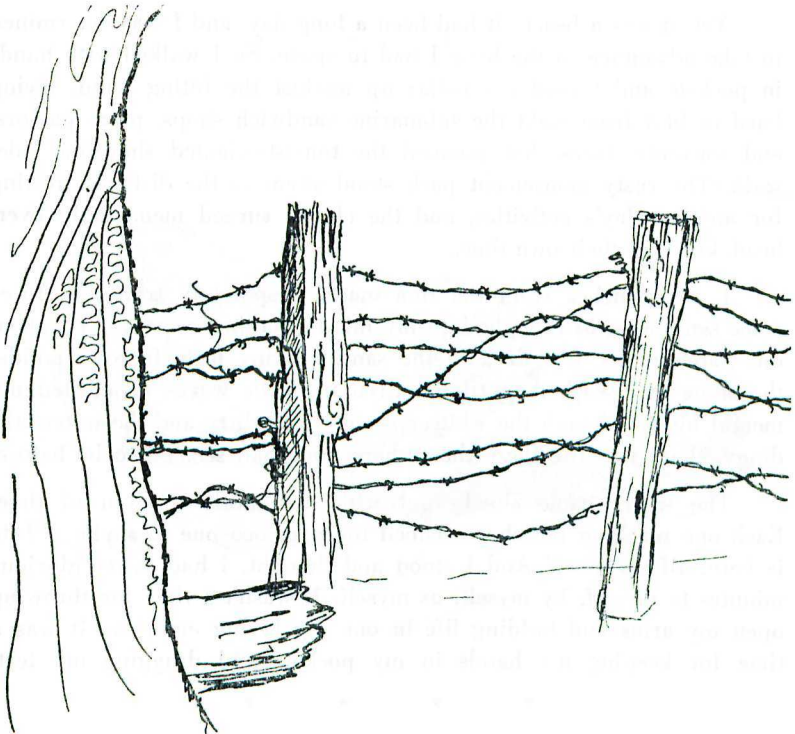


Where Thoughts Dwell: an Anthology

(Excerpts from Cindy Schamel, Jo Anne Stokes, Ray Prible, and Leslie Van Koughnett, respectively)

Behind my house there was a field. It was not quite an empty field; it was filled with all forms of life. There were flowers and weeds and trees in addition to rabbits and field mice and quail. When I was smaller, the field was a horse pasture. I can remember standing by the fence for hours with sugar cubes in hand trying to lure the horses to my side of the field. The field was my backdrop for make-believe. My friends and I would play that we were pioneers carving a path through the wilderness. In the winter when it snowed, we tracked rabbits. The only time I ever caught up with one, I think I was just as frightened as he, and I ran just as fast in my direction as he did in his.

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I had been looking for an isolated place—just a few trees overlooking a pale and graceful beach. I had been looking for a place “custom-made” for thinking, where you were guaranteed a period of thoughtful creativity, or your time and effort would be cheerfully refunded.

What I found was something quite different. There were no trees, the sand was a dismal brown, and the shore was a mass of jagged stones and broken seashells. My promising, though imaginary signs were nowhere to be found. In hope, I looked out to the sea and found no immediate solace there. The whitecaps were dirty off-white, and the water was dingy gray and ironically lifeless. Even the twigs and seaweed that had washed onto the shore failed to suggest the presence of some ancient mystery, only the muck of this generation. I half-convincing myself that I would never accomplish any *real* thinking there.

Yet, it was a beach, it had been a long day, and I was determined to take advantage of the hour I had to spare. So I walked with hands in pockets and turned my collar up against the biting wind, trying hard to blot from sight the submarine sandwich shops, pizza parlors, and souvenir stores that jammed the tourist-oriented shoreline sidewalk. The rusty amusement park stood silent in the distance, resting for another day’s activities, and the clouds surged menacingly overhead, knowing their own time.

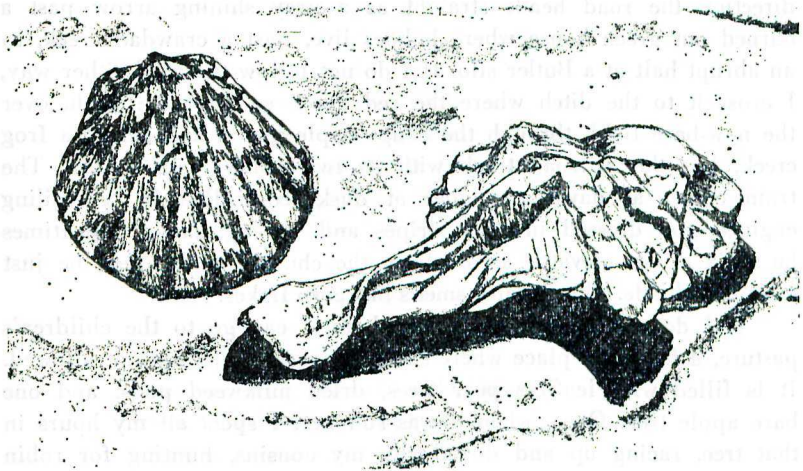
I stood inches from the tide mark, desperately trying to force some semblance of thought into my mind. Nothing came. So I walked on, watching my feet drag in the sand, leaving little furrows amidst the stone and seashell, until the rhythm of the waves penetrated my mental block. Though the whitecaps were still dirty and the water still dingy, there was life there then where none had seemed to be before.

The waves came slowly but with the subtle wisdom of time. Each one reaching the shore echoed the previous one in saying, “Life is here; life is now.” And I stood and thought. I had thirty glorious minutes to myself, by myself, as myself. It wasn’t a time for throwing open my arms and holding life in one big loving embrace. It was a time for keeping my hands in my pockets and dragging my feet.

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The nippy summer morning woke me early, and I dressed quickly and went outside. The newly risen sun had not yet dried the dew on the pier and grass, which glittered in the young sunlight. Tightly gripping my fishing pole and bait, I stepped into the old rotting green rowboat. The early morning ripples gently lapped the bottom of the boat, and on the beach, fingers of small waves reached for the pebbles buried high in the sand. Soapy-white sea foam quietly washed stones lying on the shore. I slowly rowed to my "fishing hole" and dropped anchor. I was alone. All the houses were still sleeping. While a light fog yet covered the valley and lake, a fish jumped, breaking the morning's silence. Sitting with my line and bobber in the calm waters, I waited—waited for the fish to bite. But none did. A motor-boat putt-putted afar, showing not all the world was asleep. It began to rain. Small needles of mist pierced the smooth surface of the lake, sounding like thousands of lighted matches hissing as they were dropped into the water. It rained, I fished, and I thought.

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Out back of the house, past a wooden gate hung with bricks, down a much-used path, I can walk to the white barn. The cattle huddle near the barn door, watching their breaths float over their heads and gather in low white clouds. They stomp and low when I walk among them, and their bull glares and shakes his head. The barn is warm with the smell of livestock, alive with the sounds of small scurrying animals. Overhead, up a wooden ladder, is the hay mow, filled with this year's hay, last year's kittens, and eternal doves. Alfalfa always smells richer on a rainy day. Below there was once a chicken coop, but three years ago a fox and a raccoon, working together and splitting the profit, disposed of the entire flock. On the other side of the pasture is a huge wreck of an elm tree. It has been all but defeated by lightning and cattle and is an etching against the heavy sky. Farther away, across fields of November, are the homes of others, white frame houses guarded by tractors and Cadillacs. I cannot walk to these places—they are too far from me.

Past the front of the house the one-lane road stretches its concrete as far as my eye can see. In one direction the road passes a small country church that everyone attends and always has, on to end, miles away, at the site of the former Christmas house that once had Santa Clauses in all the windows and no electricity. In the other direction the road heads straight as a grey shining arrow past a burned out green house where hoboes live, past a crawdad creek, to an abrupt halt at a Butler silo. If I do not follow the road either way, I cross it to the ditch where the red fox lives. Past the ditch, over the now-bare field, through the hedge apple grove, and across a frog creek, lies the railroad track with its twice-daily freight train. The train comes at dawn and goes at dusk, controlled by a smiling engineer-god dressed in blue stripes and waving hands. Sometimes he stops at the elevator across from the church, more often, he just toots his whistle. The elevator smells like corn flakes.

If I do not want to walk anywhere, I can go to the children's pasture, a fenced-in place where cattle and grown-ups are not allowed. It is filled with leafless pear trees, dried milkweed pods, and one bare apple tree. Once, when it was summer, I spent all my hours in that tree, racing up and down with my cousins, hunting for robin nests, eating wormy, half-red apples, watching the road for my grandfather, and listening to the wind. If I do not feel like walking, I will not.