

Balanced in Waiting

Standing in a soggy yard, I'm transfixed by a sugar maple. Chill wet seeps into my shoes; the sky lowers grudging and gray. Yesterday, red knots marched down these branches, but today the tiny fists sprout red hair. It's early March in Kansas, that time between seasons, not winter, not yet spring, and I am caught – caught between seasons and caught between lives.

When I decided to move back last summer after forty years of everywhere else, I knew I faced a major transition. What I didn't know was how much my mother and my children would be involved. I should have, but I didn't. They didn't live here. Or at least they didn't until I did. Last summer, I was only returning to the place that remained home in a life of wandering: a deserted farm hilltop in Marshall County. I couldn't live there, no one had for many years, so I planned for Kansas City. But home, I suppose, even as a concept, is never complete without family.

I pull myself away from the burgeoning tree and slosh across the grass to the car, turn on the heater full blast, and begin the two-hour drive out of my life and into my mother's. But our lives are so intertwined that finding where one begins and the other leaves off has become a daily introspection. For the most part, I seem to be doing both of them at the same time. Like last week when I stepped outside to begin another of my drives and found a robin sitting on a snow-covered branch.

"What are you doing here?" I asked aloud. "What are you doing here? It's still winter." I sounded like my mother.

The robin looked at me in a robin sort of way, cocking its head to the side and studying me with one eye – recognizing another migratory animal, I imagined, one dressed in wool.

A migratory animal: a nomad, if you will. The roots I've planted remained shallow. In many fights with God, more than I want to remember, I've shouted "What do you want with me?" as I moved from place to place in search of the Promised Land. Now I find myself home in Kansas. My first winter, first spring, in a very long time, turned all around to face an end while creating a beginning. I never thought I'd do the ritual of mid-life crisis since my whole life has been filled with crises of one sort or another – but here I am, driving out of the neighborhood where I live, and where my children live, knowing the road but unsure of my way.

When I prepared to leave Santa Fe – my previous abode and a doable jaunt back to Kansas across desert and prairie – I'd informed my son, who, with his wife and son, had lived in Hawaii for two years.

"Kansas," Nathan had said. "I liked living in Kansas. And Kyong's not happy here. No Koreans. Are there Koreans in Kansas City?" I found out there were, so back they came across the ocean to follow me across the plains. That was July. I registered my grandson in school; I took him to piano lessons.

In September, my 84-year-old mother called to say she wanted to visit. After Dad died, she'd lived with my sister Judy north of Seattle. She hadn't been back in several years.

"I need to come home while I can still remember who people are!" she said during our conversation.

Her wry humor masks a reality we both understand: our lives are built on memory's real, yet fluid, foundation. Kansas sifts our memories. Nathan remembers his early teen years when he made friends with a cowboy and rode horses; Mother remembers friends at church; I remember the creek down the hill from the farm. And the sky. We all remember the sky. But other memories grow out of those memories until I feel as if I've stepped into a pool of shadow dreams. Everything is childhood familiar, yet I'm creeping past middle age.

For example, two blocks from my apartment, I found a neighborhood True Value Hardware store, one whole aisle fitted with small wooden drawers, like the ones in Dad's shop on the farm, and filled with loose nails of every conceivable size, wood screws, cup and door hooks, wooden knob handles and metal window pulls. A small bucket sat next to the cash register, half-filled with oval, rubber change holders – the kind with a slit down the middle. On my first visit, I picked one up and squeezed the ends to open it.

Through a wellspring of memory, I saw my dad, his brown, callused hand fishing in his overalls pocket. I looked at the old man behind the cash register and did a quick chin-point, a Kansas-grown habit I'd carried with me around the world.

“My dad carried one of those,” I said.

Coming back here to live is different from the times I came back to visit. I'd return to the farm when I was between addresses and on my way to somewhere else; I'd leave belongings and lighten the load for places like New York or Mexico City. But I didn't stay in those places – I always came home again, picked up some things, left others behind, and traveled on.

At the new places people would ask where I was from.

“You tell me a year and I’ll tell you where I was,” I’d say. Like Mother, I hide the grit of my life with humor.

On my drive today, I’ve reached the St. Joe turnoff on a route I’ve driven often: north on I29 to St. Joseph; loop around the city; exit at Highway 36; and at the top of the exit, follow a sign reading *Pony Express Highway*. It’s a legend, this highway.

The Kansas section of the old Pony Express route lies beneath the Highway 36 route from St. Joe to Denver. An historian could tell the stories of young men, braving bone-chilling cold, blizzards, and dust storms to carry mail across the country, but my stories are rooted in family and land. Further west, there are sections I know so well I even remember the trees: a stark lightning scarred cottonwood near a barn, a solitary elm on a hill, the line of trees on the road leading up to the farm - all slanting toward the polestar, pushed by a southwest wind “blowing steadily as if out of the lungs of the universe,” as William Least Heat-Moon so aptly puts it.

When I was young, from just a baby really, we’d drive the highway east, going to Grandma’s house. One winter night we hit a patch of ice and slid off the road near a favorite red, neon sign that said EAT GAS – eat and gas joined horizontally and vertically in a cross. I always liked that sign. Grandpa told stories of hiring out his horse team to clear land for the first highway. And the summer I turned sixteen, I drove the road into town for a job as a carhop at the A&W root beer stand. Boy dreams bloomed on that road and dreams about marriage. I guess you could say it was the road I took in learning to grow up. Now I drive it to learn about dying. That’s a lot of responsibility for one stretch of highway.

No more than a quarter of a mile beyond the Interstate, I’m caught in the timelessness of no-season. The slate-gray horizon sprouts three, northward-drifting towers of smoke where

farmers have begun the spring burn. Waterways along the road are blackened into ash. The fields are brown – waiting. The time between, as I am the fulcrum between this time and the next, between the road in the rearview mirror and the road in front of me.

After Mom arrived, she wanted to visit her home church. We drifted through September's ripe sunshine under a cloudless, blue sky. Happy to be back, Mom looked out the side window and watched the unwavering fields of blood-red milo.

"I don't ever hear the wind at Judy's," she said, apropos of nothing except her own memories unwinding behind her eyes.

As we walked across the church's gravel parking lot, Mom took my arm. "When someone comes up to us, you say hello first and say their name in case I can't see who they are."

"Sure," I said. "But what if I don't know them?"

Mom looked at me as if I were six years old. "Just ask them to remind you of their name," she said.

People swarmed around us from the minute we walked inside. Youngsters of all ages came up to hug her and remind her of the times they had measured their growing heights against her four-foot eleven-inch frame. Adults bent down to hug her and say how happy they were to see her. Between us, we remembered most of the names, but her smile began to strain at the noise and attention. I took her by the elbow and guided her toward the pews. With an unerring sense of direction, she went to her usual seat as if her absence of five years were only a week. She lifted a hymn book out of the rack and with her other hand, reached up to comb fingers through her ruffled white bangs.

As I heard her clear alto rise to meet the organ, I relaxed my vigilance and allowed my own memories to unroll. I'd grown up in this church, shaped by the voices of a series of preachers. This is where my spiritual journey began as I sat through the years, fuming at St. Paul's directive to keep my head covered and my mouth shut. I was never adept at keeping my mouth shut.

My rebellion and my own precocious reading prepared me for years of rocky confrontations. "Jesus got angry," I'd argue; but that was different, preachers would say. "David danced before the Lord," I'd say at the injunctions against teen dances. It took years to realize how much my own style, my own voice, and my in-reverse theology shaped itself from those eloquent, thundering childhood ministers. We are all shaped by the forces we run from, sparks streaming behind us as if from some chaffed piece of metal.

After church, we ate lunch at the truck stop, a tradition left over from Mom and Dad's years once we kids were gone. The fare was standard farmer-truck-stop: roast beef or fried chicken, real mashed potatoes and homemade gravy, canned green beans. We had rhubarb pie for dessert.

When we finished, Mom asked to drive down to "The Good Sam" and visit a friend who wasn't in church. The Good Samaritan has been the town nursing home for longer than I can remember, and the home where three of my grandparents lived out their lives: Grandpa Albert, Dad's father, who told us stories of the old country; Grandpa Joe, mother's father, who read poetry and turned to alcohol in his late years to ease loneliness; and Grandma Sunderland, my father's mother, who made the best sugar cookies in the world. These are the grandparents I'm fashioned by, a story teller, a poet, a cook; our interwoven connections more complicated than I can begin to unravel.

I remembered the old, two-story brick building from my last visit with Grandma. My sons had been young enough to roll over each other on the floor as they played.

“They look like their father,” Grandma had said, smiling, and then caught her memory and shook her head. “Oh, no. I mean their grandfather, don’t I?” she added, remembering her own son, John, my father who died when I was eight. Dad became my second father, the one who raised us after John died.

I already knew wider boundaries by the time we moved to the farm where Dad lived with Grandpa Albert. Lincoln to our north and Topeka to our southeast formed our television boundaries, but I’d been born in San Francisco, miles and miles to the west, and although I left as a baby and had no San Francisco memories, it was mine. I vaguely remembered Arkansas, and I remembered Barnes, Kansas where we’d lived when my father died. Barnes retained a Never Land quality, a place of dreams and distances that seemed much further away than it was in actual miles.

That’s how my memories of The Good Sam felt, part of the Never Land where dreams die.

We drove up and parked in front of a new one-story, white winged building, gleaming in the middle of a well-kept lawn. Behind us, across the street, the Good Sam I remembered sagged empty.

“Do you want me to check with the nurses’ station for the room number?” I asked.

“I know where her room is,” Mom said. “I’ve been here.”

Her voice sounded steady, but as we walked down the hallway, she held my hand as tightly as a child might who’s afraid of the first day at school. I stepped out of the way and watched the two old friends greet each other.

That evening on the long drive back to Kansas City, Mother sat quietly staring out the side window. Finally, I heard her sigh as she turned to face me.

“It’s time for me to move into The Good Sam,” she said. And just that quickly, a two-week visit turned into forever.

In the car, in my head, I carry what is behind and what is in front of me: the cycle of seasons, the cycle of family and elders, my own cycle, carrying me out of my past into a future containing my far past as if a revolving door spins me in the wind.

Hawks circle over a tower of smoke off to my left. I want to call them, have them show me how to journey, which direction to take. How long will I keep driving east to west, I wonder, only to turn around and travel back?

Once Mom entered the nursing home and I started driving the highway, Kansas became a vision, an idea, a drama of sky and land. I watched the fall harvest and I watched winter creep into ditches; I watched the light and shadows deepen. Seasons change almost in secret, as if only in the silence of not looking can something so tremulous come into being.

Two hours driving is a lot of landscape when there’s not much to break the horizon except a roll of hill, a change of green where fields shift from winter wheat to alfalfa. The few farmhouses nestled solitary among clumps of trees as if the builders were uneasy about their place in the sweep of land and looked for a safer parameter at night from the repetition of field, pond, lane, pasture, alfalfa, milo, pond, wheat. And sky. Forever the sky.

From the cache of family stories, I remember the one of Grandpa Albert’s father, the man who originally came to Kansas with his bride, and how he’d walk to St. Joseph for salt and sugar, the only two commodities he couldn’t produce on their piece of prairie, to turn around and walk back, carrying the bags slung across his shoulders. His trip took ten days in

good weather and in that time, his wife and young children stayed alone in a sod house under a sky so big they were almost invisible.

Suddenly, ahead of me, the road sign for Hiawatha calls me to attention. Just as the road makes a wide curve around town, I look for the line of different-sized windmills that march away in a straight line. I like seeing them, wonder at the story that planted them in that particular spot in someone else's dream of wind and sky. And then, past the curve, the road flattens again, heading for Seneca.

Mom felt restless the first two months she lived at the Good Sam. She needed something to do, she said, something to feel useful. She'd raised six kids and wasn't happy sitting around and playing bingo, she told me. I asked the activities director about a job, something Mom's eyes and memory could do. Now each morning, Mom folds two baskets of "clothes protectors" (at each visit, she reminds me they don't say "bibs"). My mother feels useful again and often stops to comfort one older woman who has lost both her mind and her socks. My mother, at 84, kneels to gently replace the socks.

I think the toughest part about Mom entering the nursing home is my own entrance into the memory of death. I mean, maybe there's a residual memory, a cellular memory, sort of like the reptilian brain but older, that remembers the time of nothing – a one-cell time of existence before the moment of contact: two universes collide – one egg, one sperm – a blinding flash – an electrical charge riveting two cells into the inexorable process of becoming.

Do we remember the time of nothing, of being a universe – alone, contained – before the mighty crash of joining made us feel?

Mother doesn't want to die. She's not afraid of death, but she's still content to live. What gives life quality? Dreams? Memories? Stooping to replace socks for someone who's lost that ability?

My mother isn't afraid of dying. Am I?

I didn't think so. Before this. Before beginning my travels on Highway 36, I was confident my return to Kansas would begin something new. What I didn't know was that my beginning would include an ending. What I didn't know was how much my mother's face reflects my own mortality.

Ahead, an unfamiliar tree jerks me from my somber reflections. Bare branches reach up, looking for life, as sunlight slices through the overcast clouds. The bark gleams silver. An old homestead ringed with trees, yet one tree alone is light, a song ready to break into praise: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia. Amen.

My heart rises, flaps into my throat. The tree of light promises hope in a shaft of sun flung from a cloud - and I remember El Greco's St. Peter, face lifted into the light, illuminated and yearning, distorted in anguish, in hope.

I am distorted in anguish and hope. In hope that my free fall into tomorrow is somehow caught and suspended and I will not die just yet - illuminated for one moment by the gleam of a silver tree, my heart leaps in song, flies, flutters up like a great, awakened butterfly.

Maybe by the time I reach The Good Sam, blue sky will break through and Mom and I will go for a drive. The family is coming in a couple of weeks to celebrate her birthday and we have to make some plans; or rather, I'll talk about the plans and she'll say, "That's fine, dear," as she watches for familiar sights. Although her eyes are failing, she manages to

surprise me with details. I often wonder how much she really sees and how much is memory, uncurling.

“Look at that tree,” she will tell me, raising one hand in a wide sweep. “See that green? That’s a beautiful tree.”

It’s spring in Kansas. Time, compressed into winter’s shadowed afternoons, is bursting free.

The End