

Presented by *Oregon Quarterly* magazine
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NINTH ANNUAL NORTHWEST PERSPECTIVES ESSAY CONTEST READING



Ellen Waterston
Gregg Kleiner
Richard Mack

Rebecca Owen
Joaquin Chapa
Mike O'Brien



THURSDAY, MAY 29, 7:30 P.M.
GERLINGER HALL ALUMNI LOUNGE



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the 125 people who submitted essays to our contest this year. You honor us with your ideas, your stories, your expositions, and the sheer effort it takes to put a couple of thousand words together and send them off to be judged. In the age of text messages and e-mail blasts, this record number of entrants testifies that the practice of thoughtful and developed writing is alive and well among those who share the Northwest perspective.

Many thanks to Kathleen Dean Moore, the Oregon State University philosophy professor and Oregon Book Award-winning essayist who served as our judge this year. Thanks also to Jim Williams and the Duck Store, whose unwavering support has been instrumental in the success of our contest; Ross West, *Oregon Quarterly* managing editor, who helped me select the fifteen final essays we sent to Kathleen; Susan Thelen and Shelly Cooper of the *Oregon Quarterly* team, who make sure the many details involved in this contest are taken care of; and Tim Jordan, *Oregon Quarterly's* art director, who designed all the promotional material.

Guy Maynard
Editor, *Oregon Quarterly*

**2008 OREGON QUARTERLY NORTHWEST PERSPECTIVES
ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS**

OPEN CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE: Ellen Waterston of Bend for “The Old Hackleman Place, an Obituary,” prize: \$750 and publication in the Summer 2008 *Oregon Quarterly*.

SECOND PLACE (TIE): Gregg Kleiner of Corvallis for “Pomegranate Prayers” and Richard W. Mack of LaGrande for “Prayer Flag.” Each wins \$300.

FINALISTS: Kellie Green of Eugene for “Fences of Connection,” Judie Hansen of Eugene for “Bear Inspires Cleanup,” Melissa Hart of Eugene for “Wanting What I Have,” Philip Heldrich of Orting, Washington, for “At the End of the Carbon River,” Tracey Kindall of McCall, Idaho, for “The Prospect of Place,” Lisa Polito of Kodiak, Alaska, for “Everywhere Is Here,” and Kellee Weinhold of Urbana, Illinois, for “My Morel Dilemma.”

STUDENT CATEGORY

FIRST PLACE: Rebecca Owen of Portland for “The Sport of Kings,” prize: \$500 and publication in the Autumn 2008 *Oregon Quarterly*.

SECOND PLACE: Joaquin Chapa of Eugene for “The Fisherman Is Just As Endangered,” prize: \$200.

THIRD PLACE: Mike O’Brien of Eugene for “Weird Nostalgia In Walla Walla,” prize: \$75.

FINALISTS: Hannah Aronowitz of Eugene for “Choosing Death” and Merilee Karr of Portland for “Covering Oregonians.”

DEADLINE FOR NEXT YEAR’S CONTEST: JANUARY 31, 2009.

CHECK THE OREGON QUARTERLY WEBSITE (OREGONQUARTERLY.COM) FOR DETAILS.

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STUDENT: THIRD PLACE

WEIRD NOSTALGIA IN WALLA WALLA

A BROOKLYN BOY'S FIRST DAY IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

BY MIKE O'BRIEN

Turning a sharp curve, I slam on the brake, just missing a sporty black Jeep parked about 100 feet ahead. “Whoa, sorry girls!” I yell out, checking to make sure the gallon jug of Poland Spring is still strapped into my passenger seat. Everyone thinks I’m out of my mind for bringing my goldfish cross-country with me, but what was I going to do, flush them down the toilet? I have no idea if my fish are actually female, but when I let my nieces name them, they chose Cleo and Jasmine, so therefore, they’re girls.

Men are working on the already-sparklingly black Highway 204, a winding mountain road through the Umatilla National Forest in northeastern Oregon. A woman in a bright orange vest holds out a stop sign at the front of a line of cars sitting on the highway. I look to my right one more time; six days and almost fourteen U.S. states later, Cleo and Jasmine are fine, despite all the warnings to the contrary. My older brother Rich, in particular, said, “You might as well just kill them now because they’re going to die in that car for a week anyway.” Turning my car off, I make a mental note to call my brother and tell him that he’s stupid.

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, which surprises nearly everyone I encounter. When my friends and I sat in front at the Comedy Cellar last year, one of the comedians said I looked like a Minnesota farm boy and actually asked to see my driver license. Brooklyn will always be home to me —that’s where I grew up, that’s where my family is, and that’s where all my earliest memories take place. But I don’t want to spend the rest of my life there. I want to experience new places, which is precisely why I spent the better part of a week traveling from the house where I grew up to Eugene, where I was to start graduate school at the University of Oregon.

It’s weird: all week, I’ve been so wrapped up in enjoying the journey that the destination has consistently slipped my mind. But here on 204, I’m on my way

to Walla Walla, Washington, and I'm captivated by the natural beauty. In every direction, there are stands of evergreens, the deep green of which perfectly complements the clear blue sky, a stark contrast to the skyscrapers in New York City. The trees seem just as tall. And then it hits me: This is where I'm going to spend the next two years. This is where I'm going to live.

I've only been in the Pacific Northwest for about an hour and a half, and it's possibly the most beautiful place I've ever seen. Once the highway workers move on and I'm free to go, I vow to drive slowly. Sure, the road has sharp curves bordered by a steep ravine, but mostly it's because the scenery is so breathtaking, I don't want to blow past it like the cornfields in Nebraska.

Walla Walla is a small city of nearly 30,000, somewhat of a college town, and the largest in Walla Walla County. Surrounded by wheat fields and rural communities, it is also home to the state's largest correctional facility, renowned sweet onions and wineries, and an annual hot air balloon rally. As I approach Walla Walla on Highway 125, I know none of these things. When I woke up that morning, at a Days Inn in Burley, Idaho, I decided to take one last detour before officially ending my road trip in Eugene. I picked Walla Walla because it's in a state I'd never visited, it's close to Oregon and most of all, because it has a funny name.

As I get off the exit, I have a strong feeling of *déjà vu*. Gas stations and diners line the street, which looks eerily similar to Route 3 in Plattsburgh, where I went to college in the Adirondack Mountain region of upstate New York. At 19,000 residents, Plattsburgh is a small college town, but it feels like Tokyo in its isolated rural area. The neighboring village of Dannemora is even home to one of New York's largest maximum-security prisons.

I stop for gas and make my way downtown. Though Walla Walla is a bit bigger and has perpendicular parking spots, the quaint storefronts on Main Street are also very similar to those on Plattsburgh's Broad Street. All over Main Street, clusters of people are in the middle of the sidewalk, engrossed in conversation. They don't seem to be going anywhere; they're all just standing around casually chatting, clearly having bumped into each other. In Plattsburgh, a five-minute walk to buy batteries can easily take half an hour because it's nearly impossible to make it to the store without seeing a few people you know. Everybody knows everybody. In Walla Walla, it seems to be the same way. I've never been here, but it's so familiar. It's a jarring feeling, like when you're convinced there's something you're supposed to be doing but can't remember what, or when you swear you've

seen someone before but you just can't place their face.

Brooklyn will always be home to me, but so will Plattsburgh—that's where I became an adult, that's where I met all of my best friends and that's where some of my fondest memories took place. What are the odds I would come to find this town, which wasn't even remotely on the way? I'm a little freaked out because part of me feels like I'm in the twilight zone. But another part of me is strangely comforted to know that as I embark on this new chapter in my life, I won't be too far away from such a vivid reminder of an older one.

Getting back in my car, I tell Amber—the GPS my aunt gave me for my birthday back in March; it has a woman's voice and tells me how to drive, so I named it after my friend Amber, who also has a woman's voice and tells me how to drive—to take me to Eugene. While she warms up and finds the coordinates, I drive off and start turning at random streets that look familiar. But everything looks oddly familiar and since I actually have no idea where I'm going, I get lost. I think I've confused Amber, who, at this point, tells me to go straight at a dead end and then turn where there isn't an actual street. She's just talking nonsense, so I pull over at a house where a man in tiny cutoff jean shorts is watering his lawn. I tell the man in cutoffs that I'm headed toward Portland, and he puts down his hose and looks up for about ten seconds, pondering. "Portland," he says. "You're a good Jesus ways away from where you're going, so listen closely because there are about six different ways you can screw it up."

I thank him for helping me and follow the convoluted directions through the labyrinthine area of Walla Walla where I've somehow found myself. I thought Pendleton was going to be on the way, but the lawn-watering man was very adamant that I follow signs for Umatilla and go nowhere near Pendleton. He also said the freeway is about an hour away. How this is possible, I have no idea, but he knows better than I do. Highway 12 is very steep, almost like a roller coaster, but Amber is coherent again, so I breathe easy knowing I'm going the right way.

When I left New York City, I went first to Syracuse to visit Ashley; we lived on the same floor in Adirondack Hall freshman year. She wanted to come cross-country with me, but didn't have the money so we held an unsuccessful "fundraiser" at a nearby casino before I headed to Chicago, where my old roommate Jon lives. Oksana, whom I met on the college newspaper, has this thing about cheese. Every time she goes someplace new, she has to sample some that's native to that particular state; she calls it "getting her cheese on." I bought a stick of cheddar at an Iowa truck stop and called her to say I was getting my cheese on

in her honor. The next day, I called my friend Chris to tell him that his last name is also a town in Colorado before quickly hanging up and throwing my cell phone on the passenger seat because I saw a cop. Though I was alone, the whole week was punctuated by Plattsburgh people and it seems appropriate that my last pit stop would be in the Plattsburgh of the Pacific Northwest. From Walla Walla to my new home in Eugene is about five hours. Of course it is. That's roughly the same amount of time it takes to drive from Brooklyn to Plattsburgh.

It's almost nine o'clock when I start driving through the Columbia River Gorge, and I'm thankful for the late summer sunset because it looks incredible. The steep, craggy mountain faces surrounded by swirls of muted orange and neon pink look like a postcard. All the adventure of driving across the United States is behind me and I'm officially transplanted to Oregon. Once again, I get excited that I'm in this place, beautiful like none I've ever seen, and I can feel like it's mine.

From the corner of my eye, I see Cleo and Jasmine swimming around their bottle and I snap out of it, suddenly remembering something I was supposed to do.

I call my brother and tell him that he's stupid.

*Originally from Brooklyn, New York, Mike O'Brien graduated from SUNY-Plattsburgh in 2006 and spent a year as an actual working adult with a cubicle and everything. Bored out of his mind, he came to Eugene to attend a graduate program in journalism at the University of Oregon. Mike believes that a wide variety of life experiences makes for better, more interesting writing; next month, he and his fish are moving to Las Vegas. While he has never been there, he doesn't anticipate any Plattsburgh-related *deja vu*.*

STUDENT: SECOND PLACE

THE FISHERMAN IS JUST AS ENDANGERED

BY JOAQUIN CHAPA

In case you haven't taken notice, New Yorkers, or at least their paper of record, have developed something of a fetish for all things Portland. Whether it's the style, dining, travel or any other section devoted to sybaritic living, Portland is hot. From their new Northwest content mine, all in the past year, the *Times* has excavated: our berries (July 25), bike culture (November 5), microdistilleries (February 28), and restaurants (ad nauseum). Now this is not a complaint, not even close. As an aspiring hip, urbane young man a little part of me unjustifiably puffs up with pride when the hippest, most urbane U.S. paper tosses a wink in the direction of my hometown.

A seemingly unrelated fact: Oregonians aren't really buying hunting or fishing licenses anymore. Lost in the bigger story of Oregon's waning salmon population then is this ironic morsel: the fisherman is just as endangered. Witness the words of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife director Roy Elicker last year, which are also notable in that they are about as desperate and honest sounding as any you will hear from the director of a governmental agency. "Most of our revenue is tied to license sales, so we're concerned when sales decline," he said in a press release produced by the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation to announce their first ever "direct mail marketing program."

"We're also concerned about what it means for the future. Adults are the key to getting kids started fishing. If parents aren't fishing, it's unlikely their kids will fish. We're excited about working with RBFF to encourage lapsed anglers to start fishing again and, while they're at it, take their kids."

I submit that there is indeed a connection between these two stories, one that is actually quite deep and meaningful. And that it is changing the very face and nature of Portland. Now, I don't claim to know whether this is good-bad-benign-whatever. In fact, I don't think you know either. But what I do know is that there is a photo in my basement that might help us explore the relationship between the *New York Times* fetish and ODFW desperation, and

maybe further muddle how we all feel about Portland's present and future.

This photo is in my basement, somewhere. I know it could be found with some effort, but I'll describe it from memory. Three boys, aged twelve to fourteen, face the camera and stand in a row on the rocks flanking a vibrantly blue, sunlight-flecked, but volume-starved August Columbia River. All three exhibit the kind of big, genuine smiles that reveal little black spaces in mouth corners, between where lips stop and teeth start. The boys on the right and left are brothers, Travis and Derrick, with uncombed but unmussed inverted bowls of orange and brown hair, respectively. Both are tall and strong and look rather about as German as their surname, Biederbecke, would suggest. The boy in the middle, me, holds a two-foot salmon with four fingers jammed up under its gills—as far away from his body as he can get it. The fish's head is at the level of the boy's waist and his arm is bent and supinating under the weight. The head-to-toe arc of his fish-facing flank is decidedly concave.

That was the only fish I ever caught. Hunting and fishing do not even crawl through my family tree, but I would quite literally be along for the ride with Travis's family. A quick sprint across the street makes for easy seat-of-the-pants planning, so when Travis's family would go out bow-hunting near Hood River, I'd ride along in the truck bed. I learned the fascinating and opinionated differences between salmon fishing with bait or spinner (the Biederbeckes were spinner men). The knowledge that skipping rocks into the river whilst fishing would scare away what brought us there was imparted to me, irritably but charitably. I learned through heavy exertion just how difficult (actually, at that age, impossible) an adult's compound bow is to even pull back into potential killing position. I learned that hunting was way, way more about hanging out and walking around—a kind of purpose-filled hike—than it was about killing a fast and beautiful animal. Travis's family would get just one deer a season, maybe two, sometimes none. They could have killed more if they hunted with guns, but they didn't, they were bowhunters. This has become a very hackneyed thing to say, but when they did get a deer, it really was special.

I was always invited over for winter dinners, when they would pull some venison steaks out of the freezer in the garage. And if you've never had smoked salmon, deer sausage, and crackers for an after-school or pre-dinner snack, you're missing something. They preceded and followed our till-dark, school night basketball games. Travis's family were "locavores" in the realest sense, before the word existed, though they sure as hell wouldn't have called themselves that.

If it isn't apparent by now, this was decidedly not the world that existed within the walls of my own home. My dad, symbolically perhaps, worked for

NIKE Inc. My mom was of the stay-at-home variety with a University of Chicago J.D. They moved to Portland from northwest Indiana shortly after my birth, basically because it's just so much nicer here than there. I can count the number of times I've been to church on three fingers, but one of those was made with Travis's family. The Biederbeckes were Republicans, too. His dad listened to Rush Limbaugh on the radio, which made for yet another first-and-only for me.

That same-block, best-friend dynamic makes for a kind of universal solvent of cultural worlds. It led to all kinds of strange and special and weird and altogether un-Rockwellian childhood memories. It's me awkwardly wagging that fish on the banks of the Columbia. It's Travis taking my dad up on his offer of a pair of Air Jordans if he would cut off his rat-tail hairdo (which if you're unfamiliar, was a popular late-eighties hairstyle that consisted of young U.S. males wearing one very long and thin braid down their back that looked just like, well, you know). It's us rooting around for Wiffle balls in the hedges by my back fence where my mom's homemade wine sat fermenting in big green-glassed cisterns.

Skip ahead a few life-chapters and what has transpired is essentially one of those uninteresting-but-true growing apart stories. My Japanese magnet program took me out of the neighborhood for high school, we played different high school sports, went to different colleges, made different summer plans . . . you get the picture. The good news is that this is not one of those sad, "and we haven't spoken in nine years" denouements. Travis is getting married this summer and I'll be his best man.

The obvious contrast here is that Travis's Portland and my Portland are not the same. This is too simple. In reality they overlap and meld, and, in many ways, work beautifully together. The *New York Times* is in love with one of those Portland's, but there is another Portland—one that is still there but fading, eroding, decaying, becoming engulfed, or being built right on top of. And I'm not sure that there's anything wrong with that, at least not in any kind of real, substantial sense—one that isn't based on that 100 percent subjective and arbitrary sense of what a place's nature ought to be. But Portland is losing something, with losing meaning nothing more than the process of unretaining—and if it wasn't absolutely clichéd and trite and precious to say so, I'd say it has something to do with what's in that photo somewhere in my basement.

Just like that ragged and unsatisfyingly ambiguous end to the old Portland–new Portland story, the Me 'n' Travis story isn't quite as clean as the best man ending would have it. Sure, we see each other, but it has been almost a year since we met face to face. And I haven't been fishing since that day imaged by the photo in the basement. The last time I talked to Travis, two weeks ago, his house had

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recently burned to the ground. We talked it over then, in the stilted, awkward way that those kind of telephone conversations are typically conducted—in which you have to try to convey sorrow and empathy through the tone of your voice and there is more blank space than is comfortable for either person.

I tried to call him back once the weekend after we talked. We had plans to meet up that never materialized. I called later the next week. He hasn't called me back yet, but I haven't exactly chased him down.

Joaquin Chapa is a graduate student in journalism at the University of Oregon and a member of the cross country and track-and-field teams.

OPEN: SECOND PLACE (TIE)

PRAYER FLAG

BY RICHARD W. MACK

They thumped their coiled lariats rhythmically against their chaps as they drove the small herd of Herefords off the hill and toward the pasture that ran along the valley floor. He liked having his son home and he watched him from across the herd as they pushed the cattle along. Still easy on the reins and quiet in the saddle, his son hadn't forgotten how to cowboy after ten years in the army.

When his son had "joined up" after two years at the university, the man had been both concerned and proud. The boy had said that he wanted to serve his country before he settled down. He had talked about "riding for the brand" and the man understood, it was what he had taught the boy to do.

Dust rose from under the shuffling hooves of the cattle and drifted in a lazy, golden cloud in the afternoon sun. The two riders, working without talking, funneled the cattle toward an opening in the pasture fence. Soon the last of the Herefords had found the gate to greener pastures and were eating contentedly. Father and son dismounted and the younger man closed the barbed wire gate. Exchanging glances, they began to lead their horses toward the creek. The older man had been riding a stocky palomino gelding that he had picked up from the Hayhook Ranch in Idaho. His son rode a tall quarter horse mustang cross that had been born on the ranch.

The boy had claimed the dun horse the day that it was born fourteen years ago. He had named the horse Cloud after the stately cumulus cloud shadows that drifted over Steens Mountain where Cloud's mother, a dun-factor Kiger mare was born. "You've got yourself a piece of history there," the man had told the boy the day the colt had taken his first steps. "That horse connects the cowboy of the Oregon high-desert to the Spanish conquistador."

Now his son, on September leave from the 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, had only one day left of his leave. His unit had spent the past nine months stationed in Balad in central Iraq and they were scheduled to return. The man watched his son lead his horse to the creek. As the young man stood with one arm resting across the slick seat of the saddle, the horse lowered his head

to drink. The older man watched his son's reflection in the water for a moment and then, looking up and across the hillside laden with sage and juniper and late lupine, he spoke, "We've run cattle here a long time, son." His boy looked at him as he added, "Sometimes I get so caught up in running this place, I forget to look around at all of its beauty."

The boy followed his father's gaze across the valley walls. "I read somewhere that the paths of philosophy and science both lead to the palace of art."

The father thought about that for a moment, admitting that maybe the two years at university hadn't been wasted. He also admitted, to himself, silently, that he hoped his boy would come back to the ranch, wiser and safe and soon.

When the horses had satisfied their thirst and had begun grazing the streamside grass, the men remounted. After splashing across the stream, they rode across the valley floor back to their pickup and trailer. The horses loaded easily and the men were soon driving along the dusty, gravel road toward home. The older man drove carefully, always conscious of the horses in the trailer. His son offered him coffee from a thermos which he accepted and sipped carefully from the blue tin cup. The man drove left-handed for awhile as the two talked of cattle prices and the lack of rain and watched Oregon dust follow them down the road.

As they drove along, the man noticed his son take a white cloth from his jacket pocket. The younger man opened his Leatherman knife and perforated one corner of the cloth. As his father watched, his son took a small caribiner from his shirt pocket, slipped it through the slit in the cloth and hung it over the rearview mirror. The man placed his empty coffee cup on the seat and reached for the cloth. As he held it open, he could see some sort of horse on it surrounded by symbols that he knew must be some kind of foreign language.

"What is it?", he asked.

"Prayer flag."

"Is that some kind of hippie deal?"

"No, dad," the young man laughed. "Remember when I got sent to Korea and I took R and R in Tibet and hiked those mountains? The trails there are almost lined with these prayer flags." Taking the cloth in his hand, he added, "That horse is called a 'wind horse' in Tibet."

The man held the cloth open again and looked at the horse. "What does it do?"

"If you hang them in the wind, they bring good luck and safekeeping. The horse carries the luck across the land." He paused for a moment and then added, "I want you and mom to be safe while I'm gone." Not much was said during the

rest of the drive home but the man glanced at the white cloth occasionally.

The next day, they drove the seventy miles to the airport in Bend. The young man hugged his mother before he got on the plane. "Call when you land in Nashville," she said.

He promised that he would and then turned to his dad. They shook hands. "Be safe, son," the man said and then his son boarded the airplane.

The next morning, the man rose at daybreak as usual. He watched the first blush of lemongrass and rose quartz light wash into the eastern sky as he finished his coffee. Going to the barn, he threw his saddle on his son's horse, Cloud, loaded him into the horse trailer and drove away from the house.

At the pasture along the creek, he stopped. He backed Cloud out of the trailer, tightened his cinch, and rode toward the valley floor. Cloud was taller than his palomino and he liked how he covered the ground. After a half hour of riding, he and Cloud came to a fence line on a ridge that offered a view of the valley and the creek that serpented through it.

Getting off his horse, he stood for a long moment looking down at the valley, then he walked to the fence, took the bandana from around his neck and tied it to the top strand of barbed wire. The wind ran soft along the ridge and he watched it flutter the cloth first one way and then another. He touched the bandana then and said his son's name out loud several times.

Richard Mack lives in LaGrande. He and his wife, Margo, own and operate Windwhistle Stables and Arena. Mack is the author of a novel set in eastern Oregon, Quail Song, and two books of poetry and essays, Against a Western Sky and Reflections in a Western River. His prose and poetry have been published in such journals as Wind Literary Review, South Dakota Review, Salal Review, Clearwater Journal, Cape Rock, Branches, The Denver Post, Palouse Review, and others. The Macks' son recently returned from a tour of duty in Iraq and is now retired from military service.

OPEN: SECOND PLACE (TIE)

POMEGRANATE PRAYERS

BY GREGG KLEINER

Using my thumbnail, I tear back the leathery peel of a pomegranate that has been sitting forgotten among apples, a banana spotted brown, and a few shrunken satsumas in the fruit bowl on the kitchen table. Nestled inside, I find the glistening seeds—hundreds of translucent rubies, or strange blisters, or some weird arrangement of soft, red teeth. A bizarre fruit, I think. Prying one seed loose and placing it on my tongue, I press it hard against the roof of my mouth until the sweet-tart liquid bursts against my teeth.

I'm sitting here in western Oregon near the window that is speckled with January rain. A blue bowl of plain yogurt waits. Steam rises from the mouth of my coffee cup. The Sunday paper lies on the floor where I just tossed it a few minutes ago, sick of hopeless headlines. Now I'm palming a pomegranate.

The nub-like end of this fruit looks like an umbilical cord that was cut a little too long at birth—an “outie.” Or a nipple. But the tough natural packaging is perfect. No need for Styrofoam trays or plastic peanuts, because the pomegranate's tough outer hide protects the seeds cushioned inside, each seed suspended in a minuscule amniotic sac of juice, a tiny womb.

Tree seeds, I think. But what does a pomegranate tree look like?

I sprinkle a few of the seeds into the bowl of yogurt where my silver spoon disappears. They are jewels on new snow. I squeeze one between my thumb and forefinger until it pops and the juice squirts, runs, several dots landing on the yogurt snow, some on my cheek. I lick my fingers, but the red stain remains. The single, somewhat shriveled stone that's left is small and white on my fingertip, the size of my daughter's first baby tooth.

Pomegranate juice is comparable in color to blood, but it stains instantly and can be removed only with bleach. Grenadine syrup, used in mixed drinks, was originally made from pomegranates, but most grenadine no longer contains any of the fruit, only corn syrup and food coloring.

I squint to read the thumb-sized sticker stuck to the peel. This pomegranate was grown in Afghanistan! It's come halfway around the world to wind up in this Oregon valley of rain and chill in deep winter. I try to imagine the orchard where it was grown in that war-stained region. Who picked this particular one? A young boy with thin brown arms and a shrapnel scar above one eye? His teenage sister with a shy white smile? An old farmer outside Kandahar whose face is withered by the arid Afghan sun? I finger the smooth skin. Whoever it was, we are connected across the planet, each of our hands having held this same orb of stored sunlight, our blood coursing through our capillaries so near all these seeds suspended in botanical fluid.

The pomegranate is sometimes called the Food of the Dead. But in modern Iran, the fruit is believed to give a long and healthy life. In Armenia, it represents fertility, abundance, and marriage.

It is said the best pomegranates in the world are grown in the Kandahar region of southern Afghanistan. Some of the world's finest apples are cultivated a couple hours north of where I'm sitting, up in Oregon's Hood River Valley, between Mount Hood and the Columbia River.

I look out the window into the slanting rain and wonder if Oregon apples make it all the way to Afghanistan? They should. We could trade apples for pomegranates—straight across. Forget the arms shipments, the grenades and guns and body armor. Instead, fill the cargo planes with shining apples that Afghan children can carry to school and share with their teachers, slice up and dip in honey. And school kids here in the United States can take Afghan pomegranates to school in their lunch pails, open the skins and share the seeds at snack time. Kindergarteners can plant the seeds in little paper cups on classroom windowsills, water the soil until tiny, pale green pomegranate trees sprout.

Children on both sides can write messages on sheets of tissue paper and wrap each fruit with their words—poems or prayers or short stories about kicking soccer balls or flying kites, playing tag in fields ablaze with poppies or worrying about landmines.

The term hand grenade is derived from the pomegranate, based on their similar shape and size, and the resemblance of a pomegranate's seeds to a grenade's fragments.

I wonder if right this instant on the other side of the Earth an Afghan mother is peeling a pomegranate for her five-year-old daughter in a house outside Kandahar? In my mind, this mother is focused only on the task at hand, not the invasion that was launched shortly after her daughter's birth, nor the war that still simmers around her. She is feeding her family, making Ash-e-anar, a thick soup consumed in this part of the world that is made from pomegranate juice and seeds, yellow split peas, ground beef, mint leaves, spices, and other ingredients. I can almost smell the mint, the garlic. It is evening in Afghanistan. Cool air. The winter stars are out. A crescent moon. The mother slips a few of the pomegranate seeds to her daughter who is helping in the kitchen that is illuminated by a single flame from a kerosene lamp because the power is out again. The girl nibbles at the seeds, smiles. Her mother reaches to retrieve another pomegranate from the basket on a nearby shelf, but this one is wrapped up in tissue paper twisted tight. She pauses, puzzled, then gently unwraps the paper, and finds a red apple inside. She holds the apple in her palm, a small, shining planet. Then the woman notices writing on the tissue paper and holds it near the glass chimney of the lamp. It is written in the hand of a child, large and looping, and in another language, but below that she sees the Pashto translation. She reads the words aloud to her daughter, who giggles and asks, hopefully, if there is more. The soup has begun to bubble. The woman shakes her head, then wipes her eyes and slices the apple into the soup pot and stirs the slices in. Her fingertips, sticky on the handle of the wooden spoon, are stained red, the same color as her daughter's tongue that flashes between her baby teeth as she talks.

What if the people who live here in Oregon sent messages like this? Written on tissue paper and wrapped around our apples? While the people of Afghanistan and Iraq and Iran shipped pomegranates to us here in Oregon, their stories and poems enveloping these fantastic fruits? We could all share meals, in a way. Break bread together from opposite sides of the Earth. Swap stories. Share poems. The elegant pomegranate and the ubiquitous apple—these globe-shaped fruits, one with its blister-like, baby-tooth seeds, the other with its sleek, nut-brown pits in the shape of small eyes—might just contain the potential to save us.

And why stop at Afghanistan? We could launch an all-out war of shared fruit and tissue-paper stories on the nations our leader called the "axis of evil." Send Willamette Valley blueberries to Iran, in exchange for kumquats. Mail purple plums grown west of Portland to North Korea in trade for persimmons. Swap Bartlett pears plucked from orchards outside Ashland for Venezuelan passion fruit.

In the United States, a recent study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggests that regular consumption of pomegranates or pomegranate juice could negate the harmful effects of prolonged exposure to the low levels of electromagnetic radiation from computers, cell phones, and other household electronic devices.

Outside, I can see the Fuji apple tree I planted two years ago. Its thin branches are bare in the weak winter light. But come late summer, those limbs will support apples. But I can't wait that long. I lift an apple from the fruit bowl and shine its skin to a luster on my flannel sleeve. Then I get up and go to the basement and retrieve a sheet of tissue paper from the gift wrap box. On the paper's sheer surface, I write a poem, a wish of a few words. Then I move to the computer and call up an online dictionary and attempt a crude translation of my English words that run left-to-right into Pashto squiggles running right-to-left. I'm sure my scrawl will be indecipherable. I almost give up. But I can't. I add my name and address and phone number. When finished, I twist the paper around the fruit, find a small box, nest it with shredded newspaper, and sit knowing I must take the next step, but with no idea how.

I wish I had the mailing address of the little girl and the mother of my imagination, or the brother and sister I could see picking pomegranates in that orchard. But I know not a single soul in Afghanistan. Nobody. I return to the computer and spend two hours searching the Internet for organizations in Afghanistan that list addresses: the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has an office in Kandahar; the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock lists a Kabul address; Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme has a regional office in Jalalabad. But none of these feels quite right; I can't imagine my box arriving there.

Then, a few more clicks, and I go still. My heartbeat picks up. The more I read, the more I know this is where I will send my apple, my words:

THE ORUJ LEARNING CENTER
Post Office Lane
Across from Ministry of Higher Education
Kabul, Afghanistan

Founded in 2003 by a young woman named Sadiqa Basiri, who spent years as a refugee in Pakistan during the Taliban rule, this group "seeks to provide

education for girls in remote regions of Afghanistan.” Using her own money, Basiri started a school for young girls in her home village of Godah in the southeast province of Wardak. Today, four Oruj schools educate some 1,200 girls, many of whom walk more than an hour each way to and from school. Some of these dark-eyed girls look out at me from my computer screen, their smiles framed by bright headscarves, barren mountains in the distance. The website says one of the schools has a pen pal exchange with an elementary school in Townsend, Massachusetts!

Then I read that in 2005, the school in Godah was burned, forcing the students to meet in the open air under the hot sun sitting at charred desks. I unwrap the apple, slip in a ten-dollar bill, all I have in my wallet. I rewrap the tissue paper, tie it with a strand of yarn, and address the box to Sadiqa Basiri, who is listed as the director of the Oruj Learning Center.

Tomorrow, I will take this box to the post office and ship it off to Afghanistan via airmail. I have no idea what the postage will cost. I will pay it. Maybe my piece of fruit will not make it through customs. Perhaps someone will pilfer the box, pocketing the ten-dollar bill and tossing the tissue paper.

But perhaps this Oregon apple will make it. And just maybe, if thousands of people here in Oregon do this same exercise, we can end the endless war in that part of the world using ammunition made solely from the flesh of locally grown fruit and words written on translucent paper.

If such a thing could work, if words and fruit could, in fact, heal international wounds all the way from Oregon to Afghanistan, then the mother and daughter of my mind in their dimly lit kitchen outside Kandahar might soon be standing outside in new sunlight, preparing to celebrate the war’s end with a feast of pomegranate soup, warm bread, and baskets of unwrapped apples from Oregon. The feast will feature decorations of worn tissue paper folded into paper cranes, the fragile wings trembling in the dry breeze, each crane weighted down with a single pebble and holding a story or a poem or a prayer for each guest.

At the end of the feast, the little girl will climb onto a stool, steadied by her mother, and sing a song she learned from a first grader in Lookingglass, Oregon, who sent the lyrics to her wrapped around a Hood River apple. And when the girl is finished singing, the guests will applaud while she works her way through the crowd, excitedly handing each person a pomegranate grown by her uncle, along with a pencil, and a sheet of blank, white tissue paper.

A graduate of the University of Oregon, Gregg Kleiner is a third-generation Oregonian with degrees in journalism and German literature. Kleiner has worked

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as a dairy goat farmer, hotel concierge in Switzerland, freelance journalist, wildlife biologist, carpenter, and technical writer. He has served as a writer-in-residence at Willamette University, Fishtrap, Kootenay School for the Arts, and elsewhere. He lives near the confluence of the Willamette and Marys rivers in Corvallis with his wife Lori and their two children, Eli and Sophia. Where River Turns to Sky, his first novel, was a finalist for both the Oregon Book Award and the Paterson Fiction Prize.

STUDENT: FIRST PLACE

THE SPORT OF KINGS

BY REBECCA OWENS

Tea Basket, a dapple-gray Thoroughbred mare, prances around the paddock next to her handler, a woman in a green raincoat. When she is older, Tea Basket will turn white. Anxious and alert, Tea Basket tosses her head. The woman in the raincoat jerks Tea Basket's lead rope, which is attached to a silver chain that runs underneath her top lip and clips onto a buckle close to her ear. Tea Basket tosses her head again.

“Quittit,” she growls at Tea Basket, “or I’ll hitcha in the face.”

* * *

It is the day of the Portland Meadows Mile, where the winner takes home \$25,000 and a monogrammed horse blanket. Portland Meadows, Oregon’s racing home, is far from the green grass and white rail fences of more prestigious racing venues. Horse racing happens only in the fall and winter, and soupy Oregon mud permeates each race day. In the summer, the best Portland Meadows horses run in Seattle; the horses less likely to win run at smaller tracks throughout Oregon. The future of this second group of horses becomes uncertain as they age and retire from racing.

Tea Basket is not running in the Portland Meadows Mile, she is entered in a \$2,500 claimer, where a horse may be purchased for the claiming price prior to the race. This practice keeps the competition even; horses of the same class compete only with each other. From her history in the *Daily Racing Form* I see dismal descriptions of past races: Turned, no menace. Rushed up, faltered. She’s raced only ten times, winning in April 2006 and coming in second in August 2006. Tea Basket is eight—ancient in racehorse years. She’s running in a race for mares who have not won more than three races in their careers. Tea Basket’s odds neither the best nor worst, Portland Meadows lists her as their fourth favorite choice for this race. Besides worrying about the dangers of galloping in mud, I worry about Tea Basket and her future.

For every potential Seabiscuit there are thousands of Tea Baskets, horses

that rarely finish in the money. Many horses, past their racing prime, will trade owners, stables, and careers and wind up in America's horse slaughter pipeline. In 2006, 104,896 horses were slaughtered in the United States. Horses from around the country are shipped from auctions to feedlots to slaughterhouses, processed into steaks destined for markets in Europe or Japan.

The ride to the slaughterhouse is long and brutal. Horses are crammed into trailers intended for cattle. Since their necks are longer, horses must stand uncomfortably for the duration of their ride—up to twenty-eight hours without rest, food, or water—as deemed humane by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

American horsemeat is marketed overseas as wild and fresh. In the wake of mad cow disease, horsemeat is thought to be safer than beef, as well as leaner. Realistically, the horses slaughtered for meat are domesticated livestock that receive medication on a regular basis stamped with a warning: *Do not use on horses intended for human consumption.*

Solomon Benarroch is one of three track veterinarians at Portland Meadows. With a soft Canadian lilt, he lists three drugs that are part of a racehorse's daily regimen: benamine, for stomach discomfort; Lasix, for lowering blood pressure and preventing bleeding in the lungs; and phenylbutazone, an anti-inflammatory. Benarroch explains that these medications are not given to mask or treat any visible pain but are given far in advance to prevent conditions that would affect the horse's performance.

"Any animal that trains will have mild aches and pains associated with being a professional athlete, and so it would be inhumane to prohibit anti-inflammatory medications," he says.

Benarroch details how the Lasix helps the horses' hearts regulate blood flow during the stress of a race. The heart's proximity to the lungs can allow blood to seep into the lungs during heavy exercise. So gamblers won't be distressed by seeing horses bleeding through the nostrils, Lasix is always administered by a vet prior to a race.

"We get blamed because of the perceived animal cruelty by some people," draws Ben Root, a young Northwestern trainer. "I can promise you that I have horses in the barn that do a whole heckuva lot better in their stall, training four or five times a week, than they do in a pasture with other horses. They love being here. In our barn, they have to perform and they have to win some money to stick around. The ones that don't, we're not going to make them. There's not a lot you can do to make them. They're bred to run, they're trained to run, and most of them like it a lot. They pace the fences when they're not here."

A bell rings, and nine jockeys enter the paddock where the Thoroughbreds are waiting, saddled. Tea Basket's bright green saddle pad contrasts nicely with her dappled coat. The jockeys are hoisted atop their mounts, and they parade to the track. No one seems distracted by the piercing, sideways rain.

"We're wet and cold constantly, so we're always trying to decide when [the horses] are healthy and when they're not," says Ben Root. According to Root, the wet sand surface of Portland Meadow's track is much better in the winter than in the summer. During hotter months, it is the consistency of hard, packed clay and is stressful on ligaments and joints. In the winter, it is comparable to running on ocean sand.

"As far as I know," Root says, "my horses' injury rate is far less in the winter."

* * *

A bell rings, and the announcer's cry of "and they're off!" is barely audible from wind and feedback on his microphone. Tea Basket's final odds: 10-to-1. The approaching hoof beats grow louder, and even from half a track away, I see mud splattering through the air. The small crowd presses the fence, but avoids a lake-sized puddle that borders the winner's circle. The horses are in a tight bunch, and I can't find Tea Basket in the muddy whirlwind. As the race closes in to the finish line, I see that my favorite is not in the top three. Tea Basket finishes second to last and I have just lost two dollars.

* * *

Since racing is such a visible horse sport, and utilizes horses between the ages of two and seven, the industry has been blamed for the surplus of young horses in their prime that find their way to the slaughterhouse. The number of horses bred for the track is high and few produce revenue for their breeders and trainers. The Daily Racing Form, when doing a "Where Are They Now?" of racehorses discovered that Ferdinand, the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner and 1987 Horse of the Year, met his untimely end in a slaughterhouse, as did Exceller, another champion who won his owners over three million dollars.

Like Dr. Benarroch, the American Veterinary Medical Association supports slaughter as a form of humane euthanasia. "Some of the animals, if they do race, if they do have an injury that is career ending and not life threatening—why euthanize the animal? It can go to some other use," says Benarroch. "It's not illegal to eat horses. Personally, would I eat horse? No. Have I eaten horse? No."

Once purchased by a "kill buyer," at auction, horses go to a feedlot. Horses of all ages, genders, and sizes mix together and fight over food and space until their final ride. Upon arrival at the slaughterhouse, they will be crowded into the interior of a building, shocked with electric prods at every refusal as they walk up

a cement ramp into the interior of the building. One by one, the horses are shot in the head with a four-inch nail from a captive bolt gun. Workers often miss and fire a number of times to render the horses unconscious enough to be chained by their legs and hoisted up to have their throats slit. Most Americans know nothing about this process and still use euphemistic terms like “glue factory” and “turned into dog food” to refer to the disposal of horses.

In 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to ban horse slaughter for human consumption. In January 2007, the two slaughterhouses in Texas were closed indefinitely because of the reinstating of a 1949 Texas law prohibiting the sale of horsemeat. Cavel, the remaining American slaughterhouse, stopped processing horses in May 2007, after the state of Illinois voted to ban horse slaughter operations. American Airlines and Delta refused to fly horsemeat to Europe, further hindering the industry. Currently, slaughter bound-horses are shipped to Canada and Mexico, but advocates are pushing for a bill that will close the borders for doomed horses.

But what will happen to 100,000 horses slaughtered each year if there is no slaughter option for horse owners? Benarroch worries that financially struggling owners will take drastic measures to rid themselves of their equine burdens. Horses will be abandoned to starve in pastures. Horses will be shot by inexperienced owners. Horses will be turned out into the high desert grasslands of Eastern Oregon to fend for themselves.

“People need options,” says Benarroch, “the ban on slaughter is a huge mistake.” Many disagree, saying that abuse and neglect will not increase; horses can and will be rehabilitated and retrained. Like shelters for dogs and cats, a growing number of rescues and sanctuaries are stepping up to care for unwanted horses.

Root trains sixty horses a season. A Portland Meadows win brings him around \$4,000; Seattle, \$10,000. Horses below Portland Meadows quality are for sale. Root explains that his retired racehorses sell off the track around \$4,000, but one just re-sold for \$25,000. The higher prices keep the meat buyers away, he implies, preferring not to give his opinion on slaughter practices.

* * *

“Once a horse leaves your possession, you can’t follow it around forever,” says Root, “but we do our best to sell to reputable people. I have no problem giving them away if they have a shot at a good life. The ones we’re most proud to sell are the good-looking slow ones. They’ll have the best chance having a good life.”

But, well-bred Thoroughbreds line the stalls at the monthly Woodburn Auction. On the third Friday of each month, surplus horses in Oregon are run

through the ring for tragically low prices—former athletes and pets sold for \$50 or \$100 to the “kill buyers” who frequent the sale.

* * *

On Father’s Day weekend, horse racing comes to Southern Oregon. Grants Pass Downs occurs on a small track that’s a dirt-bike course the rest of the year. During the third race of the day, a tall chestnut Thoroughbred stumbles and is carried away by the horse ambulance: a dusty Ford truck and trailer painted red and white.

I look through my program to the next race and see Tea Basket’s name. She hasn’t won since I saw her in Portland, but I still bet five dollars for her to win. She stands calmly in the saddling paddock while a groom tightens the girth of the small racing saddle. At nine years old, Tea Basket is the oldest horse in this race by far. Her dark coat is flecked with white.

As the jockeys are hoisted onto their horses and parade away, I secure myself a spot at the finish line; my fingers braid the chain link fence. The bell rings, and the horses are off in a blur of dust and snapping whips. Tea Basket trails the field. Her final odds: six-to-one.

The horses heave their delicate bodies with all the speed they can muster as they sprint to the finish. The crowd is on their feet, cheering. Like all great races, one horse surges through the pack in the final seconds. She changes leads and overtakes the rest of the field, lengths ahead of the competition. It’s Tea Basket, and I have just won twenty dollars.

Rebecca Owen grew up in Southern Oregon. She now lives in Portland, but has been admitted to Minnesota State University’s M.F.A. in Creative Non-Fiction program for next fall. She currently attends Portland State University for writing and Russian language classes, plays the cello in The Oregon Sinfonietta, and is a volunteer at Hytyme Equine Rescue.

OPEN: FIRST PLACE

THE OLD HACKLEMAN PLACE, AN OBITUARY

BY ELLEN WATERSTON

Each summer I take a sentimental journey—head out into the High Desert, turn north out of Brothers, and drive deep into Oregon’s “outback,” deep into the brittle-boned, bake-oven, parched-earth desert, finally reaching a ridge that looks down on an emerald valley, strikingly green running up against the sere yellow hillsides of cheat and bunch grass. I sit down on a rock, a vestige of some millennial volcano or fossilized ocean sand (out here it could be either), my lofty perch putting me eye-to-eye with the red-tailed hawks cruising the updraft, lazily looking for the sage rats that flee a swather in the meadow far below as it cuts the ripe hay, leaving it in neat, parallel windrows. This is my annual pause and reflect, a chance to contemplate my life now and to muse on my past in the rough embrace of that beloved, dusty ranch where I once lived. While I do, I leaf through my new copy of the *Oregon Road and Recreation Atlas*, to look for familiar landmarks, to confirm that the map agrees I am where I think I am. I’m stunned to discover it doesn’t, that the designation of “Hackleman Ranch” has been removed. The longtime map locator for where I lived as a newlywed, carried three children, raised a family, and lost a husband to addiction was gone.

“Where did you say your ranch was again?” a local might ask in conversation. If I give geographic indicators—the South Fork of the Crooked River, north of Buck Creek, between Little and Willow buttes, he looks slightly dissatisfied. You can see his mind trying to home in on the exact location, maybe coming up with an image of a dried-up reservoir on Twelve Mile Flat where he’d camped during the last antelope season. “No, not there exactly.” Maybe picturing the unnatural gash Camp Creek carves through the meadow of crested wheat near Logan Butte. “Close. A few miles more to the west.” Like a searchlight scanning the night sky he offers his best guesses. A few more tries and, visibly disappointed he can’t see, can’t picture in his mind’s eye exactly where I am talking about, he shrugs off the effort. “I think I got a rough idea of where you mean.”

But if I say “the old Hackleman place,” his face lights up with recognition.

He pictures the plunge and curve of the road off the rim, the way the two-story house sits at the head of the valley, its windows squinting into the sun. Neither of us speaks for a bit. I happily indulge myself with memories of the joyful pell-mell of my mornings there, ranch hands at the breakfast table, a baby on my hip, a toddler and ranch dogs underfoot, my stomach swelling with new life, the sizzle of bacon and eggs. He nods slowly, given an excuse to recall what he had heard about the original ranch owners—tiny, tidy Margaret managing the place after her husband, Abe Hackleman, died young. Stories of her brother Claude trapped for a day under a capsized tractor, miraculously surviving but losing a leg. His place used to be shown as the “Coffelt Ranch” on the map, just down the valley from the Hackleman, moored safely inside an embrace of steep rimrocks. Now, I notice, that place name has also been dropped from my new road atlas.

Inheriting the original owner’s name along with a ranch was like being knighted, honored, passed the baton, entrusted with something precious. If their experience had ended badly, you felt it your obligation to right it. If their experience had gone well, you felt an obligation to continue that legacy. If the grass glistened green and the ditches were weed-free and the barn upright when you got there, you wanted to leave it as you found it. Or better, if you could. And it guaranteed that you would inherit lots of anecdotal history about the place where you now lived. Just make mention of the old Hackleman place and you would hear, whether you wanted to or not, had time for it or not, about the sisters-in-law, Margaret and Dorothy, fighting at Margaret’s mailbox with their umbrellas over Margaret’s accusation that Dorothy cut the fence between their places to let her wild-eyed, slack-jawed cattle graze Margaret’s lush grass. Dorothy Hackleman. She never married. “Nobody crazy enough to marry her,” was the position taken by those who knew of her antics. It was said she herded cattle in her car, kept all her money in cash under the seat, died in the Prineville hotel fire.

“The old Hackleman place,” he’ll repeat, coming out of his reverie, interrupting mine. “So you must be that gal from back East. Now I remember. You and your husband are the ones bought from Margaret. Met that crazy son-of-a-bitch husband of yours. Liked him. Damn straight. Helluva cowboy. He got kind of carried away with the drugs and booze. Sure sorry about that.” By the standards (unwritten) of desert etiquette he wasn’t being rude or intrusive, instead just doing his job of updating the lore associated with a specific location. He was acknowledging a more recent chapter that now was part and parcel of the old Hackleman place, was now embodied in that geographic designation and, as much as any natural occurrence, shaped the sharp cleft of the valley, wrote the melody the cottonwoods sang in the wind.

Over time, family ranch names became synonymous with a certain landscape, with a certain lay of the land, attaching themselves to the red shale and bunch grass and wild rye of the place. “Dorothy’s” came to mean apple trees, aspen groves, the slim ankles of the Maury Mountains revealed behind her place, the bold Ponderosa spires visible on the higher elevations. Dorothy’s was always referred to as Dorothy’s. Margaret’s always as the old Hackleman place. Though only a few miles removed from Dorothy’s, how different the landscape: the overgenerous vistas (I could spot guests coming off the ridge and have the bed sheets changed before they pulled up at the door), the lanky, bare-banked South Fork of the Crooked River. No frilly willow collar for this tributary—rather a ragged lightning strike of blue water that reeled back and forth across the breadth of the valley. Cowboys from this part of the desert didn’t much like Dorothy’s end of things, all those narrow, forested draws, snarls of pine, mountain mahogany, and underbrush. They favored the long view, where a person could see for miles, ride at a lope all the daylight hours.

Oceanographer Jacques-Yves Cousteau theorized that the horizon we look at affects how we think. His, a salt water ocean, this, an ocean of sagebrush. The long view. Steady, calm. I have come to believe we are led to the landscape that can teach us what we need to know. In my case, the learning has taken awhile, coming from a tight, stonewalled, and densely wooded New England. I have been slow to learn from this patient, stare-down place where land meets sky halfway. But I am getting there.

* * *

A year or so before her death I learned that Margaret had been placed in a nursing home. The orderly directed me to a frail woman sitting in a wheelchair in the hallway, chin to chest.

“She can’t walk?”

“Oh, she can walk all right. Just won’t. Ornerly, is what she is.”

“Are you her caregiver?”

“Day shift I am.”

“Do you know her, much about her?”

“Not a thing, except that she’s ornerly. *Aren’t you, Margaret!*” she shouted.

I looked over at Margaret, who gave no sign of having heard. I turned back to the nurse, the color rising to my face. “This woman, in case you didn’t know, ran a 100,000-acre ranch all by herself after her husband died, dressed down lazy hired men, cooked for an army, pulled calves, broke horses, survived blizzards. . . .”

“After all that, I can see why she’s so ornerly.” And the nurse was on to other things.

I squatted down in front of Margaret. “Margaret? It’s Ellie.”

“Who are you,” she asked, her left index finger worrying the front of the arm rest.

“Ellie. It’s Ellie. We bought your place, the old Hackleman place, out in the desert. Remember? I wanted to come and say hello.”

She lifted her head slowly, as though it weighed one hundred pounds, as though she had forgotten how to look up and out, all horizons robbed, the long view, the kind she was used to. She studied me through small, cloudy eyes. “The Hackleman.” And for a moment I saw in her gaze a robin’s-egg blue morning on the desert, snuffy horses bucking and twisting with glee, cows nuzzling their newborn, chickens two-legging it to her chant of “Here, chick, chick!” For a moment the smell of sage was bright between us, trumped the stench of urine in this land of TVs, trays, IVs, and shiny linoleum. “The Hackleman,” she repeated.

“The ranch is doing great, Margaret. Thanks to you, all your work.” She nodded. At least I like to think she did, before giving in to abandonment, confusion, and no view or promise of anything. I took her hand. “Are you doing okay?” Her chin was back on her chest. “Margaret. I told the nurse about you. She didn’t know. . . .”

“Who are you?” The question was directed at her lap. “Go away!” she shouted at her knees.

* * *

The desert doesn’t give a fig about ranch names, place names, about me, whether or not I spent time on the South Fork of the Crooked River. The High Desert is absorbed, but not self-absorbed. It dedicates itself to each moment, without any attachment. Humans attach—another word for suffering, according to the Buddhists—attach to things, events, and their meaning, to the chatter in our minds. We attach to how we think our lives are supposed to play out, how we name ourselves. When things take a different turn, we mourn what isn’t, go and sit on ridge-tops, and muse, instead of making the recalibration to what is and the possibility of peace and maybe even joy. The desert instructs that if we spend all our time trying to force our version of things on what is actually taking place, to make our tracks (and namesakes) permanent, we will destroy where we live, literally and metaphorically, as well as our chance at experiencing what is commonly referred to as happiness.

The lesson of the desert lies in the glee of the wobbly legged, see-me-run calf eyed by the chops-licking, cool-hand coyote on the ridge or the breathless abandon of a fragile desert lily blooming into the crushing hailstorm. If the desert has a memory, it is seasonal, magnetic, moon-guided. It does certain things at

certain times of year, or tries. Some years the grass does get green again, water does fill summer-dry creeks during the spring snow melt. Obsidian chips are unearthed with the runoff and sparkle like the bright, black eyes of a newborn. There is watchfulness, acceptance, meditation but no evaluation, ranking, judgment. And it is of no matter whether something took place at the corner of Main and Elm streets or at the old Hackleman place. All that matters is the commitment to go like beautiful, exquisite hell in the time you have. Because in the end, dust to dust. In the end, what we have is the one hundred percent of the right now.

But humans are, well, human. It is what distinguishes us from the calf and coyote and lily. We need something to help bridge this black hole in space we tumble around inside, some ballast for the helium of our existence. For us, perhaps it is in naming things and the history and stories that names, in this case family place names, evoke. Done lightly, it doesn't have to be one more way of peeing on the rocks and corner posts of our existence, one more way of obtaining more meaning or permanence. Done lightly, a name is a benediction, not a stake in the ground. It doesn't guarantee anything, or self-aggrandize the bearer, but simply is a named repository of a certain "species" of experience. Done lightly, naming and cherishing those places can connect us instead of separating us, can sustain rather than destroy.

The old Hackleman place—it runs together like a single word and holds within it human and natural history that spans centuries. Now that appellation is off the map. (The Bureau of Land Management office in Prineville explained ranch names were now being removed if they don't border county roads). As that name fades from view, the associated memory links start to atrophy, the stories evaporate, the place reserved in our hearts for the unique emotional experiences triggered by that name seals shut. The complex interconnectedness of man and the natural world that is held and nourished within the moniker disappears. The High Desert is full of these invisible grave markers. From Stauffer to Fife, from Sartain to Lister. When the language of the old Hackleman Place ceases to be actively spoken, and that reference is dug up years from now in some semantic archaeological exploration, the earnest archaeologist will have no way of retrieving the stories attached to it because all the fragile links to time and people and land and heart will be severed, parked in a wheelchair in a nursing home for forgotten names, and left for dead.

Ellen Waterston's essays, short stories, and poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies. Her memoir, Then There Was No Mountain, was

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selected by The Oregonian as one of the top ten books in 2003. Her chapbook I Am Madagascar won the 2005 Willa Award in poetry. She is the winner of the 2007 Obsidian Prize in Poetry and the author of two children's books, Barney's Joy and Tea at Miss Jean's. She is the founder of the Writing Ranch, which supports writers through seminars and retreats, and is director of the Nature of Words, an annual literary event held in her hometown of Bend. Waterston's collection of poems, Sack of Birds, published by Wordcraft of Oregon, will be released in fall 2008.

2009 NORTHWEST PERSPECTIVES ESSAY CONTEST

Oregon Quarterly's editors encourage writers to submit essays to the 2009 Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest in both the open and student categories. Entries should address ideas that affect the Northwest, should be nonfiction, and should not have been previously published. In the open category, essays should be no longer than 2,000 words. In the student category, open to any student currently enrolled and pursuing a graduate or undergraduate degree at a college or university, essays should be 1,500 words or less.

In the open category, the first-place winner will receive \$750 and publication in *Oregon Quarterly*, the second-place winner will receive \$300, and the third-place winner will receive \$100. In the student category, the first-place winner will receive \$500 and publication in *Oregon Quarterly*, the second-place winner will receive \$200, and the third-place winner will receive \$75.

For contest rules and manuscript submission guidelines, e-mail quarterly@uoregon.edu, see our website, OregonQuarterly.com, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to *Oregon Quarterly* Essay Contest Guidelines, 5228 University of Oregon, Eugene OR 97403-5228. No phone calls, please.

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OregonQuarterly.com

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