A Sense of Place  
*Writers’ Night*  
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The day was still as honey in a bowl;
The maple-sap came fast, with winter gone
The cattle stood beside the bright snow-pool
Their dung packed down and steaming in the barn.
No help for it — go get your fork and spade
For even those who serve the world with wit
Are trundling down into the deep barn-shade
And blocking up their nose, and shoveling it.
You hacked and grunted all day at my side;
And then we heaped it, drove it up and flung
Great cartloads on the cornfield, near and wide,
Breathing new air rich with earth and dung.
Then stood a little while, single and whole.
And the day still as honey in a bowl.
The time’s come round again: blind pomegranates shine
In their dark bins like tawny Tuscan wine.

Peeling and rinsing will steal my afternoon.
I try to put them off, but they will have me very soon

Shucking glassy citadels out of their stiff leather jackets
Flushing black seeds away and stuffing plastic packets

Row on row, until the hinges of the freezer-door
Complain against my labor and won’t take any more.

What is it? I ask myself, there must be a reason
Beyond my father and the turning of the season —

And why the urgency, this itching in the blood?
It’s surely not the taste - you could hardly call them food.

Yet here’s my father again, in the same old patch of sun,
Hunched over, halving and scooping, one by perfect one,

Sucking his corn-cob pipe, though it’s long sputtered out,
Insisting that I join him, grunting against his gout.

And then he’s off, and I’m alone with the radio
Hoping this time the fruit will walk toward me, although

They seem quite deaf to any wish of mine; they simply squat.
Again, it’s up to me. I ease myself from the spot

Where all decisions are made as the falling days go round
Between my lowbrow ceiling and the all too solid ground.

I clomp down the cellar-stairs, take the top one in my hand.
I close my eyes and turn it, very slowly. It’s cooler than the wind.

I can almost hear the small sea that washes under its rind.
Mary Ellen Frame

Between Prairie and Big Woods

This is not a place set apart from human influence, but rather where all the elements, soil, sun, wind, rain, heat and cold, microbes, plants, animals, all interact with human will and effort. And that living matrix is a farm. It isn’t wholly ordered by human will and rationality and not entirely shaped by the order working through nature.

Envision this place, the farm where I live. Bordered on three sides by roads, a fence completes the rectangle. Custom, too, has imposed rectangular fields and pastures. But set against those humanly straight lines are the lift of hill dropping to the curve of waterway, irregularly shaped wet spots, the insistence of three oak trees, where you have to steer the tractor wide, leaving islands that have collected rocks and wildlife. The oaks have been there since before white settlers came, emblem of the borderland between prairie and Big Woods, both taken now by plow and saw. They stand here, oblivious to fields, roads and towns. The fields are spread out like a quilt around the trees that wrap the farmstead: ash, oak, hickory, chestnut, pine, maple, walnut, and more. inside the belt of trees, the buildings circle an open back yard. The nineteenth-century farmhouse, dignified and habitable, is due for paint. A garden shelters in the foundation of the old barn, which was taken down when it became more a hazard than an asset. That barn, which was playground and school, was almost as much my home as the house.

Except for summer-pastured cows, and a few cats, domestic animals are gone, but wild animals have moved into the outbuildings. Raccoons nest within the double walls of the milkhouse; woodchucks burrow under dirt-floored sheds. Deer, opossum, rabbits, squirrels, birds find abundant nesting sites and food. I have caught a whiff of skunk, heard coyotes howl in the moonlight, and seen a fox in the backyard. Some balance has shifted toward the power of untamed life.

A farm evolves in accord with the generations of farmers, as well as the cycles of climate. When our family moved here in 1943, the farm “needed work.” My parents gave it work. Besides caring for children, animals, crops and garden, they cleared trash, tore down, built, rebuilt, remodeled, and planted trees, hundreds of trees. What was here was life, living: thrust of seedlings, year after year, the rub of shoulders, flex of knees, bleating and bellowing, laughing and talking, eating and dying. It’s all about food and growing. Soil came through roots, through leaves, through milk, through flesh, into us. We children grew up, found our own paths, moved away. As years passed, my parents had less strength to give the farm. The animals were sold; the fields are worked by a younger family. The deaths of my parents marked the end of another cycle of the farm which is ready for a new generation.
I stand now in the barnyard, amid sights, sounds and smells that are utterly familiar to me. Flies buzz; I smell dust and cow manure. The weathered wood of the milkhouse is on one side, trees are on the other. In front of me is the cement cow tank with lichen on its sides, and beyond that, open grass. Around me are dried cow pies, and the usual barnyard weeds: rose mallow, sheperds purse, lambs quarters, pigweed, dandelion, burdock and thistle. Sunlight, like a warm hand, lies on my head and shoulders. This is my right place. This is where I belong.
Brendon Etter

I Hate the Iron Range

I hate the Iron Range. I’m allowed to hate it because it’s where I’m from. Well, not technically where I’m from, but, rather, where I’m most identifiably from. If I told you where I’m really from, as in where I was born and lived all my single-digit years, you would be confused or you’d nod politely as if you’d heard of it, but really, in your mind, you’d pity me, because, having never heard of the towns, you’d assume that they must be neither grand nor notorious enough to have even registered.

Although, maybe, you’d be filled with quiet envy assuming that I lived in one of those romanticized, quaint-but-insn’t-it-great-that-you-had-the-type-of-support-that-comes-from-everyone-watching-out-for-everyone-else kind of towns. If I knew that’s what you were thinking, I’d say: “nice try”.

Where I’m from a guy could whip it out on the east side of town and walk, into the sunset, and still have enough urine left to mark a small grove of trees upon reaching the western boundary. Although for both public decency and sanitary reasons, I’d caution against walking and peeing at the same time – unless the wind’s strong from the east and the sunset’s very nice so people’s attention would not fall below the belt.

So small and insignificant were the towns in which I spent my pre-adolescence, that, by the time I moved to Virginia, Minnesota, I was amazed at the immensity of the city. The grand metropolis of nearly nine thousand people! Nine thousand! That’s nearly ten thousand! That’s five digits worth of people! Oh! The enormity! Oh! The implied sophistication!

I was sure that, if you looked at the night sky, you could distinctly make out stars being obscured by the dim orange glow of this urban behemoth at night. For the first time in my life, I could not see all the stars that I know I should have been able to see. I was fourteen, the city lay before me with its seedy opportunities, and corruption of my small-town ideals was, hopefully, a-coming my way!

Two observations: First, Virginia calls itself the “queen city” of the Iron Range – I guess in reference to the “Virgin Queen” Elizabeth I – although any possible connection to the English monarchy could be validated by neither the cultural make-up of the city itself – largely Finnish, Slovakian and German – nor the sexual purity of its young. Second, the Iron Range often is referred to colloquially as “Da Range” – perhaps, again, a reference to some long lost royal connection – the Da dynasty of ancient Russia – or, more likely, because of the Scandinavian tendency to shortened the overly-lengthy “the” to “da”. This linguistical laziness is not necessarily reserved only for Scandinavian-derived cultures. Chicagoans, Brooklynites, Atlantans, pretty much everyone slides a ‘d’
in place of the ‘th’, everyone except thee San Franciscans, probably. Dose people are just too far past dat.

For the Iron Range, though, I find “Da Range” to be apt. I’ve always removed the space between “da” and “range”, and left “darange”. Deranged, it is. If asked for a more detailed description of the “Da Range”, I usually refer to it, glibly, as the deep south of the deep north.

Politically, the grinding, blue-collar, labor-first iron workers have twisted the arms of the citizenry to encourage the election of Democratic candidates for office. James Oberstar has been the Range’s Democratic U.S. Representative for nearly 111 years. Early on, when the political trade winds blew favorably for the workers and the U.S. needed the ore to make the steel to make the wars go smoothly, the Iron Range thrived and its citizenry touted progressive, even positively socialistic, policies. Education was prized! We had commies! Unions ruled!

But, the winds changed, the ore purchased more cheaply from Brazil and other places, and the progressive ideals that reigned o’er the salad days, turned inward and ate out its own heart. The shell remains. To this day, Republicans rue their brief campaign stops on the Range. Ironically, Democrats win because of the fear of change. Democrats win because the citizens of the Iron Range want to stick with the status quo: the absolute benchmark of conservative ideology. The schools lost their luster, leaving citizens to fight for every ballot measure to expand opportunity for students.

Socially, too, conservative ideals hold sway. Racial minorities are frequently made to feel less than welcome; although being unwelcoming toward a racial minority on the Iron Range is not easy to do, as there are so few you can unwelcome. It seems that you would so exhaust yourself from the searching; you would have precious little energy left for active discrimination.

God forbid you happen to be gay on the Range. Not pretty. The passion against “faggots” only superseded by the passion for guns. Guns, that the good old boys of northern Minnesota, if they really had their choice, would use on open season against “queers” and other obvious threats to their liberties and genitalia: like people not using their guns against gays, or people not snowmobiling from September to June.

I hate the Iron Range for all these things: the hollowness of their “progressive” ideals, their vitriol toward all things different, turning away from education. But, now, I also hate the Iron Range for another, much more personal reason. I hate the Iron Range because of metaphor.

I believe in metaphor the way many people believe in love or God or narcotics: that it can change your life. Not only do I look at events and see them as metaphors for the “something larger” or the significant circumstances that underlie the events themselves, but also that the circumstances actually create the metaphorical event.

The woods around Virginia and surrounding towns, Eveleth, Gilbert, Biwabik, Aurora, are mostly second-growth after the logging of the early decades
of the twentieth century. I have spent many, many hours tripping along in the shadows of the spruce and birch. We walked, as teenagers, to the closed mine pits that pock the land and dived in their green, mineral-rich water. Dangerous, but we were not capable of death when we were sixteen, and a thirty-foot jump off a cliff was nothing for us.

I should have smelled the metaphor even then, as a teenager. It was thick enough. Those forests reeked of it: cut down, left for dead, or replanted in artificially straight rows. Those mine pits, left, abandoned, cliffs supporting little to no vegetation, water where fish don’t swim. The natural resources exploited, converted to cash to build communities that were dying, succumbing to their decay and their slow roll down the slope of poverty. The citizens, succumbing to the desperation of that poverty, isolate themselves from much in the world, hiding away from change. Stubborn, but dying too.

I hate the Iron Range because it has turned its back on the progressive forces that made it so strong; it has taken the easy road out: blaming everyone else for its failure to plan, adapt, change and grow. In my world of circumstances setting us up for the metaphorical event, I wend my way again into the woods that I’ve walked before, and make my way to the site where the plane went down, where the physical embodiment of those great progressive thoughts died that October day. He couldn’t make it, in my mind; the winds of the Iron Range had changed. They couldn’t lift his plane for a couple minutes longer, just a couple minutes. Others blame the plane or the pilots or the guiding systems on the ground. For me, it’s personal. I blame the Iron Range.

So, walking down the paths to the site of the plane crash only in my mind, I tell myself never to go back physically. I don’t think I could stand it. There is too much pain, and I know why the pain is there. The pain is there because I still, in so many ways, love the Iron Range.
Trimming the Blackberry Bushes

1
Trimming the blackberry bushes leaves my hands raw
Digging down under the roots of shoots that have leaped
Over the tulips to start a new colony pulling them up

I didn’t get to the asparagus patch covered by briars
I think of my eighty-five year old friend’s story about
His efforts to save a dying Japanese tree in his front yard

He couldn’t bear to destroy the nest wrens had built in it
It was eight years ago when he decided he had to do his best
to care for the tree feeding and pruning it back to life

He found it profound to consider this interaction with the natural world
How tenuous all our lives seem - how absurd an old man tending
An old tree so that wrens could be wrens and he could delight in it

He wondered how long it could go on - who’d fall first - he continues
His wife of sixty years now gone - most of his capacity for joy gone
He continues nurturing - the tree keeps blooming - the wren sings

2
Late in the day the stream of sunlight is more vertical than horizontal
The sky - that cast of Prussian blue - an eagle soars circling slowly
I call to him under my breath and watch as he finds me - circles overhead

I gather the dead cane from the phlox and the hyacinth
Poke in the black earth trying to reclaim the garden
What will keep me alive - the tenderness others show me

The delight in music and friendship - a walk along the riverside
The warm sun - a kiss a caress a word or two - the thought of something
I missed or did not say - some gift not given or word of thanks held on to

The moon wrapped in white mist that fills me with such longing
Alone in the dark wondering - if I close my eyes will I wake in the morning
Or fall into the stream with Li Bai dreaming of a sad bliss that eludes me
Mary Steil

*Stepping Out of Paradise*

Late November and I’m raking in a windstorm
Gathering donated leaves.
My lawn is bare
The lawn crew packed up the leaves and took them away
I forgot to tell them I needed a few
I just wasn’t thinking.

My neighbor offered me these leaves
But so many blow away as I lift them to the basket
That it seems hopeless to bring any to my shivering plants
What good will it do?

I forget so much now
Where I put the keys, what time I’m meeting a friend for lunch
But I never forget this:
That you wanted no more of hospitals
And as the helicopter circled to land
You died.

I remember how your lips opened to kiss me
The little sigh as we came together
How your arms reached for me as I slid into bed
Pulling me close, fitting your body to mine.

Your pens are here, your guitars
The perfect little flies you tied for fishing
Your heavy leather hiking boots, your silver pocket watches
The wooden boxes that you crafted, their surfaces smooth as glass.
I can see your fingers as you touched each of them, and then touched me.
Why did I think it would never end?
Mary Steil

Losing My Hold

Alone now
I spin around the edges of my world
Unattached
Bumping into walls
Scraping bits and pieces of my former life
from my body
There goes love, and laughter and lovemaking
Long nights of deep sleep
Dancing and hugging
Teasing and scheming.
Thin now
I am skin without veins
Bones without muscle
A heart without a home.
This Land

Characters:  Little Crow, also known as Taoyateduta, chief of the Mdewakanton Dakota, one of the Eastern bands of the Dakota

Alexander Faribault, a trader for Little Crow’s band who had kinship ties with Little Crow

A Settler Woman

St. Paul Entrepreneur

Setting: November, 1852. Alexander Faribault is trying to convince Little Crow to sign a receipt which will allow territorial governor Ramsey to distribute money to traders who have made claims against Indian debts. This is the final step in the 1851 Mendota treaty which will remove the eastern Dakota tribes from the lands on the Mississippi.

(LITTLE CROW and ALEXANDER FARIBAULT stand overlooking the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, at Mendota. LITTLE CROW wears a white shirt with gaudy neckerchief, a medicine bag suspended about his neck, a red belt with silver buckle, beaded leggings and moccasins. He holds his hands, which are deformed from an injury, inside of long sleeves.)

FARIBAULT

The people are starving, I know. That is why I’ve come to you, Little Crow. Help your people. Sign this receipt, as Governor Ramsey requests, so that the money your people owe the traders can be paid off.

LITTLE CROW

Traders—like you, Mr. Faribault.
FARIBAULT

Yes, of course, the Mdewakanton have debts to me, but that’s not why I come. If you sign the receipt you will receive a means to live: land, farm supplies, cattle—

LITTLE CROW

We are not farmers. Besides, we never receive half what is promised.

(FARIBAULT wants to interrupt, but LITTLE CROW holds him off and continues.)

Last year our Great Father made a great fuss about the treaties. He asked us to hitch along and let him sit down on our grounds where we could have a talk together about his buying our land. Our father sat down with us and began to talk with us and whittle a stick and then whistle, and he kept on in that way for almost two moons—kept us waiting there, many bands having come from away up the Missouri River.

FARIBAULT

Ramsey can talk. He’s a politician, isn’t he?

LITTLE CROW

We got very tired. We danced attendance on our father so long that we raised no corn. Our father is a devil of an old fellow to hunt, if he can only corner a drove of cattle. Our father is a great glutton; he would go and shoot a cow or an ox every morning, and give us the choice pieces of it, such as the head and the paunch; and there he kept us waiting for six weeks; and when the cattle were nearly all gone, and he had whittled all the sticks he could find, he got up and shut his jackknife, and belched up some wind from his great belly, and poked his treaty at us, saying, “I will give you so much for your land.” And now you would have us trust Ramsey with our money. So that it can wind up in his pocket and the pockets of the traders who have given us nothing!

FARIBAULT
I have made arrangements. Yes, Ramsey will give the money to the traders. But there will also be quite a bit of money for you. The treaty was signed. Brother... finish what has been started.

(LITTLE CROW pushes away the document FARIBAULT is handing him.)

LITTLE CROW

We signed the treaties, we could not help ourselves. We went home. There, around the bend of the river is my village, Kaposia. All of this land to the west of the river has been our home. But when we came back we had no corn crops and could find no game to speak of. The white settlers came in and showered down their houses all over our country. We did not really know whether this country any longer belonged to us or not.

(Lights out on LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT. Spot to opposite, on SETTLER WOMAN.)

SETTLER WOMAN

There, around the bend of the river, is our new home. It hardly feels like home. We’re living in a tent and we walk half a mile to get our water. But the roof is going on the house next week and Amos says we’ll have a well before the ground freezes. Brrr! I think that might come sooner than we think!

(Spot off SETTLER WOMAN, lights on LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT.)

LITTLE CROW

The settlers gave us something to eat, that is certain. They have generally been very kind to us. But they took our lands before the proper time, before the Senate at Washington had ratified the treaties. Then the Senate took away the lands we were promised as reservation. They say now they will give it back, but can we believe them?

(Lights out on LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT. Spot to opposite, on SETTLER WOMAN, who is writing a letter.)
SETTLER WOMAN

Dear Sister: We too were relieved when the treaty was signed, since we knew we really had no right to be here. But, like Amos said, if we didn’t get the land, someone else would! The Indians generally left us alone, except to come begging for food. Still, I think we will all breathe easier once they are gone. When they are settled on their own plots of land, the missionaries can better do their work of converting them to Christianity and a civilized way of life.

(Spot off SETTLER WOMAN, lights on LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT. LITTLE CROW is pretending to dig with a hoe, but he is using the wrong end.)

LITTLE CROW

Now you, Mr. Faribault, are a farmer. This is how you taught me to dig, isn’t it?

(They laugh.)
It would be better used if I would mount and ride away.

(LITTLE CROW pretends to “ride” the hoe.)

FARIBAULT

So much for all those hours I spent in Kaposia teaching you to farm. Farming may be the only way to live from now on. But you’re right. The Mdewakanton are not much suited for it.

LITTLE CROW

Farming is not such a bad occupation. But they want us to change our ways, our dress, our traditions, our ceremonies. Those I will never change.

FARIBAULT

You are not one to cave in to pressure. I admire that, Brother. You have always been strong. Remember the time we chased the elk for five days, twenty-five miles a day, Sibley and I on horses and you on foot? You never slowed or tired, nor failed to keep up conversation with us as we traveled! You are like that in all
you do, Little Crow. Taoyateduta, we are blood relatives. Haven’t I provided the Mdewakanton the supplies they needed? Haven’t you invited me to hunt with you, to sit at your councils and give advice, to attend your feasts? When the people hurt, I hurt.

(beat)

I can’t make you sign. You have no fear. As a young man you took leadership of your village, confronting your half-brother, taking the gunshots in your hands. Last year at Mendota you were the first to sign the treaty, though there were threats on your life. I will never forget what you said that day: “I believe this treaty will be best for the Dakotas, and I will sign it, even if a dog kills me before I lay down the goose quill.”

LITTLE CROW

I might choose to die for a good reason, but how will my name on this paper help the people? It will help the puffed up men on the hill across the river. It will help the traders. It will help all who throw up store fronts as fast as they can in St. Paul.

(Lights out on LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT. Spot to opposite, on ENTREPRENEUR.)

ENTREPRENEUR

Land! Land! Look at this land! Land! That’s what the treaties mean. Thirty-seven million square geographical miles of territorial surface: prime agricultural land, rich veins of minerals waiting to be extracted and put to use in boundless industry, driven by inexhaustible water power. I arrived a year ago at the St. Paul levee--there, across the river. Already it’s changed from a small village to a bustling, noisy city. Soon, I have no doubt, it will be a driving, miniature . . . . Pittsburgh! With new settlers arriving every day and the traders coming in to spend treaty money, I can make a good living with my shop, my hotel, my saloon.

(Spot off ENTREPRENEUR, spot on SETTLER WOMAN.)
SETTLER WOMAN

We couldn’t pay the mortgage on our farm in Pennsylvania, but here we’ll have a chance. It said so in the St. Anthony Express, June 21, 1851:

(reading from a newspaper)

“Who are Wanted in Minnesota: We want farmers—strong, robust, active men, who know the way, and have the will and means to tame our wild uncultivated soil, and develop its surprising fertility and unsurpassed resources. Let it be distinctly understood then that farming is by far the most profitable business at present in Minnesota and is likely long to continue so. And young ladies are wanted: not genteel young misses, brought up to read yellow-covered literature, to idleness and tight lacing, to sing a sentimental song or play a tune on the piano, dance the polka and talk fashionable nonsense. There is no room for such in Minnesota. We use the term ‘young lady’ in its legitimate sense, as meaning one who is ready to engage in any labor that may be useful and necessary, whether it be to wash or bake, mop the floor, clean house or patch a worn garment. Such can command from two to three dollars per week for their work, break the hearts of industrious and enterprising young men by their charms, heal them by consenting to become happy wives and mothers, and become the founders of great and prosperous commonwealth.

(suddenly sober) I met a woman who lives on a small claim a couple of miles from ours. Her husband shot himself by accident and had to have his leg amputated. There was no anesthetic, poor thing. They have three small children, but they’re determined to stay here. Good Lord, I don’t know how. She says the winters are endless.

(Spot off SETTLER WOMAN, spot on ENTREPRENEUR.)

ENTREPRENEUR

But land! That’s where the money is today! Town lots! Saw mills to cut timber to build towns! Why not buy now, when land is cheap and they’re ready to roll in by the thousands to buy and settle?! By God, that treaty’s the best thing to happen to this territory. Some folks call Minnesota the Promised Land. All I know is it makes no sense to take a land that could support a thousand civilized folks and leave it to a handful of savages.

(Spot off ENTREPRENEUR, lights on LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT.)

(Silence as we see LITTLE CROW and FARIBAULT share a pipe together.)
FARIBAULT

Three thousand dollars for you, Brother. To do with as you see fit. I think we are just about finished here.

(pause)

LITTLE CROW

You call me brother and apply to my sense of kinship. Yet something in me says this is not right!

(pause)

FARIBAULT

(becoming impatient) A lot of things aren’t right. But what are we to do? It’s been a long time since the Dakota lived only by hunting game, by gathering nuts and berries and wild rice. I’m a trader and my father was a trader and even long before that the Dakota lived by trading furs. They came to depend on the things traders brought them: brass kettles and arms, knives and hatchets, fancy shirts and combs. Not to mention whiskey. In turn, the people trapped beaver and otter, fox and wolf and cured buffalo and deer hides for us to sell. It worked well. It benefited everyone. But now for 20 years, there have been no pelts. Only muskrat, which are worth next to nothing.

LITTLE CROW

(a bit sarcastically) You might wish to remind me of the years you brought goods in the fall, knowing you might not get pelts in the spring.

FARIBAULT

There was no game. The people came to rely on government for handouts. Beef, pork, flour.
LITTLE CROW

Yes, yes. You call them handouts, but it was the very least they could do.

FARIBAULT

Pressures. All around. Everyone with their own interests.

(For the next six lines, we see all four characters on stage at once.)

ENTREPRENEUR

All this land! Why shouldn’t I make money, if I can?!

LITTLE CROW

We did not want to be humbugged out of our lands.

SETTLER WOMAN

All this land! A blessing to the thousands waiting in the East, thousands coming from Europe!

FARIBAULT

It’s bound to change, and we have to change with it.

ENTREPRENEUR

All this land! I treated Representative Sibley to my hotel’s finest. These politicians need to know which side their bread is buttered on.

SETTLER WOMAN

All this land! But it’s so empty. When there’s a town here with a church and a school, then it will be home.
(Spots off SETTLER WOMAN and ENTREPRENEUR. LITTLE CROW takes the pen and paper from FARIBAULT.)

LITTLE CROW

Now they would take even more of what is ours.

FARIBAULT

What else can you do?

(Pause. Then LITTLE CROW signs the paper.)

(End.)
Leslie Schultz

Walking the Labyrinth

After I first walked a painted canvas labyrinth at Pathways, a healing center in Minneapolis, I dreamed of being able to walk one every day. I wasn’t sure exactly what effect it had had on me, but I knew it was powerful. What I yearned for was to walk a labyrinth barefoot, on grass, when my feet could touch the ground.

After returning to Northfield in 1996, I was delighted to discover the temporary labyrinth near the Hill of Three Oaks. I walked it often, and dreamed of having a nearby labyrinth as a permanent resource. The next summer, in 1997, my husband and I asked Marilyn Larson to help us create a labyrinth in our garden at 114 Winona Street, just down the street from Carleton’s Chapel. Marilyn dowsed the labyrinth’s outline on August 6, 1997 -- our 9th wedding anniversary and the 48th anniversary of Hiroshima Day, an international symbol of the importance of working for peace, both in one’s daily life and in the world.

As a yoga teacher, I have told students how the first yogic principle, Ahimsa, means “non-violence. Yoga is a way of practicing non-violence with one’s self, of quieting for a time the overlay of voices we each carry that insist we push too hard, too far, too fast. As a writer, I have found that when I am struggling with a project, stuck in a mental cage of my own making, it helps to walk the labyrinth. Because I feel safe there, fear of failing dissolves and along with it my writer’s block. The built-in turns that all labyrinths contain encourage me to look at problems of all kinds from new perspectives. The circular path reminds me that the process, not the product -- the race, not the finish line -- is what is truly important to me. I am reminded that “peace is every step” and that if I simply put one foot in front of the other I will arrive. By walking, I become grounded, but not stuck.

One large fear, now dissolved, is how other people would interpret the labyrinth. Our labyrinth began as a relatively discreet outline of twine pegged into the lawn. The next year, my husband and I moved stones from a farmer’s field to mark the paths. This meditation walk is visible from the street, and has drawn many comments. I have been surprised by how intrigued people are, and how many decide to accept the invitation to walk it themselves. Most report a sense of calm and well being. One woman who has trouble with an occasionally irregular heartbeat described how walking this pattern restored her normal rhythm in a few minutes, a process that usually took several hours for her. I have heard a variety of such stories from strangers and friends alike. I’ve noticed, too, that birds, squirrels, and rabbits are drawn to the perches and hollows created by the stones.
Today, I consider our labyrinth a form of living sculpture. The stones, which seemed so permanent when we laid them in place, shift as the grass grows and the frost heaves the ground beneath them. Each time I walk this circle of stones is unique, because I am different and so is the world about me -- the air, the light, the seasons, and the possibilities for my day. It is said that “Truth waits for eyes unclouded by desire.” Like its shadow, fear, I find desire suspended when I walk the healing pattern of the labyrinth. This is the ongoing gift the labyrinth makes to me, encouraging me to slow down, look carefully around me, and to emerge from this place refreshed by listening to that still, small voice within.
Olivia Frey

Florida is not the South

“Where are you from?” my classmates in college would routinely ask me.
“From the South,” I would answer.
“Where in the South?”
“Florida. Homestead, south of Miami.”
“Florida? That’s not the South.”

But I knew it was the South, because the vegetation—the thorny hedges, the moss-filled trees, the toxic croton, the razor sharp palmetto—could wipe you out. If you stood too close to the trailing vine Kudzu, you could disappear.

In Minnesota, the plants rest with the change of seasons. The first killing frost beats back the trailing vines, the bind weed, the wild cucumber, the morning glory and creeping Charlie. Prairie plants die back—the purple Coneflower and hot orange Butterflyweed. Tall grasses lie down, storing nutrients and establishing intricate root systems over the winter. No food comes out of the ground, except for the potatoes, onions and acorn squash stored in the cellar. The evergreens stay green, of course, but lose their vibrancy. They are dormant, too.

Not so the rough Bermuda grass, Florida pines and poinsettias of Homestead, Florida.

I did not pay much attention to the landscape when I lived in Homestead, except to know that it was an obstacle and an annoyance. Vegetation was a green wall against which we constantly pushed to make room for our work and play. As I ran through a stand of pines, the sharp leaves of the palmetto bushes would cut my hands and legs. The Ficus tree’s knotted roots and thicket of hanging limbs entangled and tripped me. We would never lie or sit for long in the grass—the blades were thick and rough—nor in the dirt, which held stinging red ants.

There were no hiking trails through the woods around Homestead, and only tourists visited the Everglades. Who, on purpose, would walk through the muck filled with snakes, slapping at mosquitoes the whole time, to stare at the motionless alligator, that bumpy reptile. Perhaps it was interesting to watch him crush small birds with his jaws, but that happened infrequently. Gators eat only once or twice a week.

As I’ve traveled back to Homestead, by car and in my memory, I’m in awe of the terrifying beauty of the place. A seven foot tall hedge of bright red hibiscus ran along the west side of our house, screening our back yard from our neighbors. The stamen were thick with yellow pollen always, and if we even brushed past the bush, the yellow dust would stick to our clothes and cling to the soft hairs on our arms. On the south side of our house grew a thick croton hedge, the plant with purple, red and black variously colored leaves. My mother spanked me if I got croton stains on my clothes. The brown oil would never wash
out. And we knew that if we chewed on the leaves, we would become violently ill. The oil is cathartic and noxious, but the leaves are strikingly beautiful with their deep reds and purples. Under the bathroom window stood two Bottlebrush trees, with long feathery red flowers that looked like their name. Flowers crushed on the sidewalk left a red stain.

In Minnesota, even the wildflowers of summer—the Queen Anne’s Lace, the Fringed Gentian—are delicate in their finery. The flowers of Florida are imposing—not only in size, but scent and colors, and in their effects. They poison and cripple. Some even eat small mammals.

My mother was born in Mankato, Minnesota, and, with memories of her own mother’s neat Petunia beds and contained Peonie bushes, she tried to tame the vegetation in her yard. She had my father build a brick flower bed along the front of the house, which she painted white. In the middle of the bed, she planted a dwarf palm, which never grew more than four feet tall. On each side of the palm, she planted philodendron. She tried to contain the vine in the box, but they were disobedient. They climbed over the edge and up the stem of the palm. She persistently trimmed them as though they were yew bushes. Among the philodendron she planted Monstera, the vine with large leathery leaves that looked like we’d gotten after them with the scissors because of the holes. And dieffenbachia. For color she tried to grow begonias and geraniums, and sometimes four o’clocks and impatiens. These flowering plants lived only with tender loving care.

On the southwest corner of our square lot, a property line neatly demarcated by a silver chain like fence, grew an orchid tree. An orchid tree. The orchids that most of us have seen are in refrigerators in Forget-Me-Not florist’s shop, or at the local greenhouse. They are lifted carefully out of their box, their stems wrapped in florist’s tape, and stuck with a pin to adorn Kay’s prom dress or Aunt Cleo’s shoulder for her wedding anniversary. But in our front yard in Homestead, they grew on a tree. The purple petals were small, but the flower had the distinctive shape of the orchid, with a white lip. They were probably not orchids at all, but I remember them as orchids. My mother hated that tree. The blossoms would fall on our front sidewalk and, like the red Bottlebrush blossoms, leave deep purple stains. The last fierce argument my mother and I had was when my daughters were throwing red camellia blossoms on her driveway in Alabama, grinding them into the pavement, leaving that dark purple stain. Those flowers of my childhood were achingly beautiful. They could draw blood.

My mother and father worked like field laborers on Wednesdays and Saturdays to drive back the relentless vegetation. Mowing, trimming, digging, chopping. My father trimmed the sidewalks with an edger—a mower-like machine with a razor-sharp circular blade that could be tilted horizontally or vertically. He sliced the edge of the grass so that there was a half inch space between the turf and the sidewalks and driveway. I had grim fantasies of what that edger could do to a finger, or an arm or leg. Farm accidents in Minnesota are
common—arms ripped off because of a sleeve caught in a threshing machine, or the grinding wheels of a tractor engine. The wounds are ragged. But that edger would slice an arm so clean, it probably wouldn’t even bleed.

My mother hated Florida, I think, judging by the way she trimmed and chopped away at it, and sealed herself off in our air conditioned house. The exotic chaos of the surrounding groves, forests, swamps, even fields, terrified her. She held Florida at bay with whatever means she could find—her edger, the chlordane, the Orkin Man who squirted DDT in the corners of our livingroom, kitchen, and closets twice a month in order to kill the roaches, or any other offending creatures.

Perhaps she was right to be terrified. Dieffenbachia and poinsettias grew in everyone’s yards, profuse bushes of them. These are the plants that baby books, or pet guides warn us about. The leaves and blooms are lethal to babies and cats. The forests and groves were impenetrable. The lower canopy in the woods north of our housing development was black muck under a layer of decaying vegetation. In the muck lived lizards and snakes, most of them poisonous, leeches and biting insects. Standing water harbored legions of staphylococcus bacteria that caused impetigo, boils and septicemia.

On December 23, 1975, an Eastern Airlines jetliner overshot the Miami International Airport, and crash landed in the Everglades, ten miles southwest of Homestead. Marl—a limey mud—and peat cover the porous limestone bedrock of the floor of the Everglades. The marl cushioned the impact of the crash somewhat, and the water prevented fires and explosions. Most of the passengers died, however, not from the crash itself, but days later in Miami hospitals, from gas gangrene caused by infection in the supposedly nonfatal injuries they had incurred. When I was nine, I watched a horror movie with my grandmother about an astronaut whose body played host to an alien bacteria-like life form—a fifties version of “Alien.” The bacteria gradually ate away at the man’s body until he was a bloody, gelatinous blob that threatened to absorb all living flesh in its path.

As I soaked in the bathtub, home from college during Christmas vacation, locked in my air conditioned house, I shuddered as I remembered the gruesome horror movie and how similar it must have been for those dying airline passengers. They rotted before they died.

These are the myths about the land of the deep South—as a rotting, insidious place. The murky swamps, with diamondback rattlesnakes gliding across the surface of the water. The cypress whose trunk branches out like a tattered skirt. The cypress “knees” that grow from the roots of the tree, sticking up above the water like a gnarled hand reaching up, ready to snatch us and drown us in the thick water.

The Louisiana Bayou, the Florida Glades. Those edges where the land reluctantly ends and die water begins, where trees and leaves have rotted for centuries and spawned creatures that look prehistoric, as though their evolution has been arrested, these places hold the darkest secrets.
This place where I grew up, it’s like memory itself I go there with fear and dread, and longing for the beautiful flowers that could kill you.
My mother taught High School in a small rural school district not too far from our town. I think she liked having a little distance between herself and her work. Her worlds didn’t often collide, and when she came home, she could turn her attention completely to her home. Weekends were often spent catching up. She would squeeze in laundry, yard work and vacuuming between her other activities like hosting dinner parties, or being in local theater productions.

Raising us alone meant long days for my mother. When I was seven, my parents were divorced. From that time on, it was just her and us. I never saw my father again, and didn’t think too much about it. I know now that he left her with debts and that he never paid the child support the court ordered him to pay. My mother never complained of money, though, and I never felt the lack of it. I did know that my mother worked at making our house a true home. Our sheets were washed and changed every Saturday. Meals were always homemade. Our mother packed our lunches each night before bed. I rarely saw my mother watch T.V. or doze on the couch.

One Friday night, she came home from school and announced that the Sprutes needed help and that she hoped we would all join her the next day when she went out to the Sprute’s house. She had some things she wanted to bring them. This wasn’t exactly a request. We knew it. Raymond and Robert groaned and rolled their eyes. Robert made a feeble attempt at coming up with an excuse, but gave it up when he caught Raymond’s eye. My brothers would be needed to help haul in the furniture. My mother had found two old beds and a dresser that she wanted to deliver to the Sprutes. Leroy Sprute was a student in my mother’s English class. She had taken a special interest in him. I think he was the oldest of ten children. Theirs was one of those large rural families you don’t encounter anymore. Nearly every grade in the small school system seemed to have at least one Sprute. When it was time for immunizations, which were, at that time, administered on school sites, my mother would plead with the principal to go out to the Sprute’s house. She knew there were younger children who needed shots, too. Regulations were looser then. She and the principal would drive out and bring back a couple of small children who would line up along with the elementary students for their turn with the needle. When they picked up the little children, my mother must have become aware of just how poor the family was. It wasn’t long after the immunizations that she got it into her head to bring out the furniture.

We borrowed a trailer from a neighbor and strapped on the beds and the dresser. The five of us piled in, sandwiched in among bags of clothing and
household items, for my mother had found out sizes and needs of the family. She must have gone to the church for these donations. There was no official clothes closet at that time.

It seemed like an odd adventure to Virginia and me. In spite of the complaints coming from our brothers, we loved the idea. We bounced along on the washboard back roads. Finally, a small run down house came into view. It seemed that there were children everywhere. As we pulled up, a boy who was missing a few teeth surprised us as he dropped down from a tree branch next to our car. He was about our age and walked up and stood too close to us as we unloaded the car.

Naomi Sprute greeted my mother as if they were the oldest of friends. She was a huge woman with a broad smile. She wore stretch pants and a bright flowered top. Her own smile betrayed her own missing teeth. Her hair was loose and long, which, at the time, struck me as odd for someone her age. She took my mother’s hand and told us to come on in.

I wasn’t prepared for the interior of the house. I guess I thought it might be like Mrs. Kruse’s house. The odor was new and horrible. Looking back, I realize it must have been a combination of manure, foods fried in lard and urine. I recall trying not to inhale, and then, realizing that wasn’t possible, discretely breathing into the collar of my shirt, glad for the smell of the laundry detergent. My mother didn’t seem to notice. She walked right in and accepted a cup of coffee from Mrs. Sprute. She explained that we couldn’t stay long, and that she was so glad to have found two perfectly good twin beds for her children.

Mrs. Sprute was so happy about this. She laughed at the good fortune and then took us upstairs to show us where the beds would go. She pointed to a small room which had two beds of slightly different heights pushed close together. Not properly made, they had a pile of bedding in the middle. The smell was stronger now, and I saw that the mattresses were dark and stained. Mrs. Sprute explained that the new beds would go in here and that she’d put these out on the porch. I wondered why, figuring the best thing would be to toss them on the garbage fire I had seen two kids tending in the back of the house, but I didn’t say anything.

My mother called for Raymond and Robert to help haul out the old beds. The expression on Robert’s face betrayed his repulsion at the task, but he did as asked. When the beds were removed, the little room looked even smaller than before. Was it possible that two beds had actually fit in this space? Dust balls rolled around the floor and a forgotten sock and several bits and pieces of toys were now visible. It was my mother who suggested that we clean the room before we bring up the new beds. She assigned this task to Virginia and me. Several of the Sprute children watched us. I remember feeling the oddest combination of pride, embarrassment and resentment. Why was I doing their job? Why weren’t they helping? I figured I’d show them, and I scrubbed away at that room, doing my best to make it shine like the books always described. The best I could do was rid the room of the grime. It was still gray, tired and old.
Raymond and Robert brought in the new beds. They were higher than the old ones. With some maneuvering, they fit next to each other, with the window in between. It was a much more conventional arrangement. The rest of the morning was spent cleaning and organizing the other bedrooms. From what I could tell, there were only three bedrooms for all those kids. Clothing was stuffed in any old way. My mother helped Mrs. Sprute sort through the things she had brought. Things were folded neatly and put in the drawers of the new dresser. Furniture was rearranged and once again, the dust bunnies were scrubbed away.

When we got home, the first thing Virginia and I did was go up to our room and clean. We dumped the dresser drawers out and organized things, just as we had seen our mother do. For the first time, we got behind and under furniture, removing the dust bunnies we were shocked to find in our own room. We couldn’t stop talking about the morning. We were full of self-satisfaction as we worked. “We would never pee in our beds,” we’d say to each other. Or “Did you see how gross the bathroom was?” We got a perverse pleasure in going over each detail of the morning’s work.

Our mother was pleased with our cleaning, but when we started to talk about how awful the Sprutes’ home had been, she was curt and matter-of-fact. “They haven’t had some of the advantages we’ve had. They don’t know any different. Leroy is a great student, and it was good that we were able to help.” She then changed the subject, and we knew better than to go on about it.
Rob Hardy

Old Memorial Field

The old football field is silvered
with dandelions gone to seed.
In this light, it looks like ice inside

the oval of the overgrown track—
seeds scatter and skate, silk skirts
spinning above slippered toes, swirling

and melting on a sudden breeze.
The wind in the cottonwood
sounds like running water,

or the echo of October applause
as the ghostly seeds break their huddle
and drift into the end zone—

dispersing like a crowd at the end
of the game, or like graduates, leaving
behind their empty chairs—

caps and tassels flung in the air,
a million plans suspended in celebration,
coming down to take root somewhere else.