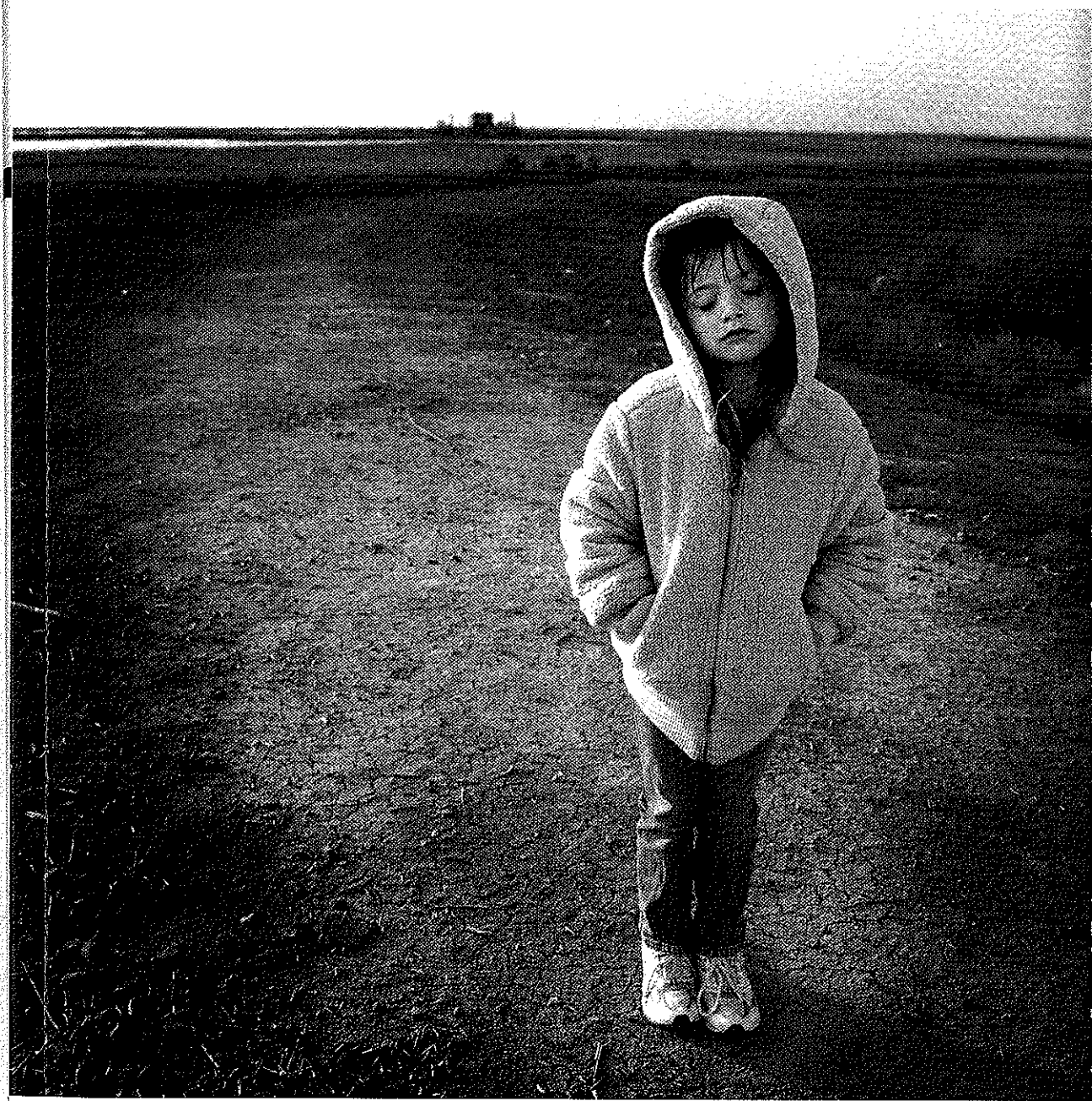
SPRING 2012



Special Feature: *Two-fers/Twofers*

Elizabeth Dodd

Isogloss: Language and Legacy on Mount St. Helens

NOTHING standing aboveground today was here thirty years ago. The ground itself wasn't here. Oh, there was ground, but much of it lay below the surface where my boot soles slip a little in the loose pebbles of pumice. Rolling on loose rock and big ideas, for a moment I lose my sense of balance, glancing first at the sky above, then at the nearby peak of Mount St. Helens as if to stabilize myself. When we stop on the trail and gaze toward Spirit Lake, I try to make sense of things. There—blue water reflecting a bright sky. The bottom of that lake, the one I'm working to bring into focus in binoculars, now lies well above what was the earlier surface. The very idea sounds like an elementary problem in philosophy: if each constituent bit of an individual has changed, can it be said to be itself? I try to remember what I've heard about cell replacement in the human body, but that's no help. Yesterday's scraped skin is already healing; the cartilage in my knees will never regrow.

I've always thought of myself as a person of sedimentary landscapes. Sandstone, limestone. Slow, slow, the accretions of dross, the bodies in seawater, sand under waves. Erosional water clocks; time locked in rocks. From my childhood in Appalachia: coal, the precipitate of rot, the metamorphosis of swamp to fire. There are magmatic intrusions into all this deep-time meditation—the granitic uplift of the Rockies and their alluvial spill back downstream into the wind-plied mat of prairie grass—but for most of my years, I've lived along variations of horizontal accretion. And rock, we all know, is ancient stuff, the mineral evidence that our own soft selves are impermanent fluff like clouds in the atmosphere. When even carbon dating won't do—the ashes we leave at

our campfires and kitchen hearths, the paint laid on cave walls or cliffs—we must turn to the longer-lived radiometric tick of the rocks.

"No vestige of a beginning," wrote James Hutton in *Theory of the Earth* (1788), considering stone and its witness of the great age of this earth; "no prospect of an end."

But this morning, on the mountain's northern flanks, I'm walking through fields first of lupine and then penstemon, broad swaths of purple atop a landscape gray with pumice and tephra, ash and dust. "Purple is the color of early seral stage succession," someone said yesterday, and now I see why it's so. (*Sere* in this context doesn't mean "dry," though I think the silvery leaves of the lupine can look like sage against the pebbly ground, and the wide vista, enlivened with ankle-high bloom, reminds me of the desert southwest. Here, *seral* means one-in-a-series, the way one plant community cedes the ground to the next.) I've been talking with biologists, botanists, geologists; the scientists outnumber the writers at the 2010 Mount St. Helens Field Pulse by more than ten-to-one, so I'm recalibrating my vocabulary, constantly at something of an intellectual jog, trying to keep up. While some of these scientists come to the mountain every summer for their field studies, this organized gathering takes place every five years. This year twelve writers were selected nationally to participate, through a program cosponsored by Oregon State University's Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word; the Andrews Forest Long-Term Ecological Research Program, and the Pacific Northwest Research Station with funding from the U.S. Forest Service. We're here to reflect, but so far I've hardly been able to pause long enough to catch my breath and scrawl some notes. And I love every minute of it.

Photographs of the mountain before the 1980 eruption show old-growth forests, a land of thick duff and humus with a refractive brilliance of snow on the peak above. The alpine lake is like so many that I've slept and cooked by, or jumped into for the brief, shrieking shock of snowmelt-cold water. *Is* in the photographs, *was* on the ground. Some of the others camping here this month remember that earlier world: John, who cut logs for Weyerhaeuser decades ago; Christine, whose family cabin was shaded by the big trees; scientists who knew the pre-blast landscape and have returned throughout their careers.

From my Kansas home, I know some rhythms of ash and sprout. Some days in spring I touch flame to the standing senescence of tallgrass and watch fire encircle the flint-and-limestone hills—slow landswells of sediment—until

the watershed sends up small cyclones of hot air and ash in a headfire with wind at its back. In the wake of the flame, bunch grass and bison dung smoke like tiny geysers. Finger-lengths of charred grass hang in the air. The first time I saw acres of burned-over prairie, I thought of destruction: the black of ashes and the pale rock outcrops like bones, an occasional charred snake still and crisp at my feet. But then, in less than a week, it all began to come back with verdant slivers of new grass just as Walt Whitman said, though he'd never seen it like this, the "uncut hair of graves."

Like photographs by Ansel Adams where the chemistry of black-and-white heightens his "patina of light on rock," the images taken immediately following the eruption are elemental: air and ash, sunlight and pumice. They also remind me of photographs of the Dust Bowl: the spill of ash like dust, half-burying behemoth logging trucks. The great flotation of blast-felled trees drift and shift across Spirit Lake's new surface, a forest transformed to lighter-than-water bones.

But the lake, for all its symbolic and suggestive beauty—sapphire in an asymmetrical setting, ill-shaped eye glaucomaed by those pale drifts of trees—is not what I'm working hardest to consider. What has me always on the verge of exclamation is the *youth* of the stone. Jeanne, our guide, points to a rounded lobe on the mountain's east rim—"The Sugar Bowl," she tells us. It's no more than eleven hundred years old. We can't see the lava domes within the volcano's crater yet, but the entire visible cone—the mountain along whose north flank we're crossing right now, tiny figures in the summer sun—was formed in the last twenty-five hundred years. When I look up, wondering if that's snow blowing from the crater's rim, or dust, or ash, or steam—dust, it turns out, from continuous rockfalls on the inner west rim that send up these signals of gravity's pull—I'm gazing at rock just a few hundred years old.

In the 1970s geologists mapped out the life of Mount St. Helens, a timeline that is utterly historic—contained within the urn of human events. After some four millennia of quiescence, the mountain entered five distinct periods of eruptive activity punctuated by no more than a few centuries of calm. Charcoal caught in the pyroclastic flows yielded specific carbon dating, pinning down each event of char and sear with real precision. I study the graph the geologists produced, a series of dots and dashes representing eruption or calm: it looks like Morse code on the page, spelling out messages.

All week the scientists have spoken of legacies—biological legacies from the as-if-miraculously protected refugia where life survived the scrape and scour

of the volcano's blast: pocket gophers in the Pumice Plain whose subterranean burrows saved them from the searing 1,300-degree heat; isolated stands of trees near Meta Lake where the unexpected shelter of late-lying snow patches held vegetation in frozen stasis; fireweed and its resilient seed. Farther east, at Ghost Lake, we studied the topography's contours, imagining how—somehow—a particular curve in the hill, right there, across the water, sheltered a stand of conifers, though to see them we would have to stand shoulder-high in young willows and clamber over fallen trees four or five feet in girth. We could see the past mapped onto the landscape, the shapes of its stories draped over the earth.

One morning at breakfast there was much discussion of where the research will go in future years. Many of these men (they're mostly men) began their work here in 1980 as graduate students or junior faculty members, and they were now looking for younger scientists to whom they can bequeath their data to continue long-term studies in the next generation. Two in particular, Joe and Don, had been squiring around a younger scholar, Lisa. They study the effect of tephra falls on the surrounding old-growth forest's understory: the damage to moss and herbs, the flexibility with which the plants responded to their changed environment. First came the pummeling and heat of the eruption itself. Then, for years, they studied the varying depositional depth: a finger-width of ash here, a cement-like crust of snowmelt and tephra there. Talking about their research over burned camp coffee in the chilly morning, Joe appeared wren-like in his animation, while Don spoke with such understated calm that I could sometimes hardly hear him.

Language is a legacy, too, a data set that stretches back through generations, linking each breathing, speaking moment in the sunlit camp with—yes—millennia of shared thoughts, the communal embers culture kindles in the surrounding dark. And that legacy is what I have brought to the table, quite literally: with a notebook in hand bearing a few lines of a poem, a list of vocabulary I'm still trying to learn.

As the 2010 summer opened, volcanic eruptions in Iceland stilled European and some American air travel, reminding those of us who live at a distance from such places that ice and fire do meet and clash. I did a little reading about the rift valley where tectonic plates are moving apart at an infinitesimal rate of three millimeters per year—on one side Eurasia, on the other the Americas. In the basin of this slow divergence, the Icelandic transplants from Scandinavia gathered together to knit their social world. At what is now called the *Þingvellir*, Germanic-speaking people came for the *Alþingi*, the parliament

for making laws and meting out justice. Twelve hundred years ago, people would step up on the *Lögberg*, the orator's rock. I wonder about *vellir*—in Old Norse *völlir* meant an untilled field or a plain, so I think of vale and valley, *wold* and *wald*. Along these lines of linguistic thought, the forest is a thing untilled. I think of *Thing*—it meant court or legal principle as well as object, a collection of concepts housed in both Old Frisian and Anglo-Saxon nouns.

This etymology seems to reach far back, through that intelligent window of Latin's *tempus*, to some Indo-European root where time and place converge.

It's an etymology I feel, somehow, tenderly close to. Haploid plus haploid, I am a partial sum of my parents' genetic bequest. Pale skin, the legacy of mostly Northern European forebears, obscures our family's Native American legacy—a bloodline that has lost contact with the cultures it once propelled. Mine is an uncertain inheritance—but isn't almost everyone's? I like to think about language and landscape, laid out across the planet's infinitesimally slow movement.

Mountains are the strongholds of wilderness, spikes of untamable terrain. To the east of Mount St. Helens, Mount Adams lifts its snow-covered dome, and between them these mountains suspend the green drape of the conifer canopy, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and the Mount Adams Wilderness. I imagine a cornucopia of Germanic wild-words spilling across the rumpled topography, phonemes sliding and pooling around the rocks and in the draws: *weald, wald, wold, wilde*. All these words speak from somewhere in the past when the forests of Europe were not all felled. Amid thickets of etymology and the aging morphemes' mold and duff, Celtic *gwher* reaches even farther back to make connection with Latin's *ferus*. *Wild* and *fierce*, beyond the safety and civility of the city-state.

But *this* mountain is younger even than the presence of cities on the planet by as much as a thousand years.

Those cities, of course, were in another world—ancient Mesopotamia, a land of rivers and desert, birthplace of both agriculture and writing. Despite modernity's links to that ancient cradle, one of the first tongues of those cities, Sumerian, seems to have been an isolate, unrelated to Indo-European and Semitic languages. Unlike both of these families, Sumerian made no root distinction between nouns and verbs. *Dug*, the people would have said, meaning both speak and speech, with syntax or additional syllables indicating the sound's contextual role. If today we were in the company of Sumerians, hiking over the

Pumice Plain or, to the east, the Plains of Abraham, they'd say *kur,* pointing toward the mountain. Two mountains? *Kur-kur,* repetition signaling the plural. Another tongue, called Harappan by archaeologists, remains only on inscribed fragments of pottery—illegible now along the banks of the Indus River. "Several respected experts have denied every possibility of deciphering the Indus script," writes Asko Parpola, the leading expert on ancient writing from the Indus Valley. "None of the crucial keys that have opened other unknown scripts is available. . . . Even the affinity of the Harappan language and the type of writing system represented by the Indus script are much debated." The Harappan script is extinct, a linguistic dead end.

Etymology's pathway takes one back beyond horizons into landscapes familiar or unknown. The Indo-European roots of English trace through the family tree something like five thousand years to pastoral people who spoke of axes and wheels and horses and crops—and, of course, mothers and fathers—with words that linguists have plotted out in illustrative tables. I think the work of comparative grammar, the painstaking comparisons of lexicon and phoneme, word-hoard and sound-scape, is a little like the lesson in plant surveying I saw this week beside Meta Lake.

Mark, the botanist, laid down a meter-square frame of white PVC pipe. "Let's bust out a micro," he said. (This means, it seems, to survey a microplot—one of several such the researchers examine, Mark explained.)

Pearly everlasting, *Anaphalis margaritacea*: 2 percent coverage. Woodland strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*: 2.5 percent coverage. Fireweed: .5 percent coverage. Quickly, the scientists estimated these proportions—plotting the plants against the totality of soil. Why, I wanted to ask, did they never switch into Latin for fireweed—*Epilobium angustifolium*? Maybe there's a special, filial fondness for fireweed—the first plant to be found punching its resilient, primrosey stems up through the scorched waste of tephra and ash. Maybe Mark just likes the sound of the name in isolation. I wondered whether the next step, back at the lab, might be population genetics, assessing the invisible-to-me diversity within each species counted in the researchers' string of beads. How many parent plants, or their seeds, made it through the blast? How many have been brought in this year, or last, by migrating birds?

But Mark broke off his explanation as he stepped closer to consult with his students about their rough estimates, and I didn't interrupt.

When we reach the end of the trail on the Pumice Plain, we're still hundreds of feet below Loowit Falls. I can't feel its spray; from here, I can no longer see

the stretch marks and rock dust of the glacier itself. We're caught, now, in the continuous present.

It's lunchtime. From our backpacks we pull out sandwiches and fruit. Jeanne tells us about a climber who fell to his death in the crater last February. Simmons takes photographs of the falls, of Spirit Lake, of the group of us posed on the rocks. Jolie and Derek are talking about something that must be interesting, but for the moment I am not listening. I look over the erosional edge where Loowit Creek carves its way down—down through the blast debris, down to the horizontal sweep of the Pumice Plain.

When I look down, everything in sight is young enough to be my own child.

This is such a bizarre notion, I keep trying to catch hold of it for better examination. I pick up pebbles of pumice, cup my hands around them. I toss a rock the size of a volleyball into the air. Around us, stretching from what the map calls, remarkably, "The Breach" (where the mountain burst open with what must have been a terrifying roar) to as far as the southeast shore of Spirit Lake and the upper North Fork of the Toutle River, lies a generation of stone, six square miles of it. Coursing against bare rock and debris, the water plunges from the glacier above, where ice has circled the young lava domes in a collar of white, blue, and gray—a rough herringbone pattern I scan with binoculars, watching for movement. But there isn't any—only dust rising from those intermittent rockfalls. And since in fact I have no children, this moment of maternal metaphor-morphosis is doubly hypothetical: as if, if, if . . .

When rock takes on such an intimate, human scale, slipping free from the stern cloak of eons and ages, you have to pay attention, take note. Maybe this is no big deal for people who live in actively volcanic regions. Maybe it only seems especially significant to me because of my own meditative attention to time and to place, the way I've been trying to inscribe some understanding of my own brief existence onto the mental map of everywhere I've traveled recently. Maybe it's because so often I find the very idea of the near future almost mind-numbing with promised disappearance: landscapes likely will morph and torque in ways that even the assiduous work of climate change researchers can't fully envision—landscapes I love and others that I'll never glimpse. In the relative climatic calm, the bright temporal meadow that has been the Holocene—our geologic era, in which most of the cultural precursors that most deeply feed us were tilled—the familiar biomes became home to the world's peoples and languages.

My thoughts are clumping together. Landscape change, climate change. Biotic community, linguistic community. They are distinctly different things, I know, but I feel they're all converging on the open space beneath this mountain, here between the ash and spray of the waterfall and the rumpled hummocks—clumps of hills—where the breached volcano's load fetched up: Loowit.

The name on the map appears differently in a story told by an elderly Cowlitz tribal leader and collected in *Salish Myths and Legends: One People's Stories* (2008). *Lawelatla*, the storyteller calls the peak, instead of Loowit, and he says she is a wife of *Takhoma*, Mount Rainier. In his tale it's not a human person but that mythic figure, Coyote, who observes the mountain's eruption, and yet the power of the volcanic peak is utterly familiar. "Once in the long ago time Coyote was going up the Seqiku, the Toutle River, and he heard a great rumbling. He perked up his ear and realized that it was Lawelatla. She was very angry. Soon he heard another great rumbling coming from another direction, and he realized that it was Takhoma, who was also very angry. They were having a husband and wife argument, and he was in between them. Soon he saw Lawelatla blow her top and knock off the head of Takhoma."

A few years ago, on a trail above the tree line, I stood beside my brother as he pointed to the visible high peaks and told me their names in Salish. I remember them vaguely: *Pahtu* was Mount Adams. *Takhoma*, Mount Rainier. *Wyeast* was Mount Hood. If he mentioned Lawelatla or Loowit—Mount St. Helens, the exploding mountain—the syllables didn't catch hold in my memory. Then, I gazed breathless from beneath my backpack's weight at the landscape of enormous trees and sudden white peaks. Now, I wonder about the way language must have spread out across that enlivened topography, pooling into distinct dialects separated, like watersheds, by slopes or ridges. Around Mount St. Helens, two languages embraced the terrain: Cowlitz, a Salish tongue, and Yakama, a Sahaptin language related to Nez Perce. A person living along the Cowlitz River in previous centuries might have spoken both, and the stories of the landscape would reflect both land and language, teller and tale.

What about this place name, Loowit? While preparing for the Pulse, I found the tale that calls the mountain Lawelatla, not Loowit. I thought maybe Loowit was an Anglo-American corruption of the Salish, and launched into months of lexical obsession, interlibrary loan, and attempts to speak a smidgen of Salish and Yakama. I looked first at a dictionary including several dialects of the Salish language, Lushootseed. But the words for different sorts of mountain—hill, ridge, snow-covered peak—are nothing remotely like the

fluid sounds of that exploding mountain, Loowit, and I could find no words for *erupt* or *explode*. For the Coeur d'Alene language, another Salish tongue from farther east, I found an introductory guide with words in simple sentences like "*Hui, tmiyiple'ent khwe'lish*" ("Please, describe the mountain") and "*Uuqwn khwa ni'syolalqw*" ("The forest is green"), but the accompanying cassette tape—recorded, said the label on the plastic case, in 1975—was torn in two. Now no one can listen for the pronunciation of these unfamiliar sound clusters spelled out in the text: *Eelish*, mountain. *E'l'lish*, hill.

So then I turned to Yakama. Like Salish, it's an agglutinating language, meaning that morphemes, little units of sound-as-meaning, are clumped together into longer words. Virginia Beavert, an elderly woman whose non-Anglo name is Tuxámshish, includes in her Sahaptin dictionary a verb, *láwilat*, meaning "to smoke or steam; to erupt." Reading farther, I learned that *-hlá* is something called an agentive suffix, implying personhood when it's attached as the last syllable to a place name. Loowit; Lawelatla.

But things get even better than that. Many words beginning with *lá-* are related to fire: *lámkw* is a verb (it smokes), *lámkwt* is the noun (smoke or steam). *Láp'ulp'ul* are hot ashes—you can see in the word the principle of repetition to make the plural. (Really, when would one see a single ash? Rarely, rarely, I think, and so *p'ulp'ul* would slip easily off the tongue.) And so these conjugations and inflections illuminate a grammar that isn't positional but rather phonemic—the tiny dental spit of a *t* seems to indicate noun-itude, while the curve of the lips into *w* hints at verbation. In a CD recording you can still hear Tuxámshish, the lexicographer herself, speaking: "*lapaashki lap'ulp'ul*"—literally, "are cooling off, the hot ashes." Then, *láwilaylak* (shine into)—she says that word, too, an easier mouthful of sound to imitate.

Of course, not all words beginning with *lá-* have to do with fire or smoke. What am I to make of *látk'i* (to look) or *látk'in* (to look at)? Do the eyes blaze with attention, I wonder, or is this some fluke of sound that signifies nothing? *Lux* (flame) and *luxlux* (shiny or gleaming)—I think these must carry the spark of an echo from *lá-*, but the typographical mirror they hold up to Latin's *lux* is nothing other than accident, and across this planet's great, capacious curve I am almost certainly the only soul—this very moment in summer—typing these musings and smiling at the coincidence.

Our second day here, three of us followed a doctoral student named Elise into the bright sunlight of the Pumice Plain. She monitors the nesting birds who've chosen this place to try to raise a brood or two. Elise is tiny—shorter than my

five feet, four inches—but she walks with speed and stamina. And she was a terrific guide, preparing us each time for what we would see, pointing to each intimate, hidden point on the landscape where birds of the air are raising their still-flightless young.

In a low draw we tried to see the nest holding two nighthawk chicks, but it was nearly invisible, just a scrape in the grass and pumice stones. Nighthawks I know from prairie country, where they startle up from the fence lines when I ride past on my bicycle, their white wing patches like late-winter snow somehow shaded in the crooked angle of their flight. Like a killdeer, the mother flapped conspicuously (*Oh, I'm hurt, look here, look here*) while we tried to ignore her and find the stone-still chicks in the patchy shade cast by the willow. Elise said this is the first year they've found nesting nighthawks, and so far neither weasel nor raven has threatened the chicks. Another prairie bird whose eggs we saw my field guide calls "a pale bird of open ground"—the horned lark. I was constantly surprised to find these open-ground species where just thirty years ago an old-growth forest held its sheltering canopy high overhead. Elise keeps careful tally of each new arrival, recording the changes as they come. How long, I wondered, until the succession of plant life ceases to be open? When will alder and willow, paintbrush and penstemon, shrink in the shade of the trees' return? With her help we found willow flycatchers, hidden so well we had to hold a compact mirror above the nest and look at their reflection. Three days old, Elise said they were, and I looked at the fine line of down along their tiny spines, their two beak-heavy heads laid side by side facing in the same direction.

In the open sun the pebbles of pumice were laced with strawberry plants. Beside a wet seep we saw liverwort and moss. And Derek found a whole patch of tiny ripe berries, so we ate, looping ourselves, if only briefly, into the nutrient web. Later, Elise paused by Willow Springs to show us a clear bend of water in the stream that's otherwise cloudy with volcano sediment, and we all filled our bottles and drank. No filter necessary, said Elise. The water was that pure.

I've eaten thimbleberry, salmonberry, strawberry. I've drunk those cold waters from Willow Springs and marked the spot on my map. I've plunged into Ghost Lake, swum out from the shore and turned onto my back to stare up at the cloudless sky, then gazed toward the nearby slopes of fallen trees, each whitened trunk left where it slammed down in the eruption's shock wave. I've dangled a bright red empty stuff sack from a conifer's new growth, luring hummingbirds that look—with mounting frustration, I imagine—at the vivid,

nectarless bloom. And I've put walnut-sized pumice chunks in my pocket, feeling dust rub against fabric with each step I take.

In the afternoon—cloudy this time, the sky like shades of granite—we hike the trail down from Windy Ridge to Spirit Lake to see the drifting rafts of trees that were the old-growth forest Christine remembers. From the ridge top they resemble jags of ice, windblown against the northeast shore. I can imagine them fusing together like the chunks of ice I walked across decades ago in Ohio, when the H cking River froze over and the town shut down in cold and snow. But when I'm at the water's edge, they're unmistakable as separate forms, sticks slender as my arm floating among larger boles of whole trees.

I find small pieces of pumice and set them on the lake water. How long, I wonder, will each one float? There's almost no wind, but they drift and bob. And when I look out over the water, I see green springing from some of the rafting logs. Some seem to be saplings of conifers, others are alders or the ubiquitous willows; they're all rooted in the horizontal bedding of the blasted trunks. I can't help but think of Whitman again—"uttering joyous leaves of dark green." I remember an interesting snippet of data from yesterday's lecture: in this heart of the blast zone, 70 percent of the new willows are female—slender branches and resilient leaves. Each is the size of a campfire, burning green against the white trunk in today's gray light. Now it's Shakespeare who joins my thoughts: "Sing all a green willow. . . . Sing willow, willow, willow." I sit for more than an hour, listening to what isn't silence, gazing at color as subtle as skin.

I tell myself the story of the blast. There once was a wave three hundred feet high—as high as the tallest, oldest tree rooted beside the blue water. It felled the forest; the downed logs clotted, at first, like platelets forming a scab. When the first helicopters arrived, carrying researchers or rescuers—I'm not sure which—they couldn't even find the lake because ash had settled on the logs atop the water, so that everything looked the same: a dull crust only hours or days old created a facsimile desert on a poisoned lake. Only later did the water bleed through, the wind-drift logs rafting against one shore or another.

So how long until my pumice stones sink? The experiment will have to continue without me, dark settling on the lake while nobody watches, the stars afloat in the night sky. It's time to go.

Only as I'm leaving do I see the ashes.

The size of a campfire's footprint, I think—not a scatter at all. As if someone had sat there, sinking down into a lap's width of ash. For it's obvi-

ously someone, the bits and shards of bone visible among the finer dust. I've stumbled onto someone's memorial, somebody's open-air grave. Roses, six of them (white and yellow), weighted by a stone—not the ubiquitous pumice, I realize, but something much older, denser, though I don't pick it up for closer inspection. And here is the other rock, a stool where someone sat down for a last moment together. I sit down, too.

Na-nix. In the Bella Coola language, the same word means to mourn for somebody and to forget. Oh, willow, willow, willow. Think of the brevity inherent in speech. The full lungs empty out, the sounds flow through the air until the pattern's reverberations dissipate. And yet we're left too with the lithics of language, the phonemic chips and shards that generations of speakers leave behind in the living system that we call their mother tongue.

Genetically speaking, I'm a dead end. My brother, too, has made the decision: he will not father children. Throughout these months in what I think of as the end of my own biologic summer, turning toward fall, I've been thinking—even when trying not to—of what it means to take oneself out of the gene pool, to forfeit, maybe, that as-if-lettered particularity in the material world's animate utterance.

Last year I scraped the inside of my cheek with a swab and sent it off for analysis to see where my bloodline might have traveled in the long hike out of Africa. The story line delivered seemed far less specific than I would have liked. Sometime between twenty-five and sixteen thousand years ago, my mitochondrial haplogroup lived in the untilled plains and forests that stretched from the Black Sea to the Baltic—the heartland of the Indo-European languages, although the people themselves were there far longer, probably, than the bits of diction we can winnow from prehistory's litter. The brief discussion of my genetic history never mentioned the Americas or my indigenous ancestry.

Language and landscape: the dance with referentiality and abstraction, the thoughts we shape about ourselves and the shadows we cast briefly on the ground. I sometimes find it hard to imagine how old that dance must be, and how many voices must have lifted in song. Is it a line dance, maybe, and my role is now to fall back with the group, hands helping to clap out the rhythm while the head couple twirl once more and move along the line? Have I spun myself in an ecstatic solo, wind-dancing on some overlook above a reflective lake? Singing along all this time, humming when I don't know any of the words, have I been dancing with mountains, dancing with stone?