

Shelby's River

~ by Gary Marks

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This was supposed to be the opening sentence of a brilliant allegorical novel, like *Moby-Dick*. But instead of forbidden waters and the hunt for a great white whale my novel turned out to be about a salmon and a river it never swam in.

My intention was to end the book mysteriously, but with a great awakening of some kind just as I fall from grace.

I thought I might also want to make reference to the circular nature of life, like *Finnegans Wake*. The book was going to be quite something.

It's depressing, however, to realize that *Moby-Dick* was 822 pages in length. And *Finnegans Wake* was 688 pages. Most of those pages were so obscure, so cloaked in symbolism, nobody could say for sure what was going on. I didn't have it in me to be that clever for that long.

As disheartening as that was, I really didn't want to succumb to taking antidepressants because they're pills, and I don't trust pills. Anything could be put in a pill, and how would you know? They could put dog crap in a pill and call it Resveratrol. I sniffed an open Resveratrol pill once and that's exactly what it smelled like.

I tried more traditional solutions for my depression, like alcohol. But my taste buds are all screwed up. They always have been. Red wine tastes like battery acid. White wine tastes sour and biting. I start to feel strangled. Beer smells and tastes like polluted water combined with Alka-Seltzer. Hard liquor tastes like varying degrees of turpentine.

The few times I've been drunk did not turn out well. Perhaps that's because I'm not part-Irish. Or because I don't really know how to love. It's hard for me to know for sure.

I could see the rooftops of the neighboring houses from my room as a child. They would have looked quite beautiful if we had been living in southern France, or Italy, or Greece. But I grew up in an American suburb, a rickety town where each roof had a rusty antenna and a various assortment of missing roof tiles.

I could also see plenty of white bird droppings on the rectangular roof shingles if I squinted hard enough. Some droppings were bespeckled with dark berries. These were gifts, little bombs, dropped from the ugly birds of summer, mostly black crows. They would caw all day and congregate on the telephone poles. White droppings fell like summer snow. Then, instead of cleaning up after themselves when autumn came, they'd migrate.

I would stare out the window constantly. Daydreaming would become my trademark. I was constantly kidded about it. Sometimes it seemed like I was living in a parallel world.

For example, my dad might be in the car and ask me to run up to get his wallet from his bedroom dresser. I would happily go bounding upstairs, but wouldn't find it there. I would then search the entire room. Befuddled but determined, I would eventually look under the bed, then dejectedly end up wandering around the bathroom in a final attempt to be thorough.

When he turns off the car engine and comes upstairs to ask why I was taking so long, and why I was looking in the shower for his wallet, I would explain to him I'd looked everywhere else.

Without speaking he would point to his dresser, and where just a minute ago the wallet was nowhere to be found, there it was in plain view. Thick, brown, leathery, and obviously visually controlled by trickster clowns. How else could it appear and disappear at will?

It was around that time that my family realized I was not quite normal. I was a spacey oddball kid that seemed uninterested in school or wallet hunting. They spent many a worried night wondering what to do with me, contemplating how I would survive this world by the time I was twenty. They also kept insisting there *were no* trickster clowns.

As a high school senior I was asked to consider a future career. I thought being a college professor sounded good, even though I knew nothing about college yet. I also didn't know what subject I would want to teach. Because there was no subject I was interested in.

I figured in a worst-case scenario I could teach literature and creative writing, because neither of those had any solid facts attached to them. Everything was cloaked in metaphor and symbolism, which was as close as I wanted to get to telling anyone what the truth was. After all, when seen through the eyes of centuries of non-fiction literature and reading competing authors, is history the truth? Is science? Is religion? By the very act of committing words to paper, *everything* becomes fiction to some degree: Everything is open to debate and revisions over time. Truth is no more definitive than someone's personal interpretation of a poem.

Here is a summary of my life before I met Chelsea.

I spent my years in middle school realizing that the year I spent in third grade might just end up being the best year of my life. No one can know the future, obviously, but my future *since* third grade allowed me to make certain assumptions. And decades later, my prediction was still right.

I assume you are asking what happened in third grade to make me so happy?

The answer was, it wasn't second grade, which by all human standards, massively sucked. Headline: My parents got divorced.

They both wanted me, by the way. But neither of them actually had the *time*.

Post-divorce, my father occasionally took me to baseball games. My mother constantly took me to therapy. They were equally unhelpful.

But in third grade they got remarried. So that was one thing.

Also, in second grade my extremely mean teacher was caught with a bottle of vodka in his desk drawer. He claimed the good fairy put it there. By third grade he was fired and the good fairy had put him behind bars in the city prison.

And in third grade my teacher, Miss Smith, got married and changed her name to something more memorable -- I forget what it was now. But the point is, she was nice, and not drunk in class. For those, and other more psychologically complex reasons, Mrs. What's-her-name became my first crush.

Events from fourth grade until high school will prevent this book from becoming a full-length novel because I can't remember a thing. Except that my mother died, and then we moved to a place where my sister and I shared an attic room the size of a

walk-in closet, while my dad and the dog shared the downstairs bedroom.

In high school I mostly just got high. I took things too literally, I guess. While fun at times, third grade was better.

At my high school graduation I was dressed in a black robe that made me feel like the ghost of Christmas past. I never thought about any of the teachers after that day, nor any of the kids in my class. We never had a high school reunion because everyone would have still hated each other.

Basically years of my life, fourteen thousand hours of school, have been blurred into nonexistence.

In college I became obsessed with collage. I enjoyed it. It was very relaxing. I liked piecing various disparate elements into a metaphor. But third grade was better.

I came to realize collage-making wasn't going to be a career in-and-of itself. However, for sixty thousand dollars a year of my father's money, I took comfort knowing I had explored the leading edge of collage technology: Unlike my early years when collage artists were cutting things out of magazines and pasting them together, by my senior year we were taking images and words off the internet and editing them into Photoshopped motifs.

Before I graduated, some of the students were already exploring 3-D printing collages. I had enough trouble living in 3-D without trying to make a collage out of it.

In fact, right after graduation I found myself broke in 3-D.

I soon found my first job at a company called The Working Company, which basically had its employees work on anything they wanted for exactly eight hours a day, five days a week, for minimum wage.

I eventually quit that job to work at The Quitting Company, which trained us to teach employees at The Working Company how to get out of their contract.

Wife-wise I chose unwisely and ended up wife-less, lifeless, strife-filled, and penniless, as is typical of many divorcees worldwide.

I suddenly found myself lost. I looked for a cheap rental to live in until either someone found me, or I found myself. So I signed up with an apartment rental search company called, Rentals-R-Us. Everyone who worked there was an independent contractor. Therefore, the company was even renting its employees (to save on pensions or having to pay their health insurance). They were good at all things rent.

They found me an apartment on 200th Avenue and 656th Street, right across from The Tall Building. It was a very big and tall city, and it's only gotten worse.

I then went back to college, a community college this time, to study math, since I had so little money I had forgotten how to count. And I eventually became an accountant.

Being an accountant was the only pragmatic option. Otherwise a math student eventually becomes a math teacher, teaching other math students to teach math students. This is called a negative cycle. (Bikes that pedal backwards are also called negative cycles, but that's not the same thing. Besides, over time they become a thing of the past.)

I landed my first accounting job in a section of the city called Rat Town. Rat Town was amazingly filthy. Small rodents lined the highway during morning rush hour, skittering faster than the traffic. They outnumbered the cars.

Humans are habitual creatures. So we no longer minded stepping over various piles of discarded filth when walking down the street in Rat Town, but if one of the piles started to move it creeped us out.

As I neared my workplace massive highways crisscrossed the sky above me like latticework created by the insane. I escaped only by walking into a musty smelling echoey parking garage. Nests and stringy goopy things left by odd creatures hung from the low beams. It was like Halloween without treats.

Down the dark cement stairwell a dim fluorescent light would appear. This was the entrance to my private office. I was the chief accountant in a refrigerator warehouse. I was the chief accountant because, as the only accountant on staff, I gave myself the title of chief and no one objected. I also gave myself a raise that the owner didn't quite notice. But I was worth it.

I sat in a small office with no door, with the fat owner constantly badgering me to cook the books so he didn't have to pay any taxes. I explained to him he wasn't making any money so his tax bill would be quite reasonable.

If my job had just been counting the refrigerators on the warehouse floor I would never have had to work again. Because in my six months there I never saw a refrigerator leave or enter the building. Some of them were gathering cobwebs.

In the darkest corners where the rats roamed spiders and cobwebs were nonexistent. Rats eat spiders. Rats would also eat

crickets, mealworms and ants. So actually the warehouse itself was cleaner than the street I lived on.

One thing I learned as a commuter. If you leave your apartment at six a.m. and someone is approaching you hunched over, talking to himself, with a hood covering most of his face, don't ask him if he wants to share a cab.

Creatively, I found time to focus on three art forms that are very clearly the worst possible ways to make money one could imagine.

The first is collage, previously discussed, which I still do, but now I only collage my dreams.

The second is playing guitar. But I never wanted to play with other people, or play in front of other people. I would play only for myself, mostly during lost times -- winter sunsets, weekend evenings.

Since no one ever saw me play I will describe it to you -- I would caress the guitar, pulling it towards me; I would feel it gently merge with my body, like the girlfriend I someday hoped to find. I would feel the pliant wood reach out to me, with its faint smell of something wonderfully old, like the aroma that exists around a first edition book.

The sound emanating from the instrument, when perfectly tuned, with new strings, was unsurpassable -- angel echoes; distant memories jangling inside a hundred overtones.

Anyway, back to my original point, the third worst art form imaginable for making money, one that has broken and killed many a poor soul, is writing what seems like an incomprehensible novel that wanders around without a purpose, until suddenly it does.

Most readers seem to prefer books about murder. They usually want someone murdered within the first few paragraphs. Other more sophisticated readers are willing to wait a little longer.

Or they enjoy diving into a story about political intrigue that leads to unspeakable corruption and heartless exploitation,

inevitably including a political assassination to widen the mystery.

Readers read these things to lift their spirits late at night, nestled alone with their paperback, lying under the glow of their reading lamp. There is something seductive and deeply fulfilling, apparently, about being scared out of your mind just before you go to sleep.

I love moving. I don't mean walking around and flailing my arms. I mean I love moving to a different town or city and becoming a completely different person in the eyes of others, until I believe it myself. The mind can expand and fill in the empty spaces.

My new town was hundreds of miles from Rat Town and all those refrigerators that may have been glued to the floor. I lived in a small apartment in a town without skyscrapers. My monthly rent was exorbitant under the circumstances, but affordable for an ex-chief accountant of a big refrigerator warehouse.

The name of the town was Seacliff, although no seas nor cliffs existed there. It was flat, and walled in on every side by other towns that didn't lie as much about their names.

What hills existed were of the rounded variety, gently sloped and very grassy, but gave the townsfolk no cliffs to comfort them when they wrote their return address on the top of an envelope.

What most of the pleasant, but rather dull-eyed citizens failed to realize -- although the mystery would have easily been solved during a trip to the local library -- was that the town was named after a rich settler of yonder-year, John James Joseph Seacliff, son of John James Joseph Seacliff Senior, an oil baron from southern Texas. It's unknown whether or not Seacliff Junior saw the irony in naming a flat sea-less town Seacliff. It's also unknown whether he had ever considered naming the town Seacliff Jr. -- but I can't see how it wouldn't have at least crossed his mind. Otherwise, how would the future citizens know whether it was named in his honor, or in honor of his father, whom he despised apparently for having been shut out of his oil business and his will.

Seacliff Senior left all of his money to his secret lover instead of his wife and child. She lived hundreds of miles away in a desert-like cactus-wild hamlet called Rivertown. That's a whole another story.

Anyway, after a time I got a job as the in-house accountant at the Seacliff Hotel and bought a nice black suit to look the part.

In third grade, my parents remarried. But then in fifth grade my mom died from something my dad didn't want to talk about. He was either heart broken or didn't care.

Anyway, each night before bed I would look through a book my dad gave me. It was a book with pictures and descriptions of different species of dinosaurs and whales. It was called *The Biggest Animals Ever*.

I began to have a recurring dream about a white whale that lived in a river.

It was like my pet. I don't know why. Perhaps I was unconsciously calling up the anima spirit of Ahab, although I knew nothing of Moby-Dick at the time. I named the whale Alice.

Alice would come up to me and eat right out of my hand. She was so gentle. Almost like a mother. She would sit with me on the rocks while I looked through my Big Animal book.

She helped me with math too, and to this day I believe that's one reason why I became interested in the subject. In fact, I think Alice told me she herself was an accountant. But maybe I'm making that up, as we often do in dreams.

Anyway, Alice the whale was quite beautiful, and I assumed she would someday be added to *The Biggest Animals Ever* book because she was without a doubt the single biggest animal that ever was; or wasn't.

Many years later, when I met Amelia, I immediately liked her, in part because her name began with "A," like Alice, like Ahab.

I was hoping for some kind of internal integration, I suppose.

Amelia was a stewardess for Airway Airlines, a fleet of old planes that carried discount-minded passengers to distant islands

like Maui and Fiji and Tahiti. I met her at the Seacliff Hotel when she was checking in after a flight.

As I came out from my little hole of an office to look for a pen that worked I was shocked by how beautiful she was. She looked stunning in her dark blue stewardess uniform.

I crumbled to my knees and went unconscious. When I came to, I was having a drink with her in the bar.

I ordered a chocolate milkshake, which was terrible. As a rule, don't order a milkshake in a bar. It's like ordering a hamburger and fries at a Japanese restaurant.

I liked Amelia's red hair, which seemed wistful, slightly curly, perfectly and elegantly out of place. She had a broad smile, painted with a subtle shade of lipstick -- traditional red but lightly applied. I liked her thin orange eyebrows as well, and her piercing blue eyes; eyes that exuded experience and trustworthiness. Her sophisticated flawless banter was impressive. I was nervous to be around her.

She liked my awkwardness. I was a shy six feet. And she was attracted to my unkempt careless look. I was unshaven that day. I wore my black suit, but it was rumped from eight hours of work. Along with my suit I wore black sneakers, which were kind of a trademark of mine. Wearing sneakers and a suit was like eating M&Ms with a steak. But one had to rebel in some way, at some point, I suppose.

She also liked the fact that, because I was so extremely nervous, I kept listening to her continuous chatter about the trials and travails of being an airline stewardess without saying a word about myself. She kept looking at me in an odd way, like, could this really be happening? A man who listens, and smiles at my jokes, and empathizes with my pain?

She stayed at the hotel twice a week from then on.

The day she invited me to her room I asked, "Why, is the TV broken?" I was joking, of course.

She said, "Yes, very."

So I followed her up to her room on the third floor. To keep up the pretense I went over to the TV and looked behind it where a mass of wires were tied in knots, coated in dust. "Hmm, I think I see the problem."

She came up close behind me until I felt her body brushing against mine. "What exactly *is* the problem, Mr. Repairman?"

"Nerves," I said. "Your TV is very nervous. It's what's causing the jittery lines on the channel. . . ."

When I turned around she kissed me.

And that was the beginning.

But as a white whale sage in a dream once told me: As the beginning ends, the ending slowly begins.

My name, by the way, is Shelby Stone. I never really liked my name. But I remember feeling quite proud for some reason when a young girl from my youth would sing a certain song each time she saw me.

"Que, sera, sera, whatever will be, will be," is the song as it was written.

But she sang: "Que sera sera, whatever Shelby, Shelby. . . the future's not ours to see, que sera sera."

When I turned eighteen I wanted to change my name. For some reason I loved the name Shelby Waters. It sounded like the name of a great ball player, or an astronaut. So I made a pact with myself that if I ever became a ball player or an astronaut I would officially change my last name to Waters.

One always has high hopes for a fulfilling career when young, before reality sinks in.

So you know how at least one person in every family loves the family dog? I mean, in some families *everybody* likes the dog. But in some families the dog is introduced as "my brother's dog," or "my daughter's dog."

Well, in my family it was different. No one loved our dog, or even liked it. Not at all. In fact, none of us could remember why we got the dog in the first place, because none of us liked dogs even as a concept.

Other people in the neighborhood loved their dogs. They would walk their dog in the rain. They would stand on the street corner sheepishly waving hello to their neighbor while little Fido shat on their ornery neighbor's lawn.

When it came time for either me or my sister to feed our dog, it was always, "Hey, not me." Because, as most everyone clearly knows, dog food is disgusting to smell, touch, see, feel, and even hear when you're scraping it out of the can with a spoon. (A spoon that you for some reason assume humans can use after you wash it off. Personally, I highly doubt that would be a good idea.)

"Well, not me either," my sister pleaded, "I fed him last week."

"So did I," I protested.

At that point my father would usually chime in, "Wait a minute, this dog hasn't been fed since last week? You can't do that! *Feed the dog!*"

"Which one of us are you talking to, dear Father?" (We knew not to ask him why *he* hadn't fed the dog.)

"I'm talking to both of you! Now feed the damn dog before it dies right there in the living room. Because I swear, I'm not dragging him out if he dies! That's going to be *your* responsibility."

We hated responsibilities.

Yet, it still left us asking which one of us would have to drag him out?

We finally, as a team, shuffled slowly over to the dog food cabinet. Our dog had its own segregated pantry for cans of luscious food, leashes, little wash towels for baths, a container of dog soap, a canister of Flea-Be-Gone, and a tooth gel Father had bought from a TV blue screen ad that we never opened because it didn't come with the toothbrush.

It was then that we discovered we were plumb out of the very dog food we were asked to gather for doggy supper. We would no longer have the honor of shoveling a tin can of vitamin-rich goop into our dear dog's plastic yellow bowl, which no one had dared to wash out since its virgin voyage.

My father then had to rush down the street in the dead of winter, darkness descending, in a wind chill factor slightly below ten below zero, to get a can of dog food from Quick Stop. By the time he came back inside and took off his big gray overcoat covered with frost and icicles, we knew we'd better be standing there in the kitchen with a can opener.

Come the first day of spring our dear dog ran away and couldn't be found. Now here is one of the great mysteries in dog folklore. If you hate your dog, can't afford your dog, and don't even want to feed your dog, why would you be driving all around town looking for your dog if it voluntarily wanted to escape?

It's probably thinking, if I can just make it to the pound from here maybe I'll be saved from this living nightmare, not realizing that, just like people, one runs away from one nightmare dead-on into another one.

So there we are, wasting away a summer night, driving around town with our brights on, looking in every alleyway, until

sure enough there he is sniffing some other dog's butt outside the movie theater, just like last time he ran away.

"Dad, leave him alone. He's having a great time. We're only going to torture him until he runs away again."

But no, Dad dutifully parks the car and sneaks up on him, grabs him from behind, and shoos the other dog away, with our dog wiggling around in his arms trying to get free. All the way home he's shaking his flees on us and shedding his smelly hair all over the floor of the car, which to be honest, was already filthy. The last time we cleaned and vacuumed out the car was when my dad's date dropped her take-home spaghetti and clams with extra garlic on the only part of the carpet that didn't have a floor mat.

Anyway, here's what I have never understood. As soon as we pulled into the driveway our crazy runaway dog leaped out of the car window and ran towards the front door and barked to get in.

Why is that? Didn't he know none of us cared? Why didn't he just try to escape again?

I came to the conclusion that dogs are loyal beyond logic. And that love is their natural state of being. How wonderfully unhuman of them.

And that's why when Amelia and I moved in together the first thing we did was buy a dog.

The reason Amelia and I broke up and eventually divorced is not particularly complicated to explain: She had an affair.

However, it's more complicated than that because I always assumed that if someone as sophisticated and gorgeous to behold as Amelia were to have an affair it would be with a pilot, a captain, during one of her overnight stays in Fiji or Tahiti. After all, there were many fine looking young pilots freshly minted from the ranks of the Air Force; or perhaps a former test pilot who was also working for the C.I.A. -- someone who knew how to keep secrets and was comfortable living a life of coercion and conspiracy.

I thought for sure, if there was to be indiscretion on Amelia's part it would be with one of them. Or one step down from there, some other member of the flight crew. Co-pilots would make a nice second choice.

But no, she fell in love with a waiter. An Argentinean waiter named Ander.

Ander was taller than me, more unshaven than me, more shy than me, and didn't wear black sneakers. In fact, he wouldn't be caught dead in sneakers of any kind. He was a formal black shoe man.

Ander had a rather goofy girlfriend named Lucy. Obviously, she was far younger than the archeologically famous Lucy. And far prettier, and wittier, you would assume. Lucy also carried a constant supply of very good marijuana, pre-rolled in perfect white paper cylinders.

The four of us met at a small party. As the night progressed, while Lucy and I were on the balcony overlooking the oily gray skyline, Amelia and Ander sat in a corner by themselves. Ander was listening, without saying a word, to all the trials and travails

of Amelia's marriage to me -- the clueless but hard working black sneakered accountant -- for three long unbearably boring years.

Lucy, meanwhile, came closer to me on the balcony to share one of her lit cylinders. As I was inhaling, her face came close to mine, her dyed blonde hair mingled with my natural brown hair, and when she took the joint from me, it seemed as though her lips brushed against mine. I was stunned, quite alarmed, and very disgusted at her lack of morals.

The four of us got together a number of times after that, and, as coincidence would have it, we would always end up huddled in opposite pairs. Lucy and I would light up and Ander would pretend to be enraptured to Amelia's complaints about work and marriage and the current state of the government. She also liked to talk about the recurring nightmare she had of her plane crashing on a deserted island, which Ander said was ridiculous. She was comforted by that.

One day I received a very polite text from my dear wife saying that she was moving in with Ander, at least temporarily. I politely texted her back that this would necessitate me filing for a divorce, permanently. And that I hoped she understood my lack of choice in the matter.

She didn't respond, later telling me that her battery had lost its charge.

She took as much money as she could, with the help of a very short, mean attorney, who took half of our nest egg for his fee.

I asked for the dog, but she told me Ander had grown close to it and that it wasn't negotiable.

She and Ander left Seacliff on a bus headed towards someplace a bit more Argentinean, and most importantly filled with cafes in need of waiters.

A year later, Ander had an affair and left her. He took the dog.

What I did the day after Amelia and I broke up seemed like a natural response. I drove out to a hillside footpath about twenty minutes from where we lived. I went down the trail far enough to be unseen by anyone. Once I found what I thought was the perfect spot, a ridge overlooking an empty valley that was being made into a water storage facility, I screamed at the very top of my lungs until I was too hoarse to make another sound.

Then I lit up a joint Lucy had given me a very long time ago and smoked nearly half of it before assessing the internal damage.

I then became aware that I couldn't find the joint in between my fingertips. I searched the ground for many long seconds, fearing it might start a forest fire. Finally my eyes saved me from panicking, good old eyes.

I spied the joint sitting atop my black sneaker. It was white and ghostly looking against the night-dark cloth, nearly tangled up in my crisscrossed shoelace; a small zigzag of gray smoke floated upwards like an Indian smoke signal.

From my bird's-eye view it looked like a white sailing ship adrift upon an ink-black ocean. And the ancient ones were right. They all could indeed sail right over the edge.

I wondered about all the people aboard the smoky little ship. Were they aware of the peril on all sides? Did they know that I couldn't be trusted? Were they getting married? Playing shuffleboard? Fighting? Breaking up?

I remembered Amelia, off with Ander, and almost felt a tear fall, but it ducked back into my tear duct before it could splatter down from what would have been a great height when seen through the eyes of a tear. . . . And what if it hit the ship?

I lifted the wayward joint back up towards the heavens, towards my parting lips, but I couldn't bear to smoke it. I realized there could still be people onboard.

I looked around to make sure no one was hiding in the bushes watching me attempt not to cry.

I knew no one was there, but there was no harm in being more than one hundred percent sure. A few turns of the neck was all it took.

After satisfying myself that only crows could see me I had an odd thought -- maybe I *did* want to cry. It might reveal something to me, like a desire to live, for instance.

I wanted to BREATHE. SCREAM. *FEEL PAIN.*

I wanted to cry into the wind at the end of my days that the world could not, *would not* deaden me, or stop me, from. . . something.

Or maybe crying could calm me and pacify my anxiety, teach me how to find peace of mind by focusing on the smaller things, subtler things, like watching a bee land on a dying flower right next to my foot. I wondered why it was not noticing that the nectar was scarce and that a juicier blooming flower was growing just inches away. It made no bee-sense. Nor did it notice the giant *me* towering above it; nor would I have noticed *it*, if I wasn't looking for a revelation.

The oddest thing began to cross my mind as I continued to contemplate whether or not to cry. I thought it would be important to write all this down. Something about what I was thinking was making supreme sense, but I was beginning to lose the thread. There was no way I would remember any of it by the time I drove home.

I also knew there was no way I was going to drive anywhere in my current condition.

Another thought bubbled up that I wanted to write down; it had something to do with why Amelia and I broke up, aside from

the obvious reasons. There were subtler reasons. I had to remember those most of all. I would never want to repeat a past mistake.

But that was going to be tricky, since so many choices I *hadn't* made might also have turned out to be mistakes.

Was anything *not* a mistake? That was the question. That was the critical cosmic question I came to: What isn't a mistake?

Eventually, as things unfold, mistakes reveal themselves. That was life. That was the world. The stuff history is made of. One mistake after another, interrupted by accidental micro-second flashes of courage or genius.

I didn't want to stand here and watch the bee and think any longer. To further confirm my instinct, the bee was gone. I took it as a sign.

"Go back down to the car and get something to write with!" demanded I to myself.

Suddenly a new idea flashed before me -- one I had never considered before. Maybe I should decide to go absolutely counter to my instincts to see what would happen. Since everything in my life had turned out so badly, maybe to get things right I had to do the opposite!

So I turned around and walked up the path instead of back down to the car until I came to a literal fork, not a figurative fork. I had to choose now.

But choosing was what I always did. So I decided to go back down the hill after all and walk back to the car, so as to not choose.

The one thing I didn't want to do was drive back home in my condition, so, counter to my planned destiny, that's exactly what I would do.

Two blocks into my counterintuitive experiment I accidentally ran a red light and smashed into the back of a police

car. A brand new Ford Taurus apparently, with a big rack of ruby red lights bolted to the top.

I can't remember why I didn't see the red light. To be honest, I don't think it was there, until it was. But that would be hard to prove in court. Trickster clowns are not a legal defense.

The blue clad policeman, who kind of looked like a clown, didn't even have to turn on his big rack of ruby red lights bolted to the top of his car to warn me I was in trouble.

By the time I got out of my car to see if he was alright he was already approaching me, moaning something about his back.

I was then summarily handcuffed and taken to jail.

The Seacliff County jail was a real kick -- there were so many fun-loving, crazy-assed, completely wacko beings to get to know in such a short period of time.

With all the terrific food, new friends offering me a free smoke and so much more, with open public toilets, and several men with excessively hairy arms, why would I ever want to leave?

A day later they put me in a lineup as a decoy for someone who had witnessed the murder of a local politician. The motive was unclear. Police suspected it could have been random, possibly part of a robbery.

The timing of the robbery was unfortunate for me, because it was exactly the time and day I was getting stoned out of my mind with a bee.

Of course, the witness immediately picked me out of the lineup. I was certainly the murderer. He wore black sneakers just like mine.

I started screaming, these are *Vans*. *Everyone* wears Vans. They took me away screaming and put me in a private cell.

The public attorney assigned to my case was an ex-con who studied law during his decade in prison. He told me not to worry. He could totally relate to my situation.

I told him I didn't think so because I didn't do it! He smiled and whispered he didn't commit his crime either, wink, wink.

He was obviously crazy. So I took the small amount of money Amelia's attorney, out of an act of irrational good will, had left me after the divorce, and hired a private attorney.

A month before the trial someone looking vaguely like me from a distance got caught robbing a house in a rich neighborhood while wearing a pair of black sneakers. The

witness immediately changed her mind and tapped him as the murderer. So I was set free.

I blamed Amelia for my troubles for a long time after that. She responded by text that it was Lucy's fault for giving me the joint in the first place.

But Chelsea made me forget and forgive. Soon Amelia would simply be a dream to me.

If marriage was supposed to be a high-flying journey, with hearts thrown joyously into the mesosphere, then Amelia crashed the plane.

I'm glad we crashed. Because the journeys we took when we tried to talk were like entering various hell realms. In fact, at our prescribed time of death, if we were sentenced to hell we would have traversed familiar hallways on the way down. Echoes of memories of fights about who wasn't listening to whom.

Chelsea was an altogether different being than Amelia. She was smart, yet her style of dress could only be called purposefully careless. Amelia was superficial, yet fastidious with her wardrobe.

Amelia had to go through a long complex ritual before I could lay my hands on her. Chelsea would just grab me in the middle of breakfast.

Amelia hated to travel, since that was pretty much all she did for work. Chelsea wanted to travel the world, and loved planes, and even ate every morsel of whatever was on the white plastic tray of death the airlines would serve up. She loved the little napkins, and the white plastic forks that weren't sharp enough to stab someone with. She loved the free ginger ale and lukewarm coffee.

Amelia, in between her work hours, was housebound and stern. Chelsea was reckless, stayed out late at night with me, and was overly silly when she was with friends.

Amelia *had* no friends.

Not that I'm comparing, mind you.

I met Chelsea in Seacliff a few months after I got out of jail. We fell in love in ways that were not about love at all. It was a sensual riot, actually, a physical revolution that took over the castle of rational thought and slayed the King of Words.

Aside from eating, running, whooping, sliding, diving, and clawing at each other like the desperate animals we were, our sounds during the first weeks we were together created a simple language all our own, translating loosely to either: *more*; *good*; or *OMG*.

This went on for some time. All fall and winter, actually. Then came spring.

As an April Fool's joke Chelsea bought me a dozen novels to read, hoping they would teach me how to talk. She was sick of all the blank space I had been allowing in between the times we were having fun.

Knowing it was a joke, I read them anyway.

The most impressive book of the lot was a surreal comedy called *Salmon Ella*. It was about a beautiful pink-ish female fish who climber her way to motherhood only to be rewarded with death.

The book was couched in metaphor, making fun of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and its author.

A Cliff Notes version of the book might go something like this: Ella fell in love with Albert Canoe, a depressed writer who hardly ever got out of his boat because he was afraid to put any of his dark thoughts on paper.

Ella tried to bring him out of his absurd funk by teaching him to dance. Except Ella had no legs so she taught him at great sacrifice to herself. In the end, despite wiggling like crazy doing the *Get Out of The Boat* dance for him, she remained childless

because she wasted so much time falling in love with what the author called 'a *b-ore-ing* shipwreck of a man.'

The ending was sad: Ella got impregnated by a friend, swam upstream to tell Albert the happy news, but was smashed to death by a falling rock just as she got to the top.

The autopsy also revealed she had food poisoning.

Chelsea was younger than me, laughed louder than me, had big eyes, brown as coffee grinds, with bright orange speckles inside them. She was curvy but petite, nice to look at if you just happened to glance at her, and at work her charisma shined through. But outside of work she liked to wear baggy clothes. Her milk chocolate hair was cut short enough to frame her impish face, a face that was sweet enough to beckon friends and fiends alike.

She came to work as the concierge at the Seacliff Hotel a few months after Amelia left me. This is how we met. Her job was to steer the already disappointed patrons of this less than stellar establishment to any one of three putrid local restaurants -- each one being too far to walk, but not worth the cab ride.

She did warn them that all the *good* restaurants were way too far from their present location: had they ever eaten the pesto in Cinque Terra? Or the house made grape sorbet in Paris? But, hey, people have to eat, she would smile. So here are three nearby restaurants to choose from. And they would walk away with grins on their faces and greatly lowered expectations. That was her job.

That sparkly but realistic attitude was pretty much the way Chelsea approached love as well. She realized that in the end it would probably be disappointing, after a long life journey getting there, and that lowered expectations were going to be critical for love's survival. She was searching for someone who wasn't even close to perfect, someone who had wild stories to tell, someone who had lived life to the fullest.

So when we met -- after telling her about my veritable lifetime in Rat Town, and realizing that life, like Rat Town was a tidal wave of nothingness frozen into a nightmare -- then

explaining how, by getting stoned and watching a stupid bee, I ended up being hauled off to jail by a cop that looked like a clown, then was wrongly accused of murdering a local politician because of my *sneakers* -- Chelsea instinctively felt she had found the love she'd been searching for.

We were eating at the Seacliff Cafe minding our own business when we met Zander. He was our waiter, but seemed uncomfortable with the role and shed it immediately.

"What are you guys doing here?" was the way he greeted us. He had never laid eyes on us before. The cafe was rather empty since the food was awful but we were only there for coffee and dessert.

I myself didn't like coffee. My taste buds recognized it as some permutation of liquid dirt. Add sugar and it was still dirt. Tea was not much better, as my brain translated the taste as possibly mold-infested water with an infusion of a bunch of leaves to hide the overall flaw.

But desserts, especially chocolate, were immediately translatable. I came to the cafe for chocolate, and chocolate only.

Chelsea smiled at Zander and said, "We have traveled here from a faraway land, young man, to choose from the world-renown specialty desserts of the Seacliff Cafe. What have ye tonight?"

Zander was nonplussed. "Chocolate ice cream, m'lady, from a magic box hidden far away in the Seacliff Cafe industrial freezer."

He kept staring at her as if to say, *Please think I'm funny – because I would like to lick your ear.*

Chelsea noticed none of this. She was blindly committed to me. And as far as loyalty on a given evening, she was beyond reproach. I didn't worry too much about Zander. He was a sardonic young waiter in a clean white shirt looking for a good tip. His tall frame was paper thin. He had middle-eastern mildly dark skin, but with an inconsistent Western nose, a bit too long and thin. He had overly-large, rather startled eyes, as if he'd just seen a ghost. I wasn't worried at all.

As lovers' stories get told, the past is framed, and often camouflaged, from the truth. How is one expected to know what they were feeling, much less what they actually said, during a certain critical time in their relationship? It's all fiction at a certain point. History from different perspectives.

In fact, all memory is fiction. The future is science fiction. Even the present is quickly being woven into some storyline that, to others, could be completely unbelievable, even if they were there.

But Chelsea and I did the best we could after "the era of taking to each other" began.

I told her about Amelia, and my dark days working for the refrigerator baron. She told me that just before I came along she had been in a relationship with Ernest, the hotel receptionist (who, in direct contrast to his name, was the biggest liar I had ever met). I lost a bit of respect for Chelsea for getting involved with someone like him. And she lost respect for me because I had gotten involved with someone like Amelia. So, really, that score evened out.

"In fact," she admitted, "you were *my* affair. I was still going out with Ernest when I met you. After our first night together I broke up with him. He called me a liar, I called him a liar. He said, 'What did I lie about?' I said, 'What haven't you lied about? Is your name even Ernest?' He said, 'Maybe.' The next day he quit, remember? That wasn't a coincidence."

I said, "So I basically killed two birds with one stone, since I hated working with him. I stole his girlfriend and got him to leave with one perfectly thrown rock."

In the end, I was relieved we had told each other our stories. It freed me to be more myself around her. It was refreshing not to have any secrets. Although, obviously, being adults, there were plenty of secrets left, and plenty yet to come.

We never went back to the Seacliff Cafe because everything was inedible. But Zander became a friend of ours. He would come over to our apartment to listen to me play guitar. He was the only living human who liked listening to the songs I played. I appreciated that. He would say, "Play more, play another, play it again." I was always happy to oblige.

I came to like Zander.

The three of us planned a big summer picnic by the river one weekend. We would invite other friends to come along. That sounded like innocent fun. We would dedicate the day to honoring middle America -- sharing food, sharing time together, pretending all was fine; whatever shall be, shall be.

There is a river in the town of Seacliff. It's where families go on summer days. And where lovers go with their umbrellas in the summer rain.

The winters are lonely. People stay huddled in their homes and build fires.

In the spring, birds gather at the water's edge. They flap their wings and shiver as they hunt in the cool morning air. They peck each other. They mate.

The summer is joyous. Humans awaken. They come to the river's shore to picnic, they gather for music concerts while swimming in the shallows.

In autumn, the entire town is sucked back inside to a dreamless place. Leaves tumble, caught in the updrafts. They fall. They crash. They become water-soaked, flattened, translucent; their brief life airborne is forever ended.

Winter soon returns.

Life on the river is circular.

Murder can happen quite spontaneously. It can also be partially accidental yet still be murder.

The concept of murder is quite new, when seen with a 500,000 year perspective.

Unless you're going to believe the bit about Cain killing Abel, then the first known murder was discovered by scientists around 430,000 years ago. It was during the Middle Pleistocene epoch. Scientists analyzing the fragments of a skull belonging to an early Neanderthal male found that he died of blunt force trauma. Possibly a rock being smashed upon his head. It was deemed murder because of an equal and similarly blunt force discovered on both sides of the skull.

Murder, however, can sometimes become hard to quantify. For instance, take Thou Shalt Not Kill. Except apparently it's okay to kill during war, even when you're the one starting the war. Everyone has their reasons.

Murder can be quite subtle, and also controversial. It's not a black and white thing. It's not always guilty or innocent.

For instance, God's commandment, Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's House (or anyone living *in* his or her house). What if your neighbor goes ahead and covets your wife or girlfriend? Exactly how pissed off might you be that a holy commandment was broken?

What if we're all still part Neanderthal, and things get out of hand?

Unlike Captain Ahab and his crew, I was afraid of the water. I hated to swim, I could hardly keep afloat. I would never consider swimming in a lake, ocean, river, or pool.

It all started back in the suburbs, way back when my sister and I lived in the attic. Oh, by the way my sister's name was Alicia. She died a few years after my mom did, but for different reasons. I think it was heroin. Although others say it was cocaine. Still others say it was heroin *and* cocaine.

Anyway, we had a neighborhood pool and because I was afraid of the water my dad insisted I take swimming lessons from the local teenage lifeguard, Bart, who unbeknownst to my father, was a sadist.

He loved to scare the hell out of the little kids. He would scream from his perch, "Stop running," "No jumping." "No diving." And if some kid didn't obey the evil Bart -- especially if he was forced to blow his ear-piercing whistle -- he would ban the kid from the pool for the day.

For me, that would have been a best case scenario. I hated being near any body of water, be it a lake, ocean, river, or pool.

Nonetheless, there I was being jostled around in his muscular grip. He was standing behind me with his hands on my shoulders. I readied myself to be pushed in at the count of three -- ready to sink down into the cold, chlorine-thick, piss-filled pool, then emerge buoyantly, and begin flailing my way to the other side, to show him my stroke.

My main problem was not being able to turn my head to breathe. I had too much fear of swallowing water.

My secondary problem was that no matter how hard I kicked and stroked, my body would not move forward. It was as if I were tethered to the starting point.

I also had an irrational fear that someone was going to jump in and land on top of my head.

Falling unconscious, I would tumble down to the bottom and die there. Or, if not found dead in a pool, I would die in a lake, ocean, or river.

Certainly the Seacliff River qualified as one of my potential death traps. But I was unafraid. I loved playing upon its shore in the summer, having picnics, attending music concerts. Or just hanging out with Chelsea -- she loved to swim there.

Zander's life was analogous to the myth of Sisyphus. The Greek legend, as most people know, is about a man, actually a King, who was punished for his crafty deceitfulness. He was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again just as he was about to reach the top.

Looking at the bright side, Sisyphus, translated from the Greek had nothing to do with being a "sissy" (which was a term created in the 19th century by the British. Sisyphus was by that time long dead. At least until 1942 when Albert Camus resurrected him in his now famous book.)

Brighter still, by all historical accounts, Sisyphus did not have a lisp. Because saying Sisyphus, or The Myth of Sisyphus, would have amounted to pure torture if he'd had one. And let's face it, the guy already had enough problems.

Anyway, every time Zander tried his hand at something, he would get to a certain level of success and then fall back.

When he was a kid he was a top teen tennis player. He played tournaments every weekend. He got better and better until he was nationally ranked in the top ten in the "Not Yet 18" class, and ranked 822 in the world, just above Santiago Fa Rodriguez Taverna. But during a match with Taverna, Zander hurt his shoulder on a wicked topspin forehand and had to have micro-surgery on his supraspinatus tendon.

The surgery didn't quite take, so he had to have the surgery again. After that, he lost his power serve, as well as the ability to hit lobs. He never fully recovered. He tried to learn to play lefty but that left him unranked.

Years later he found a girl he fell in love with, a seventeen year-old Italian girl named Kay Sera. They spent a fortnight together, and she agreed to marry him when she turned eighteen. But their future imploded when the entire Sera family moved to Nigeria to take advantage of the cheaper currency. They bought a huge white mansion just outside the capitol of Abuja. Zander tried to keep in touch but she stopped all communication.

Finding himself back down at the bottom of the mountain again, he tried his hand at learning guitar. This is why he loved to hear me play. After three years of intense practice with a world famous Flamenco master the same shoulder he'd hurt in tennis started acting up every time he put his strumming arm around the wide body of his Yamaha. It was as if he was somehow touching a human body inappropriately, and God was forcing him to stop. God teaches subtle lessons. No one listens. Back down the mountain he slid.

Finally he went back to school to study law. His other love. But in his senior year he couldn't keep up with the workload while holding down two jobs so he could pay for the classes and feed himself. He had to drop out after unsuccessfully trying to give up food. Once again he found himself at the foot of the mountain looking up.

He was still looking up from that bottom when we met him. There is a name for hitting bottom around these parts. It's called being a waiter at the Seacliff Cafe.

One day he mentioned to us that the breakfast rolls were so stale they were like miniature boulders.

Looking back, it's clear that despite the many cosmic messages being whispered to him, he couldn't escape his fate.

Word gets around in this town. We do not live in a vacuum. I don't know who told me that. I have blocked all of that out of my memory. But I did confirm the rumor that Amelia, now happily ensconced on another coast with her airplane pilot lover, had a child. A daughter, in fact.

Her name was Silvia, named apparently after the beautiful silver coloring of a commercial airplane.

My reaction was slow to emerge. But after a few nights' dreaming and ruminating about the situation, I realized that I was insanely jealous. I don't know why. These are the molten lava things in us that erupt without logic or warning -- like an engine blowing up on an airplane. Or a vacuum cleaner bag exploding.

Simultaneously, or perhaps in some way because of this hideous news, Chelsea and I were not getting along. We were thinking about getting separate apartments.

The idea evolved because both of us were feeling something like this: I love you. But I'm bored to death of you. I have had you over and over again, until I am nauseous from over-having you. And no amount of not having you is likely to make me want to have you again.

Plus we talk too much. And that says a lot about a person. Too much, in fact.

But what about all the sweet nights in front of the plasma TV, and texting each other from the same bed before we go to sleep?

And this town, void of any true charm as it may be, is not Rat Town. I mean to say we are one of the fortunate few. Why give up all the good because we have lost the ability to be great?

Plus, one apartment is so much less expensive than two. We've actually been saving. *Saving!*

The problem with modern day is there's too much choice. Too many decisions, too many opportunities to change one's mind.

Sisyphus might have ended up as a playboy, cynical and drunk in the back of some bar. His mountain climbing days forever over. Nothing left to prove, Waiting for his one and only, his rock, to walk in sober and sweep him off his feet.

Camus might have given up writing and become a stand-up comic.

Ahab's men might have bought homes in the suburbs and sat in front of plasma TVs.

Finnegan and his river-wife, Anna, might have walked away forever from Howth Castle and never circled back around to its environs.

It's just too easy to let go of what you have, not realizing at the time how hard it might be to start over.

The day of the great picnic honoring middle America arrived.

We invited a number of friends, of which there were few to begin with, but the only one to show up was Zander himself. He usually worked on weekends at the cafe but he'd found a sub.

We walked up and down the shoreline and laughed about little things, then we ate enormous amounts of picnic-appropriate food, packed neatly in a cute picnic-appropriate straw basket, with picnic-appropriate plasticware.

The sun was high, the water was clear, as it bubbled downstream with the ease of a silent slow-moving train.

The wind was in between breaths. The clouds were thin and streaked, like jet fumes from an airshow.

After our dessert of chocolate cake, bought fresh from the Seacliff Bakery, Chelsea, wearing a very thin bikini, with every intention of swimming after our meal, fell asleep. She lay innocently and ninety-nine percent exposed on a quilted blanket we'd brought from home.

Zander excused himself and went for a swim downstream. He disappeared, waving to me.

I wandered over to a group of children playing. One brave girl was wearing a red whale patterned swimsuit. I recall it all so clearly now.

The kids were laughing, running around like electrons, daring each other to jump in the river and swim.

"Go touch the bottom, touch the bottom," they yelled.

"No, you."

"No, you!"

No one went in.

"The water's too cold," said one of the boys after touching the water's edge with his finger.

I sat down and watched them play.

After a while they saw me, and for some reason they all gathered around and sat cross-legged in front of me.

"Tell us a story, mister," one girl said.

It was as if I were a camp counselor about to start a fire and roast marshmallows.

So I told them a river story. The one about a salmon named Ella, and her boyfriend Albert Canoe.

I told them Ella tried to teach Albert how to dance because he was a somber old grouch, but she didn't have legs. The children began to giggle and squeal.

"In the end," I said over the ruckus, "a big rock fell and. . ." They became quiet.

Realizing I had children listening, I changed the end of the story. "almost crushed her, but she had a very hard hat on her head, and the rock bounced away to kill somebody else instead."

"Yay," the children clapped.

"Tell us another story."

But I was distracted. Salmon metaphors began racing through my mind. If Chelsea was Ella, and I was Albert, Chelsea was sacrificing her life trying to teach me how to dance, but I just couldn't learn, and now our time was coming to an end. Or was it? Should we try again?

I was afraid to even dog paddle in a river, much less fight my way upstream.

I had been away from Chelsea and Zander too long and I was starting to feel a knot in my stomach.

The children continued clapping, "Tell us another story."

"Not now. Maybe later," I smiled.

Then I added as a dare, "Now who's going to swim in the river? *Who?*"

"Not me, not me," yelled identical twin boys.

"I will," said the brave young girl in the red whale swimsuit, and off the others tromped to see if she really would, really could. Perhaps if she jumped in, they would too.

When I returned to where Chelsea lay sleeping I noticed Zander had returned from his swim and was lying right next to her.

I hid behind a boulder to observe them.

He looked around to make sure no one was nearby, and when he thought he was alone with her, he kissed her lightly on her bare stomach. Then he pulled her bathing suit bottom down to her hip bone and gently kissed her skin there. Very slowly, very gently.

Chelsea began to moan and laugh.

Did she know it was him, or think it was me?

She awoke fully and looked at him.

Her fingers slowly found the top of his head and she began to caress his long curly hair.

He became excited and lifted his face to hers to kiss her.

"Heeeey!" I screamed, racing downhill.

They were mortified, startled.

I ran full force towards them. It felt like I might outrun my legs. Zander stood up to defend himself but I was charging too fast downhill.

I crashed my elbows into his upper body, mostly to stop myself from falling. He lurched backwards, stumbled over a tree root, tumbled into the river, and hit his head on a rock.

My momentum carried me past him and I splashed into the water a few yards away. I thought about swimming away in anger but I couldn't swim. And if I went any further out I would be getting in way over my head. So with my black sneakers soaked through to their very soles I emerged, part river.

Chelsea ran over to him.

"*What did you do?*" she screamed.

"Don't you mean to say, '*I'm sorry, Shelby?*'" I huffed indignantly.

"*What did you do?*" she screamed louder, almost beyond being able to pronounce the words.

I looked closer. Zander wasn't breathing. His arms were spread wide open. Red rose water began to trickle downstream.

Chelsea immediately ran off to the car to use her phone to call for help.

I forced myself looked closer. Zander, a.k.a Sisyphus, was dead. Just as he'd reached the summit. Just as Chelsea was about to say yes.

I didn't mean to hurt him. My momentum was just too much for him. But how Chelsea would describe the circumstances to the police was another story. I had already been accused of murder once. This time I was guilty.

I looked fifty yards upstream and saw the children playing, squealing with youthful delight. They were unaware of our situation. Nothing was wrong. We were far off, far away, phantoms in another world. They simply assumed that their grown-up futures would be as sun-bright and joyous as this day.

I watched to see what they would do next.

The brave girl in the red whale swimsuit was waving from the middle of the river, shouting for everyone to come join her. Then she saw me from a vast distance and motioned for me to come in too.

I swam not, being long afraid lakes, oceans, rivers, and pools.

Time froze.

The sun began to set, turning the sky a whispery pink.

I replayed the scene over and over --

I didn't mean to kill Zander. But one reason I was running so fast, and even allowed myself to speed up, was because an odd realization struck me while accelerating downhill --

The name *Zander* was *Ander* with a Z in front of it!

Both Zander and Ander were waiters. But they didn't wait. They took love away from me!

But. . . was that really possible?

Here's the thing -- it wasn't really the loss of love, or a stolen future with Amelia or Chelsea that upset me.

Love couldn't be taken away from me because it was never love to begin with! *That's what upset me!* There was never a full connection. No truly lasting bond.

But connecting to humans is hard to do. You have to start with something easier. I closed my eyes. . .

I feel fully connected to. . . the seasons. . .

. . . to my guitar. . .

. . . to the river. . .

I opened my ears. . . .

I heard a wind gust rattling the leaves.

I heard the river running behind me in rapid motion, splashing, hissing, flowing relentlessly towards a distant sea.

Through oceanic mist, cloud bursts, and staggering falls down the mountainside water angels would return to refill this same river someday.

Such a strange circular game water played.

Another revelation came to me -- As love flowed through time, through seemingly pointless days and years, a certain evolution *was* possible. A full connection was conceivable. But it was never a straight path. . . . Love would have to be allowed to live a swirling river's life. Love could flow back around stronger , deeper than ever, surging, swerving, brimming with new energy, if we just took the time to. . .

A wailing sound cut through the air. A police siren.
It zigzagged up and down in pitch. Pulsing in intensity.
Closing fast.

The sound had a color - a certain shade of red.
Sound had color to me now -- maybe I was developing synesthesia!

The red became a light-orange, allowing my awareness to turn back inward.

A took a breath and felt a deep calm.
Then I surrendered.
I wasn't just surrendering to the siren's call.
I was surrendering to everything I had ever done, thought, said, or felt. Because none of it had worked. All my calculations had turned out to be wrong.

The setting sun turned the sky a muted gray; color disappeared.

Time was running out. . . .

Tears began to fall.
 Words died.
 Memories filled the silence and became pure feeling.
 The siren was ear-piercingly close now. Then the sound
 stopped, yellow.
 I heard a car door slam a few feet away.
 Someone was walking towards me with hard footsteps.
 I felt his breath.
 "It was an accident," I said in a soft steady voice.
 "*Everything's* an accident," the officer barked.
 He asked for my name but I remained silent. I was trying to
 think of more connections. . . What would happen to Chelsea?
 "*I said what's your name?*"
 "*Whatever. . . Shelby. . . Shelby!* The future's not ours to see.
 Que sera sera."
 The officer gave me a shove.
 I tumbled into the back seat of the patrol car. The door was
 shut forcefully behind me.
 I looked out the window to the river for one last moment --
 it was rising, racing faster, pushing up against the shore. A long
 journey, with no end in sight.
 Two herons landed together on a free-standing boulder.
 They skittered closer until their feathers touched.
 Children were leaving the park, picnic baskets empty,
 holding hands with their parents. Holding hands so tightly.
 I finally saw the truth flickering in the sky's remaining light.
Everything was aglow.