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California Rental

Late summer blackberries are gone now. The vines have drawn their juices in. And the sunburned grass is oak-leaf strewn, brittle to my every step. Yellow jackets (people here call them “meat bees”) cluster like crabs between the window and the screen. And in this stillness waiting, it rains the first rain in weeks on the hour of the equinox.

I walk outside my rented house in the southern Cascade Mountains of northern California, inspecting the ground for black bear tracks near the woodpile; I thought I heard footsteps in the night. I find no bear sign in the rained-fresh earth but there, where reflected light redirects my eye, a small red toy car. I pick it up. It is dense and boxy, foreign and artificial. Who was the child who dropped this here? How long ago? Mother calling? Or haphazardly in pursuit of something else? What life passed through this place in a time just beyond my reach?

These past days since we moved in, my wife and I have unearthed artifacts of other lives, signs of the people who have lived in this house. In the attic storage space I finger thin clay shards scattered on the floor, a potter’s fractured labor. A penny in the grass is a hole in someone’s pocket? A forgotten box of cat litter (still sporting that smell) beneath

the lip of the back deck. We find so much of those who came before it seems the house resists our getting too settled too soon.

Suzanne and I married just days ago. It was a small ceremony in Orofino, Idaho, at my parents' house overlooking the Clearwater River. We try not to trust illusions about how common or how extraordinary our experiences were, or will be. We're new at this, we know.

With our boxes stacked center-high in the living room, we work at the kitchen first, because so much settling comes with settled food. We wipe down the shelves and countertops with a solution of warm water and bleach. We unroll glasses and cups, plates and pie pans from newspaper packing, rewash all of it despite having packed it clean. We load the shelves with this here, that there, making it up as we go.

We clean behind the refrigerator (because it isn't our dirt) and discover the secret web-work of the ubiquitous cellar spider, how many summers old? A Pilot V Ball pen, extra fine, black. A dime, and three pennies. Another pen, ballpoint, with "Advantage 2U Appliance, Shingletown CA" printed on the side; the cap red, white, and blue. And in the deepest corner, a plastic monarch butterfly, its toy wings arcing in forever flight. I hesitate with the humming Shop-Vac in my hand—what right do I have—and then plunge in, sucking up the evidence.

Whose gear this is I do not know, whose lives still linger in the webs. Even in their absence, these former inhabitants make their claim. A disquieting mood washes over me: I am an interloper here, a stranger to this place and this space.

We unpack pictures and artwork for the walls. A framed Robert Bly broadside, "No. 76/250, Six Winter Privacy Poems"; a print of Annie Lee's "Blue Monday"; my treasured shodo piece by my Japanese friend, Mikami; a pencil drawing of the main gate at The Orme School in Arizona, where Suzanne and I met and fell in love. We lean them all against the wall, stacked one in front of the other.

Wandering through the house, we try to picture where our pictures go. "How about this here?" and "How about that there?" we call to each other from different rooms. The walls are peppered with other people's pounded nails inside the sun-faded outlines of former pictures. I guess at them: family portraits, favorite dogs, a daughter's graduation. The house holds onto the memory of these former arrangements. I get my hammer and, one by one, jack the nails out.

But some remembrances can't be removed. The owners, two college professors at the University of California–Chico, are kind, generous people who love this house. They bought two ceramic tiles—one a moon, the other a sun—on a tour through Spain, and mounted them on either end of the shower walls. Bathing is a daily reminder of the first lives embedded in this house.

Still, we're settling in just fine. Cleaning up overlapping lives—in the house and in us. Old relationships to leave behind, old habits, old attitudes are all replaced with taking care of ourselves and each other. This is the way good new beginnings might be.

After our day's work we sit down together, Suzanne and I, on the back deck looking out on Mount Lassen. I open two bottles of local beer—after-work prizes—and watch one of the green caps go willy-nilly across the deck. I bend to catch it but it slips between my fingers and down between the planks. I hear it touch bottom and roll still. Peering down through a crack with one eye, I see it there beneath us, settled in just out of reach. And, beside it, something else: a plastic toy cowboy, stuck upside down in the leaf litter.

I return to the moment: out before us now, the Earth curves away under the sun, settling pink across the mountains. An acorn woodpecker rings in the oak beyond the star thistle. Another leaf falls.

Five Country Walks

When I rest my feet my mind also ceases to function.

J. G. HAMANN

I

Boise, Idaho, USA—1989

I began walking one cloudy day, without ceremony, to while away a Sunday afternoon. The day was warm and moist and early fall, and I pulled on my boots and walked outside. At that time, I lived near the edge of the university campus, and the Boise River was on the far side of it. I set off in that direction, after posting a letter to a woman who would not love me.

My boots were suede leather and nylon, very light, almost a running shoe, and well broken so that I wore them without discomfort. They made no sound in themselves, and very little against the Earth, shaped and rolling in the gait of my walking. Later, in Marseille, France, I would pass them on to an old traveler who said he had been a salvage diver on deep sea wrecks. His shoes were tattered and toe-less, with the soles worn through. I was sporting new boots I'd purchased in Rome. I noticed him eyeing the old boots tied to my pack, asking why or how the

world was so geared as to provide me with two pairs of boots and him none. So I evened it out.

Where the path met the river I walked against the current, along the edge of the great asphalt parking lot behind Bronco Stadium. The artificial turf, a brilliant blue, was said to attract waterfowl in winter, ducks and such from the river. But I thought it a silly story, a lie, even, one our culture tells to trick us into believing that the artificial is as good as the natural.

The path passed beneath the bridge on Broadway—usually busy with commuters and consumers, but quieter on Sundays—and on out beyond the business district, where a number of large corporations had set up shop headquarters. I wound through the cottonwood trees wrapped in chain-link fence against the beaver, and on up, a cyclist whizzing by, a runner pushing a baby in a big-wheeled stroller, and a mallard and a merganser at slow tread in the river eddies.

I paused at the outdoor theater of the Idaho Shakespeare Festival (which isn't held there anymore). The summer before, I had seen a Shakespeare play, *Troilus and Cressida*, for the first time, with a friend who was both an actor and a teacher. Although the production did not wow me—the Greeks dressed in Hell's Angels costumes, the Trojans in Frederick's of Hollywood—the experience was freeing: Shakespeare's language with wine and fresh bread on the public lawn before I was of age.

There were no locks or doors of any kind, so I entered the theater, stage left. I stood at center stage looking out on the tiny plot of green grass (it had been so much larger during the play). The theater space was painted a forest green, almost black, edged with columns against the spare plywood background. I climbed up onto the catwalk to take in the view from the actor's position, came back down, and then, standing center stage, delivered my lines to the empty sky: "To be, or not to be, that is the question . . ." and on, as far as I could remember it. Then I turned and made my exit.

The asphalt pathway led me on, greenery on both sides, behind a building made of mirrors. Was anyone inside looking out? The way became a bridge over a creek flowing into the main river, and two pairs of mallard duck, male and female, flew up out of the water in front of me, so close I might have touched them if I'd tried.

And fast around the corner, a runner, a woman, came out of the future,

charging by. I felt the heat of her heart as she passed, and my surging desire now cooling on the riparian after-moment.

The path made two more turns and I broke out of the trees and the city and into the drier, sandy desert country more typical of southern Idaho. The asphalt turned to earth, and the path became a boot-worn track following the bending water.

I wanted to check my watch, to see if I had been walking long enough for anything to happen. I resisted, stretching myself out longer, farther than I wanted to go. Instead of leading me into forgotten country as I had expected, the path turned again into the world. The earthen foot-path transformed to asphalt. I passed a complex of apartments and a series of ritzy homes at riverside. Was there no good country left? Would the entire riverside be paved to still the sound of questions on an earthen path?

I stopped and descended the bank to the moving water. The surface of it swirled and softened away. I placed my hands in the cold current, my fingers like eyes over the smooth bottom stones. I lifted one out and turned it over to a dozen Jurassic creatures escaping into my hands. I set the stone back down gently.

My hands were cold in the warmer air. I put them into the water again to remember this difference. I thought I would go. The sun was getting on in years and it would be dark soon. I waited a moment more, until a great blue heron hidden by stillness rose up from the river's edge and pulled and tucked and smoothed away as it faded against the river and the close of day.

Back in my little apartment, seated with afternoon coffee and a book, I realized I was still walking, I was still out traveling, when I came to these lines:

As a general rule of biology, migratory species are less “aggressive” than sedentary ones.

There is one obvious reason why this should be so. The migration itself, like the pilgrimage, is the hard journey: a “leveller” on which the “fit” survive and stragglers fall by the wayside.

The journey thus pre-empts the need for hierarchies and shows of dominance. The “dictators” of the animal kingdom are those who live

in an ambience of plenty. The anarchists, as always, are the “gentlemen of the road.”

BRUCE CHATWIN, *The Songlines*

II

Chitose, Hokkaido, Japan—1994

Lake Shikotsu formed inside a collapsed volcanic caldera; the water is deep and cold. The local people call it Dead Bones Lake because the bottom is said to be a wide plain of suicides. The Chitose River flows out from here, and follows and creates the green wet overgrowth of the little valley. It meets the Ishikari River to the northeast and flows down and out into the Japan Sea.

I live here with the birds: the birds I know and the birds I don't know. Kawasemi, the common kingfisher, a little nomad, here only in spring and summer, maybe early fall when the salmon run; hashibuto-garasu, the jungle crow, the big black-feathered feeder, often confused with the northern raven; ao-sagi, or sagi, as people here call it, the grey heron, also a migratory bird, following at the river's edge, the fish and frogs. And there are others.

At 10:00 a.m. almost every morning I leave my small apartment at Kasuga-cho 2-chome and walk over the footbridge into Aoba Park. The walking path here leads through the lush northern woods and out into the sporting fields for baseball (a recent Japanese obsession), soccer, rugby, and play spaces for children, with a central fountain. Moving through these trees the ground is moist with summer dew, the path, foot-worn wood chips following the perimeter of the park.

Twenty years ago this park was wild country. My friend, Takuji Noguchi, a haberdasher in Chitose, used to play here as a boy. He said in those days these woods were alive with spirits. He would run among the trees as fast as he could, in joy and terror, with a dozen demons on his tail. It was, he said, the best time of his life.

Walking here I meet old men, bald headed with the folds of time drawing their faces down. One fellow I meet almost every day carries a long staff across his lower back with his arms bent over it at the elbows. He walks this way to keep his posture, I guess, his composure, his compassion? I do not know. We exchange only smiles as we pass.

When fall leaves fall, salmon come up the river to leave their progeny and their bodies behind. And crow is here rejoicing in mealtime along the salmon-littered shores.

On some walks I'll go upriver beyond the park entrance, beyond the little cars that go whizzing by in the early morning, past country people headed into town. I'll go on up around the shape of the river shaping the land, a kawasem's sharp call at Doppler play in my ears. I come to the place the river drops over a ledge and plunges into a roiling hole, the place Noguchi and I come to play at surfing in canoes. I pause, remembering rivers I have run in Idaho and Oregon: the Payette, the Deschutes, the Middle Fork of the Salmon. Scenes of this place, too, past weeks and months with Noguchi going over this little drop, backward and forward, spilling out in our canoes and rolling back up, paddles played high, laughter, and fast the faster water draws beneath the boat and surges and plays and fattens as it speeds.

It was up here, somewhere in the country of the river, that the same woman I loved back in that time of Idaho stumbled on the body of a man who had hung himself in a maple tree. We tried to live together in Hokkaido, and that day we had quarreled, so far from home. She went out to ride her bike for sanctuary. She returned trembling like a leaf, and I held her heaving steady as she cried and told me about the hanging-man she'd found. I felt her strength then in her weakness, her sorrow, and knew again the shock adolescents find in the exchange of the imagination for adult reality. She praised me for my compassion, my willingness to listen, and she kissed me and told me what a good person, what a good man, what a good husband I would make some day, for someone else.

Later she talked about the hung-man's face, the hands and bare feet, purple like lupine blossoms, the way the Japanese police were more interested in her—a beautiful blonde foreigner—than the tragedy in the tree. As it turned out, the dead man was the city's chief of education and the husband of a student of mine. The woman, his wife, fell from public approval and vanished. She told me which tree it was that she found him in, which branch, where he lay when they cut him down, and how he fell and lay like a sack of rice. And now, forever, in that place and time, that tree bears the weight of it, and in our memories, too, and so do we hold it between us: a force of attraction, a force of repulsion.

But the river moves on from here, and that place and that tree have both grown but not been forgotten. I doubt if I will ever go back.

The path along Chitose River, each stopping place, I will always know as mine: the bridge with brass birds that sing in electric warblings when you pass, the Shinto shrine at the top of the hill, and the riverbend behind the community center where the water swirls in a wide eddy and I go to skip stones. Here, in the morning, I found the silvered bodies of a dozen tiny trout laid up on the rocks and carelessly abandoned to the jungle crows. But the jungle crows have not been keeping up with their work, else I would not find them here at all, these lost pages from the river's story. I cradled each one in my hands and let them out easily on the back of the river. Like petals they swirled away.

After (it was over) my lover flew home to America, I came here with another woman local to this place. She would go a-wandering into the woods with me, and walk behind me when we walked, and behind just a bit more until I could no longer see or sense her and I found I was walking alone. I would call her name into the foreign trees and wait to hear, but no reply, only the wind at play in the dwarf bamboo. I walked along, calling for her, until she, in a burst of giggles and smiles, would appear out of the forest like a dark fairy from my dreams.

One rainy afternoon we set out on the path to the headwaters of Naibetsugawa, a feeder stream off the main river from which the town gets its drinking water. The place is a spring, a pooling source emerging from the deep Earth. We found the old road there, cut years ago to get the timber out, but long since fallen to disuse. We could expect to be alone. Basho said it best: "None is traveling / Here along this way but I— / This autumn evening."

The air grew colder, sharper as we walked, and we came to a crossing where the creek broadened into a pool. It began to snow. I looked up through the trees at the sky to ask if we should go on. We hadn't come dressed for the weather. But she, unafraid, took a long bamboo leaf and folded it into a tiny boat. She took my hand and we knelt and set it free on the moving water. We watched it cross the pool, ride the little waves and burble around the rocks, tumble down beyond where we could see it—perhaps it would make it to the ocean!

She taught me how to fold the boats, and then we made more and let them go. We set two adrift at once, to race. Shoulder to shoulder we

waited like children, as first hers, then mine, then finally hers came out ahead. We made more boats and let them go, and at one time we had nine boats at sail on the water, and watched them slip one by one over the edge of the pool.

We did not have far to go and the snow was a comfort now, so we walked on, covering the distance in under an hour. She played her hiding game, disappearing into the forest and returning again in flurries of girlish laughter. She took my hand and skipped along beside me under the horsetail swinging of her long black hair; I felt that young, too.

The road softened into the next turn and without warning we came to the end of it. The spring was there, the water coming up in an Oh!, black and deep and beautiful. How far, how deep we could go if we stripped our clothes and plunged deep down, diving, as deep as the Earth would take us. And would we find God down there, or the devil?

The pool invited us. We knelt side by side on the wet ground, soaking our knees, humbled our heads, and drank like cats. We loved each other then, and the evening would become the morning in the rising sun wrapped in each others arms.

Above all do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it . . . but by sitting still, and the more one sits still, the closer one comes to feeling ill . . . Thus if one just keeps on walking, everything will be all right.

SOREN KIERKEGAARD, letter to Jette, 1847

III

Borrego Pass, New Mexico, USA—1995

At Borrego Pass School on the Navajo Reservation, 8,000 feet above the sea, I walked first alone and then with the dog, a Queensland I called Kuma. He came to live with me at five weeks old and I always felt it was a bit too soon to leave his mother. His ears did not go up, bat-like, the way they should have, and his temperament was wary, aggressive, deeply pessimistic. But he loved (or hated?) Mozart. I played all kinds of music for him to which he paid no mind. But when I played Mozart,