



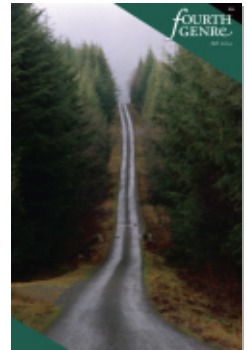
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Wandering Blood

Maureen Stanton

*Away from rest and shelter
Why should we further press
The end of our self-searching
Is only homelessness.*

Lucy Larcom, "Come Home!"

For the past three years, a pair of phoebes have nested in my friend Nancy's carport in Maine, successfully fledging young each season. This year, Nancy knew almost within the day when the birds would return. She watches their courting rituals, and when the female occupies the nest, Nancy refrains from parking in the carport so as not to upset the incubating mother. Phoebes winter as far away as Mexico, but each spring these hollow-boned creatures follow a system of interstate highways in the sky to the exact spot of their nest 2,000 miles north.

Ornithologists have their different theories, but the truth is they don't know exactly how birds home. They've gone to great lengths to find out. In one experiment, scientists flew a Manx shearwater in an airplane from Wales to Boston, over 3,000 miles from its breeding island. Once released in Boston, the shearwater was back in its Welsh burrow twelve and a half days later. (A strange idea—transporting a bird in an airplane. Intrinsic ability against applied mechanics. Poetry versus math.) Scientists have spun birds on turntables, have even surgically severed the semicircular canals in their ears (thought to be used in migration), but the birds still orient.



Instinct is partly responsible for homing in birds. If this were true in humans, I might find myself on a rocky outcrop in the Connemara region

of Ireland, on the porch of a thatch-roofed stone house where Stantons have lived for three hundred years (and counting, as my great uncle Coleman, now in his nineties, still resides there, sans indoor plumbing). Stantons stay put.

My grandfather was the exception that proved the rule. At twenty-six, the oldest of ten, he walked up the dirt road of his village for the last time. "I waved and waved, but he didn't turn around," my grandfather's sister, Nan, told my father and me when we visited Ireland in 1984. As we were leaving, Nan climbed halfway up a wooden ladder and waved to us as we drove away in our rental car. I imagined Nan as a little girl in 1926 climbing as high as she could on a hill or stone wall to watch her big brother Patrick grow tinier as he walked away, to savor the last look at him. My grandmother, from the same village, emigrated too (though she didn't marry my grandfather until later in Boston). Neither of them traveled back to Ireland the rest of their lives, never again laid eyes on some of their siblings, or stepped foot on the soil of their blood.



I'm operating against my nature then, against my ancestry. I've moved from Massachusetts where I grew up, to New York after college, to Michigan where I lived for nearly a decade. At thirty-three, I relocated to Maine where I thought I would settle, but two years later I moved to Cape Cod, then to New York for a second time, a summer back in Maine, and now at thirty-eight I find myself in Ohio. I am surprised to be here. I feel like I'm moving backwards through life, like riding in the jump seat of my parents' station wagon as a kid, speeding away from where I just was, blind to where I am going.

The day I landed in Columbus in 1997 for graduate school, I moved purposefully around my apartment putting things in place, recreating for the fifteenth or so time a kitchen, a living room, like a robin arranging bits of grass and twig in the perfect crux of a branch. I was happy to see my things that had been in storage, like gifts to myself all over again, but when my paintings were hung, and rugs and accouterments arranged just so, I still felt cored out, gutless. I wandered from room to room tilting pictures, touching things, perfecting placements of shells and bottles like a museum display or Macy's window, a *mise en scène*, trying to *configure home*. Ohio feels familiar though, this place I have never lived (the landscape, the daylight lingering so long on summer nights like in Michigan). I am treading the same ground, moving in circles. If I were a bird, radio-tagged, leg-banded, tracked by scientists, what would they make of my aimless, unintentional loops?



We are research specimens, each and every one of us. The census tabulates where we've been, where we are going by sex and age and region, income, race, occupation. Whites move less than blacks; blacks move less than Hispanics. Young move more than old, poor more than rich. Where's everyone going? Not far, it appears; two-thirds of movers each year stay within the same county. Movin' on up, like George Jefferson did, is probably why most people relocate: thumbing their noses at their former neighbors with whom they lived side by side, seditiously thinking all the while, *I aspire to leave you behind*. Upward mobility: we all want to rise.

I would have guessed that we Americans relocate more today than, say, a generation or two ago, but mobility in the '40s and '50s was slightly higher than it has been since. Maybe it seems that everything around me is in flux because I am. Sometimes, when you look out your train window in Grand Central station, if a train on the parallel track is pulling slowly into its berth, for a moment, the station appears to be moving.

Statistically, I have moved more than most people my age. A third of all movers in any given year are between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine. But something happens when people turn thirty: the percentage halves, then continues to decline with age. Perhaps we Americans have a collective goal that by thirty we ought to have a house and family and be somewhat settled. I am a slow learner, or maybe I am caught in some invisible current. Rafting on the Penobscot River in Maine, you have to watch out for a stretch of roiling whitewater called the "washing machine." If you fall out of your raft there, the hydraulics will cycle you around in a loop. Eventually you'll pop up downstream, dead or alive. This Midwest-New England shuttle I'm on feels a bit like that. I've bought and sold the same stool, the same yard sale ironing board a dozen times. My friends and relatives write my name in their address books in pencil. I look forward to the day they commit me to ink.



In high school psychology class I learned about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs: that each person must satisfy the most basic needs—food and shelter—before focusing on the next levels—love, esteem, self-actualization. We begin Maslow's project early. As children, we drape blankets and towels over chairs and coffee tables to form the most rustic of lean-tos, but like marsupials we remain pocketed in our parents' homes. When I was seven, I

moved my modest indoor fort from the mothership to the backyard, and at ten ventured into the woods at the bottom of our dead-end street with my sister, Sally, and our friend, Julie Thurlow. We didn't locate our fort in a tree like my brother, but on the cushiony forest floor, in the duff of the white pines, ground nesters like woodcocks and grouse and vesper sparrows. We didn't pound nails or use lumber, but ingratiated ourselves into nature; didn't construct or add so much as *blend and adapt*.

Our fort was a mansion with many rooms, carpeted in rust-colored pine needles, delineated by stick and rock borders. The walls were visible only to the initiated. We napped on beds of moss (which we called Prince of Pine) and felt like creatures of the forest: nymphs, elves, children of Pan. Our only artifact was a roll of toilet paper we borrowed from home, which we needed as we played all day in our fort: hunting rare pink lady's-slippers verboten to pick, squeezing ink from clusters of purple berries we naturally called ink-berries, pretend-eating the yellow, fibrous wood of rotting pine which made lovely chicken, slicing whips of balsam fir lengthwise, hollowing out the pith from the core, a pale, soft substance we chewed feeling like natives. The smell of humus, jays shrieking, branches rubbing together in awful moans, insects of all sorts. Dreams germinate in woods, and fairy tales and myths.

In ninth grade, my girlfriends and I claimed a spot in the woods by our school and named it Cat's Cabin. Cat's Cabin was merely a juncture where two sides of sheer rock-face created a near perfect ninety-degree angle, the arc of which was our shelter. Cat's Cabin was a found place; we were like cave dwellers. Boulders and logs were chairs and divans, and on crisp autumn Sundays we sat around a fire and roasted hot dogs, even exchanged gifts there one snowy Christmas eve. Woods have always felt like home to me.



When I left my childhood home for the University of Massachusetts in 1978, I lived in a section of campus where 5,500 students were packed into a quarter-square mile area, a denser population than Beijing, one-child China. Brick and concrete dormitories rose out of a great plain of pavement sprung in the middle of the bucolic Berkshires. Periodically, I'd be compelled to flee the honeycomb of cement cells: *be* flung really, just propelled from my desk in the middle of writing a paper or reading a book. It was the pressure of bodies in proximity: so many people rubbing against my personal bubble, the eighteen-inch sphere of air we Americans arrange around ourselves—our weightless tortoiseshells, our containerless containers. Coatless,

I'd run a half-mile to a patch of trees near the football stadium, and rain or snow, I'd sit on a log and cry.

One fall when I lived in Herman Melville, a four-story, all-female dorm, a girl who I'd seen in a couple of my classes, a girl who looked like someone I could be friends with, a girl with a purple oblong chafe mark from a rope around her neck (though I didn't know that then), a girl I was too shy to speak to as we brushed our teeth in the bathroom, rode the elevator of John F. Kennedy Tower across the way and knocked on the door of a room on the nineteenth floor. When the boys opened the door, she strode past them and leaped from their window. Why did I think I could have saved that falling girl whose name I didn't ask?



After the required two-year stint, I moved off campus into an apartment with my boyfriend, David, who at thirty seemed so worldly. Signing the lease, I felt responsible and smart and strong. The battalions of cockroaches that infested the place seemed part of the glamour, the gritty reality of life I was eager to face. I turned twenty that year, and wrote down three goals to be achieved by the time I turned thirty: a trinity of dreams. Three seemed the perfect number, odd and interesting, with the power to settle disputes, the promise of something extra. One goal was to write a book, though I envisioned that happening after the first two: to build my own home, beam by hand-hewn beam fit together like Lincoln Logs, and to walk across the country. It didn't occur to me that the latter two goals opposed each other: to wander or to stay, to roam or to settle. Perhaps that's why I never achieved them, caught betwixt contradictory desires.

When I turned thirty, I wrote about these goals for a magazine called *Funny Times*. I laughed at my foolishness, my naiveté, the world laughed with me. Luckily, building my own home no longer interests me. I get tired just thinking about it, and the hours I spent helping a friend finish a spare room were saturated with thoughts of the millions of things I'd rather be doing. Aside from that, I have little talent for this type of labor. Once, I constructed a birdhouse from scrap wood. It was a house into which it was physically impossible for a bird to enter. There was no form. There was no function. I hung it up, but never did a bird light there.

As for walking across the country, well, I drove twice, camping along the way. Walking would be nice, but I just don't have the time or energy, so I am returning that overdue idea to its rightful place on my shelf of unrealized, unrealizable dreams. There is great relief and rest in letting go of

unwieldy, ill-fitting goals. As for the book, I readjusted the deadline to forty. Ten years seemed enough time to write one book—due in 2000, the next century after all. Now that I am a mere two years away from forty and only incrementally closer to my goal, I am not really laughing anymore.



One theory of birds and homing is that they store kinesthetic information—impressions of every twist and turn on an outgoing journey—and recall them in reverse order: body memory. If I shut my eyes and tune-out, go completely blind, I can still play “The Bowery,” one of two songs I recall from three years of childhood piano lessons. (“The Bowery,” a song about a neighborhood in New York where the bums lived, the home of the homeless.) If I watch my fingers hunt for keys I can’t play, but hypnotized, my body remembers.

Perhaps my circuitous vapor trail is all part of a path I am destined to take: that circumnavigation is, for some reason, the only way to get to where I need to go. That would explain *déjà vu*. *Déjà vu* implies that a map exists, that a practice run or dress rehearsal was performed somewhere, sometime. Whenever *déjà vu* swallows me, I stand motionless and watch the film unspool before me, a time bubble that floats up from some mysterious fore—hovers like a hummingbird in the present—slips back into the past.



Since I was twenty, I’ve lived in five states and a dozen and a half towns on streets whose names I’ve mostly forgotten with the exception of the more interesting ones: Dunleavy Lane, a good place for a murder; Vesper Street, not holy at all; and Denver Street, a street that thinks it’s a city, a street with big ideas and aspirations. Denver Street was in Michigan where I lived for nine years, though the flatlands of the Midwest never felt like home after growing up in lumpy, bumpy Massachusetts.

When I flew out to Michigan for the first time at twenty-four, my boyfriend, Steve, whom I’d met and fallen in love with in New York (he was working a temporary construction job), picked me up in Detroit. Steve and I drove west towards his hometown of Jackson via Michigan Avenue which stretches across the southern band of the state, never once veering off its straight course, never rising to obscure what comes up next, hell-bent for Chicago as if escaping the small town doldrums. From the cab of Steve’s pickup I could see everything: miles of dusty cornfields and sprawled-out, laying down buildings, squat, lazy architecture. The totality of the land, of

my future was laid out in front of me. I felt exposed and vulnerable. "It's so flat," I said.

The abundance of space lends the illusion of an abundance of time. I grew to love the elongated days in Michigan, time for people to talk with you, supermarket clerks to chat you up. When Steve and I first moved to the small factory town of Saline, I was annoyed and impatient with the supermarket cashiers who wasted my time with their banter. But there came a point when I found myself happily conversing about a recipe my items foretold I was going to cook. After, when I visited Boston it was strikingly clear how rude the salespeople were, and I valued the generosity of the clerks in Saline, relished the blatant squandering of time on activities of little consequence as if I were defying laws of physics, tight-rope walking the space-time continuum, thinking I was in control.



Time proved no slower in the Midwest though. Michigan is where I finally grew up, where I first felt old. A year and a half after I moved to Michigan, Steve became ill with cancer and eighteen months later he died. At twenty-seven, I had less in common with my friends and co-workers who were getting married and starting lives than with the elderly widow who lived next door to me. Eight months after Steve died, using money he left me as down payment, I bought the house on Denver Street, a bungalow ("doll house" the ad said) in a so-so neighborhood in Lansing, Michigan. When I first moved in, I felt like I was staying in a luxury hotel, a suite of rooms. The plush wall-to-wall carpet hushed everything and made me feel like an adult and a consumer and an American.

But though the house was mine alone and I could bang nails wherever I wanted, I knew the entire time I lived there that it wasn't home. Every bulb and perennial I planted was for temporary joy, a gift to passers by, to my neighbors looking out their windows. The house on Denver Street was a stepping stone, a starter home like a bike with training wheels, a cupless bra for girls. But the geography was wrong: I moved to Michigan for Steve, and three years later, August 2, 1987, he died. I stayed for six more years because it was Michigan soil that needed to absorb my sadness, the soil Steve was buried in, the soil in which I planted hundreds of tulips and daffodils to adorn the future.



Some scientists believe that birds respond to terrestrial magnetism to find their breeding grounds year after year. I understand: they are pulled to a

place. My niece, Stephanie, was born three months after Steve died, the first of my sisters' babies. I flew home to Boston that Christmas and held Stephanie for the longest time, absorbing the halo of heat from her tiny soft body, her heart fluttering a hundred times a minute as she slept on my chest, lulled by the rhythm of my own heart beating, reminding me that pure joy was possible still.

When Stephanie was four, she cried at Logan airport after I spent a week at her house, long enough to feel the cadence of my sister's family's life, to see them at their best and worst, to become, for a short time, part of their tribe. The day after I left she telephoned me in Michigan and said, "I still miss you," and cried all over again. I kept a message from her on my answering machine for weeks, couldn't bear to erase her feathery, "Hi, Ain't Mo." Once, all bright-eyed, Stephanie said to me, "I know! Since you miss me so much, and I miss you so much, maybe you can 'leep over!'", not being able to pronounce "s" when it was married to "l". But I preferred the way she said it, turning me into a super-hero aunt who could make a huge bounding leap from Michigan to Massachusetts to watch her ice skating recital. She was dressed as a tulip in green tights with a red petal hat that flopped over her eyes and blinded her. She continued skating, righting her hat all the while.

Stephanie was the magnet for me, as were my two nephews, four sisters, three brothers and parents. Everyone in my family was calling me home like individual moons with gravitational pull, a critical mass urging me to move back after Steve died. Even my grandmother got into the act when she wrote in a letter, "Everyone is better off in Boston." She meant me, of course, when she referred to the entire world. (This from a woman who walked away from her village in Ireland, never succumbed to the temptation of Lot's wife.) But I was afraid of this back-three-steps move: afraid of being sucked into the family quagmire, cast into my childhood role of rebellious daughter, outspoken, troublemaker. I was afraid of looking like a failure.



In 1993 I moved to Maine, as near as I could get to my siblings in Massachusetts. (My sister Sally, too, had moved to Maine.) Maine had the elbow room I'd grown accustomed to in capacious Michigan—couldn't tolerate the claustrophobic Boston area I had grown up in, and I wanted to live in a place that was beautiful. Half way to Maine, all my possessions crammed into the back of a rental truck, I stopped in a hotel to sleep. In the middle of the night I woke up crying. "I want to go home," I told Nancy, who was helping me move. "I don't belong anywhere," I sobbed.

But I fell swiftly in love with Maine—its law forbidding billboards; the northern two-thirds of the state, the “unorganized territory,” wild still; fortresses of rocks along the shore; light at dusk so sharp and sensual I felt like I was walking around in a painting. For weeks when my roommate, Julianna, also a transplant, and I commuted to work along Casco Bay, we’d say, “*Look* at where we live. We *live* here.” For eight months I searched for a house in Augusta near my new job, but hundreds of not-quite-right houses later, I awoke one morning to a clear and singular directive: Don’t Buy a House. Rarely do I have such near-tangible thoughts, those in which the very words seem to shimmer in the air like the aurora borealis, so I honored the message, and settled into an apartment in Portland, my third address in Maine in twelve months.



I didn’t miss my house when I left Michigan, I missed my garden. For five years I had planted and dug and divided flowers until every border of my yard, back and front, was garden. One could walk around the perimeter of my house and yard without stepping on grass. When I ran out of perimeter, I laid circular beds plop in the sunny center of my lawn. It seemed bold and rebellious and reckless to cut into the middle of a perfect square of grass, like tearing chapters out of a paperback to read on a plane. After I moved, I wanted to spend the couple hundred dollars it costs to fly to Michigan: to walk around, pull some weeds, see what’s blooming, what’s getting big or spreading, then get back on the plane and go home, wherever home was then. Home for me has been a moving target. I’ve left my heart, or pieces of it, in various locations, but like an overgrown thatch of daisies, choked and root-bound, divided thrives anew.



As I get older I am drifting farther away from what I have longed for, where I imagined I would be by now: home. In 1995, after two years in Maine, I quit my job fundraising for an environmental group (whose wealthy patrons have two and three homes). I saw the life I wanted blurring by me in the opposite direction, faster and farther away, a dot on the horizon. In danger of losing sight of it, I bailed from the hurtling train I was on, attempting to be like Superman who faster than a speeding locomotive could stop time and prevent calamities. I was attempting to prevent the calamity of living an untried life, of never attempting my dream, to write.

For two years I was a floater, moving from various friends' and relatives' homes where I could live for cheap: Nancy's in Maine in the summer, Philomena's apartment in New York for a temporary job (painting in a nuclear power plant), sleeping on a foam pad with a turned-over cardboard box for a nightstand. That summer at Philomena's, 1997, just outside my bedroom window was a robin's nest in a scrappy box elder. From my vantage point on the second floor, I could see perfectly into the nest. Every day before work I watched the female robin incubate her eggs, stretching and holding her beak wide open for minutes at a time as if sustaining the final note to an aria. In fact she was doing the opposite: inhaling air to cool off. I watched her fidget and rearrange herself as if she couldn't get comfortable, or was hot and ornery like I was in those July days. I called my friend Nancy, a wildlife biologist, and she informed me that the robin was positioning the eggs directly under a bald patch on her breast so warm skin would blanket each egg. Finally, the brood hatched. I spied on the mother as she fed three raggedy big-mouthed babies, recorded their progress in my journal.

July 26, 1997

Sped up time, those robins. Fast growth, quick learning, unlike me. Now, instead of seeing big beaks and bald crowns, I see brown feathered heads and lots of wing flapping. The mother has returned with some food and they all screech at her like aliens in a horror movie. They are big, these fledglings, must be on top of each other in the nest, anxious to be on their way. I worry about them, their first flight might leave them on either of two busy driveways. No small bushes or hedges to soften the blow.

Location, as realtors chant, is critical. This nest was an unfortunate choice—the tree wedged in a six-inch alley of dirt between driveways. I kept a vigil, hoping to witness the fledglings first attempt at flight, to rescue any weak-winged bird, but before I could see those babies lift off and fill the sky with prose, I was laid off from my job and gone.



In the winter I lived on Cape Cod in my mother's little cottage, off-season, after everyone else had left and houses were vacant and the ocean cold. I moved against the flow of the mainstream, against the rhythm of families on vacation and kids in school and found myself alone. When you live alone there are no rules, or rules you can change capriciously. There is no one to govern you, no one for you to govern. I ate curried chicken and pork fried

rice four nights in a row and dined on whole bags of frozen corn swimming in butter. I went to bed ridiculously early or slept until noon, walked around the house naked and took two-hour baths, muttered to myself and hurled insults at the television. I cried whenever I felt like it, sobbed into my pillow, broken loose and loud. My emotions were honest and immediate like a child's, untamed by culture, unsocialized. I felt rangy and untethered and wildly free: deliriously joyful, often terrified. In chemistry, the opposite of fixed is volatile. That's how I felt, but volatile also means able to fly, or flying.



On Cape Cod, the early winter darkness arrives in late afternoon, 4:30 P.M., like a party guest who doesn't understand the concept of being fashionably late. In this crepuscular time when night like a suitor came to mingle in the busy brothel of day, I walked around the neighborhood glancing into people's windows at furniture and photos on the walls, at torsos and body segments, neck to waist, head to bosom, interiors, the blue glow of t.v. in every living room giving a fix to people. I was a voyeur studying other's creations of home, learning, envying.

But with exile I purchased time. Thoreau wrote, "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it." Every dime I saved in rent was a minute of unemployment, and the minutes piled up into jobless days in which I could write, days of *not* reporting to some responsible position, *not* arriving home each night drained, the marrow sucked from my bones. I exchanged place and stability for the currency of time; uprooted myself so that I could restore my marrow, so I could produce again my own blood. "I like a broad margin to my life," Thoreau said. This has become my credo. (Though the margin I choose is that of time. I have a slim margin financially, and no margin of space, no place that I own or that owns me.)



For two years my belongings were packed away while I lived out of boxes, which demonstrated that the amount of stuff I truly need fits in a car. Homeless people live in their cars sometimes. You hear of a whole family living in a big old Ford LTD. I imagine the front seat as a kind of living room, and the back as the bedroom, although they must sleep everywhere in the car. Some people trade their earth-fixed abodes for motor homes, which they drive around until they die. Are they happy? Do they feel unsettled? What is it like to dwell among miniature appliances and convertible

furniture? Like a magic show with mysterious fold-up boxes and hidden panels that bloom into larger things, change functions altogether—table into bed, couch into dresser?

I've had passing thoughts of trading my meager retirement funds for a camper, having my house with me so that no matter what longitude and latitude I found myself pinned to, I would always be home. Home would be a trail, as it is for the gypsies who still roam Europe by the millions. Gypsies migrate seasonally, or sometimes follow a chain of kin or tribal links, way stations. Anthropologists call gypsies nomadic, as if traveling were coded in their genes, as if they had wandering blood. But I wonder, would there be gypsies at all had they not been unwelcomed, persecuted, repeatedly forced to move after their initial emigration from India a thousand years ago?



Wander saps you: the getting there never ends. Packing and unpacking is always for me an occasion to review every belonging and relive its origin, meaning, importance to my life, as if studying markers of my past would reveal a clue to where I should go. This rewinding then fast-forwarding through decades of time is emotionally exhausting: dwelling on the image of myself as a ten-year-old in a basketball uniform, palming the ball with co-captain, Debbie Looney. The size of the universe was hardly larger than a basketball court, so consumed I was with winning games, so focused, determined, unscathed by the world. Enormous possibilities existed in the mind of this girl who didn't know yet that as years tick by options disappear. In childhood, the boundaries of the world are drawn around your family, neighborhood, school. As you grow, the edges push out, and sometimes, fluttering around in the vastness, you get lost.



When I relocate, I aim to conquer the new territory. I arm myself with maps and guides, and gazetteers with topo lines and symbols like the musical score to a libretto. The land hums beneath me as I drive —my car crammed with garbage bags filled with chic ensembles waiting for the right soiree (which never seems to come along), pillows mashed against the windows like faces of hijacked children— feeling bold and optimistic about the next phase of my life, which I always think of as the final phase, the last place I will live, the place where I will become part of a community, where people in the hardware store will greet me by name, where the whole town, when I die, will come to my funeral. En route, I am caught between nos-

talgia and anticipation, mourning for the old life, which has already begun to ossify, excited about the new life still boundless like a dream. Speeding along the highway, time is paused: neither here nor there, for the moment I am completely free.

I am not alone out there on the highways. In 1995, the year I quit my job and moved from Maine to Cape Cod, forty-two million other Americans moved too. This is like the entire country of Spain vacating, or all of Canada leaving for some other place. I imagine the interstates teeming with yellow Ryder trucks and orange and gray U-Hauls advertising state slogans on their panels. About those U-Hauls: the state pictured on the side of the truck is never where the driver is from, never where she's going. Part of me wants all the trucks to go back to their states of origin and stay there. All this flux is tiresome.



Birds, with their semiannual, thousand-mile treks, make migration look effortless. Birds always seem to be flitting, and flitting is not the activity of the weary. But that's a lie. Migration is arduous for birds: one dog chasing those matchstick-legged sanderlings feeding along the tidal flats of Cape Cod, one innocent, amusing puppy disrupting their hurried gluttony, chancing their intake, can mean the difference between a sanderling having the energy to reach home, or dying along the way, dropping out of the air mid-flight like a fat little grenade.

Once, when I was sitting in Central Park, a pigeon dropped out of the sky and landed on the pavement ten feet away from me. Its wings moved slightly as it struggled to survive. Two men walking a dog and another man who had been feeding the pigeons gathered around the bird. "Should we take it to a vet?" one asked. "I'll take it home," the pigeon-feeding-man said, and captured the frightened bird in a bag so he could nurse it back to health. Then we went on our way, carefully stepping around bodies sleeping on sidewalks, under newspapers and boxes.



Moving is a slow process of wear and tear. Years ago I had a box of butterflies from a professor who willed his estate to the conservation group for whom I worked. The butterflies, collected from around the world and wrapped in newspaper triangles dated decades earlier, were too damaged to be of value to a museum or university. But I couldn't bear to discard this box of art—pastels, chalk pieces, glassine—so I took it home. I wanted to

make earrings and broaches out of the butterflies, to wear their wings like jewels from God, but I couldn't figure out how, and the more I shuffled them around the faster they disintegrated into powder.



Grounded, there is no rest yet. Stores of energy are needed to rebuild a life over and over, to discover where to find the ingredients you need, to meet kindred spirits, to become accustomed to patterns of weather and light and time. When I first moved to flat and dusty Michigan I had tornado dreams: vivid, loud, frightening scenes in which I was nearly sucked out from under tables where I crouched and covered. When I moved back to New England, I dreamed the tidal wave dreams I had there before: huge, powerful walls of water that threatened to unloose me from my mooring, sweep me away.

Occasionally, another dream visits me: I am roller-skating, usually in a large gymnasium, performing with far more grace and agility than I can in real life, flying around the polished wood floor lap after lap. The dream is at first enjoyable: the speed, the turns and twirls, but whenever I slow down nearly to a stop, I instantly start up again, gain speed quickly. I can never take the roller skates off because I cannot completely stop, and the pleasure of the dream dissolves into anxiety.



Traveling, I long for home. Fixed, I dream of travel. When I drove through Ireland with my father he sang a song for every town we passed through—"The Rose of Tralee," "Galway City," "Oh, Killarney"—the ballads of his people. I envied my father's connection to a land he never lived in, to a culture formed by that land. At get-togethers in Massachusetts, my relatives stand around my father seated at the piano and sing the Irish tunes we love: "Wild Colonial Boy," "Whiskey You're the Devil," "Irish Rover." In a pub in Limerick, Ireland, the locals, mugs of Guinness in hand, gathered around the piano player and sang, "Take me home country roads, to the place I belong, West Virginia, Mountain momma, take me home country roads."



My grandmother's house in West Roxbury, Massachusetts was sold "right out from under her" it feels like, though my father agonized about the decision, leaving her house vacant for months. All of my grandmother's possessions were claimed by various relatives. I took a fancy gilded comb set that

was arranged on her dresser as if the next morning she'd be standing in front of the mirror brushing her hair. I felt strange taking this brush, a nest of grayish-black hairs woven in the bristles, but I wanted something to remember her by, though she is not yet gone.

Recently, I visited my grandmother in the expensive, private nursing home where she gets the best of care, but where nevertheless people come to die, a softly carpeted death row. My grandmother never leaves her hallway, never goes into the sun room, or downstairs, though she gets around with a cane and could certainly use a wheelchair. Each day she sits in a brown, high-backed vinyl chair that she has staked claim to, that is known among the staff and patients as Margaret's chair.

"I brought you a book about Ireland," I said. When I try to coax her to talk about Ireland she gets tight-lipped, her mouth pursed, the same as when she kisses me, not so much a kiss as a brush of air.

"I can't read that, my eyes," she said.

"Oh, but there are no words, only pictures!" Slowly I turned the pages. "Here's your region," I pointed out. She looked at the photo of a Connemara pony.

"My father had a horse like that. He rode it all around. One day the horse went up a steep hill and fell over the edge and died." She refused to tell me anymore. "That's all past." She clamped her lips. Yet for seventy-odd years my grandmother held onto a parcel of family land in Connemara, sold it only recently after she entered the nursing home, to my grandfather's brother, Coleman.



For two summers I lived in Nancy's house in her spare room. I paid her just a little rent (though she asks none), and she gave me free reign over her garden, somehow tolerated my squabbling. When I worked for The Nature Conservancy, an ornithologist on staff called me a house wren. All the scientists laughed. The fund raisers and public relations people like me didn't get the punch line. Nancy said later, "Wrens are kind of noisy. They sound twice as loud as a bird their size ought to." If I had my druthers, I'd be a wood thrush. Their delicate song reminds me of the music I used to make by tracing my finger around the rim of my mother's crystal goblets. For now, I am like one of those cowbirds who lays its eggs in other species' nests then moves on: a squatter, guest, nomad.



I used to think my relocations were unpredictable and random, not part of any larger plan. But I see now that all this roaming has been a quest: a search for the perfect job, relationship, place, a desire to fill my life with passion, nothing less. The ultimate goal is to land all three, a happy triangle, utopia. (From Greek, utopia means “no place.”) I’ve sacrificed geography for relationship (as with Steve), or geography for job (moving from Maine for cheap rent so that I could write). These three points on the plane of my life—job, place, partner—do not form an equilateral triangle. I want the job more than anything, though writing is less a job than an inexplicable drive. That drive has moved me to Ohio for the time being, away from the land that I adore, away from family and friends. I’ll be in Columbus for two more years, though I feel like I am hovering here, refusing to trade my Maine driver’s license and plates for Ohio’s. Emily Dickinson said, “Where thou art—that is home.” But Emily Dickinson never really left her home.



I have another recurring dream, which I call the paradise dream. I am walking through a primeval forest, stepping between huge lichen-covered boulders—the shoulders of slumbering giants—towards a stream that sounds like faraway laughing, and a pool of emerald water. I swim. Freud might have said that I’m back in the womb, our original home, and maybe that is so. What I love about this dream which comes to me once a year or less, is not so much the setting but the peaceful, happy feeling that lingers even upon waking.

This is the feeling I imagine I’ll have when I am finally in my dream home: a hut in the woods of Maine with a sunny spot for a garden, not too far from civilization for I’ll always need a good library and bookstore, a decent bakery, and a movie theater. I can see it clearly, this fantasy of a home in which I can fantasize, for that is what I wish to do with my life. I can visualize the exact detail and dimensions of the house, its nooks and crannies, its crooked lines and haphazard architecture, its window panes, and the rectangles of light the sun lays on the floor like fabric, as if the place has existed all along. I know I will get there some day, with a “wing and a prayer” as my mother often says, or else I’ll die trying like those weary sanderlings who fall from the sky. ■