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Jan Shoemaker

My daughter Anna and I made a break for the beach a few weeks ago, just the two of us. It was only mid-October but we'd already had it with our separate school lives—hers as a high school student, mine as a high school teacher. So on Saturday we loaded up our van with blankets and books and chocolate and drove west across the Michigan peninsula and stopped when we arrived at Lake Michigan itself.

Anna is a senior in high school and, realizing that in a handful of months she will be gone from me—in some ways forever—I am determined to enjoy every second of her company this year. I can only imagine how put upon she must often feel, how shadowed. Nevertheless, she is a good sport about it, meeting me at our favorite bookstore café a couple of afternoons a week for tea and scones and several hours of homework and book browsing. I am usually correcting papers and she is usually slogging through her art history textbook which is roughly the size and weight of our hard drive, which no one, by any stretch of the imagination, considers portable.

I think it was the bison that drove Anna to the beach or, at any rate, made her jump at the opportunity when I suggested it. She'd been studying cave drawings for what seemed like a geological epoch and she'd had it with bison that seemed to have seized hold of the prehistoric imagination in much the same way that Brad Pitt has nailed down the American tabloids. It was beginning to seem pretty obvious that 15,000 years ago you couldn't scan the bar code on your yak carcass in the checkout line without running into a bison staring vacantly back at you from the cave wall of the A&P.

"Untitled with Two Bison" was the last straw. "I'd give anything for a *title* and *no* bison," she sighed. The best I could do was offer her the beach.

I go to the beach when I want to have a good look at death—to set it apart and give it my full consideration—and this was really what I

had in mind when I suggested the road trip to Anna. When I find myself crying in the car about veal calves, when I wake up in the night weeping about children buried by earthquakes and swept away by tsunamis—that's when I haul death's sorry ass to the beach, to isolate it from its complicated trappings—its whys and what-ifs and if-onlys. There at the beach, whether I'm oceanside or at one of the Great Lakes, I hold death up against an expanse of water too vast to see across, a seamless canvas large enough to minimize it—to outperform it—by evoking eternity.

I needed the barrenness of the beach to clear my head. Too many people and animals whom I loved had recently died or were laboring to do so. I wanted the clean sweep of infinity; I wanted a windless place.

If windlessness is what you are looking for, the Lake Michigan shore in October, it turns out, is no place to go. Hooded and gloved, Anna and I were still unprepared for the near gale that was blowing off the lake. But we bent our heads into it like a couple of Arctic explorers and searched out a hollow among the dunes, which walled out the rushing air, and fashioned ourselves a den in it. By standing up we could watch the whitecaps roiling on the lake; sitting down we could listen to them break against the lighthouse while we read and ate and wrote. Anna dropped her backpack and rolled out an old quilt onto which I set the bread and cheese and olives. We unpacked a book of the letters exchanged by Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh and a collection of poems by Wendell Berry, and tore open a bag of peanuts that had been dipped in chocolate—twice. We unloaded sketchpads and journals and the bare-knuckles camera that Anna's been hauling around for years. It was ample provender and we intended, through it, to indulge all of our appetites and come away nourished. As a bonus, there was a conspicuous absence of bison. We settled in.

Anna, enamored of "the bright young things," had packed the Mitford-Waugh book. I'd brought Wendell Berry's beautiful, often elegiac poems along in part to help me navigate the grief I was feeling over my father's recent death. When you discover someone whose vision surpasses your own, whose intuition is keener, whose cry is more eloquent, it would be foolish to leave him at home. Truth be told, Wendell Berry went most places with me those days, and still does today. He writes of the sleeping ground waking in his lilies, celebrates its singing "in fragile things unnumbered years" and considers his own land where he hopes that

“nothing falls but into life.”¹ He hears in carrion “the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.”² I was desperate to know wholeness, to recognize my personal loss as sacred transformation, to believe that death unfolds into life.

Anna, relaxing into the bisonless landscape, was casually scribbling ideas for a college admissions essay into her journal. “I’m supposed to divide people into two categories,” she explained, “and tell why I draw my line where I do. What do you think?” I wasn’t so much thinking as I was awkwardly hacking Double Gloucester into chunks with the blade on my corkscrew, a tool that I keep in the glove compartment of our car next to the windshield scraper. While I disapprove of the homophobic Boy Scouts generally, I do believe in being prepared. “How about cat people and dog people?” I threw out. It was an insipid but almost instinctual response, as inventing new ways of disparaging our cat—an animal whose predatory inclinations rival Dick Cheney’s and whose condescension withers your outstretched hand—is one of the few competitive sports I really enjoy. I’ve more or less horrified my family with the series of nicknames I’ve tried out on her over the years—the Petit Despot, Kurtz, and then (somewhat redundantly) the Horror, but it was with Delirium Tremens that I felt I’d really reached my personal best. Like a furry little Shiva, DTs keeps dancing the Refusin’-Ta-Die rag. “You are *really* not a cat person,” people tell me. Fortunately for little DTs, there are people in our home who are.

Our golden retriever, Buddy, on the other hand, *was* dying and it was this more than anything that had sent me running for the beach. My bones were aching because I had spent the previous night sleeping on the floor beside him; he’d grown too weak to climb into our bed even though my husband, Larry, had built steps for him. Buddy, who had bulked up on our love over the past dozen years, had endured surgery and months of emaciating chemotherapy in our selfish efforts to keep life in him. Something broke in my chest when the last vet’s report had labeled him, “anorexic dog.” I was gulping air and horizon hungrily now, stocking up to see us both through another night’s vigil.

1. Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems 1957–1982* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 115.

2. Berry, 151–52.

Anna put down her journal and extracted an oily olive from its slim jar. Despite the amount of time we spend together she is very private about her writing and her painting and well, her life—which I get—she's 18. I had been pointedly keeping my busy fingers off the control panel of her life since she'd practically bitten off my head for mentioning that I liked—*liked* the mural she had painted, like Amy in *Little Women*, on her bedroom wall. But I am no dispassionate Marmie, able to rise above the stormy passions of her young to administer gentle reproofs. Stung, I had reacted—not by shouting any of the outraged and, by the way, completely justifiable retorts clamoring around in my head, things like “I *own* those walls so I’ll look when and where I damn well want to in *my* house!” but by brusquely backing off, which included turning over the complicated college application process entirely to her. I placed the college catalogues in her lap along with the half dozen pocket-folders I had labeled and color-coded according to application deadline. Nothing there to indicate that I might have been a tad overinvolved. *She can get in*, I fumed silently, *or not get in—it’s her life*. I’d been wounded and I was *out*. But that had been weeks ago and this essay topic was teasing me—I’m an English teacher, after all—and I was having trouble keeping my sticky fingers off.

“Orthodox and heretic?” I tried again. Anna, who had set about ripping a baguette into fist-sized chunks, nodded noncommittally—maybe a little interested. “You know, people who recite creeds and people who question them.” I was liking the diversion this essay topic was providing. While I was proving to be entirely powerless to save the humans and dog I loved, I was finding myself to be handy with throwing up a template and slicing up the world to fit into its frames. It was a little like finally understanding that although you’ll never be so erudite as to win the Nobel Prize for physics, you are just clever enough to cut and paste a Word document into your email, only considerably less useful. Still, it seemed like something.

“Or how about people who run away from a disaster and people who run toward one?” Anna and I had recently been in England together, had left London for the Lake District two days before what the British call “bombing outrages” shook the city and killed 52 of its irreplaceable citizens. The London we returned to the same week was altered by police tape and a ubiquitous police force that seemed to have sprouted machine guns like terrifying new appendages. The London *Times* was covered with photographs of

carnage; a few pictures showed terrified people running away from the double-decker bus that had exploded in Tavistock Square while others, incredibly, ran toward it. Some humanitarian impulse too sudden to have sprung from thought propelled those people toward that horrific wreck—that seemed a thing worth considering. It suggested, I thought, some force underlying the material world and perhaps even orchestrating it in odd, unpredictable moments, perhaps even outlasting it. I was all for an argument that would point to eternity showing its hand in the world. But Anna put down her journal, wrapped a scarf around her neck to just below her eyes, and set off to photograph the pier.

That night I spread out my blanket next to Buddy on the floor again and we slept nose to nose—breathing in and returning to each other the same air. *One pneuma—one breath*. He died a day later with his big head in my lap, and a few days after that Larry and I scattered his ashes in the woods where he had loved to walk. We soaked our shoes hauling a rock out of his favorite creek and lugged it home to our hearth where it sits in memorial, black and smooth, uncannily resembling, when the light hits it right, his wise and gentle face.

I sometimes wonder where love goes when the ones we love disappear. Sitting on the bathroom floor, which is where I do my best grieving, I can still feel the love for my good dog and my good dad emanating from my body like a pulse, but it's a current without a receiver. Does it slip through the screen over my head and spiral into space? Could I see it with just the right high-tech, heat-sensitive goggles developed by *NASA* or MIT? What, after all, are the physics of love? Maybe it just falls back to earth and soaks into the ground like rain.

Anna opened her letter of acceptance from the college for which she had written the essay that began at the beach a few weeks later as we sat at a table by the fireplace in our usual café. She had drawn a line between us and had gotten into college just fine without my indispensable assistance. I see now that her intelligence and vision and exuberance are going to carry her beyond borders I have not even conceived of and the certainty of that fills me unequivocally with joy.

I didn't drag Anna to the beach in October looking for answers to explain away loss or negate the fact of death; God knows I am too skeptical to embrace with certainty any theories about what follows our dying. I ran to the coast for breathing space, for a seamless terrain large enough to receive

my sorrow and absorb some of it—a wide beach and a Great Lake will do that for you, will take the run-off when you feel you are drowning in the rising backwaters of your own grief. I was as buoyed by Anna's quiet company that day as I am by her confidence now; it will be difficult and thrilling to watch her go.

I am sure to feel her absence keenly. I am equally sure that I will take my loneliness to the beach and to the woods too, where even now, I tell myself, Buddy's ashes are feeding the ferns and where his redistributed atoms will comprise the coils of early fiddleheads. "Practice resurrection," Wendell Berry urges.³ I don't think for a minute that he believes it's a simple business picking ourselves up and moving forward in the echoing absence of the ones we love—no easier than it is for a spring shoot to part the heavy April earth. I'll try—that's all, not heroically but with any luck steadily, with occasional setbacks to which, I think, we are all entitled. And this summer I'll walk in the shade of the woods and lower my face to the ferns.

3. Berry, *Collected Poems*, 151-52.