

Retrospective of Life in a Small Town

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The following are photographs from my perspective as an insider/outsider in a rural midwestern village. I would characterise Selma as a place of traditional sex roles, conservative politics, racial/ethnic bigotry, Christian fundamentalism, and a devastated economy. I would also characterise Selma as the place which has most strongly formed my identity, since I lived there for 19 years among my entire extended family.

I am queer—which to me has just as much to do with my childhood responses to, and relationships with landscape, religion, working people, and my family, as it does with having crushes on girls in high school. And, just as Carol Pope sings, I believe “you can’t go back,” but I feel a strong connection to that place, even when my connections with family may be tenuous and strained.

Regardless of what I gained or lost personally by finding myself in a different world, the living truth remains: I am from that place where floods happen, where people lose their farms, where tent revivals still take place on the banks of the Des Moines every summer. For the most part, however, folks just try to feed themselves and their families. And although this piece follows my personal trek of alienation, attempts to gain perspective, and resistance, I also am remembering those who allowed me to grow.

signs of love:



inspiration point



loveseat (detail), circa 1991



tracks: evidence



vanishing point

FAMILY TREE last winter i came home for the last time and i hung grandma’s laundry out on the line by the time i got done laughing it was frozen stiff i remember now she’s waiting in the kitchen with fried onions and soup it’s been seven long years since i flew the coop i covered my tracks now i can’t find my way back home... METAPHORS for what might have been my family tree’s got an elephant’s skin where on earth did the cottonwoods go with their soft white seeds does anyone know? funny how my blood’s so distant now light years between us no one asking how all i feel is that my family’s not a family to me but who

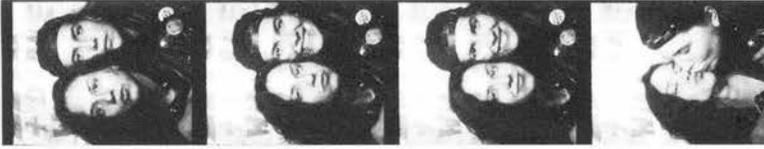
are we? my daddy's retired my mama works too much but it helps keep her thoughts far out of touch she forwards my mail with a scribbled note: "it's really hectic" is all she wrote SO i took a little tour thru the greyghost town got a village full of spirits of the trees torn down from the banks of a river i called my own grew from the seeds we all had sown. mid-afternoon and not much light long cinder alleys and no one in sight i yell from the schoolhouse there is no sound—just the barks of dogs from miles around...

TOO much history—this is what my friend donna said to summarize why old lovers never quite make it when they try again, or the reason given to me by marie-ann for leaving paris for toronto while we were sweating in the sauna together. too much history in paris, she had said. i've always wondered how much history was too much, and what it felt like, probably because i now feel as though i've had a lifetime deficit. when i left home i tried to disappear but i forgot to leave a trail to find my way back...this talk of history reminds me of martin luther king jr.'s freedom speech, we were robbed of our names, robbed of our language, robbed of our culture, robbed of our families, our history...my back shivers in response, yes that is right, mr. king. i feel remorse, but the only pity i feel is for myself as i begin to confess that perhaps my history was not robbed from me. more likely, more pathetically, had i given it away? too much, too little, gave it away...which was it?



"People have never had a problem disposing of the past when it gets too difficult. Flesh will burn, photos will burn, and memory, what is that? The imperfect ramblings of fools who will not see the need to forget. And if we can't dispose of it we can alter it. The dead don't shout. There is a certain seductiveness about what is dead. It will retain all those admirable qualities of life with none of that tiresome messiness associated with live things. Crap and complaints and the need for affection. You can auction it, museum it, collect it. It's much safer to be a collector of curios, because if you are curious, you have to sit and sit and see what happens. You have to wait on the beach until it gets cold, and you have to invest in a glass-bottomed boat, which is more expensive than a fishing rod, and puts you in the path of the elements. The curious are always in some danger. If you are curious you might never come home, like all the men who now live with the mermaids at the bottom of the sea."

- Jeanette Winterson,
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit



love?

1) i go off on my own until i am lost, until i am drunk with who was i yesterday? amnesia. sun comes up, it's wednesday afternoon, i'm in love; only thing is i can't remember with whom. en francais, en anglais, to be in love (with)—a transitive verb, and i cannot think who it is. my love has no one object, or if so, i've forgotten her name and gained some kind of emotional tattoo...but i am surely lost, and i am feeling alive and in love. i know i'll be loved again, i know i'll love again, i can feel it, and this makes all the difference in the world. i am in love just knowing that, i am giddy and giggling uncontrollably, running into people and things, i am both mute and loud, aggressive and gentle.

fidelity

2) look into my eyes, see my insides twist and shout with an abundance of surging blood and crimson brilliance lying just under the skin and fat...the muscle and bone is waiting for you to come and feed. look: my back is your table, my hair your napkin. every woman has the vase with a single bud, but have you seen the nasturtiums explode from every pore on my breasts? you'll be eating your first course for hours, my love. hello, i'll be your waitress for the night, and i intend to make you very...hungry.

3) confusion, surprise, these i am sure of. i hope to see these twins as my friends who know me better than Trust. Trust is not to be trusted, i trust so easily—but the breath of my intuition blows like a fall breeze through the leaves in the form of a secret, a whispered question. the leaves respond, and make their choice, as evidenced by the rich burgundy kaleidoscope pattern below. few things are certain, but always the wind will breathe, always the leaves will respond. everything else is negotiable.

4) most of us are mere apprentices to love, we play in its aesthetic attraction. like trying on vintage clothing—drawn to its charm, lured by its mystique, but caring nothing of its history, its meaning, even its function. we look at ourselves in the mirror, and we are amused. we pose: we hang it back on the rack. instead we'll wear something more expensive, yet mass-produced: the fibres ball up and unravel sooner, stains are hard to remove, the fabric rips like a page from your diary. yes, we choose to dress ourselves in the insidiously flawed, knowing that “wearing it out” comes conveniently quick, and gives a surefire excuse to go shopping once again.

trust



desire?

Deanna Bickford is finishing her Masters in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, and identifies with all kinds of queer-socialist-anarchist-ecologist tendencies.

