THE DIVINE COMING OF THE LIGHT

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The Divine Coming of the Light is a memoir-in-essays that covers an experience, from 2007 to 2010, when I lived in Kosuge Village (population 900), nestled in the mountains of central Japan. I was the only foreigner there. My memoir uses these three years as a frame to investigate how landscape affects identity. The book profiles who I was before Japan (an evangelical and then wilderness guide), why I became obsessed with mountains, and the fall-out from mountain obsession to a humanistic outlook. The path my narrator takes is one of a mountain hike. I was born in tabletop-flat West Texas to conservative, Christian parents in the second most Republican county by votes in America. At 19, I made my first backpacking trip to the San Juan Mountains of western Colorado and was awed by their outer-planetary-like massiveness. However, two friends and I became lost in the wilderness for three days without cell phones. During this time, an obsession possessed me as we found our way back through the peaks to safety, a realization that I could die out there, yes, but amid previously unknown splendor. I developed an addiction to mountains that weakened my religious faith. Like the Romantic poets before me, God transferred from the sky to the immense landscape. I jettisoned my beliefs and became an outdoor wilderness instructor. On every peak I traveled up, I hoped to recreate that first conversion experience when I was lost in the woods. After college, while teaching English in Kosuge Village, I learned about the mountain-worshipping religion Shugendo: a mixture of Buddhism, Shintoism, and Shamanism. I climbed dozens of peaks, spending several days backpacking. However, while in Japan, I was nearly fatally injured on a solo, month-long hike. I saw the accident as a warning and turned my attention to studying writing and literature. When I came to Japan, I went up mountains, but as I left, I came down.

The book profiles my experiences with mountains and my double disillusionment, leveling off with a humanistic outlook, leaving the narrator less a wanderer but more willing to empathize with other people.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ... iii

PART I. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: ESSAYING THE ENVIRONMENT ... 1

Works Cited ... 25

PART II. CREATIVE NONFICTION ESSAYS ... 27

The Divine Coming of the Light ... 28

Everything All at Once ... 38

First Bow ... 48

Mountain Haze ... 55

Mid-Slope ... 80

Giving Fire ... 91

Outdoor Pursuits ... 105

Coming Down ... 121

Tokyo Walk ... 133

Strange, Ripe Fruit ... 178

Live From Kosuge Village ... 195

Love in the Valley of Death ... 209

Rides with Strangers ... 222

Bibliography ... 235

PART I

CRITICAL ANALYSIS: ESSAYING THE ENVIRONMENT

The Austrian psychologist and writer Stefan Zweig, a later-life fan of Michel de Montaigne, once recalled his reaction upon first reading Montaigne's essays in his twenties, that of boredom and mystification. Zweig wrote, "'What appeal could there be… in the rambling excursus of a Sieur de Montaigne…?'" (8).

Born near the end of the nineteenth century, Zweig, like many Victorians, assumed personal liberty would flourish. The gains of nineteenth century humanism seemed never-ending (Bakewell 217). Zweig, like many of his generation, were not, at first, receptive to the message of a writer like Montaigne who was steeped in asserting his private gaze and circular ramblings, portraying an ever-flawed, but ever-present reminder of human fallibility. But then the Great War came. Followed by another and the Holocaust. Zweig, as a Jew, had to escape, ensconcing himself in Brazil during World War II. There, Montaigne came to make sense to him when times turned tempestuous. Montaigne himself had written in a chaotic age. Though he lived a spoiled existence and literally wrote *in a tower*, he was the son of a woman whose family was burned at the stake for being Jewish. During his lifetime, Montaigne witnessed five bloody civil wars between Catholics and Protestants, as well as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre by Catholic mobs of thousands of unarmed Calvinists. He himself suffered a lifetime's bout with kidney stones (eventually killing him), and almost died from a horse-ridding accident. Five of his six children perished in infancy, and while Montaigne was mayor of Bordeaux, one-third of the town succumbed to plague. Zweig said, quoted in Bakewell, "'The similarity if his epoch and situation to ours is astonishing… Montaigne has become the indispensable helper, confident, and friend'" (218). Because Montaigne was so unapologetically *himself*, he helped Zweig to see how one maintains humanity during upheaval.

The discursive, rambling self, for Montaigne, was the ultimate subject of investigation. "I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself," he wrote (296). Montaigne was always appearing as himself in his work, fluctuating, inconsistent, with the liberty to fluctuate. "I do not portray being; I portray passing," he famously quipped (611). Late sixteenth century Montaigne appears on the page as a walking mass of contradiction. "I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness" (610-611). And yet Montaigne swaggered about his writing with his confident yet un-firm self, confident about his malleability. "These are my humors and my opinions; I offer them as what I believe, not what is to be believed. I aim here only at revealing myself, who will perhaps be different tomorrow" (108-9). By design it seems, there is a tendency in Montaigne's work to be perceivably, ostentatiously even free-flowing.

Phillip Lopate and other personal nonfiction essay critics have long codified this mind-stream element of the essay form. As Lopate writes in his introduction to his *The Art of the Personal Essay*, "Their supposed formlessness is more a strategy to disarm the reader with the appearance of unstudied spontaneity" (xxxviii). In other words, by appearing as thoughts from a similar, rambling mind, readers will be drawn to the intimacy and purported lack of pretense. Carl Klaus calls this performance, writing about Montaigne, "a depiction of his mind in the process of thinking" (8). Readers, goes the theory, are drawn to thoughts milling about as they are to their own mind-stream. Readers, essayist Scott Russell Sanders has noted, do not approach Montaigne and other essayists for their argument or historical content, but for the sensation of having a "haven for the private, idiosyncratic voice in an era of anonymous babble" (3). Montaigne was candid about his subject material and aims. "I study myself more than any other subject," he wrote, "That is my metaphysics; that is my physics" (13). Jeff Porter writes in

Understanding the Essay that the essay has the, "ability to emulate the genesis of thinking" (x). He goes onto to write that, as Montaigne once explained, Montaigne saw his writing primarily as a reflection of the human mind caught in the act of rumination, "as if the essay, unlike other prose forms, were capable of turning the mind inside out" (xiii).

Whether Montaigne's literal mind is on the page is up to question. Montaigne spent many years writing two subsequent editions to his essays, expanding them by hundreds of pages (a separate edition was even uncovered in the late eighteenth century after his death (Bakewell 303)). Clearly, this seems like a lot of revision to be in keeping with spontaneity. But perhaps the form was what counted though, as well as its effect on the reader. As Jeff Porter writes in *Understanding the Essay*, "That the essay seems artless is one of its great ruses" (xxiii). Fellow essayist Nancy Mairs confesses as much in her book *Carnal Acts* when she writes, "I am not the woman whose voice animates my essays. She's made up" (2). Carl Klaus has devoted an entire book, *The Made-Up Self*, to the subject of essayists' personas. Montaigne, and subsequent essayists, *appear* to be minds thinking in lines and paragraphs, and this can generate an intimate, confessional, conversational reaction in readers. Few minds experience the word in coherent narrative or eloquent lyricism (so goes the aesthetic theory). Essays have a democratizing form that can seem refreshing after imbibing so much literary construction. Scott Russell Sanders has argued as much when he writes that essayists' private-seeming idiosyncrasy gives readers purchase in a contemporary world of noise that strangles so many people into silence or faux-feeling performativity. Readers, according to Sanders, "relish the spectacle of a single consciousness making sense of a portion of the chaos" (2) Essaying seems to be born out of the pressures of the void that reduces human beings to their thoughts or unmeditative responses (i.e., in the 21st century, ubiquitous Tweets).

Montaigne turned his discursive pen onto a striking array of incongruent subjects. His mind strayed into areas of love, death, social discourse, cannibals, drunkenness, parenthood, human anatomy, defecation, and Virgil. One short essay by Montaigne, "Of Thumbs," deals exclusively with the opposable digit as seen through antiquity and his mind. But the self, for Montaigne, is the ultimate subject of investigation. "I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself," he writes in "Of Books" (296). In whatever subject he strayed, he was conscious to map the content with his own mind on the page, apparent in all its inconsistent, contradictory, discursive glory.

I have never lived through any period as tragic as Zweig's nor as quotidianly brutal as Montaigne's. The late twentieth and early 21st centuries, though bulging with conflict, terrorism, tension, and climate change (and devastating for many), have never steeped my own body in personal jeopardy as World War II did Zweig's. But I am a student of natural history. In ecology, the Circle of Life love song has long since fallen from scientific vogue. Paleobotanists and paleontologists have pieced together the story of rise and collapse, rise and collapse of orders and species and habitats over the last 3.5 billion years. Five major mass extinctions have carpeted our planet with death. We are now, by many accounts, in the throes of a sixth. I don't think it's hyperbole to say that the natural state of existence, as Montaigne might have figured, is evolutionary chaos. Or to put it differently, the world seems so in turmoil when looked at up close that all order we project onto it should at least be called into doubt. This is why, in writing my book about mountain obsession, *The Divine Coming of the Light*, I have settled on the eco-essay form to digress, reflect, and doubt, a form which I will enumerate further below.

I did not encounter mountains, those Romantic symbols of the natural sublime, until I was nineteen. I grew up in the hyper-flat, hyper-conservative panhandle of Texas on the Llano

Estacado, which Barry Lopez once said could have been the staging ground of Moby Dick because of its isolating vistas (Lopez). Mountains awed me with their outer planetary-like massiveness. From the first moment I set foot in the jagged Rockies of Colorado to go backpacking with two friends, getting lost for three days, I made designs for the next ten years on how to return.

These designs, as well as a common ardor for books, led to an undergraduate degree in natural history, for which I studied ecology and evolution. Particularly, the deep-time story of the earth's evolution fascinated me. As John McPhee describes in *The Annals of the Former World:*

> With your arms spread wide again to represent all time on earth, look at one hand with its line of life. The Cambrian begins in the wrist, and the Permian Extinction is at the outer end of the palm. All of the Cenozoic is in a fingerprint, and in a single stroke with a medium-grained nail file you could eradicate human history. (89)

In this view, dinosaurs rose midway past the wrist in the palm. Humans are a mere shave off a finger nail. In between nail and shoulder is a land pummeled by interplanetary ballistic missiles, volcanoes that left lava trails as large as Europe, and species that hunted others to extinction and went extinct themselves. Self-doubt, as I know Montaigne would agree, seems to be the most accurate way to approach one's relationship to this ever-radically-changing environment.

Though our circumstances were different, I had a similar reading arch with Montaigne as Zweig did and have found it a common enough reaction. Lopate himself writes, "I myself could not make heads or tails of him in college and wondered why this old geizer was being foisted on us as one of the great authors" (*To Show*, 49). Montaigne, As Lopate notes in his book *To Show and To Tell*, is a writer who can be initially off-putting but becomes friendlier over time. A reader begins to speak Montaignian as she reads him. Mystifying at first because he resists encultured narrative, Montaigne eventually becomes a trusted source for aesthetic and

intellectual stimulation. It's almost as if, in this story of approaching Montaigne, his rambling familiarity reads as *unfamiliar* at first until a reader grows accustomed to the voice that sounds eerily like the discursive jumble inside a reader's own skull.

I initially encountered Montaigne in the college classroom and found him verbose, labyrinthine, self-possessed. "Who is this guy?" I thought and expressed as much in the first class I was assigned to read him in. Some years later, I was taking The History of the Essay from John D'Agata at the University of Iowa. Whatever a critic may think of D'Agata's famed truth-in-nonfiction challenges, he teaches the essay's history in graduate courses rigorously. He assigned a book every other week, and in weeks between books we read packets of photocopied material that ranged up to 400 pages. D'Agata's class was sometimes called "essay boot camp" by graduate students. I came back to Montaigne in this survey, understanding and seeing the influence he has on essays today, the genre for which he is widely considered the headwaters of. Many essayists (such as Jericho Parms, Linda Hogan, Patrick Madden, Claudia Rankine, Kathleen Graber, Lily Hoang, Steven Church, Nicole Walker, and Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas), enact a retro-Montaigne, following a mind stream on the page with essays that do not seem to be organized on principal nor on plot but rather flittering thoughts. Montaigne might not be contemporary, but his DNA is. It crawls inside authors as far-reaching as David Lazar with his parentheticals fusing high and low, serious and whimsical; James Baldwin with his serpentine introspection and thundering oration; and Maggie Nelson with her aloof compilation of disparate thinkers to wrestle a subject into understanding. And many other writers exhibit a tendency to following connective tissues in their work that are more based on ideas rather than story lines, flights of fancy rather than action. Even in my own work, having read, loved, absorbed

Montaigne, I feel the *permission* to let my prose range wider than I otherwise would have, than I did before I met Montaigne again in D'Agata's class.

Montaigne is widely credited with founding my chosen sub-genre of nonfiction. But John D'Agata has argued in his *Lost Origins of the Essay* that this essay-origins story, while somewhat enlightening, is also misleading. Seneca, Cicero, Plutarch, Petrach and other Greeks and Romans as well as Asian writers such as Yoshida Kenko, Sei Shōnagon, Kamo no Chōmei (Japanese *Zuihitsu*, "pen at will," writers) and Tang poet-memoirist Li Qingzhao were writing, at least, essay-like materials well before Montaigne ever picked up a pen. Montaigne was not the first, but he's often credited for *defining* essays. He used the French word *essai* for his collection, which is usually translated as "attempt" or "to try." Shortly after Montaigne's collection was published in 1580, the first printing sold out, was translated, and he became internationally famous. Only a few years later, in 1597, Francis Bacon, writing across the channel, probably took Montaigne's idea and published a book with "essays" also in the title (Bakewell 280). Montaigne's Renaissance blockbuster soon made its way into the hands of Shakespeare; Hamlet, a reader can find, became a retro Montaigne. William Hazlitt later became a retro Montaigne skeptic, wanderer, and radical. Charles Lamb (Elia) formed a self-conscious, self-deprecating, curious "Stammering buffoon." The practice has continued into the 21st century.

To define "essay," though, of course, is a slippery task. Ask a high school student, and she may grimace while imagining body paragraphs sandwiched between leaden introduction and watery conclusion. Ask a lyricist, and she may claim that T.S. Elliot was a fine essayist. Samuel Johnson famously wrote that an essay was "a loose sally of the mind." Emerson wrote that an essay could be "the meteorology of his thought." For Cynthia Ozick, an essay is "a stroll through someone's mazy mind" (xvii). To put it another way, the mind is not a narrative. Nor is it,

usually, a symphony. Instead it is jumbled, discursive, digressive. Phillip Lopate has compared an essay to a science experiment (*To Show* 60). An essay "tests" a hypothesis, but does not necessarily provide a conclusion. An essay may be seen as the mind in the process of judgement having not yet reached a firm conclusion (and may never reach one). This seems in keeping with the scientific method, with the aim of science itself, in which there is no better knowledge, only better theories.

Montaigne claimed, "Each man bears the entire form of man's estate" (611). With this foregrounding, a writer's mind making sense of itself (or rather, putting itself to words onto a page for a reader to make sense of), connects to the ramblings of other humans. Montaigne was emphatic in many of his essays that he relied on his own personal judgement, not merely received wisdom to make his work. This was an imperative, a moral calling. He swore that even when quoting copiously from ancient Greeks like Seneca, he is simply unwinding the threads of literature that, along with travel, politics, and family, made him into the person he was. As he noted in "Of Books," books *were* who he was too.

To be sure, this Western idea of the universality of man's experiences may, indeed, be a colonizing force that squashes alternate, non-Western, ways of thinking. "To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it," Edward Said writes (32). Montaigne and any essayist's claim to access the "general" human consciousness may be a flattening of perspectives, one that upholds the dominant, Western one, and it seems to be a facet of white privilege to make claims to this access. Jacqueline A. Housel maps out elements of white privilege, including that it can be unconscious, fluid, and dialectic, but that ultimately, "White privilege must be understood in relation to racial discrimination and exclusionary processes," such as the exclusions a writer may make unconsciously by purporting to carry the

entirety of humanity's estate (133). I don't think this critique should be ignored. It strikes me, in contemporary times, that for Montaigne to presuppose he represented all of humankind is a kind of grandstanding, patronizing arrogance. It may be enough to say that he represented *himself*, for readers to see themselves or not. Idiosyncratic Montaigne, and perhaps every essayist, is, to return to Scott Russell Sanders, "A single consciousness making sense of a portion of the chaos" (2). Every culture and, indeed, every writer has her own consciousness.

Having obtained a degree in natural history and read widely in environmental literature, I'm not sure what could be more chaotic that humanity's relationship with its environment. Lots of essayists have addressed the natural world as I aim to do in my dissertation project. Thoreau embarked on a wilderness sojourn. Emerson walked. John Muir swayed with the whip-like Douglas firs in high winds. Annie Dillard spied on muskrats at Tinker Creek. Terry Tempest Williams stalked the retreating waters of the Great Salt Lake. Ed Abbey crept upon dancing snakes. Barry Lopez retreated from an ocean clogged with ice. And Edward Hoagland tossed marooned turtles into a torrential sea. The first-person essay has a formidable history in the field of nature writing.

There is a, perhaps, "traditional" and well-challenged notion of nature essayist, developed after Montaigne, as a first person seer engaging with landscape and species, dissecting with the senses wilderness and animal experience. This is, of course, not the only way to define environmental writing. Many ecocritics and writers have been hard at work in the last twenty years parsing out different streams of the environmental genre, works that can fall under sub-umbrellas of nature writing, including eco-feminism, eco-justice literature, eco-post-colonial literature, post-humanism, and many, many others.

This kind of work has sometimes been dubbed nature writing, but I opt to lose that contested terminology, "nature writing," in favor of "eco-essays." The purpose for this move is partially because of the baggage "nature writing" carries. For me what is important about what eco-essayists are doing is a lot of what they are not doing. Nature writing is too often identified, in my view, justly or unjustly, with white male writers, like John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Lummis, Edward Abbey, Ernest Hemingway, Farley Mowat, Wendell Berry, and Jon Krakauer, among others, trekking off to wildernesses where other people can't, lecturing about humanity's sins while benefiting from them. "Nature" itself also too often seems codified as "pure" or "without people" in a way that I think has corrupted the term. With eco-essayists, we also find no rough and ready male affirming masculinity and ignoring the ordinary, privileged, and toxic effects of human culture that make wilderness wanderings possible. Additionally, coupling the environmental focus as indicated by "eco" with the inward gazing, Montaignian ramblings signaled by "essay" seems an apt way to define the genre of writing that I'm fitting my dissertation project into.

If you are a Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart kind of person, who knows a thing when you see it, there are several recent, notable examples of eco-essay collections such as Amy Leach's *Things That Are*, Alison Hawthorne Deming's *Zoologies*, Nicole Walker's *Quench Your Thirst With Salt*, Kurt Caswell's *An Inside Passage*, Linda Hogan's *Dwellings*, Matthew Gavin Frank's *Preparing the Ghost*, Lisa Couturier's *The Hope of Snakes*, Lauret Savoy's *Trace:Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*, Yelizaveta Renfro's *Xylotheque,* and Elena Passarello's *Animals Strike Curious Poses* to name but a few, as well as Angela Pelster's *Limber* which I will discuss in more detail below. I do not pretend I've exhausted the genre. Certainly there are eco-essayists such as Barry Lopez and Annie Dillard who have been

long at work. But today I want to highlight what I think is a trend in essays that my book and dissertation are most clearly following.

I have heard many writers ask why readers seem to have an allergy to the environmental writing genre. Why is the "Nature Writing" shelf at Barnes & Noble often a dusty and lonely one? I believe the perceived tone and sanctimoniousness of many nature writing texts has driven many readers to other shelves. As Phillip Lopate writes:

> The defect of much environmental writing in our time is its self-righteousness, and solemnity, its general shortage of humor, irony, wit. Regardless of how dire the situation may be and how correct are those sounding the alarm, their warnings do not often make for stimulating prose. (*To Show* 193)

Joyce Carol Oates famously writes, in "Against Nature," that nature writing, "inspires a painfully limited set of responses in 'nature writers' — REVERENCE, AWE, PIETY, MYSTICAL ONENESS" (46). These tones, I believe, though indicative of only one branch of environmental writing, reveal the strand steeped in privilege and unaware gawking, dating to the Romantics like Wordsworth, who notoriously (and lyrically) beheld the surroundings a few miles above Tintern Abbey but not the poor populations struggling to make a life around there. Through quotation marks, Oates, questions the validity of *nature* writing. Because what is it, really? If nature writing is texts in which green spaces appear, *Sense and Sensibility* might warrant inclusion, though a text as engaged with ecofeminism as Han Kang's Man Booker-winning *The Vegetarian,* with its Seoul cityscapes, might not.

I suggest, as many have (such as ecocritic Timothy Morton in his *Ecology Without Nature* and Slovenian Philosopher Slavoj Zizek) that "nature" doesn't exist. Oates herself writes that she doubts, "'Nature' as a single coherent noun, anything other than a Platonic, hence discredited, is-ness" (49). In other words, there is no "out there." There is only the world and we who live in it. Nature writers as far back as Thoreau, and maybe further to Petrarch in his summit

of Mount Ventoux, have often been about going “there,” a land separated from everyday human experience. “There” has often become a space of veneration, mysticism, and moral reckoning.

In addition to the false dichotomy between humans and nature that nature writing ironically often holds up, many ecocritics have bashed the cliche adventure story outlet that white males have used for reestablishing outdated gender norms. As ecocritic Mei Mei Evans has noticed, “Most often in these narratives, Nature is encountered (and subsequently conquered) by a (white) male figure, who then wrests from the confrontation an instatement or reinstatement of his hegemonic identity” (182). This trend is surely still seen today with popular near-death narratives of mountain climbers, Everest surviver tales, and television personalities like Bear Grylls and Turtle-man, whose click-bait sensationalism reaffirms the necessity of being learned in a kind of Special Forces Wilderness Ninja mysticism. “Nature,” thanks to these guys, has become a dark place where one will be immediately assaulted with violence. To be transparent, I was certainly influenced by this male-typified writing. On my first backpacking trip I carried a very heavy machete, a Bowie knife, a hatchet, and a fish boning knife. I also remember years later, mid-backpack in Northern New Mexico, I came across an exhausted young man carrying a katana sword up a mountain. I believe this kind of gender-typified masculinity has deeply engrained itself into American culture in its regard for more-than-human places.

I’m not sure any writer has done more to foster this macho literary land assault than Edward Abbey. When I worked for three years as a wilderness guide, our outdoor shop had a modest bookshelf on which sat guides to various rock-climbing spots, wilderness medicine, packing tips, and almost all of Ed Abbey’s books. His name was as regularly spoken on backpacking trips as Edward Said’s is at post-colonialism conferences. Work from Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* is widely anthologized. And in it, Abbey has eliminated his wife and child from

his narrative. They were living with him in his park ranger trailer, during the stretch of his *Solitaire*, in which Abbey chases snakes, rafts a raging river, and searches for a dead body, but never once has to change a diaper.

In his most popular novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, the main character, George Hayduke, fits in with the fantasy of backcountry superheroes. He torches construction equipment, survives off the land, and wins the sexual affection of his friend's lover through prowess and determination, all the while remaining aloof, rugged, and fearless.

But Abbey's wilderness idolization trespasses farther in the essay "Immigration and Liberal Taboos" published in a later essay collection, *One Life at a Time, Please.* In the book's introduction, Abbey describes the essay about illegal immigration as his favorite of the collection and that it was an Op-ed commissioned and then rejected by *The New York Times.* In the essay, Abbey writes, speaking of undocumented immigrants, "…it might be wise for us as American citizens to consider calling a halt to the mass influx of even more millions of hungry, ignorant, unskilled, and culturally-morally-generically impoverished people." Abbey feared the influx of southern neighbors would ruin the West. Later in the same essay, he advocates for the U.S. military to patrol the Mexican border and opines that we should, "Stop every *campesino* at our southern border, give him a handgun, a good rifle, and a case of ammunition, and send him home" (43-4). Thus a white man worried about migrants invading the desert recommends his government send them home with guns so they can kill themselves.

This reverence and fear for spaces that are disconnected from most readers' experiences has long been a problem. Edward Hoagland realizes why when he writes, "The survival of wild places and wild things, like the permanence of noteworthy architecture, or the opera, or a multiplicity of languages, or old shade trees in old neighborhoods, is not a priority for most

people" (22). Here Hoagland seems aware of the privilege it takes to be invested in the preservationist, purist branch of environmental stewardship. In a near canonized piece of ecocriticism, "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon rails against the Edenic notions of "Nature" and wilderness that necessitate "saving." Cronon argues that the creation of landscape purportedly unmolested by human tinkering was a way to make, "a product of the very history it seeks to deny" (79). "Nature" helped erase Western Civilization's effects in the view finder, according to Cronin. When the United States government turned California's Yosemite Valley into a National Park, they first made sure to evict the Mexican-Americans and the Native Americans who had labored in the soon-to-be scenic park and called it home. These humans marred the "pristine" view of a national park as beyond human tinkering. This white-washed projection is still true for many other parks and wilderness areas across the United States, once teeming with people before 1492. Backpackers and writers attend to these locations as if they are beyond the human clutches (as I did once when I worked for an outdoor program). Even part of the National Park Service's mission today is to preserve "unimpaired the natural and cultural resources… for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations" ("About Us"). But as scholar of the Literature of the American West, Sara Spurgeon, said to me once, we have to remember that, "Wildernesses were not unpeopled but rather *de*-peopled."

One essay I find immensely useful in helping me understand what is possible with eco-essays is Scott Hess's "Imagining an Everyday Nature." Hess writes about moving to Indiana, a place that conjures flat farm fields and overstuffed cattle, far from the grandeur of wall-calendar ready mountain vistas (Barry Lopez, interestingly, suggested to me once that scenic nature calendars are a kind of pornography because they highlight only a narrow range of beauty for mass consumption). But Hess became committed to, "positive imaginative and ecological

models," for the home he found himself in (90). Rather than relying on escaping to more heralded (commercialized and advertised) locations, Hess wanted to, "encourage [a] deep commitment to the unspectacular, developed, aesthetically ordinary environments where most of us live" (90). Similarly, I believe eco-writing does well when it highlights the ordinary because that is what most of us can relate to. Eco-critic Wes Jackson writes, "To have a designated holy land and ignore the rest—to treat our wilderness as saint and Iowa farmland, or for that matter an East Saint Louis slum, otherwise—is a form of schizophrenia" (52). That doesn't mean we *can't* write about places as remote from most people as ANWR or Pacific atolls. But it might be profitable to be aware of what we're insinuating when we compare Yellowstone with Cathedrals, or rafting the Grand Canyon as a transcendental experience, and that it is an immense privilege to go and write about these places, and an immense expenditure of natural resources, especially when there is all manner of more-than-human things literally under, above, and inside our own homes.

Another ecocritic who I find valuable in thinking about new eco-essays is Stacy Alaimo in her "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." Alaimo argues that, "The time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment" (238). In other words, human molecules (even the pious ones) are enmeshed with all the other molecules around them. Thinking across boundaries, those of the mind and of the skin, can help us imagine and understand our environment not as separate from us, but *as us.* Alaimo flattens out the destructive dichotomy of nature and human culture, often maintained, interestingly, by writers who write "nature" as a place "out there." Alaimo suggests humans are tied to their surroundings in a real dirt and blood and microbe way, not a mystical one, (Joyce Carroll Oates don't worry). This is not always a friendly cohabitation.

That *stuff* around us acts, is not passive. So do viruses. So do rats. So do cockroaches. These are all “nature” too. Dirt, one of the most benign thing in our imaginations, is actually a life form, a conglomeration of lives, each microbe separate yet as one trying to stay alive. Which really, and this may seem creepy, is what our human bodies are. I am astounded thinking about the multitudes of lifeforms that co-inhabit my body, many of which I could not live without. The scholar-celebrity Donna Haraway, has suggested that more-than-human beings make up to ninety percent of the total cell count in our corpus (3). This fact may make “human,” as an isolated being experiencing the world, like “nature,” another false ideal.

Like Alaimo, Haraway, in her *When Species Meet*, believes we can level life (and non-life like rocks and water) into, essentially, matter. From there, at the very bedrock of existence, we can begin to define what’s healthy and not for the systems (including the solar systems of our human bodies) that make up this planet.

Luckily, not all eco-essayists are interested in proving themselves by penetrating wilderness, forgetting history and the contemporary political situation they find themselves in. Angela Pelster blends observation and research with personal reflection on human realities within the world in her stunning *Limber: Essays*, which was a finalist for the 2015 PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. Angela Pelster’s collection is often dark. In several of *Limber*’s essays, the writing swerves away from the fun to deliver rumination on the scarring of landscape and the fragility of human and environment alike.

In “Rot,” Pelster describes walking by a dead squirrel near her home for several weeks with her daughter, witnessing the decomposition process, and trying to understand. Pelster writes, “As soon as an animal’s heart stops beating, the chemicals in its body change and so its pH levels change and so its cells lose their structural integrity. They sway and crash like an old

house in the wind" (96). Enzymes break away and begin eating other cells, which is called "autolysis," the term for the body feasting on itself. This is not mystical oneness. Thus the fate of a squirrel is, without much preamble, transmitted over to a human's. With autolysis, Pelster deconstructs nature/human binaries as well as undoing false Edenic notions. The human body consuming itself will likely not strike many readers as romantic. Furthermore, she does not examine the demise of a polar bear, or a popularly beloved sperm whale, or an endangered creature far and away from most readers' experiences. She inspects, rather, a garden-variety tree squirrel, as urban as dry cleaning. Dissecting the processes of so familiar a rodent brings the lens of environmental literature to the city, where most humanity lives. This move helps imagine Hess's everyday nature, one where humans and their close neighbors live and die together.

In the essay, "Burmis," seemingly about a local landmark tree in Canada, where Pelster is from, Pelster weaves in the economy of the town that houses it, a once vibrant mining community in Eastern Canada. Like many of its kind, the mining town has suffered from the mechanization of industry, outsourcing, and from its own labors. Pelster takes her readers through the travesty of the mining accidents that have wrecked the town's population, the brutality that is the community's life blood and curse. The town's mass graves are just down the road from the tree, which signifies the town.

Similarly, the Burmis tree is rotten from inside, held up by metal rods stuck through it like supports in a museum dinosaur skeleton. The heartwood of the tree, Pelster explains, has rotted away. "Every deep wound, broken branch, fire scar, sliced root and boring bug invited the fungus that causes heart rot to enter. The fungus grows, softening and weakening the wood, making it vulnerable to strong winds and breaking" (21). Pelster details how the mining

townspeople stayed on, despite many hardships, out of poverty and stubbornness, a commitment to the cause of mining and celebration of their trade.

This commitment flies in the face of the constant rumblings, the landscape's warnings. Here Pelster is outlining a kind of agency of the land, transforming it, as Stacy Alaimo would do, from the blank slate to agent. "They wanted the mountain the way a lover can want the flesh," Pelster writes (18). Pelster then describes how the mountain was unable to retain snowmelt that soaked into the hollowed out mines and expanded as ice. "The mountain strained against the swelling, but its strength had been hollowed by the miners" (19). The mountain exploded and sent ninety-million tons of rock into the town, killing hundreds and virtually wiping the place off the map.

As Stacy Alaimo writes with Susan Hekman, "Nature 'punches back' at humans and machines they construct to explore it in ways that we cannot predict" (7). Pelster again shows the direct life connection between the plight of a once living tree and the tragedy of a once alive town, both dead from a fissure that gave way to a kind of rot.

Though Pelster's writing does at times risk taking trees and nature as mere metaphor for the human condition, Pelster pushes against this easy reading by connecting the life she describes to her own, not only as commentary:

> Autolysis means that I live in a body ready to eat my own body, and that I exist inside the continual possibility of being split from myself. Once, when my once respectable father had started smoking crack, I thought I saw him stumble in front of my car as I stopped at a crosswalk. Who needs another tree metaphor? (103)

In this passage, Pelster is grappling with the equation of tree life as human life. The appearance of her drug-addled father is so startling as to shake the reader into an awareness that all in *Limber* is very real. After all, everything is of the world, including dead city squirrels and

crack cocaine. Here Pelster nudges eco-writing past the stereotype of privileged wilderness fetishization, and brings the writing to a place where many of us live and suffer.

I do not pretend to eco-essay as well as Pelster does nor as well as any of the eco-essay authors mentioned above. But I will declare my aims. With *The Divine Coming of the Light*, I want to essay an experience, from 2007 to 2010, when I lived in Kosuge Village (population 900), nestled in the Chichibu Mountains west of Tokyo. My essays will use these three years as a frame to investigate mountain obsession and why I and many other readers are drawn to liminal places, sometimes to their own detriment. But the chapters of the book perform what essays are known to do: digress, ruminate, grab onto tangents. For instance in the title essay which begins the book, I weave what ordinarily might seem as a typical mountain conquest of the tallest peak in Japan, Fuji, with discussions on the military, extreme sports, and toilet paper. In this essay, I attempt to make the hike a vehicle for essayistic wondering and not just hegemonic domination of a geological wonder. Miller and Paola have a useful way of explaining the movements I am looking for with this particular essay. They describe the "horizontal" drift of an essay as a reader pushes through, but in this movement can create vertical shifts to different subjects, themes, and ideas (95). The horizontal movement is the stabilizing or grounding element of the essay that keeps the reader from drifting too far, while the vertical movement grants the satisfying, intimate feeling of discursive essaying. The piece then is something like an EKG. In this first essay of the book, as with the book project as a whole, I am very interested in my relationship (as well as the other Fuji hikers' relationships) with the ground we tread on. Following Alaimo and Hekman's idea that nature "punches back," I include essaying about Fuji's volcanism and inclement weather that has caused at least one plane crash on its mountain flanks. In my title essay, my

narrator is attempting to connect his ardor for mountains with his fall from his religious upbringing. Like the Romantics before the narrator, his god shifted from the sky to the immense landscape he found himself inside. I write, "I didn't know, still don't really, if it's a choice to believe, to believe in something ethereal. Mountain lust gripped me, as it sometimes does when I think back on why I would spend 24 hours hiking up and down a rivet of magmic earth." Here, I try to make the narrator's interior quest plain, the vertical shifts along with the horizontal movement of the hike, or, perhaps, the journey within the journey. I write, "Why did I feel satiated with a view out of Tokyo Bay and the Chichibu Mountains, with the clouds we rose above, the thunder and lightening reflecting my height then relative to the world?" I make attempts at answering this question, connecting my mountain lust with a fall from religion, with a gap that needed filling, a loss not just of faith, but of a stern father, am Episcopalian deacon, who was responsible for influencing me towards religion in the first place.

Another fairly clear example of eco-essaying, is my long chapter on hiking across the world's biggest city, Tokyo. This chapter has the horizontal movement of the narrator trekking across the city, but the vertical movement ranges pretty widely. The narrator is very interested in Scott Hess's idea of "everyday nature," which is what starts him out on his hike. I write, "what if instead of escape I dove deeper into the row of unpleasantries, of car honks and suffocating concrete heat? One in four people living in Japan dwells in Tokyo. This is where what a lot of people think of as "Japan" is, if I cared to see it." My narrator is also embodying William Cronon's arguments in "The Trouble with Wilderness" by rejecting the notion that one has to escape urban areas for peace or that wild lands are somehow disconnected from urban places or humanity. Indeed, as the narrator walks from the bright lights of the Shibuya scramble intersection to the woods, rivers, and mountains of West Tokyo, he finds it is all a chaotic

jumble, that city and nature are as connected as organs in his body. I write, "The green hills of Ome were indistinguishable from Kosuge where I lived, just as downtown Tokyo sprawl never separates from the metropolis. Ecosystems, urban or forest, are not demarcated as in a map." Later I write, in a similar vein, bridging the human/nature false dichotomy, "The human jungle is untangleable from the more-than-human forest."

With this collection, my narrator was obsessed with mountains and, when reflecting, was interested in why. Was there something to the hyperbolic awe? Was there a relationship I wanted to feel that connected my skin to the physical earth and mountainsides, in a way Stacy Alaimo talks about with Trans-corporeality? I wasn't sure, but it seemed essaying was a means to accomplish my thought experimentation, of getting to what drove me up mountains again and again, and to have a slate of accidents on a solo hike, which I recount in "Coming Down," that came close to ending me. I write, "I wanted to weave an identity out of the fabric of the place I found myself in by situating my story on top of it. But the country, the mountains, and my body had other ideas." Later in the essay, I write about a serious of accidents during a planned month-long trek that was to be my defining hike, one that I would write about, one that would grant me legitimacy. Here, as Alaimo and Hekman write, nature "punches back," thwarting my plans, and my narrator realizes the agency that the more-than-human world has, one he didn't take into account when he planned his ill-advised adventure.

As I recount in my essay, "Giving Fire," in 2008, I attended Kosuge's annual festival and dressed as a yamabushi mountain monk. This chapter profiles the mountain monks and my experience at the festival where I was trying to figure out my role as the foreign teacher in the village. One of the attempts with the book as a whole was to inquire as to why I, and I presume (considering the many people at the fire festival and climbing Mt. Fuji every day), why are we

drawn to the liminal? With this chapter, I attempt to break down the quest for liminality, which the mountain monks were known for inhabiting. My attempt at an answer is that it is a way to make sense from chaos by rising above it. Though this is an illusion, it seems to create a satisfying bond among the people who share it. Inevitably, as I explore in a later chapter "Rides With Strangers," the seed of my confusion was getting along with others who seemed alien to me, and once I lost my Christian faith and once I stopped obsessing over mountains, people became a kind of way station, a humanism I descended to with humility.

I still care about wilderness areas, ones I will never visit, because I think their messy wildlife cities offer us another example of how to live much like other human cultures do. And there are many other issues related to the human-entanglement-with-the-more-than-human-world that get labeled "environmental." What the eco-essay genre has in its utility belt is the ceaseless wonder of the natural world, of humans, of millions of lives trying in unique ways to stave off death. Eco-essays have the power to connect to other lives so that we may see our own in relief. One truth that grants any kind of environmental literature staying power is the physical, material interconnectedness among humans, other earthlings, and processes of this world.

People need air, food, water, friendly bacteria in our guts, soil, oceans, animals that we eat, hunt, or snuggle with, and the sun that keeps us warm and the ozone that keeps us from frying. Our cell phones include materials mined form the Earth's skin, and plastic is simply the congealed leaves of long ago Triassic ferns. These encounters may help the perspective of what it means to be a creature among many, a life among many non-lives, a view of humans' place in the biological, geological, and anthropological processes of our existence. This wider view can aid understanding, not by eliminating humanity, nor slums, nor toxic waste, but including the more-than-human within our own cultural framework, where it is, actually, already.

Being aware of these connections and investigating them seems to be a way for eco-literature to stay alive, to create art and expression, to illuminate what it means to be human as creatures enmeshed within the processes, the metaphysical (if you want) and physical, of this earth.

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PART II

CREATIVE NONFICTION ESSAYS

The Divine Coming of the Light

Only a fistful of people begin their hike up Mount Fuji from the verdant Sangen Shrine at the bottom of the island volcano. Halfway up they encounter an army. These hordes of hikers drive or bus up the highway blasted into the mountain for the 1964 Olympics, and there almost every night in summer 3,000 people, winter coats in hand, backpacks of snacks of squid jerky and wasabi Kit Kat Bars, supplemental oxygen, and trekking poles, summit Japan's tallest peak. They shine their way up the mountain in the dark, rising through the clouds in hopes of catching the sunrise from the roof of the volcano, which is called Go-raiko, the divine coming of the light.

Go-raiko is said to be good luck for a year, and I was beginning my year as an English teacher in Japan. A year would mushroom into three, but I didn't know that then. Just as I didn't know my obsession with mountains that led to a job as an outdoor instructor, blossoming when I lost my Christian faith, would dwindle as my praying once had.

They say everyone must hike Fuji once, but only a fool would hike it twice. I would hike the volcano four times while in Japan, a symptom of my obsession with mountains not just for the views or the exhilaration or the macho-codified activity, though there was a little of that. I did it for what I felt the mountains meant to my inexplicable self, which I thought existed though I couldn't then have articulated why. A visage of religion, a bland hope, a matter of instinct? Why did I feel satiated with a view out of Tokyo Bay and the Chichibu Mountains, with the clouds we rose above, the thunder and lightening reflecting my height then relative to the world?

I didn't know, still don't really, if it's a choice to believe, to believe in something ethereal. Mountain lust gripped me, as it sometimes does when I think back on why I would spend 24 hours hiking up and down a rivet of magmic earth, one of the most climbed, one of the

most photographed mountains in the world, why I would hike in the dark, through a storm, to sit in the cold and wait for the same light which appears everywhere on earth.

When I was nine, I watched a news broadcast from the foot of Mount Fuji, as my family was getting ready for church. We lived in Lubbock, which at the time was the second-most conservative county by votes in America. The town sat perched on the Caprock Escarpment, a tabletop flat of land that spread across the Panhandle, a mile up, overlooking the rest of Texas. Dust walled off the town, rising from the cotton fields watered from aquifers. The airborne agriculture interfered with our visions, so that most of what we saw was each other. There were more churches than liquor shops if only for the reason that there weren't any liquor shops. I believed in Christ, as many did, because I grew up with it, just like I knew Columbus sailed the ocean blue. It was penciled into the architecture of my childhood.

While I gaped at the volcano, a female reporter, suited in red, relayed that at the moment thousands of people were hiking to the peak. The camera zoomed in, and I could make out a zig-zag route swishing up to the crater. It was morning, but there was a string like Christmas tree lights of headlamps marching up the mountain.

I traced the line on the TV glass with my finger, thinking about caterpillars in the children's book *Hope for the Flowers,* in which butterfly larva fight their way to a mountaintop crawling over each other. Once the larva break through clouds that had shielded the peak, they find their own struggling mass. A mountain of ambition, a warning against the lust of climbing.

I later gave the book to a woman I loved before she left for a missionary trip in 2003. We had been Bible-studying together in Lubbock, and we'd made tentative plans to marry after her proselytizing journey and go preaching and teaching in South Africa.

But she left, and my stern father suffered a stroke, and I felt my faith weaken without their confident voices. On a lark, I went backpacking with two friends in Southern Colorado. Three days of bushwhacking, traversing untrailed scree, tearing our clothes on the density of Douglas firs, we screamed for help in the wilderness with no answer. Eventually, we followed a small creek, which led logically downhill to a river, and then, over a few rises, to a dusty parking lot, where miraculously lay my Oldsmobile just as we'd left it.

When we came out, I felt something inside me slip. The chalky imprint of quiet limestone and the cloud haloing a mountain at my eye level left me uncertain about Christian reality. Adrenaline suffused me when lost hiking, and I thought about my grave, staring up at Cretaceous monoliths. Like the Romantics before, Shelly and Wordsworth, God transferred from the ominous sky to the awesome, but very real bulkhead of landscape both horrifying and gorgeous. This is what the poet Rilke has said are the two faces of reality: horror and beauty. The mountains, I thought, nature's spear points, were the elemental power of the world.

My first Fuji hike began at the 1200-year-old shrine, Sangen, where sixth-century monks trail-blazed their pilgrimage up to the fire goddess Kona Hana's mouth. They were some of the world's first mountain climbers, and they built a place of worship at Fuji's feet, what is now a postage stamp of giant cedar trees wrapped in bows, set in the middle of the city of Fujiyoshida. Mountain worship was once endemic in Japan. It makes sense to fear and revere beings who give birth to rivers and hiccup ash and molten lahar.

A young monk directed I follow a road, which was quiet and leaf-lined, to find a trail up the mountain. I began at seven o'clock, so there was still light in the trees, casting vibrant shadows on the trail, and I noticed an off-rust, tomato color on the trunks, as I gained elevation. From far away, from satellite, the forest resembles an afghan quilt, patched with the vermillion

and rustic autumn, something woven onto the mountain from the maples and from the mountain cherry blossoms and ubiquitous cedars.

The path sloped gently for a few miles and four hours and began spiking, and took the form of steps, etched into the mountain with log beams and mountain rock, platforms, stacked on top of each other like spiral stairs as I wound up and up.

Hiking Fuji, you can traverse three generations of eruptions, several hundred thousand years of fire. Baby Fuji is only 10,000 years old and still active. The mountain is the convergent point of not two, but three tectonic plates. They impact each other, shaking up the world's tenth most populous country, and construct a mountain from the heat of the Earth's red heart.

When Fuji last erupted in 1707, it sent ash and magma-cut shrapnel into four metropolitan prefectures, the equivalent of an eruption outside Paris or the Tri-states. Metamorphic highways of lava ran down the mountain, paralleling the road later carved by dynamite.

But the mountain's explosions aren't only geologic. On one side of Fuji are two military bases, and in the night, while ascending, one can hear bombs exploding in the east like distant thunder. Beyond the bombs lies the Aokigahara suicide forest, where every year fire departments sweep up bodies of the despondent. Inside the forest: Aum Shinrikyo, the cult who gassed Tokyo's subways, and in the forest the location of a Fuji-caused plane crash. A 1966 Boeing 707 with 125 on board that collided with the mountain, assaulted by hurricane-force lee waves fanning off Fuji.

I wasn't thinking about convergence then. About how Fuji is a near perfectly conical. About how it once dragged an airplane into its orbit. How Fuji rose to fame when Japan's most notorious Shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, slaughtered hundreds of thousands and relocated the

nation's capital to a tiny fishing village now called Tokyo. He forced his vassals to travel cross country to this swampy hamlet twice a year, road trips in the seventeenth century requiring thousands of retainers, as much as half of the vassals' budgets earmarked for travel. All beneath the shadow of Fuji, which became subject to the most famous and beautiful woodblock prints in the world. I wasn't thinking about how much art and death converged on this mountain.

I wasn't thinking if I hadn't been religious, that if my father wouldn't have gotten sick and my love departed, I might never have obtained my fervency for mountains. I don't think I thought about the convergence of vulcanism beneath my feet or spirituality in my heart. Nor did I worry about the storm, typhoon leftovers, above which was likely to block out whatever sunlight I hoped to see.

After a few hours of tramping, darkness closed it, and I ascended in the thick woods with my headlamp. The cicadas buzzed through the night, and somewhere east a bomb went off.

This part of the hike, once the eeriness past, became peaceful. A thick river of stars sinewed above me following the wide trail cut through the trees. The path was steep but well-defined. Then, without much warning, I broke through the tree line and saw the moon and met up with a line of a thousand people.

These were the hikers who had begun from the end of the mountain highway. With them, it was as if hiking on a moon, the landscape covered in gray dust and charcoal rock. Only with a crowd like the Chicago Marathon, or fans leaving the Texas Rangers' Stadium. Streaks of phosphorescent from the newest trends in name-brand hiking gear. Those fools with heavy backpacks. Those envious types who were jogging. One man with a bicycle. Another with skis. I with my backpack and a Japanese-English dictionary in one pocket.

The trail zig-zagged, etched into the rock, flanked by winded hikers, some toddlers, some ancient men and women. One man in a wheel chair. People saw me, the foreigner, and wished me well. Cheers. Banzais. There were clangs of bells. The sharing of snacks.

I hadn't expected this, the camaraderie. In America, when I encountered hikers on the same trail, it was begrudgery. Here the people, many bundled up in rain jackets as the storm started to drizzle icicle rain, decorated the mountain in bright flashes of well-meaning and color.

I met several hikers who talked with me and shared their emails, though I forgot them all later; they blurred into the bright motion of life upon the volcanic peak that had burned its top half and secreted the bombs and suicides below. Up here everything was bare; everyone was exposed.

I breaked at a mountain hut, one of a dozen blasted into the mountain side, serving as bunkhouses and convenience stores. It was elbow-to-elbow-to-ski. On side of me was a British father prying his toddler, who wasn't faring well, with the tiny oxygen canisters sold for ten dollars. The skier was on my right.

He was traveling alone and had a grim determination about him I've come to associate with extreme sports athletes, those free-climbers and backcountry kayakers who sometimes populate outdoor programs like where I had worked. He said his skies were for rock skiing, that yes, you could fall, but you wouldn't fall much, unlike in winter when the flanks of iced Fuji morph into a glass sheen where hikers glide to death every year.

Later, I saw him skiing down. I was bleary, exhausted from hiking Fuji, and the apparition of a man skiing down the same rock and ash face hundreds of us were stomping down felt like an encounter with the liminal, a man on the way to his doom, a man making impossible.

A person, who I could tell earlier held fear, was skimming along the edges of near-death, screaming at no one.

When my girlfriend left, and my father, the deacon, started dying. I became acquainted with the unjust suffering a community like Lubbock tries to shield itself from. I trusted mountains because they were firm and had no intentions. They just were. They felt solid beneath my feet, omni-present on a map. They couldn't change their mind, couldn't move, couldn't give up their life's work.

But this is the narrow view. Mountains rise and flatten in the blink of a geologic eye. Fuji is in its fourth incarnation. The ancient Appalachians in American in their third. Great mountains once existed over Lubbock, monoliths resembling giant hands clasped to the sky. On Fuji, I saw hiker after hiker pocket volcanic stones from the edge of the trail. There must have been thousands of stones taken per day, millions in a few years. How do you move a mountain? One wing brush, one hand at a time.

We were all moving in that geologic and geographic space, mountain and human. Most of the people were trudging up, but a few were packing in and crawling off. The altitude punishes the human who drives up from sea level Tokyo and embarks on an atmospheric dart. In the winter, the fallen are reported every year. In the summer, the lost, those who wander into the wrong prefecture descending the peak.

But most make it to the top after a night's slog. Many watch the sunrise on the way, inglorious beneath the peak, in its shadow. But the light is still there. Several hundred sleep fitfully in the huts, buried in concrete that borrows into mountain. They lay on stacked bunks like wine bottles racked.

At about three AM, a weariness overtook the hikers I passed, the ones summiting, no plans to stop for a fitful sleep. They appeared less able to bid me well or offer a bite of squid. But three o'clock is the darkest, coldest part of night because it seems the farthest from the day that's about to begin. It was also the highest up the mountain where turning around was still a possibility, an arduous but doable backtrack.

People's faces appeared glum, gazing inward. They sat on the volcanic boulders that flanked the ashy trail while the storm overhead became fog that we had to swim through, cold, skin-bursting wet.

I too had lost vitality, my ardor for the mountain, my love for the hike, the thrill of high exposure. The secret about most hiking is that the mind is not wandering in taskless places, is not romantically inclined. It burrows in itself, like those concrete huts, hundreds of secreted thoughts like exhausted hikers in their beds turning and turning beneath the surface of things. Was I wasting time? Should I be home with my father? What was my purpose?

On the peak after most of the night ascending, I learned from a fellow hiker that the winds were gusting at a hundred miles an hour. With all the waiting hikers, I was amazed, that if one just descended a few meters, from the top height, there was a wall that would protect me from two angles.

What I didn't observe, and wouldn't until I rose to descend three hours later, were the thin flecks of white paper and an earthy, biting odor, the pale looks from other hikers with the knowledge I had sat downstream from the highest toilet in Japan.

Why Fuji didn't get World Heritage status until 2013. For decades, the septic tanks had been left open to drain down the mountain.

But the building faced east, shit or not. This I did know, despite the wind strong enough to topple me over and the fog so heavy I couldn't see beyond 30 meters, nor smell anything. All the other people on the peak were facing the same direction, ready to drink up the sunrise, and I trusted them.

Fuji from below, because it rises from an unassuming valley and is jet black from its waist up, appears to be a spaceship set down upon earth. And because we hikers along with the wind and rain were moving Fuji, one keepsake, one speck of dust at a time, the spaceship was moving, just as the three plates below, the convergence of the world's soup crusts, pushed and ground their way across the world.

The most visceral relief from my Lubbock upbringing I lost, was the idea of the eternal. That not my body but my essence would emanate infinitely, that I would be conscious of what was to come to this world and which I cared about. My idea of mountains, in their way, continued this hope. But watching the clouds part to reveal the smoky haze of dawn, I sensed, in some animal way, the connection with not the rock beneath me, but all these other fools who had climbed Fuji to be here for this brief spark of sun.

Only the sunlight wouldn't come. It was dramatic, the light ducking beneath the clouds, then revealed. The storm rolling up and down like an ocean, and the sweet light appearing over the valley and the mountains and Tokyo bay and the big cities of Kanto.

Japan, of course, in mythology was birthed from the celestial fire, and the national flag bares this root. The nation was born in this sunrise that lasts for only a glimpse before it passes overhead and becomes night just as a mountain wears away within an eon.

The flicker of sun on the peak would appear. And then disappear. Then reappear. And then I'd doubt. Then believe. And at one point I gave up choosing which outcome I wanted and instead sat back against the building I didn't know to be a bathroom.

But I'll be honest and say I don’t know if I stopped believing. I don't know if I could. I saw the sun everyday, and I knew it must come up *somewhere*. Somewhere there was a sun as there is now when I write this at night in the cold light of winter, ten years later. The sun is on the other side of the earth, warming Japan as it did to me the first time I climbed Fuji and waited on its pinnacle.

I stood up for the final curtain with all the other hikers on the peak. The clouds washed away, as the light started to spread over the horizon, meek at first, a tittering dull orange. Then the welder's torch appeared, and a daggering twilight ray. Then the oval of an egg yolk. The lit nub of a cigarette. The light was water, warming us, washing away the night's exhaustion. I was bathed in sweat, but the beam cooked that away, made my skin feel alive and new. The Japanese on the rise above me began giving banzai cheers as the sun fully cracked the horizon. Thousands of people had come to watch the same light we had in the different parts of the world.

We all bowed, saluted the dawn, the warm sight, unfiltered, clear as a drop of oil in an otherwise still ocean. And trailing down from the crater, in their raincoats and sun hats and hiking boots, was a zig-zag road, all the way, as far as I could see, to the foot of Fuji and beyond, which I had seen as a child, to the water and cities, people, at different stages of their hike, at different huts, some at rest, some already heading back down, foreigners and countryman, all the way up and down the morning mountain of light.

Everything All at Once

In Lubbock, where my parents once built a house at the edge of city limits, the street bordered cotton fields, rows and rows that stretched as far as I could take in. It wasn't mountains nor hilltops nor skyscrapers that broke the sky, but the over-tilled and over-fertilized horizon. The common joke went that you could watch a dog run away for two days if you stood on your roof in Lubbock. The vast expanse of geology lay flattened, limitless.

When I was a younger child, I lived on Padre Island, waking to the mad rush of waves, green, curling onto the sand, one surge piggy-backing the next, receding like floating hills. It doesn't seem odd to me now that my earliest eyes were trained on the infinite, cotton fields, ocean, ethereal.

In the nineties and early 2000s, Lubbock had the most religious institutions per capita in the United States. I've come to see this as myth, but it seemed verifiable data at the time. So much so that I heard the factoid parried around different corners of town, treated disdainfully by the voices I knew in high school, the disaffected amphetamine peddlers, tattooed outcasts that grew up in trailers at the edges of town, my friends and girlfriend. But sometimes the pseudo-fact was bantered by the old guard, friends of my father's, father's of his friends, as if, a tone checked at the edge of scorn, that it was the world gone to shit and Lubbock city limits a moat. But other notes rose from the song of myth-making, something about the way I and the people I lived around associated with God, gods, or what couldn't be seen, some identification with the rivulet of the unobservable and obscure. Even those among my friends who wore ripped, sleeveless shirts and wallet chains and who placed disemboweled lightbulbs between their lips to smoke a snowy powder, there was a notion, I think, that this mythology was what tethered us to this place.

But there was a wider world. Surrounding the small city of Lubbock, boarding the checkerboard cotton fields, is a canyon system, the second largest in the United States. Roughly sixty million-years old, the Caprock Escarpment lifted up like a rivet punched through the skin of the earth, a table top the size of Switzerland. Canyons drained this elevated plateau, surrounding the imported cattle, imported cotton, and imported religion, with a dry, dusty impenetrable maze of sandstone. The town I knew seemed at the edge of something. That, along with the sheer oblivion mass media treated Lubbock with, left me the impression that I lived cradled within the confines of the edge of existence.

When I was in high school, I had two profound experiences that remolded the clay formed by religion and West Texas. The first was my conservative, journalist father discovering his brain tumor. It was a lemon-sized, mucous-colored mass that had begun growing when he was an adolescent and had thrived in obscurity until it had wrapped itself like a corkscrew, from mid-brain to brain stem.

It was not just the tumor, though, that detonated inside him and weakened nearly every physical function, but the radiation that doctors poured into his skull. This a man who once ran marathons, lifted weights and had a kind of life-threatening charismatic power that seems now to have gone hand-in-hand with his being a deacon in our Episcopal church.

There is a cap, a legal limit, to how much radiation a person can receive in order to benefit the life support of their human bodies. More than that, the theory goes, and the cannon-like gun that fires off molecules and destroys cells will devastate more than it heals. Because my father’s tumor was so advanced, he received the maximum dosage. He became a limping, blind, gamma ray.

Enough radiation blasted the tumor and the shriveled, dead fungus-like mass. But it

weakened my dad's capillaries, and for the next eleven years he would suffer four hospital-bound strokes and countless mini strokes as the toxic medicine conquered him.

Did I miss my father? Dad began for me as a domineering but passionate disciplinarian who cared about his children, and wrote about football. He ended for me as a raspy, wheel-chair bound septuagenarian who was unable to read nor write, nor recall most of his life. He spent his last years in nursing homes, eating pureed foods. He confessed to me his wish that he'd started writing and traveling earlier, that he'd given up on his series of life-sapping jobs before journalism. The experience taught me, in a way, something that may have been hard to learn otherwise. That death was real and final, that there wasn't enough time to stay motionless waiting for distant lands and knowledge to arrive at my doorstep.

Like many children, I over-corrected the mistakes of my progenitor. My interests from an early age tacked towards the horizon, for the sea and the flatland Llano Estacado that spread like a blanket behind my parents' house. But it also rose to the lofty heights of the church where we attended when I was young, a church we gave up when my father settled on sports writing before he got sick, my mother then still a homemaker, though she would soon become a teacher and the family bread-winner. As I finished high school and entered college, the same time by father began his descent at age 59, I was trying to decode the world and my place in it. Which is not unlike the waking states of many of the college-aged people I now teach, with the exception that maybe I was more zealous.

My high school friend Mike was emblematic of the edge I was seeking. Mike was six-foot-three, scrawny, but deceptively strong. Veins bulged from his arms like slithering garden snakes. Besides his tattoos, Mike had a flair for ostentation. Our last year of high school, he was spending two hours a day putting wood glue into his hair to make spikes as thick as rope. He also

made the school newspaper for a collection of belly button lint that he kept in a jar. At the end of his junior year, cops entered the school to arrest him for mooning the shocked teachers and gleeful children of an elementary school.

His real edge morphed from the disillusionment with his family. His mother had vanished when he was a child. His stepmother was more parent than his father, who was alcoholic and abusive. Mike's father didn't realize how big his son was growing until one night, sixteen-year-old Mike knocked out his belt-wielding, blitzed father with one surprise punch to the jaw. Mike stepped over his unconscious parent and left to live with a friend and her children.

Then Mike informed me he was set on escaping to Houston with his GED. That night at a dirty coffeeshop, Mike passed me a folded up piece of aluminum foil, inside which were two sheets of graph paper, a blot of purple circumscribed within the edges. He explained to me what it was. In the year 2000, I hadn't even tried lesser drugs like marijuana or opioids or the amphetamines that were favored among my class. I'd gotten blistering drunk twice, but that was it. But I had wanted an edge, and here it was, perhaps the last time with my friend who was seeking a horizon of his own.

Around an hour later, after I licked the graph paper from the foil, someone mentioned we should go to the public gardens. Midnight had fallen, the coffeeshop closing. There was a group of about a dozen. We walked along the dark streets. My peripheral vision began to expand. Giggles foamed from my stomach. The light poured in from street lamps and appeared as little suns. A feeling bubbled in the caves of my chest, something like a hot new love. Every sensation around, the taste of gum on my tongue, the smell of cigarettes, crickets chirping, the prickly woo of night air, the bright moon reflecting off the windows of houses, the boy and girl talking about bands they liked, everything, all at once, echoed in my skull.

There were flowers of all kinds at the city park's arboretum, along with pine, oak and pecan, trees with limbs so long they touched the ground and concealed whatever was in the long skirts of their leaves. I think, though I never heard this voiced, we felt safe there, shielded from adults, police, the rest of Lubbock.

Somehow our number grew to thirty. The bulk of the acid party was in the oaks smoking marijuana, which oddly, though I was on acid, I was still afraid of. Mike and I squatted on a knoll at a pond's edge. I ripped up clips of grass and began throwing them. Mike said he imagined them to be rain.

Then I stood at the pond's edge with a chainlink fence between me and the water. I opened my arms to the fence and curled my fingers around the links. The metal lattice turned red and heaved like lungs. My fingers water-colored with the mesh. I opened my lips and licked the steel, tasting blood. The links fattened and blood pumped through the dirty fence into my arms and chest. My legs grew into massive arteries pumping blood back into the Earth. I listened to a rhythmic *Fufump, Fufump. Fufump, Fufump.*

I brought Mike over and told him to do the same. I watched him plant his face to the fence as if he were sensing a pregnant woman's fetus. His arms, hands dyed red. I described for him what I felt, and he grinned madly. "Holy fucking hell," he said, "I feel it too." I wouldn't have put it like this then, but we had felt the beating heart of the world, through metal, flesh, and earth, no differentiation, no hierarchy, collapsing human/nature dualism in our young, drug-addled minds.

Someone in the garden had brought an twenty-pound bag of crushed ice. At some point, I got a handful and set it on my chest and let it simmer in the summer air, the fingers of melt curling around my chest. The ice disappeared fast, and someone said we should get more.

Intoxicated and without thinking, I volunteered, and so did my amiable, crop-topped friend Jorge, and a whip-thin white guy with dreads who I sensed was kind of dangerous and went by the name Fry Kid, "fry" a term my friends used for dropping acid.

At the neighborhood, Minute-man grocery store, we found the cooler with bags of ice in it unlocked as Jorge knew we would. We piled ice into his truck like sandbags. I'm not sure how many bags, maybe a hundred. We formed a pyramid above the guardrails. At one point, Fry Kid hopped into the cooler to toss out bags and expedite our theft.

Fry Kid called shotgun in the bucket seat, stick-shift Ranger. Who was I to argue? When we drove back, I sat atop the ice, holding onto the inside of Jorge's cab with one hand. As the street lights knifed by, I slid around on my seat atop the ice, one arm in the air like a bull rider, the danger lost to me. The wind whipped over my bare arms and face, and I felt not the logical concern I should have. An odd voice existed outside me looking down, laughing, nervous, scared. I was watching the TV show that was me on acid, riding in the back of Jorge's truck atop a pile of stolen ice that spilled overboard, while Jorge drove like a maniac and blasted Limp Bizkit.

When we bounced to the gardens, the acid party poured into the parking lot. Teenagers unloaded ice bags and threw them at each other like water balloons. They tossed bags into the air and watched them explode when they grounded. A group of six began constructing an igloo. I squeezed open a bag and began munching the cold candy.

Twenty minutes into the revelry, all of us oblivious to the retirement home across the street, a blue-and-white with flashing reds squealed into the lot. There was a scurrying of human insects into the park. I dropped my ice and ran after Mike. Mike and I slunk behind a row of

thick mesquites, and followed them down to the dark water of the pond. We squatted in a concrete drainage, adrenalin-flooded.

Over the water I could view a large family of geese that dwelled in Lubbock year-round. Each winter, thousands of Canadian honkers bed in Lubbock's playas before returning home in spring, but many never leave. They swim back and forth across water, catching what insects they can, the occasional bread crumbs from well-meaning toddlers and elderly.

Mike and I, or maybe it was someone else fleeing the police, spooked the birds, and they rose with a cacophony of magnetic proportions. The forest filled with their noise, honking, love-calling, the fanning of wings on water, the inevitable drops of shit missiling around us. The noise tornadoed, and if the sound had a detectable physical presence it seemed to hit me in the face like a wind. The world came alive for me then, and my arms went slack while I drooled and watched the creations bellow above.

Most of the people I would later come to work with at the Outdoor Pursuits Center— the place where I corralled mopey teenagers and college students and sometimes the middle-aged, ferrying them up through mountains and around the gurgling rapids and yellow-baked canyons of the American West— would hardly believe my delinquent story of how I became enchanted with the natural world.

But it was these two experiences, my father becoming sick and an experience with a controlled substance, that opened me up to a world that was living beside me, through me, and existed for me to notice or not. The illumination was profound to me, and it would possess me again and again. I'm convinced, now, that it eventually led me to top peaks and wander canyons and read books and write essays searching for that same sensation of a being a red blood cell in the world's organs and in that eye of the geese tornado while I was on LSD. This was my

introduction to far horizons, a world of cacophonous, thriving noise, a living planet whose heart beat inside metal, among fanning wings, and within my and my friend's roiling minds.

Two years later, I stepped into a wilderness for the first time. Mike and I hadn't seen each other, and he didn't have a phone, and had moved often. In the age before social media, I made peace that I may not see him again, though I would, another year later, when I was about to graduate college and Mike had moved from one odd job to another to amphetamine dealing.

I traveled with two other friends, Logan and Dave, and only one of us had backpacking experience, from when he was twelve-years-old. Still, it seemed like a good idea, a continuation of the view I had been looking for. The two friends shared similar views of wanting what was just over the barrier of cotton fields. The "experienced" one, Logan, a rail-thin, brilliant, acne-scarred, product of Texas foster care had been to Colorado's Weminuche Wilderness, and since I'd never been to any wilderness, they were all the same to me. Open arteries of the world.

In our macho, Hollywood-fed ignorance, we carried with us a machete, a hatchet, a dull Bowie knife, and a 10-inch long fish-gutting knife (though we were not fishing). Our non-verbalized assumption was that as soon as we stepped into the woods, we would be video game-assaulted by bears and lions, which we would have to fend off by the dozen. I also carried a CD player, a case of CDs and a fifteen-pound tent. We brought canned food but no stove, cotton clothing, and Walmart rain gear. Only later did I understand what it meant to carry everything with you, the weight of ambition.

Since Logan had been backpacking once, he was our leader. The other friend, Dave, was a moody, witty, artist-type, who favored psychedelic clothing. We left the trailhead around ten a.m., meandering up a deer trail, instead of a human one, and crested one ridge and then another, and lost the faint path. We had a map and compass, but every peak became the one we based

measurements on. Logan was too proud to admit that he couldn't read a map. Dave and I had not a clue. None of us had cell phones in 2002.

We circled around and around, crested another ridge and then realized the sky was dimming. We were dehydrated, frightened, exhausted, altitude-poisoned, pissed at each other. We raised a tent on the flattest spot we could find. That night my imagination flirted with death. The Weminuche was the largest continuous wilderness in the lower 48 states. It was possible that even with three days of screaming, depending on how far back we were, no one would hear us die.

The next morning, I got up and stretched. I unzipped our tent to let in the roiling mountain fog. Up on the peaks, I saw the last of a winter snowpack wedged in a granite crack, melting into a stream that burbled near our sleeping bags. The stream led uphill to a glacier, the first I'd ever seen in my life. As a Texan, I felt crash-landed on Jupiter's moon Europa. I inched up to the water and got a sip, stinging-cold to my lips. The air chilled my legs. I sat on a grassy patch, the earth soft and moist, and followed the trickle with my eyes downhill. I came upon the crashing, big river below. A cloud, shaped like a hand, wrapped around a mountain across from where I sat. The white peak jutting up through the fingers was an island in the cumulous. The egg-yolk sun rose, suffusing the air with radiance, and the churning waters conjured up a mist that rolled up the cliff sides and hit the sparkling air. Hawks circled. A jay called. There was a smell of honey. My friends were not yet up.

Perhaps it was exhaustion, hunger, fresh air, the altitude, and the chemicals that we now know waft among trees, that stirred my mind into a dizzy euphoria. Perhaps it was the view. In any case, it set me to wondering. I had no idea where I was or how we would get back down. I thought, curiously and calmly, about the possibility of death, the thought which I had until then

shut out. In reality we were only a day's hike from my car, but where that path lay, we had no idea. With my elbows hooked deep back into mountain moss, and my feet perched on a rock, dying worried me less. What of it? Our bodies in this landscape in the coming weeks and years? Our garments, skins, and tent worn apart by rain and animals until fragments washed into the creek. How long until there was no trace? Five years? Ten? Only bones and tent poles would remain, the deepest part of ourselves and our shelter.

I felt as if I'd stared into the night sky for the first time and contemplated the distance between my life and galaxies. A first brush with inconsequentiality. The underside to the coin that was what I had seen on acid when all those geese in the tornado had honked at me. I was lost in a wilderness of both aspens and the interior without, as a common American teenager, any real experience in either. But there was a sense I had mulling in that landscape, that seemed true then, as it does to me today, that it does not matter how much I climbed, how far down the river I wandered, it was the way I sat, in the middle of life's curtain call, drifting in the body, that let me ride the current of existence while I could. And if I didn't, I didn't, but I would be swept downstream at some point just the same.

The weather that day turned sunny, high seventies. My friends and I had food for three days and nothing better to do. We decided to follow the stream down to the big river. We choose to follow the current wherever it took us. Which happened to be a parking lot with a sky-blue Oldsmobile sitting perkily in one corner, a car that was willed to me by my dead grandmother, my father's mother, the memories of her, and him, carried to wherever I drove.

First Bow

When I was 24 I met Naoyoshi-San, my new boss, and we drove up a corkscrew road through the mountains to a village called Kosuge. We reached the town hall where I had introductions, a flurry of bows from the staff and tea with the mayor. We exchanged business cards and bows, and Naoyoshi-San, mad-scientist-white hair and beer belly, drove me to the apartment, which when Brian, the former English teacher, left in a few days would be mine.

Brian was squat, curly haired, and had the expression on his face of a man constantly chewing aspirin. While I changed out of my suit, showered, put on a pair of shorts, Brian sat in the living room drinking. He offered me a beer, but I turned him down. He asked me how I was doing, and I said jet-lagged but okay. I told him about buying hundreds of pencils and key chains for our students in Houston before I'd left town. In turn, I asked Brian about life in Kosuge.

"When I first got here," he said, "my predecessor was off hunting wild boar with the locals, and I didn't speak Japanese. So, when they drove me up here, I was like, 'where the hell am I?' It was beautiful, the mountains and everything, but I had nothing to do, no internet, no TV, no phone and no night life. So I drank in a lot, and the habit's kind of stayed with me. It's a nice place though, I'm sure you'll do fine here."

We heard a honk from my new boss's car and got up to leave through the sliding glass doors. I noticed Brian had stacked five trash bags outside, the kind used for lawn leaves, filled with empty beer cans.

"Yeah, I could never figure out the right garbage days," Brian said. "They recycle everything here."

Naoyoshi-San's wife dropped us off at a restaurant; the size of a Denny's, most of its tables were on tatami mats where you would sit on cushions. We sat on the side with Western

chairs and tables, our feet on the dusty floor boards, the only customers.

Naoyoshi-San undid his tie and untucked his shirt. He picked his teeth with one hand, and held the other over his mouth to conceal the toothpick. I noticed a thick gold ring on his right hand.

“This?” he said. “I got in Oregon.” We were talking in a mix of Japanese and English, the distillation of which I don’t remember.

“Yes, it’s a beautiful place,” he said. “We have our sister city in Oregon. I have been four times, and each time I have fallen in love.”

An old woman wearing an apron and slippers came out. She slid us a menu and gave us three Asahi drafts without asking.

"You drink a lot?" Brian asked.

"Yes," I lied.

He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "You'll do fine here."

We touched glasses. "Kan-pai!" Brian drank his mug without stopping.

“He’s famous for being drunk,” Naoyoshi-San said. “He’s the town drunk!”

“Yeah, I’m the town drunk,” Brian agreed. He asked for another beer.

Naoyoshi-San said something to the woman.

"He just ordered raw horse meat,” Brian said. “You ever tried it? You'll love it. Trust me."

Then it was on a plate at our table — elongated slices of cranberry jelly with blue veins. Naoyoshi-San handed me a pair of chopsticks. I didn’t, couldn’t think about it. I dipped a hunk into soy sauce and then into my mouth. It was salty, chewy, and sweet the way bacon fat is.

"It's delicious," I said, truthfully.

I ate a few more slices while we finished our drinks, cautioning myself about eating too much raw meat and drinking, which I'd never done in combination before. But my hands and mouth countered my plan. We all got drunk, me first, then Brian and finally Naoyoshi-San.

"You're strong!" Naoyoshi-San yelled to me. "Town drunkard!" he said to Brian.

"Number two," Brian said aiming a finger at his nose. "Number one." He pointed at Naoyoshi-San. We all laughed. The woman who brought us another plate of raw horse laughed.

A man named Masahide came in, an employee of Naoyoshi-San's at the Department of Education. He was a linebacker-looking sort of guy with a square head and glasses, and he and Brian began talking seriously about something. Naoyoshi-San grabbed me by the neck like a coach and bent me over on his side of the table.

"Clinton," he said, "I like America. I like America very much. I go to America many times. Oregon, I love Oregon. I want to go to Oregon many more times. It's a very beautiful place. You're not from Oregon?"

"No, I'm from Texas."

"Texas? What's in Texas? Are you a cowboy? Do you have a gun?"

"I had a gun," I said.

"Scary," he said. "Americans are so scary. I'm so scared of guns every time I go there."

I pushed out of my seat to go to the bathroom, took seven steps and realized how old the building was: cracking hardwood walls, mildew stains where rain leaked in, torn posters of enka singers dressed in kimonos crooning their lofty syllables. But something about a simple yellow cotton banner advertising Asahi Super Dry made it hit me: I had gotten the job I hadn't expected and was about to live in a Japanese village of 900. When I had signed the contract in Texas, I assumed some agent of inertia was going to keep me in Lubbock. I thought my life destined like

my father's, raised and buried between two rivers. I'd never been overseas, yet, there I was, the year gaping before me. And after twelve months I could recontract. The thought was sobering. Brian would be gone in six days, and I would be the only Westerner in town. For how long? How long would I stay? It was a question of adaptation as well as allowance. Would I become an alcoholic? Would I be a good teacher? How long was I supposed to stay?

When I returned to the table, they'd ordered pig intestine and a potato alcohol called sho-chu. Then I remember singing a song by the Ramones. I remember ordering more food and Naoyoshi-San and Masahide warbling an enka ballad. More than once I remember somebody clapping me on the back and saying I was all right.

Then it was time to go. Naoyoshi-San had paid the check. We rose, pushed in our chairs, blushed and thanked the old woman. Naoyoshi-San's wife came, and we waved goodbye as Naoyoshi-San got inside his car. We were singing as they left, bellowing some song that somehow all of us knew.

The three of us slogged uphill along the quiet street, passing four dark hotels, the closed flower shop and fish farms. Masahide and Brian had their arms across each other's shoulders and were blubbering about how they were tomodachi (friends) itsumademo (forever). Masahide turned down his street, a row of tiny two-story homes, and Brian and he hugged goodbye.

We didn't say much as we went up the road, until on a bridge, just before the apartment, I looked out over the river that appeared silver beneath the towering shadows of mountain and said to Brian, "Man, it's a beautiful joint."

Brian took a deep breath and said, "You know what though, man, fuck Japan. I'm glad to be leaving this motherfucking place behind."

Later, Brian would tell me how our job made us recontract in February when the snows

piled over the hoods of cars and you had to wear long underwear every day. Brian was from Georgia. Warm, southern Georgia. “Yeah, it was a bad time,” he would say. He tried to apply again in the spring, but the decision had been made and I’d been hired.

We stumbled the rest of the way home wordlessly and went to bed on futons in separate rooms. In a few minutes I could hear Brian’s snores, which were like the troubled sleep of someone with a cold.

I closed my eyes, but woke soon, my stomach somersaulting. I took a breath and calmed, amazed I’d handled all this new meat and alcohol. But then of course as if remembering were the trigger, I rushed outside through the sliding glass door and vomited by the pile of beer cans.

I stayed out there for a few moments while a wind rolled in off the hills keeping my stomach cool. I tried going back to sleep, but after half an hour, I saw a light coming in through the window and wandered outside. I was sluggish and dizzy, but I was able to climb a knoll at the end of the road and saw that my new place was at a bend in the river. The main village opened up before me: the town hall next to the one traffic light, the police station with its sole officer, most of my students’ houses, the schools, the gym, the gas station, the volunteer fire department. The glow was coming over the mountains in the back of town — the theatre’s lights coming on.

On my first transoceanic flight I had played a game. I was nervous but adrenalin-pumped as if I was at the top of a rapid. Nothing brings you into the moment like a steep drop. I wanted to see what, if anything, would give away that I was in Japan. Kidnapped and taken to the land of the rising sun, how would I know? What would tell me what river I was coursing onto? There wasn't much except that the cars were driving on the left and that everything seemed a little smaller than back home.

But Kosuge at first light was something I'd not known: houses hugging hills like mountain goats with staircases of rice paddies. Even the massifs were a spectacle. I'd assumed mountains would be the same everywhere, but these peaks jutted out of the ground like spears. Their sides, heavily forested, were as steep as the pitch of a rolling wave. Maybe Ginza street lights were flashy, but in Kosuge, cars rusted over in the backs of cabbage fields. Kitchen sinks stood outside houses draining into street gutters. Drying cloths hung out of windows everywhere as they would even in winter. Old men and women, I later saw, walked around with baskets filled with fresh vegetables on their backs because that was what seemingly still worked.

It's a fallacy to make a generalization about a culture, even my own, even for something as small as a village, but if I could have made one about Kosuge, a projection, really, of what I wanted to be, it's that its people had a way of making do with the messiness of their environment. Maybe that's the best you can say about someone, that they took the turns around the rivulets of the cosmos and made definitive choices. That they steered through the traffic they were dropped into. Or maybe that's not saying anything. Maybe I just wanted to feel caught in a world more special than it was because that's the way it felt to me at the time.

And then my stomach, as if on cue, still swirling with liquor and horse, told me to lean over the guardrail and, again, give back those presents to the land I'd received them from.

The trouble was unexpected. I'd been enjoying the sunrise and had felt a warm calm as if I'd taken a bath. I suppose many abroad experiences are like this.

As I stood up, I remembered something about Japan, something that made me shiver. One of the luckiest things you can do, I'd been told before coming, is to catch the first sunrise of the new year. Sometimes the Japanese call it go-raikou*,* or the divine coming of the light. My contract ended exactly one year from the date I was standing there, in front of Kosuge,

presenting myself over this guardrail. Inadvertently, I'd given Kosuge and the light a bow. This was my salutation, my way of introduction, and, as the Japanese would, humbling myself before my new home and the year that awaited. But I was happy with the thought, I hoped, that most of the town was sleeping, waiting yet to welcome me.

Mountain Haze

One summer, after about a year of working in Japan, I plodded through a three-day backpack around Kosuge's civic boundary, the trail shaped like a jagged North Carolina, rising and falling like an EKG. And I realized something that would be apparent later when I looked at Kosuge from satellite camera. Aloft, I would see the town was shaped like a cadaver lying on its side. Two legs spiraled out, arms pretzeled, raised above the head. The town hall, grocer, post office, and lone traffic light, along with dozens of houses and manicured gardens, combined into the upper torso. I lived at the elbows, perched above the river, with wrists and hands disappearing into a river bend behind me, the legs sinewing into their valleys below. The loins were about where the schools were.

Workweeks went like this: Mondays and Thursdays, I climbed aboard a once-white-now-gray, squawking Corolla and vise-gripped the wheel for thirty minutes over the mountain hairpins to the village next door, Tabayama, and taught there. The rest of the week, I walked to Kosuge's schools. I always co-taught with a Japanese teacher. I wore flannel and jeans. I was taller than everyone in either village and mostly younger, at twenty-four. I was the only white person I ever saw.

There were days I'd arrive at the school and have nothing to do except stare at my computer, study Japanese, pay bills, read, wander hallways. Other days, I'd arrive and have seven classes to teach (in two different schools). The schedule was kept in Japanese and would change, and I was never at the same school two days in a row.

On a lax day, I strolled up the stairs to Tabayama Elementary's abandoned third floor. The classrooms piled with 1970s furniture: chairs with wood-flip desks, nuclear waste-green couches, a beanbag chair. Dust coated everything like a skin; the blinds were pulled shut. Some

of the walls wore educational math posters, whispering of their former classes, hinting at life squeezed out of the mountains.

I said I was the only white person, but this was not always true. A Tuesday morning in Kosuge, my first October of teaching, I found three white men with smiles, sharp suits, and javelin ties, flanking the road and passing out Jehovah's Witness literature to children. So gladdened to see English speakers, I forgot to feel protective of my students or antagonistic to the men's dope-dealer, catch-them-young strategy. We fist-pumped, chatted. They were Missourians, frolicking the Japanese countryside, sponsored by their home church, warning of End Days. Their pamphlets boasted inkjet art of burning hell.

Their presence sent me into a time warp. A girlfriend in college had left me to be a missionary in Japan, a vocation I'd studied to follow, desperate and growing up as conservative as I did. But I'd lost religion and became addicted to mountains. Still, a part of me had the uncanny sensation I was greeting who I might have been and never was, a me I realized after one or two periods of teaching my impressionable students, I loathed, the ramifications of the missionaries' cultural invasion belatedly apparent. I felt the kind of shock that quickly morphed into rage when I met somebody who reminded me of a self I no longer desired. A rage born by the fear of how I might have ended up like these pamphlet-slinging Missourians.

Naoyoshi-San, my boss, was livid, and walked over to the junior high to talk with me, his white hair mane wilder than usual, as he kept stroking it to figure out what to do. By then our tempers matched. He must have seen me greeting them. I said I didn't know them; they weren't family. I didn't share their beliefs. What they were doing was destructive.

"What do you think about them?" he asked.

I'd just learned the perfect Japanese word to describe them — "*abunai,*" which is something you might say when you see a bulldozer zeroing in on a human or to a patron about to gobble a browning piece of sushi. Naoyoshi-San smiled. "Abunai," he agreed. Later, the village cop went to run them off. I think we bonded over that, Naoyoshi-San and I, a link born by a common enemy, midwifed by language. Language further separated the me I almost was from the me I was becoming

I was told by the Japanese consulate's office in Houston when I was hired that local language skills were not a requisite for the job. Whoever figured that hadn't tried living as the only native English speaker in a town of 900.

The first time I went grocery hunting, the curt shopkeeper with his massive forehead and flying spittle, almost made me cry because I didn't understand he didn't have enough one yen coins for change. The first time I went to the post office, staffed entirely by middle-aged women in gray suits and calf-high socks, I just left after they smiled and greeted me in unison. Following that, when driving, I dialogued with pirated Pimsleur MP3s. At home, I studied *Making Out In Japanese*. At work, I scrawled kanji.

After three years, the pinnacle of my language skills (which have since ebbed) was in 2010, a month or two before I was about to leave. The movie about dolphin killing in Japan, *The Cove*, had released in 2009 and had won best documentary Oscar. Even at that precocious moment before I ever heard of post-colonialism, the film chaffed me because it portrays white, millionaire-backed filmmakers (along with world-champion free divers, ex-military, and a technician who uses self-designed cameras disguised as rocks) to perform a sting on working-class Japanese fisherman. The crescendo of which, portrayed in self-congratulatory heroic

fashion, is gore-porn the likes of which are available at any American slaughterhouse or on any weekend during Texas deer season.

I thought the movie racist and fascinatingly un-self-aware. A Kosuge elementary school teacher held the polar opposite position, was glad the movie was made, and donated a healthy percentage of her salary to help check the slaughter. We hashed out our arguments over a drunken bowel of ramen one night while another teacher served as neutral moderator. I was indulgently impressed with myself, as much for my calm tone as language dexterity. But the conversation ended with the other teacher in tears, comforted by the moderator. I couldn't decide if this was because of the alcohol, the dolphins, or the fact that she was crushing hard, as everybody in the school knew, on the muscled, charismatic sixth-grade teacher who held her in his arms as she sobbed.

I worked at four schools, and each one would have an *enkai*, the pedagogical equivalent of a kegger, once a month. Which meant I went to a party every week. The teachers became frat-boy drunk, and by teachers I mean men. The female teachers would get tipsy and have endurance grins pasted to their faces, though there were a few who karaoked with the boys, swaying to enka ballads, spilling bottles of Asahi across the tatami. And me, I have always been an alcohol lightweight, so I was routinely drunk. These parties would last until two in the morning on weeknights. School would begin at eight. It is to my shame that I began leaving parties early, tired of the Shōchū and karaoke and haziness at school. But I never had it as exhausting as the other teachers.

The Japanese work ethic is famous (infamous) for its crushing executions. I understand it has lightened up since 2007, but probably no one worked harder, or at least longer, in Kosuge, than the *sensei*.

“Sensei” is an honorary term that means literally “one who comes before.” It’s often used to address doctors, martial arts instructors, and teachers, the latter who literally performed their duties in Kosuge by showing up to work early and leaving quite late. While I was allowed to return home at five o’clock, they would stay until well past nine, filing paperwork, grading essays, jotting notes to parents, penning speeches for conferences. Because they were perched on knolls, our schools became a kind of lighthouse in the dark and star-strewn village. The school lights stayed on until most of the villagers were asleep, knowing the teachers, the sensei, were up late, watching, working for them and their children.

Sixty percent of teachers in Japan end up married to other teachers, and I wonder if all the time together plus alcohol equals love. Also, teachers in Japan are shuffled around and tend to not stay for more than three years in one school, especially true in Kosuge. Teachers were a life-force, something that spiced the village, kept it vibrant. And the teachers, without roots to the town, facing the mountainy distance from friends and relatives, relied on each other for camaraderie, advice, and for a dating pool. Like me, the teachers were aliens crash-landed into a remote hamlet, which, some of them told me, felt stranger than if they’d been working abroad. I had to think, would teaching in Kosuge require more or less cultural adjustment than, say, teaching in an Appalachia mining town? Maybe that’s one thing that was brought home to me in Japan, how multiplicitous we are, wherever and *whoever* we are.

One of the first times I hung out with teachers was during my first typhoon. For Kosuge hurricanes translated into bathtubs of rain, umbrellas snapping in the wind, and the occasional unpleasant mudslide. The Kosuge River running through town filled with a stool-brown sludge and churned into rapids. The roads washed out, so everyone was trapped. During that first typhoon, I trucked a six-pack over to the elementary school secretary’s apartment, a rail-thin

chill guy who rode motorcycles and fly-fished. He spoke as much English as I did Japanese, and joked all the time, puncturing the teacher's office with adolescent hilarity.

Turned out he was having a small gathering, and now I and my six-pack were invited. The buff sixth-grade teacher carted over his portable, electric grill, the second-grade teacher with anime-big eyes and emo haircut brought meat and veggies. Soon, most of the elementary school staff crowded the secretary's one-room apartment, the futon folded up and placed in a closet. We ran out beer, and I volunteered to dive through the rain, soaking myself as if bathing, to the beer machine across the street. We drank so many Kirin lagers that we began stacking the cans, creating skyscrapers of aluminum, shouting and urging each other. Often, two or three teachers would break aside and converse in complicated Japanese, and I would be left out. It was then I'd notice the storm breaking around us, the rain filling up the river and saturating the mountains, which could if they wanted keep us shielded in this village for far longer.

On normal weather days, the Kosuge River spilled through the town, gargling past my home and work. Hawks soared above, and trees fanned into arbor seas. The ridges receded into the distance, never quite ending before their mysteries disappeared into blue clouds. It was a startling beautiful mountain cleft for somebody who once worked for paying customers to guide them to views like what I then had outside my back door.

I say all this but a truth about my three years in Kosuge was that I was ill with loneliness. It was something I wouldn't have admitted because of my fortune in scenery, nor could I because I didn't understand what it was. I wonder now, was it simply the geographic phenomena of mountains blocking out the sky, the sky I was used to stretching out like the earth's second skin over Lubbock, that made me feel unease in a blood-deep way?

I've heard it from mountain and forest-born people who relocate to West Texas that they feel the eeriness of empty land spread before them, an acute, geologic agoraphobia. Maybe it wasn't a closetedness I felt in the shadow of Kosuge's mountains. The armies of unusual-to-me peaks standing guard with their weapons of boulders and mudslides, unleashing fog that tsunamied over the ridges and filled the valleys and hawks that dismembered songbirds— it all did seem to threaten a kind of doom. I would sometimes shake at night in August.

When I began a village-wide walk around Kosuge, it was as simple as making a right turn outside my door and starting up a trail that flanked the water-falling terraces of a wasabi farm. The day balmy and the trail shaded. Bird cries knifed from all sides. I was mid-revelry when two gunshots cracked the air. I panicked because Japan is a country where the government controls firearms, and illegal possession fetches a seven-year prison sentence. It is said that only police and Yakuza carry guns. But around a bend I unearthed three, cheerful wild boar hunters clad in orange-camo, shouldering rifles that looked plucked from Toys"R"Us shelves (even these would require annual inspections). I didn't know the men, but, as was common, they promised me meat from their kill, post-evisceration.

Earlier, on a walk to explore Kosuge, I wandered across a middle-aged woman speed-walking with her schnauzer, its car-crushed hindquarters on a wheeled cart powered by front paws. She diverted us to her house, where she offered me plum wine. She unleashed and uncarted the schnauzer who chased toys and balls around the living room. We relaxed at a low table and watched the disabled dog drag half its carcass on the wood floor, fetching rubber bones and plush dinosaurs, whining when we were distracted. In my mind's eye, his tail was wagging. What I do remember that I think is true is that the nails on his back paws scratched against the

waxed wood, sounding like distant children on roller skates. We drank an entire bottle of *umeshu*, and then she drove me home.

One time jogging in winter cold, spewing steam, snot cascading my face, I startled as a mother to a student sprinted out into the street in robe and slippers and offered me a cucumber and a radish and bid me a good morning. I took both and finished my run. Later I stewed the vegetables.

Just downriver of the town center, there was a restaurant, The End of the Road, that I could patron any day of the week, eat twice my fill and get oath-taxingly drunk and not have to pay.

Two years went by before I found out I had been using the washing machine of a perfect stranger who had been living in the same building as I. When she moved, I used my co-teacher's laundry (after first asking).

A lot of the people in Kosuge went out of their way to make me welcome and less lonely. And there is something to be said about Japan's reputed national project at friendliness; the tales of foreigners getting help from strangers in clutch moments is legion. But with the mountains breaking the sky, creating impasses from the rest of the world anytime there was a mudslide, I wonder if it was a care born of natural threats. A common enemy fostering a common, unspoken language.

The first time I strolled through Kosuge, on the streets, I was on orders from Naoyoshi-San to get to know the town. I'd been reading in his office because the semester hadn't started, and I was a distraction. So he told me to get out and learn the place I would be living in.

I frolicked uphill from the city hall to the hot spring then maneuvered over to the clay-tiled roof neighborhoods where all the lawns were museum-grade manicured, bushes rising into Edward Scissorhands creations.

Amid one tranquil village neighborhood sprung a dense graveyard the size of a rice paddy. The human-sized obelisks porcupined the land, calligraphic family names emblazoned on the sides in gold. The years stretched back centuries, my first indication of what history means in Japan. The graves in Kosuge carried no corpses but ashes piled into the obelisks. Walking along, I found several mounds of flowers and also coffee cans, lids pried up, oranges, half-peeled, tempting. At one, an open and half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's. It didn't take an anthropology degree to know these were treats for the dead. I found the same offerings for the deceased in the graveyards that flanked both streets that wove behind my apartment. I wouldn't discover these tombs for several weeks as I continued my walks about town, and the graveyards tended to be tucked into clefts in the mountains, out of sight from the main thoroughfares.

Maybe the fixture of surrounding graveyards was reason enough to feel doom in Kosuge, but there's this: mountains in Japan symbolize the dead because they were once a way-station between the valleys where almost everyone lived and the clouds that crackled and forked with lightning and thunder. Climbing mountains, historically, in Japan, as in most of the world, was treacherous. Living among peaks like suicide, certainly a lonely existence.

Added to this, my domicile was a hallway of six apartments attached to a care center for the elderly. Every morning as I shuffled to work, a passenger van would arrive and disgorge around twenty patients, many of them senile, some of them dying.

These elderly used to live in the rooms I stayed in. I still had the emergency call buttons dangling from my wall, as well as the red-pull cord in the shower. Once, I tripped over a cord in

my bedroom, and I got a knock at my door from emergency technicians clad in white and hospital masks. The elderly had ceased living there, but their memories remained, enough to call attention to themselves.

Despite a skepticism about ghosts, I did sense on more than one occasion a *presence.* My imagination running away with narcissism, I suppose, me believing myself the worthy subject of a haunting. And what was the sensation? Arm hairs stiffening. Toes tickled by an unseen feather. Laughter. A fleeting image of a boy running through the hallway. Nothing substantial. Nothing *real* I do declare. Just a half-tactile sense. Made manifest by the men and women who kept dying next door.

On half-a-dozen occasions, I returned home to an ambulance in my driveway, loading up another man or woman on oxygen. Once, a medic was giving CPR to a gaunt, splayed out man, which communicated to me death. Sometimes I would peek into the main hall where the patients were kept for the day, tended to by four harried, friendly middle-aged female nurses, and keep track of who survived the night. I wasn't always sure, but many times I lost sight of a familiar face.

And who had died in the rooms I stayed in? Perhaps no more people than die in any given home or apartment or hotel or hospital. It's strange how I've never thought much of quietus in hospitals, where Death hangs its shingle, and never feared incorporeal presences there. But in the room I lived in, with the ambulances chirruping to my doorstep, the faded visions of gowned patients in peripheries, their emergency pull cord in my shower, I contemplated it nonstop.

I would later be reminded of this when I walked, on vacation, into a *wooden* shrine in Kyoto that was a thousand years old. A fascination sure, but I lingered on the thought of how many carbon-flesh beings once walked through and on the same wood, itself a once-living thing

afloat soil, the earth a collection of wasted material and biotic mass chowing down on bodies. And *I* chewed on thinking of waste as bodies, of myself and loved ones decomposing.

This struck me then because I was generally good about having a Labrador retriever-outlook on life. But, again, I lived in an elderly care center and when I went jogging daily past graves. Also, there was my father to think about in America, wasting away from strokes, a man who my mother would eventually turn over to an adult care center.

There was guilt I had at not being at his side that I didn't want to face. For I was selfish, being there, beginning my adult life while my dad terminated his slowly. He once orally absolved me of guilt, exclaiming he lived vicariously through me as he'd never been abroad. But shame would crop up nonetheless, uninterrogated. Maybe my loneliness wasn't just a preoccupation with my doom, but a reckoning with my privilege while so much suffering went on in the world, and inside my very own family.

The hospital pull cords in my room and the attached elderly care center added to the premonition that I wasn't going to stay long. In Kosuge, in Japan, on earth. In some ways, this practical, even pedantic sensation would give rise to existential concerns, something I thought about when I thought about mountains, which would block the very light of sun almost throughout the snowy winters.

On that same first walk through Kosuge when I passed the graveyard, I realized that a street I thought was a dead end, had another right turn into a cul-de-sac. And at the end of this stood a house, creepily shaded, sporting not bushes nor trees manicured into art, but a garden piled with automotive junk. The house and lawn belonged to the family of my most misbehaving, firecracker junior high student, a boy who's furnace burned as hot as mine did at that age. Maybe he too, as I had, would adventure into controlled substances, though the

consequences in Japan were direr than even in West Texas. Drug offenses in Japan in 2007 were akin to being arrested with child pornography. And mountains for him wouldn't be an escape, though, perhaps, a certain valley with the world's biggest city would.

A part of me wonders if I, like so many others, am forever destined to want the opposite of what I have? In Lubbock, I craved peak vistas, but in Kosuge, once I started dating my now-wife Yumiko, I was traveling more often to the big city in Japan's largest plain. And Tokyoites, in turn, used Kosuge as a vacation destination, tourism Kosuge's biggest economy booster.

City slickers would arrive in Kosuge on weekends in Audis and Kawasakis and Honda S2000 convertibles seeking nature, fishing, or just seeking. Some would drag race, white-smoking their tires over mountain passes. They would charge at night with headlights dark so the beams wouldn't alert staked-out cops. Until an inevitable accident, the tires stains spreading across asphalt, an impact crater appearing in a stone fence. The young dismantled cars looked indistinguishable from old salvage on my student's lawn.

I drove over the pass from Tokyo into Kosuge one Saturday morning with Yumiko, having carted her from the train station. We were chatting when a heavy motorcycle, coal-black and growling, came jetting up at least eighty miles an hour on the noodle road. The man "laid it down" in bike parlance, in front of my grill. I heard Yumiko scream, and then my memory is the man flying, break smoke, the motorcycle grinding on asphalt, rider disappearing beneath my car. A light tap (only) of tire on helmet.

They say the reactive brain pushes your pedal before you notice, the adaptive power that lets us, makes us, take hands off stoves before we realize what's charing. In ways, most of my life, especially that first year in Kosuge where my corpus was reacting to almost everything new

and, to me, strange, seemed like nerve-ending commands: reactive, instinctual pushes, clamping, breaking, longing.

After the Tokyoite (nobody in Kosuge drove like that) reappeared inches from the maw of my tires, he saddled his bike and without saying anything or waving, sped uphill. Yumiko rolled down her window and yelled, “Moron!” in Japanese. I had to park in the shade for five minutes while my head glued itself back on.

I went back to Kosuge seven years after I’d lived there and drove up with Yumiko’s father, Kazuyoshi. I realized driving with Kazu, that when in 2007, abroad for the first time, learning a new language for the first time, teaching school for the first time, living alone for the first time, there were too many “firsts” that my brain didn’t wrap around how monstrous the roads into Kosuge were, how their drop-offs stared down, sans exaggeration, a thousand-foot cliff. How the asphalt gleamed with ice for five months. How I once saw three cars, bumpers kissing, on the side of a road. How my predecessor recalled throwing up the first time he navigated to work. For me, the new things amalgamated into the handshake agreement I’d made with the town and my students and the host country. It seemed like a treacherous road was written in the contract somewhere, so I didn’t really think about it.

But it was another part of the geography that kept Kosuge Kosuge, even though, as the hawk flies, it was an hour’s easy soar to the metropolitan ocean.

Perhaps because of this geologic boundary, children from Kosuge and Tabayama are slipping into the Tokyo sea. When I was hired, the manilla packet of contract and brochures that arrived in Lubbock informed me that Kosuge’s population was over a thousand. By the time I moved in it was 971. And when I left, 900 (which made me wonder, was I the one that kept it from 899?). As of 2017, it’s around 700.

Because of Yumiko, I have spent enough time in the globe's largest metropolis to fathom Tokyo's power. There are countless metro-caves to disappear into, enough worlds to fill a galaxy. The futuristic graphics studios, the video game makers, the comic book malls, the baseball teams, the pedestrian highways of Ginza, the never-sleeping Roping. One couldn't spend time in Tokyo and not be engrossed by parts of it, enough to contemplate immigrating.

Added to this, for a Kosuge Village kid, the television and radio were the mouthpieces of Tokyo. Tokyo *is* Japan from one angle, and not just the exported flavor that Japan sells and that Western nations exotify. Thirty percent of the nation's population exists in the Western Capital, along with the banking center, the Tokyo Giants, the Olympics (the second time in 2020), two international airports, the world's busiest train station. It's not enough to compare it to New York. Tokyo is the center of the hinge of Japan, geographically as well as culturally, where the two, elongated parts of the country pivot.

There was a gulf between city and village, despite how close Tokyo was. A mere mountain pass was the boundary, but even given the weekends Kosuge's citizens almost never drove nor trained into the big city while Tokyoites decorated mountain roads with wreckage from their sports cars.

In Japan, the schools populate with the season. Graduates embark at the end of winter. In April, the fleet of new teachers and students arrive, anxious, chewing the skin off their fingertips. The four schools I taught (two elementary schools, two junior highs, a pair each in Kosuge and neighboring Tabayama) each had cherry blossom, *sakura*, trees in their yards. Sakura are gnarled, geriatric-looking arbor life that explode in pink for a few beats after winter dormancy. They shimmer for two weeks and then shed their blossoms in sudden gusts, what are often called cherry blossom blizzards, for the petals that stack and drift and pile and must be swept up. The

students and teachers who left were, to me, like those bursts of color blown away by the weather. The green came in on the twisted branches, dully filling the spaces that we wished, even if we didn't admit it, were still occupied by pink.

I didn't encounter the same sensation when I came for two reasons. One was that my predecessor, Brian, was never a good fit for the valley. He was too dependent on cities, on drink specials, and on concerts not performed by nine-year-olds. Mountain views didn't awe him. He drank too much. Or perhaps those are the kinds of things I was told by the teachers to make me feel more comfortable, to help me make room.

Also as America operates on a fall-spring system, I did not arrive in Kosuge until early August. No fellow class of just-ripe teachers and students to start with in April. Instead of a group introduction, the four schools just got me. I gave four solo speeches in four gymnasiums on four stages in two languages. Invariably, I riffed on my experience in outdoor guiding.

I hoisted my backpack filled with a camp stove, a sleeping bag, pad, and postcards. I enacted a mountain hike, still bedecked in suit and tie and loaner indoor-slippers that only covered the halves of my heels. I climbed the stairs to the gym stage, pantomiming brow-wiping, stove setting, tea making, tea drinking, sun-toasting, and then crawling into my sleeping bag for sleep. One of the teachers shook me awake because she wasn't convinced this was an act.

At one school, Kosuge's junior high, the student and faculty body watched wordless, gape-mouthed. When I handed out gift postcards from Texas, the adolescents reacted as if I hadn't washed my hands. At the elementary schools, the students squealed with delight and sprinted around in spirals and almost tugged the pants off my legs in excitement. Both reactions were a harbinger for their respective schools' next three years.

It was a shocking and memorable introduction, which was what I was going for. But I think there was another aim inside staking an identity on mountain hikes. When I was at my desk or the blackboard, or peering over a student's work, or critiquing the finer points of written passive voice, there was a sense I wasn't *there* in the mindfulness way. A part of me was always in the mountains, which I could see, right outside the school windows, fog rolling off the cliffs. Even though mountains were eery and doom-dealing, they were alluring, which is what I suppose death is to a lot of young people. Also, compared to table-top flat Lubbock, Kosuge was paradise, an enchanted land of winding trails and snow-capped peaks. It was perfect, if I didn't dwell on the loneliness or the people dying next door or the grumpy pubescent students who looked at me with that universally translatable expression of regarding a fly let into the room.

I never admitted what is so easy to say now: mountain hiking in Kosuge could be miserable. It was often joyous and mind-centering, in that way the body gels with the brain given purposeful exercise. My neurons, foot-to-the-pedal on a hike, would rev into hyper oscillations, strip away clouded thinking. It was cerebral showering.

Other times, like the first time I tried hiking around the permitter of Kosuge, the rain cracked hello as I left my apartment and didn't stop for two days. My map, it turned out, was grossly inaccurate, showing a slight, gentle ascent up Kosuge's ridgeline. That section hid massive, meandering switchbacks around unmarked valleys. The elevation rose and fell. The path fell apart in the mud, water washing me down-trail.

What was supposed to take a morning took all day, and I caught a cold. Exhausted, I backtracked. This wouldn't seem a big deal except that I refused to accept that I was having a bad time. For me, hiking was the fruit of my existence, and to leave that part of my life made me feel like I was quarantined from purpose. The real world, for me, began and terminated in peaks.

Because I wrapped my identity with trails, I couldn't admit one was anything less than a transcendental experience, so much better than my educating in Kosuge.

I have been teaching in some capacity since 2005, so I think I can look back and say that apart from some of the old school sensei and one principal who had backwards views on race and never ceased to condescend me (side bar: good experience for a white American), I had it very good. I was paid well, and would, on more than a few days, have absolutely nothing to do except sit inside the school for appearances. And the teaching itself was occasionally belly-achingly hilarious as it can be with human beings discovering sexuality. There was a group of eighth-grade boys at Kosuge's junior high that used to morph a day's lesson into ribaldry, which my inner teenager couldn't help encouraging.

"At least they're learning," I said to Sekihara-Sensei, the athletic, mop-headed English teacher, who grumbled after class.

An example: studying comparisons, one wrote, "Which is more fun, English class or masturbation?" Another wrote, "Which is bigger, my stool or the Earth?"

Later while I helped the eighth graders clean their room, which they did every day, the boys took turns practicing out of ear shot of other teachers. One said, "Mr. Sekihara is weaker than an old woman."

I laughed and pushed the offender out of the class door laughing and threw the lock behind him. He came back through a different door and said, with perfect articulate pronunciation, "English class is as fun as masturbation."

Other days teaching could be very *real*. One student, Hikaru, a bulky athlete at the Tabayama junior high school, the fastest person in the entire town, always with a steady stream of snot on his face, was a special needs child. His grades ranged near failure, and he enjoyed

answering English conversation inquires with “unko,” — shit, masking his disability with irreverence and so disappearing into common teenager-dom. Because it was a small village, there was no special needs teacher.

A month into school, I pulled him aside for one-on-one conversation (possible in a class of six). A forever-teenager myself, I thought I could commiserate. I prodded him with sports paraphernalia (whose meanings are often bilingual) and about Japanese celebrities. After exhausting his shit jokes, Hikaru began sobbing for forty minutes, continuing after the periods changed. Only Obi-Sensei, Tabayama’s resident compassionate, a thirty-something, oval-faced, and dark-eyed English teacher, could consul him, as she did many of the kids in school when they were broken by their other teachers.

A year later, I was beginning junior high English class at Tabayama, the boys in their crisp black, gold button uniforms, girls in navy skirts and white blouses. A figure blurred down the hallway and down the stairs. Two teachers, including Obi-Sensei, followed. One of the big boy students in my class shouted, “Oh, Hikaru is running away!” and rose from his desk, opening the class door as if to follow, but he just stood there, pointing. I jerked him by the shoulders to his desk.

“Let’s begin,” I said in English.

The students rose and began our routine. “Today,” a girl said, “let’s start English class. Attention please! Bow!” The students bowed and yelled “Good Morning.” What they did for every teacher, though, in my case, in English.

Obi-Sensei, my co-teacher, was still vanished down the stairwell, our lesson plan on hold. I ventured into English dialogue and then chalkboard Hang Man. Revealing a vowel, I looked

out the window and saw the same blur that was Hikaru running down the riverbank and crossing the bridge to the other side. Many hundred meters distant, the science teacher followed.

Hikaru crossed and disappeared into a cleft in the mountains, his black uniform and pumping limbs so ant-like against the looming peaks. The rest of the students sat staring at the chalkboard, arguing over consonant possibilities, and didn't witness him. Obi-Sensei, trudged into the room a few minutes later, eyes glazed over, a thousand yard stare. "I'll tell you later," she said as we began the planned lesson.

After class, Obi rushed downstairs, and I later saw her and the science teacher in heated conference with the square-headed, frequently red-faced principal who didn't like me and scarcely, from what I could tell, cared much more for the students. After, there was an hour-long impromptu, school-wide teachers meeting, none of which I really understood. When I rose to leave, Obi grabbed me in the hallway and revealed that the science teacher (a Schwarzenegger in glasses) had found a broken school pingpong paddle hidden behind a desk. He confronted Hikaru, but escalated the dialogue into a screaming war, ending when Hikaru kicked a hole in the wall and ran out of the school. Hikaru, jogged all the way, miles, home, but because he forgot his key in his locker, had to wait outside for several hours in the winter shivering and crying before his mom, who was a single parent, commuted home.

"All for a pingpong paddle?" I asked.

Obi shook her head, threatening tears. "All for a pingpong paddle."

I don't know why I asked, maybe some cultural curiosity, but I said, "Did he change from inside to outside shoes before he fled the school?"

Obi looked up, a cloud leaving her face. "Yes, he did." She paused. "He's a good boy."

"Did the science teacher?"

She grimaced. “No, I don’t think so.”

There is a well-known, and often Western-fetishized, condition in Japan called *hikikomori* where young people shut themselves up in their rooms and refuse to leave. My theory about why Westerners are obsessed with this phenomenon isn’t because the US doesn’t have it (we do) but because we’re somewhat vicariously jealous. Mothers often keep feeding hikikomori, sometimes leaving trays at their closed doors. Though activities range widely, some of them stay accessed to the internet, perhaps the closest thing to an all-digital existence, maybe even precursors to our VR future.

The percentage of hikikomori in Kosuge and Tabayama villages was shocking, as was the fact that many of them were allowed to graduate even after not attending school for years. Out of one hundred students the year that I counted, seven were shut-ins and didn’t attend class. I do not profess to understand the mechanisms for their graduation, what homework they were doing or not. I do know that the teachers visited them regularly.

I also know that I didn’t face anything like they did when I went to school in America. My students went to class longer and almost all year (they had homework over summer break, which lasted a month) Some then went to cram schools in distant towns after class. Virtually all of them were in a club or sport, and with the schools representing the future of the villages and there being so few students, the pressure was astronomical.

I sometimes wonder and try to interrogate myself about how much of my mountain love was escapism. I told myself at the time (and when the hiking was great I certainly believed it) that I climbed mountains to get in touch with a slice of the earth’s physical plain not done justice by nature calendars. But more than a footnote of my environmental love was born on the experiences of growing up in Lubbock, of not wanting to return to an existence I thought I’d

grown out of and would find impossible to return to. In some ways now, I don't find this impulse totally different from the shut-ins who bury their consciousness in the internet.

Another way I buried my consciousness, of course, was by not thinking about my father. I sent emails and received reports from my mother and then my sister when my parents divorced. But I succeeded mostly in ignoring the snare my mind would catch on when it thought about Dad. When I returned to the states in 2010, Dad continued his descent until finally dying in 2013. For three years, I visited often. In some ways, I think I made up for my absence, but in other ways I'm not I can wipe my escape clean.

Sometimes, now, I am judgmental against escapism, other times lenient and even accepting it as a necessity. Who wants to be *themselves* twenty-four hours a day? Maybe without escapism, it's hard to center the self. I think of one such teacher who only lasted a year in Kosuge, who was shunned, but deservedly so.

I first met Makino-Sensei last year during the Opening Spring Ceremony, when the new teachers and students get introduced in the gym, and the students sing songs welcoming the school year. Makino-Sensei possessed a toad face, salt-and-pepper hair, and a mole just to the. He perpetually wore a suit and tie, even when lots of the other teachers wore tracksuits on non-ceremonial days. He sat to the left of Sekihara-Sensei, the English teacher who sat just behind me. When I turned around to discuss class with Sekihara, I always found Makino starring at me. A lot of teachers eavesdropped on my English because they wanted to learn, but there was another edge to Makino, something that now makes me guess sexual longing. He was the oldest teacher in the school, I was a 24-year-old with long hair from America.

Or perhaps it was because he was bored. Though Tabayama didn't have one, Makino-Sensei was Kosuge's one Special Needs teacher. I don't think he had any actual degree in the

subject, and I and the other teachers found his teaching methods deplorable. He often resorted to brow-beating and root memorization as if this were a British prep school at the turn of the nineteenth century. Truth was, he didn't do much actual work, because the Special Needs kids still had homeroom teachers who worked and conferenced with their parents. So he sat around drinking coffee and browsing the internet. Which is what *I* did many a day, both of us sitting at our computers, earning the same pay as the rest of the teachers for a fraction of the work.

I might have found a friend and confident in Makino if I wasn't so put off by him. For one thing, he tried damn hard to dissect me. When I would go walk an errand, he'd interrogate me and offer to join. Anytime there was a conflict, say I had to switch my school schedule, Makino-Sensei would jump from his desk and stand by the phone and listen while I made a call to the other school. Then when that was done, he'd stand there smiling.

In the morning he had the habit of making a cup of coffee, first thing of the day, with buckets of cream and sugar. It would take him five minutes. He made it right by my desk at the coffee and tea station (always bumping into for some reason, as he also slammed into doorways full tilt, or side-swiped students with his shoulders). He'd say, "Sorry," in English as he'd make his cup, more out of habit it seemed than a recognized violation of my desk space. He'd stand, hovering, trying out his mixture. What grated wasn't his presence, or even his stare, so much as how he tasted:

"SLLLLURRRRP. AGHHHHHH. SLLLLLURRRPP. AGHHH. SLLURP. AGHH."

Usually it was only three, sometimes four big slurps with deep, satisfied grunts at the end. Sometimes I could hear him from the hallway. The greatest orgasm has never given me the same kind of satisfaction he was displaying, beside my desk. I even looked over once and saw him with his eyes closed, slurping away. I tried giving him a hint at the deep *dis*satisfaction this was

giving me. “You sure like coffee don't you?” I'd ask. Which is about as Japanese as you can get while telling someone to go fuck themselves. “Yeah, I love coffee,” was all he said.

I tried to reason that coffee was just his drug of choice, that he was just un-self-aware. But I couldn't help feeling there was something more, something about an insecure yet prideful man trying to claim his territory, an old injured lion trying to roar.

I found out later that Makino had once been a principal, had “retired” (the implication was he’d been fired), and “missed” teaching so much he joined up with his school as a teacher. Perhaps there was a shortage of special needs teachers. Maybe he had an old-boys in. Why did he get canned? No one had any idea.

During our enkais, Makino would leave early, and the other teachers would talk about how strange he was. His slurping, his terrible teaching, his ostentatiously bad BO. During school, the teachers never seemed to talk with him, and when he opened a conversation with them they tried to find the quickest exit, like a child avoiding his parents. In fact, I got the sense, outside of any sort of physical attraction, that Makino wanted to be friends with me for the reason that he seemed to lack friendship with any of the faculty.

Makino also did odd, very un-Japanese things like burp and fart in public. One time he walked up to me while we were watching a rehearsal for the school festival in the gym and said, “How are you?” in English, then cut a loud fart and just stood there blinking at me as an awful stench engulfed us.

The one thing Makino did well was ping pong. Kosuge had a ping-pong team until 2010, when there wasn’t enough students to keep it running, and I used to practice with them. I played below average but could hang with my students at least. Makino proved to be the best player in the school and whipped me in two games straight the first time we played. He faked tiredness

during his play, something I admired as sly. I say faked because when he wasn't hitting he panted, and slouched, but bounced on his toes like a boxer ready to strike. His hits were rapid-fire, spin or slam. Hardly anyone could score a goal on him. And then when the game was finished, he suddenly didn't look tired anymore.

It’s a shame that this dexterity didn't extend to his social life. He had a wife, which he introduced to everyone at a mandatory school drinking party one evening and I remember little of her, except she looked the same edge as Makino, and seemed as shy and awkward as him. I don't remember her ever saying a word. What he did all day on the computer I can't imagine, but he did things the reminded me, inexplicably, of me. In fact, this is the reason I’m most interested in him now because, though I was well-liked by most teachers, students, and parents, there’s no better corollary for how the town saw me than how they saw Makino-Sensei.

I was a weird foreigner who had unfathomable habits, and who probably smelled funny. Like Makino, I bumped into things, and all around, just looked liked I didn't belong. I was, in some ways, incomprehensible, and I don’t doubt that in some ways the town was happy to see me go, as I was glad when the time came after three years. Not out of animosity, not out of dislike or spite, but because the craving for what I’d known was strong as I bet it was for Kosuge too.

When I returned to Japan years later and dined with my former co-teachers and asked what their impressions of me had been, it was that they had seen me as some kind of wild animal. A huge, six-foot-four, white guy who trekked up dangerous mountains and had long hair down to my nipples. I don’t doubt nor blame them for, after my three years, wanting a more conservative teacher, who they got in the form of clean-cut, do-gooder from Ohio, a man who would go onto to work in the NGO sector after Japan.

I, on my part, after three years of living next to the dead and dying, of being ensconced in mudslide-plagued Kosuge, and hiking my fill of mountains that sometimes tried to kill me, craved the flatness of West Texas like one does a cream-and-sugared coffee after returning from a snow-skinned peak.

Mid-Slope

Before Japan, I lived for one year in Idaho, which, in April, cheats you. Melting snowcaps spike on the horizon and fill stream beds, while Alberta clippers fan down the state, reddening ears, cracking lips, numbing toes. Your friends south report camping trips and water skiing. The geese feeding behind your house, braying through winter loneliness, have vanished in dagger formations. April is an in-between world, not perfectly cruel, but only hinting at the majesty of Idaho summer. Each morning begins a mystery, the hybrid of seasons: sunshine followed by sleet, fog and then sweaty tropical heat. It's as if every day has somewhere else to be.

I was 22 and helping take care of my father, my mom, the professor, educating teachers at Boise State, her job only two years old. I thought time in Idaho stretched out eternally. I had put my undergraduate classes on hold back in Texas, had left a job I loved in wilderness guided, moved up and had no definite plans of going back.

It was morning, and I had constructed for Dad his usual cinnamon toast, sliced banana, and hazelnutted coffee. Mom wheeled to work, and it was me and my hunchback father, staring at each other and the crusts on the plate. Maybe the TV was on. The windows in our Boise home faced east, and the morning rays waved inside.

Dad moped, as he did most days. He said something like, "Well son, what do you think I got to live for the rest of my life?" a philosophical conundrum he plied me with nearly every morning. Maybe because it was the forty-fifth time he'd asked, or that I hadn't again slept well because the couch was too short and the floor too cold, or maybe I was just tired of my father, the, depressed, depressing form he'd become, an existential exclamation mark I didn't know how

to have distance on, because what I said was, "Well Dad, there's a part of me that wonders if you should die."

Five years earlier, on his way home from watching Texas Tech football practice, which he did each weekday during fall, Dad braked his truck at a gas station because he had no idea how to get home. He couldn't remember the roads he'd driven for decades. He phoned my mother to come get him.

An MRI revealed a tumor shaped like an octopus, wrapped around his brain stem. Surgery scalpeled half the tentacles, but the operation triggered a quake in his mind. A stroke, which would soon be followed by three more. Neurologists, to finish off the tumor, fired the maximum allowable radiation into his skull over six months to neutralize the beast. It was the radiation, I believe, that prevented him from recovering, a beam not from the heavens but from a cannon that projected invisible rays across the room, weakening his capillaries, bleeding his brain, punctures so unnoticeable that you had to have faith that they were there until his lip started drooling and his left side went limp.

In the middle of this descent, after he couldn't type but before he couldn't walk, Dad spent most of his days in Boise watching movies, talking with his friends in the sports business on the phone, trying to claw his way back into a life that was gone. He'd only arrived at his career in sports journalism at age fifty, after spending his adult years ping-ponging between jobs and volunteering as a church deacon. Writing about and traveling with the Texas Tech football team across America was an existence that had assuaged his wanderlust and needs for creative expression, desires my father felt were trampled on by his blue-collar, oil field parents. He believed the Lord had allowed him to find his path, something I'd witnessed him praying on obsessively

Before writing, Dad had made our family God-fearing, Lent observing, murmurs before supper, crucifixes on our walls. But his "chosen" life was over, and while we were staying in Boise, Dad had his third stroke, and after that I don't remember anyone in our family, except Dad, praying anymore.

In the hospital, after stroke 3, we were told by a ponytailed doctor that Dad "ought to get his things in order." But this was the remotest thing in Dad's mind. He'd only begun following what he thought had been the righteous trail (the weirdness of God's plan leading to college football never struck me as a child). When we'd moved to Lubbock so Dad could write, my mom found the spare moments to complete her PhD. When she finished, Dad was already unable to function as a journalist, which made her job search uncomplicated.

There had been a murmur of hope trailing his brain surgery when Dad continued pecking away at his keyboard, that he could return to ways we knew. But that belief fractured when his body weakened to his commands, when his fingers' lost the agility to speed across the keys. His driver's license went unrenewed. When his third stroke detonated, Mom and I stopped believing resurrection was possible.

It's an old question, what do you do when someone you love is not dying but slowly eroding? End-of-life care-taking is a bewildering responsibility (as is parenting). But armchair quarterbacking 2006 from 2018, Dad and I could have read blogs or checked out memoirs by the myriads of people suffering in the same ways and learned from them. I would have more patience, now. I would read books by the scores written by end-of-life caregivers working across oceans as I have done since (maybe even talked to them on the phone).

There is no definitive guide through the wilderness of life or death. We all go about it confused. What a lot of caregivers do is hold their patients' hands, a simple gesture that signifies

that though we both cannot see, we can cross through together for a while. They also don't argue with their patients much as I did relentlessly with mine.

I did buy one memoir at the time to help understand Dad: a story about an architect who loses his memory and abilities to dementia in his forties and is cared for by his wife and twenty-something son. I related to the tale, but the details were too close. The kind of advice I needed, could only be more abstract. I wasn't prepared for the visceral truth of not sudden death but withering. I could have invested in studies and the ample research on end-of-life psychology. But I didn't. I spent my time reading science fiction, dreaming up backpacking trips. My father was dying slow, and that was dark stuff to escape from.

What I said to Dad at the breakfast table was unvarnished and shockingly cold. It appalls me now that what I said to my father was, in a sense, to go fuck off and die. In Boise, I was often groggy with that half-awake state parents feel when their infants are new. Dad's night monitor sat on a table by my ear. Because mom slept in one room, my dad in another, I decamped in the living room, surfing the couch or, often, the floor. But I bolted awake from droopiness at what I'd said, sitting across from my dad ("A part of me thinks you should die"?). I'd thought this before but couldn't have imagined saying. I wanted to retract what I'd claimed, but I knew I couldn't. Resurrections are fleeting, pent up in mythologies.

Dad looked as if he were going to vomit, the light cutting across his stomach. He'd gained weight under pain meds like fentanyl and blood thinners, his belly ballooning while his legs atrophied. In the worst way, I thought of him as Humpty Dumpty, fragile and obese.

"How's that supposed to make me feel?" he screamed. "My own soon telling me he wished I were dead?"

I stared at him, numb.

"Huh?" he barked.

"Well, Dad," I fumbled, "You know I don't really mean it in that way, just that like the doctor said we have to prepare."

"I want to *prepare*," he shot back at me. "And all you can think about is dying. What if this were you? I want you to feel this sometime."

I shrugged. My empathy switch malfunctioning.

"You just wait."

I wrote these words down in a journal I was keeping, as a writer-wannabe, just as clueless as most people about how to contribute to the conversation of literature. His words haunted me then and now because in large part he was right that I couldn't imagine what it was like to be staring down the headlights of death. Nor did I fathom Dad losing his life, still young-ish at age 64. Saying what I did, I'd only just come to understand, in Idaho, that middle space of seasons that the father I knew growing up, who was the other half of the equation besides my mom who created me, was not quite gone but definitely not all there.

I'm startled now to have revealed that layer of condescendence. My dad had been so fervent that God had mapped out his life, yet here he was suffering from some demonic disease. Part of what I was doing was putting a challenge to him, to his God and His plan. I experienced the snarky edge of superiority children come to when they grow beyond their parents' beliefs. I thought then that one of the most instinctual reasons to believe in God is fear, of Hell, of a life of unhappiness as punishment, a kind of faith by tyranny. But when the God-half of the equation that He's supposed to live up to fails, that of making one's life bearable, there's no reason to feel chained to any bargain made with the spiritual world, I believed. The repercussions of this perceived spiritual betrayal still sit with me.

My dad, for all his suffering, never gave up God. I could have seen this as a kind of inner strength, a steadfastness against easy doubt. But inwardly I ridiculed him. Telling Dad to die was my way of saying, "Trust in God," with that ironic obnoxiousness common to young men. Also. Dad and I both knew his purpose in writing was lost because he wasn't physically able to do it anymore, and I didn't think it fair for him to deal me the duty of figuring out how he would make use of the days left. I was 22, though may as well have been 18 for all I'd figured out about life-and-death and story. I worked in outdoor pursuits while enrolled in undergraduate writing classes. I camped in the branch in the road, unsure about which track was mine.

I wanted a role model, a guide through choices. Dad had written, but for only nine short years in a life bookended by confusion. He needed a Virgil through the thicket of death, and neither of us was willing/able to be the light for the other. My needs were perhaps too demanding of a man facing the reality of strokes and a tumor. Dad was asking me about how to go about shaking Death's hand, and I wasn't ready for that.

None of this was made conscious nor verbal for either of us. For me, these thoughts were fleeting and animal, an instinct gnawing against the pressure my father was putting on me to help make sense of the end of his life when I was, I believed, just beginning mine. In a way, we were intersecting trajectories, like two mountain trails, one ascending and one crawling away from the peak.

Having summited many mountains, for me, the moment that I most savor but often forget to is the mid-slope. Peaks are glamorous with their uninterrupted islands of mountains or expansive deserts and prairies extending in the cardinal directions. Basins and bottoms offer clear, Romantic views of the mountain itself.

But middle altitudes offer promises that the tops can't keep because I do not transcend on

a mountain. I realize the hike is over, snap a picture, and angle back down. While still midway, I have invigorating designs for the top and am engaged in a bodily transformative effort to ascend. The danger is losing sight that the experience is the thing itself. Not the view, nor the photographic capital. It this middle moment that has the lasting effect when I return to my life.

I do not remember how the conversation at the table ended. Likely we broke it off because I had to take him to some therapist's appointment. Or maybe Dad limped back to his room with the hospital bed so he could view *Magnificent Seven* again. I may have retreated to my faux-leather couch to thumb through *Ender's Game*, checking the outside temperature and likely find it sunny but still too blisteringly cold. What I wish the most I would have done with him was write. Five years later, when my dad was further gone, I had begun an MFA program and spent several days and hours on the phone and by his bedside, piecing together his memories. Many of them were hallucinatory because by then dementia was devouring his brain.

In Idaho, Dad was well enough he could still have relayed the pieces from his childhood that I could have written down. My inherited hands swung across a keyboard just fine. But I didn't have the sense that I was a writer, wouldn't have known how to try to figure out my own voice, while also becoming Dad's. If I could teleport myself to that time, I would ask and transcribe his unspooling stories, which he liked to tell anyone at that time anyway, unprovoked.

And there's this: Dad had written a book before his strokes. It was a novel, a thinly veiled autobiography of himself as a young man, chiseled chin, handsome-tall, baby blue irises. The story pivots around a turning point, one hot August night when he was drag racing rural roads, my father a cliche rebel-child of the 50s.

The book opens with Davy (that was the name Dad gave himself) and his friend, Weasel, a lanky, thin creature known for chewing dialogue, staked out a Texas highway. The book then

flash-forwards through some teenage angst and returns to the road with Weasel and Davy. They wait, and a lone Volkswagen Beetle, family-filled, loaded to the axels, chugs by. Then, coast cleared Weasel and Davy line up their waxed, seatbelt-less automobiles. They rev, laugh, throw empty beer cans at each other. Their tires shriek and they burn off. The mesquite trees beat by, and the moon shines the way. The world turns fast-forward.

Davy listens to the hoots from his friend, the teases, even as the wind tunnels around them, their engines snarling. My father gains. His piss-yellow Chevy cuts in front of his friend's black sedan, fishing-tailing to prevent Weasel from passing. Dad glances back, throws his friend the finger, laughs.

A hill looms. Over it, the family's Volkswagen. It clunks away at the speed limit. Davy brakes, wheels out of the way. Weasel startles at the apparition, Dad's wheel wells fogging, car breaking down. Weasel swivels his gaze out the side window, raises a middle finger, the largest grin on his face my father has ever seen. Davy screams and points forward. Wiesel turns his head in time to miss rear-ending the Beetle. He swerves, barreling off the road, waving up at the mounds of dirt, slams into a telephone pole.

When Davy squeals over, Wiesel is crumpled onto the dash, half-in, half-outside the windshield, the glass keeping his body from flying up the road. Wiesel spends the next three hours moaning, blood draining from his body. Because Davy doesn't want to leave him, and because the Volkswagen has not stopped, he waits for an excruciating half-hour to flag down another car, and still another two before the paramedics show.

Dad later told me that while he was watching the EMTs decide how to remove Weasel, Wiesel made the decision easier by dying.

This was just one story that my father revealed to me that was in his autobiographical novel, and he did not tell me until I was 20 and he thought I could handle it. Other tales included my oil platform foreman grandfather picking a knife fight, my grandmother almost dying while giving birth to Dad and having an out-of-body experience, my great-grandfather having ten children by eight different women. My father cheating on his first wife with a long-term mistress and then my mother. It haunts me now the stories, the fascinating life I could have mined while giving him a repost for life. Who wouldn't want half a father, half a friend, rather than a ghost, a body to bury?

Dad's novel was almost unreadable. But then he had a college education in history and little formal training in prose. He was an autodidact in both journalism and memoir. I write now, but I've had the privilege of an MFA and PhD. When my dad went to college, the idea of a writer's workshop was confined mostly to the those who could distinguish caviar brands. His parents would never have encouraged anything in the humanities, nor any degree that did not offer a beeline to law school.

The way I looked at it, I wasn't impressed with what he was able to accomplish, I was glad that I thought his book had failed. His defeat granted me a lazy superiority, and every son wants to grow taller than his father. I believed I was justified in avoiding the grudging rewriting, the shopping around to agents and publishers, though I'm not even sure he wanted this. Now that I have more experience I look at reading Dad's book as a way to mine what he'd written about his life to make sense of my mind, to uncover the puzzle pieces linking his stories with mine.

For days after that sad breakfast revelation, Dad was quiet. I knew I'd put up a wall—something between him and me. I was pushing him into the land of the dead, the country of the discarded, where I'd put his book in my mind.

My situation was not special. Many people care for their mothers and fathers and uncles and aunts and siblings and children and adopted children and step-parents. None of them has an easy job.

A few years later, talking to my dad over the phone, I began to accept the bargain he'd laid before me, stories to make sense of my life in exchange for a few comforting words and thoughts as he made his exit. There wasn't any epiphytic moment, nor was there any spoken agreement. With a little distance between us, I saw how my father and I could make sense of and for each other.

I want to flash forward to the part where I redeem myself, with a phone call from Texas in which I took back those words I said. But I should talk about my dad's memory. Before writing sports Dad studied history, and his ability to conjure up names and dates and obscure battles was astounding. Yet in Boise, typically he forgot what day it was. He remembered as friends and family said what he wanted to.

He didn't seem to remember, years later, what I told him that cruel, mid-sloped April day. I know, because I had a few beers while living in Iowa and called him up and asked him and said sorry. But he said he had no idea what I was talking about. And for that I'm thankful. It's a painful memory of my insensitivy, and I'm glad I bore it alone. Or, if he kept quiet about it, I deeply admire his tact.

Dad did remember, however, a conversation on the phone one time, mentioning it before launching into some delirious but entertaining anecdote.

"Clint, I'm just going crazy here. I keep thinking of all these stories."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, like I think of the entire story in my head. It's crazy. I keep thinking, 'Bill, what are you doing?' Some are about sports you know, of course. Some about history. I remember the entire incident in my head, even the dialogue. I just want to write them down so bad."

"Why don't you tell me about them?"

Giving Fire

Hermetic mountain monks in Japan, the *yamabushi*, were once called upon by hill-nestled towns to carry messages to the clouds. Around the ninth or tenth centuries, this priesthood formed when people gazed upon craggily peaks and saw the realm of ghosts. Cemeteries were built on mountains as they still often are in Japan. The modern term "toge," for mountain pass, has a root in the word "offering," which is what you would give the spirit of a mountain if you hoped to cross alive.

It took a liminal figure to act as a go-between. The yamabushi were guides, priests, cemetery caretakers, and shrine keepers. They practiced Buddhist, Shinto, and animist religions. When they came back from peaks to the land of the living, it was sometimes assumed that they died and had returned born-again.

In the late 2000s, I spent three years teaching in a village in the mountains near Nagano, once yamabushi trekking grounds. I was an English instructor, working in a Japanese public school and tutoring both my students and fellow teachers. I also served as a kind-of foreign mascot, a tall — six-four, giant for Japan — white man with long hair, a token of the town's cosmopolitanism.

It was a life-orienting opportunity at the age of twenty-four, but in Kosuge Village I felt at a loss as to what precise educational script I was following. I'd moved to a new country so surely I should act like a new person. A mere, three-day Tokyo conference in the summer of 2007 had instructed me on the job. I learned popular English grammar games and how to travel across the country, but nothing to help me become a foreigner acclimatized to mountain village life. My English classes, made up of first grade through ninth, felt more like babysitting,

shadowing a textbook and conjuring games under the perplexed gaze of my native co-teachers, many who didn't understand English.

I did and did not take my job seriously. On the one hand, I was conscious that, for better or worse, English was a global language, and it could help my students learn and navigate the world. Second thoughts, however, dispelled the fantasy that my job, and my life there, mattered. I could be replaced with a tape recorder, an iPad, a switchboard where you plugged in the right English information to jettison expected responses.

My students and my fellow teacher's abilities in English (and my own in their language) were usually enough to form a kind of shadow understanding of the texture of our lives. They could not know that I spent most of my free time reading about Japan in order to understand my ephemeral place there, and I could only imagine about their own lives outside of school, where they disappeared to on weekends. Beyond that, there was a chasm of mystery between us.

Surprisingly, during a festival celebrating children, I got invited to dress up as a yamabushi and present the gift of fire to the town. At the time I was elated, as if the valley were opening up, and I didn't hesitate accepting. But as the event drew near, I fretted that the role as a mountain ascetic was just one more I didn't know how to play. I worried my life in Kosuge would be empty space in my memory, three years spent in learning and teaching mis-connection.

The day of the festival, ten of us sat circled on the third floor of City Hall, beers cradled in our laps. Reading from a stack of papers, Kato-San, my boss, a fisherman and hard drinker in the Department of Education, turned to us with his sun-worn face and said, in Japanese, "Nakano-Sensei, you'll go after the principal. Then Kitagawa-Sensei. Then, finally, you Clinton." He pointed at me, grinning. "You'll go last. It's important. You have to be the manliest yamabushi."

The others guffawed, but Kato-San added, “Well, don’t be manlier than the principal.”

The principal, next to me, square-headed, sweaty, and toupéed, shook his head as if resigned. At our junior high, the principal ran a tight ship, but here we were at the whim of Kosuge’s archetype prankster, Kato, who routinely kept the Department of Education up until three in the morning singing karaoke.

“You guys are going to have some fun,” Kato-San said in a voice that sounded like he was gargling sand. “Every year, this is an amazing experience. Especially for the girls. Girls like yamabushi. Did you know that David?”

Dave sat on the other side of me, a foot shorter, immaculate dark hair, sipping beer, a wide grin on his face. He was one of the few friends I had in Japan. Dave was Irish and taught at a high school a three hours’ drive away. We’d met at our introductory conference and occasionally traveled on weekends. At the last second, another yamabushi had canceled, and I’d been able to invite him.

David turned to me. “I have no idea what he’s saying, but I think we’re gonna have a good time.”

“That’s what he said.”

“Who?”

“Kato-San.”

Dave looked around. “He the one who’s had three beers already?”

“No, he’s the one talking to you.”

Kato-San listened to us, smiling. “Clinton, is he planning to make a date?”

There were tumults of laughter. Beer foamed, and someone passed around Asahi.

Kati-San warned, “Don’t drink too much. You don’t want to be messing with fire later while drunk.”

It might go without mentioning that alcohol was inherent to life in Kosuge. Weekly I was invited to *enkais*, or “teacher meetings,” uproarious parties, either at one of the town’s tourist-driven hotels or at the local Chinese restaurant called “The End of the Road.” Often, a party would begin at a hotel and spill over to the End of the Road, where in a smoke-filled haze we would consume dumplings and spicy shrimp chili, while the teachers grabbed liquor bottles off the wall. These enkais were on school nights, and in the mornings the principal looked the other way if a teacher snoozed on his desk or kept a wastebasket nearby.

Some teachers, I believe, were simply alcoholic. Others faked how much they drank, how drunk they were. For me, I found myself forced along, if only to have some semblance of connection. More than one teacher pulled me aside (sober) and recommended getting more drunk at our meetings. But even at 230 pounds, I’d never been a strong drinker. I’d never been fond of losing my senses, of seeing myself slip into some kind of emotional state.

When I put it to a friendly math teacher once, he informed me that they believed alcohol encouraged *bureikou*, the suspension of hierarchies and formality. Why this codified way of letting one’s hair down? I wondered. Yet this blowing of consciousness seemed a key to Kosuge’s impenetrability. Maybe there was a kind of willingness to bare your hidden self if the other would too. Was this was the project of humanity, to strip down impenetrable layers? To find beneath culture a strumming layer of comprehension, a recollection that, across timezones and histories, there was a gift in recognizing the depth behind an other?

Kato-San’s instructions spilled into his Koshu dialect, stockpiled with slang, and I only digested a third of it.

“Does everyone understand?” He asked. Without waiting for an answer, he followed, “Okay, get dressed!”

Bewildered, I strolled over to the ten costumes laid out on a long table in the back of the room. On top of my underwear I understood that I was to slide on ballooning, canvas trousers. Over them, a white cotton gi and a deerskin robe, secured with a vermillion sash. Then leather wrist guards. For accessories: prayer beads and a neckless of tassels that looked like amputated rabbit tails. And then a wooden box worn on the back called an *oi*. The oi was, I later learned, a portable alter that displayed Buddha’s carved image and once carried venerated scrolls. It also symbolized the womb. It was a subtle representation of the yamabushi’s rebirth on the mountain.

Last was a pentagonal skull cap that I secured over my temple. The wooden cap represented the Yamabushi’s connection with the divine and with the dead.

I felt unnerved, eerie donning these garbs, like I was partaking in a ghostly ritual, awed by the wardrobe. I felt relevant, weighted by time, the centuries’ long accumulation of artifacts.

“It’s a nose,” a man said beside me, having tied the skull cap around his face, making bovine squeals.

“Isn’t that sacrilegious?” I said, reflexively, in English.

Dave pointed at the erupting laughter. “They don’t seem to be minding.”

I glanced at that direction, the teachers slurping beers, bellowing.

This was a mostly dead religion after all. The Yamabushi were banned in the late 1800s because of its competition with state-sponsored Shintoism. Yamabushi made a modest comeback after World War II, but not enough to ensure longevity as anything but a relic. Maybe I was letting nervousness boil over into austerity. Maybe I was caught in that mindset of respecting

something because it was old and of wanting everyone in Kosuge to do the same, still missing what was at stake here.

Perturbed, I caught a sound wafting in from the tall windows, and I shuffled over. We were on the third floor, and I could look out to see the village's roofs and modest gardens with manicured trees and postage stamp lawns and see the fair grounds where thousands of people were standing by the river. The sounds of *koto* strings echoed off the hillsides like water dripping in the distance.

The thirteen-strings stretched over tapered, elongated lacquer make up Japan's national instrument. Koto are constructed from Paulownia wood, one of the fastest growing hardwood trees in the world (growth spurts of seven feet per year). According to woodworker guilds, it is one of the easiest materials to shape and create lasting instruments, and even houses. The trees grow in the United States from Washington to New England, are considered invasive in some parts, yet, few carpenters east of Hawaii utilize Paulownia. For Americans, the materials of construction lie all around us, ignored.

By being an American abroad, I projected my world, my systems of reference onto a tiny village. Naturally, it pushed back. I think Kosuge's teachers took pity on me and explained the route into some kind of recognition, through drinking and through the festival. With my senses obliterated, I would be an elemental self, willing to be shaped.

The town's echelons invited me to the festival because my role was cast and the script was theirs. In the realm of the mountain gods I would be inscribed within forces beyond my steering.

Kato-San looked around. "Everybody all right?" he asked. And without waiting for answer, "Let's go."

Outside, we followed the paved village roads down to the base of the mountains. Leaving the asphalt, our boots followed a sandy path to the river. At the water's edge, three kindling stacks for the bonfire waited, the middle pyre three-stories tall.

Sitting next to a bridge with bright blue handrails, we could see the onlookers swamping the road above. Three of them, teenaged girls, turned around, and beneath quarts of makeup, I recognized my students.

They waved. "Clinton-Sensei, how are you?" they called out in English.

I thought for a moment, still surprised I was seeing students. I decided to be honest, "I'm nervous."

"Why?" one called.

"Because I'm not sure how to be a yamabushi."

Their faces didn't show understanding, but they laughed. "Do your best," one said, and snapped a picture with a flip-phone. Then they turned around.

David leaned close to me, beer on his breath. "It might be a little late to back out of this."

I looked around and asked the other yamabushi, "Anyone else nervous?"

"No, I'm not nervous," my principal said. "This is very fun!" His voice cracked.

Kato-San strolled in front of us, opening and snapping shut his Zippo lighter. "Has everyone memorized their lines?"

Before we lit the fires we would each come up to the water's edge and deliver a speech. We practiced now in low tones. "*Onajiku*, *warekosowa…*" my principal read off a sheet of paper.

"Remember, you will be speaking from a deep place," Kato advised. "Pretend you are like a tree and talking for the first time."

“Be like a samurai,” he added, rubbing his dome. “You can’t let on that you don’t mean what you say.”

In our speeches, we were announcing we’d come from different mountains around Kosuge. My principal was coming from the famous *Daibosatsu*, or Big Buddha, that stood at the end of the village. I was coming from Shishikura Mountain that rose just behind my school, covered in a patchwork of cedar and maple, which I looked up at every time I went to work. Because Kosuge had only so many mountains, the others were coming from their home towns, and Dave was coming from Ireland.

Kato-San came up to us, smoking a cigarette. “Everyone, do you know your speeches?”

We all held out our scripts.

“Practice quiet now. But when you do it the real time, be loud, deep.”

“Samurai voice,” my principal said and poked me.

“Samurai voice!” Someone else said.

We had beers by our side, still cold, but I wasn’t touching mine. My knees were shaking. I looked up at an arch of cedar trees on the mountain opposite the river. Their tops fanned in the wind like a verdant ocean. I remember when I’d first moved to Kosuge, driven in over the mountain pass, and I’d spent most of the time looking up in bewilderment. What was I to do in the face of this magnitude?

Mountain peaks around the world puncture the invisible heavens and are bearers of disaster: rock slides, bear attacks, floods, tree falls, and mud wall tsunamis that can wash away entire towns in a blink. But they are also benefactors: streams that trickle into rice paddies and rivers, a place for livestock, wood for homes, mushrooms for picking, and the heralding of

sunlight. This is why it is wise to worship mountains, to address the fickle nature of unseen forces, ready to grant life or destroy.

Mountain worship is certainly not endemic to Japan. It has occurred nearly everywhere where there are mountains. The key to mountain history is awe. More than statues or skyscrapers, rivers or oceans, more than redwoods or waterfalls or whales, *yama* are the one thing on this earth that can rise up and to break the edges of our vision. When magmic, they can literally blow everything apart. When you journeyed up one, you weren't expected to return unchanged.

The koto music stopped, and Kato-San put out his cigarette. Two men wearing overalls came up carrying ten torches and handed them around. Kato called us forward, and he drenched the fat, cloth-wrapped ends amply in kerosene. He then sparked the torches with his lighter.

We held the heavy light with one hand. The sun was setting, already a faint glow over the end of town. We followed Kato single-file under the bridge, beside the koto stage, and in front of the eyes of the people. Along the river, the crowd covered the stone seats on each side. Adults slurped noodles and nibbled skewered trout. Their children lit sparklers and trailed them in front of their faces and around their parents making shadows behind the living.

There was a hush like the air gone out of a room. The sparklers dimmed and winked out.

A spotlight came on, shining on the river, from where I don't remember. The principal blinked and a trickle of sweat ran down his scalp as he walked into the light.

"I am here!" he yelled. "I am a yamabushi!"

Flash bulbs went off, and the crowd stadium-cheered.

"We have come to bring you fire. The gods have given it to you as a gift."

The locals, my principal went on, had requested yamabushi to go up to the mountains and ask the gods for a way to make meaning in this awestruck valley. The Japanese gods trusted humans with fire, but not only that, they gave the people friendship, passion, love, and peace. The yamabushi were carrying these things, too.

"What would they do, the gods asked," my principal asked, "if they didn't let us have these things? Would they just keep them?"

My principal's speech lasted a half-hour. His trickle of sweat had become a dam burst. Our torches burnt out, and Kato handed us new ones. Finally, the principal stepped back from the spotlight. An elderly farmer stood in and quickly announced his mountain and that he was bringing the fire of peace.

One by one the yamabushi entered the spotlight, stated their mountains, their gifts, their names. In the moments before my cue, I listened to the yamabushi, absorbed in their rhythm. There were differences, but I noticed a common trancelike state. Each yamabushi had his speech. The young men boomed, while the old men spoke soft, but from a similar place of resolve.

I'd forgotten the order, and as the last yamabushi before me trailed out, I quickly walked into the circle by the river. The noise deafened me. I heard yells; the crowd was roaring. I took a quick breath, and then, without time to wonder, said, "I am like those who come before!"

At this the crowd stormed me with their voices in celebratory drunkenness. A couple of beer cans were thrown, their foam sparkling in the light.

"I am a yamabushi from Shishikura Mountain," I yelled. I raised my torch, which glowed some two feet above my head, warming the pentagonal skull cap. In the way that I believe athletes function, my brain entered a sudden senseless drone. I recited my lines. "I have come *running* down the mountain."

I was speaking in Japanese, from a learned script, but I tried to announce myself from my root self. I tried to plant myself in that time, in that place, where regardless of misgivings, I had something, even if it was only memorized words to offer.

"I am bearing a gift for you. I bring you fire."

I said my name and then stepped back. The crowd boomed, and my scalp tingled.

I don't know if it was the euphoria of the crowd that teleported me or that I was reorienting myself. Maybe I was learning to become a new person, living among new persons, and if we shared our myths an understanding could be reached at some unconscious level.

Somehow, I thought I was supposed to be last, but David had not yet arrived. I was startled when another white, Western face took the spotlight, the beam askew on his forehead, delivering the same speech. It was as if I recognized the strangeness of my being in Kosuge for the first time, the threat of my body and culture, and the dawning appreciation for all the town had done to try to accept me.

"I too, am like those who came before me!" David boomed. "I have come from the mountains of Ireland, and I bring you love!" The crowd roared.

Dave stepped back, and the ten of us trampled over and encircled the stacks of kindling. The night air was growing darker and cool.

At a shout by Kato-San, we lapped our torches against the pyres. The wood crackled and smoked, dry branches engulfing in flame. The heat rose against our legs. As I turned to light the shorter trees, taiko drummers began playing on the koto stage.

A fellow teacher grabbed me by the shoulder. While my back had turned, the middle pile had turned into a 40-foot torch that rolled down the river in enveloping waves of sapphire, blood-orange, and gold. Speechless, I backed away beneath the bridge. The crowd screamed,

abandoned their food, and escaped up the bank. We watched and listened to the rumbling drums. Soon projectile sparks began falling on the bridge and stage.

The flames from the skyscraper fire began licking the maples on the opposite bank, and the Kosuge volunteer fire department switched their hoses on. A million embers filled the sky like fireflies, falling all around.

I stood next to Dave in the shelter beneath the bridge.

"Can you imagine this in America?" he asked.

I started to shake my head, but then I remembered and recalled to him a bonfire at Texas A&M, in my home state, that was so giant several students had been killed when the logs had blown over in the wind.

Dave seemed stunned. "Well, maybe in Texas you'd have that."

The firefighters curtailed the flame, and the crowd moved gingerly to their seats. After two taiko songs, the koto players joined the drummers on stage. Together, strings, drums and flames, there ensued a stilling overture.

Twenty minutes later, Kato-San came up and announced our final act. My principal, still streaked with sweat, made one more speech under spotlight. He said it was time for the yamabushi to be reborn. Having come back from the place of the dead, our rebirth was going to occur now as we crossed the river. Torches alight. Water is how one comes into this world.

I'd been advised by my teachers to cross at the deepest part, to fully immerse myself. Crossing here was how the newest arrivals arrived. I was hesitant as the current was appeared depthless. The older yamabushi went through the shallowest section of the Kosuge River, but another young teacher, who'd only just come a few weeks before, and I bee-lined for the dark

pools. It was a spark of thought I wouldn't have had earlier, something instinctual, a trust newly fashioned.

The river was flowing a walking pace. The young teacher and I were soon submerged up to our necks, our sacred oi boxes, which represented the womb, floating us, feet off the ground. Mountain snowmelt swirled around, sucking away my breath. Water pooled in my ears, creating a silenced cone. I barely kept my torch above water. With one hand I held my fire, and with the other I swam, legs kicking.

As I rose from the water, the river cascaded from my robes and skin. To my right the crowd cheered. Dozens of people I didn't know called my name. I waved, smiled and held my flame. I felt like I'd just arrived.

Walking past the crowd, we came to an orange and white traffic guard. Three firefighters instructed us to bring our torches together around a cord dangling over the side.

I wasn't sure what we were doing, and I didn't understand what was about to happen, nor did I remember anything about lighting a little rope, but I followed. We became a collective. We lowered our flames.

The cord wasn't a rope, it turned out, but a fuse that, when lit, scurried along the riverbank like a phosphorescent insect and led to a charge of fireworks.

This was how we were going to give back fire. We were setting off beautiful bombs — patterns of turquoise and vermillion, sparkling silver, orange, and bronze, shapes like inverted mountains — into the sky.

The yamabushi walked over a small wooden bridge to get a better view as the explosions cracked overhead and rained ash on our faces. I crossed with them and watched the mountains

become shadow on shadow as the sky blew up and the river reflected the colors of the twinkling blasts and the light on our faces.

Outdoor Pursuits

Leaving Lubbock, Texas at dawn through the twenty-mile perimeter of glowing, checkerboard cotton is like trying to upend yourself in space. The hyperbole of West Texas is that due to the expanse of land, the earth cracks apart one's notion of distance. The sky can stretch and fill with more shades than otherwise, and the storms roll in, revving downhill from the Rockies, forking and sparking as they ignite over the plains.

This is a land that was once, 100-million-years-ago, mountains; then the peaks eroded to nubs, and a magmic geyser of earth, lifted the northern handle of Texas until it became flat as a dining table, hovering over the central part of the state.

I lived there for 15 years, with a brief hiccup in Idaho. A stretch of time that seems bewildering when I think to the places I've lived in since, Iowa, Denton, Dallas a stint teaching in Japan, a job guiding students through the gargantuan wonders of America. No wonder Lubbock imprinted so strongly the normalcy of vistas from an average rooftop, the sand dunes piling up *inside* closed windows, the churches that seem interwoven with city like ribs on a body. Surrounded by dirt and cotton and by the maw of canyons that boarded the town's geology, I formed the impression at a young age we were living on an outpost of the world.

Isolated, yet Lubbock was the hub for Ogallala aquifer-slurping towns that perimetered our highways. These whistle stops with names like Plainview, Levelland, and Shallowater. Cotton Center, Brownfield, Littlefield. Muleshoe and Lamesa. Towns whose hearts had stopped pumping long ago, whose citizens sought refuge in the 200,000-membered micro-metropolis, Lubbock, which featured one of the only gay bar within three hundred miles. It housed coffeeshops and bookstores. A mall. College football. But still, there were no liqueur shops in city limits until 2008.

In the time I lived in Lubbock, my life was formed, it seems, with the question of how to leave. My family escaped to state parks during summers, Thanksgiving and Spring Break. Garner State Park in South Texas, was our most common terminus, on the banks of Rio Frio sprinkled with cedars and cottonwoods and aging rocks that cracked open with moss. My father and mother, in a rare sign of trust, after pitching the tent and opening a cooler, jettisoned me, their over-active child, to the hills we camped beneath. This freedom was never allowed in-town. And though dangers in Garner were apparent: cliff edges, poison berries, and the phantom child-chewing mountain lions, my parents knew a child wandering alone in the woods is in almost every way safer than when frolicking a city.

I scampered up steep limestone bluffs and would peer down the cliffs that looked out over the river. I dressed in dirty jeans and long-sleeves, my hands chaffing from finger-holds, knuckling up boulders and dips. As I peaked, hundreds of feet above my parents, the rump of our blue tent poking through the foliage, I could see my family reclined in lawn chairs sipping Bud Light, guffaws echoing off the cliffs. My freedom from them was their freedom from me.

My hyperactivity in Lubbock was sometimes soothed by prescription drugs, by sugar-free drinks, and by sheer exhaustion. But my energy haunted my family from when I could walk. My body carried itself under its own power, from my mother in grocery stores, exploring parking lots. From our yard into the path of a slow-moving car, into a puddle of glass, and, once, into a slamming garage door at my school. We were no strangers to emergency rooms, doctors, and, even, once, for my flattened nose, a plastic surgeon.

Even my birth was traumatic: a thirty-hour event that ended with a doctor straddling my mother as she was wheeled into surgery, sawing her open before the drugs kicked in. My body

was rushing out, my heart thumping erratically in utero. I wanted to escape into the world, my mother suffering from even my birth because of it.

One day, hiking in Garner, I took a step over a petrified log lying in the bright sun and heard what sounded like a cat hiss. I concreted, swiveled my head but could see no movement. My parents had warned me of cougars, as had the park rangers. The thing to do to scare them, the rangers said, was to doff your jacket and flap it like a signal flag.

As I unzipped, a clanging of maracas formed in my ears. I noticed a thin arm of the log I was straddling slouch off, a tiny red whip lassoing the air. I followed the limb with my eyes and met the pair of needle eyes hovering above a gaping mouth. I jumped then and fell back and seemed to run downhill to my parents with a bullet shot.

Frantic, I lied to my parents about my hurry, they who'd had rush their son to hospitals on holidays. They would corral me even here, along the banks of the frosty river, in the backcountry that I roamed, antelope-like. The risk of curtailment forced me mute. And, once in the security of the campsite and their alcoholed, lazy eyes, the snake, the danger, and adrenaline, eased up and thrilled me. Perhaps a childish adulation of power or a fascination with wildness. Later, I went searching for the rattler but never unearthed it.

This flake of experience, my straddling a serpent, stayed with me until I was an adult, a secret life, I thought, outdoors that only I knew about. A light and a darkness of possibility that I would long for.

In college, my continuing obsession with outdoors led me to think I might pursue a career in wilderness pursuits, saddling up backpacks, certifying myself in wilderness medicine, teaching outdoorsy tricks. But long before I landed that job, I had escaped Lubbock in the way people have fled circumstances since literacy. Both my mother and father were readers; a habit, it

seems, they developed anomalously from their families immersed in alcohol and oil booms. Our home was guarded by towering bookshelves. For me, it seemed possible, from a young age, to make two lives, one summiting hills and the other encased in paperbacks.

But I knew little about writing. I knew less about the struggles a writer would face. Like many, I was duped by myths, abysmal failures of realism, how one becomes a scribe in a single moment of clarity after spending many hours moping, and *aspiring*. By the time I was 23 and finished college at Texas Tech, I had worked years already in the field of outdoors, I'd taken writing workshops, but I was far from even a novice understanding of the challenges behind either life.

One experience that shaped my trajectory stands out, a trip I guided to Big Bend State Park, the National Park's much less visited, neighboring cousin, a harsh but elegant moonscape where astronauts used to train. There I shuttled, with a co-leader, twelve people to the red-rock cliffs and cactus of the Chihuahuan Desert, on the banks of the septic Rio Grande.

The experience, encountering as I did my reverse doppelgänger in a man named Eric shooting in a different direction, has left me with the awe of intersecting lives, revealing both where I was heading and what was left unlived.

The drive south from Lubbock took twelve hours, an uneventful, dirt devil-filled beeline until we dropped off the Caprock Escarpment and coasted to the crimson and bare Davis Mountain — hardened and wrinkled peaks like geriatric dunes. We slept that first night by the Grande. It was the stretch of that cafe latte river below banks of cattails and prickly pears, the Rio a thick rivulet, a muscle of brown water.

I informed the group about our 26-mile backpack through the bordering sandy hills that wove over and around Big Bend, named for the sharp turn north that the river makes. We slept,

and in the morning I cooked a pre-hike smorgasbord of sausage, eggs, salsa, and peppers, that was to fuel us through four days of packaged lunches. It was only when washing dishes that I realized I hadn't seen Eric up.

Eric was a bird call-lover, mild-mannered owlish man, whose face lit up when you talked about spiders. He was short, chubby, looking like he belonged in a J.K. Rowling novel. "I'm into invertebrates," he'd said the first day I met him.

Eric could identify hundreds of birds, flowers, and beetles. How many undergraduates at state schools do you know who can do that? I, with my knowledge of wilderness triage and gear paraphernalia, couldn't have identified more than the obvious: the whipping, tentacle-like ocotillo, the bovine javelinas, and the studied, and sometimes petrified, wild asses that were invasive and roamed the desert. Beyond them and the phantom coyote and rare puma, the desert was a mystery for me, a *tableau rosa* to explore but not to know.

I searched behind a forest of man-tall reeds, and there was Eric's tent flapping, his sleeping bag rolled out, his stuff scattered around him like a bomb gone off. And he was perched by the river, shoeless, looking out over the water in his long johns. He saw me and smiled. "I thought maybe we could take our time this morning," he said.

While I thought about what to say, I looked out over the water with him, into Mexico. The Chihuahuan sandstone cliffs, while sandpaper brown in the heat of afternoon, were simmering blood-red at dawn. The river banks weighted with tiny cacti perched atop their arches. The reeds and golden switch grass whipped against the horizon. The Rio Grande gurgled. I explained: we had six miles to backpack that day through rough desert.

Eric stiffened, his eyes downcast. "Look, I said, "if you want to go slow, I understand, but you're going to have to start earlier. People are waiting on you." I rolled up Eric's sleeping

bag, stuffed his pad. Stonily, he began packing his clothes. I stood and gave him what I thought was as friendly a warning as you can five a customer that I didn't want to help him like this again.

I believe now that Eric imagined our backpack through Big Bend would be some kind of desert *Walden,* hours spend under shady mesquites, perusing books, and field note-taking. I didn't know it yet, but Eric had packed five books for the trip, including a five-pound meditation on the lost art of naturalism. Despite Eric's prodigious knowledge of wildlife, he'd never once spent a single night outdoors. It never occurred to me to teach him to carry less than five books, that he would have to put all that weight on his shoulders for four days. We didn't know what he didn't know.

I think the reverse of Eric was true of me. I'd been working for two years and had ten years of backpacking behind me. I knew eight different brands of sleeping bags. But I wanted to know nature, categorically, like Eric, about the places we explored. I wanted to put name to thought. Which was part of why I was glad to have him along. We both didn't know what we didn't know about ourselves, but maybe we could show each other.

Once Eric had his pack ready, we loaded the van and drove five miles up-road to a trailhead, a blaze of land like a comet tail through the cactus and the mountains. I sunscreen-lectured everyone, checked packs, hid the van key under a rock. We set off into the sandy-cotton canyon trail under the full sun.

"Ocotillo," Eric pipped, pointing to the armies of flaying arms, standing torches solidified into sharp thorns. "Yucca and hackberry," he said. "Curve-billed thrasher" and "black-tailed gnatcatcher." "Agave."

Agave, of course, is known as the century plant and grows for about forty years before blooming. A ragged bunch of leaves cocoon around the bulb, nurturing it, defending until the proper time. The quills have tips that could puncture leather, and I used to nightmare about stepping on one. When dying, the cacti shoot forth a palm stalk geysering into the air, up to thirty-feet, a mastiff of spore and flower that jettisons seeds across the desert. In the Chihuahuan, the agave stalks are sometimes the most prominent topographical features. You can mark trails with them, though only for a season. They birth, wilt, and die. The agave waits for decades for that spark of life.

According to my watch thermometer, by noon it was 95 degrees. Even in Big Bend, it wasn't supposed to be this hot in March. I turned the group into an S-shaped gully, passing below limestone walls. We paused when some of the overhanging rocks offered shade. A dusty wild ass explored over a ridge and froze like a shadow when he saw us sipping water, our vibrant backpacks discoloring the monotones of sandstone. We stared back, the burro puncturing the stillness of the desert. He didn't move until we'd gotten up and gone around a corner.

At about three o'clock, when my watch thermometer read 99, everyone heaved off their packs and sat down in the sand for a break. I advised everyone to slurp their waters. Susan, a middle-aged college professor who competed in triathlons, suddenly stood, stalked down the gully, knees trembling. "Oh man, I'm in trouble," she said.

I sat her down and asked two, broad-shouldered petroleum engineers to stand over her for shade. They fanned her with bandanas. I splashed water on her forehead. "Susan, have you been drinking?" I asked.

"Of course. It's hot; of course I'm drinking water."

"What color was your urine last?"

“Yellow.” She said quickly then hesitated. “Brown. Actually, it was very brown.”

I could tell by her face she knew what that meant. I gave her a bottle of water so she could double-fist Someone then said I should check on Eric. Eric was sprawled out in the full sun, covered head to toe in his khaki, water-falling sweat.

“Eric, are you sure you’re not wearing too many clothes?” I said.

“Oh. Maybe,” he said.

I had Eric sit over by Susan in a patch of shade. Eric said his right knee hurt so I took a bandana from my pocket and borrowed another. I tied the two bandana’s together into a figure-eight around the knee as a makeshift brace. After they’d rested, we hiked for one more hour, and then I stripped weight off both Susan's and Eric's packs because they were pale-faced. From Susan’s backpack, I took out food, four water bottles, and tent poles. In Eric’s I found the books.

I glanced at Eric; he was leaned back against the sandstone, wet towel on his forehead, beaming, as if he was glad to show off the presents he’d brought. The group rested for another thirty minutes, while I patched up the soles of a petroleum engineers’ boots with duct tape. The soles had separated from his boots.

“When was the last time you wore these boots?” I asked.

“Ten years ago.” He grinned.

The tape wouldn’t last, but later in camp the engineer and I took some fishing line and wire that I’d packed and wrapped that around sole and boot and then made do for the rest of the trip. Besides these useful items, I carried a ten-pound med kit that included four EpiPens and an aluminum splint. I carried signal flares and emergency salts. I carried climbing rope. The weight of my emergency supplies probably matched Eric’s books.

But I wasn't always so handy. Like Eric, when I first backpacked at nineteen, I brought my share of dead weight. My baggage was the insecure masculine kind, not the encyclopedic. In Colorado, I had pictured a fight-to-the-death, multiple bear attacks, a more-than-chance encounter with pumas, my prevailing against tornados of claws. A kind of cliche American action pulp movie. To this end, I packed a hatchet, a fish-gutting knife, an army-standard Bowie knife, along with the machete I had clipped to the outside of my pack. Lucky the Wiminueche Wilderness in Colorado was dry that year because I brought nothing to wear but cotton.

As ill-prepared as I was, the experience was transformative and led me to pursue a job trying to recreate that moment for others. But it's one thing to get yourself lost; it's another to be responsible for people with their ideas of wildness who were putting their lives in my hands. I had learned to read maps, treat blisters, listen to gripes, keep up morale. I was as much a cheerleader as guide. A cook more than scout. I was also, briefly, counselor and friend and sympathetic bartender to strangers with whom I shared a tent. Leading meant carrying what others brought in.

Eric's lack of initiation into this world I studied allowed me to reflect how far I'd come, not unlike the experience of listening in classrooms when students make comments that echo in memory, offer puzzle pieces to what I've searched for answers to.

Leading in Big Bend, I wished I knew more about the land I was seeing, impatient with the necessity to learn, to study for hours under lamp instead of stars. I wanted to know the blueprint of survival, but a deep-rooted part of me wanted to explore the wider ways of being as well. Eric and I were like opposing ships sailing in the desert colliding and ricochetting.

After I divided up Eric's books to other participants, I stayed in back of the line. I often employed leading from behind to make sure no one fell back. We trampled through the eons of

worn down and matted sand, the sun knifing from above. Physically, I was focussed and alert, despite the heat and weight on my shoulders. I had ample experience and was in touch with who I was. I have often desired this sparkling sense of awareness and duty again with whatever I do. Teaching seldom offers such clearcut affirmation.

The group was running out of water, but we were closer to camp, where there was a spring, than to the van. Eric was in the back, and I tried to stay with him and not lose sight of the group.

At a bend, I stopped, sipping water while he caught up. I watched him trudge around the corner, and I noticed Eric had grabbed hold of an ocotillo, wrapped a towel around it and was using the cactus as a walking stick. From the back, with his body hunched over, he seemed hermit-like, wizardly.

"Eric, Do you need water?"

"No, I'm fine, but I'd like a little snow though if you have any."

"No," I laughed, "no snow here."

"Shame. I love snow." He pointed up the wash. "See the sheep trail?"

I looked, no idea what he was talking about. Between the crisscrossed leanings of cactus, the desert resembled a horizontal spider's web.

"Between the two big boulders, you see the dirt they kick up? Sometimes they must run through."

As we hiked, I imagined walking with Eric through a snowy field, the flakes to our ankles. If it were just the two of us, we could walk at whatever pace Eric wanted. I was not one for plowing up hikes like some of my peak-bagging friends, whose motives I've scoffed at. We

could mosey, exchange information — me how to backpack, and Eric what all the names of the things we saw, how they grew, how they make the mesh of the fabric we call world.

Eric was the kind of guy I'd always wanted to travel with, someone who was immersed in the environment we were in and didn't revert to talking about movies or his troubles or his life or his job. He cared about the land in a way I had not often encountered.

Rounding a corner, I envisioned a sweaty, well-tanned man traipsing the other way shouldering a bilge bag. A mirage, I thought at first. He was bedecked only in shorts, sunglasses, and Chacos. I walked up, muttered hello, and he told me he'd hiked in that morning, turning back now because of the heat. He was a kayaker driving cross-country for big river waves. The desert, he said, "a little yoga time."

He eyed behind me for a moment over his sunglasses, and I turned to see Eric bent over a yellow cactus flower. From behind, someone would have thought him an old man.

"Watch out for that guy," the kayaker said.

"He's all right, just slow."

The man inhaled, readying a speech, "Rangers told me back at the station cougars are around here, and they like to pick off weak ones in a group. The cougars hide up on a hill, so you don't even notice, especially when everyone is tired. They attack without a sound, drag the person out of sight, go for the throat so you don't scream."

I gaped at him.

"Just letting you know." He walked off, saluting me, his sandals scooping sand into the air behind him. I stared after, angry. One for the bullshit because cougars have killed fewer than a dozen people in all of North America in the last decade. Also, because the heat was working on me and worry about Eric I did. The hairs on my arm stood up looking at him. He was, indeed,

easy meat. He appeared small under his pack and unaware of anything besides what he was examining. A marching band could sneak up on him.

I put Eric at the front of the group after that, as I should have in the first place. Having Eric at the front meant the group stayed together. The anchor setting pace. We then stopped every twenty minutes for breaks, which no one but Eric needed.

"Eric, how can we help you go a little faster?" I asked when no one else could hear.

"They can go on; I'll catch up."

"You're stopping to look at stuff. I know it; I've seen you."

Eric didn't respond.

It'd been a long day, and I was starting to feel heat-drunk. It was dusk, the magic hour descending onto the desert. The sky became an explosive yellow egg yolk, and the shadows of ocotillos stretched on for twice their height. The cobbles that cluttered the edges of the trail turned to the last coals of a night fire. I looked across the heads of the people I was responsible for. Few seemed to have noticed the change besides Eric. The rest were grumpy, grumbling, thirsty, asking me why we couldn't keep going.

"Can't we sit here and enjoy this," Eric said.

"People are hungry Eric," I said, half-talking to him. "They want to get to camp where there's water and we can make dinner. It's getting dark, and I can't leave you out here because I'm responsible for you."

Eric emitted a low sigh, the air pushed from his question-mark mouth like the death rattle of some fine automobile. At the next stop, one of the petroleum guys leaned over, spit, and said, "Clint, I can't take all this stopping shit. If we keep a pace like this, I'm going to die. Let's let him catch up."

“You're not going to die,” I said.

“Yes, I am. I’m just going to die from all this stopping.”

"No, you're not. We’re gonna be fine.”

As the sky turned purple and the stars came out, we rounded a dozen hills, tripped over three hundred million jagged pebbles, and broke the skins to our shins and fingers on the armies of cactus that lay in wait. We crested the top of another endless sandstone hill, and I saw two square specks of adobe houses in the valley below. The houses had once been dude ranch quarters, and after that, the hideout for horse thieves. Water bubbled from a small spring in a grove of cottonwoods and hackberries just below the hill, cradled in an out-of-character desert womb.

I knew the group wouldn’t get lost, and I let them take off, which they did at a jog-stampede. Eric and I sat down and took another break.

Later, our group ended up spending three nights at the adobe and didn’t finish our planned loop. We back-tracked to our van on a cooler, partly cloudy and forgiving day.

On the hike back, Eric rolled his ankle stepping off of a rock. I was close enough to hear the snap of his tendon, like a popping piece of bubble wrap. Eric cried out, but even in his exclamation was the marked curiousness that I knew meant Eric was thinking *Now what’s this* We completely emptied Eric's pack then, and that's when I found the gargantuan treatise on natural history that had remained hidden and passed it onto someone else. I wrapped Eric's ankle in the light-weight, aluminum cast, and fed him pain meds. Eric talked to us blissfully. He was unaware that people were taking the weight off his shoulders and putting it on their own.

I bent over and whispered, “Next time Eric, bring one book.” I held up a finger. “So others don’t end up carrying your shit.”

Eric frowned. I think it was the first and only time we were angry with each other.

I know now that Eric speaks the language of the outdoors and relies on this experience. I've learned through the human encyclopedia of Facebook that Eric, improbably or expectedly perhaps, now leads outdoor trips for the State Park Service in Virginia. I wonder if his participants remind him of the place he came from the way my writing students jettison me back to my undergrad days.

After our trip, Eric came into our shop looking for a job. I gave him the run-around because I didn't want to say no and hurt his feelings and because I saw he wanted it. And because I was exhausted with the aggressiveness males carry into outdoor pursuits, the lack of curiosity and intimate knowledge that Eric could bring. So, frankly, I didn't know what to say. What I would say now is, Eric, you have the love, the knowledge, but you need the responsibility.

Eric later tried but failed to work for our program after I'd gone. Still, he became our highest repeat customer, going on dozens of different trips, more than some of the leaders did.

Eight years later, he became a ranger, leading interpretive hikes in the Appalachians. I quit guiding and became a professional academic and writer, positions in which I have now hauled around the globe, twice, fourteen cardboard boxes of books, weighing in, I know, at 178 pounds.

I don't get outdoors much anymore. I know more names of plants now than I have ever known because I read guidebooks. I listen to bird songs on the internet and wait outside for male birds to show. I set my laptop on the windowsill, hit play, and watch and study while the digital and live-bodied birds have turf wars.

I write and I read and I think of those times when I carried a pack on my shoulders and led people through deserts and canyons to water of some kind.

I think about the animal in me that misses that hot sun, the tangibility of being in charge of peoples' lives in a way for which I could make clear decisions. Now I ask, should a student become a writer? Should anybody? What direction should they go? There is no map here in academia. Only the arroyos and streams, and perhaps dried-up springs to lead oneself to.

"What else can I do for you?" I asked Eric at the end of that first day, while we watched the rest of the group frolic to the spring water below. He leaned back, a switch of grama grass in his teeth. "Well, my backpack is still so heavy," Eric said.

I lifted his pack and tested the weight. Still a good thirty pounds. I wondered what could be left besides clothes and food. Of course, it was the giant book that examined naturalism's lost place in the world, which, like his journal and field guides, where different ways of exploring the world and the human imagination. It would still be a long time before I found out about either of them.

I asked Eric what I hoped sounded offhanded, "Eric what would you think if this backpack disappeared and you didn't have to carry it anymore?"

"Oh, that'd be lovely, I guess." He laughed and started to get up.

I hoisted his blue backpack by one strap onto my shoulder, where my pack was already, bulkier than all the others with the safety equipment and med kits, a kind of weight I probably will never lift again.

With my other hand, I helped Eric get up off the sand. But was it myself I was helping? Me meeting this man who was so immersed in the outdoors in a knowledgable way? It was as if I was shaking hands with myself, a former and future life.

I see Eric walk ahead of me, seeming weightless now, light on his soles with his ocotillo staff. I don't envy him now, his job. I want him to stay in front so I can watch, see where he goes. Notice his vulnerability as he enters a new world we've both only seen the half of.

Coming Down

Breathing shallow, finally, I thought of my cell phone. I unpacked and peeled the ziplock, hands shaking, and kindled the screen. Docomo was Japan's largest mobile company, and I had two bars of reception. I cradled the gadget while I breathed. It felt warm, somehow, reaching from my hands to some sentinel antenna.

I had a way off the mountain. Mountain rescue would arrive within twelve hours. They'd likely helivac me, which would be about two million yen. If I were lucky, a dozen volunteers would hike in and carry me out on a stretcher —Cleopatra on a caravan, med kits and defibrillators spilling across my chest. Granted, I was going to crawl off first, but I had a way.

Either way, in the hospital the journalists would show up, as they did for any accident in Japan. It's a strikingly safe country, and the media are pressed for sensation. I would appear on the news and in the papers, and I would never hear the end of it in my village where I taught English, until I was fired, that is, which was likely.

I turned off the phone and stowed it. I sat in the trail mud, a ringlet of tears haloing. Reality announced itself as clear and obvious as a broken bone. My hike was over, and so was the life I'd had in mind.

I was on the second day of my one month trek across Kanto, the region of Japan that houses Tokyo. My plan was to hike from my apartment to Mount Fuji, loop around the world's largest metropolis, and limp back to the village where I called home. Even as a former wilderness guide this was going to be my longest shouldering of laundry, kitchen, and dwelling across a landscape.

I was one of five thousand native English speakers that the Japanese government cast like seeds throughout the countryside. I was a teacher, but my interest was the outdoors and writing

about it. I fancied myself a wanderer scribe, one in a long line — old-fashioned and tunnel-visioned. I missed the cues from the universe, the obvious from the people around me.

A week before at my elementary school, I was outside with students watching a solar eclipse. We each held bottle-heavy sunglasses that were so dark all you could see was a soft thumbnail of sheer white before it winked out, and there burned a wheel of solar flare. The day after, I awoke with a pinched nerve in my neck from staring up. It was the same kind I'd gotten from a freak rock climbing accident and another time following a drunken, head-banging karaoke session. Each time I'd been to the same doctor who'd prescribed a neck brace and told me to stop doing stupid shit.

But I was entering my final summer in Japan after three years, my last and only time I had to complete the Big One, the hike I'd been thinking about since coming over. I believed I needed a long hike to cap my experience. It was something that would tell the world I was more than just a dabbler.

As a writer and as a backpacker, I believed in the necessity of doing something sexy to be listened to. I think American consumer culture validates this claim. I wagered if I could make my own route that was arduous and original, I could hike and write about it, have flair and ownership.

Travel narratives are more about the writer than anything else. Yet at this age, 25, I didn't know. Not that I'm much older now at 34, but it feels like a different universe. Distance and reflection, maybe that's a bridge. I didn't understand you couldn't possess a place by writing about it, by taking control of a country with your fingers and lassoing it onto the page. My thoughts were unconscious, centuries-old manifestations, likely, of colonialism renewed in a young American man trying to see the world and construct himself. I wanted to weave an

identity out of the fabric of the place I found myself in by situating my story on top of it. But the country, the mountains, and my body had other ideas.

Four days after the eclipse, I packed up my backpack, tent on the bottom, then clothes, food and water, sandals, med kit, map and compass — everything, coffee cup strapped to the outside, like always. A system doesn't fail, as we told ourselves in the outdoor program I had worked for.

I deposited the load by the door and set the neck brace on top, my two trekking poles resting by the side. At night, when I could barely sleep because of nerves, I'd turn, tenderly, and look at the pack leaning against the glass door in the half-moonlight to see the shadow of a headless inebriant that was my pack, keeled over and blocking the door. A silly half-man, canted against the glass.

The next morning, I woke with the rain. I stared out the battered windows. I made a breakfast of rice and canned fish. A little broth. A coffee. My neck hurt. I was free for a month of summer vacation. I wanted to read, to write, to do anything but trudge uphill.

I packed up my garbage with the leftover vegetables I had in my fridge. The trip already a chore. I left my apartment, trash in hand, and down the road I glanced up at the verdant hills that surrounded my home, cedars and maples perched on the bluffs, clouds rolling over the peaks like a river's rapids. Running the length of the valley were corrugated roofs, the fish farm lagoons, the lumber mill, the machine parts factory. There were two schools, one police station, the traffic light, the post office, the grocer. Telephone poles. All towered over by the Chichibu Mountains that rose like unassuming whales, several arches deep, cresting from the blue soil. Hawks circled and swooped, catching songbirds on the wing. The river crashed through the village and tossed up ricocheting sound onto the limestone wall. All this I could experience from my apartment.

On the narrow road, I ran into a first grade student walking with his father, a fisherman. As usual, the boy smiled, performed his boxing jump-dance and pointed at me but didn't say anything. Today, father and son were almost bald in their summer haircuts. The man asked what I was doing.

"Going for a hike," I said.

"To the garbage bin?" He joked.

"Yes." I almost laughed. "After that I'm going to Big Buddha Ridge."

He gestured towards my pack. "Do you need so much?"

I decided to lie. "Just camping," I said. "I'm taking a few books."

"Ehhhh. It could rain all week."

I looked to the sky, saw it filled with gray.

"The rain's okay," I said. "I'm going to set up camp when I get there."

He shrugged. "Well, be careful."

He waved, and he and his son bobbed away, the boy grinning and laughing behind his fists. I stepped up the road and set my trash into the dumpster, a mild satisfaction at leaving something where it belonged.

I found the trail out of the valley and pursued the zigzag that was covered in bark and perimetered with boulders that cracked and belched spring water. Among the trees were rows of sword-shaped, sasa reeds. Sasa tend to grow and die en masse, so along the trail I would come upon entire hillsides of darkened, toppled grasses, followed a few hundred yards later by an upright sea-green army.

Another part of why I was out there was because I missed that guiding job in America. Isolated work in the Rockies, the Guadalupes, the Davis Mountains. The clarity of it. Little is as bare bones as survival in wilderness.

I was a teacher then, and now, as I write this, a writer/teacher. Writing and teaching is less clear in direction than outdoor pursuits, like zoo-keeping-acting-lottery-ticket-gambling. I wore and wear many different hats. I wear a tie. When backpacking, I wore zip-off short-pants. I carried what I needed, and what I needed was certain. Maps and compass and trail punched the way. forward. There was one direction of travel.

I summited Big Buddha Ridge after seven hours. Fog, fog, fog, up and down the patchy scrub grass and trail. I had, a few months previous, hiked a circuit around my village, three days camping along the logging trails. When the clouds descended, the distant peaks remained visible, that high like sleeping alone on an island.

I camped in a tiny bowel of land, and the next morning at 3:30, I got up to take down the bear bag. I hadn't noticed that the tree I'd chosen for hanging my food and mammal-luring toiletries was perched on a slope. While I was monkeying in the tree, maneuvering the compression sack, I dropped the basketball-sized load. The bag rolled once, twice, picking up speed.

I dropped off the tree, took one step, and slip-kicked in the mud. My whole body in the air, I had a moment of clarity: *there is no reason for me to be out here.*

I crashed to the ground, head knocking a root. Dazed long enough for my bag to disappear. When I got up, I could hear it crashing through the brush, hundreds and hundreds of feet below, like the rush of a distant train.

I sulked to my tent and unfolded my map. I'd have to stop at one of the ubiquitous convenience stores to buy snacks and squid jerky. And the thought of three weeks of cephalopod sent bile rushing to my nose. But I couldn't see another way.

Except, that is. There was a train line that I would have to cross, which ran all the way to Tokyo. From Tokyo I could catch a bus to the suburbs. And I could be home in Kosuge in a few hours. My feet up, sipping coffee, munching toast.

I decapitated the idea. Ending the hike early would mean I was a failure. I wasn't ready to let go of the part of myself ravenous for validation, each hike a potential merit badge for my future. My imagined future adventure writing.

Writing for me then, true for most wannabes, was what I was *preparing* to do. Something I had to stockpile raw material for. Hemingway, that ur-colonialist, steamrolled the idea into me. Many other white men marched the same pavement. Adventure, encounters, writing. Sentences which would manifest themselves like orchards from defecated travel.

Another truth was that writing, digging into it, was more daunting than any solo hike. Hiking was a way of staving off work. Hiking kept me with the familiar while remaining convinced that I was still exploring forward, destined for greatness.

It did not occur to me that a lucky month of solitude could be a blessing, not to fertilizer, but *to my writing*. That I could hole up in my apartment while my neck healed and the rains fell, and I pounded out pages. No, this was unthinkable.

I made my first summit that morning in shadow dark. As I trekked up and over Dark Peak, the sky brightened, and my view opened to a grassy savanna and I saw Fuji, the ambassador of Japan, a jet-black spaceship landed on earth. Then rain. For the next couple of

hours I jostled along a wet trail that brought me in and out of patches of pines and maples and went up and down like a camel's back.

I wish I could say I thought deep or examined myself on this hike while the clouds crowded. Like on most other treks, I daydreamed about movies, replayed conversations, and won fantasy arguments. A common misconception, perpetuated by REI, is that outdoor antics allow access to Thoreauvian thinking. But not in my experience.

I once spent an entire three-day backpacking trip with my mind in a tape-loop on a Japanese mamba song. I've had more philosophy occur to me on commuter trains or walking a Shih Tzu than on the fourteen days I spent canoeing in Montana.

I don't mean to suggest that communing with outdoors is valueless. The scenery and health benefits are profitable. But not when you can't see anything or the scenery itself is hidden.

My route was a little ditch dug into the ground that wormed down the hillside covered with taller, out-of-control sasa reeds. These sasa towered. One moment I was in an open field, and then the sasa reached two feet over me, caving around. Pushing through with my hands, the water poured off the grass, ran into my pants and boots. The tips nicked my face.

I cannot describe how unnerving this was. I could not see in any direction, front, back, down, without having the giant, tentacled life slither and block my vision. I could only see the sliver of sky above me and the mass of tangled life that clawed and crashed and looked to continue on.

It got worse when I stepped on a softball-sized rock, rolling my ankle and pitching my body forward into the grass with a splash.

It was a sprain, I knew. I'd had many as a short-footed backpacker. I raised a trekking pole and began assaulting the sasa, which fanned and sprayed thin spittle-like sheets. As I beat

the grass, I conjured a break in the wall a dozen yards ahead. I lurched forward, unpacked my med kit, and sat on a stump.

I checked my map. This was my last chance to turn, before it no longer made sense. Yet I don't remember wondering if I should backtrack. It wasn't determination that kept me going, I think, but hate — self-hate, for the weakness behind why I couldn't keep hiking. Couldn't backpack without rolling an ankle. Something that burned fiercer than the ordinary impatience of youth. It was a self-hating, self-propelling emotion.

I sat for thirty minutes, massaging the foot, wrapping the ankle in ace bandages. When hiking again, the reeds receded, and the path rose to follow a root-strewn, muddy trail with leering drop-offs. For two hours I passed scraggly cedars and caught the furtive movements of deer. At the peak I was rewarded with a desolate picture of petrified pines laid out like dinosaur bones, mice and crows.

I took my pack off, sat on a hollow log. I wanted an orange, though it was at the bottom of a mountain. This fruit is the reward I pack on my hikes. Along a trail, whenever I come to a peak, or the ceremonious view, or if I feel flattened by grandeur, when the moment strikes me that *this is it*, I will break out the fruit, a luxury. An orange is mostly water and so weighs down my pack. Other hikers I know carry Pabst Blue Ribbon, so I don't feel too illogical. Just an orange to celebrate and remember that none of this was necessary.

One point of hiking, if you're doing it right I think, isn't to prove yourself or escape; it's to get in touch with a side of the world that isn't done justice by wall calendars. When I was blind to that, and had doubts about what I was doing, it made me reflect on the emptiness of my task.

Usually I would have peeled the orange, one tiny bit of rind at a time. Have you ever noticed how an orange cross-section resembles a hallway of rooms, tiny apartments of nectar? You can play a monster game, pinching each slice with the front of your teeth, letting it explode, floor by floor. With an orange, I could have lived for a moment in those pleasurable rooms and not think that I was carrying dead weight with a hurt neck and sprained ankle when I might be blowing steam off my coffee on the table where I scribbled.

I suppose no one does life or every trail right. Perhaps now as I'm a little bit older and, as things go, have less time for travel, I wish I had spent fewer hours on a desperate quest for empowerment. I wish my precious hikes had been *for themselves*, as unnecessary as they could be.

I was switchbacking down the other side of the peak when a sudden view of the valley opened up like a window in the clouds. I could see, ten miles off, the station where I boarded the train for Tokyo. I could make out the tiled roofs around the parking lot, the ramen peddlers, and even, vaguely, the track itself, the artery feeding middle Japan.

I tried to pay attention to the trail, but the window was so uncanny, the size of a painting you'd hang on a wall. It was a landscape so real I could crawl inside.

And it was then I rolled and popped my right ankle.

I hadn't noticed the twelve-inch drop in the trail. The front of my boot planted on a wet root, while the heel slipped and spilled into the drop. My pack and I came collapsing around.

I was spitting and sweating as I unlaced the boot. I have broken my ankle once in my life, and the pain was this. The ankle was so fat I had trouble getting it out the shoe. An involuntary cry, and I had the heel free. I unsheathed limb from sock and found it was purple and jade. I sat there sobbing.

“Fuck you! Both of them?” I hollered at the dirt and reeds, as if a bargain had soured.

Fear leads to anger, psychologists say. The truth is I’d been blocking out the danger, as I always did on solo trips. But I *could* die out here. Of course I could. Now, with my food gone and if the trail was out and if my ankle was shot, I could be in an unsolvable, lethal snag.

I shivered in sweat, my brain shutting down. After some minutes, I quieted and eased my breathing. I switched from panic to survival and tried to block out everything. I swiveled attention to my foot.

I was taught the steps in wilderness medicine. Read the injury. Check off symptoms and treatments. Keep the patient zeroed-in on calm. That’s when I remembered the phone.

A flicker in deep space is still a light. And I was on a mountain within cell range.

An hour later, after resting and controlling my tremors, I loaded up my pack on two bulging, wrapped ankles, the bad one with an aluminum splint stuffed inside my boot. I tested the feet, and though they were weak, they could still carry a food-less pack with trekking poles. I considered leaving my pack in the mountains, but I’d lost enough gear, fuck-it-all, and I might have to spend one more night outdoors.

The interesting thing is that it took me this much to give up: two wrecked feet, fog, rain, lost gear, a pinched nerve. I’m in awe of my own tenacity, my resistance to the future.

I wonder how my hike would have turned out. I gamble poorly because of the heat that came that July, yet I consider now, sometimes in the thick of my urban existence, hiking a longer trail, something definitive still. Not to write about, but to undergo. But I’m at the point where money and worry and family are too-big obstacles. And part of me rolls my own eyes at my predictable nostalgia. That I’ve only cracked the middle of my third decade and I’m trying to crawl back through that window to the man who had an unknown journey in front of him.

Six hours later, my feet concreted numb. I had water in my boots, my socks, my underwear. My hands welted red from sasa. My neck brace a noose.

When my feet landed on a dirt road, I felt my body melt. Euphoria surged, a greater jolt when touching pavement. Asphalt meant I would live.

I followed the road for two hours, the street a hammer on my feet. I descended one switchback, then another. I kept walking and saw buildings peak around a corner. Abandoned, they were a mini-mall of sorts. I was eyeing the bus stop sign and accompanying pink bench. I threw my pack down and checked the schedule. The second-to-last bus, I read, arrived in thirty minutes.

But what was there to bring it out here? Behind me, the failed outpost was being consumed by weeds and worms and grass. It was a kind of craft shopping center, set up with the backdrop of ecology's maw. It was one of those hare-brained investments — airdrop an arts colony up in the mountains. Now there were three-foot-high reeds in the parking lot, and a pine branch poking through the window, birds nesting in the eves, roof caved in. The paint on the row of buildings was peeling like somebody's skin, revealing the wound that was once a growing thing.

The mountain was alive and bearing down on me, and on these mini-mall plans, as a grizzly snags a migrating salmon. There's nothing personal in this. If I've learned anything, it's that the mountain didn't care about my journey.

Japan is Mussolini with its transportation. Sure enough, a bus rumbled up five minutes later, an unassuming ride, as if on the global street corner. I took a ticket from the front, and the uniformed driver didn't seem surprised to see me. I toyed with the idea in my blurry mind that if

I were in Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" this would be my version of the plane that takes me to the next life. Except my mountain would be the one that had almost killed me.

Instead the bus hummed, unmemorably, to the train terminal. After I got back to Kosuge, I took a train to Tokyo, where the English used-book store hosted a sale, and I forked over a hundred dollars of yen. I then spent every morning in cafes writing poorly because of the cigarette smoke that impregnates Japanese restaurants. I read memoirs by people in other cultures elsewhere — China, Nepal, Pakistan. I'd grown tired of white men bravely nation-trekking, though I wouldn't have been able to tell you that.

The summer grew hot; I retreated indoors, rode my bicycle because that was possible with my feet. Gradually the ankles healed. My idea of an adventurer writer was dead, the colonialist with a self-important book. I can't help but wish that man ill, he who I will never be.

Yet at the corners of my imagination, the truth is I sometimes feel empty, storyless, undefined as if I still need that lost trophy. My memories, though they make up the superstructure of my ego, do not stand out as singular. Walking across Japan is a tangible accomplishment that sings from the dust jacket of a life. Whereas I made an attempt up craggily peaks, jeopardized my existence, and limped back down.

I do feel satisfied though, that this turned out to be my take on things. I didn't shoot anything or hike and piss across a country. I got hurt, which makes the me then more likable to the me that I have become.

Tokyo Walk

I don't remember when I had the idea to walk across a city, from end to smoggy end. Barry Lopez once said that cities are "the best we can do." Meaning, the life force of humanity bundled together, served by electric trains and living quarters stacked like packing crates, the vibrancy of a human rainforest is the most reasonable way to evolve eight billion of us.

Metropolises are thought to be anti-nature, urban pleasantries the anti-mountain. But I have always felt awed by cities because I grew up on the tabletop-flat Llano Estacado in West Texas. Skyscrapers affect my vision the way mountains do, breaking off the sky. Many backpackers detest metropolises and their sewage and density, but when I look at digital billboards and noodle shops and elevated rails, I sense another kind of wonder: our human geology. The deep-time sight of what will be left of us when we're gone, skeletons of corporate havens, twisted train track, styrofoam coolers.

I think I assumed years ago that I would one day hike across New York, that mythic creation, the "most over-imagined of places" according to Eula Biss, that beacon paragon of America. But it made little sense to jet to Queens when I lived in Japan and walk the well-scribed city when the world's largest metropolis was a three-hour train ride away.

Tokyo is twice the size of New York, in population and sprawl. It is home to 38 million, more than 197 countries can claim. It is 10,000 years old and shelters the oldest, unbroken imperial line. It houses the largest bank and the tallest free-standing tower. It sports the world's busiest train station and the busiest pedestrian crosswalk. It sits atop the intersections of three tectonic plates, which is more morphology than most worldkind experiences.

I had the chance to walk across these cracks of earth in the summer of 2009. It took me three days and something like eighty miles. I developed the largest blister I have ever seen. And I did it in the worse possible weather because I had time off from teaching.

I wanted to know what it felt like to walk through a city. Hikers, in Japan or America, often travel to mountains and canyons to escape urbanity, but cities are where so many of us actually live. Where we conduct our lives and where we actually die. A hike is like a good prayer because it lets one escape the trappings of flesh not in an after-life but the here-now. It's not transcendence; it's an ego-assuaging attempt to forget oneself. But what if instead of escape I dove deeper into the row of unpleasantries, of car honks and suffocating concrete heat? One in four people living in Japan dwells in Tokyo. This is where what a lot of people think of as "Japan" is, if I cared to see it.

When I'd flown to the Land of Rising Suns for a schoolteacher job in my early twenties, I worried I would crashland in a rebar boulevard, where my companions would be power lines and smokestacks, not mountains nor birdsong. But I ended up in a valley in the lush Chichibu Mountains. My image of Japan was that of a lot of Americans': Big City, millions of Japanese, the Tokyo Giants, neon kanji, vending machines that sold beers, canned coffee, and high school girl panties.

That is only a sliver. Japan is 75% mountains. But Tokyo is the Japan most Western people think about when the picture the country. Coming over, a part of me was deeply curious about the reality behind the urban image.

When I used to work as an outdoor guide in Texas, we made sure to point out to participants that the riskiest thing we were doing was driving. That the time when the car started and especially when the building roofs cracked the horizon, we would be at most risk. In Tokyo,

I would be crisscrossing hundreds of roads and railways, risking my life in a real way that mountain hiking usually only gestures at.

Cities are like hippopotami in that they appear less dangerous than a carnivore because of sprawling girth, but are much more likely to kill. And because of their rich diets, they also hold vast, mysterious quantities inside them.

The city began for me in a bedroom community east of Tokyo center, a town stuffed with gyoza shops, pachinko parlors, and coffee vending machines, waking up at 6 AM. My girlfriend, Yumiko, shook herself ready for work at the shipping company where she helped coordinate the ballet of container ships across the Indian Ocean. After I left, she would later cram into the East-West subway line.

Far from clear-headed and after waving goodbye, I stumbled to an artery road of the city over a grey, vegetation-less canal, where homeless camp, pelicans nest, and fathers with sons line the banks for fishing. Pleasure boats once clogged the water and housed opium dens and prostitutes. Now they guide mahjong tours.

I crossed a bridge, and a train jangled by overhead. I stared up at the sardined bodies through windows, bags and hands and noses pulped against glass. I imagined I could see Yumiko, a known face greeting me as if it were a regular morning, her eyes slightly caffeinated as she maneuvered to one of Japan's major automotive companies. I texted "have a bueno day!" our couples' joke. Apart from speaking English and French, Yumiko was digesting Spanish.

I had a backpack with a change of clothes, a toothbrush, two half-liter water bottles, but no cell phone charger, which would turn out to be a cumbersome misfire. I carried copies of street maps and a guidebook, which I would look at exactly once.

The weight of the smog sat on my shoulders as I walked, and the city woke up. Konbini convenience store shopkeepers hosed off their welcome mats as I passed by. Lights tinkled. The few homes gave way to blocks of stunted apartment towers, out of which hung laundry and floating gardens. The smell of fresh rice hung in the air, and last night's beer cans lined the street.

A trickle and then a flood of people poured out of the box apartments whose heights were lost in haze. Women and men dressed in black lined up at the corner stores for breakfast, cigarettes, and palm-sized cans of warm coffee. The flood was checking its watches, swinging its bags or briefcases, swiftly churning downstream to the lakes of train stations.

After two hours of morning, I crossed the thoroughfare from Chiba Prefecture suburbs into metro Tokyo. Soon I was inside the Ginza, so named "Money Place" where once banks lent our their prodigious cash. The neighborhood housed a slur of fashionable boutiques, where broad-shouldered men with microphones clipped on their collars eyed teenagers as they passed and would open doors for someone if approached, or not if it was someone like me in jorts and knock-off Nikes.

I had planned a route that took me to highlights and to the ordinary, the five-star and unspoken. I had seen most of guidebook Japan, so I wanted something abnormal normal. I had read up on the history of the land I was tramping through and also wanted to see the locations etched thickly through time.

The history of Ginza is the story of money mountains rising and eroding, rising and eroding again. After the accountants riding the final tide of Feudal Japan stockpiled their wealth in Ginza, the sixteenth century Edo Era saw a turn in fortune. Prostitutes arrived in Ginza and then the brutal Shogun himself, Tokugawa, who erected his fortress-palace next door and

connected the two neighborhoods with what is still known as “Japan’s Bridge.” It was there that the city’s horror show sprung. Adulterers and priests who’d fucked their last were tacked to walls on Japan’s Bridge, spread-eagle for public whim. Murders were lowered deep into holes, leaving their heads exposed, rusty saw blades scattered around them. Other skulls were skewed on pikes, bodies flayed, shattered. Felons were shackled to the railings and left to dangle. Most people who were not criminals shied away from Ginza.

Then in the mid-1800s, Americans used black gunboats to pry open Japan to trade. The Shogun fell, and the Emperor returned to power. Ginza again attired in glitter.

Then during the war, Ginza was firebombed and blackened into a rubble-strewn shell. As much as fifty percent of Tokyo and 100,000 of its occupants were erased by indiscriminate bombing. The Imperial Palace was destroyed, but the emperor escaped. He later broadcast capitulation from a library in the palace’s basement. Next door, ruined Ginza served as home to malnourished refugees.

But again, by the 1980s, the economy bubbled, Japan recovered. One could buy sushi wrapped in gold leaf in Ginza fish stores. You could find a toilet to squat on lined with mink fur. Salarymen strolled around Ginza with briefcases filled with cash looking to spend it all. And why not when history was bound to crash down around you.

Ginza is modest now since the eighties’ economy popped. On holidays and weekends, Ginza still blocks off streets to traffic. Metal chairs with tables with umbrellas sprout from asphalt as shoppers picnic. They are guarded by smiling, elderly police.

I have never felt at home in the burnished side of cites, the exploitative, somehow glamorized minority of platinum. The austere sheen leaves me feeling mildly nauseous in a way I know is not justifiable. I think I’m more used to the unshowered grime of a mountain trek, the

laces of boots rather than the heels of Gucci. Not in an ethical sense, but in the way that money and those accustomed to it speak an unfamiliar language.

But Yumiko, my girlfriend, now wife, worked in Ginza and lent the place for me an odd, endearing atmosphere. We used to meet up at a five-way Ginza intersection for dates, crowds like an ocean tide-shifting around us, the glare of animated billboards and taxi belches surrounding. At an intersection, thinking about her, I craned up and double-took a glass-coated building with roof-rotating restaurant. Under which, Yumiko tolled away, crunching mileage, sending vessels into calm seas outside Indonesia. I smiled at the building as if it could manifest into her form. It reminded me of a line by Brian Doyle, "There are a few moments in life when you are idly dreaming about a book, a place, a meal, a girl, and you look up and there is your dream before you."

I ached at the base of this fairly ordinary construction: bone-white with plastic windows and a subpar eatery that spun like a globe on its axis. Hundreds, thousands of pedestrians huffing by.

What did she think of my urban stroll? She would rather I stayed home and had a glass of red wine waiting for her after an eye-glazing day. Sometimes I did that. Sometimes I hiked. My mind tabulating my proper level of guilt.

These days, ten years on, I stay at home more. I also write and cook, and I think we're happier. But I doubt I would have understood it this way when I was punishing my feet across a city.

The uncanny sentiment I had for the silver-waxed neighborhood of Ginza made me drift, as I walked, to the value I placed on my home, an outburst in the Texas panhandle, Lubbock.

Home of Buddy Holly and cotton fields stretched to the horizon. Whose monotony and conservative political redoubt are as well-heralded as Japan's anime and hot springs.

I grew up in the sweltering heat and dust storm haboobs, churches barging into biology classrooms, and yet I know enough citizens and contradictions about Lubbock that my chest swells with air whenever I enter its city limits. I visit the well-attended gay bar across the street from the college football stadium and attend the coffee shop where most of the baristas are atheists. I bike with the wine-art crawl that as vibrant as the ones I've seen in New York.

My memory dances with all that I have known about myself and those around me, those who've turned me into who I am. A place so intricately connected to my human experience of it that to disdain it would be to cut from myself a piece.

Tokyo, for me, writing with a distance of three thousand miles and a decade, is standing and staring up at Yumiko's work building and waiting for her to come out. Which I would do on days when I wasn't hiking across the city or trekking elsewhere.

New York for me is just a town of mostly strangers that pay too much rent and compare their home too often to others. This isn't objective, but then I'm exhausted with t attempts to rank the livability of lives. I spent three days walking across the world's largest city, but the most memorable moment for me occurred the first morning when I almost stopped my trip entirely to wait for my girlfriend to get off work.

The story of how Tokyo became a city should inspire insipid Hollywood to finish siphoning off the dregs of American history for scripts such as *Monuments Men* or *Bridge of Spies* and turn to Medieval Japan.

In 1456, an uneducated ruffian who schooled himself on Chinese classics, Ōta Dōkan, known as the "Warrior Poet," was the first to build a castle in Tokyo, then called Edo. The

location, the Warrior Poet realized, would put a vast distance between himself and mainland Asian invaders, which when I recall various hordes, seems a real threat. Edo sat within what is still the largest alluvial plane in Japan, a flatness like a chessboard, perfect for rice and its byproducts. Rivers converged into a bay for shipping.

Ōta built up fortifications for thirty years. In the meantime, the Warrior Poet sheltered monks and aristocrats during a civil war in the 1470s that bloodied many intellectuals and destroyed much of ancient Kyoto.

Some say because of this, or because of an overlord's jealousy, the Warrior Poet was assassinated in 1486. And Edo was forgotten for a century.

In Japanese history classes, students are taught an old saying about Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu, the sixteenth-century samurai who created the largest city on earth.

If a songbird refused to sing, Oda, the psychopath, killed it. If a songbird refused to sing, Toyotomi, the bully, would threaten it. Meanwhile, Tokugawa, whose future Shogunate line stretched for two and a half centuries, would wait on the bird. Murder, coercion, patience: the midwives of Tokyo.

Edo, 1590: the hamlet snug within the swamp of an inlet bay where people in wrap-around robes wear straw sandals and fish with long bamboo poles. Cranes spear invertebrates beside them. Rice paddies fan in the distance. Snow-capped Fuji hovers above the sea (often in the 21st century obscured by smog).

But this wasn't ideal; life expectancy hovered in the mid-forties. And elsewhere in central Japan, around the outskirts of Kyoto, you might see a defeated warrior roasting alive. Serial killer-samurai Oda Nobunaga enjoyed burning his unarmed, surrendered enemies. Up to 20,000

were torched in his lifetime, by one estimate. When he wasn't tormenting disarmed supplicants, he was slaughtering Buddhist priests because he didn't trust them. On at least one occasion he killed and burned an entire monastic complex.

Oda had come closest to unifying Japan with warfare. The lawless days of wandering samurai were at an end, and the arts were gaining traction as entertainment for calmer times. A bloodthirsty man with a dandy's taste, Oda became an accomplished actor and singer.

He was dancing in Noh play, with his young son, when his enemies killed his guards, barred the door, and incinerated the temple. Fittingly, the Oda family was scorched out of existence.

His successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, was kinder to his foes, to a degree. When he rose to power, he favored kidnaping nobility instead of burning them. Toyotomi was tactful in persuading and consolidating the last of unruled Japan. In doing so, he realized there were future conquests beyond his shores. He manifested a navy and invaded Korea.

Toyotomi had wisely organized his underlings in a way that stripped them of power, but one of them was Tokugawa Ieyasu. Toyotomi sniffed Tokugawa's ambition and sent him far away from Kyoto, to the Eastern edge of the country. Tokugawa was given command of a hamlet barely anyone knew, Edo, forgotten since the Warrior Poet's days. This was Toyotomi's miscalculation.

Edo spread upon the widest fertile plain in the country. A nation's length from enemies. Filled with fish, rice, people, and money.

The future sire of three centuries of Shoguns saw in Edo what the Warrior Poet had seen, a natural fortress with miles of rice paddies as good as any moat. He also saw the means to feast

his armies. While Toyotomi had been looking east, Tokugawa sharpened his sword. He counted the warlords loyal to him.

Unfortunately for the bully, Toyotomi, his Korea campaigns ended in disaster. Twice he was defeated, his forces sent swimming home. Toyotomi lost men, money, power, and eventually his health, which left him in 1598.

When Toyotomi died, Tokugawa led his army of 70,000 from Edo against a Western force of Toyotomi's remaining loyal lords that numbered 120,000. They armed themselves with swords, shields, horses arrows, and gunpowder-fueled arquebuses. But at the Battle of Sekigaharra, the armies' horses and guns became clogged with mud from recent rains. Their fighting evolved into something cinematically primal, a *Braveheart* on a different island. Swords lopped off heads, which cannonballed while innards slithered on the wet ground. The rain and blood and mud combined into steaming stew.

But Tokugawa's greatest weapon was ink. For months he had promised land to turncoats. Several battalions switched sides mid-battle, causing the opposition to retreat in melee. Its leaders committed suicide. Tokugawa declared himself Shogun, supreme ruler-dictator. He remained in Edo, instead of the ancient Kyoto power seat. He took a leaf from Toyotomi's book and held his lord's children hostage, forcing their families to beat down the now most traveled road in Japan, the Tokaido, from Kyoto to the new-fashioned Tokyo.

As the lords marched with their thousands of retainers, servants, cooks, entertainers, jugglers, bodyguards, all spreading money along the way, the road sapped as much as one half of the lords' income, funds otherwise diverted to rebellion.

Tokugawa waited at his rice paddy fortress on the bay, guarded by sheer distance and road trip expenses. The lords visited and dined; they partook of massage and fish and Edo's accompanying invention of sushi.

The world's finest and most famous woodblock prints were created to capture the culture that flowed into Tokyo, the thousands that traveled and gambled and created the art of the Floating World.

By 1781, Tokugawa's city became the largest in the world.

As I edged under the fancy marquees of Ginza and the glass displays of Rolexes and $15 chocolates, I was watching the morning millions about their work. Everywhere I glanced, men and woman donned in black suits, briskly trod their way down the road on some errand or another. Most were young, many looking anxious, plugged into an iPod. A sea of rushing hair, ties, purse straps, plastic mugs, and tailcoats. A fluidity that continued as I crossed a bridge and entered Imperial Park.

Here I wadded along with a few baby strollers, shoppers, and dog-walkers, those who didn't mind or even enjoyed diving in and out and between the armies of suits. I tried to make eye contact with these few people, who like me were dressed in shorts or Hawaiian Ts and often had a smile or an indifferent air. We were the odd people here, our purpose less recognizable.

It was Thursday, but that hadn't stopped the dozens or so tourist group from other parts of Japan, as well as from China and Germany, with their megaphones and signs wondering through the grass. Most took to the gravel path that led up to a long, wide, slopped walkway, which is chained off. Above that path sits a bridge across a moat to the Imperial Palace's inner compound. Occasionally, the emperor and empress approach from this bridge and wave from it, some 100 meters from the crowds that gather by the thousands.

I was making my way around a giant group of Chinese tourists, about a hundred or so, when my eyes fell onto a foreigner, a white man, casually dressed. He was sporting tattoo sleeves and a backpack, all alone in a sea of Asians. We glanced at each other, both in sunglasses. I knew he was looking at me just as I him, if only for a microsecond before we parted. We walked in opposite directions, and I was unable to shake the surprise I'd had of recognizing myself.

This happens to me, mirror-imaging, my face floating on another person, and I realize, with gut-prodding clarity, the absurdity of my skin. Witnessing, a white man in an Asian country opened up an inner part I was not comfortable with, the knowledge of how my race has made my existence possible. That Japan held a kind of exotic flavor partially because I was white and not used to being the minority. Suddenly, my walk had an added texture of guilt. After all, how many of us can stroll around a city and *enjoy* the sense of dissimilarity? It's a gamble, I think, when I travel, that I will get enough out of my voyage that I can justify the expense and the accounting of my privilege. A gamble that means nothing to the wider world.

Hot and sleepy and the morning rush over, I stopped in for coffee and a chain like many others whose name I forget. Everything plastic-efficient. Even my iced coffee had a straw dipped at a pre-calculated angle. The taste a crisp, burnt-brown sugar.

On my phone's GPS, I examined the route through bedroom towns I would never have visited otherwise, excited about the upcoming encounters with suburban paraphernalia. I slouched in the cafe, staring at the outside crowds. I listened to the Brazilian music murmur through speakers. Could I have been anywhere? Crowds. Music. Whispers. Iced latte. Is everywhere here because of globalization? Or was that too solipsistic? The heat was playing tricks on my clarity.

For convenience, I headed once again through Imperial Park.

Back in 1605, Tokugawa Ieyasu had celebrated his self-appointment to Shogun with the construction of the largest castle compound in the world. He cleared away the Warrior Poet's bamboo and thatched fort and set about fashioning a palace that resembled ancient Egypt's taste. Large stones were carved from mountains hundreds of kilometers away and dragged by dozens of men, the stones lubricated by seaweed. Soldiers beat drums like slavers. Backbreaking, death-dealing, construction for a patriarch, an old tale.

1500 giant stones armed Tokugawa's cathedral of war. Thousands of soldiers filled its battlements, secondary fortresses, stockpiles, munitions, bunkers, and administration. Two golden dolphins adorned the roof. Tokugawa created a system of moats with bridges that could be guarded, burned, or smashed at the front of an invasion. He molded interior waterways into a yin-yang, the Warrior Poet in fulcrum, like the butcher Oda Nobunaga who danced the Noh.

Today, the compound is the size of Manhattan's Central Park. The public can explore a fraction of this as the rest is quarantined for the Imperial Family. The paths I crisscross are Tokyo's version of The Great Lawn, a commonplace for protests after WWII, and nowadays, sometimes, outrage at North Korea. I crossed several bridges and lost myself untangling dirt paths like unspooling threads of history.

The next few hours blitzed by, leaving me steamy and with little memory. I know I angled around the gray cobblestone and giant, gothic Diet building (Japan's Congress), which was in session. The Diet guards around the cast-iron fence seemed tense, eyeing me and my little backpack, billy clubs and taser guns clenched.

Later that year, Japan threw out their conservative party which had been ruling for seventy years since the US occupation. But the tsunami of 2011 would wash away the reformers

as it did 19,000 people. A conservative prime minister would return, Abe, he who had left the Diet when his Agricultural minister had been found embezzling and hanging by his tie.

I stumbled along the green Yamanote train line which ensnares most of Tokyo, and I somehow found what I was looking for. The busiest intersection in the world.

In Shibuya Station, five fingers of pedestrian armies meet the palm of Shibuya Station's exits. A mass of a thousand people at a given time crisscrosses in six directions. I arrived at the scramble as the lights changed and accompanied the crowd towards the gyre, a throng populous enough to fill many small towns. The sensation was whirlpool, the bright flash of clothing, shoulder straps, and orange sunglasses. The animal young people with squeals and jingles of noise-makers strapped to backpacks. The glistening sun reflecting off hundreds of earrings and watches and bifocals. The old-pizza smell of humanity during summer. The hive of life and non-life pulsating in six ways, breaking up midstream into a band of chaos that sorted itself out when the lights turned green, somehow, for the cars to begin humming.

Walking with this mass, feeling the brushes against me, hearing chuckles and the voices on the giant digi-billboards hanging from buildings, was, to me, to take in the pulse of a thriving, if one-sided humanity. Here we all were, I thought, walking, enjoying soft drinks and Starbucks, headed towards different destinations. We experienced the bright lights and beat of two thousand shoes, but distantly, I imagined, intent on whatever it was we desired that day, as any, but each desire colliding with a thousand others, a galaxy of thoughts merging.

I understood then why people who have a choice live in cities; they rise amid a din of life-sustaining humanity. This is the other thing you don't get in the mountains beside the wine and art: the turmoil of raging human energy.

Across the street was a small taiko drumming group. No microphones, just the basal power of cow skin stretched across cedar-bodied logs. The group's costumes were indelicate, cotton robes with vermillion fringe tassels. They had a crowd circling them, many young with their dogs, taking pictures. But I was swept by, caught in a current.

I trampled on and the drums died behind me as the crowds flocked to pachinko parlors, love hotels (rooms rented by the hour), and concert halls. But I wanted the floating sensation of moving with the town-sized crowd again, so I turned upstream. But on second cross, someone crushed my foot, forcing me to halt. The man in suit and glasses slammed into my back, toppling me. My hand on the street nipped by shoes. As I recovered, a few sharp elbows caught me in the ribs. The chaos didn't favor me anymore. It rewarded my greed with a stubbed toe and confusion. And stares, as I reached the end of the pavement with three people gawking at me, mumbling. The other side of life — the misunderstandings, micro-violences, why people leave cities. And I had to cross again to get where I was going.

I spent the next few hours following footpaths, which were as wide as a Volkswagen Beetle, surrounded by greenery, a break from the pavement. They were frequented by students with banana-yellow backpacks and mothers with strollers and the lycra color-wheel of joggers. As the sun set, I realized I was more or less perfectly following the direction I wanted, west-by-northwest.

I entered the city of Mitaka. I trampled over another train track and bypassed another busy train station. Japan is a railway geek's wet dream. Of the fifty busiest train stations in the world, measured by people passing through a station's gates, Japan has 45 of them, around half in Tokyo. By far, Tokyo runs the most extensive city rail network in history, with 158 lines of track, including subway, 40 million passenger uses per day (14 billion in a year).

It's statistics like that which make me want to move back to Japan if I could when I contemplate walking across any car-fouled city in my home country. Also, Japan's trains are clean and Mussolinian on-time. Train riding, itself, a vacation. Unless, that is, you logjam with the morning rush.

A train ride sounded medicinal when I realized my error, wearing old socks that were coming apart and sandpapering my heals. When I checked my foot at a bench, I was impressed by one blister's half-dollar size. I slipped on my spare socks for protection

Physically spent, I looked for a room to stay. Another tactical error as there were no hotels in this bedroom town. Pre-smartphone era behavior, I pit-stopped a convenience store and questioned the two elderly, aproned, hair-netted madams behind the counter as I purchased a packet of squid jerky.

"Here? No, no hotels here, one said. "This is a place where a lot of people live you know." She eyed me.

Why would I want to sleep here? Probably to have sex with someone, she surmised. She fled to talk with another old lady who confirmed her story. Nowhere to sleep.

"Why don't you go into Tokyo?" the first lady asked.

"Because I'm walking," I said. I explained my task.

"But why?"

"So I can learn about Japan, well Tokyo anyway."

They look at each other. "Couldn't you read a book?"

I liked to think I could be charming: "But if I read a book, I wouldn't get to talk to you two."

But the effect didn't take. "Well, we're not anything special," the first one said.

“We don’t have anything to tell you about Japan,” the second one said. “You should read a book like that.”

“Do you get a lot of foreigners here?” I asked.

Their smiles fell. If there was one way to stall a conversation in Japan, it was to point out my foreignness.

“We get foreigners here from time to time,” the second one said.

I reverted to my quest. “So, if,” I said with a smile, “there was a place to sleep —?”

“Why don’t you try about a mile up the road?” the first one said.

So, a mile later I popped in another 7-11. I was passing one every block, and this one was also staffed by two *obasan.* They claimed I needed to walk a mile back and I’d find a lively neighborhood where I’d find a hotel. They pointed the way.

“But I just left a konbini there and they said to walk this way.”

“I have no idea what they must have been thinking.”

“Maybe they were just scared of me,” I said, winking and smiling. The woman just eyed each other.

At some point I caught myself in a store mirror with a dawning revelation: I was a 6-4, white dude with long hair, scraggly goatee, who may have been perfuming the convenience store with a collection of aromas from his walk across downtown.

One of the women mentioned the police, which I first I took this as threatening. Then I remembered Japan’s police are street-wise guides and many of them parse English. They thumbed the way.

At the police box, a cop rose from his chair, square-headed, bulky, wearing what I assumed was a bulletproof vest. When I queried about a hotel to stay, he said, “What, you want

a love hotel or something?" The nerve he must have thought I had to ask a cop where to have sex.

"No," I laughed. "I just want to sleep."

"What are you doing here?" He examined me top to bottom. It could have been my imagination, but I believed he calculated how to throw me to the ground. I explained.

"Why would you do that? It's hot," he said, amazing how seven words could deflate me.

I relayed something at least a quarter true. "I'm trying to write about Japan. So this is research." I shrugged my shoulders and rolled my eyes to let him know this could be just as bad an idea as I thought. Also, my Japanese was conversational, but nuanced explanations eluded me.

"So you're a writer?"

I thought about this and said, "I want to write."

He flipped open a thick binder of papers with scale maps of town. He fingered a red dot.

"Here's where we are. There's a manga cafe about a block away. It's the only place to stay within five miles if you're walking."

"Oh so it's just that way?" I pointed.

"Yes," he said, stepping out, leaving his police box door open, flapping his hand for me to follow. The neighborhood was bustling with commuters and their briefcases and groceries returning from workaday. As we walked down the sidewalk, the Tokyoites gave the officer a berth, and with the black suits flowing past us, I had the sensation of swimming up an oblique current.

On our left were several of the humming pachinko gambling parlors you find near subway stations as well as clubs where young women sit, but only sit, on salarymen's thighs. The

cop, shorter than me by about a foot, spoke up, surprising me. “When I was in high school I wanted to write,” he said.

“Really?” I said, too loudly.

He stopped and sized me again. “Sure. Everyone wants to be a writer at some point. I did too. But then I didn’t go to college, and I thought becoming a cop would be a good thing. Plus I have a wife and kid.”

I tried being magnanimous. “Well, I’m sure being a cop is cool,” I said, using the word *kakkoii*, which you might use for someone sporting overpriced sunglasses,

“Is it *kakkoii*?” he asked, eyebrows furrowed.

“I think so?” We were silent for a block.

“Do you still write?” I asked.

“Oh,” he sounded bored, “No, no time. This neighborhood keeps me busy.”

“Is it a good neighborhood or a bad one?” I don’t know why I asked this. Maybe the heat was scrambling my end of the conversation. I thought he was going to eyeball me again, but instead, he turned his head down a busy street as if looking for the answer. It occurred to me I was implying that he might not be doing his job.

“Oh, it’s a good one. A very good one.”

“Looks like it.” I exhaled my judgment.

“So what do you do now? Writer?”

“No, teacher.”

“What will you do, I mean in your future?” he asked. “It’s hard to write and make money. Or do you not want a family?”

I hadn't predicted that my personal questions would so boomerang. I stammered out an answer, "Well, maybe be a college professor?"

"Oh, a college professor? That's good, isn't it? I thought about that too. But, too much reading."

I was stupidly stunned again. Why did I sometimes feel like it would be easy for me to live and imagine other people's lives but not them live nor imagine mine? When I started to ask what he liked to read he abruptly halted and pointed up the street at a building with bullet-tracers of neon lights and bright, rainbow, kanji.

"That's where you can stay. Now, be safe." He saluted and walked away.

"Really, thanks a lot," I yelled. He waved but didn't look back.

Manga cafe night wasn't pleasant. In case you're unfamiliar with manga cafes, they are mazes of foam-padded cubicles with comics where people can rent a hovel by the hour to read, peruse anime, the internet, have discreet sex, or spend the night. Plus free coffee. Manga cafe cubicles are far cheaper to rent through dawn than a hotel room.

I woke up three times to minor earthquakes. Once a woman screamed. A bit of dust fell into my eye, and when I looked up, I saw a giant air conditioner, cracks in the concrete where it was connected, and realized I was in the basement of a three-story building. I could have asked to move cubicles, but I was too far out of my mind. At about three in the morning, I gave up on sleep and decided on watching cartoons on the internet, nostalgic for a comfortable time.

In the morning, I left the cafe and followed a train with many of Mitaka's citizens piling off to work on a Friday. I'd changed into a yellow t-shirt with a fist that morphed into a tree trunk for maximum expressiveness. "Good morning," I said, too-loudly, to sleep-fogged commuters.

The day was already firecracker hot, so I choose paths along rivers, canals, green spaces, savoring shade, benches, water. This is the day, of the three across Tokyo, I remember least. I remember my wrestling with heat, the monotony of sidewalk, the thought that I was just testing myself, that this walk was one long run away from my adulthood.

At a moment befogged with this speculation, the lonely road I traveled exploded into vibrancy. I rounded a corner and there, poof, lay the city's energy spread before me, a neighborhood of humanity's creative juices. Shops and bicycles, walkers and shoppers, streets blocked to traffic. A pack of giddy kids frolicking by with ice cream cones, one of them, I lie not, fisting a string trailing to a hive of balloons.

There was music in the air, floating out of cafes and bread shops, J-pop and the ubiquitous classical jazz that finds a home in Tokyo's smokey bars. I hadn't noticed how I'd missed this, or how unnatural it seemed not having music about me, having neglected to pack any music-assemblage. I suppose for a lot of my generational contemporaries, surrounding ourselves with our chosen sound is as biological as urinating. I didn't usually think twice about packing music, but I didn't for Tokyo because I never did for hiking.

What would I have been missing, closing myself off from the stray audio experience of the urban world? So far, having tuned in that day, I was audience to the rush of automobile tires as they jettisoned street grime, the roll of leaves in a limp wind, the omnipresent hum of electric wires, and screeching of civilized birds, as well as the soft padding of my poor shoes. Disappointing, I'm afraid, except when I was creek-side or when I was bull-rushed by the crowds of this phantom, unexpected Pleasantville. I don't think I would have missed much carrying my alt-rock-filled iPod and headphones. I could have ceremoniously doffed them when nearing a stream or when blitzed by the unexpected pedestrian-laced burg.

I think what I've moved away from since I've left hiking so much is this idea of the outdoors as a counterbalance to the inequity of humanity. It seems like a retro-Edenic worship of celebrated hills and demonizing homo sapien spaces. I believe now when I hear notions of "lost humanity," finding our self "again" in wilderness (whatever that is), it seems to be a cock-hardening of oneself above all others. Deploring, in effect, all humans, except the hiker because he travels through mountains or woods or desert.

I have yet to meet a climbing-addict who doesn't goad others into hiking more, into obtaining salvation through peak-surfing. But if all humans flocked to the wild, mountains would be mounds of people. And this *is* what a city is. If you take the mountain Puritan's advice to conclusion, our peaks would be streets, our trails lined with traffic, our rivers floating with sewage, used condoms, and a bird species or four in the trees. And to say it's ok for *me* to summit mountains, but not everyone seems the crassest sort of un-self-aware privilege. The great thing about cities is a nod towards democratization. And a smiling boy with an ice cream in one hand and a horsetail of balloon strings in the other while jazz fills the air also helps.

Music, when it came floating out of cafes or from the earphones wrapped around my neck helped me negotiate the over-sensed world a middle-space, a comfortable level of existence. To argue myself though, I remember, also backpacking in South-Central Colorado, with a Walkman and a case of the CDs (in the early aught years) and not once listening to any song because something *did* feel off. The silence of the Weminuche Wilderness was deafening and invasive in a way that penetrated earphones. I was missing something.

Perhaps my personal negotiation space with the world isn't any other's. Maybe the hum of the city creates a gap in my hearing, an unsteadiness that is mollified by music. Maybe tunes complete how I interact with the urban world in a way that is, as much as anyone can tell, the

way I was born. I don't think it's a mistake to treat urbanity like a living wilderness. In any forest, you have to plan and prepare for how to adapt.

I didn't want to waste precious phone battery kindling it to life, so I had no idea where I was. Somewhere between downtown Tokyo and the mountains of Ome, a heretofore unheralded suburb enclave. It didn't occur to me in my heat-addled brain to ask anyone. Nor did I stop in any of the cafes or gyoza shops. Perhaps I was too wrapped in the blanket of joy and heat that I zipped by.

Eventually, descending a hill, I espied a Key Coffee sign in the window of a small store on a gray street, and I walked in hoping to get a late-morning caffeine lunch. The door seemed to nearly come off its corroded hinges when I opened. Inside the darkened and steamed room, emerged dusty and newspaper-splattered tables slouching about, faded Enka calendars circling the walls, and an ancient glass bottle Coke machine in one corner. I looked to the right and saw garlic and bowls lining the counter, and realized it was a noodle shop.

There was a hum from a window air conditioner, and I sat before it, realizing too late my mistake. The Arctic air stormed the room, carrying the current of my unwashed bodily tropics to the customers who had been staring at me since I walked in. Now they jerked their heads as if punched. I moved to a bar against the wall, out of the telltale stream.

"You're not from Japan," one of the customers said in English. A dead-ringer for a Japanese Martin Sheen, white hair, serious chin. A trench coat in the heat, newspaper in fists.

"No, I'm not. Are you?" I said, deciding to be playful.

He got the joke, smiling. "Yes, I'm from Okinawa. Do you know where that is?"

"Sure." The man carried on amicably in English and claimed he was a film producer. When I asked, he wouldn't divulge his name. "I can't because I'm famous."

"Will you tell me part of your name?" I asked.

"No." He stabbed his eyes around the restaurant at the old woman wiping the counter and the other customer elbowed up to print journalism.

"I live here, and I don't want my name to get around," he said. "But if I told you my name you would have heard of me."

Not unless his name was Kurosawa or Ozu, I thought. "I don't know very many Japanese movies," I confessed.

"You'd know mine. I also produce music."

Something about this deadpan, blow-hardy audacity amused me. It made me grin, widely. I was resistant to celebrity, though who can go all the way and say she or he doesn't care? But claiming celebrity? That seemed inventive. Wasn't the mark of fame curated false modesty? Or was the man more youthful than the fifty-sixty years he looked?

The ramen *obasan* shuffled over and asked me what I'd like to drink.

"Do you have iced coffee?" I said.

"Sure," She obliged and reached behind the counter and screamed a high-pitched wail that startled the room. "No, wait! I'm such a stupid old grandma. We don't have coffee." she said, then began hitting her skull with a flour-strewn palm, the motion repeated more times than necessary, her head spasming back with each blow. A sight made more disturbing because it carried the tinge of familiarity. "We ran out," she said. "Only Coca-Cola. I can't believe I forgot we don't have coffee. Would you like a Coca-Cola?"

I didn't usually, but was I going to say "no" to a self-abusing *obasan*?

"What'll you'll have to eat, sonny?" she then asked, seeming to recover.

"Miso Ramen?" I said, fearing another masochistic explosion.

“Sure, we have that.” She trampled behind the counter and waited, staring at the old man who perched on a stool. She put both her hands on her hips and smacked him on the shoulder with her palm. Her violence seemed a common form of dialogue.

“Why don’t you make the ramen for the customer,” she said. “You’re just sitting here not doing anything. I have all this cleaning to do...” The rest I didn’t understand, but it was a class-act scolding. The old man rose, shook himself. His eyes sagged, lips parched. He wore a blue chest apron that revealed a fading golf shirt. He rubbed his eyes and grabbed a wok, but before cooking, he wrinkled his nose at something behind the counter. Investigated. Retrieving a gallon jug of pickled eggs, he held it, eye level, sniffed, recoiled and then poured the batch in a trashcan.

“This place isn’t very clean,” the famous movie producer revealed, perhaps watching my eyes.

“Well, I’ve seen worse,” I said, which might have been true.

“Do you like Japanese movies?” The producer asked.

I decided to be honest and what’s more, I wanted to rattle him, the sneaky side of me rising from its hovel. “Not really. Most of them aren’t very good.”

He showed offense. I don’t know why I was surprised. “What Japanese movies have you seen?” I rattled off a few and then said that at the movies the previews for the scores of other films to come out always looked so invariably insipid, usually about high school failed love. To reconcile, I compared this to Hollywood’s motley assortment of disappointments.

“Well, then, what movies *do* you like?”

I laughed. He wore a scowl, and the question was comically pointed. I judged him fairly or unfairly as ridiculous. I looked him with what I hoped was a non-confrontational smile and

said, “good ones.” He said something about certain directors I should see more of. Ozu predictably came up, a few others whose names I didn’t know and didn’t write down. The subject of me gurgled.

“I want to write,” I told him at some point.

He leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Writing’s a very difficult profession. I know. I’ve tried writing. I’ve tried writing screenplays. Some work out, but I’ve only been able to sell a few. It’s a hard business.”

“I don’t want to write screenplays.”

Perhaps he thought this was a challenge. “What, no one reads books anymore. You’d better write screenplays.”

“But you just said —”

“It’s worse for books.”

“Have you written any books?” Now we were arguing.

He forced a laugh. “Trust me; you’ll see when you get older.”

Which, of course, is the dead end of any argument. But I couldn’t help thinking of all the books I *did* read and of all the train-rider-readers I saw in Tokyo (Japan is one of the world’s most literate countries) and remember the many bookshops near Yumiko’s place. And also, of how many screenplays there were in the world. How many of them flop. The only more malicious business to break into besides writing was *show* business. Perhaps the only business with more pretensions.

We said some more things. I mostly let him have his way, realizing I would write about the director as soon as he or I left (the memoirist gets the last word) and talked about the things I usually talked about in Japan, — beer, America, cultural politics. He said one thing that made

him human for me. He was surprised as people usually were when I told them I lived and worked as a teacher in a tiny village of 900 in the mountains. In turn, he revealed he'd moved to Tokyo, of all places, to calm down. "Things were busy in Okinawa. It's a beautiful place, but, in a way, it's like Hollywood. Everyone goes down there for the sun and to be famous and make films. But hardly anyone does. Too much ambition. I came here for a little quiet. Also because the people around here don't dream of screenplays or anything like that. They're just simple in the way I'm simple too."

What he said was more nuanced than that. But just as jaw-hangingly confounding. Tokyo the land without ambition? I judged he was sincere, caught up in his self-claimed Okinawa movie world to believe this. To believe Japan's New York City was where practical people resided with no thoughts of fame or recognition. Despite the vast majority of the TV and film of Japan took place in Tokyo.

The last thing he said was, healing earlier jabs, our swords holstered, "When you get old and you get famous for writing. I encourage you to move to a place like this in your own country."

Before I left, I asked to use the bathroom, and the *obasan* showed me to a staircase crowded with empty liquor bottles from bottom step to top. As I climbed, I realized the lady and her husband lived here; clothes flung about and a shower with a toilet revealed themselves between more stacks of newspapers. There were shampoo bottles scattered on the floor and a clump of hair in the sink. Much like my bathroom.

Something about this left me joyful, my mood rebounding like a gymnast recovering from an unstable tumble. Something about the bathroom seemed *real* in a way I often craved.

Was I committing the same atrocity as the phantom movie-maker, believing these elderly to be unthreateningly “common”? Yes, I believe I was.

After leaving the ramen shop, my life vanished until I walked on the hot streets, sweaty, into the chain gyoza store, hours later, where I sat at the bleach-white counter and ordered dumplings from the sour-looking young cook. Then I remember following a thoroughfare because it was prominent, cars revving angrily beside me. I Zenned into a mowing grass-like trance.

I had been trying to take side streets to get away from cars and check out gardens and porches. But the roads, as they tend to do, wound themselves into spaghetti noodles and dead-ended, involving lots of grumbling and back-tracking. I was sticky and dizzy, and slogged along the road, wishing again for music.

After I left the gyoza chain (loading up my water bottles on free water), I trampled along a concrete path along the car-fogged road. After an hour or two, the sun arching down, the neighborhood softened. I entered something of a tourist hovel, a few shops and eateries, not deep but against the road. I realized I could smell the Tama River nearby and that I was following it up to its source in the mountains. This wide river, which empties into Tokyo Bay, originates in rocks of the town where I teach. It was a modest, muddy sweep of river that rested between two cut-grass banks, sandwiched by fenced yards. Upstream, it was damned, powered much of Tokyo, and gave its residents drinking water.

Following the war, when 800,000 repatriated troops disbanded in Tokyo, one could often find wounded, maimed, or glossy-eyed soldiers begging, sleeping, or staring at far away clouds near the shores of the Tama. The British and Russians kept many Japanese prisoners for slave labor as the Japanese had done. Fed half rations and returned after, sometimes five years later,

the starved, hallowed men swamped the cool water's edge in summer, looking for handouts. During the post-war occupation, American GIs favored dumping their used condoms into Tokyo's waterways. At the Imperial Palace, retainers used a wire scoop to fish out prophylactics once a week.

The homeless riverbank vets met with the floating condoms, occupational boogie-woogie blaring from loudspeakers, and drunk GIs with their arms around new-fashioned local prostitutes. It wasn't just the vets who were depressed. Writer Osamu Dazai, who grew up in north Japan and who often stayed in the mountains of Yamanashi where I lived, moved to Tokyo and developed, it seems, the explicit intent to drink himself insane and drown himself in the Tama River. He was a self-styled irreverent "decadent writer," a Hemingway-esque member of the barfly intelligentsia. In the economically thin but publishing boom of the postwar, the decadent writers swarmed Tokyo's back alleys and coughed back a mixture of sweetener and airplane engine lubricant while they discussed writing. Or they swilled a more repellent drink called "kasutori shōchū" which left some writers blind.

War, as Osamu Dazai saw it, had been a forced march through hell and spiraling darkness. Degeneracy, he thought, might shatter the power structures and yield hope. Dazai's post-war novels epitomize a nation lost, hovering outside itself, watching the firebombing of their once-confident cities, much like the protagonist of *The Setting Sun* watches the proverbial self-immolation of her stubborn, war-torn brother.

In *The Setting Sun,* Dazai wrote, with typical beauty-laced-with-bitterness, "I like roses best. But they bloom in all four seasons. I wonder if people who like roses best have to die four times over again." Likewise, Dazai would have to attempt suicide four times before he perfected it, once disastrously botching a joint suicide attempt with a girlfriend who died. Finally, in 1948,

soaked with whiskey, Dazai tied a sash around himself and a courtesan, and the couple heaved themselves into the Tama River. Dazai was discovered three days later.

Another of his contemporaries, Nobel Laureate Yasunari Kawabata, who later suicided, wrote at the time, “I have the strong, unavoidable feeling that my life is already at an end. For me, there is only the solitary return to the mountains and rivers of the past.” Not a despairing person myself, I was still an acolyte of these postwar Japanese writers probably because of how grippingly self-aware they wrote. I was haunted and ensnared by their reflective sentences. Trudging along Osamu Dazai’s death river, I could feel the lyricism in the waters, in the haunting idea of return.

Slogging along, I noticed a bait-and-tackle store along the street-front nearing what looked like a suburban center. I’d entered the town of Fussa, which I learned later houses a US military air base, along with the usual workings: fast food, clothes box stores, love hotels. The bait-and-tackle shop sported a Coke sign and contained several tables. A thin young man in a Tokyo Giants blue shirt and Tokyo Giants cap, my age, was at the counter. He looked up and fled his work tying flies to talk with me. He said his day had been slow, and he hadn’t had a chance to practice his English. He sat with me and brought me a beading cola, and I was happy to have the company and the respite, and equally euphoric that the sun had slipped over the edge of the building across the street.

He was parseable in English, though we spoke in a kaleidoscope of our languages. A year or so ago, he said, he’d held a job at a dairy plant, squirting udders into cartoons, but gave it up after a few years, allergic to corporate possessiveness.

“I was working 8 to 5, but you know it’s never really that. You can’t leave at five because you’d never be promoted. So I’d stay with the other guys until six, seven, eight. Sometimes nine.

And then we'd go out drinking with the boss, and I'd get home at two in the morning and have to work again in the morning. But more than that, I just couldn't take they way they treated women. They had a couple of women working there and they were just kicked like dogs. So I quit. I know I did nothing to help those women, but I couldn't stay there. You know, it does something to your — "

At this, he gestured to his stomach. "Soul," he said. "Is that the word?"

His was a story I was familiar with. Two of Yumiko's favorite places were tiny coffee shops owned by middle-aged men who had escaped companies, abandoning job, security, and workplace camaraderie. They, like this tackle store owner named Hiro, had chosen a quieter, struggling life.

"My shop's not doing that well," Hiro said. "But since I was a boy I've loved fishing. My grandpa took me fishing, then my dad. My dad died, but he didn't have a business to leave me like some dads. He'd tried owning a store selling sweets, but it didn't work out and he ended up working for the same milk factory. Tying flies is something I'm good at. Plus, I just wanted a store where people could come in and talk."

I asked him where to fish around Tokyo. I'd just taken the sport up half-heartedly with a co-worker and was interested if there were good spots around. He got up and got some polaroids. Almost every one was underexposed and dark, but there were identifiable grains of him with a fish, under flash. One bass was the length of his arm.

"I caught this at five in the morning," he said. "When the fish don't see you."

We were sitting on a table that was a polished cross-section of a truck-sized cheery tree set atop crates. The rings of the cherry ran like waves beneath our arms and caught the light at captivating angles. Above it hung pictures of marlin and taxidermied trout.

“Cool isn’t it?” he asked of his setup. He was proud of his catches and talked about each one. He asked what I did, and for once, I just said I was an English teacher, didn’t mention my writing, nor my walk.

“How are Japanese kids?” he asked. He pulled out a cigarette and began smoking.

“They’re fun,” I said, thinking I was in a good mood or I might say something else, though neither adjective would be more truthful.

He laughed. “I wasn’t a very good child, so I wouldn’t want to be a teacher. My bad behavior would come back to me.”

“I wasn’t a good kid either.”

“Really?”

“I can’t say I’m a very good teacher.”

He laughed. “It’s hard to teach. People think Japanese kids are so well-behaved, but it’s not like that. So many Japanese kids are bad.”

“Well, my kids are all right,” I said.

“I hope mine are.”

He noticed my surprise. He reached back to a table and retrieved another Polaroid, this one revealing his two sons, one who looked like he was about to enter elementary school. The man was 25.

Perhaps he sensed what I was wondering. “It was hard “when I quit the dairy," he said, "I didn’t know if I could be a good father. I still don’t know. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll have to close up this shop.” He blew smoke, pregnant with thinking, “It’s hard to have everything you want, dream kids, dream wife, dream job.” He said the word “dream” in the heavily accented

Japanese way that drags the word out into "du-reem-a-mu" and made the sentence even weightier.

"Sometimes I wonder how long I can hold it together. I can't give up my family, but I can't return to that work. It'll kill me or I'll kill myself."

It occurred to me that behind his shop ran the portentous Tama. That what lay in front of Hiro was the real present and not the idealism of innocence. If he could survive, I thought, Osamu Dazai would be proud.

And here's the moment I regret. The man was just settling into a conversation with another cigarette. And we were getting into serious *terra incognita*, and I felt like it was time for *me* to reveal myself in turn. My fears. The day was cooling, comfortable. But I'd planned on walking a few hours more and didn't want to be jogging along the street in the dark with the crush of cars at my elbow. I wonder now if the man's maturity and accountability and good nature also made me feel a little questioning of myself. My struggles of love and finance made thinner by comparison to his acrobatic acts.

Anyway, abruptly, I announced I had to go. The man was disappointed but showed it only slightly. I do not remember what he said when we parted, and I didn't write it down either, but I remember the sense of childhood as I left him, which is how I often felt while teaching, the forgotten past rushing up to meet me, the sense of meeting someone whose knowledge or experience of the world cracks open something new inside me.

Less than thirty minutes up the road, my legs began cramping, tentacles of pain crawling up my thighs. I knew I'd have to find a place to stay, though I was still two hours from where I wanted to be. The bleached-white sidewalk morphed into cobblestones as I limped into a shopping district, business storefronts with polished windows and dwarfing signs, giving me

shade in what I knew must be a thriving neighborhood. A liver-spotted old man on a one-speed bicycle cranked by, and when I said, “sumimasen,” and asked for a hotel, he turned around and I realized it was another blue-visored cop.

He growled, “A love hotel?”

“No, no, no. I’m looking for a regular hotel.”

He looked me up and down. “You really want a hotel?”

“Of course I do.”

“A business hotel?” He narrowed his eyes. “Not a love hotel?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Well,” He peddled on at a pace I could keep up with. When he came to a side street, he directed me up it and gave me complicated directions. He turned around on his bike. I gave him a little bow and thanked him excessively. He pedaled on, and I turned on my heels to cross the street. There was a screech of tires. I didn’t even see the car, until the driver leaned out the window and yelled, “Oi!” which can be translated as, “Hey, shitbird!”

For I had almost become one of the 5,000 American pedestrians a year whose last sensation is the unforgiveness of axles and tires. I stared and cried “Sorry.” The car wheeled around. I crossed the street, my pulse leaping in my throat. Wondering what if this had been my last day walking across a jungle of cars. A man fallen prey to the beasts on the city ecosystem.

I entered the bursting downtown of Fussa, about 10,000 with a train station area like many Japanese towns, a half-dozen pachinko parlors with their popping lights and smoke curling out their doors, windows tinted so you didn’t know who was inside, family, friends, bosses, students. The hotel was hard to find, but I was tired and not looking hard. As it happened, I

walked past, several blocks too far north, then walked south, a block too far west, circling it, shark-like.

I saw a couple of American soldiers up the street, easy to pick out by their square shoulders, crew-cuts, no-necks, and the way they bunched together, in-time, in-stride, fresh off the boat. The men stared up the buildings. Gawked open-mouthed. They appeared vulnerable that way, curious like children, despite veiny biceps.

“How you doing, man?” the one in the center asked.

“Doing real good. What are you guys doing?”

“We’re in the Navy. Base isn’t too far from here, what about you?”

“I teach English.”

“Oh great! You’ll make things so much easier.”

I gave him a little wave and thought about that. Of course, assuming the Japanese should learn his language was self-centered. But that was the American military enterprise in Japan itself. The richest, strongest military conquering Japan seventy years ago and maintaining fortresses and armed-to-teeth soldiers in its capital’s suburbs. Many Japanese newspaper editorials wondered aloud when the USA military was going to leave. This I think was a macrocosm of my own work there. I wonder how many of Kosuge’s parents and elders approved of my stay. An odd foreigner, being trusted because there was no alternative.

The lobby of the Fussa Business Hotel was Raymond Chandler-dark. The carpet off-purple or viciously blood-stained, at least forty years old. The paint peeling, geriatric furniture. It occurs to me now that I may have stumbled into a nondescript love hotel, one no different from scores others, with rooms for the one thing that drives so much human impulse, and just didn’t know it.

The bell boy was watching TV. I rang the bell, and he stood up, all sixteen years of him, laced in khaki, with brass buttons and a hat that he adjusted so it sat upright on a mess of mop hair. He tucked his shirt in. He finished, looked up. “Yes?” he said, more a statement of confusion than a question.

“Do you have room?”

He laughed. “Sure.”

“Can I get a room?”

He stared at me.

“A room. I want a room.”

He started shifting his eyes sideways as if looking for help. I tried rotating through my Japanese language Rolodex, “I want to stay here.”

He looked down at the lobby carpet and laughed.

“Uh...” he said.

“Not here,” I pointed at the floor. “There.” I pointed at the ceiling.

He looked up. My patience departed. “I want to sleep here!”

He jumped. “Oh,” he said. He had me sign the register and pay. When I left him, I never saw another person in the hotel, nor heard another human-made sound. I was too tired to wonder if the “hotel” was a yakuza front or a coitus making-destination or some derelict property that anyone else would know better than to patron. Walking to my room with the floorboards creaking, I paused on the dim landing of the second floor. My door was at the top of the stairs. In the room, two twin beds with dusty sheets and a window unit. I stripped naked and stood in front of the air conditioner. Cold showered. Then I sat, still naked on the floor, my head against the thin mattress of one of the beds and dozed.

I missed Yumiko and called, our talk short to save battery. I knew she worried about my walk about the road and the cars. I caught the sadness in the phone's voice, the truth leaking out of her that she'd had another mind-crushing day that had coerced its pound of flesh. The call to Yumiko was maybe, oddly, the aspect of my walk across Tokyo that separated the adventure from anything else I had done, the confirmation of the worry I sometimes have that, while tramping, my time could be better spent elsewhere or that there was a tradeoff with my choice, that the consequence of hiking was not only what I got out of it.

In the morning my legs were de-cramped, at least, and my blisters receding. I tossed the hotel key on the unmanned, creepy desk and left, making good time, starting off at a little after seven.

I walked two hours to Ome City and my life in Japan came full circle. Here was the place where I grocery-shopped, an hour drive from my town, where Yumiko and I had eaten yakitorri and fought in a little brick-street lined neighborhood behind the train station. We were increasingly, and fast I thought, talking about marriage and settling down. She was already planning our next move, and it was up to me to decide if I was ready for a joint immigration to my home country. Had I crept along Tokyo as a way of escaping our planning? The fleeing from important decisions until the last possible second so panic can lend its authoritarian advice was a common tactic for me. I loved Yumiko, or rather I thought of her as a part of my body, amputatable only with death. But I also knew as a homebody, Yumiko would leash my wandering ambitions. We'd traveled together to backpack craggily peaks in western Japan, exhausting for her after a blood-draining workweek.

Also, and this I wasn't able to tell her: she wasn't who I had imagined falling in with. For years I'd daydreamed of a grad student in English or environmental studies, one who mountain-

biked and didn't shave her legs. I'm amused now, Yumiko and I together ten years, knowing how our personalities feed off each other — her centering me and me freeing her darkest moods, both of us as goofy as Mel Brooks films. What I had been doing was picturing a relationship from the outside. That with Yumiko, I can't really envision how we appear, because I'm too wrapped up in who we are. As frustrating as it is, my carelessness, her excessive brooding, I'm still content and oddly proud that we made our choice. But in Japan, I held that image of the joined liberated, eco-warriors, and wouldn't erase it until well after I was married.

The last day of walking Tokyo was a green and blissful blur. Ome made the transition from urban to rural, into space few people outside Japan imagine Tokyo contains. Wild trees lined streets; the mountains slopped above the roads, which snaked their way through the valley. I followed the Tama River through the ancient volcanism that belched up the waterway. Noisy Japanese macaques scrambled over boulders, performing cliff-hanger acrobatics, staring me down, their elongated arms, scooping up their children. Rabbits scattered across the road. You wouldn't know that the same river and ecosystem would flow into Tokyo Bay with its industrial storm and bright neon and 400-dollar sushi and floating used condoms, just two days' walk away.

This was the Tokyo I'd been waiting for on my walk, and it almost seemed like a waste of time because in a way it felt like a return home. The green hills of Ome were indistinguishable from Kosuge where I lived, just as downtown Tokyo sprawl never separates from the metropolis that spreads into Chiba prefecture. Ecosystems, urban or forest, are not demarcated as lines in a map. Even when walking through mountains, I still felt I had burst from the Shibuya scrabble crosswalk, and fallen into the jungle world of white water and screaming monkeys. The human jungle is not untangleable from the more-than-human forest.

The serpentine Tama gnawed its way through a town and at a T intersection, I followed the wrong road I had not planned on taking. But following this route, I was able to trail the river, a sidewalk only a heartbeat from a highway and then the downslope to water. This was my favorite and yet least surprising day of urban crawl. For much of it, I was able to hike the cement path that trailed the Tama, where below hundreds of families, because it was Saturday, vacationed from the Tokyo heat, splashing water, frying noodles, kayaking. Dozens of restaurants abutted the banks, and I stopped into a few, to check out menus, hosts, and their views. I reclined on patios and decks shaded by cedars, listened to squeals of children.

When the cement path petered out, I was forced to walk on the two-lane road, a whiz of camper cars and the freed Tokyoites zipping uphill. This was most unnerving, probably most objectively dangerous part of my walk. What must the drivers have thought of me passing, the long-haired, sweaty gaijin with a backpack on this summer highway of escape? But the danger didn't dispel my mood. Trees, innumerable flowering cedars, lined the road, cooling my skin.

At one bend I found a store on stilts that sold hand-molded plates and mugs, and I bought a plate for Yumiko. At another moment, a village opened up in a neck of a valley, and I heard the shouts and bell clangs of a carnival. I swiveled around the side streets and found a crowd circling twelve men, be-decked in dark blue shirts and the diaper-like wraps of sumo wrestlers, sweating, hollering, smiling in the sun, bouncing a portable shrine on logs.

They jogged up the road and made a quick turn and jogged back, dancing in place, hollering, the shrine, likely a mountain god, balanced on their shoulders. Someone poured beer onto one of their heads. They tilted up their chins to drink.

At a restaurant with white napkins, I sat for a hamburger steak and coffee and to write in my notebook, oblivious to my t-shirt and sweat. I scribbled. But I lost concentration when realizing that the music was a single Carpenters song on repeat, “Yesterday Once More.”

Every Sha-la-la-la
Every Wo-o-wo-o
Still shines
Every shing-a-ling-a-ling
That they're startin' to sing's
So fine.

I became combative then as I still do when I’m in a writing mood and a person makes ugly noises, the snob inside me unchained. The owner was rounding tables, a middle-aged woman with a kind, oval face and hair up in a bun. She had been eyeing me for the hour I was there, either out of concern or interest. Finally, she came over and practiced her English. “How are you?”

Every Sha-la-la-la
Every Wo-o-wo-o

I asked, “Is this really the same song over and over?”

She seemed joyous. “It’s the Carpenters!” she sang and clutched her heart.

“They’re great,” I said, and then added, “but the same song? Over and over.”

Every shing-a-ling-a-ling
That they're startin' to sing’s
So fine.

Her shoulders sank. “I thought all Americans liked the Carpenters.” She murmured.

“Yes, but why the same song…”

She demurred and strolled away, but didn’t ratchet the tune. So I paid and left, the look of disappointment and somehow relief on the owner as I did.

Every Wo-o-wo-o

My last memory of the day, of the walk, was the dimming sun's magic hour. I had separated from the main road and was taken a cracked and weeded side route that led into the town of Okutama, which held the closest train station to where I lived. If I wanted to continue my walk, I could wind around the mountains on a track that sideswiped a mountain lake, one that is mirror-flat, a human-made pond that powers Tokyo at an electric dam and puts up a startling reflection of the buck-toothed Chichibu Mountains.

I thought about staying the night and finishing, walking to my house, some twenty miles away, but I realized I had already crossed Tokyo. The big city lay behind Kosuge and me was where I would return once school started. My experiment, the urban jaunt, was finished, and while I had learned there was more to the city than a cesspool, I also fathomed why so many of its citizens flocked to its outskirts in a visceral way I hadn't understood until then, since I had retraced the very progression of their escape on foot. And yet (there's always a yet), I could not forget the flocks of humanity that reverberated an energy return, and drenched Tokyo with history, that murmured as I tramped, the homeland of the Warrior Poet, the bloody Bridge of Japan, the rotating restaurant beneath which my future wife tolled away, likely thinking of I as I of her.

Maybe that is the only important thing that brings me to the places I come to live and grow attached to, the tangled assortment of emotions projected onto the walls of mastodon skyscrapers or river bungalows or the sheer vastness of peaks. Maybe the awe that I sought was for a permanence that wouldn't exist because I wouldn't, one day, my love and longing vanishing like the wink of a star that has slipped below the horizon. But that was true for mountains as well as me. I've read that the ancient American Appalachians, which I always associated with permanence, have risen and fallen like waves three times over their existence.

Humanity, maybe, will last longer. Or probably not, but I won't be around to mourn. The meaning I put onto things and beings in my life amounts to more, I find now, when I pay attention to that impermanence.

I was grasping at this in my head, when I noticed a derelict shack, stripped by time, charcoal grey, shaded by cedars. A wave of marijuana smoke poured from the wood walls' prodigious cracks. The cloud was uncanny, like a thick mass of hovering flies, the aroma of a Berkley dorm room. I had to stop to in disbelief. Pot smoking is an unpardonable offense in Japan. Any foreigner would be deported if caught, and locals would lose jobs and serve prison time. It was a familiar smell from adolescence, though, and its presence in Japan, in the Tama-cut valley, transported me eight years to my high school lunches, spent doping in parks, in window-cracked cars, soaking myself in Febreze. That moment seems now a kind of time warp, the smoke a wormhole between one existence and another. The point I was caught up in was the halfway from Lubbock controlled substance escapism to an English Ph.D. navel-gazer. I looked forward then to a possible future as a teacher, as I reflect back now, spying on the figment who breathed those marijuana fumes at the end of his city-crossing quest. I did not get high, though in a way I did.

I fed the ticket machine at Okutama station some coins and plopped into in a seat just as the train doors shut. As I sat, finality drained me, something like the last bite of a meal, or hearing the melody of a movement in a symphony coda. Maybe that's romantic. What I wanted was to savor the relief at the end and had no plans of talking with anyone. But then a bald, white Australian walked in from another car, shoving ahead his two Asian children, each about ten years old. He was tall with rugby shoulders and laser eyes scanning the room. He assumed something like a military air. He spotted me and brought his progeny over. They'd been playing

in the river, he said, and they were ceremoniously noisy. The man carried a bag of climbing gear including ropes and some high-dollar tools I knew only to be of use for trad rock-climbing.

He asked what I was doing, and without thinking, I told him about my walk across the urban forest. The way his lips grimaced and his eyes kindled with fire made me believe he was a jealous, possessive type. And, perhaps, if it hadn't been for a three-day city walk, he would have found something else to feel insecure and competitive about. As it was, his eyebrows ascended to the middle of his forehead, and his lips set into a war scowl. He didn't want to believe me and prodded with practical questions, like about bathrooms (I often used chain stores) and my feet (which were fairing better now that I was sitting).

"Well, I've done a few rough things in my life, he said to me, "lots of backcountry, but never walked across Tokyo. No, never that of doing *that*." He said "that" as if he wanted to spit it out, get it away from him. As we talked, he asked me about my salary as an English teacher. I told him, and his satisfied grin almost broke his chin."That's not bad, not bad," he said, "especially for just starting off. Not if you have a couple of kids, you'll have to make a little more."

The conversation was spinning unpleasantly. It came out that he fancied himself an outdoorsman, a climber in Australia. He kept eyeing his open duffel of ropes and cams and stoppers, which looked unused and recently purchased. A guy who prided himself on outdoor accomplishments saddled with family, he seemed unsuited to children. While he was talking with me, they climbed atop his horse shoulders and clamored onto the luggage rack, knocking around newspapers. I had never seen this before in Japan. The majority of train-riding children glued themselves to game screens and stayed quiet. I was fascinated, watching them turn the train into a jungle gym. While the Aussie and I talked, one of his son's shoe slide off and glided

across a man's face, taking the man's glasses with it. The train riders, in a few minutes, except me, scooted away down the car, exchanging glances. The Aussie made-half hearted attempts to corral the sons, never sternly. He picked them up at one point, but they just giggled and climbed away. He tried light scolding in English, but the boys whispered in Japanese, a language, I gathered, their father didn't share.

At the time, I thought I could see this guy clearly, and what frightened me most was how afraid I was that I would turn out like him in five years. A man in over his head with two willful children who probably took after him in adventurous spirit, but held the power of language over him. Meanwhile, he hacked it out in whatever bullshit English job he could hold down.

He was begging me with his gray eyes to ask him what he'd accomplished, the dream lists crossed off. I can't remember if I did or not; I might have and whatever he told me, wasn't as egotistical as I'd expected. He restrained himself, realizing, maybe, with some wisdom that whatever wires I had tripped off hadn't been to my endeavor. As the ride wore on (it was two and a half hours to central Tokyo), it turned out that when calmed he wasn't unreasonable, not very macho, not even rude.

"All right you monsters, enough of that," he said to his children, roughhousing with them for a moment. But the kids, went on climbing over luggage and poles, even going so far as to descend into a woman's surprised lap who hadn't been paying attention. There was something about the way the man watched his two boys that made me think he was joyed to see them climbing with abandon.

The last hour of the train ride was quiet. The man dozed; I read the book I brought along. He came to a couple of times to scold his kids who never returned to him a syllable of English.

The barely seemed to acknowledge their father who stuck out like a big bald, Aussie thumb, and I couldn't help but wonder at how satisfied he found his life.

We got off at the same stop. In a move that seemed familiar, the man scooped up both kids in one rocky arm, while slinging the heavy duffle on the other shoulder. The kids were smiling, swinging in the tree trunk of their father. I was impressed by how strong he was, and caring and soft in a way with his kids. He wasn't angry with them for embarrassing him. Their two-hour, mobile gymnastics club seemed hardly worth his commenting as I assume it would to many parents. He seemed to regard his children as natural beings that would fly or take root as they would. His life something of a leaf caught in a breeze, not unlike mine.

As I saw the man's back receding, four legs poking through the curvature of a plump bicep, I thought that when I left Japan, I would pursue a job not as an outdoor leader, not as a mountain guide, but as a teacher and writer, something I could do for the rest of my life. I didn't think I could live a carefree, somewhat troubled life like his. Watching the sad, big man carry his children like firewood seemed to me to be a kind of small death, but not one that was tragic, as much as instructive. I spent the next hour of train rides thinking about where the earth would open up.

Strange, Ripe Fruit

There comes a moment in Sophy Village, Cambodia, the April air steaming with confusion, when I'm squatting over the toilet on the Meng family's balcony, and I hear laughter and my name called from below. I have skivvies lassoing ankles, and my only partition aboard this raised platform shielding me from a precipitous fall below is the humidity from the rainy season. My thighs throb. I crouch aboard the squat-style toilet no one has boarded yet for my purpose. Without the tools I am used to, the culture I've grown with, the toilet paper to wipe, I am without purchase, and I am revealing what I am by blocking the light of noon with my posterior. This moment will sing out to me in memory whenever I contemplate my time in East Asia.

One spring in 2008, when I am 25 and in the middle of teaching English in Japan, I decided to spring-break in Cambodia. Cambodia is wrecked by socio-economic inequalities. The life expectancy is 56. Of its population, 75 percent survives on subsistence. It has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in Asia. Prime Minister Hun Sen once served in the Khmer Rouge and has held power for 35 years. His rivals disappear.

I feel sheepish mentioning critical cultural facts, matter-of-factly, like I'm pointing out the warped siding on a neighbor's condo when my lawn is on fire. Instead of Cambodian, I could, for instance, begin talking about the United States's corporations that jet over to growing economies to buy up all the local businesses and shut them down. I could point out Cambodia's carbon footprint is the soft pad of a lemur compared to America's Imperial Walker. Or that Americans disproportionately incarcerate black people and jettison drone strikes that kill Yemenis on their way to weddings. Or I could write "Trump." I'm not sure those facts are less relevant about my time in East Asia than the ones about Cambodia

One thousand years ago, the Khmer conquered Southeast Asia, a culture that would have rivaled the Aztecs in size, gruesomeness, and ostentation. They ruled from Vietnam to Myanmar to China. Cambodians still speak Khmer and celebrate its checkered history. Khmer leaders constructed, through slaves, impressively phallic, superb, architecturally enlightened monoliths, consisting of around ten million hand-kilned sandstone bricks. The Temples of Angkor place Cambodia, crash-landed long ago from empire high, on the map for international travelers. Plane tickets from Tokyo cost $400. Which is why I ended up there.

Surfing lodging, I came across a home-stay organization. I thought, why stay at a grimy hostel and see only dead statues when I could room in somebody's stilt house and witness their part of the world?

In Siem Reap, the city that houses Angkor, I had arranged to meet Sim Piseth. Piseth worked as a temple guide and volunteered for the home-stay NGO that placed paying customers in Cambodian households and let them teach English if they liked. I would be couch-surfing in Piseth's wife's family's home. When we shook hands, Piseth was a round-faced, linebacker-looking fellow. I learned he was a former Buddhist monk, an orphan raised by monastery, father murdered by Khmer Rouge. A European visiting Angkor befriended him and taught him German. Piseth, it turned out, owned a linguistic craving. He excelled at German, studied and learned English, then Spanish, and was working on Japanese and French and Italian when I met him at the town's crossroads 7-11.

He offered to buy a snack, suggesting ice cream. I eyed a Thai beer that my friend had recommended but didn't want to offend Piseth. So I settled for both. I noticed the frown on Piseth's face as he shelled out eight bucks (a quarter-day's wage) for my junk. Doubly ironic: the beer wasn't drinkable, and I'm lactose intolerant.

Seated in a booth near the 7-11's front, while the unnecessary ice cream melted in my hand and the beer grew stale, I noticed a team of soot-covered children, 6 to 12-year-olds, which I'd been warned about on internet forums— the ones with deft fingers — entered the convenience store. I couldn't look them in the eyes. Mobbed by poor children is a traveling cliché, but how can the bedrock of an adult-child-self not sink to its calves when confronted by these desperate looks? I suppose it takes practice. Without trying, the image of hungry afternoons and the torture of a malnourished body elongating into adult shapes filed my mind. I couldn't look, because what was I doing there? Why didn't I fling my wallet at the 7-11's ceiling? Truth was, with my piss-beer in one hand and a dripping ice cream in the other, I was panicking about my experience. I was worried how the trip would go. This was why I settled on the beer and ice cream. I wanted to try it all, say yes to every tree that dangled ripe fruit. Because that was why I was there. To experience the experienceable, though I'd fogged over about how the world births suffering and if I wanted to taste the planet I would have to swallow that too.

"Don't worry about them," Piseth said, putting a hand on my arm, "They come here all the time."

Sophy Village was dark when I arrived — no electricity. Only the glaring lights of our behemoth taxi as it rose and pitched over the slopping dirt road and bobbed and reeled and seemed to want to keel over.

Our arrival was a momentous occasion. Piseth's father-in-law shook my hand and then bowed to Piseth. Neighbors flocked outside. The mother of the house, then son and daughter, both teenagers lined up to press my palms. A softball team's worth of children danced around with a random, bell-clanging, rib-showing cow.

To be honest, I felt an intense voyeuristic shock when seeing the lives of poorer people. There was a flattening of concern, a kind of destabilizing zen-like transcendence. I worried less about if I remembered to switch my gas off, or was watching too much television. All this damagingly selfish, of course. I don't think I gave much thought to what my experience would be to Sophy Village until I got there. And now that I was, the significance of my privileged flight snapped my brain, and I just wanted to shut out the thought and sleep.

More neighbors wandered into the yard. Chickens frolicked around my knees. Somebody brought out pretzels and Coca-cola. It was a party. But I begged off, was exhausted from the flight, was rude, answered some perfunctory questions, even as I recognized, to my American eyes, the out-worldliness of so much cheer and gaiety in a street without any light.

The School in Soppy Village was British preparatory academy-hybrid-Peace Corps project. The children whose families could afford them wore uniforms. The rest wore an assemblage of banana shorts, torn collar Polos, and flip-flops. Many males went shirtless. The schools were constructed from concrete and shaded by palms, bordering cattle yards. Pencils, I could tell, from the bartering and arguing, were a hot commodity.

The schools in Sophy Village were un-air conditioned, but the windows were wide and there were no doors and there was an extended break between second period and third during which the kids received a juice box courtesy of the UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT, as they received a customary breakfast of porridge from the UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT with an American flag as long as my arm floating alongside the rice bags. When I walked to the school for the first time, the students were mid-breakfast, eating from red bowls. The first boy who saw me pointed, screamed, sprayed porridge chunks into the air. The schoolyard flocked to me, touching my shorts, my arms. More than one aspiring sadist plucked hairs off my calves.

The teachers, all in Polo, escorted me with smiles into a classroom. For two periods, we had energetic conversations in English, twenty students screaming responses. The rooms segregated, boys front, girls back, though girls spoke up more. One tyke in the back with hair to her knees in prep school uniform queried a complicated question on superlatives that was so impressive I started clapping before I realized that was the wrong response and began a rambling answer. I was worried she wouldn't follow, but she sat beaming and jotting notes and appeared satisfied at the end. I was not used to this participation in Japan; most of my students there couldn't remember their notebooks.

It was during this second-to-third period juice break that I felt my proudest cultural accomplishment of perhaps my entire life: teaching an entire school, fifty children, how to play Ultimate Frisbee.

It was marvelous, so many lives and mine laughing and sweating and screaming and charging up and down the sand of the schoolyard. I am six-foot-four, so I could scan the schoolyard and see the entire student population lit up with joy, the children running around me when I possessed the disc, like orbiting, ecstatic electrons. Palm trees the goal posts, and we used a disc I'd brought and would subsequently leave, the kind of mark I'd like to have on the world, the kind that can just as easily be picked back up and lofted somewhere else, safely and without any harm to anyone.

One struggle with travel, and in a smaller way my life, is how much to participate. I want to watch, not in a stalker way, but in a photographer way, which I guess maybe isn't dissimilar. And how much of my lens in Cambodia was an occidental gazing at the Other? I don't know. Maybe I wanted Cambodians to be an Other I could gawk at, and they weren't letting me, instead gawking at me, causing me to rethink my impulses.

I slept in the Mengs' living room, with doors to bedrooms on all sides of me. The house was hardwood on stilts as many houses are in Cambodia, as Mr. Meng explained, to avoid floods and thieves. "We never know who may come here," he said, eyeing me, double-bolting the doors.

Mr. Meng was tall and bald, had gnarled hands and thick, carroty muscles around his neck and calves. Apart from being a rice merchant, Mr. Meng was a doctor, providing injections of pharmaceuticals to neighbors.

Mrs. Meng, his wife, was short, plump, with a round-face, deep voice, and strong thumbs. Every day, Mrs. Meng maneuvered her red scooter barefooted to the market and returned with a soup-filled plastic bag for breakfast. Lunch took her the morning to prepare, and dinner cost most of the afternoon. Sixteen-year-old Seakliam helped, the Mengs' beautiful girl with a moon face like her mother's. Together they would make curries, fish, and pork broth soups.

The seventeen-year-old son, Seaknam, spoke English well, smiled more in a day than I do in a year and went to a private high school in Siem Reap.

The Mengs had done well for themselves: Seaknam in school, a house bigger than most, a black-and-white TV powered by a car battery. Their eldest daughter (who I never met) was married to Piseth, and he had some standing as a multi-lingual guide at the cash-cow temples.

We all seemed to get along, but then there was the dog. Mow. Pronounced as in "Chairman Mao," and in my mind, I came to call him, "The Chairman." A wiry dachshund, he distrusted me from the start. Mow barked and yipped and took a nip of my sandaled ankle the first time I saw him. Later he wagged a tail and whined at neighbors who came to ask the father for medicine. The Chairman slept on the stairway, guarding it, growling whenever I was in spitting range. It didn't help that I stepped on a slumbering Mow once while climbing up the

stairs in the dark. It occurred to me that, even if the rest of the Mengs could not, Mow saw through me.

The second day, I made my visit to the Temples of Angkor, during which I made the perfunctory trudge through the pyramidal, slave-made phalluses, climbed up the UNESCO world treasures like a jungle gym as people are somehow allowed to do. Anyone can fly to Cambodia and trample all over their internationally renown artifacts. It was a lot of sunny fun.

About the Mengs' property: they had twelve mango trees, 32 coconut trees (I counted), a fish pond, a vegetable garden, a grass field to feed neighbors' cattle, about two dozen chickens, and a compost heap. The chickens were impossible to count as they roamed. I even once found yardbird in a hammock.

I wasn't sleeping, which turned me edgy, and I was discouraged from wandering around, wandering which sets my hull a-keel. The house was hot, and between classes, there was a lot of leisure time in hammocks hanging from coconut trees. I'd bought a biography of Pol Pot (about the dimmest view you could get of the place) by one of the myriad hockers thronging the Angkor temples. I had supposed it was better than buying a six pack of something labeled "BEER" in all white letters for five dollars, though looking back I wished I'd purchased the latter. Not sleeping, not moving, reading Pol Pot, and confronting my privilege squeezed my mind in a way that BEER might have helped.

I ended up finishing the Pol Pot book and worked through Peter Matthiessen's *Snow Leopard*, an odd book, the Nepal snows in Cambodia April. Matthiessen ponders wondering heights and transcendence, and I wallowed in my increasing self-centered panicking and aimless, consuming vacation. Also, I read in a former French colony, and the book is classically colonialist, Matthiessen whining about the underpaid servants he's employing to haul his

belongings on their backs as they caterpillar up the Himalayas. Matthiessen uses terms like "lazy" and "dirty" and "suspicious" with abandon He also claims to see a Yeti. Americans gave him the National Book Award.

I read while swaying, hammock-bound in a country bombed by Americans in 'Nam, which gave credence to the Khmer Rouge's anti-imperialism, the Rouge who then slaughtered 1/4th of the country. Piseth still guides for a company called "IndoChina Excursions" and groans when I asked him how he feels about that name. "If you knew anything at all about the history of my country," he said, "you would know how I feel."

And there were the land mines. I'd been warned by Lonely Planet, Rough Guides, and the Japanese doctor who gave me my vaccinations, not to set one foot off touristed paths. I would have asked the Mengs, but after reading Pot's biography, I didn't want to mention anything to do with that era. Which meant that what I was used to was off-limits — walking for hours to clear my head. Shut-, I read and bided my time between the courses at Sophy School. I suppose in a subconscious way I was waiting until I could get home, and by home I really mean America. Japan didn't seem like a reset button, and really, then I just wanted to reorient myself.

It strikes me now how the stem of that word, "orient" is Latin for "the East" or "sunrise" and originally from "oriri"—to rise. Sunrise was the means by which travelers used to figure out where they were. Through "orient" Westerners have come to know their brethren in this part of the world, a poetic (and orientalist) licensure for gazing at a group of people from a still position, centering the Western self so that everything revolves around it. Maybe what I was getting was a good, swift kick in the compass, my self gyrating loose, which, let's face it, for a white man from America was probably a healthy thing.

I'm not used to spending large chunks of time with people. I grew up friendless, which is

not to say lonely, though perhaps it is. So retreating to a hammock was both a quick escape and a necessity, and by the end of the week, I realized when was a good time. Noon was perfect, but two o'clock was impossible. It seemed families, patients, neighbors, the police on one occasion, and, increasingly, body guards showed up around two for a custom mango-eating session. Laughter and questions pried into my life, the white visitor's. One day I decided to ignore them and read upstairs, but due to the heat settled into eavesdropping. The laughter rifled up the stairs; it was almost infectious enough not to envy.

At night Sophy School held class under two incandescent lights powered by a car battery. Then, on Wednesday, when the lights were stolen by someone, a single compact fluorescent tube was purchased and hung with the veneer and dimness of a bug zapper, the class glowing an eery blue.

My classes were rapt, so much more energized and eager and, if I can say this, important, than my classes in Japan. I fielded dozens of grammar questions (tricky because they employed British English). I had sleeves tugged, screams of joy, and volunteer note-taking. The students had purpose. Unlike my Japanese students, who could easily live unaware of the ins and outs of passive, here gerunds meant a chance for a job. Gerunds could lead to shuttling tourists. Gerunds equaled hocking goods as one young girl did at the Angkor temples, showing off vocabulary and the time-tested technique of knowing American state capitals (I bought a pair of magnets).

I wasn't proud that I was helping (a little) to set these kids up for a life of hustling, with the end-goal, maybe, of better schooling or Piseth's job or who knows? But I really enjoyed the energy. In my fifteen years teaching, I don't know if I've had a more appreciative, invigorating bunch. I wanted to keep doing it. Why I didn't, of course, is that I was paying for it, about a hundred dollars a day.

By the fourth day, it seemed that my life was in danger, and the police force could not let me stay in Sophy Village without the 24/7 accompaniment of an armed guard. To my dismay, I would now be followed by a man with a machine gun.

I confess, I did feel a little rise at the thought of this man coming to protect me. Was I important? Did it signify that my life was worth guarding? Short answer: probably no. The police chief glimpsed my white face teaching English and saw dollar signs. When Piseth explained the situation, I forked over an extra $50 a day (I was making good money staring down students in Japan).

To prove this theory, on the sixth morning the armed man disappeared after camping out in the Mengs' hammocks all night, and I felt something akin to what my gun-owning family in Texas must feel if their firearms are ever confiscated. I became irrationally anxious. The town that I had seen in such a positive light now hid such lurking qualities. Who was the father or older brother of that boy waving to me now as I sat on the balcony? Who were all these people? The sensation never passed.

One of the highest points of my stay, and one of the lowest, was using the toilet. Cambodians don't need toilet paper, a fact which electrified my privileged skin when I learned. My first day I'd walked into the bathroom looking for two missing pieces of installation: a flusher and a roll of paper. What I found instead were a bucket of water and a ladle.

The thought struck (panicked) me that I was supposed to use my hand for wiping, but this is not the case. One should rather pour ladlefuls of water down the posterior until it is sparklingly clean. Amazingly, gravity works as elsewhere, and all one's worries go spiraling away down the hole in the ground.

Well, into a septic tank, which can be pumped for fertilizer as the Mengs did. Seaknam showed me the pipe by which the family pumped out sewage and hosed over a rice paddy, which I support and am in reverence of and envy. In America we jug fossil fuels like a football player loads up on steroids, our system of living, growing food and "prospering" so harmful for everyone and everything that my deepest sense of national shame is not cultural but environmental.

And by that, I don't mean just the effects on endangered species and ecosystems, which is severe, but on the rest of the planet — countries, oceans, populations, which have done little to deserve the metaphorical sewage that pours out of the American system and covers the earth. What if we all cycled waste like the Mengs? So that it sustains us and everyone, not just runs into the ground into a septic tank that coughs up into a poor neighborhood and ensures, as ever, that the burden falls on those who are least able to hold it up? And by that I mean more than just human feces.

But the toilet for me, the crescendo of my experience as I see it, represented how I could not live like the Mengs. It was, as I mentioned, open-air on a balcony, on a platform adjacent to the kitchen. It was as clean as a jet engine. Bone-white porcelain, with a large clay pot of water to the side. Mrs. Meng often got water out of this pot and used it for dishes, which she dried on a wooden rack that, with my long arms, was within reach of the squatting position.

This should have been my clue, but I can be ridiculously literal-minded. I saw a porcelain toilet and thought, "outhouse," not that an uncrapped and clean toilet could serve as a dish sink. It was my second to last day, and I had been thinking about the toilet since I got there, staring at it the way cowboys stare at widow-makers, using only the downstairs toilet instead. Finally, I wanted the experience, this unusual ripe fruit of travel. Early afternoon I had to go, so I did.

Mid-experience, I noticed that the customary ladle was missing. I hadn't brought any TP with me, which I'd been using downstairs. Looking back I see most of my worry was not of getting shit all over myself, but of being seen getting shit all over myself. Legs buckling, I espied something that looked similar to a bedpan: stainless steel, shape of a man's groin. It looked clean. I scooped water out of the clay pot with my *clean* hand into the bedpan, which I overturned on my backside. I checked: too soon! I dumped water again. Slipped, almost over the side. Groaning. A voice: "Ah, Mr. Clinton, what are you, ah, doing up there?"

No response from me.

"Mr. Clinton?" It was Mr. Meng.

"I'm using the bathroom!"

"What?"

(Quieter) "I'm using the bathroom."

(Laughter). "Ok, let us know if you need any help." (More laughter, the neighbors were over).

Sweat poured down my face like rain off a gutter. I grabbed water with my clean hand again to cool off my brow. Then I cupped water and poured. And poured. Down my backside, without touching. Then, clean, I pulled up shorts. I grabbed my hand sanitizer and covered my hands and the inside of the bedpan with literally a third of the bottle. Wiped clean.

Later that night Seaknam broke it to me good-naturedly.

"You know, we don't use that toilet for, you know, the toilet."

"You mean…?"

"Yeah, we use it to wash dishes and stuff. But sometimes we men at night use it, you know, for number one. But," he smiled "don't tell anyone."

My toilet had been their kitchen sink. Was this a metaphor for anything? I imagined waking in America to find a foreign guest squatting over the kitchen sink.

Seaknam squeezed my shoulder. “But don't worry about it. You can use it if you want.”

“No, no, no,” I say.

“Well, it's probably better if you don't. Anyway, it was really funny to see you up there.”

“You saw me?”

Seaknam couldn’t help laughing. “Yours is the first white arse I think I have ever seen.”

The next morning, the monks across the rice paddy woke me up at 4 am, this on my last day. The date was the annual festival at the new temple, and I hiked over with a machine gun-slinging, combat-booted man and Seaknam. In front of the earth-toned temple was a volleyball court, hundreds of people. Fortunately a fistful of my students (I was already calling them “my”) came, and I got lost with them, ignoring the crowds and the camo man who smoked cigarette after cigarette and stiffly put them out with his boot on the mud below, so that when we left there's a small pile of butts like fallen solders at his feet.

More students circled, a crowd I was not anticipating because I expected to <u>be</u> in the crowd at the festival not the subject of one. But the only entertainment of that morning was prayer. Chanting monks kneeling in the main temple, which was decorated with reliefs and Sistine Chapel-esque depictions of the Buddha's life, from birth to transcendence in pastel all the way up the arched ceiling.

Apparently, I could pray with the monks. Go in, sit down, chant, go out, have some black tea, come back in. I did this, finding squat style enormously painful and chose watching from outside instead. At the front of the temple on a platform sat about a dozen monks leading the congregation, while outside a pig roasted on a pit, children squealed and some folks gyrated

while drinking something clear from glass cups. I walked over to watch but quickly got absorbed in the movements, became the center of attention, all faces on mine as if I were an alien. Which I had to remind myself I was.

Then I was being shown to the center of the circle, and I realized it was all hand-made music: drums, singing, strings, a flute, though I could have sworn there were speakers because the tune was so piercing. The music accelerated, rhythmical, percussion and strings that sounded like shamisens. A woman pretzeled her hips and arms in front of me, and it was just us two in the circle of people who hooted and fist-pumped.

The woman eye-locked me, and for a matter of three seconds I am freaked out, and I'm using present tense now because it feels present still. The woman wears a shawl and a sun-hat that lets the shawl draw like a bedpost curtain around her face. Was the crowd trying to wed us together? Was this all in fun? My month's wage-bet is fun. I was paranoid of mockery, and equal parts worried I would be forced to sleep with this dancer. But I should have been more realistic, accommodating, game. After all, I was leaving in 24 hours, and somewhere there was a solder with a machine gun who guarded my posterior.

I shuffled out of the circle and the lady's gaze. There was much about this experience I was not ready for. Only now while looking through the tape-recorder that is sometimes, and luckily I suppose, my memory, have I been able to piece together the thoughts and gestures that got me to that position of trembling, of humiliation. At the time I just wanted out. Wanted away, and so I went crashing through the circle, almost knocking a man over who was playing flute. He pushed me angrily and the music did the one thing I didn't want to do, which was stop. All eyes turned to mine and I fled through the bordering temple cemetery with about ten children following.

Some of the graves were massive, with stone carvings as large as Buicks. Some crosses stood at attention. Then we came to a big pit in the ground filled with ash, and I knew instantly what this was. The children were used to this place as the austerity of such a location didn't daunt them. One tugged at my hair, another my belt. There was a constant barrage of English grammar-related questions.At one point, I started yelling Japanese to confuse them and fingered them away. But fearing their leaving me more, I beckoned them all back like an ill-tempered alcoholic uncle.

I sat stunned by the pit, couldn't believe what I was looking at — it was the burning site of corpses. One child actually reached in and, before I could stop him, pulled something out, held it up to my eyes, and said, smiling, “bone,” and so it was, and he dropped it back in.

Seaknam Meng came trailing over the hill, a rare look of worry on his face, the man with the machine gun following, yawning. “Clinton, we couldn’t find you!” Seaknam said.

“Seaknam, is this….?”

Seaknam stopped, still frowning. “Yes, this is where we care for our dead. You see we used to burn in that field over there,” he pointed, “but it was easier here, near the temple. Come,” he said, grabbing my wrist, “there’s nothing for you here.”

Piseth greeted me on my last night after he spent an afternoon guiding middle-aged, crapulent Germans. On the Meng’s balcony, Piseth unbuttoned his khaki shirt, and I saw the faintest trace of a gut spilling across his pants. I gave him the two hundred-dollar bills I'd been saving up for the organization, and he gave me a plaque of some kind that later broke on the plane.

He confessed that he was relieved. He’d been looking for 150 dollars to pay for water pumps around the village. The other fifty might go towards a new library or computer lab. Last,

over a few cups of tea, we discussed living off the grid. Strange, I'd come here expecting to see a village in want and found it, in many ways kind of an ideal. The Mengs grew their own food, raised fish and chickens, chopped down lumber for fuel. The electricity they used in a month, for occasional late-night viewing of Korean soap operas, was consumed every five minutes in an American home.

Piseth sighed. “But Clint, we don't like this,” he said.

But my culture was all screwed up on many levels, I said. Wasn't there something to learn in Cambodia about efficiency? About not wanting it all. About staying put, so you didn't shit all over the world?

How odd I must have seemed ranting about the ideals of energy conservation after I’d taken two planes, a monorail, a train, a bus, and a taxi to get to the house I was staying in. An American who was living abroad in Japan. Looking back, it’s the classic colonialist screed, “Please don’t change because you remind us of how we once were and how we can be better,” the shit Native Americans have been eating since 1880.

Piseth was tired, and it'd been a long day with the inebriated Germans. Maybe he could have replied with the story Seaknam told me later, about a young man across the street had climbed up a coconut tree the week before, slipped, plummeted, felt a crack, and died just before I'd arrived. Sure, his family had been worried, but what? Spend hundreds and get an X-ray to tell him he needed surgery and would have to go to Bangkok? I realized now it’s not Cambodians’ responsibility to serve as guiding lights of sustainability. The Western world can watch and learn, but it is in charge of its own waste crew.

Is it just me or is the best part about traveling the airport, or the train station or the bus stop, or in transit when you're between one place and the next, between one idea and another,

this culture or that one, a line that seems to stretch and blur as the horizon of the earth does when scanning out a transoceanic window and the distinction between living sea and breathable air becomes invisible?

I left the next morning, on the back of Seaknam's scooter, rolling through the village, along the waves of the dirt road, the earth tide that took me past the palm trees and stilted houses, past the petrol station where gas is stored in liquor bottles, passed the highway, where thirty Cambodians crowded a Ford pickup like circus bicycle riders. Past the temples of Angkor and Bangkok, past Japan and on back (I say back, but I really mean sideways) to America where in a few years thanks to reading and listening to people who use words like "agency" and "trans-corporeality" and "colonialism" I would cross some kind of land within myself. But I would never be quite sure where that land was, if anywhere.

Live From Kosuge Village

It was more than a little odd when I patroned the tiny Kosuge Village grocery store, overlooked by jagged mountains, and saw another white guy besides me in the store for the first time, with long hair, camo pants, and combat boots, holding an armful of potatoes.

"Whoa," he said, with an American accent.

"Hello," I mumbled.

I turned and spied yet another white man, this one sporting the lumberjack look: flannel and jeans, red beard and Timberlands, bent over the ice cream cooler rooting around like a honeying bear. When he stood up, he blinked and dodged back as if I'd thrown something. "Whoa," he coughed.

Whoa was right.

"We're here for a trance concert," Camo declared when I asked.

"What?"

"A trance concert. You know, bright lights, bass, crazy times, jivey tunes. There's going to be like five hundred people out there."

"Wait, you're not here for the concert?" Flannel asked.

"No. I live here."

Their mouths opened, and so did mine. There was a trance concert in the Japanese village of nine hundred people, and I didn't know about it.

"You gotta come," Camo said, his name Nick. "The concert's in a campground, and the music just fits in so well with nature."

I furrowed my brows. I hadn't thought I could be more surprised than I already was.

I didn't think much of trance then. Not that I knew what it was. Trance, as I would learn, is a Detroit-born, German-filtered music rooted in the eighties, epitomized by synthesizers with minimal rhythmic changes and only occasional instrumental atmospherics, putting listeners into a symphonic pleasure coma. But my lazy idea was of doped-up youths twitching to sounds that came from an inkjet printer.

I worked and lived in Kosuge as an English teacher, but I stayed on for the mountains. I had grown up family camping in hill country, and as a teenager I often tented in the shade of red-rock canyons. In college, I worked as an outdoor guide, taking students on backpacking trips, teaching them to take only pictures and to leave only footprints.

I doubted one could reconcile outdoors and city. I know such dualism is a sign of simple-mindedness. Humans are as much a part of nature as anything. Our Reeboks come from prehistoric ferns. Edible plants become us, etc. Words like "nature" say more about the speaker than anything else. My idea of it was just that, and a human one.

But trance? How can bright lights, pounding bass, and drugged hippies fit in with mountain streams, wildlife, and bird songs? Bringing something as ear-walloping into a forest wasn't my idea of fitting in.

Nick said, "I'll put you on the guest list," and winked.

Curiosity churned. It was a question too impossible to ignore. *How could this act fit in with the mountains?* So I told him, "Sure, Nick, if you wouldn't mind."

Like many species, I'm also an opportunist.

The campground lay across town, and by night, rain slammed down. I wheeled in my decrepit Toyota, and at the entrance found sprouted shacks of PVC and tarp. One held a ticket

booth and a shivering Italian woman with purple hair. She reclined with a stack of T-shirts for sale and a coil of black light powered by a car battery.

“How’s the concert? I asked.

“There’s not a lot of people in yet,” she said, “But, remember, the trance in Japan is beautiful. Once I was freaking out because I took too much acid, but people here helped me out.” She looked away into the rain. “Not like in Italy. I got a very bad vibe there.”

I was no stranger to psychedelics. From high school on, I had tried them some two dozen times, culminating when I bought three hits of LSD and vanned to my favorite canyon. I backpacked two miles in, tented, and dissolved the pieces of blotter acid atop my tongue. An hour later, I went hiking. A solo stroll around the sandstone wonderland completed as thick muscles of purple clouds clamped down. Lightning sparked and forked. The storm lifted, and the setting sun kindled the rocks. A rainbow spread its half-halo across the canyon, from cliff to cliff, for what seemed like an unbearable hour. Which would be enough to awe any sober person, but I was on *LSD*, feeling sights and smelling distant sounds.

Driving home the next day, I had a fear that my exploration was taking me into dark terrain, the uncharted waters of body experimentation. I decided to stop, figuring I had gotten all I could out of chemically fucking my mind. Part of what I resisted with trance is what I’d left behind. Backpacking and canoeing were adventures, but not descents into uncanny caverns that I was disinclined to get pulled back into. In this way I was a cliché: judgmental of a lifestyle I had recently given up, worried, in truth, that I might slip back it.

Apparently the guest list only insured you got in. The price for admission was twenty bucks, yen. “If that’s cool,” the Italian woman said, looking guilty, but I paid up.

Pulling ahead, I crossed the river and soon felt vibrations in my seat. My car windows rattled, and the hairs on my arms stood at attention. I sensed a looming war zone.

I parked by the lodge and walked uphill where I came out into an open area with the staging ground. The stage was a thirty-foot-tall, red-wooden structure with an eve shielding the performance. The platform stood three feet off the ground, weighed down by skyscrapers of speakers and slithering cables. The stage hardwood lay thick but cracking.

A set of sentinel speakers flanked a young woman in black sweats. Her hood was pulled over her face so you couldn't see her eyes as she toggled buttons on a surfboard-long panel. An armada of rainbow lights beamed behind her, silhouetting the controls and DJ into Rorschach blots.

The air was freezer-cold. Six people in the audience, including me. I wrapped myself in the rain gear I usually wore for high-altitude summiting. The music rippled under wet mud, and I felt the bass poke through my boots. The rest was what I expected: the grocery bag-crinkling hum, no lyrics, a headache-provoking beat. I cracked open a beer I'd brought to have something fun to do.

I tapped my feet for a moment, and then Nick, the camo guy from the store, stepped up, and seemed glad to see me. He said there should be more people coming later—perhaps the five hundred he'd mentioned earlier—and the concert was scheduled to last until two in the afternoon.

"You plan on staying up that long?" I asked.

A cheshire cat-smile: "I'll have some help."

When Nick strolled off, I realized he, of course, was grinning about drugs.

While I stood before the stage, I had this idea I should dance. I don't know why; the audience was stiff and in the single digits. I thought maybe if I was going to give trance a chance, I should exercise.

I began by bouncing thighs, first one then both. I swayed, jerked, shrugged my arms. I nodded my head, my torso oscillating in contortions like a squiggle pen. I spilled my beer, so I revolved slower. I felt very uncool, and there was no scene to join with. Of the audience, half huddled over cigarettes as if collectively amassing a camp fire.

As I was about to walk away, two muscled pale faces walked up wearing skin-tight, flame-colored shirts. They surveyed the scene and began pumping their feet and hammering their forearms. They spun and twist-jerked. They bent at the waist and performed a move similar to two wet dogs drying off. Their movements caused me to go still with awe. For a few moments their energy burned away the rain.

Nick, who was beginning to seem like a nice guy, checked in, and when I asked he explained the music being played was Psy Trance. "Psy," of course, short for psychedelic. This subset grew out of Trance's eighties' heyday.

Trance, of course, is not limited to the three-minute trajectory of common rock or pop. Trance develops symphonically over a half hour, . There are motifs that slither in and out of a stream. This openness has led to variations. Psy Trance was more chill than other harder-hitting forms, though tell that to my headache.

"Unlike other types," Nick said, "which is really just fit for clubs, Psy trance is just made for the outdoors."

"And drugs," I added.

Nick grinned again. "Well, that too."

Behind us was a sloping hill of Japanese cedars, which the concert lights illuminated like a torch. I excused myself to go piss. Walking through the trees, I heard voices and grunts in shadows—two people fucking. In Kosuge's mountains, I knew, lived macaques, boar, rabbits, deer, Asiatic black bears, kites, crows, swallows, dozens of warblers, pheasants, woodpeckers, and mice. I wondered how many creatures would come within a mile of this tornado of sound.

I walked back to the lodge and bought barbecue from the Japanese newlyweds who ran the campground, now working a grill. They looked shell-shocked, so I tried to smile.

"How do you like trance?" I asked.

They glanced at each other with baggy eyelids. The man responded. "We like that they bring money to our campground. And we like to see all the foreigners, and we get to practice our English. But, I guess..."

The woman spoke up, nodding, "We usually listen to reggae."

Inside the packed lodge, I found the red-bearded man from the grocery store. He said his name was Quasar and invited me to sit down. He was preoccupied, a pen and paper in hand, rewriting tomorrow's set, paired with the man sitting next to him, a DJ named Dylan. Out in the pouring rain, I had heard audience members murmuring about Dylan, praising him, if there was one, as the concert's guru.

Dylan did have an aura: a forty-year-old with a tie-dye beanie covering the rest of his balding pale head with bleach-blond curls. His eyebrows streaked white-blonde. He sported a dozen piercings and connected with penetrating eye contact. He sipped from a Coke and said to me they'd been touring Japan for two weeks as a duo called "The Fractal Cowboys."

"How long have you been into this?" I asked.

"Ten years. Before that we were doing ambient rock—you know, lighter stuff, chill-out. We actually used instruments."

He'd enjoyed the last Japan tour. "I really like these nature concerts, and Japan seems to have a ton of them," he said.

I tell him I thought it was curious that I kept hearing his music fit in with nature. "I guess I'm just not seeing the connection," I said.

Dylan nodded, expressionless, swigged his Coke. "I hear you, but you gotta keep perspective. For some people used to these concerts in warehouses, it's nice to get out."

Then he said something to the effect of, "Also, I like to think it's organic. I think of the way trance evolved, earthly beats to the digital. It's all an extension of culture right? And culture's natural. There's a pattern about it, at least the trance I listen to. Some trance is just shit, believe me, but this trance makes me think of rivers, trees, that sort of thing. Since it's caught up in the flow, I just see it as a continuation of when we were first human, with the rhythms in our DNA."

I stared at him, believing he had me. Music does make biological connections with material consciousness. This is why people's brains light up like Christmas trees when they hear music while scanned inside MRI machines.

But then when I asked Dylan what he missed from America, he responded with "the drugs," and I felt the weight of enlightenment fall from my stomach. Empty again, I wonder: am I missing something because I'm ignorant or because I'm no longer into mind-altering controlled substances?

Trance, loudmouth bass and synthesizer, is an extension, a cultural evolution, from cave-and-stick ancestry. A meandering line from when we first became human. But then, what part of

culture isn't derived from our origins? Toxic sludge, acid rain, speakers? That didn't mean it "fit in" with other lifeforms of a forest environment.

But thoughts swirled inside me. The earliest humans made art and beat the ground. We are, after all, the Earth expressing itself.

I asked when the Fractal Cowboys were playing. Maybe I needed to hear the "right" trance.

"Six in the morning," Dylan said. "You should come. We've worked a lot of PSAs into our set."

"Public Service Announcements," Quasar looked up and said.

Dylan read my face. "Just come; you'll see."

I promised I would and then strolled downhill from the lodge, the air crisp, rain momentarily lifted. I held my car keys while I listened to the trance waffling down from the stage, while the rain trickled and my windshield rattled.

Sleepless, I read from my copy of *Walden*. I had no idea what I was doing when I grabbed the book. I was lounging in my floor chair as I did every night, and it was simply a matter of reaching over and plucking the book off my shelf. It seemed logical later: my idea of nature besieged with towering, aggressive speakers and angelic, well-spoken DJs, I look to Henry D. for comfort.

And what should I find, not thirteen lines below the famous "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation"?

"It is never too late to give up our prejudices."

About Life? Even that?

After-school-special advice, I thought, and I continued reading, although a seed, I guess, had been sowed, like the kind I used to make eggplants and peppers and watermelons in a garden, which is perhaps the oldest, most easily recognizable art, a combination of human will and the earth.

After a late night spent reading, I overslept, snoozing through an alarm I'd set for five. I woke up, rubbed the night out of my eyes, and drove back to the campground at about nine thirty, the entrance deserted, tarps blowing in the wind as if from a shipwreck.

I worried everyone had vanished, but when I wheeled in next to the lodge, I espied Quasar bouncing downhill, braids whipping to-and-fro, carrying an MP3 player with headphones. He was sweating and called out, beaming. I'd just missed the Fractal Cowboys set.

I sat down on a log beside him. They'd had a terrific set, he said, maybe the best in eight years, and they'd recorded it and planned to release it as an album.

"Where are we again?" he asked.

I said Kosuge Mura.

"Moo - Rah?" He said.

"Mura means *village* if that helps."

"Live from Kosuge Village," he said. "That sounds so much better than Live from Oakland."

I told him I was surprised he's recorded an album from such a small venue, with—how many today?—a few dozen people in the audience.

He appeared hurt, all frown. "Coming out here was a big deal," he said. "I can't just get on a plane and fly to Japan. I got a wife and two girls."

Reeling in a propensity to stereotype, I let my jaw hang. "You have children?"

"Yeah. Seven-year-olds."

He retrieved a faded flip wallet, and when he lifted up a color photo of twin, blue-eyed blondes, lightning struck more clearly than if I'd been on LSD watching a storm. Quasar became a different person; in fact, trance became a different music because somebody who would show photos of his daughters was behind it, not a life I'd left but one I hadn't yet lived.

I arrived at the stage and found Dylan standing alone at the edge of, I counted, 25 people — half Asian, half white, and one black. They watched Nick, Camo-guy, spin. Nick bounced from foot to foot, pumping a fist. The day was warmer. I told Dylan sorry for being late.

"What?" he said. "You couldn't get up at five in the morning and come stand in the rain?"

We watched Nick, and Dylan revealed, surprising me again, that like me, he rose from a small town in Texas.

"That's why we're the cowboys!" Dylan said. "I don't know how it is with you, but my family keeps asking when I'm going to have a family and settle down and move to New Braunfels." He laughed. "It's like they have no idea what kind of world I'm in now."

Because we were revealing, I tell Dylan about how my family picked up and moved from Texas, first to Idaho and then to a Tennessean suburb, then split apart. They don't continue to share the love for the outdoors that was born with them.

"I feel a little adrift," I said.

Dylan shrugged as if to say, *aren't we all*?

As drizzle fell, Dylan entered a circle of people dancing. His movements were slow at first and then built. He bobbed with his eyes closed, and held tilted back as he were taking a

shower, an image made more real by the rain beading on his face. Soon his legs thumped on the grass. His arms spread, and he revolved in place.

In Trance, there are often special effects, call-outs, breaks. I think this makes it easier for people to join, for there's always an opening. Trance mixes in one track, then two or three or four, then mixes them out, so you are often left with the beat you began with. Tempos rise and crest and then fall. Like a mountain.

I was watching Dylan dance, because I was trying to figure out what to do. Not just with movement but with this music, with this much sound in something I'd identified as quiet. For the moment, I stood with my arms crossed and watched. Most dancers were decked in spandex and neon tights, but in the crowd was an elderly, Japanese man in shorts and a see-through rain slicker. He jumped from wooden-sandaled foot to wooden-sandaled foot.

After a few minutes, without realizing it, my right knee unhinged. My heel picked up and dropped back down. Again. And again. Faster. My arms unspooled, twisting around, making a pretzel. I dipped my hips, started to roll my torso into parabolic waves.

The music hummed into synthesizing riffs, chords of piano and violin spiced with sitar and the echo one would hear inside a beaten hollow tree. Amid the track was also something sounding like swallow chirps mixed with a bulldozer's engine: revving and cooing and pounding. I guess I liked it, if "liking" means getting lost in the beat.

It was odd, that blend of animatronic and animal. There was a tug at my subconscious, which was why my body was moving. But once aware, I became shy and slowed, pulled my arms into tight circles, and eventually devolved to foot-tapping.

Then the notes spiraled out as if caught in a breeze. There was a twinkle of chimes; the bass stopped. I heard a voice over the speakers — white, male, mid-thirties, but not Nick, who stood with a big smile, speechless.

"Better taste. Better quality. Better nutrition. Simply better food.... Eat organic."

I looked up on stage and see Nick punch the air. The crowd, too, raised their fists. "Yeah, organic!" a young man in pink spandex yelled.

"We're mostly all vegetarians," Dylan told me when he came back. "Nick just likes to spread the organic message, thinks it's less confrontational."

Vegetarianism, as any greenie knows, is one of the best things you can do to curb your carbon footprint.

A new track switched on. The beat mixed in a twang of a bass guitar. An echo floated off the treble range, some mix of piano and synthesizer. Jazzy. Somewhere in the background: an uncanny rendition of cricket chirps.

I closed my eyes to see what it felt like, the music tripping over me, and there, what was that? It was my heart leaping from my chest, my stomach clenching. There was a whirring, almost like a blender, but softer, the rustling of feathers.

In my mind, I pictured geese, a tornado of them swirling in and out of a field, flying through trees; you couldn't keep track of singular rustlings as they grew into a roar like rapids. The wings beat, rolled out of my head and out over the forests and mountains and, I guess, out to the sea.

Most trance at the concert sounded like a vacuum cleaner revving, but when the beats were less aggressive, when somebody like Nick was spinning, I got to the point where I could

recognize this harmonization. Nature is slow and methodical, but it can be fast too. And then slow. And then fast again.

When I'd arrived at the concert I believed trancers were engaged in a world I had departed, and I'd assumed that all-too cliche attitude of condescension. I realized that, but I still wondered if I was past the time I could really enjoy trance. I recognized its value, but that maybe you would still need drugs to sink into it. In Kosuge, the concert-goers were breathing in the narcotic fumes of the forest which were enchanting and alleviating, as numerous health studies show. But likely the concert was also damaging the forest with its crotch-kicking sound. And sound, as much as sight, is an experience of the forest, the crackle of water, the stillness of damp earth. Tiny mammals escaping away.

Then again, I walked around a bush where there was a recycling station (instructions in English and Japanese), and I realized that with the PSA, the recycling, the vegetarianism, this was, perhaps, the most eco-friendly concert I've been to.

Like with any conversation about what's natural, the one I'd been having in my head was ambiguous, unanswerable. Did I like the music? Kind of, though it was splitting my skull. Did it fit in with nature? "Nature" was a human construct, like a microphone.

Would I go to another trance concert? That, at least, felt easy to answer. When Nick, standing in a circle with Quasar and Dylan, smoking a joint, asked the same question, I replied in the affirmative, as easy as water flowing off a stone.

Nick offered the weed, with a tight look in his eye I knew meant he was welcoming me. But I turned him down with my own look saying I appreciated the gesture, of being part of a wider circle.

We chatted for a bit, and I asked when the Fractal Cowboys were playing again.

“In two weeks in San Francisco,” Quasar said.

Dylan elbowed him with the joint in his mouth.“"We play Wednesday.”

They flew out soon, arriving, California time, on Tuesday.

“The music doesn’t stop, so we don’t,” Nick said and took a drag from the herb, a plant, grown in a garden somewhere with the same sunlight I could see parting between the gray clouds.

Love in the Valley of Death

One of the most belligerent and successful warlords, Takeda Shingen, grew up and reigned over the Japanese prefecture where I met my wife 400 years later. The car-sized bronze statue of Shingen at Kofu's train station hovered over my three years an English teacher in the rural countryside of Yamanashi. He perched on a battle stool, bullhorn-capped, mustachioed, evermore snarling. He glowered over the parking lot, greeting me on my first dates with my then-girlfriend Yumiko.

A Takeda battle reenactment had helped us meet. Later, our wedding took place near where his son killed himself and his line was obliterated. And we once made love near Shingen's first conquest. I resisted paying attention to this for many years, but it's uncanny now how samurai ambition coincides with memories of our ardor. The proximity leads me now to question the ties between attraction and violence. Love is elevated to the romance of poetry and epic, as is war, but the two are rooted in the worminess of death, the grubby snuffing of light. And I wonder, is it all instinctual, sex and violence?

I didn't want to be fascinated by samurai, *bushi* they're called in Japan. Few journeys for Westerners in Japan are more trampled than warrior-worship. Samurai are too often twisted into a projected image of false-exotic integrity. Their personal loyalties exchanged like yen coins. Murdering young innocents in the samurai's time was commonplace. I don't want to revere them while I recount our unavoidable parallels.

Japan is eighty percent mountains, farmland at a premium. Many samurai wars were fought not for honor but for food. Shingen and his arch-nemesis, Uesugi Kenshin, a self-made warlord from the North, met on a single mountain farmland five times to belligerate. Their battles wiped out 65 percent of all the men fighting.

In 1561, Kenshin besieged a Takeda outpost, a small castle called Kawanakajima. Kenshin was baiting Shingen north, who recognized the ruse but marched anyway. Shingen traveled horsed, sporting iron, cotton, leather battle armor, shins-to-palms. His helmet was famous for its golden antlers and cloud-white wisps of horsehair that flowed behind him like dragon's breath. After night maneuvers and morning fog lifted, the two sides realized that they were staring at each other. The battlefield swam in chaos. Soldier lines broke. Heads lopped off. Shields cracked. Takeda's command post lay exposed. Shingen was perched on his battle stool, crimson, wooden signal fan in hand, trying to order his lines, his helmet's breath blowing in consternation, when a masked horseman charged, sword slashing. It was Kenshin, the warlord from the North. In one of the rarest combats recorded in history, the two generals fought, hand-to-hand.

Shingen parried with his fan. Uesugi circled him with his horse, cutting down in calligraphic strokes. The blade dug into Takeda's fan eight times, nicking his armor three. Finally, Shingen's retainer speared Kenshin's horse, which dumped its rider. Kenshin withdrew. His army would then be caught in a crunch as the rest of Shingen's forces, charged downhill, realizing their lord was in danger.

Somewhere in researching, I realized that the man garrisoning the Kawanakajima fort, which lured Shingen north, which caused him to risk his entire clan, for which he engaged in hand-to-hand combat for, was Shingen's gay lover, Danjo Masanobu.

Samurai heterosexual marriages, like among royalty in Europe, were political, loveless. But the samurai camped, bathed, and fought with each other. Samurai could choose men in a way they couldn't pick their wives. The list of famous Japanese emperors, shoguns, and samurai who are thought to have been gay or bisexual reads like a like a *Who's Who* of Japanese history,

including Tokugawa Ieyasu, Uesugi Kenshin, and, of course, Takeda Shingen. The samurai's codeword for these relationships was "beloved retainers." For isn't that what long-term sexual partners are, people who join lives and mend each other's wounds?

Danjo Masanobu was a peasant who had risen from serf stock through the chaotic samurai ranks to become a commander in Shingen's army. After courting, Shingen signed a love pact with Danjo, their relationship preserved in writing. At Tokyo University's archives, one can view their love pact dating from 1542. In it, Shingen promises "not to hurt" the younger Danjo, nor take another gay lover. If he does, he asks that "I may receive the divine punishment of the Great Myoshin of the First, Second, and Third Shrines of the province of Kai, Mount Fuji and Shirayama, and particularly Hachiman Bosatsu, and all the higher and lower deities."

Some samurai gay relationships lasted lifetimes. The couples charged the battlefield together, trained with arrows and swords, and kept their camp tents warm. One scholar has suggested that Danjo and Takeda remained lovers and companions for three decades until Shingen's death in 1573. In the turmoil of Sengoku Japan, when lives fell like autumn leaves from swords, poison, and disease, these two men had an eon of companionship.

Yumiko and I met at a dancing party in a hazy recall of hip-hop, barbecue, and tequila. Yumiko had waist-length, thick hair that trailed her athletic body like a cape. She spoke English and French, had lived in three continents, and carried herself in the confident, jokey-but-no-real bullshit way of a park ranger. She'd studied philosophy as had I, and one of the first things we chawed about was Sarte. This sounds pretentious, but at the time I was starved for this sort of conversation. When I announced I would set up a tarp to block the grill from sheeting rain, she offered to help, not caring if her makeup streaked, her brand sweater sponged, her shoes muddied. Attraction wasn't enough; her lightheartedness, her kindness, her ability to evaluate

existentialists, and not give a fuck about her footwear let me wonder if this was the kind of person I was compatible with. By the time the party was over, I wanted nothing but her and became alive in that way animals must know.

Yumiko for her part postured skeptically — me in my tie-dyed shirt with a frayed hole over one nipple and long hair — *who was this hippie*? It wouldn't have taken much to persuade her away. Unknown to me was that Yumiko was three years out of a violent relationship with a controlling Frenchman who'd revealed, among other things, that he'd raped his sister when they were younger. Yumiko had grown depressed, sworn off men for three years, and only decided, weeks before the party, to begin dating again. She was romantic, idealistic about new people, trusting in coincidence. She saw in my former outdoor guiding a kind of adventurous spontaneity, in my insecure joking a lightheartedness, and a charisma that she'd so lacked in her last partner. Though to give me any real credit that night is suspect. She agreed, reluctantly, to go on a date the next week because I was good for a laugh. Later, she was drawn to my interest in art and outdoors, someone who was balanced but venturesome, stable but adaptable. And my tall frame and hazel eyes didn't hurt. I didn't create my eyes, nor did I choose her ex-boyfriend that made her open to someone goofy like me. Luck is what every famous swordsman or lovestruck human has ever had, but it often gets plowed under the guise of guile within storytelling.

Yumiko had five suitors that night, one of them a woman. Friends seem shocked when I recall the plans I went through to ruin this competition. "Cockblocking," it's called, a parrying of penises (and a vagina in my case). I had never done anything like this before, but I performed out-wooing maneuvers with uncommon success. I stirred one a too-strong drink and watched him vomit it back up. I loudly embarrassed a man as he was queering Yumiko for her number. I persuaded another away on an errand. I monopolized Yumiko's time and danced with her, took

shots together. I was aggressive, assertive, territorial, you could say. And I did this because, even if Yumiko couldn't see it yet, there was a future worth slaughtering for.

In the Sengoku Period, in which Takeda Shingen was born, many clans birthed many sons, whose names rang throughout the nation and whose castles speared the Japanese sky. Most would wink out of existence. Guns entered samurai combat in 1543 thanks to shipwrecked Portuguese, and for 150 years, bodies piled.

Takeda Shingen's name would spread across Japan, but first his father planned on disowning him. Nobutora was an incompetent ruler, thin-skinned and jealous of his son. One winter, fifteen-year-old Shingen, led 300 men through wind and snow and darkness, to an enemy fortress his father had fled in defeat. Blood perfumed the December snows, and Shingen carried the castle lord's head to his father.

The generals celebrated, but Nobutora simmered. He rode to a province governed by a son-in-law. Marriage was a frail pact in Sengoku Japan, as good as one would have with a bail bondsman. Nobutora attempted to bribe his son-in-law and arrange Shingen's imprisonment for life. But over the course of tea, Nobutora was informed that he was to be captive. His generals had revolted in his absence. Fifteen-year-old Shingen would begin his reign ahead of schedule.

The first time I proposed to Yumiko was after a Nagano ski trip, near the castle that young Shingen conquered. The two of us joined thirty others for a group rate, not knowing we would share cold rooms on tatami mats in the basement of a ski lodge where snow drifts covered the windows. Yumiko and I had not seen each other for three weeks and made love in a desperate meeting among hushed moans while people in the room stirred.

This was how love was made in ancient Japan. Paper walls screening embarrassment, the family next door averting their eyes the following morning as did our roommates. Later in the

car, we made love again in a parking lot before I dropped her off at the station so she could return to Tokyo, and I to the village in the mountains, four hours away. Our separation of a week's time like severing a bone, younger love, not imagining a future.

Post-coitus, we were still so hungry for each other that I proposed marriage, and Yumiko cried in joy. Ever-warring Romans, who conjured wedding rings as an eternal symbol of union, believed a nerve or vein bolted directly from the ring finger to the heart. Love was in the body it was thought, which is how Yumiko and I felt each weekend. After the proposal, when we separated at the station, we both knew, through eye contact, pinched limbs, and croaking voices, that our need, our physical ache at separating, had nearly ruined us. We both weren't ready for a lifetime commitment, a word sometimes listed synonymously with confinement. Our veins or nerves hadn't grown as strong yet in our bodies. A week later we almost ended, taking back our vows, in a panic because, like Nobutora, we'd thrust the frightening future upon us.

I want to pause here and reveal my uneasiness with the slippage between sex and swordplay. It strikes me as a gross way to describe desire, the conversation of limbs, eyes, and pheromones. I don't mean to repeat misogynist quips about conquest; I'm more interested in the animality of attraction. However, I can't help recalling the Medieval, Renaissance, Romantic expression *le petite mort* or small death. Drawn from the days when doctors thought too much sex spelled doom, *le petite mort* almost always meant orgasm. "I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom," King Lear says in Act IV. Shelley called it, "the death which lovers love." *Le petite mort* also signals psychological loss, how we lose ourselves with partners, when they are with us and when they are gone. How one kills off former loves in the heart and replaces them with new, and erases uncoupled possibility.

What possible futures did Yumiko and I kill off by pairing? Confession time: I'd invited someone else to that hip-hop/barbecue/tequila party, a model-gorgeous kindergarten teacher I'd met at a trance concert. After I blinked my eyes at Yumiko and we started talking Sartre, I dialed the teacher to lie that I was sick, that the party was off. She wanted to meet again, but I never called back. The lance in the back, the devious turn, perhaps I could have stomached being a samurai.

Yumiko fell for me, and we've been together eleven years. I look on our first meeting fondly, but how whimsical and nostalgic would I be had my own wooing been diced, if some dude made me throw up as I was pursuing Yumiko? Who remarks on the slaughtered, the warriors that would have been? How did that teacher feel, the castoff? The arrow of time is hard to divert. It's insistent and violent, and I'm a part of it.

Yamanashi's people loved Shingen because he taxed the samurai class as well as peasants. He also struck the fastidious warmonger's balance of armies with enough farmers to feed them. He maintained convenient roads, à la Mussolini and trains, and he opened up the mountains to gold mining. And he was cautious, famously installing two doors to his lavatory so he could never be cornered by assassins.

Takeda Shingen, fat and battle-hardened and in his fifties, came near to extinguishing the rival Tokugawa clan at the seaside fort of Hamamatsu, thereby taking control of Japan. He besieged Hamamatsu but broke off his attack because Tokugawa's outnumbered drums spooked him. Shingen backtracked home, dragon's breath trailing in the wind. Had he not, he likely would have beheaded Tokugawa Ieyasu and overrun the capital, Kyoto. Tokyo, now the world's biggest city founded by Tokugawa, would not exist. In which case, it's likely I never would have

met Yumiko nor lived in Yamanashi nor anywhere near Takeda's power center. We would never have danced nor made love in that hotel room buried in snow.

The arrow of time seems to manifest a marriage or the most populated mega-city with irrevocability. But one fewer drum might have changed our trajectories. If Shingen's instincts had not been so well tuned against the unfamiliar, the hidden assassin, the life he made would have snuffed the love I have now.

Hamamatsu, the town on Japan's Inland Sea where Shingen almost erased Tokyo, is where I began to feel closer with Yumiko's dad, Kazuyoshi a taciturn, ex-Japanese Special Forces veteran with rooty muscles, who growls more than speaks. Eight years ago, he chauffeured us on an 18-hour drive, motoring in the pre-dawn and camping at the sea. He showed us his elementary school and where he had picked plums as a farmer's child, and afterward, we poured from the mountains and wound along the edge of the ocean. Near sunset, we arrived in Hamamatsu, an urbanized, a sub-city filled with aluminum roofs, fishing docks, and barges on the horizon. The city felt squeezed, juiced between the mountains and ocean.

We came to a World Heritage site that sprouts from an inundated strip of peninsula. Here a pine forest sprouts along the shore, one that has been manicured for centuries into living art. The trees grow at right angles, bent, serpentine, weaving over dozens of feet in arbor, S-shaped, brush strokes. One pine stretched thirty feet horizontally, three feet off the sand.

Pine scent filled our clothes, pushed inland from the ocean wind. Kazuyoshi softened, himself wary of my foreignness, as we are, often, of unusual things. He told us about his childhood, how he was the son of a fruit baron. As a boy, he was often beaten for not picking enough fruit. Then, following his family's aims, he trained with Japan's Self-Defense Forces. He rehearsed how to parachute out of airplanes. How to penetrate the black night with a knife

gripped between his teeth as he crawled along enemy ground. To slit throats. This was his family's wish.

When he left the army, his life came apart. Kazuyoshi spiraled into alcoholism and poverty, and his family didn't help. It was almost as if the trials of his life had been for nothing, like a clan wiped clean. But Kazuyoshi adjusted, controlled his cravings, learned how to make jewelry. He took dancing lessons, and in dance class, he met Yumiko's mom, Miyoko, a nurse and daughter of a doctor. Both couples, Yumiko and I, Kazuyoshi and Miyoko, our relationships brewed in the battle-like embrace of dance.

Then, Kazuyoshi's family took interest in him again. They wished to arrange his marriage or benefit from it, as they had for all their children. The same people who had told him to enlist, who beat him when he was younger and abandoned him in the throes of disease. They wanted to direct the course of his affections. This was the filial bond that Kazuyoshi knew. So he disowned them, and never spoke to his family again.

I used to assume it was natural, an animal thing, that the people called family are the ones I was closest to by blood. But these bonds can be as frail as pacts made with strangers, and sometimes more so because they're assumed stronger, which makes betrayal knife deeper. The death of Kazuyoshi's family paralleled the creation of ours, and I sometimes wonder if it took the one thing to make the other.

Most historical accounts list Shingen's death as from illness, but a legend inspired one of Akira Kurosawa's best films, *Kagemusha*. In 1573, Takeda besieged Tokugawa's castle again in Hamamatsu. The defenders had not stockpiled for siege but began consuming their resources. When food disappeared, they swigged the alcohol. Believing death imminent, Tokugawa's soldiers caroused and bellowed songs and one began fingering a flute. The mournful tune

captivated soldiers inside the ramparts and out. They quieted, listened, weeping. When the carousing died off, Shingen could hear the flute leaping the battlements. He shifted out from his post. The sad tune struck him motionless, he an aging general with more life and battles behind him then in store. A man worried, perhaps, about the safety of his lover, Danjo, who he'd already saved once, about the future of his country, his clan. He was mesmerized, and a bullet sailed out from the castle and struck him in the face.

Accounts differ about what happened next. Some claim Takeda survived for weeks as sepsis conquered his cells. Takeda's dying wish was that his clan keep secret his death, a warlord, winner of many battles, struck down by a flute. What is clear is that the Takeda clan employed a *kagemusha*, a "shadow warrior" body double to ride into battle and cheer the troops wearing Shingen's armor, his dragon's breath. The clan hoped to keep Shingen's empire afloat until his son was ready to lead.

The *kagemusha* ruse worked, for a time. Takeda's armies torched enemy castles and decapitated more heroes for two years after Shingen's silencing. But Shingen's death was revealed, and his son, Katsuyori, took over for a short-lived reign. Heeding the advice of glory-lusting retainers during the Battle of Nagashino, he soon shattered his father's fearsome calvary against waves of rifle fire. Katsuyori retreated and was pursued throughout his father's lands. One by one, his retainers defected or were killed. Finally, in eastern Yamanashi, in the foothills that bordered the mountains I would later come to live, Katsuyori lay surrounded. He and his immediate family killed themselves, ending the Takeda line, spilling their guts over the mountainside.

In the valley where Takeda's son sliced open his belly, now spreads a conglomeration of vineyards. Due to the balmy climate, this has become Japan's Napa. In the countryside of

Katsuyori's defeat, Yumiko and I dined on a free roast beef dinner (bait for wedding couples), sampled mediocre vintages at one restaurant-winery perched on a hill, with floor-to-ceiling windows and egg yolk-yellow walls that burned when the sun crested. We were picky about the restaurant, staring down the barrel of a $20,000 tab which we were going to fund with donations from family. Only the strongest would win, the tastes clashing on our tongues.

Because of the restaurant's subpar offerings, we settled on a different winery in the central valley, with generous staff who cut us a deal: the entire restaurant on a Saturday. We were aggressive to snatch up the deal, jealous of other guests. I mention this because I fathom the idea of wanting more, of seeing what the world can give you and asking for as much as you can. During the Sengoku period, the world of Japan offered Shingen land from sea to sea, mountaintops to shore. I think it says little about him that he tried to gobble Japan until a bullet or flute bit him. Every day, I try to leach as much as I can, as many people do, and in that leaching, in some wild, cataclysmic way, I somehow help provide life that keeps on marching.

Every year, near Shingen's hometown, thousands of locals and tourists don armor and reenact the fourth battle of Kawanakajima, in which Shingen met his arch-rival Kenshin in sword-to-battle-fan combat to defend his gay lover. People reenact the charges, the impalements, the thrusts. Warriors are scheduled to die at certain places, some lying prone on makeshift combat zones for hours. It is considered an honor to be one of the few who dies in the water and thus forced to endure many moments, attempting not to drown while also appearing dead.

I skipped the battle and went cherry blossom viewing. I fancied myself, a bit smug then, above the fray of idolizing warfare. I revered trees rather than bloodshed, ignoring that it was blood that made leisure possible, as it has throughout the world. Refinements are carried on the lives of others, the slave laborers in sweatshops sewing gowns, the imprisoned cattle granting

roast beef. Many of us are conquerors of sorts, and like other engrained drives of mine, I attribute “greed to evolution. To ancestors who survived the cold by grubbing as they could, murdering and betraying.

That choice was the reason I ended up marrying Yumiko. Lured into battle, I would never have met her. My friends and I viewed the blossoms on an old cherry tree that was more than 400 years old and as gigantic as a hilltop. Combat is one kind of experience to leach from the world, but so is gazing on four-hundred years-worth of cherry blossoms, the floral scent as powerful as a hurricane.

Four hundred years ago, the Sengoku Period was ending. Takeda died as this tree was planted.

During the cherry blossom-viewing, a friend and I realized her departure from Japan coincided with my birthday, so we planned a joint, dance/barbecue/tequila party, to which she invited her friend through a French club. Yumiko and I met while I was taking boots off in the shoe-splattered entryway. I looked up and saw my future love’s radiant face knifing through my chest. An energy burned through me. It was the arrow of time continuing its violent course, pouring through fields, the mountains, and later that night our hands and hips.

Two months before we married, Yumiko and I sat among a crowd of a thousand, watching men dressed as monks carrying torches to light the giant bonfire. Each actor-priest gave a speech as the sun set, announcing they had come from mountains bearing gifts from the gods. When they finished, together they lit the fire, a three-story pyre of plywood and fir. The flames whipped into the sky, reflecting and dancing off the river, and embers exploding above us in halos of orange and crimson. As the wood burned, the men crossed the river, torches in hand.

The symbology here was that they had danced with death while up in the mountains but were being reborn as they crossed through the water.

Later, Yumiko and I ate at the local noodle dive and walked the town. Over two years, she had realized my sneakier, ambitious side rooted in insecurity, which she found darkly charming, and I learned her obsessiveness and knew it drove her to work hard, to believe in people and expect mountains from them. We each had lacerations we helped balm, provisions we shared, enemies we plotted against.

Perhaps this is the thing that makes us human, an impulse to build something greater than ourselves, through love or war, like the way Kazuyoshi, even after being born to non-family, decided to try again and create family with Miyoko and then with Yumiko and me. But I wonder. Animals, like whales and prairie dogs, care for each another in ways that seem beyond survival. Perhaps that's love, a benevolence that is reciprocal selfishness, a death that is a life, a lie that is true. Perhaps we can love and give to each other, rather than conquer because together we are more formidable.

We talked and strolled, walking from one end of the village to the other, watching as tourists' cars rolled out of town, feeling unjustifiably smug that we could stay there. A quiet valley filled with the hum of cicadas and the river, the same water that leads downstream to Tokyo, Tokugawa's megacity birthed from Shingen's death. We held hands, walked to my apartment on a bend, crossing a bridge over the dark water to get home.

Rides with Strangers

I'm born-again and at the wheel in 2003, four years before Japan. A rainy day on the Snohomish, WA turnpike and I'm cruising for hitchhikers. I catch a man with headphones, charcoal hair, poncho-wrapped with two miles before he makes it to town.

"Need a ride?" I yell, as I wheel my van in front of him.

Rain fogs his glasses as he accepts. He tells me his name is Gary. He's about 25, and he's headed for work as a dishwasher at the Red Lobster.

In thirty-seconds, I make my pitch: "So Gary, what do you think about Jesus?"

A minute yawns, and I glance over. Gary's looking out the window, and his fingers are pinching my air vent, as if trying to pry it off.

Maybe this had happened to him before. As for me, I am on my way to Africa in a year, to convert, I presume, the Africans. Gary is a practice run.

"Man, I'm just trying to live," he says.

I exclaim, "What do you mean live? How can you live without the Lord? That's like breathing without air, Gary." I laugh.

Breathlessly, I evoke St. Anselm: "Gary, think about this. You know about infinity? How could we *know*, how could we even have any *idea* about infinity, as we're far from infinite beings? I mean, come on, *Humans*? *Infinity?!* The idea of infinity has to have come from an infinite being, therefore it has to have come from God."

The weight of my preparation and pronouncement feels warm, powerful, thunderous. But Gary holds his hands up to the window, palms out, still looking at the field by the road.

I ask, "You want a Bible?" I pull one out of my pack and offer it to him.

"This is good," he says, and opens the door before my tires stop at a light.

For a moment I debate following him, going to the restaurant, having lunch. *Excuse me*, *could I talk to Gary in the kitchen?* But Red Lobster is out of my price range and so, I guess, is Gary's soul.

A month later, I'm back in Lubbock, Texas, where I grew up and where I met Rachel. The truth is Rachel wanted to be a missionary first. She had curly bangs, pale skin, soft hands, and mole, and I went weak-kneed. She had wooed me at coffee shops, the evangelical watering hole, and didn't I want to praise Jesus together? I was old school Episcopal, my father a deacon, and so the defection to Evangelicalism wasn't so traitorous.

Rachel may have been a catalyst, but in the year 2004, Lubbock is the country's most conservative county by votes next to Provo, Utah. From 1980 to 2000, Evangelical affiliation mushrooms by seventy percent. I, and many of my co-believers, are somewhat religious by osmosis.

After an all-night worship session I had affirmed my faith in Christ and was baptized in a supine lake on a chilly, January morning. I heard about building a home for myself in heaven and decided on going to Africa and teaching them all about the Word, the selfish do-gooder mantra that brings missionaries to all corners of the globe. The righteous smack that we stuck into our veins, the highest high on High. I am just a small part of the Christ freight train, but I am hooked, in love, and drawn to the steel rush of catching the doubter's doubt.

Plus, when I leave my father's home for Seattle for self-imposed proselytizing, the controlling force in my life is gone. Typically conservative, I hasten to second-string patriarchy.

But Rachel departs for Japan on a missionary trip, which is why I'm back in Lubbock. God's work is more important than me, but I can't say I'm above being jealous.

And I don't have her soft hands to fall back on when I'm strolling through a park and staring up at the moon and thinking, *For real?*

I also inadvertently (not so, says Freud) take evolution and world religions classes simultaneously in college, and they wear down my defenses.

My idea of God in stasis. What's the plan? I wonder. I embroil myself in a triple major to stop thinking about the guideless forces of the universe. If Darwin and Lao Tzu can be right, then what else?

I give up Africa. Stop going to church. Give up the cross I had hung around my neck for three years, which began to feel like Coleridge's bloated seabird. I am ashamed for not believing anymore and somehow equally ashamed for being wrong.

I don't tell my parents. I stop writing to Rachel who last sends me a sweatshirt from Japan, one of those charming articles where the English is just off and makes us Americans feel self-righteous about our inherited language. The pullover reads, "San Francisco's Oranganic Beans Company. Not one bean unalike."

"Unalike and all alone, every bean is," it should say.

It is around this time I begin picking up hitchhikers. First people caught in the rain — an impulsive Samaritan thing to do. Then random thumbers. I am driving a lot these days, back living on the outside of Lubbock and on weekends jaunting to the isolated cotton towns slurping the Ogallala aquifer. The expanse of space allows my head to breathe. I can let the cold numbness drift across the Great Plains. The joke is, if your dog runs away in West Texas, stand on your roof and you can watch him for two days. You can see the earth slip away into the blue haze of nothingness from an overpass.

Then one night after class at Texas Tech, I give a ride to an elderly man in cowboy boots who is lurching across the highway with a knee brace and a bad limp. He is literally falling all over the road, and I lap around the exits to pick him up.

He speaks only Spanish, is wildly, friendly drunk and mustachioed.

“De donde es...” I try to say in my high school Spanish.

“Post!” he yells.

“Queires post office?” I say.

“No, Post!” He says and points up the highway.

That first silence with a hitchhiker is what addicts me to giving rides. The quiet awkwardness before the other person decides whether I will assault him or not (it’s always men), and I decide the same in reverse. We eye each other like snipers over a long distance. Statistically, the odds are in my favor. His hands are free, but I can smash the car. I think, though I wouldn’t voice it this way, that I want to meet “sinners” so I can break my bone-engrained assumptions. I want to see how far I can trust whatever is out there — to stretch that rubber band of the universe and feel it snap around me. I want to know what presence is lurking beyond the pitch of the horizon I can’t see, even from my roof.

The man and I are silent for five minutes, and then a sign, I can read, coming out of the shade of an overpass, says, “Post — 10 miles.”

Later I’ll learn it is the once-upon-at-time utopia of cereal monarch, C.W. Post (of Grape Nuts and Raisin Bran fame). Trees lined every street. The schools were long and grand, and there were as many churches as fire hydrants. And no, no, alcohol. Post had set up his dream world, an outpost of civilization, at the edge of civilization.

Now, since Mr. Post's death, the town is like any other small outland. Many of the trees dead, the churches closed. The gas stations sell beer, and the schools are on life support. The town is less assuming and much more empty without its mission.

We drive for a few minutes, and I look around for something to say. I point down to the man's knee where there is a polyethylene support. "Que?" I ask.

He straightens out his thumb and his forefinger. They form a lazy L, which he cocks and fires at my dashboard.

"Pow," he says.

I stare at him, doubtful. "Verdad?"

"Si."

I look him in the eyes."El amigo?" I say. I don't know why.

"Que?"

I point at his leg.

"No, no, no, no." He waves a hand and speaks a stream of Spanish, ending by firing his finger gun at my air conditioner.

We don't say anything after that, and I wouldn't know what to say. But then he points to himself and mimes hoisting a bottle to his lips and laughs and slaps my thigh. Then he mimes smoking a joint and waving in the air and coughing and points at me. I wave him off, and he laughs and hits my thigh again.

A minute later, or so it seems in my memory, he gestures up ahead at the road, beneath a shadowed overpass. He is sullen. "Aqui," he whispers.

I stare. "Aqui," he says, again. The overpass is coming up on our right. I take my eyes off the road and turn towards the ordinary culvert, the pylons and lights, the reeds and grama grasses

and signs and traffic cones and those orange barrels filled with sand that keep us from running off the road and killing each other.

He points, cocks his thumb, and shoots my air vent.

“Aqui,” he says.

We drive down the highway. We pass. We pass it all in an instant. The scene goes by us in one clear, sharp moment. The danger lurking along the road.

Later that year, I let a man in my car who’s holding a switchblade. Whether he wants me to see it or not, I don’t know. I am holding my own in my right hand, between the arm rest and my hip. This is standard for me, to keep my knife handy and out of sight while somebody gets in the car. I had thought it was an unnecessary precaution that only made me feel safer. Maybe the hitchhiker sees it. His eyes go wide as he sits, like tiny flames, and we could be mirrors. Four white flames on a car’s canvas.

I quickly calculate to stab him in the throat and eyes if he attacks me, as if I have any fighting experience, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to blind and de-jugular the living. The moment seems scripted, unreal. The real fear won’t penetrate for years, coming in a shaking sweat as I ride in a bus next to a guy who looks like him.

He slides in and doesn’t put on his seatbelt. I peel away, iron grip on the wheel. I recall that he looked so pathetic on the lampless, midnight highway hunched in his trench coat under the annual toilet flush of the South Plains’ faux-monsoon. But now he resembles a coiled viper, with glasses, razor nose, and greasy hair. The man must be six-seven and hunches beneath the roof. We spend a few seconds as the car picks up speed, staring at the rain.

When I ask him how he’s been, for want of anything better to do, he starts off by talking about his penis. It had turned purple, he says.

“Yeah, man, it was an erection that lasted for 48 hours. It was so painful. I couldn’t stand it. So I got a ride with my buddy to the emergency room. He was on his way to work in Lubbock.”

“What’d they do?”

“They put a fucking shot in my dick. I couldn’t believe it. A shot about this long.” He holds his boney fingers out. He is staring right at me as he says this. “But I still have a hard-on, man. They say it might last like for sixteen hours.”

“Jesus,” I say.

“Maybe longer,” he says.

I look him in the eyes, and he holds my gaze. We’re having what Barry Lopez calls “the conversation of death.” Animals, say an Arctic wolf and moose, meet, and the predator brings down the prey. Something happens, a flash between the eyes and the moose stops struggling. Lopez believes it is an exchange: respect for the spirit of the animal for a gift of life-sustaining flesh.

We are having the conversation of death in my car about life. How else can two people stuck in a drama with fraught characters hope to trust each other? I believe the line about his penis is a screen for when he hitches. It’s odd, but disarming. Who wants to mess with a guy who got a shot in his dick? So I ease up. My spine, a carpet of nerves, descends back to the seat; my fear retreats to the nether-reaches of my brain. I think if he’s trying to ward me off it means he isn’t hunting.

So we begin to talk like humans meeting anywhere. Imperceptibly, we put our knives away.

He tells me that he hitchhikes regular. Sleeps on train tracks. Watches for snakes. But tonight, his friend gone to work, he felt like the thirty mile stroll home in the dark before the deluge.

"Thirty miles is nothing to me, man, though it would have taken most of the night. I'd just sleep in a ditch when I got tired, or maybe trek up to some nice acreage or farm. I've gotten rides from many weirdoes, though," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Even had to bail out of the car one time. Guy wanted me to give him a blow job. Kinda fucked up my knee, but I made it out all right."

I understand now why he doesn't wear his seat belt. That with the knife he is only, like me, protecting himself from the dark spots on the highway.

"I got a girl though," he says. "She's a good one. Good woman, always someone you can trust, you know? Trust is so important these days, and some women, some people, you just can't. I've been divorced once and that bitch done stole my car."

"That why you couldn't drive?"

"I can't drive anyway; vision's too blurry. I bought the car for her, for us. But she done run off with it, and I have no idea where she is. She won't even sign the divorce papers, so technically I'm still married to the bitch. And I can't marry this woman I got now, though she still sticks with me. Says she'll be my girlfriend as a wife, you know what I mean? People in our town talk, but what can you do? Fuck 'em. I done found me a person I can trust. I'd trade the whole world for just one person I could trust."

Thirty miles whip by. I drop him off at a gas station by his home in a small town. He doesn't have a job or a way to pay me.

"Hey, I don't want to be like some kind of leech or something," he says. "I'm all in for a trade for a trade, so here you go."

He offers me a blinking magnet from his pocket, the kind to stick on your refrigerator that he might have gotten from another gas station. You can clip things to it and remember. It is an American flag with LED lights in the center.

Across the flag in capital letters is the word, "Hope," and the letters flash on and off.

At 24, I consider leaving Christianity the opposite of the conversion experience. It's, as one writer described, like watching fog lift off a lake: you're not sure how fasts it's disappearing, but you're pretty sure when it's all gone. So, after college, I fly to Japan for a job in linguistic proselytizing.

I spend a month teaching squealing elementary schoolers the ins and outs of fast food conversations, greetings, and emergency predicaments, and meanwhile I explore the mountains around my town.

One night I have a green pay phone receiver cradled in my chin when three Japanese men walk up to me. The man in the middle is brawny and has a spiked crewcut with a gray pullover. The other two are rail thin, modeling baggy rock shirts, orange and plum.

Crewcut speaks: "Excuse me, what is the problem you are having?"

I look these guys over, wondering if I should tell them about my problem.

"I missed the last train to Otsuki," I say finally and hang up the phone.

"You live there?" Crewcut asks.

"No, my car's parked there, but I've been hiking all day and just got back."

"What do you plan to do?"

That was a good question. I look over at the sleeping homeless spread out on the station's brightly lit floor. I can stay a groggy night, and take the first morning train to Otsuki, which literally means "Big Moon." But from Big Moon it will be another hour's drive to my village, and I have a sports festival to go to the next day. If I miss the festival I can be fired, if fired, then deported. But I do not feel like leaving the tracks of the this experience.

To the other two, who haven't spoken to me, Crewcut says something in Japanese, and they pull out their cell phones.

While they talk, Crewcut turns to me. "We would drive you, but," he laughs. "We've been drinking heavily."

He hands me his business card. The man, named Yusuke Iida, says, "Last year, I spent a month in Thailand and I couldn't speak Thai, but many spoke English and helped me when I was in trouble. Now I want to return that help."

He pauses and lifts his rocky hand to his face like Rodin's philosopher. I realize I've never seen a karmic policy like his put in action outside the bounds of religion.

"Other Japanese are too afraid because they can't speak English," he says.

I put his card in my wallet and chuckle, tiredly.

Iida frowns. "Why do you laugh?"

"Because I teach English."

He smiles, levels a finger at my nose and says, "You be a good teacher."

Iida holds my eyes for longer than I'm willing, a conversation not of exchange but of giving.

Then the man in the purple shirt gets off his phone and says something to Iida, who translates. A friend of theirs is driving to the station to pick us all up.

Iida puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. He says what I've been hoping he'd say — hoping like when the light turns green as you come around a hill, when the bag in the road is just a bag, when the charging dog is on a leash, when your friend loans you just enough money for that cross country ticket. For once, or if you're fortunate or keen, or maybe one of the many times it's happened for you, the tracks open up and you can cross. The lights flash on and off.

Those tracks are people upon which the machinery of this universe operates.

"Today is your lucky day," Iida says.

We walk outside and wait by the curb. Trying to be thankful, I ask each of the three men about themselves. They talk about their schools, their work, what sports they like. I talk with the other two in a mixture of bad Japanese and English. The subject of the driver comes up.

"The driver," Iida tells me, with his hands stuck in his pullover, "is a very nice man, and he hasn't been drinking, but he's a new driver. I think he just got his license this month."

As if on cue, their friend, driving a 4-door sedan, pulls into the bus driveway and beelines toward the guard rail where we are standing. His eyes go wide, and the tires squeal and smoke while he lifts his hands up as if resigning control to a higher power.

When Iida opens the door, I hesitate before climbing in. Only then do I think about the possibility of getting beat up or murdered. Iida seems sincere, but how can I know? How can we know what any one person on this earth is thinking? I'm relying on faith here.

Anyway, I am too tired to worry. I will just have to buckle up and see. I make some small talk. Then, while the other four are chatting, I lean my head against the cold window, and fall as fast asleep as I did when I was a kid and said my prayers to the night-glow Jesus that my parents had tacked above my head.

I wake up twice to see the car stopped in the road and hear Iida berating the driver to go back and take the turn he'd missed. Twice we stop at convenience stores for directions. Twice I wake up to see Iida wandering across the road, his knees floating above the pavement where my vision cuts off at the door.

I rise again to hear the others laughing and high-fiving. We've arrived at Big Moon Station, surrounded by the now-darkened hills. Normally the circuitous route takes an hour, but we'd taken two. I try to thank all of them the best I can and shake all of their hands before I get out. As I stand outside, Iida rolls down the window, grabs my palm with both hands and looks me in the eye.

"You be a good teacher," he says again and smiles.

I wave as they drive away, the sedan morphing into mantis eyes. I realize I completely forgot to offer them gas money. But I'm kidding myself if I thought this could be an even trade.

At the town sports festival, my team gets second place. I am made unofficial captain and have to give a speech in Japanese at the after-party — the team tried hard, good job everyone, I had lots of fun, really, thank you — simple, and yet for me the most sincere and complicated words I can manage.

As I sit down on the tatami mat to eat my fried chicken and tofu and pickled eggplant and drink Asahi with the laughing parents of my students, someone asks me a common foreigner question, what my favorite thing about Japan is.

I usually say things about hot springs or the noodles or the mountains, none of which is true but not exactly untrue. No one can answer a question like that with any certitude, but we can try. At the party something clicks in a whip-smart way that is rare for me, and I say, "people."

Which, if we're lucky, should be our favorite thing about anyplace, anywhere. If we’re lucky, we give a little prayer for every time we didn’t notice that someone made our lives and kept them on track and out of danger.

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