October 2020

I returned to the river, waited

patiently impatient for 11 months, peeking through bridge beams to swollen waterways:

winter, endless spring, now

mid-September, I was summoned

black boots sunk in

firmament damp with rebirth

sprigs of smallest flowers sprinkled like wedding bouquet petals tossed across God’s aisle:

this valley cradling a green delighting in water’s mercy

supple and obedient yet rooted.

I walked to where I thought I had been: road rocksteps earth water: placement

All three: I couldn’t wait, couldn’t stop mischievously teasing*:*

*I was the robber! Do you recognize me? Do you remember me?*

1: Cusp

My cut dug deep

Entrance to this valley seen from the road:

Tender footing

Thick toe sucking mud

Wandering the puzzled land.

It was there: framework of submerged soil

Rebounded by time, land rising and enveloping and folding back in and lifting.

I remembered the internment of pain at three feet,

The soreness at two,

And numbness at one.

It could still be seen!

2: Dig

I spent one full month contemplating this land and segmenting it between

Three old white men

FriedJuddMorris. My work – me – did not fit.

I look, I look to water

I looked, I looked to water

I look, I look to water.

My epiphany by page ten: permanence and impermanence.

I initially thought it was about my disappearing. Would any one or any thing notice? Would my dissipated, pixelated presence matter? Would my restless, frenetic, unnoticed body seep into the land? Camouflage my soul into acres of wilderness? After wrestling with land art forefathers, I conceded to Loos’ postulate that it was the simple line that was made that mattered.

I had come from a funeral. Lewis’ father. Lewis is one of my favorite students. I had taught him for two years, every day. Good kid, always upbeat. In first period, he would be the first to come in because he walked to school. This year, he’d plop his backpack to the floor and rest his head in his hands. I wouldn’t talk to him, but I hugged him. Every morning. Six months later his father passed. The passing is harder on the living I think because of the time ahead contemplated. How do you fathom waning presence? How does a boy resurface during swells of high tide?

Lewis’ father was the Pastor of a Lutheran church.

The parking lot was filled. I waited to walk through the double doors. Hundreds of people stood shoulder to shoulder. They were waiting and had been for awhile because conversations paused. Their leader had passed. I had forgotten about leaders. Our Father. There were rows of people wearing white but I was guided to an opening where there was one jovial, grinning woman. Lewis’ mom. She was like a matron saint, thanking me and moving on to the next greeter. I was pointed to a large chapel.

No seats from first glance. I was late. I had hesitated because I didn’t want to go. Who wants to go to a funeral? Who goes alone? Who wants to be pressed with Kingdom Come? But this was Lewis so I went. I was his only teacher present. When I entered the chapel, I could see him near the pulpit with his family. Every pew was filled. I stepped in further to search for a seat. Then Lewis saw me. “Ms. G!,” he cried! His voice carried to the rafters and second floor balcony. The entire congregation turned. I walked to him, he was smiling. I was his normal. I was his routine. This place, this event, this cycle was disorienting and I could see that in his eyes. He could barely speak. I nodded, guided him to his sisters, and turned around. Someone scooted over and made room for me by the wall. It was a place.

I was handed a white paper program when the choir began. I followed along for a half hour but with each psalm wanted to seep into the empty hallows of the pine transcept. So purely I saw pain and love. Resounding loss. When the Lord’s Prayer came to Praise Thee Thy Name and I had to stand and the room felt dizzy and I was alone and I had to go I shouldn’t go I had to go I had to go

I left, pushing past the whirl of white shoulders to

air.

I opened the door and placed my car keys on the kitchen table. No one looked at me. No one spoke. They typed. I stood staring. Twenty seconds of prone naked determination to be seen or heard or recognized. I bolted to my closet to change clothes. I grabbed my boots and shovel and left. Silence allows you to hear your own voice.

I knew it was time. I had been looking for land for a full year. I searched in state parks, considered boarding an airplane to Nevada. I drove ten minutes down a curving road, parked, climbed through bramble, slid my video camera on to the tripod, marked my start by referencing the road and the vanishing point and I started to dig. My mentor has asked me three times how long it took me to dig this piece. I’ve never told her. It’s inconsequential because it was the action, not the length of the action. I was my own compass. I covered 500 feet. I wanted to dissolve. I wanted to present the viewer with the impression that I was disappearing and how come no one would stop me? My entity was released by my own labor, marked by blistered hands and sweat, and absorbed into the land. How come no one could hear me? And how come it didn’t matter? And why was Lewis’ father gone when his presence was valued?

Questions fade on wind. Time, circling like the minnows avoiding the heron, is said to heal wounds. The cuts into the land would be covered come January when the dam’s waters pushed humanity’s sins to the river banks. I held faith in my hand, like the Jewish prayer for soil uttered at the delineation of the Sabbath and the rest of the working days: the land would mend.

I walk through knee high grasses to reach the drying land. When I dug last November, it felt like tundra: dry and cracking like a large garden maze. Greenery seemed frozen. I was the plastic figurine placed in an office terrarium. As I stepped, my feet sank, I jumped quickly across the stream to not get stuck in mud. I used my body like a divination rod, sensing where I had started and trying to align myself between the road and the mountains like I had done a year before.

I know it was here.

I know…

It was here

Was

Was

Here.

I spent an hour looking. All different angles, changing perspectives: hill, road, stream, river bank. I thought I saw it. Almost a mirage? A trace, three feet. Maybe. Maybe? I had fooled myself! Of course I did not see the line.

Had it ever existed?

I hike to the car, weaving my way past my earlier footprints and crushed water bottle artifacts. Start to write. Then stop. I’m sure it’s there. It has to be there. I return, a golden dusk crawling over the mountain now. I take photos. I know I see it. I can sense the evaporated image of my self. And it is separated from the land.

I smile. People who question the spirituality of nature need to spend more time out here. I hold evidence, a digital form of proof, that I dug a line 500 feet.

But now I didn’t. Disbelief.

And my existence is like marionette strings bouncing through God’s fingertips as he brushes against the tree tops.

A boy emerges from the wood, followed by his family. He is boisterously yelling

Freedom! Freedom!

Words that echo across the valley, silencing crickets and passing cars.

Am I free

Am I

free

My mind sees sealed land, no residue of scarring.

I’ve deceived myself

Or

Or

Or

Am

I too

healing

3. Bend

Mud to knees

Reached boulders where mountains slid

To peek:

The third piece was submerged, like a sunken clipper

Waiting to be explored at low tide.

Another season, when land, like skin, hardens.