

THE WAY IT USED TO BE

We used to launch our inner tubes from Little Big Creek in the icy water as early as April if we could talk Mom into it. She would follow alongside the stream over barely paved roads in the station wagon, waving wildly, a.m. radio turned up, all the windows down as we floated two to a tube.

Seeing the overpass in the distance we knew to look for a tree branch and grab hold till she came along to load us up take us back to the top for another ride.

Back home she would lay newspaper over low tables setting big pots of crawfish, steamed clams and crab fresh from my Dad's pots while we each hovered over our own cereal bowl full of butter to dip in.



There used to be a picture in our living room of my mother in a creamy floor-length polyester dress with a lacy shawl she must have ordered in advance from the JC Penny catalog since no store in town would have sold such a thing.

My father is perched next to her on the chair crisp shirt, dark socks shoes with only four eyelets each leaning towards her smiling in a way that only older children remember.



My mother used to protest in the background when my dad let me go out on the boat to lay gillnet in the cold evening river then get up before morning to skip school & eat lemon meringue pie for breakfast at the Svensen Café before riding over gravel along the dike road in the log truck for his first haul of the day.

We would listen to Kenny Rogers sing about gambling And call to my uncles across c.b. airwaves. Dad would tell about sharing schoollunch with his little sister & eating the round half of the sandwich because she was afraid it would keep rocking in her stomach.



In college, people used to ask me where I came from even after I had told them. Give me something I can use they would say. Your map is too small to be of any help to me.

I stopped drawing a line with a patient finger for strangers some time ago. They have stories with beginnings and ends & prefer places easily found & enthusiastically described in guide books. I think it saves them the trouble of finding anything.



It used to be I didn't realize that not everyone comes from a place with creeks that run swift & clear, wireless roads lined with stacked sandbags to keep water in its place & gravel paths alongside rivers that beckon in the night.

It use to be that I would spend time wondering what such people used for a guide or what they considered good fortune.

FOR MY LITTLE SISTER WHO CAN'T REMEMBER THE GOOD TIMES

Listen. Can you hear the creaky alders rattling out familiar names over and over in the branches that make a canopy vaulting our mother's garden patch. In the distance, that's the sound the jake break makes when the log truck crests the hill and starts down the other side to home.

Bend your cheek down near your daughter's brand new one. Ask yourself if you really believe that much in luck. Look closely. Whether you know it or not, you've been here before.

See the houses that sit so close, gathered together like old ladies on one side of a large table with many empty seats. Notice they all have the same shutters, kittens, baskets of socks, rolls of waxed paper for wrapping sandwiches to send off to work.

Let's pour out the last of the wine. If my glass comes up fullest, let me make it up to you. I have an agate in my jewelry box Mother and I picked off Road's End Beach in Lincoln City just about the time you were born. I'll give it to you. Put it in your pocket so at odd times of the day your hand can go to it smoothing its glassy sides. It is showing you a history that you can't remember But surely can tell.

EULOGY FOR GRANDMA

I opened the gate in your backyard at Sunset Lake so I could go back to the dock behind the trailer and feed the ducks soft slices of fresh Wonder bread torn into little pieces one more time.



MELINDA BECK

EPITAPH

After my Grandma's funeral, her only sister didn't even come to the Moose Hall for a piece of cake or a drink. She said it was a long drive home and she had to get back.

My best friend didn't come at all. She said she meant to. It was what she wanted to do. But she didn't. She called a florist to send flowers.

When I had my oldest child my Grandma cashed in her Supersaver to fly home early from Las Vegas even though she had tickets for Wayne Newton's show that night and she even brought me a keychain from Harrahs.

IT'S POSSIBLE TO BE A POET

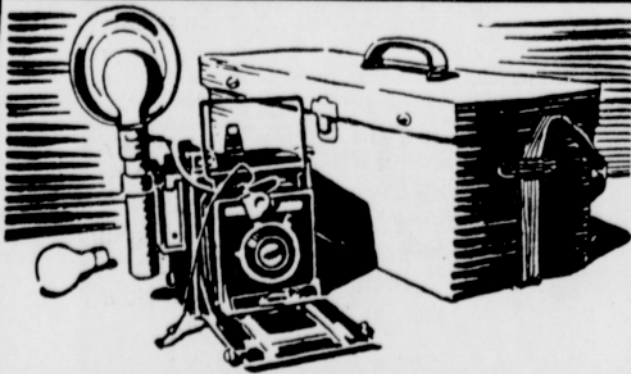
It's possible to be a poet and still raise a child, though there's no stability in it.

You feed her stanzas for breakfast, watching her crunch through some and leave others sogging in the bowl.

You clothe her in similes and metaphors, draping them like silken and linen threads over her smooth, white body.

You house her with words no fire can burn down.

And your pen guides her through all the days of her life.



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FORGIVENESS

Even through the booze my dad was smart. One year for the science fair he helped me make a set of scales with an old broom handle, rubber bands and sour cream containers.

With shaking hands he used his set of metal fishing weights to lower the buckets while he marked 6 oz., 8 oz., 12 oz., along the broom handle with a pencil he sharpened to a precise point with his pocket knife all the while singing mama don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys under his breath.

He wasn't there when I won a prize but it felt like he was.

THERAPY

The first time I went was after my divorce. I had lost thirty pounds and was dating a man half my age. The doctor said this was all normal and gave me Prozac.

The second time was after my mother died. I couldn't get out of bed and the world seemed to be turning slowly on its side. The doctor told me I needed to grieve, let me talk and burned candles in memory.

The third time I went, I couldn't stop worrying. My shoes had to be lined up facing North by the door and I would leave the water running when I went to the grocery store. The doctor told me to wear a rubber band on my wrist and snap myself every time I felt like worrying.

The last time I went, I told the doctor, sometimes I just feel sad for no reason at all. My children seem far away and some days I don't feel much love for my husband. I was hoping for the pill again but she just bought me a cup of coffee and sent me home.

BROWNSMEAD STORIES

There's a road, half gravel half pavement in a far country with my last name on it. The world used to be so small I could walk down that road to get to Brenda Saukko's house or past Auntie Mabel's bobbing floathouse or even the gnarled tree that grew the gravenstiens my mother and grandmother made into sour applesauce.

If you turn into the elbow of my road slowly enough, the air stands still and hovers over Blind Slough. The water twists wide like a freeway then narrows into a logjam ride into the underbrush, joining the river and heading out to sea.

More people pass over the road like Lewis & Clark looking for an ocean or a bridge. Hobos stayed long enough for a hot meal marking the parallel railroad tracks with chalk signs at friendly doors. Despite my drops of island and city blood, I never went to town much. Like the Finns and Norwegians before the land and the climate said home to me.

Nowadays, most roads are paved and I live among houses where everyone thinks they've got a name. Sometimes the Mayor buys me a drink and even Old Highway 30 has turn lanes. In the next years, they say, 30 million people will pass by my road looking for an ocean or a bridge. I say most of them will just find a souvenir.



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