

MAP OF HOME

Every map is a fiction.

—D. J. WALDIE

I used to spend hours poring over the state road map, perplexed by the way towns and cities were annotated. Here was a small pink dot called Hebron, its name typed neatly in a little sans serif font. I moved my finger across light yellow paper, then across a wavy blue line until it touched the next pink dot. This one was called DeMotte. This was where I lived. In the pink dot called DeMotte in the map of Indiana. But our address was Hebron, Indiana, and not DeMotte, Indiana. Knowing little of governance and less of mapping, I rested my eyes curiously on the yellow paper—what was between the two pink-dot towns? A vast patch of nothing? How could we reside in both towns, yet seemingly in neither at the same time? Where did one town start and the other end? Was there an unnamed part between the two that was up for grabs? I wanted to conquer that yellow land and write myself all over it: this part, this swath of land right here, belongs to a girl.

I obsessed about this empty space. I turned it round and round in my head, mulling over its possibility. At school, I was learning about the laws of physics—a primary introduction to an invisible governance that was as old as time. I became aware of moving forward in time, bound by the laws of the universe. This, too, I obsessed about. It changed the way I saw everything around me, including Corey,

the boy next door whose bedroom window faced mine. He moved mechanically, rhythmically, through time and space. At eight years old, I had imagined mapping myself onto his skin, clinging to the idea of a future between me and my eleven-year-old friend that did not exist. I followed him closer than his own shadow. Little girl, second skin. He did not mind.

The yellow space on the map could be an isolated system, I thought, enclosed and separate with a nuclear interior—like a thermodynamic system, where all the energy is contained and nothing gets out. I was well acquainted with the sensation of exterior isolation and interior energy, of the power in that juxtaposition. We lived many miles away from most of the kids I went to school with in DeMotte. I lacked a true set of friends, our home far from the subdivisions where kids from school played together. Instead, I took to books and art, to sketching still life pictures with charcoal and singing loudly in the rain. Though I watched Corey in his window as if he were a television show, he was a real friend, materializing beyond the frame as hands that gripped mine and swung me in circles, as feet to kick a ball to, as ears to listen to me talk and sing. As proof that we existed beyond our windows. But mostly, solitary pursuits replaced social ones and a cacophony of ideas swirled inside me, while DeMotte's social hubbub remained distant and encamped within a town I didn't feel much a part of. Further isolation stemmed from the fact that the town center, several miles from where our houses were located, was comprised of the affluent Dutch, who had settled and built homes, farms, and churches there many decades earlier. The DeMotte Dutch were a close-knit bunch: tall and blond with smart little noses, nearly interchangeable last names, and conservative values and politics. In this town, you were either Dutch or you weren't. Other back-grounds weren't given attention.

Most of the kids we lived near were poorer than us. Some of

them were the kind of poor that amounted to dirty hands, hunger, unwashed and ill-fitting clothes, and no coats at the school bus stop in the thick of winter. Many were the kind of kids who either bullied or were bullied by others. My brother, Marcus, and I were well fed and clean clothed. While our food wasn't fancy, it was abundant. A measurable amount of parental love was available to us. Our clothes were from the clearance racks at Montgomery Ward, which my mother felt was an extravagance—it was more than she'd had, and certainly more than my father had had. And it wasn't much to complain about. The clothes were usually one season removed from fashionable, but they were new and our very own. Despite these differences, all of us living by the river were the kind of kids who sometimes had money for the ice cream truck and sometimes did not. We were the kind of kids who sometimes looked on, frozen in our tracks as the truck rolled by, a plea hanging between us as a slowed-down, creaking version of "Home on the Range" cut through the air.

Something about our neighborhood had caused my parents to set physical boundaries of roaming allowance that did not extend much farther than our backyard. The road, barely wide enough for two cars to pass, had no sidewalks, and there were many drunks, as we called them, who often drove recklessly down our shared street. If you were playing on the road and a car came, you didn't simply step aside. You ran out of the way. There were also near vagabonds, supposedly unsavory individuals who stayed a spell in one of the makeshift pole barns or partially dilapidated trailers and then moved on. These were factors in our boundaries, though I didn't yet know how or why.

The area to which we were restricted had once formed the bed of the Kankakee River and often flooded. Every few years, when the human-made part of the river swelled and reclaimed its old course, our home became an island. Periods of flood became epic

adventures, because our house was constructed in the exact place where the river ought to have been. Where it once *had* been. Floods gave us the opportunity to go back to a time when sustenance came from the land, as did fear and injury. We learned from our neighbors, who were active Revolutionary War reenactors and rendezvousers, how to suck the thin pink trills of grapevine when we were thirsty. We practiced spearing fish on gigantic carp, the mud-veined fish that seemed to rise up from the bloated overflow like Loch Ness monsters, with the point of an arrow. Leaning over the edge of a canoe, we would look the mythical beasts right in the eye. Then, *wham*, we hit them straight through the spine, justifying their deaths by the fact that they were inedible and served literally no useful purpose on Earth.

One day I asked my mother about the space between the pink dots. "Look at the map. Dot here. Dot there. No middle."

What was in the yellow? Could we go there and find out?

My mother was a good sport, letting my child's mind discover these small curiosities according to its own will. We got into the car and drove past two houses. The first was Corey's house. The second house belonged to my aunt Carleen, who was my mother's younger sister. We turned right, passing the River, the bar and restaurant that sat fifteen feet from the riverbank. I would someday get a job there—a rite of passage in this neighborhood that I looked forward to. We then drove across the bridge that spanned the actual river, the mighty Kankakee, as we moved along the path I'd traced on the map with my finger. Then we stopped. I'd been holding my breath.

We hadn't driven far at all.

"This is it," she said. "This is the part between the two towns."

Through the back window of our van, I could still see our house. On the other side of our newly constructed fence, smoke rose from a narrow pipe that stuck out of the top of Wild Bill's workshop, where he was undoubtedly tinkering with a metal forge, clanking

red-hot iron with a small mallet, a tobacco pipe hanging from his lower lip and a green beret set askew on the top of his graying head. We thought he resembled a renegade Bilbo Baggins, the adopted uncle of all the neighborhood kids reincarnated from our favorite story, from which he read to us in his cabin as we chewed homemade sourdough pretzels by the fire. Another trail of smoke seeped from the top of his tepee, which he lived in a few months of the year, though he had a perfectly functional house. From where I sat with my mother, I could also see Penny's rusted mailbox, felled and flattened by the side of the road, left there in protest against the man who'd run out on her or as a reminder of him and how she would never take him back again. Brightly colored azaleas bloomed around its metal carcass, growing up and around its remaining parts, demanding that passersby take note of its irony. A little farther in the distance, a blue tarp extended from the front of Earl's trailer, rigged up on steel poles staked into the ground. The trailer's door hung wide open.

The laws of thermodynamics, I would learn, deal with the concept of entropy—a measure of a system's disorder and uncertainty. Entropy cannot decrease within any isolated system. It only shifts, like all matter, changing shape and colliding with itself. Diluting, diffusing, evaporating, and folding back onto itself. In our perfect history, junk particles from the big bang eventually become Lake Michigan, the Sahara, a field of tulips in Holland. What wonder is the order in disorder. What beauty. What certainty. A more specific definition of entropy considers the energy within the closed thermodynamic system. This energy serves as a yardstick for the disorder, where entropy is directly proportional to the energy's heat and inversely proportional to its temperature. In our closed system, the river was the heat and the water table was the thermometer. It was a system that seemed desperate to break the boundaries of physics.

"We live in the middle?" I asked my mother.

metaphorical entropy

“Technically,” she said. “Our address is in one town, and our phone number is in the other. Pay taxes to one, and go to school in the other. It’s like not living in either town. Or like living in both at once.”

“So nobody wants us.”

I looked around, stunned by my new perspective. Most of what I saw was familiar—driveways and houses I’d seen before. These were signs of home, but I felt spat out like bad milk. And yet, I was looking at it in a new way—seeing it for the first time with the scrutiny of a stranger. It occurred to me then that this part of the map was unlike either of the pink-dotted towns. Children I went to school with did not live like us, shooting handmade weapons into the woods and wearing deerskin costumes. They were not learning Morse code or the words to Revolutionary War folk songs.

*Soldier, soldier won't you marry me,
With your musket, fife and drum?
Oh, no, sweet maid I cannot marry ye,
For I have no coat to put on.*

In the songs we sang, I always pictured myself as the girl waiting to be married off to a soldier or a carpenter or a sailor like some certain destiny, packaged, but unaddressed, for a future delivery date. When I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I never knew how to answer. “What do you think I should be?” I would reply.

When I sketched with charcoal, I anticipated the sensation of blurring the crisp black lines into something softer, more fluid and wet-washed. When I painted with watercolors, I most often favored textures that were salt spattered or misted with water. I was engaged in an ongoing corruption of medium, and every undertaking was an exercise in thinning and thickening substances of expression until they were perfectly muddled. “Here is the fringe edge where elements meet and realms mingle, where time and eternity spatter each other with foam,” Annie Dillard writes in *Holy the*

Firm. Dillard has an intimate relationship with land that shifts, with water that rises around people who can only watch and try to understand what they’re seeing. Fringe investigation was the science of my neighborhood and of my art.

Along the banks of the Kankakee, where water met the land and foam blurred the line between solid and liquid states, Wild Bill lived in a tepee. *But why?* I wondered. And from that *why*, other *whys* flowed. Why did the ice cream truck driver look relieved when we shrugged our shoulders as he drove by? Why had the river been moved? Why had anyone built a whole neighborhood in an old riverbed that flooded half the time and stunk like rot and heat all the time? More important, why did they stay there? Why did some people seem a part of the land more than others, more entwined with it?

Filled with this new view, I knew that I was neither sort, but instead some half-breed spawn of both worlds and alien to both. A bookish fishergirl who longed for the social opportunities of a cookie-cutter subdivision. When I looked more closely, I saw that Penny’s mailbox might well have been blue at one time. One day in the distant past, Penny and her man had bought a little house with a nice blue mailbox. They had planted flowers that emerged newly green from the soil each April. Once, hope had filled the emptied valley of the river’s bends.

“You shouldn’t look at it that way,” my mother said, and drove the car a little farther down the road. I looked out the back window at the river behind us, the river that, over time, would thrill me, claim me, disappoint me, and save me. It wasn’t a wavy blue line like its cartographic representation, but brown with muddy water that ran quickly westward. It gave me the sense that the water was the only thing that would ever get out of this place. And it was in a hurry to do so.

We were isolated by our coordinates, by the *where* of us. Where

we lived was rural, in the broadest and most specific senses. Isolation was a measure of that fact. Our address was Rural Route 101. The in-between space on the map was a real place that had been there all along. Not unclaimed, not up for grabs, but completely inhabited by the parts of the two towns that were beyond “town limits.” Address over here, phone number over there, missing from the map. Energy contained. Separate. Because we were beyond limits, isolated and insular, rural and unclaimed, we became unassuming outlaws of sorts. We were both on the map and off it at the same time. We were the entropy of the two towns, the junk particles of the nucleus with its own status. But even so, there was a pulse that connected us, a bloodline of sorts. In our in-between-towns land, population forty, there were nights of whiskey-fueled fire-side revel, when everyone sang sea shanties and knuckled wash-board rhythms beneath full moons. There were archery lessons and tomahawk throws and jewelry-making lessons. There were gourd paintings and firecrackers and canoe races. There was a band of kids who swung from the thick vines that draped our very own Sherwood Forest.

Description of Indiana

Decades later, I would find that it's in places like these that I am truly comfortable—in the square half inch of yellow paper between pink dots. The in between here and there, where damp moss grows and people sometimes live in tepees. Where a boy turns his bedroom light on and off to send an SOS signal across a small patch of grass to a lone girl who sits on a rock with a book and cannot save anyone. Where hologram children play forever and eat electric blue Popsicles and never wash their hands and sometimes spear fish with arrows. Where things stay a little bit broken. On maps, you notice, they never put a line. Between countries and states and counties, yes, but not in the yellow space between bright pink dots. But sometimes the yellow is green. Sometimes it is white. Sometimes it

is brown river water, rising above the flat line of the land to prop up the identity of a tiny village.

When I came back to this spot twenty years later to see what had become of the riverbed, to see what ghosts would rise from its eroded banks, it was all still there. The road had a new name, the one-way arrow of time expanding here as it was anywhere else on Earth, but the defining entropy of the place was the same. There was no aftermath through which I could proceed as story, as I'd hoped for—no obvious tale waiting to be told. There was only stasis and the recapitulation of a contained present tense, moving toward a future that bears scars of the past. I glimpsed Earl, older now than ever, still adding scrap-made structures that outcropped around his aging trailer. Corey's parents remained, though their little white dog was no longer yapping on the front steps and Corey himself was in a prison hours away from the river. The blue house with the accidental magenta door, where I'd lived for fourteen years, was still there, the way my father had left it when we moved. The people, the who of the place, still bore the unmistakable marks of rural folk—that telltale dichotomy of endurance and neglect, active and passive states happening at once.

The who of a place

If there was a fixed point from which every other happening here flowed, it was when the river was recoured, its snaking dregs drawn taut in the 1800s. Beyond that, there is no single human crisis, no single lens, from which this place can be understood. “We begin with the trouble,” Kyle Minor writes in *Praying Drunk*, “but where does the trouble begin?” In my story, the uncle does not blow his brains out. He threatens to, but it never happens. And where is the story in that? “Nothing is going to happen in this book,” writes Dillard. “There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time.” Violence clips the corners of my past, and language sets me free.

Violence in the language

But there is more than that. Flowers bloom and drown. Dogs

die. A friend kills. The sediment is dredged for valuable metals. The water rises and recedes. Everyone hangs on, waiting for a god to deliver a life preserver or else not. A girl becomes a woman, nearly normal. Not quite. The girl, our girl, makes it out of the riverbed, but she carries traces of brown water in her lungs and sediment in her pockets so she knows the river is still there, despite all her moving on.

AN ARSENAL OF SAND

Notice the sand which is somehow both inside you and beneath you.

—LORRAIN DORAN, *Phrasebook for the Pleiades*

On Sundays during the summer of the 1991 flood, men and their cigarette smoke circled our card table, which my father had made himself with wood left over from the ongoing remodeling he did to our home. Sundays were roll-your-owns; hand-carved pipes stuffed with tobacco; squishy, pocket-sized packs of Camels; piles of Jays potato chips on the green felt tabletop next to piles of quarters and dollar bills; and cans of bronze-rimmed Strohs that my dad let me sip when my mom wasn't watching.

School was about to let out. Unlike the more haphazard schedule the summer months would bring, the rhythms of my school-year days began and ended with my neighbor, Corey. In the morning, we met at the bus stop and he let me get on first. At night, after his bedroom light went out, I put his wristwatch to my ear and let its quiet tick-tock lull me to sleep. He had given it to me one night when he had stayed over. I'd been scared about a storm and held his hand to my cheek as I lay in bed. "You can have it," he said as I fell asleep. When the water began to rise at the start of the summer, I started wearing it all day.

I always wanted a reason for the floods. I thought that they might be a sign from God, that perhaps we were suffering a punishment for the sins of our forebears or for sins of our own. During a flood, the

end of times seemed to barrel toward our small enclave of riverfolk, while land beyond the floodplain was unaffected. During a third-grade field trip, I had learned about the over 800 Potawatomi who in 1839 had been marched at gunpoint from their land in northern Indiana southwest to Kansas. Our class had visited the nearby historic marshes containing the ruined ancient burial grounds of the Potawatomi and their lucrative trapping territory, and I came to believe that times of flood were the Potawatomi's revenge. President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 had instituted the right of the American government to negotiate land exchanges with Native American groups via treaties. Under the act, lands held east of the Mississippi by Native American tribes could be confiscated in exchange for undisclosed lands in the "west," sight unseen. Tribes that refused to negotiate, which included the Potawatomi under the leadership of the unwavering Chief Menominee, were often forcefully removed. The Potawatomi's violent extraction from their homeland in the Kankakee Marsh, though by comparison it was not as massive or as deadly as the more widely noted Cherokee Trail of Tears, was known as the Trail of Death.

The farmers had been gauging heavy rains for a week. They then made phone calls to those who lived in the old riverbed, or along the new river's banks, depending on your terminology, to report on the probability of a flood. That gave the residents two or three days to prepare for the water, which the farmers had determined would surely rise. After the necessary phone calls were made, the news burning up the wires, two dozen anxious men—my usually gregarious neighbors—set their faces to stone and hauled load after load of sandbags to dam the weak banks of the young river. Their sons and daughters—including Marcus and I—watched from their porches. Someday, we would be the ones to haul the sand. We needed to know how it was done.

The men labored silently in a long line, passing the weighty bags from man to man to man like a crew of sailors loading a ship with provisions. The last man in the line threw the bag on top of the last bag until the stack was man-high. They prepared the riverbed itself first, adding height and breadth to the banks; then the crew filled the eroded hollows between the houses of the little riverside hamlet that we called home. After that was done, they helped each other secure their own homes until every home was ready to receive the rising water.

Most folks could see the river from their porches. Everyone could smell it. When a flood was coming, an ancient stench of mud and fish and scum hung in the air—the scent of the river amplified, swollen and ready to burst. The flood itself, though, the water's tipping point, always arrived in the middle of the night.

When this one came, our phone rang around midnight on Friday. My dad put on his waders and sloshed over to his pickup truck. He pulled two more sandbags from the bed of the truck and hoisted one onto each shoulder, looking like Atlas in the moonlight to my wide eyes, and then he put them on top of the line of bags near our front door. For good measure, I guessed. Though I had the feeling that if the water got that high, sandbags wouldn't much matter.

In a question-and-answer session after reading aloud his story "On the San Juan," Ron Carlson addressed the topic of water shortage in the American Southwest in a way that only a writer can—with personification: "You get the sense that the heat wants to hurt you." It was all he really needed to say. He was talking about the violence of nature. Violence like the hot, slapping hand of the sun. Violence like cracked earth and scorched vegetation, of prolonged thirst and hunger. I thought of the Kankakee and its opposite problem. I thought of the river that taunted us each year as it crept up and spilled over its human-made boundaries

Relation to Water
"Violence of Nature"
San Juan R. v. Kankakee R.

landscape shapes
"inherent" fears

toward our homes. I thought of drowning, a swifter aggression than drought.

A flood was a call to the strongest and ablest among our tribe of riverfolk, but it never stopped anything important. Not school, not work. Definitely not poker games.

The beer had been stocked early that week. On Saturday, families tended their properties for most of the day. They secured their porch furniture with chains and ropes, waiting out the rise, periodically lowering the end of a two-by-four into the water to see how much it had gained on them. Half inch by half inch. On Sunday, a couple of the men came to our house by canoe and tied it to the handrail with a mud-caked yellow rope. The other men trekked through the marsh in waist-high rubber waders, hauled themselves over the sandbag barricade, and stripped down to their clothes on the porch, which had become a peninsula, surrounded by the river's water. Once inside the house, they pulled apples and boxes of raisins from their overall pockets for me and my brother, smiling as if nothing were out of the ordinary. They handed over the treats on their way to the card table, while my mom hung their waders on metal hooks and lay towels on the linoleum beneath them to catch the brown water. The men took their seats, the same ones they hunkered into each week. My dad sat right across from Uncle Tom; Slims sat to my dad's left, Slick to his right. They began to smoke.

"Shoo-ee, young lady. You see how high that water is?" Uncle Tom said through his near-toothless smile, rubbing his flannel-covered chest with grease-stained hands. He was from a little piece down the road. Though he wasn't my real uncle, he'd have made a good one. Kind as you'd want. Much kinder than Ralph, who was cold and brusque with children. A drinker like my pops, but a different type.

Slick leaned toward me and held out his palm. "Blow on my quarter." A fella called Slick had gotten such a moniker for good reason.

I blew. That was for luck. *I hope Slick does good, but I hope Daddy does better*, I thought, my fingers crossed under my leg.

Then it was one up, one down. Bring in, ante up. The dull clank of quarters kept time over the game as the men flicked the edges of their cards with dirty fingernails and hummed to themselves. Five different tunes were going at once, none of them a recognizable melody.

I chomped apple after apple down to the core while I watched the game, juice and seeds running down my chin. My dad let me sit on his lap and watch them play, even though by his word I was too old for it at nine years old, so long as I promised not to mention which cards I saw and kept a straight face. What you couldn't do when you were playing poker was conflate the language or give yourself away. You couldn't bid when you meant to call. You couldn't fake anything. Even if you were bluffing, you had to mean it, believe it yourself. And I got real good at bluffing. Even better than my dad. In the mirror, I learned not to trust my own expressions. I could look like nothing, when I felt everything. When our dog died, my brother cried while my face stayed ordinary. Dimples and bright, dry eyes. I found myself smiling at my father all the more, bidding his favor in spite of my own aching heart while my brother crouched by his knee and sulked. When Corey walked into the room, I pretended my insides weren't ablaze. When the river flooded, I played cards with the men and it was no trouble at all.

The Kankakee River's course was significantly restructured throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The river had once crept through one of the largest wetlands in the United States, the Great Kankakee Swamp. The swamp spread for over 5,300 square miles of

dense marshland, the river jutting through it, until the Swamp Land Act of 1850 was passed. Before the Swamp Land Act and the Indian Removal Act, the Kankakee had been an important waterway for the Potawatomi and early European settlers, who trapped riverine creatures and traded their fur. Over the course of the next several decades, the Swamp Act straightened the bends of the river, one of many measures taken to drain the mega-marsh in order to turn the Indiana soil into mineral-rich farmland. In the mid-nineteenth century, Americans had begun to populate the heartland. Its rivers aided in transporting the goods produced by an impending regional industrial boom—including grains, iron ore, coal, and lumber. By the end of the nineteenth century, the new Kankakee River no longer meandered, but rather cut somewhat adroitly across Indiana and Illinois. Its new path was fortified with drainage ditches, leaching even more of the marsh's excess water outward in rigid grid patterns that fed the new farmland. The drainage system fed what was left over westward to join with the Iroquois River, eventually emptying into the Illinois River. Though I could never believe the river had looked any other way but straight, every few years the water proved me wrong and the river reclaimed its natural course, filling in its original sediment bed behind our house and throughout our neighborhood as if the very ground itself had called it back home.

Kankakee → Iroquois → Illinois R.

Like rivers, people are always folding back on themselves, and then straightening again. Contradicting themselves. Pulling off a bluff even as they try to begin anew, and then collapsing back onto the past. Acts are passed, then are repealed by government bodies. Human progress is a bendable substance. It moves half inch by half inch. But water must go somewhere; the laws of science rarely bend.

Human nature to fold back

I raked in the pile with my sticky hands when my dad won the pot. I got to count the stack, and he peeled off ones every so often and

gave them to me and said, "Good work, baby girl." It was early afternoon, and he was still generous with his kindness. Then I folded the bills and put my cut of the winnings into my pocket, where the ones dampened and tore a little at the edges.

For card games, my dad wore his tattered carpenters' union T-shirt and his lucky blue trucker's cap, his curly brown hair peeking out at odd angles around his neck. On the front of the hat, a voluptuous cartoon woman stood next to a caption and looked sideways over her shoulder, blond hair tumbling midway down her back. The caption read "Tight butts drive me nuts!"

I shuffled the extra deck as the game went on, warming it up in case they needed it. I wanted badly to be useful to the men and be noticed by them—especially by my father, but also by Corey. Sometimes Marcus, Corey, and I would play our own poker game, gambling Chips Ahoy! cookies and Doritos. We were always practicing at being adults.

The men laughed their gravelly laughs and took another drink from their cans of beer. I didn't know what made the cap lucky, but I wanted to look like the woman with the tight butt. I wanted to drive a man nuts, to form curves in the right places. I was waiting for mine, and I wanted to know what to do with them when they arrived. Driving a man nuts had to be better than being someone's ol' lady, which is what my dad called my mom when he was at the poker table. The old lady, his old lady, our old lady. Like something owned. My mom brought cold beers and more food. She stayed in the kitchen, wearing a sweat suit that was a decade old, as the game progressed and the men grew drunker. She clanked pots and pans so hard you'd have thought she was trying to break something.

In poker, you didn't get to hang back and stew about what to do. That's what I liked about it. I did enough of that already, and this was a lively game that forced motion. A poker player led with thought-out action—you didn't just think, and you didn't just act.

alcoholism

inducer characterization (implicit conflict / tension)

You decided, you faced the consequences, then you got another go at it. Maybe you got lucky the next time. Maybe you broke even the whole time. But you kept perfecting your game and your bluff, thinking and acting, until the two were one.

As the game went on, the piles of money grew higher and lower as the pot shifted. I listened to the men's stories about how high the water was and who was stranded this time. Bruce from the other side of the river was making stew that everyone was welcome to, even though he'd lost his cat Buckles and his car was flooded. Penny from down the way was all alone. Some of the men helped make sure her place was taken care of, trading off hours of work for beer or fresh-baked peanut butter cookies.

The men around the poker table told and retold stories of prior floods, ones I had never seen, the water higher each time they spoke of it.

"Three feet that year we canoed the whole way down a road with them bottles of Wild Turkey," said Slims. "Floated 'em over to some right thirsty folks on Frisbees. Shoulda seen their faces light up. You'd think they'd seen Jesus walk on water."

"Five feet," said Slick, shaking his head. "And one year Willie had his motorboat out, too. You never seen a supper delivered like that."

"Nah, six feet deep if it was an inch." Uncle Tom was the biggest tale-teller of them all, once he got enough beers down. Who knew what was true? But telling the stories brought them together more than it kept them apart. It balanced the loss, which they rarely inventoried. And I liked listening, weaving myself into their history, belonging with them to something bigger than me in my own head.

When the phone rang, my mom brought it in from the kitchen—stretching the thirty-foot cord until it almost snapped. Sometimes she'd do that so you were stuck talking in front of her while she waited for you to hand it back. The phone was her territory. She handed it

to my dad and then folded her arms, the sleeves of her sweatshirt pushed up to her elbows, exposing tan wrists and forearms.

My dad mumbled what sounded like an agreement and then handed the phone back. "Looks like some sandbags aren't holdin'. Said I'd give it a look after we call it a night here."

My mom nodded and walked away, the cord snagging on her way to the kitchen. She slammed the phone back onto the hook so hard it rang back at her. Everyone looked up from the poker table expectantly for a moment, then returned to the game.

My river was not the only river moved for the convenience of humans. An act of government can move a mountain if it wants to. It can move buildings and communities of people. It can build a bridge that connects two slips of land or, as in the case of Alaska's Bridge to Nowhere, it can connect one strip of land to absolutely nothing. An act of government can move a river. It sounds simple and swift when it is boiled down to words: "Move the river." But speed and ease are feats not readily scaled to a body of water. How vast the human need must be to unbend a current.

In his essay "Rivering," Dinty W. Moore discusses one such river, the Hockhocking in Ohio, which was also strategically rerouted to suit human purposes. "The engineers managed a rather graceful curve in the new riverbed," he writes, "but it doesn't feel natural. It can't be mistaken for the unpredictable, sometimes elegant, sometimes abrupt, always idiosyncratic way that a river actually cuts through a landscape." Without a current propelling it and banks to guide it, a river is only water. Moore draws a parallel between determining what's crucial to include in a narrative's undercurrent and the way that rivers are directed and controlled—both by their natural paths and by the ones that have been carved by people. The boundaries must be tempered, or else the water will burst forth and drown us all.

Later that night, well after the men had made their way through the water and back to their homes, I sneaked out of my bedroom to the card table and put a cigarette butt in my mouth. My brother was asleep, and my parents squabbled about something in the distance. Stir crazy was what we called it. Stuck inside, stirring around each other until someone went crazy. Usually, my dad.

The refrigerator door opened and closed. I heard a can pop open, and I tried to count back how many times I'd heard that pop since the card game had started. Back and back, all day. Double digits, easily.

I pretended to smoke and said *full house* in a low voice, making it into a one-syllable word like the men did. "F'ous, boys. Read 'em and weep." Puff.

I heard a cracking sound then, and yelling. A familiar routine. Everything got loud for a few minutes, then the door slammed and the house was quiet again. These episodes tended to rattle my brother more than me. He'd wail and intervene in a heated argument, offering himself as a shield for either party, or as a bargaining chip. I'd retreat to my bedroom and wait for the talk that never came: we're getting a divorce. If I ever cried, I did it in the shower, which made it only half true.

In the morning, there was a hole the size of a dinner plate in the wall near the kitchen. My dad was already gone to work.

"What happened?" I pulled my long hair into a high ponytail.

"Your dad wanted to order a pizza. I told him we couldn't get one," said my mom. She was wearing different sweats—her going-out sweats. They were less embarrassing than her staying-in sweats, but I still hated them. Maybe she didn't know my dad liked women to look like the one on his hat—tight jeans and tight butts and small waists that cinched neatly beneath their breasts. "That was his answer." She nodded at the hole that had been punched through the

wall. She said it as if it were true, unflinching, as if she dared me to believe otherwise.

I stood at the fridge and nodded, alternating bites of Pop-Tarts with drinks of milk from the jug. Anger in our family was like the water: it had to go somewhere. Rise up, sink down, or burst everywhere at once.

My mom hammered a nail into the drywall above the hole. She took six plastic pears out of a basket on the kitchen table. She shoved the pears into a random drawer and hung the basket over the hole. "The bus won't come because of the flood," she said in a flat voice. Her anger was the sinking kind.

But the bus would come. I knew it would. It just wouldn't come right up to the house. It wasn't the first flood we'd been through. When it flooded, we were supposed to get a ride out to where the water was lower, where the dead-end road met with the road that led toward town. But I guessed my mother was proving a point about the pizza, so I didn't argue. I wanted to go to school. I would miss seeing Corey that morning, but I wanted to get to where the water wasn't and where my chest didn't burn like it was trapped under a heavy rock when I tried to breathe. I needed to run around some, fill my shoes with playground rocks until home seemed a vague memory, like someplace I had read about in a book and then remembered only circumstantially, or in summary. *Oh, the place with the hole in the wall, yes, I remember it now.* → *clever wording*

I put Corey's watch on my wrist, and it slipped down to my hand, even on the smallest setting. But I was determined to wear it. It smelled like him, and, what was more, it softened the distance between us. I wore my dad's oversized cement boots to get to the van, which was parked in the garage, where it had stayed relatively protected from the water due to the slight incline. As I waited for my mother to come out of the house, I stabbed my pocketknife

into a sandbag. I wanted the sand to spill out like blood, like air from a punctured lung or helium from a popped balloon. I wanted to do harm to this bag. Inflict my ire quietly upon it. I'd make a sinkhole in the barrier, a slow leak that would float me away from this place forever. But it didn't work. The whitish-gray material that secured the sand within was dense and fibrous, and it resisted the dull blade. I worked it through with a few more jabs and wiggles, dragging it lengthwise until a small gash formed. The sand inside was packed so tightly that nothing happened at all.

When my mother walked into the garage, I stashed the knife between two of the sandbags, and we set off for school. My brother sat in the bench row seat behind me, none the wiser about the hole in the kitchen wall or about the hole I'd made in our arsenal of sand. I envied his disinclination to question the world around us, to grow weary of it. His mind didn't wake up with "Why?" in it like mine did.

My mother drove slowly along the river road, easing the front end of the blue and silver van into the water, and I watched the water filling in behind us where the vehicle had briefly parted it. I watched her face want to cry and then stop itself. Seeing this was too much for me to bear. I knew my anger would one day grow large enough to battle my father's, even if my mother's would not. I could not help her out of this, but how I wanted to try. Our eyes met in the rearview mirror. "You look pretty," I said. Prettier than the girl on the hat with the tight butt. Pretty enough not to settle for being someone's old lady, perpetually subservient and wearing sweatpants in the kitchen. When I thought I might cry, I called up my poker face. I shifted my gaze to the mailboxes that popped from the water like spring flowers. To chain-link fences half-covered in water. The roads beyond ours weren't flooded, only the parts where the river had once been. I thought of our little house plunked down right in the middle of one of those ghost bends, and the way the

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bottom two feet of siding were rotting away after too many floods. From the window of the van, I saw a farmer standing in thigh-deep water in the middle of his bean field. He seemed to be having a long think about what to do. I watched him as long as I could, waiting for him to raise his fist to all that water, but he never did.

Indiana Imagery

- school
- work
- poker
- beer
- pocketknife
- bikes
- dogs
- implicit sexism
- alcohol & violence
- floods
- cigarette buds
- van
- racing
- red rover