

To Be Considered for the May B. Smith Award

Places to Live, Places to Be From

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I

Welcome, reader, to the place of far-off things. You are now a stone sinking to sea bottom, a ship grazing coral reef, a fish in a frozen river. You are a bird in the middle of an ice storm. Please entertain this vision of yourself, lost in the wilderness. This is where we meet.

I am here because my tongue is restless. I am here because of the ink in my blood. I am not here to strike the poses, tell tall tales, move through the automated motions. I want a place of consciousness, full of air and light, where my third eye rests outside of myself.

The need is so deep it comes to me in dreams—in a house exaggerated into the cool corridors of forgotten places, haunted by cars and planes. I am divided by lines of territory. Both sides of me are pelted by rocks. The dampness here becomes a mildew, a stain, a personality. The dark becomes my memory, vacant as a drum.

What I want is a sense of knowing.

What I want is a liminal space in which to see and be seen.

II

Once you've had practice, it only takes half an hour to pack all your belongings into one black leather suitcase. Socks, underwear, shirts, pants, shampoo, the notebook in which I write everything, the water shoes I received for Christmas, the buckeyes I found on a hillside behind my grandmother's house—all stuffed into a 3' by 5'

rectangular space, zipped tight like a body bag. I slip the case into the trunk. I slide the metal buckle across my chest. We drive for miles like this, my eye wandering out the window to take the count of trees, birds, and telephone poles.

Hours later, stepping out of my mother's dirty white Nissan, I notice the tingle of blood rushing back to my legs, the coolness of waking up what has been asleep for hours. The car door slams behind me, and I shuffle clumsily toward the gas station bathroom. Everything inside is filthy. The tile is caked in places with a half-inch layer of dirt. The walls are splattered with urine. It's like any other gas station bathroom in the middle of Alabama, on an interstate between Kentucky and Florida. The procedure remains the same: one stop for every two hours of driving for a bathroom break, then back onto the long stretch of road.

Driving across farmlands, a patchwork quilt busied by the passing shadows of clouds, the mind wanders home. The mind becomes an open circuit, a stretch of road, a gathering place for half remembered names. I am nine years old. Twice each year, I travel across four states, covering a distance of 2,000 miles, swapping one family for another. Twice each year, I have to relearn the meaning of the word "home." I have to grow new roots, forsake the old for the new, adapt, forget.

Palm trees have a smell. The ocean has a smell. Loss has a smell, too. It's like salt and fish and sand. He draws his legs together on the end of the pier, watching white crests form on the ocean waves. A storm is moving in. He can tell by the shifting waters in the distance, the lack of reflection on the water's surface. Drops of rain crash into the

waves like little bullets. He watches his father hoist the net, casting a web of yellow rope into the water, drawing out fish.

His father looks like him, only different. They share a set of common features: two harsh eyes, the same brow, the same oval face. Something about his father is more weathered, like a stone left on the beach for years, tossed back and forth between sand and shells until it is worn smooth and hard as drift wood. Lately, the lines that exaggerate his heavy brow have become deeper. His face used to look like a kind gorilla, old but gentle. Recently though, he just looks old. His hair is gray as the clouds passing over them. His eyes are developing the thin veil of old age.

At nine years old, a child knows when something is wrong with his father. Slowly but surely, he has begun to smell like the cheap wine from the kitchen pantry. He stays up later and later watching movies about adventure and love instead of actually having either of them, drinking more than a man should. He says, “Son, I’m going to teach you how to be a man.” Even a nine year old knows that being a man means being miserable, driving art and love deep into the ground, deep underneath an exterior unforgiving and rough as barnacles. The time they spend together is full of awkward silences. Thankfully, those days are few. His father takes him fishing, or boating, or to the local swimming pool—all places that can’t hold his interest. He prefers setting a line in the sand and watching hermit crabs race to cross back into the water. He prefers playing make-believe games about mer-people on the bottom of the sea, or hearing ghost stories about the Indians who used to live in this place before it was called Pensacola—Indians who still roam the beaches at night looking for somewhere to call home.

These are all things his grandmother does well. When his father is out with the young woman they call his new “stepmother,” he is usually left in the care of her old, loving arms. This happens most days of the week. She lets him help pluck lemons and limes from the backyard. For the sake of key-lime pie, he braves the thorns that conceal the little green fruit. They stay awake together some nights, listening for ghosts outside her house, “old chiefs,” she calls them. But he is never afraid. Her voice is full of spirit; her house is free of ghosts. She is an oasis in the midst of a wasteland. She is the eye of the storm.

His father’s voice is full of grit—grit like Floridian soil. Dirt here has no substance, no nurturing qualities. It is as liable to shake things down to their roots as to make them grow, ready at any moment to let the wind or the rain or the weeds gather them up from the ground and into the air. The plants that grow out of this harsh climate often develop barbs and thorns to protect them from attack. Some of them are known carnivores, meat-eating plants. Venus fly traps grind down insects with dilating jaws. Cross vines suck sustenance from the bones of their victims, exploding with trumpet-shaped blossoms. Cacti have learned to conceal their fleshy bodies under long, thick needles. The Spanish moss that hangs from myrtle oak trees has learned to draw its nutrients from the instability of air.

He learns that outside his grandmother’s garden nothing grows round and sweet. Everything is wilderness. Every growing thing reaches out to him with terrible intent. Inside her realm, she holds the power. Even his father has to obey her law. “Don’t you think you’ve been neglecting your son?” she says, “Don’t you think he needs his father around?—That *is* the reason he *visits*, you know.” The subject of their conversation is

wedged into the corner, pretending not to notice when someone mentions his name. He imagines that his eyes can glare a hole through walls, trees, clouds.

“I don’t want to leave with him,” he says, his words quivering out into space like dying stars. His words become meteors, descending on the atmosphere of their talk. His grandmother is silenced. His father hangs in disbelief. Suddenly, everything has changed. The space that stood empty between father and son is now filled with a tangible kind of discomfort. They stare at each other for a minute, wondering about the strange power of words to change the world. When one of them finally moves, it is a motion of separation. His father darts toward the door and doesn’t look back. He is left watching the red car sift forth into traffic.

The voice of the captain crashes through speakers above my head. “Ladies and gentlemen, we will be departing as soon as the runway is clear.” All of the things I own are somewhere else now, between the beach and the mountains, traveling independently of their owner. The woman to my left has buried herself in an issue of Vogue, pretending not to be surrounded by strangers, becoming invisible, in her own way, behind reading material. On my other side is the window—nearly three inches of plastic between me and the outside world.

Flight is not about being free. I’ve never understood how it is that people confuse the two. During flight, the body is strapped tight against its chair, thrown back into seat cushions by the thrusting motion of the plane moving into atmosphere. There is a moment or two of elation, elevation really, when the body rises against buckles and

straps, rising independent of luggage, rising indefinitely. Buildings become small in the distance, slipping into the peripheral. Even the ground is a distant memory.

The feeling of anonymity is a different kind of elation. Not one person on this plane is going to demand my attention. Here on this plane, I am no longer anything to anybody. Not a son, not a grandson, not a stepson, not a young man, not a student—just a boy in a blue coat and pajamas, sleeping with my head against the window pane. From this high in the sky, ocean water looks like a smooth surface. I know that down there, miles below, there are waves and currents that could drag me under. There are powers in the ocean that beach-people know never to underestimate. But from here, in this small moment, I can imagine that all the oceans of the world are reflective glass, tame enough to walk across on bare feet.

I watch the changes in the landscape, moving north. Things become greener and less watery—flat planes of reeds and crabgrass become rolling hills, trees lumbering across the tops of mountains. Wide pools of water recede into the earth. The land divides itself into squares, stitched together with fences into a patchwork quilt. The relationship between earth and sky is very different in Kentucky; unlike Florida, where they are polarized, gazing at each other across space, Kentucky's land and sky seem to converse more easily. Clouds hang lower, drenching the ground below. Mountains reach higher, climbing into the territory of the sky.

We jostle down the runway. The woman to my left shudders upon landing, her breath stolen by the quaking movement of the airplane back on land; after years of travel, my nerves have utterly submitted to this abuse. I gather up my body and collect my mind. I stand in line. There is nothing freeing about airports. I try to linger between the small

plane and the gate entrance, walking slowly across the concrete, soaking up the open space. Even Kentucky air smells different—lighter, cleaner, full of rock.

III

I have the hands of my father—dry and thick as gloves, dragging the oar, pulling the line, sifting through the sand.

I have my mother's neck, elongated in the manner of deer.

I have my father's eyes, staring out of me like two watery orbs nestled in the middle of my face.

I have a head of hair like my mother's—wild and untamable, the color of soil or trees or coffee, the color of molasses in sunlight.

I have my father's tongue, quick and unyielding, flinging word before thought, receding behind my teeth like the tide.

I have the bent nose of my mother, turned up at the harsh tip, ridged like limestone overgrown with moss.

I have my father's temper—all salt and whipping reeds.

I have my mother's ears, perking just above my brow, tilted out into the air to harness sound bouncing off mountains.

I have the torso of my father, ridiculously hairy, pale as a seagull.

I have my mother's legs, restlessly wandering the whole length of a place, interrogating the ground with the soles of my two feet.

IV

His mother has this way of saying everything and nothing at the same time. She gathers up her long hair under a barrette, her eyes settled onto the floor. They are the kind of brown you encounter at the pit of an apricot, or on the back of a flying beetle hanging on your screen door at night. Her shape is like mine—long and bent and without muscle. When she does speak, everything around her is transformed—she almost sings out, letting out long breaths between words. “I know we don’t have much,” she says, “but we deserve every bit of what we’ve got. There are some people who can take and take and take. They never get full.” She means his father.

He was only five when the two of them moved from Pensacola to Lexington, after the divorce. She told him they would live deep in the woods, where they could play the music on the radio as loud as they pleased—a place where no one had to wear shoes in the summertime because the grass was so soft. Here and now, in the middle of Lexington, struggling to survive in a house with holes in the roof and no air conditioning in the summer, that is hardly the case. Life is more like the nightmare his father described, a now fulfilled prophecy. He remembers the day his father told him that if he moved to Kentucky, he would have to live in a dirt house with a dirt floor, eating dirt every day instead of food. He was only five, but he remembers.

Neither of these two Kentuckys are real. He isn’t free; he isn’t underground. He knows that Kentucky soil is richer, and that here it is possible to make a living out of the earth. There are many homes and businesses built out of the land. In that sense, there are a great many dirt houses here, and in them people who can feel the weather in their bodies, mountain people who can tell you what to pick and what to plant. Rows of peach

trees tower outside the home his grandfather built—now nearly thirty-five years ago. In the country during springtime, when there's lots of rain, the creek bed beneath them becomes a rushing stream, and the furry orange balloons topple over, floating away with the current.

He learns how to climb trees. He spends some weekends in the country at his grandfather's house, learning how to live in the wide, empty places of the world without being afraid. In the mountains, there is a breaking down of the psychic membrane between human and land consciousness. Home and self meld into one knowledge. Mountain people are happy when it rains because the land is nourished. When the fields are frozen still with frost and snow, they are frozen with it—locked inside their houses until the way is cleared. There is a loneliness in the land that pervades the senses. Some people in the country, especially old people, go days without seeing another living person. Human interaction takes on a vivid quality that does not exist in cities; mountain people are forced to master intimacy with self before learning intimacy with others.

In Lexington, human noise is everywhere, and space is much more limited. Everything is segmented into rigid squares of territory. The houses are small, especially his own, where even indoors the air is plagued with the sound of cars booming past, their headlights illuminating his bedroom window during all hours of the night. When it rains, his mother races to place pots and pans beneath the leaking cracks in the ceiling.

Walking to and from school, the smell of exhaust streaming from passing cars, he imagines what it would be like to keep on walking. He considers the very real opportunity to walk off into the distance until his house, his life, and all the people in it become small, receding into the horizon. He feels his body and mind become small to fit

inside this condensed world, a place with no expanse of earth or sky. Sometimes he is made of water, shifting to fit the shape of his container. Sometimes he is made of clay, wedging under the pressure of foreign hands. He has learned the terrible art of being different things to different people, and no one to himself.

The car halts, screeching. My mother and I sit outside a diner in Birmingham, Alabama. We are waiting for my father's car to slide into the space beside us. I am waiting to be exchanged from one set of hands to another, like currency. The only noise besides passing traffic is our breath—mine are short and huffy, hers are long and deliberate, drawn out as if she has to force her lungs to manage air. It's almost Christmas, cold enough to dry your skin and freeze your breath. "Let's try to find some carols on the radio," she whimpers. I'm unsure whether she is telling or asking. Either way, the intent is lost over waves of static on every station.

When my father's car finally pulls up next to my door, my parents give each other a glance I can't decipher—some combination of need and aversion. He leans across my half-lowered window. "You want a burger?" He could be asking me. Or her. The three of us shuffle along into the diner.

I'm grateful for the food, grateful for anything to chew on. Sitting between my mother and father, eating is easier than trying to vomit up some talk. I wonder whether or not we look like a real family, whether the other people in the restaurant look at us and recognize both of their features in me, or whether the emotional distance is so great that we no longer resemble a whole. As soon as the food is gone, so are we. My father and I drive in the opposite direction of my mother's car. "My Old Kentucky Home"

comes on the radio, followed by a look of disgust washing across his face, curling his lip.
“Son, there are places to live,” he says to me, “and then there are places to be from.”

V

Hillbilly. Redneck. Beach-bum. City-slicker. Land-lover. Daddy’s boy.
Mama’s boy. Sea-dog. Bumpkin. White trash. Fisherman. Woodsman. Hunter.
Gatherer. Captain. Pioneer. Country boy. Tree-climber. Wave-rider. Peach-picker.
Oarsman. Stream-chaser. Corn-shucker. Swimmer. Runner. Greens and corn bread.
Fish and chips. Swimming trunks and water shoes. Mittens and thermal underwear.
Following the smell of fresh apple butter into my grandma’s kitchen. Noticing a change
in the winds before a summer squall. Wading in the leafy green sea of tobacco fields.
Climbing the rocky orange ledges of bluffs. Navigating the imaginary landscape between
two worlds: hot and cold, flesh and spirit, sea and soil.

VI

When someone asks me where I’m from, the answer is either all truth or all lie. If they are only being polite, I might tell them I’m from Kentucky. The real answer is much more complicated. If they really want to know where I’m from, they will have to hear about two distinct landscapes, and then they will have to hear about all the places in between them. I grew up on airplanes and in cars. I grew up on the road. I grew up wondering exactly where I was growing up.

It is always these in-between places in which I find myself willing to live honestly. I have learned that a state of questioning is not an unhealthy way to be. I am

both a Kentuckian and a Floridian, and neither. I can remember the scent of palm trees mingling with the salt of the ocean, and the thick, heavy smell of tobacco fields after a good rain. I come from planes and automobiles. I come from both ends of Interstate 65.

As time passes, I've been told I look more and more like my mother. Now that I'm twenty years old, my father has all but disappeared from my face and my life. I don't miss him. He remains in my anger, but no longer in my eyes. Their color has softened over the years. It all has something to do with the land here—spending the bulk of my time in the bluegrass has altered my sense of self; it has made my skin paler, and my feet more accustomed to fields than sand and water. If I were to step onto a boat now, I would not be able to keep balance. The ocean and I haven't broken our silence with each other in nearly six years, and the price of losing that relationship has been steep. Still, sometimes the smell of fish evokes memories. It's odd, the things a person comes to miss: kicking sand, gathering shells, sitting still in deep water until little fishes wander up to your bare feet.

My grandmother and I still talk. She tells me about her garden, sometimes sends me packages stuffed with kumquats and giant limes. I slip a small kumquat between my lips—the whole thing, skin and all—and instantly I remember gathering the orange, egg-shaped things from the ground with my own hands. I remember walking barefoot over sandy earth, putting up with the occasional prick from twigs, rocks, and pine needles.

Her husband, my grandfather, died several years ago. My other grandfather followed him into death, more evidence of the terrible balance at work in my life. I miss them. Recently, I've come to believe that when a person dies they become a part of the land forever, that the return of the body to soil is spiritually as well as biologically sound.

I imagine my grandfathers slipping into the green stalks of elephant ears and homegrown corn. I glimpse them peeking out at me from dogwood flowers and orange blossoms.

The same rain nourishes them all, the same air and light. The same glowing orb looks on from the sky, dragging its body across the vast blue like a ship at sea, a blood-red holy thing, an ancestor.