

Memory as Preservation

“An Encyclopedia of Instances”

Mayhem, Fruit, and a little Dying

By Ivan Reynolds

FORWARD

The following work was created in the summer of 2021 during a Nature in Words Fellowship with the Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. It takes the shape of an Encyclopedia, a format heavily inspired by the book *“Encyclopedia of An Ordinary Life”* written by the late Amy Krouse Rosenthal. The thirty-or-so entries, composed of poems, stories, and written accounts span from letters A to Y, acting together as a piece of fragment literature describing the intersections of memory, nature, and people. A mosaic, if you will. Like a mosaic, the entries have meaning on their own but not nearly as much as they do cumulatively. That being said, this book can be read forwards, backwards, or shuffled like a deck of cards in a late-night euchre game. If done right, this Encyclopedia might be thought of as a fossil that preserves memory and imagination, place and person, human and non-human worlds just the same. Before the entries, is a description of characters, setting, and a timeline. This is meant only to express a more complete story of how this place and people came to be. The confluence of these factors is intended to orient the reader to a place and time they may not live in and offer a more thorough representation of the facts. My process for writing this was simple. I was in nature daily, walked the trails, climbed the trees, waded in the waters waiting to be amazed. When I was, and I was often, I jotted down a few words to come back to later and unwind the story, not as it was but as I remembered it. To that end, not everything you’re about to read is true, but everything was rooted in one central question. *What is worth remembering today, here in this place south of Hastings, Michigan?* Thus, it is the broader intention of this writing to weave, braid, and re-member the disjointed parts of this spot, this summer, this one wild and precious life, to approach with wonder and preserve.

SETTING

There's a stretch of land near Hastings, Michigan where the hand-me-down sun of our mothers shines on the pines while the mourning doves keep time with the sky above. Those who care to call it Pierce Cedar Creek Institute (PCCI), but it was once what all things are bound to be again:

- A. Wilderness
- B. Nameless
- C. Forgotten
- D. Free

Shorthand PCCI Trail Guide:

Beech Maple Ridge Trail - fits roughly 1,672 humans placed longways
Black Walnut Trail - Takes 3 minutes and 52 seconds to skip/frolic
Brewster Lake Trail - A good walk, a bad run
Cedar Creek Trail - Probably a nice place for a first kiss
Old Farm Trail - Path I take home

Distances from PCCI:

Nearest Neighbor - 535 feet
Nearest Gas Station - 3.8 miles
Nearest Lumber Yard - 7.9 miles
Nearest Metropolitan Area - 28 miles
Nearest Meteorite Landing Site - 90 miles
Nearest Star - 24,925,000,000,000 miles

CHARACTERS - Researchers, writers, and humans involved in the story of this summer 2021

Andre - Tick Fella (closeted anarchist and public-property forager)
Anthony - Box Turtle Wrangler (ideal company for road trips)
Faith - Box Turtle Expert (suspected jack of all trades)
Matt - Boss / Big Kahuna (listens to funky experimental jazz)
Maryann - Creative Writing Prof. / Mentor (certified good person)
Ivan - Me (perpetually undecided)

A BRIEF STORY ABOUT TIME

4,500,000,000 BC: Gas and dust solidify, Earth exists¹, land belongs to no one

541,000,000 BC: Climate warms, Earth floods¹

65,000,000 BC: "Wow, a shooting star," said the Chasmosaurus. Meteor smashes into the Yucatan (7 in 10 vertebrates die)¹

250,000 BC: Humans now exist, but they're hairy and likely smell like onions¹

10,000 BC: Humans discover Michigan, land still belongs to no one¹

5,500 BC: God is tired of being alone and has an idea: Earth²

5,500 BC: On the sixth day, Humans now exist (2 humans call Earth "home")²

2,900 BC: After risking it all on a fruit tree, God gets mad at humans for their decisions, Earth floods²

Year 1: Earth is born³

Year 2: Earth floods³

Year 2: Tcakabesh (the Great Spirit) rebuilds Earth on a turtle's back³

Year 3: Humans now exist³

541: Global Plague, lots of humans die, you'd think this would bring them together, but, no, it doesn't

1622: Humans discover⁴ Michigan, land belongs* to the French

1671: Algonquin people use land near the Tomba-Signe (Thornapple River) as winter grounds

1763: Land belongs* to the British

1796: Land belongs* to the United States

1804: 1 billion humans call Earth "home"

1812: Guns, guns, guns, the British want their Empire back

1813: More guns, land still belongs* to the United States

1821: Algonquin tribes cede land in lower Michigan to the United States

1830: Trading post built beside the Thornapple River (Tomba-Signe)

1831: Beaver disappear from the area for a while

1836: Land along the Thornapple River purchased by Detroit banker, Eurotas (cool name) Hastings

1837: Happy Birthday, Michigan!

1838: The Potawatomi begin forced march to Kansas (1 in 10 die, mostly children)

1839: Land belongs* to Joseph Williams, a farmer

1849: Land belongs* to Amos Brewster, a 19-year-old from New York who wants to be a farmer

1850: Amos dies. Some time later, they name the lake after him (good swimming, polite beavers)

1855: Hastings now exists (300 people call it "home")

1918: Willard Pierce is born, he'll later go by Bill

1945: Humans use Atomic Bomb on other humans for the first time (66,000 die)

¹Scientific ways of knowing

²Biblical ways of knowing

³Algonquin (Potawatomi and Ottawa) ways of knowing

⁴Nope.

1950: Land belongs* to Dr. Lewis “Lew” Batts who turns it into a bird sanctuary

1957: A dog, named Laika, is the first being from our planet to wade among the cosmos

1961: The first humans leave Earth. They really like space and want to go back

1969: Humans go to the moon for vacation and take lots of pictures (unless...)

1988: Pierce Foundation is established

1992: Bill Pierce and wife Jessie visit a friend, Kensinger Jones, they drink Tanqueray Gin Martinis and fall in love with the land from Kensinger’s back porch

April 29, 1998: Land belongs* to the Pierce Foundation (bought from Lew and Kensinger in order to, “keep it the way it is.”) Dinner at Kentucky Fried Chicken follows

May 4, 1998: Bill Pierce dies

November 10, 1998: Pierce Cedar Creek Institute is now a thing, Dr. Gary Pierce becomes Director

August 17, 1999: Ground broken, construction completed as follows: WetLab (2000), Resident Manager’s house (May 2000), Hyla House Remodel (May 2000) Education Building (October 2000), Visitor Center (December 2000) Prairie View (February 2001)

October 12, 1999: 6 billion humans call Earth “home”

Summer of 2000: The first group of women researchers moves into Batt’s cottage

Summer of 2000: The most charming Massasauga Rattlesnake is found by the Lab, he is named Bob

October 13, 2011: 7 billion humans call Earth “home”

August 21, 2018: Global temperatures up 1.2 ° C (since 1900)

March 7, 2020: Ivan, now a freshman in college, heads home for spring break

March 8, 2020: Global Plague, lots of humans die, they will say it’s unprecedented. However, it is extremely precededented. (Spring break lasts nine months. Ivan never returns to art school)

January 27, 2021 (2:15 pm): Ivan receives an email from Maryann about “Words in Nature Fellowship” but doesn’t know what that means and kind of ignores it.

January 27, 2021 (5:29 pm): *Text from a friend* “Are you applying for the nature writing thing?”

February 4, 2021 (12:01 am): Ivan applies for Nature in Words Fellowship

March 3, 2021 (12:02 pm): Matt tells Ivan he’s been selected as a Writing Fellow, hollering ensues

May 17, 2021 (9:09 am): Ivan steps foot on the land

(You are here)

*Question: If the land belongs to us, what do we belong to?

A

Arrival

I do not come from a family that says hello very often. Perhaps as a formality on the phone, or to the Salvation Army bell ringer outside Hobby Lobby around the holidays, or strangers (I secretly love talking to strangers), but very rarely do we ever say “hi” to those closest to us. Just now, my mother, I call her Ma, my Ma walked in and the first thing she said to me was, “It’s going to be a very busy week this week, and I’m gonna need you to take care of some things. You’ve got -” and at that point, I sort of reflexively stopped paying attention. It’s not that I won’t take care of those things, or that I don’t care about what she has to say, but that I love my Ma, and I understand that this is how she greets the people she loves, and that I am one of those people, that this is what she knows.

For me, arriving at a new place for the first time is very similar to the sensation of wearing new shoes. At the very least the stories have the same shape: *This is so cool, this feels weird, this is not cool, I am not cool, oh wait, hang on, this is pretty cool.* I arrived at the Institute on a Monday morning. Close to my chest were the new-place feelings made of sand, not built to last. *This is cool,* I thought, watching the wide black raspberry field blanket pass by my passenger window with its splotchy lupine polka dots. I turned left and there was a greenhouse with the canonical compost bins indicative of people who feel particularly guilty about their trash output. One day, like them, I’ll be pushed to my breaking point and do the unthinkable starting my own pile of hot smelly garbage. There’s a prairie, on the right, which is in that transitory category of things along with newborn calves, and swimming in the rain, objectively delightful, but not overwhelmingly beautiful. Even still, I liked that grass, a lot. Before me were buildings. Two buildings built into hills, or rather, hills were built around those buildings to make them look naturey, in a very 2001 way. I parked outside the one labeled Visitor Center and started sweating prolifically. “Good Morning Matt!!” A text started, “I was hoping at some point today I could snag a key from you and get settled into a room!!!” I should add, I’m not nearly as excitable in person as my texting voice would suggest. As I rule, I prefer to use a truly unnecessary amount of exclamation points when messaging new people in hopes that they might think I’m nice.

There isn’t a unified definition of the word “weird” which satisfies its varied uses. Bringing your own glass to a restaurant - that’s weird, but not like eating dandelions is weird. Sleeping in

someone else's bed for the first time, that too feels strange, but not the same as sleeping in *everyone* else's bed. Yet, there I was that first night in Room 211 on a bed everyone before me had slept on. *Did anybody pee on this thing?* It was possible, I concluded. History is big, or at least big enough that someone somewhere along the line might have urinated on a mattress, even if just a little. But, history is also new and we are both the authors and the characters. Dead or alive, we are the bookmarks in each other's stories. Tall tales, memories, and flat-out lies all bleeding into one another through generations and across time, across mattresses. Contemplating the impressive volumes of dead skin compacted into the layered cake that is a dorm-style bed, my mind began to wander. I knew that I was in a new place, I knew that people believed I was a writer, but I also knew that wasn't true. I was not a writer. I'd taken one creative writing class and got especially lucky. I knew that. For a while, I'd be alone. And, I would want so badly for my sister to open my door and say, "What's up dickhead?" She would not. But, there were oh so many crickets and spring peepers which belted from the trees that first night, and I thought, quietly at first, *maybe in the morning, I will work on hello.*

B

Box Turtling

/bäks 'tərdling/

Verb:

Tonight, like every night in June, Anthony, Faith, and I play a game with ten or so female Eastern Box Turtles identical to hide-and-go-seek in every way except that we possess a TV antenna hooked to a radio which beeps the closer we get to one. *Why?* Because Faith and Anthony need "field experience" for resumes and CVs, so they can get ambitious jobs in competitive fields to pay for houses and welcome mats to put in front of those houses and SUVs, let alone the student loans which got them there. Because Box Turtles are lovely even while peeing on you and holding one momentarily proves that the world isn't all bad, or at least it's not half as bad as the half we know of. Because, we are not the only species capable of genocide, nor the first to lose themselves in it. Because not a night goes by that we do not walk on the empty husks of a hundred turtle shells, a hundred more than will ever know what a sunrise looks like. We say very little, picking at what the raccoons left. We each tell ourselves that they are just Snapping Turtles eggs, or Map Turtles eggs but that too is a round-a-bout way of saying, we are, as of today, unable to protect the universe from itself

and that makes us rather sad. We get it though, calamitous death and whatnot. We'll come back tomorrow, still. *Why?* Because we have nothing better to do. When pushed, we don't have good reasons. Because, if left alone we don't know what to do with ourselves, and we are always alone or never alone depending on how hopeful our days leave us. To our knowledge, we are the only species from this infantile world to grow up enough to break a planet, and we aren't so sure we can fix it. Oh, and somebody threw away the instruction manual. So, we're writing that too, along the way, and books. Poetry. Romance. *How to File Your Taxes, For Dummies (we are)*. We are stumbling towards reconciliation. We're mourning each other. We're teaching each other Box turtle anatomy, and tick identification, and how to duct tape your pant legs without removing your ankle hairs. Plants, we're learning which one is garlic mustard, and which one is making my face swell up. Poison Sumac. We are walking through the prairie during a thunderstorm while the rain comes down sideways at impossible angles. Anthony has a radio antenna. I have an umbrella to protect the radio antenna. Faith has a plan (and another umbrella). The plan: to be clapped out of existence by an epic bolt of lightning. All of us. It will be legendary, but if that doesn't happen we are going to find a turtle. Her name is Blueberry, I'm told. And, we will sit there with her until she nests. All night. All of us. *Why?* Because we cannot, as of today, save the universe, much less protect it from itself. Because, time always wins, and unlike the Box Turtles, we lack the ability, or a carapace, to hide in so as to pee our demons away, as much as we'd like to, as much as we try. Because despite it all, there remain the promises we made to our younger selves and the meaning we use to justify the inherent suckiness of surviving, but let this be one - someone loved you before you knew your name. And now, you might do the same, on a hill, by the prairie, at the edge of a torrent that laughs at umbrellas. We will be the first eyes from this uncertain universe to see those eggs and hold them gently without cause or name. Because it goes on. Because it must.

C

Cedar Creek

I'm down here by the stream,
looking at myself in the wiggly water.
You, the flowing current, are what you are.
The song without the words
that has never lost itself
finding the direction
it will lean. One needn't look
further than this river to realize
you can go anywhere from
anywhere, so long as you move.
But, as for me,
I am whatever I believe.

D

Dear

The way I start all my letters

Deer

The way I start all my car accidents. To my credit, I have never hit a deer. On the other hand, I have been hit *by* one. This immaculate record is made possible, in part, by my chronically pervasive anxiety around driving and a little trick I've learned called Deer Paranoia. Allow me to explain. I'm driving back to the Institute from Walmart, I've been pounding this pint of coffee ice cream for the past eleven miles. Life is good. Life is really really good, and then in the high beams, I see it, that slight reflection of certain and imminent death. ERRrrrrRR, crunch. I stomp on the brakes. Ice cream is no

longer in my hands but now on my lap, it's more melty parts navigating their way into my underwear. *Ope. It's okay, that was just a mailbox.* Four miles down the road, *Is that-* I reduce my speed to 35, *nope, just a Possum.* Much to the chagrin of those driving behind me, I will spend the remainder of my journey going 35. Deer are curiously elegant, infinitely erratic, and deceptively unpredictable. All I mean is, I would not make a very good deer.

E

Esker

The esker lifts itself from the dusty brown of this understory
like the vertebrae of a planet suffering from scoliosis.
There's talk that time alone heals all wounds
except for death, and why is it we should be so afraid?
The sugar maples and beech trees grow
still, on the corpse of a glacier, and
the glacier itself came from the long-lost sea,
and all of these lives recur in the leaves and capillaries which pull
water as high as it can go. Lend your ear to the trunk. Listen.
In this brief slice of eternity,
our memories are always written with erasers,
but the stories are the loveliest I have still to hold.
We are, each of us, preserving one another.

F

Ferns / Being Alive

Here I am, again, in the thigh-high ferns
that run this white trail, as I do,
my arms outstretched,
so I can run my hand over
their ostrichy green leaves.
I was on my way to the river
to find whatever
was worth finding
but I found it, the difference
between life and breathing,
on this path along the way.

4 a.m.

Everyone staying up late went to bed;
everyone getting up early isn't up this early,
not even the crickets. For now, in this oak opening,
under the inky purple sky, I'm watching for signs
or, better yet, some clouds and reasons to stop asking *why*.
For now, It's just me, this equisetum, and whatever God
I do or do not believe in that does or does not believe in me
staring at each other in the silence. *I've really missed you,*
I, less awkward, finally crack, *I'm drowning in noise*
searching for music, hoping you might teach me to sing.
There came an apricot sky and the thrushes sang to me.

G

Grapes in Chicken Salad

Faith found a bird at lunch, the dead kind. Over chicken salad sandwiches, Anthony and the rest of us took turns identifying the body. In the end, we settled on Swainson's Thrush. Its white eye-ring glasses and spotty throat matched the picture best. Matt hucked the playdoughy corpse into the weeds apologizing for not being very sentimental about dead birds. It was sort of beautiful. This is Anthony's first time eating chicken salad with grapes in it. He says it is sweet, if not a little strange, not unlike attending a stranger's funeral.

H

Headlamp

When Anthony got a headlamp, it was not entirely necessary. A headlamp is not mission-critical to the human enterprise in the same way water or immunizations are, but they are handy should you have a use for them. When Anthony got a headlamp, we all kinda spectated as he demonstrated the functions. You had a few options, the brightness of a thermo-nuclear-explosion, medium, and the crowd favorite, red. It's important here to note that no one looks especially dashing in a headlamp, but amongst a group of college researchers studying such things as ticks and soil erosion, cool is particularly relative. *Can it blink?* It can. And so, when Anthony bought a headlamp we did not immediately have a use for it. That is until we wanted to cut a watermelon in the dark. For that task, headlamps are ideal. In the soft red glow, trying like hell not to stab myself, it came to pass that the most delightful needs we have are the ones we make for ourselves, so as to come together and stave off the chills of aloneness, even for one night.

I

I (As in Me)

My name is _____ (name), and, right now, I am the one who is writing this page of the story. It all began ____ (number) years ago when, by no means of my own, I was patch-welded together in the cellular soup of my mother's uterus. I didn't ask to be here, but I'm here all the same, and I grew. As a child, I believed _____ (false belief), and I grew. In time, I realized _____ (truth), and so I learned that growing would always mean exchanging one reality for another. Now though, I am much bigger, more sophisticated, and charming. I know words like _____ (big word) and I no longer need to hold someone's hand while I pee. I even prefer not to. Simply put, I'm doing this on my own. I matter, and there are those who like me. I am worth \$_____, according to my bank account, but seeing that number, written out so matter-of-fact, it feels _____ (emotion). People don't go around talking about that sort of thing. In fact, most people don't say much at all. It's been _____ (number) _____ (unit of time) since I felt truly understood. And, it's been _____ (number) _____ (unit of time) since I hugged a tree. Tonight though, I'm going to make time for the sunset, I promise. I'm going to have _____ (person) watch it with me, or at the very least look at it, for a moment, out a car window, or in the parking lot of a Taco Bell. I will make time. There is time to smell the flowers, time to enjoy the weeds poking up from the sidewalk that always look like _____ (emotion). There is time to drive to _____ (closest body of water) in the middle of the night and wade in with all my clothes on. There are ways out of this town. There are roads that lead to _____ (closest mountain range). I could go there. Don't be surprised if I do. But, as long as I am here, I am capable of new realities. Though, I will not always be here. At most, I have ____ (number) years left or maybe a few days. So, no, I won't always be writing this story, but right now I am.

J

Juneberry

Along the driveway and hugging the pavement there stands a bush. The bush itself is rather bushy, vaguely resembling the shape of untrimmed rutabaga, but by no means is it remarkable. In fact, you are able to pass it every day for weeks without dwelling on the fact that it's there, or dwelling at all. This is not to say it has no effect. The driveway curves around the sprawling rutabaga, giving rise to the question: *which came first, the pavement or the plant?* In either case, for the brief moment you pass it each day, your life, in a very real sense, revolves around the bush.

And, so it stays, and so you go - to the laundromat, and the lake and the mailbox to send letters and receive crummy unusable coupons, lots of them - everywhere life occurs. But, you can afford to ignore bushes like they're just bushes when you've seen bushes countless* times before, or when you'll see one tomorrow. Tomorrow comes, and comes again, until, one day, the green thing on the corner of the driveway gets a name. "Juneberry," your friend tells you. You like Juneberries because they're like blueberries if blueberries were red and shy of their own flavor. Your life continues around the bush for the brief moments it does, but you stop occasionally now to collect a few red clumps and remember its name. Sure, it might not be the name it gave itself, but neither is yours. It's a name just as well, nice knowing all the same.

From the porch, one evening, you notice the bush dancing for its own sake, or perhaps because it's windy. This makes you smile. See, you dance for reasons or music, but there the bush is with neither. For a while, rain doesn't come. Instead, you bring the bush water. You arrive with soup pots when you can't find a pitcher. A day comes when you say good morning to the bush. It cannot hear you, nor does it really intend to say anything back, but you talk to it as your dad talks to the TV, only with less yelling. Finally, you understand why he does this. Understanding makes you feel silly, but not nearly silly enough to stop. You tell your friend. You want to show your friend what a Juneberry tastes like, the way you were shown. Better still, they'd like to find out. You start researching how to propagate its seeds, and what the word propagate means anyway. You find comfort in this bush and its weird adopted family of things including birds called, Cedar Waxwings, and bugs called, "Did that thing just move?" Including you. There you are, in the corner of the driveway, with this thing which cannot love in the ways you were taught to see.

And then, one day in late June, you go to the bush, and all the berries are gone. There were countless*. There are none. And so it is that anything less than "always" seems sad when "never again"

is so real. Is this why we say “never again” when we really mean, “one more time,” and “always” instead of “I don’t care?”

*Beware the things you love; they will hurt you most, and you will love them still.

K

Killdeer

This thing, hunched over on the ground screaming at me with its splayed wings does not especially remind me of a deer, let alone a dead one, nor the sort of thing that could kill a deer. In that regard, humans would more aptly be named kill-deer, but instead, we did the naming, and thus became homo sapiens, *wise men*, from the specified classification *Sapien Sapien*, meaning wise-wise. Genuinely, I would like to believe that name is true, but just today I was baking a few sweet potatoes. Taking them out of the oven, I remarked, “Wowza those are HOT.” Exactly thirty seconds later I bit into the molten center of one and was positively beside myself to learn what the final moments of life must have been like for the poor peasant-folk of Pompeii. The oven was set at 425 degrees. It was thirty seconds after. I cannot agree with the terms that we are a species of superior wisdom. But, as I said, we do the naming, which is always really just a series of renaming. I tried looking up the Algonquin word for Killdeer, but it no longer exists. So, this is a Killdeer, only a Killdeer named by eighteenth-century naturalists for the noise it makes. Loud. Harsh. Its primary survival strategy is to lure predators from their young by pretending their wings are broken. I mean no harm, but I’m not moved by this performance. I am, after all, a wise wise man.

L

Lumberyard on a Thursday

I find it, at the very least,
a little poetic that before
I called them anything,
the trees were called
“Standing People.”

Now especially, here too,
amongst the tall timbers of
a thousand forests brought to their knees
before people, standing, we contemplate
the price of lumber and the housing market.
Come to find, the danger of every dream is its reality.
And so we built the necessary homes and
a world in our own image forgetting
how mirrors make us insecure.

I haven't quite figured out the purpose of life.
So, I ask him, the man behind the counter,
who tells me a 2x4 is eight bucks.
I see, how much is it worth alive?

M

Mayapple

Many people have very legitimate reasons to be smart, I'm sure. Matt though has no business being as smart as he is. He knows everything about everything and even some things about nothing. Once, I asked him a question about colonial history, and he answered by coughing a little and asking me what I knew about the primordial origins of multicellular life. Imagine Matt's brain like an ill-fated water balloon in the possession of some feral child at a barbeque. Everyone knows a balloon will pop if filled too much. Regrettably, no one thought to tell the kid this. So, there he persists by the spigot, blissfully unaware of the outer limits of brains or balloons. He will find them or prove that they were

never there, to begin with. While he and I are walking, I ask Matt, “What’s the actual name for Umbrella Plants?”

“Mayapple,” and now for the show, “It’s a part of the Barberry family, but you can actually eat the fruit later in the summer when it’s yellow and wrinkly. They’re kinda neat, actually. Exotic, sort of like a grapey-pear type of thing. It’s also a laxative.” He and I both share a laxative look. “Yeah, but the rest of the plant is super toxic, so probably don’t eat that.” I probably won’t.

Meadowlark

For about an hour this afternoon,
a Meadowlark pretended to be a seagull.
I sat there for a spell on my towel by the sea
while the tide came in and waves crashed,
not quite landing at my feet. I ask the Beech tree,
“Must the price of these answers always be wonder?”
And then, I opened my eyes and saw that ocean for
what it was, a little wind working its way
through a field of prairie grass.

N

Night Swim

Walking through the shadows on the path that made our shadows long we longed for clear skies to float our cares away. Setting the boat down in the water, I took a moment to appreciate the mythic quantities of goose poop on the dock which at once haunted my psyche and impressed my body-bound soul on a profound level. It was around this time that someone, I think it was Andre, deemed it necessary to announce “Yep, that water is crazy black. There could be anything down there, and we wouldn’t know it.” Altogether, and at once, everyone said nothing, but looked over the dock’s edge, as if to prove, “Ah yes, just as I suspected, no murderers.” Upon drawing this conclusion, the boat left with us on it, and someone else revealed that beavers are crepuscular, a fun Scrabble word worth lots of points that means active only at dawn and dusk. It was dusk then, and we all agreed, it would be cool to see the beaver, in the same way, it’s cool to see a swan or a bull moose - not within

maiming distance. To that point, we were all pretty sure the odds of a beaver biting our respective feet off was low, but no one could guarantee it was zero. Our ignorance on the matter kept us individually quiet, but by no means calm, as we entered that deep black water. At any moment, one of us could unluckily be engulfed by the great and mighty beaver. The prospect of which forced us like barnacles to the sides of the rowboat. Our affliction being, there were cold spots in the lake, and so throughout the evening, we would each break off, circle around to find warm water, and dart back to the confines of our sheet metal sanctuary. We did this until we saw a star, a real one, not a satellite. Then, we went home, walking the path with our yet uneaten feet. The water was still black, and the sky was still clear, and there are no paths that lead back to our yesterdays. For a moment we were young, we were, and, for a moment, the only thing on our minds was a rodent that ate trees. There are, and always still, worse things in this way-to-big world, but not then, not while night swimming.

O

Oak, Bur

You don't have to do everything right to enjoy the shade of a Bur Oak. You can mess up. In fact, you can elbow an old lady in the face while hiking your pants up in a Walmart (true story). You can tell your parents you hate them an hour before they die in a car crash (happened to a friend). You can have a baby, and a week later drive 101 miles to Ironwood, Michigan and leave that boy in the backseat of the nicest car in town (heard this story on the radio). Bur Oaks know nothing of the sins of sinners or the people who love them all the same. Bur Oaks were not made for knowing. The words shame and shade look very similar, but you can lose your life to one, and the other is the cool indiscriminate shadow of a tree.

Other times

Other times, I melt into a soggy puddle in my chair, or on the floor like a slug. *Oh, I am silly*, I think while I say my affirmations: I am kind. I am smart, and I'll probably fail at whatever I end up doing. I'm not very sexy. I suppose everyone that likes me is kindly pretending, or lying, and everyone else will be dirt soon anyway. Outside my window, a robin that blew in from Cleavland balances on the fence post, perfectly. She holds the basil leaf pruned this morning and calls to me, "Won't you come outside and stop being so alone?"

"I can't. I'm hopeless today."

"Tomorrow then?"

A. "Yes."

B. "Yes," I say grinning.

P

Prayer

Within the Chartres Cathedral in France, there is, cobbled into the floor, a labyrinth where one might walk circles in quiet contemplation of incarnation and all that. I really think that's nice, beautiful even, but it's not me. My flavor of prayer is a little more chaotic. For instance, I am on the floor right now, and I do not mean that of the Chartres Cathedral. See, I'm on the floor because it's both dark and cold and I've recently contracted a mystery illness, hopefully resulting in superpowers, which in the meantime has produced in me an impressively unshakeable headache with an utter distaste for light. Outside my door there is life, I can hear it. I know it. Outside my door, there is a House Sparrow who is fledging her babies and assuredly that is beautiful, but it's not me. I am on the one on the floor, saying. "Hello God, it's me. Thanks for all the lily pads and chipmunks. I have built enough character, and would now like some rocking pain meds and someone to cry with. Amen."

Update: No superpowers, just Lyme Disease.

Q

Quarantine

For a few months, we all huddled
discreetly in our rooms while
the world imploded
and everyone pretended that they knew
half of half the things they know now.
Even then, the wind came, from the northeast
as it did today while I was walking past
the tamarack tree, near the cedar swamp
whose rose-bud cones couldn't care less about
the least of my concerns. I saw a cloud
which bent down and whispered something
into the ear of the cottonwood whose pollen
carried the message to me. There is no
bright line between our heavens and the earth.
Yet, we are, all of us, reaching upwards for
a bigger place to call world.

Quercus alba

No, I thought, *this is not the tree*. It was a painfully average tree-looking tree. It was not volumetrically humongous like the beech trees or the tulip poplar Faith found in the swamp. Even with two people, that one was unhuggable. This tree, on the other hand, is exceptionally huggable. I think at least somewhere inside of me there remains the younger version of myself, perhaps in my toes. When we were younger we believed the stories that our parents told us, that bigger is older, and older always knows. But, here it is, the oldest tree, an unsatisfyingly plain white oak. Matt took out a long thin dowel. He explained the manner in which a core sample was obtained by drilling into the tree with a large hand drill. There were about 293 rings, or so I was told, I didn't really care to count. "The rings," Matt explained, "are closer towards the middle, but," he pointed, "here they start to space out. That's because when this tree was established the canopy was much denser, which meant less

light got through to the saplings in the understory, which meant photosynthesis occurred slower, which meant that growth occurred slower, which means smaller rings. Then they cut the trees down, and the canopy got open an—

"Why'd they leave the tree," somebody asked. "I don't know," Matt said, "but I'm glad they did."

We have something like tree rings at my house. By the porch room, our annual heights are recorded and burned into the wood trim. My growth, unlike the red oak, occurred much faster at the start tapering off over time. In the end, I became my own overstory, but what I like about trees is that they can point to themselves in a way I cannot. *Here, this is where it all started, the center.* Whatever past versions of myself that there were, they are all gone now. Forever. All I have are unreliable stories. Older has no answers, just more reasons why. But, the tree reminds us, that we do have memories as much as they have us, as much we are our memories. Growing out is another way of growing up, but there is always a center, just as I am here. Here, ring 293.

R

Rainy Sunshine

Feels like it shouldn't exist, even while they're happening, parts of every life are impossible. A three-minute deluge came through today while the sun was still out. That is still my favorite way to remember that even the Earth, in all her majesty and dwindling mystery, has temper tantrums.

Rational Creatures (and Other Lies)

At dusk, there came three prominent economists in their field. They all wore black, moving with an "I mean business" walk which itself solved the world's problems. Considering an article I read on the smartness of Corvids, and from a patio chair, I watched as the three of them debated amongst themselves a treatise on the hotdog cast into the weeds. One who studied Marx postulated that the dog, no matter how lukewarm or dusty, is best if given from one's ability according to one's needs. That was nice, they agreed, but not quite so nice as the hotdog. Another wore his hair slicked back

and had an indentation on his hip from where he might have kept his phone clip (very fresh, very sexy). He explained that perhaps they should put the hot dog extremely high in a Sycamore where nobody could reach it, and over time little hotdog nuggets would fall to the ground. "Trickle-Down Hotdogonomics." They all thought that was a perfectly stupid idea, even him, although he didn't admit it. The third among them was a hippie back in the 70s who tripped three tabs of double-dipped acid in a garage once and met God. God was great but revealed that nothing is real, especially hotdogs. And, well, after that, the conversation was over. Yelling was better anyway, and the Marxists screamed, "You didn't meet God; there is no God, you donut!! We are God!!!" Ever the opportunist, the slick-haired figure picked up the hotdog with his feet and started jumping around quite pleased with himself bubbling, "Yes, hello. I am Hotdog God. I eat the hotdogs. Now, I must flee," and he flapped his wings and flew away inelegantly. Well, as soon as the two left on the ground became aware of this diversion they grabbed him by the ankles and the group commenced headbutting one another ferociously. However, in all this, they seemed to forget about what truly mattered, the almighty hotdog, flung quite some distance away into a patch of milkweed. The crows fighting for an elongated meat tube were certain of the beliefs which made them real, but so am I. It would seem that belief exists before rationalization, not because of it. My best thoughts are little more than the things I hope to someday tell someone to convince them I'm not crazy. Better yet, that I'm crazy in the same ways as you. Oh, that I might be acceptable, and if not, I will be right. I would scream with fiery rageful furry, spit and all. I'd blow a blood vessel and ruin Thanksgiving dinner to prove it. I'd change the way I talk or dye my hair green; I'd change my last name, hyphenate it, and delete my favorite songs, all of them. I'd hide scars, hide other things, I'd do the unspeakable, something really terrible and permanent. I'd do it all smiling. In a heartbeat, I would eat a hotdog covered in dirt and slugs. The debate does not end with the best idea appearing right and good to everyone. That was never the point. The crows flew away, in the end, and at last. There are no rational creatures.

S

Smell After Rain

People often talk about the smell
after rain, its damp moody melody,
the way it arrests the senses, as if
there is more meaning in right words

than in puddles. Smells don't talk at all
lest we forget. Life is bilingual,
speaking through silence
and whatever death isn't.

The living, on the other hand,
prefer metaphors we don't really understand.
Like today, when the woman on the radio said
it would rain cats and dogs and everyone who was
busy in their cars sighed, *What about the wedding?*
In this way too, the Treefrogs, and the knapweed, and
every pair of muck boots on every small foot remember
that living is itself purpose, our one wild and precious act of
rebellion. The splash was not made for its significance
but its impact. I am therefore certain it wasn't the sun-baked
earthworm scabbed onto this concrete step
who came up with a word like petrichor.

Stick, Really Cool

At the trailhead and 30 feet beyond a kid walking with his sweaty mother is unable to resist that
basest of instincts to pick up a stick and carry it. Only now that I'm called an adult can I bring myself
to do what he cannot. Now, I walk without tree limbs... but only sometimes.

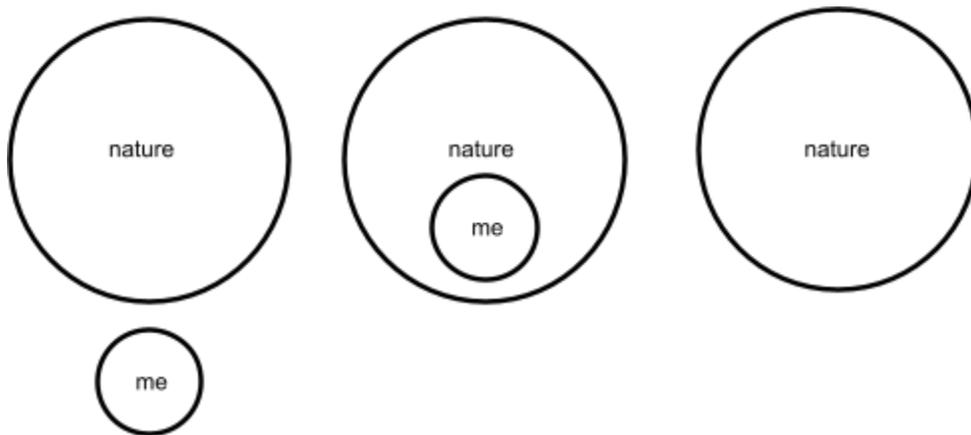
T

Tick Removal

I find that life with ticks is really just a high-stakes game of Guess Who. In the summer of 2020, I
encountered my first ever tick. Roughly the size of flaxseed, she was flax-seedy brown with a white
half-arch on her back and she was exceptionally keen on lodging herself in my left calf. I expressed
my interest in her not doing so and instead suffocating slowly in the film canister I carried in my first
aid kit. As a novice, I did not realize that the American dog tick is relatively unremarkable insofar as it
does not carry any of the spooky diseases which strike fear into the hearts of mortals. That lovely

virological cocktail is largely transmitted by the real tick bad-boy, the black-legged tick, colloquially known as the deer tick. Humans have had a long and violent history with ticks but not nearly as long and violent of a history as ticks have had with the world. The tick genome stretches back to the Late Cretaceous period, 90 million years ago. Humans on the other hand have been around for only 250,000 years, or so. Put another way, I am here as a result of about 7,500 generations while the tick, burrowed in my left calf, has a family tree with 30 million branches. We are incredibly young in an unfathomably old world. *Dermacentor variabilis* has survived one mass extinction and will likely survive us. In the event that humanity cannot outgrow its adolescence, we will be eulogized by a species we intentionally sought to destroy, and because they are a blood-sucking parasite, parts of our DNA will live in them as long as they still survive. You can remove this tick, but you cannot remove all ticks, and you absolutely cannot un-Lyme yourself once you have Lyme disease. Collect your fears and keep them close. In the end, they may be all that is left of you. As for us, the inhabitants of Meadow Lodge, we keep our fears in a coffee mug just above the refrigerator. Its message reads, "Tick Cup - Here lies the mortal remains of ticks slain and gone. May they rot in hell forever."

Two Lies and a Truth



V

Vegan

She asked if I was vegan. I said, “I don’t know.” We ate our onion and lentils in prolonged flat-line silence. That must have been the wrong answer.

W

Woodchuck

A Woodchuck with a dad-bod is insulting simply because it exists. His unconditioned hair and ragged buck teeth look at me in a way that assures me I’m not coping well. Cards on the table, it’s not him who’s jealous. He did not look like the kind of Woodchuck who regrets much at all. Meanwhile, this afternoon, I deleted four emails because nothing deflates my soul quite like rereading my own responses. Perhaps, I’ll delete four more tomorrow. I think I will.

X

X Marks the Spot

On a map of Michigan, Pierce Cedar Creek makes up .001% of the available land. That’s .0000006% of the world. But, how does one measure a life? This summer my life was 742 acres. It was Bergamot, bean burritos, and the occasional bee sting. It was 24 hours straight of movies, eight pounds of rice, and five vials of blood work (not in that order). It was eighteen people, seven days a week. It was two crickets in the bathroom at 3:00 am, and one pair of goggles. As for me, I am content with a small life, a countable life. I like it when “x” marks the spot.

Y

You

This might not be what you're looking for. I mean a whole book about life, the memory of all things, love, sorrow, wonder, and on the last page you are left only with yourself. Just you. No triumph, no bitter sorrows of defeat, or lessons learned, each morning is always just another morning. Whatever conclusions you draw are your own. But, wasn't that always the point? I mean, whoever you are, no matter how uncertain, you are the furthest the universe has come. You are the cutting edge of this little dance we do for a while called existence. You are in my future, all those miles and moments ahead of where I am now, a fact cooler, perhaps, to those looking forward than to those looking back. I might not be there with you. I might be late. But, I was alive once. Like you, I knew how scary it was to fumble your change at the cash register while everyone watches only to give up and stuff it into your pocket clumsily. I too breathed quieter hiking uphill past people so they thought I was fitter than I was. I sat under the stars with my friends and said, "Hey, look, the big dipper." I named turtles. I fished ticks out of my armpits in the shower. I jumped over the fire. I waited for the mail and fell in love. I was here. You are here. See the difference? You *are*, that brief and beautiful word wide enough to fit you in it. I *was*, that word that never stops being true if it's true only once. Now though, my story, this one, is over. Whatever I was is no more, I am the way you will remember me, if you do, and so please be gentle. And, when you forget, be kind. Memory is and has always been the preservation of things in what they leave behind.

...And they all lived until they didn't, and even that wasn't so bad because in death, still:

- A. They had known what it was to be alive.
- B. Someone, somewhere, missed them.
- C. Their love outlived their bodies.
- D. The story went on.