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Seeking a Language that Heals: Teaching and Writing from a Ruined Landscape

Amy Nolan

There seems to be no escape from our difficulties until the industrial system breaks down...and nature reasserts herself with grass and trees among the ruins.

—Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*

. . . to call the Midwest the heart of the country is not to get it right. It is more the gut. It is the gut of the nation.

—Michael Martone

A few years ago when I was riding a shuttle bus from an airport to a large writing conference, I sat next to a man who, like me, teaches at a small, liberal arts college in Iowa. This man, also like me, and like so many academics I have met here, was not from Iowa originally. As we introduced ourselves, I told him that I had moved here from Michigan, and that I'd never been to Iowa before my move. He grew quiet, his gaze grew distant and he looked out the window. In a tone not unlike a doctor telling a terminally ill patient that there is nothing more he can do, he said, "Iowa is a ruined landscape."

A year later, I heard another man, also an academic, utter the same phrase, which he followed by bitterly stating that he does not want to die here. The casual certainty with which both of these men had uttered the phrase troubled me. I wondered what "ruined" means to them. What constitutes a "ruined landscape" outside of what we readily recognize in a devastated war zone or place destroyed by a natural disaster? We write of how our actions and policies have shaped and ruined the land—but what of the reverse? What does it mean if our home is "ruined" and how does that shape our vision of ourselves? Further, what can ruined places teach us about holding contradictions in balance?

In the two men's comments was also a sense of wanting to have it both ways: to be able to reject Iowa as a place and idea, and to claim a privileged, academic status, as one who can endure calling such a place home—as one who understands himself as someone who does not need to care about a place where the job market had thrust him. I realized that a thinly veiled grief and fear live beneath this marked sense of superiority, which manifests itself in a sometimes-cynical over-investment in the illusion of distance: but the illusion covers up a sense of homelessness and disconnection that we cannot admit that we long for.

One could argue that our whole culture is based on notions of flight, fantasies of flight. So-called flyover zones could be defined as anything that we don't want to deal with—like the proliferation of cancer and other diseases as being connected to how much we are polluting the earth (and by extension, our own bodies). Too often, we enter fatalist thinking, which is already expected of the "armchair academic," or scholar who

observes and critiques the world from a “safe” distance from the complicated places in our hearts. I wonder what we can learn from those places, what not only confronting them--and our own complicity in creating them and perpetuating them, while at the same time accepting our tendency to try to abdicate responsibility by ignoring them--can teach us about how we are shaped by these places, and what a study of ruin in this way can show us about where we go from here, especially if we feel paralyzed or overwhelmed by grief about the disappearing and polluted landscapes we call home. It's easy to dismiss a place as ruin while refusing to touch down on the ground; it's harder to allow the place and its complex history to talk to us, to shape us.

In the summer of 2017, I attended the Biannual Prairie Conference in Council Bluffs. While there, I listened to stories about the prairie, and learned of Iowans' long-lasting passion for trying to preserve what is left, and even restore what is possible. I talked with scholars, activists, students, writers and scientists, who told me that climate change is forcing *all* species to move north. The Midwest, especially Iowa, is actually a “bullseye” for mass extinctions that are occurring today. The thesis of every lover of the prairie, every piece of literature on the prairie, and every nature writer who discovers the prairie, is that Iowa is the most altered state in the country. Many bird, butterfly, reptile, and small mammal species rely on high quality grasslands to raise their young and thrive.

At the conference I learned that researchers are still collecting data on how crop erosion is affecting the soil, and they are still monitoring bird populations as they migrate. They placed tree swallow boxes in the prairie strips, and are hoping to help the honeybee population. Remnant prairies have been found in these unfarmable places, but average less than 15 acres, because they are isolated and cannot support species reproduction. The researchers say that we can protect what is left by creating roadside prairies, as well as in yards—as opposed to lawns. We can incorporate prairies into agriculture more deliberately, especially in places that cannot be farmed.

At the conference we took a field trip into the Loess Hills Prairie trail system. I ventured off alone, and walked beneath a canopy of massive oaks, river birches, and walnut trees. My head buzzed with the sound of the deep-summer cicadas' rhythmic rattle. It drowned out everything: other voices, cars, my own breathing. I was enveloped in a cathedral of sound—the sound of being under water—the rush of a river current. I closed my eyes and surrendered to it. I had never listened to cicadas so closely as I did that summer, four months before my mother died. In Michigan we don't have cicadas like we do in Iowa, where they grow to the size of fat moths. The cicada's song guides us through the dark night of the soul. Its vibration “has the ability to cleave us to our very core, open us, and remind us of what we need to hear” (Star Wolf and Cariad-Barrett 150). Cicadas pulse time. They *ride* time. Surrounded by the relentless, powerful rhythm that I felt in my chest, my belly, my throat, I felt like my body was disappearing into the sound—reminding me of something much bigger—something we are not in charge of, something that holds and protects us. I'd just been to Michigan to visit my mother who was dying of ovarian cancer. Her voice, along with fragments of stories that she has

told me forever, were then coming at me from nowhere—pieces that I hadn't heard in years, like how she once told me that when she was a little girl another kid had said to be careful or the cicadas will sew your lips together.

I found in the cicadas what essayist Lynn Casteel Harper calls “the golden hour,” where we feel the dance between darkness and light, “the ripening of what is before and within and beyond. The thin edge between life and death stirs my soul to inscrutable awareness. My heart aches...as the really real hovers near, waking me from drowsy numbness. For this brief time—which can only be witnessed, never willed—the inimitable heart of the universe swells across gulfs impassable in ordinary time” (9). When we are called to dwell in this place—this “thin edge”—we are being presented with a precious gift. Any time we are called upon to witness the truth of the present, no matter how painful or difficult, we are never more awake than this.

I call two places home: Iowa and Michigan. I was born in Mt. Clemens, a town situated just north of downtown Detroit. I was raised in Grayling, a small northern Michigan town, named after a now-extinct river trout. I moved to Iowa when I was thirty-six years old. I had never even driven through the state. I moved here because I had secured a rare tenure-track teaching position in creative writing. As a graduate of a doctoral program in a competitive field—contemporary American literature and film—I counted myself as deeply lucky. My husband and I have literally planted roots here: since we moved to Iowa we were married in our backyard, we have buried two beloved pets, we have planted ten different species of trees, vegetables and fruit.

Academics and economics uprooted me from my home state, but the sacred work of teaching in this particular place, my friendships, my colleagues, and the landscape, keep me staying in Iowa. Twelve years later, I still live, write, and teach here. At the midpoint of my career (on my twenty-sixth year in the classroom), I am re-learning how important it is, not only to encourage and create space for students to write about and reflect on their inner lives, but also their own responses to the changing landscape, especially that of where they are from. No matter if a student is from rural Iowa or Chicago or Swaziland—students long for stories—their own, and those of others—especially in this “fly-over space” that we live and learn within. They long to dive in, to recognize themselves in the greater whole. I tell them, while the opposite may seem true, the way to that sense of the universal is through the specific, the small: that is why *your* stories are important.

The collapse of bee colonies, the disappearance of earthworms, both vital to our survival, speak to present and future ruin. Their message is that there is nowhere to run. So. Perhaps somehow, some way, we need to keep finding ways to connect, or re-connect, with what is here, with what shapes us—not despite, but perhaps because, it is wounded, and reflects something ruined and thus vulnerable in ourselves. In *Dwellings*, her collection of essays on how landscapes shape us, Linda Hogan writes, “What we are searching for is a language that heals this relationship [between us and the natural world], one that takes the side of the amazing and fragile life on our life-giving earth. Without it, we have no home, have no place of our own within the creation” (59-60).

As I continue to explore the many-layered notions of what ruins means, I am also learning how I might teach more effectively—that is, teach as if the local environment is not separate from the world of the text, of the importance of critical thinking, human interaction, and cultural literacy. I notice that I am becoming more comfortable with silence and the space it can provide: to open to the stories that find their way into the gaps. The increased anxiety, depression, a sense of overwhelm that many students are currently experiencing are, I argue, indicative of the sense of loss that they feel every day—that something is missing, and they do not have the language to express it. And that something, perhaps, is the story—however designed or shared—that connects lived experience, a sense of shifting identity, a sense of place or places, inner and outer, and how they come together in a way that lets us see, underneath all the noise and chatter, that nothing is *truly* lost.

In a recent poetry class, my students read a poem about a young boy who comes across a deer carcass at a winter camp, and in a moment of reverence, takes a bit of hair from the deer's body. After some discussion, including the possibility that the boy is a sociopath, silence pooled comfortably. I hadn't planned to, but in the moment it felt appropriate to share a story with them. That very morning I had stopped my car when I saw a dead raccoon in the road. I told them about how I had waited for traffic to clear, got out of my car, and walked over to the raccoon, carrying a flat piece of cardboard. The raccoon's fur was striking, with layers of silver, gray, brown, and black, and soft in appearance. I was also struck by how beautiful its hands were. I slid the cardboard under its body, which was surprisingly light, considering how big the raccoon had looked from the road—a dark lump on the pavement. I told the students that I felt the animal deserved respect—that I couldn't bear the thought of its body being squashed over and over, by car after car, as if it were a piece of trash. I carried the raccoon over to the grass, and then covered it with the cardboard, a makeshift lean-to. I told them that because we live here among the raccoons and deer and skunks and porcupines, we owe it to the world to pay attention as best as we can. To bear witness, to notice, to really *see* the world around us, in all its beauty, horror, and perhaps hardest of all, its woundedness.

I noticed that my students were completely quiet—and while their gazes were fixed on me, I could also see that their focus was inside, too. I realized that I had taken a risk—to share something of myself, something of my soul. And I could tell that they knew it. I knew that it was up to me, in the classroom, to hold the integrity of balance—to model vulnerability, and not force students to share in kind, but to let them know that they can depend on me as a teacher to hold ground, and hold the silence that allows stories to form.

The challenge is for those of us who teach to not view “the life of the mind” as more relevant than the ground on which we stand. To be fair, it is extremely difficult, since we are groomed right from the beginning toward the opposite approach. In the essay collection, *Black Earth Ivory Tower*, Brooks Blevins reflects on this widespread quality of what it means to be on the academic job market. Blevins writes: “[M]ost academics simply try to find that good, tenure-track job, wherever it may be, and adapt to the surroundings as best they can. After all, don't we make a living with our minds? What difference does it make *where* you teach World Civilization or Composition I? Isn't the physical world ultimately superfluous to the life and career of the intellectual?” (305)

In academia very often there does not seem to be a choice in where one “lands” when she applies for a job. According to Eric Zencey, “[Professors], citizens of the...mystical ‘world city’...are expected to owe no allegiance to geographical territory; [they’re] supposed to belong to the boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths, not the infinitely particular world of watersheds, growing seasons, and ecological niches...[As a result, they] tend to mistake ‘disconnected from locale’ for ‘educated.’ They tend to think of education as little more than an organized assault on the parochial point of view, the view of the rooted ‘I’” (15). Zencey’s viewpoint is perhaps cynical, but I agree that not being rooted inhibits us from building history, memory, and connection. The plight of the academic is a microcosm of the plight of the average American citizen, whose ancestors, willingly or not, were uprooted from every corner of the globe.

Of this displacement, Laura Sayre writes, “One of the failings of graduate education...is the structural dislocation it forces upon you, the way in which it asks you to spend your late twenties—a period in which you might well be setting down roots for life—digging into a place only in order to be uprooted” (191). Perhaps our challenge as teachers is to have the courage not only to dig into where we are, but to address the conditions that require us to perpetuate detachment and disconnection from the landscape around us and under our feet. In what ways might we begin or continue to engage students in this way, whether in conversation, in reflection, in going outside and to see and feel the world around them right now? How might we find ways to help them, and ourselves, incorporate their stories into their chosen disciplines, and thus, into their very lives?

The cost of the sense of disconnection that we often feel, teachers and students alike, whether it is conscious or not, is rooted in the stories we tell ourselves: whether an overinvestment in the story of an “idealized past,” or Edenic place that has been sullied; or its flipside, which is an overinvestment in the idea of inevitable extinction. These trap doors—the “lost Eden” story and the extinction ending story—can be barriers against speaking about place and galvanizing action to address the questions and problems that unfold, especially for addressing what constitutes “ruined landscapes.” Both stories are dead ends: whether writers fixate on a “better time,” or romanticize science and technology, especially the notion that they can “save” us, they miss the point, which in my view, is to simply stand still and behold what is here, all around us, and within us.

The importance of stories to help us understand and hold onto the feeling that might serve as a catalyst for action—stories unmediated by the pressure to analyze experience away, to theorize and quantify—cannot be underestimated. Stories not only hold cultures together by creating a common language; they offer multiple ways of seeing experience. They support the need—a desperate one—for empathy and understanding. My story touches, overlaps with yours, but your experience and story (even with its silences, laughter and tears) have value in and of themselves. While writing, by its very form, is an act that takes us away from the present, it also allows us to linger in it. To write is to have a broken heart—and the source of a broken heart is often the witnessing of that which seems irrevocable, beyond the reach of time. From that source, I might come to glimpse the possibilities and even hope—that hummingbird of a word—in the notion that staying with what is ruined could help us find and hear a language that gives us the strength to heal what has been broken.

At the beginning of my story there is a river—a *singing river*: a flowing, fast river full of stories: the source of my existence, and the source of my love for the world. We all come from stories, written and oral, told by both men and women, through films and music, too. Mine come from all of these things, and through listening to and watching the northern Michigan AuSable River, the tall pine trees, my grandmother, my mother, and the earth itself. The river helped me survive, and it is why I write. The river reminds us that the world is not fixed; it is an alive, ever-changing, place.

When I was one year old, I tumbled into the icy AuSable River on a winter afternoon. I had fallen off my grandparents' dock into the dark, clear current of the AuSable in northern Michigan, where fly-fishermen and women came to fish from all over the world. In winter, there was no sound but the river singing its exciting, tumbling song, and I was floating due east, toward the lazy whirlpool just around the next two bends, and ultimately, Lake Huron. The AuSable didn't meander. It swept. In a blur of cedar tree tops, my pink snowsuited body floated.

My father ran toward me through the water that was up to his thighs. He let the current push him downstream, his big strides clumsy with panic—the sound of water churning filled his ears. I was almost around the first bend when he hauled me out.

Years later, when my mother told this story, she said that I was gazing up at the low, gray sky with wide eyes. She and my father were surprised that I didn't cry or struggle—that, instead, on my face was a look of wonder as I bobbed down the river, a bundle growing smaller on the river's glassy surface.

One year after my immersion, my father died from a sudden heart attack. He was forty. The story is made of images, things sensed, dreamed: my mother's Tupperware party, her long dark hair, her late pregnancy, a snowstorm, a Catechism class that my father taught before he came home and shoveled the driveway, before he cried out in the darkness. My mother found him lying on his back, eyes open, gazing upward.

What if my father's heart was so full of love, so open, that his body couldn't take it? What makes a heart break open?

In the wake of my father's death, I fell in love with the muscle of the river, with nature, with life. The sky is a miracle from under the surface. The sun spreads out and down, penetrating the coldness. To feel the force of the river's current you have to attempt swimming across it, attempt paddling against it—to feel the cold rush in your ears. The river has its own gravity and yours is no match for it. This particular river—the landscape of the water—has taught me about how grief gently but persistently becomes part of who we are, the way the ancient currents shape everything from stones to plastic to bones to trees. My immersions within the river instilled in me a desire to further immerse myself fully into other places.

Inherent in statements that label a place as “ruined” is an assumption that there was once a “better time,” or a time when things were somehow better. When we idealize a mythical past, we reveal our fear of the future and neglect the present, which is at the heart of bearing witness. Conversely, our dominant culture associates death with failure instead of resting in the wisdom that it is a necessary part of existence. Further, examining ruin always puts us in touch with the immediacy of the present. I think that is why a lot of people don’t want to acknowledge the “invisible” ruined landscapes, in contrast to the ongoing fascination with and very visible lure of urban ruin. The challenge is not to try to analyze it away—but to abide with it. This is especially so in the world of academia, in which we are often convinced that we must observe from a distance, keeping ourselves removed from what we examine.

Sometime after I moved to Iowa, I asked my colleagues if it was possible to swim in the Cedar River. Unanimously they said, “No.” The reason: farm run-off. Every town in Iowa has at least one community swimming pool, with slides and waterfalls: clear, chlorinated blue “lakes” surrounded by corn fields, hog confinements, and miles and miles of green, mowed grass. I could not imagine living in a region where I could not safely swim in the rivers and lakes. As a child, teenager, and adult I did so without question or hesitation. Hardly anyone had swimming pools. And even if they did, I still preferred the bracing, clear cold of north Michigan waters: from great lakes to the tiny, hidden spring-fed lakes that you could only reach by hiking—lakes that looked like the setting of a 1970s horror movie. It is a strange feeling, to be surrounded by water in Iowa, but not be able to swim in any of it. My stepdad, who was born in Flint, Michigan, told me that when Iowa gave itself completely over to agriculture, that was just one sacrifice that had to be made in the name of progress.

When asked to consider Iowa, people who have never been here might think of the films *Bridges of Madison County*, *Field of Dreams*, and the second half of *Sleeping with the Enemy*, set in idyllic Cedar Falls. In America’s “breadbasket,” home of apple pie and 4-H club, what does “ruin” really mean? On its bucolic surface, Iowa is green and rolling. On a summer day, the huge blue sky seems to crash down upon the fields. People don’t come to Iowa to photograph the polluted rivers, dead pigs piled up in the driveway of a hog confinement, the absence of worms in the ground of over-sprayed fields, the bitter effects of Monsanto’s Round-Up. Ruin becomes a much more contested idea in Iowa, when the sources of ruin are not as readily visible as they are in places like Detroit or Flint.

In the graphic memoir, *Imagine Only Wanting This*, which chronicles her exploration of ruined places throughout the world, Kristen Radtke describes both being from Iowa, where she went to university, and then leaving to find a career elsewhere: “Iowa was a place I began leaving constantly [to seek out ruin elsewhere]. Native Iowans told me about the dangers of all the state’s rivers, the flat and modified land that flooded [in 2008] and formed lakes, roof peaks jutting from the surface like coastal boulders and forming currents across roads, the moldy basements when the water drained the closest thing they had to ruins” (110). Though her memoir is about her fascination with ruins—urban decay, in particular—Radtke does not explore the idea of Iowa as “ruined landscape.” However, Radtke’s memoir poses an important question that applies to the kind of ruin that characterizes Iowa’s land: “What can be made of the spaces that we cannot witness?” (204)

On a drive on back roads one weekend, my husband and I passed a hog confinement that sits less than ten miles from our house. With a strong south wind, especially on a hot day, the smell is so powerful that we can't have the window open in the bedroom. The day we drove by the confinement, we couldn't see any pigs, just long, white covered buildings with ventilation pipes. Then we noticed, right in the front of the property, a pile of pig corpses stacked up in a concrete fenced in area. I didn't even think about taking a photo. I was too shocked. I thought, there are seven times as many pigs in Iowa as there are people (Schmidt 9C). I live in a world now where it is automatic, an instinct, even, for people to take photos and film everything. But there are still private spaces, where unspeakable things happen—where it is both impossible, and absolutely necessary, to bear witness, to bear the silence that both holds the story, and denies it.

When I first contemplated the notion of ruined landscapes, I thought about the science fiction and horror films I loved when I was an adolescent in the 1980s. I thought of John Carpenter films, and the strangely beautiful, apocalyptic and spare electronic soundtracks, which I still enjoy, that perfectly matched the seemingly empty, evocative spaces that filled my car window as I sat in the back seat looking out at endless fields and urban sprawl, plugged into my Walkman. I remember being mesmerized by the vastness of the crumbling houses, the still-apparent majesty of long-abandoned department stores, a train depot, a theatre, and a ghost mall. At one time an economic auto capital boom-town, then a bombed out, apocalyptic shell of a city, Detroit is now sought out for its glorious ruined buildings, photograph-ready decay, and its powerful urban history. Detroit's ruins exude a haunting beauty that now draws artists, musicians, writers, and hipsters, who are starting to re-inhabit the parts of the city once thought too dangerous to live in. Detroit is sublime. Its beauty has grown out of its ruin, and is part of its appeal now. One could say that its ruined status has imbued Detroit with a new kind of credibility, a richness of spirit that was always there, but has somehow been reawakened by the gaze of those who are drawn to ruined places. But what of ruin that is not as visible, let alone celebrated? Because its "ruin status" is not the same as, say, Detroit's, or Gary, Indiana's, people do not seek out a ruined landscape like Iowa's and take photographs, because they do not see it and do not look for it.

I think of this lack of ability (or willingness) to witness the space of Iowa whenever I see commercials for Round-Up. One ad is particularly disturbing: it features a smug, slender white man in a uniform—white, red, orange, green—wearing a baseball hat. He carries Round-Up spray bottles in both hands, holding them as if they are guns and he is a cowboy. This is a free-for-all, like the old west. This is war. To me, a Round-Up commercial signifies a powerful representation of ruin that goes deeper into the territory of grief than does a crumbling building in Detroit. When I see images of weeds drying up and turning to dust the instant they are sprayed, I think of the groundwater, of birds, of bees, of butterflies. I think of the soil—the literal foundation upon which our existence and all of our dramas unfold. I wonder, how on earth did we think up this awful power, to literally vaporize the life that sustains us? What kind of species does that? What claim on meaning or life can I make, let alone teach, with this awareness?

In the introduction to her 2017 epic poem, *Plenty*, which evokes the work of Walt Whitman and Rachel Carson, Corinne Lee chronicles the complex links between what happens to the bodies of all animals and how untold pollutions infiltrate everything we eat, drink, breathe and wear. She does not write about Iowa specifically, but focuses on the Midwest, where Monsanto (housed in St. Louis, Missouri) created Round-Up to be a powerful herbicide and desiccant, to kill weeds and facilitate early harvest by prematurely drying grain. Monsanto has genetically engineered 'Roundup Ready' seeds such as corn, soy, canola, alfalfa, sorghum, and wheat—these plants resist glyphosate and similar herbicides, remaining alive even when native grasses and other plants around them perish after a spraying. In response to widespread opposition, Monsanto withdrew its Roundup Ready wheat from production in 2004 (xv).

Over the past two years, class action lawsuits have been filed against Monsanto—and legal commercials airing in Iowa have been soliciting victims of Round-Up's effects to come forward and sue Monsanto. Lee goes on to point out that Round-Up's far-reaching impact cannot be underestimated: it is literally everywhere. It kills plants, but also destroys bacteria and damages soil, killing earthworms, who are obviously vital to the soil's health. Monarch butterflies have experienced an 81 percent decline, "because the chemical destroys milkweed—the only plant monarch caterpillars are able to consume" (xvi).

Speaking about ruin as an invisible force, Heather Swanson, in her 2017 essay, "The Banality of the Anthropocene," asserts that "'Iowa is objectively one of the most ruined landscapes in the United States, but its ruination garners surprisingly little notice.'" Swanson's chief argument is that Iowa's dominant demographic, the white and middle-class, do not see that the ruin lies in their lawns, their corn fields, their malls, and drainage ditches. Ruin is "the industrial pig farm. It is the 4-H county fair and eating hot dogs on the Fourth of July. It is precisely this banality, this routinized everydayness...that makes the Iowa Anthropocene so terrifying." Iowa's tallgrass prairie, its bees, butterflies, migrating birds, CSA/organic farms, and its maze of rivers, hardly receive any press. And they should. While urban, human-made ruins may be the stuff of great photographs, ruins wrought by irrevocable ecological imbalances are just plain scary, and put us in touch with a deep grief (and guilt) that most are not willing to face, and therefore discussions about Iowa's status as a ruined landscape often result in a troubled silence.

This is true of all quietly ruined landscapes. My thoughts once again turn to Flint, where silence shrouded that lead-poisoned drinking water until too many people were getting sick and it couldn't be ignored anymore. In Grayling, Michigan, where I lived from age four to eighteen, we drank well water. The house I lived in is situated in a subdivision built into a marsh-bordered forest of red pines, tamaracks, maples, oaks, jack pines, and white pines. The marsh is actually where the headwaters of the AuSable and Manistee Rivers end and where the East Branch of the AuSable flows, behind our house, toward the main branch. A mile to the west of our neighborhood is the Camp Grayling Military Airport. For years, our well water and soil have been contaminated by an invisible plume of perfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs), also called perfluorinated chemi-

icals (PFCs). The investigation into these chemicals, initiated by the Michigan National Guard, is part of a nationwide Department of Defense effort to test military sites for PFAS contamination caused, primarily, by historic use of Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF), a firefighting foam the military began using in the 1970s that was laden with PFAS chemicals that helped quash jet fuel fires. According to Garrett Ellison, reporting for Michigan News Live, as of September 2017, about 180 wells south and west of the airfield have been sampled. Of those, 83 tested positive for some level of PFAS compounds and four tested above the 70 parts-per-trillion, which is the Environmental Protection Agency health advisory level for two of the compounds, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctyl sulfonate (PFOS). How do we address the truth of a place, or a person, in a sea of silence? The chemicals contain stories, too, about ruin and restoration. How can we tell those stories, and provide our students with the language to tell them, as well?

Silence is the repository of everything we deny as individuals and as a culture. Silence is cancer, growing in my mother's body. Silence is also the ground of the capacity to behold the world, to rest a soft gaze upon it, to be still amid the trees, the birds, the prairie, the river. Silence can hold us back, and it can hold us up. *Silence*: around the military bases that pollute groundwater in northern Michigan: around the disappearances of frogs' songs, snakes sunning themselves on dusty trails: around dead zones at the mouth of the Mississippi: around dead bodies of pigs next to hog confinements. Silence is a civil defense against inconvenient truths, brokenness, and the necessary outrage and demand for change that must be voiced in the face of ruin.

I am coming to learn that maybe I can begin to acknowledge what is ruined, and at the same time nurture a love for the world while I cultivate a sense of curiosity in my students. I have discovered that, even more than when I taught in Michigan, students are more likely in Iowa to have come from farming communities and families—and at least one student I know has interned or worked for Monsanto. I have taught many students who have grown up on hog confinements. Still, they often seem to be, or feel, disconnected from the wider implications of such experiences—and how could they not be, if this is all they know, and they do not have a means for understanding their place and experience as part of a larger context? In teaching, it is a delicate balance: not to “lose” the student by demonizing what Monsanto stands for to a large part of the world, but to also give them the tools to find out more about where they come from, even, and especially, when it doesn't warrant much attention or curiosity on their part.

The mission of cultivating curiosity in students has always been a challenge for teachers. All we can do is provide the conditions that are favorable for sparking that curiosity: by teaching them how to ask good questions, and get in touch with what they *really* are afraid of, excited about, confused about. I often ask my students what changes they notice about their home place when they return periodically after they have left. I tell them about how I couldn't wait to leave my hometown—how college had been expected of me. I also remind my students that some stories are like tender shoots, and need the dark nourishment of the ground for a while—that it's okay not to share every-

thing. I haven't told my students this story: that at the same time my stepdad and I witnessed yet more trees come down near Grayling, near the house I grew up in, to make way for the lumber industry, and other trees die from unexplained illnesses, we watched helplessly as ovarian cancer, commonly known as "the silent killer," ravaged the ecosystem of my mother's body. Ovarian cancer has one of the highest death rates of all cancers because it is notoriously difficult to detect—and when it is, it is very often too late.

My mother lived for two and a half years, from her diagnosis in 2015 to her death in November of 2017. Over those years, we felt time differently. It came in the form of vignettes: waking up that first summer of chemo and watching my mother brush out her thick dark hair and fling it into the wind, shouting, "It's for the robins' nests!"; seeing her hair grow back all salt and pepper curls; eating her homemade "gorp" trail mix as we talked in a Cincinnati hotel room and got ready to go to her sister's funeral; laughing in the back seat of a car with the windows down eating Boom Chicka Pop; or sitting at a picnic table at the Dairy Queen in late August—the last time I would eat with her. Just days before she would stop eating altogether, we sat shoulder to shoulder, savoring our Blizzards, our backs to the setting sun in late August.

That night I lay in my childhood bedroom with the window open and heard nothing—no crickets, no frogs, no rustlings of raccoons or deer. The silence frightened me. I was suddenly five again, panicked that my mother would die. At 2 a.m. I found her awake on the couch, as she was often too uncomfortable to sleep. I lay my head in her lap and cried. She rubbed my head and said, "Oh, honey. Everything is going to be all right."

What do we do when it all feels like too much—when we are frustrated by knowledge? When the more we know, the more paralyzed we feel to change anything? I try to stay present to the smallest things: the shape of a rabbit's silhouette in the bright silver light of the moon against melting snow; a goldfinch at my window looking in and chirping; the miracle of earthworms in my garden, a place unsullied by Round-Up. I want to cling to them as I wanted to cling to my mother. Even though I've never given birth, I have learned that being a mother means, among so many other things, to learn how to let go of what is beloved to us. If I am to be alive in this time, then how am I to live? How do I live without my mother?

Iowa, as Swanson and many writers have observed, like much of the Midwest, has been forever altered by agriculture. The ruined status of Iowa's landscape tends to be literally "underground"—but is visible in the clear loss of prairie: that between 1830 and 1910 Iowa lost 97 percent of its prairie acreage. According to Swanson, "Nearly every acre has been privatized. Ninety-nine percent of its marshes are gone. The level of its main aquifer has dropped by as much as three hundred feet since the nineteenth century, largely due to the extraction of irrigation water." Recently I spoke about this with a friend who has lived in the Black Hawk region of Iowa her whole life. She and her husband live in her mother's family farmhouse, where three generations have lived.

Twice they have had to change the place where to dig their well, due to high levels of nitrates found in the drinking water. I know that her situation is not unique; I know of other nearby farms who have had to completely re-design their water-retrieval system and dig even deeper wells.

These stories are small, in the bigger scheme of things—but they reveal both the silence that surrounds the state of Iowa's ruined landscape, because nothing has changed in relation to mono-agriculture and hog confinements; and they reveal the invisibility that continues to define much of the Midwest in general, despite its importance in food production. Swanson offers that “we are all implicated in Iowa. We are all entangled with the everyday violences of industrial agriculture and nationalist projects in a way that substituting an organic latte for the hot dog or shopping at Whole Foods won't solve.” One way to address these entanglements, if we choose it, is to involve poets and writers in the crucial work that ecologists and biologists do. Amid the research that goes into sampling soil and cataloguing the decline of endangered species, we need poets, writers, and musicians to command an audience—to transmute data into storytelling. The writer-teacher, instead of looking sadly outside a shuttle bus window and proclaiming the local landscape a ruin, might need to ask how he can help—and maybe come to love this place that is now his home.

In late October of 2017, two weeks before my mother died, I drove back to Michigan and accompanied her and my stepdad to Traverse City, an hour west—to the new cancer center that attached to the complex of Munson Medical Center. We walked into the cancer center where over the last two and a half years my mother had received her chemotherapy, had liters of fluid drained from her body, clinical drug trials, and the invasive pelvic exams that she hated so much. It was late: the clinical trial was not working, and she hadn't eaten anything since August. I'd never been to this place before: finished in 2016, it was impressive—all glass and metal and Frank Lloyd Wright—like a spaceship standing near the gothic Victorian structure of the old state mental institution—once a ruin itself, now a maze of art galleries, hipster coffee bars, bakeries, fusion restaurants, and apartments for retired doctors.

The cancer center was housed with a café on the bottom floor; a Zen garden; art on the walls; a nursery; a chapel; it was modern, tasteful, with soft colors, wood, metal, and glass—as if the architects had consulted a *feng shui* book. There was no hint whatsoever of death, or dying—at least on the surface. You only saw it in the eyes of the patients, many of them, despite their street clothes, fleece North Face clothes and soft beanies, baggy on spare skulls, and bright colors against pale skin. Under their tasteful scarves and hats, some of them had the far-off look that I'd noticed developing in my mother's eyes since July. The research nurse greeted her with a cheery familiarity that I found bracing. She told my mother that she “looked good.”

My mother thought she was going to have chemotherapy. But not fifteen minutes after she'd been called back to see the doctor, my mother, stepdad, and I were led into a small, triangular room. We sat in the three chairs that were spaced far apart. One wall was a window looking out over the colorful October trees. Cars swept by below, as if it

was just a normal day. The sun was warm coming in the window, where two flies buzzed against the glass. I noticed a fitness magazine with an impossibly fit forty-something celebrity on the cover—her face carefully and obviously smoothed out by photo-shop, her hips narrow, her stomach flat and hard. On a small counter with a sink I saw a miniature plastic model of female body parts: uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, all packed into a disembodied plastic recess, like a puzzle toy. I thought about how we carve up the body like we carve up the world. I recalled the long vertical scar on my mother's abdomen, where just two years earlier the oncologist had taken out her ovaries, uterus, and cervix—how her scar had looked as if he'd just pulled the flesh together and sewn it up with the crudeness of Dr. Frankenstein. Days after the surgery she lay on the floor unable to stretch out from the pain, pulling her knees up as I covered her with a blanket and lay my hands on her belly and breathed with her.

After a few minutes, the oncologist burst in, harried, his face full of practiced concern, and oddly, embarrassment. He told my mother that she was too weak to have any more chemo. She nodded politely, her knees pressed together like a little girl. The doctor continued, "Your body is riddled with disease. You are no longer achieving quality of life. Go home, be with your family. Eat some chocolate, drink some wine. At this point you may want to contact hospice."

Then, he apologized on behalf of the flies, who kept bouncing off the window. "Oh," my mother laughed, "I hadn't noticed them." I thought, at least the flies are more honest than any of us. So far no one here had used the words "death" or "dying," much less the words "grief" or "cancer." But my mother *was* dying, and with a swiftness that surprised all of us more than her lack of pain. She hadn't eaten in a month, and every two or three hours she vomited bile, a bright, emerald green. She had no interest in food or water anymore, much less chocolate. She was, I realized, as I looked at her peaceful face, doing exactly what a dying person is supposed to do.

I never saw fear in my mother's eyes while she was dying. Her eyes were intense in her face, dark, and contemplating—but not afraid. Though faraway at times, her eyes were never drawn from the present. It was as if she was becoming *more* present, even as she was disappearing. One day, I asked her what she was thinking about when her gaze becomes so intent—when she looks so deeply into me, not unlike the way she must have when I was a baby.

She said to me, "I am just trying to take you in."

I knew then something I'd never considered—that the dying miss us, too.

We all witness something of the natural world disappearing every day—and this witnessing most often happens in silence and isolation. Even though I know others see it too, we do not discuss it openly, or if we do, it is with anxious humor or that fatalistic, cynical, and protective language that reveals how isolated and helpless we feel in the face of what we cannot control. We stay silent, maybe because we can't bear how others might respond to us if we wept for a tree, or "roadkill," or the disappeared prairie. The language that heals may be the one that opens up this vulnerable part of ourselves—to admit that yes, it is sane to weep in the face of what is disappearing, or gone.

If part of our vocation is to teach students to think for themselves, to be “whole citizens” and educated, informed individuals who know how to engage in critical thinking and discourse, then the natural world, the landscape, the world under their feet, the air they breathe, the animals they share this planet with, absolutely must be part of this endeavor. This means that we have to tune in to our own limitations, to not rest in our authority on a specific subject, but to expand our awareness to the spaces around us. From the very beginning, Iowa has gently, slowly, but persistently claimed me. To be claimed by a place is not only about standing ground, or defending it, either. Iowa confirms at once its status as a “ruined landscape,” but it also tells the story of how ruin is actually a process of transformation—and not a permanent state of being. We have seen this hypothesis come true as we witness what is happening in places like Chernobyl, Detroit, and Ohio, where in 1970 the Cuyahoga River caught fire due to pollutants.

Hogan writes, “Can we love what will swallow us when we are gone? I do. I love what will consume us all, the place where the tunneling worms and roots of plants dwell, where the slow deep centuries of earth are undoing and remaking themselves” (30). In a culture that is fixated on light, striving, achieving, and by all means, not failing, we don’t have many opportunities to be still, to withdraw, to go into the dark and sink down into those places where we hurt so much. When the things we love die, they leave a hole that can never be filled again. Maybe a broken heart doesn’t write despite these things, but alongside them, or even because of them. Maybe that means that we are called to have the courage to fill our hearts with our love for the very world that reclaims us.

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