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Abstract

Title: Downstate: A Mixed-genre, Recollection of Place in Prose

Working in the model of James Agee’s classic documentary prose Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, this place-based memoir presents a written collage that tells the story of a region, a family and a person with one foot in her past and the other stepping confidently into her future. Informed by the fields of environmental studies, place studies and regional history, this project considers how the unique geography, history and culture of southern Illinois, a place also known as ‘Little Egypt’, creates a backdrop for the author’s youth. Relying on informal interviews, regional lore and autobiographical writing, this extended personal essay explores how a young person can honor established childhood roots while continuing to grow new ones.

[117 words]
Preface

At its most basic, the study of literature focuses on gaining a better understanding of how the written word presents information and knowledge about the world around us. From this discipline, a study of place can be extracted, as seen in works such as James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and C.D. Wright’s *Deepstep Come Shining*. When this occurs, literature becomes the means to explore the various ways geography, culture and history influence the stories that we each choose to share.

As children, we are born into a place. We are moved from here to there and back again, at the whims and wishes of others. As adults, those decisions become ours. And while the transition from child to adult is more than the ability to choose our physical places, in its essence, it is just that. At some moments, this transition is welcomed. We eagerly anticipate when that choice will become ours, ready to step away from childhood homes. At others, we cannot imagine anything more difficult. This project represents that struggle, the continual process of honoring your roots while continuing to grow new ones.

My roots are found in southern Illinois, a place far different from where I am now and from where I will be in just a year. But before I move beyond these roots, before I move from this transitory period between child and adult, it seems necessary to remember, examine and reflect on the people, culture and places that have shaped my present. For over a decade, southern Illinois created a backdrop for the story of my life. These are my stories of Little Egypt, a place that made me who I am.
Downstate: A Mixed-genre, Recollection of Place in Prose

My father’s closet houses three generations of wedding gowns behind solid wood doors. His mother’s. His wife’s. His daughter’s. His closet space was not volunteered. As clothing has never been one of his vanities, the dresses fit nicely in the left corner. Three garment bags all in a row.

To him, these dresses are all quite similar. He can make few, if any, distinctions between the shades of white. The detailing of lace appliqués, embroidery, satin-covered buttons, and tulle goes unnoted.

The first time I tried on my Granny’s dress, the stiff tulle brushed my kneecaps, as it does in the pictures from her wedding day in 1962. But at the age of fifteen, the zipper and buttons were already unable to span the distance between my pale shoulder blades. The slightly yellowed lace sleeves wouldn’t stretch the length of my arms, leaving a small freckle, one that marks the end of my ulna, exposed on my left wrist.

By that year, my mother’s dress wouldn’t fit either. She hooked button after button, only to pause at my mid-to-upper back. It buttoned no higher. As a little girl, I dreamed of wearing my mother’s dress when I walked down the aisle and my grandmother’s tea-length gown as I shared a first dance with my husband. Learning that I would wear neither was enough to draw tears.

Years later, I consoled myself by purchasing a new dress: a Vera Wang on sale. My mother and I drove three hours each way so that I could try it on, a full year before I was offered a proposal. My father smiled when its cloth bag was added to his closet.
The three dresses wait in a line, from oldest to newest, left to right. My father notices anytime they are moved, a certain protectiveness. While he could not tell layers of satin from those of chiffon, he could offer countless stories and recollections of the women who have worn, or will wear his closet full of gowns.

As I prepared for my wedding day, it became increasingly clear that weddings demand a certain amount of nostalgia. While weddings are about the beginnings, these beginnings require pause. If two are to become one, it cannot be done without acknowledging the past. The old cannot fully be left behind. Pretending otherwise is foolish.

Perhaps our transition will be eased by intertwining roots. Daniel and I share an understanding of an area that collectively we have called home for thirty-five years, his whole life and over half of mine. Saying goodbye to home is a process that holds the ability to simultaneously spark both overwhelming fear and excitement. And as we start out together, failing to acknowledge the culture that we have grown in would never seem right. Beginning anew requires a recognition and goodbye.

“When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, ‘Why do you just keep looking at each other?’ 2 He continued, ‘I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.’”

Genesis 42: 1-3
New International Version

When people ask where I’m from, southern Illinois is my given response, but I think Little Egypt. The name never seemed odd. It’s colloquial in the best meanings of the word; its familiarity and informality feel like home. But there’s a history to the name, and it’s one my Pa tells.
Before the Civil War, Illinois had a harsher winter than anyone could remember. The snow came early and stayed until spring. That summer came late and the fall frosts came early. Nobody north of Benton had any corn, but they needed it. There was livestock to feed, people to feed, and the next season’s planting. The farmers and ranchers from the north headed south, searching for corn to survive. They found it in southern Illinois. Being a biblical folk, these farmers soon called these trips ‘going to Egypt,’ like Jacob’s sons.

Over time, you learn to take my Pa’s stories with a grain of salt, but he swears this one to be true, and others will do the same.

There’s the nickname you’ve had since childhood—the one you’ve had for so long, you can’t quite remember where or when it started, but that’s why you love it. It’s the name used by people that matter the most. In my family, I’m ‘Mantha Mo. Tucker is reduced to Tuck. Eli becomes E-Man. Andrew expands to Andrew Jackson. And southern Illinois, that’s Little Egypt.

To most who live outside of the state, Illinois contains one city that covers about 57,915 square miles: Chicago. Even its suburbs are nonexistent. The first time you encounter this notion can be off-putting. My first? Mission work in Beaufort, South Carolina.

We sat with Alzheimer’s patients and played countless games of Go Fish with a faded deck the size of greeting cards. A conversation with a fellow volunteer quickly veered to the topics deemed socially acceptable for small talk. The weather—it was hot. School—I was a high school freshman, she a sophomore. State of Origin—she was from Florida; I was from Illinois.
“Oh, you’re from Chicago! I’ve always wanted to go there!”

It’s conversations like these that reveal the vital piece of information that many people are missing. Most sources will agree that the Chicagoland area stretches approximately 10,850 square miles, presenting a mathematical conundrum. That’s only 18.74%. Where is the rest of Illinois?

While unlikely its original intention, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources provides an answer to this question. Illinois is made up of five regions: Northwestern, Northeastern, East Central, West Central, and Southern. The Chicagoland area only occupies one.

I spent the first years of my life in the Northwestern and the most recent in the Northeastern for school. I’ve passed through the Centrals on multiple occasions, but have called the Southern region home. Each region boasts stories and a history worth studying; I know only my own.

The Northwestern taught me to say goodbye. There were childhood friends: Kristen with long, copper hair and Gabrielle who had already learned backflips in gymnastics. A home that boasted the scars of a hundred years and guarded whispered secrets, with a stairway whose squeaks and groans defended the cookie jar at night. A glass aquarium dismantled and its resident released into my grandparents’ pond. Speedy’s shell, one scrubbed with a toothbrush since Kindergarten, was later discovered empty. My painted turtle was lost, as was my first marriage. Long-distance relationships don’t work in the second grade; as Jonathan put it, “sometimes love ends in divorce.”

I valued the Centrals for the grass, just far enough north to avoid the lingering itch of chiggers but far enough south that bare feet didn’t suffer the numbing sting of thistles. When
crossing the state end-to-end, the Centrals offered parks with flat land and room to fly kites.

Under the shadows of white oaks, we ate watermelons carefully chosen and hauled from Arkansas, a chef’s knife exposing the lycopene-reddened flesh.

The art of choosing melons is one of my Pa’s prides. You should be able to find the place where its weight pressed against the earth, a soft yellow against the deep greens. No longer boasting a glossy sheen, the watermelon’s rind is dulled, and its once distinct striping blends into a uniform shade. Its ripeness discovered by a heavy thump against the side and the judgment of a trained ear.

Almost a Bearcat instead of a Cardinal, McKendree University wanted to keep me south—Lebanon, a mere two hours from home. With my tuition reduced by a Legacy Scholarship, my grandparents’ traditions could have continued at their alma mater. Perhaps I would have majored in Chemistry like they did. I might have joined Sigma Zeta and presented my own paper on “Poisons in Your Food”. I could have attempted my hand at tricking a senior into an imaginary snipe hunt, only to have the joke turned on me. But I didn’t. Instead, I sat in a parking lot on McKendree’s campus on a late April afternoon and made my choice. I called North Central.

A three-year stay in the Northeastern has been my transition to adulthood. The values instilled by my parents and a childhood in southern Illinois have either been adopted as my own or discarded. Here, I’ve learned to recognize my roots, while beginning to move beyond them.

Perhaps I’m biased in my attraction to southern Illinois. Yet even if approached with a biased attraction, there are a few facts that remain. I have grown up interacting with diverse natural environments and a rich history. Southern Illinois has offered a backdrop for my life, and for even longer, generations of my family. The people and their stories, the region’s strengths
and shortcomings, have all played a part in shaping me into the person that I am and will continue to be. It’s home.

Even as a child, I liked my Pa and Granny’s address better than my own. While my 412 South Main Street was common, their 45 White Pine Cove asked for my imagination. I often played with words; the public library’s Merriam-Webster and I maintained a close friendship. White: “having the color of fresh snow or milk.” Pine: “a tree that has long, thin needles instead of leaves.” Cove: “a small sheltered bay.” The definitions of south, main, and street were, and remain, boring in comparison. If those words weren’t enough, my grandparents heightened the intrigue with the addition of a house name. Cedar: “a very tall evergreen tree….noted for very fragrant wood.” Rock: “a large mass of stone forming a cliff, promontory, or peak.” To a young and budding sufferer of logophilia, the words that made up their home offered unmatchable potential. I secretly rejoice when others take note of the potential these words offer.

But in 1st grade, my Granny died and those words I loved were harder to hear and write. As much as I valued their beauty and sounds, they would only ever be words. For the first time, I realized that part of what makes words so powerful are the voices and memories of people that use them. While I lost the beauty of the words, my Pa lost the beauty of his home. Together, my grandparents had built Cedar Rock for their retirement. Their two wooden rockers faced one another in the corner window. Local creek rocks gathered by my uncle and father surrounded the fireplace hearth. It was theirs, and my grandfather couldn’t stay. The loss we all felt meant that any joy I had in that address becoming my own a year later was diminished.

Years passed before those words regained their value. Working on fractions significantly more complex than those practiced in third grade, I listened as my mother paid a bill over the phone. “Yes. 45 White Pine Cove…. It is a rather unique address…..Thank you. We think it’s
quite pretty too.” Hearing a stranger appreciate the complexity and beauty of the words, strung together like pearls, was the reminder to celebrate the address, and its memories, again.

A move south meant a transition of thought and fears. Unlike my three younger brothers, I do not relish the abundance of all things that creep and crawl in southern Illinois. The desire to be an entomologist or herpetologist is one that I have never owned. Simply put, when teachers would ask the time-honored question ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ my response never included insects, reptiles, or snakes. To my dismay, southern Illinois offers just that.

I nearly peed on a green treefrog, an inhabitant of swamps, lakes, and streams. This was not during a camping trip; this was not a bathroom in the woods. I nearly peed on a green treefrog that was hiding in a toilet inside my home.

A shade of green somewhere between a lime and an avocado, and only about as wide as a golf ball, this little guy might have been tolerated if he hadn’t been residing in the toilet. Why he would choose this particular toilet remains a mystery. It was a bathroom shared amongst four siblings: one girl, who always cleaned the bathroom, and three boys, for whom the same cannot be said. Due to the high traffic, this toilet was an extremely poor choice. The frog’s saving grace was that I entered the bathroom and not one of my brothers. I was horrified at the idea that I had almost emptied my bladder upon a treefrog; my youngest brother, then a boy of four or five, did not share my sentiments. In fact, he was disappointed in me. That frog invaded our toilet and deserved the consequences. He would have “peed all over that frog!”

You may wonder how I know to refer to the invader as Mr. Treefrog rather than as a Mrs. As stated, there was never a desire to be herpetologist; however, I am a bibliophile. The male
green treefrog is known to make a nasally “quonk, quonk.” That day, the lift of the toilet lid was serenaded by that distinctive cry.

In southern Illinois, buses come early. Large school districts with limited budgets mean few buses and long routes. You have to pick the kids up, even if a blonde boy is the only one at the end of a very long, very rural road. Catch the bus at 6:55. School starts at 8:30. You were always still half asleep when climbing the three steps into the faded, yellow bus.

A new magenta backpack, a 3-ring binder and a pair of purple rimmed glasses marked my first day of fifth grade. Mind clouded by sleep, few details stand out from the bus’s pick-up that morning. It’s quite certain that my brother and I hugged our dad goodbye when we climbed out of his old, brown Ford truck. Surely the stop sign flashed red as my brother and I crossed the road. It was the first day of school, so the bus driver undoubtedly waved. It’s true that I screamed as we tried to board the bus.

Showing its cold-blooded nature, a copperhead lay coiled at the bus’s steps, warming in the sun. I was certain that my brother was about to be his breakfast. While somewhere in my mind I realized this was impossible, the fear of *Agkistrodon contortrix* was justified. A copperhead cannot eat a whole human; however, with fangs just shy of a half-inch, they give a poisonous bite.

This reign of terror was quickly ended by the tires of my father’s truck. The yard-long, thick-bodied, rusty brown copperhead was flattened. Knowing that our two young beagles possessed a hefty dose of curiosity and an insatiable appetite, the snake was hung like Christmas tinsel from a dogwood tree. By that evening, a turkey vulture had helped itself to a meal.
My family’s affinity for turtles, an attraction of unclear origins, means that I grant one pardon to reptilians. Spring is marked by the increasing number of wandering turtles and rarely does my family take a drive without someone calling out a turtle spotting. We are proud members, perhaps even founders of the TTR. The purpose of Total Turtle Rescue is to provide aid and assistance to chelonians that find themselves in desperate, and often unavoidable, circumstances. This includes, but is not limited to, the difficulty of safely crossing any road, street, lane, avenue, or boulevard. If a turtle is determined to be in dangerous conditions and can be moved to its destination without harm being incurred by the TTR member, then the turtle shall receive help. To the occasional dismay of my brothers, no cruel tricks such as returning the turtle to its start are deemed acceptable behavior. It must be moved in the direction in which it was attempting to reach.

Over the years, TTR developed an outreach program for the meandering turtles of southern Illinois. Any turtle whose path crosses the headquarter doors, located at our home residence, is offered a meal. Provisions vary daily, based upon what is currently available in the fridge; however, standard offerings include melon rinds, lettuce, carrots, and the occasional fishing worm. Despite its inconsistent offerings, this program appears to be very popular amongst the visiting turtles, as a number of regulars make yearly appearances; occasionally, visiting multiple times per summer.

One turtle of particular fame is Lucky, and as far as turtles go, he’s a rather friendly fellow. Already missing a leg, his crawling gait leaves a distinctive trail through the yard. Over time, he’s become a mascot of sorts.
As I prepared to leave home for my freshman year at North Central, my three younger brothers didn’t hesitate to share their confusion. With false confidence I touted the benefits of my choice, while they insisted that I was paying thousands of dollars for a degree that only proved I could read. But my reassurances and time have failed to convince them, and each remains puzzled by my choice to study English. I’ve held onto a lingering hope that turning my attention towards writing would change their minds. But simply put, this hope was hopeless. If anything, they’ve become more apprehensive.

For some time I was touched by this level of concern. If my three brothers remain so worried for my future then surely I must have fulfilled the requirements for being their sister. I kept their secrets, and it must have all been worth it.

**OBLIGATIONS & REQUIREMENTS of SISTERHOOD**

**The Official Rules According to The Boys**

- Allow for the repeated demolishment of carefully stacked, wooden alphabet block towers by dinosaurs.
- All Barbies will be dunked in toilets on April Fool’s Day.
- The aforementioned Barbies will also be parachuted from stairwells.
- Male siblings—Tucker, Eli, and Andrew—are entitled to the final cookies and the last glasses of milk.
- The previously named male siblings will perform the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song when any diary raid uncovers a boy’s name.

I was prepared to accept an award for the goodwill and kindness bestowed over the years when my mother shared the truth. They’ve learned about this project, and their renewed concern is not for my future but for their anonymity. It is certain that I will embarrass them and there is no worse fate for boys between the ages of 17 and 12.
After all, what if I share stories about dancing in the rain underneath the gutter spout? Crying over chicken eggs that didn’t hatch by the end of incubation? Pretending to cross the Trail of Tears with the Cherokee? That’s their worry. Would I dare?

The old fire pit with three walls of coarse red bricks and a rusted metal grate easily became my open-air kitchen, while the boys, using their shirts as baskets, gleaned the wooded hillside for leaves, nuts, and the occasional bug. Surrounding rock ridges offered a natural mortar and pestle, allowing acorns to become a mealy, beige powder. When added to a warped pot filled with duckweed and lake water, these ingredients became a cloudy soup best served with dried moss. An insult to the Native American tribes that called these hillsides home, these soups were never gourmet, never edible.

It was a rather foolish game and perhaps my brothers are right to be embarrassed, but this free play was valuable. We spent time outdoors and learned to occupy ourselves. We formed our own rules and played our own games. Our parents were just inside the house but never hovering. Arguments were quickly resolved by determining who could throw a rock farthest. There were toy bows formed of sticks and the raffia once used to tie back plaid kitchen curtains. And yes, there were falls and scrapes but we played with the modern conveniences of Band-Aids and Neosporin.

This time we spent with these games and imaginings is easily dismissed, a silly diversion for fall afternoons. It always seemed to be more, but is it only that? Perhaps I’ve simply succumbed to romanticizing, the musings of girl six hours from home.
In the advertising world, nature is a go-to appeal for families. Marketers know it, package it, and sell it. Laundry detergents in ‘mountain meadow’ and ‘fresh rain.’ Candles and air fresheners in ‘Cape Cod’ and ‘Rocky Mountains’. Is this enough? Can nature be bottled and sold? Light the Air Wick candle and let the engineered scent wash over you. Does the “sweet vanilla & pumpkin bring the magnificence of Acadia National Park to life with its rich autumnal blend of sandalwood, vanilla and creamy pumpkin?”

Air Wick claims to offer you the opportunity to “explore the rare essence of our national parks.” Their Fall Line 2013, introduced Acadia. But turn on the computer. Google Maine Acadia. Click Images and this is Acadia. Evergreens. A rocky coastline. A lighthouse against the orange and pinks of the sunset. These places are easy to see; all of these images at our fingertips. South Dakota’s Badlands. Alaska’s Denali. Arkansas’ Hot Springs. Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave. Virginia’s Shenandoah. California’s Yosemite. Is it enough?

If the noises are captured will that be? Round, reflective discs reproducing The Sounds of Acadia, taking listeners on “a 3-dimensional musical journey” exploring the “many moods of this enchanting sanctuary.” Does sound make this replication complete?

Scents. Images. Sounds. If you’ve never experienced nature, then maybe you can fool yourself. A series of succinct scents, images, and sounds securely packaged in a clean box is plenty. But if you have smelled dew evaporating from blackberries in the rising summer sun, cupped earth in your hands and imagined life too small to be seen, or heard a tree crashing to the forest floor, then no matter how prettily packaged, these replications will never be a replacement.
Collected Definitions of Star

Merriam-Webster: “a self-luminous gaseous spheroidal celestial body of great mass which produces energy by means of nuclear fusion reactions.”

NASA: “a sphere of gas held together by its own gravity… The force of gravity is continually trying to cause the star to collapse, but this is counteracted by the pressure of hot gas and/or radiation in the star's interior.”

National Geographic: “cosmic energy engines that produce heat, light, ultraviolet rays, x-rays, and other forms of radiation…composed largely of gas and plasma, a superheated state of matter composed of subatomic particles.”

Fifty-seven stars serve as our steady guide, chosen by the Nautical Almanac for their brightness and distribution. A calculated series of angular measurements taken between a celestial body and the visible horizon point have the ability to point the way home. But how can something so remote and so impersonal provide not only a path but a constant reassurance?

Emerson wrote that “if the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore…. But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.”

He was wrong; the stars are missing here. It’s two-thirty in the morning and there are none, perhaps it’s too cloudy. But it’s the constant glow of manufactured light in suburbia, not the weather to blame for this empty sky. Wishes are thrown upon passing airplanes and I listen to the rumble of a nearby train. What can I cling to?

I learned to watch the stars through the lens of a Christmas gift, a telescope of molded plastic not of sturdy metal. It was the type that lines the highly-coveted endcap displays during
the holidays and boasts signage proclaiming that this product will provide your family with years of enjoyment at the lowest price of the season. It was the kind of telescope that parents buy after their children experience the STARLAB portable planetarium, when their only dreams are to become the next Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, or Galileo Galilei.

My lack of significant contributions to the field of astronomy proves that I am neither these men nor Johannes Kepler. And when the telescope lens cracked, it wasn’t replaced, but packed away next to a faded purple gymnastics leotard, and other aspirations of childhood. Even then, the stars retained their mystery. With a blanket separating me from the gritty shingles, I would lie on the roof and count stars. When sleep was evasive, there was comfort in knowing that day would break before the task could be finished. Now, there are only headlights that flash through the window panes, scattering shadows across beige walls.

Fireflies, *Lampyridae*, are the summers of childhood: glowing light to be cupped in your hands and carefully placed in a jar, a small glimpse of magic. I want to capture the stars like fireflies. I want to wake up during the night and see a soft glowing light from a cracked Mason jar resting on the bedside table. When I can’t sleep, I want to count until day breaks.

“*Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket*

*Never let it fade away*

*Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket*

*Save it for a rainy day.*”

When you can’t see the falling stars, how do you catch one?
When it wasn’t counting stars, it was counting horses, or deer. Occasionally cows. It was my parents’ love of meandering road trips that developed these tallying games. There was never a vehicle in our drive that featured a DVD player. Instead, it held a white Dodge Grand Caravan with wheels that could gather dirt from the Missouri Bootheel, north-eastern Arkansas, southern Illinois, the Jackson Purchase of Kentucky, and north-western corner of Tennessee in a single day.

The rules are simple. First, you must stay awake. Any horses you happen to see, pet, or ride while dreaming are not part of this game. After all, attempting to include these horses becomes obvious when they boast a gleaming, purple mane.

Second, this is a daily count and not an official census. Regardless of how many horses you observe during previous treks, journeys, voyages, trips, or expeditions, a new winner is crowned as the day’s final destination is reached. Prior calculations have no influence or sway over a daily total and cannot be banked for future credit.

A participant is not allowed to claim a side of the vehicle as his or her own territory. For example, it would be considered grounds for disqualification if Participant A (for the sake of convenience and clarity, we’ll call him Tucker) declared the right-side view as his personal possession and under his sole jurisdiction.

Finally, you wish to avoid the cemeteries, as they mean that all of your horses have suddenly succumbed to disease and died. Now whether the vehicle encounters the 30,000 graves of the Marion City Cemetery or a forgotten family plot nestled under the hushing voices of pines, the fate of the tallied horses is the same. They must be buried. The cemetery is on the left? Then all passengers on that side prepare a eulogy for the lost Equus ferus caballus. When a cemetery briefly flashes by the right-hand windows, the same process begins. For some time, Andrew, the
youngest, successfully avoided this burial custom and despite his state of constant distraction, continually exited the van victorious. An amendment was added to the game as his preference for the middle seat slowly raised our suspicions: all passengers that take the middle seat bury half of their herd at each cemetery passing.

While the game did pass the time, it failed to ever erase the constant backseat bickering. If anything, our arguments only increased. Who saw the chestnut first? Why did you count three palominos? There were only two. Do donkeys count? The bay was mine! Regardless of my parents’ original intentions, this counting game kept us looking out the windows and observing our surroundings. Hours of childhood were spent watching southern Illinois pass through the fingerprint-smudged windows.

Daniel enjoys discovering southern Illinois as much as my family, but he has never quite understood these unplanned explorations. His thought process strongly favors a structured plan and purpose, the certainty of a firm goal. My brothers simply think he’s impatient and tease that I’m forbidden to marry a man who lacks the ability to ramble. I’ve tried to explain that the childhoods they experienced were different than most. To them, hours in the car seem commonplace. They hold a patience slowly developed in seeking the people, places and stories of southern Illinois.

Illinois’ southernmost city stands at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi, connected to Kentucky by the U.S. 51 River Bridge: Cairo (/ˈkeɪroʊ/ CARE-o). Somewhere nearby is the disputed location of the Ulysses S. Grant’s Fort Defiance. Much of the state remains unimpressed. In 1987, the Chicago Tribune writer John Husar described the area under
the title “Ugliness of State Park at Ft. Defiance Almost Defies Belief.” He offers the following notes:

- The road is incredibly rutted and potholed. I dared to let my truck coast only at idling speed. At three of the worst spots, motorists have carved detours on the grass.
- The grounds are filthy. Garbage spills from untended trash cans and litters the entire park. Huge shards of broken bottles gleam from the picnic lawn, which offers four scarred and dirty tables.
- A view of the beautiful Ohio River is unavailable from the ground, blocked by four strings of barges moored with questionable legality to the state park shore. A visitor who happens to live in Cairo told me they had been there for months.
- Fishing is impossible because of the driftwood piled along both shores. I could not find the boat ramp until I drove to a nearby state police substation and a cop told me where to look. He said the ramp is usually clogged by driftwood and debris and is rarely usable. “I’m not sure who maintains the place,” he said. “I don’t think the state does anymore.”
- The lawns are dead, killed by flooding and neglect.
- A two-story observation tower, painted a year ago by the Youth Conservation Corps, no longer offers restroom facilities. The rivers have eroded two corners of the foundation. The windows of a concessions stand were bricked up long ago.
- The water fountain is gone. Reduced by vandals to a pile of bricks and a capped pipe, it was covered with dirt two years ago.

While ownership has changed hands, the former state park now controlled by the city, not much has improved since Husar visited Fort Defiance and Cairo. Husar’s displeasure in the Park was shared by the State. Bob Coomer, who joined the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in 1985 and later became its director, bluntly admits that he was appalled when the IHPA was given control of Fort Defiance, comparing it to being handed a garbage dump.

The southern tip of Illinois hasn’t changed much. The freshly-painted observation tower is faded and the foundation hasn’t been repaired and visitors echo the words of Husar in their online, TripAdvisor reviews:

ncsearch: I would visit again for the scenic aspect of it, but would make sure there a couple of other people with me.
**SwampeastMike:** Like the town of Cairo it is neglected and not particularly safe. Also like Cairo, its very existence seems in defiance of reality.

**CobbCoGA:** Unfortunately, it’s a bit scary to be in the park when no one else is around….Between the grass, the rusted swings, and the desolation, it felt a bit post-apocalyptic. It was one of those places that was definitely worth seeing, but also makes you kind of sad at the same time…

Their words do not stand alone; Charles Dickens made his own observations. In a travelogue of his journeys, *American Notes and Pictures of Italy*, he concluded that his 1842 journey from Cincinnati to St. Louis by river became despondent at Cairo. In his words, Cairo was “a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it: such is this dismal.” While a bustling river port during the Civil War and flourishing until the 1920s, this city had not grown up from the marshes when Dickens passed through. But like many small, broken towns of Little Egypt, Cairo grew and then it fell.

Hardin County’s Cave-In-Rock or *caverne dans Le Roc*, a name bestowed by the French in 1739, also rests on the Ohio River. Continually reshaped by the forces behind its formation—years of wind, water, and earthquakes of the New Madrid Fault—the 55-foot entrance offered asylum to outlaws, river pirates, and bandits.

Just down the river, from 6:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., Illinois Route 1 and Kentucky Route 91 remain linked by ferry. Reminiscent of earlier days, the red-and-white *Loni Jo* slowly moves cargo from shore to shore, its diesel engine giving off a low, continuous hum, working hard under its load.
When the river waters are contrary, rising too high or falling too low, local residents have few options: stay home or drive. Without the ferry, trips to Kentucky require a drive 27 miles north to the Shawneetown Bridge or 55 miles west to Interstate 24 and its crossing to Paducah.

There seems to be a simple solution: construct a new bridge. However, since the 1970s, the population of Crittenden County, Kentucky has plateaued at around 9,000. Meanwhile, the population of Hardin County, Illinois has steadily decreased since 1980. In 2012, the population fell to 4,258, an 11.05% loss in the last 12 years. Dwindling populations almost guarantee that these two counties will never see a bridge, crossing this expanse of the Ohio would cost millions. Rather, the pilots of the *Loni Jo* will keep ferrying nearly 2,600 cars daily.

**2012 Population-United States Census Bureau**


Very few of these cities have seen recent growth, and this list could be significantly expanded. Like Crittenden County, KY a few have plateaued. Most have shrunk. We’d drive through and around these towns until one of us begged to stop at the Cache River Wetlands, an Amish bakery, river beds, or anything that happened to peak our interest on that given day and that particular road. My parents chose to show us these places, the quiet streets and falling buildings, their history and heritage slowly being forgotten.

As a child, their choice was one I rarely appreciated. What purpose is there in watching a small town disappear? Why sit and watch foundations crumble? And as I’ve grown, I’m still unsure that I fully understand. But perhaps I’m never meant to, perhaps the power of these
forgotten places is found in the questions they force you to continually ask. Why did this happen? Can this be changed?

It’s difficult to admit that you’re part of the problem. Small towns die when people no longer choose to live there. Southern Illinois offered us our beginnings, but Daniel and I are unable to see our future there. Close friends say we’re making a mistake and at times, it’s difficult to argue. But, we’ve each made our choices and we can’t figure out how to stay. His Master’s degree in Human Resources will soon move us to Cincinnati, Ohio. We’ll follow the Ohio River five hundred and nine miles northeast of Cairo.

A 2007 study conducted by economist Nattavudh Powdthavee, of the University of London, found that if you take a job that entails giving up seeing family and friends on a regular basis, you’ll need to make $133,000 to make up for the lack of happiness you will feel. Will leaving Little Egypt be worth it?

My mother and I watched as my wedding grew on our secret Pinterest board, Down the Road. Rather than tomatoes, carrots, and rutabagas, we practiced our own form of horticulture, tending neat rows of photos. When we became less prudent, unsuitable ideas would spring up as weeds amongst our work. Intruders, plans and ideas unsuited for winter, deprived ideas deserving attention their due. But the starred December 21st on the calendar served as a scarecrow guarding the entrance—a lone sentinel, wearing layers of tulle and chiffon.

As the board grew to a monstrous size, so did its power and intimidation. If Daniel and I married ten more times, my mother and I had still planted too many seeds. How do you choose which sprouting idea is worth nurturing and which must be discarded among the weeds? Like judges at the 4-H Fair, we reviewed the submissions—weighing impact against feasibility, appearance versus practicality—marking the best in each category.
Throughout my childhood, I realized that being the first grandchild and only granddaughter is a status worth remembering and occasionally exploiting. Flouncy dresses and tight braids hold immense power when used carefully, and boast the ability to sway and convince my grandparents of any number of things. In childhood, my requests were small: a sleepover with an entire batch of chocolate chip cookies just for me or a trip on the red four-wheeler to throw out apples for the deer. But this year, my request grew. And despite the intimidating size of the task, my grandparents agreed: 700 caramels wrapped in foil squares. As the tea lights began to burn out and the coffee turned cold, each guest left the wedding reception carrying a small box. Inside was a sampling of my Papa’s homemade caramels, soft, gooey concoctions that dentists despise, and taste like the best parts of Christmas.

If my brothers knew their eventual punishment, more Barbies would have survived April Fool’s Day. At first, they were excited by the containers of caramels. Never in their lives had they imagined such an abundance of candy. While they still failed to see the purpose in giving these caramels away, their assistance was bought. We developed a payment system, for every twenty boxes filled, a small price to pay, their reward was a caramel. However, their patience quickly evaporated and they began to ask questions. Why can’t we throw the caramels like we’re at a parade? Was Daniel in marching band too? You were, so a parade makes sense. Don’t you know it will be more fun? Imagine all of the old people scrambling to pick up the candy off the dance floor! In moments of weakness, their ideas sounded tempting. After all, the excitement would be an element of surprise at this brunch reception. And then, I did imagine. There would be no parades, but a wage increase. The final going rate? One caramel per fifteen completed wedding favors.
Papa’s Homemade Caramels

1 cup butter 1 cup light corn syrup

1 lb. (2 ½ cups) brown sugar 1 (14 oz.) can sweetened condensed milk

Dash of salt 1 tsp. vanilla

In a 3-quart saucepan over medium heat, melt butter. Add sugar and salt; stir well. Gradually add milk, stirring constantly. Cook for approximately 15 minutes, or until candy thermometer registers 245° (hard-ball stage). Remove pan from heat. Stir in the vanilla. Pour into a buttered 9x9x2-inch metal or glass baking pan. Cool. Turn pan over and turn candy out onto a cutting board. Cut into small squares. Wrap individually in plastic. Store in a tightly-covered container in a cool, dry place.

Wedding planning seems to invite the comments of each person you meet, wherever you may be. At the grocery store, Hobby Lobby, the library, it doesn’t matter. Many were cautiously congratulatory, confused by my young age, but others were unabashedly expressive—like the Naperville dental hygienist.

As I lay waiting for a dosage of Novocain to become effective, the dental chair reclined, scrolling through the music on the provided iPod, she spoke her mind: “You’re still having the wedding?” I shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, this followed the precedent we had established over the last few months.
Mid-March, 2013: Emergency Visit, Lost Filling

**Hygienist:** Really you should be happy you lost that filling. It’s revealing quite a few bigger issues.

**Me:** Oh…

**Hygienist:** It’s actually quite lucky. He’s going to put a temp filling in and then you’ll be back in a few weeks for a more thorough exam and consultation. You’ll probably be seeing a lot of us.

**Me:** Lucky, huh?

Early April, 2013: Thorough Exam and Consultation, Temporary Crown

**Hygienist:** I just talked to the dentist and he’s preparing a temp crown and mold. In two weeks, you’ll come back to have it replaced by the permanent crown.

**Me:** Come back?

**Hygienist:** Of course. We don’t like making our crowns in office, the quality just isn’t the same.

**Me:** Ok. Two weeks.

**Hygienist:** And then we’ll move onto the next tooth! [Looking down at my left hand] That’s quite a rock for a girl your age.

**Me:** Well, yes…my boyfriend, actually fiancé now, proposed last week.

**Hygienist:** Congrats...although you seem too young. Do your parents know?

Mid-June, 2013: Next Tooth #3

**Hygienist:** He’ll recommend an oral surgeon after we finish up all our work here. There’s no need to see one yet, if you’ll just have to go again.

**Me:** Oral surgeon…

**Hygienist:** So are you still working on wedding plans?

**Me:** [Glad for the change of subject] Yep.

**Hygienist:** Oh, really? I thought you probably postponed since you’ve had all these dental bills you’ve been worried about.

**Me:** A lot of the big payments have been made for the wedding already, we’d only lose that money.

**Hygienist:** I guess that’s true; but still, I thought you might. I would.

A lot of the time, she was probably attempting to be nice; however, that was my last visit to that office. My responses seem abrupt, discourteous, and quite often snippish. But in my defense, I was reminded at each visit how awful my teeth are. I was already not fond of, and if stated more accurately, terrified of visiting the dentist. It has never been the pain involved, but the judgment—what kind of girl can’t take care of her teeth?—and the guilt—how are my
parents going to pay for this?—that has left me uneasy. At home, visiting Dr. Settle, I could get my teeth fixed and leave without having judgment passed. In Naperville, my teeth weren’t cutting it; I left feeling more judged with each visit. Terrible dental genes were never considered as a part of the problem. The closest I got to a pardon was my rural upbringing. Clearly my water must have lacked added fluoride.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2012, 4,200 dentists were employed in the state of Illinois. This places the state as boasting the fifth highest employment level in this occupation. On average, these dentists make $61.65 per hour, or an annual salary of $128,240. The Bureau doesn’t report how many dentists are employed in southern Illinois; the maps show that the information wasn’t available. But when the information is pieced together, it becomes an easier deduction. Between 1,100 and 2,440 dentists are employed in the state of Missouri. The states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas have between 400 and 1,090 dentists employed within their borders. Illinois may have the fifth highest employment level of dentists, but it isn’t southern Illinois that gives it that ranking.
“SIU-E School of Dentistry discussed at Egyptian Health Department annual meeting”

“The annual meeting of the Egyptian Public and Mental Health Department was held Thursday evening...in 1967 a survey of health care facilities and of health care delivery systems in the State of Illinois brought the realization that the smaller communities of Southern Illinois were not sharing in the influx of professional health care sweeping the country...the average age of the dentists practicing south of the Springfield Champaign-Urbana line was 57 years...most dentists who graduated from the one state dental school (University of Illinois) and the two private dental schools in Chicago area (Northwestern and Loyola Universities) tended to remain in or near the environs of Chicago or else return or move to another state...all students must be residents of Illinois to qualify for admission, and most are accepted from downstate communities, it is hoped that most graduates will remain in Southern Illinois to establish their dental practices. The aim of the school is to graduate a well-trained, mature professional individual who will be able to answer as nearly as possible the total dental needs of smaller communities. The non-urban generalist in dentistry must have a greater depth of training in many areas of patient care, some of which are dentistry for children periodontics (treatment of the gums and supporting tissue), as well as orthodontics (straightening teeth), endodontics (root canal fillings) and many others.”

- THE DAILY REGISTER
HARRISBURG, ILL.
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1974

I ate an apple off its core when I should have sliced it. It sounds like a simple mistake, it wasn’t. It was just a small, red apple, with a peel artificially thickened and shined by wax, the kind of apple that belongs in Happy Sack meals at the school cafeteria. When I picked it up, I was struck by the memories of the countless apples just like it that I had thrown away. Like those, this apple should have been discarded in a green plastic trash can, making a satisfying thud
as it hit the bottom. Instead, I chose this apple from the red plastic bowl that sat near the cash register in an old gas station off of Interstate 57.

The apple wasn’t a planned meal; we didn’t have time to stop for those. I traveled home with Daniel in the passenger seat, the stick shift of my manual transmission Toyota between us. I pushed the speed limit. At 74 mph, the cars wheels pounded a steady rhythm, like a heartbeat. But that day, I rushed because there wasn’t one. With each mile, that loss only became clearer. Daniel’s cousin was dead. I couldn’t comfort him, Daniel didn’t want my hugs and my tears only added to the confusion. All I could do was point my wheels south and take us home.

Few things interrupted the silence of that drive, but that gas station apple was one of them. The granola bar offered no difficulties—one bite, a few chews, swallow, repeat—the way consumption is supposed to happen. The apple wasn’t even ripened, its flesh a telling pale green just under the peel. With my first bite, tooth 11, an upper cuspid, lost its filling. The loss was small but significant. Nestled against the gum line, its failure left nerves exposed. Any composure that remained in my body fled.

I pulled my car into Bailey Funeral Home—Vienna, Illinois at 7:15 p.m. on August 23rd. I didn’t even get Daniel to the visitation on time, the one way he let me help, and I failed. The next day, I woke up, went to the funeral, and then immediately to the dentist.

**Dental Emergencies**
- Monday, Wednesday, Thursday 1:00-3:00 p.m.
- Tuesday 2:00-4:00 p.m.
- If needed, Dr. Settle will see emergencies after normal business hours, Fridays and weekends. Please call Dr. Settle’s emergency number, 618-364-2526, if you have a serious problem.
Under normal standards, my lost filling wasn’t an emergency. However, Dr. Settle and I reached an understanding over the years: all dental visits are emergencies.

The shared parking lot at 1129 North Carbon Street, Marion, Illinois 62959 stood nearly empty as my parents and I pulled into the office. The heavy front doors to the complex of medical buildings creaked, unaccustomed to opening on a Saturday. Inside, a dental hygienist waited and Dr. Settle arrived a short time later. He was different on a Saturday, office scrubs replaced by jeans and a long-sleeved, button-up plaid shirt in a mix of blues. There weren’t quiet office shoes, but slightly scuffed, brown boots. He’d come from his farm and a morning spent ear tagging Black Angus calves.

He didn’t charge any extra for the emergency services, and in talking to Dr. Settle that day, it became evident that there’s a different way of doing business in southern Illinois. Individuals, families, and communities remember kindnesses like his, and someday, in some way, they will be repaid. Just like the hopes expressed in Harrisburg’s The Daily Register in 1974, Dr. Settle graduated from Southern Illinois University School of Dental Medicine, and returned home to open his practice. It takes someone local to do the work he does, to see the value of waking up, tagging calves, seeing a patient.

I should avoid being too tough on my Naperville dental hygienist; after all, Daniel and I heard the same from a number of people. Some speculated and the rumor circulated amongst acquaintances of a shotgun wedding, a marriage of hurried necessity if I was to avoid being an unmarried mother. After all, the average marriage age for females is now twenty-seven; I was too young to marry unless I was pregnant. This rumor lingered until December, only discarded when I failed to produce a pronounced bump, or child, by the wedding.
I easily ignored the gossip of mere acquaintances and often laughed. But it wasn’t always that easy, sometimes it was more personal and difficult to overlook.

It was a close family member that pulled Daniel and I aside late one July night. I had just shown her photographs of my wedding dress and we had given her family a *Save the Date*. The conversation was unexpected. It began as a short chat, but that wasn’t enough. The chat turned into a discussion, which grew to a conversation, only to become a lecture.

She couldn’t understand why we were making this choice. Quite simply, it was foolish. As our conversation continued, we moved to our separate sides of the blue, kitchen counter. The George Killian’s Irish Red held in her right hand chased away the reminder of her already low inhibitions. Desperately hoping to sway our opinion, she told tales of early marital hardship and abuse—her own, her family’s, her friend’s. I shrank beneath the weight of her words. Daniel eventually shut down. Our silence only offered more opportunity. Everybody else was asleep, and even the dogs lost interest. But for Daniel and I, there wasn’t an escape; we were forced to listen as she described the darkest parts of marriage. Of all the worries and concerns expressed, Jen’s were the hardest to comprehend. We hadn’t made our decision hastily. We never assumed that marriage would be easy and had considered our options. Having someone undermine a decision so carefully made was defeating.

Afterwards, I cried for the better part of an hour. I had been confident that this was the best decision I could ever make, and suddenly that confidence was gone. Evaporated. Disintegrated. Shattered and splintered, the pieces fallen to the ground, at my feet.

It was nearly three in the morning when I got home. My mother had woken up as I pulled into our gravel drive. She opened the door to the remnants of tears marking my face, dark streaks of mascara outlining my features. Her first response was the tea kettle. Sipping Autumn
Mist from oversized mugs, I explained and my mother listened. After hearing for hours why I shouldn’t get married, I took my turn to explain why I should.

The thoughts placed in my mind needed to be gone. It was upsetting to be called impulsive, but Jen’s opinions weren’t what continued to upset me. My anguish lay in how quickly uncertainty claimed my thoughts. If this was the right choice, her words shouldn’t have so easily unsettled. If I was so confident in our decision, her words shouldn’t have mattered. I struggled with the thought that Jen spoke what I already knew.

I wanted to turn back the filigreed hands of our wall clock to a time when I was certain. I wanted to find the place where I knew that marrying Daniel at the age of twenty-one years and six days was exactly what was I was intended for. That night, that day, that week, I couldn’t find it. Nowhere inside me was the part that had known, even though I so urgently, so desperately needed to find it.

It’s funny to look back sometimes. Not necessarily to the big moments—it’s easy to see how those have the potential to matter—but to the little ones. To look at the choices counted as insignificant, those that are forgotten, and find the surprises. Somehow, it’s the miniscule and the mundane that make all the difference.

As children we often spend time searching for a four-leaf clover, the stem with an extra leaf that proves it’s different from the thousands of others. You wake up and tell yourself “Today, I will find one.” And then you spend hours on your knees, grinding dirt deep under your bitten nails, before triumphantly plucking one stem, only to realize that it’s simply a torn, split leaf. That clover really isn’t special at all. You try and you try, until you believe it will never be found. So, you give up, and in that moment you throw yourself on the ground. You tell yourself
that a fourth leaf is really not something spectacular anyways. You let your head fall to the side, and let your cheek press against the earth. And then, it’s there. You see it, a small and hidden stem, belonging to the undergrowth. The four leaves occupying a space you never would have noticed from above. If your ear had fallen just one more inch to the right, it would have been gone.

My move to southern Illinois most concerned my parents. For my father, it was moving home. It was harder on my mother, but she would be ok. Tucker was only entering Pre-K; all the children would be new. Eli was barely two-years old; Andrew wouldn’t be born until that September, but I was a terribly shy girl entering the third grade. We attended a neighbor’s church hoping I would make a friend. Our first visit, Miranda invited me to Bible School.

Her choice was small. In fact, it might not have even been her own; perhaps Miranda’s mother forced her to talk to the new girl in Sunday School. Either way, it doesn’t matter. That small moment changed my family. Like many childhood friendships bound together by serendipity, Miranda and I drifted apart, but my family kept attending Goreville United Methodist. My parents took over the youth group. My mother and I planned Bible School six times. Later, I would meet a new friend at that church, the one who eventually introduced me to Daniel. This past December, I was married there. So many moments of my life are wrapped up in that building. I can’t count them or the hours.

Morning sun came through clear-paned windows rather than the customary stained glass, and the congregation sat in rows of chairs lining the fellowship hall. Unnoticeable from the outside, the sanctuary’s beams tucked between the ceiling’s plaster and roof’s shingles are broken, displaced by a wind storm. My father isn’t a pastor yet, but he’s filling in this Sunday
morning. Already, he’s known for his jokes, everybody attending church that day expects those. We’re all used to his laughing; I can’t remember the first time I heard my father laugh. It has always been a constant, a laugh that you can’t help joining. But I remember the first time I watched him cry. He was telling the story I just shared, the one about Miranda. Sitting next to me that day, she was embarrassed. Her embarrassment became my own and I couldn’t understand why my dad shared this story. But in ways I am just beginning to comprehend, my father is able to notice how the forgettable moments and decisions become something noticeable.

The eggs are from a friend’s farm. His chickens are collective and varied, evidenced by the dozen eggs housed in our incubator. Two are a medium brown, freckled with spots of a deeper coffee. A few so similar they are nearly indistinguishable, pale, earthy-yellows. One resembles the color of autumn wheat, and the remaining shells fall somewhere between light and dark khakis, hinted with specks of gold.

The sturdy, white plastic incubator gives off a continuous low hum. Two small, clear panels allow curious eyes to check on its unmoving occupants. The science is left to my father, a balance of proper temperatures and humidity. Three to four days in, you candle the eggs. A warm egg is carefully removed from the box and balanced on the end of a cardboard tube, like the ones in a roll of toilet paper. In a darkened room, you place a flashlight to the other end. If an egg is fertilized and developing, lines of faint red veining start to appear. While not nearly as complex as a spider web, these lines confirm the beginnings of life.

When it’s time to check our dozen, we surround my father. One by one, each is candled. Nine are placed against one wall and the remaining three against the other. For three more days, we wait. At a week of incubation, two still show no signs of development. Carefully, these two are removed and thrown into the back yard. It seems cruel and impatient, but there isn’t any
more time to give. Kept between 99 and 101 degrees, the incubator’s air temperature is an unforgiving environment for the undeveloping. If left in this warm air, unfertilized eggs threaten to explode and coat the inside of the incubator and remaining eggs with a terrible mess and an unbearable smell.

The incubator occupies a small square of the kitchen counter, and we spend a lot of time watching and waiting. Every walk into the kitchen includes a peek into the box, waiting for a sign of movement. We all have our moments of softness. I grab a glass from the cabinet and whisper an encouraging word. Andrew occasionally sings. Tucker just patiently watches. But Eli always has soft heart. Without my parents’ knowledge, Eli often claims the night shift.

The sun is barely entering the kitchen windows, as I walk into the room. Expecting to be alone, I’m surprised to see Eli leaning against the dishwasher. His green blanket wrapped around his small frame, he’s instantly alert when he hears my footsteps on the linoleum floor. I try to send him back to bed, but he refuses to leave the kitchen. He argues that when left in the nest, the mother hen guards her eggs. Our eggs are lonely; it’s his job to keep them company.

At twenty-one days, we start to worry. But then we hear it, a noise muffled and barely distinguishable through the egg shells and the layers of plastic, the faintest of peeps. Then one pip appears. Then another, a little break, barely noticeable on the surface of the egg. Then comes the zip, a line of breakage that stretches around the circumference. A beak appears and then a wing. One egg at a time, it continues to test our patience. You want to help, but the experts tell you “don’t.” Let nature take its course. When eggs crack, but no chicks appear, discard the egg. The chicks you help are too weak and too sick to be healthy. We’re never very good at following directions. She has black feathers and her name is Lucky.

We wait a number of days before the rest of the chicks are given names. At first, they all
look the same. They’re small, slimy masses of wet feathers and flesh that bear no resemblance to those chicks that decorate Easter baskets. As they morph into creatures that resemble life, names are assigned. The hens’ names are rather unremarkable; but, we’re more creative with the roosters. Once his feathers fluff, one rooster is the distinctive orange of roadwork. He’s obviously destined to be Construction Chick. The other rooster becomes a puff of white, a small patch of yellow on his chest. He’s a Daisy.

Jug fishing is the form of contradictions. It’s a long process, but doesn’t test your patience. There isn’t expensive bait and tackle—just thick lines, sturdy hooks, chicken livers and the necessary jugs—but there’s a hidden art. For all its simplicity, it demands effort.

UNATTENDED DEVICES

“Any unattended devices used to catch aquatic life or to hold aquatic life is required to have the angler’s name and address clearly displayed on the device.”

- 2013-2015 Illinois Fishing Information
Effective April 1, 2013-March 31, 2015—Revised Edition

The jugs can’t be too similar to your neighbor’s or you only unnecessarily complicate the form. Years ago, my father, uncle, and Pa chose a bright yellow that stands out on foggy, summer mornings. In black permanent marker is MANIER, marking our fleet of roughly eighty-five Pennzoil jugs. Some came from use; when the car needed oil, it was purchased in the yellow jugs. Others were purchased prior to filling at the factory, a means to expedite the process.

We always begin planning the fishing trip days before, looking for two days of consecutive clear weather. The first is used for preparation. We used to buy livers at the grocery store, but even in southern Illinois, that option is slowly disappearing. If the bait stores are out too, there are alternative routes: a fishing trip to prepare for the fishing trip. The last time we
went, this was our method. My brothers stood on the end of the dock, fishing around the remains of our old Christmas trees, the bare branches creating a spawning bed and providing protection for young bluegills, *lepisomis macrochirus*. At this age, these fish are too small to filet, but too large to eat with bones. They’re left whole and become our bait.

**BLUEGILL AS BAIT**

“There is nothing in the Illinois Fish Code which prohibits the use of legally taken bluegill or sunfish as bait for another species of fish, but bluegill/sunfish can only be used at the body of water from which they were taken. The bluegill/sunfish must have been taken by a properly licensed sport fisherman using legal sportfishing devices. You must observe all size and creel limits both where the bluegill/sunfish were taken and where they are being used as bait. Also, it is illegal to cut up or dress or be in possession of cut up or dressed fish on any body of water where there is a size limit for that particular species of fish.”

● 2013-2015 Illinois Fishing Information
  Effective April 1, 2013-March 31, 2015--Revised Edition

In humans and chickens alike, the liver filters blood from the digestive tract, meaning that by nature, it is bloody both inside and out. Chicken livers aren’t large; they come in a small plastic container, with a blue stripe around the package. When the lid is opened, a strong coppery smell permeates the air. The catfish, *siluriformes*, love them, but in July and August, when the average high is 89 and the air drips with humidity, my dad prefers fishing with bluegill. The stench of livers is unbearable. Whether liver or bluegill, the process remains the same.

They are drifting jugs; one bottle, one mainline, a small weight and a single, large metal hook. Simple, effective and affordable. In the early evening, just as the sun begins to set, about 8:00, we load the supplies into the jon boat, a dark camouflage green. One by one, a piece of bait is attached to the hook, its pungency increased by the lingering heat. The bottle is lowered into the water and left to wait. That’s it, and the process repeats until eighty-five jugs are left to bob and wander.
We wake early and return at sunrise, just as the fog begins to lift from the lake. The sputtering of an old Yamaha outboard motor breaks the early morning silence, a lone sound rupturing the air. It settles into a slow, steady hum as the boat moves away from the dock. The jugs drift overnight, moved by subtle currents of tributary streams and creeks, the night winds, and the steady swishes of catfish fins. They can be difficult to find; you start close to the dock and the coves, moving slowly along the lakeshore.

As my dad steers the boat, my brothers and I wait for the bright yellows to emerge from the browns and greens of the lakeshore, and the blue reflection of the sky. There’s a glint of yellow, so we move closer. A Mountain Dew bottle, the incorrect yellow. As we pull away, a great blue heron, *ardea herodias*, lurches from its nest. Its frantic wingbeats slow as it gains height; its long neck pulled back into its chest and long legs trailing behind. They are graceful birds with understated blue-grey plumage, long feathers that wave from their necks and a dark crest. Their grace does not extend to their calls; rather, their cries pierce the air with harsh, short bursts. As we move away, the heron circles back to its nest and the search continues.

There are arguments as we reach the first jug. Tucker and Eli claim this fish, as one lifts the jug from the rippling lake water, the other captures the fish in the dark green net. While the fish seems docile as it’s pulled, its strength quickly returns. Scales glint against the rising sun, gills quickly pulsate, and the spines of the dorsal fin flex. This one continues to fight, the hook becoming more entangled in its lip. My dad searches for the needle-nose pliers when the fish is handed to him. As lifejackets are moved, the pliers land on the bottom of the boat, the bitter clang of metal striking metal. The pliers show their age, red paint worn away by countless thumb grasps and the tips just beginning to show signs of rust.

That catfish waited to fight in the boat; others begin at the sign of being first pulled from
the water. It’s a small, female bullhead, one that we didn’t expect to struggle, but she entangles herself in the moss. The jug disappears, becoming a faint shadow in the dark water. It reemerges a few yards away before disappearing again. We follow the trail of surfacing bubbles, waiting for another opportunity to make the grab. Eventually, she tires. When the jug is lifted from the water, her body sways from the hook. The fluttering of her gills starts to slow and her mouth falls to an open gape. The fight is over.

**Code of Angling Ethics**

“Ethics cannot be dictated. Angling ethics develop with time, experience, and interaction with others. The following code is offered as a guideline to increase awareness and encourage discussion. An Ethical Angler:

- Understands fishing and boating regulations.
- Cares about aquatic and marine habitats.
- Keeps only fish they will eat, and properly releases the rest.
- Is respectful of others - anglers and non-anglers alike.
- Leaves no monofilament line or trash, even if left by others.
- Shares expertise with less experienced anglers.
- Cooperates with authorities.
- Fishes and boats safely.
- Preserves the sportfishing tradition.

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Standing on the banks of Alaska’s Nenana River, I found the scent of Little Egypt. It’s the scent of summer by the water—the lingering bitterness of decaying fish, the bleaching of moss and algae underneath the sun, the drying mud from the last night’s rain, a heavy humidity compressing the air.
I found myself transported home from 3,801 miles away. In that moment, Alaska was
gone. My brothers laughed beside me. My hand grasped a chilled Fanta from the rusted, metal
fridge in the boat house. Water splashed my sunburnt face as the dog shook out her fur.

They called my name and the moment disappeared, lapsing into memory.

It’s difficult to tell where the lines are drawn. You never think you have an accent; it’s
always somebody else. There is certainly a Chicago accent, and even in the second grade, I knew
that was not mine. Without knowing what it was called, I imagined I had a General American
accent, most similar to a generalized Midwestern accent. A newscaster’s tones and expressions.
Perhaps I did, but the General American accent isn’t general in southern Illinois. I cried my first
day at Goreville Grade School.

The gymnasium is an intimidating place. The students line the bleachers. Down the right
High girls join the left and the boys the right. The third grade section sits almost at the end of the
gym, underneath the streaked glass windows. The double doors open and I look for my grade.
There aren’t any signs. It’s expected that we all know who our classmates are. I don’t. I can pick out the kindergarteners. Their polish looks too artificial, small children forced into new jeans and dresses. I have to study the second graders closely. Eventually, their teeth give them away, too many jack-o-lantern smiles. Despite my careful study, I choose incorrectly. The fourth graders are initially welcoming. There are introductions and smiles. Then I ask who’s in Ms. Gunn’s class. Silence.

I’m quickly pushed to the third graders. Their questions are curious, but insistent. Where are you from? When is your birthday? Why do you say the letter M funny? Why do you say all your letters funny? The first are easy, but the rest are questions I can’t answer. If I was brave, I would ask the same ones, but I’m not. I meet their questions with silent stares. I’m granted pardon when they find new distractions, saved by the annual School Day Slip.

The janitors always wait to polish the floors until the end of summer vacation. It doesn’t make much sense. The effect of the fluorescent lights reflecting on the gym floor is nice touch, but never seems to be worth the risk. And while the Spiderman backpacks do provide a bit of cushion, the sound of young, sunburned flesh slapping the ground is unmistakable. With every fall, there is always a slight delay, a moment of silence to honor the fallen. But then the surge of laughter spreads over the gym, crashes off the ceilings, and floods down upon the body splayed out at center court. Intermixed in the laughter are silent prayers. The fear of embarrassment has the power to turn the entire gymnasium into church-going believers, thanking the Lord above that this year He has seen fit to save our pride. We each give thanks for His mercy and begin our pleas for His continuing favor and grace.

Nobody wants to be the kid that slips on the first day. But every first through eighth grader knows it must happen to someone. Once it was a kindergartener, and that didn’t seem
fair. The little blonde didn’t know what he was getting into. Nobody laughed that year, a rare display of childhood compassion. But the chubby 10-year-old was an entirely different story. His backpack burst. That year—laughter roared. Crayola Crayons rolled across the floor and the yellow #2 pencils snapped. He fell not once but a second and a third time while trying to stand up. After that he just scooted, leaving a smudged, waxless path behind him. A reverse-action slug.

I gained wisdom over the years, learned to walk carefully, and wished the new kids that weren’t aware of the danger the best of luck. And over time, I slowly become part of my classmates. By fifth grade, I join them in watching the new, new girl. She shuffles her feet and carries a purple backpack. She makes it across the floor, and without knowing that we all did the same, says her silent prayers. Her hair is penny-colored and braided. The brown paper bag in her left hand carries a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich. She sits by me at lunch, but we don’t talk. We’re both quiet, and I still feel new. Everybody around us talks; we just eat our sandwiches. Both still have the crust. My parents say I have to eat the crusts when they were the ones paying for them. I assume her mother makes her eat the crusts too, but we never talk. Maybe she likes the crust, somebody has to.

I learned how the school worked, but it took me years to be comfortable. I couldn’t be friends with quiet girls. I made that decision that day with purple-backpack-girl. Two would be one too many. I needed a stage and a performance to observe, someone else to put on a show. If there were two of us, who would perform? No quiet girls became the rule. It was carried in my purple backpack, with my crust-bearing peanut butter sandwiches. It was pushed on fifth grade swing sets, stuffed in seventh grade lockers, and carried through freshman year hallways.
In Little Egypt, truly belonging is being the progeny of parents whose parents, and preferably their parents, call the region home. You can find the remains of this, family names dominate the schools. For Goreville, it’s the Webbs and Bishops, Mazes and Billingsleys. When my dad applied for his teaching position at Carrier Mills, the superintendent reminded, jokingly but with a lingering truth, the School Board of my family’s legacy to belong—“Go and look on the wall. You’ll see his father’s graduation photo.”

My great-grandfather, Carl Manier, worked the Sahara Coal Co. mines for thirty-six years. The work he did was hard.

“I will tell you this, Congressman: I have worked in coal mines for many years…I know the psychology of the miner…I have lived with them, because I am one, because my family has been associated with the mining industry for a century and a half, and it is inbred in me, if anything is inbred in me…Anyhow, I have had some experience in the coal industry. I don’t suppose you have. I don’t suppose you have ever laid down in a mine tunnel with your face in a half inch of water, and pulled your shirt up over your head, expecting to die the next minute from an explosion you hear coming toward you. I have, and when God performed a miracle and stopped that explosion before I died, I think it gave me some understanding of these things.”

- John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers
  Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives
  Subcommittee on Education and Welfare

We found his picture, more proof of a Little Egypt family legacy, included C. William Horrell’s *Land Between the Rivers*. My great-grandfather wears two shirts layered under a pair of denim bib overalls, a tightly fitted bandana wrapped around his head. A pipe dangled from his lips, filled to the brim with tobacco. He died in August, 1975. My brothers and I, we look like something like him. My mother’s genes mellow the appearance, but you can see the traces. The ears, the eyes, the size of the head.
I’ll never be claimed by Little Egypt in the way my three brothers are. To their peers, they are children of southern Illinois. I am not. I’ve driven the miles of roads, fished the numerous lakes, and hiked the forests, but that will never be enough. Regardless of how many memories I record or stories I share, or how proudly I claim it as home, I will always remain the girl that moved too late. I never played sports in school. It wasn’t that I couldn’t play, but that I couldn’t break in. By third grade, the parameters were established. With little variation, the girl who played shortstop in grade school filled the same position on the high school softball team. I entered as an outsider looking in, and the closest I came to fully belonging was as an insider looking out. Throughout school, this was a painful role to fill. I moved between circles of friends, sociable with many but never intricately connected.

I’ve traced these pieces, found the small fragments of memories, and I still find myself hesitant to leave Little Egypt behind. But I suppose that’s the beauty of memories, even the painful ones. As Daniel and I continue to grow new roots beyond southern Illinois, the old ones will not die. When honored and remembered they have the persistence to survive, a foundation to be built upon, not destroyed.

When we move to Cincinnati, I will again walk the banks of the Ohio River. Heels pressed into the gravely sand, unpainted toenails brushed by lapping waves, I will send my thanks with the river waters to a childhood home. I will look back, remember, and smile for what has been and what will be.
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