



2016

Fairweather Gods

Jacqueline Haskins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Haskins, Jacqueline. "Fairweather Gods." *The Iowa Review* 46.1 (2016): 35-48. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7684>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Fairweather Gods

I have been a speck under a glacier's foot—and only a moment later, a god—and the next moment, a mouse between a god's paws. But my sister? Although mostly hidden to me, her journey dwarfs mine like my cloth-shelled kayak is dwarfed by the submersible Alvin, which fell farther than light can, into a never-before-seen world of chemosynthetic life, changing our understanding of our origins and ourselves. Diving into a new world, do you hope to encounter it fully, let it rub along every pore? But does human nature encase us like an astronaut's suit, compelling us to see everything through some bubble of home?

Glacier Bay, Alaska: two paddles and one cloth-and-wood double kayak rest by the water. My husband and I are the only humans, horizon to horizon.

How foolish. I had pictured beaming from the bubble of my kayak as nature frolicked around me. I hadn't imagined combat-crawling, legs dragging behind me, sun-warmed stones bruising my breasts, urging myself: *lower*. I hadn't wondered if a naked cobble beach could provide cover.

Pierre crawls ahead up the long, bare slope toward looming McBride Glacier. My foot, in a too-big rubber boot, slips, sending a stone skittering. Pierre pivots his head, cheek to stone, and frowns, a finger across his lips.

When we've belly-wormed to the crest, I wriggle up beside him. Here my fingers are surprised by sand, crumbly and warm. We can rise up on our elbows into a river of ice-edged wind and a view of water and glacier. Or we can sink down into a nearsighted world measured in inches, silent, redolent of sun-baked dirt.

Out of nowhere, buzzing blares into our faces. An enormous insect side-lurches, slip-streams. A tiny helicopter in ultra-fuzzy fur strikes the soil beside my face. A solitary bumblebee. The biggest I have ever seen: thumb-sized, radish-sized. Legs churning the soft sand, she bumbles into a hole. Stone quiet descends again. How the heck could a bee survive *here*?

Upper Glacier Bay is a landscape inching up out of the ocean, still rebounding from the weight of skyscraper-thick ice that stripped this world down to bedrock, then ironed the bedrock smooth. An epoch as

much as a place, where life is a pattern still taking hold. A world of rock, ice, saltwater, and wings.

From an airplane window, McBride Glacier would look like a vast white cloak. But Pierre and I stare up at its toe—which we also, oddly, call its face—darkly pocked and pitted, soiled with embedded rock, wrinkled and scarred with blue.

The silence fractures again, with a dark crack like a tree struck by lightning. The Tlingit called this “white thunder”—like cannon shot, said the European invaders. A turret of the ice wall slumps, a crystalline skyscraper crumpling in slower-than-slow motion. It sags forward into a foaming robe flung up from the water. The shock runs through the whole basin, and a mini-tsunami rushes up the bowl’s rock rim.

Here, seals birth.

Pregnant mothers browse the calved spires of ice and choose one for a birthing bed. As Pierre and I peer down, an incoming tide holds the icy flotsam milling in this saltwater bowl where the glacier soaks its feet. When the tide turns, the birthing seals will begin to raft, like Huck down the Mississippi, down a narrow tidal channel toward Muir Inlet.

I spy on a new mother through my binoculars. She stretches, basking, on a sturdy barge in the center of the mosh. Her coat is light-colored, nearly dry. Her cheek is on the ice. Around her, the floe blushes rosy pink, like alpenglow, her birthing blood already soaked deep. Her newborn drowns a few feet away.

As the two loll in the sun, the mother’s eyes stay watchful. While I study her, she scans the horizon. She must make an instant decision if the horizon’s edge changes, if anything hints “bear.”

Had Pierre or I spoken or stood, the mother—weak, bloody, frightened—might have plunged between the giant, jostling floes. If the few-hour-old pup had jumped after her, he wouldn’t have been able to clamber back onto this floe, one of the biggest, thickest, and safest, riding high out of the water. In grinding, icy slurry, the pup would have had to choose too soon between the chill of the water and the dangers on land.

It’s an odd burden to be an inscrutable alien from the land of Smartwool, prewrapped granola bars, and marine radios. It’s distressing to have pictured yourself a tourist and then discover yourself a sword of Damocles, any moment of inattention pregnant with murder. When we only came to enjoy nature.

Whidbey Island, Washington. Another duet of land and water. As I walk the narrow, meandering road, salt water glitters through a fringe of madrones. Loveliest-barked of trees, they shade from merlot to crimson

to spilt blood to soft curls of raspberry, puzzle-pieced about a fresh salad of greens. It was the mile-thick ice back in Glacier Bay who, after ironing the bedrock smooth, marred—or signed—her work, claw-scratching the fresh rock sheet with embedded stones. Whidbey Island has been human-scratched into insistent lines and nailed-down edges. But civilization's grid too is rimmed by tide-wash, rhythm, and flux. Our ruler-rigid lines are tongued incessantly by reshaping spirits.

As, for instance, right here, where the road swings smack against the water, so close the asphalt's narrow shoulder is a downward wall of trucked-in boulders. I scramble down and stand catching my balance on wobbling, plate-sized rocks. I breathe in creosote and salt and sun-baked rotting algae.

This is not a walker's beach. The dank, loose rocks are sea-lettuce-slick and barnacle-sharp. But not too far away, long logs washed up mid-beach look like sturdy, temporary sidewalks to nowhere. Perfect.

Balancing along the logs brings me closer to a stranger's boat than I would normally walk. The boat was eye-catching from far off: a bright yellow canoe with distinctive black lashings. Tied to the far end of my walking-logs, she sits two-thirds on land, tail in the water.

As I get closer, I look beyond the canoe, or up at the sky, or back toward the road. I catch myself, shake my head, and laugh out loud. This is silly. I am careful not to stare at the canoe, just as I wouldn't stare too long at a stranger on a city street, just as I'd loop through the woods rather than tromp through a campsite, just as I wouldn't stare—long—into uncurtained windows. The logs have carried me within a few feet of the yellow canoe, and I feel like a trespasser. Strange but unshakeable, this notion of mine, that looking intently is an aggressive act.

Then, a peripheral glance shows me something I never expected. I turn and gape at the canoe. I stare at it full-on, open-mouthed.

Glacier Bay, near White Thunder Ridge. This far up-bay, you take what you can get for a campsite. Myself, I like this narrow, private beach. Pierre, Mister Safety, remains uneasy about the thick blind brush pressing close all around, so we broke camp completely this morning—home erased, transformed to a heap of colorful sacks on the beach—before a quick, stand-up breakfast of granola and fruit leather.

Now I am knee-deep in water, holding the double kayak. It is a foldboat—let me brag about her—our Klepper travels on the plane like a suitcase, then assembles waterside, elegant as a whale skeleton, the light, strong, perfectly crafted wooden ribs and supports slipping glove-tight into the fabric skin. But a foldboat does have one drawback: we

carry her into shallow water and load her afloat. This many days out, we have our system down, what goes where to take advantage of every inch of space. While Pierre ferries bags from beach to boat, I use a paddle blade to stuff tent and sleeping bags deep into stern and bow compartments. Our lovely Klepper, thirty years old, does not have hatches. We have tied long strings to the bags we'll stuff deep, and I make sure each string dangles so we can pull the bag out tonight.

A wave crests over one of my boots, filling it with water. Shit, it's cold. Now my foot will be wet all day. Why did boots just knee-high seem like a good idea? I am bent way over, trying to see deep into the kayak's guts. The wooden ribs form an obstacle course through which I maneuver each bag and each awkward hard-plastic bear-proof food canister. My paddle handle catches on the seat, then the frame, then the seat. I hear Pierre splashing back and forth behind me. Stuff-sacks slump between ribs like sleepy, sullen teenagers. Pierre is outpacing me. Orange, blue, and green cloth sacks pile up on the seats.

Then I hear a different sound. The bushes crash and snap. I look up. Pierre freezes, mid-stride. Willow branches thrash like hands held high over heads. The branches rip open. An Alaskan brown steps onto the beach, raising its nose, scenting.

Bears, Glacier Bay. Stay calm. Bears, friends, are just bears. Like fire is just fire. Like tsunamis and landslides, they are predictable, usually, within broad outlines. A significant part of the interaction is up to you.

Bears are curious. About everything. Back home in our backyard that backs onto forest, a bear once clawed a sheet on the line to ribbons, evidently a comment on our new laundry detergent. One kidnapped my fifty-pound bag of peat moss—carried it off and rooted through the entire thing—like that kid's joke: there's a pony in here somewhere. A Montana friend has watched a grizzly rise up on its hind legs and sip daintily from a hummingbird feeder on a porch. I've found a plastic yellow-jacket trap that a bear *unscrewed* with his teeth to find out what was inside. So deftly done. He could have simply shattered it. One bear routinely lifted our outhouse seat. Just looking, I guess. For weeks I'd been accusing Pierre of leaving it up, and he'd harrumphed and shook his head, certain it was me.

Glacier Bay. Every day we've been out has been marked in some way by a bear. Our trip began in the lower bay, where there are trees, tangles of them you can barely bushwhack through, they're so thick with alder and devil's club. Down there, all the bears are black bears. As you paddle up-bay, you paddle back through successional time, to land ever-

more-recently emerged from ice. Conifers disappear, then alder, then even most of the cottonwood, leaving rock, sedge, burgeoning tidal-life, water birds, willow. Up-bay, all the bears are Alaskan browns. AKA grizzlies to greenhorns and lower-48ers. But a grizzly is a lightweight, inland dude; browns are coastal, feast on salmon, and are *big*. Brown bears are regal, impersonal, gods.

As I stand knee-deep near White Thunder Ridge, looking into the face of the brown, all the black bears we saw down-bay, impressive at the time, suddenly seem puppyish.

Our first camp was on Strawberry Island. A mother black and two cubs moved out onto the broad, low-tide mud flat, feeding and playing a quarter mile from our camp. They stayed for hours. We kept a careful eye on them, but their presence felt, in hindsight at least, almost companionable. They strolled away into the woods in the late afternoon.

The next day, paddling through a narrow, high-tide-only channel between an island and an unnamed islet, we rounded a curve to see a young adult black not forty feet away. He looked up from clawing the mud of the islet's bank. We stared back, statue-still. There was nowhere for us to go. It was a long channel, and we had timed our passage for the tide that would river us north; turning around would mean a long slog back against the tide, and might strand us.

The black bear assessed us coolly for a long moment. Nose to the wind. Then both eyes fixed intently. Then nose again. The only sound was the drip off our paddle blades. Finally, the bear put his head down and continued feeding. We drifted down the center channel, closer, motionless, gawking. We could see individual muscles ripple under his loose skin and thick fur. When we had drifted well past and couldn't crane our necks any farther, we silently dipped our paddles once more.

On Garforth Island, we did meet a black bear who was a bit disturbing. In fact, while we were out on our trip, the Park Service decided to close Garforth to camping because of this "problem" black bear. Which we heard after the fact—stories of this bear swimming way out into the channel, aggressively, toward kayakers.

We found a sweet campsite on Garforth, flat and dry, just above the beach. Garforth Island has the only camping for miles around, because mainland cliffs stretch high on both sides of the channel. Rice-grain specks way up the cliff walls turn, through binoculars, into mountain goats.

As we were setting up our tent, we heard something moving. Something big. We stepped onto the beach to look. Odd thing about this bear: it did not amble with a normal bear's nonchalance. This bear

was beelining, fast, toward our camp. We clapped our hands. “Go away bear!” we called out. It never blinked, just came on like a freight train.

“Grab the fly,” Pierre said, hurrying.

We had just put our rain fly onto its center pole and had not yet staked down the edges. We ran with it back to the beach and stood in plain sight, the fly between us like a big, odd animal with us for legs. We flapped our outside arms and did whatever we could think of to appear big, loud, inedible. The bear was close now. It came at us at a fast trot, unswerving as a missile on target.

The wind caught our tent fly, and it snapped like a flapping sail—perhaps like a gunshot. With a jerk, the bear pivoted. He turned ninety degrees, straight into the brush, crashing away through the branches. We listened. The racket became more and more distant. After something like that, you hear little sounds: the birds when they come back, the leaves moving, the salt water’s to-and-fro shush.

In the sumptuous light show of twilight, we cooked and ate below the tideline, where the water would rise to cover the smell. The beach was magical, wound through with a ribbon-ridge of purple—a windrow made entirely of mussel shells, stretching out of sight in both directions. Kneeling beside it, I touched infinity. Every size of shell tumbled together, almost all unbroken, perfect in the palm. When I stood, the windrow rose deeper than my knees. It glistened in slanting light like a fresh snowdrift of mulberry butterflies.

Before bed, we stashed our food, toothpaste, and anything else that smelled better than we did, in those clever, if ungainly, plastic food containers. We left them on the ground, tucked up in a brush thicket, since there were no trees on Garforth.

Next morning we woke peacefully, breakfasted—seems those bear-proof containers work—and goat-watched. Mountain goats do a lot of relaxing, chewing their cud, their legs folded beneath them. A kid leapt from shelf to distant foothold so casually, like an Olympic gymnast triple-backflipping to a perfect landing. I had to remind myself to breathe again.

“Let’s paddle,” Pierre said, and we walked down the beach to where we’d stashed our kayak behind a log. We stared down, speechless. Holes had been punched through the cloth skin of our kayak. Tooth-shaped holes. One seat dangled in a bush. It had been ripped out of the boat and all its foam padding chewed and shredded away.

Bears are curious. Bears check things out—typically, by biting them. This one had bitten our cloth kayak in a few places but, to our stunned gratitude as we slowly regained perspective, always above the water

line. He could have splintered that cloth-and-stick boat in five minutes, marooning us. Instead, a little duct tape, a treasure hunt for the scraps of seat foam among the willow leaves, and we were paddling again, heading farther up-bay. Toward the tidewater glaciers. Toward the truly unopposable bears: Alaskan browns.

The front kayak seat never has snapped in quite perfectly since. It's almost better that way.

Whidbey Island. Even the shore is man-made here. Madrona Way was shoved between Penn Cove and a brackish lagoon, displacing the shore seaward. At high tide, the water is a few inches of height and a few feet of width from the asphalt.

Landward loom widely spaced houses with magisterial lawns. The road has been balanced up on trucked-in boulders, dry at this tide. At the foot of the boulders, a strip of scrambled, oozy cobble-mussel lines the road's curve like nacre lines a shell. Not so much a beach as a place the human eye flits across to rest on what's beyond: the far shore dotted at night with the lights of Coupeville; Mount Baker, when the light gets long at day's end, gleaming as if suddenly plugged in.

The light is subtler now, Mount Baker an erased sail tattering the edge of the sky. I am balancing along a log toward a yellow canoe with black lashing. My eyes absorb a barrage of split-second visuals. I retain one in a thousand. Memory is impression, generalization, emotional response. For instance, the canoe: positive. Nice color. And it holds two full, white sacks of garbage. A friend and I were remarking yesterday that someone should organize a trash pickup down this shore.

This log is leading me awfully close to the yellow canoe. Too close. As if, in a crowded subway car with a few empty seats, I were heading straight for someone's lap. I stare down the neatly coiffed houses pressing from all sides, gaze at the distant mountain, study the log beneath my feet. Then, stepping across the black-and-orange bowline, I steal a sideways glance. And freeze, midstride.

Words stop me. Written words. Inside the canoe. With these words, the canoe becomes a story.

"God Bless..." Only two words are visible, printed neatly on a piece of cardboard. The cardboard, folded trim, tucks securely under the straps of a weathered blue daypack. The rest of the black-marker writing disappears inside the cardboard's fold. A fifth of whiskey lies in plain view in the bottom of the boat. Under the stern seat is a portable fire pit, a cylindrical contraption with air intake holes and a lid; it's store-bought and dusted with ash, but the holes are clean.

The canoe's front seat, once woven mesh, is a busted-out rim trailing raffia strands. A bleach bottle trimmed cleanly to a bailer floats in four inches of scummy water in the stern. Sun-faded plastic rope is coiled precisely, beside the cheapest kind of kayak paddle, flimsy aluminum, bent—blades that are just a joke. The wooden gunnel is missing in places. Near the bow, it flops out a foot, dangling in the air, the tiny screw still in the pulled-away end.

What I had seen at first glance as black lashing is actually spray-paint, bold black Xs at the bow and stern, casually spaced, with paint drips in places. Those bags, one on the stern seat and one stowed aft, I saw as garbage—they are tied-shut garbage bags, not quite as expensive and durable as the ones I line my own stuff-sacks with. The garbage bags bulge, but there is no clutter in the canoe. The boat is organized in neither an anal nor a sloppy way—offhand but orderly—about the way I would organize my own.

Yesterday's NPR interview pops into my head. "I'm not talking about fashion—this week's look," said the diva being interviewed. "I'm talking about style—taking control of the message your physical presentation sends to others."

The vast majority of us, said the diva, are kidding ourselves about the message we're sending—if we're astute enough to *attempt* perfecting our personal style. (Thankfully, she and her new book were here to help.) Looking at the yellow canoe, I thought: the competent homeless, whose minds are clear, have both the strong motivation and the constant, blunt feedback required to become experts on the message their physical presentation sends. "Style" is scenery for us. It's life and death for them.

Everything in the boat, and the leaking boat itself, was probably once thrown away. Even after being reclaimed, everything had to continue to appear valueless. But why the unopened fifth of whiskey, so easy to tuck in a pocket but left in plain view while everything else was stashed in pack or sack? Perhaps to communicate: I'm coming right back. I might be watching you now.

And what had this apparently competent and pragmatic person come seeking in this bit of landscape? I guessed sleep—that so vulnerable and valuable commodity for the wanderer. I had poked around the long dirt drives across the way. I too had discovered overgrown, brambly roads dead-ending in waste land at the edge of the highway, washed in a constant roar of cars.

I'm ashamed to say this. Now that the canoe belonged to a homeless person, I felt uneasy. I didn't want to be standing next to it. Like a startled bear, I turned straight toward the road, climbed back up to the

asphalt, and walked quickly off the way I had come, glancing over my shoulder and hurrying toward my vacation rental. It has the sweetest kitchen nook, all windows; you can gaze out across the water, where the view changes minute to minute. Of course at low tide, at night, anything could be staring back the other way. That night, I locked my door.

My last glimpse of the yellow canoe had shown me two small grocery sacks tucked in the front, white plastic stamped repeatedly with a red message: *Thank You, Thank You, Thank You.*

The Alaskan brown bear stepped onto the beach. I stood ten feet out in the water, holding our kayak. A wise person stays much, much farther from a brown bear than I stood at that moment.

Black bears are a bit like conniving co-workers. You want to learn their motivations, be scrupulous in your own doings, and never turn your back. Then you can coexist indefinitely with a bit of thrust and parry, and a bit of grudging admiration when the other outfoxes you.

Brown bears, no. A brown bear is otherworldly, sovereign in a realm that does not understand you. A brown demands absolute abnegation. If you are attacked by a black bear, fight back. If you are attacked by a brown bear, fall to the ground, avert your eyes, hide your face, curl into a fetal position to protect your organs, clasp your hands over the back of your neck, and surrender unconditionally.

I saw with relief that Pierre had carried over the last of our stuff-sacks. If he hadn't, we would have abandoned a pocketknife, even a sleeping bag. Wordlessly, with "hurry up!" and "don't make a sound" tripping over each other in our minds—trying hopelessly to be tai-chi-smooth, no abrupt movements—we oozed into our skinny floating boat. Our kayak wobbled as we perched on the gear still mounded on the seats, our centers of gravity too high, making the boat particularly tippy.

Brown may be the most underrated color. An Alaskan brown bear is pumpkin-tipped caramel, with burnt walnut shadowed deep in its fur. A brown bear moves like marble smoke, impossible fluidity accentuating impossible power.

We were surreptitiously back-paddling—trying to, all at the same time, be invisible, run away, and not tip our unsteady boat. My butt was balanced on a few inches of a cooking pot. Drips from my paddle wet a bag under my right foot holding my few pieces of dry clothing. A sig bottle of gas wedged my left foot awkwardly, and the spray skirt was clutched between my knees.

The bear began walking down the beach toward us. We went rigid, hardly breathing, paddles suspended. Our boat continued to glide very

slowly backward, away from land. We were telegraphing with our minds to the bear: we're just a floating log, just landscape, let your eyes flit across us and move on, nothing to see here.

Which way was the wind blowing? Were we downwind? I tried to feel a breeze on either cheek. It was early and felt dead calm, but there is always some flow of air. I stared at the willow leaves, the paddle drips, Pierre's hair. I couldn't tell. The bear halted, halfway toward us, and raised its nose high.

There are many kinds of waiting. I have never, before or since, waited so starkly. As if everything between my ears was the same color, one monotone hum. Anything else was out there. Anything else belonged to the bear.

When she began to move again, we heard each leathery paw scuff the beach stones. She reached the spot where our bags had been heaped. She examined the area, snuffing thoroughly, patiently, like it was a job she took seriously, like she had all the time in the world. At last she began walking again, deliberate, vigilant, swinging her head side to side.

She slowed to a stop where tufts of wire-thin, round-stemmed sedge greened the beach. After a last, regal look in all directions, she lowered her head. We could hear the sedge stems rip in her teeth.

Whidbey Island. The yellow canoe was gone the next morning when I walked that stretch of road. I never saw it again. Except in a photo a week later in an online news story. There was no mistaking those black Xs like shark teeth.

The news story said that the owner of the canoe had fallen into Penn Cove. Someone in a house onshore had seen him struggling in the water and phoned for help. He'd misstepped, allegedly, between a floating dock and a moored sailboat. He was in a hospital, name withheld pending investigation.

What had he gone to that moored boat to steal, I wondered—just sleep? Then I wondered at my own question. How much would that answer define him as a person? Hospital, jail, urban warehouse-shelter... where would he end up? What would become of his canoe? Would his life take a turn for better or for worse after this well-intentioned intervention? Was that 911 call a life raft or a sword of Damocles?

The rest of the story we are left to write in our imaginations. I suppose this: for some number of days, knowing the tides without a tide table, paddling where and when he wished, seeing the physicality of the world more than the proprietary lines scratched upon it—even, perhaps, looking into lighted windows at night—he owned Penn Cove in a way

I never had. Did he notice what he owned, or was his mind filled with getting through the next few hours? There's a question that could be asked of any of us.

The foremost god of Glacier Bay is rain. In that world, rain is a persona, with a hundred moods. To exist in Glacier Bay is to flow with water. Cooking is something you do under a tarp shelter propped up by paddles. Paddling is over salt, in the smell of salt, with the soft dazzle of fresh outlining your cheek's topographies, thickening your lashes. Walking is bashing through brush wearing stout rubber raingear, with the world above the beach seeming nearly as wet as the world below. Oystercatchers chortle a high whinny, gossiping in twos and threes at the water's edge, their long red beaks like a third stilt. Oystercatchers remind me of a woman I work with who talks a lot, but it's all a variation of the same thing. Not rain, though. Rain drums a hundred wholly different songs, sometimes all in one day.

Strange, then, that my sharp, clear memories of Glacier Bay are filled with light. I see sun igniting the white teeth of the Fairweathers, and sun firecrackering along the water. In shafts of sunlight, terns beside their cliff rookeries are whirlwinds of white wing. Clownish pigeon guillemots with bright red legs pound the salt water's surface as they gallop along, struggling to take flight. The long gravel spew of dry riverbeds. In Adams Inlet at night, you could dip your fingers in the water and draw pictures in the bioluminescence. We finger-painted in the water with light.

Seen from the future, Glacier Bay glistens, all sunlight and luminescence. Yet at the time, I lived down inside the rain, like the hermit crab huddled in her underwater shell, like the old woman inside her shoe.

A new world. Sometimes we plan to cross that line and have carefully packed our bubble of home: our medicine pouch, or kayak, or locket from the old country. Other times we simply look up, agape.

A new world is crammed with "them." We work hard to scratch clear lines between us and them, then discover our lines constantly reshaped, veiled and exposed by unexpected tides.

In apeless North America, the bear may be our closest brother. Bears come close to our ecological niche, diet, curiosity, territoriality—and sometimes even family. Indigenous tales tell of the woman, or sometimes the man, who married the bear. Indeed, who has not, in a many-year marriage, awoken beside a bear, thinking *But I know you too well; this,*

this cannot be true? An unnerving vertigo: knowing someone like the back of your hand, and then in a blink, not knowing them at all.

We read bones and scat, we read water, we read each other as intently as Agatha Christie novels, asking *Are you us or them?* Careful not to stare, we read swaggers, skirt lengths, the width of a shirt strap, the sag of pants, chains, tattoos, which finger a ring is on, the lilt of an accent, which gang sign flashes, the cloth of the suit jacket, the thickness of eyeliner. Maybe fascinated, maybe frightened, we ask with our eyes: *what world are you from?*

Perhaps we came wired this way out of tribalism so we could defend our little anthill. But who today has only one tribe? Do you have more in common with your genetic family, your musical generation, or your spiritual congregation? With your birth sisters or with your sisters bald from the same cancer treatment, hunched under the same glass ceiling, twelve-stepping out of the same addiction, or dreaming the same dream?

Mother-of-pearl and bioluminescence, bubble nets, nematocysts, and the opalescent sea slug—everything that is, is so improbable. You—your exact DNA right here right now—too improbable to believe if bets had been placed at the dawn of mankind. And here you are.

My sister, my only sibling, is closer to me genetically than anyone on this planet. She slept below me in our bunk bed, her soft breathing rising up like a heartbeat heard in the womb, feathery as a comforter. We share our childhood home, parents, language, familiar foods, town, culture, country, and the molasses and rust smell of the dirt in our backyard on Filbert Way.

My sister and I kayaked together growing up, but she doesn't kayak anymore. She works at an airport, is active in green politics and in her church. Owning no car, she walks from her historic 1890s house to her neighborhood food co-op. These past two decades, when she interviews a new housemate, she explains up front that she is schizoaffective (much like schizophrenic and bipolar combined), but she is stable on meds.

Toss a thousand dice into the air. One outcome, absurdly improbable in that airborne instant, is about to become what is.

Could I count the kindnesses that saved my sister's life? Anyone's life? No more than I could number the flecks in a whirl of snow beside an arctic sea-cliff—snowflakes that turn, through binoculars, into black-silk-capped arctic terns. The ultimate planetary vagabonds.

I wish I could thank the housemate who, passing the bathroom, heard my sister screaming back at the invisible voices and saved her from

drowning in an ice-cold shower. Or the housemates who let strange comments pass, so that my sister had, most of her life, a roof over her head. Also the housemates who dialed 911.

Once, voted out by her housemates, my sister survived for a while on the Minneapolis streets in winter. She wandered the aisles of late-night stores to stay warm and rode city buses to sleep.

But to my parents and me, she was gone, vanished, leaving no message, no trace. Days dragged by. Then weeks. I wish I could thank a Salvation Army staffer who intervened in a suicide attempt, and the owner of a run-down diner who said *If you pick up the trash in the parking lot, I'll give you a hot meal.*

How improbable that I still know my sister. How improbable that she got to hold my baby, plant peonies and turtleheads and snow-on-the-mountains, volunteer for the Sierra Club, and play Scrabble on Monday nights. I am forever indebted to someone whose name I do not know. Someone in Atlanta, Georgia, sat down beside a person who, to them, must have been just one more dirty and delusional homeless woman. They learned her story. They bought her a ticket home.

Most of the stories I will never know. Even if my sister wanted to tell me. Your own mind is a terrible thing not to trust. My gratitude is like flinging fistful after fistful of pebbles into water. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

We were paddling down the East Arm. The day had started squally, with breaks between showers, before settling into infinite rain. I remember wolf prints, moist, on a gray sand beach. The rain's song looped rhythms within rhythms within rhythms. Into this, we fit our paddle strokes. At the end of the day, soaked through, we took out on a cobble bar to set up camp. Our tent wilted in the steady rain, like spinach in a frying pan.

When we crept under our cooking tarp, the rain's percussive became twice as loud. Like listening to a choir: sometimes you pick out the individual explosion of a drop that sounds the size of a cherry pit, and sometimes it all blurs into a choral roar. Pour-overs around the edge lilted in and out with rolling counterpoint.

We settled back to watch the royal spectacle, squirming to get comfortable on wet stones the size of dinner rolls. Our cookstove hissed back at the rain like a half-grown cat. We had chosen a broad, high bar, with a view almost a mile up and half a mile down the arm. Low clouds swirled through the landscape, shifting the scenery here and there, as if stagehands were at work. Tonight there were no long views, no hint that there ever had been peaks in the distance. The whole world was water.

Pierre grabbed my arm and pressed it softly, intently. I looked up-bay. What animal was that? I fumbled for the binoculars hanging among my fleece layers under my raincoat. It was a moose, wading out into the salt water. The East Arm narrowed there, but was still at least a mile wide.

Moose were the only animals that scared us more than bears. Bears are, in their own way, pretty predictable. Like me. A foot-high picket fence keeps me out of a front yard as predictably as wolf piss stops a wolf. But you never really know what a moose will do.

This one was so far away we weren't afraid. We were fascinated. We hadn't encountered many moose. It splashed deeper, water rising around it. Soon, only its head could be seen, dark nose elevated. Had we only now glanced over, we would've been puzzled by that oddly behaving, distant, resolute duck, and wondered—*was it moving?*

The East Arm stretched, enormous and bitter cold, before that fleck of moose. Pierre once watched a deer struggling to swim a snowmelt river; he went away so he wouldn't frighten it and returned to find it washed against the bank, dead of hypothermia.

In twilight, the water and fog were silver, the trees were filigree, and the moose, a black dimple making the minutest of ripples. We watched the fog drift and plait the trees across the way. We waited as long as we could before glancing at the moose again, so we might see a speck of progress.

After an eternity, it was closer to the near shore than to the far. After another, it approached our shore and began to grow, neck down, into an animal with legs. In the next blink, it trotted into the brush and disappeared.

I let out my breath. "I'm so glad he's okay."

Pierre's eyebrow quirked up, but his voice was kind. "He made it out of the water," Pierre said, his arm warm around me. "That's all we know."

Author's note: McBride Glacier is shrinking—thinning as well as retreating about three hundred feet per year. It, and no doubt much else in Glacier Bay, must be very different today than it was, as I describe it, a dozen years ago.