NOTES ON THE NEW WORLD

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Trying to Leave Horse Heaven

For years nature and I didn’t speak. I grew up ignoring the world outside our house, determined to resist this smalltownamerica place that was not-Africa, not-Europe: not like us. A dry indentation of earth cupped in a ring of sagebrush hills so matte and purple they could have been a painted backdrop for one of the countless westerns my mother grew up on—a different double feature every weekend—red-felt cowboy hat dangling from a string around her neck. Hills holding back the big blue bowl of sky wherever we looked: the Rattlesnake Hills to the north, the Horse Heaven Hills to the south. The sour smell of the feedlot at the entrance to town enveloping the car and worming its way through vents and window cracks. Endless days of punishing sun with not enough trees, broken sidewalks refracting the light with blinding intensity. Escape that.

Two Houses

When I think about childhood, those perfect years between the ages of six and twelve, I picture my grandparents’ farmhouse, pale yellow, nestled
among the densest cluster of trees on Route 2: the lemon, tangerine, and mint-colored kitchen; the pink music room; the rose-and sea foam master bedroom; the black-walnut tree with the rope swing that smelled of musk; the raspberry patch buzzing with fat bees; the cool, green fields of spearmint; Mummi bent over dusty zinnias and sugar-pea vines in the garden. Never the flimsy mobile home behind the house. Where—except for that first summer—Mom and I actually lived.

I never consider the trailer’s shameful boxiness. Its hollow walls, panels of dark veneer stapled together and camouflaged with battered posters from Mom’s college days: van Gogh’s Starry Night, Picasso’s Mother and Child. Its seventies gold-and-green-brown color scheme. The kitchen’s muddy-avocado appliances. The drabness of the olive bathtub against mustard wallpaper. At each window the same rough, open-weave curtains with machine embroidery.

Was there a moment I didn’t hate the trailer? Perhaps an initial thrill when poring over the dog-eared factory catalog with Mom and choosing the fifty-foot single wide? The weeks of waiting for our ready-made home—the first in the neighborhood, its tinny, simulated-panel siding gleaming white. The call-and-response of the workmen as they wheeled our home into the backyard and cranked it down onto the waiting foundation.

In the beginning, surely we must have loved the trailer. Old Pappa set concrete stepping-stones into the lawn between the two houses. Their shapes echoed the raised pattern of linoleum that ran through the trailer—coolly smooth like so many dark, mossy stones in the trout streams we fished each summer. He built a porch outside the front door and steps from the back door down to Mom’s flower beds. As soon as he constructed a lattice to hide the foundation, the barn cats moved in. At night we could hear yowling through the floor as boundaries were crossed and territories invaded.

Then came puberty and with it, shame. Now mobile homes were no longer unique. Now they fell into rusted disuse, symbols of the dark-skinned migrant workers who perched on the edge of the county line near the fields they worked: apples, asparagus, cherries, peaches, pears, hops. Now a subtle shift in relationships began: my friends no longer kids on the bus, but those who lived in town on the Hill, slept in pastel rooms with canopy beds, and walked to school.

The New World Shifts and Steam

I’m nearly sixteen before I learn the true story of my birth. It’s spring 1979, fifteen months before snowcapped Mount Saint Helens will wake up a couple hundred miles away and forever change the weather and landscape we thought we knew, seventeen years after my teenage mother lay down on the floor of her father’s house and contemplated suicide. I can picture her in 1962, with her apple cheeks and light brown ponytail, prone against the gray carpet, looking too brunette to be Nordic and much younger than her nineteen years. She might have been wearing a sleeveless blue cotton smock, the patch pockets stuffed with half-used tissues, and a mannish pair of black glasses. Those droopy blue eyes of hers, so deceptively sleepy, would have been open. Seventeen years later, except for the short bowl haircut swirled with cowlicks, she looks exactly the same.

Time has stopped in the living room of our tiny house. It’s as if, with my mother’s silence, a spell descends over us like the ash will when Mount Saint Helens erupts, turning cars and flower beds silver. We’ll have to wear surgical masks outside, as will the thousands of spectators and beauty queens waving to each other from behind white paper cones at the annual Portland Rose Festival to the south. But for now, my mother contemplates the ceiling, and the cats on the roof fall asleep, whiskered chins upturned in the shade of the honeysuckle vine.

No one on Gregory Avenue moves. Next door, Mr. Graham turns to stone in the midst of his prized hybrid teas. Across the street, Tommy the Plumber stalls, tattoos motionless in the hairy forests of his arms and legs and chest. At the end of the street, the boys on the high school wrestling team—state champions for three years straight—slump drooling onto gym mats, while next door at my mother’s junior high, three kids smoking joints topple over on the football field.

The entire town of Sunnyside, Washington—where, according to the chamber of commerce then, the sun shines 360 days a year—holds its breath. At the feedlot near the sign welcoming visitors to Sunnyside—Home of Astronaut Bonnie Dunbar, the milk-faced Herefords and polled Angus stand vacant-eyed and slack-jawed, just like they will when the volcano blows. In the tiny business district, the Rotarians and Kiwanis and Elks and Eagles stop
singing midsong: the neon warrior on the awning of the Safari Restaurant watches his spear and shield blink and fizzle out; and the Golden Pheasant Chinese restaurant actually closes.

The blond kids up on the Hill continue drifting in their blue swimming pools, while Mexican workers doze on ladders in the sooty fruit orchards, their burlap bags slipping to the ground. Nothing much was happening to begin with at the big Catholic and Mormon and Episcopalian and Methodist and Baptist and Presbyterian churches, but in the tiny new churches that are continually forming and separating at any time of day—so many that Sunnyside, according to Old Pappa, is in the Guinness Book of World Records—the congregations begin to snore right in their folding chairs.

This hush while I wait for my mother to call the true tale of my origins up from hibernation carries out of town, past Old Doc Querin’s big-animal practice, past the huge Dutch dairies with their tin-roofed barns, past fields strung high and beaded with hops. It wafts along the restricted road to the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, which did the plutonium finishing for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and where people say that strange new insects breed in the chalky limestone. It floats by the Moore farm with its collapsing barn and twelve kids, the Kludas farm with its narrow lambing shed and single giant son, and my grandparents’ farm wedged in between. For once the woodpecker attacking their trees is quiet, enjoying the bright pink blossoms on the thorny hawthorn, the heart-shaped leaves of the catalpa, the drooping weeping willow. The silence wends along the irrigation ditch to the asparagus fields at the tiny airport, the same fields where my mother walked barefoot in 1962, the soil damp between her toes, and began to consider killing herself and her unborn child.

Places We Don’t Remember

In 1962 everyone understood that as soon as a girl got out of the Home, she would spend the rest of her life trying to forget it. It was a nonplace, one of a network of places that weren’t talked about and therefore didn’t exist. As her due date approached, my mother too began to disremember things. She waddled through the shabby, cheerless rooms, omitting each detail from her memory. She would forget that couch in front of the television, sagging with
dazed, pregnant teens. The card table with the bent leg near the piano. Now, seventeen years later, she can barely remember how long she was exiled there, or anyone’s name. Silence has managed to erase almost all of it.

A New Country

The spring of 1979, the year before Mount Saint Helens decides to awake from her 123-year slumber, the self my mother has kept dormant these seventeen years creeps out of the past. The last time the mountain blew was 1857, the year the U.S. Supreme Court decided blacks were not citizens. And like the pressure building now beneath our feet, the Dred Scott case weakened the fault line between Northern abolitionists and Southern slaveholders, four years later exploding into civil war.

Mount Saint Helens’ very first outburst was the stuff of legends, an origin tale that also pitted brother against brother. According to the Klickitat, who call her Tah-one-lat-cha (Fire Mountain); the Puyallup, who call her Loowitlatka or Loowit (Lady of Fire); and the Yakima, our local tribe, the mountain was a lovely, white-clad maiden with whom both sons of the Creator fell in love. They battled each other for her, causing the sun to darken and the earth to tremble. As they hurled molten rock back and forth, entire forests and villages disappeared in flames. Angered, the Creator turned one son into Mount Adams, the other into Mount Hood, and Loowit into the symmetrical, beautiful Mount Saint Helens, perennially encased in ice and snow.

For three months in 1980, prior to the eruption, the ground beneath her will tremble—ten thousand quakes in seven weeks. A crater will yawn in her mouth, growing at a rate of six feet per day. Though geologists and biologists recognize the signs, they will ignore them. When at last Loowit succumbs to the pressure, the avalanche preceding the blast will splash water 850 feet high, temperatures will reach one thousand degrees, and five hundred million cubic yards of rock will be released in one of the largest volcanic explosions in North American history. The entire mountaintop will slide into the Toutle River valley.

Two hundred miles away in Sunnyside, we will sit open-mouthed before the television, watching thick, white smoke curl like brain matter against a blackened crater. We will hear the stunned cries of journalists and rescue
workers. "It doesn’t even look like the same country!" someone shouts into a radio. "I can’t find any landmarks. It doesn’t look like anyplace I’ve ever been before!"

The Lady of Fire will forge an entirely new country. Before the explosion, Sunnyside is so dry that when it rains, school closes. My mother tells me tales of the west, just over the Cascade Mountains, where there are cities and water, people who read. When Loowit blows, the largest landslide in recorded history will level 230 square miles of forest in three minutes, wiping out entire populations of elk, deer, bear, and coyote. Glistening Spirit Lake, where my cousin Heidi and I spend summers creasing through snow thaw, will become a bowl of mud, as will the Columbia River, plummeting from a depth of forty feet to thirteen and stranding four dozen freighters in the process. The silvery ash will drift in a fifteen-mile-high column all the way here to southeast Washington. By noon, ash will be falling in Idaho. In two weeks, it will circle the globe. After that, rain in my hometown becomes normal and school is never canceled. The very earth outside the door changes but still, I want out.

In Horse Heaven

The spring before our geography irrevocably changes, my mother breaks the spell that binds us to the living room sofa, the cats to the roof. "Well," she says, recalling my father’s return to Nigeria, her expulsion from the farm by the very grandparents I trial each day, the hazy arrival to the unremembered Home—all new information: "this is the story."

The spring, seventeen years before, when the Rattlesnake and Horse Heaven hills were buttery with yellow wildflowers and the irrigation ditches clogged with velvet-silver pussy willows, I entered the world, joining my mother in exile at the Home and then somehow, in less than a year, leading us back.

Demographics

For years I was an only child, the only child. The only black baby born to a white girl in the Home. The only New World African in Sunnyside with a doting Nordic immigrant family. The only child raised on a farm in a valley of pale landowners and Mexican field hands, nestled at the edge of painted Native American lands. The only one on the playground with no father and no good excuse like "He died." The only one whose mother had to swear not to overthrow the United States government, me balanced on her hip, so that the National Security people would give her the money to finish college and spend the next six years teaching in dry school districts where no one had a father and yet I was still, still the only black one.

Invaders

As a child I studied my African folktales and Norse legends and waited for Anansi the Spider and Loki the Half-Giant, both tricksters who amused themselves at others’ expense, to come scuttling over the purple mountains that ringed the town, cupping us in the curve of dry earth. The invaders would be half-Nigerian, half-Nordic and look like me. They would say "Welcome, sister!" in a special language that only we understood. But no one ever came, other than the occasional earth-colored rattlesnake, and in the end, I got on a plane and left in hopes of increasing my odds.

In college territory is marked by color. I learn to read the subway’s deceptively cheerful hues: Red Line linking Harvard Square’s monied tourists and college students with Dorchester’s Irish bars and dog-shit-speckled sidewalks. Green Line running from green suburbs and designer shopping to brick, white-steepled colonial buildings and cement, monstrous Government Center. Blue Line focusing on the always-under-renovation airport and Wonderland, the intriguingly named racetrack. The odd Orange Line, spanning both Charlestown, infamous for school busing violence, and black stronghold Roxbury. Miles, seemingly, between cobblestone streets and high-rise projects. Rocks. Baseball bats. Black body splayed across the electrified third rail, white hot. T stops like landmines. When traversing the landscape, I learn to choose wisely.

Increasing My Odds

Boston is destined to become my disremembered place, the place I will spend the rest of my life trying to forget. In the end, I get on a plane and leave in hopes of increasing my odds.
Suddenly—Nigeria. I arrive, hungry for my people, and yet, every day I stare open-mouthed at the place: My father’s village in Igboland, nestled in the shadow of a giant achee, the largest tree I’ve ever seen. Huge, gnarled roots arcing out of the ground higher than a man, a series of natural seats that stretch nearly a block along the forest floor. Evenings the villagers gathering and laying the day to rest. The sun dropping into a cluster of branches and the moon disentangling itself to provide some light amongst all that shade.

My raised-in-Nigeria sister tells me that the tree saved the village during the civil war. “When the Federal troops finally made it this far south,” she begins in that lilting voice of hers, as if speaking from far away, “they marched into the village and began looting houses and setting farms on fire. Our house was one of the first to go.”

“When they saw the prize achee, they rushed to chop it down.” My sister smiles, her fingers seeking mine, our feet clogged with red earth. “They say that wherever Federal axes struck the tree, blood ran like sap. The soldiers fled the village in terror.”

What am I fleeing? Mummi’s village in Finland, Old Pappa’s in Sweden—long empty roads, strands of thin, white-barked trees, vacant farmhouses—pale landscapes you abandon for the New World. My mother’s village of America with its hills that held us in, not danger out. With its volcanoes and cities that attacked not our enemies, but us.

Morning in Alaigbo arrives with a variety of sounds and smells: First the mournful, pre-dawn dirge of hymns learned from missionaries. Then the rustle of family members returning to the morning’s tasks, the splash of water rising from the well, the sizzle as palm oil heats up, releasing its nut-musk scent, the plop of thick slices of ji dropping into a water-swollen pot. True yam—not the sweet, orange-yellow, New World pretender. This white-fleshed tuber balances on the head, thick and dark as firewood.

I dream the glottal murmur of Igbo, thick and restful to my untrained ears. Someone picking fruit from his or her natal tree, the crack of stick against trunk, the rustle of leaves resisting the harvest, accompanied by the blooming floral bouquet of pawpaw and citrus and mango. The bleat of the goats that follow me everywhere from a careful distance. That wait around the corners of the house for me like a gang of bearded thugs, smelling my difference.

When the air thickens, burning mist off the tangled greenery, my body shifts in sleep, positions itself to process Igboland swirling through the open window. Bugs purr steadily like the generator out back. I open my eyes to a dim room, a Welcome! banner strung across the wall: Samson House, a dollhouse-size pastel bungalow my father built on the ashes of the burned homestead and named for my grandfather. I see Old Pappa, my other grandfather, in the pink and blue rooms. In the courtyard ringed with trees.

I wonder if my modern, educated stepmother buried my siblings’ umbilical cords and afterbirths beneath the taproots of their natal trees. It must be comforting to know under which tree one’s origin rests. When my born-in-Nigeria siblings stand on ancestral land, they can feel themselves growing beneath. When they eat the fruit from their natal trees, they taste themselves.

No wonder the Igbo always return to the village to build a house in which to grow old. How far, across how many oceans, can we stray before Ala, goddess of the earth, calls us home? We return, fleeing notplaces and New World shames, to sit in the spot where our father’s father’s father sat and watch the sun go down. Remember. Or, we return, drawn to trees that taste of our blood and are prepared to shed theirs for us. Death surely comes as no great shock, burial merely a return to the familiar network of roots that have held us close since birth.

I open my eyes to a sister who could be my twin, stranger-brothers who sit and stand and laugh like me. Finally, nature—calling me to plant myself, blood and all.
THE COLORS OF NATURE

Culture, Identity, and the Natural World

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