



In the Waters

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image info

THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THE PLACES WE KNOW AS CHILDREN.

The wood-framed houses of my hometown appear in succession as in a dream. The trees stand clearly etched against the dying light just as they always were in winter in the north when the sun set so early.

The geography of that place—physical and mental—will always be as familiar to me as the back of my own hand. It isn't simply a place I'll return to. It's a state of mind I'll try to go back to even when I know I'm destined to go away from it forever.

Every day I spend there is just like this: I climb trees with no fear of falling. I sit on the banks of the river to watch whirligigs spinning on the taut surface of the current. Minnows linger in the shallows where the water is clear, while larger fish hide in the dark, deeper pools. That place is everything, and I am that place. To leave there is to be taken out of Eden.

In my reverie, I'll disremember all the bad stuff that happened. I'll forget the days when my father got drunk and my mother yelled, cried, and lashed out. Still, just when I'm about to dredge up some benign night blooming with bright stars, truth intervenes.

I remember playing outside in the yard. Suddenly, the darkness opens up around me like a giant maw. Terrified, I run for the porch light to pull at the screen door. Inside the house, it is always the same. My family is watching television. They stare at the flat screen, and they don't look at me. My father might be sleeping in his recliner or at least dozing. Whenever he is home and sitting down, his eyelids droop and he starts to snore.

I can hear a voice speaking to me, and it

says this: *There's a cruelty you have to accept. You don't know this now, but you will learn. Even if you do believe that things are broken, you cannot repair the world. In any case, there isn't any individual alive who can say for certain what a perfect world would look like, and you can't know that either.*

Still, I believe I know how a perfect world might look. There's an image I carry inside me—a picture of a radiant place where everything is exactly as it should be. But that halcyon image is always challenged. The perfect world is shattered. No matter how hard I try, I can't avoid the bad stuff. It's going to come at me and at all of us because that's the way life is.

I was born in a small town in the middle of my country. It doesn't matter what town it was. Those places were all the same then, and there was nothing auspicious about my birth.

My father was an alcoholic.

When he was drinking, my father was like Icarus, the mythical character who was given wings. Icarus's father, Daedalus, fashioned those wings so the two of them could escape from a dangerous, life-threatening situation. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, but Icarus ignored his father's advice. As the flying boy approached the hot, golden orb that warms our planet, the wax holding his wings together began to melt. Feathers floated toward the blue sea below, and finally, the errant, ecstatic boy fell from the sky. The heedless lad smacked the water's surface. As he sank below the waves, he drowned.

My father was like that. Some energy seemed to propel him. He became intoxicated, even euphoric. But as he approached the heat of his interior sun, the wax that held his wings together would melt. Like the mythical Icarus, he would crash and fall into the sea.

Because of his propensity for smashing up cars when he was drunk, my father's survival was always questionable.

He was always going down the road and back to where he belonged. Again and again, he would turn up at the big rock candy mountain. Sometimes, perhaps, he walked on the green grass of a place he imagined to be his true home. My father made up stories. He embellished reality. People liked to listen to him talk.

My father sometimes dreamed big dreams, and sometimes he even executed those dreams. But my father was also predictable. A single certainty seemed to govern his life. No matter what, and even if he went on the wagon for a while, we all knew he was a drunk at heart. Eventually, he'd always go back to the booze.

My father married an opposing force. While he seemed fearless and unaware of consequences, my mother bore her burden of fear, envy, and disappointment. It was my mother's job to keep my father under control. When he flew off toward the sun, she had to reel him back in and put him to bed to sleep it off. My father put our lives at risk again and again. That had a cost. I was never sure any of us would survive at all.

I remember hooking my legs over the monkey bars at school and then hanging upside down with all the blood rushing toward my head. I was seven or maybe eight years old then. My body was supple and loose, and it felt good to hang like an ape and pretend I was seeing the world from a new perspective. The whole of my weight tugged toward earth, as though it wanted to fall, and I could appreciate all the structures around me in a fresh way. The buildings and trees pushed upward into the sky, and it seemed that this might require some sort of effort or will on their part. The hanging was a lesson in physics. I came to

understand the reality of bodies falling toward the ground in a visceral way.

That was just a time I lived through. Maybe things in my life weren't too good, but they weren't that bad either. I never thought about how I felt. I'm not even sure I had feelings.

Did I have a mind then? I don't know. I can't remember. That period of my life seems like an endless list of unnamed days, of times when we were at school and times when we were not. There were times that felt like no time. The hours floated on the broad back of something—not water, not a river, but something like water or a river. The minutes meandered. They rode atop the unnamable thing that held up time. None of us could see this entity, but we all knew it was there. Not just the enlightened among us saw this. Everyone knew about our mutual and almost ineffable movement through many moments, but we never spoke of it. It was the greatest miracle in our lives, and there were no words to speak of that reality.

I was one of the kids who ran after the trucks hauling the pea vines to the canning factory for processing. We'd pull down strands of greenery and hunt through the leaves for sweet pods to chew on. Intensely bright days were followed by hollow nights when I'd listen for trains pulling away from that place into darkness. My sense of wholeness was constantly assaulted. I fragmented. I exploded into a million pieces.

DO WE PASS THROUGH THE WORLD OR DOES THE WORLD PASS THROUGH US?

It's a conundrum, a question impossible to answer.

I remember a rainy day. There was rain over the park, rain on the green baseball-

field grass. I was riding my bicycle. I didn't care that it was raining. I wasn't tired. I wasn't with anyone, and I didn't want to be. The world was rain and green and lavender. A darkness like dusk enveloped it all, but it was not yet dusk. Some yellowness seemed to emanate from the green, a glow from the plants that suggested they all had some inner, personal life. I could see this in every blade of grass, in every leaf. The seeing didn't happen suddenly but rather gradually. My mind opened to the dance of molecules, a playing of light through droplets of water, but more than that. It was some essence touching me, an utterly clear manifestation of photosynthesis, an emotional knowledge of chlorophyll. I stopped my bike and stared across a green lawn. The rain plastered my hair to my head. It took me a moment to emerge from that meditation and turn for home.

I thought a lot about animals in my early days. It seemed unfathomable to me that they could live without houses. The deer in the forest did not know the meaning of walls. The wild geese knew only the sky—that seemingly unbounded and limitless space. The geese soared upward and flew toward the horizon.

I liked to think about birds and how they lived so free and unencumbered. They existed in three dimensions while my life seemed to play out on a flat surface. I felt a great affinity with wild creatures. On winter nights, I imagined fish below the ice that covered our lakes and rivers. Those fish stayed still, or maybe they swam in the cool arc of their particular fish knowledge.

And then, too, in early spring, white wings were already beating against the pale sky. Even before the ice went out on the river, the wild swans headed north to breed. The swans represented hope, but there was the

possibility that even they would not make it through if a winter storm hit. Everything was at risk, and I knew it.

At the town's swimming pool, I practice meditation. I'm learning to be utterly passive. I float limply and then sink. I pull with my arms, rise to the surface, and breathe in only to sink again. I know this much. I have to save myself and this is how. I do the only thing I know how to do. I breathe in and out.

Sometimes, when I think something really bad might happen, I try to prepare for the worst. I imagine the worst thing that could happen, and I live through it in my mind. My father will die in a car crash. We won't have any money. My mother will not know what to do. Maybe we won't have anything to eat. I believe that if I run through these thoughts often enough, I'll be prepared for anything that comes.

But I can't prepare. The real thing would not be the same as a dress rehearsal. It would be much more traumatic and horrible. My world could fall apart at any moment. Nothing I do or say will make any difference. Whatever is going to happen, will happen. Many of my dreams have the same ending. Someone is trying to kill me, and they'll probably succeed.

I'm walking home from school. There's snow on the ground. The light is all around me, and I hear a voice. Someone is calling me. I don't know who the person is or what they want. Inside myself, I feel their summons, and it makes me want to approach. I wish I could find them or meet them so that the singing in my ears would stop. But it doesn't stop.

The trees reach toward the sky with their branches. Each tree looks different. Every twig has taken off on its own to present a particular aspect. This overwhelms me. It feels exhilarating that the world should be so full.

No matter how hard I look, my vision cannot contain it all. It is so bright. The entire sky radiates energy. I want to sit down in the snow and cry.

Early on, I find that I do not love people. I love trees. There's a huge willow down by the river. It's possible to climb to a fork in its broad trunk and crouch there. I fit my body to the tree. I feel the tree in some strange way. The exchange seems reciprocal. Sometimes it seems as though the tree is feeling me. This living thing with a body has roots that go deep. From my perch, I can see the river and that feels like another living thing, and I have a reciprocal relationship with the river as well. I stay there for hours.

We're in an open fishing boat traveling down river with my father at the helm. I've been dragging my hand along in the water beside the boat, something I always find very soothing. Suddenly, the wind comes up and I look up to see a darkening sky. The storm lifts a spray that soaks our clothes. My father brings the boat in close to a dock. We don't know who owns this small pier, but we need to get off the open water. The rain can't harm us, but the lightning might be dangerous.

My father climbs the bank to knock on the door of a nearby cabin while my mother, brother, and I huddle in the pelting downpour. The strangers share the yellow light of their kitchen while the cloudburst pounds the roof. The tempest is short-lived and passes quickly. We go back outside to bail rainwater from the boat. It seems that my father always knows what to do. We head toward home. Everything is all right for now, but probably not forever.

One day, I'm walking home from school. I'm in the second or maybe the third grade. A boy from a higher grade comes up behind me and pushes me into a snow bank. For

some reason, this boy hates me. He has a thin leather strap in his hand and he strikes me across the cheek with it. I barely know him. He lives down the street on the other side of the railroad tracks.

I punch at his face, raise myself, and run. He doesn't follow. After that, if I see him coming, I cross the street to walk on the other side. He seems to avoid me too. Maybe he's afraid I will tell someone and cause trouble for him.

Another day, during recess, I'd just gotten off the merry-go-round when a boy throws a spiked metal ball at me, leaving a small gash on my forehead. Blood drips down my shirt and onto my shoes. I have to go to the school nurse. She cleans me up and applies a bandage. I don't know why that boy wanted to hurt me either. The violence is always there. It's just below the surface. Why? I don't know. I only know I have to learn to live with it.

Still, sometimes, the violence almost disappears. There are moments of peace, moments when nature is so beautiful, and singular hours when my town seems so idyllic. In the presence of that beauty, I locate myself in my body. I walk down the street and the trees sway above me. Then I am cheered up, and my heart fills with hope. I don't know the source of this positive feeling. It's not something I create though. It's something I receive or perceive.

Something is taking care of me. I'm buoyed up by a nameless and unexpected quality in the environment where I live. I'm surprised no one else sees it. Why doesn't anyone ever talk about our ride on the back of this great beast that holds up time? Why don't they speak of the medium we all exist in? Why doesn't anyone else experience what I am experiencing?

In the tales my father tells, he is the hero and the good guy. He always sees things clearly. He is better than all those other fools

out there, and we are lucky he is our dad. My father is constantly telling the same story about himself. In it, he is the main character, and everything revolves around him. He's an adventurer—the wily Odysseus who always wins through the journey. He sails the sea, he scavenges for booty, and then he returns home.

My mother is not an explorer. Like Penelope, she tends the hearth. She waits for him, worries about where he is, and provides the anchor for his wandering spirit. Perhaps it's true that she really does keep him under control. Without her, my father might veer off course and be lost forever. Without her to return to, he could be detained for years on some Calypso island, or maybe he would simply drown on the high seas.

The reasons for their marriage seem lost in time. I can't figure out what brought those two people together unless it was just to make me and put me through this miserable experience with them so that I could learn something. But what will I learn from this?

I was no longer a child when I began to dream I could play the violin without having had any study or training. In the dream, I pick up the instrument and bow my way through a classical passage or a waltz. In the dream world, this is as easy as opening my mouth to sing. I can't play the violin, and I don't know what the dream means. Maybe that's the point. It's not necessary to understand the dream in any literal way. It's only important to feel the mystery of its potential.

Later, when I'm older, I dream of a green cave. I am in that cave with my lover. We're in a boat. Some force draws us further and further into the cave's interior. I can't identify the source of this pull. A strange and brilliant green light emanates from the depths. In the

palm of my hand, I cradle a white pearl, and I know what I am supposed to do with it.

I DROP THE PEARL INTO THE SUBTERRANEAN LAKE. AS IF IT IS PASSING THROUGH SOME VISCOUS MATERIAL THAT IMPEDES ITS FALL, THE PEARL SINKS SLOWLY TOWARD THE LIGHT.

If I could make a painting of my life as a girl, I would center it around that luminous gem. The pearl would be like an unfertilized lone egg falling into some incredible brilliance. The pearl, formed in the oyster by an irritant such as a grain of sand, coated smooth with a beautiful sheen, would sink like all my knowledge toward something I might call God. Then again, maybe any ideas about God are too grandiose for this simple image generated by sleep. I can't comprehend the pearl, so I have to let it go.

I LET IT FALL, AS LIFE FALLS, AS TIME FALLS, AS I FALL WITH TIME—INTO SOME ABYSS, TOWARD A PLACE WHERE ALL DISTINCTIONS FADE. MY OWN PORTRAIT BECOMES A FAINT OUTLINE, AND ALL THE IMAGES DISAPPEAR.

Only the light remains—green, animated by chlorophyll, and ready. ❖