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THE LONG HORIZON

by

Tiffany Smith

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Jennifer Sinor, Ph.D.  
Major Professor

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Logan, Utah

2019

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## ABSTRACT

## The Long Horizon

by

Tiffany Smith, Master of Science

Utah State University 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor  
Department: English

The following thesis is a two-part memoir describing my experience with severe depression and anxiety after my mother passed away from metastatic breast cancer in 2014. It relates some of the struggles I faced in my grieving process over a period of several years and how I ultimately found healing by turning to the natural world, particularly the desert areas of southern Utah. In my memoir, I explore grief as an emotional landscape by comparing basic processes of geology (deposition, uplift, erosion) to the grieving process. I explore my attraction to the desert with scenes taking place at Bryce Canyon National Park and in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. I also relate a trip I took to the coast of Washington (one of my mother's favorite places), expecting to work through some of my emotions, but during which, I almost ended my life. I conclude with a hike to the Escalante Natural Bridge where I learn to accept the fact of my mother's passing and move forward with optimism and more openness to the present moment.

(84 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Long Horizon

Tiffany Smith

The idea for my thesis stemmed from a braided essay I wrote for a creative writing class. I didn't initially plan on expanding my class essay into a memoir, but I have discovered that oftentimes the story finds *us* rather than the other way around. Using the memoir form allowed me to bridge quite naturally the subjects of grief and landscape by giving me space to reflect on a turbulent period in my life and arrive at some sort of conclusion. While I could see the importance of the natural world in my life, I didn't realize at first how it helped me work through the grief, depression, and anxiety I experienced after my mother passed away. Writing about that period of my life helped me see the direct connections between landscape and healing. Grief itself can feel circular or like a whirlpool with no escape. Healing, on the other hand, transpires more linearly. For that reason, I decided to use geology as a metaphor to demonstrate how I worked through the emotional landscape of grief toward acceptance and healing after tragedy.

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I am also indebted to my family for their encouragement to keep at it. My appreciation extends to my dear friend Amy Rosenvall for helping me not get lost in all the stress. Finally, a big thank you to Joe Perry for his patience and humor during my most stressful moments.

Tiffany Smith

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## Critical Introduction

In her book, *When Women Were Birds*, Terry Tempest Williams writes, “I told my husband life is an act of faith. He said, no, it is a choice.” But life doesn’t often feel like a choice, and what you have faith in sometimes disappears. That is how Williams felt when, several years after her mother’s death, she opened her mother’s journals only to discover that every one of them was blank. When my own mother passed away in 2014 from metastatic breast cancer, I lost not just my mother, but a best friend. We shared a close relationship, and, when she died, I fell into severe depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts out of which I had to make the choice to continue living despite great personal loss. Like the pages of Williams’ mother’s journals, the grief I experienced seemed like an immense empty space impossible to fill. That grief was also a place, a landscape I learned to navigate in order to heal.

The landscape of grief is difficult to traverse. On one hand, even though we *must* grieve, it is so personal, so painful, that we often close ourselves off from it or we feel we cannot do it in the presence of others. Perhaps we don’t want to appear foolish, weak, or too emotional. On the other hand, when surrounded by support from others who knew the loved one as well, we might feel the need to comfort *them*, even though we, ourselves, can barely stem the tide of emotion.

I chose to write my thesis as a memoir in order to examine my process of grieving and how the natural world, specifically the desert, helped me find healing. When my mother passed away, I had not experienced anything like that kind of pain before, and I was shocked by the depth of emotion. I tried to block it out, become numb to it, not talk

about it at all, or, when people asked, I would tell them I was deeply sad, of course, but I wouldn't describe the depression, anxiety, and the increasing desire to commit suicide. My thesis explores what drove me to desire death over a continuation of the pain I felt at that time and how turning more fully to the natural world kept me from seeking that end. While grief drove me toward suicide, landscape guided me back.

My mother had a deep connection to the natural world, specifically to southern Utah where she grew up, and the Washington coast where my family and I visited annually for over twenty years. She and I often retreated to southern Utah together. She was educated as a geologist and talked about the landscape while we hiked and camped, explaining what we were seeing and how the formations took shape. Through her, I developed a love and reverence for the natural world, not realizing how central it would become when I lost her.

After her death, at first, I returned to places we ventured together as a way of bringing her back and trying to relive those memories. Of course, that was impossible, and only contributed to the growing body of grief inside me. Yet, at home, I couldn't face the grief either, mostly out of guilt in which I argued within myself that I could have helped her better in her last few months as her caretaker, and, perhaps even prevented her death. Attempts to ignore my grief only increased the sadness and turmoil inside me that took form in panic attacks, severe depression, and frequent suicidal thoughts.

It took several years for me to realize I had to make a significant change. That realization came in 2017 when I took a trip to La Push, Washington, and, while passing through Oregon, nearly took my own life on the banks of the Columbia River. I saw how deeply my grief ran and that I couldn't keep expecting the same experiences with places I

had known while my mother was alive. Instead, I had to move on by creating my own experiences in those places. I still don't know entirely what allowed me to step away from the edge of the river that day, but I know it had something to do with being fully present to the world around me, even for just a few moments—looking up at the clouds overhead, the trees on the riverbanks tossing in the wind, the grey-black basalt of the Columbia River Gorge. Something in that place showed me the beauty of the world and gave me the understanding that it was big enough to hold my grief. Even though I still felt the pain, I realized the depth of my grief, and, from that, my desire to overcome it strengthened. I didn't want to keep living with that emotional baggage; I had to let it go.

After returning home from that trip to Washington, over the course of that summer, I spent a great deal of time in the Deer Creek and Calf Creek areas of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Returning to those places time after time allowed me to bridge the gap between my mother and me. Drawing on the love we both felt for the desert, I found a more purposeful relationship with those places, one which allowed me to rebuild the ties with her that I thought had been severed.

The desert was unbiased; it didn't judge and tell me how I ought to do things differently or that I was even doing them wrong. It also didn't care whether I lived or died. Landscape gave me a place to be fully present, a space apart to reflect on life without my mother and decide whether or not it was worth it for me to continue living. At first, I returned to southern Utah hoping something tragic would happen, such as getting struck by lightning or slipping and falling, so I wouldn't have to make that choice whether to live or die. I could see no other way to end the pain than by ending my life. As I returned often to the same places in the Grand Staircase, my perspective changed. The

stillness and solitude I felt there gave me space and calm from the storm of emotions and disturbed thoughts within me. Finding that stillness helped me see that life actually is a choice, as Terry Tempest Williams describes. It's a series of day-by-day choices we must make, from the most mundane to the most serious, such as if I was really going to take that final step off a pier into the Columbia River. Those choices add up to daily acts of persistence. It is this persistence Mark Doty examines in his memoir called *Heaven's Coast*.

Doty became an important guide for me in writing my thesis. *Heaven's Coast* takes readers through Doty's experience of losing his partner, Wally, to HIV. "Our apocalypse is daily," he writes, "but so is our persistence." It was through reading *Heaven's Coast* that I developed the central question of my thesis: How does the physical landscape and the subtle landscape of the body serve as terrain in which to explore the apocalypse of grief and its aftermath? *Heaven's Coast* takes place on the Atlantic coastline. The tidal zone where water meets shore becomes a metaphor of Doty's own troubled healing. While Doty relies on the Atlantic coast literally and metaphorically to explore his journey of healing, my memoir takes place in western landscapes—the coast of Washington and the southern Utah desert—and I demonstrate how those physical landscapes brought healing to my inner landscape. As I hiked through the desert and studied the geology of the area, I observed that as the physical landscape was a place where enormous change occurred over millions of years. I realized I could also change my inner landscape with time, patience, and making the choice to move forward *through* the grief, in order to accept the loss of my mother.

Terry Tempest Williams' iconic memoir *Refuge* has been another guide in writing my thesis. I first read *Refuge* while volunteering at Bryce Canyon National Park in 2010. By then, my mother was two years out of her first encounter with breast cancer. At that time, reading *Refuge* touched me as I considered myself lucky that my own mother had survived her cancer. Five years later (one year after my mother died) I read *Refuge* a second time. That time, I recognized the voice of deep grief in those pages. Like Doty's, Williams' honesty opened another way for me to view my own tragedy—an experience not to be ashamed of, but one worthy of exploration in connection with the physical landscape.

A third guide, geology, helped me choose both form and structure. Like a memoir, geology offers a chance to look back on the past. We see what conditions were like in the natural world at a relative point in time, what life forms existed, what kinds of events occurred, from the small to the catastrophic, that altered the course of natural events and how the landscape presently appears. Memoir allows us to explore the terrain of our lives—events that altered us, perhaps setting us on a course entirely different than the one we expected or even wanted. Judith Barrington writes in her book *Writing the Memoir*, “The memoirist need not necessarily know what she thinks about her subject but she must be trying to find out; she may never arrive at a definitive verdict, but she must be willing to share her intellectual and emotional quest for answers.” Memoir allowed me to bring together quite naturally the subjects of grief and landscape. It gave me space to reflect on a turbulent period in my life and arrive at some sort of conclusion. The scenes and opinions I write about in my thesis may not be definitive answers to questions I have contemplated in the years since my mother passed away but are explorations of how the

natural world informed my grieving process, and with time, allowed me to come to a place of healing through acceptance.

When I began writing this memoir, I knew my basic ideas would center around grief and landscape, but in trying to recreate the inner turmoil I experienced, I expected the structure to be more nonlinear. As I got deeper into the writing, however, I discovered that while grief acts like a vortex or a whirlpool, something circular in which there is no clear way out, healing mimics geology more closely time, transpiring in a more linear process. Time only moves forward, and it is time that also allows great change to occur. Like the individual layers visible in a canyon or a gorge, with each layer representing different environmental conditions, my experiences with depression and anxiety felt chaotic and circular at the time, but ultimately, they charted forward movement toward a calmer end.

Memories are similar to core principles of geology: deposition, uplift, erosion. Our memories accumulate from our experiences; layer upon layer they are put down, buried over and sometimes forgotten. Uplifting begins when a shift occurs—a traumatic or deeply moving event on the human level; in nature, that shift might be pressure within the earth that caused, for example, the uplift of the Colorado Plateau, or the meeting of two continental plates that formed the Wasatch Mountains. Then comes folding and faulting processes that occur over millions of years until finally weathering and erosion loosens individual sediments and washes them away. We see today what has been left behind in the form of canyons, cliffs, hoodoos, slopes, and valleys.

In the human experience, our physical bodies are like the earth, our memories the sediments that are laid down year after year—some easily remembered and happily

reflected upon, others forgotten or wanting to be forgotten. Memories are buried, until something shifts. It doesn't always have to be traumatic, but those moments are, perhaps, most worthy of inspection because of how they alter us: how we view the world and ourselves, how traumatic events set us on a different course than we may have anticipated. In *Heaven's Coast*, Mark Doty writes, "Remembering is the work of the living, and the collective project of memory is enormous; it involves the weight of all our dead, the ones we have known ourselves and the ones we know only from stories." Remembering acts as the forces of erosion that filter our memories—loosening and removing what is on the surface, then proceeding deeper, even to painful areas we don't want to return to. During my writing process, remembering, as Doty described, was *work*. It meant digging up old memories, reading journal entries, talking with my family, and trying to recall specific details and feelings I had tried to block out for years.

While writing this memoir meant moving back into a landscape of incredible sorrow and guilt, it also meant that crossing the landscape of grief made me examine my attraction to the desert and ultimately see with more clarity why it matters: a connection with the desert means a connection also with my mother.

Moving into that space, however uncomfortable and painful, informed my present moments more positively. I learned to see my fears, insecurities, and vulnerabilities more simply as passing emotions or states of mind rather than permanent conditions. As in nature, landforms we currently see are the features more resistant to weathering and erosion. After a traumatic event on the human emotional landscape, it can take time to see the moments of resilience—persistence—we might never thought we had. But looking back allowed me to see the linear progression of moving beyond tragedy.

One of the greatest challenges in writing my thesis was narrowing down a traceable theme. Grief takes many forms and it was difficult to distinguish what my grief most felt like. I finally saw it as a landscape. While I focus a great deal on geology in this piece, I also kept returning to experiences that involved water in some form or another—rain, creeks, rivers, ocean. Geology lays out time layer upon layer, chronologically. Grief on the other hand, feels like a whirlpool where memories come and go, disturbing that chronology. But grief, too, comes back to this linear process that characterizes geology and time. Time only has forward momentum and I realized that I also had to internalize that forward momentum in order to find a way out of a landscape of depression and avoid getting pulled back into that whirlpool as I had in years past.

Like the earth's natural processes, the grieving process must be played out. That process varies for each of us. It's commendable that humans have a natural instinct for compassion when we find someone in distress. We want to give them support and comfort just as we need it in our own moments of crisis. But we must also recognize that people need a personal space to grieve. That's not to say we shouldn't refrain from giving advice or taking action against self-destructive behavior, but our concern ought to allow the grieving to *grieve*. We ought to be cautious that our words don't shut them down when they need to open up; that we don't smother them when they need to expand and breathe; sensitive enough that we don't trespass on the path to healing that they need to tread, nor intrude on the experience they need to work through.

This memoir offers a glimpse into my journey of healing after intense grief. I explore my retreat into places my mother and I first experienced together, as I essentially tried to bring her back. Later, as I returned to some of those desert places, I realized I

could still have a meaningful relationship with the land as I remained fully present to it, just as I had to be fully present to my grief. The times of intense grieving—depression, anxiety, tears—those earthshaking moments where I was forced to demolish present structures to make room for another, more complete version of myself, all happened in their own time. Experiencing severe depression is not fun nor is it something one wears as a badge of honor or shame. As I have learned to navigate my own lowest, darkest moments—real moments where I wondered if those would be my last moments alive—I have developed a fuller sense of what it means to be human. It is opening up to a fresh perspective, one that encompasses a wide spectrum of experiences. In his poem *Rhu Mor*, Norman MacCaig explores a moment where a new consciousness, or a new perspective, opens:

*Space opens and from the heart of the matter  
Sheds a descending grace that makes, for a moment,  
That naked thing, Being, a thing to understand.*

Those moments of understanding, of space opening, began to happen more frequently as I journeyed to La Push, Washington. It was stepping back from the edge of a pier on the Columbia River. It was fighting through a drenching storm even as I fought through my thoughts on the Washington coast. It was finding solitude in the redrock country of southern Utah. It was sitting by Upper Calf Creek Falls and recognizing the miracle of water in such an arid place. It was pondering the death of a ponderosa pine at Yovimpa Point. It was facing a fear of water that I'd had all my life and hiking the Escalante River to see a natural bridge. It was realizing that landscape itself served as a bridge to my mother. Even now, in 2018, it's an ongoing struggle at times as I realize that mental illness will likely remain with me for many years. Giving myself time as well as

making the choice to keep moving forward, allow me to return to a place of stillness and acceptance after losing my mother—an ending that opened a new beginning.

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## PART I

## The Long Horizon

The call came sometime after 3 a.m., September 22, 2014.

“Tiff, you better come.” The low, grounded voice of my sister’s partner, Shelley, sounded through the line. “Her heart rate and blood pressure are going down. The nurses say she won’t last much longer.”

“Ok, I’m coming.”

I hung up, hurried to change out of my pajamas, and rushed out the door.

The inevitable had arrived: my mother’s second fight with cancer was about to end. She had fought a similar battle five years earlier, in 2009, after she discovered a lump in her left breast. She had fought that battle and won. But not this time.

In June, 2014, my mother visited her doctor about a cough that had been pestering her for the past year or so. It wasn’t a hard, hacking cough that often accompanies something like the flu, just a soft, consistent cough that she kept “meaning to get checked out.” The doctor took some tests and came back with a most unwelcome diagnosis: cancer.

More tests revealed spots of cancer not just in her lungs but in her brain as well. The doctors put her on a chemotherapy pill instead of an IV this time and also began radiation treatment. I remembered her radiation treatments from her previous cancer and the burning, agonizing pain she endured as they treated the area around her left breast. This time, I couldn’t imagine the kind of treatment required for cancer in a person’s brain.

During July, I had taken her to her appointments. She'd had to wear a special mask while the radiologist essentially spot-treated the cancerous cells. My three siblings and I had celebrated our mother's sixty-second birthday a couple of weeks before on September 6, 2014. Something about that day, however, marked a change, and over the next two weeks, she took a steady downhill turn. Now, September 22, it appeared the end had come.

Two days before, she fell into a coma and I'd called an ambulance to take her to the hospital in Provo, Utah. There, the doctors informed me and my three siblings that it would only be a matter of days.

As I got in my car and drove to the hospital, Crosby, Stills, and Nash sang in flawless harmony from the stereo.

*"Oh when you were young, did you question all the answers? Did you envy all the dancers who had all the nerve?"*

The song was upbeat, cheerful—an odd choice of music given the circumstance, but my mother had always loved this group for their anti-war stance. She grew up as a rebellious teenager in the sixties, after all. She loved this song in particular for its call to stop wasting time, stop wasting love, and start living life.

It must have been the song, then, that provided the strange calm I felt as I navigated the city's dark streets. At this time of night, I could hit all the green lights, so I sped down State Street with neither traffic nor red lights to hamper me, keeping a wary eye out for police cars hiding in the shadows.

*"So much time to make up everywhere you turn. Time we have wasted on the way..."*

I pulled into the hospital parking lot, found a space, and took an elevator up to the sixth floor. The door to my mother's room stood halfway open, a pale glow coming from the single light hanging over the sink in the corner.

My sister, Jen, turned as I came in.

"She's gone," Jen said, eyes red as tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, it happened so fast. It was just a few minutes after Shelly called you."

My two brothers and sisters-in-law arrived just minutes after me, followed a short while later by my grandparents. My parents were divorced and my father knew nothing about my mother even having cancer. She had made it clear that she didn't want her ex-husband to know anything about her illness, and I honored her wish even as part of me felt he ought to know. I understood something of my mother's desire to appear strong and independent as a trait that ran stubbornly through me as well.

For the next several hours we cried, we reminisced, we arranged to meet later that day with Funeral Services to discuss her cremation, and we gathered our spirits for the reality that we would no longer be privileged to her living, breathing presence.

As devastating as it was, I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of relief. I'd spent the last three months living at her house to help care for her. My family all lived in Utah Valley, but since I was the only single one in the family, it made sense that I assume the role of caretaker. I kept working part-time but helped fix her meals, clean the house, and keep track of all the required medications. When she stopped driving after her radiation treatments began, I drove her to all of her appointments and anywhere else she needed to go. As draining as it was to help her out with all of these physical things, as well as

working part time and keeping my yoga and karate practices, the emotional toil nearly drove me mad.

Throughout the previous three months, there was so much that didn't make sense. After completing radiation, during her follow-up appointments, the doctors kept saying everything looked "normal." For me, I felt a growing sense of doom that sometimes exploded in private bouts of anger and tears, utter hopelessness, and fear that left me tense, irritable, and unable to sleep at night. Of course, I didn't want to show any of that to my mother. For her, I wanted to be positive and compassionate, strong and capable so that not only would she recover with the least amount of pain as possible, but that our whole family could get through this temporary nightmare and move on with our lives.

But my mother didn't make it. In those early morning hours on September 22, the relief I felt was simply the burden of caretaker lifted and then replaced with a new burden: grief. Little did I know, this new burden, grief, would take myriad forms over the next few years as it rose and fell like a tide that threatened to obliterate the close relationship I shared with my mother. Not only that, the grief would spark the onset of depression and anxiety that threatened to consume my very desire to live.

When there was nothing else my family and I could do at the hospital that morning, we dispersed to our own places before reconvening later on that day with Funeral Services.

As I returned to my car, I didn't try to stop the tears, nor did I stop Crosby, Stills, and Nash from singing me home again.

*"So much water moving underneath the bridge. Let the water come and carry us away."*

As far back as I can remember, my mother and I enjoyed a close relationship bridged by our mutual love for the natural world. Much of it began as she shared one of her greatest passions with me: geology. In 1990, several years after my mother divorced my father, she returned to school at Brigham Young University to finish her Bachelor's degree in geology. When I was six and seven years old, she sometimes took my brother and me to campus with her while she did her lab work.

“Just put things back where you find them,” she would tell us. While she did her homework, my brother and I wandered up and down the aisles of that enormous room with their rows of shelves loaded with rocks, fossils, and dinosaur bones, each specimen marked with names I couldn't pronounce and numbers too big to mean anything. I don't remember asking any specific questions about the rocks we admired there; I just remember the wonder of their colors and textures.

During my childhood, whenever my family visited our mother's hometown of Cannonville in south-central Utah, or went hiking at Bryce Canyon National Park, she would tell the story of the landscape for us. Her passion for the earth came out in her teaching. I can still recall how she waved her hands to point to a particular hill or knob, or how she stacked her arms while demonstrating how the layers of sediments layered over each other and then subsequently eroded away. Her happiness shone through her eagerness to share this knowledge with us. As a child, I wasn't always a willing listener, but she planted the seeds of appreciation that grew into a deep-seated love for the desert as I got older. Like any relationship, my relationship with the desert has changed over the

years, most distinctly during the year I spent as a volunteer at Bryce Canyon after graduating from BYU in 2010.

While I never planned on permanently giving up close proximity to southern Utah, I still planned on attending graduate school somewhere and continue professional training in the Humanities. During my senior year of my undergraduate degree at BYU, I applied to five graduate programs, but as my final semester ended and I received one rejection letter after another, I realized I had to answer the dreaded question of, now what?

I was embarrassed to have not made it into any of the schools I applied to in 2010. Education was highly valued in my family and going to graduate school was simply the next step to my desired career in the Humanities. What I saw then as an embarrassment, I see now was an opportunity to delve deeper into the natural world. My mother suggested that I consider the national park service. Working for the government had its pros and cons like any other job, but the park service would allow me to connect with people *and* the natural world. To get hired with the park service, however, people were either veterans or began as volunteers. I had a cousin who worked at Bryce Canyon so it made sense to start there. They had a volunteer opening in the Interpretive Division, so in late September 2010, I packed a couple of suitcases and headed for Bryce.

The Interpretive Division members at Bryce Canyon worked the Visitor Center front desk answering questions (How long does it take to hike the Navajo Loop? Where can I see Thor's Hammer? How many miles to Yovimpa Point? Where is the nearest hotel from here? How long does it take to get to Zion? What's the best viewpoint? Where

can we get some food?) and helping visitors find their way around the park. They also led hikes and carried out evening programs at the Visitor Center. Even though in years past I had made many visits to the park and the Bryce Valley area, for me, it was an odd combination of formality, government protocol, and feeling like I was still partly on vacation.

My first two weeks were especially disorienting as I had to memorize exact distances, all the names of the viewpoints and exactly how to reach them, how far away other parks were from Bryce, know the daily weather forecast, learn how to use a radio to connect law enforcement if necessary, know specific names of the geologic layers, the flora and fauna. Coming from a background of critical thinking, writing essays, and interpreting art, each new day brought another load of additional information that I had to relay to visitors correctly or they would get lost or upset, or in the worst-case scenario, injured. Luckily my mother was only a phone call away to talk some sense into me when I confided to her that I wasn't sure I was cut out for this type of job after all.

“You've only been there two weeks!” she reminded me. “You'll do fine. You just have to give it time.”

In another phone conversation, she said, “I'm jealous, you know. If I could, I'd leave the office and go work there with you!”

She worked both as a secretary for the Dean of Humanities at BYU and as a director the college's International Cinema program. Although she loved the people she worked with, I knew how she disliked BYU itself. Ironic, then, that with her geology training she worked in the College of Humanities, while I had just graduated in

Humanities and now volunteered for the park service where part of my job was to understand and explain the geology of this intensely visited park.

I chose to stay because of her. If I had given in to my doubts and insecurities, I would have missed an opportunity to deepen my relationship with that place I thought I knew. Although my position as a volunteer required me to know the park in a formal way, the very next week I would discover that I really wasn't giving up the personal relationship I had with Bryce. Instead, I had the chance to see the park in more detail than I ever had before.

In the first week of October, 2010, I arrived at Bryce Point, the highest overlook surrounding the main amphitheater of the park, just before 9 a.m. to lead a hike for visitors along the rim to Inspiration Point. The clouds were thick, the rain steady; I wasn't surprised when nobody showed up.

I was just beginning my third week of volunteering at Bryce Canyon. After two weeks of sunshine and the lingering heat of summer, a storm rolled in and hunkered down over the entire region. For nearly a full week, we received rain that surprised even the locals.

I waited ten or fifteen minutes just to be sure I wouldn't miss any latecomers for the guided hike, then walked out to the tip of Bryce Point. It was a narrow, nose-like point with chain-link fence cemented into the soft, erodible limestone. Since most of Bryce Canyon's famous hoodoos were concentrated there in the amphitheater, it made sense that the park's one million annual visitors spent the majority of their time there. Today, however, the hoodoos—those stunning orange and pink pinnacles—had vanished

in a dense cauldron of fog. I felt like I stood on the edge of oblivion. Clumps of yellow rabbitbrush, stalks tattered and bent, clung to the edges of the slopes, but past those edges, nothing seemed to exist.

I wasn't scheduled to return to the visitor's center until noon, so when it became obvious that no one was going to show up, I decided to take the hike myself. From the tip of the point, I walked back up toward the parking lot, then took a gravelly trailhead that split off to the right and curved away into the fog.

My boots sunk an inch deep into the mud, each step loud and wet in the stillness around me. The trail followed near the edge of the rim. Although I could not see them, I knew the hoodoos were there, rocks spread out like the ruins of ancient castles. Those rocks drew hundreds of visitors each day during the peak summer season, hundreds of people seeking to capture their experience in the click of a camera shutter. When I had visited the park with my family in years past, I'd felt that same urgency to take as many pictures as possible from the same points of view. Now, as a volunteer with the possibility of a few months to a year here, I had time to stop and think about what I was actually looking at.

I considered myself lucky. Most people would only see this place once in their lifetime. There were a few people at the point when I headed for the trail, but as I moved into the fog along the rim, I was alone.

The rain lessened to a light patter. A juniper, not much taller than me, sat poised on the edge of the trail. The tree leaned backward as if trying to slow down its inevitable demise as its roots delved into the eroding cliff on which it stood. It was a dilemma many trees faced when daring to live out their lives here.

Continuing along the trail, I walked only a few yards more before pausing in front of a twisted ponderosa pine. Away from the edge of the plateau, most ponderosas rose straight and true toward the desert sky. To me, they were noble trees with their thick reddish-gold bark a protective armor against forest fires. This one, however, rose only a couple of feet before splitting into two fat branches more intent on crawling along the ground than reaching for the sky. Such deformities were more prevalent in the trees growing out of solid rock or closer to the edge of the plateau. The rain, however, heightened the gold and red of the inner bark, with the outer bark a heavy, earthy brown. After waiting weeks and months for a storm in that arid landscape—a storm that lingered instead of the quick afternoon bursts—that ponderosa could now drink its fill.

Out there on the rim, away from the formality of the Visitor Center desk, I found myself able to relax now that I didn't have to pretend to be an expert, like I had worked there for years, and answer a long stream of questions. I could slow down and allow both my eyes and mind to wander. I had never seen such a storm like this over the park, the hoodoos hidden behind silent veils of rain and mist. In many ways, I never expected to be here and certainly not on a day like this, in a familiar landscape that overnight had become quite foreign, staring at a weather-worn juniper like we were somehow related. I had fully expected to be attending graduate school by now, but earlier in the year, as I received one rejection letter after another delivering apologetic words and wishing me good luck with my future, I was forced to find an alternative. Coming here was my second choice, but maybe it would be all right after all. Maybe I didn't have to pursue just one course of action on the timeline I expected.

Although I was in a familiar landscape, my duties felt well outside my comfort zone. Even so, I felt a surprising sense of relief. The past five years I'd been cooped up in university life, studying, and planning for my future. It felt strange to not have to think about homework and to not worry about preparing for the next test or essay to write. My Humanities training taught me to be observant and critical, always on the lookout for symbols and deeper meaning. Now, I was learning what it meant to observe the world right in front of me. I'd been visiting Bryce once or twice a year for almost my whole life and now, I could finally slow down and observe why I liked it so much. Now, thanks to my mother's suggestion, I had space to consider more options. Now, I was beginning to see that I didn't have to forge ahead on just one path. I could slow down and learn to analyze the world right in front of me.

This landscape seemed so permanent with the rocks and the trees so static. And yet, it occupied a timeline far outside of my limited human scope. Then, in 2010, I was twenty-five years old. I would be lucky to live somewhere between eighty and a hundred years old. Those rocks, however, had been around for millions and millions of years in some form or another: first as sediments laid down by a great seaway, then faulted, lithified, and uplifted with the rest of the Colorado Plateau. Weathering and erosion began wearing down the layers and sculpting the limestone into the bizarre shapes that now held my attention. The limestone is comparatively soft and makes Bryce Canyon one of the fastest eroding landscapes on the Colorado Plateau—roughly twelve inches per century. In geologic time, that amount of change is stunning. What seemed permanent was actually changing right before me.

With the wide views closed in by fog, I turned my attention to smaller worlds. Patterns in tree bark, their colors deepened with moisture, became miniature jigsaw puzzles; raindrops dangled in tear-shaped crystals from the tips of pine needles; the slight movement of the fog could have been the very breath of the earth—inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

When I reached the next viewpoint, Inspiration Point, it was almost strange to see other people. I leaned against the log railing and looked out over the amphitheater. The fog had shifted enough that I could make out a few features: the Wall of Windows, the thin line of the Peek-a-Boo trail, and, far below, Bryce Creek. Usually nothing more than a gravelly dry bed, today, Bryce Creek was a small river as a hundred tiny streams flowed down the slopes and cliffs to meld into one streambed.

As I stood there, two ladies walked up and stood nearby me.

“Too bad we can’t see anything,” I overheard one of them say.

“I know,” her companion replied. “We come all this way and can’t see a thing.”

They stayed a few more minutes and then walked back to their car in the parking lot.

After they left, I looked over toward Bryce Point where, a little over an hour ago, I stood there unable to see past the edge of the trail. Looking down into that deep well of fog, I had felt a sudden desire to leap over the safety of the chain-link fence and dive in, trusting that somehow, those clouds would carry me gently to the bottom a thousand feet below.

During my volunteering sojourn at Bryce Canyon, I was still very Edward Abbey-esque in my views of park visitation. Abbey wrote in his iconic *Desert Solitaire*, “In the first place, you can’t see *anything* from a car; you’ve got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet, crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus.” While I wasn’t at the point of drawing blood from crawling through thornbush and cactus, I still (unfairly) wanted people to have more than the “window experience” of their park. I wanted them to touch the rocks and get mud on their boots and listen to how the wind sifted through the ponderosa trees. I wanted them to sit on the rim for more than just a few minutes and watch the shadows change over the hoodoos and put their nose up to a ponderosa trunk to inhale that creamy vanilla-pine scent. In other words, I insisted that others connect with that place as I connected with it.

Although I tried to put aside my personal affiliation for the place, I grew more agitated as I noticed a pattern in the questions:

“We only have a half hour to spend here—what’s the best viewpoint?”

In my many phone conversations with my mother, I often complained about what I judged as people not being appreciative enough of the beauty right in front of them.

“You can’t spend five minutes at a viewpoint, snap some pictures, and say you’ve seen Bryce,” I said to her.

“You’ve been spoiled because you’ve lived close enough to visit it every year of your life,” she replied. “It’s just impossible for people to see it exactly the way you do.” Her voice of reason always countered my flighty passions.

That year at Bryce showed me a lot of things, the most obvious of which was that working for the park service wasn’t the direction I wanted to go.

A year later, October 2011, I stood at Yovimpa Point, the highest viewpoint within the park's boundaries. I was alone—the end of a day and the end of the busy summer season. I was also nearing the end of my time at Bryce. Although I had learned a lot during my sojourn there, I ultimately decided that a government job was not the direction I wanted to go. By December, I would find another job and return to Utah Valley before preparing another round of graduate school applications.

That evening, a mid-autumn chill clung to the air; steady wind breathed through the boughs of firs, spruces, and bristlecone pines. Clouds drifting above the horizon changed moment to moment—blue, yellow, pink, purple—as the sun tucked itself away for the night. I had just come from my shift at the Visitor Center. There was still enough daylight that I had time for a walk, so I took the Bristlecone Loop trail, a rather flat, easy one-mile loop through the forest and along the rim.

As I crossed the parking lot to get to the trailhead, I noticed a few cars still in the lot, but as I made my way into the forest, my only companions were a few squirrels, ravens, and mule deer.

Once in the forest, the air warmed with the smell of earth and trees. Firs and spruces pressed close around me, their bodies filling the air with a rich, woody scent. As I looked up, I saw the tops of their trunks rocking back and forth, swaying in time with the wind. Occasionally one let out a groan as wood fibers stretched too far.

At over 9000 feet elevation, Yovimpa Point is only slightly higher than the more popular Rainbow Point, but Yovimpa is always quieter, lonely almost, as if most visitors used their energy to reach Rainbow Point and just hadn't the stamina or interest to walk the last mile to Yovimpa. It became one of my favorite points to visit. More often than

not, this particular viewpoint offered a sense of isolation that I found myself enjoying more and more. Surrounded by this scenery every day, it seemed I needed more time alone in order to internalize it.

The trail took me close by the rim where I could view the cliffs once more and look out over the successive steps of the “great geologic stairway” as Clarence Dutton, the first government geologist to make an official survey of the region, called it in the 1870s. His record later influenced the naming of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in 1996. Bryce Canyon represents the top step of the Grand Staircase.

There, out on the rim, the wind blew harder, whistling now through the trees and in the crevices of cliffs. I put my hands in my jacket to warm them. Resting my elbows on the thick log fence surrounding the point, I peered over the edge at the limestone cliffs. How quickly their colors changed in a single day. I’d seen these same cliffs blaze like fire from the morning sun; a blinding pink at noon; now, as the sun set, they rested in soft orange and red as smoldering coals. If I could have reached out and touched them, I imagined how warm they would feel.

These cliffs marked the edge of the Paunsagunt Plateau on which the park sat, and then gave way to the lower benches and mesas of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Away to the east, Kodachrome Basin lay in strokes of pale red with the milky white hills around the town of Henrieville just north of the Basin. At this elevation, I could easily pick out the various landmarks dotting the monument: Mollie’s Nipple, No Man’s Mesa, Skutumpah Road, the White Cliffs, Kaibab Plateau, Navajo Mountain. Their names came to mind like the memories of friends. Even ones I could not see—Bull Valley Gorge, Willis Creek, Everett’s Hollow—I knew they were there, somewhere, in

the maze of sage, sandstone, and clay. At this elevation, the distances around the 1.9 million-acre monument shrank to mere inches. How easy it was to see all those landmarks, how small the distances became. Standing on the top step gave me the advantage of seeing everything else laid out so clearly. On that far western edge of the Colorado Plateau, I had a privileged view of time. The top layers at Bryce Canyon are part of the Claron Formation laid down by a calm, inland sea that repeatedly rose and fell about fifty million years ago. The sea dried up, the Colorado Plateau rose, and the topmost layers began weathering into the famous hoodoos that we see today. One thing I have learned when studying the earth is that with practice, thinking in terms of millions of years becomes routine. You begin to suspend a limited perspective to glimpse the earth as it may have been millions of years ago.

At the moment, I walked around the point and then paused at the base of a dead ponderosa. The tree rose perhaps fifty feet above me, skeletal branches outstretched like a dancer reaching for her partner, but stood on the edge of the slope, dry and dead. Even in death, its roots remained locked into the slope on which it had lived. From the width of its trunk, I guessed the tree to be somewhere around a hundred years old and wondered how many years even since its death it had been here. During its lifetime, it would have been a witness to the changing seasons and colors on the cliffs and mesas, exposed to the cold of 9000 foot-high winters, watching the slope erode at its base, and its own life get closer to the edge.

Perched on the edge of the slope, it looked as if any moment it could topple over and tumble all the way to the bottom. Yet for how fragile it appeared, as I ran my hands across the hard, smooth surface, the bark long since weathered away, it felt as solid and

strong as stone. I pressed my palms against it, feeling the coldness and finality of death in its bonelike form, but the way it rose into the darkening sky—a great form sculpted by wind and water—it seemed to me a memorial to a past life.

Stepping back from the tree, I was surprised how dark the sky had become. I glanced around but I was still the only person there—still alone with the wind rushing over the edge of the plateau and ravens calling to one another from the trees. As I walked back to my car, I thrust my hands, stiff and cold, back into my pockets to warm them, flexing them to keep the blood moving and feeling something of a new life flowing through my veins. Perhaps it was the high desert landscape affording me a glimpse into the relative nature of time. There was more to these rocks than just bright colors and fantastic shapes. They had lifetimes of history lying silent within them. Perhaps I was beginning to internalize this landscape after all—the earth beneath me, the solid, even if impermanent, nature of the rocks, the roots of trees and shrubs stabilizing themselves on that rugged terrain. I was learning to feel the stillness of that place within myself, knowing that change was possible, but also understanding that change was not something to fear.

Except for the wind tossing the branches of the trees, it all appeared absolutely still, suspended as a picture in time. But as static as it seemed, that landscape was always in flux. Atoms moved unseen, occasional rocks gave way to the constant pull of gravity, sap and water ran in roots and through the trunks of trees as the blood in my veins. The rocks themselves represented lithified ancient beaches, coral reefs, oceans, rivers, lakes, and vast deserts. Even the ground beneath me, part of the greater Colorado Plateau, still

rose from unseen pressures deep within the earth. All around me the landscape spoke of movement and change.

Like that landscape, our bodies change, cycling through cells, nutrients moving through the body, blood flowing through vessels and veins, our energy rising and falling from day to day. In that time, too, my mother was still rebuilding her life a year-and-a-half after her first encounter with cancer. The chemotherapy and radiation had been successful the year before and so far, each checkup revealed that she was in the clear. Yet she seemed permanently weakened by those first treatments. Her strength was never the same and although she and I continued to venture out to various places in southern Utah's varied landscapes, she began slowing down and not wanting to go as far. A couple of years later, she developed a small cough.

At the end of 2011, I returned to Utah Valley and found another job, but that evening at Yovimpa stayed with me for months. I wanted it permanently sealed into my memory, but in several more years, I would see even the impermanence of memory as my mind both consciously and unconsciously attempted to block out the painful circumstances around my mother's illness and death. Death, although permanent, allowed me to return to nature as a stabilizing force in the riptides of depression and anxiety.

Even before my mother passed away, even before everything got swept away so completely, I yearned for the desert.

*"When this is over, I think I will fly."*

I wrote those words on September 19, 2014, just three days before she died. All that week, my mind had been spinning as I tried to find answers to my frantic questions:

Why did she seem to be losing her energy, sleeping more and more during the day but staying awake for hours at night? Why did her eyes, once hazel, take on more of a grey hue and seem unable to focus? Why did she begin closing her bedroom door, adamant that her two cats not set foot in her room, when, before, her door was always open to let them roam as they pleased?

Several times, I found her sitting at her desk computer, hands on the keyboard but just staring at the screen. She would have part of an email written out, but the sentences were incoherent, words misspelled. As a secretary, she was the fastest typist I knew, but there she sat as if she had forgotten how to even form a sentence.

“I need to send an email to Matt about the film festival,” she said once. Or, another time, “You remember Dave McGraw? I just wanted to tell him thank you for the show he put on in Escalante last year.”

I was scheduled to teach yoga at the Escalante Arts Festival in southern Utah during the last week of September that year. I had everything arranged with my siblings about helping our mother while I was away—who was coming which days, notes on medications, instructions and recipes for meals and fresh juices, a meeting with one of her doctors.

Really, going to Escalante was an escape.

*“Maybe I won’t come back from Escalante,”* I revealed in my journal on another day.

I still remember the guilt in which I penned those words. My mother needed my help and while I wanted to be there for her, strong and supportive, and help her keep control of the situation, I felt as if I myself was dying on the inside. Confusion, anger,

and terror all churned inside of me as an accumulating ball of emotion. There were days when I couldn't believe how my emotions could fluctuate so hard from tenderness and compassion to wanting to seize whatever objects happened to be within reach and hurl them at the wall. I sobbed alone in my car where she couldn't hear me. I lay awake for hours at night, wondering what exactly didn't feel right even though her doctors didn't give any reason to worry.

In June, the doctors had given her the diagnosis; by July, she was on disability leave. August, she spent more and more time in bed. Living with her as a caregiver, of course, I spent the most time with her and so I noticed many of the day to day changes she experienced—how her appetite waned, the days when the color in her eyes faded to grey and her attention sometimes became so vague that I had to reach out and physically touch her arm or shoulder to help her realize I was speaking to her. She became disoriented, confused, or else frantic and demanding. I'd never seen her like that before, so anxious and moody. That same month, she banished her two cats from her room, saying their meows hurt her ears. She seemed to occupy a separate world, sometimes hardly speaking to me for an entire day.

My oldest brother and his family lived about ten minutes away in Orem, my other brother in Provo with his wife, and my sister and her partner lived almost a half hour away in Spanish Fork. When they could, they stopped by to help relieve me or arranged to spend the afternoon with our mother when I had to work. But as the one most directly involved with her care, I noticed many of the changes with her physical strength, how her personality became demanding and frantic to the point that she no longer seemed to be my mother. Her welcoming smile, her jokes and sarcasm about religion and politics, her

invitations to go get lunch or just to talk and be together had disappeared. But even through all this change, she never revealed anything but thoughts for the future. She was determined to pull through this. Although it crossed my mind, I dismissed as easily as a speck of dust the possibility of her dying.

But as her strength dissipated, terror arose within me. She was still able to walk and bathe and eat on her own, but I drove her to see her doctors and anywhere else she needed to go; I made her meals and plenty of fresh juices so she could get the more potent nutrients her body needed to fight the onslaught of disease; I took charge of her medications, memorizing the doses and even some of the hopeless names attached to those pills that were supposedly helping her fight the disease within her.

My siblings and neighbors stepped in occasionally to spell me, but by September, I was going out of my mind. I didn't understand how people could serve as caretakers for years. I had only been doing this since June and I was exhausted.

I was doing my best, but she continued to worsen. Her energy sank; the sores in her mouth from the radiation and chemotherapy made eating unbearable. And yet the doctors said things were "normal." I trusted their expertise, even though my insides were tense as steel. This did *not* seem normal. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to leave that house and never return.

I clung to my morning yoga practice and nightly martial arts training like lifelines, but even those dissipated as my mother became more disoriented, more distant, as the summer wore on. During August, I only left the house to go teach yoga or to my work at a picture framing shop. Those hours away added to the mental strain as I tried to find a neighbor or one of my family to be with her. The worry, the nagging questions running

through my mind as I puzzled over what else I could do, why she only seemed to get weaker each week when the doctors didn't seem concerned—each day seemed to get heavier, like another stone added to the growing burden on my back. Relief came more in the form of anger those days as I wondered how much longer she and I would both have to endure this.

On the outside, I forced myself to help her with composure and understanding. On the inside, I wanted to flee. As September wore on, I could hardly say how much I looked forward to heading south for a week to participate in the festival at Escalante. To stretch out on sand and stone, to finally breathe deeply again, to walk barefoot on bare rock under an immense blue sky. The festival presented a necessary respite from that house of death, away from that city, and to a place of quiet, fresh air, and the red dirt under my feet.

I started reading Terry Tempest Williams' *Red* as a way to bring the desert to me, even copying out whole paragraphs in my journal as if to engrain their meaning into my memory.

*"This landscape will take care of me. The open expanse of sky makes me realize how necessary it is to live without words, to be satisfied without answers, to simply be in a world where there is no wind, no drama. To find a place of rest and safety, no matter how fleeting it may be, how illusory, is to regain composure and locate bearings."*

One day, however, I snapped.

I came home from work about a week before she died, and noticed the light on in the closet where I kept her medications. Earlier in the summer, I started helping her keep track of her medications—doses and times, the names and complications—to try and

avoid a possible mix-up. She knew where they were, still, but keeping them there was more for my peace of mind. That evening, however, I noticed the pills had been rummaged through and straightaway I panicked, hurrying to her room to see what she might have taken in my absence.

“Mom,” I said, “Did you take any pills while I was at work?”

“I took the chemo pill,” she replied. She sat at her computer, playing some sort of game. She didn’t look at me and her voice was flat, nonchalant. “It’s one o’clock.”

It was almost six-thirty by then, and I had already given her the chemo pill just before one o’clock when I left for work.

“No,” I said. “It’s *not* one o’clock, it’s almost *six-thirty!* You already took your chemo pill today!”

“Oh,” she said, still not looking at me. “Sorry. Sorry, I thought...I don’t know.”

Oh my god, I thought. Her doctor’s office was closed for the day already so I couldn’t call them. With everything so precarious already, how would taking her chemo pill twice in one afternoon affect her?

Incensed, I stormed from her room, down to the kitchen, and started banging around as I made dinner. Her apathetic attitude infuriated me. I wanted something to blame, and although I knew better—knew, that it was the cancer that had in fact started all this—in those moments, I blamed her.

But it didn’t seem to have any adverse effects on her. Over the remainder of the week, she acted the same as before.

On September 19<sup>th</sup>, the same day I revealed my desire to fly, I went to bed with an odd rise of hope inside me. All day I puzzled over the whole situation: how long this

might go on; my mother's changes in personality; all her medications and if might be possible for her to get off of some of them. It seemed highly possible that all the medications she'd been prescribed were contributing to her confusion, apathy, or bursts of panic. She had an appointment with her doctor the following week and I decided I'd ask him if we could possibly reduce the number of pills.

I made dinner again that evening. We ate together, and I noticed she had more appetite than she'd had for days. But after dinner she wanted to go right to bed. Over the past week she'd begun leaning on me more and more, but she could still dress and shower on her own. I helped her into bed that night and she sighed as she settled into the mattress. She was under a hundred and ten pounds by then.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you."

"Have you talked with God today?" I asked. Over the past several days, perhaps in my search for hope and life again, I started asking her this question. Although earlier that year I had stopped attending and associating with the Mormon church and she herself attended less and less, she told me that she was always talking with God, "Like we're just having this long, continual conversation."

So that night, when I asked her if she had talked with God today, she replied with her usual, "Yes."

"What did he tell you?" I asked.

She closed her eyes and smiled, as if recalling the exact moment they had spoken together. "Peace, peace, peace."

She must have sensed my doubt, even fear, because she opened her eyes, reached over and put her hand on my arm.

“We’re going to get through this,” she said. Her voice, though still weak, sounded strong again, the apathy replaced with a quiet intensity that I recognized. That intensity had vanished over the summer, but there it was again as if all along it had just been smoldering beneath the surface. There was the mother I knew, the woman who had carried on after divorcing her husband and raised four children alone, who had shown me the meaning of endurance by pursuing her Bachelor’s and then a Master’s degree centered around the most enduring physical body of all—the earth itself. Intensity, passion, fierce hope, love for her family and love for the earth—she embodied those qualities, lived her life fueled by them. The cancer was taking over, but in those moments at her bedside, I recognized my mother again, her *self* persisting through the onslaught of disease.

I looked back at her. Her eyes, though still grey, focused on me. Through her words and her gaze, I believed her. There simply wasn’t any other option. We just had to take it one day, even one hour, at a time. I went to bed with hope enough to relax me through the night. I thought if we could just make it to her doctor’s appointment on Monday, things would start to improve, and once I had a chance to catch my breath at Escalante, I could return renewed with strength from the earth to help me carry on as well.

I never made it to Escalante that year. The next morning, Saturday September 20<sup>th</sup>, my mother was in a coma. Two days later she died.

Nothing in this life feels as permanent as death. When my mother died, of course it took a little while for it to sink in. I kept wanting to call her on the phone, to see how

her day went, arrange to get lunch together or go for a drive. But during the two days she spent in the hospital and then the week after she died, I felt a pain in my lower back that I also feared would be permanent.

I first noticed the ache in my back on that Saturday I found her in a coma. I figured I had tweaked something trying to help lift her into bed the night before, and I spent the next two days while at the hospital with my family, shifting in my seat, standing up, walking around, only to sit down and start shifting all over again. No matter what position I took, I felt it. Five days later, it wasn't getting better, but at least it wasn't any worse. Just a dull, steady pain across my lower lumbar telling me something wasn't right.

I didn't tell anyone at first; I'd had enough of doctors and dreaded the thought of having to go see one for myself. I also worried that this might disrupt my martial arts training even more. By mid-morning on Wednesday, however, two days after she died, my brain was shutting down. My siblings and I had spent the day at her house sorting through cupboards, closets, dressers, and bookshelves to prepare for an estate sale. Our mother, it turned out, was quite a hoarder. There were boxes in closets and in the garage that hadn't been opened in years. Even after each of us four kids moved out over the years, stuff had been left behind, and now we were finding it again. Stuff, stuff, stuff—so much *stuff*. It didn't take long for piles to start building up in every room: what each of us wanted to save, what could be thrown out or given away, what to include in the estate sale.

My eyes were tired of focusing, my mind tired of making decisions. I started not to care if my back hurt; I wanted to get back in the dojo to practice and bring back some

semblance of routine. I craved to throw some kicks and punches, get my heart rate up and get sweaty again.

The dojo where I studied Shaolin Kempo was five minutes from my mother's house. Concerned for my back and considering my emotional state, I didn't want to be around many people just yet, but I figured I could handle a private lesson. My teacher, Sensei Joe, had already known of my mother's illness since July. The day before she died, he stopped by the hospital and we had talked for well over an hour. By the time he left, he actually had me laughing.

That had been only four days earlier, but it seemed ages ago. When I pulled out my phone mid-morning on Wednesday to text Joe about going in for a private lesson, I saw he had already sent me a message: "Hey. You should come to noon class today." The noon classes were usually smaller since most people were working or in school, but I still wasn't ready for a group class. I texted back and asked if I could have a private lesson instead. We settled on 1:30 and at 1:15, I headed over.

The dojo sat on State Street in Orem, a squat, one-level building painted on the outside with the brightest red my teacher could get when he moved into the place ten years ago. Panoramic windows lined the east and south walls, allowing midday sun to pour inside. Two Chinese lions the height of my hips guarded the front door.

As I walked in, I heard Joe finishing up a private lesson with another student.

"Pivot, step out, block. Then half-moon forward, punch." Even just hearing his voice helped my nerves relax.

I slipped my shoes off by the bench in the lobby and went to the dressing room to exchange my jeans and t-shirt for my plain white *gi*. I started training in Kempo here two

years ago out of curiosity while looking for a new workout. I only expected to study for a few months, have fun and learn some moves, but after passing my first belt test I knew this was something I couldn't live without. In all my schooling, I hadn't encountered structure or discipline like this. I was the type of person prone to making hasty decisions even as I sought structure and routine. The structure and discipline of Kempo, as with other martial arts, was grounded in hundreds of years of tradition and history.

Usually I attended class four, five, even six times a week. But my mother's health was first priority and as her health declined over the summer, I attended less and less, barely making two classes in the month of August. I didn't step foot in the dojo for two weeks because I was so worried about leaving her alone. I knew my siblings were busy and I felt it was my responsibility to do whatever I could, so I was afraid to ask for help.

Now, slipping on my *gi*, I let out a deep sigh. Something about that loose cotton made me feel I could breathe again. I just wished it would somehow also relieve my back.

"All right," Joe said, after the other student left and we bowed in to begin the lesson. "Let's start by reviewing your forms."

Pinan One, a traditional Okinawan form, was the first form we learned in our system. I knew it by heart and had passed it off on two belt tests already.

I bowed, stepped my right foot out to the side, and then my mind stalled. I couldn't remember anything.

Silence.

"Dragon Breathes Fire," Joe prompted me after a few moments, standing by the south wall, one hand cupping his chin, the other arm around his ribs just above his belt—

black with five stripes sewn in red. He wore his black *gi*, the bottom edges of his pants frayed and the knees grey and thin with years of wear.

I brought my hands in fists slowly down in front of me as I exhaled a shallow, shaky breath. Then I drew my left hand up near my face as my left foot lifted up into Cat Stance, stepped out and my left arm came down in a low block. Right foot half-moon forward, right front two knuckle punch. Traditional, linear, basic. Something I could count on.

But five steps into the form, another surge of emotion rose from my belly to my chest and lungs. I held my breath and then excused myself, hurrying out of the dojo to the bathroom where I jammed my palms over my eyes in a vain attempt to stop the tears. I wondered what I was doing there, why I'd even come when there was so much to do still at my mother's house. I wavered, feeling guilty leaving my three siblings to do the work themselves, even though I'd just stepped out for an hour or so for the lesson. I knew I needed this break, but I still felt the guilt and the grief pressing on me, a literal weight I felt on my back and shoulders.

I straightened up and took a deep breath. I exhaled slowly and drew in another breath, deeper and fuller than the first. I needed this time here at the dojo. I had just spent the last three months caring for my mother and then watched her die; I could give myself an hour away from all of that. As I continued breathing, the tightness in my chest softened; my shallow, choking sobs steadied and lengthened out to a normal breath, a buoy to help me stay above a rising tide of emotion.

After several minutes, I stepped out of the bathroom and walked back into the dojo where Joe waited, pacing slow, patient steps. I brought my feet together, rested my left hand over my right fist, bowed, and began Pinan One again.

I breathed, stepped, blocked, and punched. Not with the power the form itself deserved and not with the strength I wanted, but I made it through from beginning to end.

Thirty minutes later, we bowed and closed the lesson.

“You made it,” Joe said. “Do you think you can make it to class tomorrow night?”

“I want to,” I said. “But I’m worried about my back. I think I strained something last week trying to lift my mom.”

“Your lower back?”

“Yes. It started hurting last Saturday so I just need to be careful.”

He looked thoughtful, but nodded. “Well, if you need a break, we’re here. I just don’t want you to quit.”

The following evening, I needed another break. I’d been at the house all day again with my siblings helping sort through the stuff and figuring out legal matters with our mother’s estate and upcoming cremation. At 7:30 that evening, I headed for the dojo for my first group class since my mother died. I didn’t say anything about what happened, but throughout the class I felt a palpable sensitivity from the other students there and I knew that Joe must have informed them.

We warmed up just like any other class: a short meditation, then pushups, sit-ups, stretches, and basics. Horse stance: feet wide, knees bent, hands in fists at the hips. Front two-knuckle punch: hand in fist, slide the arm forward, twist the fist at the last moment to

strike with the first two knuckles of the hand. Front ball kick: lift the knee, send the foot out, toes up.

Sweat began to accumulate on my brow. My muscles warmed with the movement. Even my back felt some relief. My moves lacked any real power and snap, but I was there in the dojo where I could let my body take over and let someone else just tell me what to do.

Joe worked us through about ten minutes of basics, then switched to review our kempo techniques: left hand block, right hand front two knuckle punch to opponent's solar plexus; shuffle step and left arm inward block, double thrust punch to ribs, right palm heel strike to opponent's temple. Precision, timing, control. No new material tonight, just returning to moves we'd practiced hundreds of times before.

As class time went on, however, my chest began to tighten again. At the end of the hour, even my shoulders were beginning to stoop as once again I felt that invisible weight pressing on my body as if gravity had doubled its force over me. That was perhaps the most surprising thing about this new sense of grief. I'd heard about "the weight of grief," but I hadn't expected a literal, physical weight on my shoulders. There were times at the hospital and in the first few days since my mother's passing that I had to grab a chair or else press up against a wall or the counter to stop from sinking to my knees.

Now, relieved when we all bowed out and Joe dismissed us, I hurried to the dressing room to change. I wanted to get out of there and get to my car where I could have my meltdown in private. I sat on the floor, trying to tie my shoes when Joe asked, "Tiff, can I talk to you for a minute?"

He stood about ten feet away in the doorway of his office and gestured with his head for me to follow him in. I knew if I didn't get out of there, I'd have my meltdown in front of him or some of the other students, but I went in anyway and sat down in one of the worn, maroon-upholstered chairs across from his desk.

"I debated whether or not to tell you this," he began, sitting up perfectly straight, his palms flat on the desktop, fingers splayed as if trying to dig his nails into the smooth, dark wood. "But you mentioned yesterday that your lower back is hurting so I think I should. Now, just let me be metaphysical for a minute."

"All right," I said, wondering what he had in mind.

"Did your yoga teacher training tell you much about the chakras?"

I shook my head. My training was eight months ago and we'd devoted only a single hour-long class on the chakras. At that time, my focus in yoga was strictly physical. I had only been studying martial arts and yoga for a couple of years, and was still unfamiliar with the more philosophical, internal sides of these disciplines. Still, I knew embarrassingly little about the chakras, the energy centers, in the physical body.

"Well, the base of the spine is the root chakra. It represents stability, security, a home base. When the chakra is blocked—say, from trauma, the death of a loved one, sometimes even the loss of a job—the lower back and the base of the spine can start to ache. It's the outward manifestation of what's happening on the inside."

When he paused, I just blinked. Finally, I just said, "Oh. Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "It's our body's reaction to trauma. This one, the root chakra, can be caused by feelings of insecurity or abandonment." He paused. "Do you feel kind of...abandoned right now?"

Abandoned, unmoored, drowning, beaten senseless. I had just spent the previous hour in class pretending I was stronger than all of it. To hell with that. Leaning forward, I put my face in my hands and let go of the flood building inside me. Unlike yesterday, I made no attempt to stop it. In the midst of this sea of change, I wanted something to make sense, something solid under my feet. Joe's explanation for my back seemed so implausible, and yet, intuitively, it felt right. My world had been rocked and my body felt the grief right at the root.

"You need to get grounded," Joe continued. "I want you to literally go stand on the earth. Go find a tree somewhere and stand by it. Barefoot. It's best if it's barefoot."

I left the dojo and returned to my mother's house. It was just before nine p.m. A somber darkness sat behind pale curtains drawn over the windows. No lamplight came from my mother's upstairs bedroom, no welcoming glow from the living room, no porch or garage lights. Darkness inside and a coming darkness outside as twilight morphed into night. It was late September on the Wasatch Front—the time of year when the mountains awakened from their drab summer slumber, igniting into reds and oranges like glowing coals, yellows like sparking matchheads; the air shifted and the cooling days and nights released the smell of earth again after the dry summer heat.

I passed through the garage to the backyard and stood out on the grass for a few minutes watching the last rays of sunlight. Between the patio and the shed, my mother had planted a beech tree about five years ago. The beech was about seven feet tall now, its trunk just a few inches around. Compared to the other trees within my view—a

corkscrew willow, two peach trees, a silver maple, four cypress, a white birch—that beech was still coming into itself. It had a long way to go to match the other trees' height.

All those trees were evidence of my mother's desire to create a natural, living space of beauty. She was a geologist by training, but also a devoted, careful gardener who did everything she could to not have her yard match the typical suburban look. She hated grass and over twenty years of living in this house had removed most of it to make way for more trees, bushes, flowers, and groundcovers.

"We live in a desert," she said, "We shouldn't be wasting water just to make the grass green." She also wanted the birds to have a safe place and as the trees, bushes, and flowers matured, the birds came: hairy woodpeckers, northern flickers, American robins, sparrows, finches, hummingbirds, mourning doves, collared doves, black-capped chickadees, magpies, western scrub jays, juncos, western tanagers, goldfinches, a few Cooper's hawks, cedar waxwings, even (for a few days) a lost parakeet.

When I arrived that evening, everything was silent.

I slipped off my shoes and walked over to the beech tree. As I stepped into the soil circle at the base of its young trunk, my feet settled into the cool, soft dirt. Great Basin and Wasatch soil—a combination of clay and ancient seabed gravel, now mixed with modern-day, imported garden soil from Home Depot. The Wasatch Mountains are part of the Middle Rocky Mountain Range, a smaller range that runs north-south for roughly a hundred and sixty miles from the Utah-Idaho border down to Mount Nebo near the city of Nephi. About eighty percent of Utah's population occupies the valleys and benches of the Wasatch Front. The Salt Lake Valley and Utah Valley mark the easternmost edge of the Basin and Range province that stretches from the Wasatch Mountains to the Sierra

Nevada. Here, tectonic forces still pull the earth's crust apart at a rate of half an inch per year.

Mount Timpanogos, rising 11,753 feet, looks down over the city of Orem where I was born and raised. Directly east of Orem City sits Cascade Peak. Those mountains once rested at the bottom of an ancient inland sea, followed by varying depths of Lake Bonneville and finally glaciers. Every day I see the evidence of time at work on a scale unfathomable to my human mind. Layers of accumulated sediment, the result of millions upon millions of years, are visible at the mouth of Provo Canyon where the Provo River enters the valley floor. On the sides of Mount Timpanogos, tracks of rockslides flare out beneath the cliffs as reminders of the inevitability of change.

Mountains, rocks, stones—they are time locked into tangible form. But even that sense of time trapped in stone was an illusion. Every day, weathering and erosion continued from wind, water, and gravity.

I dug my toes in deeper.

The layered Wasatch mountains rose to the east with their blocky cliffs, and the lower, contoured Lake Mountains rested to the west. The darkening sky, dotted with the first stars of the night arced overhead like an ethereal bridge between the two mountain ranges.

I reached out and took hold of the beech's smooth, rippled trunk, hearing Joe's voice in my head, "*You need to get grounded.*"

I stood there until the sun set, night falling silent as a veil over me. My back still ached, my feet were chilled, but I grasped the tree, rooted and secure. I imagined my feet absorbing the energy of the earth and that energy rising up to fill my entire being. I was

just a tiny figure in a valley bounded on both sides by mountains that I often took for granted as models of fortitude enduring geologic forces and change by yielding to them: first as sediments sinking to the bottom of an ancient sea, compressed into stone, and finally pushed up thousands of feet to the height I viewed them now. The earth, of course, works on a timescale only accessible by the human imagination. Given enough time, perhaps I would learn to yield to the pain of my own catastrophic change, moving through the sorrow through a river of time. Death may be permanent—my mother certainly was not coming back—but for the living, it could open the door for transformation. What I didn't realize yet was how deep that change would run its course through me.

Over the course of the fall and then into winter, as the earth's energy pulled into itself, my spirit also seemed to pull more and more into itself. I still sought any opportunity to go south. The desert was the only place I wanted to be, but I couldn't seem to get there except for a quick overnigher I took toward Goblin Valley in late October. On one hand, I wanted time to stop so I could process what had recently happened. On the other hand, I wanted time to speed up so I could bulldoze through the grief as fast as possible and be done. Grief, however, moves on its own time.

I continued working at the picture frame shop and teaching yoga. I maintained my personal yoga practice and kept up at the dojo, all with the intent to stay as busy as possible so I wouldn't have to think about it all, but I couldn't ignore that fresh, burning hole cut inside of me. As the days shortened and the year darkened, that hole with its edges of raw pain, filled more and more with guilt and despair. In my mind, I had failed

both my mother and my family. I kept telling myself I could have been more attentive, more aware, asked more direct questions to the doctors, pressed them for clearer answers. Each time I thought of the doctors' indifference, I felt a surge of combined anger and sorrow. Had she been that close to death the whole time and he hadn't told any of us, or had he really not seen where it was going? Worse, I berated myself for not seeing what was happening right in front of me.

About a week before Christmas, I sat in my car at the Smith's parking lot in Orem with a couple of hours' break between teaching and my afternoon shift at the framing shop. Clouds hung low over Mount Timpanogos and Cascade Peak. Snow flurries spun through the air. I could have been shopping for Christmas presents. I also could have been grocery shopping, which was why I came in the first place. Instead, I stayed in my car, wrapped in my thick black coat, still wearing my hat and gloves.

I sat there because all morning I had been trying to suppress a panic attack. I couldn't bring myself to step out of the car; the thought of being around other people terrified me to the point of immobility. I was terrified that Christmas was only a week away and people kept asking what I planned on doing for the holiday. Always before, my family would all gather at our mother's house for Christmas. That year, I planned on spending Christmas Day with my oldest brother Mike and his family.

Even more than that, I was terrified that people would see through the lies I'd been telling them for the past two months, reassuring them that I was fine, and even though it was hard, I was doing okay. Perhaps my conversations with other people should have looked like this:

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Except when I’m not.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what.”

I couldn’t find any pattern to the panic, anxiety, or depression. I never knew what would trigger it—one time it was John Denver’s “Country Roads” on the radio at work, another time a bag of gingersnaps at the grocery store set me crying as I recalled those as my mother’s favorite cookie—so the dread of encountering anything that reminded me of her, only seemed to give more power to my harried mental state.

There were days when I didn’t know exactly what I felt. Some days it was an emotional hash, an accumulating mess. Other days it was like one layer after another, more pressure mounting up, until fracturing into a full-blown panic attack. I didn’t know how to relieve the pressure inside me. Sure, I could breathe through the sorrow for an hour of yoga; I could kick and punch it away at the dojo. But it always waited just outside the door, where it draped itself over me again like a stone-heavy cloak the moment I walked out.

What I didn’t realize with grief was how much I could hold it back, even in my worst moments, to reassure others I was okay. For some reason, I was ashamed to let others know how sad I felt, even my own family. I had left the Mormon church earlier that year, but the culture was still embedded within me. In Utah Valley Mormon culture, people don’t really acknowledge their grief. I had been to funerals and saw only a surface level grief as people stated how happy they were that their loved one got to move on from

this mortal life, presumably to a happier place, and they felt the love of God stronger than ever before.

This was my first experience losing someone close to me. The cutting depth of my sadness shocked me. I didn't understand how people could claim to feel God's love in such a time of intense pain. For all the divine love I felt, God may as well have given me the finger.

Instead of reaching out for help, I pulled away, preferring privacy over exposure, burying my sorrow under my busyness and not telling anyone about the suicidal thoughts coming to mind every day, seeking any chance of escape to southern Utah. I wanted to get away from everything and everyone I knew. I wanted out of Utah Valley with its traffic and smog and noise and people. I wanted to find a trail somewhere out in the desert where I could just walk alone for miles and miles not looking back. I seemed to fluctuate between drifting out on a riptide of sorrow or else being crushed beneath the loss. The grief was a weight, a burden that couldn't be shaken.

Somehow, I'd managed to hold it together pretty well on the very day my mother died. Now, almost three months later, another wave of panic lashed through me. I bawled, bordering on screaming, as I clenched the steering wheel of my Subaru in the grocery store parking lot. I let out here in the safe container of my vehicle what I couldn't let out in front of other people.

I just wanted to stop thinking, to stop carrying that weight, and stop making decisions about anything—work, money, Christmas presents, where to spend the holidays, even the pettiest decisions like what I was going to eat for my next meal, what outfit to wear, if should I wear earrings with it, if I really wanted to go to class today, etc.

My mother was gone. Just plain gone. I couldn't call her on the phone and see how her day went. I couldn't suggest a quick weekend to Capitol Reef or Arches National Park when I needed to talk through a problem. In the past, when the congestion of the valley became too much and I wanted to get out, even just for a day, I called her first because she understood. She loved the desert as much as I did, and for us, southern Utah was as much a respite from the city as it was a chance to be together as mother and daughter.

But now she was gone. Now nothing mattered. Nothing except my desire to get back to the desert.

## PART II

June 2015, nine months after her death, I stood at the bottom of a ridge of sandstone bordering the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and the town of Boulder. Like most of the Colorado Plateau, the Grand Staircase averages eleven inches of rain per year. Funny, then, that I encounter rain on so many of my visits.

I was on my way to visit some cousins in the town of Henrieville. On Highway 12 and about a half hour from Henrieville, I drove into Boulder and decided to take a detour onto the Burr Trail for a short hike. At the border of the monument, I pulled off the road, got out, and took off my shoes. Ever since the previous fall when Sensei Joe told me to take my shoes off and get grounded, I hiked barefoot whenever possible for that direct connection to the earth. Unlike the limestones in the Wasatch Mountains with sharp, crumbly edges, the gritty surface of sandstone allowed my toes a comfortable grip.

I began climbing up the face of the ridge, my breath coming faster with the exertion, past tufts of ricegrass and pockets of soil and sand inhabited by a fledgling pine or yucca. What most astonished me about this type of terrain were the ponderosa pines growing out of the larger cracks in the stone. From seeds carried up by some bird or chipmunk, all it took was an inch of soil for the trees to sprout, watered by the region's intermittent rains of the summer monsoon season. For those trees, every day of their lives required a fortitude greater than the stone itself. The stone supported them, but by no means did it cater to the trees' comfort. As tough as the stone was, the trees were tougher. Even as they faced exposure to heat, cold, wind, and of course, scant amounts of water, their roots continued boring deeper into the stone one grain at a time.

As I climbed higher, I saw the entire western horizon sealed in a deep navy and grey bank of clouds. A storm was coming. I decided to chance it, justifying it by climbing faster, and continued clambering upward. About halfway up, however, I heard the wind. It sounded hollow, like it was forced through a tunnel. Down at the bottom of the ridge, I saw the branches of the ponderosas bouncing and tossing around.

*Caw caw caw!* Half a dozen ravens hastened eastward. Over the eastern expanse of the Escalante Canyons area, patches of blue sky spread between mountainous clouds blowing ahead of the storm.

I had a choice: either go down now, return to my car, and continue on to Henrieville warm and dry, or continue climbing to the top where I'd get wet and be exposed to possible lightning. Even halfway up on the slope, my car looked lonely and far away down by the road. There would be nowhere to hide at the top of the ridge: just me, the stone, and the storm.

I turned my back to my car and kept climbing. I decided it didn't matter to me if something happened up there. I had spent the past nine months toying with the possibility of my own death anyway.

Cold, fat drops of rain spattered my face. After a few moments, the rain came faster and I climbed faster with it. The wind turned cold, and pushed sideways into me as I continued up the face of the ridge. More wind, more rain, and now thunder rumbling like a low growl deep in the throat of some wild predator.

Just as I reached the top, the center of the storm reached me. Rain billowed with the wind, blowing like curtains whipping at an open window. My hair dripped, my clothes were soaked. But I could see over the ridge into what locals called Lower

Boulder—a part of town tucked into a side cove along Boulder Creek. Some houses and more alfalfa fields lay out there, along with a big red barn. The sky looked bruised with the clouds so black and blue, and they bore down over the entire area.

It was a foolish thing to do, to stand on top of a ridge completely exposed to both the elements and lightning, but I didn't care. I almost wished something *would* happen. Let me get struck by lightning. Let me slip on the rocks and fall a hundred feet to land at the bottom, twisted, in a heap of flesh and broken bones. At least then I could be the victim and not have to make that final choice between life and death myself.

But nothing happened. I stood there as more minutes passed, my clothes and hair completely soaked, rain dripping down my face and neck and pouring over the face of the rock I just climbed. The rain was cold, the wind strong. I could hear and see and feel it all, still alive; not struck down as I secretly wished. But if Nature wouldn't send me off that day, I couldn't find the courage to do it myself.

I turned away from Lower Boulder, back toward where my car sat, looking pummeled and sad far below. The face of the rock was slick now from small waterfalls cascading toward the bottom, washing into cracks to scour them deeper and flowing down the smoother places like water rinsing off a dinner plate. I slid and scooted down the rock in a zig-zag pattern, finally landing at the bottom where I got into my car and soaked the seat. I hadn't noticed anyone drive by on the road the whole time I was up there. If something had happened—one slippery misstep or even getting struck by lightning—it may have been a while before someone noticed.

The storm continued as I headed back to Highway 12. It stayed with me along the Hogback, past Calf Creek and the Escalante River trailhead. It followed me through the

town of Escalante and finally broke when I rolled up to my cousins' house in Henrieville. Once inside, my uncle, Guy, gave me a hug. I apologized for being so wet, but he just grinned.

“You’ve been out hiking, I see,” he laughed. “There’s no stopping you.”

I didn’t regret the risk I took standing there on the ridge. I chose not to end my life myself up there, perhaps for the simple awareness of being alive and present to the storm. Vulnerability, durability—the two can exist alongside each other. Perhaps it was also the trees’ quiet example, bearing down to their lives of toil as they grew out of that rock. If they could do it, surely, so could I.

April 2017: I was two days and just over halfway to La Push, Washington, still near the start of a ten-day trip I’d been planning for months. It had been two-and-a-half years since my mother died. I wanted to return to La Push as a way of reconnecting with her. She had loved that place as I loved the southern Utah, and I hoped that in going there I might put to rest some of the growing anxiety within me. At the moment, I stood on a concrete pier at Cascade Locks, Oregon, feeling safe enough but not at ease. On either side of me, several feet below, flowed the brownish green water of the Columbia River. The pier was the one solid thing in that part of the river. I stood there alone, receiving the full brunt of the wind blasting through the Columbia River Gorge.

I spent the first night of my trip in Ontario, Oregon. The previous night it was The Dalles. My third night, I planned on staying in Aberdeen, Washington. Those cities were only several hours apart, giving me plenty of time to explore during the day. I was certainly taking my time getting to La Push, but I had planned it that way. My family

happened upon La Push, a tiny coastal town on the Quileute Indian Reservation, one rainy night while vacationing in the Pacific Northwest. From then on, we incorporated it into our year like any other holiday tradition. We all loved it, but none of us loved it as much as our mother. All during my childhood, my family rushed along this same highway once a year from Utah to La Push, Washington, in one sixteen-hour day of driving. For twenty years, we did that, saying each time we rolled past The Dalles or Cascade Locks or Portland or Aberdeen, “We should spend the night here sometime and explore.” We didn’t, of course. We just wanted to get to the coast.

In 2017, I decided to make a trip there myself. I blocked out ten days from work so I *would* have time to explore some of the places my family had always passed by in the past. On the third day of my trip, at Cascade Locks, I stopped at a park next to the Columbia and walked out onto a pier for a closer look at the river. I had come prepared with my winter coat, but the wind kept gusting my hood back so I finally grabbed it with both hands to keep it up tight around my head. Now my fingers were stiff inside their thin gloves. I even felt the cold starting to creep through my coat.

I squinted against the wind and biting cold, my face dry and stiff, like it might crack. I couldn’t help feeling annoyed at the weather. This was not how I envisioned this trip. In the past, going to Washington with my family always meant relaxation, hiking through temperate rainforests, walking barefoot on summer beaches. That day, I had to remind myself, it was only the first week of April. According to the owner of the art gallery I visited there in town, it had been one hell of a winter for all the communities along the gorge: rain for weeks at a time, ice, wind, fallen trees, car crashes, highway closures.

I started my trip with happy anticipation of finding new towns to explore with art galleries and bookshops. Also to find some new hikes in a place that was much the opposite of Utah's high desert country. But it was also to connect with the comfort of memory in the forests and beaches that meant so much to my mother. Time, it seemed, had not much altered the sorrow I still felt. The hole of my mother's absence didn't seem to be going away as I expected, just refilling with perpetual loss. My capacity to bear with it didn't seem to have grown much over the last two years either. I may as well have been caught in one of the eddies twirling in the river below me.

In planning my trip, I hoped to escape my emotions for a little while, leave them back in Utah while I enjoyed the comfort of memory in a place that meant as much to my mother as did southern Utah. I should have recognized the danger of traveling alone for so long. Without anyone else there with me, my thoughts, anxieties, and grief only circled around themselves for every single one of a thousand miles from Utah to Washington. My physical destination was certain that day. But even more than two years after my mother's death, I still sought an elusive inward destination of quiet and harmony.

Whether it was the cold or because I was alone in less familiar territory, that morning, my excitement took a decided plunge. Out on the pier, on either side of me, the river rippled and eddied in its channel with a power I could only imagine. Clouds sailed by overhead, nothing to weigh them against the wind. Likewise, on the shore, cedars and Douglas firs sighed and swayed in the force of the air current channeled between the blackish walls of the gorge. Occasional patches of sunlight streamed between the clouds, and I relished the warm reprieves.

At Cascade Locks, the mighty Columbia is funneled through a series of dams and “locks” that help watercraft navigate the rough portions of the river. It was a wonder, really, that the river’s banks didn’t burst with all the pressure after the man-made structures altered its natural flow. But it would take an enormous upheaval to disrupt the flow completely. My own flow of emotions showed no sign of returning to the way they were before the tragedy of my mother’s passing. They lacked the steady, controlled depth that river embodied. At the moment, the Columbia held my attention, its beauty an enormous body of power that began cutting a passageway through hundreds of feet of basalt somewhere around 2 million years ago—an astounding feat even in geologic time. Basalt rocks, grey as tempestuous skies, formed the walls of the gorge and revealed the land’s fiery, volcanic past. Even with the passage of time, plate tectonics in this region and nearer the coast were still young and active. In another 130 miles, the river’s journey would terminate in the ocean, a melding of fresh water and salt water. Equilibrium. Union. Perfect Harmony. Everything opposite how I felt at the moment.

I stood there, rooted into the pier, continuing to watch the water when the thought came to me of what it might be like to be *in* that water.

The thought caught me off guard even as it brought a familiar pleasure. It would be so easy. On the pier there were no railings, nothing to stop me from pitching over the side if I happened to stumble or slip on the slick, mossy surface. But I could also just step off and end it all right there; there would be no coming back. In the face of the river’s monumental flow, I would be nothing more than an anonymous splash.

I was the only person out there at the moment. On such a cold day, most people were smart enough to stay indoors. Likely, no one would see me if I stepped off the edge and plunged into the river's green-gold depths.

Two years before, in the ensuing weeks after my mother died, I was surprised how quickly the depression moved in to occupy my interior landscape. As her caretaker at the time, I suppose I took on the responsibility of her life more than I realized. I convinced myself I was part of the reason she hadn't made it. Although deep down, I knew that wasn't true—the cancer had advanced enough by the time the doctors found it that there wasn't anything anybody could do—my grief demanded a better reason than that.

Once again, I had a choice: I could take those final two steps into the river or stay put and stay alive. Once again, I knew better than to give those thoughts any sort of wiggle room, but depression had a way of sidling up, resting its arm around my shoulders to persuade me that it was normal to think that way. It didn't matter if it meant ending my life. If I wanted to end the pain, death was simply a solution to the problem. Just do it and be done. No more depression, no more guilt or obsessing over what more I could have done to help my mother, no more thoughts spinning like the river's eddies. Nothing. I could disappear like my mother had disappeared.

But before I got any closer to the edge, I paused. I was only on the third day of my trip—what did I think I was doing? I'd come as a way to relax, explore new places, and reconnect with a place I had come to know slowly over the course of twenty years. Time—I could give myself more time. That river had not carved out its gorge in two, twenty, or two hundred years. Two million years, geologists estimate, and the river cut

through all that rock in a path to the ocean. Catastrophe could happen in an instant, but lasting change also happened over time. It had only been two years. I didn't have to cut my life short.

Standing on the pier, that one point of stillness amid the endless flow of the river, I stared down at the water. So much water. Brown and green with occasional flashes of gold from the sun. I looked up from the water to the clouds, then around at the Douglas firs and cedars on the shore. The way their branches tossed in the wind struck me as truly beautiful. As cold as it was, the wind was a miracle. The trees were a miracle. The river. The basalt cliffs of the gorge itself. All of it seemed like a beautiful miracle and there I stood in the middle of it, shivering from cold, but *alive* to experience it. Inside my chest, my heart still beat. That heartbeat, too, was a miracle. If I stepped off the edge, there would be no going back. I wouldn't get to see my family and friends again. I wouldn't get to return to the desert. I couldn't do yoga or martial arts again, the two things keeping me sane at home. I couldn't even return here in future years if I wanted to. I couldn't desecrate the beauty of that place by using it for my own death.

I looked down at the river one more time before carefully stepping back from the edge of the pier. I decided that river was not going to take me. I was stupid enough to go there alone with only my competing thoughts for company, but it shouldn't end that way. With the help of the landscape itself, with the aid of memory, I could give myself another chance, but I was the only one who could make that choice.

I made my way back to the shore and back to my car. I had miles to cover still before I reached La Push, and I was determined to get there.

Four days later, the wind hurled itself against the wall of my motel room at La Push, prompting me to look up from my book of poems by Sarah Kay.

*I am a god  
 Of drawers left open.  
 It is easy to catch me in the act  
 Of searching—  
 My keys  
 My self.  
 Careful.  
 Don't sit there.  
 You might knock over the pile of  
 Confidence I took all day to stack.*

The warm sunshine that first greeted me when I rounded the bend to La Push, was gone, snuffed out by clouds thick, low, and heavy with rain. Likewise, the confidence and optimism I found by the Columbia four days before drained away over the week as the weather forced me to spend much of my time in the room, alone with my books and, once again, my thoughts.

I sat on the couch bored. I'd been reading most of the morning and while I wasn't tired of reading, I was tired of sitting. My legs and lungs begged for a walk outside, but despite my best hopes, the storm showed no desire to let up.

Frustrated, I tossed the book aside and stood up, going to the sliding glass door that opened onto the deck. Another barrage of wind shifted the screen door in its track. I tried to look past the raindrops trailing down the glass, but they blurred even the grey wooden deck, obscuring the resort lawn, and the stony trail winding through the blackberry bushes on out toward the beach. My room was on the ground floor so I wasn't privileged with an ocean view, but I still heard the waves pounding, pounding, pounding

on the beach. Even at low tide, a storm like that could drive the surf too high up the beach for a comfortable stroll.

I was down to my last day there. All week the weather shifted between cold and colder, wind and windier, rain and more rain. Today, it all seemed to climax. I just wanted to walk, to enjoy my limited time here at the coast and let my legs take over so my mind could rest. I thought I *had* come here for a rest, but with this storm keeping me inside, my mind again began to wander and circle.

I turned away from the window, marched into the bedroom, and began pulling on a second long-sleeved shirt, waterproof pants over my jeans, my coat, gloves, beanie. Rain, wind—whatever. I couldn't be there any longer with myself. I had to get out.

Cold, fat drops of rain dripped from the Douglas firs as I left the motel, their boughs thrashing in the wind. Zipping my coat up to my chin, I squinted against another spray of moisture and headed for the trailhead to Second Beach. I knew the trail would be inches deep with mud—not exactly fun—but I couldn't sit still and didn't want to waste any more time just sitting around.

The row of cabins down from the motel seemed to hunker against the storm. Some of the cabin windows revealed lights on inside; now and then I caught the sharp scent of burning cedar and pine. In years past, my own family had enjoyed fires in one of those cabins on rainy days. That all seemed like it belonged to another lifetime.

I kept walking.

Water streamed from the eaves of the Lonesome Creek store as I dodged the swelling, oily puddles in the parking lot. A few cars *shirrrrrred* past me on the road, but I was the only person on the half-mile asphalt path leading to the trailhead.

With each step, I questioned why I had even come back. To keep up a family tradition? To try and touch base with my mother in another place she loved? While that place was ripe with memories, even my mother felt nonexistent that day. It didn't feel right to be here without her. I didn't want her death to be final, but of course, I clung to the impossible. Even two years later, I didn't know why it was so hard to let go.

Halfway to the trailhead, I stopped at a clearing in the trees, an overlook on higher ground where the pines and alders parted for a wide view of First Beach and James Island—

*A-Ka-Lat*, in the Quileute tongue, the forested basalt sea stack where the Quileute people had buried their chiefs for centuries. A wall of brooding clouds enshrouded *A-Ka-Lat*. The ocean frothed as it heaved onto the shore, running over the rounded stones and piles of beached trees brought in by previous storms many years past. Second Beach wouldn't be any better, but at least I could walk for a while in the forest.

The wind quieted in the semi-shelter of the forest, but rain still dripped heavily from the canopy. My boots slapped the mud, sinking several inches deep in some places, the ground slippery and uncertain, but I charged on. I could not escape the mud that day, just as I could not escape myself. How many times I had walked that very trail with my mother I didn't know and it didn't matter. What mattered was that we had trodden it together, in both sun and rain. But now she was no longer there. It was only me, and I walked it in a storm as ferocious as the grief welling within me.

At first, I thought the place had betrayed me, turning from sun to storm the day after I arrived and continuing right up to the day I left. Perhaps I wanted to be in the storm as much as I wanted to let it inside of me—a flood, a purge, to break loose what had become stagnant, poisonous, and dangerous.

Unable to face myself, I faced the storm instead. Unable to sit with myself, I chose to head straight for the storm, apparently in a hurry to arrive at a flooded beach. I wanted the rain stinging my face. I wanted to move my body and breathe the wet air. I *didn't* want to have to think about anything. That would mean making decisions and decision reeked too much of finality. Instead, I wanted to bathe my physical senses to block out the mental storm of anxiety and depression that had burned inside me over the past two years, nearly driving me to step off the edge and sink out of sight in the Columbia River four days ago. Inside, my emotions raged and now the landscape raged right alongside me. Instead of finding peace here like I used to, I found a howling storm and I only wanted to be right in it as much as I wanted to let it inside of me.

I slogged through mud the entire trail to Second Beach, my white and blue coat bright and foreign among the evergreens, ferns, salmonberry bushes, and salal. When the trail opened up at the edge of the forest and onto the beach, I could hardly tell where the sky ended and the ocean began. It was all a mass of seething grey; a blanket of clouds covered even the nearest sea stacks. At the edge of the forest, I became target once again to the wind's bullying shoulder, the spray of rain in my face. Like at First Beach, the tide washed itself clear up to a jumbled pile of logs—bark long since stripped away by salt water and weather, leaving them stark and pale as bones—rolling over the logs so they dripped with streams of water and froth.

I stood there for some time—a half hour, maybe—on the boundary of forest and sea, between shelter and exposure, just looking out at a beach that was familiar but inaccessible. In twenty years of annual visits, I had never seen it in a storm like that.

I went there expecting a landscape where I could walk without worry, even forget my current troubles, but the weather seemed to turn the place against me. Inside, my emotions raged and the ocean, the skies, and the wind raged alongside me. I had buried my grief for too long, not being completely honest about my feelings with other people and driving myself to stay busy, physically moving, so I wouldn't have to face the pain of acceptance over my mother's death.

Perhaps I also went there with some intention to fill my mother's absence by reconnecting with that coastline and the lush forests resplendent with life and movement. A landscape like La Push was easy to surrender to, to yield to the traceable, daily changes worked by the tide. In the past, for me, the coast was a place of continuous, energetic movement so that the longer I gazed out at the waves, meditative in their cyclic washing of the shore, eventually I could find nothing to think about. Instead, the storm and the mountainous, coastal landscape with its history of volcanoes and shifting plates buried beneath the ocean pointed me towards myself. Look inside, they seemed to say. This is you. The storm I walked through was the storm in myself in all its torrent of despair. The enormous chaos of waves thrashing the beach were the waves of grief threatening my most basic desire to live.

Whipped by the storm, saddened that this place was no longer the same in the absence of my mother, I breathed through all that rain and fury, inhaling a freshness from the trees and the rushing air. No, that place wasn't the same; it would never be the same

again. The coast is a place of swift change, not like the desert where change is more contemplative, gradual, even stubborn. The coast is also vibrant with life—from the kelp and the rockweed, to the mussels, starfish, and snails, to the birds (though absent in the gale that day), otters, and deer, and from the tallest trees in the forest to the most minute thread of moss—the coast thrives from daily renewal by the tides, the nourishment of moist air drifting inland, as well as the harsh thrashing of storms. Perhaps I could also take away a renewed hope.

In a way, perhaps I also sought the landscape as an oracle, similar to how I looked to my mother for advice and wisdom. This time, it was not about school or career advice, talking through our frustrations about religion or politics. This time, it was asking if I could make it, if it really was worth it. Battered by wind and a roiling tide, I could find no trace of my mother's spirit. No life. That day, I was upset at first because the place was not "behaving" like I wanted. Really, it was trying to turn me inward, to show me that the change first needed to happen within myself.

I started home for Utah two days later. Part of me wanted to linger and make peace with that place, but the rain nearly put me over the edge. I needed to leave as soon as possible. It would be there in the future if I decided to go again, perhaps when I was in a better state of mind to receive it. Sometimes it's the downward descent, and then touching the bottom of a deep, that gives us a solid enough base to springboard from, to bounce off and propel us back toward the surface.

*May 6, 2017 Upper Calf Creek Falls*

*I don't know what I'm searching for anymore. Maybe it doesn't even matter because I've found all I need in this beautiful country: sand, sun, wind, and a long path to walk.*

Just a month after returning home from Washington, I sat on the slickrock near the trailhead to the Upper Calf Creek Falls in Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. I wrote those lines in a pocket notebook overlooking the thick, white, layer of Navajo sandstone—petrified dunes from a 200 million-year-old sand sea that stretched over that region, comparable to Africa's Sahara Desert today.

I had come out of a night of dreaming at Deer Creek campground out on the Burr Trail, about twelve miles away. During the night, I awoke frequently to hear rain tapping my tent. Far from being an annoyance, it comforted me. Then, as I drifted in and out of sleep, I heard birds. I didn't recognize their calls, short and high-pitched, and I've not heard them again since, but I remember thinking how strange to hear them so clearly at night.

To this day, I don't know whether they were real or a dream. The space between sleep and consciousness—a playground of the subconscious—is a place where nothing is real but everything seems possible.

At the top of the Upper Falls trailhead that day in early May, the only possibilities were positive and life-giving. Any negative thought was wiped out as cleanly as the rain before the morning sunshine. Although I wrote about my uncertainty of what I sought anymore, I countered it with the simplicity of what lay right before me—sand, sun, wind, and a path leading into the wilderness. Still, I had to pay attention.

The monument covers nearly two million acres of southern Utah, but in all of that vast expanse, that summer, I kept returning to two small areas: Deer Creek and the Upper Calf Creek Falls. Deer Creek felt more remote than it actually was; the campground and the trail along the creek are just seven miles outside of Boulder. But I returned for the sense of remoteness and solitude that allowed me to breathe. Over the course of that summer, I returned to Deer Creek and the Upper Calf Creek Falls as often as possible, staying only one or two days, but each visit helped me memorize more details. It became a ritual. Each morning at Deer Creek, I watched the sun light up the white wall of sandstone in the west, turning it gold or pink. I counted the birds during breakfast, then took off for Upper Falls where I would sit awhile at the top of the trailhead to write, think, and just look out at the expanse of time sealed in the layers of stone.

Up there, it was all so clear. I saw the ancient dunes—lithified time—the grooves in the rock where, one storm at a time, water continued to carve a channel down the face of the stone. I saw both sides of the Calf Creek area carved out by the tiny, perennial stream. West, beyond Calf Creek, I saw the Aquarius Plateau's pink cliffs—the same formation found at Bryce Canyon, but even higher elevation. I saw the Straight Cliffs stretching south past Escalante. Many layers, but a long horizon carrying my gaze into time past, beyond my imagination.

Some changes happen quickly, others impossibly slow. Going from the stormy coast to the high desert helped me chart those changes in myself. La Push was not my place, it was my mother's. Her life may have been cut short by disease, but I could still appreciate what she had given me: love—full, pure, complete. A love that extended outward to the earth itself, a being that would long outlive any of us.

I was still there, still subject to the depression, but I was beginning to see that nothing, in fact, was happening to me. The storms were in my mind, disturbances to be endured. As long as I didn't act on my thoughts, I would be all right. The openness of the landscape opened within me, a desire to continue living. The trails leading out from Deer Creek and to the Upper Falls led me to a place within myself where I could be as present to my thoughts and grief as I was to the ground I walked on. The rocks themselves became things I could sit upon or even hold to help slow down my circulating thoughts. The sheer physicality of those rocks reassured me that I was still alive, that I could sit on them or even hold them, and nothing was actually happening. If I could just learn to observe rather than judge. If I could watch my moods shift as I watched the clouds drift in the sky, or how the light shifted on the rocks, lighting one point, then another, each ridge receiving its own turn in the spotlight. Unlike my time at La Push, here, at last, I was learning to sit still. Returning to those places was a meditation.

Like the landscape, I was cracked, broken, exposed. Time, however, was also weathering those raw edges, smoothing them over like the ancient dunes sloping before me. This desert also teaches me patience, endurance. What appeared drab, meaningless—after all, those rocks held no real *value*—was actually an ongoing story of change.

Memories of ancient landscapes and even the creatures who inhabited them.

Time, it seemed, began to open a passageway at last for my grief to be broken down and washed away. Looking out over that desert place, the trailhead leading to the falls, I recognized time as but one element in the shaping of the land. Wind and water also shared responsibility for carving out those channels and canyons, for loosening each

grain of sand and carrying away the excess, what was no longer needed; the canyons themselves also defined by what was absent.

So much of what is now the desert was formed by water. Yet there was another place I kept avoiding that summer *because* of water: the Escalante Natural Bridge. It was one of the more popular destinations in the Grand Staircase for the trailhead's easy access right off of Highway 12, but each time I drove past the trailhead, I thought, Maybe someday. Really, my only excuse was fear. The hike to the bridge involved crossing the Escalante River, a feat my mind amplified way out of proportion.

Someday came sooner than I anticipated. In mid-September 2017, I decided the time was right to hike to the bridge.

I have been scared of water for as long as I can remember. I don't know where that fear came from; I have never had a near-death experience in a river or a swimming pool, it has just always been a part of me. Water, of course, is essential to my survival—if I don't drink it, I will die. As a human, my body is made of approximately 60% water. Even my astrological sign, Scorpio, is considered a water sign. In short, water and I have a close, but tenuous relationship. I suppose that's why it took so much for me to finally hike to the Escalante Natural Bridge. Three years after my mother's passing, I decided it was the right time.

To get to the bridge, according to my guidebook, I would have to cross the Escalante River four times—*four times* venturing into a cold river with slippery rocks and hidden potholes waiting to dunk me.

At least that's what I imagined.

My guidebook assured me, “This fine, short hike...is a trip accessible to any hiker willing to ford the shallow river,” but I still pictured water up to my waist, feeling my way around submerged rocks while I held my pack above my head. One little misstep and I’d be a goner. I didn’t think water was a bad thing or that I couldn’t even look at it without having a panic attack. Rather, I distrusted the instability I felt whenever I stepped into a body of water.

This time, however, there was no way around it. If I wanted to see the bridge, I had to get wet.

From my home in Orem, I had almost four hours of driving to try and convince myself to go somewhere else. There was always Capitol Reef. I wouldn’t have to get wet there.

But no. I made a commitment—even if only to myself—and I was going to keep it. I had avoided the larger waterways of the Grand Staircase for years, all because of that fear I couldn’t explain. It was time to get over it.

In the town of Torrey, I practically had to force myself to turn right onto Highway 12, the road I normally speed my way through Northern Utah to get to, the road up and over Boulder Mountain, scaling that exhilarating ridge known as the Hogback, and descending into the heart of the monument to the Escalante River trailhead.

The river runs through the eastern section of the monument. Although a temperate desert today, by and large, this land was created by water. At viewpoints along Boulder Mountain, I witnessed once again the mind-boggling display of geology: the tilted plates of the Waterpocket Fold, the volcanic peaks of the Henry Mountains, the deep red Circle Cliffs along the Burr Trail, and the invisible boundary between Capitol Reef and the

Grand Staircase. From the viewpoint, there was no real boundary, no distinction, just a continuous labyrinth of red, orange, and white sandstone, mudstone, and siltstone. A winding complexity of canyons carved out by the enduring patience of streams and rivers, as well as the merciless ferocity of flash floods. To see the work of streams and rivers creating this maze sent my mind reeling, even after seeing it time after time. But looking was the easy part. Soon I would have to get wet.

Turning off the highway, I parked my Subaru in the small dirt lot, made sure my Camelback was filled with water and snacks, then checked once, twice, three times that my car keys were stowed in the small inner pocket, my writing materials accessible, my extra jacket and mini first aid kit tucked into the bottom of my pack—everything in its place.

“Ok, you can do this,” I told myself aloud. “Just breathe.” I took a few deep breaths to pump up my spirits, confident that I was fully prepared for whatever may happen.

Once again, I’d come here alone. But the parking lot was nearly full and I figured if I had any trouble in the river, other people wouldn’t be far away.

From the trailhead parking lot, I followed the sandy bank through stands of sagebrush, rice grass, and cheat grass. As I approached the riverbank, I had my first good look at the raging torrent that threatened to drown me in my imagination. I almost started to laugh. The river glided along with the trickling sound of a gentle brook. Through the silty water, I could see the bottom, and most importantly, the opposite bank was only about twelve feet away.

Somewhat relieved, I slid off my shoes and rolled up the legs of my jeans. Then, holding my shoes, I took my first step into the water.

Cold water lapped up to my ankle. Feeling for those hidden potholes I just *knew* lurked down there somewhere, I step-slid my way along the bottom, water rising to my shins. I was past halfway. Just a few more steps until...solid ground under my feet.

I slapped up the opposite bank and into the looser, dry sand on the trail, taking a moment to pause and look back. I could no longer see my white Subaru in the parking lot. It appeared I was all in it now. My confidence buoyed with my first successful crossing, I hoisted up my pack a little higher and continued down the trail. Cottonwoods towered over me, their leaves just beginning to yellow with the earliest touches of fall. A few leaves even drifted down to the ground, their lives spent as the trees pulled their energy inward for the winter. I rubbed my fingers on some grey-green tips of sagebrush; the bright pungent smell like a welcome home. Sagebrush is so prolific in the southwest, it may seem like it's always been this way, but it hasn't. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep over the last one hundred-forty years removed many of the native grasses and opened the landscape for sagebrush and invasive plants to thrive. With the natural system so heavily disturbed, an ecological return to the way things were now seems impossible.

The trail distanced itself from the river until I could no longer hear the bubbling, liquid language. The sand on the trail was so fine, I felt like I was walking on silk—until a sudden prick in my left big toe stopped me. I lifted my foot and found a spiny white seed clinging to my skin. Pulling it out, I tossed it away and scanned the trail more closely, irritated that I might have to put my shoes back on. The path led me right into a patch of Russian thistle.

If ever a plant knew how to make a permanent mark on the landscape, Russian thistle was it. Favored by evolution, when the plant's single stem broke off, it dried out into the well-known spiny yellow ball tumbling round and round wherever the wind carried it, dispersing thousands of seeds. Russian thistle did not just outcompete neighboring plants for water, it outnumbered them. On average, tumbleweeds carry around 250,000 seeds per plant.

The trail rounded another bend and passed between two boulders, each roughly the size of fifteen-passenger vans. I paused between the boulders to place my hands on the gritty surface. I stood in sand, touching stone. Sandstone. Stone that would eventually wear down to become part of the sand at my feet. Erosion may be a slow process on a human scale, but it keeps on, inevitable and persistent.

On the other side of these rocks, I saw a clutter of sticks and broken bark. Flood debris. It seemed rather high for a flood to reach, but I thought back to my recent visit to the Grand Staircase Interagency Center and remembered reading that a flash flood can weigh as much as two adult elephants. From that description, it wasn't hard for me to envision a wall of water barreling down the canyon to break over where I stood, enjoying the illusion of safety.

I made the next three river crossings without incident. On the final stretch, the canyon broadened out into a plain studded with smooth, round stones, and the trail mounted onto a brushy bench. Further up, I saw the thin opening of a small arch.

*Is that it?* I asked myself. That couldn't be it. The guidebook described the bridge as a "massive 130-foot high, 100-foot wide bridge of sandstone."

I glanced around, hoping for something more, but all I saw were rounded domes and red-orange walls streaked with black desert varnish. I kept walking forward, my eyes fixed on the downward thrust of the arch resembling a giant jug handle, my focus so intent that I didn't notice the trail thinning out and disappearing until I heard the crackle of seeds underfoot. I couldn't seem to get away from those thistles.

Backtracking a few steps, I spied the trail veering off to the south. There, silent and hidden against the canyon wall, spanned the Escalante Natural Bridge. Now that looked more like its description. No wonder I hadn't noticed it right away. It hugged close enough to the wall that from a distance it blended right into the cliff face and the wall behind it, no sky showing through the opening to reveal its presence.

For the last fifty yards or so, I followed the trail as it tucked beneath the cottonwood trees. Standing on the moist bank, I looked up at that small, natural wonder. It was only the fifth largest natural bridge in this region, but considering the millions of years it took to create it, I was still wonderstruck. I was also struck by the fact that I was the only visitor in sight. The entire time on the trail, I met only two other hikers—a man and his dog. I took one of the last parking spaces in the lot by the highway so I knew other people had to be wandering about somewhere. Perhaps they all went downriver from the trailhead to see Maverick Bridge or Phipps Arch instead, leaving me as the only person admiring that bridge at that moment in its lifetime of millions upon millions of years.

By definition, a natural bridge forms when a stream or river tunnels beneath a weak point in a rock where it meets the ground. Arches, on the other hand, are created when water percolates downward through the stone and dissolves it until an opening

occurs. The Escalante was high up on the rock wall above me and I couldn't see its contact points with the ground that would technically classify it as a bridge. Perhaps I thought too hard about it. Perhaps I should just trust the geologists' expertise and accept it for what it is.

While some natural bridges and arches appear fragile, as if they could collapse any day, the Escalante appears quite thick all the way across, enough that it looks as if it would bear my weight easily if I could get up that high to walk across. Such a venture would be impossible, of course. Even if the monument's regulations allowed walking on bridges and arches, there was no way to it.

The river rushed soft and continuous between me and the bridge. I could have crossed it one more time to get right up underneath the bridge, but I decided against it. I was happy where I stood with both feet on solid ground. There I was at last, viewing a landmark in many ways I hadn't expected to see for years to come, especially not alone.

The sun passed between scattered clouds as I made my way back from the bridge, winding backward through time. Layer upon layer, the rocks of this canyon were put down—not in a day, a century, or even a millennium. Only through the consistent effort of elements and time. The Escalante River Canyon has seen tropical climates, inland seas, dinosaurs, barren deserts. Now it is a riparian corridor, just one canyon out of hundreds of others in this region. It is characterized by everything that has been removed—tons and tons of sediment over eons of time. An emptiness exists now, a space for the life-giving force of the river to flow unceasing.

Death severs a relationship only in the physical sense. In the years immediately following my mother's death, I sought the desert as a way of forcing that relationship

back, to relive our experiences. Grief over her absence took me to the darkest parts of myself, a landscape I navigated through touch and go, recoiling from the pain of loss that I desired my own death more times than I could count. It finally took a trip away from there, an expedition in which I dredged the bottom of my self-hatred enough to realize that if I threw away my own life, I would also throw away everything my mother had given me. I loved and honored her too much to do that.

Back in the desert, ironically, I found a bridge only by crossing a river. I don't know how many times I had gone to the banks of my inner rivers, only to turn away from the pain of a loss of my mother that seemed so permanent. But it wasn't permanent, only subject to change. Just as the canyon itself was defined by what was *not* there, what was absent, I was shaped by my loss, but no longer fighting to hold onto what had already been lived. I could yield to change, let go of what was not necessary, and over time, let this desert be the bridge by which I could still reach her.

During one of my last crossings, I paused mid-river and stood still. The effect was immediate: the current pulled away gravel and sand from around my feet, bringing a strange sensation of movement, of flowing downriver, even though I stood absolutely still.

For many years, I had avoided the Escalante for a fear I couldn't explain. It was a fear never grounded in any reality, just present somewhere in the back of my mind. In reality, the river was not what I had harbored in my imagination for so long. I had expected a powerful torrent; I found a shallow, gentle current. Fear can be healthy. It compels us forward at times, otherwise we risk complacency. But our unhealthy fears—the ones that keep us from finding those rich gems of experience—must be faced. Instead

of letting that fear continue to control me, I began to see it for what it was: an emotion. One of many emotions that rose and fell in my human experience.

At that moment, nothing was happening except water passing around my ankles, leaves rustling from cottonwoods overhead, my breath, an occasional songbird, sunshine slanting through the cottonwoods. The water continued to pass, but at last I found a place of stillness. Even as I felt the water pulling the ground away from beneath my feet, I was still in control. All I had to do was walk to the other side. There would be more rivers to cross, perhaps the swift-running torrents I first imagined this one to be, but I knew the stillness I found there at last was embedded enough within me that I could find it again and again.

Before continuing on, I looked down. Sticks, twigs, leaves, silt, sand, a pinecone tumbling end over end: they all kept flowing around me on their journey toward Lake Powell where the Escalante River terminates. From there, perhaps someday they would reach the Colorado River, which wound on toward the Pacific Ocean. Fresh water meeting salt water. Equilibrium. Union. Perfect Harmony.

There, beneath the bending trees, I watched the water carry it all away.