COPING WITH BEAR COUNTRY

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A

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By

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Abstract

Coping with Bear Country is a work of creative non-fiction, a genre in which non-fiction writers use dramatic techniques usually employed by fiction writers and poets (such as narration, dialogue, and detailed description) to look at their subjects. Coping with Bear Country draws on the styles of nature writing, personal essay, and memoir, combining descriptions of natural history and tales of adventure with a look towards emotional landscapes reflected within them.

At its most physical level, Coping with Bear Country looks at the "bearish" qualities of the complex land called Alaska, and at how a person simultaneously might both struggle against and embrace them. At this level, the work's focus is the author's personal struggle to make a home in a challenging land. But at its deepest level, Coping with Bear Country digs more deeply, asking universal questions, exploring how faith takes root when we face our limitation and fear.
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Sprout

The ocean, rough and wild, collapses in waves along the shore. My husband Paul and I comb the beach on a Caribbean island, picking our way carefully over its jumbled boulders. There are no fine white sands here, yet there is no debris either—as if this world is too rugged, too inhospitable, for small life forms. On the exposed shores of such islands, the wind blows relentlessly in from the sea.

"Is this what I think it is?" I ask Paul, catching my first glimpse of a frayed coconut amidst the rocks. A green stem shoots from a crack in its side, reaching for sun.

"It must be a palm sprouting," he answers.

"Where do you think it came from?"

"It probably floated in from the ocean . . ."

Though the coconut probably came from another beach on the island, I imagine that it floated from Africa, its buoyancy a minor miracle on an incomprehensible sea.

"You should write about it," Paul tells me.

"What should I say?"

"Say that it's a story of distance and travel."

It's about how one can go a long way searching when one attempts to find home.
Hauling Water

On a crisp September day when the Fairbanks hillsides were golden, I came to live in my first cabin in Alaska. The only person I'd ever known who cut wood for a living took me to see it in his pickup, his arm around me as we sat side by side. I was visiting him from Homer, where I was spending the summer.

"If you're going to live here, you're going to have to get yourself some Carhartt work clothes," he teased me. "I wonder if they make 'em that small!"

The cabin sat in a stand of birch trees overlooking a small field. "It's a strawberry farm," the owner of the cabin told us, a sturdy Swedish woman whose daughters ran a bakery in town. "You pick 'em yourself. And there are vegetables, too."

"I had a friend who lived here," said the woodcutter, John. "She told me moose graze along the edge of the field."

A big black wood stove sat just inside the doorway, in a sunken entrance area. I wondered if it was a good one, knowing the temperature was likely to drop to fifty or sixty below. Having no experience with which to answer this question, I asked John what he thought. After looking it over, he said he thought it looked air tight and plenty big for the size of the cabin. "You might even have to open the windows," he told me.

A metal sink sat in a plywood countertop in one corner of the cabin, but instead of leading to a septic system, the pipe coming out of the sink led to a white plastic bucket which had to be emptied every few days. Every wall had at least one window, and the wall facing the field was made of French style sliding glass doors. Aside from a small, doorless closet in the corner, the cabin was bare.

"I'll help you build a bed," said John.

I was worried about whether I'd be warm enough living with only a wood stove in Fairbanks, Alaska, but John pointed out the six inch walls and double paned windows,
and assured me that winter wasn't as bad as it sounded. I decided to rent the cabin and took my backpack over later that day.

I'd spent a year in Homer, a coastal town in Alaska, in a log house in the woods. Working hard to earn each piece of wood for the fire, I'd found satisfaction in each small success. Sometimes, I took ten or fifteen swings with the maul, hefting the heavy metal wedge up over my shoulder, just to make the first split in a round. Another ten swings would get me four or five pieces the right size for the stove. I could split only fifteen pieces a day, but it was enough to keep warm. The temperatures, moderated by the nearby ocean water, stayed above zero all winter. It snowed six inches or more every day during February, though, and I was kept busy shoveling snow. These chores gave me something I needed, a peace of mind free of distraction.

I had been visiting John in late summer when I decided to stay in Fairbanks. I'd been planning on moving closer to my family, who lived on the east coast, but Alaska was calling. John and his friends carved wood, built furniture, and knew the joy of peeling logs on an autumn day that smelled like thousands of acres of forest. We'd been canoeing on the Tanana River, and I couldn't believe how quickly upon leaving town we'd entered wild country.

As I walked from John's cabin to call my parents, the air was brisk and a hot cup of coffee warmed my hands. The black spruce that lived in the lowlands grew short to the ground and had gnarled, twisted tops. My stomach too felt gnarled and twisted, as I worried over whether I was doing the right thing. Twenty-five years old, I tended towards impulsive decisions, and my choice to stay had been abrupt.
The gas station by the highway was warm after the brisk walk outside. I set my coffee on the pay phone and looked around as I dialed the number. The concrete walls were dirty, and there was little furniture in the room, just a couple of metal chairs and an old vending machine full of candy. Outside, a low-lying mist filled the valley, and sadness crept into my chest as I dialed the phone.

It was good to hear my father's voice. I told him of my decision to stay in Alaska. "Are you sure that's what you want?" he asked me, sounding worried. "It's so different from where you grew up... so far away."

"I can leave if I don't like it," I replied.

I don't know whether this reassured him, but it was the best I could do. I wasn't sure how long I'd stay in Alaska and thought I might want to live here for good.

I could barely lift the five-gallon jugs when they were full of water, but hauling four of them a week from the laundromat to my new cabin in Fairbanks wasn't that hard. I drove most of the way, and once I got home the driveway was short. I hauled the water on my new plastic sled.

The climate was colder than it had been in Homer, but as winter set in, though I was still pretty slow, I managed to keep up with the wood. Wood splits more easily when it's colder, and I didn't have to lift the maul all the way over my shoulder before bringing it down on the rounds. John and I went out a few times to the Rosie Creek wood cutting area, and, together, we felled a winter's worth of dead trees for the both of us.

Within weeks after moving to Fairbanks, I decided to get a dog for company. She'd need walking, and that would get me outside for fresh air and exercise even though the winter would be cold and dark.
When I went to see a litter of husky pups, I chose the one who didn't come up to me, who wandered off on the sidelines away from the others. Watching her sniff around in the brush, I admired her self-reliance.

She was smaller than a round of wood then. Afraid to come into the cabin the first day I brought her home, she cowered a bit by the door, until I scooped her up and put her on the bed John had helped me build, where she became a permanent fixture. I named her Maya, a Sanskrit word which reminds me that much of what we see is illusion, a veil we can pierce if we try.

Maya herself seemed like anything but an illusion; she was the most down to earth part of my life. When she was six months old and had started to figure out she did not have to come when I called her, I chased after her by the side of the road. The first day that I could not catch her, I dove after her, trying to grab her, but she jumped just beyond my outstretched arms. I landed in the willow bushes, and she ran away.

Maya spent many nights out after that, while I worried about her until she came home. When she was ready to return, her tail between her legs, she would slink around, looking thin and wary, knowing she'd done something wrong. I'd chain her up each time she'd run away, to teach her where she belonged, but I always set her loose a few days later. I wanted a dog who was independent, allowed to roam free.

Just after New Year's Eve, I arrived in from the east coast, where I'd been visiting my family. At one o'clock in the morning, a taxi dropped me off at my driveway, and as I began the short walk to the cabin, I was enchanted by the darkness, the way the stars provided the only light for miles around. But as I walked through the three feet of snow that lay in my driveway to the cold, dark cabin, the air bit my face. It was almost fifty below. A small doubt crept into my mind.
The hot baths and easy life at my parents' houses had given me a much needed rest. We'd had a loving visit over the holidays, and it was hard to realize they were once again five thousand miles away. I'd broken up with John before Christmas. He'd wanted to see other women; I'd said that was fine so long as one of them wasn't me. I missed him though, and I wondered why I'd chosen to move so far away from family to this rustic place where it took so much hard work to live.

Before leaving Fairbanks, I'd had the sense to leave myself a fire to light in the wood stove, and as I fumbled in the cold to light a match I was glad at least not to have to stack the logs this winter night. It took a long time, though, for the fire to give off heat, and an even longer time before it took the chill out of the cabin. As I paced the cabin in my parka, rubbing my mittened hands together for warmth, my doubts grew stronger. Perhaps I was not tough enough for this sort of life.

By five o'clock in the morning, when it was finally warm enough in the cabin for me to crawl in between the sheets and lie down, I'd finally found solace. I didn't know whether I'd stay in Alaska forever, but I was warm enough to settle in for the night.

In the longest cold spell that Fairbanks had seen in a long time, the temperature stayed fifty-below and colder for three weeks, while I scrambled to keep up with the wood. Every day, I came home from work, built a fire, and fell asleep in an old armchair next to the wood stove, waiting for the rest of the cabin to heat up. Watching my wood pile dwindle, I began to think about where I would go if the wood ran out before the temperatures rose. None of the woodcutters would be able to work until the cold spell broke; fortunately, I had become friends with a woman up the road who said I could stay with her if I needed to.
Midway through the cold spell, worried, I had trouble sleeping. Dog-tired from lack of rest, I worried I wouldn't be able to split enough wood for the stove. When John came by, just to see how I was doing, my self-reliance broke down and I asked for help. In half an hour, he split a pile of wood to keep me going into February, and I finally slept the following night.

If I didn't have the toughness for this life when I got here, Fairbanks winters taught it to me. Every night at three o'clock in the morning, awoken by cold, I got out of bed to stoke the fire. Otherwise, the cabin would have been almost freezing when I woke again in the morning. Big crystals formed on the styrofoam seat of the outhouse, which I visited as infrequently as I could.

Maya and I danced together many a night to bluegrass music played on a local radio station, running around the small cabin, even leaping up on the bed and then off again in exuberance. I loved the long dark mornings of winter, the way I lost track of time without my usual cyclical cues. I spent long hours in meditation and flickering candlelight, a warm fire crackling in the stove.

Even during the three weeks of the cold spell, I went outside every night when my bladder was full. Though leaving a warm bed to go out into the cold was not easy, those nights were as scenic as any daytime landscape. During the cold spell, the moon etched a hole in the sky as distinct as a paper cut-out. The birch trees laid deep shadows in the snow, and I became familiar with the silver-blue of a clear Alaskan night. If the cold hadn't chased me inside, I would have stayed out there for hours. Times like this one taught me to be at home on the Earth, as the moon is at home in the sky.
After a couple of years, I moved further away from town and onto a large mining claim which was leased by a friend. I'd wanted to live further from town, where the lights and noise of town intruded less, and this cabin was a quarter mile distant from the closest road, which was made of dirt and full of ruts. The forest there was a mix of tall birch and white spruce, and the cabin sat at the top of a gentle, cleared hillside which sloped down to the garden below. Like the other cabin, this one had only a wood stove for heat and no running water.

My second winter there, we had a record snowfall, too big for my friend's small plow, and he stopped clearing the driveway in February. I began hauling water up a trail I'd established. Wearing heavy snow boots and a thick parka, I loaded the five-gallon water jugs onto my plastic sled by the side of the road. The sled, solid enough for the short driveway at my first cabin, bent at each bump in the trail. It found inclines where I hadn't seen them, where I had to tug extra hard. When the trail turned a corner, the jugs tipped over, falling in the snow. After picking them up, I leaned over the sled and held onto them, to keep them stable, and pushed the sled like that around the sharp bends in the trail.

Hauling the water up the steep incline from the first bend in the driveway to the second, the jugs tipped over four times. But I took my parka off midway up the driveway, wearing just a sweater in the twenty-degree temperature, which felt warm. The birch trees swayed, and snow was firmly packed beneath my feet.

I didn't mind the frustrations the work presented, though loneliness did interfere with my joy in those days. I chose my sacrifices deliberately, and this renunciation had power. I lived simply and remotely as a form of spiritual practice. Alaska was my
monastery, and the life I chose to live here the single practice that could teach me what I needed to know.

In spring, I worked on the cabin's rooftop, shoveling snow to keep the roof from falling in. The effort was rhythmic and warming, and as I pushed my shirtsleeves above my elbows, I looked at the mountains, which I could just make out through a cleft in the trees. Any time I worked outside in winter, strength built up inside me, a sense of confidence that came with hard work and went beyond what I had known was in me before.
Early Adventures

The sun was shining warm and bright the day we first got taught how to do an Eskimo roll in our kayaks. I hadn’t yet been to Alaska, but my National Outdoor Leadership School group, all thirteen of us and our three instructors, milled around on a small lake in northern Colorado, taking the sun into our bones. Having spent three winter weeks in the Wind River Range in Wyoming, followed by a month in the dessert further south, we considered ourselves seasoned wilderness travelers. But here was something new, these little boats that loved to turn over, boats that might spill us into the Delores and the Colorado in April, icy water rushing in around our heads.

We had one day to learn how to roll, and no one succeeded. Nevertheless, the next day we set out for the river. When we got there, the river was as cold as my worst expectations. "This is crazy," I told my friend, Robin. "Early spring in the mountains, and we don't know how to roll."

Our instructors had told us to stay in our boats if we turned over. "If you go over, knock three times on the bottom of your kayak," they said, as we set out into the water. "We will come and help you turn your boat right-side up."

N.O.L.S. gave me an unending taste for the wild—for its moments—the sound of coyotes howling on a winter night in the mountains, the sight of a pelican at a bend in a river, the surprise of a giant shooting star as it drew a big arc in the sky. I would never return to the cities once I had seen the true depths of nature’s quietude and its natural rhythms. Though the wilderness contained violence, it seemed unlike the violence of man.

But N.O.L.S. showed me, too, how a person can be thrown too fast into a situation. That first day on the Delores, a friend turned over in white water, traveling
upside-down for close to a minute before the instructors answered her call. I remember well the hollow sound of her knocking.

Though I loved the thrill of coursing through rapids, I chose most days to ride in the rafts we'd brought along to carry our supplies. The risk involved in riding upside-down in the river, my head exposed to unseen rocks and whirlpools, was a bit too much for me to take on.

I loved the mountains, and as N.O.L.S. was ending I began to plot the way I would return. "If you think this is beautiful, you should go to Alaska," said Rusty, one of the instructors.

One summer, when N.O.L.S. was just a memory, I followed Rusty's advice, landing in Homer with friends. With voracity I sought out the mountains, surprised, though, by how much I held myself back. I couldn't bring myself to hike alone in the Chugach and spent the day I'd meant for hiking reading in the van. It's the rain, I tried to rationalize, though it drizzled only lightly. You're not the only person who's scared of bears. I tried to pat myself on the back for trying, but my disappointment ran ahead of me like a mountain goat up the trail, taunting me with possibility, unmoved by fear.

In the early days, I was lucky enough to meet a friend who kayaked. He took me out several times on Kachemak Bay in a double. Both of us were proud of our strength, the way together we could send the boat through the waves even when they swelled over the bow. Before I met him, I had paced the beach a lot in Homer, longing for a way to get to the wilderness on the other side of the bay. Now we went out every Sunday to face whatever adventure the water chose to provide.
But there wasn't always someone to play with, a friend to give me the courage it took to face Alaska's big wilds. When I moved to Fairbanks after a few summers in Homer, for many years I didn't have a partner with whom I could travel. The wariness left over from my N.O.L.S. adventure prevented me from going out too far alone, or with people I didn't know well. I did not want to be out in the wilderness with people who didn't care about my welfare, yet I needed guides to teach me how to survive in this country. The result was that I did not get out as much as I wanted to, and my first six years in Alaska held a certain frustration.

After that, I would meet Paul, and he would serve as the guide I needed to open the door. But during those first six years in Alaska, before I met him, my adventures were sporadic and brief. In those early days, I couldn't get enough of the wilds, and my fear of the bears that lived there remained something I knew I would someday have to face.
Tulip Tree

If you miss the train I'm on, you will know that I am gone.

You can hear the whistle blow 5,000 miles. . . .

Sitting on the deck at my cabin, I was thinking about whether to move to Vermont; six years in Alaska had left me hungry for the family I'd left behind. The fireweed had long since gone to seed, and the thought of another winter in Fairbanks was enough to drive anyone south. The cranes and geese had already departed. But as I looked out at the forest, I wondered—Could I give this place up? The hillsides were golden, the understory deep red.

What I remember most about the first two times I tried to leave Alaska is the exhilaration I felt when I chose to return. The first time, my boyfriend Dave and I decided to move to Portland, Oregon. He was tired of compromising his career, and I followed him because I was in love. We gave away what we wouldn't need for our new lifestyle—the water jugs, propane tanks, and splitting mauls—packed what was left in the car, and set off, unsure of whether we really wanted to go.

Towards the end of the first day on the Al-Can Highway, we reached the Canadian border. Checking through customs, we felt tired, and the journey ahead looked dusty and long. "I hope we're doing the right thing," Dave said, expressing what was on my mind as I watched the tundra ridges and glacial lakes rolling by, capturing bits of mountains and sky.

The words came tentatively. "We could go back," I said.

"You want to?"
"Do you?"

We looked at each other and laughed, each surprised to find the other so willing. Dave turned the car around and we went back through customs, telling the official we were having car trouble and wanted to check it out in Tok before heading on.

Coming and going was all a big joke to us, more or less. For our friends back home who teased us wildly upon our return, turning around made a far better story than leaving. They said we'd had our going away party just to get a free meal, and dubbed us "the wind" and "the breeze."

The second time I left, it was my own search for work that called me away. Planning to study in Seattle, I shipped thirteen boxes full of possessions to a friend in Port Townsend, and then drove down the Cassiar Highway. The Cassiar, even more remote than the Al-Can, was full of potholes and ruts, and sharp embankments where I hugged the sides of mountains and held my breath. Twice, unsure how far the next town was, I wondered if I would run out of gas. Still, all this was an adventure, I loved the wilderness that much.

At first, the juice bar on the corner near my friend's house made up for the dirty Seattle streets, but a week of difficult house hunting soon wore me down. The first place I visited, in Greenwood, was charming, but they interviewed three of us at once for a single room. At the second house, a woman blew up at me; I wasn't sure why. Quickly, it became clear the city wasn't for me. I couldn't stand to see Maya on a leash all the time. She strained and tugged with all her six-year-old husky strength. We were used to wandering freely on soft dirt and spruce needles, instead of pavement and concrete. After my bike seat was stolen, we hightailed it out of the city and drove back up the Cassiar. I sang the whole way.
Those first two times I tried to leave Alaska, I was in my twenties, with plenty of time stretching ahead: if I didn't succeed then, the door remained open to move back east when I was older. But the stakes were higher now. I felt ready to find a mate and settle down.

The dark red leaves of the fireweed and the peeling, white bark of the birch shook in a breeze; beyond, the autumn sky was clear. I've never known a richer blue than the September skies of Alaska. I smelled the forest, the same forest where I had learned to fell trees, peel spruce logs, and carve spoons out of birch. I had hauled my own water here, built things on my own.

_You could do these things in Vermont_, I told myself.

But the words wouldn't sit right.

When I first decided to make my way to Alaska, ten years earlier, I knew it was the right thing to do. Such certainty doesn't come often, but that night I lay awake until morning gently euphoric, watching the stars.

Driving from Whitehorse into Haines Junction, my friends and I came upon the St. Elias Mountains. _I know these mountains_, I thought to myself, though I'd never seen them before. Then it struck me. I'd dreamed of these them before I knew what they looked like, or where on Earth they resided.

The forest outside of Haines Junction was made up of miniature birch trees, and bloomed with the first pasque flowers of the season. The ice on the sides of a river was blue where the water had eaten it from the shores. Towards midnight, loons called from the surface of a still lake, nestled in a tundra swamp under the strange, low-angled light. Unable to take my eyes off the wildness, I stayed up all night, looking out the window and listening to the sound of the wheels as the van took us north.
We pulled into Tok, Alaska, towards morning, parking the van by a fast mountain stream. After I slept for the first time on Alaskan soil, I awoke with a start to find the van swaying. The valley, and everything in it, rocked gently, like a pendulum, or the mast of a sailboat on high seas. I wondered whether I was dreaming, but no...my friends were sleeping but I was not. It wasn't an earthquake, not anything as concrete as that. It was a vision, my first one. The valley rocked from side to side, and I felt tranquil, clear-headed, awake.

Five thousand miles takes ten days to travel by road, or twelve to sixteen hours by plane. A plane ticket costs seven hundred dollars. I missed a lot of holidays with my family, including Thanksgiving, my favorite. There's something about the way a family gathers round and envelopes the children, the way generations follow closely upon one another without pause. That's a kind of belonging which no unpeopled landscape can provide, the kind that exists when parents take care of young children, when grandparents hold their grandchildren in their arms. As I stood surrounded by the forest at my cabin in Fairbanks, I thought of my nieces growing up without me and knew I had to return.

"We're going on a road trip," I said to Maya, my dog who's never liked moving. I dumped the dirt from a clay pot still blooming with summer's flowers and began to pack my belongings. I filled up box after box and sold a few of the larger possessions that I couldn't take with me—my loom and massage table. When I finally loaded the car, there was barely a space left for Maya; she had to sit all curled up, or put her paws on the transmission hump to stretch out.

When I called my father to tell him I was leaving, I promised him I wouldn't turn around.

"You don't have to promise," he told me. "It's your decision."
"But I want to," I answered. "It's the only way I can be sure I'll make it all the way east."

It took all the strength I could muster to drive out of town, cross the Canadian border, and pass Lake Kluane, which reflected the mountains and Yukon-pink clouds. I remembered cookouts with my friends on the lake's rocky beaches, searching the bare slopes for goats. Late into one of those evenings, trying to start a fire, we had laughed at how our four college degrees didn't mean a thing against all that rain.

When I got to Liard two days after crossing the border, I couldn't sleep, the pain of leaving Alaska was so strong. The full moon cast light into the motel room, and I remembered a night in Fairbanks when the moonlight had called me outside. Hooking Maya up to her harness, I had sped down the road. Maya was young then, and all I had to do was hold on. When we got to the trailhead, my friend Dave's dog, a white Samoyed, was there, wagging his tail in our path.

"All right... You can come, Lupe," I told him.

He raced down a hill, and Maya took off in chase, with me in tow on my skis. When we got to a sharp turn in the trail, I bent my knees and took a deep breath, thinking I wouldn't make it around the curve without falling.

I careened around that corner like a young girl swinging on her partner's arm in a square dance. The snow was silver-blue on the spruce boughs, and, exhilarated, I laughed while Maya ran as fast as she could. We skijored eight miles in the moonlight, chasing Lupe the whole way.

At Liard, unable to sleep, I went outside to get my map from the car, wanting to see just how far and winding the road was. The stars were out, and I wondered if I'd ever find another home where they would shine so. It seemed a long way to Dawson Creek,
the end of the Al-Can highway. From there, I would still have a few thousand miles to go, but at least then I'd be out of this Canadian wilderness that called me back home.

In the Teslin motel the night before, it had been Maya who'd had trouble sleeping. Neither of us had felt safe in a tent by the roadside; being alone had magnified my fear of bears and of strangers who might wish us harm. But in Teslin the four flimsy walls didn't comfort Maya. For hours, until she could no longer keep her eyes open, she anxiously guarded the door, her hackles standing straight up.

As the trip continued, it was difficult to get her to eat, and in the ten days it took to drive back east, her muzzle turned gray.

I didn't move to Alaska for good the first summer I went there, but when I did, I came by boat from Seattle. Standing on the ferry deck in the late November rain, alone with all the wind and water, I watched the mountains. Ice pushed down against up heaving rock, and the timber line submitted to the snowy heights with clear distinction. Waterfalls dropped thousands of feet, from the highest crags to the shore. Spruce and hemlock dotted the slopes, and on the lower hillsides the brush was brown. Moose, bears and wolves lived in the valleys that stretched just out of sight. I felt pulled to belong to the land in the way that wild animals do.

A few weeks after I arrived on the east coast, I was walking with Maya along a dirt road which might soon be part of my new neighborhood. I'd been offered a well-paying job and a wooden house with picture windows overlooking the mountains. Red and yellow leaves from maple and oak layered the forest floor. The sweet smell of their decay filled the air. I breathed deeply; I might just like it here in Vermont.
Maya and I were wrestling the way we liked to—she grabbed at my mitten, I grabbed at her nose—until I looked up at a house by the side of the road. A woman peered out of the doorway, calling her children in from the yard. Her log house looked unfamiliar and wrong—an imitation of the cabins I'd known in Alaska. The trees were too tall and her clothing too tidy; there was no splitting maul in the yard, no mound of spruce chips building up where wood had been handled.

Suddenly, I wanted to go back to Alaska. I couldn't shake the feeling that even northern Vermont, as rural as it was, might be too much like what I'd chosen to leave behind when I first moved to Alaska—an urban landscape where wilderness had been abandoned, cast out. I hurried to the car, anxious to escape the sensation, but it followed me across the roads as I drove.

The road to Montpelier from the smaller town of Cabot where I'd been walking wound past farm after farm, hillsides graced with fields and cows, old barns and wandering streams. Behind the farms stood tall pine trees. Everything seemed to belong where it stood.

Though I wanted them to, the farms and hills didn't comfort me. The possibility that I might not like it here scared me. What if were to find out I didn't like it only after I'd formed attachments, after I'd fallen in love? I might be trapped then, unable to find my way back to Alaska.

In Montpelier, I sat in my car at a stoplight, in the rain which had begun as evening fell. I watched the wipers smear red light across the windshield and saw a hectic pace around me—too many cars at the intersection, a shopping mall, a dirty gas station.

A gas attendant hurrying towards the island where two cars were waiting wore greasy coveralls and hunched his shoulders against the late October rain. Four lanes of
traffic came in from each direction, and lines of people waited in their cars. Masses of people looked stuck, their cars not moving at all.

*Don't be overwhelmed,* I told myself. *Montpelier has only six thousand people. This part of Vermont is more rural than Fairbanks.*

I went back to my mother's house for a while in hopes of reversal. It seemed wrong to turn around now. I'd driven all the way from Alaska, five thousand miles, to get here. How could living in Alaska be more important to me than living near family? It didn't make sense.

Walking in the woods in November, trying to decide what to do, I remembered a moment in Alaska which had taken place a few years before. It had been early September, and friends and I were visiting Tolovana Hot Springs, an idyllic spot in the forest sixty-five miles from town. We had driven most of the way on gravel roads to a trailhead. From there, we had walked eleven miles, across a valley and then up and over to the camp settled in a nook on the other side of the dome.

Maya and I were on our way to Wolf Lake, just the two of us, our friends back at camp. I had wanted to feel what it would be like to be out on the trail without other people along, and I was not disappointed. There must have been this kind of freshness when humanity first came along.

The tundra was variegated—red, yellow and orange. The sky was a thick autumn blue. Maya ran ahead of me, waving her tail high like a flag, and pushing her nose underneath rocks and branches. The trail was wide, and we moved quickly. Fresh air tingled my bare shoulders. My leather boots were strong and tough.
Arriving at the lake, I saw terns and guillemots circling and diving, their calls the only sounds for miles around. A breeze sent ripples on the water, and a few small clouds hung in the air above the far shore. Wilderness stretched in every direction.

Beyond the lake, to the east, the Tolovana River wound through the Minto Flats, a wild game refuge consisting of lakes and low-lying tundra. Beyond the flats, the forest and tundra continued uninterrupted by anything but small villages across northern Canada to Hudson Bay and beyond. To the west, there were no large settlements for five hundred miles—just the village of Galena at a bend in the Yukon River and the small city of Nome at the Bering Sea coast—and beyond Nome lay the ocean. Only small villages lay between Wolf Lake and the Arctic Sea ice four hundred miles to the north. The next major settlements to the south, Anchorage and Wasilla, were over two hundred miles away.

Fairbanks was by far the largest settlement for a long, long way in any direction. Most of Alaska remains untrammeled country where a person might wander. I imagined skiing the winter trail that led from Wolf Lake to my cabin, Maya digging in her heels as she pulled me, my well-waxed skis gliding easily over the snow. The air would smell of spruce fronds, and the snow would catch the daylight, its hoar frost crystals shining like opal sparks alongside of our tracks.

In the forest near my mother's house in New Jersey, I struggled to make sense of this situation that tore me in two. Reaching for something to hold on to, I found the familiar bark of a tulip tree. If I went back, there'd be so much to let go of—holidays with the sisters I'd grown up with, the subtle ways my nieces and nephews would grow in the interim times between visits, the ability to closely care for my parents and receive their
love and attention. Though I'd already lived in Alaska for six years, embracing the knowledge that I would probably spend the rest of my days there would be an adjustment.

But no matter how I longed for it, there was no way I could move back and live near my family. Though they had raised me, my origins ran deeper; my calling to know the wilderness was thicker than blood. The pull would haunt me if I didn’t give it its due. I would miss my family, but I had to go now. I released my grip on the tulip tree. It was time again to make the long journey, and to begin the next phase of working to make Alaska my home.
Coping with Bear Country

Silhouettes of hemlock greet us today in the gray fog. Their branches droop with old man's beard, lending the forest a look of maturity. As I clamber up a hillside of rich, eroding loam, I try to step up vertical inclines as big as my stride. My footing slipping frequently, I grab for vines and tree trunks. Though these aren't the safest handholds, they're often the only way I can get where I'm going in the steep country around Jack Bay where my friends own a cabin. My fiancé, Paul, used to spending much time in these woods, walks quickly. In order to keep up with him, I try to think like a wild goat who can spring up any mountain. But it's no use. My feet keep getting tangled in blueberry vines. Unlike the animals who live here, I don't quite belong.

We've come here to seek relief from the depression we feel when we spend too much time around cars and airplanes, population, and noise. And though we often find that here, today I'm having trouble accessing the deep sense of calm that occurs when my mind comes to rest. There's too much to watch out for. The hike is not breaking through my depression, and I wonder if it's fear that keeps me from feeling open and free.

The first time I ever came to Jack Bay, a black bear was fishing for pink salmon at the mouth of the creek. He snatched the salmon like toys in his claws. We saw their skeletons on the beach the next day, when we headed up the valley to our cabin. We walked a wide arc through dense woods to avoid the salmon-stuffed creek. Even in the woods there was a heavy litter of scat.

Bears are numerous in this valley. Sometimes, but not always, they pose a threat to people's welfare. A neighbor shot a grizzly that charged him; for many years, its skeleton lay on the wooded trail we walk to the cabin. Another bear shredded the raft my friends used to travel out to the bigger boat they used to travel between Jack Bay and Valdez.
On the other hand, there's the time my friend Jon climbed the tall peaks and saw fifteen black bears grazing like cows on the hillsides below. He saw his wife, Lou, down there too, not far from the bears. From above, he could see that they were all eating blueberries together. When I think of bears in this way, I see them as neighbors, if not exactly as friends.

Many people don't share this view. Some hunters want to establish a fly-in lodge up the hill from the cabin. I don't know whether they've thought about hunting and habitat loss in a way that preserves enough bears to prevent their extinction. If they are like the people who live in the lower forty-eight states, the answer may be "no." So few bears are left behind in the wake of our fear.

When I think of bears in this way, I see them as victims, the threat of their extinction a violation to people like Jon and Lou, who sweat for many years to build a rustic cabin in this pristine setting and consider the bears a natural part of the wildness they've come here to enjoy.

When Jonathan Waterman, a climber who's spent a lot of time in Alaska, was presented with a bear carcass, he wrote the following words:

As we scraped back the final hank of fur from the white-sinewed flesh below, we stood back and stared. For a brief moment . . . we gazed at the naked body with stark and abject realization: [the bear] resembled a human being.

Unconsciously, before reading his words I had known this. There is not so much distance between a bear and a man as we might like to think. Everything is interdependent. Killing off the bears amounts to killing off a part of ourselves.

I know all this, but when I walk in the wilds, I feel otherwise. I want a place where I can go and be a part of nature without having to risk my life to do so. A typical
human attitude, to want the goodies without hazard. But I won't just call it greed—I need wildness to cure what ails me. Whatever complications arise, this will always be true.

We wind our way along the muskeg at the top of the hill. Where the muskeg meets the forest, purple shooting stars with yellow centers grow in the mud, and iris, too, their petals overlaid with spidery markings.

We've set a goal of searching for a lake that's located about eight or ten miles away. "It's a real lake," Lou told us, "deep water, no lillipads, surrounded by hemlock. Not a pond in the muskeg like the ones near the cabin."

Finding the lake is a secondary goal. It provides us with a destination for our journey. Having such direction helps us feel at home here. Because we're only visiting, we don't have work to do—like finding food and shelter—that ties us to the land. This is how we use our leisure, the time we use for rejuvenation. But our goals are dual. Though on the one hand we want relaxation, on the other, we need to remember our true relation to our planet Earth, in all its wildness. This is our primary goal.

Though the spruce and hemlock stand proudly, I don't find the forest a comforting place. Beyond the muskeg fields, it is littered with fresh bear scat. We follow the top of the ridge through dense trees and thick brush. In some spots, high bush blueberry shrubs taller than we are crowd us, obstructing our vision. I feel claustrophobic, unsafe, even though we make lots of noise.

On the trip down here, as we drove through the Alaska Range, I thought about what it would be like to be a ground squirrel when bear paws suddenly come digging—how they would rip at my flesh. As a child I saw photos of the disfigured faces of people who were attacked by bears; I couldn't imagine going on after an experience like that. I
wonder what I'm doing here and whether this hike is really worth the fear of being attacked, so visceral, so strong.

I like open places, where I can see what's coming. I remember one day when Paul and I were traveling around Knight Island in our kayak. As the day drew to a close, we found ourselves at the head of a bay surrounded by steep, dark mountains. A stream murmured softly.

"Do you want to camp near the stream?" Paul asked me.

The stream looked appealing. We'd already been scrunched in the boat for ten hours. We were hungry and tired.

An image of hot food came into my mind, and then the thought of how much work lay between us and that vision. Before we could cook dinner, we'd have to unload the kayak and carry all the gear up the beach to a place above the high tide line—wearing cold, wet clothes so the gear wouldn't drip on our only dry set. We'd want to set up tarps and the tent before we ate dinner, in case it started raining. There was still a lot to do, and it was getting late. It made sense to camp here.

But dread had lodged itself between me and that campsite. A bear might choose to dine tonight in the stream.

There are many things I fear, and sometimes I wonder if the bear has come to stand for all of them. Certainly, I fear for my mortal safety. But wrapped up in that fear may be all the ones I don't usually recognize—fear that I'll lose touch with my family, lose Paul, have to leave Alaska. I even fear losing my mind, that my world will tilt too far one way or another, and I won't be able to retrieve a viable path.

I couldn't see past my fear enough to stop that night at a reasonable time. We paddled another five miles, away from the stream. When we were too tired to go any further, we camped on a rocky promontory where there was barely enough beach to land.
I can imagine paddling all night to avoid camping in bear country. And some nights I'd probably do it, if I didn't know how dangerous that too can be.

The dread I feel in bear country is probably out of proportion. Looking back, I realize we didn't even check whether the stream was populated with salmon. I wanted out of there at any cost. Dread is often like this, eclipsing logic, demanding that we flee without pause.

When I walk with Jon through the woods around Jack Bay, I feel less fearful. "I like to see bears," he once told me, while we walked along the creek on our way from the cabin to the beach. "I purposely keep quiet when I walk the trail alone, in hopes I'll get to see one."

Later, though, back home in Fairbanks, he said, "I've learned to keep more distance. I feel more comfortable when I'm with other people."

Like Jon, I feel more strength in numbers, perhaps because our many voices echo through the woods, giving warning. But it's not just the noise. Paul and I make plenty of noise in the woods even when it's just the two of us, enough so a bear should hear us coming, but I don't feel as safe then. It's the sense of dominance we humans claim for ourselves that seems present when we move around in large enough groups.

Every few weeks, it seems, each summer, I hear a story about another bear getting shot in the Interior. The ones unfortunate enough to wander into Fairbanks don't make it. Again, my response is ambivalent. If a bear were hanging around my neighborhood all the time, I might find it difficult to live there. Yet it seems like the bears don't do that, unless they're desperately hungry or unless some human, not paying proper attention, baits them in.
One summer the berries grew sparsely, and a bear was sighted in my neighborhood. It made sense that a bear might come closer than usual into town in search of food that year. The bear had smelled the dog food that someone had left out on her porch.

When the bear came to our neighborhood, we let each other know, took all our foodstuffs off the porches, and stayed off the trails for a while. When the bear showed up at a neighborhood down the way, someone shot him.

Doug Peacock, who has spent a lot of time around bears in Montana, says human intolerance makes anything less than true wilderness a battleground where the bears always die. "The bears could probably adapt to us," says Peacock, "but we have not given them the chance. We don't maintain a culture that allows us to live with another clever and predatory species."

Like Peacock, I believe that bears must have wilderness. And people need wilderness too. I worry we'll kill off most of the bears. People of the future won't have to dread them, but I don't think it will make any real difference in our level of safety. Overall, we won't have more control. We try to push wilderness, the place where we see wildness and danger, further and further away. But we are of it, and it is inside us. We can't remove the risk without destroying ourselves.

Deep within the forest, the lake reflects only the dark color of the tall conifers ringing its shores. From our perch, we see a portion of Jack Bay and, beyond, the Valdez Narrows. My footing has become more sure in the forest, and the beauty of the lake and the vista help break through my depression at last.

I almost don't notice my contentment, it's so over-shadowed by the fear that I've endured to get here. It's not the deep sense of rest I've come in search of. Coming out
here, I didn't understand how much wilderness would ask of me. No matter how we'd like it to be, it's not a park made for human enjoyment. It's a dangerous place where we roam at our own risk.

Perhaps I'll never get over my fear while I'm out here, but I think it's good for me to explore such places. I find a peace in knowing my true place amidst its web of interactions. They challenge me to move beyond the same rutted country I've traveled in the past.
The morning my mother and I went shopping for my wedding dress, I shaved my legs for the first time in fifteen years, in the pink bathroom where I had shaved them all through high school. I hurried into my best pair of jeans and went downstairs to the kitchen, eager to spend time with my mother and my step-father, Jules, people I only get to see two or three times a year.

Mom and Jules have modernized the kitchen, adding a black and white tile floor and red ceiling, but the old, wooden furniture—the table and hutch—are still there. The house is made of white brick and has black wooden shutters. Its fourteen rooms are decorated with careful attention to detail; my mother has a strong sense of style. The living room contains a white silk sofa and Chesterfield couches. The dining room contains a cherry wood table, an antique French chandelier, Chippendale chairs and a Bombé commode. A long driveway lined with an English hedge winds up to the portico, where four white Grecian columns stand guard at the black front door. My sisters and I used to be embarrassed by the columns—we joked that there was one for each sister—and the house that reminded us too much of the president's mansion. None of my friends had such an elegant house.

That morning, my mother dressed in her Italian black leather pants, a wool turtleneck sweater, and high-heeled boots tucked under her pants. I felt a bit shabby, though I had tried to look nice. She and Jules seemed content, doing a crossword puzzle together over their morning coffee.

"I hope we find a dress today," I said, just to make conversation. The truth was, I was so happy to be with them that nothing else mattered.

"What kind of a dress are you looking for?" asked Jules, looking up from the puzzle.
"I'm not sure. Nothing too fancy."

"Dana, let me tell you something," Jules began, so I knew he had something important to say. "You're only getting married once. Do it in style. Your clothing should reflect the occasion's importance."

My mother and I both agreed with him, but it wasn't that simple. My fiancé, Paul, and I lived in Alaska in a one room cabin without running water. We had decided to have a small, afternoon wedding in a clearing in the woods, down the dirt road from our cabin. Many of my parents' friends would be coming to the wedding, and it seemed important to me to bridge both my worlds: the forested one, where many of my friends have never known New York conventions, and the wealthy, urban world of my parents and their friends, a landscape which once had been mine, no matter how I later rebelled.

In October, when my mother first asked me what kind of dress I wanted to wear for my wedding, I hadn't thought much about it and wasn't ready to, either. The wedding was still eight months away.


"Surely you'll wear white."

Her insistence surprised me. Perhaps she hadn't liked my suggestion.

"I don't know," I told her. "Some of my friends have worn colorful dresses."

Two of my friends had worn knee-length, print dresses. The rest had worn traditional gowns.

My mother was silent. She'd never heard of a bride that didn't wear white.

A few months later it was my turn to bring up the search. "What if I can't find something I like here in Fairbanks?" I asked her.
"You'd better start looking," she urged me. "If you don't find anything, we can look around here when you're home for the holidays."

I was going to New Jersey for my usual December visit. "Do you think we could find a dress in Greenwich Village or Soho, like Sabrina did?" I had liked my sister's antique-lace wedding gown, which she wore with strands of baby's breath lacing her dark, curly hair. The image was bohemian, yet elegant too.

"I don't know," said my mom. "I'll take a look and let you know what I find."

My mother didn't find an antique dress. The Greenwich Village and Soho boutiques had gone out of business. But she did send me a copy of Brides magazine.

I hadn't wanted to see what the people in Brides magazine were wearing. I'd long ago decided to have little to do with the world of New York fashion. In college, one of my roommates wore a different pair of shoes every day of the week; I wondered how she knew which shoes went with which outfit. I wore hiking boots with my peasant-style skirts, neither of which was in fashion in New York. My mom, on the other hand, always knew what styles were "in."

When Brides magazine arrived in the mail, I made fun of it. Just as I had suspected they would, the models looked like mannequins, with painted lips and eyebrows, and perfectly powdered cheeks. The magazine taught even flower girls to be good consumers of expensive dresses, gift registries and honeymoons, as if all it took to be happy with one's mate were shimmering crystal, sparkling china, touches of satin and lace.

Almost all of the clothes I own serve functional, rather than fashionable, purposes: they keep me warm at thirty below zero and keep the mosquitoes off in the summer. I feel most myself with my hands in work gloves or weeding in the dirt, or when I'm sloshing through puddles in the bog down the trail from my cabin. I don't even
have a closet where I can hang the dress or two I now own. They hang on a nail on our cabin's central support post. The tweed blazer my mother bought me two years ago lies folded in a suitcase, accumulating creases.

When I was a child, my family often went out in the city, piling into the yellow station wagon, driving over the George Washington Bridge into New York City. We dressed up in bright dresses, and, in the winter, wool coats with velvet collars. We passed through Harlem on our way, where graffiti covered the buildings and trash lay uncollected in the streets.

I was surprised and embarrassed to find out I was curious, allured by the gowns in Brides magazine. It wasn't their elegance, exactly, that I was after. It had more to do with the way they resembled my mother's wedding gown. When I was a child, we took it out of a box in the basement, and it was the most beautiful article of clothing that I'd ever seen. My first images of what a bride might look like were formed. I would look like my mom.

Over the years, these images had been evolving, and by the time I moved to Alaska they involved fields full of daisies and lupine, and long, flowing gauze. I decided that maybe I could alter one of the more simple gowns to make it less ornate, something I could wear in a clearing in the woods.

One day after looking at Brides, I told my mom, "I saw a gown I liked in the magazine you sent me. With pink roses embroidered on the front."

"You mean on the bodice? I remember. The one with the square neckline, right?"

"It's at a store called Priscilla's of Boston. Have you heard of it?"

"Of course," she said, in such a way that I was startled. "That started out as a Boston store, but there's one in New Jersey too now... But they tend to sell more elaborate, traditional gowns. Have you started looking in Fairbanks?"
I started looking for a dress in November, at a small boutique near the university. I wouldn't find a traditional gown there, but I might find something less formal, made of gauze. The store smelled like jasmine and was full to the brim with merchandise from Asia and Africa: batik clothing, woven baskets, textured weavings. I ran my hands along a thick tapestry, glad to be in the spicy room, where I felt at home.

I told the store owner that I was looking for a wedding dress for the spring. "Spring clothing isn't in yet," she said. "Want to look at the catalogues?"

The catalogues were filled with peasant style dresses. I was surprised to find wedding dresses that cost under a hundred dollars. But some of them were made from cheap Indian cotton that looked thin enough to rip during the wedding itself.

A week later, though I was dreading it, I drove to the far end of town to visit a clothing store in the mall. The dresses there looked matronly, and one bridal head piece had what looked like antennae coming out from the band. I ran out of the store feeling anxious, dismayed, and said to myself, "Winter isn't a good time to go shopping in Fairbanks, anyway." As I backed my car out of its parking spot, I almost hit a parked car, and felt shaken. I went straight home, fearing I'd get hurt otherwise, and went to sleep for the rest of the day.

I've often wondered why I became so distraught. Deep down, I'd known I wouldn't find anything that I'd want. But it was as close as I could find to being the kind of store my mother would have looked in, and I needed for her to know that I'd tried.

When my mother started scouting for dresses in New Jersey, I didn't tell her to stop. It seemed like a way for us to be close. After all, mothers and daughters throughout time have shopped together for wedding dresses. She told me she'd seen some dresses I might
like. "They're less formal than the one Pam wore," she said. My younger sister, Pam, had gotten married at a black tie affair on a Saturday night in upper Westchester County. Her wedding was the sort of thing my parents usually attend—traditional, and appropriate to our economic background.

The dresses my mother described to me that day were a flapper dress with long-hanging fringes and a knee-length dress with multiple layers of creamy chiffon. She was trying to find what I wanted, but neither style resembled the simple image in my head. I didn't say anything. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. But I was getting worried that I'd feel pressured into getting a dress I didn't like. It's no wonder I felt this way; I do it to myself. But saying no is so hard.

In spite of these feelings, the thought of going together to pick out my wedding dress was alluring. Shopping together, like the traditional wedding gown itself, is part of the ritual that's been handed down through the ages, one way mothers give away their daughters.

More importantly, it had been too long since just the two of us had done anything special together. My move to Alaska had kept us apart. So, although it was likely to be unsuccessful, we set a date to go shopping during the holidays. My desire to feel close to her overrode all.

As we drove to Priscilla's, my mother told me again about the chiffon dress she'd seen. "The fabric drapes in layer after layer. . ."

"I'm not sure about that dress, Mom. It doesn't sound right." I tried to write off my discomfort as jet lag, though I knew that my annoyance was more.

"It's hard to describe. You should at least look at it."
The date began to seem like a bad idea. I'd shaved my legs in hopes of fitting in, but our interactions made me feel like this could never be.

In Priscilla's huge show windows, the mannequins wore elaborate wedding gowns that fell to the floor in layers, with full skirts. "It will be fun to try on one of these gowns," I thought, my reservations slipping away, "a once-in-a-lifetime experience regardless of whether I buy one."

"I've got nothing to lose," I thought further. But perhaps I was wrong.

Priscilla's was sparsely decorated, with glossy-white walls and a well-varnished floor. Off the lobby were three of the largest dressing rooms I'd ever seen. I glanced into one. It contained a large mirror, some benches, and a tiered pedestal on which the bride-to-be can have her measurements taken and try on the gowns.

A saleswoman approached us, introducing herself as Brigitte. Her hair was styled in a coiffure, her make-up subdued. She wore a finely-textured, gray wool suit. Guiding us into a dressing room, she instructed me to get up on the pedestal in front of the mirror, then drew her tape measure around my hips, waist and bust.

I showed her the photograph of the gown with pink flowers. While she left the room to get me the gown, my mother and I agreed we were in good hands.

"She really seems to know what she's doing," I said.

"This is a very fine shop," said my mother.

For some reason, when she said this, I felt as if my remark should have gone without saying. Perhaps she forgets, sometimes, how different my life is, how unused to such places I've become. Sometimes I worry that being different is worse, that my family will reject me for not having chosen their milieu for my own. They must feel rejected by my choice to live so far away and lead so different a life.

"How come you shaved your legs?" my mother asked me.
"So they wouldn't interfere with the look of the gowns." I didn't tell her how much I wanted to fit in, to be accepted.

"They look nice," she said, and I felt calmed.

Brigitte returned and pulled the gown over my head, zipping it for me. The embroidered roses in the bodice gave the gown a country look, yet it was sophisticated too, with graceful and elegant lines.

"How much is it?" I asked. Perhaps I would buy it.

"Twenty-two hundred." answered Brigitte.

"You're kidding," I blurted.

My mother looked annoyed. But how anyone could spend that much money on a gown to be worn for only one day?

"Do you have anything less expensive?" I asked Brigitte, not telling her that I'd been looking at dresses that cost under a hundred dollars.

"We have a gown that might be on sale for only twelve hundred dollars."

"Let's see it," I said. We'd come all this way, I might as well see what they had.

Brigitte returned with a gown. I knew I wouldn't buy it, but I wanted to try it on anyway, to feel its satin fabric and full skirt. As my mother and Brigitte helped me into its folds, I felt well taken care of, as I had when my mother took me to buy clothes as a child.

"She's got a wonderful figure for that gown," said Brigitte to my mother. "Don't you think so?" The sleeveless gown showed off my bare shoulders.

"Yes," said my mother. "That one's even nicer than the first one." I agreed. The bodice was covered with the thickest lace I'd ever seen. The gathered skirt was elegant, like the gown my mother wore when she married my father. For a moment I considered buying it. My parents could afford it and would want me to look like that to get married.
But they got married in the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. I was getting married in a field of wild roses. I couldn't quite see myself wearing this gown as I walked down the dusty road to a ceremony around the corner from a bog, with my dog Maya leading the procession and a folk song in the air.

I told Brigitte I needed to think about it, though I knew I would not buy the gown. Maybe she knew too. She walked out of the room, leaving me to struggle back into my clothes.

"It's ironic," my mother commented, after Brigitte had left. "You didn't shave under your arms but that's the part that shows with the gown. You shaved the wrong thing!"

That night, attempting to sleep, I tossed and turned for hours, thinking I was worried about finding a dress. Well after midnight, still tossing, the realization that my mother and I had not succeeded in our task made me sad. It felt as if our closeness had depended on finding a gown.

I felt jealous of the girls I'd seen in the store who still lived in New Jersey, and surprised by the strength of the sense of isolation I felt. On the pedestal in that long satin skirt for a moment, I had been the daughter I imagined my mother wanted me to be. I had been the daughter I wanted to be for her—able to spare both of us from separation and grief by living exactly in her image, diverging no more.

It hurt to have been that daughter and so quickly to have lost her. I was exhausted from the effort of always having to leave my mother. What I hadn't remembered while we were shopping was that even this feeling of isolation has to be part of our closeness. Though mothers and daughters can learn a lot from each other, inevitably we each have to walk our own path.
I told my mother about my decision the following morning. She didn't seem upset by it. She just asked me what I'd do, and I told her, "I'll keep looking." I missed her already.

Back in Fairbanks, I went shopping once more, back to the boutique by the university. Spring dresses had arrived. They didn't look as bad as they had in the catalogs, so I took a few into the dressing room, a small space partitioned from the main store by a batik curtain hanging on a wooden rod. I sighed and felt a twinge of sadness, remembering Priscilla's, my moment on the pedestal. I tried the dresses on in solitude, while thinking of my mom. Our closeness hadn't diminished because we hadn't found a dress in December. Our relationship doesn't rely upon our being the same as each other, and it certainly doesn't rely on our attempts to change each other. What matters is that we both jumped at the chance to go on an outing meant for just the two of us, that we wanted to know each other better as we went a momentous life passage.

The first dress I tried on fit nicely and had the look I'd been imagining all along. A white rayon dress, with short sleeves and a v-shaped neckline, it hung without much tailoring. For decoration, there was only a diamond-shaped pattern sewn into the bodice with white thread and a simple sash which tied in the back. The plain fabric clung to me gently. I wouldn't have called it elegant, not in and of itself, but I remembered something a friend had said to me the day before.

I'd been walking in the woods with Paul and our neighbor, Sean. As we walked, I admired the forest floor, a cushion of moss peppered by cranberries, willows and Labrador tea. We came to a clearing where a tall birch tree stood, and Sean's voice floated back to me along the trail. He said, "Birch trees are elegant, don't you think? A birch tree lives about as long as a human being?"
I'd never thought of birch trees as being like humans and hadn't thought to call them elegant either. But I do now. One's choice of wedding dress matters all the more because it is meant to be worn only once, and elegance, in such cases, must take into account how clothing reflects the spirit of the person within it. I guess, when push comes to shove, I want to be more like a birch tree than like satin and lace.

I bought the dress without hesitation and wore it happily on the day of the wedding, when Paul and I walked down a makeshift aisle in the clearing, our friends and family beaming around us and Maya leading the way. I borrowed my mother's pearls for the occasion. The crowns of the birch trees nodded, and I wore white and yellow roses in my hair.
Alternations in the Sound

Evening brings the sweetest light. As I walk the beach at Shoup Bay, a nearby mountain face covered in hemlock flames green in the glow of the sun. Across Port Valdez, the mountain faces have already darkened. The sky overhead is as bright as any summer afternoon, and florescent clouds band in the lower rim of the sky. The air is cool, but as I walk I encounter warm pockets and breezes. A bald eagle calls overhead, joining its mate in their nest. Irises stand tall by the pond underneath them. Some have not bloomed yet, and their petals tuck closely together. Those that have already bloomed are crinkled and burnt by the long days of sunlight. When the wind blows, the alder leaves shiver. Surf pounds. Thrushes trill their fluted songs.

Yesterday, my husband Paul and I paddled out from Valdez in fierce afternoon winds. Paul sat in the stern of our kayak, steering the boat with the rudder. My job in the bow was to watch for sea debris we didn't want to run over—long kelp strands, driftwood, and, sometimes, whole trees. It felt good to be out in the weather, our sleeves pushed up above our elbows, water dripping on our spray skirts as we lifted our arms to paddle. Our faces tingled with sun and salt. The tide moved us along. But after we rounded the point at Mineral Creek, not far from Valdez, three-foot waves, strong wind, and the incoming tide pushed against us, pressing hard against the small boat. We paddled hard but made little progress.

Around the next point, the waves grew bigger and we began to paddle with all of our strength. Hugging the beach wouldn't have helped, as the shoreline was exposed to the incoming water. Surf pounded along the coast so hard we didn't try to make a landing, even though a lunch break on land would have helped give us ease. We tried to eat some food in the kayak, just a bit of trail mix and chunks of cheese from our lunch
bags. But, quickly, we became queasy as the boat was tossed around by the turbulent sea. We moved on, hoping the Potato Point might cut back on the force of the incoming weather. But the wind and waves kept coming at us.

By the time we got to Shoup Bay, we were cold, tired, hungry. In the quiet water behind the spit at the entrance, curious about how long we'd been on the water, we checked our watches. A trip that we'd thought would take us three or four hours had lasted seven. Looking forward to dry clothes and hot food, we headed towards a forest service cabin where we hoped to spend the night near the back of the bay. But when we got to the cabin, a skiff was moored twenty feet from shore. The cabin was already occupied, so we paddled around Shoup Bay in search of a place to make camp for the night.

At times, in Prince William Sound, it can be difficult to find an adequate campsite. We need a flat spot well above the tide line, where we can string up a tarp in the trees to keep out of the rain. When possible, a stream or waterfall—drinkable water—should be within walking distance, so we won't have to get back in the boat to find water in case of a storm.

An hour passed while we searched for a site. With tired arms, cramped legs, and hands already numb from the cold, we paddled the coastline unhappily. The sun was down, and the snowfields were shadowed. The spot we found was less sheltered than we had hoped for, but it had a view up the Narrows and a small waterfall at one end of the beach. Skirting the rocks, we came in at low tide. I peered into the dark, rocky water, directing Paul as to the least rocky course towards the beach. Landings are always a little bit stressful; it takes good communication between the two of us to steer the boat among the rocks. When we'd gotten as close as we could to the shoreline, I stepped into the water where it looked the most shallow, glad it didn't spill over the tops of my rubber
boots. I pulled the boat around so the stern was in shallow water too, so Paul could jump out.

As quickly as we could, we emptied the kayak, strewing our gear every which way on the beach. We wanted to get the boat away from the shoreline as soon as possible, in case a boat were to come by with a wake. When it was empty, we each grabbed an end of the boat and began to haul it up the beach, away from the tide line, picking our way through the rocks and the gear.

Water dripped on us from the kayak, wetting our torsos and legs. Our footing on the wet rocks was tenuous, which grated as they slid from underfoot. The heavy boat seemed to push us in the wrong direction as we carefully picked our way up the beach. We stowed the boat in the grass at the edge of the forest. Then, in less of a hurry, we began the process of carrying gear to the campsite. Though we load ourselves with as many dry bags as we can carry, unloading the boat always takes several trips. There's no point in putting on dry clothes to haul wet gear, especially since we only have room in the boat to bring two sets of clothes. I was cold. Anxious to get the gear hauling over with, I struggled to balance our two fishing poles amidst three other dry bags. The whole pile tipped out of my arms.

Another hour passed from the time we landed the boat until we'd brought all our wet gear up the beach, and I was shivering the whole time. My feet hurt from walking over small hard rocks in soft-soled rubber boots. By the time I got into my warm pile pants and jacket, I was shaking so badly I had to set up the tent and get into my sleeping bag right away, and didn't warm up until I ate the spaghetti that Paul—not quite as cold as I was, though just as tired—had cooked us for supper. It's a good thing, I thought to myself, that one of us had enough energy to light the stove and fix the hot food.
Tonight, happily watching the evening light linger, I wonder, yet, whether being out here is worth the discomfort. Paddling takes so much energy; everywhere we go, there is risk. Not all of our kayaking is as difficult as yesterday's paddle, but by the end of any day on the water, it's hard for me to muster the resources I need to settle in for the night. Kayaking tests me to my limits, and though the Sound is as beautiful a place as any I've ever seen, I can't forget yesterday's trials.

Paul and I have our reasons for kayaking, despite the hard work and the risks that come with exposure. We want to spend time on the water, and in the mountains around Prince William Sound. But in a world quickly being depleted of resources, neither of us wants to use gasoline to power a boat engine. It's one thing to use gas to drive a car to work or get groceries, to meet our basic necessities, but another to use a motor for recreational means. To us, the wilderness remains a place apart—where we can meet wild forces, work our bodies, encounter our fears.

A hummingbird whirs through the woods, waking me up the next day. Early morning, feeding time. I notice the quiet, the smell of the hemlock and salt on the air. The bird hovers in the air outside the tent, and I see its speckled, green feathers before it takes off. Lying warm and content in my sleeping bag, I have time to wonder whether this will be a good day for finding nectar and where hummingbirds go for protection when winter arrives.

Then I remember, and apprehension arises—today we plan to cross the Narrows, and then paddle out Valdez Arm to Jack Bay. Crossings can be troublesome. The wind and waves roll fiercely out in the channel. Once we're out in the middle, there is no easy way to escape. Tankers and cruise ships like tall apartment buildings move quickly through, and we can only hope they'll see us if our paths veer too close. In such a small
and quiet vessel, so close to the water, even the bright orange life vests we tie to the
decking might not help us be seen.

The gear is strewn again on the beach by the shoreline, the boat in the water. Standing in
the shallows, Paul leans into the stern to stuff the smaller dry bags as far back as they'll
go. All I can see is his legs and rear end; the rest of him is underneath the deck. I put
some gear into the bow and then climb into my seat, to push the bags into place with my
legs. Straining, I slide my buttocks forward, mashing the bags with my feet against the
narrow triangle that makes up the front of the boat. Every ounce of space counts in the
small kayak, which we need to load to the gunnels. Even though Paul has spent hours at
home figuring out the best way to pack the boat, the first few times we pack it on a trip
cause a struggle, while we experiment with different arrangements before we finally fit
everything in. The boat is vulnerable to wakes in this position, so we hurry as much as
we can. It's harder to pack the boat in the water than it is on dry land. But we have no
choice. If we packed it on the beach, it would be too heavy to lift into the water.

On a different journey, but on this very same beach, I forgot the need for
 quickness and waited until we'd already packed the kayak to adjust a few of the clothes I
planned to wear for the day. While I was changing, a wake came in from a cruise ship on
the other side of the channel. The boat looked far off, and I thought the wake would be
small when it got here: Port Valdez is more than two miles across at that spot. Still, I
tried to hurry, to be on the safe side. When the wake arrived, it surprised us with its size.
I was struggling with my rain gear suspenders when the first wave broke over the boat,
sending water into the hatches. As the wake bashed the stern against the rocks, I ran
without finishing what I was doing to help Paul hold the boat. But it was too late. With a
loud crash, the rudder shook loose from where it was fastened. A rudderless double kayak on the ocean is quite hard to steer.

When I'm not feeling my best, a day on the water can be too demanding, the constant need for alertness a pressure that wears on me in ways I can't handle. Cold and hungry, I'm not quite up to the task, and feel like I'm pushing myself to go beyond a meaningful limit. Jonathan Waterman says adventure is not fun if it's easy. He wants situations where he's cutting it close, risking death. I like exhilaration, but I've never wanted to put my life on the table. I don't mind if the travel comes easily.

The day is sunny, and while this makes it more likely there'll be an afternoon breeze, we are comfortable this morning in shirtsleeves. I wiggle in my seat to get situated amongst the lunch, binoculars, and rain gear that I stuffed hurriedly into the boat as we launched. Making one last adjustment, I pull my lifejacket down so it won't hunch up around my shoulders, and begin to paddle. Paul's already got a rhythm going, and before long the kayak streams through the water. Sunlight glints on the white froth surrounding the bow.

I slow down my paddling to rest, and Paul says, "Keep paddling."

"How come? The waves aren't big yet."

"Yeah, but they could be soon. We should get across while we can."

We both know the afternoon winds can kick up the water. The waves can unexpectedly kick up any time, as they did in Culross Passage one day in a storm. Culross Passage is protected by an island in almost all kinds of weather, and it made sense to feel safe there. But when the wind blows in hard from the north, waves come in from Port Wells, a large body of water, and the upper end of the passage starts rolling. One moment, we were paddling in protected water, and then, suddenly, three foot swells
tossed our boat so hard that we feared for our safety. Pouring rain drenched us, and we saw we'd need to turn around.

"I don't know if it's safe to turn the boat around," Paul yelled into the wind that day in Culross. I'd never heard him say those words before.

"What do we do?" I asked him. "We can't go out into Port Wells."

There was little choice. As we began the turn, waves swept the kayak sideways. Water poured over our spray skirts, the boat heeled, and we both wondered if we'd go over.

We've talked a lot, in the kayak, about what we would do if we capsized. A person's got only a few minutes to get out of that water whose temperature is not much above freezing, and the options are to swim to shore or climb onto the overturned boat. Either way, we'd be wet and exposed. Unsure of whether we'd survive this situation, when we're talking, we try to reassure ourselves the boat won't capsize, and wonder whether we should have gotten more rescue training before leaving the shore.

A moment later, without capsizing, we were fully upright, and, soon after, we found a place to camp, on an old wall-tent platform in a muddy and protected cove. But I remember that time in Culross as a close call, and decide I should not be too glib today. The wind is likely to pick up as we get out towards the center of the Narrows. Squinting as I look into the sun in Valdez Arm, I try to see the weather coming in from the Sound. I wonder what we're in for.

Sure enough, as we get further out into the channel, the waves start rolling—just like yesterday, only this time they hit the boat crosswise at a ninety-degree angle. Once again, we have to pull hard on the paddles, and my arms begin to hurt right away. The wind picks up even more, then, and up front, I get soaked by spray as four-foot waves course in from the Arm. A wave washes over my spray skirt. For a moment, I am so
immersed in water it's hard to believe the boat will keep afloat. A twinge in my chest tells me I'm beyond the place where I feel safe, and I wonder whether we should try to turn around. Another wave comes over my spray skirt, and Paul says, "Keep paddling!" before I realize I have stopped paddling on account of my fear.

One cannot linger in such places. I paddle again though I'm hot and my arms hurt. Looking warily out at the whitecaps, I think of a time Paul told me about, when he was making a solo crossing and got into big water. He had to huddle in his kayak, in the lee of a tiny island, holding onto the rocks because there was no way to climb onto the land from his boat. We are here in the middle without even an island.

I paddle until I don't feel my arms anymore. Perhaps I am working too hard to feel fear now, for the terror seems to have left me. After long hours of paddling, even during crossings, thoughts settle. The mind empties and calms.

The wind and water are like a puzzle, and when all is in balance, my piece fits snugly into its place. The kayak, the elements, my partner and myself are aligned. I used to feel this way, too, when my parents took me sailing. Only nine years old then, I saw for the first time how wind fills a sail, how forces push on one another, how they only know balance when they meet with an equal and opposite force. When the sails were set right, the rudder knew its spot in the water, and the keel sliced evenly through the oncoming sea. Both telltales, the inner and outer, lay flat against the jib sail. There was nothing to adjust or maintain.

Finally, the water begins to settle. We're far enough across now that the weather's blocked by the point at the end of the Narrows. The waves rolling into the strait are less fearful. I have time again to look around me. The mountains surrounding the Narrows
look olive green, and the ocean surface reflects a deep turquoise light. Waterfalls rage
down every cliff from the glaciers that straddle the mountains.

There is still plenty of water to play in. It drips down the lengths of my paddles
onto my wrists, soaking my forearms. Waves rolling, up to my elbows in chop, my
clothing and sunglasses drenched with salt, I laugh with exhilaration. White froth
sparkles where the wind pushes over the white caps. Snow-capped peaks dazzle my eyes
with their brightness, and the sky is drenched in light. I feel at home in the boat now, in
the ample landscape so close to the sea. Salt dries in the hot sun on my bare arms. I want
to be burnt by the wind and the sun, exposed to the elements like an iris that's already
bloomed.

That evening we paddle next to the shore, on the way up the Arm to Jack Bay. On the
side of the Narrows from which we have come, the sun has gone down beyond a notch in
the mountains. The water, an even deeper green than before, almost black, has lain down
in the cooler air of evening, and ripples only slightly. We stop paddling for a moment,
and glide quietly past a vertical meadow—a cliff where yellow buttercups and a single
daisy bloom on what look like difficult perches. The rock towers over the ocean, which
stretches out as far as I can see. Naked Island, thirty-five miles away, looks like a small
gray smudge on the horizon, and beyond that are Knight Island, Montague Strait, and the
great huge body of the Sound.

The stillness of the rock and the swelling movement of the water evoke a tension
inside me. Our kayak is seaworthy, an ocean going vessel, but compared to the great
expanses of water, it can seem tiny and frail. As we round the entrance to Jack Bay,
rollers coming in from the sea bounce back off the cliffs. The shifting waves toss the
kayak like a grizzly bear batting a salmon. There's no obvious pattern, just chaos and turbulent motion.

Afloat on this huge body of unstable water, I feel my own smallness. At times like this, I want to tuck inside myself, to reside within my own folds, like the inner petals of the iris still waiting to bloom. As we paddle through the chop, I remind myself of all the times I have felt at ease in rough water. I've spent years now paddling in waves I wasn't sure I could handle, crossing channels that felt much wider than they first had looked. I've come through every encounter. Perhaps that's reason enough to trust in my capacity for survival. But still I don't always trust in my endurance—my judgment, the strength in my shoulders, the tenacity of my will.

I've traveled in more exposed waters than Valdez Narrows. One day, a few years ago, Paul and I kayaked across Knight Island Passage. We hadn't planned to cross the passage that evening, having already come fourteen miles from Applegate Island, three miles of this to cross the entrance of Port Nellie Juan. But when we got to Crafton Island, the closest point to Knight Island, the entire Sound was laying down. Reflections of a few white clouds stared back at us from the water's silky undulations. We couldn't resist making the six-mile crossing in such quiet water. Tomorrow could be storming, and we'd have missed a good chance.

Out in the passage, the largest body of water I've ever crossed in a kayak, we could see fifty miles across the Sound, which was encircled by the glacier-covered, Chugach mountain range. The peaks on our side of the Sound stood out clearly, their glaciers blue in the evening sun. We could just make out the mountains on the eastern shore, near Cordova, as we paddled our boat across the passage, surrounded by sea birds'
spare calls. There was little reason to hurry; no wind would come up until the next day. Miles and miles of water rose and fell gently, gleaming like blue and black glass.

The cove inside Jack Bay is calm as we come in for a landing. The snow is pink in the alpenglow which settles on the mountains. Strands of clouds ring the peaks, florescent orange. The water is quiet, and we paddle slowly, to take it all in. We don't have to watch each other to adjust our paddling rhythm. After a long day of working together, we each intuitively match the other's pace. It's close to midnight as we pull our kayak onto the beach, and there's still much work to do before we rest. But the seaweed in the flats glimmers gold in the evening light, and the only sound we hear is the call of the eagles, who caw as they fly from tree to tree along the shore.
In February

Mid-afternoon, one winter day, it doesn't look like the sun will come out at all. I want to crawl back into bed, the day is so dim, but decide I'd better go for a ski. Sometimes, getting outside helps relieve the lethargy brought on by winter darkness.

As I lay my skis against the kitchen counter to wax them, I wonder whether a ski will help today. There isn't any light to speak of, outside. But the air is stuffy in the cabin—wood smoke leaks from the stove. The air outside should do me good.

Outside, I latch myself onto my skis and head down the trail that leads away from the cabin. Snow hasn't fallen in over a week, and the trail is hard packed, solid ice. When it's cold like this, my feet slip sideways, making forward motion hard to achieve.

Gray and dim, the cloud cover hangs as low as the ceilings inside my unfinished cabin. Not even a faint glow of sunshine breaks through the clouds. Sometimes, though, it is lighter at the lake.

The cold air, minus-twenty, creeps in between my neck gaiter and hat. I huddle down as far as I can in my jacket. Icicles form on my eyelids. I rub them with my mittens to melt the ice, so they won't freeze shut.

Dropping down the winding trail towards the lake, I check the high branches of the black spruce around the lake for a sign of wind. This time of winter, I long for movement—flowing water, a wind in the branches. But not even a tree branch is moving. The world is frozen, and I feel mute in response. Winter seems indifferent—to me and to the trees and land that surround me, as well. If only that tie would help bind us. But while I long for connection, the winter freeze forms a barrier between me and the world. We bear down separately under the weight of the cold.

I ski out across the lake, in search of a glimmer of light or movement, and I find what I’ve come for. The sun comes out, lying low on the horizon and casting muted light
across the ice. The cattails on the opposite shore put forth golden warmth, but they do so just for a moment. This is the only sign of life I'll see today.
Building the Fire

Monday, six thirty a.m., I throw crumpled newspaper into the wood stove and the sleeve of my white sweater gets caught on the door. Withdrawing it, I find a large smudge of ash and shove the next batch of newspaper in with frustration. I was already in a hurry, and now I'll have to get the ash off my sleeve. I place the kindling, light the fire, and rush off to brush my teeth, comb my hair, put away the dishes. I've got a lot to do today.

A few minutes later, I notice the cabin is quiet. No crackling comes from the wood stove. The fire has gone out from lack of attention.

In winter, getting to work involves so many small steps in a row, each action a burden, like a brood of ducklings needing attention. So much to do, in such a hurry. There isn't enough time to fit everything in. After starting a fire, I bundle up, go outside, and split wood for the evening. Then I start the car so it has time to warm up, unplug it, and wind up the cord—so it won't get run over, or buried by snow. Inside, I gather my books in one bag, my gym clothes in another bag, and my lunch in yet another bag. Finally, I lock the door to the cabin, give the dog a biscuit in her dog house, kiss her on the head, get in the car and drive away. I'm looking for a way to slow down.

Some mornings, I sit on my meditation bench and light a tall candle. The flame illuminates a small space in the winter morning's darkness. I sit in the circle of light, friend to the darkness which asks nothing of me, in front of the miniature hardwood chest that has been my meditation altar for twelve years.

The first time I meditated, I was nineteen, in college. Fred, my boyfriend who practiced Zen, taught me how. "Light a candle and place it between yourself and a mirror," he said. "Sit in front of the mirror for a while, and look into the flame."
"Which flame should I look into?" I asked him. "The real flame or its image in the mirror?"

"It doesn't matter. Either one. You can switch off if you feel like it."

"How long should I sit there?"

"It doesn't matter. As long as you want to."

"What's the mirror for?"

"When you're ready to stop your sitting meditation, look up at your image."

I was nervous the first night I meditated, in my dorm room, alone. As I set up the mirror and candle on my bed, I wondered how it would go. If I became anxious, there'd be no one there to comfort or help me. I lit the candle, went over to the wall, flicked off the light switch, and returned to the bed to sit in front of the mirror. Enveloped in darkness, I stared at the flame, and then its image. I let my attention wander back and forth too.

As the first thoughts ran through my mind, I felt self-conscious: Nothing's happening. . . . I wonder what's supposed to happen. . . . How will I know when it's time to stop? But, also, I breathed. The flame wavered, and then stood without moving. It glowed; I grew calm. Am I ready to stop now? I wondered. No, I answered myself, not yet. This feels good. After five to ten minutes, an impulse told me to stop. I wasn't used to sitting in such a manner; my mind would not stay focused for long.

I looked up at my image in the mirror and saw my eyes. They looked back at me calm, unafraid.

That deep, calm center was part of me, and I would never totally lose it again. I meditated often through that year. When my parents divorced and Fred left me, meditation helped me find a self that went deeper than anxiety, deeper than fear.
I resolve to build the fire more slowly. Crumpling a piece of newspaper, I place it gently in the wood stove and take a deep breath. I pick up another piece and feel its chalky smoothness, its stiff, dry texture, the way it crackles in my hands. Peering into the stove, I crumple the third piece. This one will fit nicely to the right of the others.

In my twenties, an empty room in my house served as meditation chamber; it contained no furniture, no paintings on the walls, just a few pillows to sit on and a candle to light. I learned during that time to sit for twenty minutes, half an hour, sometimes more, as my body told me to stay there. The desire to sit grew from inside me. I did not say, "I'm going to sit now for twenty minutes." I followed my intuition. And it told me to keep meditating.

I was drawn to meditation because of the deep relaxation it provided. My empty room was quiet, providing little outside stimulation, so I could rest in a place deep inside. The outer world can be full of distractions.

I crumple the last few sheets of newspaper and place them a bit less deliberately in the wood stove. It's hard to maintain such a high degree of slowness—putting sheet after sheet of newspaper slowly into the wood stove brings boredom, impatience. But over and over again I bring myself back to moving slowly. I want to see each intention arise.

It's in that moment that I can choose how to act.

It is not that I stop thinking, when I meditate. I think about teaching and writing and sleeping; about caring for my dog, getting along with my husband, whether I need to do laundry. I think about my parents' getting older, how hard it will be to cope from 5,000
miles away with their sickness and dying. I think about my sisters and how much I miss them.

I think about the life and death that goes on outside my small circle of light, but still I am alone, enclosed. My thoughts, like images in a mirror, are not actually the things they represent. I am not teaching, sleeping, or doing laundry as I sit in the candlelight. I am merely thinking about these active parts of life while I sit.

One thought arises. Then another. I watch them pass, one by one. The stream of thought is not everything I once thought it was. There is always space around each individual thought, even when my mind is running full tilt. It takes attention to see it, but it is certainly there.

I want to become aware of the space because the thoughts then seem less domineering, the stream less overpowering, and there is so much more to life than I realized before. At the meditation bench, I sit with eyes closed and take in air through my nose, my chest expanding. I let in as much air as I can without forcing my chest to expand any further than it wants to. There is a point—when the air has to pass through the heart cavity—where I have to consciously open the channel to let it flow through. This is a different kind of breathing from the unconscious breathing I usually do. It has to go deeper; the chest has to expand more; even the diaphragm expands to make room. I watch for the pause, so subtle, that comes as the breath turns around.

I listen to the breath as it makes its way out of my body. At first, I regulate its pace, establishing a slower rhythm. Eventually, it cycles again on its own, like waves breaking against a shoreline. I try not to hold on.

*Quiet the mind,* I tell myself. *But that's just a thought,* I notice. *You don't have to quiet the mind,* says the next thought. I've been taught to watch them arise, to note them. *Pay attention to the breath.* Another thought.
To experience the space in between the thoughts is calming in the long run, but can be unsettling at first. Like most people, I'm used to rushing from one activity to another with little time to pause in between. Learning to sit quietly takes practice.

When I lose concentration, I take a deep breath and look at the candle. The flame helps me re-focus, to find the single-mindedness I seek. The hot center holds stable. I breathe for a while, eyes open, then close them, ready again to stay centered inside myself.

Before I know it, I'm watching thoughts come through again.

I'm doing it.

You're thinking.

That too is a thought.

I watch the candle, listen to the dog snoring quietly at my side. I've been taught to pay attention while sitting to the sights, sounds and smells, to the bodily sensations, and to note all these too. There's the window. . . . It's dark outside. . . . My neck is sore. . . . All are just thoughts, each a piece of debris on the ocean.

For a moment, all is quiet. Then, I begin thinking again.

I'm not having any thoughts.

That's a thought.

. . .

I feel more peaceful.

That, too, is a thought.

. . .

At a meditation retreat in the hills outside of town, we fix and eat our meals without speaking, refrain from making eye contact with one another, live within ourselves. From
dawn until dark, we sit or we walk, our meditations uninterrupted. The monotony can be excruciating; meals become something to look forward to so we can fix our attention on something outside of the thoughts moving through us. But such solitude, and the quiet it brings, is exactly what I've longed for, an antidote to always having so much to do.

In walking meditation, I move as slowly as I can, just to see what will happen, one part of the body moving at a time. One thigh moves slightly forward. A knee unfolds. A shin parts the air gently. I move so slowly that a person might think I'm not moving, if he doesn't watch closely, with care. I do this so I can watch my life inch forward, like a trickle melting from a piece of ice in a gently-sloping stream bed. When I move like this, I become aware of how each action is preceded by an intention. Such heightened awareness enables me to choose not just how to act, but also whether to act, which improves my self-control.

During one meditation period, I walk outside, taking an hour to walk to the end of the driveway and back. I become distracted, finding too much to contend with beyond my body's intentions: birds, clouds, sky, squirrels, soil, and wind in the branches. Walking meditation in the out-of-doors is a glorious pursuit, making me aware of how much life is there. But I've so rarely had the luxury of the isolation available only inside the walled and ceilinged retreat. Complete freedom from outside distractions gives me a heightened awareness like the cool blue heart of a flame. So when the next opportunity for walking meditation comes, I remain inside. Though all that outdoor activity is beautiful, in my quiet state it seems like a frenzy and interferes with my internal awareness. Maybe someday, when I have mastered indoor meditation more fully, I will learn how to achieve such heightened states beyond the meditation hall.
It is time to place the kindling into the stove. I pick up the first piece, gently, so I won't get a splinter like I do when I rush, and lay it on top of the newspaper. I look at its angle, check its balance. It will do. I pick a second piece of kindling from the box, one that's similar in size, big enough to support the whole structure but not too big to let air circulate. I place it at just the right distance from the first one so that the two will support three more layers of kindling. A strong foundation.

The sun comes up as I sit here. The frost-covered branches of a willow tree outside the window turn orange in the dawn's burning glow. Watching them distracts me from the quiet which I find between my thoughts.

I look at the candle and sigh. It's getting late. *Should I leave for work?*

*No, not yet... You'll just start rushing around again.*

*Try to stay calm.*

The waves of breath cycle through me, washing away the urge to become busy again.

*I can't build this fire slowly, I need to hurry, I was supposed to be working by now...* I come out of these thoughts to find the kindling pile askew. *Slow down, Dana.* Seems I'd put four more pieces on while I wasn't paying attention, and now the pile's fallen over. I'll have to start again.

Frustrated with myself, I pull the wood from the stove.

I remember the time I told a friend how frustrated I get when I realize I've been acting without consciousness. "I wake up and realize I've just been doing things, not watching or paying attention. I get so mad at myself," I told him.

"That's interesting," he said, smiling.
"What?"

"That you get mad at yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"When I come out of not paying attention, I just feel glad to be conscious again."

Consciousness is a gift. So I place the sticks, one by one, carefully each in its place—maybe not as carefully as I did at the beginning, but more carefully than while I was paying no attention at all.

Though I've learned the importance of having a separate room for meditation, I've rarely had such a room to put aside for this practice. The cabin where I live with my husband doesn't even have a room where I can shut the door to be alone. But I've always had my altar, the small wood chest where just a candle sits, and a place in front of it to put my meditation bench, dedicated only to silence and stillness. The single flame reminds me to remain aware, to watch life as it waxes and wanes.

I will not be lured away from this bench today, but will wait instead to see what knowledge will greet me in stillness.

*Keep breathing.*

....

....

*I think I'm awake now.*

....

....

....

I sit a few moments longer, taking in the soothing darkness, then bow to the candle before gently blowing it out.
Winter brings the gift of darkness. The enclosure I feel in a wood-paneled cabin where all light and warmth come from fire brings me a deep sense of security. Both fire and this sense of security are elemental, closely linked to the source of creation.

I put a match to the paper in the wood stove, close the door all but an inch, and wait for the fire to catch. It doesn't matter if I'm late getting somewhere every now and then. Someday I might even get used to getting less done in a day. A few more silent moments would be their own form of achievement.
Plowing the Driveway

My hand-held scoop cuts across our driveway, which winds through a birch forest, the blade making its way through the dry, airy snow. As I head for one side of the driveway, just the right amount of snow accumulates in the scoop. I tilt it away from me, up over the edge, the snow falling into the ditch. Next, I drag the scoop back up the hill and start again.

I've been learning how to use my new tool this morning, and by now, after an hour's work, I've established a rhythm. Small accomplishments like being able to take time to shovel the driveway mean more to me than ever before.

Just weeks before Paul and I got married, I suffered through an episode of physical and mental exhaustion. The mostly vegetarian diet I'd been living on hadn't sustained me. Lacking the nutrients it needed to rebuild itself, my nervous system broke down until I fell with a thud.

At first, it was only physical and minor mental exhaustion. Though I couldn't do as much heavy work around the house as I was used to and my neurotic habits flared, life remained mostly unchanged.

But what followed was enough to scare anyone. I became almost unable to function, unable to love.

One February, as the length of the days and the amount of sunlight grew at a dazzling pace, the normal boundaries separating me from the natural world lost their distinctness. For six weeks, I saw images of a friend on the distant high reaches of mountains, and inside of hawks and snowstorms. I couldn't tell the difference between my self and this person whom I barely knew. While awake I dreamed about trails that took a new path
every day through the tundra, gyroscopes spinning until they lost their delicate balance, faeries claiming my life for their rituals deep in the woods. I felt a close relationship to the snow that evaporated off ridge tops.

The world vibrated, alive with metaphor. When I wrote, I felt that something like God spoke through me. Mania in its early stages brings artistic inspiration.

But sleep does not come easily in a life filled with motion. Intoxication soon gave way to anxiety and then depression, as my euphoria drained me. One morning in April, I awoke frightened and looked out the window. Outside, the light was sharp, mud coated the street. The snow was breaking up, and anxiety splintered off in every direction. I was exhausted.

Major depression follows mania and makes every moment interminable, the future unimaginable. It makes one’s old world look lifeless and intolerable. To get through such a time, one has to continue living, though it feels like beating one's head against a wall, without hope or faith that the wall will come down. According to my Buddhist teachers, there can be meaning in beating one's head against this hardness, if only because it takes us to the end of old means of coping that are no longer valid. The Buddhists say there is no for our deepest hopelessness, except perhaps compassion. Sometimes we continue because it's the only thing left we can do.

Near the end of my illness, almost a year later, a snowstorm swept in, eighteen inches. The spruce boughs were over-laden with the weight of the snow. At three o’clock one morning, I left my bed and let the dog out, sat by the fire. Unable to sleep, I needed to commune with what was left of the storm.

Maya scratched at the door, and as I went to open it for her, I saw moonlight on the wall. It touched my hand and I didn't know how much more I could take. Everything
seemed to get under my translucent skin. The wheels of change turned over almost physically inside me. Tears passed through like showers, the weather blowing through me like a storm.

I'd felt, while I was sick, like a current was swelling below me, taking me too quickly, moving out towards the sea. I'd tried to slow the process through deep breathing and quiet movement, but this practice hadn't always worked to slow the tempo down. Being in touch with all that powerful, sweeping motion was intoxicating sometimes. But maintaining a solid center against the force of so much flow was almost impossible, especially when a powerful storm such as this one swept through.

In winter, when a hot bath at home would have warmed my cold-weary muscles, I began to wonder whether I wanted to keep living without running water. Dirty dishes piled up by the sink until we finally heated the water to wash them; the water jugs were heavy to carry; sharp strands of frost laced the cold outhouse seat. In the dim light of winter, our one-room cabin looked dingy. With its stained carpet, and dirty slop buckets under the sink, the cabin sometimes felt like a hovel. So little light came through the tiny windows tucked in under the eaves.

Coping with mental illness took all my energy, which in turn made me almost unable to take care of myself. Paul worked hard to see me through. While I was lost inside my mind, he did the dishes, balanced the checkbook, split the wood.

I wanted very little to do with him. He existed in a mundane realm that I could no longer relate to, and I was busy keeping my self in one piece.

He had no way to know whether I'd ever return. At first, I wasn't sure whether I wanted to; later, I wasn't sure if I knew how. But, somehow, in spite of my doubts, I
gave him enough inklings, enough threads to hang on to. I still am thankful every day for the way he held on—for his generosity of spirit, his compassion and trust.

When we bought our own house, we chose one that has running water. Twelve years had gone by since I moved to Fairbanks, and I couldn't do as much physical work as I had in the past. Maya, too, was getting older; she took medication for her ailments and was unable to run like she used to.

Getting older takes a different kind of courage than facing off with bears and water, as I come to terms with different fears. I don't need to live without running water to understand sacrifice; my body teaches me everything I need to know now about living with limitation, facing my fear.

Our new house doesn't have the rustic charm the cabins did. Instead of spruce paneling and log walls, white plaster on the walls surrounds our daily life. But living here makes winter easier. We don't have to haul water, and we take a bath when we want to. Our southern exposure brings us whatever warmth and light there is to be had.

The scoop glides almost effortlessly as I learn the feel of our new driveway. The sky is bright, the birch trees white and tall. The air smells wet and sweet, like snow. I laugh at myself for enjoying such rote labor, and wonder if I'll enjoy it when the novelty wears off—during January for instance, when another snow storm forces me outside to walk up and down the driveway for three hours, pushing and dragging the scoop. But the novelty has worn off before, and I always come back to a life close to nature. I'll be out in the driveway for each winter snow.
Being Brave

Over three hundred miles from the ocean, Paul and I stand in the driveway, surrounded by dry bags and gear. All of it needs to fit into the kayak—a month's worth of food, sleeping bags, tent, tarps, etc.—and it's hard to believe that it will. I've never spent a whole month on the water, and the pile of gear looks larger than the boat.

We're looking for a life that isn't one of "quiet desperation," and though I'm not sure what awaits us on the water, I know it's not that. Paul takes charge of packing up the kayak. Usually, it takes him two or three tries before he fits everything in. Today, all we'll need for a month fits in on the very first try.

"Let's get out of here," Paul says, a few days later at the boat dock in Whittier. A motorboat at the dock where we're launching is putting out fumes.

"How long you going out?" asks a tourist.

"A month," we both answer.

"You're brave."

Whenever someone says that, I worry about facing bear country, rough water. Four years have passed since the last time I kayaked. The boat sat idle while my illness kept me at home. I can't quite remember what I'm getting into, but I know it will be tough out there sometimes, that there'll be times when I'll wish I were home.

After twelve miles of paddling, the campsite we'd hoped for is taken, and there is little flat ground to be found. We settle for a small mound of rock and trees with a beach only about eight feet in length. Setting up camp, cooking dinner, hanging food—it seems like all we ever do out here is work. I worry about how worn out I feel, and imagine being out here two or three weeks into the trip, feeling exhausted and wishing for home. On
prior trips I've struggled with anxiety, and, unknowingly, with sleep-deprivation and malnutrition. I didn't know at the time that my health was failing, which made it hard to live up to the challenge.

Being out here can put me in touch with strengths I haven't accessed in the years that have gone by since those trips. But I am going to have to fight for those strengths, and I fear the moments when I will meet my limitations.

A storm passes through while we are on Culross Island, rattling the tent fly, the grasses and tarps, but everything holds. In the kitchen we've set up, we pull the tarp down low against the rain and drink hot tea in the small dry space left us. Most of the day, we sleep and read in the tent.

When the weather calms, the animals resurface—a great blue heron stalking fish in the intertidal, a family of mergansers, and a harbor seal in the bay to the east. New waterfalls spill from the muskeg. The water in the bay ripples gently, a light drizzle placing drops on its surface. The tide is low, and we can see the narrow undersides of the islands, rocky pedestals holding the forest at bay from the water's smooth surface. Currents move along in the passage.

Settling in to sleep, I look forward to returning to the kayak tomorrow—creating a rhythm, cutting through waves, feeling strong. One moves along with the weather here, and we are more aligned with it now that we've been here through some of its phases. On our last trip, we worked hard to get through some fairly big water. Tomorrow may be such a day, and I rest up, in hopes that I will be up to the challenge.

A mother bear and her cub have left tracks in the sand near our intended tent site on Crafton Island. Though we have traveled twelve miles already, we decide to move on.
The water is glassy, and we head out into Knight Island Passage. Sunlight shines diffusely through a stable cloud cover, and the water, opaque and metallic, is like an old bottle, rippling without giving up its curves. When the wind is quiet, mountains and muskeg cast shapes and colors into the mirror of water—green forests, white snow fields, dark mountain faces.

We plan to roughly circumnavigate the lower end of this passage, a wide body of water where many fetches stretch out. Our plan is to head down through Dangerous Passage, cross Icy Bay, and dip south to catch a glimpse of the Gulf of Alaska before turning north to kayak towards home up the western coast of Knight Island. Our path will make a wide circle around lower Knight Island Passage, where the wildlife thrives.

Having already come twenty miles, cramped in the boat for ten hours, we cannot find a site for two more. But there is no camping in sight against the bay's smooth circumference. The scenery elevates our spirit and takes our minds off our discomfort. The walls of Granite Bay are golden and white in the late evening sunshine. Water laps gently at the edge of the land, eddying quietly into the coves.

Kittiwakes dive bomb us as we paddle past their territory to unload our kayak. Oyster catchers whistle when our boat approaches the mound where they are raising their young. The water in the cove where we hope to camp is choppy, and the rocks are jagged where we land on the beach. To unload at such a site is tricky. We unload the boat in sections, first the bow, then mid-ship, then the stern. We pull each section out of the water as it empties.

Though surrounded on two sides by alders and ferns, we are camped largely in sea grass, on a narrow isthmus embraced by two inlets. Waiting to be sure the tide won't come through the tent, I can't sleep. Around two a.m., the water rises so close to the tent
that I have to look outside to understand the noise it is making. It fills a narrow funnel in the rocks to our left.

The rain pelting the tarp sounds like voices, proclaiming our newness to this place, our exposure with only tarp and tent to protect us. The wind rustles in the grass so that we have to listen, until we know it's not bears.

It takes time to get used to each new camp, to become finally so tired that I fall asleep in spite of my apprehensiveness, and by morning I always feel more at ease. We domesticate each camp a little bit with our presence, and we master each new situation with time.

Animals live everywhere. Salmon jumped the whole way here from Culross Island, flashing silver in the sunlight, squirming jumps like they're trying to get out of their skins. A fish jumped into the air in front of the boat, and an eagle swooped down in hunt, its legs and talons extended. A humpback whale surfaced forty feet away from us this morning. And heading out towards Icy Bay, we saw a bear cub on a rock under an alder tree by the water. He skitted into the forest as we stared.

We have settled into the rhythms of taking care of ourselves in this climate. Constantly, we work at survival—cooking, setting up tarps, tightening them down, sizing up bear scat, and making sure we get enough hot food and drinks. It is a lot of work, but it is satisfying and simple. We laugh at ourselves for wanting to live this way, deprived of all but the most basic necessities. Setting up the tarps is like a puzzle to solve, and it's fun.

Three-foot seas, our first waves of the trip, and a head wind greet us around Icy Point, but, able to make headway, we don't turn around. Instead, we check in with each other at
every outcropping of the coast, and decide to keep going. We want to travel far and see as much as we can of the country.

Looking for a campsite, we land where the waves roll in across an extended shallow beach. "Uh oh," says Paul. "Looks like the rudder is broken. I think the screws are sheered off." The plastic support has come loose from the screws which usually hold it in place.

We line the boat across the algae-filled stream that filters out into the shallows, but quickly assess that the walk to any potential campsites is too long and wet. Piles of fresh bear scat surround the stream's wide, flat mouth.

The tide ebbs quickly. Worried that the boat will get stuck in the shallows, Paul tries to fix the rudder so that we can move on. Shivering with the cold of being out from under my spray skirt, I look around at the wild salt marsh, the forest harboring bears all around us, the three-foot chop on the sea.

The forest we’ve been paddling by looks dark, dense, and steep—beautiful but foreboding. Frightened to venture there, I have shirked from the challenge, leaving it to the bears that I fear. There is so much of this forest, covering the coastal mountains, more than I know what to do with, stretching between our boat and our home.

Paul climbs headfirst into the boat while I stand there. "I'm stuck," he says as he tries to resurface. In a contorted twist of his hips, he squirms his way out of the cockpit.

"I've got a job for you," he tells me. Thankful for something to do, I hold the screws, which he's found inside the boat, in their places. Paul, upside down in the cockpit, affixes the plastic support. I am quite relieved when we are able to move on.
Out in the bay, the waves are one to two feet with small white caps, a milky green color. Pieces of ice stick up like fins from the water. We don't have to paddle very hard, and we can rest when we want to. The Sargent Ice Field rises to the west, and we are on a long journey, making our way to the southern islands which we've wanted to see. A clear evening like this makes us want to keep traveling, especially after we've been cooped up a few days in a storm. With twenty miles on the water behind us this evening the adrenaline flows.

The second beach we come to has fresh bear tracks and bear scat, so we move on to another. The third beach has bear scat, too, but we have to make camp. Darkness is settling in for the night. Tying the ropes for the tarp, I notice I am no longer frightened. Perhaps it's the adrenaline moving through me, or the feeling of satisfaction that comes from making safe crossings. But I think, more so, that it is the power of necessity, and I fall right to sleep in spite of the risks.

There is no doubt we are in real bear country now, old growth forest. The next morning, we see a black bear on the next beach we pass in the kayak, not a mile from our campsite. No cub this time, but a big one, and our presence doesn't quite scare him away.

In national parks, bears may become tolerant, accustomed to people. But we are not in an area highly traveled by people. It is mainly wild black bears who live in remote areas where they have little association with humans, who occasionally try to kill and eat a human being.

Such encounters are extremely rare, but I can't get my mind off the thought of bear teeth tearing my arms off, big jaws crunching the bones that make up my skull. At our next campsite, Point Countess, I imagine being wakened from sleep, dragged by a bear from the tent. At one camp, the rain falls so heavily on the tarp that we think
raindrops are footsteps. At another, the surf rips at two beaches in asymphonious patterns. Breaking waves become growls, claws ripping at flesh. We live in an almost constant state of alertness.

Sometimes, the alertness feels good. We feel our aliveness, a heightened sense which comes with living on edge. But a month is in some ways a long time on the water. The sensation grows tiresome when I just want to forget about bears for a while, not to worry, not to feel this close to the knowledge of death. In the forest and amidst all this eating, one knows one is next. The weeks which stretch out ahead then seem filled with interminable moments, each one filled with awareness of the hazards of living as flesh.

Everyone is eating—humpbacks filtering krill, eagles diving for salmon, kittiwakes and murres eating herring and candlefish, seals mouthing rockfish and cod. Bears claw at young skunk cabbage and berries. Sea otters smash mussels. Even anemones are predators, preying with their stinging tentacles. In order to eat, they must kill.

The ocean is gunmetal. Thick clouds obscure the tops of the mountains. Murky with debris, the waves push against a fat roll of seaweed—pounding, insistent. Rain pours down in sheets.

Fortunately, Paul loves to joke and he helps me forget. He sets traps for me when I try to reach across him in the tent to grab a tide book or head lamp. This is the most relaxed time we've had together since my illness, and when the storms come, we read and sleep and make love.

Paul puts three eagle feathers in the tall Sitka spruce overlooking our campsite, and I find them strangely comforting, protective. In the forest, thick bark twists like sculpted statuary. The ferns and devil's club fronds stay dry under the canopy. The forest is filled with the lingering peace of tall trees. Sleep comes in like a cloud drifting
over the mountains. Built of cold weather and the patter of raindrops, it takes over like an encasement—final, complete.

We awaken to an orange glow, and above that the blue sky, the water lapping in short bursts, like breaths, on the shore. I don't think I've ever felt quite so rested.

Everything is light—the glow in the low-lying mist burning off under the sun at five in the morning, the shadow of an afternoon cloud on a snow field, the silhouette of a kittiwake, light glinting on the backs of its wings. A fish jumps from the sea like a moment—a glint, then a splash and it's gone.

A hermit crab scuttles away while I am washing, and I am amazed at how much life is in the intertidal—mussels, limpets, periwinkles, barnacles, chitons, anemones, star fish. We see baby mergansers riding their mother's back at Point Countess. Humpback whales cruise by in a pageant. The seals seem the most shy, but also the most curious. We watch an eagle eat a pink salmon, and a young sea lion leads us down our next passage. This world is full of abundance, with respect to more than its dangers.

We cross Prince of Wales Passage in three foot waves, admiring the steep gulches and watercourses that come down from the heights. Porpoises circle the boat, breaking the water's surface with their sleek rounded backs. We catch our first sight of the open ocean through the southern end of the passage—two headlands, beyond them an expanse of stratus and cumulus, and above those, blue sky.

Swells lift the boat as we round Evans Island. I've never been on the ocean in a kayak, and so I wonder what we are getting into. Buoyant and gentle, the ocean meets us like a caress and breaks on the headlands in what seems like slow motion. Time is suspended as we are held fast at the top of each incoming swell.
A large family of sea otters swimming amidst the kelp in the sea swells swim away as we paddle towards them. Humpback whales shoot water from their spouts out towards Cape Puget. Horned puffins zip like little helicopters just a few feet over the water. More animal life exists here than we've seen further inland.

And yet, for the first night in over a week we find a beach with no bear scat, just deer tracks. We walk hand in hand as the sun sets over the water, enjoying the southernmost point on our journey, a place very quiet, and peaceful, and wild. I think back on all the times I've struggled with whether to stay in Alaska, and I'm thankful I did.

On the way home we cross Knight Island Passage as we did Icy Bay, when it's already late in the evening. Having looked unsuccessfully for a campsite from Bishop Rock to Evans Point, we've run out of options. Stiff chop meets us as we intercept the northern end of Prince of Wales Passage.

"You want to go for the crossing?" I ask Paul.

"Maybe..."

It's the biggest crossing of the trip, four miles, and the most open expanse of water I've ever taken on in a crossing, but the only alternative is to paddle south into two foot waves with their tops pushed over, which isn't appealing.

"We might as well go for it," I tell him, though it's eight o'clock and we haven't had dinner. We each eat a thick slice of cheese on a pilot bread cracker before we set off again from the shore.

Out in the passage, waves push us from behind towards our next destination, Squire Island. The whales which have been with us since Cape Puget lead the way. A wide arc of mountains stretches out to our left—Point Countess, Icy Bay and Jackpot—all the places we've come from in the weeks we have traveled.
The waves get bigger, two to three feet, and few white caps appear. We still can't see the rocks under the opposite shore, a sign of how far we have yet to travel.

"I think it's okay, don't you?" I ask Paul unsurely.

"I think so," he answers. "I didn't expect the water to be this rough." Memories of the time he got caught out in big waves behind the nearby Pleides Islands are in both of our minds.

We paddle harder. "It doesn't look like the waves are going to get bigger," I say, like a question.

"You never know," he responds. "It's good to have a healthy respect for the water."

How can I adequately convey the crossing, Icy Bay and Knight Island Passage broad and expansive, the mountains blue in the eight o'clock summer light? Knight Island Passage stretches fifteen miles before us to the north and fifteen miles to the east. Another body of water stretches ten miles to the west, past the lower end of Dangerous Passage to the ice fields and glaciers. Behind us, Montague Strait comes in from the Gulf of Alaska. Waves push us, three pairs of humpback whales lead us, and once again we ride the edge where safety and exhilaration can turn so quickly to danger.

But this time, something's different. I know we are at risk, but, seasoned paddlers, we have years of experience at making calls on the weather. And though I'm scared, I trust my judgment in a way that I have never done so before.

It's as if I'm at the hub of a wheel I've been seeking. Circling this place where so many bodies of water come together for two weeks now, exploring the crevices at the ends of its spokes, we've come to its center. Ice fields gleam.

We reach Squire Island, the tiredness in our backs and our shoulders the only discomfort. Even that discomfort is slight—the following seas have done a lot of our
work. Relieved and very tired, we find a snug spot of ground just under a protective embankment, amidst spruce and alder, a soft place to sleep. And as we eat our supper under the darkening sky, a mother otter dives to nourish herself while the baby she is nursing sleeps soundly at the surface. She comes up frequently, to make sure her little one is protected.

We paddle in the rain even when we don't want to, to get home before we run out of food. Hungry, and low on rations, we catch salmon and smoke it in driftwood and alder, while otters dive for shellfish in the intertidal.

We try to leave for home on two occasions, but five-foot waves—dicey black water capped with froth—hold us back. But only once do we feel in danger. We've learned to weigh more carefully when it's time to turn back. Finally, on the third try, we make it to a point further north on Knight Island, but as we set out to make the big crossing to Point Nowell, a squall comes driving in from nowhere and pushes us back. In pouring rain, we make camp, the storm offering one last lesson in humility before we go home.

With all that goes on in the world today, I don't know if I can define recreational wilderness travel as bravery, but perhaps the tourist we saw as we were embarking was right when he said that we are brave. Paul too says, "You come out here, you take risks. You do everything you can to keep yourself safe. But there are bears, there are storms." It worries me sometimes how easily bravery can become stupidity's neighbor. But how else can I come to know myself, to find such deep satisfaction, if I do not put myself in the face of such tests? I've been fortunate to be able to create these tests for myself instead of facing far more grave dangers.
On the last leg of the trip, we come out of Culross Passage into Port Wells in the sunshine, facing an expanse of water that lies flat and calm. We steer the boat for Decision Point and paddle the six-mile crossing with a gentle rhythm, taking our time. We don't want the trip to end. We fear going back to something more hectic, more desperate. Resolving to bring the peace we've found out here back to the city, all we really know is that we hope to return.

Back home, I'll arrange the eagle feathers in rocks from the beach on Elrington Island. Maybe they'll protect us from something we didn't see coming, maybe something we unconsciously conjured by not being brave, some kind of dark water, a storm.
On Chena Dome

Yellow-green leaves on the hillside below shake like paper. The valley is quiet; only the sound of wind sweeps its reaches. The light is broad and high, like that of an endless summer afternoon. Its rays are ribbons from one mountaintop to the other along the range of hills that surrounds us. They play among clouds with dusky blue undersides.

My husband Paul and I overlook a sun-filled valley of small willow and tall-standing trees. We have been here before; we come to this spot only one mile from the trailhead every autumn to pick berries. But our intention this Friday evening is different: we hope to hike in a three-day weekend the entire twenty-nine mile loop trail that stretches out past this spot.

Twenty-nine miles in three days is a strenuous goal for someone of my stature. While I am strong, I am only 5'2" and short-legged. But the adventure seems a reasonable challenge, even with its ascent of the 4,421 foot high Chena Dome, after which the trail is named.

Eager to get to the high country, we take a quick drink from our canteens and move on. We are hungry for the challenge. Though both of us have tried before, neither one has ever completed the twenty-nine mile trail, most of which is up above treeline.

As I climb the first hillside, I listen to the methodical thump of my boots on the soil. The sound has a timeless quality, which takes place outside of space, too, in a way. It is calming, this ever-present rhythm of hiking, the repetition of boots on ground, changing as our pace picks up and slackens, but always there.

Fatigue sets in as the trail rises sharply over the next few miles through blueberries, cranberries, and willow. The fourth mile, which will take us past the brush and onto the flat tundra ridge top, our destination for the night, rises 1,000 feet in one mile. I am not
sure whether I can make it up this last mile of trail, which we hope to put behind us tonight. The first time I tried to climb it this summer, I became dizzy halfway up the sharp rise and we had to go home. We turned around once for Paul, too, this summer, on Memorial Day weekend, when he felt faint. His illness turned out to be chicken pox.

But tonight we make it up this first sharp rise in the trail, and later, tent pitched and dinner cooking, I admire the way the light angles low, cutting shadows in the hills. The light is so low-angled it can't even shine over plants only inches tall, and the treeless ridge top looks like a moonscape, pocked with dark holes where the sun can't penetrate.

Eating our first meal in the open air, we watch the sun disappear beyond the horizon. The moon rises in a cloak of silver clouds—a full harvest moon, round and glowing orange. There is no need for speech, and our meal tastes better than it would have indoors.

Saturday morning, the sun comes up warm and golden. The hills stretch and yawn. A large shadow from a nearby ridge darkens the eastern face of Chena Dome, which we'll be climbing later in the day. All is quiet, windless. I find the range of rolling hilltops sensuous: one rounded hillside follows the next, their crevices filled with shadows. Paul says he thinks of these crevices as "the Interior," and I think upon this idea for a while.

The Interior generally refers to this whole region, the inland part of Alaska, but Paul means something different. He's talking about the valleys below, the dense forest and willow-shrubbed bog. To Paul, the valleys are interior because it is not easy to probe into their reaches. To do so, one has to bushwhack through wetlands and thick brush reaching over one's head. They remain less accessible than the treeless ridges where we will be traveling.
For me, the idea of the interior is complicated. While some people might find their personal interiors difficult to probe into, I have spent a lot of time exploring my own. Emotional instability has forced me to ask some tough questions about what I might be doing to create turmoil. I've had to learn to blaze a new trail.

Though it's full of brush and I've acquired many scrapes and bruises while I roamed there, my interior has been mostly a safe place—protected, I suppose, by my ability to hide it from others. Sensitive to the world around me, I've hidden inside myself at times. Hiking allows me to expose myself to the outside, to face more directly my fear of the world, especially on these high tundra ridge tops. While I am glad for the protection offered by valleys, I need right now to explore this ridge top world, to see what I can learn here. Above tree line, I've found a place of wide daylight, golden hillsides, wandering destinations. I've found the meaning of ascent, where crests which at first seemed so high become inconsequential, left far behind and below as I press on.

As I thump along in the sunshine towards Chena Dome, full backpack shouldered, I watch the autumn colors going by underneath my feet. Maroon and brown and green reign here—not the bright greens of a deciduous canopy but the subtler colors of mosses and lichens. Brown willow scrub twines its way through our footsteps, and the grasses have gone dry. The trail winds along the ridge top, which rises and falls a few hundred feet here, a few hundred there. Jagged granite rocks lay scattered in hilltop gullies and in chutes which wind down the mountainsides. Green and black lichens peel from the granite. There is white, triangular marble here, too, spotted with lichens. The colors are subtle, and like the lichens growing on the rocks, the beauty of this landscape attaches itself most fully to the people who take time to know it.
A plant the color of blood grows in mounds, with tiny leaves like currants knit tightly. "What do you think it is?" I ask Paul, but he doesn't know. Generally, Paul is more of a naturalist than I am; I rely on him to teach me the names of things and about how they live. I have always focused more on the interior—the psychological and spiritual, the abstract and intellectual—but my hunger for understanding of concrete ecology has grown stronger the more time I've spent with the land. Paul wonders if the plants are cranberries, but they look different from any cranberries I've seen, more compacted. He moves on, not all that concerned, but I pay careful attention to the plant for the rest of the day.

Tired but not totally winded, later in the day we reach the highest point on our climb, the flat plateau on top of Chena Dome. The quiet of this region and its lack of people are magnified when we reach the highest point, where we can see more of the country than ever before.

Ridges and valleys fill the view far into the distance. I've always been struck by how this land takes its time in unfolding. I want to live in that kind of time and space, in a place where people do not have the power to hurt me, where I don't need to put up walls between the inner and outer because there's nothing harmful outside to come in.

My eyes linger on the view, but, contrary to our hopes and expectations, we cannot stay long. In the past we have lounged on this high point, basked in the quiet sunshine one finds here, but today a late afternoon wind has come up. Though we see no threatening clouds, no sign besides the wind of potential bad weather, we know that sometimes it is wise to seek shelter from exposed places, no matter how beautiful we find them.
Though there are no people here who can hurt us, other forces reside here, forces greater than man. In wintertime, these treeless expanses become barren, ferocious and windswept. Except for a lone fox here and there, what little life remains in the region in winter goes to sleep or finds a place to hide in the valleys. We can stay here only while the weather allows us.

Leaving the summit, the trail doesn't offer much shelter. It follows a 4,000-foot ridge for another six miles before descending. In sub-Arctic country like this, 4,000 feet is exposed. The weather is changeable, and wind always holds the spell of winter. If the weather were to get really bad, we could leave the trail and descend any time, to bushwhack down into the valley, where there's a trail to the road, or return to the ridge once the weather improved. But we want to stay in the high country as long as we can, to complete the whole trail once and for all.

I look for solace in a place this far from the din and rush of civilization, in the same way as I tend to retreat from people into my mind. But a mile past the dome, the wind gusts at twenty miles per hour. An ominous cloud moving towards us casts shadows, and before long it casts hail. I think about our exposure. The wind has made me cold and it shows no sign of stopping.

Would I rather be tucked away in some safe valley? Not exactly. Risking exposure in the physical world can teach me how to survive here. In the same way, risking exposure of my inner world can teach me how to come out of hiding. But the storm continues, and we rush into our rain gear, slinking from the icy assault. The hail stops before we get totally soaked, but dramatic clouds and twenty mile per hour wind accompany us further. We seek set up camp shortly, seeking what little refuge we can find on the leeward side of the ridge.
Forgetting for the moment my desire to be here, I rush through supper dreaming only of my sleeping bag's warmth. There are times, on the ridge top, when my fortitude runs out, and, depleted, I can only cave in. Though the hot food begins to answer the need in my stomach, only sleep will bring the final rest that I need. When I do finally get to the tent after a meal that seems to take forever, the wind beats loudly on the tent flaps, and I wonder whether we'll sleep at all.

Miraculously, we do sleep well. The strenuous hiking has tired us out. I wake only once in the night, my bladder full from going to bed so quickly after I had eaten and drank. Rested, I remember why I come out here. If I want to find my strengths, I have to face my limitations; this is part of what it means to be human in a universe where forces more powerful than ourselves are in charge. Paul stirs too, and we go outside together around three in the morning. The wind has calmed, and the moon is once again full and orange, the blackened sky filled with quiet and stars.

Sunday, a gray and windy morning threatens rain and, worse, fog. We talk about descending but decide to continue. With the fall semester looming and winter growing near, neither of us, both teachers, will have a chance for such a trip again for a while. I look back over my right shoulder often as I follow the cairns, towards the more remote hills and valleys behind us. The civilization I've come to get away from lies ahead.

We'll have to move along the rest of the trail in half the time we had intended in order to have a chance of outwalking the incoming fog. We've got to cover twelve miles today, to get out of the high country by way of the trail while the weather permits. Between here and tree line, where the fog will be less of a threat, we need to climb three domes within six of those miles: 3,300, 3,200, and 3,400 feet tall. Each will be exposed
to the sub-Arctic wind. Each will require us to make a 700-foot ascent from the saddle before it. I wonder if I am up to the challenge.

Before we make the first of the three ascents, the sun comes out briefly and we stop to eat in a warm, protected saddle. This notch is filled with blueberries and overlooks a golden-leafed valley of poplars. We forage amidst the blueberries to supplement our lunch of soy nuts and raisins and cheese. We thirst for the juice in the berries; our water bottles are just about empty. Clouds obscure the last of the sun.

Even just the start of the first ascent is exhausting—a long, trudging climb through wet bog filled with the jagged rocks that make up this country. We'd expected to find water on this hillside. But though we look and look amidst the blueberry bushes, all we find are dry holes and mud. Nervous about whether we'll have to leave the trail soon and descend to the valley in search of water, we head on, conserving what water we have and hoping there's some in the next saddle along the trail.

I take off all but one of my layers, trying not to overheat, but still I'm sweating before we reach the top of the dome. On the summit, the wind, gusting in from the south where the storm lies, pushes us sideways, dries our sweat, makes us cold. While we stand still to put back on our layers, we become even colder. I am tired of discomfort—of putting on clothes, over-heating, and taking them off. Everything takes work out here, even meeting the simplest of needs.

Fortunately, while I am picking my way down the steep, rocky hillside, I hear an optimistic holler. It is Paul, pointing towards some glinting pockets he has spied in the saddle. Relieved, we wind our way down to the small dips in the tundra. But it takes a half an hour to fill our bottles, slowly pumping the water through a filter to prevent giardia, which is likely in such areas. Our hands become numb with the cold.
Two more domes stand between us and the tree line. The weather brings confining sweat and sheering cold every time we work to climb and descend. The fog and rain keep moving closer. We worry about making it over the top of the third dome before our way is obscured. The last ascent is the steepest section of trail we've encountered, an almost vertical rise where we cling to the rocks with our fingers at times. When we get there, I rest every ten or so steps, while Paul moves on ahead.

But even the difficulties involved in this kind of travel give me something I need. For while I am tired or hungry, too hot or too cold, my attention is focused. I want to be elsewhere, perhaps, but I am irrevocably here. Terrain and weather don't exactly tell us what to do, but they make the options obvious and elemental. Necessity, with its narrowing of choices, provides me with a kind of ease that I can get in no other way. We've traveled twenty-three miles now; my boots have thumped along, and my attention has focused more clearly. Calm is one inevitable result of such practice.

As I take each careful step, conscious of my footing on the unstable hillside, thousands of tiny plants in myriad colors meet my way. Beautifully-colored plants, sweet-smelling plants, fill my attention. I can see clearly now the similarity between the compacted plant in the high country and the larger-leafed cranberry plants in the valleys below. All day the wind has blown through us. Many thoughts, too, have traveled through us, leaving us clean.

Though we always face risk when we set out in search of adventure, things usually turn out right in the end. When setting out for a journey, Paul and I choose our gear carefully, make sure we've got plenty of layers, clothing that will protect our store of energy from the rain and the cold. We make it over the top of the last exposed dome and
descend to the saddle, a notch where willow and birch have begun to creep up the hillside from below.

Monday morning, mist fills the valley. Rain falls lightly. Fog obscures the country where we traveled late the day before. Chena Dome, the 4,000-foot tundra ridge top, and the three 3,000-foot domes we crossed over all are socked in. Down low, as we walk through the forest, our world is once again quiet and windless, enclosed.

With the high country behind us, I feel a little sad at what we are leaving. The trailhead and the road are only four miles away through the forest. When we get there, we will have to face whatever we've come here to escape from, our human relationships, the realization that we are part of the society from which we sometimes try to escape.

Rain drips onto my face now and then from my hat brim, but I retain the sense of ease I have felt so often on this journey in spite of the hazards of high country travel. With twenty-seven miles behind me and two left to go, I attend to each step carefully and listen to the thump of my boots on the trail.
The day Sally and I began our backpacking trip, a slight ring of clouds hovered over Denali's highest peaks. Sally, who was not from Alaska, was thrilled at the sight of the mountain. "Isn't it true you can only see Denali twenty-five percent of the time?" she asked.

"That sounds about right," I responded. "You can see it from every point on the ridge if it's out." We'd come to hike the Kesugi.

Sally and I had spent a lot of time together in Homer, living on the spit and in a shack we rented on the bluffs overlooking Kachemak Bay. We'd driven to and from Alaska, gone to bluegrass festivals together, confided in each other during the rough and wild times brought on by being in our early twenties. The day that stands out most vividly for me is the day we kayaked out in the bay, the two of us in a double kayak. Both beginning kayakers, we'd always gone with more experienced companions. That day, we took on the water together, and it gave us a ride. The waves were already kicking in the breezy afternoon sunshine, but there was little sense of danger. We paddled with glee.

Now, fourteen years later, we'd been given another opportunity to test our strength as a team. Visiting from Port Townsend, she hadn't seen Alaska in all those years, and she was ready to travel. Paul was working, so Sally and I had taken on a four-day backpacking trip on our own.

Because I'd hiked the Kesugi Ridge twice before, it seemed a safe bet. The trail was marked clearly, and the route well traveled in summer. The rangers at the local state park office had said the forecast called for clear weather. Our backpacks heavy with the bear-proof containers the rangers had asked us to carry, we walked determinably up the
winding trail through the forest, turning every few minutes to gaze at the white peaks of Denali, to see the glaciers which came into view as we climbed.

The next day dawned cloudy, the mountain nowhere in sight. A storm lay heavy in the valleys. "We were lucky to see it," I told her. Though she seemed to feel fortunate, I was disappointed. The first time I'd backpacked on Kesugi, the weather had stayed clear for four days in a row. Denali had been out the whole time. Still, the weather looked stable, and as we hiked the steep treeless hillsides that took us towards the top of the ridge, Sally marveled at the sight of the tundra. She stopped to eat blueberries with her backpack on and exclaimed at their sweetness. And when we got into the high country, she asked about the plants, amazed to find cranberries growing so close to the ground. The crowberry bushes were red with the coming of autumn, and streams flowed in places where on other hikes to Kesugi I'd seen only trickles or dry rocky beds.

We only had a mile to go to the lake where we'd be camping, so after setting up our tent we took off for a day hike to see the very top of the ridge. Camp was at 3,200 feet, the top of the ridge at 4,000. It felt good to hike the last 800 feet without those fifty-pound packs.

We were about two hundred feet from the top of the ridge, hiking on rocks above the altitude where tundra plants could grow, when we heard thunder and stopped in our tracks. It had come from the north, to our left.

"Do you think we should keep going?" I asked Sally. The tent perched by the lake looked far below.

"I don't know," she answered. "We're so close. And the storm seems far away."
"I know what you mean. I'd hate to wimp out prematurely." I imagined what Paul might have said if he'd been there. I thought he would have chosen to go on. "On the other hand, storms can come on fast in the mountains."

But knowing the view into the next valley over would be spectacular, I wanted Sally to see it. So we waited a while, watching the storm. It wasn't moving, and we didn't hear any more thunder. "We can't stay long," I advised Sally, knowing I was the one with more experience in these Alaskan mountains. "We'll just run up there, take a peek, and leave."

I didn't say anything as I came to the top and saw the valley come into view, and Sally exclaimed out loud an "Oh my!" as it opened before her. Below us, tundra lakes dotted the green plateaus that filled the valley. The ridge we stood on was the first in a series of folds heading east from Denali, and the valley below us ran like a river from the north to the south. Though we couldn't see the Susitna, it ran through the farthest side of the valley, up against the next ridge which rose sharp and steep to another plateau. Here and there we could see its willowed bluffs.

"You take me to the nicest places," Sally said. It felt good to have guided her to such an expanse.

The view closed in, and I didn't like the way the clouds were billowing up from the valley. "We'd better get going," I urged.

"Wait," said Sally. "Maybe we'll get to see it again." Our viewing had been brief, and I understood how she felt.

A hole opened in the mist around us—a patch of trees and then a piece of lake came into sight. "It's opening up," said Sally. Wanting to leave, I looked around nervously at the clouds swirling in. But I couldn't drag her away. She might only have
this one chance to see the Susitna valley. The clouds moved on and once again we stared in wonder at the lakes and plateaus, the many streams which fed the river.

"There's so much wildness," said Sally. "I can't believe the way it goes on and on."

It started to hail while we were still on the spine of the ridge that had taken us up there. Thunder rolled again up north, and we hurried, cold from the rain. Down at camp, we huddled into the tent to get warm and wait out the weather. "I'm glad we got to see that," I said to Sally, feeling proud that we hadn't come down without seeing the valley. "I wonder what kind of weather we're in for."

After a few minutes the rain stopped. "I guess we'd better eat while we can," said Sally. Outside, we cooked hurriedly, and ate even faster when we saw a dark and turbulent cloud approaching from the west.

"Uh oh," I said between quick swallows of hot macaroni. "This one's coming from Denali. We don't want to be out here when it hits."

Quickly, we put away our cooking gear and threw the plastic covers over our backpacks. "Hurry!" I yelled at Sally, as the cloud billowed up the ridge towards our tent. I ducked inside as the first patter of rain hit the fly, without brushing my teeth for the evening. Sally was not far behind.

The first lightning lit up the tent as she was crawling into her sleeping bag. Though the thunder didn't follow for another ten seconds, we looked at each other, our eyes opened wide. "I thought the ranger said we didn't have to worry about lightning," said Sally.
"That's right," I told her. "But she also said the weather's been unusually warm."

We tried to remember what we knew about lightning formation as the attendant thunder clap came.

"Do you think we should go down?" I asked Sally.

"Go out in the storm?" she said. "No way."

I looked at my watch. Eight o'clock. Even if we did go down now, we might not make it to the car before dark settled in.

"I don't want to get hypothermia," she continued.

"It's too late to go anyway," I answered. "I guess we're here for the duration."

Sally read, but I just lay there, unable to take my mind off the storm. The lightning became more and more frequent, the time between lightning and thunder more brief. I retraced our decisions, wondering whether we'd made a mistake, and wondering whether Paul would have tried to leave the ridge in this storm. Reassured by the thought that probably he wouldn't have, I consoled myself with the idea that we'd done the best we could in making our decisions. One has to take chances at times in the mountains, and we'd had no way to know this storm would come in from the east. Its location, many miles across the Chulitna valley, had appeared stable all day.

The tent lit up and thunder followed directly. "Two seconds," said Sally. "The lightning and thunder were only two seconds apart."

"I know. I've been counting." What else would I be doing in a storm on a 3,000 foot ridge top?

Shaking, I wondered whether lightning would be attracted to the lake we were camped by, whether we'd be hit though we were lying so close to the ground. Our tent, though small, was the highest bump on the open plateau where we camped. What would
we do if one of us were hit? I pictured myself hiking down the mountain without Sally, or being left alone while she went for help. There was no way either one of us could carry the other one down.

"You haven't said 'You take me to the nicest places" lately." We giggled, and it helped for a moment. But being out here with Sally wasn't going to protect me from the storm that went on and on without any sign of abating. Exhausted from counting the seconds before thunder, and from trying to stay alive by sheer will power, I found a place inside myself that hated the ridge top. Everywhere I go in Alaska, it seems I face this exposure, and a certain rational part of my mind will never understand why I do it.

A clap of thunder shook the ground hard. Sweat built on my forehead, and I strained to hold back tears. "Please God," I began to pray, "don't let this weather hurt us." I thought about God for a moment, unable to picture a God that was bigger than such weather, and changed my prayer. "DON'T HURT ME!" I yelled, inside my head, this time directly to the storm. "Don't hurt us," I asked more gently, as I understood that I was speaking to a living presence who didn't have to comply.

Ultimately, my relationship with the land is a one-on-one venture. I asked myself that night if I regretted being out there. But as much as I wanted to be anywhere but that ridge top—and most of all to be snuggled safely in bed at home with Paul—I still knew the storm was part of the mountains. It contained all the wildness that I'd come to see. I go to the wild to talk to my maker, to find out why I'm here, someday to be gone. Throughout the night, the rain came hard, but the thunder grew quieter, the time between lightning and thunder expanding. The front of the storm was past, and we could rest now. In the space of its quiet, we finally slept.
Harvest

The first garden I grew perched on a tall cliff a few miles down the airport road in Homer, overlooking Kachemak Bay. A friend taught me how to turn raw dirt into agricultural soil. I worked the land late into the evening light, standing on the blade of the shovel to bring my full weight into each slice of the ground. Up came tangles of roots packed in sand and clay, light brown and packed tight by years of exposure to the sun and the wind. Using the sharp edge of the shovel, I tore the clumps apart until the soil was soft, then bent down and manually broke it up with my hands. I rubbed it against my fingers and the palms of my hands to experience its rough, dry texture, and learned the feel of the roots as I cast them one by one out of the six-by-eight foot plot where my first vegetables would grow.

Taking a break to swig from my water bottle, I looked at the silver stretch of water below me, the line of mountains circling the far edge of the bay. I wanted to visit those mountains in spite of the high bear density on that side of the inlet. I laughed as I remembered the story of a friend who took off his clothes to ford a creek, and encountered a family of bears, greeting him in all his nudity, when he got to the other side.

Hauling a few gallons of water per day from the road to the garden was easy, and the plot was easily weeded, on account of its small size. Many an afternoon after my shift at the bakery, I came home and foraged in the garden—eating lettuce, radish, and broccoli sprigs. On sunny days, I lay down in a clump of grass which grew near the edge of the cliff by the garden, and basked in the sun, listening to the rhythmic pound of the sea as it broke against the rugged shoreline.
My second garden grew on the mining claim far from a town. This time, I didn't have to dig in any packed clumps of clay, as the former tenants of the land had worked the soil, building it up with rich compost, peat, and manure. The garden rested at the bottom of a gentle slope consisting of fireweed, raspberries, and birch trees. The hillside turned magenta when the fireweed bloomed.

I tried to repair the old chicken wire fence that was partially standing, propping it up with some slab wood I found in the garden, that hadn't yet rotted. Here, I tried to grow my first tomatoes, cabbage and corn.

The corn didn't have time to ripen. And one day I watched a moose cow and calf step over the slab wood and chicken wire fence, which looked suddenly fragile. I yelled at the two moose, but they ignored me. Gone was the only cabbage I'd ever grown.

But a few tomatoes turned red, in spite of there being no greenhouse or viscuine. The raspberries too were producing, thick and wild in the field around the garden, and I soon forgot to grieve the lost cabbage. I was busy staying out of the way of the spiders that lived in the thickets, falling periodically and getting stuck up to my waist amidst the matted brush. Sticky red juice and thorns made their way into my hands, but I picked every last berry in the field, except for the ones which fell on the ground. I left those for the birds and went back to the cabin, where I put up eight quarts of raspberry jam.

When I moved in with Paul, he showed me a falling down greenhouse in a small, quiet field in the woods. Years before, someone had built the greenhouse by forming PVC pipe into arches and covering them with viscuine. After asking permission of our neighbors, who owned the land, we rebuilt the greenhouse with pipe that still lay around at the site.
Paul looked earthy working the garden soil, wearing faded tan work clothes. He tied his dark hair in a pony tail to keep it off his neck, and pulled a blue bandana out of his pants pocket every once in a while to wipe the sweat from his brow. I looked up from my own work to watch him dig in the rich brown dirt, the forest coming into bloom all around.

Our cabin roof provided water, which we stored in garbage cans under spots where the gutter conveniently leaked. In the yard by the cabin, we built raised beds, using slabs of spruce and odd ends of plywood, whatever we could find.

We filled the greenhouse with tomatoes, and with basil which grew so well we had to harvest it three times in one season. Mosquitoes and an occasional bee buzzed around in the hot, pungent greenhouse, and as summer continued, we often lingered inside the space we'd created to take in the warmth. In the field next to the greenhouse, we planted rows and rows of potatoes, kale, beans, carrots, and peas.

Some of the water we could catch at the site, on a shed roof we built of old greenhouse panels. But most of the water—four five-gallon jugs every day—we had to haul in a wheelbarrow from the cabin, three hundred yards away on a narrow trail. It took all my strength to keep the wheelbarrow moving, especially when the wheels got stuck on the roots in the trail, but it was worth it, for the sake of growing our own organic, fresh produce and the sheer joy of gardening in such a beautiful spot. The work was good for us, and after hauling water in the wheelbarrow, we jumped in the lake to rinse off the dust. Come September, our wheelbarrow was full of potatoes, carrots, and kale, enough to eat all winter long.

Towards the end of summer, Paul and I catch fish in the Copper River, hauling thirty red salmon out of the river in just a few hours with our nets. We kneel over the river's edge
until our backs are sore, to clean the fish, then haul them in smelly old backpacks up a cliff to the car.

The labor is hard, but I am glad my body remains strong enough to live off the land in this way, thankful to have work which takes me to the river, instead of preventing me from getting here. I can't afford to take such blessings for granted, given all I've been through.

After driving home across the Alaska Range—a kaleidoscope of granite, clouds and sunlight—we spend another long day wrapping fish into packages for the freezer. Slime gets in our hair, and the smell of fish lingers for days on our cutting boards, but we don't mind. We feel lucky to have all this fish, and the work is a necessary part of the process that connects us to our land.

When the cranes and geese assemble for their autumn migration, I always wish for a moment that I were going too. To go south would mean warmth, ease, and closeness to family. But I need to watch the forest change towards winter and do the work it takes to call Alaska home.

The tundra changes color; we go on long hikes in the hills to take it all in. Cranberries slide off their bushes with ease in solid handfuls, round and firm inside the warm palms of my hands. Their taste is almost sour, it is so tart and tangy; but come mid-winter no other fruit will provide an antidote for cabin fever and illness in quite the same way.

This may be the last year Maya will come with us in autumn. At thirteen, she sometimes seems to hold onto life by a thread. We give her antibiotics to fight off infection, glucosamine to keep her legs from folding beneath her. Old age has made her nervous: she scratches her nose up now if we try to chain her and doesn't like staying
alone in the house. Sometimes, I have to encourage her to continue walking, instead of the other way around.

Downed trees crisscross the forest floor around our house, where we cut them in the spring to build a garden. I haul six-foot lengths with a hook from the woods to our driveway. Paul bucks them into lengths for the stove. The woodpile, twelve feet long and three feet high, is growing. We'll be ready for winter when I can no longer see over the top.

Paul and I are happy to be together. We miss our families but we know our place is right. We blanch the chard and kale, the kitchen filled with steam and pungency. When we put the greens into the freezer, it is full from the season's efforts. Outside, with dirty hands, we pull the jewel-like carrots and potatoes from the soil. We wash and dry them, and put them up for winter in a cool, dark corner of our home.
The Bear

The one time I did encounter a bear while on land, at close distance, he was foraging alone in the blueberry brush about one hundred yards down the trail. It was a large black bear, and we crossed his path towards the end of our successful completion of the Chena Dome trail. In all the years I'd hiked in the country just outside of Fairbanks, I'd never encountered one closely. Stopping to assess the situation, Paul and I agreed we might be able to keep traveling onward, so long as we gave wide berth to the bear. The wind was blowing towards us, instead of from us towards the bear, and it looked like there was ample room to travel around him.

The black bear foraged like we had, in a saddle where willow and short spruce trees crept over the ridge from below. We picked our way around him out in the tundra, keeping our distance, hurrying along and looking over our shoulders at him again and again as we passed by.

Though fear stayed with me until we'd put a quarter mile between us, I needn't have worried. Busy eating berries, the bear never looked up.