Losing the Meadow

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Neither my father nor my mother knew
the names of trees
where I was born
what is that
I asked and my father and mother did not
hear they did not look where I pointed

—W.S. Merwin, “Native Trees”

Iowa, a cool spring morning with the windows open. The robins are saying cheer up, cheer up. Mourning doves coo, and crows swoop down, cawing as they pick through a bag of garbage that one of them has dragged from the dumpster and spread across the driveway.

The lawn outside these windows is edged by a row of untended trees and shrubs that provide cover for all these creatures, including the rabbits who creep out in twos and threes in the morning and scuttle back under the tangle of vines at night when my headlights swing around back to park in the underground garage.

Until recently, on the other side of this grove, a creek trickled through steep wooded banks, and beyond that was a large pasture with rolling slopes and an unpainted barn. As many as six horses swished their tails in that meadow during the day as I worked. Sometimes when I got stuck, I would put down my book and watch the horses grazing, watch their long necks bend to the grass, the muscle of their withers flexing to the rhythm of chewing. Sometimes on snowy days, they would cluster on the windbreak side of the pale barn and nuzzle each other, their manes riffling in the breeze.

This morning, if only for the company of the birds, I’m grateful for the presence of these few remaining trees—a mixture of ash and basswoods with a leafy understory of wild plums and mulberries that produce fruit that will fall to the ground and rot by the end of summer.

Whoever landscaped this complex when it was built in the sixties must have loved fruit and flowering trees. Along this short street, Pinon Drive, are dwarf apples, crab apples, and redbuds. They ring the recreation area at the end of the cul-de-sac in perfect intervals even as the small pool and tennis court grow more paint-chipped and decrepit.

From my second-story windows, for the last nine years, I have watched these trees in every season—greening, blooming, or going to yellows and oranges in the fall. One winter morning after an ice storm that paralyzed all movement in the city for three days, I emerged from the dark underground garage in my car only to be blinded by bright prisms of sunlight reflecting through the limbs of these trees like ice-glazed sculptures.

Farther in the distance, beyond where the horses grazed was once a small pond, not a swimming hole, but enough to provide a shimmering mirage like a slim coin of silver from the distance—enough to give the frogs something to sing about at night. Closer, standing
tall in the mid-distance, there remains a dead tree whose stripped-smooth trunk and limbs jut into the sky in bone-white silhouette in both sunlight and moonlight.

The pasture that the horses grazed in was described as a meadow in the newspaper ad that I answered nine years ago—*apartment overlooking a meadow*. I was going through a divorce, and even though my husband and I agreed that none of it would be unpleasant (we’d never fought, and we would not start now), making the call affirmed some reality I hadn’t yet faced. Perhaps it was only the encouragement of the word “meadow” that allowed my fingers to dial the number.

The receptionist at the management company transferred me to Ed. In Ames, Iowa, a small college town where trade in apartments is big business, most of the listings are held by a handful of companies, and Ed’s was one of them. He said he had several apartments that fit that description, and he would drive me around to look at them later that morning. He suggested that I drop my car at the Kum & Go. (This is really the name that someone decided to give a convenience store chain in Iowa, and I see no reason to conceal it.)

I suppose I should have been cautious about leaving my car at a gas station and driving off with a complete stranger. It’s the kind of red-flag detail that causes you to shake your head in disbelief after a woman’s disappearance. I don’t imagine that I was thinking clearly during that time, on the verge of ending a fourteen-year marriage. Besides, it is a small college town, and Ed was the owner of the company.

On the phone, he told me to look for a yellow Cadillac, which, my god, it was—not canary yellow, but closer to banana pudding. The car looked a mile long idling in front of the Kum & Go. Ed got out to shake my hand, looking pleasantly surprised as if he’d already sized me up as a suitable tenant—the girl who sought a meadow apartment.

He was tall, with a forward list in his walk—in his sixties with a full head of silver white hair and a deep golf tan. His shoes were white, and he wore a polo shirt that matched his car. We introduced ourselves and jumped into the Caddy, heading south on South Dakota Avenue toward the edge of town where there were still rumored to be meadows.

It’s only several blocks from the Kum & Go to Pinon Drive where the rental properties were located, but in that time Ed managed to get a lot out of me: that I didn’t have children so I’d be living alone; that I’d wanted children but wasn’t able to have them; that my husband was ten years younger than me; and that I was leaving the marriage, in part, because I wanted him to have a chance at having a family of his own.

Maybe it’s the Midwest, maybe it’s Iowa, but people manage to get the critical details pretty quickly. Having moved here in 1991 from North Dakota, where people are no less curious, but more reticent about asking probing questions, I’d learned by then to just let the information flow out of me. I figure, Iowans are going to construct a story about where you’re from and what you’re doing here whether they get the true facts or not, so you might as well let them start with good information.

The questions seemed reasonable in the context of property management, trying to assess how many bedrooms and bathrooms I would need, how much square footage. I confessed to Ed that I’d originally imagined moving to a farmhouse somewhere in the country. I’d had a recurring dream about sitting on a porch in a rocking chair and watching
the sun rise directly out of an open field, although I didn’t tell Ed that.

I had already answered several ads for farmhouses that had been discouraging—tiny kitchens and closets, unfortunate linoleum choices, floor-to-ceiling fake wood paneling, and the troubling mustiness in the air that signals the occupation of mice. One woman I called wouldn’t even agree to show me the small guesthouse she’d advertised that sat on her property. She lived in the main house on the acreage and would only consider renting to a young man, she told me, who could shovel her walk and driveways in the winter. As a forty-something woman who’d just been declared officially barren, I was already feeling superfluous. I didn’t even attempt making the argument that I was a born-and-bred farm girl who could shovel as well as any man.

I learned from Ed that he owned much of this open land on the southwest side of town which included patches of development, a rough-wood condo complex with a curved driveway, a brick hospice with a gazebo and a massive green lawn. These buildings were surrounded by postage-stamp fields of corn and soybeans that gave way to woods that descended into the small ravine of the creek and to the open fields spreading to the highway.

I’d always liked the rustic feel of this side of town, the way it blended to open country. The lone red barn on South Dakota Avenue that threw a tall shadow could easily be imagined as an artist’s studio. I don’t know when or how Ed came into possession of this land, but it had been a smart move—the city had grown right into his hands.

As we navigated the intersection of South Dakota and Mortensen in the yellow Caddy, Ed said, “There’s a farmhouse for you to rent.”

The property on the corner that he pointed to seemed to be disassembling before our eyes—grass worn thin, overgrown bushes, and a half-standing fence with broken posts. In the back of the lot, abandoned vehicles rusted where they had died or had been pushed, and unpainted outbuildings tilted at angles.

I estimated that this was the original farmstead to which all of this land had once belonged, and I wondered about the woman who had planted those lilac bushes. How would she feel if she could see her yard in such disarray, with the city spreading around her front door? Ed told me that the property had just become available again. If I was interested, we could stop and look at the farmhouse after he’d shown me the apartments.

We turned left onto Pinon Drive, passing by look-alike townhouses with attached garages all in rows. Ed parked the car and showed me inside one, but the bedrooms seemed too small, the ceilings too low. That icky feeling came over me, the one I imagined I would feel each morning waking up alone in this place.

“Let’s keep going,” I said, remembering the promised meadow apartment. We got back in the car and drove to the cul-de-sac at the end of Pinon. These two large buildings, he explained as we parked, had been designed for older tenants downsizing from family homes. These are known as “professional” buildings in college towns. My neighbors would be retirees, college professors, medical interns, and carefully screened graduate students—all people who were unlikely to party until four a.m. on the rare occasion when Iowa State University won a football game.

We passed through the foyer which featured a cathedral ceiling and transom windows above the doorway, a wraparound staircase that led to the second floor, and a chandelier
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hanging high in the center. It must have been a grand building when it was new. But now
the handrails were loose, the carpet was fraying on the edge of each step, and the scuffed
walls were painted a toothpaste mint green with a floral pastel wainscot.

Still I could feel the solidity of the place, no trampoline effect on the floors when you
walked. And the walls were thick, no stereo or TV sounds, or the screaming of children
leaking from behind doorways. I was thinking, I'm really doing this, when we reached the
three-bedroom apartment on the end of the hallway.

The door unlocked to an open kitchen, a dining room and living room larger than any
apartment I'd ever imagined trying to furnish before. I started to imagine it. Ed asked me if
maybe this was too much space for one person. I told him that I had hoped to someday
adopt a child—which I did—but I also knew that I had plenty of books that I'd never been
able to put on shelves.

How does one block out plans for a new life? How much space is enough to imagine
growing into, and when does having too much space risk feeling cavernous and lonely?

The master bedroom had large corner windows, allowing a view in two directions, like
a hideaway perch overlooking the world. Ed showed me the walk-in closet, the mirrored
vanity area, the second bathroom, all of which I admired for his benefit.

But what I remember most about the master bedroom was the way the sun streamed in
the northeast window and that when I looked out the window for the first time I saw the
horses grazing in the rolling green pasture, and I had the immediate thought, I could work in
a place like this.

Several minutes passed as I stood looking, trying to decide what to do. Signing a lease
would be an irrevocable act. Maybe Ed left me alone for this time. I lose track of him here
in my memory, and only become aware of him several moments later watching me from the
doorway. And when I turn to notice him, I see myself for a second through his eyes—a
fragile woman, sad, standing in the sunlight.

"How much is the rent for this apartment?" I asked. The figures had risen with each
place he had shown me, and this was clearly the finale. Maybe I imagined it, but I thought I
could see that he wanted me to have the place, perhaps for selfish reasons—I'd be a steady
tenant—but I also believe that he could see how badly I needed a place like this.

He hesitated, then looked down at the beige carpet and said, well, normally this
apartment would rent for around $900, but he could tell that I'd live lightly on the place,
so I could have it for $700, if I promised not to tell anyone what I was paying.

Cool evening as I finish this, early fall. The trees serve as a gathering spot for the deafening
insect symphony—the cicadas, the crickets, the grasshoppers—as well as the tree frogs and
the occasional barking dog. I can pick out most of these sounds as they rise and fall, al­
though I must admit that I'm not certain what sound grasshoppers make. And every so
often I hear a slow ticking sound that rises through the mix made by a creature that I'm
also not able to identify.

It's a complex layering, the acoustic evidence of things out there that I've always found
comforting during the long mild autumns in Iowa. On these nights, I like to sleep with my
windows open, listening to these pleasant sounds without being awoken by the window-
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rattling car stereos of someone coming home at two a.m., or the whining escalation of someone’s motorcycle racing down South Dakota Avenue at four a.m., or the garbage truck with its back up beeper coming at six a.m.

So this is the quintessence of early fall to me—the night sounds of insects, the wind in the trees, the semi-cool breeze coming in the window, the three-tone wail of the train moving through town. And what’s that other sound in the distance? Ah yes, the ever present hum of someone’s air conditioning unit.

I will tell you something strange. When I moved to Iowa in 1991, I thought there were altogether too many trees. They blocked my view of the sky. I could never see the moon! That’s when I realized I was irrevocably marked by North Dakota, a place of flat unbroken horizons. In the Dakotas we only have naked clusters of trees in the middle of an agricultural field, the last vestiges of where a farmhouse once stood. We have woodland corridors along the occasional lakes and rivers, volunteer Russian olives in the ditches, and mature groves surrounding farmhouses.

So this has made me a lifelong stranger to trees. As a North Dakotan, I’ve only known a few woodland species personally enough to speak of them with any certainty—the lilacs that marked the edge of my grandmother’s backyard; the giant cottonwoods by the chicken coop on the edge of our farm that let out loose white puffs in the spring; and the chokecherries in the orchard bordering our family land that we picked fruit from in late summer for canning, the sweet grit of the cherries as we popped them in our mouths on the way home even with the light dust from the gravel road still on them.

During my time in Iowa, I have come to know a Kentucky coffee tree that sits outside my office window in Ross Hall. Even before I knew its name, I sensed that my tree must be something of a celebrity. I would look out my office window and see forestry professors with groups of students circling the tree, stroking its bark, pointing to its roots, examining the folds of its leaves as students jotted down things in notebooks.

I became so curious about my tree that I searched and found its name on a forestry department website that catalogs and identifies significant trees on the ISU campus. But I’m only able to retain the name because I’ve come to know it so intimately over the years through the frame of my third floor window—spending ten- to twelve-hour days working in my office, always looking up from my desk to find it, taking comfort in the silhouette of its branches against the backdrop of the sky as it changed from soft blue to indigo.

Many afternoons, I’ve watched crows perch in the Kentucky coffee tree’s branches in artful and ominous configurations, as they peer in on me, strange creature toiling away inside the lighted window, then caw and reel off into the sky to join the clusters of crows that gather in Hitchcockian numbers to blacken the treetops around our campus.

I come from generations of people who can tell you the names of birds, flowers, grasses, and trees, but I did not seem to inherit this talent. I try, I try. I study the particulars—needle-like or broadleaf; compound or simple leaf; types of bark and trunks—but the names still fall out of my head, even as I struggle to memorize them. In order to remember a tree, it seems, I must know it over a period of time, through seasons, in my eyes, hands, and blood.

Yet even as an itinerant musician and artist who has spent her time out in the world as a renter and not an owner of property, it appears I have unconsciously followed my pas-
toral leanings. If I list the apartments that I’ve lived in since leaving the farm for college in 1974, I can see that I’ve always chosen high places with large windows overlooking green spaces. I’ve looked for mature trees in the distance, apartments that stand on the undeveloped edges of cities—the view that most closely resembles the prospect from my childhood bedroom on the farm.

And as a renter and not an owner, I have experienced again and again the helplessness of losing these green expanses. Maybe a year or two of this bliss, then the first troubling signs appear. Maybe the horses disappear one day, as mine did. Hard to know if they were really gone when I last checked or just grazing on the far end of the pasture. Sometimes on walks you could approach them on the avenue side, and they would lean across the chain link fence, sniff the air with their dilated nostrils, and allow you to stroke the velvet of their broad smooth foreheads.

So maybe out of curiosity, I decide to venture into the meadow along the creek and that’s when I notice the wire stakes with the orange flags on them, stuck into the ground by the gas and power companies to guide the excavators who are coming in to do the digging. Could the yellow earthmovers be far behind? Following that are the incessant sounds of backhoes and front loaders, and then the construction sounds—the backing up of dump trucks and later the hammering of the carpenters that starts so early and goes so late.

Then one day I look out the window and notice that I can’t see the thin blue wafer of the pond in the far distance anymore, which causes me to wonder where the frogs had to go. And that night I notice, instead, the bright funnel of a streetlight shining down where the pond used to be. Then I check again the next morning and finally see the thin band of pavement that now runs through the space where the pond used to be, as well as the red realtor signs posted at neat intervals marking the lots available for purchase, and, yes, already there is a power walker wearing a pink headband making her way along the freshly plumbed-in street.

Soon, through the cover of leaves, I will begin to identify the wood frames of large houses taking shape, and it finally occurs to me to climb the fence despite the “No Trespassing” sign that’s been posted. And when I do, I see the meadow—or the pasture, or whatever we decided to call it—entirely gone, as is the creek. And I can’t help but wonder what they could possibly have done with the creek. But it’s gone, as are the dozens of trees that hugged and followed its contours, and now several backyards are being leveled out in fresh black dirt where the deep roots ran, where the trickle of water and the sharp rocks and steep inclines of the creek used to be.

It’s hard to know if all this began after Ed died in 2004, because I didn’t learn about Ed’s death until a year later, and I only realized it when his son, Ed Jr., sold my building to another management company, who sold it to another management company, all of whom introduced themselves in cheerful flyers left in the crack of my door announcing that they were thrilled to take possession of my lease and eager to please me, the corporate addresses of each successive owner coming from places farther and farther away from Ames, Iowa—Des Moines, Chicago, Newark.

Long before that, the older couples on the first floor began to die off or go to nursing homes never to be heard from again, and the math professor moved back to Italy, and the medical intern became a general practitioner and moved his small family to a house. And
then it was just mostly me here in the building with a few nice couples and a changing cast of undergraduates who had big dangerous dogs and who did bonehead things like set their balconies on fire or drag their garbage to the dumpster through the hallways and not bother to clean up the rotten eggs or cat litter that streamed from the broken bags. And then there were the pot smells in the hallways and the empty beer cans on the lawn.

Maybe it was that one summer I went to Greece to research olive groves that I came back to find that the city had passed a referendum to fund a new middle school. It’s likely I had voted for it. I’d done artists-in-the-schools work at the middle school and knew the current facility to be a horrendous tinder-box where nobody could ever possibly learn anything. Certainly I wouldn’t begrudge the middle-schoolers a new building. But did they have to build the thing on the most beautiful eastern rolling edge of my meadow?

I should have remembered that I was a renter and not an owner all along. And I suppose I should have known from the very beginning that it was all business and not personal that first day with Ed in the Caddy, when we came back around the corner after Ed showed me my apartment, and he confessed that he was evicting the current tenants of the farmhouse he offered me on the corner because they hadn’t paid their rent in six months.

We drove by the intersection and watched them, sitting forlornly in the front yard of the farmhouse on their tumbling piles of belongings like the Joads waiting for a truck to come and pick them up. And when Ed asked if I wanted to stop and look inside the farmhouse, I told him to keep going because I couldn’t bear to face someone else’s misfortune on top of my own sadness.

So I took the spacious three-bedroom apartment and bought enough furniture to fill it, including a humongous princess-and-pea king-sized bed which I still haven’t slept on all the parts of, even after nine years, and I made a studio overlooking the meadow where I managed to create a few good things, and I didn’t adopt a child, but instead created a library in the smallest bedroom, which for a long time I wouldn’t refer to as a library, but insisted on calling it “the room where I keep my books,” until I accepted that it was just easier to call it the library.

And my husband became my ex-husband but helped me move every stick and stitch of my belongings into the new place, because we agreed we would never allow ourselves to have that icky feeling upon parting. And when I started unpacking my books and putting them on my crappy old particleboard bookshelves, he said, No, I can’t let you do that, and he went out and bought me beautiful new bookshelves to put into my new library, which is one of the millions of reasons he remains my best friend in the world even today.

And it was all hard to face—being alone those first months, where each minute of the weekend stretched on in infinite ticks of uncountable seconds, and the rooms were silent, and no phone rang. I moved into the apartment in August of 2001, and in September of that awful year, I was driving to the eastern part of Iowa for an event when the news broke about the towers falling in New York, and I circled back home and got into my big bed in that room where all the light comes in, and I watched CNN for hours, wondering if the world would ever be the same.

And in those rooms I faced the reality that I’d never have children, and I came to realize that I had never really mourned the death of my father, so I sat on my off-white couch that
first fall and cried for hours in shoulder-rocking spasms at the end of each day after coming home from teaching, and only the horses and the meadow bore witness.

I will acknowledge that in very recent history there must have been a farm where my own apartment building sits, and before that there was a probably an oak savanna or a mixed grass prairie, all of which were destroyed so that I could look at the meadow from these high windows. It seems we name things after what was destroyed to create them, which is why no Ioway tribe survives in Iowa, and also why we have treeless apartment complexes with names like Whispering Pines and Shady Acres, and housing developments with names like Hickory Grove Farms or Creekside Crossing, which is what they named the new strip of mini-mansions outside my windows.

The lone farmhouse and the falling-down outbuildings on the corner of South Dakota and Mortensen were razed soon after I moved into the neighborhood, and almost overnight three complexes of multi-story apartment buildings cropped up in the spot. So where once a single family lived rather inefficiently, now hundreds of people make their home with windows overlooking Highway 30 and the cornfields that stretch beyond it.

A big gas station lights up the opposite corner now—another Kum & Go—with a sports bar and a hot wings place behind it. And there are more apartment complexes beyond that with swimming pools and man-made ponds with squirting fountains in the center and even a workout place and a gourmet coffee shop, along with new bike paths that connect everything where the undeveloped acres used to be.

I’m not naive. I know that life rushes forward and nothing stays put for very long. But for a time, there was a creek and an untended meadow behind my apartment where horses grazed. I faced the saddest days of my life in those rooms, and when it got really bad, worse than I ever imagined it would be, the birches and the willows lifted up their green arms and comforted me.