets were a mêlée of taxis, cars, motorbikes, and *becaks*—motorized rickshaws—set against remnants of Dutch architecture from the mid 1800's when the Netherlands began cultivating Sumatra's land for tobacco plantations. The consulate and consul general's adjoining quarters were on a sluggish street stretching only three blocks: *Jalan Walikota*, literally, the way of the Mayor. A dense mix of overhead palms and eucalyptus shaded the fenced estates, which were characterized by verandahs, porticos and elaborate eaves. A guard opened the gate to 13 *Jalan Walikota*. His small, wood-sided hut stood next to a tent where the grounds keepers and service staff congregated in folding chairs between duties. From the outside, 13 *Jalan Walikota* was a life I'd never known, but vaguely wanted, and felt unfit for, all at once. Indra carried my bag inside.

Though young and not yet having defined myself, I still knew my limitations. I was not brilliant—the trait I suspected raised people into sophistication—but supposed I could, through hard work, become so. I believed what I'd been told as a child, that I, a Midwestern middle class girl, could scale social ladders. I could be anything; the past—who and where I came from—

didn't matter. It wasn't money that I longed for, nor did I recognize it as a desire for the elusive habits and preferences of the elite intelligentsia. But in reality that was why I was there, to collect cultural capital, to collect experiences that would make me different from the rest of Wisconsin, that would make me different from my parents.

In Paul's living room, paintings hung almost cluttering the walls. It was the type of art that was neither reproduced nor unsigned. I'd adopted a superficial appreciation of modern art from an ex-boyfriend nicknamed "Cheeser." He dabbled with oil paints and had a Kandinsky poster in his room. Earlier that year when I visited New York's Modern Art Museum, I had insisted on reading and forgetting nearly every placard in the six stories of exhibits. So, I entirely lacked the contextual background to understand Paul's collection. Instead of seeing emotions or statements, expressionism or surrealism, I saw refinement.

The sounds of his living quarters felt smart. A faint recording, of what I assumed to be Frank Sinatra, but could have been any voice from the swing era, drifted in the background. I'd grown up listening to Madison's oldies station and my mother's cassette tapes of the Beach Boys. I knew things like Simon and Garfunkel greeted a lamp post in the *59th Street Bridge Song*, Buddy Holly's voice sounded like soda-pop, and Don McLean asked the deep question, "Can music save your mortal soul?" I didn't know the answer, but the 1940's crooners seemed pleasingly foreign to my 1960's pop-rock sensibilities.

Paul spoke to the housekeeper, Effie, in Bahasa Indonesian, a language he claimed was painless to learn. He sounded nimble, stringing together hard, consonant-driven sounds—similar to English—with glottal stops. Then, in order to ask Mr. Hoa, his lithe cook with dark, straight hair, an angular jaw, and a meek smile, if I might join him at the market the next morning, Paul switched to the sliding tones of Vietnamese. Though I couldn't make sense of the discordant

noises, it wasn't meaningless: it reinforced Paul as cosmopolitan. I was so taken by the success I saw in his surroundings that it would be years before I'd see him, a man who became my dear friend, as anything but impressive. I certainly did not suspect that he, like all of us, was vulnerable, that he felt behind in his career, that he was frustrated by his health, that he still felt the loss of Franco. I became determined, like Paul once had, to discard the nasal timbre in my Midwest accent.

From the back of Hoa's motorbike Medan appeared coarse: grimy and pierced with heat, crowded with the drone of motors, and swollen with commerce. My pale complexion and blonde hair made me an obvious outsider in a city where life was the only tourist attraction. I felt at ease on the motorbike because I couldn't expect to blend in; I was exotic. The city could not see me as common. Here, I felt privileged.

The market was an elaborate network of tented counters. We knit our way through corridors, and Mr. Hoa, in his mild manner and limited English, inquired about my food preferences while stopping to purchase various bits of produce I assured him I'd never tasted. He carried a bag of *salak*, a fig-sized fruit with brown scaly skin and trisected flesh that looked and felt like cloves of garlic. He bought *marquisa telur kodok*, a smooth racquetball sized sphere with brittle, yellow skin, white pith, and a mass of sweet gelatinous seeds that looked like the translation of the fruit's name: frog eggs. At the back of the market, largely out of sight from the other stalls, Hoa approached a Chinese-Indonesian woman with large cuts of meat spread across a work surface. We'd walked past live chickens, as well as butchered beef and mutton in order to find the ply-wood topped kiosk that sold both B1 and B2, the discreet names under which non-Muslim vendors peddled dog meat and pork. The back wall had once been painted white, but

was weathered around the bottom, revealing bare concrete. A barrel of water stood next to the back counter where generic plastic bags, ready for purchases, rested next to a newspaper and a tin lunch bucket. Liver and trotters dangled from the canopy ceiling. When Hoa selected a pork shoulder, she told him I was pretty, like Barbie.

I delighted in the compliment. I wasn't a pretty Wisconsinite. I wasn't a pretty Midwesterner. I was a pretty Westerner.

It was easy to appreciate the market. I found myself fascinated by what I thought was rough and basic, a place lacking modern comfort. I was fascinated, unknowingly, by my own feelings of sophistication. Oddly, it wasn't a feeling of overt superiority, but rather a feeling of confidence. The world was now a part of my view because I knew a bit more of what the world looked like. As an outsider, I didn't feel what I'd often felt in northern Wisconsin, that the modesty of this place personally reflected on me.

The next morning Hoa made crepes for breakfast. An English language newspaper accompanied my lone place setting. Paul was at the dentist. Henri Charpentier, the French chef who, in his memoir, claimed to have invented the famous Crepe Suzette, and once said, "Thus was born and baptized this confection, one taste of which, I really believe, would reform a cannibal into a civilized gentleman." I knew not what to do with Hoa's crepe. Sure, I'd had the thin pancakes once or twice in my life, but these crepes, though not the life-changing Suzette variety, were accompanied by apples and yogurt, a thick pineapple sauce, and a French press. I considered my options, chose what most resembled maple syrup, and poured coffee on my crepes.

Indra drove Paul and me through six hours of hairpin turns to *Ketambe* research station in *Gunung Leuser* national park. Only researchers, park staff, and, apparently, well liked diplomats could gain access to the camp. A man in a slender dugout canoe met us on the banks of the *Alas River* where Paul, Indra, an elephant patrol man, and I climbed aboard. The canoe, attached to a manual pulley system, was the only transportation to or from the steep banks of the research area. The man stood at the bow with us, his passengers, seated in the rut. Hand over hand, his arms powered us through the sturdy current. The greenery of dense tropical rainforest skated down light rock face. We were deep in the rainforest. Seven primate species, including the critically endangered Sumatran Orangutan, were known to inhabit the forest, though we would only see macaques and nests.

The boat navigator showed us to camp, where Paul and I would share one of the five stilted cabins with corrugated metal roofs. Our cabin, the place researchers called home for months at a time, was large. A covered porch ran the length of the front, and through the door was a common room with chairs. There were separate quarters for Paul and me, each bedroom containing a cot. A bathroom with a squat toilet and bucket shower—a pail, a vat of room temperature water, and a drain in the center of the floor—stood between our rooms. The six other men—Indra, the elephant patrolman, two cooks, the boat man, the camp manager—stayed in cabins near the red paneled building that housed a kitchen and screened in dining room.

I was not a particularly outdoorsy child. I'd been camping in platform tents when I was a Girl Scout, very occasionally went on day hikes up north, explored a cave with my children's choir, and thought our family property—a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River in western Wisconsin—was neat. I wasn't a real north woods girl. Against my meager outdoorsy childhood, corrugated roofs in the jungle were rugged and glamorous. Even when monkeys

climbed through a window I'd left open and, much to Paul's disappointment, looted our snacks, this slice of jungle felt exclusive.

We spent the afternoon hiking, then pulling dozens of leeches from our skin, then swimming, then eating a typical Sumatran meal where rice served as a vehicle for spicy stews, and small bananas were offered, at the end, to cut the heat. The sun set, and Paul retreated to bed, leaving only the rustling jungle sounds and faint chatter of staff lounging on the porch in the distant air.

I walked outside. As the only woman in camp, and just twenty-two years old, not far enough from curfew days to feel fully in control of my time, I timidly made my way down the dirt path towards the voices. I equated Paul with my father which made venturing out feel improper, as if I was violating his role of authority. So, I stood, using the darkness and trees as a screen, and peered at the porch where the staff had gathered. They ate fish. Flames of a small fire, just beyond the porch landing, reached towards a school of fish that were bundled like bananas and hung from a stick bored into the soft ground. I wanted to join but didn't know how, so I stood lurking. On the periphery, I was alone and private, comfortable but aware of my reserved clumsiness. I wasn't quite sure how to navigate my expanding world without a guide. I turned back toward my cabin, but not halfway down the path Indra sidled up to me with a fish. The black of its eye had turned white and fatty in the heat, its skin crisp with char. It was the invitation I'd needed, a gesture that told me I wasn't imposing. I joined the men on the porch.

None of the staff, besides Indra, knew English. And I knew one phrase in Bahasa: *terima kasih*, thank you. So I sat among them, and Indra taught me to count to ten. *Satu, dua, tiga, empat*—at four he'd point to his armpit reminding me of the number's sound, am-pat. At five, *Lima*, he'd prompt me uttering, "Peru." The limited communication was comforting; it was

another screen to stand behind. I could observe and participate in truncated facts and gestures, but nothing more. Language made me an other. Not an other that would go home to her plain college town and dull hamburgers, an other who could come and go from the west as she pleased, an other who had privileges. This otherness was the status that I so desired to establish at home.

Paul appeared out of the shadowy trees, his hair chaotic and wearing bed clothes.

He demanded, anxiously, to know what all this noise was about. I couldn't answer. I didn't have an answer. The noise was not the cause of his concern. Paul knew the cruelty of the world, he'd experienced the tsunami, he'd experienced Franco's death, he'd experienced the loss of his own health. I'd disappeared from my room. He knew what could happen to a young woman in a camp full of unfamiliar men. He'd experienced things I wouldn't want in my collection.

"Fish and cigarettes," Indra answered before Paul walked back to the cabin.

Days later I flew to Banda Aceh by myself. Paul, unable to entirely abandon his responsibilities at the consulate day after day, arranged for a driver, Roni, to fetch me from the airport and show me Aceh, the northern most province of Sumatra. For twenty-six years, resentment over the central government's unfair appropriation of Aceh's rich natural resources—particularly oil and natural gas—fueled a violent separatist movement called *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, the Free Aceh Movement. While Aceh never succeeded, like East Timor, in achieving full independence, by 2001, the Indonesian government had granted the province more autonomy and allowed the Acehnese to impose sharia law. I wore a headscarf at the airport.

Roni held a small placard with my name written in tidy black ink. He was a sturdy man with coarse hair that collected in small spheres flecking his scalp. His complexion, while a deep shade of brown, appeared varied and swollen with pockmarks. Gently, he insisted on carrying my backpack to the car.

Roni spoke less English than Indra. In a place where, two years after calamity, paved roads were still memories in the dirt, and entire neighborhoods of skeletal houses stood roofless and soggy, he didn't need to say much. He stopped the car and pointed. Just beyond a row of newly constructed single-room houses, a commercial fishing vessel rested atop the first floor terracotta walls and columns of, what were once, homes.

Up and down the coast, brambled beaches remained where humble communities once stood. Young men playing soccer on an uneven clearing where a soft layer of grass had emerged gave us thumbs up as we passed. Each wore pants rolled to the calf and no shoes. From the *Okinawa Café*, a tented counter posted in the sand, I watched men roll their pants, and women lift the hems of their skirts just to the knee before entering the warm tidal waters. We drank Cokes and said nothing before making our way back to the center of the city.

Roni told me, through gestures, I could remove my head covering. Since the significant influx of foreign aid workers following the tsunami, enforcement of non-Muslim head coverings had become lax. I'd felt both awkward and safe with the silk draped around my face. My Midwestern tendency to make others feel comfortable at all cost embraced the scarf. I would do what the Acehnese wanted. At the same time, I was different from them. Wearing a scarf, though polite and considerate, also felt disingenuous. I wanted to look around and take what I could with my eyes; I didn't want to blend in here. And even if I wanted to blend in, I knew I couldn't. We hadn't shared the same horrors. Blocks later, after I'd removed the silk from my

face, a military vehicle with armed men riding in the cab, the sharia enforcement police, drove slowly down the street in front of us. My exposed blonde hair was of no interest.

In a café, Roni and I sat across from one another in white plastic chairs. It was over plates of *Mie Aceh*—noodles coated in a spicy herb paste that takes on the pungent herbal flavor of ganja and is often served with pickled birds-eye chilies, fried crackers, and a crab—that he found words to tell me about his wife and young daughter. They both died in the tsunami. His house had been washed clear out to sea while he'd been at the airport unaware, but waiting, on higher ground, for a patron. He didn't tell me that a new prospective wife had turned him down because he still didn't have a home. I'd learn that from Paul. The pickled chilies tasted like fire in the back of my throat but, sitting across from Roni, I didn't feel uncomfortable enough. I could see and understand the devastation, but I couldn't feel it. Aceh was another place to take home with me. It was a place that required more sensitivity, and, of course, I could recount it with sensitivity and compassion, but it didn't weigh on me. It didn't consume me. It didn't make me feel helpless. It didn't make me feel exposed.

The next morning, en route to the airport, Roni pulled over one last time. Just outside the gates of a rectangular field of grass, no larger than a basketball court, an engraved sign read:

“tugu peringatan

Disini dimakamkan secara bersama

Saudara-saudara kami yang meninggal

Pada saat bencana gempa dan tsunami

“Memorial

Buried here together

Our brothers who died

At the time of the earthquake and tsunami”

At the time I didn’t know the translation of the engraved words, nor that the cite was called *Lambaro*. I only knew the number Roni told me: 46,000. All of them unidentified.

Following the trip, my parents picked me up at the Madison airport. It’s a small airport with only thirteen gates, but plenty of jet bridges, a place where I couldn’t become lost, but did blend in. I rode the lone down escalator, sinking from the terminal, from thirty hours in airports, from Indonesia, back to the people I knew. It was the last time I’d unpack my bags in Madison and stay.

We went to the bar my parents frequented, the one a mile from our house, the one that served dull but satisfying pizza, the one where my mother would point out Sara their favorite server who had two little girls, and a husband who very sadly had been diagnosed with MS. But he made artwork out of spoons. It was there, at their tavern, that I unloaded every single story. They listened to the experiences I’d collected. They wanted to see photographs. And when I was satisfied, all out of anecdotes, they took me home to my apartment where I’d sleep until I couldn’t. Then after conquering my jetlag, I’d sleep until I could, waking early to coach kids at the country club.

I never shared my photographs with friends. I shared only the smallest or most vague details when asked about the trip: squat-pans, no utensils, we hiked, beautiful. I told myself not to brag. Other people’s photographs are dull. This doesn’t mean anything to them. But really, I didn’t need to anyone else my stories. I’d already told the people that mattered. I’d told the people I needed to impress, the people I needed to feel different from. At the end of the summer,

without a job or a place to live, I'd buy a one way ticket to Washington D.C., and my parents would drive me to the airport.

THE THINGS WE LEAVE BEHIND

Loren Fimian's coffin, an Amish-made funerary box, rests in his carpeted basement closet. Three evenly spaced iron handles are fixed to the side panels, and three simple hinges mark the top. Otherwise, it's all cedar. It's a modest coffin, though not artless in its simplicity. The varnish on the planked surface reveals several knots where branches or dormant buds—life—once extended from the tree. His deceased wife's wedding dress, a gown with wrist length lace sleeves and a full satin skirt, hangs above with its train resting on the foot of the coffin. An artificial wreath from her funeral, now fifteen years old, lies to the left. The entire closet smells of the forest.

Loren is upstairs unwinding after a humid walk in his yard: a pumpkin patch. I find him, much as I left him, sitting in a recliner holding a cardboard Café Karuba cup—the same disposable container he refills every day for ninety-three cents at the Alma Kwik Trip. Two dark stains run its length.

“Did you see my new home?” he asks referring to his coffin.

I tell him “yes” and comment on the clean lines and craftsmanship. The rounded corners are soft and informal.

Loren is seventy-five, and not in the best or worst health of his life: he has a pacemaker and fluid retention in his lower extremities, but he is much improved since a stint in the hospital just a year earlier. He is a sturdy man, shaped like a barrel in the middle, though not overweight. His ashen hair is, perhaps, his only delicate feature and kept short around the sides, but tussled on top. From the profile, it's a budding Mohawk.

He purchased his coffin in Portage, which is some 160 miles southeast of his home on the Upper Mississippi river. Through the living room window, I see a Burlington Northern freight

train thud along the river bank. Its rumble can be heard from any seat in the house, but Loren doesn't take notice: nearly fifty trains pass by every day.

When Loren talks about the Amish carpenter, he pronounces it Ay-mish, with a hard Wisconsin "a" that only now rings unusual to me, having lived in the Mid-Atlantic for six years. The casket was built for someone else, but that someone else didn't want it.

"Three-hundred dollars." Congestion garbles his voice. "I'm not getting embalmed." Our conversation has entered the coffin and there he sees himself, where no one else will. This should be a dreadful conversation because, sitting here, we both know the reality that it might very well be soon. As a healthy twenty-eight year old, I imagine my own coffin somewhere far in the periphery, blurry and aloof, maybe shaped like an urn, but still very much unknown, not confronted. Somehow, the way he doesn't shy from death is appealing, almost comforting. It's as if he's prepared and accepted that life will run out. But I can't help but wonder if he is ready, if we are ever ready to die.

"I want to write my own funeral," Loren declares. "I need to get started on that. One night in bed, I had her down pat." He shrugs as if watching the words vanish. I notice Billy Graham's autobiography, among other things piled on his coffee table: the *2005 Standard Catalogue of Firearms*, a coin price guide, two magnifying glasses, and a bowl of wooden apples. "I think they go overboard with these funerals sometimes."

Loren's immediate family is small. He has no children, and his wife, Ardys, passed away over a decade ago. He's not gripping life with the determination of a soon to be grandfather, the pride of a father awaiting a son's graduation, or the fear of a husband who will abandon his wife. Loren's closest living relative is his brother, Don Fimian.

Don is, at seventy years old, sturdy but trim. His entirely white hair, a set of barely visible hearing aids, and creases set around his eyes are the only signs of aging. Don's hands are broad, but quite remarkably, after an entire life working the land, they appear brawny instead of worn. When he smiles, which is often, dimples dent both of his cheeks, accentuating his gentle gaze.

When I arrive at Don and Sharon's two-story house that stands on 232 acres of bluffed hillside farmland, he greets me warmly. They were once dairy farmers who milked forty-eight cows twice a day, cut and baled their own hay, and grew and grinded their own corn. Now, all but one of their fields, the area closest to the hay loft where steer graze, are rented to other farmers. Don plans to keep steer until the hay loft, which contains about 300 square bales, is empty. This should take roughly three years.

For a lifetime, the land has bent and shaped and twisted him, and in return, he's bent and shaped and twisted it. It's an intimacy he appears comfortable with, one he's not broken or exhausted by, one he's not yet abandoned. We walk to the smoke house, or what Don more accurately calls "a shack": the walls are a patchwork assemblage of corrugated metal, the roof is a frayed collection of misshapen shingles, and the door that looks to be scrap from the interior of a house is hinge-less and propped closed with a metal pole. This is where Don smokes his venison sausage and makes "them sticks"—a dried snacking sausage—during hunting season. He hunts his land with a cross-bow and explains, "I aint a big buck hunter, I'm a meat hunter. I enjoy my big bucks when I see 'em out in the field, but I let the other guys have 'em." Tonight Don and Sharon will eat sausage for dinner.

Their house is a collection of memories and comforts—floral wall paper, crocheted valences, a basket of beanie babies, Don's childhood height chair, a wooden plaque that reads

“Jesus”—nothing extravagant except the view from the living room. Alfalfa, corn, and hay fields stretch and wrap the contours of the bluffs. “It’s a pretty good life,” he tells me.

Loren knows this. He’s close with Don and Sharon. But responsibility to family does not appear to be what keeps him alive; he’s not been left with anyone who relies on his care. He knows they’ll be okay—perhaps grief stricken but okay—when he goes. At times, it seems that Don refuses Loren’s poor condition more than Loren himself does, which makes me wonder if Loren’s resolve—his forthright acknowledgement of death—is meant to comfort the people around him. I wonder if this is a way to put us at ease. I wonder what sort of hope he keeps to himself. When in the hospital, Loren called Don asking him to help unload some newly purchased merchandise.

“What did you buy?” Don asked.

Loren told him, “I bought a casket.”

What are you doin with that?”

“I’m going to use it.”

A fully dressed Christmas tree stands in Loren’s foyer. Porcelain and glass ornaments, suspended from ribbons and metal hangers, dangle from artificial branches. An angel marks the top, but the lights are unplugged. It’s June, and I wonder if a man with a dressed Christmas tree thinks he’ll make it until December, or if he fears taking it down because it may never go back up.

Loren is prepared for death. He has a casket. He has a plot at the Buffalo City Cemetery. He has a will to sign. It’s as if he’s cleaning up after himself by brushing the crumbs of his life

towards the correct receptacles. Is this how we face death? Do we create order in something we cannot control? Does organizing those things that will outlast us—our body, our possessions—give us the courage to face the unknown? Loren holds an invoice from his attorney and grumbles over the expenses. “Lawyers, they just charge the hell out of you. He’s a crook.”

From a man with at least a million dollars’ worth of assets, this is penny-pinching. But then again, frugality amassed this wealth. He spent his working years employed by a barley plant and ran cattle on what he and Ardys named *Fimian’s Rainbow Farm*. “I wouldn’t do that again,” he says of working all day then spending the evening making hay for the animals. “Stupid thing to do. I worked my tail off.” As an aged man, his body shows the years of labor. His breathing easily turns wheezy, and his lower lip becomes purple when he tires. Three of the nails on his broad left hand are yellowed bricks, and his eyelids droop like tents over the sockets. He claims Don worked harder than himself.

“Don don’t want my stuff,” Loren claims. And beyond Don, family becomes distant: sisters-in-law, cousins, nieces and nephews, all of whom he cares for, but is wary of giving money. He repeatedly praises wealthy acquaintances for “being real frugal,” and explains that they are “just common people,” which appears to be his unease in leaving wealth to heirs and heiresses. He values practicality, and wants to control how his life’s work will be spent. This money wasn’t meant to buy new snowmobiles or fund vacations. These ideas doesn’t comfort him. Instead he turns to organizations and foundations with mission statements. He tells me he’s giving “a lot” to the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, “a lot” to the Salvation Army, “a little bit” to the Ronald McDonald House, “some” to the American Legion, “a little bit” to the church, “some” to the Alma garden club, and “some” to Jimmy Swaggart whom he’s not sure is good or bad, but he likes to listen to Swaggart’s television program. The songs are beautiful.

The next afternoon Loren and I drive to the Buffalo City cemetery. The first thing he tells me is that the will is signed, and now he can die in peace. He's certainly prepared for death, but I'm not sure it's the same as being ready.

Loren is a collector. He opens a cupboard under the kitchen counter, removing a stack of leather-covered coin books. On top is a group of peace dollars minted in the 1920's to memorialize amity following World War I. The first page holds twelve silver dollars that are pressed into circular indents and labeled by year and mint location. Lady Liberty's profile and wind-blown hair mark the front of each coin. I notice a return address label, with the Ducks Unlimited trademark, fixed on the inside cover. Beside Loren's zip code "\$4,000" is written in ball-point pen. He hands me a set of Morgan dollars minted between 1878 and 1890. "This is a pretty nice set," he tells me. Inside, I see Lady Liberty's profile is fleshier and her crown more discreet than the Peace Dollar. The set would likely sell for \$25,000. He points to an individual coin minted in San Francisco in 1893. \$7,000. He hands me something called an Isabella quarter, a piece of silver honoring Queen Isabella of Spain who sponsored Columbus' expedition, and it is worth \$800. "Oh, it's a fun hobby," he tells me.

In the basement are three safes, each filled with coins. "I've got a bunch of these Mexican pesos, they're pure gold, about seventeen of them." Quickly, I realize this collection is more than just an investment. It's become his trophy reflecting decades and decades of relentless labor. "I had, not to brag, as many as anybody in Wisconsin."

In between laboring for Archer Daniels Midland Malting and running cattle, Loren had raised pumpkins, squash, and melons. The gourd money funded his coin collection. He still grows seven fields worth of squash and rutabaga, the two varieties of the cucurbit family that

require less physical labor to harvest. The squash, he says, is the money maker. “It’s all tax free money, and that’s good money.”

Until recently, an entire freezer chest in his garage was full of penny books; He’s started to scale back his collection. He declares, “I’m going to kick the bucket one day, so what am I going to do? I’m going to sell it.” He holds a hand written list, on graph paper, of the sets his dealer is collecting bids on. It’s an extensive, calculated grid predicting his death.

I’m not entirely surprised when he tells me that just three days ago he bought a new set of coins for \$45,000. “A lot of nice gold, some real premium stuff.” He still quests to complete his collection. It’s as if, very briefly, he’s relinquished control and revealed a fissure in his comfort with death; he’s not entirely boarded up his future but I can’t tell if collecting money is an addiction only death can break, or if Loren is hanging on, uncertain and vulnerable, hoping to make it until December.

Twenty-three rifles line the wall of Loren’s walk in closet. He goes through and names each one: “Did you ever see an eight-gage shot gun? That’s a lever action Winchester. Here’s a saddle gun. This is a .22. Here’s what they call a game-getter.” He pulls out a box of handguns. “Here’s one you don’t want to mess with, a Remington .51. A .41 Darringer—I wouldn’t want to get shot with that. This is what they call a knuckle buster.” He flips the snout into his palm and throws an imaginary punch, showing me how it doubles as brass knuckles.

This collection differs from the coins. It’s neither catalogued nor growing. He seems both less connected and exposed by the guns. Perhaps he’s put less of himself and sees less of himself in them. When he disappears down the hallway I notice, on his bedroom wall, that a portrait of his wife hangs next to a picture of Jesus, and an open can of Miller Highlife sits on his

bedside table. I don't ask him the things I want to know, like whether his wife's death still hurts, or if he believes, with certainty, in an afterlife. I should, but I can't; I'm not sure if it's me or him who is scared of what is behind his composure. I'm afraid to discover that when life is bearable we can't be ready for death.

He comes back into the bedroom and sits on the floral comforter covering the bed. From the bathroom closet, he'd retrieved a .44 Winchester, an 1873 rifle known as "The gun that won the West." He held it out for me to inspect, though I couldn't differentiate it from the collection in the closet. He stores this one separate from the collection because he "don't want them buyers" to see it. It's a family gun. He plans to give it to General Nash, a distant relative. "He's one of the finest Generals I've ever met," Loren tells me. "Very common."

Downstairs, among more collections—hand planes, bells, and marbles—I find forty-two bottles of home-fermented wine. Some are gallon-sized glass jugs with hand written labels stuck over apple cider nutrition facts. Others were once handles of brandy or whisky. Some have never been tasted, others are half full. From atop a safe, Loren hands me one labeled "1995 Birch Wine" in all capital letters. It's faintly yellow and tastes of cloves at the back of my palate. I try to move the impromptu tasting along. We are already late for dinner. But Loren lingers in what he's made, bringing a jug of blackberry wine to his lips, and grimacing at its acidity. He recaps it, and returns it to the table despite knowing it won't get any better. Leaning against the table, tired, he tries to find something more pleasant. We go through boysenberry, wild grape, and blueberry. The strawberry-rhubarb is light and sweet.

He shows me one final collection: cast iron seats made in the 1880's for horse drawn implements—tractors of the time. Over two-hundred cast iron seats cover the walls of his garage, creating a medley of color. Most were cast with intricate cut-outs and shaped like the cross-section of a mushroom top. In the center, each is bolted to the wood beams of the garage. I can only guess that these seats remind him of both the farm life he came from and the status he achieved.

This is the only collection he won't sell. He doesn't explain why these seats need to stay together, but he shows concern that they do. The historical society doesn't want them, and he fears an heir will sell them. This isn't the collection keeping him alive, but the one that will survive him. "As you get older," he tells me, "your life changes. You can't take it with you." Perhaps our possessions, at least a select few, are more personal than implement seats or home fermented wine could ever articulate. But maybe that is okay. Maybe it's okay that our truths are not anyone else's truths. And maybe wanting to keep these pieces together is self-preservation. He laments, "A lot of this stuff don't mean anything to anybody." He's neither growing nor reducing this collection; he simply wants it to stay the same.

Highway 35 follows the Mississippi river south through Alma where we pass the concrete barricades of lock and dam number four, and the double smoke stack of the Dairy Land Power Cooperative. Instantly, the scene becomes a bucolic picture of farmland barging up against hills, the same one I've seen for the past three days. "Take a right," Loren tells me at a small paved road bisecting a cornfield. The street meanders through crops, and suddenly rod iron gates, stone posts, and curated trees appear. As we approach, I realize we're at the Buffalo City cemetery. It's tranquil and well kept, the grass is short, and hedges trimmed. From the

perimeter, as I drive, Loren motions to the third row where his parents are buried. He directs me to the next gate and down a row of gravestones. Watering cans hang every few yards, and a sign states “Flowers must be planted in the ground or in a plant stand April 1st through November 1st. All winter decorations removed by April.” I let the car roll slowly down the paved aisle until he tells me to stop. “Ardys and I got the first one here,” he says, peering at the stone bearing Fimian in large letters. A cross is etched in one corner, a farm in the other. Red geraniums grow in front of Ardys name. “Don planted those,” he tells me.

Loren scans the plots. He’s decided he wants to add artificial flower holders to his grave. “You can’t have anything in the ground after October,” he says, much like the sign stated. He figures it would be nice to have flowers all year round.

We move on. The crypt, in the center of the cemetery, is a small stone building where Ardys body was stored until the ground thawed. Loren continues to examine options for flower holders. We never leave the car.

Four months later, on October sixth, the men of American Legion Post 224 found him alone in his home with no pulse. He hadn’t shown up to sell pumpkins. In short order his body will decay in the cedar funerary box, his wine will be dumped, his unclaimed possessions will be auctioned, and years from now memories of him will die too. It seems unfair that a granite tombstone with artificial flower holders will define him in a generation’s time, that a group of tractor seats can’t mean more, and that putting life in order will only ensure our things—the ones that matter—are placed on the right shelf.

I still don’t know if a bearable life can ever really be ready to end.

FINDING BJ SURHOFF

There are nineteen baseball cards in my collection. The stack, which I pushed into a drinking glass with the 1989 Milwaukee Brewers emblem stamped on the front, and an advertisement for “Scrub-a-Dub Car Wash” on the back, is nineteen images of one single player: BJ Surhoff. Thirty-four of the one-hundred-and-eight double stitches on my Bob Uecker signed baseball dip below the rim, nearly touching the cards, while the cursive writing of the legendary Brewers announcer’s name is visible, an inch above the tumbler, on the uppermost shelf of my living room bookcase. It all stands next to two volumes of Shakespeare’s Complete Works printed in 1892, a pair of tea cups from Harrods, and a U.S. flag that, on the day of President Obama’s inauguration, flew over the Capitol; these are, I suppose, my fanciest possessions.

It would be difficult to find another baseball card collection resembling mine. Each is protected by a clear plastic sleeve, and according to the price written in Sharpie on every sleeve, not a single card is worth more than twenty-five cents. All nineteen were issued between 1987 and 1995. The Christmas after I’d graduated college and moved from Wisconsin to Washington, D.C., I found the collection, when I returned home for the holidays, in the toe of my cross-stitched stocking that hung from our basement banister every December. As our family of four pulled wrapping paper from chap-stick and malted milk balls and other bric-a-brac, I’d known immediately that the nineteen cards, held together with only a rubber band, came from my dad.

My dad is not terribly tall at about five feet eight inches, his full head of silvered hair bends across his brow from a right side-part, and while not overweight he carries a few stray pounds around the torso. We share brown eyes, a slender nose that is a bit too long, and deep rounded nail beds. Months before I’d found the rubber-banded cards in my Christmas stocking, he’d come across a box of baseball cards at an auction. Attending local auctions was a hobby

he'd taken up years earlier, when my brother and I were just nearing adulthood, and my dad's thirty years serving as the Deputy Counsel for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation became, for him, as irksome as it was rewarding. He'd go alone to auctions. It was as if he'd found a reflective space not entirely different from the one he'd once known in Catholic mass; it was a place he'd felt purposeful in solitude. He was fascinated by the possessions people left behind, things that once meant something to someone, but would change through the eyes of a new owner.

A ten dollar bid won my dad a box of baseball cards. Although the collection was a grab bag of one-hundred-and-fifty new-ish cards, he'd spotted, amongst them all, a subset that would be anything but accidental to me. He knew that this particular collection would remind me, someone far from home, what it meant to be a hometown fan, what it meant to be a Maassen, and what it meant to have a childhood hero.

August 20, 1991 was my first Brewers away game. I was seven years old. The dramatic red of my toddler hair had mellowed leaving my blond pigtails with ruby undertones, my frame was not only short but small, and my right cheek creased into a dimple when I smiled. Family vacation had taken us 670 miles from Madison, across the Canadian border, and into the Toronto Blue Jay's Skydome.

The Skydome was just two years old, and its fully retractable motorized roof, made of four panels that open and close in a circular motion, was a technological wonder of its time. From our upper deck seats, the Skydome looked nothing like Milwaukee's familiar County Stadium, a stadium built just after the Korean War when the steel supply rebounded and the tiered stands horseshoeing home plate could be completed, yet was, in 1991, still ten years from

being leveled. My eyes lifted, peering above centerfield at the height of skyscrapers. A crowd of 50,000 had withstood a downpour to watch skydivers sink into the stadium during the opening ceremony two years earlier. We had nothing of this sort in Milwaukee. We didn't even have luxury boxes.

As a seven-year-old, I knew we weren't at the Skydome to see the Blue Jays. I knew Maassens were Milwaukee fans, and that I liked the Milwaukee boys. It was family law, the sort of thing I never challenged nor wanted to challenge because it made me belong with the people around me. What I didn't know was anything about baseball—batting averages, ERA's, that there were nine innings and relief pitchers. In Milwaukee, I could survive as a feigning fan. There was a bugle horn telling me when to scream “charge,” people in all directions to mimic, and a yellow mustachioed mascot who slid feet-first into a beer stein celebrating the Brewer's home runs. I could, and did, collect all-star ballots, punching out all one-hundred-and-twelve perforated circles, not voting for any one player, but making a game of how many ballots I could completely disarm before the last out, leaving a littering of polka-dots under my stiff backed seat, and still appropriately react to the action. I knew the cues.

It was all backwards at the Skydome. Rooms at the stadium's hotel overlooked the field, and t-shirts were marked with red maple leafs and a gentle bird face. It wasn't home, and while I knew that, I didn't know what it meant for my cues. In the bottom of the second inning, Toronto's Pat Borders hit a sacrifice fly to bring Maldonado safely across home plate. I busily picked the peanuts from my crackerjacks and handed them to my mom until the crowd erupted. I high-fived the Jay's fans a row in front of us, making myself a part of the celebration, a part of the crowd taking delight in scoring points against my team. My brother scolded me, “They're not on our side.”

When my dad was seven, he attended to his first baseball game. He grew up in a lumber town, Washburn, a dot in northern Wisconsin that is tucked into Lake Superior's Chequamegon bay and flanked on the western edge by the slender white birch trees and stockier pines of the Chequamegon National forest. Washburn was the place where my grandfather would cover the basement windows with butcher paper when breaking down the buck carcass he'd shot outside of hunting season. Where my grandmother preserved the summer garden in ball jars that lined the basement wall, across from the coal furnace that needed stoking from October to April. My dad and his eight siblings shared the two rooms on the second floor of 690 West Third Street, the upstairs hallways a division between the three girls and six boys in the congested two story house. It was a household where baseball—a luxury—was listened to over the radio.

But, in the summer of 1957 Auntie Beth gave three of the oldest—Ron, Jane and my dad Joe—the only childhood vacation they would ever know, a trip to Milwaukee County stadium.

I knew of one player on our side: BJ Surhoff. In 1985 Surhoff was the Brewers' first round draft pick, a catcher from the University of North Carolina. As a seven-year old, I didn't know that Surhoff threw right and batted left, something his father who played NBA ball for the New York Knicks taught him. Nor did I know that Surhoff's .289 batting average and .321 slugging percentage made him nothing more than an ordinary hitter, a player who floated above the league average but lacked power. All I knew about BJ Surhoff was, that amongst Maassen's, he belonged to me. Dad had given me BJ Surhoff.

In a prior season my dad had leaned over the upper deck seats at County Stadium and told me to watch the young catcher, he thought catchers had the toughest job in baseball, and this

one, he could be the next Milwaukee hero. What I understood: the blond haired guy in the bulky mask behind home plate, was cool. I threw myself onboard.

When Surhoff stepped up to the plate I became a fan—nauseous under the pressure of a full-count, screaming encouragement from the upper deck, aware of the ump’s imbalanced judgment according to the chatter around me, and giddy when the ball reached the outfield wall. My dad had, unwittingly, given me a way into baseball.

In Toronto, my brother and dad talked batting averages and miles per hour clocked on this and that fast ball during the bottom of the third inning. They admired the late breaking action on Chris Bosio’s two seamer, the way the ball would subtly snap to the right as the pitch crossed the plate. They pointed to the infielders as they swung the ball around the horn to register a rally-killing five-four-three double play: the third baseman snagging a ground ball and sending it to second, the second baseman turning it to first before the batter’s cleats grazed the base. It wouldn’t be until the top of the fourth, when BJ Surhoff stepped up to the plate, that I would find my way inside the boy’s conversation.

The closest train station to Washburn was in neighboring Ashland. For my dad and his siblings a trip to train station was a thrill itself, watching the web of undercarriage machinery bring the cars to a halt on the tracks to let a stream of passengers disembark. It was the place where they would always pick up Aunty Beth, their mother’s unmarried older sister, a schoolteacher with wire rimmed glasses who was a sort of year-round Santa Clause to the kids, buying each their first bicycle, adding small frills to their childhood. My dad had never boarded a train before the pilgrimage to Milwaukee. It was fancy. Everything was “yes sir and no sir,” and porters changed the linen head rest covers as passengers came and went. The route from

Ashland to Milwaukee was long, roving south 400 miles down Eastern Wisconsin, and stopping in Green Bay for a connection. Ron and my dad brought aboard their baseball gloves and stuffed baseball cards in their pockets. Ron, being a twelve-year-old paper boy, had bought a new glove, the leather bright and smooth in his lap, while my dad cradled his scuffed hand-me down. He was pleased, just having something to call his own was enough.

As they pulled into Milwaukee, the train passed through the backyards of housing that seemed to stretch forever to a seven-year old from a town with fewer than two thousand people. The Milwaukee train depot, with its sharp clock tower and rounded chateau architecture of red brick, stood just south of the commercial center of the city. They walked three blocks north to the Schroeder Hotel, adjacent to the gloomy Milwaukee River where freighters and ferries flowed through the open jaws of the draw bridges that tied the rear of the Pabst brewery building to the jewelers, banks, and fur factory across the way. Walter Schroeder, a friend of Auntie Beth's, owned Milwaukee's biggest and best hotel, rising twenty-five stories above the sidewalks of the brewing and manufacturing city's downtown. From their ninth floor window, my dad and his siblings could look out on the city they only knew through the radio, and chase after the Giants players, who stayed in the same Milwaukee landmark, snagging their autographs on the back of Schroeder Hotel postcards.

In the top of the fourth inning BJ Surhoff thumped a fly ball deep into right field, a solo homerun that was the Brewer's only tally in the run column the entire game. I redeemed myself. I let it be known whose side I was on by high-fiving, and hooting, and hollering. That was my Brewer. One row up, amongst a crowd that regularly sold out in Toronto that year, there were two middle-aged Brewers. They took notice of my curious shouting, and I heard my dad's voice

become excited. “He could really introduce Megan to BJ Surhoff?” Their son was a Brewers bat boy. He knew the team. All of them. Plans were made to meet up after the game.

During the 1957 season, baseball legend Willie Mays played for the New York Giants. Years earlier, had the Braves taken the advice of scout Bud Maughn and signed the Negro League player, Milwaukee would have enjoyed Mays and Hank Aaron—the man who broke Babe Ruth’s home run record—in the same outfield. As it went, Mays wore the orange and black of the Giants, stayed at the Schroeder hotel with his New York teammates, and ignored the handful of kids hanging out by the taxi stand bothering him for an autograph. Inside, the female elevator operator shooed the non-patron eight and ten year olds from the lift, guarding the ballplayers and other clients from their pestering. Although Mr. Schroeder would never charge Auntie Beth for the rooms, Ron and Joe fully embraced their patron status, an exclusivity they had known on few other occasions. Allowed free range of the elevator, they pinpointed Charlie Neal’s room, knocked on the door, and were greeted by the bare chested second baseman while a woman mulled around in the background. Remarkably this resulted in another autographed postcard.

But Mays, he just walked on by, lowered his head into the back of a cab, and sat down on the continuous pad of the bench seat filling the rear cabin of the vehicle, leaving none of the taxi stand kids with autographs. Seven-year-old Joe peered in the eye-level window and looked at him. In photographs, more often than not, the “Say Hey Kid,” as Mays was nicknamed, had an approachable grin and soft, kindly eyes. But that’s not what my dad saw. To him Mays wasn’t just a nice guy trying to get to work. He was a hero. Not the same type of hero as the Braves players, but someone whose name, whose baseball card could, momentarily, transport him

outside of rural Wisconsin—and now Mays was his challenge. So, before turning back to the hotel my dad said one word to him: Chicken. Mays stepped out of the cab, walked up to my dad, and put his signature on the back of a postcard. It was a moment of victory, when my dad felt distinguished from his siblings, when his older brother was in awe. For years, the post card was his trophy, prominently displayed on the sill of the entryway window that overlooked the pickup games played in the middle of Third Street. Ten years later, the signature, along with the box of baseball cards the boys kept under the bed, warmed the house when his mother burned it all in the coal furnace.

Surhoff hit a fly ball to center field to end the eighth inning, drawing my attention to the DayGlo Astroturf for the last time that game. They were behind by two, only the top of the ninth to save them. But it didn't. It was a three-up-three-down inning, a victory to the Blue Jays, the Jays' only victory that series. We stayed for all two hours and twenty-nine minutes of the game, because that, my dad had taught me, was what fans did. They stuck by their team. That night losing didn't bother me so much, not because I didn't know baseball, but because winning wasn't a tradition I was familiar with. Weber grills with bratwurst in County Stadium's parking lot—baseball's biggest site for tailgate parties—was my tradition. Punching out all-star ballots was my tradition. BJ Surhoff was my tradition. Surhoff had hit a home run and I could see the glow of lit skyscrapers against the dark of nighttime. I was satisfied as we followed the long trail of Jays fans down the stairs that overlooked the field where the grounds crew yanked the square bases from the field and swept sunflower seed hulls from the dugout floors. We were headed to find BJ Surhoff.

In 1957, the mezzanine box seats directly behind the Braves dugout cost \$3.60. Given the Braves popularity, it was likely that Aunty Beth bought the three games worth of seats with the help of Mr. Schroeder. The crowd of men wearing bowler caps, felt homburg hats, collared shirts, and slacks were to their back or mere flecks in the stands across the scruff of green infield. They sat close enough to make out the stately white “M” on pitcher Lew Burdette’s red brimmed ball cap while he took warm-up tosses from the pitcher’s mound. To seven-year-old Joe this was it. This was the biggest, best thing he could imagine. He knew every Brave. He knew their batting averages. He knew the pitchers ERAs. He knew that Hank Aaron batted fourth after Eddie Matthews. Those guys were his team. All of them.

It was a team he’d grown to love, and would know in years to come. In 1957, a player wasn’t a Brave today, Yankee tomorrow, and Dodger on Friday; players were bound to a team, a forced loyalty as teams retained lifetime rights to players before the era of free agents. So my dad hollered for each of them, rattling off statistics and encouragement, taunting Willie Mays, making himself a part of the live action. A woman in her early twenties walked across the aisle and beckoned my dad; she wanted his autograph.

Light still poured out of the open roof of the Skydome when we located the bat boy’s family. My dad was undoubtedly trying to give me a version of his Willie Mays thrill so many years earlier. He knew what the signature of an idol could mean to a seven-year-old, that it could set her apart from the crowd. What he didn’t know was that all I really wanted was to blend in, to be all right. And to me, in our family, that meant being one of the boys. At home I felt uneasy about girl things—makeup and high-heels and dresses. But outside our family, I wanted to wear ribbons around my pigtails, have tea parties, and to dress-up in costume jewelry with my

friends. On the outside, to the rest of the world where roles and expectations clung to gender, I wanted to blend in and be whatever it was that little girls were supposed to be.

When we found the bat boy's family, I hadn't processed the situation. I was neither excited nor nervous to meet my Milwaukee Brewer. I'd never thought of him as someone, he was just my part of baseball. So when they told me that, unfortunately, I wouldn't be meeting BJ Surhoff that night, I wasn't disappointed. My dad was. He took it gracefully though, telling them thanks for trying because "Surhoff is her hero."

That was the moment my dimple flattened and distraught tears rolled down my cheeks. I felt betrayed by the word hero. Surhoff was between me and dad, something that made me his kiddo. And it was as if I'd been found out, that I was revealed as a misfit, I was a girl who liked little boy things; as a seven-year-old, it didn't seem that little girls were supposed to look up to baseball players.

In 2012, for the first time in twenty years, the Milwaukee Brewers found themselves playing in the National league championship, the final determination of who reaches the World Series. In 1957, the Braves brought Milwaukee the only World Series title the city would know, and 2011 was the year for the Brewers to rebrand Milwaukee's glory.

It came down to game six against the St. Louis Cardinals, a franchise that already had ten World Series titles. Adam, my boyfriend, and I watched from the plaid couch in our living room. The Cardinals went up four in the first inning, but the Brewers answered with two homers in the second, tying up the game. But not for long. Our lackluster pitching allowed four runs in the fourth, and a steady drivel of St. Louis players scored until they reached twelve. The

Brewers bats were respectable, but couldn't keep up with Tony LaRussa's shockingly effective use of the bullpen. We lost.

My hopes were dashed. I'd come to care about this team; John Axeford, our closer, a former bartender from Canada who kept an overgrown playoff mustache; Nyger Morgan, our centerfielder largely known by his alter-ego-gentleman's-name Tony Plush; Prince Fielder, our first baseman who started the team's "beast mode" tradition, a request from his kids to mimic the movie "Monster's Ink." Those guys were my team. All of them.

While Adam sat muttering on the couch about it being wholly unfair, that St. Louis had like a billion championships already, that their team was supremely stuffy and unfun, I found myself watching the post-game interviews with tears in my eyes. My dimple flattened. But this time it wasn't about fitting in. I have nineteen reasons to believe that I'm one of the boys, that my dad and I are in the same club. These were the tears of what I had become: a fan. The tears that you cry when losing just hurts.

DRIVING THE CHAIRWOMAN

I'd never been to Los Angeles before. But there I was, driving down Century Boulevard with Madeleine Bordallo—the U.S. Congresswoman from Guam—in the passenger seat, requesting a detour to the McDonald's drive through. At seventy-four-years-old, the Congresswoman was elegant. Her short crop of blonde hair was professionally styled. The perfect fit of her skirt suit suggested it was tailored. And there was not a single chip in the polish of her manicured fingernails. She pointed to the two-story McDonald's. It stood between a gas station and the ordinary rectangular architecture of a Holiday Inn. A billboard, advertising something other than McDonald's, was rooted amongst the shrubs leading to the front entrance, and a few palm trees stood secluded on the perimeter of the parking lot. We were four blocks from the airport, where our flight from Washington, D.C. had landed not more than an hour earlier, and it was lunch time.

I hadn't slept well the night before. In my basement apartment on southeastern Capitol Hill, fear kept my mind twisting, never quite exhausting me, just leaving me semi-alert all night. General scuttlebutt told me I'd never be able to navigate the circus of a highway that was L.A. I envisioned broad freeway that would stretch ten lanes in each direction, cars moving at unsettling rates, and traffic patterns that would make merging seem heroic. It would, undoubtedly, be the worst experience in my driving life. It would top the time in college when hammering rain flooded the streets in Madison, leaving me stranded in my Hyundai Accent, unable to drive. The drainage water slowly rose above my tires, then over the bottom seam of my closed door. I felt water flow in and pool at my feet. When it reached my knees and the entire clutch was submerged, I panicked and called my Dad at work. He would know what to do. Before saying hello I explained, between hurried breaths and tears, that my car was filling

with water. He told me to roll down the window. If worse came to worse, I knew how to swim. The water was up to my thighs when the rain stopped, and eventually I opened the door. I was left with an inch or two of water covering the floor, and a grimy film coating my bare legs. I'd kept myself awake that night thinking driving in L.A. could only be worse.

But it happened to be my job as a clerk for the House Natural Resources Committee. It was my first job after college, and it wasn't a glamorous role; I was in charge of the logistics for Congressional hearings. For a field hearing in Santa Barbara that meant, amongst other things, providing transportation for the Chairwoman.

Days before traveling to Los Angeles, I printed Google maps with driving directions to all of our destinations in southern California: from the airport to our meeting at an LA hospital, from the hospital to our hotel in Santa Barbara, from our hotel to the hearing site, from the hearing site back to the hotel, from the hotel back to L.A, and just in case, from the hearing site back to L.A. Each was tabbed with a yellow Post-it Note.

Pulling into the McDonald's driveway was a relief; I wouldn't need to deviate from the tabbed Google map sitting in my lap, nor would I need to decipher the tastes of a seventy-four-year-old Member of Congress who drank her coffee black. When we reached the menu, I rolled down my window, letting in the surprisingly thick November air. It was hazy, and I couldn't tell whether I was surrounded by humidity or smog. When a voice politely asked us for our order, I turned to the Congresswoman, ready to relay her choices. A hamburger and water.

"Will that be all?" The voice from McDonald's asked.

The Congresswoman seemed concerned that I hadn't ordered anything myself. Who knew how long we'd be at the hospital. I told her I'd be okay. I still had the three bananas she'd

urged me to stow in my purse at Continental Airlines President's Club during our layover in Houston. That, of course, she told me, was not lunch. I ordered a cheeseburger.

The first bit of driving was easy. There was nothing urgent about four lanes and a boulevard, or the seven-story mid-range hotels lining the street. The cheeseburger sat, wrapped in its yellow paper, on my lap under the map.

"I'm looking for Imperial Highway." I said hoping she might help navigate.

"Imperial Highway." She repeated the words, but focused on her hamburger.

Imperial Highway would lead me to, what looked like on a map, a tangle of wires where the Century and San Diego freeways intersect. I watched the sign for Imperial Highway pass as I continued, in the center lane, straight on Century. I'd missed it. And as a young Congressional staffer every mistake seemed a crucial failure. So, I quietly pulled a U-turn and backtracked. Once on Century Freeway, I stuck myself in the right lane and hyper-attentively tracked the exits until 7B connected us north to Interstate 110. The land just beyond the noise barrier looked inhospitable, as terrain surrounding a twelve lane highway often does. The lean palm trees, whose leaves clustered in a sphere at its top, were meagerly scattered amongst electrical wires and occasional neutral toned rectangular buildings. But then we exited onto Flower Street, where the traffic was thin, but the tall and thoughtful architecture announced that we'd entered downtown. The Congresswoman never mentioned the U-turn. She did, however, notice how thin McDonald's hamburgers had become, that flying made her tired, and that she would be talking to the veterans staying in the Weingart Guest House about the proposed military buildup on Guam.

Guam is a small island, 212 square miles of land surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. It's far from the continental United States, a little closer to Hawaii, and closer yet to the Philippines, which is only 1,500 miles to the west. For the United States, it is a postern in the Pacific. A quarter of the island is dedicated to U.S. military operations. It's a place that occupies a foggy existence as an unincorporated organized territory of the United States—not quite a state, but not a sovereign country either. Although only select portions of the constitution apply to the territory, all 185,674 Guamanians are United States Citizens.

The Congresswoman, who was technically a “Delegate” and wasn’t granted the full voting rights most of her colleagues enjoyed, was not originally from Guam. She, like myself, came from the middle of the country. Not quite Wisconsin, but neighboring Minnesota. There were short-lived moments when I heard my grandmother’s midwestern sensibilities in the Chairwoman’s voice. And at the time, it was hard to know what to make of her. Back in Washington, my colleagues addressed her as “the Chairwoman” and called her “Ma’am.” When she was out of earshot they called her Madeleine, and in e-mails shortened Congresswoman and Chairwoman to “CW.” Everywhere in the Capitol complex, Members were treated with a veneer of respect, conduct that told me I ought to revere these people, but a sentiment that was complicated by rumors and gossip: the Appropriations Chairman was overheard calling his caucus “a bunch of fucking bed-wetters” while drinking an Old Fashioned at a bar; a member of the Wisconsin delegation saved money by sleeping on the standard-issue leather couch in his office, and showered at the gym; a southern Member powdered his bald spot to reduce its shine on T.V.; our Chairwoman had once worn high-heels to a nature walk. Behind the yeas and nays were people with temperaments, and vulnerabilities, and vanities, and motivations.

It was difficult to decipher a Member's credibility. By no means could one Member be an expert on every bill as well as issue taken up on the House floor or in committee. It's the reason the Chairwoman's briefing binder contained a tab marked "script." The contents would, word-for-word, guide her through a hearing. The "questions" tab contained pages and pages of inquiries aimed at the expert witnesses. A legislative staffer would navigate the questions based on the tenor of the hearing, and point the chairwoman to the next appropriate inquiry. In the hearing room, the audience would see the Chairwoman sit at the head of two tiers of horseshoe dais made from dark mahogany and edged with elaborate carved moldings. A brass chandelier stemming into a dozen tulip lights hung from the center of the ceiling, and perfectly pleated empire valences draped the upper reaches of the tall windows. She would, in a charming but serious-minded way, rap the sturdy gavel, and traverse the nuances of proposed legislation. She would be in control of a well-informed discussion. But, from my seat it was just a well-choreographed production.

She was a woman who cared deeply about Guam. She knew her District and its people, that the ethnic make-up was mostly a mix of Chumurros—Indigenous Guamanians—and Filipinos. That nearly a quarter of the population lived below the poverty line, and a small but significant number of households lived without refrigerators. So now, of course, I can see why she relied on our staff with Ph.Ds and Master's degrees in fisheries science and forestry to maneuver her through the conservation propositions in the National Marine Sanctuaries reauthorization and the emerging crisis of white-nose syndrome in bats. She prioritized issues like the proposed military build-up on Guam that would relocate 23,000 Marines and their families from a base being closed in Okinawa to her island. It could bring economic possibility to Guam. However, I only saw her in Committee the hearings which I'd come to think of as

mere recitals. My admiration of the Chairwoman became dented, leaving me skeptical of her expertise, wary of her sensibilities, and uncertain she deserved my deference. I was waiting to be convinced.

The Weingart Guest House, an inexpensive boardinghouse associated with Good Samaritan Hospital, was northwest of downtown in the West Lake neighborhood. It was located in a strip of West 6th street amongst one-story businesses with worn awnings and faded signage. A small whitewashed shop called Coqueta advertised “clothing for the whole family, \$4.99 and up.” A shadow remained on a corrugated steel sign where the “B” of Lucky Buy Discounts was missing. Loma Pawnbrokers offered to “Buy, Sell & Loan Money For Gold, Diamond, TV, VCR, Tools, etc.” A mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the side of a building was equipped with two shelf-like ledges, one at her hips and the other at her ankles, where offerings of potted flowers sat. I dropped the Chairwoman at the front doors of the guest house and went to find parking.

It was the type of street where I wanted to eat lunch. I’d learned from previous travels that low the rent and dingy ambiance often meant the best food. Though I only saw West 6th Street through the car windows and didn’t slip out for a half hour to try Magee’s Donuts or Restaurant Merendero Salvadorno, that strip of West 6th Street became my impression of L.A.’s charisma; it was the reason I’d want to go back, the reason I came to respect the city.

The Weingart Guest House was modest. The linoleum floors were scuffed, and the front desk reminded me of a dormitory. It had the sense of a hospital without the sterility. Upstairs a narrow corridor led to the one and two bed room suites. I found the Chairwoman circulating amid a knot of twenty-or-so Guamanians, shaking hands, listening to stories of ailments, and

never showing unease. There were both dark-haired and greying veterans, but nearly all looked drained and thin. Their wives, though also weary, moved with more certitude and strength carrying trays of just-fried bonelos—coconut milk donuts dusted with powdered sugar—and vegetable platters. In the small lounge room, twenty seem a crowd.

For the first time I saw the Chairwoman speak without notes. Her military build-up remarks were no longer than needed, clear, and to the point. With the decorum of the hearing room 2,500 miles away the mechanical tin of her reading voice was replaced with a comfortable ease. In her carefully chosen earrings and Congressional lapel pin, she certainly did not blend in with the crowd, but appeared, in a way, to be at home. She gently fielded their concerns and organized a group photo. The families would, undoubtedly, receive copies in the mail, signed in her neat cursive writing. She only signed documents in black ink—blue, she said, was unprofessional.

As we prepared to leave, a woman motioned me toward the galley kitchen where a thickset man with thinning silver hair insisted we take remaining bonelos for the drive to Santa Barbara. He'd made them for us. My instinct was to decline kindly—it didn't seem right to take food away from the families who had already treated us so well—but from behind me, the Congresswoman spoke up, "Yes, that would be lovely." She knew 'thank you, no' would insult her host.

I pulled the car around to the front doors of the guest house where, accompanied by a handful of our hosts, the Congresswoman awaited. While they opened her door and assisted her into the vehicle, one man came round to my unrolled window. I was young, and looked toward him with inexperience. "You take care of this woman." They were protective words said with the type of affection reserved for family, and there was an earnestness in the way he put his hand

on my shoulder. I didn't understand how she'd won their hearts. When I pulled us up to West 6th Street I turned the wrong way.

The Congresswoman was not new to politics; she was serving her fourth term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Before being elected as a U.S. Congresswoman, she served the term-limited eight years as Guam's first female Lieutenant Governor, after spending five terms in the Guam legislature. But, her first experience in public service was thirty-five years ago as Guam's First Lady.

Madeleine Bordallo's husband, Ricardo, was elected Governor of Guam twice, in 1975 and 1983. Near the end of his second term, while preparing for the upcoming gubernatorial election, news reports rumored that he was being investigated by a federal grand jury. When summoned before a grand jury Ricardo refused to answer questions and trudged out. After a long two years of trials, he was convicted of bribery and extortion, and sentenced to four years in prison. Just days before he was scheduled to report to Federal prison in Boron California, Ricardo ended his life with a .38 caliber pistol. He was found draped in the Guam flag, chained to the statue of Chief Quipuha, and surrounded by placards reading "I regret that I only have one life to give my island."

The Chairwoman had lived through it all and somehow found the courage to resume her public life. The year of Ricardo's death she unsuccessfully ran for Governor, and five years later became Guam's Lieutenant Governor. Driving down the highway in L.A., all I knew was that she lived alone at the Watergate, and male staff members accompanied her to formal events.

We took Highway 101 towards the coast. Once outside of L.A. it became a calm stretch of road, where, in its most scenic moments, dim hills lurked behind a diverse cloud of green foliage. As we settled into the two hour drive, she turned to me, “Does this car make noises?”

I sure hoped not. I listened, only hearing the light sounds of traffic. Tires humming along the pavement.

“I don’t hear anything,” I told her.

There was a moment of silence.

“I mean, like songs,” she replied.

I tuned the radio to eighty-eight-point-something, imagining a seventy-four year old woman might enjoy classical music. It was my best guess.

Almost immediately she told me she was trained as a classical singer. Before becoming a television broadcaster in Guam, she’d wanted to sing. And now she played the tambourine with a bipartisan group of House Members who called themselves “The Second Amendments.” Then, in a very ordinary way, she just kept talking. She reminisced about growing up in Minnesota and moving to Guam when she was fourteen. We talked about her daughter—a Realtor in Las Vegas who also owned a house in Florida. We talked about her granddaughter—a very impressive Google employee. She contemplated her Legislative Director’s love life, coming to the conclusion that she needed to find him a girlfriend, an island girl. She told me that Arundel Mills was the best outlet shopping near D.C., her Prada bag had been twenty-five percent off. She observed the surroundings suggesting, as we approached the coast, that the scenery would be much nicer without those motor homes. When the car fell quiet but it seemed the Chairwoman wanted to continue chatting, I complemented the sizable diamond on her left hand. It was a gift

from her husband. After he passed, she told me, her daughter had it re-set in yellow gold. “I never really liked white gold.”

We listened to symphonies until we reached Santa Barbara.

When we arrived at the Villa Rosa Inn I carried the Chairwoman’s bag upstairs. It was a charming Inn with Spanish Colonial architecture, eighteen rooms surrounding a courtyard, and rates that fit our government per-diem. The next morning she would tell me that she ran laps around her room for exercise, and comment on the odd configuration of her room. Then Dave, a co-worker who flew directly to Santa Barbara the day before, would brief the Chairwoman on the National Marine Sanctuaries Act over the continental breakfast. But that night when I went back to our car, I noticed, a bit irritated, that the bananas and bonelos, the food the Chairwoman had collected for anyone but herself, remained untouched in the backseat.

Two years later, after I’d become a Legislative Advisor and helped the chairwoman navigate policy, I left the Natural Resources Committee to follow the love of my life to Michigan where he would start graduate school. I was ready to move on. I’d realized that saving Atlantic Menhaden—a silvery little bottom feeding fish—through legislation, or helping re-design the Coastal Zone Management Act wouldn’t be what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I didn’t have the passion of my co-workers. They wanted to save the environment. I was all for it, but not the one to do it.

They threw me a going away party where we drank Heineken and Cabernet around the hearing room dais, and my co-workers gave me a crystal etched with the Capitol building. The

Chairwoman stopped by and insisted on addressing the room. Her words were kind and encouraging, and she ended with a story of the time I'd navigated L.A. without a single mistake. I'd always assumed she really hadn't noticed. That she genuinely thought I'd navigated L.A. with no missteps. I'd supposed that behind her refined style was someone who read scripts and didn't detect U-turns. But now I wonder if she knew. I wonder if she could see my fear and uncertainty and naiveté, and chose to relate to me in ordinary ways. That maybe the Congresswoman knew I'd pulled a few U-turns, and was saying that I was okay, that that is how we get where we're going. My heart sinks when I think that maybe she was giving me the respect I'd quietly withheld from her.

THE HANDS BEHIND THE PAPER

At six a.m., the sky is still dark. In the blocks surrounding the Columbia Heights Metrorail station only two businesses are lit: Pan Lourdes Bakery, where a single customer stands before the back counter, and Washington Sports Club, where a row of patrons run on treadmills overlooking the street from the third floor. Newly built brick apartments and condominiums, nearly all still dark, raise six floors above the metro station, across from the calm of big box stores not yet open for the day's business. It's a brisk forty-five degrees, and one of DC's most densely populated neighborhoods feels lonely.

There are two entrances to the Metro at the intersection of 14th and Irving. On the northeast corner, only a pair of escalators carry passengers up and down through the entrance marked "Pleasant Plains." The other, on the southwest corner marked "Mount Pleasant," is equipped with three escalators. Square glass panels cover both entrances providing a tented roof that protects the stairwells, and heavy steel gates stand open after being chained shut for five hours.

Outside of both entrances, two orderly stacks of free daily newspapers—the *Express* and *The Examiner*—are bundled with the coarse weave of yellow polypropylene strapping, and reach the height of my hips. Four newspaper distributors—Alhagie, Tristan, Barbara, and Roberts—have already made their morning commute and attend to the papers. Barbara places a square, fifteen-page *USA Today* insert, picturing "Gardens to live with...not just look at," in the center of each *Examiner*, creating a pile of stuffed newspapers on the metal news boxes lining 14th Street. Her hands are bare. Roberts stands, in black gloves and a knit hat, at the same entrance handing the *Express* to the sluggish drift of six-o'clock commuters. Across the street at the southwest entrance, Alhagie and Tristan do the same, greeting morning commuters with

respectful hellos, good mornings, and an abridged morning paper for the train. For a dim, stony morning, each of the distributors is astonishingly pleasant, as if the dark and cold were congenial. It is what they do every weekday morning. The distributors spend four hours as a face behind the daily newspapers, wedged in the torpor of our morning commute.

Alhagie stands about fifteen feet from the Columbia Heights Metrorail station on Irving Street. He is twenty years old, not quite six feet tall, wears a bulging white jacket, and knit hat with the gothic typeface “Washington Examiner” embroidered across the folded band. When he smiles, which occurs frequently, a slender gap between his two front teeth is revealed. For eight months he’s worn what looks like a combination of a smock and vest: a rectangle of red water-proof material with an oval cutout at the center—a neck hole of sorts. The material hangs from his shoulders down his chest and back, and ties at the waist. On both the front and back are clear pockets displaying the front page of the current *Examiner*, most prominently a photo of the Washington Capitals after clinching a playoff berth, and the headline “Barry hits Asians with racial insult ‘they ought to go’ and make way for blacks.”

Seven-thirty to nine a.m. is busy. Commuters approach the three escalators from various directions, and he pivots to greet as many as he can, gently offering a newspaper. Sometimes it’s taken, but just as often declined. The whole operation is polite. Alhagie has little incentive to badger potential patrons as he, like all the other distributors, is paid by the hour. When I ask if there is motivation to get rid of all of the papers, he tells me that it would save him a phone call to the suppliers who pick up the extras after ten a.m. The biggest challenge, he says, is the cold. “People walk around with their hands in their pockets.”

Alhagie is the only distributor at the Columbia Heights metro station who did not grow up in the District. He moved to DC from Gambia two years ago and is a student at Montgomery County Community College. He hands out another paper, and a woman goes out of her way to say “hi.” People’s attitudes differ based on the weather. He timidly reveals there have been moments, different from this April Thursday, when he’s felt patronized. But he remarks, “This is just a part time job.”

The newspaper in Alhagie’s hand is twelve by ten-and-a-half inches and stapled at the seam. Both *The Examiner* and the *Express* are papers that rely solely on advertising revenues, emulating a trend that started in Stockholm. In 1995, a Swedish publisher, Modern Times Group, introduced a free weekday newspaper called *Metro International*. It was printed in full color tabloid format—a design squatter than an unfolded broadsheet—and aimed to capture a young non-traditional demographic: the elusive 18-35 year-olds who were increasingly ignoring daily newspapers. The thin daily newspaper, designed for a twenty minute commute and filled with concise news stories emphasizing entertainment and lifestyle coverage, became a success. Over a decade, *Metro International* posted \$11 million dollars in revenue, and the circulation of free daily newspapers rose from 231,000 to 26 million readers.

In 2009 when revenues were down and staying down, *The Washington Post* launched *Express*, which mimics *Metro International* in form and content. In the April 6th edition of *Express* two pages are devoted to National news (no story exceeds ten brief paragraphs), one page covers local news, two pages are dedicated to a cover-story about would-be suburbanites remaining in urban centers, three pages cover sports, and eleven pages are devoted to lifestyle. The paper only once indicates that a story is “continued on page 22” which occurs under the

header “Now Playing,” where fifteen movies are summarized. Full page advertisements run by Prudential, Home Décor Furniture and Flooring Liquidators, Sleepy’s, and Forman Mills Clothing Factory Warehouse, cost \$1800 apiece per day, but are by no means the only advertisements; just the most spacious. *The Washington Examiner*, which is owned by politically conservative Denver billionaire Philip Anschutz, is similar in size and advertisements. *The Examiner*, however, carries denser news stories that reflect Anschutz’s political agenda.

Metro International’s business model was, by no means, ground-breaking. The *Contra Cost Times* in California and the *Colorado Daily* are often cited as two of the first free daily newspapers. During the 1960’s and 1970’s, when these free dailies began operations, relying solely on advertising income was a bold divergence from the conventional dependence of newspapers on subscription revenue. The innovation of *Metro International* was linking free distribution and mass transit, putting distributors in busy commuter locations.

Express Distributor Tristan sets his alarm for 5:30 a.m. On mornings when he is slow out of bed he skips his usual oatmeal or cereal and makes his ten minute bicycle commute, uphill, on an empty stomach. Tristan’s been distributing the *Express* at Columbia Heights since 2009.

Just before 6:00 a.m., he dismounts a simple mountain bike and locks it to an arched bike rack with a U-lock. In khaki pants, a thick sweatshirt, Nike high-tops, and headphones pressed in his ears, he immediately locates ten bundles of the *Express*, grasps the yellow strapping, and two-by-two, lugs the bundles to a strategic position fifteen feet from the metro entrance. He ruptures the strapping of a top bundle allowing commuters effortless access to the newspapers while he ducks around the side of the entrance and pulls a yellow *Express* vest over his head. A hand written name tag and large circular button exclaiming “FREE” in bold lettering are pinned

to his chest. Alhagie has not yet arrived, so Tristan carts bundles of the competing newspaper, *The Examiner*, into a pile neighboring his own, and again, gently snaps the strapping of the top bundle. Though their products may be in competition, the distributors look out for one another.

Tristan is soft spoken and articulate as he talks about his morning commute. He used to take the metro, but when it habitually delivered him to the Columbia Heights Station at 6:05, five minutes late, he switched to his bike. Since the switch, he casually explains, “I’ve lost forty pounds.” Maybe, he admits, it has something to do with his three-time-a-week jogging schedule and forgoing the energy drinks he used to pick up at the seven-eleven every morning. Now he drinks coffee, and only two cups.

He does his job with a sense of pleasant seriousness, and in his quiet but forthcoming way he tells me about the hazards of the job, which seem largely a product of being stationed in the public space of a city. In February of his first year on the job, a machete wielding gang fight interrupted the rush hour. Last year, he was harassed for nearly a week by a proselytizing Christian with a blue diamond tattooed across his forehead. Periodically people are rude. In the instances when a commuter throws insults, he just lets them walk by. “I’m not the type to get physical.”

By 9:45 a.m. his shift is nearly over, and there are less than a dozen papers left in his stack. “I always run out on Thursdays,” he explains, telling me about the popular weekend guide. He begins thumbing the back pages to show me, but hands the paper to a passing commuter. He points to two untouched bundles of *Examiners* by Alhagie’s feet. “They gave him too many today.”

When Tristan first started, he claims he didn’t hand out all his newspapers. It took time and many “good mornings” to gain customer trust. He pulls the last copy of the Express from

the clear pocket of his vest and hands it to a customer. I find it curious that a free good needs selling, that the commuters are invested in this moment of interaction, that good morning or hello mean something before the seclusion underground.

Commuting is a lonely business. After I file through Metro's fare gate a green line train approaches in the direction of Fort Totten. A modest number of people enter the train to be taken north under the city and out toward Maryland. The other side of the platform, awaiting a train toward the center of the city, is a dreary picture of isolation. Nearly all of the commuters stagger themselves, finding a buffered place of silence to fiddle with mobile devices. Two people read the *Express*, and one, standing diagonally to my left, has folded his *Examiner* into a small square and does the crossword puzzle in pen. No one talks.

The train is not terribly different, though, for the sake of space, personal buffer zones are reduced, and occasional physical contact is made to the noticeable chagrin of riders. If there is any illusion of fraternity amongst commuters, it is found in the quiet disenchantment of eyes that never meet. On a surprisingly empty car in the midst of the morning rush, all forty-three passengers keep to themselves. The tinny voice of the train conductor announcing each stop competes only with the static of the PA system. Twenty-five of the passengers are fixed on their electronic screens or a book, and thirteen daily papers—almost an even mix of the *Express* and *The Examiner*—are read, the flimsy newsprint of each sagging at the upper corners. The remainder, except myself, have their eyes shut.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, claims that every ten minutes of commuting results in ten percent fewer social connections. He was quoted in the *New Yorker* saying, "Commuting is connected to social isolation, which causes unhappiness." The average commute

on public transportation in Washington D.C. is forty-eight minutes, which means about half of the two or so hours of leisure time established by the eight-hour workday are now spent in solitude. Instead of beers at the bowling alley, we are left with daily newspapers and mobile devices on the train.

Around the time that *The Washington Post* launched the *Express*, a daily freesheet called *thelondonpaper* was introduced by *News International*, Rupert Murdoch's UK newspaper. It followed the same light news and lifestyle bent as the *Express*, which the general manager of *thelondonpaper* suggested should be like your hip cool friend. The general manager was, of course, not suggesting that the daily newspaper would act to fulfill our waning social connections, but rather that it might provide readers trendy information.

Although these papers are not our tennis partners or checkers opponents, perhaps they keep people company on the train. When I get off at L'Enfant Plaza, a stop surrounded by federal office buildings and a transfer point to the orange and blue line, a tide of passengers move to the lower platform to catch their next train. On the escalator, I spot two fully opened copies of the *Express* being read, but more commonly the daily is folded horizontally in half and clutched at one's side. They are everywhere.

More likely though, the papers are merely used to erode the time of an urban commute. Following rush hour, the oversized trashcan that stands on the hexagonal tile of train platform contains a heap of daily papers. The can is covered with a cylindrical lid the size of a car tire, which has rectangular openings on both sides where the *Express* hangs over the edge. At Farragut North, one after another, commuters slip papers through a horizontal slot in a rectangular receptacle with the words "newspapers only" and "recycle" across the front, above a white stenciled picture of *The Washington Post*. Papers lie deserted on a bench, on the floor, and

tucked against the train seats. On my trip home, at least three daily papers remain on every car; on a particular car, I find twelve.

Barbara estimates that she gives away three-hundred papers in a morning. She wears khaki pants and a hooded sweatshirt under her *Examiner* vest. Her hood is up, framing the fullness of her cheeks. When a customer approaches, she wishes him a “good morning” and laughs, revealing the gold dental work in the back of her mouth, then points to a man and his dog on an early morning walk. He waves.

Barbara, unlike the reserved Tristan and Alhagie across the street, is boisterous. Her voice is full-bodied, and she is hearteningly unguarded. “They tell me I’m funny,” she says of her patrons, and continues placing inserts in the Friday paper. The people are what she likes about this job; she just enjoys talking to people. Barbara is middle-aged, older than the men at the southeast entrance, and is the newest of the distributors at the Columbia Heights Metro station. She started on January 1st, the day after she interviewed. But before distributing newspapers for *The Examiner*, she worked a collection of jobs. She mentions custodial jobs, cashier jobs, and a position at a roller rink. The dry tone of her voice tells me she is content to have moved on. Even if it is cold outside, which, like the others, she says is the most difficult part of the job—that and getting up early—she likes what she does. “I wasn’t sure I was going to make it through the winter,” she says, not so much referring to the cold, but rather being on her feet five mornings a week. She suffers from swelling in her knees. Besides that and the occasional crabby patron, she is pleased. “We all get moody,” she tells me.

The northeast entrance to the metro station receives less traffic than Alhagie and Tristan’s side; by 6:40 a.m. commuters arrive with regularity on Irving Street. Barbara looks across the

street. She excitedly recounts the few occasions she distributed papers at the southeast entrance, sounding thrilled. “It’s faster over there.” She moves her arms in a flurry of directions imitating the commotion of distributing papers on Irving Street. “It’s just like morning, morning, morning...” When I ask if there is a rivalry between the two daily papers, she looks at Roberts, who hands out the *Express* at her entrance, and says, “no,” but adds, “I think they like his paper better than mine.” For a brief moment she seems to take the perceived preference personally, as if it reflects her own likability.

Barbara is a resident of Northeast D.C. and a native of the city. At ten o’clock her work will be done for the day, and she plans to take her thirteen-year-old grandson, who she supposes is still asleep, to the arcade. He is on spring break. Her grandson, she explains, is the reason that she is pursuing her GED; she has one segment left until she graduates and expresses no embarrassment in not finishing high school. Perhaps, not surprisingly, she talks of her schooling with the same bonhomie that seems characteristic of all her actions, and I detect a pleasant sense of pride.

Between her job and church—Mount Rona Missionary Baptist Church, which is a brick church with parapets and stained glass windows four blocks from the Columbia Heights metro station—Barbara finds herself in the neighborhood quite frequently: Weekday mornings distributing newspapers, Wednesday evening bible study, and Sunday services. When I tell her I used to live a block from Mount Rona she says, “Oh, I bet you could hear us on Sunday mornings,” and asks if I’ve ever been.

“Only to vote,” I tell her and comment on the charcoal aroma of the outdoor grills that they fire after summer services.

With no reservations, Barbara suggests I drop in at Mount Rona. “You’d like it.”

At the end of the morning, when I go to thank her for talking with me, Barbara turns and pulls me in for a hug.

It would be hard to call Barbara a hawker. Her affability is not tethered to a commission. She seems to inhabit a space somewhere between Wal-Mart Greeters and the newsboys who fought against Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst's attempt to raise the wholesale price of bundled newspapers. Historically, news hawkers were young men who bought papers on a cash basis, and made a living from the meager markups they charged readers. Having reputations for exaggerating headlines, appealing to patrons with false sob stories, and withholding change from customers, newsboys were perceived as social problems, plucky bottom dwellers. It's a common attitude towards street vendors world-wide: trouble makers whose purpose is to create chaos on the streets.

By the 1920's, the news hawker was eclipsed by more genteel forms of newspaper distribution: newspaper boys and the newsstand. The home delivery routes of newspaper boys were grounded in ideals of thrift and industriousness, and the newsstand was a kiosk of urban amenities, selling a variety of newspapers, chewing gum, and cigarettes. It wasn't until the 1990's, ten years before the rise of the free daily newspapers, that American cities experienced a subtle re-emergence of news hawkers with "street newspapers"—monthly news publications often sold by the homeless or unemployed. However, most street publications have a smaller circulation and are less bureaucratically organized than the free commuter dailies. So, it really wasn't until the rise of the free daily newspapers that a hawker-like figure reappeared with frequency.

Interestingly, the connotations of old—that hawkers are a nuisance—remain. The *Vancouver Sun* interviewed commuters who, by and large, described the distributors as an irritant, often lumped in with the clipboard carrying social activists perusing money. A free daily in London actually trains distributors to stand a substantial distance from the subway exit as a tactic to give uninterested commuters more time to convince themselves to take the paper. It seems, early in the morning, before coffee and the day, commuters are finicky about feeling pestered. But, as I watch them drift past Barbara and Roberts towards the metro, no one shows it. The distributors at the Columbia Heights metro station may, indeed, be closer to the greeters Sam Walton once employed under the conception that they give a business personal atmosphere. The distributors appear to be a hallmark of friendliness before the ascent into a dark and lonely commute.

Roberts, much like the other distributors, says he likes meeting individuals. “Some are friendly, some grumpy, and then...” he pauses, “some I don’t know how to categorize.” He is twenty-six, has worked for the *Express* since November, and lives in the Fort Totten neighborhood about three and a half miles northeast of Columbia Heights. The hardest part of the job? Getting up at 5:00 a.m.

Roberts’ voice is soft and his demeanor understated as he tells me of his employer’s expectations: be on time, be presentable. He doesn’t gesture much, just attends to the slow six-o-clock hour commuters that pass. As he tells me about the job, how a friend recommended him, and that he strives to greet people with a “nice good morning,” he comes to the conclusion that the job is “pretty okay.” It’s a conclusion he delivers with a smile, an expression that isn’t plastered on his face, but breaks through his serious-mindedness. For a man in his mid-twenties,

he answers questions with unexpected wisdom and sincerity. I ask if patrons give him the respect he deserves and he replies, “They decide what sort of respect I deserve.”

At the end of his shift, Roberts heads to his second job as a mechanic at an Exxon station on Riggs Road, another job that he finds frustrating and rewarding. Being a mechanic, Roberts tells me, takes common sense. He learned this from an early age as both his father and step-father were mechanics. “The battle is figuring out what’s wrong.” He exhales, not quite a sigh, but enough to lament the challenges of diagnosing a problematic car. The other challenge is the customers. Just a few weeks back Roberts finished his work on a car and let the owner take it, before paying, for a test drive. He wanted to ensure she was satisfied with his work, that everything felt right. She got in her car, told him she wasn’t paying, and drove off. “I was just trying to be nice,” he tells me, then explains the shop’s policy to receive payment before returning keys. The 700 dollars of labor and parts came out of his paycheck.

Though Roberts is a native Washingtonian, he moved to New York when he was twenty-two. He spent two years in what he calls the “crazy city,” caring for his ailing father just before he passed. I can’t help but think what a grim responsibility it must have been, particularly for someone so young, but he sees it differently. He could never repay his father for all he’d done for him. He says the same of his mother.

As we continue talking, Roberts acknowledges that his days are often long. He’s on his feet for twelve hours. He looks forward to his evening shower after being at the shop. It’s the moment he knows he can finally relax. He works at the shop on Saturdays, and says it’s a bit easier than the weekdays, not needing to distribute papers at six a.m., but Sunday, Sunday is when he sleeps.

I watch as a thin man with silver hair steps off the Metro escalator. He wanders four or five steps from the entrance and stops. Roberts excuses himself from our conversation, and walks to the elderly man. Extended in front of the man is a slender white cane tipped with red. Roberts says, “good morning,” yokes elbows with the man, and guides him to a nearby bus stop. He returns to the stack of newspapers, and continues delivering the daily news.

I walk home with two papers in my hand, neither of which I read in entirety. Now, they sit on my desk as little more than artifacts from that Thursday commute in April. Commuting, day after day, is a banal routine, something we endure, perhaps make the best of, or just accept for its necessity. It isn’t likely to change. And while we read the *Express* and *The Examiner*, just as intended, to pass the inevitable solitude, maybe we take the daily newspaper, not because it is our friend or keeps us company, but because there is a person behind it.